



# CODENAME ANASTASIA

작화 안 · 각색 은비 · 원작 보이시즌

# Codename Anastasia

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**Author:** Boy Season

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## SYNOPSIS

NIS ace agent Kwon Taekjoo is dispatched to Moscow to uncover the identity of 'Anastasia', a deadly weapon created under the secret collaboration of Russia and North Korea. However, his mission goes south the moment he sets foot into Russia, and Zhenya, a local partner assigned to him by the NIS, only serves to confuse him even more.

Zhenya, who has connections to Russian political and business figures as well as the underworld mafia, seems to always be easygoing and cheerful, but at the same time, his sudden bursts of brutal violence put Kwon Taekjoo on edge. Meanwhile, Zhenya begins to take a newfound interest in Kwon Taekjoo, who refuses to be broken by any hardship...

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I only merge the files to make it easier to read.

-Yuri from Yarichin Bitch Club >\_<

# Part 1

## Chapter 1.1 – Prologue: Mission in Busan

7:49 pm Busan International Port.

As night gradually fell onto the pier, preparations for the scheduled train's export took place enthusiastically. The 5,000-ton auxiliary ferry was clearly visible under the flickering light of street lights, showcasing its supremacy. This train operates once a day and is set to arrive at the port of Shimonoseki, Japan tomorrow morning.

After the boarding time ended, the doors were closed. The crane finished loading the goods and then quietly withdrew. As expected, the lights in the station went out. The surrounding area was quiet, buried in the stillness of the night. Only the ferry, tied to its rope, was still floating on the black, rippling sea.

However, the atmosphere inside was completely different. As the man entered the room, the atmosphere inside was palpable. The passengers surrounding him were too occupied, their eyes darting everywhere on the train with enthusiastic facades.

Everyone gathered in small groups at a drinking table in the village hallway, some people also recorded every moment with cameras in hand. Boisterous laughter echoed everywhere, creating an infectious buzz in the air. Even on the cold, windy deck of the ship, the typical atmosphere of excitement and anticipation for the journey about to begin was felt.

Amidst the crowd was Kwon Taek Joo, wearing a normal suit with a jacket, looking no different from the people present except for his extremely depressed expression. Despite staying in the most expensive room, he seemed to be weighed down by something heavy, something that showed on his face and in the way he carried himself.

He lifted his sleeve from time to time to check the time. Kwon Taek Joo carefully watched every movement of the second hand on his watch.

It was exactly 8 o'clock when the whistle blew, indicating the departure of the ferry. Following suit, Kwon Taek Joo walked out onto the balcony.

"The deck below came into clear view in front of him. Despite the darkness, tourists were still busy taking photos, constantly pressing the shutter button in attempts to capture the moment. He was observing their movements indifferently when a small mechanical sound suddenly came from his left ear.

Then, someone's voice rang out.

"Hey Taekjoo, how are you? How does it feel to be sailing through the sea at night?"

"Hmm... it's not bad. It's quite noisy but also a bit boring."

Light laughter came from the communication device in Kwon's ear. Meanwhile, Kwon Taek Joo's eyes were still directed towards the deck. He carefully looked at each person passing by, but no one particularly stood out.

"Give me the report"

"

Contact person Kim Young Hee and National Security Agency official Lee Cheol Jin were both confirmed to have boarded the plane. Lee Cheol Jin is disguising himself as a Chinese citizen. He will probably leave China as soon as he arrives in Japan, and Kim Young Hee has booked a ferry leaving from Shimonoseki tomorrow night."

"Then I'll have to contact them before we arrive at the docks."

Kwon Taek Joo's eyes darted around as he muttered to himself, before abruptly turning around and making his way off the balcony. The speaker's voice spoke from the earpiece.

"Are you going to start moving now?"

Kwon Taek Joo didn't answer right away, but instead began to walk briskly through the empty hallway, the sound of his footsteps echoing off the walls. Eventually, he responded, his voice carrying down the corridor.

"When playing hide and seek, the best players are those who like to take bold approaches."

In case the targets need to contact each other, it is best to do so in a chaotic scene where there are a lot of people. Meeting in a place with few people will only attract more attention, thereby increasing the risk of getting caught. Kwon Taek Joo gracefully descended down two spiral stairs and walked past a group of people gathered in front of the 2nd floor restaurant. He meticulously examined each face one by one, looking for any sign of recognition or suspicion. However, there were no outstanding characters this time, which put him at ease. Without any delay, Kwon Taek Joo headed down the stairs leading to the first-floor lobby, his mind focused on the task at hand.

He gave out a brief instruction.

"Give me a call."

The phone rang immediately.

He didn't answer immediately, but instead waited for it to vibrate twice before picking it up.

"Hello?"

His voice was low and serious as he spoke to the person on the other end, maintaining composure despite the urgency of the conversation. He walked with purpose, careful not to draw attention to himself, as he continued to talk and listen.

Not long after, a woman passed by. She was wearing a coat with the collar standing up awkwardly, making her appear uneasy. As she approached the vending machine next to the elevator, she seemed to be taking her time in selecting a drink, causing other people to come and go.

Eventually, she took out a 1,000 yen bill and hesitated for a while before choosing green tea.

The sound of the drink and coins falling from the machine echoed throughout the quiet hallway. The woman picked up the green tea quite naturally, holding it close to her chest as if it were a source of comfort.

She gathered the change and headed back to the 2nd floor, not paying any special attention to Kwon Taek Joo, who pretended not to notice her.

"The target is approaching."

The voice ringing on the intercom caught Kwon Taek Joo's attention after the woman disappeared upstairs.

"Okay. Let's talk later."

He pressed the button to end the call. At this moment, a man walked out of the living room at the back of the lobby. He was wearing a navy blue beanie and was striding towards the vending machine.

The man rummaged through his pocket and took out a few coins but only glanced around, showing no interest at the drink selection. An overly cautious attitude. After a while, the man placed a 100 yen coin into the slot.

Suddenly, an arm reached over his shoulder and a cheerful clicking sound was heard, similar to the sound of a coin rolling through a narrow groove. The person wearing a blue beanie was still holding a hundred yen coin in their hand. The stranger then inserted their arm into the vending machine, chose a drink, and pressed a button to make their selection.

"What's up?"

The navy blue beanie man inhaled sharply, realizing the current situation. The heavy can of water fell with a clatter. The beanie quickly grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's hand as he walked towards the place to receive the drink. He shouted in confusion at the unexpected situation.

"Ah you bastard, what are you doing?"

"It seems like you're having trouble making a decision. At this rate, you will probably have to stay up here all night."

Kwon Taek Joo's grip on the man's hand was tight and possessive, his response brazen and provocative. His tone was low and whispery, with

a faint smile on his face that showed no signs of remorse. It was as if he had intended for the conflict to happen.

The blue beanie felt an unfortunate premonition, a creepy feeling that made his instinct recognize the danger before his mind did. Under the bright light, his anger dissipated, replaced by an expression of anxiety. His eyebrows furrowed in worry, his breathing became rougher, and at some point, cold sweat formed on his forehead, indicating the severity of the situation.

"Damn it."

Immediately, the blue beanie suddenly lunged his hand towards the vending machine pick up slot. He quickly lifted the lid and attempted to grab something inside. However, Kwon Taek Joo did not hesitate to stomp onto the lid.

"Ah!"

A loud scream erupted from the man whose hand was caught in the vending machine. Kwon Taek Joo remained calm.

"Ya crazy bastard!"

The man, feeling provoked, grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's collar with force. His eyes widened as he glared at him, but Kwon Taek Joo stood his ground, gazing calmly from his shirt to the man's face. Kwon Taek Joo's expression was unfazed and his movements were slow and deliberate, giving the impression of someone who was in complete control.

Despite the man's attempts to ignore it, an intense and unsettling energy began to radiate from Kwon Taek Joo's grip. The man began to feel uneasy as he realized that Kwon Taek Joo was not to be trifled with. What was happening was definitely not good.

Kwon Taek Joo glanced at the people gathering around and muttered.

"Ah geez, I hate grabbing attention"

Kwon Taek Joo glared down.

"Lee Cheol Jin-sshi must also understand this feeling, right? Everyone does in this line of work.."

As soon as his name was called, the man known as Lee Cheol was able to guess Kwon Taek Joo's identity. The man's fuming face suddenly turned pale.

Passengers rushed out and quickly gathered around two people who were apparently fighting. It's always curious to watch a fight, and people often run to watch a noisy action movie. However, there is no benefit to continuing like this. A cornered mouse will bite the cat back. Kwon Taek Joo was unsure what unexpected actions Lee Cheol Jin would take if he continued to put more pressure on him. If innocent people get hurt, a mere letter or two of apology will hardly calm the situation..

Kwon Taek Joo held Lee Cheol Jin's arm tightly. Suddenly the man burst out laughing.

"Ah. Screw this!"

Lee Cheol Jin had given up on trying to conceal his identity. In case the spies' identities are exposed, they have only two options - either take their own lives by consuming a pre-prepared poison or use force to escape. Lee Cheol Jin doesn't want to let go of something he has worked hard for, so he has chosen the latter option this time.

Lee Cheol Jin swiftly reached for his jacket, but Kwon Taek Joo swiftly lifted his arm and slammed his head into the vending machine.

The vending machine shook violently, causing Lee Cheol Jin to stumble in shock.

Wasting no time, Kwon Taek Joo acted swiftly and decisively. He seized Lee Cheol Jin's arm and easily snatched the gun away from him. The gathered onlookers were thrown into a panic, screaming and retreating as the gun appeared out of nowhere.

Without any hesitation, Kwon Taek Joo used all his strength to launch a powerful kick at Lee Cheol Jin's butt. The impact was devastating, causing Lee Cheol Jin's body to hit the floor with a loud thud. His face and head were shaken so badly that he lost consciousness and couldn't stay awake.

Meanwhile, Kwon Taek Joo quickly surveyed the area, making sure that no one else was a threat. He then turned his attention to the vending machine and lifted its lid, revealing the USB that the woman from earlier had left behind. According to intelligence information, the USB may contain high-level information equivalent to state secrets. Kwon Taek Joo knew that this was a crucial piece of evidence that could help unravel a dangerous conspiracy.

"Sorry, excuse me! Please move."

A flight steward was approaching them after receiving a report about the commotion. Kwon Taek Joo glanced towards him as he heard an angry mutter in his ear.

"I'm not going down without a fight"

Kwon Taek Joo turned his head, a chill ran down his spine, as if he sensed something ominous was about to happen. His eyes met Lee Cheol Jin's with a strange intensity. As he looked closer, he noticed the rope that had just been dropped in front of him, and his heart skipped a beat. He couldn't shake off the feeling that something terrible was about to unfold.

"Is everything alright?"

The flight steward rushed over to ask.

"Hic.."

It happened in just a split second. Lee Cheol Jin wrapped his arms around the flight attendant's neck and tugged him back. In his other hand was a sharp knife.

"Ahhh!"

"Ah!"

Seeing the weapon, the surrounding passengers fled, only Kwon Taek Joo remained in his position.

Kwon Taek Joo habitually bites his lower lip whenever things go smoothly, feeling uneasy as he believes there is no such thing as an easy task. This time is no different.

Lee Cheol Jin tightened his hold around the hostage's neck and clutched his weapon. The flight attendant winced. Kwon Taek Joo scratched his head in an act of frustration at the sudden turn of events.

"Hand it over."

Lee Cheol Jin outstretched his hand. The blade drew closer to the hostage's neck. Kwon Taek Joo remained still like a statue, observing without a single expression at all. Lee Cheol Jin impatiently waved his hand. When no response, the man eventually shouted "Throw it over here!" Kwon Taek Joo's eyes bore at the hostage's paled face . The man's breathing was rapid, almost like a sob.

As Kwon Taek Joo held the USB in his hand, he didn't hesitate to throw it away. The small device hit one of the hostages before falling to the floor. Lee Cheol Jin almost bent down to pick it up, but then decided to ask the hostage to retrieve the item instead.

The flight steward reluctantly picked up the USB with trembling hands. The urgency of the crisis the man's pants were helplessly soaked. Lee Cheol Jin forced him to stand up and step back step by step on weak legs that no longer had any strength due to fear.

Kwon Taek Joo started moving slowly towards Lee Cheol Jin, who began to retreat. Kwon Taek Joo's movements were quick and decisive, as if he wasn't concerned about the safety of the hostage. Every time Lee Cheol Jin took a step back, Kwon Taek Joo took one step closer. Lee Cheol Jin's voice was filled with anger, and it even cracked at one point.

"Don't come closer to me!"

But that threat had no effect at all.

Every time he took a step back, Kwon Taek Joo would mirror the action. Although a certain distance was still maintained between the two sides, the anxiety of the person being chased was still indescribable.

"Please help me."

The hostage pleaded, his hands stuck together. The urine that had soaked his pants was now dripping to the floor. For a moment, all movement and noise stopped as if time itself had stopped.

Lee Cheol Jin took a step back as if to analyse the situation. Kwon Taek Joo followed again. Lee Cheol Jin's patience snapped.

Does this man really not care about the hostage?

"You bastard, didn't you hear me when I told you to stop?"

There is little point in getting angry because Kwon Taek Joo seemed unwilling to compromise. Even if a hostage's life is in danger, he will not yield. However, it is evident that if the hostage dies, Lee Cheol Jin himself will be at risk. All of this is conveyed through Kwon Taek Joo's calm but intense stare.

"This son of a bitch...!"

Lee Cheol Jin, feeling defeated, decided to abandon the confrontation and shoved the hostage aside. He then made his way up the narrow stairs located at the back of the room, disappearing from sight.

Meanwhile, Kwon Taek Joo, after helping the flight steward who had fallen to the ground, took off in hot pursuit, his heart pounding in his chest with adrenaline.

As soon as he reached the second floor, people started flocking to the entrance to the deck. Kwon Taek Joo turned around and dashed straight in that direction. The sight of Lee Cheol Jin scurrying away entered his sight.

Kwon Taek Joo strode forward purposefully without any haste, knowing that there was no need to rush. He was confident that the ship was going to set sail, no matter what. As for Lee Cheol Jin, he was trapped like a helpless mouse, unable to escape Kwon's grasp.

Kwon Taek Joo calmly followed Lee Cheol Jin who was fleeing. His dark hair danced in the ocean breeze. This image evoked an eerie feeling.

"Senior

, the ferry assistant just reported to the Coast Guard that there was an armed person on the ship. What's going on?"

T

he voice from before rang out from the communication device in Kwon Taek Joo's ear.

"Let's talk later. I'm about become a little busy."

Kwon Taek Joo's eyes locked in straight at Lee Cheol Jin, who was now trapped at the ship's safety railing. A warning sound came from the walkie-talkie, but Taekjoo turned it off. . As a result, only Lee Cheol Jin and Kwon Taek Joo remained on the windy deck.

Lee Cheol Jin peered down at the dark sea. His hands were clinging to the railing in a tight grip. Behind him, Kwon Taek Joo gradually narrowed the distance. Lee Cheol Jin, knowing he was cornered suddenly swung his weapon wildly into the air. That gesture was like an animal trying to escape at all costs, but it was also meaningless. The moment you are afraid, your threat has lost its power.

"Don't come here!"

Taekjoo took more steps towards the aggressive Lee Cheol Jin. The man sent continuous glances from the waves back to the Kwon Taek Joo who drew closer. The man waved his knife wildly in the air.

"I told you not to come any closer!"

The man panicked and screamed violently. Kwon Taek Joo took out the Colt. At that moment, Lee Cheol Jin's knife transformed into worthless scrap metal.

## Chapter 1.2 – Prologue: Mission in Busan 2

Lee Cheol Jin's eyes widened in shock as he locked eyes with Kwon Taek Joo. But before he could react, a sudden burst of sparks erupted from Kwon Taek Joo's gun, followed by a deafening explosion.

The bullet struck its intended target with deadly accuracy, but it wasn't Lee Cheol Jin who collapsed and screamed in agony. It was Kim Young Hee, the unsuspecting woman who had snuck up behind Kwon Taek Joo.

Her ivory jacket now stained with blood, Kim Young Hee's trembling form collapsed to the ground, clutching her shredded hand as the Colt in her grip fell and fired off shots wildly into the air. In the chaos, it was impossible to tell if her intended target had been Kwon Taek Joo or Lee Cheol Jin.

As Kwon Taek Joo turned his attention back to the scene before him, Lee Cheol Jin discarded his knife and stood with his back to both of them. With a deep breath, he grasped onto the railing tightly until his muscles bulged and his body began to quiver with rage. A sick feeling washed over Kwon Taek Joo as he realized what was about to happen, but before he could react, Lee Cheol Jin launched himself off the railing in a violent and calculated attack.

Kwon Taek Joo's heart raced as he sprinted towards the railing. But before he could reach it, a deafening "thud" echoed in his ears. He peered over the edge and saw the once calm sea erupt into violent white water jets, sending chills down his spine.

Taekjoo's eyes looked looking for Lee Cheol Jin but couldn't spot him. Kwon Taek Joo waited a little longer. Finally, a head broke through the turbulent waves.

Jumping from that height into the unforgiving sea was practically suicide.

But as if to mock Kwon Taek Joo's idea ,a boat suddenly appeared in the distance. It was an old wooden fishing boat, perhaps able to evade the surveillance networks of investigative agencies and reach their location undetected.

The wooden boat glided in the darkness gradually approaching Lee Cheol Jin.

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help feeling like he'd been hit in the back of the head. Maybe this was their real escape route. The plan may have been to distract their pursuers with fake train tickets and then disappear at sea once they received the item.

Kwon Taek Joo immediately opened fire, but it was difficult to aim at a moving boat from such a far distance and in the dark of night. They had a clear shot, but taking action now could complicate things for them. If only they could have taken out their target from the start, things wouldn't be so complicated.

The goal of this mission was to find and eliminate North Korean spies who had been living in South Korea for an extended period of time, holding important positions and stealing national secrets. There were likely multiple people involved in supporting and aiding these spies. Cutting off one branch wouldn't solve the problem - Kwon Taek Joo needed to dig out the roots.

Meanwhile, the ferry continued on its course, widening the distance between itself and the fishing boat. A man on board pulled Lee Cheol Jin onto the boat and helped him remove his wet jacket, revealing various small buoys attached to his body. As the boat sailed away, Lee Cheol Jin mockingly raised his hand, a proud and victorious expression on his face.

Kwon Taek Joo's smile quickly faded as he turned to face the fallen figure of Kim Young Hee. He walked over to her and knelt down beside her.

Despite the pain in her injured arm, Kim Young Hee persisted in trying to retrieve something. Kwon Taek Joo struck her forcefully on the back of her head to prevent her from committing suicide. Kim Young Hee

blacked out from the blow. When she came to, Kwon Taek Joo was stuffing a handkerchief into her mouth to prevent any further harm. He then grabbed her left hand and twisted it behind her back.

Kwon Taek Joo glanced down and noticed a ring on Kim Young Hee's finger. The ring appeared to be new with no visible scratches.

"That's a pretty ring you have there," he remarked, with a hint of sarcasm. "I'll have to put this bracelet on you to match it."

As he said this, Kwon Taek Joo pulled out a pair of handcuffs and secured Kim Young Hee's left hand to the railing with a loud click.

Once he finished, Kwon Taek Joo turned back on the intercom.

"Okay, in 8 seconds, come here immediately."

"What?" came the muffled shout from the other side, as if they had misheard. Kwon Taek Joo ignored it and focused on his watch. With a press of the reset button, the time indicator disappeared and was replaced by road markings. During their chase, Kwon Taek Joo had attached a tracking device to Lee Cheol Jin's belt. The red dot on the screen showed the target moving away from their original location. Time was running short. Taking a deep breath, Kwon Taek Joo sprinted towards the back of the ferry.

He reached the end of the deck and stepped onto the railing before jumping off without hesitation. For a moment, everything went black. The wind whipped through his body as he fell, seeming to last longer than expected.

Crap. The water level suddenly rose, accompanied by a deafening noise. When Kwon Taek Joo touched the inky black seawater, a fierce jolt surged through his body, causing every muscle to feel like they were being ripped apart. Water bubbles exploded all around him, filling every pore as he submerged himself in the ocean to lessen the shock. Slowly, he moved his limbs and fought against the current that was carrying him away. He opened his eyes but saw nothing but pitch-black darkness.

Summoning all of his strength, he kicked his legs and broke through the surface of the water. It was hard to keep his position with the rough waves constantly crashing into him. With difficulty, Kwon Taek Joo raised his wrist and pressed the reset button on his watch once more. The navigation chart disappeared, and a bright light illuminated the entire license plate before shooting into the air for 2-3 seconds. Then a familiar mechanical sound could be heard not far away - it was the engine of a motorboat.

As the noise grew louder and then abruptly stopped, white foam from the propeller whipped at Kwon Taek Joo's skin while a voice shouted down at him from above.

"You're really something else. Keep this up and you'll become a ghost of the sea."

Yoon Jong Woo, who had sprinted here in just 8 seconds, reached out his hand to help him onto the boat. Kwon Taek Joo climbed aboard, feeling completely drenched and uncomfortable. Despite the biting cold, he took off his watch and tossed it to Yoon Jong Woo without a word. Yoon Jong Woo immediately steered the boat towards where the red dot on the watch's direction board indicated.

Kwon Taek Joo removed his wet jacket and struggled to catch his breath.

The motorboat roared across the choppy waves in the dark. The whole boat was violently bouncing and swaying. The red dot was getting closer to the orientation line, gradually approaching its intended destination.

Pip, pip, pip, pip, pipipipi.

The mechanical sound of the wooden boat grew louder as it came into view. Even as the boat tried to escape, it was clear that their pursuers were gaining on them.

A man emerged from the cockpit, brandishing a rifle. Yoon Jong Woo clenched his teeth and steered the boat, causing it to turn abruptly and

create a strong wake. Most of the bullets from the fishing boat missed, but one grazed the side of their own boat. Thankfully, it didn't hit any vital parts and cause a fiery explosion.

There was still no light coming from the fishing boat. In this situation, it seemed impossible to approach without causing harm to the other occupants. Every attempt at getting closer resulted in a barrage of bullets being fired back at them. Trying to capture an armed target was a futile and absurd task.

The same pattern repeated over and over again - getting attacked, dodging, trying to get closer, and then being shot at once more. Yoon Jong Woo slammed his hand against the steering wheel in frustration. The target was so close yet so out of reach; it drove him crazy.

"Move out of the way"

Kwon Taek Joo suddenly said, pulling Yoon Jong Woo back into reality. He quickly took control of the driver's seat and steered them towards a nearby fishing boat. Yoon Jong Woo could only watch helplessly as their motorboat violently bounced along the waves.

"Ah! Senior, we're going to collide! We're going to collide!"

Yoon Jong Woo shouted in horror as they barreled towards the wooden boat. But Kwon Taek Joo showed no signs of slowing down, instead tilting the boat and causing a huge wave to splash onto the deck of the other boat.

This temporarily impeded their attackers, giving them a chance to escape. And so, they continued on like this for what felt like hours, with Kwon Taek Joo making sudden turns and maneuvers to avoid getting caught by their pursuers.

Inevitably, however, the enemy boat reappeared in their sights. Desperate and anxious, they began firing bullets at them once again. Kwon Taek Joo was too focused on maneuvering to shoot back, leaving Yoon Jong Woo to cower and try to protect himself.

"You're going to get us killed! Are you crazy?!"

Yoon Jong Woo yelled at his superior in panic, cursing him without hesitation. But Kwon Taek Joo paid him no mind and continued on his path of escape.

As they continued to flee, it became clear that their boats were on a collision course. Yoon Jong Woo's eyes squeezed shut as he thought of his parents back home. Just two months ago, he couldn't even afford the kimchi his mother sent him. The memory of her calling him a "bastard" in a text message before this mission still lingered in his mind.

Oh, mom.

The wooden boat also seemed to sense the impending disaster as they watched the motorboat headed straight towards them. In a moment of desperation and helplessness, both boats jumped into the water at almost the same time, narrowly avoiding a collision by just 5 meters. In that brief moment, both Yoon Jong Woo and their attackers felt equal levels of abandonment and despair.

Kwon Taek Joo cranked the steering wheel aggressively, causing the boat to jolt and shake from the abrupt deceleration. The hull lifted up out of the water and skidded across the surface in a wide arc. But conflict was inevitable. It was the logical moment to give up and save their lives, but Kwon Taek Joo refused to release his grip on the steering wheel. The wooden boat collided with the motorboat, creating a loud thud and sparks flying from the friction. For a brief moment, it seemed as though both boats were suspended in mid-air.

"Huh?"

After the chaos settled, Yoon Jong Woo slowly opened his eyes. They were still on a boat, not drifting helplessly in the freezing ocean. Kwon Taek Joo remained at the helm, smoke billowing from the back of the boat and a large hole on its right side. Yoon Jong Woo's tense muscles relaxed, but his heart pounded so hard he could barely control his body.

The engine noise finally ceased as waves crashed against them, bringing them closer to the wooden boat. The two boats collided repeatedly with deafening crashes. Kwon Taek Joo stood up and made his way towards

the wooden boat. Only then did Yoon Jong Woo snap out of it and frantically searched for his Colt handgun on the floor.

Kwon Taek Joo boarded the fishing boat and shined a flashlight around. He saw two men desperately swimming in the deep sea with no chance of escape. Calmly observing their futile efforts, he grabbed a nearby fishing net and threw it towards them. The net flew through the air and entangled both men as they struggled to break free.

After watching their struggle for a while, Kwon Taek Joo turned on the machine connected to the net – an old hand tractor commonly used on small fishing boats – making a rusty rattling noise. It was surprisingly easy to operate.

Suddenly, Kwon Taek Joo glanced back and saw Yoon Jong Woo approaching. The boy, embarrassed by his earlier actions, was now operating the net machine with even more fervor than Kwon Taek Joo. Moments later, Lee Cheol Jin and his accomplices were pulled onto the boat deck along with the tangled fishing net.

"Ha...ha...what should I do now?"

Yoon Jong Woo wiped the sweat from his brow as he spoke up, but Kwon Taek Joo didn't respond. Frowning, Yoon Jong Woo looked up and saw that Kwon Taek Joo was already heading towards the motorboat, searching for something.

"What are you doing?"

"Where is the item I asked you to prepare?"

"Ah, it's under the driver's seat."

Kwon Taek Joo immediately sat in the driver's seat and reached underneath, feeling around until he found a suitcase. Opening it, he quickly checked its contents before turning to give orders to Yoon Jong Woo.

"Contact headquarters and inform them that we have captured Lee Cheol Jin, his accomplice, and the USB drive. Also tell them that Kim Young Hee is tied up on the ferry and the Coast Guard should be searching for her by now."

"Yes? Senior? But do I have to do everything myself?"

"You're not doing anything else. Call them and tell them to take over."

"What about you, senior?"

"I'm busy as hell. I have a family event to attend. Work hard."

Is it true that when facing life and death, people often speak without thinking? Yoon Jong Woo kept asking questions, hoping for a different answer. As if confirming his worst fears, the motorboat started up. Left behind on a small boat with two men trapped in a net, Yoon Jong Woo watched as Kwon Taek Joo left without even looking back.

The powerful motorboat sped away quickly, leaving Yoon Jong Woo no time to process what was happening. As he looked back in confusion, he realized that his shoes were already soaked from water leaking into the boat. Even if this makeshift boat doesn't sink right away, can a superior really leave their subordinate behind like this?

Yoon Jong Woo screamed out in desperation as Kwon Taek Joo could only hear the wind and waves. The sound of the wind seemed to mock him, screaming "Unbelievable!"

It is said that the more precious a child is, the stricter they must be raised. So perhaps, this was all just a mistake.

## Chapter 1.3 – Prologue: Psych Bogdanov

Kwon Taek Joo parked his boat at a corner of the dock without any obstacles since it had been previously registered for official purposes. He did not encounter any legal procedures because of it.

After leaving his boat, he went into a nearby warehouse to change into a neat suit. As the darkness fell, he walked through the station and found the taxi waiting for him that he had called earlier. He got in the car and headed to Busan station.

Upon his arrival, the departure announcement of the KTX train heading to Seoul rang out. Kwon Taek Joo quickly joined the group of people heading down to the station platform. He found an early train waiting and went through the nearby door to check his seat number and sit down. Since it was late at night, the train carriage was quiet.

Drrrrr... drrr...

As soon as he sat down, the phone in his pocket rang. It was his personal phone, not used for work purposes. He knew it would be his mother on the other end of the line. Kwon Taek Joo cleared his throat and answered the call with a rehearsed response.

"Hi Mom, I just got on the train. Cleaning up after the event took longer than expected so I'll be arriving early tomorrow morning. Don't wait up for me."

Kwon Taek Joo could almost recite these words in his sleep from how many times he had said them before. His mother bombarded him with questions about the train's departure and arrival time, how he would get home from the station, and more. She only saw her son once or twice a year, so these visits were always special to her. He promised her that he would come straight home without stopping anywhere else before ending the call.

Kwon Taek Joo hung up and suddenly felt exhausted, a feeling he thought he had forgotten. The train doors closed and it began its

journey towards Seoul. Leaning back in his seat with his still-wet hair, he could feel the vibrations of the train. In the quiet car, an announcement was made for each stop until finally reaching 'Seoul', and the lights slowly dimmed.

Kwon Taek Joo's whole body sagged from the heat of the heater. Trying to stay awake was futile; with every blink, they felt heavier due to the sea salt still stuck on his eyelashes. There were still three hours left until he reached home. Should he try to get some rest? Just as Kwon Taek Joo was about to close his eyes and compromise with himself, his phone began vibrating in his pocket again.

Drrrrr... drrrrr...

He knew it must be a call related to work. Ignoring it and trying to sleep was not an option, as the phone continued to vibrate nonstop. He knew they wouldn't stop calling until he answered. The noise was starting to make other passengers uncomfortable in the car.

"Ugh..."

Kwon Taek Joo finally gave in and sat up, pressing the button to answer the call.

"Where are you now?"

The person who suddenly asked the question was Chief Lim. Yoon Jong Woo would have received direct updates from him if he hadn't disappeared under the sea. But why did Chief Lim want to talk now? Kwon Taek Joo never felt good about receiving any kind of contact from him.

"Is something wrong?"

"I want to see you for a moment."

"Why should I come in? What's going on?"

All that came to Kwon Taek Joo's mind were thoughts of the recent spy-catching operation. It was supposed to be handled discreetly, but there were too many witnesses and even an innocent civilian hostage involved. High-ranking officials who received the report may have

raised concerns, and with the Coast Guard also involved, it would not be easy to smooth everything over. The media may have already caught wind of the incident, so Chief Lim's persistent inquiries were not unexpected.

Even though he knew it would be useless. Kwon Taek Joo still tried to make excuses.

"This isn't the best time to be scheduling a meeting.."

"That's alright . We will only two for a bit. Come here now."

Of course. He wouldn't be Chief Lim if he didn't give orders like this.

Before starting this campaign, Kwon Taek Joo had reminded him countless times that tomorrow was his mother's birthday and she couldn't sleep at night worrying about her only son. So no matter what happened, Kwon Taek Joo had to go home. What had Chief Lim promised at that time? Didn't he say that even if a second Korean War broke out, he would make sure Kwon Taek Joo returned to his mother?

Kwon Taek Joo asked if he had forgotten and reminded him of their conversation.

"Chief, have you forgotten? Tomorrow is my mother's birthday.

"I won't keep you for long."

There was no way to refuse now. Chief Lim was known for being brazen and stubborn. Kwon Taek Joo angrily ran his fingers through his wet hair. He made his final argument while looking out at the passing scenery through the train car window.

"But the train has already departed, what can I do?"

At that moment, the KTX train abruptly came to a halt. Startled passengers, engrossed in their music or phone games, looked around in confusion.

The train remained still for some time in the tunnel. There were no announcements or staff passing through the cabin. It was not uncommon for KTX trains to experience technical issues and stop, so most passengers were unaffected. Those who initially leaned out into

the aisles to find out what was going on soon lost interest and fell asleep.

It's nothing too serious, Kwon Taek Joo reassured himself. But ominous signs always creep up like ghosts.

"Come here, hurry up."

Chief Lim issued quick instructions. Kwon Taek Joo was about to ask what was happening when an announcement came over the speaker:

"Due to a track problem, the train had to make a temporary stop. We apologize for the inconvenience and appreciate your understanding."

Temporary stop. This meant that if Kwon Taek Joo didn't follow instructions, the train wouldn't move again.

"Aren't you planning on getting off?"

The gentle urging continued. Chief Lim's tone was almost leisurely, as if he was enjoying the situation. Kwon Taek Joo found his attitude irritating and didn't feel like obeying anymore. He also paid little attention to the other passengers.

But as long as the train wasn't moving, Kwon Taek Joo had no way of getting home. Frustrated, he hung up his phone. Manager Lim didn't call back, and there was no sign of the dormitory leaving either.

Kwon Taek Joo sat for a while before sighing and standing up. He walked down the hallway and exited through the train doors which opened as if waiting for him. Shaking his head, he descended the stairs and made his way along the gravel road.

While walking towards the back of the train, Kwon Taek Joo made a call. As soon as he emerged from the tunnel, the KTX started moving again. Just then, his mother's voice came through the other end of the line: "Hello". She sounded deeper than before. Undoubtedly, she was worried about her son who had promised to return and then suddenly claimed to have urgent work.

"Mom, it's me. There's an issue with the train so I'll be a little late. Don't worry, I'll definitely come back this time."

He stopped for a moment and added.

"Oh, and mom? Can you not light any candles and just wait for me?"

The place where Kwon Taek Joo arrived on a prepared helicopter was the National Intelligence Agency. An employee was waiting at the helipad and guided him to the office of Deputy Chief 1.

He followed along without saying a word, deep in thought. The person I had requested you to meet earlier was Chief Lim, yet somehow you ended up in the office of Deputy Chief 1 instead of the Chief's office.

The National Intelligence Agency is led by three Deputy Directors, each with their own specific role and authority. In the agency, hierarchy is strictly enforced, with departments following orders from their immediate superiors. So when Kwon Taek Joo and Chief Lim were summoned to Deputy Director 1's office, it was a bit unusual for them to see Deputy Director 3 also present.

As they entered the office, Kwon Taek Joo's curiosity was growing and he couldn't help but have questions swirling in his mind. But before he could ask anything, the employee opened the door for them and they were greeted not by Chief Lim, but by Deputy Director 1 himself.

Kwon Taek Joo forgot to greet him back as he sat down across from Deputy Director 1. It wasn't surprising that he was here, but what was unexpected was Chief Lim sitting beside him. Kwon Taek Joo locked eyes with Chief Lim, silently asking for an explanation. But all he got in response was a confused smile.

The atmosphere was tense and uncomfortable. Kwon Taek Joo tried to ease his nerves and looked at both Deputy Director 1 and Chief Lim. Deputy Director 1 spoke first in a gentle tone.

"I heard you just finished your mission in Busan, right?"

"Yes, sir. I did my best."

Kwon Taek Joo replied without hesitation. He could sense that there were more underlying issues than just his performance during the mission. It seemed like Deputy Director 1 was overstepping his authority by reprimanding him like this. Both Deputy Director 1 and

Chief Lim exchanged looks and smiled strangely at Kwon Taek Joo's defense. This made him feel even more uneasy.

"But that's not why I've called you here tonight. I'm sure you are aware of the recent leak of classified information during our operation in Busan?"

Deputy Director one's sarcasm was not lost on Kwon Taek Joo. He continued to look at Chief Lim with suspicion, but his superior just smiled and shook his head innocently. This only added to Kwon Taek Joo's confusion.

If it wasn't about the mission in Busan, then why were they summoned at this late hour? He couldn't come up with any logical explanation.

Sensing Kwon Taek Joo's thoughts, Chief Lim decided to ease the tension by showing him a tablet device that he had been holding onto.

"What is it?"

"Have a look and see for yourself."

Kwon Taek Joo shrugged and casually took the tablet from Chief Lim. He quickly scrolled through the first page, barely paying attention. But as he went further into the article, his interest was piqued and he carefully read through each page. Chief Lim watched his reactions before speaking again.

"This is highly classified intelligence information that we have recently obtained. It has been a rumor for some time now, but this is the first solid evidence we have. As you can see, it involves North Korea and Russia working together to develop a new weapon for the past three years. This weapon boasts unprecedented firepower and could potentially shift global power dynamics. Its codename is Anastasia, although we are not sure if that refers to the weapon itself or the agreement between North Korea and Russia to produce it."

Kwon Taek Joo could sense the gravity of the situation as Deputy Manager 1 and Director Lim exchanged meaningful glances. If North Korea and Russia were able to join forces and create a powerful weapon, it would spell trouble for the rest of the world. Kwon Taek Joo

knew this without having to think too deeply about it. He was aware that such a partnership would put both Korea and the United States at risk.

"We need to gather more information on this weapon to maintain balance of power. If there's any chance, we should try to stop its development before it becomes fully operational," Deputy Manager 1 stated.

"Can't we do something for the greater good of humanity and world peace? Sometimes stealing is necessary if it prevents a major catastrophe," Kwon Taek Joo added.

Thus, the identity and details of this joint project between North Korea and Russia needed to be uncovered. And if necessary, measures would have to be taken to retrieve or destroy any blueprints or secrets related to it. But who would carry out such a dangerous mission? Would it be Kwon Taek Joo himself?

Since he started working as a Special Agent at the National Intelligence Agency, it wouldn't be abnormal for him to be sent on overseas operations. Rather, the days he spent abroad were more than the days he spent in Korea. For that reason, business travel missions were nothing new.

However, what set this particular mission apart was that it was in Russia – a country Kwon Taek Joo had never visited before, let alone engaged in strategic operations.

But he was not unqualified for this task – he had been trained in Chinese, Persian, and Russian since joining headquarters. Even if he had to leave for Moscow immediately, language wouldn't be an issue for him.

But that wasn't his main concern. What worried Kwon Taek Joo was his lack of field experience in Russia. For an agent, nothing was more crucial than hands-on training. This mission was akin to sending him into battle without any weapons. And he couldn't understand why this responsibility was placed on his shoulders.

Kwon Taek Joo rolled his eyes and gave Chief Lim a dissatisfied look. He nodded as if he understood everything that was being said.

"To be honest, you're not the most suitable candidate for this mission," Chief Lim finally spoke up.

"Then shouldn't you find someone qualified?."

"I already found someone and sent them."

"But?"

Chief Lim just shrugged, unable to give a straight answer. Deputy Manager 1 also wore a wry smile. Clearly, they were keeping something from him.

"Probably not."

He then spread three photos on the table in front of Kwon Taek Joo. The first one showed a hand with all ten fingers amputated, its skin swollen from water retention.

The second photo depicted a body with a white cloth covering its forehead, with a tattoo engraved in the center. Judging by the condition of the skin and fresh ink, it seemed like the tattoo had been recent.

Lastly, there was a clean ID photo. Based on the details, it appeared to be of the person before their body had been mutilated. Kwon Taek Joo recognized the person in the photo

"Dominic Morgan. He was an elite agent from the US intelligence agency who was sent to Russia. Four days ago, his body was found on the banks of the Nara River – right where he was on assignment to uncover information about 'Anastasia'. He was an expert in gathering Russian intelligence, but unfortunately, Russia treated his death as just another unknown case since he used an alias during his mission."

Do they truly consider him an "anonymous" figure? As a result, Russian surveillance has become more stringent. What do you want me to do?

"You understand what I mean. Let's not complicate things any further. Since North Korea is involved, our country could also be considered a plaintiff, correct? We cannot simply stand by and watch." That's right,

you know Agent Morgan from the last joint Korean-American training course, don't you?"

"We've only known each other for about a month at most, to be exact. By chance, I was assigned to room with him."

Everything made sense now. Chief Lim smirked as he skillfully pressured Kwon Taek Joo, who was trying hard not to reveal any weaknesses.

"That's why I chose you. Emotions clouding reasoning can lead to undesirable consequences."

There are no other options. Just as Kwon Taek Joo was about to angrily object, a buzzing sound suddenly interrupted them. It was Deputy Chief 1's phone ringing. He said "Wait a minute, please understand," then walked past Kwon Taek Joo and left the room. The door opened briefly before shutting again. Chief Lim gave the order as if he had been waiting for a long time.

"On behalf of Agent Morgan, go find Anastasia."

The gentleness from before was no longer there, replaced by a rather serious, commanding tone. Kwon Taek Joo stared at him without answering.

Is this really the only option?

Surely there had to be someone more suitable for this mission than Kwon Taek Joo.

While it was obvious that there were't many employees in the headquarters... there must just one qualified person? Kwon Taek Joo racked his brain, but no suitable candidate appeared in his mind.

Chief Lim maintained his calm façade, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Only one elite agent was found dead overnight - no big deal, right? Kwon Taek Joo almost responded sarcastically, but thought better of it and remained silent. He had been working under Chief Lim's direction since he joined headquarters, and they had grown close enough to joke around. Still, Chief Lim was his superior and Kwon Taek

Joo knew better than to resist or refuse his orders. Chief Lim smiled with satisfaction at his subordinate's resigned expression.

"I promise to provide full support. I will arrange the team members according to your wishes."

"I prefer to work alone."

"This mission won't be easy. It will be very difficult."

"There's no need to send more people to death early"

Kwon Taek Joo responded gently, and Chief Lim smiled knowingly. He then pulled out a thick envelope containing documents, which Kwon Taek Joo quickly snatched. Inside were various papers and a fake passport. When he opened it, he saw an unfamiliar face.

"Hiro Sakamoto?"

"There's been a contract signed between a Japanese energy company and Gazprom, the Russian state-owned gas company, for the construction of an LNG facility. The expected profits are estimated to be in the tens of trillions of won. As a result, high-ranking officials from energy companies, major banks involved in lending, and international trading companies have been invited to Russia for the signing ceremony and to visit the proposed construction site. Among them is Hiro Sakamoto, a senior officer at 'Itochu' international trading company responsible for Europe. His name is on the list of attendees."

Will Kwon Taek Joo assume the identity of Hiro Sakamoto and infiltrate Russia? Not a bad plan. If North Korea is indeed collaborating with Russia on weapons development, there would only be a few people involved or aware of the details - those in high positions within the Russian government. But as Hiro Sakamoto, Kwon Taek Joo would automatically have access to them without much effort.

Of course, this plan would only work if his identity remained hidden. There were many other officials invited to the event, and if any of them noticed something off about 'Hiro Sakamoto', their entire operation would be compromised. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but think of Agent Morgan's fate as he imagined this scenario.

Chief Lim reassured him with calm confidence.

"Don't worry. As long as another Hiro Sakamoto doesn't appear, there's no chance of your true identity being revealed. The real Hiro Sakamoto is scheduled to leave the country the day before the delegation's visit, and our agents in Tokyo will make sure he doesn't leave."

The headquarters' disguising skills were top-notch - they could even fool his own mother. And given that most Japanese people are shorter than him, there was little risk of anyone noticing a slight height difference between him and Hiro Sakamoto (whose listed height was 180cm). If anyone did get suspicious, he could simply claim he was wearing insoles.

Kwon Taek Joo would have brushed it off as normal if it were any other situation. As a subordinate, he had no right to refuse orders from his superiors unless he removed his professional uniform. But this time, he couldn't bring himself to blindly follow along. For some reason, an inescapable sense of unease gnawed at Kwon Taek Joo.

Was it because Agent Morgan, who was in charge of the mission, was now deceased? While it did affect him to some degree, that wasn't the only reason for his hesitation. Kwon Taek Joo's intuition told him that something bad was coming.

"This is about redefining world dominance. If we succeed, your role will drastically change."

Manager Lim cleverly tried to sway Kwon Taek Joo's decision, but he met his gaze with unwavering determination. Chief Lim remained silent with a warm smile on his face. There was a long pause between the two men.

Shortly after, Kwon Taek Joo pocketed the envelope that had been prepared for him. He added one final statement to make his stance clear.

"I don't care about status or power. They only bring unnecessary hostility."

"If you have no interest in this combat mission, then why did you accept it?"

"It's an order from a senior manager. As a subordinate, I have no right to refuse."

"Is there any other reason?"

"If I reject this mission, my perfect track record will crumble."

"In other words, you're worried about your career."

"Can I leave now?"

"Oh, also, there's one thing to note."

"What is it now?" Kwon Taek Joo asked irritably. Chief Lim's demeanor had suddenly become more serious as he cautiously observed Kwon Taek Joo with quiet eyes.

"Psych Bogdanov."

Who the heck is Psych Bogdanov?

"That's not a typical name," Kwon Taek Joo furrowed his brow and tilted his head. ‘

Bogdanov'

sounded like a Russian surname, but 'Psych' was certainly not a common human name.

What parent would intentionally name their child something that means "crazy"?

Chief Lim clarified, assuming Kwon Taek Joo hadn't misheard.

"People often refer to him by that nickname instead of using his real name."

t's interesting how someone else's chosen nickname can become the basis for evaluating them. The fact that this Russian man was known as "crazy man" Bogdanov rather than by his actual name meant he had quite a reputation. Even in this distant country, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but wonder what kind of person he could be.

In Russia, this man is like a 'nuclear bomb.'"

"If 'nuclear' then nuclear means 'center of gravity'?"

Kwon Taek Joo asked skeptically. There are many meanings for the word "core," including "focus" and another meaning entirely. But why would someone compare a person to such a deadly weapon? Quizzically, he looked at Chief Lim, who smiled back.

"Well, that's one way to interpret it."

Regardless, that definition seemed closer to referring to nuclear weapons. Unconsciously, Kwon Taek Joo's expression turned into a frown. Just who is this person who is known more commonly as "crazy" rather than by their real name, and even symbolizes a nuclear bomb?

Contemplating about 'Psych Bogdanov' brought up another question: why was he mentioned in the campaign to find 'Anastasia' this time around?

"Did that person have anything to do with Morgan's death?"

"I'm not sure. There isn't any concrete evidence, just speculation. If you want to get close to the big players in Russia, you'll likely have to face this person. It's not normal for someone to be referred to as 'nuclear.' It suggests potential for harm, so it would be best to avoid confrontation."

A burst of laughter broke out. The more warnings Kwon Taek Joo received, the more intrigued he became about this "crazy" individual.

At that moment, a knock on the door interrupted their conversation. When Chief Lim acknowledged, the employee who had escorted Kwon Taek Joo arrived with a large bouquet of flowers and a suitcase. He handed them over to him and silently bowed before leaving.

"I've prepared everything you might need. To save time and money, I took your preferences into consideration when replacing items. No need to thank me; after all, we don't want to buy anything else since I already bought you underwear two months ago."

"Wow. You know the condition of my underwear better than I do."

The man laughed.

"There's only so much I can do. And make sure to bring those flowers home. I remember you said today is mom's birthday, right?"

This man is so cunning.

"I won't tell my mom that the gift is from the Chief. If she finds out it came from the person who took your son away on his birthday, it will only spoil her mood further." My mother's good day had just turned sour."

"Thank you for considering my feelings,"

Chief Lim responded with a brazen smile.

"Don't die!"

As Kwon Taek Joo turned to leave, he was suddenly asked for another favor. He paused for a moment before nodding absentmindedly and walking out into the deserted hallway. He trudged towards the door as each sensor light behind him flicked on and off.

The lights dimmed and darkness engulfed him. Suddenly, he stopped in his tracks and turned around. The ceiling light finally turned off, shrouding Kwon Taek Joo's silhouette in thick darkness.

## Chapter 1.4 - New Mission: Set Foot in Russia

What is more useless than asking a child about their future aspirations? From wanting to be the president to becoming a lawyer, doctor, astronaut or entertainer overnight, career paths often change countless times.

Kwon Taek Joo's childhood was no different. Even when he entered the university exam room, he never thought he would become an agent of the National Intelligence Agency.

His brother was different. From the beginning, he spoke seriously about his dream of becoming a soldier like their father. Their mother was initially worried when his brother chose a book on military theory for his first birthday. She had always hoped her children would not pursue careers in the military since her husband was in the military and her father prioritized family affairs over housework.

On days when Kwon Taek Joo's father went on business trips, his mother would often stay up all night with his two brothers, not wanting to pass on the difficulties of military life to her children.

However, people often say that no child does what their parents want. Kwon Taek Joo's older brother eventually ignored their mother's expectations and volunteered to join the Navy, only to die in combat about ten years ago. Since then, their mother has become almost obsessed with Kwon Taek Joo, her only remaining son. As soon as she had taken care of her eldest son's funeral, she hugged Kwon Taek Joo and repeatedly begged him not to follow his brother's path. However, he could not fulfill his mother's wish.

Even if the National Intelligence Agency didn't have strict regulations about employees keeping their identities secret from family, Kwon Taek Joo still couldn't tell his mother the truth.

She had already lost so much for their country - her father, husband, and eldest son. If she found out that Kwon Taek Joo was holding a gun

instead of chopsticks, it would devastate her. She always believed he was just a simple civil servant in a small town. Little did she know that his work took him to Moscow as a Japanese citizen.

He closed his eyes as he remembered the past, then suddenly took out his phone. His mother's message appeared as expected:

"Son, have a delicious lunch. Do your best today too!""

The daily inquiry always came at noon. If there is no response, she would contact him right after work hours. So, Kwon Taek Joo had to reply promptly upon landing. It's Monday and there's a lot of civil complaints waiting for him, making him very busy. He hoped that the excuse will be enough to appease his mother's trust in him.

Checking the time while resetting his phone, he realized it's been nine hours since he boarded the plane and still has about an hour left until reaching his destination. Adjusting his mask, he rose from his seat.

Thankfully, the bathroom was empty as he walked towards it. But just as he's about to open the door, he heard commotion coming from the economy class seats. Peeking through the curtain, he spotted a passenger and flight attendant arguing over free alcohol consumption. Losing interest, Kwon Taek Joo entered the bathroom and locks the door.

Studying his unfamiliar face in the mirror, he remembered that he was currently Hiro Sakamoto. Everything from his ears to his jet-black eyes was modeled after that person. He ran his hands over his artificial skin, it felt exactly like his own.

After smoothing down his hair and drying his hands with a paper towel, he prepared to leave when something suddenly slammed into the back of the door, causing all the lights on the ceiling to flicker. Soon, chaos erupted outside as a flight attendant outside asked if he was okay while footsteps rush towards his position and a man screamed nonsensically.

Unlocking the door and pulling it open forcefully, Kwon Taek Joo found himself face-to-face with the man who had been leaning against it from outside.

"Fuck...What the hell?" The man swears as he falls inside.

A Russian man, who appeared to be heavily intoxicated, was holding an empty bottle of vodka. It seemed that he had consumed all the alcohol he had purchased at the airport duty-free shop and decided to open it on the plane. Kwon Taek Joo was surprised that someone would be so bold as to drink free alcohol until they got drunk, but the reality was even more troubling.

Without saying a word, he looked down at the struggling man for a brief moment. The flight attendants were unsure of what to do in this confusing situation.

"Sir, please sit up. I will help you."

"What? How dare you touch me? Let go! Ahh!"

"Ugh!"

The belligerent drunk pushed away the flight attendant who was trying to help him up. Not only did the crew member stumble and fall, but the other crew members also looked lost. It seemed like no one could calm down the large Russian man at the moment. A passenger could step in and help the crew, but directly interfering in such an incident would be troublesome. While Kwon Taek Joo pondered on what to do, a flight attendant rushed to contact the cockpit.

Usually, in these situations, the plane would make an emergency landing at the nearest airport. In that case, both the drunk man and all the passengers would have to disembark. All procedures, from baggage check to boarding, would have to be done again. Then there would be an hour-long delay until a replacement flight or arrangements are made.

Interfering in other people's affairs is not advisable, so Kwon Taek Joo didn't want to attract attention by getting involved. However, he couldn't ignore the fact that his original plan had been ruined by a shameless person, causing trouble for everyone else.

Kwon Taek Joo grabbed the drunk man by his back as he leaned against his leg.

"Stand up ."

"Eh!"

The man was forced to stand up and dragged towards the bathroom. He was pushed harshly, hitting his butt on the toilet before falling forward. As his arm dangled out of the door, muffled screams could be heard from the passengers outside. People sitting in the front seats quickly got up to watch this unexpected show. The flight attendant repeatedly asked them to sit down, but no one listened. Soon enough, shouts started pouring in from all over the plane.

The man staggered to his feet with a menacing look on his face. He chuckled, wiping saliva from his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Come on, let's do this," he said slurredly.

Kwon Taek Joo simply shook his head at the drunken man who was huffing and puffing. The man mumbled something before charging towards Kwon Taek Joo like an enraged buffalo.

Kwon Taek Joo swiftly wrapped his arms around the man's neck and pinned him to the ground. The man tried to fight back, grabbing Kwon Taek Joo's legs and attempting to lift him up to slam against the plane's ceiling.

The crew members shut their eyes tightly, bracing for impact. But after a few moments of silence, they realized that no crash had occurred yet. The passengers who had backed away nervously blinked in disbelief as they waited for the inevitable sound.

But it never came. Instead, the large drunk man fell to the ground unconscious while Kwon Taek Joo stood unscathed. He kicked the man aside before calmly exiting the bathroom and fixing his rumpled jacket.

"What happened?"

At that moment, the co-pilot arrived after being informed of the situation. He looked between the unconscious man and Kwon Taek Joo before turning to the flight attendants. Meanwhile, Kwon Taek Joo returned to his seat as if nothing had happened. Click. The sound of seat belts being fastened signaled the end of the chaos.

The flight attendants were now busy tending to the drunk passenger and pacifying other upset passengers. It was no different for the vice captain.

"My apologies, everyone. Were you all startled? I will bring some warm water for you."

"It's okay now, please don't worry."

"We are truly sorry for any inconvenience caused."

Kwon Taek Joo could hear the apologies being offered from behind the closed curtain. He tried to tune it out and closed his eyes, but was soon interrupted by the co-pilot and manager who came to express their gratitude for his help. It seemed like he had just defeated a formidable opponent.

"Will we still arrive on time?"

"Unfortunately, we have already reported the incident to air traffic control and are waiting for permission to land. So we may be delayed by an hour or so."

Kwon Taek Joo's expression turned sour as he reluctantly nodded, then immediately put on his headphones. Despite their attempts at small talk, the co-pilot and manager sent sincere thanks before returning to their duties.

As the plane continued to experience turbulence, the previously complaining passengers became quiet and quickly followed instructions to fasten their seat belts and remain seated. Some even said prayers under their breath.

Thanks to this unexpected turn of events, Kwon Taek Joo was able to spend a peaceful hour on the flight. His ears were still ringing and he couldn't fall asleep, but at least he wasn't in danger anymore. As he waited for the plane to land, another announcement played over the intercom.

"In a few minutes, our plane will arrive at Moscow Domodedovo Airport. The local time is 16:11. The weather was cloudy, and the outdoor temperature was -13 degrees Celsius. We sincerely apologize

for any inconvenience caused to you due to unwanted noise during the flight. Thank you for using Japan Airlines, and we look forward to serving you again soon. Thank you and see you again."

However, even after the announcement, the plane continued to hover in the sky for a long time. By the time it landed on the ground, it was already past 5 pm.

Kwon Taek Joo followed the crowd to the immigration checkpoint. He was not very stressed because disguising himself as someone else to go abroad was familiar to him to the point of boredom.

The inspection was over in a flash. The employee just glanced at Kwon Taek Joo without asking any questions. Everything went smoothly until he picked up his luggage and exited immigration.

Outside the exit, there was a crowd of people waiting to welcome their guests, family, and relatives. Although he came to Russia at the invitation of the country, Kwon Taek Joo entered a day earlier. So it was expected that he would go to the hotel by himself without any transportation.

But out of nowhere, a piece of paper with 'Hiro Sakamoto' written on it caught his eye. Even when Kwon Taek Joo took off his sunglasses and looked again, the name written on it, once in Japanese and again in English, was still correct 'Hiro Sakamoto.' The bottom also thoughtfully included the company name "Itochu Corporation."

When he stopped walking, the man holding a paper gave a bright smile.  
"Mr. Sakamoto?"

Yes, that's me. But..." Kwon Taek Joo replied hesitantly. The man's smile widened.

"Hello! My name is Vasily Alexandrovich and I work at Gazprom's public relations office. I heard you were arriving in the country today, so I came to welcome you."

He held out his hand for a handshake. Kwon Taek Joo looked at it and tilted his head.

"I didn't receive any information about this..."

"You didn't receive it? "How could that happen? We already informed your company this morning. They said they would inform Mr. Sakamoto as well."

Vasily was confident that there were no mistakes made. "I see. Please give me a moment." Kwon Taek Joo quickly checked his work phone, thinking that the messages coming through were just roaming notifications or updates from the embassy, but he also found Chief Lim's messages mixed in there.

"Ah... That's right."

"Was there a mistake? You must have had a long journey. You're much later than expected."

"There was some disturbance on the plane."

"Did someone get drunk and cause trouble again?"

". .That, how did you know?"

"It happens quite often with hot-blooded Russian men who love their vodka. It must have been surprising for you. Is that all your luggage? Let me help you carry it."

"It's fine, I can handle it myself."

"Ah, very well. Please follow me this way."

As Vasily led the way, Kwon Taek Joo trailed slowly behind him. Despite having his goodwill rejected, Vasily remained cheerful and hospitable, making Kwon Taek Joo feel welcomed.

They walked towards a waiting black sedan, where a man stepped out from the driver's seat and greeted them with a nod. He then took Kwon Taek Joo's bag and put it in the trunk. Vasily personally opened the backseat door for Kwon Taek Joo, displaying his warm hospitality. As soon as Vasily sat in the passenger seat and closed the door, the car left the airport.

Kwon Taek Joo was exhausted from the lengthy flight. He settled into his seat and closed his eyes, signaling to those around him that he did not wish to engage in small talk. However, Vasily had already turned to face him.

"Are you feeling very tired?"

"Yes, I'm a little tired because of the time difference."

Reluctantly, Kwon Taek Joo answered, and then Vasily proceeded to ask about the quality of the in-flight meal, the comfort of the seats, and the friendliness of the flight attendants. Vasily even shared his own experiences on the plane. Kwon Taek Joo listened with indifference before turning his head towards the window.

The road outside was enveloped in darkness, but Kwon Taek Joo could still feel the atmosphere of Moscow. Lada cars seemed to be everywhere, solidifying their status as Russia's national car. The combination of Starbucks' logo and Cyrillic writing caught his eye as they passed through the city center. Pedestrians walked by wearing long coats or thick, short jackets. Their necks were hunched over and their red noses protruded from their faces due to the cold weather.

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't tell if it was because of the freezing temperatures or simply their demeanor, but everyone seemed unapproachable.

"Do you get this kind of cold weather often?"

Vasily suddenly stopped talking about his trip to Japan when asked this unexpected question. He smiled widely, undeterred by the interruption.

"It's been pretty mild lately. Even though it's winter, it's only around -15 degrees Celsius. It's quite bearable."

Kwon Taek Joo shuddered at the thought of extreme temperatures dropping down to -40 degrees Celsius. Vasily continued to ramble on about various topics without much direction.

"Sometimes people say that Moscow is extremely cold, but they haven't experienced the real cold. In Irkutsk and Verkhoyansk, temperatures can range from -20 to -45 degrees Celsius. Compared to that, isn't

Moscow much more bearable? Of course, it's not as warm as Tokyo where the temperature always stays above 0 degrees, but if such weather were to happen in Russia, even the neighbor's dog would laugh at it."

Taekjoo lifted his gaze to the front and saw a seemingly endless line of cars, like a never-ending parade. They must be stuck in traffic during rush

If the plane had arrived on time, this would not have happened. It's all that damn drunk's fault.

Kwon Taek Joo should have smacked him a little harder. Vasily turned to exchange a few words with the man sitting in the driver's seat, then turned to Kwon Taek Joo and asked permission.

"If we keep going like this, I don't think we'll be able to move at all. How about taking a shortcut? This guy knows all the streets in Moscow. It's late at night, so Mr. Sakamoto is probably very hungry. Either way, I'm sure you must want to rest after a long flight.

That's good news worth hearing. Kwon Taek Joo did want to eat something quickly and head straight to bed immediately. He nodded several times to Vasily, who was asking him

"Is that okay?"

Upon receiving permission, the driver veered off the long line of cars and drove into a nearby side road. It was a narrow street with no clear demarcation between the roadway and the sidewalk, and the dimly lit street made it difficult to navigate. The car drove into the dark with its headlights on. A stray cat rummaging through the trash was startled by the light and scampered away.

Kwon Taek Joo's head spun to the window. It was only for a second but there was a shadow somewhere in the corner of his vision. He did another double take glance at the road they had just passed, but there was nothing there. He could have sworn he saw something resembling a human figure.

Was it just an illusion?

It's hard to be sure because the surroundings are so dark. But Kwon Taek Joo still felt an uncomfortable feeling that he couldn't shake off right away. He turned his head, slowly leaned back in the chair, and replied "it's nothing" when Vasily asked what was going wrong.

He gazed outside and suddenly noticed something. The car was still moving on the same road it had been on before. The buildings looked identical, and the alley was so dark that it was impossible to tell what was ahead. However, there was no mistaking it. Kwon Taek Joo muttered under his breath as he looked at the trash can that had just passed by.

"I think we're lost."

"Impossible. We're going the right way."

"No, this is clearly the same road we were on before. The trash can on the left is the same as the one we saw not long ago. The location of the stains on it, the overflowing trash, and even the lid of the trash can are all the same. There's also the building behind it. The cracks in its outside wall, the color of the bricks, and the shape of the window frames, even the laundry and flower pots hanging all over it - it's no different from what I saw earlier."

Kwon Taek Joo compared and confirmed the details of the scene outside the window with his past memories. Vasily listened silently and then laughed.

".You have a good eye."

The sudden shift in tone from goodwill and excessive generosity to a fishy one is never a good sign.

Kwon Taek Joo felt that strange sensation of being watched and pulled out the Colt without hesitation. The sound of reloading was heard and the trigger was pulled halfway. He made eye contact with the man sitting in the driver's seat through the rearview mirror.

"Stop the car. Now."

## Chapter 1.5 – New Mission: First Meeting

A low, commanding voice rang out. The man sitting in the driver's seat obediently followed instructions. The moving sedan stopped in the middle of a narrow alley. Vasily did not resist and raised both hands.

"You have quite a dangerous toy there, Mr. Sakamoto."

"Who exactly are you guys?"

"I told you. My name is Vasily Alexandrovich, and I've come to escort you"

"Alexandrovich has nothing to do with Gazprom, right?"

"Maybe."

Before the Kwon Taek Joo could say anything, the backseat door was flung open, and man shoved his way into the car and grabbed Kwon Taek Joo. In his hand was a Tokarev, a Russian rapid-fire pistol. The black muzzle of the gun immediately touched Kwon Taek Joo's temple. Not only that, a red dot flew out from somewhere and hovered near his left chest. He was completely surrounded. Kwon Taek Joo clenched his teeth in tension.

"Wouldn't it be better to stay silent, Mr. Sakamoto?"

Vasily hummed as if singing, word by word. There were no clues as to who he was. What could Vasily's goal be? Well, one thing was clear: Kwon Taek Joo had to get out of this bad situation immediately.

But how?

Even if he attempted to move a muscle, his head and chest would be blown off. Kwon Taek Joo rolled his eyes in frustration as he looked around the dark alley. The only thing illuminating the dark alley was the sedan's headlights. No, there was also a light inside the car illuminating Vasily's smiling face.

"Don't do anything funny. Or else, your head will..."

Vasily's warning cut off as a gunshot echoed through the air, causing Kwon Taek Joo to instinctively jerk his upper body downwards. In the blink of an eye, the car plunged into darkness as a bullet shattered the back seat window without warning.

Before they could even process what was happening, another sniper shot tore through the air from a nearby rooftop, followed by clear gunshots and vicious cracking sounds that seemed to never end. The inside of the car was consumed by chaos and panic.

After that momentary commotion, there was an overwhelming silence. There was no movement around the car. The sniper slowly moved the barrel of the gun and in a matter of seconds, all was still. The snipers had done their damage and now lay in wait with their guns trained on the car. Sensing the threat, the driver hit the gas and veered down a narrow alleyway without turning on their headlights. The car careened out of control, smashing into trash cans and buildings along the way as bullets rained down upon them.

"If you don't want to end up like them, you better listen to me,

Kwon Taek Joo wiped blood from his face, seething with rage at the man who had used him as a shield before being shot dead. And Vasily, lying on the dashboard with a bullet through his skull, was no better off. But amidst the chaos and danger, Kwon Taek Joo remained calm and in control.

The drenched driver continued to steer the sedan without resisting, afraid of what might happen if he did. Kwon Taek Joo wrapped his arms around the driver's neck from behind and directed their movements.

The problem was that no matter how hard they drove, they couldn't reach the main road. The snipers were still lurking in the distance and it was impossible to know if there was a dead end ahead.

Suddenly, something swift and agile darted between buildings - an existence that Kwon Taek Joo had seen not too long ago. Was it a cat? No, it was much larger and heavier. And its movements became even more agile.

Kwon Taek Joo looked around frantically, trying to spot the creature that had disappeared into the darkness. But it was nowhere to be seen. Once could have been an illusion, but not twice. He turned uncomfortably in his seat and scanned his surroundings.

Then, a sedan suddenly emerged from the next alley, accompanied by a loud bang. The car jolted forward and the backseat, where Kwon Taek Joo was sitting, lifted into the air for a brief moment that felt like an eternity. In that split second, everything seemed to freeze as the car flipped over and Kwon Taek Joo's body slammed against the window, showering him in shards of broken glass. As the car spun out of control, Kwon Taek Joo's vision quickly turned upside down before coming to a stop with a thud.

Time seemed to stand still as the silence was abruptly shattered by a sudden noise. Someone was trying to escape by kicking the completely deformed door multiple times. The door gave in and burst open and a figure crawled out, gasping for air.

It was Kwon Taek Joo.

As he tried to stand up, his head spun with pain and disorientation. He had hit his head during the crash and now suffered from a mild concussion.

Even in his dazed state, Kwon Taek Joo knew that he had to act quickly. He stumbled towards the car, his hands shaking as he clung to the metal frame for support. Through the shattered window, he could see blood splattered everywhere - there was no way the driver could have survived.

And then he noticed the other car, motionless and silent. What was going on? Who were these people and why were they trying to kidnap him - or more accurately, Hiro Sakamoto? They must have known about his schedule and background, meaning they were not just ordinary criminals. Did this have something to do with the Russian government or Gazprom holding Japanese officials hostage?

It seems a tad unfair that Kwon Taek Joo was taking the fall for the actions of the real Hiro Sakamoto. It's unfortunate that he has been

caught up in such a chaotic and movie-like scenario right after arriving in Russia, especially after all the hard work he put in to get here

Kwon Taek Joo shook his head in frustration as he made his way to the back of the car to retrieve his luggage. But before he could open the trunk, a harsh voice cut through the air.

"Hands up."

He froze, feeling a cold shiver run down his spine at the sound of guns being reloaded behind him. Any sudden movement could be fatal.

Slowly, with a mix of fear and annoyance, Kwon Taek Joo raised his hands and turned around. The sight of the man holding a gun made his blood run cold - it was the same man he had encountered earlier, the one working with Vasily.

What could he do in this situation? His eyes darted around, searching for a solution, but all he saw was the familiar Colt lying at the man's feet. Without thinking, he slowly started moving towards it.

"Stop right there! Don't try anything stupid."

The man's voice shook with nerves, despite having the upper hand. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but feel a glimmer of hope - maybe this wouldn't be as difficult as he thought. But before he could reach the gun, a sudden grip on his neck jerked him backward.

"Take off your coat. I don't know what else you're hiding inside."

Kwon Taek Joo's heart raced. He couldn't recognize the face, but he knew it must be the sniper who had been after him earlier. Without thinking, Kwon Taek Joo quickly shed his jacket, leaving his right arm free for action.

With lightning speed, he feigned pulling out his arm and instead pulled the whole jacket towards him, using the distraction to grab the sniper's rifle. But as he struggled to gain control of the weapon, an explosion rang out and the sniper groaned in pain. Kwon Taek Joo took advantage of the chaos and ran as fast as he could, leaving the dead body of the sniper behind.

"Get him!"

His pursuers were not far behind, shooting wildly in every direction. Kwon Taek Joo sprinted through alleys and streets, narrowly avoiding bullets that left bullet holes in buildings around him. He had no time to stop and think, only to keep moving and find a way out of this deadly chase.

The advantage of being surrounded by darkness also posed a disadvantage - there was hardly anywhere to hide or take cover. Each time he reached an open space, bullets would narrowly miss him and leave holes in nearby buildings.

As he continued forward, a truck suddenly appeared before him and he rolled over its hood to lessen the impact. Four doors opened simultaneously and armed men emerged from within - even the sniper who had been chasing Kwon Taek Joo was among them. They exchanged words before pointing their guns at him without hesitation.

"...Dammit."

After battling with one opponent, another one appeared and it continued in a never-ending cycle. Kwon Taek Joo had to keep fighting off his attackers. Frustrated and tired, he took a few steps back and started running again, cursing under his breath. He ran for a while until he reached an open space where he saw an abandoned building under construction.

The building had no front or rear walls, only a bare frame remained. The place was littered with construction materials such as cement and steel frames. Kwon Taek Joo knew that he had no time to waste and quickly decided to hide in the building. He descended the dusty stairs and climbed up to the 4th floor, finally catching his breath and allowing his heart rate to slow down. Despite wearing only a thin shirt, he didn't feel cold.

A group of people who had been chasing Kwon Taek Joo eventually arrived under the building. After counting, Kwon Taek Joo realized that there were only four people in the group. This made him wonder about the fifth person. Kwon Taek Joo leaned his back against the wall next to

the stairs and listened carefully to the movements below. He heard someone approaching him secretly and quietly took off his belt, holding it with both hands in preparation for any situation.

Soon, the muzzle of a rifle protruded from the wall as he climbed each step. Not missing that moment, Kwon Taek Joo threw the buckle of the belt horizontally. The belt came off and wrapped around the barrel of the gun again due to the recoil force and returned to Kwon Taek Joo's hand. He immediately grabbed it and tugged on it.

Bang bang bang bang.

Bullets were fired continuously from the rifle upward. Kwon Taek Joo suddenly released one side of the belt he was pulling tight and swung it with all his might. The belt whipped the back of the man's hand like a whip. The man screamed violently and dropped the gun. Kwon Taek Joo kicked the rifle forward that had just fallen to the floor and wrapped his belt around the neck of the man trying to pick it up. The strangled man struggled with his legs.

"Ugh!"

Kwon Taek Joo put more effort into tightening the belt. The man's body trembled and then went limp. When Kwon Taek Joo loosened his grip, the man fell to his knees. Kwon Taek Joo hurled a kick and the man collapsed onto the ground.

Footsteps echoed from downstairs. It seemed like a whole group of people were pouring in after hearing the gunshots earlier. The gun was lying in a position facing the stairs. If he doesn't pick it up in time, Kwon Taek Joo won't be able to shoot back and he will become a dead man. He couldn't fight off an armed group with just bare hands.

Kwon Taek Joo inhaled another deep breath and quickly moved to the other side. The group had almost climbed the stairs when he picked up the rifle that had fallen on the floor. When one of the men spotted Kwon Taek Joo from the front, the supposed leader signaled to raise their guns.

But Kwon Taek Joo pulled the trigger first. Gunshots rang out one after another, two men fell down screaming in despair. The bullets fired from

the other two's guns which accidentally hit the ceiling.

Without a second thought, Kwon Taek Joo discarded his rifle, which now only held an empty magazine, and moved forward. Two more names had been taken care of; he mentally calculated the remaining targets and kept a watchful eye on the area below.

Suddenly, he lifted his head up. Something else had immediately caught his attention. But when Kwon Taek Joo turned back to look, there was no one there. Why did he keep seeing these insignificant things? Perhaps it was due to the stress weighing heavily on him, as his breaths were louder than usual. He also couldn't shake that annoying sixth sense.

Once again, Kwon Taek Joo stood up and gazed across at the building in front of him. The distance was too great, making the figure on the rooftop seem blurry and indistinct. He strained his eyes to get a better look, but the hulking silhouette quickly vanished from his view.

As he mulled over these thoughts at the wrong time, he suddenly found himself under attack from below. Bullets whizzed through the air, turning the spot where he had just been standing into a cloud of dust. Kwon Taek Joo frantically dodged the gunfire while searching for signs of his assailant.

The remaining two attackers had formulated a plan. One of them leapt into the building while the other raised his gun and aimed it towards Kwon Taek Joo. Desperately looking around for a way to fight back, he realized there was nowhere to hide and no weapon within reach.

Just as he thought all hope was lost, a gunshot rang out from below. Kwon Taek Joo froze, straining his ears to listen for any further sounds. In an instant, a blood-curdling scream pierced through the air.

"HELP!"

Or perhaps it was more of a roar than a cry for help. It didn't sound very far away... maybe somewhere just below him. Kwon Taek Joo waited anxiously, but there were no further sounds. He cautiously peered outside the building to assess the situation. The man who had been waiting outside also appeared bewildered by the sudden gunshots and

screams. As soon as he spotted Kwon Taek Joo, he raised his gun and fired.

Instinctively, Kwon Taek Joo leapt out of the way to avoid the bullet. He had no idea what was happening. But soon enough, even the man outside had entered the building. Kwon Taek Joo could hear leisurely footsteps ascending the stairs, drawing closer and closer until they reached the fourth floor.

With no other options left, he reached for something on his sleeve and yanked it off. A button detached from his clothing, revealing a long thin string attached to it with a small mechanical sound.

It was a mini bomb. Kwon Taek Joo only had one chance to use it, and he hoped it would be enough to end this crisis.

But that person didn't appear for quite a while. The surrounding was coated in silence as if Kwon Taek Joo was the only person in the building. He couldn't even hear his breathing, let alone the footsteps that were chasing him.

What happened?

Was the person hiding somewhere and waiting for Kwon Taek Joo to make the first move? Kwon Taek Joo peered out from the corner, looking around at the clearing. There was not a single person in sight. Unanswered questions began to flood Kwon Taek Joo 's mind.

The silence was shattered when something shot out right next to his face. Kwon Taek Joo spun around in that direction, stiffened and was unable to move. What was being stretched out was a human arm.

And the person hanging from the end of his arm was the man who rushed into the building earlier. Kwon Taek Joo could only recognize his identity based on the outfit he was wearing, because his face was being squeezed by that large hand. More precisely, long, straight fingers were stuck in that man's eyeballs. The man was pushed out of the building almost floating because his fingers had gone through his eyes and got stuck in his eye sockets. His legs trembled in the air.

"Ah ah... ugh...cough..."

A wheezing groan came from the man's mouth. Kwon Taek Joo's eyebrows furrowed. His body felt frozen. He didn't dare turn his head to see who that monster-like hand belonged to. This was not a matter of courage but of instinctive refusal. He didn't even dare to breathe.

The owner of the monster-like arm did not prolong the situation any longer. He shook off the man hanging on his finger like he was removing a strand of hair stuck to his body. Without the slightest hesitation. The man kept falling. A thud rang out from under the building.

The last man standing was Kwon Taek Joo. Well, scratch that, there was that unidentified murderer hanging around.

Kwon Taek Joo could tell without looking back that he was within range where the stranger could grab him simply by extending his arms. He could feel those predatory eyes slide down his hidden form like a hungry animal looking for prey. Kwon Taek Joo firmly believed that the disappearing form he had seen since the start of his kidnapping belonged to this person.

Kwon Taek Joo squeezed his eyes shut and then slowly opened them, trying to regain his composure. His senses began to awaken, one by one. Finally, he could perceive the towering shadow that loomed above him. The pungent scent hit his nose, numbing it with its cold energy that could suppress all air currents.

With clenched fists, Kwon Taek Joo knew he had to act fast. He couldn't let this skilled killer get close enough to detonate the bomb, or else his limbs would be ripped apart. But at the moment, he had a more pressing concern - ensuring his own head stayed attached to his body. With determination in his heart, Kwon Taek Joo turned around.

But before he could do anything, the hand holding the bomb was grabbed and suddenly everything was upside down. The bomb slipped out of his hand and flew away as he braced himself for impact. But instead of pain and destruction, there was only a loud explosion from under the building. The heat enveloped him as his last defense crumbled.

Kwon Taek Joo's head hit the rough cement floor and all he saw were a pair of long, straight legs wearing crocodile leather shoes with a pointed toe - something he had only seen in magazines. Its luxurious appearance reminded him of a crocodile's smooth skin, making it even more memorable.

A luxury item like this was not fitting for a murderer's feet.

His first words were:

"You got something dirty on your clothes. Don't mind taking it off?"

Surprisingly, his voice was not as deep and intimidating as Kwon Taek Joo had expected; he seemed quite young. But what was he asking to be taken off? The only thing that could be considered dirty was the hand that had just stabbed someone else's eye.

A vague idea crossed Kwon Taek Joo's mind, but he pushed it away. If this bastard took away even the remaining shirt, he would freeze to death before being killed by him.

However, it seemed that the young man was not a patient one. While Kwon Taek Joo continued to feign ignorance, an object with a familiar texture pressed against his head - a Colt revolver.

"Damn it."

Kwon Taek Joo cursed under his breath and began to unbutton his shirt. With his right arm still firmly gripped by the young man, he could only use his left hand. The new fabric was stiff, making it difficult for him to unbutton even the second button. Just when he thought he was making progress, the young man suddenly grabbed the back of his shirt and ripped it open. The buttons flew off and hit Kwon Taek Joo on the chin and cheek with great force. Something cold replaced his hand and wrapped around his wrist as he pulled away - handcuffs. The other end of the handcuffs was attached to an iron bar nearby, leaving Kwon Taek Joo's head still resting on the floor.

The young man moved leisurely and slowly, casting a long shadow over Kwon Taek Joo's body. When he finally stopped moving, Kwon Taek Joo

saw that his now ruined shirt was stained with blood and other bodily fluids.

Next he took a deep breath and exhaled longer. Looks like he's smoking or something. With his slowing breathing, the delicate scent emanating from him became even more intense.

He then heard the young man take a deep breath before exhaling longer than usual - perhaps he was smoking something. With each breath, the unique scent emanating from him became even more intense. It was not the usual smell of nicotine; it was darker, deeper, and spicier. Kwon Taek Joo could almost feel the moisture in that scent. Suddenly, something fell into his inverted vision - the tip of a handmade cigar left behind after being smoked.

As soon as the young man finished smoking, he turned around and left without a word. His straight legs walked away slowly and gradually, showing no intention of retrieving the handcuffs. He was quite tall, and it took a while for Kwon Taek Joo to see the back of his head before he disappeared down the stairs.

Only when the mysterious man's presence completely vanished could Kwon Taek Joo finally let out a breath. His whole body had become weak and feeble. Even his goosebumps had retreated as if his skin was freezing and cracking from the cold wind blowing against it. "Damn it," Kwon Taek Joo cursed again, frustrated with himself as he lay on the floor.

Before long, the sound of a familiar siren reached his ears from afar, gradually getting closer.

It was the sound of a police car approaching.

## **Chapter 1.6 – New Mission: Cohiba Behike Limited Edition**

Kwon Taek Joo was detained at the police station for a long time. A policeman passing by gave him a thick blanket. He didn't know when it was washed last, but a musty smell hit his nose. And despite the heater being switched on, the coldness still filled the room. Kwon Taek Joo had no choice but to cover himself with something.

So he cocooned himself in the blanket and peered down at his throbbing wrist, which had just been bandaged. The murderer's fingerprints were still there.

While receiving first aid, Kwon Taek Joo was not aware of his dislocated wrist until the medical staff noticed it. He laughed to himself as he struggled to move his injured hand that had been bandaged.

It was a bewildering and unexpected turn of events - being kidnapped and then saved by a stranger who disappeared just as quickly. He couldn't even say if he was truly "saved" considering the state of his now injured wrist and the danger he was in. If the police hadn't arrived on time, he could have ended up frozen to death.

Was that man even human? How could he break a grown man's wrist with just a firm grip? Kwon Taek Joo prided himself on his strong muscles, but even his strength paled in comparison to this mysterious savior.

Just as Kwon Taek Joo was lost in thought, the person in charge returned and took a seat, causing the old chair to creak. He spoke of the incident as if it were a battle due to the large sum of money involved - 10 trillion won. Despite being a civil servant, his eyes lit up at the mention of such immense profits. Kwon Taek Joo remained silent and only glanced discontentedly at the clock on the wall, eager to return to his hotel.

Finally, the official calmed down and expressed his hopes that this incident would not create any tension between Russia and Korea. He promised to investigate and find out who was behind the attack. With that, Kwon Taek Joo was allowed to leave by another superior who was heading out for dinner.

"My baggage..."

"Oh, you mean the bag in their car? If that's the case, I would have brought it over for you. I checked to make sure there were no bombs or tracking devices inside. You don't need to thank me for these small things."

It seems like I should thank you after all.

Kwon Taek Joo nodded and rose from his seat. Just as the police officer had mentioned, a bag was placed right in front of the door. Kwon Taek Joo quickly snatched it up and left the office. He descended the stairs, trying to find his way back to the hotel, with the persistent police officer following closely behind him. Kwon Taek Joo tried to ignore him, thinking he just happened to be heading in the same direction. However, the officer continued to follow at a safe distance. Eventually, Kwon Taek Joo stopped walking and turned around.

"Something wrong? "

The officer responded calmly, "You were targeted once before, and there's no guarantee it won't happen again. Now that their accomplice is dead, they might seek even more revenge. So I'll take you back to your hotel safely."

Then, as if it was his habit, he added, "You don't have to thank me."

But of course, I still should thank you.

The policeman led the way without waiting for confirmation from Kwon Taek Joo and said, "This way." Unnecessary kindness was nothing but a nuisance, but the current Kwon Taek Joo was going by Hiro Sakamoto - a civilian who had been suddenly kidnapped and whose life had been threatened. He had no reason to refuse protection from public authorities, so he reluctantly accepted the officer's offer of goodwill.

In the parking lot there was a Volga with paint peeling off one side and dented in many places, looking like it was at least 15 years old and been through hell. Kwon Taek Joo took out a decent set of clothes from his bag and put them on. The police officer struggled to pry open the damaged trunk and managed to push Kwon Taek Joo's bag inside, then he made himself comfortable in the driver's seat. Switching on the ignition, the old car body vibrated to life.

Kwon Taek Joo hesitated before deciding to sit in the back seat of the car. He knew that a little disrespect wouldn't kill him, but he also knew that Japanese people valued politeness and avoiding inconvenience. After sighing as if he were dying, he finally opened the passenger door.

As he accidentally sat down and put his hand under his butt, Kwon Taek Joo felt something spreading underneath and pulled out a sock. The police officer quickly grabbed it and threw it back into the mess of bread crumbs, paper cups, and adult magazines strewn across the dashboard.

"I thought you only worked with paperwork, but I guess you're also into sports?" the officer remarked, quickly trying to cover his embarrassment.

It was clear that he had noticed Kwon Taek Joo's toned body from working manual labor instead of being desk-bound all day. He shrugged and said that physical strength was important for sitting for long periods of time. Even as they spoke, Kwon Taek Joo's ears still felt hot and itchy.

After some time passed and they still hadn't left the police station due to a problem with the rear wheel that needed replacing, Kwon Taek Joo considered taking a taxi home. However, the officer insisted on driving him home for safety reasons regarding the ongoing investigation. Finally, after a new tire was replaced, they were able to leave the station.

"Go back to your hotel, try not to think about anything and just rest. If you can't sleep, have a glass of vodka; it helps sometimes. We will make sure to properly punish those responsible for causing you trouble," the officer reassured Kwon Taek Joo.

But then, he suddenly tilted his head in confusion.

"What did you say earlier? About another person at the scene besides the deceased wearing luxury cowhide shoes? And how it smelled bad? That person gouged out the eyes of another and caused them to fall off the building, right?"

During his time at the police station, Kwon Taek Joo had repeatedly told the officers what he saw at the scene. However, it seemed like they didn't pay much attention as the officer in charge couldn't remember any of it accurately. It felt as though everything he said was just empty words. But then again, Kwon Taek Joo wasn't expecting much from the start.

"Not cow leather shoes but crocodile leather."

"Maybe it's just its shape like that. Crocodile-style cowhide shoes"

"Definitely crocodile leather, I'm not wrong. I don't remember the exact brand but the price must be at least 250,000 rubles. Dark brown color, size from US 13 to 14. good condition as if it was just taken out of the box. That means the shoes haven't been used for long or they were recently purchased. That means the person must be quite wealthy."

Kwon Taek Joo angrily tried to explain but realized he had revealed too much. Before he knew it, the police officer threw a surprised look at him. Kwon Taek Joo coughed, averting his gaze before adding how it was a product he had been hoping to buy.

Although not an entirely unreasonable statement, the policeman still couldn't take his eyes off him, looking at him suspiciously before laughing.

"Ok, fine. Let's call it crocodile skin.

His words sounded like he was trying to come to a compromise with all of his generosity. Kwon Taek Joo felt uncomfortable and decided to change his shirt. It seemed that unnecessary things were causing him to become more difficult. Even though he tried to remain calm, he couldn't shake the discomfort. If he continued to suppress his anger, it would eventually explode.

The police car stopped suddenly, bringing Kwon Taek Joo back to reality. He couldn't hold it in anymore and spoke up.

"Not only is it not a stinky smell, but it also smells like something burning. It's not just a regular cigarette, it's more like a hand-rolled cigar."

"Yeah, I'll take note of that too.

He replied absentmindedly. For some reason, the police officer didn't seem concerned about the murderer who had boldly appeared in the middle of the city; instead, he seemed very interested in Japanese women. Along the way, he kept asking questions about whether or not they served their husbands like a boss and if their kimono sashes were mats they could lay on.

Kwon Taek Joo was sure this Russian policeman would never catch the murderer.

After enduring what felt like an eternity, they finally arrived at a luxurious hotel.

"Here we are. We don't know when they'll try to target you again, so it's best for you to change locations if possible. If you need a personal bodyguard, you can contact me privately. I'll do my best to help you out. Don't worry about paying for anything now; just buy me some wine later as a thank you."

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't even muster up a fake smile anymore. He used all his energy to force a stiff grin.

"I'll think about it. Today has been quite eventful already."

"Don't worry about it; it's just Russian hospitality. No need to thank me."

Why did he keep saying that?

Kwon Taek Joo nodded and quickly left, feeling creeped out by the officer's invitation to drink together.

He walked into the lobby where a porter took his bag from his hand. The hotel was less than an hour away from the airport, but due to the

flight delay, kidnapping, and investigation, he arrived half a day later than expected. Kwon Taek Joo was completely exhausted as he slowly made his way to the reception desk.

"Welcome"

The employee skipped the customary greeting and silently took his passport and credit card. They checked the information quickly and handed him his room key.

Kwon Taek Joo intended to go straight to his assigned room but hesitated. After a moment of thought, he turned back to ask.

"Is there a shop nearby that sells handmade cigars?"

"We have handmade cigars available at our hotel shop. We offer a wide variety of products so you can find one that suits your taste perfectly. Just come back here; I'll give you a tour of our facilities."

The employee pulled out a catalog and pointed in the direction of the shop. Even though he was exhausted and just wanted to rest, he couldn't shake this feeling of unease. It was better to confirm a few things before his real mission began; once it did, he wouldn't have time for anything else.

Kwon Taek Joo quickly found the shop selling handmade cigars. The beautiful exterior and high-quality products displayed in the window immediately caught his eye. Without hesitation, he walked inside.

"Are you looking for anything in particular?"

"Yes. There's one I remember by its scent but not the brand."

Kwon Taek Joo surveyed the shop with a focussed expression. The employee slightly arched his dark eyebrows and walked out to the display counter.

"Cuban cigars are renowned for being the best in the world. Although there are various brands, most of the cigars found here are of Cuban origin. It's worth noting that 100% handmade cigars are not necessarily produced on a small scale. The cigar in front of you is 'Macanudo',

which is the top-selling cigar in the United States. Being a popular choice, it is perfect for beginners due to its mild flavor".

Ha, it seems like Kwon Taek Joo was being considered a beginner. He looked at the 'Macanudo' the seller gave him.

"How much does this cost?"

"It costs \$7 a cigarette. It's very affordable."

"So that's probably not it."

He returned the cigar. The employee placed it on the shelf and inquired about it again.

"Hmm.. could you tell more about the Cigar you're looking for?"

He smiled curiously. It seemed that the salesman was very interested in the challenge of finding a specific cigar variety among the dozens or hundreds of options, based solely on the scents he encountered.

It was like a puzzle that was associated with the pride of experts.

"That's what someone wearing \$4k worth of shoes would smoke."

"Considering the fact shoes are quite an consumer item so it seems the person is quite wealthy. Such people usually look for the highest quality in everything. All the products here are good, but there are some that are exceptional. This masterpiece is called 'Romeo and Julieta'. Its flavor is spicy and rich. You can also feel the smell of damp earth, mushroom and sweet honey."

"While it did smell moist, it wasn't earthy or mushroomy. And I picked up some sweetness but it was far from that of Honey,"

"Then, it wouldn't be El Rey del Mundo if it didn't smell earthy. Did you smell burnt wood? What about leather?"

"Yes. I think it's closer to the smell of burning wood. It didn't smell like leather"

"Was that smell very strong?"

"Umm... not very strong."

"Then it wouldn't be a Montecristo, but what about Bodhi? Was the whole thing a long cylinder? Or is the head and feet both pointed?"

"All I saw was the residue left after smoking. It was blunt. It also had an aromatic scent.

"Ah, if so, is it really this one?"

The employee smiled gleefully and took out a box of cigars. Although Kwon Taek Joo did not specifically ask, the seller explained in detail.

"It's called Cohiba Behike. Its characteristics are a deep and delicate scent. It has an Aroma that is both strong and sweet, but also subtle enough to create a wonderful overall flavor. Do you want to try?"

Kwon Taek Joo nodded silently. The seller lit 'Cohiba Behike' with a specialized cigar lighter. Unlike a regular cigarette, the tip of a cigar burned slowly as if a fallen leaf had just caught fire. The ash did not fall to the floor but remains sticky and retains its shape.

Kwon Taek Joo actually enjoyed the aroma of the cigar filling his mouth. Kwon Taek Joo could even smell the smoke when looking at the burning cigar. But in the end he shook his head.

"It's similar, but a little different."

"How is it different?"

"The overall feeling is quite similar. But the smell of the cigar I smelled at that time was a bit stronger and the Aroma fragrance seemed more intense. Furthermore, this cigar does not smell damp."

"If you smelled a wet cigar, it's because the person might have dipped it into a little bit of Cognac little before lighting it. The distinct flavor of the cognac blends well with the aroma of the cigar."

The salesman signaled Kwon Taek Joo to wait a moment and then went inside. A moment later he returned with a glass of wine in his hand, which appeared to be cognac. He used a knife to cut off the burning end of the cigar and poured cognac on it, then lit it again and gave it to Kwon Taek Joo.

"How was it this time?"

"It's more similar. But there's still something different."

The salesperson's face looked confused by the disappointing response. He muttered to himself while stroking his wrinkled eyebrows like a habit.

"Similar scent means it's the same cigar, but it's much darker and stronger than this... Then I can only think of one."

"What is that?"

Kwon Taek Joo asked again. The salesman rubbed his chin and pondered a bit more before opening his mouth.

"Cohiba cigars are typically made by brewing the main ingredient, tobacco leaves, twice. However, a few years ago, a limited edition 'Cohiba Behike' was produced and sold to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the birth of Cohiba cigars. This special cigar is said to be made by aging the highest quality tobacco leaves three times, while keeping them in the right humidity and temperature to produce the best flavor. Once completed, it is stored in a cigar box and aged for 6 years to further enhance the flavor. Unfortunately, this cigar is only sold in Spain and is limited to 4 thousand packs. Many cigar enthusiasts have tried to get their hands on it, but due to its limited edition status, it is quite expensive, priced at \$400 per cigar. The unique characteristic of this limited edition product is that it has a stronger aroma than regular Cohiba products, with a richer scent".

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Kwon Taek Joo's eyebrows furrowed.

So he wears shoes that cost four thousand dollars, and smokes four hundred dollars cigars. Such a wealthy environment must have turned him into a monster."

"Do you have any in store?"

"I wish I could see it with my own eyes."

The salesman smiled helplessly. Regardless, thanks to the salesman, Kwon Taek Joo's answers were resolved. He took out a few bills and

held them out with the intention of giving a reward (tip). Doing the math, three \$10 bills seem to be enough.

"You don't have to do that. You didn't even find the product you wanted."

"Then I'll take this. I must have bothered you, but thank you."

Kwon Taek Joo picked up a \$20 handmade cigar nearby and left the store. There are only four thousand packs of 'Cohiba Behike' in the world.

He has quite the taste for a crazy lunatic.

## **Chapter 1.7 – New Mission: Face to Face**

Kwon Taek Joo strode into the room and disregarded the bag sitting before him. He simply stripped off his clothes and headed to the bathroom, turning on the shower and letting the hot water cascade over his head. As he stood motionless under the soothing heat, he let out a deep breath and leaned against the wall, taking a moment to gather his thoughts.

He agreed with the police's theory that the kidnapping upon his arrival in Russia was linked to those opposing the energy facility contract. That much was clear. But what puzzled him was the presence of crocodile leather shoes at the scene. Who was that person, and what was their intention? They had ultimately helped him, but Kwon Taek Joo couldn't be sure if they were truly an ally or not. Did they never have any plans to harm him, or were they simply unable to due to the sudden arrival of the police?

Just thinking about them being so close behind him made him feel suffocated. It was as if there was a dangerous predator lurking nearby, ready to attack at any moment. Kwon Taek Joo felt completely defenseless and vulnerable in this barbaric world. It was a new experience for him to not even consider fighting back. Despite his efforts to survive, he was easily overpowered.

Pointed shoes, the scent of cigars, a calm demeanor masking violent tendencies - it all made Kwon Taek Joo shudder. The attacker didn't just overpower their victims; they seemed to relish instilling fear and slowly destroying their prey.

Shaking his head, Kwon Taek Joo forced himself to push away these haunting memories. If they were unpleasant, it was best to forget them quickly.

Finishing his shower as quickly as possible, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't stand the discomfort from the bandage around his arm any longer.

Without much thought, he removed the wet bandage, wincing slightly at the pain in his wrist.

He then proceeded to peel off the artificial skin covering his face, revealing his refreshed appearance. After quickly washing his face and hair, he put on a robe and stepped out of the bathroom.

Opening his bag, Kwon Taek Joo noticed that it had been jostled around like himself, with various items scattered inside. Among the pile of clothes were razors, game consoles, watches, tablets, cameras - all high-end gadgets. He lined them up and took out a small screwdriver from his toolbox before starting to disassemble each item. In no time, he had brand new devices.

Using a small device that could connect to his phone, he accessed a secure messaging application through a laptop connected to the hotel's communication network. This high-tech device changed IP addresses periodically, making it difficult for anyone to eavesdrop or hack into their conversation. Logging into the application, Kwon Taek Joo was immediately connected to headquarters where Chief Lim appeared on the screen with a scowl.

"You're late," he scolded him.

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but complain back.

"If you wanted me to stay incognito, shouldn't you have chosen someone more subtle?

"You have to be valuable enough to be kidnapped to meet high-ranking people

."

"It seems like you knew this was going to happen, huh?"

"I just figured it could happen. Because you are an excellent agent, even if you are in danger, I believe you will survive."

Prick.

What happened? Apparently you said Gazprom would pick me up."

"Ah, yes

. That party contacted me and said they would send someone to the airport."

"Did you really receive contact from Gazprom?"

"What are you trying to say? His identity was almost compromised. They waited for a long time, then claimed he didn't show up and immediately contacted the Itochu Group. I intercepted the call and blocked it. I heard your flight was delayed due to chaos on the plane? It seems there was an issue with the Gazprom staff who were supposed to pick him up from the airport. I also heard that an Asian man who arrived in Russia before you took on the identity of Hiro Sakamoto. It wasn't until later that we realized he was not actually Hiro Sakamoto. In the meantime, he was kidnapped by a fake employee."

Kwon Taek Joo pieced together the events that had happened on the plane - a drunk Russian man causing trouble and Kwon Taek Joo arriving late to meet Vasily, who turned out to be a false Gazprom representative.

"But this all took longer than expected, right?"

"There was a minor disturbance on the plane," Kwon Taek Joo replied.

"Did another drunk person cause trouble again?" he asked.

"How did you know that?" Kwon Taek Joo asked, surprised.

He remembered his encounter with Vasily and responded, "Because it's the same group, right?"

Frustration and anger bubbled up inside Kwon Taek Joo as he clenched his fists, but then he winced as pain shot through his wrist.

He glanced down at his arm, where a handprint bruise still remained from when the killer had grabbed him. The shame and embarrassment he had tried to push away resurfaced once again. He knew he had to expose the killer's true identity or else he would have to live with these feelings of defeat forever.

Kwon Taek Joo confided in Chief Lim about the murderer and his plan to use headquarters' resources to gather information. However, Chief Lim responded with disappointment.

"Let's think about this. If you didn't see his face, we have no way of confirming his identity. Our research shows that 4 thousand packs of cigars were sold, which means there could be up to 4 thousand buyers. Keeping track of all of them would take a lot of time and effort. Plus, the shoes he wore were not rare or limited edition."

Kwon Taek Joo opened his mouth to speak but then closed it again. He couldn't argue with Chief Lim's logic.

"It's only the first day and you're already facing so many challenges," Chief Lim commented, trying to console him.

Ignoring Chief Lim's attempt at comfort, Kwon Taek Joo buried his head in his hands in frustration. After observing him for a moment, Chief Lim leaned closer and spoke again.

"No matter how much you prefer to work alone, if you're struggling from the very beginning, how can I trust you in this unfamiliar place? I will be constantly worried about you."

"Why are you suddenly saying such discouraging things?" Kwon Taek Joo groaned.

"I've found someone who can help you."

"You never mentioned that before."

Kwon Taek Joo furrowed his brow. This mission was supposed to be carried out by himself alone, and yet now he was being informed of a partner at the last minute. It felt sneaky and underhanded. As he glared at the screen, Chief Lim continued talking without seeming to notice.

"This person not only knows the lay of the land, but also has an understanding of power dynamics and finances in that area. They will be a valuable asset. Based on the current situation, I believe they will contact you early the day after tomorrow. When I have a chance, I'll send you a photo of them so you can confirm their identity."

With a sly grin, he revealed his plans and then suddenly exclaimed, "Oh!" as if just remembering something.

"Since you'll be meeting with the people involved in the contract tomorrow, let's go over the details of the LNG equipment project."

The communication was cut off before Kwon Taek Joo could speak. A file arrived from Chief Lim. Kwon Taek Joo opened it with a disgruntled expression. Soon after, details of the contract signed between Russia and Japan and documents related to the construction of the LNG facility appeared in the form of a 527 page PDF file.

Kwon Taek Joo stared intently at the pile of documents filled with tiny words and then suddenly turned his head.

The soft bed without a single wrinkle was seducing him. But he had no other choice.

Kwon Taek Joo let out a sigh that made his shoulders droop and stood up. He opened the minibar and took out beer. drank half the can, then returned to the table. He took a deep breath and sat down. Finally, his academic skills become useful after a long time.

Kwon Taek Joo was sitting in the main restaurant looking extremely depressed. Key Russian and Japanese figures were expected to join him for lunch. Fortunately, the Japanese officials were not suspicious of him because he was just a lower-level employee. All he had to do was finish today's lunch safely and attend the celebration party that would be held in a few days. Once he left the gathering of Russian political and business tycoons, his role as Hiro Sakamoto would end.

Suddenly, Kwon Taek Joo looked at the clock. Although lunch was scheduled for noon, it was already past 12 and the Gazprom representative had not yet arrived. Those who arrived on time were forced to wait for about 30 minutes. The person in charge of Gazprom called the company several times to confirm. Kwon Taek Joo found this scene pitiful.

"... Mr. Sakamoto?"

Kwon Taek Joo was so distracted by that scene that he even missed a question from a Russian official.

"Yes? Ah, sorry. Could you say that again"

"I heard you ran into some bad luck on your arrival. Are you okay now?"

"Fortunately, the Russian police arrived just in time and made sure I was safe. One of the officers even kindly drove me to my hotel."

"I don't know how to apologize for what happened. I'm truly sorry for putting you through something like that."

"There's no need for you to apologize. It was my fault for not paying closer attention. I feel terrible about the whole situation."

Kwon Taek Joo responded courteously, but his eyes showed no remorse. He assured the person that everything was fine, but they continued to apologize. Even the Japanese delegation joined in on the apology, bowing their heads in unison and taking responsibility for scaring him.

Amidst the chaos of apologies, Kwon Taek Joo suddenly felt uncomfortable and excused himself with a wry smile, pretending to wash his hands before leaving the room. As soon as he closed the door, he let out a deep sigh and loosened his necktie.

However, his moment of peace was interrupted when he heard the CEO of Gazprom making an angry phone call in the hallway.

"Where is the chairman? Has he departed? Is he not coming?"

The patience until now suddenly melted into soap bubbles. Not long after, the employee broke out in his suppressed anger.

"Representative? What are you talking about? Which representative is coming??"

Exasperated by his lack of patience, Kwon Taek Joo strolled towards the bathroom, checking for any suspicious signs along the way. Once inside, he washed his hands and reflected on his recent activities - studying for the contract negotiations and greeting the Japanese delegation at the airport.

Despite cramming for the past two days, he was able to follow along with conversations thanks to reading previous contract documents. Just then, he heard someone talking outside the bathroom door. The voice sounded familiar but he couldn't quite place it until it spoke again from directly behind him.

“..No, I'm here, but it'll probably be boring.”

That sounded familiar, like something he's heard before.

It was a recent memory, but not too old. Kwon Taek Joo didn't hear it often enough to know it well, but the moment was so powerful it left an imprint on his mind. Kwon Taek Joo tried to remember where he heard it as the voice rang out again, directly behind him. ”

“Let's get one thing straight. If you're here to support me, what happened last time is enough.”

Kwon Taek Joo didn't need to look over to know...

It was him.

All of Kwon Taek Joo's senses sharpened at once when this realization fell upon him. His sense of smell was the first to awaken - the strong scent of wet leaves and burning cigar filled the air.

Cohiba Behike.

The smell was almost tangible, even though the other man hasn't lit a single cigar.

As the voice continued talking on the phone,

Kwon Taek Joo suddenly felt eyes on him. He didn't turn around or look in the mirror, but he knew someone was watching him.

A chill ran down his spine.

“That's enough... I know. Alright, I will call you later.”

The tone almost seemed longer than before. The call ended and the gaze became even more intense. Any stronger and Kwon Taek Joo's clothes would have melted off him.

Now they were alone in the closed bathroom. The person never took his gaze off his back as Kwon Taek Joo washed his hands, looking down and not recognizing himself in the mirror. The tension in the room grew thick as time passed in a painfully slow manner.

How long has it been? The man's footsteps start up again and the person walked over to the sink next to Kwon Taek Joo. Water started pouring with a click of a button and the man began to gently rub his hands together, intensifying the smell of Cohiba and bringing back memories of their first encounter.

Kwon Taek Joo inhaled, trying to act calmly by turning off the water tap and drying his hands with a towel he had prepared.

Why did the killer have to show up now of all times?

It couldn't just be a coincidence.

Considering their economic situations, it was not impossible for them to end up in the same place by chance. The only problem is that they're now locked in a small space together. Kwon Taek Joo could feel the weight of this situation and searched his brain to think of a way to escape..

Kwon Taek Joo's hand trembled as he tossed the wet towel into the trash, trying to contain his anger. But before he could even take a step away, a sudden word was hurled at him, catching him off guard and causing him to choke.

"Not even a hello to me? But I'm sure this isn't our first meeting."

The man's voice dripped with false politeness.

"I never knew Japanese people could be so rude", the man continued in a supposedly offended tone.

Kwon Taek Joo doesn't turn around or respond - he's afraid of what might happen if he acts too hastily. Even if something terrible happened here to him. It would be too late once someone found out.

The man continued in a sarcastic tone, "I thought Samurai had better manners."

No further words were exchanged as Kwon Taek Joo kept his back turned, channeling all of his senses into a controlled exit. The door slammed shut behind him, cutting off any lingering presence of the other man. Finally alone, Kwon Taek Joo let out a shaky breath, feeling his heart racing in his chest. This level of stress was unfamiliar to him, a foreign sensation that consumed him without warning. He couldn't remember the last time he had felt this on edge.

## Chapter 1.8 – New Mission: Zhenya

Kwon Taek Joo resisted the urge to sprint away from the threatening figure he had left behind as he fumbled for his phone, a strange mix of fear and annoyance coursing through him. Hiro Sakamoto's phone was in his outer pocket, so the current vibration must be coming from the phone used to contact headquarters.

His colleague, Manager Lim, had promised to send a photo of them participating in the campaign together. Kwon Taek Joo reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone, finding the promised photo from Chief Lim waiting for him.

It takes about 2 or 3 seconds for the display device to load the image on the screen. 1 second, 2 seconds, 3 seconds. Kwon Taek Joo clicked on the 'Download completed.'

The awaited photo quickly filled the screen.

"Hmm? It's me."

Kwon Taek Joo almost dropped the phone to the ground, because someone's voice suddenly interrupted.

Rolling his eyes, Kwon Taek Joo braced himself as a looming shadow approached from behind. The woody scent that filled the air paralyzed his senses, making it clear who this intimidating figure belonged to even before he turned around.

The Gazprom representatives never showed up. After waiting and socializing for a while, the group dispersed and the Japanese delegation retired to their rooms. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't even bring himself to enter his own room, instead pacing outside the door for what felt like hours.

Finally, summoning all his courage, he opened the door and immediately locked eyes with the man sitting by the window. The murderous bastard was sitting on the armrest of a chair and looking

out like he was some raring model. The person's presence was overwhelming, with broad shoulders and a strong back exuding power and pressure.

Golden-white hair caught the light brilliantly as they turned their head towards Kwon Taek Joo. Their features were strikingly beautiful but lacked any trace of sympathy or humanity. Meeting their gaze felt like being watched by a predator about to pounce on its prey.

"Just come in already," Zhenya said with an unnerving smile.

"No need to be shy."

As if their roles had suddenly reversed, Kwon Taek Joo cautiously entered the room and tried not to recoil from the offered handshake.

"I'm Zhenya."

Kwon Taek Joo's eyes widened as Zhenya's hand reached out towards him. He couldn't help but think, "Is this the same hand that gouged someone in the eye?"

Kwon Taek Joo's body tensed up as the long white fingers stopped right in front of his chest. Zhenya seemed to be teasing him, swinging his fingers and grinning mischievously.

The overwhelming tension seemed to be dissapated. Dissatisfaction was evident on Kwon Taek Joo's face.

Zhenya chuckled and gently tapped his hand on his side.

"You don't look too happy."

"Why should I be? But if you let me hit you a few times, maybe I'll feel better".

Kwon Taek Joo clenched his jaw, his strength focused in the lower half of his face. Perhaps taking it as a joke, Zhenya simply laughed and ignored the comment.

"So what's your name?"

"You already know it."

"It's really difficult to pronounce. Can I call you something else?"

"If my name is too difficult for you, then don't bother calling me at all,"

Zhenya observed him with a strange glint in his eyes. His lips still curved into a smile. The room fell silent once again. Kwon Taek Joo suddenly felt uncomfortable under such close observation without any means of defense.

A moment later, Zhenya spoke up. "I heard you went to the police station." He broke the silence shamelessly as if everything that happened before had been forgotten. Kwon Taek Joo stared at him but didn't respond. No, he couldn't afford to show any weakness to this man. Intuition told him not to let down his guard.

Zhenya paid no attention and left the table to go to the mini bar. He browsed through the various bottles of liquor on display and selected some whiskey. He sipped from the bottle and shrugged.

"There's no need to be so guarded. I was just helping out a fellow colleague who was in danger."

He said it so casually, as if it were nothing out of the ordinary. Kwon Taek Joo kept a close eye on Zhenya.

"Since when have you been following me?"

"From the very start."

Was he even there at the airport? Did that mean he had intentionally waited for the right moment to make contact with Kwon Taek Joo and then rescued him from his abduction? If so, why didn't he reveal himself at the time?

A mischievous grin tugged at Zhenya's lips, as if he could see right through Kwon Taek Joo's thoughts.

"HQ told me to lay low until today. If you hadn't been captured in such a dramatic way, I wouldn't have had an excuse to step in."

Zhenya chuckled with whiskey-coated lips. The shame that Kwon Taek Joo had been trying to suppress resurfaced once again. The person he

had thought to be a superhuman was actually just his colleague. Kwon Taek Joo's pride took a hit.

"Your first impression was really unforgettable. You even showed me what it was like to poke an eye out of someone."

Kwon Taek Joo clicked his tongue, refusing to feel inferior just because they were partners. They were on the same team, after all. And that simple fact dispelled any lingering fear he had felt towards Zhenya for the first time in his life. Zhenya smirked playfully at the unexpected criticism.

"You're quite the pacifist, huh?"

"I prefer things to be clean and efficient."

"Efficient like shooting or bombing? That sounds boring."

Zhenya shook his head, feigning apathy before tapping his temple with two fingers.

"Think about it. We all hope for a meaningful last breath. But how pointless and unremarkable it would seem if our deaths were simply lumped together as "killed by shooting" in a news headline? It wouldn't make an impact unless we were killed in some dramatic, gruesome way. Isn't that what matters nowadays?"

That's just an excuse. The excuse of a psychopath trying to justify his nefarious behavior. Kwon Taek Joo replied:

"If I ever end up in your hands, please spare me any senseless death."

"Well, that's not an easy request to fulfill, but I'll consider it."

Zhenya paused for a moment, as if pondering something, before speaking again. "Don't worry too much."

"As long as you don't hurt me, I won't hurt you. Believe it or not, I only attack in self defense."

"Are you a pacifist?"

Kwon Taek Joo responded to the sarcastic remark from earlier.

Zhenya laughed and threw his half-empty whiskey bottle towards Kwon Taek Joo. Without hesitation, Kwon Taek Joo put the bottle to his lips. The alcohol burned his throat as he finished it off in one gulp.

Just then, his phone rang from within his jacket pocket.

He set down the empty bottle and retrieved his phone. Once again, a photo had been sent by headquarters. This time, it was a picture of a mysterious-looking Russian man named 'Psych Bogdanov'. "Is this the person we were warned about?" Kwon Taek Joo wondered aloud.

Before he could even process the thought, Zhenya snatched the phone from him.

"I've been told to stay away from that guy".

Zhenya squinted, examined the photo, and then nodded.

"Do you know him?"

"Of course I know him. Quite well actually."

"What kind of person is he?"

"It's best not to get involved with him. Nothing good ever comes from messing with him."

"Could Morgan's death be connected to this man?"

"If you're talking about the former American, Morgan... who knows? It could be one of that crazy guy's schemes or it might have nothing to do with him at all. Don't worry about it. You're not here for revenge. Just focus on our task and let this guy play his own game."

Kwon Taek Joo shook his head while Zhenya chuckled. Even if the man in question really was 'Psych Bogdanov', Kwon Taek Joo would still believe it without hesitation.

If Zhenya was calling this man crazy, then he must truly be an unpredictable man.

In any case, getting involved with this matter wouldn't help and could potentially create more problems. It was best to avoid any collisions for now. Kwon Taek Joo needed to stay focused on his assigned task.

"I've heard you have a good understanding of the political structure and money flow here."

"Of course. If you want, I can give you a detailed list anytime."

Zhenya's confident demeanor didn't seem like just an empty boast. Perhaps it was a good idea to make the most out of having an unwanted partner. The problems that had arisen from day one seemed to be getting resolved smoothly.

Kwon Taek Joo relaxed slightly and decided to give out instructions.

"First of all, I hope you choose individuals who possess knowledge regarding underground weapons transactions, regardless of whether they are investors, actual developers, or businessmen involved in the trade. If you wish to meet 'Anastasia', you must make the first move.

At the mention of "Anastasia

", Zhenya's eyebrows raised slightly, a subtle change that Kwon Taek Joo wouldn't have noticed if he weren't paying close attention.

However, Zhenya simply nodded in understanding and got up from his seat.

"Very well. I'll prepare that for you. Let's meet again tomorrow ."

Kwon Taek Joo followed Zhenya closely, almost as if he intended to chase him out of the room along with his distinct scent. Kwon Taek Joo opened the door for himself.

Zhenya obediently left, but instead of telling him to leave, Kwon Taek Joo bid him farewell with a "See you tomorrow." He closed the door, but it didn't shut completely; a shoe was sticking out through the crack. Kwon Taek Joo looked down curiously before looking back up at Zhenya with an irritated expression.

Zhenya tilted his head and leaned down slightly until their eyes met.

"I cannot wait to rip that mask off and discover the real you"

Zhenya's voice carried a hint of dark amusement.

Kwon Taek Joo frowned and stared at Zhenya, who just grinned and walked away to the other side of the hallway. Kwon Taek Joo watched until the elevator doors shut before finally closing the door behind him.

The elevator swiftly opened its doors again, revealing a man standing inside who made eye contact with Zhenya. This man was standing from behind Zhenya while they rode down to the first floor in silence.

Suddenly, he spoke up.

"What should we do?"

Zhenya glanced at the numbers on the display board as they descended and a thought crossed his mind. A small smirk spread across his usually expressionless face as he replied in a nonchalant tone,

"Blow it all up. Leave no hiding places for it."

Kwon Taek Joo woke up to the sound of the hotel room doorbell. He quickly checked his mask and glanced at the clock. It was only 8 a.m., still early for the scheduled cleaning time. There was no official schedule for the visiting delegation today. Could it be Zhenya? If so, he seemed more diligent than he appeared.

He smoothed out the mask covering his face and stepped out of the door. Before he could ask who it was, a voice spoke from outside.

"Room service."

Kwon Taek Joo opened the door with skepticism but it seemed like he hadn't misheard. A specialized cart stood in the hallway, pushed by a waiter dressed in a hotel uniform who greeted him politely.

Kwon Taek Joo peeked out into the quiet hallway. It was still early and there weren't many people around. The waiter asked, "May I come in?" as he stood right in front of the door.

"I think you have the wrong room."

"No, this is room 911, sir."

"But I didn't order room service."

"Ah, someone else requested it."

Someone else? Could it be that guy?

"It's from a representative of Gazprom."

Kwon Taek Joo laughed, finding his earlier thoughts about that man to be silly. Despite being a colleague, he felt no different from a murderer. What could one expect from someone with that kind of name?

If this was an apology for what happened yesterday, why didn't they just attend the luncheon or send a representative? If Kwon Taek Joo refused, they would probably contact him again. There was no need to draw unnecessary attention with careless mistakes.

He nodded towards the living room and the waiter bowed slightly before pushing the cart inside. The food was placed on the table next to the window and silverware was neatly arranged. The waiter left after asking if there was anything else Kwon Taek Joo needed. He couldn't understand why they were going to such lengths.

All the dishes were covered in foil, but he could smell the Russian borscht, toast, poached eggs, fruit, and coffee. Kwon Taek Joo slowly scanned the table and noticed a card on the note shelf. There was probably a greeting written on it. He glanced down at the content of the card with indifference. There was only one word written there. Four clear letters caught his attention.

BOOM.

Shit.

## **Chapter 1.9 – New Mission: Why Don’t You Remove It?**

Kwon Taek Joo quickly threw the card and sprinted towards the door, not even pausing to assess the situation. He clenched his teeth and used all of his strength to leap up, reaching for the doorknob with his fingertips. Suddenly, there was a loud bang and the air seemed to freeze in place. Kwon Taek Joo was thrown back into the wall behind him as the floor beneath him collapsed. The explosion shattered the front window of the room and destroyed furniture inside. The ceiling shook violently and alarms blared throughout the hotel, causing chaos among guests.

People immediately stopped their activities and looked around in shock. Many thought of terrorism and panicked without anyone telling them to do so. They frantically tried to escape through the narrow emergency exit, pushing and shoving others out of their way. In their extreme fear, they trampled over each other and injured themselves further.

The situation only calmed down once firefighters arrived on scene. After putting out the fire, a team was brought in to remove any remaining explosives. Reporters arrived at the chaotic scene, loudly describing what they saw. The number of injured individuals was surprisingly high compared to the size of the explosion, with most injuries occurring during evacuation rather than directly from the blast itself.

Amidst all this chaos, a man was arguing with medical staff. It turned out it was none other than Kwon Taek Joo, who had sustained serious injuries.

"You may not feel it now due to shock, but you will regret refusing treatment later," one rescue worker said sternly as he looked down at Kwon Taek Joo lying on a stretcher.

Despite his protests that he could take care of himself, Kwon Taek Joo was eventually convinced to seek medical attention.

The stubbornness of Kwon Taek Joo was evident as he continued to insist that he was okay. But upon closer examination, it was clear that he had suffered a laceration on his forehead and some damage to the artificial skin on his chin. The medical staff were firm in their decision to treat him, even if it meant going against his wishes. Kwon Taek Joo begrudgingly accepted the treatment, realizing that it was for the best.

It was absurd. Kwon Taek Joo insisted that he was fine. His forehead was grazed and bleeding lightly, but a simple disinfectant and bandage would do the trick. At most, a few stitches might be needed to stop the bleeding, but it wasn't urgent. The medical staff in front of him remained persistent, though. Who was being stubborn now?

Kwon Taek Joo rubbed his irritated forehead, revealing an unnatural portion of his left chin where the skin had peeled off from the explosion's impact. The medical staff did not overlook this detail.

"Is that area injured too? Let's see."

He waved away the approaching hand of the medical worker. The worker's eyes widened at the sudden reaction, not from being pushed away, but because Kwon Taek Joo's expression had become even more serious. It was clear that he had been affected by the shock of the accident. The worker nodded as if understanding and gently patted Kwon Taek Joo's back before gesturing to a colleague. A member of their team quickly approached them after watching their heated conversation for some time. Together, they urged Kwon Taek Joo onto a stretcher, while he cursed under his breath. What a terrible way to start the day - being gifted a bomb and then dragged around like this.

If they kept dragging him away like this, people would find out that Kwon Taek Joo was not Hiro Sakamoto. There were probably police stationed at the hospital, and any suspicious equipment found there would cause major problems. This was absolutely not an option.

"I'm really okay. Look!"

Kwon Taek Joo tried to demonstrate his vitality with energetic movements, but the medical staff simply laughed and said, "Okay, keep walking like that in front of the doctor." And so he did, looking completely crazy. With so many eyes on him, he couldn't even lash out.

Kwon Taek Joo was reluctantly carted off, but suddenly caught sight of a familiar face in the crowd. He turned to look at them, and just as quickly they disappeared into the mass of people. It seemed like a suspicious action.

Changing his mind, Kwon Taek Joo obediently followed the medical staff's instructions.

As he walked towards the ambulance, the gazes fixed on him seemed to be more clear now. Suddenly, he turned back in that direction again, but the person had once again vanished into the crowd. His heart raced when he saw their face.

It was him. The infamous Psych Bogdanov, a man known as a madman in this country, and Kwon Taek Joo had been warned countless times to avoid encountering him at all costs. Kwon Taek Joo was stunned for a moment before a question formed in his mind: why was he here? What purpose did he have for being here? Or was it just a coincidence that he happened to be passing through at the same time? No, that was too absurd.

The theory that the culprit always shows up at the crime scene made more sense. It wouldn't be surprising if that was the case. But why? Has his identity been exposed?

Kwon Taek Joo weighed his options and came to the conclusion that he needed to leave this place immediately. All of his possessions, including his Colt handgun, were destroyed in the explosion. Even if he ran into Psych now, it wouldn't be wise to confront him. No matter how crazy he was, he wouldn't dare do anything in broad daylight. Kwon Taek Joo calculated his next move and then climbed into an ambulance.

Out of nowhere, Psych Bogdanov suddenly appeared beside Kwon Taek Joo. The agile man who had been blending into the crowd was now wearing a white coat, disguising himself as a medical staff member. He

put on a white mask and confidently walked towards the driver's seat of the ambulance. If things continue as they were, Kwon Taek Joo would end up riding in the same vehicle as him.

Danger alarms blared in Kwon Taek Joo's head.

Without hesitation, Kwon Taek Joo pushed away the impostor and leapt out of the ambulance.

"Hey!"

The medical staff shouted loudly as Psych Bogdanov got out of the driver's seat and onto the road, drawn by the commotion. Kwon Taek Joo locked eyes with him and slowly backed away. Psych also advanced towards him with a fierce expression, the two eyes above his mask glowing brightly.

Kwon Taek Joo gritted his teeth and ran through the crowd of people, causing screams to erupt in all directions. It was part of his strategy. In this situation, drawing attention and being seen by many people was safer for him. Perhaps because he was aware of the public's gaze, Psych Bogdanov couldn't easily chase after Kwon Taek Joo anymore. He hesitated for a moment before disappearing in another direction.

Kwon Taek Joo quickly left the area around the hotel and entered the main street. That psychotic man must have memorized every nook and cranny of this area, so he had to get as far away as possible.

He had been running for a while when suddenly a loud engine noise came from behind him. Turning around, he saw a Jeep speeding towards him. The front windshield was heavily tinted, making it impossible to see inside, but one thing was clear: Psych Bogdanov was sitting in the passenger seat.

Kwon Taek Joo cursed under his breath and immediately turned into a narrow alley that cars couldn't fit through. The Jeep that had been barreling towards him stopped at the entrance of the alley. The backseat door opened and a man dressed in all black stepped out. After receiving a nod from Bogdanov, he lifted up his shirt and started chasing after Kwon Taek Joo. Meanwhile, the Jeep disappeared again

onto the main road. Their plan was to pursue Kwon Taek Joo from behind and cut off his escape route from the front.

Kwon Taek Joo fled in a panic, his mind racing with questions. Why was Psych Bogdanov targeting him? Unless his true identity was discovered, their main target would be Hiro Sakamoto.

Was the man also unhappy with the Russia-Japan agreement?

No matter how hard Kwon Taek Joo tried to analyze the situation, it all seemed too complicated to understand. If their goal was to exert influence by holding someone from the delegation hostage, then why not kidnap someone of higher value than Hiro Sakamoto? On the first day of their trip, he had been the only important figure worth kidnapping but now things had changed.

So, in the end, the person they really wanted was not Hiro Sakamoto but Kwon Taek Joo himself? But why? The doubts and suspicions continued to swirl in his mind, but no definite answer could be reached.

Looking around for a way out, Kwon Taek Joo spotted a spiral staircase leading up and out of the building. He quickly weighed his options: climbing to the rooftop or scaling over to the next building might help him escape this trap. He visualized his route before making a decision.

But his pursuers were relentless. A bullet grazed Kwon Taek Joo's arm as he ran, leaving a scratch on the wall behind him. They seemed to anticipate his every move and began firing shots around the staircase. He considered climbing up to a ventilation hole on the neighboring building, but even that option was shot down - literally.

"..Shit!"

Kwon Taek Joo cursed under his breath in frustration as he continued running. But his pursuer showed no signs of giving up either. No matter how hard he ran, there seemed to be no escape in sight. And yet, amidst all this chaos and danger, how could this city remain so peaceful and quiet? Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but criticize the laziness of the Russian police as he changed directions once again.

He found himself on a narrow alleyway that eventually led out to a wider road by the river. At this point, it seemed like he was just running around aimlessly since arriving in Russia. But at least now he knew the layout of the roads.

As he sprinted onto the main road, a car suddenly appeared and blocked his path. It was Psych Bogdanov's Jeep, with his henchmen trailing close behind.

Kwon Taek Joo used his strength to push open the driver's door, causing the driver to stumble out of the vehicle. He took advantage of this moment and agilely leapt over the hood.

But just as he landed, the passenger door opened and collided with him, throwing off his balance. He tripped and rolled to avoid getting hit by other cars on the road, but his situation only seemed to worsen.

A motorcycle came speeding towards him in the opposite lane. The driver noticed Kwon Taek Joo too late and slammed on their brakes, but it was already too late to stop. With no strength left to run or stand, Kwon Taek Joo instinctively ducked down. The motorcycle screeched as its front wheel scraped against the asphalt, narrowly missing him.

Even Psych Bogdanov's group, who had been chasing Kwon Taek Joo all this time, closed their eyes tightly in anticipation of the worst outcome.

A loud screeching noise pierced through the air, sounding as if it were about to rip a hole in the space around them. The sound of friction rang out relentlessly. For a moment, all other sounds disappeared, but the shock that typically follows did not occur.

Kwon Taek Joo slowly opened his eyes. The rear wheel of the motorcycle stopped directly in front of his face. A car had collided with the front of the Jeep, causing the back end to lift up dramatically. In that split second, everything seemed to stand still.

Reacting purely on instinct, Kwon Taek Joo quickly moved out of the way. The motorcycle's back wheel fell to the ground with a loud thud. If he had been even slightly slower in his movements, Kwon Taek Joo's head would have been crushed by the heavy wheel.

After nearly meeting his demise and coming back to life, Kwon Taek Joo breathed out a sigh of relief. His eyelids fluttered uncontrollably as his body trembled from the adrenaline rush.

How many times had his life been threatened since his arrival to this insane country?

Someone grabbed Kwon Taek Joo and pulled him up off the ground. It was one of Psych Bogdanov's subordinates. Crazy Bogdanov himself grabbed hold of Kwon Taek Joo's other arm. He looked around frantically and muttered under his breath.

"Stop making noise, get in the car."

Suddenly, a fist slammed into Kwon Taek Joo's stomach. He doubled over in pain as his strength drained away without any resistance. The group manhandled him into the back seat of their car with ease. Psych Bogdanov took a seat next to him while all of the doors were closed one by one. Then, they drove off down the street as if nothing had happened. No sirens blared in pursuit, and there was no sign of the police.

Truly a kidnapper's paradise. Even in his dazed state, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but laugh at the absurdity of it all. What would happen to him now? Would he end up like Morgan, with all ten fingers cut off and drowning in a river?

It was an unexpected and frightening thought for Kwon Taek Jo.

Where is that damn bastard Zhenya when I need him most?

Suddenly, something clicked in Kwon Taek Joo's mind - a memory that had been forgotten for too long. In the distance, he could hear the distinctive sound of helicopter blades cutting through the air.

"That's him!"

The man sitting in the passenger seat shouted. Kwon Taek Joo rolled his eyes and looked out the window. Sure enough, a helicopter was approaching from the opposite direction. A figure was visible inside, stretching their long legs out of the aircraft.

Though they were still indistinct, Kwon Taek Joo recognized it as Zhenya.

The man sitting next to him quickly rolled down his window and started shooting at the helicopter. Meanwhile, Psych Bogdanov reached under the back seat and pulled something out. He then struck Kwon Taek Joo's heel with it. It was a Bazooka.

"Open the window."

The rear window lowered at Bogdanov's command. He leaned out of the window with his upper body and took aim directly at the helicopter. If his shot hit, it would surely explode on impact.

Kwon Taek Joo lunged at Bogdanov in an attempt to stop him, but was held back by the man pressing a gun to his temple. With no other option, Kwon Taek Joo raised his hands and stepped away. At that moment, the Bazooka fired with a deafening blast. The impact caused the car to sway violently.

The helicopter quickly ascended to avoid the incoming missile. Bullets grazed its tail, whizzing through the air and crashing into a nearby building. One side of the wall crumbled under the force of impact. As if waiting for this response, the helicopter returned fire with ferocity. Zhenya unleashed a barrage of bullets from his machine gun, firing mercilessly at Bogdanov's vehicle.

Psych Bogdanov and Kwon Taek Joo fought for control, and the driver was struggling to hold onto the steering wheel as the car's body crumbled like a sack of potatoes. The driver leaned over and the steering wheel followed suit, causing the car to lurch to one side. Despite being shot, the occupant in the front passenger seat made a move to grab the wheel but it was too late; the car crashed through the guardrail and plunged into the icy river.

Kwon Taek Joo barely had time to react before everything went black. When he came to, he found himself disoriented and disheveled as water seeped into his nose and ears. He could still hear the sound of gunfire echoing around him, and he struggled to stay calm until it finally

stopped. Only then did he realize that Psych Bogdanov had also lost consciousness.

With no other options, Kwon Taek Joo swam through an open window, narrowly avoiding another gunshot from below. He hid inside the sinking car as bullets rained down on it, hitting everyone except for him.

As his vision blurred and his lungs screamed for air, Kwon Taek Joo waited for the attack to end. But just when he thought it was over, more gunfire rang out and he knew he couldn't stay underwater any longer. With every ounce of strength he had left, he broke through the surface and gasped for breath. But even as he struggled to catch his breath, he knew that the attacker was still out there somewhere, waiting for their next move.

Bullets continued to pour down, striking the body of the driver and passenger in the front seat. Kwon Taek Joo's vision blurred as blood stained the water around him. He was helpless, unable to do anything to stop the chaos unfolding before him.

Did Zhenya not realize he was still in the car? The bullets were fired with a ferocity that showed no mercy.

This madman knew no limits.

Kwon Taek Joo was frustrated and narrowly avoided being hit by the relentless gunfire. As he struggled to catch his breath, he could feel his lungs burning for oxygen. If he didn't surface soon, he would suffocate before being shot to death. Suddenly, the barrage of bullets ceased, but only momentarily as if to assess the situation. But it was clear that the attack was far from over.

Kwon Taek Joo kicked his feet and swam towards the nearest window. He was only a few meters away from the surface. He had to move quickly before Zhenya opened fire again. With determination, Kwon Taek Joo pushed through the water. Suddenly, he felt something grab onto his ankle from below - Psych Bogdanov. The crazed man stared at him intently before wincing in pain; a bullet had pierced his left arm.

Kwon Taek Joo delivered a fierce kick to Psych Bogdanov's face, causing him to release his grip. But he wasn't done yet. The man grabbed onto Kwon Taek Joo's collar once more and refused to let go, as if he didn't want to die alone.

Kwon Taek Joo swung his fist at Psych Bogdanov, who tried to dodge but ended up clutching at Kwon Taek Joo's neck instead. They struggled in the water, both weakened by injuries and exhaustion. In a last ditch effort, Kwon Taek Joo squeezed Psych Bogdanov's neck, watching as he convulsed and eventually stopped moving.

With a deep breath, Kwon Taek Joo emerged from the water; his body trembling. The coldness of the air hit him like a shock, and he struggled to control his breathing. His eyes widened in realization of the frigid temperature. He needed to get out of the water immediately, but his body was too weak from the fight. All he could do was relax and let himself float up. Suddenly, someone grabbed onto his neck and pulled him out of the water.

"Ughh."

He vomited a lot of water that had accumulated in his lungs. He coughed for so long that his throat was sore and his mind was dizzy. The stomach that was beaten by Bogdanov was also painful. Kwon Taek Joo sat down holding his stomach with his upper body leaning forward. His eyelids twitched. Then a pair of long straight legs appeared in front of him. Kwon Taek Joo slowly looked up, from the pointed tips of the person's shoes to the grinning face.

It was Zhenya.

"Still kicking, I see,"

"Thanks to you, I almost didn't make it."

Another round of coughing left him gritting his teeth.

"What happened to the other guy?"

"Sent him back to wherever he came from,"

Zhenya mumbled, "Pretty impressive." Kwon Taek Joo glared at him before getting up. Water dripped from his body, quickly freezing in the cold air. His damaged lungs struggled to function properly. Even with deep breaths, he couldn't seem to catch enough air. He needed to warm up quickly.

Kwon Taek Joo started walking but Zhenya blocked his path.

"That looks pretty weird."

"What?"

Zhenya pointed to his own cheek and Kwon Taek Joo instinctively touched his face. The artificial skin had been torn during the explosion and car accident earlier. He sighed and peeled away some of the loose skin. Zhenya watched closely as Kwon Taek Joo's fingers moved gently over his face. Although he had said it looked strange, he seemed more curious than anything about what it would feel like to peel someone's skin.

Ignoring Zhenya's concern, Kwon Taek Joo walked away wearily. Zhenya followed behind casually and asked, "Why don't you just take it off?" Kwon Taek Joo couldn't even find the energy to laugh at such a ridiculous question.

He walked to the main road, feeling the cold wind from across the river hit his entire body. His teeth began to chatter again. He glanced over at Zhenya, who was standing next to him in a thick fur coat. Kwon Taek Joo shivered as he observed Zhenya's calm expression, as if questioning why he looked so miserable. He didn't expect Zhenya to give up his coat for him, but he also couldn't help feel slightly disappointed that his colleague wouldn't even offer it.

Kwon Taek Joo gave up and waved at a passing taxi. It slowed down and then suddenly sped up, driving past him. Was the driver worried about getting their car dirty? Or were they surprised by Kwon Taek Joo's pathetic appearance?

This happened three or four more times before Kwon Taek Joo finally gave up hope of getting a taxi. Each time, Zhenya would laugh at his

misfortune. At this point, what was even Zhenya's purpose anymore? By this point, Kwon Taek Joo could no longer feel his fingertips or toes.

"No matter how you interpret the situation, it's because of that ugly thing."

Zhenya had been observing the interaction and decided to start teasing Kwon Taek Joo. He shifted his gaze to Kwon Taek Joo, causing him to feel uneasy. Zhenya used only his fingertips to brush against his cheek, questioning if he was truly as stubborn as he appeared. Nothing major happened; however, it was so cold that there wasn't enough time to process what had occurred.

Something flew near Kwon Taek Joo's face. He instinctively moved back and accidentally hit whatever was approaching him. Zhenya's hand, which had been reaching out towards him, froze in midair as their eyes met briefly. Zhenya's sarcastic expression disappeared, replaced by a curious sparkle in his narrowed eyes.

"Why do you keep avoiding me?"

"Why do you keep coming closer?"

Kwon Taek Joo responded irritably, but Zhenya didn't seem to mind as he extended his hand again. "Don't do that," Kwon Taek Joo protested as Zhenya grabbed his wrist to stop him, causing his head to tilt back. But before he could react, Zhenya's other hand suddenly reached forward and grabbed his chin.

The skin on his cheek was torn off before he could even protest, causing a tingling sensation on the already irritated area. Kwon Taek Joo cursed as he opened his eyes, which had been closed in pain. Zhenya stood in front of him, examining every line on his face with his blue eyes.

His strange reaction surprised Kwon Taek Joo. So what if Zhenya saw his real appearance, the man should have recognized his face from the photo sent by the HQ. However, there could always be a possibility that someone looks a bit different in person compared to a photograph, and since Zhenya was familiar with Hiro Sakamoto's appearance, Kwon Taek Joo's true self may not have been recognizable to him.

But was it really necessary to observe him so intently?

Kwon Taek Joo felt like he was standing naked in front of Zhenya, with all of his thoughts and emotions exposed for him to see. It made him feel uncomfortable and threatened.

Suddenly, Zhenya spoke again. His voice was barely audible but it seemed like he was saying,

"That's more like it..."

The harsh wind blew once again, causing Kwon Taek Joo to tighten his grip on Zhenya's hand resting on his shoulder. A moment later, he realized what he had done and quickly let go.

Hitchhiking in the cold was not going well for a foreigner who already looked suspicious. Car after car passed him by without a second glance.

Feeling numb from the cold, Kwon Taek Joo suddenly felt a tap on his shoulder. He looked over and saw Zhenya holding out a shiny card between his fingers.

"What's this?"

"Just in case there will be more surveillance or searches in the future, hang in a hole and hide well."

"Hang?"

It seemed he heard strange words. Does the word 'hang' in Russian have another meaning that even Kwon Taek Joo doesn't know? For example, 'tiger's den' or wolf's den...

Suddenly, Zhenya's phone rang and he answered it after checking the caller ID. The voice on the other end sounded different, colder and more distant than usual. It was almost like a completely different person speaking.

"I know. I'll be right there."

Zhenya only listened to the other person's story before hanging up and gesturing towards the street without explaining anything to Kwon Taek Joo.

A taxi pulled up and Zhenya hopped into the back seat without saying a word, leaving Kwon Taek Joo behind. Kwon Taek Joo stood frozen in confusion. His clothes, now solid blocks of ice, were doing more harm than good. Kwon Taek Joo hand trembled as he clutched onto the provided card, his knuckles turned pale from the cold. He was lost and had no idea where to go in this foreign city.

The speeding taxis showed no signs of stopping for them. As the frigid wind whipped through Moscow once again, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't even muster the strength to shrink away from it.

He gazed blankly at the speeding cars, his stomach growling - he hadn't even had breakfast yet. "What a movie-worthy predicament we're in," he thought with a hint of self-deprecating humor, feeling like a beggar in a land thousands of miles from home.

## **Chapter 1.10 – New Mission: Do You Want to Keep Me by Your Side to Watch**

Kwon Taek Joo stumbled upon a run-down motel near the river. It was a far cry from the luxurious hotel he had been staying at courtesy of the Russian government. Despite the various room options available, Kwon desperately opted for the priciest one in order to take a hot shower. However, when he entered the room, he couldn't fathom why it was considered more expensive than the others. Perhaps the price simply varied based on having windows or not? The cramped room only contained a small bed and a broken-legged table. There was also a tiny television, but Kwon doubted there was enough power to even turn it on. And as for Wi-Fi, that seemed like an impossible luxury.

But as long as there was running water, he could make do. Kwon quickly peeled off his still-damp clothes and stood under the shower. He turned the knob all the way to hot, hoping to thaw his frozen body. However, the hot water didn't come until after he had already finished freezing through a cold shower. With no bathrobe in sight, he wrapped a large towel around his waist and stepped out of the bathroom.

Something scurried away at his sudden presence - a cockroach, perhaps 3-4 inches in size. They were surprisingly resilient creatures, able to survive and reproduce even in Siberia's extreme temperatures ranging from -40°C to -50°C.

Shaking his head in disgust, Kwon threw himself onto the bed without hesitation. The mattress was dusty and made his nose and throat feel itchy and irritated. He couldn't help but cough repeatedly, but he lacked the energy to even sit up.

The bed let out a loud creak as Kwon Taek Joo shifted his weight. He couldn't help but wonder if it would collapse under him, but he was too tired to care. He closed his eyes and hoped that sleep would clear his dizzy head. As he drifted off, his thoughts turned to how his mother would be trying to reach him right about now. But he had lost

everything, including his cell phone, in the chaos. The thought of never being able to contact her again made him say a silent goodbye. However, he knew his mother wouldn't give up.

She would probably leave their home in search of him after a few days of not hearing from him. And when she found out the truth about his job as an undercover agent, she would be devastated and bedridden. It was too much for him to bear. He sat up and grabbed the phone on the table, ready to call the front desk for assistance.

But no matter how many times he tried, there was no dial tone. Anger welled up inside him as he saw that the phone's cord had been chewed through by rodents. Frustrated, he threw the useless phone away.

Things just never seemed to go his way lately. What could he do now? With a sigh, he decided there was only one option - to go downstairs and use the owner's phone at the counter.

He wrapped a towel around his waist to cover himself since he didn't have any dry clothes and made his way down to the lobby. Surprisingly, there were no other guests around and even the owner was dozing off behind the counter. Kwon Taek Joo woke him up and asked if he could make an international call using a credit card. The owner agreed and handed over a dusty phone that looked like it hadn't been used in ages.

Kwon Taek Joo quickly learned how to use the phone and dialed his home country's code followed by his mother's number. After a few beeps, she picked up on the other end, sounding worried as usual.

"It's me. Did you try to call me?"

As expected, Kwon Taek Joo was bombarded with questions as soon as he answered his phone. His mother's voice was filled with worry and concern, as if she hadn't heard from him in days. Kwon Taek Joo knew how to calm her down and promised to call her every day before ending the call. He felt exhausted, and rubbed his tired eyes as his stomach growled. It seemed like he needed to eat something before he could even think about getting some rest. Glancing at the grumpy motel owner, Kwon Taek Joo asked if there were any good restaurants nearby. With a sigh, the owner stood up and pointed towards a specific location.

The motel owner was about to sit down after giving instructions when the scarf tied around Kwon Taek Joo's waist suddenly became loose. The towel fell to the floor before he could stop it. Kwon Taek Joo asked the owner who was staring at his downtown area one more thing.

"I probably need some clothes too."

Why, out of all the restaurants around here, did he show you such a shabby place? Kwon Taek Joo sat in an empty restaurant and kept looking around. Who knows, maybe this is a hidden delicious restaurant that only locals know about. He tried to console himself and immediately changed his mind when he saw the owner. If the innkeeper's name is '

Ivanovich', then isn't the owner of this place 'Ivanova

?\* It's just that the hairstyle is slightly different, but if it were a stranger, it would be difficult to be so similar.

There seems to be no menu, nor any special notes. The owner who had been neglecting Kwon Taek Joo all this time. suddenly brought him dishes that he had not ordered. Borscht cabbage soup and Russian-style Pelmeni wontons. Kwon Taek Joo looked curiously at the restaurant owner. She pointed at the wall in front of him. The words coffee, vodka and kvass were scribbled on it. He chose kvass, a traditional Russian drink, and began to taste the food that was being served.

The distinctive smell of lamb spread as soon as he took his first bite. After all, it was just an appetizer, Kwon Taek Joo frowned and continued stuffing food into his mouth. He ate and drank sips of kvass.

He chewed and rearranged his thoughts. Obviously, after coming to Russia, he encountered bad luck, otherwise the situation would not have been so complicated. He was assigned a mission that he didn't have enough experience to begin with, he was kidnapped on his first day in Russia, his belongings were blown away in a bomb attack on the third day, and he almost drowned not long ago, he almost couldn't keep this small life alive. Furthermore, his partner couldn't help him at all. If he didn't die at his hands, he would have been very lucky. Kwon Taek

Joo has never had so much bad luck in his life, but why is it all happening at once now?

His stomach was boiling but Kwon Taek Joo tried to stay calm. There's no use complaining about the past. It is better to think about the future that is more constructive

. It seemed necessary to first report that he was still alive and the progress of the accident to headquarters and then receive additional support. And you must leave here immediately. Considering that Kwon Taek Joo suddenly became the target of Psych Bogdanov, it seems that he is not the only one targeting him. He must clearly understand the situation to ensure safety before it is too late.

How could Kwon Taek Joo possibly contact headquarters now? With the communication equipment destroyed, he couldn't reveal his true identity as a Korean spy in Russia. Not even the embassy knew the truth. During his time in Russia, he had to go by the name Hiro Sakamoto and avoid any Japanese connections. He needed to find a way to contact Zhenya, but he didn't know how. Zhenya was unpredictable and appeared at random times.

All they could do was wait. Kwon Taek Joo was frustrated and put down his fork, losing his appetite for the bland food. Two Policemen entered the scene.

They seemed to be very close friends with the owner, after cordially greeting each other, they found a place and sat down. The owner brought out glasses and vodka as usual, chatted with them for a while at the table before returning to the counter to collect

"It's 3000 rubles."

A ridiculously high price for subpar food, but he didn't have the energy to argue about it. He reluctantly handed over his card.

The owner of the establishment looked unhappy. When Kwon Taek Joo mentioned he didn't have cash, she eventually accepted his card. However, after several attempts at payment, it seemed like there was an issue with the terminal. The owner then left to talk to two policemen

sitting at a nearby table, looking over at Kwon Taek Joo and whispering something.

He immediately made eye contact with two police officers but for some reason those eyes were not very friendly. Are they talking about Kwon Taek Joo himself?

He made eye contact with the officers, but they didn't seem friendly. Were they talking about him? In no time, one of the policemen stood up and approached Kwon Taek Joo with a troubled expression.

"Can we have a word, sir?"

Meanwhile, the other officer came over as well and grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's arm. What was going on here? How could these unexpected occurrences keep happening?

It appeared that there was some sort of misunderstanding. These things can often be resolved through calm communication. But now that his disguise had been removed, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't hide his true identity as Hiro Sakamoto. He needed to avoid any involvement with the police at all costs.

Should he just run away and ignore them? He could easily take on both officers with his bare hands. But running away would mean admitting guilt for something he wasn't even aware of, possibly making the Russian police his enemies. And in his current situation hiding from authorities, having more pursuers wouldn't help him in any way.

Kwon Taek Joo needed to think calmly about what his next move should be.

"Can you tell me why I'm being detained?"

"The card you used has been reported stolen."

What? That couldn't be right. He had just used it at a motel not too long ago without any issues. The owner handed him the card reader which displayed a warning message.

"Come on, let's not waste any more time. Let's go," urged one of the officers as Kwon Taek Joo stood there in shock.

What should he do? Going along with them would only bring more difficulties. He had lost contact with his headquarters and couldn't count on any support. The only option left was to knock out the two policemen and escape. But before he could make a decision, one of the officers attempted to handcuff him. Acting quickly, Kwon Taek Joo used the back of his hand to hit the officer's face and then followed up with an elbow to the chest. The officer fell to the ground, holding his bleeding nose and chest. His colleague rushed over in shock.

"You bastard!"

Kwon Taek Joo shook off the officer's grasp and was about to kick him when a distinctive bell rang from the door. Both officers froze, along with Kwon Taek Joo who was suspended mid-kick.

Walking in at just the right time was Zhenya. Seeing a familiar face gave Kwon Taek Joo a sense of relief. If it was the owner of the card arriving, everything would likely be resolved.

Kwon Taek Joo abandoned his aggressive posture and straightened up. Just then, the officer charging at him knocked him down and handcuffed him with his wrists behind his back. Kwon Taek Joo could only glare helplessly at Zhenya, who nodded for him to quickly resolve the situation. But Zhenya took his time looking around the restaurant, seemingly assessing the scene.

Shouldn't he also consider the right time and place for comfort? As Kwon Taek Joo was being pinned down by the officers, one of them suddenly jerked him back up and asked about their colleague who had just regained consciousness. The officer with a nosebleed approached Kwon Taek Joo with a hateful look in his eyes as he pushed him forward.

However, Kwon Taek Joo stood his ground, refusing to take a single step. He maintained eye contact with Zhenya, who had been observing everything from a distance.

"Hurry up!" the larger officer shouted angrily. When Kwon Taek Joo still didn't budge, he raised his hand as if preparing to hit him. But before his fist could make contact with Kwon Taek Joo's face, something fast and agile stopped it in its tracks.

"..Ah!"

It was unclear what had happened because Kwon Taek Joo's view had been obstructed for a moment. But when he looked again, Zhenya was standing like a solid wall in front of him, holding the neck of the officer with one hand. The officer's face turned pale within seconds from being squeezed so tightly and his eyes widened as if he were about to lose consciousness. Zhenya let go just in time for the officer to catch his breath.

He fell to the ground helplessly, struggling to regain circulation in his face that had turned red from being choked.

"Let's talk first." Zhenya looked down at the officer and made a calm request. The two officers exchanged wary glances and after a few seconds, one of them nodded and signaled for him to follow.

Zhenya turned back to Kwon Taek Joo and silently gestured for him to come with him.

Kwon Taek Joo took a seat at the table by the window. Zhenya was outside talking to a police officer, flashing his charming smile and smoothly continuing the conversation. Kwon Taek Joo tried to guess what was being said by watching Zhenya's mouth, but the police officer blocked his view with his large frame, making it difficult for him to concentrate.

Eventually, Zhenya and the officer returned to the restaurant. Kwon Taek Joo looked at Zhenya, silently asking for an explanation. With a shrug and a smile, Zhenya didn't offer much information to his curious companion. Instead, the policeman pointed a finger at Kwon Taek Joo and gave him unexpected news: "I'll let you go."

Feeling surprised, Kwon Taek Joo looked at Zhenya, wondering how the conversation could result in a good outcome. Suddenly, the handcuffs binding his wrists were removed. The two officers exchanged quick pleasantries and left the restaurant. The owner of the establishment had been watching the whole situation unfold and tilted his head in confusion. Kwon Taek Joo felt just as confused.

"What did you do?"

"I just paid them off with some coins and told them to buy a few drinks."

Zhenya replied casually. As Kwon Taek Joo stood with his arms crossed, suspiciously eyeing Zhenya, he couldn't help but wonder how this man always managed to stay one step ahead of everyone else. It seemed that Zhenya had already thought through their predicament and come up with a plan. He would track the location of where his stolen card was used and possibly even report it as stolen if necessary. The fact that Zhenya's actions may have made someone feel uneasy didn't bother him; he was not a simple person. Even though they were using Psych Bogdanov's car, Zhenya didn't hesitate to continue shooting while his partner was still in the vehicle.

Zhenya didn't seem to mind Kwon Taek Joo's suspicious gaze. In fact, he seemed to relish it, as if he wanted to be looked at with admiration. This only heightened Kwon Taek Joo's annoyance.

"You seem very busy. I barely have time to see your face."

"What's wrong? Feeling lonely? Do you want me to stay by your side so you can watch me?"

"No, I want to sew your damn mouth shut."

Kwon Taek Joo forced a fake smile, baring his teeth. He quickly shifted his gaze to Zhenya who was next to him, then looked over his shoulder. When Zhenya also turned to follow his gaze, Kwon Taek Joo grabbed Zhenya's chin and turned his face back to him. Blue eyes met his and Zhenya's eyes narrowed.

"Someone has been watching us for a while now. Have you noticed?"

"..Huh?"

"You're not being careful enough."

"What should we do?"

"We need to take care of it."

"You stay here, I will handle it and come back."

"If you need help, let me know."

"Thank you, but I'll handle it on my own."

Zhenya smiled and left the restaurant. As Zhenya walked out, someone hiding in the corner suddenly jumped up in surprise. They began running away as Zhenya calmly followed behind them. The two soon disappeared from Kwon Taek Joo's view.

A few minutes later, Zhenya returned. Kwon Taek Joo furrowed his eyebrows when he saw that they were no longer wearing the fur coat they had before.

"Where's your coat?"

"I got rid of it."

Kwon Taek Joo didn't ask why because he could guess the reason. But Zhenya still eagerly explained.

"It was dirty."

Kwon Taek Joo glanced at their hand. Even though he tried not to, he couldn't help but notice it. Those fingers have punctured someone's eye before. Where did they use them today? If they went as far as removing their coat and turning around, it must have been around the neck area? Perhaps Zhenya suffocated the person by blocking their nose and mouth with their hand. It may sound absurd, but for someone like Zhenya, it would be easy to do. Suddenly, Kwon Taek Joo felt uncomfortable. This person reminded him more of Psych Bogdanov than the man who died in the river.

He stared at Zhenya's hand and thought to himself. Then he heard a light snap. Kwon Taek Joo jumped, realizing that Zhenya had snapped his fingers in front of his face. He looked up and saw a mischievous smile decorating the light-skinned face. Kwon

Taek Joo didn't like it one bit.

Zhenya pushed something out to him, glaring and frowned sharply.

"Stop daydreaming. Eyes on me."

## Chapter 1.11 - New Mission: Armory

Zhenya presented Kwon Taek Joo an invitation card for a party at the Kremlin, celebrating the agreement between Russia and Japan. A delegation from Japan would be attending, along with various Russian figures from different backgrounds. Kwon Taek Joo had planned to attend disguised as Hiro Sakamoto, but the whole plan was foiled by the surprise attack.

However, the date on the invitation did not match what he had previously been told. It seemed that the schedule had been changed due to an incident at the hotel where the Japanese delegation was staying. Security measures were also being heightened.

How could we still get in?

While Kwon Taek Joo pondered this, Zhenya took back the invitation.

"This is just a cover. The real party will be held later."

"A different party?"

"Not far from the Kremlin is the residence of the Boedanov family, who are actually true representatives of Gazprom. The second son has a close relationship with the President. I heard that after a national event, there will be a dinner party at their mansion. Even those who weren't invited to the Kremlin will show up there. Underworld bosses and powerful players who control Russian money will be in attendance as honored guests. They'll do anything for profit, making them a valuable source of information. Who knows what kind of clues you might uncover if you meet them and talk about 'Anastasia'."

"Could it be that the Bogdanov listed is someone I know?"

"It's possible."

"But they're still going ahead with the party, even though a member of their family just died?"

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't understand it. By now, Psych Bogdanov's body would have already been found. Even if it was a national event, how could it really take place in their own home?

Zhenya scoffed.

"Do you honestly think he's dead?"

"Isn't that what everyone is saying?"

"Sorry to break it to you but the news said only two bodies were found in the river."

It made sense. Why would it be so easy to kill him?

Kwon Taek Joo had been warned multiple times about him, right? But it was true that he was unconscious and bleeding heavily from a gunshot wound – saving him would be difficult. And with the cold river water, his body temperature would drop rapidly. Surviving in such harsh conditions, as expected, this man was not ordinary.

Knowing Psych Bogdanov survived meant he could target them at any moment. Kwon Taek Joo felt uneasy but pushed it aside for now.

"How can I make sure I find Anastasia's clue there?" Zhenya immediately handed Kwon Taek Joo something, as if he knew he would ask that question. It was a folded envelope containing documents. He opened it and saw an old newspaper article and a list of unknown names – Russian and Korean. Kwon Taek Joo looked at each name while reading the article.

They all had dates in the past alongside how they died. But why did these names seem so familiar to him? He checked the list again with a skeptical expression. Soon, his eyes widened as he realized most of the names matched those of deceased individuals listed in the article.

Zhenya then explained why.

"These are the people involved in developing Anastasia. As you can see, they're all dead now."

"How did they die?"

"Good question. How did they die?"

Zhenya taunted with a sarcastic smile, as if teasing a child who knew nothing. Kwon Taek Joo had some thoughts, but he couldn't jump to conclusions just yet.

Doubts kept creeping in and interrupting his thought process. Anxious, he kicked Zhenya's shoes, urging him to answer quickly.

Zhenya finally opened his mouth after enjoying Kwon Taek Joo's nervousness for a while longer.

"Anastasia possessed an unparalleled destructive force, making her a feared weapon. There were many secrets surrounding her, and while people discussed her existence, most were ignorant of what she truly was. And yet, this ignorance only heightened their fear towards her. Perhaps it was the unknown that made her so powerful. But once her development was complete, the story would change. The research subjects would disperse, and one of them might reveal Anastasia's true nature and intentions. This could not be allowed to happen – she must remain a source of terror in both the present and the future".

Kwon Taek Joo furrowed his brow, sensing a connection between 'Anastasia' and the other items on the list, even without hearing the full explanation. Zhenya nodded in agreement.

"All traces have been eliminated to prevent any future creation of such weapons."

Kwon Taek Joo was rendered speechless for a moment. The victims were not killed because they possessed top-secret information or information on counterintelligence. No, they were eliminated before even having the chance to acquire such knowledge.

He looked down at the list again in disbelief. Then, he noticed something odd and raised an objection.

"But...!"

"Yes, there are still survivors for now."

Interestingly, members of the Bogdanov family were also listed. However, they were still alive and well. With most of those involved in the development of 'Anastasia' now deceased, how can one explain their

continued survival? Kwon Taek Joo logically reasoned through the situation and then turned to Zhenya with a look of realization dawning on his face. A satisfied smirk spread across Zhenya's features.

It was clear that the Bogdanov family had some involvement with 'Anastasia'. And with most of the researchers dead, they were the only ones left alive. This could be interpreted as evidence that they were the ones responsible for eliminating their fellow researchers, in order to maintain complete control over this deadly weapon and prevent its recreation.

As Kwon Taek Joo examined Zhenya's somewhat serious expression, he spoke up.

"What do you think? Do you feel like having a little fun now?"

"That would be akin to jumping into a tiger's den without any weapons," Kwon Taek Joo shook his head, feeling overwhelmed.

If Zhenya's information was accurate, it was highly likely that the Bogdanov family knew where Anastasia was hidden.

The problem lies in his current situation. Tomorrow night, they will be attending a party. Even if he managed to contact headquarters through Zhenya, there was no guarantee that they could provide him with the necessary resources within 24 hours. He couldn't just walk into danger without any means of protection.

"I didn't expect headquarters to be so prepared."

Zhenya chuckled and told him to get up. After paying for their food and leaving the store, a sleek convertible pulled up in front of Kwon Taek Joo, its appearance matching its owner. Zhenya pushed Kwon Taek Joo into the passenger seat and drove off quickly.

After about 30-40 minutes, they arrived at their destination. The tall buildings gradually disappeared and the streets became less crowded. Where are they? Kwon Taek Joo looked around suspiciously as the car came to a stop.

"We're here."

Kwon Taek Joo obediently got out of the car and continued to look around. There were no warehouses or garages in sight, only an abandoned building that was falling apart. The first floor had a sign for a bookstore, but it seemed to have closed down a long time ago as there were no customers in sight.

Kwon Taek Joo followed Zhenya inside, filled with doubts. The guy in front raised the shutter and entered the building. Kwon Taek Joo also walked inside, stumbling in the dark.

Zhenya opened another door inside and disappeared down some stairs. Without thinking, Kwon Taek Joo followed him and nearly slipped and fell on the stairs. Zhenya should at least warn people about these things, but he wasn't one to care about others' well-being. Kwon Taek Joo suppressed his frustration with Zhenya and continued feeling his way along the wall in complete darkness.

Finally, his feet landed on a flat floor. Although it was still dark, Kwon Taek Joo could feel dust swirling around him with every movement.

But something didn't feel quite right. The basements of bookstores typically have a distinct smell of old books, but here there was no such scent.

It wasn't long before he realized the cause of his uneasiness. The basement was filled with large bookshelves, but they were all empty except for an old phone sitting on one of them.

Why did Zhenya bring him here? As doubts and complaints filled his mind, Zhenya approached the phone. He picked up the receiver and dialed a series of numbers: 3, 9, 1, 6, 5. When he returned the dial to its original position after reaching '5', a mechanical beep sounded from somewhere.

Suddenly, the empty bookshelves began to rotate with loud creaks, sending clouds of dust into the air. Kwon Taek Joo closed his eyes and when he opened them again, the old bookshelves were gone, replaced by a shiny steel cabinet. Inside were all sorts of guns, high-tech equipment, and small bombs neatly stored away.

## Chapter 1.12 – Nuclear Man: Bogdanov Mansion

The Bogdanov family's grandiose mansion stood before Kwon Taek Joo in all its opulent glory. Its colossal size and luxurious appearance could rival even the mighty Kremlin.

The pristine white walls were adorned with a stunning blue roof that exuded elegance and sophistication. The intricate patterns of Rococo style curved around the building, embellished with dazzling gold decorations that added a touch of classic grandeur. As he approached the entrance, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but admire the meticulously crafted circular stone steps and giant marble columns that supported the high ceiling of the mansion.

Passing through the sturdy gates, Kwon Taek Joo felt overwhelmed by the majesty and solemnity of the place. The soft glow of light enveloped the entire building, casting a warm atmosphere. Even in the dead of night, cars were still lining up along the vast garden outside.

Located next to a large lake, it took some time for guests to reach the entrance after passing through the main gate. Dense trees acted as a barrier, shielding the activities inside from prying eyes.

Security was tight at this exclusive event, where only high-status individuals were invited. Everyone must pass through two checkpoints - first at the main gate and then again at the entrance to the main garden. Kwon Taek Joo's car was also subjected to thorough inspection.

An armed security guard approached his vehicle and instructed him to lower his window. With meticulous attention to detail, four or five pieces of information were checked - from the invitation and attendance list name to car number and accompanying person's details. No exceptions were made.

"May I see your invitation, please?"

The guard asked politely as Kwon Taek Joo handed over his invitation. Using a special reader equipped with a hidden light, he scanned the

envelope and a previously unseen mark appeared. A distinct electronic sound signaled recognition on the device's screen. Satisfied, the guard then inspected the back seat to confirm the accompanying person.

It was clear that not only were secret details hidden on the invitation, but also the identity of the guest. The device automatically displayed their information once it recognized the serial number on the card. The intention to keep out uninvited guests was evident in these strict security measures.

With a quick nod and a "Thank you for your cooperation," the guard stepped back and allowed Kwon Taek Joo's car to pass through.

The congestion from earlier now extended all the way from the main gate to the entrance of the garden and to the front of the magnificent mansion.

Kwon Taek Joo grumbled with a bored expression,

"This party is almost like something out of a spy movie. How lucky am I to endure all these unnecessary and ridiculous things alone? Is the world fair?" He glared at the rearview mirror and complained, his eyes meeting Zhenya's gaze in the backseat.

A small smile curled up on his lips.

"I was the only one invited, so there were no other options. The only two ways for uninvited guests to join the party are to be a driver like you now or to be my date. If you didn't like the first option, you could have disguised yourself and joined me on the floor." Zhenya fluttered his eyes in Kwon Taek Joo's direction, almost alluringly.

"Wouldn't that have been exciting?"

Ugh.

"I could have knocked a guard out and changed clothes. There are so many people here, surely no one will notice, right?"

"Are you someone who likes to take risks? If you want to use your strength, save it for critical moments."

Kwon Taek Joo didn't know how Zhenya got an official invitation, but since they were invited, there was no need to make a fuss. He just didn't like the idea of having to treat Zhenya like a boss, even for a moment.

"You can close the window now," Zhenya requested lazily, knowing there was a button in the backseat but not wanting to lift a finger.

Kwon Taek Joo reluctantly obliged and glared at Zhenya through the rearview mirror before finally arriving at the mansion and parking the car with valet service.

Finally arriving in front of the mansion, Kwon Taek Joo pulled over and applied the handbrake. Zhenya didn't move from his seat.

"Why aren't you getting out?" Kwon Taek Joo asked, confused.

"That's what I was going to ask you. Did you forget something?" Zhenya replied smugly with a head nod towards the door next to him.

Although Kwon Taek Joo shook his head in disbelief, Zhenya nodded as if confirming his suspicion. They had caught the attention of many people outside of the car, including a valet parking attendant for guests arriving at the residence. With no other option, Kwon Taek Joo let out a sigh and got out of the driver's seat.

He walked around and opened the backseat door, allowing Zhenya to leisurely step out with a pleased smile on his face.

This son of a bitch.

"This way, please," one of the wait staff politely guided them inside.

The lobby that greeted them after climbing ten steps was like stepping into another world compared to the chaos outside. The grandiose entrance had high ceilings and extended on both sides like a cathedral chapel. Everything was adorned in elegant luxury, with white walls and pillars, gold-plated decorations, and a magnificent chandelier hanging from the ceiling. The dark-toned paintings on the ceiling added depth to the room, while statues were strategically placed to break up any monotony on the walls. The sound of a small orchestra filled the air without overpowering conversation.

"I feel sick," Kwon Taek Joo suddenly muttered to himself.

Zhenya turned to glance at Kwon Taek Joo.

Despite being in such an enchanting space, Kwon Taek Joo face lacked signs of awe or wonder. Kwon Taek Joo had never been one for aesthetics and didn't particularly enjoy playing the role of servant in this extravagant setting. Even so, as they entered a place that he would likely only visit once in his lifetime, all he could feel was nausea. Zhenya observed Kwon Taek Joo's paled face before smirking and looking away.

There were many people gathered in the main lobby. They were divided into groups of 3-4 people and talked to each other. Among them was a person that caught Kwon Taek Joo's attention. This person is the president of Russia. Even though it was a face he had seen many times in the media, seeing him right in front of him made him feel unreal.

"You there. Come here."

Kwon Taek Joo was checking the surrounding situation when a middle-aged employee approached and sincerely greeted him. He looked like a butler or general manager of the party. Zhenya merely walked him and entered the hall without sparing a look. The man adjusted his position, blocking Kwon Taek Joo who was unintentionally trying to follow.

"Drivers go this way."

The man stretched out his arm and pointed to the side passage. It looked like a side room mainly for employees. Kwon Taek Joo sent a desperate look after Zhenya's fleeting form, but the bastard just kept mingling with the rest of the party invitees.

Honestly, what was the point of having Zhenya as a partner, when he couldn't even help Kwon Taek Joo out of these situations.

Zhenya deserved the 'Inadequate Partner' award' if such an award existed.

"Let's go. Stop stalling."

Kwon Taek Joo reluctantly followed the manager to a storage room near the kitchen, where he found a group of people preoccupied with their

phones.

The last time he saw Zhenya, the man had moved on to talking with some high-ranking guests. He seemed to fit strangely well in Russia's top royal Social circle.

This led to the question, who exactly was Zhenya?

Kwon Taek Joo's gaze hardened instantly, all emotions vanishing from his stoic face. The manager had led him to a storage room near the kitchen, a place that even uninvited guests like Kwon Taek Joo were familiar with. As he entered the room, the door slammed shut behind him, and he noticed that everyone inside was engrossed in their phones, used to this kind of treatment. Some were playing games or joking around with each other.

Why did they allow staff into the mansion?

Wouldn't it be wiser to stay in their cars? But then again, perhaps they were expecting an important call from their boss.

Kwon Taek Joo clicked his tongue in disdain at the inefficient scene before him. Unlike these people, he actually had work to do. The party was in full swing and this would be the perfect opportunity for him to uncover any secrets.

He needed to leave this room and return to the main hall where the important people were gathered. But as a driver, he needed permission just to use the bathroom. If he suddenly left without a valid reason, his identity could be threatened. Should he trust Zhenya and wait for his signal? No, that was not a viable option. He had to come up with a plan.

Kwon Taek Joo paced by the door, thinking of ways to escape. The staff glanced curiously at him but soon lost interest. Quietly slipping out unnoticed seemed like the best option now. He cautiously opened the door, mindful of any creaks from the hinges. Outside, there were people transporting food and drinks. He had to time it perfectly.

When the moment was right, Kwon Taek Joo slipped out of the room and closed the door silently behind him, releasing a sigh of relief once it was shut securely. In the hallway, it was just him alone.

He needed to make it back to the main hall before anyone noticed his absence. Kwon Taek Joo turned his back on the kitchen and started walking, soon coming upon a side hallway. Everything was going according to plan.

"Where are you going?"

The unexpected voice made him stop and turn around. It was the manager he had encountered earlier, standing tall with a suspicious look in his eyes, taking in every detail of Kwon Taek Joo's appearance. He needed to think fast and come up with an excuse.

"I need to find the restroom," Kwon Taek Joo blurted out, struggling to maintain his composure. The manager gave him a skeptical look, clearly not convinced by his excuse.

He scrutinized Kwon Taek Joo's every move and expression, making it difficult for him to keep up the act. But Kwon Taek Joo had learned how to put on a convincing facade after years of dealing with people in his line of work. However, he couldn't shake off the suspicion that seemed to be piercing through his skin like shards of glass.

Finally, the manager gestured for a passing waiter to attend to Kwon Taek Joo's request. The waiter approached him with apprehension and said, "Let's go." As they walked down the hallway, Kwon Taek Joo took note of every detail - the ceiling, walls, columns, windows - but didn't see any surveillance cameras.

When they reached the bathroom near the kitchen, Kwon Taek Joo quickly scanned the area again but still didn't see any cameras. He nodded at the waiter and said,

"Thank you, I'll be quick."

But before leaving, he suddenly grabbed the waiter's shoulder and whispered in his ear, "You should probably get some rest."

The waiter looked confused for a moment before Kwon Taek Joo hit his pressure point and he fell to the ground. Taking advantage of this distraction, Kwon Taek Joo dragged him inside.

The door to the room where the waiter had been earlier was now tightly shut. Kwon Taek Joo noticed something fall from inside and quickly grabbed a mop leaning against the wall, securing it across the door and the opposite wall. It would take some time to locate the missing waiter, so Kwon Taek Joo took charge of everything in the meantime. He wasted no time and headed straight to the busy kitchen.

"Where's the whiskey? And where did you run off with those canapés? Move faster, you lazy slowpokes!" a man demanded, trying to maintain order in the chaotic kitchen.

While outside an elegant party was in full swing, inside the kitchen was a chaotic battlefield. The grumpy chef handed Kwon Taek Joo a wooden tray of Single Malt as he entered, pushing him back and telling him not to act like a snail. Despite being kicked out again, Kwon Taek Joo saw this as an opportunity to enter the main hall alone. He followed closely behind another waiter and managed to find his way back without getting lost. However, as he walked towards the lobby door, he spotted the manager and quickly lifted the tray onto his shoulder while covering his face.

In the main hall, people were engrossed in various conversations - some discussing political issues with serious expressions while others laughed together as they sipped on their drinks. The children who were dragged along reluctantly were dozing off or playing rather than enjoying themselves. It was hard to find any signs of innocence in these children that are usually seen in others their age.

Kwon Taek Joo weaved through high-ranking guests and offered them Single Malt wine on a tray, carefully eavesdropping on their conversations for any information on Anastasia's whereabouts. With the help of a special lens worn over his left eye, Kwon Taek Joo could quickly obtain information about specific individuals by looking at them for more than three seconds.

He scanned the faces of each guest, from high-ranking government officials to powerful businessmen and notorious mafia bosses gathered in one place.

"This outfit suits you," a familiar voice suddenly rang out.

Kwon Taek Joo turned to see Zhenya standing next to him, happily reaching for a glass of Single Malt.

Kwon Taek Joo also offered drinks to passersby, trying to blend in with the crowd and gather any valuable information he could.

Zhenya whispered, gently swirling the wine around in his glass.

"This place is odd, isn't it? It's loud, but no one truly exists here."

Kwon Taek Joo almost asked for clarification, thinking he had misheard something strange. But then he remembered his current situation and stayed silent, his eyes narrowing suspiciously at Zhenya.

Zhenya brought the glass to his lips slowly, deciding to change the subject as if his muttering had been a figment of Kwon Taek Joo's imagination.

"The man standing next to Lomonosov is Bazim Vissarionovich, the second son of the powerful Bogdanov family. Rumor has it that he's one of the president's closest confidants and they go horseback riding together once a week. He holds a lot of sway among Duma parliamentarians and any public projects proposed by the Russian government must pass through him before being approved by the president."

Upon further reflection, Kwon Taek Joo recalled hearing that the head of the Bogdanov family was actually the true representative of Gazprom. It made sense, considering his son's close friendship with the President and influential position in parliament.

Zhenya quickly set down his empty glass on a passing tray as he explained how they were able to successfully secure an energy facility construction contract with Japan and become the biggest beneficiaries thanks to their ties with the powerful state-owned corporation. To emphasize his point, he gestured towards an older man sitting in a nearby wheelchair.

"See that man over there? That's Visarion Romanovich, a key figure at Gazprom who has helped the Bogdanov family maintain their grip on

the energy industry. Russia may be led by its president, but it is truly run by people like him."

The true nature and power of the Bogdanov family exceeded what Kwon Taek Joo had initially imagined. His curiosity about the rest of the family was piqued. He scanned the room for Vladimir Vissarionovich, the eldest son of the family, but couldn't spot him anywhere. So he decided to take a glass of Single Malt and offer it to Zhenya, understanding the unspoken request for some liquid courage. He smiled and accepted it calmly before saying, "Here he comes."

Kwon Taek Joo followed Zhenya's gaze and saw a man descending down the stairs, shaking hands with guests along the way. He was surprisingly small in stature but still exuded a commanding presence.

"It is rumored that when Vissarion Romanovich passes away, his eldest son, Vladimir, will inherit the family business and become Russia's top energy tycoon. Like father like son - it seems that slaves will give birth to slaves and kings will be born kings in this family. Vladimir has already gained more recognition than his father in the industry, and many believe that the business will thrive even more under his leadership. But amidst all of this family talk, there are whispers about another potential heir: Psych Bogdanov. Some say he may be an illegitimate son of Vissarion Romanovich, but with his gangster background, he doesn't quite fit in with the royal image of the family".

"Hm. You'll be surprised to know that individual is technically a member of the government," said Zhenya, glancing at Kwon Taek Joo.

It seemed like he must have misheard because Zhenya wasn't known for telling jokes. But Zhenya simply maintained a calm expression as he smiled at Kwon Taek Joo.

It was almost unbelievable. Was the person who had attempted to kidnap an innocent foreigner actually a government employee? The same person who had boldly wielded a bazooka in broad daylight in the middle of the city? Even a passing dog would find this situation comical.

But instead of correcting himself, Zhenya added more information about Psych Bogdanov.

"That individual is highly knowledgeable in the defense industry and their abilities are quite impressive. They are well-known in the criminal underworld where arms deals take place."

The "underworld" referred to here was the mafia. In recent years, the mafia had become a powerful force in the Russian economy. While they used to operate through illegal activities such as prostitution, human trafficking, and drug dealing, they have shifted their focus to the defense industry since the early 1990s. This has led to a significant increase in their income and solidified the defense industry, along with the energy sector, as major powers in today's Russian economy.

In Russia, the mafia often acquired weapons for more lucrative deals instead of going through the legal and official channels.

These advanced weapons were developed using national funds, the government appeared to turn a blind eye or even approve of this practice. The powerful financial influence of the mafia had led them to be seen as allies by the government, rather than enemies. The Bogdanov family is a prime example of this relationship.

Before Vissarion Romanovich's time, the Bogdanov family were not well-known in the business world. However, they quickly rose to prominence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, during a time when new corporations were thriving. It may seem unlikely, but if we assume that the Bogdanov family has connections to the mafia, it would explain their struggles before the 1990s.

Kwon Taek Joo also speculated on why Psyche Bogdanov is known as "Russia's nuclear".

Despite facing opposition from the Royal Family, he maintains strong ties within the underground world and serves as a bridge between two divided economies. It is common for weapons developed in Russia to be traded through the mafia due to their ability to generate higher profits outside of formal channels.

And while it is possible that the government is unaware of this practice, it is also likely that they choose to ignore it or even condone it.

## **Chapter 1.13 - Nuclear Man: Prick Your Ears and Listen**

Was the man who developed 'Anastasia' the same one that Morgan suspected and ended up getting killed for? Despite a lack of concrete evidence, it definitely seems fishy. Kwon Taek Joo was still deep in thought when Zhenya suddenly pointed out,

"I'm running low on wine."

The tray in front of him was littered with empty glasses. A normal waiter would have refilled the drinks before they were completely gone, maintaining an air of professionalism. But Kwon Taek Joo was so engrossed in their conversation that he lost track of time. When he finally glanced towards the kitchen hallway, the manager from earlier was giving him a strange look. "I have to go," Kwon Taek Joo said abruptly.

"Let's finish our discussion first. I saw Psych Bogdanov heading upstairs just now, followed by Alexei Perov and Yuri Levin." These were the Ministers of Defense and Foreign Affairs for Russia, respectively.

The fact that they were having a secret meeting with Psych Bogdanov piqued Kwon Taek Joo's curiosity.

"Turn on your communicator, I'll cover you," Zhenya insisted as Kwon Taek Joo hurried back to the kitchen.

There was something oddly carefree about his tone; it almost seemed like he was expecting something good to happen. But Kwon Taek Joo wasn't sure if he could trust someone as shady as Zhenya. He shook his head and made his way across the hallway. "Wait," the manager called out, catching his attention.

He quickly lifted his tray to obscure his face.

""Did you forget the instructions? Do your job properly and work quickly."

"Yes, I remember."

"I would have taken another step instead of answering, if it were me."

Kwon Taek Joo held himself responsible for catching his coworkers' mistakes and then reprimanding them. He composed himself and hurried through the hallway. The head chef's angry shouts still rang out from the kitchen. As soon as the waitstaff set down their empty trays, they were sent back out with new ones. Kwon Taek Joo had just entered the kitchen when someone snatched the empty tray from his hand.

He peered inside and noticed a corner of the kitchen where food was piling up without being cleaned. While another waiter distracted the chef, Kwon Taek Joo made his way to the kitchen counter. The chefs in each department put great effort into preparing ingredients, cooking dishes, and presenting and decorating them. But if something small like spilling sauce occurs at the end, the dish is mercilessly thrown away. As a result, trash accumulates and spills onto the floor.

According to the mansion's layout, there should be a door leading from the pantry to the backyard. And often trash is disposed of in places that are not easily visible. So there is no better place than the backyard.

Kwon Taek Joo lifted the heavy garbage bin. The kitchen staff were all too busy to pay attention to him. He walked around the kitchen counter and entered the ingredient storage room. There was a side door on the opposite wall. It was locked from inside so getting out wouldn't be an issue. What he needed to be careful about was security outside. As expected, as soon as he opened the door to step outside, Kwon Taek Joo was approached by a bodyguard.

"What's going on?"

"Oh, there's so much trash... If we don't take care of it right away, the head chef will go crazy."

The bodyguard glanced at Kwon Taek Joo and then at the trash can in his hand. His eyes quickly passed over Kwon Taek Joo and looked into the kitchen. The head chef's frantic shouting could still be heard from the open door. The guard seemed to understand the situation. Kwon Taek Joo bowed and headed out to dispose of the trash.

He took out the food waste while surveying the entire building. If the two ministers and Psych Bogdanov were having a secret meeting, then the first floor where the party was being held wouldn't be an ideal choice.

Of course, even if the entire first floor was eliminated, there would still be many empty rooms.

Kwon Taek Joo surveyed the entire mansion and suddenly fixed his gaze on a room at the end of the 3rd floor. Because it was night, all of the rooms had their curtains drawn, but for some reason that room was an exception. He didn't know why, but he just couldn't ignore it. It would be better to check it out.

Kwon Taek Joo visualized his general route. There were too many eyes inside so it would be better to move from the outside. The backyard was relatively quiet and the darkness of the building provided good cover. Of course, he needed to deal with the guards first.

Kwon Taek Joo returned to the ingredient storage room with an empty trash can. The same bodyguard was still keeping watch over the area. When Kwon Taek Joo approached, he turned around without any questions asked.

In a sudden moment, Kwon Taek Joo used a trash can to disorient his bodyguard and disarm him. He then proceeded to defeat him with a well-placed punch to the face, taking advantage of the lack of security in the building's back entrance. With no time to waste, Kwon Taek Joo prepares to climb the building using a nylon rope he had hidden in his watch. As he struggles with the weight and gravity of his own body, he is suddenly faced with an unexpected obstacle - his rope snaps due to repeated rubbing against sharp golden ornaments. In a moment of panic, Kwon Taek Joo braces for impact, but finds himself being caught by something or someone, saving him from what could have been a fatal fall.

He opened his eyes slowly. Kwon Taek Joo's body was suspended in the air, held up only by a thin nylon rope that had just snapped.

He quickly grabbed onto the third-floor window frame to stop himself from falling. The rope fell to the ground uselessly. Kwon Taek Joo let out a sigh of relief. It could have been much worse; he had almost fallen from a skyscraper over 100 meters high before. After taking a moment to calm his muscles and nerves, he pulled himself up onto the window frame.

He peered into the room, disappointment evident on his face. It was completely empty, with no trace of anyone ever being there. Kwon Taek Joo scanned the other rooms, each one large and difficult to navigate. How was he supposed to find Psych Bogdanov and the two ministers in this massive mansion? Just as he was trying to focus, he heard a clicking sound in his earpiece.

"Where are you?" Zhenya's voice came through.

Kwon Taek Joo hadn't even thought about using the communication device until now. He sighed again, feeling like he was wasting his time.

"If you're done playing around, listen carefully now,"

Zhenya continued. Confused, Kwon Taek Joo was about to ask what he meant when he heard the sound of a door opening and closing.

Instinctively, he lowered his breathing and focused on any signs or sounds around him. He could hear whispers of conversation coming from somewhere nearby, three distinct voices speaking in different tones.

But it was hard to tell if one of them belonged to Psych Bogdanov without hearing their real voices – all he could do was eavesdrop on their private conversation for now. "How is SS-29 coming along?" "We're waiting for Sonchev's update. They're searching for experts to fix any errors with SS-29, and it seems they're quite busy. Sonchev didn't even show up at the party tonight.

We'll wait for their contact." "And what is North Korea's response to the error?" "They claim it was an unexpected incident.

There were no issues during the experimental phase." Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but smile. In Russia, the designation "SS number" was

usually reserved for intercontinental ballistic missiles, or ICBMs. The infamous "Satan" ICBM from the Soviet era was officially called "SS-18". This meant that the weapon they were discussing, known as "SS-29", was likely a nuclear weapon of similar caliber. And the group mentioned – Sonchev – was a Slavic mafia organization.

They seemed to have possession of this weapon, which must have some connection to the Bogdanov family if they were hosting a large event like tonight's party. And even North Korea was involved in its development. Could this "SS-29" be the same as "

Anastasia"?

"What's the update on the Americans?"

"They're still quiet. We took care of the unexpected intruder, so maybe they're being more careful. But what does it matter? They're still stuck in a situation where they can't claim the body."

If it was a rat that snuck in, were they talking about Morgan's death? The possibilities range from secret nuclear weapons development in Russia to North Korean interference to US surveillance and elimination of spies. Every scenario is plausible, but without solid evidence, it's all just speculation.

The conversation paused briefly. Kwon Taek Joo heard the door open and close. Did someone leave the room? He wondered, but Zhenya gave an update on what was happening inside.

"Bogdanov just left. Looks like he's getting a phone call."

Kwon Taek Joo nodded and furrowed his brow. A question he hadn't considered while eavesdropping suddenly came to mind. Where was Zhenya anyway? How did he have such detailed knowledge of Psych Bogdanov's movements?

"How did you figure out what just happened?" Kwon Taek Joo asked.

"Well, I was escorted by a girl named Olga who claimed to be the youngest daughter of Visarion Romanovich. She offered to give me a tour of the mansion and who was I to refuse? So I slyly planted a listening device in the keyhole of their meeting room,

"Zhenya replied.

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but be more intrigued by Zhenya's identity than "Anastasia" at this point. What kind of person gets invited to a party at the heavily guarded Bogdanov family mansion and casually roams around like it's no big deal?

"Where are you right now?"

"In the basement control room."

"And what exactly are you doing there?"

"Oh, just watching someone almost fall from the third floor," Zhenya said with a mischievous laugh.

Kwon Taek Joo immediately spun around and gave the surveillance camera in the corner of the wall outside his middle finger without hesitation.

A burst of laughter erupted from Zhenya on the other end of their communication device.

After a moment, Zhenya spoke up again in surprise, "

Why are you hanging around outside?"

Kwon Taek Joo didn't bother answering - there was no need to explain himself. As he checked the time and saw that it was almost 3am, he remembered hearing part of Psych Bogdanoy's conversation earlier about an important phone call. Clearly, work can wait when there's some juicy gossip to eavesdrop on.

"The phone call that Psych went to receive, was it from Sonchev?"

"I'm not sure, but we can test it out. I noticed a landline phone on the second floor of the mansion when we were there earlier. There's also one in Bogdanov's office, but the lines are different so calls can only be received at his office."

"But how do we receive calls?"

Kwon Taek Joo asked, looking down. The location Zhenya mentioned wasn't far from where they were now; just open the door to the room

downstairs and it would be right in front of them. The important thing was to see if there was any security measures in place. It didn't seem too difficult to approach.

"Okay...if you can get from here to there in 8 seconds."

Looks like the line is connected. Timing is key. All Kwon Taek Joo had to do was reach the phone within eight seconds and answer at the same time as Psych Bogdanov picked up in his office. Easier said than done - even the slightest deviation could cause major trouble.

Kwon Taek Joo glanced at the CCTV then took out a piece of gum and started chewing. He stood up and placed his feet on the window frame, using his body weight to stay attached to the wall behind him. He didn't have any safety equipment prepared - 8 seconds wasn't a lot of time. He took a deep breath and jumped down.

He managed to grab onto something as he fell - it was the window frame on the second floor. His knuckles, wrists, and elbows were sore from the impact, but he gritted his teeth and pulled himself up. Three seconds had passed before he safely landed back on the window frame.

"Not bad" Zhenya chuckled as he watched Kwon Taek Joo struggle with everything while he sat comfortably looking at his computer screen.

Ignoring him, Kwon Taek Joo took out a lighter. At first glance, it appeared to be a regular Zippo lighter. But when he opened the lid, a long and thin tube resembling a screwdriver appeared.

He bent it and turned it on, causing a small ray of light to emit from the end. Kwon Taek Joo placed the chewing gum on the glass door and used the flame from the lighter to draw a circle around it.

Then, he carefully removed the gum and cut out a round piece of glass without making any noise. He placed it on the window sill and reached inside to unlock the window with ease. After quickly surveying his surroundings, Kwon Taek Joo stepped inside.

Kwon Taek Joo moved cautiously and light on his feet, like a cat. He crept towards the door, pressing his ear against it to listen for any signs of activity outside. It was eerily quiet. Slowly, he opened the door and

stepped out, turning his head to see a table at the far end of the hallway. The phone Zhenya had mentioned was sitting on top.

Just as he made his way towards the table, he heard Zhenya's voice in his ear again.

"I'll give you a signal; make sure to synchronize properly."

Kwon Taek Joo nodded and reached for the receiver. At that moment, Zhenya began counting down from the other end of the radio.

"Three."

He took a deep breath.

"Two."

Kwon Taek Joo looked back over his shoulder, checking for anyone approaching.

"One."

As soon as Zhenya finished counting, power surged through Kwon Taek Joo's hand holding the receiver.

"Do you hear it?"

Kwon Taek Joo grabbed the receiver and listened intently. There was complete silence. Not only did he not hear anything from the other side of the line, but Zhenya also didn't say anything. It seemed like Kwon Taek Joo was the only one holding the receiver. His mouth felt dry.

Could I have gotten it wrong again? He clutched the stethoscope tightly, waiting for any sound.

Was it just the sound of wind? Suddenly, Psych Bogdanov's voice came through loud and clear from the other end of the receiver.

"Right on schedule. Just as we were discussing."

"I have just reached an agreement with that party."

"And how is it going?"

"We'll be sending a technician from North Korea."

"This is the best news among everything I've heard. When will they be sent?"

"We leave tomorrow and should arrive in Moscow the following day."

"We need to make sure there are no unwanted visitors like last time."

"Our technician will disguise themselves as a Chinese tourist, so even Americans won't suspect them."

"Keep monitoring their movements and report back regularly."

"Yes, of course."

The call was abruptly disconnected, leaving a sense of unease in the air. Kwon Taek Joo furrowed his brows, already on edge from the cautious conversation. He held onto the stethoscope tightly, feeling its weight and solidity grounding him in the midst of uncertainty.

His confidence wavered for a moment, but he quickly regained it, determined to wait until Psych hung up first.

Suddenly, a deafening roar erupted from his communication device, causing a sharp pain to shoot through his ear and into his brain like an awl. Kwon Taek Joo's body convulsed as he kneeled down, clutching his head in agony. He frantically tore off his communication device and threw it away, but the sound continued to reverberate in his head.

Cold sweat dripped down his forehead and a shiver ran down his spine as he struggled to regain control of himself. Even his vision was blurred from the shock and his heart pounded in his chest.

He couldn't understand why the normally reliable communication equipment had suddenly malfunctioned. Surely, Psych Bogdanov must have heard that deafening noise as well.

Cursing under his breath, Kwon Taek Joo knew that his worst fears had come true. A gunshot rang out outside the mansion, signaling that Zhenya had been discovered by the security guard amidst all the chaos. In this dire situation, he needed to think quickly and act even faster.

Fighting through the dizziness and confusion, Kwon Taek Joo shakily stood up and stumbled down the hallway. His mind was still reeling and

he couldn't focus on finding an escape route.

He simply ran blindly, desperate to avoid any more danger.

## **Chapter 1.14 – Nuclear Man: Don’t Hate Me So Much!**

As Kwon Taek Joo reached the central staircase, he heard hurried footsteps coming from below. At least three or four people were approaching. It appeared as though the guards were on their way to search for the intruder. If he continued to delay, the number of guards would only increase. He decided it was best to avoid confrontation while there were still few in number. Changing his original plan, Kwon Taek Joo headed upstairs.

The 3rd floor was eerily quiet. He pressed himself against a wall and scanned his surroundings. The guards were getting closer by the minute. Kwon Taek Joo took long strides down the hallway, careful not to make any noise with his shoes.

Suddenly, he noticed someone at the door of one of the rooms. It seemed like whoever was inside was about to come out. The doorknob began to turn and Kwon Taek Joo quickly ducked in the opposite direction before the door could fully open.

Moments later, the door opened and the guards entered the room silently.

"Have you found anything yet?"

The voice and tone sounded familiar - it was the same voice Kwon Taek Joo had overheard during a phone call. Psych Bogdanov.

"We're still searching, but we suspect there may have been an intruder. Traces of entry from outside have been detected. It's not safe here, so please come with us downstairs first."

The two ministers and Psych silently followed the suggestion. Half of the guards who had gone to provide cover on the third floor had left, leaving only two or three remaining outside the door. They were all armed, making it difficult to handle them.

One of the guards attempted to close the open door. Holding his breath, Kwon Taek Joo watched as the guard's hand on the doorknob moved - on both sides of the door. In that split second, Kwon Taek Joo kicked the door with all his might. The guard's head snapped back as the door flew open, causing him to fall with a loud thud.

Another guard peered into the room next to him and inched his head out when he sensed something suspicious. He quickly found his fallen comrade and cautiously approached. As he stooped down to examine the other guard's wound, a figure silently slipped through the door behind him. The guard reacted swiftly, reaching for his gun, but before he could fire a shot, a bullet pierced his shoulder from the opposite side of the door.

"Bang!"

Hearing the gunshots, another guard sprinted from down the hall. As soon as he saw that his fellow guards had been hit, he opened fire without hesitation. Kwon Taek Joo ran to the end of the hallway, dodging bullets along the way, but soon found himself surrounded by more guards coming up the stairs.

Desperate for an escape route, Kwon Taek Joo ducked into the nearest room. It wasn't ideal, but it was better than being caught out in the open. He locked the door and hastily piled nearby objects against it to create a makeshift barricade. Outside, the guards banged on the door with increasing intensity. Kwon Taek Joo knew it wouldn't hold for long.

Turning around to look for another escape option, Kwon Taek Joo suddenly felt a sense of *déjà vu* wash over him. This room...he had been here before. In fact, it was the same room on the 3rd floor that he had scoped out earlier.

Meanwhile, outside the door, there was a commotion as more guards gathered. It seemed like they were discussing how best to break into this particular room on the 3rd floor. What should he do now? Kwon Taek Joo scanned his surroundings for any possible escape routes.

He even climbed onto a table and prodded at the ceiling in case it was thin enough to punch through and climb up. But unfortunately, it was

too solid. He tried the walls, but they were just as impenetrable.

As the guards in the hallway fired at the now closed door, Kwon Taek Joo weighed his options. He was backed against a bookshelf with two Colt guns in hand, ready to face whoever came through that door. There was no other way out for him.

The smell of cigars, so familiar to him, caught his attention and he turned around just in time to be attacked from behind. His mouth was covered and a strong arm squeezed tightly around his neck. Before he could even think about escaping, he was dragged inside and everything went dark.

Soon after, the sound of the door breaking down echoed through the room as guards rushed in. They searched high and low for the intruder, pushing books off shelves and lifting furniture and curtains.

Meanwhile, Kwon Taek Joo was dragged through a secret passage by someone he recognized only by their scent. As they walked through narrow corridors, Zhenya suddenly stopped and scanned the ceiling before causing a stone tile to vibrate. Through a small gap in the floor, they saw someone walking back and forth in the room below. Kwon Taek Joo signaled for Zhenya to lower the floor and they both descended into the room. When a guard approached them, Zhenya pushed on the ceiling tile to knock him off balance and give Kwon Taek Joo an opportunity to take him down with his guns.

The sound of gunfire echoed through the air, causing Zhenya to tilt his head to avoid being hit. He felt a sharp pain as a bullet grazed his earlobe, drawing blood. Despite this, he couldn't help but burst into laughter.

Meanwhile, Kwon Taek Joo's bullet struck one of the bodyguards in the hand, causing him to yell out and clench his wounded hand.

But the tragedy was far from over. Before he knew it, Zhenya had approached them. Kwon Taek Joo's instincts warned him that something terrible would happen to the poor man. However, he was busy and didn't have any free time to intervene.

He didn't want to make the situation worse than it already was, but he couldn't stop what happened next.

"Ugh... Ugh... Zzzz... Argh.."

Zhenya forcefully opened the guard's mouth and shoved both hands inside. The guard struggled and tried to free himself, but Zhenya's grip was too strong. With a sudden jerk, Zhenya removed his hands from the guard's mouth.

Kwon Taek Joo turned away in disgust at the gruesome sound of jaw bones breaking and being separated. The bodyguard passed out from the pain and trauma. Kwon Taek Joo took a step back, feeling like he was witnessing a scene from a savage animal attack rather than human behavior. It was absolutely inhumane, especially with the way Zhenya smiled afterwards.

With blood still on his hands, Zhenya looked around until his eyes landed on Kwon Taek Joo. The man took a step back and shook his head disapprovingly.

"I didn't think that was impossible."

Zhenya continued to approach him. Kwon Taek Joo tried to step back, but it was futile as Zhenya quickly closed the distance between them. Kwon Taek Joo's eyes glinted with anger and wariness as he stared at Zhenya. But Zhenya seemed unfazed, only a hint of a smile on his face. He showed no signs of remorse.

Aggravated, Kwon Taek Joo unbuttoned his shirt and threw it at Zhenya, cursing him for the bloody mess. But Zhenya didn't seem bothered and simply wiped his hands on the shirt, staining it with blood and bodily fluids.

"Why don't you use a handkerchief?"

"What's it to you?"

Zhenya seemed to imply that it was okay to just take someone else's shirt if necessary.

"Over there!"

Meanwhile, the other guards scattered in response to the gunfire. Kwon Taek Joo was torn between retreating back into the hallway or confronting the chaos directly. Suddenly, Zhenya grabbed his collar and dragged him towards the window. Looking outside, they could see cars racing away from the mansion due to the commotion. Without hesitation, Zhenya opened the window and forcefully lifted Kwon Taek Joo onto the windowsill. It became clear that this room was located at the front of the mansion, rather than the back.

With a strong grip, Zhenya pulled Kwon Taek Joo closer to the window to get a better view of what was happening outside.

The guards broke into the room and demanded surrender. Kwon Taek Joo felt an overwhelming force against him from every direction - his head, back, and even his arms and legs. Despite being surrounded, Zhenya's momentum did not waver. He continued to stare straight ahead and whisper incomprehensible words.

"Get ready," Zhenya said abruptly.

"What?" Kwon Taek Joo asked, confused.

"Now," Zhenya replied tersely.

Before Kwon Taek Joo could process what was happening, Zhenya yelled "Jump!" and launched them both into the air. They were quickly dragged away by landing on a waiting sedan outside the mansion.

The car sped off in a frenzy, swerving in all directions as Kwon Taek Joo struggled to keep his balance. If he hadn't managed to grab onto the rear trunk lid, he would have been thrown off the car.

Zhenya maintained his balance by twisting half of his body and punching the driver's side window with a fierce determination. The glass cracked slightly before shattering under Zhenya's repeated blows.

He reached inside and yanked the driver out of the car, ignoring the futile attempts of the seat belt to hold them in place.

The driver was forcibly pulled out of the car as the person sitting in the passenger seat awkwardly took control of the wheel. Zhenya, determined and quick-thinking, kicked the intruder with both feet and

managed to squeeze into the driver's seat before accelerating without hesitation.

The sudden movement caused Kwon Taek Joo's body to lurch uncontrollably. He struggled to crawl into the backseat while bullets from the security team flew around them, but he finally made it inside just in time.

With barely a moment to catch their breath, Kwon Taek Joo aimed his gun at the man sitting in the backseat - the owner of the car they had just stolen. It wasn't his intention to kill him, but rather to use him as a shield against any further attacks from Vladimir Bogdanov and his men.

But their optimism was short-lived as bullets continued to fly towards them, this time from a rifle held by Bogdanov himself who was leaning out of a window at the distant mansion. Luckily, they were far enough away that none of the shots hit their target. The sedan sped away from the danger and towards one more obstacle - the main gate, which was tightly shut.

Despite seeing their impending collision with the iron gate, Zhenya showed no signs of slowing down. In fact, he pressed harder on the gas pedal until they reached top speed. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but wonder if Zhenya was insane or simply fearless in the face of danger.

"Aaaahhhh!"

The screams of terror from the car's owner filled their ears as they drew closer and closer to certain impact. Even if they tried to brake now, it would be too late. The security team stationed at the gate scrambled to get out of harm's way as the reckless sedan barreled towards them. Just when it seemed like all hope was lost, miraculously, the iron gate began to open.

The car crashed through the half-opened gate and sped away, leaving the bewildered security team in their wake. But the screams of terror from the car's owner continued, much to Kwon Taek Joo's annoyance. In a split second, a gunshot rang out and the screaming stopped. The car's owner slumped in his seat, a bullet through his forehead.

Covered in blood, Kwon Taek Joo glared at Zhenya with seething anger. He wished he could just shoot him right then and there for all the trouble he caused. But Zhenya seemed completely unaffected by the chaos and casually muttered,

"...Too Noisy."

Water cascaded down from the showerhead, disappearing into the drain. As he reached up to loosen his tie, the man hummed and sang a tune. Slowly, he peeled off his clothes until his strong, muscular body was revealed. He shook out his damp hair before stepping into the warm spray of the shower.

His wet blonde hair turned darker as it clung to his skin. The water flowed down his chin and stopped at his defined collarbone before continuing down over his chiseled chest muscles. The tattoo on his chest became more visible against the backdrop of wet skin. His muscles rippled and relaxed under the hot water, while his fingers gently massaged shampoo into his hair.

But behind the steamy mirror, a pair of intense eyes stared back at him with violent intent. It was like looking at a crocodile after it had just tasted blood – comfortable yet brutal.

Kwon Taek Joo dumped all the ice from his drink into the bucket and mixed in some cheap vodka. The contents were on the verge of spilling over, but he didn't hesitate to plunge his hand in. Some vodka spilled out and a few ice cubes fell onto the table. He winced as a burning sensation shot through his wrist. It was an old injury that had been bothering him lately, a dislocated joint that he should have taken better care of. But with all the stress and exhaustion, he ignored the doctor's advice and stopped wearing a cast.

Kwon Taek Joo sighed and leaned back against the dusty old sofa. He closed his eyes, trying to ignore the pain spreading through his body. The sound of running water echoed from the bathroom where Zhenya was taking a bath without permission. Kwon Taek Joo had just escaped from the Bogdanov mansion and returned to this rundown boarding house where they were staying temporarily. The owner was away, so they could easily sneak back in, but it wasn't a safe place for them to

stay for long. Kwon Taek Joo had paid for the room using Zhenya's card, which meant their location would soon be discovered.

It wasn't surprising that there was chaos outside their window. Roads were being monitored and barriers were set up at every entrance. Patrol cars were constantly patrolling the city center, ringing warning bells. This was expected after a deadly shooting had occurred at a gathering of Russia's influential figures. Security would remain tight for some time, making it risky for Kwon Taek Joo to make any moves now. It would be best to wait until surveillance relaxed before taking any action, but the situation didn't seem to be in their favor.

Finally, the sound of running water stopped and Zhenya emerged from the bathroom fully dressed from head to toe. Kwon Taek Joo was surprised by this, wondering why he didn't just wear a towel or something. They were both men, after all, and it wasn't unusual for them to see each other naked.

Zhenya noticed Kwon Taek Joo's curious gaze but didn't seem bothered by it. He simply looked back at him with more attention.

Zhenya took a sip of vodka, caught off guard by the question he received. He seemed confused as to why someone like him would be asked about their identity.

"You don't seem like an agent like me in any way. Your nonchalant entry into the Bogdanov mansion showed that much. You had an official invitation and smoothly blended in with the other guests. It was almost too natural, not forced or planned at all. But is that really all there is to you? You know every detail about the mansion's layout and even its emergency exits. As partners, we should always be aware of each other's whereabouts and actions, but I have no idea where you are or what your plans are until you suddenly appear. So tell me, what exactly is your role? You've never willingly shared information with me, and it seems like our goals may differ."

"Hasn't your superior revealed everything to you yet?"

"I know very little. Enlighten me."

"Is this an interrogation?"

"Let's call it a self-introduction. You still haven't properly introduced yourself."

Kwon Taek Joo tapped lightly on the table, making it clear that Zhenya shouldn't try to escape. Zhenya wasn't thrown off by the unexpected question, instead he just smiled and anticipated what Kwon Taek Joo was thinking.

"It's obvious I'm Russian, with a distinctive accent and pronunciation that points to someone who was born and raised here. I also have access to a personal helicopter without difficulty and was involved in a public conflict without facing any consequences.

Is that why you're so interested in my identity?"

"Alright. What I don't understand is why someone like you, who is 100% Russian and comes from a privileged background in this country, would be helping us with our work."

That question had been nagging at Kwon Taek Joo since their encounter. Zhenya was clearly Russian, but unlike Kwon Taek Joo himself, he wasn't swayed by his superiors' agendas. This made him a powerful ally for neutralizing any potential threats from those in positions of power. It was hard for Kwon Taek Joo to comprehend why Zhenya would cooperate with them in this operation unless it was an exceptionally important and urgent matter.

Zhenya simply shrugged his shoulders, trying to appear unconcerned.

"Along with being a Russian citizen, I am also a businessman," he stated. Kwon Taek Joo's expression became even more bewildered. The words themselves weren't difficult to understand, but the idea behind them was harder for him to accept.

So, was Zhenya willing to risk his life in this game for personal profit?

To Kwon Taek Joo, it seemed like an act of betrayal and treason. "Are you willing to sacrifice your integrity for fame?" he asked incredulously. "There is no business deal more lucrative than selling out your own country."

The sheer absurdity of it all stunned Kwon Taek Joo. He had never expected anything grand from Zhenya, but he still thought of himself as a patriotic citizen. He was just doing his job; he never imagined that he might have to sacrifice his life for his country. But Zhenya's actions were a whole different level of betrayal and damage to their nation. "

"Do you even know why we are playing this dangerous game?" Kwon Taek Joo demanded.

"Of course," Zhenya replied confidently. "We are testing whether this weapon can strike fear into both South Korea and the United States. If it proves successful, we will use it against our enemies."

He paused for a moment before adding cunningly, "And if the weapon fails, we will simply take the blueprints and continue developing it elsewhere." It was clear that Zhenya knew everything about this mission - including its potential impact on international relations and how detrimental it could be for their own country's standing. "

"What do you gain from all this?" Kwon Taek Joo pressed on, feeling increasingly unsettled by Zhenya's cold-hearted attitude towards his country's well-being. "To me, it doesn't matter whether the weapon succeeds or fails," Zhenya revealed.

"All I care about is getting my hands on Anastasia's blueprint. That is my ultimate goal, not her herself."

It became apparent to Kwon Taek Joo that Zhenya's motives were different from the others in their group - it wasn't just about completing the mission and finding Anastasia; it was about obtaining the valuable blueprint for himself.

"If we succeed, I will obtain that blueprint as my reward," Zhenya concluded with a surreptitious grin

"What?"

"It doesn't sound like a bad deal, right? Without these conditions, who would willingly participate in such a risky venture? Think about it. Anastasia's existence is more terrifying than fire. The one who possesses her will hold unimaginable power, fueled by the fear she

incites. If I have the blueprint, I can create my own version of Anastasia. And even if my attempt fails, it's still a masterpiece weapon that I can develop and sell to special customers."

"Special customers?"

Zhenya just grinned without answering. If he were to successfully create a second Anastasia, his target market would be those who understand the true potential of such a weapon - whether they be from Korea or America. Kwon Taek Joo's mind was now clearer on the plan for this campaign. However, as much as his doubts had been resolved, his trust in Zhenya seemed to diminish.

But Zhenya's strange actions could be understood. His exceptional information gathering skills were what made him an ideal partner for Kwon Taek Joo. The headquarters could not afford any unnecessary risks.

While reason dictated this, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but feel uneasy for some reason. He maintained a suspicious gaze towards Zhenya, who continued to make sarcastic comments.

"Your first impression of me wasn't great, so now you have to be skeptical of my every move?"

"I'm just thinking."

"Don't hate me too much."

Zhenya laughed loudly at his own joke. Kwon Taek Joo gave an irritated look and took something out of his pocket before tossing it to Zhenya - a tape recorder. It contained Bogdanov's phone call with someone from "Sonchev".

"As you heard, it seems that Bogdanov is working on developing a new weapon - possibly an intercontinental ballistic missile, but we need to confirm it. I can't say for sure if it's Anastasia or not, but with the involvement of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Defense, and North Korea, it seems highly likely."

Zhenya nodded silently, then turned to look at Kwon Taek Joo, as if urging him to continue.

"I will use this tape recorder to program Bogdanov's voice into a voice converter. With that, we can find out who he was speaking to from 'Sonchev' on the phone. And once we meet with 'Sonchev', we'll be able to uncover the identity of the newly arrived North Korean engineer and their destination."

Zhenya listened attentively before raising his hand to stroke his eyebrows, appearing hesitant.

"Do you know why all mafia members have tattoos on their bodies?"

"Is that relevant right now?"

"Not knowing could shorten your life."

"What do you mean?"

"Mafia tattoos symbolize belonging. By looking at the tattoos on an old mafia member's body, you can piece together their life story - which group they belonged to and who they pledged allegiance to. So if you harm one of the 'Sonchevs', you will make enemies out of everyone bearing similar tattoos. Does that make sense?"

"I don't care."

Zhenya raised a brow.

"What do you believe in that gives you such confidence?"

"I don't believe in anything. It's just..."

"Just?"

Kwon Taek Joo withdrew his right hand from the ice box and slowly rotated his stiff wrist.

"It's just that I have a pretty useful monster as my partner."

Zhenya immediately recognized himself as the "monster." The compliment was somewhat ambiguous, and Kwon Taek Joo's tone did not sound like he was praising him. However, there was something about it that made Zhenya feel strangely proud.

"Huh? If that's how you see it, then I'm fine with that."

His voice sounded indifferent, but pride was evident in Zhenya's face. His shoulders straightened and his chin lifted slightly. They say praise can even make whales dance, and Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but feel a bit embarrassed watching Zhenya casually boast about something that wasn't even a real compliment.

But this doesn't have to make him lose interest. In fact, he saw an opportunity in Zhenya's enthusiastic state. For the first time, Kwon Taek Joo grinned and handed over his phone with a friendly tone.

"Pretty good, huh? Go ahead and give it a call."

The plan was to use the call as bait to lure "Sonchev" out.

E/N:

A popular South Korean Saying said by Taekjoo: "평생동안 물고기 춤을 추게 한다" translates as "

praise can even make whales dance

". Also based on a book called "Compliments Make Even Whales Dance" (Original title: Whale Done by Ken Blanchard) which was popular in Korea"

## **Chapter 1.15 – Nuclear Man: Let Me Take My Shirt for You**

Translator's Note: This chapter includes violence!! Also a little bit of sexual talk in some parts near the end.

Upon arrival, the two noticed several black sedans already parked at the old warehouse. The only person inside was a man who appeared to be a low-level member of the mafia. Kwon Taek Joo and Zhenya waited nearby, carefully observing the movements around them. They waited for the right time to enter, but no one else joined or made any surprise attacks.

Kwon Taek Joo checked his Colt's magazine while Zhenya threw away his cigar. As soon as it stopped rolling on the floor, the two silently moved forward.

In one swift motion, Kwon Taek Joo pulled the trigger twice on his silenced Colt. However, the car's bulletproof glass prevented any immediate damage, leaving only a large crack on the windshield. The low-level mafia man quickly reached for his rifle.

Before he could aim at them, something heavy landed on the car's hood, causing it to shake. It turned out to be Zhenya's doing as he grabbed hold of the man by his collar and pulled him out of the car. Kwon Taek Joo looked away as they took care of their target.

Not long after, Zhenya returned and tossed a handkerchief at Kwon Taek Joo. The man wiped his hands on it without hesitation, staining it red. While he was distracted, Kwon Taek Joo looked around the old warehouse for any sign of 'Sonchey'.

He suddenly turned to face Zhenya who met his gaze immediately. After a brief nod from Kwon Taek Joo, Zhenya entered first with a smile. Kwon Taek Joo followed suit, waving away dust that clouded their vision. They surveyed the messy space filled with office furniture and

construction materials haphazardly thrown about. The brick walls were partially collapsed, and there was even a hole in the ceiling.

Sitting in the middle of the chaos was a middle-aged Russian man, Boris - also known as 'Sonchev'. Behind him stood five or six large figures, creating an intimidating atmosphere even though it was only a brief meeting.

What surprised them was Boris' nonchalant reaction. He seemed unfazed by the fact that Psych Bogdanov himself did not summon them. Instead, he appeared amused and slightly surprised.

"You're a bit late, aren't you?" Boris broke the silence.

"I heard there was quite a commotion at the Bogdanov mansion last night. And I heard you were responsible for it. It seems like things are getting serious now."

Boris's piercing gaze bore into Zhenya, a silent acknowledgement of the chaos that had erupted at the Bogdanov mansion. Zhenya, ever the cunning mastermind, neither confirmed nor denied his involvement; instead, he simply smirked and shrugged in a nonchalant manner. Both men exuded an air of danger, belonging to the secret underworld where such events were commonplace.

Boris gave Kwon Taek Joo a thorough once-over before turning to Zhenya with a quizzical expression, silently asking for an explanation.

"Why cause such a commotion?" Boris finally asked, frustration seeping into his voice.

"Why not?" Zhenya's grin widened, revealing a slyness that could rival any fox. "Sometimes being reckless pays off."

Boris shook his head disapprovingly, knowing all too well the risks involved in their line of work. But Zhenya remained unfazed, always pushing boundaries and taking risks for the sake of profit. It was just another day in the life of a true player.

Kwon Taek Joo felt uneasy under Zhenya's assessing gaze, not because of the scrutiny itself but because it meant he was seen as an equal to someone like Zhenya. A thought that both excited and terrified him.

Kwon Taek Joo wasted no time and immediately joined the conversation.

"That's enough small talk, let's get to the point. Where is Anastasia?"

Boris raised an eyebrow in suspicion.

"Anastasia? I have no idea why you would think I know."

So he still won't cooperate. And there is still no concrete evidence linking 'SS-29' to 'Anastasia'. Kwon Taek Joo knew from the start that this wouldn't be easy.

"So you do know about 'SS-29'? I have some questions about that weapon."

"It seems I've fallen into a trap, is that your intention all along? I can't decide if you're brave or naive. Surely you don't expect me to just give you all the answers?"

"Then there's only one option left. If you won't talk, then we'll use force."

Before Kwon Taek Joo could finish his sentence, bullets started flying. He quickly rolled towards a pile of construction materials for cover. The constant barrage of bullets created a thick cloud of dust, making it difficult for Kwon Taek Joo to see clearly. His ears were ringing from the noise. But the gunfire continued without letting up.

Kwon Taek Joo timed his counterattack perfectly and threw a smoke bomb into the warehouse. Black smoke quickly filled the area, giving him cover to destroy the fluorescent light bulbs one by one.

The sound of shattering glass echoed through the chaos inside. Gunshots could be heard somewhere in the distance, along with screams and the sickening sound of bones breaking.

Zhenya was nowhere to be seen, but Kwon Taek Joo wasn't worried. No matter what happens, he will survive. Right now, he needed to focus on his own safety.

Kwon Taek Joo put on special goggles, allowing him to track the movements of the mafia members based on their body activity. In the

midst of the chaos, he couldn't distinguish between friend or foe and simply fired his gun while constantly moving among the crowd.

"Arghh!"

"Ahh!"

As screams filled the air, bodies dropped one by one before Kwon Taek Joo's eyes. He continued towards the chair where Boris was supposed to be sitting but found it empty. Panic started to set in as he searched for his target and Zhenya, but they were nowhere to be seen. Kwon Taek Joo scanned the area, trying to figure out how far they could have gone.

Suddenly, a presence behind him made him tense up. He turned around just in time to dodge a sharp blade that sliced through his sleeve, leaving it soaked in blood. He instinctively backed away, ready to defend himself against his opponent who had aimed for his head. But then he hesitated - would killing someone who wasn't Boris serve any purpose? Before he could make a decision, his attacker lunged at him again with the blade aimed for his neck.

However, a tall figure appeared near the door, arms crossed in an arrogant stance. It was Zhenya, looking unbothered as always as he watched the commotion. Kwon Taek Joo noticed a pile of bodies on the floor near him, revealing that Zhenya had been having some fun of his own. The blade once again came for Kwon Taek Joo's stomach and he used his gun to block it before shooting at his opponent's knee.

The man fell to the ground with a groan, similar to Boris' cries earlier. Kwon Taek Joo let out a sigh of relief and removed his goggles, only to see blood dripping down from his arm onto the floor. He realized he needed to stop the bleeding quickly and rummaged through his bag before remembering he had given his handkerchief to Zhenya earlier. With no other options left, Kwon Taek Joo took off his jacket and unbuttoned his shirt as makeshift bandages while Zhenya approached at a leisurely pace.

"That was a close one," Zhenya commented, flashing Kwon Taek Joo a playful smirk. "Can you imagine if you had gotten shot in the stomach? You'd have to go a whole month without sex."

Kwon Taek Joo shook his head and struggled to unbutton his sleeve with one hand. Zhenya chuckled and stepped forward to help. "At this rate, we'll be here all night," he teased, pushing Kwon Taek Joo's hand away and expertly undoing the buttons.

Kwon Taek Joo mentally noted that this assistance would have been nice several minutes ago.

Zhenya raised his arm, revealing a slow trickle of blood running down his side.

"Thanks to me, you won't bleed out anytime soon. Aren't you grateful?"

"Oh, absolutely," Kwon Taek Joo replied sarcastically but with genuine gratitude in his smile.

Kwon Taek Joo dropped his voice to hushed whisper, "There's still a lot of work to do," but Zhenya remained silent. His gaze was focused intently on unbuttoning Kwon Taek Joo's shirt as if it were the most important task in the world. Unbeknownst to him, Kwon Taek Joo was staring at his gentle fingers delicately working each button.

"Okay, it's done."

Annoyed by the touch of Zhenya's hand, Kwon Taek Joo shook it off and removed his shirt himself. The last button popped off from being thrown so forcefully. Without hesitation, he wrapped the shirt tightly around his bleeding left arm and tied it into a knot using his teeth. This type of situation wasn't uncommon for him on solo missions.

After stopping the bleeding, he approached Boris. Despite his injured leg, he managed to grab a gun and point it at Boris. With force, he made Boris sit back in the chair from earlier and handcuffed him tightly with his hands behind his back. Kwon Taek Joo then placed his foot on the chair and pushed it backwards.

With a loud bang, the chair collapsed and Boris fell to the ground with a groan. Kwon Taek Joo picked up the chair and repeated this action several times.

Boris didn't flinch as he was thrown to the floor multiple times. In fact, he seemed to be mocking Kwon Taek Joo. Suddenly, he grabbed his own

hair and let out an unpleasant laugh.

"You think I'll tell you?"

"Just wait and see."

Kwon Taek Joo forced a fake smile. He quickly walked over to a computer against the wall, pushed away all the clutter around it, and grabbed an old keyboard. He smashed it against the wall to separate each key and then picked up the fallen keys and returned to Boris. He forcefully opened Boris's mouth and shoved the keys inside.

Boris's cheeks immediately puffed up. Kwon Taek Joo tightly taped his lips to prevent any of the contents from spilling out. Zhenya stepped forward and watched with interest.

Once everything was prepared, Kwon Taek Joo slowly circled around Boris.

"A North Korean engineer is being sent to fix the SS-29 issue, right? I heard he'll arrive tomorrow. Where should I go to meet him?"

Boris remained motionless. Kwon Taek Joo crouched down to be eye level with him, showing no emotion in his dark eyes. Boris glared back at him with bloodshot eyes. Suddenly, Kwon Taek Joo punched his swollen cheek. The face that had been relaxed became contorted in pain as the keys inside his mouth caused even more discomfort. Just the thought of being hit with a fist was excruciating.

But Boris stubbornly refused to talk. It's no wonder he was known as 'Sonchev'. Kwon Taek Joo stood back up. Boris took a quiet breath, then suddenly punched himself in the face. His whole body shook from the intense pain, causing his eyes to roll back and emit screams even though his mouth was full.

Kwon Taek Joo tightly gripped Boris's cheeks, which were wincing in agony. The color drained from his face. "Are you ready to talk now?" Kwon Taek Joo asked. Boris shook his head defiantly, his eyes glaring at him with anger. Kwon Taek Joo's expression turned cold. Zhenya stood by watching and laughing.

Anger boiled over in Kwon Taek Joo and he began ferociously punching Boris like a punching bag. He had been patient for so long and suddenly snapped. Saliva and blood dripped from Boris's tightly shut mouth. When Kwon Taek Joo finally removed the tape, his lips parted helplessly. Computer keys and teeth were covered in blood.

"I'll ask again. Who is the technician who came to fix the SS-29 and where is he going?"

Boris smirked at the persistent question and suddenly spat out saliva mixed with blood that landed on Kwon Taek Joo's face. Without even bothering to wipe it away, Kwon Taek Joo silently picked up Boris's fallen knife.

"Why don't you leave?"

He coldly suggested to Zhenya, almost as if out of concern or advice.

"Just pretend I'm not here."

Though he felt some concern for him, it seemed unnecessary. The anticipation of watching an interesting scene filled Zhenya's gleaming eyes.

"Alright," Kwon Taek Joo stated, walking towards Boris. He paused to take a deep breath and locked gaze with Kwon Taek Joo who seemed capable of ripping him apart with just one look. Despite his weakened state, he still radiated energy. It seemed that Kwon Taek Joo would have to resort to his last option.

"Indian warriors proved their bravery by hunting as many enemies as possible. They were notorious for their brutality and inflicted excruciating pain on their opponents until the very end. In comparison, beheading and separating flesh from the body may seem more humane, as it only causes pain in the moment. I've heard that they often scalp their enemies while they are still alive."

As Kwon Taek Joo spoke, he stroked Boris's forehead, causing his hair to fall back and reveal his broad forehead. With the knife in his hand, he drew a line on it.

"Ahh!"

Boris writhed in agony as the blade cut into his flesh. It was not unbearable, but blood oozed from the wound.

"They make a small incision on the forehead with two fingers and then slowly peel off the skin. Most people die of shock before all the skin is removed. The pain supposedly surpasses being stabbed, shot, or having bones broken."

A wicked grin appeared on Kwon Taek Joo's lips, and Zhenya's excitement reached its peak. For the first time in his life, Boris felt true fear for the impending ordeal.

"Ahh!"

His scream echoed throughout the building.

The doors of the warehouse opened, revealing a satisfied Zhenya and a clearly dissatisfied Kwon Taek Joo. As they walked to the car together, Zhenya followed closely behind him.

"Why didn't you skin him?" Zhenya asked, sounding like a disappointed child who had his playtime cut short.

"Because it made me uncomfortable," Kwon Taek Joo replied nonchalantly, brushing the blood off his hands. Zhenya continued to babble without understanding the gravity of the situation.

"You know, you looked quite sexy just now. My little friend down there got rock hard," Zhenya teased.

"Well next time, tell me right away I would be more than happy to strip some scalp off you anytime," Kwon Taek Joo retorted, gritting his teeth in anger as he pulled Zhenya's collar. But even as their faces were inches apart, Zhenya's cold fingers wrapping around his wrist, made him recoil.

The brief contact between their skin sent chills down Kwon Taek Joo's spine, but Zhenya merely smirked as if nothing unusual had happened.

"So what's our next move?"

Kwon Taek Joo replied in response and Zhenya took off sauntering without another word. His back swayed gently as if he were humming a

tune. Kwon Taek Joo stood there watching him, unable to shake off the feeling that something wasn't quite right.

Zhenya could switch from serious to carefree at the drop of a hat, pretending not to notice if his partner caught on. But Kwon Taek Joo knew better - behind that laid-back facade was a dangerous person, indulging in sick thrills.

With just one step, Zhenya could easily blur the line between sanity and madness. It was a constant battle for Kwon Taek Joo to keep up with his partner's ever-changing mindset.

## **Chapter 1.16 – Siberian Train: Getting to Know Each other (18+)**

Translator's Note: This chapter has some sexual content so be warned before reading !!!!

The train chugged away from the city of Moscow, leaving behind the lights and noise in its wake. As it pierced through the darkness of the night, a thick veil of blackness descended outside the windows. Inside, however, there was a sense of calm and serenity that filled the air.

As the train embarks on its journey towards Beijing, passengers settle into their respective classes. Third class is crowded and cramped, with passengers battling for any small amenity they can get. The lack of partitions between seats makes it impossible to escape the constant tossing and turning of their restless neighbors. In contrast, first and second class carriages are filled with anticipation and excitement for the adventure ahead.

But amidst the hustle and bustle in other carriages, third class is filled with an air of struggle and hardship. Stuffy air lingers in the poorly ventilated carriage, accompanied by a musty smell that seems to have no origin. Exhausted parents try desperately to soothe their crying babies while other passengers frown and turn to see what all the commotion is about. A group of tired soldiers share a bottle of cheap vodka, finding solace in each other's company. Merchants try to cram their bulky packages into already occupied seats before drowning out the chaos with earplugs. It's evident they are used to enduring long journeys.

In second class, passengers from different backgrounds gather together, united by their shared experience on this long trip. They spend their nights chatting endlessly, sharing stories, helpful tips for the upcoming schedules, and even snacks. For them, it's just another part of the journey and they seem unfazed by any signs of fatigue.

The special cabin, reserved for those willing to pay extra for privacy and comfort, is a haven of tranquility. With a private bathroom and minimal foot traffic in the corridor both day and night, passengers can enjoy a good night's sleep in their comfortable beds. And when hunger strikes, they can always head to the ship's restaurant, no matter how overpriced the food may be.

But for Kwon Taek Joo, this luxurious cabin is a source of dissatisfaction. As he lies in bed, trying to ignore the sounds coming from his partner's room next door, he regrets not choosing a different cabin. The loud moans and screams of pleasure are impossible to tune out as they intensify with each passing moment. Frustration mounts within him, first towards his partner Zhenya and then towards the headquarters who paired them together.

Insomnia is a foreign concept to Kwon Taek Joo. After finishing combat, he could sleep for days on end and even while on duty, short naps were enough to replenish his energy. Taking care of oneself, including getting enough sleep, is crucial in their line of work. And yet here he is, unable to drift off into a peaceful slumber. In an attempt to calm himself down, Kwon Taek Joo resorts to counting sheep.

One sheep. Two sheep. Three sheeps. Four sheep...

But the noises from the bunk next to him become too much to bear.

"Haaaaah, haaaaaaaaaa, aaaaaaa!"

"Haaaa haaa aaaaa... Damn it."

Kwon Taek Joo sat up. . He could clearly see Zhenya's face, his eyes shining brightly in the dim light without any sense of shame. The woman sitting on top of him had her skirt hiked up to her waist, but her uniform shirt was still on. Kwon Taek Joo recognized her as the blonde flight attendant who had shown them to their seats on the train. He stared at her with disbelief as Zhenya continued to lift her waist without hesitation, causing her upper body to bounce and moan loudly.

As she moved, Zhenya's member became more and more visible, a massive and impressive piece of flesh that seemed to have a mind of its own. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but be amazed by the human body's

ability to accommodate something so big and ugly. He sat with his arms crossed, wondering just how far they were willing to go. It may have been his imagination, but it looked like a small smile appeared on Zhenya's lips.

The woman's body shook uncontrollably as she continued to take Zhenya inside her. She let out screams of pleasure and saliva dripped from her mouth. But Zhenya didn't seem to care, only focusing on finding more intense stimulation from the writhing body above him. The sound of flesh slapping against each other echoed through the room, and even the woman's skin turned red from the roughness. She screamed again before finally collapsing in painful pleasure.

Zhenya also reached his climax, his massive member swelling before ejaculating and sliding out of the woman's body. Thick semen dripped onto the bed and floor, startling Kwon Taek Joo.

He quickly opened a window for some fresh air, shivering in the cold wind as he watched Zhenya finish bathing in the cramped bathroom. It was time for Kwon Taek Joo to let go of any questions, but they seemed to be stuck in his mind, unable to be shaken off.

Zhenya looked at him with confusion as he huddled in the cold, wondering what could possibly be going through his head.

"Why are you leaving the window open and letting the cold air in? Do you want to freeze to death? Close it." The man clearly understood everything, but he pretended not to. Kwon Taek Joo glared at his hateful face and slammed the window shut.

Finally, the strong fishy smell disappeared. He had a sleepless night, so he was in a bad mood in the morning.

Kwon Taek Joo had no appetite and didn't feel like eating. Zhenya looked at his frowning face and smiled.

"I didn't think you would sit there so comfortably. Isn't sex something two "normal" people should enjoy in private?

Kwon Taek Joo let out a slight, foolish laugh.

His stomach twisted as he watched the man talk about their encounter as if it were no big deal. His intention was to tease him, so Kwon Taek Joo calmly responded,

"Why should I avoid it? Watching high-quality porn for free can be quite enjoyable."

"Well... high quality is a must," Zhenya nodded as if he understood, his chest puffed out slightly.

That was not a compliment, you bastard.

Anyone who heard that would understand it was clearly a criticism, but the man still straightened his shoulders and raised his chin, as if saying,

"So the movie was good, right?" "You also know how to say things that make others happy?" No matter how you look at it, it's clear that this person has issues with their thinking system and social skills.

How could anyone listen these sarcastic comments and still feel proud?

Kwon Taek Joo gave up on answering and let him think whatever he wanted. There's no need to disappoint an optimistic person in a strange place. Furthermore, if someone keeps being sarcastic and the other person doesn't feel embarrassed, only their mouth will hurt. The two arrived in Beijing yesterday morning.

Kwon Taek Joo received information from 'Sonchev's' Boris that a North Korean engineer, Hong Yeo Wook, would be disguised as a Chinese tourist and board the Trans-Siberian train.

Before going to Moscow, Psych Bogdanov planned to contact Hong Yeo-wook, but they still didn't know the time or method. 'SS 29' was also being moved to a secure location, so it was unknown where it would ultimately be stored. There were many uncertainties, but that didn't matter. If they followed Hong Yeo Wook, Kwon Taek Joo would naturally end up at the location of 'SS-29'.

Last night, they confirmed that Hong Yeo Wook had boarded the plane. Just as Boris had said, he disguised himself as a Chinese person and entered the second-class carriage. He appeared to be alone, but it remained to be seen if it was true or not. Bogdanov's men may have

followed him on the train. That's why Kwon Taek Joo didn't immediately attack Hong Yeo Wook.

If Psych Bogdanov found out that Hong Yeo Wook was being followed, he might stop contacting him. If that happened, all their plans would go up in smoke. They needed to be extremely cautious. "So Boris, how did it go? You said you would handle it." "Hm... I did."

"By handling him that doesn't mean you sent him to the pearly gates of Heaven?"

"I've been considering that option..."

Zhenya trailed off and smiled.

Kwon Taek Joo looked at him intently.

His eyes were not only unfriendly but also fierce, yet he hummed for a long time before answering.

"I just locked him up because I figured he could be useful later"

"So what if he were to escape?"

"Now you want me to kill him? Wow, you're such a indecisive and cruel person."

"I didn't mean it like that, but if he opened his mouth, our entire plan will be ruined."

"Don't worry, that's never going to happen".

"You sure I can trust you?"

"Of course. Without my orders, he won't be able to get out of there."

Despite his lingering doubts, Kwon Taek Joo still held onto his silent belief. It was a paradox, but he couldn't deny the truth of it. Perhaps all he needed to do was show some concern for Hong Yeo Wook.

Kwon Taek Joo's gaze drifted out the window and took in the vast field passing by. The winter landscape brought with it a sense of endless cold and gloom no matter where you looked. Occasionally, a few animals

could be seen grazing in the distance. As they traveled through this desolate land, an inexplicable feeling of loneliness overtook him.

No matter how far they went, the scenery remained the same outside. The mountains stretched on and on, seeming to never end. Kwon Taek Joo watched in silence for a while before growing bored. The drowsiness that had just barely dissipated returned once again.

He yawned and glanced at the clock, only to be startled by the time. Quickly, Kwon Taek Joo retrieved a bag from the shelf. At first glance, it appeared to be a briefcase, but it was actually a temporary device used for satellite communications. In case of emergencies, it could be used to call Korea.

Kwon Taek Joo turned on the device and entered a specific command on the keyboard. The wireless antenna inside activated and began receiving satellite signals. He plugged in a headset and dialed a phone number.

Zhenya stood with his arms crossed as he observed the scene before him. His plan was to grab breakfast and then keep an eye on Hong Yeo Wook's movements. He had no intention of going with Kwon Taek Joo, but his rushed and flustered demeanor piqued his curiosity. Who is this man so frantically trying to call?

"Yes, Mom? It's me."

Kwon Taek Joo's mother answered the phone as if she had been waiting for a long time. Knowing that the call was delayed, he tried to calm his mother's worries. He didn't even have time to worry about Zhenya listening intently beside him.

Strange words spilled out of Kwon Taek Joo's mouth. Zhenya had met North Koreans before for work, and their language sounded similar to Korean. However, not being fluent in Korean, he couldn't understand who Kwon Taek Joo was talking to or what they were discussing.

He could only make assumptions based on Kwon Taek Joo's gentle and soothing tone – it seemed like he was trying to comfort someone's emotions. The initial voice coming through the headset sounded like a

woman's voice. This woman wasn't just a one-night stand but someone with whom he had a deep and lasting connection.

Zhenya pulled out his phone and opened a translation app. Sure enough, Kwon Taek Joo was speaking in Korean, and the word that kept repeating was "mother". Carefully reading the translations on the screen, Zhenya chuckled. Despite his gentle demeanor, the person on the other end of the call was not a young woman but Kwon Taek Joo's own mother.

Kwon Taek Joo's call ended quickly, and he let out a sigh as he pressed the button to hang up. With a tense expression, he packed away his communication device and suddenly looked up.

His eyes met Zhenya's gaze as he stared down at him with a mischievous grin. It was clear that he had caught onto what Zhenya was doing but pretended not to notice as he picked up his bag and sat back down. Zhenya couldn't help but tease him, knowing full well that he had been waiting for this moment all along.

"I couldn't help but wonder what Mama's boy would look like, though I never expected it to be someone so close to me

"It's always the ignorant ones who think they know everything"

"Aw, did I strike a nerve? You seem angry."

Zhenya didn't usually pay much attention to other people's family matters. However, seeing this seemingly unbreakable man become gentle and then cold again piqued his curiosity about the story behind it all.

"Wouldn't it be easier to just embrace being a mama's boy?" he asked, genuinely curious.

Kwon Taek Joo hesitated before continuing on with his story. "Living alone is hard - how could someone like you understand? The worries and insecurities are multiplied when one has lost a loved one; we have to endure not only our own burdens, but also those of the deceased. That's why I had to lie and always appear optimistic in order not to

worry my mother even more. She still thinks I'm working as a civil procedure handler at a local agency..."

He suddenly stopped talking as if realizing he had said too much, and Zhenya looked dissatisfied with the incomplete explanation.

"Why did you stop talking?"

"Because you don't need to know anything else." Kwon Taek Joo leaned back in his chair and fell silent. He picked up the thick book he had been reading and showed no intention of speaking further.

He reached over and closed the cover, having only read a few pages. Their eyes met once more.

But we have so much to chat about."

"Well, I'm not that bored to bring up family stories. I have plenty of books with me." Kwon Taek Joo pointed to his bag, which was filled with enough books to last at least 6 days.

Zhenya smirked and looked at Kwon Taek Joo curiously, as if he had just noticed something interesting about him. But Kwon Taek Joo pretended not to notice his probing gaze. Instead he tried to offer him a book.

Zhenya barely gave the book a glance, a thin line formed on his lips.

"Thanks, but I don't need it. I'm not interested in one-sided conversations. I can just find another woman if I'm bored."

Sure. Whatever.

Kwon Taek Joo shook his head and returned to staring at his book.

At that point, Zhenya stopped asking questions and left silently. Even though they were partners, Zhenya never revealed where he was going or why. The door opened and then closed again. Kwon Taek Joo's focus shifted from the book to the door as his tense shoulders relaxed. He always felt nervous whenever Zhenya stared at him like that.

To him, Zhenya was like a deceitful predator, hiding his true intentions behind a sophisticated facade. No matter how many times he tried to

convince himself that they were on the same team, Kwon Taek Joo could never fully let his guard down around such a dangerous teammate.

## **Chapter 1.17 – Siberian Train: Am I Your Type? (18+)**

Translator's Note: This chapter has sexual activity, so be warned before reading !!

The train reached the border between China and Mongolia after 12 hours. The train had not yet completely stopped when the chaotic atmosphere filled the cabin, due to an immigration check.

The situation had seemed relatively safe compared to the border with Russia, but it still took an average of three hours for inspections. In emergencies, the duration could be even longer, leaving passengers stuck on the train for an unknown amount of time.

When the train finally came to a complete stop, waiting inspection officials stepped inside. Each team consisted of an immigration officer, a customs officer, and several police officers, meticulously inspecting their assigned areas. Passengers' faces were closely scrutinized against their declarations and passport photos. Baggage checks and body searches were also conducted.

Most passengers were able to pass through security without issue, but there were occasionally strict officials who would unload luggage and search it thoroughly, even checking under beds, bookshelves, and trash cans. During this process, no one was allowed in or out of the room, causing discomfort for those waiting for their turn to be inspected.

Kwon Taek Joo and Zhenya's situation wasn't much different from the other passengers'. They sat facing each other in a small room, not saying a word to each other. Kwon Taek Joo was only half-awake after just waking up and didn't bother trying to read a book. He simply waited for his turn, half-dreaming while trying to stay alert.

In reality, Kwon Taek Joo and Zhenya had the most to worry about as they carried many items that could potentially raise suspicion: mini bombs, Colt guns, and various high-tech devices.

Even though they had hidden them in advance to prepare for the inspection, they knew they were up against experienced officials who could easily discover their weapons. The thought alone was enough to make Kwon Taek Joo unable to relax for even a moment.

As they sat facing each other, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but be bothered by Zhenya's knee precariously close to his crotch. With legs entwined in a natural yet uncomfortable manner, he couldn't retreat without risking an awkward touch. But Zhenya, with his longer legs and mischievous grin, refused to budge.

Finally, after mustering up some patience, Kwon Taek Joo spoke up. "Could you maybe move your legs somewhere else?"

Zhenya nonchalantly shrugged and quipped, "My apologies for my blessedly long legs."

Kwon Taek Joo rolled his eyes and tried to ignore the looming threat. Shifting his gaze, he looked out the window, trying to resist the urge to kick Zhenya's leg away. But as boredom and drowsiness set in, he couldn't help but yawn a few times.

But Zhenya wasn't done talking yet.

"You know, you're not very cute" he remarked.

"And you're not very funny," Kwon Taek Joo snapped back.

The noise outside the room increased, as more and more people seemed to be moving around. Soon, officers started entering the room. Kwon Taek Joo presented a passport with a different name than his usual disguise as Hiro Sakamoto, who was reported missing after the hotel explosion.

The examiner checked the passport and returned it without suspicion. Luggage inspection followed immediately, with Zhenya taking his time and Kwon Taek Joo trying to remain calm.

Suddenly, Kwon Taek Joo felt a gaze focused on him and turned to see a police officer staring intently. He forced a fake smile and looked away, but the officer's eyes remained fixed on him. The controller even

checked the bathroom, inspecting every part of it before leaving without saying a word. Kwon Taek Joo let out a sigh of relief.

But then, the door opened again and the same policeman returned. This time, he ordered both Zhenya and Kwon Taek Joo to stand against the wall. Despite their confusion, they obeyed without making any noise.

The policeman checked Zhenya first, then moved on to Kwon Taek Joo.

As the checks became more intrusive, Kwon Taek Joo felt increasingly uncomfortable with the policeman's touchings. His anger boiled over when the policeman blatantly groped him and he almost punched him in the face in retaliation. However, he managed to control his anger and push the policeman away instead. The police officer quickly retreated from the room.

"Looks like he's quite taken with you, isn't he?" Zhenya continued to push and prod, but the other man grabbed a book in anger and hurled it at him. However, Zhenya effortlessly caught it and set it back down. Their eyes locked and he couldn't resist poking fun once again.

"You know, that guy has the most delicate waist and handsome features. Why don't you play along and have some fun? It's been a while."

"I wouldn't expect someone with equally beautiful features to say such things."

"Oh? So I'm your type then?"

"Don't say such terrifying things."

Through gritted teeth, he retorted, but Zhenya just flashed a cheeky grin. He shot a deadly glare at the nuisance and began to tidy up the mess around them.

Shortly after, the train returned to orbit and Kwon Taek Joo finished tidying up before sitting down with a book in hand. He couldn't help but wonder how much time had passed since he last checked his watch. Suddenly, a familiar vibrating noise interrupted his thoughts. It was Zhenya's phone. Zhenya hesitated for a moment before answering and stepping out of the room.

This wasn't the first time this had happened. Whenever Zhenya got a call, he would leave the room. It seemed excessive if it was just personal matters, but perhaps it was because Zhenya only shared minimal information about their mission together and never spoke about himself.

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't bring himself to completely ignore Zhenya's calls, even though he wished he could. As he watched Zhenya talking on the phone through the slightly open door, he noticed something strange in his expression and demeanor.

When they were alone, Zhenya was usually carefree and relaxed. But now, he seemed serious and his voice was low - there wasn't a hint of his usual charming smile anywhere. Kwon Taek Joo didn't want to get any closer to him than necessary; he knew that getting too involved with someone like Zhenya could only lead to trouble. He just hoped that their mission would be over soon so that their relationship could be resolved.

As Kwon Taek Joo was about to turn away and go back inside, he caught Zhenya glancing towards the door and making eye contact with him. In that moment, Zhenya's lips curved into a fake smile before quickly disappearing back into his room.

Feeling uneasy, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but wonder if Zhenya already knew what was going on between them and was just playing a game with him.

It had been a day since they boarded the train, and Hong Yeo Wook remained mostly still. He only got up three or four times in total, for short periods of 5 to 10 minutes.

During one of his bathroom breaks, Zhenya snuck in and installed a hidden camera before returning to his seat. Kwon Taek Joo didn't know where it was located or how it was hidden, but Hong Yeo Wook seemed completely oblivious to its presence. This made it easier for them to move around without arousing suspicion.

But just like avoiding melon peels and finding coconut shells, they also had to be careful not to get caught.

"...Aaaa...ummm."

Zhenya's sexual desires were relentless, regardless of the time or place. Today's target was not yesterday's flight attendant. The woman's face, trembling after being assaulted by Zhenya, looked familiar. She was one of the flight attendants that Kwon Taek Joo often saw when monitoring Hong Yeo Wook in the second class car. Last night it was a special car attendant, and today it was a second class car attendant. It seemed like Zhenya planned on having fun with all the flight attendants before their journey ended.

It was just after 3pm when Kwon Taek Joo tried to distract himself from the bright surroundings by opening a book and immersing himself in its pages. However, his efforts proved futile as every movement he made was clearly visible to those around him. Zhenya usually didn't pay attention to other people's eyes, but the man seemed to have no shame or regard for their shared space.

The more he acted out, the more Kwon Taek Joo gritted his teeth and endured it. Such behavior in such close quarters was almost an invitation for Kwon Taek Joo to lose his temper. But despite the hesitation and confusion of others, Zhenya seemed even more interested and excited.

Kwon Taek Joo quickly regained his composure amidst the chaos. Luckily, the book he was reading was so engrossing that it was easy to tune out everything else.

"Haaaa... hmmmm.."

But their indulgent frolicking did not escape the notice of others. The woman scratched at the pillow, then suddenly reached for the table.

In her clumsy reach, she knocked over a wine bottle which shattered on the floor, drenching it in vodka and splashing onto Kwon Taek Joo's pants. He looked down at the wet stain before raising his head to make eye contact with Zhenya.

Kwon Taek Joo didn't expect an apology, but all Zhenya did was smirk slightly. This only made Kwon Taek Joo scowl more, until Zhenya stuck out his pink tongue and slowly licked his upper lip, slowly.

And Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but follow the movement with his eyes. This seemed to please Zhenya, as a satisfied smile spread across his face.

The woman's body collapsed onto the table as Zhenya pressed against her neck and lifted her stomach to his level. She struggled but had nowhere to escape as he pushed into her forcefully, the friction causing a harsh sound.

The girl on the nearby table shook with each thrust, seemingly on the verge of collapse. Despite Kwon Taek Joo's frustration, he was unable to stop Zhenya's actions.

The sounds of his protests were drowned out by the flight attendant's moans of pleasure. Zhenya showed no mercy as he continued to push inside her, causing her to fall into a state of extreme arousal.

Unable to endure it any longer, Kwon Taek Joo got up to leave, but not before catching a glimpse of the woman's exposed breasts. He turned away in disgust and tried to suppress his own desires.

As the woman reached climax, Zhenya pulled her closer and continued thrusting until he ejaculated with a strong smell filling the air. Kwon Taek Joo glared at Zhenya's relaxed face, disgusted by his behavior.

Suddenly, without warning, Zhenya changed positions and continued thrusting until the woman cried out in ecstasy.

Kwon Taek Joo gasped for air as he leaned against the bathroom wall. The intense heat building in one area felt like it was about to burst. Despite his attempts to ignore it, Kwon Taek Joo was a man in his prime and couldn't help but feel aroused when faced with a woman's exposed breasts.

His head was spinning and his hand instinctively grabbed at his crotch while his jaw clenched tightly. He could hear the sound of grinding teeth as they fit together perfectly.

The flesh between his fingers was slick with moisture, and he gently rubbed the tip of his penis where it had gathered, sending shivers

through his body. His mind was clouded and he couldn't think straight, consumed by an overwhelming desire for physical pleasure.

In frustration, Kwon Taek Joo turned on the shower, letting the cold water pour down on him. Even though his body cooled slightly, the discomfort didn't go away. Her damp hair clung to her head, making it look even thicker, and her shirt stuck to her curves, accentuating them.

The tension in her muscles only heightened due to the stimulation. A strange sensation spread throughout his body, causing his nipples to harden beneath his shirt.

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't hold back the moans that escaped from his clenched teeth. The cold water hitting his body only intensified the burning sensation in his groin. Even just holding and stroking it made his entire body feel like it was on fire. His knees were shaking, and his jaws ached from being clenched so tightly. The sharpness in his eyes had faded, replaced by frustration. Kwon Taek Joo tried to shake off the strong desire that was consuming him, his hand pressing against the wall as he struggled to control himself.

He was past the point in his youth where any little stimulation could make him tense with anticipation.

But now, even standing up straight was a challenge as the tingling feeling between his legs spread throughout his body. Every inch of his veins felt hot as blood rushed through them, causing a light to flash before his eyes due to increased pressure in his brain.

Suddenly, he reached climax, unable to contain himself any longer. His vision flashed white and his muscles contracted as he let out a loud groan that echoed in the bathroom.

Finally, after taking a deep breath and regaining some clarity, Kwon Taek Joo stripped off his wet clothes and stepped into the shower to wash away any remaining traces of desire.

As the cool water washed over him, he gradually returned to his senses and shook off the intense heat that had consumed him just moments ago.

## **Chapter 1.18 – Siberian Train: What Kind of Woman Do You Like?**

Translator's Note: The chapter has topics about sexual stuff again, so be warned before reading!!

Kwon Taek Joo was ready to dry off and leave the bathroom when he noticed Zhenya standing in front of him. He felt a twinge of discomfort, wondering if Zhenya had overheard everything. But he quickly reminded himself that masturbation was a natural and healthy act, nothing to be ashamed of. Still, Zhenya's mocking look made Kwon Taek Joo feel uneasy as he walked back to his seat. Suddenly, Zhenya blocked his path, seemingly on purpose. Kwon Taek Joo looked up at him with hatred in his eyes, but Zhenya just grinned as if he had expected this reaction.

"Sorry."

But there was no hint of regret in his smile. Kwon Taek Joo shrugged it off and calmly walked past Zhenya to his bed. As he unpacked his clothes from his bag, he realized that he was still shirtless. It didn't bother him much since they were both men, but it struck him as odd that Zhenya always covered up after bathing or making love.

As Kwon Taek Joo slipped into his underwear and started putting on a T-shirt, he suddenly caught Zhenya staring at him intently. He tried to ignore it and finish getting dressed, but Zhenya couldn't seem to tear his eyes away. Finally, he spoke up.

"What is it like having sex with a man?"

Kwon Taek Joo was taken aback by the question and angrily pulled down his shirt.

"I don't want to imagine it."

"Hmm. I guess you wouldn't be in the mood for that kind of thing. Dark-skinned guys whining aren't cute at all."

Before Kwon Taek Joo could respond, he was flooded with thoughts about whether he could even imagine being intimate with another man. He shook his head to clear his mind before things went too far.

"Stop saying those disgusting things. It's not funny."

He sat down at his desk with a determined expression and watched Hong Yeo Wook through the screen. He had been in the same position, reading the same book for two days now. Kwon Taek Joo had even looked into the contents of the book to see if it offered any clues, but found nothing. There had been no contact from Bogdanov yet.

Occasionally, someone would talk to Hong Yeo Wook, but their conversations were brief and uneventful. Hong Yeo Wook never left his seat for long and avoided any communication or use of technology. Kwon Taek Joo was deep in thought when Zhenya suddenly appeared with a bottle of vodka, tequila, and cognac. He set two empty glasses on the table and pulled out a handmade cigar, clearly a limited edition product celebrating its 40th anniversary. As expected, it exuded luxury and class.

Zhenya poured a glass of cognac, then dipped the tip of his Cohiba cigar into the amber liquid. He expertly lit the cigar and took a deep drag, exhaling smoothly as the signature aroma of Cohiba Behike filled the air.

"Smoking it like this really brings out the flavor," he commented before passing the cigar to Kwon Taek Joo.

Without hesitation, Kwon Taek Joo accepted the cigar and took a puff, relishing in the strong scent and taste. Zhenya poured more cognac into his empty glass and asked if he was on "that side."

Confused, Kwon Taek Joo asked for clarification.

"Because when you saw a topless woman right in front of you, you didn't react at all. I thought maybe you don't like women."

Kwon Taek Joo smirked, taking another puff of his cigar. "How could you be so mistaken? I like women. Even if the world were ending and only men were left, I wouldn't stoop to that level."

Zhenya chuckled as he refilled their glasses. "It's also a problem to get others too excited," he muttered to himself before changing the subject.

"So, what kind of girl do you like?"

Kwon Taek Joo raised an eyebrow. "Are you planning on introducing me to someone?"

"Well, I just want to make sure we're not chasing after the same type. It could get awkward if I happen to seduce a girl that's your type."

Kwon Taek Joo scoffed. "A player like you should know all about awkward situations."

Even as he sarcastically insulted him, Zhenya simply smirked and took a sip of cognac. The heat from the alcohol started to rise in Kwon Taek Joo's body, making him reach for another drink. However, Zhenya stopped him from pouring more and asked him to tell him about his type instead. Irritated, Kwon Taek Joo answered bluntly.

"I like women with curves. Big breasts and hips. I prefer them a little plump rather than too skinny."

"Your taste is quite obvious," Zhenya chuckled.

"And what's wrong with that?"

"Well, it's just insulting to say I have no taste. Trust me, I'm very picky when it comes to women."

Kwon Taek Joo rolled his eyes before sarcastically grabbing the bottle and pouring himself another drink. As he did so, Zhenya began talking about his own preferences without prompting.

"I don't like getting into relationships. It's fun once, but doing it repeatedly with the same person gets boring."

That seemed to sum up Zhenya's character perfectly. He was the type of guy who changed partners as often as he changed his clothes, never sticking around for too long. While some may enjoy casual hookups and one-night stands without any strings attached, it still felt disrespectful and lacking in self-respect.

Despite knowing the answer would be meaningless, Kwon Taek Joo still couldn't resist asking. "So you've never been in a serious, committed relationship before?"

Zhenya shook his head without hesitation.

"Never."

It was clear that he had never been in a serious relationship. It was difficult to imagine him developing feelings or longing for love towards someone. Reflecting on Zhenya's past actions, he couldn't recall any sincere emotions directed towards a woman. Which girl would he choose to give his attention and affection to?

The thought of it made me feel sorrowful and pitying.

"But you never know. Maybe if they're strong and resistant, and can withstand anything, that could be interesting. It would be entertaining to have control over someone with such strength."

The more Kwon Taek Joo listened, the more he realized how refined Zhenya's taste was. It wasn't surprising; from the beginning, Zhenya didn't seem like the type to form attachments or start a family.

Such a normal and mature life just didn't suit him at all. If that were the case, he wouldn't be here in the first place.

In reality, Kwon Taek Joo's situation wasn't much different. What woman would be happy with a husband who kept his actions secret, rarely took time off, and traveled for work constantly? He knew he could never fulfill his mother's wishes in this lifetime. Having a stable job and creating a harmonious family seemed too far out of reach.

"I've heard that Koreans usually don't leave their parents' home even when they grow up, right?"

Zhenya suddenly changed the subject. Even when discussing matters of love, he seemed disinterested and quickly lost focus. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but feel suspicious, but Zhenya simply nodded at him calmly.

"You call your mother regularly and update her on everything."

"What did I say? Is there something wrong? Are you curious?"

"If you admit you're a mama's boy, then there's no reason to be curious."

"It's just that my mother is a bit different."

Kwon Taek Joo let out a resigned sigh. He had never shared his family issues with anyone, not even Chief Lim could fully understand Kwon Taek Joo's situation.

But why was he venting to Zhenya now? Maybe because he was drunk. It didn't matter, after this mission they would never see each other again. But was that an irresponsible action?

"My grandfather, father, and brother were all involved in my mother's life as soldiers. And what do you know, all three died while on duty, and I am the only one left. So my mother worries constantly. Korea has a high rate of traffic accidents, so she always told me not to drive. Ever since my father passed away, it's been like this. Life just keeps getting tougher over the years. After my brother died, I couldn't even spend as much time outside."

Zhenya's expression turned serious as Kwon Taek Joo laughed at himself.

"After all, everyone has to die at least once."

Was that supposed to be comforting?

He couldn't imagine saying something like that to his own mother who couldn't sleep at night worrying about her son.

Looking at someone like Zhenya with such unusual thoughts, actions, and emotions, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but be curious about his family background. How must one be raised by their parents to have such emotional deficiencies?

The glass in front of Kwon Taek Joo was empty, and he waited for a while before tapping lightly on the table with his cup. Zhenya finally noticed and poured him a glass of tequila, which Kwon Taek Joo downed in one gulp. He then licked the back of his hand to savor the aftertaste of wine that stimulated his taste buds.

"It's a shame we don't have any lemons."

"Oh, do you enjoy them? If I had known, I would have arranged for women and lemons."

Zhenya laughed strangely as if he had thought of something interesting. He even gently touched my collarbone.

"Okay, let's talk about you."

"What do you mean?"

"Obvious things. Family relationships, worries. That sort of thing."

"Hmm, if you must know, I have several brothers. Thanks to them, I don't have to impress my parents. When I'm bored, I seek out women, but I have no interest in watching others having sex or masturbating."

"Where's the excitement in that?"

He continued to tease Kwon Taek Joo, clearly pleased with himself. He even gave him a fake smile.

"Do your parents know what you've been up to?"

"What did I do?"

"You're killing anyone who bother you."

"Ah, I think there's some misunderstanding here. I don't attack innocent people. Haven't I told you this many times? It's just self-defense."

"Why not just say it outright? You're being overly protective."

"I was defending myself because they intended to harm me. If I were weaker, it would be me who died instead of them."

It's pathetic. He still sees himself as a victim. As if there was no other option but to defend himself in these unavoidable situations. It's absurd to justify killing someone for being too loud or following him. Will he eventually kill me too if Kwon Taek Joo accidentally steps on his shadow?

Kwon Taek Joo clicked his tongue in frustration. But he had no intention of wasting time preaching to Zhenya. As long as he didn't harm Kwon

Taek Joo, it didn't matter what he did or where he went. If he wanted to nag, he must care on some level.

The atmosphere seemed more relaxed, so Kwon Taek Joo decided to speak more honestly.

"You don't seem financially deprived from what I can tell, so why are you involved in this?"

"I've already told you."

"Yes, you did. You're only in it for the blueprint. Once you have it, you'll be able to create powerful weapons and make a fortune. But the more I think about it, the less sense it makes. Even without the blueprint, wouldn't you still have plenty of money?"

"There's nothing wrong with having a lot of money."

"True, but you can't take it with you when you die. Are you dreaming of immortality? Or are you obsessed with money to the point of selling out your own country?"

"I didn't know you cared so much about me."

"Because I've never met someone like you before. Usually, people's motivations can be predicted in some way or another, but I can't figure out yours at all. Why are you such a wild card? Money is not everything... Oh, I'm sorry if that sounded rude. That's just how I feel."

Despite being labeled as a 'crazy rich guy', Zhenya remained unfazed and sarcastically replied to Kwon Taek Joo's question.

"Because it's intriguing. If something piques my interest, I'll go for it regardless of the consequences, because opportunities like this rarely come by."

This wasn't an extreme sport and he wasn't talking about the thrill of risking lives. It would seem more human to simply say that he was after the money.

But Kwon Taek Joo couldn't expect anything less from a mindless lunatic like Zhenya.

Zhenya snapped to attention, his body now sitting up straight. The light caught his hair, making it gleam even more. His hair was not quite blonde, but also not pale enough to be considered platinum. However, as he shifted slightly, the bright shine of his hair was impossible to ignore.

"I've heard there aren't many blondes among Russians. Is that hair color inherited or did you dye it?"

Kwon Taek Joo suddenly turned to Zhenya. Zhenya leaned in closer, revealing his natural ivory locks that filled their view.

"This is a genetic anomaly. No one in my family has had this hair color. Would you like to touch it?"

The man inched closer.

"I'll pass," Kwon Taek Joo firmly declined. Zhenya smiled and sat up straight with satisfaction.

The conversation seemed to have just begun, but the daylight gradually faded outside the window. Being stuck in a confined space for a day can feel like an eternity, but today was an exception - perhaps because so much had happened since morning, or maybe because Kwon Taek Joo was a little tipsy. The more he drank, the calmer his anxious mind became. His body felt lighter too.

Zhenya poured Kwon Taek Joo's empty glass again, which eventually ended up empty once more.

"Are you handling your drinks well?"

"I suppose so. I've never been drunk before, so I don't know my limit, but I think I'm doing okay."

"Hmm?"

Zhenya playfully teased Kwon Taek Joo, pretending to be suspicious. But he didn't let himself get caught up in such shallow banter. Even when faced with those mocking eyes, Kwon Taek Joo remained composed and drank at his own pace. He hated being drunk and losing control of himself.

He couldn't speak for others, but he knew he shouldn't fall asleep before Zhenya did. It was just a vague feeling; maybe nothing would happen and his vigilance was unnecessary.

It's also possible that this was all just a pointless psychological game. But even so, Kwon Taek Joo didn't want to risk his life in front of someone he couldn't fully trust.

The stories had gradually become meaningless. The act of pouring and drinking a glass was repeated continuously, like two people playing a boring game that only ended when someone left.

Kwon Taek Joo could stop drinking, but if possible, he wanted to relieve his long-standing discomfort by getting Zhenya drunk.

His tongue had gradually stiffened, and he could no longer taste the typical spicy flavor of wine. It felt more like drinking water. Despite the burning sensation, he constantly craved moisture and drank large amounts without keeping track. But his consciousness was not easily dispersed.

Kwon Taek Joo was generally a pretty good drinker, but the problem was that the other side was just as skilled. As their vision became blurry, they poured wine into places other than glasses - the table, carpet, and even their clothes were soaked. Empty wine bottles littered the floor as they finished their fifth bottle.

As Kwon Taek Joo got more and more drunk, his mood began to fluctuate. They competed with each other to throw out-of-nowhere jokes, bang on the table, and giggle like crazy people. At one point, Kwon Taek Joo even opened the window and screamed - actions he would never do if sober.

"If Chief Lim saw me like this, he would probably be very surprised," Kwon Taek Joo laughed and muttered to himself as he poured another glass of wine. But suddenly, the surroundings grew quiet. The sound of train wheels rolling on the tracks still echoed, but that was all. It was as if he was talking to himself.

Startled by the sudden silence, Kwon Taek Joo spilled wine on his knees and noticed that Zhenya had been silent this whole time. When he

looked up, he saw Zhenya crossing his arms and tightly closing his eyes - clearly asleep.

A smirk crossed Kwon Taek Joo's lips. "You're went this far... Young master, young master," he mocked.

Feeling victorious, Kwon Taek Joo raised his full glass of vodka as if celebrating. But in his drunken state, nearly half of the drink spilled out and wet his arm. He struggled to bring the glass to his lips, finally managing to take a sip.

But just as he did, his body suddenly gave way and he fell face first onto the table with a loud thud. The room fell silent again except for Kwon Taek Joo's deep breathing as he slept peacefully - exhausted from a long day and the effects of alcohol.

Eyelids snapped open with razor-sharp precision, as if they had never even slept. No trace of drunkenness lingered in his emotionless eyes as he stared down at Kwon Taek Joo.

Zhenya reached for a handmade cigar, his fingers tracing the charred black end before expertly cutting it off with a specialized cutter.

As he lit the cigar and took a slow drag, his gaze remained fixed on Kwon Taek Joo's outstretched hand.

With mechanical precision, Zhenya pressed the cigar cutter between his long, white fingers, creating a chilling 'click click' sound that echoed in the room.

He ran his fingers over each wrinkle on Kwon Taek Joo's straight digits, his porcelain-white face showing no emotion except for the faintest hint of a cold smile.

With deliberate slowness, he lifted Kwon Taek Joo's ring finger using just one finger, savoring the power he held over this man who lay helpless before him.

## Chapter 1.19 – Siberian Train: Louise (18+)

Translator's Note: This chapter is a little bit of 18+

Kwon Taek Joo slowly opened his heavy eyelids and took in the familiar surroundings. He could see the front door ahead of him and hear the sound of a passing train. He could also feel the hard table against his cheek. As his senses kicked back into gear, he realized his cheeks were wet and there was a strong smell of cognac in the air.

With a groan, he propped himself up and saw that the table was covered in empty wine bottles. Zhenya was nowhere to be seen. When he tried to move, a stray wine bottle rolled into his leg. Kwon Taek Joo felt a brief moment of annoyance before quickly dismissing it - he knew better than to expect basic courtesy from Zhenya.

He gathered up the bottles and glasses and headed towards the bathroom, where he heard the sound of running water coming from inside. Did Zhenya wake up too? Kwon Taek Joo couldn't remember if he had passed out or fallen asleep, but he was drenched with alcohol and desperately wanted to take a shower.

But as he reached for the bathroom door, exhaustion overtook him and he flopped back onto the bed. It had been awhile since he had indulged in alcohol, and now his body felt like it had been beaten all over - like it was one with the bed and couldn't be separated.

The sound of water continued to lull him until his barely conscious mind drifted off again. Was Kwon Taek Joo falling back asleep? He scolded himself for neglecting work again, but the drowsiness was overwhelming and soon even his hearing started to fade away.

The bathroom door creaked open, the sound of running water filling the small space. Kwon Taek Joo's consciousness sank deeper and deeper as his body floated, weightless. It felt like he was being pulled into a never-ending abyss.

But then he heard wet footsteps approaching. Suddenly, a massive shadow loomed over him as he laid helpless on the bed.

"Get up," a deep voice commanded.

Kwon Taek Joo struggled to move, but his body wouldn't respond. His arm was lifted by cold fingers that traced along his skin, sending shivers down his spine. He recognized the touch as Zhenya's - the man who had taken everything from him.

"Foolish rabbit," Zhenya sneered, his icy breath brushing against Kwon Taek Joo's ear.

Without warning, something sharp and cold pressed against Kwon Taek Joo's ring finger. He tried to pull away, but Zhenya held on tight. The man's eyes bore into him with an intense and cruel gaze as he slowly inserted Kwon Taek Joo's finger into a cigar cutter.

Pain shot through Kwon Taek Joo's hand as the blade sliced through his flesh. He couldn't help but scream in agony as blood dripped onto the floor. And just when he thought it couldn't get any worse, Zhenya tightened his grip and began to cut through his finger again.

Blinking back tears and fighting off waves of nausea, Kwon Taek Joo abruptly woke up with a gasp. His vision was flooded with blinding light, causing him to shut his eyes tightly.

Slowly, he regained his senses and realized he was safe in his own room. But the terror and pain of the nightmare still lingered, haunting him like a ghost from his past.

Kwon Taek Joo's hand shook uncontrollably as he slowly raised it, fingers trembling as he counted each one to make sure they were all still intact. The image of Zhenya's blade slicing through his ring finger was still vivid in his mind, causing a wave of dizziness to wash over him.

But it was just a dream, right? Everything around him seemed to suggest otherwise - the messy table, empty wine bottles strewn on the floor, and the untidy bedsheets. Even the faint smell of cigar smoke lingered in the air, evidence that Zhenya had been there recently.

But where was he now?

As Kwon Taek Joo glanced at the clock, his heart raced with anxiety. It was time for breakfast - would Zhenya be waiting for him at the restaurant like usual, or was he busy keeping tabs on their rival Hong Yeo Wook?

Trying to shake off the uneasy feeling that crept over him, Kwon Taek Joo stood up from his bed.

But as he moved, he noticed a strange weight below his waist. Baffled, he looked down and realized with horror that his erection was back again.

"Why...?" He muttered to himself in disbelief. He couldn't understand why he would be so aroused after dreaming about something as gruesome as losing a finger.

Shaking his head in frustration, Kwon Taek Joo tried to push the thoughts out of his mind. He didn't believe in superstitious nonsense like prophetic dreams, but the unease lingered nonetheless. Maybe a shower would help clear his mind.

Just as he began to calm himself down, a sound suddenly broke through the silence of the room - running water coming from the bathroom. His heart stopped for a moment before racing even faster than before. Could it be...Zhenya? As much as he tried to convince himself that it was just a dream, the feeling of *deja vu* was too strong to ignore.

Determined to confront whatever it was that lay behind the bathroom door, Kwon Taek Joo reached for his Colt. It may have just been a dream, but there was no harm in being cautious. Slowly and silently, he approached the bathroom, his grip on the gun tightening with each step.

But before he could even think about opening the door, it swung open on its own. Startled, Kwon Taek Joo turned around to see Zhenya walking in with a nonchalant expression.

Their eyes met and time seemed to stand still for a moment, both men frozen in shock at the intense energy between them.

"What are you doing? Why do you seem so suspicious?" Zhenya's narrowed his eyes and asked, clearly sensing a misunderstanding. Kwon Taek Joo didn't know how to explain himself. Maybe he was having a strange dream that was coming true - but it was better to keep quiet about it.

By the way, if Zhenya was here, then who was in the bathroom? Instead of trying to justify himself, Kwon Taek Joo just nodded towards the closed door. He even mouthed the words, "There's someone inside." Just then, the sound of running water stopped.

Kwon Taek Joo cautiously approached the bathroom door and held out his arms. He had a black Colt aimed at the door, ready for anything. Zhenya looked confused by this scene and walked over to the bathroom without saying a word. He hesitated for a moment before yanking open the door.

Kwon Taek Joo reflexively pulled the trigger halfway, but ultimately did not fire. It was just a naked woman standing in front of him.

"Oh! You're back already? Thanks to you, I was able to shower comfortably. Thank you."

The woman hugged Zhenya from behind and grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's gun as well. She didn't seem bothered by her nakedness or being caught in a compromising situation. She appeared to be a European tourist, and it seemed like Zhenya had enticed her with the well-equipped bathroom once again.

Zhenya gently pushed her back into the bathroom and closed the door with a thud. Kwon Taek Joo was left alone in the living room, feeling quite awkward. Soon enough, he could hear moans coming from the bathroom, and he knew what was happening inside.

Kwon Taek Joo stood still for a moment, then tossed the Colt onto the bed. The sandwich Zhenya had brought caught his eye; it seemed like he bought it to share with the woman he was with. Kwon Taek Joo took a bite as he gazed out the window, feeling drained from living with someone who was no different from a wild animal.

"Ugh."

Suddenly, he lowered his head and looked at his crotch. He had dealt with it before, but the uncomfortable stiffness remained. Maybe with a little stimulation, it would rise again.

Kwon Taek Joo glared at his obnoxious member and used a pillow to push it down. He deliberately left the train window open so that the sound of the wheels would drown out any vulgar noises.

The woman's name was Louise.

She claimed to be French, soon to be married, and traveling solo to enjoy her last moments of freedom. She had visited many countries in Africa and Asia, the furthest lands from her own, and now planned to explore more familiar European countries in search of herself. If her entire journey went smoothly, she would return to France and get married just a week later. Her fiance agreed to this plan and perhaps he was also enjoying his last days of being single.

Louise didn't leave even after breakfast. She took over Zhenya's entire bed and slept there all day long. When she finally woke up in the late afternoon, she wrapped her arms around Zhenya and insisted they go out to eat.

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't understand why Zhenya followed her request so willingly. He had once said he wouldn't sleep with the same person more than twice, but he seemed to really like Louise.

As she sipped on her beer while sharing her story, Kwon Taek Joo realized that was all he really knew about her - from that moment in time.

Whenever Zhenya was not around, Louise showed concern for Kwon Taek Joo. Every time he looked up, their eyes met. She was always the one to strike up a conversation and smiled brightly at him.

"You seem to enjoy reading books often. What book are you reading now?"

"Just a typical detective novel."

"Are you finding it interesting?"

"It's fascinating to uncover the author's silly and weak excuses," Kwon Taek Joo retorted sharply. Louise couldn't help but laugh at his blunt response.

"If you're bored, I can lend it to you," Kwon Taek Joo offered, holding up the book he was reading.

He was clearly drawing a boundary, unwilling to play along with Louise's games. Their relationship was stress-free and harmless, even if they immersed themselves in it.

But how many men could resist getting involved once? Probably not many.

"It's strange how women are more attracted to men who seem indifferent towards them," Louise commented, looking at Kwon Taek Joo without expecting an answer. For a moment, their gaze held a deeper meaning.

But before anything more could be said, the door opened and Zhenya walked in.

Despite drinking heavily last night, he still held a bottle of wine in his hand. Louise immediately turned her attention to him and showered him with affectionate hugs and kisses on the neck, seemingly forgetting about Kwon Taek Joo's presence. He simply smiled and returned to his book.

## **Chapter 1.20 – Siberian Train: Instinctual Desires (18+)**

Translator's Note: 18+ for this whole chapter, the sexual action is crazy for this chapter.

Zhenya suddenly made a proposition, "Let's have sex together. How about it?" Kwon Taek Joo frowned at him, and the bastard nodded as if he had guessed something from his suspicious eyes. Naked Louise slowly lifted her head from beneath him, her cheeks flushed from the wine. "I'm okay with it. I want to try it once," she said, placing her hand on Kwon Taek Joo's arm and silently urging him on. The idea of exposing their private parts and mixing skin and flesh together, like they used to do, doesn't seem like a big deal to the two of them. But does Louise really want to try it with two men she hardly knows? It's beyond understanding why they would try to manipulate an indifferent person like Kwon Taek Joo.

Kwon Taek Joo made eye contact with Zhenya, who replied, "You're not a monk either, who knows how to endure that?" Kwon Taek Joo didn't like his joking face, but while he was still making eye contact with Zhenya, Louise's hand thrust into his sleeve. Even though she tried to seduce him, Kwon Taek Joo's eyes remained focused on Zhenya.

He smiled sarcastically again, knowing that Zhenya was trying to challenge him by predicting his refusal.

It's okay to endure it once or twice; after all, he's been dissatisfied with his desires lately and relieving them in this way isn't so bad.

He quickly decided and unbuttoned his shirt, announcing, "Then I'll do it first."

"Oh??" Zhenya stood aside with a surprised look on his face and Louise looked up at Kwon Taek Joo with a red face.

It was also her first time having sex with two men at the same time, and she knew she wouldn't have the chance to meet handsome men like these again, with looks far beyond average and completely different styles.

However, she still couldn't understand why Kwon Taek Joo, who always acted like a stoic rock no matter how many times she flirted, suddenly agreed. The thought of conquering that cold man made her excited.

Louise hugged Kwon Taek Joo's neck as soon as he took off his shirt. He lifted her up, gently placed her on the bed, and pushed the bulky books to the floor. Zhenya sat opposite with his arms crossed, observing the scene.

Louise kissed Kwon Taek Joo's ear and gently caressed his strong shoulders. She slid her finger along the curve of his collarbone and chest, feeling the solid muscles woven together in his body. Despite his long limbs, he looked slim and fit.

She rolled her eyes at him before suddenly touching his neck, eliciting a sweet sigh from him. Kwon Taek Joo quietly smelled the sweet scent passing through his nose before lifting Louise's waist and pressing her against his stomach.

He tucked her wavy hair behind her ear and lightly bit her smooth earlobe. Louise moaned with excitement as if she was half-melted. He then buried his lips in her hot ear and whispered softly.

"

Dragging me into this was a mistake. I won't be kind."

"...Ah!"

Louise's body turned over, her face buried in the soft pillow while her lower half was raised. Kwon Taek Joo rubbed against her with his erect penis under the soft surface, enjoying the scent and arousal of flesh. Louise held onto his thigh tightly, both worried and anticipating what was to come.

"Wait, ah..."

But before she could protest, he forcefully entered her without any foreplay. Louise gasped at the rough penetration, her body trembling. The sound of skin rubbing together filled the room.

Zhenya smirked, knowing he would never be as reckless and impatient as Kwon Taek Joo. He would take his time to please a woman, teasing her until she was wet enough for him to satisfy his own desires. That patience is what sets human sex apart from animal mating.

But Kwon Taek Joo couldn't care less about the process; he only cared about the end result. As disappointment washed over Louise, she could do nothing but endure his rough thrusts.

Kwon Taek Joo continued to move in and out, ignoring Louise's moans which were a mix of pain and pleasure. His breathing became more erratic as he picked up speed. His entire body was drenched in sweat and his muscles glistened.

Zhenya swirled his glass of wine, transfixed by the sight before him. His gaze never wavered from Kwon Taek Joo's perfect posterior, each flex and movement accentuated by the pressure he placed on his lower body. It was a mesmerizing display, made even more enjoyable by the rich taste of the wine.

As their bodies moved in unison, a soft grinding sound could be heard emanating from Kwon Taek Joo's clenched teeth. He bowed his head in concentration, intensifying the rhythm of his hips. Despite biting down on his lips, low moans and labored breaths escaped from Kwon Taek Joo's mouth. Through each thrust, his toned and sinewy physique rippled with power, every muscle defined and visible.

At first glance, one might mistake their passionate movements for an athletic competition rather than lovemaking.

Zhenya found himself so absorbed in the spectacle that he had forgotten about his drink in hand, fully engrossed in the captivating scene unfolding before him.

Trickles of sweat trailed down Kwon Taek Joo's sharp jawline, beckoning to be licked off and savored. The heat radiating from his dark eyes only added to the mounting desire between them. They glistened

with a mischievous gleam, inviting Zhenya into their alluring depths as they continued their dance of ecstasy.

Zhenya leaned forward, captivated by the sight of Kwon Taek Joo. His thighs were taut and powerful, flexing with each movement as if holding a hidden strength. The feeling of fullness emanated from them, enticing Zhenya's senses. Every second seemed to bring a new level of stimulation, causing his entire body to wiggle with anticipation.

But it was not just his thighs that caught Zhenya's attention. Kwon Taek Joo's body was a masterpiece - broad shoulders, a slim waist, and long, slender limbs that seemed to go on forever. From behind, there were no obvious curves, only a lean and sculpted physique that exuded strength and grace.

Yet, Zhenya couldn't help but let his gaze travel down to the curve below Kwon Taek Joo's waist. It was natural for his eyes to be drawn to the swell of his buttocks, glistening with sweat.

What would happen if he were to rub it or tightly squeeze it in his hand? The thought brought a flush to Zhenya's cheeks and a persistent, dark gaze fixed on that alluring spot.

Kwon Taek Joo gritted his teeth and lifted his head once more, the strain evident on his broad forehead. It seemed like the sweat was making his eyebrows and eyelashes appear thicker than usual. The powerful hip movements that had been relentlessly pounding slowed down noticeably.

Now, the movement of his waist above his firm buttocks was smooth and gracefully beautiful. Zhenya couldn't take his eyes off the trembling buttocks as they were struck again and again, feeling a tingling sensation in his jaw. He realized that his wine glass was empty but he couldn't tear his gaze away from Kwon Taek Joo's body: his eyebrows furrowed in pleasure, his trembling fingers clenched, lips bitten and muffled moans escaping from them. Zhenya memorized every detail with reverence, not wanting to miss a single moment.

If he could lick Kwon Taek Joo's body with his tongue instead of just his eyes, it would surely be drenched his saliva.

In the blink of an eye, Kwon Taek Joo pushed himself closer to Zhenya. He couldn't hold back any longer and let out a deep groan, as his body reached its peak. His penis throbbed and exploded in intense pleasure, causing his buttocks to clench tightly.

Zhenya's eyes widened with desire. In a spontaneous moment, he reached out towards Kwon Taek Joo's backside, unable to control his impulses. But before he could touch the soft flesh, his arm was seized by Kwon Taek Joo's hand, gasping for air.

It wasn't until he saw Kwon Taek Joo wince and struggle that Zhenya snapped out of it and realized what he had been about to do. He looked down at his hand in disbelief, laughing at himself for being turned on by another man's rear end. Why was he suddenly so thirsty and aroused?

"If you act crazy like that again I'll kill you."

Kwon Taek Joo warned sternly, letting go of Zhenya's hand forcefully. Zhenya chuckled under his breath.

After satisfying himself once with Louise, Kwon Taek Joo let go of her without hesitation. She was completely spent and unable to move for a while. He grabbed a bottle of vodka and chugged it down, trying to quench his insatiable thirst. Some of the liquid dribbled down his chin, wetting his neck and chest.

He took deep breaths as he leaned against the wall. Louise moved closer and rested her head on his lap. Kwon Taek Joo didn't say anything but offered her the bottle of vodka.

Louise reached out to grab it eagerly, but then she slipped and fell because Zhenya was pulling her ankle.

"Ah.. Give me 10 minutes to rest and then we can continue."

Louise begged, both pleading and complaining.

But Zhenya pulled her in closer and started caressing her again. She repeated "Just 10 minutes" but eventually gave in, laughing as the man bit her chest and licked the semen from her thighs.

Louise tickled and giggled, but Kwon Taek Joo, who was watching them, suddenly scowled. Their eyes met briefly, and Zhenya's face twisted into a mocking smile.

But Kwon Taek Joo ignored it and didn't react. Should he take a shower while they were playing around? A hot bath would relax his mind and body. After that, even if they had sex or stayed up all night, he could still get a good night's sleep. This was enough craziness for entertainment.

He was about to sit up with that thought in mind, when suddenly...

Louise let out a small scream and fell onto Kwon Taek Joo, almost as if she had been pushed away. Amidst the chaos, he instinctively embraced Louise who had rushed towards him. It took him a moment to realize what had happened.

Without warning, Zhenya lifted Louise's leg, causing her weight to increase and trapping Kwon Taek Joo underneath. Then, Zhenya bent her body in half and inserted his grotesque penis into her. The sheer weight of the man's large frame on top of her also placed pressure on Kwon Taek Joo, who was pinned beneath them.

What is this insane man thinking?

Wild moans filled his ears as Louise's body moved against him. With every sway and vibration, Kwon Taek Joo felt it too. When Zhenya's thighs pressed against Louise's buttocks, Kwon Taek Joo tensed up. As Zhenya thrust himself inside her, taking deep breaths, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but feel a sense of dread.

Was this going to continue?

Kwon Taek Joo's eyes flickered with an uneasy feeling, while Zhenya smiled in satisfaction. Despite Kwon Taek Joo's attempts to push Louise away, Zhenya didn't give him any chance to do so. He pulled back and thrust deeper, causing Louise to hit the wall with Kwon Taek Joo sandwiched between them.

"Ahhh... haaaa... uhmmm haaaaaaaaaaa...!"

Louise was lost in a frenzy of pleasure, her eyes wild with excitement. Her screams echoed through the room as she jumped and writhed in

ecstasy. It was as if some unknown strength had taken over her body, pressing her tightly against Kwon Taek Joo.

And despite being the object of desire for both Zhenya and Louise, it seemed like it was Kwon Taek Joo who was being violated as he felt something deep in his stomach being punctured. A burning sensation coursed through his groin as he struggled to maintain his composure.

Kwon Taek Joo forcefully pushed Zhenya away in an attempt to escape the uncomfortable situation. However, his efforts were in vain as Zhenya had a tight grip on his wrists and would not let go. Despite his anger, Kwon Taek Joo was unable to break free from the oppressive hold of this monster. He could feel himself being pushed against the wall, with Zhenya blocking all of his movements and pressing his hips forward.

The sensation was overwhelming, and Kwon Taek Joo's eyes burned with resentment towards Zhenya. The two of them locked eyes, or rather, Zhenya's gaze never left Kwon Taek Joo's face even for a second.

This crazy bastard, what is he after?

Even when Kwon Taek Joo turned away from him, Zhenya's intense stare continued. Despite feeling a rush of excitement, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but fear this unpredictable man. As the pressure increased, it felt like a void was growing within him. He started to feel uneasy and suffocated as Zhenya's large body pressed against him. This vague feeling of being consumed sent warning signals through his mind.

You will be devoured.

Every instinct told Kwon Taek Joo to stay away from this man, urging him to do so with constant warning signs flashing in his mind. His vision seemed to flicker with a warning light, almost as if it was a sign of danger.

There was no way this strange encounter could be just a coincidence.

As he thrust deep inside, then pulled out, leaving only the tip of his penis remaining, Zhenya's forceful movements caused him to

accidentally stab Kwon Taek Joo in the knees and thighs multiple times.

The impact was so intense that it felt like he could punch a hole right through him. At one point, he purposely rubbed his erect red member against Kwon Taek Joo's trembling thigh. And every time Kwon Taek Joo tried to protest, Zhenya would pretend not to notice and withdraw his hateful flesh.

Louise let out a gasp before falling to the ground with a thud. The girl holding onto Zhenya's neck was shaking as if she had been electrocuted without any means of defending herself. Zhenya then grabbed his throbbing member and pulled it out, denying it the pleasure of reaching its peak before he placed it on Kwon Taek Joo's lap and vigorously stroked it.

Suddenly, the member with a hole in front exploded as if it were a living creature. Zhenya's hand tightened around Kwon Taek Joo's arm as thick semen shot into the air. Kwon Taek Joo instinctively turned his head away, but still couldn't avoid getting some on his eyelid. The sticky fluid slowly dripped down the side of his face as Zhenya continued to hold onto his wrist.

"Oh my...It seems I made a mistake," Zhenya grinned as he made excuses.

Kwon Taek Joo glared at him as if he wanted to tear him apart. His eyes and the surrounding area turned red from the semen shooting out, causing his jaw to clench painfully and veins to bulge on his forehead. His trembling hands balled into fists.

One day, Kwon Taek Joo vowed to kill this bastard himself.

## Chapter 1.21 – Siberian Train: It Seems to be Zhenya

The sun rose again, signaling the start of a new day. Kwon Taek Joo emerged from his train car after washing his face and heard an announcement that the train would soon be arriving in Irkutsk.

It suddenly dawned on him why the inside of the train was so cluttered - most tourists get off at this stop, as Irkutsk is a popular destination on the Trans-Siberian route due to its location near Lake Baikal.

Louise, like many others, had already disembarked.

Zhenya had not been seen since early morning and Kwon Taek Joo couldn't understand why he was keeping himself so busy. Despite being partners, Zhenya never informed him of his whereabouts or activities.

But then again, what was the difference from when he went on solo missions? It just seemed like a waste of time worrying about that man.

The events from last night suddenly flooded Kwon Taek Joo's mind. He tried to dismiss them by repeatedly washing his face, but the unpleasant feeling lingered. The slimy residue left behind by Zhenya's actions still made him feel uncomfortable.

Despite Zhenya trying to shift the blame onto him, it was clear that he had intentionally provoked Kwon Taek Joo. But dwelling on these thoughts would only distract him from his work.

Kwon Taek Joo clenched his teeth and shook his head, determined to push those distracting thoughts away. It was pointless to get caught up in Zhenya's antics - all it did was play into his intentions. With unwavering focus, Kwon Taek Joo scanned the surveillance screen.

To his surprise, Hong Yeo Wook's seat was empty.

Did he go to use the bathroom? In the past few days, he had only left his seat a couple of times in the morning for that reason. Perhaps he would return shortly, so Kwon Taek Joo waited patiently.

After waiting for a while, Hong Yeo Wook did not show up. Kwon Taek Joo decided there was no point in delaying any further and quickly grabbed the Colt before leaving the room.

The passage to the special room remained eerily quiet. Kwon Taek Joo thought he heard Zhenya on the phone outside, but when he looked, she was nowhere to be found. He must have left when something important came up.

Kwon Taek Joo continued down the hallway, plugging in his headphones. The volume control appeared on his connected phone's screen, but he had no intention of leisurely listening to music at this time. He carefully operated the touch dial and held the phone near each closed door in the special car and first class car. When he turned up the volume to maximum, every movement inside each room was transmitted clearly through his headphones.

A deep sigh could be heard from one room, and another room rang with voices offering coffee to a group, but he didn't detect any suspicious activity.

He should probably go straight to the second class room and look for Hong Yeo Wook. Kwon Taek Joo put on his headphones and made his way through each train car.

Most of the passengers in second class were tourists, causing the whole carriage to shake as the train passed through endless snowfields outside the windows.

Even a boring looking tree caused people to exclaim and scramble to take pictures. As a result, it was even harder to make his way through the train car.

Kwon Taek Joo walked slowly, carefully checking each seat. Perhaps Hong Yeo Wook had realized they were being followed and was now hiding somewhere? The train had been running non-stop since last night. Hong Yeo Wook couldn't suddenly fly into the sky or disappear from the ground. So if Kwon Taek Joo looked closely enough, he would be able to find him.

Despite knowing this, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't shake off the unease that settled in his gut when their target suddenly disappeared.

As he made his way through the train, luggage and people kept bumping into him, exhausting him. The second-class cabin flew by and soon he was faced with the cramped and noisy third-class cabin. It was akin to walking through a busy market, with vendors shouting and crowds jostling past each other.

He took a deep breath before pushing open the door. A sudden cry from a child echoed through the cabin, making it difficult to even find a place to step on the floor. The air was stuffy and musty, filled with tired passengers either making noise or passed out from exhaustion.

Traders were focused on unloading and arranging their large packages, their brows furrowed in concentration. Just passing through such chaos was tiring enough; trying to search for Hong Yeo Wook in this mess felt like an impossible task.

Kwon Taek Joo carefully scanned every face, seat, and pile of luggage as he walked through the crowded area. But there was no sign of their target anywhere. Did he slip away to the bathroom or go down to the restaurant? Straightening his rumpled clothes, Kwon Taek Joo made his way towards the restaurant compartment.

The smell of freshly brewed coffee filled his nose as he opened the door. It was still early in the morning, so there weren't many people around.

Thankfully, this made searching much easier. In one corner of the room sat the only Asian person, a woman sitting alone. Her presence was nothing to be suspicious of; it was clear that she wasn't Hong Yeo Wook in disguise due to her different physical appearance. Plus, he doubted their target had enough time to change into a Westerner's attire. With no new leads, Kwon Taek Joo left the train car empty-handed.

As he scurried down the hallway, a new question formed in his mind. Other than Hong Yeo Wook, he hadn't even caught a glimpse of Zhenya despite searching carefully and not missing a single detail.

It seemed impossible for someone with such a large build and imposing presence to go unnoticed. Where could he have gone?

Kwon Taek Joo leaned against the window and gazed out at the snow-covered landscape outside. The sparse, old trees were coated in thick layers of snow, glimmering as if they were dusted with sugar. He stared at the scenery absentmindedly while trying to organize his thoughts.

Kwon Taek Joo spun around, surprised by the sudden stillness. He noticed a restroom up ahead, primarily used by second and third class passengers. Just a moment ago, it seemed like there were people in there.

He cautiously approached the door and pressed his ear against it, but there was no sound coming from inside. Curiosity got the best of him and he took out his phone to use as a makeshift listening device. He could faintly hear the sounds of someone fidgeting inside. Was it Hong Yeo Wook?

Or Zhenya?

Without hesitation, Kwon Taek Joo tried to turn the doorknob, but the door was locked tightly from the inside. How strange.

On cross-border trains, restrooms are often locked for about 10-30 minutes before arriving at a station. At larger stations like Irkutsk, they may even be locked for 30 minutes or more. With only 40 minutes left until reaching the station, about 20 minutes should have been enough time for someone to come out.

Who could have gone in and locked the door? Maybe it was a crew member. Regardless, Kwon Taek Joo had to check again.

He took a few steps back and pulled out his Colt handgun, pointing it at the door. Suddenly, he felt something tense behind him and instinctively turned around. In a blur of motion, he saw a figure wearing a hooded jersey passing by. Before he could react, a gun was pointed at him.

Who was this person? Perhaps Hong Yeo Wook?

Tensing his finger on the trigger, Kwon Taek Joo attempted to identify his opponent. But before he could make a move, a heavy object struck the back of his head.

"Ah!"

In an instant, his vision turned yellow and shattered like shards of glass. The blow came without warning or sound of the bathroom door opening.

Despite the intense pain, Kwon Taek Joo managed to maintain his composure and aimed his gun at both the hooded figure and the bathroom door. But within moments, his knees buckled and he collapsed to the ground.

His mind was spinning, but he could still sense people approaching him in his blurred vision. He couldn't make out who was wearing black, but he felt a strong sense of Deja vu.

As consciousness slipped away, he could have sworn he saw Zhenya's familiar back.

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## A Main Story

Translator's Note: Before reading, I would like to say sorry that the spacing isn't that good. I tried but having to make space with pages that are 100+ is a little challenging and stressful. Anyways, enjoy reading^^. And about volume 5, I'll add it later on because I'm not finished with it.

Editing Note: Please take note that all chapters from Volume One have undergone thorough editing by Moyu to improve the reading experience.

Format Note: I tried my best to reformat everything for an easier reading experience. Hope you enjoy it. Lastly, this is not an official translation. Please go support the original creators

[here](#).

## Chapter 1.1 – Prologue: Mission in Busan

7:49 pm Busan International Port.

As night gradually fell onto the pier, preparations for the scheduled train's export took place enthusiastically. The 5,000-ton auxiliary ferry was clearly visible under the flickering light of street lights, showcasing its supremacy. This train operates once a day and is set to arrive at the port of Shimonoseki, Japan tomorrow morning.

After the boarding time ended, the doors were closed. The crane finished loading the goods and then quietly withdrew. As expected, the lights in the station went out. The surrounding area was quiet, buried in the stillness of the night. Only the ferry, tied to its rope, was still floating on the black, rippling sea.

However, the atmosphere inside was completely different. As the man entered the room, the atmosphere inside was palpable. The passengers surrounding him were too occupied, their eyes darting everywhere on the train with enthusiastic facades.

Everyone gathered in small groups at a drinking table in the village hallway, some people also recorded every moment with cameras in hand. Boisterous laughter echoed everywhere, creating an infectious buzz in the air. Even on the cold, windy deck of the ship, the typical atmosphere of excitement and anticipation for the journey about to begin was felt.

Amidst the crowd was Kwon Taek Joo, wearing a normal suit with a jacket, looking no different from the people present except for his extremely depressed expression. Despite staying in the most expensive room, he seemed to be weighed down by something heavy, something that showed on his face and in the way he carried himself.

He lifted his sleeve from time to time to check the time. Kwon Taek Joo carefully watched every movement of the second hand on his watch.

It was exactly 8 o'clock when the whistle blew, indicating the departure of the ferry. Following suit, Kwon Taek Joo walked out onto the balcony.

"The deck below came into clear view in front of him. Despite the darkness, tourists were still busy taking photos, constantly pressing the shutter button in attempts to capture the moment. He was observing their movements indifferently when a small mechanical sound suddenly came from his left ear.

Then, someone's voice rang out.

"Hey Taekjoo, how are you? How does it feel to be sailing through the sea at night?"

"Hmm... it's not bad. It's quite noisy but also a bit boring."

Light laughter came from the communication device in Kwon's ear. Meanwhile, Kwon Taek Joo's eyes were still directed towards the deck. He carefully looked at each person passing by, but no one particularly stood out.

"Give me the report"

"

Contact person Kim Young Hee and National Security Agency official Lee Cheol Jin were both confirmed to have boarded the plane. Lee Cheol Jin is disguising himself as a Chinese citizen. He will probably leave China as soon as he arrives in Japan, and Kim Young Hee has booked a ferry leaving from Shimonoseki tomorrow night."

"Then I'll have to contact them before we arrive at the docks."

Kwon Taek Joo's eyes darted around as he muttered to himself, before abruptly turning around and making his way off the balcony. The speaker's voice spoke from the earpiece.

"Are you going to start moving now?"

Kwon Taek Joo didn't answer right away, but instead began to walk briskly through the empty hallway, the sound of his footsteps echoing off the walls. Eventually, he responded, his voice carrying down the corridor.

"When playing hide and seek, the best players are those who like to take bold approaches."

In case the targets need to contact each other, it is best to do so in a chaotic scene where there are a lot of people. Meeting in a place with few people will only attract more attention, thereby increasing the risk of getting caught. Kwon Taek Joo gracefully descended down two spiral stairs and walked past a group of people gathered in front of the 2nd floor restaurant. He meticulously examined each face one by one, looking for any sign of recognition or suspicion. However, there were no outstanding characters this time, which put him at ease. Without any delay, Kwon Taek Joo headed down the stairs leading to the first-floor lobby, his mind focused on the task at hand.

He gave out a brief instruction.

"Give me a call."

The phone rang immediately.

He didn't answer immediately, but instead waited for it to vibrate twice before picking it up.

"Hello?"

His voice was low and serious as he spoke to the person on the other end, maintaining composure despite the urgency of the conversation. He walked with purpose, careful not to draw attention to himself, as he continued to talk and listen.

Not long after, a woman passed by. She was wearing a coat with the collar standing up awkwardly, making her appear uneasy. As she approached the vending machine next to the elevator, she seemed to be taking her time in selecting a drink, causing other people to come and go.

Eventually, she took out a 1,000 yen bill and hesitated for a while before choosing green tea.

The sound of the drink and coins falling from the machine echoed throughout the quiet hallway. The woman picked up the green tea quite naturally, holding it close to her chest as if it were a source of comfort.

She gathered the change and headed back to the 2nd floor, not paying any special attention to Kwon Taek Joo, who pretended not to notice her.

"The target is approaching."

The voice ringing on the intercom caught Kwon Taek Joo's attention after the woman disappeared upstairs.

"Okay. Let's talk later."

He pressed the button to end the call. At this moment, a man walked out of the living room at the back of the lobby. He was wearing a navy blue beanie and was striding towards the vending machine.

The man rummaged through his pocket and took out a few coins but only glanced around, showing no interest at the drink selection. An overly cautious attitude. After a while, the man placed a 100 yen coin into the slot.

Suddenly, an arm reached over his shoulder and a cheerful clicking sound was heard, similar to the sound of a coin rolling through a narrow groove. The person wearing a blue beanie was still holding a hundred yen coin in their hand. The stranger then inserted their arm into the vending machine, chose a drink, and pressed a button to make their selection.

"What's up?"

The navy blue beanie man inhaled sharply, realizing the current situation. The heavy can of water fell with a clatter. The beanie quickly grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's hand as he walked towards the place to receive the drink. He shouted in confusion at the unexpected situation.

"Ah you bastard, what are you doing?"

"It seems like you're having trouble making a decision. At this rate, you will probably have to stay up here all night."

Kwon Taek Joo's grip on the man's hand was tight and possessive, his response brazen and provocative. His tone was low and whispery, with

a faint smile on his face that showed no signs of remorse. It was as if he had intended for the conflict to happen.

The blue beanie felt an unfortunate premonition, a creepy feeling that made his instinct recognize the danger before his mind did. Under the bright light, his anger dissipated, replaced by an expression of anxiety. His eyebrows furrowed in worry, his breathing became rougher, and at some point, cold sweat formed on his forehead, indicating the severity of the situation.

"Damn it."

Immediately, the blue beanie suddenly lunged his hand towards the vending machine pick up slot. He quickly lifted the lid and attempted to grab something inside. However, Kwon Taek Joo did not hesitate to stomp onto the lid.

"Ah!"

A loud scream erupted from the man whose hand was caught in the vending machine. Kwon Taek Joo remained calm.

"Ya crazy bastard!"

The man, feeling provoked, grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's collar with force. His eyes widened as he glared at him, but Kwon Taek Joo stood his ground, gazing calmly from his shirt to the man's face. Kwon Taek Joo's expression was unfazed and his movements were slow and deliberate, giving the impression of someone who was in complete control.

Despite the man's attempts to ignore it, an intense and unsettling energy began to radiate from Kwon Taek Joo's grip. The man began to feel uneasy as he realized that Kwon Taek Joo was not to be trifled with. What was happening was definitely not good.

Kwon Taek Joo glanced at the people gathering around and muttered.

"Ah geez, I hate grabbing attention"

Kwon Taek Joo glared down.

"Lee Cheol Jin-sshi must also understand this feeling, right? Everyone does in this line of work.."

As soon as his name was called, the man known as Lee Cheol was able to guess Kwon Taek Joo's identity. The man's fuming face suddenly turned pale.

Passengers rushed out and quickly gathered around two people who were apparently fighting. It's always curious to watch a fight, and people often run to watch a noisy action movie. However, there is no benefit to continuing like this. A cornered mouse will bite the cat back. Kwon Taek Joo was unsure what unexpected actions Lee Cheol Jin would take if he continued to put more pressure on him. If innocent people get hurt, a mere letter or two of apology will hardly calm the situation..

Kwon Taek Joo held Lee Cheol Jin's arm tightly. Suddenly the man burst out laughing.

"Ah. Screw this!"

Lee Cheol Jin had given up on trying to conceal his identity. In case the spies' identities are exposed, they have only two options - either take their own lives by consuming a pre-prepared poison or use force to escape. Lee Cheol Jin doesn't want to let go of something he has worked hard for, so he has chosen the latter option this time.

Lee Cheol Jin swiftly reached for his jacket, but Kwon Taek Joo swiftly lifted his arm and slammed his head into the vending machine.

The vending machine shook violently, causing Lee Cheol Jin to stumble in shock.

Wasting no time, Kwon Taek Joo acted swiftly and decisively. He seized Lee Cheol Jin's arm and easily snatched the gun away from him. The gathered onlookers were thrown into a panic, screaming and retreating as the gun appeared out of nowhere.

Without any hesitation, Kwon Taek Joo used all his strength to launch a powerful kick at Lee Cheol Jin's butt. The impact was devastating, causing Lee Cheol Jin's body to hit the floor with a loud thud. His face and head were shaken so badly that he lost consciousness and couldn't stay awake.

Meanwhile, Kwon Taek Joo quickly surveyed the area, making sure that no one else was a threat. He then turned his attention to the vending machine and lifted its lid, revealing the USB that the woman from earlier had left behind. According to intelligence information, the USB may contain high-level information equivalent to state secrets. Kwon Taek Joo knew that this was a crucial piece of evidence that could help unravel a dangerous conspiracy.

"Sorry, excuse me! Please move."

A flight steward was approaching them after receiving a report about the commotion. Kwon Taek Joo glanced towards him as he heard an angry mutter in his ear.

"I'm not going down without a fight"

Kwon Taek Joo turned his head, a chill ran down his spine, as if he sensed something ominous was about to happen. His eyes met Lee Cheol Jin's with a strange intensity. As he looked closer, he noticed the rope that had just been dropped in front of him, and his heart skipped a beat. He couldn't shake off the feeling that something terrible was about to unfold.

"Is everything alright?"

The flight steward rushed over to ask.

"Hic.."

It happened in just a split second. Lee Cheol Jin wrapped his arms around the flight attendant's neck and tugged him back. In his other hand was a sharp knife.

"Ahhh!"

"Ah!"

Seeing the weapon, the surrounding passengers fled, only Kwon Taek Joo remained in his position.

Kwon Taek Joo habitually bites his lower lip whenever things go smoothly, feeling uneasy as he believes there is no such thing as an easy task. This time is no different.

Lee Cheol Jin tightened his hold around the hostage's neck and clutched his weapon. The flight attendant winced. Kwon Taek Joo scratched his head in an act of frustration at the sudden turn of events.

"Hand it over."

Lee Cheol Jin outstretched his hand. The blade drew closer to the hostage's neck. Kwon Taek Joo remained still like a statue, observing without a single expression at all. Lee Cheol Jin impatiently waved his hand. When no response, the man eventually shouted "Throw it over here!" Kwon Taek Joo's eyes bore at the hostage's paled face . The man's breathing was rapid, almost like a sob.

As Kwon Taek Joo held the USB in his hand, he didn't hesitate to throw it away. The small device hit one of the hostages before falling to the floor. Lee Cheol Jin almost bent down to pick it up, but then decided to ask the hostage to retrieve the item instead.

The flight steward reluctantly picked up the USB with trembling hands. The urgency of the crisis the man's pants were helplessly soaked. Lee Cheol Jin forced him to stand up and step back step by step on weak legs that no longer had any strength due to fear.

Kwon Taek Joo started moving slowly towards Lee Cheol Jin, who began to retreat. Kwon Taek Joo's movements were quick and decisive, as if he wasn't concerned about the safety of the hostage. Every time Lee Cheol Jin took a step back, Kwon Taek Joo took one step closer. Lee Cheol Jin's voice was filled with anger, and it even cracked at one point.

"Don't come closer to me!"

But that threat had no effect at all.

Every time he took a step back, Kwon Taek Joo would mirror the action. Although a certain distance was still maintained between the two sides, the anxiety of the person being chased was still indescribable.

"Please help me."

The hostage pleaded, his hands stuck together. The urine that had soaked his pants was now dripping to the floor. For a moment, all movement and noise stopped as if time itself had stopped.

Lee Cheol Jin took a step back as if to analyse the situation. Kwon Taek Joo followed again. Lee Cheol Jin's patience snapped.

Does this man really not care about the hostage?

"You bastard, didn't you hear me when I told you to stop?"

There is little point in getting angry because Kwon Taek Joo seemed unwilling to compromise. Even if a hostage's life is in danger, he will not yield. However, it is evident that if the hostage dies, Lee Cheol Jin himself will be at risk. All of this is conveyed through Kwon Taek Joo's calm but intense stare.

"This son of a bitch...!"

Lee Cheol Jin, feeling defeated, decided to abandon the confrontation and shoved the hostage aside. He then made his way up the narrow stairs located at the back of the room, disappearing from sight.

Meanwhile, Kwon Taek Joo, after helping the flight steward who had fallen to the ground, took off in hot pursuit, his heart pounding in his chest with adrenaline.

As soon as he reached the second floor, people started flocking to the entrance to the deck. Kwon Taek Joo turned around and dashed straight in that direction. The sight of Lee Cheol Jin scurrying away entered his sight.

Kwon Taek Joo strode forward purposefully without any haste, knowing that there was no need to rush. He was confident that the ship was going to set sail, no matter what. As for Lee Cheol Jin, he was trapped like a helpless mouse, unable to escape Kwon's grasp.

Kwon Taek Joo calmly followed Lee Cheol Jin who was fleeing. His dark hair danced in the ocean breeze. This image evoked an eerie feeling.

"Senior

, the ferry assistant just reported to the Coast Guard that there was an armed person on the ship. What's going on?"

T

he voice from before rang out from the communication device in Kwon Taek Joo's ear.

"Let's talk later. I'm about become a little busy."

Kwon Taek Joo's eyes locked in straight at Lee Cheol Jin, who was now trapped at the ship's safety railing. A warning sound came from the walkie-talkie, but Taekjoo turned it off. . As a result, only Lee Cheol Jin and Kwon Taek Joo remained on the windy deck.

Lee Cheol Jin peered down at the dark sea. His hands were clinging to the railing in a tight grip. Behind him, Kwon Taek Joo gradually narrowed the distance. Lee Cheol Jin, knowing he was cornered suddenly swung his weapon wildly into the air. That gesture was like an animal trying to escape at all costs, but it was also meaningless. The moment you are afraid, your threat has lost its power.

"Don't come here!"

Taekjoo took more steps towards the aggressive Lee Cheol Jin. The man sent continuous glances from the waves back to the Kwon Taek Joo who drew closer. The man waved his knife wildly in the air.

"I told you not to come any closer!"

The man panicked and screamed violently. Kwon Taek Joo took out the Colt. At that moment, Lee Cheol Jin's knife transformed into worthless scrap metal.

## Chapter 1.2 – Prologue: Mission in Busan 2

Lee Cheol Jin's eyes widened in shock as he locked eyes with Kwon Taek Joo. But before he could react, a sudden burst of sparks erupted from Kwon Taek Joo's gun, followed by a deafening explosion.

The bullet struck its intended target with deadly accuracy, but it wasn't Lee Cheol Jin who collapsed and screamed in agony. It was Kim Young Hee, the unsuspecting woman who had snuck up behind Kwon Taek Joo.

Her ivory jacket now stained with blood, Kim Young Hee's trembling form collapsed to the ground, clutching her shredded hand as the Colt in her grip fell and fired off shots wildly into the air. In the chaos, it was impossible to tell if her intended target had been Kwon Taek Joo or Lee Cheol Jin.

As Kwon Taek Joo turned his attention back to the scene before him, Lee Cheol Jin discarded his knife and stood with his back to both of them. With a deep breath, he grasped onto the railing tightly until his muscles bulged and his body began to quiver with rage. A sick feeling washed over Kwon Taek Joo as he realized what was about to happen, but before he could react, Lee Cheol Jin launched himself off the railing in a violent and calculated attack.

Kwon Taek Joo's heart raced as he sprinted towards the railing. But before he could reach it, a deafening "thud" echoed in his ears. He peered over the edge and saw the once calm sea erupt into violent white water jets, sending chills down his spine.

Taekjoo's eyes looked looking for Lee Cheol Jin but couldn't spot him. Kwon Taek Joo waited a little longer. Finally, a head broke through the turbulent waves.

Jumping from that height into the unforgiving sea was practically suicide.

But as if to mock Kwon Taek Joo's idea ,a boat suddenly appeared in the distance. It was an old wooden fishing boat, perhaps able to evade the surveillance networks of investigative agencies and reach their location undetected.

The wooden boat glided in the darkness gradually approaching Lee Cheol Jin.

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help feeling like he'd been hit in the back of the head. Maybe this was their real escape route. The plan may have been to distract their pursuers with fake train tickets and then disappear at sea once they received the item.

Kwon Taek Joo immediately opened fire, but it was difficult to aim at a moving boat from such a far distance and in the dark of night. They had a clear shot, but taking action now could complicate things for them. If only they could have taken out their target from the start, things wouldn't be so complicated.

The goal of this mission was to find and eliminate North Korean spies who had been living in South Korea for an extended period of time, holding important positions and stealing national secrets. There were likely multiple people involved in supporting and aiding these spies. Cutting off one branch wouldn't solve the problem - Kwon Taek Joo needed to dig out the roots.

Meanwhile, the ferry continued on its course, widening the distance between itself and the fishing boat. A man on board pulled Lee Cheol Jin onto the boat and helped him remove his wet jacket, revealing various small buoys attached to his body. As the boat sailed away, Lee Cheol Jin mockingly raised his hand, a proud and victorious expression on his face.

Kwon Taek Joo's smile quickly faded as he turned to face the fallen figure of Kim Young Hee. He walked over to her and knelt down beside her.

Despite the pain in her injured arm, Kim Young Hee persisted in trying to retrieve something. Kwon Taek Joo struck her forcefully on the back of her head to prevent her from committing suicide. Kim Young Hee

blacked out from the blow. When she came to, Kwon Taek Joo was stuffing a handkerchief into her mouth to prevent any further harm. He then grabbed her left hand and twisted it behind her back.

Kwon Taek Joo glanced down and noticed a ring on Kim Young Hee's finger. The ring appeared to be new with no visible scratches.

"That's a pretty ring you have there," he remarked, with a hint of sarcasm. "I'll have to put this bracelet on you to match it."

As he said this, Kwon Taek Joo pulled out a pair of handcuffs and secured Kim Young Hee's left hand to the railing with a loud click.

Once he finished, Kwon Taek Joo turned back on the intercom.

"Okay, in 8 seconds, come here immediately."

"What?" came the muffled shout from the other side, as if they had misheard. Kwon Taek Joo ignored it and focused on his watch. With a press of the reset button, the time indicator disappeared and was replaced by road markings. During their chase, Kwon Taek Joo had attached a tracking device to Lee Cheol Jin's belt. The red dot on the screen showed the target moving away from their original location. Time was running short. Taking a deep breath, Kwon Taek Joo sprinted towards the back of the ferry.

He reached the end of the deck and stepped onto the railing before jumping off without hesitation. For a moment, everything went black. The wind whipped through his body as he fell, seeming to last longer than expected.

Crap. The water level suddenly rose, accompanied by a deafening noise. When Kwon Taek Joo touched the inky black seawater, a fierce jolt surged through his body, causing every muscle to feel like they were being ripped apart. Water bubbles exploded all around him, filling every pore as he submerged himself in the ocean to lessen the shock. Slowly, he moved his limbs and fought against the current that was carrying him away. He opened his eyes but saw nothing but pitch-black darkness.

Summoning all of his strength, he kicked his legs and broke through the surface of the water. It was hard to keep his position with the rough waves constantly crashing into him. With difficulty, Kwon Taek Joo raised his wrist and pressed the reset button on his watch once more. The navigation chart disappeared, and a bright light illuminated the entire license plate before shooting into the air for 2-3 seconds. Then a familiar mechanical sound could be heard not far away - it was the engine of a motorboat.

As the noise grew louder and then abruptly stopped, white foam from the propeller whipped at Kwon Taek Joo's skin while a voice shouted down at him from above.

"You're really something else. Keep this up and you'll become a ghost of the sea."

Yoon Jong Woo, who had sprinted here in just 8 seconds, reached out his hand to help him onto the boat. Kwon Taek Joo climbed aboard, feeling completely drenched and uncomfortable. Despite the biting cold, he took off his watch and tossed it to Yoon Jong Woo without a word. Yoon Jong Woo immediately steered the boat towards where the red dot on the watch's direction board indicated.

Kwon Taek Joo removed his wet jacket and struggled to catch his breath.

The motorboat roared across the choppy waves in the dark. The whole boat was violently bouncing and swaying. The red dot was getting closer to the orientation line, gradually approaching its intended destination.

Pip, pip, pip, pip, pipipipi.

The mechanical sound of the wooden boat grew louder as it came into view. Even as the boat tried to escape, it was clear that their pursuers were gaining on them.

A man emerged from the cockpit, brandishing a rifle. Yoon Jong Woo clenched his teeth and steered the boat, causing it to turn abruptly and

create a strong wake. Most of the bullets from the fishing boat missed, but one grazed the side of their own boat. Thankfully, it didn't hit any vital parts and cause a fiery explosion.

There was still no light coming from the fishing boat. In this situation, it seemed impossible to approach without causing harm to the other occupants. Every attempt at getting closer resulted in a barrage of bullets being fired back at them. Trying to capture an armed target was a futile and absurd task.

The same pattern repeated over and over again - getting attacked, dodging, trying to get closer, and then being shot at once more. Yoon Jong Woo slammed his hand against the steering wheel in frustration. The target was so close yet so out of reach; it drove him crazy.

"Move out of the way"

Kwon Taek Joo suddenly said, pulling Yoon Jong Woo back into reality. He quickly took control of the driver's seat and steered them towards a nearby fishing boat. Yoon Jong Woo could only watch helplessly as their motorboat violently bounced along the waves.

"Ah! Senior, we're going to collide! We're going to collide!"

Yoon Jong Woo shouted in horror as they barreled towards the wooden boat. But Kwon Taek Joo showed no signs of slowing down, instead tilting the boat and causing a huge wave to splash onto the deck of the other boat.

This temporarily impeded their attackers, giving them a chance to escape. And so, they continued on like this for what felt like hours, with Kwon Taek Joo making sudden turns and maneuvers to avoid getting caught by their pursuers.

Inevitably, however, the enemy boat reappeared in their sights. Desperate and anxious, they began firing bullets at them once again. Kwon Taek Joo was too focused on maneuvering to shoot back, leaving Yoon Jong Woo to cower and try to protect himself.

"You're going to get us killed! Are you crazy?!"

Yoon Jong Woo yelled at his superior in panic, cursing him without hesitation. But Kwon Taek Joo paid him no mind and continued on his path of escape.

As they continued to flee, it became clear that their boats were on a collision course. Yoon Jong Woo's eyes squeezed shut as he thought of his parents back home. Just two months ago, he couldn't even afford the kimchi his mother sent him. The memory of her calling him a "bastard" in a text message before this mission still lingered in his mind.

Oh, mom.

The wooden boat also seemed to sense the impending disaster as they watched the motorboat headed straight towards them. In a moment of desperation and helplessness, both boats jumped into the water at almost the same time, narrowly avoiding a collision by just 5 meters. In that brief moment, both Yoon Jong Woo and their attackers felt equal levels of abandonment and despair.

Kwon Taek Joo cranked the steering wheel aggressively, causing the boat to jolt and shake from the abrupt deceleration. The hull lifted up out of the water and skidded across the surface in a wide arc. But conflict was inevitable. It was the logical moment to give up and save their lives, but Kwon Taek Joo refused to release his grip on the steering wheel. The wooden boat collided with the motorboat, creating a loud thud and sparks flying from the friction. For a brief moment, it seemed as though both boats were suspended in mid-air.

"Huh?"

After the chaos settled, Yoon Jong Woo slowly opened his eyes. They were still on a boat, not drifting helplessly in the freezing ocean. Kwon Taek Joo remained at the helm, smoke billowing from the back of the boat and a large hole on its right side. Yoon Jong Woo's tense muscles relaxed, but his heart pounded so hard he could barely control his body.

The engine noise finally ceased as waves crashed against them, bringing them closer to the wooden boat. The two boats collided repeatedly with deafening crashes. Kwon Taek Joo stood up and made his way towards

the wooden boat. Only then did Yoon Jong Woo snap out of it and frantically searched for his Colt handgun on the floor.

Kwon Taek Joo boarded the fishing boat and shined a flashlight around. He saw two men desperately swimming in the deep sea with no chance of escape. Calmly observing their futile efforts, he grabbed a nearby fishing net and threw it towards them. The net flew through the air and entangled both men as they struggled to break free.

After watching their struggle for a while, Kwon Taek Joo turned on the machine connected to the net – an old hand tractor commonly used on small fishing boats – making a rusty rattling noise. It was surprisingly easy to operate.

Suddenly, Kwon Taek Joo glanced back and saw Yoon Jong Woo approaching. The boy, embarrassed by his earlier actions, was now operating the net machine with even more fervor than Kwon Taek Joo. Moments later, Lee Cheol Jin and his accomplices were pulled onto the boat deck along with the tangled fishing net.

"Ha...ha...what should I do now?"

Yoon Jong Woo wiped the sweat from his brow as he spoke up, but Kwon Taek Joo didn't respond. Frowning, Yoon Jong Woo looked up and saw that Kwon Taek Joo was already heading towards the motorboat, searching for something.

"What are you doing?"

"Where is the item I asked you to prepare?"

"Ah, it's under the driver's seat."

Kwon Taek Joo immediately sat in the driver's seat and reached underneath, feeling around until he found a suitcase. Opening it, he quickly checked its contents before turning to give orders to Yoon Jong Woo.

"Contact headquarters and inform them that we have captured Lee Cheol Jin, his accomplice, and the USB drive. Also tell them that Kim Young Hee is tied up on the ferry and the Coast Guard should be searching for her by now."

"Yes? Senior? But do I have to do everything myself?"

"You're not doing anything else. Call them and tell them to take over."

"What about you, senior?"

"I'm busy as hell. I have a family event to attend. Work hard."

Is it true that when facing life and death, people often speak without thinking? Yoon Jong Woo kept asking questions, hoping for a different answer. As if confirming his worst fears, the motorboat started up. Left behind on a small boat with two men trapped in a net, Yoon Jong Woo watched as Kwon Taek Joo left without even looking back.

The powerful motorboat sped away quickly, leaving Yoon Jong Woo no time to process what was happening. As he looked back in confusion, he realized that his shoes were already soaked from water leaking into the boat. Even if this makeshift boat doesn't sink right away, can a superior really leave their subordinate behind like this?

Yoon Jong Woo screamed out in desperation as Kwon Taek Joo could only hear the wind and waves. The sound of the wind seemed to mock him, screaming "Unbelievable!"

It is said that the more precious a child is, the stricter they must be raised. So perhaps, this was all just a mistake.

## Chapter 1.3 – Prologue: Psych Bogdanov

Kwon Taek Joo parked his boat at a corner of the dock without any obstacles since it had been previously registered for official purposes. He did not encounter any legal procedures because of it.

After leaving his boat, he went into a nearby warehouse to change into a neat suit. As the darkness fell, he walked through the station and found the taxi waiting for him that he had called earlier. He got in the car and headed to Busan station.

Upon his arrival, the departure announcement of the KTX train heading to Seoul rang out. Kwon Taek Joo quickly joined the group of people heading down to the station platform. He found an early train waiting and went through the nearby door to check his seat number and sit down. Since it was late at night, the train carriage was quiet.

Drrrrr... drrr...

As soon as he sat down, the phone in his pocket rang. It was his personal phone, not used for work purposes. He knew it would be his mother on the other end of the line. Kwon Taek Joo cleared his throat and answered the call with a rehearsed response.

"Hi Mom, I just got on the train. Cleaning up after the event took longer than expected so I'll be arriving early tomorrow morning. Don't wait up for me."

Kwon Taek Joo could almost recite these words in his sleep from how many times he had said them before. His mother bombarded him with questions about the train's departure and arrival time, how he would get home from the station, and more. She only saw her son once or twice a year, so these visits were always special to her. He promised her that he would come straight home without stopping anywhere else before ending the call.

Kwon Taek Joo hung up and suddenly felt exhausted, a feeling he thought he had forgotten. The train doors closed and it began its

journey towards Seoul. Leaning back in his seat with his still-wet hair, he could feel the vibrations of the train. In the quiet car, an announcement was made for each stop until finally reaching 'Seoul', and the lights slowly dimmed.

Kwon Taek Joo's whole body sagged from the heat of the heater. Trying to stay awake was futile; with every blink, they felt heavier due to the sea salt still stuck on his eyelashes. There were still three hours left until he reached home. Should he try to get some rest? Just as Kwon Taek Joo was about to close his eyes and compromise with himself, his phone began vibrating in his pocket again.

Drrrrr... drrrrr...

He knew it must be a call related to work. Ignoring it and trying to sleep was not an option, as the phone continued to vibrate nonstop. He knew they wouldn't stop calling until he answered. The noise was starting to make other passengers uncomfortable in the car.

"Ugh..."

Kwon Taek Joo finally gave in and sat up, pressing the button to answer the call.

"Where are you now?"

The person who suddenly asked the question was Chief Lim. Yoon Jong Woo would have received direct updates from him if he hadn't disappeared under the sea. But why did Chief Lim want to talk now? Kwon Taek Joo never felt good about receiving any kind of contact from him.

"Is something wrong?"

"I want to see you for a moment."

"Why should I come in? What's going on?"

All that came to Kwon Taek Joo's mind were thoughts of the recent spy-catching operation. It was supposed to be handled discreetly, but there were too many witnesses and even an innocent civilian hostage involved. High-ranking officials who received the report may have

raised concerns, and with the Coast Guard also involved, it would not be easy to smooth everything over. The media may have already caught wind of the incident, so Chief Lim's persistent inquiries were not unexpected.

Even though he knew it would be useless. Kwon Taek Joo still tried to make excuses.

"This isn't the best time to be scheduling a meeting.."

"That's alright . We will only two for a bit. Come here now."

Of course. He wouldn't be Chief Lim if he didn't give orders like this.

Before starting this campaign, Kwon Taek Joo had reminded him countless times that tomorrow was his mother's birthday and she couldn't sleep at night worrying about her only son. So no matter what happened, Kwon Taek Joo had to go home. What had Chief Lim promised at that time? Didn't he say that even if a second Korean War broke out, he would make sure Kwon Taek Joo returned to his mother?

Kwon Taek Joo asked if he had forgotten and reminded him of their conversation.

"Chief, have you forgotten? Tomorrow is my mother's birthday.

"I won't keep you for long."

There was no way to refuse now. Chief Lim was known for being brazen and stubborn. Kwon Taek Joo angrily ran his fingers through his wet hair. He made his final argument while looking out at the passing scenery through the train car window.

"But the train has already departed, what can I do?"

At that moment, the KTX train abruptly came to a halt. Startled passengers, engrossed in their music or phone games, looked around in confusion.

The train remained still for some time in the tunnel. There were no announcements or staff passing through the cabin. It was not uncommon for KTX trains to experience technical issues and stop, so most passengers were unaffected. Those who initially leaned out into

the aisles to find out what was going on soon lost interest and fell asleep.

It's nothing too serious, Kwon Taek Joo reassured himself. But ominous signs always creep up like ghosts.

"Come here, hurry up."

Chief Lim issued quick instructions. Kwon Taek Joo was about to ask what was happening when an announcement came over the speaker:

"Due to a track problem, the train had to make a temporary stop. We apologize for the inconvenience and appreciate your understanding."

Temporary stop. This meant that if Kwon Taek Joo didn't follow instructions, the train wouldn't move again.

"Aren't you planning on getting off?"

The gentle urging continued. Chief Lim's tone was almost leisurely, as if he was enjoying the situation. Kwon Taek Joo found his attitude irritating and didn't feel like obeying anymore. He also paid little attention to the other passengers.

But as long as the train wasn't moving, Kwon Taek Joo had no way of getting home. Frustrated, he hung up his phone. Manager Lim didn't call back, and there was no sign of the dormitory leaving either.

Kwon Taek Joo sat for a while before sighing and standing up. He walked down the hallway and exited through the train doors which opened as if waiting for him. Shaking his head, he descended the stairs and made his way along the gravel road.

While walking towards the back of the train, Kwon Taek Joo made a call. As soon as he emerged from the tunnel, the KTX started moving again. Just then, his mother's voice came through the other end of the line: "Hello". She sounded deeper than before. Undoubtedly, she was worried about her son who had promised to return and then suddenly claimed to have urgent work.

"Mom, it's me. There's an issue with the train so I'll be a little late. Don't worry, I'll definitely come back this time."

He stopped for a moment and added.

"Oh, and mom? Can you not light any candles and just wait for me?"

The place where Kwon Taek Joo arrived on a prepared helicopter was the National Intelligence Agency. An employee was waiting at the helipad and guided him to the office of Deputy Chief 1.

He followed along without saying a word, deep in thought. The person I had requested you to meet earlier was Chief Lim, yet somehow you ended up in the office of Deputy Chief 1 instead of the Chief's office.

The National Intelligence Agency is led by three Deputy Directors, each with their own specific role and authority. In the agency, hierarchy is strictly enforced, with departments following orders from their immediate superiors. So when Kwon Taek Joo and Chief Lim were summoned to Deputy Director 1's office, it was a bit unusual for them to see Deputy Director 3 also present.

As they entered the office, Kwon Taek Joo's curiosity was growing and he couldn't help but have questions swirling in his mind. But before he could ask anything, the employee opened the door for them and they were greeted not by Chief Lim, but by Deputy Director 1 himself.

Kwon Taek Joo forgot to greet him back as he sat down across from Deputy Director 1. It wasn't surprising that he was here, but what was unexpected was Chief Lim sitting beside him. Kwon Taek Joo locked eyes with Chief Lim, silently asking for an explanation. But all he got in response was a confused smile.

The atmosphere was tense and uncomfortable. Kwon Taek Joo tried to ease his nerves and looked at both Deputy Director 1 and Chief Lim. Deputy Director 1 spoke first in a gentle tone.

"I heard you just finished your mission in Busan, right?"

"Yes, sir. I did my best."

Kwon Taek Joo replied without hesitation. He could sense that there were more underlying issues than just his performance during the mission. It seemed like Deputy Director 1 was overstepping his authority by reprimanding him like this. Both Deputy Director 1 and

Chief Lim exchanged looks and smiled strangely at Kwon Taek Joo's defense. This made him feel even more uneasy.

"But that's not why I've called you here tonight. I'm sure you are aware of the recent leak of classified information during our operation in Busan?"

Deputy Director one's sarcasm was not lost on Kwon Taek Joo. He continued to look at Chief Lim with suspicion, but his superior just smiled and shook his head innocently. This only added to Kwon Taek Joo's confusion.

If it wasn't about the mission in Busan, then why were they summoned at this late hour? He couldn't come up with any logical explanation.

Sensing Kwon Taek Joo's thoughts, Chief Lim decided to ease the tension by showing him a tablet device that he had been holding onto.

"What is it?"

"Have a look and see for yourself."

Kwon Taek Joo shrugged and casually took the tablet from Chief Lim. He quickly scrolled through the first page, barely paying attention. But as he went further into the article, his interest was piqued and he carefully read through each page. Chief Lim watched his reactions before speaking again.

"This is highly classified intelligence information that we have recently obtained. It has been a rumor for some time now, but this is the first solid evidence we have. As you can see, it involves North Korea and Russia working together to develop a new weapon for the past three years. This weapon boasts unprecedented firepower and could potentially shift global power dynamics. Its codename is Anastasia, although we are not sure if that refers to the weapon itself or the agreement between North Korea and Russia to produce it."

Kwon Taek Joo could sense the gravity of the situation as Deputy Manager 1 and Director Lim exchanged meaningful glances. If North Korea and Russia were able to join forces and create a powerful weapon, it would spell trouble for the rest of the world. Kwon Taek Joo

knew this without having to think too deeply about it. He was aware that such a partnership would put both Korea and the United States at risk.

"We need to gather more information on this weapon to maintain balance of power. If there's any chance, we should try to stop its development before it becomes fully operational," Deputy Manager 1 stated.

"Can't we do something for the greater good of humanity and world peace? Sometimes stealing is necessary if it prevents a major catastrophe," Kwon Taek Joo added.

Thus, the identity and details of this joint project between North Korea and Russia needed to be uncovered. And if necessary, measures would have to be taken to retrieve or destroy any blueprints or secrets related to it. But who would carry out such a dangerous mission? Would it be Kwon Taek Joo himself?

Since he started working as a Special Agent at the National Intelligence Agency, it wouldn't be abnormal for him to be sent on overseas operations. Rather, the days he spent abroad were more than the days he spent in Korea. For that reason, business travel missions were nothing new.

However, what set this particular mission apart was that it was in Russia – a country Kwon Taek Joo had never visited before, let alone engaged in strategic operations.

But he was not unqualified for this task – he had been trained in Chinese, Persian, and Russian since joining headquarters. Even if he had to leave for Moscow immediately, language wouldn't be an issue for him.

But that wasn't his main concern. What worried Kwon Taek Joo was his lack of field experience in Russia. For an agent, nothing was more crucial than hands-on training. This mission was akin to sending him into battle without any weapons. And he couldn't understand why this responsibility was placed on his shoulders.

Kwon Taek Joo rolled his eyes and gave Chief Lim a dissatisfied look. He nodded as if he understood everything that was being said.

"To be honest, you're not the most suitable candidate for this mission," Chief Lim finally spoke up.

"Then shouldn't you find someone qualified?."

"I already found someone and sent them."

"But?"

Chief Lim just shrugged, unable to give a straight answer. Deputy Manager 1 also wore a wry smile. Clearly, they were keeping something from him.

"Probably not."

He then spread three photos on the table in front of Kwon Taek Joo. The first one showed a hand with all ten fingers amputated, its skin swollen from water retention.

The second photo depicted a body with a white cloth covering its forehead, with a tattoo engraved in the center. Judging by the condition of the skin and fresh ink, it seemed like the tattoo had been recent.

Lastly, there was a clean ID photo. Based on the details, it appeared to be of the person before their body had been mutilated. Kwon Taek Joo recognized the person in the photo

"Dominic Morgan. He was an elite agent from the US intelligence agency who was sent to Russia. Four days ago, his body was found on the banks of the Nara River – right where he was on assignment to uncover information about 'Anastasia'. He was an expert in gathering Russian intelligence, but unfortunately, Russia treated his death as just another unknown case since he used an alias during his mission."

Do they truly consider him an "anonymous" figure? As a result, Russian surveillance has become more stringent. What do you want me to do?

"You understand what I mean. Let's not complicate things any further. Since North Korea is involved, our country could also be considered a plaintiff, correct? We cannot simply stand by and watch." That's right,

you know Agent Morgan from the last joint Korean-American training course, don't you?"

"We've only known each other for about a month at most, to be exact. By chance, I was assigned to room with him."

Everything made sense now. Chief Lim smirked as he skillfully pressured Kwon Taek Joo, who was trying hard not to reveal any weaknesses.

"That's why I chose you. Emotions clouding reasoning can lead to undesirable consequences."

There are no other options. Just as Kwon Taek Joo was about to angrily object, a buzzing sound suddenly interrupted them. It was Deputy Chief 1's phone ringing. He said "Wait a minute, please understand," then walked past Kwon Taek Joo and left the room. The door opened briefly before shutting again. Chief Lim gave the order as if he had been waiting for a long time.

"On behalf of Agent Morgan, go find Anastasia."

The gentleness from before was no longer there, replaced by a rather serious, commanding tone. Kwon Taek Joo stared at him without answering.

Is this really the only option?

Surely there had to be someone more suitable for this mission than Kwon Taek Joo.

While it was obvious that there were't many employees in the headquarters... there must just one qualified person? Kwon Taek Joo racked his brain, but no suitable candidate appeared in his mind.

Chief Lim maintained his calm façade, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Only one elite agent was found dead overnight - no big deal, right? Kwon Taek Joo almost responded sarcastically, but thought better of it and remained silent. He had been working under Chief Lim's direction since he joined headquarters, and they had grown close enough to joke around. Still, Chief Lim was his superior and Kwon Taek

Joo knew better than to resist or refuse his orders. Chief Lim smiled with satisfaction at his subordinate's resigned expression.

"I promise to provide full support. I will arrange the team members according to your wishes."

"I prefer to work alone."

"This mission won't be easy. It will be very difficult."

"There's no need to send more people to death early"

Kwon Taek Joo responded gently, and Chief Lim smiled knowingly. He then pulled out a thick envelope containing documents, which Kwon Taek Joo quickly snatched. Inside were various papers and a fake passport. When he opened it, he saw an unfamiliar face.

"Hiro Sakamoto?"

"There's been a contract signed between a Japanese energy company and Gazprom, the Russian state-owned gas company, for the construction of an LNG facility. The expected profits are estimated to be in the tens of trillions of won. As a result, high-ranking officials from energy companies, major banks involved in lending, and international trading companies have been invited to Russia for the signing ceremony and to visit the proposed construction site. Among them is Hiro Sakamoto, a senior officer at 'Itochu' international trading company responsible for Europe. His name is on the list of attendees."

Will Kwon Taek Joo assume the identity of Hiro Sakamoto and infiltrate Russia? Not a bad plan. If North Korea is indeed collaborating with Russia on weapons development, there would only be a few people involved or aware of the details - those in high positions within the Russian government. But as Hiro Sakamoto, Kwon Taek Joo would automatically have access to them without much effort.

Of course, this plan would only work if his identity remained hidden. There were many other officials invited to the event, and if any of them noticed something off about 'Hiro Sakamoto', their entire operation would be compromised. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but think of Agent Morgan's fate as he imagined this scenario.

Chief Lim reassured him with calm confidence.

"Don't worry. As long as another Hiro Sakamoto doesn't appear, there's no chance of your true identity being revealed. The real Hiro Sakamoto is scheduled to leave the country the day before the delegation's visit, and our agents in Tokyo will make sure he doesn't leave."

The headquarters' disguising skills were top-notch - they could even fool his own mother. And given that most Japanese people are shorter than him, there was little risk of anyone noticing a slight height difference between him and Hiro Sakamoto (whose listed height was 180cm). If anyone did get suspicious, he could simply claim he was wearing insoles.

Kwon Taek Joo would have brushed it off as normal if it were any other situation. As a subordinate, he had no right to refuse orders from his superiors unless he removed his professional uniform. But this time, he couldn't bring himself to blindly follow along. For some reason, an inescapable sense of unease gnawed at Kwon Taek Joo.

Was it because Agent Morgan, who was in charge of the mission, was now deceased? While it did affect him to some degree, that wasn't the only reason for his hesitation. Kwon Taek Joo's intuition told him that something bad was coming.

"This is about redefining world dominance. If we succeed, your role will drastically change."

Manager Lim cleverly tried to sway Kwon Taek Joo's decision, but he met his gaze with unwavering determination. Chief Lim remained silent with a warm smile on his face. There was a long pause between the two men.

Shortly after, Kwon Taek Joo pocketed the envelope that had been prepared for him. He added one final statement to make his stance clear.

"I don't care about status or power. They only bring unnecessary hostility."

"If you have no interest in this combat mission, then why did you accept it?"

"It's an order from a senior manager. As a subordinate, I have no right to refuse."

"Is there any other reason?"

"If I reject this mission, my perfect track record will crumble."

"In other words, you're worried about your career."

"Can I leave now?"

"Oh, also, there's one thing to note."

"What is it now?" Kwon Taek Joo asked irritably. Chief Lim's demeanor had suddenly become more serious as he cautiously observed Kwon Taek Joo with quiet eyes.

"Psych Bogdanov."

Who the heck is Psych Bogdanov?

"That's not a typical name," Kwon Taek Joo furrowed his brow and tilted his head. ‘

Bogdanov'

sounded like a Russian surname, but 'Psych' was certainly not a common human name.

What parent would intentionally name their child something that means "crazy"?

Chief Lim clarified, assuming Kwon Taek Joo hadn't misheard.

"People often refer to him by that nickname instead of using his real name."

t's interesting how someone else's chosen nickname can become the basis for evaluating them. The fact that this Russian man was known as "crazy man" Bogdanov rather than by his actual name meant he had quite a reputation. Even in this distant country, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but wonder what kind of person he could be.

In Russia, this man is like a 'nuclear bomb.'"

"If 'nuclear' then nuclear means 'center of gravity'?"

Kwon Taek Joo asked skeptically. There are many meanings for the word "core," including "focus" and another meaning entirely. But why would someone compare a person to such a deadly weapon? Quizzically, he looked at Chief Lim, who smiled back.

"Well, that's one way to interpret it."

Regardless, that definition seemed closer to referring to nuclear weapons. Unconsciously, Kwon Taek Joo's expression turned into a frown. Just who is this person who is known more commonly as "crazy" rather than by their real name, and even symbolizes a nuclear bomb?

Contemplating about 'Psych Bogdanov' brought up another question: why was he mentioned in the campaign to find 'Anastasia' this time around?

"Did that person have anything to do with Morgan's death?"

"I'm not sure. There isn't any concrete evidence, just speculation. If you want to get close to the big players in Russia, you'll likely have to face this person. It's not normal for someone to be referred to as 'nuclear.' It suggests potential for harm, so it would be best to avoid confrontation."

A burst of laughter broke out. The more warnings Kwon Taek Joo received, the more intrigued he became about this "crazy" individual.

At that moment, a knock on the door interrupted their conversation. When Chief Lim acknowledged, the employee who had escorted Kwon Taek Joo arrived with a large bouquet of flowers and a suitcase. He handed them over to him and silently bowed before leaving.

"I've prepared everything you might need. To save time and money, I took your preferences into consideration when replacing items. No need to thank me; after all, we don't want to buy anything else since I already bought you underwear two months ago."

"Wow. You know the condition of my underwear better than I do."

The man laughed.

"There's only so much I can do. And make sure to bring those flowers home. I remember you said today is mom's birthday, right?"

This man is so cunning.

"I won't tell my mom that the gift is from the Chief. If she finds out it came from the person who took your son away on his birthday, it will only spoil her mood further." My mother's good day had just turned sour."

"Thank you for considering my feelings,"

Chief Lim responded with a brazen smile.

"Don't die!"

As Kwon Taek Joo turned to leave, he was suddenly asked for another favor. He paused for a moment before nodding absentmindedly and walking out into the deserted hallway. He trudged towards the door as each sensor light behind him flicked on and off.

The lights dimmed and darkness engulfed him. Suddenly, he stopped in his tracks and turned around. The ceiling light finally turned off, shrouding Kwon Taek Joo's silhouette in thick darkness.

## Chapter 1.4 - New Mission: Set Foot in Russia

What is more useless than asking a child about their future aspirations? From wanting to be the president to becoming a lawyer, doctor, astronaut or entertainer overnight, career paths often change countless times.

Kwon Taek Joo's childhood was no different. Even when he entered the university exam room, he never thought he would become an agent of the National Intelligence Agency.

His brother was different. From the beginning, he spoke seriously about his dream of becoming a soldier like their father. Their mother was initially worried when his brother chose a book on military theory for his first birthday. She had always hoped her children would not pursue careers in the military since her husband was in the military and her father prioritized family affairs over housework.

On days when Kwon Taek Joo's father went on business trips, his mother would often stay up all night with his two brothers, not wanting to pass on the difficulties of military life to her children.

However, people often say that no child does what their parents want. Kwon Taek Joo's older brother eventually ignored their mother's expectations and volunteered to join the Navy, only to die in combat about ten years ago. Since then, their mother has become almost obsessed with Kwon Taek Joo, her only remaining son. As soon as she had taken care of her eldest son's funeral, she hugged Kwon Taek Joo and repeatedly begged him not to follow his brother's path. However, he could not fulfill his mother's wish.

Even if the National Intelligence Agency didn't have strict regulations about employees keeping their identities secret from family, Kwon Taek Joo still couldn't tell his mother the truth.

She had already lost so much for their country - her father, husband, and eldest son. If she found out that Kwon Taek Joo was holding a gun

instead of chopsticks, it would devastate her. She always believed he was just a simple civil servant in a small town. Little did she know that his work took him to Moscow as a Japanese citizen.

He closed his eyes as he remembered the past, then suddenly took out his phone. His mother's message appeared as expected:

"Son, have a delicious lunch. Do your best today too!""

The daily inquiry always came at noon. If there is no response, she would contact him right after work hours. So, Kwon Taek Joo had to reply promptly upon landing. It's Monday and there's a lot of civil complaints waiting for him, making him very busy. He hoped that the excuse will be enough to appease his mother's trust in him.

Checking the time while resetting his phone, he realized it's been nine hours since he boarded the plane and still has about an hour left until reaching his destination. Adjusting his mask, he rose from his seat.

Thankfully, the bathroom was empty as he walked towards it. But just as he's about to open the door, he heard commotion coming from the economy class seats. Peeking through the curtain, he spotted a passenger and flight attendant arguing over free alcohol consumption. Losing interest, Kwon Taek Joo entered the bathroom and locks the door.

Studying his unfamiliar face in the mirror, he remembered that he was currently Hiro Sakamoto. Everything from his ears to his jet-black eyes was modeled after that person. He ran his hands over his artificial skin, it felt exactly like his own.

After smoothing down his hair and drying his hands with a paper towel, he prepared to leave when something suddenly slammed into the back of the door, causing all the lights on the ceiling to flicker. Soon, chaos erupted outside as a flight attendant outside asked if he was okay while footsteps rush towards his position and a man screamed nonsensically.

Unlocking the door and pulling it open forcefully, Kwon Taek Joo found himself face-to-face with the man who had been leaning against it from outside.

"Fuck...What the hell?" The man swears as he falls inside.

A Russian man, who appeared to be heavily intoxicated, was holding an empty bottle of vodka. It seemed that he had consumed all the alcohol he had purchased at the airport duty-free shop and decided to open it on the plane. Kwon Taek Joo was surprised that someone would be so bold as to drink free alcohol until they got drunk, but the reality was even more troubling.

Without saying a word, he looked down at the struggling man for a brief moment. The flight attendants were unsure of what to do in this confusing situation.

"Sir, please sit up. I will help you."

"What? How dare you touch me? Let go! Ahh!"

"Ugh!"

The belligerent drunk pushed away the flight attendant who was trying to help him up. Not only did the crew member stumble and fall, but the other crew members also looked lost. It seemed like no one could calm down the large Russian man at the moment. A passenger could step in and help the crew, but directly interfering in such an incident would be troublesome. While Kwon Taek Joo pondered on what to do, a flight attendant rushed to contact the cockpit.

Usually, in these situations, the plane would make an emergency landing at the nearest airport. In that case, both the drunk man and all the passengers would have to disembark. All procedures, from baggage check to boarding, would have to be done again. Then there would be an hour-long delay until a replacement flight or arrangements are made.

Interfering in other people's affairs is not advisable, so Kwon Taek Joo didn't want to attract attention by getting involved. However, he couldn't ignore the fact that his original plan had been ruined by a shameless person, causing trouble for everyone else.

Kwon Taek Joo grabbed the drunk man by his back as he leaned against his leg.

"Stand up ."

"Eh!"

The man was forced to stand up and dragged towards the bathroom. He was pushed harshly, hitting his butt on the toilet before falling forward. As his arm dangled out of the door, muffled screams could be heard from the passengers outside. People sitting in the front seats quickly got up to watch this unexpected show. The flight attendant repeatedly asked them to sit down, but no one listened. Soon enough, shouts started pouring in from all over the plane.

The man staggered to his feet with a menacing look on his face. He chuckled, wiping saliva from his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Come on, let's do this," he said slurredly.

Kwon Taek Joo simply shook his head at the drunken man who was huffing and puffing. The man mumbled something before charging towards Kwon Taek Joo like an enraged buffalo.

Kwon Taek Joo swiftly wrapped his arms around the man's neck and pinned him to the ground. The man tried to fight back, grabbing Kwon Taek Joo's legs and attempting to lift him up to slam against the plane's ceiling.

The crew members shut their eyes tightly, bracing for impact. But after a few moments of silence, they realized that no crash had occurred yet. The passengers who had backed away nervously blinked in disbelief as they waited for the inevitable sound.

But it never came. Instead, the large drunk man fell to the ground unconscious while Kwon Taek Joo stood unscathed. He kicked the man aside before calmly exiting the bathroom and fixing his rumpled jacket.

"What happened?"

At that moment, the co-pilot arrived after being informed of the situation. He looked between the unconscious man and Kwon Taek Joo before turning to the flight attendants. Meanwhile, Kwon Taek Joo returned to his seat as if nothing had happened. Click. The sound of seat belts being fastened signaled the end of the chaos.

The flight attendants were now busy tending to the drunk passenger and pacifying other upset passengers. It was no different for the vice captain.

"My apologies, everyone. Were you all startled? I will bring some warm water for you."

"It's okay now, please don't worry."

"We are truly sorry for any inconvenience caused."

Kwon Taek Joo could hear the apologies being offered from behind the closed curtain. He tried to tune it out and closed his eyes, but was soon interrupted by the co-pilot and manager who came to express their gratitude for his help. It seemed like he had just defeated a formidable opponent.

"Will we still arrive on time?"

"Unfortunately, we have already reported the incident to air traffic control and are waiting for permission to land. So we may be delayed by an hour or so."

Kwon Taek Joo's expression turned sour as he reluctantly nodded, then immediately put on his headphones. Despite their attempts at small talk, the co-pilot and manager sent sincere thanks before returning to their duties.

As the plane continued to experience turbulence, the previously complaining passengers became quiet and quickly followed instructions to fasten their seat belts and remain seated. Some even said prayers under their breath.

Thanks to this unexpected turn of events, Kwon Taek Joo was able to spend a peaceful hour on the flight. His ears were still ringing and he couldn't fall asleep, but at least he wasn't in danger anymore. As he waited for the plane to land, another announcement played over the intercom.

"In a few minutes, our plane will arrive at Moscow Domodedovo Airport. The local time is 16:11. The weather was cloudy, and the outdoor temperature was -13 degrees Celsius. We sincerely apologize

for any inconvenience caused to you due to unwanted noise during the flight. Thank you for using Japan Airlines, and we look forward to serving you again soon. Thank you and see you again."

However, even after the announcement, the plane continued to hover in the sky for a long time. By the time it landed on the ground, it was already past 5 pm.

Kwon Taek Joo followed the crowd to the immigration checkpoint. He was not very stressed because disguising himself as someone else to go abroad was familiar to him to the point of boredom.

The inspection was over in a flash. The employee just glanced at Kwon Taek Joo without asking any questions. Everything went smoothly until he picked up his luggage and exited immigration.

Outside the exit, there was a crowd of people waiting to welcome their guests, family, and relatives. Although he came to Russia at the invitation of the country, Kwon Taek Joo entered a day earlier. So it was expected that he would go to the hotel by himself without any transportation.

But out of nowhere, a piece of paper with 'Hiro Sakamoto' written on it caught his eye. Even when Kwon Taek Joo took off his sunglasses and looked again, the name written on it, once in Japanese and again in English, was still correct 'Hiro Sakamoto.' The bottom also thoughtfully included the company name "Itochu Corporation."

When he stopped walking, the man holding a paper gave a bright smile.  
"Mr. Sakamoto?"

Yes, that's me. But..." Kwon Taek Joo replied hesitantly. The man's smile widened.

"Hello! My name is Vasily Alexandrovich and I work at Gazprom's public relations office. I heard you were arriving in the country today, so I came to welcome you."

He held out his hand for a handshake. Kwon Taek Joo looked at it and tilted his head.

"I didn't receive any information about this..."

"You didn't receive it? "How could that happen? We already informed your company this morning. They said they would inform Mr. Sakamoto as well."

Vasily was confident that there were no mistakes made. "I see. Please give me a moment." Kwon Taek Joo quickly checked his work phone, thinking that the messages coming through were just roaming notifications or updates from the embassy, but he also found Chief Lim's messages mixed in there.

"Ah... That's right."

"Was there a mistake? You must have had a long journey. You're much later than expected."

"There was some disturbance on the plane."

"Did someone get drunk and cause trouble again?"

". .That, how did you know?"

"It happens quite often with hot-blooded Russian men who love their vodka. It must have been surprising for you. Is that all your luggage? Let me help you carry it."

"It's fine, I can handle it myself."

"Ah, very well. Please follow me this way."

As Vasily led the way, Kwon Taek Joo trailed slowly behind him. Despite having his goodwill rejected, Vasily remained cheerful and hospitable, making Kwon Taek Joo feel welcomed.

They walked towards a waiting black sedan, where a man stepped out from the driver's seat and greeted them with a nod. He then took Kwon Taek Joo's bag and put it in the trunk. Vasily personally opened the backseat door for Kwon Taek Joo, displaying his warm hospitality. As soon as Vasily sat in the passenger seat and closed the door, the car left the airport.

Kwon Taek Joo was exhausted from the lengthy flight. He settled into his seat and closed his eyes, signaling to those around him that he did not wish to engage in small talk. However, Vasily had already turned to face him.

"Are you feeling very tired?"

"Yes, I'm a little tired because of the time difference."

Reluctantly, Kwon Taek Joo answered, and then Vasily proceeded to ask about the quality of the in-flight meal, the comfort of the seats, and the friendliness of the flight attendants. Vasily even shared his own experiences on the plane. Kwon Taek Joo listened with indifference before turning his head towards the window.

The road outside was enveloped in darkness, but Kwon Taek Joo could still feel the atmosphere of Moscow. Lada cars seemed to be everywhere, solidifying their status as Russia's national car. The combination of Starbucks' logo and Cyrillic writing caught his eye as they passed through the city center. Pedestrians walked by wearing long coats or thick, short jackets. Their necks were hunched over and their red noses protruded from their faces due to the cold weather.

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't tell if it was because of the freezing temperatures or simply their demeanor, but everyone seemed unapproachable.

"Do you get this kind of cold weather often?"

Vasily suddenly stopped talking about his trip to Japan when asked this unexpected question. He smiled widely, undeterred by the interruption.

"It's been pretty mild lately. Even though it's winter, it's only around -15 degrees Celsius. It's quite bearable."

Kwon Taek Joo shuddered at the thought of extreme temperatures dropping down to -40 degrees Celsius. Vasily continued to ramble on about various topics without much direction.

"Sometimes people say that Moscow is extremely cold, but they haven't experienced the real cold. In Irkutsk and Verkhoyansk, temperatures can range from -20 to -45 degrees Celsius. Compared to that, isn't

Moscow much more bearable? Of course, it's not as warm as Tokyo where the temperature always stays above 0 degrees, but if such weather were to happen in Russia, even the neighbor's dog would laugh at it."

Taekjoo lifted his gaze to the front and saw a seemingly endless line of cars, like a never-ending parade. They must be stuck in traffic during rush

If the plane had arrived on time, this would not have happened. It's all that damn drunk's fault.

Kwon Taek Joo should have smacked him a little harder. Vasily turned to exchange a few words with the man sitting in the driver's seat, then turned to Kwon Taek Joo and asked permission.

"If we keep going like this, I don't think we'll be able to move at all. How about taking a shortcut? This guy knows all the streets in Moscow. It's late at night, so Mr. Sakamoto is probably very hungry. Either way, I'm sure you must want to rest after a long flight.

That's good news worth hearing. Kwon Taek Joo did want to eat something quickly and head straight to bed immediately. He nodded several times to Vasily, who was asking him

"Is that okay?"

Upon receiving permission, the driver veered off the long line of cars and drove into a nearby side road. It was a narrow street with no clear demarcation between the roadway and the sidewalk, and the dimly lit street made it difficult to navigate. The car drove into the dark with its headlights on. A stray cat rummaging through the trash was startled by the light and scampered away.

Kwon Taek Joo's head spun to the window. It was only for a second but there was a shadow somewhere in the corner of his vision. He did another double take glance at the road they had just passed, but there was nothing there. He could have sworn he saw something resembling a human figure.

Was it just an illusion?

It's hard to be sure because the surroundings are so dark. But Kwon Taek Joo still felt an uncomfortable feeling that he couldn't shake off right away. He turned his head, slowly leaned back in the chair, and replied "it's nothing" when Vasily asked what was going wrong.

He gazed outside and suddenly noticed something. The car was still moving on the same road it had been on before. The buildings looked identical, and the alley was so dark that it was impossible to tell what was ahead. However, there was no mistaking it. Kwon Taek Joo muttered under his breath as he looked at the trash can that had just passed by.

"I think we're lost."

"Impossible. We're going the right way."

"No, this is clearly the same road we were on before. The trash can on the left is the same as the one we saw not long ago. The location of the stains on it, the overflowing trash, and even the lid of the trash can are all the same. There's also the building behind it. The cracks in its outside wall, the color of the bricks, and the shape of the window frames, even the laundry and flower pots hanging all over it - it's no different from what I saw earlier."

Kwon Taek Joo compared and confirmed the details of the scene outside the window with his past memories. Vasily listened silently and then laughed.

".You have a good eye."

The sudden shift in tone from goodwill and excessive generosity to a fishy one is never a good sign.

Kwon Taek Joo felt that strange sensation of being watched and pulled out the Colt without hesitation. The sound of reloading was heard and the trigger was pulled halfway. He made eye contact with the man sitting in the driver's seat through the rearview mirror.

"Stop the car. Now."

## Chapter 1.5 – New Mission: First Meeting

A low, commanding voice rang out. The man sitting in the driver's seat obediently followed instructions. The moving sedan stopped in the middle of a narrow alley. Vasily did not resist and raised both hands.

"You have quite a dangerous toy there, Mr. Sakamoto."

"Who exactly are you guys?"

"I told you. My name is Vasily Alexandrovich, and I've come to escort you"

"Alexandrovich has nothing to do with Gazprom, right?"

"Maybe."

Before the Kwon Taek Joo could say anything, the backseat door was flung open, and man shoved his way into the car and grabbed Kwon Taek Joo. In his hand was a Tokarev, a Russian rapid-fire pistol. The black muzzle of the gun immediately touched Kwon Taek Joo's temple. Not only that, a red dot flew out from somewhere and hovered near his left chest. He was completely surrounded. Kwon Taek Joo clenched his teeth in tension.

"Wouldn't it be better to stay silent, Mr. Sakamoto?"

Vasily hummed as if singing, word by word. There were no clues as to who he was. What could Vasily's goal be? Well, one thing was clear: Kwon Taek Joo had to get out of this bad situation immediately.

But how?

Even if he attempted to move a muscle, his head and chest would be blown off. Kwon Taek Joo rolled his eyes in frustration as he looked around the dark alley. The only thing illuminating the dark alley was the sedan's headlights. No, there was also a light inside the car illuminating Vasily's smiling face.

"Don't do anything funny. Or else, your head will..."

Vasily's warning cut off as a gunshot echoed through the air, causing Kwon Taek Joo to instinctively jerk his upper body downwards. In the blink of an eye, the car plunged into darkness as a bullet shattered the back seat window without warning.

Before they could even process what was happening, another sniper shot tore through the air from a nearby rooftop, followed by clear gunshots and vicious cracking sounds that seemed to never end. The inside of the car was consumed by chaos and panic.

After that momentary commotion, there was an overwhelming silence. There was no movement around the car. The sniper slowly moved the barrel of the gun and in a matter of seconds, all was still. The snipers had done their damage and now lay in wait with their guns trained on the car. Sensing the threat, the driver hit the gas and veered down a narrow alleyway without turning on their headlights. The car careened out of control, smashing into trash cans and buildings along the way as bullets rained down upon them.

"If you don't want to end up like them, you better listen to me,

Kwon Taek Joo wiped blood from his face, seething with rage at the man who had used him as a shield before being shot dead. And Vasily, lying on the dashboard with a bullet through his skull, was no better off. But amidst the chaos and danger, Kwon Taek Joo remained calm and in control.

The drenched driver continued to steer the sedan without resisting, afraid of what might happen if he did. Kwon Taek Joo wrapped his arms around the driver's neck from behind and directed their movements.

The problem was that no matter how hard they drove, they couldn't reach the main road. The snipers were still lurking in the distance and it was impossible to know if there was a dead end ahead.

Suddenly, something swift and agile darted between buildings - an existence that Kwon Taek Joo had seen not too long ago. Was it a cat? No, it was much larger and heavier. And its movements became even more agile.

Kwon Taek Joo looked around frantically, trying to spot the creature that had disappeared into the darkness. But it was nowhere to be seen. Once could have been an illusion, but not twice. He turned uncomfortably in his seat and scanned his surroundings.

Then, a sedan suddenly emerged from the next alley, accompanied by a loud bang. The car jolted forward and the backseat, where Kwon Taek Joo was sitting, lifted into the air for a brief moment that felt like an eternity. In that split second, everything seemed to freeze as the car flipped over and Kwon Taek Joo's body slammed against the window, showering him in shards of broken glass. As the car spun out of control, Kwon Taek Joo's vision quickly turned upside down before coming to a stop with a thud.

Time seemed to stand still as the silence was abruptly shattered by a sudden noise. Someone was trying to escape by kicking the completely deformed door multiple times. The door gave in and burst open and a figure crawled out, gasping for air.

It was Kwon Taek Joo.

As he tried to stand up, his head spun with pain and disorientation. He had hit his head during the crash and now suffered from a mild concussion.

Even in his dazed state, Kwon Taek Joo knew that he had to act quickly. He stumbled towards the car, his hands shaking as he clung to the metal frame for support. Through the shattered window, he could see blood splattered everywhere - there was no way the driver could have survived.

And then he noticed the other car, motionless and silent. What was going on? Who were these people and why were they trying to kidnap him - or more accurately, Hiro Sakamoto? They must have known about his schedule and background, meaning they were not just ordinary criminals. Did this have something to do with the Russian government or Gazprom holding Japanese officials hostage?

It seems a tad unfair that Kwon Taek Joo was taking the fall for the actions of the real Hiro Sakamoto. It's unfortunate that he has been

caught up in such a chaotic and movie-like scenario right after arriving in Russia, especially after all the hard work he put in to get here

Kwon Taek Joo shook his head in frustration as he made his way to the back of the car to retrieve his luggage. But before he could open the trunk, a harsh voice cut through the air.

"Hands up."

He froze, feeling a cold shiver run down his spine at the sound of guns being reloaded behind him. Any sudden movement could be fatal.

Slowly, with a mix of fear and annoyance, Kwon Taek Joo raised his hands and turned around. The sight of the man holding a gun made his blood run cold - it was the same man he had encountered earlier, the one working with Vasily.

What could he do in this situation? His eyes darted around, searching for a solution, but all he saw was the familiar Colt lying at the man's feet. Without thinking, he slowly started moving towards it.

"Stop right there! Don't try anything stupid."

The man's voice shook with nerves, despite having the upper hand. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but feel a glimmer of hope - maybe this wouldn't be as difficult as he thought. But before he could reach the gun, a sudden grip on his neck jerked him backward.

"Take off your coat. I don't know what else you're hiding inside."

Kwon Taek Joo's heart raced. He couldn't recognize the face, but he knew it must be the sniper who had been after him earlier. Without thinking, Kwon Taek Joo quickly shed his jacket, leaving his right arm free for action.

With lightning speed, he feigned pulling out his arm and instead pulled the whole jacket towards him, using the distraction to grab the sniper's rifle. But as he struggled to gain control of the weapon, an explosion rang out and the sniper groaned in pain. Kwon Taek Joo took advantage of the chaos and ran as fast as he could, leaving the dead body of the sniper behind.

"Get him!"

His pursuers were not far behind, shooting wildly in every direction. Kwon Taek Joo sprinted through alleys and streets, narrowly avoiding bullets that left bullet holes in buildings around him. He had no time to stop and think, only to keep moving and find a way out of this deadly chase.

The advantage of being surrounded by darkness also posed a disadvantage - there was hardly anywhere to hide or take cover. Each time he reached an open space, bullets would narrowly miss him and leave holes in nearby buildings.

As he continued forward, a truck suddenly appeared before him and he rolled over its hood to lessen the impact. Four doors opened simultaneously and armed men emerged from within - even the sniper who had been chasing Kwon Taek Joo was among them. They exchanged words before pointing their guns at him without hesitation.

"...Dammit."

After battling with one opponent, another one appeared and it continued in a never-ending cycle. Kwon Taek Joo had to keep fighting off his attackers. Frustrated and tired, he took a few steps back and started running again, cursing under his breath. He ran for a while until he reached an open space where he saw an abandoned building under construction.

The building had no front or rear walls, only a bare frame remained. The place was littered with construction materials such as cement and steel frames. Kwon Taek Joo knew that he had no time to waste and quickly decided to hide in the building. He descended the dusty stairs and climbed up to the 4th floor, finally catching his breath and allowing his heart rate to slow down. Despite wearing only a thin shirt, he didn't feel cold.

A group of people who had been chasing Kwon Taek Joo eventually arrived under the building. After counting, Kwon Taek Joo realized that there were only four people in the group. This made him wonder about the fifth person. Kwon Taek Joo leaned his back against the wall next to

the stairs and listened carefully to the movements below. He heard someone approaching him secretly and quietly took off his belt, holding it with both hands in preparation for any situation.

Soon, the muzzle of a rifle protruded from the wall as he climbed each step. Not missing that moment, Kwon Taek Joo threw the buckle of the belt horizontally. The belt came off and wrapped around the barrel of the gun again due to the recoil force and returned to Kwon Taek Joo's hand. He immediately grabbed it and tugged on it.

Bang bang bang bang.

Bullets were fired continuously from the rifle upward. Kwon Taek Joo suddenly released one side of the belt he was pulling tight and swung it with all his might. The belt whipped the back of the man's hand like a whip. The man screamed violently and dropped the gun. Kwon Taek Joo kicked the rifle forward that had just fallen to the floor and wrapped his belt around the neck of the man trying to pick it up. The strangled man struggled with his legs.

"Ugh!"

Kwon Taek Joo put more effort into tightening the belt. The man's body trembled and then went limp. When Kwon Taek Joo loosened his grip, the man fell to his knees. Kwon Taek Joo hurled a kick and the man collapsed onto the ground.

Footsteps echoed from downstairs. It seemed like a whole group of people were pouring in after hearing the gunshots earlier. The gun was lying in a position facing the stairs. If he doesn't pick it up in time, Kwon Taek Joo won't be able to shoot back and he will become a dead man. He couldn't fight off an armed group with just bare hands.

Kwon Taek Joo inhaled another deep breath and quickly moved to the other side. The group had almost climbed the stairs when he picked up the rifle that had fallen on the floor. When one of the men spotted Kwon Taek Joo from the front, the supposed leader signaled to raise their guns.

But Kwon Taek Joo pulled the trigger first. Gunshots rang out one after another, two men fell down screaming in despair. The bullets fired from

the other two's guns which accidentally hit the ceiling.

Without a second thought, Kwon Taek Joo discarded his rifle, which now only held an empty magazine, and moved forward. Two more names had been taken care of; he mentally calculated the remaining targets and kept a watchful eye on the area below.

Suddenly, he lifted his head up. Something else had immediately caught his attention. But when Kwon Taek Joo turned back to look, there was no one there. Why did he keep seeing these insignificant things? Perhaps it was due to the stress weighing heavily on him, as his breaths were louder than usual. He also couldn't shake that annoying sixth sense.

Once again, Kwon Taek Joo stood up and gazed across at the building in front of him. The distance was too great, making the figure on the rooftop seem blurry and indistinct. He strained his eyes to get a better look, but the hulking silhouette quickly vanished from his view.

As he mulled over these thoughts at the wrong time, he suddenly found himself under attack from below. Bullets whizzed through the air, turning the spot where he had just been standing into a cloud of dust. Kwon Taek Joo frantically dodged the gunfire while searching for signs of his assailant.

The remaining two attackers had formulated a plan. One of them leapt into the building while the other raised his gun and aimed it towards Kwon Taek Joo. Desperately looking around for a way to fight back, he realized there was nowhere to hide and no weapon within reach.

Just as he thought all hope was lost, a gunshot rang out from below. Kwon Taek Joo froze, straining his ears to listen for any further sounds. In an instant, a blood-curdling scream pierced through the air.

"HELP!"

Or perhaps it was more of a roar than a cry for help. It didn't sound very far away... maybe somewhere just below him. Kwon Taek Joo waited anxiously, but there were no further sounds. He cautiously peered outside the building to assess the situation. The man who had been waiting outside also appeared bewildered by the sudden gunshots and

screams. As soon as he spotted Kwon Taek Joo, he raised his gun and fired.

Instinctively, Kwon Taek Joo leapt out of the way to avoid the bullet. He had no idea what was happening. But soon enough, even the man outside had entered the building. Kwon Taek Joo could hear leisurely footsteps ascending the stairs, drawing closer and closer until they reached the fourth floor.

With no other options left, he reached for something on his sleeve and yanked it off. A button detached from his clothing, revealing a long thin string attached to it with a small mechanical sound.

It was a mini bomb. Kwon Taek Joo only had one chance to use it, and he hoped it would be enough to end this crisis.

But that person didn't appear for quite a while. The surrounding was coated in silence as if Kwon Taek Joo was the only person in the building. He couldn't even hear his breathing, let alone the footsteps that were chasing him.

What happened?

Was the person hiding somewhere and waiting for Kwon Taek Joo to make the first move? Kwon Taek Joo peered out from the corner, looking around at the clearing. There was not a single person in sight. Unanswered questions began to flood Kwon Taek Joo 's mind.

The silence was shattered when something shot out right next to his face. Kwon Taek Joo spun around in that direction, stiffened and was unable to move. What was being stretched out was a human arm.

And the person hanging from the end of his arm was the man who rushed into the building earlier. Kwon Taek Joo could only recognize his identity based on the outfit he was wearing, because his face was being squeezed by that large hand. More precisely, long, straight fingers were stuck in that man's eyeballs. The man was pushed out of the building almost floating because his fingers had gone through his eyes and got stuck in his eye sockets. His legs trembled in the air.

"Ah ah... ugh...cough..."

A wheezing groan came from the man's mouth. Kwon Taek Joo's eyebrows furrowed. His body felt frozen. He didn't dare turn his head to see who that monster-like hand belonged to. This was not a matter of courage but of instinctive refusal. He didn't even dare to breathe.

The owner of the monster-like arm did not prolong the situation any longer. He shook off the man hanging on his finger like he was removing a strand of hair stuck to his body. Without the slightest hesitation. The man kept falling. A thud rang out from under the building.

The last man standing was Kwon Taek Joo. Well, scratch that, there was that unidentified murderer hanging around.

Kwon Taek Joo could tell without looking back that he was within range where the stranger could grab him simply by extending his arms. He could feel those predatory eyes slide down his hidden form like a hungry animal looking for prey. Kwon Taek Joo firmly believed that the disappearing form he had seen since the start of his kidnapping belonged to this person.

Kwon Taek Joo squeezed his eyes shut and then slowly opened them, trying to regain his composure. His senses began to awaken, one by one. Finally, he could perceive the towering shadow that loomed above him. The pungent scent hit his nose, numbing it with its cold energy that could suppress all air currents.

With clenched fists, Kwon Taek Joo knew he had to act fast. He couldn't let this skilled killer get close enough to detonate the bomb, or else his limbs would be ripped apart. But at the moment, he had a more pressing concern - ensuring his own head stayed attached to his body. With determination in his heart, Kwon Taek Joo turned around.

But before he could do anything, the hand holding the bomb was grabbed and suddenly everything was upside down. The bomb slipped out of his hand and flew away as he braced himself for impact. But instead of pain and destruction, there was only a loud explosion from under the building. The heat enveloped him as his last defense crumbled.

Kwon Taek Joo's head hit the rough cement floor and all he saw were a pair of long, straight legs wearing crocodile leather shoes with a pointed toe - something he had only seen in magazines. Its luxurious appearance reminded him of a crocodile's smooth skin, making it even more memorable.

A luxury item like this was not fitting for a murderer's feet.

His first words were:

"You got something dirty on your clothes. Don't mind taking it off?"

Surprisingly, his voice was not as deep and intimidating as Kwon Taek Joo had expected; he seemed quite young. But what was he asking to be taken off? The only thing that could be considered dirty was the hand that had just stabbed someone else's eye.

A vague idea crossed Kwon Taek Joo's mind, but he pushed it away. If this bastard took away even the remaining shirt, he would freeze to death before being killed by him.

However, it seemed that the young man was not a patient one. While Kwon Taek Joo continued to feign ignorance, an object with a familiar texture pressed against his head - a Colt revolver.

"Damn it."

Kwon Taek Joo cursed under his breath and began to unbutton his shirt. With his right arm still firmly gripped by the young man, he could only use his left hand. The new fabric was stiff, making it difficult for him to unbutton even the second button. Just when he thought he was making progress, the young man suddenly grabbed the back of his shirt and ripped it open. The buttons flew off and hit Kwon Taek Joo on the chin and cheek with great force. Something cold replaced his hand and wrapped around his wrist as he pulled away - handcuffs. The other end of the handcuffs was attached to an iron bar nearby, leaving Kwon Taek Joo's head still resting on the floor.

The young man moved leisurely and slowly, casting a long shadow over Kwon Taek Joo's body. When he finally stopped moving, Kwon Taek Joo

saw that his now ruined shirt was stained with blood and other bodily fluids.

Next he took a deep breath and exhaled longer. Looks like he's smoking or something. With his slowing breathing, the delicate scent emanating from him became even more intense.

He then heard the young man take a deep breath before exhaling longer than usual - perhaps he was smoking something. With each breath, the unique scent emanating from him became even more intense. It was not the usual smell of nicotine; it was darker, deeper, and spicier. Kwon Taek Joo could almost feel the moisture in that scent. Suddenly, something fell into his inverted vision - the tip of a handmade cigar left behind after being smoked.

As soon as the young man finished smoking, he turned around and left without a word. His straight legs walked away slowly and gradually, showing no intention of retrieving the handcuffs. He was quite tall, and it took a while for Kwon Taek Joo to see the back of his head before he disappeared down the stairs.

Only when the mysterious man's presence completely vanished could Kwon Taek Joo finally let out a breath. His whole body had become weak and feeble. Even his goosebumps had retreated as if his skin was freezing and cracking from the cold wind blowing against it. "Damn it," Kwon Taek Joo cursed again, frustrated with himself as he lay on the floor.

Before long, the sound of a familiar siren reached his ears from afar, gradually getting closer.

It was the sound of a police car approaching.

## **Chapter 1.6 – New Mission: Cohiba Behike Limited Edition**

Kwon Taek Joo was detained at the police station for a long time. A policeman passing by gave him a thick blanket. He didn't know when it was washed last, but a musty smell hit his nose. And despite the heater being switched on, the coldness still filled the room. Kwon Taek Joo had no choice but to cover himself with something.

So he cocooned himself in the blanket and peered down at his throbbing wrist, which had just been bandaged. The murderer's fingerprints were still there.

While receiving first aid, Kwon Taek Joo was not aware of his dislocated wrist until the medical staff noticed it. He laughed to himself as he struggled to move his injured hand that had been bandaged.

It was a bewildering and unexpected turn of events - being kidnapped and then saved by a stranger who disappeared just as quickly. He couldn't even say if he was truly "saved" considering the state of his now injured wrist and the danger he was in. If the police hadn't arrived on time, he could have ended up frozen to death.

Was that man even human? How could he break a grown man's wrist with just a firm grip? Kwon Taek Joo prided himself on his strong muscles, but even his strength paled in comparison to this mysterious savior.

Just as Kwon Taek Joo was lost in thought, the person in charge returned and took a seat, causing the old chair to creak. He spoke of the incident as if it were a battle due to the large sum of money involved - 10 trillion won. Despite being a civil servant, his eyes lit up at the mention of such immense profits. Kwon Taek Joo remained silent and only glanced discontentedly at the clock on the wall, eager to return to his hotel.

Finally, the official calmed down and expressed his hopes that this incident would not create any tension between Russia and Korea. He promised to investigate and find out who was behind the attack. With that, Kwon Taek Joo was allowed to leave by another superior who was heading out for dinner.

"My baggage..."

"Oh, you mean the bag in their car? If that's the case, I would have brought it over for you. I checked to make sure there were no bombs or tracking devices inside. You don't need to thank me for these small things."

It seems like I should thank you after all.

Kwon Taek Joo nodded and rose from his seat. Just as the police officer had mentioned, a bag was placed right in front of the door. Kwon Taek Joo quickly snatched it up and left the office. He descended the stairs, trying to find his way back to the hotel, with the persistent police officer following closely behind him. Kwon Taek Joo tried to ignore him, thinking he just happened to be heading in the same direction. However, the officer continued to follow at a safe distance. Eventually, Kwon Taek Joo stopped walking and turned around.

"Something wrong? "

The officer responded calmly, "You were targeted once before, and there's no guarantee it won't happen again. Now that their accomplice is dead, they might seek even more revenge. So I'll take you back to your hotel safely."

Then, as if it was his habit, he added, "You don't have to thank me."

But of course, I still should thank you.

The policeman led the way without waiting for confirmation from Kwon Taek Joo and said, "This way." Unnecessary kindness was nothing but a nuisance, but the current Kwon Taek Joo was going by Hiro Sakamoto - a civilian who had been suddenly kidnapped and whose life had been threatened. He had no reason to refuse protection from public authorities, so he reluctantly accepted the officer's offer of goodwill.

In the parking lot there was a Volga with paint peeling off one side and dented in many places, looking like it was at least 15 years old and been through hell. Kwon Taek Joo took out a decent set of clothes from his bag and put them on. The police officer struggled to pry open the damaged trunk and managed to push Kwon Taek Joo's bag inside, then he made himself comfortable in the driver's seat. Switching on the ignition, the old car body vibrated to life.

Kwon Taek Joo hesitated before deciding to sit in the back seat of the car. He knew that a little disrespect wouldn't kill him, but he also knew that Japanese people valued politeness and avoiding inconvenience. After sighing as if he were dying, he finally opened the passenger door.

As he accidentally sat down and put his hand under his butt, Kwon Taek Joo felt something spreading underneath and pulled out a sock. The police officer quickly grabbed it and threw it back into the mess of bread crumbs, paper cups, and adult magazines strewn across the dashboard.

"I thought you only worked with paperwork, but I guess you're also into sports?" the officer remarked, quickly trying to cover his embarrassment.

It was clear that he had noticed Kwon Taek Joo's toned body from working manual labor instead of being desk-bound all day. He shrugged and said that physical strength was important for sitting for long periods of time. Even as they spoke, Kwon Taek Joo's ears still felt hot and itchy.

After some time passed and they still hadn't left the police station due to a problem with the rear wheel that needed replacing, Kwon Taek Joo considered taking a taxi home. However, the officer insisted on driving him home for safety reasons regarding the ongoing investigation. Finally, after a new tire was replaced, they were able to leave the station.

"Go back to your hotel, try not to think about anything and just rest. If you can't sleep, have a glass of vodka; it helps sometimes. We will make sure to properly punish those responsible for causing you trouble," the officer reassured Kwon Taek Joo.

But then, he suddenly tilted his head in confusion.

"What did you say earlier? About another person at the scene besides the deceased wearing luxury cowhide shoes? And how it smelled bad? That person gouged out the eyes of another and caused them to fall off the building, right?"

During his time at the police station, Kwon Taek Joo had repeatedly told the officers what he saw at the scene. However, it seemed like they didn't pay much attention as the officer in charge couldn't remember any of it accurately. It felt as though everything he said was just empty words. But then again, Kwon Taek Joo wasn't expecting much from the start.

"Not cow leather shoes but crocodile leather."

"Maybe it's just its shape like that. Crocodile-style cowhide shoes"

"Definitely crocodile leather, I'm not wrong. I don't remember the exact brand but the price must be at least 250,000 rubles. Dark brown color, size from US 13 to 14. good condition as if it was just taken out of the box. That means the shoes haven't been used for long or they were recently purchased. That means the person must be quite wealthy."

Kwon Taek Joo angrily tried to explain but realized he had revealed too much. Before he knew it, the police officer threw a surprised look at him. Kwon Taek Joo coughed, averting his gaze before adding how it was a product he had been hoping to buy.

Although not an entirely unreasonable statement, the policeman still couldn't take his eyes off him, looking at him suspiciously before laughing.

"Ok, fine. Let's call it crocodile skin.

His words sounded like he was trying to come to a compromise with all of his generosity. Kwon Taek Joo felt uncomfortable and decided to change his shirt. It seemed that unnecessary things were causing him to become more difficult. Even though he tried to remain calm, he couldn't shake the discomfort. If he continued to suppress his anger, it would eventually explode.

The police car stopped suddenly, bringing Kwon Taek Joo back to reality. He couldn't hold it in anymore and spoke up.

"Not only is it not a stinky smell, but it also smells like something burning. It's not just a regular cigarette, it's more like a hand-rolled cigar."

"Yeah, I'll take note of that too.

He replied absentmindedly. For some reason, the police officer didn't seem concerned about the murderer who had boldly appeared in the middle of the city; instead, he seemed very interested in Japanese women. Along the way, he kept asking questions about whether or not they served their husbands like a boss and if their kimono sashes were mats they could lay on.

Kwon Taek Joo was sure this Russian policeman would never catch the murderer.

After enduring what felt like an eternity, they finally arrived at a luxurious hotel.

"Here we are. We don't know when they'll try to target you again, so it's best for you to change locations if possible. If you need a personal bodyguard, you can contact me privately. I'll do my best to help you out. Don't worry about paying for anything now; just buy me some wine later as a thank you."

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't even muster up a fake smile anymore. He used all his energy to force a stiff grin.

"I'll think about it. Today has been quite eventful already."

"Don't worry about it; it's just Russian hospitality. No need to thank me."

Why did he keep saying that?

Kwon Taek Joo nodded and quickly left, feeling creeped out by the officer's invitation to drink together.

He walked into the lobby where a porter took his bag from his hand. The hotel was less than an hour away from the airport, but due to the

flight delay, kidnapping, and investigation, he arrived half a day later than expected. Kwon Taek Joo was completely exhausted as he slowly made his way to the reception desk.

"Welcome"

The employee skipped the customary greeting and silently took his passport and credit card. They checked the information quickly and handed him his room key.

Kwon Taek Joo intended to go straight to his assigned room but hesitated. After a moment of thought, he turned back to ask.

"Is there a shop nearby that sells handmade cigars?"

"We have handmade cigars available at our hotel shop. We offer a wide variety of products so you can find one that suits your taste perfectly. Just come back here; I'll give you a tour of our facilities."

The employee pulled out a catalog and pointed in the direction of the shop. Even though he was exhausted and just wanted to rest, he couldn't shake this feeling of unease. It was better to confirm a few things before his real mission began; once it did, he wouldn't have time for anything else.

Kwon Taek Joo quickly found the shop selling handmade cigars. The beautiful exterior and high-quality products displayed in the window immediately caught his eye. Without hesitation, he walked inside.

"Are you looking for anything in particular?"

"Yes. There's one I remember by its scent but not the brand."

Kwon Taek Joo surveyed the shop with a focussed expression. The employee slightly arched his dark eyebrows and walked out to the display counter.

"Cuban cigars are renowned for being the best in the world. Although there are various brands, most of the cigars found here are of Cuban origin. It's worth noting that 100% handmade cigars are not necessarily produced on a small scale. The cigar in front of you is 'Macanudo',

which is the top-selling cigar in the United States. Being a popular choice, it is perfect for beginners due to its mild flavor".

Ha, it seems like Kwon Taek Joo was being considered a beginner. He looked at the 'Macanudo' the seller gave him.

"How much does this cost?"

"It costs \$7 a cigarette. It's very affordable."

"So that's probably not it."

He returned the cigar. The employee placed it on the shelf and inquired about it again.

"Hmm.. could you tell more about the Cigar you're looking for?"

He smiled curiously. It seemed that the salesman was very interested in the challenge of finding a specific cigar variety among the dozens or hundreds of options, based solely on the scents he encountered.

It was like a puzzle that was associated with the pride of experts.

"That's what someone wearing \$4k worth of shoes would smoke."

"Considering the fact shoes are quite an consumer item so it seems the person is quite wealthy. Such people usually look for the highest quality in everything. All the products here are good, but there are some that are exceptional. This masterpiece is called 'Romeo and Julieta'. Its flavor is spicy and rich. You can also feel the smell of damp earth, mushroom and sweet honey."

"While it did smell moist, it wasn't earthy or mushroomy. And I picked up some sweetness but it was far from that of Honey,"

"Then, it wouldn't be El Rey del Mundo if it didn't smell earthy. Did you smell burnt wood? What about leather?"

"Yes. I think it's closer to the smell of burning wood. It didn't smell like leather"

"Was that smell very strong?"

"Umm... not very strong."

"Then it wouldn't be a Montecristo, but what about Bodhi? Was the whole thing a long cylinder? Or is the head and feet both pointed?"

"All I saw was the residue left after smoking. It was blunt. It also had an aromatic scent.

"Ah, if so, is it really this one?"

The employee smiled gleefully and took out a box of cigars. Although Kwon Taek Joo did not specifically ask, the seller explained in detail.

"It's called Cohiba Behike. Its characteristics are a deep and delicate scent. It has an Aroma that is both strong and sweet, but also subtle enough to create a wonderful overall flavor. Do you want to try?"

Kwon Taek Joo nodded silently. The seller lit 'Cohiba Behike' with a specialized cigar lighter. Unlike a regular cigarette, the tip of a cigar burned slowly as if a fallen leaf had just caught fire. The ash did not fall to the floor but remains sticky and retains its shape.

Kwon Taek Joo actually enjoyed the aroma of the cigar filling his mouth. Kwon Taek Joo could even smell the smoke when looking at the burning cigar. But in the end he shook his head.

"It's similar, but a little different."

"How is it different?"

"The overall feeling is quite similar. But the smell of the cigar I smelled at that time was a bit stronger and the Aroma fragrance seemed more intense. Furthermore, this cigar does not smell damp."

"If you smelled a wet cigar, it's because the person might have dipped it into a little bit of Cognac little before lighting it. The distinct flavor of the cognac blends well with the aroma of the cigar."

The salesman signaled Kwon Taek Joo to wait a moment and then went inside. A moment later he returned with a glass of wine in his hand, which appeared to be cognac. He used a knife to cut off the burning end of the cigar and poured cognac on it, then lit it again and gave it to Kwon Taek Joo.

"How was it this time?"

"It's more similar. But there's still something different."

The salesperson's face looked confused by the disappointing response. He muttered to himself while stroking his wrinkled eyebrows like a habit.

"Similar scent means it's the same cigar, but it's much darker and stronger than this... Then I can only think of one."

"What is that?"

Kwon Taek Joo asked again. The salesman rubbed his chin and pondered a bit more before opening his mouth.

"Cohiba cigars are typically made by brewing the main ingredient, tobacco leaves, twice. However, a few years ago, a limited edition 'Cohiba Behike' was produced and sold to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the birth of Cohiba cigars. This special cigar is said to be made by aging the highest quality tobacco leaves three times, while keeping them in the right humidity and temperature to produce the best flavor. Once completed, it is stored in a cigar box and aged for 6 years to further enhance the flavor. Unfortunately, this cigar is only sold in Spain and is limited to 4 thousand packs. Many cigar enthusiasts have tried to get their hands on it, but due to its limited edition status, it is quite expensive, priced at \$400 per cigar. The unique characteristic of this limited edition product is that it has a stronger aroma than regular Cohiba products, with a richer scent".

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Kwon Taek Joo's eyebrows furrowed.

So he wears shoes that cost four thousand dollars, and smokes four hundred dollars cigars. Such a wealthy environment must have turned him into a monster."

"Do you have any in store?"

"I wish I could see it with my own eyes."

The salesman smiled helplessly. Regardless, thanks to the salesman, Kwon Taek Joo's answers were resolved. He took out a few bills and

held them out with the intention of giving a reward (tip). Doing the math, three \$10 bills seem to be enough.

"You don't have to do that. You didn't even find the product you wanted."

"Then I'll take this. I must have bothered you, but thank you."

Kwon Taek Joo picked up a \$20 handmade cigar nearby and left the store. There are only four thousand packs of 'Cohiba Behike' in the world.

He has quite the taste for a crazy lunatic.

## **Chapter 1.7 – New Mission: Face to Face**

Kwon Taek Joo strode into the room and disregarded the bag sitting before him. He simply stripped off his clothes and headed to the bathroom, turning on the shower and letting the hot water cascade over his head. As he stood motionless under the soothing heat, he let out a deep breath and leaned against the wall, taking a moment to gather his thoughts.

He agreed with the police's theory that the kidnapping upon his arrival in Russia was linked to those opposing the energy facility contract. That much was clear. But what puzzled him was the presence of crocodile leather shoes at the scene. Who was that person, and what was their intention? They had ultimately helped him, but Kwon Taek Joo couldn't be sure if they were truly an ally or not. Did they never have any plans to harm him, or were they simply unable to due to the sudden arrival of the police?

Just thinking about them being so close behind him made him feel suffocated. It was as if there was a dangerous predator lurking nearby, ready to attack at any moment. Kwon Taek Joo felt completely defenseless and vulnerable in this barbaric world. It was a new experience for him to not even consider fighting back. Despite his efforts to survive, he was easily overpowered.

Pointed shoes, the scent of cigars, a calm demeanor masking violent tendencies - it all made Kwon Taek Joo shudder. The attacker didn't just overpower their victims; they seemed to relish instilling fear and slowly destroying their prey.

Shaking his head, Kwon Taek Joo forced himself to push away these haunting memories. If they were unpleasant, it was best to forget them quickly.

Finishing his shower as quickly as possible, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't stand the discomfort from the bandage around his arm any longer.

Without much thought, he removed the wet bandage, wincing slightly at the pain in his wrist.

He then proceeded to peel off the artificial skin covering his face, revealing his refreshed appearance. After quickly washing his face and hair, he put on a robe and stepped out of the bathroom.

Opening his bag, Kwon Taek Joo noticed that it had been jostled around like himself, with various items scattered inside. Among the pile of clothes were razors, game consoles, watches, tablets, cameras - all high-end gadgets. He lined them up and took out a small screwdriver from his toolbox before starting to disassemble each item. In no time, he had brand new devices.

Using a small device that could connect to his phone, he accessed a secure messaging application through a laptop connected to the hotel's communication network. This high-tech device changed IP addresses periodically, making it difficult for anyone to eavesdrop or hack into their conversation. Logging into the application, Kwon Taek Joo was immediately connected to headquarters where Chief Lim appeared on the screen with a scowl.

"You're late," he scolded him.

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but complain back.

"If you wanted me to stay incognito, shouldn't you have chosen someone more subtle?

"You have to be valuable enough to be kidnapped to meet high-ranking people

."

"It seems like you knew this was going to happen, huh?"

"I just figured it could happen. Because you are an excellent agent, even if you are in danger, I believe you will survive."

Prick.

What happened? Apparently you said Gazprom would pick me up."

"Ah, yes

. That party contacted me and said they would send someone to the airport."

"Did you really receive contact from Gazprom?"

"What are you trying to say? His identity was almost compromised. They waited for a long time, then claimed he didn't show up and immediately contacted the Itochu Group. I intercepted the call and blocked it. I heard your flight was delayed due to chaos on the plane? It seems there was an issue with the Gazprom staff who were supposed to pick him up from the airport. I also heard that an Asian man who arrived in Russia before you took on the identity of Hiro Sakamoto. It wasn't until later that we realized he was not actually Hiro Sakamoto. In the meantime, he was kidnapped by a fake employee."

Kwon Taek Joo pieced together the events that had happened on the plane - a drunk Russian man causing trouble and Kwon Taek Joo arriving late to meet Vasily, who turned out to be a false Gazprom representative.

"But this all took longer than expected, right?"

"There was a minor disturbance on the plane," Kwon Taek Joo replied.

"Did another drunk person cause trouble again?" he asked.

"How did you know that?" Kwon Taek Joo asked, surprised.

He remembered his encounter with Vasily and responded, "Because it's the same group, right?"

Frustration and anger bubbled up inside Kwon Taek Joo as he clenched his fists, but then he winced as pain shot through his wrist.

He glanced down at his arm, where a handprint bruise still remained from when the killer had grabbed him. The shame and embarrassment he had tried to push away resurfaced once again. He knew he had to expose the killer's true identity or else he would have to live with these feelings of defeat forever.

Kwon Taek Joo confided in Chief Lim about the murderer and his plan to use headquarters' resources to gather information. However, Chief Lim responded with disappointment.

"Let's think about this. If you didn't see his face, we have no way of confirming his identity. Our research shows that 4 thousand packs of cigars were sold, which means there could be up to 4 thousand buyers. Keeping track of all of them would take a lot of time and effort. Plus, the shoes he wore were not rare or limited edition."

Kwon Taek Joo opened his mouth to speak but then closed it again. He couldn't argue with Chief Lim's logic.

"It's only the first day and you're already facing so many challenges," Chief Lim commented, trying to console him.

Ignoring Chief Lim's attempt at comfort, Kwon Taek Joo buried his head in his hands in frustration. After observing him for a moment, Chief Lim leaned closer and spoke again.

"No matter how much you prefer to work alone, if you're struggling from the very beginning, how can I trust you in this unfamiliar place? I will be constantly worried about you."

"Why are you suddenly saying such discouraging things?" Kwon Taek Joo groaned.

"I've found someone who can help you."

"You never mentioned that before."

Kwon Taek Joo furrowed his brow. This mission was supposed to be carried out by himself alone, and yet now he was being informed of a partner at the last minute. It felt sneaky and underhanded. As he glared at the screen, Chief Lim continued talking without seeming to notice.

"This person not only knows the lay of the land, but also has an understanding of power dynamics and finances in that area. They will be a valuable asset. Based on the current situation, I believe they will contact you early the day after tomorrow. When I have a chance, I'll send you a photo of them so you can confirm their identity."

With a sly grin, he revealed his plans and then suddenly exclaimed, "Oh!" as if just remembering something.

"Since you'll be meeting with the people involved in the contract tomorrow, let's go over the details of the LNG equipment project."

The communication was cut off before Kwon Taek Joo could speak. A file arrived from Chief Lim. Kwon Taek Joo opened it with a disgruntled expression. Soon after, details of the contract signed between Russia and Japan and documents related to the construction of the LNG facility appeared in the form of a 527 page PDF file.

Kwon Taek Joo stared intently at the pile of documents filled with tiny words and then suddenly turned his head.

The soft bed without a single wrinkle was seducing him. But he had no other choice.

Kwon Taek Joo let out a sigh that made his shoulders droop and stood up. He opened the minibar and took out beer. drank half the can, then returned to the table. He took a deep breath and sat down. Finally, his academic skills become useful after a long time.

Kwon Taek Joo was sitting in the main restaurant looking extremely depressed. Key Russian and Japanese figures were expected to join him for lunch. Fortunately, the Japanese officials were not suspicious of him because he was just a lower-level employee. All he had to do was finish today's lunch safely and attend the celebration party that would be held in a few days. Once he left the gathering of Russian political and business tycoons, his role as Hiro Sakamoto would end.

Suddenly, Kwon Taek Joo looked at the clock. Although lunch was scheduled for noon, it was already past 12 and the Gazprom representative had not yet arrived. Those who arrived on time were forced to wait for about 30 minutes. The person in charge of Gazprom called the company several times to confirm. Kwon Taek Joo found this scene pitiful.

"... Mr. Sakamoto?"

Kwon Taek Joo was so distracted by that scene that he even missed a question from a Russian official.

"Yes? Ah, sorry. Could you say that again"

"I heard you ran into some bad luck on your arrival. Are you okay now?"

"Fortunately, the Russian police arrived just in time and made sure I was safe. One of the officers even kindly drove me to my hotel."

"I don't know how to apologize for what happened. I'm truly sorry for putting you through something like that."

"There's no need for you to apologize. It was my fault for not paying closer attention. I feel terrible about the whole situation."

Kwon Taek Joo responded courteously, but his eyes showed no remorse. He assured the person that everything was fine, but they continued to apologize. Even the Japanese delegation joined in on the apology, bowing their heads in unison and taking responsibility for scaring him.

Amidst the chaos of apologies, Kwon Taek Joo suddenly felt uncomfortable and excused himself with a wry smile, pretending to wash his hands before leaving the room. As soon as he closed the door, he let out a deep sigh and loosened his necktie.

However, his moment of peace was interrupted when he heard the CEO of Gazprom making an angry phone call in the hallway.

"Where is the chairman? Has he departed? Is he not coming?"

The patience until now suddenly melted into soap bubbles. Not long after, the employee broke out in his suppressed anger.

"Representative? What are you talking about? Which representative is coming??"

Exasperated by his lack of patience, Kwon Taek Joo strolled towards the bathroom, checking for any suspicious signs along the way. Once inside, he washed his hands and reflected on his recent activities - studying for the contract negotiations and greeting the Japanese delegation at the airport.

Despite cramming for the past two days, he was able to follow along with conversations thanks to reading previous contract documents. Just then, he heard someone talking outside the bathroom door. The voice sounded familiar but he couldn't quite place it until it spoke again from directly behind him.

“..No, I'm here, but it'll probably be boring.”

That sounded familiar, like something he's heard before.

It was a recent memory, but not too old. Kwon Taek Joo didn't hear it often enough to know it well, but the moment was so powerful it left an imprint on his mind. Kwon Taek Joo tried to remember where he heard it as the voice rang out again, directly behind him. ”

“Let's get one thing straight. If you're here to support me, what happened last time is enough.”

Kwon Taek Joo didn't need to look over to know...

It was him.

All of Kwon Taek Joo's senses sharpened at once when this realization fell upon him. His sense of smell was the first to awaken - the strong scent of wet leaves and burning cigar filled the air.

Cohiba Behike.

The smell was almost tangible, even though the other man hasn't lit a single cigar.

As the voice continued talking on the phone,

Kwon Taek Joo suddenly felt eyes on him. He didn't turn around or look in the mirror, but he knew someone was watching him.

A chill ran down his spine.

“That's enough... I know. Alright, I will call you later.”

The tone almost seemed longer than before. The call ended and the gaze became even more intense. Any stronger and Kwon Taek Joo's clothes would have melted off him.

Now they were alone in the closed bathroom. The person never took his gaze off his back as Kwon Taek Joo washed his hands, looking down and not recognizing himself in the mirror. The tension in the room grew thick as time passed in a painfully slow manner.

How long has it been? The man's footsteps start up again and the person walked over to the sink next to Kwon Taek Joo. Water started pouring with a click of a button and the man began to gently rub his hands together, intensifying the smell of Cohiba and bringing back memories of their first encounter.

Kwon Taek Joo inhaled, trying to act calmly by turning off the water tap and drying his hands with a towel he had prepared.

Why did the killer have to show up now of all times?

It couldn't just be a coincidence.

Considering their economic situations, it was not impossible for them to end up in the same place by chance. The only problem is that they're now locked in a small space together. Kwon Taek Joo could feel the weight of this situation and searched his brain to think of a way to escape..

Kwon Taek Joo's hand trembled as he tossed the wet towel into the trash, trying to contain his anger. But before he could even take a step away, a sudden word was hurled at him, catching him off guard and causing him to choke.

"Not even a hello to me? But I'm sure this isn't our first meeting."

The man's voice dripped with false politeness.

"I never knew Japanese people could be so rude", the man continued in a supposedly offended tone.

Kwon Taek Joo doesn't turn around or respond - he's afraid of what might happen if he acts too hastily. Even if something terrible happened here to him. It would be too late once someone found out.

The man continued in a sarcastic tone, "I thought Samurai had better manners."

No further words were exchanged as Kwon Taek Joo kept his back turned, channeling all of his senses into a controlled exit. The door slammed shut behind him, cutting off any lingering presence of the other man. Finally alone, Kwon Taek Joo let out a shaky breath, feeling his heart racing in his chest. This level of stress was unfamiliar to him, a foreign sensation that consumed him without warning. He couldn't remember the last time he had felt this on edge.

## Chapter 1.8 – New Mission: Zhenya

Kwon Taek Joo resisted the urge to sprint away from the threatening figure he had left behind as he fumbled for his phone, a strange mix of fear and annoyance coursing through him. Hiro Sakamoto's phone was in his outer pocket, so the current vibration must be coming from the phone used to contact headquarters.

His colleague, Manager Lim, had promised to send a photo of them participating in the campaign together. Kwon Taek Joo reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone, finding the promised photo from Chief Lim waiting for him.

It takes about 2 or 3 seconds for the display device to load the image on the screen. 1 second, 2 seconds, 3 seconds. Kwon Taek Joo clicked on the 'Download completed.'

The awaited photo quickly filled the screen.

"Hmm? It's me."

Kwon Taek Joo almost dropped the phone to the ground, because someone's voice suddenly interrupted.

Rolling his eyes, Kwon Taek Joo braced himself as a looming shadow approached from behind. The woody scent that filled the air paralyzed his senses, making it clear who this intimidating figure belonged to even before he turned around.

The Gazprom representatives never showed up. After waiting and socializing for a while, the group dispersed and the Japanese delegation retired to their rooms. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't even bring himself to enter his own room, instead pacing outside the door for what felt like hours.

Finally, summoning all his courage, he opened the door and immediately locked eyes with the man sitting by the window. The murderous bastard was sitting on the armrest of a chair and looking

out like he was some raring model. The person's presence was overwhelming, with broad shoulders and a strong back exuding power and pressure.

Golden-white hair caught the light brilliantly as they turned their head towards Kwon Taek Joo. Their features were strikingly beautiful but lacked any trace of sympathy or humanity. Meeting their gaze felt like being watched by a predator about to pounce on its prey.

"Just come in already," Zhenya said with an unnerving smile.

"No need to be shy."

As if their roles had suddenly reversed, Kwon Taek Joo cautiously entered the room and tried not to recoil from the offered handshake.

"I'm Zhenya."

Kwon Taek Joo's eyes widened as Zhenya's hand reached out towards him. He couldn't help but think, "Is this the same hand that gouged someone in the eye?"

Kwon Taek Joo's body tensed up as the long white fingers stopped right in front of his chest. Zhenya seemed to be teasing him, swinging his fingers and grinning mischievously.

The overwhelming tension seemed to be dissapated. Dissatisfaction was evident on Kwon Taek Joo's face.

Zhenya chuckled and gently tapped his hand on his side.

"You don't look too happy."

"Why should I be? But if you let me hit you a few times, maybe I'll feel better".

Kwon Taek Joo clenched his jaw, his strength focused in the lower half of his face. Perhaps taking it as a joke, Zhenya simply laughed and ignored the comment.

"So what's your name?"

"You already know it."

"It's really difficult to pronounce. Can I call you something else?"

"If my name is too difficult for you, then don't bother calling me at all,"

Zhenya observed him with a strange glint in his eyes. His lips still curved into a smile. The room fell silent once again. Kwon Taek Joo suddenly felt uncomfortable under such close observation without any means of defense.

A moment later, Zhenya spoke up. "I heard you went to the police station." He broke the silence shamelessly as if everything that happened before had been forgotten. Kwon Taek Joo stared at him but didn't respond. No, he couldn't afford to show any weakness to this man. Intuition told him not to let down his guard.

Zhenya paid no attention and left the table to go to the mini bar. He browsed through the various bottles of liquor on display and selected some whiskey. He sipped from the bottle and shrugged.

"There's no need to be so guarded. I was just helping out a fellow colleague who was in danger."

He said it so casually, as if it were nothing out of the ordinary. Kwon Taek Joo kept a close eye on Zhenya.

"Since when have you been following me?"

"From the very start."

Was he even there at the airport? Did that mean he had intentionally waited for the right moment to make contact with Kwon Taek Joo and then rescued him from his abduction? If so, why didn't he reveal himself at the time?

A mischievous grin tugged at Zhenya's lips, as if he could see right through Kwon Taek Joo's thoughts.

"HQ told me to lay low until today. If you hadn't been captured in such a dramatic way, I wouldn't have had an excuse to step in."

Zhenya chuckled with whiskey-coated lips. The shame that Kwon Taek Joo had been trying to suppress resurfaced once again. The person he

had thought to be a superhuman was actually just his colleague. Kwon Taek Joo's pride took a hit.

"Your first impression was really unforgettable. You even showed me what it was like to poke an eye out of someone."

Kwon Taek Joo clicked his tongue, refusing to feel inferior just because they were partners. They were on the same team, after all. And that simple fact dispelled any lingering fear he had felt towards Zhenya for the first time in his life. Zhenya smirked playfully at the unexpected criticism.

"You're quite the pacifist, huh?"

"I prefer things to be clean and efficient."

"Efficient like shooting or bombing? That sounds boring."

Zhenya shook his head, feigning apathy before tapping his temple with two fingers.

"Think about it. We all hope for a meaningful last breath. But how pointless and unremarkable it would seem if our deaths were simply lumped together as "killed by shooting" in a news headline? It wouldn't make an impact unless we were killed in some dramatic, gruesome way. Isn't that what matters nowadays?"

That's just an excuse. The excuse of a psychopath trying to justify his nefarious behavior. Kwon Taek Joo replied:

"If I ever end up in your hands, please spare me any senseless death."

"Well, that's not an easy request to fulfill, but I'll consider it."

Zhenya paused for a moment, as if pondering something, before speaking again. "Don't worry too much."

"As long as you don't hurt me, I won't hurt you. Believe it or not, I only attack in self defense."

"Are you a pacifist?"

Kwon Taek Joo responded to the sarcastic remark from earlier.

Zhenya laughed and threw his half-empty whiskey bottle towards Kwon Taek Joo. Without hesitation, Kwon Taek Joo put the bottle to his lips. The alcohol burned his throat as he finished it off in one gulp.

Just then, his phone rang from within his jacket pocket.

He set down the empty bottle and retrieved his phone. Once again, a photo had been sent by headquarters. This time, it was a picture of a mysterious-looking Russian man named 'Psych Bogdanov'. "Is this the person we were warned about?" Kwon Taek Joo wondered aloud.

Before he could even process the thought, Zhenya snatched the phone from him.

"I've been told to stay away from that guy".

Zhenya squinted, examined the photo, and then nodded.

"Do you know him?"

"Of course I know him. Quite well actually."

"What kind of person is he?"

"It's best not to get involved with him. Nothing good ever comes from messing with him."

"Could Morgan's death be connected to this man?"

"If you're talking about the former American, Morgan... who knows? It could be one of that crazy guy's schemes or it might have nothing to do with him at all. Don't worry about it. You're not here for revenge. Just focus on our task and let this guy play his own game."

Kwon Taek Joo shook his head while Zhenya chuckled. Even if the man in question really was 'Psych Bogdanov', Kwon Taek Joo would still believe it without hesitation.

If Zhenya was calling this man crazy, then he must truly be an unpredictable man.

In any case, getting involved with this matter wouldn't help and could potentially create more problems. It was best to avoid any collisions for now. Kwon Taek Joo needed to stay focused on his assigned task.

"I've heard you have a good understanding of the political structure and money flow here."

"Of course. If you want, I can give you a detailed list anytime."

Zhenya's confident demeanor didn't seem like just an empty boast. Perhaps it was a good idea to make the most out of having an unwanted partner. The problems that had arisen from day one seemed to be getting resolved smoothly.

Kwon Taek Joo relaxed slightly and decided to give out instructions.

"First of all, I hope you choose individuals who possess knowledge regarding underground weapons transactions, regardless of whether they are investors, actual developers, or businessmen involved in the trade. If you wish to meet 'Anastasia', you must make the first move.

At the mention of "Anastasia

", Zhenya's eyebrows raised slightly, a subtle change that Kwon Taek Joo wouldn't have noticed if he weren't paying close attention.

However, Zhenya simply nodded in understanding and got up from his seat.

"Very well. I'll prepare that for you. Let's meet again tomorrow ."

Kwon Taek Joo followed Zhenya closely, almost as if he intended to chase him out of the room along with his distinct scent. Kwon Taek Joo opened the door for himself.

Zhenya obediently left, but instead of telling him to leave, Kwon Taek Joo bid him farewell with a "See you tomorrow." He closed the door, but it didn't shut completely; a shoe was sticking out through the crack. Kwon Taek Joo looked down curiously before looking back up at Zhenya with an irritated expression.

Zhenya tilted his head and leaned down slightly until their eyes met.

"I cannot wait to rip that mask off and discover the real you"

Zhenya's voice carried a hint of dark amusement.

Kwon Taek Joo frowned and stared at Zhenya, who just grinned and walked away to the other side of the hallway. Kwon Taek Joo watched until the elevator doors shut before finally closing the door behind him.

The elevator swiftly opened its doors again, revealing a man standing inside who made eye contact with Zhenya. This man was standing from behind Zhenya while they rode down to the first floor in silence.

Suddenly, he spoke up.

"What should we do?"

Zhenya glanced at the numbers on the display board as they descended and a thought crossed his mind. A small smirk spread across his usually expressionless face as he replied in a nonchalant tone,

"Blow it all up. Leave no hiding places for it."

Kwon Taek Joo woke up to the sound of the hotel room doorbell. He quickly checked his mask and glanced at the clock. It was only 8 a.m., still early for the scheduled cleaning time. There was no official schedule for the visiting delegation today. Could it be Zhenya? If so, he seemed more diligent than he appeared.

He smoothed out the mask covering his face and stepped out of the door. Before he could ask who it was, a voice spoke from outside.

"Room service."

Kwon Taek Joo opened the door with skepticism but it seemed like he hadn't misheard. A specialized cart stood in the hallway, pushed by a waiter dressed in a hotel uniform who greeted him politely.

Kwon Taek Joo peeked out into the quiet hallway. It was still early and there weren't many people around. The waiter asked, "May I come in?" as he stood right in front of the door.

"I think you have the wrong room."

"No, this is room 911, sir."

"But I didn't order room service."

"Ah, someone else requested it."

Someone else? Could it be that guy?

"It's from a representative of Gazprom."

Kwon Taek Joo laughed, finding his earlier thoughts about that man to be silly. Despite being a colleague, he felt no different from a murderer. What could one expect from someone with that kind of name?

If this was an apology for what happened yesterday, why didn't they just attend the luncheon or send a representative? If Kwon Taek Joo refused, they would probably contact him again. There was no need to draw unnecessary attention with careless mistakes.

He nodded towards the living room and the waiter bowed slightly before pushing the cart inside. The food was placed on the table next to the window and silverware was neatly arranged. The waiter left after asking if there was anything else Kwon Taek Joo needed. He couldn't understand why they were going to such lengths.

All the dishes were covered in foil, but he could smell the Russian borscht, toast, poached eggs, fruit, and coffee. Kwon Taek Joo slowly scanned the table and noticed a card on the note shelf. There was probably a greeting written on it. He glanced down at the content of the card with indifference. There was only one word written there. Four clear letters caught his attention.

BOOM.

Shit.

## **Chapter 1.9 – New Mission: Why Don’t You Remove It?**

Kwon Taek Joo quickly threw the card and sprinted towards the door, not even pausing to assess the situation. He clenched his teeth and used all of his strength to leap up, reaching for the doorknob with his fingertips. Suddenly, there was a loud bang and the air seemed to freeze in place. Kwon Taek Joo was thrown back into the wall behind him as the floor beneath him collapsed. The explosion shattered the front window of the room and destroyed furniture inside. The ceiling shook violently and alarms blared throughout the hotel, causing chaos among guests.

People immediately stopped their activities and looked around in shock. Many thought of terrorism and panicked without anyone telling them to do so. They frantically tried to escape through the narrow emergency exit, pushing and shoving others out of their way. In their extreme fear, they trampled over each other and injured themselves further.

The situation only calmed down once firefighters arrived on scene. After putting out the fire, a team was brought in to remove any remaining explosives. Reporters arrived at the chaotic scene, loudly describing what they saw. The number of injured individuals was surprisingly high compared to the size of the explosion, with most injuries occurring during evacuation rather than directly from the blast itself.

Amidst all this chaos, a man was arguing with medical staff. It turned out it was none other than Kwon Taek Joo, who had sustained serious injuries.

"You may not feel it now due to shock, but you will regret refusing treatment later," one rescue worker said sternly as he looked down at Kwon Taek Joo lying on a stretcher.

Despite his protests that he could take care of himself, Kwon Taek Joo was eventually convinced to seek medical attention.

The stubbornness of Kwon Taek Joo was evident as he continued to insist that he was okay. But upon closer examination, it was clear that he had suffered a laceration on his forehead and some damage to the artificial skin on his chin. The medical staff were firm in their decision to treat him, even if it meant going against his wishes. Kwon Taek Joo begrudgingly accepted the treatment, realizing that it was for the best.

It was absurd. Kwon Taek Joo insisted that he was fine. His forehead was grazed and bleeding lightly, but a simple disinfectant and bandage would do the trick. At most, a few stitches might be needed to stop the bleeding, but it wasn't urgent. The medical staff in front of him remained persistent, though. Who was being stubborn now?

Kwon Taek Joo rubbed his irritated forehead, revealing an unnatural portion of his left chin where the skin had peeled off from the explosion's impact. The medical staff did not overlook this detail.

"Is that area injured too? Let's see."

He waved away the approaching hand of the medical worker. The worker's eyes widened at the sudden reaction, not from being pushed away, but because Kwon Taek Joo's expression had become even more serious. It was clear that he had been affected by the shock of the accident. The worker nodded as if understanding and gently patted Kwon Taek Joo's back before gesturing to a colleague. A member of their team quickly approached them after watching their heated conversation for some time. Together, they urged Kwon Taek Joo onto a stretcher, while he cursed under his breath. What a terrible way to start the day - being gifted a bomb and then dragged around like this.

If they kept dragging him away like this, people would find out that Kwon Taek Joo was not Hiro Sakamoto. There were probably police stationed at the hospital, and any suspicious equipment found there would cause major problems. This was absolutely not an option.

"I'm really okay. Look!"

Kwon Taek Joo tried to demonstrate his vitality with energetic movements, but the medical staff simply laughed and said, "Okay, keep walking like that in front of the doctor." And so he did, looking completely crazy. With so many eyes on him, he couldn't even lash out.

Kwon Taek Joo was reluctantly carted off, but suddenly caught sight of a familiar face in the crowd. He turned to look at them, and just as quickly they disappeared into the mass of people. It seemed like a suspicious action.

Changing his mind, Kwon Taek Joo obediently followed the medical staff's instructions.

As he walked towards the ambulance, the gazes fixed on him seemed to be more clear now. Suddenly, he turned back in that direction again, but the person had once again vanished into the crowd. His heart raced when he saw their face.

It was him. The infamous Psych Bogdanov, a man known as a madman in this country, and Kwon Taek Joo had been warned countless times to avoid encountering him at all costs. Kwon Taek Joo was stunned for a moment before a question formed in his mind: why was he here? What purpose did he have for being here? Or was it just a coincidence that he happened to be passing through at the same time? No, that was too absurd.

The theory that the culprit always shows up at the crime scene made more sense. It wouldn't be surprising if that was the case. But why? Has his identity been exposed?

Kwon Taek Joo weighed his options and came to the conclusion that he needed to leave this place immediately. All of his possessions, including his Colt handgun, were destroyed in the explosion. Even if he ran into Psych now, it wouldn't be wise to confront him. No matter how crazy he was, he wouldn't dare do anything in broad daylight. Kwon Taek Joo calculated his next move and then climbed into an ambulance.

Out of nowhere, Psych Bogdanov suddenly appeared beside Kwon Taek Joo. The agile man who had been blending into the crowd was now wearing a white coat, disguising himself as a medical staff member. He

put on a white mask and confidently walked towards the driver's seat of the ambulance. If things continue as they were, Kwon Taek Joo would end up riding in the same vehicle as him.

Danger alarms blared in Kwon Taek Joo's head.

Without hesitation, Kwon Taek Joo pushed away the impostor and leapt out of the ambulance.

"Hey!"

The medical staff shouted loudly as Psych Bogdanov got out of the driver's seat and onto the road, drawn by the commotion. Kwon Taek Joo locked eyes with him and slowly backed away. Psych also advanced towards him with a fierce expression, the two eyes above his mask glowing brightly.

Kwon Taek Joo gritted his teeth and ran through the crowd of people, causing screams to erupt in all directions. It was part of his strategy. In this situation, drawing attention and being seen by many people was safer for him. Perhaps because he was aware of the public's gaze, Psych Bogdanov couldn't easily chase after Kwon Taek Joo anymore. He hesitated for a moment before disappearing in another direction.

Kwon Taek Joo quickly left the area around the hotel and entered the main street. That psychotic man must have memorized every nook and cranny of this area, so he had to get as far away as possible.

He had been running for a while when suddenly a loud engine noise came from behind him. Turning around, he saw a Jeep speeding towards him. The front windshield was heavily tinted, making it impossible to see inside, but one thing was clear: Psych Bogdanov was sitting in the passenger seat.

Kwon Taek Joo cursed under his breath and immediately turned into a narrow alley that cars couldn't fit through. The Jeep that had been barreling towards him stopped at the entrance of the alley. The backseat door opened and a man dressed in all black stepped out. After receiving a nod from Bogdanov, he lifted up his shirt and started chasing after Kwon Taek Joo. Meanwhile, the Jeep disappeared again

onto the main road. Their plan was to pursue Kwon Taek Joo from behind and cut off his escape route from the front.

Kwon Taek Joo fled in a panic, his mind racing with questions. Why was Psych Bogdanov targeting him? Unless his true identity was discovered, their main target would be Hiro Sakamoto.

Was the man also unhappy with the Russia-Japan agreement?

No matter how hard Kwon Taek Joo tried to analyze the situation, it all seemed too complicated to understand. If their goal was to exert influence by holding someone from the delegation hostage, then why not kidnap someone of higher value than Hiro Sakamoto? On the first day of their trip, he had been the only important figure worth kidnapping but now things had changed.

So, in the end, the person they really wanted was not Hiro Sakamoto but Kwon Taek Joo himself? But why? The doubts and suspicions continued to swirl in his mind, but no definite answer could be reached.

Looking around for a way out, Kwon Taek Joo spotted a spiral staircase leading up and out of the building. He quickly weighed his options: climbing to the rooftop or scaling over to the next building might help him escape this trap. He visualized his route before making a decision.

But his pursuers were relentless. A bullet grazed Kwon Taek Joo's arm as he ran, leaving a scratch on the wall behind him. They seemed to anticipate his every move and began firing shots around the staircase. He considered climbing up to a ventilation hole on the neighboring building, but even that option was shot down - literally.

"..Shit!"

Kwon Taek Joo cursed under his breath in frustration as he continued running. But his pursuer showed no signs of giving up either. No matter how hard he ran, there seemed to be no escape in sight. And yet, amidst all this chaos and danger, how could this city remain so peaceful and quiet? Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but criticize the laziness of the Russian police as he changed directions once again.

He found himself on a narrow alleyway that eventually led out to a wider road by the river. At this point, it seemed like he was just running around aimlessly since arriving in Russia. But at least now he knew the layout of the roads.

As he sprinted onto the main road, a car suddenly appeared and blocked his path. It was Psych Bogdanov's Jeep, with his henchmen trailing close behind.

Kwon Taek Joo used his strength to push open the driver's door, causing the driver to stumble out of the vehicle. He took advantage of this moment and agilely leapt over the hood.

But just as he landed, the passenger door opened and collided with him, throwing off his balance. He tripped and rolled to avoid getting hit by other cars on the road, but his situation only seemed to worsen.

A motorcycle came speeding towards him in the opposite lane. The driver noticed Kwon Taek Joo too late and slammed on their brakes, but it was already too late to stop. With no strength left to run or stand, Kwon Taek Joo instinctively ducked down. The motorcycle screeched as its front wheel scraped against the asphalt, narrowly missing him.

Even Psych Bogdanov's group, who had been chasing Kwon Taek Joo all this time, closed their eyes tightly in anticipation of the worst outcome.

A loud screeching noise pierced through the air, sounding as if it were about to rip a hole in the space around them. The sound of friction rang out relentlessly. For a moment, all other sounds disappeared, but the shock that typically follows did not occur.

Kwon Taek Joo slowly opened his eyes. The rear wheel of the motorcycle stopped directly in front of his face. A car had collided with the front of the Jeep, causing the back end to lift up dramatically. In that split second, everything seemed to stand still.

Reacting purely on instinct, Kwon Taek Joo quickly moved out of the way. The motorcycle's back wheel fell to the ground with a loud thud. If he had been even slightly slower in his movements, Kwon Taek Joo's head would have been crushed by the heavy wheel.

After nearly meeting his demise and coming back to life, Kwon Taek Joo breathed out a sigh of relief. His eyelids fluttered uncontrollably as his body trembled from the adrenaline rush.

How many times had his life been threatened since his arrival to this insane country?

Someone grabbed Kwon Taek Joo and pulled him up off the ground. It was one of Psych Bogdanov's subordinates. Crazy Bogdanov himself grabbed hold of Kwon Taek Joo's other arm. He looked around frantically and muttered under his breath.

"Stop making noise, get in the car."

Suddenly, a fist slammed into Kwon Taek Joo's stomach. He doubled over in pain as his strength drained away without any resistance. The group manhandled him into the back seat of their car with ease. Psych Bogdanov took a seat next to him while all of the doors were closed one by one. Then, they drove off down the street as if nothing had happened. No sirens blared in pursuit, and there was no sign of the police.

Truly a kidnapper's paradise. Even in his dazed state, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but laugh at the absurdity of it all. What would happen to him now? Would he end up like Morgan, with all ten fingers cut off and drowning in a river?

It was an unexpected and frightening thought for Kwon Taek Jo.

Where is that damn bastard Zhenya when I need him most?

Suddenly, something clicked in Kwon Taek Joo's mind - a memory that had been forgotten for too long. In the distance, he could hear the distinctive sound of helicopter blades cutting through the air.

"That's him!"

The man sitting in the passenger seat shouted. Kwon Taek Joo rolled his eyes and looked out the window. Sure enough, a helicopter was approaching from the opposite direction. A figure was visible inside, stretching their long legs out of the aircraft.

Though they were still indistinct, Kwon Taek Joo recognized it as Zhenya.

The man sitting next to him quickly rolled down his window and started shooting at the helicopter. Meanwhile, Psych Bogdanov reached under the back seat and pulled something out. He then struck Kwon Taek Joo's heel with it. It was a Bazooka.

"Open the window."

The rear window lowered at Bogdanov's command. He leaned out of the window with his upper body and took aim directly at the helicopter. If his shot hit, it would surely explode on impact.

Kwon Taek Joo lunged at Bogdanov in an attempt to stop him, but was held back by the man pressing a gun to his temple. With no other option, Kwon Taek Joo raised his hands and stepped away. At that moment, the Bazooka fired with a deafening blast. The impact caused the car to sway violently.

The helicopter quickly ascended to avoid the incoming missile. Bullets grazed its tail, whizzing through the air and crashing into a nearby building. One side of the wall crumbled under the force of impact. As if waiting for this response, the helicopter returned fire with ferocity. Zhenya unleashed a barrage of bullets from his machine gun, firing mercilessly at Bogdanov's vehicle.

Psych Bogdanov and Kwon Taek Joo fought for control, and the driver was struggling to hold onto the steering wheel as the car's body crumbled like a sack of potatoes. The driver leaned over and the steering wheel followed suit, causing the car to lurch to one side. Despite being shot, the occupant in the front passenger seat made a move to grab the wheel but it was too late; the car crashed through the guardrail and plunged into the icy river.

Kwon Taek Joo barely had time to react before everything went black. When he came to, he found himself disoriented and disheveled as water seeped into his nose and ears. He could still hear the sound of gunfire echoing around him, and he struggled to stay calm until it finally

stopped. Only then did he realize that Psych Bogdanov had also lost consciousness.

With no other options, Kwon Taek Joo swam through an open window, narrowly avoiding another gunshot from below. He hid inside the sinking car as bullets rained down on it, hitting everyone except for him.

As his vision blurred and his lungs screamed for air, Kwon Taek Joo waited for the attack to end. But just when he thought it was over, more gunfire rang out and he knew he couldn't stay underwater any longer. With every ounce of strength he had left, he broke through the surface and gasped for breath. But even as he struggled to catch his breath, he knew that the attacker was still out there somewhere, waiting for their next move.

Bullets continued to pour down, striking the body of the driver and passenger in the front seat. Kwon Taek Joo's vision blurred as blood stained the water around him. He was helpless, unable to do anything to stop the chaos unfolding before him.

Did Zhenya not realize he was still in the car? The bullets were fired with a ferocity that showed no mercy.

This madman knew no limits.

Kwon Taek Joo was frustrated and narrowly avoided being hit by the relentless gunfire. As he struggled to catch his breath, he could feel his lungs burning for oxygen. If he didn't surface soon, he would suffocate before being shot to death. Suddenly, the barrage of bullets ceased, but only momentarily as if to assess the situation. But it was clear that the attack was far from over.

Kwon Taek Joo kicked his feet and swam towards the nearest window. He was only a few meters away from the surface. He had to move quickly before Zhenya opened fire again. With determination, Kwon Taek Joo pushed through the water. Suddenly, he felt something grab onto his ankle from below - Psych Bogdanov. The crazed man stared at him intently before wincing in pain; a bullet had pierced his left arm.

Kwon Taek Joo delivered a fierce kick to Psych Bogdanov's face, causing him to release his grip. But he wasn't done yet. The man grabbed onto Kwon Taek Joo's collar once more and refused to let go, as if he didn't want to die alone.

Kwon Taek Joo swung his fist at Psych Bogdanov, who tried to dodge but ended up clutching at Kwon Taek Joo's neck instead. They struggled in the water, both weakened by injuries and exhaustion. In a last ditch effort, Kwon Taek Joo squeezed Psych Bogdanov's neck, watching as he convulsed and eventually stopped moving.

With a deep breath, Kwon Taek Joo emerged from the water; his body trembling. The coldness of the air hit him like a shock, and he struggled to control his breathing. His eyes widened in realization of the frigid temperature. He needed to get out of the water immediately, but his body was too weak from the fight. All he could do was relax and let himself float up. Suddenly, someone grabbed onto his neck and pulled him out of the water.

"Ughh."

He vomited a lot of water that had accumulated in his lungs. He coughed for so long that his throat was sore and his mind was dizzy. The stomach that was beaten by Bogdanov was also painful. Kwon Taek Joo sat down holding his stomach with his upper body leaning forward. His eyelids twitched. Then a pair of long straight legs appeared in front of him. Kwon Taek Joo slowly looked up, from the pointed tips of the person's shoes to the grinning face.

It was Zhenya.

"Still kicking, I see,"

"Thanks to you, I almost didn't make it."

Another round of coughing left him gritting his teeth.

"What happened to the other guy?"

"Sent him back to wherever he came from,"

Zhenya mumbled, "Pretty impressive." Kwon Taek Joo glared at him before getting up. Water dripped from his body, quickly freezing in the cold air. His damaged lungs struggled to function properly. Even with deep breaths, he couldn't seem to catch enough air. He needed to warm up quickly.

Kwon Taek Joo started walking but Zhenya blocked his path.

"That looks pretty weird."

"What?"

Zhenya pointed to his own cheek and Kwon Taek Joo instinctively touched his face. The artificial skin had been torn during the explosion and car accident earlier. He sighed and peeled away some of the loose skin. Zhenya watched closely as Kwon Taek Joo's fingers moved gently over his face. Although he had said it looked strange, he seemed more curious than anything about what it would feel like to peel someone's skin.

Ignoring Zhenya's concern, Kwon Taek Joo walked away wearily. Zhenya followed behind casually and asked, "Why don't you just take it off?" Kwon Taek Joo couldn't even find the energy to laugh at such a ridiculous question.

He walked to the main road, feeling the cold wind from across the river hit his entire body. His teeth began to chatter again. He glanced over at Zhenya, who was standing next to him in a thick fur coat. Kwon Taek Joo shivered as he observed Zhenya's calm expression, as if questioning why he looked so miserable. He didn't expect Zhenya to give up his coat for him, but he also couldn't help feel slightly disappointed that his colleague wouldn't even offer it.

Kwon Taek Joo gave up and waved at a passing taxi. It slowed down and then suddenly sped up, driving past him. Was the driver worried about getting their car dirty? Or were they surprised by Kwon Taek Joo's pathetic appearance?

This happened three or four more times before Kwon Taek Joo finally gave up hope of getting a taxi. Each time, Zhenya would laugh at his

misfortune. At this point, what was even Zhenya's purpose anymore? By this point, Kwon Taek Joo could no longer feel his fingertips or toes.

"No matter how you interpret the situation, it's because of that ugly thing."

Zhenya had been observing the interaction and decided to start teasing Kwon Taek Joo. He shifted his gaze to Kwon Taek Joo, causing him to feel uneasy. Zhenya used only his fingertips to brush against his cheek, questioning if he was truly as stubborn as he appeared. Nothing major happened; however, it was so cold that there wasn't enough time to process what had occurred.

Something flew near Kwon Taek Joo's face. He instinctively moved back and accidentally hit whatever was approaching him. Zhenya's hand, which had been reaching out towards him, froze in midair as their eyes met briefly. Zhenya's sarcastic expression disappeared, replaced by a curious sparkle in his narrowed eyes.

"Why do you keep avoiding me?"

"Why do you keep coming closer?"

Kwon Taek Joo responded irritably, but Zhenya didn't seem to mind as he extended his hand again. "Don't do that," Kwon Taek Joo protested as Zhenya grabbed his wrist to stop him, causing his head to tilt back. But before he could react, Zhenya's other hand suddenly reached forward and grabbed his chin.

The skin on his cheek was torn off before he could even protest, causing a tingling sensation on the already irritated area. Kwon Taek Joo cursed as he opened his eyes, which had been closed in pain. Zhenya stood in front of him, examining every line on his face with his blue eyes.

His strange reaction surprised Kwon Taek Joo. So what if Zhenya saw his real appearance, the man should have recognized his face from the photo sent by the HQ. However, there could always be a possibility that someone looks a bit different in person compared to a photograph, and since Zhenya was familiar with Hiro Sakamoto's appearance, Kwon Taek Joo's true self may not have been recognizable to him.

But was it really necessary to observe him so intently?

Kwon Taek Joo felt like he was standing naked in front of Zhenya, with all of his thoughts and emotions exposed for him to see. It made him feel uncomfortable and threatened.

Suddenly, Zhenya spoke again. His voice was barely audible but it seemed like he was saying,

"That's more like it..."

The harsh wind blew once again, causing Kwon Taek Joo to tighten his grip on Zhenya's hand resting on his shoulder. A moment later, he realized what he had done and quickly let go.

Hitchhiking in the cold was not going well for a foreigner who already looked suspicious. Car after car passed him by without a second glance.

Feeling numb from the cold, Kwon Taek Joo suddenly felt a tap on his shoulder. He looked over and saw Zhenya holding out a shiny card between his fingers.

"What's this?"

"Just in case there will be more surveillance or searches in the future, hang in a hole and hide well."

"Hang?"

It seemed he heard strange words. Does the word 'hang' in Russian have another meaning that even Kwon Taek Joo doesn't know? For example, 'tiger's den' or wolf's den...

Suddenly, Zhenya's phone rang and he answered it after checking the caller ID. The voice on the other end sounded different, colder and more distant than usual. It was almost like a completely different person speaking.

"I know. I'll be right there."

Zhenya only listened to the other person's story before hanging up and gesturing towards the street without explaining anything to Kwon Taek Joo.

A taxi pulled up and Zhenya hopped into the back seat without saying a word, leaving Kwon Taek Joo behind. Kwon Taek Joo stood frozen in confusion. His clothes, now solid blocks of ice, were doing more harm than good. Kwon Taek Joo hand trembled as he clutched onto the provided card, his knuckles turned pale from the cold. He was lost and had no idea where to go in this foreign city.

The speeding taxis showed no signs of stopping for them. As the frigid wind whipped through Moscow once again, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't even muster the strength to shrink away from it.

He gazed blankly at the speeding cars, his stomach growling - he hadn't even had breakfast yet. "What a movie-worthy predicament we're in," he thought with a hint of self-deprecating humor, feeling like a beggar in a land thousands of miles from home.

## **Chapter 1.10 – New Mission: Do You Want to Keep Me by Your Side to Watch**

Kwon Taek Joo stumbled upon a run-down motel near the river. It was a far cry from the luxurious hotel he had been staying at courtesy of the Russian government. Despite the various room options available, Kwon desperately opted for the priciest one in order to take a hot shower. However, when he entered the room, he couldn't fathom why it was considered more expensive than the others. Perhaps the price simply varied based on having windows or not? The cramped room only contained a small bed and a broken-legged table. There was also a tiny television, but Kwon doubted there was enough power to even turn it on. And as for Wi-Fi, that seemed like an impossible luxury.

But as long as there was running water, he could make do. Kwon quickly peeled off his still-damp clothes and stood under the shower. He turned the knob all the way to hot, hoping to thaw his frozen body. However, the hot water didn't come until after he had already finished freezing through a cold shower. With no bathrobe in sight, he wrapped a large towel around his waist and stepped out of the bathroom.

Something scurried away at his sudden presence - a cockroach, perhaps 3-4 inches in size. They were surprisingly resilient creatures, able to survive and reproduce even in Siberia's extreme temperatures ranging from -40°C to -50°C.

Shaking his head in disgust, Kwon threw himself onto the bed without hesitation. The mattress was dusty and made his nose and throat feel itchy and irritated. He couldn't help but cough repeatedly, but he lacked the energy to even sit up.

The bed let out a loud creak as Kwon Taek Joo shifted his weight. He couldn't help but wonder if it would collapse under him, but he was too tired to care. He closed his eyes and hoped that sleep would clear his dizzy head. As he drifted off, his thoughts turned to how his mother would be trying to reach him right about now. But he had lost

everything, including his cell phone, in the chaos. The thought of never being able to contact her again made him say a silent goodbye. However, he knew his mother wouldn't give up.

She would probably leave their home in search of him after a few days of not hearing from him. And when she found out the truth about his job as an undercover agent, she would be devastated and bedridden. It was too much for him to bear. He sat up and grabbed the phone on the table, ready to call the front desk for assistance.

But no matter how many times he tried, there was no dial tone. Anger welled up inside him as he saw that the phone's cord had been chewed through by rodents. Frustrated, he threw the useless phone away. Things just never seemed to go his way lately. What could he do now? With a sigh, he decided there was only one option - to go downstairs and use the owner's phone at the counter.

He wrapped a towel around his waist to cover himself since he didn't have any dry clothes and made his way down to the lobby. Surprisingly, there were no other guests around and even the owner was dozing off behind the counter. Kwon Taek Joo woke him up and asked if he could make an international call using a credit card. The owner agreed and handed over a dusty phone that looked like it hadn't been used in ages.

Kwon Taek Joo quickly learned how to use the phone and dialed his home country's code followed by his mother's number. After a few beeps, she picked up on the other end, sounding worried as usual.

"It's me. Did you try to call me?"

As expected, Kwon Taek Joo was bombarded with questions as soon as he answered his phone. His mother's voice was filled with worry and concern, as if she hadn't heard from him in days. Kwon Taek Joo knew how to calm her down and promised to call her every day before ending the call. He felt exhausted, and rubbed his tired eyes as his stomach growled. It seemed like he needed to eat something before he could even think about getting some rest. Glancing at the grumpy motel owner, Kwon Taek Joo asked if there were any good restaurants nearby. With a sigh, the owner stood up and pointed towards a specific location.

The motel owner was about to sit down after giving instructions when the scarf tied around Kwon Taek Joo's waist suddenly became loose. The towel fell to the floor before he could stop it. Kwon Taek Joo asked the owner who was staring at his downtown area one more thing.

"I probably need some clothes too."

Why, out of all the restaurants around here, did he show you such a shabby place? Kwon Taek Joo sat in an empty restaurant and kept looking around. Who knows, maybe this is a hidden delicious restaurant that only locals know about. He tried to console himself and immediately changed his mind when he saw the owner. If the innkeeper's name is '

Ivanovich

', then isn't the owner of this place '

Ivanova

?\* It's just that the hairstyle is slightly different, but if it were a stranger, it would be difficult to be so similar.

There seems to be no menu, nor any special notes. The owner, who had been neglecting Kwon Taek Joo all this time, suddenly brought him dishes that he had not ordered. Borscht cabbage soup and Russian-style Pelmeni wontons. Kwon Taek Joo looked curiously at the restaurant owner. She pointed at the wall in front of him. The words coffee, vodka and kvass were scribbled on it. He chose kvass, a traditional Russian drink, and began to taste the food that was being served.

The distinctive smell of lamb spread as soon as he took his first bite. After all, it was just an appetizer, Kwon Taek Joo frowned and continued stuffing food into his mouth. He ate and drank sips of kvass.

He chewed and rearranged his thoughts. Obviously, after coming to Russia, he encountered bad luck, otherwise the situation would not have been so complicated. He was assigned a mission that he didn't have enough experience to begin with, he was kidnapped on his first day in Russia, his belongings were blown away in a bomb attack on the third day, and he almost drowned not long ago, he almost couldn't keep

this small life alive. Furthermore, his partner couldn't help him at all. If he didn't die at his hands, he would have been very lucky. Kwon Taek Joo has never had so much bad luck in his life, but why is it all happening at once now?

His stomach was boiling but Kwon Taek Joo tried to stay calm. There's no use complaining about the past. It is better to think about the future that is more constructive

. It seemed necessary to first report that he was still alive and the progress of the accident to headquarters and then receive additional support. And you must leave here immediately. Considering that Kwon Taek Joo suddenly became the target of Psych Bogdanov, it seems that he is not the only one targeting him. He must clearly understand the situation to ensure safety before it is too late.

How could Kwon Taek Joo possibly contact headquarters now? With the communication equipment destroyed, he couldn't reveal his true identity as a Korean spy in Russia. Not even the embassy knew the truth. During his time in Russia, he had to go by the name Hiro Sakamoto and avoid any Japanese connections. He needed to find a way to contact Zhenya, but he didn't know how. Zhenya was unpredictable and appeared at random times.

All they could do was wait. Kwon Taek Joo was frustrated and put down his fork, losing his appetite for the bland food. Two Policemen entered the scene.

They seemed to be very close friends with the owner, after cordially greeting each other, they found a place and sat down. The owner brought out glasses and vodka as usual, chatted with them for a while at the table before returning to the counter to collect

"It's 3000 rubles."

A ridiculously high price for subpar food, but he didn't have the energy to argue about it. He reluctantly handed over his card.

The owner of the establishment looked unhappy. When Kwon Taek Joo mentioned he didn't have cash, she eventually accepted his card.

However, after several attempts at payment, it seemed like there was an issue with the terminal. The owner then left to talk to two policemen sitting at a nearby table, looking over at Kwon Taek Joo and whispering something.

He immediately made eye contact with two police officers but for some reason those eyes were not very friendly. Are they talking about Kwon Taek Joo himself?

He made eye contact with the officers, but they didn't seem friendly. Were they talking about him? In no time, one of the policemen stood up and approached Kwon Taek Joo with a troubled expression.

"Can we have a word, sir?"

Meanwhile, the other officer came over as well and grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's arm. What was going on here? How could these unexpected occurrences keep happening?

It appeared that there was some sort of misunderstanding. These things can often be resolved through calm communication. But now that his disguise had been removed, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't hide his true identity as Hiro Sakamoto. He needed to avoid any involvement with the police at all costs.

Should he just run away and ignore them? He could easily take on both officers with his bare hands. But running away would mean admitting guilt for something he wasn't even aware of, possibly making the Russian police his enemies. And in his current situation hiding from authorities, having more pursuers wouldn't help him in any way.

Kwon Taek Joo needed to think calmly about what his next move should be.

"Can you tell me why I'm being detained?"

"The card you used has been reported stolen."

What? That couldn't be right. He had just used it at a motel not too long ago without any issues. The owner handed him the card reader which displayed a warning message.

"Come on, let's not waste any more time. Let's go," urged one of the officers as Kwon Taek Joo stood there in shock.

What should he do? Going along with them would only bring more difficulties. He had lost contact with his headquarters and couldn't count on any support. The only option left was to knock out the two policemen and escape. But before he could make a decision, one of the officers attempted to handcuff him. Acting quickly, Kwon Taek Joo used the back of his hand to hit the officer's face and then followed up with an elbow to the chest. The officer fell to the ground, holding his bleeding nose and chest. His colleague rushed over in shock.

"You bastard!"

Kwon Taek Joo shook off the officer's grasp and was about to kick him when a distinctive bell rang from the door. Both officers froze, along with Kwon Taek Joo who was suspended mid-kick.

Walking in at just the right time was Zhenya. Seeing a familiar face gave Kwon Taek Joo a sense of relief. If it was the owner of the card arriving, everything would likely be resolved.

Kwon Taek Joo abandoned his aggressive posture and straightened up. Just then, the officer charging at him knocked him down and handcuffed him with his wrists behind his back. Kwon Taek Joo could only glare helplessly at Zhenya, who nodded for him to quickly resolve the situation. But Zhenya took his time looking around the restaurant, seemingly assessing the scene.

Shouldn't he also consider the right time and place for comfort? As Kwon Taek Joo was being pinned down by the officers, one of them suddenly jerked him back up and asked about their colleague who had just regained consciousness. The officer with a nosebleed approached Kwon Taek Joo with a hateful look in his eyes as he pushed him forward.

However, Kwon Taek Joo stood his ground, refusing to take a single step. He maintained eye contact with Zhenya, who had been observing everything from a distance.

"Hurry up!" the larger officer shouted angrily. When Kwon Taek Joo still didn't budge, he raised his hand as if preparing to hit him. But before

his fist could make contact with Kwon Taek Joo's face, something fast and agile stopped it in its tracks.

"..Ah!"

It was unclear what had happened because Kwon Taek Joo's view had been obstructed for a moment. But when he looked again, Zhenya was standing like a solid wall in front of him, holding the neck of the officer with one hand. The officer's face turned pale within seconds from being squeezed so tightly and his eyes widened as if he were about to lose consciousness. Zhenya let go just in time for the officer to catch his breath.

He fell to the ground helplessly, struggling to regain circulation in his face that had turned red from being choked.

"Let's talk first." Zhenya looked down at the officer and made a calm request. The two officers exchanged wary glances and after a few seconds, one of them nodded and signaled for him to follow.

Zhenya turned back to Kwon Taek Joo and silently gestured for him to come with him.

Kwon Taek Joo took a seat at the table by the window. Zhenya was outside talking to a police officer, flashing his charming smile and smoothly continuing the conversation. Kwon Taek Joo tried to guess what was being said by watching Zhenya's mouth, but the police officer blocked his view with his large frame, making it difficult for him to concentrate.

Eventually, Zhenya and the officer returned to the restaurant. Kwon Taek Joo looked at Zhenya, silently asking for an explanation. With a shrug and a smile, Zhenya didn't offer much information to his curious companion. Instead, the policeman pointed a finger at Kwon Taek Joo and gave him unexpected news: "I'll let you go."

Feeling surprised, Kwon Taek Joo looked at Zhenya, wondering how the conversation could result in a good outcome. Suddenly, the handcuffs binding his wrists were removed. The two officers exchanged quick pleasantries and left the restaurant. The owner of the establishment

had been watching the whole situation unfold and tilted his head in confusion. Kwon Taek Joo felt just as confused.

"What did you do?"

"I just paid them off with some coins and told them to buy a few drinks."

Zhenya replied casually. As Kwon Taek Joo stood with his arms crossed, suspiciously eyeing Zhenya, he couldn't help but wonder how this man always managed to stay one step ahead of everyone else. It seemed that Zhenya had already thought through their predicament and come up with a plan. He would track the location of where his stolen card was used and possibly even report it as stolen if necessary. The fact that Zhenya's actions may have made someone feel uneasy didn't bother him; he was not a simple person. Even though they were using Psych Bogdanov's car, Zhenya didn't hesitate to continue shooting while his partner was still in the vehicle.

Zhenya didn't seem to mind Kwon Taek Joo's suspicious gaze. In fact, he seemed to relish it, as if he wanted to be looked at with admiration. This only heightened Kwon Taek Joo's annoyance.

"You seem very busy. I barely have time to see your face."

"What's wrong? Feeling lonely? Do you want me to stay by your side so you can watch me?"

"No, I want to sew your damn mouth shut."

Kwon Taek Joo forced a fake smile, baring his teeth. He quickly shifted his gaze to Zhenya who was next to him, then looked over his shoulder. When Zhenya also turned to follow his gaze, Kwon Taek Joo grabbed Zhenya's chin and turned his face back to him. Blue eyes met his and Zhenya's eyes narrowed.

"Someone has been watching us for a while now. Have you noticed?"

"..Huh?"

"You're not being careful enough."

"What should we do?"

"We need to take care of it."

"You stay here, I will handle it and come back."

"If you need help, let me know."

"Thank you, but I'll handle it on my own."

Zhenya smiled and left the restaurant. As Zhenya walked out, someone hiding in the corner suddenly jumped up in surprise. They began running away as Zhenya calmly followed behind them. The two soon disappeared from Kwon Taek Joo's view.

A few minutes later, Zhenya returned. Kwon Taek Joo furrowed his eyebrows when he saw that they were no longer wearing the fur coat they had before.

"Where's your coat?"

"I got rid of it."

Kwon Taek Joo didn't ask why because he could guess the reason. But Zhenya still eagerly explained.

"It was dirty."

Kwon Taek Joo glanced at their hand. Even though he tried not to, he couldn't help but notice it. Those fingers have punctured someone's eye before. Where did they use them today? If they went as far as removing their coat and turning around, it must have been around the neck area? Perhaps Zhenya suffocated the person by blocking their nose and mouth with their hand. It may sound absurd, but for someone like Zhenya, it would be easy to do. Suddenly, Kwon Taek Joo felt uncomfortable. This person reminded him more of Psych Bogdanov than the man who died in the river.

He stared at Zhenya's hand and thought to himself. Then he heard a light snap. Kwon Taek Joo jumped, realizing that Zhenya had snapped his fingers in front of his face. He looked up and saw a mischievous smile decorating the light-skinned face. Kwon

Taek Joo didn't like it one bit.

Zhenya pushed something out to him, glaring and frowned sharply.

"Stop daydreaming. Eyes on me."

## Chapter 1.11 - New Mission: Armory

Zhenya presented Kwon Taek Joo an invitation card for a party at the Kremlin, celebrating the agreement between Russia and Japan. A delegation from Japan would be attending, along with various Russian figures from different backgrounds. Kwon Taek Joo had planned to attend disguised as Hiro Sakamoto, but the whole plan was foiled by the surprise attack.

However, the date on the invitation did not match what he had previously been told. It seemed that the schedule had been changed due to an incident at the hotel where the Japanese delegation was staying. Security measures were also being heightened.

How could we still get in?

While Kwon Taek Joo pondered this, Zhenya took back the invitation.

"This is just a cover. The real party will be held later."

"A different party?"

"Not far from the Kremlin is the residence of the Boedanov family, who are actually true representatives of Gazprom. The second son has a close relationship with the President. I heard that after a national event, there will be a dinner party at their mansion. Even those who weren't invited to the Kremlin will show up there. Underworld bosses and powerful players who control Russian money will be in attendance as honored guests. They'll do anything for profit, making them a valuable source of information. Who knows what kind of clues you might uncover if you meet them and talk about 'Anastasia'."

"Could it be that the Bogdanov listed is someone I know?"

"It's possible."

"But they're still going ahead with the party, even though a member of their family just died?"

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't understand it. By now, Psych Bogdanov's body would have already been found. Even if it was a national event, how could it really take place in their own home?

Zhenya scoffed.

"Do you honestly think he's dead?"

"Isn't that what everyone is saying?"

"Sorry to break it to you but the news said only two bodies were found in the river."

It made sense. Why would it be so easy to kill him?

Kwon Taek Joo had been warned multiple times about him, right? But it was true that he was unconscious and bleeding heavily from a gunshot wound – saving him would be difficult. And with the cold river water, his body temperature would drop rapidly. Surviving in such harsh conditions, as expected, this man was not ordinary.

Knowing Psych Bogdanov survived meant he could target them at any moment. Kwon Taek Joo felt uneasy but pushed it aside for now.

"How can I make sure I find Anastasia's clue there?" Zhenya immediately handed Kwon Taek Joo something, as if he knew he would ask that question. It was a folded envelope containing documents. He opened it and saw an old newspaper article and a list of unknown names – Russian and Korean. Kwon Taek Joo looked at each name while reading the article.

They all had dates in the past alongside how they died. But why did these names seem so familiar to him? He checked the list again with a skeptical expression. Soon, his eyes widened as he realized most of the names matched those of deceased individuals listed in the article.

Zhenya then explained why.

"These are the people involved in developing Anastasia. As you can see, they're all dead now."

"How did they die?"

"Good question. How did they die?"

Zhenya taunted with a sarcastic smile, as if teasing a child who knew nothing. Kwon Taek Joo had some thoughts, but he couldn't jump to conclusions just yet.

Doubts kept creeping in and interrupting his thought process. Anxious, he kicked Zhenya's shoes, urging him to answer quickly.

Zhenya finally opened his mouth after enjoying Kwon Taek Joo's nervousness for a while longer.

"Anastasia possessed an unparalleled destructive force, making her a feared weapon. There were many secrets surrounding her, and while people discussed her existence, most were ignorant of what she truly was. And yet, this ignorance only heightened their fear towards her. Perhaps it was the unknown that made her so powerful. But once her development was complete, the story would change. The research subjects would disperse, and one of them might reveal Anastasia's true nature and intentions. This could not be allowed to happen – she must remain a source of terror in both the present and the future".

Kwon Taek Joo furrowed his brow, sensing a connection between 'Anastasia' and the other items on the list, even without hearing the full explanation. Zhenya nodded in agreement.

"All traces have been eliminated to prevent any future creation of such weapons."

Kwon Taek Joo was rendered speechless for a moment. The victims were not killed because they possessed top-secret information or information on counterintelligence. No, they were eliminated before even having the chance to acquire such knowledge.

He looked down at the list again in disbelief. Then, he noticed something odd and raised an objection.

"But...!"

"Yes, there are still survivors for now."

Interestingly, members of the Bogdanov family were also listed. However, they were still alive and well. With most of those involved in the development of 'Anastasia' now deceased, how can one explain their

continued survival? Kwon Taek Joo logically reasoned through the situation and then turned to Zhenya with a look of realization dawning on his face. A satisfied smirk spread across Zhenya's features.

It was clear that the Bogdanov family had some involvement with 'Anastasia'. And with most of the researchers dead, they were the only ones left alive. This could be interpreted as evidence that they were the ones responsible for eliminating their fellow researchers, in order to maintain complete control over this deadly weapon and prevent its recreation.

As Kwon Taek Joo examined Zhenya's somewhat serious expression, he spoke up.

"What do you think? Do you feel like having a little fun now?"

"That would be akin to jumping into a tiger's den without any weapons," Kwon Taek Joo shook his head, feeling overwhelmed.

If Zhenya's information was accurate, it was highly likely that the Bogdanov family knew where Anastasia was hidden.

The problem lies in his current situation. Tomorrow night, they will be attending a party. Even if he managed to contact headquarters through Zhenya, there was no guarantee that they could provide him with the necessary resources within 24 hours. He couldn't just walk into danger without any means of protection.

"I didn't expect headquarters to be so prepared."

Zhenya chuckled and told him to get up. After paying for their food and leaving the store, a sleek convertible pulled up in front of Kwon Taek Joo, its appearance matching its owner. Zhenya pushed Kwon Taek Joo into the passenger seat and drove off quickly.

After about 30-40 minutes, they arrived at their destination. The tall buildings gradually disappeared and the streets became less crowded. Where are they? Kwon Taek Joo looked around suspiciously as the car came to a stop.

"We're here."

Kwon Taek Joo obediently got out of the car and continued to look around. There were no warehouses or garages in sight, only an abandoned building that was falling apart. The first floor had a sign for a bookstore, but it seemed to have closed down a long time ago as there were no customers in sight.

Kwon Taek Joo followed Zhenya inside, filled with doubts. The guy in front raised the shutter and entered the building. Kwon Taek Joo also walked inside, stumbling in the dark.

Zhenya opened another door inside and disappeared down some stairs. Without thinking, Kwon Taek Joo followed him and nearly slipped and fell on the stairs. Zhenya should at least warn people about these things, but he wasn't one to care about others' well-being. Kwon Taek Joo suppressed his frustration with Zhenya and continued feeling his way along the wall in complete darkness.

Finally, his feet landed on a flat floor. Although it was still dark, Kwon Taek Joo could feel dust swirling around him with every movement.

But something didn't feel quite right. The basements of bookstores typically have a distinct smell of old books, but here there was no such scent.

It wasn't long before he realized the cause of his uneasiness. The basement was filled with large bookshelves, but they were all empty except for an old phone sitting on one of them.

Why did Zhenya bring him here? As doubts and complaints filled his mind, Zhenya approached the phone. He picked up the receiver and dialed a series of numbers: 3, 9, 1, 6, 5. When he returned the dial to its original position after reaching '5', a mechanical beep sounded from somewhere.

Suddenly, the empty bookshelves began to rotate with loud creaks, sending clouds of dust into the air. Kwon Taek Joo closed his eyes and when he opened them again, the old bookshelves were gone, replaced by a shiny steel cabinet. Inside were all sorts of guns, high-tech equipment, and small bombs neatly stored away.

## Chapter 1.12 – Nuclear Man: Bogdanov Mansion

The Bogdanov family's grandiose mansion stood before Kwon Taek Joo in all its opulent glory. Its colossal size and luxurious appearance could rival even the mighty Kremlin.

The pristine white walls were adorned with a stunning blue roof that exuded elegance and sophistication. The intricate patterns of Rococo style curved around the building, embellished with dazzling gold decorations that added a touch of classic grandeur. As he approached the entrance, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but admire the meticulously crafted circular stone steps and giant marble columns that supported the high ceiling of the mansion.

Passing through the sturdy gates, Kwon Taek Joo felt overwhelmed by the majesty and solemnity of the place. The soft glow of light enveloped the entire building, casting a warm atmosphere. Even in the dead of night, cars were still lining up along the vast garden outside.

Located next to a large lake, it took some time for guests to reach the entrance after passing through the main gate. Dense trees acted as a barrier, shielding the activities inside from prying eyes.

Security was tight at this exclusive event, where only high-status individuals were invited. Everyone must pass through two checkpoints - first at the main gate and then again at the entrance to the main garden. Kwon Taek Joo's car was also subjected to thorough inspection.

An armed security guard approached his vehicle and instructed him to lower his window. With meticulous attention to detail, four or five pieces of information were checked - from the invitation and attendance list name to car number and accompanying person's details. No exceptions were made.

"May I see your invitation, please?"

The guard asked politely as Kwon Taek Joo handed over his invitation. Using a special reader equipped with a hidden light, he scanned the

envelope and a previously unseen mark appeared. A distinct electronic sound signaled recognition on the device's screen. Satisfied, the guard then inspected the back seat to confirm the accompanying person.

It was clear that not only were secret details hidden on the invitation, but also the identity of the guest. The device automatically displayed their information once it recognized the serial number on the card. The intention to keep out uninvited guests was evident in these strict security measures.

With a quick nod and a "Thank you for your cooperation," the guard stepped back and allowed Kwon Taek Joo's car to pass through.

The congestion from earlier now extended all the way from the main gate to the entrance of the garden and to the front of the magnificent mansion.

Kwon Taek Joo grumbled with a bored expression,

"This party is almost like something out of a spy movie. How lucky am I to endure all these unnecessary and ridiculous things alone? Is the world fair?" He glared at the rearview mirror and complained, his eyes meeting Zhenya's gaze in the backseat.

A small smile curled up on his lips.

"I was the only one invited, so there were no other options. The only two ways for uninvited guests to join the party are to be a driver like you now or to be my date. If you didn't like the first option, you could have disguised yourself and joined me on the floor." Zhenya fluttered his eyes in Kwon Taek Joo's direction, almost alluringly.

"Wouldn't that have been exciting?"

Ugh.

"I could have knocked a guard out and changed clothes. There are so many people here, surely no one will notice, right?"

"Are you someone who likes to take risks? If you want to use your strength, save it for critical moments."

Kwon Taek Joo didn't know how Zhenya got an official invitation, but since they were invited, there was no need to make a fuss. He just didn't like the idea of having to treat Zhenya like a boss, even for a moment.

"You can close the window now," Zhenya requested lazily, knowing there was a button in the backseat but not wanting to lift a finger.

Kwon Taek Joo reluctantly obliged and glared at Zhenya through the rearview mirror before finally arriving at the mansion and parking the car with valet service.

Finally arriving in front of the mansion, Kwon Taek Joo pulled over and applied the handbrake. Zhenya didn't move from his seat.

"Why aren't you getting out?" Kwon Taek Joo asked, confused.

"That's what I was going to ask you. Did you forget something?" Zhenya replied smugly with a head nod towards the door next to him.

Although Kwon Taek Joo shook his head in disbelief, Zhenya nodded as if confirming his suspicion. They had caught the attention of many people outside of the car, including a valet parking attendant for guests arriving at the residence. With no other option, Kwon Taek Joo let out a sigh and got out of the driver's seat.

He walked around and opened the backseat door, allowing Zhenya to leisurely step out with a pleased smile on his face.

This son of a bitch.

"This way, please," one of the wait staff politely guided them inside.

The lobby that greeted them after climbing ten steps was like stepping into another world compared to the chaos outside. The grandiose entrance had high ceilings and extended on both sides like a cathedral chapel. Everything was adorned in elegant luxury, with white walls and pillars, gold-plated decorations, and a magnificent chandelier hanging from the ceiling. The dark-toned paintings on the ceiling added depth to the room, while statues were strategically placed to break up any monotony on the walls. The sound of a small orchestra filled the air without overpowering conversation.

"I feel sick," Kwon Taek Joo suddenly muttered to himself.

Zhenya turned to glance at Kwon Taek Joo.

Despite being in such an enchanting space, Kwon Taek Joo face lacked signs of awe or wonder. Kwon Taek Joo had never been one for aesthetics and didn't particularly enjoy playing the role of servant in this extravagant setting. Even so, as they entered a place that he would likely only visit once in his lifetime, all he could feel was nausea. Zhenya observed Kwon Taek Joo's paled face before smirking and looking away.

There were many people gathered in the main lobby. They were divided into groups of 3-4 people and talked to each other. Among them was a person that caught Kwon Taek Joo's attention. This person is the president of Russia. Even though it was a face he had seen many times in the media, seeing him right in front of him made him feel unreal.

"You there. Come here."

Kwon Taek Joo was checking the surrounding situation when a middle-aged employee approached and sincerely greeted him. He looked like a butler or general manager of the party. Zhenya merely walked him and entered the hall without sparing a look. The man adjusted his position, blocking Kwon Taek Joo who was unintentionally trying to follow.

"Drivers go this way."

The man stretched out his arm and pointed to the side passage. It looked like a side room mainly for employees. Kwon Taek Joo sent a desperate look after Zhenya's fleeting form, but the bastard just kept mingling with the rest of the party invitees.

Honestly, what was the point of having Zhenya as a partner, when he couldn't even help Kwon Taek Joo out of these situations.

Zhenya deserved the 'Inadequate Partner' award' if such an award existed.

"Let's go. Stop stalling."

Kwon Taek Joo reluctantly followed the manager to a storage room near the kitchen, where he found a group of people preoccupied with their

phones.

The last time he saw Zhenya, the man had moved on to talking with some high-ranking guests. He seemed to fit strangely well in Russia's top royal Social circle.

This led to the question, who exactly was Zhenya?

Kwon Taek Joo's gaze hardened instantly, all emotions vanishing from his stoic face. The manager had led him to a storage room near the kitchen, a place that even uninvited guests like Kwon Taek Joo were familiar with. As he entered the room, the door slammed shut behind him, and he noticed that everyone inside was engrossed in their phones, used to this kind of treatment. Some were playing games or joking around with each other.

Why did they allow staff into the mansion?

Wouldn't it be wiser to stay in their cars? But then again, perhaps they were expecting an important call from their boss.

Kwon Taek Joo clicked his tongue in disdain at the inefficient scene before him. Unlike these people, he actually had work to do. The party was in full swing and this would be the perfect opportunity for him to uncover any secrets.

He needed to leave this room and return to the main hall where the important people were gathered. But as a driver, he needed permission just to use the bathroom. If he suddenly left without a valid reason, his identity could be threatened. Should he trust Zhenya and wait for his signal? No, that was not a viable option. He had to come up with a plan.

Kwon Taek Joo paced by the door, thinking of ways to escape. The staff glanced curiously at him but soon lost interest. Quietly slipping out unnoticed seemed like the best option now. He cautiously opened the door, mindful of any creaks from the hinges. Outside, there were people transporting food and drinks. He had to time it perfectly.

When the moment was right, Kwon Taek Joo slipped out of the room and closed the door silently behind him, releasing a sigh of relief once it was shut securely. In the hallway, it was just him alone.

He needed to make it back to the main hall before anyone noticed his absence. Kwon Taek Joo turned his back on the kitchen and started walking, soon coming upon a side hallway. Everything was going according to plan.

"Where are you going?"

The unexpected voice made him stop and turn around. It was the manager he had encountered earlier, standing tall with a suspicious look in his eyes, taking in every detail of Kwon Taek Joo's appearance. He needed to think fast and come up with an excuse.

"I need to find the restroom," Kwon Taek Joo blurted out, struggling to maintain his composure. The manager gave him a skeptical look, clearly not convinced by his excuse.

He scrutinized Kwon Taek Joo's every move and expression, making it difficult for him to keep up the act. But Kwon Taek Joo had learned how to put on a convincing facade after years of dealing with people in his line of work. However, he couldn't shake off the suspicion that seemed to be piercing through his skin like shards of glass.

Finally, the manager gestured for a passing waiter to attend to Kwon Taek Joo's request. The waiter approached him with apprehension and said, "Let's go." As they walked down the hallway, Kwon Taek Joo took note of every detail - the ceiling, walls, columns, windows - but didn't see any surveillance cameras.

When they reached the bathroom near the kitchen, Kwon Taek Joo quickly scanned the area again but still didn't see any cameras. He nodded at the waiter and said,

"Thank you, I'll be quick."

But before leaving, he suddenly grabbed the waiter's shoulder and whispered in his ear, "You should probably get some rest."

The waiter looked confused for a moment before Kwon Taek Joo hit his pressure point and he fell to the ground. Taking advantage of this distraction, Kwon Taek Joo dragged him inside.

The door to the room where the waiter had been earlier was now tightly shut. Kwon Taek Joo noticed something fall from inside and quickly grabbed a mop leaning against the wall, securing it across the door and the opposite wall. It would take some time to locate the missing waiter, so Kwon Taek Joo took charge of everything in the meantime. He wasted no time and headed straight to the busy kitchen.

"Where's the whiskey? And where did you run off with those canapés? Move faster, you lazy slowpokes!" a man demanded, trying to maintain order in the chaotic kitchen.

While outside an elegant party was in full swing, inside the kitchen was a chaotic battlefield. The grumpy chef handed Kwon Taek Joo a wooden tray of Single Malt as he entered, pushing him back and telling him not to act like a snail. Despite being kicked out again, Kwon Taek Joo saw this as an opportunity to enter the main hall alone. He followed closely behind another waiter and managed to find his way back without getting lost. However, as he walked towards the lobby door, he spotted the manager and quickly lifted the tray onto his shoulder while covering his face.

In the main hall, people were engrossed in various conversations - some discussing political issues with serious expressions while others laughed together as they sipped on their drinks. The children who were dragged along reluctantly were dozing off or playing rather than enjoying themselves. It was hard to find any signs of innocence in these children that are usually seen in others their age.

Kwon Taek Joo weaved through high-ranking guests and offered them Single Malt wine on a tray, carefully eavesdropping on their conversations for any information on Anastasia's whereabouts. With the help of a special lens worn over his left eye, Kwon Taek Joo could quickly obtain information about specific individuals by looking at them for more than three seconds.

He scanned the faces of each guest, from high-ranking government officials to powerful businessmen and notorious mafia bosses gathered in one place.

"This outfit suits you," a familiar voice suddenly rang out.

Kwon Taek Joo turned to see Zhenya standing next to him, happily reaching for a glass of Single Malt.

Kwon Taek Joo also offered drinks to passersby, trying to blend in with the crowd and gather any valuable information he could.

Zhenya whispered, gently swirling the wine around in his glass.

"This place is odd, isn't it? It's loud, but no one truly exists here."

Kwon Taek Joo almost asked for clarification, thinking he had misheard something strange. But then he remembered his current situation and stayed silent, his eyes narrowing suspiciously at Zhenya.

Zhenya brought the glass to his lips slowly, deciding to change the subject as if his muttering had been a figment of Kwon Taek Joo's imagination.

"The man standing next to Lomonosov is Bazim Vissarionovich, the second son of the powerful Bogdanov family. Rumor has it that he's one of the president's closest confidants and they go horseback riding together once a week. He holds a lot of sway among Duma parliamentarians and any public projects proposed by the Russian government must pass through him before being approved by the president."

Upon further reflection, Kwon Taek Joo recalled hearing that the head of the Bogdanov family was actually the true representative of Gazprom. It made sense, considering his son's close friendship with the President and influential position in parliament.

Zhenya quickly set down his empty glass on a passing tray as he explained how they were able to successfully secure an energy facility construction contract with Japan and become the biggest beneficiaries thanks to their ties with the powerful state-owned corporation. To emphasize his point, he gestured towards an older man sitting in a nearby wheelchair.

"See that man over there? That's Visarion Romanovich, a key figure at Gazprom who has helped the Bogdanov family maintain their grip on

the energy industry. Russia may be led by its president, but it is truly run by people like him."

The true nature and power of the Bogdanov family exceeded what Kwon Taek Joo had initially imagined. His curiosity about the rest of the family was piqued. He scanned the room for Vladimir Vissarionovich, the eldest son of the family, but couldn't spot him anywhere. So he decided to take a glass of Single Malt and offer it to Zhenya, understanding the unspoken request for some liquid courage. He smiled and accepted it calmly before saying, "Here he comes."

Kwon Taek Joo followed Zhenya's gaze and saw a man descending down the stairs, shaking hands with guests along the way. He was surprisingly small in stature but still exuded a commanding presence.

"It is rumored that when Vissarion Romanovich passes away, his eldest son, Vladimir, will inherit the family business and become Russia's top energy tycoon. Like father like son - it seems that slaves will give birth to slaves and kings will be born kings in this family. Vladimir has already gained more recognition than his father in the industry, and many believe that the business will thrive even more under his leadership. But amidst all of this family talk, there are whispers about another potential heir: Psych Bogdanov. Some say he may be an illegitimate son of Vissarion Romanovich, but with his gangster background, he doesn't quite fit in with the royal image of the family".

"Hm. You'll be surprised to know that individual is technically a member of the government," said Zhenya, glancing at Kwon Taek Joo.

It seemed like he must have misheard because Zhenya wasn't known for telling jokes. But Zhenya simply maintained a calm expression as he smiled at Kwon Taek Joo.

It was almost unbelievable. Was the person who had attempted to kidnap an innocent foreigner actually a government employee? The same person who had boldly wielded a bazooka in broad daylight in the middle of the city? Even a passing dog would find this situation comical.

But instead of correcting himself, Zhenya added more information about Psych Bogdanov.

"That individual is highly knowledgeable in the defense industry and their abilities are quite impressive. They are well-known in the criminal underworld where arms deals take place."

The "underworld" referred to here was the mafia. In recent years, the mafia had become a powerful force in the Russian economy. While they used to operate through illegal activities such as prostitution, human trafficking, and drug dealing, they have shifted their focus to the defense industry since the early 1990s. This has led to a significant increase in their income and solidified the defense industry, along with the energy sector, as major powers in today's Russian economy.

In Russia, the mafia often acquired weapons for more lucrative deals instead of going through the legal and official channels.

These advanced weapons were developed using national funds, the government appeared to turn a blind eye or even approve of this practice. The powerful financial influence of the mafia had led them to be seen as allies by the government, rather than enemies. The Bogdanov family is a prime example of this relationship.

Before Vissarion Romanovich's time, the Bogdanov family were not well-known in the business world. However, they quickly rose to prominence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, during a time when new corporations were thriving. It may seem unlikely, but if we assume that the Bogdanov family has connections to the mafia, it would explain their struggles before the 1990s.

Kwon Taek Joo also speculated on why Psyche Bogdanov is known as "Russia's nuclear".

Despite facing opposition from the Royal Family, he maintains strong ties within the underground world and serves as a bridge between two divided economies. It is common for weapons developed in Russia to be traded through the mafia due to their ability to generate higher profits outside of formal channels.

And while it is possible that the government is unaware of this practice, it is also likely that they choose to ignore it or even condone it.

## **Chapter 1.13 - Nuclear Man: Prick Your Ears and Listen**

Was the man who developed 'Anastasia' the same one that Morgan suspected and ended up getting killed for? Despite a lack of concrete evidence, it definitely seems fishy. Kwon Taek Joo was still deep in thought when Zhenya suddenly pointed out,

"I'm running low on wine."

The tray in front of him was littered with empty glasses. A normal waiter would have refilled the drinks before they were completely gone, maintaining an air of professionalism. But Kwon Taek Joo was so engrossed in their conversation that he lost track of time. When he finally glanced towards the kitchen hallway, the manager from earlier was giving him a strange look. "I have to go," Kwon Taek Joo said abruptly.

"Let's finish our discussion first. I saw Psych Bogdanov heading upstairs just now, followed by Alexei Perov and Yuri Levin." These were the Ministers of Defense and Foreign Affairs for Russia, respectively.

The fact that they were having a secret meeting with Psych Bogdanov piqued Kwon Taek Joo's curiosity.

"Turn on your communicator, I'll cover you," Zhenya insisted as Kwon Taek Joo hurried back to the kitchen.

There was something oddly carefree about his tone; it almost seemed like he was expecting something good to happen. But Kwon Taek Joo wasn't sure if he could trust someone as shady as Zhenya. He shook his head and made his way across the hallway. "Wait," the manager called out, catching his attention.

He quickly lifted his tray to obscure his face.

""Did you forget the instructions? Do your job properly and work quickly."

"Yes, I remember."

"I would have taken another step instead of answering, if it were me."

Kwon Taek Joo held himself responsible for catching his coworkers' mistakes and then reprimanding them. He composed himself and hurried through the hallway. The head chef's angry shouts still rang out from the kitchen. As soon as the waitstaff set down their empty trays, they were sent back out with new ones. Kwon Taek Joo had just entered the kitchen when someone snatched the empty tray from his hand.

He peered inside and noticed a corner of the kitchen where food was piling up without being cleaned. While another waiter distracted the chef, Kwon Taek Joo made his way to the kitchen counter. The chefs in each department put great effort into preparing ingredients, cooking dishes, and presenting and decorating them. But if something small like spilling sauce occurs at the end, the dish is mercilessly thrown away. As a result, trash accumulates and spills onto the floor.

According to the mansion's layout, there should be a door leading from the pantry to the backyard. And often trash is disposed of in places that are not easily visible. So there is no better place than the backyard.

Kwon Taek Joo lifted the heavy garbage bin. The kitchen staff were all too busy to pay attention to him. He walked around the kitchen counter and entered the ingredient storage room. There was a side door on the opposite wall. It was locked from inside so getting out wouldn't be an issue. What he needed to be careful about was security outside. As expected, as soon as he opened the door to step outside, Kwon Taek Joo was approached by a bodyguard.

"What's going on?"

"Oh, there's so much trash... If we don't take care of it right away, the head chef will go crazy."

The bodyguard glanced at Kwon Taek Joo and then at the trash can in his hand. His eyes quickly passed over Kwon Taek Joo and looked into the kitchen. The head chef's frantic shouting could still be heard from the open door. The guard seemed to understand the situation. Kwon Taek Joo bowed and headed out to dispose of the trash.

He took out the food waste while surveying the entire building. If the two ministers and Psych Bogdanov were having a secret meeting, then the first floor where the party was being held wouldn't be an ideal choice.

Of course, even if the entire first floor was eliminated, there would still be many empty rooms.

Kwon Taek Joo surveyed the entire mansion and suddenly fixed his gaze on a room at the end of the 3rd floor. Because it was night, all of the rooms had their curtains drawn, but for some reason that room was an exception. He didn't know why, but he just couldn't ignore it. It would be better to check it out.

Kwon Taek Joo visualized his general route. There were too many eyes inside so it would be better to move from the outside. The backyard was relatively quiet and the darkness of the building provided good cover. Of course, he needed to deal with the guards first.

Kwon Taek Joo returned to the ingredient storage room with an empty trash can. The same bodyguard was still keeping watch over the area. When Kwon Taek Joo approached, he turned around without any questions asked.

In a sudden moment, Kwon Taek Joo used a trash can to disorient his bodyguard and disarm him. He then proceeded to defeat him with a well-placed punch to the face, taking advantage of the lack of security in the building's back entrance. With no time to waste, Kwon Taek Joo prepares to climb the building using a nylon rope he had hidden in his watch. As he struggles with the weight and gravity of his own body, he is suddenly faced with an unexpected obstacle - his rope snaps due to repeated rubbing against sharp golden ornaments. In a moment of panic, Kwon Taek Joo braces for impact, but finds himself being caught by something or someone, saving him from what could have been a fatal fall.

He opened his eyes slowly. Kwon Taek Joo's body was suspended in the air, held up only by a thin nylon rope that had just snapped.

He quickly grabbed onto the third-floor window frame to stop himself from falling. The rope fell to the ground uselessly. Kwon Taek Joo let out a sigh of relief. It could have been much worse; he had almost fallen from a skyscraper over 100 meters high before. After taking a moment to calm his muscles and nerves, he pulled himself up onto the window frame.

He peered into the room, disappointment evident on his face. It was completely empty, with no trace of anyone ever being there. Kwon Taek Joo scanned the other rooms, each one large and difficult to navigate. How was he supposed to find Psych Bogdanov and the two ministers in this massive mansion? Just as he was trying to focus, he heard a clicking sound in his earpiece.

"Where are you?" Zhenya's voice came through.

Kwon Taek Joo hadn't even thought about using the communication device until now. He sighed again, feeling like he was wasting his time.

"If you're done playing around, listen carefully now,"

Zhenya continued. Confused, Kwon Taek Joo was about to ask what he meant when he heard the sound of a door opening and closing.

Instinctively, he lowered his breathing and focused on any signs or sounds around him. He could hear whispers of conversation coming from somewhere nearby, three distinct voices speaking in different tones.

But it was hard to tell if one of them belonged to Psych Bogdanov without hearing their real voices – all he could do was eavesdrop on their private conversation for now. "How is SS-29 coming along?" "We're waiting for Sonchev's update. They're searching for experts to fix any errors with SS-29, and it seems they're quite busy. Sonchev didn't even show up at the party tonight."

"We'll wait for their contact." "And what is North Korea's response to the error?" "They claim it was an unexpected incident."

"There were no issues during the experimental phase." Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but smile. In Russia, the designation "SS number" was

usually reserved for intercontinental ballistic missiles, or ICBMs. The infamous "Satan" ICBM from the Soviet era was officially called "SS-18". This meant that the weapon they were discussing, known as "SS-29", was likely a nuclear weapon of similar caliber. And the group mentioned – Sonchev – was a Slavic mafia organization.

They seemed to have possession of this weapon, which must have some connection to the Bogdanov family if they were hosting a large event like tonight's party. And even North Korea was involved in its development. Could this "SS-29" be the same as "

Anastasia"?

"What's the update on the Americans?"

"They're still quiet. We took care of the unexpected intruder, so maybe they're being more careful. But what does it matter? They're still stuck in a situation where they can't claim the body."

If it was a rat that snuck in, were they talking about Morgan's death? The possibilities range from secret nuclear weapons development in Russia to North Korean interference to US surveillance and elimination of spies. Every scenario is plausible, but without solid evidence, it's all just speculation.

The conversation paused briefly. Kwon Taek Joo heard the door open and close. Did someone leave the room? He wondered, but Zhenya gave an update on what was happening inside.

"Bogdanov just left. Looks like he's getting a phone call."

Kwon Taek Joo nodded and furrowed his brow. A question he hadn't considered while eavesdropping suddenly came to mind. Where was Zhenya anyway? How did he have such detailed knowledge of Psych Bogdanov's movements?

"How did you figure out what just happened?" Kwon Taek Joo asked.

"Well, I was escorted by a girl named Olga who claimed to be the youngest daughter of Visarion Romanovich. She offered to give me a tour of the mansion and who was I to refuse? So I slyly planted a listening device in the keyhole of their meeting room,

"Zhenya replied.

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but be more intrigued by Zhenya's identity than "Anastasia" at this point. What kind of person gets invited to a party at the heavily guarded Bogdanov family mansion and casually roams around like it's no big deal?

"Where are you right now?"

"In the basement control room."

"And what exactly are you doing there?"

"Oh, just watching someone almost fall from the third floor," Zhenya said with a mischievous laugh.

Kwon Taek Joo immediately spun around and gave the surveillance camera in the corner of the wall outside his middle finger without hesitation.

A burst of laughter erupted from Zhenya on the other end of their communication device.

After a moment, Zhenya spoke up again in surprise, "

Why are you hanging around outside?"

Kwon Taek Joo didn't bother answering - there was no need to explain himself. As he checked the time and saw that it was almost 3am, he remembered hearing part of Psych Bogdanoy's conversation earlier about an important phone call. Clearly, work can wait when there's some juicy gossip to eavesdrop on.

"The phone call that Psych went to receive, was it from Sonchev?"

"I'm not sure, but we can test it out. I noticed a landline phone on the second floor of the mansion when we were there earlier. There's also one in Bogdanov's office, but the lines are different so calls can only be received at his office."

"But how do we receive calls?"

Kwon Taek Joo asked, looking down. The location Zhenya mentioned wasn't far from where they were now; just open the door to the room

downstairs and it would be right in front of them. The important thing was to see if there was any security measures in place. It didn't seem too difficult to approach.

"Okay...if you can get from here to there in 8 seconds."

Looks like the line is connected. Timing is key. All Kwon Taek Joo had to do was reach the phone within eight seconds and answer at the same time as Psych Bogdanov picked up in his office. Easier said than done - even the slightest deviation could cause major trouble.

Kwon Taek Joo glanced at the CCTV then took out a piece of gum and started chewing. He stood up and placed his feet on the window frame, using his body weight to stay attached to the wall behind him. He didn't have any safety equipment prepared - 8 seconds wasn't a lot of time. He took a deep breath and jumped down.

He managed to grab onto something as he fell - it was the window frame on the second floor. His knuckles, wrists, and elbows were sore from the impact, but he gritted his teeth and pulled himself up. Three seconds had passed before he safely landed back on the window frame.

"Not bad" Zhenya chuckled as he watched Kwon Taek Joo struggle with everything while he sat comfortably looking at his computer screen.

Ignoring him, Kwon Taek Joo took out a lighter. At first glance, it appeared to be a regular Zippo lighter. But when he opened the lid, a long and thin tube resembling a screwdriver appeared.

He bent it and turned it on, causing a small ray of light to emit from the end. Kwon Taek Joo placed the chewing gum on the glass door and used the flame from the lighter to draw a circle around it.

Then, he carefully removed the gum and cut out a round piece of glass without making any noise. He placed it on the window sill and reached inside to unlock the window with ease. After quickly surveying his surroundings, Kwon Taek Joo stepped inside.

Kwon Taek Joo moved cautiously and light on his feet, like a cat. He crept towards the door, pressing his ear against it to listen for any signs of activity outside. It was eerily quiet. Slowly, he opened the door and

stepped out, turning his head to see a table at the far end of the hallway. The phone Zhenya had mentioned was sitting on top.

Just as he made his way towards the table, he heard Zhenya's voice in his ear again.

"I'll give you a signal; make sure to synchronize properly."

Kwon Taek Joo nodded and reached for the receiver. At that moment, Zhenya began counting down from the other end of the radio.

"Three."

He took a deep breath.

"Two."

Kwon Taek Joo looked back over his shoulder, checking for anyone approaching.

"One."

As soon as Zhenya finished counting, power surged through Kwon Taek Joo's hand holding the receiver.

"Do you hear it?"

Kwon Taek Joo grabbed the receiver and listened intently. There was complete silence. Not only did he not hear anything from the other side of the line, but Zhenya also didn't say anything. It seemed like Kwon Taek Joo was the only one holding the receiver. His mouth felt dry.

Could I have gotten it wrong again? He clutched the stethoscope tightly, waiting for any sound.

Was it just the sound of wind? Suddenly, Psych Bogdanov's voice came through loud and clear from the other end of the receiver.

"Right on schedule. Just as we were discussing."

"I have just reached an agreement with that party."

"And how is it going?"

"We'll be sending a technician from North Korea."

"This is the best news among everything I've heard. When will they be sent?"

"We leave tomorrow and should arrive in Moscow the following day."

"We need to make sure there are no unwanted visitors like last time."

"Our technician will disguise themselves as a Chinese tourist, so even Americans won't suspect them."

"Keep monitoring their movements and report back regularly."

"Yes, of course."

The call was abruptly disconnected, leaving a sense of unease in the air. Kwon Taek Joo furrowed his brows, already on edge from the cautious conversation. He held onto the stethoscope tightly, feeling its weight and solidity grounding him in the midst of uncertainty.

His confidence wavered for a moment, but he quickly regained it, determined to wait until Psych hung up first.

Suddenly, a deafening roar erupted from his communication device, causing a sharp pain to shoot through his ear and into his brain like an awl. Kwon Taek Joo's body convulsed as he kneeled down, clutching his head in agony. He frantically tore off his communication device and threw it away, but the sound continued to reverberate in his head.

Cold sweat dripped down his forehead and a shiver ran down his spine as he struggled to regain control of himself. Even his vision was blurred from the shock and his heart pounded in his chest.

He couldn't understand why the normally reliable communication equipment had suddenly malfunctioned. Surely, Psych Bogdanov must have heard that deafening noise as well.

Cursing under his breath, Kwon Taek Joo knew that his worst fears had come true. A gunshot rang out outside the mansion, signaling that Zhenya had been discovered by the security guard amidst all the chaos. In this dire situation, he needed to think quickly and act even faster.

Fighting through the dizziness and confusion, Kwon Taek Joo shakily stood up and stumbled down the hallway. His mind was still reeling and

he couldn't focus on finding an escape route.

He simply ran blindly, desperate to avoid any more danger.

## **Chapter 1.14 – Nuclear Man: Don’t Hate Me So Much!**

As Kwon Taek Joo reached the central staircase, he heard hurried footsteps coming from below. At least three or four people were approaching. It appeared as though the guards were on their way to search for the intruder. If he continued to delay, the number of guards would only increase. He decided it was best to avoid confrontation while there were still few in number. Changing his original plan, Kwon Taek Joo headed upstairs.

The 3rd floor was eerily quiet. He pressed himself against a wall and scanned his surroundings. The guards were getting closer by the minute. Kwon Taek Joo took long strides down the hallway, careful not to make any noise with his shoes.

Suddenly, he noticed someone at the door of one of the rooms. It seemed like whoever was inside was about to come out. The doorknob began to turn and Kwon Taek Joo quickly ducked in the opposite direction before the door could fully open.

Moments later, the door opened and the guards entered the room silently.

"Have you found anything yet?"

The voice and tone sounded familiar - it was the same voice Kwon Taek Joo had overheard during a phone call. Psych Bogdanov.

"We're still searching, but we suspect there may have been an intruder. Traces of entry from outside have been detected. It's not safe here, so please come with us downstairs first."

The two ministers and Psych silently followed the suggestion. Half of the guards who had gone to provide cover on the third floor had left, leaving only two or three remaining outside the door. They were all armed, making it difficult to handle them.

One of the guards attempted to close the open door. Holding his breath, Kwon Taek Joo watched as the guard's hand on the doorknob moved - on both sides of the door. In that split second, Kwon Taek Joo kicked the door with all his might. The guard's head snapped back as the door flew open, causing him to fall with a loud thud.

Another guard peered into the room next to him and inched his head out when he sensed something suspicious. He quickly found his fallen comrade and cautiously approached. As he stooped down to examine the other guard's wound, a figure silently slipped through the door behind him. The guard reacted swiftly, reaching for his gun, but before he could fire a shot, a bullet pierced his shoulder from the opposite side of the door.

"Bang!"

Hearing the gunshots, another guard sprinted from down the hall. As soon as he saw that his fellow guards had been hit, he opened fire without hesitation. Kwon Taek Joo ran to the end of the hallway, dodging bullets along the way, but soon found himself surrounded by more guards coming up the stairs.

Desperate for an escape route, Kwon Taek Joo ducked into the nearest room. It wasn't ideal, but it was better than being caught out in the open. He locked the door and hastily piled nearby objects against it to create a makeshift barricade. Outside, the guards banged on the door with increasing intensity. Kwon Taek Joo knew it wouldn't hold for long.

Turning around to look for another escape option, Kwon Taek Joo suddenly felt a sense of *déjà vu* wash over him. This room...he had been here before. In fact, it was the same room on the 3rd floor that he had scoped out earlier.

Meanwhile, outside the door, there was a commotion as more guards gathered. It seemed like they were discussing how best to break into this particular room on the 3rd floor. What should he do now? Kwon Taek Joo scanned his surroundings for any possible escape routes.

He even climbed onto a table and prodded at the ceiling in case it was thin enough to punch through and climb up. But unfortunately, it was

too solid. He tried the walls, but they were just as impenetrable.

As the guards in the hallway fired at the now closed door, Kwon Taek Joo weighed his options. He was backed against a bookshelf with two Colt guns in hand, ready to face whoever came through that door. There was no other way out for him.

The smell of cigars, so familiar to him, caught his attention and he turned around just in time to be attacked from behind. His mouth was covered and a strong arm squeezed tightly around his neck. Before he could even think about escaping, he was dragged inside and everything went dark.

Soon after, the sound of the door breaking down echoed through the room as guards rushed in. They searched high and low for the intruder, pushing books off shelves and lifting furniture and curtains.

Meanwhile, Kwon Taek Joo was dragged through a secret passage by someone he recognized only by their scent. As they walked through narrow corridors, Zhenya suddenly stopped and scanned the ceiling before causing a stone tile to vibrate. Through a small gap in the floor, they saw someone walking back and forth in the room below. Kwon Taek Joo signaled for Zhenya to lower the floor and they both descended into the room. When a guard approached them, Zhenya pushed on the ceiling tile to knock him off balance and give Kwon Taek Joo an opportunity to take him down with his guns.

The sound of gunfire echoed through the air, causing Zhenya to tilt his head to avoid being hit. He felt a sharp pain as a bullet grazed his earlobe, drawing blood. Despite this, he couldn't help but burst into laughter.

Meanwhile, Kwon Taek Joo's bullet struck one of the bodyguards in the hand, causing him to yell out and clench his wounded hand.

But the tragedy was far from over. Before he knew it, Zhenya had approached them. Kwon Taek Joo's instincts warned him that something terrible would happen to the poor man. However, he was busy and didn't have any free time to intervene.

He didn't want to make the situation worse than it already was, but he couldn't stop what happened next.

"Ugh... Ugh... Zzzz... Argh.."

Zhenya forcefully opened the guard's mouth and shoved both hands inside. The guard struggled and tried to free himself, but Zhenya's grip was too strong. With a sudden jerk, Zhenya removed his hands from the guard's mouth.

Kwon Taek Joo turned away in disgust at the gruesome sound of jaw bones breaking and being separated. The bodyguard passed out from the pain and trauma. Kwon Taek Joo took a step back, feeling like he was witnessing a scene from a savage animal attack rather than human behavior. It was absolutely inhumane, especially with the way Zhenya smiled afterwards.

With blood still on his hands, Zhenya looked around until his eyes landed on Kwon Taek Joo. The man took a step back and shook his head disapprovingly.

"I didn't think that was impossible."

Zhenya continued to approach him. Kwon Taek Joo tried to step back, but it was futile as Zhenya quickly closed the distance between them. Kwon Taek Joo's eyes glinted with anger and wariness as he stared at Zhenya. But Zhenya seemed unfazed, only a hint of a smile on his face. He showed no signs of remorse.

Aggravated, Kwon Taek Joo unbuttoned his shirt and threw it at Zhenya, cursing him for the bloody mess. But Zhenya didn't seem bothered and simply wiped his hands on the shirt, staining it with blood and bodily fluids.

"Why don't you use a handkerchief?"

"What's it to you?"

Zhenya seemed to imply that it was okay to just take someone else's shirt if necessary.

"Over there!"

Meanwhile, the other guards scattered in response to the gunfire. Kwon Taek Joo was torn between retreating back into the hallway or confronting the chaos directly. Suddenly, Zhenya grabbed his collar and dragged him towards the window. Looking outside, they could see cars racing away from the mansion due to the commotion. Without hesitation, Zhenya opened the window and forcefully lifted Kwon Taek Joo onto the windowsill. It became clear that this room was located at the front of the mansion, rather than the back.

With a strong grip, Zhenya pulled Kwon Taek Joo closer to the window to get a better view of what was happening outside.

The guards broke into the room and demanded surrender. Kwon Taek Joo felt an overwhelming force against him from every direction - his head, back, and even his arms and legs. Despite being surrounded, Zhenya's momentum did not waver. He continued to stare straight ahead and whisper incomprehensible words.

"Get ready," Zhenya said abruptly.

"What?" Kwon Taek Joo asked, confused.

"Now," Zhenya replied tersely.

Before Kwon Taek Joo could process what was happening, Zhenya yelled "Jump!" and launched them both into the air. They were quickly dragged away by landing on a waiting sedan outside the mansion.

The car sped off in a frenzy, swerving in all directions as Kwon Taek Joo struggled to keep his balance. If he hadn't managed to grab onto the rear trunk lid, he would have been thrown off the car.

Zhenya maintained his balance by twisting half of his body and punching the driver's side window with a fierce determination. The glass cracked slightly before shattering under Zhenya's repeated blows.

He reached inside and yanked the driver out of the car, ignoring the futile attempts of the seat belt to hold them in place.

The driver was forcibly pulled out of the car as the person sitting in the passenger seat awkwardly took control of the wheel. Zhenya, determined and quick-thinking, kicked the intruder with both feet and

managed to squeeze into the driver's seat before accelerating without hesitation.

The sudden movement caused Kwon Taek Joo's body to lurch uncontrollably. He struggled to crawl into the backseat while bullets from the security team flew around them, but he finally made it inside just in time.

With barely a moment to catch their breath, Kwon Taek Joo aimed his gun at the man sitting in the backseat - the owner of the car they had just stolen. It wasn't his intention to kill him, but rather to use him as a shield against any further attacks from Vladimir Bogdanov and his men.

But their optimism was short-lived as bullets continued to fly towards them, this time from a rifle held by Bogdanov himself who was leaning out of a window at the distant mansion. Luckily, they were far enough away that none of the shots hit their target. The sedan sped away from the danger and towards one more obstacle - the main gate, which was tightly shut.

Despite seeing their impending collision with the iron gate, Zhenya showed no signs of slowing down. In fact, he pressed harder on the gas pedal until they reached top speed. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but wonder if Zhenya was insane or simply fearless in the face of danger.

"Aaaahhhh!"

The screams of terror from the car's owner filled their ears as they drew closer and closer to certain impact. Even if they tried to brake now, it would be too late. The security team stationed at the gate scrambled to get out of harm's way as the reckless sedan barreled towards them. Just when it seemed like all hope was lost, miraculously, the iron gate began to open.

The car crashed through the half-opened gate and sped away, leaving the bewildered security team in their wake. But the screams of terror from the car's owner continued, much to Kwon Taek Joo's annoyance. In a split second, a gunshot rang out and the screaming stopped. The car's owner slumped in his seat, a bullet through his forehead.

Covered in blood, Kwon Taek Joo glared at Zhenya with seething anger. He wished he could just shoot him right then and there for all the trouble he caused. But Zhenya seemed completely unaffected by the chaos and casually muttered,

"...Too Noisy."

Water cascaded down from the showerhead, disappearing into the drain. As he reached up to loosen his tie, the man hummed and sang a tune. Slowly, he peeled off his clothes until his strong, muscular body was revealed. He shook out his damp hair before stepping into the warm spray of the shower.

His wet blonde hair turned darker as it clung to his skin. The water flowed down his chin and stopped at his defined collarbone before continuing down over his chiseled chest muscles. The tattoo on his chest became more visible against the backdrop of wet skin. His muscles rippled and relaxed under the hot water, while his fingers gently massaged shampoo into his hair.

But behind the steamy mirror, a pair of intense eyes stared back at him with violent intent. It was like looking at a crocodile after it had just tasted blood – comfortable yet brutal.

Kwon Taek Joo dumped all the ice from his drink into the bucket and mixed in some cheap vodka. The contents were on the verge of spilling over, but he didn't hesitate to plunge his hand in. Some vodka spilled out and a few ice cubes fell onto the table. He winced as a burning sensation shot through his wrist. It was an old injury that had been bothering him lately, a dislocated joint that he should have taken better care of. But with all the stress and exhaustion, he ignored the doctor's advice and stopped wearing a cast.

Kwon Taek Joo sighed and leaned back against the dusty old sofa. He closed his eyes, trying to ignore the pain spreading through his body. The sound of running water echoed from the bathroom where Zhenya was taking a bath without permission. Kwon Taek Joo had just escaped from the Bogdanov mansion and returned to this rundown boarding house where they were staying temporarily. The owner was away, so they could easily sneak back in, but it wasn't a safe place for them to

stay for long. Kwon Taek Joo had paid for the room using Zhenya's card, which meant their location would soon be discovered.

It wasn't surprising that there was chaos outside their window. Roads were being monitored and barriers were set up at every entrance. Patrol cars were constantly patrolling the city center, ringing warning bells. This was expected after a deadly shooting had occurred at a gathering of Russia's influential figures. Security would remain tight for some time, making it risky for Kwon Taek Joo to make any moves now. It would be best to wait until surveillance relaxed before taking any action, but the situation didn't seem to be in their favor.

Finally, the sound of running water stopped and Zhenya emerged from the bathroom fully dressed from head to toe. Kwon Taek Joo was surprised by this, wondering why he didn't just wear a towel or something. They were both men, after all, and it wasn't unusual for them to see each other naked.

Zhenya noticed Kwon Taek Joo's curious gaze but didn't seem bothered by it. He simply looked back at him with more attention.

Zhenya took a sip of vodka, caught off guard by the question he received. He seemed confused as to why someone like him would be asked about their identity.

"You don't seem like an agent like me in any way. Your nonchalant entry into the Bogdanov mansion showed that much. You had an official invitation and smoothly blended in with the other guests. It was almost too natural, not forced or planned at all. But is that really all there is to you? You know every detail about the mansion's layout and even its emergency exits. As partners, we should always be aware of each other's whereabouts and actions, but I have no idea where you are or what your plans are until you suddenly appear. So tell me, what exactly is your role? You've never willingly shared information with me, and it seems like our goals may differ."

"Hasn't your superior revealed everything to you yet?"

"I know very little. Enlighten me."

"Is this an interrogation?"

"Let's call it a self-introduction. You still haven't properly introduced yourself."

Kwon Taek Joo tapped lightly on the table, making it clear that Zhenya shouldn't try to escape. Zhenya wasn't thrown off by the unexpected question, instead he just smiled and anticipated what Kwon Taek Joo was thinking.

"It's obvious I'm Russian, with a distinctive accent and pronunciation that points to someone who was born and raised here. I also have access to a personal helicopter without difficulty and was involved in a public conflict without facing any consequences.

Is that why you're so interested in my identity?"

"Alright. What I don't understand is why someone like you, who is 100% Russian and comes from a privileged background in this country, would be helping us with our work."

That question had been nagging at Kwon Taek Joo since their encounter. Zhenya was clearly Russian, but unlike Kwon Taek Joo himself, he wasn't swayed by his superiors' agendas. This made him a powerful ally for neutralizing any potential threats from those in positions of power. It was hard for Kwon Taek Joo to comprehend why Zhenya would cooperate with them in this operation unless it was an exceptionally important and urgent matter.

Zhenya simply shrugged his shoulders, trying to appear unconcerned.

"Along with being a Russian citizen, I am also a businessman," he stated. Kwon Taek Joo's expression became even more bewildered. The words themselves weren't difficult to understand, but the idea behind them was harder for him to accept.

So, was Zhenya willing to risk his life in this game for personal profit?

To Kwon Taek Joo, it seemed like an act of betrayal and treason. "Are you willing to sacrifice your integrity for fame?" he asked incredulously. "There is no business deal more lucrative than selling out your own country."

The sheer absurdity of it all stunned Kwon Taek Joo. He had never expected anything grand from Zhenya, but he still thought of himself as a patriotic citizen. He was just doing his job; he never imagined that he might have to sacrifice his life for his country. But Zhenya's actions were a whole different level of betrayal and damage to their nation. "

"Do you even know why we are playing this dangerous game?" Kwon Taek Joo demanded.

"Of course," Zhenya replied confidently. "We are testing whether this weapon can strike fear into both South Korea and the United States. If it proves successful, we will use it against our enemies."

He paused for a moment before adding cunningly, "And if the weapon fails, we will simply take the blueprints and continue developing it elsewhere." It was clear that Zhenya knew everything about this mission - including its potential impact on international relations and how detrimental it could be for their own country's standing. "

"What do you gain from all this?" Kwon Taek Joo pressed on, feeling increasingly unsettled by Zhenya's cold-hearted attitude towards his country's well-being. "To me, it doesn't matter whether the weapon succeeds or fails," Zhenya revealed.

"All I care about is getting my hands on Anastasia's blueprint. That is my ultimate goal, not her herself."

It became apparent to Kwon Taek Joo that Zhenya's motives were different from the others in their group - it wasn't just about completing the mission and finding Anastasia; it was about obtaining the valuable blueprint for himself.

"If we succeed, I will obtain that blueprint as my reward," Zhenya concluded with a surreptitious grin

"What?"

"It doesn't sound like a bad deal, right? Without these conditions, who would willingly participate in such a risky venture? Think about it. Anastasia's existence is more terrifying than fire. The one who possesses her will hold unimaginable power, fueled by the fear she

incites. If I have the blueprint, I can create my own version of Anastasia. And even if my attempt fails, it's still a masterpiece weapon that I can develop and sell to special customers."

"Special customers?"

Zhenya just grinned without answering. If he were to successfully create a second Anastasia, his target market would be those who understand the true potential of such a weapon - whether they be from Korea or America. Kwon Taek Joo's mind was now clearer on the plan for this campaign. However, as much as his doubts had been resolved, his trust in Zhenya seemed to diminish.

But Zhenya's strange actions could be understood. His exceptional information gathering skills were what made him an ideal partner for Kwon Taek Joo. The headquarters could not afford any unnecessary risks.

While reason dictated this, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but feel uneasy for some reason. He maintained a suspicious gaze towards Zhenya, who continued to make sarcastic comments.

"Your first impression of me wasn't great, so now you have to be skeptical of my every move?"

"I'm just thinking."

"Don't hate me too much."

Zhenya laughed loudly at his own joke. Kwon Taek Joo gave an irritated look and took something out of his pocket before tossing it to Zhenya - a tape recorder. It contained Bogdanov's phone call with someone from "Sonchev".

"As you heard, it seems that Bogdanov is working on developing a new weapon - possibly an intercontinental ballistic missile, but we need to confirm it. I can't say for sure if it's Anastasia or not, but with the involvement of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Defense, and North Korea, it seems highly likely."

Zhenya nodded silently, then turned to look at Kwon Taek Joo, as if urging him to continue.

"I will use this tape recorder to program Bogdanov's voice into a voice converter. With that, we can find out who he was speaking to from 'Sonchev' on the phone. And once we meet with 'Sonchev', we'll be able to uncover the identity of the newly arrived North Korean engineer and their destination."

Zhenya listened attentively before raising his hand to stroke his eyebrows, appearing hesitant.

"Do you know why all mafia members have tattoos on their bodies?"

"Is that relevant right now?"

"Not knowing could shorten your life."

"What do you mean?"

"Mafia tattoos symbolize belonging. By looking at the tattoos on an old mafia member's body, you can piece together their life story - which group they belonged to and who they pledged allegiance to. So if you harm one of the 'Sonchevs', you will make enemies out of everyone bearing similar tattoos. Does that make sense?"

"I don't care."

Zhenya raised a brow.

"What do you believe in that gives you such confidence?"

"I don't believe in anything. It's just..."

"Just?"

Kwon Taek Joo withdrew his right hand from the ice box and slowly rotated his stiff wrist.

"It's just that I have a pretty useful monster as my partner."

Zhenya immediately recognized himself as the "monster." The compliment was somewhat ambiguous, and Kwon Taek Joo's tone did not sound like he was praising him. However, there was something about it that made Zhenya feel strangely proud.

"Huh? If that's how you see it, then I'm fine with that."

His voice sounded indifferent, but pride was evident in Zhenya's face. His shoulders straightened and his chin lifted slightly. They say praise can even make whales dance, and Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but feel a bit embarrassed watching Zhenya casually boast about something that wasn't even a real compliment.

But this doesn't have to make him lose interest. In fact, he saw an opportunity in Zhenya's enthusiastic state. For the first time, Kwon Taek Joo grinned and handed over his phone with a friendly tone.

"Pretty good, huh? Go ahead and give it a call."

The plan was to use the call as bait to lure "Sonchev" out.

E/N:

A popular South Korean Saying said by Taekjoo: "평생동안 물고기 춤을 추게 한다" translates as "

praise can even make whales dance

". Also based on a book called "Compliments Make Even Whales Dance" (Original title: Whale Done by Ken Blanchard) which was popular in Korea"

## **Chapter 1.15 – Nuclear Man: Let Me Take My Shirt for You**

Translator's Note: This chapter includes violence!! Also a little bit of sexual talk in some parts near the end.

Upon arrival, the two noticed several black sedans already parked at the old warehouse. The only person inside was a man who appeared to be a low-level member of the mafia. Kwon Taek Joo and Zhenya waited nearby, carefully observing the movements around them. They waited for the right time to enter, but no one else joined or made any surprise attacks.

Kwon Taek Joo checked his Colt's magazine while Zhenya threw away his cigar. As soon as it stopped rolling on the floor, the two silently moved forward.

In one swift motion, Kwon Taek Joo pulled the trigger twice on his silenced Colt. However, the car's bulletproof glass prevented any immediate damage, leaving only a large crack on the windshield. The low-level mafia man quickly reached for his rifle.

Before he could aim at them, something heavy landed on the car's hood, causing it to shake. It turned out to be Zhenya's doing as he grabbed hold of the man by his collar and pulled him out of the car. Kwon Taek Joo looked away as they took care of their target.

Not long after, Zhenya returned and tossed a handkerchief at Kwon Taek Joo. The man wiped his hands on it without hesitation, staining it red. While he was distracted, Kwon Taek Joo looked around the old warehouse for any sign of 'Sonchey'.

He suddenly turned to face Zhenya who met his gaze immediately. After a brief nod from Kwon Taek Joo, Zhenya entered first with a smile. Kwon Taek Joo followed suit, waving away dust that clouded their vision. They surveyed the messy space filled with office furniture and

construction materials haphazardly thrown about. The brick walls were partially collapsed, and there was even a hole in the ceiling.

Sitting in the middle of the chaos was a middle-aged Russian man, Boris - also known as 'Sonchev'. Behind him stood five or six large figures, creating an intimidating atmosphere even though it was only a brief meeting.

What surprised them was Boris' nonchalant reaction. He seemed unfazed by the fact that Psych Bogdanov himself did not summon them. Instead, he appeared amused and slightly surprised.

"You're a bit late, aren't you?" Boris broke the silence.

"I heard there was quite a commotion at the Bogdanov mansion last night. And I heard you were responsible for it. It seems like things are getting serious now."

Boris's piercing gaze bore into Zhenya, a silent acknowledgement of the chaos that had erupted at the Bogdanov mansion. Zhenya, ever the cunning mastermind, neither confirmed nor denied his involvement; instead, he simply smirked and shrugged in a nonchalant manner. Both men exuded an air of danger, belonging to the secret underworld where such events were commonplace.

Boris gave Kwon Taek Joo a thorough once-over before turning to Zhenya with a quizzical expression, silently asking for an explanation.

"Why cause such a commotion?" Boris finally asked, frustration seeping into his voice.

"Why not?" Zhenya's grin widened, revealing a slyness that could rival any fox. "Sometimes being reckless pays off."

Boris shook his head disapprovingly, knowing all too well the risks involved in their line of work. But Zhenya remained unfazed, always pushing boundaries and taking risks for the sake of profit. It was just another day in the life of a true player.

Kwon Taek Joo felt uneasy under Zhenya's assessing gaze, not because of the scrutiny itself but because it meant he was seen as an equal to someone like Zhenya. A thought that both excited and terrified him.

Kwon Taek Joo wasted no time and immediately joined the conversation.

"That's enough small talk, let's get to the point. Where is Anastasia?"

Boris raised an eyebrow in suspicion.

"Anastasia? I have no idea why you would think I know."

So he still won't cooperate. And there is still no concrete evidence linking 'SS-29' to 'Anastasia'. Kwon Taek Joo knew from the start that this wouldn't be easy.

"So you do know about 'SS-29'? I have some questions about that weapon."

"It seems I've fallen into a trap, is that your intention all along? I can't decide if you're brave or naive. Surely you don't expect me to just give you all the answers?"

"Then there's only one option left. If you won't talk, then we'll use force."

Before Kwon Taek Joo could finish his sentence, bullets started flying. He quickly rolled towards a pile of construction materials for cover. The constant barrage of bullets created a thick cloud of dust, making it difficult for Kwon Taek Joo to see clearly. His ears were ringing from the noise. But the gunfire continued without letting up.

Kwon Taek Joo timed his counterattack perfectly and threw a smoke bomb into the warehouse. Black smoke quickly filled the area, giving him cover to destroy the fluorescent light bulbs one by one.

The sound of shattering glass echoed through the chaos inside. Gunshots could be heard somewhere in the distance, along with screams and the sickening sound of bones breaking.

Zhenya was nowhere to be seen, but Kwon Taek Joo wasn't worried. No matter what happens, he will survive. Right now, he needed to focus on his own safety.

Kwon Taek Joo put on special goggles, allowing him to track the movements of the mafia members based on their body activity. In the

midst of the chaos, he couldn't distinguish between friend or foe and simply fired his gun while constantly moving among the crowd.

"Arghh!"

"Ahh!"

As screams filled the air, bodies dropped one by one before Kwon Taek Joo's eyes. He continued towards the chair where Boris was supposed to be sitting but found it empty. Panic started to set in as he searched for his target and Zhenya, but they were nowhere to be seen. Kwon Taek Joo scanned the area, trying to figure out how far they could have gone.

Suddenly, a presence behind him made him tense up. He turned around just in time to dodge a sharp blade that sliced through his sleeve, leaving it soaked in blood. He instinctively backed away, ready to defend himself against his opponent who had aimed for his head. But then he hesitated - would killing someone who wasn't Boris serve any purpose? Before he could make a decision, his attacker lunged at him again with the blade aimed for his neck.

However, a tall figure appeared near the door, arms crossed in an arrogant stance. It was Zhenya, looking unbothered as always as he watched the commotion. Kwon Taek Joo noticed a pile of bodies on the floor near him, revealing that Zhenya had been having some fun of his own. The blade once again came for Kwon Taek Joo's stomach and he used his gun to block it before shooting at his opponent's knee.

The man fell to the ground with a groan, similar to Boris' cries earlier. Kwon Taek Joo let out a sigh of relief and removed his goggles, only to see blood dripping down from his arm onto the floor. He realized he needed to stop the bleeding quickly and rummaged through his bag before remembering he had given his handkerchief to Zhenya earlier. With no other options left, Kwon Taek Joo took off his jacket and unbuttoned his shirt as makeshift bandages while Zhenya approached at a leisurely pace.

"That was a close one," Zhenya commented, flashing Kwon Taek Joo a playful smirk. "Can you imagine if you had gotten shot in the stomach? You'd have to go a whole month without sex."

Kwon Taek Joo shook his head and struggled to unbutton his sleeve with one hand. Zhenya chuckled and stepped forward to help. "At this rate, we'll be here all night," he teased, pushing Kwon Taek Joo's hand away and expertly undoing the buttons.

Kwon Taek Joo mentally noted that this assistance would have been nice several minutes ago.

Zhenya raised his arm, revealing a slow trickle of blood running down his side.

"Thanks to me, you won't bleed out anytime soon. Aren't you grateful?"

"Oh, absolutely," Kwon Taek Joo replied sarcastically but with genuine gratitude in his smile.

Kwon Taek Joo dropped his voice to hushed whisper, "There's still a lot of work to do," but Zhenya remained silent. His gaze was focused intently on unbuttoning Kwon Taek Joo's shirt as if it were the most important task in the world. Unbeknownst to him, Kwon Taek Joo was staring at his gentle fingers delicately working each button.

"Okay, it's done."

Annoyed by the touch of Zhenya's hand, Kwon Taek Joo shook it off and removed his shirt himself. The last button popped off from being thrown so forcefully. Without hesitation, he wrapped the shirt tightly around his bleeding left arm and tied it into a knot using his teeth. This type of situation wasn't uncommon for him on solo missions.

After stopping the bleeding, he approached Boris. Despite his injured leg, he managed to grab a gun and point it at Boris. With force, he made Boris sit back in the chair from earlier and handcuffed him tightly with his hands behind his back. Kwon Taek Joo then placed his foot on the chair and pushed it backwards.

With a loud bang, the chair collapsed and Boris fell to the ground with a groan. Kwon Taek Joo picked up the chair and repeated this action several times.

Boris didn't flinch as he was thrown to the floor multiple times. In fact, he seemed to be mocking Kwon Taek Joo. Suddenly, he grabbed his own

hair and let out an unpleasant laugh.

"You think I'll tell you?"

"Just wait and see."

Kwon Taek Joo forced a fake smile. He quickly walked over to a computer against the wall, pushed away all the clutter around it, and grabbed an old keyboard. He smashed it against the wall to separate each key and then picked up the fallen keys and returned to Boris. He forcefully opened Boris's mouth and shoved the keys inside.

Boris's cheeks immediately puffed up. Kwon Taek Joo tightly taped his lips to prevent any of the contents from spilling out. Zhenya stepped forward and watched with interest.

Once everything was prepared, Kwon Taek Joo slowly circled around Boris.

"A North Korean engineer is being sent to fix the SS-29 issue, right? I heard he'll arrive tomorrow. Where should I go to meet him?"

Boris remained motionless. Kwon Taek Joo crouched down to be eye level with him, showing no emotion in his dark eyes. Boris glared back at him with bloodshot eyes. Suddenly, Kwon Taek Joo punched his swollen cheek. The face that had been relaxed became contorted in pain as the keys inside his mouth caused even more discomfort. Just the thought of being hit with a fist was excruciating.

But Boris stubbornly refused to talk. It's no wonder he was known as 'Sonchev'. Kwon Taek Joo stood back up. Boris took a quiet breath, then suddenly punched himself in the face. His whole body shook from the intense pain, causing his eyes to roll back and emit screams even though his mouth was full.

Kwon Taek Joo tightly gripped Boris's cheeks, which were wincing in agony. The color drained from his face. "Are you ready to talk now?" Kwon Taek Joo asked. Boris shook his head defiantly, his eyes glaring at him with anger. Kwon Taek Joo's expression turned cold. Zhenya stood by watching and laughing.

Anger boiled over in Kwon Taek Joo and he began ferociously punching Boris like a punching bag. He had been patient for so long and suddenly snapped. Saliva and blood dripped from Boris's tightly shut mouth. When Kwon Taek Joo finally removed the tape, his lips parted helplessly. Computer keys and teeth were covered in blood.

"I'll ask again. Who is the technician who came to fix the SS-29 and where is he going?"

Boris smirked at the persistent question and suddenly spat out saliva mixed with blood that landed on Kwon Taek Joo's face. Without even bothering to wipe it away, Kwon Taek Joo silently picked up Boris's fallen knife.

"Why don't you leave?"

He coldly suggested to Zhenya, almost as if out of concern or advice.

"Just pretend I'm not here."

Though he felt some concern for him, it seemed unnecessary. The anticipation of watching an interesting scene filled Zhenya's gleaming eyes.

"Alright," Kwon Taek Joo stated, walking towards Boris. He paused to take a deep breath and locked gaze with Kwon Taek Joo who seemed capable of ripping him apart with just one look. Despite his weakened state, he still radiated energy. It seemed that Kwon Taek Joo would have to resort to his last option.

"Indian warriors proved their bravery by hunting as many enemies as possible. They were notorious for their brutality and inflicted excruciating pain on their opponents until the very end. In comparison, beheading and separating flesh from the body may seem more humane, as it only causes pain in the moment. I've heard that they often scalp their enemies while they are still alive."

As Kwon Taek Joo spoke, he stroked Boris's forehead, causing his hair to fall back and reveal his broad forehead. With the knife in his hand, he drew a line on it.

"Ahh!"

Boris writhed in agony as the blade cut into his flesh. It was not unbearable, but blood oozed from the wound.

"They make a small incision on the forehead with two fingers and then slowly peel off the skin. Most people die of shock before all the skin is removed. The pain supposedly surpasses being stabbed, shot, or having bones broken."

A wicked grin appeared on Kwon Taek Joo's lips, and Zhenya's excitement reached its peak. For the first time in his life, Boris felt true fear for the impending ordeal.

"Ahh!"

His scream echoed throughout the building.

The doors of the warehouse opened, revealing a satisfied Zhenya and a clearly dissatisfied Kwon Taek Joo. As they walked to the car together, Zhenya followed closely behind him.

"Why didn't you skin him?" Zhenya asked, sounding like a disappointed child who had his playtime cut short.

"Because it made me uncomfortable," Kwon Taek Joo replied nonchalantly, brushing the blood off his hands. Zhenya continued to babble without understanding the gravity of the situation.

"You know, you looked quite sexy just now. My little friend down there got rock hard," Zhenya teased.

"Well next time, tell me right away I would be more than happy to strip some scalp off you anytime," Kwon Taek Joo retorted, gritting his teeth in anger as he pulled Zhenya's collar. But even as their faces were inches apart, Zhenya's cold fingers wrapping around his wrist, made him recoil.

The brief contact between their skin sent chills down Kwon Taek Joo's spine, but Zhenya merely smirked as if nothing unusual had happened.

"So what's our next move?"

Kwon Taek Joo replied in response and Zhenya took off sauntering without another word. His back swayed gently as if he were humming a

tune. Kwon Taek Joo stood there watching him, unable to shake off the feeling that something wasn't quite right.

Zhenya could switch from serious to carefree at the drop of a hat, pretending not to notice if his partner caught on. But Kwon Taek Joo knew better - behind that laid-back facade was a dangerous person, indulging in sick thrills.

With just one step, Zhenya could easily blur the line between sanity and madness. It was a constant battle for Kwon Taek Joo to keep up with his partner's ever-changing mindset.

## **Chapter 1.16 – Siberian Train: Getting to Know Each other (18+)**

Translator's Note: This chapter has some sexual content so be warned before reading !!!!

The train chugged away from the city of Moscow, leaving behind the lights and noise in its wake. As it pierced through the darkness of the night, a thick veil of blackness descended outside the windows. Inside, however, there was a sense of calm and serenity that filled the air.

As the train embarks on its journey towards Beijing, passengers settle into their respective classes. Third class is crowded and cramped, with passengers battling for any small amenity they can get. The lack of partitions between seats makes it impossible to escape the constant tossing and turning of their restless neighbors. In contrast, first and second class carriages are filled with anticipation and excitement for the adventure ahead.

But amidst the hustle and bustle in other carriages, third class is filled with an air of struggle and hardship. Stuffy air lingers in the poorly ventilated carriage, accompanied by a musty smell that seems to have no origin. Exhausted parents try desperately to soothe their crying babies while other passengers frown and turn to see what all the commotion is about. A group of tired soldiers share a bottle of cheap vodka, finding solace in each other's company. Merchants try to cram their bulky packages into already occupied seats before drowning out the chaos with earplugs. It's evident they are used to enduring long journeys.

In second class, passengers from different backgrounds gather together, united by their shared experience on this long trip. They spend their nights chatting endlessly, sharing stories, helpful tips for the upcoming schedules, and even snacks. For them, it's just another part of the journey and they seem unfazed by any signs of fatigue.

The special cabin, reserved for those willing to pay extra for privacy and comfort, is a haven of tranquility. With a private bathroom and minimal foot traffic in the corridor both day and night, passengers can enjoy a good night's sleep in their comfortable beds. And when hunger strikes, they can always head to the ship's restaurant, no matter how overpriced the food may be.

But for Kwon Taek Joo, this luxurious cabin is a source of dissatisfaction. As he lies in bed, trying to ignore the sounds coming from his partner's room next door, he regrets not choosing a different cabin. The loud moans and screams of pleasure are impossible to tune out as they intensify with each passing moment. Frustration mounts within him, first towards his partner Zhenya and then towards the headquarters who paired them together.

Insomnia is a foreign concept to Kwon Taek Joo. After finishing combat, he could sleep for days on end and even while on duty, short naps were enough to replenish his energy. Taking care of oneself, including getting enough sleep, is crucial in their line of work. And yet here he is, unable to drift off into a peaceful slumber. In an attempt to calm himself down, Kwon Taek Joo resorts to counting sheep.

One sheep. Two sheep. Three sheeps. Four sheep...

But the noises from the bunk next to him become too much to bear.

"Haaaaah, haaaaaaaaaa, aaaaaaa!"

"Haaaa haaa aaaaa... Damn it."

Kwon Taek Joo sat up. . He could clearly see Zhenya's face, his eyes shining brightly in the dim light without any sense of shame. The woman sitting on top of him had her skirt hiked up to her waist, but her uniform shirt was still on. Kwon Taek Joo recognized her as the blonde flight attendant who had shown them to their seats on the train. He stared at her with disbelief as Zhenya continued to lift her waist without hesitation, causing her upper body to bounce and moan loudly.

As she moved, Zhenya's member became more and more visible, a massive and impressive piece of flesh that seemed to have a mind of its own. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but be amazed by the human body's

ability to accommodate something so big and ugly. He sat with his arms crossed, wondering just how far they were willing to go. It may have been his imagination, but it looked like a small smile appeared on Zhenya's lips.

The woman's body shook uncontrollably as she continued to take Zhenya inside her. She let out screams of pleasure and saliva dripped from her mouth. But Zhenya didn't seem to care, only focusing on finding more intense stimulation from the writhing body above him. The sound of flesh slapping against each other echoed through the room, and even the woman's skin turned red from the roughness. She screamed again before finally collapsing in painful pleasure.

Zhenya also reached his climax, his massive member swelling before ejaculating and sliding out of the woman's body. Thick semen dripped onto the bed and floor, startling Kwon Taek Joo.

He quickly opened a window for some fresh air, shivering in the cold wind as he watched Zhenya finish bathing in the cramped bathroom. It was time for Kwon Taek Joo to let go of any questions, but they seemed to be stuck in his mind, unable to be shaken off.

Zhenya looked at him with confusion as he huddled in the cold, wondering what could possibly be going through his head.

"Why are you leaving the window open and letting the cold air in? Do you want to freeze to death? Close it." The man clearly understood everything, but he pretended not to. Kwon Taek Joo glared at his hateful face and slammed the window shut.

Finally, the strong fishy smell disappeared. He had a sleepless night, so he was in a bad mood in the morning.

Kwon Taek Joo had no appetite and didn't feel like eating. Zhenya looked at his frowning face and smiled.

"I didn't think you would sit there so comfortably. Isn't sex something two "normal" people should enjoy in private?

Kwon Taek Joo let out a slight, foolish laugh.

His stomach twisted as he watched the man talk about their encounter as if it were no big deal. His intention was to tease him, so Kwon Taek Joo calmly responded,

"Why should I avoid it? Watching high-quality porn for free can be quite enjoyable."

"Well... high quality is a must," Zhenya nodded as if he understood, his chest puffed out slightly.

That was not a compliment, you bastard.

Anyone who heard that would understand it was clearly a criticism, but the man still straightened his shoulders and raised his chin, as if saying,

"So the movie was good, right?" "You also know how to say things that make others happy?" No matter how you look at it, it's clear that this person has issues with their thinking system and social skills.

How could anyone listen these sarcastic comments and still feel proud?

Kwon Taek Joo gave up on answering and let him think whatever he wanted. There's no need to disappoint an optimistic person in a strange place. Furthermore, if someone keeps being sarcastic and the other person doesn't feel embarrassed, only their mouth will hurt. The two arrived in Beijing yesterday morning.

Kwon Taek Joo received information from 'Sonchev's' Boris that a North Korean engineer, Hong Yeo Wook, would be disguised as a Chinese tourist and board the Trans-Siberian train.

Before going to Moscow, Psych Bogdanov planned to contact Hong Yeo-wook, but they still didn't know the time or method. 'SS 29' was also being moved to a secure location, so it was unknown where it would ultimately be stored. There were many uncertainties, but that didn't matter. If they followed Hong Yeo Wook, Kwon Taek Joo would naturally end up at the location of 'SS-29'.

Last night, they confirmed that Hong Yeo Wook had boarded the plane. Just as Boris had said, he disguised himself as a Chinese person and entered the second-class carriage. He appeared to be alone, but it remained to be seen if it was true or not. Bogdanov's men may have

followed him on the train. That's why Kwon Taek Joo didn't immediately attack Hong Yeo Wook.

If Psych Bogdanov found out that Hong Yeo Wook was being followed, he might stop contacting him. If that happened, all their plans would go up in smoke. They needed to be extremely cautious. "So Boris, how did it go? You said you would handle it." "Hm... I did."

"By handling him that doesn't mean you sent him to the pearly gates of Heaven?"

"I've been considering that option..."

Zhenya trailed off and smiled.

Kwon Taek Joo looked at him intently.

His eyes were not only unfriendly but also fierce, yet he hummed for a long time before answering.

"I just locked him up because I figured he could be useful later"

"So what if he were to escape?"

"Now you want me to kill him? Wow, you're such a indecisive and cruel person."

"I didn't mean it like that, but if he opened his mouth, our entire plan will be ruined."

"Don't worry, that's never going to happen".

"You sure I can trust you?"

"Of course. Without my orders, he won't be able to get out of there."

Despite his lingering doubts, Kwon Taek Joo still held onto his silent belief. It was a paradox, but he couldn't deny the truth of it. Perhaps all he needed to do was show some concern for Hong Yeo Wook.

Kwon Taek Joo's gaze drifted out the window and took in the vast field passing by. The winter landscape brought with it a sense of endless cold and gloom no matter where you looked. Occasionally, a few animals

could be seen grazing in the distance. As they traveled through this desolate land, an inexplicable feeling of loneliness overtook him.

No matter how far they went, the scenery remained the same outside. The mountains stretched on and on, seeming to never end. Kwon Taek Joo watched in silence for a while before growing bored. The drowsiness that had just barely dissipated returned once again.

He yawned and glanced at the clock, only to be startled by the time. Quickly, Kwon Taek Joo retrieved a bag from the shelf. At first glance, it appeared to be a briefcase, but it was actually a temporary device used for satellite communications. In case of emergencies, it could be used to call Korea.

Kwon Taek Joo turned on the device and entered a specific command on the keyboard. The wireless antenna inside activated and began receiving satellite signals. He plugged in a headset and dialed a phone number.

Zhenya stood with his arms crossed as he observed the scene before him. His plan was to grab breakfast and then keep an eye on Hong Yeo Wook's movements. He had no intention of going with Kwon Taek Joo, but his rushed and flustered demeanor piqued his curiosity. Who is this man so frantically trying to call?

"Yes, Mom? It's me."

Kwon Taek Joo's mother answered the phone as if she had been waiting for a long time. Knowing that the call was delayed, he tried to calm his mother's worries. He didn't even have time to worry about Zhenya listening intently beside him.

Strange words spilled out of Kwon Taek Joo's mouth. Zhenya had met North Koreans before for work, and their language sounded similar to Korean. However, not being fluent in Korean, he couldn't understand who Kwon Taek Joo was talking to or what they were discussing.

He could only make assumptions based on Kwon Taek Joo's gentle and soothing tone – it seemed like he was trying to comfort someone's emotions. The initial voice coming through the headset sounded like a

woman's voice. This woman wasn't just a one-night stand but someone with whom he had a deep and lasting connection.

Zhenya pulled out his phone and opened a translation app. Sure enough, Kwon Taek Joo was speaking in Korean, and the word that kept repeating was "mother". Carefully reading the translations on the screen, Zhenya chuckled. Despite his gentle demeanor, the person on the other end of the call was not a young woman but Kwon Taek Joo's own mother.

Kwon Taek Joo's call ended quickly, and he let out a sigh as he pressed the button to hang up. With a tense expression, he packed away his communication device and suddenly looked up.

His eyes met Zhenya's gaze as he stared down at him with a mischievous grin. It was clear that he had caught onto what Zhenya was doing but pretended not to notice as he picked up his bag and sat back down. Zhenya couldn't help but tease him, knowing full well that he had been waiting for this moment all along.

"I couldn't help but wonder what Mama's boy would look like, though I never expected it to be someone so close to me

"It's always the ignorant ones who think they know everything"

"Aw, did I strike a nerve? You seem angry."

Zhenya didn't usually pay much attention to other people's family matters. However, seeing this seemingly unbreakable man become gentle and then cold again piqued his curiosity about the story behind it all.

"Wouldn't it be easier to just embrace being a mama's boy?" he asked, genuinely curious.

Kwon Taek Joo hesitated before continuing on with his story. "Living alone is hard - how could someone like you understand? The worries and insecurities are multiplied when one has lost a loved one; we have to endure not only our own burdens, but also those of the deceased. That's why I had to lie and always appear optimistic in order not to

worry my mother even more. She still thinks I'm working as a civil procedure handler at a local agency..."

He suddenly stopped talking as if realizing he had said too much, and Zhenya looked dissatisfied with the incomplete explanation.

"Why did you stop talking?"

"Because you don't need to know anything else." Kwon Taek Joo leaned back in his chair and fell silent. He picked up the thick book he had been reading and showed no intention of speaking further.

He reached over and closed the cover, having only read a few pages. Their eyes met once more.

But we have so much to chat about."

"Well, I'm not that bored to bring up family stories. I have plenty of books with me." Kwon Taek Joo pointed to his bag, which was filled with enough books to last at least 6 days.

Zhenya smirked and looked at Kwon Taek Joo curiously, as if he had just noticed something interesting about him. But Kwon Taek Joo pretended not to notice his probing gaze. Instead he tried to offer him a book.

Zhenya barely gave the book a glance, a thin line formed on his lips.

"Thanks, but I don't need it. I'm not interested in one-sided conversations. I can just find another woman if I'm bored."

Sure. Whatever.

Kwon Taek Joo shook his head and returned to staring at his book.

At that point, Zhenya stopped asking questions and left silently. Even though they were partners, Zhenya never revealed where he was going or why. The door opened and then closed again. Kwon Taek Joo's focus shifted from the book to the door as his tense shoulders relaxed. He always felt nervous whenever Zhenya stared at him like that.

To him, Zhenya was like a deceitful predator, hiding his true intentions behind a sophisticated facade. No matter how many times he tried to

convince himself that they were on the same team, Kwon Taek Joo could never fully let his guard down around such a dangerous teammate.

## **Chapter 1.17 – Siberian Train: Am I Your Type? (18+)**

Translator's Note: This chapter has sexual activity, so be warned before reading !!

The train reached the border between China and Mongolia after 12 hours. The train had not yet completely stopped when the chaotic atmosphere filled the cabin, due to an immigration check.

The situation had seemed relatively safe compared to the border with Russia, but it still took an average of three hours for inspections. In emergencies, the duration could be even longer, leaving passengers stuck on the train for an unknown amount of time.

When the train finally came to a complete stop, waiting inspection officials stepped inside. Each team consisted of an immigration officer, a customs officer, and several police officers, meticulously inspecting their assigned areas. Passengers' faces were closely scrutinized against their declarations and passport photos. Baggage checks and body searches were also conducted.

Most passengers were able to pass through security without issue, but there were occasionally strict officials who would unload luggage and search it thoroughly, even checking under beds, bookshelves, and trash cans. During this process, no one was allowed in or out of the room, causing discomfort for those waiting for their turn to be inspected.

Kwon Taek Joo and Zhenya's situation wasn't much different from the other passengers'. They sat facing each other in a small room, not saying a word to each other. Kwon Taek Joo was only half-awake after just waking up and didn't bother trying to read a book. He simply waited for his turn, half-dreaming while trying to stay alert.

In reality, Kwon Taek Joo and Zhenya had the most to worry about as they carried many items that could potentially raise suspicion: mini bombs, Colt guns, and various high-tech devices.

Even though they had hidden them in advance to prepare for the inspection, they knew they were up against experienced officials who could easily discover their weapons. The thought alone was enough to make Kwon Taek Joo unable to relax for even a moment.

As they sat facing each other, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but be bothered by Zhenya's knee precariously close to his crotch. With legs entwined in a natural yet uncomfortable manner, he couldn't retreat without risking an awkward touch. But Zhenya, with his longer legs and mischievous grin, refused to budge.

Finally, after mustering up some patience, Kwon Taek Joo spoke up. "Could you maybe move your legs somewhere else?"

Zhenya nonchalantly shrugged and quipped, "My apologies for my blessedly long legs."

Kwon Taek Joo rolled his eyes and tried to ignore the looming threat. Shifting his gaze, he looked out the window, trying to resist the urge to kick Zhenya's leg away. But as boredom and drowsiness set in, he couldn't help but yawn a few times.

But Zhenya wasn't done talking yet.

"You know, you're not very cute" he remarked.

"And you're not very funny," Kwon Taek Joo snapped back.

The noise outside the room increased, as more and more people seemed to be moving around. Soon, officers started entering the room. Kwon Taek Joo presented a passport with a different name than his usual disguise as Hiro Sakamoto, who was reported missing after the hotel explosion.

The examiner checked the passport and returned it without suspicion. Luggage inspection followed immediately, with Zhenya taking his time and Kwon Taek Joo trying to remain calm.

Suddenly, Kwon Taek Joo felt a gaze focused on him and turned to see a police officer staring intently. He forced a fake smile and looked away, but the officer's eyes remained fixed on him. The controller even

checked the bathroom, inspecting every part of it before leaving without saying a word. Kwon Taek Joo let out a sigh of relief.

But then, the door opened again and the same policeman returned. This time, he ordered both Zhenya and Kwon Taek Joo to stand against the wall. Despite their confusion, they obeyed without making any noise.

The policeman checked Zhenya first, then moved on to Kwon Taek Joo.

As the checks became more intrusive, Kwon Taek Joo felt increasingly uncomfortable with the policeman's touchings. His anger boiled over when the policeman blatantly groped him and he almost punched him in the face in retaliation. However, he managed to control his anger and push the policeman away instead. The police officer quickly retreated from the room.

"Looks like he's quite taken with you, isn't he?" Zhenya continued to push and prod, but the other man grabbed a book in anger and hurled it at him. However, Zhenya effortlessly caught it and set it back down. Their eyes locked and he couldn't resist poking fun once again.

"You know, that guy has the most delicate waist and handsome features. Why don't you play along and have some fun? It's been a while."

"I wouldn't expect someone with equally beautiful features to say such things."

"Oh? So I'm your type then?"

"Don't say such terrifying things."

Through gritted teeth, he retorted, but Zhenya just flashed a cheeky grin. He shot a deadly glare at the nuisance and began to tidy up the mess around them.

Shortly after, the train returned to orbit and Kwon Taek Joo finished tidying up before sitting down with a book in hand. He couldn't help but wonder how much time had passed since he last checked his watch. Suddenly, a familiar vibrating noise interrupted his thoughts. It was Zhenya's phone. Zhenya hesitated for a moment before answering and stepping out of the room.

This wasn't the first time this had happened. Whenever Zhenya got a call, he would leave the room. It seemed excessive if it was just personal matters, but perhaps it was because Zhenya only shared minimal information about their mission together and never spoke about himself.

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't bring himself to completely ignore Zhenya's calls, even though he wished he could. As he watched Zhenya talking on the phone through the slightly open door, he noticed something strange in his expression and demeanor.

When they were alone, Zhenya was usually carefree and relaxed. But now, he seemed serious and his voice was low - there wasn't a hint of his usual charming smile anywhere. Kwon Taek Joo didn't want to get any closer to him than necessary; he knew that getting too involved with someone like Zhenya could only lead to trouble. He just hoped that their mission would be over soon so that their relationship could be resolved.

As Kwon Taek Joo was about to turn away and go back inside, he caught Zhenya glancing towards the door and making eye contact with him. In that moment, Zhenya's lips curved into a fake smile before quickly disappearing back into his room.

Feeling uneasy, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but wonder if Zhenya already knew what was going on between them and was just playing a game with him.

It had been a day since they boarded the train, and Hong Yeo Wook remained mostly still. He only got up three or four times in total, for short periods of 5 to 10 minutes.

During one of his bathroom breaks, Zhenya snuck in and installed a hidden camera before returning to his seat. Kwon Taek Joo didn't know where it was located or how it was hidden, but Hong Yeo Wook seemed completely oblivious to its presence. This made it easier for them to move around without arousing suspicion.

But just like avoiding melon peels and finding coconut shells, they also had to be careful not to get caught.

"...Aaaa...ummm."

Zhenya's sexual desires were relentless, regardless of the time or place. Today's target was not yesterday's flight attendant. The woman's face, trembling after being assaulted by Zhenya, looked familiar. She was one of the flight attendants that Kwon Taek Joo often saw when monitoring Hong Yeo Wook in the second class car. Last night it was a special car attendant, and today it was a second class car attendant. It seemed like Zhenya planned on having fun with all the flight attendants before their journey ended.

It was just after 3pm when Kwon Taek Joo tried to distract himself from the bright surroundings by opening a book and immersing himself in its pages. However, his efforts proved futile as every movement he made was clearly visible to those around him. Zhenya usually didn't pay attention to other people's eyes, but the man seemed to have no shame or regard for their shared space.

The more he acted out, the more Kwon Taek Joo gritted his teeth and endured it. Such behavior in such close quarters was almost an invitation for Kwon Taek Joo to lose his temper. But despite the hesitation and confusion of others, Zhenya seemed even more interested and excited.

Kwon Taek Joo quickly regained his composure amidst the chaos. Luckily, the book he was reading was so engrossing that it was easy to tune out everything else.

"Haaaa... hmmmm.."

But their indulgent frolicking did not escape the notice of others. The woman scratched at the pillow, then suddenly reached for the table.

In her clumsy reach, she knocked over a wine bottle which shattered on the floor, drenching it in vodka and splashing onto Kwon Taek Joo's pants. He looked down at the wet stain before raising his head to make eye contact with Zhenya.

Kwon Taek Joo didn't expect an apology, but all Zhenya did was smirk slightly. This only made Kwon Taek Joo scowl more, until Zhenya stuck out his pink tongue and slowly licked his upper lip, slowly.

And Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but follow the movement with his eyes. This seemed to please Zhenya, as a satisfied smile spread across his face.

The woman's body collapsed onto the table as Zhenya pressed against her neck and lifted her stomach to his level. She struggled but had nowhere to escape as he pushed into her forcefully, the friction causing a harsh sound.

The girl on the nearby table shook with each thrust, seemingly on the verge of collapse. Despite Kwon Taek Joo's frustration, he was unable to stop Zhenya's actions.

The sounds of his protests were drowned out by the flight attendant's moans of pleasure. Zhenya showed no mercy as he continued to push inside her, causing her to fall into a state of extreme arousal.

Unable to endure it any longer, Kwon Taek Joo got up to leave, but not before catching a glimpse of the woman's exposed breasts. He turned away in disgust and tried to suppress his own desires.

As the woman reached climax, Zhenya pulled her closer and continued thrusting until he ejaculated with a strong smell filling the air. Kwon Taek Joo glared at Zhenya's relaxed face, disgusted by his behavior.

Suddenly, without warning, Zhenya changed positions and continued thrusting until the woman cried out in ecstasy.

Kwon Taek Joo gasped for air as he leaned against the bathroom wall. The intense heat building in one area felt like it was about to burst. Despite his attempts to ignore it, Kwon Taek Joo was a man in his prime and couldn't help but feel aroused when faced with a woman's exposed breasts.

His head was spinning and his hand instinctively grabbed at his crotch while his jaw clenched tightly. He could hear the sound of grinding teeth as they fit together perfectly.

The flesh between his fingers was slick with moisture, and he gently rubbed the tip of his penis where it had gathered, sending shivers

through his body. His mind was clouded and he couldn't think straight, consumed by an overwhelming desire for physical pleasure.

In frustration, Kwon Taek Joo turned on the shower, letting the cold water pour down on him. Even though his body cooled slightly, the discomfort didn't go away. Her damp hair clung to her head, making it look even thicker, and her shirt stuck to her curves, accentuating them.

The tension in her muscles only heightened due to the stimulation. A strange sensation spread throughout his body, causing his nipples to harden beneath his shirt.

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't hold back the moans that escaped from his clenched teeth. The cold water hitting his body only intensified the burning sensation in his groin. Even just holding and stroking it made his entire body feel like it was on fire. His knees were shaking, and his jaws ached from being clenched so tightly. The sharpness in his eyes had faded, replaced by frustration. Kwon Taek Joo tried to shake off the strong desire that was consuming him, his hand pressing against the wall as he struggled to control himself.

He was past the point in his youth where any little stimulation could make him tense with anticipation.

But now, even standing up straight was a challenge as the tingling feeling between his legs spread throughout his body. Every inch of his veins felt hot as blood rushed through them, causing a light to flash before his eyes due to increased pressure in his brain.

Suddenly, he reached climax, unable to contain himself any longer. His vision flashed white and his muscles contracted as he let out a loud groan that echoed in the bathroom.

Finally, after taking a deep breath and regaining some clarity, Kwon Taek Joo stripped off his wet clothes and stepped into the shower to wash away any remaining traces of desire.

As the cool water washed over him, he gradually returned to his senses and shook off the intense heat that had consumed him just moments ago.

## **Chapter 1.18 – Siberian Train: What Kind of Woman Do You Like?**

Translator's Note: The chapter has topics about sexual stuff again, so be warned before reading!!

Kwon Taek Joo was ready to dry off and leave the bathroom when he noticed Zhenya standing in front of him. He felt a twinge of discomfort, wondering if Zhenya had overheard everything. But he quickly reminded himself that masturbation was a natural and healthy act, nothing to be ashamed of. Still, Zhenya's mocking look made Kwon Taek Joo feel uneasy as he walked back to his seat. Suddenly, Zhenya blocked his path, seemingly on purpose. Kwon Taek Joo looked up at him with hatred in his eyes, but Zhenya just grinned as if he had expected this reaction.

"Sorry."

But there was no hint of regret in his smile. Kwon Taek Joo shrugged it off and calmly walked past Zhenya to his bed. As he unpacked his clothes from his bag, he realized that he was still shirtless. It didn't bother him much since they were both men, but it struck him as odd that Zhenya always covered up after bathing or making love.

As Kwon Taek Joo slipped into his underwear and started putting on a T-shirt, he suddenly caught Zhenya staring at him intently. He tried to ignore it and finish getting dressed, but Zhenya couldn't seem to tear his eyes away. Finally, he spoke up.

"What is it like having sex with a man?"

Kwon Taek Joo was taken aback by the question and angrily pulled down his shirt.

"I don't want to imagine it."

"Hmm. I guess you wouldn't be in the mood for that kind of thing. Dark-skinned guys whining aren't cute at all."

Before Kwon Taek Joo could respond, he was flooded with thoughts about whether he could even imagine being intimate with another man. He shook his head to clear his mind before things went too far.

"Stop saying those disgusting things. It's not funny."

He sat down at his desk with a determined expression and watched Hong Yeo Wook through the screen. He had been in the same position, reading the same book for two days now. Kwon Taek Joo had even looked into the contents of the book to see if it offered any clues, but found nothing. There had been no contact from Bogdanov yet.

Occasionally, someone would talk to Hong Yeo Wook, but their conversations were brief and uneventful. Hong Yeo Wook never left his seat for long and avoided any communication or use of technology. Kwon Taek Joo was deep in thought when Zhenya suddenly appeared with a bottle of vodka, tequila, and cognac. He set two empty glasses on the table and pulled out a handmade cigar, clearly a limited edition product celebrating its 40th anniversary. As expected, it exuded luxury and class.

Zhenya poured a glass of cognac, then dipped the tip of his Cohiba cigar into the amber liquid. He expertly lit the cigar and took a deep drag, exhaling smoothly as the signature aroma of Cohiba Behike filled the air.

"Smoking it like this really brings out the flavor," he commented before passing the cigar to Kwon Taek Joo.

Without hesitation, Kwon Taek Joo accepted the cigar and took a puff, relishing in the strong scent and taste. Zhenya poured more cognac into his empty glass and asked if he was on "that side."

Confused, Kwon Taek Joo asked for clarification.

"Because when you saw a topless woman right in front of you, you didn't react at all. I thought maybe you don't like women."

Kwon Taek Joo smirked, taking another puff of his cigar. "How could you be so mistaken? I like women. Even if the world were ending and only men were left, I wouldn't stoop to that level."

Zhenya chuckled as he refilled their glasses. "It's also a problem to get others too excited," he muttered to himself before changing the subject.

"So, what kind of girl do you like?"

Kwon Taek Joo raised an eyebrow. "Are you planning on introducing me to someone?"

"Well, I just want to make sure we're not chasing after the same type. It could get awkward if I happen to seduce a girl that's your type."

Kwon Taek Joo scoffed. "A player like you should know all about awkward situations."

Even as he sarcastically insulted him, Zhenya simply smirked and took a sip of cognac. The heat from the alcohol started to rise in Kwon Taek Joo's body, making him reach for another drink. However, Zhenya stopped him from pouring more and asked him to tell him about his type instead. Irritated, Kwon Taek Joo answered bluntly.

"I like women with curves. Big breasts and hips. I prefer them a little plump rather than too skinny."

"Your taste is quite obvious," Zhenya chuckled.

"And what's wrong with that?"

"Well, it's just insulting to say I have no taste. Trust me, I'm very picky when it comes to women."

Kwon Taek Joo rolled his eyes before sarcastically grabbing the bottle and pouring himself another drink. As he did so, Zhenya began talking about his own preferences without prompting.

"I don't like getting into relationships. It's fun once, but doing it repeatedly with the same person gets boring."

That seemed to sum up Zhenya's character perfectly. He was the type of guy who changed partners as often as he changed his clothes, never sticking around for too long. While some may enjoy casual hookups and one-night stands without any strings attached, it still felt disrespectful and lacking in self-respect.

Despite knowing the answer would be meaningless, Kwon Taek Joo still couldn't resist asking. "So you've never been in a serious, committed relationship before?"

Zhenya shook his head without hesitation.

"Never."

It was clear that he had never been in a serious relationship. It was difficult to imagine him developing feelings or longing for love towards someone. Reflecting on Zhenya's past actions, he couldn't recall any sincere emotions directed towards a woman. Which girl would he choose to give his attention and affection to?

The thought of it made me feel sorrowful and pitying.

"But you never know. Maybe if they're strong and resistant, and can withstand anything, that could be interesting. It would be entertaining to have control over someone with such strength."

The more Kwon Taek Joo listened, the more he realized how refined Zhenya's taste was. It wasn't surprising; from the beginning, Zhenya didn't seem like the type to form attachments or start a family.

Such a normal and mature life just didn't suit him at all. If that were the case, he wouldn't be here in the first place.

In reality, Kwon Taek Joo's situation wasn't much different. What woman would be happy with a husband who kept his actions secret, rarely took time off, and traveled for work constantly? He knew he could never fulfill his mother's wishes in this lifetime. Having a stable job and creating a harmonious family seemed too far out of reach.

"I've heard that Koreans usually don't leave their parents' home even when they grow up, right?"

Zhenya suddenly changed the subject. Even when discussing matters of love, he seemed disinterested and quickly lost focus. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but feel suspicious, but Zhenya simply nodded at him calmly.

"You call your mother regularly and update her on everything."

"What did I say? Is there something wrong? Are you curious?"

"If you admit you're a mama's boy, then there's no reason to be curious."

"It's just that my mother is a bit different."

Kwon Taek Joo let out a resigned sigh. He had never shared his family issues with anyone, not even Chief Lim could fully understand Kwon Taek Joo's situation.

But why was he venting to Zhenya now? Maybe because he was drunk. It didn't matter, after this mission they would never see each other again. But was that an irresponsible action?

"My grandfather, father, and brother were all involved in my mother's life as soldiers. And what do you know, all three died while on duty, and I am the only one left. So my mother worries constantly. Korea has a high rate of traffic accidents, so she always told me not to drive. Ever since my father passed away, it's been like this. Life just keeps getting tougher over the years. After my brother died, I couldn't even spend as much time outside."

Zhenya's expression turned serious as Kwon Taek Joo laughed at himself.

"After all, everyone has to die at least once."

Was that supposed to be comforting?

He couldn't imagine saying something like that to his own mother who couldn't sleep at night worrying about her son.

Looking at someone like Zhenya with such unusual thoughts, actions, and emotions, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but be curious about his family background. How must one be raised by their parents to have such emotional deficiencies?

The glass in front of Kwon Taek Joo was empty, and he waited for a while before tapping lightly on the table with his cup. Zhenya finally noticed and poured him a glass of tequila, which Kwon Taek Joo downed in one gulp. He then licked the back of his hand to savor the aftertaste of wine that stimulated his taste buds.

"It's a shame we don't have any lemons."

"Oh, do you enjoy them? If I had known, I would have arranged for women and lemons."

Zhenya laughed strangely as if he had thought of something interesting. He even gently touched my collarbone.

"Okay, let's talk about you."

"What do you mean?"

"Obvious things. Family relationships, worries. That sort of thing."

"Hmm, if you must know, I have several brothers. Thanks to them, I don't have to impress my parents. When I'm bored, I seek out women, but I have no interest in watching others having sex or masturbating."

"Where's the excitement in that?"

He continued to tease Kwon Taek Joo, clearly pleased with himself. He even gave him a fake smile.

"Do your parents know what you've been up to?"

"What did I do?"

"You're killing anyone who bother you."

"Ah, I think there's some misunderstanding here. I don't attack innocent people. Haven't I told you this many times? It's just self-defense."

"Why not just say it outright? You're being overly protective."

"I was defending myself because they intended to harm me. If I were weaker, it would be me who died instead of them."

It's pathetic. He still sees himself as a victim. As if there was no other option but to defend himself in these unavoidable situations. It's absurd to justify killing someone for being too loud or following him. Will he eventually kill me too if Kwon Taek Joo accidentally steps on his shadow?

Kwon Taek Joo clicked his tongue in frustration. But he had no intention of wasting time preaching to Zhenya. As long as he didn't harm Kwon

Taek Joo, it didn't matter what he did or where he went. If he wanted to nag, he must care on some level.

The atmosphere seemed more relaxed, so Kwon Taek Joo decided to speak more honestly.

"You don't seem financially deprived from what I can tell, so why are you involved in this?"

"I've already told you."

"Yes, you did. You're only in it for the blueprint. Once you have it, you'll be able to create powerful weapons and make a fortune. But the more I think about it, the less sense it makes. Even without the blueprint, wouldn't you still have plenty of money?"

"There's nothing wrong with having a lot of money."

"True, but you can't take it with you when you die. Are you dreaming of immortality? Or are you obsessed with money to the point of selling out your own country?"

"I didn't know you cared so much about me."

"Because I've never met someone like you before. Usually, people's motivations can be predicted in some way or another, but I can't figure out yours at all. Why are you such a wild card? Money is not everything... Oh, I'm sorry if that sounded rude. That's just how I feel."

Despite being labeled as a 'crazy rich guy', Zhenya remained unfazed and sarcastically replied to Kwon Taek Joo's question.

"Because it's intriguing. If something piques my interest, I'll go for it regardless of the consequences, because opportunities like this rarely come by."

This wasn't an extreme sport and he wasn't talking about the thrill of risking lives. It would seem more human to simply say that he was after the money.

But Kwon Taek Joo couldn't expect anything less from a mindless lunatic like Zhenya.

Zhenya snapped to attention, his body now sitting up straight. The light caught his hair, making it gleam even more. His hair was not quite blonde, but also not pale enough to be considered platinum. However, as he shifted slightly, the bright shine of his hair was impossible to ignore.

"I've heard there aren't many blondes among Russians. Is that hair color inherited or did you dye it?"

Kwon Taek Joo suddenly turned to Zhenya. Zhenya leaned in closer, revealing his natural ivory locks that filled their view.

"This is a genetic anomaly. No one in my family has had this hair color. Would you like to touch it?"

The man inched closer.

"I'll pass," Kwon Taek Joo firmly declined. Zhenya smiled and sat up straight with satisfaction.

The conversation seemed to have just begun, but the daylight gradually faded outside the window. Being stuck in a confined space for a day can feel like an eternity, but today was an exception - perhaps because so much had happened since morning, or maybe because Kwon Taek Joo was a little tipsy. The more he drank, the calmer his anxious mind became. His body felt lighter too.

Zhenya poured Kwon Taek Joo's empty glass again, which eventually ended up empty once more.

"Are you handling your drinks well?"

"I suppose so. I've never been drunk before, so I don't know my limit, but I think I'm doing okay."

"Hmm?"

Zhenya playfully teased Kwon Taek Joo, pretending to be suspicious. But he didn't let himself get caught up in such shallow banter. Even when faced with those mocking eyes, Kwon Taek Joo remained composed and drank at his own pace. He hated being drunk and losing control of himself.

He couldn't speak for others, but he knew he shouldn't fall asleep before Zhenya did. It was just a vague feeling; maybe nothing would happen and his vigilance was unnecessary.

It's also possible that this was all just a pointless psychological game. But even so, Kwon Taek Joo didn't want to risk his life in front of someone he couldn't fully trust.

The stories had gradually become meaningless. The act of pouring and drinking a glass was repeated continuously, like two people playing a boring game that only ended when someone left.

Kwon Taek Joo could stop drinking, but if possible, he wanted to relieve his long-standing discomfort by getting Zhenya drunk.

His tongue had gradually stiffened, and he could no longer taste the typical spicy flavor of wine. It felt more like drinking water. Despite the burning sensation, he constantly craved moisture and drank large amounts without keeping track. But his consciousness was not easily dispersed.

Kwon Taek Joo was generally a pretty good drinker, but the problem was that the other side was just as skilled. As their vision became blurry, they poured wine into places other than glasses - the table, carpet, and even their clothes were soaked. Empty wine bottles littered the floor as they finished their fifth bottle.

As Kwon Taek Joo got more and more drunk, his mood began to fluctuate. They competed with each other to throw out-of-nowhere jokes, bang on the table, and giggle like crazy people. At one point, Kwon Taek Joo even opened the window and screamed - actions he would never do if sober.

"If Chief Lim saw me like this, he would probably be very surprised," Kwon Taek Joo laughed and muttered to himself as he poured another glass of wine. But suddenly, the surroundings grew quiet. The sound of train wheels rolling on the tracks still echoed, but that was all. It was as if he was talking to himself.

Startled by the sudden silence, Kwon Taek Joo spilled wine on his knees and noticed that Zhenya had been silent this whole time. When he

looked up, he saw Zhenya crossing his arms and tightly closing his eyes - clearly asleep.

A smirk crossed Kwon Taek Joo's lips. "You're went this far... Young master, young master," he mocked.

Feeling victorious, Kwon Taek Joo raised his full glass of vodka as if celebrating. But in his drunken state, nearly half of the drink spilled out and wet his arm. He struggled to bring the glass to his lips, finally managing to take a sip.

But just as he did, his body suddenly gave way and he fell face first onto the table with a loud thud. The room fell silent again except for Kwon Taek Joo's deep breathing as he slept peacefully - exhausted from a long day and the effects of alcohol.

Eyelids snapped open with razor-sharp precision, as if they had never even slept. No trace of drunkenness lingered in his emotionless eyes as he stared down at Kwon Taek Joo.

Zhenya reached for a handmade cigar, his fingers tracing the charred black end before expertly cutting it off with a specialized cutter.

As he lit the cigar and took a slow drag, his gaze remained fixed on Kwon Taek Joo's outstretched hand.

With mechanical precision, Zhenya pressed the cigar cutter between his long, white fingers, creating a chilling 'click click' sound that echoed in the room.

He ran his fingers over each wrinkle on Kwon Taek Joo's straight digits, his porcelain-white face showing no emotion except for the faintest hint of a cold smile.

With deliberate slowness, he lifted Kwon Taek Joo's ring finger using just one finger, savoring the power he held over this man who lay helpless before him.

## Chapter 1.19 – Siberian Train: Louise (18+)

Translator's Note: This chapter is a little bit of 18+

Kwon Taek Joo slowly opened his heavy eyelids and took in the familiar surroundings. He could see the front door ahead of him and hear the sound of a passing train. He could also feel the hard table against his cheek. As his senses kicked back into gear, he realized his cheeks were wet and there was a strong smell of cognac in the air.

With a groan, he propped himself up and saw that the table was covered in empty wine bottles. Zhenya was nowhere to be seen. When he tried to move, a stray wine bottle rolled into his leg. Kwon Taek Joo felt a brief moment of annoyance before quickly dismissing it - he knew better than to expect basic courtesy from Zhenya.

He gathered up the bottles and glasses and headed towards the bathroom, where he heard the sound of running water coming from inside. Did Zhenya wake up too? Kwon Taek Joo couldn't remember if he had passed out or fallen asleep, but he was drenched with alcohol and desperately wanted to take a shower.

But as he reached for the bathroom door, exhaustion overtook him and he flopped back onto the bed. It had been awhile since he had indulged in alcohol, and now his body felt like it had been beaten all over - like it was one with the bed and couldn't be separated.

The sound of water continued to lull him until his barely conscious mind drifted off again. Was Kwon Taek Joo falling back asleep? He scolded himself for neglecting work again, but the drowsiness was overwhelming and soon even his hearing started to fade away.

The bathroom door creaked open, the sound of running water filling the small space. Kwon Taek Joo's consciousness sank deeper and deeper as his body floated, weightless. It felt like he was being pulled into a never-ending abyss.

But then he heard wet footsteps approaching. Suddenly, a massive shadow loomed over him as he laid helpless on the bed.

"Get up," a deep voice commanded.

Kwon Taek Joo struggled to move, but his body wouldn't respond. His arm was lifted by cold fingers that traced along his skin, sending shivers down his spine. He recognized the touch as Zhenya's - the man who had taken everything from him.

"Foolish rabbit," Zhenya sneered, his icy breath brushing against Kwon Taek Joo's ear.

Without warning, something sharp and cold pressed against Kwon Taek Joo's ring finger. He tried to pull away, but Zhenya held on tight. The man's eyes bore into him with an intense and cruel gaze as he slowly inserted Kwon Taek Joo's finger into a cigar cutter.

Pain shot through Kwon Taek Joo's hand as the blade sliced through his flesh. He couldn't help but scream in agony as blood dripped onto the floor. And just when he thought it couldn't get any worse, Zhenya tightened his grip and began to cut through his finger again.

Blinking back tears and fighting off waves of nausea, Kwon Taek Joo abruptly woke up with a gasp. His vision was flooded with blinding light, causing him to shut his eyes tightly.

Slowly, he regained his senses and realized he was safe in his own room. But the terror and pain of the nightmare still lingered, haunting him like a ghost from his past.

Kwon Taek Joo's hand shook uncontrollably as he slowly raised it, fingers trembling as he counted each one to make sure they were all still intact. The image of Zhenya's blade slicing through his ring finger was still vivid in his mind, causing a wave of dizziness to wash over him.

But it was just a dream, right? Everything around him seemed to suggest otherwise - the messy table, empty wine bottles strewn on the floor, and the untidy bedsheets. Even the faint smell of cigar smoke lingered in the air, evidence that Zhenya had been there recently.

But where was he now?

As Kwon Taek Joo glanced at the clock, his heart raced with anxiety. It was time for breakfast - would Zhenya be waiting for him at the restaurant like usual, or was he busy keeping tabs on their rival Hong Yeo Wook?

Trying to shake off the uneasy feeling that crept over him, Kwon Taek Joo stood up from his bed.

But as he moved, he noticed a strange weight below his waist. Baffled, he looked down and realized with horror that his erection was back again.

"Why...?" He muttered to himself in disbelief. He couldn't understand why he would be so aroused after dreaming about something as gruesome as losing a finger.

Shaking his head in frustration, Kwon Taek Joo tried to push the thoughts out of his mind. He didn't believe in superstitious nonsense like prophetic dreams, but the unease lingered nonetheless. Maybe a shower would help clear his mind.

Just as he began to calm himself down, a sound suddenly broke through the silence of the room - running water coming from the bathroom. His heart stopped for a moment before racing even faster than before. Could it be...Zhenya? As much as he tried to convince himself that it was just a dream, the feeling of *deja vu* was too strong to ignore.

Determined to confront whatever it was that lay behind the bathroom door, Kwon Taek Joo reached for his Colt. It may have just been a dream, but there was no harm in being cautious. Slowly and silently, he approached the bathroom, his grip on the gun tightening with each step.

But before he could even think about opening the door, it swung open on its own. Startled, Kwon Taek Joo turned around to see Zhenya walking in with a nonchalant expression.

Their eyes met and time seemed to stand still for a moment, both men frozen in shock at the intense energy between them.

"What are you doing? Why do you seem so suspicious?" Zhenya's narrowed his eyes and asked, clearly sensing a misunderstanding. Kwon Taek Joo didn't know how to explain himself. Maybe he was having a strange dream that was coming true - but it was better to keep quiet about it.

By the way, if Zhenya was here, then who was in the bathroom? Instead of trying to justify himself, Kwon Taek Joo just nodded towards the closed door. He even mouthed the words, "There's someone inside." Just then, the sound of running water stopped.

Kwon Taek Joo cautiously approached the bathroom door and held out his arms. He had a black Colt aimed at the door, ready for anything. Zhenya looked confused by this scene and walked over to the bathroom without saying a word. He hesitated for a moment before yanking open the door.

Kwon Taek Joo reflexively pulled the trigger halfway, but ultimately did not fire. It was just a naked woman standing in front of him.

"Oh! You're back already? Thanks to you, I was able to shower comfortably. Thank you."

The woman hugged Zhenya from behind and grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's gun as well. She didn't seem bothered by her nakedness or being caught in a compromising situation. She appeared to be a European tourist, and it seemed like Zhenya had enticed her with the well-equipped bathroom once again.

Zhenya gently pushed her back into the bathroom and closed the door with a thud. Kwon Taek Joo was left alone in the living room, feeling quite awkward. Soon enough, he could hear moans coming from the bathroom, and he knew what was happening inside.

Kwon Taek Joo stood still for a moment, then tossed the Colt onto the bed. The sandwich Zhenya had brought caught his eye; it seemed like he bought it to share with the woman he was with. Kwon Taek Joo took a bite as he gazed out the window, feeling drained from living with someone who was no different from a wild animal.

"Ugh."

Suddenly, he lowered his head and looked at his crotch. He had dealt with it before, but the uncomfortable stiffness remained. Maybe with a little stimulation, it would rise again.

Kwon Taek Joo glared at his obnoxious member and used a pillow to push it down. He deliberately left the train window open so that the sound of the wheels would drown out any vulgar noises.

The woman's name was Louise.

She claimed to be French, soon to be married, and traveling solo to enjoy her last moments of freedom. She had visited many countries in Africa and Asia, the furthest lands from her own, and now planned to explore more familiar European countries in search of herself. If her entire journey went smoothly, she would return to France and get married just a week later. Her fiance agreed to this plan and perhaps he was also enjoying his last days of being single.

Louise didn't leave even after breakfast. She took over Zhenya's entire bed and slept there all day long. When she finally woke up in the late afternoon, she wrapped her arms around Zhenya and insisted they go out to eat.

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't understand why Zhenya followed her request so willingly. He had once said he wouldn't sleep with the same person more than twice, but he seemed to really like Louise.

As she sipped on her beer while sharing her story, Kwon Taek Joo realized that was all he really knew about her - from that moment in time.

Whenever Zhenya was not around, Louise showed concern for Kwon Taek Joo. Every time he looked up, their eyes met. She was always the one to strike up a conversation and smiled brightly at him.

"You seem to enjoy reading books often. What book are you reading now?"

"Just a typical detective novel."

"Are you finding it interesting?"

"It's fascinating to uncover the author's silly and weak excuses," Kwon Taek Joo retorted sharply. Louise couldn't help but laugh at his blunt response.

"If you're bored, I can lend it to you," Kwon Taek Joo offered, holding up the book he was reading.

He was clearly drawing a boundary, unwilling to play along with Louise's games. Their relationship was stress-free and harmless, even if they immersed themselves in it.

But how many men could resist getting involved once? Probably not many.

"It's strange how women are more attracted to men who seem indifferent towards them," Louise commented, looking at Kwon Taek Joo without expecting an answer. For a moment, their gaze held a deeper meaning.

But before anything more could be said, the door opened and Zhenya walked in.

Despite drinking heavily last night, he still held a bottle of wine in his hand. Louise immediately turned her attention to him and showered him with affectionate hugs and kisses on the neck, seemingly forgetting about Kwon Taek Joo's presence. He simply smiled and returned to his book.

## **Chapter 1.20 – Siberian Train: Instinctual Desires (18+)**

Translator's Note: 18+ for this whole chapter, the sexual action is crazy for this chapter.

Zhenya suddenly made a proposition, "Let's have sex together. How about it?" Kwon Taek Joo frowned at him, and the bastard nodded as if he had guessed something from his suspicious eyes. Naked Louise slowly lifted her head from beneath him, her cheeks flushed from the wine. "I'm okay with it. I want to try it once," she said, placing her hand on Kwon Taek Joo's arm and silently urging him on. The idea of exposing their private parts and mixing skin and flesh together, like they used to do, doesn't seem like a big deal to the two of them. But does Louise really want to try it with two men she hardly knows? It's beyond understanding why they would try to manipulate an indifferent person like Kwon Taek Joo.

Kwon Taek Joo made eye contact with Zhenya, who replied, "You're not a monk either, who knows how to endure that?" Kwon Taek Joo didn't like his joking face, but while he was still making eye contact with Zhenya, Louise's hand thrust into his sleeve. Even though she tried to seduce him, Kwon Taek Joo's eyes remained focused on Zhenya.

He smiled sarcastically again, knowing that Zhenya was trying to challenge him by predicting his refusal.

It's okay to endure it once or twice; after all, he's been dissatisfied with his desires lately and relieving them in this way isn't so bad.

He quickly decided and unbuttoned his shirt, announcing, "Then I'll do it first."

"Oh??" Zhenya stood aside with a surprised look on his face and Louise looked up at Kwon Taek Joo with a red face.

It was also her first time having sex with two men at the same time, and she knew she wouldn't have the chance to meet handsome men like these again, with looks far beyond average and completely different styles.

However, she still couldn't understand why Kwon Taek Joo, who always acted like a stoic rock no matter how many times she flirted, suddenly agreed. The thought of conquering that cold man made her excited.

Louise hugged Kwon Taek Joo's neck as soon as he took off his shirt. He lifted her up, gently placed her on the bed, and pushed the bulky books to the floor. Zhenya sat opposite with his arms crossed, observing the scene.

Louise kissed Kwon Taek Joo's ear and gently caressed his strong shoulders. She slid her finger along the curve of his collarbone and chest, feeling the solid muscles woven together in his body. Despite his long limbs, he looked slim and fit.

She rolled her eyes at him before suddenly touching his neck, eliciting a sweet sigh from him. Kwon Taek Joo quietly smelled the sweet scent passing through his nose before lifting Louise's waist and pressing her against his stomach.

He tucked her wavy hair behind her ear and lightly bit her smooth earlobe. Louise moaned with excitement as if she was half-melted. He then buried his lips in her hot ear and whispered softly.

"

Dragging me into this was a mistake. I won't be kind."

"...Ah!"

Louise's body turned over, her face buried in the soft pillow while her lower half was raised. Kwon Taek Joo rubbed against her with his erect penis under the soft surface, enjoying the scent and arousal of flesh. Louise held onto his thigh tightly, both worried and anticipating what was to come.

"Wait, ah..."

But before she could protest, he forcefully entered her without any foreplay. Louise gasped at the rough penetration, her body trembling. The sound of skin rubbing together filled the room.

Zhenya smirked, knowing he would never be as reckless and impatient as Kwon Taek Joo. He would take his time to please a woman, teasing her until she was wet enough for him to satisfy his own desires. That patience is what sets human sex apart from animal mating.

But Kwon Taek Joo couldn't care less about the process; he only cared about the end result. As disappointment washed over Louise, she could do nothing but endure his rough thrusts.

Kwon Taek Joo continued to move in and out, ignoring Louise's moans which were a mix of pain and pleasure. His breathing became more erratic as he picked up speed. His entire body was drenched in sweat and his muscles glistened.

Zhenya swirled his glass of wine, transfixed by the sight before him. His gaze never wavered from Kwon Taek Joo's perfect posterior, each flex and movement accentuated by the pressure he placed on his lower body. It was a mesmerizing display, made even more enjoyable by the rich taste of the wine.

As their bodies moved in unison, a soft grinding sound could be heard emanating from Kwon Taek Joo's clenched teeth. He bowed his head in concentration, intensifying the rhythm of his hips. Despite biting down on his lips, low moans and labored breaths escaped from Kwon Taek Joo's mouth. Through each thrust, his toned and sinewy physique rippled with power, every muscle defined and visible.

At first glance, one might mistake their passionate movements for an athletic competition rather than lovemaking.

Zhenya found himself so absorbed in the spectacle that he had forgotten about his drink in hand, fully engrossed in the captivating scene unfolding before him.

Trickles of sweat trailed down Kwon Taek Joo's sharp jawline, beckoning to be licked off and savored. The heat radiating from his dark eyes only added to the mounting desire between them. They glistened

with a mischievous gleam, inviting Zhenya into their alluring depths as they continued their dance of ecstasy.

Zhenya leaned forward, captivated by the sight of Kwon Taek Joo. His thighs were taut and powerful, flexing with each movement as if holding a hidden strength. The feeling of fullness emanated from them, enticing Zhenya's senses. Every second seemed to bring a new level of stimulation, causing his entire body to wiggle with anticipation.

But it was not just his thighs that caught Zhenya's attention. Kwon Taek Joo's body was a masterpiece - broad shoulders, a slim waist, and long, slender limbs that seemed to go on forever. From behind, there were no obvious curves, only a lean and sculpted physique that exuded strength and grace.

Yet, Zhenya couldn't help but let his gaze travel down to the curve below Kwon Taek Joo's waist. It was natural for his eyes to be drawn to the swell of his buttocks, glistening with sweat.

What would happen if he were to rub it or tightly squeeze it in his hand? The thought brought a flush to Zhenya's cheeks and a persistent, dark gaze fixed on that alluring spot.

Kwon Taek Joo gritted his teeth and lifted his head once more, the strain evident on his broad forehead. It seemed like the sweat was making his eyebrows and eyelashes appear thicker than usual. The powerful hip movements that had been relentlessly pounding slowed down noticeably.

Now, the movement of his waist above his firm buttocks was smooth and gracefully beautiful. Zhenya couldn't take his eyes off the trembling buttocks as they were struck again and again, feeling a tingling sensation in his jaw. He realized that his wine glass was empty but he couldn't tear his gaze away from Kwon Taek Joo's body: his eyebrows furrowed in pleasure, his trembling fingers clenched, lips bitten and muffled moans escaping from them. Zhenya memorized every detail with reverence, not wanting to miss a single moment.

If he could lick Kwon Taek Joo's body with his tongue instead of just his eyes, it would surely be drenched his saliva.

In the blink of an eye, Kwon Taek Joo pushed himself closer to Zhenya. He couldn't hold back any longer and let out a deep groan, as his body reached its peak. His penis throbbed and exploded in intense pleasure, causing his buttocks to clench tightly.

Zhenya's eyes widened with desire. In a spontaneous moment, he reached out towards Kwon Taek Joo's backside, unable to control his impulses. But before he could touch the soft flesh, his arm was seized by Kwon Taek Joo's hand, gasping for air.

It wasn't until he saw Kwon Taek Joo wince and struggle that Zhenya snapped out of it and realized what he had been about to do. He looked down at his hand in disbelief, laughing at himself for being turned on by another man's rear end. Why was he suddenly so thirsty and aroused?

"If you act crazy like that again I'll kill you."

Kwon Taek Joo warned sternly, letting go of Zhenya's hand forcefully. Zhenya chuckled under his breath.

After satisfying himself once with Louise, Kwon Taek Joo let go of her without hesitation. She was completely spent and unable to move for a while. He grabbed a bottle of vodka and chugged it down, trying to quench his insatiable thirst. Some of the liquid dribbled down his chin, wetting his neck and chest.

He took deep breaths as he leaned against the wall. Louise moved closer and rested her head on his lap. Kwon Taek Joo didn't say anything but offered her the bottle of vodka.

Louise reached out to grab it eagerly, but then she slipped and fell because Zhenya was pulling her ankle.

"Ah.. Give me 10 minutes to rest and then we can continue."

Louise begged, both pleading and complaining.

But Zhenya pulled her in closer and started caressing her again. She repeated "Just 10 minutes" but eventually gave in, laughing as the man bit her chest and licked the semen from her thighs.

Louise tickled and giggled, but Kwon Taek Joo, who was watching them, suddenly scowled. Their eyes met briefly, and Zhenya's face twisted into a mocking smile.

But Kwon Taek Joo ignored it and didn't react. Should he take a shower while they were playing around? A hot bath would relax his mind and body. After that, even if they had sex or stayed up all night, he could still get a good night's sleep. This was enough craziness for entertainment.

He was about to sit up with that thought in mind, when suddenly...

Louise let out a small scream and fell onto Kwon Taek Joo, almost as if she had been pushed away. Amidst the chaos, he instinctively embraced Louise who had rushed towards him. It took him a moment to realize what had happened.

Without warning, Zhenya lifted Louise's leg, causing her weight to increase and trapping Kwon Taek Joo underneath. Then, Zhenya bent her body in half and inserted his grotesque penis into her. The sheer weight of the man's large frame on top of her also placed pressure on Kwon Taek Joo, who was pinned beneath them.

What is this insane man thinking?

Wild moans filled his ears as Louise's body moved against him. With every sway and vibration, Kwon Taek Joo felt it too. When Zhenya's thighs pressed against Louise's buttocks, Kwon Taek Joo tensed up. As Zhenya thrust himself inside her, taking deep breaths, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but feel a sense of dread.

Was this going to continue?

Kwon Taek Joo's eyes flickered with an uneasy feeling, while Zhenya smiled in satisfaction. Despite Kwon Taek Joo's attempts to push Louise away, Zhenya didn't give him any chance to do so. He pulled back and thrust deeper, causing Louise to hit the wall with Kwon Taek Joo sandwiched between them.

"Ahhh... haaaa... uhmmm haaaaaaaaaaa...!"

Louise was lost in a frenzy of pleasure, her eyes wild with excitement. Her screams echoed through the room as she jumped and writhed in

ecstasy. It was as if some unknown strength had taken over her body, pressing her tightly against Kwon Taek Joo.

And despite being the object of desire for both Zhenya and Louise, it seemed like it was Kwon Taek Joo who was being violated as he felt something deep in his stomach being punctured. A burning sensation coursed through his groin as he struggled to maintain his composure.

Kwon Taek Joo forcefully pushed Zhenya away in an attempt to escape the uncomfortable situation. However, his efforts were in vain as Zhenya had a tight grip on his wrists and would not let go. Despite his anger, Kwon Taek Joo was unable to break free from the oppressive hold of this monster. He could feel himself being pushed against the wall, with Zhenya blocking all of his movements and pressing his hips forward.

The sensation was overwhelming, and Kwon Taek Joo's eyes burned with resentment towards Zhenya. The two of them locked eyes, or rather, Zhenya's gaze never left Kwon Taek Joo's face even for a second.

This crazy bastard, what is he after?

Even when Kwon Taek Joo turned away from him, Zhenya's intense stare continued. Despite feeling a rush of excitement, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but fear this unpredictable man. As the pressure increased, it felt like a void was growing within him. He started to feel uneasy and suffocated as Zhenya's large body pressed against him. This vague feeling of being consumed sent warning signals through his mind.

You will be devoured.

Every instinct told Kwon Taek Joo to stay away from this man, urging him to do so with constant warning signs flashing in his mind. His vision seemed to flicker with a warning light, almost as if it was a sign of danger.

There was no way this strange encounter could be just a coincidence.

As he thrust deep inside, then pulled out, leaving only the tip of his penis remaining, Zhenya's forceful movements caused him to

accidentally stab Kwon Taek Joo in the knees and thighs multiple times.

The impact was so intense that it felt like he could punch a hole right through him. At one point, he purposely rubbed his erect red member against Kwon Taek Joo's trembling thigh. And every time Kwon Taek Joo tried to protest, Zhenya would pretend not to notice and withdraw his hateful flesh.

Louise let out a gasp before falling to the ground with a thud. The girl holding onto Zhenya's neck was shaking as if she had been electrocuted without any means of defending herself. Zhenya then grabbed his throbbing member and pulled it out, denying it the pleasure of reaching its peak before he placed it on Kwon Taek Joo's lap and vigorously stroked it.

Suddenly, the member with a hole in front exploded as if it were a living creature. Zhenya's hand tightened around Kwon Taek Joo's arm as thick semen shot into the air. Kwon Taek Joo instinctively turned his head away, but still couldn't avoid getting some on his eyelid. The sticky fluid slowly dripped down the side of his face as Zhenya continued to hold onto his wrist.

"Oh my...It seems I made a mistake," Zhenya grinned as he made excuses.

Kwon Taek Joo glared at him as if he wanted to tear him apart. His eyes and the surrounding area turned red from the semen shooting out, causing his jaw to clench painfully and veins to bulge on his forehead. His trembling hands balled into fists.

One day, Kwon Taek Joo vowed to kill this bastard himself.

## Chapter 1.21 – Siberian Train: It Seems to be Zhenya

The sun rose again, signaling the start of a new day. Kwon Taek Joo emerged from his train car after washing his face and heard an announcement that the train would soon be arriving in Irkutsk.

It suddenly dawned on him why the inside of the train was so cluttered - most tourists get off at this stop, as Irkutsk is a popular destination on the Trans-Siberian route due to its location near Lake Baikal.

Louise, like many others, had already disembarked.

Zhenya had not been seen since early morning and Kwon Taek Joo couldn't understand why he was keeping himself so busy. Despite being partners, Zhenya never informed him of his whereabouts or activities.

But then again, what was the difference from when he went on solo missions? It just seemed like a waste of time worrying about that man.

The events from last night suddenly flooded Kwon Taek Joo's mind. He tried to dismiss them by repeatedly washing his face, but the unpleasant feeling lingered. The slimy residue left behind by Zhenya's actions still made him feel uncomfortable.

Despite Zhenya trying to shift the blame onto him, it was clear that he had intentionally provoked Kwon Taek Joo. But dwelling on these thoughts would only distract him from his work.

Kwon Taek Joo clenched his teeth and shook his head, determined to push those distracting thoughts away. It was pointless to get caught up in Zhenya's antics - all it did was play into his intentions. With unwavering focus, Kwon Taek Joo scanned the surveillance screen.

To his surprise, Hong Yeo Wook's seat was empty.

Did he go to use the bathroom? In the past few days, he had only left his seat a couple of times in the morning for that reason. Perhaps he would return shortly, so Kwon Taek Joo waited patiently.

After waiting for a while, Hong Yeo Wook did not show up. Kwon Taek Joo decided there was no point in delaying any further and quickly grabbed the Colt before leaving the room.

The passage to the special room remained eerily quiet. Kwon Taek Joo thought he heard Zhenya on the phone outside, but when he looked, she was nowhere to be found. He must have left when something important came up.

Kwon Taek Joo continued down the hallway, plugging in his headphones. The volume control appeared on his connected phone's screen, but he had no intention of leisurely listening to music at this time. He carefully operated the touch dial and held the phone near each closed door in the special car and first class car. When he turned up the volume to maximum, every movement inside each room was transmitted clearly through his headphones.

A deep sigh could be heard from one room, and another room rang with voices offering coffee to a group, but he didn't detect any suspicious activity.

He should probably go straight to the second class room and look for Hong Yeo Wook. Kwon Taek Joo put on his headphones and made his way through each train car.

Most of the passengers in second class were tourists, causing the whole carriage to shake as the train passed through endless snowfields outside the windows.

Even a boring looking tree caused people to exclaim and scramble to take pictures. As a result, it was even harder to make his way through the train car.

Kwon Taek Joo walked slowly, carefully checking each seat. Perhaps Hong Yeo Wook had realized they were being followed and was now hiding somewhere? The train had been running non-stop since last night. Hong Yeo Wook couldn't suddenly fly into the sky or disappear from the ground. So if Kwon Taek Joo looked closely enough, he would be able to find him.

Despite knowing this, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't shake off the unease that settled in his gut when their target suddenly disappeared.

As he made his way through the train, luggage and people kept bumping into him, exhausting him. The second-class cabin flew by and soon he was faced with the cramped and noisy third-class cabin. It was akin to walking through a busy market, with vendors shouting and crowds jostling past each other.

He took a deep breath before pushing open the door. A sudden cry from a child echoed through the cabin, making it difficult to even find a place to step on the floor. The air was stuffy and musty, filled with tired passengers either making noise or passed out from exhaustion.

Traders were focused on unloading and arranging their large packages, their brows furrowed in concentration. Just passing through such chaos was tiring enough; trying to search for Hong Yeo Wook in this mess felt like an impossible task.

Kwon Taek Joo carefully scanned every face, seat, and pile of luggage as he walked through the crowded area. But there was no sign of their target anywhere. Did he slip away to the bathroom or go down to the restaurant? Straightening his rumpled clothes, Kwon Taek Joo made his way towards the restaurant compartment.

The smell of freshly brewed coffee filled his nose as he opened the door. It was still early in the morning, so there weren't many people around.

Thankfully, this made searching much easier. In one corner of the room sat the only Asian person, a woman sitting alone. Her presence was nothing to be suspicious of; it was clear that she wasn't Hong Yeo Wook in disguise due to her different physical appearance. Plus, he doubted their target had enough time to change into a Westerner's attire. With no new leads, Kwon Taek Joo left the train car empty-handed.

As he scurried down the hallway, a new question formed in his mind. Other than Hong Yeo Wook, he hadn't even caught a glimpse of Zhenya despite searching carefully and not missing a single detail.

It seemed impossible for someone with such a large build and imposing presence to go unnoticed. Where could he have gone?

Kwon Taek Joo leaned against the window and gazed out at the snow-covered landscape outside. The sparse, old trees were coated in thick layers of snow, glimmering as if they were dusted with sugar. He stared at the scenery absentmindedly while trying to organize his thoughts.

Kwon Taek Joo spun around, surprised by the sudden stillness. He noticed a restroom up ahead, primarily used by second and third class passengers. Just a moment ago, it seemed like there were people in there.

He cautiously approached the door and pressed his ear against it, but there was no sound coming from inside. Curiosity got the best of him and he took out his phone to use as a makeshift listening device. He could faintly hear the sounds of someone fidgeting inside. Was it Hong Yeo Wook?

Or Zhenya?

Without hesitation, Kwon Taek Joo tried to turn the doorknob, but the door was locked tightly from the inside. How strange.

On cross-border trains, restrooms are often locked for about 10-30 minutes before arriving at a station. At larger stations like Irkutsk, they may even be locked for 30 minutes or more. With only 40 minutes left until reaching the station, about 20 minutes should have been enough time for someone to come out.

Who could have gone in and locked the door? Maybe it was a crew member. Regardless, Kwon Taek Joo had to check again.

He took a few steps back and pulled out his Colt handgun, pointing it at the door. Suddenly, he felt something tense behind him and instinctively turned around. In a blur of motion, he saw a figure wearing a hooded jersey passing by. Before he could react, a gun was pointed at him.

Who was this person? Perhaps Hong Yeo Wook?

Tensing his finger on the trigger, Kwon Taek Joo attempted to identify his opponent. But before he could make a move, a heavy object struck the back of his head.

"Ah!"

In an instant, his vision turned yellow and shattered like shards of glass. The blow came without warning or sound of the bathroom door opening.

Despite the intense pain, Kwon Taek Joo managed to maintain his composure and aimed his gun at both the hooded figure and the bathroom door. But within moments, his knees buckled and he collapsed to the ground.

His mind was spinning, but he could still sense people approaching him in his blurred vision. He couldn't make out who was wearing black, but he felt a strong sense of Deja vu.

As consciousness slipped away, he could have sworn he saw Zhenya's familiar back.

## Chapter 2.1 – Twilight: Do You Have Abs?

Every time Dad would leave the house, he would say, "Please take good care of mom. I trust you guys." To little boy Kwon Taek Joo, this phrase always seemed strange. He couldn't explain why, but deep down he knew that it wouldn't be surprising if Dad never came back. And sadly, his premonition turned out to be true as his father's daily greeting eventually became his last.

His mother wept in front of his father's portrait and Kwon Taek Joo couldn't bear to see her in such despair. The sudden loss of his father made his mother a stranger to him, causing more shock than the loss itself.

His older brother was different. Despite not being an adult yet, he was more composed and responsible than anyone else in the family. He took care of their mother and handled all household tasks with ease. Even after the funeral, he remained strong and focused, not letting the expectations or worries of others affect him. He was someone their mother could rely on and for Kwon Taek Joo, he was a comforting and protective figure in the absence of their father.

Due to their six-year age difference and his brother's busy work schedule, they didn't interact much but they were still close siblings. They lived like that for some time until one day, Kwon Taek Joo received a surprise phone call from his brother. He had a gut feeling that something was wrong but during their conversation, his brother didn't mention anything out of the ordinary.

"I may have to leave the country for two months. Please take care of Mom while I'm gone."

Even though it was a normal conversation, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't shake off the unsettling feeling. However, nothing happened to his brother or his family for some time and he finally let go of his unease.

But tragedies often strike without warning and when they do, it hits harder. That night, a call came informing them about an accident involving their brother. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't believe it even though he heard the words clearly. It felt like a nightmare and he couldn't remember how he got to the location that was announced. Both he and his mother were in shock and unconscious when they arrived.

There were many people gathered when they arrived - soldiers, family members, reporters, and curious onlookers. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't make sense of anything that happened after that. He sat there numbly amidst the chaos of emotions - despair, sadness, and anger.

He spent most of his time tending to the altar, unable to differentiate between sleeping and waking anymore. In his dreams, he saw his father and brother repeatedly saying the same things as if they already knew what was going to happen. He hated those repeated requests and tried to block them out but they continued to scold him until he answered. They appeared as they did at the moment of their deaths - haunting images that left him feeling incomplete.

As Kwon Taek Joo slowly regained consciousness, his mother sat quietly by his side. Despite the traumatic events and her own fainting spell, she seemed strangely calm and collected. Her grip on his hand was firm, providing comfort as he struggled with a nightmare. She gently ran her fingers through his damp hair.

"Seeing you is what keeps me going now."

A glimmer of determination showed in her tired eyes.

Kwon Taek Joo drew a deep breath and opened his eyes, feeling a tremor in his thin eyelashes. He could feel the cold, hard surface of an object against his skin, almost like a glass window. As he closed and opened his eyes, the outside scene passed by quickly through the car window: scattered buildings, abandoned cars lining the road, and dense but bare trees that resembled a city made of snow.

Was he still on the train? No, he no longer felt the vibrations or sounds that came with being on a railway track. However, he was still moving

forward, despite not remembering switching to another form of transportation.

Before he could fully process the situation, a familiar voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Are you awake?"

Kwon Taek Joo made eye contact with the man sitting in the driver's seat and immediately recognised him by his signature blue eyes.

Who else could it be but Zhenya?

"What is going on... Ugh!"

Kwon Taek Joo groaned as he felt a dull pain in his back. He subconsciously reached for the back of his neck and felt a bandage there. His last memory was hazy and unclear. He remembered being attacked by two people while searching for Hong Yeo Wook who had gone missing. Had he been unconscious this whole time? How long has it been? How did he end up off the train, and where were they heading now? Kwon Taek Joo couldn't make any guesses. He glanced sideways, hoping to find some answers.

"A lot has happened while you were sleeping," Zhenya said with a smirk, his tone almost taunting. Kwon Taek Joo glared at him disapprovingly but said nothing.

He was too curious about what happened while he was out to let Zhenya's teasing bother him. But Zhenya didn't give him a clear answer to his doubts.

"You don't remember anything, do you?"

"No..."

"That's good, it would be embarrassing if you remembered everything."

"Stop beating around the bush and just say it."

"Well, if you insist on embarrassing yourself more, I won't stop you. After I returned to my room and couldn't find you, I went looking for you myself. The bathroom was empty and after waiting for a few

minutes, I still couldn't reach you. So I decided to go look for you and found you lying in front of the bathroom door."

"...I went looking for Hong Yeo Wook and got attacked by those two men who seemed to be working together.

"Did you see their faces?"

"Let me think... should I say I did see them?"

"If you saw them, it's a yes, if not, then no. Why are you avoiding giving a straight answer?"

"I didn't get a good look, because they were all smashed in."

It was unclear why Kwon Taek Joo felt like Zhenya played a major role in what had happened.

He had seen his partner with his own eyes before losing consciousness.

Kwon Taek Joo shot a disapproved glance at him.

This crazy lunatic definitely turned them into life-sized human punching bags.

"It was self-defense, I swear it was self-defense." Zhenya opposed in his usual shallow tone.

Yeah right. Kwon Taek Joo no longer believed his shameless justification.

"You must have identified them before dealing with them, right? Are you saying they were sent by Bogdanov?"

Kwon Taek Joo had expected this in silence, but Zhenya promptly denied it. The answer that followed was even more surprising.

"They're skinheads. You know, those people who want a world only for white people."

"..What?"

"They are the ones who attacked you."

No way. One of the names in that group is Hong Yeo Wook; it has to be him. Even though Kwon Taek Joo searched all the train compartments, he couldn't find him anywhere.

And as soon as they confronted him, he attacked without hesitation; it must have been because Hong Yeo Wook realized he was being followed. Plus, the guy in black had the latest gun too.

But were they really just skinheads and did Kwon Taek Joo just happen to get caught up in their attack? In Russia, it wouldn't be unexpected at all. It's just that the timing seemed too random to not be suspicious.

Even if Zhenya's words were completely true, doubts remained. If Hong Yeo Wook wasn't one of those two guys, then where did he disappear to? The train didn't stop at all from the previous night until morning. Kwon Taek Joo searched for Hong Yeo Wook and checked every part of the train before arriving in Irkutsk. The only place for Hong Yeo Wook to hide would have been a locked bathroom.

That wasn't the only strange thing either. While looking for Hong Yeo Wook, Kwon Taek Joo never ran into Zhenya. If Hong Yeo Wook and Zhenya had nothing to do with the gang that attacked him, then where were they during that time?

Was it possible for people to hide under the floor of a moving train or hang from the ceiling?

Kwon Taek Joo's eyes grew sharper as he tossed a staredown at Zhenya.

"Where were you then?"

Zhenya had the audacity to look insulted by the sudden inquiry.

"Are you accusing me? Or are you angry that I wasn't there to protect you when you were attacked?" Zhenya replied calmly.

"I searched the entire train for Hong Yeo Wook, but neither he nor you were anywhere to be found." Kwon Taek Joo's voice was tinged with frustration.

"You searched the whole train... Is that true? You never came to the management office," Zhenya replied, raising an eyebrow.

"The management office...what about it?" Kwon Taek Joo asked, confused.

Zhenya paused, as if he had been caught off guard. "Of course you didn't go there. Why would a man like yourself go to such a place? But that's where Hong Yeo Wook was."

Kwon Taek Joo's doubts began to clear up - perhaps this explained why he couldn't find Hong Yeo Wook on the train. But still, something didn't add up.

"What were you doing there?" Kwon Taek Joo questioned.

"I was watching Hong Yeo Wook all night while you slept comfortably. He suddenly left and I got curious, so I went to find him. That's when I ran into the woman who manages the train car. She said he wanted to change his destination from Irkutsk to Moscow and needed to meet with the manager."

Kwon Taek Joo now understood - if someone wants to change their travel plans, they must meet with the person in charge of the train car. However, this didn't make sense because Hong Yeo Wook had already purchased a ticket to Moscow from the beginning. And even if he did want to change his plans, he could do so without needing to see the manager.

A feeling of unease crept over Kwon Taek Joo. He quickly checked the rearview mirror, searching for confirmation. Zhenya nodded slightly, confirming his suspicions.

Zhenya shared the information, "He was in the management office. The Bogdanovs' contact is the deputy manager."

Kwon Taek Joo felt betrayed, as if he had been stabbed in the back. Contacting Hong Yeo Wook during such a crucial mission seemed like a reckless move. He had assumed they would have a contact already onboard the train.

However, he had also considered that the contact could be disguising themselves as a regular tourist, or even as a flight attendant. But he

never expected that public officials would be willing to aid and abet criminals for their own convenience. It was a shock.

Kwon Taek Joo's shoulders, once tense with anticipation, suddenly relaxed and drooped.

"So, how did you not notice him? Don't tell me you lost them"

"Yes and No."

The situation was becoming more serious by the minute, yet everything was still unclear and hazy. Kwon Taek Joo's patience wore thin and he became irritated.

"Just give it to me straight."

"In conclusion, Hong Yeo Wook never got off at Irkutsk."

"And how did he do it?"

"After contacting the conductor, he took off in a pre-arranged helicopter and disappeared from the moving train."

"Is that even possible?"

"Nothing is impossible if one is willing to sacrifice half of their life."

Physically, it may not have been possible, but mentally it certainly was.

Kwon Taek Joo was just taken aback because this was something he hadn't even considered.

Hong Yeo Wook had used the excuse of changing his itinerary to visit the management office. The manager, who was their contact, promptly called for a waiting helicopter. Adjusting the speed of the train to allow Hong Yeo Wook to board safely would not have been difficult. At that time, the train was approaching Irkutsk so no passengers would have suspected anything unusual about its slower pace, including Kwon Taek Joo.

As the train continued on its way to Irkutsk, Hong Yeo Wook would leave in the helicopter. Even if someone had discovered him and tried to follow, he would have long disappeared by then.

The contact person could have easily returned to Moscow as if nothing had happened.

And all of this happened while Kwon Taek Joo was occupied in the restroom area. He felt a sudden drop in his mood. He had worried that he might miss Hong Yeo Wook, but not like this,

It couldn't be over yet.

He couldn't let this mission end on a miserable note. Frustrated, he snapped at Zhenya.

"So you just stood there and did nothing!?"

"What else was I supposed to do? Were you expecting me to grab the helicopter and bring it down?"

Zhenya's answer sounded absurd, but with Zhenya, anything seemed achievable. He could probably catch a helicopter like he catches a dragonfly. It's hard to believe that he let Hong Yeo Wook slip away right before his eyes.

He wasn't the type to let his target escape. Unless he purposely let him go. That was the Zhenya that Kwon Taek Joo knew so far.

And as if reading his thoughts, Zhenya confessed that he deliberately released Hong Yeo Wook.

"I didn't see the need to capture him immediately, so I left him alone. Let's savor the element of surprise"

"What is your reason for being so confident?"

Zhenya picked something up and tossed it at Kwon Taek Joo. He caught it and saw that it was a GPS tracker with a blinking red dot on the coordinates.

"What is this?"

"My confidence."

"You put a tracking device on Hong Yeo Wook?"

"But this simple method will probably lose its effectiveness soon."

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but question, "How?"

"I fed it to him."

"...Fed it?"

"For the past few days, I've been monitoring his food intake. He's only consumed a small amount of bread. It seems that Russian cuisine doesn't agree with Hong Yeo Wook's palate. But when he saw other Asians enjoying Chinese instant noodles, he seemed quite interested. So I asked the snack vendor for a favor."

Did Zhenya hide a tiny tracking device in the instant noodles and sell them to Hong Yeo Wook? Considering he has only been eating dry bread lately, he must be craving some soup.

If it's spicy enough, it will be difficult for him to be on guard. For someone like Kwon Taek Joo from Korea, this plan makes perfect sense.

As much as he hated to admit it, Zhenya's idea was right this time.

If they try to stop Hong Yeo Wook by force, Bogdanov's team will surely become aware of Kwon Taek Joo's presence as well. In order to maintain secrecy, the original plan may have to be altered.

It would be more effective to let Hong Yeo Wook escape as planned and then track him down. The main goal of this operation is to uncover the identity of 'SS-29,' not hinder Hong Yeo Wook's communication with Bogdanov.

Zhenya suddenly declared, "We only have one day." This meant they only had 24 hours to complete their mission. Once Hong Yeo Wook digests all the food, the tracking device will become useless. Kwon Taek Joo could only hope that Hong Yeo Wook would meet 'SS-29' before that happens.

Their target continued to move southeast. The sign outside the window indicated they were headed towards Lake Baikal. Kwon Taek Joo wasn't sure if this was their actual destination or if they were trying to throw them off their trail again. Either way, he was grateful that the distance between them and Hong Yeo Wook was decreasing.

The car sped through a vast field, with no one else in sight. Kwon Taek Joo's head began to feel light and dizzy, perhaps from the lack of sleep. He desperately searched for any signs of life. Finally, he spotted a herd of sheep with long, shaggy fur perfect for surviving in cold climates. They passed by occasional wooden houses with steep roofs designed to withstand heavy snowfall.

As they continued driving through endless snowy landscapes, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't deny the reality of their situation. They were in the heart of Siberia now.

Zhenya asked suddenly, "Is your head okay? I stapled it back together." Kwon Taek Joo met Zhenya's gaze and unconsciously touched the bandage on his head.

He couldn't remember what had hit him, but it had a strong impact. He wouldn't have been surprised if his skull had been shattered, yet there was hardly any blood on the bandage.

Kwon Taek Joo wondered who had stitched him up - he had assumed it had been a doctor. But then he remembered the long train journey to Irkutsk and doubted there were any medical staff on board.

The thought of being at Zhenya's mercy made Kwon Taek Joo feel embarrassed and vulnerable. Zhenya then continued to ramble on about details that Kwon Taek Joo didn't care for - the condition of his scalp when they found him, the amount of blood loss, the weapon used against him, and even the sensation of using a stapler on raw flesh.

Each time he spoke, it stirred up pain that Kwon Taek Joo had been trying so hard to ignore. He needed to change the subject quickly.

"Have you properly greeted Louise?"

Zhenya looked confused and pointed at himself with his finger.

"Me?" he asked incredulously.

Kwon Taek Joo reminded him of their encounter with Louise on the cross-border train, where they had all ended up doing it together. Zhenya laughed at this memory, admitting that he found her attractive

as well due to her large breasts - something that Kwon Taek Joo had mentioned as a preference before.

This realization brought back images from that night, when Kwon Taek Joo was seduced by both Zhenya and Louise.

He remembered Zhenya's devious smile as he ejaculated on his face, and it sparked anger within him. In a sudden burst, Kwon Taek Joo rolled down the back seat window and let out a primal scream into the wind.

His hair and clothes fluttered behind him, and he stared up at the sky with fierce glint in his eyes.

"I never noticed before, but do you have abs?" Kwon Taek Joo clenched his jaw as he spoke each word, vowing to personally take revenge after their current job was finished.

Zhenya looked at him, seemingly unfazed by this threat. After a moment of laughter, he finally rolled up the window and responded with a smirk.

"I look forward to it."

## Chapter 2.2 – Twilight: The Only Room

Nestled in the heart of Siberia, Lake Baikal holds a rich history spanning 25 million years. With an area of up to 31,500 square kilometers and a diameter of 636 kilometers, this expansive lake is home to 22 islands. The largest and only inhabited island is Olkhon Island.

To reach Olkhon Island, one must carefully time their visit as crossing the frozen river is only permitted during winter when the surface is solid or in summer when the ice has fully melted. In summer, boats are used to cross the river while in winter, cars can drive directly across.

Zhenya drove their car at full speed over the never-ending expanse of frozen lake. Despite the uneven surface causing the car to shake, Kwon Taek Joo remained silent without complaints. While it may seem like they were driving on a road, they were actually crossing a deep body of water covered in thick ice, causing anxiety for both of them.

Thankfully, they arrived at Olkhon Island pier without any accidents. It seems that even the famous Lake Baikal cannot withstand temperatures as low as -50 degrees Celsius.

Stepping out of the car, Kwon Taek Joo looked back at the path they had just taken, surrounded by a peaceful white landscape. He couldn't think or feel anything for a moment, perhaps overwhelmed by the beauty before him.

Leading to the dock from where they stood were tire tracks marking the way through the snow-covered terrain. This was their road. Following these tracks and a flashing red dot on his tracker, Kwon Taek Joo saw a villa in the distance. It was smaller than the Bogdanov Mansion but still stood out among the island's size.

Parking near the villa, Kwon Taek Joo noticed that the red dot on his tracker overlapped with their current location - Hong Yeo Wook must be inside.

Peering between the driver's and passenger seat, Kwon Taek Joo observed the villa in front of them.

"Is that it?"

"Looks like it."

The two individuals scanned the CCTV cameras placed in every corner, ensuring there were no blind spots.

"We can't just charge recklessly."

"Why not?"

Kwon Taek Joo gave Zhenya a bewildered look. Why was he asking such an obvious question? Wasn't it clear?

The villa was situated on high ground on Olkhon Island, overlooking a steep cliff below. The constant winds around the island made it nearly impossible for anyone to intrude from above. And at first glance, there were no air vents or openings to enter through. The surveillance cameras were tightly packed at the main entrance and along the walls, some even equipped with electronic guns that could be controlled wirelessly.

"Even after seeing this setup, you still ask why? Do you have nine lives or something?"

Kwon Taek Joo's comment was intended to be sarcastic, but Zhenya raised his chin confidently. His expression turned arrogant as well. Clearly, this was not meant as a compliment. He tried to protest with his expression, but Kwon Taek Joo quickly looked away from the smug bastard. Seeing him act so cocky only made Kwon Taek Joo feel embarrassed.

"We already have Hong Yeo Wook's location, so that's all we need. It would be foolish to attack head on, so let's review our surroundings quickly."

Zhenya agreed and took control of the steering wheel, driving away without mentioning where they were headed. He didn't even use GPS but drove confidently on an unmarked road, clearly familiar with the

area. Kwon Taek Joo watched as the red dot on their tracking device grew farther and farther away until suddenly the car stopped on a steep incline.

Was it an animal? Kwon Taek Joo wondered as he sat up straight. Zhenya opened his door and said, "Get out." The words were harsh; was he planning to camp out here?

Kwon Taek Joo looked around but saw no one.

He glared at Zhenya for an explanation, but before he could say anything, Zhenya teased, "I won't eat you or anything, so come out of the car and follow me."

Kwon Taek Joo grumbled as he stepped out into the strong winds that were absent in the shelter of the car. All he had on was a loose shirt and jacket, causing him to hunch his shoulders instinctively. Despite the freezing temperatures, his heart remained surprisingly calm. Meanwhile, Zhenya pulled out a luxurious fur coat from the trunk and put it on. Even if they hunted and skinned an animal alive, its fur wouldn't compare to this coat.

While Kwon Taek Joo stood by the car, frozen in place, Zhenya walked ahead without a word. After a few moments, he turned back to urge Kwon Taek Joo to follow him.

The two struggled against harsh winds as they climbed a snow-covered hill. Kwon Taek Joo slipped and stumbled multiple times while trying to keep up, struggling to catch his breath as the cold air and ice particles made it difficult. But he refused to give up, drawing on his military training to push through the challenge. It wasn't long before Kwon Taek Joo realized that Zhenya's goal was a guest house at the base of the hill. The number of rooms may not have been many, but in their current situation, it was more than enough.

Kwon Taek Joo was the first to enter the guesthouse, pushing past Zhenya in his haste. His legs were weak and barely able to carry him to the front desk. The owner, taken aback by the unexpected arrival of a stranger wearing only a thin shirt and a bandage on his head in the bitter cold, looked confused.

"How did you get here?"

"Ro... room..."

"Did you make a reservation?"

Kwon Taek Joo's mouth stiffened at the question, as if he had seen a ghost. He trembled and struggled to answer.

"No. I didn't reserve a room. Are there any available?"

"Since it's winter, we still have some rooms available, but we require 100% reservations. One room should be enough for you, right?"

"No. Two. We need two rooms."

Kwon Taek Joo made sure to emphasize this multiple times, even using his fingers to communicate in case there was any misunderstanding with the owner's language. He did not want to share a room with Zhenya any longer; while he could tolerate being together during battle when necessary, he wanted some privacy for resting.

The owner's response was not very promising. "Oh," he sighed sadly, glancing pitifully at Kwon Taek Joo. No, it was his own fault for not paying attention. All of his focus was on the owner's lips.

Just then, Zhenya barged in through the door, his fur coat swaying delicately as if it were alive. And then came the forlorn answer from the owner.

"We only have one room left."

The room assigned to Kwon Taek Joo and Zhenya was barely wider than a closet. As they entered, the first thing they saw was a small table for two placed directly in front of the door. A narrow path led to a bunk bed pushed up against the far wall, leaving hardly any space for movement. No minibar, no wardrobe, not even a shelf to store their belongings. The only saving grace was that there was only one bed - a bunk bed at that.

The silence between them was heavy and uncomfortable as they sat facing each other. Kwon Taek Joo's eyes roamed around the cramped space, stopping aimlessly in the corner. He couldn't help but think that if he had gotten off the train at their last stop, he wouldn't have to share

this tiny room with Zhenya anymore. But now, they were stuck together for a few more days until they reached their destination. Mentally and physically exhausted, Kwon Taek Joo longed to close his eyes and rest, but the presence of the other man made it impossible for him to relax.

The warmth had completely dissipated from the mugs, leaving behind a heavy and awkward atmosphere between them. Despite this, Kwon Taek Joo knew how to make himself comfortable.

He constantly watched Zhenya's every move, looking for any signs of betrayal. Even though they were now colleagues on the same side, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but feel like he was still an opponent that he couldn't defeat.

Every time Zhenya did something reckless or dangerous, his heart would race with fear. Despite being coworkers, Kwon Taek Joo never knew when or how Zhenya would take off his mask. In his career as an agent, Kwon Taek Joo had encountered many people who became cunning due to complex interests, but rarely did he come across someone as unpredictable and carefree as Zhenya.

Zhenya claimed he was only interested in profiting from getting 'Anastasia', but his actions didn't seem to be driven by money or power.

Even in situations where their lives were at risk and they had yet to achieve any positive results in their mission, Zhenya remained happy and excited like a child playing a spy game. He seemed to have no concern for the cost of his actions or how many people may suffer because of them.

And Kwon Taek Joo knew that once Zhenya lost interest in their current mission, he would retreat without hesitation and possibly even turn on him if it meant tying up loose ends.

This realization kept Kwon Taek Joo on edge every day, every hour, every minute spent with Zhenya.

"I can practically hear your thoughts all the way from here," Zhenya remarked, hitting a nerve. Kwon Taek Joo was peeved but didn't show it.

"I'm just trying to sort through my thoughts, you know, this and that," he feigned ignorance and made weak excuses.

Zhenya gave a fake nod and sarcastic smile on his lips. Although his beauty naturally drew Kwon Taek Joo's gaze, when their eyes met, he felt a strange sensation. It was like being observed by a crocodile with narrowed pupils, scrutinizing every expression, movement, and gesture. If Zhenya kept looking at him like that, he feared that all of his thoughts would be exposed.

Kwon Taek Joo shifted the conversation to avoid getting too encumbered.

"Do you happen to know who owns the villa where Hong Yeo Wook is staying?"

"I noticed a symbol engraved on the main gate of the place."

A symbol? Suddenly, Kwon Taek Joo remembered the mansion's entrance. Just as Zhenya had mentioned, there was a distinct emblem in the middle of the gate.

"It's a familiar symbol that every Russian knows. That symbol is a trademark to show it belongs to the Bogdanov family."

A peculiar spark seemed to ignite in Zhenya's gaze as he spoke these words.

However, Kwon Taek Joo paid little attention and instead contemplated Zhenya's words.

If that was true, then they had come to the right place. He had been feeling lost and confused trying to verify the authenticity of 'SS-29' and 'Anastasia', but now he felt like he was one step closer. Simply by infiltrating the mansion, he could find out if 'SS-29' was really Anastasia or not.

Although it wasn't much, it was enough to bring him some comfort. The struggles of the past didn't seem as significant anymore. Kwon Taek Joo presented his future plans with a sense of optimism for the first time in a while.

"Alright, let's keep an eye on this place day and night until we figure out how to get inside."

Zhenya nodded silently and stood up, causing the chair to squeak as it was pushed back.

Kwon Taek Joo observed silently as Zhenya made his way towards the door. Zhenya paused before turning around to gaze at Kwon Taek Joo.

"I heard there's a Banya here. Would you like to take a bath together?"

A Banya, or Russian steam bath, was available in the vicinity. Kwon Taek Joo was tempted to refuse out of habit, but his mind was preoccupied with other thoughts. He had been cooped up in a cramped train compartment for days, and his body desperately yearned for some relief. Perhaps due to his injury, his blood wasn't circulating properly, and the freezing temperatures only exacerbated his discomfort. What a tempting offer. The only issue is that Zhenya would also be present.

Kwon Taek Joo had no desire to share a small space with that man. Besides, there was no need for them both to use the banya at the same time; he could simply wait until Zhenya was finished. However, despite these reservations, he couldn't bring himself to immediately decline the invitation because doubts lingered in his mind.

Up until this point, Kwon Taek Joo had never seen Zhenya completely naked. Even during sexual encounters, usually it was the partner was underneath him that remained clothed while Zhenya kept his own clothes on, minus his unzipped pants.

This behavior piqued Kwon Taek Joo's curiosity - what was Zhenya trying to conceal? And as someone who didn't easily dismiss doubts that arose, Kwon Taek Joo found himself considering the offer.

"Sure."

## Chapter 2.3 – Twilight: Bathing Together

Translator's Note: Somewhat 18+!!!!

Kwon Taek Joo carefully poured water onto the glowing hot stones of the pechka. The steam rose in thick waves, engulfing him in a sweltering heat that initially made it difficult to breathe. But as his body adjusted, the warmth seeped into every muscle, melting away the frozen stiffness. Beads of sweat rolled down his face, carrying with them the accumulated fatigue of his duties. At that moment, there was nothing more luxurious than a peaceful sauna session off duty.

The banya around him seemed small and humble compared to the grandiose claims of its owners. Kwon Taek Joo could imagine that if two or three men were to enter at once, it would feel cramped and uncomfortable. But for now, he enjoyed the solitude of being alone. However, everything would change once Zhenya's arrival.

He gazed across the room towards the door. Remembering their earlier conversation, Kwon Taek Joo knew that Zhenya would arrive with vodka in hand and would inevitably have to strip down before entering the banya. A mix of excitement and slight anxiety filled him as he anticipated seeing another man's body again. It was all because of Zhenya - Kwon Taek Joo couldn't quite understand why he was so drawn to him. And yet, he couldn't help but wonder why Zhenya was so hesitant to reveal himself. After all, what did he have to lose by exposing his body to Kwon Taek Joo?

Kwon Taek Joo was silently cursing as he waited for Zhenya to arrive. When the door finally opened, his gaze immediately fell on Zhenya's tall, imposing figure. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but frown at the size of his...manhood. It wasn't even fully erect yet, but it was already so large. No wonder people who had sex with him screamed in pain.

Trying to maintain his composure, Kwon Taek Joo forced himself to meet Zhenya's gaze. The other man seemed to know exactly what he was thinking and gave a strange smile. Kwon Taek Joo tried to divert his

attention elsewhere, but the sight of Zhenya's bare, red flesh between his legs kept drawing him in.

Desperate to avoid any awkwardness, Kwon Taek Joo looked away and accidentally caught a glimpse of Zhenya's dangling balls on the seat. His eyes instinctively followed their movement, much to his embarrassment. Zhenya didn't seem to notice or care and simply handed him a glass of vodka, breaking Kwon Taek Joo out of his trance.

"Once it's up, it has to be plugged into any hole," Zhenya said casually, causing Kwon Taek Joo's eyes to snap back up to his face.

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't properly process what was happening. He took a sip of his drink and tried to discreetly scan every inch of Zhenya's body in an attempt to distract himself from the uncomfortable situation.

Zhenya's physique was almost unreal in its perfection. Each muscle seemed carefully placed, creating a stunning work of art. His slim and toned figure boasted straight collar bones, broad shoulders, and prominent joints that formed graceful lines. Even his abs were perfectly defined, resembling the sleek fins of a shark. His porcelain white skin was unblemished and smooth, giving off an aura of strength and solidity. You could stab him with a knife, but it would most likely break upon contact. There were no scars or signs of skin disorders on his body, leaving Kwon Taek Joo surprised and slightly disappointed that Zhenya still chose to hide it away.

"I thought you were being careful because you were hiding something important, but it seems I was wrong."

Zhenya chuckled.

"Were you that desperate to see my body?"

Kwon Taek Joo's lips curved into a scowl as he poured water into the stove. Steam rose, adding to Zhenya's glistening form and making him even more irresistible. Every inch of his muscles called out to Kwon Taek Joo, tempting him to explore and indulge. As sweat dripped down Zhenya's body, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but feel a stirring sensation in his gut.

He watched as droplets slid down Zhenya's neck and chest, mesmerized by their movements. It was strange how such simple actions could make Kwon Taek Joo feel flustered and aroused.

Suddenly, Zhenya opened his eyes and their gazes locked. No, he wasn't looking at Kwon Taek Joo's face - his transparent blue pupils slowly rolled under wet lashes as if inspecting Kwon Taek Joo's body.

A tingling sensation spread through his whole body, like a snake's tongue flicking against his skin. Kwon Taek Joo quickly covered his head with the towel and leaned forward, trying to hide from that naked gaze.

The room was filled with the sound of pouring vodka as Zhenya filled their glasses to the brim.

Kwon Taek Joo's lips were a crisp contrast against his dark skin, glistening with sweat and panting heavily from the suffocating heat. The vodka seemed to have a strange effect on him, making his normally full lower lip even plumper and glossier.

Zhenya watched intently as he tilted his own glass, the outline of his lips creating a tantalizing image of a tongue within. He downed the vodka in one go, then licked his lower lip with hunger in his eyes.

Kwon Taek Joo could feel the intense stare of Zhenya upon him, like a predator eyeing its prey. He raised his head to meet his gaze, unable to escape its persistent and oppressive nature. The two continued to lock eyes in a silent duel, neither willing to back down. Suddenly, Zhenya leaned in closer until their faces were only inches apart. He squinted his eyes and chuckled, sending shivers down Kwon Taek Joo's spine.

"It makes a little sense now..."

Zhenya finally broke the tense silence by pulling away with a sly grin on his face.

"Without a doubt.."

"Your butt is wasted on a man's body".

Kwon Taek Joo bristled.

This damn son of a bitch and his impolite mouth.

Kwon Taek Joo's arm shot out like a snake, snatching a nearby birch branch and whipping it at Zhenya's face. Water droplets from the leaves dotted the pale skin like a painting. Despite the attack, Zhenya's expression remained as stoic as ever. But at that moment, Kwon Taek Joo had a sinking feeling that maybe he shouldn't have done that.

Oops.

In one swift movement, Zhenya grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's wrist and twisted it behind his back, causing his arm to bend unnaturally and his face to slam against the wall. The sound of impact echoed in the room as Kwon Taek Joo's vision blurred and spun. With a heavy weight pressing against him, Kwon Taek Joo felt Zhenya's breath hot against his ear that made Kwon Taek Joo's blood run cold. In their struggle, the towel slipped from Kwon Taek Joo's head, forgotten in the heat of the moment.

Kwon Taek Joo's heart raced as he felt Zhenya's strong grip on his arm, the same grip that had held him captive before, and now threatened to do so again. His mind flashed back to the coldness in Zhenya's eyes, like a dark afterimage burned into his memory.

Desperately trying to break free, Kwon Taek Joo twisted and struggled against the iron-like hold. But Zhenya remained unmoved, silently studying him with calculating precision. His gaze swept over Kwon Taek Joo's tense body, lingering on his nape and wrist, sizing up where to strike first.

Zhenya's gaze stopped at the curve of Kwon Taek Joo's buttocks glistening with sweat. The sight seemed to ignite something in Zhenya, transforming the madness in his eyes into a concealed eagerness.

Without hesitation, Zhenya reached out towards Kwon Taek Joo's plump backside. But just as his fingertips were about to make contact, Kwon Taek Joo shifted his weight and pushed back into Zhenya with all his might. Using all of his strength, he grabbed onto Zhenya's wrist and yanked it off him, breaking free from the man who threatened to consume him once more.

Zhenya was caught off guard by the sudden attack and fell to the ground. Taking advantage of his momentary lapse in defense, Kwon Taek Joo swiftly made his move. In an instant, their roles were reversed as Zhenya went from being an opponent to a cooperative colleague. All tension gone.

Kwon Taek Joo nonchalantly picked up the towel that had fallen beside him and draped it around his neck.

"Off to call your mommy now?"

Zhenya teased with a smirk as Kwon Taek Joo walked out of the Banya. His response was equally sarcastic.

"I'll let her know to give you a well-deserved scolding." Kwon Taek Joo flipped his middle finger before leaving the Banya and shutting the door behind

Zhenya's laughter rang out from within the chamber, and Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but wonder what was so amusing about the situation. He shook his head and made his way towards the dressing room.

But after a few steps, he stopped in his tracks. Placing his hand over his heart, he felt it pounding so hard it was nearly suffocating him. He realized that every inch of his body was covered in goosebumps.

This was truly dangerous. If Zhenya hadn't been distracted during their fight, he could have seriously injured him. Kwon Taek Joo knew that Zhenya wasn't someone who would simply tolerate others because they were partners; if something made him uncomfortable, he would destroy anyone without hesitation.

Fueled by fear, Kwon Taek Joo clenched his trembling hands into fists. This was an emotion he had never experienced before in his life. One cannot truly understand fear until they face it themselves, and that was exactly what Kwon Taek Joo was feeling.

Perhaps it would be best to wrap up this mission as soon as possible. Completing their task and severing ties with Zhenya seemed to be the only way for him to escape these unfamiliar and unsettling emotions.

## **Chapter 2.4 – Twilight: Package of Korean Spicy Ramen**

The wind howled against Kwon Taek Joo's face as he stood on the shore of the frozen lake, contemplating his plan. Snow swirled around him, making it difficult to see the surroundings clearly.

But despite the harsh weather, Kwon Taek Joo was determined to go scouting before breakfast. He knew the risks - one wrong step could mean a twisted knee and being unable to move - but he couldn't resist the thrill of adventure.

As he grumbled about the snow and cold, a large hill loomed into view. It was only at the top of this hill that he could see Hong Yeo Wook's mansion. With renewed determination, Kwon Taek Joo pressed down on the stiff pedal and began the ascent. The climb was treacherous, with wheels slipping and sliding in the snow multiple times before finally reaching the top.

Gasping for breath, Kwon Taek Joo took in the sight of the villa below.

There were no signs of activity, likely due to the overnight snowfall.

Kwon Taek Joo adjusted the lens leg of his camera and activated its special feature - the ability to see through structures and buildings. As he zoomed in on the mansion, it appeared more like a fortress than a home.

The chimney was designed to release steam through the ground instead of out from the roof, and windows were small and too narrow for anyone to enter or exit. Even the water supply and drainage system faced towards a cliff, making it nearly impossible to break in without risking one's life.

Frustrated, Kwon Taek Joo reached into his pocket for a cigarette. He bit it between his teeth but didn't light it yet; instead, he glanced at his wristwatch which displayed real-time information about wind speed

and direction at his current location. It confirmed what he already suspected - breaking into the mansion by helicopter or parachute was out of the question.

But despite the setback, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but feel a sense of satisfaction. The more impenetrable the mansion seemed, the more valuable whatever secrets it held must be.

With a final look at the fortress-like home, he made his way down the hill and back to safety.

"I'm so fed up with this."

Kwon Taek Joo returned to the motel and immediately sat down for breakfast.

The Pelmeni, a traditional Russian dish, felt like rubber in his mouth. After enduring the freezing weather outside for what seemed like hours, all he got was a bowl of mediocre food. It was warm at least, but not very comforting.

The menu never changed, and always consisted of the same bland dishes - lamb, herring, cabbage or potatoes. These were foods that could be enjoyable when eaten occasionally, but became dull and unappetizing when eaten every day. Just the thought of them made him feel full.

But alas, Kwon Taek Joo had been constantly hungry, making everything even more difficult.

All he really craved was a warm and spicy soup. He searched through the spice cabinet but couldn't find anything similar to chili powder.

"I'm so exhausted."

His stomach growled in hunger but he didn't have the desire to eat anything.

He let out a heavy sigh and rested his chin on his arm. Kwon Taek Joo had just finished taking a hot bath and his hair was still wet as he sat there in only his underwear under a blanket, struggling with the Pelmeni.

Zhenya entered the kitchen and Kwon Taek Joo didn't bother turning to look at him as he stabbed at another piece of Pelmeni.

"It's still quiet. Nothing special has shown up."

He reported with forcefulness. Zhenya didn't respond either, only rustling could be heard from the stove area. Kwon Taek Joo accidentally turned his head to see and suddenly his eyes widened in surprise because what he saw was none other than Korean spicy ramen noodles.

How could he not recognize the infamous red package with its bold black letters?

Just looking at the packaging made his mouth water.

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't take his eyes off the ramen package and Zhenya gently held it up like it was a God's offering.

Even as he tossed it from one hand to the other, Kwon Taek Joo's eyes remained fixated on it. Zhenya's lips formed a gaping smile.

"I heard that Koreans would die to eat this. Is that true?"

"Where did you get that?"

"The landlord gave it to me. The previous tenant, a Korean, left it for him."

The motel owner must be going senile because how the fuck does Zhenya look more Korean than Kwon Taek Joo himself?

Why did he give such a valuable item to that guy without telling him? Kwon Taek Joo glared at the ramen package and cursed the landlord.

Kwon Taek Joo unconsciously reached out his hand. His finger brushed against the corner of the ramen packet, making a rustling sound.

As if summoned by this sound, he suddenly lunged for the ramen package, not even caring that his blanket had fallen off his shoulders.

Zhenya raised the packet higher, trying to avoid Kwon Taek Joo's grasp. But Kwon Taek Joo was determined and kept jumping up, flailing his arms in an attempt to catch the coveted ramen. Zhenya deftly dodged

and weaved, raising his own hands defensively to block any attempts from Kwon Taek Joo. The scene looked almost comical.

Kwon Taek Joo abruptly stopped his attack and adjusted himself with a calm demeanor. He inhaled deeply before confidently making his request.

"Hand it over."

"I can't just give it away like that."

It was almost unbelievable to say. Was he any different than the devil? Though Kwon Taek Joo was not satisfied, he still asked his question.

"What do you want then?"

"Nothing too special, it all depends on your attitude."

Zhenya spoke nonchalantly as he held both the phone and a package of ramen noodles in his hands. He seemed to be using a translation app to decipher the Korean cooking instructions.

Soon, a small pot of water sizzled on the stove. Zhenya carefully adjusted the flame before standing back with his arms crossed. Now Kwon Taek Joo's eyes were fixated on the pot, drool seemingly ready to escape from the corners of his mouth at any moment. But even with such tempting bait, he couldn't bring himself to ask for anything evil.

How long would this charade last? Just as he was starting to contemplate, the water began to boil.

Zhenya added the soup powder into the boiling water, its pungent aroma instantly awakening their senses.

Kwon Taek Joo pretended not to care and returned to his seat, continuing to eat his cold Pelmeni. Maybe our brains can cause temporary hallucinations and our sense of smell can deceive our taste buds, Kwon Taek Joo thought optimistically as he took a bite of his Pelmeni, only to be met with an oily taste that mocked his humble expectations.

Zhenya finished cooking the ramen and set it down on the table. Kwon Taek Joo's eyes followed the dish closely, knowing just one bite would

satisfy his grumbling stomach.

The spicy flavors of Korea would surely wash away his fatigue upon touching his tongue.

He cautiously reached for his fork, but Zhenya swiftly moved the pot out of reach. Kwon Taek Joo's fork missed its target and clattered to the ground. He tried again, only to be met with the same result.

Frustrated, he issued an unreasonable warning in a fit of annoyance as Zhenya continued to keep the pot out of his grasp.

"If you don't let me eat it right away, it's going to get cold."

"Don't care."

Of course he didn't care. Bastard.

The fork in his hand trembled as his hunger grew stronger and everything around him seemed to spin. His vision became blurry. If he didn't eat now, who knows when he would have the chance again?

Maybe Kwon Taek Joo was overthinking Zhenya's simple request.

Let's at least hear him out first.

As he pondered, the ramen soup began to decrease rapidly. It felt like a matter of survival to eat it immediately. The thread of reason in Kwon Taek Joo's mind was breaking. He stood up suddenly and picked up the pot, then proceeded to drink the soup as if it were life-saving water.

His neck moved up and down vigorously as he consumed the spicy broth, his eyes lighting up and his senses becoming sharper. It was like all the richness and heaviness in his stomach dissipated instantly.

Zhenya sauntered behind Kwon Taek Joo, his steps slow and deliberate. Kwon Taek Joo was too engrossed in his bowl of noodles to notice Zhenya's approach. As Zhenya drew closer, his gaze traveled down the length of Kwon Taek Joo's body, taking in every inch with a fervent hunger.

He imagined tracing the curve of Kwon Taek Joo's neck, the line of his back, the definition of his muscles, and the smoothness of his skin. A

voice resonated in a low growl.

"Stay still."

Zhenya's fingers brushed against the back of Kwon Taek Joo's thigh, as if wiping away an invisible speck of dirt. His intense eyes followed each movement of his fingers, refusing to miss a single detail. Even his breathing was barely audible.

In an instant, he squeezed tightly on Kwon Taek Joo's thighs, surprising him as he gently massaged the skin. With an annoyed expression, Kwon Taek Joo turned to look at Zhenya before returning his focus to his noodles. He had half-expected Zhenya to make a mischievous request, but this was surprisingly acceptable.

But suddenly, he realized how reckless that thought was as Zhenya's fingers crept under his panties and began exploring. The hand that was massaging his thigh now boldly caressed the curve of his buttocks. Zhenya's ice-cold eyes were now glistening with desire. He kneaded and squeezed at the plump flesh until it slipped through his fingers. And then came another bold demand.

"Clench your muscles a bit."

Kwon Taek Joo felt a frown forming on his face as he was about to protest. But before he could say anything, a sharp sound blared from the location tracking screen. Quickly putting down his ramen pot, he checked the status of their target. True enough, the red dot indicating Hong Yeo Wook's location had disappeared from the coordinates. This could only mean that the location tracking device inside her had been removed.

He turned to Zhenya with the device in hand.

"Duty calls."

Zhenya didn't respond, still looking down at his hand that looked almost lost. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but feel curious about the thwarted expression lingering on the man's face. Shrugging the thought off, Kwon Taek Joo patted Zhenya's shoulder, adding a soft chuckle.

"Thanks to you, I had a good meal."

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't resist teasing him. He wrapped the fallen blanket around his shoulders and left the kitchen, leaving behind an empty pot.

Zhenya stood stunned for a moment before bursting into miffed laughter.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, Zhenya left Kwon Taek Joo to his own devices. With the echoes of the day's activities finally fading, Taek Joo allowed himself to sink into the plush mattress of the bunk bed, a rare moment of true relaxation washing over him. His body ached with the sweet exhaustion of a mission finally going in the right direction.

Reflecting on the past, he couldn't ignore the fact that Zhenya's assistance had been necessary in certain situations. However, he couldn't rid himself of the notion that having a partner like him only led to chaos and peril.

He still preferred working alone.

Suddenly, a vibration interrupted the stillness. Kwon Taek Joo instinctively reached for his phone, but it remained silent. It was the device that Zhenya had given him from the start, so only he knew how to contact him through it.

Was it just the wind playing tricks on his mind?

Despite considering other possibilities, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't resist the urge to investigate the source of the vibration.

Kwon Taek Joo heard the noise again and began to search for its origin. After looking around Zhenya's bed, he discovered a phone hidden under the blanket. As expected, there was a new message waiting to be read.

Without hesitation, Kwon tried using the password Zhenya had used in the armory to unlock the phone. To his surprise, it worked and the lock screen disappeared.

But then a sudden hesitation washed over him.

Was it right to invade someone else's privacy like this? It went against his principle of not interfering in other people's affairs. But what if this message contained important information about Zhenya's true intentions?

The conflicting thoughts battled in his mind.

In the end, curiosity won and Kwon Taek Joo connected his laptop to the phone. It would take some time for Zhenya to return, so he used this opportunity to confirm his suspicions. Who was Zhenya really working for? Was he just using this mission as a means to get the blueprints, as he claimed?

And who were his allies? Kwon Taek Joo knew he had to be cautious and keep an eye on Zhenya's every move from now on.

He inserted a USB into the computer, one of the few belongings he managed to salvage from the explosion at the hotel. It was specially designed to withstand shocks and moisture, but he wasn't sure if it would still function properly.

In a state of restlessness, he scrolled through the files on the storage device. Fortunately, the hacking program on his laptop was still functional.

With a few keystrokes, Kwon Taek Joo downloaded all the files from Zhenya's phone. The program was able to retrieve even deleted or modified files with ease. Once done, he disconnected the phone and returned it to its original place.

No one would ever suspect that it had been hacked.

Kwon Taek Joo opened the most recent message among the files on his computer. It was a lengthy MMS message filled with incriminating evidence.

What the hell?

The issue with the SS-29 has been resolved successfully and further tests are being conducted to ensure there are no other defects. The final results will be announced in two days, with everyone present.

Kwon Taek Jo was surprised by this development, as he believed that only machines were involved in the creation of the weapon. He was aware of the problems but he couldn't understand why Zhenya had received the update. It seemed like it was only meant for those directly involved in the SS-29's development.

"How silly of you to do something so pointless."

Zhenya's sudden voice startled Kwon Taek Joo as he stood in the doorway.

A chill ran down his spine, causing his fingers to clench into a tight fist. When did he come back? Kwon Taek Joo didn't even sense his presence. Not because his senses were slow, but because Zhenya was like a ghost, always silent and undetectable. His attempt to hack into Zhenya's phone had been discovered.

"I could have shown you if you had asked,"Zhenya said, surprising Kwon Taek Joo with the man's lack of anger or aggression. Usually normal people would go into a fit of rage if their privacy had been invaded.

Kwon Taek Joo thanked his lucky star that Zhenya's personality was far from the normal type.

Regardless, Kwon Taek Joo now felt like he had no idea how to act in front of Zhenya. He usually didn't commit such shameless acts.

"What is this?"

"Oh that? I stole it."

"What do you mean? Elaborate"

"Remember when I went to the Bogdanov mansion and met Olga? Before we broke up, she asked for my phone number. When I entered it in, I also installed a sneaky application on her phone. It's not like a normal hacking or virus program that experts can detect. It spreads through text messages without anyone even realizing it. Luckily, Olga still keeps in touch with her family, right? You can see all the messages sent and received from the Bogdanovs' phones."

Zhenya explained as he pulled out his phone and unlocked it himself. He tossed it to Kwon Taek Joo, who hesitantly looked at him before turning his attention to the phone.

As Zhenya had promised, there were piles of messages between members of the Bogdanov family and others. There were also folders containing personal information such as past calls, contacts, photos, notes, and schedules. It seemed that Zhenya had successfully breached the Bogdanovs' security.

"These days, things like that are more valuable than big, heavy weapons."

The era of physical warfare was long gone. While countries continue to develop weapons and increase firepower, most of them are only hypothetical concepts. The true means of power struggles between nations now revolve around intelligence and information control. In this world where secrecy and access to information are vital, Zhenya's hacking skills are highly coveted. The fact that he used the Bogdanov family as an experimental subject speaks volumes about his abilities.

However, there is still one question left unanswered.

"That's all well and good, but why didn't you tell me about this before? If I hadn't discovered it first, would you have kept pretending not to know?"

"I don't feel obligated to share my business plans just because we're working together for a short time," Zhenya retorted impertinently.

A surreptitious smile played on his lips.

Zhenya's next words were especially dubious.

"Besides, did you ever consider me a colleague in the first place?"

Despite facing criticism, Kwon Taek Joo had no reason to defend himself as Zhenya's suspicions were completely accurate. He had never considered Zhenya a colleague, so it was unreasonable for him to feel betrayed when he didn't share important information.

However, Kwon Taek Joo knew that Zhenya was also highly perceptive and must have been aware of his lack of trust.

Yet, he never expected such blunt criticism from Zhenya.

As the tense situation between them settled down, Zhenya seemed to lose interest in provoking Kwon Taek Joo.

With a defeated expression, he breathed a sigh, handing back the phone and was about to close his laptop when Zhenya's hand clutched his own and scooted into Kwon Taek Joo's personal space.

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't shake off the feeling of unease, as if he was exposing himself to a dangerous predator.

He turned his head slightly, but could feel Zhenya's piquant breath on his neck.

"Even though we're only temporary colleagues, do you really find me so untrustworthy that you would resort to hacking into my computer?" Zhenya smirked provocatively, gazing into Kwon Taek Joo's eyes with unwavering volume.

Kwon Taek Joo didn't feel the need to offer explanations or apologies; instead, he angrily closed his laptop.

"If I were to treat you coldly, it would also hurt your feelings, wouldn't it?"

What a load of nonsense, Kwon Taek Joo thought as he gave up trying to make sense of Zhenya's behavior.

They needed to focus on their work now. Thankfully, they had received news that the 'SS-29' issue had been resolved and it was time to take action. The only obstacle was figuring out how to sneak into the mansion without getting caught.

"With people about to arrive, wouldn't it be easier if we broke in before them?" Kwon Taek Joo suggested.

"I suppose so," Zhenya agreed absentmindedly, before adding,

"When would be a good time? Tonight? Tomorrow morning? Or should we rest until afternoon and then go?"

Kwon Taek Joo clicked his tongue and gave a disdainful look at Zhenya. If anyone overheard their conversation, they would think they were discussing a casual stroll rather than breaking into a mansion.

"Why are you making it seem like it's the easiest thing in the world, you bastard? There's no place to hide, everywhere you look."

"That's because you're always scheming like a mouse. You make everything so complicated. Why can't we just enter through the main gate?"

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't even muster a laugh.

If he did that and rang the doorbell...would they even bother to warmly welcome him in?

"Ugh, you say it so casually, but do you have a plan?"

"Of course I have a plan."

"The hacking app we just checked isn't even on the market yet. Not many people know about it. Most of the weapons being traded right now are iron bars used for fighting and destroying objects. This is our chance to make an impact. Think about it - like a virus, this app will spread naturally and steal information from infected individuals in real time. Who wouldn't be enticed by such a product?"

So he's planning on making a fake transaction using the hacking app and officially visiting the mansion as an arms dealer? There's definitely a chance of success. Just by looking at the person in charge of maintaining 'SS-29', it's clear that the mansion owner is very interested in weapons.

"But what if they don't respond to our proposal? Aren't they busy preparing to welcome guests right now?"

"That could be the case. But if we suggest that this is a joint project between the US and Korea, they'll give it a try."

"Why are you so sure? They won't easily trust us. In military transactions, trust is essential."

"As long as I'm around, there's nothing to worry about." Another smicker surfaced on Zhenya's lips.

"It seems you've forgotten, but I am also a businessman myself. I am familiar with these industries and have an important role to play. No one would dare question my abilities."

"If you're so confident, then your reputation must be as tiny as an ant's eyeball. Are you sure you're okay with this? There could be a huge loss if things go wrong and you have to reveal a product that you had no intention of releasing."

Zhenya shrugged.

"There is no greater loss than not obtaining Anastasia."

If that's what Zhenya believes, then Kwon Taek Joo has no reason to refuse. With all other intrusion routes blocked, it's difficult to find a better plan.

"Sergei Ilyavich Bogdanov. The owner of the mansion. He is a distant relative of Vissarion." Zhenya showed Kwon Taek Joo a photo of a middle-aged man.

"He is very interested in weapons, especially those made in America".

Kwon Taek Joo hummed in thought.

That was definitely a good sign then.

## Chapter 2.5 – Twilight: Sergei's Mansion

In the dead of night, Kwon Taek Joo woke up with a jerky motion. He tiptoed his way out of the room and descended the stairs. Zhenya remained in a deep slumber, undisturbed by his movements. Kwon Taek Joo gazed at Zhenya's face expectantly, but all he could hear was the quiet rhythm of his breathing. Satisfied that Zhenya was still asleep, Kwon Taek Joo double-checked before leaving the room.

He walked softly down the dark hallway to his intended destination - the homeowner's room. It was late, so he knocked gently on the door. After a few moments of shuffling sounds from inside, the door opened to reveal the sleepy homeowner. Kwon Taek Joo apologized for disturbing him and asked if he could make an international call.

Using his usual excuse of dropping his phone in the toilet, Kwon Taek Joo convinced the homeowner to let him use their phone. He also added that it was his single mother's birthday in Korea, another fabricated lie.

Once inside, the homeowner reluctantly handed over the phone and gave detailed instructions on how to make an international call and how the charges would be calculated.

As soon as the homeowner left, Kwon Taek Joo picked up the receiver. He rarely had personal contact with this person; usually, they communicated through walkie-talkies and SNS messages for their operations.

This made it difficult for Kwon Taek Joo to remember their phone number.

After waiting for what felt like an eternity, only a busy tone could be heard from the other end. Undeterred, Kwon Taek Joo pressed the callback button.

The busy tone continued until finally, after what seemed like forever, a familiar voice filled his ear.

"Hello?" the voice answered cautiously.

"Yoon Jong Woo"

"What? Is this... senior?"

The voice was taken aback when they realized it was Kwon Taek Joo.

"Yes, it's me. Listen carefully to what I am about to say," Kwon Taek Joo said urgently.

Yoon Jong Woo could tell that something was wrong from the tone of his voice. He couldn't help but wonder why Kwon Taek Joo suddenly called and why his phone number was different.

"I have a favor to ask of you," Kwon Taek Joo continued.

"Sure, what do you need?"

Yoon Jong Woo replied, trying to hide his confusion.

"I sent a photo to your email. Can you find out what he's planning?"

"Do you know who the person in the photo is?"

"If I knew that, why would I still call you?"

"Right, sorry. Let me look into it,"

Yoon Jong Woo said, mentally shaking his head at himself for asking such an obvious question.

Kwon Taek Joo explained that he couldn't give any details over the phone due to strict confidentiality rules within their organization.

He needed Yoon Jong Woo's help discreetly finding out information about the person in the photo.

After hanging up, Yoon Jong Woo browsed through the photo and directions that Kwon Taek Joo had sent him. It wasn't the first time Kwon Taek Joo had asked for his hacking skills and ability to gather unofficial information.

It was almost like a one-way directive rather than a favor.

Meanwhile, Kwon Taek Joo walked down the hallway towards the kitchen where light was coming from under the door.

He could hear voices inside and guessed that the homeowner was talking with a guest who couldn't sleep either. Kwon Taek Joo felt guilty for interrupting their sleep, so he decided to stop by the kitchen before returning to his room.

"Thank you. And thank you for your help .."

As soon as Kwon Taek Joo entered the kitchen, he saw a familiar figure standing at the counter. He stopped in his tracks. The person swivelled around, revealing Zhenya. He had a bottle of vodka and a glass in front of him, suggesting that he had been chatting with the homeowner.

Kwon Taek Joo suddenly felt guilty, as if he had done something wrong.

Zhenya calmly asked about it, as if he already knew everything.

"Who were you calling?"

"My mom."

"...Ah, I see."

Kwon Taek Joo expected to be teased, but Zhenya's reaction wasn't very conciliatory. Did he suspect something? It seemed like he should leave before things became more awkward. Kwon Taek Joo quickly greeted the homeowner before leaving the kitchen, stealing a glance at Zhenya.

"You're not going to sleep?"

Just a little longer."

Zhenya gestured towards the half-full bottle of vodka on the counter. Thankfully, he didn't ask Kwon Taek Joo to drink with him.

Feeling relieved that he wouldn't have to join in on drinking, Kwon Taek Joo shrugged and left the kitchen. He could feel Zhenya's eyes trailing after him, but he ignored it and tried to shake off his discomfort.

Back in his room, Kwon Taek Joo climbed into his bunk bed and pulled the blanket up to his neck. He pondered different thoughts and

wondered how long he could keep this up without having a mental breakdown.

From tomorrow onward, his physical strength will be pushed to its limits. A good night's sleep would do wonders for his health. With that thought in mind, Kwon Taek Joo forced himself to fall asleep.

As he gradually drifted off, the surroundings grew quiet once again. He could hear the faint sound of snow falling outside his window, and occasional noise of chatter from the nearby kitchen.

Initially, it annoyed him, but eventually it became like a lullaby, lulling him into a peaceful slumber. He faced the wall and let himself succumb to sleep's embrace.

Unbeknownst to the slumbering man, the door that had been tightly closed all this time, creaked open. The figure slunk into the room, and made their way towards the bunker.

It was Zhenya.

After finishing his bottle of vodka, he planned on going to bed. However, instead of immediately crawling under the covers, he remained still and stared at the sleeping figure.

Zhenya, tall enough to see over Kwon Taek Joo's neck, observed him as he slept peacefully with his back facing him. Zhenya watched this placid scene for a while, his blue eyes glinting in the dim lighting.

The man stood there watching for so long that he forgot to blink, only bending down to lie down when he grew tired.

The tension created by Zhenya's movements quickly dissipated, and the room fell silent once again.

Kwon Taek Joo's tightly closed eyelids suddenly opened wide. He gazed at the dark wall in front of him, lost in thought for a long time.

"Ready to head off?" Zhenya asked from the doorway, hovering in anticipation. Kwon Taek Joo nodded while he adjusted his tie. He was dressed in a sleek, black suit - a departure from his usual shirt and vest ensemble, but today was a special occasion.

As he struggled to button his shirt up to the collar, Kwon Taek Joo felt the tightness of the tie around his neck. He put on his vest and coat, one by one, and began to button them up.

Suddenly, Zhenya appeared behind him and draped a fur coat over his shoulders. Kwon Taek Joo's initial reaction was surprise - did he look too scruffy to be an arms broker?

The soft fur gently brushed against his skin as he admired it. But when he caught sight of himself in the mirror, he was surprised. He had never been called small before, but in this outfit, he looked like a teenage boy playing dress-up in his father's clothes.

The width fit fine, but the length was an issue - the hem of the coat dropped to the floor.

"This? No fucking way. No thanks".

Kwon Taek Joo's face contorted in displeasure as he hastily removed the ostentatious fur coat and threw it back to Zhenya with force. Zhenya's smug expression turned even more victorious, as if he had just won a grand prize.

His playful gaze sparkled from beneath his perfectly curled lashes, almost daring Kwon Taek Joo to question his intentions.

Was this all just an elaborate game for him?

Kwon Taek Joo glared at Zhenya and walked out of the guest house first. The homeowner came to the front door to see the two people off.

Kwon Taek Joo originally planned to sit in the back seat, but instead he moved towards the front passenger door. He was a guest of Zhenya's and sitting in the front would seem less suspicious to Sergei Ilyaevich, an old acquaintance of Zhenya's.

But in the end, does it really make a difference?

Sergei would probably still be wary since he knew Zhenya was the type of person who would willingly chauffeur someone around with him.

EDITOR NOTE: PAUSING TRANSLATIONS/EDITING HERE FOR NOW—  
WILL RESUME

Zhenya swiftly settled into the driver's seat, causing Kwon Taek Joo to unconsciously straighten his back. Whenever Zhenya was near, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but tense up. Even though they had been together for days, he still remained on guard.

The car pulled out of the guest house and the strong winds had wiped away any traces of snow from the previous night. The wheels rolled over the untouched snow-covered mountainside, leaving a long trail behind.

Riding his bike through the biting cold, the mansion had seemed so far away to Kwon Taek Joo before, but now it was within reach. Zhenya parked the car a short distance from the main gate and looked at Kwon Taek Joo, unsure if he should enter or not. After taking a deep breath, Kwon Taek Joo nodded.

"Let's go."

"As you wish"

Zhenya responded with a sonorous chortle before suddenly pressing down on the accelerator. The car sped through the entrance and headed straight towards the main gate. Cameras mounted on either side of the thick iron gate were focused on them, while guns attached below aimed at their temples.

Any sudden movements would result in a fatal shot.

After a moment, the camera returned to its original position and the iron door opened. An SUV could be seen through the gate as if someone had personally come to greet the unexpected guests. The windows of the SUV all rolled down simultaneously, revealing heavily armed guards with their rifles pointed outwards. Kwon Taek Joo had expected this level of security and obediently raised his hands.

The guards confirmed that they posed no threat and signaled for them to follow. At the same time, the SUV blocking their path slowly moved aside.

Zhenya drove closer until they reached where the SUV had been, and as soon as they passed through the main gate, it closed behind them,

trapping them inside.

The inside looked simpler, even rough, in contrast to the grand exterior. The small garden in front of the building was more like a wasteland than a beautiful green space. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't find a single patch of green, not just because it was the middle of winter. Perhaps Sergei Ilyavich wasn't interested in maintaining the property, or maybe his taste ran towards neglect.

Every part of the mansion appeared cracked and weathered, resembling an ancient ruin.

The two were directed to the front stairs of the building. The SUV came to a stop and armed men poured out, quickly surrounding the vehicle. With no hesitation, they roughly opened the driver's and passenger doors and pointed their guns at the two people inside.

Their eyes met again as they were forcibly pulled out of the car by one of the guards.

One of the guards couldn't wait any longer and pulled Kwon Taek Joo out of the car, pushing him against its body for a thorough search. All firearms were confiscated, including the Colt on his belt and the Glock 26 hidden inside his jacket. Even a small knife meant for fruit peeling had to be handed over.

Zhenya couldn't avoid the same treatment.

The guard carefully scanned every inch of his body, constantly tilting his head as he examined the groin area with suspicion. Maybe he was wondering if Zhenya was hiding something other than his penis under that guise. The shape vaguely resembled a gun, and Zhenya couldn't help but smirk at the man's assumption. His penis wiggled teasingly as if challenging the guard's doubts, causing him to quickly clear his throat and back away.

Just then, a chubby Russian man made his way down with his assistant. This was Sergei Ilyavich, a distant relative of Visarion and a powerful figure within the Bogdanov family. He used to be a member of the Russian parliament but his past glory had long faded.

After numerous scandals and rumors, Sergei withdrew from politics and now hides in this secluded location. It is said that he turned his attention from the world of power under the sun to the underworld.

The ancient mansion, standing tall on the Russian landscape, perfectly symbolized Kwon Taek Joo's current situation.

It made sense why 'SS 29', a project he had poured so much effort into, was being kept hidden here.

No one would suspect that the powerful Bogdanov family would trust such an important item to a distant relative living in the suburbs.

Sergei Ilyavich stood with his arms crossed, leaning on his staff. Despite his corpulent appearance, he seemed at ease, and the staff with a large pearl embedded in it looked more like an accessory than a walking aid. He paused on the stairs and gazed down at Kwon Taek Joo with calm eyes. There was both curiosity and tension hidden behind their facade.

Then, Sergei flashed an apprehensive smile.

"How did you find your way here?"

"I have something impressive to show you."

It was Zhenya who answered, drawing Sergei's attention away from Kwon Taek Joo towards him.

"I can promise it will intrigue you. Why don't we go inside and discuss this privately. I don't believe this is something to be shared freely in a place like this."

"Well, the house is currently a bit of a mess..." Sergei , giving a weak excuse.

But Zhenya nudged him confidently.

"I can assure you, it will be worth it."

Zhenya's voice was captivating and persuasive; no wonder he called himself a businessman.

Kwon Taek Joo could sense his confidence and determination, luring the old man into thinking this was his golden ticket to whatever Zhenya

had in store.

Anyway, Hong Yeo Wook was currently in the mansion, and 'SS-29' was also hidden there. If he carelessly brought guests in, then confidential information could get leaked. And that would be problematic, at least for Sergei .

But it was obvious he couldn't resist the temptation of seeing what Zhenya had brought.

Sergei gave an awkward smile, then looked between Zhenya and Kwon Taek Joo before finally nodding in agreement. He turned and ascended the stairs, and the guards released the two men.

Kwon Taek Joo smoothed out his rumpled clothes and followed after Zhenya. It seemed they had successfully piqued Sergei's interest from just one meeting.

A promising start indeed.

Sergei led the two men to his private reading room. As they entered, he offered his hand for a shake.

"It's been a while."

Zhenya nodded slightly and shook Sergei's hand. Sergei then turned to Kwon Taek Joo, as if seeking an explanation.

"This man belongs to the Korean intelligence agency..."

"Hello my name is 'Lim Daehyung'"

Kwon Taek Joo extended his hand first, immediately taking on the persona of Chief Lim. That person was living a comfortable life in Korea, so it was impossible for him to be falsely accused because of this matter. This job was already difficult enough, and he would have to endure just a little more.

It was the price that Chief Lim had to pay for enlisting Kwon Taek Joo in this strategy.

Without hesitation, Sergei shook Kwon Taek Joo's hand.

"Nice to meet you."

His chubby fingers were adorned with multiple rings, as if trying to fill every inch of space on them.

When Sergei released their tight hold, he gently touched the middle of Kwon Taek Joo's palm before pulling away. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help feeling unsettled by this action. Zhenya, who had been watching closely, chuckled softly.

"We don't have much time, so let's get down to business. What good information do you have for us?"

Sergei asked with a serious expression, and Zhenya began his prepared explanation.

"Not many people know about it yet, but three months ago, South Korea and the United States jointly created a program. These two countries recognized the importance of controlling information and came up with a method akin to devilish spying. With this program, they don't need to send elite agents to steal information or break through strong security networks.

Technically speaking, it's hacking, but it leaves no trace. There's no need to risk direct contact with the enemy.

All you have to do is borrow a communication device from someone they know and trust. Whenever that person makes calls, sends messages or emails, malicious code will be automatically transmitted. This allows us to record all incoming and outgoing information on their phone without them suspecting a thing. Impressive, isn't it?"

"Hmm? This sounds like something out of a spy movie."

"Well, it's now a reality."

Zhenya then pulled out his cell phone and handed it to Sergei. After some hesitation, Sergei took the phone and immediately checked the Messages app. As he scrolled through thousands of conversations, his cheeks twitched occasionally.

It was a strange expression that seemed to be both smiling and not smiling at the same time. How would one feel upon discovering that a private message they had sent was now on someone else's phone?

Sergei quickly put down the phone and rubbed his hands together in excitement.

"I-I don't know what to say.."

"I don't expect you to make a decision right away. Take a day to think it over," Zhenya offered, trying to ease the tension.

Sergei gave Zhenya and Kwon Taek Joo a meaningful look before forcing a laugh. He seemed anxious as he tapped his forehead and lost himself in thought. Every so often, he would roll his eyes and then glance at each of them intently. Despite the product's popularity, Sergei still seemed hesitant about why Zhenya would bring such a valuable item to him.

After much hesitation, Sergei finally nodded.

"Alright, let's take some time to consider and decide. The price is steep, but the item is enticing enough that I don't want to miss out on it. Can you both stay here for the meantime? You are not busy?"

It would take at least a day for those involved with "SS-29" to arrive. Sergei needed to make a decision before then. If he was interested, he would purchase the item, but if he hesitated, he would kick them out.

Their main priority was making sure that the existence of 'SS-29' was not discovered.

In other words, they had just one day to find 'SS-29' before Sergei made his decision.

Kwon Taek Joo smiled and agreed.

"Of course."

## Chapter 2.6 – Twilight: Go Away

As soon as Kwon Taek Joo entered the room, he got straight to work. He stood with his back to the door and assessed the overall structure of the room before walking along the wall and inspecting the window. After carefully examining the frame and glass material, he attempted to open and close it, but it was fixed in place.

As expected, there was a cliff outside.

Sergei wouldn't have given a good room to a stranger. It seemed nearly impossible to move around this mansion without encountering security guards.

Kwon Taek Joo retrieved a lighter from his pocket - a small device used for penetrating glass or thin steel plates with high heat. He pulled out the long tube and bent it before turning the flint wheel in a circle.

A bright flame appeared at the end of the tube, allowing him to successfully punch a large hole in the glass window facing the cliff.

He placed the neatly cut piece on the window frame and slid his left wrist through the hole. Standing so close that his head touched the glass door, he pointed his watch towards the sky and pressed a control device on its side. The watch face opened and released an object that quickly flew up and disappeared from sight. Not long after, a clicking sound could be heard in the air.

Kwon Taek Joo removed the watch, opened its inside cover, and took out a tiny memory chip. Plugging it into his phone, he downloaded the saved file - a cross-sectional drawing of the mansion that appeared on his screen shortly after. He could now understand the structure of the entire building as if he were looking down on it from above.

Even hidden spaces between walls and floors were revealed.

He sent this diagram to Zhenya and deduced three or four possible storage locations for 'SS-29': basement, attic, behind the second

bookcase in the reading room, and inside Sergei's bedroom.

Attempting to contact Zhenya, he pressed a communication device to his ear.

"I'll have to search these places one by one."

"Then I'll take care of the reading room. There's tight security there, so it'll be quite interesting."

"Don't harm any innocent people. Cleaning up after you would be troublesome."

"I've never harmed an innocent person. I'm simply trying to protect myself in a legitimate way."

'Justified' isn't a word you should use." Kwon Taek Joo clicked his tongue and ended the pointless conversation.

"Then I'll start with the basement. Good luck."

Kwon Taek Joo finished speaking and glanced at the room door before making a quick decision to head towards the bathroom.

The mansion was designed for daily use, so surveillance cameras were cleverly hidden not only in hallways and staircases but also in unexpected places such as fire extinguishers, picture frames, and even flower pots.

Now that an unfamiliar guest had arrived, security would be even tighter.

In a situation where they were uncertain of the whereabouts of 'SS-29', they couldn't risk a direct confrontation. When outnumbered, it was best to avoid any conflict altogether.

According to the floor plan, there was an exhaust fan installed on the ceiling of the bathroom.

All rooms were connected by vent pipes that extended all the way to the tower for air release. The basement was no exception.

Kwon Taek Joo locked the bathroom door and turned on the water to create a cover sound. He pulled the opaque curtain closed to conceal his

absence. After completing a series of preparation steps, he entered the toilet and removed the cover of the ventilation fan. Poking his head through the opening, he saw a dark passage ahead. It wasn't a spacious area, but it didn't seem too difficult to crawl through.

Carefully climbing up to the ceiling, Kwon Taek Joo felt its low height pressing against his back. Even the slightest movement stirred up dust that made his nose and throat itch.

He buried his nose in his arm and coughed for a moment before turning on his headlights and shining them ahead.

His line of sight could only see about one meter clearly. Taking short breaths, he crawled slowly and cautiously to prevent shaking the ceiling.

As he approached his room and neared down the hallway, loud voices suddenly echoed from below. They seemed to be guards stationed by Kwon Taek Joo's room entrance. Ignoring their private conversation, he held his breath and continued forward. Finally, a turn appeared in the path. Kwon Taek Joo briefly turned on his phone to check the floor plan again. The basement could be reached by turning left at this point.

When he did so, a passageway leading downstairs came into view. Up until now, Kwon Taek Joo had been supporting himself with one arm and keeping his upper body straight. However, as he reached for the ventilation hole to guide himself, it collapsed beneath him.

He had accidentally touched the bottom of an old ventilation hole. Quickly grabbing onto the wall for balance, Kwon Taek Joo caused quite a bit of noise.

At that moment, a guard passing by suddenly stopped in his tracks and looked up towards the ventilation hole, his head tilting as if trying to make sense of the noise.

He then turned to someone behind him and tilted his head again. His colleague asked what was going on.

"Did you hear that just now?"

"Hear what?"

"It sounded like something falling...?"

He quickly glanced to the left and right, then his eyes landed on a ventilation hole that had fallen from the ceiling. It had been in need of repair for some time, but owner Sergei kept delaying it, prioritizing other work in the mansion.

As he stood guard, the sound of something falling caught his attention. He tapped the ceiling with his rifle, testing for any movement or sounds. His colleague asked him what was wrong, but he brushed it off as just rats appearing lately.

But when he looked into the ventilation hole, he saw someone hiding inside. Kwon Taek Joo was struggling to keep his grip on the vent ceiling, using all his strength to stay hidden until the guards passed by.

If they found him, there would be no escape. Sweat dripped down his forehead as he tried to hold on, but eventually, he fell to the ground with a loud thud. After waiting anxiously for a few more moments, he finally let out a breath of relief when it seemed like the coast was clear.

Dust covered him as he crawled through the long ventilation shaft, until finally reaching the basement filled with furniture and other items. However, one large item covered in a thick veil caught his attention.

He hurriedly made his way to the furniture and began tidying up the area. The cover was swiftly removed, causing a cloud of dust to rise up yet again. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but sneeze as he opened his reflexively closed eyes.

As soon as he saw what was in the basement, the strength in his shoulders vanished. It wasn't the weapon he had anticipated; it was just an old piano. As he lifted the lid, rats with glowing red eyes scurried out from within.

Kwon Taek Joo let out a frustrated sigh.

He had risked his life to come here, but it seemed like he had failed completely. As much as he wanted to deny the truth in front of him, his search turned up no results.

He scoured not only inside the piano, but also all the boxes around it, hoping for any sign of firearms or weapons. He even banged and pressed on the walls, but there was no secret compartment or hidden space to be found.

To top it off, Kwon Taek Joo now had to make the journey back the way he came.

He stared at the ceiling with boredom and exhaustion. What was once a glimmer of hope now felt like an insurmountable challenge - a 3 to 4 meter vertical climb back up. How was he supposed to do that?

In a dejected mood, Kwon Taek Joo took out a device resembling a camera from his pocket. He had brought it along just in case of emergencies like this. Aiming at the ventilation hole above, he clicked the shutter button and a long wire shot out from the lens area, along with the lens cap.

The rope caught onto something in the ceiling and didn't fall down, indicating it was secure. Kwon Taek Joo gave it a tug and confirmed its stability.

He climbed onto the old piano and attached the rope to his belt before using both hands and his feet to scale up towards the ventilation hole. Rope climbing was a familiar skill to him since he often practiced it during his judo training.

Safely reaching the ventilation hole, Kwon Taek Joo crawled through and made his way back to his room.

Anytime he heard movement from below, he would pause and wait until it stopped before continuing on. By the time he reached the hallway leading to his room, he was exhausted and ready to collapse.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. Zhenya never knocked, so it must have been Sergei or one of his assistants.

Kwon Taek Joo was taken aback for a moment before quickly making his way towards the ventilation hole in the bathroom.

The knocking on the door persisted as he approached the ventilation hole, and he could see that the door was opening. There was no time

left.

Sergei barged into Kwon Taek Joo's room and was taken aback by the chaotic state he found inside.

He could hear the sound of running water coming from the bathroom and wondered if Kwon Taek Joo was taking a bath and didn't notice him enter.

Not wanting to intrude, Sergei decided to come back later as it would be impolite to disturb his host's personal time.

But then he suddenly changed his mind and headed straight for the bathroom, his face tense with urgency. When he tried to open the door, it was locked from the inside, which struck Sergei as odd because usually only the main door of a hotel room is lockable. A sense of unease crept over him and he quickly pulled out a set of keys from his pocket, frantically searching for the one that would unlock the bathroom door.

Just then, the steamy air escaped through the opening door as Kwon Taek Joo emerged from his shower, his wet black hair glistening in the light.

Sergei couldn't help but stare at Kwon Taek Joo's impressive physique as he wrapped a towel around his waist.

Embarrassed at getting caught staring, Sergei stumbled over his words and invited Kwon Taek Joo to dinner at the restaurant on the first floor.

After hastily excusing himself, Sergei left the room in a hurry, leaving behind a loud bang as he closed the door. Meanwhile, Kwon Taek Joo calmly put on his robe and sat down with a sigh of relief.

He had narrowly avoided an awkward encounter with Sergei while still in a disheveled state. As they made their way to dinner, Zhenya asked about their latest project and joked about how much time designing takes.

Sergei laughed and leaned towards Zhenya to ask about when they would announce their new project to the industry.

Zhenya replied that he was still considering the timing, but stopped abruptly when he noticed Kwon Taek Joo enter the restaurant. Sergei also looked up to see Kwon Taek Joo looking fresh and clean, and raised his hand in greeting.

"Over here." The restaurant had a large table that could easily seat 40 people, but only three were currently occupying it: Sergei, Zhenya, and Hong Yeo Wook. This was the first time Kwon Taek Joo had met Hong Yeo Wook officially.

Their eyes met and Kwon Taek Joo simply nodded in greeting. Hong Yeo Wook continued to eat quietly, bowing his head in response to any conversation.

It seemed that Kwon Taek Joo's seat had already been assigned, as it was the only one with cutlery already placed. The waiter appeared and set down an appetizer for him at his place next to Sergei. Sergei nodded and said hello, not particularly interested but with no reason to refuse.

He then went back to staring at Zhenya across from him. Kwon Taek Joo politely ate and cut his meat while glancing at Sergei, who shook his head slightly without looking at him. It seemed that Zhenya had also wasted time and effort on the initial search.

Kwon Taek Joo's eyes stayed fixed on Zhenya before turning to Hong Yeo Wook. He didn't participate in the conversation at all, focusing solely on finishing his meal quickly before quietly leaving. As Hong Yeo Wook made his way around the table, his gaze briefly touched the back of Zhenya's neck.

Even though it was just for a moment, the intensity of his stare startled Kwon Taek Joo. Had their identities been discovered? Sergei mentioned that Hong Yeo Wook would be staying for a while before swiftly changing the subject.

"Is the hacking program you mentioned used in both Korea and the United States?"

He was skilled at masking his sinister intentions behind a charming facade. When it comes to lying, sometimes saying less is better than repeating oneself.

Kwon Taek Joo wiped his hands on a napkin and brushed it away.

"I prefer not to discuss information related to weapons."

"Ah, my apologies. I was careless."

Sergei apologized more profusely than necessary before trying to steer the conversation towards more personal topics, asking about Kwon Taek Joo's hobbies and interests. He couldn't understand why the old man was so curious about others.

As Kwon Taek Joo searched for something to say, he often made eye contact with Zhenya. Zhenya rested his chin on his hand and observed the two of them as if they were an interesting spectacle. There was no indication that he would change the subject or help Kwon Taek Joo.

When Kwon Taek Joo silently urged him to do so, Zhenya simply chuckled and stood up from his seat.

"I'll leave first. The journey here has been tiring. You two can continue your conversation."

Zhenya left alone, leaving only Sergei and Kwon Taek Joo at the table. It was clear from the way he glanced back at Kwon Taek Joo and teased him that it was intentional.

Despite being furious, Kwon Taek Joo had no choice but to watch Zhenya's back as he walked away quickly. This caused him to miss Sergei's question entirely.

"...Are you?"

"What? What did you say just now?"

"Are you married? Like, do you have a significant other or something?"

Sergei asked with a friendly expression on his face.

"Does my relationship status affect your decision to buy from me?"

Kwon Taek Joo repeated, laughing. His smile was genuine and he felt a sense of calm in his voice and body language.

Sergei's thick lips drooped at the unexpected question. He covered Kwon Taek Joo's hand with his own, which was adorned with many rings. The slow movement of his thumb and hand kneading Kwon Taek Joo's hand made him extremely uncomfortable.

"It depends on each situation," the older man slyly replied.

Meanwhile, his hand slipped into Kwon Taek Joo's sleeve, continuing his blatant harassment. Suddenly standing up from his seat, Kwon Taek Joo brushed off Sergei's hand and apologized for having to leave due to urgent business.

With a fake smile, he left the restaurant, leaving Sergei alone and bewildered.

Shortly after, the waiter brought out dessert - a chocolate-covered brownie with a moist and chewy texture. Sergei hesitantly looked down at it before regaining his appetite and putting down his fork to enjoy the cake.

## **Chapter 2.7 – Twilight: Crocodile Became a Panther (18+)**

Kwon Taek Joo entered the room and came to a stop. Zhenya had taken over his bed, acting as if they were still in their shared hotel room.

"Come on in, don't be shy."

Kwon Taek Joo gave him a stern look before closing the door and joining him.

In a low voice, he asked, "How's everything going?"

"What do you mean?"

"I went to investigate outside, and you said you were going to check out the office?"

"Yeah, I left. I'm curious about why they have such intense security measures there."

There's even a safe. I haven't been able to open it myself, but I checked it out - mostly gold bars, cash, and documents."

"Anything else?"

Zhenya shook his head.

"Isn't it the same with the library? That just leaves two places to search - the attic of the tower and the secret space inside Sergei's bedroom. If we don't find any trace of 'SS-29' in those places, this whole operation will be a failure."

The officials from 'SS-29' would be arriving the next day. They would make sure that all defects had been corrected before transferring 'SS-29' to another location. If Psych Bogdanov was among the guests, it was only a matter of time before they discovered his true identity.

Of course, there was always the possibility that Sergei would catch on and kick them both out again.

So they needed to act quickly - everything had to be done by tonight before he could find out the truth. If they didn't take advantage of this opportunity, identifying 'SS-29' would become nearly impossible. But they also needed to be cautious in their actions.

Reaching the remaining two places wouldn't be easy - there was only one road leading up to the tower. The ventilation hole that led down to the basement was connected, but it would become increasingly narrow as they climbed higher, making it difficult for a child to pass through.

Climbing the wall of the building wasn't an option either - the steep cliff and strong winds made it almost impossible, not to mention the surveillance by CCTV cameras and security guards both inside and outside. And using the stairs to reach the top of the tower was out of the question - the entrance to that room was heavily guarded, especially if 'SS-29' was being stored there.

Infiltrating Sergei's bedroom wouldn't be easy either - he usually took a nap in his room around this time. The security would be even tighter now, with sensors and cameras installed everywhere. If they waited any longer, it would only become more difficult.

Kwon Taek Joo sighed in disappointment. "Or we could just capture Sergei and beat him up."

"Then our own bodies will turn into honeycombs before that happens. We have no idea how many bodyguards are here," Zhenya replied.

On that point, Zhenya was right. They only knew the size and structure of the mansion - they had no information on how many people were inside or what kind of security measures were in place. No matter how hard Kwon Taek Joo thought, he couldn't come up with a suitable plan. Getting inside the villa was one thing, but once they were inside, there were still more obstacles.

"Sometimes soft power can be more effective than guns and knives," Zhenya spoke up.

Kwon Taek Joo looked at him curiously.

'Soft power' often referred to women's power - intelligence in problem solving, persuasion, emotional depth and empathy...and let's not forget beauty. History had proven that even the strongest men could fall under its spell.

"But what good does that do us now?" Kwon Taek Joo immediately dismissed the idea. He even scrunched up his nose to give emphasis.

"Things like inspiration and cunning can drive people mad, but how can we find reinforcements now? The only person we've come across on this island is the owner of the guest house."

Zhenya's gaze lingered on Kwon Taek Joo, a playful smirk dancing on his lips. Slowly, he rose from his seat and sauntered over to Kwon Taek Joo's side. Kwon Taek Joo stood still, trying not to show his nervousness as Zhenya approached.

But when Zhenya's hand reached out, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but flinch and look down in canniness. With a mischievous glint in his eye, Zhenya brushed a strand of hair behind Kwon Taek Joo's ear, making the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. He closed his eyes and let out a soft sigh before pulling back and giving Kwon Taek Joo a charming wink.

"There's nothing to worry about. Rumor has it that Sergei Ilyavich has a preference for dark-skinned men, especially in bed."

"What..."

"The way he looked at you wasn't normal."

Kwon Taek Joo pushed away Zhenya who was teasing him. As if warning him not to speak nonsense anymore, he pointed his finger at him.

"Are you crazy? I'm not that desperate."

"Don't be angry, think about it. You can enter Sergei's room without having to run or fight. Who knows, maybe he'll be so interested that he'll talk about 'SS-29' himself. I'm just saying you should find a way to get into his bedroom; after that, it doesn't matter if you beat him up or actually end up in bed with him. It will all happen behind closed doors, just between the two of you. Just pretend on the inside. Right?"

Zhenya continued to persuade him. It was easy for him to say. If he were in Kwon Taek Joo's shoes, would he want a perverted old man touching him?

Kwon Taek Joo firmly refused and walked towards the window.

"Stop trying to push me into strange things. I absolutely will not do it."

"Do you really think that's nonsense?"

Something suddenly flew towards his back; Kwon Taek Joo instinctively caught it. It was a location tracking device. A red dot on the screen indicated that the target was nearby, but not exactly at the source of the signal. This meant that the target was standing close to the device.

Kwon Taek Joo looked at Zhenya, silently asking for an explanation. Zhenya smirked and sarcastically replied, "Who do you think is loitering outside which room door?" It seemed that he had attached a tracking device to Sergei without anyone noticing. Kwon Taek Joo shook his head again and tossed the device onto the bed.

"Regardless, I won't..."

"You know what they say? The more rivals there are, the greater the desire to conquer."

Kwon Taek Joo was about to refuse again, but then Zhenya continued to approach him. Without realizing it, he backed up until his back hit the window frame and he had nowhere else to go. The two of them locked eyes for a moment, with Zhenya's gaze burning with an unusual intensity.

"The more desirable you are to others, the more valuable you become," Zhenya said cryptically.

Before Kwon Taek Joo could respond, there was a knock at the door and Sergei's voice calling out. Despite his quick response, Kwon Taek Joo could feel the suspicion rising in Sergei if he took too long to answer.

As he moved towards the door, Zhenya suddenly grabbed his wrist and pulled him closer. Kwon Taek Joo struggled to break free, but Zhenya's grip was firm and he couldn't move away. Zhenya pressed himself

against the window frame and effectively blocked Kwon Taek Joo from leaving.

"What do you think you're doing?" Kwon Taek Joo gritted his teeth as he tried to push Zhenya away. But instead of stopping, Zhenya unzipped his pants and reached inside. Kwon Taek Joo immediately grabbed Zhenya's arm to stop him, but he persisted in touching him intimately. The sensation was overwhelming and Kwon Taek Joo's mind started to spin.

Zhenya looked into Kwon Taek Joo's face as he continued to touch him. Despite the pain and discomfort, Kwon Taek Joo didn't want to give him the satisfaction of showing it. He bit down on his lip and clenched his fists.

Just then, there was another knock at the door from Sergei. Panicked, Kwon Taek Joo pushed Zhenya away again. But instead of backing off, Zhenya pressed closer and prevented him from struggling.

Kwon Taek Joo felt trapped between Zhenya and the window, with no way to escape. Zhenya rubbed himself against Kwon Taek Joo, causing a strange mix of pain and pleasure. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but gasp and tremble under his touch.

As he let out a sigh, his upper body seemed to dissolve away and his head drooped. But Zhenya wouldn't allow that. He grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's chin firmly and forced him to meet his gaze. Zhenya licked his lips lightly as he watched Kwon Taek Joo frown, his arousal evident and almost aggressive.

As the flesh between his legs swayed, Kwon Taek Joo frowned at the unfamiliar sensation. A satisfied smirk appeared on Zhenya's face as he used his hot tongue to lick the side of Kwon Taek Joo's face, his eyes glistening with desire.

In the midst of it all, Kwon Taek Joo seemed to forget why he was being held back. His penis throbbed each time it rubbed against the rough veins on Zhenya's skin. He tightened his grip, using his own muscles to scratch at Kwon Taek Joo's skin. The fluids spilled out quickly, making his palms slick with warmth.

With every movement of his hand, a rustling sound echoed throughout the room.

The sudden release made everything tense up in the middle. Kwon Taek Joo covered his mouth to stifle any sounds from escaping.

His entire body heat seemed to concentrate in one area, until finally exploding into whiteness at the tip of his penis.

"Ahh...oh..."

Kwon Taek Joo squeezed his eyes shut tightly and bit down on his hand to muffle any noises. Zhenya gazed at him intently with a flushed expression before pressing himself against the other man's firm thighs.

The smooth skin felt scalding hot, but after releasing himself, he no longer had the strength to resist the overwhelming exhaustion.

"Are you alright? I'll come inside."

Suddenly, Sergey opened the door without hesitation and then paused at the sight before him. Kwon Taek Joo was sitting half on the windowsill, while Zhenya stood in front of him, smoothing out his clothes. The room was stuffy and filled with a distinct fishy smell that couldn't escape. There was an unusual tension between the two men who were pressed up against each other.

Zhenya turned to Sergey with a polite smile.

"Please come in. I just came to borrow a book."

He rambled off an excuse, grabbed a random book from the bed, and quickly left the room. Just before the door closed fully, their eyes met. Zhenya smirked meaningfully at Kwon Taek Joo, as if daring him to do anything.

Kwon Taek Joo stared at the closed door for a moment before Sergey cleared his throat, reminding him of his presence. He stepped down from the windowsill and approached Sergey.

"What can I do for you?"

"Ah, actually..."

Sergei opened his mouth to speak, but then fell silent. His gaze was fixed on Kwon Taek Joo's lower area. When Kwon Taek Joo bowed his head, Kwon Taek Joo's eyes widened with shock; the zipper of his pants was undone.

Cursing under his breath, Kwon Taek Joo realized that he had allowed Zhenya to fix his clothes and hadn't noticed the man had left his pants unattended.

He remembered the smug look on Zhenya's face as he left the room. In a flurry of movement, Kwon Taek Joo zipped up his pants, but Sergei caught his hand.

Whispering earnestly, Sergei shared his true motive for seeking out Kwon Taek Joo.

"As you know, I am curating an object that has everyone in Russia buzzing. Rumor has it that it will fetch a high price once it hits the market. I wanted to hear your expert opinion, Mr. Lim, on whether this pile of iron is truly valuable or not. Care to weigh in? It's not something one encounters every day."

## **Chapter 2.8 – Twilight: Crocodile Became a Panther**

### **2**

Sergei's bedroom is equipped with three doors: the first at the end of the hallway, the second through a long hallway adorned with paintings, and a sliding door that requires fingerprint and iris identification to enter. Security cameras monitor every movement in the room, leaving guests wondering what secrets are being hidden. Sergei personally opens the last sliding door, revealing a spacious interior with a round bed in the center covered in a large leopard skin on light purple silk.

The design of the room even includes a spacious bathroom. Kwon Taek Joo approached the bed and noticed a secret room behind it, according to a sectional drawing he had seen. Sergei offered him wine and his demeanor changed as they enter deeper, his eyes now focused on Kwon Taek Joo. Taking a sip, Kwon Taek Joo discreetly noticed undissolved white powder surrounding a small stone in his glass. Sergei climbs onto the bed and observes him like he's a display item. He began to undress while staring at Kwon Taek Joo, eventually closing the distance between them and touching him intimately. Kwon Taek Joo tried to endure and look away, but could still feel Sergei's arousal against his thigh through their clothes.

In an instant, he was thrown to the ground, his chin hitting the floor with a painful thud. Sergei paid no attention as he rubbed his swollen third leg against Kwon Taek Joo's thigh, breathing heavily into the back of his neck. Feeling like he was being ridden by a wild animal, Kwon Taek Joo could feel something crawling through his veins.

He tried counting the spaces on the floor to distract himself, but suddenly found himself muttering out loud.

"No way..."

"Huh? Huh? What did you say?"

Sergei, completely naked and pressed against him, was panting heavily. His chubby hand moved towards Kwon Taek Joo's groin without hesitation, but he held it tightly. It seemed that Sergei mistook this for a sign of sympathy and used his tongue to lick the back of Kwon Taek Joo's neck.

Kwon Taek Joo lifted Sergei's body up and threw him over his shoulder, causing everything to flip upside down in an instant. Sergei landed on the floor with a thud, dazed from what had just happened.

"It's too sickening... I can't take this perverted behavior anymore."

Kwon Taek Joo muttered as he pulled back his disheveled shirt and angrily wiped saliva off the back of his neck.

Just then, his phone rang with a series of unfamiliar numbers appearing on the screen. After thinking for a moment, Kwon Taek Joo remembered that it was Yoon Jong Woo's number. He had asked Yoon Jong Woo for a favor before leaving.

He answered the call immediately and heard Yoon Jong Woo shout through the phone.

"Senior!"

Kwon Taek Joo winced at the sudden scream in his ear and had to move the phone away for a moment. Yet even then, Yoon Jong Woo continued to speak frantically in words that Kwon Taek Joo couldn't understand.

"What's going on? How is the research coming along?"

Kwon Taek Joo tried to make sense of the situation.

"Who are you with right now? He... You know?"

"What are you talking about?"

Kwon Taek Joo had to move the phone away from his ear once more, this time because the connection was poor. The freezing Siberian climate seemed to disrupt radio waves and cause audio disruptions. He couldn't help but wonder who he was talking to; could it be someone hacking into the CCTV cameras?

Kwon Taek Joo subconsciously looked back at the bed and was startled to see that Sergei, who he had just thrown in that direction, had vanished without a trace.

Panicked, Kwon Taek Joo quickly scanned the room and saw Sergei rushing towards him. He hung up the phone and grabbed hold of the man's wrist.

Despite successfully blocking an attack, the old man's speed and weight caused them both to fall onto the bed. Pressed down by Sergei's giant body, Kwon Taek Joo struggled to breathe. Summoning all his strength, he managed to push Sergei off of him with a loud thud.

After catching his breath, Kwon Taek Joo stood up and searched every inch of the bed for a key to the secret room. But no matter how much he searched- under the sheets, behind the headboard, even beneath the leopard skin rug- he couldn't find anything.

There must be a key somewhere! Where could it be?!

As he racked his brain for answers, Kwon Taek Joo glanced back at Sergei still lying on the floor.

If there was something important enough for him to keep hidden in a secret room, he would have brought it with him. But now, with all his clothes stripped off during their scuffle, it must be hidden in one of those garments.

Kwon Taek Joo frantically picked through each piece of clothing scattered on the floor until he felt something strange around Sergei's belt- something hard and square. With curiosity piqued, Kwon Taek Joo carefully unfastened the belt and discovered a square button. With a sense of satisfaction, he pressed the button and watched as a remote control appeared from a hidden compartment.

"I found it," Kwon Taek Joo said with a smile, feeling elated at the thought of finally entering the secret room he had been searching for.

But his joy was short-lived. Suddenly, his mind went blank. It must be a temporary side effect from whatever drug Sergei injected him with during their struggle, but Kwon Taek Joo's vision began to blur and his

thoughts slowed down until he couldn't even remember why he was there in the first place. Desperately, he shook his head trying to regain control of his mind.

Then, an image of the syringe Sergei had held flashed through his mind. The cylinder was empty but he couldn't be sure if any liquid had entered his system during their fight. Panic set in as he felt a sharp pain in the back of his neck.

He didn't know what kind of drug it could be or what effects it would have on him, and that uncertainty only made things worse.

Kwon Taek Joo shook his head and massaged his temples, hoping to ease the throbbing pain. He collapsed onto the bed, feeling the room spin around him.

How much time had passed? He could see someone's feet in his peripheral vision. Were they there before? Or was it just a hallucination? Kwon Taek Joo wanted to lift his head and get a better look, but his body wouldn't cooperate.

With great effort, he rolled his eyes and gradually lifted his legs, then thighs, waist, chest, and shoulders. After a moment, he could finally see the person's face. At the same time, Yoon Jong Woo's voice came through the phone that was still connected.

"

The voice on the other end of the phone was urgent. "It's him! Are you listening, senior?"

"Who are you talking about?"

The phone was suddenly turned by someone else. They hung up device and made their way towards the bed.

Kwon Taek Joo's body felt numb from the drugs, but his instincts were screaming at him.

He needed to escape.

Suddenly, a familiar voice spoke. It was Zhenya. His shadow loomed over Kwon Taek Joo as he approached. He clicked his tongue, showing

no sympathy or remorse, only mild interest in the situation.

Zhenya walked past the unconscious Sergei and stood over Kwon Taek Joo. Looking down at him, he tilted his head. Kwon Taek Joo's black eyes stared back with determination. Zhenya smiled before swiftly grabbing him and throwing him onto the bed.

"I came here because I was worried, and now look at you."

He climbed on top of Kwon Taek Joo and gazed down at him, covered in sweat. It wasn't clear if he was more worried about Kwon Taek Joo or Sergei.

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't make sense of what was happening, but deep down he knew. Conflicting thoughts and emotions raced through his mind. But one thing was certain: if he stayed here, he would die.

Zhenya picked up a belt from the bed and skillfully operated some buttons with his hands.

A loud mechanical sound echoed through the room, followed by a section of the wall slowly moving aside.

Behind it was not a safe or an armory, but a large photo frame hanging on the wall. It showed a group photo of about 20 men. Kwon Taek Joo recognized many faces - Visarion and his sons from the Bogdanov mansion, Sergei who lay unconscious on the floor, and even Zhenya himself, except he looked slightly different.

Kwon Taek Joo sighed and looked at Zhenya. He needed to make sure. With a trembling hand, he grabbed the man's shirt as if trying to crush it. Zhenya watched silently as Kwon Taek Joo held onto his collar.

A glint of cold joy flashed in his eyes.

Kwon Taek Joo grabbed at his shirt, causing the buttons to pop off and hit him in the face. Without flinching, he saw the tattoo on Zhenya's chest, a familiar pattern that he had seen before in various places.

It was confirmation of what he had suspected all along: Zhenya was actually Psych Bogdanov.

"Ah, this? You didn't think you were the only that could use that camouflage technique too?" Zhenya taunted, his words only adding fuel to the fire.

It was true, Zhenya was indeed Psych Bogdanov. Kwon Taek Joo struggled to catch his breath, feeling like he was suffocating as he looked up and saw himself struggling on the ceiling mirror.

Each time he exhaled, the ceiling seemed to come closer and then pull away again. He felt hot all over and his body trembled with pain. His mind raced with thoughts - from their first mission together to the moment when he realized Zhenya was his colleague.

He had been a ruthless killer but also a trusted partner assigned by headquarters.

But now, Kwon Taek Joo could see that it was all part of Zhenya's plan to deceive him. He would always put them in situations where they had no choice but to trust each other.

It was thanks to Zhenya's guidance that he learned about 'SS-29' and even shared secret information with him when needed. And now here they were, in this mansion looking for 'SS-29', all because of Zhenya's support and manipulation.

How did things get so complicated? Was it possible that headquarters had made a mistake in choosing his partner?

Maybe Zhenya wasn't really his colleague from the beginning. None of it made sense to Kwon Taek Joo as he struggled to understand how things had unfolded like this.

He stuttered as he looked at Zhenya, noticing that he looked the same but somehow different. It was ironic that the partner he had trusted and considered a friend turned out to be someone he needed to stay away from.

Every sign and instinct pointed to the truth, but there were still things Kwon Taek Joo couldn't comprehend about this situation.

Why have you allowed me to live this long?"

"Where did you get that idea from?"

Zhenya sneered, not hiding his disdain. "You're so delusional."

Kwon Taek Joo was taken aback by the blatant mockery. Looking back, Zhenya had tried to get rid of him at every opportunity.

Joo was blown up. The entire room exploded and he barely escaped with his life. He couldn't even retrieve his belongings and lost contact with headquarters.

If he didn't have experience dealing with terrorism, he probably wouldn't have survived.

What was it like when Kwon Taek Joo was being chased by who he thought was Psych Bogdanov? Zhenya appeared in a helicopter and opened fire. It's a shame that their car got stuck in a cold river; otherwise, everyone inside, including Kwon Taek Joo, would have been riddled with bullets. Even when his colleague fell into the water, Zhenya continued shooting and made no attempt to save them.

What else? At Bogdanov's mansion, there were strange noises coming from the communication device Zhenya gave him. And on the train crossing borders, Kwon Taek Joo was attacked while searching for a missing person.

Looking back, it all seemed absurd. Every time Zhenya aimed at him, Kwon Taek Joo misunderstood and thought he was being helped.

Meanwhile, new doubts arose. If Zhenya truly wanted to kill him, he would have done so already. But it seemed that the fact that Kwon Taek Joo was still alive was not just luck; it was because Zhenya hadn't put all his effort into killing him yet. And now, Zhenya reveals the reason why.

"It's amusing to see you fight for your survival."

A slight curve formed on Zhenya's lips. This had always been the case. Every time he disappeared, a dangerous situation would arise. And if Kwon Taek Joo managed to escape the danger, he would always find Zhenya watching from a distance before he even realized it. Even when his life was threatened, Zhenya always seemed calm and relaxed. To him, Kwon Taek Joo's life and death were nothing but a game.

"Bastard..." Kwon Taek Joo gritted his teeth. He clenched his fists so tightly that his nails dug into his skin. He couldn't stand seeing Zhenya's arrogant face anymore. He wanted to turn it into a bloody mess so he wouldn't be so smug anymore. With determination, Kwon Taek Joo swung his fist.

But Zhenya effortlessly blocked the punch with one hand. Kwon Taek Joo's fists trembled with all their strength, but Zhenya's hand didn't budge. In that moment, the smile on Zhenya's face disappeared, revealing the true face of the man who he had encountered many times before. At the slightest provocation, Zhenya discarded his mask without hesitation.

"It would be wise for you to consider your actions before charging in recklessly. Got it?"

With a loud thud, Kwon Taek Joo was sent flying to the side. The intense impact to his left cheek was excruciating. For a brief moment, he saw stars and everything went yellow in front of his eyes. He couldn't even cry out as blood gushed from his nose and his gums were torn, filling his mouth with a metallic taste. If his skull was crushed at that moment, he would have believed it without question.

If this continues, he will surely die at the hands of Zhenya. The survival instinct overpowers any feelings of personal resentment and takes over Kwon Taek Joo's entire body. He struggles against the pain, but Zhenya holds him by the neck with one hand, rendering him helpless.

Zhenya's fingers tightened around his throat, causing Kwon Taek Joo to gasp for air. Kwon Taek Joo tried to escape, but Zhenya's grip was too strong.

With a fierce determination and an almost animalistic look in his eyes, Zhenya seemed to have lost all sense of reason. Kwon Taek Joo attempted to hit Zhenya's elbow, but it was futile; he was completely overpowered.

A sharp pain shot through his stomach as Zhenya punched him with his other hand. The blow left him doubled over in agony, fighting to stay conscious. Memories of past missions flashed through his mind -

moments where his life had been threatened in even more unpredictable situations than this one. But he had never given up - not when the plane crashed, the storage room exploded, or when he was hundreds of meters below the surface.

Yet now, facing the end of his life in this sudden and unexpected way, he felt defeated. There was no escape from this situation, that much was clear. Kwon Taek Joo's eyes trembled as he struggled to focus on Zhenya's face, searching for any sign of recognition or remorse.

But there was nothing - just cold indifference. How could this man be Psych Bogdanov? Just a few minutes ago they were joking and laughing together, and now...

A vein appeared on Kwon Taek Joo's forehead as his eyelids twitched uncontrollably. He felt as though he were about to explode from the pressure building inside him. His exhausted voice cracked as he spoke.

"Y-you... you're really... him..."

Zhenya had succeeded in fooling Kwon Taek Joo. This would be funny if it weren't so serious. Of course Zhenya could pass as Psych Bogdanov - he had connections to the Royal Family and access to high-tech military weaponry.

Kwon Taek Joo should have been more suspicious, but he had foolishly trusted the information given to him by headquarters. Bitter laughter escaped from his lips as he tried to catch his breath. He was still in pain, but now he couldn't help but laugh at his own gullibility.

Suddenly, Zhenya's cold expression changed and a smile spread across his face. It happened so quickly that Kwon Taek Joo didn't even notice. And just like that, Zhenya released his grip on Kwon Taek Joo's neck.

"P-Phew... ha, ha, ha..." Kwon Taek Joo took a deep breath, relieved that he could breathe again. But then he started coughing uncontrollably, blood spilling from his mouth.

Zhenya watched with amusement before pulling out a dagger from his ankle and holding it up to Kwon Taek Joo's throat.

## **Chapter 2.9 – Twilight: Crocodile Became a Panther**

### **3 (18+)**

The sharp blade glided slowly across the edge of Kwon Taek Joo's eyes, a menacing threat that could easily result in his eyeball being gouged out at any moment. Zhenya held the dagger upright, hovering the tip dangerously close to Kwon Taek Joo's eye.

The tip of the blade grazed his eyeball gently, while Zhenya's unwavering gaze did not so much as blink for a second.

Kwon Taek Joo's cough almost stopped as his instincts took over his body completely.

A smirk played on Zhenya's lips when he saw Kwon Taek Joo stiffen in fear.

Without warning, Zhenya placed the knife in his mouth and used his knee to lift up Kwon Taek Joo's lower body, supported by strong thighs.

With a swift motion, he tore off Kwon Taek Joo's clothes and tossed them aside with the dagger still clenched between his teeth. The knife not only damaged the fabric, but also scraped against the skin, though Kwon Taek Joo was too panicked to even register the pain.

Suddenly, the sound of a zipper echoed in the room. Something heavy fell onto Kwon Taek Joo's lap - it was Zhenya's massive penis.

Already fully erect, it pressed forcefully against Kwon Taek Joo's skin, leaving him feeling overwhelmed. When Zhenya glanced at him and adjusted himself, his fingers slid down between Kwon Taek Joo's buttocks.

He shook his throbbing member with vigor, as if it could penetrate anything. The small hole at the tip pulsated with arousal, impossible to hide.

Zhenya held onto Kwon Taek Joo tightly as he struggled frantically, flailing his arms and legs. He recklessly pushed his hot genitals into the tight opening.

The large mass of hard flesh was met with resistance and could not fully penetrate, causing Zhenya to bite down in frustration. He used his saliva-coated index finger to widen the hole before thrusting again.

This time, the tight folds gave way and the swollen head of his member was finally engulfed.

After removing his fingers, Zhenya gripped Kwon Taek Joo's shoulders firmly. With all his strength, he lifted his hips and drove himself fully inside.

An indescribable pain overwhelmed Kwon Taek Joo as he felt penetration for the first time. His eyes widened before quickly narrowing in a frown.

His buttocks twitched as the ferocious monster pushed its way in, feeling like an iron rod being driven into the center of his body. A burning sensation spread around his navel.

Something trickled down, sliding along the massive shaft and drenching Zhenya's coarse pubic hair.

The muscles were still too tight and suddenly contracted, Zhenya clicked his tongue in frustration.

The hole was clamped tightly around his penis, obstructing blood flow. A large vein stood out on Zhenya's smooth forehead. If it became too uncomfortable, it would be best to stop - but it seemed that Zhenya had no intentions of stopping.

Instead, he arched his upper body and spoke coldly.

"If you had any sense, you'd use your hips to save yourself."

The humiliation caused Kwon Taek Joo's skin to tremble under his eyes. The anger bubbling up from deep within him was enough to make him tear Zhenya apart in an instant.

Zhenya smirked with satisfaction as he watched Kwon Taek Joo clenching his teeth in anger. Without warning, he lifted his leg and placed it on Kwon Taek Joo's shoulder, exposing the tightly clenched entrance below. The hole spasmed in anticipation of the eager penis.

Kwon Taek Joo's spine shivered as Zhenya slowly licked his lips and pulled back.

He looked away and closed his mouth tightly as the impact from Zhenya's lower body pushed his own back. The pain was unbearable, but Zhenya continued to thrust deep inside, relentlessly scratching and filling the once-narrow opening. Each thrust felt like Kwon Taek Joo was being ripped apart, yet he couldn't escape or fight back.

Wet sounds filled the room as their bodies collided, and Zhenya enjoyed every reaction from Kwon Taek Joo without changing his pace.

Despite feeling humiliated and defeated, Kwon Taek Joo's body couldn't help but respond to the intense heat building within him.

He tried to resist, but his body betrayed him, giving in to the overwhelming pleasure that consumed him. Eventually, Zhenya's movements came to a halt, and he took a deep breath while still inside Kwon Taek Joo's trembling body. He relished in the sensation and admired his smooth and glistening skin drenched in sweat.

Zhenya forcefully ripped open Kwon Taek Joo's shirt, revealing his toned body.

As Zhenya ogled him with hunger in his eyes, it was clear that he desired more than just a physical encounter. Despite satisfying his urges, Zhenya still felt a void inside. He wanted something deeper.

As he straightened up, the mirror on the ceiling reflected the view below Kwon Taek Joo's waist.

Embarrassed, Zhenya turned away but quickly grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's chin and forced him to look forward. Though Kwon Taek Joo tried to resist, Zhenya didn't budge. With closed eyes, Kwon Taek Joo could feel Zhenya thrusting inside him.

"You need to lift your head. Imagine how difficult it was to install a mirror on the ceiling."

Zhenya's face was filled with mockery. Unable to handle the humiliation any longer, Kwon Taek Joo clenched his teeth and closed his eyes tightly.

Without hesitation, Zhenya raised their lower bodies for deeper penetration, causing immense pain and suffocation for Kwon Taek Joo.

But it wasn't over yet. Zhenya lifted Kwon Taek Joo's knees and bent their body at an angle, showing off their arched back and exposed butt through the ceiling mirror.

As Zhenya slowly moved in and out of them, they could see every detail through the reflection.

The previously tight entrance now loosened as if it would tear at any moment. When Zhenya's penis was fully inserted, the discomfort subsided but soon returned as it was continuously pulled out.

"Ah...You bastard...Ugh!"

Before Kwon Taek Joo could curse, Zhenya thrust inside again with force. The impact made a loud noise against the empty wall and only increased the intense mix of pleasure and nausea for Kwon Taek Joo.

"Ah, ah, ha...!"

"Compared to what you were thinking...isn't this better?"

Zhenya's voice was filled with excitement, and his eyes shone with madness as if he had just finished a hunt.

"I thought it would be dry and tasteless."

As Zhenya lowered their upper body onto Kwon Taek Joo while continuing to penetrate them, they gently lifted their arm and turned their head to the side. Zhenya leaned down and bit into his protruding sternum, causing Kwon Taek Joo to tremble in pain and pleasure. With a wicked smile, Zhenya sucked on the area he had bitten.

"...Ugh"

Kwon Taek Joo winced as Zhenya licked his exposed neck, his delicate skin rubbing against the softness of Zhenya's tongue.

After what felt like an eternity, he suddenly clenched his teeth. Kwon Taek Joo's body jerked at the sensation of sharp teeth sinking into their skin.

A clear bite mark was left behind, quickly followed by a rush of heat and blood under their chin.

Through gritted teeth, Kwon Taek Joo muttered "fuck."

Zhenya leaned back in satisfaction as he continued his forceful penetration. Kwon Taek Joo's entrance struggled to take in and release the monstrous penis with each thrust. His arms were tied tightly, causing his chest to jolt with every movement. Zhenya wasted no time in grabbing onto Kwon Taek Joo's chest, feeling its firm yet soft muscles under his palm. As he squeezed and massaged them, Kwon Taek Joo's nipples stood at attention between his fingers. Zhenya scoffed, "You're so lewd."

"Your nipples are practically begging for me to suck on them."

Kwon Taek Joo blushed with embarrassment and tried to push Zhenya away, but the drugs had rendered him almost paralyzed. Zhenya gently held onto Kwon Taek Joo as he struggled, using his tongue to tease and lick his nipples.

"..Dog!"

A vein bulged on Kwon Taek Joo's neck as he tried to hold back curses that couldn't escape his throat. His head turned as Zhenya used the tip of his tongue to play with his sensitive flesh. Even his abdominal muscles tightened.

Enjoying Kwon Taek Joo's resistance, Zhenya sucked even harder on his nipples. The stimulation spread down Kwon Taek Joo's body, intensifying as he struggled and protested. Even the untouched nipple hardened under Zhenya's passionate mouth. Gradually, Kwon Taek Joo found himself succumbing to the unfamiliar sensations from an area that had never been touched before.

"Aww... uhm... ah!"

Zhenya lifted Kwon Taek Joo's chin and moved on to suck on the other nipple. He licked the areola then bit down on the round nipple, savoring the sharp pain it caused. Zhenya held onto Kwon Taek Joo's trembling knees and shoulders, rubbing his aroused nipples. The small, hard masses of flesh were covered in saliva and skillfully teased by Zhenya's tongue. The pleasure radiating from his nipples spread throughout his body.

"...Ugh, ah, ak."

Zhenya continued to play with Kwon Taek Joo's nipples until he suddenly noticed something hard pressing against his waist. Kwon Taek Joo had been erect this whole time, his arousal evident. A smirk formed on Zhenya's lips.

"Look how swollen it is."

Kwon Taek Joo's face burned with shame at the naked sarcasm. He gritted his teeth and cursed in a language that Zhenya couldn't understand, promising to kill him. Meanwhile, Zhenya stopped playing with his waist after a while, satisfied with the results. The sound of their bodies colliding echoed as Zhenya's long, thick penis continued to thrust in and out of Kwon Taek Joo's tight hole. It wouldn't be surprising if the skin around his abdomen tore from the force.

With one final burst of energy, Zhenya thrust forward as if reaching the finish line. Suddenly, his hips pulled away and exposed not only the soft skin around his hole but also the slimy mucous membrane within. He looked down at the pale pink tissue clinging to his genitals, lightly touching it with his body fluids before plunging back in.

"Ah!"

Kwon Taek Joo moaned anxiously, trying to push himself away from Zhenya's grasp even in his hazy state of mind. But it was futile as Zhenya continued to fiercely stab him in the stomach. Soon, Kwon Taek Joo's knees were opened and his lower abdomen was being pressed against by Zhenya's own. He braced himself with his arms and pushed his upper body towards Kwon Taek Joo, penetrating deeper than ever

before. Kwon Taek Joo's waist was left suspended in the air, trembling with each movement. His face was flushed and he struggled to catch his breath.

"Come on. I have no intention of letting you live."

Zhenya whispered as he pushed harder and deeper inside. The gnawing pain in Kwon Taek Joo's stomach made his head spin and he had no idea how much longer he could endure it. Zhenya showed no signs of stopping, continuing to thrust mercilessly into him.

## **Chapter 2.10 – Twilight: Crocodile Became a Panther 4**

Kwon Taek Joo drifted in and out of consciousness, unsure if this was all a terrible dream or a grim reality. He could feel Zhenya's weight on top of him, restraining his arms and legs with tight bonds. Waves of pain wracked his body as he screamed and passed out repeatedly.

He wanted to remain still, but Zhenya continued to thrust into him forcefully. His throat was raw from screaming and he couldn't even swallow. There was no feeling in his lower half, and he was afraid to move his legs because his bodily fluids had dried and stuck to his skin. He could feel the wetness between his legs, threatening to spill down his thighs if he moved suddenly.

Suddenly, the bed jolted as Zhenya reappeared, holding a thick cigar in hand. After taking a puff, he sat down next to Kwon Taek Joo.

"I'll answer your questions now. It wouldn't be fair if you died without knowing what happened before or after, right? I can admit that much."

Kwon Taek Joo narrowed his eyes at Zhenya's mock kindness. He balled up his hand into a fist, ready to defend himself if needed. Zhenya just laughed and held out his hand. Kwon Taek Joo didn't bother reaching for it.

"Let's start with the Anastasia you were looking for."

Kwon Taek Joo's blurry vision suddenly sharpened. Zhenya chuckled at his determination to complete their mission even in this dire situation.

"There is no Anastasia. It never existed."

Kwon Taek Joo furrowed his brow in disbelief. That couldn't be true. Zhenya must be playing another one of his mind games.

"Don't play games with me. How do you explain SS-29?"

"SS-29... I don't know why you mistook that for Anastasia, but that ballistic missile is nothing compared to it."

Kwon Taek Joo's expression remained blank at Zhenya's casual response. Could it be that 'SS-29' was just a regular missile? In Russia, he learned that the serial number 'SS-No.' was used for intercontinental ballistic missiles. But the information about 'SS-29' he found in Bogdanov's mansion reminded him of 'Anastasia', leading him to believe they were one and the same. Anastasia was rumored to have unprecedented firepower, but in reality, it was expected to be similar to existing nuclear weapons.

But were they completely different after all? Was it all just a ploy by Zhenya to trick him into believing in Anastasia? Questions flooded Kwon Taek Joo's mind.

"The research on Anastasia failed a long time ago. There were some design flaws. I wasted countless money, time, and manpower on its development. But in a way, it wasn't a complete loss. The whole world was fascinated by the mere idea of its existence or completion. Just look at how both Korea and America sent you and your colleagues here. It's crystal clear now."

Zhenya laughed and flipped Kwon Taek Joo over, his strength depleted from the ordeal. His hand ran up his calf and between his thighs, grasping his limp penis. "No need to be too disappointed," Zhenya said as he toyed with Kwon Taek Joo's flaccid member.

"Anastasia, the last princess of Russia, is still shrouded in mystery. The death of the royal family and her fate remain a topic of debate and speculation. After being shot in a cellar, their bodies were allegedly thrown into a mine shaft. But these are just rumors - we can never be sure what really happened. That's the problem with unclear events - they leave room for falsification. And that's exactly what happened after Anastasia's death: numerous women claimed to be her, seeking the wealth of the Romanov family. One of them was Anna Anderson, initially dismissed as an impostor but later gaining credibility as evidence and testimonies emerged suggesting she could be the real princess. But what is the truth?"

Zhenya paused and asked Kwon Taek Joo for his opinion, but received no response. He then awkwardly squeezed his crotch and repeated his question, hoping for an answer.

"Kwon Taek Joo let out an exclamation of frustration. How was he supposed to know that? Zhenya found his reaction amusing and lightly massaged Kwon Taek Joo's swollen testicles with his soft hands. But Kwon Taek Joo couldn't relax, not knowing when Zhenya would get angry again. Zhenya continued to explain as his hand slid deeper between Kwon Taek Joo's legs.

"The legal battle over Anastasia's return had dragged on for decades, dividing people into two camps: believers and non-believers. Eventually, Anna Anderson, the woman claiming to be Anastasia, passed away. It all seemed like a pointless charade, but it sparked something in people's minds. Over the course of many years, countless people pondered the possibility that Anastasia might actually be alive."

What was Zhenya trying to say? Kwon Taek Joo struggled to understand the heart of the story.

"In Russian folktales, there is a character named Koschei the Immortal. As the name suggests, he is invincible and cannot be killed. He represents the ultimate challenge for any hero in the story. In one tale, Koschei kidnaps a beautiful woman and a brave warrior attempts to rescue her but always fails. Of course, Koschei has weaknesses too. Only he knows what they are. In the end, he is defeated by the hero. If you constantly boast about your beauty and openly reveal your weaknesses without hesitation, then you are truly foolish."

Kwon Taek Joo listened silently, still struggling to understand Zhenya's intentions. Suddenly, he felt a sharp pain in his thigh as Zhenya pressed down hard on him. Zhenya, who had been playing with Kwon Taek Joo's genitals, climbed back on top of him again and pinned his legs down.

Zhenya's gaze was fixated on Kwon Taek Joo's back. The straight line from his broad shoulders to his slim waist was captivating, and even the slightest movement caused his sweaty muscles to ripple. His buttocks, tightly attached to his waist, displayed smooth curves like a ripe fruit. Zhenya's dark eyes took in every detail.

He lowered himself and pressed his lips against Kwon Taek Joo's neck with a gentle touch, completely different from before. Kwon Taek Joo's scent filled his nose. Unable to resist the growing lust, he bit down on the back of Kwon Taek Joo's neck, causing him to lower his head in disgust. Zhenya smiled softly and whispered in his ear.

"You may not be conventionally beautiful, but I will tell you Koschei's weakness."

Kwon Taek Joo thought it must still be a dream. He couldn't make any sense of the stories Zhenya had told him, and it all felt like one continuous dream.

But the pain throughout his body was undeniable.

Zhenya's voice rang out clearly. This was not a dream. Zhenya continued to speak cryptic words that Kwon Taek Joo couldn't fully comprehend.

"There is an abandoned castle in a vast land that can only be reached by becoming a fish, worm, or flying creature. In that castle stands an ancient tree as old as Koschei himself. On the south side of the tree is a large jewelry box filled with smaller boxes inside. One of those boxes holds what everyone seeks. It's neither too much nor too little compared to the other boxes. Inside may or may not lie Koschei's heart. But if you find it, Koschei will be at your mercy. You will become the new Koschei."

Zhenya crouched down, his muscular chest pressing against Kwon Taek Joo's back. Their hot bodies melded together, their skin glistening with sweat. As Kwon Taek Joo shrugged away from the contact, clearly irritated, he grumbled, "That's enough. Get off." His words came out like a snarl, but Zhenya just chuckled in response.

He placed his hand under Kwon Taek Joo's stomach and rolled his penis. As Zhenya slowly pulled down the skin, the pink glans were revealed. Kwon Taek Joo's back arched. The mouth that was barking fiercely also closed.

The penis fell into Zhenya's hands trembling with both anticipation and fear. Zhenya looked at him like a child and then lowered his lips to Kwon Taek Joo's shoulder. He kissed along the straight back.

When Zhenya's lips touched the rising buttocks, Kwon Taek Joo's body stiffened. He gently hugged her firm buttocks and let go.

"I want to meet your expectations."

Immediately after that, Kwon Taek Joo's buttocks were expanded to the sides. The semen-soaked hole was exposed without time to hide it, even the slightest exposure to the outside air startled him. The semen that filled Kwon Taek Joo's stomach flowed out all the way to the entrance, filling almost all of the tight folds. If he turned even a little, some of it would spill out and flow out. Kwon Taek Joo buried his head in the pillow at that extremely sensitive feeling.

Zhenya put the handmade cigar in his mouth again. Then he stuck a finger into the hole. Semen flowed out from the fingers. He raised his fingertips to rub against the inner wall, the remaining semen flowing down.

Between Kwon Taek Joo's legs quickly became shiny.

Zhenya opened the hole wide and suddenly lifted Kwon Taek Joo's face. He opened his mouth with a long finger and pressed it against his tongue. Zhenya put the cigar he was smoking into his mouth. Kwon Taek Joo could neither smoke nor spit out the cigar, groaning with difficulty and clenching his hands into fists. The curse came out from between clenched teeth.

"Haah... bastard."

Because Zhenya opened his ass and licked it. The wet hole continuously rubbed against his tongue. The sensation is maximized to the point where the taste buds can be felt in each unfamiliar stimulus. The tip of Zhenya's tongue slid across all the wrinkles at the entrance. Kwon Taek Joo's back twisted violently every time the hard tongue pressed tightly against the hole and pushed inside. The cigar he had just sucked on soon fell out of his mouth.

Overcoming the itchy feeling, Kwon Taek Joo shivered because of the feeling of joy that followed. Zhenya's legs were propped up against the soft bed sheets.

He grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's hips as if he wanted to break them and firmly immobilized his body as he tried to escape. Kwon Taek Joo quietly pressed his lower abdomen to the bed and rubbed it in pleasure from behind. And his penis quickly became erect.

You must be crazy. Kwon Taek Joo felt like his brain was being torn apart. The humiliation of being arbitrarily violated into a secret area that even he himself had never touched. The blood flowing throughout his body became as thick as semen. Thick saliva spilled out of his mouth as he bit into the pillowcase trying to hold back his moans.

As time passed, Kwon Taek Joo seemed to become sensitive to stimulation. By the time Zhenya sucked the thin skin around the hole until it made a sound, the thrusts of the lower abdomen became more intense. Kwon Taek Joo squirmed under the stimulation from the front and back then suddenly held his head and gritted his teeth. The next moment, his spine stiffened and his thighs tightened.

".....!"

Zhenya suddenly raised his head. He looked down at his hand, something splashed out. Semen smeared between his fingers. Zhenya suddenly looked at the wet hand and Kwon Taek Joo who was panting. Then he raised the corners of his mouth and smiled

"Did you shoot semen because I sucked your hole?"

Kwon Taek Joo trembled and cursed. He thought he could endure it, but couldn't believe it. anything else? His body caught fire with just the slightest touch, he must have been completely drugged. At first Kwon Taek Joo thought it was just a muscle relaxant, but now it seems to be an aphrodisiac. It was clearly Sergei's action, because he wanted to hug Kwon Taek Joo from the beginning, so he must have had a plan in advance.

Zhenya laughed at Sergei lying on the floor and spread Kwon Taek Joo's legs a little more.

"I'll let you shoot one more time, just from behind."

As soon as he finished speaking Zhenya's penis plunged into the hole and crashed into the inner wall. The opened entrance bit the mass of meat immediately. Kwon Taek Joo still can't get used to the feeling of his stomach filling up at the same time as the pressure on his spine.

"...Ah!"

He tried to hold back but a moan that was no different from a scream came out. This time Zhenya inserted his genitals to the base and observed the junction. The hole opened its mouth and closed tightly around him like a small creature.

Zhenya's arms stretched out to support his upper body. Kwon Taek Joo with her legs spread wide held his arm. Maybe because he was too tired, he couldn't resist like before. Instead Kwon Taek Joo just waited for this terrible moment to pass quickly. None of this is fun at all.

Zhenya enjoyed the tightness for a while then grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's nape. He pressed his lower abdomen against his ass to penetrate deeper. As he put all his body weight down, Kwon Taek Joo groaned. Just like that, he pushed his waist behind him.

Zhenya's huge muscle mass attacked with vigor, Kwon Taek Joo tore the bed sheet with his angry hands. The pillow was also thrown to the floor.

Zhenya's eyes gradually turned a different color. Strange excitement rushed over him when he saw a creature writhing restlessly and helplessly under him. The thrill of catching a bluefin tuna with your bare hands, the thrill of beheading a reindeer struggling to survive, and the heat radiating from the core are similar to the feeling of euphoria. It quickly rose to the nape of the neck and spread to the head.

Immediately after that, the calmness disappeared from Zhenya's face. He frowned and concentrated on mixing skin and flesh. The sound echoed from skin hitting each other. Body fluids pooled white and stretched like spider webs across the buttocks and pelvis. While pushing himself like a storm, Zhenya ran his nose across Kwon Taek Joo's neck and ears. The strong smell of her body stimulates desire.

Kwon Taek Joo's stomach was so compressed it felt like it was about to explode. Every time the huge mass of flesh pushed in, his stomach

tensed helplessly. He gasped at the burning numbing sensation. His fingers dug down again, tearing the bed sheet.

Zhenya did not hide his overflowing lust. He bit Kwon Taek Joo's ear and continuously buried his face in his black hair.

"If you want to walk out of this room on your own two feet, you'd better bend down and shake your hips or howl like a dog in heat. I'm even more excited to see a fearless rebel." scary. They say you have to trample on lovely things to release your essence. You're defending that you're like this because Sergei drugged you. Huh?"

"Nonsense... Ah!"

Kwon Taek Joo shouted again in anger, because Zhenya's lower body was excitedly pressing down on his waist. The sinewy penis mercilessly rubs its head against the overworked hole. He thrust so fast and hard that sometimes his penis stuck into his thigh. The mass of meat was as hot and hard as a heated iron bar that seemed to be able to easily pierce a hole in Kwon Taek Joo's thigh, quickly finding its position and stabbing inside.

"....."

Kwon Taek Joo's eyes opened wide. For a moment, a corner of his stomach tightened. He jumped up in confusion but Zhenya suppressed that almost convulsive body movement and pressed his chest tightly against Kwon Taek Joo's back. The sweaty skin stuck together, Zhenya's penis also dug deeper into the mysterious place.

He grabbed the trembling Kwon Taek Joo's waist and squeezed his groin tighter. The glans, which was expanding the tight inner wall, was suddenly pulled up somewhere it had never touched before. Right after that, Kwon Taek Joo, who was pinned under Zhenya, jumped up.

"...Ha ha!"

Zhenya was startled by the unexpected reaction. He gently removed the upper part of his body that was clinging to Kwon Taek Joo and looked down at the back of his neck. Kwon Taek Joo buried his head in the pillow but he couldn't hide the blush behind his ears and nape. His

body trembled from the indescribable burning sensation he had just experienced.

Zhenya's lips drew a long arc. He immediately pulled his genitals out of Kwon Taek Joo. His body trembled as the tight inner walls suddenly became loose. The cells, which were very tense, quickly relaxed and fell into silence for unknown reasons. Even his shoulders suddenly lost strength.

Noticing all those changes, Zhenya stretched Kwon Taek Joo's buttocks to the sides and immediately gently rubbed the genitals that were eager to enter on the buttocks bone. Every time the hot meat rubbed, Kwon Taek Joo's head was buried deeper into the pillow, his hands gripping the bed sheet also tightened.

Zhenya patiently rubbed the outside. The afterglow of intense stimulation made Kwon Taek Joo's hole tickle endlessly.

"Come to think of it, there was something I was curious about before..."

He left the sentence unfinished and suddenly stabbed his genitals inside. Kwon Taek Joo's body, which was restless and worried, became crazy.

Zhenya's penis wiggled, enjoying the sweet encounter inside, without hesitation, stabbing into the same spot as before. A gentle tingling feeling ran down Kwon Taek Joo's spine.

"Ah...!"

The old feeling returned. His whole body trembled, not knowing what to do, as if an electric current was running through all the cells in his body. Just as the constricted cells were about to burst open, Zhenya suddenly withdrew his penis. Kwon Taek Joo's swollen stomach suddenly became empty.

When Kwon Taek Joo felt suspicious, Zhenya rubbed his genitals against his butt bone. As soon as the heat increased, the flesh woke up and screamed. His patience ran out and he began to burn. Kwon Taek Joo tried to rub his lower abdomen and his tense center.

Once again, Zhenya plunged his penis into Kwon Taek Joo's hole. He pressed down hard on Kwon Taek Joo living helplessly below, the heat of the friction seemed to melt his skin.

A quick breath suddenly came out, the pain penetrating his lungs made his upper half collapse. Kwon Taek Joo frowned bitterly, realizing that his genitals could explode at any moment. There was a sharp pain between his legs, and his mind was spinning. However, he still endured until the end.

The hole was exhausted from being repeatedly attacked by Zhenya. Kwon Taek Joo nervously bit the glans but his penis was still dripping wet.

He gently placed his palm beneath Kwon Taek Joo's stomach as he rolled his fingers over his penis. As he slowly pulled back the skin, the pink head was revealed and Kwon Taek Joo's body tensed up in anticipation. His once fierce barking mouth now remained closed.

Zhenya held onto the trembling member with a mix of excitement and trepidation. He looked at Kwon Taek Joo like a curious child before placing soft kisses along his straight spine.

As his lips reached his firm buttocks, Kwon Taek Joo's body stiffened. Zhenya gently gripped onto the muscles before letting go.

"I want to fulfill your desires."

With that, Kwon Taek Joo's cheeks were spread open, exposing a semen-filled hole that had no chance to hide from the outside world. The sticky fluid oozed out and pooled around the tight folds. Any slight movement would cause it to spill out even more. In response to the overwhelming sensation, Kwon Taek Joo buried his face into the pillow.

Zhenya took another puff from his cigar before inserting a finger into the hole. More semen escaped from within, coating his fingers as he rubbed against the inner walls. Between Kwon Taek Joo's legs, everything glistened with wetness.

Zhenya spread open the hole further and abruptly lifted Kwon Taek Joo's head. He forced his long finger into his open mouth, pressing it

against his tongue. Then, he put the cigar back into his own mouth. Unable to spit it out or smoke it, Kwon Taek Joo groaned and clenched his fists tightly. Curses slipped through gritted teeth.

"Ugh... you bastard."

Because Zhenya was licking at his exposed ass. With each swipe of his wet tongue against unfamiliar sensations, Kwon Taek Joo's body shuddered. Zhenya's legs were propped up against the soft beddings.

He gripped onto Kwon Taek Joo's hips, as if trying to break them, and kept his body firmly in place. As he gently rubbed his lower abdomen against the bed, Kwon Taek Joo felt pleasure building inside of him. Soon enough, he was fully erect.

This must be insanity.

Kwon Taek Joo felt like his mind was being ripped apart. The humiliation of being forcefully taken to a secret area that he had never even seen before. His blood flowed thick and heavy, like semen. He bit into the pillowcase, trying to silence his moans as Zhenya sucked on the delicate skin around his hole, causing intense sensations throughout his body.

Time seemed to blur as Kwon Taek Joo became more sensitive to the stimulation. Zhenya's thrusts against his lower abdomen grew stronger and Kwon Taek Joo squirmed under the dual sensation of front and back. Suddenly, he grabbed his head and gritted his teeth, feeling his spine stiffen and legs tighten.

Zhenya abruptly stopped and looked at his hand, which was splattered with semen. He smirked at Kwon Taek Joo, who was panting heavily. "Did you come because I sucked your hole?" Kwon Taek Joo trembled in disbelief. He thought he could withstand it, but with every touch, his body felt like it was on fire. He must have been drugged beyond belief. At first, he thought it was just a muscle relaxant, but now it seemed like an aphrodisiac. It was clearly Sergei's doing - he had wanted to take advantage of Kwon Taek Joo from the very beginning and had planned this all along. Zhenya laughed at Sergei lying on the floor and spread Kwon Taek Joo's legs further apart.

"I'll make you come one more time, but from behind." With that, Zhenya plunged into him again, hitting the inner wall of his entrance with force. Kwon Taek Joo still couldn't get used to the feeling of fullness in his stomach while also feeling pressure on his spine. He tried to hold back his moans, but it was no use - they escaped from his lips in a scream.

This time, Zhenya pushed in all the way to the base and observed the tight junction between them.

The hole opened and closed tightly around him like a small creature. Zhenya leaned on his arms for support, while Kwon Taek Joo gripped onto his arms with his legs spread wide. He was too exhausted to resist anymore, so he simply waited for this terrible experience to be over. None of this was enjoyable at all. After savoring the tightness for a while, Zhenya grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's nape and pressed his lower abdomen against Kwon Taek Joo's back, pushing even deeper inside. As he put all of his body weight into it, Kwon Taek Joo groaned in pain.

Zhenya's muscular body moved with aggressive force as he tore through the bed sheets with his hands. The pillow was thrown to the floor in the heat of the excitement.

As Zhenya's eyes changed color, he felt an overwhelming excitement seeing the creature beneath him squirming helplessly. The same thrill he experienced when catching a large tuna or beheading a struggling reindeer flooded through him, radiating from his core and spreading to his head.

But suddenly, Zhenya's calm demeanor disappeared. He furrowed his brow and focused on mixing skin and flesh together, the sound echoing throughout the room. Body fluids dripped down, creating a spiderweb-like pattern on the buttocks and pelvis. Zhenya ran his nose along Kwon Taek Joo's neck and ears, intoxicated by the strong smell of their body.

The pressure from Zhenya's massive weight caused Kwon Taek Joo's stomach to feel like it was about to burst. Each thrust brought a numbing, burning sensation that left him gasping for air. His fingers dug into the bed sheets once again.

Zhenya did not hide his intense desire. He bit Kwon Taek Joo's ear and buried his face in their black hair.

"If you want to leave this room on your own two feet, you better bend over and move your hips or howl like a dog in heat. I get even more excited by fearless rebels." They say you have to destroy beautiful things to reveal their true essence. Are you still trying to blame Sergei for drugging you?"

"Nonsense... Ah!"

Kwon Taek Joo shouted in anger as Zhenya's lower body pressed against their waist with excitement. His sinewy penis relentlessly rubbed against their overworked hole, thrusting so forcefully that it sometimes hit against their thigh. The hard, hot mass of flesh resembled a heated iron rod, easily penetrating Kwon Taek Joo's thigh and finding its place inside.

Kwon Taek Joo's eyes widened in shock. For a moment, their stomach tightened. They tried to push Zhenya off but he held them down tightly against his chest, their sweaty skin sticking together as he pushed his penis even deeper inside.

Zhenya grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's waist, squeezing it tighter as he rubbed against their groin. His expanding glans suddenly hit a spot that had never been touched before, causing Kwon Taek Joo to jump up beneath him.

"...Ha ha!"

Zhenya was taken aback by the unexpected reaction from Kwon Taek Joo. He gently separated himself from Kwon Taek Joo's upper body and looked down at the back of his neck. Despite burying his head in the pillow, a blush still crept up behind his ears and on his nape. He trembled from the intense and unfamiliar burning sensation he had just experienced.

The sight of Zhenya's satisfied smirk made him even more flustered as he withdrew from Kwon Taek Joo's body. His body shook as the once-tight inner walls suddenly became loose. The cells that were once tense

now relaxed and fell into silence for unknown reasons. Even his shoulders lost their strength.

Noticing these changes, Zhenya spread Kwon Taek Joo's buttocks apart and gently rubbed against his eager genitals on his coccyx bone. Every time their heated flesh touched, Kwon Taek Joo buried his head deeper into the pillow and tightened his grip on the bed sheet.

Zhenya patiently teased him from the outside. The lingering effects of their intense encounter kept Kwon Taek Joo's hole twitching uncontrollably.

"Come to think of it, there was something I was curious about before..."

He trailed off without finishing his sentence before abruptly thrusting back inside. Kwon Taek Joo's restless and worried body gave into pleasure once again.

Zhenya's penis moved with ease, enjoying the sweet sensation inside as he unhesitatingly hit the same spot as before. A gentle tingling sensation ran down Kwon Taek Joo's spine.

"Ah...!"

The familiar feeling returned, causing his entire body to tremble as if an electric current ran through every cell. Just as he thought he couldn't take any more, Zhenya pulled out suddenly. Kwon Taek Joo's bloated stomach was suddenly left empty.

Feeling confused, he watched as Zhenya rubbed his genitals against his coccyx bone. The intense heat reawakened his desire and he couldn't help but writhe in pleasure. His patience ran out and he began to burn with need. Kwon Taek Joo tried to rub his lower abdomen and the tense area between his legs.

Once again, Zhenya thrust himself inside Kwon Taek Joo's hole. He pressed down heavily on Kwon Taek Joo who could only lay there helplessly, the intense friction feeling like it could melt his skin.

A sharp breath escaped Kwon Taek Joo's lips as the pain shot through his lungs, causing him to collapse forward. He grimaced in pain,

realizing that he could explode at any moment from the overwhelming sensation between his legs.

Despite the sharp pain and swirling thoughts, he endured until the very end.

Kwon Taek Joo's exhausted hole throbbed from being repeatedly ravaged by Zhenya. He nervously bit down on the glans of his own penis, which was still dripping wet from their encounter.

Zhenya let out a heavy sigh and muttered, "Is it possible to kill someone just by doing this?"

Kwon Taek Joo didn't respond, but he gently pushed his back and entered the hole a little more. The inner wall seemed to tighten around his skin like a joke. He repeated this action a few times before smiling softly.

Suddenly, Kwon Taek Joo's body rushed towards Zhenya in an instinctive move. Zhenya watched with surprise as against Kwon Taek Joo's will, his body opened up and swallowed the huge, ferocious piece of meat. A satisfied smile appeared on Zhenya's face while Kwon Taek Joo could only tremble with humiliation and shame.

With mixed emotions, Kwon Taek Joo grabbed his hair and buried his red, distorted face into the other pillow.

His aphrodisiac-infused eyes burned and blurred as he felt his buttocks twitching against Zhenya's body. Zhenya continued to devour Kwon Taek Joo's hole, thrusting his reddened penis roughly in and out of the tight entrance. The two men moaned in unison as Zhenya suddenly turned Kwon Taek Joo over and locked their bodies together, causing them both to shake from the intense sensation.

He lifted Kwon Taek Joo's legs onto his shoulders, rubbing their flesh together for even more stimulation. As he reached out and squeezed Kwon Taek Joo's chest continuously, Zhenya picked up speed until both men were panting heavily and moaning non-stop. The burning sensation spread throughout Kwon Taek Joo's entire body all the way down to his toes.

Something was about to explode inside of him while Zhenya showed no signs of slowing down, seemingly determined to devour him whole between his legs. Finally, a tingling feeling like an electric shock exploded, and both of them roared in ecstasy, releasing their lust onto Kwon Taek Joo's chest while something shot deep into his stomach.

Exhausted and breathless, Kwon Taek Joo could barely move a muscle or even look down at the source of his lingering pleasure. Zhenya continued to thrust until he was spent, his penis still pulsing with energy inside his brother.

After he finished, he pushed Kwon Taek Joo's legs off his shoulders and let them droop helplessly. As they both lay there panting, Zhenya lit up a cigar and enjoyed it slowly while admiring Kwon Taek Joo's body. Despite being no different from him, there was something about this man that captivated him.

"It's also a good test to see if a person can die just from this," Zhenya said casually. "Either way, you're going to die here today."

The tone of his voice suggested that he was wasting time on something unimportant.

## **Chapter 2.11 – Twilight: Crocodile Became a Panther 5**

Zhenya repeated this process three more times since then. Kwon Taek Joo was barely conscious during those times, so he may have done it even more.

His body would run out of blood and fluids before he starved to death. When did he lose feeling below the waist? The thrill of the experience also faded away, as if the injected drug had worn off. All that remained was intense pain.

Kwon Taek Joo slowly opened his eyes when he felt the bed shaking. Through his blurred vision, he could see Zhenya leaving the room. Without hesitation, the bastard walked over to a dressing room behind the bed, which was also where a photo of the Bogdanov family hung on the wall.

Zhenya stood in front of the photo frame and flipped it aside without a second thought. Behind it was another door. He knew how to enter the password and easily opened the door with a mechanical sound. Inside were rows of unidentified glass bottles. Zhenya took one of them and returned to the bed.

"Do you know what this is?"

He gently shook the small bottle in his hand. No response. Kwon Taek Joo didn't even have enough energy to lick his lips. Zhenya remained silent and unfazed.

"This is polonium-210. You could say it's a relic from Anastasia's failed experiment."

Kwon Taek Joo's eyes widened at the mention of 'polonium-210'. It was a substance with thousands of times more alpha particles than radium, and only about 100g were produced annually in the world. Even a small

amount introduced into the human body could be fatal due to its high toxicity.

Zhenya slowly raised Kwon Taek Joo's hand and muttered while neatly examining each long, straight finger as if he were humming a tune.

"What should I do? Let's start by cutting off each finger, okay? A body was found in Lake Baikal. Not bad. Your colleagues will bring back the frozen body. No matter what." He also tried to contact you. He must have been very hurt because you beat him and left him to die."

Who was Zhenya talking about when he mentioned Kwon Taek Joo's colleague? No one came to mind, but there was one person who reminded him of being "hurt from being beaten". Could they really be Kwon Taek Joo's partner?

Zhenya didn't give Kwon Taek Joo much time to think before inserting 'polonium-210' into the syringe. He pulled the plunger and a clear liquid filled the cylinder.

"Do you think you're hated over there too? Did the place known as the National Intelligence Service accidentally send my photo to you?... That's not possible."

It was all so confusing. Too much information pouring in at once in a desperate situation with death looming near. Kwon Taek Joo's heart skipped a beat not only because he had a premonition of the end of his life. An uneasy feeling of unknown origin stuck in his mind and couldn't be shaken off. It was as if Kwon Taek Joo himself had forgotten something important.

What could it be?

Zhenya tapped the syringe to remove any air bubbles.

"It's like you knew about your superiors' corruption that they didn't want anyone to find out."

Zhenya made this judgment as he pressed down on the plunger and the medicine sprayed out from the sharp needle. He then lifted Kwon Taek Joo's arm.

Every muscle in his body was tense. Could he really die like this? It seemed impossible. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't go out without finding out what was going on first. But his body was weak and he didn't have the strength to fight anymore. The sharp tip of a syringe loomed closer, ready to pierce his skin at any moment.

But then, after being silent for so long, Kwon Taek Joo suddenly pushed Zhenya's shoulder.

He didn't know where the strength came from, but it was enough to startle Zhenya. However, he quickly regained his composure and easily subdued Kwon Taek Joo once again. Without hesitation, he injected the medicine into Kwon Taek Joo's neck with the needle.

"Ugh!"

Kwon Taek Joo winced at the sharp pain and blood gushed from the injection site. Zhenya smiled as he pushed the plunger all the way, making sure all of the liquid inside the syringe entered Kwon Taek Joo's body. In that moment, everything became hazy and Kwon Taek Joo's struggling arm fell limply to his side. His vision shattered into fragments before fading completely. Was this the end? All sound seemed distant now as he felt something open and close near him, clicking repeatedly. A sound he had heard somewhere before...were they cigar scissors?

In the distance, someone whistled happily while holding tightly onto Kwon Taek Joo's ring finger. The sound of clinking cigar scissors grew louder as they drew closer to him. Then came a sharp pain in his ring finger.

"Foolish rabbit."

A deep laugh echoed in his ears as he realized something had been cut off and an intense pain radiated from his finger. What would happen now? His consciousness slipped away into a dark void, leaving behind only futile questions.

EDITOR NOTE: PAUSING TRANSLATIONS/EDITING HERE FOR NOW—  
WILL RESUME

## Chapter 2.12 – Counterattack

A vague humming sound. The shadow swayed rhythmically across Kwon Taek Joo's eyelids. Fingers were cut off, limbs and body were cut in half. The body was cut into pieces like a fish and quickly lost body heat. All the blood was drained, leaving only a bloodless mass of flesh washed in bleach. He didn't feel any pain. His mind was still blank. Are you dead? All that remains are vague thoughts that dominate my mind in the last days of my life.

His arms and legs froze. His body seemed to float in a vacuum, and also seemed to be sinking into the water. The strong smell of alcohol entered his nose and a dark area immediately appeared. Cold water flowed through every hole in the body. There is a fishy smell.

A black snakehead fish appeared in the darkness. One child, two children, three children... They kept coming in droves, their eyes sparkling. They wander around and look for prey that has been thrown away. Then a guy suddenly burst in and everyone simultaneously started tearing off the white meat and eating it.

A dark shadow swayed in the blurry vision. But Kwon Taek Joo could neither see the face nor hear the voice. When he came closer to get a closer look, they also backed away. A certain distance was maintained and a dark shadow surrounded it. It moved slowly, then faster until his eyeballs couldn't keep up. His breathing became labored. When the rotational force reached its peak, the black shape became a water bubble and burst.

Don't forget your promise to dad.

A sound echoed in the foam that had disappeared. It wasn't a human voice. Kwon Taek Joo quickly turned back to the source of the sound but the separated black shape did not reappear. Have you completely stopped breathing? So you can see the souls of the dead and even hear their voices? Why does consciousness not disappear but still remain?

Kwon Taek Joo floated vaguely, but a giant water bubble suddenly emerged and quickly passed beside him. He turned back to look. The bubbles receded very quickly and then formed a shape. It was bigger and more dynamic than anything Kwon Taek Joo had ever seen.

It's that bastard. The moment he realized the identity of that shape, his body reflexively took a step back, but the more Kwon Taek Joo stepped back, the bigger and bigger he became.

Don't come here.

The silent scream shook the space.

The next moment, that giant shape crashed into him. His body was sucked into the dense darkness. Kwon Taek Joo choked. The forgotten pain returned more vividly as if every joint in his body had been chopped into pieces. The peeling skin was unbearable. The black shape that covered his body instantly turned white, emitting a cold, mocking laugh.

Stupid rabbit.

"..."

Kwon Taek Joo's eyelids opened wide. Vision fades then becomes clearer. Everything is before your eyes. Is there a problem with your vision?

Kwon Taek Joo closed his eyes and then opened them again. Nothing changes. The quiet white ceiling, the faint sound of the air conditioner, the familiar smell of disinfectant.

The cushion felt like it supported his back firmly. From what he saw, it seemed like this was a hospital.

Kwon Taek Joo raised his hand. An intravenous needle was stuck in the back of his hand. There are up to two injections. He even brought an oxygen tank with him for emergencies. Apparently he was still alive after thinking he was dead.

So what is illusion, what is reality? His head felt like it was waterlogged and he couldn't remember anything clearly. It's difficult to know

whether the afterimages left in the brain are real or not. The only thing Kwon Taek Joo was sure of was right before he got off the train. When he tried to recall the memories afterward, his head felt like it was about to explode. Kwon Taek Joo groaned softly and clutched his bandaged head.

"Are you awake?"

Suddenly an unfamiliar voice intervened. Kwon Taek Joo suddenly woke up with relief. His hands involuntarily groped around his waist. But the guns that should have been there were gone.

After identifying his opponent, Kwon Taek Joo quickly let down his guard, because the person facing him was also in a not so good condition. He was in a cast from shoulder to wrist Kwon Taek Joo raised his head because of a bandage around his neck. His eyes were bruised and swollen, and his lips were swollen and dry. A bandage was wrapped around his head and duct tape was applied to his torn forehead and cheekbones. Judging from the fact that he was on crutches, his legs also seemed to be in bad shape. It appears this person has been in treatment for at least 12 weeks.

But somehow, that face caught Kwon Taek Joo's eye. It might have been just a hallucination, but he had a profound sense of déjà vu. Not long after, the man's identity appeared in his mind. Kwon Taek Joo could recognize him, but he didn't immediately because of his miserable appearance.

It's Psych Bogdanov. No, he's the man that Kwon Taek Joo mistook for that bastard. On the day of the hotel terrorist attack, he disguised himself as a paramedic and followed Kwon Taek Joo. At the time, he thought he was Psych Boedanoy. Now he knew he wasn't, but what the hell was he talking about? Remembering that he aimed at the helicopter as soon as he saw Zhenya with a bazooka, it's best that Kwon Taek Joo should not get close to this person.

"Who are you?"

"You asked too early."

"There has to be a time to ask."

"Ah, that's probably not the case. You must have been so busy that you didn't even notice your partner."

"...partner?"

Kwon Taek Joo frowned. The man came forward to face him.

He heard from department head Lim that there was a randomly assigned partner. After considering the attention of people around him, the other side naturally approached him and said they would send photos at the appropriate time. The next day, two pictures were sent to him. One was a photo of Zhenya, and the other was of the man standing in front of him. At that moment, Zhenya started talking and Kwon Taek Joo immediately thought he was his colleague. He was very brave and he helped him on the first day he entered the country, so Kwon Taek Joo was not too suspicious.

How the hell did things get so messed up? A perfect confusion was created by the head office's mistake of forcing an unwanted partner and mistakenly sending a really important photo and time to meet Zhenya.

But there's still something puzzling

"Why didn't you reveal your identity sooner?"

"Did I have time to reveal? If you had time then why didn't you tell me? How the hell was I supposed to get to you when you were so attached to Bogdanov? I waited until you were alone to approach you but I almost died trying to take you to a quiet place to explain. Have you forgotten that you beat me until I passed out and drowned in the water?"

He wears his sarcasm with a lot of resentment towards Kwon Taek Joo. Why not? It's all because of Kwon Taek Joo that this man is now in such a bad situation. He was so embarrassed that he couldn't lift his head and wondered what the hell he had done.

"Now it sounds like an excuse, but I have a reason... Ha, it's really an excuse. Sorry for not recognizing you. I'm truly sorry for that."

"I feel like I'm being teased because you admit your mistakes so easily. This is the price of wasting time."

"Because of misunderstandings with my teammates, I almost died several times. If that doesn't console you, I can take a few hits right now."

Suddenly Kwon Taek Joo stuck out his left cheek. That's not just talk. He thought that if the man wanted it that way, he would comply. The man clenched his fists. But soon he loosened his grip and scolded him for being ridiculous.

"I really want to, but that's okay. Look at you."

The man clicked his tongue in disapproval. What could be enough to arouse his compassion? Only then did Kwon Taek Joo raise his hand and touch his face and body. That alone gave him a clear idea of his condition. His head was bandaged, and his forehead, cheekbones, earlobes, nape, and collarbone were also bandaged. Even the slightest twist made his back ache.

So what about your fingers? Kwon Taek Joo remembered old memories and suddenly opened his arms. A bandage was wrapped around the ring finger, which was in severe pain. Truly so.

"Finger."

"I heard it was a broken bone."

That's right, as expected at that time... huh?

Kwon Taek Joo nodded and looked blankly at the man.

".What?"

"Are you deaf in your ears too? I said it's a broken bone. Is that the first time you got your finger bandaged?"

"Isn't it cut off?"

"Is there any reason to cut it off? You've watched too many mafia movies."

He shook his head with a puzzled expression. Before losing consciousness, Kwon Taek Joo received a strong shock from his ring finger. He clearly heard the clicking sound of the cigar cutter, and he

thought he was going to cut his finger, but it was just a simple fracture. In addition, except for the ring finger, the other fingers are normal. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't believe it and turned his hand over.

"But didn't Morgan's body have all ten fingers cut off?"

"That's true, but you're alive and he's dead. So you don't have to be sad that your fingers are still attached in the same position."

Kwon Taek Joo was confused. He thought that, just like Zhenya killed Morgan, Kwon Taek Joo would do the same. How are you still alive?

"How did I get here?"

"You were left on the riverbank near Olkhon Island. Just in time the Bogdanov family moved there and our agents who were still chasing them found you. The doctor said if it had been a little slower it would have damaged your heart."

Is that so? Zhenya didn't save Kwon Taek Joo himself, he just didn't care if he lived or died. He didn't even know that his joke had luckily saved his life, that he would try to save his miserable life.

No, right? Kwon Taek Joo remembered the injection he was given before losing consciousness. He also felt the bandage on his neck. Really if it was 'polonium-210' at that time, would he still be able to open his eyes?

"I won Polonium-210?"

"Who said that?"

"At that time it was obvious that Zhenya..."

"Zhenya, that crazy guy? Yevgeny Vissarionovich Bogdanov. I mean your best friend?"

He raised his voice sarcastically. "Zhenya, Zhenya..." he repeated his name several times.

"How can you call him by such a familiar name? Even his blood relatives don't call him that."

He clicked his tongue with a tired expression. What kind of intimate name? Kwon Taek Joo was about to get angry but he kept his mouth

shut. A vague thought appeared in his mind. From the beginning, he introduced himself as Zhenya. Of course he didn't think that was his real name, because it wasn't a common Russian name. So he thought it was just a nickname he often used. Because arms trading is his main job, he seems to hide his identity as a habit. In some ways, he resembled Kwon Taek Joo himself, and he felt a kinship with him.

He also knew that 'Psych Bogdanov' was scandalous. He still forgot that Psych had a real name, though. Additionally, Yevgeny's nickname is 'Zhenya. When learning Russian, he also learned about ethnic composition, history, society, life and culture. But nicknames don't really matter. At that time, he did not know that Kwon Taek Joo would come to Russia or call Russians by nicknames.

What was he thinking when he told him his intimate name? And what did he think when Kwon Taek Joo called him by that name without any suspicion? He had given him a clear hint as to his identity, but how interesting it was to see an idiot who believed he was a colleague. Climb back up walls, cycle in Siberia in the cold of winter and go through dusty air vents.

Zhenya's face, which was smiling like a devil, sparkled before his eyes. Kwon Taek Joo gritted his teeth, his fist trembled.

"Zhenya!"

## Chapter 2.13 – Counterattack

The pent-up anger exploded. The man stood and looked and shrugged. Kwon Taek Joo was furious. The bandage on his head loosened halfway, the injection solution hanging on the shelf fell down. and even the pillows and blankets on the bed slid to the floor. As if that didn't alleviate his anger, he stomped his hand hard for a moment.

"Calm down. You didn't even get a P of polonium-210 that you were worried about. It was just a simple anesthetic but it was so strong that you couldn't even wake up." when shocked."

The man interrupted Kwon Taek Joo with a confused look. He bowed his head and took a quick breath. His flowing hair covered his eyes so he couldn't see Kwon Taek Joo's expression. It took a while before he opened his mouth and asked the man, "What is he doing?".

"What?"

"Yevgeni, that bastard... What the hell is he doing?"

Kwon Taek Joo raised his head, his already sharp eyes now burning with anger. The man shrugged. "You've heard about the FSB, right?" Kwon Taek Joo nodded instead of answering.

'FSB' is Russia's Federal Security Service. Its predecessor was the KGB, an organization famous for its 'once you enter, you cannot return alive' reputation in the former Soviet Union. They can investigate multiple organizations without a warrant and often gather necessary information by sending spies abroad or establishing shell companies. They even enjoy the privilege of not being monitored by other agencies. Official operations included counterintelligence and counterterrorism missions such as the National Intelligence Service, but unofficial rumors of kidnappings and assassinations of enemies were also widespread.

'FSB'? Although a bit hasty, Kwon Taek Joo had an almost certain hunch. If Zhenya belonged there, then as he said, he was a state official. He

really doubted the national reputation of a country that would entrust work to such a madman.

Kwon Taek Joo's face suddenly darkened. The man did not pay attention and continued to explain.

"There are two special forces under the FSB. Spetsgurpa Alpha and Vimpel. Among them, Spetsgurpa Alpha

, commonly known as Alpha, is said to be composed of the most elite agents. Most of their troops are stationed in Moscow. It is a unit, but a group that is independent enough to have its own investigative powers. They are made up of five subunits, each with at least 150 to 250 members. The important thing is What's next: 1 of those 5 units has only one member."

Gathering only elite agents into each unit proves that the work that must be handled is very difficult and complicated. But is there anyone who can handle work alone that should be shared by many people?

No way. When Kwon Taek Joo was still skeptical, the man firmly affirmed

"It's him."

Kwon Taek Joo laughed loudly, Is that possible? Isn't he saying ridiculous things to tease you? But it's true that it has to be at that level to be worthy of being called 'Psych Bogdanov'. However, it was still beyond his understanding.

Does the Russian government or 'FSB' accept such deployment of manpower? The man again eliminated Kwon Taek Joo's doubts with a simple question.

"If it were you, would you want to be on the same team as him?"

Never. Kwon Taek Joo did not like Zhenya from the beginning. If that damn headquarters hadn't sent me the wrong photo,I wouldn't have run into him. Even if he had to face him unexpectedly, he would still completely follow his instincts and stay far away from him. Kwon Taek Joo doesn't remember sleeping comfortably for a single day since meeting Zhenya.

"It's not for nothing that the word 'nuclear' is attached to him. It's like it will explode at any time even if it's just a small mistake. I heard that if someone messes with him, Even his allies will be crushed to death."

"And he will claim that it was a legitimate defense."

Kwon Taek Joo joined the story with the tone that he was so familiar with. The man waved his hand to say that was it.

By now, Kwon Taek Joo understood a little more. The reason why Zhenya saved

him the

day he came to this country disguised as Hiro Sakamoto. The reason why he met him again at the hotel where he had lunch with Russian representatives. At that time, Zhenya was talking to someone on the phone.

"..Are not. I came but it must have been boring."

His voice sounded like he was making excuses, maybe he was in the process of spying on his opponent. On the way to the bathroom, Kwon Taek Joo saw a Gazprom employee fiddling with his phone. That person said the representative didn't show up at the luncheon?

Let's be clear. If it's support, then what happened last time was enough."

Zhenya also said the same.

In the end, it was because he was the third son of the Bogdanov family that he saved Kwon Taek Joo, or actually Hiro Sakamoto. He went to the hotel to 'represent' at the request of his father or brother at Gazprom, only to meet Kwon Taek Joo right there.

Kwon Taek Joo felt like he was pushed out to accidentally discover unexpected interesting things. He looked meaningfully at the photo of himself on Hiro Sakamoto's phone. Since he was a member of 'FSB', he must have realized that this was not a normal situation. That is also the reason why Gazprom representatives did not appear at the luncheon that day.

Puzzle pieces that rarely fit together have found their way into place. All of Zhenya's odd behavior is also explained. As that bastard said, Kwon Taek Joo himself is completely lucky to be alive. There were countless moments when his life was threatened by him.

Kwon Taek Joo organized his thoughts then suddenly sighed. Raising his head to face the man, he regained his usual calmness

"So what's your name?"

"What does it mean to say it now?"

"I'm Kwon Taek Joo."

He paid no attention to the man's scolding and asked for a handshake. The man patted Kwon Taek Joo's hand with a dissatisfied expression.

"Salman. Salman Basayev."

When Kwon Taek Joo turned around a bit to shake hands, the muscles all over his body screamed, especially the area below his waist was in unbearable pain. Salman frowned and shook his head.

What would he expect from a patient who just woke up from near death? Salman stood up and prepared to leave. Kwon Taek Joo looked puzzled.

"Are you going?"

"Can't I go?"

"From now on we have to plan the next steps."

Salman made a funny face and then burst out laughing, Kwon Taek Joo suggested discussing the plan when he looked like a zombie. Even when his health was in the best condition. nothing changed. Did you ever think about giving up right after just saving your life from Psych Bogdanov? Or was there a concussion in the head that made him unconscious?

Salman clicked his tongue.

"You still don't know? This operation has failed."

"Are not....?"

"You probably want to deny and save your mistake, but we don't have any more chances. Support from headquarters will also stop when the treatment ends. So in order to receive proper treatment, you should Go back to your country."

Kwon Taek Joo immediately tried to object, but Salman raised his hands as if he didn't want to listen any more and then limped towards the door. He opened the door and stopped for a moment. As if thinking of something, Salman turned to Kwon Taek Joo and spoke meaningfully.

"I guess he likes your butt a lot? But it looks like it's torn."

What?

Before Kwon Taek Joo could ask, the door closed. He stared at the closed door. It was clearly a smile mixed between teasing and mocking. But where the hell is torn?

Kwon Taek Joo thought over Salman's words. He was tired and pale in the blink of an eye. Forgotten embarrassing memories quickly returned. He slammed his hand on the bed but still didn't feel better. The roar suddenly rang out throughout the hospital.

"You crazy bastard, I'll kill you...!"

"Why?"

Vladimir Vissarionovich raised his eyes inquisitively. Gazprom's next boss visited the FSB headquarters early in the morning to meet a relative as an annual event. The main character, true to his name, is calmly scratching his ear.

"It seems like someone is talking about me."

No matter what he said, he couldn't hear it and started saying bland words. Vladimir rubbed his throbbing head. His already wrinkled eyebrows furrowed even tighter.

"Dad was very disappointed."

"It's not just one or two?"

He mumbled childishly as if he didn't know he was being scolded. Furthermore, that's not wrong. How many years has it been since the family had to overcome the consequences that Zhenya caused?

Vladimir thought that after puberty things would get better, that one day Zhenya would grow up, and over the past ten years he had always been optimistic and patient. It doesn't matter what crazy things he does outside, as long as he doesn't bring that problem into the house. But Zhenya is without limits.

Vladimir clearly remembers the first time Zhenya laughed. It's been quite a while. The white peacock that the youngest sister cherished suddenly disappeared. It is a bird that is carefully raised by creating an artificial habitat in the garden. Not long after, the poor bird was found in the corner of the garden. Its feathers had been plucked. Next to the staggering and collapsed peacock was Zhenya, wrapped in white feathers.

"Look at me, brother. It pretends to be elegant but it's ugly."

That was when he was less than ten years old. Zhenya smiled brightly like he was so happy he couldn't bear it. If he finds anything interesting, he will take pains to destroy it. After it was completely destroyed, he would quickly set his sights on something else.

When Zhenya's destructive instincts manifested in humans. Vladimir's father made a decision.

You booked a spot at the FSB and put him there. There. Zhenya's violent tendencies are not a big deal. The problem is that sometimes work can't cover him up.

The same is the case this time. When Gazprom became the biggest beneficiary of the contract between Russia and Japan, dissatisfied forces appeared. Vladimir was worried that it would harm even the VIPs on the Japanese side. It was for this reason that he sent his direct secretary to pick up the Japanese staff who entered the country one day before the visiting delegation.

It was only when he arrived at the hotel that he learned that the male escort had been bribed by a disturbing force. Vladimir immediately

sent Zhenya to the airport. That's a mistake. But it was a done deal anyway, and he shouldn't have called Zhenya to the luncheon. Unfortunately, that morning, Vissarion collapsed from a chronic illness and things got complicated.

Vladimir tried to coax him to go, but Zhenya did not attend the luncheon and played spy with a Korean intelligence agent. He openly took him to a place where only important people were invited and he even revealed secret information about 'SS-29'. anything else? There was a gunfight and hostage kidnapping right at the party.

Just thinking about it gave Vladimir a headache and dizziness. He let out a sigh.

"Baram's stance became very awkward because of the commotion he caused. What should I do at the place where the president and ministers gather? What are you thinking? The person\* has been betrayed by you." kidnapped that night and died...

"Ah, come to think of it, how did you deal with him?"

"...That Korean agent used you and him as hostages to escape and kill him."

Zhenya suddenly burst into laughter. "Who took who hostage?" he asked the confused Vladimir.

Anyone who knows Zhenya would not believe such a brazen lie. However, it is only a countermeasure. Russia today is a society where money is power and power is law. The existence that proves that is the Bogdanov family.

"Why didn't you get rid of that Korean agent as soon as you knew he was a spy?"

Vladimir reluctantly asked. He was also personally curious. An existence that Zhenya could hunt to his heart's content had fallen into his hands, so why did he let it live forever? Even when spy Kwon Taek Joo was found with his naked body, no one could say anything. Even in Korea, where he was sent, the issue could not be raised. That is the fate of spies, and the practice of many intelligence agencies.

Zhenya shrugged differently.

"I thought I should, but they trust me so much that playing together for a while wouldn't be bad."

"Just like that, you caused something so serious..."

"It's fun to watch them struggle to survive, so killing them so easily would be a waste. It's boring."

..alright, let's put it that way. I found out he's being treated at a small hospital in Irkutsk. If you've had enough, you should clean up. Why leave him alone?" alive?"

"I didn't mean to let him live. If I had discovered him a little later, he would have died."

"Anyway, when you let him go, he was still breathing. Don't you show off your brand by chopping off their fingers or their body and throwing it away? There's never been an exception."

Zhenya smiled strangely at Vladimir.

"So what are you worried about in the end? Are you worried that someone who is barely breathing will fight back? Don't bother. He can't act that cute."

Zhenya was decisive. Vladimir was about to say something more, but he closed his mouth. It's already done, no matter how much we argue about it, it won't change anything. Some secrets may have been leaked to the South Korean side but their operations were not carried out. They will not know that vigilance has become stricter.

Zhenya showed a bored expression and said, "That's all you came to say?". In fact, there were several reasons why Vladimir wanted to meet him. As the eldest son of the Bogdanov family, trying to advise the family's troublemaking third brother was a headache. But he has another purpose.

"Is Anastasia still not done?"

Zhenya grinned at the straightforward question. A mocking look appeared in his curved eyes. Originally the relationship between the

two was like this. Although they haven't seen each other for a long time, they are still more curious about their work progress than about each other's health, which is not surprising.

Zhenya did not answer the question but asked the opposite.

"Who's curious about that? Dad? The president? Or the other big hands?"

Vladimir did not answer. Actually everyone is curious about the 'Second Anastasia' that was created based on the design of 'Failed Anastasia'

Months ago, North Korea and Russia agreed to destroy all evidence related to Anastasia's research. Designs created by leading weapons developers over the years are a top priority for being scrapped. All officials were massacred, weapons, arsenals, and blueprints under development were blown up. Of course only the Bogdanov family survived the brutal destruction of evidence. That's the price to pay to keep quiet about all that forever.

Rumors spread that, just as the Bogdanov family had not been purged, the blueprints were still out there somewhere. The Bogdanov family remained silent, but ironically, their unclear stance added to the fear of the outside world.

Vladimir was also curious in his heart. Instead of seeing whether the blueprint existed or not. what he was interested in was whether they could rearrange it to create the real Anastasia. The only one who knows the answer is Zhenya. Because the current Anastasia blueprint exists in a form that only he can understand.

Whenever he had the chance, Vladimir asked Zhenya when the complete 'Anastasia' would be published. Zhenya appeared reserved and said that he would think about it when he felt like it. Vladimir remembered the conversation at that time and reaffirmed Zhenya's intentions.

"Are you still not satisfied with it?"

"I think I'll play with it as soon as this job is finished."

"However?"

"Looking back today, it seems better to leave it alone, right? It's great to see everyone around like a dog in heat. Not long ago, someone said he would avenge his father. and ran to me. He didn't even know that his arms and legs would be torn to pieces, but he kept barking that he was going to kill me... I wish you could see it too."

Zhenya seemed genuinely interested. Vladimir turned his head towards him, sighed and pressed his throbbing temples

".So did you kill Hong Yeo Wook?"

Zhenya did not answer. He only gave a vague smile with cold eyes and an excited expression. For some reason, he felt like the clothes he was wearing were being peeled off one by one, it felt like all the curtains around the man named Vladimir were being exposed. Frustrating.

Vladimir absentmindedly stroked his collar. Zhenya leisurely observed and asked, "Do you regret it?"

"What?"

"Do you regret sending me there?"

The question is vague but not difficult to answer.

"I regret trusting you. I regret being optimistic that you would obediently do only what you were asked. Me and dad too."

Although the family expressed disappointment and resignation, the laughter continued.

"Regret as much as you want and stop drooling at other people's things. It's mine now. I have no intention of using it for the benefit of others. I'll keep it until I get bored and will destroy it myself. Until now, I still think about brotherhood, but if it keeps going like that, I can't sit still."

Vladimir silently looked at Zhenya. Expressionless eyes passed between the two brothers. The space was filled with silence.

Vladimir silently looked at Zhenya. Expressionless eyes passed between the two brothers. The space was filled with silence.

Vladimir firmly walked up to Zhenya's desk and snatched the phone from his hand. The phone that he hadn't even touched was in the call connection state. The caller ID displayed on the screen was the same as the ID on his phone.

"Are you still following the whole family now?"

How silly. Zhenya makes no excuses. Vladimir stood up from his seat and casually opened the door.

Vladimir left the office after threatening to sue Zhenya if he didn't stop hacking phones. He walked out and slammed the door

Peace finally came after noise pollution disappeared. Zhenya went to the window and watched Vladimir angrily climb into the car. The smile filled with teasing quickly disappeared.

Zhenya slowly turned around and looked around the empty office. The clock on the wall said that the morning was not over yet.

"So boring, so boring."

He muttered to himself. Strangely, time seems to pass slowly.

## Chapter 2.14 – Counterattack

The window rattled non-stop and then burst open, the wind that followed blew the curtains violently. In his sleep, Kwon Taek Joo pulled the blanket up to his neck, but the cold seemed to penetrate deep into his skin, making him shiver. If he continued to sleep, he would probably become a frozen corpse the next morning. Finally despite the discomfort, Kwon Taek Joo woke up.

His whole body felt cold when his feet touched the floor. He thought his body was quite flexible, but maybe he was wrong. After waking up, his physical strength also decreased and it took him quite a long time to recover like before. Kwon Taek Joo trudged to the window and closed the doors completely. Only then did the wind stop blowing, but his shoulders were still shaking.

He half-awake and half-dreamed and returned to bed. The mattress was so hard and the blanket so short that he had to curl up as much as possible to cover himself. The single room with very poor facilities, if he returns to the country safely, Kwon Taek Joo will definitely settle the matter with the headquarters.

He sat up, wetting his throat, then lay down again. Now he just wants to rest without thinking about anything. Kwon Taek Joo closed his eyes and tried to sleep but suddenly his hair flew up. Perhaps it was due to the steam escaping from the humidifier, but he gradually realized that everything from his hair to the hospital gown, the IV tube, and the blankets began to shake violently.

The window is obviously closed, right? Kwon Taek Joo rolled his eyes with a puzzled expression.

He was startled and raised himself up. The window that had been tightly closed suddenly opened again. Someone's silhouette was reflected through the fluttering curtains. Even though he couldn't see his face. Kwon Taek Joo felt like he knew who it was. His heart was pounding. The blood vessels of the entire body also beat violently.

"Is this your cave?"

He grinned and jumped through the window with his long legs. Kwon Taek Joo's hospital room is on the 4th floor but that doesn't seem to be a problem for him. He lifted the curtain and walked over with a characteristically scary smile. Kwon Taek Joo instinctively took a step back but soon a cold and hard wall hit his back. There's no way back anymore.

"Ah, how... That bastard is here, keogh...!"

The voice came out broken. Because he suddenly reached out and strangled him. It seemed that his body had grown several times larger and his power to suffocate the breath was similar to that of a monster. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't stand the pressure, his eyes bulged and his mouth fell open. He struggled to escape his arms, but the bastard didn't budge. He just whispered in a relaxed tone.

"If you're tired of playing, you should leave, right? As expected, you should deal with it neatly."

He licked his lips and looked down at Kwon Taek Joo, his eyes glowing like those of a giant reptile. He was breathing rapidly and could barely open his eyelids that he was trying to close. His eyes glowed red. That is desire, the red color of desire.

"You've heard enough, now I have to say goodbye, right?"

As soon as Kwon Taek Joo felt danger, his body flipped over. The hand that was strangling him kept pressing hard on the back of his neck. His head was helplessly buried deep in the pillow, his pants had slipped off, something hot and hard touched his tense buttocks. Kwon Taek Joo struggled desperately.

"Can't you stop? If it's rape then you've done enough, you bastard!"

He tilted his head to watch Kwon Taek Joo scream angrily and then teasingly rubbed the hot flesh against his hip bone.

"You call that rape? You like it too. How many times have you had orgasms?"

A terrible pressure was placed on Kwon Taek Joo's spine along with a cold mocking laugh. His lungs and intestines felt crushed. He panicked and screamed in extreme pain, even though he knew that if anyone ran to him, it would be useless.

But the higher he raised his voice, the more buried his voice became as if he were falling deeper into water or drowning in a thick swamp. No one heard and no one came to help. A feeling of despair came.

"..Oh my God!"

Kwon Taek Joo took a deep breath and opened his eyes. He could see the familiar ceiling. In the blink of an eye, all the pores opened, the hair on his whole body stood up, and his trembling hands touched the mattress. Everything was still the same, he was still lying in the hospital bed and the window was still closed.

Just a dream. Kwon Taek Joo lay unconsciously groping every corner of his body, without any special pain except the uncomfortable feeling like he had just been strangled.

He wiped his sweaty face and sighed. Even if I dream, do I have to dream like that?

It took a while for Kwon Taek Joo to sit up. Sweat fell from his face, his throat dry from labored breathing. Suddenly his mood dropped and his head felt heavy. Kwon Taek Joo felt like he had to take a shower.

He was getting out of bed when he suddenly stopped. Something in the blanket was standing up straight. No way. Kwon Taek Joo quickly lifted the blanket. Sure enough, his front was bulging like it was about to explode.

Damn, damn, damn.

Kwon Taek Joo jumped up from his seat and went to the bathroom. He didn't take off his clothes but turned on the shower to cool his excited body.

Crazy. That's crazy. How could it be made in such a nightmare? Not once or twice. If it was just today, Kwon Taek Joo could have argued that his

body was reacting abnormally to fear. But he has no excuse for this recurring phenomenon.

Kwon Taek Joo banged his head in embarrassment. Before losing consciousness, it was clear that the drug Zhenya injected into him was not a simple sleeping pill, otherwise there was no way he could have such an erection naturally.

Zhenya's face suddenly appeared in his mind. The face Kwon Taek Joo saw in his dream and the cold smile appeared vividly again, His fists clenched under the cold water.

As Salman said, it was lucky that he kept his little life. Kwon Taek Joo knows he cannot win against Zhenya. Besides wealth and power, he also has extraordinary physical strength. Even though he knew that in advance, Kwon Taek Joo's anger still could not be appeased. If this continues he will die of anger.

Anger aside, confronting Zhenya directly in a body that had not yet recovered was a reckless act. The hotter his heart is, the more Kwon Taek Joo has to keep his head cold. Hasty judgments only ruin things.

Is there any way to get revenge on him? Is there any way to deal a fatal blow to someone with the strength of a monster and a sharp head?

Kwon Taek Joo racked his brain and thought. Past memories are brought back with a profound sense of *deja vu*.

"...It is very strong and nothing can kill it."

It was a story he heard recently. Who said that?

There is a character who always appears in Russian folk tales.

Koshichei-Immortal.

It's Zhenya. That was definitely the story he told me. Thinking about the narrator and the circumstances in which the story appeared, Kwon Taek Joo's face heated up in an unnecessarily vivid memory.

He shook his head to get rid of nonsense thoughts and then slowly repeated what he had said.

Of course Koshichei also has weaknesses. Only Koshichei knows that.'

What else did he say?

"In the end he was killed by a brave warrior. If you're passionate about beauty and don't hesitate to brag about your weaknesses, that's really stupid."

He also added.

"No matter how you look at it, you're not a beauty, but I'll tell you Koshichei's weakness"

Weaknesses of Immortals.

Kwon Taek Joo goes back a little further and examines the circumstances of that subject. Before mentioning

Koshichei, Zhenya talked about Russian princess Anastasia.

He had previously told Kwon Taek Joo that the development of the weapon he was looking for, 'Anastasia', had failed. Anastasia does not exist, Anna Anderson, the last princess impersonator and Koshichei's weakness-the Immortal. Each story that seemed to have no special connection began to connect little by little in Kwon Taek Joo's mind.

After production of "Anastasia" failed, everyone involved in its development was massacred. However, only the Bogdanov family survived. Why weren't they purged? Also, did Anastasia, hailed as the first deadly weapon, really disappear forever without a trace? Or, like the surviving Bogdanov family, does Anastasia also exist somewhere, in some form?

"Anastasia? I don't know why you're looking for me."

When Kwon Taek Joo met 'Sonchef's' Boris, he replied that he didn't know why. He even glanced at Zhenya with an incomprehensible smile. There were quite compatible looks between those two people. What is it? Something that Kwon Taek Joo himself has been missing all this time. It seemed like something was about to pop into his head.

Kwon Taek Joo turned off the shower, memories of the past sprouting like mushrooms after rain filled his quiet head.

Psych Bogdanov. In Russia, he's like a nuclear man.

"It's not for nothing that the word 'nuclear' is attached to him."

Nuclear. Nuclear Man

The man is no different from a nucleus.

Kwon Taek Joo tried to develop his thoughts step by step and then blinked. Something powerful pierced his mind. Why didn't you think of it?

The bottom of the lamp is usually the darkest place. What you're looking for is often found right under your nose. Perhaps this time that truth will also work for Kwon Taek Joo. He rushed out of the bathroom with crazy thoughts.

The place Kwon Taek Joo visited was a library in Irkutsk. Pitiful eyes glanced at a stranger in a hospital gown. I do not care. Kwon Taek Joo was worried that the documents in a place with old facilities might be too few or only partially available, but unexpectedly, there were high-quality documents inside.

He uses a desktop computer to patiently access the Internet at snail's pace to retrieve information. When the access website finally appeared, Kwon Taek Joo clicked on the satellite image. He entered the address 'Bogdanov villa in Moscow' into the search bar at the top.

Wait a moment, a photo appears. It is a picture of the Bogdanov mansion and the surrounding streets. Kwon Taek Joo zoomed all the way. It was difficult to determine exactly due to the image quality, but he could distinguish between the main building, the outer garden, the central garden, and the main gate. Kwon Taek Joo muttered to himself, pointing at that blurry photo.

"An uninhabited castle, a tree the same age as Koshichei, a jewelry box in the south and small jewelry boxes inside.."

Kwon Taek Joo's eyes suddenly opened even wider. His heart was also beating erratically. Maybe it's not. Could be just a coincidence. You should have checked more to be sure.

Kwon Taek Joo left the computer and went to the bookshelf. He strode past several bookshelves and stopped at the architecture section. He took all the documents related to housing styles in recent years. Kwon Taek Joo went through the list of selected books and selected the ones that mentioned the Bogdanov mansion.

In Kwon Taek Joo's hand, there are only five or six books left. He opened the page pointed to in the table of contents. Photos of the Bogdanov mansion and detailed descriptions of the architectural style used to construct the building, the designer and the materials used in its construction come out beautifully.

The image of the villa was taken in many different photos. Some are lush spring backdrops, some are winter landscapes with bare tree branches. There is also a book showing photos that appear to have been taken at night while also explaining the local lighting around the building.

"....."

Kwon Taek Joo looked at the photos over and over and then stopped. He thought it was an illusion but he checked again and it was clear. No matter when the photos were taken or from what angle, there was one room among the mansion's countless rooms that always had the lights on and the curtains always open.

Found it. Koshichei's heart.

## Chapter 2.15 – Counterattack

When Kwon Taek Joo visited, Salman had just removed his bandage. The doctor in charge repeatedly reminded him that he had not fully recovered, so he should absolutely not be abused. The doctor only went out after Salman promised that he would  
obe

y. Salman looked at Kwon Taek Joo and slowly moved his arm.

"The nurse said she hasn't seen you since dawn. Where have you been?"

"Are you really going to end it like this?"

As soon as he was asked, Salman did not answer but just stopped and stared at Kwon Taek Joo and shrugged.

"What if it doesn't end?"

"If you complete this mission, what benefits will you receive?"

"You're so unreasonable. What's the use of that?"

"Try it, maybe it might be useful."

Salman looked at Kwon Taek Joo with a puzzled look. For some reason, Kwon Taek Joo looked very excited. Did something happen last night?

He hummed in response because he thought that if he ignored it, he would be bothered more.

"We will get independent funding."

"From the Chechen side?"

He nodded to the next question. Zhenya said that a Russian was involved in this operation to get the blueprints of Anastasia'. He said it was something worth doing, but it was hard to believe. Because it would be dangerous enough to risk one's life, and even if the mission was completed, it would still be selling the country for glory. Surely

Salman's story is much more convincing than someone like him who already has rights.

It is understandable that Zhenya and Salman know each other. His 'FSB' is periodically monitoring the movement in Chechnya. An Alpha unit was even stationed in Chechnya under the pretext of preventing unrest. It is possible to guess the extent of Salman's influence if South Korea and the US privately contact each other and even involve them in the operation. That will be a thorn in the side of the Russian government and even Zhenya is no different from their natural enemy.

However, after knowing Salman's real identity, a question arose. Chief Lim has instructed to keep Anastasia's blueprints confidential if possible. The same request will be made to Salman. Then when the design falls into the hands of the two of them, who will own it? Korea sent Kwon Taek Joo? Or did the US make a deal with Salman?

"If we get Anastasia, what happens next?"

The next moment, Salman suddenly pulled out his gun. A black gun was aimed at Kwon Taek Joo.

"I have one more mission."

Kwon Taek Joo without falling, even his outstretched arms did not waver. Those were the eyes of a sniper. A story appeared in Kwon Taek Joo's mind when facing the cold face that seemed to want to pull the trigger before his eyes.

'Do you think you're hated over there anyway? Did the so-called National Intelligence Service send you my photo by mistake?... There's no such thing.'

At that time, Kwon Taek Joo did not pay too much attention to what he said. He couldn't even afford to consider that.

'It's like you knew about the corruption of your superiors that they couldn't reveal.'

That's just Zhenya's guess, but it's good to be able to confirm it on this occasion.

"Is that a directive from the US? Or Korea?"

"I cannot speak."

"Can't you even grant a dying man's wish?"

Kwon Taek Joo persuaded. Salman, who didn't seem to budge even when pricked by the needle, lowered the gun and smiled.

"It's over, why are you asking?"

"Since it's over, I asked."

"If you really want to know, it was a directive from Korea. The US side will operate independent funding, now that I think about it I'm quite curious, what the hell did you do back home? You did it. Why did you get sent all the way here and almost get killed?"

"That's it. I also want to know."

"If you really want to know, it was a directive from Korea. The US side will operate independent funding, now that I think about it I'm quite curious, what the hell did you do back home? You did it. Why did you get sent all the way here and almost get killed?"

"That's it. I also want to know."

Salman threw a puzzled look. Actually, even Kwon Taek Joo doesn't understand why he became the subject of elimination. He thought about returning to Korea and asking questions.

But there is something more important right now. Kwon Taek Joo remembered why he came to meet Salman. He still hasn't organized his thoughts so his story has no beginning or end.

"Zhenya.. No, that Psych guy shot and killed a politician at a party at his house. I thought he would be wanted immediately but in the end nothing happened. If he was officially invited to come Isn't the Bogdanov estate quite an influential person? How is this possible?"

"If it was that news, I would have heard it too. It's hard to believe, but they are Bogdanov."

"So he leaked state secrets knowing clearly that I was a foreign spy? Is that also because 'they are Bogdanov'?"

"State secret? It depends on how serious it is."

"I heard Russia is developing a new ballistic missile. Like 'SS 29'? There was a serious error but a North Korean engineer recently came and solved the problem. I thought that's it." was 'Anastasia. That's why I chased him all the way to Olkhon Island."

Salman listened silently, looking puzzled. Even though he knew the opponent was an agent of another country, he still took the opponent to a party and even murdered an influential politician for seemingly revealing secrets related to the latest weapon. not enough. In addition, he did not hesitate to act against the country when he became Kwon Taek Joo's colleague.

But Salman also did not hear that Zhenya had been disciplined or reprimanded at all. Even if you are a member of the Bogdanov family, can you not be affected like that? Salman's face looked doubtful, Kwon Taek Joo brought up a possibility.

"There must be a reason why no one can touch him no matter what he does?"

"No matter what you do, you can't touch it?"

"Like, 'He has Anastasia."

Salman was surprised by the sudden inference and then quickly objected strongly as if it were absurd.

"No way. That's the type of weapon that Russia and North Korea have been working on for many years. There's no way they'd let a kid under 30 years old take over it."

Kwon Taek Joo shows the documents he brought to Salman, brief articles about various incidents and accidents.

"All of the deceased listed are people who participated in the development of 'Anastasia'. Coincidentally, they all died on the same

day, in an unavoidable accident or in a way that caused death cannot be determined."

"You mean this is all murder?"

"If everything Psych says is true, think about it. 'Anastasia', what would happen if development failed. Russia and North Korea were hoping that the news wouldn't be leaked. leaked out. A unique lethal weapon. Just the title alone, the unfinished 'Anastasia' has made the whole world worried. The fact that you and I face each other like this is proof. On the contrary, if 'Anastasia' cannot be completed, the consequences will not only be limited to its failure, but even Anastasia"'s inherent power will be damaged, even if it develops again later. difficult to be taken as seriously as before. Perhaps that's why they tried to cover up not only the results of the research but also the fact that they had started developing it again. To do that, they would have to calm down, oppress those who know the identity and development achievements of 'Anastasia'"

Salman's eyebrows drew closer together. Kwon Taek Joo looked at his suspicious eyes and nodded in conclusion.

"All of them were killed so that 'No one can reveal that Anastasia's development failed and no one can develop such a weapon again"

Salman sighed deeply.

"They had to deal with dozens of people in a short period of time without leaving any clues. Who was in charge of that?"

"If that's the case, of course it's the FSB..."

"They can't send anyone away because this is a special situation."

When Kwon Taek Joo mentioned it, only one person appeared in Salman's mind. He is the sole member of Alpha Unit 3, a special unit of the 'FSB' and the third son of the Bogdanov family, which provided a huge amount of money for the development of 'Anastasia'. There seemed to be no other person better suited for the final phase of research, the purge mission.

Perhaps the government intends to wipe out Zhenya and his family as soon as he returns after completing all his work. But they couldn't. The Bogdanov family has remained since then. No, their influence seems to be much stronger than before. That's the most confusing part. After all, why is the Kremlin holding such a time bomb?

Perhaps the reason is Zhenya. For example, if he didn't completely follow instructions to massacre all the developers and even get rid of the blueprints, or if the failed blueprints fell into Zhenya's hands and let's say he figured it out. the cause of the problem based on his extensive knowledge of weapons, then the answer appeared. It is said to be a powerful enough weapon to rebalance global hegemony. If it's in Zhenya's hands, even the Kremlin can't do anything to him. They had no choice but to turn a blind eye no matter what he did.

"But that's just my guess..."

Salman was about to object but Kwon Taek Joo offered something else. It was a local newspaper in Irkutsk published yesterday. Featured on the front page is a short article about a mysterious body found in Lake Baikal with a photo attached. The unidentified deceased is believed to be an Asian and was found with torn limbs. Because there was no evidence of using a blade to destroy the body, it was tentatively concluded that the body had been attacked by a ferocious animal.

Salman's face was bewildered after reading the article.

"What about this?"

"This is Hong Yeo Wook, a North Korean engineer called in to fix the 'SS-29' error. I saw him at the Bogdanov family's villa. And..."

"And?"

"Anastasia's developer list also includes his father."

"What do you mean?"

"Hong Yeo Wook came here not only to fix 'SS-29' but also to meet with Psych. Sergei will call the Bogdanov family and government officials once the equipment problem is fixed. Really.", and perhaps he recognized Psych from the moment he boarded the Trans-Siberian

train. They just pretended not to know each other. We finally met again at Sergei's villa on Olkhon Island, and I wondered if the situation would be reversed when he tries to avenge his deceased father? Looking back, it seems like Hong Yeo Wook often pays attention to Psych."

If Hong Yeo Wook had no other reason to attack Zhenya, then his death would prove the speculations from now on. Kwon Taek Joo's head, which was full of complicated thoughts, was clear.

Kwon Taek Joo confidently asked Salman, who was just reading the newspaper.

"Let's cooperate. Then I will help you receive the promised support money."

Kwon Taek Joo is full of confidence in his tone and expression. Is there anywhere Salman can trust? After a moment, he looked at Kwon Taek Joo and shook his head.

"I told you, right? The headquarters' support ends up being the hospital expenses."

"I don't need support from headquarters."

"What are you talking about? What will you do with a weak body and no support?"

"Don't worry. You can move better now, right? You don't need to worry about weapons either."

"That's not the only problem. What you're trying to do is a single action outside of the campaign. If you fail, that's the end, and if you're unlucky, you die. Do you think headquarters will reclaim your body?"

"Did you prepare for all that when you came here?"

"That's right. But the situation back then was much better than it is now. Why don't you stop and face reality? They already know who we are. If we were noticed, we would be followed immediately." immediately. Besides I don't even know where that damn 'Anastasia' is."

"Let's see. As for how to defeat the immortal Koshichei, that Psych guy already told me about it."

"What was that again?"

"I think I know where the blueprints are."

Kwon Taek Joo assured us that by opening the satellite image he had been wearing since now. It appears to be Bogdanov's mansion. Salman had seen it once before, so he was familiar with it. But what does this mean? Salman's expression became more confused.

Kwon Taek Joo pointed to different places in the photo and told an unexpected story.

"Psych said that there was an uninhabited castle in a vast land, and that there was no way to get there, either on horseback or on foot, and that I couldn't get there without being a fish or a flying beast. In that story, the vast land seems to mean the estate, and the uninhabited castle seems to mean the Bogdanov mansion. Psych has told a similar story before, that their villa has double and triple security and very tight surveillance, so I cannot enter without going through official visitation procedures."

On the night of the secret party held at Bogdanov's mansion, Zhenya said so.

'Isn't this a strange place? It's so crowded now, but normally there's no one.'

Kwon Taek Joo dismissed it at the time as a meaningless statement but he did not expect it to be such a great suggestion. Of course he's still not 100% sure. Kwon Taek Joo is just trying to connect each little piece as if putting a puzzle together.

"And there is a very tall old tree growing in the castle, they say that the age of the tree is equal to the age of

Koshichei

. Bogdanov's mansion was decorated with many trees in the garden, but only four birches were planted around corners. Since ancient times, the Slavs planted a young birch tree when a child was born, right?

Coincidentally, there were 4 children in the Bogdanov family and there was a villa to the south of the trees So, the 'big jewel box' placed on the

south side of the tree must mean the building itself. Each room that fills it is a 'little jewel box'.

Intersecting lines are drawn on the satellite image to divide the building into a set of small squares. Each square represents a room.

"Psych says there is a jewelry box that everyone is looking for, but it's neither too much nor too little compared to the other boxes. If there's a blueprint of 'Anastasia' somewhere in the mansion, I think it would be right there. He said that Koshichei's heart may or may not be in there. That means that even if the room is found, the blueprint may not be found right away, right? In the room, right? there's a special device or something like that."

"So, Psych told you where such a design was?"

Salman was skeptical. Kwon Taek Joo nodded in response. A sigh came from Salman.

"Hey, calm down. What was he thinking, revealing such information?"

"I don't know about that either, but he has never revealed false information. He's always been so complacent."

Kwon Taek Joo was not discouraged by the sincere advice. He made an attractive offer to Salman.

"I won't force you to work with me. If you're not interested or not interested, you can refuse, but I can't give you much time so decide quickly. If you really have the ability to design, I'll give it to you."

Salman remained silent. Dangerous and reckless. But he also doesn't want to give up right away. Salman cannot go home empty-handed after such a failure.

"Are you sure there are blueprints in that room?"

Salman did not give up his doubts until the end. Kwon Taek Joo shrugged.

"When I broke into Bogdanov's mansion, I saw one of the rooms. Everyone was at a party so all the lights in the room were on, all the curtains were drawn. But only the curtains were there." in that room it

was wide open. There was no furniture in the room, no one was there either. Of course it could just be a coincidence. So I searched for more pictures of the villa. Yes can be seen at a glance. All year round, day or night, that room is always lit. Whether the weather is nice or not, the curtains are always open. Recalling the memory of that room, it seems suspicious. At that time, I was a bit confused so I lurked in front of the room's window. My shadow fell on the floor and something sparkled, even though it was only fleeting. Maybe it was moonlight, but it was different from the light. moon. There's something in that room."

Kwon Taek Joo's conversation with Zhenya at that time also appeared clearly in his mind.

'Why are you hanging there?'

When he looked at Kwon Taek Joo climbing outside the 3rd floor, he said that clearly. He wondered if he would mind him wandering around in front of that room.

Kwon Taek Joo stared at Salman as if he had finished what he needed to say. Salman, who was nervous, suddenly stood up and took the gun.

"I'm really crazy too."

## Chapter 2.16 – Counterattack

"What's here?"

Salman looked disgruntled at the empty surroundings. From Irkutsk to Moscow, then from Moscow to the suburbs, they move nonstop to find the arsenal that Kwon Taek Joo promised. But when he got out of the car, all around was an unpaved road and not a single streetlight. Kwon Taek Joo walked forward without explanation.

A moment later, the two arrived in front of a dilapidated building. Salman watched blankly, laughed and said, "It's unbelievable."

"Not here, right?"

Kwon Taek Joo pulled up the shutter, shattering that modest hope. As soon as Salman entered, a cloud of dust rose, causing him to cough violently.

Leaving Salman coughing behind, Kwon Taek Joo held a lamp to shine on the floor. The light spread into a small groove. Just like Zhenya did. Kwon Taek Joo grabbed the notch and slowly lifted it back up. Another cloud of dust rose and then slowly subsided. Below it, a staircase appeared.

Kwon Taek Joo walked first down the dark stairs, Salman followed step by step in confusion, looking left and right. Perhaps because he moved carefully, the stairs seemed endless, it took a while before Salman's feet touched the flat floor. The surroundings were still pitch black.

Kwon Taek Joo was standing nearby, and suddenly left. Salman was about to rush after him when the lights inside turned on with a clicking sound. The vision opened quickly with an empty bookshelf appearing, but without a single book, only a dial phone.

"What is it? Did you come all this way just to show me this?"

Kwon Taek Joo passed by Salman who was standing dumbfounded in front of the phone. Once you pay attention to something, it is not easily

forgotten. The password Zhenya entered was the same. Of course, if he takes precautions against Kwon Taek Joo and comes back here to change the password, this place will become useless to him. But Kwon Taek Joo has a hunch that that won't happen.

3, 9, 1, 6.

Kwon Taek Joo took turns dialing the numbers. Finally, the wheel engages the number '5' and spins and stops moving. Just then, a familiar mechanical sound rang out. Salman was standing there in a depressed mood, fearfully pulling out his gun. Busy eyes are alert to the surroundings.

Empty bookshelves appeared one after another after that. Unlike the confused Salman, Kwon Taek Joo was very calm. No. his back stiffened  
"I underestimated this."

He muttered dissatisfied and then examined the high-tech weapons that appeared in front of him. Kwon Taek Joo randomly took a few rifles and pistols and threw them at Salman. He also gathered various explosives, including TNT into his bag.

Something was flashing, Kwon Taek Joo turned around. A surveillance camera is flashing a red light. Kwon Taek Joo immediately raised his middle finger and pulled the trigger towards the reflective lens.

"There are two approaches worth trying. One is to go against the drainage pipe in the mansion that connects to the river, or infiltrate from above."

The only chance of survival is the first. If they tried to infiltrate from above, they would end up like a honeycomb before even setting foot in the mansion.

The sewers of the Bogdanov mansion are connected to the river that flows through the center of Moscow. The water was quite deep so both had to wear diving suits. As the crow flies, it seems like there's nothing to worry about. However, Salman has other worries.

"Even if we get close to the mansion, from then on it will be very difficult. We will have to turn the fan to swirl the flow at the manhole. If

we are lucky enough to get out of there, the passage inside may be wide enough to carry diving equipment."

The two of them looked down at the meandering river at the same time. The water flowed so fast it seemed like it could swallow them up at any moment.

"..Surely there is another way?"

Kwon Taek Joo asked boredly. Salman coldly shook his head. He sighed deeply, put on his diving suit, and without anyone telling anyone, they jumped into the river.

The heavy body sank deeply and then emerged again. Kwon Taek Joo followed Salman before he could catch his breath. He nodded and led the way to the river. Kwon Taek Joo swam while checking the device on his wrist. The red dot indicates the current location of the two, gradually approaching the sewer pipe of the Bogdanov mansion. The closer you get to the target point, the more intense the water flow becomes. That means there is a device nearby that is doubling the flow rate. That is the propeller that Salman mentioned.

The reality that Kwon Taek Joo faced right before his eyes was truly colossal. The two propellers rotate in front and rear respectively. Just looking at it made me feel tired, but Kwon Taek Joo kept calm to measure the rotation speed. If the timing is right, they can get through it safely. If they were wrong in a split second, they would be crushed beyond belief and there would be no guarantee of life or death.

This time Kwon Taek Joo went first. He kept enough distance to avoid being sucked into the propeller and closely observed its movements. The two of them had to make good use of this short moment. He adjusted his rapid breathing and stepped closer to the fan blades.

The powerful rotation force causes the surrounding water to quickly spin. Kwon Taek Joo tried to hold on and pulled out the underwater gun. The plan was to stop the propellers from operating at least temporarily, by inserting a high-strength iron harpoon between the interlocking blades.

Kwon Taek Joo quietly aimed the gun. He focused all his attention on one point, the propeller seemed to slow down for a moment. Kwon Taek Joo did not hesitate to pull the trigger. The harpoon bounced out of the gun barrel and quickly rushed through the water, crashing between the propeller blades. The force of the swirling water was intense for a while and then the rotation of the propeller slowed down little by little. Then it completely stopped.

Was it successful?

"..."

As if punishing that hasty judgment, the propeller started to rotate again. The rope connected to the harpoon quickly coiled and pulled Kwon Taek Joo's body away. He quickly let go of the gun but to no avail, his body was swept away by an uncontrollable force and sucked into a giant propeller. Iron wings swirled a large amount of water appearing right before Kwon Taek Joo's eyes. He unconsciously closed his eyes. At the last moment of intuition, the rumbling sound of friction rang out and at the same time a heavy pain rushed through my whole body.

Kwon Taek Joo opened his eyes, a strange scene appeared. His body thought it would be cut by the propeller, but it was floating somewhere. The surrounding rushing water also became quiet. The propeller kept making mechanical noises like a whale's roar but was no longer working properly. Kwon Taek Joo gasped and turned his head to see that his oxygen tank was stuck between the two propeller blades.

Kwon Taek Joo felt like 10 years of his life had just quickly passed, the tense and contracted cells immediately relaxed. But there was no time to relieve himself, so he quickly took out the oxygen tank he was carrying and signaled Salman on the other side to come. Salman immediately turned against the current and swam towards Kwon Taek Joo.

Just as Salman arrived on the other side of Kwon Taek Joo, the propeller suddenly roared and began to crush the trapped oxygen tank. Salman falls into a dangerous situation.

Kwon Taek Joo quickly pressed the button on the watch on his wrist. A long rope came out and wrapped around Salman's arm. Just before the propeller touched his body, Kwon Taek Joo wrapped the rope. Salman narrowly escaped the propeller, so tense that his arms and legs seemed to lose all strength.

Salman, who almost died, gave his oxygen mask back to Kwon Taek Joo. He took a full breath of oxygen and swam again.

The two finally reached the sewer entrance, which was their destination. The pipes are divided into several sections: kitchen, bathroom, garage and garden. On the day he came here for the party, when escaping from the mansion with Zhenya's help, Kwon Taek Joo discovered that there was a secret passage inside. If you can find the starting point, the path to the destination will no longer be a problem.

First of all, in terms of circulation, the two of them turned to the drainage pipe on the garage side. Immediately after that, a long and wide corridor appeared overhead, the end of which had to be connected to the manhole outside the garage. Salman took off his heavy diving suit and took out the equipment he had prepared.

After silently signaling, Kwon Taek Joo alone climbed up the simple ladder mounted on the wall. He tried pushing the manhole cover on his head but it was firmly fixed and wouldn't budge. Kwon Taek Joo took out a card and inserted it into the slot of the lid. The card quickly swelled and lifted the heavy lid. Through the gap, Kwon Taek Joo could see the bodyguards going in and out of the garden.

Kwon Taek Joo was only 2-3 meters away from the parking garage. If you're lucky, you might not get caught, but you have to be very careful, you need to avoid the eyes of the bodyguards for a moment.

There was something rolling on the grass in the garden. Round objects like beads simultaneously rolled to the feet of the guards. The bodyguard unsuspectingly looked down at something that had just touched his shoe. Immediately, a strong, blinding light emitted from the beads. The guards simultaneously covered their eyes. When they opened their eyes again, their vision turned white and they couldn't see anything in front of them.

Kwon Taek Joo took the opportunity to flip the curved lid and get out. In an instant, he ran to the front of the garage and leaned close to the wall and pressed the open/close button outside, the garage shutters opened smoothly.

"Ah!"

But inside the garage there are also bodyguards. The sudden intrusion surprised him. Kwon Taek Joo quickly kicked the confused bodyguard's rifle. The long barrel of the gun just hit him straight in the face. Kwon Taek Joo grabbed his nose and gave him another blow on the back of his head. The bodyguard quickly collapsed without even groaning. He grabbed his intercom and went inside.

Perhaps because it was a weekday afternoon, the inside of the mansion was unusually quiet. Although the occasional sound of plates clinking could be heard from the kitchen, there was little sign of other people. Thanks to that, Kwon Taek Joo was able to climb the stairs easily.

As soon as he reached the third floor, Kwon Taek Joo leaned his back against the wall in the hallway and placed a microscopic device on the floor. The object, which imitates the appearance of a bug, is a spy device that uses a built-in camera to transmit panoramic images of the area to a connected account. Salman checked the video under the manhole and suddenly warned Kwon Taek Joo.

"Wait a minute."

Kwon Taek Joo stood closer to the wall. He even stopped breathing and noticed a presence from the other side of the hallway. A moment later, there was a sign that a door was opening and closing. There was the sound of human footsteps. There were at least two of them, all female. The women chatting in the hallway quickly split into different directions.

"Right now."

Kwon Taek Joo followed Salman's instructions and quickly moved. He avoided the cleaning supplies lining the hallway and went inside the nearby door to find the secret passage.

A hollow sound echoed from under the sofa but there was no way in the room that was connected to the hallway, only the main door was not locked but it seemed to be designed for exit.

"Hurry up. Help is coming."

Kwon Taek Joo's heart beat rapidly and Salman's urging was added. There's no other way. Kwon Taek Joo knelt on the floor and sat down. He cut the floor using a special device equipped with a silencer and then slowly lifted up the neatly cut piece of floor. Sure enough, a secret passage appeared. He jumped in and covered the floor again. The cutout is inserted into the floor perfectly, hiding the cutout.

Kwon Taek Joo quickly strode across the aisle. A moment later the bodyguards' intercom began to buzz. They seemed to be aware of the intruder's presence. Kwon Taek Joo hurriedly walked and ran forward.

A dead end appeared. He groped every inch of the dark walls. Busy hands caught on a hook. Kwon Taek Joo pulled hard, the wall on the blocked side slowly lowered. A staircase appeared.

Kwon Taek Joo walked up the stairs, a handle that looked like a bank safe was waiting for him. Kwon Taek Joo grabbed the handle and turned it with all his strength. A metal plate that seemed to be unable to move slowly rolled up and divided the wall in front of Kwon Taek Joo into two sides. The bookshelves that filled the wall were opened and an emergency door appeared through the gap.

The room at the end of the third floor that Kwon Taek Joo entered was still the same as the first time he saw it. The curtains were still open and all the lights were on even though it was midday. Something is quite strange.

Kwon Taek Joo walked over and closed the door, then he pulled all the window curtains. Kwon Taek Joo then tried to turn off the lights inside, but he couldn't find the switch anywhere. Meanwhile, the bodyguards were rushing into the hallway. Kwon Taek Joo has no other choice. He pulled out his pistol and shot at the light bulb. The next moment, an unbelievable scene unfolded before his eyes.

"This.."

When all the light was covered, an existence that tried to hide was exposed. Kwon Taek Joo suddenly gasped. He felt like he finally understood why the lights were always on in this room and why the curtains were never closed. Even the reason why the heart of the immortal 'Koshchei' may or may not be in the jewelry box.

Inside the room, a long line made of fluorescent material continued, forming a single shape. The room itself is Anastasia's design.

## Chapter 2.17 – Counterattack

In the corner of the 2nd floor of the FSB headquarters, there is a sign saying 'Alpha 3 unit command headquarters'. In fact, it's no different from Zhenya's own office. Facilities are limited to a desk and sofa for receiving guests. Even so, the owner of the room rarely used it so no signs of wear could be found.

Zhenya was sitting in a chair staring out the window. A boring surrounding landscape appears. Occasionally there are people passing by and cars moving around. In the hallway outside the door, there were sounds of people walking and talking every now and then. close and then quickly subsided. He was not in a comfortable enough state to listen to the noises around him. The phone on the table has been ringing for a long time. But as if he hadn't heard that sound, Zhenya moved his chair from side to side in complete relaxation.

It was still a day no different from any other day, but for some reason his mood was more boring and boring. Zhenya didn't feel that way for a while.

"That's fine."

Suddenly he thought about something and muttered with satisfaction. Looks like there's someone outside the door. The presence is so gentle that it can only be detected by the criminal's intuition. Even so, Zhenya still noticed that someone was hesitating whether or not to knock on the door. But that was it, he didn't react any further. Zhenya waited to see how the opponent outside the door would act.

It wasn't until a while later that there was a knock on the door. Hearing no movement from inside, he knocked on the door again. This time Zhenya also did not speak. The guest hesitantly said "I'll come in" with a voice as loud as an ant and opened the door after a while. At that moment, Zhenya turned around.

The person who entered the office was a low-level employee with a package of letters. When their eyes met, he was startled. The way he reluctantly walked to the sofa looked like a cow being led to the slaughterhouse, it seemed like he was planning to hand over the mail in his hand and quickly run away.

Zhenya silently looked at the man. He placed the stack of letters on the edge of the table like he was giving food to a beast. It's as slow as watching slow motion.

"Then I'll ask your permission to go out."

He hesitated, waiting for the opportunity to run away immediately after announcing his intention to leave. Immediately, Zhenya stood up from his seat. The man was suddenly startled, but then he stiffened and did not move.

Psych Bogdanov, whom he had only just heard about, was here. The seniors' advice that it was best not to appear before his eyes flashed through the poor employee's mind. His characteristic heavy body odor emanated from such a close distance.

The man's throat burned, his stomach churned.

"Is there a tiger here? Why are you so tense?"

"No. I'm not tense."

"Is that so? Then let's dance."

The employee was bewildered by the unexpected request. As if to say he hadn't heard wrong, Zhenya told him to jump again. The man's face turned pale in shock. He cannot resist. Following orders from superiors is the principle. If Zhenya doesn't do what he wants immediately. Will he bite his neck?

Just walking through the hallway was enough to suffocate, now alone in a cramped space, the hair on his body kept standing up. The man regretted his actions as he entered and closed the door. Not caring about those complicated thoughts, Zhenya urged again "Huh?" The employee looked up at him frantically, his eyes as if begging for his life.

Zhenya grinned and sat down at the table with his arms crossed. Let's see. He stared at the employee with clear eyes. The man swallowed his saliva and closed his eyes tightly, hypnotizing himself as if he had been bitten by a mad dog. He could not end his life in vain just because he did not please Psych Bogdanov. Just do enough and you'll be fine.

The man made up his mind and shook his body desperately. The tension made his limbs stiff, no movement matched the other. If you keep calling this dancing, it's really embarrassing. It was just a fierce struggle for survival.

Zhenya looked absentmindedly and told him to stop.

"It's not fun. How about taking it all off and dancing? Climb up on the table."

Faced with that ironic request, the man looked like he was about to cry. In an instant, he compared the time it took to run at full speed to the door and the time it took Zhenya to grab and twist his neck. If the employee is lucky enough to escape, the consequences are unpredictable. The man imagines everything in the most positive way possible and is soon disillusioned. Everything is hopeless no matter what measure. He gave up all hope and gently took off his clothes. Zhenya looked at the naked man without any interest.

This is a man's body. All men are like that. His arms and shoulders looked quite sturdy, but his stomach was full of fat, probably from drinking too much. The thighs are quite big but not all muscular. The skin was so pale and red that he could feel the roughness even without touching it. No matter how you look at it, it doesn't look pretty. But how did he come to desire a man's body?

Zhenya was deep in thought when the employee walked up to the table. The penis shrinks from tension. His balls were red and wrinkled and his butt was as saggy as a lump of protein.

Then suddenly, the man's head landed on the sofa. That's because Zhenya suddenly grabbed him by the back of his neck and pinned him down. A large body pressed against the back of the man who didn't know what happened to him. Zhenya grabbed the frightened

employee's arm and inhaled the body odor. There is no stimulation at all. His brain felt like it was becoming limp and his lower body also lost feeling. Or is it because the other person looks like a corpse?

"Hey, aren't you protesting?"

Zhenya annoyed reprimanded the employee. The man was just trembling as if he was waiting for this moment to pass safely.

"Go away."

Zhenya nodded at the employee. He suddenly woke up, quickly grabbed his clothes and ran away. The door slammed shut with a loud bang. The pile of letters piled up on the table fell down at the same time. Normally Zhenya would ignore them, but for some reason today he picked them up. It was the height of boredom.

Zhenya opened each letter that arrived. Usually it's a damage claim invoice, a fine, a lawsuit, a statement of expenses too much to tell.

He nonchalantly glanced through the pile of letters and then suddenly stopped, because there was an envelope with nothing written on it.

Zhenya thought for a moment then opened the envelope and examined the contents. A piece of paper appeared. A single message was written on it.

[Tick tock. Tick tock. Boom!]

He recognized this text. The sound of the hour hand suddenly seemed longer. Tick tock. Tick tock. And soon there was a loud bang, quite far away. Before Zhenya could understand what was going on, his cell phone and land phone rang at the same time. An unpleasant feeling crept up the back of his neck, but it was also a strange expectation.

Zhenya immediately picked up the phone, Vladimir's urgent message came from the other side of the call. He listened silently and then turned off the phone.

So cute, so he would appear like that.

His stiff mouth drew a long arc, a large amount of adrenaline surging, making his head spin. Zhenya threw away the phone and immediately

left the office. The blue eyes were filled with unusual joy and shone brightly.

The whole city was blocked off because a mysterious explosion had occurred in the Bogdanov mansion, only fire trucks lined up to pass through the controlled road.

The explosion occurred in two places. One place is in the manhole near the garage and one place is on the third floor of the villa. Damage was limited to a room blown away without a trace and several security personnel injured. Based on claims that there was an intruder at the villa, police sealed off surrounding roads and launched an extensive search. Reporters and curious people flocked to see the terrorist attack that occurred in the center of Moscow, especially in the mansion of the most famous family. Soon the whole area became crowded with people.

The explosives disposal team brought in first came out and firefighters entered the scene. Because the area of the mansion is very large, it is necessary to thoroughly inspect it to ensure there are no remnants of the fire. Firefighters disperse in an orderly manner to assigned areas.

Firefighter Dmitry also rushed through the nearby door following the captain's hand signal. The room was largely unaffected by the explosion, but he still carefully observed the corners of the walls inside.

At that moment, Dmitri's eyes turned to the window full of cracks. Suddenly the floor he was standing on stood up.

"Ah!"

His body suspended in the air fell with a thud, a single scream trapped in the mask unable to escape. Dmitry groaned in pain and quickly felt dizzy from the back of his head and fainted.

A moment later. Kwon Taek Joo, not Dmitri, walked out of the room. He took advantage of the chaos and quietly left the building. Thanks to his firefighter uniform, no one suspected him.

Just as two fire trucks entered the garden, Kwon Taek Joo climbed into a passenger seat.

"Dmitry? Why are you free here? Why Aren't you working?"

Dmitri's superior, sitting in the driver's seat, suddenly asked and looked suspicious at the strange appearance reflected outside the protective suit. Kwon Taek Joo immediately threw a punch and hit a vital point. The firefighter couldn't even stand up straight and fell off the steering wheel.

Kwon Taek Joo changed seats to the driver's seat. Having to leave here as quickly as possible, he immediately started the engine and turned around. A nearby police officer approached with a suspicious look on his face.

"Where are you going?"

"We're having trouble with the fire hydrant. I'll quickly replace it and come back."

Kwon Taek Joo cleverly made excuses. The policeman checked the extent of the fire then turned around and nodded coldly. Kwon Taek Joo drove onto the street and smoothly escaped the scene. He turned onto an avenue.

A police official controlling the road stopped the fire truck. He looked around the car and suddenly asked a difficult question.

"What is your name and employer?"

Kwon Taek Joo doesn't know. He hesitated, the police officer looked at him suspiciously and then suddenly exchanged something over the radio. The officer's attention gradually turned to Kwon Taek Joo and soon, he pulled out his gun and closed the distance. It seems like it's only a matter of time before Kwon Taek Joo's identity is revealed. There was no other way, he could only continue.

Kwon Taek Joo made a decision and stepped on the gas. The wheel's sudden acceleration made a noise that seemed to tear apart space. The police officers who were slowly approaching also suddenly stopped the car in front. But when a heavy barricade was rapidly approaching, police cars had no choice but to open the way. The fire truck rushed away like an angry bull. Unstoppable bullets were fired from behind.

A barrage of bullets shattered the rearview mirror and even shattered the car's windows. Kwon Taek Joo pressed his chest against the steering wheel and continued to accelerate. The giant fire truck sped away with momentum, pushing back everything on the road.

Kwon Taek Joo thought of going to the embassy. It wasn't a smart move, nor did Kwon Taek Joo expect them to protect him there. But that's a way to buy time. Even the Russian Investigative Service cannot enter a foreign embassy without permission because it could escalate into a diplomatic matter. He just needed to hide there for a while and find a way to return home.

Dozens of police cars suddenly followed. Sirens were blaring and chasing like a swarm of bees from the side and from behind.

Kwon Taek Joo continued to speed up. Not long after, a sharp turn appeared in front of him. He should have stepped on the brake, but Kwon Taek Joo just quickly turned the steering wheel. The car's body could not stop at the speed it was going and began to slide down the road. He held the steering wheel tightly as it was about to rotate on its own due to too great inertia. The car's body screamed and ran zigzag, hitting the railing but still not veering off the road. However, the police cars following closely next to them were caught up in the heavy vehicle body and fell into the river because they could not withstand the centrifugal force.

Even though they had overcome such a difficult period, there was no time for relief. A convoy of police cars immediately appeared on the other side. They did not hesitate to run back at a fierce speed. If this continues, Kwon Taek Joo will be surrounded in the blink of an eye.

He nervously turned the steering wheel and went into a side alley. The road was so narrow that fire trucks got stuck between buildings. Violent sparks emitted from the car's body, continuously colliding with the outside wall, and the car's body also kept rattling. The more they collided, the harder Kwon Taek Joo stepped on the gas pedal. Fire trucks rattled through the narrow road.

Shots were fired from police cars. A stream of water gushed out from the punctured water tank. Roads in all directions soon became flooded

with water.

Kwon Taek Joo suddenly went out onto the main road, the police car also blindly followed. He kept running for a while and then stepped on the brake. The police car also quickly stopped when the fire truck stopped suddenly. A film of water formed on the paved road due to water sprayed from the punctured tank, so even when the brakes were applied, the police cars still drifted helplessly away. Cars running from behind crashed into the back of another car and flew into the air.

Kwon Taek Joo looked at the cars crashing into each other and then stepped on the accelerator to start.

Not long after, he heard the familiar sound of propeller blades. It seems helicopters have been mobilized. The helicopter hovered in the air and warned that if they did not surrender, they would open fire. Dead either way, Kwon Taek Joo ignored the warning and ran across the bridge. Now go a little further and you will see the Korean Embassy.

The last helicopter opened fire. Kwon Taek Joo quickly turned the steering wheel. The merciless rain of bullets tore through the passenger seat and water tank. Black smoke rose from the engine. Kwon Taek Joo focused on controlling the wobbly body of the car without having time to care about the blood flowing from his arm. The car's body lost direction and spun around. Kwon Taek Joo saw the embassy in sight.

Just a little more, just a little more.

Kwon Taek Joo gritted his teeth and stepped on the accelerator. The engine roared one last time.

"Damned!"

The embassy was right before his eyes. The siren from behind was also closer. The helicopter continued to fly overhead like an eagle waiting for its prey to stop breathing. Kwon Taek Joo has no other choice.

He closed his eyes again as he turned the wheel again, his foot never leaving the gas pedal. The fire truck drove straight into the front door of the embassy and crashed into it. A loud noise like an explosion rang out,

the low walls and guard posts were swept away. The shock was as intense as if Kwon Taek Joo had thrown himself into a storm.

Thick dust flew up, but the surrounding was as quiet as a sheet of paper. The sound of police sirens and helicopter blades were still there, but otherwise there was no sound at all

"..Ugh."

Kwon Taek Joo barely left the wheel. The area around his collarbone was stiff. He took a slow, deep breath and looked around. The fire truck driven by Kwon Taek Joo crashed into the main gate of the embassy and got stuck on the outside wall. He saw police pouring out of the car in the rearview mirror, but they couldn't set foot inside the embassy.

Kwon Taek Joo used a pistol to hit the windshield, which cracked like a spider web. The pieces of glass stick together and break easily. He gently swept away the damage and crawled forward.

Inside the embassy, it was unusually quiet. It's a weekday and it's not even time to get off work yet, but Kwon Taek Joo doesn't see a soul. Which direction should you turn? Kwon Taek Joo stood for a while in the hallway and then went to the ambassador's office. Red blood dripped into drops with every step, Kwon Taek Joo's ankle was cold, causing him to limp.

A while later Kwon Taek Joo also arrived at the ambassador's office. During the entire journey, he didn't even see a shadow, let alone a person. Kwon Taek Joo reluctantly knocked on the door. There was no response from inside. He carefully lowered the door handle. The door is not locked.

There are four tables placed inside, divided into two sides. Looking at the layout, it seems like this is a secretary's office, but there's no one there. There was still half of the coffee left in the cup and the screen was still on, indicating that someone had been here a while ago.

Kwon Taek Joo took another step inside. There are two other doors, probably the ambassador's office. He was about to knock on the door, but as soon as he touched it, the door opened by itself. Looks like it wasn't sealed in the first place.

In front of Kwon Taek Joo is a large desk often used for political purposes. A high-backed chair is facing the window. There is someone sitting there. Kwon Taek Joo happily took another step.

At that moment, a suppressed groan rang out from somewhere, as if someone was gagged and calling for help. It's obviously Korean. Kwon Taek Joo turned his head to follow the noise and saw a locked cabinet. Not sure if it was an illusion or not, there was a series of thudding sounds coming from inside. The locked cabinet door also shook. Kwon Taek Joo's head was stunned by the strange scene, his instincts sent a danger warning signal.

But his legs couldn't move and felt like they were glued to the floor. His whole body stiffened. An unfortunate premonition ran down Kwon Taek Joo's spine. The senses of the whole body are directed towards the chair in front of you.

The chair slowly turned around as if fulfilling that expectation. The breath that was about to escape was choked, the floor under Kwon Taek Joo's feet seemed to collapse.

The person sitting in the chair is not an ambassador. It's Zhenya. An evil smile appeared on his lips as he faced Kwon Taek Joo.

## Chapter 3.1 - Contrabass Solo (18+)

Translator's Note: This chapter has violence and r@pe..

"Is this your cave?"

Zhenya was still filled with relaxation and slowly looked around the office. That calmness surpasses Kwon Taek Joo. His fingertips were shaking, the blood flowing in his body was also boiling.

"You should have dug a little deeper. Deep enough that I couldn't reach it."

Zhenya whispered then lifted himself up. Kwon Taek Joo's stiff body suddenly shrank. His eyes opened wide without blinking for a second. The instinctive siren of danger rang loudly in my ears.

Zhenya is also in no hurry. He coldly laughed at Kwon Taek Joo and then gradually approached.

It's not too late to run away now. If Kwon Taek Joo ran away at full speed. he would have had a chance. Of course there are still a lot of police outside the fence but it might be better to be caught by them.

Zhenya took another step forward. Perhaps fear makes Kwon Taek Joo's hearing more sensitive, so his presence is especially clearer. His heart seemed to have stopped beating for a moment and was now beating wildly again. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't keep calm.

That was the moment when Zhenya was about to take another step. Gunfire suddenly rang out. Smoke rose from the tip of Kwon Taek Joo's gun. There's no way the threat to shoot him if he moves is going to work. If Kwon Taek Joo didn't kill him, he would die today.

But the bullet aimed at Zhenya went straight into the wall. He turned his head to avoid the bullet and smiled slightly. Kwon Taek Joo tightly grasped the trembling gun and gave a useless warning.

"Do not come near."

Zhenya took another step as if to tease him, his face glossy and mocking. Kwon Taek Joo took the phone out of his pocket and held it up in front of him.

"If I go one step further, I will send this photo."

Zhenya's gaze shifted to the phone screen. There is an image inside a rather familiar room. It appears to be a photo taken before Anastasia was blown up.

It's a photo with only half of the design, the rest belongs to Salman. Kwon Taek Joo decided to send the part he was keeping as soon as he got on the plane to Korea. For Kwon Taek Joo, it was the price of his life. He didn't know that he would have to use it here, like this.

Are threats effective? Zhenya did not approach any further but just blankly looked at the worried Kwon Taek Joo. Then, as if it were a very funny story, he curled his mouth and spoke.

"How do you prove that it's 'Anastasia's blueprint?"

Kwon Taek Joo frowned at the unexpected question. The photo itself is the design of 'Anastasia', so what more proof is needed?

"Who knew that the room you blew up was Anastasia's blueprint? At most, me and my family members knew. Do you think they would be willing to admit that 'Anastasia was stolen? Those bastards aren't that naive. Of course your runaway partner could make a fuss about getting 'Anastasia'. The problem is that no one would believe it. Aren't they a group of traitors? Is this movement threatening the peace of Russia? This will be considered a plot to weaken my power. Then there is only one person left who can reveal the secret... There is also no need to worry because that person won't be able to walk out of here on his own."

Sparkling blue eyes. The hand holding the Colt had more strength.

"If the blueprints leaking and exploding weren't an important issue, you wouldn't have come running here like this. The fact that no one knows where the blueprints are means no one can confirm that it exists or not? The whole world was scared just because of the rumor that this

country was holding Anastasia but what would happen if a rumor spread that the blueprint had disappeared? No one would believe you.. There will probably be doubters, but the words are scary. If you persist in creating something that doesn't exist and reinforcing that fiction, one day it will come true, just like Princess Anastasia there."

That could be the case, but are you monitoring the situation? Thank you for worrying about me, but why don't you think about your situation first? Even if I die. I won't die alone."

Kwon Taek Joo moved his finger to the bullet, his black eyes glowing with fighting spirit. All senses are sensitive to Zhenya's every move. He completely forgot to inhale and exhale.

Zhenya burst out laughing again but the feeling was completely different from a moment ago. He snapped his long fingers. Kwon Taek Joo didn't answer and pulled his feet back. The two pairs of eyes stared at each other, the tension seemed about to break.

Suddenly Zhenya's finger stopped. His originally smiling face suddenly turned cold. a large vein appeared on his forehead.

The next moment, Zhenya strode forward ignoring Kwon Taek Joo's warning. The distance between the two quickly decreased even as he retreated in despair. Kwon Taek Joo stepped back and hit his back against the wall, his finger accidentally pulled the trigger. Zhenya stopped and looked at the confused Kwon Taek Joo.

The surrounding noise suddenly completely disappeared. A dark silence prevailed. The life-sustaining thread has also disappeared in vain. The corner of Zhenya's mouth pulled up.

Then he immediately rushed forward, just strides but the feeling was no different than a tiger about to attack. If Kwon Taek Joo stood still, his neck would probably be bitten off by him. He did not hesitate to pull the trigger, but Zhenya easily avoided the flying bullets no matter how many times he fired.

"I don't know how many more shots you can shoot, but you better finish it quickly."

Kwon Taek Joo fired again before Zhenya could give his arrogant advice, but the bullet didn't even graze the monster's hair or collar. Kwon Taek Joo's injured arm made it difficult for him to aim accurately. The distance between him and Zhenya rapidly decreased again. He finally filled Kwon Taek Joo's field of vision.

He gritted his teeth and pulled the trigger again, but before the bullet could be fired, the gun barrel was kicked away. Just like that, the Colt fell from Kwon Taek Joo's hand and flew into the air.

While Kwon Taek Joo was still trying to figure out what was going on, Zhenya's shadow covered him, his hand grabbed his neck and squeezed him tightly. A distinctive body odor wafted into Kwon Taek Joo's nose, making him suffocate even more.

"Should I ask for damages now?"

Blue eyes filled with anticipation. Kwon Taek Joo was thrown into a nearby cabinet before he could regain his composure. The pile of files stacked on top of the cabinet also fell down.

"Ugh."

His back hit the cabinet handle as if it was about to split in two. His head was also pounding. The shock was so sudden that Kwon Taek Joo didn't have a second to stand up on his painfully sprained legs. He tried to lean his back against the cabinet and try to stand up straight, but Zhenya was right in front of him before he realized it. He used his shoe to stomp on Kwon Taek Joo's right shoulder.

He was pushed back into the closet. As if a large spear was stabbed into his shoulder, Kwon Taek Joo tried to push Zhenya's leg to escape but it only increased the pressure on his shoulder. His shoulder bone felt like it was about to break, Kwon Taek Joo gritted his teeth.

"What's wrong? Are you already about to die? Haven't you prepared for this outcome?"

"..Ugh, this is the result of your arrogance."

"And also the result of your petty pride."

Zhenya shrugged and mumbled. Kwon Taek Joo grimaced in pain. His joints ached, his forehead was also drenched in sweat, and the grinding sound continuously came from his teeth clenched together.

Just before Kwon Taek Joo felt like his shoulder would break. The cruel shoe came off. But the relief didn't last long as he stepped on between his legs. The toe of the shoe is reminiscent of a crocodile's snout, squeezing Kwon Taek Joo's crotch tightly. His upper body tilted strongly forward.

"Ahh.."

"I thought you wouldn't do such a lovely thing, but it turns out I was wrong."

With every word he uttered, the pressure from the shoe increased and Kwon Taek Joo's body also collapsed. He quickly grabbed Zhenya's shoe with both hands but to no avail. His genitals were about to be crushed out of shape, his nerves stretched with intense pain. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't even breathe

Zhenya slowly stepped on Kwon Taek Joo's groin. He knew that if he still wanted to live, if he still wanted to keep his life, he should not provoke him, but Kwon Taek Joo could not bear it any longer.

He used his fist to hit Zhenya's shin hard. The blow must have caused considerable pain, but he did not move. His face was completely expressionless.

Right after that, Kwon Taek Joo's face turned away with intense shock. The fishy smell of blood mixed with exhaled breath. His whole body lost all strength, even the will to fight against violence was broken.

After a moment of lifting the shoe, it fell onto Kwon Taek Joo's lower abdomen, his shirt flap was lifted up by the sharp tip of the shoe. Zhenya's eyes stared at his curled toes then he moved his foot a little higher. The deeper the shoes go, the more the shirt swells.

"Spying, breaking into people's houses, assault, terrorism, theft, impersonating public officials, destroying public property.. You've really caused a lot of trouble"

As if looking closely at Kwon Taek Joo's every action, Zhenya listed each crime. His eyes slowly looked down. Just like that. The first button flew out of his shirt, revealing his flat lower abdomen.

Zhenya moved his feet without stopping. The toe of the shoe goes over the abs and then reaches the ribs. The shirt was ripped again.

"That's fine anyway. But you should have heeded my warning. I've already explained it to you, haven't I? Just don't touch my things. Is it that difficult?"

Another button popped out and hit Kwon Taek Joo on the chin. He angrily rolled his eyes and stared at Zhenya. But right after that, Kwon Taek Joo bowed his head and groaned, because Zhenya's shoe was stepping on his chest. His lungs were compressed so he couldn't breathe.

Two other buttons popped out one after another as the shoe slowly moved forward. If he continued to step down, Kwon Taek Joo's ribs would definitely break and pierce his lungs. If you're unlucky, the bones can get stuck in your heart. Life and death are facing each other.

Kwon Taek Joo held his breath and lay still as if waiting for a full stomached tiger to give up interest and obediently retreat. Zhenya's eyes looked down at him extremely calmly. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't read any of his emotions.

The shoe threatens the final knot. The button tightened and trembled, Kwon Taek Joo's eyelashes also shook slightly. Zhenya's pupils immediately tightened.

"If you damage someone else's things, you have to pay a corresponding price, right? I'm not losing business."

The last button fell out, causing the shirt to open completely. The sharp toe of the shoe touches Kwon Taek Joo's chin. His chin was lifted, his eyes froze. Zhenya looked into the dark eyes that trembled in uneasiness, and he clicked his tongue in pity.

"From now on you have to learn to think hard about how to keep your little life."

Kwon Taek Joo was pushed through the table and fell down. All office supplies fell to the ground. His right cheek and bare chest along with his stomach hit the cold tabletop. Before he could get used to the shock, his lower body was empty and his pants flew off. Kwon Taek Joo struggled reflexively, but Zhenya's weight quickly overwhelmed him. Then, a burning and heavy pain cut through his lower body.

"Ahh!"

Kwon Taek Joo screamed like he was about to cry. A mass of hot flesh without hesitation plunged its head between his legs. The hole, which was hardening with tension, was forced to open and take in the ferocious giant.

Kwon Taek Joo angrily raised

his head and then pushes it down again. His lungs were pressed down so much that he couldn't even take a single breath. The two buttocks that were pushed hard trembled as if they were convulsing. Despite that stiff resistance, the meat column continued to devour the hole. Zhenya's firm thighs finally touched Kwon Taek Joo's buttocks.

"Ugh, ha."

His jaw clenched, his fingertips continuously scratched the table, Kwon Taek Joo's stomach was full.

The lower part was completely expanded, almost sucking the penis. If it was rubbed mercilessly like this again, the unhealed wound would tear again.

Zhenya's chin rested on Kwon Taek Joo's stiff shoulders. The temperature on his skin suddenly dropped, giving Kwon Taek Joo goosebumps. Zhenya's long fingers lifted Kwon Taek Joo's chin, his jaw trembling even though he tried to clench his teeth.

The huge muscle that was enjoying the tightness suddenly twisted its head. Kwon Taek Joo closed his eyes at that terrible feeling.

"Do you cry often?"

Zhenya whispered softly. Kwon Taek Joo's butt stiffened. He gave a low smile and pulled away. Immediately after that, the meat stick was pulled out and used all its strength to stab hard below, hitting Kwon Taek Joo's spine.

"Aaa!"

A horrifying scream rang out. Even Kwon Taek Joo's fingertips that were scratching the table surface turned white and clenched tightly, the large blood vessels on his neck also stood out, and the hole in terrible pain tightened Zhenya's penis. The monster seemed about to crush everything inside.

The calmness on Zhenya's face also gradually disappeared, the grinding sound

came

from his clenched teeth. It seemed he was in pain also. From the place of contact with Kwon Taek Joo, every cell in his body seemed to be accelerating, his spine throbbed like blood was flowing backward. His eyes were dark.

Zhenya pulled his penis all the way out and then thrust it back n hard. Kwon Taek Joo's entire body trembled at the feeling of deep penetration. He was impatient because the hole was not loosened. Zhenya grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's buttocks, spread them wide and thrust them underneath. The tight hole began to loosen little by little with rough thrusts. The action is filled with pain that brings gentle pleasure. Zhenya grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's arm as he was trying to struggle away from him, pulled him back and lifted his back up.

The table was pushed away by Zhenya's hip thrusts causing scratches on the floor. Kwon Taek Joo's body was stuck between the table and Zhenya gradually helplessly opened it. He shook his head angrily because he couldn't overcome the overwhelming strength even when he struggled fiercely. Suffering groans continuously rang out.

"Ahhaaaa! Ugh, hmm! Haa!"

The sound kept coming out of his open mouth, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't bear it without screaming. But no matter how much he screamed, the pain did not subside even a little. It wasn't

like the time he

was drunk. There is no place for pleasure, only excruciating pain.

Zhenya grabbed Kwon Taek Joo who was trying to escape and stabbed him in the lower abdomen.

"Ahha!"

He pushed deeper, Kwon Taek Joo lowered his head to the table. His legs struggled helplessly in the air. Zhenya pressed her chest against his hot back and kissed Kwon Taek Joo's jet black hair.

"Why did you decide to come back?"

"Huh?" He said as he thrust his hips continuously, the hot product reached Kwon Taek Joo's navel. Every time he pushed in, his stomach bulged, the feeling of nausea made saliva ooze out at the tip of his chin.

Zhenya took a deep breath of Kwon Taek Joo's body scent. The stimulation from his nose rushed straight to his brain, the blood running through his body also boiled.

"The ideas from your little head are so adorable."

Zhenya's mouth curled up. A child receiving a magical toy for the first time in his life would not be as excited as he is now.

Suddenly, Zhenya bit the back of Kwon Taek Joo's neck. He grabbed his thighs, which were burning and felt like they were being crushed, and moved in and out quickly. Kwon Taek Joo's red hot penis was chopped up inside tight as if he was trying to make a mold of the right size inside.

When Kwon Taek Joo felt like he was about to go numb from the feeling of his stomach being brutally stabbed, a strong force landed on his right buttock. Kwon Taek Joo was startled, he hit his butt again. Intense pain rose from the same place.

"Fuck.. stop. you bastard! Ah!"

There was no doubt that he was administering physical punishment. Zhenya seemed to ride in and out of Kwon Taek Joo and continuously patted his right buttock. The tormented muscle in his palm quickly swelled to the shape of his palm, so painful that the skin felt like it was about to peel off.

Zhenya grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's arm as he struggled to block the brutal blows, then he pulled out his meat and hit his butt again. The poor red butt trembled. Kwon Taek Joo was both painful and embarrassed and banged his head on the table. Zhenya looked at the arm holding his hand tightly as the small hole tried to swallow his exploding load with a strange feeling of pleasure.

The liquid flowing from the penis made the hole wet, the flesh stuffed inside also became shiny, and a sharp friction sound rang out every time Kwon Taek Joo's butt and Zhenya's pelvis touched each other.

The table shook more violently, causing Kwon Taek Joo's vision to shake. He closed his eyes, but the feeling of his flesh being deeply penetrated by that hot iron bar became clearer. Even his gasps and reluctant moans could not be hidden. Kwon Taek Joo is dead, one way or another.

He clenched his fists to endure, but Zhenya suddenly grabbed his shoulder and turned him around. The flesh column stuck in his body also rotated. Kwon Taek Joo opened his mouth and gasped at the uncomfortable burning feeling. Zhenya lifted his sweaty thighs and placed them on his chest. The two people's eyes met between their widely opened legs.

Kwon Taek Joo's eyes were filled with fatigue. Zhenya grinned down and licked his exhausted face. The pupils in his eyes shrank strangely as if they did not belong to a human.

"I don't know if you're worth replacing Anastasia."

Zhenya hit the right buttock again. The butt was beaten continuously so just touching it was so painful that it was beyond words. If this continues, it would be better for Kwon Taek Joo to be shot with a gun.

He spoke as if he was emotional and then spanked the innocent butt again. The muscles under Kwon Taek Joo's skin were screaming, his knees twitching uncontrollably from the pain.

"If you've caused trouble for others, you should receive a suitable punishment, right?"

Zhenya smiled. His blue eyes shined strangely. Kwon Taek Joo was like a frog thrown into the hands of a child. The frog's limbs were tied and its white belly was exposed. There was a sense of crisis that he was really going to die here.

The tense hole tightened and bit into the genitals tighter. Zhenya continued to spank Kwon Taek Joo's swollen butt as if telling him to relax. His muscles twitched from shock and sharp pain. Kwon Taek Joo kicked Zhenya's leg and cried out.

"Damn, it hurts."

Zhenya didn't leave it alone. He put his hand firmly on the butt that was jerking in pain. Kwon Taek Joo held his breath nervously, there was still a groan even though he tried to clench his teeth.

Zhenya raised the corners of his mouth and continued to push into the lower part and dig inside, causing Kwon Taek Joo's hips to also be pushed up. In that moment, he pulled out his column of flesh and pushed it back as if to defeat Kwon Taek Joo. The stabbing speed also increased rapidly, then slowed down, then rammed again.

Each time Zhenya's penis was pulled out, the red mucus inside that stuck to the surface of the flesh was also sucked out. Just like that, Kwon Taek Joo felt like his lower body would completely fall down, and his stomach would also roll up.

Zhenya pushed his hips and pressed Kwon Taek Joo's thighs down further. In an instant, Kwon Taek Joo's shoulders shook as if burned by a fire.

"Ha ugh!"

He bit his lip but couldn't stop the moan. The body's reaction surprised Kwon Taek Joo even more. In contrast to the trembling gesture like an

electric shock and trying to escape, the hole bit the huge mass of flesh even tighter. Zhenya was surprised by that obvious change in attitude and then curled his mouth and smiled.

Uneasiness came. Zhenya used force to press Kwon Taek Joo's arm that was trying to defend himself and plunged his genitals straight into the spot just now. Kwon Taek Joo's back shook violently.

"Aah!"

His whole body stood up. Zhenya's thighs that were placed in front of his chest also twitched because of that echo. His toes curled and his wide eyes trembled in surprise.

Zhenya followed his every move and then suddenly leaned his upper body towards Kwon Taek Joo. The level of penetration became deeper and his face got closer. When Kwon Taek Joo met his naturally curved eyes, his stomach tightened, with an unfortunate omen.

"Damn.. Aaaa!"

The big, hot object kept stabbing into a corner as if Kwon Taek Joo's body was folded in half. The skin inside feels like it's peeling off, creating a feeling of numbness. The stimulation from the pelvic area surged violently to the head and then spread to the tips of the toes. Kwon Taek Joo bit his lips and tried to endure but could not stop the moans that flowed out chaotically.

"Haa. Ugh!"

His eyes flashed. If this continues, Kwon Taek Joo will go crazy. He struggled to escape this unbearable feeling but Zhenya used his entire body weight to stop him. His whole body pressed down on him, making Kwon Taek Joo unable to move. Even in the midst of that, the meat column still persistently stabbed inside without tiring. Kwon Taek Joo's saliva seemed to boil in his mouth.

Beads of sweat formed on Zhenya's chin, his forehead wrinkled in sweet pleasure but only his lips still drew an arc.

He wants to break and destroy Kwon Taek Joo completely. He had only one thought: to completely crush his rebellious body by expanding it

again and again. Red-hot excitement took over his consciousness. Just like that, Zhenya pulled himself away and stabbed into the deepest part of Kwon Taek Joo until desire flowed out.

"Ugh."

"Damn party, ah!"

Zhenya firmly fixed Kwon Taek Joo's thighs and rubbed his lower body against the firm buttocks. The penis swelled for a moment and spurted out thick semen. He lifted Kwon Taek Joo's waist even higher so as not to miss a single drop.

Kwon Taek Joo's lips were dry, saliva boiling in his mouth flowed down his chin, his hair seemed to stand on end. His whole body's temperature seemed to evaporate in an instant and hot steam rose through the pores all over his body. The current passes through the whole body still inside, sending out a tingling stimulation.

Zhenya still didn't stop, he smacked his penis again. The remaining semen erupted and flowed out all the way to the entrance. The compressed hole became smaller and swallowed it whole. Zhenya observed the scene with satisfaction and vaguely declared.

"You're going to cry a lot today."

The huge column of flesh still inside suddenly became larger. In an instant, Kwon Taek Joo's stomach was full of pressure. Kwon Tae Joo's shocked face distorted miserably.

## Chapter 3.2 – Contrabass Solo

Consciousness is interrupted many times and then continued, the boundary between day and night is not clear. Even when he woke up, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't tell if he was dreaming or awake. He suddenly felt cold on his skin, but even that was difficult to guarantee that it was real. Then a completely different scene flashed across his gradually expanding vision. The surrounding scenery was completely different from the last memories.

A long time later. Kwon Taek Joo fully woke up, his body was covered in a layer of soft fur. There's something warm nearby. There is a pungent smell of burning firewood. Is it the fireplace? As if to increase certainty, the flickering flames nearby continuously dimmed and then flared up again.

A shadow passed in front of Kwon Taek Joo. The movement was leisurely. Soon, a heavy object pressed on his leg. The characteristic body odor is also more intense. There was smoke coming from somewhere that stung his nose as if Kwon Taek Joo had just smoked a cigar. Cohiba Behike. The distinctive scent enhances its presence.

Kwon Taek Joo took a deep breath. The strong scent faded a bit and then quickly became rich again. The cigar soon approached Kwon Taek Joo's lips. He turned his head away to avoid that unpleasant touch. A mocking laugh rang out from the head of the bed.

Zhenya's hands slid past him, over his upper body and then slowly down, down and further. Kwon Taek Joo's eyes showed discomfort. As if sensing something bad, he looked down. A cigar was wandering over his drooping penis.

The burning red cigar swayed gently back and forth. Kwon Taek Joo's thighs tensed up at the feeling of crisis. Zhenya's lips drew a long arc.

"If you stand up now, you'll touch it."

Zhenya pressed the shoulders of Kwon Taek Joo who was angry at his fishy warning and moved closer. He naturally leaned down to Kwon Taek Joo's upturned chest and placed his lips on his nipple. Zhenya gently sucked on the small piece of meat and then used the strength of his tongue to slide over it. He used his entire tongue to flatten her stiff nipples. Kwon Taek Joo could not adapt to those completely unfamiliar and intense situations.

"Ahh!"

His body became excited. Kwon Taek Joo shook his head and struggled, but his arms and legs were locked tightly, unable to move, letting his flesh be oppressed until it completely stood up. The tingling sensation from the sensitive area rushed to the center, the groans and grinding of teeth that could not be swallowed emanated from the clenched teeth. the two knees rubbed together, causing an intense burning sensation to run. to the groin.

Kwon Taek Joo's whole body feeling became clearer in her restless mood. Every time Zhenya sucked hard on her nipple, something seemed to be pulled out from inside. That intense feeling runs down between the legs, where the still-floating cigar encourages an erection. Kwon Taek Joo worriedly examined the situation below, his tense flesh seemed to be about to touch the cigar. He forgot to breathe, his nipples were being chewed on and seemed like they were about to break off.

"Ah!"

The veins on Kwon Taek Joo's neck and forehead stood out from the persistent pain, at the same time his penis also raised its head. The heat seemed threatening around the swaying flesh. It will be touched. Kwon Taek Joo tried to brace his thighs.

Zhenya licked Kwon Taek Joo's lower lip with a happy face. There is a faint taste of blood on the tip of the tongue. A small drop of blood on Kwon Taek Joo's nipple glistened along with his saliva. Zhenya pretended not to know and then kissed the surrounding area.

Every time the sharp tip of her nose passed by, Kwon Taek Joo's injured nipple trembled, a premonition of fear and worry for what would

happen next arose. Zhenya smiled and pressed harder on Kwon Taek Joo's wrist and then once again he sucked on the injured nipple.

"Ugh. Ah!"

The small piece of meat became sensitive as the tip of the soft tongue began to rotate. The feeling of tingling pain mixed with pleasure rose up. Kwon Taek Joo's legs could not stand the stimulation and were sliding down. He tried to lift his wrist that Zhenya was holding so tightly that it turned white. The more he tried, the more Zhenya's perseverance increased. Kwon Taek Joo's arms and legs were forced down reluctantly and her nipples were sucked so hard that they made a sound.

"Ugh, stop it. damn it, ugh!"

No matter how hard he tried to shake it off, he couldn't beat him. Even when Kwon Taek Joo tried his best, only his body being controlled by Zhenya ached. He bit the nipple and sucked it again as if in punishment for that useless resistance. His lungs tightened as the pleasure gently spread through his body with a sigh, that unbearable pain returning to his groin.

The cum mixed with resignation came from Kwon Taek Joo. The next moment, his trembling limbs clenched tightly.

"Ah!"

Zhenya stopped after that moaning sound and looked at the small trembling column of flesh.

"You seem to like being sucked, don't you?"

Zhenya raised the corners of his mouth and smiled widely. The fist Kwon Taek Joo swung out in anger was grabbed and twisted back immediately. He bent down completely and licked the inside of my trembling arm for a long time. Goosebumps appeared intermittently on Kwon Taek Joo's skin. If Zhenya suddenly bared her teeth and bit into his wrist artery, it wouldn't be surprising at all.

Zhenya lifted Kwon Taek Joo's arms up, tied them tightly with a belt, then waved something at him. Kwon Taek Joo stared at him both scared and angry. That small object was made of gold and had a ring attached to a long and thin bar that just looking at it made Kwon Taek Joo feel uncomfortable.

Zhenya held Kwon Taek Joo's wet front hole still for a moment and then opened it slightly on both sides.

"Since the days of the KGB, the FSB has been training agents in sex. It can penetrate a target's deepest recesses without bloodshed. There is a town called Klin, about 80 km away, where they taught sexual techniques for three weeks. I served as an instructor there for a while."

"Ah!"

Suddenly Kwon Taek Joo's upper body shook, because Zhenya had pressed the instrument into his gaping urethra. The metal bar pushed through the hole but barely scratched it. Kwon Taek Joo's abdominal muscles tightened before the unfamiliar stimuli. The semen left inside like lubricant swallowed the metal rod smoothly. Soon the tool was deep inside with the circle hanging in the middle pressing on the muscle that hadn't even had time to tense up yet.

Kwon Taek Joo's chest opened but he stiffly held his breath. He couldn't move, only his

evelahes

were shaking slightly. If Kwon Taek Joo moves hastily, his body will be damaged. Zhenya looked at him pitifully and then affectionately lifted his flowing hair.

"That means I'm still good at making people cry."

Zhenya's knee crashed into Kwon Taek Joo's thigh right after that statement. He quickly lifted his stiff legs and immediately slid his giant meat rod into the hole. Kwon Taek Joo's entire body was pushed up by his thrust. Zhenya used his hand to cover Kwon Taek Joo's naturally opened mouth and slowly leaned down to look at his face. Kwon Taek

Joo's eyes widened from the heavy feeling in his stomach then he frowned.

Zhenya looked into his eyes filled with his silhouette and pulled away. The penis is sucked out, leaving only the head, which quickly retracts inside. Kwon Taek Joo's insides, which were already hot from the previous contact, now became burning. The cells of the entire body, which were already stimulated, are now even more sensitive, so gentle provocations are enough to cause unusual pain.

Kwon Taek Joo shook his head angrily. The scream he couldn't let out choked in his throat, choking him. The lower part was continuously opened and deep inside was continuously oppressed. Zhenya remembered exactly Kwon Taek Joo's weak point, so as soon as he passed through that area, he grabbed him tightly and deliberately stabbed him in one place.

"Ugh! hmm. ahhh.. Ah!"

He was in the mood to make a mold in someone else's stomach. Kwon Taek Joo's insides were constantly being kneaded and dug as if it was about to turn into the shape of Zhenya's penis. Other than his wriggling legs, the wall inside his stomach yearning for intense pleasure tightened even more tightly around his large member.

Zhenya's eyes sparkled, the corners of his lips also drew clearer lines. He did not hesitate to lick Kwon Taek Joo's armpit and then sucked even harder on the sensitive skin as he gritted his teeth and shivered. Zhenya moved her lips and then bit into the strong chest muscles until he left teeth marks and then held his nipples tightly. When he sucked the small piece of meat and made a loud sound, Kwon Taek Joo's toned waist also began to vibrate. He held his waist tightly and continuously sucked his nipples, Kwon Taek Joo's lower body also automatically lifted.

"Ah. ugh, haa, ugh!"

Kwon Taek Joo tilted his head and kept looking down. Her exposed chest clearly rose and fell with difficulty. Zhenya dug into his stomach as he used the tip of her tongue to press down as if to engulf the raised nipple. The small hole was pushed in and out violently, still persistently

squeezing the hot and hard meat column. The feeling of discomfort and excitement at the same time made Kwon Taek Joo dizzy.

The thrusting shaft of flesh quickly slid out of the hole and rubbed against the skin of the inner thigh. Kwon Taek Joo swallowed his breath in vain when the large object inside suddenly disappeared. Zhenya looked at his helpless face and then gently rubbed her genitals against Kwon Taek Joo's thigh. The soft skin quickly became hot.

Then Zhenya squeezed his ass open and inserted the meat rod into the small hole again. Kwon Taek Joo frowned and shouted. The cylindrical monster rammed into him until his insides collapsed.

"Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ugh."

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't stop moaning, his knees kept rubbing together, blood rushed to his groin and he was about to go crazy. Because the iron bar had blocked the hole in front, the inside was cramped and swollen. The sirens of his instincts rang loudly again. If he couldn't ejaculate properly, his balls would explode. Kwon Taek Joo quickly pushed Zhenya but he remained as stubborn as a rock without moving. On the contrary, he only clung to him even more and continuously licked the veins on Kwon Taek Joo's neck.

Two sweaty bodies overlapped each other. The pitiful mass of flesh was pressed and continuously swept against Zhenya's abdominal muscles that stood erect with tendons and veins bulging in extreme excitement. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't bear it anymore, his toes curled white but Zhenya continued to thrust inside.

Kwon Taek Joo desperately struggled with all his strength to shake off the huge ghost that was oppressing him. He struggled to escape by any means. Zhenya hit him hard underneath and lifted him up. Kwon Taek Joo's frantically waving limbs were instantly shaken violently. He continued to bend his knees towards his chest, his buttocks naturally lifted and the places where their bodies were intertwined also tightened.

"Ahhhhh! Ughh."

Even when he tried to run away, his legs held tightly by Zhenya wouldn't budge. Kwon Taek Joo gritted his teeth and endured, his hands clenched tightly with his breath panting in his throat.

Zhenya gently caressed the place where their bodies were interlocked. Kwon Taek Joo's eyelids twitched, veins bulging on his sweaty forehead. He couldn't breathe and stared at Zhenya then suddenly Kwon Taek Joo's body jumped.

"Haa!"

An explosive groan. A layer of saliva flowed down Kwon Taek Joo's trembling chin. His chest opened wide and his shoulders stiffened. His eyes seemed to melt, his heated brain seemed to turn into liquid and flow through the pores of his body. Wet tears gathered in the corners of my eyes. When Zhenya lifted Kwon Taek Joo's waist again, the mess started to flow down.

Zhenya's lips curled up. He licked the drops of tears flowing down Kwon Taek Joo's face and gently pulled out the tool that was clogging his front hole. The wet metal ring and rod that had constricted Kwon Taek Joo's painful penis slid out easily.

The next moment, Kwon Taek Joo's penis, which could not ejaculate, twitched and spurted out semen. The liquid that had accumulated inside spewed out little by little irregularly. The inside of Kwon Taek Joo's stiff thighs also trembled at the same time. He covered his eyes in fear with both his tightly tied hands.

"Ughh!"

"You surrendered really quickly."

Zhenya used his fingertips to touch Kwon Taek Joo's trembling flesh and then he smeared the semen there into the hole that was biting his muscle mass. Zhenya takes all that's left and rubs it all around the penis. Kwon Taek Joo's normally calm genitals suddenly swelled up, inflating Kwon Taek Joo's entire body. His insides were quickly filled with no gaps left.

Zhenya smiled and lifted Kwon Taek Joo's legs, which were stretched out due to exhaustion, onto his shoulders.

"Aren't you already crying? It's going to take a long time for me to stop being angry."

Kwon Taek Joo would rather be sentenced to death than be in despair right now.

Kwon Taek Joo could barely lift his heavy eyelids. It was dark all around. I don't know what day it is or what time it is. Every minute and second seemed like an eternity. Even being thrown into hell probably wouldn't be as scary as it is now.

His back hurt so much that he couldn't move. His spine must have been misaligned. Kwon Taek Joo was very sure, but he soon realized that he was wrong, because his stomach, which was already full, suddenly became loose and then immediately became full again. Zhenya is still bothering him.

Kwon Taek Joo's eyebrows frowned, a soft curse echoed in his throat, consciousness had returned but his eyes were tightly closed and could not be opened.

Suddenly Kwon Taek Joo heard something, it seemed like the clanging of iron furniture, as if Zhenya had just inserted his giant monster into someone else's stomach and was preparing something. His shadow swayed on Kwon Taek Joo's back.

Not long after his hand touched the waist area just above his buttocks. Zhenya gently groped around and then suddenly put strength into his fingertips. Right after that, something sharp cut into Kwon Taek Joo's flesh.

"Ahh! Ah!"

The sharp feeling of stabbing into the skin made Kwon Taek Joo's senses tense. The delicate, sensitive skin is unbearably painful. A sharp needle pierced his skin and intentionally caused the wound. Then a dark dye is applied to the area. It hurts like crazy. Zhenya squeezed Kwon Taek Joo's

body was trying  
to escape the pain and carefully carved a pattern.

"Some people say this is a symbol of desire."

Zhenya dipped the tip of the needle again and began carving the most important part, his eyes opened wide with an unprecedented sharpness. He even held his breath.

"This is just a contract between a lord and a servant."

"What are you doing, you bastard! Ah!"

Kwon Taek Joo shouted in anger and then quickly put his head down on the bed, because Zhenya lifted his waist as if to respond to that crazy protest. A heavy burning feeling pressed down on his spine and spread throughout his body, his fists trembled white.

"Instead of the blueprint you blew up, now you should know clearly who owns your body."

Zhenya looked down at the tattoo and smiled with satisfaction. He turned to bite Kwon Taek Joo's nape and slowly lifted his waist.

"Ha ha. Ah!"

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't lift a finger, trembling, moaning and squirming to let Zhenya tear him apart. His back was pushed violently but his mind was gradually fading.

## Chapter 3.3 – Contrabass Solo

There was some echo in Kwon Taek Joo's dream, was it the sound of the wind or the heartbeat of a giant creature? The melodious melody that followed seemed to be interrupted, causing the icy air to tremble splendidly.

Looks like someone is playing a musical instrument. It's clearly a stringed instrument, but it doesn't have the brilliant tone and technical variety of a violin. That heavy sound weighed on Kwon Taek Joo's body. It's sad but not unpleasant at all. His exhausted body became even more tired, and his consciousness gradually became blurred.

Even though he knew he shouldn't and couldn't do that in a situation like this, Kwon Taek Joo fell into a deep sleep. No longer worried or afraid, he seemed to enter a perfect and safe space in that moment.

Kwon Taek Joo's eyes were closed tightly but he still felt the cold. He gently lifted his eyelids and closed them again. The sun poured down on his face, not hot but very bright. Kwon Taek Joo raised his hand to cover his eyes and looked around.

The first thing he saw was the fireplace. The fire was almost extinguished but the embers were still there. Large fur blanket was spread out in front of it and a white sofa. The feeling of the fur blanket is quite familiar, so it seems that the fact that Kwon Taek Joo was lying on it was not an illusion. He still doesn't know where the dream comes from and what is reality.

Did you just fall asleep like that? Maybe Kwon Taek Joo fainted for a while. He groped through his past memories and looked around him. Zhenya was nowhere to be seen.

Kwon Taek Joo lifted himself up. A dull pain came. Every part of his body, down to his knuckles, ached. When Kwon Taek Joo felt intense

pain from his muscles, past events appeared in his mind one after another. Is it all real?

Kwon Taek Joo sheepishly stroked his face. It's crazy. How did he get held down by a man and ejaculate in the hands of someone who wouldn't be happier if he tore him apart right away? It's not like he was injected with drugs like he was on Olkhon Island. He had orgasmed many times while sober and abused. Even if it was a dream, isn't it too embarrassing and cruel?

'Do you call that rape? Do you like it too? How many times have you had an orgasm?'

Zhenya's mocking smile in his dream reappeared every day. Kwon Taek Joo's teeth naturally grinded together. Not only that, he also slept very well and comfortably. If only he had been injected with drugs like last time or even drunk, his feeling would have been less bad. Kwon Taek Joo scratched his head in embarrassment.

He sat up. Something slowly flowed from inside his ass as soon as he took a step. Kwon Taek Joo bit his dry lower lip because of that terrible feeling, his forehead wrinkled bitterly. After a while of regaining consciousness, Kwon Taek Joo realized that some kind of liquid was glistening under his thighs. His stomach was filled with sticky semen.

"Damned."

Hands clenched into fists trembling with anger, Kwon Taek Joo angrily punched the rigid wall in front of him but his anger could not be relieved at all, if only he could have died at Zhenya's hands at that moment. It wasn't as embarrassing as it is now. Perhaps this is the reason he kept Kwon Taek Joo alive.

He banged his head against the wall as if torturing himself. Nothing has changed either. He was still breathing stupidly, only the discomfort was more obvious.

Kwon Taek Joo slumped his shoulders and exhaled a long breath then raised his head. He turned back to look at the unfamiliar space in front of him. This was not the Korean embassy. Kwon Taek Joo turned pale and got goosebumps, not just because he was naked.

He strode hastily toward the window. Inside his butt there was a tingling pain every time his legs met, the small hole was soaking wet. Kwon Taek Joo walked slowly so his skin wouldn't rub against each other then suddenly ran to press his forehead against the window. The eyebrows that were frowned as a habit were now completely relaxed, because of a scene that was unbelievable even when Kwon Taek Joo was witnessing it with his own eyes.

Everywhere, from all four directions, there is only snow, snow, and more snow. He couldn't even see a single tree, even to feel the distance was really difficult because of the pure white color that met his eyes. A scene no different from the vast ocean.

Kwon Taek Joo also doesn't know how he got here because he has no memory of him using his legs to move here. His consciousness had been unclear since meeting Zhenya at the embassy. There were times when he felt the air and temperature changing, but it was still shocking to see such an unfamiliar scene. Where the hell is this place? How many days have passed?

Kwon Taek Joo was vaguely aware of reality but the back of his neck suddenly tightened. A cool scent spreads. He reflexively turned his head and met his blue eyes.

Zhenya had just come out of the shower with wet hair that was thicker than usual. Her body was naked, revealing an ugly object between her legs. Kwon Taek Joo's stomach felt tense when he faced that giant weapon. Was that thing put inside you? Kwon Taek Joo's butt suddenly cramped in pain.

Zhenya is back as usual, even the eyes looking at Kwon Taek Joo are calm and cold. The marks left on Kwon Taek Joo's body proved that everything that had happened was true, but his extremely calm face and clean appearance seemed to tease him as if he had just had a dream.

Kwon Taek Joo took a step back and frowned angrily. Suddenly the cold window sill touched his back. With no room to retreat, he clenched his hands into defensive fists and glared at Zhenya as if he were about to tear him apart.

Zhenya spoke up indifferently.

"Why don't you go take a shower, you're so dirty."

He nodded toward the bathroom. Kwon Taek Joo's whole body was wet and sticky, he really needed to take a shower.

However, Kwon Taek Joo's vigilance did not calm down. Would a cornered mouse look like that when it meets a cat? Just a slight movement is enough for it to raise its feathers and rush out to attack. But Zhenya did not hesitate and reached out his hand, which was violently thrown away before it could touch Kwon Taek Joo. The scratch on the back of his hand appeared squiggly and then turned red and hot.

"Do not touch me."

Kwon Taek Joo wrinkled his nose and growled. Zhenya quietly looked at the back of his red hand and shrugged, his face remaining calm and unchanged. On the contrary, there was only a slight smile that Kwon Taek Joo did not know what it meant. Zhenya gently turned around to get out of the way. A series of leisurely and indifferent actions like a conqueror who has completely defeated his opponent.

Kwon Taek Joo's mood suddenly calmed down, he pushed Zhenya with his shoulder and walked past. This time he obediently moved aside. With eyes watching behind her, Kwon Taek Joo slammed the bathroom door shut.

He leaned his back against the closed door and sighed, ruffling his falling black hair. From special gestures to smiles and Zhenya's naked eyes, it made him uncomfortable. Kwon Taek Joo just wanted to bury as quickly as possible the embarrassing moments he shared with him. Zhenya is clearly the culprit and also the witness to Kwon Taek Joo's tragic collapse before his primitive instincts. Has the aftertaste of sex ever been this dirty and humiliating? No amount of violence or torture could compare to his current state of being like a dog. Kwon Taek Joo himself had never felt so helpless, he didn't know what to do with the feeling of having to give up when being subdued like this. Everything becomes confusing and chaotic.

Kwon Taek Joo wants to wash away all remaining traces on his body. He turned on the shower and stood still for a long time under the hot water. His body and mind gradually calmed down.

I have to go back. If Kwon Taek Joo can somehow escape Zhenya's clutches and reach Korea, all the pieces that have been dislocated since he mistook him for his colleague will be put back in place. Your identity that was distorted and destroyed by him will also be restored.

Kwon Taek Joo watched from inside the bathroom. There might be a key to escape somewhere. The first thing that caught his eye was the window on one side of the wall. However, its width is too narrow for a person to squeeze through, it is even blocked by thick and strong barriers. There is sunlight shining through it from outside, if the wall is not too hard or too thick, Kwon Taek Joo should try to find the weak point and smash it.

He stepped out of the shower, dried himself and the soles of his feet, then put on a thick bathrobe and tied it tightly around his waist.

Kwon Taek Joo still doesn't know where this is, but if an area can build a villa of this scale, there must be other houses. He will be able to arrange a place to hide and find a car or other means of transportation. So all Kwon Taek Joo has to do right now is get out of the villa.

He made up his mind and stood under the window. Kwon Taek Joo tried sweeping the wall, but the bathroom tiles were too slippery. Climbing up the window with your bare hands is absurd.

He immediately rummaged through his closet looking for a solution, but all he found were a few towels, facial cleansing products, and cleaning supplies. Kwon Taek Joo scratched his head and suddenly threw a towel on the floor. He used a razor to tear the long scarf and tied both ends of a piece of scarf cut to the right width to form an unbreakable knot.

Kwon Taek Joo connected a dusting clip to the rope. The end of the rope had become quite heavy. He looked up at the window, estimated the distance and height, then threw the clip with all his might like a dart. The clamp hit the metal bars with a prolonged sound and then fell

uselessly. Kwon Taek Joo had to try again before Zhenya noticed, but the result was the same.

I Can't give up. Impossible. If Kwon Taek Joo couldn't escape. what would his life be like and how would he die? A well-fed beast will be docile, but it will quickly change its attitude and become cruel as soon as hunger returns. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't sit still and wait for that moment.

He made up his mind again. Kwon Taek Joo grabbed the towel under the clamp and rotated the clamp in the air to obtain centrifugal force. When the thrust reached a certain level. Kwon Taek Joo threw it like a spear towards the high window. The clamp flew quickly and slid between two iron bars. He took a deep breath and yanked the attached rope, the clamp lying on its side and clamped tightly between the bars. Alright.

Kwon Taek Joo used a towel string to quickly clean the slippery tiles on the wall and then thoroughly wiped the soles of his feet again. After a series of preparations, he was ready to grab the rope with both hands. Kwon Taek Joo slowly pressed the soles of his feet against the wall and put his body weight on the rope. He kept falling down in vain, but after a while of perseverance, Kwon Taek Joo was able to climb up proficiently. He quickly crossed his legs and hung himself under the window frame, then quickly grabbed the iron bars.

Kwon Taek Joo's left leg slipped but he stretched out his right arm immediately. His chest hit the wall hard as he tried to hold on to the iron bar. He endured the pain and supported his whole body with one arm. Then he raised his other arm to grasp the iron bar. And then Kwon Taek Joo was certain that the iron bars on the window could not be cut with any tools he had. He tried to shake it as hard as he could but to no avail. The cold iron bars did not move. Kwon Taek Joo pulled it until he was exhausted and then gave up and let it go.

"Ah!"

His butt hit the floor. His buttocks, which were supposed to reduce shock, were now causing him pain. After a while of groaning, Kwon Taek Joo slowly stood up and frantically searched for another escape

tool. He saw the drain pipe in the sink. Kwon Taek Joo recklessly pulled it out and used all his strength to smash it against the wall.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

Every time I hit the drain pipe, there was a swearing sound. Zhenya must have noticed the commotion in the bathroom, but Kwon Taek Joo couldn't back down. He gathered all his strength and hit the wall, the solid bricks began to crack. In desperation, Kwon Taek Joo grabbed the cracked brick with his bare hands and tore it apart.

But it didn't take long for Kwon Taek Joo to stop, because another wall appeared where the brick fell. It's not just a simple concrete wall, it's like a rock that has been smoothed and polished, perhaps even an excavator wouldn't be able to drill through it. Is Kwon Taek Joo trying in vain again? He couldn't try any more because he was completely exhausted.

Kwon Taek Joo tiredly trudged out but suddenly stopped, because Zhenya had been standing in front of the door. He stared at Kwon Taek Joo's haggard face and then looked inside the bathroom, then he smiled.

"Are you done having fun yet?"

Kwon Taek Joo glared at him without bothering to speak. He didn't even have enough energy left to speak. Zhenya looked at him with amusement and ridicule, then suddenly reached out his hand. Kwon Taek Joo was startled unconsciously. The outstretched hand suddenly paused in the air for a moment and then grabbed the cloak. Then without saying a word, Zhenya pulled him somewhere. Kwon Taek Joo instinctively tried his best to hold his body back, but he was still dragged away.

He was worried about what he was going to do to torture him, but the place Zhenya took Kwon Taek Joo to was an unexpected dining room. He was looking confusedly at the strange room with only a table large enough to seat ten people when he was pushed into a chair. A piercing pain emanated from below. Kwon Taek Joo was clenching his fists trying to endure when the food was brought in front of him. It's Blini, a

Russian-style pancake that just looking at the image on the packaging is enough to make Kwon Taek Joo sick.

He moved the plate aside and asked.

"Where the hell is this place?"

"Even if I told you, you wouldn't know."

"Where is this place?"

"Ajinoki Island."

What place is that? Kwon Taek Joo's face darkened. Zhenya smirked.

"See, I told you you wouldn't know. This is an uninhabited island 60 kilometers from Murmansk."

Kwon Taek Joo doubted his ears. Murmansk is the northernmost region of Russia, 200 km from the Arctic Circle. But an island 60km away? And is it an uninhabited island?

"No way. Is there really an uninhabited island? Who can live here?"

Kwon Taek Joo muttered denying reality, the questions sounded like self-defense monologues, no crazy person would build a villa on a remote island where no one lives and no one goes around.

But Zhenya's assertion that followed cruelly extinguished even that faint glimmer of hope.

"There's nothing here but this house."

That crazy guy.

Kwon Taek Joo stared blankly at Zhenya, it was hard to believe that no one or means existed to help him escape. Zhenya again pulled the plate of

Blini from before in front of Kwon Taek Joo.

"I brought it, so you should eat it, unless you want to starve to death."

What he said didn't sound like a joke at all. Kwon Taek Joo's stomach was empty and rumbling. If he didn't put anything in, he probably

wouldn't be able to bear it. But Kwon Taek Joo rarely eats Russian food, and even his crushed self-esteem shows resistance to the food that Zhenya seems to be generously offering.

Kwon Taek Joo glanced at the cold plate of blini, but soon his stomach growled again. This is not the time to show pride. He reached for a piece of blini with a shy expression and put it in his mouth. His stomach was excitedly preparing to receive food after a long time, but Kwon Taek Joo's jaw moved extremely slowly. Zhenya kept looking at his face as if admiring an interesting scene. Kwon Taek Joo turned away to avoid his eyes and continued digging through innocent pieces of blini.

"I'm probably going to get bloated. Why are you free to stay here like this?"

"I'm not too busy."

"Why aren't you busy? Don't you have to clean up that mess?"

"Cleaning up the mess? Ah, you mean the blueprint? It seemed like you were excited to blow it up, but unfortunately it didn't cost me that much. If it was as loose as it was Then I couldn't have survived to this day in the first place."

"What are you talking about?"

"What do you think you can do with the blueprints that you and your colleagues took away? Are you going to use it to develop a new weapon that can be compared to 'Anastasia'? No, you can't do that. That's okay. Because I'm the only person in this world who can analyze that design."

Zhenya's cheerful expression looked as if what he had just said was not nonsense. If it was simply because of the design that no one could touch him, then Zhenya must have come up with a way to not completely lose it even if it was lost. He couldn't be careless for even a second when he held in his

hands was what everyone was aiming for.

There is actually no way to prove that the blueprints were lost. The only people who know that the room exploded is the blueprint, at most only Zhenya and his relatives. Would one of them risk his privilege and his

life to reveal the truth? Salman is a target of surveillance by the Russian government, so there is no reason for him to stand out and attract attention.

Depressed. Kwon Taek Joo thought he had dealt Zhenya a fatal blow, but instead it turned into a handshake that pushed his head into that bastard's mouth.

Zhenya looked at Kwon Taek Joo's stiff and sulky face, his eyes were like a cat watching a trapped mouse.

"I told you. From now on you have to find a way to save your life."

## Chapter 3.4 – Contrabass Solo

Zhenya placed the shafka

on the table, the slightest movement causing the fur coat to flutter, as if a living animal were riding on his shoulders.

Kwon Taek Joo sat sideways on the sofa to watch him prepare. I didn't ask where he was going. Zhenya also said nothing. A while later, Kwon Taek Joo walked up the stairs.

The sound of propellers rang out immediately afterward. Perhaps it was an illusion, but it seemed like the window was shaking slightly. Kwon Taek Joo was shocked and quickly ran to the window. A helicopter was flying right above him and into space, inside seemed to be that bastard.

'I brought it, you should eat it, unless you want to starve to death.'

Does that mean that? The helicopter quickly became a dot and disappeared. Zhenya probably doesn't intend to ride it out to the grocery store. Is it okay if he leaves only you as a prisoner like this? Kwon Taek Joo raised a question while forgetting the current situation.

He looked down at his hands. His wrists were not tied with rope, let alone handcuffs. Kwon Taek Joo is free as a bird. Not only that. Both the windows and doors were unlocked. Is Zhenya asking you to disappear while he's not here?

Kwon Taek Joo quickly turned around with a skeptical expression. He went into the living room and checked the condition of the fireplace. Only piles of ashes remain after burning, the warmth has almost disappeared. Not lighting the fire anymore means he will be absent for a long time.

Was Zhenya careless? No, that bastard is not that kind of person. I just don't know if he underestimated that Kwon Taek Joo himself wouldn't be able to escape even if he went like this.

A smile appeared on Kwon Taek Joo's lips. Whatever the reason, this is a golden opportunity. Maybe he will be very angry, but right now preserving your life is the most important thing.

Kwon Taek Joo was about to rush out when he suddenly remembered how he dressed. He couldn't freeze to death in vain, Kwon Taek Joo went straight for Zhenya's dressing room. Hundreds of decent clothes were hung in the narrow and deep room but he couldn't even think of what to wear. He took out a jacket that seemed to fit him and put it on. Both the length and width are absurdly large.

Kwon Taek Joo folded his sleeves and tied his belt just right then went out. The heavy door pushed the pile of snow on the floor and slowly opened. Breathing outside air for the first time, a stream of cold, clear air penetrated Kwon Taek Joo's lungs. It was cold enough to make his throat constrict.

He pulled back his collar and strode forward. The snowfields stretched on endlessly, with no signs of life anywhere. Is it like this when you suddenly fall into the desert? He was confused and didn't know which direction to go.

A snowy mountain in the distance looks like a screen, but it's hard to tell whether it's snow on the mountain or natural snow, and it's hard to open your eyes when the white snowfield reflects the sunlight. It seemed like the entire land inherently rejected human settlement.

Kwon Taek Joo turned his back on the snowy mountains and moved towards the blowing sea smelling winds. His lips are a bit salty so it seems like there is a sea side lately. His feet sank with each step and quickly became soaked to the knees, his skin was numb and itchy, and the cold wind blew like it was cutting his skin. Kwon Taek Joo hurriedly walked through the fluttering snow.

A moment later he reached the beach with gentle waves lapping at his feet. Zhenya said that this place is 60 km from Murmansk. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't find a small island or a coral reef nearby. Everything became distant again.

But that doesn't mean Kwon Taek Joo will give up. He was going to die, one way or another, and whatever the outcome was, it was better than playing around in Zhenya's clutches.

Kwon Taek Joo returned to the path he came from. Swimming 60 km with a fragile body was impossible, so he had to find some way, if not, he planned to cut a birch tree to make a boat.

Kwon Taek Joo returned to the villa after walking non-stop. He lit a fire in the fireplace and sat in front of it to thaw his whole body and then went down to the basement. As expected, all kinds of household items were piled up in the basement warehouse. He boldly stepped into it. A thick layer of dust flew up blindly.

"Found it."

With his dusty face shining brightly, Kwon Taek Joo found a kayak after half a day of diving. No matter how you look at it, it's just a boat for one person, but that's enough to make him emotional. Without it, Kwon Taek Joo would have to cut down a frozen birch tree outside.

He put the kavak

on his back and left the villa. The boat was made of much heavier wood than he thought. Considering the heavy snowfall, Kwon Taek Joo was more prepared than before but his feet still sank deeper because of the kavak

. It was not easy to take even one step, his toes were gradually becoming numb.

Kwon Taek Joo is willing to endure frostbite. Compared to the difficulties he has experienced so far, this hardship is nothing. If you are smart enough and try hard enough, the weather will definitely help you escape. The fierce snowstorm that had lasted until this morning had subsided, the heavy snowfall had subsided, and the sea that he had come to with great difficulty had calmed down.

"Alright."

Kwon Taek Joo immediately placed the kayak on the water. He carefully pressed each place on the boat's hull and checked to see if it was leaking water. Contrary to concerns, none of the corners are worn or damaged, and the weight balance is also quite well adjusted so it won't tip over easily.

Kwon Taek Joo immediately placed the kayak on the water. He carefully pressed each place on the boat's hull and checked to see if it was leaking water. Contrary to concerns, none of the corners are worn or damaged, and the weight balance is also quite well adjusted so it won't tip over easily.

Kwon Taek Joo held the oar for a while and waited for the boat's body to shake less. The kayak, which was shaking violently, gradually regained stability.

He took a deep breath and then used all his strength to hit the water surface. While in the special forces. Kwon Taek Joo once went on a 20 km round trip on a rubber inflatable boat. He will have to travel three times that distance to reach the mainland but with the help of the weather, there is nothing Kwon Taek Joo cannot do. This is no longer training but real combat, desperation that pushes human's potential to the maximum.

Kwon Taek Joo gritted his teeth and rowed even harder. The force of the water hit the boat hard and was pushed out. The kayak continued to turn the water and move forward.

But the real ambush was the ocean weather. Just because the coast is quiet doesn't mean the ocean is the same. The kayak, which had been moving forward strongly for a while, suddenly began to spin. Rising waves quickly pushed the boat's hull to shore. Kwon Taek Joo could no longer control the boat even when he tried to row. If he keeps being swept away like this, his fragile kayak will sink.

Kwon Taek Joo kept his oars steady and moved forward. The strong wind blew with high waves, the kayak lost momentum and swayed violently, the boat's head could not be completely oriented and began to spin. Meanwhile, fierce waves continuously hit the boat's hull, the kayak swayed precariously as if it would capsize immediately. Kwon Taek Joo

managed to keep his balance by moving the oar to the opposite side but he could barely control the small boat against the big waves.

The waves pounded relentlessly against the boat. The second wave was larger and more ferocious than the first wave. The sea that is neither blue nor black opens its mouth as if swallowing everything. Kwon Taek Joo's whole body was soaked in the fierce water, ice crystals seemed to grow from the wet skin. Kwon Taek Joo's heart beat violently at the feeling that his survival was threatened.

"Ah!"

He faced the wave with all his might, but even as he pushed the oar desperately, the boat's hull still moved only slowly. The deep sea swallowed the strength he had worked so hard to build, but Kwon Taek Joo still tried his best to row the boat in place because if he sat still, the boat would be swept away in an instant.

"Ha!"

Kwon Taek Joo shouted in shock. As if realizing his efforts, the bow of the boat was moving forward little by little.

But unfortunately, that hopeful situation did not last long. Suddenly Kwon Taek Joo heard a very loud noise, he looked ahead in bewilderment. A dark blue wall was approaching from afar. It was a wave the size of a house

If you face him head-on, you won't be able to survive. Before his head could give an order, his arms and legs moved automatically, but the continuous ripples kept wrapping around Kwon Taek Joo's ankles.

The wave crashed before his eyes while he could not move, his black muzzle opened wide. It's here. Just as intuition alerted the brain, the giant wave hit the kayak straight. Kwon Taek Joo was helplessly sucked deep into the water in the blink of an eye before he even realized it. The strong force of the water pushed his whole body deeper. Kwon Taek Joo choked.

A moment later, the water that was pushed in continuously flowed back and burst white, taking Kwon Taek Joo with it. He raised his legs above

the water to avoid being swept into the sea again. Underwater is terrifyingly quiet, but above is still a battlefield. Waves came from all directions, leaving Kwon Taek Joo unable to breathe.

"I will never give up!"

Kwon Taek Joo shouted frantically. He cannot submit to this challenge. He stretched out his cramped arms and leaned against the water, his legs also stretched out. Every time he turned his neck to breathe, the salty seawater rose. His lungs tightened, making Kwon Taek Joo gasp. Despite all his efforts to separate the water and move forward, his body, which had no strength left, was immediately pushed back.

Kwon Taek Joo's whole body relaxed from exhaustion. He kept being pushed up and then swept in, then pushed up again and swept back. He couldn't imagine where he was drifting or how much further he had to go. He also didn't know if he would even be able to return to Ajinoki Island. My arm felt like it weighed a thousand pounds and no longer obeyed Will Kwon Taek Joo die like this?

".?."

Something caught Kwon Taek Joo's eyes just when he was about to give up. That was the remains of the previously broken kayak floating on the sea surface swept away by the waves. The survival instinct that had been extinguished flared up again, and he exhausted all his remaining strength to chase after it.

Kwon Taek Joo grabbed the board that looked like it would disappear instantly. The body that was about to be submerged was suddenly supported firmly. He leaned back for a moment and took a heavy breath, his whole body feeling as heavy as soaked cotton wool. Kwon Taek Joo wanders aimlessly at sea. The sunset was setting behind him.

The sound of waves gently lapping in my ears. Kwon Taek Joo's body is still being supported by something.

Is it the remains of a kayak? But it's much tougher than that. It does not shake at all even in the constant rushing water, Kwon Taek Joo could feel the roughness touching his cheeks. His fingers wiggled, the wet sand in his hand.

Kwon Taek Joo tried to lift his drooping eyelids. It was pitch black all around and he couldn't see anything. He lay on his stomach like that for a while after waking up. He also didn't dare stand up.

The waves still crashed into Kwon Taek Joo's wet body. His limbs trembled as his senses awakened. He tried to move in every way but his body was frozen from cold and fatigue and did not move. Can this be called survival? The most reassuring thing is that Kwon Taek Joo is no longer floating at sea. Right now he doesn't know where this place is, but luckily he has arrived on the mainland.

He tried to lift his upper body. Sea water flowed from Kwon Taek Joo's hair and clothes. The lungs that had been compressed for a while calmed down and let out a deep breath. He drank so much cold and salty sea water that his stomach was churning and his head felt strange. Kwon Taek Joo slowly looked around. While unable to see even a centimeter ahead due to lack of light, suddenly there was a human presence.

There was the sound of someone stepping on the sand and approaching. Kwon Taek Joo tried to call for help but no sound came out. Looks like your vocal cords are damaged. Kwon Taek Joo squeezed his neck as hard as possible and screamed.

"Here!"

The voice was hoarse and broken. The sound of footsteps gradually approached and stopped in the distance. Kwon Taek Joo's arm that was happily raised suddenly stopped. Because the savior who appeared in the darkness was none other than Zhenya.

"Swimming in the ocean at night? Is that your special hobby, huh."

Probably just a nightmare. Otherwise, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't understand how he got here. Zhenya was still wearing the same clothes he went out in. Impossible. Has he returned to Ajinoki Island? Kwon Taek Joo quickly glanced around but the darkness made it impossible for him to distinguish the terrain.

"Get up if you don't want to freeze to death."

It's not incorrect either. Teeth collide and make clicking sounds. If this continues, Kwon Taek Joo will go straight to hell because of hypothermia. He staggered for a moment to stand up and then sat down again. He tried to stand up again but this time even the arm supporting his upper body lost its strength and slid and Kwon Taek Joo fell down helplessly.

Zhenya stood watching and then openly clicked his tongue. Then with a reluctant expression, he grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's elbow. Only the arm was pulled up, while the heavy body hung down like water-soaked cotton and still did not move. Zhenya shook his head and sighed then suddenly bent down. The smell of his body buried in the sea breeze becomes even stronger. Kwon Taek Joo's arm reflexively tried to throw him away but was quickly grabbed by him and he immediately slung him over his shoulder.

"You're more troublesome than animals."

Zhenya also did not forget to scold him. Every time he walked, Kwon Taek Joo's body shook. Sea water trapped in the body also flows down and wets the clothes. Zhenya didn't pay attention and just quietly walked towards the villa.

Kwon Taek Joo instinctively pressed his body into the soft fur coat, deeply burying his face that had lost all feeling due to the cold. The black waves winding behind the two people that were gradually getting farther away.

## Chapter 3.5 – Contrabass Solo

Hot water poured down, Kwon Taek Joo was thrown into the bathtub with his wet clothes intact. Warm energy quickly spread throughout his body. His lower jaw trembled even as he curled up tightly. His lips also turned pale.

Zhenya sat down in the bathtub and roughly pulled off Kwon Taek Joo's clothes. The wet shirt that stuck uncomfortably to his body was torn into pieces. He nonchalantly took off his pants. The zipper was ripped off, then he grabbed the bottom and turned it over. Kwon Taek Joo's lower body was lifted up in an instant and his upper body fell into the bathtub. A large amount of water rushed into his nose and ears. Kwon Taek Joo struggled but he could barely keep his upper body steady. The cough broke out intermittently.

"Cough."

The inside of his nose and throat quickly became irritated. As if that wasn't enough, Zhenya turned on the shower head hanging on the wall and sprayed water so that Kwon Taek Joo couldn't open his eyes. Even when bathing animals, no one does it like that bastard.

"Are you stupid or brave?"

Zhenya muttered in an unintelligible voice.

"I'm sorry, but human power alone is not enough to leave this island. In the sea nearby, there is a coastal current that pushes everything towards this island."

That's probably why he comfortably went out even after leaving Kwon Taek Joo alone here. Around the islands there are often strong belt currents. If they cannot penetrate that current, they will be swept away by waves and pushed back to the coast. Kwon Taek Joo didn't even know it and swam to death over and over again. He burst out laughing with frustration.

"Don't be so hard in the future. If I have to pick you up like today, it will be very troublesome."

Zhenya demanded with disdain and stood up. The showerhead he was holding fell into the bathtub, causing water to splash. Kwon Taek Joo turned his head away to avoid the water. The bathroom door made a loud noise and slammed shut.

Left alone, Kwon Taek Joo slowly stroked his face. His shaking fingers and toes still tingled from the numbness. The blood seemed to be circulating rapidly, spreading a tingling sensation throughout his body. The sudden change in temperature made his head dizzy.

Kwon Taek Joo's whole body became tired, his mind and body were so exhausted that all his will was gone. He just wanted to lie down in front of a warm fire.

Kwon Taek Joo lifted himself up, but even that alone made him stagger. The limbs attached to his body moved slowly as if they were no longer his. Kwon Taek Joo limped out wearing only a robe and untied belt.

All that was on his mind was the fireplace. Kwon Taek Joo was about to go into the living room but Zhenya suddenly blocked the path. Right now, even looking up at him was beyond his strength.

"What's wrong?"

The fatigue was evident in his weak voice. Zhenya calmly spoke up.

"Are you going to skip dinner?"

After dying and coming back to life, do we still have to eat rice? It's not that Kwon Taek Joo meant to be rude, but he really didn't have the strength to lift the spoon halfway. He waved his hands with an annoyed expression.

"Don't need it."

Zhenya suddenly let go of Kwon Taek Joo. He left him behind and disappeared into the kitchen alone. Kwon Taek Joo was about to continue walking when a scent entered his nose. Is it wrong?

His legs moved automatically, the closer he got to the kitchen, the clearer the scent became. An unprecedented craving for food made Kwon Taek Joo's jaws stiffen. His eyes looked straight at the pot in Zhenya's hand. There, a pungent smell that touches the hearts of Koreans is emanating. Looking at the packaging still lying next to the kitchen counter, Kwon Taek Joo knew for sure it was it.

Zhenya carried the pot from the stove to the sink and as if emptying out everything inside, he tilted the pot without hesitation. The moment the ramen broth dripped into the sink, Kwon Taek Joo ran over and grabbed his hand.

"I'll eat."

"..."

"I will eat."

Kwon Taek Joo conveyed his intentions again and took the pot away. He reached for any fork that was within reach and hurriedly scooped up the ramen. A few noodles hung from the fork, but before they could reach the tip of the tongue, they slid into the pot. It stays that way no matter how many times Kwon Taek Joo tries. Losing patience, he used scissors to cut the noodles into small pieces, then placed his mouth on the pot and drank the broth at the same time as the noodles.

Zhenya crossed his arms and observed Kwon Taek Joo, who was still limp like a corpse, then he turned his eyes to the ramen package. He picked it up and looked at it for a moment then tilted his head.

"Does it have drugs in it?"

Kwon Taek Joo lay down on the fur blanket and lit the fire. The rolling heat started from the back and slowly warmed the entire tired body. He was full and felt comfortable. Kwon Taek Joo even yawned peacefully. Who risked his life to escape this island?

Kwon Taek Joo didn't try to open his drooping eyelids, he used his arm as a pillow and fell into a deep sleep. His back slowly bulged and then deflated, making a loud breathing sound. Consciousness vaguely enters the world of the unconscious.

Soon Zhenya appeared. The unique scent makes it impossible for Kwon Taek Joo to recognize it. His shadow hovered in front of the fireplace. Then, a naked gaze landed on Kwon Taek Joo's face. He wondered if he had something to say, but once he closed his eyes. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't lift them anymore. He just wanted to be buried in this sweet, body melting feeling

He pretended not to know but the bottom was suddenly empty, because the robe had been raised above his waist and his buttocks were exposed.

"Go somewhere else, kid."

Kwon Taek Joo still closed his eyes and muttered. He waved his hands as if annoying, but Zhenya didn't mind and continued to grope the waist area right above his buttocks. No, it feels thicker and softer to the touch than a finger. Before Kwon Taek Joo had time to realize what it was, Zhenya climbed on his back.

"I told you I was tired."

Kwon Taek Joo pushed him away again with an annoyed look. Perhaps the words had an effect, the weight on his back decreased at the same time as Kwon Taek Joo's grimace also relaxed. Now you can sleep soundly without being disturbed. A satisfied smile spread across Kwon Taek Joo's lips.

Suddenly his shoulders jerked up while he was falling asleep, because something hard was being pushed between his buttocks. Its aura silently heated up uncomfortably. Kwon Taek Joo closed his eyes and turned around. but he still stubbornly followed and rubbed his head between his buttocks.

"Sleep comfortably. Sleeping while having sex isn't that bad."

Zhenya's voice gently reached his ears while Kwon Taek Joo's whole body was completely out of the control of his head that was still deep in a silent sleep.

He opened his ass and slowly put something in. Even in his sleep, the tingling pain still penetrated throughout Kwon Taek Joo's body.

"Um ah."

A soft groan came out, his body began to tremble slowly. The bottom was punctured, but his consciousness became more and more distant, Kwon Taek Joo gradually fell asleep.

When he opened his eyes, the sun had already reached the middle of the sky. Kwon Taek Joo opened his eyes feeling much more refreshed than when he fell asleep like he was unconscious. The sudden movements hurt his lower back and butt, but not enough to make him groan.

Kwon Taek Joo looked around bewilderedly and then suddenly stared at his crotch. Why is that possible? He tried to deny it and lifted the blanket. It's not a mistake. The immature object between his feet was raising its head upright.

Kwon Taek Joo didn't dream about anything last night, nor did he have anything to get an erection while sleeping. He was startled and searched for his memories. Kwon Taek Joo remembered he talked to Zhenya until before going to bed.

I remember he said it was okay to have sex and sleep and he didn't hesitate to put it in. Every time Kwon Taek Joo woke up halfway, that bastard was still on top of him. It seems that one time he clamped it on his thigh and pushed his hips. Kwon Taek Joo hesitantly checked the inside of his thighs, the bruises appeared clearly as if they were not an illusion. How much did he rub that disgusting thing to make it like this?

No, that doesn't matter now. Kwon Taek Joo did it again with Zhenya last night. His erect penis must have been the result of him, but other than that, he couldn't find any other reason. Kwon Taek Joo is so embarrassed that just because of a package of ramen, he physically merged with him.

"I can't believe it. I'm crazy. Really crazy!"

Kwon Taek Joo screamed and scratched his hair that was falling in front of his face. He doesn't want to admit it. But he couldn't pretend that nothing had happened. On the contrary, the more he denied it, the more

clearly he would remember what happened last night. Even the feeling of Zhenya's lips touching his skin came back vividly.

Kwon Taek Joo immediately left his seat and stood up. He wandered around the mansion without the slightest concern about putting his almost off robe back on. Zhenya was nowhere to be seen, it seemed he had boarded the helicopter again and left.

I don't know what the hell that guy was thinking, when facing him at the embassy, Kwon Taek Joo had a premonition of his doom. Zhenya had no reason to keep him alive. But he's still breathing, and since that day, he hasn't tried to hurt Kwon Taek Joo anymore.

Why so? Or did he think it would be more fun to kill him slowly instead of killing him with one shot? Or is it because Kwon Taek Joo's life is so insignificant compared to what Zhenya lost? I don't know half of it either. What are his real intentions?

Kwon Taek Joo was still repeating the doubts in his head when something soggy flowed down his thigh. Kwon Taek Joo looked down and gritted his teeth. No matter what his intentions were, he had to go take a shower first.

He rushed into the bathroom and turned on the shower. Kwon Taek Joo stood under the water looking into the mirror, a tattoo on the back of his waist caught his eye at first sight. Zhenya was marking him like a cow or a pig. No, it's not much of a difference. He was imprisoned in a cage surrounded by the sea on all four sides and only ate the food he gave him.

'This is just a contract between a lord and a servant.'

Kwon Taek Joo frowned angrily. The area of skin that was swollen immediately after the tattoo has now subsided, but the area around it is still mottled for another reason. That's because of the unusual hickeys. He clicked his tongue to finish the shower.

But he still couldn't relax, because that stupid mass of flesh still hadn't calmed down. Its aura is so good that its red head feels like it could hit his stomach.

Kwon Taek Joo placed his forehead against the wall and bowed his head slightly. He grabbed his hot penis and started stroking it roughly. The tingling sensation in the groin increased, the muscles that had been silent became visibly twisted in pleasure.

"Damned."

Kwon Taek Joo lowered his head more and more. His teeth clenched tightly, creating a grinding sound that made the veins in his lower jaw stand out. He stroked as if he wanted to tear off his excited flesh. Kwon Taek Joo's body was engulfed in hot arousal and kept clinging to his moving hand. Kwon Taek Joo's fingertips dug hard into the wall. Not long after, the lower part of the body bounced violently.

"Ah!"

Kwon Taek Joo roared like an animal and spewed semen. His body temperature quickly dropped, making him shiver. The front of his eyes turned white, causing dizziness. Kwon Taek Joo gradually regained his composure, a sudden feeling of loss of strength overtook him.

He looked at the semen scattered on the wall and laughed to himself. Who is the person who once bragged that even if there were only men in this world, he wouldn't plug into that hole? Just because you have sex in the back multiple times doesn't mean the front has to react as well. Is Kwon Taek Joo becoming gay?

He shook his head. Kwon Taek Joo didn't want to have to think about a problem that he had never even thought about once in his life. He finished washing his dirty body and left the bathroom. Masturbation was also work, and his stomach was immediately hungry.

Kwon Taek Joo went into the kitchen and rummaged through the cabinets but couldn't find the package of ramen he ate yesterday. All that could be found was Russian-style pre-cooked food. Frustrated, he put one of them in the microwave.

How long will it take this time? Kwon Taek Joo estimated the time Zhenya would return while waiting for the food to be heated. If he intended to come back during the day, he wouldn't have gone at noon

like this, so at least Zhenya wouldn't come back today. During that time, Kwon Taek Joo had to escape.

Ever since he got stuck on Ajinoki Island, all he could think about was running away. Kwon Taek Joo can't continue to live like this forever.

There are only two ways to get off this remote island with no boats or passersby. Ride a helicopter or use a boat equipped with a powerful engine. Kwon Taek Joo searched the mansion a few days ago and only found a kayak, and even that was destroyed. The only hope left is to fly.

The problem is where and how to get the raw materials. Kwon Taek Joo was immersed in thought. The wind blew from the open window for ventilation, the curtains fluttered gently. He looked at the scene meaninglessly and then opened his eyes wide. Suddenly a thought flashed through Kwon Taek Joo's mind.

Parasailing. Right. If it jumps far enough and is supported by the wind, it can fly a distance of 100 km. If the thrust is doubled thanks to skis in the snowy highlands, Kwon Taek Joo can completely reach Murmansk, 60 km away.

Thoughts continued to appear one after another, and paragliding preparation methods were quickly concretized. While rummaging through the mansion a few days ago, Kwon Taek Joo discovered an umbrella covering household items. It covers all the furniture in the warehouse, so the width is just enough. Kwon Taek Joo sometimes paraglides, so he clearly understands its structure and operating principles. It's worth trying to make your own umbrella at this time.

The microwave announced that it had finished cooking, but Kwon Taek Joo did not take the food out and went straight to the basement. The parachute fabric was still intact in the position he saw. A bundle of acrylic fibers was also found in a nearby toolbox.

New hope arose. Due to the geographical characteristics of the island, the wind blows strongly and non-stop from all directions. It is unfortunate that the new, good quality parachute fabric is used as a tarpaulin and right now, the surrounding area is covered. Because snow is also a blessing.

Kwon Taek Joo immediately squatted down and cut the parachute fabric out.

Zhenya returned the next morning. He returned earlier than expected, so Kwon Taek Joo stopped sewing and hurried upstairs. He went into the bathroom, threw away his dusty clothes and quickly washed himself before he came down from the roof.

Kwon Taek Joo wrapped himself in a towel and walked out, but Zhenya was standing right in front of the door.

"Oh, did you just come back?"

Kwon Taek Joo was embarrassed, he even raised his hand to say hello. Zhenya looked down at Kwon Taek Joo with a strange expression. He bit his hand in embarrassment because of Zhenya's suspicious expression as if he had eaten something by mistake.

Why did he come back so early? I have a lot of work to do today. After sewing the fabric, Kwon Taek Joo had to find something that could be used as a belt and connect it. And if he has time, he plans to look around the island to calculate wind speed and direction. It will take another three days of test flying but there is no sign that the Zhenya will be out again anytime soon.

While worrying about this and that, Kwon Taek Joo accidentally followed Zhenya. He pulled off his fur coat as he entered the living room. The coat slid over his back and fell to the floor. Then shirt buttons and collars were also continuously removed. I don't know if it was an illusion, but every time he took off something, his body odor seemed to become more intense.

Zhenya quickly sat down in the armchair in front of the fireplace. Kwon Taek Joo, who was following him, also stopped, looking hesitant as if he had something to say.

"What's up?"

"When are you leaving again?"

Zhenya just stared at Kwon Taek Joo without answering. He felt that Kwon Taek Joo seemed a bit strange. He pretended not to know and

fixed his eyes on Zhenya's lips. It was a look of worry and expectation.

"I won't go for a while. Going out is too troublesome."

"What's bothering you?"

"Headquarters is asking for you to be taken out. My brothers are also scolding me that you must be punished to set an example for the family's pride."

Zhenya grinned. Kwon Taek Joo was speechless so he kept his mouth shut. It wouldn't be strange if Zhenya immediately dragged him to FSB headquarters. The FSB knew that Kwon Taek Joo was a secret agent of South Korea and that he entered Russia in disguise for intelligence activities. Somehow, he even discovered the existence of the new weapon 'SS-29' and he was involved in the murder of a government official and even committed a terrorist act against his family, Bogdanov. Clearly his capture would be of the highest order and he would be lucky if there was not an immediate kill order upon discovery.

If caught, Kwon Taek Joo will at least be imprisoned for life and if necessary, he can be eliminated without anyone knowing. That is the situation of an intelligence officer caught in the process of carrying out an action. If he is lucky, Kwon Taek Joo may be released thanks to the exchange of spies between the two countries, but such a chance is not much because as far as he knows, there are no Russian spies detained in Korea.

The problem facing him was more complicated than he thought. Even if he got off this island somehow, another difficulty was waiting for him. Without support from headquarters, can Kwon Taek Joo escape all pursuit and return home safely? He suddenly felt doubtful.

But Kwon Taek Joo has no intention of giving up. As difficult as it was, there was still more hope than being locked up here waiting for Zhenya to get fed up with him and then be dragged to the FSB, or ending his life at the hands of that bastard sooner than that.

The immediate problem is that he won't be out for a while. Kwon Taek Joo must research countermeasures. Everything had better be prepared

in advance so that the next time Zhenya goes out he can escape immediately. To do so, it is important to catch him off guard.

Kwon Taek Joo secretly looked at Zhenya's face. He was closing his eyes but it seemed like he wasn't sleeping yet. He thought about secretly leaving while he was sleeping like that but then quickly gave up the idea. It's too reckless to do that to someone as sensitive as him. Or rather, even if it's reluctant, going with him will avoid suspicion.

"I'm so bored staying inside all the time, do you want to go fishing?"

Zhenya opened his closed eyes wide at the unexpected suggestion and then he didn't say a word but just stared at Kwon Taek Joo. It seemed like Zhenya was trying to see through his intentions, but even if it wasn't intentional, Kwon Taek Joo's face was still full of boredom. Being locked in the house with nothing to do was something he couldn't bear.

What's so surprising about two people spending some time together? Zhenya tilted his head as if he had heard strange words. Kwon Taek Joo tries seduction more actively.

"The water is so clear that there probably won't be any fish."

"Is it a bet?"

"You can say that."

"What do you have to bet?"

At times like this Kwon Taek Joo feels that Zhenya is truly a businessman. If he didn't have the money to bet, he probably wouldn't agree. But Kwon Taek Joo really has nothing to bet on.

"Right now I don't have anything to bet on, how about granting the winner's wish?"

"A wish?"

"Instead, no matter what you wish for, I won't complain."

"Can you bear it?"

Zhenya raised the corner of his mouth and asked again. Before starting, Kwon Taek Joo was sure that he would win. He always looked down on

others like that, which made his desire to defeat this bastard even more boiling.

"We'll see, kid."

## Chapter 3.6 – Contrabass Solo

The two stood side by side on a rock on the west side of the island and lowered their fishing rods. It is a relatively windy area. Buckets are placed right at your feet, the fish will be removed from the fishing rod and placed there. Kwon Taek Joo's bucket was full of salmon, pollock and herring, but for some reason, Zhenya's bucket remained empty, and his fishing rod was also motionless.

Kwon Taek Joo put the newly caught pollock in the bucket and checked the wind direction. A gentle west wind blew through most of the morning, and the weather was no different from any other day. The sun was up but not too hot and the amount of clouds was not too much. It is perfect for fishing but not suitable for paragliding.

Meanwhile, the fishing rod jerked up again.

"Just now, you took the bait."

Kwon Taek Joo muttered to himself as if for Zhenya to hear and then pulled the fishing line. A cod as big as a forearm appeared. When he threw it into the bucket, the other fish that were dying were suddenly startled and jumped away. There's no more room in the bucket. When Kwon Taek Joo was thinking about what to do, it seemed like a look was staring at him. He turned his head and met Zhenya's eyes.

"What's wrong? Does the fishing rod have a problem, I change it for you? Or the seat?"

He pretended to look pitiful and chuckled. Zhenya's pride must have been deeply hurt because he turned his head away without answering. Then he quietly glared at his fishing rod that was lying still. Does anyone fish that way? Kwon Taek Joo couldn't hide his bright smile.

He threw the fishing rod again. The conversation was interrupted for such a long time. There was only a breeze between the two of them and they quietly watched the sea.

It's getting cold. Kwon Taek Joo wanted to go back because he had already visualized the terrain and wind direction on the west side of the island. But it seems Zhenya doesn't think so. Should he wait until he catches a fish as big as a human? Kwon Taek Joo estimated the time again. The fishing line was pulled down again.

The severity this time is significantly different. His body leaned forward on its own. Kwon Taek Joo quickly shifted his weight back and began to hold tightly to his prey that was trying to escape. The caught fish struggled violently. The winding water stream also breaks into pure white. It was clearly a big fish. Kwon Taek Joo struggled for a while and then, without knowing when, Zhenya rolled his eyes to watch that scene.

He smirked and reeled in the fishing line as hard as he could. Midway, Kwon Taek Joo loosened the fishing line a bit and then rolled it up to flexibly pull the prey. Then a moment later, he used the elasticity of his belt to lift the fishing rod.

Soon the stubborn fish appeared. Looking back now, it was not one fish but two fish. Kwon Taek Joo happily sang and said, "Kill two birds with one stone." As soon as Kwon Taek Joo made eye contact with Zhenya, he also appeared openly arrogant.

"My bucket is full, so can I put some into yours?"

This time Zhenya didn't say anything. Kwon Taek Joo looked serious while humming a song and separated the fish from the fishing rod. Knowing this, he wouldn't have had to work so hard on sewing. If he wins the bet, Kwon Taek Joo will make his wish and it's nothing fancy, all Zhenya has to do is give him the keys to the helicopter. Just the thought of leaving Zhenya on this island and going out alone made him overcome with emotion.

The guy's fishing rod that was glancing at was still silent, while he himself was also intently looking at his fishing rod that had no news. That sincerity is pitiful.

"Hey, We should go back now."

"Shush."

"No way. Do you know how many kilograms of fish you have to catch at once to win?"

Zhenya signaled Kwon Taek Joo to be quiet, his eyes still facing the sea water. Is there something there? He looked at his fishing rod without expecting anything. Not sure at first, Kwon Taek Joo quickly noticed a dark shadow floating below. Is it a coral reef? Because of its unrealistic size, that was the first thing he could think of. It leisurely hovered near the fishing rod and then suddenly stopped moving. At the same time Zhenya's fishing rod began to bend down without hesitation.

The force to hold and the force to pull need to be compatible with each other. The water surface, which was calm a moment ago, suddenly curved and then broke into a white light. The fishing line looked like it would break at any moment. No, it looks like the fishing rod might break. Kwon Taek Joo was able to loosen the rope a bit but Zhenya could not. Faced with the unknown existence opposing him, Zhenya resolutely pulled the rope.

The next moment, the fishing rod's float quickly returned. When the tightrope suddenly slackens, the bait that is swinging wildly from side to side slides out. Zhenya did not miss the moment when the reins were released and wrapped around the rope immediately. Then he pulled the fish that was biting the hook using only the strength from his belt.

The water splashed and something huge emerged. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't even wipe the water off his face and could only look blankly. The living fish that was confronting Zhenya made a loud noise and fell down. Even then it continued to bang its tail against the stone floor.

Zhenya without hesitation stabbed the knife into the fish's gills. Red blood flowed out. He didn't stop there, he turned the fish over. The big fish struggled for a while longer and then gradually shrouded itself. That moment the shape of the fish caught Kwon Taek Joo's eyes. It is about 150 cm long and weighs at least 40 kg.

Zhenya threw the big fish that was about to suffocate at Kwon Taek Joo. He caught it but it was too heavy so he dropped it. Even though he saw it with both eyes and even if he was touched for a moment, he still

couldn't believe the truth. Zhenya looked at the bewildered Kwon Taek Joo and then smiled apologetically.

"Now I have to make a wish."

Kwon Taek Joo took off his cloak with a confused expression. The shirt slipped off his body and fell to the floor. Zhenya sat on the other side of the bed watching the scene. His upturned mouth seemed to foretell the hardships to come.

His wish was too clear. All Kwon Taek Joo has only a healthy body, and that's the only thing he's interested in. It's just a matter of how many obnoxious tricks will be added.

Kwon Taek Joo sat still on the bed facing Zhenya. Now being naked in front of him was nothing to be ashamed of, but he wasn't sure if he would still be like that after hearing his request. In an uneasy mood, Kwon Taek Joo planned to place another bet.

"You said you wouldn't do that to the same person more than twice."

"It used to be like that."

"As I recall, we've had sex at least three times, right?"

"There's no other way, because right now I have nowhere to plug it in."

"Won't the problem be solved if you didn't come to this island?"

Zhenya laughed as if that didn't change anything, then without giving Kwon Taek Joo a moment to think further, he suddenly demanded.

"Get down on all fours."

"What?"

"Don't you understand? Bend down like an animal."

"Hey, that.."

"You said you won't complain."

Why did Kwon Taek Joo add that condition? Damn stupid mouth, damn it.

He looked at Zhenya with his eyes asking if that was really his wish but he showed no signs of backing down. That bastard's hobby is really dirty.

Kwon Taek Joo still hesitated, Zhenya lowered his chin and looked at him urging him. He scratched his head and said. "It's crazy," then reluctantly turned over. Kwon Taek Joo just lay down on his stomach but did not dare to stretch out his arms and legs, his clenched fists trembled with shame.

"Don't like it? I say another wish?"

He silently urged. For some reason, Kwon Taek Joo had a premonition that his other wish might be worse than what was happening. He clenched his molars and slowly lifted his feet. The arms are stretched out and the prostate like a four legged animal. Zhenya stared at him from behind then tilted his head.

"Spread your legs, I can't see anything."

Damn it, what else does this bastard want to see?

The sound of grinding teeth rang out. There's no good in holding back, it's better that this moment passes quickly. Kwon Taek Joo tried to separate her legs. The penis that was curled up on the inside of the thigh slid out.

Zhenya rested his chin on his arm, enjoying the sight. He slowly swept his hand down the plump buttocks, then to the firm thigh muscles, then moved to the smooth butt bone and the hanging flesh below. Kwon Taek Joo's shaking limbs further stimulated his desire to conquer. Soon, his blue eyes were filled with a burning desire.

Zhenya slowly stood up from his seat. The cloak on his shoulders also slowly fell off.

He covered Kwon Taek Joo's prone body while biting his neck hard. Kwon Taek Joo was startled and puffed out his chest, but Zhenya still didn't move.

"Ah."

He bit harder on his neck as if to punish his useless resistance. a block of hard flesh was also continuously pushed between his tight buttocks. Kwon Taek Joo's body twisted as if he folded under brutal pressure, his lungs were heavy and he was constantly out of breath, his whole body tilted forward. At that moment, the part of the penis that was inserted was pulled out, then as if dissatisfied, Zhenya grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's arm and yanked it towards him. The flesh column was pulled out, leaving only the tip which was immediately penetrated deep into the root.

Zhenya's pelvis hit Kwon Taek Joo's butt, making a loud noise. Kwon Taek Joo's thighs clenched at the horrible feeling of penetration. He still wasn't used to that terrible feeling even though he had experienced it several times.

"Ah!"

Kwon Taek Joo lowered his head with a choked groan. Zhenya held tightly the back of his neck that kept shrinking, he was blind with a desire as a male in breeding season.

With the genitals inserted, Kwon Taek Joo's ears turned red. Zhenya licked vigorously at his ear where the hair stood up. The ears quickly become hot and clammy.

Kwon Taek Joo turned his head away to avoid that itchy and embarrassing skinship scene while muttering "Don't do that"

"Okay, foreplay is a luxury in sexual intercourse."

Immediately after that, the penis was pulled out, leaving only the glans to plunge back in. Kwon Taek Joo's body was pushed up at the same time. Zhenya didn't even like that, he thrust continuously as if he wanted to flatten his bulging buttocks and then rubbed hard to make the joined bodies wrap tighter.

"Ah, ah!"

Kwon Taek Joo felt like his stomach was being devoured. Zhenya did not let go of him, but he pulled his waist away and pushed hard inside. His body trembled as if there was an electric shock. Before that shiver

disappeared, Zhenya let go of Kwon Taek Joo and then quickly poked him below as if he were riding a horse. The naked rubbing sound clearly came from the skin that was continuously being hit. The echo seemed to resonate deep inside the body. If he continued stabbing like that, Kwon Taek Joo's body would be split in half.

Kwon Taek Joo's limbs seemed to freeze in an attempt to escape the cruelty pouring into his senses like a waterfall. The heat immediately spread to the back of my ears and neck and all over my back. Zhenya pressed harder on Kwon Taek Joo and licked his dry lips.

"Cry, rabbit."

Kwon Taek Joo laid on the bed staring at the ceiling. No matter how he accepted the outcome of the bet, there must be something in his head to be able to accept Zhenya's dirty request so obediently. A belated regret came rushing out of him.

This time it was almost consensual, clearly not rape. Kwon Taek Joo knew he could lose the bet. What Zhenya called a 'wish' was obviously not going to be pure. However, determined to escape, he stuck his head into his pillow.

It's frustrating and embarrassing. It's a shame that Kwon Taek Joo was so arrogant and in the end he was crushed by Zhenya.

But that's it. Kwon Taek Joo is no longer shocked and angry like before. Has he been hurt so much that having sex with Zhenya is no longer a problem? This may be a defense mechanism to maintain mental integrity.

In fact, this was a common problem in all-male prisons or on ships on long voyages and in the military. Surely Kwon Taek Joo is used to this because he is stranded on a deserted island and is in a special situation where the only existence is the two of them together. Humans are inherently creatures that are strongly influenced by their environment.

After all, having sex with Zhenya has no meaning at all so there was no need for him to add meaning to the meaningless act. Kwon Taek Joo doesn't need to try to rationalize it.

He was clearing his troubled mind when a sound that Kwon Taek Joo could not recognize rang out. It's a pretty familiar tune. It's not a strong enough tone to immediately immerse yourself in it. It's simple rather than flashy, and it's quiet and gentle but has a heavy power.

Kwon Taek Joo felt a deep sense of *deja vu*. When did he hear it? He recalled the memory and realized that the first time Kwon Taek Joo came into contact with a melody like this was also in this house. It seemed that what he thought was a dream was actually reality.

Kwon Taek Joo raised himself up and listened. This is clearly a stringed instrument, but it does not appear to be a violin or cello. Is it a viola?

Kwon Taek Joo got out of bed as if he was being pulled by something. It was dark. He pulled the blanket to cover his naked body and did not turn on the light but just moved his steps

The show is continuing upstairs. Kwon Taek Joo swept his hand on the wall and then walked up the dark stairs, the melody becoming more vivid with each step he passed.

The footsteps that seemed to be walking in a dream finally stopped. His vision widened in an instant. The moonlight through the large window shines onto the sound of the contrabass. The vibrations echoing from the huge body of the instrument touched his heart.

The long white fingers played on the strings and the signature platinum blonde hair shone brighter than ever, but the expression of the person who was breaking the

low

chords suddenly looked extremely lonely. Kwon Taek Joo was so enchanted and immersed in the illusion created by the light that he forgot who was performing it.

He leaned his heavy head against the wall and sat down. Kwon Taek Joo wasn't too familiar with music, but he knew people rarely played contrabass solos. It is a musical instrument that is often optimized in ensembles to create harmony rather than performed alone. The stubbornness and slow melody emanating from that giant body looked

so strong and masculine, except for a feeling of deep sadness creeping in somewhere.

Kwon Taek Joo closed his eyes, immersing himself in emotions. A monster without emotions knows how to make such beautiful sounds? The melody is neither harsh nor intense, making the atmosphere ambiguous. Kwon Taek Joo's eyelids gradually became heavy, he gently fell into a comfortable sleep like on his mother's back on a sunny spring day.

The music stopped not long after but Kwon Taek Joo didn't notice it at all. A huge shadow covered his head after Kwon Taek Joo fell asleep.

Zhenya stretched out his long arm to brush Kwon Taek Joo's hair. His face, which had always been stiff, was now relaxed. He looked down at that strange face for a long moment.

Not long after, the loose bangs fell down to cover Kwon Taek Joo's eyes. Zhenya returns to perform with the contrabass.

A low, gentle melody echoed in the space.

## Chapter 3.7 – Contrabass Solo

"What's over there?"

Kwon Taek Joo asked while eating breakfast. Actually, it's not a question out of curiosity. Zhenya was drinking coffee and turned his head to look at Kwon Taek Joo's arm. He could see a few trees in the distance outside the window and beyond that was birch forest.

Zhenya shrugged as if he didn't care. Really hard. Kwon Taek Joo had to check the terrain of that place to find the optimal spot for skydiving.

But Zhenya shows no signs of going out. If Kwon Taek Joo said he would walk alone, he would definitely be suspicious. There's no other way.

"There's nothing to do, how about we go hunting together?"

Zhenya raised his eyes again at the unexpected proposal and looked at Kwon Taek Joo. He constantly proactively suggesting to do

this or that thing like this must be extremely strange to him. As if trying to guess what his real intentions were, Zhenya stared intently at Kwon Taek Joo.

"If I don't have a way to kill time. I'll die of boredom."

Only that is sincere. There wasn't a single book in the house. There is no sound, let alone an internet-connected computer or TV. Moreover, the only conversation partner, Zhenya, spoke very little and Kwon Taek Joo didn't even have anything to share with that guy. One day feels like a year. No prison could be more desolate than that.

Despite his best efforts, Zhenya did not show much interest. He is someone who likes to be alone, so how can he know the suffering of abandoned people?

Kwon Taek Joo decided to change methods. To deal with an insolent animal, you must gently scratch its belly.

"Tiger skins are everywhere in the house. Don't tell me you caught them all."

The compliment was a bit vague, but it was enough to make Zhenya's chin quietly tilt up. Those words can be understood as compliments even though Kwon Taek Joo did not intend to say compliments. Zhenya tilted his head as if wanting him to say more. "How many are there? Why don't you continue?" His chest opened up, his silent mouth drawing an arc.

"Do you want my body to play with you that much?"

What.?

Kwon Taek Joo's face immediately turned red at the cheeky voice. If Kwon Taek Joo really wanted to, all he had to do was lift himself up.

"Is this also a bet?"

Zhenya asked again before leaving the kitchen. Last night's embarrassment suddenly came back to Kwon Taek Joo's mind. He swallowed his tears and nodded. Instead of being angry, you will win. Even if Kwon Taek Joo cannot defeat Zhenya with strength, he is still very confident that he will not lose to him in accuracy and speed.

Gunshots rang out across the quiet snowfield. The birds flew away in surprise. Even small animals quickly disappeared. Snow accumulated on tree branches then fell to the ground as if the sleeping forest suddenly woke up.

Kwon Taek Joo ran through the forest. He was chasing a reindeer that was peeling and eating tree bark. That was also the first time he saw it in real life. Kwon Taek Joo knew that the reindeer's size was huge, but he was still stunned by its 2m tall body. The reindeer galloped and kicked the ground with its long, strong legs in a risky way as if its giant horns were about to get caught in the branches.

The forest has not been affected by human hands so it is still pristine, with only animal footprints across the snowfields. Trees naturally fall down and then grow back up on their own. If you carelessly place your foot on the wrong foot in a place like this, it is very easy to get injured

by tripping over wooden cracks that have been buried under snow. It's not easy to climb over a fallen tree, the wild forest seems wary of strangers and places traps everywhere.

The reindeer disappeared among the dense forest and occasionally jumped up to show off its presence. Just when it seemed like it would soon be caught, it quickly got out of range. Those flickering movements made Kwon Taek Joo impatient. He recklessly ran after it for a while then suddenly bent one knee and sat down. It seemed faster to shoot it from afar than to continue the never-ending pursuit.

With the gun pointed forward, Kwon Taek Joo held his breath and waited for the reindeer to jump again. He focused his attention on the target, the noise around him seemed to temporarily subside. Kwon Taek Joo narrowed his eyes and pulled the trigger halfway.

The reindeer that had disappeared behind the tree suddenly appeared. Kwon Taek Joo without hesitation aimed at its head and pulled the trigger.

The bullets returned with a bang, but the reindeer quickly changed direction and Kwon Taek Joo only hit one horn.

"Damned."

He sighed. Meanwhile, Zhenya overtook Kwon Taek Joo and chased the reindeer.

Kwon Taek Joo was about to run after him when he suddenly stopped. Meanwhile, the distance between him and Zhenya became increasingly distant. He suddenly remembered the mission he had forgotten because he was engrossed in hunting. This was not simply to kill time, but he also had to learn about the terrain characteristics and wind direction of the forest to escape.

But now it seems that is not necessary. The two of them were quite far away from the villa. Zhenya was excited about the hunt and was busy chasing the reindeer, leaving Kwon Taek Joo alone. In terms of distance, he is closer to the villa than he is.

What will happen if Kwon Taek Joo comes back like this? If only he could return to the villa before Zhenya caught up with him and boarded his helicopter like that.

What will happen if Kwon Taek Joo comes back like this? If only he could return to the villa before Zhenya caught up with him and boarded his helicopter like that.

Kwon Taek Joo opened his eyes wide and ran away even before he was sure. He desperately flailed his limbs while cutting through the rising wind as fast as he was running. Just the fact that Kwon Taek Joo turned his back on Zhenya was enough to make his vision

waiver

uneasily and his heart beat even faster, his legs felt like they would twist and fall at any moment. Kwon Taek Joo is now no different from a reindeer being chased.

He ran away unconsciously. Kwon Taek Joo really didn't think and just ran blindly. The back of his thighs and calves quickly ached, but he didn't have time to stop. He must escape after failing once. Kwon Taek Joo must run farther, faster, before Zhenya could notice his absence.

The next moment, a gunshot rang out in the distance. Kwon Taek Joo suddenly stopped in surprise. He turned to look, but Zhenya was nowhere to be seen. However, he was certain that the reindeer was killed by that shot.

Kwon Taek Joo hesitantly took a step back, then gritted his teeth and ran away faster. Now the person who just finished hunting will notice your absence. Just imagining Zhenya coming to him was enough to send chills down Kwon Taek Joo's spine.

Soon a snowfield opened before him. It is both an entrance to the forest and an escape route. Kwon Taek Joo ran for a long time but he still had to cross that distance. The trees have protected his body until now, but now Kwon Taek Joo will have nowhere to hide. No matter how fast he ran, it was difficult to avoid the flying bullets, so he had to quickly get out of range.

Just a little more. Just a little more.

Kwon Taek Joo cheered himself non-stop. Suddenly a sign reached his ears. Maybe it was the sound of the wind, but it was different.

Something was penetrating and damaging the dense birch trees. Is it a reindeer? No, it's bigger and more agile than that.

Kwon Taek Joo felt a deep sense of *deja vu*. It seems like a similar situation happened in the past. Immediately, the first day he arrived in Russia appeared in his mind

, similar feelings when he wandered through dark alleys after being kidnapped by strangers.

It's that bastard.

Kwon Taek Joo could clearly hear Zhenya's collar rubbing against the bushes. It was even scarier than the previous gunfire. The trees swayed gently, warning of his approach. Damn it, he was quickly leaving the forest.

The snow field reflected sunlight, making it impossible for Kwon Taek Joo to open his eyes. All he could hear with his ears was his own panting. His heart raced and nausea rose to his throat. Even when his feet sank into the snow. Kwon Taek Joo still ran like he was crawling on all fours.

Even when he was in the special forces, Kwon Taek Joo did not run that hard in the special forces physical test, or even when chasing enemies or being chased back. Because your life is not threatened in those situations.

But the situation is different now. Kwon Taek Joo doesn't know how the days will pass if he continues to be detained by Zhenya. His whole body exerted superhuman strength like never before, stirring up the freezing air and trampling on the slippery snow surface.

The back of his head kept tensing up, though. Kwon Taek Joo did not dare look back, the thick snow secretly hid the presence of the pursuer.

His right foot accidentally stepped deeper than expected, causing him to stagger. In that moment, something passed over his shoulder and ear with an explosion.

Kwon Taek Joo's whole body froze. If he had staggered a beat later, his ears would have blown off and his head would have exploded.

"Next time I won't miss it."

A warning from someone running towards me. Zhenya must have run a considerable distance without stopping but his cold voice did not waver in the slightest.

What should I do?

Kwon Taek Joo still couldn't hear his footsteps so he couldn't feel how far away he was. He couldn't move in a hurry. The arm holding the shotgun tightened, sweat formed in his palm, his heart beat so fast it made him dizzy. Kwon Taek Joo doesn't have the confidence to try anything, but there's nothing more desperate than standing here waiting for him.

Kwon Taek Joo tried to the end as if meeting a tiger on a deserted road. Ignoring Zhenya's warning, he ran away again. It was a risky decision. His limbs instantly went numb, cold sweat poured from his pores, he gritted his teeth with desperation to become whatever he wanted to be.

Soon, three or four gunshots rang out from behind. Kwon Taek Joo closed his eyes tightly because he thought he was going to die. But he didn't feel any pain for a while, Kwon Taek Joo ran with both feet again with eyes wide open. An unusual sound rang out somewhere while Kwon Taek Joo was still skeptical. Is it an illusion or the ground also seems to be shaking little by little.

Some giant existence is turning around. Kwon Taek Joo unconsciously stopped and turned his head towards the direction where the noise originated. He was immediately startled by the snow peaks lined up like partially separated screens sliding down the slope. It's an avalanche.

Kwon Taek Joo had to run away. His mind was filled with that idea but his legs didn't move. He couldn't even think of raising his arms and

covering his eyes. Then a wave of white snow hit Kwon Taek Joo.

The surrounding area was silent again after a period of commotion. All traces on the snowfield were completely erased. Zhenya walked over it. Bright red blood oozed from the neck of the reindeer that was draped over his shoulder. Drops of blood embroidered on the pure white snow field create a vivid color contrast.

Zhenya nonchalantly passed the point where Kwon Taek Joo disappeared and then he stopped for a while in a quite far place. How long has he been waiting? Suddenly a hand poked out through the snow. That hand was clawing at the thick snow, desperate to survive. Zhenya stood watching for a moment then reached out his hand, and the desperate hand grabbed his. Zhenya pulled with force. Soon, Kwon Taek Joo, who was covered in snow, was pulled up onto the snowfield.

"Ah Ha. Cough, cough."

Kwon Taek Joo exhaled the breath that had been choking for a while and his whole body trembled. He felt nauseous because he inhaled too much. Kwon Taek Joo shook his head and brushed the snow off his body. His head throbbed. This time he really almost died.

"It Looks like I won again."

Zhenya whispered while looking down at Kwon Taek Joo who was panting. His face suddenly stiffened.

Kwon Taek Joo's hand uncomfortably pushed his chin away and he fell onto the bed. Zhenya stopped moving and looked down at his grim face. There were dried tear stains on his wet eyes, deep wrinkles formed between his eyebrows, and even thick veins appeared on his forehead. Kwon Taek Joo's dry lips opened helplessly and let out a shallow breath. He relaxed his hand on his neck. His chest, shiny with sweat. moved hard and slowly, and his normally grim face relaxed slightly.

He slowly tilted his upper body towards Kwon Taek Joo. As he entered deeper, Kwon Taek Joo's body twisted slightly. Chest to chest, shoulder to shoulder tightly. His body temperature and pulse could be clearly felt through the skin when touching each other.

He quietly licked Kwon Taek Joo's wet eyes and then used the tip of his tongue to trace her sharp eyelashes. Tastes salty. Then he gently licked Kwon Taek Joo's lower lip.

"Why is that?"

No matter how many times he asked himself, he still didn't know. It is nothing more than an interest in strange and difficult to grasp things. What if he did this? If he did it differently, what would happen? This is just an object of curiosity, he will not regret throwing it away when he runs out of inspiration.

Kwon Taek Joo is not the only object he is interested in until now. As soon as the short-term interest fades, he will look for a new joy. In his relationships with women, he had never felt interested in the same person more than twice.

The moment Kwon Taek Joo reappeared, he became an exception. As soon as he received the call that 'Anastasia' had been blown away by his hands, Zhenya had goosebumps. An uncontrollable shiver erupted from his head and spread throughout his body. He laughed because he was thinking about hunting him down.

He never lets go of his prey. He will chase it relentlessly and slowly suffocate it. The object he is interested in will be conquered by any means and will be eliminated without hesitation if it does not submit. That's his way.

However, Kwon Taek Joo is still alive and well. He was an existence that should have died three times over. Why is he so comfortable with him?

If Kwon Taek Joo were to live, it would be a little troublesome but not unpleasant. Even though he constantly tries to escape, if he is caught he will be obedient for a while. He is quite pleasant in eating and knows how to say cheerful words. Kwon Taek Joo's biggest advantage is that he is so tough that he won't break even if he controls him to his liking. It was fun to hold him back even when he was fierce with pride. It's nice to see a body that seemed like no needle could pierce it finally become limp.

Is it like having a pet? That's right, it's not so different from raising an animal that's not easy to tame. He only goes out when he can't avoid it, comes home early and hangs around grocery stores he's not interested in, it's all part of it. The more you look at something, the more attached you will be to it. What's new is that Zhenya has never raised anything before.

He put aside what he was thinking and moved his waist where it had stopped. Kwon Taek Joo's drooping body also swayed. A strong and sharp jawline, a prominent neckline, a straight collarbone with a busty chest underneath and abdominal muscles that vibrate with each breath. There wasn't a single corner that wasn't masculine. but for some reason, his mouth kept drooling.

The deeper you penetrate, the more the thirst below increases. No matter how much he shook Kwon Taek Joo's unconscious body, his anger still could not be released. He placed his knees under Kwon Taek Joo's thighs and lifted him up and pulled him closer to the end of the bed. He stretched his body and pushed it into Kwon Taek Joo's weak body. As he inserted deeper, his body felt like it was being crumpled. His penis was wrapped nicely and warmly inside, writhing violently.

"Haa."

Zhenya enjoyed the tightness and then let out a long breath, everything before his eyes seemed to spin for a moment. He rubbed hard where their bodies interlocked and dug deeper into it, Kwon Taek Joo groaned. He grabbed his arm, which was still reflexively waving chaotically, then he pressed his own huge, ferocious muscle mass into him mercilessly. Every time the swollen hole scratched his hot genitals, his blue eyes were engulfed in a fiery red.

Unable to control his own excitement, he pressed his lips to Kwon Taek Joo's face, ear, and chin. His mind was so chaotic that he couldn't bear to do nothing. His body, which was so hard that it caused him pain, now became tight and mesmerizingly soft. He reveled in having expanded and having tamed a body that no one had ever touched before.

He pushed his waist and devoured Kwon Taek Joo's inner meat. Looking down at Kwon Taek Joo who was being stabbed by him, the corner of

his mouth curled up.

"It would have been a shame to have to kill him."

Zhenya lit a cigar. The spicy scent spreads into the quiet space with each inhalation and exhalation. Kwon Taek Joo suddenly opened his eyes. His eyelids felt heavy as if a stone had been placed on them. His throat was dry and it

hurts

. Kwon Taek Joo screamed until he passed out so it's not so surprising.

He tried to stand up but his body refused to obey. Kwon Taek Joo rolled his eyes and saw Zhenya sitting on the bed with his back turned. He tried calling him but no sound came out.

"?"

Zhenya, who was lighting a cigar, suddenly glanced back, because Kwon Taek Joo had patted him on the back. His hand swayed in the air as if he was longing for something. He looked intently at Kwon Taek Joo's still moving hand and then handed over the half-smoked cigar. Kwon Taek Joo let out a shallow breath as if that wasn't what he wanted when Zhenya hesitantly stuffed the cigar between his lips. Kwon Taek Joo was not satisfied, but he also did not throw away the cigar from his lips.

He slowly raised his body while pressing the acupressure point on his throbbing head. Zhenya lit a new cigar. The bedroom was quickly filled with acrid cigarette smoke. A violent cough erupted from Kwon Taek Joo's dry throat.

I thought I was going to die last night. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't forget Zhenya's face when he pulled him out of the snow. A cold face he had never seen. He could even feel the anger in the hand gripping the back of his neck. Was he angry because he was lied to?

Kwon Taek Joo's still throat suddenly ached. There was no feeling from the waist down, but he knew he was still alive. The ferocious beast that appeared all night seemed to be trying to tame another spoiled mountain beast. It was not a demonstration of coaching ability but an act of unilaterally trying to create rank and superiority. Zhenya's rough

and harsh gestures made Kwon Taek Joo realize the extent of his perception of people. It was clear that he considered people other than himself to be creatures to be subjugated.

Kwon Taek Joo's lower back hurt just because he turned a little. Can you get bruises during sex? Looking back at his body, there is no corner where Kwon Taek Joo is not determined enough to ask such a question. He groaned for a long time before sitting up straight, leaning his back against the headboard and letting out a sigh.

"I saw a lot of slopes yesterday so it would be great to go skiing."

Zhenya looked confused. Skiing looking pale and haggard like this? Right now, even walking on his own feet seems impossible.

"It's still worth living, right?"

"It's better than staying here and going crazy."

"Prison is better than here

." Kwon Taek Joo muttered. Once again, Zhenya's eyes were still looking straight at him. The look in her eyes made it seem like Kwon Taek Joo's dark inner thoughts would be exposed immediately. He quietly averted his eyes and took a deep breath of his cigar, Kwon Taek Joo even scolded the arrogant guy who never responded obediently.

"Don't pretend to be upset, kid. I'm enjoying myself too."

"Did you do the best you could?"

Zhenya laughed and provoked. The consecutive losses in the previous two bets were due to the impact of variables. This time will be different. It must be different.

"Just show off. Looking at it like this, I still get dozens of business cards asking if I want to try becoming a skier."

"Ah ha.?"

Zhenya seemed to be completely in disbelief, he really always looked down on others.

"This is a bet, understand?"

Kwon Taek Joo seduced him again with his indifferent reaction. Zhenya let out a mischievous laugh.

"Do you keep begging because you want me to have sex with you?"

How did the other head come to such a disturbing conclusion?

"Get your ass ready."

Kwon Taek Joo growled and raised his middle finger. After successfully provoking, Zhenya appeared satisfied. The back of him going to get ski equipment looked quite happy. For some reason, his gait seemed lighter than usual and his shoulders seemed to move comfortably. It must be just an illusion.

## Chapter 3.8 – Contrabass Solo (18+)

Kwon Taek Joo rubbed his eyes and ran as hard as he could. The wide and short Siberian ski runs slide smoothly ev snow-covered fields. He rushed through the tall trees as if he was attacking it head-on. After a long slide, a feeling of suspense spread every time Kwon Taek Joo jumped up. His mind, burning with the desire to win, was relieved and he began to enjoy the joy of skiing. I don't know how long it's been since he's been immersed in excitement like this.

Two people glided along the mountainside, one in front and the other behind. The faster he accelerated, the more difficult it became for Kwon Taek Joo to breathe. A sharp pain rose from his chest but even that felt good. All toxins in the body seem to be eliminated just by breathing this clear air.

Kwon Taek Joo also did not forget to grasp the surrounding terrain while skiing. He carefully considered which ridge to use so that he could achieve a strong thrust. It couldn't be a hill that would collapse with just a few shotgun blasts like yesterday. It would be great if it was a high hill, but the most important thing is the wind, you have to have the wind pushing your back to fly far.

Kwon Taek Joo continued to accelerate while flexibly dodging trees and rocks that were no different from obstacles. Zhenya was nowhere to be seen. He looked around for a moment to search for him and then quickly gave up. Not having him around was an advantage. Kwon Taek Joo carefully checked the areas he could take advantage of that he might have missed.

Of course, if Kwon Taek Joo wins this bet, paragliding will be useless. He tried to endure any of Zhenya's demands to win one day. Kwon Taek Joo had accepted everything so far so he wouldn't be able to ignore his request.

Just imagining Zhenya reluctantly handing back the helicopter keys made Kwon Taek Joo feel excited. This time he will definitely win. With

that strong confidence. Kwon Taek Joo moved forward.

Victory or defeat will end when either person reaches the predetermined point. Kwon Taek Joo dares to ensure his victory. He had never lost a ski bet, unless there were unreasonable variables, otherwise even a monster like Zhenya would have a hard time beating him.

Kwon Taek Joo increased his speed and ran down the steep slope. Still no sign of Zhenya, he must have tripped on a rock and fainted.

Now just turn the corner. Kwon Taek Joo used his stick to hit the snow hard and speed up. The thighs and calves that balance the body stiffen as if about to explode. But victory is right in front of your eyes, so it's okay to be so painful. A satisfied smile spread across Kwon Taek Joo's face.

He's won.

Just as Kwon Taek Joo confidently turned the corner, something flew above his head. When Kwon Taek Joo accidentally raised his head, a dark shadow fell over his face. It's Zhenya.

"Ah."

Kwon Taek Joo unconsciously exclaimed softly. The snowballs created by his dash were gradually increasing in size and rolling down. He had to avoid it but if he flinched even for a moment then Kwon Taek Joo would lose to Zhenya. He gritted his teeth and endured.

A snowball suddenly fell on Kwon Taek Joo, turning him into a living snowman. Zhenya has landed safely and is accelerating forward. Kwon Taek Joo belatedly tried to chase, but the collision with the snowball caused his speed to decrease. Kwon Taek Joo could not close the gap.

Zhenya smoothly turned into the rendezvous point and easily pulled out the pole planted there. Kwon Taek Joo arrived a little later. He ran and shook his head to brush off the snow, but his whole body was still covered in snow. Kwon Taek Joo angrily threw the stick like a polar bear fishing for salmon. That's why Zhenya suddenly

burst out laughing.

"Ahaha!"

Kwon Taek Joo's eyes widened in a daze. This was the first time he saw Zhenya smile so brightly. Is that why your heart is beating wildly? Kwon Taek Joo was so surprised. He gently rubbed his chest, which did not calm down easily.

The snow all over Kwon Taek Joo's body was melting and the coldness pulled him back to reality. He sat down on his skates and began to brush away the snow that was sticking deep into every corner. He shook his head to brush away the snow from his eyes and ears, but Zhenya came closer and continued with sarcasm.

"Winning all the time is so boring"

Kwon Taek Joo's heart ached but he did not show it. It's not like there's no harvest at all. Even if he didn't win the bet and didn't win the helicopter, Kwon Taek Joo had completed the topographic survey, so he had achieved his next goal. I just can't accept that he's being arrogant again.

Kwon Taek Joo unconsciously reached out his hand to the unlucky bastard. It is a habitual action. A habit that Kwon Taek Joo previously only did with people who went skiing with him. He suddenly realized his mistake but Kwon Taek Joo did not withdraw his hand.

Zhenya just blankly looked at Kwon Taek Joo's outstretched hand. The hand reached out shyly. "Hey." he urged, then twitched his fingers. Zhenya looked at him like he was looking at a strange creature and then after a moment. He reached out his hand.

No. Kwon Taek Joo thought so. The moment he tried to stand up by leaning on Zhenya, he fell backwards. As soon as Kwon Taek Joo fell, Zhenya's body fell on top of him. He reflexively raised his hand, but Zhenya skillfully grabbed his arm and pressed it down. Soon, Zhenya's face was placed within the distance of their noses touching each other.

Zhenya quietly looked at Kwon Taek Joo. Facing each other so close made him able to see what was in his eyes. Kwon Taek Joo's thick

eyebrows, dark eyes, straight nose and rather thick lips are being slowly scanned one by one. Zhenya then lowered his head and pressed his lips to the corner of Kwon Taek Joo's eyes and the inside of his neck.

Perhaps because of the cold, his lips that gently touched and then parted were warmer than ever. The man kissed Kwon Taek Joo's neck for a moment, then let go, then lowered his head a bit and bit the zipper of his jacket in his mouth. Zhenya then slowly pulled it down.

Kwon Taek Joo's bare skin was soon exposed. Zhenya leisurely moved her lips from Kwon Taek Joo's neck to his collarbone and then to his chest. It was an unusually gentle touch. Kwon Taek Joo got goosebumps, not sure if it was because of the cold or because of that itchy action.

"Is this the wish?"

Kwon Taek Joo waited patiently and asked. Zhenya hesitantly raised his head. His face was blank as if he had just woken up from a dream. All childlike emotions in his eyes disappeared like a ghost. Zhenya seemed quite confused.

"Ah, that's right, the wish.."

The man muttered and suddenly stood up. Kwon Taek Joo also quickly sat up and pulled back the zipper that had been pulled down to his navel. He brushed off the snow again.

Zhenya stood with her back to him for a long moment. Kwon Taek Joo looked at where his gaze fell, but there was nothing outstanding there. Not long after, Zhenya said he would go ahead and

crossed the snowfield alone.

Kwon Taek Joo blankly watched the man leave and then struggled to stand up alone. He picked up the sliding stick that was lying around. Kwon Taek Joo was quite far away from Zhenya's but he had absolutely no thought of running away.

Even if he fled, Kwon Taek Joo was still on the island and he was not confident enough to deal with the consequences of being captured. Kwon Taek Joo rubbed his eyes and went straight home.

He tilted his head to listen to his irregular heartbeat. Thump. Thump. Even if he took a deep breath and continued to stroke his chest, Kwon Taek Joo still couldn't calm down. Are you about to die? Kwon Taek Joo really doesn't know half of it.

Kwon Taek Joo finished showering and went out. Zhenya was soon sitting in front of the fireplace. As soon as their eyes met, Kwon Taek Joo sighed and turned around. He unbuckled himself and took off his loose robe. The remaining underwear was also slowly pulled down. If there was anything to wish for. He would have done it yesterday so today Kwon Taek Joo hopes to end it quickly in one go.

"What are you doing?"

Kwon Taek Joo turned around at the sudden question with her underwear hanging between her thighs. Zhenya's surprised expression was brazen. Isn't it obvious that that would be his request? Kwon Taek Joo glared at him as if protesting.

"I never said that was my wish."

Kwon Taek Joo frowned, his face felt like it was about to explode. Every time he wins a bet, Zhenya only asks for one thing, Kwon Taek Joo undressed

himself because hearing those words from him made him feel embarrassed every time, but now he really doesn't understand. Kwon Taek Joo cursed and put his underwear back on.

The man smiled and snapped his fingers, like calling a dog. When Kwon Taek Joo didn't answer, he immediately stiffened his face. That bastard must have bipolar disorder.

He approached Zhenya with a reluctant expression. He suddenly reached out towards Kwon Taek Joo. He hesitantly put his hand on top of the other hand. Zhenya used his thumb to rub the back of his hand and then he immediately pulled Kwon Taek Joo down in front of him. His knee hit the floor in unbearable pain.

"Ugh, it hurts."

"You can hit your knee as many times as you want, but using it there would be a waste."

Zhenya grabbed the angry chin. Kwon Taek Joo tilted his head back and shook off his hand, but that effort only made his jaw clench tighter. He unzipped his pants and pulled his hateful penis out through that gap. The mass of flesh that wasn't even erect yet swayed proudly in front of his huge body. Zhenya gently rubbed its head against Kwon Taek Joo's lower jaw. Inauspicious.

"Suck it."

"No!"

He grabbed the hair from the dodging head and rubbed his flesh against Kwon Taek Joo's pursed lips. He gritted his teeth and held his lips tightly, but Zhenya pulled his head back. "Ah" just as Kwon Taek Joo let out an unpleasant groan, the thick piece of meat was stuffed into his mouth.

Both of his cheeks were tense and his mouth was full. The penis presses against the mouth and then hits the tongue. Kwon Taek Joo will vomit. His upper body shuddered in horror, Zhenya gripped his struggling chin and silently looked down at his grimacing face.

Kwon Taek Joo tried not to bite his genitals, causing his gaping jaw to begin to tire. The saliva he couldn't swallow continued to pool in his mouth. The mass of meat was halfway to his throat, making Kwon Taek Joo's breathing even more rapid. Every time he tried to take a deep breath, the rich smell of flesh came up. You better end this quickly.

Kwon Taek Joo closed his eyes tightly and held the penis in his mouth. That alone made Zhenya's lower abdomen clench in satisfaction. The hand holding Kwon Taek Joo's chin gradually relaxed as he slowly moved his head.

This was the first time he sucked a man's penis. It wasn't originally what he wanted to do, but since it had already begun, Kwon Taek Joo also wanted to do it well so that the bastard would be obedient. but he didn't know what to do.

While Kwon Taek Joo was still confused, Zhenya grabbed his head and pulled him in. The red-hot column of flesh penetrated deep inside, the small hale in the column of meat continuously throbbed in anticipation. Kwon Taek Joo frowned

dissatisfiedly

and looked at Zhenya then opened his mouth again. Zhenya's abdominal muscles visibly twitched as he bit and sucked on that hot skin. He tilted his head slightly and slowly looked down at Kwon Taek Joo.

Soon something came out. It's slippery and fishy. The genitals in the mouth also increase in size when rubbed against the soft mouth. Kwon Taek Joo's mouth became fuller and his jaw opened wider, he didn't know what to do next as the meat was too big to even hold.

Zhenya inserted his finger into Kwon Taek Joo's mouth and pressed down on his confused tongue before he thrust his erect penis. Kwon Taek Joo's eyes opened wide. The corners of his mouth stretched up because his meat was much larger than before it was erect. If Kwon Taek Joo's mouth is torn right now. it would be understandable. He couldn't believe that this weapon had penetrated his butt.

The penis rubs on the tongue a few times and then is pushed all the way to the base and touches the throat. The hangover surged.

"Ugh!"

Kwon Taek Joo leaned back trying to escape the pain. Zhenya pressed his lower abdomen to his face, enjoying the sweet warm feeling from inside Kwon Taek Joo's mouth. The image of Kwon Taek Joo bowing his head into his core evoked an unprecedented feeling of conquest. A dull heat spread to his spine. Zhenya couldn't take it anymore.

He grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's hair and pressed his back against her. The thick mass of meat is pushed in, sweeps onto the tongue, then immediately touches the throat and passes through it. Sometimes he turns around and pokes me on both cheeks. Kwon Taek Joo opened his mouth helplessly before that violent thrust. He gasped for breath in his throat, his tongue rolling away like he was about to get a cramp.

"Ha ah ug cough"

Saliva ran down his chin. His genitals rushed in, causing his neck to swell, putting pressure on his airway. Kwon Taek Joo would die of suffocation. Angrily, he bit his teeth down on the mass of meat.

A hard Colt touched Kwon Taek Joo's temple. Zhenya looked down at him as if wanting him to try something. He observed Kwon Taek Joo's reaction while gently pushing her back. He stared at him with disgust as if he was about to bite off his flesh. But instincts are still more inclined towards survival than self-respect.

Zhenya looked at Kwon Taek Joo who had calmed down now and raised the corner of his mouth. From that moment on, he calmly trampled Kwon Taek Joo's mouth. Zhenya rubbed the glans vigorously against the inside of the palate and then poked the inside of the cheek. Then he gently touched the skin on his face with his thumb. Soon the whole palate tingled.

As if that wasn't enough, Zhenya grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's shoulders and changed positions. The chair he was sitting in touched the back of his neck, both arms were still tightly held by him.

Zhenya tied Kwon Taek Joo's wrists and mercilessly pressed his penis inside. The two balls hit his lower jaw, Kwon Taek Joo's neck and entire face turned red from the brutal compression that left him without even a chance to breathe.

Zhenya's thigh touched the side of Kwon Taek Joo's face and began to convulse violently. His abdominal muscles were also extremely stimulated from the pleasure of running from head to toe, while Kwon Taek Joo just waited for the current pain to pass.

Immediately afterwards, Zhenya's lower abdomen pressed against his nose and was completely attached to his face. Kwon Taek Joo felt like he was about to suffocate because the strong smell of flesh made his breathing stop. The genitals in his mouth

vibrated

violently, and something thick splashed down his throat.

"Ah ugh."

Zhenya gritted his teeth, his composure completely disappearing from his excited face. A fishy smell along with mucus spread in his mouth. Kwon Taek Joo wanted to spit it out quickly, but his penis was still stuck firmly in his mouth as if not allowing it.

Kwon Taek Joo tilted his head back and raised his back a little more, the semen suspended in his mouth then flowed down his throat. Kwon Taek Joo's eyes were filled with surprise, strength poured into his arms that were tightly held by Zhenya.

Kwon Taek Joo's neck moved up and down to swallow the semen. Immediately after that, the genitals slid through the throat and out. At the same time as the breath was released, nausea struck him, Kwon Taek Joo collapsed and gasped for air. His trembling lips were wet with semen and saliva.

Zhenya silently observed the scene and then extended his hand again. He lifted Kwon Taek Joo's chin, his black eyes were puffy and wet with tears. Zhenya looked at him with wide, surprised eyes. Kwon Taek Joo turned his head away to avoid his hand

At that moment. There was a vibration somewhere. Zhenya's eyes, which were looking at Kwon Taek Joo as if about to pierce his face, moved according to the vibration. A phone lying on the floor caught Kwon Taek Joo's eyes.

Zhenya slowly stood up and picked up the phone. He didn't pick up the phone right away but still hesitated to check the caller's identity. Even when receiving the phone call, Zhenya did not greet him but just listened to what the other person was saying. He listened and looked back at Kwon Taek Joo. His face showed signs of disapproval, but Kwon Taek Joo didn't know why or what the meaning was.

Kwon Taek Joo followed Zhenya to the roof with an unhappy face, his mood was still uncomfortable because of last night's events. Zhenya stood there staring at him instead of immediately climbing into the helicopter. He also didn't say anything. For a long moment, there were only glances back and forth between the two.

"Go quickly."

At first it sounded like a greeting to wish him a good trip, but it was more like asking him to go away quickly. But Zhenya still looked at Kwon Taek Joo with a strange look. Actually, this wasn't just once or twice. Sometimes he has strange expressions even with Kwon Taek Joo's normal small words and actions. He frowned and asked, "What's going on? and only then did he come to his senses.

Zhenya climbed into the helicopter without saying anything. The engine started and the propeller began to rotate immediately afterwards. A strong wind seemed to shake Kwon Taek Joo's whole body, blowing his hair and collar fluttering. He remained standing there until the helicopter took off overhead, then nonchalantly waved goodbye. The two of them wouldn't see each other again soon, so he wondered if there would still be any difficulties. The bet with Zhenya that Kwon Taek Joo never wanted and felt shameful about will end here.

Zhenya looked out the window for a long moment before slowly turning towards the sea. Kwon Taek Joo watched until the helicopter completely disappeared from sight and then descended from the roof. The place he immediately headed to was the basement, a place he hadn't been able to set foot in for many days.

When Kwon Taek Joo opened the door, the paraglider was still left on the floor. He was very worried that Zhenya would find out during the time he was here. Kwon Taek Joo immediately squatted down and finished sewing the unfinished part. The location for the paragliding launch has been chosen. The wind speed and direction he had just checked on the roof were also just right.

Kwon Taek Joo will leave this place today.

## Chapter 3.9 – Contrabass Solo

The Zhenya helicopter landed in a meadow near Moscow. The day was quite warm, although there was still a little snow left in places where the sun didn't reach. The ground where the snow had begun to melt was covered with mud as if ready to cling to his clean shoes. Zhenya looked at his feet and immediately gave up trying to cross the mud. He decided to wait for the appointed person at a nearby stable.

Dozens of horses were tied inside. Thanks to high-quality food and regular care, they all have shiny, shiny coats. When Zhenya appeared, the normally polite horses became visibly agitated. It is unknown whether it is because they are wary of strangers because of their sensitive temperament or because that visitor is Zhenya. As Zhenya slowly moved through the central aisle, nearby horses scratched their hooves against the floor in surprise while some raised their front legs in excitement.

The innermost position is a horse with dark brown fur whose ransom alone is equivalent to a supercar. Zhenya held the fence with both hands and looked at it. It didn't buck up like other horses but just hesitated and backed away a bit.

"Is this it?"

Suddenly someone was approaching the entrance. It was his brother, Bazim, who summoned Zhenya to this place. Bazim calmed the aggressive horses and approached. His hands became more serious as he stroked the brown horse that Zhenya was observing.

"It won't eat anything, It's been several days."

It's like worrying about an anorexic child. Since the listener was Zhenya, it didn't seem like he was discussing or looking for advice on getting his favorite horse's appetite back. It was just like a sigh. Normally Zhenya wouldn't care but for some reason today he suddenly came up with a solution.

"Because it always eats delicious food, it is full. You let it eat things it doesn't like and then occasionally throw something it likes, it will be obedient and run after you."

It's absurd. He gave advice to a horse lover when he himself had never even raised a blade of grass. And that method is not breeding but abuse.

"Are you raising tigers?"

"Well, it's the same."

Another vague answer. Zhenya smiled strangely as if thinking about something. Bazim didn't know what he was doing or where he was. He asked again.

"Where have you been living lately? I heard you don't even go to headquarters."

"That's not what I'm really curious about."

He avoided the answer and smirked, his eyes curling up as if mocking. Bazim looked towards the entrance for a moment and sighed. He opened his mouth again, his voice low.

"What did you do to him? Don't tell me you took care of him yourself?"

"Let's see."

"In that case, bring the body here."

Bazim added. In fact, that seemed to be the real purpose of summoning Zhenya to this place.

"Can we announce Anastasia now?"

One person or another is just because of Anastasia. Zhenya burst out laughing as if what he said was silly.

"Suddenly you told me to give up my life?"

"I'm asking you to give it to me. There are rumors that the Americans have obtained the blueprints of 'Anastasia', I don't know if it's true, but of course the Kremlin is very worried. And because you're still keeping the name He was a Korean spy, so I lost face. The senators also agreed

that we should punish him as an example. The president also wants to reaffirm your loyalty. This may be generosity. The end of the Kremlin."

Zhenya smirked at the warnings that threatened his life. Then with a smile on his face, he took a step closer to Bazim. He blinked nervously even though he was his blood relative.

"Go and tell them. Don't pay any attention to the Korean spy or 'Anastasia'. If you continue to covet my things, I'll throw Anastasia' into the Kremlin."

The smile disappeared from Zhenya's face. He wrinkled his nose threateningly and walked past Bazim.

"Yevgeny!"

He was harshly called Zhenya. He walked away without looking back, Left alone, Bazim angrily kicked the fence.

Before returning to the island, Zhenya stopped at a shopping district. There are many things you need to prepare for your stay on the island in the near future. He intended to buy daily necessities and medicine and then turn back, but a grocery store suddenly caught his eye. A picture of a Korean flag is drawn on the sign.

This was an area Zhenya often frequented when he needed to buy sundries, but for the first time he knew that such a store existed. The unpleasant smell wafting throughout the store made his forehead naturally wrinkle. Zhenya stood there for a long time without going in or leaving. The shop owner saw him and ran out.

"Please come in. What do you need?"

The shop owner who was greeting me kindly was an Asian. Zhenya glanced at the products displayed behind her, they were full of things that he couldn't tell what they were.

Finally Zhenya pointed to the familiar wrapping paper. The shop owner quickly understood and brought out the ramen in the box.

"Do you need anything else?"

Zhenya shook his head as he accepted the box. He was about to pay, but the store owner took advantage of that moment to introduce other products.

"This is a product that was just imported from Korea and everyone's reaction is very good. I sold it all just yesterday and now only have this left. If you are interested in Korean food, buy a bag. Come back. It's very delicious."

She emphasized by pronouncing the word 'very' long. Zhenya's eyes, which were glued to the wallet, suddenly shifted to it. Doubt was evident on his face. The shop owner quickly picked up a bag for him to take a closer look at. A wrinkle formed between Zhenya's eyebrows at the offensive smell of it.

"Are Koreans crazy about this?"

"What? Ah, of course! Koreans can't eat rice without this. There seems to be a whole song related to this. Living abroad, everyone wants to eat this dish so much that I really miss home. How about I get you a bag?"

She asked while packing half of the things into her bag. Zhenya reluctantly nodded.

"What are you doing up there?"

Zhenya looked up at the tall birch tree with a silly expression where Kwon Taek Joo was hanging from a branch. On the way back by helicopter, he saw a dark parachute fluttering. Zhenya came to check and found it like this.

Kwon Taek Joo remained silent and did not answer. Zhenya looked at the knife sticking straight into the ground right below his feet. It was flapping helplessly every time the wind blew. His rudimentary paraglider became entangled in a tree, and Kwon Taek Joo must have dropped the knife while trying to escape by cutting the leather.

Seeing through the entire situation, Zhenya smiled. Kwon Taek Joo impatiently shouted not to laugh, but in a situation like this, he couldn't threaten him.

"Don't move."

Zhenya took a knife out of his pocket and warned. Kwon Taek Joo grasped his intention after a while, then Zhenya without hesitation threw a knife at him. The blade quickly flew around Kwon Taek Joo's head and cut the puppet string. He fell freely and hit his butt violently on the ground. If the accumulated snow wasn't as thick as a mattress, somewhere on his body would have broken.

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't believe that Zhenya was just staring at a falling person. After all, it will be a long time before he becomes human. He groaned and stood up. Zhenya immediately grabbed the parachute and dragged him away. The boy didn't ask anything but just told Kwon Taek Joo why he failed.

"If you want to grasp the wind direction of this place, it will take at least 20 years."

Kwon Taek Joo thought he had fully grasped the island's terrain and wind direction for a few days, but all of that seemed to be temporary. He successfully slid down the snow and glided powerfully, but he was helplessly swept away by a sudden strong wind. It was like that for half a day.

As soon as he returned to the villa, Kwon Taek Joo didn't even take off her clothes but sat down right in front of the fireplace. His whole body trembled from the cold wind all day. as if the wind had penetrated his bones. I didn't expect he could be so unlucky. Even if the sky resents you?

Zhenya went straight to the kitchen to cook ramen but after a while he turned back to look curiously. Kwon Taek Joo should have smelled the scent and appeared, but he was still nowhere to be seen. He must have had a cold combined with disappointment, so his appetite also disappeared.

Zhenya reduced the heat on the stove and approached Kwon Taek Joo.

"Don't you want to eat ramen?"

"I don't want to eat."

Kwon Taek Joo refused without any hesitation. He struggled with just one ramen dish, but he wasn't that crazy about ramen. Right now, his stomach is bloated, his limbs are weak and Kwon Taek Joo just wants to lie down and rest.

Zhenya didn't ask any more questions but just shrugged and returned to the kitchen.

"Then I guess I'll have to get rid of this stinky thing."

What is that stinky thing? Kwon Taek Joo slowly turned his head. Just then, he saw Zhenya's thumb and index finger holding a red bag. Kwon Taek Joo doubted his eyes for a moment. He rubbed his eyes. The shape of what was about to be thrown into the trash became clearer.

Kwon Taek Joo ran to Zhenya in an instant. He caught the bag of kimchi on its way to the trash. He didn't even know where that speed came from when just a moment ago Kwon Taek Joo didn't even have the strength to lift a finger.

He took out an empty bowl and carefully put kimchi in it. Then, Kwon Taek Joo added it to newly cooked ramen noodles and ate it. People say that if you eat kimchi, you will feel less homesick, those words are certainly not meaningless.

There are definitely drugs in it.

Kwon Taek Joo looked satisfied after quickly eating all the ramen. He rubbed his belly then leaned back in his chair and met Zhenya's eyes. Suddenly he felt embarrassed even though he hadn't done anything wrong, he coughed and looked away Zhenya smiled faintly.

"You really are interesting."

"Please get fed up with me, please."

Kwon Taek Joo responded as if begging. Zhenya didn't pay attention and just stared at Kwon Taek Joo. He missed the time to stand up because his gaze was too intense. There's nothing special to say, so if you just sit still like this, you'll feel even more embarrassed. Kwon Taek Joo asked seriously.

"Have you eaten yet?"

That means he should stop sitting here and do what needs to be done. Is your expression strange? Zhenya's smiling face suddenly turned bewildered. He didn't seem uncomfortable, instead he had a strange expression.

Just as Kwon Taek Joo tried to get his attention by saying "Hey!". Zhenya suddenly said strange words.

"Anastasia, do you want it?"

"What?"

"Do you want it?"

Kwon Taek Joo didn't know what he was talking about. He was frowning in confusion when Zhenya turned away and left the kitchen.

"What's this crazy bastard talking about?"

Kwon Taek Joo scratched his neck in confusion.

Zhenya did not appear in the bedroom until later that night. Thanks to that, Kwon Taek Joo can sleep comfortably on a spacious bed. It seemed like there was a contrabass sound echoing in his faint consciousness. The flowing melody is still as quiet and peaceful as before, but somewhere there is a hint of sadness.

## Chapter 3.10 – Lonely Koshichei

Bazim is the president's political partner in both name and reality. The two enjoy riding together once a week. On the way back from horse racing as if they were competing, the two often had normal conversations like this and that. From general government affairs to popular rumors in society, to extremely personal stories. Today is no different.

"Okay, so what are you going to do about that troublemaker?"

The president often calls Zhenya a 'troublemaker'. The implied question was not simply asking about his situation. Not long ago, Bazim received instructions to hand over Anastasia to the government. It was for that reason that he urgently summoned Zhenya.

Bazim silently swallowed his dry saliva. He couldn't convey his young brother's answer to the president, who was secretly expecting it.

"I still haven't received an answer."

Bazim gave a disappointing answer. The president's face did not harden, but the coldness of the ruler could be seen in his calm eyes looking into the distance.

"I've been following him all this time because he's related to you and because of the trust that the Bogdanov family and the Kremlin have built, but I can't continue anymore. If in the end that troublemaker doesn't give Anastasia I have no choice. I have no choice but to sacrifice a cow for a great cause."

Bazim just listened silently. Even if Zhenya was his younger brother, it would be difficult for him to oppose the government.

"I heard that he often visits that private land recently?"

"Are you talking about Ajinoki Island?"

"I don't know the name, but I heard that it is an uninhabited island"

"Yes, It's the island his father gave him for his 10th birthday. It's on the coast of the Arctic Ocean and no one can reach it without using a helicopter. Zhenya has always been there and never goes out. He hates being bothered."

"Even so, traveling back and forth so often isn't easy. Don't you think so?"

"I don't know, but it seems like he's raising some kind of animal. That guy who's as dry as a cactus recently even taught me how to tame animals. No matter how busy work is, it's impossible." I'm starving my pets so I have to feed them sometimes, right?"

"No, it's not like that."

"What?"

"How could that troublemaker be interested in something like that? Not at all. On the contrary, I don't know if he's interested in new metal accessories or not. For example, 'The Second Anastasia' for example."

"Anastasia. I don't even know how far the development has progressed because Zhenya never mentioned it. But if 'Anastasia' is finished then there's only one place to hide it. That's the island. Remote islands visited by Zhenya in all four seasons."

"I'll have to come look for you when the homeowner leaves."

The next words were like a declaration of war. Bazim soon realized these were not empty words. The FSB director and the defense minister had been called by the president and were waiting for them in front of the stables.

"Do what?"

He asked again as if he heard wrong. Rock, paper, scissors, Kwon Taek Joo happily repeated. The chessboard and the pieces scattered on the table were pushed aside.

How silly, Zhenya burst out laughing. After spending some time burying himself in the warehouse, Kwon Taek Joo found a chess board and as soon as he lost, he immediately proposed another entertainment.

It's 'rock, paper, scissors.'

"This time it's a one-shot match. Either you win or you lose."

Kwon Taek Joo gently held and shook his fist while agitating Zhenya who was not moving at all. He rolled his eyes and shouted to quickly prepare. Zhenya shook his head and reluctantly raised his hand. Kwon Taek Joo quickly shouted 'rock, paper, scissors'. A voice like a powerful scream rang out.

Both of them made fists. After confirming the draw, Kwon Taek Joo let out the breath he had been holding. He had exerted so much force that his arms were tingling. Catching the bored Zhenya off guard, he quickly shouted the slogan again.

"Once again, rock, paper, scissors!"

This time, fist and fist met again. Kwon Taek Joo stood up after drawing once again. He turned back and took a deep breath. Winning or losing depends entirely on luck and you are wasting more energy than necessary.

Zhenya watched Kwon Taek Joo bite his lips and rub his hands together. Right after that, Kwon Taek Joo returned.

"Rock, paper, scissors!"

He closed his eyes tightly, not daring to look. Zhenya could only indifferently watch the results unfold before his eyes.

Kwon Taek Joo let out a long breath and slightly raised his eyelids. His eyes alternately looked at the two hands facing each other extremely cautiously. Zhenya has never changed hands from the beginning until now. And Kwon Taek Joo's hand is outstretched.

Did I win? Really?

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't believe it even when he looked closely. He pinched himself and winced in pain.

"I won!"

He clenched his hands in joy. Zhenya also laughed when he saw him happy as if he had the world after winning just one round of rock, paper, scissors.

"Okay, what's your wish?"

"I need to leave this island."

Kwon Taek Joo answered without hesitation. He thought he would be a bit surprised, but Zhenya calmly nodded unexpectedly.

"Are there any other conditions?"

"Alone, standing on 2 legs."

"And?"

Why does he suddenly feel like he's rolling out the carpet for you? Kwon Taek Joo was skeptical but he still did not hesitate to read the necessary items. What if you're a little brazen?

"I need a change of clothes, a passport, a Colt... and also some cash."

Zhenya bowed his head as if he would listen to anything. It went so smoothly that Kwon Taek Joo was a little worried. He set a limit.

"Instead, you can only go while it's still light."

"What are you planning?"

"You lost the chess game, so even if you go, you have to pay up."

Zhenya threw something at Kwon Taek Joo when he still looked at him with suspicious eyes. He caught it and realized it was the helicopter key.

Everything became confused. Kwon Taek Joo could escape so easily, why did he have to go through so much trouble? The futile efforts and endeavors of the past flashed through his mind like a kaleidoscope. It's all quite unrealistic but it's good that what he wanted was met. Kwon Taek Joo thought about the prospect of returning home safely and lay down on the bed in his room.

But the ecstasy didn't last long, because Zhenya suddenly stood up and quickly approached him.

"What's up?"

He took a wary step back. Zhenya did not respond and gradually closed the distance. Kwon Taek Joo was hesitantly backing away when he suddenly tripped over the bed and fell down. Zhenya naturally climbed onto his fallen body. Kwon Taek Joo was about to protest, but the hand that was trying to push him away was easily grabbed.

"I'll let you go when it's still light."

Along with that sly whisper, Kwon Taek Joo's shirt was immediately removed on both sides. The buttons popped out violently. Zhenya pressed his lips to his exposed neck and took off his pants in one go. Kwon Taek Joo's body immediately became naked and covered with traces of previous lovemaking. There was no place left to carve another kiss mark, but Zhenya stubbornly bit into the mottled skin and pulled down the remaining underwear as if wanting to tear it apart. He straightened his knees then grabbed and lifted Kwon Taek Joo's legs for closer contact.

"Ah!"

The focus quickly shifted to his head and shoulders, blood rushed to Kwon Taek Joo's face, which turned red, his eyes closed tightly. As he struggled in an uncomfortable position, Zhenya pulled Kwon Taek Joo's legs towards his shoulder. The back of his thighs touched Zhenya's chest and his body was completely folded in half. He put his hands on the bed and pressed his lower abdomen against Kwon Taek Joo's exposed buttocks.

The erect penis rubbed against his ass. Kwon Taek Joo clutched the bed sheet tightly in front of the disaster that was happening right in front of him.

Zhenya licked Kwon Taek Joo's calves while pulling his waist back. The wet glans rubbed gently against the soft hole. The surrounding wrinkles were quickly moistened, then he pressed his waist and slowly penetrated Kwon Taek Joo.

"Ahh!"

A groan of pain came from his clenched teeth. The two of them did a lot last night but the inside was still too cramped to receive the huge mass of meat. Zhenya did not take his eyes off Kwon Taek Joo's face even when he was frowning as if in pain. Then he leaned down further and licked his eyelashes that were trembling in pain. The kiss gently glided across her face like a lover, but the flesh column kept digging holes like a tyrant.

The hole, which had been loosened by the repeated lovemaking sessions, kept opening up. The skin and flesh are entwined together. Each time Zhenya pushed in, his weight and pressure increased. Kwon Taek Joo's stomach felt like there was a hole in it.

"Ah, wait!"

He unconsciously grabbed Zhenya's arm, his pleading tone made him stop for a moment and look at him. He had no intention of asking him gently. Kwon Taek Joo opened his mouth and then closed it tightly. He turned his head to the side.

Zhenya used the tip of his tongue to draw on his ears, then suddenly pushed the tip of his tongue into his ear and continued to push the belt where it had stopped. Intense friction sounds came from the thighs and buttocks being rubbed. Saliva-soaked ears devoured those naked sounds.

Kwon Taek Joo's insides had been stimulated all night, so even a light brush caused scratches. He aimed at Kwon Taek Joo's weak point and stabbed it violently. His toes curled at every contact, his vision blurred and turned white.

"Ah, ah, ha!"

Crazy moans came out. Zhenya was pushed to the limit, continuously pounding inside. Then he tilted his head while rubbing his groin against Kwon Taek Joo's butt and placed his face right on Kwon Taek Joo's face.

"Ahh"

"If you can go out, please do so."

The corner of his mouth curled up. Kwon Taek Joo has an unfortunate feeling that this night will be very long.

Zhenya didn't let go of Kwon Taek Joo until dawn. Every time he woke up after passing out for a while, he would always stab him in the butt. Zhenya massaged Kwon Taek Joo's penis, causing him to ejaculate multiple times. After four or five times like that, he no longer had enough strength to lift even one arm. Kwon Taek Joo goes limp and realizes Zhenya is a fraud. His throat only let out moans and gasps that sounded like metal hitting metal.

After a long time, Kwon Taek Joo woke up. He could barely lift his eyelids as if they were pressed down with a rock. The dizziness made his vision shake. He closed his eyes and opened them again, but it was still the same.

"Ugh."

Kwon Taek Joo rose up little by little. There was absolutely no feeling from the waist down and he had no strength left in his legs, as if the lower half of his body had been paralyzed. He propped himself up on his elbows and looked around. At that moment, he had only one thought in his mind: to quickly leave.

Kwon Taek Joo urgently searched for the helicopter's key. The key lying quietly on the bedside table soon entered his field of vision. Kwon Taek Joo accidentally reached out and hugged his waist, groaning, cold sweat running down his spine.

"Why are you leaving? The sun is about to set."

Suddenly Zhenya's voice rang out. Kwon Taek Joo quickly turned around. He was sitting leisurely on the chair behind him, leisurely tilting his glass of wine while observing the suffering of others.

Kwon Taek Joo should have realized when he accepted the rock-paper-scissors result. Zhenya is not the type to easily release the prey he caught in the first place, it could just be that he got bored playing with it or his prey was destroyed first.

However, this was also an opportunity that Kwon Taek Joo had, so he did not want to give up. I will confidently leave while looking at him. Kwon Taek Joo gritted his teeth and tightened his grip. His arms trembled trying to support his body as if it could break in an instant. The muscles that ached all night just twisted a little and caused severe pain. Almost crawling out of bed, Kwon Taek Joo reached out and grabbed the helicopter key on the table, then lost his balance and fell to the floor.

"Ah."

Shock spread throughout the body. An indescribable feeling of pain rose from inside the buttocks as if something serious had happened there. Kwon Taek Joo grabbed his back again and waited for the pain to subside. Not only his face but his whole body was quickly drenched in sweat. Kwon Taek Joo glared at Zhenya with heavy breathing, then grabbed the bed and stood up.

His knees were shaking. As soon as he took a step, the semen accumulated in her abdomen spilled out onto her thighs and flowed down. The thighs covered with bodily fluids became shiny again. Kwon Taek Joo tightly closed his mouth to endure that terrible feeling.

He placed his hand on the wall and moved step by step. He couldn't blame why the house was so large. Kwon Taek Joo also doesn't have time to shower. With the current situation. There is not much time left to go to the rooftop.

With great difficulty he reached the front of the stairs. He was in a hurry, but as soon as he took the first step, he fell to his knees. Kwon Taek Joo was so exhausted that he couldn't even groan. He clung to the railing to hold his breath, his chest and shoulders heaving with difficulty.

Zhenya followed and crossed his arms to observe before he realized it. Even though Kwon Taek Joo tried to stand and hold on to the railing, his knees still buckled.

"It's less than 30 minutes until sunset."

How kind. But Kwon Taek Joo no longer had the energy to talk so he just ignored him.

He decided to change his method because his legs kept shaking. Would it be better to crawl with both arms? As expected, it's much easier. Kwon Taek Joo's elbow was injured due to rubbing, but at least he didn't bend his knees or fall halfway. Zhenya continued to follow Kwon Taek Joo, his shadow from behind inciting even more anxiety.

Kwon Taek Joo adjusted his breathing as he walked up the stairs to the second floor. His lungs were compressed and he was panting, his head still dizzy. The fragmented vision could not grasp even the key in his hand. Kwon Taek Joo has never had body aches before, but this time he seemed to have a serious problem.

"Ha ha."

He shook his head angrily and climbed the stairs again. Every time the body moved, moans echoed out. Finally, his eyes were spinning.

Kwon Taek Joo wanted to climb to the rooftop but the sun had already begun to set. The red sunset fell on my sweaty body, He really doesn't have much time left.

Zhenya silently looked at Kwon Taek Joo who was desperately trying to escape from him. If it was normal, he would happily watch but for some reason his face turned stiff.

Kwon Taek Joo managed to reach the rooftop door. He felt the cool air outside from the iron door his hand touched.

Arrived.

His distorted face relaxed, Kwon Taek Joo quickly reached out and turned the doorknob. But Zhenya was one step faster. He looked at him holding the door handle and wondered what he was doing? That's because it's getting dark outside the window.

"Time's up, Rabbit."

## Chapter 3.11 – Lonely Koshichei

Zhenya was busy preparing to go out early in the morning. Kwon Taek Joo slept like the dead all day and just lay in bed without any energy left. He put on his fur coat and was about to leave when he suddenly turned back to look at him.

"It will take about two days."

Zhenya suddenly reported his schedule. Since when did he say those things to Kwon Taek Joo? He just turned over without reacting.

A moment later there was the sound of a propeller spinning. The noise echoed from above and then gradually disappeared. Once again, Zhenya left and only Kwon Taek Joo was left alone on the island. How long will he have to repeat this boring life?

So boring. Kwon Taek Joo is not used to killing time but he also has nothing to do. He seemed to be becoming a useless piece of meat day by day, for the first time in his life he felt helpless like this.

What will happen if Kwon Taek Joo continues to be left in a place where there is snow on all four sides? You will go crazy. If he hadn't committed suicide before, he might have been lucky. Each day passes and the sense of time and reality fades away. Kwon Taek Joo wants to get out of here before his mind becomes strange. His heart became more and more desperate, but the path to fulfill that wish was too far away.

Kwon Taek Joo nervously pulled the blanket up to his head.

He left the villa late in the afternoon to get some fresh air. He kept walking without a destination until the blue sea appeared before his eyes. Kwon Taek Joo chose a relatively dry rock, sat down and quietly looked at the distant horizon.

He seemed to fall into a completely different world with no way of knowing what was happening outside or how things were going. He

could never imagine that Kwon Taek Joo himself would live such a desolate and jobless life.

He sighed and stood up. Kwon Taek Joo decided to take a walk on the white sand beach to relieve his still stiff body. The sea breeze brought harsh cold but was quite familiar to him.

After walking for a while. Kwon Taek Joo saw a tree branch swaying on the ocean waves. He quickly picked it up because it was a disposable chopstick. Where does it come from? Is it China? Could also be Korea. It seems that his mental condition is worse than what Kwon Taek Joo thought.

He used his chopsticks to scribble large letters on the sand. By the way, Kwon Taek Joo picked up seashells and pebbles around, and placed them on top. The complete script is an 'SOS' distress signal. If you're lucky, ships or planes passing nearby will see it. If not, then that's it.

Kwon Taek Joo lay down on the ground as soon as he finished. The thick layer of snow covered him like a blanket. He closed his eyes, only the sound of waves and wind remained in endless silence, as if even if he disappeared into nothingness, nothing would change. His consciousness gradually sank into the immense abyss.

How long has it been? A sudden sound rang in Kwon Taek Joo's ears. Is it because your ears are ringing because you want that to happen so much?

Kwon Taek Joo jumped up. He couldn't help but panic and suddenly looked everywhere. A helicopter approaching from afar fell into his sight. It's not the same as Zhenya's. Could it be that they saw his distress signal? With that thought, Kwon Taek Joo desperately waved both hands.

"Here! Look here!"

He even jumped up and down on the spot, but the helicopter just passed by without seeing Kwon Taek Joo. He couldn't give up like that so he ran to the villa. If he

waved with his

shirt from a higher place, they would definitely notice.

In an instant, Kwon Taek Joo climbed onto the roof and waved with his shirt. He yelled as loud as he could trying to get attention. The helicopter made a big turn and approached the villa. Joy spread across Kwon Taek Joo's face.

He stepped aside to let the helicopter land safely. It crashed down on the roof with a strong wind, the roaring fan blades slowly stopped. Only then can Kwon Taek Joo open his eyes.

He quickly ran closer to the helicopter. The door opened and a man in a black suit appeared. While he stretched out his arms to block Kwon Taek Joo's approach, a young girl followed behind.

"What is it, this?"

It was a somewhat disappointing reaction. The woman then continued to carefully walk around Kwon Taek Joo and observe him little by little.

"Oh. I thought it had to be better since he hid it and said he was the only one who could see it.'

Kwon Taek Joo doesn't know what he's talking about. Who the hell is this woman anyway? She looks much younger than Kwon Taek Joo. The facial features are exceptionally clear and appear to be both who they are and who they are not. She was beautiful but quite pale, maybe he was tired after a long flight.

Kwon Taek Joo stood with his arms crossed in front of the woman who was looking at him as if evaluating him. The woman also stopped walking and returned his gaze. The eyes are very bold.

"Who are you?"

She rolled her eyes and smiled even with that disapproving tone. She even reached out her hand without hesitation.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Olga."

Olga. Where did you hear it? Kwon Taek Joo felt a strange sense of déjà vu. The face is strange but her name is quite familiar.

Olga added a few words and resolved all of Kwon Taek Joo's doubts. That's also the reason he came to this place.

"Olga Vissarionovna Bogdanov."

Kwon Taek Joo and Olga sat facing each other for a long time. He invited her down for tea, but neither of them could drink a sip of water.

Olga sat on the chair that Kwon Taek Joo gave her and stared at him as if he was about to pierce him. She is even shameless as to assert he is Zhenya's sister. Kwon Taek Joo sat with his arms crossed in front of that attentive gaze.

Nothing is known about Vissarion's illustrious daughter, Olga. Not only photos, Kwon Taek Joo also doesn't know when he was born, what school he went to, or where he did what he did. He didn't know if he was different from her brothers just because he was a woman.

"That person, what is it that you like so much?"

Olga was the first to speak, her tone quite blunt. It was so difficult to grasp her intentions that Kwon Taek Joo doubted whether he had heard correctly. Waiting for a while without an answer, Olga shrugged and added.

"I don't understand at all. Up until now I haven't seen anyone who wants to be with that person."

'That person' must be someone known to both Olga and Kwon Taek Joo. There was only one name he could immediately think of, but the question was a bit strange. "What is it that you like so much?" It seems like he thought that Kwon Taek Joo herself liked him so he voluntarily got attached to him.

"You misunderstood. It's not like that."

"Misunderstanding?"

"It's not like I'm stuck in a place like this because I like it."

"So what?"

Kwon Taek Joo intended to answer immediately, but then closed his mouth. He didn't know where to start or how to explain. There was no reason for him to reveal his situation to someone he had never met. No matter what, he is also an accomplice of that guy.

Kwon Taek Joo shook his head as if he didn't want to speak. Even so, Olga made her own guess and then exclaimed in surprise.

"Were you kidnapped!?"

"Huh?"

Kwon Taek Joo was speechless. That's not an incorrect guess either. Although it was a bit ambiguous to say that he was really kidnapped, Olga took Kwon Taek Joo's silence as a confirmation and couldn't help but sigh. She muttered, "That crazy guy is really..."

Olga's eyes, which were wary of Kwon Taek Joo, suddenly softened. She held Kwon Taek Joo's hand and apologized for her rudeness.

"I was rude. I thought you had your eye on that person. That person ran away with a terrorist who blew up the house so I thought it was like sleeping with the enemy. Anyway, sorry for the misunderstanding. I can't believe an idiot fell in love with that person. I didn't know anything and came all the way here"

The last sentence is almost a monologue. It seems like Olga came here to see the monkey in the zoo. According to her words, he came here to find 'the idiot who ran away in love with Zhenya'. How silly.

"So why did you come here?"

"I came here to recover."

Then Olga changed the subject while ignoring Kwon Taek Joo's objections with her eyes.

"But are you going to use those stupid signals like before and continue waiting to be rescued?"

Are all people who have never paid attention to others since birth like that? There's really no way to talk to that bastard or his sister.

"Who knows? Maybe someone will come to save the poor idiot."

"Um, I'm not saving you're an idiot."

"Thank you for your comfort."

"By the way, what's your name? I don't even know your name."

"Don't be curious. Because I can't tell you."

"How can you say that? Can't you tell me? How am I not curious?"

"If it's not possible then it's not possible. I don't want to get into trouble."

Kwon Taek Joo persisted while Olga pursed her lips in protest. He didn't blow up the Bogdanov mansion for no reason, and because he was on a job he wasn't allowed to reveal his identity.

Olga quickly changed her question.

"So what did that person call you?"

"That.."

Kwon Taek Joo was about to answer but then fell silent. He couldn't bring himself to say the name 'Rabbit'. He doesn't know if it was because he wanted to embarrass him even more, Zhenya kept using this name. It was like that from the beginning with words like "Dig a hole and hide well". And "Prick up your ears"...

Olga showed her utmost concern with shining eyes. Her upper body tilted towards Kwon Taek Joo.

"If you can't help, don't ask too much."

"I can't help you. If I get caught, I will be scolded."

Somehow, "being scolded" here doesn't seem to be the usual category of an older person advising a younger person. Kwon Taek Joo didn't think that violent guy would let it go just because he was a woman, but he also never saw him treat women badly.

That's it. If Olga can't help Kwon Taek Joo, then there's no use continuing to talk. He left the kitchen with a sad look on his face. Olga followed.

"Which room can I use?"

"If it's just the bedroom, there's still a spare room so you can use any room."

"Well, is that room nice?"

Olga walked past Kwon Taek Joo, through the living room with the fireplace, and into the innermost bedroom. Kwon Taek Joo looked bewildered and then suddenly jumped up. In an instant, he caught up with Olga and blocked her path. Olga looked at him suspiciously.

"Huh? What's wrong?"

"This room is taken."

Kwon Taek Joo has no other valid reason. Olga looked into the bedroom between Kwon Taek Joo's arms and nodded.

"It looks like someone's room."

If you don't look closely, you won't know that this is a bedroom for two people. Kwon Taek Joo tried to rationalize it but his pounding heart still couldn't calm down. He was worried that somewhere in the room there might be something that reminded Olga of his relationship with Zhenya. His body was suddenly drenched in sweat.

While Kwon Taek Joo stopped her, Olga gave a strange smile and looked around the room. She said "Ah" with a long, naked breath.

"Even though you don't have feelings, your bodies are still very compatible."

She giggled mockingly and moved to another room before Kwon Taek Joo could justify it.

He turned his head. The mark of someone lying on the pillow on the bed is still intact. Two robes rolled around on the floor and the bed sheet

slid

halfway down along with the pillows. He also found his underwear turned upside down and forgotten there. All of that didn't seem normal.

Kwon Taek Joo sat on the chair, stunned. He had been like that ever since Olga left the bedroom. What the hell is Kwon Taek Joo doing here? Eat, sleep and be pampered by Zhenya. It is a habit that many people repeat every day. The difference is that they use it to maintain their species. At least he didn't roll around mindlessly or without will while eating what he gave him.

Why don't you actively run away? Did Kwon Taek Joo adapt to Zhenya because he had no other choice? It wasn't that he felt any desire for him and he had never been eager to meet him.

But when Kwon Taek Joo and Zhenya lived together, everything changed. His body was steadily reacting to him, and now it was melting even when the sex was no different from violence. From that moment on, he stopped resisting. Because Kwon Taek Joo has learned that doing so will only incite Zhenya's excitement and push him into a worse situation.

In his resignation to not being able to escape him, it seemed he had become indulgent while constantly making excuses that the situation was unavoidable. Kwon Taek Joo was just trying to make himself comfortable by using the silly excuse that he had no other choice. So even when he was raped, he still had to listen to nonsense about what rape was like.

Kwon Taek Joo shook his head angrily. something is definitely going wrong. He denied it to Olga, but his life these past few days was no different from that of a lover. He lived in a villa where only Zhenya visited, slept in the same bed as him, and made love whenever he wanted. The two spent time together in the name of betting while surviving each day on the food he gave them. Being in the same room as Zhenya or having breakfast together is no longer new or stressful. It's no surprise that Olga discovered the mark and laughed sinisterly.

The appearance of a third person makes the cloudy thoughts become more obvious. When Kwon Taek Joo is alone with Zhenya, a conflicted relationship with him develops without his knowledge. Thinking back, Zhenya's actions also changed subtly compared to the beginning.

The guy agreed to bet on any bet that Kwon Taek Joo suggested and became more obedient. The two of them often laugh freely, and even when making love, which only revolves around inserting and withdrawing, the small touches increase significantly. When Zhenya went out and came back, he always brought Korean food with him and the number of times he went out also decreased significantly. anything else? Before going out today, Zhenya even announced when he would return.

Suddenly Kwon Taek Joo's face and neck became hot. His heart began to beat uncomfortably. It was as if the two of them were playing family. Before I knew it, I was being dragged into things like this with him. Kwon Taek Joo clenched his fists.

It won't work like this.

"Good morning."

Olga appeared in the kitchen just after noon. I don't know if he just woke up or not, but her face is still swollen. She walked up to Kwon Taek Joo, pointed at the ramen and asked. "What is that?". Then he wrinkled her nose and was startled.

"You can't eat it! it's spoiled!"

The other person was eating deliciously but was complaining that it was spoiled. Kwon Taek Joo took the kimchi back from Olga when he was trying to quickly clean up the bowl. Then as if to show off, he took a piece into his mouth and chewed it greedily. Olga's face wrinkled.

"Do you even have the mind to bring that here?"

"He bought it."

Kwon Taek Joo answered indifferently and drank the rest of the soup. Olga looked surprised. It was unreasonable for Kwon Taek Joo to bring food that suited his taste when he was kidnapped, but it was even more

unreasonable for Zhenya to buy and bring food for others. Did something happen to his mind that he didn't know about? There is reason to be suspicious.

Olga wanted to check again. but Zhenya was nowhere to be found.

"By the way, where did that man go?"

"Why are you asking me?"

It's not that Zhenya constantly informed Kwon Taek Joo, he had no obligation to do so and he himself never asked. Since he was a member of the FSB, he could only guess that Zhenya was on duty. Of course this time for some reason, he announced that he would be back in two days, and didn't necessarily have to tell her anything.

Olga changed the subject by saying "I'm sorry" to the unsympathetic response.

"I'm really curious. How did you know that room had the blueprints?"

Olga's sparkling eyes signaled that he would persistently pry if Kwon Taek Joo did not answer. Without much hesitation, he explained that he had combined the mysterious stories Zhenya had told along with many other circumstantial evidence.

"Koshichei."

Olga rubbed her chin and repeated those words. Then he smiled strangely, looking like that bastard as if he was plotting something. Kwon Taek Joo left Olga alone and stood up from his seat. He brought the dishes to the sink and started washing them.

"Don't you have anything to ask me?"

"No."

"Are you originally the type of person who doesn't care about women?"

"I'm curious to hear that too. Why would a woman ask such a thing?"

Kwon Taek Joo looked back at Olga with a puzzled expression. Even when he received a question, he just smiled. Louise was the same before, women's psychology is always complicated.

Just then Olga took something from the refrigerator and brought it to the table, Kwon Taek also finished washing the dishes. He was about to leave after wiping his hands when Olga pulled him back.

"Do you want some fruit?"

In Olga's hand, an apple was being cut into pieces. If you peel it like that, will there be anything left to eat? Kwon Taek Joo sighed and grabbed the fruit knife. It would be less trouble for him to do it himself than to let Olga bleed.

Using a skillful knife, the apple is peeled and cut into equal sized pieces. Olga held her breath as he watched and ate what was placed in the bowl. She said to eat together but he pushed it all into her mouth. Kwon Taek Joo looked down at the empty bowl.

He peeled another apple. This time Olga also ate all the apples that were put in the bowl, it seemed like it was a substitute for breakfast.

Kwon Taek Joo by the way peeled all the apples that Olga bought. She asked why he didn't eat after he was full. Silly, Kwon Taek Joo smiled and bit an apple that was turning yellow. How long has it been since you last ate fruit?

There was the sound of a fan spinning as Kwon Taek Joo was cleaning up the remaining things. It seems Zhenya has returned. The characteristic noise lasted and subsided and soon he came down from the roof. Kwon Taek Joo thought Zhenya would return late in the afternoon but he came home half a day early. Zhenya walked into the kitchen with his arms full of luggage.

"What are you doing here?"

That was all he said as soon as he saw his sister. As if he was used to such treatment, Olga was not disappointed at all. Instead, he naturally asked him where he had gone.

Zhenya turned his gaze from Olga to Kwon Taek Joo. It seemed like he should explain why he was here, but Kwon Taek himself had no way of knowing. All he could do was shake his head and shrug his shoulders.

"I still have to unpack my things."

As if he didn't want to hear unpleasant things, Olga actively avoided him. Zhenya looked at his sister displeased. After Olga went to the second floor, he turned his head and stared at Kwon Taek Joo. He looked at him chewing the apple and wondered.

"When did that come?"

Calling brother and sister into objects like objects is the same for both brothers. Kwon Taek Joo shook his head, he replied that he suddenly appeared yesterday afternoon and it seemed like he came to recuperate. Then he took his knife, bowl and fork and brought them to the sink.

Zhenya boiled some water while Kwon Taek Joo cleaned up. It seemed like water was being poured somewhere, and soon a familiar smell lingered. He turned his head curiously.

Kwon Taek Joo's eyes fell on a box of mixed rice. It is a product supplied as military food. After carefully reading the instructions written in Russian, Zhenya mixed the hot rice, then scooped it out into a large bowl and gave it to Kwon Taek Joo.

"Have you eaten?"

"Huh, what?"

Kwon Taek Joo nodded. Even so, he still did not withdraw his hand. Instead, he squeezed the spoon between his lips.

Is this kid deaf?

"I have already eaten."

Zhenya gently nodded. However, as soon as Kwon Taek Joo opened his mouth, he pushed the spoon in. His cheeks quickly puffed up. Kwon Taek Joo looked bewildered as the empty spoon escaped his mouth. What game is this?

He munched and protested.

"I said I've already eaten, kid."

"Don't pick up and eat dirty things."

Zhenya's face suddenly grimaced. Could he be talking about apples? It's impossible to say. Just as Kwon Taek Joo opened his mouth to object, a spoonful of bibimbap was shoved in.

## Chapter 3.12 – Lonely Koshichei

Translator's Note: This chapter has violence!!!!

Kwon Taek Joo ate breakfast twice in a row. His stomach was bloating and starting to reflux with just the slightest movement. He had to lie still all afternoon waiting for the food to be digested, but it was also hard work for Kwon Taek Joo. Is this a new type of torture from Zhenya?

After all, why the hell was that boy so dissatisfied that he had such a grimace on his face? Even if Kwon Taek Joo actually swallowed something he shouldn't have, it's none of his business. 'Don't pick up and eat dirty things' what does he mean? Those are not words to say to humans. Does Zhenya think you're his dog just because he overpowered you with his strength?

Kwon Taek Joo's mood suddenly calmed down. It seemed that he had learned the reason for his discomfort during his time here. That's because he was always controlled by Zhenya. Kwon Taek Joo has no right to choose what to eat, what to do, where to sleep or how to sleep. Even going to the bathroom was monitored by him. Moreover, on his waist there is also a tattoo with the meaning of depending on him.

"Ha ha ha."

Looking back at his situation. Kwon Taek Joo burst out laughing. Even though he once denied it, he was no different from a dog or pig raised by him, and having sex with him was no different. The more he resisted, the more Zhenya enjoyed it. In his eyes, Kwon Taek Joo could see the joy of taming a wild animal.

"What are you doing?"

Olga's voice suddenly rang out. Kwon Taek Joo didn't even feel the signs approaching, it seemed he was too immersed in his thoughts.

"What do you think I'm doing?"

"Playing dead?"

"That's wrong. Playing like a pig locked in a cage."

Kwon Taek Joo replied nonchalantly and lifted himself up. He didn't even ask Olga to sit down, but he sat down on the chair next to him.

"You must be very bored. How are you doing these days?"

"Lay, sit, eat, bathe, sleep."

"I'll let you borrow my book. Read it. It's an unprecedented masterpiece."

The book presented with a compassionate expression was at first glance a romance novel. It would be more interesting to read Buddhist scriptures. Kwon Taek Joo absentmindedly turned the page.

"The main character is a bit unsophisticated, doesn't have money and doesn't know how to play around, but since childhood he has had a burning dream. Her advantage is that he honestly and positively believes that if he has faith and effort he will achieve that dream even in reality, that is also a drawback and it soon defeats her. She meets a man in a small place and loves unconditionally. Later on, we found out that the man was one of the famous athletes, a lawyer and a second-generation tycoon. Because he was a workaholic, he had no interest in anything all his life. woman, but he was fascinated by the main character's innocent and pure appearance and loved only her until the end of his life. Thanks to that man's support, the main character's dream came true. Isn't that right?"

Olga's eyes opened wide.

"Have you read this?"

"Even if I'm not reading, I still feel like I'm reading."

Kwon Taek Joo returned the book with a confused face. It seemed very interesting because Olga was engrossed in reading again as if he was immersed in the book.

"I don't think so but that bastard. Does he like raising animals?"

Olga did not immediately answer the question. It was as if he couldn't hear clearly because he was engrossed in reading a book. An answer given a beat too late is also an off topic.

"Sure. I love birds, dogs and cats."

"No, not you."

"If not me then who?"

Olga raised her head. His eyes were filled with surprise.

"Could it be that person? Is that called a question?"

"So I assumed it couldn't happen."

"You already know, why do you still ask? I've never seen that person raise a blade of grass. If he didn't catch poor animals out of boredom, he'd be lucky."

Perhaps people sometimes exceed expectations. I don't understand why a guy who never raised grass, let alone animals, suddenly became interested in raising humans. Why was the target Kwon Taek Joo himself? Does he have to bother you to make him happy?

"Because it's a tiger."

Olga grumbled while looking over Kwon Taek Joo's shoulder. He turned his head and saw Zhenya walking down the aisle.

He stood tall in front of Kwon Taek Joo. Zhenya didn't even look at Olga, who was worried whether he would be sent away or not. A look that could not be ignored fell. Kwon Taek Joo has a bad feeling.

"What's up?"

As soon as he opened his mouth, Zhenya's arm approached. Kwon Taek Joo clutched his arm with no chance to escape. He lifted him up and dragged him somewhere. That's the bedroom. Behind Kwon Taek Joo, Olga opened her eyes wide and looked at the two people. Was he planning on going straight to bed like this? It wasn't him who got to choose the time and place, but his sister was still watching.

Kwon Taek Joo put on a slim hope but Zhenya unbuttoned his shirt in the blink of an eye. It was as if it had been ripped apart. He panicked then suddenly doubled over and cried out.

"Ouch."

"What's wrong?"

Only then did Zhenya stop and look back, seemingly annoyed at being suddenly stopped. Kwon Taek Joo pretended to moan.

"My stomach hurts so much. It probably hurts like this because I was forced to eat."

The hand that was clenched tightly suddenly became loose. Kwon Taek Joo took advantage of that moment to run into the bathroom. As soon as he stepped inside, he locked the door. He closed the toilet lid and sat on it, a sigh escaping him.

The immediate crisis has been averted but Kwon Taek Joo doesn't know what to do in the future. You can't complain about having a stomach ache every day. Zhenya doesn't believe it easily, and given the size of Olga's luggage, he won't be leaving anytime soon.

Kwon Taek Joo is fed up with life on the island just the two of him with Zhenya and wishes for anyone to show up. But this is not what he wants. The situation is getting worse and worse. He ruffled his messy hair and sighed again.

Kwon Taek Joo, who was sleeping, suddenly opened his eyes wide because a shadow was covering his whole body. Zhenya was standing above his head all the time. He raised himself up and said, "What are you doing?" Accidentally, the hard dry floor touched his feet. It seems like Kwon Taek Joo fell asleep on the sofa while going in and out of the bathroom with the excuse of a stomach ache.

He slowly rubbed the goosebumps on his arms and sat up straight. His neck was stiff because he had been curled up. Kwon Taek Joo turned his head away and stretched to avoid Zhenya's eyes.

"Why are you sleeping here?"

"I fell asleep going in and out of the bathroom."

Kwon Taek Joo made an excuse in a shy voice. A glare fell on the side of his face. Every time Zhenya looked like that, he felt like he was being dissected in every detail.

"It's all your fault, kid."

"Are you better now?"

Kwon Taek Joo stopped grumbling and looked at him. A bewildered expression appeared on his face. Kwon Taek Joo did not expect Zhenya to ask such a human question. Did he eat something wrong? He nodded awkwardly and then suddenly Zhenya held out his hand. Kwon Taek Joo reflexively jumped back in surprise. The approaching hand also stopped.

He slowly glanced at his hand and then looked at Kwon Taek Joo's face. His eyes moved silently as if suffocating his breath. The more he looked, the more he thought of a crocodile.

The man, who had not said anything until now, smirked.

"Nothing to compliment, right?"

"I didn't ask you for a compliment."

"When a pet loses its cuteness, it will be boiled and eaten."

His sarcastic attitude clearly sees Kwon Taek Joo as a pet. It wouldn't be wrong to say that if he didn't behave lovingly he would die. The death that he and no one else is talking about is very likely to come true. It's more absurd than scary, though. How can a person born and raised have such a crazy mind?

Zhenya immediately reached out his hand again. Just as his hand was about to touch Kwon Taek Joo's face, he turned his head away.

"Don't."

Zhenya's eyebrows furrowed, dissatisfaction clearly visible on his bloodless face. Kwon Taek Joo stared at him with a dissatisfied face.

Two sharp eyes faced each other. Suddenly Zhenya reached out and grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's chin, breaking the tension for a moment.

"Don't do that."

He angrily threw his hand away. Immediately after that, Kwon Taek Joo was roughly grabbed by the collar and pushed down on the sofa. He waved his arms and legs angrily trying to get away from him. He desperately pushed his chin and kicked Zhenya in the stomach but the more he did that, the harder his face became. The terrible strength in his arms also doubled and his whole body felt like it was about to be crushed.

Zhenya violently flipped up his shirt, his body was exposed and the buttons looked like they could be torn immediately. He immediately used his teeth to sink into Kwon Taek Joo's exposed lower abdomen.

"What are you doing!?"

He groaned and kicked both legs. Is he planning to make love in the morning in the open living room on all four sides?

At that moment there seemed to be an unexpected presence on the second floor. Olga seems to have woken up. Kwon Taek Joo was startled and looked at Zhenya. He also raised his head and faced Kwon Taek Joo. But in just a moment, he licked again from his lower abdomen to his right hip as if to provoke him. The restraint slipped away. Anxiety increased to the maximum. Kwon Taek Joo cannot be seen in such a dirty way.

He gritted his teeth and pushed him fiercely, but Zhenya persisted. He slid his hands under his shirt and grabbed his chest as if he was about to explode, then used his thumb to gently rub his nipples. Kwon Taek Joo raised his body in shock, both his eyes opened wide in surprise.

"Good morning.."

Olga said hello and stood tall right after bumping into two people wrapped around each other on the tiny sofa. She lowered her voice and avoided him.

Kwon Taek Joo was embarrassed and covered his eyes with his hand, his molars clenched. Zhenya stared at Kwon Taek Joo and then twisted his nipples.

"Ah!"

He shouted worriedly and glared at him. Zhenya's expression became even colder from that moment on.

"You better not be naughty."

It wasn't once or twice that Zhenya was rejected, but this time he seemed seriously mad.

Kwon Taek Joo even skipped meals and cleaned the empty room. If he couldn't leave this island immediately, he felt he should have a room of his own, and absolutely couldn't let a situation like this morning happen again. He can't just sleep in the same bed as Zhenya.

There are plenty of rooms available in the villa but bed linen is severely lacking. Sleeping without a blanket can cause hypothermia which can kill even mice and birds, Kwon Taek Joo reluctantly decided to bring the one he was using from Zhenya's bedroom.

Zhenya is resting on a chair in the bedroom. He tilted his head back and closed his eyes. Kwon Taek Joo didn't want him to wake up so he took each step carefully. But without knowing when, Zhenya opened his eyes and followed Kwon Taek Joo. He tried not to notice that calm and naked gaze and picked up a pillow. He also took an extra blanket from the closet.

"What are you doing?"

"We have eyes to see, I can't continue to stay here."

Kwon Taek Joo opened the drawer and took out some underwear. All are brand new, unopened packaging. He went into the bathroom to get his own toothbrush and razor. He was busy moving back and forth and dropped the pillow he was wearing at his waist. Kwon Taek Joo tried to bend down to pick it up, but Zhenya stepped closer and stepped on it with his shoe. He slowly raised his head. Zhenya's stiff face turned grim.

"In whose saying?"

"Of course it's my idea. Stay out of my way."

Kwon Taek Joo growled in a low voice, the emotions he had suppressed for so long seemed to burst out immediately.

"Don't get excited just because I let you loose a little. You need to know your situation."

Kwon Taek Joo clenched his molars, his hands clenched into fists. If it were normal, he would try to endure it, because after living together for a while, he learned that provoking Zhenya was not a good thing.

However, Kwon Taek Joo cannot ignore this time, even if he looks down on others, there must be some level.

He stood up straight and patted Zhenya on the shoulder.

"Everything should be in moderation."

Zhenya stared at his shoulder then turned his head to look at Kwon Taek Joo with cold eyes.

Up to this point, he still lived like that and rarely protested. At many stages Kwon Taek Joo gave up on himself just to survive and because of that he endured whatever he had to face. In almost every situation, Zhenya takes the initiative and Kwon Taek Joo's life and death are completely in his hands. He is the only way to connect him to the outside world and let him know that Kwon Taek Joo himself is still alive.

Then a new person appeared, and a lot of things changed because of that one thing. At least that's the case with Kwon Taek Joo. Olga appeared and woke him up. He had to face his laziness in enjoying the comfort of adapting and compromising with Zhenya. Looking back now, his relationship with Zhenya had been distorted beyond definition. He felt like he would lose control if he continued to be carried away.

While he was arranging his thoughts, Zhenya strode forward. Kwon Taek Joo reflexively stepped back and tossed the blanket he was holding in his hand. The fluttering blanket obscured Zhenya's vision. He swung his fist at the loser. However the attack ended in vain as he raised his hand to block it. His clenched fist was grabbed and twisted back. Kwon

Taek Joo's knuckles seemed to be twisted by merciless force. He seemed to be fading away but suddenly turned around halfway and kicked Zhenya in the shin. The unexpected counterattack caused Zhenya to fall to his knees. Kwon Taek Joo, who was being held by him, also fell down.

"Ah"

The sound of the head hitting the floor rang out. If it weren't for the carpet, Kwon Taek Joo would have suffered a concussion. His lungs were compressed, making him short of breath. He wanted to stand up but Zhenya pressed on him, making Kwon Taek Joo unable to move. Looking back at the situation at that moment, it seemed that he had intentionally fallen.

The next moment, Zhenya suddenly grabbed his pants. Kwon Taek Joo grabbed that arm and pushed him away, but he was motionless. The hand-to-hand fight went on in silence for a long time, with only the sounds of panting and fierce gestures going back and forth countless times. Suddenly a knock on the door signaled its end.

The movement of the two people stopped. But in a moment, Zhenya without hesitation grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's ankle, then he tore off his shirt and scrunched it up. Kwon Taek Joo quickly pushed his chin away and tried to hold the shirt tightly with one hand. His shocked eyes and Zhenya's blind eyes were intertwined.

Just then, Olga raised her voice and said, "Let's go outside and talk for a bit.". At that moment, Kwon Taek Joo picked up a pillow that fell to the floor and hit Zhenya in the face. He was hit in the face unconsciously, his head turned half way and he was motionless. Even the sound of breathing stopped.

In that gap, Kwon Taek Joo stepped back and escaped from Zhenya. Then he hurriedly left the bedroom.

"..."

Zhenya didn't move for such a long time. It seemed like a bright red fire was spreading before his eyes, his chin trembled, and the water from his whole body seemed to evaporate. He himself didn't know why he was suddenly so angry.

Zhenya stood up. Not in a rush. The slow movement increased the pressure as if the warmth that was lacking on the white winter day had completely disappeared.

He intended to chase after Kwon Taek Joo but Olga suddenly stopped him in front.

"Stay away."

Zhenya ordered in a voice that was neither high nor low. When Olea shook her head and stood still, he shoved her shoulder hard. Olga helplessly fell down, then stood up again and ran in front of Zhenya. His cold eyes fell again. Faced with those crazy sparkling eyes, no matter how hard he tried, her shoulders would shrink.

"I want to talk to you."

Zhenya ignored that request and walked past Olga. Olga couldn't hold him back. All he could do was scream at his indifferent back.

"Bazim is home. His conversation with dad was very unusual. You might actually get hurt this time. So don't be stubborn and give everyone what they want!"

The real purpose of the surprise visit was there. But Olga's worries couldn't reach Zhenya. He strode up the stairs as if he hadn't heard anything.

"Aren't you tired of being here isolated and alone?"

Olga called to the end. Again still no answer. Zhenya's figure also quickly disappeared from her sight.

Even talking to the wall would not be so helpless, Olga slumped her shoulders and let out a choking sign.

Boom. The shock was strong enough to bend a closed door. But inside the door remained silent. Once again half Zhenya banged on the door. The fist pounding on the door was filled with rage, but the voice that followed was low and dry.

"Open the door."

There were still no signs inside. Zhenya's face became colder. He lifted his foot and kicked the door without hesitation.

The door broke in half with a violent crash. Zhenya quickly opened the tattered door and stepped inside. Kwon Taek Joo stood next to the window, frowning in surprise. Zhenya strode closer and grabbed his chin.

"Cough."

For a moment, his legs were lifted into the air. Zhenya's jaw clenched as if he was about to crush him. Zhenya held Kwon Taek Joo with one hand and stared at him, his eyes expressionless as if he was enjoying things and not people. Kwon Taek Joo's face immediately turned red, his eyes closed tightly

It seemed like he was about to die in his hands. His feet were struggling to hold on to life and kicked him in the stomach. Immediately, Zhenya pinned Kwon Taek Joo against the opposite wall.

He hit his head against the wall and fell onto the table. Kwon Taek Joo groaned with shaking limbs. Meanwhile, Zhenya looked down at the spot where he had just been kicked, then tilted his head back and took a breath. A golden light of anger spread in the eyes of the person who was closing the distance once again. It seemed like the detonator in his head had been activated.

Kwon Taek Joo quickly lifted himself up. He threw a wooden stool that was lying right at his feet. Zhenya raised his hand and gently blocked it. The old stool shattered as soon as it hit his hand.

Zhenya lightly brushed wood chips and sawdust off his arm. Immediately after that, the two people's eyes met. His eyes silently looking down at Kwon Taek Joo were not like human eyes at all. It was almost like a predator preparing to hunt.

Just as Kwon Taek Joo was startled. Zhenya rushed at him in an instant. There was no time to dodge, his entire face was grabbed. Kwon Taek Joo was pushed against the wall from behind his head. While he was still dazed with shock, his throat was tightened, his body was lifted up.

Kwon Taek Joo tried to swing his fist out of survival instinct, but to no avail.

When Zhenya raised his hand, Kwon Taek Joo's feet were lifted off the floor. His body had no support and struggled desperately to survive. Zhenya attentively watched Kwon Taek Joo in severe pain. The blue eyes held no sympathy or any hesitation.

"If a dog stands up to its owner, there's no need for it to live"

His fingertips tightened the neck more and more, the skin stretched as if it was about to be punctured by his fingers. Pressure was on his eyes and saliva flowed from his lips that were panting with difficulty.

Kwon Taek Joo's life with Zhenya is threatened every moment. Although he behaves extremely comfortably, he will turn around and rush in when insulted.

Kwon Taek Joo was too exhausted to continue walking on such a precarious rope. Living in a place without hope and having to be in harmony with Zhenya's mood to live, if you can't get off this island, it's a life no different from death. No, maybe death would be better.

Kwon Taek Joo opened his eyes with difficulty and saw Zhenya. A vein appeared on his smooth forehead. He frowned at the pain every minute and second and stubbornly looked at Zhenya. No matter how he strangled him, only his eyelids trembled but he definitely did not close his eyes.

Is that persistent gaze enough to cause pressure? Zhenya's eyebrows furrowed. Kwon Taek Joo muttered intermittently, looking down at him.

"Okay, kill me. I can't do anything other than moan."

The expressionless face was permeated with discomfort. Zhenya strangled Kwon Taek Joo mercilessly. The force was so great that it seemed to crush all the vertebrae in his neck. Kwon Taek Joo's head tilted back on its own.

His reason had given up the struggle to survive. He just looked at Zhenya's horribly distorted face, his limbs had no strength left. Zhenya

wrinkled his nose. He didn't even realize why he was so angry that he was immersed in punishing Kwon Taek Joo.

Kwon Taek Joo gasped then smiled. He was ready for death, a ghost like him was now nothing. On the contrary, he always felt sympathy for his extremism.

"I feel sorry for you too."

Kwon Taek Joo whispered in a voice as weak as his breath. Perhaps it was just an illusion, but it seemed like Zhenya's hand that was strangling him also lost its strength for a moment. But that was just for a moment. Kwon Taek Joo soon lost consciousness. The black eyes that once contained Zhenya closed heavily. Kwon Taek Joo's pulse, which was beating violently, could no longer be felt.

Zhenya withdrew the power from his hand. Kwon Taek Joo's floating body fell to the floor. When he opened his wet hand, his fingertips were covered in blood. It was buried in Kwon Taek Joo's neck. Zhenya looked at Kwon Taek Joo who had collapsed at his feet and then looked at his own hand in dismay.

He dealt with the person who made him unhappy, but why is he in such a bad mood? Nothing could bother him anymore, but why was his heart, which he couldn't even feel the beat of normally, beating so fast and heavily.

Zhenya observed Kwon Taek Joo motionless from afar and then suddenly grabbed his arm. But only his arms were pulled up while Kwon Taek Joo's body still sagged. He grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's collar and shook him wildly. His eyes trembled as he looked around.

There was no reaction from Kwon Taek Joo at all. Zhenya slapped his cheek. After only two times, his cheeks were red and swollen and the corners of his mouth were also filled with blood. However, there was still no significant response.

Zhenya pulled Kwon Taek Joo's face closer and continuously placed his ear on his nose and mouth to check his breathing. He could feel the breath, but it was hard to tell if it was Kwon Taek Joo's or Zhenya's own.

He put Kwon Taek Joo on the ground and tore his shirt. He placed his ear on her bare chest again and listened to the heartbeat. There was a light pulse from inside his skin, but it was so weak that it seemed like it would die at any moment.

Zhenya grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's chin and opened it. He inserted his finger and pressed it on his tongue and fixed his airway. At that moment, something fell from his face and landed on Kwon Taek Joo's forehead. His sweat.

Zhenya's actions stopped immediately. What was so urgent that he was drenched in sweat in just a moment? His eyes opened wide empty but contained nothing in them. He was quite shocked.

Zhenya immediately stood up. He walked to the broken door. He then threw debris and furniture around. The room that Kwon Taek Joo diligently cleaned was quickly devastated. However, he still couldn't relieve his mood, Zhenya curled his shoulders and breathed heavily.

He tilted his head for a moment and adjusted his breathing. An unnamed feeling of loss spread throughout his body. Frustrating. His heart was still beating fast for no reason. Why? After all, why? Why is he so unhappy?

Zhenya left his seat and walked away. Olga was running towards him when he saw the strange face, he looked at Zhenya with a surprised expression. Olga asked what was going on, but he just walked up the stairs without answering.

That was the first time Olga saw that expression on Zhenya. Having an unfortunate feeling, he quickly entered the broken door. Kwon Taek Joo is lying in a messy room with no place to put his feet.

Olga checked his breathing first then lifted his eyelids and looked into Kwon Taek Joo's pupils. Luckily, he was still breathing. There was blood on the neck where the fingerprints were. It wasn't too much, but it seemed like he had to stop the bleeding first.

Olga was about to go get the medicine box when the sound of spinning blades rang out. The helicopter took off and quickly left the villa.

## Chapter 3.13 – Lonely Koshichei

Translator's Note: Violence + 18+!!

FSB Director Oleg Khizinsky left his office and went to the command headquarters of the Alpha 3 unit. He was on his way straight after receiving news that Zhenya had gone to work. He was always absent and only answered calls when he felt like it, so he had to go find him personally.

Two armed elite agents followed the director. It is to prepare for any possible armed conflict. Like a reptile whose body temperature changes every hour, even Zhenya's temperament is so sensitive that it is difficult to please him.

Just as the director's group had just arrived on the second floor, one person was suddenly thrown out the door. The man collided with the opposite wall and then collapsed. The room he had just rushed out of was the group's destination, 'Alpha 3 Unit Command Headquarters. The two agents quietly pulled out their guns.

The inside of the room was more messy than expected. The so-called window was smashed and the iron desk was overturned. Office supplies such as papers and phones were scattered on the floor.

Zhenya turned his head at the presence at the door, the director's eyes observing the group of people looked very unusual. What happened to him today?

The director signaled the agents telling them to put their guns away. He then sent those two people on high alert out. He closed the door himself and sat on the sofa that had long been pushed out of place. Zhenya stood in place and observed his every move. His stinging glare made him uncomfortable.

"I heard you're keeping that Korean spy, right? Is he dead?"

"If not, then hand him over now, what do you think? We should also think about the face of the FSB."

The answer is silence. Zhenya didn't even show any thought for a second. If he had that intention from the beginning, he wouldn't have gone too far with the spy. Heavy silence followed.

Finally, the director shook his head and sighed. As if he had given up, he threw out the pile of papers he was carrying.

"If you don't like it then take charge of this and deal with it. Something has to be achieved to restore the lost image, right?"

No matter how you look at it, it doesn't look like a superior is giving instructions to a subordinate. It's more like a conditional agreement.

Zhenya glanced at the pile of papers at his feet and then looked back at the director. The director briefly explained what he would have to do.

"Not long ago, a military intelligence officer was murdered. was right after he was seen entering the hotel with a woman. According to the crime scene investigation team, it appears that he was killed by a suicide bomber while having sex. The rebels now seemed ready to resort to beautification. A group of about 20 rebels disguised their identities, including the woman. dead woman, entered Moscow. So this is probably the beginning."

The director paused for a moment and then gave an order.

"Find and deal with them all."

Late at night. The two men and women wrapped their arms around each other and left an upscale bar in downtown Moscow. The man is a high-ranking government official in the Ministry of National Defense. He climbed into a sedan provided by the bar, not an official vehicle. The man's partner is a woman whose overflowing sensuality cannot be hidden.

As soon as he arrived at the hotel, the man impatiently pulled her wrist. After entering the elevator, the two were extremely entwined with each other. The excited man hugged the woman and sat her on the handrail

inside the elevator, then rolled her skirt up to her waist. The woman also opened her legs and squeezed the man tightly.

He bit into the garter belt that wrapped around the woman's smooth thighs. When the belt was thrown off, the woman trembled slightly at the waist and groaned softly. The man touched his lips and greedily sucked his tongue as if ready to swallow her excited breath.

The elevator quickly went up. They were both half-naked when they stepped out. He threw the woman onto the bed. The girl smiled and rubbed her round breasts. It was a provocative gesture. The naked man rushed at the woman immediately.

He touched his lips again and pulled the rest of her clothes off. When the bra was pulled up, her plump breasts rose elastically. He buried his face in it and spread the woman's legs wide and wrapped them around his waist while rubbing furiously. The shirt, neatly ironed by his wife, was crumpled in the hands of an unknown woman.

He took off her underwear while frantically kissing the woman's neck. The girl was very anxious but insisted on keeping her knees together. The enthusiastic man with a restless body moved around and tickled her buttocks.

"Ha, ha, should I lift my ass, huh?"

"Ah."

He pulled out his penis that was about to explode. The erect mass of flesh snorted, looking for a hole to enter. He sucked the nipple while brushing the hot glans over the woman's center. She tilted her head and arched her body. In an instant, her body opened wide and he inserted his meat shaft.

"Ahh!"

"Ah, huh?"

After enjoying the feeling of tight compression for a while, the man let out a questioning voice. His head was buried in the girl's chest, looking up. A hard object touches the glans inside the hole. It seemed like there was something inside the woman's vagina.

He looked bewildered at the still smiling girl hugging his neck, a somewhat forced smile. The man belatedly tried to run away, but the woman hugged him tightly and refused to let go. To prevent the man from easily escaping, her legs were also tightly wrapped around his waist.

"I said I would kill you."

The girl whispered sweetly into the bewildered man's ear. The man panicked at the feeling of danger, but for some reason he could not escape the woman's arms.

Suddenly a loud noise rang out. At the same time, the tightly closed door was almost torn apart. The man and woman looked back at the door in surprise at the same time. An uninvited guest walked in front of the two. The one person who didn't have a trace of shame when he saw the two of them entwined with each other was none other than Zhenya. He burst in with a rifle.

Zhenya suddenly grabbed the man who couldn't move because the woman grabbed him and threw him to the floor without hesitation. In an unexpected situation, the woman quickly pulled out the detonator. However, before he could press the detonation button, her arm was grabbed. In an instant, the detonator fell from the woman's twisted arm.

"Ah!"

The woman screamed in pain. Zhenya did not hesitate to point the gun at her head. He did not hesitate for even a second until he pulled the trigger.

The woman's body shook and drooped down. Fresh blood splattered all over Zhenya's face and body. The man who had witnessed the entire scene hastily ran away.

But at that moment, it seemed like the air particles in the air suddenly swelled. Part of the wall was blown away with consecutive loud explosions, and the ceiling also fell helplessly. The impact of the explosion shattered all the windows at the front and all the lights in the building went out. His vision was suddenly blocked.

Zhenya blocked debris and dirt with the flap of his jacket. Even though he didn't understand what was going on, his ears were ringing as if something was wrong with his eardrums.

Not long after, a laser beam shines through the broken windows. The groping light in the hotel room, which was full of broken glass and stone dust, quickly reached Zhenya's mouth. Immediately after, the laser light moved down around his left chest area. Without saying a word, Zhenya looked down at the red dot on his chest.

In the next moment, dozens of laser beams flew from many directions and stuck in one place. Instantly, Zhenya's chest and head were dyed red. Now, if he moves just one step, his entire body will become a corpse.

A moment later, there was the familiar sound of propellers approaching. The helicopter hovered in the dark sky and aimed its lights at Zhenya. For some reason, its appearance looks quite familiar. And of course, the FSB symbol emblazoned on the bottom of the helicopter appeared. He didn't ask for help, so of course he didn't come to help voluntarily.

Zhenya can speak intuitively. This is a double trap.

Even though it was late, the president still stayed in the Oval Office. Bazim also sat on his chair with a restless look on his face. The two just silently waited for some news. Occasionally he pulled up his sleeve to check the time.

Just then, he felt a presence outside the door, and there was a knock on the door. The person who appeared when invited in was FSB director Oleg Khizinsky.

The eyes of the President and Bazim turned to him at the same time. The director politely bowed and reported the progress.

"A combat team has been brought into the scene. We have blocked all of the target's escape routes and completely surrounded them."

It's a vague expression but it's not difficult to understand its meaning. The President nodded silently. Bazim's expression was not much

different, there was no concern or sympathy for his blood relative on his face.

The president looked at the FSB director again. There was another piece of news that he had been waiting for more than the previous report. Oleg Khizinsky did not keep him waiting long.

"Half an hour ago, nine members of the Vimpel special forces were also dispatched to the location. They are elite agents that you can trust, so please don't worry."

Faced with the director's boasts, the president finally smiled with satisfaction. He nodded and praised me. "Good job." Important instructions were given one after another.

"If the 'watchman' resists to the end, then just eliminate him."

All that could be seen was thick darkness. No, maybe it's snow. Even though he couldn't see anything, Kwon Taek Joo could feel the characteristic coldness. Not a single wind passed through that place. There was no way out, and he felt trapped in a space with nothing passing through. It's so stuffy.

A child suddenly appeared while he was looking at the dark surroundings. A

boy

who looked about 6 or 7 years old. The child stood alone in the distance so he couldn't see his face. Kwon Taek Joo tried to talk but for some reason he couldn't raise his voice.

A moment later, someone approached the child. He couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman. That figure hovered around the child for a while then suddenly disappeared somewhere. Another person approached the bewildered child. But then that person quickly disappeared. The boy was once again left behind.

Countless silhouettes passed by the child. Sometimes one or two people, sometimes a whole group. But in the end no one remained. The boy attracted many passersby but quickly became a loner.

After a while, the child turned around. The pale face first approached Kwon Taek Joo. He didn't hesitate to step forward and quickly approached the boy. Even at close range, he could not see the child's face. A white hand slowly reached out. Kwon Taek Joo was absentmindedly looking away when suddenly that hand grabbed his finger. The boy's ice-cold body temperature sent chills down his spine.

The child suddenly clenched his hands, so tight that his fingers throbbed in pain. That's unparalleled power for such a small body. Kwon Taek Joo wondered if the boy was afraid of losing the hand he just held?

The child dragged Kwon Taek Joo somewhere. For some reason, he had a premonition that if he was dragged along, he would never be able to escape. He is not confident in raising children. With the thought of being responsible for a child he didn't even know who he was, Kwon Taek Joo quickly twisted his hand away from that small hand. With empty hands, the child looked at Kwon Taek Joo in bewilderment.

The child held out his hand again. Kwon Taek Joo unconsciously stepped back. Its white face was confused with shock, Unlucky premonition. The child immediately burst into tears. The fresh air of space quickly froze. With every breath he took, sharp ice crystals also filled his lungs.

Ignoring the tears that continued to flow, the child cried loudly until his voice was hoarse. With that echo, the vast space around began to collapse helplessly. The floor shook as if an earthquake had occurred, and the ceiling and walls crumbled.

It's dangerous. Kwon Taek Joo tried to cling to the child and protect him, but it was not easy to catch him. The more he reached out, the more it wiped away its tears and moved away.

A completely collapsed world suddenly swallowed Kwon Taek Joo.

He took a deep breath and opened his eyes. His vision widened rapidly, making him dizzy. The rotating ceiling looks quite familiar. Kwon Taek Joo moved his hand and felt the floor. It's stiff. Kwon Taek Joo was left on the floor, not on the bed nor in front of the fireplace. He closed his

eyes and recalled his last memories before losing consciousness. A sigh came out, I don't know if it was from relief or helplessness. This time he thought he was going to die.

"Are you awake?"

Kwon Taek Joo noticed Olga's presence when he heard the question. He lifted himself up and as if he was waiting, a sharp pain shot through his body. Kwon Taek Joo swallowed back the moan that was about to come out and looked around again. The look of the room was unbelievable, even the post war ruins didn't seem that bad.

Meanwhile, only the area around Kwon Taek Joo was tidied up. His body was covered with a blanket and had a pillow for his head. Not only that, there were bandages wrapped around his neck and arms. Olga couldn't move Kwon Taek Joo so it seemed like he took care of him that way.

"What happened yesterday? Why did he go so crazy?"

Olga was curious. He shook his head. Even Kwon Taek Joo couldn't understand why Zhenya was so angry. Even though he usually changed his expression every time he caused trouble, he wondered if using a private room was something worth being so angry about. Of course his useless attacks in anger might have also made him angrier. For someone who likes 'legitimate defense', is that an act worth killing him for?

"He went out yesterday."

Olga informed about Zhenya's whereabouts when Kwon Taek Joo still did not ask, and also classified the drugs he used. Then he said "Let's eat" and left the room first.

Kwon Taek Joo awkwardly touched the bandage. He had no intention of remembering, but Zhenya's cold expression appeared clearly. He had never been a rational person, but at that moment, it seemed like a fuse in his head had blown. Even when attacking others, he is filled with leisure. Even when it was revealed that he was not Kwon Taek Joo's colleague and when he came to the embassy to arrest him, Zhenya did not make that face. I don't know if this is a miracle when Kwon Taek Joo

is still breathing. After realizing it again, belatedly, his fingertips trembled again.

Then suddenly he remembered the strange dream he had just now. The person he saw in his dream was a child, but why did he suddenly think of him? The only similarities are her transparent white skin and unusual ivory hair. Kwon Taek Joo shook his head again to clear his thoughts. He hurriedly left the room before any more strange thoughts appeared in his mind.

Kwon Taek Joo walked down the stairs and into the kitchen. For some reason, Olga wasn't there. No, I thought so. That was because he was cowering on the opposite side of the dining table hidden from view. Just what was he doing there, but the image of her unnaturally clenching her chest caught Kwon Taek Joo's eyes. Cold sweat broke out on her bloodless face.

"Hey! What's wrong?"

"Medicine, get medicine."

Kwon Taek Joo licked his dry lips vigorously. His whole body trembled. He looked around in shock. Soon he found a bottle of medicine rolling under the table. Kwon Taek Joo didn't even have time to check what kind of medicine it was, so he opened the lid and gave it to Olga.

Olea swallowed the pill in her hand without water. Then he took a deep breath. Kwon Taek Joo carefully lifted her body and brought her water for her to slowly drink. Her cold hands are also massaged to help blood circulation. After a while. Olga's breathing gradually returned to normal. Her skin also improved significantly.

"I have congenital angina."

(Congenital angina is having chest pain or discomfort, it's a heart condition from birth)

Olga confessed while rubbing her aching heart. It seemed like her coming here to recuperate wasn't just empty talk. Kwon Taek Joo helped Olga unsteadily sit down on the chair. He boiled water and

brought her another cup of warm water. Olga smiled lightly and said thank you.

That was when Olga had just received the glass of water. A slight wave rippled on the surface of the water in the glass. Is it an illusion? The sound of helicopters rang out continuously. Zhenya is back? No, this sound is different from his. At this level, it is likely that this military helicopter has auxiliary rotors.

Kwon Taek Joo reached out and placed his index finger between his lips. Olga, not understanding what was going on, nodded silently. He left her in the kitchen and moved to the front window. Kwon Taek Joo pressed his back against the wall and observed the movement outside the window. Not long after, military helicopters crossing the sea appeared in his sight.

As if planning to land on the island, they gradually lowered their altitude. It doesn't feel very good. At least they weren't here to patrol an uninhabited island owned by Zhenya, Kwon Taek Joo hurried back to the kitchen.

"What's going on?"

"Military helicopters are approaching."

"Military helicopters?"

Olga raised her hand to cover her mouth. It seemed like something was choked up. Before coming here, he overheard a conversation between her father Vissarion and Bazim. They said that if Zhenya did not eventually hand over 'Anastasia' they would seize it by force. He said it was the Kremlin's will.

She couldn't tell if those unwanted guests were simply looking for Anastasia or if they were trying to harm Zhenya. Now that he's not here. I wonder what the situation will be like? Above all, he worried about Kwon Taek Joo's safety.

"I don't know why they came here, but we should get away first. For now, just do what I say."

Olga nodded silently. No one in the family knew he was here. There was no way Vissarion or Bazim would allow her to meet Zhenya before a major event that needed to be kept secret. So nothing good would come of her encountering the government army.

Kwon Taek Joo went down to the basement and took out the gun he and Zhenya used to hunt with. He also put bullets in his pocket. Even if the accuracy of the shot is a little lower, it is still better than hitting with bare hands. When he returned to the kitchen, Olga immediately lifted up the hem of her dress, then he took the Colt off the gun rack on her lap and gave it to him.

"I'll give you this."

After all, he is a blood relative of the Bogdanov family. Kwon Taek Joo smiled and returned the Colt to her.

"You don't have to wear it as jewelry, you know how to shoot, right? Keep it and shoot it in case you have to."

"But you're more dangerous than me."

"Who are you worried about?"

At about that time, the noise of the propeller subsided. Kwon Taek Joo quickly led Olga through the back door. As expected, a military helicopter landed on the snowy field. As soon as the engine stopped, the door opened and armed agents poured out. A total of 9 people including the pilot. The difference in the number of people and the inferiority in weapons were too great, it was better for Kwon Taek Joo to avoid a direct collision and hide somewhere.

"Do you know how to ski?"

He asked while wearing Olga's umbrella. Olga said "Is that a question" as if it was unreasonable. What a blessing in misfortune. Kwon Taek Joo showed her a place far away on the horizon.

"See that birch forest over there? When I give the signal, run in that direction. Even if a shot rings out or there's some noise behind you, don't look back and keep running,

got it?"

Olga nodded eagerly. There was no sign of fear. That's thanks to the courage honed for decades in the Bogdanov family.

After quickly checking Olga's ski equipment, Kwon Taek Joo signaled by patting her on the back. Olga hit the floor with her pole and slid on the snow. He had to attract attention until he reached the safety of the forest. Kwon Taek Joo looked at the girl who was sliding away expertly and then returned to the villa.

Immediately afterwards, the agents were divided into two special teams and rushed in. Following the commander's signal, one team went upstairs, the other team stayed on the first floor and began searching. As if they were looking for something, they kept knocking on the walls and floors, and they even carried metal detectors.

Soon, one of the group members found the stairs leading to the basement. They turned on the lights on their helmets and carefully got off.

The moment they confirmed that there was no presence and took another step, a hand reached out from between the steps and grabbed their ankles. The attack was so sudden that they fell forward without a chance to react.

"Ugh!"

A painful groan came from the fallen man. Meanwhile, he was busy searching for the rifle he had lost in his hand. But nothing came within reach. He raised his head curiously. Soon, someone's long legs filled his vision. That's Kwon Taek Joo. The rifle the man was looking for was turned over to him.

He hit the man in the head with the butt of the gun in his hand. The man could not fight back and fell limp. Kwon Taek Joo dragged him down the stairs and rummaged through his clothes. On the back of the bulletproof vest is embroidered the emblem of "Vimpel. a special unit affiliated with the FSB.

Did the FSB send them with the purpose of arresting Kwon Taek Joo? There are a lot of angles that aren't very clear. The same goes for using a metal detector to search inside the mansion and not being too vigilant to find someone hiding. It was as if they already knew that the homeowner was not here.

While Kwon Taek Joo was developing his thoughts, a bullet flew out of nowhere. Another group member seemed aware of the commotion in the basement and ran over. He quickly dodged it. The other agents heard the gunshots and ran to the front of the basement one by one.

Kwon Taek Joo went to the door leading outside and mounted the skateboard. It will be difficult to avoid being chased as long as your presence is detected. The forest was the safest place to hide, but he couldn't drag them there with Olga. Kwon Taek Joo walked in the opposite direction from which he had fled.

It was still daytime and the surface of the snowfield had melted moderately, Kwon Taek Joo slid quickly across it. The wind was as fierce as the speed of running, making his eyes sting. He frowned and walked away because he didn't have goggles with him. Not long after, the agents found Kwon Taek Joo and called each other.

Gunshots rang out continuously. The bullets flew from behind through the snow just one step ahead or behind Kwon Taek Joo. He gritted his teeth and rubbed his eyes harder. When he suddenly ran out of range, the agents equipped special skateboards and chased him. Helicopters also followed above his head.

It was difficult to aim at a target running in an S-shape, but even if he ran until his limbs became weak, the distance would gradually narrow. With a numerical inferiority, Kwon Taek Joo cannot stop or confront them. It seemed like he had to use the geographical features he had learned up to this point to cut them off.

Soon after, multiple shots were fired from the helicopter. Kwon Taek Joo turned around and hid under a cliff covered with white snow. Three or four agents kept up. Then the helicopters began providing cover fire. As if he had been waiting. Kwon Taek Joo rushed out. Bullets rained down

continuously and stuck to the steep cliff. Not long after, a loud roar rang out.

Kwon Taek Joo pushed the pole as hard as he could and increased his speed. The moment he left the cliff, the separated layer of sediment collapsed. The agents chasing him were startled and changed direction but could not avoid an avalanche that occurred immediately.

Kwon Taek Joo didn't look back and sped through the snowy field. The helicopter kept rushing and shooting. Bullets rained down, tearing apart the normally quiet snowfield. Kwon Taek Joo narrowly passed through the crossfire on a white snow covered field.

A steep cliff will appear in a moment. That's where he had his eye on trying paragliding. It was perfect for sliding down but he didn't know if it was suitable for jumping. However, Kwon Taek Joo can only try.

He made up his mind and flew up without hesitation. The wind blew from all directions supporting his body. Kwon Taek Joo reduces drag by tilting his upper body at an angle. The agents couldn't react in time, so they could only watch Kwon Taek Joo's daring and reckless jump. The bottom of the cliff is quickly being approached. That's the falling point. Kwon Taek Joo grabbed the rope so he could open the parachute at any time.

Just then, a gunshot rang in his ears. The body that was falling straight down suddenly lost strength.

## Chapter 3.14 – Lonely Koshichei

Suddenly he looked up into space with an annoyed expression. His pale face was covered with streaks of fresh blood of unknown origin. At his feet were the agents who had participated in last night's operation scattered.

He frowned at the bright sunlight. He didn't even realize it was morning. Thinking back, my ears were too noisy. Police who started after receiving reports of an explosion were lined up on the street. Ambulances also blared their sirens and rushed to transport the injured.

"Ugh!"

The man in his arms let out a heavy groan. He was the only survivor among the FSB agents sent in last night. Zhenya did not ask him who was the instigator of this mission and what was the purpose. He was used to having his life threatened this way.

Even in a dying state, he still easily broke the neck of an agent who was trying to fight to the end. The man convulsed and drooped down.

He was lost in thought as he wiped his bloody hand on the edge of the curtain. Having received an unexpected gift, now it's his turn to say thank you, right? Who should he go to first? FSB Director? Or the Kremlin? He smiled as he imagined how Bazim would react when he saw him.

He happily developed these thoughts, but suddenly he felt doubts. They will not be optimistic that they can eliminate Zhenya with just that much force. He didn't know if they were going to tie him up and buy time or not.

'The President also wants to reaffirm your loyalty. This opportunity could be the Kremlin's last generosity.'

'Bazim is home. His conversation with his father was very unusual. You could really get hurt this time.'

Could it be?

The doubts over the past seemed to have been reinforced. His mischievous face also stiffened. He remembered Kwon Taek Joo who was on the island. His eyes flashed bright yellow and he felt dizzy. For a moment, the comfort was gone.

He must return to the island immediately. The strides quickly turned into a quick run.

He flew through the erratic air currents. When the speed was increased to maximum, the helicopter could not bear to shake violently. The winding black surface of the sea seemed like it could swallow a dangerous helicopter in an instant. He was reckless with a flight that could crash at any time. The only thought in his mind was to return to the island.

His heart was pounding uncomfortably. The speed got worse. Nameless frustration continuously tightened around his neck. He doesn't even know why he is doing these things. He only vaguely thought that if he set foot on the island, this unpleasant feeling would disappear.

Despite the bad weather, he arrived on the island earlier than usual. The first thing that caught sight was a military helicopter turning near the cliff. He immediately turned around and flew straight there. When Zhenya's helicopter approached, the military helicopters opened fire without hesitation.

Zhenya could not avoid the flying bullets. The bullets went through the windows, propellers and the front of the fuselage. Black smoke billowed out from the tail. However, he still stubbornly rushed into the military helicopter. That reckless action hides the will to not be afraid of collision.

Sensing danger, the military helicopter stopped firing and to hastily increase altitude but in the end it was still impossible to avoid a collision. The fan blades rub against each other creating sparks. The air around it temporarily condensed and then exploded violently.

A terrible explosion shattered the air. Black smoke rose, the two planes became piles of scrap metal and fell helplessly. One step before, Zhenya jumped into the sea. Debris from the helicopter fell menacingly. He avoided it and dived deep into the water, then kicked the water and emerged.

The agents ran to the battlefield and pulled the trigger randomly. The target once again dives and disappears from their sight. The agents targeted all over the sea and waited for Zhenya to reappear. But he never appeared on the water.

Was he injured and drowned? It was during this time that the agents faced each other in bewilderment, a chill somewhere behind them. The agent quickly turned the barrel of the gun, but his head was bowed first. The last bullet he fired took away the breath of his poor comrade. Dreamy red blood spread across the pure white snow field.

Zhenya rushed to the cliff where the military helicopter hovered. Even though his eyes were wide open, there was nothing strange there. The closer he got to the cliff, the more the feeling of haste that was boiling in his heart had spread to the extreme.

He reached the edge of the cliff and looked down. Blood streaks gradually spread across the prominent snowfield, but Kwon Taek Joo was still nowhere to be seen.

Zhenya without hesitation attached his body to the ice wall and slid down. The snow was so dense that it softened the shock, but it was not completely without shock. He clenched his molars and lifted his throbbing body. Zhenya looked around in all directions, searching for Kwon Taek Joo.

He chased after the sparse blood stains. That trace was interrupted dozens of meters from where he stood. And there, he saw a small cave that even Zhenya did not know about. It's called a cave, but it's just a groove narrow enough for people to enter.

Kwon Taek Joo, the person he had been looking for, sat hunched inside. I don't know how long he's been like this, his face is pale without a drop of blood, even his cold breath of white smoke is weak. Zhenya ran over

and grabbed his arm. It's not an illusion. Only then did the breath he had been holding come out chaotically.

"Ha ha."

Zhenya urgently checked Kwon Taek Joo's breathing and pulse. It was difficult to tell how much Kwon Taek Joo's body temperature had dropped because his body seemed to freeze. The collar of Zhenya, who was checking his breathing by placing his ear on his chest, was gently pulled. Even though it was a very weak force, he immediately stopped all movements and looked in that direction.

Kwon Taek Joo's cold hand was pulling Zhenya's shirt. Hand gestures are weak, as if they could break just by touching them. But why did he feel that hand was so heavy? He couldn't take his eyes off the collar he was holding.

No one told Zhenya about life. Up until now he has lived a life no different from a messenger. He took so many lives himself, and that's all the world wanted and demanded of him. Yet this foolish man is asking him to save his life. This is absurd.

But right now only he can help him. Just Zhenya.

He helplessly looked at Kwon Taek Joo and supported his back. His whole body immediately collapsed without any strength and fell into his chest.

"Is this how you came up with it..."

He muttered as he stared endlessly at Kwon Taek Joo's pale, bloodless face. It was a voice that contained a strange aftertaste.

Zhenya then gently hugged him and slowly walked back to the villa. Steps leave much deeper footprints than steps taken alone. That step also left a deep mark on Zhenya's chest.

Kwon Taek Joo blinked his eyes open. It felt like his head was being weighed down. His body seemed to be boiling. The high temperature causes the eyes to melt and vision becomes confused. He could feel someone's presence next to him, but he didn't have the strength to open his eyes and see that face.

A cold towel was placed on his forehead. A grumble was also heard. Something cool flickered outside the closed eyelids. He reached out and grabbed it. Surprised by Kwon Taek Joo's sudden action, that existence was startled.

"Are you awake?"

That was Olga's voice. He tried to open his eyes. Olga was sitting next to the bed with a worried look on her face. What happened? Kwon Taek Joo doesn't remember anything from the middle.

The FSB's special unit Vimpel' suddenly entered, and while fleeing from them, he jumped off a cliff. Right after that, he even remembered that a sharp pain had passed through his body. It seems like Kwon Taek Joo exhausted his remaining strength and took refuge in a cave. Perhaps because of the bullet wound, his body temperature dropped rapidly and he gradually lost strength.

It's been a while and no one has come. There is no way to escape on your own. The wind blew stronger and stronger and visibility became increasingly blurry. It seemed that even if someone died there, the body would not be discovered unless someone made an effort to search. For the first time, Kwon Taek Joo faced complete loneliness. He thought he was used to living alone, but the thought that he might be abandoned forever made him feel helpless and scared. It is said that when the body is weak, the mind is also weak. Seeing him alive and healthy like this, it seemed like he was discovered before his death.

Kwon Taek Joo tried to lift his upper body, but half of his body was stiff. When he stopped with a groan, Olga quickly put Kwon Taek Joo down. His condition got worse so he lay down again. It appeared he had been hit in the side.

"You were unconscious for quite a while, you know that?"

Olga sighed and asked. Kwon Taek Joo shook his head. After losing consciousness, all his senses became dull and he could not even notice the passage of time. He didn't even know how Kwon Taek Joo was brought to this place. It's impossible with Olga's power alone, so someone else must have helped.

Olga did not explain in detail what had happened. It is important for physically and mentally exhausted patients to get absolute rest. She soaked a towel in water and

wrung it dry.

"You're sweating a lot and have a high fever, so you might need to clean yourself up a bit. Are you okay with that?"

Kwon Taek Joo nodded and said, "Thank you." It was uncomfortable because his whole body was drenched in sweat, and the gunshot wound made it difficult to bathe for the time being.

Olga carefully lifted the blanket that Kwon Taek Joo was covering. At that moment, someone grabbed her arm. He also snatched the towel he was holding in her hand. It's Zhenya.

He signaled Olga, who was staring at him, to stop and go out. Olga hesitated with worried eyes. If a duel breaks out between the two of them again, this time Kwon Taek Joo won't be able to survive. Zhenya spoke up while he was still hesitant.

"Get out."

The voice was calm but enough to feel the pressure. Olga reluctantly got up and left the bedroom, leaving the door cracked in case of emergency.

"..."

"..."

Two eyes met. This was actually the first face-to-face meeting after the quarrel, but the hostility, resentment and antipathy towards each other had subsided. After all the fuss, that's a good thing. However, Kwon Taek Joo looked quite tired. He didn't even have the energy to compete with Zhenya.

Zhenya pulled the blanket away without saying a word. Cool air rushes into Kwon Taek Joo's hot body. He shivered coldly. Zhenya looked intently at Kwon Taek Joo and then raised one hand. He was suddenly startled and reached out his hand, Our eyes met again. The usual Zhenya would completely change his expression, but today he showed

patience and withdrew his hand. Then he gently wiped his sweaty skin with a damp cloth.

At first, just touching the towel gave Kwon Taek Joo goosebumps, but after a while he got used to it. Furthermore, Zhenya only focused on wiping his body and remained silent. The guy delicately wiped each finger and then all the way to the inside of his armpit. Kwon Taek Joo quickly felt comfortable and refreshed, but he also felt embarrassed because every corner of his body was being scrutinized so intently. Just because you're a patient and you're being cared for, it seems like your private parts are being exposed.

Zhenya moistened the towel again and placed it on his neck. Kwon Taek Joo frowned at the sudden temperature difference. After waiting for a while, Zhenya gently wiped his bandaged neck and chin. The collarbone is straight and the chest mound is also carefully touched as if tracing a trace.

His aching body immediately felt refreshed. Kwon Taek Joo freely entrusted himself as if forgetting that the other person was Zhenya. Finally, he pulled the blanket covering his back. Kwon Taek Joo is completely naked. The fact that he wasn't even wearing underwear made him cringe, but he didn't show it. There was no reason to be ashamed as Zhenya had seen everything he could see.

Zhenya wiped Kwon Taek Joo's abdomen and thighs in turn, then thoroughly cleaned the groin, genitals and perineum. His testicles shrank when they touched

the cold towel. Zhenya, who was often sarcastic and said vulgar things, remained silent. He kept his mouth shut and just focused on what he was doing. It's embarrassing. For some reason, this guy doesn't seem like the person Kwon Taek Joo knew.

Finally, Zhenya lifted Kwon Taek Joo's knees and let the soles of his feet touch his chest. Kwon Taek Joo's legs bent and he stretched out his hand deeply to gently wipe the back of his thighs and buttocks.

"Why do you keep running away? I don't intend to kill you."

A moment later, Zhenya opened his mouth. That tone seemed to secretly reveal the concerns that had been cherished for so long. Kwon Taek Joo did not answer immediately.

He just stared at the guy's face. It was strange that he suddenly asked such a question. Did he really ask because he didn't know?

Zhenya immediately faced Kwon Taek Joo. To the man who was silently waiting for an answer, he replied indifferently.

"Because there's no reason for me to stay here."

His voice was calm, not agitated. From the beginning, he did not come to this place voluntarily. From that moment on, this island was like a prison for Kwon Taek Joo. Trying to escape was not simply about Zhenya, he just had no desire to stay here.

Is he not satisfied with the answer? Zhenya stopped and silently looked at Kwon Taek Joo. He did not frown, nor did he have any obvious change in expression.

But for some reason, that face resembles the face of the hurt child that Kwon Taek Joo saw in his dream. It seemed like he did something really bad. He couldn't help but feel heavy at the gaze of the boy in front of him who couldn't avoid it even for a moment. Kwon Taek Joo turned his face away, avoiding gazes, then lowered his feet.

The conversation was interrupted and a persistent silence prevailed. The two of them don't talk often, so there's no reason to be awkward even now. But the longer the silence lasted, the more uncomfortable Kwon Taek Joo felt.

A moment later, Zhenya stood up. Kwon Taek Joo was unconsciously tense but he did not pose any danger. All he did was put the towel he was holding on the table. The man who was just about to leave suddenly spoke.

"Then leave."

## Chapter 3.15 – Lonely Koshichei

Kwon Taek Joo woke up after a long sleep. He had been moaning non-stop so not only his mouth but also his throat was dry. He didn't know how much time had passed, but the night already seemed very late. It seemed like there was a contrabass sound in his sleep, but when Kwon Taek Joo opened his eyes, the surroundings were quiet. Is even that a dream?

Kwon Taek Joo got out of bed and went out. The pain in his hip was still throbbing but he endured it. He went into the kitchen and soothed his dry throat. The gentle water seemed to flow through every corner of the body, making the dizzy head clearly alert.

He took a moment to catch his breath and looked out the window. His eyes looked around superficially and then accidentally fixed themselves on one place. He thought it was a reflected light, but Zhenya was sitting outside the mansion. What is he doing there this late at night?

Kwon Taek Joo took a sip of water and approached the window. Then he openly admired Zhenya. Surprisingly, the guy didn't do anything. He just sat there without lighting a fire. Where he was headed there was only a deserted snow field. Even the size of a guy so big it scared him felt insignificant before Mother Nature. Is it because of the contrast effect? His eyes followed the back of the guy sitting absent-mindedly. There was no way a monster would feel lonely, but his back looked especially lonely right now.

In the end, who is sympathizing with whom? Kwon Taek Joo shook his head and was about to turn away but he suddenly looked back. The two eyes inevitably met. Does that kid have eyes in the back of his head? His heart beat wildly with surprise.

Contrary to expectations, Zhenya did not take any action. He just quietly looked at Kwon Taek Joo who was confused. Those eyes were so

straightforward and intense that he didn't know what he was embarrassed about. Unable to just stand still like that, Kwon Taek Joo turned away.

The place Kwon Taek Joo headed was not the bedroom but the dressing room. What the hell are you doing this late at night? Kwon Taek Joo took out his jacket and put it on while grumbling. He found a bottle of Macallan in the kitchen and took it out with him.

Zhenya turned his head at the sound of the door opening. He seemed surprised to see Kwon Taek Joo.

"I brought a delicious drink."

He waved the bottle towards Zhenya, who had been looking at him blankly all this time. Then he walked over and sat down next to him with a soft groan. The hip injury is still very painful. Zhenya still didn't say anything until then, and Kwon Taek Joo's stare that seemed like it was about to pierce through didn't stop either.

Without a glass, he opened the bottle of Macallan and drank the wine from the bottle. Alcohol is not good for gunshot wounds, but it seems that drinking alcohol eases the pain. After taking a sip, he handed the bottle to Zhenya. Without hesitation, he put his lips to the glossy mouth of the bottle.

After giving and receiving two more times, Kwon Taek Joo was the one to start the conversation.

"I ask this because I'm really curious, why did you buy an island like this?"

"It's nice, it's quiet and there's nothing."

Is that so? Kwon Taek Joo grabbed the bottle with a disapproving look on his face. I've known for a long time, but his taste is truly quite special.

"Hey kid, don't you have any friends?"

Zhenya stared at Kwon Taek Joo without answering the next question. Kwon Taek Joo shook his head confidently.

"There's no such thing"

"What about you?"

"I don't know what you mean. I'm of extremely normal standards. When I want to drink, there are plenty of people for me to call. Just because of work, I have to hide a lot of things so I can't meet them often."

Kwon Taek Joo added.

"I also have a mother who can't even sleep because he's worried about me."

The words made him feel a little guilty. However, not much has changed on Zhenya's face. Of course. He licked his lips again and asked again.

"Anyway, you're a special kid. Is it fun to play alone like this?"

"It's not fun. It's familiar."

The answer didn't seem pathetic or pitiful at all, but Kwon Taek Joo couldn't be as sarcastic as before.

He looked into Zhenya's face for a moment. Surely many people have told him to keep his mouth shut and be quiet like now. When he is assertive and acts cocky, his words are quite eloquent, like when he brags about the technology that worked on the Trans-Siberian Train.

He suddenly reached out his hand. Zhenya looked at Kwon Taek Joo's hand that was suddenly approaching. Just then, his finger touched the side of Zhenya's forehead. That was the position that had been injured not long ago. A mischievous smile spread across his always straightforward face.

"How many people are you planning to seduce?"

Zhenya grabbed his hand and brought it to his mouth to bite it. Kwon Taek Joo's body was pushed continuously and fell backwards on the soft thick snow behind him.

The black night sky filled his vision. The countless stars embroidered on it seemed to be about to fall. This is the first time Kwon Taek Joo has seen the stars even though he has been here for many days.

"Oh.."

Kwon Taek Joo bewilderedly looked up into the air and then pointed into the void. A curtain of blue-violet light fluttered like a curtain. It's Aurora. He was completely fascinated by the wonderful scene that the vast nature brought. No matter which art museum you go to, no work will surpass the night sky.

How long has it been? Zhenya climbed on top of him and blocked his view. The two people's eyes were close. Maybe he was drunk, or he still hadn't regained his composure, but Kwon Taek Joo just stared at Zhenya without avoiding it. Kwon Taek Joo's blue eyes filled with images expressed pure desire. Impossible.

Zhenya's face slowly approached before he realized it. His lips first touched his chin, then pressed against the bridge of his nose and then pressed against his forehead. He accidentally closed his eyes. The man removed his lips and looked down at Kwon Taek Joo. Zhenya gently ran her thumb on his neck, Kwon Taek Joo's

eyelashes

trembled because of the tickle. That must be the reason why his breathing was shaky and unstable.

Then Zhenya's face returned as Kwon Taek Joo didn't even think about avoiding it, but the moment his breath touched his philtrum, Kwon Taek Joo suddenly came to his senses. Almost halfway, their lips almost touched each other.

He turned his head to the side so Zhenya's lips fell on his pointed chin. Zhenya no longer forcibly held Kwon Taek Joo's face like before, he just didn't say a word but looked straight at one side of that indifferent face. Kwon Taek Joo's mood became uncomfortable, he quickly pushed his chest and sat up.

"I'm not doing that with you."

He drew clear boundaries and left before the atmosphere became more ambiguous. A stinging look followed his back, but Kwon Taek Joo pretended not to know.

As soon as he entered the villa, he tore his hair and tortured himself. He was almost completely carried away. Even the excuse that it was due to being drunk, or just to see what would happen, didn't comfort him one bit. No matter how strongly humans are animals influenced by the environment, this isn't true.

It was no one else but Zhenya who raped, assaulted and attempted to kill him so many times. Apparently he had gone crazy from being left in the snow-covered space for so long.

Kwon Taek Joo needs to leave this place before the situation gets worse.

"Go home."

Zhenya gave Olga one-sided orders during breakfast.

"Just a few more days, okay? Just two days."

"No."

Zhenya refused immediately. A tough face shows there is no room for compromise. Olga reluctantly nodded, her face sullenly digging her spoon into the bowl of fish soup.

If Olga leaves, only Kwon Taek Joo and Zhenya will remain on the island. He sighed deeply. Then Olga looked at him slyly, saying "Would you be sorry if I went?" Zhenya's eyes followed.

"Goodbye."

Olga pouted again indifferently and grumbled that he took care of Kwon Taek Joo in vain. Even after that, Zhenya's persistent gaze did not leave. Kwon Taek Joo ignored him and silently ate his food.

He went up to Olga's room after dinner. There was nothing to do, so Kwon Taek Joo intended to follow her to borrow the book, but he ordered him to do one thing after another before he realized it. Olga used the excuse that the helicopter was coming and threw the things to Kwon Taek Joo as soon as he picked them up. Once inserted, the bag cannot be closed.

While trying to stuff the outer clothes into the bag, something suddenly caught Kwon Taek Joo's eyes. He secretly observed Olga's eyes. She

busied herself with arranging the clothes he was supposed to wear. Kwon Taek Joo hid the thing in his hand that was in his pocket.

"Are you all done?"

Olga suddenly looked back. "Yes," he said and closed her bag.

"What time will the helicopter arrive?"

"About thirty minutes."

"Is that so? Then I'll take this out."

Kwon Taek Joo picked up a suitcase that looked like it was about to explode and placed it in front of the stairs. Then he went straight to the basement. Boxes of benzene used for trimming fur are piled up in the warehouse. He grabbed one of them and went into the bathroom.

He locked the door tightly. His heart began to beat violently. Kwon Taek Joo tried to escape countless times, but failed every time. But maybe this time will be different. At least it's more hopeful than other times. His fingertips

tingled with excitement and anticipation.

He put the benzene on the floor and took out a small bottle from his pocket. It was taken from Olga's bag. The main ingredient in prescription medications for angina is nitroglycerin, which helps dilate blood vessels. Nitroglycerin can explode even when dissolved in ethanol or benzene. For that reason, it is also a popular drug used by homemade bomb makers.

Kwon Taek Joo took all the pills out of the bottle and crushed them finely, then carefully poured the powder into the glass bottle containing benzene. He gently stirred with the handle of the toothbrush and waited for the powder to completely dissolve. The finished homemade bomb was placed at the entrance to the roof.

When Kwon Taek Joo finished all the work, he heard the sound of the propeller spinning. A helicopter was also seen approaching in the distance. As if nothing had happened, he went down to the second floor and ran into Olga.

"It seems like it's almost here."

To avoid suspicion, Kwon Taek Joo spoke first. Olga nodded and got down from the suitcase he was sitting on.

"It seems like that person didn't want to send me off."

"What do you expect from that bastard? Let's go."

Kwon Taek Joo walked up the stairs carrying Olga's suitcase. She went down the stairs where Zhenya was and shouted, "I'm leaving" and followed Kwon Taek Joo.

Just as the two reached the entrance to the roof, Kwon Taek Joo, who was walking in front, suddenly stopped walking. He bent down as if to see if anything had fallen to the floor.

"What's going on?"

"I owe you this time."

"Huh? What?"

Olga gasped in confusion. At the same time, her trunk fell down the stairs.

Zhenya was adjusting the contrabass when he suddenly raised his head because of a sudden noise from upstairs. Apparently Olga dropped something while walking around. There couldn't be a second of quiet even when he was about to leave.

He stood up and went to the window. Looking outside, he saw a helicopter hovering in the air. It seemed like I had been arriving for a while but somehow it still hadn't landed and continued to wander in the sky.

Zhenya looked at it without any doubt then suddenly frowned. An ominous feeling ran down his spine, he immediately grabbed the shotgun hanging on the wall and ran up the stairs

Olga's suitcase fell to the second floor. Something is rattling inside.

"Taek Joo."

Zhenya mumbled like a groan and rushed to the roof. When he threw open the door, Kwon Taek Joo was holding Olga hostage, in his hand was a large bottle of benzene.

"Don't come close!"

Kwon Taek Joo shouted with high alert. Zhenya ignored it and approached, he lifted the benzene bottle.

"Stop. If you take another step I'll blow it."

Kwon Taek Joo wrinkled his nose in warning again. Even so, what you're holding is just benzene used for fur care, what kind of threat is that? After a moment, a quick calculation was made in Zhenya's head. Olga had angina and a large dose of benzene. These facts were combined to arrive at the conclusion that it was a 'nitroglycerin bomb'. If it falls and breaks, the entire roof will be blown off. Not only Zhenya and Olga, but also Kwon Taek Joo's life, and death cannot be guaranteed.

Zhenya quietly took a breath. He gritted his molars to try to control the emotions rising in his heart and then reached out towards Kwon Taek Joo.

"Come here."

Kwon Taek Joo shook his head and took a step back. As if wanting to show his determination, he put all his strength into making the hand holding the benzene bottle turn white.

What the hell? Zhenya's eyebrows furrowed. He closed the distance as if he was going to test it. Immediately after that, Kwon Taek Joo retreated and did not hesitate to raise the bottle. Looking at his resolute expression, the words he just said did not seem like a useless show off. Regardless of whether anyone was injured or not, it was enough if he could overpower Kwon Taek Joo, but Zhenya couldn't get any closer. He stopped again. Boiling anger welled up.

"Damn it, come here!"

Even when urged. Kwon Taek Joo still shook his head firmly. Soon the ladder descended from the helicopter. Zhenya's eyes wavered. The moment Kwon Taek Joo grabbed the ladder, something was cut off in

his head. His body temperature dropped in an instant. As if forgetting Kwon Taek Joo's warning, Zhenya did not hesitate to rush straight for the helicopter. A bottle of benzene flew. At that moment, it seemed as if the air around him had been sucked in and condensed.

An explosion occurred immediately afterward. The entire floor shook and every corner of the building cracked. One side of the wall was completely destroyed. Zhenya also couldn't stand the pressure and fell down. His back hit the wall and felt like it was about to break. His skin was also scratched from debris flying from all directions. A beeping, ringing sound rang in his ears. Blood flowed from his head, dying Zhenya's vision red.

He lifted his tattered body up and through the smoke and dust. The front of the roof has collapsed to the point that its original shape is unrecognizable. When Zhenya hurriedly looked around, the helicopter was flying in the distance, Olga and Taek Joo holding her standing on the hanging ladder.

Zhenya looked around with the thought of chasing after him, but he didn't have any to. His helicopter sank deep into the sea a few days ago. He could call another helicopter, but Taek Joo wouldn't wait until then. Even as he stood there helpless. Taek Joo continued to drift far into the sky, never once looking back

"TAEK JOO!"

A desperate roar rang out in the distance.

The helicopter carrying Olga and Taek Joo arrived in the suburbs of Moscow. The two walked down with calm expressions as if nothing had happened.

"What will you do when you return to Korea?"

"There's still a lot to do. The mission must be completed, and I personally have some things to figure out. I'll be busy for a while."

Olga nodded and asked to shake hands first. A bit of regret appeared on her face.

Taek Joo gently held her hand that was reaching out in front of her. Olga shook hands and then looked back at the helicopter. The pilot brought a small bag and gave it to Taek Joo.

"What's wrong?"

"I think you'll need it to return home. Thank you for saving my life twice."

In the bag was cash, a neat new shirt and a Colt. Taek Joo needs a fake passport and money to leave Russia. Olga's support was happily accepted.

"Thank you for helping me earlier."

"I didn't help you. I just sat still because I didn't want to get hurt"

"If you want to run away, you have a gun. Just shoot a shot and you're done."

"It's not impossible, but if I do that then I'll really die with that person."

Olga smiled mischievously. A plane was descending in front of the runway and passed over the two people's heads. Olga looked up at the plane and suddenly said to herself.

"As a result, everything ended up just like Koshichei's story."

The situation of Taek Joo, who finally ran away from Zhenya, is like the beauty who found and destroyed Koshichei's heart and escaped from his castle. Koshichei's story always ends there.

When the plane's shadow disappeared, he said, "Let's go now." Taek Joo looked at Olga for a moment then turned away without hesitation. Olga's face looked a little bitter as he watched him stride away. She thought of Zhenya, who still called Taek Joo's name even though his head was injured and bleeding. It was as if he had lost everything. This is the first time Zhenya had made such a face. Even when Anastasia was lost, he didn't seem that sad. Her shocked heart at that time still couldn't calm down.

If Taek Joo hadn't brought the bomb at that time, would the outcome have been different if Zhenya had dared to shoot him with a shotgun.

Olga muttered, staring at Taek Joo who was walking far away.

"Koshichei's weakness is not his hidden heart."

Another plane passed over her head. Buried in the hum of the engine,  
the added words faded without a trace.

"But love, Taek Joo."

## Chapter 3.16 – Hide and Seek

"Eh? What's this?"

Yoon Jong Woo was about to log into the game and suddenly frowned. When he entered his ID and password and clicked the Login button, an error message appeared indicating that he had already logged in before. He tried closing and reopening the active window, but the result was still the same. If it wasn't for a server error, his ID would definitely have been stolen by someone else.

Yoon Jong Woo felt this a long time ago. Every time he logged in, his level changed subtly and some items were no longer in stock. Yoon Jong Woo simply thought that there might have been some event that he didn't know about, but it seemed like today he caught that tail.

Dare to hack a national intelligence officer? I don't know whose name it is, it's really big.

"You bastard, you touched the wrong person."

Yoon Jong Woo entered a different ID to access the game. It was an ID he created just to register for the event and just left it unused. That's why he didn't have anything other than the basic items.

Yoon Jong Woo looked for the old ID in the user search window, and the thief's location was immediately revealed. Entered the server. The thief is there preparing for a game that is about to start. Yoon Jong Woo was talking to him but other users urged him to quickly end the wait. Without hesitation, Yoon Jong Woo pressed the fight button.

Soon the game started. A vivid desktop reminiscent of a real battlefield fills before your eyes. The sound of gunfire echoed through the headphones as if it were real. In the place where they went crazy killing each other, Yoon Jon Woo only chased the thief. The guy naturally got caught up in the game and only chose high-level users who were immersed in the massacre of civilians to shoot. It's magical, it's a hundred hits.

"Ahh! I purposely didn't use it and saved it."

Yoon Jong Woo, who was aiming at him, shouted in surprise. The item that the thief just threw out is a rare item that is difficult to obtain even with cash. The treasure he had carefully stored without daring to use it even once was being proudly squandered by that bastard. He couldn't sit still any longer.

Yoon Jong Woo registered for the 1:1 match with a very serious expression. Forgetting the fact that the ID the other person was using was his, he decided to sacrifice the new cards.

Then the thief answered.

Don't play tricks, go out there and play.

Yoon Jong Woo was speechless so he gasped. He signed up to fight again. Rejected again. He registered again. Rejected immediately again.

"This bastard."

Yoon Jong Woo kept clinging to him until he accepted. Then the thief suddenly agreed to the confrontation. Suddenly, he was confused again. As soon as the match started, the two rushed at each other. However, there is one thing that Yoon Jong Woo overlooked. The ID, which he had accumulated experience by dividing his time with great difficulty, was no longer his. Yoon Jong Woo is just an insignificant and powerless low-level user.

He used up all his flamboyant skills and launched all kinds of attacks, but the thief didn't suffer a single wound. On the other hand, as soon as his bullet passed by, his health meter dropped sharply. Yoon Jong Woo stood up mid-sentence, pounding the keyboard and mouse angrily.

"Ahh! Die!"

Opponents are equipped with special armor so they will not take damage from most attacks. The problem was that all of Yoon Jong Woo's firepower was put into that attack. Even when he aimed straight and pulled the trigger, his opponent did not receive a single scratch. He decided to step out of the armor, but that only affected Yoon Jong Woo's life.

In a dilemma, the thief made the decisive blow. His vision was turned upside down when Yoon Jong Woo was hit in the head by a bullet.

"No way! Ahh!"

Yoon Jong Woo grabbed the screen and shouted, but the game was over. Damned. He cursed while looking for the ID that the thief had stolen. But he has already logged out. Unable to scream in the middle of the night, Yoon Jong Woo could only grab his hair and kick his legs in anger.

It wasn't until a long time later that Yoon Jong Woo discovered that the message had not been read. The sender was the thief from earlier. He immediately checked the content. There is only a place and time written on it without any mention. It's ridiculous.

The time he specified was 30 minutes later, and the location was a computer room in Incheon. He even friendly wrote down his seat number. If Yoon Jong Woo works hard from now on, he will be able to arrive on time. Yoon Jong Woo, who was in a rage, took his coat and left the house.

The lighting in the PC room is designed to be quite dim as if to increase concentration. Because it was not rush hour, there were many empty seats. The part-time student working at the counter also fell asleep and did not notice Yoon Jong Woo's appearance.

He narrowed his eyes and walked through the dark room. Yoon Jong Woo ran for nearly 30 minutes with fighting spirit, but when he arrived, his heart was pounding. Yoon Jong Woo took a deep breath and moved to the 59th chair that the thief gave him. After passing the 30th and 40th rows and entering the 50th row, his heart beat so fiercely that it seemed like it wanted to jump out of his chest. Yoon Jong Woo walked carefully and finally reached seat number 59.

Yoon Jong Woo's face showed a trace of disappointment, because seat 59 was empty. The damn thief called Yoon Jong Woo here and then ran away? Maybe he was chatting somewhere in the store. Yoon Jong Woo quickly looked around. No one caught my eye, no one stood out. Wasn't it enough to get beaten up in the game, but now you're being played properly by him like this?

"Ah, you bastard!"

Yoon Jong Woo clenched his fists in anger, gritting his teeth and struggling wildly, causing other computer users to also look at that soundless scream.

Just like that, Yoon Jong Woo received everyone's attention and reduced his anger. He accidentally touched a nearby computer screen, the power saving mode was turned off and the screen turned on. It's suspicious because eye-catching writing fills the screen.

"Sit down."

What game is this again? Yoon Jong Woo was extremely uncomfortable but sat down quietly. He pretended to calmly look around and wondered if this was a trick of the thief, but on the one hand he was also curious about what trick he was planning to play.

However, even after waiting for a long time, the thief still did not appear. Other PC users are just immersed in their games. Are we playing together again? A fire burned in Yoon Jong Woo's heart.

You have to let him know who he touched. Yoon Jong Woo will find this bastard no matter what the tricks or methods are. He gritted his teeth and stood up from his seat.

At that moment someone suddenly cried out.

"A mature person is a wise person."

How does that voice sound so familiar? Yoon Jong Woo flinched and looked at the seat next to him. Immediately the opponent also slowly lifted his back away from the partition. Yoon Jong Woo's eyes widened.

"Senior!"

"Take it easy, you bastard."

Kwon Taek Joo panicked and blocked Yoon Jong Woo's mouth and carefully observed the surrounding movements. Yoon Jong Woo also suddenly looked around after panicking. Kwon Taek Joo only released him after making sure he was safe.

"What happened? I thought senior was dead!"

"Aren't you looking forward to that?"

"What are you talking about? I worry about my senior day and night."

"Playing games day and night?"

"Yes. Playing games day and night. Ah, I told you that's not true, really!"

Yoon Jong Woo, who was unconsciously drawn, quickly corrected his words. His face almost looked like he wanted to cry. Kwon Taek Joo smiled and nodded telling him to follow and stood up first.

Yoon Jong Woo asked in a loud voice as he went down the narrow and steep stairs.

"But was the thief just now senior?"

"ID cherryboy, password pure1004@. Isn't it time to change it?

Kwon Taek Joo admitted frankly. It's shameless to openly steal someone else's ID. Yoon Jong Woo was full of resentment and looked at the back of Kwon Taek Joo who was walking in front, thinking over and over again what he wanted to say if it wasn't his senior.

"What if it's not senior?"

"What?"

Wondering if he accidentally mumbled what was on his mind, Yoon Jong Woo was startled and covered his mouth.

"Don't you know? I know how to read minds."

Yoon Jong Woo innocently asked if it was true. Kwon Taek Joo just smiled without answering. Obviously they're playing each other again. Why would Yoon Jong Woo himself meet a sniper like Kwon Taek Joo? How could it have to be him? Today you needlessly challenged God's will.

Kwon Taek Joo's face reflected in the streetlight cannot be described in words. Everywhere you look you see bandages or band-aids. His physique is still the same, but it seems he has lost 5kg because his facial

features have become sharper. Maybe he didn't sleep well, so he had dark circles under his eyes. He's so pitiful that Yoon Jong Woo doesn't even feel resentment toward him anymore.

Yoon Jong Woo had no way of knowing where Kwon Taek Joo was or what he was doing, as he had to keep the mission a secret even from his NIS colleagues. It was common for him to not be able to be contacted during combat, but he also wondered what he had been doing in the past few months without any news. However, Kwon Taek Joo is also the type of person who will suddenly appear and invite him to dinner, as if he just met the day before if he completes the mission safely.

Yoon Jong Woo has never worried about Kwon Taek Joo's safety, but this time it's a little different. After Kwon Taek Joo called back from Russia, he felt uncomfortable. 'Yevgeny Vissarionovich Bogdanov', with whom he was traveling at the time, a character for whom no official information could be found. That in itself wasn't a good sign, but the more he knew, the more dangerous he became. He tried to tell that truth to Kwon Taek Joo, but the two lost contact. He also didn't call back. Yoon Jong Woo reported to Chief Lim in vain but all he was told was not to worry because Kwon Taek Joo was safe. Then he put aside his thoughts and shook off his worries like an old woman.

However, Kwon Tae Joo, whom he met again after a long time, did not seem to be safe.

"Did you bring the car?"

"Yes, over there."

Yoon Jong Woo carefully opened the car door. Both sat in the driver's seat and passenger seat respectively

"Where are we going now?"

"Let's talk here."

Kwon Taek Joo turned off the car engine and pulled out the memory chip from the black box. He also deleted the location information recorded on the locator. The inside of the car was dark because the

headlights and interior lights were turned off. It seemed that from the outside, no one could know the presence of the people sitting inside.

Kwon Taek Joo only opened his mouth after erasing all traces.

"Chief didn't say anything about me?"

"Last time I was talking on the phone with my senior, the phone was disconnected and you didn't contact me after that. I was very worried at that time, so I told the department head about the name you went with. He told me not to worry because you're fine. Isn't that right?"

"I'm fine. I'm not saying it's wrong because I'm not dead yet. So how's the atmosphere at headquarters these days?"

"Oh, stop talking. I really don't have time to breathe these days. As of yesterday, I had to work nights for 3 days in a row. Why? Not long ago there were rumors that there would be large-scale personnel changes. The Blue House decided that the next head of the intelligence agency will be one of the current deputy directors at NIS."

Stories like that still spread regularly. There are rumors that the current head of NIS has announced his intention to resign due to personal reasons. The head of the NIS is appointed by the president and the position is usually held by an outsider. Although it is the highest leader, to prevent excessive power, that position has only symbolic meaning. Actually, it is not irrelevant that it would be easier to manage if the position held was by someone close to the Blue House.

For that reason, it is an extremely unusual move for one of the deputy directors to become NIS director. If the rumors are true, then only the employees below are tired, because each department will have to work harder to accumulate another achievement.

Yoon Jong Woo's complaint afterward is proof of that.

"The department head is also very active and treats everyone like slaves."

"Is there nothing else besides that?"

"Let's see. Well, here's one. I was recently transferred to the information support team."

Only then, Kwon Taek Joo, who was looking straight ahead, turned his head towards Yoon Jong Woo. "Why?", the boy shrugged indifferently.

"I was originally not suitable for the investigation team. From the beginning, I did not go in that direction. When I joined headquarters, the department head promised that if the investigation team had enough people, I would be transferred to the support team. So it's not bad at all. As expected, the support team's job is to race against time, not take risks like in the field. Life insurance used to cost 1 million won a month, but now there's no need to buy half. Everything is good but.."

"But what?"

Yoon Jong Woo vaguely missed what he was saying. He was silent for a moment, wondering if he should continue speaking or not. He waited a moment and then continued.

"I still find something strange. Our team hasn't been staffed yet and I haven't heard that there will be staff from another team transferring in. It's not like I made a big mistake or anything." What a great achievement. Whether it's a punishment or a reward, there's no reason to transfer me to the support team right now. Or is this just an act of personnel management?"

From the sounds of the complaints, there doesn't seem to be any obvious reason. Such personnel actions are more likely to be based on the needs of superiors.

"Dude, what was the last mission you took on in the investigation team? Destroy Kim Young Hee's group in Busan, that one?"

"I can't reveal it."

"Relax. Do you want to lose your life before talking?"

"That's right, that's the case."

Kwon Taek Joo heard the answer and fell into thought. Looking back, it all started right there. Immediately after arresting Kim Yeong Hee and

her accomplices in Busan, Chief Lim called him over and he immediately left for Russia. Then, Yoon Jong Woo, a partner in that mission, suddenly had his personnel adjusted. There is definitely something unclear. It is impossible to transfer a gunner's assistant without notifying the gunner.

'If considered seriously, you are not qualified for this campaign.'

'From the beginning you were so confused, how could I feel secure in this far away place? So I've already found someone to help you.'

Looking back, there were many strange points. Partners are usually attached before going live. Kwon Taek Joo prefers to work alone and he will definitely refuse to work in a group, so there must be a reason for the delay in announcing the partner. Even if he had given in and they had a good reason to, the swapping of Salman and Zhenya's photos was not a mistake at all.

'Do you think you're hated there anyway? Did a place called the National Intelligence Service send me my photo by mistake? That never happened.'

"I have one more mission."

'That was an order from the Korean side. What the hell have you been doing in your own country? What did you do to be sent here and almost killed?'

Zhenya and Salman's words flashed through Kwon Taek Joo's mind. At this point, it seems like the situation isn't just that bad. You definitely need to dig deeper into it.

"How are the guys arrested in Busan?"

"Ah, maybe the senior still doesn't know. It's a bit noisy. It was the strategy to wipe them out on our passenger ship but because there were so many hostages and even witnesses on the ship, they couldn't just let it go quietly. Perhaps they were afraid of being held responsible later, so instead of claiming that those people were arrested by agents, they claimed that those people were armed drug smugglers and were arrested by the Coast Guard."

That is normal. Civilians do not know that there are still agents in Korea today, and the government also wants to avoid social unrest as much as possible.

"And Kim Young Hee drank poison right before being arrested."

"Poison?"

A wrinkle formed in the middle of Kwon Taek Joo's forehead. Yoon Jong Woo nodded and said that he was dead when the police arrived.

Kim Young Hee also attempted to commit suicide when he was captured by Kwon Taek Joo at that time. However, immediately after that he tied her left hand with handcuffs and hung it on the railing, and her right hand was hit by a bullet. He even stuffed a handkerchief into her mouth so he couldn't bite her tongue. How could Kim Young Hee harm herself?

"Tell me more clearly. Why is that so?"

"I don't know either. After that, the whole team was quickly mobilized. It seems the department head wrote the report on your behalf because the senior was not here."

If there is no doubt, there will be no doubt. Nothing is impossible if you try to understand it by all means. And once he asked the question, Kwon Taek Joo felt everything was suspicious. He knew the situation was quite unusual, but he also didn't know the cause. He felt like he had missed an important clue.

It seems he has to reconsider from the beginning again. If so it will take time, so Kwon Taek Joo's return to Korea will have to be kept a secret for the time being. Deep in thought, he softly called out "Jong Woo."

"Yes?"

"Don't tell anyone you saw me."

"Why not?"

"Because there might be an arrest warrant for me in the future. If they knew you were meeting me today, you would be considered an accomplice."

"Yes? What the hell did you do?"

Yoon Jong Woo shouted in shock. Pupils seemed about to roll down from wide open eyes. Kwon Taek Joo flicked his finger on his forehead. Yoon Jong Woo rubbed the painful area as he spoke.

"Has

senior really caused trouble, you wouldn't come back here, right? You would have run away."

"Yeah, right? There's no way criminals can properly appear in front of NIS officers. Don't you know what fear is?"

Yoon Jong Woo muttered to himself and then quickly understood. Kwon Taek Joo turned his head and smiled. Yoon Jong Woo immediately understood the meaning of that smile and blushed and said not to laugh at him. That's right, if you look at the madness in shooting games, Yoon Jong Woo is honestly the best agent in this field.

Yoon Jong Woo's phone suddenly rang. He said "Wait a minute," then checked the message he had just received. Outside the window the sky gradually brightened as dawn appeared. There were no passersby but they were still alert.

"Spam is really tiring."

Yoon Jong Woo quickly put his phone in his pocket. He tried to pretend to be calm, but his tone seemed to have stiffened a bit. Kwon Taek Joo just rolled his eyes to scan him once. He nervously touched the gun on his belt, then threw his gaze out the window and calmly warned.

"Don't act stupid. I don't want to knock you out."

"What? I don't understand what senior means."

"What? don't you understand? Don't be so obvious, kid."

Yoon Jong Woo sighed deeply after being scolded as if teasing him. His shoulders, stiff with tension, also dropped.

"As the senior said, an internal arrest warrant has just been issued. Please report to your superiors as soon as you contact

senior."

"What is the charge?"

"I heard you were suspected of being an insider with a Russian intelligence agent? Didn't you mention that guy? It's Yevgeny Visarionovich Bogdanov."

Laughter broke out, It's absurd. The entanglement with Zhenya was completely the headquarters' fault and Kwon Taek Joo himself went through all the hardships when he reluctantly attached himself to him, and he came back alive but they made it up like this. Of course. whether he likes it or not. accompanying him to the gathering place of important Russian figures is also a fact, so just with that situation alone. it is easy to be forced into revealing secrets. nation. He even impersonated Chief Lim to Sergei. Yoon Jong Woo doesn't know what mission Kwon Taek Joo himself was on and there's no other way to prove it, because Zhenya blows up the hotel and all evidence about him is destroyed. The same goes for Zhenya's mistakenly sent photo. If Kwon Taek Joo is arrested by headquarters, all suspicions will be against him.

Someone is planning. Kwon Taek Joo himself is just a horse playing around on it. When did the drama unfold? After Kwon Taek Joo was sent to Russia? Or after you arrested Kim Young Hee and his accomplices in Busan? Perhaps wiping them out was also included in the script.

There are clearly two goals in the Russian campaign. Anastasia and Kwon Taek Joo himself.

"What's going on? The suspicion is an insider accusation, if this continues, it will involve the crime of revealing national secrets. Unbelievable. There is no way the senior would interact with That Russian bastard. If so, I wouldn't have called to let you find out who he was. That would be like publicly proving that I was in contact with him, right? I wouldn't have come back if I knew. that the arrest warrant will fall in front of you."

Yoon Jong Woo didn't know whether to laugh or cry. His trembling eyes clearly showed insecurity. As an NIS employee, he had to follow

headquarters' orders, but he seemed confused by the questions about the instructions he received.

Kwon Taek Joo had no choice but to briefly tell what happened in Russia. Yoon Jong Woo listened carefully then shook his head at the truth about what happened to Kwon Taek Joo and the headquarters. If identities are revealed during normal operations, the NIS will cut off support to the agent to avoid national surveillance. Even so, inside the headquarters there are still carefully considered countermeasures.

However, Yoon Jong Woo had not felt such an atmosphere until now. To him, he was always worried about Kwon Tae Joo's safety. Chief Lim still told him to relax. Something is definitely not normal.

"What do you think, senior?"

"I don't know for sure. We'll have to find out from now on."

"You still don't have any proof, okay? If you keep moving on faith like this, it's too dangerous. If it's true as you guess, someone at headquarters arranged this, they definitely won't let you freedom of movement. Assuming it's not simply an insider but revealing national secrets, they will involve the prosecutor. At that time, if they are caught, their lives will be over."

"I don't know if I'll be arrested if I keep going like this. Someone keeps stepping on me, but I have to try until my last breath. I will first investigate again from Kim Young Hee. No matter what I think, Looks like I missed something there."

"We're done with that case, is there anything else we can investigate now?"

"Maybe we don't know. We just looked at a tree named Kim Young Hee and forgot that there was a whole forest. Maybe they threw Kim Young Hee as bait to distract us. Looking back, I caught her so easily back then."

"The situation is quite similar to now. There are many suspicious points but I have no evidence. At that time, Kim Young Hee contacted Lee Cheol Jin."

First, we must be suspicious of matters that have been resolved too smoothly. At that time. Kwon Taek Joo could not arrest Lee Cheol Jin and he intended to arrest him as a criminal. He planned to arrest him first and then conduct a solid investigation later, but Kwon Taek Joo didn't have the chance to do that. He himself was sent to Russia and Yoon Jong Woo was sent to another team.

"The arrest warrant alone is enough to make things difficult. If you're careless, it's inevitable that you'll be arrested, and you'll be imprisoned on all sorts of charges. However, if you're careful, it's still possible."

Agents often compare their situation to that of a bloodhound. Despite their dedication to the country, they were cruelly abandoned when faced with a crisis. Kwon Taek Joo knew there was no other way, which was also what he was ready for when he became a special agent. But this is not an inevitable situation. It is impossible to sacrifice just for someone's needs.

Yoon Jong Woo groaned and put his head on the steering wheel. He dreams of becoming the main character in superhero movies, action movies, and shooting games. Applying to the National Intelligence Service is also part of that aspiration. However, he doesn't know what to do when he encounters a situation like in the movie.

The arrest warrant for Kwon Taek Joo has been issued. If you help him even a little, you can be accused of agreeing to help. If you are more unlucky, you will easily be accused of complicity.

The most miserable moment as a civil servant is wondering between finding out the truth and silently ignoring it, and because he is human, Yoon Jong Woo has no other choice but to be shaken.

However, when I think back, it was correct to obey the headquarters' orders. There is no reason for you to put yourself in danger by falling into the trap of friendship or camaraderie. All Yoon Jong Woo has to do is follow his beliefs to live a long and leisurely life. Living healthy in the world is already too difficult, after all, other people will not be responsible for your life.

Yoon Jong Woo, after continuously rationalizing his thoughts, finally spoke.

"Can I help you senior?"

Yoon Jong Woo betrayed his reason in pursuit of safety when his conscience spoke up.

## Chapter 4.1 – Hide and Seek

At prosecutor Seok Jae Hee's office of the Seoul Central District Prosecutors' Office, preparations for the trial are in full swing. This happened before the 5th trial of the case against Kim Young Hee, who had been in the US for more than 10 years and had washed her citizenship to return to work in Korea, and Lee Cheol Jin, her contact. ta. The trial is expected to end soon because Kim Young Hee, the key figure in the case, passed away during the arrest process.

Because it was necessary to gradually determine Lee Cheol Jin's punishment, prosecutor Seok thoughtfully looked at the pile of documents on the table. The prosecutor's decision has a great influence on the sentence. The simple principle is to clearly define the crime and punish the criminal according to the severity of the crime. However, following this principle is not easy.

As he was checking the precedent cases, a knock sounded on the door and Chief Kim entered.

"These are the documents you were talking about."

Chief Kim handed over the overseas cases that prosecutor Seok had requested and then asked if he had heard about them. Only then did he raise his eyes to look at Chief Kim. He came a little closer and whispered.

"On the way here I met Park Gye

Jang of the public security department. Do you know the NIS agent who investigated us last time? It seems that person is wanted."

"What's his crime?"

"It seems he had an affair with a Russian intelligence agent. Probably for the crime of revealing state secrets."

Prosecutor Seok also knows Kwon Taek Joo. They cooperated several months ago regarding the investigation into Kim Young Hee's group.

But because the two only met a few times, there is no basis to evaluate 'Kwon Taek Joo's' personality, patriotism or integrity as well as personal relationships. However, he still couldn't understand why, after personally arresting Kim Young Hee and his accomplices, he himself was being chased for leaking national secrets

"Tell me more."

"I didn't hear it very well. Kim Young Hee was arrested in Busan and Kwon Taek Joo immediately left for Russia. He applied for leave for his mother's birthday to the NIS, and then even disguised his identity. But having an arrest warrant shows that there is definitely evidence of him spying in Russia, right?"

Come to think of it, Prosecutor Seok never met Kwon Taek Joo after the case ended. All required documents are received directly from NIS.

Inherently, litigants in security cases are often unexpected characters. Kwon Taek Joo is no exception. However, Prosecutor Seok was even more curious and suspicious about what national secret he was selling so hastily.

A knock on the door rang out again. Because he didn't have an appointment with anyone, Prosecutor Seok looked at Chief Kim with skepticism. Chief Kim shrugged as if he didn't know who it was.

"Come in."

The door opens upon approval. "Hello", the face of the person standing outside the door looked quite familiar. Perhaps because he was talking about Kwon Taek Joo, Prosecutor Seok remembered clearly that it was Yoon Jong Woo, a junior who often met with Kwon Taek Joo.

Ah yes. Hello. But why did you come here?"

"You're probably busy preparing for the trial, but I ventured here because I have something to ask."

"Is that so? Come in."

Even though he was invited in, Yoon Jong Woo continued to hesitate outside the door. Prosecutor Seok glanced at Chief Kim with a confused

expression, as if Yoon Jong Woo wanted to talk privately.

Prosecutor Seok immediately stood up and put on his coat. There was still a mountain of work to do, but he couldn't send away someone who had just come to visit.

"I'll be back within 30 minutes."

After informing Chief Kim, Prosecutor Seok left the office with Yoon Jong Woo.

The two entered a coffee shop near the prosecutor's office. It was quite late in the morning so there were very few people. Even so, Yoon Jong Woo still decided to choose a seat inside. His very alert attitude towards his surroundings made Prosecutor Seok more curious about the reason he came. He asked first while drinking water.

"Now tell me. What's wrong?"

"I heard that Kim Young Hee committed suicide."

Prosecutor Seok tilted his head at Yoon Jong Woo's first words. Kim Young Hee passed away less than three months ago. The person in charge of the investigation like Yoon Jong Woo cannot help but know this. However, he still calmly nodded and wondered why he mentioned the old story.

"Yes. You also know that she died during her capture. When the Coast Guard arrived at the ferry, she was already dead."

"On what basis do you conclude that Kim Young Hee's death was suicide?"

"The autopsy results showed that Kim Young Hee used force to hit her left molar right before she died. There was Cyanide in that molar. Perhaps they put Cyanide in her teeth to commit suicide in case of another accident."

"What about handkerchiefs?"

"Handkerchiefs?"

"Kwon Taek Joo said he stuffed a handkerchief in Kim Young Hee's mouth to prevent self-harm. There was a gunshot wound on her right arm so it was almost impossible to use, and her left hand is bent back and tied to the railing, so it will be difficult for her to pull the handkerchief out of her mouth herself. Her mouth is also tightly stuck so she probably won't be able to bite her molars."

"We have not received any reports of handkerchiefs being found at the scene."

Yoon Jong Woo's face stiffened. Prosecutor Seok's face also became serious. As Yoon Jong Woo said, if Kim Young Hee couldn't move voluntarily and was gagged, and if she was alive until Kwon Taek Joo stayed on the ferry, then how did she try to commit suicide and when? That information was not shown in the CCTV footage obtained from the scene.

There is only one possibility to infer, and that is the existence of a third party. Between the time Kwon Taek Joo chased Lee Cheol Jin until the coast guard arrived, there was still a small gap of time. It was only a few minutes, but it was enough time to put Kim Young Hee to death. Of course this is just a hypothesis and requires evidence to verify before drawing clear conclusions. This also refers to the need to determine that Kim Young Hee is not capable of committing suicide under Kwon Taek Joo's certain measures.

"So now you're saying there's a possibility that Kim Young Hee was murdered?"

"I think we need to check again. The handkerchief disappeared unexpectedly, Kim Young Hee died right before being arrested and the fact that what she stole was top secret data cannot be accessed unless it's a high-ranking official. I feel a bit confused."

"That document was provided to Kim Young Hee by a military officer who had a relationship with her, is that what you mean? He also received a summons and jumped to his death so he couldn't have gotten it. Considering that both were spies, the act of trying to commit suicide after failing in combat is not incomprehensible."

"Um. So have you seen that ring?"

"What ring are you talking about?"

"Wasn't Kim Young Hee wearing a ring?"

"No. There are no reports of that either."

Whether it was the handkerchief or the ring, it was a story that Prosecutor Seok was completely unaware of. The trial took place without such elements from the beginning. If Yoon Jong Woo's words are true, then the trials up to this point are all in vain.

"So what do you mean.."

"What if someone is manipulating this case?"

"Manipulating? You mean the defendant was falsely accused?"

"No. That's not the case, but there could be other people involved in the case. The dead military officer's statement that he had nothing to do with the operation could be true. Could there be anyone?"

Yoon Jong Woo constantly hinted at new possibilities. Exactly close to a conspiracy theory. Prosecutor Seok also thought that the timing of this case was very delicate. Kim Young Hee, who had hidden her identity for many years, suddenly tried to reach out too hastily. Just two months after the official investigation began, a military officer suspected of being an insider committed suicide, and she also made an extreme choice. Except for Lee Cheol Jin, all the key figures in the case have disappeared.

However difficult it may be, right now it is just a fantasy without reality, as if something happened without physical evidence.

"That's right, although the truth is unique, each person has a different relationship and perspective, so dozens or hundreds of different theories can appear. The story of the handkerchief or the ring disappearing from the scene is incontrovertible. After all, it's just someone's one-sided argument. If you need my help, please come with clearer evidence. I will try to help within my ability."

Prosecutor Seok draws a clear line. In the trial of Lee Cheol Jin that will take place in the next few days, before that if Yoon Jong Woo presents convincing evidence, all the time and effort so far will be wasted but Prosecutor Seok will still clarify the truth. But otherwise he could never have agreed.

Yoon Jong Woo nodded as if he understood, his face also looked tired and unhappy.

"If there's nothing left to say, I'll go first."

Prosecutor Seok immediately stood up. Yoon Jong Woo quickly stood up and nodded. For some reason, Prosecutor Seok silently nodded to Yoon Jong Woo and then strode towards him instead of towards the door. He passed by Yoon Jong Woo, who was watching suspiciously, and went to the chair behind him. A hooded man was sitting there. He bowed his head and his face was almost invisible, but Prosecutor Seok still started talking without hesitation.

"I heard that an arrest warrant was issued not long ago. I haven't received an official request for cooperation yet so I'll let it go this time. But the next time we meet I won't have a choice. other than arresting you. Personally, I hope that never happens."

Prosecutor Seok warned in a low, low voice. There was no response from the man. Prosecutor Seok looked down at the man for a moment then turned away and left the cafe.

Yoon Jong Woo sat down on the chair.

"Senior, it seems you've been discovered."

Yoon Jong Woo said while turning his head to look back. The man sitting with his back to him is none other than Kwon Taek Joo. Although Prosecutor Seok soon recognized him, he refused to arrest him. It was as if Prosecutor Seok agreed with Yoon Jong Woo's questions, or Kwon Taek Joo's questions to be exact. As long as physical evidence is secure, the Prosecutor will always act according to standards.

Of course, no matter whose request, Kwon Taek Joo still needs evidence to prove his innocence.

"First you go back to headquarters. Nothing good will come of it if you keep hanging around with a wanted person like me."

"What about senior? If you're suddenly discovered."

He lightly slapped Yoon Jong Woo's pale face. Blood circulates quickly, making the whole face hot. Yoon Jong Woo clenched his jaw and shouted "Ahh!" when he felt Kwon Taek Joo's hand on his face.

"Just worry about yourself, I'll find a way to live my own way."

Kwon Taek Joo grabbed the hard-working junior's nape and comforted him, but Yoon Jong Woo was still somber.

Kwon Taek Joo's mother stood at the sink with a confused look on her face. The rice in the pot was mushy. She was absent-minded for several hours while cooking with the thought of feeding her son.

She suddenly calmed down and then moved her hand mechanically again. Then, with many thoughts, she hurried into the living room.

The phone was being charged and a text message had just arrived. Her hands trembled as she checked the message she had just received. However, it was spam, not the contact she had been waiting for so long. For more than three months, she didn't know whether her only son was alive or dead.

She was frustrated for a moment then suddenly relaxed and stood up. She quickly grabbed a random coat and hurried out of the house. Each of her feet wears two shoes from two different pairs.

She passed by without hearing the neighbors' greetings. She didn't even realize someone was watching her.

A while later, the place where Kwon Taek Joo's mother arrived was a nearby police station. The police were confused as soon as she appeared. A police patrol who was monitoring the situation nearby approached.

"Have you found my son?"

Kwon Taek Joo's mother desperately grabbed the policeman's arm. He just smiled faintly at this repeating situation, then said, "Let's sit down

here for a moment" and led her to a nearby table. Another police officer who was following the story also brought a cup of warm water.

However, Kwon Taek Joo's mother still looked at the two of them with despair in her eyes, looking confused and constantly muttering.

"Have you found my son?"

"Ah, about that.. We are also working on it. However, as I said last time, in cases where adults disappear without contact, we usually focus on the aspect of leaving voluntarily rather than being lost. Especially since your son.."

"It's not like that! He called every day. No matter what happened, no matter how late, I always answered. He's not the kind of person who disappears without a word like that!"

"Yes, of course. But, ma'am, your son didn't say anything honest to you. The community center where your son works said that there is no such employee and Even after searching the list of local officials, there was no one with the same name. You've seen this too, right?"

The police officer calmly persuaded but Kwon Taek Joo's mother repeatedly denied that such a thing could ever happen.

"There must be something wrong. Something bad must have happened. We can track the phone's location. I don't know if the phone will turn back on at this time. Hurry up, try it. Hurry up!"

"Ma'am, please calm down. First of all, drink water."

"You said you would find my son! Hurry up! Find my son!"

The water in the glass splashed out with excitement. The police officer grabbed both of her arms to avoid unwanted injuries, but Kwon Taek Joo's mother continued to move frantically. The police officers who were resisting were pushed away and their nails were scratched and injured.

A senior police officer looked at the scene displeased and then he approached. He then confidently presented a printed piece of paper to Kwon Taek Joo's mother, who was still in a panic.

"Ma'am, look at this. Is this your son?"

Kwon Taek Joo's mother accidentally looked at the photo paper and opened her eyes wide. She shook off the policeman's hand holding her and grabbed the printout in a split second. The printing condition isn't very good but it's definitely a photo of Kwon Taek Joo. She nodded several times.

"That's right, my son. Have you found him?"

"That's why he lost contact. Your son, he is a wanted criminal."

"..What?"

"Don't you understand? I want to say that Kwon Taek Joo was not the one who was captured by bad people, but it was he who committed evil actions and then ran away. How can we find the person who did it?"

The last words he said were almost to himself.

Kwon Taek Joo's mother stood blankly and shook her head. Eyes absentmindedly blinked continuously.

"I do have it."

"Yes. Your son is not like that, everyone says so. But anyway, your son is being chased for committing a serious crime. You don't need to tell us to find him, you have to be on duty. Continue to find him and bring him here. If he contacts you, please tell me to surrender and confess."

The police officer said an overflow had no chance of being stopped. Kwon Taek Joo's mother completely lost her senses as if she had just been bombed. She only occasionally groaned and repeated, "It can't be like that."

After a while, she was able to turn around and walk away. The worried eyes of the people around followed. Not long after, she collapsed on the floor before she could get out the door.

"Ma,am!"

"Oh my god, call 119!"

"What are you looking at? Quickly get over here!"

The confused policeman shouted hastily. Someone called 119 and several people carried Kwon Taek Joo's mother to a bench. They wet a handkerchief and apply it to their foreheads, quickly massaging their arms and legs to circulate blood. Ten minutes later the ambulance arrived.

Kwon Taek Joo's mother was taken into an ambulance in an unconscious state. A patrol police officer decided to accompany her to the hospital instead of the guardian who was not present. The ambulance turned on its warning lights and hurriedly left the police station.

Until the loud siren faded away, there was one person still standing there. That's Kwon Taek Joo. Because he was worried about his mother, he wandered in front of the house just as she walked out of the house. The fact that a wanted notice was issued means that people close to him will definitely be followed, so Kwon Taek Joo just planned to look at his mother from afar and then leave.

His mother is someone who can't sleep peacefully because she's worried about her son, so he doesn't expect her to have a good life. He never thought he would see her being carried away on a stretcher. Kwon Taek Joo felt resentful as he had to stand by helplessly even though he had not committed any crimes.

Kwon Taek Joo pulled the brim of his hat down further. His fists turned white in his hurried steps. Another reason to quickly find out the truth.

Kwon Taek Joo immediately went to the computer room. He went to the farthest corner and accessed the shooting game that Yoon Jong Woo loved. When he logged in with Yoon Jong Woo's ID, a message appeared. It was sent by Yoon Jong Woo through another ID. Kwon Taek Joo checked the content and deleted it immediately. Less than 5 minutes after entering, he left the computer room.

The place where Kwon Taek Joo reappeared was the subway station. He walked among the crowd of passengers flocking to the station and then left the group. He walked through the low corridor of the station and

then began walking in a small tunnel with few passersby. Homeless people were sitting together, chattering and not paying attention to strangers along the small road. Kwon Taek Joo cautiously walked past them and stopped in front of a man lying on his side on a piece of newspaper.

On the man's chair was a worn Bacchus energy drink box. There were only a few coins in the box. As soon as he noticed a wad of money being pulled out from Kwon Taek Joo, he sat up, grabbed the money he was about to put in the box and openly counted it.

Immediately after that, the man handed back the black bag he was holding in his hand. Kwon Taek Joo silently took it and the man lay down again as if he had finished his business.

Kwon Taek Joo opened the bag and checked each item. Inside was a phone, ginseng juice and a corner of a newspaper with small notes on it. Kwon Taek Joo opened the bottle of red ginseng as he walked and drank it all in one gulp. A memory card is discreetly attached to the inside of the bottle cap. He removed the memory card and inserted it into the slot of the mobile phone and checked the data stored on the card. All the necessary information is arranged right in front of him. Kwon Taek Joo put the phone in his pocket and hurried out of the tunnel.

## Chapter 4.2 – Hide and Seek

A while later, Kwon Taek Joo boarded the express bus bound for Taebaek. Before entering the main stage of the journey, there was someone he wanted to meet. He reviewed the information related to Kim Young Hee in the investigation documents during the car trip.

Kim Young Hee left Korea for China and then Japan when she was 20 years old. After a year, she went to New York and lived there for ten years to clear her citizenship. By the time she entered Korea, her identity had transformed into that of a perfect second-generation immigrant.

The investigation into Kim Young Hee began with the awareness of that suspicion. Headquarters obtained intelligence about her and then decided to assign the capture task to Kwon Taek Joo as usual. After monitoring media data such as Kim Young Hee's

SNS

and emails, he determined that she had received instructions from North Korea.

However, the results of eavesdropping or monitoring cannot be used as evidence. Evidence obtained from direct interrogation is needed to prove Kim Young Hee's crime of espionage. Even when the "fish" was caught, appropriate evidence could not be found, so an arrest could not be made. At that moment, Kim Young Hee herself revealed it herself. The investigation became intense and Kwon Taek Joo chased her to Busan to attack the scene where she came into contact with Lee Cheol Jin. Everything went smoothly.

But is that really the case? Kwon Taek Joo may have missed something important. From realizing the existence of a spy to investigation and arrest, it was so easy. On the other hand, the aftertaste of being arrested is not very pleasant. Kim Young Hee and a military officer committed suicide, Kwon Taek Joo and Yoon Jong Woo who participated in the

capture mission were unable to follow the operation to the end. As a result, the case was handed over to the prosecution with some evidence missing. Every time she contemplates, Kwon Taek Joo feels more uncomfortable and confused.

He looked at the report that Chief Lim had submitted on his behalf, everything looked very reasonable. The data that Kim Young Hee tried to transfer to Lee Cheol Jin was related to military secrets and could only be accessed by a few people. The military officer who committed suicide was one of them, and he had a very close relationship with Kim Young Hee. He maintained his innocence to the end, but in the report, they recorded that he was a person of high social status so he committed suicide because he could not overcome the psychological pressure. There's nothing to doubt, but there's also no evidence to refute it. Even those who might have objected disappeared. More and more, Kwon Taek Joo wondered if he had misunderstood something.

The bus arrived three hours later. It was starting to get dark. The location that Yoon Jong Woo wrote on the paper was quite far from the bus station and there were only two buses a day, so Kwon Taek Joo decided to take a taxi.

After looking at the address, he agreed with the driver to add a small tip and they departed. The taxi left the city center and drove for a long time on a winding mountain road. The car drove non-stop, approaching the top of the mountain.

When the navigation system ends the instructions, everything around is completely submerged in darkness.

"According to the address, it seems to be somewhere nearby."

The taxi driver looked out the window with suspicion. Of course. Because there was no light around, not even a streetlight. A place in the middle of a mountain seemed to show no signs of life, but Kwon Taek Joo still paid in full as promised and got out of the car.

He confidently walked down the dark dirt road ahead. The taxi quickly turned around and returned the way it came. The sound of the engine

quickly disappeared, but Kwon Taek Joo didn't pay attention. He was too used to the dead silence while being held on a deserted island.

Kwon Taek Joo continued walking, the bumpy dirt road disappeared and a mountain road with dense trees began. This is not a climbing path but just a path leading into the forest. Is there a hermitage in the mountains? Or did Kwon Taek Joo go the wrong way?

Kwon Taek Joo hesitantly stood at the beginning of the road. He walked back and forth then suddenly heard the sound of a car door opening somewhere. He turned around, a man stepped out of an old truck in the darkness. He looked like a ranger wearing a large coat and hiking hat.

"Hey. Don't go in there. The climbing path has been identified."

The man tried to stop Kwon Taek Joo.

"Huh? Who is this?"

"It's been a long time since I last saw you, Doctor."

Kwon Taek Joo recognized the man and greeted him. The man also recognized him and gave him a familiar smile.

"What are you doing here? You're not climbing a mountain in the middle of the night, are you?"

"I'm here to see the Doctor."

"What doctor? It's been a long time since anyone called me that."

Like Kwon Taek Joo, Dr. Jo was a member of the National Security Agency until two years ago. His job is to produce high-tech equipment needed for intelligence activities. Because Kwon Taek Joo performed so many missions, the two naturally became close. But since Dr. Jo retired, Kwon Taek Joo has not seen him again. Partly because of his busy work, but also because he did not leave any contact information.

"Don't stay here, go home first."

Following Dr. Jo's

advice, Kwon Taek Joo climbed into the old truck with him. The engine starts making a noise like boiling water.

"Did you come empty-handed?"

"Impossible."

Kwon Taek Joo shook the bag he was holding. Inside, the bottles collided with each other, making clear sounds. Dr. Jo smiled contentedly.

"You're such a tricky person."

He added, "I'll give you the chance to stay in the worst room in the country."

The old truck staggered and crawled in the dark. After about 10 minutes, the two arrived at a small village with only 5 or 6 houses, but enough for shelter.

It seemed like there weren't many people living in this place, and it was already late at night so there were no lights on anywhere.

Dr. Jo's residence is located at the farthest location. The front yard of the house was full of scrap metal from unknown sources. If strangers saw it, they would mistake it for a landfill rather than a place to live.

Inside the house is not much different. One side of the room is covered with a blanket and a table with leftovers from the previous meal left intact.

"Sit down."

Kwon Taek Joo hung the clothes scattered on the floor on the wall and tidied up. Meanwhile, Dr. Jo has set up a table of drinks. Dishes only include kimchi and tuna. Even so, the two of them gulped down two bottles of soju in the blink of an eye.

"You really didn't come here to see this wrinkled face, did you? Why did you suddenly appear?"

"I need your help, Doctor."

Kwon Taek Joo answered honestly. Dr. Jo smiled determinedly.

"You stopped your current work to go see this old man. Are you going to work without letting headquarters know?"

"Yes, it's due to circumstances."

"Then I also have to know a little about that situation. Retired state employees should be able to live comfortably."

Sure. Kwon Taek Joo cannot ask for help without explaining anything. He tried to briefly summarize everything that happened recently.

Dr. Jo listened carefully and then suggested another approach.

"That, wouldn't it be more comfortable to pretend you don't know? If you're worried about the situation later, you can face Chief Lim right now and compromise if you're hated by your superiors and forced to Wrong crime. You are no stranger to such things. You are still young now, so you need to consider which side will benefit more. I think you are not the type of person who will risk your life for justice, right?"

"I've considered it, but I can't accept defeat and just live quietly like that. If there was room for compromise, headquarters wouldn't have issued an arrest warrant so lightly. Now then. The only way is to play the chicken game."

"Tsk tsk. When you're old, you'll regret it. When your bones dry up, you'll regret what you did today."

"Because Dr. Jo doesn't know, that's why I say that. I was abandoned in Russia and went through a lot of things that I will have to suffer from for the rest of my life."

Kwon Taek Joo spoke as if he was about to kill someone, but his mind was still completely clear. Dr. Jo poured him another glass.

"So you want me to be your accomplice?"

"If caught, I'll say it's my fault. Please tell them you were threatened by me."

"It's okay."

Both laughed loudly. Dr. Jo looked at Kwon Taek Joo with a look of mockery and complaint.

"I just want to live a normal and small life when I retire, but bad people have come here to cause trouble."

"Thanks."

"Don't thank me, I haven't decided yet. Let's go take a nap first."

Dr. Jo crawled to the bed and just fell down. Not long after, a steady snoring sound filled the room.

Kwon Taek Joo also laid down on the floor after cleaning up the messy wine table. It's been a long time since he slept comfortably like this. Kwon Taek Joo looked up at the low ceiling and slowly closed his eyes.

That night, he doesn't remember how he slept.

Kwon Taek Joo wandered aimlessly through the alleys of Moscow. Then he found a small bar with no sign.

Strong cigarette smoke greeted Kwon Taek Joo as soon as he opened the door and entered. There is no ventilation anywhere, making visibility blurry. Kwon Taek Joo broke through the stuffy atmosphere and went deeper inside. At every step, there seemed to be a persistent gaze following him. That dissatisfied gaze swept across a fearless Asian.

Kwon Taek Joo stood in front of the bar. The man who appeared to be the owner of the shop handed out vodka as usual. He pushed the glass aside and suddenly asked.

"I need a passport."

"Why are you looking for your passport here? You see, this is just a bar."

The man behaved as if he knew nothing. The others who were watching the two of them laughed crudely. Several of them turned towards the bar and swayed their giant bodies. Some threaten by cracking their knuckles.

"I'm busy, don't waste each other's time."

Despite Kwon Taek Joo's warning, the man continued to laugh. There was the sound of a chair being pulled out from behind. Kwon Taek Joo lowered his head as he felt the back of his neck tense. A huge fist cut

through the air uselessly. He immediately grabbed a wooden chair and hit him on the head. The giant groaned and fell down.

The other men saw that scene and immediately rushed in without hesitation. Kwon Taek Joo placed his back on the bar table and kicked both legs at the same time. Two men who were trying to lift the table in the back were kicked in the chest and collapsed.

Soon, the inside of the shop became chaotic. In another unexpected turn of events, one of the two men pulled out a knife. He licked his thin lips and gripped the handle of the knife tightly, his half-closed eyes shining strangely. He rushed forward suddenly as if he was going to stab the knife immediately.

But after a moment, he flinched and stopped, because Kwon Taek Joo took out the Colt and aimed it at his forehead. For a moment, all movement and noise in the bar was silent. The only thing that could be heard was the rapid breathing of the excited man.

He rolled his eyes, looked into the void, then suddenly swung his knife. Kwon Taek Joo easily dodged his attack and pulled the trigger.

"Ahh!"

The knife fell with a clear gunshot. Its owner grabbed his right hand with severed fingers and shouted "I will kill you". Kwon Taek Joo picked up the fallen knife and stuck it on the bar. The knife was stuck firmly so it kept swaying from side to side. The energetic bar owner reluctantly retracted his hand and tilted his chin behind the bar. Kwon Taek Joo followed him.

As expected, the room was equipped with fake devices. From identification cards such as passports to certificates and travel documents, the types of transactions are indeed very diverse. Kwon Taek Joo took passport photos on the spot and paid half the cost in advance. He decided to hand over the rest when he received his passport. Kwon Taek Joo gave him some more money and asked him to buy a train ticket to Beijing.

That evening, Kwon Taek Joo received a third-class ticket for the train to Beijing and a fake passport. The passport had a strange name and

personal information written on it in Japanese, and even in Kwon Taek Joo's eyes, it was quite perfect. While he was paying the remaining amount, the bar owner secretly asked.

"I heard someone is looking for an Asian who wants to fake a passport. Is it you?"

"Who asked that?"

"Psych Bogdanov."

For a split second, his heart skipped a beat. It's also not something that can be predicted. Kwon Taek Joo thought that Zhenya would chase him as punishment for the beating he suffered. Even so, his heart still pounded when he heard that he was actually moving.

Zhenya clearly predicted Kwon Taek Joo's upcoming moves

. If he is captured again, his humble status will be very difficult to maintain. If he can find even a bar that Kwon Taek Joo went to, it's only a matter of time before he gets caught again.

Kwon Taek Joo stepped on the train under the bar owner's watchful eyes. The shop owner stood and watched until the train closed all the doors and left the station before leaving. Kwon Taek Joo, who was looking for an opportunity inside the train, immediately opened the window and jumped onto the tracks. He avoided injury thanks to his speed.

Kwon Taek Joo just disappeared and moved to a local airport. He then bought a one-way flight to Shanghai with cash. Immigration officers checked the passport here and there and stamped it without any special problems. A sigh of relief escaped.

But Kwon Taek Joo still couldn't relax even after boarding the plane. He didn't know why he was so restless during the short time before takeoff. Immediately after that, the boarding gate closed and the crew headed to their seats. After getting ready, the plane slowly began to move.

Finally, Kwon Taek Joo left Russia to die. Everything went smoothly, until the plane, moving toward the runway, suddenly stopped.

The crew hurriedly gathered into the cockpit. Passengers also looked around continuously in an unusual atmosphere.

A moment later, the announcement on the plane rang out.

"Please inform passengers. Departure will be delayed for a while due to an emergency request from the airport police. We hope passengers will understand and cooperate."

The passengers' eyes simultaneously turned to the window. Kwon Taek Joo saw an official vehicle driving in the distance. The plane quickly moved off the runway and landed on a separate stand.

The emergency stairs were quickly connected and someone was slowly going up that way. Suddenly Kwon Taek Joo's heart was pounding, pounding heavily. His mouth was dry with an ominous feeling for unknown reasons.

Kwon Taek Joo turned his head to the opposite window. There's no reason for that to be the case, he's probably just worrying for nothing. Kwon Taek Joo denied the thoughts that were dominating and constantly inflating in his head. Finally, the person boarding the plane slowly walked down the aisle. All eyes were on him so Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but pay attention.

Finally, his steps suddenly stopped. Kwon Taek Joo still ignored him but he was able to recognize his true identity immediately, because that unique scent immediately entered his nose.

Kwon Taek Joo didn't dare turn his head to look at him at all, every cell in his body seemed to be frozen.

"Do you think you can run away like this?"

Every word he spit out was like a sharp needle. The conversation quickly turned cold. Kwon Taek Joo's ears perked up as a beeping sound rang out in his ears.

His cold hand tightened on Kwon Taek Joo's wrist like a handcuff. When Kwon Taek Joo looked back in surprise, the passengers filling the plane had disappeared and the surroundings were in darkness. All that's left is Kwon Taek Joo and the guy controlling him. He whispered under his breath and then tightened his grip to the point where he could crush his bones.

"You can't go, Kwon Taek Joo."

"Oh my God!"

Kwon Taek Joo took a deep breath and opened his eyes. His vision was blurry and spinning. The moldy wallpaper and the damp, undulating ceiling met his eyes. Where is this? Kwon Taek Joo tried to calm down and think and finally remembered that he had come to find Dr. Jo.

Drops of sweat formed on his delicate, trembling eyelashes. Kwon Taek Joo's whole body had goosebumps, his heart was beating fast and heavily. He sat up, cold sweat running down his spine, his eyebrows furrowed at the terrible feeling. There was no time for quiet as an even more strange and haunting feeling began to surface. Kwon Taek Joo clenched his fist and quickly placed it on his mouth to suppress his emotions. The suspense has not yet completely dissipated, the breathing and heartbeat become even more intense.

It was just a dream. Kwon Taek Joo does not expect Zhenya to let go lightly. Zhenya is not someone who can simply be ignored, and since when

has his attitude towards Kwon Taek Joo changed in such an incomprehensible way. If I'm not wrong, then that means..

Kwon Taek Joo accidentally developed a train of thought and quickly dismissed it. It seemed like he wasn't too miserable yet because he still had time and energy for random ideas.

What happened in the nightmare was quite similar to reality when Kwon Taek Joo fled Russia. He got off the train and boarded a plane to Shanghai at a local airport, but he did not encounter Zhenya.

Kwon Taek Joo faked his passport in Shanghai to enter Korea, he had to use a ship with a relatively lower level of vigilance, because if Kwon Taek Joo himself was falling into someone's plot, entering The scene from the beginning was a difficult hurdle.

His subconscious still reminded him not to let his guard down around Zhenya. Has he ever felt scared and worried about a specific object like this? Even if he sees a ghost, it seems that Kwon Taek Joo will not be as restless and helpless as he is now. He tried to calm his uncomfortably beating heart.

Kwon Taek Joo shook his head to regain his composure. He looked around and realized Dr. Jo was no longer in the room. He must have woken up very early.

Kwon Taek Joo opened the creaky door and went outside, the cool morning air rushing deep into his lungs. He walked to the faucet and turned on the water. Ice-cold water gushed out. His hands were filled with water and then splashed on his sweaty face. After washing his face, his mind also became clearer, and the thinking circuit that had stopped working seemed to return.

"The sun is up and you're just waking up now?"

Kwon Taek Joo turned around when he heard the sound of clicking his tongue. Dr. Jo is preparing the table. He quickly walked over to help lay out the food. Breakfast is simple with two types of kimchi and soy bean soup cooked with sliced onions, potatoes and zucchini.

Kwon Taek Joo didn't have any appetite, maybe because he drank last night or because the nightmare made his stomach hurt, but he still sat down to eat a little while thinking about Dr. Jo's sincerity.

"What did you dream about last night that made you gasp? I was wondering if I needed to call an ambulance."

Kwon Taek Joo choked violently, almost spitting out what he was chewing. He couldn't answer so he just quickly drank water. It wasn't even a dirty dream at all but he suddenly felt embarrassed about being caught. Dr. Jo's eyes widened in surprise at that unusual reaction. He smiled mischievously and then seriously changed the subject.

"What? Sleeping one night and still thinking the same? Do you still want to do that reckless thing?"

"Yes."

Kwon Taek Joo nodded without hesitation.

"There's no other way, right? Then let me know what you need, I'll prepare it right away."

"Thanks."

"It will be quite difficult. Even if I help you, in the end you will have to fight on your own."

Kwon Taek Joo nodded silently. Dr. Jo looked at him with some sympathy then he stood up. The two got on an old truck and drove to a nearby hill. Dr. Jo parked the car at the bottom of the hill and confidently started climbing the mountain road. It was a long and narrow climbing path but there was no trace of anyone passing by. Even the elk don't seem to be going that way.

After climbing for more than an hour, a small cabin appeared. Kwon Taek Joo could tell intuitively, it was Dr. Jo's personal laboratory. The inside was just like his home, with many miscellaneous objects scattered around. Pens, lighters, ties, hats and other common items, but in this context, they take on an unusual look that makes the space more unique.

Dr. Jo suddenly gave a pen to Kwon Taek Joo, who was engrossed in looking around the cabin.

"It's a device that can deflect laser light or move it in a parallel direction. It looks simple but is quite useful."

As if to demonstrate, Dr. Jo pulled down the curtain. Kwon Taek Joo also closed the blackout curtain behind him. The inside of the cabin soon became dark.

As Dr. Jo operates the computer, dark blue lasers bounce off from everywhere forming a grid. Looks like the security device has been activated. Dr. Jo rotated the cap of the pen and held it toward the laser.

Then, like pieces of metal being attracted to a magnet, all the laser beams began to move along with the pen. It seems that just having that pen makes most security devices useless.

Dr. Jo said that it could be used in a different way and then picked up a targeting device mounted on the gun. He turned on the laser and aimed it at his heart. He then bent the laser beam again with the pen from before. The red laser beams were strangely broken or stretched straight up.

After explaining, Dr. Jo gave the pen to Kwon Taek Joo and opened the curtains. Kwon Taek Joo then personally prepared the necessary items that were around.

"Here, this looks like a normal laptop, but it is a machine that can create artificial skin, fingerprints, iris lenses, etc. Perfect practical implementation is possible with just a simple scan. The stick here is as soft as clay, but if pressed into the hole, it will quickly harden in that shape and can copy any key. But how did you get here?"

Dr. Jo asked questions instead of happily introducing his inventions. He looked at Kwon Taek Joo's surprised eyes and then pointed to the small screen under the table.

"The detective dogs have already smelled the scent."

The screen showed troops and police climbing through dense trees. Looks like the location has been leaked.

Dr. Jo took out his bag and gave it to Kwon Taek Joo. He also coordinated his hands and feet and swept advanced equipment into it.

"If you are caught, I will declare that I was threatened by you and give all my belongings to you."

Dr. Jo leads Kwon Taek Joo to the emergency exit. He nodded and patted his back, "Go quickly." Kwon Taek Joo bowed and quickly exited through the emergency exit. He lowered his body and quickly advanced between the dense bushes.

Dr. Jo watched for a moment then locked the door. The table that was pushed aside was also moved back to its original position and the

emergency exit was completely obscured.

When everything was finished, there was a knock on the door from outside. The newly arrived army and police were breathing heavily outside the door. Dr. Jo opened the door without hesitation and fulfilled his duties as a park ranger.

"Everyone must have had a hard time climbing up here, but you have to go down now. This is a restricted area."

## Chapter 4.3 – Hide and Seek

A knock on the closed door gave permission to enter. The door opened and Professor Yoon's eyes moved from the screen to the door. She had assumed it was a student or a teaching assistant, but the visitor surprised her.

"Why have you come here?"

The middle-aged man bowed his head.

"I have a few questions regarding Professor Kim Young Hee. May I come in?"

Professor Yoon's face stiffened.

"Hm, I don't know what you're expecting, but I also don't know much about that person. Everything I know is not true so I have nothing more to say. So please go back."

She drew clear boundaries and expressed her discomfort, but the man remained gentle and did not back down.

"Please, just a few minutes."

"Who are you anyways? Are you a reporter?"

"Sorry, I'm late for introductions."

The man took out his ID card and showed it to Professor Yoon, who was wary.

"I am the prosecutor's investigator in charge of Kim Young Hee's case. I came because there is a part that needs to be added in the trial."

The man who was explaining those things had a face similar to Chief Kim, but in reality. It was Kwon Taek Joo disguised as him. His identity card and appearance were so fake that even his family had a hard time telling the difference.

Professor Yoon sighed as if disappointed.

"Honestly, I don't know anything. A few years ago I went to a conference and got to know her through the introduction of another professor. We exchanged a few words right when our school decided to hire her. So we live close to each other but don't know about each other's private lives. But it's all just a disguise, what else can I say to the investigator?"

Even after living in the same house for more than a decade, people often cannot know that their spouse is a spy. Furthermore, there is no way she could have been aware of Kim Young Hee's activities within the co-worker relationship. What Kwon Taek Joo is trying to confirm is much more trivial.

"At the time of her arrest, Kim Young Hee was wearing a ring on the ring finger of her left hand. That ring is almost unworn, professor, do you know what ring it is?"

"I heard she was getting married. She's been dating a man. I don't know who it is, but I've seen him several times on her phone."

Is that man the dead military officer? But he has a family. Social status and self-image are important to spies. Based on that stance, it seems that she will not publicly announce that she is about to marry a married man. If she approached a military officer with the intention of stealing confidential information, their date would have to be more discreet. At least my colleagues couldn't notice.

If so, then there is definitely someone else. Kwon Taek Joo was quite confident but he did not rush to make a decision. This time he must dig step by step.

"I wonder if you know where you bought that ring?"

"Normally I don't know because men are the ones buying the rings."

"But.. you mean you know?"

"Yes. The person who designed the ring is the wife of a member of the same academy."

Professor Yoon immediately took out a business card and gave it to Kwon Taek Joo. "Let's try to find out." he felt a firm voice telling him to stop the questioning.

Kwon Taek Joo immediately went to the jewelry store that Professor Yoon mentioned. Seeing Kwon Taek Joo in a neat suit, the manager warmly greeted him and guided him to the consultation desk.

"Excuse me, what product are you looking for?"

"I want to see a ring."

"Ah, so that's it. Are you going to use it to propose?"

Kwon Taek Joo nodded. Thinking he was shy, the manager smiled and took out the request form.

"Do you want any special designs?"

"I'm not very familiar with gemstones, can I look at other products?"

"Of course."

The manager happily took the tablet and opened up the catalogs. He scrolled through each product photo and gave explanations that bordered on praise. Kwon Taek Joo listened briefly and only carefully observed the photos.

"Don't you know what the bride-to-be likes? Some people like fancy things, and some people like simple things. This type ignores the small details and increases the carat instead."

Suddenly an image caught Kwon Taek Joo's eyes. That is it. That is the ring that Kim Young Hee wore.

"This design."

"Ah, you like that design?"

The manager, who was embarrassed by Kwon Taek Joo's sullen reaction from beginning to end, suddenly became happy, but he was immediately confused after checking the relevant information.

"Sorry, but that ring was specially designed for a teacher to give to an acquaintance. It is not an ordinary product but a type of work created by inspiration. It will be impossible to make another one like it. But instead, I can make a similar one. What do you think?"

"When was this ring made?"

"Hm, I don't know. But it probably hasn't been half a year."

"This isn't a couple ring, right?"

"Yes, this is perfect for proposals and gifts."

"So the person who bought it must have been a man, right?"

"What?"

The manager's smile faded from the questions that continuously flowed out like flowing water, his eyes silently sparkled with suspicion. It seemed he was slowly backing away.

"Where's the bathroom?"

"Ah, yes. Over there."

Kwon Taek Joo walked in the direction the manager pointed. He pretended not to notice the prying eyes clearly following behind him and walked into the bathroom aisle.

The phone bell suddenly rang. The manager finally looked away and went to answer the phone. During that time, Kwon Taek Joo went out alone again. He saw the surveillance camera mounted in the center of the ceiling as soon as he entered. Cameras record the entire store's activities in real time because the products on display are expensive items. Even if the built-in memory is periodically cleared, there will still be a backup file.

Sometimes Kwon Taek Joo still hears the manager's voice talking on the phone. Repeated apologies, it seems he is receiving complaints. He focused on that and seemed to forget Kwon Taek Joo's existence.

A moment later Kwon Taek Joo arrived in front of the office. He gently lowered the door handle, but it was locked tightly. Kwon Taek Joo took

the clay bar he received from Dr. Jo and pushed it into the keyhole. He waited a few seconds then tried turning it carefully, the locking device was immediately removed. Kwon Taek Joo went inside, careful not to make any noise from the door.

As expected, a computer was placed there. He turned on the power and inserted the USB into the slot. Immediately after that, an import window appears. The hacking program is executed by entering a specific command. Kwon Taek Joo specified the copy scope as the entire hard drive and pressed Enter. A progress bar graph appears on the screen.

Kwon Taek Joo waited and observed the movements outside the door. The manager seemed to still be on the phone. He still just kept apologizing, pitiful.

The copy was quickly completed. Kwon Taek Joo took the USB back and turned off the computer. He arranged the mouse back to its original position and went out. Kwon Taek Joo also did not forget to lock the door with a hard clay bar and stop by the bathroom to wash his hands.

"I'm very sorry, ladies and gentlemen. When you have time, please come visit and we will compensate you as desired. No, that's not it. It's not that I intend to ignore it, it's just that there are other customers here. Store.. What? Do you feel neglected? It's unfair. Yes, of course. You must have been heartbroken. I understand."

Kwon Taek Joo returned to his seat and pretended to take his coat and take a photo of the ring in the catalog. He then approached the manager who was still holding the phone. As soon as their eyes met, he showed remorse.

"It seems you're busy. I'll come back later."

"What? No.. I..."

He didn't have time to stop Kwon Taek Joo because the voice on the other side of the receiver continued to sound. The manager's face showed a tired look. Kwon Taek Joo left the store after he asked him to stop by again next time.

Kwon Taek Joo quickly walked out, the phone in his pocket rang. The only person who knows this phone number is Yoon Jong Woo. He took out his phone and walked away while receiving the call.

"Senior, have you succeeded?"

"You really have the talent to act, don't you? As far as I can see, your skills aren't something you've only

done this 1 or 2 times."

"Are you scolding me?"

"If you want to hear it as a compliment, it's fine."

"The ring, have you checked it yet? Is it really there?"

"Yes. I found the ring. Now I just need to find someone."

If there is a hidden truth, the clue is contained in the USB. "I will contact you later," Kwon Taek Joo ended the call with Yoon Jong Woo and took longer strides.

Kwon Taek Joo checked the sale records in the copied files. Quarterly revenue data is organized in detail. According to the manager, Kim Young Hee's ring was made about half a year ago. The search scope was set by Kwon Taek Joo to the fourth quarter of last year and transaction details, deposit and withdrawal records from bank accounts, and sales records were entered. Kwon Taek Joo searched for the name of Kim Young Hee's ring model.

Two results soon emerged. Kwon Taek Joo clicked on the transaction statement. The credit card information that paid for the ring is written on it. The owner of the card is not the deceased military officer. However, there was a strangely familiar name that caught Kwon Taek Joo's eyes.

"This is.."

Suddenly a character with the same name appeared completely unexpectedly in Kwon Taek Joo's mind. It's not a common name, but it's not a very rare one either. Assuming that person is involved, the

suspicions are mostly resolved. But that's just an assumption. Caution is required.

He also opened the surveillance camera recording. To prepare for unexpected situations, a whole year's worth of videos have been kept intact by the store. Among them, Kwon Taek Joo replayed the video on the day that coincided with the sales invoice.

Since early morning, there have been quite a few customers coming in and out. Kwon Taek Joo also saw the manager and designer he just met. However, there was no one in particular that attracted his attention. Kwon Taek Joo fast forwards the video at 4x speed. He looked at it for an hour and then stopped. He rewinded the screen that had just passed and played it back at normal speed.

A man and a woman visited after lunch. The designer personally came out to welcome the two. The image quality of the video is not very good, but the woman clearly looks like Kim Young Hee. However, the man hovering around the corner of the screen could not be seen clearly. Suddenly Kwon Taek Joo felt deja vu from that figure.

He sighed as he zoomed in on the screen like a habit. The place where Kwon Taek Joo was sitting was a shabby computer room. Unable to enlarge the screen and unable to improve image quality, it seemed he needed Yoon Jong Woo's help.

Kwon Taek Joo carefully uploaded the video to a website and logged into Yoon Jong Woo's favorite shooting game. He left his ID, password and requests in a note, then deleted all usage records on his computer and left.

As soon as he left the computer room. Kwon Taek Joo entered a big street. Crowded streets before work. He naturally blended into the crowd and walked away.

"...."

How long have you been gone? Kwon Taek Joo became aware of an unusual sign from behind. The road was filled with pedestrians. Some of them may have the same destination. However, it was strange when that person followed Kwon Taek Joo while constantly looking at the

back of his head. At that moment, the faces of the people behind were reflected in the window of the car turning right. There are three people in total. They all closely watched Kwon Taek Joo.

There was an entrance to the subway station nearby, Kwon Taek Joo pretended to pass by, then suddenly turned around and walked into it.

"Chase!"

The pursuers no longer pretended to be people on the road and hurriedly gave in to chase him. They pushed people climbing up the stairs like water at the train station while fiercely chasing Kwon Taek Joo.

Kwon Taek Joo jumped through the ticket gate and avoided other passengers to climb up the railing of a staircase. He did not slow down and slid down the steep railing

When the pursuers arrived at the station, Kwon Taek Joo had disappeared. The men exchanged signs in silence and then dispersed in various directions. One of them walked around and checked the faces of the sparsely lined passengers while those who remained continued to turn in other directions. At that moment, the announcement that a train was about to arrive rang out. He became more impatient.

The man's eyes looked around and then suddenly fixed on one place. There was another man holding up a newspaper and covering his face. He gently approached, one of his hands reached inside his jacket and grabbed the gun.

Soon the train arrived. In a split second, he tugged at the newspaper. Contrary to expectations, the newspaper fell so easily but he did not have a chance to wonder because a strong shock fell on his neck.

"Sigh."

He clutched his neck and staggered kicking the man. Passengers around were panicked by the sudden violence. The other pursuers who noticed the commotion also rushed over.

At that moment, the train doors opened and people poured out. The helpless pursuers were carried away by that fierce crowd. Kwon Taek

Joo looked at that scene and then leisurely walked onto the subway. The pursuers pushed their way through the crowd and tried to approach, but the train doors closed first. The men who missed Kwon Taek Joo right under their noses vented their anger on the innocent screen door.

Kwon Taek Joo stood leaning his tired body against the train for a while. The movement of the subway train running on the tracks was transmitted to him intact. By now the other men must have called for backup, so he had to get off at the next stop. Kwon Taek Joo was calculating how to escape the siege when his phone suddenly rang. The caller was definitely Yoon Jong Woo.

"Have you checked yet?"

"Senior. This is not a composite, right?"

Yoon Jong Woo asked in a confused voice. Isn't the game found on the sales invoice the same person?

"What's wrong?"

"If you watch it live. I just sent it to senior."

Kwon Taek Joo checked the image that was just sent. It appears to be an image taken and edited from a video. The person in the picture is definitely someone that Kwon Taek Joo knows. The person who promised Kim Young Hee a future was not the dead military officer.

Kwon Taek Joo put the phone to his ear.

"Shit."

"This is definitely appropriate. What are you going to do now? Should we send this document to the prosecutor in charge?"

"Not yet."

"What evidence is more accurate than this?"

The train arrived at the next station. Kwon Taek Joo carefully looked around and then quickly walked out.

"This is not enough. There needs to be more."

"I'll try to find it and get back to you, until then Jong Woo, slowly dig him out."

Kwon Taek Joo assigned the job. Before Yoon Jong Woo could say anything, he said "Alright." then hung up the phone.

Just like that. Kwon Taek Joo blended into the crowd again. The phone started ringing again. The text 'does not display caller identity' appeared on the screen. If it were Yoon Jong Woo, he wouldn't have to do that. But no one else knows this phone number. Kwon Taek Joo felt confused.

He ignored the call and stuffed his phone into his pocket. Not long after, the shaking subsided. Kwon Taek Joo was about to try to ignore it and continue walking, but before he could take a step, his pocket vibrated again. This time, the caller is still 'does not show caller identity'

Who is it? Kwon Taek Joo stared at his phone that continued to vibrate and touched the call button. He didn't speak, but just held his breath and put the phone to his ear.

For some reason, it had been a while and he still hadn't heard anything from the other end. Kwon Taek Joo thought the phone might have been disconnected, but the call connection time continued.

Kwon Taek Joo brought the phone to his ear again. As he gathered all of his nerves, Kwon Taek Joo could hear the sound of light breathing. The opponent also seemed to be clearly aware of Kwon Taek Joo's moves.

"Who is this?"

He growled. Although the tone was quite overwhelming, laughter came from the other side of the phone. At the same time, Kwon Taek Joo's heart sank. The laughter that rang in his ears was quite familiar.

Is it him?

Vague associations stirred up in Kwon Taek Joo's heart. His heart was beating wildly as if ready to pierce his flesh. His pulse was beating frantically. His spine suddenly felt cold, his hand holding the phone was

sweating. Even in that situation, Kwon Taek Joo still couldn't hang up his phone. His thinking system was paralyzed and he couldn't do anything.

The call ended immediately after that. Kwon Taek Joo quickly checked his phone again, and the screen had turned to standby status.

It's really that bastard. How the hell?

A memory returned to Kwon Taek Joo's mind. While in Irkutsk, he contacted Yoon Jong Woo using the phone Zhenya gave him when he told him to feel free to learn about him. And he also owned a program that was easily infected with hacking viruses. If Zhenya succeeds in spreading this program to Yoon Jong Woo's phone, a call like just now is completely possible.

"Damned."

Kwon Taek Joo hugged his heaving chest tightly. His strong heart that was always proud was now trembling at the thought of Zhenya. Is it because this is the first time he has exceeded such power? Or is it because he is scared that he will take revenge.

No, the current insecurity does not stem from such simple emotions. It's much more complicated and deadly. During his time with Zhenya, everything always seemed to be under threat, and in the moment when he met Zhenya again, Kwon Taek Joo had the feeling that everything would collapse. It hasn't even been a month since he ran away from that deadlock.

The laughter from earlier still rang in his ears. Suddenly Kwon Taek Joo felt a passionate gaze looking at him. Kwon Taek Joo looked around again but there was only a stream of people rushing back and forth, no one was paying attention to him. Probably not Zhenya. Maybe those are just your useless worries. Kwon Taek Joo tried to comfort himself.

He pulled his collar up to cover his face and quickly left the place.

## Chapter 4.4 – Hide and Seek

Chief Lim's eyes turned to the door because there was a knock on the door that he was waiting for. Even though there was no answer, the door opened and a man walked inside.

"Missed him."

Faced with the meaningful report, he placed his hand on the armrest of the chair. It wasn't until recently that Chief Lim learned that Kwon Taek Joo had secretly returned to the country. However, he did not go to headquarters nor return to his home. It seems like Kwon Taek Joo is digging up what happened to him.

Chief Lim immediately issued an arrest warrant and began a close search. Surveillance of Kwon Taek Joo and Yoon Jong Woo's mothers and other close aides was also increased. Then he discovered that Yoon Jong Woo had been frequently contacting a certain phone number recently. Chief Lim succeeded in finding Kwon Taek Joo by tracking the location of that phone number in real time, but still could not arrest him. And since then, the phone power has been continuously turned off. Even at Taebaek, every time Chief Lim missed him right under his nose.

"So, what was he doing in the PC room?"

"There's no trace because he deleted all his computer history. Why don't we use Yoon Jong Woo as bait?"

It wasn't a bad idea, but Chief Lim shook his head. The opponent is an agent skilled in chasing or being chased. Cell phones are turned off more often than they are turned on. He erased the traces so that even experts could not recover them when using public computers. Kwon Taek Joo knew exactly how headquarters would pursue him, so he skillfully escaped. There's a high possibility that he won't appear even if Chief Lim tries to capture Kwon Taek Joo using Yoon Jong Woo.

Okay, go out. Report as soon as you locate him."

"Yes."

The man bowed politely and went out. Chief Lim looked at his watch and then stroked his face. It was late at night. He hadn't been home for many days and was practically living at headquarters. He had no change of clothes left so he probably had to go home. Chief Lim left the office carrying his coat hanging loosely on the chair.

He took the elevator down to the underground parking lot. There were only a few cars left there belonging to the night staff. Chief Lim crossed the empty space and went to the parking lot in Block C.

He took the key out of his pocket and prepared to unlock it first. Suddenly the driver's door opened wide.

"I'm home, chief."

The person who stepped out of Chief Lim's car was none other than Kwon Taek Joo. He couldn't understand how Kwon Taek Joo got into the headquarters while being chased.

"Long time no see."

After a moment of hesitation, Chief Lim calmly greeted. Kwon Taek Joo nodded dryly. He also did not show an offensive attitude or show hostility. From the beginning, Kwon Taek Joo had no intention of threatening Chief Lim. He just wanted to hear him talk.

Chief Lim pretended like nothing happened.

"How is your mother?"

"Well, the department head should know better than me about that."

Chief Lim smiled at the gnarled answer. Kwon Taek Joo lifted his body leaning against the car body and slowly approached him step by step. Soon, Chief Lim's face was dyed with Kwon Taek Joo's shadow.

He held the phone out in front of him. An image of the ring taken from the jewelry store filled the screen. Old Lim also acted like he didn't know anything this time.

"What is this?"

"The chief knows it better than me."

"I don't understand what you're talking about."

"So let's see if you know this."

Another photo appeared on the screen. That is the CCTV screenshot that Yoon Jong Woo sent. It has been meticulously edited enough to distinguish the people in the photo even at a glance. Chief Lim's expression, which was always calm, suddenly turned sharp.

"When I caught Kim Young Hee on the ferry to Shimonoseki, I realized she was wearing a ring on her left hand. Although I'm not someone who knows much about jewelry,

even I

thought it was something. It must mean something to Kim Yeong Hee, otherwise she wouldn't have worn it even in such a difficult situation, because a ring like that shouldn't be scratched. That ring had no scratches, it seemed like it had only been purchased recently, and it was not found at the scene. The handkerchief I used to cover Kim Young Hee's mouth was also gone."

"So what?"

"Well then. I found out why it disappeared, from where the ring was purchased, and who paid for it. The results were surprising. I thought that the department head was secretly having an affair when His wife was abroad and didn't know anything. But maybe it's a little more serious than that. Who would decide to kill a subordinate along with his lover just because he doesn't want a divorce? I don't know if there is a temptation that is more difficult to resist. Then, when I saw this CCTV footage, the answer appeared."

Kwon Taek Joo was silent for a moment then looked straight at Chief Lim.

"Why did you do this to me? Deputy manager 1 said that if this job goes well, he will give you a special promotion?"

Chief Lim was unmoved by the angry criticism. He just looked at Kwon Taek Joo's phone with a calm expression. The character filling the screen is Deputy Manager 1.

Recently, it was reported that the current head of the National Intelligence Agency is about to resign. Rumors spread that he would appoint one of three deputy chiefs. Every department is busy secretly accumulating achievements and washing records. In case the direct superior is promoted, the position of the subordinate departments that person is in charge of will also change. If an agency, an organization or a group of people gathers, it is impossible to escape internal politics.

Meanwhile, Chief Lim, who was subordinate to Deputy Chief 3, suddenly shook hands with Deputy Chief 1. It was clear that he had been guaranteed a huge benefit that could not be obtained through formal methods.

"Now I understand what nonsense you're trying to talk about. Is this why you came back and dug it up? Like you said, even though Deputy Chief 1 has a deep relationship with Kim Young If

Hee

is dead, nothing will change. Even in a husband and wife relationship, it's normal to be completely unaware that the other person is a spy. But that doesn't mean we should blame all the blame. for one side. Hiding someone you love is not a crime, right?"

On that part, Chief Lim is absolutely right. All Kwon Taek Joo discovered was that deputy chief 1 had a personal relationship with Kim Young Hee. To prosecute Deputy Chief 1, he must find evidence that he was closely related to Kim Young Hee's death. Or, it needs to be proven that he received orders directly from North Korea and contributed to stealing classified information. It's not an easy task.

Chief Lim smiled triumphantly.

"Wouldn't it be much easier to reveal your guilt? There's no way to prove you went to Russia on a mission. Furthermore, the fact that you met Psych Bogdanov, a member of the agency Russian intelligence, and

always with him is the truth, and to this world only what is clearly seen is considered truth, isn't that right?"

"I didn't come here to compare who is better off."

"So you came here to say your final goodbye? I also want to see you at least once before you get caught. I want to advise you to give up before the situation gets worse. To put it simply Then you're just an agent who stole national secrets on this land and died. What's so big about having to investigate so endlessly? It's not too late now. Don't drag it out. half more. Why don't you turn yourself in so your guilt and sentence can be reconsidered?"

Kwon Taek Joo's chin shook, his eyes became more fierce.

"If you had any desire for status or power, I wouldn't be like this. You said it was too stressful and uninteresting. So maybe you should leave the field? You really went to NIS to protect the country? How naive."

"Ah, I'm almost really angry."

Kwon Taek Joo is full of spirit. Chief Lim was a superior he was quite dependent on, if not respected enough. Because he has worked closely with him since Kwon Taek Joo joined NIS. Chief Lim is also the only person Kwon Taek Joo has ever opened up about his family and thoughts. But for him, all that is just a flashy appearance. He knew how to throw everything away to protect his rights.

A 'click' sound rang out when Kwon Taek Joo's Colt touched Chief Lim's forehead. His face turned cold. Lives were in danger, but Chief Lim still didn't blink.

"So you still remember this sentence? I can't accept my 100% mission completion record from collapsing."

"Does that mean you'll investigate this alone?"

"It means I won't be able to die alone."

Kwon Taek Joo pulled the trigger without hesitation. Chief Lim, who was already relaxing, tightened his whole body at that moment. But

some time passed and the surroundings remained quiet, because the gun had no bullets.

Kwon Taek Joo slowly pulled back the gun. Chief Lim, who was closing his eyes tightly, smiled tiredly. Kwon Taek Joo looked at him silently for a moment then turned and left. Such a warning was given.

"If this continues, not only will the crime of leaking classified information be added, but illegal intrusion, falsification of official documents, and even intentional murder will also be added."

What is he saying? Kwon Taek Joo frowned and looked back. At that moment, Chief Lim pulled out his Colt and pulled the trigger. The ricocheting bullet grazed his shoulder and flew away, smashing the ceiling. Immediately afterwards, the alarm system was activated throughout the building. Chief Lim grabbed the staggering shoulder and smiled with satisfaction.

The emergency exit became noisy for a moment. Night duty officers heard gunshots and continuous alarms and were running over. Anyone looking at the current scene will mistakenly think that Kwon Taek Joo is intentionally harming Chief Lim.

Kwon Taek Joo quickly picked up Chief Lim's car keys, climbed into the car and started it. There were about three or four employees running from the emergency exit. One of them assisted Chief Lim, and the rest targeted Kwon Taek Joo.

"Don't move!"

"If you move, I'll shoot!"

Kwon Taek Joo did not hesitate to step on the accelerator despite the warning. When the car body rushed out, the staff blocking the front also quickly moved to the sides. A late shot is fired at Kwon Taek Joo who is running away. However, the hastily fired bullets only grazed the air vent and the side of the car's body. The car stubbornly pushed through the lowered barrier and quickly disappeared from sight.

Kwon Taek Joo left the car in the middle of the road and leisurely walked along the deserted market road. Occasionally a patrol car can be

heard from across the street. At times like that, he just quietly hides in the darkness for a while, waits for the situation to return to normal, and then continues moving.

His legs felt like they were carrying a bag of sand. His head felt like he had just woken up and couldn't think of any thoughts. Since escaping from Zhenya's island, Kwon Taek Joo has never had a comfortable day of rest. Now he just wants to lie down for a while.

How far has he gone? Suddenly something caught his leg. It's an advertising sign for a boarding house. However, there was no place around that resembled an inn. Kwon Taek Joo tried looking at the alley that looked like a trail. There is an old building that appears to be an inn. Kwon Taek Joo didn't think anymore and walked straight there.

Don't know if they are doing business or not, but the surrounding area is very quiet. The cashier counter is also so dark that it is impossible to distinguish the faces of people inside or outside. The occasional noise from the TV shows that there are still people here. Kwon Taek Joo inserted a 50,000 won bill into the narrow slot. Immediately a key was given.

Kwon Taek Joo took the key and went to the second floor. As he walked through the hallway, voices from other rooms leaked out. He wondered if he could rest comfortably here.

Kwon Taek Joo entered the arranged room and turned on the lights. The old fluorescent lamp flashed once, but it could not light up completely and kept flashing alternately. Regardless, Kwon Taek Joo closed the door and just fell to the floor without even taking off his shoes. He let out a long breath. Kwon Taek Joo completely lost all his strength.

Suddenly, he became a criminal who leaked state secrets and an immoral person who tried to murder his superiors. To prove his innocence, Kwon Taek Joo must uncover the schemes of Chief Lim and Deputy Chief 1.

Meanwhile, today's call still made him worried. Hopefully not. Even though he firmly denied it, Kwon Taek Joo still couldn't get rid of the insecurity that always haunted him. Zhenya always 'justly defends' and

he is also someone who always gives back more than what he receives. He can't guarantee that a guy like him will completely give up on Kwon Taek Joo.

And how is your mother doing? Kwon Taek Joo hasn't been able to see her once since she was taken out of the police station. Because of what happened to Chief Lim, the surveillance will be stricter so it will be difficult to see his mother from afar.

Kwon Taek Joo lay back. The light gradually dimmed and then brightened on the ceiling. He gently stroked his face. Too tired. His mind was confused as if his brain was having a cramp.

Racing day and night in a noisy and bustling world, every moment seems filled with pressure, Kwon Taek Joo remembers the stillness he once vaguely had. When consciousness became distant, Kwon Taek Joo imagined himself immersed in a white snow field.

The door opened. His body was still in contact with the hard floor. The cool air from the hallway flowed onto Kwon Taek Joo's feet. He tossed and turned in his sleep. But he couldn't quickly get up and close the door. Have you locked the door carefully? Memories of that are also unclear.

Kwon Taek Joo suddenly felt uncomfortable. But that feeling is familiar, not strange. Are you used to this cold? The cold quickly enveloped his body. His eyes were still closed, but it seemed like Kwon Taek Joo could see the hallway through his eyelids. What stretched there was not darkness, but a field of snow.

Heavy snowflakes blew into the room. The surrounding was still so quiet that Kwon Taek Joo couldn't feel a trace. However, he felt he needed to get up immediately. A vague sense of urgency as if everything was going in an unexpected direction. But Kwon Taek Joo doesn't know how to escape this dream. He was only aware that he needed to wake up, but his eyes still couldn't open.

Kwon Taek Joo vaguely felt someone's presence. He was startled, but luckily that person was not big. A boy who looked quite young was standing behind him. That image brings a feeling of both strangeness

and familiarity. The child covered his eyes with the back of his hand. It looked like he was crying. Why are you crying? Kwon Taek Joo wondered and suddenly remembered a memory. And soon he realized, it was Kwon Taek Joo who made that child cry. Because the child held his hand so tightly, he thought that if he was held back, Kwon Taek Joo would never be able to escape.

The child suddenly looked up. A face he had never seen before. But with this feeling, Kwon Taek Joo seems to know who that person is. His normally calm heart suddenly beat wildly. At the same time, a bad premonition rose in Kwon Taek Joo's head. The dark fire called insecurity burns like a forest fire.

Run. His instincts spoke up to give orders. Suddenly the boy ran over. Kwon Taek Joo tried to step back but his body lay still and did not move. The child's body was as cold as an ice field embracing him tightly. Kwon Taek Joo was startled and reflexively pushed the child away.

But the child no longer let go as easily as before. No matter how hard he tried to shake it off, it only increased the pressure on his waist.

"Kwon Taek Joo, why."

A gentle voice rang in his ear. Kwon Taek Joo looked down bewilderedly. The child was gone, and Zhenya suddenly appeared pressing his whole body against him.

No, it's not him. Kwon Taek Joo denied his presence even though he saw that person with his own eyes. He never spoke like that. And he can't call Kwon Taek Joo in such a pitiful way.

The surrounding landscape changed into a white snow field. The gentle scent of McCallan along with the scent of birch trees carried by the wind gently touched his nose. The chaotic atmosphere also calmed down. His vision was obscured by Zhenya. Kwon Taek Joo cannot move even without being bound by anything.

So Kwon Taek Joo fully received Zhenya's eyes looking down. Inappropriate emotions filled those blue eyes. His heart was beating wildly again, uncontrollable. Everything is just an illusion, only the

heavy and uncomfortable heartbeat is real. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't even breathe.

Suddenly the man's face came closer. Somehow Kwon Taek Joo couldn't avoid it. He was no longer swept away by the atmosphere like before, but he still lay quietly under him. Two nervous lips touched each other. The cool air quickly spread from his lips and ran along all the blood vessels throughout his body. Kwon Taek Joo's limbs froze.

Why..?

The complaining voice blew like a wind. A strange feeling invaded Kwon Taek Joo's entire body, like something unidentifiable had penetrated deep into his soul.

Kwon Taek Joo immediately opened his eyes. Drops of sweat ran down the sides of his face and down his neck. His eyebrows furrowed because of the scary feeling.

Some people say that if you think too much, your dreams will become gloomy. That's right, in the past few days, Kwon Taek Joo has continuously had nightmares. His heart beat so hard it hurt. Like an automatic reflex, just seeing Zhenya makes Kwon Taek Joo excited uncontrollably. It seems like the difference between fear and desire is as thin as a piece of paper.

Kwon Taek Joo gasped. His whole body was drenched in sweat, making him uncomfortable. Even though he really needed to take a shower, he couldn't stand up and just lay quietly in one place.

The next thing Kwon Taek Joo realized was that the discomfort came from a very subtle place. He was startled and looked down, the leg below him was raising its head stiffly. Kwon Taek Joo rubbed his eyes and looked back, its appearance still hadn't changed a bit.

And what for..

Kwon Taek Joo tried to find another reason, but the only thing he saw in his dream was Zhenya. No matter how many times he thought about it, everything just stops at the moment their lips touch each other. Could it be.. Just because of that, you're like this? Kwon Taek Joo stared at his

core but it was not subdued in the slightest. It was still very arrogant as if teasing him. Kwon Taek Joo angrily rubbed his messy hair

"Fuck, am I really gay?"

While he was still struggling fiercely with himself, there was a whisper from the next room. He also knocked hard on the wall with a warning to be quiet.

Outside the window it was already bright. It seems that Kwon Taek Joo slept soundly in the situation of running away. Whether in a dream or when waking up, Kwon Taek Joo feels chased. Pitiful. He groaned and then lifted himself up. Kwon Taek Joo quickly left the room. The hallway and cashier counter remained quiet.

Kwon Taek Joo walked quickly on the road where dawn had begun.

## Chapter 4.5 – Hide and Seek

The sauna house was almost empty after work, only Kwon Taek Joo and two elderly people.

Thanks to that, he rented a private sauna. The hot air covered his tired body. Kwon Taek Joo comfortably rested his neck and enjoyed the hard-won peace. It is a luxury that he does not know when he will be able to enjoy it again. He looked up at the ceiling with countless drops of water forming. Kwon Taek Joo meaninglessly counted them and rearranged the complicated thoughts in his head.

The key character in this case is not Kim Young Hee or Department Head Lim but Deputy Department 1. The important thing is whether he only has a pure love relationship with Kim Young Hee or something more. If Chief Lim affirms that Deputy Chief 1 is also just a victim of Kim Young Hee, then his crime is limited to neglecting the case. However, if he helped Kim Young Hee despite knowing her identity, or if he acted on direct orders from North Korea, the punishment would be much harsher. The nature of the evidence that must be found to clarify the truth will also be different.

Kwon Taek Joo met Deputy Head 1 at headquarters before going to Russia. At that time he appeared extremely calm. That has never been the attitude of someone who has just lost a lover. If the relationship between them was so deep that it promised a future, could he be so calm after hearing the news about the other's true identity and death?

Kim Young Hee suddenly made a move after a period of silence at a time when the NIS and the prosecutor's office were busy. It could have been just a coincidence, or there could have been orders coming from North Korea at the time. Maybe someone proactively revealed the incident between Kim Young Hee and Lee Cheol Jin. One thing is for sure, if Deputy Director 1 is interested in the NIS head position, he will definitely want to cut off all ties with Kim Young Hee.

If Deputy Chief 1 went beyond the level of mere participation and interfered in operational activities, there is a high possibility that he also contacted Lee Cheol Jin. Lee Cheol Jin is the only survivor among the key figures of the incident. First, it's best to meet him.

Kwon Taek Joo took a quick shower and then went out to the dressing room. He took out his phone and turned it on. A pile of missed calls and texts, all from Yoon Jong Woo. He must have gone to work so he must have heard the news from headquarters. Kwon Taek Joo called the worried Yoon Jong Woo. Before the call connection sound could be heard, Yoon Jong Woo picked up the phone. He asked without stopping.

"Where are you? Are you alright? I heard you came here last night? The atmosphere right now is no joke. Senior, you almost became a terrorist."

"That's all?"

"Really? So what? Why is the senior so calm! They said that the senior tried to kill the department head, which was attempted murder. The arrest warrant has also been strengthened. There will be a request to cooperate with the national investigation agency."

Yoon Jong Woo seems to be hiding somewhere talking on the phone. He lowered his voice as much as possible and whispered very softly but his mouth was moving non-stop. "Jong Woo", Kwon Taek Joo spoke while using his teeth to tear the plastic layer of his underwear.

"Yes. What?"

He spoke softly.

"Do you think I shot Chief Lim?"

"That.. I don't know anymore. If it wasn't the senior, then who shot? It's true that you came here last night and met the department head. Really.. What are you planning to do next?"

"The others don't know, but you have to trust me. There's no other way now. Chief Lim must have realized that you were helping me."

"Yes? What do we do now?!"

"There's no one else there but you who can help me. I forced you to be my accomplice a long time ago. Although.. I wonder if I can reduce your sentence based on the condition that you leave the NIS.."

"It's gone!"

"That's why I said that if I get caught, it probably won't work, right? If you don't want to get into trouble, then tell me what you investigated."

"He's deputy chief 1. Did you know he previously worked at the Korean Embassy in the US?"

Yoon Jong Woo opened his mouth in a low voice as to say more.

"It seems he met Kim Young Hee around that time. Both were active in a relief organization called 'POC', and also regularly participated in volunteer activities abroad. It is possible that he contacted North Korea at times when he used the excuse to go to a third country. It is highly likely that he contacted Lee Cheol Jin, who took on a role related to communications and transportation in Kim Young Hee's operations. Coincidentally, the time and country Deputy Chief 1 participated in volunteer activities were almost identical to Lee Cheol Jin's movements."

"As expected, we have to meet Lee Cheol Jin first. It's going to be difficult. Jong Woo, please continue to dig deeper for information about Deputy Chief No. 1 and those close to him. If I'm not going to be arrested, the chief Lim won't do anything to you so don't worry."

Kwon Taek Joo gave instructions and ended the call. He turned off the phone immediately as usual.

A new guest entered the sauna. This time it was also a gray haired old man. Kwon Taek Joo started getting dressed as if nothing happened.

Suddenly a look was directed towards Kwon Taek Joo. That old man looked at his belt and frowned. As soon as their eyes met, he clicked his tongue and turned his head away.

Kwon Taek Joo looked at his back in the full length mirror. A clear tattoo appears just above the butt. During this time, he didn't have time to look in the mirror, so he completely forgot about it.

The existence of the tattoo caused embarrassing memories to come back. The sharp feeling of the needle piercing his skin mercilessly, the painful feeling of the ink applied to the wound, even the fingertips gently pressing down on the skin.

Kwon Taek Joo shook his head. He quickly took out his clothes and put them on. He already knew the first thing to do today.

"It's going to hurt a lot."

Kwon Taek Joo nodded at the doctor's warning. A drape is immediately placed over the surgical site.

"Hm, looks like it hasn't been long since the engraving."

The doctor muttered to himself as he touched the tattoo. A moment later, the laser turned on with a clicking sound.

"Then I'll start."

Kwon Taek Joo closed his eyes tightly. Laser treatment begins with a characteristic mechanical sound. It felt like there was a flash of light on his tense skin. Kwon Taek Joo suddenly shivered. The throbbing, burning pain continued to spread, and the smell of burning raw meat also rose.

Laser beams are continuously fired into damaged areas causing sharp pain. Kwon Taek Joo had made up his mind, but he still automatically groaned at the repeated stimulation on the rough flesh.

"Shit."

Because the dye has penetrated the dermis, the wound that needs to be treated is also deeper. The doctor was examining the burn site with a laser and clicked his tongue.

Treatment was paused for a while and then started again. Cold sweat continuously poured out from the sharp pain, Kwon Taek Joo gritted his teeth. When the laser light shined on the tattoo, the feeling of contempt that day also suddenly arose.

Some people say this is a symbol of lust.

As if trampling him like that wasn't enough, he also marked him like cattle or a slave. The burning sensation from the burning red needle was still vivid. The feeling of ink seeping bitterly into the wound still hurts.

This is just a contract connecting a lord and a servant.

Kwon Taek Joo clearly remembers Zhenya's sarcastic smile.

He frowned. He was determined to cut everything off, but the events in Russia still appeared indiscriminately in his mind and occupied his complicated mind. The moment Kwon Taek Joo escaped from that prison-like island, that bastard's meaninglessly painful face was still like a dark afterimage in his heart. It gave him goosebumps. His chin was also tense.

The reason Kwon Taek Joo was drawn to him in an instant was because that space was isolated with only the two of them. Because Zhenya is the only person he can talk to, in dire situations, he will turn to him as a place of refuge. There is no room for emotion in temporary compromises for survival. Therefore, nothing has changed in his nature and feelings towards him. Just like that, rationalization was like a mantra that Kwon Taek Joo repeated many times.

Kwon Taek Joo recalled unpleasant memories and then realized his heart started pounding again. It was like having a terrible nightmare. A nightmare that he never wanted to return to.

The skin is being burned and fluid is flowing from the wound, along with that terrible pain, the memories of the past will fade with it.

There's no reason to go back there.

Incheon International Airport arrival hall. Large electronic billboards continuously announce flight arrivals. People who came to welcome family, relatives, customers, business partners gathered in front of the gate. Passengers passing through customs poured out endlessly. Because everyone comes from different places, their appearances and costumes are very diverse.

Among them, there was one man in particular who attracted attention. He is so tall that he can be seen from afar. That's why the accompanying passengers and the surrounding receptionists all glanced at him. Some people even stopped and looked back. It's unknown whether this special attention comes from his unusually colorful appearance or not.

The man slowly looked around the airport without paying attention to the looks of the people around him. Around every corner are the faces and voices of Koreans. A quiet smile appeared on his lips, his blue eyes sparkled a strange light.

"Fortunately, it was only a muscle rupture. If you slide down a little further, the prognosis will not be good. But you should not overexert yourself. You must rest absolutely until you completely recover, and Monitor rehabilitation well."

Chief Lim just nodded vaguely at the request of the doctor in charge. After completing the examination, the medical team went out, and Deputy Chief 1 walked in. Chief Lim tried to stand up as usual, but Deputy Chief 1 told him to lie down and held him back. Chief Lim finally sat up, Deputy Chief 1 clicked his tongue.

"That person is also real."

In addition to the two people, plainclothes police were always on duty in the hospital room. It's part of personal protection.

"Sorry, I have some personal business to attend to. Please step out for a moment."

At Deputy Room 1's request, the policemen looked at each other. "Just a little," Chief Lim added. There was no reason for them to follow orders from someone other than their superiors, and they had no obligation to follow the plans of the other two. However, they still left quietly.

As soon as the door closed, the friendly smile of Deputy Manager 1 immediately disappeared.

"You still don't know your friend's location?"

"This has already attracted the intervention of the police, so it won't be long before there will be contact. After all, he is a notable talent at NIS,

so he won't be caught easily. That's why I advised you to choose another friend from the beginning, is that what I said?"

"You're so calm at the moment."

Deputy Head 1 expressed discomfort. Chief Lim smirked and changed the subject.

"Isn't silencing Lee Cheol Jin more urgent?"

"If that's the case, then there's no need to worry. Since he failed to carry out his orders, he will know clearly that all that remains for him is death. Even if he is killed, everyone will think it's North Korea's actions."

Deputy Chief 1 boasted while whispering another word.

"Maybe we won't make it through today."

The sound of an iron door opening could be heard from afar. The warden passed through many doors one after another and stopped in front of a room.

"No. 342. Talk to the lawyer."

He unlocked it and the door opened. However, Lee Cheol Jin sitting there had no intention of getting up immediately. The warden pulled him out as if he was used to it. He handcuffed Lee Cheol Jin's bony wrists and gently pushed him in the back.

It took a long time just to get to the interview room. Lee Cheol Jin's lawyer, who had been sitting there before, stood up. "Please sit down." The two sat down at the warden's request.

"Long time no see."

The lawyer nodded in greeting afterwards. He observed Lee Cheol Jin's absent-mindedness. It seems that the arduous life in prison was not the only reason why Lee Cheol Jin's face was so ruined. There were clear marks of self-injury on his neck and arms. It was said that last night he tied an electric cable to his neck and strangled himself.

"Lee Cheo Jin-sshi, why do you keep trying to harm yourself?"

"Do you know the feeling of someone who just waits for death?"

The outcome of the trial in Korea did not seem to matter, it did not concern him, and he seemed to believe that he would die somehow. Instead of waiting to be eliminated, he chose to volunteer.

Even in that heavy situation, the lawyer still smiled, then he slowly leaned back. The lawyer took off his glasses with one hand and placed them on the table. There was something strange about the eyes that appeared, the feeling of those eyes being so sharp that Lee Cheol Jin didn't know if it was originally like that.

"I heard that Kim Young Hee already has a lover?"

The words were suddenly different. Even the lawyer's tone completely changed, and he seemed to be a completely different person. However, that voice was strangely familiar. Where did Lee Cheol Jin hear it?

"I saw it clearly on the boat, but it disappeared. It was the ring that Kim Young Hee wore."

The lawyer raised his left hand and lightly moved his ring finger. Lee Cheol Jin's eyes opened wide. It seemed he finally knew the cause of the unpleasant feeling of déjà vu. The man in front of Lee Cheol Jin was not a lawyer, but that person, a Korean agent who fought with him at a vending machine on the ferry. The person who caused Lee Cheol Jin to be imprisoned here.

Lee Cheol Jin jumped up from his seat. Then, the lawyer, no, Kwon Taek Joo disguised as a lawyer, quietly looked up at Lee Cheol Jin. Kwon Taek Joo looked straight into the eyes of Lee Cheol Jin, who was trembling with panic, and nodded for him to sit down again.

"I even covered her mouth so she wouldn't die easily. Even that disappeared."

Lee Cheol Jin's face added to the chaos. He clearly understood the meaning of the clues that Kwon Taek Joo had just thrown at him. The two people's eyes were tense. Lee Cheol Jin's eyes were full of doubt.

"Sit down, I didn't come here to compromise with you."

"So what did you come here for?"

"I wonder if you know you were stabbed in the back?"

Lee Cheol Jin's eyebrows furrowed, his suspicion deepening. Both he and Kim Young Hee seem to believe that they failed their mission simply because of their own mistakes. Kim Young Hee's death is just self-responsibility. Looking back at the situation at that time, there was nothing suspicious. However, Kwon Taek Joo appeared again and is giving a completely different story.

Kim Young Hee's death in a state of being unable to commit suicide, and the ring's disappearance. Just with those two questionable points, there is already a character associated with it. However, Lee Cheol Jin did not act hastily, he kept his mouth shut and endured even though his eyes wanted to inquire about many things.

"Anyway, that author might be the next head of NIS."

"You said director of National Intelligence?"

"Even if he is a great man who sells his country, he still has to covet that position. Perhaps he can enter the political world starting from being the head of the National Intelligence Agency, but there are two other opponents. half a competitor and it was not a position that could be won with just small achievements. Meanwhile, they were also constantly looking for dishonesty in each other. Perhaps he was very worried. If Kim Young Hee's identity is a secret, or their relationship is discovered, then even maintaining the status quo will be difficult."

Lee Cheol Jin's face darkened even more, his eyes wavering, showing confusion. Kwon Taek Joo sat up straight, looked intently at Lee Cheol Jin and continued.

"If you have something to say, you better do it now. I won't come back here anymore, no one will listen to you except me. Not even your lawyer."

"Why are you trying to reveal the truth? Isn't this a very troublesome matter?"

"Of course it's troublesome. But I've already been hit, so what can I do? I have to return what I received."

Kwon Taek Joo smiled, revealing straight teeth. Lee Cheol Jin's expression wavered slightly. They say you can't spit on a smiling face, but Kwon Taek Joo is an exception. Every time he smiled, Lee Cheol Jin didn't feel comfortable at all. It has been like that from the beginning.

The trial, which has been going on for several months, is about to end. Lee Cheol Jin could guess his sentence just by the atmosphere in court. At least 10 years, if he's lucky not to be eliminated before then.

"There's no need to think complicatedly. He abandoned you first. Is there a need to be loyal to someone like that?"

Kwon Taek Joo persuaded Lee Cheol Jin again, but he just kept his mouth shut and bowed his head, not even moving.

It certainly didn't work, but it's very difficult to believe the words of the person who personally arrested Lee Cheol Jin and put him in prison. Furthermore, to prove the crime of Deputy Division 1, Lee Cheol Jin must completely reveal himself, the organization, and the purpose of infiltration. This is an act of neglect of duty and betrayal of the country.

Even after waiting for a long time, Lee Cheol Jin still had no reaction. There is no sign of compromise. This was not a place to stay for long, Kwon Taek Joo did not hesitate to stand up from his seat.

Until then, Lee Cheol Jin still did not move. However, there are signs of something a bit strange. Looking closely, his body was convulsing. Kwon Taek Joo immediately grabbed his neck.

Ugh.

White foam poured out of Lee Cheol Jin's mouth and he collapsed on the table. The eyelids are completely inverted and only the whites are visible.

"Hey! Is there anyone outside?"

Kwon Taek Joo shouted at the closed door. At that time, Lee Cheol Jin, who was having a seizure, grabbed Kwon Taek Joo tightly. Then, he

struggled and peeled off the bandage from his lower abdomen, where there was a fresh wound from the stab wound that had just been stitched.

"Ugh!"

Lee Cheol Jin ran his fingers through the wound. The area was stitched open and blood flowed from the wound that had not yet fully healed. A groan came from clenched teeth due to the unbearable pain. Just by looking at it, it seemed like the pain was completely transferred away.

Right after that, a small chip was picked up from Lee Cheol Jin's bloody hand. He gave it to Kwon Taek Joo without hesitation. When Kwon Taek Joo frowned and just stared at him, Lee Cheol Jin even directly placed the chip in Kwon Taek Joo's hand.

"What's this?"

Immediately the security guards came running. They took Kwon Taek Joo out of the interview room and gave first aid to Lee Cheol Jin. The area around the quiet interview room suddenly became noisy.

A prison guard approached Kwon Taek Joo.

"Did he try to harm himself again?"

"No. He had a sudden seizure during the interview. I wonder if he has any problems with his diet or any illness?"

"That's not true.. Things like that.."

The warden stammered and looked away. He did not know whether his words would be caught red-handed by the prisoner's lawyer.

Kwon Taek Joo finally left the detention center as if he was being chased. The prison said they will contact you again when the cause of the seizure is determined. The last time Kwon Taek Joo checked, Lee Cheol Jin was completely unconscious. His face was pale, not knowing whether he was alive or dead. Perhaps Deputy Chief 1 is also trying to eliminate Lee Cheol Jin. If Kwon Taek Joo is discovered to be a fake lawyer, his accusations will continue to be added.

Kwon Taek Joo peeled off his artificial skin and threw it away as soon as he left the prison. He had to move faster.

What Lee Cheol Jin gave me was a memory card. What's in this? Just looking at the tearing of flesh and hiding it deep inside, this is definitely not an ordinary document.

Kwon Taek Joo was accidentally walking towards the avenue when he stopped, because three or four patrol cars passed by one after another with sirens blaring. He turned into the next alley and moved restlessly to the narrow road that cars couldn't pass through.

Then Kwon Taek Joo found a photography studio. As soon as he stepped inside, the photographer who was eating quickly stood up and said "Welcome". Kwon Taek Joo immediately gave him the memory card.

"Here, thanks."

The photographer took the memory card and inserted it into the reader. Kwon Taek Joo tried to wipe off the blood but it was still unreadable, so he took it out several times and tried again. There are only photos and videos

in the card.

"There's pretty much.. all of these?"

The photographer turned to Kwon Taek Joo to ask for confirmation. Just as he said, there were hundreds of photos saved. Inside, Kwon Taek Joo could see Lee Cheol Jin, Kim Yeong Hee, and Deputy Chief 1. There was also a scene where only Lee Cheol Jin and Deputy Chief 1 were taken. Given the different appearance and background of the subjects, it seems that the place and time the photos were taken are different. If Lee Cheol Jin did not serve at 'POC', it is clear that he took these scenes to prepare for the possible betrayal between his accomplices.

"How long will it take to print these photos?"

"There are so many that it will take several hours."

The photographer replied and then moved all the images to the print folder. Then, the siren sounded outside again, this time not far away but

right in the next alley. Was Kwon Taek Joo's travel route recorded by CCTV?

"What's going on outside? It's been so noisy since just now."

The photographer glanced out of the store and returned the copied memory card. Kwon Taek Joo silently wrote something on paper and then gave it to him.

"Can you send it to me as soon as you have the picture?"

"Is it the prosecutor's office?"

On the paper were the words 'Prosecutor Seok Jae Hee's Office, Prosecutor's Office 1, Seoul Central District Prosecutor's Office'. Kwon Taek Joo also did not explain the situation to the confused photographer but only took out 50,000 won bills.

"Then thank you."

The photographer nodded bewilderedly. Kwon Taek Joo bowed slightly, took the memory card and left the photo room.

The photographer was left alone, looking at the money lying on the counter in disbelief. Big profits always come with a corresponding price. Perhaps he is involved in unpleasant matters. He was worried, but the place where the customer had just asked to send the photo was not anywhere else but the prosecutor's office. At least it doesn't seem like this has anything to do with crime.

The photographer immediately put the money in his pocket and started printing.

## Chapter 4.6 – Hide and Seek

At the hospital there were many police officers in plain clothes. Three or four people stood in front of the main gate. two people stood guard around the taxi stand and bus stop, and perhaps more people were placed inside.

It's true that he shouldn't go in there, but Kwon Taek Joo bravely walked into the hospital. He has to check if his mother is safe. His cloak flutters with each step, inside the white cloak is a gray shirt and tie, his hair is fixed by a moderate parting and black horn-rimmed glasses hide his face and sharp eyes.

Plainclothes detectives glanced at him as he passed by, but no one came to check his ID card, because anyone who looked at him could see that Kwon Taek Joo looked exactly like an internal medicine doctor at the hospital.

The police not only camped at the reception desk and windows but also at the cafe and restroom on the first floor. Kwon Taek Joo naturally walked forward and comfortably responded to the

greeting medical staff 'Older brother'

Thanks to checking the location in advance. Kwon Taek Joo arrived at the hospital's internal medicine department without getting lost. The police are also wandering around. He took a deep breath and calmly continued walking forward.

"Hello", the nurses who were taking care of the patient greeted him. Even for just a moment, the eyes of the detectives who had focused on Kwon Taek Joo also stopped, but they did not suspect anything.

Kwon Taek Joo tried searching for his mother's name on the computer. He checked the patients admitted to the hospital, and the search results appeared instantly. His mother was placed in a single room because she was the subject of special surveillance.

He said, "Everyone has had a hard time." and left his seat just as a nurse stepped out from behind the counter. As soon as he bowed, she tilted her head.

"Oh, doctor. Isn't today your day off?"

"Ah.."

Hearing her voice, the inspectors turned their attention to the counter again.

"I changed it to tomorrow."

Kwon Taek Joo smiled and left the counter. He also nodded to the police officers who were watching, then leisurely walked to the side and entered the elevator, then he went to the 8th floor where his mother's hospital room was located.

The problem is from now on, because the place where his mother was staying was a one-person room, it was difficult to access. The police's ability to concentrate human resources is higher, so he must also approach more cautiously.

The elevator stopped at the 8th floor. The door opened but Kwon Taek Joo did not step out immediately. He checked the situation in the hallway first, but for some reason there wasn't a single sound. Kwon Taek Joo waited a little longer and then went out.

Immediately, he was bewildered because the hallway was unexpectedly empty, not seeing a single person, let alone the police. Kwon Taek Joo was suspicious as he walked through the hallway.

The feeling of insecurity reached its maximum when he was about to reach the emergency exit. The door that should have been closed was slightly open, and someone was sticking their hand out of the gap. Kwon Taek Joo was about to close the door when, right then, he saw six or seven men had fainted on the emergency stairs, they appeared to be police and security Guards.

Kwon Taek Joo looked around again but could not sense any other signs. He carefully approached and examined the condition of those unconscious people. They were still breathing but all their limbs were

hanging down. With hardly any visible injuries, it seemed like they had been restrained for a short period of time targeting only weak points. Someone broke into this place and didn't make any particular noise, the person's workmanship was unusual.

So what about your mother? Kwon Taek Joo's heart was pounding, a cold air spread on the back of his neck. Immediately, Kwon Taek Joo stood up and opened the hospital room door.

"...!?"

He was about to rush into the hospital room but then stopped, because someone was sitting in front of his mother's bed. Is it an intruder?

Kwon Taek Joo's heart was pounding, and the beat was getting faster. It wasn't simply the suspense of an intruder, but more like a game that originated from an unfortunate premonition.

Kwon Taek Joo is used to that appearance of sitting with his back turned. He also did not look back at Kwon Taek Joo but just sat there and expressionlessly looked down at his unconscious mother. Apparently he also heard the door open.

Is it okay to run away now? Kwon Taek Joo definitely had to do that to maintain his life, but leaving his mother in that guy's hands?

But maybe he won't be discovered. Kwon Taek Joo himself is a doctor at this hospital right now, even though he has a hard time seeing through it right away.

He made up his mind and went inside. Kwon Taek Joo approached the bed and checked the amount of injections hanging in front. Only then will the view from the side become clearer. Kwon Taek Joo turned his head and looked straight into those eyes. The person calmly sitting next to his mother was Zhenya.

His heart was pounding so hard it felt like it was about to jump out of his chest, so much so that Kwon Taek Joo was worried that the sound would reach him. The confident courage in him quickly put his tail down and ran away, his mind confused as to how he got here and what he intended to do with his mother.

"Excuse me, are you the guardian?"

Kwon Taek Joo had difficulty suppressing his confusion and opened his mouth, but because it was Korean, Zhenya couldn't understand it, and his voice was different from his own. As expected, Zhenya just stared at Kwon Taek Joo.

"I will check the patient's condition a bit," he said, then looked down at his mother's pale face. The lips were dry, the eyelashes and the corners of the eyes were sticky with white, probably marks of tears. He looked at his mother's thin cheeks and neck, it seemed like she couldn't eat properly. A heavy lead pressed on Kwon Taek Joo's chest.

He pretended to check the needle while stroking the back of his mother's skinny hand. He only looked at biological signals such as heart, blood pressure, and brain waves; they are not at a dangerous level. It seems that letting his mother stay here until Kwon Taek Joo clears his crimes seems to be better.

But the problem is Zhenya. He can't let him stay with his mother.

"Come out with me for a moment. I have something to say."

Kwon Taek Joo tilted his head toward the door at the man who didn't understand what he was saying. First, he planned to drag him out of the hospital room and wait for the right moment to run away. The police were everywhere, so he couldn't just jump up and down arbitrarily. It wasn't a hopeful plan, but Kwon Taek Joo had no choice but to bet everything on it.

He turned his head to go first. Zhenya also slowly lifted himself up. The distance to the door is extremely far. His body odor seemed to fill the hospital room, making Kwon Taek Joo unable to breathe comfortably. His heart was pounding uncomfortably hard and constantly putting pressure on his lungs, and his hands were numb from the stress.

Kwon Taek Joo pulled the door aside. The door opened for a moment and then was immediately closed, because a hand reached out from behind and grabbed the door. Zhenya's shadow was swallowing Kwon Taek Joo and his unique body scent was suffocating him.

His mind was blank, and his body was completely stiff and unable to move. Zhenya couldn't recognize it, now it seemed like he could break his neck at any moment.

Suddenly his hand reached into his pocket. Kwon Taek Joo also unconsciously shrugged. Zhenya gently took out his phone and held it towards the door, right in front of Kwon Taek Joo. He was calling someone, a ringing

sounded in Kwon Taek Joo's ear.

"drrrr.. drr.."

Zhenya's hair fluttered and he burst out laughing. The alarm siren in Kwon Taek Joo's head continuously sounded.

Right after that, Zhenya's face approached Kwon Taek Joo's ear.

"Is it fun to play hide and seek?"

The whispering voice contained satisfaction. The floor beneath his feet felt like it was collapsing.

## Chapter 4.7 – Checkmate

Suddenly Kwon Taek Joo was grabbed by his shoulders, he turned around to face him. Blue eyes that were cold like ice.

"Ah!"

Zhenya forcefully peeled off the mask on Kwon Taek Joo's face. Even the last fortress that hid him could not hold back, Kwon Taek Joo felt like he had suddenly become naked. The man's blue eyes sparkled wildly.

In a moment, he was grabbed by the neck and was dragged. He stood on tiptoe due to the height difference, and because he was suffocated, he unconsciously grabbed Zhenya's hand. His arms were cold, completely unlike human hands. Zhenya glanced down at the hand holding his hand tightly and then stared at Kwon Taek Joo. His eyes were so sharp.

Kwon Taek Joo's eyes, filled with Zhenya's cold, dangerous image, slowly shifted aside. He saw his mother over Zhenya's shoulder. If the situation continues to escalate, it will be difficult to control it, and that's something he doesn't want to happen.

Kwon Taek Joo shook off Zhenya's hand and used all his strength to push him away by his shoulder. While distracted, Zhenya was pushed back a little. Then he breathed softly and tilted his head to look straight at Kwon Taek Joo, a thick vein appeared on his smooth forehead.

The moment he felt the danger. Kwon Taek Joo was violently pushed. His back hit the door hard, making a loud noise. His whole body ached from the terrible thrust. He saw Zhenya's hand raised in his wavering vision. Kwon Taek Joo reflexively closed his eyes tightly. He had no chance to cope differently. and as if anticipating the terrible pain that was about to occur, the cells throughout his body began to shrink.

However, after a while, Kwon Taek Joo still didn't feel anything.

He slowly raised his eyelids, the situation remained the same. as it was just before he closed his eyes. Zhenya's hand was still as if he would hit

Kwon Taek Joo immediately, and the fierce aura also did not change. The only thing that changed was that distorted face.

Zhenya's hand trembled in hesitation, as if he couldn't understand this situation. Kwon Taek Joo was also quite confused because his actions were different from what he imagined.

Kwon Taek Joo looked at Zhenya bewilderedly. Many emotions rushed into his eyes, anger, hostility, confusion and resentment. Kwon Taek Joo's eyes opened wider.

Then Zhenya stopped and his hand quickly rushed in.

Kwon Taek Joo turned his head away and thought this time it would be right. But there was no pain like he expected, just once again he was pushed back. Then he grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's neck. Once again, he pushed Zhenya's hand down, but it didn't budge. Kwon Taek Joo frowned and stared at him. In that short distance, Zhenya's eyes also froze.

"Don't make me kill you with my hands."

Zhenya wrinkled the bridge of his nose and growled, but it didn't sound like a threat. Not only that, the hand that was squeezing Kwon Taek Joo's neck also seemed to loosen, and suddenly his face came closer to him. The eyes of all those mixed emotions radiated a strange heat. Kwon Taek Joo quickly raised his hand and pushed his chin away.

"You bastard, what are you planning to do?"

Zhenya looked down at his pushing hand. The stubborn struggle between the two was like a fierce fight without any sound. Have Kwon Taek Joo really forgotten where he was and who was lying on the hospital bed?

"Let me go, don't act like that."

After pushing hard, Zhenya smirked, then he gently turned his head to look towards Kwon Taek Joo's mother's bed.

"What if I keep doing that?"

"You crazy bastard!"

Kwon Taek Joo shouted in surprise and then quickly lowered his voice. He quickly looked at his mother first, but she didn't move. The moment he was relieved that the situation was defused, Zhenya suddenly pulled him into the bathroom in the hospital room. A premonition of misfortune spread throughout Kwon Taek Joo's body. If only two people were locked in there, he would have to face something embarrassing. But even though Kwon Taek Joo tried to resist, Zhenya forcefully pushed him inside.

As soon as he was thrown hard against the wall, Kwon Taek Joo's back seemed like it broke. His lungs writhed endlessly as the cold brick wall and his chest were completely pressed together. He struggled to escape Zhenya's hand, but the more he struggled, the more intense the strength and pressure from his side became.

Zhenya tugged on Kwon Taek Joo's pants. The lower body is pushed back due to too strong a pull. The zipper could not withstand the impact of the pulling force and was removed as if it was about to explode. The bare skin on the back is exposed intact. His eyes seemed to stop at one point on his back. Zhenya was staring at his waist, where the scar from the removed tattoo was left.

"Fuck"

Zhenya muttered, while Kwon Taek Joo's spine chilled.

The next moment, he grabbed his pants with a stronger grip than before. Kwon Taek Joo tried to stop it by all means, but to no avail. His pants and underwear were pulled down at the same time and his buttocks were clearly exposed. Then he heard the sound of his pants being pulled down from behind him. The insecurity that was growing inside became concrete.

Kwon Taek Joo struggled and shook his arms desperately. He used his foot to push against the wall and tried to push him away, but could not overcome the monster. He was pushed against the wall again and pinned from behind. Kwon Taek Joo was suffocated between the wall and Zhenya as if he were trapped in the hands of a crocodile.

Kwon Taek Joo was tired but he still lifted his elbow and pushed him. He continued to push his thigh that was approaching him. Afraid that even a small sound would leak out, Kwon Taek Joo tried to keep quiet. There was no sound, only fierce movements back and forth, his whole body quickly drenched in sweat.

"...."

Suddenly outside the door became noisy. Police deployed everywhere in the hospital seemed to have received suspicious signs. They must have discovered their unconscious colleagues at the emergency exit so they were ready to invade the hospital room immediately.

If arrested now, Kwon Taek Joo will be forced to accept all charges. Prosecutor Seok has not yet received the photos, and the original that can be used as evidence is still on Kwon Taek Joo. Moreover, he is still involved with the bastard he is suspected of colluding with.

There were signs that the hospital room door was carefully opened from the outside, but Zhenya still did not give up. His eyes looked out the door for a moment and then turned back to Kwon Taek Joo. Fifty thousand thoughts mixed in his head. Now or never. No matter how optimistic he was about the future situation, the outcome would only be the worst.

"Choose."

A low murmur suddenly reached Kwon Taek Joo's ears. Was he hallucinating in an extremely urgent situation? However, his heart was beating strongly with a completely different feeling than before. In this moment of despair, it seemed as if a rope had been thrown down.

He reached back and placed his hand on the back of Zhenya's hand that was gripping his ass. Zhenya just stared at Kwon Taek Joo's hand, overlapping his hand. There is only one way out of the current crisis. He couldn't know if it would work or not, but he could only try it first.

Kwon Taek Joo let go of his tightly closed lips and begged.

"Please.."

The voice was mixed with a sigh, but Zhenya did not react at all, only the hand that was leaning against the wall was clenched into a fist.

"Please."

Immediately after that, Kwon Taek Joo's body was turned around. Zhenya's melancholy gaze was fixed on him. Even in such an urgent situation, the wrinkles on his forehead and his concerned eyes still fell on him.

"Don't complain later."

In the man's hand holding his arm tightly, Kwon Taek Joo felt a restlessness that did not match his appearance. Zhenya looked into his eyes suspiciously and pressed her hand firmly down on Kwon Taek Joo's hand, waiting for an answer.

"Answer me, you clung to me first."

There's no other way. Kwon Taek Joo nodded patiently as if agreeing with himself. Then, the hand that was ready to break his arm finally let go.

The bathroom door handle is pushed down. It seemed that the police were also monitoring the situation from outside. Zhenya grabbed the door handle and without hesitation pulled the door inside.

"Ah!"

The door opened without warning, they lost their balance and fell loudly. One policeman was hit in the back of the neck, the other was kicked in the face and lost consciousness. The last policeman who was pointing his gun hastily had his wrist completely bent backwards

Zhenya simply controlled all three people and then turned to look at Kwon Taek Joo, before he could even put on his pants. He nodded and left the bathroom first. He followed behind while

re-zipping

his pants. Kwon Taek Joo looked back once more. He didn't know if it's because of the noise going on or not, but his mother's face is

wrinkled

little by little. It looks like his mother is about to wake up, he has to leave here. Kwon Taek Joo took the gun out of his jacket and hurriedly left the hospital room.

"Over there!"

"East of the ward!"

Being a Noisy hallway, a group of police were running from the opposite side. Zhenya did not slow down. He moved away, took the gun out of his chest and did not hesitate to open fire. Kwon Taek Joo didn't even have time to stop it. The police panicked and hid behind the wall during the sudden shooting.

Meanwhile, the two of them coordinated well and ran down the hallway next to each other even though there was no plan discussion.

When someone appeared in front of him, Kwon Taek Joo tried to dissuade Zhenya from shooting and running away, wanting to avoid collision as much as possible. Zhenya replied quite obediently while clicking his tongue in annoyance. The man is so weird. Even when pretending to be his colleague, even though Kwon Taek Joo was in a dangerous situation, he still just stood by and watched. But now that man is helping him without offering any price. Maybe because he was so surprised, that his heart kept pounding.

How long has it been running? The stairs below became noisy. Police who received requests for assistance seemed to be rushing in. Kwon Taek Joo cannot continue to stay at the hospital like this because not only will he soon become a rat in a rat, but he will also harm innocent people.

"Where did you park your car?"

Zhenya tilted his chin toward the street corner that was about to appear before him. He ran after him around the corner, and the police appeared. They threw a smoke bomb and warned that they would shoot if the two continued to move. The entire area became chaotic as

smoke rose. Taking advantage of that chaos, the two ran to the emergency exit.

The emergency radio, voices and footsteps mixed together so the stairs vibrated loudly. The siege was constantly tightening from top to bottom and from bottom to top, it seemed there was no other way but to go through it. Kwon Taek Joo took a deep breath and jumped down the stairs below. Immediately, he met the police climbing up. The moment they were about to take out their guns, Kwon Taek Joo rushed straight at them. A group of people were swept away by Kwon Taek Joo and rolled down the stairs. Zhenya followed behind and helped Kwon Taek Joo stand up. He then held his head, waist and legs tightly and then braced himself to kick at those who tried to fight back

The two finally went down the stairs. Kwon Taek Joo stood in front of the emergency exit for a moment to observe the pursuit and then went into the hallway. Immediately there was the sound of quick footsteps following, and the two people's steps also became more hasty.

When the two of them ran to the end of the hallway, a window appeared right in front of them. Tempered glass windows are no different than a retaining wall. Kwon Taek Joo intended to turn back, but the special task force had already been brought in and was blocking the front.

"Stop right there!"

"If you don't surrender, we will shoot!"

The loaded rifles were simultaneously pointed at the two people. If they moved even a little bit, they would probably become two honeycombs.

What should he do? Kwon Taek Joo slowly raised his hands and thought. At that moment, Zhenya silently approached him. Even with that small movement, the gun muzzles moved towards him simultaneously.

"Hold on tight."

Zhenya whispered so loudly that only Kwon Taek Joo could hear. He looked at Zhenya in bewilderment, and his arm suddenly wrapped around his waist. At the same time, he threw something into the front

window. Kwon Taek Joo's eyes along with the eyes of the opposing commander team chased that small object. Nearly all of them had the same bewildered expression.

A crack appeared around the small object and suddenly the entire tempered glass cracked into a radioactive form. Zhenya immediately dragged him to the broken glass window. As soon as it was touched, the glass pieces broke into pieces. Kwon Taek Joo threw him into the air as he leaned over and hugged Zhenya. A long fire hose stretched out into his chaotic vision.

The task force ran to the window immediately afterward. Meanwhile, two people were hanging on the fire hydrant and swaying at the height of the 2nd floor. Without saying anything, they both jumped down to the grass. The special task force, immediately after confirming that the two people were not normal,

and opened fire without hesitation.

Kwon Taek Joo ran through the bushes to avoid the bullets, the back door appearing before his eyes. Zhenya arrived first and immediately threw something at him. Kwon Taek Joo caught it and realized it was a motorcycle helmet, he was surprised.

"Didn't you drive here?"

"I never said I drove here."

Zhenya suddenly started the engine. Kwon Taek Joo quickly put on his helmet and sat in the back.

"Damn it, I'm going straight to hell today."

He was still muttering indignantly when the motorbike sped away without warning. His unbalanced body stuck to Zhenya's back. The police following behind quickly opened fire. Dozens of bullets flew but the motorbike still gilded comfortably and avoided everything, It ran straight towards the back door.

But nothing is easy. The patrol cars waiting outside the back door blocked the front. The motorbike going downhill gradually accelerated. No matter how big the body is, there is no chance of winning when

colliding with a car, but now if they hold the brakes, the two people will not be able to overcome the speed they are going.

Zhenya pulled the handlebars hard, the front wheel lifted up and the entire motorbike immediately flew up. The moment of floating in the air took place like a slow motion movie. Kwon Taek Joo even saw the officer in the patrol car widen his eyes in surprise.

Immediately afterwards, the motorcycle crashed onto the roof of the patrol car with a loud noise. The warning light must have been broken. Just like that, the motorcycle weighed down on the ceiling and lowered to the road surface. The car fortunately did not turn off the engine, the tires remained intact, maintained speed and entered the avenue. Kwon Taek Joo's hair and clothes fluttered due to the wind. The car glided on the highway between fast-moving vehicles on the road.

If this keeps up, he will fall to the ground. He hugged Zhenya's waist tightly. At that moment, the guy's eyes that were pointed towards the front fell on Kwon Taek Joo's arm.

The peace did not last long when the siren sounded again in the distance. Kwon Taek Joo turned to face the siren, and three or four police cars came from the opposite lane. The vehicle of the commando team following from the hospital is also tightening.

Kwon Taek Joo kept looking forward and back in worry, the motorbike following closely to a truck. Even though it was as dangerous as being hit by a car immediately, Zhenya still maintained the same speed, so the police could not rush to get close.

The motorbike ran all the way down the highway and a large intersection appeared ahead. The go straight signal is about to turn to stop. The police cars running on the opposite side were rearranging their ranks as if preparing to attack. If they stop now, their retreat will be blocked by a commando vehicle chasing from behind. The sidewalk starting from the end of the pedestrian street is not wide enough for a motorbike to pass because there are too many trees. And if you just ignore the signal and turn left, there is a very high risk of colliding with another vehicle going straight ahead.

However, Zhenya's speed did not decrease, on the contrary, the motorbike accelerated to maximum speed. He ran out between the cars waiting for the signal to go straight. The signal light ahead turned green and the cars waiting at the stop line simultaneously accelerated. At the same time, Zhenya's motorcycle passed in front of the cars going straight, Zhenya tilted the motorcycle to avoid falling from the excessive rotational force and immediately, the road surface and the two people's bodies seemed to touch. Kwon Taek Joo closed his eyes tightly and hugged Zhenya tighter.

The cars intending to go straight suddenly braked and honked loudly. In a moment, the intersection became so chaotic that even the police could not move. Leaving that commotion behind, Zhenya did not hesitate to launch into the empty left lane.

Even after the moment of crisis had passed, Kwon Taek Joo's arms still hugged Zhenya tightly. His limbs seemed paralyzed. Because of the life threatening situation, the hair on his whole body stood up and he got goosebumps. His fingertips trembled.

Kwon Taek Joo gasped and then he heard a familiar sound above his head. That was the sound of a helicopter's rotor blades. The helicopter flying from behind quickly caught up with the motorbike. Not only that, police cars were also crowded together at every intersection

"Stop. If you don't stop, you'll be shot at!"

Warnings sounded several times from the following police car. Zhenya ignored it and continued driving, all car windows rolled down. That is a sign of preparing to shoot.

Suddenly Zhenya turned the steering wheel to the left, the motorbike crossed the center line and started running in the opposite direction.

Cars driving in the opposite direction honked loudly. While the police cars hesitated, a road leading to an overpass appeared right in front of them, and a median strip also appeared on the main road. Now, even police cars cannot get through there.

However, the two of them could not completely escape under the helicopter. Even if they cut off one team. the support team would come

from the other side.

Rather than surrender, Kwon Taek Joo nervously stared at Zhenya. He still didn't slow down. All he could do was hug him tightly, pressing his forehead against his back and tightening the arms that were holding him, ignoring what was happening even for just a moment.

As soon as the speed reached its peak, the motorbike  
crashed

straight into the edge of the fence. Kwon Taek Joo closed his eyes and foresaw the last thing.

The fence seemed to be torn apart with a fierce friction sound. The motorcycle jumped off the road and the two people were pushed into the air.

A sudden blockage occurred on a smooth traffic road. The helicopter rotated in a large circle and observed the situation below. Smoke rising from the accident scene obscured visibility, so it took a long time for the police to grasp the situation with the remains of the motorbike and the fence blocking the road. All vehicles traveling on 4 lanes were stuck on the road.

However, no matter how much they searched around, they couldn't find the target. The number of surrounding motorists curious to see what was going on continued to increase, but other than that there was no other chaos.

## Chapter 4.8 – Checkmate

The two of them entered the empty motel. Taek Joo was completely exhausted. The moment it fell from above, the motorbike luckily landed on a passing truck, otherwise if it hadn't both of them would have been arrested. Now, being able to still breathe was a blessing. The siren still sounded in his ears.

The room was full of old things. Unknown stains were scattered all over the wallpaper, the corners of the furniture were scuffed, and there was no way to tell when the bed sheets had last been changed. But anyway, a hiding place like this was good enough.

Taek Joo raised his hand to stroke his face, persistent fatigue came over him, right now he just wanted to lie down and sleep.

Taek Joo sighed and turned his head, immediately making eye contact with Zhenya. The guy was sitting at the table next to the window. Taek Joo thought that if it was just them two alone, he would definitely be beaten, but unexpectedly, Zhenya just looked at him quietly.

Taek Joo stared at Zhenya for a moment then stood up. He rummaged around in drawers and closets, and soon a dusty first aid box was found. Inside there was an ointment box with the medicine inside spilling out, bandages faded to yellow, disinfectant. He sighed. They weren't good enough, but in this situation there was no other way. Taek Joo held them and approached Zhenya.

Taek Joo pushed the table back a bit and sat on it. Zhenya just watched him without saying a word. He returned that persistent gaze for a moment then pulled his arm towards him. There was quite a bit of blood flowing out of Zhenya's upper left arm, possibly from the bullet passing by or from impact somewhere, but at first glance there seemed to be no bullets or debris inside.

For proper treatment, Taek Joo unbuttoned Zhenya's shirt button by button. Despite having had sex many times before, it was strange to see

Zhenya with his shirt off. His fingertips stiffened from the useless tension, and from that persistent gaze.

The shirt opened to reveal his large body. Taek Joo clicked his tongue and pulled his shirt back over his shoulders. Zhenya, who had been watching since then, suddenly smiled softly.

Taek Joo examined the injured area. The wound was quite deep so stitching was inevitable

He poured disinfectant. The transparent medicine mixed with the flowing blood caused bright red bubbles to appear on the wound. It would have been very painful, but Zhenya didn't flinch.

Ignoring that passionate look on his face, Taek Joo found hemostatic medicine in the first aid box. At that moment, Zhenya, who had been obedient until now, suddenly stood up. The guy's shadow covered Taek Joo's face. The moment he turned his head, his face came closer and his warm lips touched Taek Joo's cheek, exactly above his chin.

"What are you doing?"

Taek Joo frowned and tilted his head to avoid it. Zhenya didn't pay any attention and just put his hands on the table and moved closer. He pressed his lips down around Taek Joo's chin and then gradually raised them above his cheekbones. A gentle rubbing sound rang out, the hairs on his ears stood up.

Taek Joo's head bowed in embarrassment, his upper body was pulled back. Zhenya used his hand to support Taek Joo and held him tightly so he couldn't dodge him, then moved his lips to his mouth.

Zhenya's hot lips touched the corner of his mouth and then pulled away. For a moment, their eyes met.

The next moment, Zhenya attacked more fiercely, breaking the boundary that Taek Joo had tried his best to build. He lost and tried pushing his shoulder, but it had no effect. Zhenya used his whole body weight to press Taek Joo down on the table. At first, his lips just randomly touched his lips, but then Zhenya tilted his head so that the two lips met without a gap.

Taek Joo was shocked by the unexpected kiss. Although he had made love many times with Zhenya, the two had never kissed.

Zhenya used his hand to cover Taek Joo's eyes, who was thinking absentmindedly, then he pursed his lips. Zhenya rubbed his tongue against his teeth and dug deep inside to lick Taek Joo's tongue. Even then, Taek Joo still stubbornly refused. Zhenya suddenly bit his lower lip.

"Ah.."

Taek Joo frowned and moaned. When Zhenya gently pressed his tongue inside, the soft corners all over his body seemed to harden, making Taek Joo excited.

Zhenya's hot breath even reached Taek Joo's throat. Breaths mixed together and sounds came from his wet lips, his thick eyelashes brushing his cheeks and his eyelids tickling. Zhenya's body odor took over his sense of smell.

"Ha..ah"

Taek Joo tilted his head and panted. Zhenya also tilted his head and swallowed his lips again. The table carrying the weight of the two of them shook dangerously as if it might collapse in an instant.

For a moment, it was just lips and tongues intertwined. It wasn't Kwon Taek Joo's first kiss but for some reason his heart was beating like crazy. The breath he couldn't exhale or swallow echoed in his throat, and his vision blurred for a moment.

Zhenya's lips only parted from his when Taek Joo choked.

He coughed until his face turned red, and in the process his pants fell off. Taek Joo shivered at the feeling of emptiness down there. The shaking table suddenly turned over. The back of his neck rang. Taek Joo was dragged away by Zhenya without having time to realize the pain, his vision was reversed. That was because he was thrown hard onto the bed.

The old mattress creaked

Zhenya pressed Taek Joo down and sat up. His hands groped his body hastily like an animal that had been starving for days.

Suddenly he was grabbed by the collar. Realizing something was wrong, Taek Joo stopped his hand, but Zhenya ended up tearing his shirt.

Suddenly Taek Joo felt a chill. Not stopping there, Zhenya's hand moved down. The wind blew onto the dick in Zhenya's hand.

The mass of flesh covered with unfamiliar body heat trembled. Taek Joo's face was restless. Zhenya moved his thumb over the dick he held in his hand.

Zhenya slowly bent down and pressed his lips along Taek Joo's chest bone and toned abs. A moment later, he suddenly raised his head and looked into Taek Joo's eyes. When Zhenya pressed his dick, Taek Joo's eyebrows furrowed. Zhenya asked, looking straight into his dark eyes.

"Why did you run away? Didn't you rely on me to survive? You clung to me first. Why?"

There we go again.

"You want me, take the initiative."

"Ugh.. What the hell are you on about?"

Taek Joo frowned as the pressure on Zhenya's hand increased. He couldn't understand what he said.

However, Zhenya ignored Taek Joo's question and just continuously massaged his crotch.

Taek Joo groaned and spread his legs, his hand that was being held tightly by Zhenya was also pressed down on the bed. Zhenya stared at his clearly exposed crotch then opened his mouth and lowered his head.

"Ha."

His cock was tightly surrounded by his warm mouth, the feeling of sharp teeth gliding vividly across sensitive skin made his leg kick. For a moment, Taek Joo's whole body had goosebumps, but unlike his neck

that automatically twisted, his lower abdomen wanted more pleasure and just stuck to Zhenya's face.

"Ahh!"

Taek Joo moaned at the feeling of both warmth and tightness from Zhenya's mouth.

Taek Joo's thighs continuously vibrated as if they were on fire. His lower abdomen swayed with each movement as Zhenya's neck bent. Taek Joo frowned at his body's too real reaction. Even though he wanted more pleasure, he couldn't let go of his reason.

His dick was taken in Zhenya's mouth and sucked hard, Taek Joo's knees once again shook from the strong feeling of absorption. His whole body heated up and grinding sounds came from between his tightly clenched teeth. Zhenya pressed down on his twitching thigh and he quickly moved his head up and down.

"Ah... ha... ahhh..."

Taek Joo shook his head repeatedly with moans he couldn't swallow. Something inside him seemed to be sucked out every time Zhenya took him further.

Just as his vision blurred from that strong pleasure, the stimulation between his legs suddenly disappeared. The intense heat that was approaching its climax suddenly disappeared. The continuous panting breath from the throat suddenly disappeared in vain.

"..?"

Taek Joo had difficulty opening his tightly closed eyes. He saw his dick was red and still hard. He moaned pitifully. Zhenya licked his lips covered in saliva while looking at Taek Joo.

What was this bastard planning to do? The sexual desire coming from Zhenya made Taek Joo's entire stomach twitch. He frowned in pain as he stared at Zhenya. He reached out and opened the desk drawer next to the bed, which contained the disposable gel usually provided in most motels. Zhenya used his teeth to bite the wrapper, the clear liquid

flowed into Taek Joo's buttocks, his body was startled by the cold feeling.

Taek Joo's entire lower abdomen, muscles and thighs were quickly drenched, the wet and slippery feeling was extremely uncomfortable. Since then, his hot dick had no chance to cool down, but on the contrary, it had stood up strongly and defiantly.

Zhenya looked down at Taek Joo who was grumbling with unquenchable lust and declared.

"If you beg, then I'll give it to you."

What? Taek Joo opened his eyes wide and gritted his teeth.

He reached out his hand, intending to relief

himself. But Zhenya didn't even allow that. The bastard grabbed both of his wrists tightly. Taek Joo wanted to kick him away, but his legs had been pressed open by him.

He wanted to escape that cramped pain, but he couldn't do it alone. No matter how many times he tried to escape Zhenya's grip, Taek Joo only lost more strength.

Taek Joo rubbed his whole body trying to do something. Suddenly, there was something strange on his thigh, something hard and hot was pounding against his soft skin. In response, Zhenya's large body moved little by little, his penis, already hard, was rubbing against his thigh.

Zhenya rubbed his cock hard and stubbornly looked down at Taek Joo's face.

"Ugh... Ugh..."

Taek Joo's toes turned white and the dense blood vessels on his neck turned red.

"Ahahh"

Zhenya's finger fidgeted and then slammed into his hole, but it didn't penetrate with all its force, just slightly rotated at the entrance.

Zhenyas' situation seemed to be no better than Kwon Taek joo's. The guy's body temperature was clearly rising, his continuous panting was rough and dull, his broad shoulders were moving up and down with difficulty, and Zhenya's muscles were constantly tightening and relaxing. That was patience Taek Joo had never seen before.

Zhenyas dick continuously slid against the gel. Taek Joo's hard lower body shook violently.

Zhenya's intense gaze fell on Taek Joo. He seemed to be asking if he was going to beg or not. The back of his neck was hot and angry. No, that wasn't the only reason why he was suddenly upset. The urge of his heart to wonder if it would be better to give up made his heart stir.

And at that moment, Taek Joo's lower stomach suddenly pushed lightly, it was so light that he couldn't even notice it. Zhenya's cock was pressing against his entrance. Every time his hard dick touched his soft hole, a moan came out. Taek Joo's thighs trembled with joy, his eyes were dreamy and his cheeks were wet and pink. Zhenya watched him with a satisfied smile spreading across his lips

Zhenya seemed not to care and left Taek Joo alone. And then Taek Joo's movements became bolder. He didn't

stop at lightly

pushing on Zhenyas stomach, but turned around and rubbed Zhenyas dick on his ass.

Zhenya licked his lower lip and observed, then pulled back slightly.

"Huh?"

Taek Joo stopped suspiciously, Zhenya pulled his cock back as if nothing had happened. Right after that, Taek Joo's back arched further and tried to push itself in. But this time Zhenya also backed away.

Taek Joo tilted his head in frustration. Slowly reaching its limit. His hands were still tied tightly and he couldn't move and his dick was so painful that he thought it would be better to cut it off. Because he couldn't breathe comfortably, even his lungs were burning

"Damn it.. Do something, you bastard!"

Taek Joo couldn't bear it anymore and screamed. His face turned red with anger. A triumphant smile spread across Zhenya's face at the same time the cock slammed right into Taek Joo's seething hole.

"Ahh!"

His prostate was penetrated all at once, his stomach was filled quickly and Taek Joo's jaw clenched. His shoulders and chest also bulged, revealing a strong feeling of rejection. Zhenya sucked on Taek Joo's nipples and stroked his soft waist.

"Ha, ha.. I'm gonna..."

Zhenya enjoyed the tightness for a moment then slowly thrusted his hips.

He pulled out and then immediately slammed back in. Nausea rose as all parts of his stomach were pushed up at the same time. Taek Joo gritted his teeth and endured it.

When he opened his eyes, he could see his legs spread open, Zhenya's every move was clearly imprinted on him. But when he closed his eyes, the feeling of his cock moving in and out of his body only became more vivid.

"Ahh.. ha"

Taek Joo picked up a pillow to cover his face. If he didn't do that, the moans he didn't want to hear would probably come out in disarray.

because he was constantly overstimulated, he naturally got used to it. Taek Joo tried to justify but he couldn't lie to his body that was being honest about its desires. Every time Zhenya's dick penetrated deep into his stomach, he unconsciously trembled, the strong stimulation spreading as if the reins were being removed.

Their bodies interlocked without rest, Zhenya bit Taek Joo's neck and continued thrusting.

"Ha!"

Taek Joo's whole body trembled and for a moment, it seemed like all he could see were stars, the tingling feeling originating from his stomach did not dissipate immediately but spread throughout his body. He looked at Zhenya with suspicion.

"Haugh, uh, ah, ahhh...!"

Taek Joo moaned like he was screaming and he trembled.

Zhenya suddenly lifted Taek Joo's legs to his shoulders, then raised his knees and thrusted in and out faster.

Taek Joo's whole body convulsed and he came, his thighs stiffened, his eyelids opened and closed continuously and his vision gradually became white.

"Ah! Fuck!"

His whole body tensed up and Taek Joo roared like an animal, his hair standing on end. At the same time, the cum boiling inside him surged out.

"Ahh.. ha."

Taek Joo's lips trembled and he panted, his sweaty chest and stomach swayed as well, the exhilarating feeling of release and the feeling of exhaustion coming at the same time. His whole body was sticky and uncomfortably slippery.

His eyelids trembled tightly closed and then opened again, the blurry, shaking scene was finally becoming clear. Taek Joo could see the ceiling of the motel that he had never noticed before.

Is that why? Why was Zhenya heavier? Taek Joo's lungs were choked when the man collapsed on top of him. "get off!" He said and pushed Zhenya away.

But Zhenya didn't budge. He didn't move away, nor did he move his dick still inside Taek Joo. Something was wrong, he looked at Zhenya curiously.

With the little strength he had left, he pushed Zhenya away. His body fell to the side. His eyelids were closed silently as if he passed out, his

bloodless face was streaked with sweat and his breathing was labored. "Hey," he called, shaking Zhenya. No reaction. He slapped Zhenya cheek but he didn't even lift his eyebrows. It seemed Zhenya was in shock from losing so much blood.

Even in that situation, his throbbing boner was still inside his body. Taek Joo slowly pulled himself out. A small moan escaped him as he tried to escape from his trapped body, goosebumps rising on the back of his neck as his tight ass suddenly became loose.

## Chapter 4.9 – Checkmate

Taek Joo crawled slowly to the floor. The bed sheets were stained with blood.

Taek Joo doesn't want anything to do with Zhenya anymore. He had no intention of returning to such an abnormal relationship.

He was nothing more than an unconscious disaster. If he ran away now, he could escape this guy.

If Taek Joo returned to the hospital while Zhenya was unconscious and ran away with his mother. Just thinking about it made his heart beat faster.

Finally making a decision, he put on the clothes that were scattered on the floor. Sorry Zhenya, but now you have to find your own way.

Zhenyas injury itself wasn't too serious, just because of vigorous exercise and no reasonable treatment, the amount of blood he lost was quite large. So if Taek Joo escaped alone, there would be no danger to Zhenya. Even if this is an uninhabited inn, there would definitely be a manager, so they would definitely find out.

"Why.."

That was the moment Taek Joo just turned away. Zhenyas voice rang out from behind. He was startled and turned his head back. The blue eyes were still tightly closed and seemed to be muttering meaningless things. Fortunately, he was still able to leave safely. But he couldn't move as if he was stuck to the floor.

Taek Joo shook his head angrily at those meaningless feelings. He couldn't even imagine or be confident about what would happen later. If you don't intend to deal with it, it's better to shake it off early.

He quickly walked to the door, grabbed the doorknob and went out. And once again, the small whisper reached his ears

".. Taek Joo.."

He didn't understand why he was heartbroken. He didn't think Zhenya could call him by such a sad name. Taek Joo's heart stirred.

His heart was beating wildly, he frowned in discomfort, even his naturally curly hair was now more messy. A trace of regret rose in his impudent conscience. Just try to ignore it and walk, but his feet won't move.

Why should he feel guilty about that monster?

Taek Joo stood in front of the door for a moment, confused. Then he tilted his head angrily and shouted.

"Damn it, I'll be back!"

He slammed the door. Taek Joo was still inside though, not outside. Even so, the question continuously echoed in his mind whether this was true.

Taek Joo took a hesitant step and walked to the table. A first aid kit was overturned underneath him, and he rummaged through spilled medications to find powdered hemostatic drugs.

Taek Joo picked it up and looked at the bed.

When Taek Joo's weight was placed on it, the mattress tilted to one side. Zhenyas face was covered in sweat, and he was even wheezing. He sprayed a lot of hemostatic medicine while clicking his tongue. Then he put gauze on it and fixed it with tape.

Even after finishing his work, Taek Joo still sat there. With his eyes quietly closed, Zhenya looked quite handsome. No, his face was beautiful to begin with. It's also because of those unusual eyes and physique that made Taek Joo's feelings even more ambiguous.

Even in the dark, his ivory golden hair still shimmered gently. He looked bewildered and then unconsciously reached out his hand. Taek Joo looked down at his hands in surprise

He's crazy.

He couldn't turn away now. The reason why Zhenya, who should have been in Russia, went to Korea, and the reason why he was shot and injured was because of Taek Joo himself.

"There's nothing to worry about. It's safe for now. Oh, this cell phone? I just borrowed it from someone else for a while."

In his hazy consciousness, Zhenya heard a familiar voice. Raising his heavy eyelids, Taek Joo's back appeared dimly little by little. It looked like he was talking to someone on the phone.

He must have been unconscious for quite a while, Zhenya couldn't remember why he was lying there. Reviewing the memories of the previous night, he remembered pushing Taek Joo to the limit. As he waited for him to latch onto him first, Zhenya tried to suppress his rising lust. When he finally got what he wanted, it felt like all the liquid in his body evaporated instantly.

But after that, Zhenya looked down at the bandage on his shoulder. He didn't remember putting it on himself, so it must have been Taek Joo's work.

Why didn't he run away? If he was determined, he probably could have run away. But why was Taek Joo still here?

Zhenya reached out to see if the man he saw now was an illusion. His straight back was touched by his fingertips. He even glanced back when he felt something touch his back.

The two looked at each other without saying anything. Taek Joo continued the call in that state.

"Anyway, I wish you all the best. I'll be in touch later."

He quickly hung up and threw his cell phone aside. When checking the call list, Zhenya saw some numbers that looked quite familiar. Not knowing what was going on, Zhenya turned on the TV.

The news broadcast on TV is reporting what was reported last night. The theme is nothing more than a chase that takes place in the middle of Seoul during the day.

The content wasn't beyond Taek Joo's expectations. Charges of impersonating a lawyer, charges of plotting to assassinate Lee Cheol-jin, charges of obstruction of official duties and destruction of public property, and charges of causing injury to police officers attempting to arrest were added to the existing charges.

While considering complex countermeasures, a metallic sound suddenly rang out. When he turned his head, Zhenya had sat up and was twisting his handcuffed wrists, his eyes showing discomfort.

"Is this fun to you?"

"From now on, I will try to threaten you. I will release you if you obediently obey."

"Listen to what I want first."

Tired of acting, Taek Joo made it clear that he had no other choice.

You said you would agree with me first."

"Do you even know what you're asking of me?"

"That wasn't a question, it was a threat, you bastard."

He frowned fiercely, it wasn't at all scary

"Taek Joo. Don't you think you should make a better deal than threaten me?"

He was clearly smiling, but it didn't look pleasant at all.

In fact, if it's not a threat, then what if it's an offer? Having only one thing to say, Taek Joo shrugged and explained quite abstractly.

It's not fair to have to throw away a car like this, so I'm thinking about reorganizing the traffic, but I need your help. So, please help me."

Taek Joo raised his chin slightly. Confident eyes directed straight at Zhenya. The guy tilted his head as if he wanted to say something, but he was sure of his suggestions.

"Kid, you should be nice to me."

Without a doubt, Zhenya's eyebrows furrowed. But just for a moment, he smiled coldly and brushed it aside. He seemed to know exactly what he wanted to say.

Taek Joo took out the memory card and placed it down in front of Zhenya.

"This is the reason why I'm being chased. I want you to hand it over to the prosecutor in charge of the case. It won't be easy. The police are everywhere. Even the execution order has probably been issued."

The tone of the request was quite sincere, but the expression on Zhenya's face was quite dissatisfied. Taek Joo's plan couldn't even guarantee his safety. But that was the only way, he asked Zhenya once more.

"It's the original, so you have to take it with you. No matter how you think about it, it's the only way. I don't know about others, but with a monster like you, I can trust it and leave it to you."

There was nothing more to say but trust each other. It's not like he's completely unaware of Taek Joo's situation or circumstances.

Zhenya obediently held the memory card in his hand, then he waved it gently and made a bid.

"In retrospect, doesn't hiring a prostitute also come at a price?"

Taek Joo curled his mouth as if he had known Zhenya was going to say that.

"Of course. If everything ends well, I'll think about taking us seriously. It will be quite interesting to try to tame someone like you."

"Who's taming who?"

Zhenya frowned as if he had just been spat on. Taek Joo happily explained further.

"You'll chase me wherever I go. I'm sick of running away now. And if I don't want to run away then I'll have to compromise with reality to some extent. So, I'll stay with you. It'll be difficult to kill you straight away, but it is what it is."

For a moment, Zhenya's face was blank, looking like he had been hit hard on the head.

Blue eyes filled with images of Taek Joo. He rarely smiles at Zhenya. Even so, Zhenya couldn't come to a conclusion on whether or not Taek Joo was trustable.

Zhenya leant back and snapped his fingers at Taek Joo.

"1 star.. I'm not paying for any of the services I received. Now come here"

He truly was a businessman.

As requested, Taek Joo climbed onto the bed. Soon, he was within Zhenya's reach. He sat quietly observing Taek Joo then suddenly turned around. Immediately afterwards, Zhenya's lips roughly intertwined with his. Looking at Zhenya coveting Taek Joo's lips with frowning eyebrows, he suddenly felt something very affectionate. He looked at that strange face and slowly closed his eyes, his whole body was pulled by a strong force, his heart began to beat strongly again. Taek Joo felt like he was stuck in a trap.

## Chapter 4.10 – Checkmate

NIS headquarters was in a state of emergency. The chase that took place in the city center after Taek Joo invaded the hospital couldn't avoid the fierce bullets of the media. Many voices criticized the incompetence of public authorities when it became known that the wanted man had escaped, despite traffic being paralyzed and civil damage having occurred.

Furthermore, when Lee Cheol Jin was arrested as a suspect in the case and was mysteriously poisoned while awaiting trial, things became even more noisy both inside and outside. That's why they had to capture Taek Joo. Someone must be responsible for this.

When the situation became serious, Chief Lim, who was in the hospital, also rushed to headquarters. He hadn't even left work since last night and was continuously receiving status reports every hour. No one knew Taek Joo's whereabouts.

Everything went according to plan, although it was a little noisy. Now, as long as they had a proper ritual offering, everything would be arranged smoothly. The only obstacle was that Chief Lim doesn't have much time left.

A knock sounded on the door and an employee entered the office. He was assigned to monitor Yoon Jong Woo's phone usage. Deputy Chief 1 accompanying him could not hide his concern and asked what was going on.

"A while ago, I received a call on Yoon Jong Woo's cell phone."

"Have you checked the sender yet?"

"Okay. This number is in the name of a Russian named Yevgeny Vissarionovich Bogdanov."

"Where is the call from?"

"It is confirmed to be near Pyeongtaek, Gyeonggi-do."

"Alright."

Deputy Chief 1 clenched his fist. Chief Lim also nodded. Now was the time for him to complete what had been planned.

The employee was still waiting for further instructions. He sat politely.

"Immediately send a cooperation dispatch to the local police station. Let our elite agents participate."

"How?"

"I will be directly in charge."

The employee who was listening to the order looked puzzled. Managers or executives are often only informed about the situation in the control room and give instructions, but do not work directly in the field.

Of course, this is not unreasonable as Chief Lim was also a special agent. However, he wanted to make sure he hadn't heard wrong.

"Are you going to join?"

"I have to go. One way or another, he's my subordinate, so shouldn't I go catch him myself?"

"Then I'll go too."

Deputy Chief 1 who was listening suddenly spoke up. The employee wondered why, as this was truly an unusual situation.

"I will prepare as you said."

"One more thing. Yoon Jong Woo from the support team, is he at work yet?"

"Not yet."

"Is he at home?"

"Yes. He was spotted leaving early this morning."

Chief Lim rubbed his chin and thought for a moment. Immediately after being contacted by Taek Joo, Yoon Jong Woo disappeared, he must have received some instructions. Manager Lim knows Taek Joo well because

the time the two of them worked together wasn't short. Even when Taek Joo is arrested, he is not a person who gives up easily. Taek Joo must have prepared a plan to deal a blow to the person who tricked him. The visit to Lee Cheol Jin before he disappeared also bothered Chief Lim.

"Then let's find out where Yoon Jong Woo is and hold him off until I'm done."

"Yes."

The staff received polite instructions to leave. The two remaining men in the room didn't say anything. Chief Lim only spoke after the footsteps had completely subsided.

"We have to end this now."

"For this to be done safely, it's all up to you. Make sure you're pulling your own weight."

"Are you sure you sent it yesterday?"

Yoon Jong Woo held the front door open and asked for confirmation. Because of Yoon Jong Woo, his plan to sleep late was ruined. Yoon Jong Woo left an emergency contact number at the photo studio, but he couldn't understand how he knew his home address. He sighed and pulled the door open.

"Ah, yes! They said that most of the pictures would be sent out the night before the holiday. Did they not deliver them?"

"Please tell me about the express delivery service you used. Does it usually arrive within a day?"

"I'm using Chunlima delivery service. And you shouldn't ask me about the delivery date but should go check with the courier?" The owner of the photo studio said, "Let's go" and pushed Yoon Jong Woo.

The front door slammed shut in front of Yoon Jong Woo while he couldn't even find the delivery receipt number. He angrily wanted to ring the doorbell again, but if he really did, he would call the police. Yoon Jong Woo shuffled back and forth hesitantly.

He went down to the alley and took out his phone. There has been no further contact from Taek Joo. Yoon Jong Woo heard about him on the news last night. He was so shocked that he couldn't sleep, but then Taek Joo called back. According to Taek Joo's instructions, Yoon Jong Woo shouldn't go to work today.

A sigh came out. You've come this far and you can't go back. Yoon Jong Woo can only do his part and hope everything goes well.

Yoon Jong Woo went online and searched for Chunlima express delivery. He couldn't look up the delivery status because he didn't have the invoice number, so Yoon Jong Woo had no other choice but to call the main switchboard number. After a while, he was connected to an agent.

"Yes, Chunlima

delivery? Thank you for your hard work. I want to ask something. This is 1724 Seocho-dong. The package I was supposed to receive yesterday still hasn't arrived."

Yoon Jong Woo gave the address of the Seoul Central District Prosecutor's Office, and an expected response rang out.

"Oh really? Do you happen to know the invoice number?"

"Ah, like this.. Today the shipping company coincidentally had a holiday. If they don't answer the phone, will it be difficult to look up my information?"

"Please read more information."

This time, Yoon Jong Woo reread the sender and recipient information that Taek Joo had tipped him off. "Thank you very much." He replied back.

"Dear customer, after looking up, I can confirm that the courier has already arrived in this area. We will provide you with the contact information of the driver in charge. Could you please try contacting us with them?"

Yoon Jong Woo quickly wrote down the contact number. Taek Joo said that the photo would be convincing evidence. If that's true then it should be safely sent to Prosecutor Seok. Due to the nature of the express delivery service, Yoon Jong Woo was very worried because he could not be sure exactly when the package would arrive or whether the package would be delivered properly.

Yoon Jong Woo called the courier driver, the call connection rang. He walked back and forth aimlessly and anxiously waited for the other end to pick up the phone. However, there is only a voice notification that the person on the other end of the line cannot answer the phone.

"Ah bastard. Why don't you answer the phone?"

Perhaps they were busy with work so they couldn't answer the phone, Yoon Jong Woo's thoughts continued to spread in a bad direction. Because it was something that had to be delivered, he couldn't help but worry about whether it might get lost on the way or someone might take it midway. Yoon Jong Woo was looking at his phone to see if anything was wrong when another figure approached from behind.

"Yoon Jong Woo."

Yoon Jong Woo nervously looked back in the direction he heard the call. Two men in black suits were standing there. Yoon Jong Woo could sense their identities through intuition, they were agents sent by Chief Lim from headquarters.

Yoon Jong Woo's phone fell to the ground. There, the message rang again that the customer could not answer the phone.

## Chapter 4.11 – Checkmate

Kwon Taek Joo left the motel and went to the rooftop of a shopping center. The surrounding buildings were of similar height and a few roads led to the main road, but most of them were alleys so narrow that even a car could hardly pass. From above, the town looks like a maze.

Sirens kept sounding somewhere, and then people who looked like plainclothes policemen started appearing one by one. It seems they checked Yoon Jong Woo's call list and are searching the train station. From now on. Kwon Taek Joo must become their own bait and attract their attention.

He took the gun

out of his belt and pulled the trigger toward an investigation vehicle equipped with warning lights. The silent bullet flying from the silenced gun hit the wheel of an investigation vehicle and focused all attention immediately. Police nearby lowered their bodies and frantically scanned in all directions looking for shooting points. Just then, one of them gestured to the rooftop.

"Over there!"

Investigators and police scattered to the building where Kwon Taek Joo was staying. They quickly jumped up the stairs and then onto the roof.

"Stay still!"

They each pulled out their guns and aimed at Kwon Taek Joo. He didn't care and continued running out of the hiding place. The police officer looked blankly at him as he suddenly rushed towards the railing as if intending to commit suicide. His body did not encounter any obstacles and just fell downwards. The policeman rushed to the railing.

Kwon Taek Joo was in the building next door. He immediately stood up and checked for any injuries then ran away again. The police officers who had been watching all this time simultaneously opened fire. Empty

bullets were fired along with real bullets, flying into the wall instead of Kwon Taek Joo and getting stuck there. Meanwhile, Kwon Taek Joo once again went from rooftop to rooftop.

"He's over there!"

The employee waiting below discovered him and screamed. A group of police chased from all directions. A patrol car also followed and continuously announced Kwon Taek Joo's location on the radio.

In a densely populated area with shabby shops and houses, even if Kwon Taek Joo passed by in front of them, they could not recklessly pull the trigger, because the safety of the people was the top priority. even if the subject is a dangerous criminal. They must be more careful now that media attention is focused, and distrust of public authority is rife. Kwon Taek Joo tried to take advantage of that so he just hung around the residential area all the time.

As the number of investigators increased and the siege gradually narrowed, Kwon Taek Joo jumped off a 3m high stone wall and then ran on a wall that appeared to be less than 15 cm wide. Without hesitation, he jumped down the wall and disappeared. The way Kwon Taek Joo moved from now on reminded people of a leopard, not a field agent from the National Intelligence Agency.

"Target detected. Move west, move west!"

The investigator was running and communicating via radio when suddenly a very loud engine sounded in front of them. A car was driving so fast that they didn't have time to check who was in it. However, just by looking at the patrol cars chasing each other, guessing that the driver is Kwon Taek Joo.

The police also quickly climbed into the investigation car. Together with the support team controlling the road, everyone focused on chasing Kwon Taek Joo. Now it's just a matter of time.

The siren sounded shrilly

in the small residential area. Kwon Taek Joo freely drives through the chaos. He doesn't slow down even on roads narrow enough that only

one car can pass.

How long has he been running? The side door of a house suddenly opened, and a man stepped out to throw trash. He turned his head at the unusual sign and shouted when he saw Kwon Taek Joo's car rushing towards him.

"Ahh!"

Kwon Taek Joo turned the steering wheel to the right. The entire body of the car was pressed against the wall and the rearview mirror was smashed. The car passed without leaving any casualties.

The pursuing patrol cars could not pass the man sitting down on the road, forcing them to stop. While the police got out of the car and evacuated the man to safety, Kwon Taek Joo leisurely slipped through the alley.

He had just gone down the hill and turned onto the main road when Kwon Taek Joo's car was caught up by the support team waiting nearby. Two nearby patrol cars immediately blocked the road, then without hesitation they crossed the center line and ran back. But luckily no car could keep up.

Suddenly there was the sound of propellers overhead. A military helicopter is following Kwon Taek Joo's car. A sniper is aiming through binoculars, ready to open fire to suppress. The investigation vehicles also drove one after another and one of them crossed the three-lane road and crashed into the back of Kwon Taek Joo's car.

As a result, his car's body spun in a large circle, leaving dark skid marks as the tires slid across the road surface. The cars chasing nearby also hurriedly braked, but the collision was unavoidable because of the sudden stop, causing six or seven patrol cars to collide one after another. Even the investigation cars driving from the other side stopped.

Smoke rose from the cars following each other but it was impossible to determine where Kwon Taek Joo was. As the patrol cars came one after another and gathered around, the whole area looked like a car cemetery.

Soon, the car door opened and armed police stepped out. They hid behind open doors in case of a gunfight and closely searched for Kwon Taek Joo's car. Sakaman guns drawn.

Soon a black sedan drove to the scene. Inside were Chief Lim and Deputy Chief 1. Chief Lim got out of the car and revealed his identity to the police officer who was trying to block the way. He then called the field manager and grabbed a megaphone.

"You are completely surrounded. Put down your weapons and surrender."

Chief Lim's voice echoed on the road where only sirens could be heard. However, there was no sign of Kwon Taek Joo's car. Pedestrians whose access was restricted and people in nearby buildings also closely observed the situation, each of them had a cell phone in their hand.

"I warn you again. Raise your hands and step outside. I will spare your life."

A comment that can only be heard in the movie makes viewers even more curious. Everyone was busy taking photos and filming even though they didn't know the severity of the situation. The police tried to stop it but to no avail. Related content spreads everywhere on social networks.

At that moment.

Kwon Taek Joo's car door, which had been silent all this time, suddenly opened wide. He finally appeared and stepped on the car's bonnet to climb up to the ceiling, Kwon Taek Joo wears a character mask that children use. Everyone was confused by the unexpected turn of events, but only Chief Lim was able to recognize that he was Kwon Taek Joo.

Kwon Taek Joo climbed into the car and slowly raised his hand. The police guns gathered at the scene were immediately loaded. The air seemed to be stirred by Kwon Taek Joo's every move.

Just like that, another silence came. Everyone held their breath and waited for Chief Lim's instructions because everything would end when

Kwon Taek Joo was arrested. Even so, Chief Lim still quietly turned his eyes as if looking for someone.

During the time Kwon Taek Joo was exposed, there were no reports of anyone accompanying him. Even now he was alone, Psych Bogdanov was nowhere to be seen. Is he not here? Is Kwon Taek Joo really safe and sound after contacting him? It's confusing. Chief Lim had a feeling something was wrong.

Then I came across an unexpected scene. The window of the car in which Deputy 1 was sitting slid down, and a long gun muzzle protruded through the gap. Since all the attention was focused on Kwon Taek Joo, no one except Chief Lim noticed it.

Since Kwon Taek Joo already knows everything, what more can be done now that it's over? Chief Lim frowned and glared at Deputy Chief 1. For a moment, their eyes met. Chief Lim shook his head to signal, but Deputy Chief 1 still closed one eye and looked into the binoculars before Chief Lim's intervention.

Harmful seeds need to be eliminated.

"Only the dead are silent."

Like Kim Young Hee and Lee Cheol Jin. The index finger on the trigger is completely folded. A flame burst out from the black muzzle of the gun.

The Seoul Central District Prosecutor's Office also had a strange sense of tension, because the wanted person succeeded in escaping every time despite the public agencies mobilizing a lot of public power. Relevant news is in turn transmitted through mass media and social networks as well as communication networks between investigation agencies. Attention cannot be quelled as it relates to the case handled by the local integrity department.

The situation is no different with Prosecutor Seok. Of course, arresting Kwon Taek Joo and revealing his crimes is beyond Prosecutor Seok's authority. But he must find out whether it was Kwon Taek Joo who poisoned Lee Cheol Jin, and if so, why. Kwon Taek Joo has stated that the series of events surrounding him are someone's conspiracy.

But so far, Prosecutor Seok has not received any further evidence. Perhaps the reason Kwon Taek Joo came to meet him himself was just an act to confuse the investigation.

"Prosecutors?"

Prosecutor Seok was lost in thought when Chief Kim approached and called him. He suddenly woke up.

"Yes?"

"The courier has arrived."

Manager Kim handed over a silver express envelope. He checked the bill. It was indeed sent to Prosecutor Seok, with the sender's name 'Garam Photo Studio' written on it.

Prosecutor Seok never received letters for personal use at the District Attorney's Office. So this courier was also sent unilaterally by someone. Solicitations bribes. Personal letters and threats are also often sent that way, but sometimes there are also clues sent in by anonymous informants.

Chief Kim suggested, "I think it's a photo." In his heart, Prosecutor Seok was also curious about the contents of the envelope. Perhaps because the sensitive moment made him automatically remember Kwon Taek Joo. Could it be? Prosecutor Seok shook his head and opened the envelope.

Inside are hundreds of photos. Prosecutor Seok tried to pull them out, and one of them fell to the floor. Chief Kim said, "Ohh" and quickly picked them up. Then, "uh," he said softly. Prosecutor Seok stiffened when he saw the photo in his hand. Lee Cheol Jin appears in most of the photos.

What surprised Prosecutor Seok more was who Lee Cheol Jin was with. Someone who looks quite familiar. Chief Kim seems to have the same sense of déjà vu as Prosecutor Seok. He tilted his head and said, "You've seen this person somewhere, right?"

"Don't you know who this is?"

"Wow, I think I've seen this person somewhere before."

Manager Kim looked closely at the person in the photo. He looked at a few more pictures and rummaged through his memories. A moment later, a vague image appeared like a mirage in his mind. Chief Kim often remembers people even though he only met once, but this time was different. Chief Kim took out his phone and to be sure, he connected to the Internet and searched for someone. Immediately after that, information about the accessed person appears. Manager Kim checked his name, current relationship, and photos on his phone one by one and then suddenly opened his eyes wide. Surely not, right?

He immediately turned the phone around and gave it to Prosecutor Seok. It was clear that the person being searched was the same person as the person in the photo. His identity is Cha Moon Seok, Deputy Division 1 of the National Intelligence Agency.

Damn it.

The sound of gunfire broke the momentary silence. At the same time. Kwon Taek Joo was raising his hand, quickly crossing his arms. The police who were aiming at him were also confused by the untimely gunfire. A few stray bullets shot into the sky. Despite the chaos, Chief Lim and Deputy Chief 1 exchanged disapproving looks with each other.

Not long after that, Kwon Taek Joo heard the sound of a propeller. A helicopter is approaching from above. He thought it was a support helicopter that had arrived late, but it looked quite different from the existing helicopters. Its sleek exterior and uniquely long, thick landing slides are its distinguishing features.

Everyone's eyes were directed into space. Kwon Taek Joo's hair and collar fluttered as the helicopter approached. He squinted as he watched the helicopter continue to lower altitude. In fact, the rotation of the rotor blades did not decrease at all and it seemed that it had no intention of landing, but the distance between it and the road surface was too close.

A helicopter that could not distinguish whether it was friendly or not, and even the purpose of its approach was unclear, dropped a large

amount of gasoline. It was a thick smoke grenade. Even in the middle of the day, visibility is instantly blocked, to the point where it's impossible to see even a few centimeters in front of you.

Even so, the sound of the propellers continued while everyone was confused. No, it's closer than before. Deputy Chief 1 in the car looked around uncomfortably. Strangely, it felt like the helicopter was just hovering above his head. The vibrations of air created when the propeller rotated shook the body of his car, black smoke and strong wind blew through the open window.

Deputy Chief 1 clutched the rifle in his sweaty hands. The next moment, the sedan suddenly swayed violently from side to side, a sharp shrill sound scraping the eardrums. Deputy Chief 1 looked out the window in horror. He saw a block of metal coming quickly through the smoke. Soon, it broke the window and crashed straight into the car. Shards of glass fell onto the chair with a violent explosion. Deputy Chief 1 was extremely surprised because the process looked like a slow motion movie, but in reality it only happened in a few seconds.

The metal block pushed right in front of Deputy Chief 1 was the helicopter's landing slider. It was probably made of special titanium so there were no scratches even after the previous collision. The slider did not hit Deputy Chief 1 but got stuck in the ceiling of the car. As a result, the helicopter and the car's ceiling collided continuously, causing sparks. No one understood what the helicopter's intention was, but it seemed it was not a wish to die together.

Immediately after that, the car's body, which had only been swaying from side to side, began to sway up and down. Sometimes it seems to float lightly in the air. Only then did Deputy Chief 1 realize what was happening to him. He tried to quickly get out of the car, but the door was crushed and could not be opened. Meanwhile, the helicopter gradually gained altitude. The sedan stuck on the slide also flipped and was lifted up.

"Ah!"

Deputy 1 screamed and rolled into the window. The car door open and close button doesn't work. He tried to destroy it with his rifle, but even

the slightest movement made the car's body shake. The slider mounted on the ceiling also slides with a squeaking sound. If it falls out of the car, his car will definitely fall. Realizing his situation, Deputy Head 1 stiffened. He didn't even dare to breathe.

The smoke gradually cleared, but the police could not take any action and just quietly watched the helicopter fly in the sky. A hostage vehicle is not safe if shot at, and for the same reason, a police helicopter hovering nearby cannot attack. It only follows the mysterious helicopter at a certain distance.

Surprisingly, the chase didn't last long, because the other helicopter landed in the parking lot of the Seoul Central District Prosecutors' Office. When the helicopter suddenly appeared from nowhere, the security guards of the prosecutor's office rushed out with puzzled expressions. The mysterious helicopter released the sedan from the slider then flew up again and landed completely next to it.

At the same time, Prosecutor Seok was leaving the office with investigators from the prosecutor's office. He stopped when he saw a helicopter land in the parking lot. Other employees also clung to the window and watched the unexpected scene. Security guards surrounded the helicopter and the sedan, uncertain what to do.

Immediately after that the helicopter door opened. The person who appeared inside was none other than Zhenya. The atmosphere around them became even more disturbed when a Russian suddenly appeared. Zhenya walked to the sedan in front of dozens of pairs of eyes, opened the dented door and dragged the bewildered Deputy Manager 1 out. After examining his face, Prosecutor Seok strode towards Zhenya.

Zhenya pushed Deputy Chief 1, who could not stand because of his pulse, into prosecutor Seok. Kwon Taek Joo suddenly held out a memory card. As soon as Prosecutor Seok received the item, he immediately realized what it was.

With that. Zeana finished all his work and returned to the helicopter. Surrounding guards all pulled out their guns to stop, but Zhenya went straight to the cockpit. Prosecutor Seok intervened and stopped the scuffle. Soon, the helicopter flew back into the air and created a huge

wind. When the wind stopped, it had gone very far, only as small as a fingernail.

Prosecutor Seok clearly informed Deputy Chief 1, who was still bewildered.

"I am Prosecutor Seok Jae-hee of the 1st Public Security Division at the Seoul Central District Prosecutors' Office. We urgently arrest Cha Moon Seok for violating the National Security Law. You have the right to an attorney, you have the right to remain silent and anything you say can later be used against you in court."

Zhenya's helicopter landed on a skyscraper. The door opened, Zhenya and Kwon Taek Joo walked out one after another. He leaned against the railing and enjoyed the wind blowing from all directions. The wind is everywhere, so pleasant.

When Deputy Chief 1 suddenly opened fire he reflexively twisted his body and almost could not avoid it. When looking at Chief Lim's eyes, Kwon Taek Joo saw a gun pointed at him from behind. Kwon Taek Joo sprained his ankle when he fell under the car, but he was lucky to avoid the bullet.

Immediately afterwards, Zhenya flew the helicopter and lowered the rope ladder through the gap in the smoke. When Kwon Taek Joo asked him why he came to do the job he was assigned, Zhenya said something cryptic that he would do that job from now on. Afterwards, Deputy Chief 1 was arrested again and taken to the Seoul Central District Prosecutor's Office.

There's nothing out of the ordinary, it's just that he feels Zhenya is adorable when doing the work he instructs, so Kwon Taek Joo probably isn't normal either. He must have gone crazy from the stress.

"It's quiet now."

Zhenya leisurely leaned against the railing. Kwon Taek Joo looked up at one side of his face for a moment then looked away and said "Mhm". He felt relieved thinking that everything was over, but something was still missing. Maybe it's because he still can't feel reality. From the day he arrived in Russia until now, it was as if he had had a long dream.

Kwon Taek Joo was lost in his emotions for a moment, but Zhenya's hand approached him. He unconsciously tried to tilt his head to avoid it. Zhenya watched him react cautiously with his arm frozen in the air. It's just that he suddenly became shy. Kwon Taek Joo stared at Zhenya without backing down any further. Zhenya then reached out and took off the mask he was still wearing. The two people's eyes met.

Will everything be okay, when Kwon Taek Joo is carried away by temporary emotions, when he has never wanted a man and has not treated Zhenya properly, Kwon Taek Joo still rushed into blindness? Maybe he would be with Zhenya now, but he had no intention of yearning for that man. Kwon Taek Joo was no longer imprisoned and isolated from the world like before, nor did he have to rely entirely on that man.

But at least, Zhenya is next to him now.

"I guess I won't have any more nightmares."

(I'm guessing he's talking about the kid dreams.)

Kwon Taek Joo muttered to himself as he stared intently at Zhenya. He's not asking him to get married or anything big, Zhenya's current feelings will probably cool down soon. So maybe Kwon Taek Joo doesn't need to worry too much, he just needs to try a little.

If he was tired and afraid of being chased, he didn't have to run away anymore, and right now he still couldn't find a better answer. Even after coming to the conclusion, Kwon Taek Joo still couldn't believe it and burst out laughing.

He looked down at the world at his feet and let out a long breath.

"I want to rest somewhere quiet."

"I know there is a place like that, where no one bothers you."

"Hm, consider helping me get there."

Kwon Taek Joo said as if lamenting. Zhenya curled her mouth at his disgusted expression, then walked towards Kwon Taek Joo and grabbed the railing. His body was trapped between the railing and his arms

stood upright, he was almost completely buried in Zhenya's arms, his body odor also became stronger.

Zhenya bit Kwon Taek Joo's shirt collar and placed his lips on the back of his neck. He rubbed his nose against the dry skin and comfortably inhaled the body odor. The gentle stimulation caused Kwon Taek Joo's heart and rhythm to become chaotic. This was enough to know that he couldn't deny it any longer.

Kwon Taek Joo took a deep breath and blamed himself for why his taste was so limited. He spoke in Korean so Zhenya couldn't understand. He asked again and as if to punish Kwon Taek Joo who was whining and talking nonsense, Zhenya bit hard and greedily on his back.

(Sadly it doesn't say what Kwon Taek Joo said.)

Sunset has set at the end of a long day. The wind was fierce, but for some reason Kwon Taek Joo felt warm. It is a harbinger of spring.

## **Chapter 4.12 – Checkmate**

Court No. 426, Section 21 of the Criminal Agreement, Seoul Central District Court. The trial of a case involving a senior NIS official has begun.

The defendant is accused of receiving orders from North Korea and carrying out activities for decades. However, he gradually changed his ideology, and when his name was mentioned as the next head of the NIS, he tried to cover up and manipulate the activities in the process. my past to wash away the past. Besides, there is another person in the plan, including personnel at the NIS department head level, and even public power is drawn into it. In addition, an innocent NIS employee was accused of stealing national secrets and was chased, also attracting public attention.

However, because the first trial took place in a closed room, reporters as well as onlookers were completely prohibited from entering. Due to strict court control, even lawyers must prove their identity when entering and exiting. It was an unprecedented scene.

"I am filing as a witness for an agent from the National Intelligence Service who arrested the defendant at the time."

The judge accepted the prosecution's witnesses. After that, the courtroom organizers brought office partitions to install them on the prosecutor's chair, the defense attorney's chair, and the participants' chairs, respectively. This is to protect the identity and take into account the professional characteristics of the witness.

A moment later, the door opened and the witness entered the courtroom. Hiding in a sheltered place, he swore to only tell the truth and answer questions truthfully. Including him, a total of three agents now sit on the witness stand. The fierce battle continued for more than two hours.

"We will rest for 30 minutes."

After a short break, the court announced that it would now switch to a public trial. Immediately, the witness protection partition was removed and the closed door was opened. The reporter waiting outside the courtroom rushed over. They eased their regret at not being able to attend the first part of the trial by taking photos of the partially covered facilities being cleaned. Meanwhile, the witnesses secretly left through a hidden entrance.

Yoon Jong Woo took off his tight jacket and threw it over his shoulder. Even the most fashionably styled hair gets messy.

"Ah, I didn't commit any crime, so I'm suddenly so scared. I came to court and was completely stunned. If we were just a little bit unlucky, we would both be sitting on the defendant's bench."

Taek Joo heard the conversation and loosened his tie, then he smiled. Like Yoon Jong Woo said, there were obviously a lot of variables, but luckily they all worked hard and led to the current results. He didn't know how things would be different if either of them made a mistake. Much of the truth is like that, but what should be revealed is often easily buried, distorted and difficult to determine.

After the case ended, Taek Joo's life returned to normal. He was still working as an NIS agent and his mother's concern for him remained unchanged.

Taek Joo still couldn't honestly tell his mother everything. He argued that the reason he was wanted was due to a computer error. The reason he hid it from her was because of NIS's job regulations, and his job there was just a simple support job. Of course, his mother's radar stopped as soon as she heard the words 'National Intelligence Agency'. So Taek Joo was ready for this incident, and lied and said not to worry because he would soon be transferred to another agency.

It's not pleasant to lie to his mother, but Taek Joo also doesn't want her to live a life of constant anxiety. The job of an intelligence officer suited him well enough to be considered a vocation. Every time he goes to a work scene, he feels like he is alive. Taek Joo is not sure if anything else can replace the joy and feeling of fulfillment after completing a mission.

His mother recently began receiving counseling to overcome the lingering psychological trauma. She was taking care of her life little by little. For peace and happiness between mother and son, it seems like Taek Joo would have to be willing to lie for the time being.

He decided to ask Zhenya for some help. Although he didn't know whether it was acceptable to use a public agency for such a private matter, thinking back, he didn't know why Zhenya would take such a position. Both he and Russia silently listened to his request without taking any countermeasures. It was an element that would only cause trouble if kept in the country, so they must have thought it would be better to bring Zhenya to the far away country of Korea.

"Anyway, I was very surprised when I heard the news a few days ago. Did you know that sir? That Russian lunatic will become the next Russian ambassador."

While Taek Joo was clicking his tongue, Yoon Jong Woo suddenly brought up the matter. He felt so guilty as if he was the cause of the incident. As if being a crazy person with a degree in Russia wasn't enough, now Zhenya has also fled to Korea. It's crazy.

Taek Joo took a deep breath and then gently shook his head. Yoon Jong Woo expressed concern, "Are you okay, sir?"

"Probably just for a while. Even if he ran here, he would get bored quickly."

Taek Joo sighed with that fragile hope. But he also did not intend to break his promise. It's just that it's hard to immediately start dating a guy who could have killed you and then saved you. The thought of being together with Zhenya made him a little scared.

That's why he hoped that Zhenya's strange feelings would naturally fade over time. Until then, Taek Joo was determined to be by his side whenever possible. As long as he still has a little affection for him, Zhenya won't act as carelessly as before. His weapon-grade cock was still uncomfortable, but Zhenya seemed like a suitable person to sleep with, so it wasn't a complete loss.

I need to go back to headquarters, what about you sir?"

"I'll enjoy the rest of my vacation."

That said, Taek Joo felt an ominous feeling flicker with the sudden vibration from inside his jacket. He took out his phone from his pocket, and sure enough, the headquarters phone number was displayed. Yoon Jong Woo looked at his phone with an unusual reaction. The tired boy stared at the constantly ringing phone and mumbled something.

"If you pick up the phone.."

"They called me and told me to find you. They know I'm with you."

Taek Joo was forced to receive the phone call. The call started and ended unilaterally as usual. He couldn't even open his mouth once. The new manager was a typical civil servant. The main characteristic of competent people is that they have the knack of forcing subordinates to obey orders.

"What did they say?"

"What are you talking about? There's a new mission."

A sigh came out. The two put their arms around each other and immediately smiled. It is a daily habit that can't be escaped while serving in NIS. Taek Joo couldn't avoid it.

Taek Joo gave up and was about to leave when the phone rang again. Somehow this time he felt like he knew who it was without having to check. It's vague, but it's an almost certain intuition. If he didn't pick up the phone it would ring for an eternity. Taek Joo pressed the answer button and brought the phone to his ear. Before he could say anything, the other end spoke up.

"Tell them you can't go."

The one who always says that is Zhenya. Looking at the timing of the call, it seemed like he hacked Taek Joo's phone.

The one who always says that is Zhenya. Looking at the timing of the call, it seemed like he hacked Taek Joo's phone.

"Hey, hacking and eavesdropping is illegal in korea? Did you forget?"

"Maybe you forgot, but diplomats have immunity."

They didn't necessarily give that privilege to Zhenya. Where will Korea's future go? Kwon Taek Joo suddenly felt worried and guilty.

He didn't know if Zhenya felt the same way he did, it wouldn't be easy because he had never considered a man to ever be an object of love in his life.

But there's one thing he's sure of, that Zhenya is the only person who makes his heart skip a beat, regardless of whether he's with men or women.

Taek Joo only wondered how much Zhenya could change for him. Every time he showed strange gestures or attitudes, a strange feeling of challenge and excitement rose within him.

Taek Joo laughed and decided to follow his heart.

"I'm coming back."

"Then hurry and come back."

## Chapter 4.13 – Honey Trap

The Russian Embassy is in Korea.

The president's goodwill visit and the Royal Ballet's performance in Korea are coming in a month. Of course, the embassy's work is also in a state of emergency. The staff spent a busy day answering phone calls that rang as soon as they got to work, receiving and sorting incoming faxes one by one, sending dispatches to relevant organizations and responding to various questions received via email.

After the official event ended, the embassy planned to hold a 'Russian Night' event for cultural exchange between Korea and Russia. That's why every department feels like it's sitting on fire. In addition, visa applications for students preparing to study abroad or train are also lined up so long they don't have time to breathe.

Unapproved documents continued to pile up on the ambassador's desk. Assistant Pavel Menshikov sighed deeply as he placed another stack of papers on it. There hasn't been a day without a sigh since the new ambassador was appointed.

It was sad to serve a young ambassador, but he also didn't want to be judged as an incompetent assistant. His eyes darkened when he heard that Zhenya was appointed as the next ambassador, because he was as famous as the president in his native Russia. No matter how many times he hoped it was just a baseless rumor.

But by the third month of the announcement there was still none of the feared chaos. In a way, it was a very natural result because the ambassador only appeared when he felt like it and usually didn't leave the house. There are no troublemakers, so there can't be any problems.

Around the time he was considering whether or not he should take over the overdue work on Zhenya's behalf today, there was a knock on the door, and soon the door opened. The Secretary of the Department of Culture and the Secretary of the Politburo entered one after another.

They opened their mouths as if they were too tired to ask about the familiar scene taking place in front of them.

"Where did the Ambassador go again?"

"I wish someone would tell me."

"Tsk tsk, there are too many documents."

"It should be done in a day or two."

All three sighed in unison and shook their heads.

"I wonder if the Kremlin knows where he went to like that after leaving his phone behind on a day like this."

"How could they not know? They just pretended not to know. No, this was expected from the beginning."

"I heard this appointment was personally requested by the ambassador. Why Korea?"

"Who knows. Even the biological mother who gave birth to him may not know."

Another sigh came from the three of them. Counting out the remainder of his term, the future seems even bleaker. They don't even want to work anymore.

The assistant still tried to explain the current situation as optimistically as possible.

"It's nice to see him in a good mood every once in a while. Have you heard from Russia? They say that just the slightest bit of anger can turn everything around him into a mess. Maybe it's better to let him do as he pleases and just stand around and observe."

The two scribes nodded in partial agreement. They were complaining about the delay in work, but in reality, they were also happy not to have to meet Zhenya. That's because of the rumors related to him. There are even rumors that there is a single one-man unit of the FSB. Everyone is understandably reluctant to become part of his unit. It's best not to

cause trouble with your superior, whose emotions fluctuate very erratically.

Ambassador work is never idle. As a top level diplomat, Zhenya represents Russia itself, so he has many foreign affairs tasks to deal with, and personal matters are also very important.

However, the Kremlin's ridiculous personnel reshuffle should be attributed to the relationship. I can't take it off, and after rubbing it many times, it's hard to keep it, so it's better to just send it far away. If Zhenya himself wants to go, there is no reason to hesitate.

Embassy staff have been drastically changed into competent diplomats, and there's a reason for that. Apparently they had anticipated the consul general's frequent absences and negligence from the moment he was appointed. Even if they realize it now, nothing will change.

"Come to think of it, what is the identity of the Korean belonging to our embassy?"

"I know, right? I also checked this out a while ago and was a bit confused. They said to contact the ambassador if we want to find that Korean employee."

The two secretaries took turns asking questions. In fact, not only them but all the employees in the embassy were curious about it, because no one had ever seen a Korean proudly write their name on the staff list. They don't know what he does or what he looks like. It's just that the special ambassador hired him, so he must be an acquaintance of his.

The Secretary of the General Department of Politics expressed dissatisfaction.

"Tch tsk. A person appointed through an umbrella hires another umbrella person."

"He is an atomic bomb, not just an umbrella. No, it has to be a nuclear weapon."

The words were full of metaphors but no one objected. They laughed and continued their work.

## Chapter 4.14 – Honey Trap

The gates opened and a group of people poured into the arrivals hall. Kwon Taek Joo immersed himself in the crowd. His neat outfit reminded people of a desk clerk who had just finished a business trip, but the bandages all over his body showed that this was no ordinary civil servant.

It's been a long time since he set foot on Korean soil. Kwon Taek Joo stopped for a moment and took a breath of the air he longed for. Enjoying the outside scenery through the glass walls. When he left it was early spring, and everyone's clothes were now lighter and more comfortable. It seems like summer is about to begin.

Kwon Taek Joo lifted his sleeve to check the time. It's past 7pm. He quickly took out his phone and turned it on. Luckily, even though the flight was delayed for 30 minutes, there was no call or text from his mother urging him to return home. If before, she would have contacted her dozens of times because she couldn't stand the anxiety of waiting. It was a good sign that his mother was gradually getting better.

But for some reason Zeana remained silent. Until yesterday Kwon Taek Joo seemed exhausted because he called every second until he answered.

"..."

Did something unfortunate happen to Zhenya? Kwon Taek Joo made an assumption and then laughed. Zhenya is someone who isn't even sick, so we should try to fight him to see if he bleeds. It's hard to imagine that something so serious happened to Zhenya that he couldn't raise a finger. Of course, monkeys sometimes fall from trees. Maybe some exceptional situation happened, so you can't predict it at all.

Kwon Taek Joo glanced down at his phone. Or would you be more lenient and take the initiative to call first? He looked for Zhenya's name

in the list of previous calls, and immediately his phone number filled the screen. However, Kwon Taek Joo's finger did not immediately press the call button but just lingered on it for a long time.

He was thinking about Zhenya's

reaction. Kwon Taek Joo's face suddenly grimaced. Just think about that guy's face raising his chin and smiling with a satisfied half mouth, then it would be better to give up, Kwon Taek Joo put down the phone.

"Is he reminding me?"

Suddenly Kwon Taek Joo felt a little itchy in his ears. It's probably because he's so tired, he needs to go home and rest well.

Kwon Taek Joo walked out and took a taxi. He told the driver his destination and immediately closed his eyes. His body quickly sagged.

It's never been like that, but lately the wheels seem to be spinning more intensely. After completing one mission. The next mission was waiting, then when he finished and returned, he was assigned a new mission. Because the period of regime change is approaching, every time the government changes, foreign and security policies also change and affect foreign interests. NIS work also cannot help but increase naturally. The mind understood that, but Kwon Taek Joo's body gradually became overloaded.

He intended to close his eyes just for a moment, but the taxi quickly stopped. To keep his mother from worrying, Kwon Taek Joo slapped his face hard to dispel the sleepiness. The taxi driver gave him anti fatigue medicine without saying a word. Kwon Taek Joo thanked him and drank it all in one gulp.

He got out of the taxi and trudged along. The entire apartment complex and Kwon Taek Joo's house were brightly lit at night. His mother usually goes for a walk to wait for him at the entrance, but today she was nowhere to be found. Every time he discovered that change, his mood softened.

Kwon Taek Joo intended to wait for the elevator but he went up the stairs. The closer he got to home, the neater his clothes were. He

buttoned his shirt up to his neck and tightened the tie that had been loosely removed. When Kwon Taek Joo arrived in front of the main door, he removed the tape on the back of his hand.

He unlocked the door and went inside. Kwon Taek Joo took off his shoes and walked into the living room.

"I'm home."

The mother was sitting in the living room, smiling and welcoming him.

"Are you back?"

Kwon Taek Joo was saying hello when he stopped, because a surprise guest had arrived. It seemed he knew why his mother hadn't contacted him. She must have been busy cutting fruit to entertain this unexpected guest.

None other than Zhenya, who looked up at Kwon Taek Joo while stabbing his fork into an apple that had been cut into bite-sized pieces. Zhenya looked at Kwon Taek Joo's face contorted in surprise and then raised the corner of his mouth.

While Kwon Taek Joo stood there staring at Zhenya in protest, his mother spoke up.

"He came to play. The ambassador has come all the way here."

His mother hit Kwon Taek Joo's back and said hello. Zhenya couldn't understand Korean, but his facial expression had become more arrogant.

His mother knew that Zhenya was the Russian ambassador to Korea. And Kwon Taek Joo's mother believed that he would quit his job at the National Intelligence Agency as promised and work as an office worker for him. His mother was someone who had lived her entire life in a culture of respect for superiors, and because he was Kwon Taek Joo's superior, his mother must have welcomed him so respectfully.

"You're here."

Kwon Taek Joo didn't want his mother to get angry so he greeted him in a brusque manner, and she also nodded lightly. He showed a

dissatisfied expression. His mother smiled wryly and said, "He must be tired," then suddenly grabbed him and pulled him out the door. Kwon Taek Joo was gently dragged away while continuing to silently protest against Zhenya. Of course, he just ate the apple as if he was completely blind.

The mother cornered Kwon Taek Joo against the wall and lowered her voice to scold him.

"What's wrong? Why are you being so rude to the ambassador?"

"It's normal, mom. He is much younger than me. After all, he doesn't understand Korean, and since he's a foreigner, he's used to dealing comfortably with superiors or elders."

"What, him? Foreigner

? Ya, ya. Did mom teach you that? If you are a superior, you must show respect!"

"Oh mom, you are truly a soldier in your blood."

Kwon Taek Joon replied jokingly and was hit on the back again.

"That young man was a big help. When I go on a business trip, he comes to my house every day because my mother is alone. Why is that? How can anyone take care of their subordinates like that?"

His mother grumbled with a dissatisfied look on her face.

"That's right. Our Ambassador really does have feelings."

"Don't say such annoying things."

"Because I'm tired, mom. The Russian consulate is not far away."

"No matter how tired you are, you can't act like that. Mom doesn't have any great ambitions. I just hope you can continue working there. Do you know yet?"

"Okay, okay. I'll eat some rice first. I'm so hungry."

"Eat the fruit first."

"Fruit first? Where's the rice?"

"Mom has plans to go to the market a little more. It would have been nice to know in advance that the ambassador was coming.. Didn't you know too? You have to tell mom."

"Ah, because of that? Oh god, it doesn't have to be like that, Mom. You can eat anything.."

"You really.."

Did Zeana hear it? Kwon Taek Joo's mother glanced back and hit her eldest son on the back, the sound of hitting the back rang out clearly. Kwon Taek Joo did aegyo with his mother to get out of the troublesome situation.

"You were wrong. But really. I'm starving to death. So today we'll just eat with side dishes. Huh?"

"Oh, how can this be? Stay there."

Mom left quickly and came back.

"Go talk to the ambassador."

Mom pushed Kwon Taek Joo into the living room and quickly left the house. He didn't understand why his mother was in such a hurry. The door opened and closed, and the door was locked carefully. The sound of his mother's footsteps also quickly faded away. Anyway, it can't be stopped.

Kwon Taek Joo shook his head and changed his expression then returned to the living room. Zhenya still leisurely ate the fruit. Even under Kwon Taek Joo's frowning eyes, the strawberries looked very delicious.

"What brings you here, Mr. Ambassador?"

"You said you were scared and couldn't sleep because you were worried about your mother being alone in a far away country. So I have to do something, right?"

There was no way it could have such a profound meaning, Kwon Taek Joo stood with his arms crossed, wondering.

"Just how many days have you been going back and forth? According to my mother, it wasn't once or twice?"

"What does that have to do with anything? My mother likes it very much."

"There is some mistake here. What mother doesn't want her son to look good in the eyes of his superiors?"

Zhenya shrugged. If he says more, his mouth will only hurt. Seeing him at home only makes Kwon Taek Joo feel more tired.

He reached out and loosened the tie around his neck, then unbuttoned a few uncomfortable buttons on his shirt. Kwon Taek Joo had been in the dry plane for a long time so his throat was also dry. He wanted to eat some fruit first.

Kwon Taek Joo did not hesitate to approach Zhenya. He sat close to the table, one eye was staring at the top of his head. Kwon Taek Joo ignored it and picked up the strawberry to take a bite. The refreshing juice spreads out, instantly refreshing the dry palate. Kwon Taek Joo quickly ate a bite, then picked up an apple and asked about

Zhenya's recent situation.

"What about work at the embassy?"

"You don't need to worry. I said I would appoint a qualified assistant."

"How can my country be so good to me?"

"If you still don't know, will you teach me?"

Zhenya muttered and slowly ran his fingers across Kwon Taek Joo's neck. The unexpected touch gave him goosebumps. He was startled and dropped the strawberry he was holding in his hand. On the white shirt there was a light pink stain.

Kwon Taek Joo sighed and was about to take off his shirt but he immediately stopped.

He really wanted to put the shirt in the laundry basket and take a shower, but that was unthinkable in front of Zhenya. It's been a while

since Kwon Taek Joo saw him again even if it's just a small stimulus, Zhenya might rush onto him. His mother was about to return, he absolutely cannot let such a situation happen.

Kwon Taek Joo regretfully glanced at the bathroom. Zhenya saw through the reason without difficulty and grinned.

"It's so dark."

"What?"

"I told you, I'll stay here."

Zhenya obnoxiously claims innocence. Didn't he touch his neck just now? If Zhenya had just sat still, nothing would have happened.

Kwon Taek Joo can't go to the bathroom even without any provocation from him. Even if he didn't have that thought, he didn't know if Zhenya had dark thoughts or not.

"Don't be too cautious. That way, only you will suffer."

Now we are even pushing the responsibility. That's ridiculous.

Kwon Taek Joo glared at Zhenya's shameless face and quickly stood up. He went into the room and brought a change of clothes. He obediently sat quietly on the sofa. Kwon Taek Joo took off his wet shirt, threw it in the laundry basket and went into the bathroom. He locked the door from the inside.

But for some reason the door couldn't close tightly, it felt like something was stuck, Kwon Taek Joo turned around to look curiously. Zhenya had been standing there all along, holding the door tightly.

"Hey, you said something different just now."

Kwon Taek Joo frowned in protest, but there was no way it would work. Zhenya's pupils narrowed with excitement.

"I was going to sit still, but I don't think I can."

"This crazy guy. Don't go into heat anytime soon."

Kwon Taek Joo used his whole body to push the door, but it did not close. On the contrary, the gap only widens. The wooden panel is bent by force from both sides. If it endured it any longer, the wooden panel would probably break. If so, how will Kwon Taek Joo explain to his mother that is coming back? The door was so old that you could break it in half alone? How can he believe that?

The door arched and began to creak, Kwon Taek Joo gave up and let go. At that moment, the door opened wide and Zhenya rushed inside. He grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's face with both hands and just touched his lips. Zhenya's unstrapped lips fell over his eyes, then his forehead, then slid down his nose and onto his lips. Then Zhenya happily licked his cheek and gently touched the corner of his lips.

Kwon Taek Joo was about to try to argue whether these things were sweet or not, but during that time, Zhenya placed his lips on his. The feeling of softness and wet sound begins to concentrate on the lips. Zhenya gently sucked Kwon Taek Joo's upper lip and then smiled softly.

"It's fine here."

Zeana smirked. While Kwon Taek Joo still stood there dreamily, Zhenya quickly kissed him. Hot breath filled his mouth and spread to his throat. His head naturally tilted back. Just like that, Kwon Taek Joo was pushed back and his thigh accidentally touched the sink. Zhenya did not stop there but continued to pressure Kwon Taek Joo. His upper body was constantly pressed down and pressured to the point that his waist stiffened. Just as he winced, Zhenya placed his lips on his and lifted Kwon Taek Joo to sit on the sink.

Zeana lifted his chin and bit his bottom lip, then released it, then bit it again before suddenly sliding his tongue inside. The tongue mixed together and the sweet flavors of strawberries and apples spread in the mouth, saliva kept rising. Zeana sucked hard on Kwon Taek Joo's tongue, which was about to suffocate in a sea of boiling saliva, the pressure as if pulling the tongue out. Finally, the tongue pulled out of his mouth and saliva flowed down his chin.

The person playing with Kwon Taek Joo's tongue bent down to kiss around the wet chin. When Zhenya's lips gradually fell down his neck

like flowing water. Kwon Taek Joo quickly patted his shoulder.

"Hey, wait. Stop for a moment."

Zeana's lips parted at the declaration of an emergency ceasefire. Kwon Taek Joo took advantage of that time to take a breath. Zhenya stared at him with a red face then lowered his head to hug his collarbone and nibble the skin on it. Kwon Taek Joo grabbed Zhenya's face with both hands and pulled him in front of him as he attacked persistently as if he had been starved for several days.

"Stop for a moment. If you behave obediently now, I will definitely listen to you later."

Kwon Taek Joo proposed a quite reasonable proposal. However, Zhenya just looked into his eyes without much reaction, as if wanting to confirm the sincerity of those words. He felt dissatisfied with having to believe in promises and having to restrain his current desires. Zhenya's face was pushed away with an expression wondering if he had been tricked or not.

"It's really piling up."

Zhenya does not hide his lust. He grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's hands that were covering his face and slowly pulled them down. The two people's eyes met through their outstretched fingers. The two eyes began to shine with a slight fire.

"Hm."

But not long after, Kwon Taek Joo frowned and groaned, because Zhenya suddenly sank his teeth into the inside of his wrist. Kwon Taek Joo tried to pull his arm back but was bitten harder. There was a dark kiss mark there when Zhenya's lips parted.

At that moment there was the sound of the front door unlocking, it seemed like his mother had returned. No matter how you look at it, the image of two grown men entering a cramped bathroom is not normal. Zhenya smiled happily watching Kwon Taek Joo's confusion.

"I'm really looking forward to it later!"

Zhenya whispered softly then obediently closed the door and went out. Kwon Taek Joo heard his mother telling the boy to wait a bit because she would prepare the meal right away. Of course it was Korean which Zhenya couldn't understand.

After Zhenya's brief answers, the two exchanged several different stories. The special thing is that Kwon Taek Joo's mother speaks Korean and Zhenya speaks Russian. He put his ear on the door and eavesdropped on the conversation. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but laugh. The way they talk is so different, there is no answer to any question. However, it was miraculous that the atmosphere was not broken at all. Other than concerns, the two seem to have lived very harmoniously together in recent times.

He must go take a shower. Kwon Taek Joo took off all the remaining clothes on his body and was about to go to the bathroom. Suddenly, a sentence from Zhenya from outside made his heart almost fall.

"Thanks to you, I will get something cool. I will receive full service from your son."

(I hope this sentence makes sense, but in short Zhenya is just saying that he will receive sex from Kwon Taek Joo.)

This kid...

Kwon Taek Joo grabbed the door handle and let go. He couldn't suddenly run out naked and grab that bastard's neck. It was lucky because his mother did not understand Russian at all.

Kwon Taek Joo finished showering and went out, his mother was still engrossed in cooking. Zhenya stood sideways toward the nearby kitchen table. The crossed-arms look doesn't seem to be particularly helpful. He just attentively watched his mother prepare the meal while chattering happily.

He didn't know if it's almost done cooking or not, but the aroma was overwhelming. Even the steam rising from the rice cooker makes the atmosphere in the kitchen warmer. The sound of dishes clinking together also adds comfort. Just standing still and looking makes Kwon Taek Joo feel like his tired mood has improved a lot.

Zhenya felt that gaze and turned his head towards Kwon Taek Joo. He looked at him without looking away. Kwon Taek Joo was also looking towards Zhenya with a rare friendly face. At that time, Kwon Taek Joo's mother picked up the marinated bean sprouts and asked him to taste it. Zhenya just stared at the bean sprouts presented in front of him, as if he didn't understand what to do with it.

Kwon Taek Joo shook his head and approached the two. He hugged his mother's shoulders from behind and suddenly ate the offered bean sprouts. Zhenya looked at Kwon Taek Joo strangely as he chewed the unprepared food.

"Um, it's delicious. The ambassador is truly blessed. My mother cooks so well. Not everyone can taste it."

"Oh mom, ah you're really.. No, it's really not that good."

The mother covered her mouth and laughed and lightly punched Kwon Taek Joo's hip. That was a signal for him to quickly prepare the table. The son returned after two months, but in front of his superiors, he had to be given priority first.

Kwon Taek Joo quietly took out spoons, chopsticks and side dishes. His mother said to sit down and then personally pulled Zhenya's chair out a bit.

Zhenya sat down familiarly and looked at the long iron rod placed on the table. Only then did Kwon Taek Joo remember and take out a fork that looked like a foreign object and gave it to him.

The table was quickly filled with food. Zhenya looked around at the colorful dishes and muttered uninspiredly.

"It smells strange."

His mother's eyes lit up and asked, "What is it?". Kwon Taek Joo's mother couldn't understand, so he spoke poorly.

"It's so delicious, he's sure he can eat a lot."

"Oh, Ambassador, please eat a lot."

Kwon Taek Joo's mother pushed the side dishes forward and offered them to Zhenya. Zhenya looked at Kwon Taek Joo bewilderedly. He just smiled fakely and nibbled on the food, then rolled his eyes and told him to eat quickly. Zhenya glared at the face that Kwon Taek Joo only showed in front of his mother and picked up his fork. The hand holding the fork was a bit hesitant, the fork was wandering on the table. Just then, the fork stuck into the cutest looking piece of pickled cucumber and Zhenya popped it into his mouth

Zhenya's chin moved slowly and then suddenly stopped. Sure enough, for a while, he said nothing, didn't move and covered his mouth with his fist. The tip of the fork in the boy's hand also seemed to tremble slightly. His mother seemed worried about the unusual reaction.

"Not to your taste?"

"No way. He eats Korean food very well. It's probably so delicious that he's touched."

(Not Kwon Taek Joo lying haha.)

His mother continued to pick up the dishes one by one and piled them into Zhenya's rice bowl. Kwon Taek Joo rested his chin on his hand and leaned towards Zhenya with a gentle smile. His expression was quite friendly, but that smile was not really sincere. Under the dining table, Kwon Taek Joo lightly kicked his leg.

Zhenya put strength into his chin. He stared dissatisfiedly at Kwon Taek Joo and then silently continued his meal as if nothing happened. A smile appeared on the worried mother's face again. She explained the effectiveness of the ingredients used and repeatedly asked everyone not to be shy and eat a lot. When Zhenya's cup was empty, his mother immediately poured water and enjoyed the sight of him eating contentedly. It seemed like his mother wasn't pretending to flatter Kwon Taek Joo's superiors, but she was actually very excited that Zhenya was here. Being alone in a house without Kwon Taek Joo was also very difficult.

She didn't know how long it has been since there has been such vitality in the house. Kwon Taek Joo is often away from home because of work,

and even when he stops by, he only sleeps. Part of it was because he had a lot to hide from his mother, but that wasn't all. It seems that she is not that close to her son.

Suddenly Kwon Taek Joo stared at Zhenya. Surely this brat had his own dark inner self, but he should be a little proud that Zhenya had kept an eye on his mother while he was unaware. After a while, their eyes met.

"Eat slowly."

Kwon Taek Joo picked up a piece of fish directly onto Zhenya's spoon. He didn't eat it right away but just stared at the spoon. In a deep place that hands cannot reach there is a gentle and delicate feeling lingering.

"You guys can sleep and then go."

The mother followed to the front of the elevator to express her regret. Zhenya looked at Kwon Taek Joo, this little woman seemed to be asking for something with such a regretful face. Kwon Taek Joo shrugged and translated deceitfully.

"Mom told you to go away quickly."

Zhenya's gaze fell suspiciously. Kwon Taek Joo ignored and stopped her mother.

"Oh, mom too. Why does it come to that? Ambassador, is it comfortable to sleep at my house? Look at this. It will be awkward for him."

Zhenya's expression didn't change at all, but Kwon Taek Joo said he was feeling awkward. Then he lifted his mother's back.

"I'll take the ambassador home and have a drink on the way. I don't know if it's late or not, so go to bed first. Oh, don't worry mom, I'll take good care of him."

His mother happily agreed. Although performing well with the ambassador had nothing to do with promotion, Kwon Taek Joo's mother was enthusiastic. The mother watched both of them get into the elevator before going into the house.

As soon as the door closed, Zhenya stuck to him. "Hey", even if he protested, he didn't mind and continued to bury his face in the other

person's hair. At times like these, Kwon Taek Joo feels like he's raising a big dog, not just a crocodile.

Zhenya's car was parked in the underground parking lot. Like its owner, it flaunts an existence that cannot be ignored. The already narrow parking lot looks more cramped. So everyone just stays away from it? The Bugatti was empty. Anyway, no more worrying about parking.

"Are you driving?"

"I'll drive."

Zhenya started the engine and nodded to get in the car. He sat in the driver's seat and Kwon Taek Joo was in the passenger seat sitting next to him. "Clack", as soon as the door was closed, the car slid out of the parking lot.

Kwon Taek Joo leaned his chair back deeply and leaned down comfortably. There was no music in the car, only engine noise. The city center late at night was almost empty of cars and people. Kwon Taek Joo looked far into the street lights. He was tired after eating and taking a bath. The gentle vibrations transmitted from the car's body also contributed to making his body more lethargic.

Not long after, Zhenya's Bugatti arrived in front of his house. When the sensor in the garage is activated, the rolling door opens. Zeana drove inside and turned off the engine. At the same time, the lights in the car also turned off.

"Here."

Zhenya opened the door and was about to get out of the car, but he looked back at Kwon Taek Joo who had been silent all this time. They arrived but he didn't make any movement. Zeana leaned over to take a look, Kwon Taek Joo completely tilted his head and fell asleep, sighing deeply and seemingly very tired. Having to wake Kwon Taek Joo up to receive the service he was promised.

Zhenya observed Kwon Taek Joo sleeping for a while longer and then got out of the car. Then he walked around the body of the car and opened the passenger door. Kwon Taek Joo's body leaned that way and

slowly fell down. Zhenya grabbed him, then gently slung him over one shoulder and leisurely walked into the house.

Kwon Taek Joo fell asleep and was put to bed. The soft mattress supported his body, Kwon Taek Joo instinctively rubbed his face and then dreamily and unconsciously crawled into the blanket.

Zhenya looked at that figure while unbuttoning his shirt. The corner of his mouth lifted up to form a long curve. Kwon Taek Joo fell into a deep sleep without knowing what was about to happen to him.

## Chapter 4.15 – Honey Trap

"Hmm?"

Kwon Taek Joo's eyes opened wide. Whether it looks familiar or not, the ceiling quickly fills the view. How did he get here? Kwon Taek Joo recalled the memories of last night. He remembered leaving the house and getting into Zhenya's car, but he didn't remember getting out of the car himself. It seemed like his consciousness was cut off midway. That's also because he hasn't been able to sleep properly for a long time recently.

Kwon Taek Joo rolled his eyes and looked around. The place where he was staying seemed to be the Zhenya family's bedroom. He had only been here once before going on a business trip, so he was still a bit confused. Zhenya was nowhere to be seen, and Kwon Taek Joo couldn't feel his presence either. Or maybe Zhenya isn't home. He vaguely speculated but had no intention of getting up to confirm. Zhenya's body odor was still wafting onto the bed sheets. Regardless, he buried his head in it.

Suddenly the blanket slipped off. Even though it was summer, he suddenly felt unusually cold, because Kwon Taek Joo didn't have a single piece of clothing on.

Thinking back, his mind felt refreshed as if he had just experienced a deep sleep, but his body felt stiff and sore as if he had struggled all night. And that discomfort is especially concentrated in the groin.

Kwon Taek Joo sat up and immediately grabbed his aching waist. He groaned and checked the area between his legs. It was unexpectedly clean. However, everywhere he can see there are colorful hickeys. The insides of his thighs were covered in dark red bruises. Did Kwon Taek Joo not know that he was bitten like this? He seemed dumbfounded by the loss of feeling in his body.

Kwon Taek Joo tried to stand up from the bed but his legs had completely lost all strength. Just sitting down made the inside of his butt numb beyond words. Even without careful inspection, it is clear what condition he is in.

"We did it, right?"

Kwon Taek Joo muttered uselessly. And it didn't seem like it was over in just one or two sessions, but he actually slept very well.

"What happened?"

Kwon Taek Joo looked down at his lower body and asked. There was no response, so he could only feel it by feeling. Looking at it without any vitality, it was enough to see that it had fallen asleep like him. Damn Zhenya, he's the only one who's happy.

He was so thirsty, Kwon Taek Joo went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. Inside was empty, with only a few bottles of bottled water lying around. Kwon Taek Joo was grateful for that simple thing, then opened the bottle and took a sip. Every time the collarbone moves, the skin around the neck with countless bites becomes itchy.

Kwon Taek Joo wiped his wet lips with the back of his hand while observing the inside of the house. The house looks like a model house. The bed, sofa and TV are all fully equipped but there is absolutely no sense of living here, as if they have never been used since they were purchased.

Kwon Taek Joo threw himself down on the sofa that had a slight leather smell. Where did that guy go anyway? It was a weekday, but he was sure that Zeana was not at work at the embassy.

Not knowing how long he would wait, Kwon Taek Joo turned on the TV to watch. The noon news is being broadcast. Kwon Taek Joo absentmindedly looked at the screen and suddenly remembered his mother. Thinking back, he hadn't been able to contact her until now after saving he would be home late.

Kwon Taek Joo went straight to the bedroom and found the phone. The battery is less than 10%. Sure enough, he received a missed call from

his mother. a text message asking where he slept and if he went to work. Kwon Taek Joo pressed the call button. Not long after. "Hello" his mother picked up the phone.

"Mom, it's me. Yesterday I drank too much so I didn't go home. They didn't let me go home until morning. I'll go take a sauna and then go straight to headquarters."

"Oh my God. You are not allowed to eat fake wine soup."

"I will go eat now."

"How much did you drink to make your voice so hoarse? Are you tired?"

There is another reason why Kwon Taek Joo's voice is hoarse, but even he couldn't say it. He just blamed everything on alcohol and reassured his mother that he would be home soon.

When the call ended, Kwon Taek Joo felt a presence at the front door. He looked outside, Zhenya had just entered the house with a heavy plastic bag in his hand, it looked like he had returned from the convenience store.

Zeana placed his purchases on the table and stared at Kwon Taek Joo. For some reason, his face seemed happier than yesterday. He put down his phone and approached Zhenya.

"Did something happen last night?"

"It's because it hasn't been filled in for a while? It seems tighter than before. I was only going to do it twice, but because of that hole.."

Zhenya was shameless and didn't change his expression, Kwon Taek Joo immediately raised his hand to cover the bastard's mouth. The guy immediately licked his palm, then grabbed his hips and pressed on Kwon Taek Joo's lower abdomen.

"If you feel sorry, you can do it again now. The day is still long."

"I'm trying to enjoy the long day."

Kwon Taek Joo tried to defend and push away Zhenya's chin that was stuck to him. Zhenya gently lifted Kwon Taek Joo up and placed him on

the table. Things bought at the convenience store spilled out, some of them fell to the floor making loud sounds.

When Kwon Taek Joo reflexively turned to look at the falling object, Zhenya grabbed his chin and turned him towards her. Blue eyes filled his face, eyes looking straight at him looked quite serious. Every time he looked at that gentle face, Kwon Taek Joo felt like he was disarmed. He often gets carried away without even realizing that his heart rate and pulse are becoming irregular.

This time is no different. His heart softened, and he also relaxed the hand that was pushing Zhenya away. The sensitive guy noticed that change and slowly approached. A sigh came out as the parted lips were falling. At a distance where the bridge of their noses were about to touch, Kwon Taek Joo stared at Zhenya's lips, and he looked straight into Kwon Taek Joo's eyes, his thin, broken breath trembling uncontrollably.

Zhenya continued to kiss him forcefully. Zhenya's upper lip surrounded Kwon Taek Joo's lower lip and then pressed firmly on his face. Kwon Taek Joo bit his upper lip and grabbed Zhenya's face. He naturally leaned back as if clinging to Zhenya. Chok,

chok

, the sound was repeated over and over again from two lips that met and gradually wrapped tightly around each other. His body also gradually grew hotter.

It would be great if he could focus on that, but the sound of the unturned TV kept entering his ears. It was news that the North was recently conducting a missile test in the presence of the supreme leader, and when the government expressed regret, public opinion poured out strong criticism. . It's not a matter of one day, but whenever the relationship with North Korea becomes tense, Kwon Taek Joo has no choice but to worry. It's like an occupational disease of yours.

"..ah.. Come on..."

Kwon Taek Joo muttered like an ominous omen. Zhenya was kissing his chin and neck, finally looking up at the TV. On the screen, North Korea's

missile launch data is being broadcast. Zhenya went straight to the TV and unplugged it. He pulled it so hard that the plug shook.

At that moment, Kwon Taek Joo's phone vibrated. He awkwardly checked the sender and then sighed as if the ground was disappearing.

Zhenya turned him around and pulled Kwon Taek Joo's legs and placed them completely on the table. He leaned towards him then turned his head and tried to kiss him again. The lips without hesitation fell down to meet Kwon Taek Joo's lips, it wasn't his lips, but his stiff cell phone, because Kwon Taek Joo suddenly put the phone between his lips.

"Headquarters called."

Kwon Taek Joo announced with an annoyed expression. He gently pushed Zhenya's shoulder then stood up and walked down the table. Zhenya's dissatisfied eyes followed him.

Kwon Taek Joo got dressed and answered the phone. When he buttoned up his shirt, the call ended. Feeling Zhenya's gaze, Kwon Taek Joo turned his head. Zhenya has been standing in front of the door ever since he reported the sad news.

"I have to go to headquarters. They called"

There's no way headquarters wouldn't know that Kwon Taek Joo just returned yesterday. Yet they still call. So, either there was a problem with the previous job, or another urgent task arose. Whatever it is, it wasn't going to be fun.

Kwon Taek Joo left the house without looking back. The door made a loud noise and then closed. Finally, only Zhenya was left alone in the large house. He stared at the ramen packages scattered on the floor with dissatisfied eyes. So what's the point of coming to Korea? Looks like Zhenya has to prepare countermeasures.

"Senior, don't you need a lot of rest?"

Yoon Jong Woo was there to welcome Kwon Taek Joo when he entered the headquarters. The boy glanced at his frowning face for no reason. He calmly nodded and put his arm around Yoon Jong Woo's shoulder. He shouted soundlessly as he tensed his body and then grunted and

groaned. He ignored Yoon Jong Woo when he couldn't leave the overworked gunman alone and personally took him to the manager's office.

Chief Kwak is the new person filling the vacancy of Chief Lim. Although he is not an agent like Chief Lim, he is so knowledgeable about North Korea that he is in turn rated as the Minister of Unification. If there is one thing in common with Chief Lim, it is the harsh way he treats his subordinates.

No matter how physically strong Kwon Taek Joo is, his blood will run out after a few months without rest. People can die from overwork, right? He arrived in front of Chief Kwak's office and proved that he would not be assigned the new assignment.

Kwon Taek Joo took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

"Come in."

He regained his composure and went inside. When Kwon Taek Joo, who had been waiting for a while, appeared, Chief Kwak glanced at the chair opposite. He quietly walked there, then gently bowed his head and sat down.

First, Head of Department Kwak expressed his admiration for the achievements he has achieved in recent times.

"It was a lot of work to get the final job done safely."

"Yes, that's what I should do."

"I heard that you are very proud of your achievements, but the more I meet you, the more I understand that."

He laughed and changed the subject, asking, "Have you seen the news today?"

"Is it because of the missile testing conducted in North Korea?"

"Right. Recently, intelligence information obtained shows that the locations of missile launch pads in North Korea have been changed a lot. Just yesterday, it was reported that the launch pad was aiming into the sky, and before that a missile test was conducted under the

supervision of the supreme leadership. I don't know if it's related, but I heard that a high-ranking North Korean official will soon be making an unofficial visit to China. You go and find out what's going on."

"You mean right now?"

"I knew you were tired when you got back yesterday. But what if the problem is urgent?"

Kwon Taek Joo raised his eyebrows looking very sad, but he seemed to have no intention of handing over the job to someone else.

"I left because you told me to. but I don't know what to say to my mother."

"If necessary, I will even give you an official document in disguise. You can also get help from the Russian embassy where you work."

"That work.."

"What's up? You seem quite close to him, right? The two often come and go together privately"

"You seem to know a lot.."

"I'm just trying to be friendly with my subordinates."

Chief Kwak smiled sarcastically. It seemed like the raccoon had left and the snake had arrived. He didn't want to talk too long so he quietly stood up and nodded. Manager Kwak saw Kwon Taek Joo off as he left the office without making a sound and said, "Let's go drink together when you get back."

Kwon Taek Joo sighed. Right now he doesn't know if he lived for work or work to live, He doesn't want anything but just wants to rest. Once this mission is completed, it looks like he will have to take a leave of absence. How should he explain this to his mother? What would he say to Zhenya? It's so stuffy. If he confessed honestly, he might be tied up. Wouldn't it be better to announce it after he left?

Kwon Taek Joo considered many different reasons and then went straight home. It was disappointing that his mother was not at home, it seemed she had

aone

out to the market. It also didn't look like Zhenya had come to the house. Is he quietly waiting for Kwon Taek Joo at his house?

He packed his things with tons of thoughts in his head. His mother did not return when Kwon Taek Joo was about to leave. And there has been no communication from Zhenya either.

He called a taxi and told the driver to go straight to the airport. Looking out the window for a moment, he called his mother.

"Yes, son. What?"

"I stopped by the house but mom wasn't home, I'm gone now. I probably won't be able to go home for a while because I'm busy with work. I told my mother last time. There is a large-scale event organized by the embassy for a month. This business trip will be extremely busy because I have a lot of work to share with the Russian department, not many people are going to work and the time zone difference."

"Uh, you must be very tired. Mom, it's okay, don't work late and eat well."

"It's just a little uncomfortable. It's a job that has to be done every day."

Maybe his mother will make some side dishes, right? Has he bought new clothes for his mother yet?

"Food will be served and you've got everything you need. I'm just calling to say don't worry if I can't contact you for a while. I hope you take good care of yourself too"

"You talk like you'll be gone for a long time"

"Mom, I have to go. I will contact you later."

"Yes, work hard."

After the call ended. Kwon Taek Joo continued to look at the phone. Since he was leaving right now, he should have contacted Zhenya. The problem is that no excuse fits him. Normally, Zhenya would try to

interfere by forcing him to refuse the new mission, and he was also uncomfortable with being apart all that time.

After thinking for a while, Kwon Taek Joo tried calling Zhenya. However, for some reason, there was only a continuous ringing sound.

Of course that guy doesn't always wait for Kwon Taek Joo. He may not answer the phone once or twice. But he was now worried, because it rarely happened before and Zhenya always contacted him first, and he also had no contacts in Korea other than him. Is he sulky? Kwon Taek Joo thought about leaving a message, but decided against it. If Zhenya was truly sulky, it seemed like he should reassure him with words rather than making a unilateral announcement, and also to avoid future consequences.

The taxi quickly arrived at the airport. Kwon Taek Joo checked in early after receiving pre-booked tickets at the headquarters.

Before entering the departure hall, he called Zhenya again. But this time, the other end of the line was also silent. After going through the scanner, he continued to try calling when he reached the boarding gate. Many times but it's all in vain.

Kwon Taek Joo lifted his sleeve to check the time. It's time to board the plane. He didn't know how many days this mission would last.

Finally, he touched the call button again but could not hear Zhenya's voice. Looking at the call history that has been accumulated since now. Kwon Taek Joo feels like a stalker without cause.

"I guess he can't answer."

He gave up, but still couldn't take his eyes off the phone. Even though he didn't turn off the power, how could

Zhenya

not answer the phone until this hour? Of course, even if something goes wrong, Kwon Taek Joo should worry about someone else, not Zhenya.

Even so, the mouse pressed the call button as if thinking about the cat. "Please answer the phone." Kwon Taek Joo muttered. At the same time, a voice instruction came out asking everyone to board the plane as soon as possible. And on the phone, there were still just indifferent beeps that kept dropping.

Suddenly the beeping stopped. Then came the breathing sound of the man he had been waiting for all this time. Zhenya is outside and there is a lot of noise. The other end of the line spoke before Kwon Taek Joo could open his mouth.

"I'm busy now. Let's talk later."

"What?"

As soon as he asked again, the call ended. Kwon Taek Joo looked down at the phone bewilderedly. Call connection time is less than 3 seconds. Needless to say, he felt quite embarrassed. Is Zhenya busy, is he going to the embassy? Luckily, there didn't seem to be any problems.

Kwon Taek Joo left a message saying he was going abroad for a while for work, then turned off his phone and got on the plane.

The flight is about two hours to Beijing. Kwon Taek Joo joined the crowd and went to the immigration checkpoint. An airport employee stands holding a sign in the reception hall. Kwon Taek Joo's name is openly written on it.

"Mr. Kwon?"

He approached Kwon Taek Joo, asking if he could predict his facial features. The feeling of déjà vu came rushing back. This time too, Kwon Taek Joo did not hear that anyone special would come to welcome him. He opened his cell phone, but there were no messages on it other than the text message sent when entering a foreign country.

Has his existence been exposed? If so, it is necessary to confirm who is trying to reach him and for what purpose. The other person already knew about his identity and appearance, but he couldn't refuse blindly

After pondering, Kwon Taek Joo slowly nodded.

"Please follow me."

He went first. Kwon Taek Joo followed silently and took out his prescription glasses and put them on. If he breaks the stem of the glasses and pulls it out, a needle containing a powerful anesthetic will come out. Kwon Taek Joo can't afford to assemble a gun right now, so he's trying to prepare for an emergency with that.

Kwon Taek Joo left the crowded scanner table, and the surroundings became even more deserted. The employee walked ahead of him to the elevator and occasionally checked to see if Kwon Taek Joo was following him. Kwon Taek Joo followed him up to a mezzanine, where there was a waiting room. It doesn't even have a name so it seems like it's used by a designated few.

There was not even a single person around at this time. The staff member guided Kwon Taek Joo to that place, knocked on the closed door, bowed politely and left. After confirming that he had gone down, Kwon Taek Joo quietly took off his glasses. Then he bent the glasses and held them tightly in his hands.

When he opened the door, the panoramic view of the runway outside the window filled the view. And an unexpected person was sitting in front of Kwon Taek Joo.

"Why don't you put it on?"

He folded his glasses and held them in his hand. He immediately realized Kwon Taek Joo's ulterior motive and even laughed at him, It's Zhenya.

The boy who should have been in Korea was sitting with his back facing the runway of Beijing airport. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't understand.

"What's going on?"

"Want anything to drink? We still have a little time before we get on the plane."

Zhenya didn't answer the question but just sat there relaxing. He snapped his fingers signaling him to come closer. Kwon Taek Joo walked over as requested and sat down on the opposite side.

"Explain. Why are you here?"

Zhenya threw a paper envelope at Kwon Taek Joo. A series of confusing situations. He frowned. Zhenya nodded towards the envelope and told him to check its contents, then poured the wine into a glass and enjoyed its aroma. Kwon Taek Joo looked at him suspiciously for a moment then opened the envelope first.

He took out the papers inside and flipped through them without thinking much. But not long after, Kwon Taek Joo's eyes widened.

"This.."

He stared at Zhenya, as if trying to make sure he wasn't mistaken about what was in front of him. Zhenya quietly raised the corners of his mouth and took a sip of the sparkling wine in the glass.

No matter how many times Kwon Taek Joo rereads it, it cannot be a mistake. That document is why he's here now. The inside story of North Korea's recent moves is fully written there. Where the hell did Zhenya get this from? Kwon Taek Joo doesn't even think he used a legal way to get it.

So, is this the reason why he couldn't contact Zhenya, why there was so much noise around him when he picked up the phone and why Zhenya asked to talk later because he was busy?

Kwon Taek Joo rechecked the report with confused eyes.

".Can I give this to you?"

"Is there any reason why it wouldn't work?"

Zhenya calmly asked the question. Kwon Taek Joo wonders whether a Russian ambassador like him can exchange information freely for the benefit of another country.

Of course, it's just a precaution because it's impossible for Zhenya's every action to be tied to national security. But his goodwill could be a major diplomatic issue.

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't shake his rampant anxiety. However, he could not ignore the sincerity that Zhenya had worked hard to achieve.

"Do you really accept it? Don't say anything later"

"Only you are like that, Kwon Taek Joo."

When did he say that? It was obviously blown away by the wind.

Anyways.. What now? When everything suddenly went smoothly, things naturally became quite boring. Kwon Taek Joo also didn't know how to inform headquarters about this.

During tasks, intermediate situations need to be reported. This is to minimize the possibility of missing information and prevent leaving the site of operations. It seems like Kwon Taek Joo should contact them that he has arrived safely.

"Wait a minute."

He apologized and stood up. At that moment, Zhenya reached out and grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's phone. Then in the blink of an eye it was in the ice bucket and wine was poured on it.

"What are you doing!?"

Shocked, Kwon Taek Joo begins to rescue his phone. Zhenya also took his hand.

"It will be troublesome if you call them."

"What are you talking about? You crazy bastard!"

"You have no commercial ethics at all. I bought you time, so how should you repay me?

Since Kwon Taek Joo has completed what he had to do, he can now use his time as he wishes. Surely if he handed over these documents to headquarters, he would only receive empty praise and a new mission would be assigned immediately. The hamster wheel will spin continuously until the busy work is finished.

Kwon Taek Joo relaxed his body. Even the phone that has crossed the river and can't turn back can be easily given up. After all, thanks to Zhenya, he was able to get valuable information without having to lift a finger. Furthermore, because of the call from headquarters, he couldn't

keep his promise yesterday. It seemed like it would be fine to comply with Zhenya's request this time. For that reason, he also had a little desire to rest.

Kwon Taek Joo held Zhenya's hand.

"So, what do you want to do?"

A satisfied smile appeared on Zhenya's lips.

## Chapter 4.16 – Honey Trap

Taek Joo looked out the window from afar and muttered in resignation to himself. The scenery outside was very familiar, but not quite the same. Green lawns spread out around the villa instead of pure white snow fields, and vegetation grew densely in the forest instead of bare trees. The sky was cloudless, as if spring had come to this remote island.

It feels so new. This is where Taek Joo was detained for many months. The space that once looked like a prison was now like a resort. The change in his feelings towards Zhenya seemed to make everything around him look so different. It was so quiet that there was almost nothing left. Just a feeling of comfort and goodness. It seemed like these past terrible days were all just a dream.

Just as he looked out the window, a large shadow passed behind him. Even if he couldn't see him, he could still recognize Zhenya by that unique scent. He rushed to bite Taek Joo's neck, who was still absentmindedly thinking and not alert. Zhenya reached out and held Taek Joo's stomach tightly, letting him lean on him.

"Did you just wake up?"

Taek Joo whined in Zhenya's ear, but it was no use. Zhenya pretended

not to hear him and then continuously bit the back of his neck and undid each button of his shirt. The front of his shirt quickly loosened, revealing his solid body. Zhenya's other hand reached in and squeezed both of his full breasts.

Zhenya took a deep breath, and smelled Taek Joo's body, then suddenly grabbed his arm.

Zhenya threw him straight on the bed and tightened his grip on his body. His loosely worn shirt was also pulled off. His smooth, curvy body

was clearly exposed and writhed. Zhenya slowly and gently ran his long fingers from Taek Joo's neck down to his chest, then suddenly made a strange suggestion.

"we can either do it once now or wait till we get back home, then well.. you know how I am, I could go all day"

Why did he have to choose just one? Of course, no questions asked, it was definitely the first choice he wanted. Taek Joo decided they'd just do it once and then he could sleep some more. Just as he was about to answer, Zhenya added another condition.

"But, if you want it now, then you'd better do it yourself."

What? He wasn't seriously asking Taek Joo to ride him...right? When he looked at Zhenya confused, he just provoked him with a half-assed smile. Until now, Taek Joo had managed to get by whenever Zhenya was especially in the mood. Many times he fell asleep first or passed out from exhaustion, but Taek Joo had never exactly done it himself.

Thinking back, Taek Joo found himself quite passive. His physical strength was inherently far beyond normal standards, and he had never lost the initiative in relationships with the opposite sex. So there's no reason to be indifferent just because the other person was Zhenya.

"Then you'd better listen to me, okay?"

Zhenya silently nodded at the unexpected request then quickly lifted Taek Joo up and placed him on top of him. Zhenya swept his hands across Kwon Taek Joo's smooth waist up to his chest and gently rubbed both his nipples. Taek Joo grabbed his hand and pulled it away from him.

"Don't touch me while I'm doing this."

Knowing Zhenya something like that was easier said than done.

Zhenya's blue eyes protested silently. For a moment, Taek Joo moved his waist to rub between Zhenya's legs and asked "Do you like it?". Zhenya just burst out laughing.

"Just do as you wish."

Taek Joo confidently put his hands behind him and leant on the bed to support his upper body.

"Ahh.."

Taek Joo put his finger in his hole and stretched it the best he could. He thought it would be better to do it himself instead of making Zhenya do it, but maybe he was wrong. He used a generous amount of lube but he was still just as stiff and tight.

Taek Joo felt this strange softness in the deepest hidden place of his hole. He clenched his teeth at the strange feeling of grazing against his prostate.

"Put some on my dick. I don't wanna hear how it hurts"

Zhenya leant back comfortably on the bed and gave his instructions. Taek Joo glared at the obnoxious guy and squeezed out a lot of lube. The slippery liquid slid down Zhenya's ass and then ran down the back of his thighs.

"You look like you're covered in syrup."

Zhenya looked at Taek Joo's dick swinging in front of his face and then gently licked his lower lip. His burning blue eyes narrowed slightly.

As soon as Taek Joo lowered his butt a little, something hard hit his thigh. Before Taek Joo could do anything, Zhenya's cock stood up and throbbed. Even when he tried to ignore it, it wriggled and rubbed against his ass.

"Fuck your disgusting."

He looked at his huge dick, with a displeased face, and pushed it away. He glared at Zhenya and he just gently smiled at Taek Joo.

Zhenya put his arms behind his head and shook his lower body some more just to piss him off. Taek Joo's eyes automatically furrowed.

Just looking at that huge thing and thinking about trying to stuff it into his stomach made him feel helpless. Taek Joo couldn't tell if riding Zhenya would be any easier than just letting him pound into him relentlessly.

The remaining lube in the bottle was poured onto Zhenya's ugly dick. The cold gel suddenly flowed down his lower body, causing him to suddenly frown and then moan softly. The head of Zhenya's dick trembled slightly because of the strange cool feeling. Precum slowly began to build at the head. Taek Joo optimistically held the base of Zhenya's cock, which even with his large hands it was hard to grab.

He braced himself against Zhenya's stomach and then guided it to his hole. Even though it just gently brushed over his hole, Zhenya's cock spurted out, leaving a trail of cum running down Take Joo's leg. Did he really just..

Taek Joo laughed surprisingly at Zhenya and just slowly sat down. His lower abdomen naturally tightened and his abs became more prominent. His hole sucked Zhenya in with difficulty. Zhenya's head tilted back, and his curled eyelashes twitched slightly.

"Ah!"

Taek Joo gasped as his hole stretched as far as it could. He raised his knees and adjusted his breathing. Taking in Zhenya's huge dick wasn't easy.

Taek Joo groaned and put pressure on his lower body again. He thought he had stretched himself out enough but taking Zhenya in so deep was no simple task. Taek Joo was confused and didn't know what to do. No matter what position he was in, he felt uncomfortable.

Zhenya looked at his struggling appearance with burning eyes. He liked it when Taek Joo teased him like that. Zhenya just bit his lower lip.

Zhenya suddenly moved his hand to Taek Joo's waist. He intended to grab his whole body and push it down. But Taek Joo was one step ahead of him. He grabbed Zhenya's hand and looked at him with disapproving eyes, then reminded him of his promise.

Zhenya reluctantly clicked his tongue and bit his hand. Taek Joo continued to lower himself further down. His spine stiffened from exerting so much strength in trying not to fall straight down on Zhenya, even his vision became blurry for a moment.

"..ahh.. Haa"

Taek Joo's breath was intermittent as if something was stuck in his throat.

Zhenya was equally miserable. The two of them did it a few times last night, so he thought things would go smoothly. Perhaps because Taek Joo was so stressed, even putting it in wasn't easy. The feeling of the tightness below made Zhenya's thighs twitch. Zhenya gritted his teeth and squinted one eye.

"ugh.."

Taek Joo looked at Zhenya curiously. It seemed like he had misheard a moaning sound, but Zhenya was breathing heavily with red eyes and ears, and his neck and abdominal muscles were constantly twisting from a seemingly insatiable thirst. Seeing Zhenya suffer in lust only made Taek Joo want it more.

At the moment Taek Joo looked away for a moment to reach for the lube bottle, Zhenya's hips suddenly lifted

"Ahhh!"

Taek Joo shivered and his body bounced. His intruding dick was suddenly pulled out again.

"Hey, don't move!"

"Just rest and let me do it for you."

While he frowned in hesitation, Zhenya raised his back again.

"Ahh!"

This time, a real scream broke out. Taek Joo's knees that were supporting his body lost their strength and he collapsed completely on top of Zhenya. He didn't miss the opportunity to take over the situation.

Zhenya thrusted as deep as he could into Taek Joo. Before Taek Joo could straighten his slumped body, Zhenya greedily lifted his back.

Zhenya's thighs slammed against Taek Joo's ass, creating a friction sound. His body suddenly flew into the air and then slammed straight

back down. It felt like all the organs in Taek Joo's stomach were being crushed.

Although he tried to suppress it, Taek Joo still kept moaning, his whole body was burning with heat and sweat began to pour out all over his body.

Zhenya slowly looked at Taek Joo's sleek body and then reached out his hand. But Taek Joo flicked his hand away again. Even while enjoying the pleasure, he still didn't want Zhenya's hands on him.

Zhenya gasped. He became grumpy. He showed his displeasure by pushing roughly on the lower half of his body. Taek Joo kept moaning, screaming and eventually collapsed.

Not only Taek

Joo's butt but also Zhenya's thighs where he was bouncing, became blood red

Zhenya complacently looked at Taek Joo as he tore him apart and made him shake. Every time his body fell, his strong dick and breasts swayed as well.

"Haa! ah..mnh haa!"

Even when he tried to cling to Zhenya's legs or stomach to support himself, it wasn't easy because of the lube. Taek Joo stretched out his hand and grabbed the headboard, Zhenyas's face was quickly buried in his leaning upper body.

".. ugh!"

Taek Joo twisted his shoulders and moaned, because Zhenya suddenly stuck out his tongue and licked the nipple he had been begging for. Looking back, Taek joo had always been sensitive there. He had thought that the reason such a thing was attached to a man's body was simply because without it it would look strange. Only after meeting Zhenya did Taek Joo realize that men could feel it just like women.

"..Fuck I've always wanted to.."

Zhenya muttered while rubbing his nipples with the pointed tip of his nose. He used the tip of his tongue to wrap around the soft flesh and suck it until Taek joo made a shrill sound. When the upper and lower parts of his body were attacked at the same time, Taek Joo's body stiffened and trembled.

He gritted his teeth, bowed his head, groaned and listened to his excited body

Zhenya buried his head in Taek Joo's chest. He pushed Zhenya's shoulder, "Don't do that.", but his upper body betrayed his reasoning and gradually clung tightly to the man's face. His throbbing dick also rubbed its tip against Zhenya's stomach.

"Hey! ..fuck I said..not to touch me!"

Taek Joo belatedly protested and took a deep breath.

"Who said anything about touching you?"

Zhenya jokingly raised his hands and brazenly protested. Even in that

moment, Zhenya only went back to eating Taek joo up.

"Ha ha! Uh haa uhm.."

"Hah"

Taek Joo hugged Zhenya's neck and let out a muffled moan in his ear as Zhenya thrusted deep inside him. Every time Taek Joo's body moved, his excited dick continuously rubbed against Zhenya's toned stomach. The sudden change made him feel more dizzy and numb than happy.

His skin was wet with sweat. Excited breaths exploded in each other's ears, causing their body temperatures to increase. His head felt like it was on fire, his eyes felt like they were about to melt at any moment. Zhenya pushed his hot tongue into Taek Joo's ear. He was excited as if he was about to reach his climax.

Zhenya couldn't stand it anymore and changed positions. He immediately turned them over and placed Taek Joo underneath him,

pulled his legs up and slammed into him.

"Ahh! Slow.. Slow down!"

Zhenyas lower body pushed hard into him no matter how many times Taek Joo pushed him away, no matter how much he twisted and struggled, it was all in vain. As if the continuous thrusts weren't enough, Zhenya completely crushed their bodies together. Zhenya slid his tongue into his mouth. "hm...", the moan was stuck in Taek Joo's mouth. With black eyelashes and wet eyes Taek Joo's chest expanded, his shoulders shook and his hole was hotly rubbed against.

The violent giant moved in and out of Taek Joo's crushed body. His toes turned white from the persistent grinding against his prostate. An intense burning sensation rushed straight into his stomach, making him want to cum. Taek Joo's breath was sucked right out of his lungs and into Zhenya's. His vision was reversed. Taek Joo turned his head away from the unbearable burning feeling. A heavy breath broke out, and the moans that only echoed in Zhenya's mouth flowed out chaotically.

"Ngh..mnph.. ah.. haa"

His whole body shivered. Taek Joo's cock rubbed roughly against Zhenya's abs, and then exploded. His thick cum spurted out and splashed all over Zhenya's chest, collarbone and chin. It then spread to Kwon Taek Joo's body, Zhenya calmly licked the semen from his collarbone.

"Ugh.. haa"

A sound came from Zhenya. His lower abdomen moved closer. His sweaty ass was completely pressed tightly and glued to Zhenya's waist. Something heavy and hot shot in his stomach. Taek Joo squinted his eyes and trembled from the heat inside.

Zhenya seemed to want to crush his entire body, collapsing and gasping for air. He breathed heavily and was immersed in the deep aftertaste. Taek Joo just wanted to collapse and fall asleep.

Zhenya raised his head. He closed his sweaty eyelids and quietly looked at Taek Joo. Taek Joo's black eyelashes and wet eyes also looked at

Zhenya without saying a word. Zhenya pursed his lips and licked his eyes as if he wanted to eat them. He groaned softly at the unfamiliar stimulation and cringed. Goosebumps arose on the back of his neck.

Zhenya pulled out the penis that was still inside. Kwon Taek Joo wonders if Zhenya will keep his promise?

What a mistake thinking that was. Zhenya picked up the lube bottle lying nearby and poured a new amount of it onto Taek joo's thighs.

"What are you doing? We already did it once..."

"Mnhm, once. Until it has nothing left to come out even if you squeeze it, that's one time."

Taek Joo was about to try to argue but had to stay silent. Suddenly something cold was stabbed inside his butt. Gel-coated fingers dug in and scooped up the liquid that filled his stomach.

Zhenya bit his lip and continued to clean him out.

Zhenya then teased Kwon Taek Joo until he lost consciousness. An affectionate voice rang in his ear, "Taek Joo" the small call echoed for a long time.

"Hmhm."

Not knowing whether he was awake or dreaming, Kwon Taek Joo was in a dreamy pleasure on a deserted island that has no visitors.

## Chapter 4.17 – Honey Trap

Consciousness dimly returned. Kwon Taek Joo enjoyed the feeling of the bed gently supporting his body. His eyes were still closed because his body no longer had any strength. A gentle breeze blew through the half-open window. It was chilly outside, but where he was lying was still warm and the sun was tickling his back.

Kwon Taek Joo thought it was a dream because of that extreme peace. Can he lie down a little longer? Kwon Taek Joo rubbed his head on the soft pillow.

"..Yes."

A shadow flickered across his closed eyelids. He could tell it was Zhenya just by his voice or his body odor. It seemed like someone was calling him. Every time he stops talking, the sound from the other end of the phone speaks out.

Kwon Taek Joo noticed a stare falling on his body. It seemed that Zhenya just continued the phone call next to him while Kwon Taek

Joo is

"sleeping" on his stomach. Does he also have a hoarse voice? The voice of the other person was babbling on the phone sounded gentler than ever.

(I put sleeping like that because he is obviously not sleeping.)

"Your son is still alive."

Zhenya drawled his voice as if he was enjoying his words. The other person on the other end of the line was chatting again. Not sure why the voice seemed familiar, but Kwon Taek Joo wasn't sure because he was still not completely awake.

Suddenly one side of the mattress tilted down, and the body odor also became stronger. His eyes were now frankly staring down at him.

Zhenya spoke in a relaxed tone.

"Last night I thought things had gotten worse. He said he didn't like it and hugged and didn't let go. I almost didn't stop and kept pounding into that narrow hole."

This crazy guy, Who is listening to that kind of vulgar talk?

Kwon Taek Joo's consciousness suddenly became clear. He didn't open his eyes right away but tried to find out who he was talking to and what he was talking about.

"I don't know what to do either. If I try to treat him like a woman, his self-esteem will be hurt. But it's not just about taking care of a few delicious dishes. He's not a dog or a horse. What if he runs away again? I'll be really angry. It's strange that I don't want to kill him. I also felt uncomfortable, because the more I looked at him, the more I wanted him. Things that make me uncomfortable right in front of me must be eliminated.. But I don't want to do that."

A big dark shadow covered Kwon Taek Joo's face. Zhenya's hand seemed about to touch his face. Even in that situation, Kwon Taek Joo still turned a blind eye. Zhenya saying such things in front of him made him feel really awkward.

The annoying man's hand was slowly covering the area around Kwon Taek Joo's eyes. Thanks to that, the bright sunlight was obscured. Next, a calm, gentle voice echoed in the ear, continuing the story with the other person.

"How could you give birth to someone like this? Huh? You have done such a good thing for me."

(I hope this makes sense)

It was lucky that Zhenya was covering his eyes, otherwise Kwon Taek Joo wouldn't have been able to lie still and pretend to sleep.

The phone call ended immediately after that. It seemed like the phone was placed somewhere on the bed. After that, Zhenya's body temperature also became warmer. He leaned closer and whispered softly into Kwon Taek Joo's ear

"Your mother says hello."

Why is he still pretending to sleep? Kwon Taek Joo quickly pushed away the bastard's hand that was covering his eyes. In a blink of an eye, he saw Zhenya's face with an evil smile. It seemed like Zhenya knew that Kwon Taek Joo had woken up a long time ago.

He talked to his mother on the phone. What Zhenya just said was replayed in Kwon Taek Joo's mind. The skin on his face felt like it was about to burn.

Of course, since Zhenya spoke in Russian all the time, his mother wouldn't understand any of his profanity. But that's not a reason to lighten the punishment for this bastard.

"This bastard!"

Kwon Taek Joo reached out to prepare to grab Zhenya's collar, but he easily leaned to avoid it. From that useless attack, the forgotten pain suddenly rushed back all over his body. Kwon Taek Joo groaned and hugged his waist that seemed about to break in half. Zhenya grabbed his arm and pulled him out of bed.

"Since you're awake, take a shower and then eat."

It's not incorrect either. The growling sound was resounding from Kwon Taek Joo's empty stomach. His already rising spirit suddenly lost all momentum. Zhenya smiled and walked out first.

At times like these, Kwon Taek Joo resents being a human being who is hungry three times a day. Well, ignoring that bastard. He slowly rubbed his growling stomach and left the bedroom. He didn't know how long he had been lying down, but the feeling of the soles of his feet touching the floor was strange.

While walking past the kitchen and into the bathroom, Kwon Taek Joo smelled a familiar smell. He glanced and saw Zhenya boiling something in front of the stove. Come to think of it, he didn't even take care of his meals that diligently. But Zhenya still didn't forget Kwon Taek Joo's dish. Is that a new form of entertainment for him?

Zhenya glared at the pot while boiling instant noodles, anyone looking would think he was cooking a whole pot of beef bone soup. Kwon Taek Joo laughed at the guy who was concentrating more than necessary. He looks lovely too. He unconsciously thought that and then suddenly woke up. Kwon Taek Joo shook his head and hurried into the bathroom.

He finished showering and went into the kitchen, the finished ramen was waiting. Kwon Taek Joo was about to go to the table and sit down as usual, but Zhenya blocked him right in front of him. And he held out a mysterious black box.

"What's this?"

Kwon Taek Joo reached out to receive it. The box was heavier than it looked, so his arms fell down. He almost dropped it. Zhenya looked at him with puzzled eyes and replied indifferently.

"Anastasia."

Ah, is that so? Anastasia.

"...Wait.. What?"

Kwon Taek Joo tried to understand then suddenly jumped up. Zhenya continued explaining like there was no mistake.

"That's the Anastasia you were looking for before."

This is an unprecedented weapon that Russia and North Korea have been diligently producing for a long time. After the development failed, Anastasia itself took and buried countless lives.

Kwon Taek Joo knew very well that only Zhenya could analyze the blueprints of 'Anastasia' and that he was an expert when it came to weapons. The reason why the Russian government can't do anything about the troublesome guy is also because of the fear that Zhenya will be able to recreate the 'second Anastasia'. If there was a real 'Anastasia' in the world, its owner would definitely be Zhenya.

But on an uneventful morning, the unexpected item given to Kwon Taek Joo was 'Anastasia'. This is beyond his imagination.

"Kwon Taek Joo, I give this to you."

Zhenya was talking nonsense again while Kwon Taek Joo still couldn't escape the shock. Was he joking this early in the morning?

Kwon Taek Joo was about to put the box on the dining table. He was careful not to cause any trouble, but the guy who had been just watching all this time gave a leisurely warning.

"You'll have to treat it well. It is very sensitive and will explode at the slightest shock."

What kind of mine is this? Kwon Taek Joo couldn't put the box down so he just held it in his arms.

"Take it back. I don't need this anymore, and I don't care."

"You have to dream big. As long as you have that, you can get your hands on anything you want, do you want to hold power? Do you want to become the richest person? Just say it out loud. It will be ready to help you."

"I will receive the attention and attention of the world. I will become the target of any person who wants 'Anastasia', will always be chased, and at any moment I will have to live as if I have one foot in death.. Just imagining it is stressful. I will never be able to live quietly and die as if I never existed. So, please take this trouble back."

"Of course there's pressure. That's why I gave it to you."

"What are you saying?"

"Instead, you will receive a worthy price from me. You gave me something as precious as your life, so it's only fair that you get something in return? So, don't hesitate any longer and give yourself to me."

That guy wanted to pay for the unnecessary thing he threw away himself. There is no love of the rich for the poor.

In front of Kwon Taek Joo's bewildered face, Zhenya took a step closer. He suddenly took a step back. It seemed like he heard something wonderful, but Kwon Taek Joo couldn't just get caught up in an

atmosphere like this. Zhenya always got his way, and the payment wouldn't be as terrible as a loan shark.

Zhenya told Kwon Taek Joo that what he was holding in his hand could explode. The warning siren in his head sounded. While he hesitated because he thought it would actually explode, Zhenya closed the distance. Soon, his entire face was covered in Zhenya's enormous shadow.

"You know, I do business at my core, so I don't make any transactions that don't make a profit."

"What a funny bastard. So what is your profit?"

Kwon Taek Joo objected, but Zhengy without hesitation brought his face closer. The feeling of a sudden change in the atmosphere was uncomfortable. Two men did things early in the morning. Kwon Taek Joo tried to retreat again but suddenly stopped because the hand holding Anastasia suddenly shook when his back suddenly touched the wall. As Zhenya had warned, it could explode with the slightest shock, and he didn't want to end his life here like this.

Zhenya's hand approached Kwon Taek Joo. Zhenya ran his long fingers down his chin and down his neck. Blue eyes slowly and quietly followed the fingertips. Not long after, Zhenya raised his eyes to look straight at Kwon Taek Joo and then gently touched his protruding sternum.

"It seems like there is no benefit now, but who knows."

There will be greater profits later.

Even when Zhenya gave a reasonable reason like business or profit, in his blue eyes there was only Kwon Taek Joo. Those blue eyes no longer showed the coldness of the reptile as usual, but today they carried within them an inappropriate desire. Looking at Zhenya completely immersed in him, Kwon Taek Joo smiled. For some reason, he remembered the moment he first met Zhenya, he was the first person to make Kwon Taek Joo feel scared. Did he ever imagine things would be like this.

Kwon Taek Joo shrugged slightly. He was the only one struggling to keep from being swept away when he dipped his foot into the rapids. But sometimes letting himself go with the flow isn't so bad.

"It is said that good memories of places, times and experiences with someone can evoke positive feelings towards that person."

Now Kwon Taek Joo realizes that the real way to win Koshichei's heart may be just that.

"Then.. Don't let me get bored when I'm with you, kid."

The reindeer were startled by the gunshots and quickly ran away. Without anyone telling anyone, the two of them kicked the ground and ran out. The green forest smells of damp moss. The fresh air exhaled from the green trees fills the lungs. Bright sunlight filtered through the dense canopy of birch trees. Everything that had been sleeping all winter seemed to wake up.

The reindeer ran away quickly and crushed the tree. The two blindly pursued, scattering in different directions as if they had made an appointment in advance. Kwon Taek Joo's heart beat as fast as the heavy footsteps of a running reindeer. Thump, thump. His skin also warmed up comfortably.

After running non-stop, Kwon Taek Joo suddenly fell to one knee. He then aimed the rifle at the escaping reindeer. Kwon Taek Joo moved the gun along the swaying bushes, he held his breath and stared ahead. Not long after, the reindeer suddenly appeared. Kwon Taek Joo pulled the trigger without hesitation.

The bullet made a fierce explosion and passed through the forest. It passed Zhenya who was running ahead. The running reindeer fell down. Zhenya, who was running after it, suddenly stopped. Did he win?

Kwon Taek Joo hurriedly ran towards it.

When he got closer, he saw a reindeer lying on its neck. Zhenya held the thick horn in his hand and turned its head from side to side. It was impossible to distinguish Zhenya's size from the reindeer's size. Just like when he caught a big fish, a strange joy covered his whole body. It

took a while for Kwon Taek Joo to realize his hand was tingling from the recoil of the rifle.

Zhenya quickly pulled out a sharp knife from the sheath wrapped around his leg. With that, the guy who was preparing to completely block the reindeer's breathing stopped for a moment. Zhenya then quietly looked up at Kwon Taek Joo.

"What?"

"Aren't you going to do it yourself?"

Zhenya happily held out a sharp blue knife. He spread both his shoulders wide with a triumphant expression as if he was giving in to something huge.

Kwon Taek Joo didn't want to cut raw meat and draw blood, even in punishment. While on missions, he would shoot guns and sometimes use knives when necessary, but it's not something he enjoys. The feeling when the blade penetrates the flesh and cuts through the skin has never been pleasant.

Kwon Taek Joo shook his head with a confused expression.

"I'm not doing that."

"There's nothing to refuse, because you're special."

It's not a refusal, it's a rejection, this kid. Why is cutting an animal's throat particularly lenient?

"Alright. Let's see.."

Kwon Taek Joo frowned and took a step back. Zhenya shrugged and immediately plunged the blade into the reindeer's neck. The reindeer trembled and quickly drooped down.

When Kwon Taek Joo came closer to observe the dead reindeer. Zhenya, who was still sitting in front of it, suddenly grabbed his ankle.

"Ah!"

Right after screaming, Kwon Taek Joo's body fell down. Luckily the grass was overgrown, otherwise he would have had a concussion.

Zhenya supported Kwon Taek Joo's back, easing the pain. He looked down at Kwon Taek Joo who was grumbling "Damn". Perhaps because of seeing blood, the pupils in Zhenya's eyes shrank. He could see his crotch bulging with excitement.

If it were any other time, Zhenya would have tried to undress Kwon Taek Joo immediately, but now he just silently bowed his head and parted his lips. A soft breath from Zhenya's lips touched his skin. Kwon Taek Joo widened his eyes and looked at Zhenya, the space between his eyebrows furrowed and looked quite urgent.

Kwon Taek Joo clicked his tongue and slowly closed his eyes. When he opened his mouth, Zhenya eagerly inserted his tongue, causing the oral cavity to stiffen tensely with the exchange of temperature and breath. Everything is like a passionate exchange. The more they mix their tongues together, the more intense the warmer feeling becomes. The gentleness from before quickly turned into passion, as if both of them were caught up in an intense, uncontrollable emotion.

The two bodies were entwined with each other as Kwon Taek Joo gradually lifted himself up. He gently pulled Zhenya's lower lip as if he were clicking on it, then gently let go, then he opened his eyes and stared at Zhenya. Again. Incomprehensible pure desire in the monster's eyes. He didn't understand why he became its owner. Was there a reason or not?

Suddenly Kwon Taek Joo remembered a question Zhenya asked him a long time ago. Even then, he had the same look in his eyes as now.

"The reason I will stay here.."

There were so many thoughts flooding his mind. But in the end there was nothing left. At this moment, Kwon Taek Joo had no time to think about his situation, the weight of Zhenya's existence, the past had gone through, and the difficulties ahead. He only saw Zhenya.

In Zhenya's blue eyes, his unfamiliar face appeared. Kwon Taek Joo felt awkward and embarrassed then he raised his hand to cover Zhenya's eyes. Thick eyelashes tickled his palm.

"..depends on what you will do in the future."

Kwon Taek Joo slowly lowered his head, his lips gently placed on Zhenya's lips. Zhenya's lips also slowly softened.

There was a strong smell of blood. It's alright, even though it's not sweet, even though it's not good, but the long winter is over and spring has come. If so, is it enough now?

## Chapter 5.1 – Side Story

Format Note: In this chapter, dialogues are primarily in English. { } is for English, [ ] is for Korean and “ ” is for Russian dialogues.

Las Vegas at night is more beautiful than during the day. As the sun sets, the sleeping city begins to awaken. Luxury hotels line the main street, flaunting their colorful lights and neon signs. Street lights, bridges, railings, signs, palm trees and giant screens, a colorful light party takes place wherever the eye can reach. Cars lined up on the street flashing their blinding headlights, and there were huge crowds of people pouring into the streets. Music is played everywhere. Colorful laser beams and streams of water from a giant fountain decorate the pitch-black sky. People line up to enjoy dinner, shop, and watch different shows while soaking up the dazzling spectacle at a classy restaurant or bar. No kaleidoscope could be more luxurious than that.

There is a pinnacle place in that unreal world. A space where tens of millions of dollars evaporate like a mirage overnight. Casinos opened their mouths and swallowed the flow of customers. Some are constantly looking for a little profit, while others dream of the biggest jackpot of their lives.

The bright lights and bustling tunes from hundreds of slot machines, the stinging cigarette smoke, the strong smell of alcohol in the air, the strict supervision of guards, the international language mingling throughout the tables and sounds. of sharp  
chips than

any other noise. The flood of stimulation quickly numbs the five senses and dull reason. Gradually, the people here will lose control and become immersed in the game.

The casino side has taken full advantage of human psychology. The clock and windows are simplified to reduce the feeling of reality, and

the table arrangement is also carefully considered, the higher the stake the deeper inside.

At the high-priced tables, the dealers are skilled, and most of the players are regular customers. The casino also offers suitable services to steadily attract them. Every time you visit the restaurant, Pit Boss, the person in charge of sales, comes out to greet each customer and mix drinks according to each person's taste. As large amounts of money come and go, monitoring becomes stricter. These make it more difficult to penetrate than any other active location.

Kwon Taek Joo is shuffling cards on the table. He wears the name tag 'Philip' on his chest, a 10-year veteran dealer and Chinese-American. Because he wore a special disguise, his appearance was not much different from him. That was so he could naturally approach the target with a lot of vigilance.

At the table he is in charge of, 'Blackjack' is going on in full swing. 'Blackjack' is a simple card game and incredibly complex. The basic rule is that the dealer and players draw cards at random and the person whose total is closest to 21 wins. However, if your total number of cards exceeds 21 and becomes a 'Boom' (quack), you will lose regardless of your opponent's hand.

None of the four sitting customers were 'squeaked'. The total of the cards changes from 13 to 19. Now it's the dealer's turn, it's Kwon Taek Joo's turn to open the cards. The song that was revealed in advance was '3'. The number is small, so the possibility of 'snapping' is very high. This is because only the dealer must continue to receive more cards until the total number of cards exceeds 17. Players pay attention to the face-down cards with worried eyes.

{Turn the cards over.}

The remaining card is turned over. A strange sigh came from the player when the number '7' appeared. If the card about to be added is 'A', then the blackjack will be completed and the dealer will collect all bets. Even if a '10' card or a card with a letter like 'J', 'Q' or 'K' appears, the sum of the cards is 20 and the dealer wins. 'Blackjack' is usually a 1:1 game between the dealer and each player. However, everyone sitting at the

table unanimously hoped that a number of buttons less than '6' would be drawn.

Kwon Taek Joo according to the rules draws one more card. The card is revealed immediately and placed next to the existing cards. That's card '5'. Still have to take one more card because the total is less than 16. The player now clenches his fist and mutters whispers as if reciting a spell, staring at Kwon Taek Joo's hand.

Draw another card. The card's tension reaches its maximum until it is turned over and placed down. {Please,} as if to break the expectations of a player who spoke up, 'Card 6 appears. 3, 7, 5, 6. As a joke, a total of 21.

{Blackjack.}

Declaring another victory, Kwon Taek Joo collected all the chips on the table. The collapsed players gritted their teeth helplessly.

{Asians are very difficult after all.}

They both smoked and openly complained. They are not social, and even if they die early, they will still try to win. Kwon Taek Joo has heard that complaint for three days now.

There is a common misconception that people who visit casinos have. If you get acquainted with the dealer, he will help you a little, and if you win the psychological battle, the hand will turn in your favor. But unfortunately, all card games are completely based on luck. As the number of repetitions increases, the consecutive win rate decreases. Being close to the dealer really doesn't change anything.

Players who blew a lot of money left one by one. An older man who guarded the table until the end lost the remaining chips. He said he owned a large shipping company and always gave generous tips.

{Phillip, it seems you are actually winning right now, but you have to lose often to achieve your long-term goal. If you keep winning, who else will sit at your table?}

Hm.. it really doesn't depend on Kwon Taek Joo.

He wanted to refute, but he restrained himself and nodded.

{I will remember. Please come back next time.}

The man laughed loudly.

{You told me to come back after wiping everything away like that.}

Even saying that, he will probably visit Kwon Taek Joo's table again tomorrow. People with greedy minds must win to be satisfied.

After the man left, the table was empty.

It's time to show up.

{Are you alone again? Did you finally win today?}

Kwon Taek Joo was cleaning up his seat for a while when he heard the voice he was waiting for. He looked up, a middle-aged woman was grinning.

{You should play with me too,} she said and sat down on the middle chair.

Her name is Kiara Chang. She said she is doing fashion-related business in Italy. She was born in China, but mostly lives in Italy. While playing cards, she said she married a local husband 10 years ago, and they had no children, thus the sad story of the estrangement between the couple arose.

It's all a lie. Kiara Chang's nationality is North Korea, not Chinese. Her real name is Choi Yeon Hwa, and she was in charge of North Korea's European funds while living in Italy for nearly 20 years. It would be impossible without the trust of the party leadership because the size of the slush fund she alone manages is several trillion won.

However, like other North Korean elites, she appears to have undergone a gradual ideological change. As her knowledge and thinking expanded through her long life abroad, she became skeptical of the North Korean system, which had been deadlocked for decades. Later, when a large-scale hereditary purge of the leaders was carried out, and her relatives and colleagues who followed the party were killed, she decided to ask for help. refugee.

Italy, which is discussing and cooperating with South Korea and the United States on this issue, did not provide any information about Choi Yeon Hwa immediately after her deportation. It's for her safety. This was a few years ago, not long after NIS started monitoring Choi Yeon Hwa. Recently, intelligence information obtained shows that a social group with close ties to domestic political forces has created a large amount of slush funds and transferred them to North Korea. According to intelligence information, this money was laundered in many European countries and transferred to North Korea, so Choi Yeon Hwa must have known about the situation. If it was simply the purchase of support funds from a pro-North Korea group, or if the price was paid in advance to gain some advantage in the political world, then it is necessary to find out in detail who is involved in the matter. Who are they and what is their purpose?

North Korea also aggressively hunted for Choi Yeon Hwa. Not just because of the trillions of won she swindled while in hiding, but because if she told everything, everything from the secret accounts hidden throughout Europe to the fundraising methods, The origin and methods of money laundering will be exposed. As part of sanctions on North Korea, if secret accounts are tied up, the North Korean government will have no way to raise dollars.

Did she have a premonition that she would be chased for the rest of her life? Choi Yeon Hwa underwent a full body plastic surgery right after being wanted. With the active support of the Italian government, her status was also completely changed to 'Kiara Chang'. It's not a lie that she married a local. I just don't know if that marriage is a limited relationship on paper or a real relationship.

Choi Yeon Hwa, who ended her long secluded life in Italy, recently started visiting casinos in Las Vegas. Is she trying to play the role of 'Kiara Chang', a successful businesswoman who is bored with married life? Or maybe she wants to let go of her true self in a place where everyone loses themselves.

One thing to note in this activity is that there must be no physical conflicts. Choi Yeon Hwa is now Italian, so diplomatic friction must be minimized. If the fact that she is in contact with South Korea is

discovered, the North Koreans will be even crazier to eliminate her. You can't alarm an important source.

Kwon Taek Joo tried to find a way to approach her as naturally as possible. The problem is that Choi Yeon Hwa's wariness towards strangers is very high. The plainclothes bodyguards she hired were pretending to be customers, hiding as quietly and neatly as possible throughout the casino.

This is why Kwon Taek Joo disguised himself as a dealer. To dispel Choi Yeon Hwa's suspicions, it seemed more effective to let her approach first instead of hastily approaching. So, four days ago, he disguised himself as 'Philip', a dealer at the biggest casino in Las Vegas, and waited for her.

Due to the nature of the work, supervision is very strict and cannot be neglected even for a moment. Even when the target doesn't appear, Kwon Taek Joo still has to exhaust himself to deal with other guests. He wondered if there had ever been an activity that made him so mentally tired.

Choi Yeon Hwa comes down to the lobby around 2 a.m. every day and enjoys the game. Kwon Taek Joo didn't try to be polite, and he didn't even risk starting a conversation. But she seemed interested.

{Did you want to lose today?}

[Good luck.]

She pouted at his industrial answer. {I will shuffle,  
} he said and shuffled the cards.

Shuffling is the rule at big tables. It is a measure to prevent suspicions of card manipulation by machines. For that reason, Kwon Taek Joo put all his effort into practicing, staying up all night to learn how to handle and follow 'Philip's' habits.

Soon, the waitress approached.

{Do you want something to drink?}

{No, I'm fine.}

Choi Yeon Hwa refused all services provided by the casino. It seemed that caution was ingrained in her. In case something was suspicious, she didn't even utter a word.

{Is this also a casino business secret? Are you going to make me bet money on alcohol?}

{Impossible. It's a special service only for VIPs. If you don't like alcohol, we have water and soft drinks.}

{Thank you for your concern, but I already have water.}

{I see,} Kwon Taek Joo said and put down the cards one by one. Choi Yeon Hwa silently shrugged her shoulders in sarcasm. The way she touched the chips was somewhat strange.

{But drinking with Philip is another matter.}

{I'm not allowed to drink alcohol while working.}

{It's not necessary to drink it right now.}

The saying is full of meaning. When their eyes met, she smiled and softly closed her eyes. Is she seducing Kwon Taek Joo? He was a bit surprised because the atmosphere was nothing special.

{What's wrong? Don't you like it?}

{This is the first time a customer invited me to drink alcohol.}

{Lie.}

{Aren't you going to bet anymore? I will turn over the cards.}

{You are like stone.}

Choi Yeon Hwa grumbled openly. She had no companions, and guests asked for her own room, but even when eating, she was always alone. She could have found a man to be with if she wanted but she didn't. Kwon Taek Joo wondered why she suddenly expressed such an attitude.

Since learning that 'Philip' is Chinese-American, she has always shown friendly feelings. Of course, he thought even that was just part of acting.

Or, if Choi Yeon Hwa was honest, he had no reason to refuse. Because he didn't bother waiting for her here anymore. Furthermore, there aren't many disadvantages to approaching the target that way. All Kwon Taek Joo has to do is create just the right atmosphere, then use confession triggers to extract the necessary information. He's just not sure yet. Kwon Taek Joo needs to be careful.

The total number of buttons on the cards that Choi Yeon Hwa received is 17. The card placed in front of Kwon Taek Joo is the '9' card. The card facing down next to it has been turned over. When 'A' appeared, Choi Yeon Hwa's shoulders sank.

{Oh, I lost. Didn't the beauty's plan succeed?}

{Because blackjack is not a psychological battle.}

{Aren't you gay?}

{Does it look like that?}

She smiled and picked up the chips. Choi Yeon Hwa said, {Wow,} and suddenly tilted her upper body forward. She began to examine each piece of Kwon Taek Joo's face. There was no way advanced camouflage techniques could be seen through, but he couldn't help but feel nervous under that gaze.

{Looking at this, I don't know if he's gay or not, but he seems gentle. I like a man who listens and understands.}

{You can't be sure just looking from the outside.}

Someone suddenly interrupted the conversation between two people. Choi Yeon Hwa turned her head with a confused expression. For a moment, Kwon Taek Joo's eyes flinched, because the voice that reached his ears was too familiar. A unique body odor that he hadn't noticed until now because he was too focused on Choi Yeon Hwa. He raised his eyes hopefully. Zhenya was slowly walking closer to the table.

Why is he here?

His cheeks stiffened in shock.

{What do you mean by gentle? He's perfect for a Chippendale show.}

Zhenya looked Kwon Taek Joo up and down and added. Choi Yeon Hwa considered it a mischievous joke and laughed reluctantly. The guy who attracts attention because of his height of over 2 meters and his unnecessarily dashing appearance is dressed a bit colorfully today. His appearance reminds people of a white peacock, causing people around her to glance at him. Of course, unwanted attention focused on Kwon Taek Joo's table.

Without hesitation, Zhenya sat down next to Choi Yeon Hwa.

{Can I sit here?}

{Well, I didn't rent that seat either.}

Choi Yeon Hwa nodded without reservation. Zhenya also squirmed strangely towards Kwon Taek Joo. He seemed to see that his awkwardness was completely because he was surprised.

Without a doubt, 'Chippendale Show' is one of the attractions that represents Las Vegas, and it is a show where male strippers with beautiful bodies will perform various performances for female audiences. The problem is that 'Philip' has an extremely normal body. Telling a woman she would look good if she were to strip is more likely to be considered sexual harassment than a compliment. Is it different for men?

{You better be careful. He will not lose.}

Responding to Choi Yeon Hwa's advice, Zhenya nodded indifferently and stared at Kwon Taek Joo. The two of them made eye contact again. He wanted to ask why someone who shouldn't be in Korea appeared here, but now was not the time. Kwon Taek Joo had to regain composure.

{Winning so easily is no fun. I can't wait to see how scary he is.}

Zhenya laughed provocatively. Kwon Taek Joo tried his best to keep a cold expression while feeling the artificial skin covering his face being pulled away.

Phillip? Bad name.

(Zhenya's thought I'm guessing)

He continued to debate in his mind whether this kid was really planning on ruining everything or not. Kwon Taek Joo shuffled the cards, ignoring Zhenya.

{China or Japan? Or.. Are you Korean?}

Zhenya asked meaningfully. Kwon Taek Joo stopped for a moment and stared at him. Zhenya muttered with a shameless face. Choi Yeon Hwa looked at the two people in a strange fight in turn and shrugged.

{Hmm. Do they all look the same to Westerners? They think that all Asians are Chinese.}

{Really? I Don't know why but he looks like a Korean I know.}

Kwon Taek Joo's strength is concentrated at both ends of his jaw. Zhenya just raised his eyebrows as if he hadn't done anything wrong. When 'Philip' looked agitated, Choi Yeon Hwa burst out laughing.

{Many people often see it wrong.}

As if listening to Kwon Taek Joo's voice, she even gave advice to Zhenya.

{However, it is rude to say that Chinese people are Japanese or Korean. There are many people who feel offended by the long and intertwined history.}

{I have to remember this. I behaved inappropriately.}

It was casual teasing. If possible, he wanted to immediately grab Zhenya's collar.

After settling in Korea, he often appeared at the places where Kwon Taek Joo worked. He even told Zhenya not to follow him because his status could lead to diplomatic friction that was useless. He is always present and interrupts Kwon Taek Joo's activities. No, if only in terms of results, Zhenya always targets Kwon Taek Joo. However, Kwon Taek Joo was not sure whether he really helped him or not. He sometimes suddenly interrupts the crowd like now.

Zhenya always walks around the scene as he pleases. He probably doesn't know that he always stands out wherever he goes with his special appearance and physical condition. Zhenya never disguises himself like Kwon Taek Joo, it's like advertising to let everyone around him know who he is. In fact, ever since the guy appeared, Choi Yeon Hwa has felt him.

Kwon Taek Joo knows that Zhenya is always watching him. He warned him not to do that and tried to set up a separate work account but to no avail. Zhenya comes like a ghost wherever Kwon Taek Joo is active. He suspected that Zhenya might have installed a listening or tracking device somewhere on his body. That's why he feels even more awkward and worried if he doesn't appear right now. Because he didn't know where Zhenya was and what was happening to him.

Of course so far there have been no major problems. But he couldn't help but worry, because every time Zhenya got involved, he always had to pay a pretty hefty price for him. The worry in Kwon Taek Joo's heart resounded again.

He was awakened by the sound of tapping on the table. When he realized, Choi Yeon Hwa and Zhenya were staring at Kwon Taek Joo.

{Shouldn't you deal the cards?}

{Ah, sorry.}

He hurriedly shuffled the cards. While moving his hands out of habit, Kwon Taek Joo thought over and over how to overcome this difficulty. His head was pounding.

{Player Cards.}

He placed a card in front of Choi Yeon Hwa and Zhenya. Card '8' and card 'Q' are drawn one after another. He placed a card in front of him.

{The cards are for the dealer.}

The first card is 'A'. Choi Yeon Hwa lamented and said, {Look.}

If the dealer's open card is 'A', the player is at a significant disadvantage and is asked if they have purchased some form of insurance. With

insurance, even if you lose, you only pay half of your bet. Instead, if the player wins, they will receive 1.5x back.

Choi Yeon Hwa and Zhenya shook their heads in unison. Kwon Taek Joo handed out the cards one by one. Choi Yeon Hwa's card is '9' and Zhenya's card is 'A'. Blackjack was completed immediately.

{Wow? Is that real?}

Choi Yeon Hwa couldn't help but be surprised. Of course, it won't end there. If the dealer, Kwon Taek Joo, also hits blackjack, they will not be able to receive the money due to the tie. To prepare for this case, Zhenya can get back 1x of the pre-stake amount.

{Do you want your money back?}

Zhenya shook his head again. Just like usual, even when gambling, Zhenya was still very reckless. Kwon Taek Joo's face down card was turned over immediately. It's a '6'. Zhenya wins.

Winner, winner chicken dinner.

After declaring Zhenya's victory, Kwon Taek Joo took a chip from the bank and gave it to him. The corner of Zhenya's mouth curled up. Sometimes he won, sometimes he lost, but for some reason his stomach turned.

Kwon Taek Joo shuffles the cards and starts a new game. Both of Zhenya's cards are '9's. Kwon Taek Joo's face card is 'Q'. At this time, the dealer must check the remaining cards with the reader and notify the player whether they have achieved blackjack or not.

{No blackjack.}

Zhenya tapped his index and middle fingers on the table to signal 'split'. because his fingers are long, the hand gesture is especially elegant, to the point that Kwon Taek Joo unconsciously stares blankly.

{I hesitate.}

Choi Yeon Hwa's announcement of giving up suddenly brought Kwon Taek Joo back to his senses. Once again faithful to his duty as a dealer, he split Zhenya's '9' card in half and gave one more card. When the 'A'

card and the '3' card are dealt, the total is 20, 12. Zhenya gets 12 buttons in total. With the addition of the '7', the combination of cards created a total of 19.

Choi Yeon Hwa, who was watching, exclaimed, {Oh my gosh.} Kwon Taek Joo and Zhenya's eyes met. He quietly narrowed his eyes and observed Kwon Taek Joo's expression. Zhenya's eyes were full of mockery. To be honest, the bet amount was not Kwon Taek Joo's personal money and it didn't matter how much he lost, but clearly, the anger was a lot.

{Do you want to bet more?}

{So boring. We have to do something to have more fun, right?}

Zhenya slyly stacked the chips in his hand. At least \$100,000 each. Choi Yeon Hwa watched the betting guy with interest.

The face down card is turned over. A '6' card is drawn. Since the total of the cards is only 16, Zhenya draws one more card. An '8' card is drawn and the sum of the three cards exceeds 21.

{Oh, is that so?}

Zhenya smirked. Is it useless to feel like the taunt was aimed at Kwon Taek Joo.

{It's not fun because I keep winning.}

Kwon Taek Joo was angry at the provocation but he did not show it. He exhausted his patience to the maximum. Zhenya clearly knew Kwon Taek Joo's feelings and continued to move forward.

A few more games were played, and Zhenya showed no signs of leaving. More and more chips piled up in front of him. Zhenya won 6 or 7 games out of 10 bets. The manager comes and

observed

the games. This is because cheating often takes place or casino robbery occurs due to collusion between players or between players and dealers. Kwon Taek Joo's mentality became even heavier.

It was a game that depended on probability, but he had continuously lost to him. How can Zhenya continuously win without cheating? Or was he born that lucky?

Zhenya's consecutive victories once again attracted public attention. Even Choi Yeon Hwa took her hands off the card game and watched him. Every time they communicated with each other with their eyes, Kwon Taek Joo winked fiercely and told him to go away, but he acted as if he didn't know anything. He even nodded towards the door, but Zhenya pretended not to know and just raised his eyebrows innocently.

{Oh, Philip. Damned, I have met the right opponent.}

{No, I was worried but you didn't realize it.}

Kwon Taek Joo straightened his stiff face and grinned. Zhenya smiled sarcastically.

{But you can't openly show that you're not happy for the guests.}

{Oh. I'm just a little tired.}

The corner of Kwon Taek Joo's mouth pulled out with difficulty, feeling like he was about to spasm. Zhenya rolled a chip between his long fingers and whispered lazily.

{If you're tired, rest a bit. I have a reservation.}

Either way, it doesn't sound like a joke. However, Choi Yeon Hwa thought it was just a joke and said, {What? Are you really going to rest?} She laughed. Kwon Taek Joo felt like his blood boiled for a moment.

Kwon Taek Joo is once again confused. The sum of the two cards Zhenya received is 14. A rather ambiguous hand to discard or play and receive a new card. On the other hand, Kwon Taek Joo's card is 'A'. Zhenya makes a bold shot without insurance. Another card is dealt. A '6' was added to complete 20. Immediately, Zhenya pushed all his chips in front of Kwon Taek Joo. Even the onlookers around him were agitated by the sudden all-in.

A crazy man suddenly appeared from somewhere. Does he know how much it costs? Kwon Taek Joo has never worried about Zhenya's wallet,

but he also never thought he would throw money on the street like this. Choi Yeon Hwa also expressed concern.

{Are you okay?}

{I'm not in the mood to eat little by little.}

(He's saying that he doesn't feel like playing a little. Something like that.)

Everyone watching looked nervous as if they had bet their own money, but it was Zhenya alone. Zhenya threw Kwon Taek Joo a meaningful look. He sighed softly and continued playing cards.

{Check the face down card.}

Kwon Taek Joo turned the card face up. For a moment, the surrounding noise seemed to stop. Everyone held their breath and just looked at Kwon Taek Joo's hand.

Card 8 is turned over. Zhenya wins. It was an unbelievable result even though Kwon Taek Joo himself was in charge. Cheers and applause rang out all around.

{You're really good. I just keep losing. Do you have any tricks?}

Choi Yeon Hwa was excited as if she had won. Zhenya leaned back deeply in his chair and stared at Kwon Taek Joo's stunned face. Then he naturally turned to look into Choi Yeon Hwa's eyes.

{Shall I teach you?}

The tone was gentle. Kwon Taek Joo's hand that was pulling out the chip suddenly stopped. Choi Yeon Hwa shows deep curiosity.

{Is there really a way?}

{Maybe. Maybe not.}

{What is it?}

{Why don't you try checking for yourself? I can't tell you myself.}

Once again, the half-hearted statement left room for flirtation with slightly narrowed eyes.

What is this kid saying?

Perhaps because of the light, the long eyelashes seem to sparkle strangely. Kwon Taek Joo's stomach boiled. Choi Yeon Hwa just looked at Zhenya with puzzled eyes at the unexpected suggestion. Immediately after, her smile deepened.

{So shall we go drink together? I have no companion.}

{Okay.}

Zhebya happily nodded. Choi Yeon Hwa immediately packed her clothes and bags. When Zhenya stood up from his seat and met Kwon Taek Joo's eyes, he greeted without hesitation.

{See you next time, Philip.}

He didn't know what to do with this unexpected situation. Zhenya threw back a chip, saying it was a tip. When he received it, it turned out to be \$500,000. The man smiled at the speechless Kwon Taek Joo and then escorted Choi Yeon Hwa out of the casino. He was dumbfounded as he watched the two of them walk away.

How long has it been? Someone knocked on the table. Meanwhile, other guests occupied the empty chairs and sat down.

[Aren't you dealing cards?]

[Oh yes. Sorry.]

Kwon Taek Joo awkwardly shuffled the cards mechanically. The manager who was watching from behind squeezed Kwon Taek Joo's shoulder and then stepped back.

He shook his head to clear his mind. Right now Kwon Taek Joo must focus on 'Philip's' work. But even after pushing himself like that, all he could think about was Zhenya and Choi Yeon Hwa. He didn't understand what the hell Zhenya was doing. He was just, vaguely, very worried. Damn, there's still an hour left until the shift ends.

## Chapter 5.2 – Side Story

Finally, it's time to change shifts. Kwon Taek Joo quickly changed clothes. 'Philip' and his close friends cracked jokes, but he couldn't hang out like other times. He refused the invitation to go out for a drink and hurriedly left the dressing room.

At that moment, Annie, the concierge, came to visit. She gave Kwon Taek Joo an envelope of unknown origin and said that it was an item delivered to 'Philip' by a certain customer. It was an envelope with the logo of a famous hotel nearby. Inside there is a card that is said to be the room key. Obviously from Zhenya.

Kwon Taek Joo left behind his colleagues who were teasing him about whether he was going to meet his lover and went to the employee parking lot. Kwon Taek Joo drove an older SUV to a safe place. It's a large mechanical car wash. He casually parked the SUV and went to the bathroom. When he reappeared, he had completely transformed from 'Philip' to Kwon Taek Joo.

He went to the parking lot opposite and got into a brand new sedan. Kwon Taek Joo immediately started the car and drove out, the destination was a luxury hotel with a logo printed on the envelope.

That hotel is located in a prime location of Las Vegas. Here you can enjoy panoramic views of Las Vegas from anywhere in the 3,000 guest rooms. Just like that, cars and people came in and out continuously. Kwon Taek Joo was

also a part there, he left the valet parking and went inside.

When he arrived at the elevator reserved for guest rooms, the receptionist asked Kwon Taek Joo for the key card key. He obediently handed over the card key that had been given to him before. The employee then asked to wait a moment and called another employee. The new employee who appeared soon greeted him warmly and then led Kwon Taek Joo to the other side.

The place he arrived at was in front of a separate elevator. It seemed that only that side was particularly quiet, and it was reserved for the VIP room only.

When Kwon Taek Joo entered the elevator and inserted the key card, the light on the top floor button turned on. When he got there and looked out, there were only a few doors in the hallway.

The room Kwon Taek Joo entered was likely 150 pyeong

. It appears to be the Presidential Suite, which is said to cost between 30 and 40 million won per night. Three bedrooms, four bathrooms, spacious living room, private bar, terrace with comfortable sofa bed and private swimming pool. The interior in the old Persian style disturbs the view. Kwon Taek Joo looked at its scale and splendor and couldn't help but sigh.

The employee said to call them anytime if you needed anything and then quietly withdrew. Kwon Taek Joo glanced around and walked inside immediately without looking closely around the guest room. He chose a bottle of whiskey and a glass and sat down on the sofa in the living room. The seat cushions were gently turned to support his tired body in the most comfortable way.

As soon as the glass was filled, it emptied in one go. The feeling of a full stomach immediately disappeared. But after just a little bit of comfort, complicated things appeared in Kwon Taek Joo's mind. He poured and then drank the whiskey in the glass, his eyes always directed towards the door.

Truly, there wasn't a day that went by that he wasn't seething over Zhenya. Even if he asked him not to interfere in work matters, Zhenya wouldn't listen. If so, please let me know in advance. But that kid always surprises Kwon Taek Joo every time and everywhere. He didn't know if Zhenya was trying to help or if he was trying to get in the way.

That guy is a diplomat, but not careful at all. You won't be able to forget that face once you see it, but Kwon Taek Joo has never seen him in disguise. It seemed that in Zhenya's mind, there were no international

problems that could arise for himself. Knowing that he was also very reckless in Russia, why should Kwon Taek Joo himself be more restless?

Even ten fingers cannot count all the troubles from Zhenya.

Were you working in Dubai at that time? Kwon Taek Joo tries to stay home as much as possible during holidays or his mother's birthday, but at that time there is an emergency at headquarters and there is nothing he can do. At that time, Zhenya visited the house while Kwon Taek Joo was away. After that, he brought his mother's homemade rice cake soup to Dubai. Have you heard that Koreans have to eat rice cake soup on the first day of the new year? I don't understand how his mother and that boy can understand and talk to each other, while both speak in their native language.

Because of the long flight, all the water in the soup leaked out. Just looking at it made me feel choked up, so Kwon Taek Joo refused and said he didn't need to eat, but it was useless. Zhenya immediately threatened Kwon Taek Joo, saying that if he ignored his sincerity, then his sincerity towards his target, him, would be in vain. And since the target had fallen into his hands, Kwon Taek Joo had no choice but to swallow the

tteokguk that was as dry as a desert.

Is that all? There was a time when Kwon Taek Joo had difficulty because he was Zhenya's date. That's when he took action in Iran, a traditional ally of North Korea. The two countries illegally traded weapons and supported the development of nuclear programs under the pretext of 'scientific and technical cooperation' from a very early age. However, US intelligence agencies determined that exchanges between the two countries gradually decreased from 2013 onwards.

But intelligence obtained from a UN member state directly contradicts that analysis. Until recently, the two countries actively traded arms and technology. Kwon Taek Joo also heard that a North Korean trading company called 'Cheongwoon' in Tehran was relaying this. It was even discovered that parts related to ballistic missiles were transported through Air Koryo and Iran Air, the national airlines of both countries.

To get clearer and more detailed information, Kwon Taek Joo approached the commander of the Iranian army. However, Zhenya appeared right at that place. Because the target recognized him a long time ago, even Kwon Taek Joo had to greet them. Zhenya blatantly introduced Kwon Taek Joo as his lover. When both the subject and Kwon Taek Joo were shocked, Zhenya corrected Kwon Taek Joo as his subordinate, saying it was just a joke. Because from the looks of it, Kwon Taek Joo was affiliated with the Russian embassy, so there was no doubt about the target.

The risky campaign at that time was easily completed thanks to Russia and Iran having a common enemy, the United States, and the long-term cooperation between the two countries in the fields of security and economics. Of course, only physical suffering is reduced, but mental suffering is several times more than normal.

Zhenya always interfered like that, ruining all of Kwon Taek Joo's plans and very actively boasting that the mission was completed entirely thanks to him. In exchange, Kwon Taek Joo was taken to Ajinoki Island and forced to go on vacation many times. Because he always stopped by Russia after completing a mission, one time Chief Kwak asked about matters related to Zhenya. Manager Kwak also could not easily understand Kwon Taek Joo's explanation. If it were Kwon Taek Joo and it were him, I probably wouldn't be able to understand.

He was very upset every time Zhenya came to his house to see his mother. Because it's his nature to not care about what should and shouldn't be said. One day, his mother felt uncomfortable communicating with Zhenya. She heard that there was a translation software and asked how to use it. Kwon Taek Joo was in a cold sweat. He said that Russian translation is not common, and even when there is translation software, mistranslations are common. His mother was very sorry but still obediently believed her son's words. But Kwon Taek Joo also doesn't know when that lie will be exposed. Suppose his mother tried to translate Zhenya's words through translation software... Just imagining it made my head spin. Every day that passes is like walking on a tightrope.

Looking back on the past journey, Kwon Taek Joo sighed. How did you get involved with such a troublesome guy? It was Kwon Taek Joo who was determined to tame Zhenya rather than continue running away from him. However it was more difficult than expected. Even though they've been together for a year, he still doesn't know Zhenya's whereabouts. Even when they were together all day, Kwon Taek Joo didn't know what he was thinking.

[...Anyway...where is this bastard and what is he doing?]

He glared dissatisfied at the silent door again. It's time for Zhenya to come back. Two hours after leaving the casino with Choi Yeon Hwa there was still no text from Zhenya. Did something happen? Since Kwon Taek Joo doesn't know what he's planning to do, it's hard to guess what he's doing right now. The two of them went out drinking together, but he wondered if that was all.

Or roll around in bed again? Of course that is not surprising. Zhenya's lower body is inherently promiscuous, and when it comes to women, he doesn't care about age, nationality, or style. On the contrary, Choi Yeon Hwa is what Kwon Taek Joo needs to worry about.

He tapped his watch, the ticking second hand made him more nervous. Finally Kwon Taek Joo stood up from his chair with a sigh and strode towards the door. He wasn't wearing camouflage or had any plans in mind, but he had to find Zhenya quickly.

That was the moment he was about to grab the door handle, when suddenly the lock was unlocked and the door opened from the outside. The person who appeared in front of the hesitant Kwon Taek Joo was none other than Zhenya. He slowly observed Kwon Taek Joo, who had a serious expression, from face to toe.

## Chapter 5.3 – Side Story

**Format Note:** { } is for English, [ ] is for Korean and “ ” is for Russian dialogues.

"Where did you go?"

"I saw it. You went out with that girl. What have you two been doing up until now?"

Zhenya spoke meaningfully. Kwon Taek Joo was uncomfortable but he tried to calm down and then stared at Zhenya uncomfortably. The guy leisurely walked past Kwon Taek Joo and then sat on the sofa, pouring whiskey from the bottle that Kwon Taek Joo had already drunk nearly half of into a glass. He didn't immediately drink the rich amber liquid but shook it in the glass.

"Why Choi Yeon Hwa, why did you do that?"

"What's wrong? Do you think I will kill her?"

Zhenya blinked and then slowly looked up. He even laughed at Kwon Taek Joo, who was extremely confused.

"You're not that inflexible."

"How about not?"

"Kwon Taek Joo, what are you really planning to do to seduce that woman? Are you really planning to use a handsome man?"

"Who used the handsome guy?"

It's beyond words. Zhenya rushed in to disrupt the group of subjects he had been diligently following for many days. The guy who had been listening silently suddenly smiled, it seemed like Kwon Taek Joo's answer made him very satisfied.

"Ah, so you were planning on chasing me? Are you afraid that she and I will have fun together?"

"No. Because I don't know what you will do with her. If you kill her, it will become troublesome."

"It seems like you already said that. I won't attack unless someone else touches me first."

Kwon Taek Joo gasped and was speechless. It's true he said that.

Zhenya didn't mind, he tilted his chin to the seat next to him, folded his arms and said

"It seems like you don't need this?"

In his hand was a small microchip.

"What's that?"

"Information on North Korea's loan account in Europe. And the source of funds deposited into each account, etc?"

Zhenya always easily gets what he wants. Always the same. Therefore, Kwon Taek Joo kept feeling uncomfortable because he felt like he was losing.

He stared at Zhenya with a disapproving expression and then reluctantly approached. Kwon Taek Joo reached for the chip, but Zhenya suddenly retracted his hand.

"Did you think I would waste so much time just to get this?"

"Unlike some others, he cannot expose his face in all directions. I don't have anyone to back me like you do."

(He's saying how he doesn't like to show his face while on missions, unlike 'someone.')

Kwon Taek Joo gritted his teeth and made a sarcastic comment. Zhenya looked at him and quietly straightened his shoulders, his expression also seemed to become more arrogant. It's obvious that this bastard has no learning ability.

"That's not a compliment, kid. Shouldn't you know that by now?"

"You're still so shy, Kwon Taek Joo."

"..Haa.. It's because of you that I'm embarrassed on your behalf, really."

"I didn't expect you to think so much about my dignity."

His head was pounding. This was something that often happened when he talked to Zhenya. Compared to continuing the dialogue, it's better to give up.

Kwon Taek Joo took a deep breath and held out his hand.

"What are you talking about? Quickly give me that."

However, Zhenya did not introduce the microchip lightly. He just turned it around as if to show off.

"Taek Joo, I never said I would give this to you."

"What? You don't need it anyway."

"That's true, but now that it's in your hands, it's up to you to use anyway."

It must have been quite a hefty price. A terrifying sigh came out.

"Is there gold on that thing of yours? As if he can give up a lot to be satisfied."

"Ah? Is it because of that that you have been sulking all this time?"

"Who!"

"You're so naive. That woman stole 400 billion from the dictators' slush fund. She would die if caught, but she still had the audacity to do so. Could such a woman be so loose as to let her guard down with a dealer she had only met for a few days? If you hadn't intervened, I would be dismembered in her bed right now. Who sent him, what is the purpose of approaching, she will try to use her body to ask for the truth. A woman only has money, but that doesn't mean she can't use beauty tricks."

When Choi Yeon Hwa suddenly seduced 'Philip', Kwon Taek Joo became suspicious. Everyone's preferences are different, but 'Philip' is not a

very sexually attractive man. Choi Yeon Hwa said she likes a gentle man. The problem was that he didn't know if it was real, because he hadn't shown anything like that before.

After all, had she always been suspicious of 'Philip'? Kwon Taek Joo did not know that she had planned a private meeting with the purpose of confirming his identity.

While he was organizing his thoughts, Zhenya added.

"If it were you, it would be a different story."

"What do you mean?"

"Now seems like the right time to unleash my beauty plan."

He frowned at the ominous omen. Zhenya seemed to enjoy Kwon Taek Joo's reaction and smiled slightly as he took a sip of whiskey.

Just then, Zhenya took something from a nearby drawer and threw it at Kwon Taek Joo. It's a small shopping bag. Part of the inside protrudes from an overturned shopping bag. At first glance, it resembles a bow.

"...What do you want me to do with this?"

Kwon Taek Joo looked at Zhenya with suspicious eyes. The corner of his mouth drew a long arc.

"Put it on."

[Ha, this crazy guy...]

Kwon Taek Joo sighed as he put on the clothes he received from Zhenya. No, it was absurd to call it "clothes". The black pants were completely tight on the lower body, with a zipper running along the crotch, and the shirt only had a bow and cuffs. Looking in the mirror, he soon believed he would be the exclusive performer of the Chippendale Show. If it's like this, taking it all off will probably be less embarrassing.

Kwon Taek Joo checked his face in the mirror and sighed as if the ground was about to collapse. The feeling of his pants rubbing against his bare skin was strange. Wearing a shirt like you're not wearing it makes you feel like you can't wait to show off your breasts. How did

that bastard's taste come to be like that? He was reluctantly looking at himself in the mirror when from outside, Zhenya urged him to come out. Kwon Taek Joo touched the mirror and then went out.

Being embarrassed in this situation will only make Zhenya happy. He regained his composure before leaving the room and going to the living room. The guy lying on the sofa grinned when he saw Kwon Taek Joo.

"Look. Is that suitable?"

Zhenya's body, which had been leaning completely backwards, now leaned forward. The cloak  
hanged

loosely. He didn't know if it's because he just took a shower, but his skin became smoother and his ivory hair looked thicker because of the humidity. The eyes also became more transparent and rolled slowly and glanced at Kwon Taek Joo. His persistent gaze licked every corner of his body down to the invisible parts. Kwon Taek Joo has known this guy before, but not with such a perverted, beautiful face.

"Come here."

After completing the overall feeling, Zhenya waved his hand. The arrogant attitude was annoying but Kwon Taek Joo had no other choice, he just bowed down dejectedly and walked forward.

He came and stood in front of Zhenya. He reached out and grabbed the back of Kwon Taek Joo's thighs. Long, slender fingers pressed firmly into his firm skin. The pants were pulled up and the genitals inside were also tightened. Kwon Taek Joo also unconsciously put strength into his stomach. Zhenya raised the corner of his mouth as if he also felt that slight change.

Disagreeing with that attitude, Kwon Taek Joo took the initiative first. He placed his knee between Zhenya's spread legs and used one hand to grab the back of the sofa Zhenya was leaning on. As the distance grew closer, Zhenya looked up at him with a satisfied expression. Kwon Taek Joo looked into Zhenya's eyes and gently touched his ear and silently rubbed the entire ear as if massaging it. Zhenya breathed slowly, his

long eyelashes fluttering slightly. Kwon Taek Joo suddenly felt a strange sense of accomplishment when seeing Zhenya in such a happy and enjoying mood. It seemed like he had properly tamed someone who was no different from a wild animal.

He lifted Zhenya's chin who was looking at him passionately and kissed him. The corners of Zhenya's mouth twitched. When he stuck out his tongue to lick his upper lip, Zhenya's hands grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's round butt. He silently pursed his upper lip and let it go, then suddenly tilted his head and pushed his tongue in. As if he had been waiting, Zhenya pulled Kwon Taek Joo's body back and bit his tongue. Persistent red tongue mixed with touch and sound. Thump, chug...

Zhenya's hand rubbed his butt and then gradually moved up his back, each place his fingertips touched seemed to have a light electric current running across it. Kwon Taek Joo's back trembled. Zhenya smiled more earnestly.

There was numbness between his legs as Zhenya's hand groped his straight spine. Kwon Taek Joo held the hand that was tickling his back and held it tightly. The lips that were tightly attached to each other parted.

Zhenya raised his head and kissed him again, he bit Kwon Taek Joo's lower lip and stretched it out with his tongue. Even if he grabbed Zhenya's shoulder to push him away, it would have no effect, Kwon Taek Joo responded for a moment and then turned his head. Zhenya licked his glossy lips with a delicious expression.

"It's a pity to watch striptease alone."

"Weird thing. If not me, who would want to see this?"

"Self-esteem is lower than expected. Or do you pretend not to know?"

Zhenya smiled and pulled Kwon Taek Joo a little more. Then while caressing his shoulder blades, Zhenya gently rubbed the tip of her nose against his smooth nipple. Kwon Taek Joo's eyes narrowed slightly at the strange feeling. The unstimulated flesh is pressed down and rubbed and then crushed without countermeasures according to the guy's

movements. Feelings that have been forgotten for a while return and stimulate faster between the legs.

"Look at this. If you don't do it regularly, it won't rise anymore. You don't even do it yourself? You neglect it too much."

Zhenya brushed the tip of his nose and lips as if he were biting them, then suddenly raised his head and buried himself deep into Kwon Taek Joo's neck. Zhenya bit his neck and sucked on the thin skin there while continuously kneading the elastic buttocks with both hands. Kwon Taek Joo's body, which was originally standing upright, collapsed little by little under the outpouring of stimulation.

He tried to separate himself from Zhenya, who was nibbling on his neck. He seemed dissatisfied with Kwon Taek Joo, who kept stepping on the brakes. Then, as if to show his temper, he bit Kwon Taek Joo's chin.

"Uh. Choi Yeon Hwa... Is it true that she is safe?"

"Did you get shot in the eye without me? Why are you so haunted by that woman's life and death?"

"Zhenya. Is it true that she is still alive?"

"Maybe so."

Zhenya said he hadn't touched a single finger and continued. This time, he licked Kwon Taek Joo's ear lobe and stuck his tongue into Kwon Taek Joo's ear, his middle finger rhythmically traced the butt bone and thrust deep inside. Kwon Taek Joo groaned and reached back and grabbed his wrist. He grabbed Zhenya by the back of his neck and pulled it away from him. Obstructed once again, Zhenya sighed.

"Taek Joo, is it not foreplay but sexual torture?"

"You must check the product's condition. How did you get that information without touching Choi Yeon Hwa?"

"That side already knows who you are."

"No wonder you go around asking to be identified like that."

Kwon Taek Joo laughed sarcastically.

"Noise is no good, so I proposed a deal. I know what she needs most right now. If you can ensure that, it will be easier later."

"You gave Choi Yeon Hwa a family tattoo?"

"Well, that's kind of it."

"Did you have such a peace negotiation?"

"Taek Joo, I don't know how much you misunderstood me, but so far the transaction has been processed without any problems."

Of course Zhenya often calls himself a 'skilful businessman'. Even when Kwon Taek Joo went looking for Anastasia, he had a flexible and tactful conversation with the VIPs and Sergei who attended the party. Just looking at his mother alone at home, the communication still went quite well. However, Kwon Taek Joo could not believe it with certainty because of Zhenya's unpredictable nature.

Looking at the unreliable expression, Zhenya sighed and said " I have no trust." His eyebrows also dropped as if he was seriously hurt. How obnoxious.

Kwon Taek Joo lifted the hem of Zhenya's robe and grabbed the erect penis inside the robe.

"You're still more focused here than talking to me so I can't believe it."

"It seems like you don't know? It's been a long time."

He kissed Zhenya a little and then stood up and knelt down. The huge mass of muscle clenched in Kwon Taek Joo's hand trembled. Zhenya also gently rubbed his body against Kwon Taek Joo's inner thighs. He was getting ready to take off his pants.

Kwon Taek Joo's face suddenly became alert, remembering Zhenya's timely presence at the casino. Once he starts, he won't have a chance to talk properly anymore, so before that, Kwon Taek Joo must definitely ask.

"How did you find out that the dealer was me? Hacking and eavesdropping weren't enough so you developed a mind reader?"

"It's impossible not to notice."

"So what? I was in disguise and Philip's colleagues were completely unrecognizable."

"I recognize you, Kwon Taek Joo, you are not Philip."

He still couldn't get used to Zhenya achieving his goal so quickly. Kwon Taek Joo's face showed disapproval. Zhenya raised her head and pressed her lips to his. The lips pressed tightly like a seal and then gently parted. His eyes were also softer than usual at that time.

"That's a piece of cake for me."

After all, this kid is very skilled at manipulating people. Kwon Taek Joo silently looked down at Zhenya and then suddenly grabbed his face. Zhenya blankly looked at Kwon Taek Joo with a relaxed face. A pure desire did not suit him, only a deep blue passion towards him reflected in those eyes. Now Kwon Taek Joo wondered if he was crazy to read those things from Zhenya.

He sighed in despair and then lowered his head to kiss Zhenya on the lips. Looking satisfied, Zhenya hugged Kwon Taek Joo's back tightly and responded to the kiss he led. Lips wrapped around lips and then rubbed together, each time they separated, the corner of his mouth slightly raised. If Zhenya had a tail, it would probably wag wildly.

Kwon Taek Joo gently sucked his lips and then rubbed his tongue against the protruding tongue. The moist and tender meat is rubbed and then blended together, both bitter and sweet. Soon, thick saliva formed in his mouth. He sucked his tongue that was bobbing between his lips, then tilted his head and inserted his tongue into Zhenya's mouth. He bowed his head moderately and did not hesitate to receive Kwon Taek Joo's tongue. Zhenya's sternum kept wiggling over and over as if it was very aroused.

Zhenya didn't wear anything after showering so static electricity continued to build up. As if enjoying that tingling stimulation, he traced the dry back of Kwon Taek Joo, who only focused on the kiss, slowly but clearly aroused. Even while kissing, Zhenya also made sweet moaning

sounds. Every time he discovers the unusual image of this steel-like man, Kwon Taek Joo feels a strange joy.

A moment later, the lips parted. Their eyes met, red with lust. Warm but rapid breaths continued to blow against each other's necks. Zhenya gently closed his eyes and suddenly stuck out his tongue to lick Kwon Taek Joo's shiny lips. He grimaced with an annoyed face.

"It's because of you. One is to take the risk to tame it or just wait quietly."

"Good dogs also need to be trained. You have to listen to me."

"Then the owner must be responsible. From the looks of it, it looks like you're ignoring me."

This kid never gives up even a word. Just then, he heard a jig, and his zipper was unzipped. The hip bone was also helplessly exposed. Kwon Taek Joo's back suddenly trembled because of the cool air blowing on his body.

Zhenya only opens the zipper halfway. That wind caused his penis to start to become erect while it was still tucked tightly into his pants.

"You must have loosened it while bathing, right? It's quite soft."

Zhenya groped around the hole with both hands and looked at Kwon Taek Joo as if to confirm.

"You have to be more humane than someone else. If you don't do anything, it'll probably bleed out."

Zhenya smirked then bowed his head and bit Kwon Taek Joo's chest then let go. At that moment, the tip of his chin gently pressed Kwon Taek Joo's nipple, causing him to suddenly tighten his chest. Pretending not to know, Zhenya continuously bit the surrounding flesh until leaving teeth marks, then used his thumb to gently rub the other nipple and squeeze gently. Kwon Taek Joo's upper body tilted forward in response to unexpected stimuli. The soft, plump breasts rushed in as if they wanted to crush the sharp bridge of his nose. Zhenya happily opened his mouth and sucked the small piece of meat he had been craving for so long. Hot breath along with saliva and the feeling of a soft

mouth rushed in at the same time. When Zhenya began to gently suck on the nipple, his eyebrows furrowed.

[Hmmm...]

Zhenya held Kwon Taek Joo's hand that was pushing his shoulder, and continued to persistently suck on the small piece of meat. He bit and sucked so hard that the skin around the nipple quickly turned red. Zhenya used his tongue to swipe over the nipple and then rolled it, making it hard. It becomes more sensitive to stimulation, and the hot breath also spreads a strange feeling.

Kwon Taek Joo's breathing became clearly rough. Zhenya hugged him tighter as he continued to try to push him away, saliva rubbing against the slippery flesh.

"Ugh, Uhmm..."

"What's up? I like it. Your waist is shaking."

Where Zhenya touched, Kwon Taek Joo's flesh trembled uncontrollably. Penis stuck in pants, tight and stiff. He wanted to touch it with his own hands, but he couldn't move because Zhenya was wrapped around his arms and body.

Zhenya grabbed Kwon Taek Joo and opened his mouth wide, taking a bite of his chest, sucking on his plump skin and then moving his tongue to play with his nipples. A newborn baby starved for many days probably wouldn't be that greedy.

Not just this time. Zhenya's foreplay tends to focus on his chest. Kwon Taek Joo himself also enjoys this stimulation, but sometimes he wonders if this is the lack of lust of his childhood manifested.

As he lost his thoughts, Zhenya's mouth moved away. Her two red nipples glistened as if covered with syrup. Zhenya did not hesitate to use his thumb to massage the smooth flesh, then turned his head to suck on the large breast opposite

"Hm.."

Kwon Taek Joo's tightly held hand stretched out and then clenched into a fist. Every time Zhenya sucked hard on his nipple, it felt like something was being sucked out of her body. His upper body kept tilting forward and the heat from his chest pooled down between his legs. Kwon Taek Joo continued to struggle with the unbearable pleasure, his thighs rubbing against Zhenya's rock-like thighs, continuing to stimulate his penis.

Zhenya bit as if to stamp his chest, as if it were a blessing if it didn't bleed.

While Kwon Taek Joo was still moaning, Zhenya tore off the gel and inserted it into the small hole. Before feeling the difference, the gel suddenly gushed out. Kwon Taek Joo was startled, his shoulders trembled. At that time, Zhenya nibbled on Kwon Taek Joo's left breast and squeezed out a lot of gel. The gel box that should have been new quickly dried up and was thrown to the floor and deformed to the point where its original shape was unrecognizable.

Zhenya poked at the hole and inserted his finger into it. Kwon Taek Joo's spine stiffened with a clear feeling of compression. He rubbed the outer circle while expanding the inner wall. Kwon Taek Joo's upper body leaned back and trembled, the knees supporting the body also wobbled.

Zhenya kissed Kwon Taek Joo's collarbone and nape as he inserted another finger to loosen it. He spread two fingers wide and wiggled them around, then squeezed and pressed the warm inside to stimulate it. Whenever that happens, Kwon Taek Joo's abdominal muscles contract.

"Huh, ha ha.."

"I think your body is resilient, but it's nothing compared to this."

"Suddenly, ugh..hm.."

"Even if it was just a day or two later, it was as if no one had ever touched it. It's a hassle to have to loosen it every day. I think I tried really hard with it before but it's still too tight inside."

"...Shut up...ugh."

"You do it on purpose, right? Every time you tense up, my finger will be sucked in deeper."

Zhenya babbled and stretched out his fingers. Although it was nothing compared to Zhenya's penis, three fingers were enough to make Kwon Taek Joo struggle. He was paralyzed from the bottom up immediately. Every time he went inside the hole and rubbed it, the gel filled inside would come out. The entire genital area cannot stand the stimulation and turns red.

Zhenya still calmly put his heart into the small hole and groped it. The long finger is inserted very deeply, so the excitement is maximized. Kwon Taek Joo felt uncomfortable as if he wanted to push Zhenya's hand away, his stomach was tight and felt like it was full. "Stop it," he said, then grabbed Zhenya's hair. His soft ivory hair easily slipped through his fingers.

The guy sucked on the nipple and made a clicking sound. The strong suction force causes the soft meat to be continuously sucked up and then bounce up again. His chest was bitten but the pleasure flowed between his legs. Kwon Taek Joo's penis was under pressure like it was about to explode.

He was about to quickly open the zipper, but Zhenya grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's wrist.

"Hmm, let go, kid."

"I'm so impatient. Are you that needy?"

"You're the one who's stimulating me."

"Taek Joo, I know you like it rougher, but..."

Suddenly, Zhenya grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's waist and gently lifted him up. The completely unpredictable situation took his body by surprise. Kwon Taek Joo's face was stunned for a moment and then quickly grimaced as Zhenya's meat entered the hole.

"You have to think about my position when I hear you complaining all the time."

"Uh... uh.."

Even though he just sat down gently, Kwon Taek Joo's eyes still frowned. His mouth automatically closed and his breathing stopped. His hands put all his strength into Zhenya's shoulders.

Zhenya was immersed in pleasure when half of his glans entered. He exhaled a hot breath and pressed his lips to Kwon Taek Joo's neck, whose skin was covered in goosebumps.

"I'm the one who bribed you."

Zhenya mumbled into Kwon Taek Joo's neck. He clenched his molars and pretended to be strong until the end and grabbed his coat as if he wanted to tear it off

Zhenya raised the corner of his mouth and without hesitation raised his lower body. The hole that was trying to bite the head of the penis suddenly opened and with difficulty swallowed the huge piece of meat. Kwon Taek Joo's cheeks became as hard as stone from stress.

"Ah... bastard.."

"I told you so."

Zhenya scolded Kwon Taek Joo for swearing while kissing his ear. Kwon Taek Joo pulled the string on Zhenya's cloak and gasped. If he kept that face, he would suffocate or the blood vessels in his head would explode. Kwon Taek Joo let out a breath and relaxed. The penis stuck underneath scraped the inside and slid in more than halfway. His lower abdomen quickly tensed and bulged out.

[Ha ha, um...]

Why can't he get used to putting it in? Kwon Taek Joo unconsciously groaned and buried his head in Zhenya's neck. The strong smell of her body made his head dizzy. His body seemed to have memorized the sensations engraved during each time he made love to Zhenya. Even though it hasn't quite started yet, the spot that's always been stimulated

is already heating up. Unable to bear that feeling, Kwon Taek Joo unconsciously knelt down. The hole holding Zhenya's penis also shrunk. The veins were clearly visible on Zhenya's smooth forehead, and the corners of his mouth were slightly raised.

"Haa... Taek Joo, are you planning to kill me?"

"ugh.., hmm.., ugh, stop talking."

He gritted his teeth and said to Zhenya. In an instant, his seemingly floating body fell straight down, the mass of Zhenya's flesh that was vaguely covered was immediately pushed into its roots. Kwon Taek Joo's body weight moved and crushed Zhenya's lower body. A strong collision sound came but. Kwon Taek Joo helplessly tilted his head at the penetrating feeling running down his spine and rising to his brain.

[Ha...uh....]

He gritted his molars and swallowed down the groan that was about to explode, strength put into his fingers gripping Zhenya's shoulder tightly. If it were a normal man, his collarbone would have been broken. The tight inner wall twisted like a spasm, squeezing the genitals, making Zhenya's always relaxed face frown slightly at the tightness. The mass of flesh trembled like a living fish inside him stirring up sensation, texture and even body temperature. Kwon Taek Joo's body has been trained for a long time but accepting this name is still too much.

Zhenya calmly touched Kwon Taek Joo's hole that was twitching like a child and buried her head in his chest. His smooth bronze skin quickly became mottled with teeth marks. Kwon Taek Joo trembled and desperately waited for the storm to come. As if he was a little impatient, he hastily tightened his grip on Zhenya's penis.

Zhenya laughed like the sound of the wind blowing.

## Chapter 5.4 – Side Story

"I know."

Zhenya started thrusting into Kwon Taek Joo's lower body with a low, cooling voice. He tried to restrain his body but his whole body kept shaking because he was suppressed by an excessive force. His body bounced up and then fell down, swallowing Zhenya's muscles, expanding the hole and clawing at the tight inside.

Kwon Taek Joo tried to run away

instinctively, but Zhenya tightly grabbed his waist as he tried to escape and quickly rushed downwards. His firm thighs and round butt rubbing against Zhenya made him even more eager. Screaming moans erupted from the strong thrusts as if left alone, Kwon Taek Joo's navel would be punctured.

The little hole was sucking on Zhenya's penis with unbearable difficulty. The inside was also constantly being hit by the foreskin like a rock.

Kwon Taek Joo bent down and quickly rolled up Zhenya's cloak and grabbed it tightly, he raised his knees and held Zhenya's thighs tightly to stop the movements.

"Hey, ugh, wait."

Zhenya appeared dissatisfied. The blue eyes looking at Kwon Taek Joo became sharp like an animal that had just smiled blood and was ready to hunt. Looking into the eyes of the man consumed by desire, it was nothing short of a miracle that he stopped.

"I think this is also part of the quest. Taek Joo, what I want is in your hands."

[Ahh, ah...]

Zhenya rubbed Kwon Taek Joo's nipples and pulled them all the way up. His pelvis

tingled

happily, he couldn't take it anymore and rubbed Zhenya gently. Taking advantage of that gap, Zhenya lifted his lower body that was momentarily frozen. As Kwon Taek Joo grunted and collapsed under repeated insertions, Zhenya placed her lips around his chin and neck and continued to thrust.

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't hold back any longer and reached between his legs. He hastily tried to open the zipper that was blocking his way, but every time Zhenya stabbed him hard under his body as if on purpose, so his repeated attempts were in vain. Then he kissed Kwon Taek Joo, who was angry and panting. He uncomfortably grabbed Zhenya's hair and pushed his tongue between his naturally parted lips. Two tongues merged together, the inside of the mouth quickly became sweet.

Only then did the zipper in Zhenya's hand fully open. Kwon Taek Joo's penis, which was already stretched from the inside, rushed out as if it were bouncing. Zhenya pulled it with his fingers and pressed it against his stomach. Kwon Taek Joo's body shuddered every time his butt was poked and his penis rubbed against Zhenya's abs. A feeling of excitement rose up to the point that his hair stood up, his eyes, ears, nape and even shoulders turned red. Zhenya's stomach was covered in clear liquid.

For a moment, the only thing left in the living room was the sound of the two people breathing heavily and pounding skin rubbing against each other.

"Ha.. ha.. Taek Joo..."

"Oh! Oh! Ah, sss, hauughss, ahh..."

Kwon Taek Joo trembled constantly, gently rubbing her bottom and then gently turning her back to seek stimulation to the desired place. Zhenya placed Kwon Taek Joo's arm behind his shoulder and hugged him tightly until their shoulders touched each other.

"You won. Who's the one who keeps hitting the brakes?"

Teasing mixed with sweet laughter. Zhenya placed his lips on Kwon Taek Joo's shoulder and then moaned softly [Hm...]. Kwon Taek Joo bowed his head as if to prepare for what was about to happen, his arms around Zhenya's neck also tensed.

The next moment, Zhenya rotated around below and thrust hard inside. For a moment, Kwon Taek Joo trembled as if he was about to faint.

Even though his glans only touched a certain spot, his whole body trembled and his eyes were wet as if he were about to cry. Zhenya's entire body tensed up as his penis was bitten fiercely, and his lungs tightened to the point of making it difficult to breathe.

"Here? Do you like it?"

Kwon Taek Joo didn't answer but just hugged Zhenya more desperately. Without any hesitation, he roughly stuffed the huge meat that was being sucked tightly. Kwon Taek Joo seemed to be crushed and collapsed with all four limbs dangling.

[A, aa! uh, ah! ugh, ha, uh, uh, ha!]

He didn't know what to do with that intense stimulation, his lips were bitten by Zhenya with his teeth and repeatedly drew long arcs. The desire for the flesh increased more and more as if it were painful, the wrinkles in the middle of his forehead did not have time to relax, the heat from the lower part of his body seemed to melt his brain. Even so, Kwon Taek Joo still wanted more.

Zhenya suddenly grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's thigh and stood up. He quickly grabbed onto Zhenya as his body slid due to gravity, the insertion becoming deeper.

[Ah, ah...uh!]

Kwon Taek Joo groaned

. He felt that Zhenya's penis had penetrated all the way to his ribs. The breath he couldn't exhale or swallow was stuck in his throat and he kept trembling. Kwon Taek Joo scratched his back so Zhenya would drop him.

But regardless, Zhenya continued walking somewhere while kissing Kwon Taek Joo's ear and face. With each step, the guy's hot iron thrust harder and harder, making him feel like he was about to die.

Zhenya pushed Kwon Taek Joo into some wall. He stabilized him between the hard wall and himself. Kwon Taek Joo's face contorted in both pain and pleasure, his eyes frowning at Zhenya as if he were annoyed. Zhenya grinned and stuck out her tongue to lick his sweaty cheeks for a long time.

"Don't endure it, just moan freely."

Zhenya whispered softly. But to Kwon Taek Joo, those words were like a declaration of war, an ominous omen ahead.

Damn it, right after that, Zhenya started moving his lower body. He stretched his back backwards then slammed downwards and dug deep into the hole. It felt like his insides were being ripped apart. Kwon Taek Joo didn't even have time to moan, his mouth was tightly closed, there was only the deafening sound of flesh slapping together; the side of his inner thigh colliding with Zhenya's thigh continuously hurt like he was being beaten. hit. The gel at the intersection of the body turns white due to frequent friction and then stretches into strong strings like a spider web along the skin.

"Ugh, ah..."

The mass of flesh coming in and out was about to explode as if it wanted to poke a hole out of his stomach. Zhenya hugged Kwon Taek Joo tightly to keep him from falling and kept moving. When Zhenya squeezed his glans, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't stand it and was startled.

[Hmmm..!]

"I told you not to endure it."

The white bubble that formed around the hole burst and reappeared. His body kept being lifted up and then falling helplessly back down, the penetration only getting deeper and deeper. Kwon Taek Joo had no choice but to hug Zhenya and endure that terrible pleasure.

Sandwiched between the wall and Zhenya, there was nowhere for him to run anymore.

Zhenya repeatedly poked the same spot and then rubbed vigorously. His fingertips stood up at the feeling of being crushed by the sensitive area being stimulated. It was so strong that even his toes felt a burning sensation.

Not long after. Kwon Taek Joo let out an uncomfortable groan.

[Uh, ha, ha...]

His body trembled continuously. His penis, rubbing continuously against Zhenya's abs, exploded white. The powerful surge of semen not only shot up Zhenya's broad chest muscles, but also shot hard up to his chin. Both the genitals and the entire pelvis are numb. An unconscious groan came out.

[Aw, oops... fuck...]

His whole body trembled pitifully, Kwon Taek Joo hugged Zhenya tightly without moving. Zhenya buried her face in his dark hair and carried him to a nearby bedroom.

The mass of meat was stuffed so tightly inside that it couldn't slip out even if Zhenya walked, but on the contrary, his slight movements also stimulated the inside of his stomach, causing pleasure to wriggle everywhere.

In the bedroom there is a bed large enough for four adults to lie around. Zhenya put Kwon Taek Joo down and climbed into bed. The giant, over 2 meters tall, exerted enormous pressure on his entire body. Even when Kwon Taek Joo was crushed by a rock, it didn't seem that heavy.

[Ahh..ah...]

Zhenya lifted his knees up as if to touch his chest, and his lungs were compressed, making his breathing unstable. In the blink of an eye, Kwon Taek Joo's entire face turned red. He choked out a sigh, but Zhenya pretended not to hear. He kissed Kwon Taek Joo's lips without hesitation. When he tried to protest in anger, Zhenya twisted his head and stuck his tongue into his half-closed lips. The hot wet tongue

rushed in and sucked Kwon Taek Joo's tongue. Even his exploding breath was swallowed without a trace remaining.

Meanwhile, Zhenya's flesh column that had been gently pierced underneath began to move. It both slowly penetrated deep inside and swirled strongly. Kwon Taek Joo closed his eyes tightly and sighed.

"How much longer will it take?"

[Ah.. ha...]

"This size can be shaped."

Zhenya muttered each syllable slowly while emphasizing the bottom. He seemed to want to create a mold in the shape of his penis in someone else's stomach.

Zhenya stared at Kwon Taek Joo's sweaty face with unusually bright eyes while his lower body steadily dug deep and stirred inside him. If this continues. Kwon Taek Joo will suffocate and die.

"Ugh, stop joking around and get it over with quickly."

He angrily gritted his teeth and growled. In anger, Kwon Taek Joo grabbed Zhenya's cloak as if pulling at the collar. He laughed again like the sound of the wind blowing.

"You still don't know your situation and are really brave."

Immediately afterwards, Zhenya pressed his chest against Kwon Taek Joo, almost crushing him completely. He was out of breath. Kwon Taek Joo tried to move his body to have time to breathe, but he was pressed so tightly that he could not move. The g

uy

fixed Kwon Taek Joo that way and moved his lower body and thrust deep inside. His thigh was hit hard. A burning sensation rose from the helplessly expanding hole.

The curses and moans that came out of Kwon Taek Joo's mouth were mixed, but Zhenya didn't pay attention and just thrust harder. At the place where the penis hits, the feeling of numbness condenses and

quickly spreads to the whole body. Kwon Taek Joo's eyes flashed, his brain felt like it was boiling. The penis, which has become smaller after ejaculation, now regains energy and stretches to stand up. He wanted to touch it to reduce the heat accumulated there, but was suppressed by Zhenya.

He angrily bit Zhenya's neck. For a moment, he squirmed and then suddenly stopped. The angry hole twitched and tightened on the guy's flesh, Kwon Taek Joo's limbs also trembled.

Suddenly Kwon Taek Joo's body flipped over. At that moment, the blood on Zhenya's face seemed to be drained, it seemed like the thin thread of reason had also been severed. "Wait." he tried to stop Zhenya. but Zhenya grabbed the back of Kwon Taek Joo's neck and pushed him down. He also grabbed the arms that were trying to resist and tied them tightly above his head. Zhenya then without hesitation lifted up the half-attached penis. The blows were so strong that Kwon Taek Joo's buttocks were pushed up. The deep and merciless thrust made his body feel like it wanted to split in half

"Ah! ah! ahhhh! ugh, ah! ah Hey, ha!"

He shook his head and twisted his body but couldn't get free. Zhenya completely disregarded Kwon Taek Joo and continued to act persistently. It seemed like his insides had been crushed so much that they became sticky, sticking tightly to the penis that was moving in and out of the small hole. As if that alone wasn't enough, Zhenya grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's ass and spread them open.

His vision shook chaotically with the rough thrusting, saliva running down his chin soaking the pillow.

[Ahhh, uhm, ah... ahhhhh... ahh...assss!]

"Uhm, uhhh, ahaahh, haaaa... Taek Joo."

"Uh, hey, ah, hey, Yevgeny..."

Kwon Taek Joo placed his wet forehead on Zhenya's arm holding his wrist. Zhenya's penis throbbed and stopped in a call that was nothing more than a plea. The pain and pleasure that poured down like pouring

rain also temporarily subsided. The restless trembling of his body became quiet and the mild dizziness returned. Kwon Taek Joo was barely breathing and the other guy's item, which had been buried deep in his stomach, exploded. The slimy semen spurted out hotly inside him. Kwon Taek Joo's stomach was tense.

Zhenya slowly and gently caressed Kwon Taek Joo's belly. He placed his body completely on his back and rubbed his face into his black hair.

"Taek Joo."

The loving call seemed to hold me back. The person who had just tore him apart as if wanting to kill him was enjoying the ultimate pleasure inside him. Kwon Taek Joo sighed and stroked Zhenya's hair helplessly.

Zhenya obediently took that hand and lowered his lips to Kwon Taek Joo's neck. He took a deep breath, enjoying the smell of his body. Even though he was such a monster, when Zhenya acted like a bia puppy like now, Kwon Taek Joo's mind suddenly became weak and defenseless. Someone has to take a step back. If he continues to watch over this guy, he probably won't be able to live according to his life's goal anymore.

When he opened his eyes, Kwon Taek Joo had been moved to another bedroom. It is unknown when and how he moved. Because the bed sheet was wet, it seemed like he couldn't sleep there last night. What time is it? Kwon Taek Joo couldn't even tell if it was night or day because of the blackout curtains.

He added strength to his drooping eyelids. His body is relatively light. Zhenya was nowhere to be seen. He usually wakes up first in the morning after completely tearing and crushing you. Is Zhenya taking a bath?

Kwon Taek Joo exhaled tiredly. Sometimes Zhenya's stamina is scary. Kwon Taek Joo himself always receives exceptional marks in all fitness and training assessments, but he cannot be compared to Zhenya. You couldn't even do it at his age to justify it just because Zhenya was young.

Kwon Taek Joo lay down for a while then stood up on his own. His head, which had been dizzy all night, was now completely blank. His whole

body felt numb as if it were swollen.

Kwon Taek Joo looked down at his body. There were speckled handprints and tooth marks everywhere the eye could see, and even the slightest movement sent screaming pain through all four limbs. It was as if he had been beaten. The problem was that his body was so used to the combined strength exercises whenever he rolled with Zhenya.

[Ah... Monster.]

The inside of his ass was still burning. While Kwon Taek Joo fell asleep, Zhenya was clearly enjoying himself again. Come to think of it, he was rarely awake when he made love to Zhenya. Until now, he has lived a life with no problems regarding nutritional supplements or physical supplements. Even during regular checkups and health checks, his physical condition is always above average. But Kwon Taek Joo himself is not Zhenya's opponent. If you have a young lover, is everything like this? No, no matter how you look at it, this kid is not normal.

Kwon Taek Joo arched his waist and walked out to the living room. The strange feeling of his thighs rubbing against each other with every step made him limp. He needed to take a shower but right now his legs were shaking and it was difficult to stand. Kwon Taek Joo tried to get a bottle of water and went to the terrace.

As soon as I opened the door, a cool breeze blew in. The noise blocked by the door also spilled in colorfully. It's night outside again. After all, how long did he have to make love and how long did he faint? Kwon Taek Joo gasped.

The flashy lights and signs found only in Las Vegas distracted him. He quenched his thirst and then indifferently looked down at the somewhat ecstatic scene below. Only then did Kwon Taek Joo feel like his sluggish head regained consciousness.

How long has it been? He felt a familiar presence behind him, and Zhenya appeared. He smells good. It looked like Zhenya had just finished showering. Kwon Taek Joo turned his head and stared at the

guy who seemed sober. The guy raised his eyebrows as if he didn't understand.

"Why are you dissatisfied again?"

"Are you human?"

"I don't understand what you're saying."

"If you go to the hospital like this, you'll have to be treated for 3 weeks, kid."

He gritted his teeth. Zhenya leisurely crossed his arms and glanced at Kwon Taek Joo's body. Seeing his chest full of bite marks, he smiled.

"Are there any hospitals that specialize in men's breasts?"

Without any expression of apology other than a vulgar joke, Kwon Taek Joo threw a cushion nearby. Zhenya easily dodged and shrugged.

"It's all your own doing."

"Did I tell you to attack? I told you more than 10 times to stop, you brat."

"Start by leaving your lover for more than 10 days. Doesn't that mean you'll accept this?"

Zhenya was as usual, blaming others and being shameless. But the problem is that being with him as a lover and being apart for more than 10 days because of work are both true. Kwon Taek Joo has nothing to refute.

Even after Zhenya followed him to Korea. Kwon Taek Joo's daily life did not change much. Once a task is assigned, another task is assigned. This is because the relationship with North Korea has not changed even though the government has changed and the policy towards North Korea has changed. As long as North Korea does not give up its nuclear weapons, the current tension has no choice but to continue.

Even though it is. When there's no one to play with, he should focus on his work, right? Kwon Taek Joo wondered if this was something to complain about when Zhenya chased him all the way to where he

worked like this. I have never seen a guy with the title of Russian ambassador go on a diplomatic mission. If he's bored, he can go to Ajinoki Island alone, but Zhenya won't accept it even if he dies.

"Don't you know I live like this? That's it, why are you focusing on such strange things..."

He scratched his head awkwardly. In the past and now, Kwon Taek Joo himself was just doing his job, but suddenly he had a strange feeling of guilt. Every time we quarrel for the same reason, he

felt a bit frustrated.

"I know. In fact, he was too obsessed with sacrificing his body. You said you had to run and roll that way to survive, right? That's why I'm compatible with you."

Just have to give in. With that statement, Zhenya will continue to do so in the future, not to mention self-criticism.

Kwon Taek Joo shook his head as if he didn't want to talk anymore, then he stood up and walked next to Zhenya.

"I'll take a shower."

"Is it okay to not check this right away?"

Zhenya held up the microchip delivered from Choi Yeon Hwa. Kwon Taek Joo has not been able to check any data in there. If you receive the wrong information, this mission is not over yet.

Kwon Taek Joo hesitated, he ignored his face and turned back to Zhenya. He snatched the chip and plugged it into the phone. Zhenya rubbed his face into Kwon Taek Joo's black hair until the data was displayed on the screen. He used both hands to massage Kwon Taek Joo's chest and abdomen annoyingly. Zhenya seems to have learned properly that if you give Kwon Taek Joo what he wants then he will become obedient for a bit.

Not long after, many files appeared on the screen. He opened one of them at random. Bank names, accounts, passwords and deposits for each European country have been listed. They all have different names,

so it seems like they are accounts that borrow names to fund slush funds.

Then Kwon Taek Joo also checked other files. It's a folder that contains multiple ledgers. It is like a kind of bill of sale. The document also states when and from whom the funding was received, how the money was laundered and what the purpose of the funding was.

Kwon Taek Joo searches for Korean social groups that appear in intelligence information. Then, relevant documents are selected. Funding is not a one-time deal. The amount of money is also very significant. Their aim seems to be to get North Korea to participate in the general election in South Korea. They still want to do something like this, even though times have changed but the quality of work in the political world remains the same.

It was data that Kwon Taek Joo himself struggled to obtain but Zhenya quickly achieved it in just a few hours. At times like these you have to say thank you, right? Kwon Taek Joo had no intention of competing with Zhenya, but he felt awkward. Can we say emptiness, or a feeling of helplessness? Zhenya's help was not very welcome.

"What's up? Is something wrong?"

"...Are not. I see everything is easy for you."

"People just make easy things difficult."

And the way of thinking is also self centered. Do you think everyone has as much money, power and inhumane force as you?

"What should I do? If you have a worthy lover, you should be proud."

"You're so strange" Zhenya said then turned Kwon Taek Joo around. He lifted his chin and was about to kiss him. Kwon Taek Joo observed the face of the guy slowly approaching. Is it because those pale eyelashes are wet that they look so clear today?

Zhenya seems to know very well that his face is his strongest point and Kwon Taek Joo's weak point. He often looked at that face in bewilderment. Kwon Taek Joo looked at the guy close to his breath and

suddenly pinched his cheek. The man's eyes, which were lowered, suddenly became round.

"...Taek Joo?"

"Do you want to hear my thanks? Then I have to leave it to you too. You're not doing this to make money, right?"

"It's okay to say thank you. Be proud of your patience for not blowing up NIS yet."

I don't understand why those words don't sound like a joke. With resignation, Kwon Taek Joo said "Uhm," then pulled Zhenya's cheek. Zhenya's lower lip that was being gently pulled away bit into him. Kwon Taek Joo tilted his head back as he tried to suck on his upper lip. Zhenya did not hesitate to touch his lips again. This time, Kwon Taek Joo wanted to receive a gentle kiss but he instead bit his upper lip. When he used his tongue to lure Zhenya into a sweet kiss, that tongue also stubbornly continued to nibble. I don't know if he's planning to kiss me or bite me. Zhenya gave a silly smile.

"Are you planning on having dinner?"

"Uhm. Some kid made me exercise all night so I'm hungry."

"Almost there."

Kwon Taek Joo was about to ask what it was but Zhenya put his finger in his mouth. He gently pressed his tongue while touching his lips. Saliva flowed in his mouth and his constantly bullied tongue got tired and began to wrap around Zhenya's fingers. Only then did he pull out his finger and slide it up his cheek and place his lips on Kwon Taek Joo's panting lips. The twitching tongue was reflexively sucked into Zhenya's mouth with a choking sound.

Just then the doorbell rang. It seemed like someone had come, but Zhenya was still so immersed in the kiss that he didn't think about going out. Kwon Taek Joo signaled to stop while gently pulling him away, but instead, Zhenya just hugged Kwon Taek Joo tighter, his lungs seemed to be squeezed too. Kwon Taek Joo moaned for a long time while sucking his tongue and then he pushed Zhenya away. "Okay."

"...Ha, once this kid starts, he doesn't know how to end. Get out. Why do you say when something comes?"

He took a deep breath and cleared his throat, panting. Zhenya reluctantly opened the door with a dissatisfied look on his face. Kwon Taek Joo hears the sound of room service outside.

While waiting, he went to the nearby bathroom and took a shower first. He turned on the faucet without thinking much and was startled by the water flowing down. Because as soon as the water touches the body, all parts of the body tingle. Feeling his whole body becoming sensitive after just one day, Kwon Taek Joo looked down at his body, there wasn't a single part that hadn't been bitten or sucked by Zhenya. The skin is congested and bruised. The inside of the arms, chest, groin, hips and buttocks still have clear tooth marks. There were also faint fingerprints on the wrists and ankles. If someone saw him, they would think he had been fighting all day, not making love.

Kwon Taek Joo sighed deeply and combed his wet hair after taking a shower. Feeling a familiar feeling, he gently pulled back the hem of his shirt and examined his chest. The condition there is worse than anywhere else in the body. Especially the color of the nipple has changed to the point that fortunately it does not bleed. Moreover, it also stands up vertically, so if you wear a shirt, you will definitely be seen. A sharp pain throbbed even as he touched it carefully. At this rate, he wondered if Zhenya would grind her teeth against his chest.

Kwon Taek Joo clicked his tongue and took the tape and stuck it on both breasts. Before stepping out, he closed the front of his coat and tightened his belt. Because if Zhenya saw it then he wouldn't be able to guarantee his current situation.

When he exited the living room, covered plates were piled high on the table. At a glance, there are likely ten discs. Zhenya was drinking tea gracefully without a glance. Sitting with long legs crossed, tilting a bright cup of tea looks like a painting, very unsightly.

[..That noble bastard.]

Kwon Taek Joo muttered to himself and tilted his head.

"Huh? What are you saying, Taek Joo?"

"It looks so delicious."

(Cover up because Zhenya doesn't know Korean, haha)

Kwon Taek Joo looked around then walked to the table. He opened each plate one by one and checked the menu. From the beginning he didn't expect much, but there really wasn't any Korean food. STaeks and pasta, steamed seafood, grilled vegetables, salads, sandwiches and soups. The only Asian dishes are Japanese bread and Chinese noodles. Just looking at it made his stomach growl even more.

"It's been 10 days since I've been able to eat anything properly."

Kwon Taek Joo grumbled while chewing broccoli. The temporomandibular joint only performs continuous chewing movement like a machine. It is often said that each race and nation has its own unique body odor. Luckily, he had stayed away from Korean food for a while so Choi Yeon Hwa couldn't notice it from him. Kwon Taek Joo even went around wearing strong perfume. Even though the result was that he was just wasting his time.

Kwon Taek Joo cut the sTaek into bite-sized pieces and placed it on a fork with the salad. He stuffed it all into his mouth as if crushing it. His cheeks were puffed up as if he had eaten a large roll and his mouth was pursed without any inspiration.

How long has it been? The doorbell rang again. Is anyone else coming? Kwon Taek Joo glanced at Zhenya. The guy stood up from his seat without a word of explanation. Kwon Taek Joo looked after him, then put the meat and salad on his fork and stuffed it into his mouth. Just then the door opened and he heard him talking to someone. Judging from the conversation, it seemed like Zhenya had requested something.

Suddenly a familiar smell stimulated his senses. Kwon Taek Joo's jaw, which was moving forcibly, stopped for a moment. His eyes widened and he walked towards the door. No way. Zhenya walked in with a tray in his hand, placed on top of it was a white bowl and a plate covering it. At first glance, it seems to be a spicy Korean dish. For sure.

"...Where did that come from?"

"I talked to the restaurant. I wonder if many Koreans come here so they have."

No, it's because I'm a VVIP that I turn nothing into something. Sarcasm welled up in my heart along with reason and instinct screaming at the same time. As if hypnotized, Kwon Taek Joo reached out his hand towards Zhenya as if he was asking for a hug. Zhenya smiled and obediently handed the tray to Kwon Taek Joo. He also quickly moved aside the plate of sTaek that was placed in front of Kwon Taek Joo.

Kwon Taek Joo carefully placed the tray down as if he were holding a child, he didn't want to spill even a drop of soup. He then looked at the state of the ramen and muttered in displeasure.

[Damn, there's as much water as the Han River. Don't they even look at the recipe?]

At first glance there was a lot of water, but he drank the broth first. Fat in the blood vessels seems to be washed away. Ramen is still just a fried dish. but Kwon Taek Joo feels much more comfortable. He slurped the soup from the noodles that were about to bloom again and enjoyed the refreshing feeling. Zhenya held his chin while watching and said that his hobby was useless.

There's clearly something Zhenya got wrong here. It is believed that Kwon Taek Joo likes ramen. Actually, I don't like ramen very much. He didn't hate it, but it was one of the dishes he didn't eat often in Korea. But the longer you stay abroad, the more Korean people crave food, like homesickness. Of course it wasn't unreasonable for Zhenya to make such a mistake since he kept his eyes on the ramen in front of him every time.

Kwon Taek Joo pushed the sTaek that had lost its owner towards Zhenya.

"Eat it."

He mumbled with his mouth full of noodles Zhenya, who never ate anything others touched first, obediently picked up his fork and knife.

Then, he carefully put the meat cut into bite-sized pieces into his mouth and chewed quietly. His cheeks weren't swollen, his lips were tightly pursed, neither opening nor moving much. And it took quite a while to finish eating that small piece of meat. Zhenya's movements were so graceful that it was as if he was acting out a scene from a movie. Strangely, it seemed that only the light on the side where Zhenya sat was the most special. Is there also a spotlight here? Kwon Taek Joo looked up at the ceiling.

The moment he looked at Zhenya again, he recognized that look and looked straight into Kwon Taek Joo's eyes. Zhenya even asked with his eyes if he had anything to say.

He picked up a noodle he was eating and brought it towards Zhenya. The guy looked puzzled. Kwon Taek Joo waved his chopsticks as if inviting him to try it. The guy didn't move. Kwon Taek Joo also nodded to ramen again without backing down.

Zhenya sighed and quickly tilted his head. He silently accepted and ate the noodles that Kwon Taek Joo gave him. "How was it?" he asked. There was no reply. Zhenya just crossed his arms and quietly chewed what was in his mouth.

He finished the rest of the ramen and watched Zhenya's reaction. The man's jaw stopped moving, and the neckline slowly swayed one by one. But that's all. Now, as if he had become immune to that level of spiciness, Zhenya casually sliced the sTaek again.

Then suddenly Zhenya lifted the glass of water and rinsed his mouth. It was a leisurely movement, not rushed. However, his ears and eyes were a bit red. Zhenya drank water little by little until the glass was all gone, it seemed like even his lips were swollen. Perhaps the ultimate secret to escaping

Koshichei is Korean red pepper.

Kwon Taek Joo had a good time with a ridiculous idea. Zhenya looked at him resentfully.

"Are you happy, Taek Joo?"

"That's really cool. Most mercenaries learned how to make kimchi within a year of living in Korea. How are you still like this?"

"Spicy is not a taste, but a pain. Is it necessary to get used to the pain?"

"Those are not words you can say, you brazen brat."

Zhenya had forced him to adapt to the pain, but now he was stupid enough to ask him that again.

"It's good for you too, Taek Joo. Now I can easily put mine in."

A person who lacks shame because he cannot be more shameless. Regardless of time and place, even in front of his mother. Zhenya said vulgar things. He gulped and said it was spicy. His blue eyes were always calm and seemed to be surrounded by gentle water.

Kwon Taek Joo put all the milk into a cup of coffee and gave it to Zhenya. The movement of the guy receiving the cup was not natural but as if surprised. He quietly placed his mouth on the cup for a moment and then swallowed. The contrasting sizes of Zhenya and the cup make Kwon Taek Joo feel both trivial and cute.

"How long do you want to live on that baby's tongue? If you can't eat spicy food in Korea, the food you can eat will be reduced by one-third."

"I hope to live there all my life."

It was a word without any particular weight, but in that moment, Kwon Taek Joo's hand, which was preparing to continue the meal, unconsciously stopped.

"What?"

He nodded and shyly brushed it off.

Kwon Taek Joo does not envision a distant future. It wasn't until one day that Zhenya's unusual interest in him faded away, when he regained composure. He just decided on such an ambiguous ending. This is not a relationship that started because we loved each other so much that we couldn't live without each other. It's only been a year. However, due to work, the two were only together for less than 100 days. It is said that life is unpredictable and people's minds change when they reflect. Is it

necessary to make an appointment for the distant future, though? It wasn't like he was determined to be responsible for Zhenya for the rest of his life.

Kwon Taek Joo understood that in his mind, but why did he keep feeling empty? The chopsticks became slow. The salad was almost at the level of being stuffed into the mouth like a masher. He didn't know what he had put in his mouth and was chewing greedily when Zhenya suddenly stood up. Kwon Taek Joo's eyes followed.

"Eat more."

He thought he wanted to go to the bathroom, but Zhenya went into a nearby bedroom. Zhenya didn't come back for a while. At first Kwon Taek Joo didn't notice, but the prolonged absence made him glance toward the door. Lunch also stops there.

Zhenya reappeared with decent clothes. When Kwon Taek Joo looked at him, Zhenya checked his watch and said "I'm about to leave."

"Where to go?"

"That..."

The guy answered briefly and then reached for the phone on the table, ready to leave at any time.

But Kwon Taek Joo still wore the robe. Wavy hair is only half dry. Leave the country looking like this?

No, ignoring that problem, he had wasted too much time on this activity alone. Kwon Taek Joo should immediately hand over the data to headquarters and be ready in case of an unexpected dispatch. I don't have time to hang out in Russia.

"Ya, this time it really won't work. The scale of the case is larger than I thought, so I must immediately report it to my superiors."

"Don't worry. I will go alone."

He almost unconsciously asked again. Because if Zhenya appeared during the operation, he had to go to

Aiinoki

Island after completing the job. You have to spend the time he earns himself there

. It's always like that, regardless of whether Kwon Taek Joo wants it or not.

But luckily that's not the case this time. However, it was clear that his shocked face had not disappeared.

"It may take a few days."

Did something happen to the Boadanov family? No, it would be strange if nothing happened to that family. Haven't there been any special trends or problems in Russia recently? Even if that happened, there would be no reason to bring in Zhenya, who is currently the ambassador to South Korea. Should you ask why? Is that too invasive of privacy? If it's a problem that Kwon Taek Joo can't solve, then asking won't change anything.

Zhenya ended the story there. Kwon Taek Joo poured wine into a glass and drank it all. Zhenya quietly observed him then suddenly approached and lifted Kwon Taek Joo's chin. Before swallowing all the wine in his mouth, Kwon Taek Joo parted his lips. A bit of wine choked in his mouth. Ugh, he frowned. Zhenya didn't mind and just licked his thick lips before leaving. He looks like he's smiling and closing his eyes as usual, so it seems like there's nothing to worry about.

"I'll be back soon."

"Go quickly. I also want to rest a bit."

Kwon Taek Joo pushed Zhenya's back. "Not cute at all," Zhenya smiled and left the room. The door opened when he left and then closed again. The room suddenly became quiet.

Kwon Taek Joo took wine and a glass and went to the private swimming pool. No one bothers me anymore so I can rest now. Kwon Taek Joo gently dipped his toes into the water. The water is moderately warm. He sat on a nearby sunbed and enjoyed the breeze. The splendid night

view of Las Vegas stretches across the glass wall. A city that forgets the night. A feast of bright lights as if sprinkled with precious stones. All of them, including the top floor rooms and fragrant sake. Have you ever experienced such luxury in your entire life?

[It's such an unreasonable luxury.]

Kwon Taek Joo sighed and drank another glass of wine. He gently swallowed the remaining wine and massaged his sore neck. His body gradually softened as if he could sleep soundly right now.

Kwon Taek Joo sat indifferently like that for a long time. Thanks to Zhenya, his work went smoothly and it couldn't have been better to enjoy some alone time like this until he returned to Korea.

But there is also something a bit worrying. It feels strange to be alone in such a luxurious space. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't understand why.

Is there anything I should ask just now? Kwon Taek Joo looked up at the ceiling and thought vaguely.

## Chapter 5.5 – Side Story

It's been two weeks since losing contact with Zhenya. Kwon Taek Joo said goodbye to him in Las Vegas and returned to Korea by plane the next morning. He checked his phone as soon as he arrived at the airport, but there were no messages from Zhenya. He should have come to Moscow a long time ago. Since then there has been no news until now.

Of course in the case of other people, it's useless to worry about Zhenya's health. But he had never been away for such a long time, so Kwon Taek Joo couldn't help but care. Perhaps the long vacation arranged after completing the mission was boring, so Kwon Taek Joo had a lot of time to think like that.

Yoon Jong Woo, who is called every two days, introduced a popular game recently. After mastering it in less than a week, Kwon Taek Joo lost interest. Yoon Jong Woo asked him to join another game with him. But the problem is that forming a group in real life or in the game does not suit his interests at all. I don't understand why Kwon Taek Joo doesn't want to watch movies or videos or even read books during this vacation.

He picked up the phone again and stared at his list of one-way calls.

Are you sick anywhere? Or was it a sudden accident or emergency surgery? Because of such unavoidable circumstances, can't you contact me or come back soon?

(Zhenya got him attached)

Kwon Taek Joo assumed some situations and then shook his head after a while. He couldn't imagine such things would happen to Zhenya.

That guy wasn't always an iron man, because we lived together for only a year and there was also a time when he got sick. Zhenya especially struggled with the Korean heat. Due to the effects of global warming, occasional heat ups and downs of up to 30 degrees have been recorded

in Moscow, but that has nothing to do with Zhenya. If it gets hot, Zhenya will go to Ajinoki Island.

The guy, after taking cold showers several times a day, finally poured ice into the bathtub, then filled it with cold water and sat down. Just being close to Zhenya at that time was enough to feel a cold atmosphere.

"What are you doing?"

"Don't you know?"

"If so, you will suffer from hypothermia and possibly go straight to hell because of cardiac arrest."

"Isn't it hell now? Awful. The whole country is as hot as boiling."

"What can you do to that extent?"

There was no point in nagging Zhenya to go out and saying he would catch a cold. And it would be even more troublesome if Kwon Taek Joo stopped him any more, because he might also be dragged into the bathtub if he kept loitering in front of Zhenya. Kwon Taek Joo had to leave him alone. A moment later Zhenya came out of the bathroom, his porcelain white face without a drop of blood.

"You are as white as a piece of paper. Lips are also pale."

Clicking his tongue, Kwon Taek Joo used a towel to dry Zhenya's hair. The boy who was obediently entrusting his body to Kwon Taek Joo suddenly rushed towards him with a cold body. It was so cold that he didn't know if it was human body temperature or not, just touching Zhenya gave him goosebumps all over his body. Kwon Taek Joo turned on the heater, but Zhenya still couldn't warm up.

I knew it would be like this. Kwon Taek Joo sighed and hugged the clingy kid. That day, Zhenya did not let go of Kwon Taek Joo until his body became hot again. Once he starts making love, Zhenya usually doesn't know how to stop, even though it's dangerous to sweat in such a frozen state. And the next day, Zhenya fell ill.

The person who always wakes up first, is drowsy that day and doesn't even intend to get up. He touched Zhenya's forehead. He seemed to

have a fever.

"Ah kid, what did I say? I told you not to overdo it. Just turning on the air conditioner is enough. I'm not a snowman but you're still so strangely stubborn."

"Taek Joo. I just have a little fever. There's nothing to worry about."

Although Zhenya acted like nothing special, he still did not loosen his arm from Kwon Taek Joo's waist. How can you move with this thing stuck to you?

"Then put this down. I have to go to work."

"You're so cold, Taek Joo."

"I'm not a child, I'm not sick to the point of death. If it continues to not get better, go to the hospital. If not, then go home. I'll call mom."

Zhenya blankly listened to Kwon Taek Joo's advice and then blinked. It wasn't long before his eyelids completely closed and Kwon Taek Joo could hear Zhenya's heavy breathing. Perhaps because of the cold, Kwon Taek Joo's breathing became more wheezing, and the arms around Kwon Taek Joo's waist also loosened.

Kwon Taek Joo checked the heat again, but it wasn't boiling enough to have to sit next to it and take care of it. Furthermore, that day he had to go to work and submit a report. He hesitated, then occasionally looked at the clock and left the house very late.

Kwon Taek Joo had lunch that day and suddenly had a cough. Yoon Jong Woo sitting across from him opened his eyes wide.

[Wow, senior has a cold? Right in the middle of summer?]

[What kind of flu? Just a sneeze.]

[Ah, my arms are full of goosebumps. Lips are also pale.]

[Why are you turning on the air conditioner here so strongly?]

[Is it too strong? But if you don't open it this much, you won't be able to breathe because it's too hot.]

Kwon Taek Joo was dizzy even though he was eating hot soup. The others were sweating profusely, but he was the only one whose chin was cold. It's all because of Zhenya. But even so, I don't know if she's eating properly.

[No way. Eat and then go.]

[Yes?]

[I have to stop by here for a bit.]

Finally, Kwon Taek Joo stopped eating and went to see Zhenya. He must have been asleep since morning and had been lying alone in bed until then. When he touched his forehead, the slight fever was still there.

Kwon Taek Joo looked at the sleeping face for a long time before trying to remove his hand. Zhenya's head slowly followed. Unconsciously, Zhenya rubbed his forehead against his hand. Not knowing if it was sleep talking or not, he sighed and muttered "Taek Joo."

...Anyway, if this bastard is like a monster then he has to do it to the end. Why does it make people feel so strangely guilty?

The fact that Zhenya lived in a foreign land was entirely due to Kwon Taek Joo. He himself is also the only person Zhenya can rely on in Korea over the past year. Even his mother, who is always proud of her friendship with Zhenya, would be just a stranger if it weren't for Kwon Taek Joo. And it's also unfair because he himself never wanted that.

[What crime did I commit in my previous life?]

It wasn't like someone in the ancestors killed the python that had just become a dragon. If that weren't the case, then there seems to be no feud as deep as this guy that warrants a nuclear bomb.

With that dissatisfied expression, Kwon Taek Joo played with Zhenya's ivory hair. The sleeping man's expression became more relaxed. The guy seemed to like his cold hands....Well, anyway. There's no 2 meter luggage to have to carry like a burden and sometimes bring about this indescribable feeling of debt.

That day was the first time Kwon Taek Joo left early since joining the headquarters.

Remembering the past, he frowned and scratched his head.

[What an unnecessary worry.]

## Chapter 5.6 – Side Story

Kwon TaekJoo muttered boredly. In general, no news means good news, but Zhenya is an exception. When he was silent, Kwon Taek Joo started to worry about where he was and what he was doing. Even if it's just a little bit, it's still worrying. Because Zhenya's identity is quite sensitive. The Bogdanov family itself has many enemies, and Zhenya is the type of person who likes to make enemies. Not long ago, Zhenya was also 'kidnapped'

because of 'Anastasia'. Thinking about it again and again, it's really impossible to say.

That was when Kwon Taek Joo went on a long business trip to China for about a month. But somehow Zhenya didn't show up all that time. He wondered if Zhenya had heeded his request not to interfere in his work.

However, Kwon Taek Joo received a phone call at the end of the mission. The strangers suddenly said that they were holding Zhenya, and if they wanted Zhenya to be safe, they should obediently bring Anastasia.

The call ended unilaterally. Kwon Taek Joo blankly looked at the silent phone and then burst out laughing. No comedy is this funny. In all his life, he had never heard anything so absurd. They kidnapped Zhenya, and in exchange for 'Anastasia' was 'Zhenya's safe return'. From the beginning, he couldn't believe that something like this would happen to Zhenya. Even if that's true. It's the kidnappers who need to worry, not Zhenya. So Kwon Taek Joo didn't pay attention. Completing the job safely was his top priority at the time.

After completing the mission, Kwon Taek Joo tried calling Zhenya. Don't pick up the phone. Can't send messages either. A vague thought appeared in his mind. No way. No matter what, he couldn't paint a single picture of Zhenya being kidnapped. Kwon Taek Joo repeatedly denied that there was no way that was the case and left to return home. Why is a two-hour flight so long?

When Kwon Taek Joo arrived home, even his mother was worried that she hadn't seen Zhenya. Until then, he still believed that this was not the case and asked Yoon Jong Woo to find the other guy's whereabouts. With no confirmed exit documents, he frustratedly went to Zhenya's house. The house is empty. The Bugatti was also quietly parked in the garage. After a while of searching, Kwon Taek Joo found a bottle of soju under the car. Around that time, whenever Zhenya went to the convenience store, he always bought it along with ramen.

Are you really caught? That kid's name?

While Kwon Taek Joo was fighting fiercely, the kidnappers sent a photo of Zhenya. The guy was tied to a chair and had his eyes closed, not knowing whether he was sleeping or unconscious. Zhenya's mouth was sealed and his body chained. The chains were tied from the neck to the wrists and then to the ankles, so it seemed difficult to move. As soon as the unimaginable image became clear, Kwon Taek Joo's spine suddenly tensed.

Even if it was Zhenya, it would be difficult to survive if attacked or drugged. In an instant, it was possible that he was overwhelmed by many people. After making such a trivial assumption, Kwon Taek Joo didn't even rest and immediately set off.

He traveled all the way to Yogyakarta, Indonesia to find Zhenya. Before that, Kwon Taek Joo stopped by Ajinoki Island for a while to pick up the item that Zhenya gave him, 'Anastasia'. After such a long time traveling, it's surprising how the heck they managed to drag Zhenya to such a remote place from Korea.

Their base is disguised as a parts factory

for an international company. Wherever he went in Indonesia, security was tight, and especially there. From the main gate, tight surveillance cameras are installed at each door and wherever you go, you have to face guards armed with heavy weapons. They are all elite agents. After manipulating each person one by one and silently controlling them, Kwon Taek Joo's physical strength was greatly depleted.

He found a secret exit leading to the building's basement with many guards guarding it. That is the main production site of the factory, if Zhenya was caught it would most likely be there. But for some reason, the hallway there was empty. Except for one room where the access system was operating, other places showed absolutely no trace of humans. Maybe this is a trap.

Feeling suspicious, Kwon Taek Joo climbed into the ventilation hole on the ceiling. He carefully crawled through the narrow, dusty passageway and entered the access control room. Trying not to make a sound made his whole body tense, the sweat that had accumulated almost turned into paste along with the dust.

There were sparse human sounds as he crawled closer to the room. There were occasional screams or groans, and Kwon Taek Joo sighed in despair as he saw movements below through the grate of the room's ventilation hole. Zhenya noticed and looked up. He rushed in front of Kwon Taek Joo.

"I'm late."

Those were the first words Zhenya uttered. The guy didn't seem to be injured by even a hair, let alone a finger. Those who claimed to have kidnapped Zhenya were lying everywhere with their heads blown off or their bodies strangely twisted. That was the moment when all the worries about him became useless.

"What? Late what?"

There is a golden time for violent incidents such as kidnapping. I was almost in danger."

"It seems like the people who captured you are the ones in danger."

"Hmm? This... Anyone can see that this is legitimate defense, right?"

Zhenya responded blatantly and then gently twisted the last kidnapper's neck. The trembling man drooped down with a groan of despair.

After cleaning up, the guy looked at Kwon Taek Joo from top to bottom and suddenly smiled. A mocking smile.

"What were you doing there that was so dusty? Crawling through the ventilation hole again?"

Kwon Taek Joo felt his body temperature drop sharply. He was worried about that bastard and came all the way to this far away place without even resting. Your ability to evaluate things is too bad.

"Ha, you're such an idiot for believing it right away. Did you have fun?"

"What fun? I don't want to be kidnapped either."

"Really? Kidnapped? You? Don't you follow people on all fours? Is it easy to kidnap someone like me?"

What? I was scared because I didn't know when I would be saved."

The bastard continued to provoke. If I scared him again, maybe even a platoon would disappear.

"Say. The threatening phone call telling me to bring Anastasia was also what you asked for, right?"

"Why do you speak as if I instigated a kidnapping?"

"Otherwise, why was there such a call? Shouldn't they call the embassy?"

"Isn't it normal to demand ransom from a guardian? The other side got the wrong person, so I'll just correct it."

"Guardian of an adult child? So are you injured anywhere?"

Kwon Taek Joo looked at him with dissatisfied eyes. Zhenya was stunned as if receiving an unfamiliar question.

"What injury?"

"So, being forced to drink drugs or being tortured..."

"Are you worried about me now?"

After all, Zhenya's only strong points are her beautiful face and body.

Kwon Taek Joo cleared his throat to regain composure, then he gently tapped his neck.

"Why is that area scratched?"

"What's up? If you knew who made the tea, would you scold that person? If I knew this, I should have let them live."

Zhenya looked around regretfully. The bodies were in such bad condition that it was impossible to determine whether they were alive or dead. Bored and don't want to talk anymore.

"Even if you are an immature child, you still have to have moderation. Why are you challenging such a busy person?"

"It's not a challenge. I thought you wouldn't come."

Zhenya shrugged as if he didn't expect much

"Several days passed without any news so I gave up."

"Ya, you must have been captured somewhere else. Do you know how hard I worked outside while you were having fun here?"

"If you hadn't come, I wouldn't have died. Even though I was alone, I escaped safely. Even so, I'm getting bored so I think I'll deal with this guy and leave. And then he came."

Is Zhenya too leisurely? Kwon Taek Joo angrily brushed off his wrinkled shirt. It's useless. The speckled dirt clung tighter as he slapped his hand against it.

Furthermore, even that was ripped apart by Zhenya. The guy did not change his behavior at all and still used other people's clothes as handkerchiefs to wipe blood and bodily fluids from his hands. Looking at him, Kwon Taek Joo's mind went blank.

"...Sigh... Because of a brat like you, I'm getting older."

It seems like the accumulated fatigue is coming down all at once. Kwon Taek Joo stroked his face and sighed deeply.

"But are you really okay?"

Right at that moment, even Kwon Taek Joo couldn't understand why he was so worried about Zhenya. Even though he knew it was the most useless action in the world. he still kept an eye on him. In any case,

Zhenya was still human, so he didn't know if he had suffered a mental attack or not, because internal injuries were inherently more dangerous than external injuries when exposed to strong shock.

And as expected, Zhenya looked puzzled.

"What else?"

"People who go through really bad things often experience trauma, right? Even the most highly trained agents will be threatened if they are captured and detained or tortured. It can have a big impact later."

Zhenya listened carefully then sighed as if laughing.

"You're unexpectedly overprotective. There's nothing to worry about. I'm quite used to things like this."

"Are you familiar with it?"

For a moment, Kwon Taek Joo thought he had heard wrong. Because he couldn't immediately realize what "

getting used to being kidnapped" meant.

"Was it when you were six years old? It could be a little before or a little later. I'm on my way home after a horse riding lesson. The driver was killed instantly by a bullet flying from somewhere. The car immediately lost direction and crashed into the river. I just swam out of the water but there were already many people waiting there. Then a mask was immediately placed on her head. When I woke up, I was locked in a musty warehouse. Don't know what they require at home. It could be money, it could be some kind of right, or it could be benefits or power that cannot be measured in money... The more things you have, the more enemies you have, right? Maybe it was evil acts during the crime, or simply because of the greed of those who covet other people's things. I'm definitely the easiest person to bully in their eyes, because I'm still young. No matter how infamous the family was, they must have thought that the bloodline would be precious. It was a mistake because the Bogdanov family values pride and pride more than mere blood."

Zhenya is someone who likes to express things abstractly, so Kwon Taek Joo couldn't understand what he was saying.

"...What are you talking about?"

"That's just an obvious story. Kidnapped by adults' wishes and abandoned by adults' calculations, things didn't go as expected, so they began to get stressed. She was starved, bullied, and never slept. They gave me a stethoscope so I could cry and beg for help. I have endured it. I don't want to beg. I didn't listen to what they wanted but bowed my head and went home to beg for my life."

"The family saw their actions as a challenge to the Bogdanov family and, moreover, to the Kremlin. They wanted to use that as an example, so they started using force to completely wipe them out. They poured artillery shells in as if they forgot I was still in the hands of the kidnappers. Dozens of hundreds of bullets and bombs flew through the walls and ceiling. The heads of those who threatened her were blown off and their limbs were torn everywhere. Incredible."

Zhenya nonchalantly recalled that moment. How could such a chaotic thing happen to a child only 6 years old? Pitiful.

"The survivors did not surrender in the end. I've been playing with grenades since I was little. Maybe it was the first time. Taking the lives of others with these two hands."

The story is so cruel.

At that time, Kwon Taek Joo was about ten years old. The time when he went to school without worrying about anything but just hanging out with friends and playing soccer. He didn't know how to comfort someone who lived in a completely different world from him. He didn't expect Zhenya to grow up in a normal environment, but he didn't know it would come to that.

"You don't need to be sad, Taek Joo. Every family has its own traditions, and everyone adapts or resigns to it. Even though it's a bit cruel and inhumane, who knows, maybe that's why the current Bogdanov family exists. People give birth to people, animals give birth to animals. Monsters will give birth to monsters. To not be overlooked among monsters, you must be stronger than anyone else. That's how I became the person I am today. First it's my peers, then it's my adults, then my

family, and finally, even the world can't look down on me. It's all thanks to Anastasia."

Surely, who would dare to touch a state employee Psych. Even Zhenya's family couldn't treat him arbitrarily. Zhenya always lives according to his wishes, but is that good? Olga's words suddenly appeared in Kwon Taek Joo's mind: "

How long will you live alone?

" Kwon Taek Joo looked at Zhenya, he looked lonely and tired because he had never been at peace.

"Don't you think that Anastasia makes you more tired? Like Olga said, why don't you give it to those who want it? If so, at least there won't be any trouble like this. These bastards also wanted that, so they kidnapped me. Now I don't need that anymore, so whether you take it back or leave it, you know how to do it yourself. Anyway, if I can confirm that you're safe, I'm planning on handing it over to these guys..."

"Ah, that's right. Taek Joo. I gave it to you. He blew one up before. I hid one at my parents' house and one at Ajinoki. Come to think of it, I did give one to the little woman"

(He's talking about Taek Joo's mother)

Gave "Anastasia" to mom? Kwon Taek Joo's eyebrows furrowed.

"What are you talking about? Why do you keep saying such incomprehensible things?"

"I told you, Taek Joo. Anastasia may or may not exist. I'm the only one who can prove it. If what I gave you was called Anastasia, everyone would think it was Anastasia. Also, if you name that pistol over there Anastasia, it will be Anastasia. Anastasia is ultimately in the mind of the person who desires it, and whether it exists or not is up to you. You are the only one who knows this secret."

"What? Is that a lie to preserve life? I thought if that disappeared, something big would happen to you."

While Kwon Taek Joo was angry because he thought he was tricked, Zhenya took a step closer. His face was filled with blue eyes.

"Right. Your breath. My weakness. And the secret weapon that makes you the strongest person in the world. Now Anastasia is before your eyes."

The hair on the back of Kwon Taek Joo's neck stood up. Zhenya is very good at spewing that goosebumps-inducing sound in people's faces. At such times, the cold, reptile-like eyes also become soft with unprecedented warmth.

"Taek Joo."

"Why? Why are you so close?"

"If you come to save the princess trapped in the castle, then that's the end result isn't it?"

(He's talking about a princess trapped in a castle and 'the end' would be a kiss to wake the princess up or something.)

"Who is the princess? Don't make fun of me."

Kwon Taek Joo didn't want to rub his lips like that in a place filled with the smell of blood, but Zhenya showed a pitiful look.

"Actually, I was waiting. I tested my patience every day, every hour, every second."

Even though he was determined not to get carried away, Zhenya always opened Kwon Taek Joo's latch with absurd ease. It was strange that he couldn't act strong when looking at that gentle face. It's all just a mask, just a trick like a fox trying to trick you. No matter how you think about it, it doesn't mean anything.

".Damn. Come here, Yevgeny."

(He's getting babied right now hahah)

"Taek Joo, my Rabbit."

So, that face is very...

[Argh!]

Kwon Taek Joo shivered as soon as he remembered the memory of kissing in a place where corpses were scattered. He scratched his head in frustration. Or is it because the inside is soft that the brain is also soft? He didn't know if Zhenya's madness was contagious or not.

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't say his life was always peaceful anywhere, but after getting entangled with Zhenya he really didn't have a good day. It's not that he doesn't know what kind of person Zhenya is, but it's also his fault for holding such a bomb.

## Chapter 5.7 – Side Story

Kwon Taek Joo picked up the phone he threw away. Open source. The list of incoming calls is displayed on the screen. No calls or messages from Zhenya.

He carefully checked each phone number. phone number as a precaution, but did not see the phone number of "

Do not display caller identity

". At least not like the time Zhenya was kidnapped.

Kwon Taek Joo tapped his phone thinking before calling somewhere. Call connection rang twice then picked up. The voice on the other end of the second rang out.

[Hello?]

The main character with a somewhat awkward voice is none other than Yoon Jong Woo.

[Yoon Jong Woo, what are you doing?]

[What am I doing? I'm working very hard.]

[Are you busy?]

[From now on I will be very busy.]

Yoon Jong Woo is afraid of getting into trouble. He was only obedient when he first arrived as an assistant shooter, but now he has grown up a lot. Of course, nothing has changed though.

[Don't be like that, do me a favor.]

[I don't know what it is, but please do it yourself. I've been resting lately so I'm very comfortable.]

[If I could do it, I would have done it early. Why do I have to say these things to you?]

There was no answer from Kwon Taek Joo's sarcastic question, instead there was just a grumble from far away from the receiver.

[Yoon Jong Woo?] Kwon Taek Joo spoke up. Only to hear the hum again, "Hmm."

Let's hear what's going on first.

[Yevgeny Vysarionovich Bogdanov. Do you know?]

[What's wrong with that person?]

[Why are you stuttering like that? Is he a ghost?]

[Are you kidding? I don't think there is any difference.]

[Okay. Find out where he is.]

[..Yes?? Now you're asking to investigate civilians? That's a very sensitive issue, senior.]

He jumped up. The scream almost made Kwon Taek Joo's ears fall off. Yoon Jong Woo is often surprised and scared but he still tries to join NIS. Is his ability that outstanding? Kwon Taek Joo sighed.

[Do you think that bastard looks like a commoner?]

[No, I mean... No... Not that... After all, he is a diplomat. If you dig up mistakes, it could become a diplomatic issue...]

[There will be no such thing and if it does happen, I will be responsible so let's find out where he is. I didn't ask you to arrest that bastard.]

This time, Yoon Jong Woo also took his phone away and mumbled something. [I heard it all.] He was startled and explained that he didn't say anything. Kwon Taek Joo laughed menacingly.

[Really, this is the last time.]

[Alright. Check it out now and call me.]

Hanging up. Kwon Taek Joo just wanted to check if Zhenya had entered Russia and if so, whether he was still there or not.

He has tried to live a life that clearly distinguishes between work and private life. But when living with Zhenya, that boundary begins to collapse. Kwon Taek Joo cannot rest assured even for a moment because Zhenya has no limits and often causes trouble. He himself decided to accept and tame Zhenya when he settled in Korea, which means Zhenya's troubles are also Kwon Taek Joo's troubles.

The phone rang again not long after. He reflexively grabbed it and checked the caller first. Still not Zhenya. Ah, Kwon Taek Joo received the call. Yoon Jong Woo's report rang out.

[Senior, Yevgeny Vissarionovich Bogdanov is confirmed to have entered Russia. 2 weeks ago.]

[What now? No records of exit from Russia or transfer to a third country?]

[Yes. None.]

So Zhenya only stayed in Russia for the past 2 weeks. The answer that to some extent Kwon Taek Joo had expected, but for some reason his arms and legs were hanging loose. [I understand.] He was about to end the call. Yoon Jong Woo's voice was urgent.

[Senior, please don't forget what I said just now.]

[A moment ago? What have I said?]

[He said that if anything happened, he would take responsibility. I'm just a pitiful subordinate who succumbed to authority.]

[Alright. Back to work.]

He laughed. Yoon Jong Woo finished speaking, [Bogdanov, please talk to that person like that too.] After all, being an employee of the National Intelligence Agency is scary.

End call. The surroundings became quiet again. Kwon Taek Joo looked at the phone bewilderedly and tried calling Zhenya. Still no answer.

[Hey. I don't know. That bastard is not a child either.]

He threw the phone away and ruffled his hair uncomfortably.

The ground shook. Bang bang bang. Kwon Taek Joo could not stand up straight every time the vibration changed. Everywhere was dark and everywhere was the smell of damp earth. Not long after, the ground shook with a loud bang. Mixed screaming The people around him were blurry with unclear shapes. The language they speak is similar to Korean, English, and Russian.

Thinking it was a dream, Kwon Taek Joo tried going a little further. He couldn't see anything as far as he could see, so he had no choice but to move forward until he came across a wall.

Then the walls and ceiling shook again, followed by broken stone powder pouring down. Kwon Taek Joo cowered out of habit. but small fragments still entered his eyes, nose and ears. He was out of breath. He shook his head vigorously and brushed the foreign object away, then waved his hand to clear the dusty air in front of him.

When Kwon Taek Joo was about to take another step, his foot stepped on something soft. He almost fell over but he kept his balance.

Reflexively raising his head, Kwon Taek Joo saw an unexpected figure. It was a boy about six or seven years old. Left alone in a dungeon-like place with no light, the child had silver hair and blue eyes. The image was similar to many dreams he had encountered before.

Why did that kid appear like that? Kwon Taek Joo frowned. Of course there's no guarantee who that baby is even though he looks a lot like someone Kwon Taek Joo knows well, but it's difficult to be sure. Kwon Taek Joo has not yet confirmed Zhenya's childhood photo but he still thinks it would be Zhenya if there was proper evidence.

Up until now, the dream has become intense every time the child appears. The boy did not cause any particular harm to Kwon Taek Joo himself, but every time he woke up he always felt confused and strangely guilty. It had been a while since he had dreamed of the boy so he felt somewhat relieved, but now it appeared like this.

The child saw Kwon Taek Joo and raised his guard and backed away. There was something in the small white hand, looking like a grenade.

Thinking back, he stepped on something just now. Kwon Taek Joo slowly looked back. In places as far as the eye could reach, scattered pieces of flesh had lost their human shape. Even seemingly normal people were groaning under the collapsed pillar.

The insecurity came again. Kwon Taek Joo frantically looked around but nothing came into view. Outside the square blue window, something like the shadow of a fighter plane flashed past. Gunfire also rang out. Red laser beams emitted from various guns instantly covered the space and floor. The warning to surrender echoed from afar.

Suddenly, Kwon Taek Joo remembered the childhood anecdote that Zhenya had told him. He said he was used to being kidnapped? It seemed that the afterimages of that time had passed through the subconscious and appeared like a dream. The problem is that Kwon Taek Joo cannot wake up even though he knows this is a dream. A crazy dream.

He looked everywhere for a way out. At that moment, a shock stronger than ever exploded throughout the building. The ground shook violently. Even the ceiling could not bear it and collapsed. If this continues, everything will be buried in hopelessness.

It was all so vivid that the perception of the dream faded away. The only thought in Kwon Taek Joo's mind was to quickly escape. He turned his head towards the silver-haired boy. The child was still glaring at Kwon Taek Joo with sharp eyes. He waved to the boy to come quickly, but the child didn't even move and just looked at him warily.

Zhenya!

He tried to scream but his throat was choked. Kwon Taek Joo tried opening his mouth wide and putting strength into his stomach, but all sounds seemed to disappear into nothingness. While the ruthless attack continued, the building began to rapidly collapse.

Kwon Taek Joo ran to the child and tried to pull him out. But even that is not easy. As if a transparent barrier had been placed in front of him. Kwon Taek Joo could not take another step forward. Even if he ran until it hurt. Kwon Taek Joo could not get close to the child.

He continued to call Zhenya, his mouth opening and closing. But the child just stared blankly as if facing a strange scene.

Damn it, run away!

His arms and legs struggled until they were numb. An urgent cry choked in his throat. He felt so frustrated that he went crazy.

As if teasing Kwon Taek Joo, something heavy blew in the wind from behind. There was silence inside the building. And just then, the condensed air exploded and tore the child apart. His whole body was as hot as fire.

[Oh my God!]

Kwon Taek Joo jumped up. His vision opened in an instant, making him dizzy. His eyes opened wide. He didn't blink for a while, his eyelids even trembled.

[Haha...]

The breath he had been trying to endure escaped him. His lungs ached. His heart was pounding like it was about to explode in his chest. His throat was dry as if he had been screaming the whole time.

Kwon Taek Joo just breathed a sigh of relief when he learned that it was all just a dream. He slowly stroked his face. His trembling palms quickly became wet. Looking back, it wasn't such a terrible nightmare that it made him shudder. To be more precise, there were times when Kwon Taek Joo lived a much crueler reality. Even so, the feeling of discomfort and frustration has not diminished.

After all, where did the child come from, and why did he appear like that and cause a stir? It's not like anything really happened to Zhenya. Even though he denied that there was no way that would be the case, his heart sank.

Kwon Taek Joo confusedly scratched the back of his neck and grabbed the phone. He still hadn't heard anything from Zhenya. He tried calling right away but this time he couldn't even hear the ringback tone. It was as if the phone had been turned off.

[Where is this kid going?]

If it's late, it's too late. It's difficult to know if something unexpected has really happened, unless you face the inevitable situations directly.

Furthermore, Kwon Taek Joo himself never made it clear to Zhenya where he was going, what he was doing, and when he would return. That was the NIS's work regulations, but he didn't feel the need to do so, and because he also knew that Zhenya still followed and came to see him like a ghost wherever he went. It's not often that he makes a private meeting with Zhenya, sending messages or calling can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

[Who doesn't have a conscience towards anyone?]

Suddenly questioning myself. Kwon Taek Joo scratched the back of his neck and checked the time. It's past 7 am. Looks like there's someone outside the door. His mother seemed to be preparing breakfast.

Kwon Taek Joo stood up and went out. Seeing him wake up early, his mother asked with a surprised face.

[Don't you go to work until next Monday?]

[Yes. But if you think too long, it will be difficult to work right away. I want to go out for a bit to grasp the work situation.]

[Uh. Mom will prepare some food, eat and then go.]

[Ah, I don't eat breakfast.]

[You should not let fasting become a habit. How can I work properly on an empty stomach?]

[If you go to work now, it'll be almost lunch time]

[Huh, will I be young forever? Debt piles up on your body when you're young, and when you're older, you'll have to pay it back many times over. You're not too young anymore, so you have to take care of your health. Nowadays, people say that illness does not discriminate by age, so you should go for a checkup regularly...]

[Yes.. I know. Is this beef stew soup? It smells so good.]

Kwon Taek Joo quickly interrupted his mother's presentation that was about to begin and rushed into the bathroom. Until the door closed, his mother still diligently recounted the medical history of her parents' family, starting with the story of her friend's son having a stroke due to a brain hemorrhage. He could guess the backstory even without hearing everything. Which foods are good for which organs, which ingredients are attracting attention today, how harmful is drinking alcohol and smoking to the body. From when he was a child until now, his mother's interests and hobbies have not changed. The nagging repertoire also remains consistent.

After a quick shower. Kwon Taek Joo sat down at the table. There were so many side dishes that he couldn't find an empty spot on the table. He picked up the spoon and said, [I will eat well.] Except for kimchi there are no old dishes. Thinking of that sincerity, Kwon Taek Joo tried each dish and the bowl of rice quickly emptied. His mother said [Look,] while scooping up more rice. This is the happiest time of her day.

[Does the embassy have a lot of work these days?]

[If so, how can I rest like this?]

[Really? I don't know if the ambassador is very busy because I haven't seen him come home.]

Kwon Taek Joo's chopsticks stopped. Because Zhenya was suddenly mentioned. The food in my mouth almost choked. He could barely swallow what was in his mouth and drink water. His mother continued to worry about Zhenya.

[Mom was worried about what happened because his phone didn't call. He lives alone in a country where it's impossible to talk, so if there's an emergency he won't be able to ask for help.]

[Mom is also real. Is he a child? He also received leave like you and returned home to rest. So mom, there's no need to worry.]

Kwon Taek Joo responded indifferently. His mother seemed surprised.

[Hey! No matter how young he is, he is still your superior, even if he is not here, how can you talk like that as an equal?]

He opened his mouth to explain but then stopped, because there was no effective excuse.

[...No, we're just trying to talk comfortably to each other.]

[Talking like that will easily become a habit, then in important situations you will make mistakes. Don't you know how old you are? You really don't know how to think.]

His mother clicked her tongue in disapproval. Kwon Taek Joo tearfully picked up a piece of fish and placed it on top of the rice. Since meeting Zhenya, the frequency with which he was scolded by his mother seemed to increase. It's not really the guy's fault, but it's not entirely none of it either.

His mother definitely wouldn't have been so supportive if she knew what Zhenya did to her only son. It's unfair, but I can't reveal the details of what happened. All he could do was eat and nonchalantly regret what he had done wrong.

Kwon Taek Joo was about to leave after getting ready when his mother brought up something.

[Take this too.]

[What is this?]

[If you were going to work, wouldn't the ambassador have come back too? He eats so little that it must be difficult. Mom has prepared something he likes.]

[How did it come to this? I told you there's no need to do that, Mom.]

[I don't have any feelings. A young man has to live alone without family because of his job. If you can help him, you should help him.]

Kwon Taek Joo and Zhenya were close but he didn't think about it this much. His mother's weakness towards Zhenya's bright appearance was probably due to the influence of her motherly instinct. Not long ago, his mother said that Zhenya looked like an angel when sleeping and Kwon Taek Joo spit out the coffee he was drinking. He didn't know what to do

when facing his mother's innocent and pure eyes every time she looked at him.

[Shut your mouth and do as I say. I also often travel for work so I know better. If we live outside for a long time, everyone becomes lonely, depressed and sad. Furthermore, the ambassador didn't know Korean so he couldn't communicate. How frustrating it would be to have no friends and be far from family. You should also regularly keep an eye on him. I mean, don't leave him and think of him as your little brother.]

Strangely, even his mother realized that Zhenya had no friends. Kwon Taek Joo also wondered how his mother was so fascinated by that guy. Even when his mother prayed day and night for his father and brother, she did not have blind faith like she does now. What would happen if the mother found out about his relationship with that brat? Just imagining it gave him goosebumps. A subtle feeling of guilt crept into his chest.

[I'm leaving.]

Kwon Taek Joo calmly received the box and hurried out of the house.

He stopped by Zhenya's house before going to work. The visit was without any great expectations. Kwon Taek Joo was just trying to handle the boxes his mother delivered.

But when he saw the empty house, Kwon Taek Joo felt empty. There was no trace of anyone in the house. The bed sheets as well as the position of objects in the house have not changed since his visit a few days ago. The house was so quiet it was cold.

Kwon Taek Joo went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. There's nothing to eat. He put the boxes in the empty space without leaving any special note, maybe one day Zhenya will come back and he will know it himself.

Kwon Taek Joo slowly looked around the house again. This is a place where a person has lived for 1 year, how can he not have this feeling of living? Aside from bathroom items, wine, bed sheets and unlabeled clothing, there was nothing that could be called Zhenya. There is not even a regular washing machine in the house. He didn't know if Zhenya

was leaving all his laundry to the laundromat or because he had so much money that he was throwing away all the things he only wore once.

Kwon Taek Joo opened the cupboard but it was also full of dust. Pulling out the large drawer at the bottom, many types of ramen are stacked one after another. Zhenya only cooks ramen for him so Kwon Taek Joo never touches ramen anywhere else. He also couldn't tell Zhenya to stop because he would frown again.

[...I don't like ramen.]

Kwon Taek Joo lamented and closed the drawer. There's no food for Zhenya anywhere. Even when he was here, Zhenya only occasionally bought cheese, bread, and fruit. That also means he doesn't like Korean food. Kwon Taek Joo really doesn't know what Zhenya does when he's not here.

He went into the bedroom for a moment. Kwon Taek Joo remembers how shocked he was when he first arrived at this house. The body is so large that it seems that commercially available mattresses cannot fit it. So Zhenya's custom-made bed took up most of the large room. It is said that it is a super king size bed.

Not necessarily not. Kwon Taek Joo really rolled on it. To the extent that there wasn't a position he hadn't tried before. Even after a year of turmoil, not a single corner of the bed was lost. Isn't this a quality product that needs to be recognized?

Kwon Taek Joo sat on the bed for a while. The mattress supports the body firmly. I thought about a lot of things that happened in the past year. How all memories seem to lead to sex. It's not an exaggeration, but the truth is that he is always physically attached to Zhenya in this house.

It is said that when God

created humans. Everything had a reason. It seems he gave Zhenya the mission of breeding the species by giving him a giant penis, an overflowing sexual desire, and an outstanding body. If it weren't for that, Zhenya wouldn't have been so filled with desire, even in the

golden age of his life. Even Kwon Taek Joo, who is healthy and has good physical strength, cannot stand him because Zhenya always rushes in as soon as the two just make eye contact. It would be quick to count the number of days that he wouldn't faint after making love. I don't know, but if you two were a newlywed couple, a set of triplets would have been born. It must have been a time of lust.

A year has passed like that. Even if it had been that long, the time to decide Zhenya's heart had passed. Zhenya was still completely unchanged that Kwon Taek Joo didn't even notice the passage of time. Meanwhile, he got used to his mother worrying about him, spending time in random conversations between the two of them, spending time with Zhenya after work or on holidays, and seeing Zhenya appear everywhere. It has become a very normal daily habit.

That's also why Kwon Taek Joo doesn't think that one day it could end, that everything could return to its original place. When the beginning is sudden, the ending can be just as sudden.

The reason why Zhenya suddenly came to Korea is because of Kwon Taek Joo. That means he can leave this place whenever Zhenya is no longer there for him.

"I hope to live there all my life."

Every word Zhenya said still bothered him like a thorn in his heart.

## Chapter 5.8 – Side Story

At lunchtime, Kwon Taek Joo skipped lunch and went to the embassy. Zhenya's current status is that of an ambassador, so that is his official residence. But in reality, it is extremely rare for Zhenya to stay there. He only attended official business by invitation, receptions and dinners.

The ambassador's residence is a building about 100 years old. The interior is decorated with antique furniture. It is customary to redecorate the interior to suit the new person's taste as soon as the new ambassador is appointed. But Zhenya didn't touch a single item there. He didn't even think it was his house in the first place.

Kwon Taek Joo also counted the number of times he was there. He felt very guilty because even though it was just to deceive his mother, he was also an employee of the Russian embassy, so he did not want to do private things in a place where he was on duty. But it wasn't just once or twice that Kwon Taek Joo broke that rule for Zhenya.

Around the time of his appointment as Russian ambassador to Korea, Zhenya did not hesitate to bring Kwon Taek Joo to this place. He said he wanted to take him to tour the mansion, but that wasn't the case at all, because he couldn't find any goodwill or enthusiasm in the guy.

"Why did you suddenly come here?"

"Today I had dinner with Korean politicians here. I heard that the reporters going in and out of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will arrive tomorrow."

"What about that?"

"It's very troublesome and boring."

The guy leisurely complained and approached Kwon Taek Joo. Instinctively, he unconsciously took a step back. Zhenya's eyes flashed strangely.

When Kwon Taek Joo hesitantly stepped back, the reception table touched the back of his thigh. Unlucky premonition. Zhenya immediately grabbed the table and locked him in her arms. Kwon Taek Joo's eyes did not approve.

"But I don't know. It would be better if we create a happy memory here"

"What nonsense? Let's get out"

"Anyway, you're thinking about doing this at home, right? It's just a change of location."

"This crazy guy. This is a workplace."

"What is the matter? This is the house provided for the ambassador's family. Everyone here has a married life, given birth and raised children."

It's not wrong. The mansion is also where the ambassador's family lives during his time in office. However, Is it because Kwon Taek Joo himself is also a civil servant? He felt reluctant to do something like this in a place used to handle work.

Zhenya's eyes burned with fire, excitement causing his pupils to constrict and the smell of flesh to become more intense. That was a signal that his body was heating up. Zhenya continuously kissed Kwon Taek Joo's neck and caressed him.

"As a civil servant, you must follow the instructions of your superiors."

"What kind of superior are you?"

"Have you forgotten what identity you came here with? If I took care of you, then Taek Joo, you should also cooperate with the public service. That's fair."

"Crazy...!"

Kwon Taek Joo turned his head when Zhenya leaned in to kiss him. He grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's face and squeezed it tightly. Both his cheeks were compressed and his lips parted naturally. Zhenya inserted his tongue into that gap and connected his lips. He rubbed his thick tongue and sucked so hard that Kwon Taek Joo was helplessly swept away.

When Kwon Taek Joo regained consciousness, his body was completely lying on the table, his shirt was half turned up and crumpled. Zhenya grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's exposed right chest and pulled down his pants and underwear in one go. The lower body suddenly felt cold. He tried to bend his knees but couldn't move because Zhenya was standing between his legs.

His middle finger poked the hole over and over, carefully reaching inside. The thumb gently caresses and massages the inner thigh. Zhenya's hair felt itchy between his legs. The penis cannot withstand strong stimulation and begins to stand erect. Not long after, a feeling like it was about to explode came over him.

The erect column of flesh touched Zhenya's forehead. He raised his head to look at Kwon Taek Joo's swaying flesh and then ran his nose straight across the surface of the penis all the way to the glans.

Zhenya gently sucked the pink glans and then let go. Kwon Taek Joo's face grimaced. The lower part of his body vibrated as if electricity was flowing through it. Zhenya looked up at Kwon Taek Joo and stuck out his tongue, seemingly touching the glans. Kwon Taek Joo looked up and waited. His stomach slowly sagged, breathing seemed more difficult.

Zhenya lowered his head and suddenly opened his mouth to take in Kwon Taek Joo's entire penis. The soft tongue wraps around the glans and then wraps around the entire body. The sensitive glans is sucked and rubbed inside the mouth, as if it were swallowed into the throat. The sweetness and happiness made him sigh.

[Ugh...hm..]

Zhenya moved his head up and down and caressed Kwon Taek Joo's lower abdomen. The penis covered in saliva was pressed close to the lips and slowly squirted out, then sucked all the way to the base. Kwon Taek Joo's hands turned white. Zhenya raised his head again with the head of the penis in his mouth, then he clamped his lips and sucked on it. Kwon Taek Joo lay down on the table to enjoy the ecstatic pleasure.

[Ah, uhm, oh....!]

Zhenya licked and sucked the head continuously, feeling like something was about to be sucked out. Then he suddenly opened his mouth and sucked Kwon Taek Joo's penis all the way to the base. Zhenya's neck also appears to bulge where the glans passes. He couldn't stand it anymore.

Kwon Taek Joo raised his upper body and grabbed Zhenya's hair. Then he lifted his lower body and slammed it into his mouth. The action was rough, but the guy still bit and sucked the muscle without letting go even when it hit his throat and Zhenya even reached out to widen the small hole in his butt.

His head spun as he looked at the guy's face obediently placed between his legs, his pulse quickened, his eyes flashed endlessly and the feeling of wanting to ejaculate came rushing in. Kwon Taek Joo pushed Zhenya's face away. No, that's what he intended. But Zhenya held Kwon Taek Joo's thigh tightly and did not let go. As the eruption was about to come, Kwon Taek Joo's thigh muscles trembled.

[Hm.. uhm, let go. ah..uh! Ahhh...!]

In the end, he failed to push Zhenya away. The genitals were pushed to the limit, spurting out a large amount of semen. He gritted his teeth and exclaimed. Zhenya clearly and slowly swallowed Kwon Taek Joo's semen. The guy gently sucked the sticky spots on the alans then looked at Kwon Taek Joo who was grimacing and grinned.

"Taek Joo, I like this."

"Ugh... I told you to stop, this crazy guy..."

"Why do you scold others after eating a full meal? You've enjoyed yourself to your heart's content so now eat this."

With the sound of the zipper coming down, the guy's penis fell out. Smelling the semen, the piece of meat wriggled and rubbed its head against the hole. Kwon Taek Joo closed his eyes tightly as if resigned.

Zhenya was used to pressing Kwon Taek Joo down and then expanding his body and lying on top. He also likes the same position, lying flat or on his side, but the problem is the location. His bare back was tense as

he continuously rubbed against the table surface. Kwon Taek Joo groaned as he was overwhelmed without a chance to rest before he could push Zhenya away.

"Uhm ha..ha...! Wait a minute. My back hurts so much, let's go somewhere else..."

"You have to be polite when eating."

He didn't understand why Zhenya persisted to the end. He repeatedly inserted and pushed out without a condom. The mixture of semen and gel filling his belly made a slurping sound every time the skin and flesh mixed. Every time the penis was inserted, a thick white mucus gushed out, running down the table and dripping onto the floor. Just like that, it gathered and created a small puddle.

[...]

Kwon Taek Joo tiredly fell asleep until morning and then remembered that there was an interview that day. He immediately opened his eyes and opened all the windows for ventilation. He tried to eliminate the odor by turning on all the ventilation fans in the house, regardless of the bathroom and kitchen.

But the problem is the stains on the carpet. No matter how much he cleaned it, it showed no signs of disappearing. Kwon Taek Joo thought it would fade, but it quickly dried and turned white. Zhenya just calmly and gently kissed the back of Kwon Taek Joo's neck as he struggled to erase the traces of guilt.

Looking at the large table in the living room, memories of that day came back to his mind. The table touched his bare skin, the air heated up quickly, and the rising humidity and scent seemed to be fully revived. Kwon Taek Joo clicked his tongue and turned back.

He specifically stopped by the mansion because he wanted to know why Zhenya's stay in Russia was so long. Inbound business parcels are usually delivered to the embassy office. On days Zhenya didn't go to work, his assistant moved them all back to the mansion. Even when acting like an asshole, Zhenya still stops by this place regularly to check

mail and schedules. That is also the minimum effort to maintain his status as an ambassador.

Kwon Taek Joo went to the office on the second floor to check the letters he had collected in the past. He did not know whether there would be any important party or event held in Russia. But no matter how hard he searched, nothing particularly stood out. After that, Kwon Taek Joo turned on the computer in the office. He calmly entered the password and then opened the real-time update schedule. Sure enough, it was empty 15 days ago.

However, there are a number of events that will be held before the Mid-Autumn Festival in 10 days. At least that means Zhenya will be back. No, is that really so? The term of office of ambassadors is not fixed. Usually it only lasts for a period of 1 to 2 years. There are also many cases of being dismissed midway or being appointed to other important positions and suddenly returning to the country.

Zhenya has reluctantly become the Russian ambassador to Korea, so he can give it up at any time. A person who is only interested in pursuing pleasure, if tempted by something else, Zhenya certainly won't look back.

[...I don't like that.]

Kwon Taek Joo mumbled dissatisfied and turned off the computer. When he was about to turn back, he saw an old Korean conversation book on the bookshelf. Ambassadors who passed through this place may have left it for their successors, but it seems unlikely that it was Zhenya's.

Thinking back, in the past year, Zhenya hadn't spoken a word of Korean, He didn't even say the usual greetings. Even when having to communicate with his mother and other Koreans, Zhenya insisted on using only Russian. He didn't even say a few words, and surprisingly everything was fine. Everyone knows how to bring him what he needs.

Kwon Taek Joo's mother is the same. When the two meet, they still only say what each wants to say. When Kwon Taek Joo happened to be with

them, he became an interpreter. One time he was so upset that he complained to Zhenya.

"If you want to continue living here, learn Korean."

"Why me?"

"That must be the case for me to live comfortably. I feel comfortable too."

"Korean is as complicated and difficult as Koreans. It's strange how the same word has different meanings. Not once or twice did I misunderstand the meaning when using translation software. Learning such a language is ineffective."

"So will I live without literacy forever?"

Zhenya shrugged with a puzzled expression.

"You're not here because you like this country, Taek Joo."

Why do you feel sad then?

Zhenya did not choose Korea. Just because Kwon Taek Joo is in Korea, he also settled here. Once the interest in him was gone, there was no longer any reason for Zhenya to stay here.

(He totally did choose Korea because Taek Joo is in Korea. He's trying to deny it.)

Kwon Taek Joo ruffled his messy hair and left the mansion. There's one more place to visit.

Assistant Pavel Menshikov squinted his eyes and glanced at Kwon Taek Joo. A moment later, he opened his mouth.

"Mr. Kwon Taek Joo, right? Kwon Taek Joo-sshi."

"Yes, I am Kwon Taek Joo."

He didn't know why the name Kwon Taek Joo had a prefix, Mr./  
sshi

, but he obediently nodded. While arriving at the mansion, he planned to stop by the embassy. Consular staff must be the ones who have the best grasp of the situation in Russia more than anywhere else.

The embassy specializes in foreign affairs, they have no choice but to react sensitively to the international situation. That includes the political, economic and social conditions of the host country. The Bogdanov family holds considerable power in Russia's political and business circles. If anything happens to them, the embassy cannot help but know. Furthermore, even in name only, Zhenya has the status of an ambassador so they will have to respond promptly to Zhenya's personal issues. If he was planning to quit his ambassadorship, his assistant Pavel Menshikov would obviously be the first to know.

"Yes. What is someone busier than the ambassador doing here without contacting me first?"

He is sarcastic and frankly wary.

A year ago, after Kwon Taek Joo was falsely accused and wanted, his mother's worries grew stronger. So he registered his name at the Russian embassy. Zhenya was the one who suggested it and his superiors also allowed it. Of course, that was only in name, so this was Kwon Taek Joo's first time going to the embassy. Zhenya said he took care of everything, but the assistant's attitude wasn't very good.

Kwon Taek Joo's position at the embassy is secretary and personal servant of the consul general, so now, he decided to stay loyal to that role so as not to be suspected in vain.

"There is a document that the ambassador asked me to deliver. I contacted him but he didn't pick up."

"If he was an ambassador, he would have returned home a while ago. You're a secretary and you don't know that?"

Every word has sharp thorns. Kwon Taek Joo tried to lift the corners of his mouth.

"Are not. He said he would come back in about ten days, but it's been half a month already."

"Hmm... I was definitely slow to grasp the information."

Pavel Menshikov gently nodded and added a few meaningless words.

"Well, that's not a simple problem to solve. Maybe you should be careful because this could be a big event for Russia."

Kwon Taek Joo was confused and didn't understand what he was talking about. However, it seems that the assistant knew the purpose of Zhenya's visit to Russia. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't ask what that purpose was, but he wanted to confirm one thing.

"Just because of that, he came home late?"

"If not, what reason is there? Are there important documents? I can receive and forward it  
for you."

Pavel Menshikov suddenly reached out his hand. Kwon Taek Joo felt like he should step back.

"No, since he said he would receive it directly, I will do so."

"Then you should come back later."

"Yes. So here we go today."

Kwon Taek Joo bowed and left the embassy. As soon as he turned his back, naked eyes followed him. It wasn't just one or two glances.

He walked away ignoring it then suddenly turned his head to look back. The heads of the people looking at Kwon Taek Joo through the window all disappeared. Some people couldn't avoid it in time and bumped into flower vases or awkwardly looked away.

Even though the vast majority of staff are Russian, would a visiting Korean be that surprising? Even Joseon people meeting foreigners for the first time probably wouldn't look at them with such curiosity.

Kwon Taek Joo tilted his head and took another step. The embassy staff who were once again observing 'Kwon Taek Joo' turned around and avoided the window.

## Chapter 5.9 – Side Story

The boring afternoon slowly passed. NIS field agents rarely come to work at headquarters. Because there's nothing to do. At most, it's just handling the costs related to conducting activities and writing reports on the results, sometimes Kwon Taek Joo also writes reports. He even had all his expenses approved before the vacation. It's a natural habit that develops because you never know when a new task will be assigned.

Kwon Taek Joo nonchalantly flipped through the desk calendar. He couldn't remember the last time he took a vacation this long. It became a daily habit for him to be called up when he was on leave. At least Zhenya intervened and thanks to that he could relax in his busy life. Kwon Taek Joo keeps nagging Zhenya, but it's true.

Who knows when there will be another excuse to take a break like now? If he didn't want to go to work and feel unfair at the same time, he should have enjoyed himself properly now, but there was nothing to enjoy. He didn't sleep well and each day was boring. What have you done in the past? Usually, Kwon Taek Joo doesn't even have enough time to rest, and recently he hasn't had time to be bored because he's been spending all his time with Zhenya.

There's nothing to do. He rummaged through this and that and then turned on the internal message. Kwon Taek Joo tries to talk to Yoon Jong Woo easily.

[What are you doing?]

Yoon Jong Woo read the message after a while. Late answer.

[Work, nothing else.]

[Want to go for a drink tonight?]

[Can't. I have to go boss hunting tonight.]

[2D Boss, right?]

[It's 3D?]

[You have to eat, too.]

[Can't. Even if I starve. I still have to do it. If senior isn't going to help, then don't talk to me anymore. I really have to leave work early today.]

[Really? Then let me help.]

[Really?]

[Really.]

Kwon Taek Joo answered while turning on his laptop. He borrowed it from Yoon Jong Woo around the end of lunch. On the desktop there is a game where he calls himself a waste. After entering the ID and password, Kwon Taek Joo pressed the login button. However, a message appears to confirm the password. He tried again and the notification line continued to appear.

Kwon Taek Joo reopened the message.

[Did you change your password?]

Yoon Jong Woo read the message and was silent for a while. It seemed like he could hear the shaking of his head through the computer screen.

Not long after, messages from him flew in one after another.

[What are you doing, senior? You said you would help.]

[Yes, I will help you upgrade your level.]

[Ah, don't!]

[What is a password?]

[You think I'll tell you?]

Yoon Jong Woo rarely shows strength. Kwon Taek Joo tried again by slightly changing the current password. He successfully logged in after 3 tries. He just replaced the exclamation mark with a hook in the

existing password. This loose guy is working at the National Intelligence Agency.

It appears that the login notification also goes to the mobile app associated with the account. The normally silent message window blinked non-stop.

[Senior.]

[Senior?]

[Senior?]

[Teacher, please answer me.]

[What's wrong? You said you were busy.]

[Do you think your hair color is much more beautiful?]

[There are a lot of items I've never seen before.]

[Don't touch my child.]

[I said I would raise the level.]

Kwon Taek Joo did not respond any further after finishing that sentence and continuously pretended not to know the message window was flashing. He was browsing the updated user interface when his phone rang. The caller was definitely Yoon Jong Woo. As soon as he pressed the listen button, he heard a gasp.

[Why? You said you were busy?]

[Can we eat together? I must leave before 11 o'clock.]

Kwon Taek Joo immediately logged out of the game and teased Yoon Jong Woo.

[Senior said it's been a long time since he invited me to dinner, so why do you have to do it like this? Must you turn me into a bad person?]

[Why must we invite you to dinner today?]

[Because I want to drink today.]

What a selfish statement. Yoon Jona Woo's breathing became more rapid. Although he couldn't see it, Kwon Taek Joo could tell that he was pulling his hair and shaking.

[I work here.] He hung up the phone. The phone still has no new messages.

After work, Kwon Taek Joo made a reservation at a nearby meat shop. Yoon Jong Woo grumbled and asked if he was going to buy pork, and then he ordered pork belly. His eyes continuously glanced at the laptop turned on next to him. The game automatically runs on the screen. What's so interesting about fighting and gaining experience? Kwon Taek Joo is completely incomprehensible.

[Hey, it's cooled down.]

[I'm eating.]

Leaving the meat that was about to burn and putting the bloody meat into his mouth, it was as if Yoon Jong Woo didn't even look at the grill. Is this what it feels like to be tired of being a disobedient teenager?

Kwon Taek Joo looked at the boy, then rolled up a book and handed it to Yoon Jong Woo. [Ah,] Yoon Jong Woo opened his mouth without doubt. He seemed to have forgotten who his opponent was because he was just looking at the game screen. His cheeks were puffed up as he chewed diligently. But not long after, the jaw movements began to slow down, and even the boy's calm face turned red as if he was about to explode. That's because the rolls only contain Cheongyang chili and raw garlic, but no meat.

[Ah! Ah!]

Yoon Jong Woo covered his mouth

awkwardly. Urgently looking for water, he grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's glass. There was no way the burning mouth could know it was soju. Yoon Jong Woo shouted without a sound. Kwon Taek Joo gave him an empty bowl to spit out.

However, Yoon Jong Woo stubbornly shook his head and swallowed what was in his mouth. Thinking about your parents being farmers, you

can't throw away even a single grain of rice

No, how should he say it? Because of self torture, his gentle eyes were filled with tears. The tip of the nose also turned red.

[That's it. Don't look away while you're eating, okay?

[Ha, ha. You did that on purpose, right?

[But maybe it was a mistake.]

Reply shamelessly. Yoon Jong Woo grumbled with resentful eyes.

[If you were in combat, you would have died of poisoning. He was confirmed dead after drinking the water.]

[Anyway, there's no way I'm going to the scene.]

[Then just do as you wish?]

[There's nothing wrong with that. From the beginning, if it weren't for the seniors...]

Yoon Jong Woo, in anger, suddenly expressed regret. Kwon Taek Joo shared.

[There is no one I trust more than you. I might die alone without a partner, if that's the case then you should provide rear support or cover. What is a good partner for?]

[Ah, really! Then that day I will submit my resignation]

Yoon Jong Woo's attitude only made Kwon Taek Joo tease him even more. He soothed the boy, asking if he wanted to eat cold noodles.

[Cold noodles and water.]

Yoon Jong Woo, who was fuming from the spicy food, quickly relieved his mood. He didn't want to be fooled anymore so he obediently closed the laptop.

He didn't know how long it's been since the two of them sat facing each other like this outside of lunch. Kwon Taek Joo often has to go on business trips, so if he doesn't spend time alone, it's difficult to meet him. In the past, even when it was difficult to arrange time, they still

met regularly, but recently it's almost impossible. It's all because of Zhenya. I don't know when it was natural for Zhenya to spend time outside of work.

[Senior. Are you lonely these days?]

Yoon Jong Woo suddenly asked, his eyes narrowed.

[What? So unexpected.]

[It's strange that you're suddenly so muddy. Should I arrange for you to go on a blind date?]

[Do you know any girls?]

[If that doesn't work, then my sister won't either.]

[Why would you sell your whole family just because you don't want to drink with your superior?]

Funny kid, he even drank alcohol today. Yoon Jong Woo quickly filled the empty glass.

[Who knows? What if it was fate? If my sister can't have it then there's my cousin, if she says she doesn't like it then even...]

[You want to cut ties with your family, right?]

[Not why? What about senior

? Guaranteed retirement age, being a civil servant earns a lot of money. is tall, has a beautiful body and a beautiful face. People have a bit of a stiff and dirty personality... How about that? Why don't you give in to your lover?]

[You have a talent for pretending to give compliments, right?]

Yoon Jong Woo secretly looked to see if he was being scolded any more. Kwon Taek Joo sipped the glass of wine and drank it all. He looked dissatisfied at Yoon Jong Woo then picked up the bottle of wine. Yoon Jong Woo held out his

glass more sincerely than ever.

[How about you? Not dating? Good times.]

[Looking like this, I'm still a celibate.]

[What does that have to do with dating?]

[If you date, you must get married.]

[Definitely...]

[Wow, bad guy. Are love and marriage two different things?]

[Of course it's different. Do you know if the other person wants to marry you or not?]

[If you really love, you won't have time to measure those things, right? I don't want to let that person go home. If we want to be together forever, then we'll get married.]

[I don't want to let that person go home, if that person wants to continue to be with me then just do that. Don't get married blindly. I'm also not saying that marriage is unrealistic. Civil servant? Are you a civil servant? I can't tell that person when I'm going to leave and every day I receive a life allowance higher than the basic salary, what do I do where, I go out more days than I stay at home. If a person gives birth, he or she must raise the child alone. If he or she dies, it is unlikely that the country will find the body, let alone treat it as a meritorious person. Which girl do you say accepts?]

Yoon Jong Woo's lips pursed. He couldn't argue because it was all right. Kwon Taek Joo poured all the remaining wine into his glass.

[If people like us confide, it would violate work rules, and keeping secrets would be cheating in marriage.]

[Senior is right. To be honest, I'm a bit embarrassed. Well, we're not here for the money. It's all for the sake of the country that we exhaust our bodies and our spirits to work.]

[It's not too late now. You can run away.]

[Anyway, I'm a celibate person. It's not like the seniors who work at the scene.]

Yoon Jong Woo muttered and then asked a rather serious question.]

[Senior, how long do you plan to work?]

[I don't know.]

[Didn't your mother force you to get married? She only has one senior, her child.]

[Why not? If a man gets married too late, the baby born will not be healthy. In your mother's mind, she must have thought about getting married and embracing you top.]

[I wonder if senior is celibate?]

[No? Haven't you ever thought about that?]

[Hmm... What about finding a more stable job now? If so, the reason for not getting married will disappear.]

[Is that as easy as it sounds?]

[If you think it's easy, it's easy.]

[Find a job that suits your personality.]

[As long as you don't call me to the scene, it's okay.]

[I just trust you...]

[Ah, don't say that anymore.]

There's no need to cry when your senior says he believes in you.

Cold noodles were brought out. Yoon Jong Woo quickly added vinegar and mustard with a sullen face and then cut into bite sized pieces. He intended to eat just out of politeness, and also because Kwon Taek Joo had already ordered. But as soon as he turned away, he picked up half of the noodles and slurped it down. A bowl of cold noodles was gone in the blink of an eye.

[Ah, I should have ordered regular cold noodles. So little.]

[There's a cold noodle dessert.]

[Lie.]

Kwon Taek Joo clicked his tongue and ordered another bowl of cold noodles, 2 portions of meat and 2 bottles of soju. Yoon Jong Woo's expression looks very happy. If he invited him, he would eat as deliciously as he does now, but why did he refuse so strongly just now?

Yoon Jong Woo opened the soju bottle first and filled Kwon Taek Joo's glass.

[Honestly, if you were a senior, wouldn't the security companies invite you back? The Blue House is also very possible.]

[Such things are very complicated and I can't do it my way. And to be honest, it's just there to create an atmosphere, there's no need to exert any effort.]

[I don't understand why you want to work hard. If you want to waste your body like that, go abroad and make more money.]

[The reason is not money. You have to at least think that you're patriotic to feel less guilty. You can't harm others for money because you will doubt yourself.]

[Then let's open a gym and exercise for a living.]

[That doesn't feel realistic.]

[Wow, that's really strange.]

[Seniors like this make my mother feel very uneasy. Instead of having a daughter-in-law or a grandson, I think she just wants her senior to settle down.]

[If we get married, can we be stable?]

[At least you will think of others when using your body. Even if it is your body, it will not completely belong to you anymore, but also to your family members. Family is like rabbits, how can you step on it?]

Let's see, Kwon Taek Joo never thought about that. You can't imagine it because you've never experienced it. If you have family. If the number of people he has to protect increases, will he really change? Won't you feel uncomfortable about a life that only pursues safety? Just being

someone's husband and father. Can personal and family responsibility quench his thirst?

Kwon Taek Joo thought for a moment then burst out laughing. He suddenly remembered Zhenya. The bastard's existence was deeply ingrained in his brain and blocked even his wandering thoughts.

That's right, my theme is family like rabbits. He'd better give up that idea before being eaten by that boy for his stupid actions.

Yoon Jong Woo said why. He shook his head as if nothing happened.  
[But is your mother still healthy? Long time no see. In the past, I often followed my senior to eat.]

[If not, my mother would have talked about you already. If you have time, let's take you home]

[Eh, but why didn't you tell me?]

[Ah... My mother has a close friend these days.]

[So what?]

[If you come, he won't like it. You probably don't feel very comfortable, right?]

[Why does my mother's best friend hate you? What do you mean 'not very comfortable'?]

[Uh, that's what it is.]

Kwon Taek Joo answered vaguely. Cold noodles and meat were brought on time. Yoon Jong Woo quickly turned his attention to cold noodles. Kwon Taek Joo puts the meat on the grill. Grill and cut. Yoon Jong Woo was so focused on eating that he couldn't ask any more questions.

After grilling the meat, he put down the tongs. Yoon Jong Woo had just finished eating cold noodles and quickly filled his glass.

[Can I ask you a question?]

[What is it?]

[I've been curious for a long time. What relationship do you have with that Russian?]

Kwon Taek Joo stopped at the silly question. He tilted the wine glass, drank the soju in one gulp and put the empty glass down.

[What kind of relationship, just back and forth. He and I almost killed each other, but in the end he did something to help... I occasionally meet that kid because he is the ambassador to Korea. 'That's the kind of relationship.]

[Wow, that relationship is really scary. How can you be friends with a murderer like that...]

Yoon Jong Woo's soft voice gradually subsided. Kwon Taek Joo wondered why the boy suddenly noticed, and then a random sentence was spewed out right after.

[But senior is not so different.]

[Hey, that's so rude. Why compare me to that guy?]

[Well, he's human first.]

It seems like the relationship with Zhenya is so strange that even the naive Yoon Jong Woo is suspicious. At first glance, it is difficult to guess what their relationship is like and it is even more difficult to understand if you know the inside story. How many times had he almost died at Zhenya's hands? Yet now, just by making eye contact with that guy, he is already attached to him, not knowing where his life will go.

Then the story of Yoon Jong Woo's family and neighbors, news about manager Lim and dissatisfaction in office life became the topic of discussion. While talking and drinking another glass, two bottles of soju quickly ran out. Should I call more? Kwon Taek Joo shook his head.

[No, you go home now.]

He didn't know if it was because of surprise or not, but Yoon Jong Woo's eyes opened wide. He took out his phone to check the time immediately. Still not enough, he looked up at the clock hanging on the wall.

[It's not even 10 o'clock yet?]

[If you want to go home, it will take time. Playing games is good, but if possible, take a shower and finish the housework.]

Kwon Taek Joo's advice couldn't help but startle Yoon Jong Woo.

[Senior, I wonder if you are following me? Did you leave the camera at my house?]

[I don't need to do those things, it's too obvious, right?]

Yoon Jong Woo rolled his eyes and stood up without hesitation. After that, he maintained a neat posture and bowed seriously

Then I will go back first. Thank you for providing food today. I love you, senior.]

He obnoxiously dropped the heart with his hand and ran away, looking back as he ran to see if he was caught again. Kwon Taek Joo watched Yoon Jong Woo run away and bursted out laughing.

The time was almost 10 pm. Not wanting to go home right away, Kwon Taek Joo called the staff who were cleaning the next table.

[Here, turn off the fire and give me another bottle of soju.]

He decided to spend a little more time alone. It's been a long time since Kwon Taek Joo drank alone at a place other than work. How have you lived lately? After entering NIS, comfort disappeared from life. After completing this job, another job awaits. The number of times moving directly from one work place to the next is not rare. During his days off, he only sleeps and replenishes his physical strength.

During the early stages of his appointment, Kwon Taek Joo often split his time to meet friends, college seniors and juniors, and comrades from when he was a special forces soldier. At that time, he still had time and was full of enthusiasm for things like loyalty and friendship. The problem is that in any meeting, the thing they are most curious about is each other's current situation. Only once or twice did he try to cover it up, but trying to lie only made him feel uncomfortable.

After leaving the rookie title, Kwon Taek Joo's workload skyrocketed and he was never able to rest when everyone else rested. So he could hardly participate in important events such as weddings, funerals, council meetings, and baby showers. He has also never spent a full holiday at home.

For a while, Kwon Taek Joo only lived by saying sorry. Everyone says it's okay, but a relationship that only involves apologizing constantly cannot be maintained normally. Contact became sparse and he gradually began to distance himself from everyone. Kwon Taek Joo has lost his phone many times during actions so he has almost no contact numbers left. He teased Zhenya that he didn't have any friends, but Kwon Taek Joo himself isn't much different now. If he dies like this, the story 'He's dead' will spread in the future. He wasn't worried that his funeral would be bland. If the body was still intact, it would be lucky.

Kwon Taek Joo laughed bitterly and drank continuously. Being alone, he has more random thoughts. Until recently he hadn't had time to think about those things. The intensity of work is still too much and interferes with his dense daily life.

[Always grumbling.]

Zhenya complains that he's always just working, but at times like this there's no news from him at all. After all, what is the big event in Russia?

Suddenly the wine was so tasteless. He thought about cigarettes so he left the restaurant. Kwon Taek Joo bought a pack of cigarettes that he usually smoked at a nearby convenience store. Lighting it, taking a deep breath, he checked the cigarette pack. It originally tasted like this so he was bored, or he was already used to handmade cigars.

Just one year. How much influence did Zhenya have on him? Kwon Taek Joo didn't notice it when he was still around but after Zhenya disappeared, he felt it with such certainty that it was unbelievable.

Kwon Taek Joo finished a cigarette and was about to light another when his cell phone rang quietly.

A strange number appeared on the phone screen. If it's normal, guessing it's an advertising call and Kwon Taek Joo doesn't have to accept it. And in this Korean land. There is no gang big enough to kidnap Zhenya. Maybe someone called the wrong number.

Then he realized it was almost midnight and there could be no advertising calls. If it's not a close relationship or urgent work, there's no reason to ignore rudeness at such a late hour.

He touched the answer button with the decision to pick up the phone.

[Yes.]

[Kwon Taek Joo?]

The sudden questioning voice was quite familiar. But this was not a number in the phonebook, so Kwon Taek Joo was not caught off guard.

[Right. Who is this?]

[Wow, is that right? It's me, Chanwoo.]

Chanwoo. Kang Chanwoo. He remembered the familiar name. Surely there is such a person among his university classmates. He is sociable and outgoing, taking on the role of faculty representative since his first year. Kwon Taek Joo remembers hearing the news that he got married a few years ago.

Even though he wasn't very close, he suddenly wondered if something had happened?

[Yes. Long time no see.]

[It's been almost 10 years, the world has changed. Still, you're still alive, right? No one has been able to contact him, so there's been a lot of talk about not seeing him for several years. But no news means good news. How are you?]

Talking a lot is still the same as before. Obviously, without asking, we know what they're talking about Kwon Taek Joo. During his time in college, he brought about an unexpected rumor. He even dropped out of a good university, so all the baseless rumors spread everywhere.

Unknowingly, he has become the main character of a fairy tale that begins with 'Once upon a time there was a senior..'

In the meantime. The thing that made Kwon Taek Joo more curious was how Kang Chan Woo found out his phone number. End stage occupational disease.

[Unlike what you expected, I'm still healthy. Are you calling to ask that?]

[This kid, what are you talking about? It's not that I'm looking forward to it, I'm just worried. There is no reason to dropout of school like that. How are you these days? Are you married?]

[No, I'm busy working to make a living.]

[What are you doing?]

[Uhm. You don't need to know.]

[Ha. The character Kwon Taek Joo remains unchanged. Must check it out, right? Everyone is curious about you.]

[Everyone lives the same way, so why are you curious?]

[You don't really know that's why you're asking? Want to see if Kwon Taek Joo will become a normal uncle. Actually, before this Mid-Autumn Festival, we decided to meet each other. But it's really difficult to keep time.]

[But..]

[But what? You come too. No matter what you do, you will rest before and after the holidays.]

Kang Chan Woo quickly added another word when Kwon Taek Joo was about to immediately refuse.

[I don't know about other times, but this time you must appear.]

What does that mean? Kwon Taek Joo majored in mechanical engineering at a technical university. Most of his classmates were male and he didn't care where they lived or what they did. He was never curious. So what is the reason to definitely attend?

When the doubt reached its climax, Kang Chan Woo continued to speak.

[I heard that Yuna Hyun came. She's about to get married. Let's meet a little bit before that.]

Kwon Taek Joo suddenly remembered another person he had forgotten about.

## Chapter 5.10 – Side Story

[Kwon Taek Joo.]

He raised his head because of the call. The classmates who ate together also paid attention to the spokesperson. Ambient noise disappears.

The person who appeared in front of the crowd was Yuna Hyun. First-year student in the department of information and mechanical engineering at a Korean university, where there are only three female students out of 150 students. Because of the so-called "beauty of a technical university," even before enrolling, Yuna Hyun received the attention of her seniors, classmates and juniors. Even on that day, stories related to her were being discussed. Those who always considered her a subject simultaneously remained silent and watched the two people's conversation.

[I'm Yuna Hyun.]

She tilted her head to introduce. At that time, Kwon Taek Joo entered his second semester. It's not like he didn't know her when everyone around him mentioned Yuna Hyun. It's just that he doesn't care as much as others.

[Yes?]

[Can I sit here?]

[It's up to you.]

Kwon Taek Joo superficially agreed. Everyone eats their portion anyway, so it doesn't matter who sits next to who. Yuna put the tray down opposite Kwon Taek Joo. It wasn't until then that others in the crowd began to ask questions properly. What kind of liberal arts are you studying, have you completed all the assignments for your core courses, where are the friends you used to hang out with, etc. Gossip.

Yuna answered moderately and stared at

Kwon Taek Joo. He focused on the meal and did not participate in any conversations. He was completely indifferent to the fact that a person was sitting in front of him and staring at him.

[This two-person exercise, I want to do it with you.]

The surroundings became quiet again after the unexpected announcement. The crowd rolled their eyes and watched the situation carefully. Some of them had sinister smiles and others were disappointed.

Kwon Taek Joo finally looked Yuna Hyun straight in the eyes.

[With me? Why?]

[You're the one with the highest score. I'm curious how the class leader does his homework.]

Yuna's tone was quite aggressive. It's not about doing homework together, it's about giving challenges. Kwon Taek Joo learns that she ranked second in her class in her first semester. Even if he didn't care, the others were still making noise so he couldn't help but know. However, he had no intention or spirit of competing with her. For Kwon Taek Joo, grades are just a matter of rank, and rank has nothing to do with him.

So he refused Yuna's offer.

[Sorry but please find someone else.]

[Why?]

[I feel like if I

can't do it my way. I cannot fit in with others.]

The decisive answer surprised Yuna. The vast majority do not want to work in groups with passive people, because the probability of having to work increases. Kwon Taek Joo is different. Instead of looking for a team member with ability and strong arguments, he prefers a member who is suitable for him. That way, even though the workload increases, in return you will feel comfortable.

Kwon Taek Joo said go ahead and stood up with an empty plate, whispering behind him. He also felt Yuna Hyun's eyes following him closely. However, there was no other way because he was not interested.

Since that day, Yuna suddenly appeared anywhere and asked to do homework together. That scene was witnessed by many people and the behind-the-scenes story about whether the two were flirting or dating became noisy. Most of them are poor quality rumors.

Female students at technical universities always receive a lot of attention. They are treated like princesses in every word. The boys compete with each other endlessly but they will degrade the girls with dirty words if they are rejected. They are especially interested in the love life of girls, whether they have a boyfriend or not, when they met

, when they feel like they will break up, and every time they have free time, they chatter. On days when girls walk or arrive late with a strange man, they exchange bad stories and jokes behind their backs.

As a female student. It is difficult to focus on studying. If you get high scores like Yuna Hyun, you will get more attention. You are criticized if you get along with everyone because they will think you are flattering your seniors. And vice versa, if you draw a certain line, you will be considered cruel.

Kwon Taek Joo is the only person in the department who doesn't care about the girls. No matter how noisy the surroundings were about those girls, he didn't say another word. When he was in his first year, he lived in harmony with his classmates and was respected by his seniors due to the influence of a family environment that had been soldiers from generation to generation.

However, Kwon Taek Joo also completely dislikes topics related to women. Stories originating from that illusion were not interesting to him. But he seemed very special to his female classmates.

Is that why Yuna Hyun still persists in following Kwon Taek Joo? From meals at school, when going to the library, when listening to lectures or

even when he was playing basketball on the soccer field. She watched the match without interest in the sunlight, sweating profusely and asked to do her homework together.

Yuna Hyun studied so well that she entered the school as valedictorian. Above all, she is beautiful, strong and has good sociability. It is natural for such a person to receive everyone's attention. However, the problem is that the more we talk, the more things change. The bad rumors are as much as the compliments for her. Just the fact that she followed Kwon Taek Joo cannot be imagined that there would be countless behind-the-scenes stories being woven. Even though he knew that, he couldn't continue to refuse.

At that time, starting with 2-person exercises, Kwon Taek Joo often accompanied Yuna. Exercise comes first and the two seem very comfortable with each other. The story of the two dating was spread publicly, but that didn't matter. Yuna Hyun also seemed more comfortable just talking about this and that with her group mates. In fact, when rumors spread that she and Kwon Taek Joo were dating, the number of people criticizing her decreased significantly.

If you compare college life to a marathon, the two are very good running partners. They always take turns holding first and second place and often do homework together. Unlike Kwon Taek Joo's prediction, the two people's opinions are quite consistent. During the exam period, anyone who comes to the library must reserve a seat in advance. Most of their meals were at the academy, but when it was too late, they ate late at a familiar store in front of the school.

But when they leave school, everyone takes time for themselves. They have never met privately outside. Kwon Taek Joo is the same, and there are extracurricular classes for Yuna almost every day. She seems to not only pay for her own tuition, but also directly earn living expenses. Kwon Taek Joo sometimes works part-time to earn pocket money, but he usually spends the rest of his time exercising. Sometimes he goes out with friends and goes to the game room or billiard room. The two are similar in many ways, but not exactly.

When the first semester of the second year begins, more than half of the motivation disappears. That's because Kwon Taek Joo is preparing to enlist.

It's good to join the army when you're young, but you want to be more cautious. If I go, I like a place where I can experience it in a meaningful way.

The most received question around that time was [When did you go to military service?] Yuna Hyun is no exception.

[Aren't you going to serve?]

[It's frustrating because I can't reply to everyone at once. I will go. Of course I have to go.]

[When?]

[Hmm.. After 2nd year?]

[Very good.]

[What?]

[That's it. I'm ready to come back here. And you?]

[Let's go.]

Study until late at night and then go home

together. The long staircase connecting the central library to the main door is illuminated by the dim light of a street lamp. No human voices were heard, the surroundings were quiet and insects could be heard from afar. Normally, they would talk about this and that, but that day, Yuna Hyun was silent. I don't know if something is wrong or not, but her face is not very bright. At times like these, Kwon Taek Joo is not the first to start a conversation. He just kept silent and pretended not to know.

When reaching the mezzanine, Yuna Hyun who was walking in front suddenly turned around and looked back.

[Do you want to go on a date with me?]

(No, No he doesn't want to.)

[Is this a new trick? Falling in love with your opponent to confuse them and take the top position?]

How silly. Yuna Hyun giggled as if she was surprised. Kwon Taek Joo took that mild reaction as a joke and ignored it.

He passed Yuna and went down the stairs first. He didn't understand why she didn't quickly follow. Then suddenly, Yuna ran to close the distance and punched Kwon Taek Joo's back heartlessly. What's wrong? He looked back at her giggling.

[Let's go on a date, Kwon Taek Joo.]

It was too dark so he couldn't see Yuna's face clearly, but her cheeks seemed to be turning red.

(Haha! She only got close to him by asking to do homework together, a new way to get close then ask them out.)

## Chapter 5.11 – Side Story

[Is it a date?]

Kwon Taek Joo sighed and sat down on the sofa. He threw away the phone that he kept picking up as a habit. He deliberately took a deep breath and then exhaled, but the discomfort in his chest still did not go away. His mind confused, he lay down on his back, his eyes vaguely closing and opening continuously. The high ceiling seems to be rotating slowly.

After talking on the phone with classmate Kang Chan Woo, Kwon Taek Joo drank two more bottles alone. He enjoyed such a normal time.

It was too late at night so he didn't go home but went straight to Zhenya's house. His steps naturally went in that direction. He hadn't done anything all day but he was tired.

It's all because of damn Zhenya. He said he was only going back to Russia for a few days but didn't tell me why and didn't think about returning after 15 days. If it's late, at least contact me. Making him so worried. Even with pets or stray dogs and cats on the street, Zhenya doesn't seem that irresponsible.

If this were a love relationship, this situation would be infuriating. But neither Zhenya nor Kwon Taek Joo have ever openly admitted to dating. Even though most of our free time is spent together and there is no one else but each other, just looking into each other's eyes makes us rush into each other, isn't that of course a date? More than anything else, Zhenya unashamedly blurted out that he was Zainka and that he was the lover. It shows that Zhenya is also clearly aware of this relationship in that way. Is this something he would do with someone who is not his lover?

(Exactly! They never openly admitted to dating yet they say 'lover'. Zainka is Taek Joo's pet name for a rabbit.)

There was a time when Kwon Taek Joo also thought that because Zhenya interfered too much in his work, please get busy or disappear for a bit. In a way, the words have become seeds. But now he's grumbling like this. Dissatisfied with this, dissatisfied with that. Being human is funny.

[I told you to give me your body. The bastard only knows how to talk every day. Damned.]

Kwon Taek Joo muttered angrily and scratched his head. He had to get up and shower but he didn't want to move because the sofa was too comfortable.

After a year of traveling, he was very familiar with this house. Kwon Taek Joo feels as comfortable as his room at home. Even when he closed his eyes, he still knew clearly where he was and what was there.

He spent most of his holidays here. The kissing starts as soon as you enter the house or even before that, then it leads to sex like running water. Bedroom, of course, then living room, bathroom, kitchen, even garage and balcony. He remembered the feeling of the curtains touching his body gently every time he moved.

The next day Kwon Taek Joo lay on the sofa all day. Every time he went to Ajinoki Island. he would lie down in front of the fireplace. After ordering food, he sat down with Zhenya as his cushion. In that state, he reads books or watches TV and waits for food to arrive. Zhenya seems sturdy at first glance, but at those times he also relaxes and his muscles relax and are surprisingly soft.

At such times, Zhenya obediently wrapped his arms around Kwon Taek Joo's waist, rubbing his head against his ears, nape and back. It seemed Zhenya insisted on checking his body odor throughout the night. And of course it never stops there. The hand that was groping around her waist grabbed her stomach and quickly massaged her breasts. The straight nose gradually rubs against the skin on the nape of the neck and ears.

"Hey. Haven't you become less attached to that place? Why do you always cling to your chest like this..."

"If there is a lack of affection, will it become like this? So from now on we have to build a very strong relationship."

"That's not what you mean, kid. Enough, don't rub anymore. It hurts."

"You like it when I'm touching you, but you always say you hate it. Ah, or do you prefer sucking?"

The guy muttered strange things and then easily put Kwon Taek Joo down on the sofa. Zhenya pulled up the T-shirt and buried his head in it. He lightly brushed her nipples over her clothes, then bit and sucked them. Kwon Taek Joo always finds a way to escape in that situation. Zhenya's harassment only ended when Kwon Taek Joo's penis lifted its head and sat up. At the same time, the muscles between Zhenya's legs also instantly stiffened.

"This crazy guy, please stop."

"This is not my intention. It's just a conditioned reflex."

The person who was brazenly protesting quickly changed his expression and was lovingly called "Taek Joo". When Kwon Taek Joo regained consciousness, he was already under Zhenya. The phone rang mid sentence but no one paid attention. Finally, delivered food is forgotten and left on the doorstep.

Have you been bewitched? Although, it may be related to some extent.

[...]

Kwon Taek Joo was immersed in endless memories when suddenly the phone rang. Thought it was an illusion, but it was clearly the sound from the phone he had thrown away.

He picked up the phone. He lost all strength immediately after confirming the caller. That's his mother's phone. Kwon Taek Joo said he was going to have a drink with Yoon Jong Woo, but it seemed his mother wanted to see when he would return.

He sighed and stroked his face, a feeling of forgotten fatigue suddenly coming to him. Kwon Taek Joo regained composure and answered the phone.

[Yes, mother. Why don't you go to sleep first?]

As expected, his mother asked where he was now and if he was still drinking. It was the weekend so she wasn't worried about going to work, but because it was so late, his mother was worried about whether he'd had too much to drink.

[Uhm. I'll be late after drinking it for a while, so I'll sleep at Jong Woo's house today. I'll come home tomorrow. Mom, go to sleep first.]

The call ended simply, Kwon Taek Joo threw the phone down. He stroked his face and sighed again.

He shook his head and stood up, then walked back to the bedroom and collapsed on the large bed. The bed supported his tired body without shaking at all.

[It's really big.]

Kwon Taek Joo buried his head in the soft pillow and mumbled. He felt Zhenya's body odor from the bed. It must have been a mistake because Zhenya would definitely take off the bed sheets and throw them away as soon as they got dirty.

Fatigue sets in. His eyes quickly dimmed. Whenever he sleeps here, Kwon Taek Joo always sees Zhenya's face as soon as he wakes up. He often went to the kitchen to cook ramen even though he didn't ask or took

a shower first, but from that moment until Kwon Taek Joo woke up. Zhenya didn't leave his seat. When Kwon Taek Joo wakes up and sees him staring at his sleeping lover, Zhenya will hug or kiss him.

Sometimes Kwon Taek Joo also wakes up earlier. It was an opportunity to look at his gentle face to death. The image of Zhenya sleeping looks harmless and innocent. And strangely enough, there is no part of the face that is not attractive.

Kwon Taek Joo did not move but silently observed. A few times he even held his breath and secretly took photos.

I don't know when Zhenya realized it. He also sometimes pretends to sleep, from inside his eyelids he can easily see everything even if his eyelashes don't move, because Kwon Taek Joo's tickling, trembling breath makes the perception even clearer..

"What are you doing?"

Zhenya quickly raised his eyelids and muttered. Then he smiled and asked solemnly.

"Why are you peeping like that? Finally, when will we do it, kiss?"

"It seems like there's a strange formula in your head. Do you have to kiss a kidnapped person or a sleeping person? Haven't you been watching too many fairy tales?"

"It's not romantic at all, Taek Joo. Women won't like it."

"Isn't that good for you?"

Kwon Taek Joo lowered his head and tightly sucked the nagging man's lips. The man who was attacked suddenly hesitated, then bit his lower lip and pressed his tongue inside. Confused eyes gently curved up. Zhenya naturally hugged Kwon Taek Joo's face and changed position, holding his hand tightly and continuing to lead the kiss. A moment later, the intertwined lips slowly parted, eyes sparkling with satisfaction.

"I don't care either."

Kwon Taek Joo looked down and nonchalantly added. Then the two kissed until their lips softened. He remembers how hard it was for several days because he felt pain just opening his mouth a little.

## Chapter 5.12 – Side Story

Translator's Note: Warning, Couple fight with violence!!!!??

There are not always only good things, there are times when two people quarrel to the point of almost fighting each other. Of course, the initiator was mostly Zhenya and the ignition point was Kwon Taek Joo who caught fire.

When things explode. Zhenya often cannot understand why Kwon Taek Joo is angry. No, he doesn't even try to understand.

Zhenya's train of thought is as self-centered as a 5-year-old child, completely unaware of his surroundings and not knowing how to ask for forgiveness even if it's all his fault. The word sorry doesn't seem to be in Zhenya's dictionary.

Of course, there were also a few times when Kwon Taek Joo was the cause of the fight. That was also the time the two had the biggest argument.

It happened not long ago. Around Zhenya's birthday, their second birthday since living together. Kwon Taek Joo promised to go on vacation to Ajinoki together when Zhenya was too tired from the Korean heat.

But at that time, an event happened that made North-South relations tense. The national intelligence agency is placed on alert and Kwon Taek Joo is assigned a series of missions. He was forced to postpone his vacation plans a bit. It was a politically sensitive time and was also the reason Kwon Taek Joo asked Zhenya to never meddle in his affairs. To compensate, he

coaxed

that he would listen to everything Zhenya wanted after the busy work was over.

Trouble began when the intelligence information he had received with great difficulty arose in the middle. As a result, the target he was about to catch after chasing for many days suddenly disappeared. Kwon Taek Joo turned on detection mode and scanned everywhere, but the fishing line broke and the fish escaped. Time passed like an eternity while he still had no clue. The Ajinoki trip was therefore also delayed.

Kwon Taek Joo had to shyly turn back when instructed to stop searching. For the first time, he could not complete the assigned task.

He returned home after a few weeks and didn't say a word. He didn't want to reveal his feelings of failure and tried to shake off all his regrets. But it's not easy. The mood is depressed and shows no signs of recovery. Zhenya also just looked at him silently.

Kwon Taek Joo slept like he was unconscious all day. When he opened his eyes again, Zhenya was still sitting in that position and looking at Kwon Taek Joo. He was also not in a hurry to start a conversation or arrogant as usual. Kwon Taek Joo went into the bathroom without saying a word to him, he filled the bathtub with water and soaked in it.

He must sincerely apologize, explain the recent situation and hope for understanding, but Kwon Taek Joo is completely in no spirit, for the time being he does not want to think or make any effort.

After a long while, Kwon Taek Joo walked out. Zhenya was sitting on the sofa in the living room. Eyes met. Zhenya's face stiffened. Thinking back, he kept hearing a vibration somewhere. Following the direction of the sound, his eyes stopped at Zhenya's hand. He was holding Kwon Taek Joo's work phone.

It looks like a call came from headquarters. They said they would be in touch if the target reappeared. In Kwon Taek Joo's mind, he only thought that the opportunity to save had come. He didn't have time to think about the problems that had to be solved along with the fatigue that had accumulated over the past time.

"Give it to me."

Kwon Taek Joo immediately reached out his hand. Zhenya's expression turned cold.

"Give it to me."

He urged again in a low voice. Just then, Zhenya smashed the phone as if for him to see. The broken phone fell to Kwon Taek Joo's feet.

The thin thread of reason in his head tensed and then was cut, feeling like being poured with a bucket of cold water.

"What are you doing?"

"I said it was all over."

"...You missed your target. So the strategy also temporarily ends."

"So what? Do you want to go again?"

Zhenya showed obvious discomfort. Kwon Taek Joo's chest was so tight it was suffocating. He exhaled.

"That's work."

"Is that so important?"

"What are you talking about?"

Feeling frustrated when having to answer a series of meaningless questions from an unreasonable person.

"Can't you tell the difference? I'm not even a child. Don't bother anymore."

When Kwon Taek Joo's offensive words rang out, Zhenya's chin and forehead wrinkled for a moment. Sharp eyes flashed fire.

"I have to blow up the entire Korean peninsula for your proud work to end, right?"

Kwon Taek Joo gasped because of the unreasonable sounds, he no longer had any motivation to talk further with Zhenya.

He ignored him and put on his clothes first. He didn't even button his shirt properly and hurriedly walked out, but Zhenya called him again. "Taek Joo"'s voice mixed with a sigh. Kwon Taek Joo turned his head to look back, he was bowing his head with his hands holding his forehead. Face dark.

"I'm trying to restrain myself from detaining you."

It wasn't just a threat. It is inherently like that, It's just that he forgot. Kwon Taek Joo thought that Zhenya had been docile the whole time, meaning he was quite well tamed. But he is still selfish and narrow minded. He's just being patient. What does peace on the Korean peninsula mean to someone who doesn't even consider the safety of his homeland.

If Kwon Taek Joo still had the ability to calmly judge, the situation would be different. But at that time, he just wanted to make up for his only failure.

"I'm sorry."

It's not an apology. But an apology to leave. Zhenya couldn't stand it any longer. He stood up, quickly closed the distance and roughly turned Kwon Taek Joo around. The arm that Zhenya held tightly throbbed. His whole body tensed with pressure he had never felt before.

"Don't go."

The cold expression on Zhenya's face was a complete contrast to the pleading tone. It's a kind of threat. It was a warning to stop because he was about to get angry. But Kwon Taek Joo dismissed that hand.

"I have to go."

Kwon Taek Joo tried to turn away but his collar was grabbed. When he protested, Zhenya grabbed him violently by the collar and pushed him into the mirror in front of the door. His head was pounding with shock. The scalp feels the entire surface of the cold mirror. Luckily it didn't break.

At this point, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't stand it any longer.

"Let go."

He clenched his molars and growled. His hand grabbed the arm that was tightening the collar. His nails dug into the back of Zhenya's hand.

"Taek Joo. Don't test my patience."

"Damned. If you can't stand it anymore, go and drag anyone back and roll around. Isn't that a special ability for a brat like you?"

Kwon Taek Joo spit it out in anger. Because he was so angry, he accidentally said something, but he couldn't take back what he said.

Zhenya's face no longer had a drop of blood. His huge shadow completely covered Kwon Taek Joo. Rapid breathing. When his hand approached, he suddenly shivered. Zhenya stopped for a moment then reached out and held Kwon Taek Joo's arms tightly. He gritted his teeth. It wouldn't be strange if Kwon Taek Joo's arm was broken this time.

"Am I that ridiculous in your eyes?"

The emotionless voice seemed to encourage Kwon Taek Joo to answer, the strength from his hand increased another level.

Time still ticks by even when arguing. Because of Zhenya, he still couldn't contact headquarters. Kwon Taek Joo's mood was restless.

"Damned. Let go."

He shouted and pushed Zhenya away but he stood as steady as a rock and didn't move a bit. Kwon Taek Joo struggled and hit his shoulder and face. Zhenya's jaw clenched tightly. The atmosphere became more tense.

"Do you mind? Me? In the end, what else should I be like? All I ask is that you don't go. Do I have to sit obediently like a dog and wait until you feed me? Thank you for your kindness."

The voice seemed to break. When Zhenya is truly angry, his iridescent eyes become as clear as crystal. It seemed like everything he had tried to suppress until then exploded all at once. If it goes any further, it will definitely become a chaos. Kwon Taek Joo realized this was the time he had to try to use his reason. He relaxed his body and asked for a truce.

"Let go, and we'll talk later."

"No I don't think so."

"Please..."

"I have the right to say no, right? I hate it, Taek Joo."

"Damn it, I don't have time to joke with you."

In the end, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't stand it anymore and got angry. Zhenya's hand was tightened more fiercely. The next moment was the sound of buttons being pulled off and a shirt being ripped apart. He was speechless and slowly looked at the pitifully torn shirt while looking at Zhenya.

Zhenya didn't seem fazed at all. He threw away the piece of shirt he was holding in his hand and said sarcastic words.

"Do not get mad. It's just an immature dog causing trouble."

"What, this bastard?"

Kwon Taek Joo was stunned. Zhenya nonchalantly stroked his exposed neck, her thumb lightly touching his protruding collarbone. It wouldn't be surprising if he broke his chest right now. It's dangerous and thrilling but he doesn't know what else to do. He got goosebumps wherever Zhenya's hands brushed.

Zhenya's eyes dropped, his gaze followed his fingers, then he suddenly lowered his head. Kwon Taek Joo squinted his eyes at the thought of being bitten. Zhenya did not hesitate to open his mouth and then suddenly bit his neck.

"..Ugh"

"My teeth are itchy so I'll grind them a bit."

Zhenya muttered then gritted his teeth in anger. His sensitive skin burned, his legs wobbled at the feeling of teeth digging into his flesh.

"Fuck, come on, fuck... don't!"

In an instant, a pop sounded. Kwon Taek Joo was startled when he saw Zhenya's face turned to the side. He just tried to push him away, but ended up swinging his hand into a fist. Time seemed to stop for a moment, only his hands trembled without support.

Zhenya's eyes slowly turned red. The tense atmosphere increased one level to the point of suffocation.

Suddenly the doorbell rang, it seemed like someone was coming. Kwon Taek Joo was startled and looked at the main door then turned his eyes to Zhenya. His pupils had completely shrunk. Kwon Taek Joo understood that the two could no longer talk anymore.

As soon as he said no, their lips suddenly stuck together. The force of the thrust caused the back of his head to hit the mirror again. He felt the danger to every cell throughout his body. Zhenya grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's chest as if he was going to tear it to pieces and even tried to pull down his pants. When Kwon Taek Joo twisted his body to protest, Zhenya immediately tore the zipper. He grabbed his wrist to stop him but could not overcome the monster's strength.

Zhenya roughly kneaded Kwon Taek Joo's penis while pressing his lips to his neck, chin and cheeks. The more he pushed away, the more ferociously Zhenya came back and attacked.

The doorbell rang again.

[Delivery.]

Feeling the presence inside, the delivery staff outside the door spoke up. They knocked loudly on the door. If he wasn't looking at the wrong house, it seemed like Zhenya ordered something while Kwon Taek Joo was taking a shower. He learned how to use an online delivery app even though he didn't know any Korean.

Kwon Taek Joo regained consciousness, he hit Zhenya on the shoulder and pushed him away as hard as he could. But right after escaping, he was caught and pushed hard through the main door. The entire entrance door rang loudly.

[This...?]

The delivery man's voice became quite cautious. A picture of domestic violence must have been painted in his mind.

Not completely wrong. Kwon Taek Joo's bare chest and face were pressed tightly against the cold front door. He couldn't escape because

Zhenya grabbed the back of his neck from behind and pressed him close. He gritted his teeth and endured it, but Zhenya didn't seem to hear anything.

Zhenya without hesitation pulled his penis out. He pulled down Kwon Taek Joo's pants and underwear and gently rubbed his meat on the exposed buttocks.

"...This crazy guy"

Curses poured out. All the muscles in Kwon Taek Joo's body were tense to the point of pain as if he relaxed even a little bit, that giant mass of flesh would crawl right into the hole.

Zhenya repeatedly rubbed his stiff penis against the hole and bit the back of Kwon Taek Joo's neck. He still did not forget the foreplay by gently squeezing Kwon Taek Joo's penis, which was erecting more slowly than usual. Even in dilemmas like this, the body gradually warms up. Crazy guy.

During that fierce fight, the delivery man's trembling voice rang out, [Are you okay?] He hasn't left the door yet.

[Hey what happened? Shall I call the police?]

Kwon Taek Joo at that time gave up wrestling. He leaned his sweaty forehead against the front door and took a deep breath. After Kwon Taek Joo calmed down, Zhenya no longer behaved excessively.

"...Tell that person to leave."

Kwon Taek Joo muttered with a tired look. The delivery person did not react for a moment and then suddenly put his hand on the handle of the main door, after which he quickly pulled it down. The main door immediately opened and Kwon Taek Joo's body that was tightly attached to it was also pushed forward. When he turned his head outward, he almost made eye contact with the delivery person.

The door opens about 10 cm. The delivery man and Zhenya's eyes met through the door, but Kwon Taek Joo didn't hear him speak. The delivery man froze when he saw a tall foreigner suddenly appear. Then

he was startled when he gradually realized the scene of two people passionately embracing each other right in front of him.

"Leave it there and go away."

Zhenya said decisively. It's in Russian but the accent is still enough to convey the meaning. The delivery person said sorry, then quickly put the things he brought, closed the door and disappeared.

Perhaps thanks to that brief incident,

Zhenya calmed down a bit. The guy vaguely called Kwon Taek Joo's name and then rubbed his face against his ear.

"Taek Joo."

"End it quickly."

Kwon Taek Joo raised his elbow to push Zhenya away. Zhenya stopped for a moment then without hesitation grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's shoulder and turned him aside. When Kwon Taek Joo resisted, Zhenya pulled him back and pushed him in front of the mirror and pushed his penis into the hole. Kwon Taek Joo's fingers leaning on the mirror turned white.

He kept his head down the entire time he was stabbed from behind. He didn't want to see his face in the mirror opposite, He jerked his head irritably when Zhenya tried to grab his chin, all he expected was for him to finish the job quickly.

As soon as Zhenya took a step back, Kwon Taek Joo immediately pushed him away

"Don't leave my sight. Or I will kill you."

(Zhenya definitely has abandonment issues. Not saying what he did was right.)

A warning with a wrinkled nose. Kwon Taek Joo did not answer but left the house. The dish placed in front of the door caught his eye. Looking at the packaging number, it seems to be Jambong or malatang. Zhenya ordered something he couldn't eat. His heart was confused.

That day Kwon Taek Joo couldn't do anything even when he returned to headquarters. He was unable to receive calls and responded slowly. Anger and frustration reached their peak.

He was disappointed that he could not appear at the action location and he did not contact Zhenya. Kwon Taek Joo tried not to think about anything else but focused on work. But nothing is different.

Finally, Kwon Taek Joo succeeded in finding the target and quickly obtained the necessary information. But his mood didn't get better at all. He felt suffocated and frustrated because he had missed something important. The thoughts he had tried to suppress quickly returned, suffocating him.

Looking back, it was Kwon Taek Joo who was the cause of the argument. He made a promise to Zhenya only because he subjectively believed that he could complete the job smoothly on time. Until the schedule was delayed, he did not appease Zhenya but asked for another understanding. In the end, things got messy and he still put work first. It was natural for Zhenya to be angry, though there was a lot to be said about that bastard's violent reaction.

His mind thought over and over again countless times. The quilt was heavy but reason still clung to the petty excuse that Zhenya had also done wrong. Kwon Taek

Jop

didn't know what face to look at him with. He's also not used to apologizing.

Kwon Taek Joo took the night flight back ahead of schedule. He arrived in Korea at dawn. Until then there had been no contact from Zhenya. He couldn't sleep for many days because he was busy with work. He also couldn't close his eyes even on the plane with wandering thoughts. His whole body was exhausted, his mind just wanted to find a quiet place to lie down.

He didn't know if the emotional tug of war would last when he met Zhenya. Maybe there will be another argument. Just thinking about it made his head spin, but he still went to Zhenya's house.

Kwon Taek Joo rang the doorbell. There was no reaction inside. Zhenya is very sensitive when sleeping, he will definitely wake up. But no matter how much I waited, Zhenya was nowhere to be found. Finally, Kwon Taek Joo directly unlocked the door and entered.

Zhenya sat with his back against the headboard. I don't know if he just woke up or how long he's been like that. Even in the presence of Kwon Taek Joo, Zhenya remained motionless. Even when their eyes met, Zhenya didn't say a word. Kwon Taek Joo also couldn't find the right words to say

"....."

"....."

The two just looked at each other as if they were having a blind date, then Kwon Taek Joo suddenly crawled onto the bed. Zhenya watched him boldly rush into the seat next to him. Just like that, Kwon Taek Joo pulled the blanket up to his neck and fell asleep. Zhenya did not touch Kwon Taek Joo and did not say a word to him.

Kwon Taek Joo slept soundly all day. When he opened his eyes again, Zhenya was still sitting next to him. He did not hold a tablet, phone or book in his hand. Kwon Taek Joo wondered what Zhenya was doing alone while he was sleeping.

He opened his eyes but just lay still without moving. Kwon Taek Joo just stared blankly at Zhenya. First he had to say sorry but he couldn't open his mouth. The two of them should have resolved the problem through dialogue and agreed not to make the mistake again. In his mind, he had already decided what to do, but he couldn't say anything and just quietly licked his lips.

Time passed like that, and Zhenya spoke up to break the silence.

"Are you done sleeping yet?"

Kwon Taek Joo nodded silently. He didn't know why, but maybe that's what he should do right now. Soon, a huge shadow covered his face, a familiar scent crept in, his body gradually melted, his breath warm and

wet when his lips touched. He grabbed Zhenya's collar tightly and kissed him more passionately than ever.

Zhenya also hugged Kwon Taek Joo tenderly, then the two made love as if it would never end. People say it's not good to fight and resolve it with your body, but there's no faster or surer way for both of you. From the beginning, Zhenya doesn't even know how to self-reflect and is a master at justifying himself. Arguing to resolve conflicts with such a guy forever is impossible.

Kwon Taek Joo scratched behind his ear as he escaped his endless thoughts. Even if he dated and married someone other than Zhenya, he would still quarrel for the same reason. The problem will never be resolved unless Kwon Taek Joo himself leaves NIS. Because if you're in love, it's natural to want to be together. Who can take on someone who always prioritizes work over himself?

Dating is extremely tiring. At least that's the case with Kwon Taek Joo. But why did you start that annoying story? Did you always think that Zhenya was a monster so he would be different from normal people, that he would never feel alone.

Kwon Taek Joo did not have time to think carefully. When he decided to accept Zhenya, he didn't expect it to be this deep. This is a limited relationship 'until he gets bored and lets go'. But is it still like that now?

[This damn guy.]

Kwon Taek Joo exclaimed for no reason and then slapped his hand on the pillow, he pulled a thinner pillow and placed it on his face. Has he been drinking too much? His body sagged and then a feeling of lethargy flooded in. He curled up his body and fell asleep.

(For a second I forgot it was a flashback.)

## Chapter 5.13 – Side Story

Kwon Taek Joo dreamed again. The boy appeared again with light blond hair and blue eyes. He hesitantly looked at the child. Nothing particularly dangerous. There was also nothing in his small white had,

He felt relieved. At least it wasn't a nightmare like the previous times.

The child was so weak and fragile that it was unimaginable that he was the Zhenya of the present. Or really it has nothing to do with Zhenya. Maybe it's just an illusion coming from Kwon Taek Joo's subconscious.

The two looked at each other warily. Looking back, ever since that boy appeared, he felt infinite pity for Zhenya. He didn't know why that boy kept appearing in other people's dreams and complicating his mind.

[Yeah, kid. Why do you keep acting so cute?]

He didn't know if the boy spoke Korean or Russian. But it seems to have been properly communicated to the child. The boy didn't answer but just stared at him. Kwon Taek Joo is not good at dealing with children, because it is very rare for him to meet a child of that age. He didn't know how to say it so the child wouldn't be hurt, or whether he would understand what he said.

[It's annoying, so don't show up anymore.]

He said bluntly. Was that a mistake? There was water surrounding the eyes of the child who was biting his lip and whimpering. His blue eyes were swollen with tears. Ah, he didn't mean to make you cry.

The child choked up and turned away and started running. He didn't know why, but he thought he had to catch him. He should have chased this uninvited guest away, but he felt like he had done something really bad.

Just as he was about to rush after him, a pair of hands suddenly reached out from behind and held his shoulders tightly. His body was gently flipped over to the opposite side.

[...]

Taek Joo.

His consciousness was half awake and half asleep by the sweet call. Kwon Taek Joo is so used to the weight on his body and the feeling of hair brushing against his cheeks. He ran his hand through his flowing hair. He took that hand and pressed it to her soft lips. The huge mass of meat continuously stabbed below and pressed deep into the abdomen. Even that is a familiar feeling.

[Um..uhmm..]

Kwon Taek Joo moaned sweetly and hugged the existence that was pressing down on him. The body he once felt threatened by is now strong and safe. He felt like he was in a big cocoon when he was hugged.

Taek Joo.

An indescribable feeling of euphoria when that man lovingly called his name, happy for him, experiencing the climax of pleasure in him. Everyone in this world, and sometimes even Kwon Taek-joo himself, did not hesitate to call him a monster, but wasn't he just a weak creature longing for love and warmth.

[...Uhm, Zhenya.]

He groaned and called Zhenya. In an instant, the strange feeling spreading from deep in my stomach suddenly disappeared. Eyelids fluttered open.

[...?]

Kwon Taek Joo looked around bewilderedly. He fell asleep. The blanket was not covering his body and his clothes were still intact. Is Zhenya back?

He tried to search, but to no avail. Kwon Taek Joo is still alone in the quiet house. Zhenya hadn't come to wake him up, it must have been just a dream.

He sighed and stroked his face, but a heavy energy surged up from below. No way. Kwon Taek Joo examined his lower body. The front of his pants bulged as if about to burst.

How silly. He had been having strange dreams and it ended up like this. Has he been so dissatisfied with his desires lately?

Kwon Taek Joo was about to take a shower when the phone rang. It was a call from his mother.

[Hey, why are you only coming back now? Drink alcohol in moderation.]

As soon as Kwon Taek Joo unlocked the door and walked in, his mother's grumbling voice poured out. He wondered why his mother opened the front door, and she was even wearing a long dress. Looks like there's a guest coming to the house. A pair of shoes with a familiar size caught his eye as he unconsciously looked at the floor, suddenly, a stupid sigh rang out.

He passed his mother and quickly went inside, where Zhenya was sitting at the kitchen table drinking tea. The guy leaned back in his chair and smiled.

"Are you coming back now?"

Kwon Taek Joo was dizzy and had difficulty breathing. He made him so worried and now he's enjoying cake at someone else's house. He tried to believe that up until now the lack of contact was due to some unavoidable situation, but it seemed that was not the case. All 10 fingers, which he had feared would be broken, appeared unharmed.

"What..."

"Who did you go drinking with last night?"

Even as he was about to jump out and swear, Zhenya took a step ahead with a gentle tone like a passing word, then his eyes moved to the bowl in front of him where a slice of melon was lying on the fork. It was a

polite gesture, but he felt a threat approaching. If that guy didn't install a listening device on Kwon Taek Joo, then the source must definitely be his mother.

"Do you still understand Korean now?"

"It's understandable at a level."

Zhenya looked at his mother and smiled. Kwon Taek Joo's mother couldn't tell how dark he was and could only laugh along. She said, [Let's get more.] When she saw that the cup in front of him was empty and enthusiastically pointed to the coffee pot. Actually, my mother's hand and foot gestures are now at the international language level.

[Hey, why are you standing there in a daze? Don't go in and talk to the ambassador.]

Mom pushed Kwon Taek Joo on the back. He went to the kitchen table to pour some tea, opened the refrigerator and started looking for a suitable dessert.

There was no other way but to sit across from Zhenya, he stared at him while picking up a piece of apple from his bowl. Sometimes they say the fruit peel is rich in nutrients, but now they carefully cut it into a rabbit shape to entertain this kid. Without hesitation, he chewed the rabbit's head.

"It's been a long time since I drank with my junior. So what?"

(He is answering the question from earlier.)

"Did you sleep with that junior?"

Zhenya slightly folded his eyes and silently asked tentatively. He knew that face well. Laugh but not laugh. For the safety of innocent Yoon Jong Woo, he must explain clearly.

"This crazy guy. What a strange fantasy?"

"Strange fantasy? I don't have it. Taek Joo, what did you think was so strange?"

"Nothing? The fact that you drank with your junior all night? Or did you sleep with that guy?"

"What? I told you it wasn't true."

"So where did you come from?"

He opened his mouth and then closed it again. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't answer honestly. He went to the house that had no owner, hugged that person's pillow and slept until his younger brother stood up. If Zhenya knew, he would be proud of himself and laugh at him for a few days. Self-esteem doesn't allow that.

"Why do I have to report that to you?"

The guy who was staring shrugged his shoulders.

"If you don't want to talk, that's okay. There are many ways to find out."

Yoon Jong Woo has been drawn into gossip and is about to face dangerous things. No matter how much people live according to their own wishes, they must not cause trouble to others.

"I slept alone."

"Where were you?"

"No matter where I was, I slept alone. Don't touch innocent people."

"We will find out if it is innocent or not."

"Ah, I told you not to."

"I look forward to seeing you get angry. What would I do if you weren't here?"

"...As expected, it would be better for my life if this bastard disappeared."

Why is he worried about this bastard? He didn't think about what he did, couldn't find any sign of apology, and appeared so brazen that he didn't know where he came from.

[What are you two talking about that's so interesting?]

At that moment, his mother returned to the dining table. Kwon Taek Joo was wondering what she was doing all this time when a heavy tray was placed on the table. A box of tea passed down from generation to generation is placed on it. His mother always kept precious things in the decorative cabinet. Thinking back, the cup placed in front of Zhenya was also an object that his mother cherished very much.

What is that, a kid?

Kwon Taek Joo looked at his mother as if giving an objection. His mother ignored that look and introduced herself to Zhenya.

[Ambassador, please try this once. It's called Seungseol tea. It is green tea made from young shoots that grow in the snow in early spring.]

She carefully explained in a gentle tone. Even so, he couldn't understand. Sure enough, Zhenya looked at Kwon Taek Joo as if asking for an interpreter.

"It's expensive so don't waste it."

Zhenya laughed at the confusing translation. His mother also smiled and held out a cup. He looked obediently holding the bottom of the glass. How obnoxious. Even if it weren't, the little teacup was like a child's toy in Zhenya's hands.

[This is a great dessert to eat with it. I don't know if it fits your taste.]

Black rice cakes cut into bite-sized pieces are brought out, bean powder and honey are also added. Perhaps because it was strange, Zhenya tilted his head slightly.

"Marzipan..?"

(Because I didn't know what a marzipan was, I looked it up. It's apparently a ready-to-eat sweet treat traditionally found in confectionary shops across Europe.)

"No, rice cakes."

Kwon Taek Joo pointed his chin towards the plate of cake while Zhenya did not move and stared at the plate as if meeting a strange creature. Kwon Taek Joo quickly picked up a piece to try. It's tougher and firmer than the ones you buy from a regular store. For foreigners, the structure may not seem very suitable.

His mother hit him on the back and asked him why he took other people's food with his hands. During that time, Zhenya stuck the rice cake into his fork and put it in his mouth. His mother immediately turned her attention to him.

[How do you like it?]

"The taste when chewing..."

Zhenya chewed the rice cake slowly in his mouth and then clicked his tongue. His mother's eyes were full of expectation.

"Like your son's butt."

What, this bastard?

The moment Kwon Taek Joo was about to stand up in anger, his mother clapped her hands with a satisfied face.

(The time where I'm glad Taek Joo's mom doesn't know Russian.)

[Oh, you must really like it. Lucky. Let's eat more.]

Zhenya also looked proud when he saw his mother happy, crazy bastard.

[Come on, this is honey water. Finally, how much did you drink? It's only been a day and my face has already become unsightly.]

His mother clicked her tongue and put down the cup. She asked why he looked like that and criticized his loose hair and wrinkled clothes. Kwon Taek Joo sighed while drinking honey water. The overwhelming sweetness made him wince, even bitter medicine wasn't this difficult to drink.

[Drink it all, don't leave anything behind. The whole part sank below. This is good for your health.]

Kwon Taek Joo drank thick honey water under her mother's supervision. Even though he tried, his face still grimaced. He held his breath and swallowed, then suddenly there was a clicking sound. He looked over confused, Zhenya was operating on his phone with a happy face. "Don't do that" with the cup still in your hand, but the guy doesn't care. He just pressed the photo button repeatedly and then showed it to his mother. His mother tilted her head and laughed.

(Cute that they both take photos of each other.)

## Chapter 5.14 – Side Story

[Ahaha, even though he's grown up, he still looks like a child, right? Ah. The other day, while cleaning out the warehouse, I found an old album. Do you guys want to see it?]

Kwon Taek Joo almost stood up.

[Ah, why is that so? No need, mom.]

[What else? The Ambassador likes to see photos very much.]

Kwon Taek Joo tried to stop but was pushed aside. His mother stood up and went into the back room. Zhenya looked at him with curious eyes. Except for Kwon Taek Joo, everyone looked very happy.

He lightly kicked Zhenya's leg under the dining table. The guy looked straight into his eyes and asked in a low voice.

"What is up?"

"You said you'd be back soon, so why did it take 15 days?"

"Are you curious?"

Zhenya asked again as if surprised. Kwon Taek Joo was speechless. He wants to hear the reason so of course he will be curious.

"Because I don't know where you are and what you're doing when you suddenly disappear like that. I was very worried."

"Ah ha, is that why you sent messages and called like that?"

Zhenya continued.

"It's surprising because I didn't think you were the type of person to be that obsessed with your lover. Do you have separation anxiety disorder?"

"Who...!"

Kwon Taek Joo tried to argue but the past few days replayed in his mind. He went to the embassy and consulate residence to find out news about Zhenya. He did not hesitate to order Yoon Jong Woo to do something no different from a stalker. Is he haunted just because this bastard returned later than expected?

Impossible. Kwon Taek Joo tried to deny and defend.

"That's because I have too many enemies. I'm afraid you might have been kidnapped again."

Zhenya laughed. It was an undisguised mockery, but the mood seemed quite happy.

"Who do you think is in front of you?"

"That's why I'm crazy. Who are you? What happened to you? I wonder if it's the other way around."

Well, the opposite is also the problem.

He made a fuss. He doesn't want Zhenya to be in danger, nor does he want the opposite situation if Zhenya endangers others.

The guy listening laughed again.

"Taek Joo, you are the only person who cares for me in this world."

([], that makes me realize he doesn't really have anyone else to care about other than Taek Joo.)

Really? Suddenly disappearing to make others worry and then making a face that makes people feel uncomfortable. Kwon Taek Joo is dating someone like that.

[This is the album. Just looking at it, it looks very old, right?]

His mother returned soon after with the album. Looking at the old stains and scratches, it looks like it's been 20 or 30 years old. Kwon Taek Joo also saw the album for the first time. No, he wasn't interested enough to know if this was the first time or not.

Except for his mother, the rest of the family members are all dry men. He didn't even try to take good photos, let alone organize albums, so

recording family moments became his mother's responsibility. All the photos in Kwon Taek Joo's room are her work.

[Because it's a family album, in addition to Taek Joo's photos, there are also photos of other people.]

Zhenya smiled brightly and happily accepted the album. I'm not doing business right now, what's with that smile? It was an expression that even Kwon Taek Joo had never seen before. A very beautiful smile but also extremely conceited. His mother smiled at Zhenya without knowing the dark intentions in his mind.

He opened the album cover. First is the parents' wedding photos. The photo is over 40 years old. Zhenya looked intently at a young couple then raised his head and smiled gently at Kwon Taek Joo.

"Taek Joo, you look like your father."

"...Really."

[Everyone around him says he looks like his father. The Ambassador looks very similar, right?]

He nodded slightly. Zhenya still only speaks Russian and his mother only speaks Korean but they understand each other without any other hand gestures. Kwon Taek Joo felt insecure with an unnamed fear coming over him.

He stared at his father's photo and muttered to himself.

"If the genetics are like this, there's no need to worry anymore."

"What are you worried about?"

"Even if I give birth to a child without you knowing, it will be just like me."

What? Kwon Taek Joo frowned. He didn't know what the hell Zhenya was talking about. He definitely knew that the two of them couldn't have children together. So even if you have a child with someone else, it's okay?

"I mean, if you dare to do so."

Zhenya added, each word slowly. The saying has many meanings. With just that one word, many people's heads were blown off. But it was unreasonable that Kwon Taek Joo secretly felt relieved.

The next section is a family biography. From the moment his brother and Kwon Taek Joo were born to the big and small events in the house. Zhenya listened attentively and carefully examined each photo. Every time he discovered Kwon Taek Joo in there, he laughed like the sound of the wind blowing.

"So you like black beans."

"What beans? You were a cool kid."

"Are you kidding? You're as small as a fist."

"Ha, this self-centered brat. You're the one who's strangely tall."

Zhenya ignored Kwon Taek Joo's excuses and bowed his head to listen to the explanations that he could not understand from his mother. Neither of them even knew how much time had passed.

Not long after, Zhenya's eyes stopped at a certain photo. It was a photo from the day of the elementary school sports festival. Kwon Taek Joo, over 10 years old, is crying sadly with a dusty face. The knee and elbow were torn and bleeding profusely. Embarrassing memories came to mind. His mother excitedly chatted without knowing what her son was thinking.

[Ah, so cute, right? Was that time 10 or 11 years old? Since he was a baby, he hasn't cried that much, only whimpering a little when he's hungry or has a wet diaper. Thanks to that, I was able to raise two sons relatively easily. The adults around were worried that he was retarded, but luckily Taek Joo grew up strongly. Since childhood, he has liked to exercise, and his ambition to win is also very big. Maybe in the photo he's crying because he lost.]

[Ah, mom. Why do you say such things...]

[Look at this. It was chosen to represent the relay race and practiced very hard every morning and evening. But why did he fight with the person running in front that day and both fell so violently? The people

running behind all caught up... I thought he was going to give up. From a distance, it is clear that a piece of skin is missing from the chin. But not. He jumped up, continued running and began to catch up with everyone one by one. Of course, he didn't get first place. There were times when he fell while running, but he didn't give up and tried his best, so that's okay. Even though the 3rd class comforter was good enough, he still sobbed like it was a sad thing. You definitely have to get first place to accept it, right? If you don't do it, don't do it, but if you do it, you have to do it.]

Zhenya stared at Kwon Taek Joo and smiled, looking like he understood the whole story while not knowing how to write even the letter ABC in half.

His mother's revelations did not end there.

[And when? I wonder if there is homework in Russia? In Korea, they force them to learn this and that because they're afraid the kids will play during the vacation. Among them is an exercise on making a glider. Taek Joo refused his brother's help and did it alone, but the day before school started, his cousin came to visit and ruined it. I couldn't do it again, so I asked the teacher for sympathy, but it didn't help. That day, he spent the whole night sobbing and doing it again. Let's see.]

[Mom, stop it. It's shameful.]

[What? It's fun.]

His mother laughed and said to Zhenya, [Isn't that so, Ambassador?] This time he also nodded slowly. He looked at his mother, gave a strange smile and then turned to look at Kwon Taek Joo.

"Taek Joo, it would be better if you were like this little woman. Isn't it cute how she talks non-stop and smiles a lot?"

"Sorry for not being cute. Also, don't casually say cute things to adults. It's disrespectful, boy."

"I don't understand why you get angry so easily, but it's fun."

He didn't know if it was Zhenya trying to soothe him, but why did those words make him feel itchy? There must be something in his body that is

broken.

Zhenya took out his phone and took a few photos of Kwon Taek Joo's childhood. His mother watched in amusement while he tried to use violence to cover the album, [Stop it], she hit and stopped Kwon Taek Joo.

[The Ambassador is watching, why are you being so rude?]

[No, mom, ah...]

His heart felt like it was about to explode because the mother didn't understand anything about Zhenya but only focused on blaming Kwon Taek Joo and scolding him.

[When he was little, he was very obedient and cute, but since he grew up, he's become stubborn like this... I don't have any great wishes. Now if he flies out of the nest, gets married and lives a happy life, I have no regrets anymore. But it seems like he hasn't met anyone, even when asked to go on a blind date, he refused and said he didn't like it.]

His mother clicked her tongue. He quietly looked into Zhenya's eyes. He tilted his head to look at Kwon Taek Joo, seemingly expecting an interpreter. Of course it's impossible to tell him.

These days, his mother often brings up the topic of marriage. On the days when Kwon Taek Joo comes home, she often pushes someone's photo and asks him to go on a blind date. When he continued to be indifferent, she asked if there were any girls he was seeing and asked to meet. He couldn't answer that there was a guy he was dating. He also had nothing to say when his mother said she was jealous of her friends who were living with her grandchildren.

It's not like Kwon Taek Joo was indulged in romantic thoughts that he would live like this with Zhenya all his life. If he broke up with him, he will never be involved with another man again. But until now, he absolutely could not imagine that ending.

This time too, Kwon Taek Joo answered with the excuse he often gives when mentioning marriage.

[Mom, how can I get married when I'm busy with work? No woman likes that.]

[Are you going to work until you die? There's no problem with living a little leisurely. Who are you that only knows how to work? Please get married and have children for me. If you have free time, travel and see the world.]

[That's when everything goes well. Mom has raised me alone all her life. Mom has almost completed the task. How can I tell someone else to do such a difficult job? If you love that person, you can't do that.]

His mother rolled her eyes again.

Kwon Taek Joo has never pictured married life. He never held that dream even vaguely and never harbored any romance. He just wondered if he would continue to work and live as he did now. Family is more likely to become an obstacle or weakness at work. Just like he loves his mother but her worries make him feel pressured.

For Kwon Taek Joo, passion for work and attachment to loved ones are values that he cannot undertake at the same time. Each of them hung on either side of the scale and kept shaking his mind, making it difficult for him to keep his balance, so he could not hastily put more weight on either side.

His mother shook her head disapprovingly then turned to look at Zhenya. A mischievous smile appeared on his face.

[Are you married, Ambassador? A young man with a good job, talented, ethical and even handsome. All the things girls love. Are you dating anyone?]

[Oh my god, mom, why do you ask that?]

[I was curious so I asked. If you don't have a lover, I can introduce you to a good girl.]

His mother kept asking despite Kwon Taek Joo's dissuasion. While she kept asking something, Zhenya stared at Kwon Taek Joo with a puzzled expression.

"What are you asking?"

"Nothing."

"What are you waiting for? What's wrong?"

"It's just nonsense so just nod your head and it's okay."

Zhenya looked skeptical. Anyway, this kid never trusts anyone. He ignored the guy's stare and looked around.

[He's seeing someone so don't ask anymore.]

[Oh, really? Are they both Russian? So that girl also came to Korea? If two people live separately, they will miss each other and be very lonely.]

[They will know how to handle it themselves.]

[No, but what about him? You should care.]

Being scolded for no reason. He always tried to be careful in front of his mother, but he couldn't do anything about her uniquely blunt tone.

Kwon Taek Joo drank warm honey water and hummed, [Yes, yes, yes.]

Even without any response from Zhenya, the mother continued the one-sided conversation.

[Why don't you say anything at home? People say that if you have the opportunity to go abroad, you should get married early.]

[...Probably not.]

If the Bogdanov family knew about Kwon Taek Joo's existence, they would try to get rid of him somehow, let alone marry him. On the contrary, it is surprising that he has remained unharmed so far. Does that side really not care about Zhenya? He had heard that rich people often get married early, but perhaps for that guy this wouldn't be a problem.

(Personally, I think that Zhenya doesn't care about marriage. Because If he did, he and Taek Joo would have been married already. And he never said anything about it.)

Kwon Taek Joo was immersed in random thoughts when his mother suddenly began to investigate the household registration.

[Thinking back, what is your family like, Ambassador? Is the Ambassador an only child?]

[Why?]

[Why can't Mom ask?]

[He has two brothers and a sister.]

[Your family must be really happy.]

Kwon Taek Joo was the one to answer, but his mother looked at Zhenya and nodded.

[Are your parents still alive?]

He couldn't immediately answer the next question. Kwon Taek Joo knows Zhenya's father, Vissarion, but he knows nothing about his mother. After a long while, he passed his mother's question to Zhenya, who had only been watching their conversation.

"My mother asked if your parents are still alive?"

"Dad is still alive."

Kwon Taek Joo was about to translate immediately, but he looked at Zhenya. If so, has his mother passed away? Thinking back, even though he knew all about the Bogdanov family history, he still couldn't know the circumstances inside. In particular, he did not remember finding any information regarding Zhenya's mother. He also never talked about himself.

"Is your mother dead?"

"It's been a long time."

Zhenya replied nonchalantly. In how long? 5 years? 10 years? Or when he was very young? It seems like you don't know much about this guy. What was his childhood like, did he go to school properly or how did he go through school? Kwon Taek Joo was sure that he had no friends, but

he didn't even know if Zhenya had ever dated. He never asked. Have you been too careless?

Maybe that's why he has gone through the past 15 unprecedently difficult days. Since Zhenya cut off contact, he didn't know where to find out about him. If it were the opposite situation then Zhenya would somehow find Kwon Taek Joo. The more you know about someone, the easier it is to figure out their scope of activities. The fact that Zhenya knows everything about him inside and out and he doesn't, makes his insides even more complicated.

A moment later, Zhenya asked.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"...Nothing."

Kwon Taek Joo quietly turned away. He felt a bit of guilt as if he had done something wrong. He took it for granted that Zhenya was by his side and he didn't seek to know more about him. Zhenya always waited for him, but he wanted to go crazy waiting for him for only 15 days.

While Kwon Taek Joo was still thinking, his mother and Zhenya were looking at another photo. It was the only family photo taken before his father passed away. Nearly 20 years have passed, and the golden light on it has faded.

[This person is Taek Joo hyung. This is the children's father. My family has no sisters, so when I got married, I wanted to give birth and raise a daughter. Fate is cruel. Except for me, there were only men, so I didn't know how gloomy it was in the house. When I was young, my children lived quietly because their father was strict, so the family was like a temple. I don't know if you know, but Taek Joo's father and older brother were soldiers. Not all soldiers are like that, but father and son are very quiet and straightforward. Actually, Taek Joo also inherited that blood, so he is also very cold. But after his father and brother passed away, he became very obedient. I wonder if he's trying to do all three because he's worried that I'll be lonely.]

The mother's chattering voice suddenly choked up when she saw the photo of her brother's appointment ceremony. She quickly pulled out a

tissue to wipe her tears as the remaining tears flowed down her cheeks.

[Oh no. Sorry, Ambassador.]

Zhenya slightly raised his eyebrows. There was a time when Kwon Taek Joo confided a family matter, so Zhenya also knew a little bit, but he still seemed quite surprised by the unexpected situation. The mother shed tears in front of the guests, looking confused. She kept wiping her tears, [Mom, it's okay.] He comforted his mother and winked down the hallway at Zhenya.

"Hey, that's no good. Just come back another day."

"...No matter what, that's the way it is."

Zhenya shrugged. He stood up and Kwon Taek Joo also stood up immediately.

[Mom, the ambassador is about to return. I'll see him off and then come back.]

[Yeah, don't bother, just go. Sorry ambassador. Be careful.]

Mom apologized to Zhenya and then rushed to the bathroom. Soon there was the sound of water on the sink. Kwon Taek Joo left the house with a heavy heart.

## Chapter 5.15 – Side Story

Two people stood next to each other waiting for the elevator. A gaze was clearly falling next to Kwon Taek Joo. He turned his head and their eyes immediately met. Zhenya didn't care about what just happened and was just looking at him intently. Kwon Taek Joo knew that he wanted to kiss him even though he didn't do anything. I can't allow it either because this place is really not suitable.

He turned his head toward the elevator again.

"Just what did you do to come back now? You still haven't answered."

"Just a few miscellaneous things."

"What happened?"

Kwon Taek Joo asked. Zhenya raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"Shouldn't you know?"

"I don't."

The guy burst out laughing, seemingly laughing at his squirming, and also looking very happy about it. The elevator has arrived. Kwon Taek Joo glared at Zhenya dissatisfied and walked in first. He also swayed and leisurely followed.

"I came back to talk about the engagement."

As soon as the door closed completely, Zhenya suddenly confessed. Kwon Taek Joo heard it clearly but he couldn't absorb it right away.

"...Engagement? Who?"

"Let's see, who is it?"

Zhenya replied indifferently. He is also 30 years old this year. The reason the children of tycoons marry early is because of the harmony between wealth and status. That is not just a unique characteristic of

Korean society. If the other party is the Bogdanov family, there will be many families willing to get married. Since Zhenya and Olga were the only ones in the Bogdanov family who were not married, their marriage must have been a hot issue. For those who only wanted to expand their power, Zhenya's temperament was not a consideration.

So what? Do you refuse? Zhenya is quite good at communication, so it is possible that he has already met his match, and perhaps the relationship has developed enough to lead to marriage. It would be unreasonable if he was in a relationship but the other person was someone who refused to come out. Or he thinks that marriage and dating are two separate things.

What happened in Russia during the 15 days of loss of contact? If Kwon Taek Joo asked him openly, Zhenya would definitely answer, but for some reason he hesitated. He was very curious, and although he was worried, he still did not ask because his false pride still lingered within him.

It's strange. Kwon Taek Joo hoped that one day Zhenya would feel bored and let go. He didn't expect loyalty or pure love from him, but when this happened, he really didn't feel right.

"I'm old enough to get engaged."

Zhenya stared at the elevator control panel and muttered nonchalantly. His indifferent attitude made him restless. A fire seemed to burn in my heart from somewhere.

Kwon Taek Joo smiled lightly.

"I'm curious who would marry someone like you."

The saying has a bit of sincerity. Zhenya's wife and children. He had never been able to draw that picture, he had failed many times even to imagine it, but Zhenya spoke up again.

"Don't think about anything. Because nothing will change."

"What the hell are you talking about? I have no intention of getting involved with a married man. I already said it. My goal is to live quietly and then die neatly. I don't like political drama."

Kwon Taek Joo announced his stance. It doesn't seem right to be angry at the person who just betrothed her to Zhenya, because after all, Kwon Taek Joo himself couldn't have officially promised to marry Zhenya like that.

Unlike Zhenya, he cannot follow him anywhere and stay by his side. It's selfish, but he has no intention of abandoning his mother and his job. Then he should at least let Zhenya go, but the more he tried to give up, the more his emotions and reason became mixed up. He also doesn't know what the hell Kwon Taek Joo himself wants.

The elevator quickly reaches the basement parking lot. The sides of Zhenya's Bugatti are empty. Previously, parking violation stickers were posted everywhere, but now he can't find them anymore. It seems his mother has made arrangements with the management office. Zhenya can come see his mother even without Kwon Taek Joo and his mother was also used to welcoming a guy like that. That's how he gradually and surely infiltrated his daily life. Can he go back to the way he was before?

(Damn, already thinking about the future without Zhenya.)

Kwon Taek Joo hesitated in front of the car without saying goodbye. There are still many things he wants to ask. He also wants to ask why he makes everyone so worried.

However, there are so many mixed thoughts and emotions that it is difficult to express them in words. What can I say to Zhenya when he himself still cannot organize his mind.

All that aside, Kwon Taek Joo wanted to be with him today. But he still has to pay attention to his mother. For no other reason, his mother cried when talking about his father and brother, and he could not bear to leave her alone.

"Let's go home."

"It's not like you don't know that I'm mama's boy."

Is it because you are closer to your mother? Zhenya today is not as stubborn as usual. But he couldn't ignore his speaking attitude.

"Yeah, yeah."

Zhenya suddenly grabbed his hand, pulled him back and kissed him. He sweetly sucked Kwon Taek Joo's lips, making a gentle clicking sound. Zhenya used his large hand to wrap around Kwon Taek Joo's face, gently pulling his slightly raised upper lip and then tilting his head so that it completely met his lips. He sucked Kwon Taek Joo's tongue and caressed his cheek like a child with his thumb.

Is it because it's been so long? Or because he's afraid someone will find out? For some reason, he felt the hairs all over his body stand up.

The two of them rubbed their soft tongues and mingled their breaths. Sweet saliva overflowed. Zhenya smiled at Kwon Taek Joo, who silently accepted the kiss even in public. That itchy breath spread across his lips. Zhenya pressed his lips tightly against Kwon Taek Joo's obedient lips and then slowly pulled away.

Zhenya immersed himself in the lingering aftertaste of the kiss and then slowly rolled his blue eyes down. The bottom hem of the shirt is lifted up. Realizing the direction of his gaze, Kwon Taek Joo quickly withdrew his hand.

"Taek Joo. You seem regretful, don't you?"

Zhenya tilted his head again and pressed his lips to Kwon Taek Joo's ear. Hot skin gently rubbed against each other.

"Has your body been deprived lately?"

He asked as he slowly lowered his lips from his ear to his neck. Kwon Taek Joo's breathing gradually became difficult.

"If it's urgent, you can do it in the car."

Kwon Taek Joo pushed the person who was whispering away. He smirked as if he knew that and then buried his head in Kwon Taek Joo's hair, taking a deep breath as if to confirm his body odor.

"Go now."

When Kwon Taek Joo blankly showed a strange expression, Zhenya just smiled, it was beyond words.

"Go upstairs. Next time you will take back what you said today."

Sending his deep condolences to the future Kwon Taek Joo, he sent Zhenya back.

"Go, quickly."

Zhenya was pushed into the driver's seat. The car started and rolled away.

Kwon Taek Joo stood aside and watched him leave. The Bugatti was gliding towards the exit when it suddenly stopped. Did he forget something? The car stood there for a long time without moving. Suddenly, the phone in his pocket rang. The caller was definitely that guy.

"What's up? What is up?"

"Taek Joo. Do you want me to come home?"

"Why are you asking again?"

"If you keep staring at me like a starved puppy like that, my heart will be moved. Do you want me to pick it up and feed it milk until it's full?"

"This crazy guy."

Kwon Taek Joo raised his middle finger as if Zhenya could see. Even though he immediately turned off the phone, it seemed like he could still hear his cheerful laughter. Finally, Kwon Taek Joo turned back first and went to the elevator. When he is with Zhenya, he always has all kinds of emotions.

Standing in front of the main door, he calmed down, took a deep breath and opened the door. His mother had just come out and was packing up the dishes. Her originally not tall figure now looked even smaller.

He quietly approached and hugged her from behind. His mother asked why and grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's arm.

[I just suddenly remembered it when I saw the photo, it's not usually like that.]

He nodded without saying anything. His mother patted Kwon Taek Joo's arm.

[I'm okay, son.]

[Mm.]

He gently rubbed his cheek against the back of her head and hugged her tighter.

Zhenya entered the house and stopped. He glanced inside as if he had discovered something. There were no signs or traces of other people. Everything

remained the same when the light is turned on.

He strode into the bathroom and opened the door. The bathroom is dry with no moisture, not a single hair on the floor and the toiletries are in the right place. He turned around and looked at the kitchen and living room respectively. All the furniture and appliances were no different from when he left the house, but in the refrigerator there was a box that he had never seen before.

Zhenya went straight to the bedroom. Even the wide bed and the sheets on it pretended like nothing happened. It seemed like this was his skill in erasing traces after spending so long in life as a spy.

But he couldn't completely hide his body odor. It seemed like he tried his best to bathe and steam with the same product as Zhenya, but the scent of Kwon Taek Joo still lingered in the air. It was so gentle that he probably didn't even know it.

"So where did you come from?"

"Why do I have to report that to you?"

Zhenya's lips drew an arc. Kwon Taek Joo's confused face appeared in his mind.

"If you don't want to talk, that's okay. There are many ways to find out."

"I slept alone"

"Where are you?"

"No matter where I was, I slept alone."

He had no idea that his tail had been stepped on and still persistently built up his pride.

Zhenya sat down on the bed. The mattress shook slightly. Kwon Taek Joo's body smell is as rich as an illusion. He picked up a nearby pillow and buried his head in it.

"Ha... Taek Joo."

He burst out laughing like he couldn't stop. If Kwon Taek Joo had stayed here like this, he would have been very anxious but he still didn't know how to honestly say that he had been waiting. Suddenly Zhenya remembered Kwon Taek joo watching his car as it left. He felt like he couldn't bear it any longer.

Zhenya laid down and buried his head in the pillow. His eyes closed on their own. Breathing deeply, slowly and sweetly, as if he were finally home.

## Chapter 5.16 – Side Story

"....?"

Zhenya turned over and woke up vaguely, because there was a shadow looming over his face. It seemed like someone was sitting next to the bed. Despite the intruder's sudden appearance, the body was not yet ready to fight. On the contrary, it is still gently relaxing. Even in the darkness, that silhouette still felt familiar.

When he lifted his eyelids, it was Kwon Taek Joo. Zhenya never slept deeply and would wake up immediately because he was especially sensitive, but today Zhenya didn't even know he was here. Was it because he had completely adapted to being in his space, or had he instinctively realized that the situation was absolutely safe.

Kwon Taek Joo sat in the chair next to the bed and observed Zhenya. He was wearing a hoodie as if he came from home. The hood was pulled over his head and both his hands were stuffed into his front pockets. Zhenya didn't know when or why he was in that position.

"Someone openly entered the bedroom but I still didn't wake up. What if you were an assassin?"

"I can tell the difference at that size."

"That's really funny."

He grumbled then suddenly stood up, propped himself up on his hands and climbed onto the bed. Zhenya stroked the back of Kwon Taek Joo's thighs while quietly watching him climb on top of him.

"Actually, my mission in Russia is still continuing, and what if the search for 'Anastasia' is just a ruse, and the real target is you?"

"Then let's die."

Zhenya replied while smiling. He didn't know when Kwon Taek Joo's hand reaching up to his hip gained strength and grabbed his firm butt

tightly.

"Taek Joo, take action."

Zhenya spoke softly then gently pulled Kwon Taek Joo's arm. He put his hand under the hood to cover his cold ear and kissed it. Kwon Taek Joo also did not hesitate to return the kiss.

Zhenya just sucked on his plump lower lip, then let go, then bit and sucked again, but a soft tongue gently came out. He thought it was an illusion but the tongue was pushed inside. Zhenya tried to touch it with the tip of his tongue, but the other tongue quickly wrapped around his tongue as if waiting for a long time, the sound of the kiss made his mouth gradually heat up.

Zhenya removed his lips for a moment and then asked.

"What's wrong?"

He looked curiously at Kwon Taek Joo. Did something happen while he wasn't there? Why did he suddenly show this rare positivity with physical touch today?

Zhenya groped for Kwon Taek Joo's lips again. He pressed his lips against his again and then pulled away, many times. Neither the obvious body heat nor the close touches were a dream.

"Why do you say you have to stay home with your mother?"

Zhenya teased and asked if he had come to drink milk. If it was normal, he would be frowning or having a serious face, but today's Kwon Taek Joo didn't react like that. There is definitely something different from every other day.

He blinked slowly to understand the situation. Long eyelashes flutter in transparent eyes. Kwon Taek Joo stared at him then slowly lowered his face. Zhenya closed his eyes waiting for the kiss but Kwon Taek Joo didn't bite his lips but the tip of his nose.

Zhenya laughed foolishly.

"Taek Joo?"

"Yes?"

"What's wrong? Suddenly you act as if you want to tear a child apart."

"It's you expressing that..."

"Are you lonely? To the point of finding your bed alone?"

Kwon Taek Joo, who had been keeping one hand in his pocket until then, took out something and threw it forward. The small box hit Zhenya's shoulder and bounced slightly. It's a box of condoms.

"I thought about whether I should sleep or not, but it piled up so much that I couldn't sleep."

"Ha?"

(I'm guessing it's said like a question.)

"Before you become a married man, I have to enjoy it all."

Kwon Taek Joo pretended not to care but it seemed his little head full of thoughts finally knew what he wanted. He smiled then grabbed Zhenya's collar, touched his lips and kissed him roughly.

A tickling feeling rose from his chest because Zhenya couldn't be honest with him. The corners of Zhenya's mouth kept curling up even though his lips were being bitten and tingling.

Not knowing how much he misunderstood the engagement story, Zhenya decided to let it go.

"Don't force me to think differently. Your mind is very complicated right now."

Kwon Taek Joo gasped after the biting kiss on Zhenya. He smiled gently then pulled off the annoying hood and smoothed his thick, tangled hair. The long and smooth neck bent down again. Without hesitation, he opened his mouth and bit Zhenya's warm skin.

[Ugh... uh...]

The two opened thighs trembled, Kwon Taek Joo could clearly see how much strength he was trying to hold and how many muscles were

twisting together. Zhenya slowly twisted three fingers to widen the circumference of the hole, pressing firmly inside and stroking the soft exterior with his thumb. Zhenya turned his wrist in the opposite direction and kneaded his soft balls. Then he put his mouth out and started sucking in. One side of the balloon is continuously sucked into the mouth and then out again. The sensitive area rubbing against the teeth and tongue stimulates arousal. His erect penis was also extremely stimulated by Zhenya's forehead and smooth hair.

[Ahh, um...]

Kwon Taek Joo used his foot to push Zhenya's shoulder as if to tell him to stop. But the guy kept his position without moving. Looking down at Zhenya lying between his legs, his whole body tensed. The meat pillar standing alone also shook. Blood rushed down, making the glans red. Feeling frustrated, Kwon Taek Joo reached out to grab it.

But Zhenya was one step ahead and grabbed his trembling hand. The guy licked from the bottom up, then gently sucked on the glans and sucked. Just with that, Kwon Taek Joo's back jumped up. The glans covered with saliva clearly showed anticipation.

Zhenya fixed Kwon Taek Joo's thighs with his elbows and holding his penis firmly with both hands, he gently spread him with his two thumbs. The gel inside spilled out, Zhenya stared at it and then stuck out his tongue to lick the hole.

[Uhm, Uhm....! Uhm, ah, ah...!]

It seemed like an electric current ran through Kwon Taek Joo's body for a moment. His knees burned, and his fingers dug down and tore the poor bedsheets.

Zhenya persisted in licking and sucking the hole. Fluid flows out like water from the tip of the penis. Kwon Taek Joo's resistance also became stronger. The lower half of his body was being pressed down, his upper body jumped up and frantically pushed Zhenya's head away. Once again, Zhenya licked the entire glans, sucked it firmly and then let go. As soon as he was released, Kwon Taek Joo's limbs hung down, his chest heaved and his breathing was heavy.

Zhenya easily removed the hand holding his hair and then intertwined his hands with his fingers, which were trembling from the warmth that could not be dissipated.

"Taek Joo, you said you wanted to cry. Why do you want to stop?"

"Ha, ha, ah, when did I say that, you bastard?"

"Look. You always insist first and then pretend to be innocent."

Zhenya frowned and reached for the drawer next to the bed. A pair of leather handcuffs and a long thin piece of silicone appeared on his hand. These are things Kwon Taek Joo has never seen before.

(Zhenya is pulling out the most random stuff, just like that outfit he wanted Taek Joo to wear.)

"If you don't tell the truth, you'll be bullied until you confess."

Kwon Taek Joo's wrist was easily controlled.

"What are you doing? Take this off!"

"When will you be honest?"

Zhenya set the conditions and then slowly touched Kwon Taek Joo's body with both hands, his pinky finger gently pressed Kwon Taek Joo's nipples and then brushed over it. His whole chest trembled slightly all the way to his waist. Zhenya's hand continued to slide across his stomach and down his thigh, both thumbs stroking back up the inside of his soft thigh and then resting on his groin. When the entire penis was completely in his large hands, Kwon Taek Joo shivered slightly.

"I was thinking before about what it would be like to tie you up and investigate like this. What is your true identity, who sent you and what do you intend to do? I was planning to ask every part of your body. If I fail to trick you, I will definitely do it. People have strong self-preservation instincts, so if the pain is too much, they will become honest."

"It's good now that those thoughts have come true," Zhenya whispered while stroking Kwon Taek Joo's penis and occasionally placing kisses. Then he held the glans aside to open the small hole in the front. The

pinkish red hole was drenched in fluid and convulsing saliva. Zhenya watched with interest and then picked up the gel- covered silicone pad. He placed the thin tip like a cotton swab into the hole and squeezed gently. Kwon Taek Joo's whole body twitched nervously as if he was about to be penetrated. His head tilted back as Zhenya pushed the round tip into the hole.

[Ah ha... Ugh...ugh...]

Zhenya held his trembling penis upright and stroked it with his thumb to soothe it. Even so, he gently twisted the silicone piece and pushed it into the hole little by little. The inserter sealed the tight entrance, slid over the gel momentarily and penetrated downward. Kwon Taek Joo's molars clenched tightly, his body also trembled violently.

[Haa, ahh]

"Taek Joo."

Zhenya hugged his body that was wavering between pleasure and pain, biting Kwon Taek Joo's stomach, sides and chest. The tooth marks left behind clearly cause burning pain everywhere, but on the contrary, the pain in the genitals is greatly reduced.

Zhenya cupped Kwon Taek Joo's bulging breasts and gently poked the insert that had been inserted in the front. When he sucked hard on the nipple, Kwon Taek Joo gasped.

"Geuh... umh! ahhh!"

The saliva he couldn't swallow left his mouth as he groaned. Bright eyes quickly lose their sharpness and fade.

Every time the stimulation point scratches inside, the restlessness suddenly increases. It hurt and tingled

so much that he couldn't breathe. Kwon Taek Joo wanted to cum quickly.

But Zhenya did not leave Kwon Taek Joo alone. After releasing all of Kwon Taek Joo's power and taking a deep breath, he completely pushed the insertion device inside. The stimulation point of the inserted device causes the base of the penis to swell. His entire pelvis roared and the discomfort quickly spread down his thighs.

"Ha ha, ugh, take it out... take it out..."

Kwon Taek Joo struggled. He shook his shoulders vigorously and turned his head to the side. Zhenya held Kwon Taek Joo's face and forced him to look straight ahead. His eyes and ears were red with lust. Tears seemed about to fall from his eyes. Zhenya's lips drew a long arc, and the pupils of his blue eyes widened.

Kwon Taek Joo frowned as if predicting the impending tragedy. As always, Zhenya lifted his legs up to his chest and lay on top of his body. Blood quickly rushed to Kwon Taek Joo's completely covered face. Zhenya watched as Kwon Taek Joo moaned and then rubbed his huge muscle against the hole he had loosened. Even though Kwon Taek Joo avoided looking at him, Zhenya looked at him with passionate eyes. His eyes seemed to be both blaming and pleading in a bewitching way.

"Haaaa, Taek Joo."

[Haa, ugh.]

Zhenya breathed heavily and pushed the penis that was lying at the entrance. The hole opened with difficulty and began to take in the thick mass of flesh. Halfway through, it bit so hard that it felt like the skin was about to peel off. Kwon Taek Joo's eyes widened a few times.

"You must be very hungry, right?"

Zhenya frowned at the cramped feeling. After catching his breath for a moment, he rushed down immediately. Kwon Taek Joo groaned and shook his head. Maybe it was an illusion, it seemed like the insertion device was blocking the hole in the front that slightly rose and then lowered. When Kwon Taek Joo curiously touched the exposed part, his whole penis visibly trembled. He pushed Zhenya with his whole body, the stimulation points of the bumpy insertion device gave a clear

feeling that there was a foreign object inside, as if he could pull it out without touching it. A strange curiosity arose.

If it were any other time, Zhenya would deliberately avoid sensitive points and continue to tease Kwon Taek Joo. The night is still long and there is no rush.

But after a long time of trying to enjoy a different kind of lovemaking, even the patience that was lacking was gone. Greed instinctively raised its head violently.

Zhenya deliberately held his stomach tightly, causing Kwon Taek Joo's penis to be completely pressed between the two and then moved his lower body.

[Ha, ahh!]

Kwon Taek Joo's entire body was still shaking, the already sensitive flesh was more stimulated by both abdominal muscles. His stomach was slightly wet with fluids oozing from his column of flesh. Zhenya pretended to mourn and then clicked his tongue.

"You're exhausting yourself. Wouldn't it be better to cry out loud once?"

Zhenya smirked and suddenly hit a certain point. Kwon Taek Joo's whole stomach growled. His limbs were stiff and shaking.

[Haha...!?]

Kwon Taek Joo's face was worried as if predicting danger could fall at any time. Zhenya looked straight at him and continued poking in the same place. Every time his penis passed by, the burning feeling gathered in one place and spread out in all directions like an electric current. Fingers, toes, hairline, all parts are numb.

"Oh, ah... I want to shoot."

"Then shoot."

"This crazy guy, how could it be... Ahhh!"

Zhenya tightly closed his mouth that was spouting curses against evil. He lowered his lips and lifted Kwon Taek Joo's lower body even higher.

Zhenya intended to put his tongue inside but his lips accidentally parted. He continuously kissed Kwon Taek Joo's lips and cheeks and then repeated the strong pounding of skin touching.

[Yeah, ugh... hah, ah, uhhh...!]

The only thing Kwon Taek Joo can do is resign. The deeper the thrust, the clearer the moaning. He tried to grit his teeth and endure, but his head kept curling up because the stimulation was too strong. The breath caught in his lungs and then burst out.

Zhenya pushed back more, the white gel stuck to the surface of the penis. It looked like the inner wall had been ground into a mold and gradually compressed into the shape of the guy's penis. It's a feeling Kwon Taek Joo has experienced many times but has never gotten used to.

No matter how hard he tried to defend himself, the inside was still violently opened and the meat was tightly sucked.

[Augh, ah, uhm, ugh, uhm...!]

Zhenya suddenly stopped thrusting. A portion of the gel extended out of his penis then broke and stuck to the side of Kwon Taek Joo's buttocks. He groaned with his body trembling. Kwon Taek Joo stammered and looked down with wet eyes.

[Zhenya...]

He urgently called Zhenya in a breathless voice. Is there any more joy than that? He happily rushed towards Kwon Taek Joo.

[Out, uhmm, ughhhhhhh...!]

"Ugh, uh, Taek Joo..."

Zhenya slammed his penis inside, writhing and choking on affection. Kwon Taek Joo also trembled with excitement. His mind was dizzy as if he had been electrocuted. Zhenya whispered Kwon Taek Joo's name and kissed wherever his lips touched. Kwon Taek Joo's sweaty skin gave rise to goosebumps. When Zhenya stuck his tongue in his ear, Kwon Taek

Joo groaned tiredly. At the same time, Zhenya's lower abdomen also became wet.

"...Hurry up."

Kwon Taek Joo gasped and rubbed his forehead against Zhenya's shoulder. He removed the handcuffs while rubbing his warm ears with his lips. Kwon Taek Joo hit his shoulder but Zhenya's face showed excitement. Even when Kwon Taek Joo pushed hard with his foot, Zhenya obediently backed away. However, Zhenya did not allow him to ejaculate.

Kwon Taek Joo was pulled by his ankle, his body helplessly slid down. Zhenya started at the ankle bone and bit down his calf, went over his knee and bit his thigh. The tickling feeling made Kwon Taek Joo uncomfortable. Zhenya paid no attention and continued to nibble on the inside of his thighs and then suck on the soft flesh between his legs. Kwon Taek Joo's penis, which was drooping down, now stood up. There was semen or something leaking out of the hole. The inserter is also pushed out a bit.

[...Uhm.]

Kwon Taek Joo was startled when Zhenya started to pull it out. His urethra spasmed. Zhenya caressed his glans while stroking and soothing his entire penis. Again and again, Zhenya gently pressed his tongue against the hole and carefully pulled out the lubricant-filled inserter. Kwon Taek Joo felt his back heat up every time the stimulation points were brushed out. When the insertion falls out, semen is blocked from erupting.

Kwon Taek Joo covered his face with his hands and cursed. Zhenya stroked his struggling penis and continuously kissed the back of his hand until Kwon Taek-Joo stubbornly gave up and dropped his hand to accept his kiss.

Kwon Taek Joo suddenly opened his eyes. Vision gradually becomes clearer. Did he faint again? The pillow seemed to have also collapsed, how long had he been lying like that? His chest and stomach were completely pressed against the bed. His lungs were also compressed.

Kwon Taek Joo turned over and lay back, feeling like every muscle in his body was screaming.

[Ah... I'll die.]

Even the moans were drowned out miserably. Really. Shouldn't have provoked that guy in the first place. He was tormented by Zhenya all night and regretted what he said. He tried to withdraw midway but there was no way Zhenya would agree. Kwon Taek Joo's body seemed to be folded in many different ways like going to physical therapy.

Is it still Saturday or Sunday? What time is it? Perhaps there was no communication from headquarters. Even with such curiosity, he still couldn't stand up. Kwon Taek Joo lazily rubbed his head on the soft pillow. As usual, the place lying next to him was still warm. Kwon Taek Joo could hear the sound of water flowing in the distance. Even though he had exerted all his strength all night, Zhenya still had more than enough strength to move.

[That guy is not human, that's for sure.]

(Only saying this now??)

Kwon Taek Joo complained and was about to sleep a little more when the phone rang. The sound is not from inside the room. Or just stop picking up the phone? Thinking for a moment, he tried to stand up. Anyway, if it's a call from headquarters, it's entirely his responsibility.

A very strange feeling in his butt every time he walked. Kwon Taek Joo's thighs ached and he couldn't describe what was going on in his stomach.

The phone was on the kitchen table. It seemed like Zhenya had picked it up to look at it. Kwon Taek Joo picked up the phone and checked the caller. It was a number not in the phonebook, probably an advertising call. While waiting, the vibrating sound gradually subsided.

Kwon Taek Joo checked the missed calls, there is no contact from headquarters. What stood out was Kang Chan Woo's message with the location and time of the alumni meeting and a request for him to

attend. He had forgotten and focused all his attention on Zhenya since he returned.

Kwon Taek Joo went back to the top and looked at the number he just dialed. The last few numbers on the number line look familiar. Who is that? He was searching his memory for a while when an incoming call appeared on the screen. Yes, that's the number. Kwon Taek Joo picked up the phone.

[Yes?]

[Hello? Kwon Taek Joo?]

It seemed like he knew the person on the other end even though it was only through their voice. More than 10 years have passed. The human voice will also change in pitch over time.

However, Kwon Taek Joo is still recognizable.

[It's me, Yuna Hyun.]

## Chapter 5.17 – Side Story

How did you two become so close?

Yuna said that she likes Kwon Taek Joo's heartless side. Kwon Taek Joo did not deny the dating rumors of the two, nor did he keep his distance from Yuna. He himself doesn't care about rumors because no one will suffer any harm from those rumors.

At that time, Kwon Taek Joo also did not have a love interest. That's the biggest reason he didn't feel the need to explain. When Kwon Taek Joo was recognized as Yuna Hyun's boyfriend, the gossip behind her back also decreased. They were no longer upset when she refused sympathy and set clear boundaries or when Yuna did not attend meetings or private events. Everyone assumed it was because she was dating and they understood it themselves. Sometimes they just blame Kwon Taek Joo for monopolizing his girlfriend too much, but anyway, it's more comfortable than before.

So is Kwon Taek Joo. Troubles are also greatly reduced when he goes with Yuna Hyun, sometimes even more comfortable than going out with friends. Yuna Hyun did not ask any personal questions or interfere in his life, nor did she ask for any unreasonable favors or requests. Instead, she reserved a place in the classroom or the library, lent him books and papers needed to write reports, shared his assignments, and helped him a lot. Yuna said it was to compete in good faith, but he didn't know if she was reciprocating in her own way.

Contrary to everyone's predictions and rumors, in reality, there was no love between the two. At least that's what Kwon Taek Joo thinks. He never saw Yuna Hyun as a woman. It seems that there is no place for love in Yuna Hyun's dictionary. He didn't know if it was her desire for success or not, but in his memory, Yuna always looked straight ahead. It took him a while to find out why.

[I grew up in an orphanage.]

That was around the time Yuna Hyun enrolled in the language training and student exchange program. If there were no other changes, it would be natural for her to be chosen.

Around that time, Kwon Taek Joo was preparing to enlist in the army. Is that the reason she confided? One time, Yuna confided in him. When he first heard about this, he couldn't help but wonder because he often saw family photos in her wallet.

[I think I've seen pictures of your family before.]

[That's right, I was adopted.]

Yuna Hyun replied nonchalantly and shook the empty soju glass. Kwon Taek Joo was very surprised but he didn't show it and just quietly filled her cup.

[My adoptive father was a firefighter.]

[What happened?]

[Because he died because of his career, when I was in high school.]

He nodded gently. At that time, Kwon Taek Joo's situation was not much different. Yuna Hyun also knows that.

[I heard that your father also died while on duty, so I feel sympathy. You know very well what will happen to the family if one day the head of the family dies without warning.]

Maybe that's why Yuna Hyun proactively approached him. Not simply because she considered Kwon Taek Joo a competitor, not because of his indifference, but because he also had a similar situation.

[I am the child of a single mother. As soon as I was born, I was taken to an orphanage and grew up there until I was seven. My foster father often goes there to serve, and he's really quiet. I don't know why, but he treats me exceptionally well. I don't know if it's because I also like that person or not. Sometimes he came with his colleagues at the fire station, and other times he came with his foster mother.]

Yuna Hyun's face flashed with happiness as she recalled the past. It was the face of someone immersed in a dream. That was also the first time

Kwon Taek Joo saw her smile like that.

[From the beginning, I liked my adoptive mother. Every time I watch TV, I wish I had a mother with the image I imagined, kind, friendly, talkative and very caring. I cried with joy when I heard that you two would become my parents. I cried so much that they worried that I was afraid to go with them. That's how we became a family, and when I was in elementary school, my mother had a younger brother. She is a precious child born after 10 years of marriage. All adults say they are lucky. After being adopted, I had a younger brother and there were many big and small events in the family. I was really happy because I had never felt anything like this before. I'm like a different person. I couldn't sleep because I was impatiently waiting for a new member of the family. I wanted to do so many things for her when she was born.]

Suddenly, an obvious story like 'an adopted child lost his position after his biological child was born' appeared in Kwon Taek Joo's mind. Yuna Hyun shook his head.

[Even after my younger brother was born, my parents always supported and loved me. My younger brother is very cute and always listens to me. An ideal family that I could only imagine has come true. At that time, every day was truly filled with joy and happiness...]

Yuna Hyun spoke passionately and then suddenly sighed, feeling a bit regretful.

[Then my father passed away. When a large fire broke out in a commercial building, he rushed to rescue those trapped inside but was unable to return. I feel like half the world has collapsed. Just sad, empty and hopeless. But the misfortune did not end there.]

What happened? Kwon Taek Joo was curious but didn't rush to intervene, just waiting for the conversation to continue.

[Like normal children, I kept my position throughout the funeral. I also want to do that. There were many people who came to visit, relatives, father's colleagues, friends and neighbors... One day before the burial, an old colleague arrived very late. He asked if I was the eldest child, I said 'yes' but didn't know anything. Then he told a strange story.]

Kwon Taek Joo tilted his head to listen. You can't guess the story behind it.

Yuna Hyun reminisced and smiled as if there was something unreasonable. For a moment, Yuna Hyun's face was confused with mixed emotions.

[Actually, I am the biological daughter of my deceased father. I heard that there was a girl that my father secretly met with my mother outside, and that girl gave birth to me but was completely unable to raise me, so she sent me to an orphanage. My dad received the news late and then continuously volunteered to meet me. Because my father always cared about me, my mother offered to adopt me.]

[...What??]

[It's not trustworthy because he told that story when he was drunk. I don't know how close that colleague was to my father, but I can't ignore it.]

[What happened? According to a former colleague, the late husband had an affair and gave birth to a child because his wife was infertile and secretly visited the child at the orphanage and deceived his wife to adopt the child. It was like a bomb falling on the life full of dedication and devotion of the deceased. Whether that's true or not, I can't imagine how my adoptive mother and younger brother must have felt. I didn't even know what to say at that time.]

[My mother refused to take a test to confirm paternity because she said it was not necessary, she did not want to offend the deceased, and father was not that kind of person, so we had to trust him. It's better to have to do it! After hearing that, the whole family was no longer the same. I feel my mother is upset every time she treats me, and I also feel sorry for my mother and younger brother.]

Yuna Hyun drank the glass she had been holding in one gulp. Then she shrugged and let out a long breath. When she spoke again, her voice was as strong as usual.

[From then on, I thought I should be independent. It will be very difficult for the mother to raise and take care of her younger brother

alone. I need to take care of myself so I don't become a burden.]

Only then did Kwon Taek Joo understand why Yuna Hyun worked tirelessly, why she always struggled to maintain high grades.

[It doesn't make sense but I often think about whether everything would be okay if my father hadn't passed away. Because of that, I want to create a machine that can be taken into dangerous places that humans cannot enter during rescue and firefighting operations. I hope there won't be any more sacrifices like my father.]

Either way, he was the one who created a family for Yuna Hyun. It seems like Yuna Hyun still remembers the happy times when he was alive. And maybe she will live like that for the rest of her life.

[I told my mom I was going to become an exchange student.]

[Did you say anything?]

[Congratulations on doing well, proud of myself. But really in my heart... Even if it's just once, I hope she'll keep me, that she'll be sad if I leave.]

Yuna Hyun smiled helplessly. Her eyes were still glued to the empty soju glass.

[I think moderate happiness is good. But if I could do it, I wouldn't feel the way I do now. I love that time that I can't get back, but now everything is empty and nothing can fill it. I feel like I'm alone in this world.]

Yuna Hyun sighed and raised her head. The two people's eyes met. The eyes are brown and transparent, surrounded by a light tear.

[Kwon Taek Joo, please stand by me.]

(This was all a flashback, if you didn't know)

"...Taek Joo."

Kwon Taek Joo was startled by the call. Zhenya, who had just finished showering, was standing behind him, naked.

"Crazy man, put something on."

He ignored Kwon Taek Joo's criticism and walked towards the refrigerator. The guy's penis was redder than usual, he didn't know if it was from the shower or from having sex all night. The condom mark is still dark red, looking so seductive. Not to mention the fingerprints left on his arms and broad back. Kwon Taek Joo suddenly looked down at his nails. They had been cut short but the consequences were still the same.

Zhenya took a bottle of water from the refrigerator and drank, his eyes fixed on Kwon Taek Joo.

"Who called?"

He tilted his chin towards the phone in Kwon Taek Joo's hand. It seemed he heard the phone. You can generally answer that it's a call from his mother or from headquarters because it will be less annoying. But Kwon Taek Joo still answered honestly. There's also nothing to hide from each other.

"College friend."

"College friends? It must have been 10 years since you graduated?"

"Uhm."

"Why are they suddenly calling at this time?"

"...What, it's not like I can't be called. You say it like it's strange."

"That's because the listener finds it strange. Or are you hiding something?"

Zhenya looked at him and asked what kind of person that was. There was nothing for him to suspect, and no reason to hide it, but there was also no benefit in saying who it was. Who knows, maybe disaster will come to the very normal lives of innocent people.

Kwon Taek Joo complained of hunger and quickly changed the subject. Zhenya looked disapproving but out of habit, he put a pot of water on the stove. Looks like the guy is cooking ramen again. Normally he doesn't complain, but today Kwon Taek Joo wanted to divert Zhenya's

attention by asking for spicy stir-fried noodles on the menu. He bluntly said that it wasn't food. Kwon Taek Joo promised that he would definitely give him a bite to eat.

(Said like if it wasn't the spicy stir-fried noodles, he would let Zhenya have some.)

When asked by Yuna Hyun if he would attend the gathering, Kwon Taek Joo replied that he would come. It wasn't because he was curious or immersed in old memories, he just felt like he should see her one last time.

[Ah, here.]

Kwon Taek Joo raised his hand. Yoon Jong Woo was running excitedly, gradually slowing down. That's because a tall foreigner was sitting across from Kwon Taek Joo, with his back towards the entrance. Looking from behind, he was still skeptical, but the feeling of insecurity did not disappear. Then suddenly Yoon Jong Woo's body became as hard as stone. That's because Zhenya, the crazy guy from Russia, turned to look at Yoon Jong Woo.

[Senior...?]

He rolled his eyes and looked at Kwon Taek Joo. Yoon Jong Woo ran over as soon as he got off work because he had promised to serve beef for dinner, and also didn't announce that anyone else would be joining the two. Of course, if it's a normal person then it won't be a problem, no matter who it is.

But if that person is Zhenya, it's a different story. If he knew he would eat with him, Yoon Jong Woo would never come to this place.

[Sit down first. I'm hungry.]

Kwon Taek Joo patted the chair next to him without any explanation. Yoon Jong Woo clutched his bag strap and glanced at Zhenya. What if you run away right now? Was he grabbed by the back of his neck and pulled back immediately? Or will his neck be broken saying he feels insulted by being ignored? After drawing violent pictures, Yoon Jong Woo hesitantly sat down. Zhenya stared at him. An unreasonable

feeling of fear when facing the clear, unblinking eyes aimed at me. Are people's eyes supposed to be so clear?

[What do you want to eat??]

[Can I go home without eating?]

[What's wrong? I said I would buy you beef.]

[Suddenly I don't want to eat anymore. I'm not very hungry either. Ah, it seems like my stomach is full! I have a bloated stomach, senior.]

[If you have a bloated stomach, you have to eat a lot to get better. Right?]

[No, since you have someone to eat with, I'll go.]

The man begged [Please,] but Kwon Taek Joo called the staff while listening and asked for many dishes himself.

Before long, the dining table was filled with side dishes. However, Zhenya still did not take his eyes off Yoon Jong Woo. The look was so intense that even though the man tried to avoid it, he couldn't help but pay attention. If he faced a tiger, would he feel like this? If he were trapped with sharks in a large water tank, he didn't know what it would be like. His knees were so tense that he lost feeling.

[Don't just look at each other, say hello to each other. After all, we are friends.]

[...Yes?]

[You two are the same age.]

Kwon Taek Joo explained superficially. Yoon Jong Woo also knew that Zhenya had the same year of birth as him because Kwon Taek Joo often asked him to investigate Zhenya's background. [After all, it's you.] It was the strangest sound he had ever heard in his life. Instinct warns that it should never happen.

[Senior. Why do you treat me like this?]

The boy grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's arm and shook it pitifully before letting go. Zhenya even looked directly at Yoon Jong Woo more openly.

Did he do anything to offend him? Yoon Jong Woo was startled and closed his mouth. Even the lips curled silently into the mouth. Two hands obediently placed on his knees.

"Is that you? Are you the junior who drank with Taek Joo?"

Yoon Jong Woo wondered if the crazy Russian had a voice like that. It's so different. It wasn't as deep as he thought, but it was a tone he had never heard before. In addition, he felt a strange chill. Is relaxed and contorted intonation characteristic of Russian? He didn't know Russian so he couldn't know. What did Zhenya's first words mean? Kwon Taek Joo smiled next to him, so he also raised the corners of his mouth.

Kwon Taek Joo forced a smile to warn Zhenya.

"Hey, stop staring. He's scared."

"What did you do?"

"You have to maintain a minimum of politeness with someone you just met for the first time. Smile, kid."

Yoon Jong Woo rolled his eyes at the back and forth conversation in Russian. Zhenya continued to glance at him displeased. They say you can't spit on a smiley face, but apparently that's not true in Russia. Cold eyes seem to represent all kinds of negative expressions. Like there's a thorn in the eye.

Kwon Taek Joo moved the corn cheese, fruit salad, and potato pancakes in front of him to the other side while saying something to Zhenya. Those items don't really suit Kwon Taek Joo's taste, but he usually doesn't bother to move them. Even crazy people can't eat spicy food because they're foreigners?

While watching curiously, Kwon Taek Joo suddenly wrapped his arms around Yoon Jong Woo's neck. His head was tilted that way.

[Jong Woo, I need to ask you a favor.]

[Don't.]

[What is a good junior? Don't be like that, help me once.]

[Do you know how many times that one-time thing has happened? You must have a conscience.]

Instead of talking, he looked into Zhenya's eyes. The stare at his forehead was too painful to ignore.

"You two are very close, right?"

It was still in Russian so he couldn't understand, but he could clearly see that Zhenya hated Yoon Jong Woo. Blue eyes like a sharp blade.

[Senior. Can you tell that person to stop staring at me? Looks like he doesn't like you.]

[Don't be like that. You two are compatible.]

[We aren't. I will forget that person as soon as I leave this store. I will live without knowing anything.]

[Just for today.]

[I said I don't like it.]

[Then it can't work.]

Kwon Taek Joo muttered. Yoon Jong Woo has an unfortunate premonition.

[Why not?]

[You have to play with him today.]

In an instant, Yoon Jong Woo's expression disappeared. He shook his head and was sure he had heard wrong. Kwon Taek Joo nodded and said he heard correctly then burst out laughing. Yoon Jong Woo immediately turned serious and whispered quickly.

[What nonsense are you talking about?]

[Hey, let's look at the situation. Just half a day. Hmm?]

[No, that person is not a child, why do I have to watch over him?]

Yoon Jong Woo also unconsciously pointed at Zhenya. Zhenya frowned. Even with that, his index finger twisted. In a situation like this, how can

we stay together for more than a day? It's impossible.

Kwon Taek Joo's persuasion continues.

[If that bastard follows, it will be very troublesome.]

[Where are you going, senior?]

[Me? I came to meet my university classmates.]

[Then it's okay to take him there. Show them what that crazy Russian looks like, tell them he's the Russian ambassador to Korea. You will become the main character.]

[Ah, stop joking.]

[What senior is saying is a joke.]

[Actually, I only asked for help today. Hmm? I will buy all the items you want.]

[Enough. I said I bought it because I didn't know how expensive it was.]

[Even if it's expensive, it won't cost more than 500 million won.]

[500 million? Ha, senior. Even if it's a game item, it's not virtual money, it's real money.]

[I know.]

[But you said spending 5,000 won on items is a waste?]

[That's right, but...I have my own money. That kid gave me a tip. If you earn dirty money, you have to spend it roughly to reduce the feeling of guilt, so I'll spend it on you.]

What did he say? Should you commit? Suddenly, a limited item appeared in Yoon Jong Woo's mind equivalent to a whole month's salary. A very rare item for domestic cars. He didn't believe that Kwon Taek Joo would buy it for him, but if it was money from Zhenya then the story seemed more believable.

If he spends half a day with a pure-blooded Russian madman, Yoon Jong Woo can get special items that he can't afford. His level will increase dramatically and his position in the game will also change significantly.

But is it worth risking his life for? Yoon Jong Woo hesitated for a moment then shook his head.

[Ah, I don't know. Seniors are doing their work, so why should I sacrifice?]

[I only trust you...]

[I told you not to trust me! Please don't believe it! I told you I don't like it!]

Yoon Jong Woo shouted violently. Kwon Taek Joo also had to raise the white flag.

[Then there is no other way.]

Kwon Taek Joo slumped his shoulders and sighed. The series of actions of picking up meat and placing it on the fire table looks very tiring. Not interested. How long has it been since Yoon Jong Woo was swayed by Kwon Taek Joo? Now he was immune to that level of acting. Today you just need to eat beef or something delicious and that's enough.

The problem is the harsh atmosphere Zhenya creates. His eyes were still glued to Yoon Jong Woo's body and did not leave. If his gaze were a knife, it felt like the epidermis was being sliced open little by little and then completely decomposed.

He couldn't eat even a side dish and just sucked on his empty chopsticks.

[What are you doing? Eat this, it's all cooked.]

Kwon Taek Joo said as he cut the meat. He even asked for a fork from a passing employee as if he just remembered it. The fork he received was placed in front of Zhenya. A fork big enough to easily harm a human like killing an ant in his hand looks like a fork used by children. Because in the hands of a foreigner, the fork didn't look anything special, but of course he wouldn't have any difficulty cutting off your life with that small fork.

Yoon Jong Woo suppressed his random thoughts and diligently picked up the meat in front of him. The meat is grilled just right so it melts in

your mouth. The taste of the gravy left on the tongue is also excellent.

[It's delicious. Let's eat more.]

Kwon Taek Joo piled up meat in front of Yoon Jong Woo. In fact, he himself didn't eat anything. Yoon Jong Woo offered to grill instead but he refused. Kwon Taek Joo wrapped the meat and gently stuffed it into his mouth before Zhenya's puzzled eyes.

Kwon Taek Joo grilled the meat for a long time then stood up from his seat. Yoon Jong Woo suddenly grabbed his wrist.

[Eh, where are you going?]

[I'm going to go to the bathroom and to smoke a cigarette.]

[Then I will go with you.]

[Why would you chase me to the bathroom? Keep eating, kid.]

Kwon Taek Joo rejected Yoon Jong Woo. Before leaving his seat, he also asked Zhenya for something in Russian. Zhenya reluctantly nodded. He turned back and glanced at Yoon Jong Woo from top to bottom and clicked his tongue.

Soon there were only two people left at the table. No chatting. The meat was burning on the stove, but Yoon Jong Woo didn't dare touch it. He just took turns looking at the bathroom and the door and waiting for Kwon Taek Joo to return.

But Kwon Taek Joo did not appear even after endless time passed. Feeling strange, Yoon Jong Woo took his phone out of his pocket and tried sending a text message.

[Senior?]

[Why are you taking so long?]

[I'm suffocating and about to die.]

[Sorry, Jong Woo. Thanks to you.]

[What?]

[Senior?]

Isn't that right?

[I'll leave quickly and come back so please monitor carefully so that kid doesn't do anything else. Well, if that kid suddenly disappears, call me right away. Anti-terrorism. Protect civilians. Just think so.]

Kwon Taek Joo did not read Yoon Jong Woo's message after the last sentence. He tried calling right away but as expected he didn't pick up.

[Unbelievable!]

Yoon Jong Woo jumped up and screamed. Immediately, the attention of everyone around him was focused on him. Zhenya also suddenly looked at Yoon Jong Woo. He felt dissatisfied at being looked at like a crazy person by a crazy person. In the end, what do you have to do to make him obediently stay here?

Yoon Jong Woo sat down on the chair with tears in his eyes. Sweat poured down like rain all over his body. The meat on the grill is burning black like Yoon Jong Woo's lap. The staff came and asked if he needed to turn off the fire. He just wanted to beg to let him go home.

Yet the employee also turned away cruelly. Zhenya still crossed his arms and silently watched Yoon Jong Woo, he could only look out the window but nothing came into view.

{Come to think of it, I have something to ask.}

Zhenya suddenly opened his mouth. Yoon Jong Woo was startled because he never thought he would speak first. Perhaps out of consideration for his audience, he used English. That is American English. However, it sounds like a completely different language because of the Russian pronunciation and intonation. Is it because of his dazzling appearance that what he said just now sounded so luxurious?

{Star? Ask me? I mean... Ah, ask}

Even if they were the same age or friends, he couldn't treat them comfortably. Yoon Jong Woo suddenly stuttered. Zhenya asked incredulously.

{Every time Taek Joo calls me, he usually uses the word '썅녀' in Korean. What does that mean?}

(썅녀/ saekki

, has different meaning on the situation, it can mean, bastard, baby, kid, or more on the situation.)

A completely unpredictable question arose. The train of thought stopped for a moment. How should I answer so that I can be safe? Yoon Jong Woo swallowed his saliva.

If you look back at Kwon Taek Joo's daily words and actions, he has the answer. When he first joined the company, he was a difficult boss to approach. The two don't see each other often, and when they do meet they never talk about unnecessary things. So Yoon Jong Woo thinks he is a serious person.

That's a mistake. After getting a little closer, Kwon Taek Joo joked around and took care of him more. Except when he works, he's like an older brother next door. This bastard, that bastard, that bastard, in general is proof that he has gotten closer to Yoon Jong Woo.

However, if the target was Zhenya, would it sound more like a curse than an expression of friendliness. This relationship was very complicated from the beginning. No matter how beautiful and elegant he is, he cannot be lovable.

The answer is out, but the problem is that Yoon Jong Woo can't confess right away. He's a crazy guy who doesn't care about other people's eyes, but you can't tell him that's a curse.

While drinking water and wasting time, how should Yoon Jong Woo respond to keep this small network safe? He exploded thinking.

{I searched on the translator and found that it means, 'Baby'. Is it really like that?}

Yoon Jong Woo spit out the water he was drinking after hearing the question and then coughed. Zhenya frowned, waiting for an answer.

Is that better? At least it's not a curse word? It's impossible to know what a monster is thinking, either live or die. Yoon Jong Woo threw his trump card.

{Yes. That's right. Almost the same. It's a term of endearment used between people who are very, very close.}

Kwon Taek Joo may get into trouble later, but the problem is that Yoon Jong Woo has to live now to see that. It was he who first put you in this situation. This level is not even revenge.

"Hmm... Baby..."

Zhenya mumbled a smile and sat back in the chair. Yoon Jong Woo didn't know what he was thinking, but the smile on his lips took a long time to fade.

(This is the cutest and funniest thing ever! All the time Taekjoo cursed at him, Zhenya thought he called him Baby.)

## Chapter 5.18 – Side Story

Immediately after getting out of the car, Kwon Taek Joo started walking. He sent Zhenya to Yoon Jong Woo but inside he was not very comfortable, no matter how many times he tried to rationalize that there was no other way.

To be honest, Kwon Taek Joo thought that Zhenya wouldn't sit still if he said he was going to the class reunion. It was clear that he wouldn't let him go or would interfere in ways he couldn't imagine. Zhenya had chased him to his overseas activity location, so there was no guarantee that he wouldn't show up at a group meeting.

According to Yoon Jong Woo's personality of pursuing absolute safety, he will definitely please Zhenya, but he cannot rest assured because Zhenya is too unpredictable. As a precaution, Kwon Taek Joo asked Zhenya to protect Yoon Jong Woo on the grounds that he was in a dangerous situation due to some incident. The openly annoyed guy accepted the request after convincing him that he could complete his job and that Kwon Taek Joo didn't have to worry if he left it to him. He felt a pang of conscience when remembering the guy's proud face, it seemed like he had to return as soon as possible.

The class meeting location is a traditional pub in front of the school gate. It seems they rented out the entire store. There was only noise but no music was heard outside the door. Kwon Taek Joo opened the door and went inside. At that sign, several of his classmates turned towards the door.

[Huh? Who is this?]

[Kwon Taek Joo?]

[Hey, you're really here.]

[Long time no see, buddy.]

Kwon Taek Joo greeted everyone, some people came up to him and asked to shake his hand. I don't know how much they drank, but the air was filled with the smell of alcohol. Kwon Taek Joo smiled and asked, [Is everyone okay?] The hand he held out did not hold tightly but just patted gently.

Estimated to be about 30 people in attendance, Yuna Hyun was sitting at the back of the group and chatting. While exchanging greetings with friends around them, their eyes suddenly met. Yuna Hyun laughed first. Kwon Taek Joo just nodded slightly.

First, he was taken to an empty chair. As soon as they sat down, everyone started drinking. Kwon Taek Joo drank it all in one go and put the glass down, the wine was immediately filled again.

[Hey, why did you cut off contact like that?]

[Everyone thought you were dead.]

[Really. We heard that you joined the special forces but there was no news after that, so we wondered what happened?]

[How come no one knows you changed your number?]

Everyone scrambled to ask questions, Kwon Taek Joo just laughed. When entering NIS, for security purposes, he changed his contact number frequently. Even his colleagues at NIS asked if it was necessary to do so, but he always wanted everything to be carefully prepared. It is a world where if personal information is leaked indiscriminately and if Kwon Taek Joo himself is careless, his identity will soon be revealed, meaning he will soon lose his status as an agent.

After a few glasses of wine, the atmosphere becomes closer. Everyone present at the table was curious about Kwon Taek Joo's current situation. It seems everyone has run out of things to say to each other.

[What do you do now?]

[I just do this and that.]

[Do you work or do your own business?]

[Kwon Taek Joo, I heard you haven't graduated yet? I was very surprised to hear that today. I thought you got into a big company.]

[Ah, so it is.]

[Huh? In today's era of technical specifications, even if you die, you still have to get a diploma.]

[Let's look at something that has nothing to do with specifications. Are you a professional soldier now? Did you get these muscles after serving in the army?]

[Hey kid, look at his beautiful body. Do you do any physical work?]

People did not hesitate to touch Kwon Taek Joo's thighs and biceps. For him, this is the most difficult time. After seeing each other for a long time, people often ask about each other's careers. Kwon Taek Joo often gives short or evasive answers, and it's awkward when people ask or ask for business cards about work. This also seems to have the biggest impact in the narrow relationships between people.

[Are you doing manual labor? Why can't you say that?]

Some people jump to conclusions without getting a definitive answer. Others seemed to guess that Kwon Taek Joo was doing something that was not easy to say, and that was why he hesitated. In fact, the main characters attending gatherings often do things that are recognized by society, or they are people who consider friendship to be the joy of life. Kwon Taek Joo does not fall into those categories. If it weren't for Yuna Hyun, he probably wouldn't have appeared here.

[Similarly, I risk my life every day.]

He laughed to keep the atmosphere from sinking. Everyone thought it was a joke and laughed along.

[Are you married yet?]

[Not yet.]

[What are you doing if you don't have a family yet? I already have 2 children.]

[I know. I'm like this because I have to work so hard.]

[Do you live to work?]

[That must be it.]

Kwon Taek Joo laughed again. People at the table are married or about to get married. As if in competition, people show each other photos of their families or future brides. He was certainly old enough to do the same.

Every time he faces an ordinary life, Kwon Taek Joo realizes how special his job is. It seemed like he was single-handedly drawing a curve in a similar trajectory of life, but every time he imagined the end, he was in an unhappy mood.

[Are you still seeing someone though? I'm sure the girls won't leave you alone.]

[Looking at him, I immediately saw that he had a lover, written right on his forehead.]

[Yes...Yes but...]

[Yes, yes, what are you talking about? How long have you been dating?]

[Probably about a year.]

[At that point, it's time to get married. How is that person?]

[Just a state employee.]

[Ooh? What is the age?]

[4 years younger than me.]

[Wow, there's a 4 year age gap, you don't even need to look at it to know that it matches. Is that person beautiful?]

[Uhm... Objectively speaking, yes.]

[Wow, this guy is really fascinated, isn't he? You guys! Kwon Taek Joo's girlfriend is not only normally beautiful, nor subjectively beautiful, but also 'objectively beautiful'!]

(Yes, "she" is objectively beautiful indeed.)

One guy suddenly stood up and shouted. Boos and cheers rang out from everywhere.

[Hey, I'm curious what that person looks like. Don't you have a picture? Let's see.]

[Alright! We will look and objectively judge whether it is beautiful or not.]

[Let me see,] the cheerful chatter, they excitedly patted the shoulder as if inciting the person next to them.

[There are no pictures, guys.]

It is not difficult to control those who intend to rob the phone. Even when everyone in the group booed and drove the atmosphere, Kwon Taek Joo did not move like a stone statue. Because there was no harvest, everyone's spirit gradually lost.

Then, the topic turned to college anecdotes, the current situation of some seniors, juniors and professors, and social issues. While laughing and talking, Yuna Hyun and Kwon Taek Joo made eye contact. He wanted to greet her properly but it was awkward to move right now.

Even though they didn't say it out loud, everyone clearly felt the reunion between the two. If he did anything to attract attention, the crowd would tease him. They won't care about Yuna Hyun getting married or Kwon Taek Joo having a lover.

For that reason, he heard news of Yuna Hyun from the people around him.

[Yuna studied abroad right after graduating and received her master's degree in Massachusetts. Do you know company M? Now she works as a senior researcher there.]

[Did she meet her husband at that company? Probably a foreigner, right?]

[It's no joke now, after getting married he will get a doctorate. I'm curious how far he will go.]

[That's so good.]

[But you two don't contact each other? When we were in school, the two of us were together every day.]

The surrounding suddenly became quiet at someone's question. Not knowing if it reached Yuna Hyun's ears or not, she also looked towards Kwon Taek Joo.

[I told you. Worrying about my own life is already too much.]

The story that everyone was waiting for was interrupted. Then, Kwon Taek Joo changed the subject by asking about his absent friends. Yuna Hyun also immediately turned away and continued the interrupted conversation. Everyone also wanted to say more about the story, but there was no reason to add or subtract words back and forth.

After about two hours, empty seats appeared one by one. The remaining people also dropped in the gloomy atmosphere. The ventilation system in the store was quite poor, so just breathing Kwon Taek Joo felt drunk. He went outside to get some fresh air. Two alcohol-soaked lungs quickly inhaled pure oxygen. It seemed like his thoughts were finally clearing up a bit.

Kwon Taek Joo suddenly thought of cigarettes. Looking at the convenience store across the street, he was considering whether to buy a package. The shop door opened and someone walked out. That's Yuna Hyun. He looked at her as she came closer. Then, she took out the cigarette pack and gave it to Kwon Taek Joo. He did not refuse and took out a cigarette.

[Long time no see. It's been 10 years since we last saw each other, right?]

[Yes. Around that.]

They stood next to each other and just blew smoke. The conversation began in earnest just after lighting a cigarette.

[How are you doing?]

[I live a busy life, sort of.]

[Is your mother okay?]

[Yes.]

[You said you're not married yet? Nothing special? You guys probably want me to marry you more than anyone.]

[What are you talking about? You can get married just by making eye contact.]

[But why aren't you married yet? I heard earlier that you have someone you're dating, 'objectively beautiful.]

[Hey, are you still teasing me?]

Kwon Taek Joo pretended to be angry and smiled at the same time, that smile didn't seem to change.

[No, I just want to make it less serious if you introduce yourself. Does your girlfriend feel pressured?]

Everyone believes that Kwon Taek Joo's lover is a woman. Kwon Taek Joo himself didn't know that he would be involved with a man until a year ago, so it was natural.

[It's not like that. Everyone already knows each other, they're almost close friends. That person sees my mother more often than I do.]

[Then it's even stranger. Is your lover ready to propose? Kwon Taek Joo, have you ever acted imprudently?]

[What do I do?]

[I'm surprised you didn't know.]

[Everything is fine now, why does it have to be like that? That person also doesn't think about getting married.]

[Have you checked?]

[Should we definitely check that out?]

[You think you can see everything but sometimes you don't. You're a bit careless.]

Kwon Taek Joo didn't know if he was getting love counseling or if Yuna Hyun was venting old resentments when they met again after more than 10 years.

[Marriage does not prove sincerity. Each person has a different way of loving each other, as if marriage is the only right answer and a happy ending. I don't understand either. We can be together if we like, right?]

[....]

Yuna's face was bewildered. Cigarette butts that have not yet been shaken fly in the wind.

[What was that reaction?]

[Oh my god, Kwon Taek Joo. The words that come out of your mouth are filled with love... That is something that can be used to live a long life.]

[No, I didn't say anything about love? I just mean it in general.]

[What's not to love anymore? Why are your ears so red?]

[Why are my ears red?]

Kwon Taek Joo covered his ears. It's not that it's not, but why is it so hot behind his ears? Maybe because he drank too much?

He grabbed the cigarette pack from Yuna Hyun's hand. He took out another cigarette, put it in his mouth and lit it. Yuna Hyun continued to smirk next to him.

[Talk about another story.]

[Why is it fun?]

[Do you want to come in yet?]

[I know, I know.]

Yuna Hyun grabbed the medicine package in Kwon Taek Joo's hand as if giving him a hand and told her story.

[This time I came back to completely arrange my life in Korea.]

[Really? Are you planning to permanently settle abroad?]

[Yes. Maybe. My future husband is American.]

[What about your relatives?]

[After graduating from university and studying abroad, my relationships with them became even more sparse. So far, I have only returned to Korea twice. My mother's 60th birthday and my brother's graduation day. Now I just consider them as distant relatives. That way I don't have to be sad anymore, and my mother and younger brother are less inconvenienced. Maybe they will come to the wedding. My mother said she would help me with postpartum care after giving birth, but I don't know anymore. I don't know how things will turn out.]

Kwon Taek Joo just nodded without saying a word. That's the way it is, what more can others say? From the beginning, Kwon Taek Joo was the type of person to quietly listen no matter what people said. He does not carelessly interfere in other people's affairs or impose his own ideas as a solution. That's why Yuna Hyun also freely shared her inner situation, like a solid bamboo forest where you don't have to worry about secrets being revealed.

Yuna Hyun suddenly turned to Kwon Taek Joo and looked at him meticulously from head to toe. She gave a mischievous smile. Kwon Taek Joo's expression was a bit uncomfortable.

[What's up?]

[You have become more handsome, Kwon Taek Joo. Now you look so manly. I was very curious about how you changed and how you lived. I really want to meet you at least once before going to America, but on the other hand, I'm also nervous. What should I do if my first love turns out to be a pot-bellied uncle?]

[That's how it should be.]

Joking but not laughing, Yuna Hyun hit Kwon Taek Joo's back as if punishing him. He was also against letting her keep some beautiful memories in Korea.

The wind blows. The two were silent for a moment to let the wind calm down. A slight smile crossed his lips. People who have shared time

together can reminisce about that time even without saying anything.

[You know what I said about you to my fiancé? There was a man who kicked me 11 times. After that, he was very curious. He said he really wants you to come to our wedding.]

[So naughty. What's so funny about jokes when you're young?]

[Is it like a joke? I mean it every time.]

[What kind of joke is this again?]

[It's not a joke. I just pretended not to be embarrassed because I kept getting rejected.]

Kwon Taek Joo clicked his tongue and thought he was heartless. He didn't know if Yuna Hyun really asked him on a date 11 times or not. But it was clear that he never accepted that confession seriously. To Kwon Taek Joo, she is a friend, a competitor, and someone who shares the same pain. He has never drawn any other relationship.

However, that doesn't mean Yuna Hyun doesn't have charm. Even compared to the women Kwon Taek Joo met and broke up with, they were not unattractive. But why is that so?

[The last time was probably at your brother's funeral, right?]

That was the time when Kwon Taek Joo had just been discharged from the army. A phone call came in the middle of the night, and he was extremely scared. For no reason at all, Kwon Taek Joo remembered the last phone call he had with his brother. The omens did not go astray. That's how Kwon Taek Joo received his brother's death notice.

His mother was not conscious during the process of moving to the designated location. As if possessed, she muttered unintelligible words to herself. Kwon Taek Joo prayed to all the gods that this was just a mistake, prayed for a miracle to happen, and prayed over and over again.

But that desperate prayer had no effect. His brother returned with a cold corpse. Even the body is no longer intact. The mother could not

bear it and collapsed. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't do anything. He only tragically realized his weakness and helplessness.

After hearing the news, teammates came to offer their condolences. Yuna Hyun was also in the crowd that day. Even after everyone left, she stayed. She was in no hurry to approach Kwon Taek Joo or try to comfort him. The next morning, Kwon Taek Joo found her.

Yuna Hyun continued to reflect on that moment.

[I said 'I want to be by your side'. Do you know what you said?]

The memory is not clear, because it happened a long time ago, and Kwon Taek Joo intentionally forgot what happened during that time. It seemed like the first time he didn't think her confession was a joke.

[You said 'My mother is the only one left. I wish you could meet someone who thinks of you first and cherishes you, so I can't accept you.' I know why you said that so I didn't try any more. How is the person you are dating now? Did that person grow up and receive a lot of love? That person doesn't depend on you and doesn't need you to take care of her all the time?]

Kwon Taek Joo could not answer the next questions. That story is far different from Zhenya. Looking back, his situation hasn't changed at all. But why is it okay for Zhenya but not for Yuna Hyun?

[If that person is like that, congratulations, even if not, congratulations.]

Kwon Taek Joo looked at Yuna Hyun with confusing words. She just laughed.

[That person is the one who defeated the stubborn Kwon Taek Joo.]

As such. Zhenya was just as needy as Yuna Hyun, maybe even more so. Maybe that's why he always tries to cling to Kwon Taek Joo and follow him wherever he goes, no matter how far or how dangerous. If it wasn't Zhenya, no one would have been able to do it. No one will understand a lover who has many secrets, often goes on business trips and rarely gets to rest.

Zhenya even left everything behind and went to Korea. The boy has no past, interests or acquaintances in Korea. He can ignore the rest of his life, purely to be with Kwon Taek Joo. It would be much easier if Zhenya lured and captured him.

But he didn't, just because Zhenya didn't want to be hated by Kwon Taek Joo himself. He felt sorry for his patience and desires that were not human at the beginning.

For some reason, Kwon Taek Joo felt restless, like he had done something bad to Zhenya. And strangely enough, he missed Zhenya.

## Chapter 5.19 – Side Story

[Kwon Taek Joo! Wake up. I don't know where you live.]

Kwon Taek Joo fell asleep and was shaken violently. He completely fell asleep and was unresponsive. There were about 10 empty soju bottles lying around on the table, which was the amount of alcohol that Kwon Taek Joo drank alone.

Kwon Taek Joo planned to smoke a cigarette and then go in and have a drink to regain his good mood. That was his initial intention, but halfway through, he started to drink too much. Kwon Taek Joo didn't realize that he was just drinking without saying a word with a sad look on his face. Before and now, Kwon Taek Joo always became quieter when he had worries.

There were only about six people left in the pub, including Yuna and Kwon Taek Joo. He couldn't even fully control himself. It's past 3am. Yuna Hyun could not find a phone number related to Kwon Taek Joo, nor could she find his home address. She doesn't know where he lives because they haven't been in contact for nearly 10 years, but she also can't wait until Kwon Taek Joo wakes up. And even though she is a man, she cannot leave her close friend who she just met after 10 years.

Well, you should also check your ID card. After a moment of hesitation, Yuna Hyun began rummaging through Kwon Taek Joo's pockets. And despite being extremely careful, her hands still grazed his hips and thighs.

(Noo, not to a drunk person. I appreciate her for being careful though.)

[Ugh... Zhenya...]

Kwon Taek Joo suddenly frowned and turned over. Zhenya? Is that your girlfriend's name? Yuna Hyun vaguely speculated and pulled the cell phone out of Kwon Taek Joo's hand. It was the only item on his person. No wallet or ID card.

Yuna Hyun naturally sighed. She tried checking his phone in case there might be some information, but it was locked. She tried to lift Kwon Taek Joo's eyelids, but the identification method on the phone was not fingerprint or iris. Even that last hope is gone.

Suddenly at that moment, a vibration rang out. Yuna Hyun was so surprised that she shrugged her shoulders. A call comes in on Kwon Taek Joo's cell phone. The caller is 'Zhenya'.

[...huh? Is that your girlfriend?]

Yuna Hyun tilted her head and touched the call button. A security window appears continuously. Anyway, why so unnecessarily tight and detailed? She struggled to answer the call but couldn't do it. The vibration on the phone gradually turns off. And it started again immediately. This time the caller was also 'Zhenya'. Unanswered calls piled up.

[Honestly. What should I do!]

She stomped her feet in frustration.

Not long after, Yuna Hyun's phone rang. It was the call from the taxi she called earlier that had arrived.

[Hello? Oh yes. I'll be right out.]

She really had no other choice, at least she had to rent a room and throw Kwon Taek Joo in there.

[Guys, the taxi is here. I will take him home, he will move there with me.]

The remaining people followed Yuna Hyun's request and moved closer. Four people struggled to lift Kwon Taek Joo up, partly because he was unconscious so his body became even heavier.

(It's funny to think Taek Joo needed four people to lift him up. Haha)

[Hey, hey, that's no good, everyone keep one side.]

Under someone's direction, each person held Kwon Taek Joo's arms and legs tightly. In that way, the group of people left the store and went to

the main street. Yuna Hyun also hurriedly followed with her coat and bag.

The taxi driver discovered the group of people, quickly got out of the car and opened the back seat door. The group struggled to push Kwon Taek Joo's head into the car.

Just then, a sudden roar came from afar. Looks like someone is enjoying showing off their speeding instincts. The noise grew louder and soon a Bugatti appeared. The car stopped in front as if blocking the taxi.

The group looked bewildered as the driver's door of the Bugatti opened. A tall foreigner got out of the car. He was a very handsome man with platinum blonde hair and handsome looks. The man approached with an expressionless face. His shadow covered the faces of the confused people.

"Come here."

The unidentified large man grabbed Kwon Taek Joo with a foreign language. Yuna Hyun thought it was Russian, but she wasn't sure.

[You... Who are you?]

[Wait a minute!]

Kwon Taek Joo's classmates scuffled with the man without knowing why, but to no avail. Even though the four of them pulled him back, Kwon Taek Joo was still helplessly taken away. The mobile phone in Yuna Hyun's hand was also suddenly taken away.

The man placed Kwon Taek Joo on one shoulder and walked straight to his car. His signature look, energy, and attitude are all very rough, but the sequence of actions to put Kwon Taek Joo in the passenger seat is extremely cautious. The man closed the door then walked around the car and climbed into the driver's seat. After that, he just left without any explanation to the extremely confused group of people. The Bugatti disappeared from sight as quickly as it appeared.

[What was that?]

[Who exactly is that person?]

[Is it okay if we just let them go like that? Not a loan shark or organ trafficker or something?]

[If so, he would have stuffed him in the back seat or trunk. How could you take him away like that?]

[Yes, but...]

[But what language was it just now? Russian, right? What relationship does Kwon Taek Joo have?]

Everyone took turns asking questions. Even the taxi driver couldn't ignore it and participated in the story. Yuna Hyun also looked in the direction the Bugatti disappeared with worried eyes.

[That face... looks so familiar. I think I've seen it somewhere before.]

A person working in the journalism industry tilted his head and said. Soon he took out his cell phone and searched for something. Focus on the man speaking a language presumably Russian and contrast it with images of important figures. Not long after, he let out a deep sigh.

[Right. As Russian Ambassador to Korea!]

[What?]

All eyes simultaneously turned to the empty street. Everyone opened their eyes wide but felt like they were dreaming.

The body trembled non-stop but those were not pleasant vibrations. The sudden impact made Kwon Taek Joo's already painful head feel heavy. He groaned and lifted his eyelids with difficulty. In his dim vision, he vaguely saw Zhenya's face.

Somehow he seemed angry. His eyes stared at Kwon Taek Joo sharply. He couldn't even see the usual sarcastic smile. Is it a dream?

[Zhenya.]

His tongue seemed to lag when he called Zhenya, his voice cracking. Maybe he drank too much. Even when Kwon Taek Joo closed his eyes and opened them again, his vision was still unclear.

He was thirsty, and his throat was burning. His lungs felt compressed and he couldn't even breathe, as if his entire body was being crushed by a rock. In the frustrating feeling of confinement, Kwon Taek Joo called out [Zhenya] again. This time he didn't answer either, then suddenly he put Kwon Taek Joo's legs on his shoulders. Zhenya leaned his body forward and stubbornly raised his knees, so that Kwon Taek Joo's body could not bend completely but was almost floating in the air, only his head was touching the bed. Blood rushed to his face with each thrust and his mind became more and more frantic. He patted Zhenya's arm to get him to let him down.

"This... uh... uh... is too deep... ah."

Zhenya didn't mind and slowly pushed his penis all the way inside. As the guy's weight is increased, the lower part reluctantly expands and the abdomen becomes harder. Zhenya's balls pressed against Kwon Taek Joo's ass, making a clicking sound. As if that wasn't enough, he rubbed the connection and tried to dig deeper inside. Kwon Taek Joo was under pressure and out of breath, his face felt hot like he was about to explode.

"Wait, wait a minute... Out, uhm, take it out....!"

He raised his fingertips and gripped the back of Zhenya's hand. Even with her nails digging into his skin, Zhenya kept rubbing the meat into his ass. The mass of muscle that filled his belly was as ferocious as a bull churning violently inside. Kwon Taek Joo's limbs tensed up at a feeling that couldn't be ignored.

Zhenya then began to violently withdraw his fully penetrated penis. The inner part attached to it rubbed back, making Kwon Taek Joo shiver. His buttocks trembled and his hole tingled indescribably from what he had endured while unconscious.

Kwon Taek Joo closed his eyes tightly and twisted his body to reduce the stimulation. But it didn't have any special meaning, because despite Kwon Taek Joo's pitiful gesture, Zhenya still managed to pull his penis all the way out and then forcefully thrust it back in immediately. The inner wall was scratched continuously without a chance to cope.

"Ah, Ah... Ugh, it hurts...Ah, haaaa.."

Every time he was stabbed, Kwon Taek Joo's stomach throbbed and tingled deep inside. His vision was also getting blurrier at the same time and he was constantly out of breath. Even though he was not mentally alert, he still felt the feeling of the penis moving in and out with unusual clarity. After all, no matter how crazy it is, it's impossible not to know that such a huge mass of flesh is thrusting into the bottom.

The sound of air could be heard from where the skin was intertwined and something slippery, whether it was semen or gel, spilled out.

"Ugh, ugh... Ah, what's wrong, huh! Ha, why is that so..."

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't finish his words because Zhenya continued to penetrate his ass deeply. He just can't understand why. No, when and how did he meet him?

Apparently Kwon Taek Joo went to the alumni reunion. He met Yuna Hyun and were drinking together, but he didn't remember anything between them. Did he return home on his own two feet? Or did Zhenya go there personally? An uneasy thought arose.

But he didn't have time to think for even a moment, because Zhenya leaned down even more and carried his own weight. His knees were draped under Kwon Taek Joo's waist. Zhenya's arms wrapped around his wet back and held his shoulders tightly from behind. The back of his thighs pressed against Zhenya's chest and stuck together, as if his body was completely folded in half and fixed to him. The connected body parts appear intact.

[Uh uh...]

An intense pain shot through Kwon Taek Joo's lower back. The pressure from above was so great that he couldn't move, he felt like he might die from being crushed by Zhenya, his hands aimlessly clinging to the bed sheet. Zhenya still paid no attention and boldly entered and exited the hole.

[Ah! Ah, Ah... uhm, take it out.]

"Taek Joo..."

Zhenya lay down further and gently kissed Kwon Taek Joo's face and neck, sweetly clinging and calling his name while tearing his bottom mercilessly. It felt like everything in Kwon Taek Joo's stomach was beaten so hard that there was nothing left, his insides also spasmed endlessly and then clung tightly to Zhenya's penis. Enjoying the sweet tightness, Zhenya continuously scratched the inner wall and then suddenly slid out. As Kwon Taek Joo was trying to get used to the feeling, he pressed his bottom together and rubbed it so hard that it pushed against his balls. The unpleasant burning sensation made his fingertips and toes tingle.

Pushed to the limit, Kwon Taek Joo punched Zhenya's arm but because he had drunk a lot of alcohol, he could not muster any strength. Zhenya bit his warm earlobe and rubbed the bottom together without a gap. He rubbed so hard that part of his balls seemed to slide inside. Kwon Taek Joo struggled with excitement and pain, then patted Zhenya's shoulder again.

[Uh uh... do whatever you want...ah ugh...]

"... Taek Joo?"

Zhenya's movements stopped in surprise. He grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's hand that was continuously hitting his shoulder and looked down at his face. Kwon Taek Joo continued to mumble incomprehensible words with a tired face.

[Uh... If you want to go, go quickly, don't confuse others.]

"I don't know what you're talking about. It's not you who's angry, it's me. Are you planning on being a victim?"

Zhenya sneered as if that was absurd. It was Kwon Taek Joo who lied to him. It felt like a betrayal of Zhenya's long sincere wait for him. I went to a class reunion and then like this.

But Kwon Taek Joo showed absolutely no signs of apology, on the contrary, he was even colder. Perhaps because he was drunk, old emotions came rushing back, thoughts he had tried to suppress until now exploded when his reason weakened. Kwon Taek Joo gasped with

shaking shoulders then reached out to pinch Zhenya's cheek. His eyes were filled with anger as he looked at the stupid man.

"Hey, Taek Joo. Why were you drunk there..."

"Betrothal?"

A completely unpredictable word popped out, Kwon Taek Joo's assertion seemed to be more than just because the two were making intense love.

"No way, you bastard."

"...Ha? Because of that, are you like this?"

"No matter what you say, I can't give up. I can't do anything even if you're alone."

Zhenya didn't know exactly what Kwon Taek Joo wanted to say. He was just surprised that the complaint had no precise subject or object. However, he was drunk and spoke his mind. He's straightforward and sharp in everything, but Kwon Taek Joo is very clumsy when it comes to expressing his true feelings, and he doesn't seem to mind the engagement either.

Unexpectedly, Kwon Taek Joo's resolute tone suddenly became weak.

"Can you look at me for a moment? Even..."

The grumbles completely subsided. The hand that was pulling Zhenya's cheek also fell helplessly. He suddenly woke up, behaved violently and then fell back asleep. A warm breath escaped from Kwon Taek Joo's slightly parted lips.

"It's hard to guess."

Zhenya quietly pressed his lips to Kwon Taek Joo's cheeks and hot lips. Static electricity gently increased. Zhenya kissed him affectionately and thrust hard again where he left off.

"For now, just sleep well."

The two figures entwined as one and never left each other after that.

Kwon Taek Joo's finger twitched slightly when he woke up. A languid sigh and a small moan came out at the same time. His whole body ached everywhere. His mind was still fuzzy. Kwon Taek Joo buried his head in the blanket and hesitated a little more, but a series of continuous shaking sounds prevented rest.

He couldn't even open his eyes and just fumbled on the bed. Even with just that much movement, the muscles throughout his body were still screaming. Kwon Taek Joo groaned while looking for his still noisy phone. The phone came to his hand after a while of groping.

Kwon Taek Joo raised his eyebrows in frustration. After struggling for a while, he finally opened the security lock. He was wondering what the alarm was when the SNS message seemed to explode on the phone screen. It seemed like there were about 300 unread messages sent, mostly from group chats with classmates.

It seems Yoon Jong Woo sent 50 of them. The number of missed calls alone exceeded 100. About 20 of them were from Yoon Jong Woo, his mother, and Yuna Hyun, and the remaining calls were marked as 'Zhenya'.

[...What is this?]

Kwon Taek Joo checks messages from Yoon Jong Woo. He reported the situation almost every 10 minutes after Kwon Taek Joo left. Shortly after midnight, his contact became frequent.

[Senior, are you still far away? Yevgeny has discovered that the senior is lying ツ ツ His expression is not very good Please pick up the phone ツ ツ ]

Kwon Taek Joo could feel Yoon Jong Woo's sense of urgency in every word. In the last message, it was written 'Mr. Yevgeny suddenly disappeared'. Right at that moment, Kwon Taek Joo's phone caught fire.

Then entering the group chat of old friends, the first thing he saw was what the Russian ambassador had said. Kwon Taek Joo froze. Immediately, his head cleared and his eyes opened wide. He went back to the top and read each message piled up.

The classmates who stayed until the end were talking about Zhenya's appearance. It's the story of a drunk Kwon Taek Joo about to be taken home in a taxi when a Bugatti appears and a gorgeous foreigner gets out to take him away. Someone even found Zhenya's official profile and posted it. The news below is that for a while, it seemed like the group was fighting fiercely to see whether Kwon Taek Joo's job was as a diplomat or a bodyguard. Some people also wondered why Zhenya was involved in a private schedule when it was a business relationship.

With that alone, Kwon Taek Joo had a general grasp of the situation. He groaned and scratched his head. He shouldn't have drank too much.

'That person is the one who defeated the stubborn Kwon Taek Joo.'

After talking with Yuna Hyun, he felt more complicated. Kwon Taek Joo kept thinking about Zhenya and thinking about the many things he had experienced recently, then he felt his mood become vague. The two of them had only met for a year, and it wasn't like they had promised each other the rest of their lives. Furthermore, Zhenya is not interested in meeting other people even though he is engaged. He used to be such a person. It's not that you don't know. On the contrary, Kwon Taek Joo should feel relieved because that is also what he wanted. But in reality it is not like that. He thoughtlessly enjoyed being with the monster, and he felt disgusted with himself.

[Bad guy.]

Kwon Taek Joo cursed and stood up only to hug his back and groan. He couldn't put enough force into his spine to the point where he wondered if the spinal joint would dislocate, because even with the slightest movement it creaked and made him shiver.

Every time he woke up, Kwon Taek Joo remembers that Zhenya was still on top of him. Even when Kwon Taek Joo collapsed and fell asleep, he always did what he wanted, but yesterday seemed more serious.

He staggered out of the bedroom. Looking at the mirror hanging on the wall on the way, he was no different from a corpse. His body's condition was miserable, it seemed faster to find a place without tooth marks, there were many places where blood had gathered into a dark blue

color from being bitten and sucked. His lips were swollen as if they were about to explode and his eyes were dull. Even when he sat still and accidentally touched his nipple, it stung and he moaned unconsciously.

[Ah..]

Zhenya usually bites and sucks like a dog, but when he's angry, Zhenya often bites as if he's really determined. At times like that, he didn't know if he was making love or being sucked blood out of him.

[This damn bastard, where did he go?]

Kwon Taek Joo looked around. For some reason, the house seemed empty. He opened the quiet bathroom door and went out onto the terrace. Zhenya was nowhere to be seen. He's not the type of person who goes to work on weekdays, but today is clearly Sunday. There was no way he would go see his mother, let alone the embassy, and leave Kwon Taek Joo at home. Did Zhenya go to the convenience store alone again?

He decided to take a shower first. Just the water pouring into his body made his skin tingle inside. No matter how many times he has experienced it, Kwon Taek Joo has never gotten used to that feeling.

He got out of the bathroom later than usual. It's still cold in the house. Kwon Taek Joo picked up the phone to try calling Zhenya. A vibrating sound rang out at the right moment, but it was not a call from Zhenya. Three letters appeared on the screen, 'Yuna Hyun'. If he had met Zhenya, he would have been quite surprised. He had to check to see what the situation was like. Kwon Taek Joo touched the call button.

[Uh.]

[Kwon Taek Joo, are you still alive?]

[If you're dead, how can you answer that?]

[Your voice doesn't sound right? It seems like being drunk is no joke, right?]

[Did you call to check on that?]

Just then, Kwon Taek Joo felt a presence outside the door. He raised his head and looked out into the hallway leading to the front door. Not long after, his eyes met Zhenya's as he entered. The guy didn't say anything but just stared at Kwon Taek Joo and then walked into the kitchen. A cold air enveloped me. Zhenya seemed angry again.

[No. I will leave the country after the ceremony. It will probably be difficult to see you again before then so I will send you a wedding invitation, so remember to bring your beautiful lover, okay?]

[Oh....]

Kwon Taek Joo glanced at Zhenya. He was arranging the newly purchased things while looking across at Kwon Taek Joo with a very dissatisfied expression.

[I'll consider it, if I'm not busy with work at that time.]

[This is the wedding of the century for your only friend. You seem to be very popular with your superiors, is that okay?]

[What are you talking about again?]

[That's right. What superior would personally pick up a drunk subordinate and also call continuously late at night, even on weekends.]

[No, it's just... There's urgent business at the embassy. Because I missed important documents and didn't post them...]

Kwon Taek Joo awkwardly made an excuse. He didn't even know what he was talking about and awkwardly shook his head slowly. He can't remember important details so now it's hard.

Zhenya witnessed those strange actions, frowned and crossed his arms.

[It's not like you have something to do with that superior, right?]

[There's nothing wrong with that! Are you still sober?]

[No, because I found that man's eyes very unusual. If you don't have that mindset then be careful.]

[Ya, if you say strange things then hang up.]

[You are so rigid. Even if it's not you, maybe your superior is like that so remember what I said.]

[Stop talking nonsense. Go well.]

[Don't forget to come to my wedding.]

He hung up after saying everything he wanted to say. The surrounding quickly became quiet. Kwon Taek Joo took the phone away from his ear and looked at Zhenya. The guy withdrew his gaze and focused on arranging the furniture. Anyway, I told Zhenya to stop collecting ramen, but he still bought it and brought it back.

Kwon Taek Joo walked around because he felt something was wrong. Anyway, Zhenya's lie was true so he wanted to justify or apologize.

"Hey, yesterday..."

"You made me very happy."

"No, that is..."

"Are you happy? To the point of completely forgetting you like that."

"I'm just going to let them know I'm still alive for a bit and then come back."

"So you're always drunk? You also did not receive calls. Ah, or did you intentionally not pick up the phone?"

Zhenya repeated sarcastically. Why did you drink so much? Kwon Taek Joo felt a bit resentful but that's another story, at first glance, deceiving Zhenya was wrong.

"I promised to attend so I couldn't not come. It's been 10 years so I want to see everyone once again."

"Who do you miss so much? Was that girl just talking on the phone?"

"What are you imagining? It's not like that, this kid."

"If that's not the case, why do you have to lie?"

"Because you will have a strange misunderstanding like now..."

Zhenya shook his head as if he didn't want to hear any more while Kwon Taek Joo actively explained. He even acted like he didn't need to explain every detail.

"Taek Joo. Don't be confused. I am free only because you did so, that you let me do what I want, right now."

People don't change easily, and Zhenya is still just as threatening. He pretended to be extremely concerned about what they should have between lovers. Zhenya is more effortful, patient and accommodating than ever, and threatening in such an obvious manner.

"That means I'm willing to accept your complaints even if you try to deceive me."

The words that followed were, in a way, a coaxing word for Kwon Taek Joo.

"If you want to know where I am, who I'm meeting, what I'm doing, if you're obsessed and want to tie me down, then go ahead."

"...What?"

"Whether it's engagement or marriage, if you don't like it, why don't you say it directly? At least then I'll still find you cute."

"What nonsense are you talking about all of a sudden?"

"You said not to do that, that you would kill me if I ran away or disappeared from your sight, right?"

"I'll kill you?"

"You threaten me in all kinds of languages."

Kwon Taek Joo's ears perked up. His heart started beating fast. What nonsense are you doing? His eyes wandered astray, glancing around. The heat spread to the back of his neck immediately. It was a rare sign of confusion from Kwon Taek Joo.

Zhenya wondered if that was all he wanted to say, then in a slow tone, he revealed more of his shameful actions last night.

"I cried all night and asked you to look towards me."

"Oh, Funny! No way."

"No, you did, Taek Joo."

Zhenya affirmed firmly and then step by step approached Kwon Taek Joo. He didn't want to see the face that appeared in his memory, and he couldn't even look into Zhenya's staring eyes.

When Kwon Taek Joo pushed Zhenya to avoid that gaze, Zhenya wrapped his arms around his waist and pulled him back. He grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's chin and turned Kwon Taek Joo's head forward. Their eyes met so close that their noses touched each other. Zhenya looked as if licking Kwon Taek Joo's eyes.

"Don't worry anymore. I will never disappear. I will no longer be by your side when you are dead." Both arms holding Kwon Taek Joo tightened. It hurt, but he felt the heaviness in his heart and seemed to be relieved."

"So unless you want me to kill you with my own hands, don't think about it anymore."

Even a romantic confession feels so cold. Actually, Kwon Taek Joo himself is no better. He laughed because it was so silly. Zhenya's face turned displeased, thinking he was laughing. Kwon Taek Joo pulled Zhenya's ears to kiss those lips. The guy's dissatisfied face suddenly relaxed. As their lips continuously touched each other, Zhenya's transparent eyes were filled with surprise. If Kwon Taek Joo himself actively shows closeness, Zhenya always has such a pure reaction. So to others, he is a monster, but in Kwon Taek Joo's eyes, Zhenya is an angel.

"Um...."

Kwon Taek Joo doesn't know if he's okay? Aren't you lonely when you're next to me? Have you ever been tired?

As I was about to ask, the phone rang, but it wasn't from Kwon Taek Joo's phone. He tilted his chin toward the phone, which kept ringing, but Zhenya sat down at the table and patiently waited for the next loving touches from Kwon Taek Joo. The guy didn't even intend to answer the phone.

With no other choice, Kwon Taek Joo checked his phone. An unfamiliar number appeared on the screen, and it wasn't a domestic call either. While he was still hesitant to answer, the call was disconnected.

Zhenya didn't care at all and just stuck his lips to Kwon Taek Joo's neck and whispered "Taek Joo". He tilted his head and hugged Zhenya's head. Kwon Taek Joo ran his long fingers through his soft ivory hair and gently stroked his scalp. Zhenya inhaled deeper. The guy who had been rubbing his straight nose against Kwon Taek Joo's neck and ears to enjoy the body smell, suddenly stuck his tongue up his protruding neck. Sensitive places became wet and Kwon Taek Joo's emotions began to change. He rubbed Zhenya's ears, stroking and comforting it.

At that moment, the vibrating sound rang out again. Still the same number. He didn't know who it was, but it seemed they had urgent business to contact. Kwon Taek Joo was about to press the button to receive the call but Zhenya suddenly bit his lip. It was like a silent protest for him not to accept that call. Kwon Taek Joo tilted his head and smiled, and while covering the approaching Zhenya's mouth, he answered the phone.

[Hello?]

"Huh? Who is that?"

The person who suddenly asked was a young woman who spoke Russian. Kwon Taek Joo felt a deep sense of déjà vu. He was surprised and wondered if the other person felt the same way.

"Taek Joo?"

The voice was definitely Olga's.

## Chapter 5.20 – Side Story

Format Note: This is a quick reminder. { } is for English, [ ] is for Korean and “ ” is for Russian dialogues.

"Taek Joo! Long time no see."

Olga smiled brightly and opened the door. Zhenya passed her and went inside first. Olga did not even pay attention to her brother.

"When did you come?"

"Last night. That guy didn't say anything?"

"No problem."

"Knew it. You know, last night he threw me here and left me alone, not bothering to answer all the phone calls."

Olga grumbled continuously. Kwon Taek Joo has nothing to say. He firmly believes that the reason Zhenya left Olga alone was to personally pick up Kwon Taek Joo. After that the two made love from dawn until sunrise, so there was no time to hear news from Olga.

Kwon Taek Joo coughed and changed the subject.

"Why did you suddenly come here?"

"Why? After all, We are blood relatives, so I came to see how he is living alone in a far away country."

"He's not a child, is he? Why do you have no conscience like that? If I let him come here, I shouldn't have worried about him but about this country."

"That's what I mean. Did you understand differently? Everyone at home is worried that that person will cause trouble again and cause diplomatic friction. Nothing special has happened yet, right?"

Sure enough, even though they knew it was so, they still sent him away, clearly on purpose. At this point, shamelessness seems to run in the family.

"It was to meet Taek Joo and see what kind of country Korea is."

It seems that the real purpose is the latter.

Kwon Taek Joo entered the mansion. The first thing that caught his eye were the bags placed haphazardly on the living room floor. There are three of them in the largest size. He didn't know how many days Olga intended to stay. Kwon Taek Joo felt like he just had another problem.

"Have you had lunch yet?"

"I'm waiting."

"Have you already ordered?"

"Yes."

"How did you call?"

"Just order the food, is there any other way?"

Olga looked as if she didn't know why Kwon Taek Joo asked her that question. Did Zhenya master in one day what he barely learned after living in Korea for a year? Or is he already surprisingly fluent in Korean?

"First, sit down. Would you like some fruit?"

Olga opened the large bag from the convenience store and took out the fruit. There are oranges, melons, pineapples and grapes. She bought a lot of things when she was alone. There are three or four more bags like that. Convenience stores don't have anything else to buy, but the two brothers' shopping trips are very similar.

"Because Korea is a warm country, I thought the fruit would taste better, but apparently that's not the case."

"Because I bought it at a convenience store, that's why. No matter what, you should go directly to the traditional market to buy fruit."

"Really? Then let's go there too."

What do you mean 'We're going there too'? The implications are strange. Before being unnecessarily misunderstood and disappointed, Kwon Taek Joo clearly stated his point of view.

"I didn't mean I'll go with you. I don't have time to go with you."

"Are you pretending to be busy? It is said that yesterday you also met friends and drank alcohol. I'm playing like this now."

"Yesterday and today are weekends."

"I know. I didn't tell you to use work time to go out. I heard that Korean civil servants leave work at 6pm? It is said that hours can be adjusted flexibly if you do freelance work like Taek Joo."

Who taught her those things? At least not Zhenya. Proof of this is the way he's been looking at his sister with his arms crossed all this time.

"Actually, when I came here, I didn't have any big expectations because Korea is a small country. Looking at the map, it looks like a bean, and it's divided in half. But it has developed a lot, hasn't it? Sanitary conditions and services are good, people are refined, roads seem more congested than in Moscow."

"Whoever sees it will know it is a giant. Are you arrogant about your country or is your personality like that?"

"Because it's really small? Anyway, it's great because it doesn't look like a country at war."

"It's still the same as before. Everyone here is in a constant state of military tension."

"Um. It's really difficult. Just wipe out the other side, why are you guys so slow?"

Olga shrugged indifferently. Compared to Zhenya, she seems normal, but she still occasionally reminds Kwon Taek Joo that she is a member of the Bogdanov family.

"Ah, the food is also delicious. As soon as I arrived, I ate my fill of Korean BBQ. I want to visit ancient palaces abroad at least once. I heard they open them at night too, so I went there yesterday."

Olga wanted to make the most of her short time. On one hand, Kwon Taek Joo wondered who was with her. There was no way Zhenya would do such a kind thing, because he was continuing to protest silently towards Olga.

"Oh, I took pictures too. Do you want to see it?"

Olga ignored Zhenya's gaze and took out her phone. There were about 100 photos taken in the palace. In Kwon Taek Joo's eyes, the setting, composition, and characters show that these are definitely not selfies, or did she hire a photographer? He wondered who would work so hard, taking photos for others, if not for work.

While Kwon Taek Joo was listening to this and that from Olga, the intercom system suddenly rang. "Here we are," Olga said and jumped up from her seat. Looks like the pre-ordered lunch has arrived. Kwon Taek Joo didn't suspect anything and followed her.

The person who opened the door and walked in was none other than Yoon Jong Woo. He smiled and greeted me like an idiot, but as soon as he met Kwon Taek Joo, he was stunned.

[Wait, senior. Are you here too?]

[What are you doing here?]

[Ah, that...]

Yoon Jong Woo rolled his eyes looking for an excuse. Just in time, Olga walked out.

{Come in. What dish did you recommend yesterday?}

{Ah. here. I didn't know what you wanted, so I bought all the famous things here.}

{Wow, you're so kind. Come in.}

Olga happily invited Yoon Jong Woo into the house. Yoon Jong Woo looked around the mansion strangely and followed Olga to the table and immediately flinched when he saw Zhenya sitting there.

{Haha, Yevgeny-shi is also here...}

He laughed, but his voice sank.

The dish Yoon Jong Woo bought is kimbap, famous for its special ingredients such as cucumber and eggs, rolled in grilled seaweed leaves, dipped in mustard sauce.

[Yoon Jong Woo.]

[..Yes?]

[Explain. How do you two know each other?]

[We have become friends. Yesterday, she said it was her first time coming to Korea, so I took her out.]

At this point, all the pieces of the puzzle have been put together. Kwon Taek Joo understood that Olga ate Korean BBQ as soon as she arrived, went to see the palace at night, and even took hundreds of photos. When he entrusted Zhenya to Yoon Jong Woo, he was worried about how the two would spend their time, but it seemed like that was overblown. Seeing Yoon Jong Woo always smiling at Olga, the feeling of guilt towards him suddenly disappeared.

[I told you to be friends with that bastard, I didn't tell you to be friends with his sister.]

As if there was nothing left to say, Yoon Jong Woo curled his lips and swallowed. However, Zhenya, who was sitting next to him, gently raised his chin and puffed out his chest with an arrogant expression.

(He is definitely now fluent in Korean, look at him acting like he was complimented.)

Seeing that, Yoon Jong Woo became restless and looked at Kwon Taek Joo. He seemed to know something.

[Yes.]

[Yes?]

[Why can't you look me in the eyes?]

[I.. I, when?]

[What, right now?]

[Ah, don't tease me!]

[Do you know why that bastard is like that?]

[Yes? I don't know!]

[You know that]

[I said I don't know!]

[You know.]

[...Ah, Yes. I'm close to Yevgeny-sshi, ask him.]

[If I can ask, why should I say anything? It's so frustrating...]

{Wow! This is really delicious. You two should try it too..}

After arguing for a while, Olga suddenly invited the two of them to eat gimbap

. Kwon Taek Joo stuffed a few pieces of gimbap into his mouth and chewed voraciously, while chewing while staring at Yoon Jong Woo. Yoon Jong Woo just looked down with his cheeks moving, occasionally nodding eagerly to Olga's questions.

How long has it been? The silent phone suddenly rang. It was a phone call from Kwon Taek Joo's mother. He pressed the button to receive the call.

[Yes, mother. I'm planning to go home now. Do you need to buy anything?]

His mother said she was preparing dinner and asked Kwon Taek Joo if he wanted anything to eat. He couldn't get over his hangover and craved cold soup. While Kwon Taek Joo was still thinking about a suitable menu, Yoon Jong Woo suddenly interrupted.

[Mom, how are you? I'm Jong Woo.]

[Oh, Jong Woo? Are you with Taek Joo?]

[...Yes, hm...]

Kwon Taek Joo pushed Yoon Jong Woo, who was stuck on his phone. Only at times like this is he friendly and bothers him. His mother was happy to hear his voice after a long time.

[Don't do that, Jong Woo should come here too. Mom will cook for everyone to eat together.]

[No, Mom. Today is the weekend. He also wants to rest, but doesn't want to go to his superior's house.]

[No mom! I'm free today!]

He didn't know how to pay attention and raised his voice. Kwon Taek Joo tried to wink and silently warn, but to no avail. Even his mother heard Yoon Jong Woo's voice.

[Right. Be sure to bring him here. Mom will cook the rib stew that Jong Woo likes.]

[Thanks Mom. See you soon!]

[Okay, see you soon. Oh, if the ambassador has time, please invite him. Mom talked on the phone earlier but I don't know if he understood clearly.]

Ah. A sigh came from deep inside. I wonder when his mother called Zhenya. Was it when Kwon Taek Joo was still lying on his bed? Isn't that crazy guy saying obscene things that shouldn't be said again? Kwon Taek Joo glanced at Zhenya. His face looked back innocently as if asking why Kwon Taek Joo looked like that. He didn't know why they were diligently calling each other when they couldn't even understand what the other person was saying.

Kwon Taek Joo sighed and said, [I know.]

"Who called?"

Olga's voice reminded Kwon Taek Joo of her presence as soon as he finished talking on the phone. "Whose voice is so different?" She showed intense curiosity.

Ah, there's also her here.

Kwon Taek Joo stared at Zhenya again. The guy didn't seem to care much. It seemed like the person who brought his sister into the mansion he had only visited a few times wouldn't care what she would do today. Kwon Taek Joo wants to leave everything behind and go home alone. But he couldn't because he had agreed to take them home and his mother would prepare suitable food according to the number of people. You also can't leave someone who comes from far away just because she's annoying.

Kwon Taek Joo suddenly felt tired. He sighed as if the ground was about to collapse.

A shopping bag suddenly flew in. Kwon Taek Joo caught it, if he had been a little slower it would have flown into him. Not knowing how much he had bought, he stopped Olga with a tired look.

"Ya, let's go home."

God, I was invited anyway. How could I come empty handed? People should be ashamed."

"I wasn't invited, I just accidentally barged in."

{That's beautiful. Please show me that one too.}

Just as she was getting to the point, Olga ignored her and turned to

engrossed in shopping. Kwon Taek Joo understood why Zhenya said that if he was going to go with 'that' he would go first.

(He is talking about Olga as 'that')

It took two hours just to decide what clothes and accessories to wear. Kwon Taek Joo waited an hour and a half at the hair and makeup salon. He didn't think she was coming to a meal but to some kind of a party.

Olga went around many famous shops. Yoon Jong Woo calls himself a porter and has already filled all ten fingers with things. If this keeps up, he will probably carry things with his mouth.

"Don't buy anymore, let's go. There's no place for this."

"Hmm, no brand at all. Inventory is also gone."

Olga does not listen to what others say and only complains unreasonably. Noble bastards. Kwon Taek Joo tensed up and muttered to himself. Yoon Jong Woo who was walking next to him suddenly pulled away, saying, [It sounded more like a compliment than a curse.] The kid is so slow to understand.

[Hmm... since I don't know what he will like. give me this, this and this too.]

In the end, Olga tried to buy all the scarves of different colors. Kwon Taek Joo couldn't bear to watch anymore so he grabbed the card she held out.

[Enough. Thank you for these items.]

"No, what's wrong... I haven't seen the shoes yet."

Olga sadly looked back at the scarf she hadn't bought it yet. If she was going to buy shoes, Kwon Taek Joo wouldn't be able to have dinner. He refused the request for alcohol and went home.

When we arrived at the basement parking lot, Zhenya's Bugatti was already parked there. Today they occupied all 3 parking spaces. Olga recognized her brother's car and angrily clicked her tongue.

"I can't touch it, but I can put an electric saw on the parking lot, and if it crosses the line, cut it off immediately. If that's the case then that person can't treat me like that."

That's how you prove that you are a member of the Bogdanov family. Luckily, Yoon Jong Woo doesn't know Russian.

Kwon Taek Joo could barely get into the elevator because he had too much luggage. He unlocked the door with his little finger and opened the front door with difficulty. Olga exclaimed.

"Is this Taek Joo's house? I expected that but it's really small."

The modest house is 48 pyeong.

(158 square meters)

"It's just that my house is unnecessarily big."

While Kwon Taek Joo grumbled, his mother opened the main door and walked out. She was cooking and wearing a lace apron. It seems completely new. He hadn't even seen the house dress worn under it. If only Yoon Jong Woo had been brought, his mother wouldn't have dressed like that.

Olga quickly walked over and gave his mother the bouquet of flowers she had bought. It was so big that she was buried in the flowers.

"Hello ma'am. Nice to meet you. Thank you for the invitation."

[Please come in. Phew. I'm very grateful for coming, but why is this? Taek Joo, is this the ambassador's sister? She is as beautiful as a fairy.]

His mother was delighted and her eyes sparkled. To Zhenya, he is an angel, but to Olga, she is a fairy. Would she still think the same when she knew how they were born and raised in the family?

Yoon Jong Woo was almost crushed in a pile of furniture, sticking his head out.

[Mom, I'm coming too.]

[Hey, Jong Woo should come in quickly too. Long time no see? Why has it been so difficult to meet you lately? If you want to eat, come anytime. My face is only half sunken.]

[I always wanted to come. If no one notices then...]

The whispers were so low that no one could hear them. Even with that, he immediately shut his mouth under Kwon Taek Joo's staring eyes.

[Let's go in. The ambassador has been waiting for a long time.]

Kwon Taek Joo followed his excited mother into the living room. Zhenya was sitting at the table enjoying a refreshing drink as usual. His mother

must have been very busy preparing the meal, but she still carefully cut the pear for him. Sometimes it seemed that his mother valued Zhenya more than her son.

"You returned really quickly."

Zhenya said as he chewed a pear. Kwon Taek Joo looked at that calm face and gritted his teeth.

"If you know her that much, you should have told me, you brat."

"I tried it."

"I have to try harder, be more determined to prevent it."

"You're strangely angry again."

Zhenya was surprised and then stuck his fork into a piece of pear. Kwon Taek Joo grabbed the guy's hand and bit the pear and ate it. The pear is cut into bite-sized pieces, delicious and crispy, cooling the whole mouth. Energy was lost from the long wait and shopping seemed to surge again. [It's delicious,] Kwon Taek Joo had just finished speaking when Zhenya put the remaining pear on the fork into his mouth. It seems that he enjoys interesting jokes more than emotional actions. Whatever, It's okay to be cute.

Kwon Taek Joo was enjoying the pleasant atmosphere and eating what Zhenya gave him when his mother passed by and hit him on the back.

[What's wrong with you? Why do you keep taking the ambassador's food?]

[It's not taking, it's 'giving'...]

[Don't just stand there, help mom clear the table.]

[...I'm planning to do it too.]

It's unfair, but it's true that Kwon Taek Joo ate the pear. He stood up and cleared the table.

Together with Yoon Jong Woo, he placed the spoon, scooped the rice and diligently carried the food his mother had prepared. Kwon Taek Joo asked for a simple meal but the table was quickly full.

Meanwhile, Olga looked around the house alone. When she found young Kwon Taek Joo in a photo frame his mother displayed, she giggled and then didn't hesitate to point. Kwon Taek Joo's mother saw her and complimented her that she seemed to have a very cheerful personality.

The food has been served and is ready for the table for 6 people. Yeonpo soup is boiling on the stove. Every time his mother had a meal with Zhenya, he always put a clear stew containing fish or seafood on the table. That's why Zhenya likes Russian style fish soup called [Uha.]

[Come on, even though I didn't prepare much, please eat a lot.]

[Wow. When did Mom prepare all this? Today is the Mid-Autumn Festival.]

Yoon Jong Woo made a fuss. Olga was busy looking at the colorful dishes with wide eyes. It's not wrong because none of the dishes are roughly made. The pancakes are decorated with chili and wormwood, and the fish dishes have colorful fried eggs. Even the chestnuts, radishes and carrots added to the rib stew are cut into round shapes.

[I will eat well,] Kwon Taek Joo said and prepared to drink. Suddenly, his mother stood up from the chair. It seems like something was missed. She quickly turned around and placed a fork in front of Zhenya. There is only one fruit fork in the house. Kwon Taek Joo and his brother have been using chopsticks since they were children because they did not like Western food. The fork seems completely new. Kwon Taek Joo wondered if his mother had specially bought it. Zhenya silently smiled. His mother also smiled happily.

Yoon Jong Woo and Olga watched the situation strangely. Even Kwon Taek Joo was not used to this scene, so the two of them must have been very surprised.

His mother introduced braised short ribs to Olga and said [Oh.]

[I wonder what you were thinking. He didn't think about the fact that the ambassador's sister probably wasn't used to using chopsticks either. What should I do?]

Kwon Taek Joo's mother was confused as if she had made a big mistake. Olga observantly looked at the situation and dismissed her worries.

"Ah, you can do it like this."

Olga confidently picked up a piece of ribs with two chopsticks. But she couldn't put it in her bowl. The fatty meat slid along the chopsticks, fell onto the table, fell to the ground and rolled around. Every time that happens, Yoon Jong Woo and his mother feel regretful. Zhenya, on the other hand, only laughed at his sister's fierce trial and failure. Kwon Taek Joo tapped Zhenya's hand.

"This. Give me the fork."

"Why me?"

"How does she eat like that?"

"It's none of your business."

"If you leave it like that, my mother will go buy a fork right away. Let's not cause each other any more trouble."

[Hmm?] Kwon Taek Joo said as he put the meatballs on Zhenya's rice. It was an action without any particular thought but a strange silence passed. When he raised his head, everyone was looking at Kwon Taek Joo. Zhenya also stared at the round meatball placed on his rice as if something strange had happened.

"What's wrong?"

"No, then I'll use this."

Olga gave a meaningful smile and took the fork. His mother also said with a satisfied face to eat quickly.

During meals, Zhenya only picks side dishes that he can eat. The guy who always talks a lot about this and that is strangely quiet today. Kwon Taek Joo quietly placed the stir-fried anchovies with red pepper sauce on top of the rice because he thought it would be fine for him. The guy quickly blushed and drank water, but he also didn't argue about whether Kwon Taek Joo did it on purpose like usual.

Olga ate the new dishes little by little. Unlike Zhenya, she can easily eat spicy dishes. Yoon Jong Woo occasionally explained the main ingredients, flavor substitutions, and nutritional content of the dish. At the dining table, Korean, Russian and English are naturally mixed.

"Ah!"

Olga spotted something during the meal and pointed at it. That's kimchi. She told curious people how she had planned to throw away the kimchi when she first saw it because she thought it was spoiled. The burst of laughter

made

everyone in a happy mood. Although communication languages are different, it is not difficult to share moments like this.

The mother looked at the four of them with satisfaction, constantly picking up food and encouraging them to eat more.

[I wonder how long it's been since Mom did something like this.]

[Just call me, I can come every day, mom.]

Yoon Jong Woo scooped up more rice while swaying. The mother was happy and poured more soup for him.

[I won't refuse.]

Yoon Jong Woo who was responding happily was suddenly taken aback, because besides Kwon Taek Joo who was always keeping an eye on him, even Zhenya was looking at him coldly. Did he say something wrong? Even so, there was no way Zhenya, who didn't know Korean, would understand.

After placing the bowl of soup in front of Yoon Jong Woo, the mother asked if Zhenya wanted more. The guy's sharp eyes then gradually calmed down. Yoon Jong Woo was silent and speechless.

[Those are not empty words, so please come often. Mom is also not good at eating alone, so you are always welcome. It's okay if Taek Joo doesn't know. Huh?]

[Yes, mother.]

[The same goes for the Ambassador. Please visit often even after your term ends.]

The mother soon expressed her regret and repeatedly asked. Kwon Taek Joo's hand that was engrossed in the meal suddenly stopped.

Typically, an ambassador's term is about

two years. By that standard, it's less than a year away. Kwon Taek Joo never thought about what would happen after that. One year from now, will Zhenya still be here, next to Kwon Taek Joo, like now? Does he ever want to return to his hometown?

"Don't worry anymore. I will never disappear. I won't be by your side when you're dead."

(I think this is a flashback from what Zhenya said)

Kwon Taek Joo couldn't be more certain but strangely he didn't feel relieved. Once again, he had a lot on his mind.

## Chapter 5.21 – Side Story

Uninvited guests even drink tea after the meal before getting up. The time was almost midnight. Kwon Taek Joo's mother usually goes to bed early, today she walked out the front door to see everyone off.

[Children, be careful and come again. Jong Woo, please be careful when driving at night.]

[Yes. I ate well and played happily. Thanks Mom.]

Everyone said goodbye and greeted each other again. Olga took her hand and said she hoped they would see each other again soon. Kwon Taek Joo pulled her out of his mother's arms and pushed her into the elevator. The mother followed and gently stroked her back like a child. Finally, Everyone entered the elevator.

Olga and Yoon Jong Woo are busy talking to each other. Most of the time, Yoon Jong Woo explained what Olga was curious about. It seemed this time he was talking about the electronic display board installed in the elevator.

Keeping his eyes fixed on the dashboard, Kwon Taek Joo felt a stare staring at his back but it was hard to react anyway. He hesitated to show off his relationship with Zhenya in front of Yoon Jong Woo and Olga, even though she seemed to understand the situation. The distance between him and Zhenya is currently less than a beat, as if they could touch each other at any moment, making him feel even more awkward. The time to get to the parking lot suddenly took longer than ever.

Yoon Jona Woo's car appeared first as it exited the elevator. He is the most individualistic person in the world and is always the first to leave whenever he attends a dinner party, but today Yoon Jong Woo lingered and continued to talk.

{Today was fun. Thanks to Olga, I also had a delicious dinner.}

[What are you savina? It's because of you that she came here.]

{...}

Yoon Jong Woo ruined his livelihood because of flirting, he enthusiastically saved the situation.

[Olga said she wanted to try kimbap first, otherwise I wouldn't have had anything to come to the mansion and wouldn't have been able to receive my mother's invitation.]

[That's so brave. If so, please thank me. If my mother hadn't given birth to me, would you have known her?]

[Is that true?]

[You're such an eyesore, just go away.]

Kwon Taek Joo pretended to kick Yoon Jong Woo's butt, he reluctantly climbed into the driver's seat and sincerely greeted Olga.

{Olga, goodbye.}

Olga smiled brightly and waved her hand. It took a long time just for Yoon Jong Woo to find the door handle in the car. If he were born in the Joseon Dynasty, he would definitely be fascinated by the nine-tailed fox.

"See you tomorrow, Taek Joo."

Kwon Taek Joo was clicking his tongue in dissatisfaction as he looked at his unpleasant junior when Olga spoke up. The sentence was so absurd that for a moment he thought he had heard it wrong.

"Hey, why don't we meet tomorrow? I still have to work."

Kwon Taek Joo raised his voice to refuse. but Olga pretended not to hear and got into the Bugatti. Are they made up of a gene that doesn't exist in humans? The blood and pus are truly unmistakable, truly terrifying.

Suddenly he looked at Zhenya but he was also staring at the Bugatti. It seems that Kwon Taek Joo is not the only one dissatisfied with the current situation.

"Don't worry, Taek Joo. I will chase it back tonight."

Zhenya shows undisguised hostility towards his sister. It didn't seem like an empty word, so Kwon Taek Joo had to speak up to stop him.

Zhenya shows undisguised hostility towards his sister. It didn't seem like an empty word, so Kwon Taek Joo had to speak up to stop him.

"Isn't it already late... She came here anyway because she was worried about you."

"Who?"

"...Could it be that she only intended to come here to have fun?"

Kwon Taek Joo himself was also uncertain when protecting Olga. Zhenya smirked. Kwon Taek Joo pointed his chin at the Bugatti.

"Scat."

"Let's go?"

Zhenya asked a question while repeating what the other person had just said in a strange tone. Kwon Taek Joo frowned because he thought he was being teased.

"What's wrong?"

"Is that your way of telling me to go away?"

What did Kwon Taek Joo do? His skepticism doubled because of the vague way of speaking of someone who avoided the focus.

"Go quickly. I'm tired."

Kwon Taek Joo urged with an annoyed tone. However, after staring at Kwon Taek Joo for a while, Zhenya suddenly reached out his hand. He tilted his head to avoid the man's arm trying to grab his chin. He also gently pushed his arm away.

"...There's someone else."

"Not at all."

Kwon Taek Joo grimaced and turned away. When he reached the elevator door, the Bugatti had also started. Then two cars exited the

basement parking lot in parallel. Kwon Taek Joo watched until the lights turned off completely and then entered the elevator.

Entering the house, his mother was cleaning the kitchen. Although Kwon Taek Joo washed the dishes first, there was still a lot to do, starting with cleaning up the dishes. She forced him to rest and instead cleaned up after himself.

Kwon Taek Joo returned to his room after taking a shower after midnight. He threw himself onto the bed without hesitation, fatigue setting in even though he hadn't had to do anything strenuous all day. It seemed like he had so much to do over the weekend that the boredom of the past time had disappeared. Kwon Taek Joo even felt like he was enjoying relaxation after a long time.

It's a pity that he wasn't able to spend proper time with Zhenya during the vacation. Thinking back now, Kwon Taek Joo even felt strangely worried, wondering if an emergency had happened and he would be summoned by work again. Did Zhenya get home safely? Or should I try calling? Right at the moment Kwon Taek Joo was thinking and picked up the phone, a vibrating sound rang out at the same time.

[Open door.]

It was a message from Zhenya. Kwon Taek Joo checked the time of sending the message, but a new message had just been sent at that moment.

[What?]

Kwon Taek Joo was confused and sat up. The apartment has only one entrance. He couldn't let go of his doubts, slowly walking forward while trying to make a phone call. Occasionally there was a slight vibration coming from outside the door. Kwon Taek Joo confusedly unlocked and opened the door, he could see Zhenya standing tall through the crack in the door. He lowered his voice and asked.

"What's up? Did you forget something?"

"I told you not to stare at me like an abandoned puppy."

Zhenya said incomprehensible words then suddenly reached out with both hands and held Kwon Taek Joo's face, then walked up and kissed him. Feeling cool lips touching first, then warm breath following, Kwon Taek Joo patted his shoulder and whispered gently.

"Go to my room first."

Kwon Taek Joo held his breath and held Zhenya's arm through the dark hallway and living room. The distance to your room seems endlessly far.

No infiltration strategy had ever made him so nervous.

Kwon Taek Joo took a deep breath after quietly closing the door and started asking about Zhenya, who had kept quiet until then.

"Kid. Why are you suddenly doing things you've never done before?"

"Taek Joo, I told you not to go."

"When did you say that?"

"You're telling me to go with a face full of sadness and regret, does that mean I have to go?"

"I didn't..."

"You're like that every time."

Zhenya teased with an extremely unreasonable tone. What did Kwon Taek Joo do? He always blames others.

Zhenya suddenly reached out and grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's hand, brought it close to his lips and gently rubbed his lips on the back of his hand.

"I made a face of not being able to sleep alone, shouldn't you let me drink warm milk as your lover?"

"What?"

Lips met again between whispers. The tongue that was stiff due to tension was mixed with a warm and soft tongue, pressed firmly inside as if blocking the breath and then sucked so hard that the base of the

tongue felt painful. Even when Kwon Taek Joo turned his head to avoid it. Zhenya quickly followed and kissed him.

When he regained consciousness, Kwon Taek Joo fell onto the bed. The bed for one person became cramped, he struggled and bumped his elbow into the wall and headboard. The kiss was so intense and persistent that he didn't know when it would stop. After a while of trying not to get carried away, Kwon Taek Joo stopped resisting. Continuing to refuse will only stimulate the desire to conquer, it's better to just adjust it moderately and comfort him.

Kwon Taek Joo gently caressed the back of Zhenya's hand holding his face with her thumb and mixed her tongue sweetly. The boy who once relied on strength as his leader gradually became obedient. Kwon Taek Joo turned over and leisurely sucked Zhenya's tongue. He gently pulled the boy's upper lip and gently brushed the guy's solid upper body before exhaling a pleasant breath.

Kwon Taek Joo sucked Zhenya's lower lip until it made a sound and then let go. His lips were placed on the pointed chin and then gradually lowered to kiss the inside of the neck, Zhenya's body trembled slightly. Kwon Taek Joo tilted his head and little by little lifted the hem of Zhenya's shirt, his hand sweeping across the toned abdomen and chest. Zhenya helped him undress, his hand gently rubbing his warm ear and then letting go to play with the rarely messy hair that was tangled in the collar. He breathed slowly and grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's butt with both hands.

Kwon Taek Joo grabbed those hands and slowly pulled them out. He placed his lips along Zhenya's lips, chin, collarbone, sternum, and stomach. When he kissed below his navel, Zhenya's penis gently pressed under his chin. Kwon Taek Joo rubbed the waiting wiggling flesh with the tip of his nose. The corner of Zhenya's mouth curled up.

"What is there to do such a commendable thing?"

"I said I would give you warm milk to drink."

Kwon Taek Joo looked at Zhenya, then unzipped his pants, pulled out his big penis, then leaned down to kiss him. The hard, erect meat rose

up and slapped his cheek. Kwon Taek Joo's eyebrows furrowed as the heavy sound rang out. Looking at the smirk on Zhenya's face, it was obvious that he did it on purpose.

"I will just eat. I can't let you in."

Kwon Taek Joo gave a clear warning and then opened his mouth and sucked on Zhenya's lower part. Just with that, the entire mass of flesh vibrated

violently. While squeezing the penis with his lips, he slowly moves up to the tip, stimulating sensitive areas such as veins and tendons with the tip of his tongue.

Zhenya gasped, his stomach visibly bulging. Kwon Taek Joo used his tongue to lick the red urethra and held the pole tightly with his whole mouth. Zhenya tilted his head slightly in satisfaction, his chin also raised.

His mouth was completely filled, Kwon Taek Joo swallowed the penis until his throat and then slowly released it. When only the tip remained, he sucked it in again, gently prodding the urethra with the tip of his tongue. Soon the tongue becomes slippery and the characteristic fishy taste spreads. Not caring, he sucked Zhenya's penis again, put it on one cheek, making it bulge, then slowly moved his head. The sensitive flesh is rubbed and stimulated between the hard teeth and soft mouth.

Zhenya's genitals quickly became shiny as if covered with a layer of syrup, and his cheeks turned red like peaches. Zhenya reached out to touch Kwon Taek Joo's thick hair, moving slowly and gently rubbing his ear. Kwon Taek

Joo slightly got

goosebumps. Zhenya happily rubbed his earlobe, making the hair on Kwon Taek Joo's back stand up.

"Haa, Taek Joo.."

The guy just licked his lips and was about to say something when he suddenly clenched his molars. At the same time, his excited breathing

was mixed with soft moans. Porcelain white skin with a rosy blush is so beautiful.

Kwon Taek Joo observed his every change while slowly massaging Zhenya's midsection. His penis was also hot and excited as he watched the guy enjoy the excitement.

During that time, Kwon Taek Joo only gently moved to the middle and pushed it firmly inside the neck. The mass of flesh in his mouth trembled from being squeezed tightly. The feeling of nausea rose every time the penis touched his throat, but Kwon Taek Joo still lowered his head deeply and sucked his entire genitals. Every time the mass of flesh choked him, his lower abdomen tensed up.

"Ugh..."

Zhenya's head tilted back little by little because of the strong sucking force. His lower body was also hot and stuck close to Kwon Taek Joo's chin. He tried to hold on to his thighs but to no avail. As soon as he released half of his penis, Zhenya lifted himself up and pushed it back inside. He pushed so hard inside his mouth that the fingers pressed against his thighs tilted backwards.

His cheeks were full of saliva. Some of it is inserted into the neck along with the penis and some of it spills out when the flesh is pulled out. Kwon Taek Joo's chin started to hurt.

When Kwon Taek Joo's movements slowed down, Zhenya grabbed his head and quickly raised his lower body and smashed it against the rough palate without stopping. Kwon Taek Joo opened his mouth wide at the brutal attack and grabbed Zhenya's thighs. The mass of meat hit his throat hard and then repeatedly hit the inside of his cheek. Something wet came out, and Kwon Taek Joo swallowed it all.

Zhenya panted

while looking at his appearance and then reached out his hand.

"Come here."

He put his hand under Kwon Taek Joo's armpit and pulled him up as if holding a child and licked his lips wet with saliva and semen.

"My mouth is about to tear, boy."

[You have to know just enough,] Kwon Taek Joo mumbled. Zhenya didn't mind, he turned Kwon Taek Joo's head around and hugged him in one arm. Zhenya then wrapped his hand around his still un-ejaculated penis, Kwon Taek Joo's mouth automatically closed tightly even though he only slightly moved his fingers and stroked it.

Zhenya gently brushed his genitals to stimulate excitement and then placed his lips on Kwon Taek Joo's forehead. Soon his body began to tremble.

"Is this room well soundproofed? Looks like the door isn't locked either."

Zhenya whispered while squeezing Kwon Taek Joo's penis. He paused as if he had just been reminded of something he had forgotten but Zhenya added more stimulation to the glans by circling and massaging it. Kwon Taek Joo belatedly tried to grab that arm but couldn't stop it. He buried his head in Zhenya's neck and groaned. He couldn't stand that moan so he bit his neck and told him not to provoke him in such a dangerous voice. Then Zhenya used his fingers to lift Kwon Taek Joo's chin and kissed him on the lips.

Zhenya rubbed his chest over his shirt and kneaded his penis. Kwon Taek Joo breathed hard, moans escaping his mouth. He struggled between wanting this moment to pass quickly and wanting to enjoy it more but all Kwon Taek Joo could do was use his entire body to hug Zhenya.

Finally, Kwon Taek Joo's body, which was flinching little by little, stiffened.

"Ah... Uh..."

He ejaculated into Zhenya's hand. Zhenya gently caressed Kwon Taek Joo's lower abdomen and continued to comfort him. Extreme fatigue made his limbs sag and his eyelids became heavy.

He had to send Zhenya back because he was sure his mother would be surprised to see him.

Kwon Taek Joo fell asleep in a worry.

[Taek Joo. Son, won't you wake up?]

Kwon Taek Joo woke up to the wake, his mother's face filling his vision. His heart was pounding, his soul scattered and looked around.

[Mom, this, this...]

Kwon Taek Joo was trying to explain why Zhenya was sleeping next to him half-naked, but he couldn't see him anywhere.

[Where did he go?]

[Huh? Who?]

[He came here yesterday.]

[What are you talking about?]

Kwon Taek Joo's mother looked at him confused. He dressed neatly and slept well all night so his body felt quite refreshed. It's all a dream.

[I have to go to work. Mom will prepare breakfast so hurry up and get ready.]

His mother went out and looked around the room in bewilderment. There is no sign that Zhenya has come and gone. But it was too vivid to call it a dream.

Kwon Taek Joo pulled the pillow up and sniffed. This is the smell of Zhenya.

"Taek Joo, my Rabbit."

The voice whispering all night long was not a dream.

## Chapter 5.22 – Side Story

Kwon Taek Joo stopped by the headquarters and left work early. He still had nothing to do and only visited the National Cemetery before the holiday.

As soon as he left the office, he ran into Yoon Jong Woo in the hallway. He's on his way to find Kwon Taek Joo.

[Where are you going, senior?]

[Ah, home.]

[Which house?]

[A house is a house, but what is a house?]

[It's almost the holidays,] Yoon Jong Woo said.

(Confused with this conversation but just ignore it)

[Ah, we have to visit the grave, right? I'm so lucky that I can spend this holiday season in Korea.]

[I know. This time I won't eat songpyeon in the desert again.]

[Songpyeon in the desert?]

[Uhm that's how it is. I'm going.]

[Ah, wait...]

Kwon Taek Joo was about to say goodbye and leave but Yoon Jong Woo grabbed him. It seemed like something was up, thinking about it, he was holding something in his hand.

[What's up?]

[Hey, didn't you see Yevgeny-sshi today?]

[Why did you meet him?]

[Because you two are close friends.]

[Who said they were best friends?]

[He seems to meet the senior's mother often and seems much closer than I thought.]

It had to be quite obvious for slow Yoon Jong Woo to notice. Maybe he also heard something the day you sent Zhenya to him. Unlike Kwon Taek Joo, Zhenya didn't try to hide their relationship, but Yoon Jong Woo probably couldn't think the two were lovers.

Kwon Taek Joo stood with his arms crossed.

[So what.]

[Tell Yevgeny-sshi 'Please... If he meets Olga, give it to her directly.]

Yoon Jong Woo held out what he was holding in his hand, which seemed to be a cookie. Certainly, without exchanging phone numbers with Olga, there seems to be no way for Yoon Jong Woo to send this directly.

[Nothing special, Olga was curious about Korean desserts so I quickly bought some popular snacks.]

[I tried. Trying.]

[I say this because it's between us, but doesn't Olga look like an incarnation of an elf?]

Are there any goblins with guns on their legs? Kwon Taek Joo was stunned.

[You really are too. Don't pay too much attention to someone who only comes to visit for a while.]

[I don't.]

[It's obvious that everyone sees it all, so why are you still pretending?]

[No, it is not. I just want to let everyone know about Korea.]

[What a great patriot. Why doesn't anyone reward a civil servant like this?]

Kwon Taek Joo snatched the bag from Yoon Jong Woo's hand with a sarcastic expression. [I will eat all of this,] he said.

[Senior doesn't eat snacks?]

[Listen to my advice. Except for the face, there is no place for cousins.]

[So senior also met Yevgeny-ssi?]

[....]

Suddenly he had nothing to say, it wasn't completely wrong but Kwon Taek Joo couldn't confirm that either.

[You're too much in the way. Let's get out of the way.]

He pushed Yoon Jong Woo aside and left. Yoon Jong Woo watched for a while then asked again. Kwon Taek Joo stopped listening and went to the parking lot. He climbed into the car and placed the snack package in the passenger seat.

Kwon Taek Joo stopped by the house first because he had to pick up his mother. The elevator went down just as he parked the car and stepped out. As soon as the door opened, Kwon Taek Joo bumped into someone coming down. He was startled and cried out because that person was none other than Zhenya.

"Where did you come from?"

"I just arrived."

"But you aren't gone yet?"

"The assistant is making a fuss that I have to go to work today. He said you had to be there because of the upcoming holidays."

Not to pretend, but Zhenya is really busy because there are many official events at the embassy during the holiday season. No matter how much fun an ambassador has, he must at least attend an event to strengthen the peaceful cooperation between the two countries. Unless you really want to look bad and be forced to return home.

Kwon Taek Joo was about to enter the elevator but Zhenya blocked the front, grabbed the safety bar of the door that was about to close and

opened it. Zhenya placed one hand on Kwon Taek Joo's waist.

"Should I not go anymore?"

"What are you talking about? Go quickly and come back."

"You're making that sad, regretful face again."

"I don't have it."

Zhenya removed his hands from his waist, rubbing his nose against Kwon Taek Joo's ear and cheek.

"Taek Joo. That new smell has gone away."

"Because I took a shower. Go quickly."

He pushed Zhenya's back and took him out. The moment the door was about to close, Zhenya did not hesitate to put both hands inside and grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's face. He was startled and was about to press the button to open the door, but before that, his face intervened and kissed him.

"Ya... hey, my hand..."

Kwon Taek Joo stuck his head out to stop him, but Zhenya still calmly licked his lips and sucked his tongue. He helplessly pressed the open button to keep the door from closing and let Zhenya kiss to his heart's content. He kissed for a while then pulled away, then went in to kiss again.

"Are you hurt, kid?"

"What injury? Just because of this? You seem so worried about me."

Arrogant and arrogant. No matter how worried he is, that's all. [Go away,[ Kwon Taek Joo pushed Zhenya away and pressed the close button. He didn't leave until both doors were completely closed. Even a 5 year old child being taken somewhere alone would not show such an expression. Who is more affectionate with whom? Kwon Taek Joo raised his hand to scratch his chest, where his heart suddenly tingled for no reason.

He adjusted his untidy clothes while going upstairs and wiped his wet lips with the back of his hand.

[Mom, I'm home.]

Kwon Taek Joo entered the house and raised his voice. He heard his mother's voice from the kitchen. Are you on the phone? Without a doubt, he went inside and saw a head behind him that he didn't expect at all.

"Taek Joo, you're home so early?"

Olga took the cup of tea and turned to look. Both Zhenya and her went to other people's houses as a matter of course.

"After all, they are siblings, right?"

"Huh? What do you mean? Are you talking about me and that person? Please!"

"No, you two are actually very similar."

Olga was upset to hear Kwon Taek Joo's conclusion, as if she had suffered a great insult. For some reason, Kwon Taek Joo had the feeling that Zhenya would react the same way. Even that point is the same.

But the outfit that caught Olga's eye was unusual. She always favored flashy outfits like the eight-colored bird, but today she wore a black dress and a black netted hat.

"Why are you dressed like that?"

"What else? When visiting a grave, you must have a dress code. I bought it in a hurry, is it okay?"

Kwon Taek Joo looked at his mother with questioning eyes. His mother smiled contentedly.

[She said she wanted to say hello to your dad and brother. The young girl is as emotional as the ambassador.]

No way. It's more like she wants to wear mourning clothes to act in a sad movie.

Kwon Taek Joo threw a dissatisfied look and then ignored it as if nothing happened.

"Let's prepare quickly. I heard you shouldn't get there too late."

The host and guest have completely reversed positions. Kwon Taek Joo started to feel a headache.

"Korea has many delicious cakes, right? I didn't expect much because this is a country where rice is the main food."

Olga kept tasting the cake, occasionally turning to offer it to Kwon Taek Joo's mother, even putting a few pieces of cake into her mouth. The two sat next to each other in the backseat and continued a meaningless conversation. They were so friendly that Kwon Taek Joo didn't have time to intervene, his job today was just to drive.

Kwon Taek Joo quietly opened the window to eliminate the typical smell of candy. Olga complained, "The wind blows my hair," and closed the window. That must be a big problem for the nobles.

"So has anything happened during the past year? I've been following foreign news in case something happens."

Olga asked as she opened the last cookie. They are a family that doesn't feel anything unusual about having to find out what their immediate relatives are doing from foreign news.

"Uhm. He hasn't harmed anyone since coming to Korea and sometimes acts like a crazy person but is also quite obedient."

"...Is it time for that person to die?"

Olga muttered in a normal tone. When she gave the newly opened cookies to Kwon Taek Joo's mother, she smiled as innocently as possible. He wondered if that was a trait of the Bogdanov bloodline.

"Otherwise, he would have met an excellent trainer, right?"

Olga smiled sinisterly as she looked in the rearview mirror.

"What do children know..."

"Do you know that person who went out without saying a word last night until dawn? Strangely, there is a scent coming from him and his bedroom."

She tilted her head forward and sniffled. Soon, as if there was a sound of wind blowing in Kwon Taek Joo's ears, Olga's face showed a mischievous smile.

"This smell."

"...Does a good nose also run in families?"

"I'm sensitive to smells. When we met at Ajinoki, Taek Joo smelled exactly like that man so I knew you two were together for a long time."

"Stick together..."

"But if you can't leave each other even for just one night with such a suspicious scent, why don't you two live together?"

There's nothing she can't say in front of Kwon Taek Joo's mother. I don't know if in Russia there is no concept of politeness or decency, or if only the Bogdanov brothers are like that.

Just in time to reach the parking lot, Kwon Taek Joo quickly parked the car.

"We're almost there, get off the bus."

"Oh my God! Are you embarrassed? That's surprising."

Olga burst out laughing. His mother also laughed without knowing why. Even though she wasn't on his side, Kwon Taek Joo sighed.

After parking the car, he carried a basket of flowers and wine and went to the cemetery. Olga slowly followed and looked at the surroundings.

"Is this a cemetery?"

"Same thing. This is where those who died are buried."

"Ah. Taek Joo's father is a soldier, right? Brother too? Surely an honorable death."

"There is no such thing as an honorable death."

"Kwon Taek Joo interrupted with a serious face. Olga tilted her head and said, "Is that so?"

"I thought Taek Joo also did that job to live with honor and die with honor?"

"I'm just doing what I have to do. It naturally turned out like that. Now I don't know what else to do besides it."

"Um. Do you mean vacation? Like fate, sometimes it's impossible to escape."

That is it. Even when people asked him why he did such a dangerous job, Kwon Taek Joo couldn't answer, because he never really thought about the reasons. He took it for granted and now it's become a habit like eating and sleeping. Just like he cannot live without eating and sleeping, it seems that Kwon Taek Joo also will not be able to live if he stops working.

While talking, he came to his father's grave. Kwon Taek Joo poured a glass of wine in front of the tombstone and put down the flower basket. His mother talked to his father while continuously scrubbing the tombstone clean. Olga watched for a moment then opened her mouth.

"Even though Taek Joo's parents were very close when they were alive, right?"

"Let's see, probably."

"Even though you're dead, is it normal to still remember this? I thought it only appeared in novels. This is something that never happens in my family."

Olga nodded and told an unexpected story.

"The last time that person returned to Russia, it was the anniversary of his mother's death."

"Really... Huh?"

That was the first time Kwon Taek Joo knew this. Zhenya said he returned to Russia because he had work to do, but he didn't say

anything about the anniversary of his mother's death. Even after he came back, Zhenya only talked about the engagement.

"Don't you know? That's right. That person is the type who doesn't talk about himself often."

"When did his mother die?"

"His mother?"

Olga was confused as if she had just received a strange question. Then, looking back at the conversation, she let out a sigh.

"Ah, so Taek Joo doesn't know anything? My brothers and I have different mothers. His mother passed away before I was born and then my father remarried. That's why you and I have such a big gap."

"So his mother died when he was young?"

"That's right"

"So..."

Kwon Taek Joo wonders if that lack makes Zhenya become "Psych".

"What do you mean?"

"When we are young, everyone longs for a mother and hates being separated."

"Uhm... is that so? Among them, none of them felt their mother's hand. Your mother is also not a person with strong maternal love. As Taek Joo also knows, our family has had arranged marriages for generations. So is your mother. Because she is an independent person, she is not bound to a loveless marriage or a family built without affection. So she's not always at home. She seems to prefer being alone rather than spending time with her family. It is said that if she gives birth to three sons with her father, her marital obligations will be completed. She died not long after he was born while on a cruise. The body was also not recovered, so a separate grave could not be made. Not long after, my father remarried my mother. There are a lot of rumors going around, that my

father killed your mother to marry my mother, because he had acquired a huge amount of wealth and power through another arranged marriage."

She shrugged her shoulders as if such rumors were unreliable. Both Zhenya and Olga were very indifferent when telling their stories, as if they were someone else's story.

"Although it's nothing to be proud of, my father is quite decent when it comes to women. However, he was very strict in matters of parentage, so every time we were born, we had to have a paternity test. Besides his two official wives, he never had children with any other woman. So I don't have any illegitimate siblings."

The more Kwon Taek Joo listened, the more surprised he became. Is that why Zhenya grew up not attached to his family, had a promiscuous sex life and liked to be alone? Not all brothers are like that so his personality is to some extent innate, but if he grew up in a family that was even a little bit normal, maybe he wouldn't be called "Psych".

Kwon Taek Joo remembered Zhenya teasing him as Mamaboy. He was surprised at Kwon Taek Joo's responsibility, obligation and guilt towards his mother and he found it strange that his mother only lived for Kwon Taek Joo. Just like Zhenya's family life is still strange to Kwon Taek Joo.

"I didn't know, he didn't say anything."

"What, that's not a good thing. My father also doesn't care about the anniversary of his mother's death. I don't know about the other guys, but every year around that time, that person puts aside work and goes to Ajinoki Island. I don't know if it's because he's remembering his dead mother in his own way or because he's not happy anymore."

Even Kwon Taek Joo couldn't guess Zhenya's thoughts, but the chaos he encountered on each anniversary of his mother's death and not being able to even name that emotion was pitiful.

"I think my father sees us as racehorses. On this death anniversary, he knew that person would return to Russia, so he held an engagement ceremony. He hasn't talked about that yet?"

"I heard it briefly."

Olga tilted her head to explain.

"Taek Joo knows that person is notorious. What sane person would want him as a son-in-law? Therefore, the story of engagement or marriage did not appear at all for a long time. But this time it seems he has found a suitable marriage partner. Because it's just us together, I say that, but the family over there is not the average type. The person mentioned as the engaged person is also quite a scary person."

How scary is that, what kind of person is he? If it's an engagement, it must be a woman. Is she the same age as Zhenya?

Kwon Taek Joo had many questions but didn't ask a word, he didn't want to show interest. No, he didn't even want to admit it to himself.

"Aren't you curious what that person did and how he reacted?"

"What..."

"Hmm. That person never believed his father, no matter what he said, he never followed through. So everyone thought he would naturally object, but they didn't expect him to say he understood! How could that person humbly accept the family's wishes? No way. He has it all planned out."

"Plan? What..."

"My father hurriedly prepared the engagement ceremony in case that person changed his mind. But on the day of the engagement ceremony, the two parties did not appear. Finally, while preparing to go to the party, it suddenly became noisy outside. When I went out, two people had arrived but they looked like they were fighting hand to hand. Both of their cars were so distorted that it was unclear how they rolled, but even the traffic police followed each other in pursuit. Then I checked the CCTV on the street and saw them playing the electric car crash game. Actually, the two of them have known each other since they were

very young because their families are familiar and their personalities are completely similar, so they don't get along very well, to the point of almost being enemies."

Kwon Taek Joo is even more curious about the other engagement person. A Zhenya woman? Just imagining it was enough to make his head hurt.

"It's not over yet. That crazy guy also brought explosives and said shouldn't fireworks be set off on a nice day. The adults in the house were very surprised. It's a pity that I can't show it to you."

Olga looked very sorry. She did not hesitate to call Zhenya a crazy person and seemed to enjoy his actions.

"That person said he would set off fireworks the next time my father tried to do what he wanted. That person will just do what he wants, he probably has a missile prepared somewhere. Hmm... That's how the engagement story was forgotten."

Kwon Taek Joo listened silently and covered his eyes with his hands. There is no evidence that Zhenya caused the commotion because of Kwon Taek Joo. That was just one example of how his family tried to force marriage while ignoring the opinions of someone like him who hated being tied down.

That must have been it, but Kwon Taek Joo's ears suddenly felt hot. He didn't know that and thought a lot. Kwon Taek Joo just thought that the reason he was sad was because Zhenya was superficial when it came to the engagement and didn't contact him even when he came back late.

"Where are you, who are you meeting, what are you doing? If you're obsessed and want to tie me down, then go ahead."

"Engagement or marriage is not important to me. If you don't like it, why don't you say it directly, at least I'll find you cute."

The face of the silently happy boy appeared in Kwon Taek Joo's mind, he suddenly felt embarrassed and ashamed.

"Taek Joo. Since we've come this far, take a picture for me."

Olga held out her phone. Before he knew it, Kwon Taek Joo was holding a lace umbrella in his hand.

"Do you want to take a photo in front of the grave?"

"I am a patient after all. I don't know what will happen tomorrow so I have to capture every moment."

Suddenly feeling a strange sense of guilt, with no other choice, Kwon Taek Joo pressed the shutter button a few times and threw the phone back. The photo was not shaky and his face was normal, but Olga scolded him for not taking the photo seriously.

In the end, Kwon Taek Joo took dozens of photos in just one location. "I tried my best but I couldn't save it," he said. If she weren't a woman, he would have punched her.

"Anyway, you've worked hard so I'll give you this."

In return, Olga took something out of her purse and gave it to him. It's a photo of a boy. Kwon Taek Joo glanced at it and softly exclaimed.

"Ah? This kid..."

The child in the photo looked like the child he often dreamed about. Kwon Taek Joo vaguely thought it was Zhenya, but he had never seen a picture of him as a child so he wasn't sure.

"Is it Zhenya?"

"Yes. Have you seen it before?"

"...Not yet."

"Beautiful, right?"

"What...?"

"I have never seen such a beautiful child in my life. That's why I carry it with me, it doesn't have any special meaning."

Olga draws the line by saying, "Don't think strangely," then arbitrarily stuffed the photo into Kwon Taek Joo's jacket pocket.

"This is my only precious photo but please keep it."

"Alright."

"Let's see, take when given. If that person makes you angry, look at this and calm down, it's quite effective."

Surely it's guaranteed to be effective, Kwon Taek Joo was speechless and burst out laughing.

Olga quickly looked back at the tombstones lined up close together.

"I don't live longer than Taek Joo but I know because I'm always close to death. People always want to be happy and only hope for good things to happen, but in reality, life is just like that, so what's interesting? Sometimes you have to go through sadness, depression, illness or pain to know how precious the normal luck that comes afterward is."

It's pitiful that way, she continued.

"That person is a person lacking emotions. In this world there are only things that that person cares about and trivial things, but there is no happiness, joy, sadness, or pain. To be honest, this was the first time he had paid attention to another person in such a long time. I thought that person would live like that and then die. Now maybe it could be different."

"What's so grand?"

"What a surprising turn of events. The hero went to save the beauty captured by Koshiche. But I like this ending. I know it's too much to ask for help, but please keep an eye on that person, Taek Joo should also sympathize with that monster."

After completing the request, Olga followed Kwon Taek Joo's mother to his brother's grave. He stood alone and took the photo out of his jacket. Zhenya's face was expressionless even as a child, it resembled the child he had seen in his dream. Kwon Taek Joo patted his cheek that looked stubborn in the photo.

Even when he doesn't want to, Kwon Taek Joo is filled with unbelievable sadness. Is there one more thing to worry about and regret? Even he couldn't understand himself.

Suddenly he thought of Zhenya. Kwon Taek Joo took out his phone and tried to call him. At that moment a vibrating sound rang out. It's Zhenya.

## Chapter 5.23 – Side Story

The sun started to set. The wind also became colder. Kwon Taek Joo took his mother and Olga home first and then stayed alone to wait for Zhenya. He informed Zhenya to come over as soon as he finished work.

Not long after, the distinctive engine sound came from behind the parking lot. Kwon Taek Joo turned around, Zhenya was walking towards him with his long dress fluttering. Except for the face, everything from the neck to the toes is black. Kwon Taek Joo smiled, the guy walked up to stand in front of him, looking puzzled.

"Why did you laugh?"

"You look like 'Death'."

"What is it?"

"It's the same as me now."

Zhenya's face was still bewildered but Kwon Taek Joo did not explain further, he pointed to the two fleur de lis Zhenya was holding in his hand.

(Fleur de lis is a type of flower)

"It is said that this is a memorial place for the deceased, a place where your bloodline is buried."

"Um. But what to do? It's late now so I can't go in."

Zhenya shrugged his shoulders indifferently and then handed the fleur-de-lis he was holding towards Kwon Taek Joo.

"Know how to be. Taek Joo, I give this to you."

"Really scary romance. The first flower I received was a visiting flower."

Kwon Taek Joo grumbled while burying his nose in the lilies, the sweet scent emanating from them. He had never received flowers except at

the entrance ceremony or graduation ceremony. Even if it was just by chance, his mood wasn't too bad. Kwon Taek Joo touched the unwrapped flowers and felt very lucky.

"My dad and brother are sleeping over there. Both of them asked him to take care of mother, as if they already knew that they couldn't do it. Now my mother only has me."

"What are you talking about that everyone knows?"

"Looks like you've become too evil. For me, you can't always be number 1. I can't throw everything away like you and can't just look at only you. Mom might just be an excuse because even though he's worried about her, he still keeps doing things she hates. I can't give up my job, my mom, and you. I want all of those things."

Kwon Taek Joo reached out and grabbed Zhenya's sleeve. Although he wasn't sure because he didn't look at his face, it seemed like the guy was showing a rare expression of surprise.

"If I'm with you, my patience will continue to be tested. Even so, you.. please don't be tired and continue to wait for me. I don't want to be abandoned by you. How selfish."

Kwon Taek Joo raised his head to look at Zhenya. He was quite confused by the unexpected situation.

"...Taek Joo?"

"You're grumbling again. Since I said so, you agree."

Zhenya's somewhat shocked face calmed down immediately. The monster does not know how to be so beautiful. Kwon Taek Joo seemed to rush in without hesitation, recklessly kissing him. Even though it was an outdoor parking lot, two lips pressed together and then slowly parted with a long breath following.

The next moment, he grabbed Kwon Taek Joo's arms. He was immediately pulled towards Zhenya before he could retreat. The kiss was as deep as if a lover could release all their longing after seeing each other for many days. Even if they gave away all their breath, they still wouldn't want to let go.

"Taek Joo, just do what you want. I will do the same. I came all this way to catch you and now I chase you every day. It will be the same later. Sometimes it's a bit annoying but one thing is clear, that is I have never been so happy in my life."

Kwon Taek Joo quietly looked into those clear eyes, in which only he was reflected, and his eyes were no different.

He played with Zhenya's chin and tried to kiss him again. The phone that had been silent for a while suddenly rang. With a bad feeling, Kwon Taek Joo checked the sender. He sighed heavily and accepted the call.

[Yes, Kwon Taek Joo listening.]

Kwon Taek Joo listened on the other end of the line. The call ended quickly because it was a summons from headquarters after a period of quiet.

Kwon Taek Joo sheepishly scratched his ear.

"Hey, you know..."

"The little woman has to worry again."

Zhenya muttered to himself and then took his hand. He bit his finger and then pretended to kiss the back of his hand. Kwon Taek Joo's eyes narrowed at the tickling feeling. Zhenya let go only after leaving clear tooth marks on his knuckles.

"I'm not busy with anything special so I'll keep an eye on your mother."

Zhenya offered to help and then nodded signaling that Kwon Taek Joo should leave. Kwon Taek Joo hesitantly stepped back.

"Shall I go?"

"See you soon."

Leaving Zhenya pouting behind, Kwon Taek Joo climbed into the car. But even after starting the engine, he still couldn't start right away. As if to say goodbye again, he flashed the two rear lights a few times before hastily leaving. A lovely goodbye from a cold man, Zhenya looked and smiled brightly.

# 2019 Q&A

All content below was translated from a compilation of Q&A and other bonus content the author provided over the years. Translator notes will be italicized in red.

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## **Q1: Zhenya and Taekjoo's profile**

A1: I made Zhenya tall, with his height at almost 2 meters. He's 203 cm, 98 kg, in his late 20s during the series. Taekjoo is 183 cm, 76 kg, and in his early 30s.

I didn't choose a specific birthday for either of them, because if I did, the characters in the story would age according to our time in real life. I thought it was only right to let the characters have their own flow of time.

\*Later, it was revealed that although there wasn't a specific birth year, Zhenya's birthday was set as August 27th while Taekjoo's was May 1st.

## **Q2: If Zhenya and Taekjoo exchanged rings, what size would they wear?**

A2: Neither of them have particularly thick fingers, so I would probably say around 17-18?

*Note: This would be roughly 8-8.5 in US size.*

## **Q3: What positions do Zhenya and Taekjoo prefer during sex?**

A3: Zhenya prefers the mating press position, which is essentially missionary with the other partner's legs lifted upwards into their chest, as well as the cowgirl position. The reason why is because it results in the deepest penetration and is therefore that much more pleasurable...

It's also because he can observe Taekjoo's expression to his heart's content. Meanwhile, Taekjoo would probably prefer doggy style, both before or after meeting Zhenya.

## **Q4: Zhenya and Taekjoo's erogenous zones**

A4: For Zhenya, it's (biting) the neck, and for Taekjoo it's his chest. They probably never experienced much stimulation in those areas before meeting each other.

### **Q5: When Taekjoo is away at work, what does Zhenya do?**

A5: I'm sure you can already guess as much (?), but Zhenya would visit Taekjoo's mother to find an excuse to go find Taekjoo, or wait for him alongside her. If Taekjoo takes too long to return, he'll follow him secretly to his mission location and do things that would... in a practical sense, help Taekjoo, although it often feels more like distraction than anything else.

### **Q6: What did Zhenya buy from the convenience store?**

A6: Since Taekjoo had fallen asleep from exhaustion, Zhenya would have bought things for him to eat once he woke up. Of course, this includes ramen and kimchi, as well as dumplings (likely in thought of pelmeni), and chicken drumsticks plus a few triangle kimbaps for protein.

From the beverages section, he would have gotten vodka (which he drinks like water) and the black raspberry wine that Taekjoo's mother always gave him, saying it was good for his health. No doubt he would've also swept all the XL condoms into his basket lol.

### **Q7: What scent do Zhenya and Taekjoo like?**

A7: Zhenya likes natural scents, like pine, snow, petrichor, the sea, the wind, etc. Taekjoo is someone who likes to sleep without a care in the world, so I think he would like the smell of bedsheets dried out in the sun or a mild fabric softener scent.

### **Q8: Which department/major did Taekjoo and Zhenya graduate from?**

A8: The requirements for becoming an NIS agent isn't publicly known, but many people assume it's quite strict, especially for special agents that would need to have good brains and brawn like Taekjoo. Taekjoo is an elite who was formerly in the special forces unit in the military, and as such he was recruited by the NIS through special means. Because of

his mother's concern, he couldn't attend military academy, but he majored in mechanical engineering in college, then took a leave of absence for his military service, secretly enlisting in the special army forces without telling his mother.

Zhenya surprisingly (?) did not graduate from college. I wonder if he ever got proper formal education ツツ

### **Q9: What if the story was set in an omegaverse?**

A9: To be honest, I'm not that familiar with the omegaverse ツ But based on what I looked up, I think both Zhenya and Taekjoo would be alphas, which would make it difficult for them to have a child.

Considering Zhenya's obsession with Taekjoo, if he ever saw Taekjoo try to sleep with another omega in heat, he would go batshit insane, likely destroying the hotel and locking up Taekjoo again... ツ Who knows, maybe he'd go as far as to make a drug that lets alphas get pregnant too. Haha...

## **2020 Q&A**

### **Q1: Kwon Taekjoo... Surely he works out a lot to maintain that body of his. What does Zhenya do when Taekjoo is working out? (Does he watch him? Work out together with him? Or maybe after seeing his zainka all sweaty, he... [redacted])**

A1: Taekjoo's entire life is pretty much the exercise he needs, so he doesn't do anything extra to stay in shape. When he's off work, he works out 2-3 hours a day or enjoys intensive activities (because his body starts to ache and stiffen if he doesn't keep it moving), but ever since he met Zhenya, most of his energy is drained in bed, so he doesn't exercise as often anymore. He enjoys most of his activities with Zhenya.

### **Q2: Taekjoo and Zhenya's mobile background screen...is it set to default? Do they organize their apps? This is for their personal phones (if they have multiple phones, then please refer to the one they use for personal use!)**

A2: Taekjoo and Zhenya both use the default background image.

Taekjoo doesn't really organize his apps or contacts, while Zhenya has no need to organize them because he has so few apps installed on his phone.

**Q3: You said Zhenya likes natural scents. Has he tried Lotte's Pine Bud drink? What's one Korean food that Zhenya has tried and was most disgusted by?**

A3: I believe he would've accidentally encountered the Pine Bud drink and occasionally add it to his drinks. He would be most disgusted by fermented foods like hongeo (fermented ocellate spot skate) or cheonggukjang (fermented soybean stew).

**Q4: It's written in the novel that Zhenya smells like the Cohiva Behike cigar. What does Taekjoo smell like? I'm also curious about what colognes they would use (if at all).**

A4: Taekjoo doesn't normally use cologne, so his skin would smell faintly of fabric softener or mint. When he's on duty, he has to go under disguise often, so the cologne he uses changes every time.

**Q5: How would you rate Zhenya and Taekjoo's fashion sense from 1-10?**

A5: Zhenya buys whatever clothes he happens to like at the time and throws them out after wearing them. So most of his clothes are usually for one-time use and reflect the latest designs, which makes it seem like he cares about fashion trends at first glance.

Compared to him, Taekjoo only wears formal clothes when he's at work. Normally, he wears gray hoodies, cotton T-shirts, and sweatshirts. While Zhenya only sticks with the coat+boots style, Taekjoo likes wearing jackets/coats he can move around in (like padded coats, leather jackets, blousons) and sneakers.

**Q6: When will Taekjoo retire?**

A6: Whenever he feels that there's something more important in his life than his career.

**Q7: Taekjoo's favorite thing to do in Odinokiy Island**

A7: Skiing

**Q8: I'd like to know what genre of music Taekjoo and Zhenya prefer to listen to, as well as who's better at singing!**

A8: Taekjoo doesn't listen to music often, but when he does, he just plays the TOP 100 charting songs at random. Zhenya prefers classical music.

There's no way Zhenya would ever sing, so let's just say Taekjoo is slightly better than him when it comes to singing.

**Q9: We know how much Taekjoo likes his spicy food. Can you tell us whether Zhenya has gotten used to spicy foods as well?**

A9: Not at all ^^; He's still just as weak as ever when it comes to spiciness.

*#still\_lovers\_even\_though\_they\_don't\_seem\_that\_way*

**Q10: When is Taekjoo most lovable in Zhenya's eyes?**

A10: When Taekjoo asks him a favor.

**Q11: Do they take photos of each other? What would you see in their phone galleries?**

A11. They do. Taekjoo's gallery is filled with photos that are pretty much taken without consent (like when Zhenya is sleeping or busy doing something else), whereas Zhenya's gallery contains a lot of photos of Taekjoo where the focus/intent is unclear.

**Q12: Have Taekjoo or Zhenya ever told each other "I love you"?**

A12: I guess they will, eventually?

**Q13: Does Taekjoo ever get jealous?**

A13: He's never felt jealous in his entire life, so I doubt he'd even recognize he was jealous if he ever did.

**Q14: Anything they find hard to get used to while living with each other**

A14: Taekjoo can't ever get used to how Zhenya easily travels all over the place, whereas Zhenya still has trouble understanding why Taekjoo gets mad at him.

**Q15: What do they do for each other on their birthdays?**

A15: Zhenya would prepare the most bizarre present for Taekjoo, while Taekjoo would simply dedicate the whole day to spend with Zhenya without needing to prepare a gift.

**Q16: Do either of them celebrate holidays like Valentine's Day or White Day?**

A16: No.

**Q17: What does Zhenya think of Taekjoo when he's wearing a long black padded coat in the winter?**

A17: He'll probably think he looks like a black bean nestled in its bean pod. If Taekjoo's wearing a hoodie, Zhenya would put the hoodie over his head and tighten it to cover his face, all the while snickering to himself.

**Q18: Would Zhenya have bought another island where the climate is warmer? If so, where would it be?**

A18: No. Even Odinokiy island has its own summer-like climate, so he wouldn't have bought another island. Taekjoo also doesn't particularly enjoy excruciatingly hot summers.

**Q19: Does Taekjoo ever jump Zhenya first? (in the sexual sense)**

A19: Sometimes, Zhenya's sleeping face is so pretty that he might just...

**Q22: It's mentioned that there's a piano in the same place that Zhenya played the contrabass. Will there ever be a day where Taekjoo ever plays the piano, or Zhenya plays it for Taekjoo...?**

A22: Taekjoo might try pressing a few keys out of boredom. He's not musically talented, so he wouldn't be able to play it that well. Zhenya would probably watch him with a loving gaze, then have Taekjoo play the accompaniment while he himself plays the rest to create a somewhat decent duet.

**Q23: What kind of physical affection do they like the most?**

A23: Zhenya likes it when Taekjoo kisses him first, whereas Taekjoo likes sitting on Zhenya like a soft pillow.

**Q24: Do they wear couple rings?**

A24: No...

**Q25: How would you envision their lives in their senior years?**

A25: I haven't really ever thought about it that far, but one thing's for sure: they would make Odinokiy their home and watch the seasons pass by together.

**Q26: Would Zhenya have prepared a special event for Taekjoo's upcoming birthday? I'm curious to know how they would have spent the day.**

A26: I'm not sure. Zhenya is far from someone who would prepare a romantic event for their partner, and Taekjoo wouldn't really appreciate the gesture either, so I don't think he would've planned anything of the sort. He's never done anything special for his birthday, let alone anyone else's birthday. Instead, he would've probably watched in fascination as Taekjoo's mother prepared seaweed soup, among other things, for Taekjoo, while gifting Taekjoo's mother (and not Taekjoo himself) things like flowers and thanking her in his own way (although Taekjoo would've considered it as vulgar talk again). While Taekjoo absolutely hates it whenever Zhenya does that, he'd feel a tad bit grateful after seeing how happy his mother gets. Later that night, he would show affection towards his boyfriend, leading to...

**Q27: When Zhenya x Taekjoo grow old, would they move away from the spotlight to a more quiet place? If so, would they stay in Odinokiy or somewhere in Korea?**

A27: At that point, Taekjoo's mother would've passed away, so I'd assume they would live together on Odinokiy island.

**Q28: If a (very slightly) sick Zhenya makes a fuss and tries to stop Taekjoo from going to work (though not on a mission), how would Taekjoo respond...?**

A28: Taekjoo would still go to work, but he would keep calling Zhenya to check on his condition before coming back home during his lunch break to check for himself. Eventually, he would just end up taking the afternoon off :)

### **Q29: What would Zhenya think about marrying Taekjoo?**

A29: For Zhenya, marriage is a contract made in order to gain an upper hand. That's how his parents (and many others around him) got married. So he doesn't place much importance on the idea of marriage and doesn't particularly want to do it with Taekjoo either.

### **Q30: Does Taekjoo have any "pretty" photos of Zhenya's face saved on his phone? Haha**

A30: Yes, a lot of them. Although they were all taken in secret.

*#what\_IF\_scenarios*

### **Q31: What would happen if they prank each other on April Fools' Day?**

A31: Zhenya wouldn't be interested in April Fools' in the first place, while Taekjoo would say something embarrassingly romantic as a "joke" to Zhenya, which would eventually lead to...

### **Q32: How would Zhenya react if he saw Taekjoo separating perilla leaves for someone other than his mother while eating together?**

A32: Zhenya wouldn't understand the meaning behind it, so he'd probably think Taekjoo just wants to eat perilla leaves so badly that he grabs it with his chopsticks before the other person can take some. He'd then give a silent glare at said person if they try to reach for it again so Taekjoo can have it all for himself.

*Note: This was a really popular "what if" debate and a relationship test of sorts that was trending on the internet. Essentially, there's a common Korean side dish called '깻잎' where perilla leaves are covered in a spicy seasoning, which makes them stick to each other and therefore makes it really hard to separate using chopsticks. So the scenario goes like this: you and your SO are eating with your best friend. Your best friend is reaching for the perilla leaf dish when they suddenly have trouble*

*separating the leaves. Your SO reaches over, picks one up, and puts it on their plate. Do you get upset or are you completely fine with it?*

*It might seem completely unreasonable to get mad here, but there's quite a lot of debate over it because placing food on someone's plate in Korea can be seen as very intimate (flashback to Taekjoo placing a pan-fried meatball on Zhenya's bowl of rice and everyone giving him the "STARE"). It's also important to realize that your SO has not met your friend before (or aren't close with them), and your friend is the same gender as you, which means it's possible that your SO might find them attractive.*

**Q33: If Zhenya's family found out that he was dating Taekjoo, how would they react? I'm also wondering if they ever just found out Zhenya was in a relationship with "that Korean spy" after hearing that he left to become the Russian ambassador to South Korea.**

A33: Zhenya has caused so much trouble over the years that they wouldn't be particularly surprised to hear that he's in a relationship with "that Korean spy" or that he appointed himself as the Russian ambassador to South Korea because of it. They'll probably think he's just indulging another strange hobby of his and might even be secretly relieved that a burden is off their shoulders.

**Q34: If Zhenya and Taekjoo go on a trip to somewhere other than Odinokiy Island, where would they go?**

A34: Probably somewhere they can access the natural wild, like New Zealand, Norway, Australia, Mongolia, the American West, etc. They'd enjoy their time doing activities like sky-diving, parasailing, scuba diving, jet-skiing, bungee jumping, etc. in places where there aren't many people.

**Q35: If Zhenya and Taekjoo were to have children, how many sons and daughters would they have? I also want to know who they would take after haha**

A35: Honestly, I think they would be better off bickering with each other instead of adding children into the mix. After all, neither of them are really family-oriented men ^^;;

But I know this isn't the answer you wanted to hear, so just as an imagination, I think three children (no preference of boys vs girls) would be just perfect, each with their own unique personalities. One child might be as adventurous and stoic as Taekjoo, another might be merciless and bull-headed like Zhenya, while yet another might be an angel that laughs easily, is harmless, and is so full of love that it's a complete mystery where they came from.

**Q36: If they ever have a child, Zhenya would probably hope that they resemble Taekjoo. What about Taekjoo?**

A36: He would, of course(?), think that his kid would have to take after himself. He'd fear that, if his kid resembled Zhenya in any way, Zhenya's personality or way of thinking might be passed onto them.

**Q37: How would Zhenya react if their kid looked exactly like Taekjoo or himself (and vice versa)?**

A37: If Zhenya has a kid that looks just like Taekjoo, he would pester them so much they would always cry. If his kid looked like himself, he would be so fascinated that he'd just stare at them all day long.

In Taekjoo's case, if he had a kid that looked like himself, he would be slightly proud of the fact that his genes are superior/dominant, whereas if his kid looked like Zhenya, then he'd be awed at their beauty while also simultaneously begging and praying that they won't take after Zhenya's personality.

**Q38: If Zhenya and Taekjoo have kids, what would be their parenting methods, and what would they hope their children would be like growing up?**

A38: Zhenya would have a mostly hands-off approach to parenting, while Taekjoo would want to raise them as polite and proper kids. Both Zhenya and Taekjoo are unusually intelligent individuals, so they would be fairly indifferent when it comes to studying, probably thinking that their kids would handle it on their own.

**Q39: If Taekjoo lives on Odinokiy as Zhenya's lover, then would he fill it with things he can enjoy to spend the time, like a TV or bookcase?**

A39: The reason why Zhenya likes going to Odinokiy with Taekjoo is because Taekjoo can focus solely on him and him alone. So he wouldn't willingly place anything Taekjoo can enjoy as a hobby. Taekjoo would have to essentially bargain each item with a silly bet. (He lost 50 times just to obtain 5 items...)

**Q40: If they play games on a console like Playstation, I'm sure Taekjoo will be great at it. Is Zhenya also good at playing games?**

A40: At first, Taekjoo would absolutely destroy Zhenya and mercilessly tease and provoke him for it, only for Zhenya to meticulously study the rules of the game and never lose again.

**Q41: In the Honey Voice Latte CD, Taekjoo mentioned raising a dog. If he ever gets one, what breed would it be? Would Zhenya ever get jealous of the dog getting all of Taekjoo's love?**

A41: It would have to be a Doberman, wouldn't it? Zhenya would definitely be unhappy if Taekjoo finds something else to focus his efforts on. Even in my imagination, I don't see the dog living a happy, comfortable life, so let's not give them any dogs... ⊖

**Q42: If Zhenya and Taekjoo were dogs/cats, what would they be?**

A42: Taekjoo would be a slim and agile Doberman, while Zhenya would be a regal yet social puppy cat, like a ragdoll? Zhenya may be a bit mean and have no friends, but if you tame him, he'll become rather puppy-like (at least from my POV)...

**Q43: What if someone came up to either Zhenya or Taekjoo and told them, "Your boyfriend was great in bed last night"?**

A43: May they rest in peace.

**Q44: How would Zhenya/Taekjoo react if they woke up to find the other turned into their younger selves?**

Q45: Zhenya would find it amusing, while Taekjoo would have a mental breakdown. Zhenya would have fun with (or rather, make fun of) the younger Taekjoo, but Taekjoo would be in for a world of babysitting hell.

[#likes\\_and\\_dislikes](#)

**Q45: Zhenya and Taekjoo's favorite chicken menu**

A45: Zhenya prefers sweet soy sauce chicken, Taekjoo likes fried or oven-baked chicken.

**Q46: What are Zhenya and Taekjoo's favorite foods from their homeland?**

A46: Zhenya likes the savory Russian soup 'ukha' filled and simmered with fish and vegetables. Taekjoo likes kimchi stew.

**Q47: Does Taekjoo like gukbap? If Taekjoo ate gukbap, would Zhenya eat it alongside him?**

A47: Taekjoo for sure loves gukgap, and he would probably offer a non-spicy version to Zhenya.

*Note: 'Gukbap' or '국밥' describes a hearty broth or soup (usually cooked and served in a clay pot called a 'ttukbaegi') with cooked rice mixed into it.*

**Q48: If Taekjoo and Zhenya had to choose between coffee vs. tea?**

A48: Zhenya would choose tea, Taekjoo would choose coffee.

**Q49: How would Taekjoo choose between 1) al dente noodles vs. fully cooked noodles, 2) pour vs. dip sauce for sweet and sour pork, 3) cold noodles vs spicy noodles, 4) freshly made kimchi vs fully fermented kimchi?**

A49: Al dente noodles / Dip sauce / Cold noodles / Fully fermented kimchi.

*Note: The question is asking whether you'd dip the pork in the sweet and sour sauce before eating it or whether you'd pour the sauce all over the pork first. Cold noodles and spicy noodles may seem like pretty vague names but are referring to specific Korean dishes. Click the links for more info.*

*Note 2: these are the same cold noodles Jongwoo and Taekjoo ordered at the BBQ restaurant.*

## *#miscellaneous*

**Q50: After they started dating, have they ever gone to Zhenya's Russian house (aka Taekjoo's in-laws)? Has Taekjoo ever met Zhenya's family?**

A50: He has not gone there yet, nor has he met with Zhenya's family.

**Q51: What does Zhenya think about that man(..) who drugged Taekjoo at the end of Vol. 1? Doesn't he get pissed off thinking about it from time to time?**

A51: Ever since he followed Taekjoo to Korea, he didn't have the chance to see Sergei, so he's never given it much thought. If Zhenya ever does run across him again, he'd be more proud of himself than pissed off and secretly laugh behind his back.

**Q52: Will Taekjoo's mother ever realize the fact that her son and the ambassador are in a romantic relationship?**

A52: She probably won't. No one knows what will happen in the future, but for the sake of her and Zhenya's close relationship, I really hope that day never comes.

## 2021 Q&A

**Q: How does Zhenya feel about the scorching heat in Korea?**

A: He wonders if Taekjoo became as stubborn and bull-headed as he is today because he grew up enduring that kind of heat.

**Q: I'm curious about how Zhenya and Taekjoo are doing today!**

A: Zhenya is slowly melting in the sweltering heat while always looking for a chance to steal Taekjoo away to Odinokiy. Taekjoo will likely be running around from place to place regardless of whether it's hot, raining, or extremely polluted π

**Q: What do they say to each other the most?**

A: Zhenya: I really should learn Korean one of these days, shouldn't I?  
(meant as a threat to Taekjoo)

Taekjoo: What did you say, you bastard? Is your pretty face all that matters to you?

**Q: How would Zhenya and Taekjoo react if they knew they had a large fanbase?**

A: Zhenya: (shrugs) You've got good taste.

Taekjoo: Me? Why? Him? Why?

[\*#their\\_TMI\*](#)

**Q1: What's the story behind Zhenya and Taekjoo's name?**

A1: Out of the two, I created Taekjoo's character first, so I thought a lot about what kind of name would be very masculine. I didn't want it to be a soft or loving name, or have it sound like a pushover. It was only after I'd chosen Taekjoo's name that I debated over a name for Zhenya. As you all know, Russian nicknames are quite unique, haha. So I tried to find a few name + nickname pairs that would be different enough to fool even Taekjoo (who's fluent in Russian), and the one that best suited a "pretty top" character was the gender-neutral name Zhenya :)

**Q2: One word that represents Zhenya and Taekjoo**

A2: Zhenya - spoiled brat, Taekjoo - young boomer

**Q3: Zhenya and Taekjoo's shirt sizes**

A3: Zhenya - 3XL, Taekjoo - XL

**Q4: I want to know Zhenya and Taekjoo's MBTI!**

A4: Zhenya - ENTP-A, Taekjoo - ENTJ-A

(I tried the MBTI test from both their POV and the above results are what I got.)

**Q5: What is the exact position and size of Zhenya's chest tattoo?**

A5: Zhenya's chest tattoo is an eagle with its wings spread out. In the words of Taekjoo himself, the image is so realistically dynamic, it looks

like it's about to fly out of Zhenya's chest lol. Its wings are broad enough to cover both sides of Zhenya's chest.

**Q6: Why does Zhenya have a tattoo on his chest? Did he choose to have it done, or did someone have him get one?**

A6: For the purposes of the story, I tried to think of an area he'd easily be able to hide without Taekjoo noticing, and also somewhere Taekjoo could easily see when Zhenya finally reveals his identity. I ultimately chose his chest. In the novel, Zhenya says that his tattoo is a "symbol that represents [his] affiliated family," which is the truth. Zhenya is first and foremost a member of the Bogdanov family, whether he likes it or not, so he would have gotten his tattoo where others could easily see it, and also in a place that's closest to his heart. Also, Zhenya would never listen to someone else ordering him around, so getting the tattoo would likely be out of his own volition, wouldn't it?

**Q9: When are Taekjoo and Zhenya happiest?**

A9: For both, it's when just the two of them are together living a normal, spontaneous, and lazy life without having to worry about anything.

**Q11: Does Zhenya know that he has the adorable habit of lifting his chin and straightening his back when he receives a compliment?**

A11: No, he doesn't know it himself.

**Q12: I'd like to know how many languages Zhenya and Taekjoo can speak.**

A12: Zhenya — 2 languages (Russian, English)

Taekjoo — 6 languages (Korean, Russian, English, Japanese - mastered at a native level. Chinese and Persian - intermediate level.)

**Q13: In the novel, Taekjoo estimates Zhenya's foot size to be 13-14 in US size. What is Taekjoo's foot size?**

A13: He would be about 10-11 in US size.

**Q14: Do Zhenya and Taekjoo have any moles? If so, how many of them and where are they?**

A14: It'd be impossible to know how many, although Zhenya's skin is completely clear of any blemishes. Taekjoo has a lot of moles hiding in places that aren't easily visible, like the back of his ears and neck, the inside of his ass and thighs, his back—in other words, places he can't see himself, lol.

**Q15: If you were to describe Zhenya and Taekjoo as a luxury brand, what would they be? (ex. a human Tom Ford Zhenya)**

A15: Zhenya would be Dior, Taekjoo would be Tom Ford.

**Q16: Does Zhenya let his hair down when he sleeps?**

A16: He always takes a shower before he sleeps, so naturally his hair would also be down, right? lol

**Q17: Is there a classical or jazz piece that fits Zhenya the most? You can also name composers.**

A17: I think classical suits Zhenya better than jazz, particularly songs that are beautiful yet bittersweet. Chopin and Bach come to mind :)

**Q18: I bet that Sergei isn't the only man who's taken an interest in Taekjoo so far... Has anything of the sort ever happened before? If it did, how many people were interested in Taekjoo, and when did it happen? I can't help but think that a few men were hurt by Taekjoo, who's quite indifferent and was strictly straight before meeting Zhenya.**

A18: Several young gay boys would've secretly pined over Taekjoo in his younger days. Once he entered society at large, he would've been on the receiving end of a lot of flirtation from overseas. But not only was Taekjoo straight back then, he's very indifferent, so it's very likely he didn't realize it in the first place. In places where homosexuality is more publicly accepted, I'm sure would've experienced more blatant sexual harassment in the form of groping/touching, which he would've promptly responded to by using force like he did in the novel.

**Q21: When Zhenya's office as ambassador ends, will he return to Russia? I'm curious about what will happen next.**

A21: Zhenya doesn't really have a set term. He'll only return to Russia when he doesn't have a reason to stay in Korea anymore - likely if Taekjoo disappears, or if Taekjoo no longer has anyone else left to protect other than Zhenya. Both scenarios are equally depressing ¶

## **Q22: What is something ZheTaek are concerned about lately?**

A22: Zhenya - how to keep Taekjoo chained to his side.

Taekjoo - how to ease Zhenya's loneliness.

## **Q23: Any other TMI for Zhenya and Taekjoo?**

A23: Zhenya recently learned that Taekjoo's favorite food is not ramen and fell into a bit of a shock. Taekjoo heard from Yoon Jongwoo that Zhenya has been thinking 'saekki' (aka 'bastard') means 'baby' all this time.

*Note: Refer back to the scene where Jongwoo explains the meaning of the word 'saekki' to Zhenya. It can mean both "baby" and "bastard" depending on the context, but when Taekjoo uses it, he pretty much always means "bastard" lol. Especially when it comes to Zhenya. Meanwhile, poor Zhenya thinks Taekjoo is calling him "baby."*

*#still\_lovers\_even\_though\_they\_don't\_seem\_like\_it*

## **Q24: When do Zhenya and Taekjoo feel that they can't live without each other?**

A24: For Zhenya, it's when he wakes up after having a rare nightmare. For Taekjoo, it's whenever he realizes how deeply Zhenya is entwined into his daily life (ex. whenever he anticipates how Zhenya will react when he heads back home from work, whenever he debates between what Zhenya can and can't eat during a grocery run, etc).

## **Q25: How does Zhenya use his good looks on Taekjoo?**

A25: If he silently looks at Taekjoo and uses his pretty face to make the world's most pitiful, sorrowful expression, Taekjoo would never be able to resist, haha.

## **Q26: What are Zhenya and Taekjoo's habits? Are there any habits that Taekjoo doesn't know himself but Zhenya does, and vice**

**versa? Also, what habit do they like the most about the other?**

A26: Normally, if someone notices a habit that even the person in question doesn't know, it's usually because it's something they really like or hate, so I tried thinking of what Zhenya and Taekjoo like about each other. Zhenya has a habit of fiddling with a cigar, even if it's unlit, when he's in deep thought (whenever this happens, Taekjoo stares at his fingers). Taekjoo has a habit of tightening his tie whenever he gets nervous (if he doesn't have a tie on, he'll still touch his collar).

**Q27: What expression do they like the most on each other?**

A27: Zhenya - when Taekjoo loses his mind from pleasure and goes soft in his arms

Taekjoo - when Zhenya smiles brightly

**Q28: How would Zhenya and Taekjoo feel about each other when they grow old?**

A28: Zhenya - Your personality is still the same as ever, even though you've grown old. So amusing lol

Taekjoo - How the fuck is this bastard still so pretty when he's old? It pisses me off.

**Q29: Has Taekjoo ever appeared in Zhenya's dreams? If so, what form does he take?**

A29: He definitely has. To Zhenya, his early childhood is his weakest and most chaotic period in his life, so it's a complex of sorts for him. He sometimes has nightmares of being kidnapped or suffering violence like he did in the past, although not as often as Taekjoo. In those nightmares, his mind and consciousness is still the same as the present, but his body reverts back to his younger self, which means he has no choice but to watch as he suffers through everything. When this happens, Taekjoo appears in many forms to rescue him like his shining knight in armor, ensuring that the dream is no longer a nightmare by the end :)

**Q31: Will Zhenya and Taekjoo ever get bored of each other? (due to either internal/external causes) If so, how would they overcome**

it?

A31: No, they won't. They'll keep going through a cycle of fighting like hell and passionately making up until they grow old...

**Q32: What body parts do they find themselves touching a lot on each other because they think it's pretty?**

A32: Zhenya likes touching Taekjoo's chest and ass... Taekjoo likes touching Zhenya's hair.

**Q33: Ever since they met each other, what is one thing each of them fear the most?**

A33: Zhenya is afraid of Taekjoo completely vanishing from his life, while Taekjoo is afraid of Zhenya becoming alone again.

**Q34: If Zhenya and Taekjoo were to award each other a certificate, what would they give each other? What would their reaction be?**

A34: Would they ever give an award to each other...? Taekjoo would be busy nagging at Zhenya, while Zhenya would only ever complain to him... lol (It'll take another 10 years before they feel like they want to praise each other)

**Q35: Between a 5-year old Zhenya/Taekjoo vs. 5 Zhenyas/Taekjoos, which one would they pick?**

A35: Taekjoo would choose the 5-year old Zhenya while Zhenya would choose 5 Taekjoos. Taekjoo would find it extremely overwhelming to handle 5 Zhenyas, but he's always pitied and worried over the young version of Zhenya in his dreams. So he would've fed the young Zhenya with lots of good food and played with him a lot. Meanwhile, Zhenya knows at least one of the 5 Taekjoos will go off to work, so he'll try to hold on to the others. He'll nuzzle against them, trying to make the most of his time before it expires, but it could also be possible that all 5 Taekjoos escape to different places and he'll have a headache trying to catch them all... ^^;

**Q36: Ever since Zhenya began living in Korea, I'm sure he's picked up a bit of Korean (whether he wants to or not) after talking with**

**Taekjoo's mother. If so, does he have a favorite word or a word he uses often? (except for 'Taekjoo')**

A36: It'll probably be "mom" or "mother." As shown in the novel, Taekjoo becomes very gentle when he calls his mom, so Zhenya is very intrigued by it. He'd later mimic Taekjoo and be fascinated by Taekjoo's mother's extremely happy reaction. Of course, when Zhenya says it, he doesn't really mean "mom," he's probably thinking that he's referring to her as Taekjoo's mother or calling her by a nickname that she likes, haha.

**Q37: While out on a date(?), have Zhenya and Taekjoo ever tried Korean street food? How would they eat fish-shaped bread?**

A37: Taekjoo would eat starting from wherever his hand grabs first, Zhenya would start with the head.

Note: You can think of fish-shaped bread or 'bungeo-ppang' as the Korean version of Japanese taiyaki.

**Q38: Do Zhenya and Taekjoo use emotes when texting each other? If so, what emotes do they use?**

A38: Very occasionally, they might use emotes. Zhenya would use annoying/mocking emotes (ex. 😊😊😊😊😊😊), while Taekjoo would use emotes to express his anger (ex. 😡😡😡😡😡😡). Sometimes Zhenya will also use sexually suggestive emotes (like 💋💋💋💋) only to get blocked by Taekjoo.

**Q39: Not that it would ever happen, but how would Zhenya and Taekjoo react if one of them asked for a hug?**

A39: Zhenya would mockingly ask, "Did you miss me that much?" but still hug him and cuddle him all night long, refusing to let him go. Taekjoo would be visibly confused, but still give him a hug and ask him what happened. Even if Zhenya tells him it's nothing, Taekjoo tends to be very anxious, so he would continue to worry about it and try to figure out the reason why.

**Q40: How much do Zhenya and Taekjoo think they've changed after meeting each other?**

A40: Not much. They think they only do some embarrassing things for each other and have become a lot more patient, but to people around them, they're completely different from before.

**Q41: I can't help but cry at how well the malatang scene in the side story was written π I can still remember how Zhenya calmly observed Taekjoo shamelessly slipping next to him in bed after stubbornly finishing his mission π I really want to know what Zhenya was thinking as he watched Taekjoo sleep next to him for a full day π π**

A41: Zhenya's mind would've been filled with all kinds of thoughts, don't you think? After Taekjoo left, he would've wondered if he should even stay by Taekjoo's side after the terrible way he was treated, felt exhausted at the thought of how much longer he would need to stay patient, felt angry at Taekjoo, all the while making a detailed plan to force things to go his way (even going as far to... bomb the NIS). But then he'd be afraid that Taekjoo would hate him forever for it, so he'd go back to square one and try to figure out what he did wrong. Of course, it's not something that Zhenya can come up with an answer to alone, so he would continue wrangling those questions over and over again in his head. He also would've debated whether to chase after Taekjoo despite being late, only to be completely dumbfounded when Taekjoo returns home and shamelessly crawls into his bed lol. He would then look over Taekjoo to see if he had any major injuries and feel relieved at his relatively okay appearance. Zhenya would find the sight of Taekjoo taking the first step to reconciling things with him and also crawling in next to him so sweet that he felt like forgetting everything he'd been debating over the past few days, while also laughing at himself for being so silly.

**#IF**

**Q42: If Zhenya and Taekjoo just so happen to get a chance to have an outdoors date, then where would they go and what would they do?**

A42: They'd spend it like any other couple. The fact that they're going on an outdoor date means that they have the leisure to do so, both

publicly and privately (aka their sexual needs are met). So they'd go for a drive in the countryside, eat good food at a nice place, and go fishing, camping, and trekking, haha.

**Q43: Zhenya and Taekjoo's reaction to a spy movie**

A43: Zhenya - How noisy.

Taekjoo - I guess they're trying their best... lol

**Q44: After the events of the side story, do they come up with any new nicknames for each other? If so, what are they?**

A44: I think I'd rather have them calling each other by their names than any nicknames, haha.

**Q45: How would Zhenya and Taekjoo react if someone gave them a silent stare?**

A45: Zhenya would give them the exact same stare back, and if they didn't stop staring, he would approach them himself. (you can imagine what would happen next...) Taekjoo, on the other hand, would confront them as soon as they made eye contact, demanding, "What? Why?"

**Q46: If Zhenya and Taekjoo were to film a commercial, what would it be?**

A46: A counterintelligence public service advertisement... Or a promotional video on how to respond to a disaster or emergency... comes to mind ^^; Or maybe even an ad for a foreign brand car?

**Q47: Though it's not ever likely to happen, how would Zhenya react if Taekjoo got kidnapped?**

A47: Zhenya would think it's impossible, but just in case, he would try to track Taekjoo down. First, he'd figure out who the perpetrators are and blow up their main base (as a preemptive warning to scare them). Then, he'd infiltrate the location where Taekjoo is held hostage and deal with the kidnappers one by one.

**Q48: How would Zhenya react if Taekjoo was sexually abused during his time as a hostage?**

A48: That would never happen, but if it did, Zhenya would go on a violent revenge spree, including chopping off their genitals, tearing their bodies apart from the crotch, and stabbing their chests.

**Q49: Let's say Taekjoo traveled back in time to when young Zhenya was being kidnapped. If Taekjoo risked everything to get Zhenya to safety, even sustaining injuries in the process, before vanishing, would Zhenya remember him at all? How would this affect the rest of his life? If Zhenya does remember, then I'd like to know how he might react when he sees Taekjoo's real face behind Sakamoto Hiro's artificial mask in the future! Though of course, Taekjoo wouldn't be able to recognize him...**

A49: If that happened, then not only would Zhenya remember Taekjoo, he would've set out to find him as soon as he reached adulthood. But Zhenya doesn't really know how to express his affections, so... Taekjoo would be confused and think, "Who the hell is this bastard and why is he always interfering with my work?" They'd end up fighting multiple times, with Taekjoo wondering if Zhenya is an ally or an enemy and wary about his true motives, but eventually, they'd grow attached to each other.

**Q50: What if Taekjoo's mother knits a scarf (or gives any other sort of gift) to Zhenya? Would he treasure it?**

A50: Zhenya would wear it all the time, probably thinking, That petite woman has done something rather adorable.

**Q51: If Zhenya and Taekjoo were offered a couple's discount, would they take it?**

A51: Both of them would think it's just a membership discount and ignore it...lol

**Q52: If someone flirted with Zhenya or Taekjoo while both of them were present, how would they respond?**

A52: Taekjoo wouldn't hesitate to demand, "He's my boyfriend. Do you have something to say?" and chase them away. Zhenya would intercept them and lure them to an isolated place before silently disposing of them.

### **Q53: Zhenya and Taekjoo's way of handling the COVID pandemic**

A53: During the height of the pandemic, I'd imagine even the NIS would've advised Taekjoo to work from home, at least for a few days. Zhenya would've also told the embassy that he would be working from home (but he ends up refusing any work) and stick to Taekjoo all day long, then take him to Odinokiy for multiple days as an excuse to quarantine. Of course, they'd tell Taekjoo's mother that Zhenya was ordered to temporarily return back home to Russia lol. When they return, she would cook them lots of food known to boost immunity.

### **Q54: If Zhenya and Taekjoo were to switch bodies for one day, how would they react and what would they do?**

A54: Zhenya would wear all kinds of outfits and try different poses in Taekjoo's body (including masturbating), then take several pictures and videos for his own keepsake. Taekjoo would test Zhenya's strong body to its limits to see how far he can physically push him.

### **Q55: How would Zhenya/Taekjoo react if one of them went missing for whatever reason?**

A55: They'd track down the other's last known whereabouts and wait for their return. But if they don't come back after some time, they'd set out to search for them personally.

### **Q56: What if one of them were to vanish forever?**

A56: I think both of them wouldn't be able to believe it at first and would look for traces of each other's survival. They'd keep searching and searching, only to eventually realize that the other is gone forever and be overcome with grief on the spot.

### **Q57: How would Zhenya react if Taekjoo's mother said to him, "You feel just like my own son~"?**

A57: Despite not understanding her, Zhenya would feel strangely happy whenever he hears those words, so he'd eventually figure out what she means by running it through an online translator. He might even ask Taekjoo, "I think that petite woman wants a son-in-law. What do you think?"

**Q58: What if Zhenya and Taekjoo were to do the chapstick challenge?**

A58: Taekjoo would first tell Zhenya what flavor it is before even kissing him, then give him a light kiss on the lips. Zhenya would deliberately pretend not to know what flavor it is and continue to lick all over Taekjoo's lips.

**Q59: How would Zhenya/Taekjoo react if one of them told the other, "I hate you"?**

A59: Zhenya has already heard all kinds of negative things from Taekjoo, so he wouldn't be bothered by it. Instead, he'd smirk and say, "Why do you hate me this time?" Meanwhile, Taekjoo would be caught off-guard, asking, "All of a sudden?" He'd probably worry a lot inside, grumbling, "this bastard is getting all sulky again," and wonder if he did anything wrong lol.

**Q60: If Zhenya and Taekjoo were to participate in the Olympics, each representing their own country, what would they compete in?**

A60: Zhenya - alpine skiing, equestrian sports, shooting

Taekjoo - triathlon, taekwondo, judo

**Q61: How would they react if the other suffered memory loss and couldn't remember them at all?**

A61: At first, both of them would be very happy with it. In Zhenya's case, it's because he'd be able to cover up his unpleasant past with Taekjoo and pretend to be his sweet and kind lover. But after seeing Taekjoo act completely different from before, he'd feel flustered and hopeless, realizing that the one and only man he's ever loved has vanished into thin air.

Similarly, at first, Taekjoo would happily think of it as the perfect opportunity to get rid of an annoying thorn in his side. But he'd get all antsy and nervous after seeing Zhenya's indifferent attitude towards him or hearing that he would return to Russia.

**Q62: In Vol. 5, I really liked the fact that Taekjoo was so worried about Zhenya being sick and alone at home that he called off work**

**early that day for the first time. What does Zhenya do when Taekjoo is sick? Does he hold off on his sexual urges?**

A62: Zhenya will use Taekjoo's bedridden state as an excuse to stay by his side and take care of him. He'd probably bother Taekjoo by kissing and touching him, but he'd hold off on doing anything overtly sexual. While Zhenya does like having sex with Taekjoo even when he's asleep, his favorite is when he enjoys rough sex alongside Taekjoo while he's conscious. He'd wait until Taekjoo was feeling better and then pour out everything he'd been holding back at once.

**Q63: If Zhenya went to college, what department would he major in?**

A63: Chemical engineering or premed sciences

**Q64: In a supernatural universe (ex. guideverse, X-men, etc) what type of powers would Zhenya and Taekjoo have?**

A64: Zhenya would have telekinesis, and Taekjoo would have teleportation skills. Zhenya is already nearly indestructible as he is now, so if he has telekinesis on top of that (+ also already has superhuman strength...) he'd pretty much become the strongest man in the world. Taekjoo's key characteristic is agility, so if he gets teleportation skills, then he'd be able to show off more fluid and impressive action scenes.

**Q65: In a zombie apocalypse AU, what if Zhenya or Taekjoo get bitten without an available vaccine? (Let's assume it takes 1-2 days for them to fully become zombies)**

A65: If Taekjoo gets bitten, Zhenya would take him somewhere isolated where the two of them can stay and share their love in their last few moments. Once Taekjoo becomes a zombie, he'd choose the same fate as him by letting him bite him. On the other hand, if Zhenya gets bitten, Taekjoo would make him fall asleep peacefully and help him die as humanely as possible. After burying him in a place only he knows, he'd go back to escort his mother and other people to a safe place. Eventually, when he's left alone with no one to protect anymore, he'd return to Zhenya's burial spot and end his human life next to Zhenya.

[\*\*#likes\\_and\\_dislikes\*\*](#)

**Q66: Zhenya and Taekjoo's favorite movie genre**

A66: Zhenya - doesn't have any (doesn't watch movies in the first place / can count on one hand the number of movies he's watched in his entire life)

Taekjoo - comedy

**Q67: What type of cigarettes did Taekjoo like to smoke before meeting Zhenya?**

A67: He preferred deep cigarettes, like Malboro Red or Black.

**Q68: Zhenya and Taekjoo's favorite tastes from best to worst (sweet, sour, salty, bitter, spicy)**

A68: Zhenya - sweet, sour, salty, bitter, spicy

Taekjoo - spicy, salty, bitter, sweet, sour

**Q69: What are Zhenya and Taekjoo's favorite fruits? If you were to describe them as a fruit, what would they be?**

A69: Zhenya - His favorite are cherries. He'd be a peach (very aromatic and looks very pretty at first glance, but you need to handle it carefully)

Taekjoo - His favorite is apples. He'd be a watermelon (hard and firm on the outside, but his insides are...)

**Q70: I heard Russians really like Choco pie. Does Zhenya enjoy them too? I wonder if he'd like other Korean snacks like Big Pie and Nune-ddine.**

A70: Zhenya would outwardly denounce it, saying it's a cheap and low-quality snack, but he'd still enjoy nibbling on it. I think he would like cake and pie-like snacks like French Pie, Fresh Berry, and Custard.

**Q71: Zhenya and Taekjoo's favorite Baskin Robbins' ice cream flavor**

A71: Zhenya - mint choco chip, My Mom is an Alien (Taekjoo explained it to him and ever since he's been hooked)

Taekjoo - vanilla, almond bon bon

**Q72: Does Zhenya prefer specific types of tea?**

A72: I think he would like black tea. After all, he drank a lot of black tea ever since he was young.

**Q73: MBTI Korean food ver. (P red bean filling vs. S cream puff filling / M likes mint choco vs. N hates mint choco / B pour sauce vs. J dip in sauce / W soft peaches vs. T hard peaches)**

A73: Zhenya - SMBT, Taekjoo - PNJT

**Q74: Does Zhenya, who's weak to spicy and fermented foods, have any other foods he's weak to?**

A74: Any ingredients with strong flavors such as garlic or perilla leaves lol

[\*\*#19+TMI\*\*](#)

**Q75: When did they lose their virginity?**

A75: Zhenya - at age 16

Taekjoo - at age 19 (after taking the CSAT)

**Q76: Who did they share their first experience with?**

A76: Zhenya had it with his older private tutor, while Taekjoo had it with his (same-aged) girlfriend on their celebratory trip after finishing their CSAT.

**Q77: How much body hair do Zhenya and Taekjoo have?**

A77: Zhenya has light body hair, Taekjoo has an average level of body hair.

**Q78: Can you describe the size, color, shape (is it curved or straight...?) of their you-know-what?**

A78: I'll leave that to your imagination ^^

**Q79: Zhenya and Taekjoo's sexual fantasies**

A79: Would they even have anything of the sort...?

**Q80: Zhenya and Taekjoo's TOP #1 satisfying sexual encounter**

A80: I would have to say it's the spontaneous sex they had in the heat of the moment with their first kiss in the nameless motel after reuniting in the novel. After all, it was a long time coming, and they were both quite awkward and (in their own way) careful about it, as if they were young adults figuring things out for the first time.

**Q81: After Zhenya choked Taekjoo at Odinokiy, has he ever tried erotic asphyxiation with Taekjoo during sex?**

A81: Taekjoo nearly died that day after Zhenya choked him, so Zhenya developed some internal trauma about it, even if he doesn't know it himself. He won't attempt asphyxiation, if not at least for his trauma.

**Q82: Zhenya made Taekjoo wear an outfit from the Chippendale show in the side story. Does he like having Taekjoo play dress-up in other outfits too? What does he want him to wear? Is there something Taekjoo wants Zhenya to wear too?**

A82: Zhenya has always talked about how big Taekjoo's chest is even before he started dating him, and he has a lot of interest in Taekjoo's ass. On top of that, Taekjoo happens to be very masculine, so I'm sure he's tried making him wear female underwear knowing Taekjoo would get very embarrassed about it. Taekjoo, on the other hand, doesn't have much interest in costume play. Still, if Zhenya came out wearing an outfit he picked out, he'd secretly enjoy it, although outwardly he'd click his tongue and say, "I can't believe you're doing this." (Taekjoo is weak to Zhenya's face, so he'll definitely love anything that highlights Zhenya's good looks, like an equestrian uniform or a suit.)

**Q83: Is there any other costume that Zhenya recalls Taekjoo wearing after sleeping with him in his Chippendale show outfit?**

A83: I think Zhenya would've made Taekjoo wear his old school uniform, which Taekjoo's mother has for safe-keeping lol (let me offer my condolences to the poor uniform that'll no doubt be stretched tight on Taekjoo...)

**Q84: Have either of them squirted before while having sex? If so, I'd like to know how the other person reacted!**

A84: Not yet.

**Q85: Is there a certain position they tried out for the first time recently?**

A85: Zhenya went to save Taekjoo during one of his missions, only to find him dangling from the ceiling upside down. He most definitely tried fucking Taekjoo in that position, away from the view of the security cameras. (Of course, Taekjoo curses the hell out of him, but Zhenya doesn't care, so... lol)

**Q86: If one of them started masturbating in front of the other, how would they respond?**

A86: Taekjoo would cross his arms and watch Zhenya while telling him off for it (though he doesn't really mean it), only to later end up kissing Zhenya and helping him come. Zhenya would watch Taekjoo and not lay a single finger on him until he finishes, then jump on him while Taekjoo is still catching his breath :)

**Q87: Does Taekjoo finger himself when Zhenya is away? What would happen if he gets caught by Zhenya?**

A87: Taekjoo is now used to coming from just prostate stimulation, so if he doesn't finger himself, his body won't be satisfied anymore. If he gets caught by Zhenya, well... he'll react exactly the way you expect (or hope for) ^^ haha

**Q88: How long do they take during sex?**

A88: Normally, it takes them around 3 hours... but if they get into a pattern of repeatedly going at it after waking up, it can take as long as 2 full days and 1 night... ^^;

**Q89: Do they ever shower together?**

A89: Unless they're really horny, no, I think they prefer showering alone :)

**Q90: If ZheTaek have a wet dream of each other, how would they react upon waking up?**

A90: Both of them would jump the other after waking up and play out the scenes of their dream.

**Q91: If they suddenly get horny outside, what situation would it be and how would they respond to each other?**

A91: I don't think that would happen outside publicly in their day to day lives, but I do think they would sometimes get aroused by the smell of blood after eliminating all their targets in a violent fight. If there aren't any lurking eyes around (and honestly, even if there are), don't you think they would've had a go at it right then and there?

**Q92: How would they respond if the other asked them, "Want to touch my chest?"**

A92: Zhenya would be suspicious, wondering if Taekjoo felt guilty about something, but would still enjoy groping his chest until they eventually have sex. He'd persistently ask Taekjoo afterwards what happened. Meanwhile, Taekjoo would grumble that he has no shame, but still enjoy groping Zhenya's chest as well (After all, Taekjoo loves big chests too...)

**Q93: In Vol. 1, when Taekjoo is drinking Tequila with Zhenya, Zhenya makes a gesture similar to a body shot. Do they ever take body shots after the events of the side stories?**

A93: I think they'd give it a shot while drinking after recalling their past memories. They'd probably rub salt somewhere other than the back of their hands (out of playfulness + being drunk) and suck at it, which would eventually lead to them moving to the bed and having sex ^^;

**Q94: Out of the 50 bets Taekjoo had with Zhenya in order to get the items he wanted, which one was the most scandalous one?**

A94: They once made a bet where both of them had to stimulate each other without penetration, and whoever came first lost.

**#miscellaneous**

**Q95: I'm very curious about the woman that the Bogdanov family paired with Zhenya as his intended fiancée!**

A95: Just like Olga said, you can think of her as a female version of Zhenya. She's a talented woman who graduated from military academy, and she's currently an officer in the Russian army. (In fact, her entire

family is involved with the army.) Just like how similar people tend to dislike each other, she's never been on good terms with Zhenya ever since they were young, and they still absolutely hate each other's guts to this day.

**Q96: How often does Olga visit Korea? What would she enjoy the next time she comes? (I think she'd like KPOP or K-dramas!)**

A96: After the events of the side stories, I think she would come visit whenever she thinks it's been a long time. Not that Zhenya or Taekjoo would welcome her with open arms, but she's made a few other friends (Yoon Jongwoo, Taekjoo's mother), so she'd still show up, stubbornly saying she's not there to see the two of them anyway. I can see her binging Korean dramas with Taekjoo's mother and going to KPOP concerts with Yoon Jongwoo lol.

**Q97: After Louise's steamy encounter with Taekjoo and Zhenya in the train, I wonder if she's doing okay. Is she enjoying a happily married life now?**

A97: She indulged in her last moments of youth and freedom without regrets, so I'm sure she's doing just fine without any big issues lol.

## **Checklists**

*Note: These images may not be viewable on a mobile browser. Use the Google Doc app or desktop browser to view. All checklists below were filled out by the author Boyseason.*

### **Favorite Couple's Checklist**

### **'Your Favorite Ship Summarized in One Page' Checklist**

## Favorite Couple's Checklist

Zhenya X Taekju

Translated by: Yeon  
Original by: Boyseason

	Top	Bot	Notes
Tends to use their fists in a fight	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Honestly, it'd be a huge relief if they don't pull out a gun.
Apologizes first in an argument	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Zhenya > has never once self-reflected on what he did wrong since the day he was born. Taekju > finds it hard to bring himself to apologize, but will still do so if he feels very guilty.
Strong at fighting	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Their specialty.
Gives into their lover's whining/demanding	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Zhenya > Taekju would never do that to him in the first place. Taekju > Of course not.
Likes eating	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Kwon Taekju, a strong-willed Korean who always makes sure to eat his meals, even if his life is on the line. Also a gourmet. ("That inn's kvass and pelmeni taste like absolute shit. What a waste of money.")
Cooks	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Zhenya > at this point, he's about to master the art of cooking thousands of different Korean ramen brands. Taekju > likes eating food others have cooked for him!
Goes to sleep earlier	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Not much else to it.
Wakes up earlier	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Zhenya > doesn't sleep that much to begin with. Taekju > even if he wants to sleep in, he forces himself to wake up due to his alarm or a call from headquarters.
Has plenty of dating experience	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Zhenya > currently dating his first love. Taekju > before joining the NIS, he was in love with academics, after joining the NIS, he's in love with his work.
Is popular	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Neither of them are bad-looking, so a lot of people have a good impression of them even if they don't do anything. The problem is if they actually do something.
Sensitive to changes in their lover's feelings or emotions	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	All they ever do is observe each other.
Isn't really interested in money	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	To Zhenya, money is like breathing air. He's always had it ever since he was young, and he'll continue to have it until the day he dies.
Finds their lover to be too much at times (direct translation is "Has a heavy love")	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Zhenya > "Is my love (= Zainka = Taekju) heavy? No, I think he can afford to gain more weight." (Clearly, there was an error in translation) Taekju > Exclusive automatic winner of lottery reserved for Russian visitors only. Prize includes the esteemed Royal Indestructible Diamond. Non-negotiable: prizes cannot be declined, returned, or transferred to others. Mandatory tax entails forfeiting one's own life.
Has a dark past	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	It wasn't elaborated much in the novel, but when I designed his character, I had written a dark backstory for him.
Talks a lot	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unless they're arguing or bickering with each other, neither of them talk much. Communicating with their body >>> just talking.
Is the one driving	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Both are skilled at driving not only cars, but also motorcycles, boats, helicopters, pretty much any vehicle you can think of. Whoever's behind the wheel will differ depending on the situation.
Has pretty handwriting	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Zhenya > because he uses his hands often, he's very skilled at handling tools. Taekju > has horrible handwriting that can be easily mistaken as code.
Would die cradling their lover in their arms	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Zhenya > there's no way he'd die of anything other than a natural death. Taekju > again, there's no way Zhenya would die.

## 'Your Favorite Ship Summarized in One Page' Checklist

ORIGINAL BY: BOYSEASON  
TRANSLATED BY: YEON

### *Your Favorite Ship Summarized in One Page*



**ZHENYA**

MY ZAINKA

AGE GAP  
4 YRS

YOUNGER      OLDER

HEIGHT DIFFERENCE  
20 CM

203 CM      183 CM

BLOOD TYPE  
AB      B

BIRTHDAY  
8/27      5/1

REPRESENTATIVE COLOR  
SNOW WHITE      BLACK



**KWON TAEKJU**

ZHENYA, YOU DAMNED BASTARD

**WHEN DATING:**

FALLS IN LOVE FIRST	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
CONFESSES FIRST	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
MORE OUTWARDLY AFFECTIONATE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
ENJOYS PHYSICAL TOUCH	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
PROPOSES FIRST	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

**WHEN TRAVELING:**

PLANS IT ALL OUT	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
PACKS LUNCH	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
DRIVES THE CAR	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
TAKES PHOTOS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
WAKES UP FIRST	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**IN A CONFLICT:**

COMPLAINS FIRST	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
HAS COMPLAINTS BUT STAYS QUIET	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
BETTER AT ACCOMODATING NEEDDS/WANTS OF OTHER	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
APOLOGIZES FIRST	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
MORE SULKY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**PERSONAL TRAITS:**

BARELY SHOWS INNER EMOTIONS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
NOTICES NEW CHANGES QUICKLY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
LIKES DRESSING/DOLLING UP	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
MORE INTERPERSONAL EXPERIENCE	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
MORE LOYAL & DEVOTED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

#1@pica0615

## BL Couple 19+ Checklist

Peach Perfect

# BL COUPLE 19 CHECKLIST

ZHENYA



TAEKJU



ORIGINAL BY: BOYSEASON  
TRANSLATED BY: YEON

PACKS CONDOMS

TEASES PARTNER

TALKS DIRTY

WANTS PARTNER TO COSPLAY

LOSES VIRGINITY EARLY ON

HAS HAD SEX W/ PARTNER IN DREAMS

PREFERS TURNING OFF THE LIGHTS

HAS HAD A ONE-NIGHT STAND BEFORE

CONFIDENT WHEN CAUGHT MASTURBATING

USES SEX TOYS

SUGGESTS NEW TYPES OF PLAY

LIKES KISSING MORE

SAYS 'I LOVE YOU' DURING SEX

GETS MORE WET

ENTICES PARTNER INTO SEX

THERE ARE TIMES WHEN TAEKJU DOES IT ON PURPOSE, BUT IT'S USUALLY ZHENYA JUST GETTING HORNY AT THE SLIGHTEST THINGS TAEKJU DOES

GOOD AT USING TONGUE

TAKES CONTROL

HAS HAD MORE DRY ORGASMS

HAS SENSITIVE TITS

HOW WOULD YOU REACT IF YOUR PARTNER IS NEARLY OUT OF THEIR MIND FROM PLEASURE?

ZHENYA: WOULD ENJOY THE MOMENT TOGETHER IN DEEP SATISFACTION  
TAEKJU: WOULD TRY TO CALM ZHENYA DOWN BUT GIVE UP FROM EXHAUSTION  
ENDS UP BITING HIM, WHICH ONLY AGGRAVATES HIM FURTHER; SEE SIDE STORY

SKIN GETS RED OR FLUSHED EASILY

TAKES PARTNER'S CLOTHES OFF

GETS EMBARRASSED DURING SEX

HE'S USUALLY MORE ASHAMED THAN EMBARRASSED, REALLY

TYPES OF PLAY YOU WANT TO DO WITH PARTNER / OUTFITS YOU WANT PARTNER TO WEAR

ZHENYA: SCHOOL UNIFORM; HE'S wanted TO SEE TAEKJU IN IT EVER SINCE HE SAW A PHOTO OF HIM WEARING ONE IN HIS OLD ALBUM

LEAVES HICKEYS ALL OVER PARTNER'S BODY

TAEKJU: A SUIT; HE REALLY LIKES SUITS OUT OF ADMIRATION/RESPECT FOR HIS DAD AND BROTHER + THERE'S NO WAY ZHENYA WOULD LOOK BAD IN A SUIT

DOESN'T AVOID EYE CONTACT

WHAT IF YOUR PARTNER SUDDENLY COMES ONTO YOU WHEN YOU'RE SLEEPING?

ZHENYA: WOULD BE INTERNALLY SURPRISED, BUT STILL ACCEPT HIM EAGERLY WITH OPEN ARMS  
TAEKJU: WOULD SIGH, GRUMBLING, "AGAIN?" BUT STILL LET HIM, PRETENDING HE HAS NO CHOICE BUT TO

BECOMES A DIFFERENT PERSON DURING SEX

ENJOYS WATCHING PARTNER COME

WHAT IF YOUR PARTNER MASTURBATES IN FRONT OF YOU WITH YOUR HANDS TIED?

ZHENYA: WOULD WATCH HIM UNABASHEDLY BEFORE BREAKING FREE OF HIS RESTRAINTS AND LUNGING AT HIM

PINK NIPPLES

TAEKJU: WOULD ACT DISGUSTED AND ANNOYED AT FIRST, BUT EVENTUALLY HOLD HIS BREATH WHILE WATCHING

PINK BANANA

TEMPLATE BY: @apple990707

## BL Couple TMI Checklist

Peach Perfect

# COUPLE TMI CHECKLIST

ZHENYA



TAEKJU



ORIGINAL BY: BOYSEASON  
TRANSLATED BY: YEON

EXTREMELY POSSESSIVE OR OBSESSIVE	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>	HAS HIGH ALCOHOL TOLERANCE <small>IF YOU HAD TO COMPARE, ZHENYA IS BETTER.</small>	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>
VERY EMOTIONAL	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	HAS HIGH SEX DRIVE	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>
REGRETS THEIR OWN PAST	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	VERY COMPETITIVE	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>
CLINGS TO PARTNER IF THEY TRY TO LEAVE	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>	SWEARS LIKE A SAILOR	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>
WANTS TO REUNITE W/ PARTNER IN NEXT LIFE <small>TAEKJU HOPES ZHENYA NEVER MEETS SOMEONE LIKE HIMSELF.</small>	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>	GOOD AT ARGUING	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>
SCARED OF BUGS	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	GOOD AT PHYSICAL FIGHTS	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>
HAS GOOD MANNERS	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	EMOTIONALLY SHUTS OTHERS OUT	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>
GOOD AT EATING SPICY FOODS	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>	SMART, INTELLIGENT	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>
STRONG PHYSIQUE	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>	GOOD AT SINGING	<small>UNABLE TO VERIFY</small>
ENJOYS EXERCISING	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>	GOOD AT DANCING	<small>UNABLE TO VERIFY</small>

HAS A LOW VOICE	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>	SKILLED AT INTERACTING WITH THE OTHER SEX	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>
VERY MUSCULAR	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>	VERY SOCIALE	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>
HAS PALE SKIN	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>	HAS MAD SEX SKILLS	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>
HAS PROMINENT ABS	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>	ENJOYS PHYSICAL TOUCH/AFFECTION	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>
HAS A LOT OF FEARS	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	HAS HARDCORE SEX PREFERENCES	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>
LAUGHS A LOT <small>IF MOCKING LAUGHS COUNT, THAT IS...</small>	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>	NO BODY HAIR	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
GOOD AT CLAW MACHINE GAMES	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>	HAS HAD GAY SEX BEFORE (EXCEPT FOR EACH OTHER)	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
CRYES AFTER WATCHING SAD MOVIES	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	HAS HAD STRAIGHT SEX BEFORE	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>
WEAK TO PROVOCATION	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>	HAS S TENDENCIES <small>ZHENYA REALLY ONLY ENJOYS THE SHAME TAEKJU FEELS.</small>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
HAS A DRIVER'S LICENSE	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>	HAS M TENDENCIES	<input type="radio"/> <input checked="" type="radio"/>

TEMPLATE BY: @apple990707

## BL Couple AU Checklist

Peach Perfect



# COUPLE AU CHECKLIST

ZHENYA 
**X**
TAEKJU

ORIGINAL BY: BOYSEASON  
TRANSLATED BY: YEON

OMEGAVERSE AU	APOCALYPSE AU
ALPHA / BETA / OMEGA <input checked="" type="radio"/>	FIRST TO NOTICE VIRAL OUTBREAK <input type="radio"/>
SUPERB PHEREMONE CONTROL <small>AFTER ALL, TAEKJU IS MORE MATURE...</small>	OBTAINS AND HANDS OVER CURE TO THEIR PARTNER <input type="radio"/>
ATTACKS THE OTHER W/ PHEREMONES <small>TIT-FOR-TAT. EVERYONE AROUND THEM SUFFERS.</small>	WOULD DIE FOR THEIR PARTNER <input type="radio"/>
IMPRINTS FIRST	WOULD KILL FOR THEIR PARTNER <input type="radio"/>
GOES INSANE DURING RUT/HEAT <small>NEITHER OF THEM ARE SANE DURING THIS PERIOD.</small>	HAS IMMUNITY <small>IF HE CAN'T OBTAIN A CURE, HE'D GIVE HIS BLOOD TO TAEKJU.</small> <input type="radio"/>

CELEBRITY AU	OFF THE RECORD AU
GOOD AT FAN SERVICE	MOST SIMILAR TO THE CHARACTER THEY PLAY <input type="radio"/>
GETS INTO LOTS OF CONTROVERSIES B/C OF THEIR PERSONALITY	INITIATES THE CONVERSATION FIRST <input type="radio"/>
GETS RECRUITED OFF THE STREETS	HAS THE MOST BLOOPERS <small>SO HE CAN FILM LONGER, MULTIPLE TAKES W/ TAEKJU...</small> <input type="radio"/>
SECRETLY STARES AT THEIR PARTNER DURING REALITY TV SHOWS	GETS NERVOUS FOR 19+ SCENES <input type="radio"/>
GOOD AT CUTESY AEGYO SONGS	UPLOADS PHOTOS TAKEN TOGETHER ON SOCIAL MEDIA <small>HIS ACCOUNT WOULD ONLY POST ON DAYS HE FILMED W/ TAEKJU</small> <input type="radio"/>

ACADEMY/CAMPUS AU	OFFICE AU
GETS GOOD TEST SCORES	<input type="radio"/> IN A HIGH RANKED POSITION <small>ZHENYA WOULD BE INTRODUCED AS A BOLD &amp; CONFIDENT ROOKIE, ONLY TO BE LATER REVEALED AS THE CEO'S SON</small> <input type="radio"/>
LEADS TEAM PROJECTS	<input type="radio"/> ALWAYS DECKED OUT IN SUITS <input type="radio"/>
BUILDS SNACKS FOR PARTNER FROM CAFE	<input type="radio"/> DRAGS PARTNER TO EMPTY MEETING ROOM <input type="radio"/>
GETS CALLED INTO A LOT OF MEETINGS	<input type="radio"/> GOOD AT HIDING THEIR RELATIONSHIP <small>IT'S AN OPEN SECRET.</small> <input type="radio"/>
GIVES FLOWER BOUQUET TO PARTNER DURING GRADUATION CEREMONY	<input type="radio"/> GETS DRUNK FIRST AT WORKPLACE OUTINGS <input type="radio"/>

TEMPLATE BY: @apple990707

## BL Couple Date Checklist

Peach Perfect

# COUPLE DATE CHECKLIST

ZHENYA

X

TAEKJU

ORIGINAL BY: BOYSEASON  
TRANSLATED BY: YEON

AT THE MOVIE THEATER:

AT THE CAFE:

WHAT GENRE DO YOU LIKE?

WHAT DO YOU DRINK AT THE CAFE?

BUYS THE TICKETS

LOOKS FOR A CAFE

EATS POPCORN & SNACKS

DEBATES OVER CHOOSING DRINKS TO ORDER

HANDLES HORROR MOVIES WELL

FEEDS PARTNER CAKE

GETS EMBARASSED DURING EROTIC SCENES

ENJOYS DESSERTS

SECRETLY HOLDS PARTNER'S HANDS

CARRIES ON THE CONVERSATION

CAREFULLY OBSERVES PARTNER'S REACTION

MOVES SEAT NEXT TO PARTNER

LOOKS FOR GOOD RESTAURANTS

ANYTHING YOU WANTED TO DO / ANYWHERE YOU WANTED TO GO TO WITH YOUR PARTNER?

LOOKS FOR A BAR WITH GOOD AMBIENCE / MOOD

ZHENYA: A HIDEOUT SIMILAR TO ODINOKIY THAT BELONGS TO TAEKJU, OR TAEKJU'S FAVORITE PLACE  
TAEKJU: GOING CAMPING IN A PLACE WITH NICE WATERS AND MOUNTAINS (+ LEISURE TIME)

ACTIVELY LEADS THEIR PARTNER AROUND

WHAT IF YOUR PARTNER KEEPS ASKING TO GO HOME FOR NO REASON?

ENJOYS DOING VERY ACTIVE THINGS

ZHENYA: GOES HOME EXCITEDLY THINKING THAT TAEKJU IS WORRY & WANTS TO DO IT  
TAEKJU: SAYS HE'S WHINING LIKE A SPOILED BRAT AND GOES HOME WITH HIM

TAKES PHOTOS FOR THEIR PARTNER

WHAT IF SOMEONE PICKS A FIGHT WITH YOUR PARTNER DURING YOUR DATE?

LIKES DRESSING IN COUPLE OUTFITS

ZHENYA: WOULD WATCH WITH AMUSEMENT (KNOWING TAEKJU WILL WIN ANYWAY)  
TAEKJU: WOULD TRY TO STOP ZHENYA AT FIRST, BUT END UP GETTING EVEN Madder ON HIS BEHALF

IT'S NOT REALLY COUPLE OUTFITS. HE JUST LIKES TO MAKE SURE THAT THEY'RE WELL DRESSED FOR THE OCCASION/LOCATION.

PREPARES SURPRISE EVENTS

KISSES PARTNER WHEN THEY GET HOME

HOW WOULD YOU RESPOND IF YOUR PARTNER TELLS YOU THEY WANT TO DO IT OUTSIDE?

SUGGESTS GOING TO A TAROT READER TO TEST THEIR COMPATIBILITY

ZHENYA: DOES WHATEVER TAEKJU WANTS (ALTHOUGH TAEKJU STARTS IT, ZHENYA ALWAYS HAS TO BE THE ONE WHO FINISHES IT)  
TAEKJU: WOULD REFUSE AND TRY HIS HARDEST TO STOP HIM, BUT IN THE END...

↑ ACTUALLY BELIEVES IT

TEMPLATE BY: @apple990707

Note: the two questions at the top (about preferred genre and cafe drinks) were left blank in the original, so they're blank here as well.

# Part 2: Nameless Star

Dark red = korean dialogue. Gray = flashbacks

{ } = spanish/english/persian dialogue

## 1. Reboot

Outskirts of Havana, Cuba. The village, far from the city center, was quiet even in the middle of the day. Dust swirled on the sun-bleached asphalt roads, where only old trucks or bicycles occasionally passed by.

The buildings, crammed together along the narrow road, were in poor condition. Cracks ran along their exteriors, and the paint had peeled off grotesquely. Electrical wires, tangled like vines, stretched along the walls, connecting to each window. The faint sounds of TV and radio occasionally emanating from the always-open windows confirmed that the place wasn't entirely abandoned.

The only apartment building in the village was in similar condition. Due to the perpetually hot weather, the walls and doors were thin, making it hard to expect any soundproofing. Whenever a neighbor's door opened or closed, the vibrations could be felt throughout. The wooden windows, no longer secure, also served as makeshift blinds to block the scorching sunlight, but they had rotted from the occasional downpour. There wasn't even reliable communication, let alone internet. Time seemed to flow more slowly in that place.

At sunrise, the air, already muggy at night, began to simmer. Just stepping out into the blazing sun would make the soles of rubber slippers sticky. Venturing outside was only bearable in the late afternoon when the heat began to subside. Around that time, the front door of the apartment at the end of the third floor, usually quiet, finally opened.

The person who emerged was an Asian man holding an action camera. A man sitting in the hallway cooling off, a woman hanging laundry in the courtyard, and an old man gazing out the window all glanced curiously at the unfamiliar outsider.

"So far, I've shown you the inside of the house I'll be living in for a week. Now, I'm going to explore the village to get familiar with the area. The layout here is a bit unique — it's a corridor-style apartment with a courtyard in the shape of the Korean consonant 'ㅁ.' In the past, there used to be a lot of these kinds of apartments in Korea, right? If you look here, there's a central staircase leading to the courtyard. At both ends of the corridor, there are additional stairs leading outside. There doesn't seem to be an elevator, but it's only a three-story building, after all. As I step out, you can see the view I showed earlier through the window. It's small, but there are shops, and regular houses as well. It's a bit hard to tell what's what since there aren't any signs. Even though it's still daylight, there aren't many people outside. It's probably because the Cuban weather is so hot that everyone stays inside. Honestly, I've just come outside, but I already want to go back in. The heat is suffocating — it feels like I've walked into a sauna. I heard they get frequent torrential rains here too."

The Asian man spoke non-stop to the camera. Judging by his outfit and behavior, he seemed like an ordinary traveler. More precisely, he was a content creator who documented and shared his daily life on video.

"Honestly, there's not much to show you here. There's nothing particularly special or historical, and it's more of a residential area. It'd be nice if there were more shops, but there are only three restaurants. There aren't any decent cafés, and there isn't even a place that you could call a convenience store. There is a supermarket over there, though. Should we check it out?"

After filming various corners of the village for a while, the Asian man approached a nearby shop. It was a small place selling groceries and miscellaneous goods, with only one scratched-up glass display case and a couple of shelves. The shop carried fewer than twenty items.

The shopkeeper tensed up at the sight of the unfamiliar visitor. She quietly pulled her young daughter, who had been playing nearby, behind her back. The Asian tourist, without hesitation, pointed his camera at them.

"This is pretty much the only supermarket in the village. It's more of a mom-and-pop store, so there's not much variety. Drinks, snacks, maybe some tissues? Since we're here, shall we buy something?"

The Asian man, who had been talking to himself the whole time, belatedly greeted the mother and daughter.

{Hola!}

The little girl, who had hidden behind her mother, shyly smiled and replied, {Hola!} Her face looked pale, and a nasal cannula was attached to her small nose. The shopkeeper still showed signs of caution.

{I'll just take one of these drinks, please. No, not that one — the orange one next to it.}

Despite the explanation, the shopkeeper kept picking up and putting down the wrong items. The Asian tourist narrated the situation in detail.

"Since I arrived, I've noticed that communication with the locals in Cuba isn't easy. At the airport or in the city, you can get by with basic English, but as soon as you leave those areas, it's hard to even buy a bottle of water. I think it's because Cuba is a representative communist country, and English isn't as widely spoken here. A friend told me that if you roam with an American telecom provider, your phone will be useless for the entire trip. So, I bought a local SIM card, but even with that, I can't

get any internet. Haha. My original plan was to spend a week living quietly in a peaceful place, but with no internet at all, there's not much I can do. Anyway, for those planning to travel to Cuba, I'd recommend learning a bit of Spanish and be prepared to give up on having internet during your trip. That's my tip for you."

The Asian tourist, who had been chattering on, handed over a dollar. The shopkeeper, though relieved, looked troubled — she didn't have enough change. He waved it off with a gesture, declined the change, and turned to leave.

"{Gracias}. So, here's the drink I just bought. The surface of the bottle feels lukewarm. I don't know if you can sense the heat from here, but it's about 4 PM right now. It should be cooling down by now, but it's still incredibly hot. Since there's nothing much left to see, I'll head back inside."

The Asian tourist returned to the apartment while capturing the village scenery with his camera. Along the way, he greeted the residents he passed. Most responded with bright smiles, but a few just stared at him.

He kept smiling as he went back inside. As soon as he shut the door, he locked it. The camera, which had never left his hand, was tossed aside carelessly. Then, while walking to the window, he reached behind his ear and peeled off the suffocating mask of skin from his face.

Soon, Kwon Taekjoo's real face emerged. The cheerful smile he had worn earlier was gone, replaced by a weary and indifferent expression. Kwon Taekjoo picked up an apple that had been rolling around on the table and gazed out the window.

He had a clear view of the shop he had just visited. Nothing unusual stood out — at least, not yet. Crunch. He bit into the apple and carefully watched the area around the shop. This was the third day.

About a week ago, Director Kwak had called for him. He had just completed his previous mission successfully and was in the middle of a short break. Though calling it a "break" was a stretch, as he hadn't been able to rest much, constantly being pestered by Zhenya day and night. Just as he was finally getting some sleep after dealing with all of

Zhenya's demands, he was summoned back to headquarters — not exactly a pleasant situation.

'You called for me.'

'Oh dear, you don't look too well. Your voice doesn't sound great either. Has something happened?'

'If something happened, it's not with me, but here.'

'Sorry to call you in when you were supposed to be resting. I know it's your day off.'

Director Kwak had offered an empty apology.

'They said it's urgent, so a regular employee's vacation hardly seems to matter. So, what's the situation?'

With a slightly displeased expression, Kwon Taekjoo had gotten straight to the point. Director Kwak had also wasted no time on pleasantries.

'Right. Time is of the essence, so let me get straight to it. Last night, several domestic companies and public institutions suffered a cyber attack. It was a Trojan horse-style malware.'

'...A cyber attack? But didn't they just distribute enhanced security programs to all public institutions recently? I even saw a notice instructing employees to use that program at all times. Has it already been breached?'

'They cleverly used that very program. They embedded the malicious code in the automatic update file. Even if the security program's monitoring system was running, it wouldn't recognize the malware. The companies and institutions that were attacked had their servers taken down, and all their data was encrypted.'

Despite having heard this, Kwon Taekjoo had still been puzzled. A large-scale cyber attack that threatened national security had undoubtedly

been serious, but counterterrorism hadn't typically been his domain — especially not when it involved cyberterrorism. There had only been one reason he could think of that would have justified his involvement in this hacking incident.

'Is it North Korea's doing?'

North Korea, along with China and Russia, was known as a major hacking power. The North Korean leadership had invested in training cyber warfare personnel on a national scale to maintain its regime's closed system while gaining an advantage in information warfare. Although North Korea claimed it was a strategy to swiftly respond to the rapidly changing international situation, it was nothing more than an excuse. These elite hackers had consistently targeted government agencies, military facilities, key infrastructure, companies, and media outlets in third countries. South Korea had been the most frequent victim of such attacks. A few years ago, major telecommunications and financial institutions had been infected by North Korean malware, causing a large-scale shutdown.

However, Director Kwak shook his head at Kwon Taekjoo's guess.

'Strangely enough, no. That doesn't seem to be the case this time. Our in-house cyber response team analyzed the malware and found several Cuban-style extension codes.'

'Cuba? Why would they...?'

'They've demanded 5 million dollars from each institution in exchange for decrypting the data.'

It was a predictable story. Recently, hackers spreading ransomware to large corporations and public institutions, demanding hefty ransoms,

have been rampant. These hackers blatantly steal large sums of money by hacking financial institutions and also extort cryptocurrencies like coins. Among them, hackers who organized themselves to take a bigger cut are often called "cyber gangs."

Interpol had been working hard to catch cyber gangs for a long time, but without much success. Identifying each individual member was challenging, and countries like China and Russia were uncooperative with investigations, much like North Korea. This is why these countries were suspected of shielding cyber gangs.

Kwon Taekjoo shrugged as if this was nothing new.

'Isn't the government's guideline to firmly respond to such demands anyway?'

'That's right. But it's become a bit of a headache.'

'Why?'

'Because, unfortunately, some of the data that was stolen this time includes national secrets.'

A long sigh had escaped him. No matter how much the thieves had been to blame, watching them repeatedly get away with it had made his insides churn.

'If we don't give them what they want, they'll just look for another source of money. For example, they could sell our information to North Korea.'

Director Kwak hinted at the worst possible scenario. From an outsider's perspective, the relationship between North and South Korea remained antagonistic. Whenever the regime changed, there might be brief moments of harmony, but they would quickly return to hostile stances. The Cuban crackers surely knew this.

'Even if that's the reason, wouldn't it be the same if we paid the ransom? There's no guarantee they won't contact North Korea after just pocketing the money.'

'They're greedy for money, so it's highly possible. Judging by North Korea's recent activities, they may have already provided them with

some information.'

A recent news report suddenly came to mind. Large trucks, typically used to transport fuel at North Korean nuclear test sites, had been spotted several times. When questioned about it, North Korea deflected by claiming they were only inspecting facilities damaged by recent floods. However, given that this happened just before the U.S.-South Korea Security Consultative Meeting, their explanation was hard to believe.

'Is the leaked confidential information related to military intelligence?'

'That's right. Most of it is related to military training schedules, joint North Korea nuclear response plans between South Korea, the U.S., and Japan, and the code words for the diplomatic security hotline. But the most problematic part is a covert contract regarding weapons deals between South Korea and the U.S. You know how it is. Weapons transactions between countries are conducted discreetly through secret networks. If that network is exposed, it could cause all sorts of trouble, wouldn't you agree?'

'Yes, it would be quite problematic, especially for the people at the top.'

Director Kwak let out a small laugh at the sarcastic reply. In the end, the so-called secret network was essentially a list of the government leaders, intelligence agencies, weapons companies, and brokers involved in the arms trade, who were all sharing in the profits. It was a practice, or rather a bad habit, that had been in place for so long that it was difficult to point fingers at any one individual. The real issue was that once that network was exposed, it would inevitably lead to damage in some form. If there were problems with the supply of weapons, national defense would be weakened as well.

Kwon Taekjoo irritably ran his hand through his hair.

'So, we have to clean up this mess again?'

'What can we do? Whether it's shameful or something to be proud of, it's our job to protect the state's secrets.'

'The problem is that there's no way to catch those Cuban hackers. If Interpol can't do it, how can we...?'

'We can't let them get away with the same trick twice. Since the last major hacking incident, we've been embedding spyware developed domestically into all confidential national data.'

'Spyware?'

'Yes. It's software that tracks the location the moment the stolen data is opened. If we were to install malware on the hacker's PC directly, it would be easily detected. But spyware, disguised as regular data, is much harder to notice.'

Director Kwak handed over a tablet while explaining. Displayed on the screen was a satellite map showing a specific location, which was highlighted. It was on the outskirts of Havana, Cuba.

'Is this the place?'

'Yes. We suspect that this is the work of 'Electric Hammer.'

'Electric Hammer?'

'They're one of Cuba's most prominent cyber gangs. When we analyzed the malicious code used in this attack, it contained source code specific to 'Electric Hammer.' Of course, you'll have to confirm this in person to be sure.'

Although he said "confirm," it essentially meant Kwon Taekjoo had to eliminate the hackers involved and destroy all the data they had obtained. And this had to be done before they could sell the classified information to North Korea. Chasing after criminals who hid behind computers, operating without physical limitations — it was no different from being asked to catch ghosts.

Director Kwak added one more thing as if it had just occurred to him.

'The U.S. has a vague idea of what's going on here. If they find out about the leak of that covert contract, they'll definitely try to hold us accountable. They might already be aware and taking action. That's why you need to recover the data before they do. There are no eternal allies, and getting caught by them wouldn't do us any good.'

'We've been constantly watching our backs for over half a century now.'

'Well, if we want to hold on to our positions, people like us have to work hard. Here, take this.'

Director Kwak handed him a new passport. The photo showed a man in his 30s with a vague and indistinct appearance.

'You're heading to Havana right away.'

And so, he had entered Cuba disguised as a travel YouTuber. The real YouTuber was reportedly involved in a personal dispute and had been detained in a foreign country. This meant there would be no restrictions on using his identity until the mission was completed.

Kwon Taekjoo thought about disguising himself as a local, but in such a small town, that would likely draw even more suspicion. Besides, while the locals found him somewhat strange as an outsider, they didn't seem overly wary of him. Apparently, they were used to other travelers or YouTubers visiting the area from time to time.

Sitting down on an old chair, he placed wireless earbuds in his ears. After tapping them, a short beep sounded, followed by Yoon Jong-woo's voice.

"So, how is it? I didn't notice anything suspicious. Even the shopkeeper didn't seem to know much."

[It looked like an ordinary family house to me.]

"Are you sure we're tracking the right place?"

[Yes. Unless the detector malfunctioned, that's the only suspicious spot. The data transmission volume around that area is significantly higher.]

Upon arrival, Kwon Taekjoo had pretended to casually explore the village while using the fiber optic cable detector. It picked up a strong signal near the shop he had just visited, indicating that fiber optic cables were buried there. It might make sense if it were an internet café or a lodging facility, but a small corner shop?

It was unlikely that the shop owner had personally carried out a large-scale project to lay fiber optic cables for personal use. Even putting aside the cost, the administrative authorities would never have granted

permission for such a project. This implied one thing: that the small shop had received unusual, state-level support.

Why?

There was only one conclusion. The shabby shop was the headquarters of Electric Hammer , protected by the Cuban government.

"Right. If you're trying to hide, blending in with something ordinary is the best strategy. Who would suspect that millions of dollars are being exchanged overnight in a little corner shop? There's no armed security, and from the outside, it looks like just a typical family home."

[Exactly.]

"Well, the only flaw is that for a corner shop, there's an awful lot of hidden CCTV cameras. So, can you map out the interior?"

[Yes, roughly.]

"Not 'roughly,' do it right. Do you think I went through all that trouble to get a half-baked, scribbled map?"

[Was it really trouble though? You seemed to be enjoying it. You say you hate it, but your acting is getting better by the day.]

"Oh? You're sounding pretty relaxed for someone who's running their mouth. Two hours. Finish it by then."

[What? That's impossible! Even completing the 3D simulation would take at least half a day!]

"When have we ever worked leisurely? Quit whining, kid."

[But still...]

"This operation is a race against time. We need to wrap it up by tonight no matter what. So stop complaining and get started."

[Ah, sunbaeeeeee....]

Ignoring Yoon Jong-woo's desperate cry, he turned off the communicator. Then, he turned up the volume on the listening device that had been set up at the corner store. Through the earphones plugged into his ears, he could hear the occasional conversation between the

shop owner, his daughter, and the residents. Though their conversations were incomplete, they were being translated in real-time and displayed on his laptop. However, it was nothing but mundane small talk, like asking about each other's well-being or discussing dinner plans.

Soon, the sun began to set. The low-lying sunlight grew darker, filtering through the wooden window lattice in scattered beams. Before long, the entire village was bathed in the glow of the setting sun. From a distance, the sound of barking dogs and children's laughter echoed, and lights began to flicker one by one in the once-quiet neighboring houses. Everything was utterly peaceful.

Meanwhile, Kwon Taekjoo kept his eyes glued to the laptop. The screen showed CCTV footage from the corner store, which Yoon Jong-woo had hacked earlier, split into eight parts and playing simultaneously. His sharp, focused eyes quietly scanned the situation, observing everything closely. In the stillness, only the whirring of the fan and the occasional crunch of an apple echoed in the room.

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As the night grew late, the entire village was enveloped in silence. Even the lights in the homes had all gone out. Kwon Taekjoo quietly slipped out of the apartment and swiftly made his way toward the corner store. He was fully equipped with a combat suit that blocked thermal radiation, prepared for any contingency. In the pitch-black darkness, where even proper streetlights were absent, his eyes shone brightly through the goggles.

When he reached the store, a faint mechanical sound echoed. Soon, the security sensor's laser beam became clearly visible through his special goggles. It was an infrared laser undetectable by the human eye. If he had accidentally triggered it, an alarm would have gone off, and he would have been caught immediately. The security was excessively tight for an ordinary house.

He carefully and swiftly moved to avoid the laser beams. Although Yoon Jong-woo had already hacked the CCTV around the store and replaced the footage with recordings from the previous night, Kwon Taekjoo still moved through the blind spots. The opposition was full of natural-born hackers, and there was no telling when the system might return to normal.

So far, he hadn't detected any significant movements. After scanning his surroundings again, he slid a miniature microphone between the crack in the front door. It was a device designed to pick up even the slightest sounds and amplify them. Inside, he could hear the whirring of a fan's propeller, the ticking of a clock, and the sound of deep breathing. Was the entire family asleep?

Kwon Taekjoo, after scanning his surroundings once more, pulled something from his jacket. It was a pen-shaped, high-powered laser cutter. Slipping his hand between the iron bars of the security window, he quietly cut through the thick wooden blinds. Through the opening he had made, he tossed in a small, yo-yo-shaped device. The wire connected to the device uncoiled smoothly before catching with a light snap. At the same time, a colorless and odorless gas began to fill the room. It was a sleep gas, diluted to a low concentration.

He waited for the gas to fully spread throughout the house, then moved toward the front door. He inserted a thin metal tool into the keyhole, twisting it skillfully until the lock clicked open in no time.

"I'm going in."

[Copy that. G1, entering the site.]

After surveying the area one more time, he opened the front door and quietly stepped inside. He made sure the hinges didn't make a sound as he closed the door behind him.

He stood still for a moment, scanning the quiet house. There was no light, making it nearly impossible to discern where anything was.

Turning on the light installed in his headgear, he quickly searched the house. His special goggles displayed a 3D layout of the interior, helping him navigate through the space.

Moving smoothly through the living room, he reached the master bedroom. There, the store owner and his wife were fast asleep, seemingly unconscious. He checked the wardrobe to ensure there were no other people present but found nothing unusual.

Kwon Taekjoo exited the master bedroom and entered the adjacent room. He hesitated for a moment because of the little girl sleeping there. Her raspy breathing was unusually loud; the girl still had a nasal cannula on, just as he had seen earlier in the day. Because of that, the sleep gas released before entering likely hadn't affected her fully. Should he remove the cannula now? But the girl was too young and frail to be subdued carelessly.

[Sunbae, have you finished clearing the site?]

“...Yeah, mostly.”

Kwon Taekjoo quietly backed out of the girl's room, taking care to close the door firmly in case of any unforeseen disturbance.

They had investigated this family to check for any connections to Electric Hammer . There hadn't been any particular suspicions regarding the couple, who had lived in this house for generations. They had two sons in addition to their youngest daughter, who suffered from congenital lung disease. One son had died in a car accident, and the other had gone missing.

Kwon Taekjoo had circled the area earlier, but aside from the couple and their daughter, he hadn't seen anyone else. The tragic family situation seemed to leave only the three of them remaining.

However, now that he was inside the house, an uneasy feeling lingered. There were no family photos anywhere. The belongings of the two sons who were said to be deceased or missing were also conspicuously absent.

Kwon Taekjoo's own mother had never been able to bring herself to clear away the mementos of his father or older brother. Family photos from years ago still hung prominently in their home.

Of course, everyone deals with loss differently, and not all families who lose loved ones act like his mother. Still, the house seemed almost too

clean, as if all traces of the missing son had been erased along with those of the deceased one.

This sparked a new suspicion: maybe the belongings of the two sons hadn't been discarded because their owners were still alive and using them.

A strange fiber optic cable installation, the overly elaborate surveillance system for such a small store, the location pinpointed by the NIS's information team as a hacker base, the fact that the original family members had disappeared — his suspicions began to solidify into certainty. If the Cuban government was indeed supporting Electric Hammer , it wouldn't be difficult for them to stage deaths or disappearances to throw off investigations.

“Where are they hiding?”

He slowly surveyed the entire house. If his deduction was correct, the hackers' hideout had to be somewhere inside. A place where they could live unnoticed by outsiders, blending in as if they didn't exist. Since the house was a single-story building, the only space that fit the bill was the basement.

First, he needed to find the entrance. He projected the 3D map of the house layout onto his goggles and searched for a suitable location. If someone had been hiding here for years without being noticed by the neighbors, they must be somewhere completely concealed.

He checked the 3D map again. Soon, he spotted a storage room connected to the kitchen. It was narrow and surrounded by walls, so it would be impossible to see from the outside.

He immediately headed toward the kitchen storage. The door was camouflaged with the same material as the walls, and without the 3D layout, he might have missed it entirely.

He lit a lighter to inspect the items in the storage. The flame flickered sideways from a breeze. Odd, considering it was an enclosed space with no windows.

With a determined hand, Kwon Taekjoo began removing the detergent and flour from the pantry. He reached deeper into the shelves until his

fingers caught on something.

With a firm tug, the pantry groaned open, revealing a steep stone staircase behind it.

“Found it — the rat hole.”

[G1, secret passage secured.]

“I’m going in now. Standby until I call.”

[G1, entering through the secret passage. Standing by. Be careful, sunbae.]

After Yoon Jong-woo’s final words of caution, Kwon Taekjoo temporarily switched off the communicator. He gripped his gun tightly, ready to fire at a moment’s notice, and slowly walked into the darkness.

At the bottom of the steep stairs was a door. Behind it lay the enemy’s hideout. Kwon Taekjoo switched his goggles to thermal imaging mode, preparing for combat. He then attached a small explosive to the locked door, ready to blow it open.

After taking a short breath, Kwon Taekjoo detonated the bomb without hesitation. He then threw a grenade through the now tattered door. It was a hybrid grenade that emitted both smoke and tear gas. As the room filled with thick smoke and the acrid gas spread, the people inside began coughing violently and panicking. Based on their silhouettes, there were at least five of them.

{Cough, cough... Intruder!}

One of them charged toward the entrance, cutting through the smoke. He was holding a knife. As they closed the distance, Kwon Taekjoo dodged slightly, grabbed the man’s outstretched arm, twisted his wrist, and disarmed him. In the same motion, he struck the man’s neck, causing him to collapse instantly.

At that moment, gunfire erupted from inside the room. Bullets, fired blindly, flew through the thick smoke. Kwon Taekjoo pressed his back against the wall and waited for the shooting to subside. Before long, the other side seemed to pause as if trying to assess the situation. Taking advantage of that brief lull, Kwon fired in the direction the bullets had

come from. The enemies didn't have time to react before their screams echoed through the room as they fell.

When the gunfire finally ceased, Kwon Taekjoo entered the room. The smoke had thinned considerably by now, and as his vision cleared, he saw the bodies of several men sprawled across the floor. In the back of the room, a boy crouched, clutching his ears. He couldn't have been older than fifteen or sixteen. His face was streaked with tears and mucus, likely from the tear gas.

The boy looked up at Kwon with a terrified expression. His face closely resembled the girl from the small shop with the nasal cannula. Could this boy be the second son who had been reported missing? Behind him, several computers were lined up, along with what looked like storage devices containing massive amounts of data.

"Unbelievable..."

Taekjoo had heard that the age of hackers was decreasing as children gained earlier exposure to computers worldwide. Still, to think that an international cybercrime syndicate threatening national security involved a kid — it was mind-boggling.

Taekjoo glanced at the men lying around the boy. They were all dressed in military fatigues and carried standard-issue weapons. They must have been protecting or monitoring the boy while staying in the hideout.

{Drop your weapon and put your hands up.}

He ordered the boy, now the only one left standing. The boy trembled in fear but couldn't bring himself to lower the pistol he was awkwardly holding. Instead, he shakily aimed it at Kwon Taekjoo.

Kwon Taekjoo sighed deeply. Without saying a word, he started walking briskly toward the boy. Panicking, the boy squeezed the trigger.

But the bullet only lodged in the ceiling. Taekjoo had already closed the distance and kicked the boy's hand, disarming him. The boy's own gun hit his face, causing his nose to bleed profusely. As the boy instinctively grabbed his nose, Taekjoo pinned him down with his knee and subdued him in one swift motion. He pulled the boy's arms behind his back and tied them up before reporting the situation.

“Site clear.”

[G1, site cleared. Retrieving data.]

Taekjoo took a moment to catch his breath before scanning the room again. He pulled out a prepared USB drive and inserted it into both the main PC and the storage devices. As soon as the USB was recognized, it began rapidly copying all backup data and temporary files. Of course, that wasn't all — it also triggered a formatting program embedded in the USB, which started permanently deleting all the files stored and used on the PCs.

Then it happened. A sudden vibration could be felt from upstairs. The ground trembled slightly as if something heavy was pressing down on it. The faint sound of an engine could also be heard. It seemed like a large vehicle was approaching the shop.

Had the Cuban military called for reinforcements? But the boy Taekjoo had just captured looked just as confused. Perhaps the gunshots had startled the locals into calling the authorities? Even so, the response time seemed unusually fast.

Kwon spoke into his communicator to check the situation outside.

“What's going on?”

[Sunbae, suspicious vehicles have shown up.]

“How many?”

[Two. They look like armored vehicles based on their appearance.]

“SWAT? Or the Cuban military?”

[There are no police lights, and I don't see any emblems.]

“Find out who they are.”

[Yes.]

At that moment, all the tasks were completed. Kwon Taekjoo retrieved the USB drives and placed them in his inner pocket.

Around that time, he felt an unexpected presence behind him. Someone was coming down the stairs. Even the boy, who had been quietly

restrained, flinched as he noticed the movement.

Kwon Taekjoo, his senses heightened by the approaching footsteps, turned around. Simultaneously, his gun was pointed at a familiar face. It was the young daughter of the shop owner. As feared, the nasal cannula had prevented her from inhaling the sleeping gas.

The girl seemed unable to comprehend the situation unfolding before her. She didn't understand why her parents appeared to be unconscious, who the dark figure in front of her was, or why her brother was captured by this man. Nor could she process the bodies strewn on the floor or the pools of blood around them. To her, everything must have felt like a continuous nightmare. She began trembling uncontrollably, likely experiencing hyperventilation.

{Don't be afraid. I won't hurt you.}

Kwon Taekjoo raised his hands in an attempt to calm her. But it was no use. The girl was on the verge of bursting into tears. Soon, a stream trickled down her legs as she stood frozen in fear.

As this unfolded, the engine noise outside grew louder and clearer. Right then, Yoon Jong-woo's voice rang urgently through the communicator.

[Sunbae! I think it's an American PMC. The situation doesn't look good. You need to get out of there now!]

Immediately afterward, something tumbled down the stairs leading to the basement, bouncing with a metallic clang. It slid to a stop beside the frozen girl. It was a high-explosive grenade, powerful enough to blow up the small basement.

{Damn it, get down!}

Kwon Taekjoo shouted in alarm. A deafening explosion followed, and darkness engulfed everything.

\*\*\*

“Ugh.....”

He flinched as his eyes opened. His head felt foggy, as though he had briefly lost consciousness. The first thing he noticed was the smell of gunpowder and dust. Slowly, he tried to move his limbs. They were sore and stiff in places, but nothing seemed broken. His in-ear communicator emitted only sharp, static noise, likely broken from the blast. Frustrated, he yanked it out and threw it aside. But the ringing in his ears refused to go away. His forehead itched, and a warm, sticky sensation dripped across his eyelids — blood. It seemed his scalp had been cut, as his vision was soon stained red and blurry.

The surroundings were shrouded in thick darkness. It seemed the entire building had collapsed in the explosion. Just before it happened, Kwon Taekjoo had managed to take cover in a gap between the falling debris, barely escaping with his life.

“Damn it...”

He groaned lowly as he struggled to lift his body, which felt as heavy as a boulder. Then, something wriggled beneath him. The girl with the nasal cannula was trapped under him, groaning. Without realizing it, Kwon Taekjoo had shielded her with his body during the explosion. The girl was conscious, albeit faintly, and though her breathing and pulse were irregular, they were still there. She didn’t appear to have any visible injuries for the time being.

{Ugh... Ah!}

The girl’s eyes fluttered open and, upon seeing Kwon Taekjoo, she paled. Instinctively, she tried to scream, but Kwon Taekjoo quickly covered her mouth and brought his finger to his lips. He stared into her eyes and slowly shook his head. The girl, on the verge of tears, nodded quietly, trembling.

He still hadn’t identified the ones responsible for this mess, nor did he know their objectives. Yoon Jong-woo mentioned they might be an American PMC (Private Military Company), but further confirmation was needed.

Kwon Taekjoo held his breath and listened for any signs from outside. After a moment, he heard the sound of boots, followed by car doors opening and closing repeatedly. Based on what he could gather, there

were at least four of them. Normally, he might have taken them on alone, but with a small child in tow, he couldn't risk it. He had no choice but to wait silently and hope they left.

Eventually, the loud hum of the armored vehicle's engine faded into the distance. It seemed the attackers had completed their mission and were now retreating from the scene.

Like a habit, he carefully scanned his surroundings before slowly stepping outside. Then, he gestured for the child, who was crouching in the darkness, to follow quickly. The child kept looking back, on the verge of tears.

{Pablo...}

Where the child's gaze lingered, an unconscious boy could be seen. It was the same boy Kwon Taekjoo had subdued before the building collapsed — most likely the entity known as 'Electric Hammer.' The boy was probably the sibling of the child. His lower body was pinned beneath the debris. Whether he was still breathing was uncertain.

Kwon Taekjoo had no obligation to rescue the siblings. In fact, he needed to leave the place as quickly as possible before his identity was exposed. Normally, he would have done just that. However, seeing the child, struggling to save her brother despite her raspy breath, made it hard for him to just turn his back.

{Haa... Just come out for now.}

{No! Pablo!}

Kwon Taekjoo forcibly pulled the child away, even as she hit and scratched him, resisting. Afterward, he squeezed back into the gap between the debris. Once he got close enough to the boy to touch him, he checked his pulse first. It was faint, but it was still there.

Barely moving his arm, he rummaged through the torn pocket of his battle suit. Soon, his hand found a pen. He wondered if it was still functional after the explosion. He placed the pen vertically under the debris pinning the boy and twisted the cap. The pen's mechanism whirred with a familiar mechanical sound and began lifting the heavy

stone. As soon as a slight gap appeared, Kwon grabbed the boy by the scruff of his neck and pulled him out.

Carrying the unconscious and limp boy through the narrow opening left Kwon drenched in sweat. Whether it was due to the lack of air or exhaustion, his head was spinning.

“Haa, haa... Damn it. What kind of hellish work is this?”

After placing the boy in a relatively safe spot, Kwon Taekjoo caught his breath. The girl, her face streaked with tears, clung to her brother, repeatedly calling his name. Given the collapse of the building, the fate of their parents was uncertain. It was heartbreakingly sad, but there was no time left to linger.

Late at night, lights began flickering on in neighboring houses due to the commotion. Someone might have already reported the incident to the police or authorities. Taking care of the siblings was now someone else's responsibility.

He creaked his weary body upright and dashed toward the apartment. He climbed the stairs three or four at a time, quickly reaching the rooftop. He was trying to locate the armored vehicle that had fled. Soon, he spotted the taillights of a vehicle speeding towards the outskirts of the village. Judging by the size and brightness of the lights, and the fact that it was speeding so quickly at this late hour, it was undoubtedly them.

Yoon Jong-woo had said they seemed like a U.S. PMC (Private Military Company). How had an American private military corporation entered Cuba? Were they hiding their identity, just like Kwon Taekjoo? But why?

‘The U.S. is vaguely aware of the situation here. If they find out about the leaked covert contract, they'll try to pin the blame on us. They may have already realized the circumstances and started taking action.’

Suddenly, Director Kwak's words flashed through his mind. Could it be that, as they feared, the U.S. had become aware of the leaked contract? Had they decided not to wait for this side to resolve the issue and blown up the hacker's base to avoid any aftermath? Given that they were the

type to bulldoze through anything for their own benefit and safety, it wasn't such a far-fetched suspicion.

The problem was that they had intervened in the operation without any prior notice or consent. The fact that military secrets were leaked was a sensitive issue that couldn't even be shared with allied nations. Internal security must have been rigorous — so where had the information leaked from? Moreover, the timing of their arrival at the scene, as if they had been waiting for Kwon Taekjoo to make a move, was uncanny. Had they been spying?

If Kwon Taekjoo hadn't survived the scene, he would have been framed as the mastermind behind the terror attack. Cuba would claim innocent civilians were killed, and South Korea would bear full responsibility for the human and property losses. And yet, they still call themselves allies? A bitter laugh escaped him.

"Those damn bastards... So this is how you're going to play it?"

He gritted his teeth. Not only had they meddled in his operation like rats, but they had also caused this chaos. There was no way he could just let them leave peacefully.

Around that time, the sound of police sirens could be heard in the distance. It seemed someone had already reported the incident. He needed to escape quickly before the net closed in.

As he hurried down from the rooftop, he ran into a resident who had come out to see what the commotion was about. The man flinched at the sight of Kwon Taekjoo's disheveled appearance and let out a sharp scream. Hearing this, other residents came out, and someone outside pointed to Kwon Taekjoo as the police arrived at the scene.

"...Damn it."

With no other choice, Kwon Taekjoo dashed back up to the rooftop. Without slowing down, he leaped over to the next building. The police chasing him followed suit, scattering in all directions across rooftops and external stairways to pursue him.

{No te muevas!} (Don't move!)

The police had now reached the rooftop, pointing their guns at him. Kwon Taekjoo, who had been calmly assessing the situation, suddenly sprinted towards the ledge. The police fired warning shots without hesitation. But Kwon Taekjoo didn't falter and swiftly jumped over the railing.

In the next moment, his body plummeted down the side of the building. The police, who had fired, rushed to the edge to look below. But Kwon Taekjoo had already vanished. All that remained was a cloud of dust spewing from a broken window in the long-abandoned building.

{Es por ahí!} (It's over there!)

The police urgently called for reinforcements. The officers waiting outside rushed toward the abandoned building. Then, from the darkened interior, the sudden sound of an engine roared to life. The police peered inside warily, and upon spotting something, scattered in a panic. Moments later, a pitch-black motorcycle burst out like a wild animal.

Riding it, of course, was Kwon Taekjoo. The bike had been modified for escape situations like this, with a max output of 300 horsepower and a top speed of 400 km/h. Its movements were so light and agile, like a cheetah, that it seemed to almost fly rather than touch the ground.

The stunned police quickly called for backup. Police cars started swarming from all directions to block his path. But Kwon Taekjoo skillfully weaved through the obstacles, narrowly slipping past and disappearing down a narrow alley that cars couldn't follow.

The police continued to pursue, exchanging frantic radio calls. Sirens blared furiously all around, as though they would rip through his brain. Kwon Taekjoo, with an increasing number of police cars on his tail, accelerated even more.

But the nighttime chase didn't last long. Suddenly, a police car appeared from the opposite direction, blocking his escape route. Rows of houses flanked him on either side.

Police cars were closing in from the front and back, narrowing the distance. He was like a rat trapped in a jar.

However, Kwon Taekjoo didn't panic; instead, he accelerated to the maximum and charged toward the oncoming police car. The other vehicle didn't attempt to dodge either. Both rushed toward each other recklessly and fiercely. Just as everyone anticipated a collision, Kwon Taekjoo momentarily lifted the front of the motorcycle. With the momentum he had built up, the motorcycle soared right over the police car. The police vehicles, momentarily stunned by the astonishing sight, resumed their chase.

Before long, a stone staircase connecting the lowlands and highlands appeared. Without hesitation, Kwon Taekjoo directed the motorcycle up the staircase. Just like when he had avoided colliding with the police car earlier, he lifted the front again, and the rear wheel of the motorcycle bounced, quickly propelling it over the stone steps. The police, who saw this a moment too late, were flustered at the bottom of the stairs, busily communicating over the radio.

The motorcycle, having soared up to the top of the total height, used that momentum to climb the outer wall of a building and ascend to the rooftop. Without ever slowing down, it leaped from the rooftop of one building to another, continuing to chase the armored vehicle that was getting further away. The Cuban police watched in shock as the black motorcycle flew brazenly over their heads. It seemed almost unbelievable that it was a heavy metal object and not a winged beast.

Finally, the American PMC's armored vehicle entered Kwon Taekjoo's range. It was likely that the other side had also recognized the presence of the pursuer. The police cars were flashing their lights and noisily tailing them, so it wasn't surprising.

After aiming at the rear of the armored vehicle with his wristwatch, he pressed a button on the side. The watch face flipped open, and something sprang out, sticking to the armored vehicle's bumper. Following that, a simplified satellite map and the target's location began to display on the watch screen.

Not long after, a junction appeared. The two armored vehicles that had been leading split off in different directions. Kwon Taekjoo followed the one that did not have a tracker attached.

From the roof and passenger seat of the leading armored vehicle, two men leaned out. They relentlessly fired machine guns and rifles at Kwon Taekjoo. The windshield, hit by the bullets, cracked radially. If it hadn't been for the special bulletproof glass, his head might have been blown off.

"You bastards! You want to try me?"

Kwon Taekjoo immediately turned and slipped into a narrow alley. The gunners from the armored vehicle repeatedly turned their heads, confused by the sound of the motorcycle engine that kept getting closer and then moving away. Kwon Taekjoo's motorcycle briefly revealed itself in the gaps between buildings before disappearing again.

How much time had passed? The sound of the motorcycle was heard very close by. However, Kwon Taekjoo was nowhere to be seen around. The shooter from the hatch, looking around, suddenly shouted toward the sky, {It's up there!}

Without having time to react, Kwon Taekjoo's motorcycle fell onto the hatch of the armored vehicle. From the moment he dropped from the rooftop to the moment of collision with the armored vehicle, he fired bullets to break the enemy's will to retaliate. As he was sliding down from the crumpled ceiling, he threw a grenade inside the hatch. After a moment, the armored vehicle shook slightly and gradually came to a stop. No movement was detected inside.

Soon, the Cuban police would be rushing this way. Their sirens were already close by. To ensure that the armored vehicle couldn't escape, Kwon Taekjoo shot out all of its front tires before leaving the scene.

Now, Kwon Taekjoo's gaze turned toward the wristwatch on his left arm. Once the Cuban police began their investigation of the armored vehicle, it would only be a matter of time before the true perpetrator of the terror was revealed. Therefore, there was no need to chase another armored vehicle to clear his name.

However, backing down like that wouldn't settle his mind. He could not simply overlook the actions of those who had recklessly intervened in his mission, tried to kill him, and even tried to pin the terror incident on him. He had to teach them a lesson: if they played around, he would

pursue them to the end and exact punishment, ensuring they wouldn't dare play such tricks again.

He pushed the speed to the maximum. Chasing the constantly moving target, he maneuvered through the narrow gaps between buildings and around obstacles of all sizes. Before long, he smoothly passed the police cars that were following him, which came rushing from the side alley. The police vehicles, intent on ramming him, repeatedly crashed into the unfortunate walls.

He took a wide turn around the corner and blocked the path of the armored vehicle. The armored vehicle was barreling forward, ready to sweep away anything in its path. The distance between them rapidly decreased. There was no time to shoot. Kwon Taekjoo gritted his teeth and charged directly toward the armored vehicle.

They were now close enough to identify each other. Suddenly, Kwon Taekjoo's motorcycle fell over sideways. He was thrown from the motorcycle and skidded along the ground, heading straight for the armored vehicle. The massive wheels seemed ready to crush him at any moment. If he hadn't turned his head, his face would have been smashed against the exposed, bulging undercarriage.

In an instant, Kwon Taekjoo's body slipped out of the vehicle. Confirming that he was unharmed, the armored vehicle abruptly braked. Right after, a gunner emerged from the top hatch. Just as his machine gun was aimed at Kwon Taekjoo, a tremendous explosion sent the heavy armored vehicle soaring into the air. This was because Kwon Taekjoo had attached a high-performance bomb underneath the vehicle as he passed beneath it. The vehicle flipped over and exploded with a loud blast.

"Hah, hah...."

Kwon Taekjoo lay low, catching his breath while dodging the flying debris. Meanwhile, he heard the sound of helicopter rotors above him. When he looked up, the light from a helicopter scanning below shone on Kwon Taekjoo. It was a search helicopter from the Cuban police. Following that, police cars surrounded the armored vehicle, now a crumpled heap of metal, along with Kwon Taekjoo. Dozens of targeting lasers painted his head and chest in red.

{No te muevas!} (Don't move!)

{¡Levantando las manos!} (Hands up!)

"Ha... today's been rough."

He obediently set down his handgun. He also threw off the rifle that he had slung at an angle. As he raised his arms, he momentarily concealed a small bomb in his hand.

Armed special forces approached cautiously. Now, there was only one chance to escape, just before they completely subdued him. Kwon Taekjoo waited for the encirclement to tighten before subtly twisting the small bomb in his hand. He could potentially injure himself, and someone in a panic might start firing, but at this moment, he had to take the gamble.

{No te muevas! No te muevas!} (Don't move! Don't move!)

{¡Date la vuelta!} (Turn around!)

The special forces were close enough now. At that moment, another helicopter rotor sound was heard from above. Everyone present, including Kwon Taekjoo, looked up simultaneously.

The search helicopter's spotlight, which had been shining down on Kwon Taekjoo, suddenly began to shake erratically before completely detaching. Soon, he could see a helicopter approaching from a distance. It was clear that it wasn't a military helicopter. The aircraft was entirely black, and the light barely revealed its presence. There were no markings that would help identify its affiliation. Everyone watched with anxious eyes as the helicopter approached, moving in a way that felt somehow threatening.

The eerie murmuring soon turned into screams of shock. It was because an unidentified helicopter had shot down the search helicopter that had warned it not to approach. Several parachutes erupted from the falling aircraft, spewing thick black smoke. In the unexpected situation, both the special forces and police were flustered. They tried to respond to the sudden attack, but mysterious grenades exploded over their heads first.

Everyone groaned, squinting their eyes tightly at the blinding flash. In an instant, their vision went white, making it impossible to distinguish anything in front or behind them. No matter how many times they blinked or rubbed their eyes furiously, they still couldn't see anything.

Meanwhile, the sound of the helicopter's propeller grew even closer. The strong wind whipped through their hair and clothes relentlessly. It became hard to even stand upright.

"Ugh... What the hell, damn it...!"

Kwon Taekjoo also struggled against the fierce wind and the flashes. At that moment, a long loop dropped from the helicopter, and then a massive figure approached. As he instinctively prepared to fight back, a familiar scent filled the air. Could it be...? He lifted his head in disbelief, only for a strong arm to wrap around his waist. That sensation was all too familiar to his body.

"...Zhenya?"

He murmured in a daze, and a soft chuckle escaped from the other person. That, too, was unmistakably familiar.

"Taekjoo. Had your fun running around?"

Even amidst the chaos, the distinct voice rang out, strangely clear.

"It's time to go home now."

How the hell did he know and come all the way here? And to top it off, a so-called diplomat openly attacks the police of a foreign country... Crazy bastard. Kwon Taekjoo sighed, but then suddenly pulled Zhenya into a tight hug. In response, Zhenya's hand firmly supported Taekjoo's back. Just that simple gesture made the tense string of nerves that had been stretched to the breaking point feel like it was finally released.

Soon, the loop automatically wound up, pulling both of them swiftly into the helicopter. The police belatedly started firing, but the helicopter was already moving further out of range, away from their bullets.

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“Haa...”

Only after getting into the helicopter did Taekjoo finally catch his breath. He carelessly threw off the goggles, mask, and helmet that had long lost their function. As he ruffled his flattened hair, Zhenya suddenly grabbed his chin. Then Zhenya leaned in and ran his tongue slowly up from Taekjoo's lips to the area under his nose. Zhenya's palms pressed against Taekjoo's cheeks. Only then did the pain he hadn't noticed before start to surface. It seemed like the inside of his mouth had been torn. His saliva-soaked lips and the corners of his mouth stung. The dampness under his nose wasn't entirely Zhenya's doing, either.

“Tastes salty.”

Zhenya muttered slowly, rolling his tongue around in his mouth. As always, he licked people without permission, only to complain about it afterward.

“Then who told you to lick?”

Taekjoo frowned and turned his head away, pushing Zhenya's hand aside.

“Let go, bastard.”

“You always act so bold, only to come back all battered and torn.”

“Who goes through a mission without a single scratch? If I wanted to keep myself spotless, I would have already quit this job.”

“A single scratch?”

Zhenya scanned Kwon Taekjoo’s body with an incredulous look. And indeed, there wasn’t a spot on him that didn’t have a wound. Even without checking under his combat suit, it was clear. His ears were still ringing from the explosion’s shockwave.

“I could have finished today quietly and cleanly, but then some guys interfered... No, more importantly, why are you here? I told you not to follow me.”

Kwon Taekjoo began making excuses in his flustered state, but quickly regained his composure and demanded an answer. This wasn’t the first time Zhenya had appeared at one of Kwon Taekjoo’s field operations. No matter where Taekjoo went on a mission, Zhenya always showed up as if to make a point. It was already troublesome enough that Zhenya would appear during missions, but he also often intervened openly, like now. Despite being a diplomat representing Russia, Zhenya showed no signs of acting more cautiously, as he should.

“You think I followed you?”

“Then what is it, huh?”

“Nonsense. I just ran out of cigars, and I came here to get ones that suit my taste. Cuban cigars are the best, after all. On my way back, by pure coincidence, I happened to find my lover wandering around. My reasons for being here and for taking you with me are entirely personal.”

Taekjoo clicked his tongue at the absurd explanation. Did Zhenya really think that excuse would work for his home country or Cuba? Come to think of it, Zhenya wasn’t just brazen — his head seemed almost childishly innocent. Did the world seem so easy and insignificant to him? Each time Zhenya’s ridiculous logic worked on him, Taekjoo couldn’t

help but feel frustrated. This time didn't seem like it would be any different.

Taekjoo pushed back his bothersome bangs. Now wasn't the time to be having a casual chat with Zhenya. He stuck his head toward the window to check the situation below. Police cars, sirens flashing, were trailing behind them in a long line. There were no other support helicopters in sight, so it looked like at least an aerial battle would be avoided.

He wasn't optimistic that they'd escape Cuban airspace safely, though.

"Fine, but where exactly are we going? Airspace is going to be locked down soon, isn't it?"

"Since some thief blew up a major funding source, they'll be desperate to catch us. It's best to lie low for a while."

"Haa... Don't I know that? I'm asking where and how we're supposed to lie low."

"If there's no den prepared, we'll have to borrow a raccoon's burrow."

"...A raccoon?"

Surely he didn't mean himself by "raccoon," right? Or did Zhenya have an acquaintance in Cuba with a safe house? Given the fairly strong relationship between Russia and Cuba, it wasn't an unreasonable assumption. Still, even with those ties, it was hard to be sure anyone would be eager to help someone currently branded as a national threat.

Before long, the helicopter began to descend slowly. Below them, a superyacht was calmly floating on the dark blue sea. It had to be at least 300 feet long. Were they really landing on that? Fleeing aboard a luxury superyacht while being chased as a terrorist suspect — Taekjoo was dumbfounded. The police cars pursuing the helicopter gathered at the dock, helplessly watching the scene unfold.

Zhenya landed the helicopter on the yacht and turned off the engine. The propellers, which had been spinning furiously, gradually slowed down. Right on cue, sailors who had been waiting at the docking area approached and secured the aircraft. None of them appeared to be armed. One of them even courteously opened the door for them.

Zhenya pulled the still-stunned Kwon Taekjoo out of the helicopter.

“Get out.”

Even as he was dragged along, Taekjoo kept looking around in disbelief. Just moments ago, they had been in a life-or-death chase, and now, within minutes, they were boarding a superyacht. It was so extravagant and surreal that it didn’t feel real.

“What is this?”

“I told you. It’s the raccoon’s burrow.”

“Who’s the raccoon?”

“Does it matter?”

“Of course it matters! Have you forgotten the situation we’re in?”

“What situation? I just came here to pick up some cigars that suit my personal taste. I guess... you could call it a vacation?”

Zhenya’s nonchalant reply made Taekjoo feel like he was about to explode. In a world that was loud, chaotic, and constantly on edge every moment of every day, Zhenya alone seemed unbothered, leisurely sailing through it all. Even if he were dropped in the middle of a battlefield, with bombs exploding and bullets flying all around him, Zhenya would probably be sipping tea gracefully.

Even now, Zhenya was calmly walking ahead as if nothing had happened. Taekjoo grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

“Stop joking around, idiot.”

“Who’s joking?”

“Did you... buy this yacht?”

“Why? Do you want it?”

“No. I’m asking if it’s yours.”

“If you want, it could become mine right now.”

“Ugh, stop exaggerating and just answer the question. Whose yacht is this?”

“You’ll find out soon enough. That’s not what’s important right now, is it?”

Zhenya, as usual, dodged the question and headed downstairs, moving through the yacht as if it were his own home. Meanwhile, the yacht they were on moved slowly but steadily away. Kwon Taekjoo stared begrudgingly at the flashing police lights on the dock, reluctantly following Zhenya.

The staff members they passed along the way repeatedly greeted them with respectful nods. Most were of Hispanic descent. Strangely enough, despite the fact that they were foreign individuals who had been chased here by Cuban police, the staff treated them like honored guests. It didn’t make sense.

Given the size of the yacht, they had to use an elevator to move between floors. Kwon Taekjoo stood next to Zhenya in a glass elevator, descending to the second floor. Through the transparent walls, he could see the yacht’s interior clearly. The spacious lobby, the chandelier of cascading crystals hanging in the center, the soft music playing in the background — it all had the feel of a five-star hotel. Even the rich fragrance that masked the typical scent of the sea added to the luxurious ambiance. He couldn’t help but wonder who owned this extravagant yacht and what connection they had to Zhenya.

The elevator eventually came to a stop. When the doors opened, the hallway they entered was eerily quiet compared to the lobby. There were no staff in sight, not even the faintest trace of another person. A feeling of unease crept up on Kwon Taekjoo as his instincts warned him to be cautious. Zhenya, however, walked ahead with long strides and motioned with his head.

“This way.”

So, they were expected to lie low here until further notice? The situation was precarious enough to warrant hiding out, but the space Zhenya led him to was far too extravagant to be called a hideout. Unlike the bustling areas they had passed earlier, this place was quiet and cozy.

“They said I was free to use the facilities as much as i want while we’re here.”

“Huh... Who exactly said that?”

Taekjoo was baffled, still not knowing whose luxurious yacht he was hiding out on or how Zhenya had secured access to it.

“Taekjoo, you don’t need to worry about this.”

He remained tight-lipped about who extended such kindness to him until the very end. Even in the most intimate of relationships, there are still many secrets. Of course, this wasn’t unique to Zhenya; Kwon Taekjoo himself was the same, so he couldn’t openly complain. The best he could do was glare at the back of the leisurely Zhenya’s head with a dissatisfied look.

Soon after, Zhenya stopped in front of a door. The large double doors hinted at the size of the room inside. As the doors swung wide open, a spacious room appeared as expected. A large, comfortable sofa, a table, a grand piano, and a minibar suggested it was likely a sitting room. A fan

was spinning on the ceiling, and there were exceptionally large windows on the walls, giving the room a great sense of openness. Although nothing could be seen now since it was nighttime, in daylight, they would be able to enjoy an unobstructed view of the blue sea.

As they ventured further in, they spotted a dining table that could easily seat ten people. The chandelier hanging from the ceiling rattled noisily with the yacht's faint vibrations. The constant sparkle of metal and crystal felt almost blinding. Shaking his head, he continued searching for the bedroom.

He thought they'd finally arrived at the bedroom, but first, a circular antechamber appeared. One side led to a staircase, while the opposite side connected to an outdoor terrace. He turned to Zhenya with a look of disbelief, and Zhenya shrugged, raising his eyebrows.

They could reach the bedroom through the staircase in the antechamber. As soon as they climbed the final step, a large window and a bed big enough for Zhenya to comfortably stretch out on came into view. It was overwhelming.

On the other hand, the bedding looked incredibly cozy, like fluffy white cotton candy. His utterly exhausted body began to tingle in response to the sweet temptation. If it weren't someone else's bed, he would've wanted to dive right onto it.

He barely managed to find the bathroom and turned his head. The sitting room had a large bathroom attached, but the bathroom inside the bedroom was on a completely different scale. The ceiling, floor, walls, sink, and bathtub were all made of natural marble. A large round bathtub was filled with fragrant hot water. Nearby, there was a minibar where they could grab water or drinks at any time, and a door leading to the deck. He felt a vague sense of unease, wondering what the cost of such luxury might be.

"Ya...."

Just as he looked back at Zhenya with a troubled expression, the man suddenly grabbed Kwon Taekjoo's chin with one hand. Then, slowly, from Kwon Taekjoo's face to his neck, shoulders, arms, and hands, Zhenya examined him carefully. He even checked inside his palms and

unfolded each of his ten fingers one by one. It was a familiar enough situation that Kwon Taekjoo simply let it happen. Remaining still, he entrusted himself to Zhenya, all the while continuing to dig into what had been bothering him.

"Is the owner of this yacht really someone we can trust?"

"Hmm, trust... what kind of person would you consider trustworthy?"

"You're not exactly one to build loyalty or honor with anyone... The yacht owner must have something to gain by helping us."

Zhenya snickered at the certainty that he had no trustworthy friends or colleagues. He nodded obediently in agreement.

"I made a deal. They were quite satisfied with my goods, and as for my side, we'll have to wait and see a little longer."

Zhenya dragged out the end of his sentence as he bent down to thoroughly check Kwon Taekjoo's legs as well. So, Zhenya and the yacht's owner had made some kind of deal, and in return, Zhenya had secured Kwon Taekjoo's safety? Kwon Taekjoo wasn't too pleased with Zhenya's mocking smile as if he was implying he was unsure whether Kwon Taekjoo was worth the price. Annoyed, Kwon Taekjoo pulled his leg away sharply from Zhenya's grip.

"So, you're not entirely sure we can trust them, right? Even if they're pretending to help us now, we don't know when they might stab us in the back. A man who'd sell out his country for personal gain wouldn't hesitate to betray us for something else, would he?"

"Merchants don't trust each other by nature. They only covet what the other has. Sometimes that greed can be stronger than any form of loyalty."

"So, you're saying the yacht owner is a traitor like you?"

"It means not everyone is a foolish patriot like you."

"What did you just say, you bastard?"

"You're getting worked up again. It wasn't even that roundabout. Even if you died fighting bravely today, your country wouldn't have cared. Your

people? They wouldn't even know you existed."

Zhenya stared up at Kwon Taekjoo and spoke definitively. Then, he grabbed his leg again and carefully massaged his swollen ankle. He thoroughly examined his shinbone, knee, and hip.

"Don't worry, Taekjoo. I don't make deals where I lose out."

As Zhenya's persistent hands massaged the bruised areas, a dull ache spread through his injuries. When he pressed a small cut, Kwon Taekjoo flinched involuntarily. Zhenya immediately raised his head, closely observing Kwon Taekjoo's expression. His hands, which had been obsessively exploring the injured areas, stopped as if frozen. The fact that this man, who could easily break someone, was being so cautious left Kwon Taekjoo feeling oddly restless.

"Stop it. I'm fine."

"Indeed, there are no broken bones. But there are plenty of places that need stitching."

Zhenya nodded and stood up. His movements seemed leisurely, but then suddenly, his face was close to Kwon Taekjoo's. In Zhenya's slowly shifting, pale blue eyes, Kwon Taekjoo's bewildered expression was reflected. Lukewarm breath tickled his philtrum. Is he going to kiss me? Kwon Taekjoo vaguely wondered, holding his breath. Zhenya noticed and briefly chuckled.

"First go wash up. You're filthy."

This shameless man who had just tried to seduce him, was now mocking him. The sharp ridicule stung. Annoyed, Kwon Taekjoo suddenly pinched Zhenya's cheek. Zhenya raised his eyebrows as if surprised. Kwon Taekjoo glared at him with displeasure before grabbing his collar and forcefully pulling him in for a kiss.

He licked Zhenya's dry lips, prying them open, and pulled his tongue out from where it had been lying still inside. It was a rough, desperate movement, as if trying to quench a thirst. Without giving Zhenya time to adjust, Kwon Taekjoo shoved his tongue into the kiss. When Zhenya tried to rub his tongue back, Kwon Taekjoo twisted his head to avoid it,

sucking on his upper lip, then went for his full lower lip, pushing his tongue inside Zhenya's mouth again, insistently and stubbornly.

As Kwon Taekjoo pressed his entire body forward, Zhenya retreated until he collapsed onto the bed's stool. Kwon Taekjoo climbed on top of him, continuing the relentless kiss. Their tongues and lips, even their philtrums and jawlines, soon tingled from the bruising intensity. The saliva exchanged between them carried a faint sweetness mixed with the subtle taste of blood.

After a long moment, their lips finally parted with a smacking sound, leaving only the heavy sound of their ragged breathing echoing in the air.

"Ha... Taekjoo."

Zhenya's face, especially around his eyes and lips, was flushed as his chest heaved. His long eyelashes, now damp with a light sheen of moisture, trembled slightly. Kwon Taekjoo, who was looking down at him while supporting himself on one arm, grinned with satisfaction. It was the smile of a victor.

"What are we going to do now? We're both filthy."

"Huh?"

Zhenya raised the corners of his mouth in surprise, but his gaze — sharp, as if he was licking Taekjoo — was filled with expectation.

Kwon Taekjoo gently caressed Zhenya's ear, then slowly leaned down for another kiss. This time, it was entirely different — a sweet and tender kiss. He softly placed his lips over Zhenya's, lightly sucking on his upper lip, then releasing it. The warmth and texture of their lips rubbing against each other could be felt intimately. Their breaths mingled warmly, and their tongues brushed together ever so gently, evoking a sense of softness and comfort. The fine hairs on Zhenya's cheeks subtly stood on end.

Eventually, Kwon Taekjoo pulled back. At the same time, a faint sigh escaped from Zhenya. His damp eyelashes fluttered slightly.

"Wait here. I'll be back after a shower."

After lightly tapping Zhenya's now beautifully flushed cheek, Kwon Taekjoo got up and headed towards the bathroom. But just a few steps in, he suddenly felt a tight grip at the back of his head. Before he could turn around, Zhenya lunged from behind and embraced him forcefully, knocking him off balance and sending himself and Taekjoo sprawling.

"Ugh, damn it! That hurt!"

"Taekjoo. You provoke me every time. Couldn't you wait even a little? Hm?"

"Are you talking about yourself? Ugh, let go, I can't breathe!"

Kwon Taekjoo slapped at Zhenya's arm, which was tightening around him with all its might. Uselessly, Zhenya only hugged him tighter. The sudden display of strength pressed against his abdomen, making it hard to breathe. He tried to crawl away, but Zhenya's weight pinned him down completely.

"Taekjoo, Taekjoo..."

Zhenya buried his face in Kwon Taekjoo's hair, repeatedly calling his name. His heated breaths tickled the nape of Kwon Taekjoo's neck and scalp. The evidence of Zhenya's arousal pressed insistently against his waist, fully erect. To think he could be like this after just one kiss. A sigh escaped him.

"Hey, wait a second. Agh, just hold on. Is this really the right time? Listen to me, you bastard!"

"Right time? Even in the midst of war, people still have sex. It's just a human instinct."

Zhenya continued to grip his chest tightly, unfazed by Kwon Taekjoo's objections. He sank his teeth into the exposed nape of Kwon Taekjoo's neck, eliciting a sharp pain that made him clench his jaw. Zhenya pulled and twisted both of Kwon Taekjoo's nipples through the thick combat uniform, sucking hard on the flesh at the nape of his neck. When Kwon Taekjoo turned his head to escape, Zhenya simply nibbled on his ear. After being pinned down and struggling, Kwon Taekjoo finally managed to prop himself up on his elbows to shove Zhenya away.

“Are you an animal, for real?”

“If you’ve gotten someone all hot and bothered like this, then you should take responsibility instead of trying to pull away.”

“If we’re going to do it, it should be later. Not here. I don’t like it, it feels wrong.”

“Oh, would it have been better to do it in the helicopter? How about on a lifeboat?”

“Stop being ridiculous.”

“You should stop pushing me away and relax. While we’re here, neither Cuba nor Mexico can touch us.”

Zhenya immediately sensed Kwon Taekjoo’s anxiety. However, the more he listened to Zhenya, the more doubt crept in. What kind of person owns such a yacht that neither Cuba nor neighboring Mexico would dare to touch? What had Zhenya promised such a powerful figure? Kwon Taekjoo couldn’t help but worry that this deal might put Zhenya in danger.

Zhenya suddenly grabbed Kwon Taekjoo’s shoulder and turned him around. Kwon Taekjoo met his gaze with a look of discomfort.

“Are you still anxious?”

“.....”

“Do you still not trust me?”

Kwon Taekjoo didn’t answer. He merely stared at Zhenya, his expression deep in thought.

“Then trust me.”

At Zhenya’s additional words, Kwon Taekjoo’s eyes widened slightly. Zhenya looked down at him with a triumphant smile on his face, his sea-colored eyes filled with certainty.

“Leave it all to me, Taekjoo. I’ll blow away any worries you have without a trace.”

How audaciously he spoke, being the very embodiment of those worries. Kwon Taekjoo chuckled at the absurd promise, but Zhenya's face quickly came closer. Their lips met, and a warm breath filled the space between them.

This was bad. How could those careless words — telling him to just trust him without any real plan — make his heart soften so fast? Without any convincing reason, without any solid evidence, it just happened. As long as Zhenya was on his side, it felt reassuring. He knew he shouldn't depend on him so much, but when it came to Zhenya, he became increasingly vulnerable, making it hard to keep his balance.

Kwon Taekjoo swallowed his irritation and fiercely grabbed Zhenya's hair. He twisted his head and eagerly devoured the tongue that was desperately rubbing against his lips.

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"Haah, haah..."

The remnants of torn combat gear were strewn messily across the bathroom floor. Kwon Taekjoo was sitting awkwardly beneath the showerhead, gasping for breath. His chest, constrained by the chest rig, heaved along with his breaths. The undershirt clung to him, rolled up to his neck. The nipples, swollen from being bitten and sucked, glistened with sticky saliva. The torn pieces of his drawers hung pitifully from one thigh, pressed against the leg holster. Zhenya's eyes glinted with satisfaction at Kwon Taekjoo's disheveled state.

He stared intently at Kwon Taekjoo's face, methodically spreading his hole. The entire bathroom was slick with body oil, making every surface slippery. Kwon Taekjoo struggled to hold himself up on his elbows.

"Haa, mhh, ugh.."

Another long finger pushed its way in, and he squeezed his eyes shut at the sensation of his insides being thoroughly stretched and explored. Despite the countless times they'd done this, the feeling never became familiar. Even though his body was covered in large and small wounds, there was no time to register the pain. Every nerve in his body was focused on the overwhelming sensation spreading from a single point. The more his body loosened, the more a familiar urgency built within him. Time seemed to drag, each second stretching into eternity.

As Zhenya withdrew, dragging along the walls, Kwon Taekjoo's knees trembled from the widening gap. When Zhenya thrust back in, stirring his weak points, Kwon Taekjoo bit down on his teeth, holding his breath. His thigh muscles reacted obediently, tightening at the sensation. His already erect member throbbed and dripped, causing him to writhe. Zhenya, watching this display, smirked, raising the corners of his mouth.

"Taekjoo. Just pushing my finger in here is enough to make you writhe."

"Shit... stop playing around and put it in already."

"I want to meet your expectations, but no matter how much you like it rough, it's too soon right now, isn't it?"

"Hah, since when did your damn self care about that, ugh?"

"There's no need to purposely do something that'll make you hate me."

Kwon Taekjoo swiftly reached out, grabbing Zhenya by the back of the head and pulling him in. Their foreheads collided hard. Kwon Taekjoo growled as he glared into Zhenya's wide eyes, surprised by the sudden turn of events.

"So, put it in. Right now."

"...Huh?"

Zhenya wore a look like he'd just been punched but then smirked. For a brief moment, Kwon Taekjoo thought he saw Zhenya's blue eyes gleam, as if they were glistening. Zhenya's fingers, which had been filling him, suddenly slid out. In their place, the thick, heated weight of his length nudged against him.

"Was this what it took to be loved?"

Zhenya grinned slyly as he firmly pushed his cock inside. The once pliant opening stretched to its limit, greedily swallowing the thick cock inch by inch. The mucous membranes, which had been almost unbearably tingly with impatience, were now crushed under the immense pressure. As Zhenya pushed in deeper, his grin widened, and his own body shivered as he enjoyed the soft, warm sensation around him. Kwon Taekjoo's hands, which gripped Zhenya's head and arm, tightened with tension.

Before long, the sharp sound of Zhenya's pelvis slamming into Kwon Taekjoo's ass echoed through the room. At the same time, a thick vein bulged on Zhenya's previously smooth forehead, his pupils constricted, and a light tremor rippled across his cheeks.

"Ha... Taekjoo."

"Agh, ugh..."

Zhenya, out of habit, buried his face into Kwon Taekjoo's hair, rubbing his nose roughly against the dark strands, scattering kisses haphazardly. His cock, fully buried, pulsed in rhythm with the tight clenching surrounding it, fully savoring the sensation. Kwon Taekjoo felt as though his entire stomach and core were being pulled tight and twisted, every muscle and tendon straining.

The boundary between discomfort and euphoria was unclear, as were the lines between pain and pleasure. Kwon Taekjoo's insides felt like they were being crushed, leaving him with a bloated sensation, yet at the same time, an unbearable heat coiled within him. Contradictorily, he wanted to break free from the suffocating pressure, yet longed to be fucked so thoroughly that he wouldn't be able to think about anything else.

“Ugh... Zhenya, faster...”

“Yes, Taekjoo. As much as you want.”

Zhenya whispered in a tone soaked with intoxication. In the next instant, his cock withdrew swiftly before slamming back in with resounding, relentless thrusts.

“Agh, ugh...! Uh, uh... guh... ah!”

“Ha, ha... Taekjoo... Taekjoo...”

Zhenya’s heavy pelvis repeatedly struck Kwon Taekjoo’s perineum with each deep thrust, sending electric jolts of sensation rippling through his limbs. The dull, burning ache caused his waist to tremble involuntarily. Zhenya wasted no time diving in again before the previous sensations could even subside, as if he was intent on leaving his mark on Kwon Taekjoo’s trembling insides, taming him faster.

The sound of their violent friction echoed incessantly, like the aftermath of a fistfight breaking out in the bathroom. The relentless stimulation made Kwon Taekjoo’s ears ring and his head spin.

His neck and spine went from chillingly cold to feverishly hot as the heat emanating from Zhenya's hips spread through him. The pain and pressure from the deep thrusts gradually morphed into a sweet kind of agony. Despite being pinned down and fucked without rest, Kwon Taekjoo found himself squirming, seeking even more of that fiery, intoxicating heat. He couldn't hold back his moans any longer.

"Uh, ugh, Z-Zhen... ha, ugh, ugh, ah, ah...!"

"Hm, Taekjoo... Feels good? Ha... you like it, Taekjoo?"

"Th-there, right there. Ah! Ugh! Ah!"

"Ugh... Here? Like this? Huh? Hah, like this?"

"Ha! Ugh! Argh, damn, f—...!"

Frustrated moans burst out uncontrollably. In response, Zhenya quickened his pace, grinding deeper into him. The rough, uneven surface of Zhenya's cock made Kwon Taekjoo's insides burn as they were relentlessly stretched. The scent of heated body oil intensified, its heavy aroma mingling with the sweltering heat enveloping them. It was hard to tell if his mind was hazy from the intoxicating scent or from the searing heat coursing through his entire body.

The back of Kwon Taekjoo's thighs, harshly ground, had turned bright red, burning and stinging. As he tried to reach out and stop him, Zhenya grabbed his arm and pressed it against the wall, pinning him down further with his lower body, crushing Kwon Taekjoo beneath him.

"Hah, w-wait... ugh, wait, aah!"

"Taekjoo... ha, Taekjoo..."

Whenever he flinched from the savage thrusts, Zhenya would only pound more violently, obliterating any last bit of resistance. The onslaught was so relentless that Taekjoo crumbled completely.

“Hngh, uh, ah...!”

In the middle of the fevered pace, Kwon Taekjoo slipped on the body oil. Instinctively, he wrapped his arms tightly around Zhenya’s neck. At that moment, Zhenya’s movements suddenly stopped, as if the embrace had momentarily stunned him. His hole that had been helplessly taking in Zhenya’s thickness now shuddered, tightening around his throbbing heat.

“Hah, hah... ngh...”

“Ha...”

Their gazes locked for an instant. Both were so intensely aroused that it seemed like they were ready to tear into each other. Their breath, heavy and hot, mingled between them.

With a fierce glare, Kwon Taekjoo twisted his hips beneath him. The cock, only half buried, slowly sank deeper into him, inch by inch. As it did, Kwon Taekjoo’s abdomen flexed tightly, his muscles hardening. The inner walls clenched mercilessly, squeezing Zhenya’s shaft without mercy.

“Ha, ugh... Taekjoo... not bad.”

The unexpected, agonizing pleasure caused Zhenya’s brows to knit together. His face flushed red, not just his eyes but his ears and neck as well. His mouth twisted into a grin, and goosebumps spread across his cheeks. His large frame even trembled slightly from the intense sensation. Watching the change, Kwon Taekjoo smirked in satisfaction.

“Loving it, aren’t you, brat?”

“What?”

Zhenya twisted his lips into a grin as he looked at Kwon Taekjoo. His blue eyes, filled with deep ecstasy, stared at him. He chuckled incredulously, seemingly amazed by the unexpected counterattack.

"Where did you even learn a trick like this? Do they teach things like this to men in your country?"

"Teach? Nah, only rookies need lessons."

"Oh, so you're a natural?"

"My improvisation skills have always been top-notch."

Kwon Taekjoo grinned and lifted his hips. Zhenya's cock tightly gripped by his entrance was slowly swallowed, then released, reddened by the friction.

As it was drawn in, his soft inner walls wrapped around the surface of Zhenya's cock, pressing firmly. When it was pushed back out, the tight ring clenched as though it was about to snap the cock in half. The intense pleasure sent throbbing pulses through both Zhenya's cock and his lower abdomen.

"Ha, ugh... Taekjoo, ugh... more..."

Zhenya greedily accepted the sweet sensations that Kwon Taekjoo gave him. Watching Zhenya moan in pleasure, Kwon Taekjoo's lips curled into a sly smile. He pulled Zhenya's flushed face closer and whispered softly against his ear, letting his lips brush coldly against his earlobe.

"Zhenya, do you like it?"

Zhenya's breath, which had been sharp and clear, suddenly quieted. For a moment, it seemed like his back swelled with tension. Kwon Taekjoo could feel the tautness in Zhenya's face, his jaw clenched tightly. Smiling in satisfaction, Kwon Taekjoo flexed his abdomen, tightening around Zhenya's shaft while subtly pressing down on his stomach.

"Ha, ugh... your cock is trembling inside me. It's shaking so much that it's making everything in here ache."

"...Ha?"

Zhenya chuckled, almost disbelievingly. He murmured Taekjoo's name, rubbing his head lazily against Kwon Taekjoo's shoulder. Then, supporting Kwon Taekjoo's slightly arched waist, Zhenya slowly licked

up from his neck to his ear. He acted like a tamed dog, yet his nature never truly leaned toward submission. This moment was no exception.

"You're squeezing me so tight inside and out... I suppose I should meet your expectations."

His voice, laced with that distinct rasp, heralded the oncoming struggle. Without warning, Zhenya's cock, which had been firmly held inside, withdrew. Kwon Taekjoo tried to tighten around him, but it was useless. Zhenya pulled back until only the head remained, teasing his hole before slamming back inside in one swift, brutal motion.

The impact sent a sharp tingle from Taekjoo's hips all the way up his spine.

"Ahh, fuck...!"

"....."

The ravaged insides of Kwon Taekjoo's body tried desperately to adjust, attempting to clench around Zhenya. But Zhenya pulled out again, only to thrust back in, deep and relentless.

"Haah! Fuck...!"

A cry, barely masked as a moan, tore from Kwon Taekjoo's throat. His fingers dug into Zhenya's shoulders and back, a desperate attempt to anchor himself against the onslaught. Zhenya, undeterred, continued his aggressive pace, driving deep as if punishing Taekjoo for his earlier provocation. His eyes never left Kwon Taekjoo's, locking onto him as he thrust repeatedly, right to the base.

"Ugh! Ah...! Fuck, you bastard... take it easy... ah!"

"You're baring your teeth again. This is what you wanted, wasn't it, Taekjoo?"

Zhenya shifted the angle of his thrusts without warning, suddenly pressing against a sensitive spot inside. Kwon Taekjoo's mouth snapped shut, his jaw tightening. His spine stiffened, trembling as it resisted the overwhelming sensations.

A sly smile spread across Zhenya's face. He retreated just enough, then ruthlessly hammered that same spot again. Kwon Taekjoo's voice cracked as he cried out, his body momentarily crumbling under the pressure. Zhenya didn't miss the opportunity, continuing his relentless rhythm, focusing on that single spot with unwavering precision. The pressure built from deep within Kwon Taekjoo's core, rising higher and higher, until it seared through his entire body, a maddening mix of pain and pleasure that had him groaning in frustration.

"Ahwuk! Mm, ugh! Th-that, ah, uhng!"

"So this is how you're biting into me, huh?"

Pleasure that rivaled the pain poured down like a waterfall. His entire body became acutely sensitive, even sensing the slightest touch of a single strand of hair. The heated cock of Zhenya was pressing in, as if determined to drill a hole inside him. The inner flesh that had been battered from within was being violently pulled out with the thrusting, only to be crushed back in without form, repeatedly. It was as if lightning flashed before his eyes. Even as he clenched his teeth to endure, thick saliva trickled down his jaw.

Zhenya licked and parted Kwon Taekjoo's lips. His tongue was bitten the moment it slipped inside, but he ignored it, as if used to it. Their tongues tangled violently, and a faint taste of blood surfaced, only to be quickly neutralized by the sweet saliva that boiled up. Every time Zhenya's flesh stabbed and stirred his insides, Kwon Taekjoo's tongue reflexively twitched, responding in kind. Zhenya's lips kept curling into a grin.

"Mmph, ugh, mm, hhng, huff, ugh, mmph, ah!"

Even while their lips were locked, Zhenya didn't slow the pace of his thrusts. The downward motion, impaling him from tip to base in one go, remained unchanged. Now, even the slightest brush against his throbbing spots sent his breath spinning away in a daze.

Zhenya eagerly swallowed even that breath. Kwon Taekjoo tried to hold on, struggling for air, but in the end, he pounded on Zhenya, begging him to stop. Yet, the man kept Kwon Taekjoo's chin in his grip and stubbornly continued the kiss. Even when he twisted his head away, Zhenya chased

after him, forcing their lips together again. His tongue was numb, and his entire jaw felt sore.

"Stop it! Hah... Hah..."

Out of a survival instinct, Kwon Taekjoo pushed Zhenya's chin upwards. Only then was he able to gasp for the breath he had been holding. His lungs ached from how long they'd been suppressed.

Even amidst all that, Zhenya continued to fuck him without pause. His pupils shrank, making it clear that he was far from being in his right mind. It seemed like he needed to release once first.

Kwon Taekjoo buried his head against Zhenya's neck and desperately tightened his hole. Then, he bit down hard on Zhenya's skin and sucked. Zhenya's Adam's apple seemed to visibly quiver, though it might have been a trick of the mind.

Right after that, Zhenya's arms wrapped around Kwon Taekjoo's body as if to crush him. His cock pounded violently into his hole. It felt like he would lose his mind any moment, but he couldn't move as Zhenya held him tightly. All he could do was endure the thick desire that Zhenya poured into him with a painful desperation.

"Hah, hah, aww, uhng, oh, Zhenya, ugh! Huff, mm!"

"Haa, uh, Taekjoo, ugh, Taekjoo..."

Zhenya's face pressed into Kwon Taekjoo's thick hair, frowning deeply. Breathing in Taekjoo's now stronger scent, he quickened his movements. A tingling sensation reverberated through his entire body. It became hard to distinguish what was pleasure and what was pain anymore.

Not that it mattered. Kwon Taekjoo's mind fogged as his brain boiled over. He squeezed his eyes shut, blindly waiting for the final blow.

"Ahwuk! Mm, ugh! Hh, uhng!"

"Taekjoo... ha, Taekjoo..."

Zhenya, who had been recklessly pounding away, suddenly fell with a thud. At the same time, his cock, which had been buried deep inside, trembled and pulsed violently, followed by a scorching heat unlike

anything before. Zhenya kicked against the floor, pushing Kwon Taekjoo further into the corner, pulling their bodies even closer despite already being pressed tightly together. A growling sound resonated from deep inside Zhenya's throat, pushing the breath from Kwon Taekjoo's lungs.

Zhenya paused for a moment, panting, before letting out a long exhale and pulling back slightly. Then, he thrust up sharply again. At that moment, Zhenya's cock convulsed, and his massive body trembled before exploding in a wave of white heat. The walls inside, already raw and chafed, were now coated with the thick fluid, which sent shivers of lingering heat through Kwon Taekjoo.

“Hah... hah... Taekjoo.”

“Aah... uh...”

Zhenya repeatedly called Kwon Taekjoo's name, rubbing his face against Taekjoo's hair. Their bodies were slick with sweat, sticky and uncomfortable, but Zhenya kept leaving kisses without hesitation. Kwon Taekjoo, too exhausted to protest, simply muttered while leaning against Zhenya.

“Damn... How is it that rolling around with you is harder than doing work on a mission?”

“For someone complaining, you sure finished well. Judging by how thick your cum was, it seems like you had a lot built up, huh?”

Zhenya wiped off Kwon Taekjoo's semen that had splattered onto his clothes. Then, he spread his fingers, letting the white fluid stretch between them as if playing a joke. He swatted Zhenya's hand away.

“Get rid of it, you bastard.”

Even though Taekjoo was clearly disgusted, Zhenya kept grinning as if it were somehow amusing. Clicking his tongue in displeasure, Taekjoo glanced around. His already dry throat felt even more parched. Swallowing became difficult. He vaguely remembered seeing some water around.

Soon, he spotted a bottle of water placed on the sink. Desperate, he reached out, but it was just out of his grasp. Still pinned down by Zhenya, who held him tight, Kwon Taekjoo lightly tapped Zhenya on the shoulder.

“Hey, let go for a sec. I’m thirsty, and I need to finish cleaning up.”

“Sure.”

Zhenya nodded casually. But that was it. He didn’t move an inch. Instead, he grabbed both of Taekjoo’s wrists, pressing them firmly against the wall.

“What the hell.”

Taekjoo muttered, trying to resist, but then suddenly, their lips collided. Before he could react, Zhenya’s thick tongue forced its way into his mouth. Was this a sloppy attempt to quench his thirst with a kiss? No way Zhenya was jealous of the water, right? Or maybe he just couldn’t stand even a moment apart? Taekjoo couldn’t understand what was going through Zhenya’s mind, but if this was some kind of sulk over Taekjoo having left work during their vacation, there wasn’t much reason to deny him.

How could someone so massive pout like a child? In a way, it was endearing. So, reluctantly, Taekjoo sucked on Zhenya's tongue in return. But far from satisfying his thirst, his throat only felt drier.

Taekjoo began to twitch, short of breath. The words he wanted to say, telling Zhenya to stop, were stifled as Zhenya pressed his tongue down on Taekjoo's, preventing any coherent sound from escaping. Zhenya lazily slid his fingers along Taekjoo's wrists, then stubbornly intertwined their fingers together, forcing Taekjoo's clenched fists open. Soon, his right arm was pulled upward, and his fingertips bumped into something. It felt like a long, bar-shaped faucet. The sudden stream of water pouring down over them confirmed it.

"Ugh, ha... ha... what are you...!"

He barely managed to pull away and shout, but then froze. Zhenya was already soaked. Droplets of water clung to the tip of his nose and chin, dripping down onto Taekjoo's face. The water hung from Zhenya's pale eyelashes, each droplet lingering before falling onto Taekjoo's cheeks. Each slow moment was vividly etched into Taekjoo's sight. Even Zhenya's light-colored eyes, which were usually so sharp, seemed to sparkle more clearly than ever. A chuckle slipped out.

"You sly bastard... You're acting all bold because of that pretty face."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Zhenya grinned mischievously, playing dumb. Meeting Zhenya's provocation, Taekjoo slowly parted his lips and stuck out his tongue. A sweet droplet of water lightly moistened it. Taekjoo licked his plump lower lip with his now wet tongue, all the while locking eyes with Zhenya, who remained focused on him. Zhenya's lips seemed to twitch

almost imperceptibly. His eyelashes trembled slightly. But Taekjoo was still thirsty.

He subtly tilted his head and caught the water droplet clinging to Zhenya's chin with his tongue. Slowly, he licked up from Zhenya's throat to his face, then lightly sucked on his earlobe. It wasn't enough to truly quench his thirst. He knew this teasing sensation would only make him crave more, but he couldn't stop.

The stream of water flowed down Zhenya's ivory hair and sleek face, converging at his prominent Adam's apple before splitting and running down either side. For some reason, leaving it alone felt wasteful. Abruptly, Taekjoo latched onto Zhenya's Adam's apple, sucking hard. A low groan rumbled from Zhenya's throat, and a furrow formed again between his brows.

"...Yevgeny. Let go of my hands now."

With a soft, audible pop, Taekjoo pulled his lips away and issued a command in his husky voice. Instantly, as if it had all been a lie, Zhenya's grip on his wrists loosened. Now free, Taekjoo wrapped both arms around Zhenya's neck. In response, Zhenya lifted him up with ease, standing to his feet as though he had been waiting for this. Taekjoo's legs instinctively wrapped tightly around Zhenya's waist.

Their mouths moved frantically, pressing against each other's foreheads, cheeks, lips, and ears without pause. All the while, Zhenya's erection pushed against Taekjoo's groin, their bodies grinding together. The continuously falling stream of water served as the perfect lubricant, making the heat between them rise swiftly.

Soon, Zhenya positioned his stiffened cock against the cleft of Taekjoo's buttocks. Yet he didn't thrust in recklessly. Instead, he licked the damp

skin of Taekjoo's cheek, naturally transitioning back into a kiss, waiting patiently for Taekjoo to melt into him.

Taekjoo's tense body gradually began to relax due to their position. Even their tongues, which had been tangled and intense, softened in the kiss. Slowly, Taekjoo's hole started to envelop the tip of Zhenya's cock, which had merely been resting there. Zhenya let out a low, breathy moan, murmuring Taekjoo's name. Not long after, his cock pushed in fully, slipping into Taekjoo's loosened body. As Taekjoo, on the verge of going limp, let out a sharp cry, his instincts kicked in, and he clung tightly to Zhenya.

"Aah... Ugh... slowly..."

"Yes, I'll go as slow as you need."

Zhenya held Taekjoo's body firmly, supporting him with practiced ease. His hard physique contrasted with the gentle rhythm of his movements, indulging in the soft flesh beneath him with elegant hunger. The sound of the shower water echoed on, refusing to stop anytime soon.

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As soon as the shower was over, Taekjoo collapsed onto the bed, spread-eagle. His body felt so heavy that even moving a finger seemed impossible. He didn't have the energy to check the time or care about the situation in Cuba. His consciousness was teetering on the edge, drifting toward the abyss.

Zhenya approached the bed, and the mattress sank slightly under his weight. He looked down at Taekjoo for a moment before suddenly grabbing one of his arms. Supporting his head, Zhenya shifted Taekjoo's position, turning him so that his head rested toward the headboard. Was it really okay to entrust his body so fully to someone else? A tiny voice of reason protested faintly, but Taekjoo brushed it off, thinking, Well, he is my lover, so why not? There had been times in the past when his life had hung in the balance in Zhenya's hands, but now, instead of feeling cautious, he felt at ease. The thought struck him as strange.

"...Mm."

The back of his head sank into a soft pillow. He sensed a pale hand moving toward his face. Assuming Zhenya was about to touch him, Taekjoo subtly leaned his cheek against it. But the unexpected sensation made him flinch and open his eyes. What he saw next was a glass of whiskey, its amber liquid gently swaying inside.

He parted his lips, but then closed them again, unable to speak right away. His voice was caught in his throat. After clearing it with a small cough, he tried again.

"Seriously? You're giving me this when I said I was thirsty?"

"Taekjoo, no matter how much you enjoy pain, you don't have to endure unnecessary suffering."

"What kind of nonsense is that?"

Frowning, Taekjoo shifted his body, but then hesitated. His body felt heavy, like a waterlogged sponge, and a dull ache spread from various parts. It wasn't just the aftereffects of sex.

Lifting his head, he glanced down at his body. Thanks to the rushed shower, his skin was mostly clean. Large and small bandages were stuck all over him. The scratches, both big and small, were all glossy, likely from some ointment that had been applied. There seemed to have been quite a few wounds that needed stitching — had Zhenya sewn them all himself?

Curious, Taekjoo peeled off one of the bandages on his arm. The wound beneath it, about the width of a fingernail, was meticulously stitched. The size and spacing of each stitch were so precise that it could've been done by a machine. He let out a quiet laugh, incredulous.

“What, you even stitched this up? You must’ve been thrilled to get your hands on my bare skin again.”

“As if. Those little scratches can leave surprising scars. And besides, isn’t it enough that I’m the only one leaving marks on your body now?”

Zhenya tilted his head with an innocent look, spouting his usual nonsense. He must be out of his mind. The absurd remark somehow sounded romantic, which made Taekjoo think his head might’ve gotten messed up from the explosion. Maybe his brain had finally short-circuited.

Is madness contagious? With that ridiculous thought, he forced himself to sit up, letting out an involuntary groan as he did.

In response, Zhenya gently shook the glass in front of him.

“Drink up. I gave you painkillers, but they’re probably wearing off by now.”

Taekjoo obediently snatched the glass and took a sip, feeling the dryness in his throat fade as the liquid moistened it. A warm burn spread from his throat to his stomach, but the pleasant aroma enticed him to take another sip. How much does a bottle of this even cost? Zhenya was the type to casually drink liquor that might be worth the price of a house, so it was hard to tell. Soon, Taekjoo handed back the empty glass.

“Want another?”

“...No, I’m good.”

Thanks to Zhenya’s treatment, Taekjoo wasn’t feeling any significant pain. The painkillers had done their job, and the accumulated fatigue had dulled most of his senses. The alcohol had probably helped, too. However, there was still a persistent dullness in his lower back and a peculiar sensation deep inside his hips that refused to fade.

Did I get bruised again? He had lost track of time midway through, so there was no way to know how long they had gone at it. But the state of his body left little doubt. The moment this guy gets horny, he tries to wear me out completely.

“Ugh... It’s hard to like you when you go overboard like that.”

“What are you mumbling about? Say it in Russian.”

Maybe you could learn Korean instead, but he’s even trying to control my speech. He retorted without holding back.

"Are you in heat 365 days a year? Harassing someone who barely made it back alive all night?"

"What are you talking about? If you're referring to last night's sex, you initiated it."

Zhenya shamelessly replied, "I clearly told you to wash up." As if to say that if Kwon Taekjoo had taken a shower first, they wouldn't have had sex, he shook his head as if to dismiss it entirely.

Then he checked his body again. His skin was covered with wounds and kiss marks, mottled all over. Especially the bruises he had before meeting Zhenya had turned into congested spots in the meantime. Was it Zhenya's intention to be the only one leaving marks on Kwon Taekjoo's body? A long sigh escaped him.

"You really bit down hard. If someone saw me, they'd think you are a zombie."

"Well, I'm not into cannibalism."

"Of course you aren't."

"Oh, I almost forgot about this spot."

Zhenya suddenly let out a low chuckle and said something incomprehensible. Then he grabbed an ointment from the nightstand beside the bed. After opening the cap, he smeared some onto his hand and immediately applied it to Kwon Taekjoo's nipple. The flesh, swollen and bruised from being bitten and sucked on all night, softened under his touch.

The strange sensation made Kwon Taekjoo frown instinctively.

"Stop it, idiot."

"Are you suddenly feeling shy?"

"No, I'm disgusted. When are you going to stop acting like a child?"

"I'm acting like a child?"

"Then why are you so fixated on my chest?"

"Even if I am, there's no need to forcefully overcome it. You seem to enjoy it quite a bit too."

Zhenya suddenly grabbed Kwon Taekjoo's left chest. Then, tilting his head, he whispered playfully in a teasing voice.

"You even came just from your chest once last night."

Zhenya's sharp nose brushed against Kwon Taekjoo's earlobe and the nape of his neck. As he instinctively moved to bite his neck, Kwon Taekjoo blocked him with his hand.

"Cut it out."

"Huh?"

"I'm not falling for your tricks anymore."

"What tricks have I supposedly been pulling?"

Zhenya made an innocent face, acting as if he had no idea. It was infuriating, especially since he had washed up and changed him into clean clothes while Kwon Taekjoo slept.

"No matter how pretty you try to act, it's not going to work. I'm immune to it now."

"...Oh? You think I'm pretty?"

He responded a beat late, then laughed out loud. Mockingly, he added, "So I was your type from the start, huh?" Kwon Taekjoo's fist clenched out of nowhere. He really wanted to punch this cheeky and annoying guy just once.

Forcing his fist open, Kwon Taekjoo extended his hand.

"Stop talking nonsense and give me your phone."

At the sudden request, Zhenya tilted his head slightly. The playful smile had already disappeared.

"Why do you need my phone?"

"My comm device is broken, so I can't contact headquarters. My phone and gun are both gone too."

"And?"

"And, no matter what, I still need to submit a status report."

"Even in this situation, you're only thinking about work?"

"I'm not doing all this just for fun, you know."

"Hurry up."

Kwon Taekjoo said, shaking his hand up and down. Zhenya, with a reluctant expression, handed over his phone. It would have been nice if he had also unlocked it, but there was no such flexibility. Letting out a small sigh, Kwon Taekjoo held the phone close to Zhenya's face.

Strangely, the real Zhenya beyond the screen seemed more unreal than his reflection on the display. Even after the facial recognition was complete, Kwon Taekjoo stared at him for a moment.

Maybe Zhenya sensed that gaze. With his perfectly composed face, he slid forward smoothly. Gently, their noses brushed, and soon after, their lips lightly touched. Kwon Taekjoo, with half-lidded eyes, admired Zhenya's face that had come so close, then slightly parted his lips. Immediately, Zhenya's tongue slipped inside, licking his dry lips as it entered. The warm breath and saliva seeped in, sweetening the bitterness in his mouth. Although the forgotten wounds on his inner cheeks stung as they were scraped, Zhenya's gentle and affectionate movement while sucking on his tongue prevented him from pushing him away.

Kwon Taekjoo softly grasped Zhenya's hands, which had habitually pressed down on his shoulders. He gave Zhenya a few light, playful kisses, knowing full well that one kiss wouldn't satisfy him.

"Wait. Just a moment."

Zhenya clung stubbornly but didn't outright interfere, as if he had learned that a bit of patience would reward him with something sweeter. It was as though this untamed beast, who had never been tamed by anyone, had become a dog now, craving only his master's affection.

As Zhenya rubbed his face against Kwon Taekjoo's neck, Kwon Taekjoo stroked his hair while typing on the keypad. To guard against any potential eavesdropping, he dialed Yoon Jong-woo's SNS messenger account. Given they were at sea, he was worried about the signal, but the tone immediately began ringing.

However, no matter how long he waited, the call didn't connect. It seemed the headquarters were also in a state of emergency. Just as he was about to type a message, the phone in his hand buzzed. It was a vibration signaling an incoming message.

—Hello. Mr. Bogdanov. I'm sorry that I couldn't answer your call. I'm in a meeting.

The polite tone made Kwon Taekjoo chuckle. If it was a true emergency, there wouldn't be any time to send such a message to an outsider. So, the "meeting" was just an excuse. He immediately replied.

—If you don't want to die, pick up the phone.

As soon as the message was sent, he tapped the call button again. The familiar ringing tone came and then stopped. A moment later, Yoon Jong-woo's voice, the one he had been waiting for, finally came through.

[Ah, h-hello? Yes, Mr. Y-Yevgeny. Um... it's been a while. How are you?]

"I'm fine. Thank you, you punk — hey, why are you stuttering so much?"

[...Huh?]

"Huh' what?"

[Is it you, sunbae? Taekjoo sunbae? Sunbae! What happened? Are you safe?]

"You're hurting my ears, man. I called because I'm fine."

[Are you hurt anywhere? There was a big explosion at the operation site, and I've been worried sick! All communications were cut off, and a whole day passed with no word from you! I was so worried I thought I'd be preparing for a funeral!]

"Weren't you secretly hoping for it?"

[What? How can you joke like that? Anyway, where are you now? Are you safe? Have you eaten?]

"You're exhausting me. Ask one thing at a time."

"That junior again?"

Zhenya, who had been lying down and listening, cut in with a disapproving tone. Did his voice carry over to Yoon Jong-woo on the other end? A faint sound of Yoon Jong-woo gasping could be heard from the phone.

[Are you with Yevgeny-ssi? Ah, this account is his, right?]

"Why are you calling him ssi/Mr.'? Aren't you two friends?"

[Sunbae, please don't try to make us friends. I have absolutely no intention of that!]

"Use your head. If you at least became friends, maybe he'd hesitate for a second before trying to kill you."

[Is... is that true? Oh, wait, that's not the point. Why is Yevgeny-ssi there with you?]

"He was just passing by. Said he came to buy some cigars."

[Whaaat?]

Kwon Taekjoo snickered at Yoon Jong-woo's astonished reaction and glanced over at Zhenya.

"See? He doesn't believe you."

Zhenya, not understanding the conversation, raised an eyebrow. Yoon Jong-woo, equally clueless about the situation, seemed just as confused.

[Sunbae?]

"It's nothing, just talking to myself. Right now, all the communication devices are down, and all my belongings are gone, so I had no choice but to contact you like this. We're out on the ocean, of all places."

[...What? The ocean?]

Soon after, the sound of typing came from the other side of the phone. It seemed like Yoon Jong-woo was tracking the phone's location. Kwon Taekjoo was curious about where the yacht was, so he waited for a moment, idly touching Zhenya's face, which was right in front of him.

[Sunbae, you're in Mexico right now?]

"Oh, so this is Mexico?"

[You didn't know?]

"How would I? I got dragged here without knowing a thing."

[You weren't... kidnapped, right? Should I call for help?]

"If I had been kidnapped, do you think I'd be talking to you like this? No need to worry. For now, this is the safest place I can be."

As he responded, he glanced over at Zhenya again. Zhenya, who didn't understand the conversation, was blatantly observing. He seemed to be trying to guess what the conversation was about based on the tone.

“Anyway, since I don’t know when I’ll be able to return, Jong-woo, could you report to the Director for me? Tell him that the ‘Electric Hammer’ base was completely cleaned out. Thanks to some guys throwing bombs, it got wrapped up quite nicely. Before that, I managed to extract some data from their PCs as well...”

He whispered “USB” to Zhenya, who had been watching him intently. It was something he’d managed to protect even while being chased by the Cuban police, fighting against the American PMC, and getting tangled up with Zhenya.

Zhenya nodded obediently and left the room. Kwon Taekjoo continued the conversation while watching his retreating figure.

“I’ll upload the data to our groupware later, so check it when you can.”

[Got it. You’ve really been through a lot, Sunbae.]

“It’s just the usual work, really. Oh, what happened to those mercenaries that showed up at the scene? Did you figure out who they were with?”

[They were multinational mercenaries. Up until recently, they worked for a U.S. PMC called ‘Golden Bullet.’ They aren’t affiliated with anyone right now, but doesn’t that seem suspicious? It looks like the U.S. is trying to pin everything on us and use this hacking incident to their advantage. Thanks to you wiping them out, though, it looks like the blame is going to land on them instead. For once, I don’t think the higher-ups will have any complaints about your solo actions. You’ll still have to write up a report, though.]

“Ugh... another report? I’m so sick of writing those.”

[You did expect things to turn out this way, didn’t you? That’s why you should’ve just run away. It’s a good thing things worked out, but if they hadn’t, it could have escalated into a serious diplomatic issue.]

“How could I stand by while an allied country stabs us in the back? Do I look like I’m volunteering to be an international pushover?”

[Pushover? Sunbae, you really need to work on controlling that temper of yours if you want to live longer.]

“I appreciate the advice, but thanks to you, I won’t be able live long enough anyway.”

[Me? What did I do?]

“Bad-mouthing me. Be honest, you’re still doing it now, aren’t you?”

[Oh, Sunbae, you really hold a grudge, don’t you? Aren’t you being too sentimental about things that happened ages ago?]

“What can I say? I have an exceptional memory.”

[...Sigh. Seeing you joke around like this, I’m glad you’re really okay. I was so worried I couldn’t sleep all night.]

Kwon Taekjoo chuckled at the grumbling tone. Teasing Yoon Jong-woo was a pleasure that never faded, even after all these years.

After chatting for a while, he felt someone’s gaze and looked up. Zhenya had returned and was staring at him with a puzzled expression. Maybe he was annoyed at Kwon Taekjoo for joking around with someone else. It seemed like Zhenya wanted Kwon’s attention all to himself, acting like a big kid despite his size.

Seeing Zhenya’s slightly sulky face, another thought suddenly came to mind. He decided to ask about them.

“There were some kids at the scene.”

[Kids? Oh, yeah, I heard there were survivors. It seems like the Cuban police are taking them into custody for statements and protection. Why, are you concerned about them?]

“Well, in a way, they were just innocent children caught up in the selfish desires of adults.”

Having lost their family and home, those kids must be living a hellish existence. Kwon Taekjoo couldn’t help but wonder whether the Cuban government would provide proper care and treatment for the siblings. For a moment, he was filled with concern but then sighed, thinking he’d gone soft. Since when did he start caring about the well-being of his targets?

Not long ago, he believed that casualties during operations were inevitable. He rationalized them as necessary sacrifices to prevent greater harm. After going through countless battles, he had even come to doubt the innocence of children who appeared to be absolute victims.

But now, he found himself unable to judge and act as coldly as before. His mind still told him he shouldn't hesitate, but his heart kept pulling the brakes. Strangely, the faces of the targets reminded him of other precious people. He recalled what a retired colleague once told him — that the more personal relationships you have, the harder it becomes to pull the trigger. Taekjoo had dismissed it as irrelevant to himself back then. But perhaps... it wasn't.

"...Anyway, tell the Director I'll return on my own."

[Are you really not going to receive any support? The borders in that area will be sealed for a while, and the surveillance will get more intense.]

"Somehow, I'll manage. I'm not seriously injured anywhere right now, and luckily, I've got the final boss right next to me."

When he mentioned the 'final boss,' he grinned at Zhenya. Zhenya wondered what he meant, looking curious.

“The strongest and most reliable monster in the world.”

He added in Russian, and the expression that had been stiff on Zhenya's face softened. As Yoon Jong-woo asked what that meant, he cut him off and turned the phone towards Zhenya. As he did, Zhenya, who was leaning in for a kiss, accidentally brushed his lips against the phone screen, ending the call. Zhenya's blue eyes filled with confusion at the unexpected turn of events. He held out his hand to him.

“I think I should at least get my USB back first.”

“Huh?”

Zhenya handed over the USB quietly. But as soon as he reached out to take it, Zhenya clenched his fist and hid it.

“What are you doing?”

“Now that I think about it, even if this USB was originally yours, Taekjoo, it's in my hands now, right? And I don't easily give up something once it's in my possession.”

“Oh, really?”

With a sly grin, he tilted his head slightly. Zhenya, too, faced Kwon Taekjoo with a mischievous smile on his face, as if eagerly anticipating how he would respond.

Kwon Taekjoo picked up the glass he had set down and gently swirled the deep amber whiskey. Zhenya's gaze briefly shifted toward the glass before locking back onto Kwon Taekjoo's face. Their eyes met immediately. Kwon Taekjoo, staring directly at Zhenya, slowly sipped the remaining whiskey. The characteristic scent of the whiskey gradually spread, and Zhenya's smile slowly faded. The dark pupils tightened in the pale blue crystals that did not blink for even a second. Reflected in them was only Kwon Taekjoo.

On purpose, he made a gulping sound as he swallowed the liquor. His prominent Adam's apple bobbed along. When he slowly pulled his lips away from the empty glass, a drop of whiskey clung between his lips and

the glass and trailed down his chin. He stuck out his tongue and licked it clean.

“It has quite a nice flavor. Want to try it?”

“Ha, even the best seduction spies would cry and leave after seeing this sight.”

Zhenya muttered in disbelief, fiddling with Kwon Taekjoo’s now-moist lips. He massaged the plump lower lip fully, and when he gently pulled it out, Kwon Taekjoo’s upper lip enveloped his thumb. Then, a soft, moist tongue lightly licked the thumb caught between his lips.

Zhenya’s body reacted with a subtle tremor to the rare temptation.

The next moment, as Zhenya was about to lunge at him, he turned his head away. His lips brushed against Taekjoo’s cheek like a mischievous flower petal. While Zhenya looked at him with ragged breaths, Kwon Taekjoo dangled the empty glass in front of him. Zhenya shook his head, inserted the USB into the glass, and a soft click sounded as Kwon Taekjoo’s lips curved into a long smile. Having gotten what he wanted, he gently cradled the back of Zhenya’s head and pulled him closer.

As Zhenya swallowed Kwon Taekjoo’s whiskey-scented breath in a rush, he was pushed against him with full force. When Kwon Taekjoo’s fingers combed through Zhenya’s ivory hair, Zhenya let out a low moan with a quick exhale. In no time, his once-pale cheeks flushed red. The way Zhenya responded earnestly to his gestures and breaths was cute. There was a strange sense of accomplishment from Zhenya’s seemingly pure attitude, as if craving his affection. It was all the more satisfying because it was so unlike his usual self.

Their lips parted and met again repeatedly with soft smacking sounds. Their tongues intertwined, pushing and pulling against each other in a playful, lustful wrestling match. In the midst of it, Zhenya fully climbed on top of Kwon Taekjoo. Holding Kwon Taekjoo's face with both hands, he kissed him continuously. Like someone tasting sweetness for the first time, his movements were eager yet somehow tender. Matching his pace, Kwon Taekjoo caressed and massaged Zhenya's ears and cheeks. The faint static from his fingertips made both of them burst into soft laughter.

Kwon Taekjoo traced Zhenya's flushed lower eyelids a few times, planting kiss after kiss. Maybe because of the rough texture of his callouses, Zhenya's long lashes quivered, tickling his cheeks and eyes.

Worried that it might sting, Kwon Taekjoo subtly pulled his hand back. But then Zhenya gently grabbed it, pressing his lips to each of Kwon Taekjoo's fingers, one by one.

Zhenya brought Kwon Taekjoo's hand back to his cheek and softly planted a kiss on the skin just above his upper lip. He twisted his head and simultaneously enveloped both his lower lip and tongue, letting out a sweet, soft moan. Kwon Taekjoo, too, let out a deep, heavy breath. He gently stroked Zhenya's cheek, his fine facial hair standing on end. He couldn't remember the last time he had been so careful when touching someone.

For a long time, they immersed themselves in the tender atmosphere, caressing each other, kissing, and rubbing their bodies together. Compared to sex, it was an almost childish play. And yet, the slow, tickling sensation was so enjoyable that they just wanted to stay close like that forever.

But it wasn't long before Kwon Taekjoo's energy began to wane. The tongue that had been moving so fiercely gradually lost its strength.

Realizing this, Zhenya paused all movements and looked down at Kwon Taekjoo. His heavy breaths became more frequent, and soon, his eyes began to droop. It seemed the accumulated fatigue had caught up with him all at once. Perhaps it was also due to the strong painkillers.

When Zhenya asked if he wanted to sleep, Kwon Taekjoo slowly nodded. He even reached out his arms toward Zhenya with sluggish movements.

“Come here, Yevgeny.”

Zhenya leaned in closer to Kwon Taekjoo with a puzzled expression. Kwon Taekjoo smiled and pulled his face into a tight embrace. Zhenya, his face suddenly buried against Kwon Taekjoo’s chest, murmured, “Taekjoo?” as if confused by the unfamiliar gesture, awkwardly shifting his body.

Kwon Taekjoo, eyes already closed, firmly patted Zhenya’s back, who was now pressed tightly against him.

“You know, let hyung take a nap, and then I’ll play with you.”

“What?”

“Yeah, good boy.”

“Hey, Taekjoo...”

“You should get some sleep too. You probably didn’t get a wink of sleep all night because of stitching my wounds.”

His voice, heavy with drowsiness, gently soothed Zhenya. Whenever Kwon Taekjoo was drunk or slipping into unconsciousness, he would always speak in such a variety of languages. So, this meant that Kwon Taekjoo was on the verge of passing out.

Soon, the inside of Kwon Taekjoo's eyelids grew still. The arms that had been holding Zhenya gradually loosened. Only then did Zhenya lift his head and quietly study the now-sleeping Kwon Taekjoo. After staring for quite some time, Zhenya brought his face close enough that their breaths mingled. Then, he inhaled the sweet breath that Kwon Taekjoo exhaled. Normally, Kwon Taekjoo would have woken up right away and stopped him from doing anything strange, but this time, he was deeply asleep, unaware of anything.

Zhenya turned his head and placed his ear against Kwon Taekjoo's chest. The steady heartbeat that made his own heart race thudded slowly but firmly, asserting its presence.

Using that rhythmic vibration as a lullaby, Zhenya gently closed his eyes. Their deep, low breathing merged into one, and soon, sweet sleep overtook them both.

## **2. Blue shangri-la**

"Wake up, Taekjoo."

The sound of someone waking him roused him from sleep, forcing his eyelids open with great effort. Blinding sunlight hit his eyes like a sharp blade, threatening to pierce them. He frowned and attempted to shield his eyes with his hand, but Zhenya approached and sat down beside him, sparing him the trouble.

"We've arrived."

"Arrived? Where?"

Zhenya gestured toward the window, as if urging him to see for himself. Groaning, he propped himself up, but despite having rested well, every part of his body screamed in pain.

His skin felt peculiar, as though his entire body was swollen.

Struggling to sit up, Zhenya handed him a bottle of water. For once, he was being useful. After giving Zhenya's cheek a few light pats, he took a drink.

The relentless thirst that had plagued him in his sleep compelled him to finish the entire bottle in one go. He crushed the empty plastic bottle out of habit and moved to the window.

As Zhenya had said, the yacht had docked in a harbor. Oddly, no other yachts were in sight, only a few motorboats and jet skis caught his attention.

The still, emerald-colored sea captivated him. There were no large buildings nearby, nor any signs of habitation. Could it be a remote island?

The perfectly maintained coast was clearly a human creation, yet the complete absence of people gave an unsettling feeling.

At that moment, Zhenya came up behind him and lightly pressed his body against Kwon Taekjoo's, wrapping his arms around his shoulders. As if by habit, he rubbed his head against Taekjoo's hair. While leaning slightly against him, Taekjoo opened his mouth.

"Where are we?"

"Not sure."

"Jong-woo said it's Mexico. Is that right?"

"Could be."

"It either is or isn't. What kind of answer is that?"

"It doesn't matter where we are. As long as it's quiet and no one can bother us, isn't that enough?"

Considering their situation, it wasn't unreasonable. Still, it was important to know where they were for the future. One variable — Zhenya — was already more than enough for Kwon Taekjoo.

"A place where no one can bother us? Does such a godforsaken place even exist?"

Just as frustration began to set in, his stomach growled loudly. Come to think of it, he couldn't recall the last time he had eaten. He also had no idea how much time had passed since he lost consciousness. Zhenya persistently rubbed Kwon Taekjoo's flat stomach, which growled insistently.

"Let's get some food first."

There was a teasing lilt in his tone, but it was still a welcome suggestion. However, even as he suggested they eat, Zhenya took his time, planting

small kisses on Taekjoo's nape. His hands, which had been gently stroking Taekjoo's stomach, gradually slid downward, shamelessly slipping into his groin. He squeezed Taekjoo's softened cock with casual ease while licking his earlobe. Sensing that things might escalate right there, Taekjoo lightly swatted his hand away.

"Why are you touching my dick when you said we should eat first?"

"Hmm... Just saying hello? It was weeping all night and I couldn't even sleep because of it."

"You bastard. Did you do it again while I was sleeping?"

"Why so worked up? You enjoy it too, don't you? You even sleep better when I give you a good fuck ."

It wasn't so much "sleeping better" as it was passing out. Before meeting Zhenya, Kwon Taekjoo would often collapse for days after completing a mission. It was to recover his depleted energy and repair his broken body. Ever since Zhenya got involved, though, they had started spending time together like this. Zhenya had a habit of showing up unexpectedly at operation sites and practically kidnapping Taekjoo.

He would often watch him sleep, stroke him with an obsessive tenderness, and eventually have sex without waking him. Sometimes, Taekjoo would awaken halfway through, but the way Zhenya whispered his name, the unwavering gaze he held, the warmth radiating from his body, and the intimacy of the moment itself felt so endearing and sweet that he pretended not to notice.

He didn't particularly prefer it, but he had gotten used to it. After all, having sex while asleep meant Kwon Taekjoo could catch up on much-

needed rest, and Zhenya could satisfy his overflowing lust. It was a win-win. So maybe Zhenya wasn't wrong when he said, "You like it too, don't you?" They say that people start to resemble each other the longer they stay together — perhaps Zhenya's bizarre tastes had rubbed off on him.

Clicking his tongue, Taekjoo pushed the smirking Zhenya away. He didn't know where they were, but they had arrived on land, so it seemed like a good idea to step outside. That meant he needed to wear something, but the combat uniform he'd been wearing was beyond recognition. He started looking for something appropriate to wear.

He opened the closet. Inside were various bathrobes made of silk and cotton, as well as Zhenya's neatly arranged clothes. It was as if he had packed for a vacation, bringing a wide variety. Taekjoo checked, but there were no clothes of his own. If Zhenya had planned to chase him this far, he could've at least brought one outfit for him. So much for attention to detail.

After putting on a fresh pair of underwear, he threw on one of the bathrobes. Outside, the place resembled a resort, and the weather was hot. Since they were just going to eat, that seemed sufficient for now. As he was about to close the closet, he noticed bags stacked neatly at the bottom.

Out of curiosity, he checked them, and as expected, they were filled with various firearms. He took out a handgun and held it. It didn't fit perfectly in his hand, but it was usable. He wondered where to carry it when Zhenya, who had been watching, smiled lightly and stopped him.

"You won't need that."

"You sure?"

Zhenya just laughed and led the way out of the bedroom.

"This way."

Something about it felt off, but Taekjoo followed him for now. Once outside the yacht, not only did the staff they had seen earlier greet them, but there were people in white uniforms lined up as well. They greeted them with great reverence, as if they had been waiting just for them.

{Welcome.}

The overwhelming hospitality made Taekjoo freeze. Goosebumps prickled the back of his neck. He wondered if they had mistaken him for a VIP rather than someone on the run.

{We were informed that you hadn't eaten anything on the yacht, so we've prepared a meal for you. Please follow me.}

A man who appeared to be the manager stepped forward and led the two of them. They walked along the wooden deck extending from the pier. On both sides of the path, shallow, crystal-clear water shimmered. It was so clear that you could see the white sand, coral, sea urchins, starfish, and small fish at the bottom. As they ventured further toward the deeper waters, a sea turtle swam lazily beneath the deck. The scene was so surreal that it looked like something out of a CGI movie.

It would've been easy to get lost in the beauty of the surroundings, but Kwon Taekjoo's eyes were busy scanning the area. Through the dense trees, he caught glimpses of white buildings. Judging by their size, as well as the number of staff and their uniforms, it looked like some kind of tourist accommodation.

"What is this, a resort?"

"They said it's a villa."

Taekjoo let out a breath. A villa with enough rooms to easily number in the hundreds on a property this vast? He wondered if Zhenya or the people he associated with had a hobby of building palace-like villas on deserted islands that no one visited. As an ordinary person, Taekjoo simply couldn't comprehend the extravagant lives of the rich. He shook his head in disbelief.

After walking for a bit, they reached the end of the deck. There, a large pergola had been set up to provide shade. The sides were wide open, allowing the sea breeze to flow freely, while long drapes fluttered endlessly in the wind. Underneath the pergola, a spacious dining table was laid out with a variety of food.

There was far too much food for a simple breakfast.

"Sit down."

"Toast and coffee would've been enough for breakfast. What's all this? I feel full just looking at it."

Undoubtedly, most of the food would go to waste since the two of them wouldn't be able to finish it all. Feeling it was such a shame, Taekjoo pulled out a random chair and sat down. It was a seat that faced directly out to the sea.

As the white drapes of the pergola parted with the wind, the flood of blue hues from the ocean dazzled his eyes. The deep indigo of the

distant sea blended into lighter aquamarine shades closer to shore. The sight was mesmerizing, but Taekjoo simply clicked his tongue.

"I don't know who owns this place, but... to hog a place like this all to themselves? Smells fishy."

"Why, do you want it, Taekjoo?"

"Why do you always assume I want something? Even if I owned it, it would still be just another isolated island like your Odinokiy. I'd feel trapped. Staying cooped up on either island would drive me insane."

At his blunt statement, Zhenya's gaze, which had been fixed on Taekjoo, shifted forward. His expression remained unchanged, but somehow, his face seemed slightly sullen as he quietly sipped his water. Was he sulking because Taekjoo badmouthed his beloved island, which he had painstakingly DIY'd into a paradise?

"The mangoes are ripe. You should try some."

Taekjoo pushed the plate of mangoes in front of him toward Zhenya. Zhenya glanced at it sideways but didn't move a muscle. For all his size, Zhenya was still childish and oversensitive. Taekjoo knew that if he wanted to make it back to Korea, he'd have to keep Zhenya in a good mood, but it was always hard to gauge how to please him.

"They're really sweet, I'm telling you."

He offered a piece of mango he had already taken a bite from. Zhenya, who had been staring at him skeptically, finally gave in and took a bite.

"How is it? Tasty?"

"Hmph."

Zhenya nodded slightly, his expression nonchalant. Then, with an elegant motion, he lifted his black tea to his lips. After inhaling the aroma for a moment, he frowned, set the cup down, and wiped his mouth. Clearly, the tea didn't meet his refined palate. What a pretentious brat. He should just eat what's served.

As Kwon Taekjoo glanced at him with a disapproving look, stuffing his mouth full of bread, he suddenly sensed someone's presence behind him. When he turned around, he saw a man walking across the deck. He was surrounded by attendants, noisily guarding him. Could this be the owner of this luxurious island?

"...What timing."

Zhenya showed a look of displeasure. Kwon Taekjoo, keeping his gaze fixed on the approaching man, asked,

"Who is he?"

"I told you, Taekjoo, you don't need to know."

"I'll be meeting him soon anyway, so why shouldn't I know?"

Soon, the man caught their gaze and flashed a wide grin. His lips curled into an exaggerated smile, and his eyes narrowed into slits. Nine times out of ten, a smile so meticulously crafted belonged to a con artist. His

grand gesture of opening his arms wide in a show of delight might have seemed friendly, but honestly, it came across as rather frivolous.

Taekjoo scrutinized him carefully. With dark hair, skin, eyes, and eyebrows, he appeared to be of Hispanic descent and seemed to be in his mid-to-late thirties. His hair was slicked back casually, nearly reaching the nape of his neck. He wore a sleeveless printed shirt, white pants, and slippers. While his appearance might seem simple at first glance, it was anything but unremarkable.

{Friends, you got here before me?}

Without hesitation, the man approached the table, resting his hand on it. A thick scent of cologne wafted over. Zhenya barely acknowledged his presence, continuing to eat without a word. The man, unfazed by the indifference, turned his attention to Kwon Taekjoo. From the outset, his overly cheerful demeanor had been unsettling, and when their eyes met, he winked. Kwon Taekjoo's expression darkened into a deep frown.

"Who the hell is this guy?"

Even his grip on the knife instinctively tightened. The man erupted into hearty laughter at Taekjoo's unexpectedly intense reaction.

{Let's keep it friendly for our first meeting, friend. Our family motto is to avoid fighting in the morning; it just makes the day unnecessarily long.}

He extended his hand for a handshake, Kwon Taekjoo looked at the man's outstretched hand with reluctance. The man lightly waved his hand up and down as if trying to break down Kwon Taekjoo's wariness.

{Nice to meet you. I'm Matthias. Matthias Pérez.}

{Matthias Pérez?}

As soon as he heard the man's name, Kwon Taekjoo tilted his head. For some reason, that name sounded strangely familiar. He was sure he had never met Matthias before, but still, the name stuck.

{Looks like my father's fame reached even that small country, huh?  
You're Korean, right?}

{Who's your father?}

Kwon Taekjoo didn't respond to the question and instead sent him a suspicious look. As Taekjoo's gaze sharpened, Matthias grinned broadly.

{Antonio Pérez .}

{Antonio Pérez... Wha...!}

As Kwon Taekjoo mumbled and tried to recall, he suddenly grabbed Zhenya by the collar. Zhenya looked at him with wide, startled eyes. Matthias was equally taken aback.

"You bastard! Now you're involved in drug dealing?"

"No way. I'm not interested in drugs. That's a hobby for weak idiots."

"Then why are you meeting with this bastard?"

At the pressing question, Zhenya raised his eyebrows and stared at Matthias. Matthias shrugged, wearing an expression that suggested he didn't understand what was going on. After carefully retracing the conversation, Zhenya chuckled.

"They want my weapons. They're in need of the most advanced and powerful firepower to safeguard their long-standing cartel."

"...Is that really all?"

"Come on, I'm your lover, yet you don't trust me at all?"

Zhenya made an exaggeratedly disappointed face. Though Taekjoo was still skeptical of the explanation, he slowly released the grip on Zhenya's collar.

His heavy breathing was still ragged, and his gaze held a lingering disapproval toward Zhenya.

It was understandable.

"Antonio Pérez" was Mexico's notorious drug kingpin. His organization had accumulated immense wealth through the production and distribution of drugs for decades. In their rise, they had engaged in illegal lobbying, bribery, kidnapping, and even murder without hesitation. The Mexican government had attempted to crack down on them as their power grew, but all efforts had ultimately failed. The cartel had built a military force more formidable than that of the government with the riches they amassed.

It was now clear why the Cuban police and Mexican government didn't dare touch Matthias's yacht. The moment anyone pointed a gun at him, an all-out war would break out. The Mexican government had already paid a heavy price due to clashes with the Pérez cartel. And in such a situation, they wouldn't recklessly confront them over foreign affairs, especially not in another country.

Zhenya was planning to provide weapons to the Pérez gang, using Taekjoo's own safety as leverage. It was obvious how those weapons would be used. Knowing this, there was no way Taekjoo could feel at ease.

"You crazy bastard! What the hell have you done?"

"Why are you mad, Taekjoo? I just made a deal like I always do."

Taekjoo was at a loss for words at Zhenya's casual response. It wasn't as if he hadn't known Zhenya was an arms dealer. Nor had he ever expected Zhenya to turn over a new leaf just because they had gotten together. But he couldn't accept that Zhenya's usual corruption was being committed for Taekjoo's sake.

"Who told you to make a deal like that? I told you I don't need your help. I told you not to interfere in my business."

"I don't see why I should adhere to your every command."

"What?"

"You know this, don't you? This is how I operate. I've always gotten what I needed through deals. This time, it just happened to be you, Taekjoo."

Suddenly, Taekjoo's head throbbed. It felt like a heavy stone was lodged in his chest. It seemed as if he had sparked another international crime while trying to counter cyberterrorism. And to think he was happy to see Zhenya who showed up at the scene, unaware of the deals happening behind his back.

In frustration, Taekjoo chugged down water, but it didn't ease the suffocation he felt. Zhenya, sensing Taekjoo's bitter frustration, added an explanation.

"You don't hesitate to employ any means necessary when it comes to protecting your country's safety. Even in this operation, you've committed countless crimes—illegal immigration, identity forgery, breaking and entering, assault, murder..."

In truth, what might be seen as justice for one nation could easily be perceived as injustice for another. This was why Taekjoo could never claim that his missions were always just and honorable. Zhenya pointed that out, adding, "I'm the same."

"Taekjoo, I simply did whatever it took for your safety. And I'll keep doing so."

"Ha..."

He was speechless. Was he supposed to be grateful for being protected to such an extent?

It wasn't as though he had suddenly been swept away by a wave of righteousness. It was simply bitter to realize that Zhenya had chosen to perpetuate the injustices faced by many for Taekjoo's sake. Of course,

Zhenya had never been the kind to consider how the weapons he sold would ultimately be used. Still, would this deal have come to fruition if Taekjoo hadn't been involved? That thought weighed heavily on his mind.

"The things I deliver are just pieces of metal. Whether they're used for protection or attack... that depends entirely on the user."

"Yeah yeah, I'm sure they'll be used nobly."

"Even if they're not, that's not our business. Are you going to say every arms manufacturer in the world is evil? What about your country's military? Are they righteous?"

It wasn't an entirely misguided perspective. Every nation bolsters its military and acquires advanced weapons to improve its defense. While this is intended for the peace and security of its citizens, it inevitably poses a threat to neighboring countries. Can such actions be classified as wholly good or evil? Moreover, just as dynamite wasn't originally created as a weapon, the production and distribution of arms cannot always be condemned. Perhaps there's no such thing as absolute righteousness. At the very least, today's understanding of justice often hinges on one's position and beliefs.

Still, Taekjoo wished Zhenya's life would gradually shift more toward the light rather than the shadows. He hoped Zhenya would come a little closer to him. Was that too selfish?

{Now, now, enough. I don't know why you're suddenly fighting, but let's focus on the meal during mealtime.}

Matthias clapped his hands, breaking the tension. Then, pulling up an empty chair, he sat down and began scrutinizing Taekjoo. Even under Matthias's blatant gaze, Taekjoo kept glaring at Zhenya, so Matthias tapped on his plate with a fork to get his attention.

{Hey, guest. I still don't know your name.}

{It's better if you don't.}

{Why's that?}

{By my principles, I'm obliged to take out anyone who knows my true identity.}

{What?}

Matthias looked like he'd been punched in the face. Zhenya chuckled at the sight, clearly amused. His hand, spreading butter on bread, moved with a carefree air.

Matthias nodded as if he understood. Far from being discouraged by Taekjoo's cold attitude, he continued flaunting his unnecessary friendliness.

{Then what should I call you?}

{There's no need for you to call me anything. I'll be gone soon anyway.}

{Hahaha! I can already see what kind of person you are. But what can we do? It looks like it'll be tough for you to leave right away.}

{If you try to stop me, I'll handle it my way.}

Taekjoo gripped the knife tightly once again. It wasn't a joke or bluff. He could easily take down an opponent with just a fork or chopsticks. And now, he was more than prepared to do so depending on how things played out. His jet-black eyes gleamed sharply.

Matthias raised both hands in a gesture of surrender, as if to say it was all a misunderstanding.

{That's not what I meant, friend. From what I've heard, the Cuban government requested Mexico's cooperation. They've apparently asked for the extradition of the terrorist suspects taken by the 'Pérez' gang. The government has been looking for an opportunity to take us down, and now they have one. So why expose ourselves unnecessarily? It's wiser to lay low and wait for the right moment, don't you think?}

"I thought I was clinging to a lifeline, but it turns out it was just a short fuse."

Taekjoo muttered sarcastically and tapped Zhenya's foot under the table.

"Hey. Can we really trust this guy?"

"He's not worth trusting."

"What?"

"Taekjoo, the only person you should trust is me. Just because the buyer is unreliable doesn't mean you should question the quality of my weapons."

"I'm questioning his sincerity. Guys like him always stab you in the back."

Taekjoo cast a disapproving glance at Matthias. Matthias, seemingly oblivious to their Russian conversation, simply smiled.

"Look at him, even now. Doesn't he resemble a two-bit thug from some back alley?"

"Well, you're not wrong about that."

Zhenya chuckled, agreeing. Taekjoo sighed at the fruitless conversation. After taking down a cybercrime gang, they'd ended up in a drug lord's lair. It was so absurd he couldn't help but laugh.

{Anyway, I don't know why the Cuban government is after you, but I'll make sure you get back safely. In the meantime, rest easy at my villa. There's no need to worry. This is the safest place in the world.}

Matthias declared confidently, as if he had the strongest weapon in the world and the safest shield. Was this island an impregnable fortress now? It was laughable.

{Forget safety. Just make sure we get back as soon as possible.}

{No matter what, shouldn't you recover first?}

Matthias gestured toward Taekjoo. Following his gaze, Taekjoo noticed his bandaged shoulder and chest visible through the loosely tied robe. Whether Matthias had any intention behind it or not, his casual glance inside his robe was discomforting. He was definitely the type Taekjoo disliked. Pulling the robe tightly closed, Taekjoo firmly drew a boundary.

{That's none of your business.}

{Ah, no need to be so defensive. I like women, after all.}

Matthias responded, flashing a broad grin in the face of Taekjoo's sharp gaze. Then, out of nowhere, he snapped his fingers with a loud click.

{How about we call some women over? That'd make things a little less boring, wouldn't it?}

{No need.}

Taekjoo said, glancing briefly at Zhenya, as if asking, Don't you feel the same? A smirk tugged at Zhenya's lips.

{Are you serious? Why not? Won't it be boring with just the two of you? I can't stay here forever, you know.}

{That's the best news I've heard all day.}

{No need to be shy, friend. It's only natural for a man to want the company of a woman. Right, Bogdanov?}

Matthias sought Zhenya's agreement, but Zhenya's gaze had already been fixed firmly on Taekjoo, unwavering.

Matthias's eyes widened in surprise as Zhenya broke into a broad, dazzling smile for some reason.

{He said there's no need.}

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Matthias' villa boasted over seventy guest rooms, banquet halls, conference rooms, two pools, four restaurants, a bar stocked with every kind of liquor, a gym equipped with modern exercise machines, and a meditation room with a panoramic view of the sea. It was a place of utmost luxury. In addition, it had tennis courts, a shooting range, and even a theater. In terms of facilities and size, it could easily rival any high-end resort.

But what Kwon Taekjoo liked most was the fact that there were no other guests besides him, Zhenya, and Matthias. Matthias assigned separate guest rooms to Kwon Taekjoo and Zhenya, but it didn't really matter. The two of them spent nearly all their time in Kwon Taekjoo's room. The room was spacious and had everything they needed, so there was no discomfort. In fact, it had become increasingly awkward and unsettling to be apart from Zhenya.

From the room, you could always gaze out through the panoramic windows at the emerald sea. When the glass doors of the terrace were

opened, a warm, salty breeze gently blew in. Though the sun blazed all day, the powerful air conditioning made sure the heat was never a problem. The air was neither too humid nor too dry. Given the abundance of water and food, it seemed there were no supply issues despite being on an island. If Kwon Taekjoo could ignore his own circumstances, it could have easily been paradise on earth.

Of course, there were downsides. As part of the fortification, the island was completely cut off from the outside world. There was no internet or phone communication whatsoever. The only way to make contact was through Zhenya. Thanks to his personal satellite, Zhenya wasn't hindered by the lack of communications.

The only issue was that Zhenya didn't willingly lend Kwon Taekjoo his laptop or phone. If Kwon Taekjoo complained that it was unfair, Zhenya would just shrug and say it wasn't his fault he was a cunning businessman. So, whenever Kwon Taekjoo needed to report to headquarters, he had to bend to Zhenya's demands to keep him happy.

For security reasons, Zhenya's communication line was only open to a limited number of contacts. All communication went through Yoon Jong-woo.

—It seems like something's going on in Mexico too, not just Cuba. They closed the borders two days ago and have ramped up inspections. The Director has ordered you to remain completely hidden until the surveillance eases.

It was expected. Either way, they were lucky to have found a suitable hideout.

Before leaving the country, Kwon Taekjoo had told his mother that he was going to Russia on official business. He also made sure Zhenya

spoke to her every day, which seemed to put her at ease. Even if his return were delayed a few more days, she probably wouldn't worry as much as before. And so, his ambiguous life, somewhere between vacation and imprisonment, continued.

For a few days, Kwon Taekjoo stayed inside the room. Although Matthias claimed that his island was the safest place in the world, Kwon Taekjoo needed his own personal assurance.

He constantly checked to see if anyone came and went on the island. Other than the occasional helicopter landing every few days, there were no noticeable visitors. Likewise, no one seemed to leave the island. One day, when he met Matthias again during a meal, Kwon Taekjoo had asked about it.

{Your staff here, they never seem to go out. Do they not clock out? Or are they permanent? Maybe they get long vacations like on a cruise?}

{Ah, you mean the servants? They've all decided to live on this island for life.}

{What?}

{I'm like family to them, and this place is their home. If they need supplies, I arrange for them to be delivered by helicopter. You must have seen them during your stay, right?}

Matthias smiled broadly, but it felt like a performance, reminiscent of how the mafia refers to itself as a "family."

Giving up their own rights and freedom. Where did that kind of loyalty even come from? Even if they were being paid a lot of money, they had no way to spend it while being tied to one place. If there was something even more valuable to them, it was probably drugs. Maybe they were getting a lifelong supply of drugs in exchange for their work.

Whatever the case, Kwon Taekjoo figured it was best not to get too close. No matter how friendly someone acted, he couldn't trust notorious criminals. That's why he had begun tapping into the communications and conversations of everyone at the villa, including Matthias.

He spent his days wandering around the villa, keeping an eye on Matthias and the servants. He even snuck into Matthias' room when he wasn't around.

The inside was not much different from the room Kwon Taekjoo himself stayed in, except for one thing — a safe placed behind the desk.

He figured it would be good to check what was inside the safe, too. How could he open it without leaving a trace? He was pondering this as he quietly exited the room. Suddenly, he sensed someone behind him and quickly aimed his gun in that direction. Standing there, arms crossed and unfazed, was none other than Zhenya.

"Ah, shit! You scared me, you bastard!"

"Taekjoo, are you doing this because you're bored? Or is it a professional habit?"

"Maybe you're just too relaxed. How can you trust someone you've just met with your safety like that?"

"I told you, you just have to trust me."

"Who says I don't trust you?"

Zhenya raised an eyebrow without a word, his gaze silently accusing, as if saying, "Look at yourself right now." Feeling needlessly pressured, Kwon Taekjoo grumbled in protest.

"There's an old saying: even when crossing a stone bridge, you should tap it first. There's no harm in being cautious."

"You're still doubting me."

"No, it's not that I doubt you..."

"You're thinking I might put you in danger."

"It's not like that."

Kwon Taekjoo was only being cautious of Matthias, not Zhenya. Matthias was someone he had just met, and he was the head of a global criminal organization. There was no real reason to trust him blindly.

However, with Zhenya at his side, Kwon Taekjoo felt he could face any unforeseen challenges with confidence. He attempted to reassure himself of this fact, but he couldn't shake off the tension. Did that mean, in the end, he didn't fully trust Zhenya either?

"I won't put you in danger."

Zhenya spoke firmly, his playful expression gone. It seemed that Kwon Taekjoo's habit of constantly checking for his own safety was being interpreted as distrust of Zhenya. Ever since arriving at Matthias' villa, Kwon Taekjoo had been on edge, which probably made Zhenya feel uneasy as well.

"...I trust you."

With a long sigh, Kwon Taekjoo holstered his gun. As he glanced out through the large window, the crystal-clear water shimmered brightly. The deep green palm leaves swayed gently in the soft breeze. Sunlight filtered through, making Zhenya's platinum hair glow radiantly.

"The weather's amazing. Don't you want to go outside?"

He suggested with a somewhat awkward expression.

"Here we go again."

Zhenya narrowed his eyes, giving Kwon Taekjoo a teasing look as if sensing he was trying to change the subject.

"What? What's your problem, you bastard?"

"Sure, I'll play along like I don't know what you're up to this time."

"What are you talking about? Come on, hurry up."

Kwon Taekjoo lightly tapped Zhenya's chest and started walking ahead. Even as he did, he meticulously checked the location of each CCTV camera along the way. Zhenya, who had been quietly following behind, shook his head in disbelief.

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The two stepped out to the sea through the back gate. If the sea near the front gate with the yacht dock evoked an image of a private beach for a massive resort, this place felt like a secluded beach connected to a private villa.

Under a white sail-shaped canopy were two sunbeds. A wide hammock, big enough for both of them to lie in, hung between tall palm trees. A small bar connected to the villa caught their attention, giving the impression they could quench their thirst or grab a bite whenever they wanted.

"Care for a drink first?"

"Is one drink enough in this weather? Let's ride those before we get drunk."

Kwon Taekjoo gestured toward the coastline. There, several jet skis bobbed up and down in the water. Matthias must have used them for parties with acquaintances, as he'd often mentioned. They grabbed the keys hanging by the bar and each took a jet ski.

When spending time alone with Zhenya, they often enjoyed extreme sports. From piloting light aircraft, skydiving, paragliding, rock climbing, skiing, snowboarding, to freediving — they had pretty much tried everything. While it felt more like physical and mental training than dating, neither of them minded since they both enjoyed the thrill.

When the jet ski engine roared to life, the pleasant vibrations shook their bodies. After resting for days, his wounds had healed quickly, but he was starting to get restless.

"When did we last ride these? Was it in Italy?"

"It was in Hong Kong."

"Ah, those guys... they were so persistent. I honestly thought we were going to die that day."

He recalled the time his lives had been in danger while being chased by the Triads during a mission. Slowly, he began moving the jet ski, as though performing a test drive. After cruising forward at a slow pace for a while, he made a wide turn and returned. The jet ski, which had been speeding along, came to an abrupt halt in front of Zhenya, causing a large spray of water to soak Zhenya's clothes. Zhenya looked at Kwon Taekjoo with a mock protest, chuckling lightly. Kwon Taekjoo merely smirked, his lips stretching into a grin.

"This hyung's going ahead first, kiddo."

He provoked Zhenya before taking off like a shot. The calm surface of the water shattered into white foam. The hot, sticky air that clung to his skin gradually became a soft breeze, fluttering his hair. The clear water beneath him revealed the depths of the sea, as he cut a long, graceful

path across the surface. The suffocating feeling in his chest — due to their situation — vanished all at once.

Before long, the loud roar of an engine could be heard from behind. Glancing back, Kwon Taekjoo saw that Zhenya had already caught up. The speed was so fierce that it seemed difficult to avoid a collision if Kwon hesitated even a little. Zhenya's previously relaxed expression was now animated, as though he were in the midst of a reindeer hunt.

Seeing this, Kwon Taekjoo laughed loudly.

"Oh, how scary! Chasing me like you want to kill me."

"A rabbit with no fear, showing off in front of a bear, huh?"

"Says the one talking big. Why don't you catch me first before bragging?"

He twisted his lips into a smile and pushed the jet ski to its maximum speed, leaning forward to reduce the wind resistance. With a loud roar, Kwon Taekjoo's jet ski shot forward like a rocket. He jerked the stiff handle, making wide zigzags across the water. Zhenya easily followed suit. The two jet skis weaved dangerously close, crossing paths in a large figure-eight pattern.

The endless ocean stretched out before them, with no deserted islands or even a reef in sight. As Kwon Taekjoo began to make a wide circle along the outskirts, Zhenya quickly followed. No matter how or where Kwon tried to escape, Zhenya pursued him persistently, their movements synchronized as if they had rehearsed it beforehand.

Kwon Taekjoo checked Zhenya's position occasionally, grinning as he did. Zhenya's face also broke into a wide smile, filled with excitement.

They sped across the sea tirelessly, never once pausing for rest. The more Kwon tried to escape, the more Zhenya faithfully gave chase, which only added to the thrill. For a moment, it felt as though they had returned to their carefree childhood. Unbound by time, circumstances, or their current situation, they soared freely across the sea. The wind, stronger the faster they went, whipped against their faces, leaving their hair standing on end. Their hearts swelled with joy, and they couldn't stop laughing.

"Zhenya! When are you ever going to catch me at this rate? We'll be at this all night!"

"You're really stirring things up, aren't you? How do you plan on handling what comes next?"

"Well, I'm not sure if there will even be anything to handle afterward."

Maybe Taekjoo had teased him too much. Zhenya watched as Taekjoo made a turn, but instead of following, he surged straight ahead, passing far in front. Then, without warning, he veered sharply and charged straight toward him. Zhenya's jet ski closed the distance fast, heading directly for Taekjoo. It felt like he was testing his nerves. Taekjoo leaned out beyond the windscreens, expecting him to pull back, but Zhenya stayed as low as possible, relentlessly speeding ahead. He had no intention of dodging. It looked like a collision was imminent.

"...Ah, this crazy bastard!"

Taekjoo hurriedly yanked the controls, narrowly avoiding Zhenya's jet ski, which came dangerously close. A torrent of water sprayed over him like a waterfall from the wake Zhenya created, soaking him completely and making it hard to keep his eyes open.

Taekjoo gradually slowed and came to a stop, wiping his face as if washing it. His eyes stung, making it hard to see, and water had even gotten into his ears, leaving him dazed.

By then, Zhenya had pulled up beside him, and their jet skis lightly bumped against each other with the waves. Taekjoo rubbed his burning eyes and scolded Zhenya.

"What the hell, man? What if we'd gotten hurt?"

"See? I told you to think ahead."

"You don't know what a joke is? I thought I was about to die!"

"You're being so dramatic. You really think I'd hurt you?"

"You sure looked like you were going to."

"Taekjoo, you really don't have much faith in your lover, do you?"

"Did you even come into this world with a conscience? Ugh, why does it sting so much?"

"Come here. I'll lick it better."

Zhenya abruptly grabbed Taekjoo by the wrist and pulled him closer. Without resisting, Taekjoo stood up and moved over to Zhenya's jet ski. The sudden shift in weight caused the vessel to wobble briefly, but it wasn't much of a problem.

He settled onto Zhenya's lap, almost as if he were collapsing into it. Then, without much thought, he ran his hand through his wet hair, which was stuck to his skin. Zhenya cradled his face, and from his eyes to the edge of his ears, licked slowly and deliberately. He even gently lapped at the bloodshot corners of Taekjoo's eyes, pulling down the skin under his eyes ever so slightly.

Though the gesture was surprisingly thorough, it tickled, and Taekjoo couldn't help but laugh. He lightly patted Zhenya's cheek, who gave him a puzzled look, and leaned in to press a kiss to his equally salty lips.

"That's enough. I'm thirsty after all that fun. Let's go get something to drink."

Taekjoo pushed against Zhenya's shoulders, standing up and moving to sit behind him on the jet ski. He patted Zhenya's back, urging him to get going.

Zhenya obediently steered the jet ski toward the beach. As the vessel bounced across the water, Taekjoo tightly wrapped his arms around Zhenya's waist to avoid falling off.

As always, Zhenya glanced down at Taekjoo's arms wrapped around him. It was amusing how he reacted to such a small gesture, as if it were something remarkable between lovers. Despite Zhenya's typically cold demeanor, whenever he acted like a lovesick boy experiencing his first crush, it was both endearing and a little pitiful. Taekjoo rested his head

on Zhenya's broad shoulder and glanced back at his jet ski, now floating farther away.

"But what about that?"

"The waves will bring it in."

"You're only neglecting it because it's not yours."

"Would it be any different if it were?"

Zhenya shrugged dismissively, and Taekjoo couldn't argue with that. Rich guys like him didn't seem to know how to value anything.

"More importantly, were you satisfied with your little reconnaissance?"

"Reconnaissance? What are you talking about?"

"You were pretending to have fun, but really you were scouting around the island, weren't you?"

Caught off guard, Taekjoo missed his chance to respond. Zhenya had seen right through him, and no excuse came to mind. After a moment of silence, Zhenya glanced back with a smirk.

"So, what do you think? Doesn't look like we could swim our way out of here, does it? Even with this small boat, it would be tough to reach the mainland."

"....."

"Paragliding might be an option, but this island doesn't have any tall cliffs to jump from, and the wind is too calm. Or am I wrong?"

Of course, the escape methods sounded familiar — Taekjoo had tried those very same tricks to get away from Zhenya in the past. It became clear why Zhenya had been smirking the entire time.

"Are you mocking me?"

In frustration, Taekjoo smacked Zhenya's back, but Zhenya just grinned wider, unfazed.

"Taekjoo, you overthink things too much."

"And you, you think too little."

"Only weak people overthink because every moment must feel like a threat or a crisis to them."

"Right. Of course. Whatever you say."

Taekjoo sneered, giving up on reasoning with him. It seemed impossible that Zhenya would ever learn humility, even if he were born again.

Soon, Zhenya's jet ski reached the shore. Without warning, he lifted Taekjoo off the ski and set him down effortlessly. Then, Zhenya casually reassured his lover who "thought too much".

"Don't worry. There's no need to overthink. When the time comes, I'll make sure you get back to where you need to be."

Can I really trust him? On one hand, doubt, deeply ingrained like a habit, began to sprout in Taekjoo's mind. But on the other hand, a reckless part of him wanted to just let go and leave everything up to Zhenya.

Taekjoo looked up at Zhenya with a smile.

"I have to say, I'm surprised. I didn't know you had it in you to say something like that."

"Well, my partner is a man of few wishes. If only he could find a few more."

"Oh, so you're finally listening to me? Then, since you're acting all mature now, how about you bring something to drink?"

"What? Taekjoo, ordering me around like..."

"Yeah, I'm probably the first person to ever treat you this way, huh? I get it. Now hurry up and go."

He waved Zhenya off and then collapsed onto one of the sunbeds under the shade. Lying there, still soaked, the gentle breeze felt cool against his skin. At the same time, the scorching hot sand underneath him made his back and waist feel like they were being baked. The thought of washing off the salty taste in his mouth with a cold beer seemed like the perfect finishing touch to this moment.

After waiting for a moment, Zhenya returned and sat on the empty sunbed, holding a bottle of beer loosely in hand.

“Where’s mine?”

“You said to bring something to drink, not necessarily for you.”

“Hah... you socially inept human. Do I have to spell it out for you...”

Zhenya paid no attention to Kwon Taekjoo’s complaint, casually sipping the beer. The gulping sound pleasantly filled the air. His Adam’s apple bobbed with each gulp, so exaggerated it was almost annoying. Unconsciously, Kwon Taekjoo stared, swallowing dryly.

After a round of satisfying his thirst, Zhenya let out a contented sigh. The smell of carbonated alcohol wafted from his breath. Kwon Taekjoo could no longer resist.

He reached for the half-empty beer, but Zhenya easily dodged and took another deliberate swig. Kwon Taekjoo’s throat faintly bobbed in frustration as he watched. The bottle was now less than a third full.

Kwon Taekjoo bit his dry lower lip and gestured with his hand, silently asking for the rest. Zhenya, pretending not to understand, drained the last of the beer.

Unable to hold back any longer, Kwon Taekjoo pushed Zhenya down by the shoulder and pressed his lips against his in a sudden rush. The sharp fizz of the beer danced on his tongue, mingling with the rich aroma of malt. Taekjoo’s eager tongue intertwined with Zhenya’s, each swirl

deepening his desire. He gripped Zhenya's face, pulling him closer as he devoured his tongue with fervent kisses.

Zhenya's lips curved into a smirk as his hand slipped between Kwon Taekjoo's shorts, caressing his firm thighs and ass.

How much time had passed? As a presence nearby caught his attention, Kwon Taekjoo reluctantly lifted his head. A hotel staff member stood before him, expressionless, bowing slightly as he placed a fresh bottle of beer and a bag of chips on the table beside the sunbed. Taekjoo froze, watching as the staff swiftly arranged everything before quietly retreating. There was no hint of embarrassment on the staff member's face, though it was clear he had witnessed their entangled moment.

Kwon Taekjoo's ears grew hot. He suddenly grabbed Zhenya by the collar, who was grinning foolishly underneath him.

“You bastard did that on purpose, didn’t you?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. You’re the one who attacked me first, Taekjoo.”

Kwon Taekjoo felt his anger rising, but Zhenya wasn’t exactly wrong, which only made him seethe inside. He shoved Zhenya away, muttering, “Get lost,” and shook off the hand that had been kneading his rear like swatting away a fly.

He quenched his thirst without restraint, draining the beer that had been prepared nearby in one breath without even pausing for air. His head felt light after downing it so quickly. Grabbing a second bottle, he lay back down on the sunbed.

He gazed endlessly at the waves as they rolled in and out at his feet. How long had it been since he last enjoyed such peace? Drifting through a few days in a place he didn't even know, with nothing happening at all, his sense of reality had gradually dulled. It felt like everything up until now could have been a dream.

As he lay there without a thought, Zhenya suddenly turned to face him. Without warning, Zhenya grabbed one of Kwon Taekjoo's legs, lifting it slightly. Kwon Taekjoo briefly looked at his hand but then returned his gaze to the distant ocean. Even as Zhenya massaged his calf while holding his ankle, he didn't care.

“Your muscles are still tight.”

“Whose fault is that?”

“Is it my fault again?”

“Of course. What’s the point of you massaging me like this all day? As soon as night falls, I’ll just cramp up again because of you.”

“Oh? Sounds like you’re already looking forward to tonight.”

If twisting someone’s words was a skill, Zhenya had certainly mastered it. “Ugh,” Kwon Taekjoo muttered, kicking aimlessly into the air. Zhenya’s hand slipped away for a moment, only to come back, this time creeping higher. His hand slid up Kwon Taekjoo’s shin, knee, and thigh, before once again slipping inside his shorts. Zhenya then propped himself up on the sunbed with his other hand and naturally climbed on top of Kwon Taekjoo.

The sun, which had been steadily growing brighter, now seemed to be setting, casting long shadows. As the rays of light angled downward, they formed a radiant halo behind Zhenya's back. The shimmering reflections on the orange-tinted sea seemed to shine like spotlights just for him. His ivory hair and pale skin radiated with an almost ethereal smoothness.

Zhenya's blue eyes, which reflected Kwon Taekjoo's face, grew translucent.

He raised his hand and gently ran it through Zhenya's fine hair. Zhenya subtly leaned into the touch, rubbing his head against the hand.

"...Damn, you're really pretty."

Kwon Taekjoo muttered to himself. In truth, it was less of a conscious statement and more of a stray thought that had slipped out. Luckily, it was in Korean, so there was no way Zhenya could understand. At least, that's what he thought. But suddenly, Zhenya, who had been staring intently at him, let out a laugh.

"Taekjoo, do you really think I'm that pretty?"

"What are you talking about out of nowhere?"

"Don't play dumb. Sorry to tell you, but that Korean phrase is something that little woman always says to me. At first, I thought she was just mispronouncing my name, but no, she wasn't."

Zhenya chuckled in a way that made Kwon Taekjoo uneasy. It seemed like Zhenya had long figured out the meaning behind the word "pretty." Now that he thought about it, Zhenya had remembered the term "的美好" (meigao).

(saekki, often used as a crude expression) and had even looked it up by himself before. Unfortunately, due to the limits of translation software, it had translated the word as “baby,” leading to some misunderstandings. Because of that, Zhenya always seemed oddly pleased whenever Kwon Taekjoo called him “this bastard” or “that bastard.”

It was only recently that Kwon Taekjoo realized Zhenya’s misunderstanding. After work, he had gone out for drinks with Yoon Jong-woo, but somehow, Zhenya had found out and showed up. With no other choice, Kwon Taekjoo pretended he had invited him and let him join.

At that moment, his mother had called, reminding him not to stay out too late and to be mindful of his drinking. Yoon Jong-woo, always one for a laugh, insisted on greeting her, leading to an unexpected conversation on speakerphone.

‘Hello, mom! This is Jong-woo. How have you been?’

[Oh, Jong-woo! I haven’t seen you in ages. Have you been busy?]

‘Not really, just the usual...’

[Is that so? Well, come visit sometime! You can come with Taekjoo or drop by on your own for a meal. I’ll make your favorite side dishes. How does that sound?]

‘I’d love to, mom. Just invite me anytime, and I’ll happily come.’

[Aww, you’re such a sweetheart, Jong-woo. You really are. I’m not just saying that, so make sure you come, okay?]

'Yes, mom. I'll visit soon, don't worry. It's late, so you should get some rest. I'll make sure to send Taekjoo home before it gets too late.'

As usual, after politely finishing his call with Taekjoo's mother, Yoon Jong-woo had brought the wrapped lettuce to his mouth. However, he had hesitated, his eyes flicking nervously, unable to ignore the piercing glare directed at him. He had turned his eyes slightly, and as soon as his gaze had met Zhenya's, he had gasped. Zhenya had his arms crossed, glaring at him with a disapproving expression. It was as if Zhenya could have killed him with just his gaze, so Taekjoo had nudged him with his elbow.

'What's your problem now, you brat?'

'Why does that idiot keep calling the little woman 'Mother'?'

'Oh, so you've learned the word 'Mother' now? When did you study that?'

'How could I not know? It's the word you pronounce the most tenderly.'

'Ah... well, there's no need to pay attention to it. It's just a common term. In Korea, a friend's mother is like your own mother, and a friend's father is like your own father too.'

'How does that even make sense?'

'Well, back in the day, neighbors would even call each other 'cousin,' you know.'

‘How refined.’

“If you have a problem with it, you can call her that too. Seriously, why are you always picking fights over nothing?”

Taekjoo had turned to Yoon Jong-woo, who had frozen up, and had told him, ‘Ignore him and just eat comfortably.’ Jong-woo had kept stealing glances, but eventually had stuffed the lettuce wrap into his mouth and chewed slowly.

‘Stop glaring at the poor guy and hurry up and eat. The meat’s going to burn.’

‘Hmph.’

Zhenya had grumbled as he scooped some rice. But that had been it. He hadn’t picked up the meat or brought the spoon to his mouth. He had just sat there, staring at Kwon Taekjoo. When Taekjoo furrowed his brow and asked, ‘What?’, Zhenya had given a small nod toward his spoon. It had been clear he was waiting for Taekjoo to put some side dishes on his spoon. With Yoon Jong-woo watching, it had felt embarrassing.

‘Oh, come on. Are you being childish now? Don’t you have hands? I even got you a fork. Use that and eat by yourself, bastard.’

‘Taekjoo, your junior is sitting right there listening. Have you no shame?’

‘What kind of nonsense is that?’

Taekjoo had frowned and glanced across the table without thinking. But Yoon Jong-woo had already buried his face in his bowl of cold noodles, barely touching the broth with his spoon. He had looked like he was feeling guilty about something. With his arms crossed, Taekjoo had watched him carefully. As Jong-woo had cautiously raised his head, their eyes had met, and Jong-woo had immediately averted his gaze again. His suspicious behavior had been too obvious, so Taekjoo had pressed him.

'Hey. You know something, don't you? Why the hell is he acting like this?'

'What? What do you mean?'

'Can't you see this brat puffing up his shoulders? He's sticking his chin out, like he owns the place.'

'I-I really don't know anything.'

'You seem like you know.'

'I don't, really.'

'You do, don't you?'

'Ugh... I swear I'm innocent, senior. If you think about it, this isn't even my fault!'

'I'll decide that. So, what is it?'

'Well, um... remember last time when you left me and Yevgeny-ssi alone to go to your reunion? That day, Yevgeny-ssi asked me why you use the

word ‘썅’ (saekki) so much when talking to him. He said he looked it up on a translation app and found out it means ‘baby,’ and he asked me if that was true. So...’

‘So, what? Don’t tell me you said yes?’

‘How could I tell him it’s a curse word when he was asking with so much hope? It was a little white lie! I mean, the translation app did say it could mean ‘baby,’ and technically, ‘썅’ can also mean baby, so it’s not really a lie, right?’

Yoon Jong-woo pleaded with an almost tearful expression. Kwon Taekjoo, dumbfounded, tilted his head back to hold in his frustration. Despite reading the room, Yoon Jong-woo stubbornly continued his defense.

‘Anyway, Yevgeny-ssi was really pleased, and there’s no way he’ll find out the real meaning unless you tell him. And it’s not like you call him that out of malice, right? So isn’t it fine?’

‘Yeah, good job. Well done. Why would a nickname even matter? All I have to do is put up with this brat puffing up his chest every now and then.’

‘Taekjoo. What have you two been whispering about for a while now?’

At that point, Zhenya’s discomfort became more evident. Worried that Yoon Jong-woo might get caught up in it for no reason, Kwon Taekjoo hastily made up an excuse.

'I was just scolding him not to be picky about the side dishes and to eat whatever. You should eat up too, bastard.'

Taking advantage of the moment, Kwon Taekjoo had placed a well-cooked piece of meat on top of Zhenya's rice. Only then had Zhenya lifted the spoon with the rice and meat to his mouth. Feeling victorious at Taekjoo's actions, Zhenya had glared menacingly at Jong-woo.

Even thinking back on it made Kwon Taekjoo's face flush. He often nagged Zhenya to learn Korean if he was going to stay in Korea. But as Zhenya's Korean improved, awkward situations like this arose more frequently, especially since Zhenya tended to interpret words in his own way.

Once again, Kwon Taekjoo tried to pull his hand away, but Zhenya caught it and brought it back to his face, even turning slightly to press his lips against Kwon Taekjoo's palm.

"If you like this face so much, feel free to look and touch as much as you want. For you, Taekjoo, I'll allow it."

It occurred to Kwon Taekjoo that no one had ever caressed Zhenya's face like this before. And not just his face — Kwon Taekjoo was likely the only one to whom Zhenya exposed vulnerable areas like his neck or more intimate spots. For someone with so many enemies who made sure to thoroughly retaliate when harmed, Zhenya's unusually soft and submissive reaction to Kwon Taekjoo made his insides itch restlessly. His palm tingled with unbearable intensity.

"Shit, this ridiculously good-looking bastard..."

Muttering irritably, Kwon Taekjoo pulled Zhenya's face close and planted several kisses on various parts of it. Zhenya exhaled with a pleased sigh, his breath sounding low and satisfied. The two of them spent a long time fondling each other's hair and ears, exchanging ticklish kisses before they finally drew apart slightly.

As the sun dipped lower, Zhenya's pale cheeks and Kwon Taekjoo's dark eyes were both tinted with the orange glow of the sunset. They stared at each other in silence, and before long, their lips clashed fiercely, neither of them waiting for the other to make the first move.

The once clear sky turned shades of red and blue as the last rays of sunlight blazed. Zhenya's broad shoulders and back were also soaked in the crimson hues of the sunset. The two of them lazily rolled over each other, completely wrapped up in one another. Their breaths, mingling on their upper lips, felt endlessly sweet. Even the salty air tasted gentle. It was as if they were both trapped in an endlessly sweet dream.

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For a while, an utterly peaceful routine continued. Taekjoo would sleep until he naturally woke up, have a meal, go out to the sea to play until everything was digested, take a shower, and nap wherever he felt tired. Then, when he woke up again, he'd read a book or watch a movie. At night, Zhenya and Taekjoo would have drinks together, chatting about this and that, which often led to them having sex. By the time he regained his senses, it would usually be late morning.

Was it acceptable to live so carefreely? On someone else's island, no less — not even Odinokiy? Occasionally, anxiety would seep in, but even that feeling gradually diminished. Zhenya never left Taekjoo's side, not for a

second. With him around, the atmosphere might become a bit chaotic, yet there was an undeniable sense of security that they could face anything together. No, it felt more like certainty.

Every time Taekjoo recognized this sentiment, he found himself surprised. He had always shunned the idea of having a partner, preferring solitude, and that hadn't changed. So why had Zhenya become someone he relied on so deeply? Now, it felt more unusual for Zhenya not to be at his side.

Lost in these thoughts while gazing at the back of Zhenya's head, Taekjoo was jolted when Zhenya suddenly turned around. Their eyes locked unexpectedly, causing Taekjoo to flinch. Zhenya tilted his head, puzzled by Taekjoo's uncharacteristic reaction.

"Taekjoo? What are you thinking so deeply about?"

"Nothing. Shall we head back?"

Taekjoo quickly stood up and brushed the sand off. The waves were perfect, so he had been enjoying surfing all morning. Taekjoo grabbed the board that had been tossed carelessly onto the sand and walked toward the water. Zhenya, who had been watching in silence, followed behind without a word.

Lying on his stomach on the board, he paddled forward with long strokes. The lukewarm water gently enveloped him.

After some time, something dark suddenly shot past beneath the board. Following its movement, a familiar silhouette came into view. It was a stingray, easily over 2 meters in size. Having already seen sea turtles and stingrays multiple times while staying there, its appearance wasn't

surprising. The creatures rarely attacked or approached humans without reason.

The stingray, swimming gracefully beneath the surface, slowly rose until it flapped its large fins just above the water. A strong current followed, completely soaking Kwon Taekjoo's face. He turned around a moment too late, and it was no use.

"Ugh."

He barely managed to keep his balance on the board, which was swaying wildly as if it might flip over at any moment. In the process, he had no chance to fix his hair, which was stuck to his face. By the time he regained his composure, the stingray had already darted off into the distance. Amidst the shaky view, Zhenya's grinning face came into focus.

"Taekjoo, even the stingrays are scolding you now? Your hair looks like seaweed soup made by the little woman."

He wore an expression of pure joy. This guy... and I call him my lover? Relying on him, feeling reassured by him... what a romantic notion. Yet, Zhenya was still just a big kid.

"Quit laughing and get ready."

"Another bet?"

"You only get interested when there's something at stake, don't you? It's just for fun, idiot. Here comes the wave."

Taekjoo said, swiftly standing up. Zhenya followed suit, rising to his feet. Moments later, a wave that had gathered strength from afar lifted their boards high. The massive buoyancy firmly supported them as they both easily maintained balance, riding up to the crest of the water. The wind pushed at their backs in a pleasing way.

Before long, they were riding the waves, sometimes passing each other, exchanging quick glances and grins. People always say that shared hobbies or tastes are important for long-term relationships, and in that regard, they were perfectly aligned. In fact, Taekjoo couldn't imagine anyone else who could keep up with his pace the way Zhenya did.

As they neared the shore, the waves gradually calmed down. They slid off their boards and headed back toward the sea, repeating the cycle several times until the sun began to set.

While surfing, his body had felt as light as a feather, but once out of the water, he felt as heavy as lead. Taekjoo tossed aside his board and trudged toward the hammock, flopping down on it and covering himself with a beach towel. Zhenya soon came over, sitting haphazardly beneath the hammock. He tugged on the corner of Taekjoo's towel to wipe the water from his face.

At that moment, Zhenya's phone, which had been lying on the sunbed, began to ring. But Zhenya, as if not hearing it, casually handed Taekjoo a beer. Taekjoo took the bottle and pointed it out to him.

"Your phone's ringing."

"I don't need to answer it."

"How do you know without even checking who's calling? It could be something important."

"It doesn't matter, Taekjoo, because you're by my side."

"...What?"

Taekjoo's brows knitted together in confusion. Did that mean that "important" only applied to him in Zhenya's eyes? Or was it that all of Zhenya's worries revolved solely around Taekjoo? Given Zhenya's arrogant disposition, the latter seemed the more plausible interpretation.

But maybe it was because they had been stuck on the island, indulging in their romance for days. The way Zhenya looked at him, and even the words he spoke, all seemed to feel strangely romantic. Surely, his brain must have been waterlogged to be this muddled.

"Hm. Still, you never know. Maybe there's an issue with your family."

"Issue? What issue? If the old man at home has finally passed, is that really a problem?"

Zhenya immediately corrected himself with,

"No, wait. That's not a problem, Taekjoo — that's a solution."

For a moment, Taekjoo was at a loss for words. The death of his elderly father wasn't a problem? Did Zhenya really have no attachment to his own father?

It wasn't surprising. After all, it was a family that had been willing to sacrifice a six-year-old child to protect their pride. Even now, they were still obsessed with maintaining their power, to the point where they forced their children into arranged marriages. If Zhenya had been treated as nothing more than a tool all his life, it made sense that he had no affection left for them.

What bothered Taekjoo was that Zhenya had grown from such a cold, heartless place, and therefore probably never knew what it was like to receive even the bare minimum of protection or affection. Taekjoo had often scolded him for not having a more humane side, but now that he thought about it, Zhenya had grown up in an environment where it was impossible to develop a normal sense of self.

He was practically abandoned a long time ago, but now they only called on him when they needed something. How typical of blood ties. It was infuriating.

For some reason, Taekjoo felt a pang of pity for Zhenya. Without saying a word, he tousled Zhenya's hair. Zhenya looked up, surprised, and said, "Taekjoo?" Taekjoo gently smoothed his hair back down. Zhenya's throat seemed to subtly tighten as he quietly accepted the touch. His eyes, fixed on Taekjoo, glimmered with a deeper intensity.

"You... don't you hide away on Odinokiy Island whenever it's your mother's death anniversary?"

"Who said that?"

"Does it matter?"

"I'm not really sure. It's not something I've thought much about. But if it comes across that way because of someone's skewed perception, then maybe?"

"You don't need to feel embarrassed about it. Even if it wasn't a conscious action, you were probably drawn to it instinctively. No matter what kind of person your mother was in life, it's only natural for you, her child, to think about and miss her. That's why people call it family bonds."

"Am I embarrassed? Miss her? Me?"

Zhenya asked again, as if the concept were entirely foreign to him. Had he truly never experienced those feelings before? As Taekjoo looked at him, he often pondered just how much emotional depth someone could lack.

Maybe Zhenya simply couldn't easily define or articulate his feelings like others could. Otherwise, how could he explain Zhenya's naive and pure devotion toward him, which seemed so out of character? It was bitter to think that Zhenya, nearing thirty, still didn't know the forms or names of emotions that most people learn naturally as they grow.

Running his hand through Zhenya's salt-dusted eyebrows, Taekjoo gently said,

"Anyway, next time, let's go together."

"It's rare for you to offer to come to my island. But Taekjoo, are you really in a position to make such guarantees about the future?"

"I'll figure out a way to make it work."

"Hmm... If that's the case, I wouldn't be against having my relatives' death anniversaries occur more frequently."

"How can you say such a thing, you brat?"

Kwon Taekjoo pinched Zhenya's cheek as he babbled thoughtlessly. Who had he been worried about and feeling sorry for? Probably the only person in the entire world who cared about him was Kwon Taekjoo himself. When it came to him, he was unusually soft.

As soon as he let go, Zhenya's pale skin turned red without fail. Had he pinched too hard? Immediately regretting it, he gently rubbed Zhenya's cheek. Even during that moment, Zhenya looked at Kwon Taekjoo quietly, calmly accepting his touch. When he kept his mouth shut and behaved, he was like an angel, just as his mother would say.

Rising to his feet, Kwon Taekjoo naturally placed a kiss on Zhenya's forehead.

As he was about to step out of the hammock, Zhenya suddenly grabbed his arm. A hint of doubt had already clouded his face.

"Taekjoo. What's going on?"

"What?"

"You're being all sweet again. Don't tell me you've received a new mission already. How?"

"You little punk, what do you take me for? I'm just trying to play the part of a good boyfriend for once."

Kwon Taekjoo pulled up the arm Zhenya had grabbed, teasing him for his suspicion. It was his way of telling Zhenya to get up as well, a kind of body language.

"We've been lazing around all day, now I feel sticky. I need a good soak in some hot water."

Zhenya chuckled softly and followed him without protest. Even on the way back to the room, Zhenya's phone wouldn't stop ringing. Though he pretended to ignore it, Kwon Taekjoo couldn't help but be bothered. Persistent calls usually meant something urgent.

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He woke up faintly from a slight sound in the middle of the night. He hadn't opened his eyes right away, but he could sense Zhenya quietly watching him. He kept still, not even moving his eyes. Zhenya softly kissed Kwon Taekjoo on the forehead, then silently slipped out of bed.

After the bedroom door opened and closed, Kwon Taekjoo waited a little longer before lifting his eyelids. He scratched the spot on his forehead where Zhenya had kissed him for no particular reason, then got up. He lazily draped on the robe he had tossed aside earlier and approached the door. It wasn't that he didn't trust Zhenya, but he was curious about what he was doing alone at this late hour. The night was so quiet that

just standing by the door made it seem like he could faintly hear voices outside.

Holding his breath, he listened for Zhenya's voice. Zhenya was on the phone with someone. Normally, his tone was calm to the point of being cold, but now it had a sharp edge to it.

"Why do you care where I am? Since when were you so interested in me?"

Who could it be? Who would ask Zhenya where he was? Judging by the fact that the conversation was in Russian, it could be someone from the embassy. But then again, it was too early for that. It must have only been around 5 a.m. in Korea.

Moreover, the way Zhenya said, since when were you so interested in me? sounded almost like a complaint. It was a phrase he often used when teasing Kwon Taekjoo. Based on all these clues, the person on the other end was likely someone with a very personal interest in Zhenya's whereabouts. Was it Olga?

"Not needed, Bazim."

However, an unexpected name came out of Zhenya's mouth. If it was Bazim, that meant it was his second brother. Bazim Visarionovich Bogdanov, a close confidant and long-time friend of Russian President Lomonosov. Could it have been him who kept calling while they were on the island? There was no way he was that curious about the wellbeing of his younger brother.

Bazim was a politician. Therefore, the value he prioritized was likely national interest. More precisely, it was about aligning with the

president's wishes to solidify his own status and power. To do so, any threats to the current government had to be cleanly eliminated — such as anything that could harm diplomatic relations.

In that sense, the frequent attempts at phone calls could be easily inferred. It seemed Bazim had learned about the events in Cuba.

Cuba was a traditional ally of Russia. Due to the terror attack that occurred there, the Cuban government lost its financial support, and a Russian citizen got involved in the incident, helping the key suspect escape. That alone would be a headache, but to make matters worse, the damned Russian turned out to be his own blood relative. It wasn't hard to imagine how awkward Bazim's position had become.

Moreover, this wasn't the first time something like this had happened. Kwon Taekjoo was a civil servant from South Korea, and Russia, even with the best of intentions, could not be called an ally of South Korea. The actions Zhenya took for Kwon Taekjoo had caused considerable damage to his homeland, Russia. That was why he had warned him not to interfere with official matters.

No matter how much his homeland abandoned him and his family cast him out, his past couldn't possibly not be an issue. Whenever he did something against Russia's national interest, calls would come repeatedly, just like they did now. Since coming to Korea, he had likely been interrogated and scolded constantly.

Until now, they might have believed it was safer to keep Zhenya outside the country. However, if his troublemaking continued, an order for his return could be issued at any moment. Even if Zhenya chose not to comply, they could easily fabricate charges and forcibly bring him back.

Taekjoo knew this; he had just dismissed it as another attempt to control Zhenya. While Zhenya still appeared indifferent to his situation, Taekjoo could no longer ignore the mounting discomfort. He couldn't simply stand by and watch Zhenya become more and more isolated.

\* \* \*

“He's coming.”

Zhenya muttered as he gazed into the air. It was during a late breakfast. When he followed his gaze, a helicopter could be seen approaching from afar. It looked different from the ones that occasionally carried supplies. Its strange exterior, reminiscent of an alien face, and its bright yellow color made it impossible to overlook. It was definitely Matthias' personal helicopter. The last time he flew out, it was a purple one that looked like a beetle; he must have so much money he doesn't know what to do with it.

“Lost my appetite.”

As he made a disgusted face, Zhenya suddenly smirked.

“He's not your type, huh?”

"What kind of question is that, you little bastard? I've never been into guys with dicks in the first place."

"And now?"

"Still the same. Try going through an all-boys middle school, high school, engineering college, the military, and a male-dominated workplace. After all that, every man's face just starts to look like a dick."

His shoulders trembled violently as he grimaced in disgust. Zhenya propped his chin on his hand, wearing an amused expression. His eyes, gently folding in satisfaction, looked quite pretty.

By then, the helicopter had arrived right overhead. The wind from the propellers made the tablecloth flutter, and the dishes clattered. He glanced up irritably. Matthias, sticking his head out of the open door, waved obviously.

{Hey, friends! Long time no see! Have you been resting well?}

Matthias's distinctive laugh echoed through the roar of the propellers, his noisy arrival turning the table into a mess. The strong wind caused the coffee to spill, soaking Kwon Taekjoo's hand. Both Kwon Taekjoo and Zhenya glared at Matthias as he headed for the helipad, saying he'd see them soon.

"Can I shoot that bastard down?"

"Just say the word..."

Zhenya followed the departing helicopter with a cold look. If Kwon Taekjoo gave the okay sign, he seemed ready to shoot Matthias down without hesitation. Seeing how much he disliked him made Kwon Taekjoo curious about what kind of relationship they had.

"What's the deal between you two, really?"

"Why, does it bother you?"

Zhenya instantly melted his hardened expression and looked at Kwon Taekjoo. He deliberately misinterpreted the question, shaking his head in amusement.

"You're quite obsessive, you know."

"That's not what I meant!"

"You're more bashful than you seem, Taekjoo. Go ahead and be jealous openly. I'll find it cute."

Zhenya straightened his shoulders and lifted his chin, oozing with arrogance. Just looking at him posturing made Kwon Taekjoo's fists clench.

"Haah, what's the point of talking to you?"

Giving up on arguing, Kwon Taekjoo chugged down the now-cold Americano. He wiped his wet hand haphazardly on the napkin on his lap.

By that time, Matthias had disembarked from the helicopter and was walking along the deck. Despite their lack of response, he continued to greet them energetically, showing no signs of weariness.

{Friends! You look like you partied hard all night! Your faces don't look too good! You handling your hangovers okay?}

Zhenya watched Matthias silently, with a blank expression, and finally spoke.

"He's just one of my loyal customers. He's admired my weapons for a very long time. It's not a brag, but my weapons are exceptional in terms of both power and precision. If desired, I can even customize them, minimizing physical limitations. Because of that, they can be difficult to master, but some people find that challenging aspect quite attractive. That guy, for instance, has come to Russia multiple times just to meet me."

"A dedicated pervert, huh."

"The more dangerous the item, the sexier it is. When something is difficult to handle, it tends to awaken a dormant desire for conquest."

Before he knew it, Zhenya's gaze had shifted back to Kwon Taekjoo. The moment their eyes met, Zhenya smiled sweetly. Pointing at his glossy face with a fork, Kwon Taekjoo scolded him.

"That's why I called you a pervert. You and guys like him."

Getting excited about a weapon's killing power, calling it sexy, and talking about a desire for conquest — these were thoughts a normal

person could never comprehend. Maybe when people had too much money, they sought extreme thrills until they finally went mad.

Watching him pretend to be a good person while being so hypocritical left a bitter taste in Kwon Taekjoo's mouth. Though, to be fair, his dislike for Matthias wasn't solely because of that.

Matthias, noticing the sharp glares directed at him, deliberately furrowed his eyebrows in mock sorrow.

{Geez. You won't even acknowledge my greeting. Did I do something to offend you, friends?}

{Friends, guests — yet you trap people and take forever to come, huh?}

{Trap? I was protecting you.}

{So, in Mexico, this is how you protect people? Creeping around and spying on their private lives?}

With arms crossed, Kwon Taekjoo finally voiced his complaint. Matthias pretended to think about it as if he didn't know what Kwon Taekjoo meant, and then, as if a realization hit, he smirked.

{You mean the CCTV? You can't really feel safe these days with all the threats lurking around. It's not the first time a guest came here and tried to pull some shady stunt. And since you two are on the run, I thought it best to monitor you closely and ensure your safety.}

While they stayed there, they had found dozens of lenses hidden everywhere: at the beach, the pool, the dining area, the gym, even in their private bedrooms and bathrooms. Every single one was a tiny camera, cleverly concealed within objects or the environment. Matthias used the pretext of protection, but in truth, it was like he had been watching their every move. Unless he had voyeuristic tendencies...

{So, did you enjoy being a spectator to what happens in other people's beds?}

{You seemed to be enjoying it without a care in the world, didn't you? Or was I mistaken?}

Even though he was caught spying, Matthias showed no sign of embarrassment. Instead, he looked intrigued, as if discovering an aspect he hadn't anticipated. Watching his gleaming eyes, filled with a strange sense of satisfaction, completely killed Kwon Taekjoo's appetite. He hated people like Matthias. There was no good reason to get more entangled with him.

{I think it's time to go back.}

{Already? Why don't you stay a bit longer?}

He didn't feel like playing around with this creepy host any longer. And besides, he wasn't in a position to laze around.

{You've got it all wrong, Taekjoo.}

At that moment, both Kwon Taekjoo and Zhenya's eyes simultaneously turned toward Matthias. Realizing why, Matthias pointed at Kwon Taekjoo.

{Isn't that right? That's your name. Bogdanov called you that several times.}

"Should I just kill him?"

Zhenya showed a look of dissatisfaction.

"Do that, and you'll be trapped here forever."

"We can just escape using his helicopter."

"And what then? The most important thing right now is getting back to Korea safely. Taking care of him doesn't have to happen right now."

Their eerie conversation barely involved words, but both of them kept their eyes fixed on Matthias. Matthias, not understanding the situation, smirked, thinking they were leaving him out again.

Kwon Taekjoo gave Zhenya a look, urging him to hurry and finish this. Zhenya complied, pressing Matthias.

{You heard him, Perez. You wouldn't want this deal to get messy, would you?}

It was a perfectly ordinary phrase, yet coming from Zhenya's mouth, it sounded much more threatening. Matthias likely felt the same way.

{Hmm... I suppose I have no choice. It's a shame, though, to see guests leave without having a proper drink with them.}

Matthias raised the glass of water in front of him. He clinked it against Zhenya's and Kwon Taekjoo's glasses in turn, promising to meet again.

[I'll have to visit Russia someday. And when I do, you'll show me that 'Anastasia,' right? I'm dying to see if she's really as stunning as the rumors say.]

Zhenya gave Kwon Taekjoo a meaningful smile.

"If Anastasia is what you seek, then he's already here, sitting right before you."

He murmured. Even though Matthias couldn't understand Russian, Zhenya had no problem saying such embarrassing things out loud. Shaking his head, Kwon Taekjoo stood up from his seat, followed by Zhenya.

Matthias, now left alone once again, could only watch the pair as he repeatedly reminded them of their promise.



### 3. 朝の予兆

(Omen: For Good or Bad)

"Taekjoo! Hey! Get up already. It's 8 o'clock!"

A familiar voice broke his sweet slumber. He flinched and forced his eyes open. The familiar ceiling filled his slowly widening view, and soon, his mother's face entered his vision from the corner of his eye.

With a long sigh, he barely managed to sit up. A groan escaped his lips. His hair, which was sticking out in all directions, was messily brushed down with his hand.

"Why didn't you set your alarm? Aren't you going to be late for work?"

His mother asked with concern, handing him a glass of water. He accepted it without a word and wet his throat first.

"No. I can leave later today."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I just got back from a business trip."

"Oh my. Is it because it's the embassy abroad, that their benefits and treatment are different? Or is it because it's a more relaxed post

compared to the last one?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"I'm going to wash up," he said as he quickly escaped to the bathroom. Trying to deceive his mother so blatantly made his conscience sting. He didn't have the confidence to face her eyes and smoothly lie. If his mother had seen Kwon Taekjoo's appearance when he had just barely escaped from Cuba, all his lies would've been exposed. But luckily, by the time he returned to Korea, most of the injuries had healed. Thankfully, he had a tougher body and quicker recovery than most.

It had already been four days since he returned home. Zhenya had said he was going to Russia briefly to wrap up some business with Matthias. Thanks to that, he had slept as much as he wanted without any interruptions.

Despite that, his face in the bathroom mirror looked unusually weary. It was because he hadn't been able to rest properly, having spent almost all his time with Zhenya right before returning.

In the past, he used to jump straight into the next mission right after completing one, confident in his stamina. But now, he wondered if the lingering exhaustion from spending all that time with his lover day and night was something that would last this long. Was this some kind of aging curve, like what athletes experience?

He yawned lazily and grabbed his toothbrush. As he brushed his teeth without a thought, the memories of his recent journey flashed before his eyes like a reel of film.

One late night, Kwon Taekjoo and Zhenya had boarded a prepared helicopter and left Matthias's island. The helicopter had landed on a large ship — a cargo ship that had departed from Panama, passed through Mexico, and was heading to Busan. When they had landed, the ship was already on its way, having left the port city of Manzanillo on Mexico's western coast, and was now crossing the Pacific Ocean.

Thus began a long 17-day voyage from there to Busan. The ship's captain and crew believed Kwon Taekjoo and Zhenya were private security guards dispatched by an international logistics company. Thanks to that, they weren't dragged into any annoying ship work. Even when they walked around the ship armed, no one raised any suspicions.

The intimidating appearance of the two also helped to block any interference or unwanted attention. The crew, regardless of nationality or age, would actively avoid the two. Even during meal times, when the two showed up, the others would quickly vacate their seats. Besides the unique aura of intimidation they exuded, being watched by security guards was surely uncomfortable in itself.

The usual power struggles that were said to occur during long voyages were none of their concern. When the crew members argued and things got noisy, it never lasted long. As soon as Kwon Taekjoo or Zhenya appeared, everyone would awkwardly disperse as if nothing had happened.

Whenever loud noises came from outside, Zhenya would furiously bang on the wall. Immediately, the entire ship would fall silent. Most of the time, it got noisy around the time when Zhenya was having sex with him, so it was fortunate. Otherwise, if he had just been disturbed from sleep, who knew what he might have done in the name of self-defense? Thinking back, it seemed like a miracle that they made it to Korea without any major incidents.

Thanks to a tip-off to the National Intelligence Service, they didn't have to go through any special immigration procedures when they arrived at Busan Port. There was some minor commotion, but in return for completing his mission, he was even granted a few days of leave. Everything had worked out as if it were a lie. It would have been impossible without Zhenya's involvement. It felt surreal, like the days they spent together on some nameless island in Mexico had been a dream.

He finished organizing his thoughts and, after showering, came out. His mother had already set the breakfast table. Unable to refuse, he quietly sat down in the chair. The table was filled with more than ten different side dishes. The rich, simmering gochujang stew whetted his appetite that had been missing until then.

"Why did you prepare so much food in the morning?"

"How hard must it have been for you, a guy who struggles if he doesn't eat Korean food for just one day, to be away for almost a month? Did you eat properly? You've been sleeping non-stop since you got home, and your face has gotten so pale. It's worrisome."

"Come on, Mom. What does it matter if a man's face looks worn out?"

"That face of yours, even though it's not useful, looks even worse now, you rascal. Should I brew you some medicine?"

"Ah, no need for that. What medicine do I need? This food you made is the best remedy."

As usual, he skillfully brushed aside his mother's concern. She shot him a mock-annoyed look but still placed a well-grilled piece of fish on top

of Kwon Taekjoo's rice. He silently scooped up a spoonful of rice and put it into his mouth. The combination of the freshly cooked savory rice and the salty grilled fish was perfect. After taking a spoonful of the rich, flavorful gochujang stew, the queasiness in his stomach quickly disappeared.

"This is delicious. Mom, you should eat too."

"I ate earlier, just something light."

"Come on, don't just eat lightly like that."

"You'll understand when you're older. It's hard to digest three full meals a day."

His mother replied as she added some braised beef to his rice. This time, the green chili peppers that she usually put in the braised dish were missing. This change had come about after Zhenya, despite Kwon Taekjoo's assurance that the peppers weren't spicy, had taken a bite and immediately choked on it. That was about a year ago. Somehow, over time, Zhenya had blended so seamlessly into Kwon Taekjoo's daily life.

"This braised beef. The ambassador used to like it so much too."

Lost in his own thoughts, he was startled by his mother's words. He quickly covered his mouth with the back of his hand to stifle a cough. Not knowing what was going on, his mother handed him a glass of water, telling him to eat slowly. She then asked about Zhenya's whereabouts.

"I hope the ambassador hasn't worn himself out with such a long trip. So, when is he coming back?"

"Who knows? Whenever he finishes his business, I guess?"

"What? You're his assistant, and you don't know your boss's schedule?"

"It's personal business. What can I do? Am I supposed to pry into his private matters?"

"Usually, subordinates are supposed to pick up on things even if their superiors don't say it outright."

He pouted at his mother's nagging. Despite how much she disliked the military mindset of his late grandfather and father, she wasn't much different herself. He couldn't tell if it was just out of habit or if she had grown fond of Zhenya and was now instinctively siding with him.

"By the way, is the Ambassador planning to spend his birthday in Russia?"

At his mother's idle comment, Kwon Taekjoo stopped using his chopsticks. He turned his eyes and looked at the desk calendar placed on one side of the dining table. Before he knew it, the calendar had flipped to August. There was exactly one week left until Zhenya's birthday.

"...He should be back before then. He said he'd come soon."

"Really? Then should I prepare a birthday meal for the Ambassador?"

"You? Why not just get a cake or something? Why go all out with a birthday meal?"

"Oh, come on. You can't treat people like that. The Ambassador is all alone here in this distant place. How lonely would he feel spending his birthday alone? We've shared enough with him already, so it's only proper to serve him a warm meal."

Everything is a matter of propriety. She already called Zhenya over for meals or tea even when there wasn't any particular reason. Now she's looking for an excuse just because it's his birthday. It felt unnecessary.

"Well, I'll ask him."

"Yes, and make sure to tell him not to feel burdened."

"That brat's not the type to feel burdened anywhere. You should know that by now."

"Really? Are you going to keep being disrespectful by calling the Ambassador 'brat' or 'that guy'?"

"But he's not here..."

"Even when he's not, it becomes a habit if you keep talking like that."

As usual, his mother took Zhenya's side. She said it was because she cared about her only son, but if she knew how much Kwon Taekjoo had

to put up with from him, would she still feel the same? Ignorance was bliss. He halfheartedly apologized and continued eating.

Come to think of it, there hadn't been any contact from Zhenya in the past four days. He thought he had made his point last time, but maybe Zhenya had already forgotten. They say no news is good news, but that didn't apply when it came to him. It seemed like he would have to reach out first.

After finishing his meal, Kwon Taekjoo entered his room and immediately picked up his phone. Just in case, he checked the missed calls, but, as expected, Zhenya's name was nowhere to be found. Did something happen in Russia again? Maybe his father had finally caught him and forced him into an engagement, or perhaps he had been placed under a travel ban because of his involvement in helping Kwon Taekjoo in Cuba.

He was always causing unnecessary worry. "That bastard," he muttered, pressing the call button. But before the call could go through, he changed his mind and decided to send a message first.

Hey. Are you still in Russia?

—Why, do you miss me already?

Surprisingly, the reply came immediately. That meant Zhenya could still move his ten fingers perfectly well. Damn bastard.

You said you'd be back soon.

—Yeah, soon.

When exactly is 'soon'?

—Taekjoo, what's going on? Why are you being so nosy?

—You're acting kind of cute, you know?

He could picture Zhenya's smug face as he typed that. Taekjoo was about to snap back with "Who's cute?" when an incoming call notification appeared on his screen.

It was a call from headquarters.

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He took a deep breath in front of the Director's office door. Reporting to superiors was the final step in closing a mission. The problem was that it almost always resulted in him getting a lecture. Would he have to write another incident report this time? Sensing the inevitable, he knocked on the closed door.

"Come in."

Director Kwak's voice was as usual. Still, Kwon Taekjoo let out a long sigh of relief. After clearing his throat, he opened the door and stepped inside. Director Kwak shifted the documents he had been reviewing to

the side and focused his gaze on him. It was difficult to read his thoughts just from his expression.

If the previous Deputy Director, Im, had been a sly old fox, Director Kwak was more like a mole — quiet and thoughtful, yet highly sensitive. As a superior, he was the more difficult type to deal with.

Kwon Taekjoo bowed and stood firmly in front of his desk.

"You called for me, sir."

"Yes. Did you rest well?"

"Thanks to your concern, yes."

"Any injuries?"

"As you can see, I'm fine."

"You're not one to complain, are you?"

"Complaining doesn't change anything. I've learned that firsthand from my time rolling around in the National Intelligence Service."

"So you don't think you're taking on more than your fair share of work?"

"Public servants can't be picky, sir. We follow orders from above."

Director Kwak chuckled briefly, then acknowledged Kwon Taekjoo's efforts.

"Anyway, you did well. We were considering the possibility of U.S. intervention, but we didn't expect them to act so recklessly. We almost lost a highly capable asset. Fortunately, they have enough decency not to lodge a formal complaint about this incident."

"They wouldn't have grounds to complain, sir. I simply responded to their preemptive strike to protect my right to survive."

"Yes, there's no end to debating justifications. The U.S. is denying that there was any prior report of that night's disturbance. They claim the PMC, which operates outside of government control, acted purely in their own interest. In Cuba, they're also framing the incident as rogue actions by international mercenaries. It wouldn't benefit them if it were revealed that the target of the attack that night wasn't just an ordinary civilian. If 'Electric Hammer' were exposed, they'd face nothing but criticism. They don't want a full-blown conflict with the U.S. either."

In the face of national interest, individual sacrifices were easily buried. This time was no different. In the end, the Cuban hackers and the American mercenaries were nothing more than pawns to be used and discarded. Perhaps Kwon Taekjoo's fate wouldn't be so different.

"Thanks to your covert efforts, we were able to retrieve the data safely. The leak wasn't too severe. And the organizations and companies that were hacked say they've stopped receiving ransom demands from the crackers. Of course, the young hackers survived, and once this blows over, the attacks from Cuba might start up again. But with the country's security systems strengthened, they won't have such an easy time as before."

"...Young hackers, you said?"

"Ah, I suppose you didn't have time to hear the full story. The hackers of 'Electric Hammer' were all children from that family. The eldest, who was believed dead, the second, who had been reported missing, and the youngest, who has a congenital lung disease."

"All three of them?"

"Yes. Quite something, isn't it? That such geniuses could be born one after another to such ordinary parents. I'm not sure how the Cuban government found out about their talents, but it seems they've kept the two older brothers locked underground, siphoning off the profits from their hacking activities. They either manipulated them with promises to cure the youngest's illness or pressured them with soldiers constantly watching over them."

Kwon Taekjoo recalled the young hacker he met in the basement and the girl with the nasal tube. He had assumed the girl was uninvolved in the crimes. That's why, even while deploying the sleeping gas, he made sure not to disturb her nasal tube, afraid she might get hurt despite knowing nothing. Looking back, he realized it had all been futile. There was no way a child living in that house could have been unaware of the basement's presence.

The enemies he encountered on the field often defied expectations. The targets to be subdued weren't always men — they were sometimes women, the elderly, or, like this time, minors. Each time, he clung to his mission and duty. For the sake of the nation, to prevent greater harm. Without those justifications, he couldn't maintain his composure.

Was this time any different? No, it wasn't. Yet, he had shown unnecessary mercy. Of course, the mission's objective was only to retrieve the leaked data. A clash with the hacker group was inevitable, but eliminating them wasn't strictly required. The siblings Kwon Taekjoo had saved from death weren't dangerous terrorists, nor had they resisted strongly. Keeping them alive didn't pose a significant threat to national security. So why was he left with this uneasy feeling? He kept asking himself over and over, trying to identify the source of his discomfort.

"There were some rather interesting files among the data you retrieved this time."

Director Kwak shifted the topic.

"It seems 'Electric Hammer' was more active than we thought. They didn't just target our country; Thailand, Russia, China, North Korea, and Japan were also on their radar. Once we decrypted the data recovered from the field, it was overflowing with high-level, classified information — even things the National Intelligence Service hadn't detected, like unusual movements in North Korea."

Kwon Taekjoo looked at the tablet Director Kwak handed him. The screen was filled with a photo of a middle-aged man. Was he South Korean? Or someone from North Korea? He glanced back at Director Kwak, silently asking for an explanation.

"Park Jung-ho. A North Korean biologist. He's spent his entire life studying the ecosystem and microorganisms of Mount Baekdu. I've heard that at the end of this month, he'll be visiting Vladivostok as a guest researcher."

"That's the official story. What's his real purpose?"

"We don't have definitive answers yet; all we can do is speculate. However, it appears that as soon as Park Jung-ho arrives in Vladivostok, he will engage in clandestine meetings with Rostec, Russia's largest defense contractor, and Pharmzashita, a state-owned pharmaceutical firm. Doesn't that raise some eyebrows? North Korea's Ministry of State Security agents will be with him for the entire trip, particularly this man."

Director Kwak swiped to the next image on the tablet, revealing a man in a North Korean military uniform. Judging by the rank insignia on his hat and the medals that covered his chest, he appeared to be a high-ranking officer.

"Who is this?"

"Shim Young-il. He's the Chief of Operations at North Korea's General Staff Department. Now, can you start seeing the full picture?"

A North Korean microbiologist was covertly meeting with a state-run Russian pharmaceutical company called Pharmzashita. Recently, Pharmzashita had drawn international scrutiny after acquiring significant quantities of potassium iodide, a compound recognized for its ability to mitigate radiation accumulation in the body. This unusual purchase has raised concerns about potential nuclear testing by Russia.

Like many state-owned enterprises, Pharmzashita would undoubtedly adhere to the Kremlin's directives, suggesting that the meeting between the North Korean scientist and the company was likely sanctioned by the Russian government. When you factor in Rostec, a company involved in developing military technology, along with the presence of a

high-ranking North Korean military officer, the situation began to appear anything but innocent.

It seemed clear why Director Kwak had summoned Kwon Taekjoo. Without further ado, Kwon Taekjoo got to the point and confirmed his superior's intentions.

"So, you want me to go to Vladivostok and find out what they're discussing?"

Director Kwak smiled in response — an enigmatic smile, without a word.

"Before we go any further, there's something I need to clarify. It's about the Russian ambassador of South Korea. Yevgeny Vissarionovich Bogdanov?"

Director Kwak mentioned a name that Kwon Taekjoo hadn't expected at all. Kwon Taekjoo felt himself tense up but forced himself to act calm.

"Yes, go ahead."

"As you probably know well, the Bogdanov family is one of the most powerful in Russia. It's no exaggeration to say they have a hand in everything Russia does. Bazim Vissarionovich Bogdanov, the ambassador's brother and a close confidant of the president, happens to serve as an advisor for Rostec. I hear that the hotel where the North Korean delegation will be staying during this visit to Russia is also run by their family."

He clamped his mouth shut. Given the kind of family they were, there was no room for protest. All that worried him was whether Zhenya knew anything about the secret meeting, or if he was involved in any way.

"I heard that Russian ambassador showed up on the scene during the Cuban operation as well?"

Director Kwak abruptly asked. Though his tone was soft, it was clearly a reprimand. A foreign diplomat's involvement in a covert national intelligence operation was always something that could be called into question. It wasn't the first time Zhenya had interfered, and it seemed like they had just been observing for quite a while.

"I still can't figure out why that guy keeps helping you. It's hard for me to believe your previous explanation that it's purely out of personal friendship or goodwill. While his involvement has so far aligned with our interests, I can't say I'm pleased about it, to be honest. Once something starts going wrong, it spirals out of control. Especially when it comes to diplomatic issues. Besides, this situation isn't something that can be brushed off like a 'coincidental involvement' as we've done before. He's now a key player in this situation. You see that, don't you?"

Up until now, Kwon Taekjoo had never carelessly leaked work-related information to Zhenya. Every time, it was just him finding out things on his own and meddling.

But that wasn't something to feel resentful about either. After all, it was true that Kwon Taekjoo had received his help, and not too long ago, when Zhenya came to save him, he felt relieved. Before he knew it, he had gotten used to Zhenya popping up unexpectedly during operations. No, he had grown accustomed to it. Even though Zhenya wasn't a colleague, Kwon had unknowingly grown dependent on him, becoming

complacent. Just like Director Im did in the past — colluding with a Russian diplomat and smuggling national secrets — and there would be no escaping if things went wrong. It wasn't just Kwon Taekjoo who was at risk; Zhenya would also be in danger.

Kwon clenched his fist tightly, letting out a long breath.

"I understand what you're saying. I'll make sure he doesn't interfere in official matters again. You don't need to worry."

"Can I trust you?"

"Yes."

"You always handle things well, but make sure you act only within what can be controlled. The last incident in Cuba was quite dangerous."

"Yes. I'm sorry."

"Alright. You can head back for now. Once the operation plan becomes more concrete, I'll call you again."

"Yes, then."

After a slight bow, he left. Though he had kept a poker face throughout, the moment the door to the director's office closed, a heavy sigh escaped him. His chest tightened with an overwhelming sense of discomfort.

It wasn't as if he was unaware of Zhenya's family background. He knew exactly how they had acquired their wealth and influence over the years. Zhenya, too, had contributed to the expansion of his family's power. Even so, Kwon Taekjoo accepted him. Not because he thought Zhenya had reformed, but simply because Zhenya had distanced himself from his kin, and because the misdeeds of the Bogdanov family did not directly conflict with Kwon Taekjoo's own interests. To be more precise, he hadn't had the time to consider such things. In the extreme circumstances he found himself in, his emotions had overwhelmed him like a storm, leaving him helpless. For the first time in his life, he had made a decision not with his head, but with his heart. Had that been a mistake?

Despite his current concerns, the secret meeting between North Korea and Russia could still come to nothing. It could simply end with the exchange of new information between the two countries. If their agreement didn't threaten the safety of South Korea, Kwon Taekjoo had no reason to feel uneasy.

Yet, a lingering sense of discomfort remained. As long as Zhenya stayed by his side, similar issues were likely to arise again. Kwon Taekjoo, continuing to work for South Korea, while Zhenya's roots remained firmly planted in Russia, was a conflict he couldn't escape. It wasn't something he hadn't foreseen. He knew all of this when he accepted Zhenya, so why did he keep feeling this way?

'The Russian ambassador to Korea. Yevgeny Vissarionovich Bogdanov, right?'

He should never have let headquarters become aware of Zhenya's existence in the first place. Nor should he have allowed them to know that Zhenya was helping him. Though Zhenya always inserted himself of his own accord, it was still a covert operation. It was something that should never have been exposed to anyone.

And yet, using the excuse that he couldn't stop Zhenya, Kwon Taekjoo foolishly kept associating with him. His naive belief that Zhenya would never betray him had led to this. No doubt, Director Kwak's warning had been well-deserved.

For Zhenya's sake as well, Kwon Taekjoo could no longer allow him to act on his behalf. The more Zhenya got involved, the more precarious his own position would become. It was time for Taekjoo to wake up and exercise caution.

"Hah... Pull yourself together, Kwon Taekjoo. You've gone so far as to get caught up in romance."

He nervously threw his head back, biting down the rising anger. Just then, he heard a voice calling from behind.

"Sunbae!"

When he turned his head, he saw Yoon Jong-woo waving at him from the end of the hallway. With a slight "Oh," Kwon fully turned toward him. Yoon Jong-woo quickly ran over to him.

"What were you thinking about so deeply? I've been calling you, but you didn't hear me?"

"Did you? My bad."

"The Director called you, right? Are you coming back from seeing him?"

"Yeah."

"Did you get chewed out badly?"

"What, do you think I get scolded all the time?"

"No, but why do you look so pale? I heard you were resting and sleeping the whole time. Are you not fully recovered? They say no one can beat time, and it looks like even you can't, sunbae."

"Who says I can't, you punk?"

Taekjoo made a motion as if to kick Yoon Jong-woo's backside, and Yoon Jong-woo dramatically dodged, playing along. Jong-woo, who had been messing around and darting about, eventually got caught in a headlock and had to surrender. After horsing around for a while, Taekjoo forgot what he had been so preoccupied with.

"Ah, sunbae, go easy on me! I think you twisted my neck!"

"You big baby. It's time for you to man up"

"Says the guy who can snap anyone's neck in one move. Now that is the Kwon Taekjoo I know, always so tough on people."

"Yap yap yap, so much chatter. Just because you've been around for a while, your tongue's getting lighter."

"See? When I hit a nerve, you always scold me. And after being away for so long, you weren't even going to stop by to see me?"

"I see you all the time, what's the point?"

"Wow, that's harsh. So when you said I was the only one you could count on, that was just talk, huh? You only come to me when you need something."

"Why are you whining so much today? Did the heat get to you?"

At Kwon Taekjoo's teasing, Yoon Jong-woo looked genuinely hurt as he protested.

"I was worried, you know. As soon as I heard the explosion and then the communication cut off, I thought something serious had happened."

"You think I'd go down that easily?"

"But we didn't hear from you for two whole days! They said none of the mercenaries captured alive on-site were Asian. How could I not be worried?"

"There was some...."

Taekjoo started to explain but shut his mouth again. The explosion had destroyed his comms gear, leaving him with no way to contact HQ. The real issue was that instead of finding an alternative method, he had spent two days rolling around with Zhenya. Of course, if Zhenya hadn't

shown up, he would have been either arrested by Cuban police or shot on the spot, making it impossible to ever reach out again.

"...Never mind. This is all on me. My own fault."

"Don't ever do something that reckless again. You don't have ten lives, you know. You should learn to tone down that temper."

Taekjoo nodded absentmindedly, patting Jong-woo on the shoulder. Jong-woo, who had been fuming and lecturing, quickly calmed down. His temper would flare up like a fire, only to fizzle out just as fast. Taekjoo found it amusing and endearing.

"You're like a nagging wife, seriously."

With a chuckle, Taekjoo ruffled Jong-woo's hair roughly. Jong-woo, who had been openly sighing, suddenly froze and glanced around cautiously. Taekjoo, following his lead, also scanned the area.

"What? What's wrong?"

"Uh, nothing. Just... being careful."

"Careful about what?"

"Well, no matter how crazy that Russian guy is, he wouldn't spy on the NIS, right?"

"Why are you suddenly bringing him up?"

"Because whenever you touch me, he glares at me like he wants to kill me. His eyes cut through people like a blade!"

"Well, you're still in one piece. Quit being dramatic."

"That's only because he's so obedient with you, so you don't see how scary he is. Seriously, can you please tell him to stop contacting me?"

"You two talk? Seems like he wants to be friends."

"Ugh, no! I definitely don't want that!"

"Then just tell that guy directly."

"Are you trying to get me killed?"

"If you can't do that, just be friends with him. You two seem to get along surprisingly well."

Yoon Jong-woo clenched his teeth and took a deep breath, his fists trembling slightly. Kwon Taekjoo, still unfazed, smirked, "You think that guy listens to anything I say?" and added,

"I'm sure you're thinking 'If he doesn't listen to you then who would he listen to...?'"

"I didn't say anything, though."

"I've learned to read your mind, you know."

"Don't lie."

Yoon Jong-woo gave Kwon Taekjoo a sarcastic side-eye, watching him chuckle to himself.

"There's really nothing going on, right?"

"Do you think something always has to be going on? Instead of worrying, let's grab a drink. It's been a while."

"Now? I'm not even off work yet."

"Just say you're going out for work. If there's a problem, I'll cover for you."

"Cover for me? We'll both end up writing reports together at this rate."

"You don't trust your sunbae? I can definitely protect you, so let's go."

With that, Taekjoo wrapped his arm around Jong-woo's neck and strode down the hallway. Jong-woo struggled for a moment, asking him to let him go, but soon gave in, sighing, "What are you going to buy me?"

They were partners who, despite everything, worked perfectly together.

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"Do you know you're a real tyrant of a boss, sunbae?"

Yoon Jong-woo grumbled as he unfolded the table. Since it had been a while and there was plenty to catch up on, both in terms of personal matters and work-related discussions, they'd decided to meet at his place instead of a restaurant.

Yoon Jong-woo's house, which he hadn't visited in a while, hadn't changed a bit. It was a two-room villa facing east, meaning it didn't get much sunlight. To make matters worse, the blinds were drawn, so it was dim even during the day. Laundry was strewn carelessly over chairs, hangers, and exercise equipment. Around the computer, every available space, save for the chair, was cluttered with various knick-knacks. He couldn't believe Jong-woo managed to eat and sleep in a place like this.

Kwon Taekjoo, stepping around piles of laundry, began tossing clothes into the basket. "All of a sudden?" he asked. Only then did they finally clear enough space to sit down. Yoon Jong-woo, while preparing the grill, continued to grumble.

"Ha. 'All of a sudden'? I've told you this countless times. You always barge in and steal my personal space and time. Even my possessions."

"Hey, when did I ever covet your possessions?"

"Did you forget about the time you used my game character without permission? And you use my car like it's a taxi. Even now, you said you'd treat me to something delicious, but why are we here? You don't actually think your subordinate is your servant, do you?"

"Why are you overreacting again? I brought good food, didn't I?"

Kwon Taekjoo nodded toward the bags he placed on the table. On their way over, he'd stopped by the local market and bought sashimi and beef — both things Yoon Jong-woo liked, perfect as side dishes for drinks. In fact, Jong-woo had even personally picked out the sashimi and the cuts of meat. It was clear that Jong-woo's sudden complaints were rooted in something else. His eyes, darting about with no real place to rest, were evidence enough.

"Are you trying to get ahead of a scolding? Look at this mess, seriously. Do you live in a pigsty? Do some cleaning! Is this even a place where a human can live? Air out the room morning and night. When are you planning to do your laundry? It's a wonder you haven't gotten sick living like this. No wonder you're always under the weather, idiot."

It wasn't hard for Kwon Taekjoo to see through Yoon Jong-woo's shallow motives. As always, a barrage of nagging ensued, and Yoon Jong-woo started to whine.

"Why are you criticizing me when you barged in uninvited?"

"Don't you know that meddling comes from affection? You should be grateful when a sunbae like me looks out for you so closely."

"Unwanted attention is a form of violence. Talking to you feels like I'm back in the army."

Yoon Jong-woo grumbled in a deflated voice. His complaints continued as he set the table.

"They say the last thing you want is to work directly under someone favored by the higher-ups. I guess I made a mistake right from the start."

"You think I'm favored? There's probably no one who's had to submit more reports than I have."

"Are you proud of that? That's what makes it worse. If you're going to be loyal to the higher-ups, just stick to it. But you always act according to your own temperament and judgment. It's not just about achieving the goal. Do you know how many times I've gotten dragged in and reprimanded alongside you?"

"I told you, this time I didn't get reprimanded."

"Does that look like the face of someone who didn't get scolded?"

"What's wrong with my face?"

"You've been lost in thought since I met you today, which isn't like you, sunbae."

Kwon Taekjoo absentmindedly rubbed his face. Even Yoon Jong-woo, usually oblivious, could sense his worries. In truth, it was hard to say he hadn't been scolded, considering Director Kwak had warned him about Zhenya's involvement. Though that wasn't the only thing weighing on his mind.

Meanwhile, Yoon Jong-woo placed the meat on the grill, which was divided into two sections, and set water to boil for ramen. He efficiently prepared the drinks, sashimi, and a couple of side dishes. All the while, he kept running his mouth. It seemed he had chosen today to vent.

"Honestly, sunbae, isn't it getting too much for you? You're doing the work of several people all by yourself, so you don't have any room to breathe, and it's getting more dangerous. You're always running around like crazy, but why are you so against adding team members?"

"Because having more team members won't change anything."

"How can you say that? Your workload would decrease, at the very least, and they could back you up in the field."

"Or it could get even harder with me having to clean up after them and save their skins. Besides, do you think anyone would keep up with my pace?"

"Ugh... That's exactly the problem, your pace. If you want to be a workaholic and a perfectionist on your own, that's fine, but you can't expect everyone around you to keep up. That's why people are complaining. You constantly bend the rules and act unorthodox. The other employees may not show it, but none of them want to back you up. They're all avoiding it."

"It's fine. As long as I have you."

"I'm not fine! I'm the one who's not fine!"

"That hurts, man. After all the meals I've treated you to, who do you think stocked your fridge with all those side dishes?"

Yoon Jong-woo clenched his fists, unable to come up with a response. He bit his lower lip in frustration, his whole body trembling. Kwon Taekjoo placed a piece of freshly grilled meat on his plate. With a look of mild annoyance, Yoon Jong-woo stared at him before reluctantly eating the meat.

"What I'm saying is, you need to start taking it easy. It's not like your goal is to die on the job."

Kwon Taekjoo gave a half-hearted nod as he opened a bottle of soju. When he tilted the bottle toward Yoon Jong-woo, Jong-woo quickly held up his glass. Taekjoo poured him a drink, then filled his own glass. After a moment of waiting, Yoon Jong-woo lifted his glass and clinked it lightly against Taekjoo's with a casual "cheers" before downing the soju in one go. There was no real kick to it — perhaps because he'd gotten used to drinking strong liquor with Zhenya lately.

He poured himself another glass right away. As he absentmindedly fiddled with the empty glass, Yoon Jong-woo shot him a knowing look. From years of experience, he could tell that this was Kwon Taekjoo's habit when he was deep in thought.

"Jong-woo, you know, right? How I've been charging ahead, no matter what."

"Of course. You've been a ruthless, unstoppable force — like a moth to a flame."

"I've never let my mind wander when I'm on the job. I didn't care if the enemy was a man, woman, elderly, or child. The thrill of overcoming extreme, unexpected situations and getting what I wanted in the end was indescribable. It was a rush I'd never felt before, maybe even something I got addicted to. Sometimes doing nothing, just resting, felt so boring that it was like hell. That's why I thought this was my calling."

"Huh... when you put it like that, it sounds like it is your calling. Don't you think?"

"Is it because I'm getting older, like you said? I keep getting distracted while working. Sometimes I hesitate to pull the trigger. My mindset also feels a bit different from before."

Yoon Jong-woo, who had been wrapping a large bite of food, paused for a moment. Rolling his eyes to recall the context, he asked carefully.

"Sunbae, did something happen in Cuba?"

Kwon Taekjoo lightly shook his head and took another shot of liquor. Then, he absentmindedly fiddled with his empty glass for quite some time.

"It wasn't just that time that was the problem. When I think about it, it's been quite a while since I lost my original drive and started becoming lax."

Yoon Jong-woo tilted his head in confusion and stuffed the food into his mouth. From his perspective, it was hard to understand what part of Kwon Taekjoo had become lax.

As far as Yoon Jong-woo knew, Kwon Taekjoo had never failed to fulfill his duties. Even his recent activities weren't any different from before. If anything, he thought it wouldn't hurt if Kwon Taekjoo took it a little easier.

While he was observing out of the corner of his eye, Kwon Taekjoo was lost in his own thoughts, repeatedly emptying his glass. It seemed like something was definitely going on, but since Kwon Taekjoo wasn't opening up, Yoon Jong-woo was hesitant to pry. All he did was serve the properly cooked ramen in front of him.

"You're going to ruin your stomach, so eat some snacks, too. You don't think your body is made of iron forever, do you?"

For some reason, Kwon Taekjoo's gaze was fixed on the ramen. He stared at it intently for a long time, but strangely, he didn't seem to make a move to eat it, which puzzled Yoon Jong-woo.

Eventually, Kwon Taekjoo began to speak.

"You know, what would you do if the two things you value most couldn't coexist?"

"... Is this about your mother, sunbae?"

"Huh? My mother?"

"Your mother wants you to be stable, but you still feel like this job is your calling. Isn't that what's troubling you?"

It felt like he'd been caught off guard. It wasn't that he was unaware of his mother's long-standing concerns. He knew full well but had deliberately avoided thinking about her while working.

In truth, neither affection nor a sense of duty toward his mother had ever been enough to hold Kwon Taekjoo back. He had rationalized that his work was for the country, for the greater good, and that it should take priority. Even when he reassured his mother with lies, he didn't suffer from guilt.

But now, why? What made his mother so different from Zhenya?

It wasn't immediate, but Kwon Taekjoo had a creeping sense that soon, he'd have to let go of either Zhenya or his work. Director Kwak's warning had ignited that vague feeling of unease. When the moment finally came where he had to choose between the two, what decision would Kwon Taekjoo make? His mind kept swirling with thoughts over something that hadn't even happened yet.

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The drinking session lasted late into the night. Yoon Jong-woo, who had been venting about work troubles, began to repeat himself after a while, and soon he was passed out, clutching an empty bottle. Kwon Taekjoo grabbed a pillow from the bed, placed it on the floor, and laid Yoon Jong-woo down. Then he sat back against the bed, trying to calm his spinning head. Suddenly, he thought about smoking, but he didn't have any on him. Yoon Jong-woo didn't smoke, and it had become a habit for him to borrow Zhenya's cigars.

Should he head home? He could stop by a convenience store on the way and grab a pack. He thought about it, but he didn't move. Instead, he idly scrolled through his phone.

—You're acting kind of cute, you know?

—No need to be so impatient. Soon means soon, after all.

He reread the last messages he had exchanged with Zhenya. Their conversation had been cut short due to a call from headquarters, and he hadn't properly responded. If "soon" meant tomorrow, would Zhenya arrive then? Before the next mission started? There was something he needed to talk about with him, something they needed to settle. Maybe that's why he was feeling so restless.

It was 11 p.m. If Zhenya was in Moscow, it would be around 5 p.m. there. Without thinking too much, he pressed the call button. The long, drawn-out ringing tone felt like it was about to stop, but then continued. He could have easily given up, but he stubbornly waited. The room was so quiet that the distinct ringtone echoed outside of the phone.

How much time had passed? The ringing suddenly stopped, and the voice he had been waiting for answered.

[Kwon Taekjoo?]

“You’re late.”

He threw back the scolding Zhenya often gave him. Zhenya, catching the nuance, let out a low chuckle.

[Have you been drinking?]

“Why? Do I smell like alcohol?”

[I told you. I can know anything about you.]

“You’re not convincing. If you know everything, why aren’t you here yet?”

[Sounds like you’ve had quite a bit to drink. You’re even whining, which is unlike you.]

Zhenya let out a throaty laugh, clearly in a good mood. Kwon Taekjoo couldn’t understand why, despite being so delighted by every word, glance, and gesture of his, Zhenya was always so slow to respond to his calls or contact him. He suddenly felt like he could relate to his exes, the ones he’d briefly dated and broken up with. The breakups always happened with a one-sided notice from them, and each time he’d been accused of being distant. It seemed true that what goes around comes around — he was getting it back just as it was.

“Whining? You always interpret things the way you want.”

He muttered in displeasure, but Zhenya’s laughter showed no signs of stopping. It was as if he was watching a cute animal or a child’s antics. Zhenya, oblivious to Kwon Taekjoo’s frustrations, seemed completely at ease, which only made Taekjoo’s irritation rise.

“Did you break your fingers? Why is it that I always have to contact you first before you finally bother to respond?”

[Hm... I just can't figure it out. When you're working, you cut off all contact like it's nothing, and when we're together, you push me away. But now that we're apart, you're the one missing me? Do you miss me that much? Can't stand to be alone even for a little while now?]

He could practically picture Zhenya's smug expression, his head held high with his shoulders squared wide. It was so obvious what he'd look like that Kwon Taekjoo let out a groan of frustration. Zhenya burst into laughter again, then added in a voice still brimming with amusement.

[Yeah, Taekjoo, go ahead and keep whining.]

“... You annoying bastard. Stop laughing and just hurry up. I need to talk to you.”

[Seems like it. You're acting strange.]

Kwon Taekjoo heard a long exhale, like Zhenya had leaned back against something.

[When I get there, you're going to have to explain what you've been doing at that idiot's place until this hour.]

“What? How do you even know where I—!”

Kwon Taekjoo straightened up, glancing around in surprise. Now it made sense why Zhenya was acting so relaxed. It seemed Zhenya had a

way of tracking exactly where Kwon Taekjoo was and what he was doing in real-time. No wonder he wasn't worried or curious. He was probably keeping tabs on Taekjoo even while he was working, showing up whenever he felt like it. Kwon Taekjoo felt overwhelmed, unsure where to even begin to address this situation.

"Ugh, whatever. Arguing with you is just a waste of time. I'm hanging up."

[See you soon.]

Zhenya hung up, still chuckling to himself. The silence returned, and Yoon Jong-woo's soft snoring filled the quiet room.

Clutching his phone tightly, Kwon Taekjoo leaned his head back and let out a deep sigh. His mind felt tangled, like a mess of knotted threads, leaving him feeling overwhelmed and confused.

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"...Since that's the case, I should head back now. Seems like my Zaika is pretty upset from being left alone."

Zhenya smiled softly as he looked at Bazim, who was sitting across from him. Bazim's expression was one of disbelief, as if he had just witnessed something bizarre. He was puzzled when Zhenya suddenly put the phone on speaker, and the content of the conversation was even more absurd. It was shocking enough that this Psikh (the crazy one) was pretending to be in a relationship, but the fact that the other person had

such a deep, masculine voice? Even though he had already suspected this with near certainty, hearing it directly with his own ears was a whole different level of shock.

Pale-faced, Bazim mumbled in disbelief.

“That Korean spy... No way...”

“Not a spy anymore.”

Zhenya’s nonchalant response made Bazim groan as he pressed his palm against his forehead.

Bazim had dropped everything and come to see him as soon as he heard that Zhenya had returned. About two weeks ago, an unidentified terrorist had attacked civilians in Cuba, and Zhenya had been spotted at the scene. For some reason, he had actively helped the terrorist escape.

This had led to an informal complaint from Cuba, a long-time ally, and even the Kremlin was not pleased. Bazim knew he had to rein Zhenya in before the trouble escalated and affected their family.

“Yevgeny, what exactly are you planning to do?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re an ambassador, yet you keep getting involved in things that don’t benefit the nation, or even your own interests. Why?”

“You’re wrong, Bazim. Maybe not for the nation, but these things are very closely tied to my personal interests. When your lover is in danger, it’s only right to do whatever it takes to save them. Go ask the Kremlin. If Natasha were about to be devoured by Baba Yaga, would they just stand by and watch?”

Bazim couldn’t respond and remained silent. The Natasha Zhenya mentioned was the president’s notorious mistress. With the president’s favor, she had committed all sorts of outlandish and illegal acts, without hesitation. The Kremlin constantly covered up her misdeeds, drawing the ire of the public, but the president brushed off all criticism with his authority.

And now, such a man was reprimanding Zhenya for his recklessness? It was laughable. The hypocrisy of allowing one person to do as they please while condemning another for the same behavior only weakened their own standing.

“Seems like you got a good earful, chasing me down like a bird with its tail on fire. Go back to the Kremlin and tell them: don’t get so rattled over such a minor commotion. Show some grace befitting a great nation. They don’t care about public opinion anyway, right? As for Cuba’s complaints? They’ll probably treat it like the neighbor’s dog barking. If they think they can pin this on me, they’ve miscalculated.”

“So what now? You’re just going to keep doing whatever you want? Are you planning to make an enemy of the Kremlin in the end?”

“Since when were we ever on the same side?”

Zhenya, who had been smirking, suddenly stood up, causing Bazim to tense up visibly. Even though they were brothers, Bazim couldn’t help

but feel a sense of unease and intimidation. Zhenya had a way of exuding authority that disregarded familial bonds and hierarchical respect, responding only to his own whims. His dangerously low threshold for excitement made him more akin to a wild animal than a man.

Looking down at Bazim from his towering height, Zhenya spoke with a warning.

“Bazim, stick to your own business. If being the Kremlin’s loyal lapdog is your dream, then keep licking Lomonosov’s boots like you always have. I’ve told you before — if you don’t touch what’s mine, we won’t have any issues between us. Is that really so difficult to understand?”

Zhenya tilted his head as if puzzled, an obviously exaggerated gesture. For a while, he locked eyes with Bazim before turning abruptly and starting to pack his belongings. He had just been speaking sweetly to his lover on the phone, saying he’d come soon, and now he was really preparing to leave immediately.

Seeing Zhenya's lighthearted attitude, Bazim's voice rose.

“How long are you going to act so insolent, Yevgeny?! Do you have any idea where all the privileges you’ve been enjoying come from...?”

“Are you seriously going to say it’s all thanks to the Kremlin’s grace? Or maybe the family’s reputation?!”

Zhenya slowly turned to face Bazim, his previous playful demeanor entirely gone. The atmosphere had turned cold, and his blue eyes sharpened like blades.

“I think I’ve repaid my debts enough, don’t you? Even now, I’m being more than generous.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Do you really think the reason Lomonosov hasn’t eliminated me yet, even though he sees me as a thorn in his side, is because of our family? No, that man has lived his whole life purging anyone who threatened him. Whether they were family, his closest allies, or even those who provided him with resources, it didn’t matter. ‘Bogdanov’? That name means nothing to that man. It might be a slight inconvenience, but he could kill us all and simply take whatever’s left. There are plenty of others who could replace ‘Bogdanov.’ But the reason he hasn’t done that...”

Zhenya trailed off and tapped his chest lightly, then gestured to Bazim.

“It’s because of what’s carved into my heart, and yours. It’s the secret of ‘Anastasia’ that he hasn’t uncovered yet, and he’s afraid of stirring the hornet’s nest prematurely.”

“You’re underestimating him too much. He’s a man who believes that losing one’s pride is losing everything. If you keep defying him, you’ll end up as an example, publicly executed. No matter who you are, how will you survive against tens of thousands of soldiers?”

“It’s true I can’t win against him with soldiers. But what about firepower?”

“Yevgeny!”

Bazim's shout barely registered as Zhenya let out a dry chuckle, suddenly bringing up missiles.

"They're still struggling to finish a single hypersonic missile, aren't they? Making such a fuss over nothing more than a name."

The mention of missiles caught Bazim off guard. Hypersonic missile development was one of Russia's key national projects. These missiles could travel 480 kilometers in just five minutes, too fast for any existing missile defense system to intercept. The Kremlin had been boasting for years that Russia had successfully developed hypersonic missiles using its own technology, and that they were already in operational stages. However, in reality, the research had been stalled for several years.

"How about this: it's not just one side that can make a statement. If they pull any stunts, I could easily give them a front-row view of that missile they're so eager to complete. Just picture the fireworks lighting up the Kremlin — now that would be a sight to behold, don't you think?"

Zhenya's words implied that he had already gained access to hypersonic missile technology. Bazim let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. He knew Zhenya wasn't one to boast without reason. Anything Zhenya spoke of, no matter how outlandish it seemed, had the potential to become a reality.

"Ha... I'm not asking you to be some paragon of loyalty. Just pretend, for the family's sake. You've gotten everything you wanted. Isn't it enough? Can't you at least lie low and avoid attracting attention to yourself, so your news doesn't reach the Kremlin? Is that really too much to ask?"

“For the family’s sake, you say? Since you seem to care so much about our grand family and brotherly ties, consider this your final warning.”

Zhenya strode toward Bazim, his massive shadow swallowing him whole.

“Don’t even think about stepping foot on this island without my permission again. Stop lurking around like a thief, meddling in matters that don’t concern you. It’s all for nothing. But if you choose to ignore me, my gatekeeper will handle you the next time.”

Somehow, Bazim had a nagging suspicion that this gatekeeper wasn’t human at all. Perhaps it was a surface-to-air missile, ready to obliterate any intruder without leaving a trace.

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A vast snowfield spread out in every direction. Everywhere I looked, it was pure white. The depth of the snow was impossible to gauge, and there wasn’t a single footprint in the pristine expanse. Even the bare branches of the scattered trees were piled high with snow.

‘This place again, huh?’

I muttered to myself as I surveyed my surroundings a bit more. I was checking, just in case, if this place could be Odinokiy Island. A hollow laugh escaped my lips. I had been thinking about Zhenya all day, and it felt like my subconscious had dragged me back here.

I started walking, heading somewhere — anywhere. The general terrain and atmosphere felt oddly familiar. If only Zhenya's mansion stood near the cliff, then it really would've been Odinokiy.

But no matter how much I looked around, I couldn't find a mansion, or even a simple cabin. There were no traces of reindeer or rabbits either. Was it because this was just a dream?

I wandered aimlessly across the desolate plain. After what felt like an eternity, I finally noticed small footprints. They weren't from an adult but from a child. For some reason, I felt a surge of relief. Grinning, I hurriedly followed the trail.

Before long, I spotted a boy sitting crouched in the distance. He was bundled up in a shapka, fur boots, and a thick fur coat. But even from afar, I immediately knew who it was.

'Zhenya.'

I called out to him with a smile, but there was no response. He didn't turn around or even flinch. Was it because this was a dream that my words weren't getting through?

'Hey, it's cold. Why are you out here? Where's your house?'

I asked as I approached him, taking long strides. But still, he didn't move. He just kept his head down, staring intently at something.

As I looked closer, I noticed his small body trembling slightly. A bad feeling crept up on me.

'Hey, kiddo. What's wrong?'

I reached out, grabbing his shoulder to turn him around. That's when I saw his face — young Zhenya, his cheeks soaked with tears. I barely had time to process my shock before I froze at the sight of what he was clutching.

It was a corpse, drenched in blood. The face was mangled beyond recognition, blown apart by a bullet, leaving no trace of its features. All I could do was guess who it might be based on the exposed hands, fingers, and the general shape of the body.

I guessed that the corpse Zhenya was holding... was me, Kwon Taekjoo.

'Zaika... my zaika...'

Zhenya began to sob, tears spilling over his round cheeks. I was too stunned to even think about comforting him. Meanwhile, the corpse turned an even deeper shade of red. Blood gushed forth in a torrent from somewhere, forming a flood. It wasn't long before both the corpse and young Zhenya were submerged in the crimson tide.

'Ahhhh!'

Zhenya let out a piercing wail, his face twisted with grief. Suddenly, the quiet sky flashed brightly. Strange objects began raining down, thick and heavy like raindrops. They were countless bombs, falling all around us.

Without thinking, I instinctively reached out toward young Zhenya.

‘Zhenya!’

I screamed his name at the top of my lungs. But it was no use. Bombs exploded all around, shaking the ground and splitting the earth beneath me. Desperately, I thrashed my limbs, but the distance between us only grew wider and wider.

‘Ahhhhh! Ahhhhh!’

Zhenya’s cries grew sharper, cutting through the air until they felt like they were ripping my eardrums apart. And then, in an instant, the snow on the ground erupted into a blizzard, and the thousands of bombs buried beneath it shot up into the sky. They collided mid-air, igniting into a blazing firestorm. The chain of explosions swelled in a flash, obliterating everything in its path.

Even the child, Zhenya, who had been sobbing so bitterly, vanished without a trace — consumed by the flames.

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“Ugh!..”

Kwon Taekjoo’s eyes snapped open with a gasp. The familiar surroundings filled his vision abruptly, triggering a faint dizziness. Even when he squeezed his eyes shut, the disorienting sensation lingered. He felt like he couldn’t get enough air.

He groaned softly, running a hand over his face. His palm was quickly drenched in sweat. Every muscle in his body ached, as if he had thrashed about violently in his sleep. After a moment, he pressed his forearm against his eyes and took a deep breath, then slammed his fist down onto the bed in frustration.

"Fuck... what a goddamn nightmare."

He sat up abruptly, his upper body now upright. Cold sweat trickled down his spine and chest, making him grit his teeth in disgust.

His neck, the insides of his elbows, even the backs of his knees were all sticky with sweat, making him feel unbearably uncomfortable. He needed a cold shower, that much was certain.

He threw open the door and stepped outside. From the kitchen, he could hear the clinking of dishes. His mother was preparing a meal, it seemed.

He glanced at the clock — it was already 11 a.m. He had stayed up late the night before, lost in his own thoughts, which was probably why he had overslept for once.

"Are you awake?" his mother called out from the kitchen, noticing his presence. Wearing nothing but his drawers, Kwon Taekjoo quickly made his way toward the bathroom across the hall.

"Yes. I'll go wash up first."

"Go ahead."

After closing the bathroom door, Kwon Taekjoo stared at his reflection in the mirror. Despite the rest he'd gotten, his face still looked dull and worn out. He sighed and trudged toward the shower.

For a while, he just stood there under the stream of water, letting it cascade over him. Slowly, his body, once heated from the nightmare, began to cool down, and the chaos in his mind started to settle.

He didn't like to assign meaning to visions like that. It was nothing more than his unconscious mind running wild while his rational thoughts were asleep. The disjointed, absurd nature of the dreams only confirmed that.

But there was something about the dream of the child who resembled Zhenya that lingered. Every time he encountered Zhenya, it left him with a tangle of emotions, like a knot that wouldn't come undone. The child in the dream did resemble the younger Zhenya, but there was no real proof it was him. It was just something Kwon Taekjoo believed in his gut. Even if it was him, the boy would vanish as soon as he woke up — a mere illusion.

Still, no matter how hard he tried to brush it off as nothing, he couldn't shake the image of the boy crying so bitterly.

"There's no way anything's going to happen."

He scrubbed his wet hair roughly, as if trying to wash away all the thoughts clouding his mind. His hands moved with a sort of forceful frustration.

After a quick shower, he returned to his room. Before he even put on his clothes, he grabbed his phone to check. There were no messages from

Zhenya. He had explained everything clearly enough, but nothing had changed. It felt like he had been talking to a wall.

"That bastard..."

He glared at his phone for a moment before tapping the call button. But before the line could even connect, the automated message informed him that the person he was trying to reach couldn't take calls. Had Zhenya turned off his phone now? Did he even realize it was off?

Frustrated, Kwon Taekjoo tossed the phone onto the bed.

"Ah, seriously! That guy's as big as a beast, but all he does is make me worry. And what the hell is wrong with me, worrying about someone like him?"

Ruffling the back of his hair in annoyance, he headed toward the kitchen.

Just as expected, lunch was being prepared on the table. His mother was about to serve soup, but Kwon Taekjoo naturally took the ladle from her hands.

"I'll take care of it."

Kwon Taekjoo said, gently placing his hands on his mother's shoulders and guiding her to sit in a chair. He then ladled the hot soup into bowls and set them on the table. Using his large hands, he efficiently moved the rice and side dishes that his mother had already set aside.

"Just the two of us eating, but you've prepared so much food again. Seriously, Mom, you have the biggest heart."

"You eat it all when I make it, though."

"True enough. Thanks for the meal."

"Eat slowly and have plenty."

The two sat down across from each other, picking up their spoons. Throughout the meal, Kwon Taekjoo made an effort to compliment the food. "It's delicious, Mom. Your cooking is the best," he said, over and over, keeping his tone light and cheerful. He didn't want her to notice that something was off about him and start worrying.

Luckily — or maybe unluckily — his mother didn't pay too much attention to him. She seemed lost in her own thoughts, picking at her food absentmindedly. Kwon Taekjoo watched her quietly, wondering if something was bothering her. Then, their eyes met, and his mother gave him a sheepish smile.

"After we eat, I'm going to the temple for a bit."

"The temple? Why?"

Whenever his mother felt troubled or thought of his father and older brother, she would visit a nearby temple to calm herself through prayer.

"Is something wrong?"

"...No, I just thought it's been a while since I offered my prayers."

"Come on, what's really going on?"

His gentle probing made her hesitate for a moment longer before she finally began to speak.

"Well, you know your aunt in Canada."

His aunt in Canada was the oldest and ten years apart from his mother. She had settled in Canada right after getting married, so Kwon Taekjoo had only seen her a few times. However, she was very close to his mother, and the two seemed to talk almost every day. When his father and brother passed away in the line of duty, she had traveled the long distance without hesitation and stayed by his mother's side for several months.

"Yeah. Is Aunt doing well? It's been way too long since we last saw her."

"You remember she had brain tumor surgery before, right? They said it was completely removed back then, but recently, her vision has been getting blurry, and she's been having trouble moving around. So she went to the hospital, and they found out it's come back... She's going to need surgery again, but the location isn't good, so she's really worried. Even if the surgery goes well this time, the prognosis might not be good."

"Ah...."

"But there's nothing I can really do from here, right? I just have to pray that the surgery goes smoothly and that she recovers safely."

It was only natural for her to feel unsettled — her closest and most trusted family member was facing a life-and-death situation far away in a foreign land. Looking back, his mother had spent her entire life anxiously worrying about the safety of those around her. Kwon Taekjoo himself had been a significant part of that burden. Living with one foot constantly in the grave, he had been deceiving her under the pretense of protecting her, which was perhaps the greatest act of filial impiety.

"I'll drive you there."

"Why bother? I can just go by myself quickly."

"You'll be tired from driving back and forth. I don't have anything else to do today, so let's go together."

"You don't like going to temples."

"I'd like to get some fresh air, too."

His mother looked at him, surprised. He met her gaze calmly and nodded.

"Today, I'll go with you."

He uncharacteristically insisted. His mother chuckled softly and said,

"Alright then, let's go."

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"But is it okay for you to keep taking days off like this?"

His mother looked concerned. It was unusual for her son, who was usually hard to see, to stay home for several days in a row, and it seemed to make her uneasy.

"Why? You used to complain that I worked too much. Are you already getting tired of seeing your son's face?"

"No, I was just worried you might've been fired from the embassy."

"Fired? No way. The ambassador hasn't returned yet, that's all."

"Really? So, if he's not there, you don't have any work to do?"

"Well, more or less? My main duty is to assist the ambassador."

"So, when the ambassador eventually goes back to his home country, what happens to you? Do you have to look for another job?"

"Well, maybe."

His casual reply deepened his mother's worry even more. It wasn't the first time she'd asked how much longer Zhenya was likely to stay in Korea. She was already feeling regret over the fact that his term would

eventually come to an end. And she couldn't help but worry that her son would end up like a dog chasing a chicken, left empty-handed.

"Don't worry. It's not like I won't be able to find any work."

"I'm not worried about that. I'm worried you might end up in a dangerous job again. I really like how stable and secure you are now, Taekjoo. That's why I hope the ambassador stays in Korea for a long time."

The job his mother believed he had quit hadn't actually stopped for even a moment. And yet, in her eyes, Kwon Taekjoo seemed to be at peace. The only thing that had changed since then was that Zhenya had always been by his side. Zhenya had not only filled in his absence while he was away, but by jumping into operations whenever he pleased, had made Taekjoo's work much easier.

In the past, even when he completed his missions safely, he never felt fully at ease. Even at home, he couldn't relax and rest properly. He had no choice but to act as if he was living peacefully in front of his mother. If he got hurt somewhere, he would suffer alone, desperately trying to hide it.

That guilty feeling, that heavy sense of duty, had gradually faded away. Now, after finishing a task, his first thought was to hurry back home. When he buried himself in Zhenya's arms, a sense of relief washed over him like never before. His tired body and mind would completely relax. He had grown so accustomed to having Zhenya by his side.

"...Me too."

Lost in deep thought, he muttered to himself. In truth, he didn't even realize what he had said.

Zhenya couldn't live in Korea forever, but still, he found himself hoping and depending on it. Even though he couldn't properly take care of him as a lover, selfishly, he kept pushing Zhenya into danger.

“Son, is something bothering you?”

His mother's question snapped him out of his thoughts. He glanced at the rearview mirror and saw his face, tense and serious. He quickly changed his expression.

“Me? No, why?”

“You seem to have a lot on your mind. Your face looks so dark.”

“Maybe it's because I didn't sleep well. Did I play too many games?”

He tried to lightly dismiss her concerns. As expected, his mother scolded him.

“What? How old are you now, and you're still staying up all night playing games? What good does that do?”

“Come on, it's a rare break for me. I'm just playing a bit to relieve stress. Cut me some slack.”

"And you think games relieve stress? I heard they just add more. If you're constantly exposed to violent situations, your brainwaves become unstable."

"It's not that bad. Oh, we're here."

Conveniently, they arrived at their destination. It was a weekday, and since it wasn't a famous temple, the parking lot was nearly empty. He parked as close to the entrance as possible, as they would have to climb a slope to reach the temple gate.

The thick canopy of leaves created enough shade that, even in the peak of summer, the heat was manageable. Occasionally, a breeze would sweep through, carrying the invigorating scent of pine and refreshing the air. It was a lovely place, yet he frequently used busyness as an excuse to stay away. The truth was that he felt uncomfortable seeing his mother's mood darken with each visit. He could easily envision how her life would change if Kwon Taekjoo were to mirror the paths of his father or brother.

"Are you going all the way to the main hall?"

"Yeah, I might as well, since I'm here."

His mother glanced at him as if this was unusual, then said, "Let's go," and walked ahead. He trailed behind her a few steps, taking his time.

He breathed in the fresh air deeply, enjoying the tranquility, when suddenly, the sound of a loud engine roared in the distance. Annoyed, he quickly turned around, wondering what kind of madman would disturb the peace of a quiet temple like this. But soon, his scowl

softened. It was because a familiar-colored Bugatti came into view. His mother, startled, said,

"Oh my, isn't that the ambassador's car?"

"It looks like it."

"How did he know to come here? Did you contact him, Taekjoo?"

"No, I didn't."

"Really? Well, go ahead and see him quickly."

"Okay, you go ahead first, Mom."

"Alright."

He hurried back down the path he had been climbing halfway up. The Bugatti, which had driven straight into the parking lot, paid no attention to the designated parking lines and stopped wherever it pleased. Soon, the driver's door opened, and Zhenya stepped out. From head to toe, nothing about his appearance had changed, but for some reason, it all felt unreal.

Zhenya wasn't surprised to see Kwon Taekjoo coming to greet him. It was as if he had known exactly where and what Taekjoo had been doing. Taekjoo gazed at him with a disapproving look as he approached. Seeing Kwon Taekjoo's irritated expression, Zhenya grinned.

"Didn't I tell you, Taekjoo? 'Soon' really means 'soon.'"

"When did you get here?"

"Just now."

Did he come here directly from the airport? Taekjoo's phone had been silent the entire time he was driving. So he didn't know Zhenya had already arrived in Korea. No, if he was coming, he could've at least given him a heads-up. He always has a way of surprising people. When on earth will he start acting like a proper person?

"How did you know to come here?"

"Does that matter?"

"Of course, it matters, you bastard. Did you put a tracker on my phone? Or install some kind of spy app?"

"Taekjoo, this is on you. You're always dashing off to dangerous places, putting yourself in harm's way."

Zhenya was still the same. Blaming others for his rude or excessive actions, as usual. Does the word 'self-reflection' even exist in his vocabulary? How could anyone date someone like him?

Kwon Taekjoo glanced disapprovingly at Zhenya's handsome face and body. It didn't seem like he'd gotten hurt anywhere in the meantime.

"Did you take care of your business? Did it go well?"

"How strange. Taekjoo, you're so concerned about my affairs."

"Well, it's because you made the deal with that Matthias or whatever because of me."

"True. It cost quite a bit. The maintenance fees are something else, you know."

Zhenya nodded repeatedly, muttering teasingly. Whatever he found so amusing, the smile never left his face. Watching his eyes alternately, Kwon Taekjoo cautiously asked to confirm.

"...You just took care of that business and came back?"

"What else?"

"Well, maybe you were called back to your family's home or something."

For a split second, Zhenya showed a surprised expression, but then he split into a mischievous grin, his chest subtly puffing out. Clearly, he was having fun twisting Taekjoo's words again.

"Taekjoo, are you still worried that I might get engaged and leave you behind? Do you want to monopolize me that badly?"

His nonsense flowed smoothly, as if he were singing a song.

"That's not...!"

Taekjoo clenched his fists, about to snap, but then he loosened them completely. Arguing would only make his own mouth sore. He scratched the back of his head in frustration.

“Ugh! You really give me a headache.”

“A headache because you think about me so much? That’s quite adorable, actually.”

His smug, beaming face was unbearably irritating. Judging by his attitude, it didn’t seem like he had faced any real emotional damage. Well, Taekjoo could check things out more thoroughly later. Honestly, who was supposed to be worried about whom? Clicking his tongue, Taekjoo shook his head.

Around that time, Zhenya started glancing around as if searching for someone.

“By the way, where’s the little lady?”

“I told her to go up first. But never mind that — how did you know I was here, and that I came with my mother?”

“Well, I’ve been here a few times before.”

“Here? Why?”

“The little lady comes here often.”

Zhenya answered indifferently. His mother, honestly. No matter how close she'd become with the guy, bringing him all the way to a temple? Taekjoo thought briefly that his mother might feel quite lonely once Zhenya returned to his homeland. As he was lost in those idle thoughts, the guy stepped closer until they were almost standing right next to each other.

"What is it? Why do you keep creeping up like that?"

"You were the one acting all forlorn when I was gone, yet you won't even give me a greeting kiss?"

Zhenya shamelessly pretended to look disappointed. He subtly tilted his handsome face towards him. The guy's scent grew even stronger. Was it because it had been a while? Or had he really missed him after just a few days apart? Taekjoo's fingertips twitched, and even his throat bobbed slightly.

"You crazy guy. In front of a sacred temple? It's bad luck."

Taekjoo stopped the face that had almost descended on him. But instead of backing off, Zhenya pressed his lips against Kwon Taekjoo's palm, resisting.

"Taekjoo, I didn't know you believed in God."

"That's why. If you make the gods even a little upset, you'll incur their wrath. My mother could see us from somewhere, you know. She knows you're here."

Saying they should leave, Kwon Taekjoo nodded towards the entrance above. As he tried to pull his hand away from Zhenya's face, the guy suddenly grabbed his wrist. Without giving him a chance to stop it, Zhenya licked his palm thoroughly. The slick wetness on his palm made Kwon Taekjoo's shoulders stiffen instinctively.

"Yah, what are you doing?"

"I'm hungry. If I don't get a taste of something right now, I might do something worse. Since you said no to my lips, I'll have to settle for this."

Zhenya bit down hard on the base of his palm before finally letting go of his arm. The deep teeth marks left Kwon Taekjoo feeling disgusted.

"Are you a dog or something?"

"You should feel proud that I held back with just a little bite."

"There's really nothing to feel proud of. Just don't make any mistakes in front of my mother."

"You worry too much. It's not like this is the first time I've met the small woman. Besides, she likes me..."

"Well, we'll see if she still likes you when she finds out you're spending every day and night clinging to her son."

They bickered as they made their way toward the temple. It seemed his mother had already gone inside the main hall, as she was nowhere to be

seen. Not planning to join her in prayer, Kwon Taekjoo calmly took in the peaceful surroundings.

"Why does the small woman keep coming here anyway?"

Zhenya, who had been silently following, asked with a bored expression. Though he had accompanied his mother a few times, it seemed he was unaware of the purpose behind the visits. With a shrug, Kwon Taekjoo gave him an answer he could understand.

"It's just like going to a church or cathedral. Sometimes, you come to honor the spirits of those who've passed, or you pray to find peace of mind."

"I still don't get it."

"Of course, you wouldn't. If you believed in God, you wouldn't have lived the way you did. How else do you plan to settle your 'karma'?"

"Karma?"

"When you die, whether you meet God or whoever, just ask to be a 'grim reaper.' It's too late for you to be reborn as a human, and it suits your temperament."

"Taekjoo, are you just going to keep talking nonsense?"

"That's why I told you to learn Korean, you idiot."

Zhenya narrowed his eyes suspiciously. It was clear that mastering words like 'karma' and 'reincarnation' would take the foreigner quite some time.

"What about you?"

"Me? What about me."

"Do you believe in God?"

"No, I don't. But there are some people who can only find the strength to carry on through their faith."

The faint smile that had been on Kwon Taekjoo's lips slowly faded. His gaze drifted toward the main hall, where his mother was deep in prayer.

"Some people believe that if you remember the dead and honor them with all your heart, their spirits will find peace, wherever they are. I guess that kind of faith brings comfort to the living, too. As for me... I think when I die, I'd want the people who knew me to forget I existed as soon as possible."

Maybe it was because he lived closer to death than to life. Even while breathing, Kwon Taekjoo seemed to project his feelings more onto the dead than the living.

He often said to Zhenya, "What will you do without me?" as if he was always imagining his own absence.

"....."

Zhenya's gaze bore into Kwon Taekjoo. The wind blew at just the right moment, causing the tightly woven branches to sway in perfect unison. Soon after, Kwon Taekjoo's hair fluttered softly in the breeze.

Then, out of nowhere, Zhenya suddenly reached out and grabbed Kwon Taekjoo, who was looking elsewhere. Kwon Taekjoo gave him a puzzled look, asking, "What's wrong?" Zhenya, not really knowing why he had done it, shook his head. Kwon Taekjoo gave a teasing smile.

"Silly bastard."

He gently removed Zhenya's hand from his arm, then subtly slid his own hand down to grasp Zhenya's. Kwon Taekjoo turned his gaze away as if nothing had happened. But Zhenya tightly gripped his hand, as if it would slip away and vanish if he didn't hold on firmly.

#### 4. One Or The Other

"Oh dear, if I had known it was the day the Ambassador was visiting, I would've prepared something at home to serve."

Kwon Taekjoo's mother expressed her deep regret. She even gave him a gentle scolding, saying, "You should've told me," as if blaming him for not giving her a heads-up. It was unclear how long his mother would continue treating Zhenya like some honored guest.

"Come on, it's nice to eat out once in a while. And the food here looks delicious, doesn't it?"

"But it's not the same as preparing it with care at home. Besides, the Ambassador has a lot of preferences."

"He's gotten better about eating different things now."

Kwon Taekjoo kept soothing his mother while discreetly nudging Zhenya under the table. Forcing a smile, he added, "Right, Ambassador?" despite his desperate attempts to get Zhenya to play along. Zhenya, however, only looked confused.

"Smile, you idiot."

"Huh? Out of nowhere?"

"And nod your head while you're at it."

He whispered these instructions. Zhenya raised an eyebrow, still unsure what was going on. But when his eyes met Taekjoo's mother's, he quickly gave a smile and nodded, just as Kwon Taekjoo had directed. With just that one smile, his mother's worries seemed to disappear.

"Well, that's a relief. Please take your time and eat plenty, Ambassador."

At her gentle urging, Zhenya nodded again, this time on his own. Though he still couldn't speak Korean, it seemed he now understood the general tone of the conversation. He was always quick on the uptake, and after spending so much time with Taekjoo's mother, it was only natural.

As usual, Kwon Taekjoo pulled the side dishes Zhenya liked toward him. "Eat quickly," he said, and Zhenya picked up his spoon, sipping some of the samgyetang broth. He barely nibbled on the chicken, using a fork to peel off a thin strip of meat and putting just a small piece into his mouth. Watching this, Kwon Taekjoo finally stuck his chopsticks into Zhenya's bowl.

"Ugh, you idiot. Stop picking at your food."

With practiced hands, he separated two chicken legs, placing them in Zhenya's bowl, and tore the thick meat into large chunks. Only then did Zhenya spear a tender piece with his fork and place it in his mouth. He closed his eyes, savoring the taste with a graceful expression. He seemed completely unfazed by being served like this.

Disgusted by the sight, Kwon Taekjoo muttered, "Ugh, you aristocratic bastard." As usual, Zhenya mistook it for a compliment, raising his chin in pride. Kwon Taekjoo clicked his tongue in frustration, just as he was

about to start eating himself. When he glanced up, he caught his mother's eye. For some reason, she wore a satisfied smile.

"Why aren't you eating, Mom?"

"You should've done that from the start."

"Huh? Done what?"

"Take care of him, just like you are now, even if he's younger than you. Who else does the Ambassador have to rely on in this foreign land? You know, I was worried you'd be careless with him, but it makes me happy to see you two getting along so well."

"Getting along? He's so helpless I have no choice but to look after him."

"Oh, don't be so shy."

"I'm not. Just eat, your food's getting cold."

"Yes, let's eat."

His mother neatly pulled off one of the chicken legs from her own bowl. She placed it on a small plate and handed it over to Zhenya.

"Ambassador, since it's almost malbok (the last of Korea's three hottest days of summer), we Koreans eat these nourishing dishes to restore our energy. You always suffer in the heat, so eat this and regain your strength."

Zhenya obediently took the plate and smiled brightly. His mother smiled back, and the scene was one Kwon Taekjoo still hadn't gotten used to, even after seeing it several times.

"Taekjoo, you also wan—"

"No, thanks. I'm fine with what I have."

He firmly refused as his mother tried to give him the remaining chicken leg. When she insisted, saying she couldn't eat much anymore because of her age, and put the leg in his bowl anyway, he quickly took it out and gave it back to her. Zhenya watched the two quietly bickering, then chuckled and said, "Koreans are funny." When his mother asked if the food suited his taste, Zhenya smiled again, his eyes crinkling. Kwon Taekjoo thought to himself, This guy's getting more and more sly by the day.

"Wow, the Ambassador's birthday is really coming up soon, huh?"

"Yeah, it is."

"Did you tell him? That mom wants to prepare a birthday meal for him?"

Kwon Taekjoo's mother's eyes sparkled with enthusiasm. He shot a half-annoyed glance at Zhenya, who was finishing his meal and dabbing his mouth with a napkin.

"Oh, come on, just treating him to a meal should be enough. Why go through the trouble of a whole birthday meal?"

"But it's a once-a-year event. Wouldn't it be nice if more people could celebrate it with him? We could invite Jong-woo, and if Olga can come, we'll invite her too. I wouldn't mind inviting all the embassy staff either, just to say thanks for taking care of my son."

"Uh, I don't know if that's a good idea. It'd look weird, honestly. Let's face it, he's not even family. People might just say I'm trying to curry favor with my boss by dragging my mother into it."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah. So let's keep it simple, okay? It'll just wear you out anyway. He should be grateful just to get some miyeok-guk (seaweed soup)."

Zhenya's gaze repeatedly flicked back and forth between Kwon Taekjoo and his mother. He looked curious about the conversation they were having while glancing his way. Taekjoo turned to him and said, "Right?" seeking his agreement.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I told you, when it's just the three of us, just go with the flow."

"Perhaps I would, if your translations weren't so sloppy."

"And what makes you think that?"

"Unfortunately for you, I'm not as dull as you hope I am."

"Do you not understand the concept of a white lie?"

"A white lie? You're becoming more brazen by the day."

"Do you really think you're in a position to say that?"

"I'm just pointing out that you're not the one who should be saying it."

Zhenya refused to back down like always. Kwon Taekjoo turned his head towards his mother, saying, "Anyway."

"My mother. She'll be really sad if you leave for Russia."

"Taekjoo, as long as you're here, that won't happen."

"Why? Is your country planning to keep you locked up here forever?"

"It's far less threatening for them that way. Besides, it's what I want, too."

"Weren't you the one saying you're not here because you like Korea?"

"I don't think I ever included you in that category."

"Oh, really?"

"If my reluctance outweighs my eagerness, can I really call that dislike? After all, if I'm still here despite not being thrilled about it, that has to mean something, right?"

Zhenya muttered to himself, staring at Taekjoo's mother across from him. Right on cue, his mother bombarded him with questions: whether anything significant happened in Russia, how Olga was doing, if his parents were in good health, whether he had plans to leave again anytime soon, and if he was going to return to the embassy right away. Since they couldn't understand each other, it must've sounded like annoying noise to him. Yet, he quietly listened to his mother's voice, occasionally offering a faint smile and responding appropriately.

Kwon Taekjoo found Zhenya rather admirable. It seemed like he was trying to fit Kwon Taekjoo, and perhaps even the people in his surroundings, into his own small world, no matter how tight the squeeze.

Under the table, Kwon Taekjoo briefly grabbed Zhenya's thigh before letting go. Zhenya's eyes glanced downward, and then his gaze fixed right on the side of Kwon Taekjoo's face. Pretending to listen to his mother, Kwon Taekjoo whispered softly enough for only Zhenya to hear.

"Let's have a drink tonight. I have something to talk about."

Zhenya's lips curled smoothly into a delicate, graceful line.

"I was hoping for that."

\* \* \*

After finishing the meal, they headed home. Kwon Taekjoo wanted to take his mother home and leave the car behind, so Zhenya quietly agreed. From the restaurant to the apartment's underground parking lot, Zhenya followed closely behind Kwon Taekjoo's car. The stress of driving with him tailing so closely made Kwon Taekjoo worry about a potential accident the whole time. After parking quickly and getting out with his mother, he shot a glance at Zhenya's Bugatti.

Zhenya, however, emerged from his car with his usual, endless elegance. He nodded lightly toward Kwon Taekjoo's mother as she walked toward the elevator. She paused mid-step and bowed in return.

"Well then, please get home safely, Ambassador. Feel free to visit anytime."

Instead of replying, Zhenya smiled, his eyes narrowing into a crescent shape. His mother let out a slightly excited breath. It felt like watching a seasoned celebrity indulging an innocent fangirl with expert fan service.

Seeing that this could go on endlessly, Taekjoo took his mother by the shoulder and guided her toward the elevator. He even pressed the button for her.

"Go on up. I'll have a drink with him and come back later."

"Alright."

"Uh... we could drink late into the night, and I might end up staying out."

"I know. Don't worry about me, just have fun. But don't drink so much that you get sick."

Taekjoo's mother was surprisingly lenient about him spending time with Zhenya. Whether he stayed out late, using drinks as an excuse, or was away for several days on business trips, she always accepted it without question. Even when he was hard to reach, she no longer worried as she once did. If he managed to call her during a work break, she'd quickly rush him off the phone, saying, 'The Ambassador must be waiting, so hurry and go.'

Did she really trust Zhenya that much? Zhenya wasn't someone you could blindly trust so easily.

"Go ahead. The Ambassador is waiting."

As always, his mother was no exception today. She boarded the elevator that had just arrived and waved him off, urging him to leave. Kwon Taekjoo nodded but watched until the doors fully closed before turning around.

Zhenya was already leaning against the passenger side of his Bugatti. As Taekjoo approached, Zhenya motioned toward the driver's seat.

"You drive."

Without further explanation, Zhenya slid into the passenger seat. He had been driving just fine until now, and it was only a short distance. Was it some kind of princely act, refusing to drive? Clicking his tongue, Taekjoo reluctantly got into the driver's seat.

He fastened his seatbelt and released the brake. Suddenly, a pale hand reached for his face. Startled, he flinched and froze. Zhenya smiled slyly at his reaction, then reached out further to caress Taekjoo's ear. The cool earlobe, played with by Zhenya's fingers, slowly grew warmer. Goosebumps formed on his neck, and even the fine hair on his cheek stood on end. The itchy sensation made him hunch his shoulders and pull his neck in.

Then Zhenya leaned even further across the center console, extending his torso to lick from Taekjoo's cheek to his earlobe. His dry lips lightly nibbled on Taekjoo's ear, teasing it at will. It was absurd.

"Is this why you made me drive?"

"What, would you rather I drive instead right now?"

Zhenya asked, pressing his lips to Taekjoo's cheek and neck. If he took the wheel, they'd likely get into an accident before even leaving the parking lot. As Zhenya rubbed his nose against Taekjoo's neck and inhaled his scent deeply, Taekjoo sighed in exasperation.

"We'll be there in ten minutes, so hold it in, you maniac."

"You should be proud I've held out this long."

"Ugh, cut it out. You're blocking my entire view with that big frame of yours."

"You've driven just fine with your eyes covered before. Why the fuss now?"

Zhenya's voice had a hint of laughter as he recalled a past event. Naturally, it brought back memories of their mission in Syria. North Korea had been a long-standing nuclear partner of Syria, and South Korea's intelligence agency was always closely monitoring their diplomatic relations. During this period, a North Korean trading company called "Cheongang" was found to have shipped a large quantity of aluminum tubes to Syria. Since these tubes are key components of centrifuges used for uranium enrichment, they needed to confirm whether North Korea was aiding Syria's nuclear weapons development. And, as always, this task was assigned to Kwon Taekjoo.

Zhenya showed up there too, unsurprisingly. Supposedly, he was on a tour of the nuclear facility as a guest of Syria. Despite his interference — or perhaps assistance — Taekjoo successfully completed the mission. But just as they were about to withdraw, their cover was blown. They ended up in a firefight with the facility's guards and hijacked the last remaining jeep.

The problem was that a flash grenade went off during the skirmish, temporarily blinding Taekjoo. Meanwhile, enemy fire continued.

With no other choice, Zhenya, who still had his vision, provided cover while Taekjoo took the wheel. He couldn't see an inch in front of him, so he had to rely entirely on Zhenya's voice, guiding him through obstacles and directions as they fled. By the time they escaped, all four tires of the jeep were blown, the front and rear bumpers barely clung to the body, and both side mirrors had vanished somewhere along the way. Thinking back on that ridiculous scene made him chuckle.

"That was a job. I drove like my life depended on it. Not the case now."

"Why? Back then or now, you love the thrill. The more terrifying it is, the more excited you get, don't you?"

Zhenya's laugh was low and mocking. Wasn't he describing himself? As ridiculous as it was, Taekjoo couldn't entirely deny it. After all, most of his memories with Zhenya involved these kinds of dangerous situations, which left him feeling a bit unsettled.

He raised a hand and gently tousled Zhenya's light-colored hair. Surprisingly, the stubborn biting at his cheek stopped with that rare affectionate touch.

"Now that I think of it..."

Taekjoo began. Zhenya pulled back his head and stared intently at Taekjoo.

"Your birthday's coming up soon. Is there anything you want?"

"Something I want? As if I'd have something like that."

Zhenya shrugged, hardly pausing to think deeply. Born into a life of abundance, he had never experienced the feeling of material lack. Anything he desired could be easily acquired before he even had the chance to truly want it. Kwon Taekjoo certainly didn't have the financial means to buy Zhenya a gift that could match his lavish lifestyle.

Still, Taekjoo wanted to give him a gift that Zhenya would actually appreciate. Maybe even more, he hoped this birthday would be memorable for someone who probably never experienced a proper celebration. Last year, he couldn't do much because of work, so he wanted to make up for it this time.

“Think about it properly, you idiot. Don’t grumble later that I didn’t get you anything.”

“Hmph. Are you going to grant whatever I ask?”

“We’ll see.”

“You don’t have many choices anyway, but you’re being picky?”

“How do I know you’re not going to ask for something ridiculous?”

Kwon Taekjoo shot a glance at him as he snidely commented that it was unfair. Zhenya didn’t look too pleased and shrugged his shoulders again.

“I’ll take time to think about it. It’s not like birthdays come around often. So, I’ll think of something only you can give me, Taekjoo.”

Whispering, “What would be good?” he bit Kwon Taekjoo’s cheek again. There was no point in telling him to stop, since he wasn’t the type to listen. He just resigned himself to it. Anyway, they didn’t have far to go.

In the midst of his persistent affection, they finally arrived at Zhenya’s house. As soon as he parked the car, a sigh of relief escaped him. It was a miracle that they hadn’t even gotten into a minor accident. The fact that they didn’t hit a single red light was pure luck too. Otherwise, passersby would have witnessed the sight of two large men clinging to each other. Just the thought of it made him feel overwhelmed.

“We’ve arrived.”

Kwon Taekjoo shot a disgruntled look at the ever-calm Zhenya before abruptly grabbing him by the back of the neck. With his other hand, he pulled Zhenya by the collar and pressed their lips together roughly, as if punishing him for all the teasing so far. Frowning deeply, he ground and bit at Zhenya's lips. Maybe it was all pent-up frustration from how indifferent Zhenya had been while he was away from Korea.

When the delicate skin split and blood began to seep out, Kwon Taekjoo extended his tongue to lick Zhenya's lips from end to end. Then, tilting his head slightly, he slipped his tongue between Zhenya's parted lips. Zhenya, who had momentarily paused at the sudden turn of events, smirked. Finally, Zhenya's eyelids fluttered closed, and his lashes quivered. Warm, expectant breaths spread from Zhenya's now-open mouth.

When their tongues touched, the atmosphere grew intensely heated. Like beasts tasting blood, they gripped each other's hair and collars, rubbing their tongues together fiercely. Elbows and knees repeatedly bumped into the steering wheel amidst the disorganized movements, but they didn't care. They pushed and pulled at each other aggressively, exploring one another with relentless intensity. Their breathing grew heavier, and their hearts pounded wildly. Ragged breaths came in short bursts, tickling their upper lips and throats. Even that became a sharp stimulus, heightening their sensitivity further.

Kwon Taekjoo took deep breaths, trying to fill his lungs with oxygen, but the stifling heat wouldn't go away. Desperately, he pressed against the slick mucous membranes, the moist tongues, and the soft lips, trying to quench his thirst. After greedily swallowing every drop of saliva, he slowly pulled away from Zhenya's lips, which were still glistening.

Their gazes clashed again from close quarters. The intensity in their eyes was fierce, as if they might pounce on each other and tear at each other's necks any second. Their ragged breathing showed no sign of calming, and their bodies trembled slightly. Their lips hovered on the edge of contact. As the tension between them grew, Zhenya's pupils constricted tightly.

In the next moment, Zhenya shattered the charged atmosphere by roughly pulling Kwon Taekjoo closer. Without hesitation, Kwon Taekjoo's head was slammed against the ceiling. But Zhenya didn't care and tightened his hold on him. Their bodies were so tightly pressed together that they were nearly wedged between the center console and the seat. Kwon Taekjoo barely managed to push Zhenya's face away, which had buried itself in his hair.

“Ugh... Not here, you idiot.”

“Hah... After getting me all worked up like this?”

Zhenya's hand slid down to Kwon Taekjoo's groin, grasping the bulge in his pants. Though Kwon Taekjoo noticeably arched his back, he eventually pushed Zhenya's hand away.

“I don't care how urgent it is; I just don't want to be bent in half like last time.”

“Huh? I guess I should change cars then.”

“You're really going to change cars just to have sex?”

He tapped Zhenya's chest, signaling him to get out, and slipped out of the car first. In just that short time, his clothes had already wrinkled.

His hair, which hadn't been styled, was now sticking out in places, pressed down in others. He smoothed the back of his hair with his hand and brushed off the wrinkles on his clothes as he made his way to the front door. Just as he was unlocking it with a familiar hand, Zhenya pressed his body against Kwon Taekjoo's back, having caught up quickly. Wrapping both arms around him tightly, Zhenya buried his face without hesitation into the back of Kwon Taekjoo's hair.

"Ugh... Seriously, can't you wait even a little? You're not some animal."

"If I were an animal, I wouldn't be holding back this much."

Zhenya breathed in his scent deeply as he retorted. Then he let out an incomprehensible groan and suddenly bit Kwon Taekjoo's neck. Right at that moment, the door lock, recognizing Kwon Taekjoo's biometric data, clicked open with a clear sound.

"Ow! Wait, stop...!"

Before Kwon Taekjoo could brace himself, Zhenya shoved him forcefully through the open door. They tumbled inside with a loud crash, tangled together. A sharp pain shot up from Kwon Taekjoo's knee as it hit the floor.

"Ow, damn it! That hurts, you bastard! At this rate, I won't have any joints left!"

"Acting like you didn't want this, Taekjoo? You were expecting something like this, weren't you?"

Zhenya, who had been thrown on top of him, rubbed his head against the back of Kwon Taekjoo's, his breath warm and sticky as he exhaled. His nose grazed through Kwon Taekjoo's thick hair, releasing a low, sweet sigh. Struggling to escape Zhenya's grip, Kwon Taekjoo's body heated up in the effort.

"Hold on. Ugh, just wait a second!"

"Mm, Taekjoo..."

"Is someone chasing you? Why are you in such a hurry!"

Kwon Taekjoo pushed Zhenya off his back with his elbow. In response, Zhenya grabbed Kwon Taekjoo's chin and kissed him feverishly. Rubbing his stiff, erect cock against Kwon Taekjoo's ass, Zhenya groaned in a low voice. Kwon Taekjoo's chest and lungs felt crushed, making it hard to breathe. His neck was twisted uncomfortably, stiffening painfully.

With effort, he turned his head away from Zhenya's assault, but it didn't mean much. Zhenya didn't care and kept pressing his lips to Kwon Taekjoo's ear, even forcing his tongue deep into the ear canal. The wet, slick sounds of licking echoed loudly as the inside of his ear grew uncomfortably damp.

Kwon Taekjoo grimaced, lowering his head in disgust, but Zhenya didn't stop, biting at his neck. At the same time, Zhenya's hand slid under Kwon Taekjoo's abdomen, skillfully undoing his belt buckle and zipper. Kwon Taekjoo hurriedly grabbed his hand in an attempt to stop him, but it was useless. Zhenya easily took hold of Kwon Taekjoo's cock, slowly stroking it.

“Didn’t you tell me to hurry up and come back? You were the one whining so cutely, begging me to come, and now you’re pretending like you don’t want this?”

“Hah... I didn’t say I don’t want, just... let’s take it slow, damn it... We have plenty of time today.”

“Well, who knows? Maybe we do, maybe we don’t. If you’re called away in the middle of our fun, I’ll be the one losing out, won’t I?”

Zhenya bit down on Kwon Taekjoo’s already tender neck, replying with a hint of bitterness. It seemed he was still harboring frustration from all the times their vacations had been interrupted by calls from headquarters. Like a starving man greedily devouring the food in front of him, Zhenya treated his time with Kwon Taekjoo as though it could be snatched away at any moment, like a precious candy. Thinking this, Kwon Taekjoo felt his own resolve beginning to crumble again.

Zhenya, noticing Kwon Taekjoo’s softened demeanor like a predator sensing weakness, pulled away from his neck. Without warning, he grabbed the hem of Kwon Taekjoo’s shirt and yanked it up over his head, leaving his back fully exposed. Zhenya’s Adam’s apple bobbed noticeably, his throat seeming to tighten.

As Kwon Taekjoo panted heavily, his shoulder blades rose and fell. Zhenya buried his teeth into them, making Kwon Taekjoo’s back shudder violently.

“Ah... ugh...”

“Taekjoo... Taekjoo...”

Zhenya whispered Kwon Taekjoo's name like a soft mantra, gliding his sharp nose down the curve of Kwon Taekjoo's spine. Every now and then, he pressed teasing kisses to his skin, relishing the warmth radiating from Kwon Taekjoo's body and the rich, musky scent that surrounded him. When Zhenya reached the scar just above Kwon Taekjoo's tailbone, he noticed how the skin had thickened where a tattoo had been removed. He traced his tongue over the scar with meticulous care, as if he were trying to restore its shape. The combination of ticklish and erotic sensations sent jolts down Kwon Taekjoo's spine, making him squirm involuntarily. His body responded instinctively, pre-cum dribbling from his cock.

"Hah... ugh..."

Zhenya continued to stroke Kwon Taekjoo's cock from the base to the tip with his large hand. His other hand gently caressed Kwon Taekjoo's lower abdomen, before swiftly pulling down his pants and underwear. The waistband of his boxers pressed against his thighs, causing his ass to rise even higher.

"Hah..."

Exhaling deeply, Zhenya pulled Kwon Taekjoo's arms behind his back, holding them in place with one hand. With the other, he supported Kwon Taekjoo's lower abdomen, lifting him slightly. Naturally, Kwon Taekjoo's knees bent, his hips raised, leaving his upper body supported only by his shoulder and left cheek pressed against the floor.

"Ugh... What the hell are you doing, you crazy bastard..."

"Are you really asking because you don't know?"

Zhenya looked down at Kwon Taekjoo with a mocking gaze. By now, Kwon Taekjoo's cheeks, as well as his ears, had turned bright red. It wasn't just from the blood rushing to his face.

As Zhenya gently spread his thick ass, his small hole inside the cleft was revealed. Staring intently at the tightly closed hole, Zhenya moved the hand that had paused and stroked Kwon Taekjoo's penis once again. In response, the small hole twitched slightly with each stimulus.

"You're anticipating this so much."

Muttering as if intoxicated, Zhenya suddenly buried his head between Kwon Taekjoo's bootycheeks without warning. His thick tongue hungrily pressed against the delicately wrinkled, soft skin. The sensation of his most intimate area becoming wet caused Kwon Taekjoo's entire body to tremble. His hands, trapped by Zhenya, clenched into tight fists. His excited penis, too, stood up vigorously as if in fervent approval.

Zhenya curled the corners of his mouth and began to explore each fine wrinkle with the tip of his tongue. The hole, constantly shrinking from the ticklish sensation, was repeatedly teased by Zhenya's sudden thrusts.

"Ugh, mm, wait, just... ugh... Zhenya..."

Each time, Kwon Taekjoo shook his head and his whole body trembled. His tightly clenched jaw produced a grinding sound. Zhenya mentally recorded each of these clear reactions as he gently sucked on the soft, tender skin. Then, without warning, he firmly pushed his tongue into the now relaxed hole.

"Haa... ha, ugh..."

Kwon Taekjoo stiffened, his limbs trembling faintly. Unable to suppress the moans erupting from deep inside, he rubbed his forehead repeatedly against the bare floor. His once-pale fists quivered and loosened as he feebly tried to push Zhenya's head away.

Ignoring that pitiful resistance, Zhenya buried his face even deeper. He opened his mouth wide, eager to engulf as much of the surrounding skin and the curve of his ass as possible.

At the same time, he gripped Kwon Taekjoo's cock and stroked it hard, like milking a cow.

"Aagh, ah, ugh... ngh, ugh..."

Kwon Taekjoo's body jerked uncontrollably under the flood of sensations. Zhenya roughly stroked his penis, but then occasionally softened, gently caressing the tip as he forcefully thrust his tongue deeper into the hole. Each time, the loosened hole would squeeze around Zhenya's tongue with a sweet tightness. The hands that had tried to push Zhenya away were now desperately clutching his ivory-colored hair.

"Aagh, ugh, no, ugh, stop... ugh..."

With a wet pop, Zhenya pulled his lips away. His hand, which had been caressing Kwon Taekjoo's penis, also withdrew without hesitation. Kwon Taekjoo's body noticeably flinched at the sudden loss. The loosened hole, slick with saliva, twitched quickly.

“Haa... So, how is it, Taekjoo? Do you still think we have a lot of time? Would you prefer if we took it slowly and leisurely?”

“Haa... ha... damn... you bastard.”

Kwon Taekjoo panted and squirmed his body roughly. However, Zhenya only pulled his arm tighter. Kwon Taekjoo tried rubbing the tip of his aching penis against the floor, hoping to relieve the agony that was about to burst, but Zhenya pressed his lower abdomen down, thwarting his efforts.

“Stop struggling and just ask to be embraced. I'll gladly do it for you.”

“Hmph, ugh... let go. Let go of my arm.”

“How long are you going to keep saying things you don't mean?!”

Zhenya, with a sly grin, pulled down his zipper. Soon, his heavy penis flopped onto Kwon Taekjoo's ass. That alone made Kwon Taekjoo's body stiffen.

Zhenya wedged his penis between Kwon Taekjoo's ass. The firm, elastic flesh pressed snugly against his thick cock, giving a satisfying sensation. With rising anticipation, the veins and tendons on the surface of Zhenya's penis bulged visibly. He moved his penis slowly, back and forth. Even the mere friction of his hole against the uneven surface of Zhenya's cock sent tingling sensations spreading through Kwon Taekjoo.

“Ugh... aaah... ngh... ah....”

“Haa, there’s no need to be embarrassed, Taekjoo. You want me, don’t you?”

“Ngh... ah... ha... ugh... mm....”

“Just say you want to be embraced. Say you want my cock shoved deep inside you, to be fucked hard.”

Zhenya pressed his lower abdomen tightly against Kwon Taekjoo's ass as he spoke. The deeper contact caused the hole to loosen rapidly. Not stopping there, Zhenya leaned down and bit Kwon Taekjoo's shoulder. He rubbed his ear against Kwon Taekjoo's, mashing them together. His excited breath repeatedly exploded against Taekjoo's ear, stirring his arousal even further.

“Ha... Zhenya... please, hurry....”

“That’s it, my Zaika.”

“Ugh... aah, stop teasing, just... hurry up and put it in.”

“Haa...”

A small, mocking laugh escaped from Zhenya. Immediately after, his teasing cock plunged deeply into Taekjoo's hole. The sudden penetration sent a chilling sharpness throughout Kwon Taekjoo's entire body. The moan that was about to escape was sucked back into his throat.

"Aagh... aah... damn..."

"What, don't like it? But I'm giving you exactly what you asked for."

"Nngh... ah... ugh..."

"Oh, are you pouting because I'm not fucking you hard enough? Is it not enough for you? Hm?"

Zhenya asked teasingly, laughter laced in his voice, as he wrapped one arm tightly around Kwon Taekjoo's neck. The pressure on his throat made his already labored breathing even more strained. Kwon Taekjoo finally grabbed Zhenya's arm with both of his now freed hands, but the force around his neck didn't ease in the slightest. Instead, all it did was pull Zhenya closer.

"Haa... alright, Taekjoo. I'll fuck you as much as you want."

With those words, Zhenya, who had been feverishly biting and pulling on Kwon Taekjoo's earlobe, began thrusting his penis violently. The thick cock expanded Kwon Taekjoo's insides to their limit, scraping the sensitive inner walls as it was forcefully pulled out. The brutal combination of heaviness and sharpness made it hard for Kwon Taekjoo to maintain any stability.

But Zhenya showed no sign of releasing the hold he had on Kwon Taekjoo's lower abdomen, continuing to pin him down. He had no choice but to helplessly accept Zhenya's relentless thrusts.

Zhenya's rock-hard thighs slapped aggressively against the backs of Kwon Taekjoo's own legs. Their sweat-slicked skin repeatedly stuck

together with loud, sticky sounds, only to peel apart again. The rough friction caused Kwon Taekjoo's skin to flush red, feeling on the verge of swelling from the intensity.

"Aagh... ugh! Nngh... ha... s-stop...!"

"Hah... stop? Is it still not enough for you?"

Zhenya whispered as he licked Kwon Taekjoo's flushed cheek. Kwon Taekjoo clenched his teeth tightly and turned his head. As a result, Zhenya's tongue forcefully pushed into the exposed opening of Kwon Taekjoo's ear. His shoulders stiffened immediately. When Zhenya's hand, which had been holding up Kwon Taekjoo's lower abdomen, grabbed his neglected penis, a muffled moan escaped, sounding even more gratifying.

Zhenya noticed each change in Kwon Taekjoo's reactions as he drove his cock deeper, occasionally twisting it with sharp thrusts. Using the snap of his wrist, he rubbed Kwon Taekjoo's cock in circular motions. Overwhelmed by the stimulation from both ends, Kwon Taekjoo's reason began to collapse.

"Ha... ha... nngh... ugh... hngh... ah... hoo...."

"Hah, now you're finally making those cute little sounds."

Lost in his own arousal, Zhenya continued to lavish kisses on Kwon Taekjoo's nape, ear, neck, and shoulders. Although he had softened the initially tense muscles, impatience gnawed at him. With every thrust, the once-resistant inner walls that had reluctantly yielded now clung tightly to his cock, as if they couldn't bear to release him. The slick, snug

walls seemed to pull him deeper, gripping him and drawing him into an unreachable place.

Teetering on the edge of that dizzying temptation, Zhenya barely managed to pull himself back. Then, he began thrusting into the hole with a relentless, punishing rhythm, as if to take revenge on the flesh that had squeezed him so tightly. His strokes were deep, hitting all the way to the base before withdrawing until only the head remained. Kwon Taekjoo's abdomen bulged and deflated with each thrust. His perineum, repeatedly struck by Zhenya's heavy balls, and the insides of his buttocks, scraped by Zhenya's thick cock, were visibly reddened.

"Haah... Zhenya... ngh... not there... no... hngh... haah...."

"Hah... see, Taekjoo? It's better when you're honest. Ah... when you tell me what you want, I actually feel like giving it to you."

Before Zhenya had even finished speaking, his penis, which had been focusing on relentlessly pounding Kwon Taekjoo's insides, suddenly changed direction.

"Hnghh...!"

A scream-like moan erupted from Kwon Taekjoo. His back, which had been lying flat, swelled and pressed against Zhenya's chest. As Zhenya ground himself even deeper, Kwon Taekjoo's limbs, which had been stiff with tension, trembled as if jolted by electricity. His previously gaping mouth snapped shut, drooling a stream of saliva, while his insides slowly squeezed Zhenya's cock with firm, deliberate contractions.

"Aah... hoo... nngh...."

"Taekjoo... Taekjoo...."

A surge of desire to merge completely welled up. He wanted to become one with him, with no gaps in between.

Zhenya, who had been rubbing his forehead deeply against Kwon Taekjoo's shoulder, suddenly lifted Kwon Taekjoo by the waist and thighs. Then, hugging Kwon Taekjoo like a doll, he rose from his seat in one swift motion. Instinctively, Kwon Taekjoo raised his arms and wrapped them around Zhenya's neck. As a result, he ended up in Zhenya's embrace, his back pressed against Zhenya's chest, his legs spread wide. The sense of instability, as if he might fall at any moment, brought him back to his senses.

"Hey! What's with this position? Ah, I'm slipping. I said I'm slipping!"

"You're not slipping."

Zhenya confidently placed his head on Kwon Taekjoo's shoulder. He kissed Kwon Taekjoo's cheek gently, which broke out in goosebumps.

"Put me down. This is uncomfortable, so just put me down..."!

Kwon Taekjoo, who had been struggling, gasped. It was because Zhenya's half-withdrawn cock had suddenly thrust back inside as they shifted positions. Hitting the most sensitive spot with intense force and precision, Kwon Taekjoo's head tilted all the way back. His eyes, distorted in shock, groped for Zhenya, trying to focus. Zhenya gave him a brief smile. Then, pressing his lips to the corner of Kwon Taekjoo's, he thrust upward again without hesitation.

Even a slight touch against his spot sent electric jolts all the way to the tips of his hair, and it was repeatedly struck and ground against. The force striking upward from below caused Kwon Taekjoo's entire body to float momentarily in the air, and each time he came down, gravity added to the bond. His cock, freed from Zhenya's grasp, swung violently, slapping against his lower abdomen. In an attempt to stop himself from slipping or cushion the impact, Taekjoo tightened his grip around Zhenya's neck.

However, that only made Zhenya even more feverish. Zhenya began calling Taekjoo's name frantically, his hips thrusting deeper and faster than before.

"Mmmpf, ugh, huh, haaugh! Ah! Ahhh, ugh! It hurts, ah, hoo, mm..."

"Haa, mmm, Taekjoo, huff, ah, Taekjoo..."

It felt as though a hole had been pierced through his abdomen, and it wouldn't have been surprising. The intense, electrifying pleasure shot straight to his brain, wringing every cell in his body.

"Ha, ugh, uh, Zh, naa... ugh! Slowly, ah! Agh, just there, like that... ugh! Damn!"

"Haa, Taekjoo. Does it feel good? Huh? Ha, ugh, Taekjoo..."

Zhenya relentlessly moved his hips, burying his nose deep into Kwon Taekjoo's neck, inhaling his scent. The groaning, which resonated heavily from deep inside Taekjoo's skin, sounded both agonized and pleading. The overwhelming intoxication made his brain feel like it was

bubbling. Whether it was due to his blurred vision or the rising heat, he even felt a slight dizziness. His whole body was sticky with sweat, and not only his cock but also his abdomen and thighs were stinging from Zhenya's unrelenting thrusts. No matter how much he breathed, it never felt like enough.

Grinding his teeth in overwhelming pleasure, Zhenya suddenly pinned Kwon Taekjoo against the wall. There was a soft scream as Taekjoo hit the wall a little too hard. There was no time to feel the pain. Immediately, he was pressed tightly between Zhenya and the wall, his lower body being prodded mercilessly. There was nothing Kwon Taekjoo could do in the inescapable ecstasy but wait for the climax, endlessly groaning.

Zhenya's forceful push caused Taekjoo's head to bump into the wall. His own groans reverberated back at him, ringing in his ears. He tried to push Zhenya off with his head and back in irritation, but it only spurred Zhenya's desire for dominance. Any slight movement made Zhenya's thrusts even more savage and ruthless.

“Ugh, ah! Ah, ugh, huff, mm, ha...!”

“Mmm, ah... Haa, Taekjoo.”

“Stop, th—agh, ugh, mmph, ugh, damn it, huh! Damn it, mmph... Haah!”

“Haa, ugh, mmph, ugh, Zaika, Zai, ka... urgh!”

As Zhenya, who had been pounding more and more passionately, suddenly stiffened, he tightly wrapped himself around Kwon Taekjoo, leaving no space between them. Soon, his cock twitched and exploded white inside Taekjoo's belly. The thick flesh walls, tightly surrounding

him, vibrated along with it, delivering a tingling sensation of pleasure. Taekjoo squeezed his eyes shut, trying to endure the overwhelmingly sticky afterglow.

He had screamed so much that his throat felt raw. He could even faintly taste blood. When he exhaled the breath he had been holding, his throat burned indescribably.

“Haa, haa, ugh, you bastard...”

“Taekjoo.”

Zhenya, with Taekjoo slumped over his arm, showered his neck and shoulders with careless kisses. He also called Taekjoo’s name tenderly. Completely drained of energy, Taekjoo felt dazed, as if he were dreaming. Even when he tried hard to lift his heavy eyelids, nothing came into focus. The overwhelming exhaustion and a creeping chill closed in on him.

“Haa... I want to wash up.”

“Mm.”

For some reason, Zhenya agreed without resistance. But that was all — he didn’t let go of Kwon Taekjoo. Nor did he pull out of his body. Instead, Zhenya simply stepped back, keeping them in that position, as he checked the mess left against the wall and chuckled quietly.

“Did you cum against the wall? That’s priceless.”

“Because of you, ugh...!”

Taekjoo tried to protest, but Zhenya’s softened cock slid out, scraping against the sore opening before dropping free. Soon, the semen that had been pooled inside dripped onto the floor, blooming into white patterns. Zhenya, who had been intently watching the scene, tugged at Taekjoo’s ear and kissed him. Only then did the heavy breathing, previously wild with excitement, start to calm down.

As Taekjoo slowly pulled his lips away, he looked into Zhenya’s pale blue eyes. His pupils were still tightly constricted, showing no sign of relaxing.

“Let’s head to the bathroom.”

Taekjoo’s request was weary. Zhenya grinned and said, “Sure.” Carrying Taekjoo, Zhenya’s steps were light as they made their way to the bathroom.

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He collapsed onto the bed, drenched in sweat, making the effort of his shower meaningless. Even with the air conditioner on, his body refused to cool down. By the time he left the bathroom, his legs had already gone weak to the point where he could barely stand. He had no idea how many times they’d gone at it. Even animals in heat wouldn’t go at it as relentlessly as they did. It wasn’t like they were reuniting after years; it had only been a week apart.

His relationship with Zhenya was now entering its second year. After that much time, shouldn’t they be able to enjoy a little distance from

each other? But somehow, his patience seemed to be dwindling as time went on. Had he picked that up from Zhenya?

He groaned as he turned over, continuing his stray thoughts. His back, endlessly pressed and folded, ached unbearably. Worse than that was the sensation of the blanket sticking to his sweaty body. He didn't even have the energy to move, so he just frowned bitterly. It was honestly hard to do anything other than breathe. His mind was hazy, and his vision spun dizzily.

The spot next to him was empty when he felt around aimlessly. But from the nearby bathroom, he could hear the steady sound of running water. It seemed the other guy had left him half-dead and was now washing up alone.

Unable to hold on any longer, his eyelids gently closed. As drowsiness overwhelmed him, his consciousness began to drift. Time lost its meaning, and soon the sound of water from the bathroom ceased. He barely registered the movement as Zhenya opened the door and came out.

The man cast a brief glance at Kwon Taekjoo lying on the bed before quietly heading out. Soon, the sound of dishes clattering came from that direction. Technically, it was noise disrupting his sleep, but strangely, he didn't mind listening to it.

Before long, Zhenya returned to the bedroom. A deep shadow hovered over Kwon Taekjoo's face, and the bed dipped under the man's weight as he sat on one side.

Then, a cold glass lightly touched Taekjoo's cheek. He smiled faintly, already used to this routine, even in his half-asleep state.

“...Now you’re not even letting me sleep?”

He grumbled, forcing his heavy eyelids open. His voice came out terribly cracked. Clearing his throat didn’t help.

“You said you wanted a drink.”

“I said I wanted to take it easy... take it easy.”

He sighed softly and grabbed the whiskey swaying before his eyes. Groaning, he struggled to sit up.

“Could it get any more laid-back than this?”

Zhenya grabbed Taekjoo’s chin and abruptly kissed him. The cigar smoke seeped straight into Taekjoo’s. The sting of the smoke made Kwon Taekjoo’s already scratchy throat burn. He swatted Zhenya’s arm away in protest. Zhenya chuckled mischievously and took another puff from the cigar. In the past, even the smell of the smoke would have set his nerves on edge and given him a headache, but now it almost felt relaxing. Was it because their relationship had changed?

He stared at Zhenya over the rim of his glass and downed the whiskey. Fresh from a shower, Zhenya’s skin looked more translucent and polished than usual. There wasn’t a trace of fatigue on him. The only difference was that the aura he exuded seemed calmer than usual.

Taekjoo was likely far more active than Zhenya. And yet, the gap in stamina between them seemed to keep widening. It wasn’t like there

was a ten-year age difference; surely Zhenya wasn't that much younger.  
Must be natural talent.

"What are you thinking about, Taekjoo?"

"Nothing."

"You're staring holes into me. Am I that pretty?"

Zhenya tilted his head slightly, smirking. His platinum blonde hair, still damp, fell messily over his smooth forehead. Taekjoo clicked his tongue in mild annoyance as he watched him.

"Why do you say stuff like that? Isn't it embarrassing?"

"You seem to be embarrassed about a lot of things. Especially considering how well we know each other's most intimate parts."

Zhenya's hand brushed against Taekjoo's flushed cheek. Taekjoo flinched, startled by how cool Zhenya's skin was. Maybe he had taken a cold shower. When Zhenya's hand leisurely slid to Taekjoo's neck, he let out a soft groan. The fine hairs from his back to the nape of his neck stood on end.

"I know exactly what you like most and what you want me to do for you, even if you don't say it."

Zhenya kept talking, his hand gliding downward. His fingers brushed over Taekjoo's collarbone before coming to rest at the center of his chest. In an instant, Zhenya grasped one side of Taekjoo's chest with an

intensity that suggested he wanted to crush it, yet he tenderly pressed his lips against Taekjoo's forehead. The contrast was striking; his face exuded gentleness while the rest of him conveyed an unwavering strength.

Not just his appearance, but everything about him.

Zhenya started to gently squeeze Taekjoo's swollen nipple, which had been neglected for a moment. The dull sensation — a blend of pain and pleasure — caused Taekjoo's shoulders to tense. Zhenya's gaze remained fixed on the mark left by his bite. Absently, he licked his lower lip, the movement drawing attention down to his Adam's apple. Uncertain of when Zhenya might lose control again, Taekjoo quickly pushed his hand away.

“Stop messing around. It hurts, you bastard.”

“Did it swell up just from a little touch? Are you getting milk fever or something?”

“Milk — what?”

That damn mouth seemed synced to Zhenya's lower body rather than his pretty face. Taekjoo pinched Zhenya's cheek lightly, as if to punish him.

“If you spoke sweetly, you'd be a hundred times prettier.”

“What did you just say?”

“Guess you don’t understand this kind of talk yet? If you’re really curious, you should learn Korean.”

Taekjoo teased Zhenya, grinning as he often did. He casually extended his hand towards him, and Zhenya, picking up on the cue, handed over the cigar he’d been smoking. Without hesitation, Taekjoo took it into his mouth and inhaled deeply. The thick, acrid smoke filled his lungs as it spread through his respiratory system.

He used to only take one or two puffs from a cigar before putting it away. But now, he was drinking whiskey with the cigar wedged between his fingers. Zhenya lit a fresh one for himself, smiling faintly.

“You’ve taken a liking to it now, huh?”

“Not smoking for a while makes me want it more.”

Taekjoo rolled the cigar between his fingers before placing it back between his lips and adding,

“It’s not just the cigar either.”

As he said this, his dark eyes locked onto Zhenya’s through the lingering smoke. Zhenya slowly grasped the meaning and smirked. With the lit cigar in his mouth, Zhenya climbed onto the bed, spreading Taekjoo’s legs apart. He slipped naturally between them and sat facing Taekjoo.

“Why are you acting so soft again? Did you get praised for finishing your last mission well?”

“Well, something like that.”

“Good for you.”

“It’s good for me. Not sure if it’s good for you.”

Zhenya tilted his head at the cryptic words. Taekjoo stared at him for a moment, then drained the remaining whiskey from his glass. Even after he finished, he continued fidgeting with the empty glass before finally speaking up with some difficulty.

“Hey....”

It wasn’t like Taekjoo to hesitate. His blue eyes slowly moved over Taekjoo’s face, taking in every detail. Soon, Zhenya’s previously tense face relaxed into an intrigued smile.

“What is it now?”

“What now?”

“When you start looking me like that, it’s usually a sign that you’re about to say something you’re unsure of. And all this talk about having something to say... Don’t tell me you’ve already been assigned a new mission?”

“No, it’s not that.”

“No? Then what?”

A hint of confusion crossed Zhenya's eyes as his playful smile faded. He looked expectantly at Taekjoo, whose lips parted slightly, then closed again repeatedly. Finally, a sigh escaped from them.

"I want this to end here."

Zhenya's expression went blank, completely caught off guard by the unexpected words.

"What do you mean by that, Taekjoo?"

"I mean I don't want you involved in my work anymore."

As the tension faded from Zhenya's face, he let out a soft sigh that felt almost like relief.

"When have I ever interfered with your work?"

"Don't play dumb, you bastard."

Zhenya leaned back slightly, his face still carrying a look of confusion.

"Why would you reject my involvement, whether it's interference or support? It benefits you. There's nothing for you to lose."

"If it was just about me, sure. But it's not."

“Not just about you?”

Was he really asking because he didn’t know? Since arriving in Korea, Zhenya had often directly involved himself in Taekjoo’s official work. He would sometimes arrive at mission sites ahead of time, obtaining classified documents or intelligence that Taekjoo was tasked with retrieving, all in an effort to spend more time with him. Thanks to Zhenya, operations had become smoother, giving Taekjoo a rare sense of freedom from his typically hectic life.

However, all of this was a violation of the National Intelligence Service’s regulations. Furthermore, Zhenya was a foreign diplomat, which made the situation even more controversial. Regardless of the results, Taekjoo was never pleased with Zhenya’s involvement.

For similar reasons, they fought quite often. There had been a few instances when Taekjoo was genuinely angry at Zhenya for treating his work as nothing more than a game. As a result, Zhenya’s solution was to help Taekjoo indirectly, like he did in Cuba. And now, being told not to do even that seemed to frustrate him to no end.

“Hmph... Are you saying I should just stand by and watch while my lover is in danger?”

“This is the kind of work where danger is expected. And until now, I’ve managed just fine without you.”

Zhenya chuckled, as if in disbelief. His expression was that of someone who had just been unilaterally told to stop playing a game he’d been thoroughly enjoying.

“So, you’re saying I’m a hindrance?”

"Don't twist my words. What I'm saying is, don't put yourself at risk under the pretense of doing something for me."

"At risk? Me?"

Once again, Zhenya's reaction was as if he'd just heard something utterly absurd. Perhaps it was a reflection of his unwavering certainty that he would never be in such danger.

With a long sigh, Taekjoo looked straight at Zhenya, who seemed to be in a bad mood. His expression barely changed. His cold gaze and stubbornly pursed lips made him look like a sulking child. How long was Taekjoo supposed to keep coaxing and placating someone well past thirty? Even as he let out a deep sigh, he calmly added further explanation.

"I know what kind of relationship you have with your family. I'm not going to meddle and tell you to reconcile with them or get along. That's entirely up to you, and it's not my place to dictate that. But I can't stand to see you at odds with them because of me anymore."

"You're mistaken about something, Taekjoo. Even without you in the picture, my relationship with them is beyond repair. They're not the kind of people who could interfere with my life, nor would they dare to."

"Even so, your roots are still there."

Taekjoo responded calmly. For a moment, Zhenya was at a loss for words. His mouth was slightly open as if trying to smile, but all he could

manage was a slight twitch of his lips. No matter how he tried to deny it, the truth was that Zhenya was Russian, and his roots lay in the Bogdanov family. That unchangeable fact seemed to frustrate and even aggrieve him.

Hoping Zhenya wouldn't misunderstand, Taekjoo added more.

"I knew all that, and I still made up my mind to accept you."

"What exactly are you trying to say? Bringing up something that can't be changed?"

"I'm not trying to make it an issue, you idiot. Since it's a concern that will keep coming up as long as I keep doing my job, I want to resolve at least part of it. The fundamental problem won't disappear, but I can't just sit back and do nothing either. Like my mother, I also want you to be with me for as long as possible, and in better shape."

Taekjoo thought it was a pretty sentimental confession, but Zhenya's expression remained unchanged. He merely narrowed his eyes, focusing on trying to discern Taekjoo's true intentions.

"What are you hiding, Taekjoo?"

"There's nothing like that."

"No. Something definitely happened to you. Am I wrong?"

"Nothing happened. I just didn't mention it to you, but I've been thinking about this for a while. I got a little lax for a time, but now I've

snapped back to my senses."

"Hah, Taekjoo. Do you really think I wouldn't know, even if you hide it?"

"Don't try to find a reason. Don't go looking into where I go or what I hear while I'm gone. That's how it's supposed to be."

Zhenya frowned. After all the passionate love they'd shared, this sudden drawing of a line must have been bewildering. Taekjoo messed up Zhenya's bangs playfully, trying to ease the tension.

"From now on, just focus on being my lover, you fool."

Zhenya suddenly grabbed both of Taekjoo's arms. His blue eyes didn't blink for even a second. He seemed unsettled by Taekjoo's unwavering seriousness and firm stance. It didn't look easy for him to accept such a demand without fully understanding why.

"Are you seriously worried about my so-called brothers? You're overthinking it, Taekjoo. With or without you, nothing would be different. What exactly do you think you've added?"

"I won't die."

Taekjoo declared it bluntly to Zhenya, who was still struggling to accept his words. Ignoring the heat rising to his face, he repeated the promise several times.

"Please, just trust me. From now on, I won't recklessly risk my life. If you wait patiently, I'll come back safely, alright?"

He pressed Zhenya for a response. Zhenya shot him a disapproving look, his expression troubled. It was as if he was struggling — his lover was making a rare plea, so he couldn't get angry without thinking, leaving him visibly unsure how to respond.

"I'm not saying things will always be like this, so lighten up, you idiot. I'll keep thinking about it and find a better way. If push comes to shove, I could even cut back on my work."

"Cut back on your work? Like you'd ever do that."

"Ah, you're so suspicious. I told you, no matter what happens, I'll keep my promises."

Zhenya, still exasperated, shook his head as Taekjoo tried to cheer him up with a mischievous grin.

"What? Is my trustworthiness still at rock bottom?"

The atmosphere had softened considerably, and Zhenya's rigid expression finally cracked into a smile.

"You should be careful with your words."

Taekjoo reached out and gently grasped Zhenya's chin. Leaning in, he brought their lips together in a soft kiss. The delicate sensation of their lips meeting was fully felt in the gentle exchange. Zhenya stared blankly at Taekjoo, surprised by the unexpected gesture.

"Collateral."

Taekjoo grinned and casually said the word. In the next moment, Zhenya threw himself at Taekjoo, and the two of them collapsed together. With a violent motion, the whiskey glasses, cigars, bottles on the table, the ashtray, and the cigar cutter all clattered noisily onto the floor. Whiskey splashed on their faces, their bodies, and even onto the sheets, but neither of them cared. All they did was possess and desire each other without restraint. In that moment, there was no room for concerns about each other's origins, positions, or situations.

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Consciousness flickered in and out. In between, his body would become sticky, then dry, only to become sticky again. Every time he opened his eyes, he was acutely aware of the presence devouring him — his labored breaths and urgent movements were unmistakable. Every cell in his body writhed in response to the intense sensations flooding him. He let out a breathy moan, half gasping for air through his open mouth. No matter how hard he tried to hold on, he ultimately collapsed under the overwhelming waves of pleasure, far beyond his threshold. It felt as though if he didn't pass out, his over-stimulated brain would melt from the sheer intensity.

He had no idea how much time had passed. He couldn't tell if it was day or night. It could have been several nights, or maybe only a couple of hours. His mind was hazy, but he could faintly hear Zhenya's voice. It sounded like he was on a phone call.

"If it's about Taekjoo, don't worry. He's sleeping soundly, like a newborn baby. Yeah, I'll keep in touch."

Was it a mistake? He thought he heard his mother's voice on the other end of the phone. Zhenya quickly ended the call and tossed the phone aside. Through his blurred vision, he saw Zhenya's silhouette moving gracefully. He struggled to open his heavy eyelids.

When his vision cleared, he was met with a puzzling sight. Zhenya was sitting firmly between Taekjoo's legs, wearing latex surgical gloves, staring intently between them.

"What are you doing?"

"Oh, you're awake?"

Zhenya looked up and greeted him nonchalantly. Taekjoo tried to sit up but froze in place. His arms were tied behind him. There was a leather belt wrapped around his waist. He twisted his body, trying to figure out what was going on, but with his limbs restrained, it wasn't easy. The leather cuffs binding his wrists were connected to the belt, limiting his movements.

He shot Zhenya a bewildered look.

"Hey. What is this?"

"You promised me a birthday present. I kept wondering what you could give me that I'd remember forever. So, I thought about it again and again while you were sleeping."

Zhenya nonchalantly responded as he spread Taekjoo's legs further apart. His thumb gently caressed the inside of Taekjoo's thigh in slow, deliberate strokes.

"You said I shouldn't interfere in your affairs anymore. No eavesdropping, no GPS tracking — so what choice do I have?"

He tugged at the skin he had been stroking and then abruptly lifted his gaze, locking eyes with Taekjoo as he added his next words.

"I'll just have to leave my mark instead."

"What nonsense..."

Taekjoo looked down in disbelief. With his arms tied behind his back, his chest was slightly lifted, so he couldn't see clearly, but he noticed something in Zhenya's hand. The faintly familiar buzzing sound suggested what it was — a tattoo machine.

He glanced back at Zhenya with wide eyes, his suspicion growing. Zhenya grinned, sealing the deal.

"Taekjoo, this is something only you can give me, and it's exactly what I want. It's the perfect gift, isn't it?"

"Hey. No way. You can't just tattoo me. That could cause problems later on."

"Even now, you're worried about work?"

"It's not just about work, idiot! You can't just put something permanent on someone's body without their consent! Do you know how hard it was to get rid of the last one?"

"Yeah, well... it's completely gone now."

Zhenya muttered gruffly, his eyes lowering, lips settling into a thin line. It was the expression he wore whenever something was bothering him.

The original tattoo had been Zhenya's idea, created without permission. Taekjoo had erased it without a word, so Zhenya had no reason to feel upset. Yet, despite this, he found Zhenya sulking like this.

"Stop messing around and untie me already."

"Messing around?"

Zhenya curled one side of his lips into a smirk. Without hesitation, he pressed Taekjoo's squirming legs down with his knee, firmly pinning him in place.

"There won't be any problems. It might even act as a charm for you."

"A charm? Stop spouting nonsense, you jerk."

"You said you wouldn't die."

Zhenya stubbornly pushed back, his blue eyes piercing through Taekjoo with sharp intensity.

"...What? What does that have to do with anything right now?"

"If I'm supposed to believe in your ridiculous promise, I need some kind of token to hold onto, don't I?"

Taekjoo couldn't wrap his head around Zhenya's reasoning. A tattoo, a mere drawing on his body, as a token or a charm — it seemed absurd. Yet, Zhenya insisted it was his only wish, the only gift he wanted from Taekjoo. How could Taekjoo outright dismiss it?

If allowing Zhenya to get this tattoo meant he would stop meddling in his affairs, it might be worth it. There was an unspoken rule among agents against visible tattoos, but something small, like the size of a fingertip, might be acceptable. Conflicting thoughts wrestled in Taekjoo's mind.

After a moment of deliberation, he finally spoke.

"...Don't go back on your word later."

"Only for you, Taekjoo."

"Just make sure it's not in an obvious spot."

When Taekjoo set the condition, Zhenya let out a mocking scoff. Then, without warning, he lifted Taekjoo's leg, exposing the inner thigh where

the adductor muscle joined near the groin. His fingers sensuously traced the intimate, hidden area.

"What would you even have to do for this to be visible? I don't think anyone else will be seeing it, except me. Taekjoo, that is if you act all proper."

"Proper? Is that really a word coming out of your mouth?"

"Isn't it the word that suits me the most right now? I'm living with someone who can't even give me a child, right at the age when I should be sowing my seeds. You can't get more romantic than that. Never in my life have I lived with this much patience, like I'm a monk or something."

Kwon Taekjoo was speechless. The guy talked about patience, yet when he got going, he would fuck Taekjoo to the point where it felt like Taekjoo would die. Of course, since Kwon Taekjoo allowed him to stay by his side, Zhenya hadn't strayed. As far as Kwon Taekjoo knew, at least. For someone who used to change sex partners every other day, it was a surprising display of devotion. Sure, Zhenya might have messed around behind his back, but for some reason, Kwon Taekjoo believed that wasn't the case. It was an inexplicable trust.

Taekjoo scolded himself for becoming absurdly soft, at least when it came to him, and repeatedly set new conditions.

"No designs that could reveal my identity."

"I know."

"And nothing too big."

"Of course."

Zhenya responded half-heartedly and swiftly began the preparations. He pressed down on Kwon Taekjoo's penis, which kept getting in the way, and rubbed a sterilizing swab on the inside of his thigh. The cool, tingling sensation made Kwon Taekjoo's body tense up preemptively. Even with the smallest movement, the leather cuffs tightened and made a jangling sound.

"Hey, if you're going to do this, at least loosen these cuffs?"

"It's better for you to stay tied up. If you move, my hand might slip, and then I'd have to make it bigger to cover the mistake."

Zhenya shot Kwon Taekjoo a look, as if asking if that's what he wanted. It wasn't much of a threat, but there was no reason to deny it either.

Kwon Taekjoo stiffened his neck and kept glancing downward. But all he could see was Zhenya's face, unusually focused, his hands, and the tattoo machine he was holding.

"What are you engraving?"

"Who knows. Just lie back and wait."

Zhenya grabbed Taekjoo's leg and pulled him back onto the bed. Then he spread Taekjoo's skin wide with his long fingers. Taekjoo stared blankly at the ceiling, bracing himself for the pain that was soon to come.

Before long, a sharp, stinging pain began to rise from below. His penis quivered in response to the sharp, searing sensation. He clenched his teeth, trying to endure it somehow. But it was useless — groans leaked out through his tightly gritted teeth.

"Urgh... ugh... damn, it hurts!"

"If you're already whining, that's going to be a problem."

"Hurry up and finish already! Ah....!"

"Complaining won't help you at all, Zaika. You need to have patience."

Zhenya's voice was full of laughter, clearly enjoying himself. What a pervert, getting pleasure from inflicting pain on others.

Taekjoo shut his eyes tightly. He'd been captured and tortured by the enemy while on missions before and had been injured plenty, both seriously and lightly. Compared to that, the pain of getting a tattoo was almost ticklish. And yet, maybe it was the situation, or maybe it was because the area being tattooed wasn't used to this kind of sensation, but his body twitched involuntarily.

Zhenya focused on his work, occasionally glancing at Taekjoo's reactions, and suddenly let out a quiet laugh. Sensing it, Taekjoo opened his eyes. It wasn't his imagination — Zhenya's shoulders were shaking subtly.

"What? Why are you laughing like that? You jerk, you tattooed something weird, didn't you?"

A bad feeling washed over him, and he shot up. But with his arms bound behind his back, he only managed to raise his upper body halfway. He strained his core to peer down at his groin. His shaky vision caught a glimpse of the tattoo Zhenya had engraved.

It wasn't a design but a phrase in cursive Russian. Due to the limited view and the script, Taekjoo couldn't immediately make out the words. On top of that, he couldn't focus properly because something else was distracting him — his now erected cock, trembling uncontrollably in response to the sensation.

Zhenya smirked, gesturing with his eyes toward his flushed cock.

"Taekjoo, are you enjoying the pain a bit too much?"

"Enjoying it? It's because of you, you bastard. My body's so used to it now that it reacts to any little stimulus."

"Oh? You've become quite the degenerate."

"Is that really something you should be saying?"

"No need to get so worked up. It's a good thing, isn't it? Means you can feel it even with just a little touch."

Zhenya suddenly flicked Kwon Taekjoo's penis. The tingle from where he touched reverberated through his entire pelvis, and the pre-cum that had been precariously pooling at the tip of his urethra dripped down onto his stomach.

"Ugh... you bastard..."

"There you go, cursing again. When you're obviously looking forward to it."

"Ah, just shut up and finish already."

"Just hang in there a bit longer. I'm almost done."

Zhenya soothed Kwon Taekjoo as he continued working. The care he put into drawing each letter was meticulous. Seeing him so focused, with all emotion drained from his face, gave Kwon Taekjoo a strange feeling. He was certain that Zhenya wouldn't concentrate this hard even when carrying out official duties. This was a man who found everything in the world boring, yet here he was, completely absorbed in something as trivial as tattooing Taekjoo. Should he feel flattered?

"Isn't it strange?"

"Ugh... what is?"

"I'm tattooing you again, just like I did before. But back then, you fought me and said you'd rather die than go through with it. Now, look at you — spreading your legs willingly and calmly."

"Ha. 'Willingly'? And where do you see 'calmly'?"

"Is it different? I don't think so."

What nonsense was he about to spout this time? Taekjoo shot him a disapproving glare, watching closely as Zhenya gently stroked his burning skin while meeting his gaze. Zhenya's blue eyes were clouded with a strange ecstasy.

"Even if I were to release you from these restraints, do you think you'd actually stop me?"

His voice was full of laughter, though it didn't sound like he was teasing. If anything, it felt like he was awestruck. Taekjoo, staring blankly at that familiar face which now looked strangely slack, couldn't manage to reply to Zhenya's smugness.

Zhenya grinned as if to say, "See?" and said, "All done." At the same time, the buzzing of the tattoo machine that had been grating on Taekjoo's nerves finally stopped. The pain, however, hadn't entirely subsided. The area around the tattoo still stung and burned.

"Ugh... you have awful taste. Now untie my arms."

"We'll see."

"What do you mean, 'we'll see'?"

Taekjoo tensed up, sensing what was coming. Give Zhenya an inch, and he'd take a mile. He always demanded too much. He wondered if he'd been too lenient with him lately.

"No."

He flat-out refused before anything could happen.

"No?"

Zhenya let out a small laugh, repeating the word as if he couldn't believe it. Then, slowly, he placed both hands on the bed and climbed on top of Taekjoo. His gaze was fixed directly on Taekjoo's face.

Taekjoo's penis, trembling recklessly, rubbed its swollen head against Zhenya's abs. Only then did Zhenya glance down, a sly smile forming on his lips. His blue eyes moved leisurely, as if he were savoring every inch of Kwon Taekjoo's body, like a predator stalking its prey. Perhaps it was the lust slowly spreading through his entire body, but Taekjoo's chest, which was already heaving as if desperate to show off, rose and fell without pause.

"Someone once told me that good memories formed from shared places, time, and experiences with someone lead to positive feelings toward that person?"

Out of nowhere, Zhenya quoted something Taekjoo had said in the past, flashing a devilish grin that contrasted his angelic face. Watching him nervously, Taekjoo tensed up as Zhenya lowered his head and slowly extended his tongue. The red, pointed tip hovered just above Taekjoo's swollen nipple, almost but not quite touching it. For some reason, that tiny motion filled Taekjoo with nervous anticipation, and his fists clenched tightly. His lower lip was caught lightly between his teeth.

Just when it seemed like Zhenya would devour his nipple, he kissed the soft mound beside it instead. Even though it was just a light touch of his lips, the nipple trembled in response.

Zhenya let out a laugh and continued planting soft kisses around the area, over and over. Then, he extended his tongue again, slowly tracing up the other side of Taekjoo's chest. Even that was enough to send an electrifying anticipation to the opposite nipple, which quivered eagerly.

Yet again, Zhenya's lips didn't land where Kwon Taekjoo wanted them. He kept teasing around it, driving Kwon Taekjoo's frustration higher and higher until it finally spilled over into irritation.

"Fuck, untie me already."

"There's a saying in Korea, something about giving someone a disease and then offering the cure."

Zhenya muttered some incomprehensible phrase, casting a brief glance at the now fuming Kwon Taekjoo.

"Since I've already given you pain, should I offer you some sweet diversion?"

He murmured playfully, almost like he was singing. His mouth opened wide, and Taekjoo couldn't help but notice how red and wet it looked. His throat bobbed involuntarily. Just before his eager nipple could meet that soft, moist mouth, a deep pressure rose from his groin. Zhenya had suddenly wrapped his hand around Kwon Taekjoo's penis, catching him off guard. His abdomen jerked visibly in response.

Zhenya glanced down with a chuckle before finally taking Kwon Taekjoo's nipple into his mouth. At the same time, his hand began kneading Kwon Taekjoo's penis slowly but deliberately. Kwon Taekjoo's head fell back completely, his restrained body shuddering in both

pleasure and pain from the overwhelming sensations coming at him from above and below.

"Ugh... ah... ugh, nngh..."

"Mmm, Taekjoo..."

Zhenya groaned as he savored Taekjoo. Zhenya's erection brushing against Taekjoo's thigh. The sensitive skin, already tender from the fresh tattoo, was now being teased by Zhenya's hard length, rubbing against him with an unbearable mixture of pleasure and stinging pain. Taekjoo's mind was in disarray, caught in the overwhelming tide of sensations.

"Haah... ngh... Taekjoo..."

"Ugh... ugh... ngh... ahh..."

Zhenya's movements became more intense, his hips grinding harder, and the way he bit and sucked on Kwon Taekjoo's chest became fiercer. The mattress beneath them began to tremble violently, and the bedframe creaked under the pressure of their bodies. Kwon Taekjoo's head was spinning, disoriented by the dizzying rhythm.

Their bodies collided with increasing urgency, pushing and pulling against each other in a fevered dance. As their temperatures rose and the scent of their mingled sweat thickened, they clung desperately to each other, unwilling to let go of any part of the intoxicating heat.

"Yevgeny... ah... Yevgeny.... Zhenya...!"

Taekjoo gasped, calling Zhenya's name. At the sound, Zhenya's frantic pace suddenly faltered. He lifted his head from where he had been hungrily latching onto Taekjoo's chest, and stared at him with a confused expression. Even Zhenya's erection, which had been eagerly grinding against Taekjoo's inner thigh, paused as if perplexed.

Taekjoo, his vision blurry with lust, met Zhenya's gaze. He was panting heavily, his voice husky and hoarse from exertion.

"Untie me."

His tone was softer now, calmer, with a quiet intensity. His eyes, which moments ago had been burning with desire, now glistened with a steady focus. He coaxed Zhenya with a gentle, almost pleading voice.

Zhenya, caught in Taekjoo's gaze as if under a spell, complied without question, unlocking the handcuffs that had held Taekjoo's wrists captive.

The moment his hands were free, Kwon Taekjoo grabbed Zhenya by the face, pulling him in for a fierce kiss. Zhenya didn't flinch, meeting Kwon halfway as their lips collided violently. The taste of blood mingled with their saliva, sweet and metallic, only fueling their arousal further. The kiss was wild, desperate, as though they were intent on devouring each other, their tongues and lips clashing with feral hunger.

Without breaking the kiss, Taekjoo guided Zhenya's rigid cock towards his entrance. As soon as Zhenya's cock brushed against him, it slipped inside with ease, disappearing into the heat that eagerly swallowed him whole.

In the next moment, Kwon Taekjoo's whole body trembled.

"Heuh... Haah... Uhng... Uhng..."

A deep moan escaped from his tightly locked lips. It was because Taekjoo had climaxed the moment Zhenya entered him. Zhenya lifted the corners of his mouth in a sly smile at the sight of his own hand soaked with semen. The fine hairs on his cheek stood up distinctly. The walls of Taekjoo's insides squirmed, swallowing Zhenya's cock , as if savoring it. The sensation made Zhenya's abdominal muscles tighten even more. His head spun.

"Haah... Taekjoo..."

Zhenya sighed deeply and rested his head against Kwon Taekjoo's nape. There was an indescribable ecstasy in the tickling breath that escaped him. Zhenya, rubbing his sharp nose against Kwon Taekjoo's neck and earlobe, finally withdrew his cock after savoring the intense sensation for a moment.

Then, he began to leisurely and deeply explore Taekjoo's inside, taking his time to savor him. Kwon Taekjoo could do nothing but passively accept the endless desire directed toward him, occasionally pressing his lips against Zhenya's forehead and hair, feeling Zhenya's heated breath.

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After finishing his shower, Taekjoo took out his clothes from Zhenya's wardrobe and got dressed. He had left a few outfits there in advance since he always ran out of clothes whenever he visited Zhenya's house. It wasn't just the clothes either. The refrigerator was stocked with side

dishes that his mother had prepared for Zhenya, and in the bathroom, there was a razor and a toothbrush that belonged to him. Household items like dishes and slippers were always paired in twos. It was practically like living together.

He thought about leaving but glanced back at the bed. Zhenya was sound asleep, for once, peacefully. After staying up for nearly a day and a half, even someone as monstrous as him had to be exhausted. Kwon Taekjoo figured he wouldn't last long if he kept trying to keep up with Zhenya's pace. If he hadn't passed out multiple times last night, he might have ended up waking up in a hospital.

Smiling at the absurdity of his thoughts, Kwon Taekjoo approached the bed and sat down gently on one side. Naturally, Zhenya turned over and wrapped his arm around his waist.

"What? You're not asleep?"

"I woke up... to your presence. And your scent."

Zhenya smiled with his eyes still closed. Like a child seeking affection, he pressed his forehead softly against Kwon Taekjoo's side, rubbing it gently. Finding the sight endearing, Kwon Taekjoo playfully pinched Zhenya's warm ear. Zhenya let out a low groan but accepted the touch quietly. After a moment, he asked in a slightly husky voice:

"Taekjoo, is it another call from work?"

"Not yet. I just woke up. Maybe because of a bad dream."

Taekjoo looked down at Zhenya's calm face and traced his fingertip over his eyebrow. Zhenya's facial muscles visibly relaxed in response. His large body swelled and then sank slowly, his breath turning sweet and steady. Afraid that opening his eyes would break the peaceful atmosphere, Zhenya didn't lift his eyelids. Instead, he tightened his grip slightly around Kwon Taekjoo's waist, holding him a little closer.

"That kid appeared in my dream again last night. Blonde hair, blue eyes."

"Didn't you just say you had a bad dream?"

Zhenya let out a snort of laughter. Even with the brief description, he seemed to immediately grasp who the kid invading Kwon Taekjoo's dream was.

"They say when a child appears in a dream, it's a sign of trouble or misfortune."

"I didn't know you believed in such superstitions."

"Thanks to my mother, I've heard it enough times. Anyway, tell that kid to stop showing up. Just seeing his face gets me all worked up."

"Dreams are reflections of the subconscious, you know. If you're clinging onto that kid, what do you expect me to do?"

Zhenya, who had been chuckling softly, called out, "Taekjoo..." as he opened his eyes. The blue eyes from his dream filled Kwon Taekjoo's vision, gently curling.

"You're really that attached to me?"

Zhenya spoke boldly. Kwon Taekjoo, deciding not to argue, covered Zhenya's eyes with his hand.

"Get some more sleep."

As he tried to push Zhenya away and get up, the arm wrapped around his waist refused to loosen. Instead, it tightened, pulling Kwon Taekjoo back toward him. In an instant, Taekjoo's body was dragged deeper into the bed.

"Where are you going? You haven't been summoned or anything."

"I should head home. If I'm out too late, my mother might start worrying."

"We can go together later."

"Don't you think it would be strange if her son, who's been away for two days, comes home with his boss, both looking exhausted and smelling alike?"

"Your mother doesn't seem to notice much, though."

"It's not that she doesn't notice. She just can't imagine it."

"Hmm."

Kwon Taekjoo warned Zhenya, who didn't seem to agree.

"Be careful. If she finds out about us, my mother will cut you off immediately."

"I don't know. I think your mother likes me much more than you think."

"I'm not sure she'd still like you if she found out you were fucking her son."

"No matter how you look at it, it wouldn't be a loss, would it? Your mother wants you to be stable, Taekjoo. And I'm the one who can keep you the safest in the world."

Zhenya spoke with reckless confidence. It wasn't just idle talk, lost in a sweet dream. There truly wasn't a more reliable ally than him.

Taekjoo chuckled softly as he tousled Zhenya's fine hair.

"So, that's why you engraved that thing on me? I wondered what you were drawing so carefully."

"You saw it?"

"Wouldn't you, if you were me?"

Zhenya lifted his head and rubbed his face against Kwon Taekjoo's hand, which had been stroking his hair. He also gently pressed his lips to the back of Taekjoo's hand.

"It's true. You're my breath, my weakness, my secret technique. And what makes me the strongest."

He added the nonsensical words he occasionally spewed. The fact that he, who was regarded as the 'Master of Anastasia,' couldn't be easily touched by anyone, yet behaved like a loyal dog around Kwon Taekjoo, was both endearing and oddly unsettling.

Zhenya turned his body and pressed down on the top of the pillow. As the pillow shifted, he naturally turned his head forward. Taekjoo gently cupped Zhenya's chin and kissed him softly. Sweet breaths intertwined as their lips met. When Taekjoo finally pulled away, Zhenya smiled contentedly with a bright, clear face.

"Taekjoo, you're being awfully affectionate."

"Look who's talking."

"Are you expecting something from me?"

"No. Except for you not to do anything."

"The more you try to rein me in, the more curious I get. What exactly are you up to?"

Taekjoo stared deeply into Zhenya's now transparent eyes. Did he really not know what was going on between Russia and his family? Even if that were the case, it wouldn't be surprising. Given Zhenya's past behavior and what Olga had told him, Zhenya was practically cast aside by his own family.

However, Taekjoo couldn't bring himself to push Zhenya into even more isolation because of his own affairs. He simply didn't want to do that.

"Anyway, hyung is heading out first."

Kwon Taekjoo roughly tousled Zhenya's hair before getting up. As usual, before leaving the bedroom, he gave what amounted to a nagging reminder.

"Don't skip meals. Make sure you eat."

Zhenya propped his head up with his arm and lazily replied, "Yeah, yeah." Kwon Taekjoo, who had turned to leave, hesitated for a moment and looked back at him with a sharp gaze.

"It's not working."

"Hm? What isn't?"

"Your beauty. It doesn't work on me anymore, so stop trying. I've already had more than enough."

Kwon Taekjoo firmly shook his head before leaving the room. Zhenya could only chuckle in disbelief.

Soon after, the sound of the front door opening and closing echoed through the house. Kwon Taekjoo's presence lingered for a moment outside the door, but then it completely faded. The house fell silent, as

quiet as if no one had ever been there. The pleasant atmosphere that had been swaying moments before abruptly grew still.

The expression on Zhenya's face disappeared. As he absentmindedly smoothed back his tousled hair, he suddenly tilted his head.

"Hyung?"

Muttering the Korean word Kwon Taekjoo rarely used, Zhenya picked up his phone. After quickly opening a translation app to check its meaning, a sly grin spread across Zhenya's lips. A glint of interest flickered in his blue eyes.

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When Kwon Taekjoo entered through the front door, he could hear faint voices coming from the master bedroom. His mother was likely on the phone.

Without a word, he headed straight to the kitchen, intending to make porridge. As he drank some water from the purifier, his mother quietly appeared, peeking into the kitchen. Instead of saying hello, he simply nodded. His mother responded with a glance before returning to the bedroom.

While he gulped down the water, snippets of the phone conversation reached his ears. It seemed like his mother was talking to his aunt in

Canada again.

He sat at the dining table for a while, waiting for her. Noticing his presence, she wrapped up the call, promising to talk more later. She then came back into the kitchen, pulling out a chair opposite Kwon Taekjoo and sitting down.

"You're home late."

"Yeah, I stopped by somewhere on the way."

"You look exhausted. You said the busy work was over, didn't you? You're all skin and bones."

"It was, but the Russians keep throwing more work our way. You know how it is, if the higher-ups say jump, we jump."

He had already told his mother that he might be gone for an extended time due to late-night work, using it as an excuse to cover for his overnight stay. He had become an expert at lying to her in ways that didn't feel too wrong. After all, he rationalized it as being for her own good, and the guilt no longer stung his conscience.

"The ambassador must've been just as tired after getting back, huh?"

"Nah, he seemed like he was having the time of his life."

"Oh my? Watch your mouth, talking about the ambassador like that.....!"

Before his mother could scold him more, he suddenly handed her something. Her eyes widened in surprise.

"What's this?"

"A plane ticket. The return flight is open."

"Wait, what? Why are you giving me this all of a sudden?"

"Stop being glued to your phone every day. Go visit Aunt."

"What?"

"Didn't you say Auntie has a major surgery coming up? The surgery will go well, of course, but at her age, recovery is more important. Haven't we received a lot from her over the years? You should go and take care of her in person. That way, you'll feel more at ease."

It was a gift Kwon Taekjoo had prepared after noticing his mother's growing concerns. She wasn't tied down by work or home responsibilities, so he wanted her to follow her heart. But the reason he felt the need to push her was that he knew the only thing holding her back was him. More precisely, it was her sense of responsibility, feeling like she had to keep the house ready for the family to return at any moment.

As expected, his mother couldn't easily accept his suggestion, even though it had been weighing on her mind for some time.

"Well, still..."

"Don't worry about the ambassador's birthday. He doesn't seem to care much about it, and I'll handle everything by myself and make sure to take care of it properly."

"It's not just about his birthday, Taekjoo. What about you?"

"What do you mean? I'm not some seven-year-old kid."

"Do you think I see you as a kid? You would have to handle all the housework by yourself, work, do overtime... How could I not worry about whether you're eating well? I fear you'll resort to instant noodles and stay up late gaming, which would harm your health."

"Come on, you should worry about real concerns. I'm perfectly healthy, honestly."

"You say that, but... Will you really be okay without me?"

"Of course. I'm not a child anymore. If you keep treating your grown son like a helpless kid, people will start gossiping."

He tried to persuade his mother with a playful smile, but she continued to look at him with anxious eyes. Seeing her hesitation, Kwon Taekjoo placed the plane ticket in her hand.

"The things you're worried about won't happen, Mom. So let's try living like everyone else now. Let's work to our abilities where needed, without worrying too much about each other, okay?"

His mother had worked hard in various ways to ease her overprotectiveness and severe anxiety about Kwon Taekjoo. She had consistently attended therapy sessions and, when necessary, combined them with hospital treatments. Of course, much of her progress was due to Zhenya. Thanks to him, Taekjoo had escaped many dangers and made it home safely. Zhenya's presence had also filled the gap during Kwon Taekjoo's absences, which was a huge help.

Gently shaking his mother's hand, he coaxed her.

"Mom, it's time to choose a name that's just yours — beyond being someone's daughter, wife, or mother. Embrace the things you've always wanted to do and reconnect with those you haven't seen in a long time."

He had always wished for his mother to live for herself, not just for him. He wanted her to make decisions based on what she truly wanted, putting her own desires first.

Maybe his sincerity got through to her. Her previously tense shoulders relaxed as she let out a soft laugh. She tightly gripped the plane ticket she had been awkwardly holding.

"I can really trust you to be fine while I'm gone, right, son?"

"Of course, Mom. Who else would you trust if not me?"

He grinned confidently. His mother smiled back, satisfied, and started to examine the ticket he had prepared for her. She began chatting excitedly, wondering where she had put her passport, whether it had expired, and if she could manage her first solo trip. Kwon Taekjoo watched her with a fond expression.

But the peaceful moment didn't last long. His phone suddenly vibrated in his pocket. He discreetly checked the caller ID, and his instincts were right. It was a call from headquarters.

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As soon as Kwon Taekjoo arrived at headquarters, he went straight to the Director's office. Director Kwak let him in but kept his eyes glued to his monitor. His expression was quite serious.

"Director."

"Ah, yes."

He turned his head at the sound of Kwon Taekjoo's voice, consciously softening his tense expression.

"Did you rest well?"

"Yes, I did."

Director Kwak nodded slightly, then immediately got to the point, signaling the urgency of the matter.

"The operation has been approved."

"When do I depart?"

"There's something you need to know first."

"What is it?"

"For this Vladivostok operation, we'll be cooperating with the U.S. and Japan."

The unexpected news prompted an immediate reaction of resistance.

"Cooperation? Does that mean this isn't a solo mission?"

"Given how hard it was to secure this intel, it would be better for us to assess and handle its validity ourselves. It'll be much cleaner that way. Even if it turns out to be a waste of time, at least we won't take the heat for acting on bad information."

Director Kwak continued, speaking in a tone that showed he understood Kwon Taekjoo's frustrations.

"But you know this. The goal of this operation isn't simply to monitor North Korea's movements. The confidential talks that may take place between North Korea and Russia could pose a significant threat to world peace. If that happens, we'll eventually have to share the information with neighboring countries. Instead of being criticized later for trying to monopolize the information, wouldn't it be better to

open everything up and get support? Especially since the operation is in Vladivostok."

He understood what that meant. Vladivostok was a global diplomatic battleground. Ideologically, it was a place where democracy and socialism clashed, and geographically, it served as a bridge between Europe and Asia. It was also a region where diplomats and intelligence agents from various countries were most active. This meant that if any country tried to carry out covert operations there, it was highly likely to be exposed. It wasn't an incomprehensible decision to cooperate with other nations that shared mutual interests rather than risk unexpected interference during the operation.

However, the problem was that Kwon Taekjoo preferred solo missions. While he occasionally received help from Zhenya, he still found it more comfortable to assess the situation on the ground and respond flexibly. During operations, he tended to rely more on intuition than sticking strictly to the plan. Even when he collaborated with other National Intelligence Service employees or special forces, he found it incredibly frustrating. Now, he had to align himself with agents from other countries. It was far from appealing.

"Director, this may be called cooperation in name, but it's likely we'll just be stepping on each other's toes."

"I know. There will be more irrational and cumbersome tasks, for sure. But what can we do? We can't just follow our preferences or convenience when the fate of the nation is at stake."

"Haa..."

"I promise. You won't have any direct contact with foreign agents. Both countries have agreed to station elite agents on standby, and they'll only step in if you fail. Since things have come to this, let's use their information to our advantage. We still don't know through which route or with what North Korea will enter Vladivostok. You're not a man with three bodies, so let's think of it as if you're using a duplication technique. Wouldn't it be fun to command foreign agents like they're your extra limbs?"

"How can I trust those guys? At the crucial moment, they'll look out for themselves first. They'll meddle and ruin everything. Hasn't this happened before several times?"

"They're also asking the same question; how can they trust everything to just a one man like you?"

Director Kwak gave a wry smile. Just as Kwon Taekjoo didn't trust them, it was natural that they would harbor doubts about him. But it was a bit too luxurious a complaint for those trying to gain a foothold with information someone else obtained. He felt a surge of irritation but clenched his fist tightly, holding it back.

"Don't worry too much. We'll take full command of the operation. The agency intends to give you as much autonomy as possible, but there are plenty of people counting on you. This mission must succeed, no matter what. Understand?"

"Sigh... Yes, fine."

He responded half-heartedly. Though his displeasure was obvious, Kwon Taekjoo would ultimately follow orders from above. Rough, stubborn, and unconventional as he was, he never crossed the line. His

unique survival instincts, born from an unfortunate family history, only heightened his operational effectiveness. That was why Kwon Taekjoo had cemented his place as the top agent over the past decade.

Director Kwak handed his tablet to the grumpy Kwon Taekjoo.

"Now, let me explain the mission. A few days ago, Kim Gilha from the North Korean General Staff's Operations Bureau visited the North Korean consulate in Vladivostok. Kim Gilha is essentially a secretary to Shim Yeong-il, the head of the Operations Bureau. The fact that he arrived in Vladivostok ahead of Shim suggests they intended to scout the area before the secret North Korea-Russia talks. And there are other unsettling signs. For one, the Bogdanov family's hotel in Vladivostok has stopped accepting reservations for the next two weeks. The hotel primarily hosts government events and banquets, rather than regular guests, and as of yesterday, it's completely closed to outsiders. All external communications have been cut off as well. Additionally, there's news that part of Russky Island in Vladivostok is under restriction. They're using regular maintenance checks on underground water and sewage systems, as well as road repairs, as an excuse, but the timing couldn't be more perfect, don't you think?"

"Russky Island, huh..."

"Yes. It's where the Far Eastern Federal University is located. A few years ago, the North Korea-Russia summit was held there as well."

"Would they really want to meet again at a place that's already drawn attention?"

"Perhaps that's exactly what they're aiming for. If key figures from both nations meet too discreetly, it could stir up all kinds of speculation

about their true intentions. If they want to pass it off as just a technical cooperation meeting between the two countries, there's no more fitting place than a university. We have to keep all possibilities open. That's why we need cooperation with other nations. We're currently considering three potential final meeting locations for the North Korean and Russian officials. The Far Eastern Federal University on Russky Island, the Vladivostok hotel where the North Korean delegation will be staying, and finally, the Khasan train station."

"Khasan?"

"Crossing from North Korea to Russia doesn't always have to be by air, you know."

Khasan is a small town in Primorsky Krai where the borders of Russia, North Korea, and China meet. With a population of less than 3,000, the town became famous when a North Korean leader transferred trains there during a railway visit to Russia. Russian trains use a broad gauge of 1,520mm, while North Korea uses the standard gauge of 1,435mm, meaning that anyone traveling by train has to switch at Khasan. This applies to not just people but also goods. The steady flow of North Korean freight trains through Khasan was enough to prove the strong alliance between Russia and North Korea.

"According to the local informant, things seem off in that area too. It's always been a military zone, but it seems that more troops than usual have been deployed. Security has also tightened significantly."

Now that he heard it, all three locations seemed suspicious. No matter how capable Kwon Taekjoo was, it was impossible for him to monitor Primorsky Krai, Vladivostok, and Russky Island all at once. Even with support from the National Intelligence Service, there were limits. He had no choice but to admit that cooperation was inevitable.

In a somewhat resigned tone, Kwon Taekjoo asked for confirmation.

"So, are we heading to Khasan first?"

"No. The Americans already have an agent working there as a train engineer. If anything unusual happens, they'll report it right away. We'll be stationed at the airport in case the North Korean delegation arrives by air. Monitoring the Vladivostok hotel 24/7 is also our responsibility."

"What about the Far Eastern Federal University?"

"The Japanese are in charge of that. We'll be tracking the delegation's every move, and if they head to the university or another meeting location, we'll follow and join them there."

"Hmm... This could easily turn into a situation where we do all the work, and someone else reaps the rewards."

"I trust you'll handle it well. We're walking straight into the enemy's stronghold, so make sure you're fully prepared."

"Understood."

"If you fail, we'll have no choice but to immediately activate Plan B. Wouldn't it sting to let the fish we've almost caught slip into someone else's net?"

Director Kwak added with a bitter smile. He was essentially cautioning that the National Intelligence Service should not only avoid giving away

valuable information to other countries but also ensure they don't hand over any credit for the operation. To Kwon Taekjoo, however, it sounded more like a warning not to mess things up due to his connection with Zhenya. Maybe being assigned to the Bogdanov family's hotel was some kind of loyalty test.

Considering the gravity of the situation, Taekjoo wasn't offended by the suspicion. He himself had resolved to make an even clearer distinction between his personal and professional life this time around. He quietly clenched his fist.

"I'm looking forward to seeing your results."

"Thank you. I'll be on my way."

He grabbed the prepared passport and quietly exited. As soon as the door closed, a long sigh escaped him. All sorts of thoughts began flooding his mind at once.

He couldn't let personal feelings interfere with such a critical mission. If he hesitated, even for a moment, many people could suffer the consequences.

Was Zhenya truly uninvolved in all of this? If he encountered Zhenya's kin during the mission, they would inevitably end up pointing guns at each other. If Kwon Taekjoo pulled the trigger and injured Zhenya's family, would Zhenya really be okay with it? And what if he ran into Zhenya during the mission? What if everything Zhenya claimed ignorance about turned out to be a lie? If that happened... the more Taekjoo thought about it, the more his mind tangled in confusion.

Shaking his head, he forced out the swirling thoughts. Taking a small breath, he calmed his unsettled mind. Soon, Kwon Taekjoo's face was set in a determined expression. With lips tightly pressed together, he strode purposefully down the corridor. His shadow, flickering in the light, glided steadily along, unshaken.

For now, he had no choice but to trust. Trust in Zhenya — and in his own convictions.

{ End of vol. 1 }

## 5. Hunting Two Tigers

"Hey."

At the sound of someone calling, I sluggishly opened my eyes. A blurry figure hovered before me. Normally, my body would've tensed, immediately sensing the presence of someone else and staying on guard, but right now, it remained relaxed. I didn't avoid the hand reaching toward me either. I simply let my face be cradled by it.

The hand resting on my head gently ruffled my hair, the sensation light and ticklish. The warmth, a little higher than usual, felt oddly comforting.

"Hey, Zhenya."

He called my name softly when I didn't respond, his voice sweet. It even seemed like his tone had softened. I instinctively pressed my forehead against the hand that was stroking my hair. It was an unconscious gesture.

"I think I need to go. I'll be back, okay?"

His tone was vague, somewhere between informing me and asking for my permission, as he said goodbye for a while. I let out a weak chuckle and muttered something, though I wasn't sure if the words in my mouth came out clearly. The shadow that loomed over my face darkened

briefly, followed by the soft, clear sensation of lips pressing down on my forehead, gently squashing as they kissed me.

"Don't cause any trouble, and wait quietly."

He spoke as if they were cautioning a child, then stood up. The warmth, the scent, the breath that had become so familiar, all faded away. I flinched and instinctively reached out, catching hold of his arm. The firm frame beneath my hand felt unbreakable.

He ruffled my hair once more. His repeated soothing touch loosened the grip I had on them. The sound of his name slipped from my lips, almost as if in a groan. His gaze lingered briefly on me, then lifted. Soon, even the presence I could feel nearby became faint. In the distance, I heard the sound of a door opening and closing.

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It wasn't until much later that Zhenya's eyelids finally lifted.

"....."

A familiar ceiling filled his vision. The large house was silent, without even the faint ticking of a clock. He abruptly sat up.

"...Taekjoo?"

He glanced around, but there was no sign of anyone else besides himself. He stared blankly at his own body. There were no visible changes.

Only his limbs felt limp, like they were soaked in water, while his head, strangely enough, felt clear.

Come to think of it, he couldn't quite remember when or how he had fallen asleep. Sitting there, he tried to piece together his hazy thoughts.

That evening, Kwon Taekjoo had come over. His hands were full, carrying various things. Most of it was used to fill the empty refrigerator and pantry.

After that, everything had been as usual. They had dinner together, and after quickly tidying up the dishes, they sat in the living room, drinking. They pretended it was to watch a movie, but neither of them had paid much attention to it. For some reason, Taekjoo had acted awkwardly, talking about how hot it had been lately, suggesting they visit Odinokiy, or mentioning a new Russian restaurant nearby that they should check out. He'd even asked if there was anything else Zhenya wanted to do. It was a clear sign that Taekjoo was about to say something regretful.

It was about time for Taekjoo to receive a new mission. He had been called to headquarters several times recently, so Zhenya decided to enjoy his flattery or preemptive consolation while it lasted.

Leaning into the rare sight of a bashful Taekjoo, Zhenya pressed his whole body against him. Taekjoo had complained, saying he was too heavy, but when Zhenya responded with a pitiful expression on his face, "So you're going to leave me alone again, aren't you?" he had quietly

given in. Taking advantage of the mood, Zhenya had pushed him down onto the couch and kissed him until he felt satisfied.

Taekjoo had accepted the relentless kisses without resistance, as if Zhenya intended to steal the very breath from him. Occasionally, he would adjust the pace, rubbing Zhenya's ear or jaw, tapping him lightly on the cheek, but that was the extent of his efforts. Even when Zhenya's tongue pushed his own back into his throat, completely cutting off his airway, Taekjoo had barely responded. Despite the difficulty breathing, and the veins standing out on his smooth forehead, he had only weakly flicked his tongue against Zhenya's, licking at it feebly.

In the midst of their deep kiss, Zhenya's collar was suddenly yanked, causing them both to tumble off the couch and onto the floor. Their positions reversed, with Kwon Taekjoo now on top. Taekjoo, supporting himself on the floor, quietly looked down at Zhenya before slowly taking a sip of his whiskey. Zhenya watched in silence, his throat involuntarily bobbing, and an odd tingle had spread through his groin.

Before long, Taekjoo tilted his head and pressed his lips against Zhenya's again. As their mouths fully met, the whiskey Taekjoo had been holding seeped into Zhenya's mouth. The warm, fragrant liquor spread across his tongue, leaving behind a small foreign object. It felt like a pill.

Zhenya shot Taekjoo a questioning look. With a calm expression, Taekjoo blew gently, urging him to swallow the pill.

Zhenya didn't resist as he tightened his throat, allowing the pill that had been dissolving on his tongue to slide slowly down his esophagus. Taekjoo's gaze followed the motion, tracing the path of the pill as it moved down. Zhenya let out a soft laugh, bringing Taekjoo's attention back to him.

“Taekjoo. What was that just now?”

“A sleeping pill. It’s mild.”

Zhenya couldn’t help but laugh. It was absurd enough that his lover had just fed him a drug, but admitting that it was a sleeping pill made the situation even more ridiculous.

The absurdity didn’t end there. Taekjoo stuck out his tongue, placing a white pill on it for Zhenya to see. The contrast between Taekjoo’s red, whiskey-soaked tongue and the white pill made Zhenya’s mouth water.

Slowly lowering his head, Taekjoo ran his tongue along Zhenya’s lips. Unable to watch any longer, Zhenya seized Taekjoo’s tongue in his mouth. The small pill dissolved completely between their entwined tongues.

Even then, Zhenya sucked on Taekjoo’s tongue, keeping it trapped between his lips until he was satisfied. As the base of his tongue began to ache, Taekjoo’s brow furrowed in discomfort. Zhenya, holding Taekjoo’s squirming body tightly in his arms, ground their tongues together as if to vent his frustration. He didn’t let go until the sweet saliva mixed with the taste of blood.

Taekjoo gasped for breath, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Then, with his sleeve, he roughly cleaned the saliva from Zhenya’s lips as well.

“You’re so careless. What if that had been poison? You just swallowed it without a second thought.”

“If it were poison, I would have noticed right away. Snapping your neck would only take a few seconds.”

“So when you said you’d kill me before you died, you were serious? How romantic.”

Kwon Taekjoo sneered in disbelief before pulling himself up. Zhenya tried to reach for him, but his arm barely lifted before dropping limply. The effects of the pill seemed to be kicking in, sapping his strength.

“Get up. You should sleep in bed.”

Taekjoo, grunting under the weight, propped Zhenya up and draped his arm over his own shoulder, supporting him as they staggered toward the bedroom. Zhenya, feeling heavier than usual, clung to him, his nose brushing against Taekjoo’s ear as they walked. He pressed his lips against the tense veins in Taekjoo’s neck, eliciting a sharp reprimand — Taekjoo scolded him for still having the energy for such things. Zhenya ignored him.

Once they reached the bed, Taekjoo practically tossed Zhenya onto it before collapsing next to him, completely spent. As Taekjoo panted for breath, Zhenya slowly turned over and wrapped himself tightly around him, pulling him close. One leg hooked over Taekjoo’s, trapping him completely.

Taekjoo struggled to free himself but to no avail. All his attempts only made him sweat more, intensifying his scent.

“Damn it... is the pill not working? How do you still have so much energy left?”

With a frustrated groan, Taekjoo reached out again, panting. Zhenya lightly brushed his cheek against Taekjoo’s dark hair, following the scent of his sweat. In the process, Zhenya began rubbing his erection against Taekjoo’s thigh, letting out a low groan.

“Taekjoo... Taekjoo...”

“You’ve got some stamina, seriously. Let go, and I’ll make you feel good.”

Taekjoo softly patted Zhenya’s arm in a coaxing manner, finally persuading him to loosen his grip. As soon as Zhenya released him, Taekjoo sat up and kissed him on the lips. His lips continued trailing down Zhenya’s face, placing soft kisses everywhere. At the same time, Zhenya’s clothes were gradually stripped away piece by piece.

Zhenya found it all strangely fascinating. He had never completely surrendered himself to another person’s hands before. The last time he had been so powerless in someone’s care was long ago, back when he and Taekjoo had stayed at a shabby motel together.

Before he knew it, Kwon Taekjoo, now straddling his bare body, lifted his knees and started fingering himself on his own. He pulled out Zhenya’s stiffly erect cock, aligning it with his own, and began to stroke.

Pleasure, radiating from the core, spread slowly throughout his body. His breath quickened with the languid and sweet sensation, his body relaxing in the pleasure.

“Mmm... Taekjoo...”

He called out Kwon Taekjoo’s name again and again, moaning sweetly. By then, his strength had entirely drained from his body, and he could only slowly close and open his eyes repeatedly.

Kwon Taekjoo occasionally leaned down to kiss him tenderly. When his lower body instinctively started craving even more intense pleasure, Kwon Taekjoo grabbed his cock firmly and, with a hesitant motion, began to lower himself onto it.

“...Ugh, ahh.”

“Haah, haa... mmph, Taekjoo...”

Even in his hazy state of mind, the sensation of penetration remained vivid. After a brief moment of pain, as if something was slicing through his cock, the pleasure that followed felt like a reward. As Zhenya let out a heavy groan, Kwon Taekjoo, who was trembling, began to slowly move his body up and down.

“Haa, ha... ugh, mmph, ahh...”

“Mmm, Taekjoo... Taekjoo, mm, feels good...”

Zhenya exhaled sharply, savoring the sweet pleasure. His consciousness teetered on the edge of drifting away completely.

For Zhenya, sex was no different from hunting. It was about making the other submit completely, devouring them without leaving anything

behind. The thrill of sex was not much different from the excitement he felt when chasing down prey and cutting off its life.

Yet, even though he was being pressed down and devoured helplessly, it didn't feel unpleasant. On the contrary, the new stimulus made the hair on his head and the fine hairs all over his body stand on end. The warmth that spread like a gentle campfire, rather than a blazing inferno, felt strangely tender and kind, making his insides feel warm and tingly.

He moaned softly, his lips twitching, and slowly closed his eyes. Though his consciousness lingered faintly, his limbs went limp, and he could no longer move. His last memory was of Kwon Taekjoo, straddling him, suddenly throwing his head back and arching his back toward the air. Then sticky semen splattering across Zhenya's face.

"....."

He instinctively wiped his face. There was nothing particularly noticeable. If last night hadn't been a dream, Kwon Taekjoo must have wiped him clean before leaving.

He chuckled softly and got out of bed. He felt refreshed, as though he'd had a good night's sleep, and the lingering effects of the sex left him in an even better mood.

When he went into the kitchen, something on the table caught his eye. Upon closer inspection, it was a microwave-safe dish with instant pelmeni inside. Was this Kwon Taekjoo's idea of providing a meal? Though it looked bleak, it was probably quite a considerate gesture coming from him, and Zhenya couldn't help but laugh.

He opened the fridge to quench his thirst. Inside were neatly stacked side dishes, likely prepared by Kwon Taekjoo's mother. They seemed to have been carefully selected from the types of Korean food that didn't cause extreme discomfort, though Zhenya had no way of knowing that most of them were considered children's food.

'Since my mother went to the trouble of making these for you, don't throw anything away — eat it all. I'll drop by unexpectedly to check on you. Got it?'

Kwon Taekjoo always said that whenever he brought food. Zhenya thought it was an odd threat, but for some reason, he always complied. Every time Kwon Taekjoo saw an empty side dish container, he seemed inwardly pleased, and Zhenya didn't mind the fact that it gave Kwon Taekjoo an excuse to stop by with more food.

To Zhenya, food had always been just sustenance. A source of energy for survival, so he never bothered with regular meals, eating only when necessary. His body, trained by that eating habit, rarely felt hunger. He never gained or lost significant weight either.

However, in the two years he had spent in Korea, his weight had increased by nearly 10 kilograms. Although the weight was mostly muscle, and his physique hadn't changed much, the problem was that he now felt hunger if he skipped a meal.

"...Let's wash up first."

He was about to close the refrigerator door when a frying pan caught his eye. He instinctively took it out to check what was inside, only to find a note stuck to the lid that read, "Eat this, if you want." It was Kwon Taekjoo's handwriting. With a curious look, he opened the lid. Inside

were scrambled eggs, cooked so thoroughly that they had taken on a brownish hue.

Zhenya could picture Kwon Taekjoo feeling sheepish after attempting to make breakfast for his late-sleeping lover, only to fail miserably and resort to leaving out the instant pelmeni. He couldn't help but laugh again. With Taekjoo around, there was never a dull moment.

"Taekjoo, you really do the cutest things sometimes."

Humming to himself as he spoke, Zhenya sat down at the table. He pushed the instant pelmeni aside and began to eat the cold scrambled eggs. As expected, they were far from soft, being dry and hard. He even crunched down on a few pieces of eggshell. The carrots and onions had been diced so finely that they only added a faint aroma without any texture.

As he endured the subpar breakfast, he started to think about what he should do today. On most days, he would've tracked Kwon Taekjoo's location first thing, but today, he decided to go elsewhere. Only one place came to mind.

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He repeatedly pressed the doorbell. The other person did not come out quickly. On any other day, she would have come out to meet him in front of the elevator as soon as the intercom notification signaled the vehicle's arrival. He was about to press the doorbell again but hesitated.

"Ah..."

Suddenly, Kwon Taekjoo's remark came to mind. As Kwon Taekjoo was carefully placing the side dishes his mother had made into the refrigerator, he had mentioned,

'My mother will be staying at my aunt's place for a while.'

It had been mentioned in passing that the aunt lived in Canada, that she was going to have surgery because of an illness, that Kwon Taekjoo's mother was going to Canada to take care of her, and that depending on the situation, she might have to stay for an extended period. He had heard it all but had forgotten. He had become accustomed to visiting Kwon Taekjoo's house whenever he wasn't there.

Kwon Taekjoo's mother didn't have much in common with him. Yet, every time she saw Zhenya, she would smile brightly and warmly greet him, so he would appropriately interact with her. Zhenya didn't know if her cooking skills that Kwon Taekjoo constantly boasted about were that extraordinary, but thanks to her, he had gotten quite used to Korean food.

She was quick-witted and took care of things as needed, making things easier in many ways. Moreover, the fact that she told Zhenya everything about Kwon Taekjoo's past — down to the smallest details — that Kwon Taekjoo himself would never disclose was something Zhenya found quite welcoming.

It wasn't just because she was Kwon Taekjoo's mother — she was an interesting woman. She loved to smile and chatter, so there was never a dull moment when they were together.

Just watching her made Zhenya feel refreshed. The more he saw her, the more he wondered how such a small woman could have raised a son like Kwon Taekjoo. It was fascinating.

Today, he had come expecting nothing more than that small, casual amusement. But it was a letdown to find the door unanswered right in front of him. Both Kwon Taekjoo, who had gone off to work, and the small woman who used to fill in his idle hours in Kwon Taekjoo's absence were now gone.

"Hmm."

Zhenya aimlessly loitered in front of the entrance. His heart, which had been floating lightly since the morning, sank helplessly. He suddenly felt intensely bored.

He took out his phone from his pocket. He instinctively opened the location tracking app but then hesitated.

'Don't follow me.'

Kwon Taekjoo had made him promise that repeatedly. Zhenya had heard those words enough to be sick of them, but this time, the weight of the request felt different. Whether it was the way Kwon Taekjoo had been subtly watching Zhenya's reactions or how affectionate he had been before leaving, it all made the situation feel more serious.

What in the world was Kwon Taekjoo planning behind his back?

If he logged into the app, all his questions would be answered. But still, Zhenya just stared at the icon for a long while. In the end, he put the phone back in his pocket.

"Shall I try keeping a promise for once?"

Zhenya had never been bound by personal promises. In fact, no one had ever dared to demand such a thing from him. So, he didn't know what would happen if he kept a promise, or what benefits he might gain from doing so. He wasn't interested, either.

However, a promise with Kwon Taekjoo was different. He thought he might as well play the role of an obedient dog for a change. He wondered what kind of reward Kwon Taekjoo would give him. The more he thought about it, the more his mood seemed to improve.

Zhenya got into the elevator and descended back to the underground parking lot. His steps, heading toward his Bugatti, were light and brisk.

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The Russian Embassy in South Korea.

The roaring engine noise, faint from a distance, was getting closer and closer. Employees who had been working lifted their heads, confused. As they exchanged puzzled glances, they all turned toward the windows. Some who had desks by the window stood up to get a better view outside. Soon, a Bugatti boldly entered through the main gate.

"What's with all the commotion?"

Pavel, who had just finished a video conference and stepped out, scolded the chaotic atmosphere. One of the employees, who had been glancing out the window, explained the situation.

"The Ambassador has arrived."

"What? The Ambassador?"

Pavel's eyes widened in disbelief. He hadn't even begged Zhenya to come out, yet here he was, arriving at the embassy of his own accord? Pavel hurried outside without a moment to grasp the situation, and the other staff quickly followed, reading the room.

As they anxiously waited near the elevator, they hurried toward the entrance. The staff trailing Pavel looked like they were fleeing from some terrifying pursuer, their panic evident.

By the time the group reached the lobby, Zhenya was just about to get into the elevator, having only just arrived. Pavel and the group hastily approached him.

"Ambassador, what brings you here...?"

Pavel bit back the words that had slipped out and quickly composed himself, bowing politely.

"Welcome. If you had informed us beforehand, we would have sent a government car to pick you up."

"For what reason?"

Irritation was plainly written on Zhenya's face. And so, it was puzzling. Despite being the Ambassador, Zhenya rarely came to the embassy, even for major events. No matter how much Pavel pleaded, Zhenya would ignore him, often forcing Pavel to report the situation to the Kremlin. Only then would Zhenya reluctantly make an appearance. Even during those times, he either exuded an aura of menace that put the entire embassy on edge or sat around like a bump on a log, killing time.

It was natural for them to be puzzled by Zhenya's sudden visit to the embassy, especially since there was no event, and he hadn't been begged to show up. It made everyone wonder if something had gone wrong, or if he was about to cause trouble.

Of course, there had been a few times before when Zhenya had shown up without notice. The problem was that each time he did, he radiated a coldness akin to the bitter winter in Siberia. No matter how many times they spoke to him, he wouldn't respond. Even when presented with documents for approval, he showed no reaction.

He would just sit in one spot all day, staring at a blank wall, as if trying to calm his mind after a serious fight.

But today, that chill wasn't present. In fact, Zhenya seemed to be in a rather good mood. It was hard to understand why.

After being silently observed by Pavel for a long time, Zhenya tilted his head.

"Are you coming with me?"

No matter how one heard it, it sounded like he was telling them not to come. Pavel's group awkwardly smiled and took a step back.

"Ah, no. Please, go ahead."

Without hesitation, Zhenya closed the elevator door and disappeared from their sight. Pavel and the administrative officers exchanged bewildered glances, unsure of what to make of the situation.

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Once Zhenya entered his office, he leaned back completely in his chair. On his desk were piles of documents waiting for him.

"Hmm..."

During this time, Pavel hadn't pressured Zhenya to come to work, so the documents weren't particularly urgent.

Even so, Zhenya picked one up and glanced over its contents. As expected, it was another pointless proposal for an event along with a budget report. The next file was no different.

The Russian embassy was notorious for its slow handling of affairs, and that reputation only grew worse after Zhenya took over as ambassador. However, Zhenya couldn't care less. He had never paid attention to public opinion, not even once in his life.

Because of this, he found it hard to understand Kwon Taekjoo. What was the big deal if you neglected some bureaucratic tasks or government affairs?

"....."

As Zhenya absentmindedly continued signing documents, he suddenly pulled out his phone. After unlocking it with his fingerprint, he opened a secret app. A map appeared on the screen almost immediately. He told me not to follow him, but he didn't say I couldn't check where he was, he thought. Without hesitation, he tapped the location icon. A message saying "Searching for target" appeared for a moment.

Kwon Taekjoo often asked how Zhenya always knew where he was, suspecting that Zhenya monitored his every move. His suspicions weren't entirely wrong. However, tracking someone as elusive as Kwon Taekjoo required more than just simple surveillance. More detailed and immediate information was necessary.

So, some time ago, when Kwon Taekjoo had been unconscious from an injury, Zhenya had disinfected and stitched up his wound. During that time, he implanted a small chip under Kwon Taekjoo's dermis.

The chip was so tiny that it was mistaken for regular tissue by most machines and couldn't be detected by standard inspections or scans. The chip sent real-time location data to the tracking app, allowing Zhenya to keep tabs on him.

Before long, the search was complete, and Kwon Taekjoo's current location appeared. Zhenya raised his eyebrows as he absentmindedly checked the area.

“...Vladivostok?”

Zhenya couldn't believe that Kwon Taekjoo had actually gone to Russia. Though his operations were often hard to predict, this was truly unexpected. Since their relationship had evolved into a romantic one, it was the first time Kwon Taekjoo had visited Russia for business.

Zhenya leaned back, lost in thought. What could possibly link Russia and South Korea so intricately this time? It seemed likely that North Korea was somehow involved. After all, the last time Kwon Taekjoo had gone to Russia, it had been to verify intelligence regarding North Korea's supposed participation in the “Anastasia” project.

Was there a new area of cooperation between Russia and North Korea? Zhenya had no concrete knowledge, nor any real suspicions about what could be happening.

He silently retraced his thoughts. Before leaving on this mission, Kwon Taekjoo had been unusually gentle. He had accepted everything Zhenya did without resistance. At the time, Zhenya had assumed it was simply because Taekjoo felt guilty about having to work again right before Zhenya's birthday. But now, he wondered if there was more to it.

“Is there something you want from me?”

“No. Except for you doing absolutely nothing.”

“You keep saying that, but it only makes me more curious.”

Even then...

"Don't twist my words. What I'm saying is, don't put yourself at risk under the pretense of doing something for me."

"At risk? Me?"

And at that time, too.

Taekjoo hadn't been irritated like he usually was when Zhenya meddled in his affairs. Instead, he had worried about Zhenya's safety. Zhenya had even noticed Taekjoo paying attention to his family dynamics — a rarity. Was he planning to stir up things in Russia? Was he anxious that Zhenya might somehow get entangled in his work?

Strangely, despite making Zhenya promise multiple times not to follow him, Taekjoo had gone to great lengths to ensure Zhenya wouldn't break that promise. It was clear that Taekjoo was determined to leave Zhenya out of this. Perhaps Taekjoo couldn't bear the thought of them becoming enemies again, no matter the cost.

"Ah, Taekjoo. You really do treat me like I'm precious, don't you?"

Zhenya sighed, but a smile tugged at his lips. Taekjoo's actions were so adorably absurd. The image of Taekjoo, likely worrying alone about potentially being at odds with Zhenya, filled Zhenya with a strange sense of lightness. The fact that Taekjoo, who once prioritized work over everything — even his mother — was now torn between his work and Zhenya brought a quiet satisfaction. His lips curved up in amusement.

Just then, a sudden knock interrupted his moment of sweetness. The contented look on Zhenya's face vanished immediately, his expression hardening. His eyes grew cold as he stared at the closed door.

When he didn't respond, a voice called from outside,

"Ambassador, are you available?"

It seemed to be Pavel. His cautious tone made it clear he was hesitant to interrupt, likely worried about provoking Zhenya's ire.

"Come in."

"Yes, sir! I'll just step in for a moment."

Pavel hesitated for a moment before finally opening the door. He entered, carrying a stack of documents meant for approval.

"Since you're here, if you could also look at these papers...."

It seemed that Pavel had scrambled to gather as many documents as possible for approval, unsure when Zhenya might decide to show up at the office again. But his optimistic thought process froze the moment he met Zhenya's icy gaze. Zhenya's piercing blue eyes felt as if they could bore right through him, and Pavel shuddered involuntarily, his entire body trembling as if he had a gun pointed at his forehead. He couldn't take another step forward.

"Am I interrupting...?"

He barely managed to get the words out when Zhenya, with his pale, slender fingers, gave a slight beckon. The simple gesture made Pavel flinch, and he swallowed hard, forcing his feet to move toward the desk

as if they were glued to the floor. His mind raced with thoughts about those who had displeased Zhenya back in their homeland and the fates they had met. The tension in the room felt like a sharp nail driving into him.

"Too slow."

"I'm sorry!" Pavel responded hastily, standing at attention before Zhenya's desk. Zhenya looked at him with clear displeasure before parting his lips. Though it was just a brief moment, to Pavel, it felt agonizingly slow, as if time itself had shifted into a surreal crawl.

"What's the situation back home these days?"

"...What?"

Pavel looked bewildered, as if he had misheard. Of course, as an ambassador, Zhenya was supposed to stay updated on both the host country and his homeland's affairs. But coming from Zhenya, that simple question felt anything but ordinary. Zhenya was the type of person who wouldn't blink even if Russia vanished from the face of the earth.

Zhenya, however, showed no sign that Pavel had misheard.

"The last time I went back, I was too busy with personal matters to really observe. But thinking back, the Kremlin seemed pretty busy. Are they scheming something again?"

"Well, I'm not sure...."

"Not sure?"

Zhenya cut him off, tilting his head slightly, his blue eyes sharpening into icy shards. Pavel pressed his lips together, swallowing hard. His body tensed up, as if bracing itself for the worst. Zhenya could easily snap his neck if he wanted to, and the Kremlin would, as usual, look the other way.

The Kremlin's indifference. Complete noninterference. That, too, was a factor that strengthened Psikh Bogdanov's influence.

"Let me ask you once more. Do you really know nothing?"

It sounded as though he was being forced to choose: either confess willingly or just die. Pavel hesitated as he met the dangerously unwavering blue eyes that never left him. He wasn't sure if the information he knew was the kind Zhenya wanted.

"I haven't been to the homeland myself, so it's not entirely accurate, but Vladivostok has been undergoing maintenance over the past month."

"Vladivostok?"

Zhenya showed interest, and Pavel quickly nodded.

"Yes. I heard in passing that North Korea was sending researchers to 'Parmzasita.' As part of a study tour, perhaps. Since they've had a technical cooperation relationship for a long time, I thought it might be part of that."

"Hmm... A few researchers coming, and they're sprucing up the entire city for it?"

"There's talk that a high-ranking official from Bokchok is accompanying them."

"A summit meeting, perhaps?"

"If it were a visit by a leader, we would've already received a response manual on our end. And there's no way foreign embassies or intelligence agencies would stay this quiet."

"That makes it all the stranger. The fact that someone is suddenly visiting 'Parmzasita' for a study tour and that the state is preparing for such a trivial matter"

"Well, North Korea is a closed-off country, so they may be wary of drawing too much attention from the world. It seems the homeland is preparing the proper protocols in response to that."

"Even so, it's not like the Kremlin to make such a fuss just to greet a mere diplomatic envoy. I wouldn't be surprised if that North Korean researcher is bringing quite the gift."

"Hard to say. I'm not privy to those kinds of details..."

"Vladivostok."

Zhenya muttered to himself, lost in thought. A faint smile of interest crossed his face, which had previously shown no expression.

"Alright, you can go."

"Oh, yes."

Pavel set the documents he had brought aside and hurriedly left the room. At one point, his legs nearly gave out, causing him to stumble.

Beyond the quietly closed door, a sudden commotion erupted. The other staff seemed eager to check whether Pavel had made it out safely.

Zhenya remained calm, continuing his silent deduction. His long fingers rhythmically tapped on the desk.

The reason Kwon Taekjoo went to Vladivostok had become clear. So had the reason he was so intent on keeping Zhenya at arm's length. It seemed that Russia and North Korea were plotting something, and both the Kremlin and the Bogdanov family were deeply involved.

"What are you hiding, Taekjoo?"

"There's nothing like that."

"No. Something definitely happened to you. Am I wrong?"

"Nothing happened. I just didn't mention it to you, but I've been thinking about this for a while. I got a little lax for a time, but now I've snapped back to my senses."

"Hah, Taekjoo. Do you really think I wouldn't know, even if you hide it?"

"Don't try to find a reason. Don't go looking into where I go or what I hear while I'm gone. That's how it's supposed to be."

Kwon Taekjoo was always concerned about the relationship between Zhenya and the people of his family. No matter how much Zhenya tried to explain that they were worse than strangers, it never helped. What Kwon Taekjoo did would always have to prioritize the interests of South Korea, which often meant coming into conflict with Zhenya's homeland. To Zhenya, though, even if that happened, what difference did it make?

"From now on, just focus on being my lover, you fool."

Perhaps that curt remark was Kwon Taekjoo's true feelings. Don't become an enemy out of fear, don't try to become an ally so recklessly either — just stay by my side as a lover.

"Taekjoo..."

Zhenya let out a small laugh as he sank deeply into his chair. A faint smile mixed into his exhale. The chair, tilted as far back as it would go, swayed gently for a while.

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Vladivostok Airport's cargo area.

Tug carts, pulling long rows of empty dollies, were moving toward the warehouse. The driver, unmistakably Russian, turned the steering wheel with one hand while offering a nod to a passing coworker. Despite the fast-beat dance music playing through his earphones, his bored expression remained unchanged.

After parking the tug cart inside the warehouse, the man stepped out and gazed at the now quiet airport. The deep night shrouded the tarmac in darkness, with only a few planes scattered about, all with their lights off. The plane that had just unloaded cargo had been the last flight of the day.

At least, according to official records.

His gaze shifted to the pitch-black sky. Though his blue eyes, buried under drooping eyelids, gleamed sharply, his slouched posture and sluggish movements remained the same as always.

He turned his head at the sound of someone approaching. His coworker, who had been working with him until the end, raised a hand in greeting.

"I'm heading in first. Take care, Igor."

"Yeah, see you tomorrow."

He responded in his usual slow tone. Once his colleague left and even the sound of his footsteps faded, the warehouse became eerily silent. The music playing through his earphones was now loud enough to leak outside. Despite the upbeat melody that could easily make anyone sway, Igor's gaze was utterly devoid of interest.

How much time had passed? The music, which had been playing smoothly, suddenly started buffering. Igor absentmindedly tapped his earphones, and soon, the static disappeared, replaced by a man's voice.

[Hunting]

{Two Tigers. Radio check.}

He replied without hesitation. The voice was no longer that of "Igor," the cargo handler. It was now Kwon Taekjoo's — firm and devoid of any nasality. After confirming the radio code, the other party responded, [Roger,] and began reporting the situation.

[This is Foxtrot. Special train 0677 from Pyongyang has just arrived at Khasan Station.]

Earlier, it had been reported that the train passed through Rajin. Now, having arrived at Khasan, it seemed to be moving along the usual route at its normal speed. The train was expected to remain at Khasan Station for about half a day. Since Khasan was within Russian territory, the train gauge would need to be adjusted, requiring a special transfer procedure. In such cases, the cargo would either be transferred to a different train or the upper part of the train cars would be lifted and swapped out, leaving only the wheels behind. This moment was the perfect opportunity to observe the activity around the train and identify the contents of the cargo.

{What about the target?}

[Can't see them. So far, the only passengers confirmed are armed soldiers. Whatever they're transporting, security is pretty tight. The gauge exchange is happening now without any additional inspection.]

It was standard procedure for all passengers to disembark during the gauge exchange for safety reasons. When a North Korean leader previously traveled by land to Vladivostok, they disembarked at Khasan Station during the exchange and rested in a nearby village for a day. This time, there seemed to be no such movement, indicating that key targets like Park Jeong-ho were not on board. If it weren't the North Korean leader, there was no reason for such an elaborate setup.

What was strange, though, was the presence of heavily armed soldiers accompanying what appeared to be a simple freight train. Additionally, as the goods were crossing a border, even a cursory inspection should have been conducted. The fact that this was skipped suggested that the cargo had already been discussed between North Korea and Russia. It smelled fishy, to say the least.

{Anything else unusual?}

[It's hard to see clearly in the dark, but all the soldiers who disembarked from the train are wearing masks.]

{Masks? Are you sure?}

[Hmm... I take that back. I can see hoses connected to the masks. It looks like gas masks.]

{Gas masks? What are they wearing?}

[They're dressed in black from head to toe... I can't tell if it's just military gear or hazmat suits.]

{Got it. Keep observing and report anything unusual immediately. And make sure to stick to the designated radio check-in times from now on.}

[There was nothing to report.]

{Even if there's nothing, report that too. That's how we keep track of things on this end.}

[You sound like a boss.]

{You think I enjoy this? If you want to play rank games, go back to the military. I'm warning you — follow the rules even if you don't like it. Don't act on your own. If you get exposed to the enemy, it's not just you who'll be in danger.}

The transmission abruptly cut off. The music resumed as if nothing had happened. His frustration boiled over at the person's blatant disregard for basic radio protocol.

"Hah, this damn..."

He cursed quietly into the air. The American agent, "Foxtrot," had been uncooperative from the start. It was clear he had major issues with the fact that the operation was being led by South Korea, with his team playing a supporting role. Every time they communicated, he had something snide to say, and this time was no different.

Kwon Taekjoo exhaled heavily, trying to suppress his anger. At least he wasn't dealing with Foxtrot face-to-face; otherwise, the man's infuriating smirk might have clouded his judgment and ruined the mission.

But armed soldiers in gas masks and protective suits on a train from Pyongyang? Even if it was uncertain, it was something to consider carefully.

What on earth were they transporting?

If it were highly volatile chemical materials, they wouldn't risk proceeding with the gauge exchange. The process of lifting the train cars could inevitably cause unavoidable jolts. Transferring the cargo to a different train would be the safer option.

The fact that they weren't doing that suggested two possibilities. One, the material being transported wasn't sensitive to shocks. Two, transferring the entire train was somehow safer than handling the cargo by hand.

In other words, the cargo might not be sensitive to physical impact but could still be hazardous to people. That would explain why the soldiers escorting the cargo were equipped with gas masks and protective suits. The extreme caution seemed excessive for a mere collaboration on pharmaceutical research or technological exchange.

Biologist Park Jeong-ho, who had been studying the Baekdu Mountain ecosystem. The sudden invitation by Russia's state-owned pharmaceutical company 'Parmzasita' and the defense giant Rostec. The special train from Pyongyang, now in transit. North Korean soldiers

in gas masks. And Russia's secretive hospitality. These unusual facts were slowly weaving together, forming a disturbing conclusion.

The emergence of a new biochemical weapon.

Of course, it could just be an overblown suspicion. A premature conclusion, perhaps. But, there was a growing sense that what North Korea and Russia were up to was far more dangerous than anyone had previously imagined.

As Kwon Taekjoo became lost in thought, a sudden bright light from behind interrupted him. He squinted in discomfort and turned around to see two airport police officers looking into the warehouse. Upon spotting him, they approached with suspicion, and the barrels of their rifles subtly shifted in his direction.

"Hey, you there," one of them called out.

"Yes?"

Taekjoo replied calmly.

"Turn around slowly, facing us."

He obediently turned toward the police. He also raised both hands, showing a compliant attitude. However, the police remained cautious.

They still aimed their rifles at Kwon Taekjoo while exchanging glances with each other. Soon, one of them approached and checked the ID hanging around his neck. He carefully compared the picture of Igor

printed on it with Kwon Taekjoo's face. That wasn't enough; he also scanned the ID with a terminal to verify its authenticity. There was no need for such strict measures unless they were secretly planning something at an airport where all official takeoffs and landings had already ended.

"Igor Mussorgsky, what are you doing here? Didn't you hear you were supposed to clock out before midnight?"

At an international airport where hundreds of planes come and go each day, being told to leave before midnight was unheard of. But this was Russia, where such impossible things happened all the time.

Kwon Taekjoo quickly apologized and slyly responded.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't realize it was this late. I've had a lot on my mind because of family issues."

"Don't you know not to let your personal problems leak outside? Stop dawdling and get out."

"Ah, yes. Of course."

Kwon Taekjoo bowed repeatedly and left the warehouse. The police continued to follow him even as he locked the door and headed toward the parking lot. Their sharp gazes remained on him until he got into the car and started the engine. They even seemed to be checking the vehicle's license plate. Maybe they were being extra cautious about possible espionage or intrusion, but this level of suspicion only confirmed that something big was happening here.

As Kwon Taekjoo drove off, he waved to the officers.

"Well then, take care."

At that moment, there was a thud from the trunk. It seemed the real Igor, whom he had put to sleep with a sedative, had woken up. Kwon Taekjoo tensed up, checking the police's reactions, worried they might have heard. One of the officers met his eyes, scowling and shouting for him to hurry up and leave.

He bowed once more and drove away from the airport. As he circled around the terminal, he noticed more police cars and luxury sedans gathering. Barricades were being set up in various places to restrict access. It was far from an ordinary scene.

Not long after, Kwon Taekjoo's car arrived at a clearing on a hill, far from the airport. The area, thick with overgrown vegetation, was usually quiet, but at this late hour, it was especially still. He got out of the driver's seat and walked toward the rear of the car. Meanwhile, the trunk was making a racket.

When he suddenly opened the trunk, Igor, whose arms and legs were tightly bound, flinched and froze. His face was now covered in tears and sweat. The tape that had been stuck over his mouth was dangling, as if he had been persistently trying to push it off with his tongue.

"Ahhh!"

Igor gasped at the sight of Kwon Taekjoo, who looked exactly like him. Clicking his tongue, Kwon Taekjoo quickly covered Igor's mouth with his hand.

"Shh. You woke up too soon. Go back to sleep for a little longer."

"Hic! P-Please... spare me..."

"Yes, yes. I'll let you live. This will sting a little."

Without hesitation, he injected a sedative into Igor's neck. Igor screamed and struggled against his bonds before slowly going limp. Perhaps due to the involuntary relaxation, he soon began to snore softly. By the time he woke up again, everything would be back to normal, as if it had all been a bad dream.

Kwon Taekjoo tossed a bottle of water into the trunk and closed it. Returning to the driver's seat, he scanned the dark night sky. There were still no visible lights.

He took out his work phone. After unlocking the screen, he saw a message from the backup team. He entered the designated code to unlock access and checked the message.

—Koryo Airlines Special Flight JS 265. Antonov An-148. Departure from Pyongyang Airport at 11:50 PM.

He scanned the airspace around the airport with binoculars. There was nothing unusual. The airport had dimmed its lights, as if all operations had concluded, and was now engulfed in deep silence.

If the flight from Pyongyang bypassed China and went directly to Vladivostok, it would take just over an hour. It was about time for it to

appear. Resting his chin on the steering wheel, he waited a little longer. Soon, another message arrived.

—Koryo Airlines JS 265. Entering Russian airspace. Control frequency 111.98.

It wasn't the previously known control frequency. It seemed they were trying to use a separate frequency to communicate secretly, likely as a precaution against espionage or terrorism. He turned on a special radio and tuned it to the frequency. Putting in his earphones, the distinctive static buzz of radio communication came through, followed by an exchange between Koryo Airlines and the Vladivostok control tower.

[Koryo Airlines 265, approaching Vladivostok. Good evening.]

[Koryo Airlines 265, turn left to heading 340 and align with runway 7L's localizer. How are you?]

[Turning left to 340, aligned with 7L localizer. Koryo Airlines 265.]

He raised his binoculars in the direction mentioned in the communication. Through the clouds, he could faintly see the aircraft's lights flickering.

[Koryo Airlines 265, reduce speed to 210 knots, descend and maintain 4,000 feet. ILS approach runway 7 approved.]

[Reducing to 210 knots, descending and maintaining 4,000 feet. Koryo Airlines 265.]

[Koryo Airlines 265, reduce speed to 180 knots.]

[Reducing to 180 knots. ILS approach runway 7. Koryo Airlines 265.]

[Koryo Airlines 265, cleared to land on runway 7. Winds from 360 degrees at 5 knots.]

[Cleared to land on runway 7. Koryo Airlines 265.]

Koryo Airlines flight 265 came into view. Kwon Taekjoo quickly turned his phone sideways, gripping it with both hands. He then remotely launched a miniature drone he had secretly left behind in the airport warehouse. The drone was capable of flying at speeds of up to 300 km/h, equipped with a special lens on the underside that allowed it to capture clear images of fast-moving objects. It was so small that it was hard to see, especially at night.

He guided the drone toward flight JS 265 as it moved across the tarmac after landing. Just as the aircraft came to a stop, a line of official cars waiting on one side approached and lined up beside it. Soon after, a mobile staircase was connected to the aircraft, and the door opened.

The drone landed on the aircraft's wing, capturing footage of the people disembarking. As noted in the confidential documents, Sim Young-il, the North Korean General Staff's Operations Director, his aide Kim Gil-ha, and the key figure in this meeting, biologist Park Jeong-ho, all boarded the official vehicles in sequence. Their group quietly moved along a restricted route, bypassing any immigration checks.

"Okay."

As soon as Kwon Taekjoo confirmed the key figures' arrival, he retrieved the drone. He then pulled Igor out of the trunk, shoved him into the driver's seat, and untied the ropes that had bound him. Afterward, he sprayed vodka around the car, tossing the empty bottle onto the back seat. To anyone looking, it would appear that a heavily drunk driver had passed out somewhere random. Even if Igor woke up and reported it, the Russian police would likely dismiss it as the drunken ramblings of an inebriated man.

Having finished his preparations, Kwon Taekjoo pushed through the dense bushes behind the clearing. Soon, the motorcycle he had hidden there earlier came into view.

He hopped onto the bike.

"Time to get going."

Starting the engine, Kwon Taekjoo quickly sped down the slope, chasing after the North Korean delegation.

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Meanwhile, Zhenya reclined in the chair in his office, staring up at the ceiling. He had already finished all his overdue work out of boredom and now found himself with nothing to do.

On any other day, he would have already followed Kwon Taekjoo off somewhere, but for once, he was trying to restrain himself. It felt suffocating, like he was under house arrest. Even Kwon Taekjoo's

mother was away, leaving him with nowhere to kill time. He had to admit, patience wasn't one of his strong suits.

"Hmm..."

Wasn't there anything that could provide a bit of amusement? Zhenya pondered for a moment before suddenly picking up his phone. He launched that secret tracking app from before. This time, the target wasn't Kwon Taekjoo, but his second brother. Whenever he had time to spare, Zhenya would often check in on his siblings to see what they were up to. He especially kept an eye on Bazim, as his movements were often closely tied to the Kremlin's intentions.

After a brief wait, Bazim's current location appeared on the Russian map. Zhenya's eyes narrowed into a sly smile as he confirmed the coordinates.

"Looks like he's in Vladivostok too. Interesting."

Bazim, a trusted confidant of the president, had left Moscow for Vladivostok. What business could possibly be so important? Bazim rarely left his position, as his absence could always invite the risk of being replaced. Such is the nature of power — any vacancy might be filled by someone else.

For such a cautious and suspicious central official to make the journey to Vladivostok, a far-off region, meant that something significant was in the works. Perhaps he was there to welcome a diplomatic envoy from North Korea on behalf of the president. If that theory were correct, it would suggest the Kremlin had a keen interest in whatever gift the North Korean delegation might be bringing.

"What are they after this time?"

After a brief moment of pondering, Zhenya began hacking into all of Bazim's accounts — personal emails, multiple work accounts, and the records of his five phones. He even accessed the secret folders on his personal computer, bringing all the data up on the monitor. Everything was highly encrypted, but for Zhenya, breaking through was simple.

Among the files displayed on the screen were confidential documents from the Russian government. Zhenya effortlessly bypassed the secondary encryption set on each document. Having thoroughly studied Russia's security systems, and with the access privileges granted to Bazim by the Kremlin's backing, there was nothing that could stop him.

Zhenya ran a search across hundreds of confidential documents for the keyword "Vladivostok" and sorted the relevant files by date, scanning through them one by one.

- 2016: With the thawing of permafrost in northern Siberia, a deer carcass was exposed. One child who came into contact with it contracted anthrax and died, while seven adults were infected. This was the first anthrax outbreak in the region since 1941.
- 2019: The body of a wolf, dead for 27,000 years, was discovered in Siberia's permafrost. A highly infectious virus was found in its intestines.
- 2022: A donkey carcass, believed to have been buried under a lake some 48,000 years ago, was unearthed in the permafrost of Yakutsk, Siberia. Thirteen new types of viruses were detected.

Permafrost. It referred to permanently frozen ground, commonly found in polar regions or high-altitude areas. It could be just a few centimeters deep or reach hundreds of meters. Permafrost was prevalent in regions like Siberia, the Arctic, Greenland, Alaska, and northern Canada, areas known for their cold climates.

Recently, permafrost had gained attention due to global warming. With rising temperatures, the layers of permafrost were thinning, revealing the remains of plants and animals that had been buried underneath. Some of these remains harbored deadly pathogens and viruses, raising serious concerns. If humanity failed to overcome these viruses, it could lead to a pandemic.

But why was this well-known ecological threat included in confidential documents? The next sentence offered a clue:

— A new microorganism was collected from the Baekdu Mountain crater in North Korea. It is believed to be a strict aerobic microorganism, causing acute sepsis when inhaled. It exhibits a strong resistance to the human immune system, and current antibiotics or vaccines show little to no effect. Symptoms of infection include headaches, fever, vomiting, confusion, hallucinations, and respiratory distress within 24 hours of exposure. The mortality rate so far is 98%.

A deadly microorganism had been discovered on Baekdu Mountain, and it was being mentioned alongside the viruses found in the permafrost. Zhenya's mind quickly pieced the puzzle together, leading him to one conclusion.

Biochemical weapons.

Could they really be developing something like that in this day and age? He let out a brief laugh, only for it to fade quickly. If it was a Kremlin ambition, it wasn't impossible. Not long ago, an RNA virus had taken the world by storm. With its unprecedented transmission rate and lethality, the virus had caused global political, economic, social, and cultural upheaval. At the same time, there were those who had amassed vast wealth and power amid the chaos. Considering the control and societal disruption that even a tiny virus could cause, it was no surprise that the Kremlin might show interest in a newly discovered microorganism.

A newly discovered pathogenic microorganism from Mount Baekdu in North Korea. The more oxygen there is, the more active it becomes, making it difficult to prevent its spread. Once infected, existing antibiotics cannot treat it.

The fact that this information was being secretly shared only between Russia and North Korea made the situation feel ominous. Humanity wouldn't learn about the existence of this microorganism until much later, probably by the time weaponized microbes threaten the peaceful lives of people — too late by then.

Zhenya, clicking his tongue in disapproval, continued to review Bazim's personal communication records. Messages like "I've arrived in Vladivostok," "I'm going to meet the delegation," "The goods are being safely transported," and "The aircraft control communications have started," filled the report, likely sent to the Kremlin.

"How long are you going to keep licking the boots of that crazed pig?"

Shaking his head, he put his earphones in, preparing to eavesdrop on Bazim's phone conversation. Judging by the intervals between previous reports, it was about time for Bazim to contact the president.

As expected, it wasn't long before a message reading "call" appeared on the hacking window. Zhenya held his breath and waited for the call to connect. Soon enough, Bazim's voice came through the earphones.

[Yes, sir. The North Korean delegation just arrived at the airport.]

[Good. What about the goods?]

[The goods should arrive by tomorrow morning.]

[You're managing it thoroughly, right?]

[Of course.]

[Make sure to verify whether it's the right goods before any serious discussions begin.]

[Understood.]

The call ended quickly. There was no detailed mention of what the goods were or why they were being brought in, likely as a precaution against possible wiretapping. However, when piecing together various details and the information from confidential documents, it was possible to infer what the Kremlin was planning.

The Kremlin had learned about the discovery of a new microorganism in North Korea. They were fully aware of how lethal it could be to humans. Using the pretext of North Korea's inadequate pharmaceutical

infrastructure, the Kremlin likely proposed collaborating on research and the development of treatments.

The real issue was whether the Kremlin would truly use the microorganism only for developing a cure, and whether they would share the research results with the world. Zhenya was certain that they wouldn't. The directive in Bazim's conversation — to verify the goods before serious discussions — hinted at something far from humanitarian. It likely meant they were planning to test the microorganism's lethality, just as North Korea claimed.

Does Kwon Taekjoo know about all this? Does he realize what the two countries are trading and how dangerous it is?

Zhenya ran the hacking program again and changed the target. He needed to check where Kwon Taekjoo was and what orders he had received. But both his personal and work lines were out of service. It seemed like this time, he was determined to evade Zhenya completely. For now, the only information he could retrieve was the location data from the biochip secretly implanted in his body.

Zhenya tapped the table. The clash between the strong impulses rising within him and the reason he tried to maintain was deafening. He quietly stared at the blinking red dot on the tracker. The red dot, which had been lingering around Vladivostok Airport, was now slowly moving toward the city center.

It was heading in the direction of a hotel run by the family. Unless there was some unexpected change, the North Korean delegation Bazim was escorting was probably assigned to stay there.

"...Taekjoo."

Muttering under his breath, Zhenya finally stood up abruptly.

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Kwon Taekjoo was watching the Bogdanov family hotel with sleepless eyes. After Yoon Jong-woo and the rest of the North Korean delegation entered the hotel around 2 a.m., there had been no movement. Russian officers patrolled the hotel perimeter throughout the night in shifts, but none of them went inside. In fact, since the North Korean delegation's arrival, not a single person had entered or exited the hotel. The internal surveillance was likely much stricter than the external one.

The goal of the operation was to discover what North Korea and Russia were secretly discussing. If they could also secure the goods transported from North Korea to coincide with the meeting, that would be ideal, but that was something to consider later. Greed would only ruin the operation. Kwon Taekjoo wasn't working alone, so he decided not to force his way in recklessly.

As the joint operation commenced, the U.S. agent "Foxtrot" was tracking the special train from Pyongyang starting from Mount Baekdu, while the Japanese agent "Sierra" was monitoring activity on Russky Island. Kwon Taekjoo was keeping an eye on the North Korean delegation from a hideout, where he could observe the Bogdanov Hotel between the buildings in front of him.

At present, there was no way to infiltrate the hotel. He hadn't been able to plant any cameras or listening devices in advance. So, he resorted to sending tiny cameras the size of bugs into the hotel through narrow

ventilation ducts and sewage pipes. The cameras looked like cockroaches, making them blend in without drawing attention.

After linking two laptops to the respective cameras, he sent one to the room of Shim Yeong-il, the Chief of Operations of the North Korean General Staff Department, and the other to the room of Park Jeong-ho, the North Korean biologist. However, controlling the cameras was challenging because the transmission signals had to pass through several walls. As a result, he had to hide the cameras in the most inconspicuous corners and make do with gathering whatever limited information he could.

After monitoring for an entire day, he noticed something unusual. People frequently entered and left Shim Yeong-il's room, and communication devices were used freely. In contrast, Park Jeong-ho remained in his room the entire time, sitting idly. Unless he was eating or using the restroom, he stayed in one place. No one came to visit him. Occasionally, guards stationed in the hallway would come in to check on him, inspect the room, and then leave. Even then, Park Jeong-ho simply stood aside and watched as the guards rummaged through his belongings and bed. It was hard to tell whether he was being protected or watched. It was a scene one could easily mistake for a prison without bars.

"...What the hell is going on?"

Wasn't the key figure of this meeting supposed to be Park Jeong-ho? Why did it seem like he was dragged here against his will? Everything was puzzling.

Just then, the alarm he had set earlier went off. He glanced at his wristwatch. It was time for the agents to report on the status of their assigned areas. However, the communications device was oddly silent.

When you think about it, none of the agents had reported on time so far. The few reports that did come through were all vague. It seemed like they were already thinking of ways to escape if they ended up being held accountable later. Perhaps they were delayed because they were first reporting to their superiors before contacting Kwon Taekjoo. This was why he didn't want to work with other agents.

Sighing, he inserted the communication device into his ear, intending to make contact first. Just then, the device beeped.

[Hunting.]

{Two Tigers.}

[This is Foxtrot. Special train 0677 from Pyongyang, arrived in Vladivostok. Only some of the passengers disembarked, and the train entered the depot for maintenance without any cargo offloading.]

{Hmm. So the cargo is likely still on the train, stored at the maintenance depot. How's the surveillance around it?}

[Tango 4. They're only guarding the car right behind the locomotive. All four of them are armed.]

{Got it. Keep watching until further instructions.}

[What? Just sit and watch? This is the perfect chance to check the cargo. The train is stopped, and the guards have been reduced. We should take advantage of the relaxed security...]

{Are you sure the cargo is even there? Do you know what it is?}

[That's why I'm saying we need to check it out.]

{Listen, Foxtrot. The top priority of this operation is to find out what kind of deal North Korea and Russia are making, not to steal the cargo. Don't mess things up by moving too hastily.}

[Ha... Always so indecisive. I can't tell if it's because Asians are cautious or just timid.]

Foxtrot sneered, clearly displeased. It was an undeniably racist remark, but Kwon Taekjoo didn't respond. After all, they had been tracking this cargo, secretly transported from North Korea to Russia, for a while now, so he could understand Foxtrot's eagerness to confirm what it was. Even Kwon Taekjoo himself would have felt just as restless if he were in Foxtrot's shoes.

However, with so many vested interests at play, caution was critical. Acting recklessly without any certainty could ruin everything. They might end up taking the fall for something beyond their control.

Suppressing his rising anger, Kwon Taekjoo warned Foxtrot.

{'Look before you leap.' That saying doesn't just apply in Asia , does it? Being annoyingly cautious is still safer than rushing in blindly. You can't bet everything on a luck that might not come. I'm warning you — don't act on your own.}

[Hmph. Roger.]

Foxtrot ended the transmission, still clearly unhappy.

"Ugh, fuck."

Kwon Taekjoo pulled the communication device from his ear and threw it aside, leaning back. The anger that had been simmering beneath the surface surged through him.

This is why he hated joint operations. Controlling each agent was difficult enough, and if anything went wrong anywhere, the entire operation would collapse like a domino chain. If he had worked with Foxtrot or Sierra even once in the past, it might have been different. But they were all strangers, with different nationalities, so clashes were inevitable. The so-called "joint operation" felt like a three-legged race with mismatched partners, stumbling along.

With a disgruntled expression, he glared at his innocent laptop. Not long after, a knock echoed at Shim Young-il's room. He quickly put his earpiece back in.

[Come in.]

Shim Young-il's voice came through. His secretary, Kim Gil-ha, soon appeared.

[So, how did it go?]

[As ordered, we left the train at the maintenance depot. and they said the Russians will handle the transport tomorrow.]

[No issues?]

[We gave them strict warnings, so they wouldn't dare cause any trouble.]

[Understood. You may leave now.]

[Yes.]

Shim Young-il waited for Kim Gil-ha to leave before making a phone call. As soon as the call connected, he bowed slightly, making it obvious who the recipient might be. Shim Young-il glanced around cautiously before standing up and moving closer to the window. At that moment, static noise, indicating radio interference, came through his earpiece. It seemed the area around the window or door was equipped with some device to prevent eavesdropping. Throughout the call, Shim Young-il kept his hand over his mouth, making it difficult to figure out what was being discussed.

With a low sigh, he removed the earphones. He thought things would go smoothly, but maybe he underestimated his opponent.

Shim Yeong-il finished the call without Taekjoo getting any clear outcome. Right afterward, he left the room with a relieved expression. It seemed like things were going as they had hoped.

A sense of unease crept over him. While the right moment often followed a long wait, merely biding his time wasn't always the best approach. To seize every opportunity, one had to stay vigilant. Yet here he was, sitting idle and watching the movements of his enemies, anxious that he might be overlooking something important.

It was then that the communicator rang again. He flinched instinctively before hurriedly putting the device to his ear.

[Hunting.]

{Two Tigers.}

[This is Sierra. Alpha, do you copy?]

It was a radio transmission from 'Sierra,' an agent from the Japan. Had there been some movement detected at the Far Eastern Federal University, where Sierra was stationed?

{I hear you. Report.}

[The atmosphere here is unusual around midnight. Black trucks are arriving one after another, and the Natural Sciences Building has been completely cordoned off since the evening under the pretext of a fire inspection. The surrounding area is barricaded, making it impossible to approach.]

{According to Foxtrot, a train that departed from Pyongyang seems to have delivered something. It looks like they'll transfer the cargo to your location overnight. Do you see anyone wearing gas masks or hazmat suits?}

[No, not at all.]

{Can you tell what's inside the trucks?}

[They're all enclosed trucks, so it's hard to identify.]

{Is there no way to get a closer look?}

[Wouldn't that be too dangerous?]

{...Yeah, if you're not confident, forget it. But if you see anyone wearing gas masks, hazmat suits, or notice any decontamination equipment, report it immediately.}

[Do you have any idea what's going on?]

{It's not certain yet. Once things become clearer, I'll share it with you. Don't get anxious for no reason. If everything goes as expected, the cargo will be moved tonight. If your location is the final destination, things will get busier, so stay alert. And just in case, make sure to have gas masks ready in advance.}

[Roger, that.]

As soon as the communication with Sierra ended, a sigh escaped. Hiding in a safe place and merely spying didn't yield quality information. One of the agents acted recklessly, while the other was overly passive, deepening the frustration. Kwon Taekjoo even wondered if it would be better for him to handle all three locations himself. If long-time partners often ended up out of sync, how much could one really expect from a hastily assembled team?

Suppressing his growing discontent, he checked the monitor showing Park Jeong-ho. Park, who had been sitting quietly the whole time, suddenly stood up. Then he strode toward the camera.

"Huh...?"

Before he could react, the monitor was filled with Park Jeong-ho's face.

"What kind of cockroach...?"

Without hesitation, Park reached out toward the bug-shaped camera. In no time, the lens was covered by his hand, and the screen went black.

"Damn it, did he notice?"

Park Jeong-ho, holding the camera in his hand, examined its exterior for a while. At first glance, it looked like a cockroach, but upon closer inspection, something felt off. Especially since the person in question was a biologist, it was only a matter of time before the camera's true nature was discovered.

Kwon Taekjoo groaned, clutching his hair. In the meantime, Park, still holding the camera, went into the bathroom. Without hesitation, he tossed the camera into the toilet and flushed it. The camera was helplessly swept away by the forceful current. The video feed captured Park's indifferent expression as he watched it disappear before cutting out.

"Argh!"

Kwon Taekjoo hurriedly grabbed a telescope and moved to the window. He needed to observe the movements at the hotel. Just in case, he kept the communicator on, ready to inform Foxtrot and Sierra that their operation had been exposed.

However, no matter how long he waited, everything around the hotel remained quiet. If Park Jeong-ho had reported the existence of the

surveillance camera to his superiors, there should have been some noticeable change.

But even after watching for a long time, nothing happened. The surroundings of the hotel were so calm it was almost serene. Not even the security personnel seemed to be exchanging radio messages.

"...What's going on?"

Could it be that Park Jeong-ho didn't report anything? Why? He would've definitely realized that what he had caught wasn't a real bug.

Thinking back, the way Park disposed of the surveillance camera in the toilet also felt odd. If he wanted to claim that someone was spying, he'd need evidence. Wouldn't it make more sense to hand the camera over to the guards rather than dispose of it like that?

No way...

A sudden instinct flashed through his mind. He immediately returned to his seat and began replaying the live footage that had just been recorded.

Park Jeong-ho, who had been sitting in the same spot all day, suddenly stared at the camera. Kwon Taekjoo zoomed in on the footage for a closer look. Park's gaze was fixed on the camera, his eyes moving as if he were aware of someone else's presence watching him.

Then, all of a sudden, Park got up and approached the camera.

‘What kind of cockroach...?’

Just like catching a bug, Park grabbed the camera and examined its shape for a while. Then, just as before, he went to the bathroom and threw the camera into the toilet.

Feeling an odd sense of unease, Taekjoo rewound the footage and played it back at half-speed. Park seemed to have noticed the camera and slowly approached it. Without hesitation, he grasped the camera, staring intensely at the unfamiliar object that someone might have sent.

“Hmm? What’s this?”

Noticing something, Taekjoo pressed the pause button. Then he rewound the footage by ten seconds and watched again.

‘What kind of cockroach...?’

In the slow-motion replay, Park’s actions were no different from before. But right after mentioning the cockroach, his lips moved slightly for a few more moments. He didn’t say anything out loud. Taekjoo maximized the audio volume and opened an audio analysis graph, but no sound was detected — at most, it was just his breathing.

Even so, Taekjoo replayed the same part over and over again. While there was still no sound, Park’s lip movements became more pronounced each time.

“He’s definitely saying something.”

He listened to the footage again. Park barely moved his lips, as if he were careful not to be caught on the surveillance cameras that the North Koreans had set up throughout the room. Taekjoo focused all his attention on Park's lips, trying to mimic the words he was mouthing.

"Sa... sav..."

Like reading lips, Taekjoo meticulously followed Park's mouth movements. Finally, the result came to him:

"Save me?"

An unexpected message was revealed.

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Bazim was staying in a nearby inn near the hotel, maintaining close communication with the Kremlin. The president had repeatedly emphasized that the contents of the current talks must not be leaked to the outside world. It wasn't out of concern for reputation. Rather, they were wary of the newly discovered microorganism from Mount Baekdu being revealed to the world before they had thoroughly analyzed and determined its potential use.

The microorganism brought from North Korea was scheduled to be transferred to the Far East Federal University's laboratory for detailed analysis and animal testing. Of course, many things had to be

coordinated with the North before that could happen. The Kremlin wanted to exert greater influence in the collaboration by emphasizing Russia's technological superiority.

If the microorganism from Mount Baekdu met their expectations, it was clear that Russia would want to claim full control over it. In return, North Korea would likely demand a hefty sum.

It was crucial to verify whether this microorganism was truly worth it.

Bazim had read and re-read the report sent in advance by the North. In summary, the unique microorganism discovered on Mount Baekdu seemed akin to a pathogenic bacteria or virus. It wasn't problematic in its natural state, but when animals inhaled it, the situation changed. According to North Korea's own tests on mice and pigs, the test subjects died from acute sepsis within 6 to 24 hours of exposure to the microorganism. Only one subject survived, and even then, it was left unable to breathe on its own.

Would it work on humans as well?

That was the first question that came to mind upon reading the report. North Korea hadn't specifically mentioned human experimentation. But considering they operated political prison camps notorious for human rights violations, where dozens of bodies reportedly emerged each day, it wasn't far-fetched. Those bodies, under the supervision of the Ministry of State Security, were either buried in mass graves or cremated, making it easy to keep the cause of death a secret.

Moreover, North Korea wouldn't have proposed cooperation without some certainty about the microorganism's usefulness. It stood to

reason that its lethality had been proven in humans as well — unless North Korea intended to deceive Russia outright.

However, regardless of alliances, Russia couldn't blindly trust North Korea's report. Given the large sums involved in the deal, it was essential for Russia to repeatedly verify the quality of the product. This was the reason the sample, recently collected, had been transported to Vladivostok despite the risks of leakage.

As Bazim carefully re-read the North Korean report, ensuring no details were overlooked to minimize experimental error, his phone suddenly rang. It was a message from the intelligence officer dispatched to South Korea. The agent had been sent under the guise of a diplomat to the Russian embassy in Seoul to monitor Zhenya, who was unpredictable.

"What is it? At this hour?"

A feeling of unease washed over him. Reports related to Zhenya usually came once a day at a scheduled time. Receiving a message this late could only mean that Zhenya had made an unexpected move — like the time he suddenly visited Odinokiy and fiddled with the weapons he had created. He quickly checked the message.

— Target has boarded the private jet. Destination: Vladivostok.

Bazim's brow furrowed deeply. He read the message again, but it was exactly as he had understood.

"Yevgeny is coming here?"

Zhenya had no real connection to Vladivostok. Even if the man was visiting purely for arms business, it didn't clear up any of Bazim's suspicions. Yevgeny rarely stepped into the forefront unless it was a special case. Transactions were almost always conducted through professional brokers.

So why was Yevgeny suddenly coming to Vladivostok at this time?

As the question swirled in his head, one hypothesis emerged.

"Could it be because of that Korean spy again?"

That one assumption immediately brought clarity to his confused thoughts. There were only two situations in which Zhenya would leave Korea: to seek out his personal weapons at Odinokiy Island or when Kwon Taekjoo was sent on an overseas mission.

Most of what Kwon Taekjoo — or more accurately, the South Korean government — was trying to do often caused problems for Russia or its allies. There had been more than a few times when Zhenya's involvement put his family in a difficult position. Despite being his brother and having explained things on behalf of the Kremlin multiple times, Zhenya had never listened, not even slightly. Even when warned that he wouldn't escape unscathed if he kept it up, Zhenya only responded with provocation, saying that if he wasn't afraid of the consequences, they could go ahead and try.

Now, Zhenya was coming to Vladivostok, a place he had no ties to. It could only be because of Kwon Taekjoo. He didn't know how the confidential information had leaked or what scent the Koreans had picked up, but all the pieces seemed to fit together perfectly.

"Sigh... Yevgeny, you just had to do this, didn't you?"

It was infuriating. To think that Yevgeny, who was so obsessed with his disgusting affair with a man, had betrayed both his family and his homeland. Bazim had never been able to understand Zhenya, not then and not now.

In any case, it was impossible to overturn a deal that was nearly finalized. Moreover, Bazim's suspicions about the South Korean government's covert activities were still just that — suspicions. He had yet to secure any concrete evidence. It seemed like the right time to try using bait. If things went well, he might be able to resolve two concerns at once.

After thinking it over, Bazim made a phone call. Despite the late hour, the other party answered immediately.

"It's me. I believe we will be able to prepare the subject you requested soon. There's no need to worry about complications afterward. Their identities are unclear, so even if they vanish without a trace, there will be no issues. Yes, I guarantee it. Oh, the timing of the experiment? That's the only problem... but don't worry. The subjects will enter the chamber at the right time. All we need to do is have the prepared chamber ready."

A deep smile spread across Bazim's face, and a faint gleam appeared in his calm eyes.

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Kwon Taekjoo stared at the division director on the other side of the monitor, his expression complex. As soon as he saw Park Jeong-ho's message, he had urgently requested an unofficial meeting. Despite having command over the current operation, rescuing Park Jeong-ho was beyond Kwon Taekjoo's authority. It required approval and a decision from higher-ups.

An unforeseen variable had arisen during the mission. In such situations, there were typically three options: proceed as planned, adjust the mission to accommodate the new development, or withdraw to avoid exposure. However, none of these decisions were Kwon Taekjoo's to make.

Director Kwak, who had already received the preliminary message, seemed uncertain despite having a general understanding of the situation.

[Park Jeong-ho asked for rescue? What does that mean?]

"Did you review the video I sent?"

[Of course. It does look like he's asking for help, just as you claimed. But we could be mistaken. Given how critical this matter is, I think we need cross-verification. I'll hand it over to the relevant team for a thorough evaluation.]

"Ha... we're running out of time."

[Don't panic. It's not going to change anything. What's wrong with being cautious? Let's be honest — our goal isn't to protect Park Jeong-ho. For all we know, he might have set a trap to lure us in.]

"If that were the case, he would have informed the North Korean guards the moment he discovered the surveillance camera, telling them that someone was spying on him.

And if the wiretap had been discovered, whether at the hotel, the train depot, or Far Eastern University, it wouldn't be this quiet right now."

[True, but all I'm saying is don't jump to conclusions. When do you think Park Jeong-ho first realized something was off?]

"I was going to ask you about that. The surveillance camera used in this operation — was a cockroach. Was it made to fit the local environment here?"

[Well, usually, we don't consider those details.]

"That's probably why he noticed. Park Jeong-ho is a biologist. Even at a glance, Russian cockroaches wouldn't be identical to Korean ones, right? A trained eye like his would notice the difference. I think he realized the cockroach wasn't real because it's a species not commonly found in Vladivostok. And since North Korea and Russia were already openly monitoring him, he probably guessed that a third party was spying on him."

Park Jeong-ho was essentially under house arrest. The fact that the North Korean guards were constantly keeping an eye on him since the airport, and that he seemed aware of the surveillance as he sat still for extended periods, confirmed this. It's possible that after sending a silent plea for help, he discarded the camera out of fear that his message wouldn't get through or that it would tip off the North Koreans.

This reasoning cleared up most of the lingering doubts Taekjoo had while observing Park Jeong-ho. But it also raised a new question.

What kind of threat was Park Jeong-ho facing? There could only be one reason why such a prominent biologist was being confined. Perhaps his scientific beliefs were at odds with the ruling party's agenda, or even the national interest.

Director Kwak let out a low sigh.

[Alright, let's assume Park Jeong-ho opposed the leadership, which explains his current treatment. If we can secure him, we could uncover the crux of the North Korea-Russia summit in one go. We could also easily figure out what it is they've been protecting like a sacred relic since Pyongyang.]

"Our agents won't need to be exposed to unnecessary risks either."

[Exactly. But since this is an unexpected variable, we need to approach it more calmly. We need to be clear about what we can and can't do right now. After all, you're on Russian soil. You're not there to rescue someone — you're there to dig into secrets between two nations. They must not know you were ever there.]

"I understand what you're saying. But if we can secure Park Jeong-ho, we could wrap up this operation immediately. We'd also avoid the hassle of getting and analyzing the item loaded on the special train. If that item is the dangerous material we suspect, we'll be able to take action before it's too late."

He pushed hard to convince Director Kwak. A deep sigh came from the other end of the phone.

[Do you think just rescuing Park Jeong-ho will solve everything? He has a family. They're likely being held hostage in North Korea. If that weren't the case, Park Jeong-ho would've been far more direct in asking for help. Right now, we're not in a position to rescue both him and his family. Even if we managed to contact Park Jeong-ho and convince him to defect, there's no guarantee he would leave his family behind. It would turn into a pointless struggle. You agree with that, right?]

"...Yes."

Kwon Taekjoo had to admit it. They were short on manpower and firepower; a full-scale operation deep in enemy territory was impossible. With North Korea and Russia both keeping close tabs on Park Jeong-ho, approaching him secretly or extracting him without a trace was nearly impossible.

"So you're telling me to just stand by and watch?"

[What other choice do we have?]

"Director, if Park Jeong-ho refused the party's demands as we suspect, then the moment he's no longer useful to them, he'll be executed. The same fate likely awaits his family, held as hostages. Won't you regret this decision then?"

[Listen, G1, this is a joint operation. Any decisions we make need approval from both the U.S. and Japan. Reaching a consensus among the three countries is a challenging task. It will take time to convince everyone, and as time goes on, mistrust and disagreements will only breed confusion. To be blunt, do you really think either country cares if a North Korean biologist dies? Just because someone turns against the

enemy doesn't mean they'll be loyal to us. Defecting from the North doesn't guarantee allegiance to us.]

Kwon Taekjoo couldn't argue with that. He couldn't definitively say Park Jeong-ho was on their side either.

"So, we continue with the operation?"

[For now, yes. We haven't detected any unusual developments yet. But considering the possibility of exposure, we need to heighten our alert level. The headquarters will also consider whether we can extract Park Jeong-ho, but for now, focus on identifying what was transported from Pyongyang.]

"Understood."

Reluctantly, Kwon Taekjoo responded, but then his silent communication device suddenly buzzed. He quickly scanned the hotel area with his binoculars, but there was no visible activity — likely due to the late hour. Were the other agents seeing something different in their assigned areas?

"Director, I have to go — there's a transmission. I'll report any changes."

He abruptly ended the conversation with Director Kwak and inserted his earpiece.

[Hunting.]

The voice on the other end was of Foxtrot, the American agent. For some reason, his tone sounded more urgent than before.

{Two tigers.}

[This is Foxtrot. The Russians are unloading cargo from Train 0677. The items are packed in iceboxes and being transported by a specialized refrigerated truck.]

{Iceboxes and a refrigerated truck... Sounds like something that can't afford to thaw.}

[That's highly likely. So, what's the plan? Don't tell me you're going to sit back and watch again?]

{Hold on. There's no movement here yet. I need to check Sierra's status too...}

A frustrated sigh came from the other side. Foxtrot voiced his irritation without hesitation.

[Come on, Alpha. What are you waiting for? We're so close! If they aren't moving, it means they're completely off guard. This is the perfect time to strike!]

{We don't even know how dangerous that item is.}

[Don't give me that nonsense, you coward! How long are you going to sit around and calculate every detail? Do you think they're going to wait

for us to act? Once we get our hands on that item, it'll only be a matter of time before we find out how dangerous it is!]

{Quiet down before they hear your barking. I've told you this plenty of times: our mission is to find out what North Korea and Russia are plotting, not to steal whatever item they're trading.}

[Stop being an idiot! Once we secure that item, it's game over.]

{Let's say we get our hands on it. Then what? How are we supposed to smuggle it out of this country?}

[We'll hide it in the embassy first and then figure it out from there.]

That answer made Taekjoo burst out laughing.

{The embassy? That's your brilliant plan? You clearly don't know the Russians. They wouldn't hesitate to storm an embassy if they had to.}

[Against the United States? They wouldn't risk a full-scale war just to get their hands on this. As reckless as the Russians can be, they're not brainless. And if they were that stupid, I'd gladly put a bullet in their heads myself.]

Whether it was patriotism, pride, or just his desire to boast about his nation's power, Taekjoo was too exhausted to argue with a fool bloated with bravado.

{Yeah, sure. But let me warn you, don't make any rash moves. Don't waste all the work we've done so far by acting out.]

[Waste? Who are you calling reckless? If you keep dragging this out, we're just going to end up chasing their tails! I don't know how slow you've been moving, and frankly, I don't care. But don't ruin my career while you pretend to be a leader!]

Foxtrot shouted in anger. Taekjoo already knew he was hot-tempered. He had somewhat prepared for the possibility that he might act emotionally and ruin things at a crucial moment. But he couldn't just sit back and watch him openly sneer and defy orders.

During an operation, the leader's command was absolute. This was especially true when the failure of the mission directly correlated with the sacrifice of team members. If there was a team member who, out of defiance, tried to act on their own, there was only one way to handle it.

{Foxtrot, you're out of this mission.}

The order was given in a calm tone. There was no emotion in Kwon Taekjoo's final command toward Foxtrot.

[What?]

Soon after, Foxtrot's astonished laughter could be heard from the other side of the comms. His protests grew even more heated.

[You use people as you please, and now that you're done with me, you're telling me to get lost?]

{A team member who loses control endangers even their allies. Any risk, no matter how small, needs to be eliminated.}

Kwon Taekjoo wasn't angry in the slightest. He simply maintained a firm stance, one that no persuasion, negotiation, cajoling, or threat could shake.

Foxtrot clicked his tongue repeatedly in frustration.

[Fine, I'll back off. You two timid Asians can have fun playing together!]

He didn't forget to be sarcastic till the end. Right after, a sharp mechanical noise blared in his ear. It seemed Foxtrot had smashed his comms in a fit of rage. Kwon Taekjoo furrowed his brow in annoyance and pulled out the device from his ear. The unexpected noise made his whole head buzz.

“Damn, that racist bastard!”

He cursed, fuming with anger. If Foxtrot had been there, he might have thrown a punch. This was why teamwork never suited him. Especially when absolute command structures weren't guaranteed, and even more so when they came from different nationalities.

Kwon Taekjoo ran his hand through his hair in frustration and took a deep breath. Then, with an irritated gesture, he opened the group messenger. Despite his anger, there were still things he needed to do. He had to notify Director Kwak and the backup team that Foxtrot had been removed from the mission. He also needed to check the situation with Sierra since the package was being transported.

— Foxtrot is now excluded from Operation Hunting Two Tigers.  
Immediately cease all material support and information sharing.

As soon as he sent the message, his work phone rang. It was HQ. He sighed softly before answering.

“Yeah, what’s up?”

[You’re excluding Foxtrot all of a sudden? What’s going on?]

“That’s how it turned out. He keeps refusing to follow orders and tries to do things his way. He’ll screw things up sooner or later, that guy. It’s going to put both me and Sierra at risk. So could you please persuade the Americans at HQ to either pull back to support or replace him with someone who listens?”

[You need to make sense. How are we going to find a replacement immediately?]

“Is that my problem? Or maybe they can just sit back and do nothing.”

[Don’t complicate things during crucial moments. Why not just ask the Americans to persuade their agent?]

“If that were possible. He’s stubborn as a mule. Let’s just hope he doesn’t cause any trouble...”

Kwon Taekjoo hadn’t even finished speaking when a sudden explosion was heard in the distance. He immediately sprang to his feet and rushed to the window on the opposite side. Grabbing his binoculars, he scanned the direction of the explosion. Soon enough, he spotted small but unmistakable flames in his field of view.

[What? What's going on? What was that noise just now?]

“Towards the southeast, about 18 kilometers ahead... looks like it's near the Russky Bridge. Something just exploded on the access road.”

[Are you sure?]

“Yes. The Russky Bridge has been closed to traffic since midnight, so it's definitely not a normal traffic accident. I need to check it out. I'll report back.”

Kwon Taekjoo ended the call with HQ and anxiously watched the growing flames. His heart pounded wildly in his chest, a cold and unsettling sense of dread creeping up his spine.

Trying to shake off the unease, he left his hideout and headed to the rooftop. Kicking open the creaky old door, he looked out in the direction of the explosion.

No matter how many times he checked, it was definitely near the Russky Bridge.

What the hell... could it be Foxtrot?

Had he gone off on his own the moment he was excluded from the mission? As he pondered what to do about the gnawing suspicion, his comms buzzed in his ear. It was a message from Sierra.

[Alpha, what was that explosion just now?]

Sierra sounded frantic, not even bothering to verify the comms code before asking. Before Kwon Taekjoo could respond, Sierra urgently reported the situation at Far Eastern Federal University.

[The situation here is suspicious too! The soldiers and bodyguards who were on standby have all come outside and are searching the area!]

{It seems like Foxtrot acted on his own.}

[What did you say?]

{That bastard went ahead and caused trouble!}

Taekjoo gritted his teeth. Immediately afterward, sirens blared not far away. Police cars, fire trucks, and even the police special forces, with flashing lights, seemed to be rushing toward the accident scene in a line.

The enemy also seemed to be caught off guard by the sudden incident. In no time, black vans sped over and surrounded the once-quiet hotel, and armed bodyguards poured out.

If the explosion at the Russky Bridge was indeed caused by Foxtrot, as suspected, it was only a matter of time before the operation was exposed. No, it might already be too late. They had to withdraw.

{Sierra, hide yourself immediately. I'll contact you again.}

Kwon Taekjoo cut the communication and turned around. Before the enemies arrived, he had to destroy the hideout without leaving a trace and escape.

He cursed under his breath, hurriedly pushing open the rooftop door. In that instant, his vision went black. It felt as if a giant wall had appeared before him.

".....!"

For a moment, he froze, but then instinctively drew his gun. A pale hand suddenly reached out and covered both his mouth and the barrel of his gun. He had half-pulled the trigger but hesitated. The hand that briefly flashed in his view was all too familiar. The silhouette narrowing his field of vision also seemed vaguely recognizable.

The feel of the hand on his face, the strength of the grip — it was all too certain. Even the familiar scent that wafted into his nose confirmed his suspicions.

"...Zhenya?"

As he mumbled in confusion, something sharply pierced his neck. Almost instantly, a distinct chemical smell filled his nose and clouded his mind.

"Ugh, what are you...!"

"It's better if you take a little nap, Taekjoo."

As he struggled to break free, Zhenya pressed down on him harder. The scent, the warmth, the feel of the skin, and even the voice — everything was undeniably Zhenya. It was him.

But why? Why was this happening?

The burning questions in his mind soon faded as his consciousness dimmed. As his senses drifted away, the shrill wails of dozens, perhaps hundreds, of sirens rang sharply in the distance.

## 6. Cease fire

A series of violent explosions and bursts of sound assaulted Kwon Taekjoo's ears. His mind was so foggy that he couldn't distinguish whether it was an illusion or reality. Following that, a piercing beeping noise drilled through his eardrums and struck straight into his brain. He opened his eyes only after all the noise had subsided.

The lingering smell of chemicals in his body jabbed at his brainstem like a sharp needle, making even breathing feel uncomfortable.

Exhaling deeply, he tried to grasp at his muddled thoughts. He forced himself to recall his last memory. It seemed like there had been a sudden attack at the hideout. Did he lose consciousness after that? Then where was he now?

As he opened his eyes wide and tried to sit up, he hesitated. The abrupt movement made his head throb as if it were about to split.

"Ugh..."

A groan escaped his lips instinctively. Gritting his teeth in irritation, he scanned his surroundings. The space that filled his vision was oddly familiar.

Not just the air and the smell lingering in the room, but even the feel of the bedding against his skin.

Am I dreaming? This isn't right.

His body reacted instinctively, and he felt around for his holster, but it was empty. Glancing around, he spotted his gun resting quietly on the bedside table.

There was no sign of his communicator or phone.

Kwon Taekjoo quickly grabbed the gun and checked the magazine. It was fully loaded. What happened after the attack? He hadn't been able to pull the trigger back then. What exactly went down? A final memory abruptly surfaced in his hazy mind.

"...Zhenya?"

On the rooftop of the building he had used as a hideout, he had come face-to-face with Zhenya. He hadn't seen his face directly, but the silhouette, the scent, the touch — there was no mistaking it. It was definitely Zhenya.

Why had Zhenya appeared there, and how? And when had Kwon Taekjoo been moved to Odinokiy Island?

One question led to another, confusion flooding his mind. Had he perhaps been dreaming? Or was this very moment a dream? Nothing was clear, but a disquieting, cold suspicion began creeping into his thoughts, unsettling him. As much as he wanted to dismiss the possibility, an unpleasant and chilling premonition kept tugging at the edges of his consciousness.

Eventually, he heard footsteps outside the door. They were quiet enough that an average person might not have noticed, but Kwon Taekjoo recognized them instantly. Just from the weight and presence in each step, he could tell who it was. His eyes narrowed sharply as he focused on the door.

The footsteps stopped just outside, and the doorknob slowly turned. With a faint click, the door creaked open, revealing none other than Zhenya.

As soon as Zhenya spotted Kwon Taekjoo awake, he raised an eyebrow. He stepped into the room with a smirk. Oddly, instead of his usual scent, a heavy smell of smoke clung to him.

"You always point that gun at me. One day, you'll finally shoot."

Zhenya chuckled, glancing at the barrel of the gun Kwon Taekjoo had trained on him. His expression was calm, as if nothing was out of the ordinary. Kwon Taekjoo's face, however, hardened even further.

Seeing Zhenya just before losing consciousness hadn't been an illusion. He had wished it had all been a dream or a hallucination. But now, with Zhenya standing right in front of him, his already turbulent mind grew even more chaotic.

"What the hell happened?"

Kwon Taekjoo asked in a low voice. It wasn't just because his voice was hoarse from having passed out. The weight of the atmosphere added to it, yet Zhenya casually shrugged his shoulders, as if oblivious.

"Why don't you eat something first? It's hard to think when your stomach's empty. Hungry animals tend to get a bit more irritable. How about some ramen?"

Zhenya turned as if he was about to head to the kitchen. Ramen, at a time like this? The back of Kwon Taekjoo's neck tightened with irritation.

"I asked you what happened."

He growled at Zhenya's carefree back. Zhenya stopped mid-step and turned his head, scrutinizing Kwon Taekjoo's hardened face for a long moment. After what seemed like careful consideration, Zhenya's answer was completely unexpected.

"You've been out for about half a day."

"What..."

"I wanted to use something milder, but that's the only drug I had on me."

Zhenya casually tapped his own neck. When Kwon Taekjoo instinctively touched his own, a sharp, dull pain shot through him. The needle had been jabbed in roughly, and his struggles during the injection must have deepened the wound.

"You're managing to sit up, even though that should be pretty hard right now. I've got to admire your pride, at least."

Zhenya smiled leisurely. After barging in, ruining everything, he acted as if it was no big deal. Kwon Taekjoo's head, which had been burning with frustration, suddenly felt like it was about to explode. How could Zhenya take everything so lightly, so easily?

"What the hell are you doing?"

"What am I doing?"

Feigning ignorance, Zhenya echoed Kwon Taekjoo's words before letting out an exaggerated "Ah," as if he'd suddenly remembered something. He smirked, mocking Kwon Taekjoo.

"Are you mad that I injected you with anesthetic? Taekjoo, you did the exact same thing to me, remember?"

Zhenya chuckled like it was all a joke. Kwon Taekjoo's brow furrowed deeply, his face twisting with the effort of suppressing his rising anger.

"Cut the crap and explain properly. Why are you here?"

"Here? What, is this somewhere I'm not allowed to be? It's my island, my home."

"You call that an explanation?!"

Kwon Taekjoo couldn't hold back anymore and yelled. Zhenya's eyes widened slightly at the outburst, but he soon regained his composure. His expression was as if he genuinely didn't understand what the problem was.

"You fucking bastard, you shouldn't be here."

A frustrated and angry mutter escaped from between clenched teeth. His tightly balled fists were trembling, pale with tension. Zhenya's pupils subtly contracted, alert to every minute change in Kwon Taekjoo's body.

But that was it. Zhenya's face showed no significant reaction. He still seemed completely unaware of what he had done wrong, or why Kwon Taekjoo was so angry. His voice, when he spoke again, was as calm as ever.

"Taekjoo, why are you so upset again?"

It felt like his tangled thoughts were being ripped apart. His nerves were already shot, and he snapped without swallowing his words.

"I told you not to follow me! This time, I said don't follow me ! Can't you understand plain words?"

"I didn't follow. I came to save you."

"What the hell did you just say?"

"When your lover rushes headlong into a fire without thinking, what can you do? I had to stop you somehow."

Kwon Taekjoo let out a breathless laugh. How could someone who could destroy a person with a flick of his finger say something so

innocent? His mood plummeted further and further, crashing to rock bottom.

Whether it was the lingering effects of the drugs or the slow blood circulation caused by his growing anger, his vision started to blur. His legs wobbled and threatened to give out beneath him. Heat flushed through his entire body, and even his breathing became ragged. He irritably rubbed his damp forehead.

Zhenya had appeared shortly after an inexplicable explosion had echoed from the Russky Bridge. Judging by the timing and the circumstances, Kwon Taekjoo had suspected that Foxtrot, who had been excluded from the joint operation, had acted independently. But whether that was true, and whether they had successfully secured the item, he couldn't be sure.

It might have been a situation where they had been suppressed by the enemy.

The only clear thing was that the explosion had made the enemy aware of the spy's presence. It was as if the operation had been exposed. Sirens were blaring everywhere, and armed police swarmed onto the Russky Bridge, the hotel, and the Far Eastern Federal University. Fighting back in a situation where they were outnumbered would have been foolish. They had to retreat and observe the situation as it unfolded, waiting for the next opportunity.

Just as he had relayed the order to Sierra to retreat and was about to turn back quickly, Zhenya appeared. It was as if he knew exactly where Kwon Taekjoo was. Even though Taekjoo had cut all lines to evade Zhenya's pursuit.

Taekjoo had long been aware that Zhenya was spying on his every move. He had repeatedly warned Zhenya to stop, but he knew all too well that Zhenya wouldn't listen.

That's why he had been even more cautious this time. He used only new communication devices and requested a dedicated line and accounts from the headquarters.

He had even scanned his entire body multiple times to check for any possible bugs or trackers.

But it was all useless. Zhenya had appeared before him as if to mock him. And even that development wasn't entirely unexpected. Before crossing over to Vladivostok, Taekjoo had uncharacteristically tried to soothe Zhenya. He had put in the effort, hoping to avoid a situation where they would become enemies. But now that things had turned out like this, he only felt like a fool.

The very thing he had feared the most had happened. He had been warned by headquarters about Zhenya's reckless interference and had promised to prevent him from getting involved again, but it had all been empty words. In the worst-case scenario, Zhenya might have been involved in the inhumane alliance between North Korea and Russia. In fact, there was no evidence that he wasn't.

Kwon Taekjoo exhaled as if in pain. Soon, his eyes flashed sharply as he glared at Zhenya.

"Could it be..." he started, his voice laced with sharp tension.

"...Are you in league with them?"

"Them? You mean my family?"

Zhenya responded with a sneer, feigning ignorance. A smirk spread across his face as he looked at Kwon Taekjoo with a crooked gaze.

"So, that's the best you could come up with? Even though I'm supposedly your lover, you have no faith in me."

"Then what the hell is it?"

"I kept the promise you forced on me. This time, for some reason, I just felt like it,"

Zhenya replied, nodding his head repeatedly. He had clearly sabotaged the operation, yet what promise was he claiming to have kept? Taekjoo's anger surged at Zhenya's attitude, which seemed as if he was playing with words.

"What kind of bullshit is that! Are you saying it's purely coincidence that you're in front of me right now?"

"No, it was inevitable."

Zhenya continued in a leisurely tone. While Taekjoo was utterly confused and overwhelmed, Zhenya remained calm, as if he had all the time in the world.

"If you're asking whether I knew my family was conspiring with North Korea, then yes, I knew. To be precise, I found out after you left, Taekjoo.

Telling me not to interfere in your affairs didn't mean I shouldn't keep an eye on my brother, right? So, I didn't deceive you."

Was he saying he learned the truth of this situation by wiretapping Bazim, not Kwon Taekjoo? That could be true. But in this moment, that hardly mattered.

The biggest problem was that Zhenya had shown up at the operational site. Because of this, the National Intelligence Service's suspicions were bound to deepen. How he'd broken through the Azit perimeter and made it all the way to Odinokiy Island was beyond Kwon Taekjoo, but if Zhenya had exposed himself during that process, his family — or even Russia — would consider him a traitor.

Zhenya, who'd already been ostracized by his own family for constantly helping Taekjoo, might have now lost any standing he had left. Everything Taekjoo had tried to protect was maybe destroyed in an instant. His insides roiled with fury, and he finally snapped.

"Dammit... I told you not to get involved! This is my job and mine alone!"

"Taekjoo, if you hadn't thrown yourself into an obvious fire pit, I wouldn't have. I told you, this time I wanted to."

Zhenya kept repeating the same thing. No matter how much Taekjoo spoke, he just couldn't get through to him. This wasn't the first time either. Often, whenever he tried to say something to Zhenya, it felt like speaking into the void. Even shouting at a wall wouldn't have been as frustrating as this.

Kwon Taekjoo forcefully swallowed the emotions that surged up from deep within. His clenched jaw caused the veins to stand out on his face and forehead. When he finally spoke, his voice was more subdued.

“You always look down on me like that.”

At the low mutter, Zhenya tilted his head in confusion. The tone was so twisted with bitterness that he couldn't ignore it.

“Throwing myself into the fire? You think I don't know what I'm getting into?”

Taekjoo pressed Zhenya, his voice demanding. But seeing Zhenya's calm, expressionless face only made it harder for him to hold back.

“How the hell can you be so sure, you bastard! Why are you so certain I'll fail? Am I some useless idiot who can't do anything without your help?”

“You're getting angry over nothing again. I'm just saying there's no need to jump into a pit when you already know it's a cliff.”

“Don't act so smug. It was the same even when you weren't around. When have I ever taken the easy route? If I wanted safety, I wouldn't have started this in the first place!”

Taekjoo's furious shout echoed through the large house. Zhenya continued to gaze at him with a calm expression. Any flicker of confusion on his face quickly vanished, replaced by a clear smirk.

“So confident, huh? And did you figure out what they were trying to trade?”

Zhenya asked without missing a beat, answering his own question, “No. Not enough time. The surveillance was too tight, so you couldn’t even get close to the target, could you?”

Zhenya tilted his head slightly, as if asking if his guess was wrong. Enraged, Taekjoo fired back.

“The guys transporting the goods from North Korea were wearing protective suits. It’s because the material they were handling is a toxic substance you can’t come into contact with. Russia was planning to use it to either create biochemical weapons or develop vaccines for their own profit.”

“Exactly. Ricin, Novichok, VX, Polonium-210... Seems like they found something similar at Mount Baekdu.”

Ricin, Novichok, VX, and Polonium-210 were all deadly poisons. Once any of these substances entered the human body, the chances of survival were close to zero. For this reason, they’d recently become more commonly used than bullets or knives for assassination.

A substance with lethal potency similar to those deadly toxins had been discovered at Mount Baekdu.... It was now clear why Baekdu’s biologist, Park Jeong-ho, had been dragged to Russia, and why he’d recklessly asked for a rescue from an unknown spy.

Zhenya leisurely pressed Kwon Taekjoo, who was lost in thought.

“Don’t you get it? The Kremlin could use ricin, Novichok, or VX whenever they want. And yet, they’re interested in this newly discovered natural substance from North Korea. What does that tell you? They’ve calculated that this new substance is more useful than any of the known poisons. If you get infected, there’s no treatment, and they don’t even know how you’ll die. Would you have preferred being captured and used for experiments? Is that it?”

“That’s my job, including those kinds of threats.”

“Huh? You mean you don’t care if you die for this great job of yours? So I should just stand back and watch? You fought so hard to survive when you were in my hands, and now you’re telling me you have no attachment to life? That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve heard, Taekjoo. Don’t be so stubborn. Is that really what you want?”

Zhenya’s face, which had carried a smirk the whole time, hardened. He quickly regained his smile, though it was clear his mood had soured. His tone became even more twisted, betraying his irritation.

“Throwing your life away as part of your job... does anyone even care?”

Kwon Taekjoo glared at Zhenya with tightly pressed lips. Zhenya met his stare head-on, continuing to mock him.

“Well? Taekjoo. Is that what your so-called noble patriotism is?”

“Don’t mock me just because it doesn’t seem valuable to you.”

“Mock you? Who’s mocking?”

Zhenya shook his head, an exaggerated motion that looked like he was making fun of Taekjoo, but his expression showed he wasn't enjoying it either.

"I'm angry with you right now, Taekjoo. Whether you live or die isn't just your business anymore, is it?"

"....."

"You said you wouldn't die. You told me to trust you."

Zhenya, who had been quietly staring at Kwon Taekjoo, suddenly approached him. His movement wasn't fast, yet Taekjoo's body instinctively tensed up. His instincts were still completely perceiving Zhenya as a threat.

"You said you wouldn't recklessly risk your life again."

He recited the words Kwon Taekjoo had once used to reassure him, now throwing them back at him. Zhenya inched closer, even if slowly.

"How many times have I told you? Play all you want, I'll chase you anywhere. But if you want that kind of freedom, then you have to entrust your life to me. Don't just recklessly cling to your pride like you're doing now."

"Look at this — this is how little you think of me. I don't know how I look in your eyes, but I've always done my best. If I don't have enough information, I work with what I've got. If the situation isn't ideal, I figure out what I can do. And what? A moth to a flame? Do you even

know what's been driving me crazy lately? If you did, you wouldn't be talking like this. I think things through now, I think again and again. Even this operation...!"

"You're being stubborn to the end, Taekjoo. It's not my fault your country's intelligence is this weak. It's not my fault your temporary partner acted recklessly and blew himself up. So stop taking out your anger in the wrong place."

Zhenya tilted his head, as if he had seen something strange, and one of his eyebrows lifted in response.

But this wasn't just a simple threat, nor was it a mere outburst of anger. Taekjoo didn't want this moment to fizzle out into ambiguity like all the others. He was done resigning himself to the idea that Zhenya wouldn't understand.

He adjusted his stance and took proper aim at Zhenya. Even seeing the gun pointed at him, Zhenya approached without hesitation.

"Don't come any closer."

Through clenched teeth, a strained voice leaked out, but Zhenya didn't care. He continued to reach for Kwon Taekjoo without hesitation.

"Don't waste your energy. There's nothing you can do right now. Everyone's out there hunting like mad. It'd be best if you took it easy until things settle down, Taekjoo."

A large, pale hand reached toward his face without hesitation. Kwon Taekjoo, who had half-pulled the trigger, still couldn't bring himself to

shoot Zhenya. Instead, he grabbed Zhenya's wrist, pushing back his advancing jaw in desperation.

"I said, don't...!"

Zhenya tried to overpower Kwon Taekjoo with sheer force. In return, Taekjoo pushed him away stubbornly with his knees and elbows. He even punched Zhenya's arm hard when it tried to cover his mouth. Yet, Zhenya didn't budge.

For a while, the two were locked together, struggling fiercely, pulling and shoving each other violently. Their constant thrashing left large and small scratches on their skin, and their joints stretched to their limits.

Despite all this, neither of them backed down, continuing their relentless tussle. Soon, their bodies were soaked with sweat. The grueling standoff only ended when Kwon Taekjoo suddenly stumbled, his head spinning from the aftereffects of the drugs.

Zhenya seized that moment, forcing Taekjoo down onto the bed. He pinned his arms down roughly, while his legs restrained Taekjoo's flailing lower body, pressing him down with his knees. Finally, the chaos subsided, and the two glared at each other, panting heavily.

It was only then that Kwon Taekjoo got a proper look at Zhenya's face. Along with the scratches from their recent scuffle, there were unfamiliar wounds on Zhenya's body. A small, yet distinct scab of dried blood sat on his earlobe, a sign that the bleeding had stopped and crusted over. As he observed more closely, he realized everything about Zhenya seemed off. His hair was disheveled, and the sleeves of his once-pristine outfit were dirty with dust.

The first sign that something was wrong was the smell of smoke instead of Zhenya's usual scent. Taekjoo was too enraged by how Zhenya had knocked him out and ruined his mission to think about how Zhenya had escaped that place. He hadn't considered how Zhenya had made it through the chaos unscathed and arrived at Odinoki.

The world outside the island was likely already in chaos. If the enemies had noticed Zhenya's involvement, there was a high chance they'd track him down and launch an attack here. No, they might already be doing just that.

Once again, he had turned his brothers, his family, and his homeland into enemies — all just to save Kwon Taekjoo.

"...Damn."

He hung his head low and muttered a curse. His jaw clenched so tightly that his chin tensed in anger. Time and again, he was overwhelmed by a sense of helplessness. Wielding uncharacteristic tenderness as a weapon, blindly.

"Taekjoo. Your breathing is too rough."

Even though he'd already found the sound of his own breathing irritating, his chest was heaving uncontrollably. His shoulders also moved up and down without his will. It seemed he was experiencing hyperventilation due to extreme stress. No matter how deeply he inhaled or how slowly he exhaled, it didn't get any better.

Zhenya, who had been quietly watching, stood up. Though Kwon Taekjoo was finally free from his grip, he couldn't even move a finger.

After stepping outside the room briefly, Zhenya returned and held a bag to Kwon Taekjoo's nose and mouth. Despite grimacing in discomfort, Kwon Taekjoo grabbed Zhenya by the collar. In response, Zhenya softly whispered,

"Breathe slowly."

As he took a few deep breaths, his consciousness gradually began to blur. Whether it was from the lack of oxygen or the lingering effects of the drugs, he couldn't tell. He frowned and tried to force his eyes open. It was no use — the eyelids that had been fluttering finally closed. At the same time, the hand that had been gripping Zhenya fell limply.

"Yeah. You might as well get a good rest."

Zhenya's voice faded away into the distance.

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"....."

When he opened his eyes again, a large window filled his field of vision. The scene outside was strangely calm and peaceful. It was the season of lush greenery. The bright sunlight filtered through the thick branches of the trees, streaming in strands. A soft breeze gently caressed the foliage in the field.

As he blinked, gradually awakening the senses in his body, he froze at the breath he felt near him. The warmth pressing against his back and the tight grip on his wrists were familiar.

Regaining his composure, he realized that Zhenya's body was completely pressed against his back. His arms were crossed in an X over Taekjoo's chest, holding him still, preventing any movement. Zhenya had buried his face in Kwon Taekjoo's nape, and his long legs wrapped tightly around his lower body. There was no way for Taekjoo to escape from the tight hold.

He had no idea how long he had been asleep like that. Nor how much time had passed since he had deserted the mission.

His head still felt heavy, but the headache had mostly subsided. It seemed the drugs lingering in his system had finally cleared out.

Due to the struggle with Zhenya, Kwon Taekjoo experienced congestion he hadn't felt before. Zhenya's hand, which had gripped Taekjoo's arm, wasn't in good condition either.

He let out a long breath. It wasn't a big movement, but it was enough to make the drowsy Zhenya stir. Even without turning around, Taekjoo could tell he had woken up.

"...Let go"

Without a sound, the pressure around Taekjoo's body intensified. Zhenya's forehead rubbed sluggishly against his shoulder blade.

"Let go."

Taekjoo's suppressed voice was filled with irritation. Despite that, Zhenya stubbornly held on. Without a word, he gripped Taekjoo even tighter. The lack of blood flow made his skin pale, and the veins on the back of his hand became more pronounced.

Another irritated sigh escaped him. Whether it was his imagination or not, the force threatening to break his arm loosened slightly. Taking that moment, he pushed Zhenya away with his shoulder and hips. In that brief moment of loosened grip, he raised his elbow to strike. The impact didn't do much, but it gave him a bit more room than before.

Once again, a silent physical struggle ensued between Kwon Taekjoo, trying to escape, and Zhenya, determined to hold him in place. They grappled, pulling each other's hands, twisting arms, and pushing. Suddenly, there was a cracking sound. Whether it came from Zhenya's fingers or Taekjoo's wrist, neither could tell. But at that moment, the two who had been locked in combat suddenly separated.

Taekjoo rolled off the bed and away. Zhenya also raised himself halfway, and the two faced each other.

"Hah... hah..."

"...Taekjoo. Come here."

Zhenya demanded calmly. But Taekjoo remained on edge, ready to attack at any moment.

Taekjoo's gaze fell to his feet. Something had hit his foot. His belt, which he hadn't realized had fallen off, was lying there. He looked back up at Zhenya. Zhenya shook his head silently, clearly reading Taekjoo's thoughts.

Staring into Zhenya's blue eyes, Taekjoo picked up the gun. The moment he did, Zhenya moved as if to pounce, but Taekjoo instantly pointed the barrel at him. Their gazes clashed fiercely as Zhenya instinctively froze.

"....."

"....."

Their sharp, piercing stares bore into each other without mercy. There wasn't a trace of affection or regret in Kwon Taekjoo's dark eyes for the person in front of him. They were like ashes, burned through to the core, devoid of any glimmer.

He gently pressed the trigger. Even then, Zhenya didn't attempt to move away from the barrel of the gun. He simply looked into Taekjoo's eyes, quietly holding his breath. The tension in Taekjoo's index finger grew stronger. Every muscle in his body was tightly clenched, from the hand gripping the gun to the bloodshot eyes that trembled slightly. A little more force, and it would all be over.

In the oppressive silence, sirens blared inside his head. The pressure made his skull feel like it was about to explode. Frowning, Taekjoo suddenly flung his hand away. The tightly coiled tension in the air dissipated in an instant.

He strode toward the door. A sharp gaze followed him, burning into the side of his face. Ignoring it, he grabbed the doorknob, but before he

could turn it, Zhenya's voice rang out.

"Are you really going to leave like this?"

Taekjoo didn't respond. His hand, which had momentarily hesitated, moved again to open the door. Just as he was about to step out, Zhenya's voice echoed again from behind him.

"You can't keep leaving me like this, Taekjoo."

This time, his tone wasn't filled with anger but tinged with sorrow — perhaps even a hint of resentment. That one sentence unleashed a flood of memories: the moment he fled Odinokiy Island, leaving Zhenya behind, screaming his name; the time he tried to leave the motel alone after Zhenya was injured while trying to save him; every occasion he chose his duty over Zhenya, pushing him away; and the bitter fight that led him to vow never to see Zhenya again, only to return and find the malatang soup Zhenya had made, waiting for him.

All the times he had soothed Zhenya with empty reassurances, leaving behind a growing weight of guilt, crashed down on him. Could he have been a worse lover?

He pressed his lips together tightly, barely managing to suppress the rising emotions that threatened to overtake him. Now wasn't the time to be swept up by such petty feelings.

As he tried to take a step forward, Zhenya caught him again.

"I never gave you permission to leave."

"I don't need your permission."

"Hah. You've always done whatever you wanted. Have I been too lenient?"

Zhenya's stubborn voice twisted bitterly. Only then did Kwon Taekjoo's hardened face turn to look at him. His voice, when it came out, was low and cold beyond measure.

"You always act like this. Pretending you're better than everyone else, looking down on people, treating them like they're beneath you."

"So now it's my fault again?"

In this situation, arguing about whose fault it was seemed absurd. How exactly did Zhenya's mind work? Taekjoo's chest felt tight.

"How simple-minded can you be?"

"Aren't you the one making things unnecessarily complicated?"

"Hah... Why am I even trying to talk to you? When have we ever been on the same page?"

His muttered words were filled with resignation and self-mockery. He honestly felt like giving up on everything that was making him act out of character. He just wanted to let it all go.

Had Zhenya picked up on that? The air between them twisted so palpably it was impossible to ignore. When Zhenya spoke again, there was a chill in his voice that hadn't been there before.

"Taekjoo."

"Stop it."

The warning that followed was even more chilling.

"I have my limits too, so stop pushing it."

It was obvious that if they kept arguing, it would turn into a full-blown fight. It would be better to ignore him. Right now, they both needed time to cool their heads and emotions. Yet Taekjoo found himself snapping.

"Pushing it? Me? You think you're the one to talk? You always interpret everything how you want, make your own judgments, and act however the hell you want! You never give a damn about what other people think or feel, do you, you bastard!"

His irritated voice echoed loudly, bouncing off the walls of the house and coming back in layers.

And yet, Zhenya remained unfazed. Instead, he hardened his expression and continued to corner Taekjoo.

"Who's really throwing a tantrum here? Don't you think you're being a little too childish, Taekjoo?"

"So, to you, this just looks like I'm throwing a fit?"

"No? Either way, it sounds like you're saying I should always put up with what you do. Just how much do you expect me to concede? You think because I've gone along with you a bit, you can treat me like I'm one of your things? Is that it? Am I supposed to stay home like some obedient dog, wagging my tail when you come back?"

"Fuck, didn't I tell you to leave if you don't like it? This is just how I am! I can't change!"

"No, it's not that you can't change — you just won't. You don't even have the desire or the will to try."

The biting accusation left Taekjoo speechless. His tightly clenched teeth made a grinding sound. With a forced exhale, a sigh of frustration escaped through his gritted teeth.

Zhenya's expression darkened with anger, his face twisting as he continued to criticize Taekjoo's behavior.

"You always try to control me like that. You sweet-talk me, flatter me, act all loyal. But when you're backed into a corner like this, you resort to throwing threats."

“Hah... and during all that, you never once thought anything was strange? How old are you that I have to coddle and comfort you all the time? How long do I have to keep doing this?! Even a spoiled child doesn’t throw tantrums like you do.”

I’m fucking exhausted of this shit, seriously.

Taekjoo half-swallowed the rest of his words. That one sigh, almost a lament, seemed to ripple through the room. Zhenya, who had been still the entire time, slowly moved. He looked like he was ready to charge at any moment, but Taekjoo acted first.

“I want to be alone.”

It was a clear declaration not to approach him or follow. Zhenya hesitated, as though he had hit a wall. He stopped all movements, now focused intently on Taekjoo’s every action. For someone like him, that restraint must’ve been rare. Agitated, Taekjoo raked his hands through his hair.

“I need time. We both need to cool down, get our emotions in check, and deal with things. Until then, I don’t think I can even look at your face.”

Taekjoo forced himself to speak calmly, trying to suppress the anger. Continuing to clash would only lead to more regret.

But Zhenya wasn’t ready to accept this so easily. He moved from where he was, ready to block Taekjoo’s way. Just that movement made the air between them stir violently. Maybe it was his imagination, but Taekjoo felt like Zhenya’s scent had grown heavier.

“You’re really going to leave like this? Just like that?”

“I told you, I need time. Please, stay here. Nothing good will come from us staying together right now.”

“And what about if you go on your own? Can you even handle everything?”

“What?”

“Look at yourself, Taekjoo. Get a grip on reality.”

Zhenya’s hurt feelings spilled out in the form of aggression, as if that were the only way he knew how to express himself. Despite his size, he was so painfully young and ignorant. The real problem, though, was that the lover of this unstable, incomplete person wasn’t a thoughtful or kind-hearted soul. Especially not someone who could gently teach him, and patiently guide him.

“You’re the one who needs to face reality! Do you think everything ends just because it’s good for you and me? Do you really think we’re in any position to play house right now?”

“So I’m asking, what exactly can you do?”

He trampled over and belittled others’ efforts and determination without hesitation. He was the type of person who always believed he was the best and that only his thoughts were right in the world.

Even with his own lover, he constantly looked down on him and treated him with mockery. This time was no different, as he flatly declared to Taekjoo, who was resolute in pursuing what he believed to be right, that it was a pointless endeavor.

"Nothing's going to change no matter how much you struggle on your own. It's always been that way, and it always will be."

Suddenly, there was a loud thud. It was the sound of Kwon Taekjoo slamming his fist against the door. The atmosphere froze in an instant. The sharp tension in the air pierced their stiffened skin. Kwon Taekjoo kept his head straight ahead, holding his breath. Though his bangs shaded his eyes, just from the tightly pressed lips, it was clear he had reached his breaking point.

"Are you done talking?"

The words that came out after a long pause took the form of a question, but they were not a question. Kwon Taekjoo no longer held back and left the bedroom. His steps showed no hesitation.

Just as Taekjoo was about to ascend the stairs leading to the rooftop, a bullet suddenly flew past, shattering the finish of the upper stair. When he turned around, Zhenya was standing there, holding a shotgun. The shadow cast by him on the ground writhed menacingly.

"Taekjoo, are you really going to make me blow up the National Intelligence Service with my own hands?"

"Try it."

His reply was weightless.

"Then you would never have to see me again."

He stared straight at Zhenya, wrinkling the bridge of his nose. There was no warmth in that gaze. Zhenya, too, faced him with eyes sharp as knives. They stood, staring each other down, tension in the air for a moment before Zhenya turned his head away. After a brief pause, Kwon Taekjoo resumed walking.

But he didn't get far before he was stopped again. Zhenya had closed the distance in an instant and wrapped Taekjoo in an iron grip, holding him so tightly that he couldn't take another step. His arms wrapped around Taekjoo's waist like steel, binding him so firmly that he could not move. Zhenya buried his face in Taekjoo's shoulder, like a child clinging desperately to a toy they refused to let go of.

"I won't let you go."

Stubbornly muttering to himself, Zhenya tightened his hold, squeezing Taekjoo's chest until he could barely breathe. Despair and frustration overwhelmed him, the hopelessness of being unable to persuade Zhenya sinking deep into his bones.

"Yevgeny, please , just stop!"

A desperate plea, barely more than a sigh, escaped him. There was a mix of irritation and pent-up anger in his voice. Was it unexpected? Taekjoo felt Zhenya flinch. The iron grip around him loosened as well. With a distant sigh, Taekjoo finally drove a dagger into his heart.

"You should know by now. I don't want to hate you again!"

Zhenya's breath caught in his throat. The fingers that had gripped Taekjoo so tightly now trembled slightly, unable to find direction. Even that clumsy movement felt stifling and infuriating. How much longer would he have to explain, teach, and guide him through everything? An overwhelming fatigue surged through him.

"Ha.... If we stay like this, we're only going to fight. Just let me go."

He asked with an utterly exhausted expression. Not long after, a grinding sound echoed in his ears. Zhenya's arms, which had been restraining Kwon Taekjoo, loosened ever so slightly. His pale hands, gradually parting, trembled as if enduring an unbearable burden.

Unable to bear the sight, he stared into the empty air instead. The moment his body was freed, he shook off Zhenya's arm and continued up the stairs. Zhenya didn't follow him any further. Only the sound of something repeatedly shattering echoed from behind. It seemed that Zhenya, unable to contain his anger, was breaking everything he could in the house.

But Kwon Taekjoo didn't hesitate for even a moment. In fact, he quickened his pace. It felt like if he hesitated even for a second, he would collapse right where he stood.

As Kwon Taekjoo threw open the rooftop door, Zhenya's helicopter came into view. One of the footrests had flown off, and the bullet marks were clear in several places. These were the signs of what they must have gone through while fleeing from Vladivostok to here.

"....."

Without a word, he started the helicopter. Right now, the priority was to return to Korea. Once there, he would have to clean up the mess Zhenya had made, completing the mission he hadn't finished. Perhaps the headquarters had already noticed Zhenya's involvement and issued a warrant. Russia wouldn't let this slide easily either. One way or another, it was best for Zhenya to stay here for a while. He didn't think about any other problems; there was no time for that.

The slowly turning propeller quickly began to rotate with a loud roar. Strong winds kicked up, scattering dust and shaking the trees around the mansion. Still, Zhenya didn't chase him to the rooftop. Nor did his silhouette appear in the mansion's windows. Was he really letting him go so easily? Or was he just that angry this time? The uneasy feeling of liberation made him glance downward repeatedly.

The helicopter slowly left the mansion behind. As it climbed higher, Kwon Taekjoo could see fragments of shells scattered across Odinokiy Island. He even spotted the wreckage of a helicopter that had crashed deep into a valley.

Suddenly, the smell of flames from Zhenya's body came to mind. As expected, it seemed there had been a fierce battle while Zhenya was helping him escape. The Russian government must have sent military helicopters to pursue him. Perhaps they had even issued an order to kill Zhenya by now.

Leaving Zhenya behind in such a situation weighed heavily on his heart. At the same time, he wondered if Zhenya would be safer without him nearby. At least Zhenya wouldn't be suspected of harboring a spy. Given the current circumstances, it might even clear Kwon Taekjoo of any suspicions of collusion. After all, they were supposed to be on opposite sides, and that's how it had always been.

Kwon Taekjoo clenched the control stick tightly, his jaw set. Every problem he had feared was erupting all at once. The tangled threads of the situation left him unsure where to even begin. Yet, as he gazed beyond the horizon, there was only one thing in Kwon Taekjoo's eyes: the determination to set everything right with his own hands, no matter what.

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Under the cover of night, Kwon Taekjoo arrived at the tri-border area between Russia, China, and Kazakhstan. Due to the region's unique characteristics, it was a place frequented by not only Europeans but also Chinese Asians. This allowed him to move freely without needing any special disguise.

Like most intelligence agencies, the National Intelligence Service (NIS) also had local exchange bases to support overseas operations. If embassies or consulates were used for such tasks, diplomatic issues could arise later on. These secret exchange bases provided weapons, operational funds, hideouts, and transportation to agents who had temporarily lost support.

He successfully made contact with the Kazakhstan exchange base, where he received the items necessary for his escape, such as a temporary passport. After that, he stayed in China, waiting for the right time to re-enter Korea. It took a full ten days to leave Odinokiy and return to Korea.

Upon arriving at Incheon Port by sea, a vehicle from headquarters was already waiting. What stood out to him was the number of personnel present. There were at least a dozen of them, and they were all armed. It looked more like an escort for detention than a welcoming party.

“You’ve had a tough time. We’ll take you to the headquarters.”

One of the escorts opened the back door for Kwon Taekjoo. Another was already standing on the opposite side, eyeing him cautiously. It seemed he would be sandwiched between the two of them on the way to headquarters.

He got into the car without protest. His body and mind were too exhausted to resist.

“G1 secured. Returning to headquarters at 23:40.”

After reporting through the radio, the escorts began the drive. The car was enveloped in an oppressive silence as they headed to the NIS. Kwon Taekjoo simply closed his eyes, taking a brief moment of rest.

Despite the late hour, the lights at headquarters were still on. He figured he would be summoned to the Director’s office for a scolding. Given the severity of the situation, he might even be called to the Deputy Director’s office.

Surrounded by the escorts, he stepped into the elevator. Expecting it to go up to the second floor, Kwon Taekjoo noticed instead that the doors closed and the elevator started to descend. The basement only housed interrogation rooms and detention cells, places without proper windows.

"Where are we going?"

Just as Kwon Taekjoo demanded an answer, the elevator came to a stop. When the doors opened, a dimly lit hallway appeared.

"This way."

The escorts led Kwon Taekjoo to a nearby interrogation room. He let out a bitter laugh. Had agents who failed to complete their missions always been treated like this? Being dragged to a musty basement the moment they returned, grilled about why the operation had failed, whether it was their fault, or if they had colluded with outsiders. Having never experienced this before, Kwon Taekjoo couldn't tell if this situation was routine or something out of the ordinary.

Of course, there was plenty of room for misunderstanding regarding the botched Vladivostok operation. He needed to prove his innocence, and further, explain why Zhenya had interfered. That was why he had left Zhenya behind and returned alone.

Without putting up a fight, Kwon Taekjoo stepped inside. The hallway was dark and filled with damp air, but the cramped interrogation room was even more suffocating.

He scanned the interior with a displeased look. As he was about to pull out the metal chair in front of him, one of the escorts stopped him.

"Sorry, but we'll need to do a quick body search."

"...Do what you need to."

He compliantly placed his hands against the wall. The escort thoroughly searched him from head to toe. He removed the gun from Kwon Taekjoo's waist and handed it to his colleague, then even checked the insides of his socks. He lifted Kwon Taekjoo's pant legs and took a knife from the holster hidden in his sock garters.

But even after all that, the search wasn't over. Although the escort had stopped patting him down, there was a moment of hesitation. Kwon Taekjoo suddenly turned around.

"What? Should I strip to my underwear too?"

"...No, that won't be necessary. Please wait here for a moment."

The escort hurriedly stepped back but then seemed to remember something. "Oh, right."

"Are you hungry by any chance?"

"What, are you going to order me some seolleongtang?"

"If you need it, yes."

"How long do they plan to keep me locked up like this?"

"...Or would you like something to drink?"

"In that case, an Americano, like an espresso."

“Understood. I’ll have it prepared.”

The escort quietly closed the door as he left. Immediately after, Kwon Taekjoo heard the sound of the door being locked from outside. Even though he had made it clear he had no intention of resisting, they were still being overly cautious.

He sank deeply into the chair and tilted his head back, letting out a long sigh. As his thoughts drifted, he aimlessly traced the air with his eyes.

What could Zhenya be doing right now? Was he still on Odinokiy Island? Kwon Taekjoo worried that the Russian government might be ramping up efforts to capture him. Had leaving Zhenya stranded there been a mistake? He shook his head at the thought. If they had moved together, getting into Korea would have been impossible. Besides, they couldn't keep running indefinitely without resolving anything. There was nowhere safer than Odinokiy for Zhenya. Until the cause of the Vladivostok operation's failure was fully uncovered, they would treat him like a criminal anyway.

In any case, there was no point in staying with Zhenya. It would only add more fuel to the fire. For now, the best course of action was to lay low until the situation calmed down. That was the right choice. No doubt about it. Yet, Kwon Taekjoo couldn't stop thinking about the last expression on Zhenya's face. He had looked as though he had been betrayed — hurt and resentful. In his rage, he had lashed out, but maybe explaining things calmly would have been better. He irritably ran a hand over the back of his head.

Just then, faint footsteps could be heard outside the door, followed by the soft aroma of coffee wafting in. The sound of the lock turning was soon followed by Director Kwak stepping into the room.

“Director.”

“Oh, stay seated.”

Kwon Taekjoo had been about to stand and greet him, but Director Kwak waved him off. Instead, Taekjoo gave a slight nod.

“It’s been a while.”

“Yes, it has. I’m glad you made it back safely.”

Director Kwak placed a cup of coffee in front of Kwon Taekjoo and then pulled out a chair to sit across from him. Kwon Taekjoo stared at the cup of coffee before him. A thin film floated on its surface.

“What, are you worried we put something in it?”

Director Kwak grinned knowingly, easily reading Kwon Taekjoo’s mind. Given the circumstances, there was always a chance the coffee had been laced with a truth serum.

“Of course not.”

“Right, of course.”

The director’s soft tone carried an underlying edge, as if he were subtly asking whether Kwon Taekjoo had done something to warrant that kind of treatment.

Taekjoo responded with a quiet chuckle but said nothing. As he took a sip of the coffee, he studied Director Kwak's expression. His eyes were tired, the dark circles suggesting significant exhaustion. The failed joint operation between South Korea, the U.S., and Japan wasn't enough — now that it had been exposed to the public, the blame game was likely in full swing.

A successful covert operation remains unknown. There are no awards or commendations. Only failed operations are revealed to the public. The exposure of an operation means diplomatic friction, and someone has to take responsibility for it. In such cases, the state feigns ignorance, often leading to agents involved in the operation being accused of espionage and punished. This is why black ops agents are treated as the government's hunting dogs.

Earlier, when they managed to contact headquarters through the Kazakhstan communication base, Kwon Taekjoo had explained the rough situation. But that alone wasn't enough to prove his innocence.

As expected, Director Kwak began questioning Kwon Taekjoo about the gap during the operation.

"So, where were you all this time?"

"On an isolated Russian island."

"An isolated island... Did you flee there on your own? Abandoning the hideout like that?"

An agent must never leave a trace, no matter the situation. Even if they must self-destruct, they must erase all evidence of the operation. That principle had no exceptions, even in urgent situations. For the first time, Kwon Taekjoo had failed to uphold that principle.

"I was attacked. When I came to my senses, I was already on that island."

"Attacked...?"

Was this unexpected? Director Kwak raised his eyebrows, deep wrinkles forming on his forehead. He seemed doubtful that anyone capable of subduing the best elite agent could exist. Director Kwak muttered the word "attack" again before abruptly asking a guess.

"Don't tell me this is the work of Psikh again?"

Kwon Taekjoo couldn't answer. He had intended to explain Zhenya's involvement, but he hadn't expected Director Kwak to bring it up first. Director Kwak smiled as if to ask if it was surprising.

"I heard the Russian ambassador to South Korea is called that back in his homeland. Answer me, Yevgeny Vissarionovich Bogdanov. Did that man also show up in Vladivostok?"

"Yes."

"Then, does that mean he's involved in the collusion between Russia and North Korea?"

"No, that's not the case."

"No? The Bogdanov family played a key role in the recent Russia-North Korea alliance. You can't deny that, right? But now you're saying the youngest son of that family has no involvement at all? How can you be so sure? He left his post without authorization and personally interfered in our operation. If, as you say, he knew nothing, how could he have appeared at that time and place? And what's the reason for attacking you while you were on duty?"

"It seems, in his own way, he was trying to save me."

Director Kwak tilted his head, puzzled. The idea that a Russian diplomat would interfere in official duties, risking diplomatic friction between nations, just to save a Korean friend was beyond comprehension. Zhenya's actions were even contrary to his family's and his country's interests, so it wasn't surprising that Kwak found it hard to understand. Still, Kwon Taekjoo had to explain repeatedly to prove Zhenya's innocence.

"I don't know how the Russian ambassador to South Korea became aware of the conspiracy between Russia and North Korea. As you know, Director, he's a certified troublemaker in Russia. It wouldn't be surprising if he hacked into his own country's secrets without permission."

"Even so, you can't deny that Ambassador Bogdanov interfered with our operation."

"The ambassador himself seemed to think it was an imminent crisis. He didn't have the luxury to weigh the stakes or consider the fallout."

“He thought it was the only way to protect both you and his family?”

“No. He’s never cared about patriotism or the honor of his family. He’s committed countless acts that brought disgrace to his family, and he wouldn’t hesitate to betray his country if it suited his interests. That’s also why I’m still alive.”

Director Kwak rubbed his forehead and tilted his head again.

“And Russia appointed someone like that as an ambassador?”

“They got rid of him because he was more of a threat to them if he stayed. Sending him to Korea was essentially abandoning him.”

“Still, it’s hard to believe. How does this situation benefit him in any way?”

Trying to keep his relationship with Zhenya secret made it hard for Kwon Taekjoo to sound convincing. The only thing that could explain it was Zhenya’s uncharacteristic affection for him. Without that, all reason fell apart.

“The clear thing is that he found out what Russia and North Korea were trying to trade independently, and immediately tried to save me. He even said so himself.”

“I want to believe you, but do you realize how far-fetched your claim sounds right now? Didn’t I warn you in advance? Not to bring personal matters into official business?”

"...That part is my fault.

He had no excuse. He knew that if Zhenya kept getting involved, misunderstandings like this would arise. He also knew that headquarters had been keeping an eye on him for a while. And yet, he couldn't stop it.

"Once we investigate everything, it will become clear. If worse comes to worst, we can summon Ambassador Bogdanov for questioning."

"It'll become another diplomatic issue. That bastard, as much as he looks the part, is still a diplomat."

"If that diplomat has been involved in espionage activities in our country, then it's a different matter altogether."

"From Russia's point of view, our actions aren't all that different. In fact, considering the intent, it's as if the one who made the mistake is the one getting angry."

Director Kwak let out a hollow laugh.

"Do you realize how dangerous your statement is right now?"

"I'm saying there's no need to blow up something that should have been quietly covered up. No matter how much we assign blame now, what's done is done."

"I agree, but when has it ever been a one-day thing to start pointing fingers when something goes wrong?"

Director Kwak shrugged, his eyebrows drooping.

At this rate, it would be impossible to clear the suspicion of collusion. It would also be difficult to clear up the misunderstanding Zhenya was caught in. Taekjoo wanted to request a lie detector test, but as an agent who had undergone long-term psychological training, the results wouldn't be reliable. There was only one solution.

"I'll provide the classified information Bogdanov revealed from Russia."

"Excuse me?"

"We failed to uncover what Russia and North Korea were trying to trade due to the botched operation. That was the original goal of the joint mission."

Director Kwak rubbed his chin, contemplating for a moment. The offer to solve the problem without lifting a finger was hard to resist.

"Alright, let's hear it."

"It seems that Park Jeong-ho discovered a new natural toxin, or perhaps a virus, on Mount Baekdu. The toxicity is said to be no less lethal than ricin, Novichok, VX, or Polonium-210. It's so deadly that even contact with it is fatal, which is probably why they transported it so carefully. Considering Russia's state-run pharmaceutical company Pazashita was at the forefront, they were likely planning to develop it into a chemical weapon."

"If that's true, this situation is much bigger than we thought."

Director Kwak, who had been listening quietly, rubbed his temples. Then, leaning back, he fixed his gaze on Kwon Taekjoo. That alone eased the tense atmosphere in the briefing room considerably.

"I believe what you're saying is close to the truth. If it weren't, you wouldn't have returned voluntarily, knowing full well the kind of misunderstandings it would cause. I also know from your record how close you were to Ambassador Bogdanov. But more than that, I can see it in your eyes — you look furious. Like you just had prey snatched right in front of you."

"But," Director Kwak drew a line. "This is only my opinion. If you want to prove your innocence, you'll need a more solid explanation. You understand, right?"

"Yes."

"You won't avoid punishment either, since you're not entirely blameless in this incident."

"I'm prepared."

"And in case you were wondering, I'll tell you. The U.S. agent you excluded from the mission tried to approach the transport vehicle on his own and was killed in a firefight with the enemy. The Japanese agent who was waiting at Far Eastern Federal University was captured on the scene, and has since gone missing."

Director Kwak, who had been relaying news of 'Foxtrot' and 'Sierra,' suddenly handed over a tablet. When the screen lit up, a low-resolution

photo appeared. It showed Asian police officers recovering a body by the water.

"This is...?"

"Early this morning, the body of an unidentified Asian was found at Lake Uvs, near the Russian-Mongolian border. The body was already badly decomposed, so identifying it has been difficult."

"Could it be Sierra?"

"Provisionally, that's what we've concluded. The height, blood type, and other physical features match the Japanese agent."

"Have they confirmed the cause of death?"

"Not yet. From what I hear, the body wasn't mutilated, and there were no signs of foul play, so it might be ruled as a natural death from disease or drowning."

"The Japanese government would probably prefer it to be quietly buried that way too."

The fate of agents who die in the line of duty is the same in every country. Agents work for the state, but the state cannot always protect them. It was a bitter truth, but one that intelligence officers had to accept as part of their fate.

"What happened to Park Jeong-ho?"

"He went back to North Korea. Since both North Korea and Russia had been trying to carry out their plans in secret, now that it's been exposed, they'll try to hush it up for a while. In some ways, it's an opportunity for us. While they're lying low, we can investigate the substance you mentioned. Park Jeong-ho even requested our help, so we might be able to make contact with him again. Either way, we can't act until we fully understand what that substance is."

Director Kwak finished speaking and stood up. Kwon Taekjoo's gaze followed him for a long moment.

"It'll be uncomfortable, but try to get some rest here. You look like you haven't slept in days."

"You're not much better off, Director."

At the bold comment, Director Kwak chuckled. Then, in a voice that was calm yet unusually gentle, he said, "Kwon Taekjoo."

"One way or another, I'm glad you made it back safely."

"....."

"And don't feel any unnecessary guilt about the mission's failure or being the sole survivor. There are some things in this world that are impossible to achieve, no matter what. If you can survive, then you must survive. Only then can you fix things or do whatever needs to be done. It's not my place to say this, but... a glorious death? There's no such thing. You're someone's son, a friend, a colleague, and a citizen of this country. Who could willingly turn a few into cannon fodder for the safety of many? I don't want to lose my agents in such a meaningless way."

Kwon Taekjoo's jaw clenched tightly. Director Kwak's gaze shifted down to the fist Kwon Taekjoo had balled up.

"By the way, should you really leave your wrist untreated?"

It was only then that Kwon Taekjoo looked down at his arm. A deep bruise had formed on his right wrist — the same spot that had twisted during his fight with Zhenya. He had received temporary treatment in Kazakhstan, but the aching pain had lingered for days. He suspected a minor fracture.

"I'm fine."

"Fine? Ignoring small injuries can lead to long-term damage. I'll send the medical team. From now on, even if there's an investigation, it'll just be a formality, so hang in there a little longer."

Director Kwak gave Kwon Taekjoo's shoulder a firm squeeze before leaving the interrogation room. Moments later, the door was locked from the outside, without fail.

Kwon Taekjoo relaxed his body and stared at the bare wall in front of him. The past few days felt like they were from a distant past. His mind was still a tangled mess, and his insides were just as noisy. He ran his hands down his face and let out a long sigh.

Failure.

Escape.

And Zhenya.

The overwhelming burden of dealing with the miserable facts and variables he never thought would exist in his life but now had to accept. It was going to be a very long night.

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Black smoke filled the air in every direction. No matter how much I pushed it aside with my hands, deeper darkness opened its maw, making it hard to see even an inch ahead. The acrid air filled my lungs, choking me as it forced its way inside.

I pressed on, step by step, struggling like I was sinking into a swamp. Soon, my vision cleared just enough to reveal a boy sitting alone. Ivory hair. A round head. Skin so pale and transparent that his veins were visible. That alone was enough to know who he was and to realize that I was trapped in yet another wretched dream.

Zhenya.

I tried to call out, but my throat closed up, preventing any sound from escaping. All that rushed in through my open mouth was the sharp, stinging gas, savagely burning my throat. The darkness I swallowed scorched my insides black as it spread through my limbs.

As I writhed in agony, the sky suddenly lit up. Countless streaks of light fell toward the ground. Meteorites? No, something about it felt off—

sinister. While I struggled to pinpoint the source of my discomfort, one of the glowing objects arced through the sky and collided with the ground. The earth trembled violently upon impact. The ground beneath me began to crack open.

In a rush, I looked at the boy. He remained seated, glancing back at me indifferently. Strangely, his face never fully came into focus. I couldn't make out his expression.

'Taekjoo, are you going to abandon me again?'

The chilling voice rang eerily clear in my ears. All the while, shells rained down on him, shattering everything around us. I screamed his name with all my might, but the cry never became a sound. My legs felt stuck to the ground, unable to move.

I thrashed my limbs, desperately trying to run toward him. But the more I struggled, the farther he drifted away. No matter my will, the distance between us continued to grow.

'Again...'

At the exact moment his bitter words struck my heart, a blinding white light crashed into the ground. The force of the explosion sent me flying.

When I opened my eyes, I saw the silhouette of the boy writhing in massive flames. Moments later, even that shape dissolved completely into nothingness.

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His eyelids shot open. Before his senses fully awakened, he frantically looked around. All he could see was gray walls. Thump, thump. His heart pounded chaotically, triggering a faint wave of nausea. Pressing his mouth shut with the back of his hand, he struggled to steady his ragged breathing. Slowly, clarity returned to his mind, and reality set in.

Had he dozed off? He leaned back slowly against the chair. Wiping his face, he felt his palm slick with cold sweat.

He knew, even in the dream, that it was just a dream. Yet, he still couldn't maintain his composure. Even after waking, he found it hard to calm down. His trembling hand clenched into a tight fist.

"Ha, damn it..."

If it was a nightmare involving young Zhenya, it wasn't anything new. He'd had it so often that it wasn't even surprising anymore. A dream was just a dream, and nothing similar had ever happened in reality. But for some reason, his heart continued to pound, and he couldn't understand why.

Could something have happened to Zhenya?

The fact that he couldn't check right away left him feeling stifled and anxious. He couldn't outright ask about Zhenya's safety either, not when there were suspicions about him secretly communicating with him.

How much longer would he be trapped here? How much time had passed already? It felt like all his senses were gradually dulling. In contrast, the creeping anxiety was growing ever larger.

‘Taekjoo, are you abandoning me? Again...’

The bitter resentment from his nightmare echoed repeatedly in his mind.

‘You can’t leave me like this again, Taekjoo.’

The image of Zhenya, the last time he saw him, followed right after. In the past, Zhenya would have restrained Kwon Taekjoo using force if necessary, but for some reason, he hadn’t done so this time. What was he afraid of?

‘You always try to control me like that. You sweet-talk me, flatter me, act all loyal. But when you’re backed into a corner like this, you resort to throwing threats.’

How long had Zhenya been harboring such resentment? It wasn’t as if Taekjoo was completely unaware. He had known, but he rationalized it, telling himself there was no other choice. He had clung to his lover, who only ever followed him, begging him for attention. When Zhenya promised he would follow him anywhere, Taekjoo had felt relieved. And yet, he had ignored Zhenya’s habitual loneliness.

The more he thought about it, the heavier the guilt became. He knew he needed to stay composed to handle public matters, but he couldn’t stop thinking about Zhenya, left alone. Though Zhenya was a grown adult, he still worried about whether he was even taking care of himself, eating properly. Taekjoo let out a long breath and scratched his head.

Then, suddenly, there was a knock at the door. Lost in thought, he hadn't noticed someone approaching. Soon after, the lock clicked, and the door creaked open. Peeking in through the small gap was none other than Yoon Jong-woo.

"Sunbae!"

"Why are you knocking on a door that you can just unlock yourself?"

"Are you alright? You're not hurt, are you?"

Yoon Jong-woo ignored the scolding and hurriedly looked over Kwon Taekjoo. He frowned, scrutinizing every inch of him.

Before long, a sigh of relief escaped from Jong-woo.

"Ah, I'm so glad you're okay. I was so worried that something might have happened since you've been locked up for two days."

"What could've happened?"

"You know, like they might pressure you to confess right away, rough you up, beat you, torture you..."

"You've been watching too many movies."

Even while chiding him, Kwon Taekjoo glanced around cautiously, as if wary of the CCTV cameras.

"But more importantly, are you even allowed to be here right now?"

"Oh, Director Kwak said to let you go. Until you're summoned again, you're free to go home and rest."

"Any other instructions?"

"No. As long as you don't leave the country, you're free to go about your life. It's a relief, right?"

Though it was put positively, it ultimately meant that a travel ban had been issued. The "freedom to live" only applied within the normal range of daily activities. Until a decision was made, he was effectively stuck within the country.

"What are you thinking about? You should hurry home. Your mother must be worried."

"My mother went to Canada."

He briefly mentioned his mother's whereabouts and stood up. After sitting in an uncomfortable chair for two days, it felt like every cell in his body was screaming. If possible, he wanted to go to a bathhouse and soak for hours.

As he trudged out of the interrogation room, Yoon Jong-woo continued to follow him. Meanwhile, he kept glancing at Kwon Taekjoo, as if there was something he wanted to say.

"Why..."

"Sorry?"

"What are you hesitating to say?"

"... No, just, stay strong."

"All of a sudden?"

"I figured you might be upset. You're a perfectionist, after all."

Was it meant to comfort him over the failed operation? True, once he started something, he always finished it. No matter what it took, he saw his plans through. He hated leaving things unfinished, and he always thought it was foolish to look back in regret.

Because of this personality, he preferred tasks with guaranteed outcomes and made sure to handle everything meticulously. If he couldn't do that, he wouldn't even start. Failing to achieve 100% on a task would only damage his sense of self-satisfaction. This mindset extended to his relationships with others as well.

Maybe that's why. Even when he reluctantly took on the Russian mission, forced upon him by the higher-ups' schemes, and when he met Zhenya, there had always been a lingering unease. At the time, he thought it would just be a single exception, and that nothing else would change because of it.

However, ever since he was caught off guard by the whirlwind that was Zhenya, the solid convictions he'd held for so long had begun to waver. He often found himself distracted while working and couldn't completely sever ties with his lover who meddled in his professional life. On the contrary, whenever Zhenya showed up, he secretly felt relieved and worried more about Zhenya's safety than the nation's. This wasn't like Kwon Taekjoo at all. His work and his love life — both were in shambles, and he wasn't handling either properly. His deepening depression was undoubtedly a result of this.

"Honestly, there was nothing you could do about this one. Things went off track because of that U.S. agent. It's definitely not your fault."

"I can't say it's entirely not my fault."

He had accepted Zhenya, fully aware of his background, his affiliation, and his temperament. No one had forced his hand. It was obvious that a crisis like this would come eventually, perhaps even repeatedly. Zhenya was the one and only variable, exception, and gamble he had allowed into his life.

He stopped walking for a moment, lost in deep thought. Yoon Jong-woo, watching him, let out an awkward laugh, trying to shift the mood with an exaggeratedly bright voice.

"Instead of this, how about a drink? My treat!"

The stingiest person in the world was offering to buy him a drink. Did he look that miserable? Taekjoo chuckled and declined the rare offer.

"I'm tired. I just want to go home and rest."

"Aw, come on! You can't stay down like this. Your mom's not around either, right? No one's there to nag you. You'll probably just skip dinner and sleep the whole time."

"That's exactly what I need right now."

"Oh, no way! I'm not letting you do that because I'm worried!"

"What's there to worry about? Why are you suddenly acting so extra?"

"Well, it's because of the situation. Yevgeny-ssi won't be able to come back for a while either..."

"...How do you know that?"

Taekjoo suddenly probed. Yoon Jong-woo hesitated, taken aback, but soon confessed.

"The director told me to monitor Yevgeny-ssi without missing a thing."

"Why him?"

"Because Yevgeny-ssi was involved this time too. It doesn't seem like it's been reported to the higher-ups yet, but since the operation failed, it could turn into a big problem. Two agents involved in the mission are already dead, and you went missing... If it gets out later that you made it back, the U.S. and Japan will demand an explanation. They'll want to know how you escaped the scene alone. If we're not careful, they might think you were conspiring with Yevgeny-ssi. The only way to prove

you're innocent is to avoid contact with him until things settle down. I think it's the best way to clear your name. The fact that the director gave me the task of monitoring Yevgeny-ssi suggests he still wants to trust you."

Yoon Jong-woo continued glancing at Kwon Taekjoo, cautiously trying to let him know. Despite all his explanations, it was a veiled suggestion that he should avoid any contact with Zhenya for the time being. Zhenya was essentially under an unofficial watch. It was absurd, like some twisted Romeo and Juliet story.

For now, Zhenya couldn't return to Korea, and Taekjoo couldn't go to him. He couldn't even contact Zhenya at this point. Both the Russian government and the Bogdanov family wouldn't take kindly to him either. He had abandoned Zhenya on that remote Odinokiy Island, a place where no one cared for him. Taekjoo had confidently said he would take care of everything quickly, but in reality, he was powerless to do anything.

'Are you going to choke me again?'

'.....'

'You should know by now. I don't want to hate you again.'

Even in the moment when Zhenya had barely let go of him, Taekjoo could vividly recall his hesitating, conflicted fingers. It was as if he was pushing himself to endure something he absolutely didn't want to do, something impossible. As if he was afraid his lover would hate him again if he didn't. As if he feared their fragile, mended relationship would fall apart and never be repaired.

Kwon Taekjoo had completely exploited Zhenya's insecurities. Under the guise of doing it for Zhenya's sake, he had been too busy ignoring and criticizing Zhenya's actions, which were really attempts to protect him.

"Damn it..."

Suddenly, his chest felt suffocated. The tangled mess had no clear solution, and an overwhelming sense of hopelessness, something he had never experienced before, washed over him. A paralyzing sense of powerlessness crushed him.

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For days, he stayed trapped inside his house. There was no contact from headquarters, and knowing full well that he was under surveillance, he couldn't even recklessly try to contact Zhenya.

He hadn't properly washed or eaten and just sprawled on the sofa. He slept so much that the line between each day blurred. Whenever he woke up, he thought endlessly, until his already dazed mind throbbed with pain. His thoughts kept returning to the same starting point without reaching any conclusion. It was an utterly unproductive cycle of overthinking and passing out, day after day.

When sleep finally eluded him, he forced himself to get up. He'd rested to the point of disgust, yet his body felt as heavy as lead. It was as if he

had turned into a rusty machine in just a few days.

"....."

He sat in a daze and glanced around. His phone had fallen to the floor at some point. The battery had long since died. Slowly, he plugged it into the charger and turned it on. The battery was at 0%, so the phone flickered on and off repeatedly, stubbornly attempting the same futile action.

After about three minutes, the screen turned on. He immediately checked his missed calls. The only notable names were his mother's and Yoon Jong-woo's.

He scrolled up and down but saw no sign of Zhenya. There was no unfamiliar number that could have been him, either. Zhenya wasn't someone who contacted him consistently, and in any case, avoiding contact with each other was for the best right now. He understood this rationally, but that didn't stop the frustration from gnawing at him.

In hindsight, Taekjoo thought he should have been the one bugging Zhenya too. At least then he wouldn't be fretting over whether Zhenya was safe or not.

Mulling over useless thoughts, he called his mother. The call was answered before the first ring even finished. His mother's frantic voice immediately followed.

[Taekjoo? Why haven't you been answering your phone?!]

"Ah... my phone was off. I forgot to charge it."

[What? Your phone's been off for a day, and you're just realizing that now?]

"I actually lost it, but I just found it today."

[Goodness, you're always like this. You seem so capable, but then you're so careless.]

Worried, his mother continued her barrage of scolding without a pause.

[I couldn't even get in touch with the ambassador, and I was so worried. I thought maybe something happened to you, or that there was some issue at the embassy. If you hadn't called by today, I was planning to come by tomorrow.]

"Come on, Mom. Your son is all grown up, aging every second at this point. You don't need to worry so much. Aunt's going to laugh at you. No news is good news, right?"

[Is that something to joke about after you've worried me sick?]

"Well, we're talking now, so everything's fine. How's Aunt doing? Has she had her surgery yet? What's the weather like? Is the food to your taste? Any problems with where you're staying?"

He skillfully changed the subject. His mother, who had been going on, suddenly quieted and softly called his name, [Taekjoo...] His forced laughter faded away at the sound.

[You're not sick, are you?]

"No, I'm fine."

[Are you sure nothing's wrong?]

"Yeah. Nothing's wrong."

[Then why does my son's voice sound so down?]

"Mm, must be because I've been sleeping so much. I've been catching up on sleep after a long time."

He even cleared his throat to sell the lie, fooling his mother. A soft sigh came from her end.

[Right. My son has always managed everything well, solving problems like it was nothing. I'll trust you, okay?]

"Goodness, you're getting all sentimental again. Don't worry, your son's taking care of himself just fine. Focus on your own health, Mom. Don't neglect your sleep or meals just because you're busy taking care of Aunt."

[Got it. But make sure you call more often, okay? You're worrying your mom. Promise?]

"You said you trusted me just 10 seconds ago, Mom. Let's hang up now."

[Fine. We'll talk again soon.]

With her gentle reminder, the call ended. A sigh slipped out. How long would he keep deceiving his mother? Ever since he joined the National Intelligence Service, his lies only seemed to multiply. He made promises he couldn't keep to the people he cared about the most.

“.....”

He glanced back at his missed calls. Zhenya's name was still nowhere to be found. Considering the heated argument they had, it wasn't surprising. Zhenya wasn't the type to reach out after such a spat, especially not when his pride was at stake. Of course, he must be angry. Probably hurt too.

It was Taekjoo who had suggested they take a break. In any normal relationship, that phrase would imply a breakup. Even though it was said in the heat of the moment, he knew he had overreacted. At the time, just the sight of Zhenya had irritated him, but he hadn't meant it as a permanent separation.

And now, it seemed Zhenya didn't even want to talk to his mother anymore. Even during their past cold wars, Zhenya had maintained his usual friendly relationship with her.

Once, a long time ago, they had fought over something trivial. Taekjoo, fuming and drinking alone, had decided to make up and headed back to Zhenya's place.

But Zhenya hadn't been there. He had tried calling, but Zhenya, thoroughly upset, hadn't answered. He had kept trying, even sending texts while waiting for him. But Zhenya hadn't shown up, and it had

been late at night. Exhausted, Taekjoo had returned home, only to find Zhenya casually sharing wine with his mother. The way he had elegantly declined Taekjoo's calls right in front of him had been infuriating. And when his mother had sided with Zhenya, asking why Taekjoo had made the ambassador upset, it had left him completely speechless.

Was that guy so devastated that he even ignored his mother's calls? Or was it a situation where he couldn't communicate with anyone at all?

He is the last person I should be concerned about. He's not the type to get caught easily if someone came for him. Still, despite his denials, Taekjoo couldn't shake his anxiety. Leaving a child alone by the water didn't make him feel this uneasy.

"...Ah."

Suddenly, a way to check on Zhenya's whereabouts came to mind. He immediately acted on the thought, scrolling through his phone contacts and calling someone. The ringing tone repeated three or four times before it was cut off.

[Kwon Taekjoo?]

A hesitant voice came from the other side of the phone. It was Olga.

"Yeah, it's me."

[Kwon Taekjoo, calling me? What's going on?]

The voice was filled with both surprise and delight. Taekjoo scratched the back of his neck, feeling awkward for no reason.

"I was just wondering if you've seen Zhenya recently. Or if you've heard anything about him."

[Hmm? Not really? Meeting that guy has always been like a once-a-year event anyway.]

"...Really?"

[Did you two fight again?]

She hit the mark without warning. He didn't respond. That alone must have been enough of an answer. Olga hummed, thinking for a moment, before easily guessing Kwon Taekjoo's intentions.

[If you're asking whether that guy came home, he hasn't. For some reason, the atmosphere at home is pretty gloomy. Probably because of him again, right? What did he do this time?]

"That's none of your concern."

[I don't see why you'd call me about something that's none of my concern.]

She teased, feigning ignorance. Typical of siblings — never helping out for free. He figured he should explain the situation, at least partially.

"It's related to official work, so I can't go into detail. It's a violation of the National Security Law. Even if you knew, it wouldn't benefit you. If anything, it's better if you don't get caught up in this."

[And you've already dragged me into it?]

"Who would find it suspicious for a younger sibling to check on her brother?"

[It might not raise eyebrows for other siblings, but for us, it definitely does.]

It was clear that the Bogdanov family had little to do with this. The fact that Zhenya and Olga met like clockwork wasn't just a metaphor.

[If that guy upset my father or brothers, wouldn't that be good news for you, Kwon Taekjoo?]

"What are you even talking about?"

[He always seemed to clash with our family over you, Taekjoo. They'd tell him not to interfere in foreign affairs, warn him it could spark diplomatic conflicts, threaten to demote him from his ambassadorial position, and insist they wouldn't be able to protect him anymore... Wasn't all of that because he was so deeply involved in your work?]

"....."

[And do you know what he always said in response?]

"....No idea."

[He asked our father and brothers if they were still interested in seeing what Anastasia looked like, then challenged them to go ahead and act on it. If they did, he promised he'd make sure they got a close-up view of her.]

Taekjoo covered his eyes with his hand, feeling a dull headache coming on. He knew Zhenya had never gotten along with his family. He was aware that ever since Zhenya began meddling in his official affairs, tensions with the family and homeland had escalated. But for Zhenya to meet threats with even bigger threats was unexpected.

"Anyway, the situation's gotten complicated, so I won't be able to keep an eye on him myself for a while. We both can't contact each other recklessly. It's hard to get any news unless something big happens, so if you think he's in real danger, contact me immediately."

[For free?]

"I'll pay you back one way or another later. Please, just do this for me."

[Hmph. No going back on your word.]

"Have you been deceived your whole life?"

[Well, it's not a difficult request. But if that guy is upset after fighting with you, I won't be able to approach the island easily either. He might even shoot down my helicopter.]

"No way."

[No way? Looks like you didn't know, Taekjoo.]

"Know what?"

[Remember when you were held captive on that island, and government forces came, putting us both at risk? After that, I believe he installed some sort of defense system. I'm not entirely sure how it works, but it seemed designed to target any unauthorized aircraft or missiles. I've heard that a few have already been intercepted.]

Did he really install an aerial missile defense system on the island?

Suddenly, the memory of leaving Odinokiy Island came rushing back to him. He recalled seeing debris from several aircraft, shredded like paper and strewn across the island. He had assumed they were just helicopters that had crashed while trying to confront Zhenya, but maybe that wasn't the whole story. Since he had always been with Zhenya when entering the island, he hadn't been aware of any additional defense systems in place.

Given the current situation, it was almost a relief. If Odinokiy had become an impregnable fortress like that, no one would be able to recklessly threaten or attack Zhenya.

[Anyway, I'll keep my ears open for any news about him and let you know if I hear anything.]

"Yeah. Even if it's something small, let me know."

[Man, what a noisy love affair. I'm hanging up now.]

Olga grumbled with an irritated tone until the end, but she seemed excited, as if something fun had finally happened. After finishing the call with Olga, the house felt even quieter than before. He checked his phone just in case, but there was still no contact from Zhenya.

What was he doing right now? Was he, once again, sitting alone, gloomily playing his contrabass? Or was he so enraged that he was wiping out all life on the island?

Or maybe... Just maybe, given that Zhenya had been eavesdropping on his every move so far, he was watching him even now. With that groundless thought in mind, he shouted into the air.

"Hey, Zhenya. Are you listening?"

He waited for a moment, but no answer came. Not that there would have been one in the first place. Scratching the back of his head for no reason, he flopped down onto the couch. The overwhelming problems left him feeling endlessly helpless, unsure of where to even begin.

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Monotonous days continued. When he was working, even 24 hours felt insufficient, but now, with nothing to do, it was surprising how long the days seemed.

In the meantime, he confirmed a few things. First, his access to the NIS servers had been revoked. As a result, he couldn't obtain any information about the ongoing operations or even about the failed mission. He had essentially been excluded from all duties.

Second, the Vladivostok operation had been thoroughly concealed. He combed through every news article from global media outlets that mentioned the region during that time.

However, the only reports were about a meeting between Russia and North Korea in Vladivostok for technological cooperation. As for anything related to Foxtrot, all he found was a short article about an American man dying in a collision between a cargo truck and a passenger car. Given the nature of the situation, it seemed everyone — Russia, the U.S., South Korea, and Japan — was eager to keep things quiet.

He had no way of knowing what had happened to Park Jeong-ho, who was said to have returned to North Korea, or whether the microorganism he had discovered ended up in Russian hands. There was no information on whether research was underway to weaponize the material. If one attempts to dig up secrets and gets caught, those secrets tend to burrow even deeper.

"Haah, haah...."

He set down the dumbbells, panting heavily. When his mind was clouded, he would exhaust his body to clear his thoughts. When the body was in pain, there was no room for other thoughts, as the focus would shift solely to the suffering itself. His muscles, stretched to their limits, ached with a burning sensation as if the fibers had torn. His entire body had long been drenched in sweat. Normally, that would be

enough to leave him feeling refreshed, but for some reason, this time, the chaos in his mind and heart refused to subside.

Thinking that maybe a little more exercise would help, he had just settled under the bench press when the doorbell rang unexpectedly. But at this hour, there was no one who should be visiting. His mother wouldn't have suddenly returned from Canada, and surely, it couldn't be Zhenya?

As soon as the thought occurred to him, Kwon Taekjoo sprang up. He went straight to the front door to open it, but a familiar face flickered on the intercom screen.

[Sunbae.]

It was Yoon Jong-woo. The fact that he had come at this hour was unexpected, but even so, Kwon Taekjoo felt his energy drain away. The urgency in his actions also faded.

"Why are you here?"

"Wow... I didn't expect you to greet me with open arms, but I didn't think you'd be this cold. That's new."

"Shouldn't you be at work right now? Don't tell me you got fired?"

"Isn't that what you were secretly hoping for? I took a half-day off."

Yoon Jong-woo tugged at the front door, saying, "I'm hungry." But Kwon Taekjoo didn't let him in so easily.

"If you're hungry, why come here? Is my house a restaurant?"

"Your mother said she made a lot of side dishes and told me to come over and eat anytime I want."

"My mother did?"

"Yes. Your mother must be worried about you because she called me. She said she'd be grateful if I could check in on you every now and then while she's in Canada."

"You've seen me now, so go back."

"You're being harsh again. I also brought some news that I thought you'd be interested in."

As if it were a lie, Kwon Taekjoo's defenses loosened. Taking advantage of the moment, Yoon Jong-woo swung the door wide open and stepped inside. He headed straight to the kitchen as usual, but upon seeing the dumbbells scattered around, he clicked his tongue.

"My goodness. Have you just been holed up at home, lifting weights? Why are you working out like it's a matter of life and death, sunbae? You're going to wreck your joints at this rate."

"You should try it sometime."

"You haven't eaten yet, have you? You know you need to eat enough protein to avoid muscle loss."

Ignoring Kwon Taekjoo's scolding, Yoon Jong-woo began pulling out side dishes. He heated the soup, which was still in the pot inside the fridge, and quickly made some fried eggs. Once the table was set, he said, "Have a seat," and then sat down first, making it unclear who was the guest and who was the host.

Kwon Taekjoo silently sat across from Yoon Jong-woo. Just as Jong-woo was about to scoop up some soup, Taekjoo pressed down on his spoon with his own. Yoon Jong-woo, as if expecting this, immediately gave up on the soup and started scooping rice instead. Kwon Taekjoo flicked Yoon's forehead with his spoon.

"Ow, sunbae! Even dogs aren't bothered when they're eating. Why are you doing this?"

"Tell me. What's this news you thought I'd be interested in?"

"Can't I just tell you after we eat?"

Kwon Taekjoo calmly but firmly shook his head. Yoon Jong-woo sighed deeply as he stared longingly at the tempting food. Then, suddenly, he glanced around nervously, as if worried someone might be watching or listening in.

"No one's here. I checked."

"If you say so, sunbae, it must be true."

"How long are you going to keep stalling? Stop beating around the bush and just tell me."

"Well... Olga-ssi contacted me."

"Olga?"

"Yes. Didn't you ask her to find out how Yevgeny-ssi's doing?"

"Why didn't she contact me directly?"

"Olga-ssi's probably being cautious. She even asked me why you and Yevgeny-ssi can't make contact. I didn't tell her everything in detail, but I said the current situation could make it look like you're colluding, so she's being careful."

"I should report you for violating national security laws."

"Ah, come on, why are you like this with me? I didn't say anything incriminating. I only told her what I mentioned to you."

"Are you just naive or outright foolish? If my talking to Yevgeny is an issue, how is it any different for you? You're still an NIS agent, and she's the daughter of a Russian big shot. Yevgeny is her brother."

"Well... we're not directly involved. Olga-ssi said if it comes to that, we could just play it off as cautiously getting to know each other."

The way he was sheepishly blushing and chuckling didn't sit well with Kwon Taekjoo, who clicked his tongue in disapproval before asking casually:

"So, what did you find out?"

"With Olga-ssi?"

"No, Yevgeny, that bastard."

Without realizing it, Taekjoo snapped. Yoon Jong-woo muttered, "Why are you getting mad?" as he obediently conveyed Olga's message.

"Fortunately, it seems he's not being held anywhere. According to Olga-ssi, he's holed up on some island, and no one's been there for a while."

"Wow, and you call that news..."

"She said it's impossible to find out more. Yevgeny-ssi isn't allowing anyone near him, and he's cut off all communications, so it's impossible to intercept anything."

Why wouldn't it be? Taekjoo himself felt hopeless when he was trapped on Odinokiy Island, with no way to escape on his own. Asking Olga to look into Zhenya's whereabouts in the first place wasn't meant as a request to infiltrate the place. He simply wanted her to get a sense of the family's atmosphere and current situation.

"Oh! She said that if I passed this on, it might put you at ease."

"What is it?"

“Olga-ssi said that Yevgeny-ssi’s issue doesn’t seem to be a priority for her family. They seemed busy with other external matters.”

“...Other external matters?”

Could it be because of the research on Baekdu Mountain’s microorganisms? Are they trying to sell a cure using that material? Or are they really planning to start a war? Either way, it was an outdated, inhumane scheme.

“You. Haven’t you heard anything?”

“Huh? A-About what?”

“Have you ever seen headquarters drop a mission just because they failed once? They must have planned the next one.”

“I don’t know... I’m not sure. Wow, this stir-fried dried shrimp with chili peppers is really good. You should hurry and eat, too. The soup’s going to get cold.”

Yoon Jong-woo awkwardly changed the subject and resumed eating. However, under Taekjoo’s intense gaze, his chopsticks trembled, unable to even properly pick up a single shrimp. Without a word, Taekjoo picked up a generous portion of dried shrimp and chili peppers and piled them on top of Yoon Jong-woo’s rice. Even as he did so, his piercing stare never wavered.

Forcing down the meal, Yoon Jong-woo warily glanced around again. Taekjoo sighed deeply and scolded him for being so jumpy.

“I told you, there are no bugs or anything like that.”

Despite the repeated reassurances, Yoon Jong-woo still couldn’t relax. He leaned in closer to Taekjoo, whispering so quietly it was almost inaudible.

“Actually... the Director’s been urgently selecting agents to send to Türkiye and Iran. There have also been several deputy-level meetings over the past few days.”

“All of a sudden?”

Yoon Jong-woo nodded repeatedly.

“It’ll likely be in the news soon, but there’s a trilateral summit being held.”

“A trilateral summit? Who is involved?”

“The leaders of Iran, Türkiye, and Russia are meeting in Tehran.”

The unexpected combination left Taekjoo feeling utterly blank. He couldn’t shake the sense that he had just ignited a fuse on a colossal bomb.

## **7. Restart The Game**

The National Intelligence Service's Foreign Intelligence Bureau, Director's Office.

On the large office desk sat a nameplate that read "Foreign Intelligence Director, Kwak Young-han." Beyond it, Director Kwak was intently scanning the monitor with a serious expression.

He was reviewing the profiles of Black agents whose main area of operation was the Middle East, in preparation for an upcoming deputy-level meeting. The goal was to find the right candidate for a new mission. Given the nature of the operation, the agent needed to be a seasoned veteran with a strong sense of loyalty. They would also need the judgment and determination to complete their mission under any circumstances.

Over the past few years, the regime had changed, leading to a major restructuring of the NIS. The former counter-espionage department focused on North Korea and the foreign intelligence department had merged under the first deputy director. As a result, the scope and scale of their responsibilities had expanded. The problem was that the number of personnel hadn't changed much. In times like these, there were few new recruits willing to take on dangerous tasks. Meanwhile, more and more agents were retiring, leaving the agency struggling with an unexpected manpower shortage.

It was even harder to find agents specialized in regions as distant as the Middle East. While there were employees who occasionally handled tasks in those areas after long-term stays, many of them ended up becoming double agents, using their position for personal gain. On top of that, Iran was a well-known pro-North Korean state, making it all the more crucial to carefully select the right candidate for the new mission.

Director Kwak repeatedly reviewed the records of the shortlisted agents. However, no matter how many times he went over them, no clear answer emerged.

Grabbing his throbbing head, Director Kwak was about to take a short break when a knock echoed through the room. He closed all the windows he had left open and said, “Come in.” His secretary entered, giving a silent bow.

“Yes, what is it?”

“G1 urgently wishes to meet with you, sir.”

Kwon Taekjoo? What could this be about all of a sudden? He had assumed Taekjoo was accepting the situation and staying home, having humbly accepted the headquarters' decision, but perhaps that wasn't the case. Was he here to once again assert his innocence?

“Let him in.”

After some hesitation, Director Kwak agreed to the meeting. Once the secretary left, Kwon Taekjoo entered the office, giving a respectful bow. Director Kwak gave him a pointed look.

“I have an important meeting coming up. You've got 10 minutes, no more.”

“It'll be over before then.”

"So, what's this about? I thought I told you we'd call you when the time came. Shouldn't you be resting at home?"

"I want to know what happened to Park Jeong-ho."

Director Kwak raised an eyebrow at the unexpected request.

"He's not someone you need to remember anymore, is he?"

"I've been going over the situation repeatedly during my suspension. The exposure of our intelligence operations indicates that both Russia and North Korea are aware we've been monitoring them. While they're known for disregarding international opinion, it's unlikely they'll stick to their original timeline. At the same time, they won't just abandon their plans entirely, especially after investing so much time and effort. Are you certain that Park Jeong-ho has returned to North Korea?"

Director Kwak didn't respond, locking eyes with Kwon Taekjoo instead. Taekjoo met his gaze without flinching. For a while, neither of them said a word.

Eventually, Director Kwak leaned back deeply into his chair. Slowly shaking his head, he drew a firm line.

"Either way, it's out of your hands now."

"If the operation regarding this matter hasn't been concluded yet, I'd like to see it through."

“I understand your desire to properly wrap up unfinished business, but you need to step away from this now. Emotions have a way of clouding judgment and ruining things.”

“Shouldn’t I at least be given a chance to explain myself?”

At this, Director Kwak raised an eyebrow.

“Explain?”

“It’s unfair to be misunderstood for something I didn’t do and to be excluded from my duties just because of suspicion. It feels like everything I’ve worked for is being unjustly denied. How much longer do I have to wait? If I wait, will my name be cleared?”

“This is a matter of national importance. There’s no time for personal concerns about your reputation...”

“What do we have to hold on to if not the honor in our work?”

“.....”

The noble sacrifice made for the sake of the nation — that justification would vanish if honor was stripped away. The necessity to forsake one's personal life and deceive those they held dear would crumble.

“Let me complete this operation. Bogdanov, the Russian ambassador, won’t be involved in this matter. I’ll prove my innocence through the results.”

Director Kwak's internal conflict deepened. There were differing opinions within the agency regarding Kwon Taekjoo's situation. The Domestic Security Investigation Bureau insisted that they needed to thoroughly investigate Kwon's connection with Ambassador Bogdanov, while Kwak argued that Bogdanov should be viewed as Kwon's intelligence asset.

After all, Zhenya's involvement had always proven useful in furthering the NIS's agenda.

In the end, they couldn't reach any conclusion, so they decided to revisit the issue after Zhenya returned to Korea. Along with that, they also agreed to exclude Kwon Taekjoo from all duties until then. In such circumstances, suggesting that he be assigned to a new operation would provoke significant opposition.

"I heard that Russia is holding a trilateral summit with Iran and Turkey in Tehran. I also heard that this meeting wasn't originally planned. Given the timing, there's a high chance they'll mention the Baekdu Mountain microorganism."

"There's certainly a strong possibility."

"There aren't any agents you can send to the Middle East, right?"

"That's the biggest issue."

Director Kwak's previously stern expression softened, and he gave a small smile. Indeed, there were almost no agents in the organization with experience conducting operations in the Middle East.

A lone wolf, unconcerned with personal gain, dedicated solely to carrying out the mission. A seasoned veteran. Fluent in Persian and knowledgeable about Middle Eastern affairs for a long time. The only person who met all those criteria was Kwon Taekjoo.

After long contemplation, Director Kwak spoke heavily.

“Park Jeong-ho reached out to us urgently not long ago.”

“Park Jeong-ho?”

“Yes. He’s seeking asylum in a third country in exchange for providing us with the information we need.”

“But Park Jeong-ho has...”

“He has a family. A wife and children.”

Director Kwak handed over a tablet. When the screen lit up, a photo of Park Jeong-ho’s family appeared. They looked like an ordinary, happy family. As the screen was swiped, a map of the border region between North Korea and China filled the screen. A projected escape route was marked on it.

“As you know, Russia, Turkey, and Iran are holding a trilateral summit. The unusual thing is that Park Jeong-ho will be attending as well, as part of a special delegation. He’s already registered as a special researcher at ‘Parimzhasita.’ Given the circumstances, there’s a high likelihood that Russia will mention the existence of the Baekdu Mountain microorganism during the summit. Iran and Russia have long been part of an anti-U.S. hegemony alliance, and... Turkey currently has

an anti-American, pro-Russian government, so it's not really surprising."

"What's our role?"

"We're going to assist Park Jeong-ho's defection. While he's in Iran, dissident forces in North Korea and our agents in China will ensure his family's safe evacuation. Before anyone notices, we'll secure Park Jeong-ho himself. We've already spoken with the Iranian embassy about it."

Helping Park Jeong-ho defect and obtaining all the information about the Baekdu Mountain microorganism. The operation itself was simple. There was only one shot, and if the timing was off at any point, everything would be ruined. Since it was a summit, security would be tight. It might even be impossible to get close to Park Jeong-ho.

Even so, it had to be done. Justifying his previous uncharacteristic behavior and proving his worth — that was the only answer Kwon Taekjoo had arrived at.

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As Kwon Taekjoo walked out of the director's office, he soon arrived at the central entrance. Without much thought, he lifted his head, and the black marble plaque came into view. Engraved on it were about twenty stars. Below them, the inscription caught his eye: "We shall dedicate

ourselves to protecting the nation by following the path of those who silently became stars."

It was a monument honoring the agents who had fallen during operations, often referred to as nameless stars. These were also the footsteps of those who had walked ahead of Kwon Taekjoo. It is through their noble and silent sacrifices that the Republic of Korea exists today. Everyone who enjoys a peaceful life is indebted to them. However, no one knows their names. Such is the fate of intelligence agents.

At times, Kwon Taekjoo wondered if he, too, would end up as just another fading star. In the inevitable moment everyone must face, could dedicating himself to his country make it feel a little less in vain? He hoped that, perhaps, it might offer some solace for the relentless and demanding life he had chosen — a life where personal accomplishments like normalcy, success, love, friendship, wealth, or fame had all been sacrificed for a greater cause.

Does that feeling still remain? At the end of my life, will I really be free of regrets and feel relieved?

Kwon Taekjoo was lost in deep thought, endlessly consumed by his own questions, when suddenly a voice called out from behind.

"Sunbae!"

He glanced back to see Yoon Jong-woo running toward him, panting heavily. For some reason, his face had gone pale.

"Hey, hey, you're going to trip."

"Haa... Haa..."

"Ah, this guy... You're wheezing after just a bit of running? I told you to start working out before it's too late."

"Haa... Is this really the time to be talking about exercise?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"I heard you met the director! Don't tell me... Are you taking on the new mission?"

"Why wouldn't I be? Who else is more suited for it?"

At Kwon Taekjoo's casual response, Yoon Jong-woo clenched his fists tightly and shouted in frustration.

"I knew it! I knew this would happen! Why can't you take it easy? How long has it been since you returned, and now you're doing this again? Does anyone even appreciate what you're doing? You were falsely accused not too long ago, and yet you're still this loyal?"

"My eardrums are going to burst, Jong-woo."

"I'm just so frustrated, that's why! Do you think you're a superhuman or something? Will world peace collapse without you? Why are you always so eager to take on dangerous jobs? It's like an illness, a hero complex, you know that?"

"...Damn. Looks like today's the day, huh? Since I was falsely accused, I have to clear my name. If I stay quiet, who's going to do it for me?"

Kwon Taekjoo muttered to himself, as if continuing his own thoughts.

"And besides... I can't let that guy end up a criminal because of me."

Yoon Jong-woo, who was about to ask what he meant, paused. Kwon Taekjoo's gaze had already left him and was fixed on the wall. Jong-woo followed his line of sight. Soon, the "Nameless Stars" monument came into view in his line of sight as well.

"Have you ever imagined your name engraved there?"

"What? Why are you saying such creepy things? No way! I absolutely hate the idea!"

"Really?"

"Of course! Dying without even leaving my name behind... What's the point of devoting myself to the country if my family won't even know where or how I died? The citizens I gave my life to protect won't even know I existed and the government? Sure, they might honor me as a noble sacrifice for a while, but soon enough, they'll forget and just find someone else to replace me."

"You manage to work here with that kind of mindset."

"In times like these, there aren't people like you around, Sunbae. No matter what anyone says, the most important thing is my safety. If I

have anything left after prioritizing that, then maybe I'll give something to the country. Who says you have to throw your life away to be patriotic? Working for the nation and paying my taxes diligently — that's patriotism."

Yoon Jong-woo, who had been passionately defending himself, suddenly pointed at Kwon Taekjoo.

"You should remember that too, Sunbae. Don't be fooled by all that talk of devotion, noble sacrifice, or glorious honor. Think about your mother, too. It would be the worst kind of unfilial act!"

"I know, man."

Kwon Taekjoo pinched Yoon Jong-woo's cheek before letting go. Jong-woo grabbed his cheek with both hands, whining in pain. Even as they bickered for a while, Kwon Taekjoo couldn't take his eyes off the stars engraved on the monument.

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Kwon Taekjoo entered Zhenya's house as if it were second nature. The sound of the door closing behind him seemed unusually loud. Though it was a place he came and went like his own home, today it felt unfamiliar and strange. Was it because the homeowner wasn't there to greet him?

As he walked in slowly, he instinctively checked for any surveillance devices that might have been planted. Even though he knew Zhenya wouldn't easily allow anyone to invade his space, it was a habit. Thankfully, there were no signs of anyone having broken in.

He thought about opening the windows for ventilation but decided against it. The scent of Zhenya, already faint, had almost completely dissipated. He feared that airing the place out might cause even the last traces of it to vanish.

Standing aimlessly in the middle of the spacious home, he eventually made his way to the refrigerator. When he opened the door, he saw the containers of side dishes he had put there himself. The scrambled eggs he had miserably failed to make for Zhenya before leaving for Vladivostok were nowhere to be seen. Had Zhenya eaten them? Or thrown them away? He could clearly imagine Zhenya sitting alone at the cold, empty dining table, eating the mess of scrambled eggs. He could picture him quietly snickering to himself while eating.

Lost in the thought, Taekjoo chuckled without realizing it. Then, suddenly aware of himself, he rubbed the back of his neck. He had acted as if he'd never want to see the guy again, and now that Zhenya was out of sight, all he could think about was him. He had it bad, no doubt about it.

He slowly sat down on the sofa. The silence was so deep that even the sound of his own breathing felt too loud. When would he be able to go see Zhenya again? Would Zhenya come back as if nothing had happened once the misunderstandings were cleared and the accusations were lifted? And what if he didn't return?

'Don't worry. I'm not disappearing. The only time I won't be by your side is when you're dead.'

He hadn't intended for their parting at Odinokiy Island to be permanent. He was just furious that Zhenya had once again put himself in danger, disrupting Taekjoo's work. Was it wrong not to have held back?

'Taekjoo. Do whatever you want to do, and I'll do the same. I came here to chase after you. Every minute of your life, I'll always be chasing you, now and forever. Sure, it's annoying at times, but one thing's clear: I've never had more fun in my life.'

Had he really not known that Zhenya would follow him? Could he have truly been unaware? Especially when he knew exactly why Zhenya was lingering in Korea, a place with no connection to his own country.

'You say you don't care if you die for that great job of yours? So, you expect me to just sit back and watch? You fought so hard to survive when you were in my hands, yet now you claim you have no regrets about the rest of your life? Don't be ridiculous, Taekjoo. Stop being so stubborn. Do you really believe that?'

Never had he worried about his own safety during a mission. His only focus was to complete the task successfully and return, just like always.

Was that arrogance?

What if the roles were reversed? If Zhenya were the one throwing himself into dangerous work, volunteering to die for his country, could Taekjoo really just let him do it? Of course not. He'd probably grab him by the collar, shouting for him to knock it off.

Scratching the back of his head in self-deprecation, his gaze fell on the laptop on the table. A memory flashed through his mind.

He slowly pulled the laptop toward him and powered it on. As the system booted up, it prompted him for fingerprint and iris recognition. Without hesitation, he positioned his eye in front of the camera and placed his index finger on the touchpad. After a moment, the security cleared, and the desktop appeared. There was only one app installed.

"Homecam Monitor? Why this all of a sudden? Planning to get a dog or something?"

"Taekjoo, you really should care for me a bit more."

"What are you going on about now?"

Zhenya had silently launched the app. Soon, the screen had switched to a live monitoring feed. The scenery displayed had been all too familiar. It was unmistakably Zhenya's mansion on Odinokiy Island.

"Why did you set up a homecam there? Planning to raise something? You don't even visit that place often anymore, so what's with this sudden whim? Neglecting something is still a form of abuse, you know."

"So you do know that, Taekjoo?"

"Know what?"

"That neglect is a form of abuse."

Zhenya's eyes had gleamed mischievously as he had taunted. Taekjoo had cleared his throat, changing the subject.

"So, what am I supposed to do with this?"

"Taekjoo, since you're always missing me and wondering what I'm doing, I had no choice. Now you can keep tabs on me anytime. You don't have to hug my pillow like a lovesick fool when I'm not around. You can whine at this camera all you want."

"When did I ever hug your damn pillow and do that!"

"Hmm. Still so shy, I see."

"Why are you doing this pointless stuff? Isn't that what video calls are for? You hate contacting me that much?"

"More like... I plan to block all signals reaching my island soon."

"Are you planning to isolate yourself from the world even more?"

"Nothing wrong with that."

"Weirdo. Whatever, just get rid of this nonsense. I don't need it."

"No need to be embarrassed. You can spy on me as much as you want."

Since Zhenya was so insistent, Taekjoo let it be. After all, if he didn't use the homecam, it didn't matter if it was installed or not.

But that thought didn't last long. Zhenya often left without a word, and every time, contact with him would be cut off. He had indeed succeeded in blocking all signals to and from Odinokiy Island, just as he had said.

Left with no choice, Taekjoo had begun using the camera to check if Zhenya was still alive. Each time Zhenya had gone days without sending even a single message, Taekjoo had called out his name through the camera, and soon enough, Zhenya had appeared in front of it. Seeing Zhenya's shiny face had always brought a sense of relief, though it had also sparked unnecessary frustration.

"What the hell, really? You said it'd only take a week, but you're late again?"

[That's how it went.]

"Is that really how it went? That's how it went?! You bastard! Don't you feel even the slightest bit sorry? Once you're gone, you don't even think about coming back, do you?"

[You're fuming right off the bat. You must have missed me a lot, huh?  
Can't stand it?]

Despite the constant nagging, Zhenya had smiled slyly, clearly enjoying it. At those moments, Kwon Taekjoo had quickly rolled his eyes, carefully scanning his face.

He had been checking to see if there were any injuries he hadn't noticed. Zhenya had often grown smug, knowing that Kwon Taekjoo sought him out first. The familiar clicking of his jaw and the broadening of his shoulders had been proof of that.

[So you missed me that much, huh? I suppose I've been gone long enough for you to get all worked up. Honestly, your patience is wearing thin with each passing day.]

"No one's getting worked up."

[Oh really?]

Zhenya had smirked, his eyes narrowing mischievously. Then he had leaned back and, without warning, unzipped his pants, pulling out his penis. It had been the first time Taekjoo had seen him masturbating. Usually, Zhenya had demanded such actions from Kwon Taekjoo and preferred to sit back and watch. The moment Kwon Taekjoo had responded, Zhenya would have immediately pounced, indulging in his pleasure. He had never quietly satisfied himself alone.

Maybe that was why watching his cock grow hard hadn't been entirely repulsive. In fact, Taekjoo had found himself holding his breath, concentrating. Every time Zhenya had stroked his own length, Taekjoo had felt strangely synchronized with him. After being touched by him so often, merely watching had brought back the sensations from before. Every time Zhenya's pale, slender fingers had glided over his skin, Taekjoo's spine had trembled. The soft, grinding motions of Zhenya's hand had transferred entirely to Taekjoo's own body, as if squeezing tightly at his groin.

Taekjoo's body had quickly heated up, and his breathing had become too ragged to hide. Zhenya, sensing the shift, had suddenly stopped his rapid hand movements. At the same time, a low groan had escaped from Kwon Taekjoo. He had flinched belatedly, but on screen, Zhenya had already been wearing the smile of a victor.

[Taekjoo, are you just going to keep watching like that? It must be agonizing.]

'.....Fuck.'

Unable to hold back any longer, he had unbuckled his pants. Roughly, he pulled out his hardened cock. Just gripping his near-bursting erection had sent waves of sharp pain and overwhelming pleasure racing down his spine. Even his spread knees had trembled along with him. He squeezed his throbbing cock as if he intended to crush it, stroking it up and down. The jolts of pleasure that flashed through his body had made his vision flicker.

'Ahh... ugh... fuck... haah... ngh...'

He couldn't stifle his labored breaths or the moans that spilled out. Desperate to reach climax quickly, he kept stroking his flushed cock without pause.

But for some reason, the sensation hadn't quite delivered the intensity he expected.

[Taekjoo, you need to be gentler. Think about how I touched you. Hmm?]

Zhenya had run his hand smoothly along his own cock, from base to tip. He had lazily massaged the head with his palm before moving back to caress his entire shaft in fluid motions. Zhenya's penis, coated in transparent precum, had shuddered slightly as his hand moved.

Fixating on the screen, Taekjoo had tried to mimic Zhenya's motions. The sharp ache from the repeated friction had slowly melted into a familiar sensation. Finally, thick waves of pleasure had begun to envelop his body.

[Slowly... from the base to the tip, gently...]

“Ahh... ngh... haah...”

[And make sure to round off the tip like this. Mmm, yeah, you're doing well, Taekjoo...]

“Ngh... ugh, shut up... haah...”

[Now squeeze a little tighter. Hold it, then release, and press upward again.]

“Ahh... ugh... haah... fuck... ugh... yeah...”

[Taekjoo, I like the way you sound when you cry out so desperately.]

Zhenya's sweet voice and ragged breaths had driven him closer to the edge. Though he had been only touching his cock, the sensation had tickled and tingled all over, from his chest to deep inside his thighs. Perhaps that had been just another reflex.

“Ahh... ngh... ugh... yeah...!”

[Taekjoo... Taekjoo... mmm, Taekjoo... ngh... ahh...!]

Before long, both of them had come hard. Zhenya's cum had splattered onto the camera, slowly dripping down the screen.

[Haah... So, Taekjoo, do you feel a little better now?]

“...Bastard. I'm dying here, so hurry up and come.”

When he had grumbled in dissatisfaction, Zhenya let out a hearty laugh.

[Certainly, it's a bit less exciting without you actually here.]

Zhenya had murmured in a hollow tone, slowly pulling in his lower lip and then pushing it out with his tongue. It was as if he had been frustrated by not being able to kiss him. Taekjoo had been about to complain and tell him to come immediately but froze in shock. Reflected on the dark screen, Taekjoo's own expression hadn't been much different from Zhenya's. At some point, Taekjoo had started chewing on his own lips , just like Zhenya.

“.....”

He wasn't sure if Zhenya still had the camera on. He didn't even know for sure if Zhenya was still at Odinokiy Island. But for now, it seemed like he had no choice but to hold on to this.

Taekjoo opened the monitoring app. After a brief moment of buffering, the screen switched to reveal a familiar room. It was the reception room of the mansion. Zhenya wasn't in sight. He tried to silence everything and sense Zhenya's presence, but nothing stood out.

With great effort, he parted his lips, though they didn't want to move. Before any words, a sigh escaped.

"Zhenya."

After hesitating for a long time, he finally called out his name.

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Meanwhile, Zhenya was holed up in the mansion's basement, studying some blueprints. He was researching how to make the intercept missiles stationed across the island operate more precisely. The current firepower was enough to track and shoot down most helicopters, but he wanted more. He needed a flawless system that could defend against fighter jets or ballistic missiles and strike back at their origin instantly. It was all part of his plan to turn Odinokiy Island into an impregnable fortress. It was also something he had taken up as a hobby whenever he was bored, even before he met Kwon Taekjoo.

From a young age, Zhenya was enamored with anything that could make him stronger. Often, burning desire surpassed natural ability or professional knowledge, and for him, it was weapons. Even without a teacher or special guidance, he freely sketched new weapons and soon

brought those ideas to life. Even when he faced unexpected problems, he quickly found solutions.

Understanding machines was easier than understanding people. Machines rewarded effort with firepower, and they never betrayed their master. Even when they malfunctioned, it was a simple fix.

In that sense, humans were just a hassle. They didn't do as expected, and once broken, it was impossible to repair them. Often, it was better to destroy them completely. The problem was, there was one human he couldn't simply dispose of that had forced his way into his life.

“.....”

At least when he was poring over blueprints, no stray thoughts interfered. He could go days without sleep or feeling hunger, completely absorbed. But this time, it wasn't so easy. No matter how much he tried to block it out, every circuit of his thoughts kept leading back to Kwon Taekjoo.

By now, Taekjoo must have returned safely to Korea. It was obvious what kind of treatment he would receive in the country he had stubbornly insisted on going back to.

Worried that Kwon Taekjoo might have been detained, he occasionally tracked the microchip implanted in him. After a few days at the National Intelligence Service, it appeared that Kwon had returned home. He remained there for several more days, which was unusual for someone like him, who couldn't stay still for even a moment unless he was asleep. Zhenya couldn't help but wonder if he had endured severe torture that left him physically compromised, or if he was trapped in a situation that prevented him from stepping outside at all.

As he continued imagining unpleasant scenarios, his anger quickly flared up again. It felt foolish that Kwon Taekjoo had returned to his homeland, risking every danger. Why was he so attached to a country that could abandon him at any moment, a country that had already taken away his own family? It was incomprehensible. Spies are doomed to work in the shadows their entire lives, only to vanish into oblivion.

He was at a loss for how to unravel the greatest conundrum of Kwon Taekjoo's life. There were no human relationships to draw upon for insight, making it all the more difficult.

[Zhenya]

Suddenly, all movement stopped. It wasn't a conscious decision but an instinctive reaction. Was it because he had been so engrossed in thoughts of Kwon Taekjoo? He thought he heard his voice.

[Yevgeny.]

Just as he thought it was a hallucination, a clearer voice reached him. He immediately stood up and went above ground. He walked briskly, but for some reason, he felt a heavy frustration. His heart pounded, thudding heavily, making him feel uneasy.

There was no way Kwon Taekjoo had returned. The radar, which would detect external approach, hadn't gone off, and there was no sound of propellers. It had to be a misunderstanding, yet he kept glancing around, scanning the large interior over and over.

No matter how thoroughly he checked, there were no signs of anyone having broken in. He couldn't even sense Kwon Taekjoo's presence. Was it really just a mistake?

[Are you listening?]

Just as he was about to turn away in frustration, a more distinct voice echoed. He followed it immediately, crossing the reception room. Before long, the blinking light of the home camera on the table caught his eye. Could the sound have come from there? He stopped in his tracks and watched for a moment. As if to confirm it wasn't his imagination, Kwon Taekjoo's voice flowed from the camera.

[I've received a new mission. It won't take long.]

He let out a hollow laugh. After their fight, where it felt like Taekjoo never wanted to see him again, it took days for Kwon Taekjoo to finally reach out, and all he had to say was that he was being sent on a new mission. Was this for real? Something felt profoundly off.

Kwon Taekjoo's behavior — telling him to take some time, while pushing aside their issues and prioritizing work again — left him feeling resentful. Give one, and he demands two. Struggling to give two, and now he's asking for three. Humans, it seemed, were greedy and selfish creatures.

Should he tie Kwon Taekjoo down and keep him by his side? Maybe then the bitterness and resentment would fade a little. Dark thoughts stirred within him.

Kwon Taekjoo, unaware of Zhenya's condition, kept talking to himself. His tone was calmer and more composed than usual, almost giving off a

tender feeling.

[I've made my decision. I'll tell you everything when I get back. All the things I haven't been able to say until now. So this time, don't follow me recklessly or try to get involved unnecessarily. Just wait quietly.]

He always acted this way, only sounding sincere when it was convenient for him.

[This isn't an order, it's a request.]

Kwon Taekjoo paused for a moment before adding his plea. His tone was uncharacteristically earnest and soft.

[I'll come pick you up as soon as the job's done, okay? Zhenya.]

“.....”

He spoke in the gentlest manner, as if he saw Zhenya as a six-year-old child. Zhenya glared at the unfortunate home camera with disapproval, as if it were Kwon Taekjoo himself.

Unfortunately, Kwon Taekjoo's voice didn't come through again. Even after waiting for a while, nothing more was heard. Finally, Zhenya approached the home camera and replayed the recorded message of Kwon Taekjoo's voice over and over again.

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Tehran, the capital of Iran. From early in the morning, tourists flocked to Milad Tower. From the observation deck, 435 meters above the ground, one could take in a panoramic view of the entire city.

Kwon Taekjoo, pretending to be a tourist, surveyed the situation around the government buildings, mosques, and the airport with a telescope. The one he was using boasted such high magnification that he could clearly see each individual tile on the Golestan Palace, even from 15 kilometers away. The palace, which preserved the Persian architectural style, was adorned with a mosaic of small mirror pieces, dazzling in the sunlight.

The Tochal Mountain range, which encircled Tehran and remained snow-covered year-round, the ever-busy Grand Bazaar, Imamzadeh Saleh Mosque at Tajrish Square, and the grayish-white residential buildings — all conveyed the unique atmosphere of Iran's bustling heart.

The city's security was heightened to welcome the Russian and Turkish leaders. Roads along the visiting route were completely shut down, and patrol cars and military trucks passed by every 10 minutes. Teams of two soldiers and police officers diligently checked each alley, maintaining security. Plainclothes agents lingering here and there, and snipers strategically positioned, were also noticeable. The entire city was practically on lockdown.

It was a measure he had fully expected. In truth, compared to infiltrating deep into enemy territory, breaking through multiple layers of security to kidnap a high-profile figure or steal something valuable, this mission was relatively simple. All he had to do was infiltrate the hotel where the Russian delegation was staying and make contact with

Park Jeong-ho. The methods for entering the hotel and the escape routes had already been prepared. Now, the only thing left was to wait until they arrived safely.

Since it was a trilateral summit, the focus of protocol and security would likely be on the presidents. As part of the Russian delegation, they probably wouldn't go out of their way to provide excessive protection for Park Jeong-ho, who, as an Asian, would already stand out more than necessary. Drawing attention to him would only complicate things.

[Russian presidential plane entering Iranian airspace.]

He had just checked his watch, thinking it was about time. The awaited news came through his earpiece. He scanned the sky with his telescope. Soon, a plane appeared in the eastern sky — the Russian president's Ilyushin IL-96. The Iranian fighter jets that had been escorting it veered off in different directions and quickly disappeared from view.

A welcoming crowd was lined up at the airport where the plane was set to land. Typically, a prime minister-level official would greet foreign leaders, but this time, it seemed Iran's president himself had come out, an unusual move.

[Russian presidential plane has landed at Tehran's Mehrabad Airport.]

He kept a close eye on the door of the plane, which had come to a stop. Soon, the door opened, and President Lomonosov of Russia and his wife stepped out. After posing for a commemorative photo at the entrance, they descended the stairs and greeted the Iranian president and his wife. One of the aides accompanying the Russian president caught his eye — Zhenya's second brother, Bazim.

“Well, look who it is. Always in the thick of things.”

He sneered as he scanned the rest of the delegation. But curiously, there was no sign of Park Jeong-ho or any other Asian faces.

Did they disguise him?

“What are they being so careful about? They must really be nervous.”

Shaking his head, he pulled a disposable lens from his jacket pocket. Right there, he opened the sealed package and slipped the special lens into his eye. After blinking a few times to secure the lens, he looked back through the telescope. As he scanned the faces of the delegation members, the height of each individual appeared as numbers at the edges of his field of vision. Since Park Jeong-ho was around 172 cm tall, it wasn't hard to narrow down the candidates.

Squinting, he focused on each candidate one by one. With the pressure applied by the special lenses, the entire body of each individual came into clear view. There was only one person among them not carrying a firearm.

“Target confirmed.”

After giving a brief report, he shifted his attention back to the city. Armed police and soldiers lined the restricted roads. Plainclothes agents were starting to move into their designated positions. The police were pushing pedestrians behind the barricades and checking the identities of suspicious individuals. Snipers were steadily setting up

their rifles on the minarets of mosques, on bridges, and on the rooftops of apartment buildings.

At the same time, the Milad Tower, where Kwon Taekjoo had been staying, was also shut down. Security guards came up and sent all the tourists down, citing an urgent need for facility repairs.

“Time to head out.”

Kwon Taekjoo descended the tower, blending in with the crowd of tourists. He smoothly got into the car he had parked and mounted his phone on the holder, activating the navigation system.

“G1, I’m on the move. Send the target’s location.”

As soon as he made the request, the current location of the target appeared on the screen, followed by the target’s predicted route and approach paths, excluding the restricted areas. He selected one of them and slowly drove onto the main road.

[Target is moving on the expected route.]

The Iranian president and the Russian delegation, escorted by dozens of police cars and security vehicles, sped ahead. As usual, all the traffic signals were adjusted for their convenience. Kwon Taekjoo followed at a reasonable distance, making sure the target stayed within the expected range. He also needed to verify that the target didn’t make contact with any third-party groups or that no one was targeting the individual. If the target faced any danger, it was also Kwon Taekjoo’s mission to protect him.

The navigation guided him through narrow, secluded alleys, as he had to avoid the restricted roads. Although driving was tricky with parked cars and pedestrians suddenly stepping out, he didn't slow down for a second. When you get used to being chased and chasing others, driving at this level becomes second nature, like you could do it with your eyes closed.

“...Hmm?”

As he cruised along, an odd sense of unease crept in. He stopped briefly and craned his neck, looking up at the roof of a nearby building. It was a large hotel, the kind where snipers would typically be stationed, but for some reason, there was no sign of them. He then used his binoculars to check the roof of the building across from it. The same situation — nothing.

Had they already pulled out? No way. The target was still en route to the Sa'dabad Palace, where the official event was set to take place. The security personnel wouldn't disperse until the heads of state had safely arrived at their destination. There was no special circumstance that would cause snipers to leave their posts.

“...Huh?”

It was then that a dark figure flickered on the hotel roof he had been watching. It seemed the missing sniper had reappeared. Similar movements were detected on the building across the street.

“What the hell are they doing?”

A sniper is never supposed to take their eyes off the target until their mission is complete, whether their goal is to eliminate or protect

someone. If it were just one sniper deviating from the rules, it could be written off, but when more than one breaks protocol at the same time, something didn't add up. He had to check what was going on.

"This is G1. Unusual activity detected. I need to confirm before proceeding."

[Approved.]

"Requesting access to Espinas Hotel."

After requesting backup from the support team, Kwon Taekjoo headed toward the suspicious hotel. He flashed his Iranian police ID at the approaching valet.

{I won't be long. Just leave the car.}

{Yes, sir.}

Taekjoo stepped out of the driver's seat and strode into the hotel. The lobby was bustling, likely because it was close to check-in time. Staff members were busy pushing carts or attending to guests. He went straight to the reception desk and presented his police ID.

{I'm with the police. I'm here to check whether the designated security personnel for VIP protection are stationed properly.}

{Ah, we've received instructions to thoroughly verify any outsider's identity. Would it be alright if I make a copy of your ID, officer?}

{Go ahead.}

The receptionist disappeared inside and didn't return for a while, likely contacting the affiliated police station directly to verify. Taekjoo began to wonder if he was being overly suspicious, wasting time for no reason, but he couldn't shake the lingering feeling of unease.

{Thank you for waiting.}

The receptionist finally returned and handed Taekjoo's ID back. It seemed the support team had successfully intercepted the communication line.

{You're free to inspect the premises. However, due to hotel policy, we can't provide you with a master key. Our security team will accompany you.}

{That's alright. I'm only doing a quick check.}

{Still, we need to be informed of anything happening within the hotel.}

With their insistence on following the rules, Taekjoo knew it was pointless to argue further. Two large guards from the security team soon appeared from the office. They led him to the staff-only elevator. He followed without a word. The elevator was quite spacious, but with three men inside, it felt cramped. One of the guards swiped his access card and gestured for Taekjoo to press the floor button. After he did, the doors closed silently.

When the elevator reached the top floor, Kwon Taekjoo was the only one to step out. He had knocked both guards unconscious and dragged

their bodies into a nearby utility room. After confiscating their radios and access cards, he entered the restricted emergency stairwell.

Moving silently, he ascended the stairs to the rooftop. Before long, he found the rooftop access door with no additional landings or stair landings. He quietly brought his wristwatch close to the thick door, activating the thermal imaging function in his special contact lenses. Through the lenses, he saw the outline of two figures beyond the door — one lying on the ground, and another preparing a sniper rifle.

It was clear that there was no need for multiple snipers in one position. This suggested that the Iranian government's sniper had been ambushed. Therefore, the sniper currently aiming wasn't there to protect the VIP but had an entirely different mission.

It was impossible to tell who the intruder beyond the door was targeting. The problem was that it could disrupt the Russian delegation's schedule and throw all the plans into chaos. It had to be stopped.

He pulled out a small bomb and attached it to the door. Then, lying flat against the floor, he pressed the side button on his wristwatch. Immediately after, the small bomb exploded, blowing the entire door off. Taking advantage of the brief commotion, he rolled towards the rooftop and pulled the trigger at the thermal silhouette. The assailant collapsed before they had a chance to respond.

But in the next moment, bullets came flying unexpectedly from behind. It seemed that a sniper from the opposite building had grasped the situation and began retaliating. Kwon Taekjoo quickly dashed towards the wall where the sniper rifle was set up, keeping his upper body as low as possible. Even during his sprint, the gunfire didn't stop. He barely dodged the bullets, slid along the wall, and began returning fire.

Not long after, the barrage of bullets aimed at Kwon Taekjoo ceased. He hadn't had time to aim properly, but it seemed like he got lucky and hit the mark.

Grabbing the sniper rifle, Kwon Taekjoo scanned the rooftops of the other buildings through the attached scope. Suddenly, he felt a sharp tension at the back of his head. He immediately turned his gun behind him, but the sniper caught in the scope had already precisely aimed at Kwon Taekjoo. It was too late, or so he thought, but at that moment, the sniper fell from an unknown attack. He hastily moved his scope left and right, trying to figure out who had done it. However, the silhouette of the person who had helped Kwon Taekjoo briefly entered his sight before disappearing like smoke.

Zhenya?

No, the vibe was completely different from him. It was only for a brief moment, and the distance was far, but he was certain of that. If it wasn't him, then who was it?

The question didn't last long. A bullet from afar shattered part of the railing he was hiding behind. Kwon Taekjoo hurriedly turned his gun forward. As he aimed carefully at the direction the shot came from, he saw a sniper standing out in the open. It was practically a suicide act. He frowned and half-pulled the trigger. Strangely enough, it felt like he made eye contact with the sniper through the scope. The way the sniper slowly shook his head was unsettling.

"...What the hell?"

[G1, a report of an explosion has been received on-site. Nearby police units are on their way. Please report your status.]

"Later."

He postponed the report and took the earpiece from the fallen sniper beside him. Every time the sniper in the opposite building moved his lips, Persian flowed out of the earpiece.

[Panj, chahar, se, do, yek.]

It was a countdown. Kwon Taekjoo frowned and looked at the sniper across the way again. The sniper had already climbed onto the railing and, shouting something, jumped off without hesitation.

[Inshallah.]

As soon as his final words echoed through the earpiece, there was a loud thud. As if it had been planned, dozens of drones immediately ascended into the air.

"...What the fuck."

The drones all flew in one direction — towards the road where the Russian and Iranian leaders were traveling. No way. As soon as the ominous thought crossed his mind, a series of massive explosions echoed. The shockwaves caused the ground beneath him to tremble.

Suddenly, the entire city fell silent. His mind went blank. The black smoke rising one by one from the direction of the main road proved that time hadn't stopped and that the surreal scene before his eyes was, in fact, real.

Police officers patrolling the alley quickly drove off. People walking along the street pressed themselves against the walls, scanning their surroundings with anxious eyes.

Kwon Taekjoo, who instinctively crouched down at the explosion, hurried to check the target's status. For some reason, nothing was showing on the map.

"Shit, what the hell is going on?"

[G1, an unidentified explosion occurred near the target. Suspected to be a terrorist attack.]

"Terrorist attack?"

Who or why someone would commit such an act didn't matter. His mind was now focused solely on rescuing the target.

He swiftly left the rooftop and rechecked the target's location.

"What's the target's current position?"

[Unable to confirm. Check directly and report back.]

"Damn it..."

Standing in front of the elevator, he repeatedly pressed the button. His urgency made the elevator's movements feel even slower.

Just as he was about to search for another elevator, something felt off. All of the elevators were heading up to the top floor at the same time. It seemed the police had been dispatched due to the explosion and gunfire on the roof. The situation made him likely to be mistaken as a terrorist suspect.

[Support team, I need backup.]

A moment later, all of the elevators came to a stop. He seized the moment to dash out to the emergency stairwell, leaping down several steps at a time. Gaining momentum, he even slid down the railing.

It was just as he neared the ground floor. Suddenly, the emergency door below swung open, and two guards appeared.

{Freeze!}

Ignoring their warning, he leaped. Using the opposite wall as a foothold, he propelled himself and kicked one of the guards in the face. In the same motion, he tangled his leg around the other guard's, tripping him to the ground, then quickly rose and threw a punch. In an instant, both guards were subdued. He grabbed their fallen radio and reported.

{Emergency staircase, all clear.}

Acting as if nothing had happened, he opened the emergency door and stepped outside. The lobby was deserted. It seemed everyone had already evacuated to safety.

He swiftly crossed the lobby and got into a car parked in front of the main entrance. As soon as he started the engine, he sped down the road, where explosions and gunfire were still echoing.

Due to the unexpected terrorist attack, the streets had become lawless. With the traffic lights out of order, cars were tangled up, ignoring the lanes.

Cars were constantly crossing over the centerline. Many people, in a state of panic, abandoned their vehicles and fled on foot. He honked furiously at those recklessly darting in front of his car.

{Move! Damn it, it's dangerous! Let me through, come on!}

Even the military and police in charge of maintaining order were completely stunned. They were disoriented, unable to tell friend from foe, and it showed in their chaotic behavior. It was as if the entire control system had collapsed, and they didn't know what to prioritize.

It wasn't just an impression; there were too many casualties. As the black smoke lifted slightly, people lying on the streets came into view. Public security personnel deployed for protection and regular civilians were mixed together. Groans and screams rang out from all directions. The acrid air was thick with the smell of gunpowder, burning, and blood, making it hard to even breathe. It was a scene straight out of hell.

"Damn it, where is Park Jeong-ho?"

The scene of the terrorist attack was even more chaotic. The aftermath of the explosion had pushed the large barricades far away, and bodies were scattered everywhere. Most had been riddled with bullets or were burning down to their skeletal remains. The once smooth roads were

now cratered or scorched black. Around them, the remains of bodies and piles of scrap metal were strewn about haphazardly.

Amidst it all, gunfire continued nearby. It seemed the Iranian special forces were in the middle of a skirmish with the terrorist group. Drones flew overhead constantly. There were far too many for mere reconnaissance. Sure enough, one of the drones crashed into the combat zone and exploded massively.

Were the leaders of the two nations even safe? And Park Jeong-ho?

[G1, target location confirmed.]

In the midst of the chaos, the welcome news came through his communication device. Soon after, the target reappeared on his phone screen.

Given the unexpected terrorist attack, there was a high chance that the official schedule would be entirely canceled. The summit itself might be nullified. That would likely mean Park Jeong-ho would return to North Korea. If that happened, this operation would be a failure.

That couldn't happen. After all the effort to get this chance, he couldn't leave everything to some uncertain future.

"Support team, we're changing the plan. I'm securing the target immediately."

[G1, hold position. I repeat, G1, hold position in a secure location.]

"There's no time for that!

Muttering in frustration, he pressed down on the accelerator. He reversed into a nearby alley to avoid the stray bullets flying on the main road. Although the streets were now mostly empty as pedestrians had fled, abandoned cars, motorcycles, strollers, and carts were scattered everywhere. Nevertheless, he didn't slow down, maneuvering between the obstacles.

Constantly checking the target's movement, he turned the steering wheel sharply and entered a narrow side street. The gap between the buildings was so tight that the side mirrors kept folding back. Clenching his teeth harder, he increased his speed.

Finally, the road ahead opened up, revealing a wide street. He barely had a moment to feel relieved before he came face to face with a waiting patrol car. The police, caught off guard by Kwon Taekjoo's sudden appearance, looked startled. Both officers hurriedly fumbled for their guns, aiming them at him.

{Hey, stop the engine!}

{Raise your hands and get out slowly. Don't try anything stupid!}

He obediently cut the engine. Then, he opened the driver's door and slowly stepped out. Or at least, he pretended to — before suddenly hurling a grenade. The shocked officers shouted at the top of their lungs.

{Grenade!}

[Get down!]

The officers threw themselves flat on the ground. But the grenade never exploded. By the time they realized something was wrong, Kwon Taekjoo had already sped away at full throttle. The late gunfire only scratched his rear bumper.

How far had he driven? The long-awaited command came through his radio.

[G1, mission change approved.]

"Finally! You should've done that sooner."

As soon as approval was given, the recommended route appeared on his map. He followed the route, chasing the target. Most of the roads were blocked, forcing him to take a winding path through alleys. In the meantime, the police, who had been alerted by the earlier patrol car, began tailing him one by one. They blared their sirens, warning him that they would shoot if he didn't stop.

He ignored everything and focused solely on pursuing the target. Despite repeated warnings, the police began firing. Bullets concentrated on the rear of the vehicle until the back window finally shattered. Kwon Taekjoo ducked his head and kept pressing the accelerator. His visibility was narrowing, and his control over the car weakened, causing it to repeatedly scrape against the building walls. In the process, the right side mirror hung loosely, and the rear bumper dragged on the ground after coming partially off.

"Alright, let's do this."

Even amid the relentless gunfire, he zoomed in on the map to get a clearer view of the surrounding terrain. A dead end was coming up soon. He had to make a sharp turn before reaching it. He should have slowed down, but instead, Kwon Taekjoo accelerated, then braked sharply, steering the wheel to make a barely controlled left turn. The passenger side scraped violently against the outer wall, leaving a deep dent.

Of course, compared to the fate of the trailing police cars, that was nothing. The police vehicles, which had been tightly following him, couldn't control their speed and crashed headlong into the dead-end wall. The cars that had been tailing them in a line collided in a chain reaction, clogging the alley.

Kwon Taekjoo clenched his fist in triumph. But it was too early to relax. The sound of propellers whirred overhead, and a police helicopter appeared.

{Suspect vehicle, stop immediately. Suspect vehicle, if you do not stop, we will open fire.}

"Like I'd stop for you."

Ignoring the command, he kept driving, and without hesitation, the helicopter unleashed its minigun. In an instant, long streaks of bullets raked across the roof of the car. Glass windows shattered, and the seat cushions were torn open, with stuffing spilling out.

"Shit! They're really trying to kill me!"

He had no choice but to deviate from the route. He swerved into an alley that led directly to a bazaar. Despite the recent terrorist attack nearby, many merchants were still packing up their stalls instead of evacuating. Honking loudly, Kwon Taekjoo charged into the bazaar. People screamed and ran inside their shops at the sudden rampage. The helicopter stopped firing and flew toward the exit of the bazaar, anticipating that Kwon Taekjoo would emerge from there. The roof of the bazaar lowered their chances of hitting him, and the risk of civilian casualties likely forced them to hold off on shooting.

Charging through the bazaar would be like walking into the jaws of a crocodile. Checking the map again, Kwon Taekjoo honked continuously and headed straight for one of the shops. Simultaneously, he launched a grenade through the shattered windshield. The grenade exploded against the wall, creating a small hole and causing radial cracks around it. Clenching his teeth, he slammed the accelerator.

“Haaah!”

With a loud crash, the car smashed through the weakened wall, and the debris piled onto the hood and roof. Both the front of the car and the roof were badly dented, barely holding together. It was a wonder the car could still move in that condition.

Breaking through the wall had allowed him to shake off the helicopter and close the distance with the target significantly. Kwon Taekjoo kept his eyes fixed on the position marker on the GPS, relentlessly driving forward.

Soon, his car ascended to the elevated road where the target was also driving. He was nearly there, so close to catching him. Just as he began to feel confident, an unexpected twist occurred. The target suddenly

exited onto a nearby ramp, driving back the way they had come, now using the road below the overpass. Was it to confuse the pursuers?

For whatever reason, if he continued like this, the target would get further away again. He had no idea how much more effort it would take to catch up. While he was still thinking, the target was already passing right under Kwon Taekjoo, heading in the opposite direction.

“When have I ever played it safe?”

Muttering to himself sarcastically, Kwon Taekjoo suddenly turned his car toward the soundproof wall. Letting out a battle cry, he floored the accelerator.

The car smashed through the guardrail and plummeted five stories down. With a loud thud, the airbags exploded with a violent force.

The shockwave hit his entire body, but he had no time to feel the pain. He used the knife strapped to his ankle to slash through the airbag, freeing himself from the suffocating pressure on his chest, and finally, he could breathe again.

“Fuck. I’m gonna die at this rate.”

Kwon Taekjoo forced himself to recover and quickly checked the target’s position. The dot on the map showed the target was now almost on top of his own location. No wonder — his car had landed right on top of an armored vehicle from the police SWAT team that had been guarding the target from behind.

Startled by the sudden crash, the gunman in the front armored vehicle aimed at Kwon Taekjoo. He ducked his head instinctively to avoid the barrage of bullets, cramming himself into the back seat. In that cramped space, he pulled out a portable rocket launcher he had hidden there and fired.

The explosion lifted the two leading armored vehicles into the air. The target's vehicle narrowly avoided a collision with the overturned armored trucks and veered into a left alley. The armored vehicle with Kwon Taekjoo's wrecked car still stuck on top followed right after.

The sharp turn caused the vehicle to tip precariously, wedging itself between the wall and the armored truck. Kwon Taekjoo was thrown around helplessly inside. Sparks flew as the car dragged along, scraping against the concrete. It looked like it could catch fire at any moment. There was a chance he'd be crushed along with the car if he didn't get out quickly.

He crawled out through the backseat window and smashed off the side mirror of the armored vehicle. Balancing for a moment on the speeding vehicle, he leaped onto the armored truck.

“Hyaah!”

Just after he jumped to the armored truck, his car was crushed into a shapeless mess. If he had been even a second slower, he would've been trapped and killed.

Without a moment to catch his breath, Kwon Taekjoo climbed across the roof of the armored truck, making his way toward the driver's seat. He fired repeatedly at the windshield, but it was bulletproof and didn't shatter easily. The impact left white cracks spiderwebbing across the

glass. He struck the weakened window with his rifle butt until it finally broke, and he knocked out the driver with a single blow. The armored truck swerved erratically as the driver slumped unconscious.

{Mind if I join you?} he quipped as he squeezed into the driver's seat. Once he took the wheel, he sped up, getting closer to the escaping cars.

There were only two cars left in the Russian presidential convoy. Whether they had scattered for safety after the terrorist attack or whether the others had already been taken out, he wasn't sure. But those two were in such bad shape, it was a miracle they were still moving at all. At this point, it was hard to tell if Park Jeong-ho was still alive. If he had already died, Kwon Taekjoo needed to confirm his body.

Kwon Taekjoo floored the accelerator, pushing the speed to its limit. The cars that had been fleeing like frightened beasts down the narrow alley now found themselves trapped at a dead end. Kwon Taekjoo rammed into the car ahead of him, shoving it forward until it collided with the one in front of it. Both vehicles, now crushed between the wall and his armored truck, were stuck, unable to move. The four wheels of the cars spun helplessly in the air.

Once all movement ceased, Kwon Taekjoo climbed out of the armored truck and approached the vehicles from the Russian delegation. Blood from a wound on his forehead had dripped down, staining the corner of his vision. It seeped into his special lenses, tinting his entire view red. Brushing off the blood casually, he started checking the back vehicle first. Inside, the occupants were slumped over, motionless. Even the driver seemed to have lost consciousness, the bullet wound too deep.

As he examined each person, his eyes caught on one in the back seat — Bazim!

Clicking his tongue, Kwon Taekjoo circled the car and opened the back door. Reaching out, he felt Bazim's pulse. He was alive. Strangely enough, though, his heartbeat was far too rapid.

At that unsettling realization, a hard object pressed against his chest — a gun. Bazim's eyelids flicked open in quick succession. Kwon Taekjoo slowly raised his hands and stepped back. Bazim, now fully on guard, also climbed out of the car, watching him closely. Standing face-to-face, he tore away the tattered synthetic skin from my face. A surprised laugh escaped Bazim's lips.

“Hah, it’s you again? The Korean spy.”

“Look who’s talking. Seeing each other this often, we might start getting attached.”

“Right... Was it your people who orchestrated the terrorist attack?”

“As if. What would we stand to gain from that?”

“If not, then why are you here?”

“Isn’t that a little too personal of a question?”

Kwon Taekjoo’s flippant response deepened the frown on Bazim’s face. In frustration, he pressed the gun harder against Kwon Taekjoo’s throat.

“You’ve been interfering with my work at every turn.”

“As if I want to. Maybe stop doing bad things? Is being shameless a family trait?”

“Even on the verge of death, your tongue never quits.”

Bazim's finger began to slowly squeeze the trigger, and his lips curled into a sinister smile.

“I've always found it annoying, but this works out.”

Bazim's breathing was unusually heavy as he chuckled softly. Upon closer inspection, his left side was soaked with blood. It seemed he had been shot. His eyes were glazed, and he looked in poor condition, yet he was still trying to act tough.

Kwon Taekjoo's gaze, which had been fixed on Bazim, briefly shifted behind him. Bazim, too, faltered in response. In that moment, Taekjoo raised his hand. The bullet fired from the gun tore through the air. Kwon quickly twisted Bazim's arm behind his back and caught the falling gun, firing it somewhere. The drone that had been approaching from behind Bazim exploded violently in the air. Kwon Taekjoo shielded Bazim as the debris rained down.

The loud explosion left his ears ringing. Shaking his head, he tried to clear his dizzy mind. There were still drone bombs deployed for the terror attack. They needed to hurry.

Without a word, Kwon Taekjoo grabbed the collar of Bazim's jacket and yanked it off.

“Let go! What are you...!”

"I doubt that bastard would be sad if you died, but still."

Taekjoo pressed the half-torn jacket against Bazim's side wound. Then he unbuckled Bazim's belt and wrapped it tightly around the jacket to secure it.

"...Ugh."

"But you might as well make the most of having a brother who's actually worth something for once in your life."

As soon as he finished the emergency treatment, Taekjoo pushed Bazim away.

"If you go 200 meters down this road, you'll run into some Iranian police. Go tell them who you are and ask for help, or whatever."

"....."

"If you don't want to, you can just stay here and become a victim of this terror attack. You don't look like you'll last long anyway."

Taekjoo gestured toward Bazim's blood-soaked pants and tossed him his gun. The magazine was already empty, but it was better than nothing.

Bazim shot Taekjoo a look of disbelief before slowly retreating, taking cautious steps backward. His mistrust was evident as he hesitated, keeping his guard up for quite a while. It wasn't until Taekjoo said, "Oh,

I hear sirens," that Bazim finally limped off in the direction he'd been told.

Shaking his head, Taekjoo remembered his duty and headed toward the vehicle that Park Jeong-ho was supposed to be in. He pulled at the crumpled door that wouldn't open, ripping it off its hinges with a strong tug. He bent down to look inside. Park Jeong-ho was huddled, covering his head, trembling. The driver and the agents escorting him appeared to have already been killed.

"I'm here to escort you, Doctor Park."

Hearing unexpected Korean, Park Jeong-ho flinched and froze. Taekjoo calmly made eye contact with him as he cautiously lifted his head.

"You're not hurt anywhere, are you?"

"Are... are you from South Korea?"

"That's right. I was the cockroach in Vladivostok. There's no time for introductions now, so let's go. The car..."

Taekjoo glanced around before nodding toward an armored vehicle nearby.

"That one should do. Can you move?"

Park Jeong-ho nodded without hesitation and took Taekjoo's hand. Despite the intense chase, he didn't seem seriously injured.

“What on earth is going on?”

“We’re still trying to figure that out. It seems like a terrorist attack unrelated to our mission. We can talk more on the way.”

“W-What?!”

As he was about to get into the passenger seat of the armored vehicle, Park Jeong-ho recoiled in horror at the sight of the bloodied agents who had collapsed. Taekjoo, unfazed, dragged their bodies out of the vehicle before telling him to get in. Park Jeong-ho appeared shocked by Taekjoo’s indifferent attitude toward the dead. Even as he hesitantly climbed into the passenger seat, he kept glancing at Taekjoo, as if unsure whether he could trust him.

Taekjoo quickly reversed and sped out of the alley.

“Due to an unexpected terrorist attack, the mission has changed. We haven’t identified who’s behind it, but we believe it’s safer to extract you during this chaos. The North will likely think your disappearance is related to the attack for the time being.”

“Th-then what about my family?”

“The North is too busy figuring out the details of the attack, so surveillance on your family has likely eased. Right now, you need to focus on one thing. You have to return safely if you want to see them again. I’ll take you to the South Korean embassy as planned.”

As he put on the headset connected to the comms, Taekjoo instructed, “Hold on tight.” The headset crackled with updates on the ongoing

skirmishes and restricted areas. Taekjoo sped forward, avoiding the danger zones.

But it wasn't long before all routes were blocked. With insufficient firepower and Park Jeong-ho in tow, a full-scale battle wasn't an option. After a brief moment of consideration, Taekjoo made a swift decision.

"The underground route will be faster."

"W-what? Ahhhh!"

Without hesitation, the armored vehicle charged down the subway entrance. With each step of the staircase, the heavy vehicle lurched from side to side.

It wouldn't have been surprising if the vehicle flipped over. Park Jeong-ho clung to the safety bar with both hands, his eyes tightly shut, emitting continuous groans that sounded like half-suppressed screams.

Due to the terror attack, subway operations had been suspended, leaving the station deserted. They shot through it in no time, heading toward the farthest exit. Workers who had been preparing to seal the station against further attacks scattered in panic as the armored vehicle came barreling through. A police car that had been controlling pedestrians nearby quickly turned on its sirens and began the chase. When Taekjoo ignored the orders to stop, the officers fired without hesitation, bullets constantly pinging off the armored surface.

"Oh no, we're going to get caught!"

"Hold on tight."

As they passed through alley after alley, police cars responding to backup requests kept tailing them. Eventually, even helicopters were deployed. They were closing in from all directions, from the ground and the sky. It was a deadlock.

Taekjoo made a sharp turn with expert handling, and in the dizzying blur of motion, a sign prohibiting vehicle access came into view. It was clear that the path was far too narrow for a vehicle to pass. Still, there was no choice but to take the risk. Taekjoo extended his arm to shield Park Jeong-ho in the passenger seat as he slammed on the gas.

“This might get bumpy.”

“Ahhhh!”

The armored vehicle scraped against the buildings lining the narrow alley, knocking off the side mirrors. The passage was so tight that the police cars had to line up one after another to chase them. No matter how many bullets the police fired from behind, they couldn't even scratch the armored vehicle. Since the police cars were so close, the helicopter couldn't risk firing its minigun any longer.

The only problem was that if the road ahead was blocked, they'd be trapped like rats. And, as expected, police cars responding to backup calls appeared from the opposite end of the alley.

Their only way out now was to go underground. Taekjoo quickly scanned for a manhole that looked suitable for escape. Meanwhile, the police's encirclement was tightening.

Taekjoo halted the vehicle and began contemplating an escape plan. Was there really no way out? Would it be better to surrender for now and wait for a chance to escape later? But what about Park Jeong-ho?

As he was mulling over the options, the distinctive sound of a motorcycle engine roared in the distance. He turned his head toward the noise. From the direction of the passenger seat, a motorcycle was speeding through a narrow alley barely wide enough for a bicycle. The rider's face was obscured by a helmet, making them unrecognizable. Out of instinct, Taekjoo pointed his gun at the motorcycle.

Oddly enough, the rider made no attempt to retaliate. Instead, they signaled something to Taekjoo. His eyes widened in recognition. He immediately understood the signal — it was a unique gesture from the special forces unit Taekjoo had served in before joining the NIS.

At that moment, Taekjoo realized that the person who had provided covering fire from the hotel rooftop earlier had been protecting him all along. For a brief moment, he had wondered if he was imagining things.

It seemed now that headquarters had conditionally deployed a Plan B agent. If they had openly assigned the agent as a team member, Taekjoo would have surely refused.

The agent's mission was likely to eliminate any obstacles that might prevent the mission's success, and those obstacles probably included Taekjoo himself if he showed any sign of defection.

“So little trust, huh?”

Muttering bitterly to himself, Taekjoo suddenly pushed down on Park Jeong-ho's head and fired several rounds out of the passenger-side

window. At that moment, the cover agent who had approached the armored vehicle smashed through the window, which had shattered under the gunfire. Park Jeong-ho, clueless about what was happening, let out a series of panicked screams while clutching his head. Taekjoo grabbed him by the collar and gave him firm instructions.

“Doctor, listen carefully. From now on, we’re escaping with that person.”

“What? Who’s that?”

“They’re one of our agents. They’ll make sure you get to the embassy safely.”

“Th-then what about you?”

“I’ll finish up here and follow you shortly.”

“There’s no time,” Taekjoo added, as he abruptly unbuckled Park Jeong-ho’s seatbelt. He shoved him forward, forcing him out through the narrow window. The Plan B agent helped Park Jeong-ho escape.

Meanwhile, the police continued to ram the armored vehicle from both sides, trying to push it down. The helicopter above also fired warning shots, demanding their surrender.

Taekjoo maneuvered the armored vehicle closer to the side alley to clear a path for the motorcycle’s escape.

“Get going, now!”

The motorcycle, now in reverse gear, quickly sped down the narrow alley with Park Jeong-ho on board. As soon as they took off, a hail of bullets rained down on the armored vehicle.

The helicopter's minigun fired relentlessly, and holes began to appear one by one in the roof.

In a way, this was also Taekjoo's last chance to escape. But if he fled now, there would be no guarantee of Park Jeong-ho's safety. He needed to buy more time — only then could he correct his past mistakes and complete the mission entrusted to him. And only then could he clear Zhenya of the espionage charges hanging over him.

"Ughhhh!"

Kwon Taekjoo clenched his teeth. As the attacks intensified, the armored vehicle pushed further, completely blocking off the side road.

How long had they endured? Suddenly, the attack from the helicopter ceased. When he looked up, he saw drones buzzing around the helicopter. The helicopter was swaying, trying to avoid them. The police, who were watching, were at a loss, fearing the drones might explode.

Kwon Taekjoo grabbed his rifle and repeatedly fired at the drones. His bullets hit the fast-moving drones one after another. Soon, the control mechanisms failed, and a drone collided with the helicopter, causing a massive explosion. The helicopter's propeller separated from the body, and it plunged to the ground.

The police cars surrounding the armored vehicle were swept away, leading to a chain of explosions. In the blink of an eye, the massive

flames filling the alley rushed right in front of him.

In an instant, past memories flashed through Kwon Taekjoo's mind like a revolving lantern. His once-happy family, his father who left for work one day and never returned, his brother who had entrusted him with taking care of their mother before setting off on his final voyage, and his mother, who had always worried about him. He recalled the moments when he had graduated high school, entered university, joined the special forces during his military service, and been recruited by the National Intelligence Service. And the moment when, on a reluctant mission, he had encountered Zhenya.

Then, the ground shook from the immense blast. In an instant, his vision was swallowed by darkness.



## 8. The Patriot

Zhenya.

I felt a twitch, the skin under my eyes trembling. The fine hairs inside my ears bristled, and then I heard it.

'Zhenya.'

The sharp tension in my senses softened at the gentle call. Even my stiff expression loosened. A rough hand approached and caressed my ear, massaging the entire area. I couldn't help but let out a languid moan. I followed the soft, sweet sensation and pulled him into a tight embrace, pressing my cheek against his thick thigh to ensure there was no escape. A faint chuckle came from him, and I reveled in the pleasant feeling of the air rippling around us. That gentle undulation transmitted directly to my eardrum.

'Get up, you brat. Stop whining. It's already midday.'

Even the annoying nagging sounded sweet to me. No one had ever been allowed to speak so freely in front of me, yet with him, it felt welcome. In fact, I wanted more. I wanted him to intrude even further, without restraint.

'Ah, pretending you didn't hear me, huh? Did you eat?'

Instead of answering, I shook my head. I felt that if I responded aloud, the warmth of the moment would shatter, though I had no real reason to believe that.

'I knew it. Ah, lift your head already. I'll make you that black bean ramen you like. For someone with such a big build, you can't even take care of your own meals, and your taste buds are like a kid's.'

He jiggled his leg, forcing me to lift my head. I grinned and slowly opened my eyes.

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"....."

He saw the familiar ceiling. The space beside him was empty when he reached for it, as though no one had been there in the first place — there wasn't even any lingering warmth.

He let out a long exhale and straightened his body.

It seemed like he had dozed off while looking at blueprints, as usual. He hadn't slept properly for over four days, so it was no surprise he had burned out.

Whenever his mind started wandering, he would retreat to the island and immerse himself in designing weapons, just like this. The work required high-level calculations and technology to turn his imagination into reality, and until he arrived at a satisfying conclusion, there was no room for other thoughts.

But at some point, even that had stopped being easy. It was usually after arguing with Kwon Taekjoo. No matter how hard he tried to block out his thoughts, unresolved questions kept creeping in. Why was Kwon Taekjoo angry this time? What had Zhenya done so wrong? He couldn't understand any of it.

Why? Why. Why on earth?

The endless questions tangled his mind. Never in his life had he faced a problem he couldn't solve. He always came up with an answer, and if that wasn't possible, he got rid of the problem altogether. Maybe this growing knot in his mind could just be cut off too.

But when it came to Kwon Taekjoo, that didn't work. No matter how many times he questioned him, there was never an answer, and there was no way to delete the problem that was him. Was that why he always felt so suffocated and frustrated?

He clicked his tongue quietly and, out of habit, turned on the tracking system.

“...Huh?”

Kwon Taekjoo was the only target, but for some reason, his current location wasn't being displayed. He rebooted the system. The situation was the same. The screen showed the incomprehensible message: ‘Target does not exist.’

That can't be right.

The microchip secretly implanted in Kwon Taekjoo was designed to recognize his vital signs and transmit his location in real time.

Unless Kwon Taekjoo was in a signal-blocked area or the device was damaged, such a message shouldn't have appeared.

Just as he was about to reboot the system again, a familiar sound reached his ears. It was unmistakably the sound of a helicopter's propellers.

'I'll come pick you up as soon as I'm done, so wait just a little longer.'

Could it be that Kwon Taekjoo had already returned? Had he finished his task that quickly? Was that why the tracking didn't work?

After turning off the defense system, he strode up to the living room. Pulling back the curtains and looking outside, he spotted a helicopter approaching from the distance. The pink exterior made him hesitate, but he figured Kwon Taekjoo must have gotten Olga's help, since it wouldn't have been easy for him to enter Russia on his own.

He headed straight for the rooftop. Soon, the helicopter began descending slowly. The gusts from the propellers made Zhenya's gown flutter wildly. He raised his arm to shield his eyes from the wind, staring intently into the helicopter. For some reason, the face he was expecting wasn't there.

The propellers finally stopped, and the door opened. Olga emerged from the helicopter and gave her brother, who had come out to meet her on the roof, a puzzled look.

“What’s the occasion? You coming all the way out to greet me like this? I don’t know what to do with myself, I’m so honored.”

“You’re alone?”

“Who else would be here? Did you suddenly want to see our father’s face?”

Feigning ignorance, Zhenya’s brow furrowed.

“Screw off.”

“I just got here, and you’re being too harsh. I’m tired from the long flight. I’m going inside to rest.”

“Do whatever you want if you don’t care about your helicopter getting blown to bits.”

With a sharp glance at Olga’s helicopter, Zhenya went inside first. Olga followed, ignoring the hostility, and mockingly spoke loud enough for him to hear.

“Now that’s more like the ‘Psikh’ I know. For a moment, I thought maybe you were on your deathbed. You seemed so strange.”

Zhenya didn’t respond to her provocations. He acted as if acknowledging an annoying insect would be a waste of energy. Olga wasn’t bothered by the lack of reaction.

Zhenya went straight to the kitchen to make tea. His eyes never left the phone in his hand, clearly busy spying on someone. The most likely target, as always, was Kwon Taekjoo. A guy who openly stalks his lover, and another who accepts him because he finds it charming — they really were a perfect match.

Shaking her head, Olga approached the table. She called out to Zhenya, who was pouring tea.

“I’ll have milk tea.”

Zhenya acted as if he hadn’t heard, only preparing black tea for himself before sitting down. Even while sipping the hot tea, he didn’t take his eyes off the phone.

“The world’s in chaos, and here you are, enjoying your little love life. Must be nice to live so carefree.”

Even with her attempts to provoke him, there was no reaction. Since childhood, Zhenya had treated everyone around him as invisible. To Olga, it was always strange how his entire demeanor changed in front of Kwon Taekjoo and his mother.

Olga took some milk out of the fridge and mumbled, pretending to talk to herself.

“Or are you being punished after getting into trouble with your boyfriend?”

“What do you mean?”

The moment she mentioned Kwon Taekjoo, Zhenya reacted immediately. A smirk spread across Olga's face. She danced lightly to the chair across from Zhenya and sat down.

"You two fought, didn't you?"

"I asked, what do you mean?"

Zhenya's gaze turned icy, a clear warning that he wouldn't ask nicely again. Olga shrugged her shoulders and responded casually.

"Taekjoo contacted me. He asked me to check on you."

"Taekjoo?"

"Why else would I be here? He begged me so earnestly, so I figured you had a big fight and came to help patch things up. But it seems I misread the situation, seeing how poorly I'm being treated."

"...Did he say anything else?"

"What else?"

Olga, with a relaxed attitude, responded, "Not sure," as she casually slid Zhenya's tea toward herself. She poured milk into it, turning it into milk tea. Her tastes were so refined that everything she consumed had an air of elegance.

Despite the sharp stares, Olga boldly drank her milk tea. Then, while fiddling with the cup in her hand, she scrutinized her brother in detail.

"Why does he even like you? Two years is more than enough time for the infatuation to wear off."

Though her gaze was probing, there wasn't much passion behind it. It was filled with nothing but curiosity.

"Of all people, you're the one he worries about."

Olga tilted her head, genuinely puzzled. Despite having meddled with Zhenya's tea without permission and making such remarks, Zhenya wasn't disturbed at all. Even the cold, threatening aura he had been exuding had vanished. Hearing that Kwon Taekjoo was concerned about him seemed to have somewhat eased his previously sullen mood.

Perhaps Zhenya was now inclined to listen to more of what Olga had to say. He stood up and prepared another cup of tea. Olga, who had been watching his unusually relaxed movements with a look of irritation, muttered softly, "Ah."

"Bazim is safe. The men in our family seem to have remarkable luck."

"Bazim?"

Zhenya furrowed his brow as he turned around. His expression soured, confused as to why Olga suddenly brought up Bazim in the midst of their conversation.

"Didn't you know? He went to Iran to accompany the president."

Iran. That was the last confirmed location of Kwon Taekjoo as well. Could it be that the new mission he had taken on was somehow connected to Bazim's work? Is that why Taekjoo had pleaded with him not to follow this time? What was Olga talking about, saying Bazim was safe? A bad feeling crept over him.

"I heard there was a large bomb attack in Tehran."

Olga added casually, but in the next moment, Zhenya lunged at her, grabbing her by the collar. Olga let out a sharp scream as she was suddenly yanked up, her body half dragged over the table, barely managing to balance on her toes.

"You crazy bastard! What the hell are you doing?"

"A large bomb attack? What are you talking about?"

"Let go! Let go of me!"

Olga kept hitting Zhenya's arm, trying to shake off his grip, but it was no use. She pulled out her gun and pointed it at Zhenya's forehead without hesitation. Yet, Zhenya didn't back down in the slightest. His eyes, wide open with bloodshot veins, locked onto her. His icy blue gaze was as sharp as a blade, ready to pierce at any moment.

"What are you talking about?"

Zhenya roared. The overwhelming strength of his grip made it hard for Olga to breathe. Just as she struggled to pull the trigger, his hand struck hers fiercely. A bullet fired from the falling gun, shattering an innocent chandelier.

Zhenya stared at Olga without blinking. His pupils contracted sharply. Even if she were facing a predator holding its breath right in front of her, it wouldn't send shivers down her spine like this. Olga, wheezing with difficulty, squeezed out her voice.

"T-There were simultaneous terrorist attacks in Tehran. Ugh, it's still unclear which president was targeted, or what the purpose or motive is, ugh, or who's behind it. Right now,nnhg the area is under a national emergency, so it's hard to get any communication. I only just heard about Bazim's whereabouts on my way here. That's all!"

Zhenya pushed Olga away as if releasing her. She fell back and clutched her reddened throat, coughing violently for a while. Even as she coughed in agony, she couldn't contain her anger and spat out, "Bastard," through gritted teeth. After barely calming down, she glared at Zhenya but then froze in place. Zhenya stood there with a blank expression, staring off into space.

"Taekjoo..."

The way he mumbled as if in a daze was unsettling. Feeling uneasy, Olga pressed him, beginning to suspect the worst.

"Why? What is it? Don't tell me Taekjoo went there too? Is he unreachable?"

There was no response from Zhenya. Her anxiety grew more intense.

"Taekjoo's safe, right? You've been monitoring him all this time. Where is he now? Have you checked? Huh?"

She shook Zhenya's leg, demanding an answer. But it seemed as if her voice couldn't reach him at all.

After standing still like a broken machine for a moment, Zhenya suddenly pulled out his phone. He reset the federal tracking system to search for Kwon Taekjoo's whereabouts. But, cruelly, only the message "Target not found" kept appearing.

In a fit of anger, he threw his phone. Olga quickly picked it up. Soon, she too was staring at the empty coordinates where the target had vanished. The last recorded location shown beneath the coordinates was "Tehran, Iran." Right in the heart of the area where the terrorist attack occurred.

"No... no, that can't be. Something's wrong here, right?!"

Olga shook her head in denial of reality. Clutching at straws, she looked up at Zhenya, but he simply covered his eyes with his hand. "This doesn't make sense," she muttered as she repeatedly reset the tracking system. No new signal appeared, no matter how many times she tried. Her hands began trembling uncontrollably for no reason. Her ragged breathing was now mixed with sobs.

Zhenya snatched the phone from Olga's hands. Without saying another word, he stormed out. His cold blue eyes flashed as he passed by.

"Hey! Where are you going?"

She shouted after him, but again, her voice didn't reach him. In truth, nothing could stop him now.

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After the Tehran terror attack, even the National Intelligence Service (NIS) was on high alert. The atmosphere at headquarters was more subdued than ever. Since the attack occurred right before a trilateral summit between Iran, Russia, and Turkey, the international community was on edge.

Iran had declared a national emergency. Communications and transportation were restricted, and inspections were intensified. Local embassies scrambled to respond to new information while keeping their heads down to avoid getting caught in the crossfire.

Various theories surfaced regarding the mastermind behind the attack. The BBC in the UK claimed it was the work of an anti-government militant group within Iran. France's AFP cited intelligence officials speculating it was carried out by Kurdish militants. CNN mentioned the recent suspicious activities of ISIS operatives in Iran, suggesting they might be responsible. An Iranian state-run news outlet went as far as to suggest that the U.S., uneasy about the strong ties between Iran and Russia, had funded the terrorists. The already tense international situation was rapidly freezing over.

The exact scale of the damage was still unclear. It was only known that both presidents had safely escaped, but many of their staff and security personnel had been killed or injured. The number of missing people was immeasurable. Since the bombing was carried out using drones,

recovering intact bodies from the scene and identifying the dead were expected to be difficult tasks.

The NIS had to be extra cautious in their communication with the area. Given that they were conducting operations at the same time and place, there was a risk of drawing unwanted suspicion.

So far, two things had been confirmed. First, Park Jeong-ho's family had safely defected during the chaos in Tehran and had now arrived in Thailand. Second, Agent P2, who was responsible for Kwon Taekjoo's backup, had successfully taken custody of Park Jeong-ho from Taekjoo and handed him over to the embassy.

As for Kwon Taekjoo, his fate was still unclear. Reports stated that a series of drone bomb explosions had occurred at the last location where he had been seen, and the entire area was devastated. There were hardly any survivors, and those who did make it were in critical condition.

It had been a week since then. The biochips implanted in all black ops agents had not transmitted any signals during that time. In such cases, it was typically assumed that the agent had been killed in action.

But Kwon Taekjoo, of all people? It was hard to believe.

Director Kwak massaged his throbbing temples as he continued to check the updates from the field, which hadn't changed in hours. There was a possibility that Kwon Taekjoo was among the unidentified, unconscious injured. In this chaotic situation, the delay in information could simply be due to the circumstances, and he clung to that faint hope.

How much time had passed? Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. Director Kwak immediately looked up and called, "Come in." His secretary soon appeared.

"Director, we've received a new message from the local embassy."

"What does it say?"

"Most of it is about Park Jeong-ho. He's currently receiving treatment and resting. The gunshot wound was deeper than expected, and even with rehabilitation, he might suffer permanent disability. Once he can move, they'll protect him until a new identity is arranged, and then he'll be exiled through Türkiye."

"And the country he'll be exiled to?"

"He seems to prefer Switzerland."

"I see. We'll need to prepare the cooperation documents for that. And the item we were securing?"

"They've received it. Right now, they're looking for a safe way to bring it into the country. According to Park Jeong-ho, it's a microorganism discovered in the Baekdu Mountain volcanic region that causes rapid inflammatory responses upon inhalation, leading to death within hours. It doesn't respond to existing treatments and spreads easily, which is why Russia showed interest."

Were they planning to develop it as an invisible, deadly weapon? Perhaps to amass enormous wealth or to destabilize the global balance of power.

This was exactly what Kwon Taekjoo had reported. The source of the information was said to be Bogdanov, the Russian ambassador. This confirmed that Ambassador Bogdanov did not share the same interests as his homeland or his family.

"Good."

Despite saying that, Director Kwak still felt uneasy. The information he truly wanted to hear was still missing.

"Have we located G1 yet? Any unidentified injured or deceased Asians?"

"No, we've searched the last location where G1 was tracked, as well as the surrounding areas and hospitals, but there's been no progress. There isn't even a single Asian person in sight, let alone someone resembling G1."

The secretary hesitated before carefully asking about Director Kwak's intentions.

"G1's only immediate family is his mother, correct? It's been confirmed that she's currently in Canada. Do you intend to inform her of G1's disappearance?"

"...At least find the body. If G1 really perished, we need to return his remains to the family. I'll handle the diplomatic coordination separately, so tell the local team to mobilize all resources to search for G1's whereabouts."

"Understood, sir."

The secretary quietly bowed and exited, closing the door behind him. Director Kwak leaned back deeply in his chair, letting out a long sigh.

According to P2's report, Kwon Taekjoo held out until the very end. As a seasoned veteran, he could have compromised at a reasonable point, but he insisted on completing the mission, putting his safety aside. Was it arrogance, believing he could survive somehow? Or perhaps an overwhelming sense of patriotism and duty? Maybe, neither...

'Shouldn't I at least be given a chance to explain myself?'

'Explain?'

'It's unfair to be misunderstood for something I didn't do and to be excluded from my duties just because of suspicion. It feels like everything I've worked for is being unjustly denied. How much longer do I have to wait? If I wait, will my name be cleared?'

'This is a matter of national importance. There's no time for personal concerns about your reputation...'

'What do we have to hold on to if not the honor in our work?'

'.....'

'Let me complete the mission. Ambassador Bogdanov won't be involved this time. I'll prove my innocence with results.'

Kwon Taekjoo had wanted to explain himself. After the operation in Vladivostok had failed, and with the added suspicion of collusion with the Russian ambassador, he must have been desperate to clear his name and restore everything to its rightful place.

But was that all there was to it?

'I have a favor to ask of you, Director.'

Before leaving for Iran, Kwon Taekjoo had made one condition. Normally, public servants had expected no compensation for their duties. If anyone had understood that, it was him. So, it had been odd when he had suddenly requested a favor.

'A favor?'

'Yes. If this mission ends successfully....'

Had he brought it up because of his growing disappointment in the organization? Was he disheartened by the fate of agents, bound to a life of unwavering devotion to the nation?

While mulling over Kwon Taekjoo's request, Director Kwak suddenly heard commotion outside. A familiar voice kept calling, "Director!" His secretary's voice followed, trying to stop the intruder, insisting that this wasn't allowed. The sound of a struggle, of something being shoved and knocked over, continued without pause. Director Kwak got up and stepped outside to see what was going on.

The person forcibly storming into his office was none other than Yoon Jong-woo. His eyelids were swollen, and his face was drenched with tears, showing how much he had cried. Director Kwak knew well that Kwon Taekjoo had been Jong-woo's mentor and that the two had been more than just close colleagues for a long time. No matter how much one must separate personal feelings from professional matters, it wouldn't be easy.

Director Kwak gestured to his secretary, who had been blocking Yoon Jong-woo with all their might, to leave them for a moment. The secretary hesitated, clearly conflicted, but eventually followed the instruction without protest.

"Director! You'll find him, right? My sunbae... he's definitely alive. Maybe he's just slightly injured and unconscious, or maybe his communication device broke, so he can't contact us. It's happened before, right? He'll show up soon, asking what all the fuss was about. He will, right?"

Yoon Jong-woo, who had been rambling incoherently, finally burst into tears. How could he not understand how hopeless the situation was?

Right after the police helicopter crash in Tehran triggered a chain explosion, Kwon Taekjoo's vital signs also stopped. It would have been fortunate if it were just a device malfunction, but several days had passed without any trace of him. For an elite agent like Kwon Taekjoo, he should have returned by now. At the very least, there should have been some kind of survival signal. The fact that no such signs were found meant that he was in a condition where he couldn't return on his own.

Director Kwak approached Yoon Jong-woo and gently patted his shoulder.

"We're using every means possible to find him. We'll definitely bring him back. So, why don't you go and get some rest, even if just for a while? You haven't even gone home for days."

"Director, I'll do anything. Just give me orders. If we hack all the local CCTVs and satellites, we can find out where he is. Or, better yet, send me to Iran. I'll go there and find him myself. Please?"

Yoon Jong-woo cried out loud, clasping his hands together and begging. He was desperate, pleading like a child throwing a tantrum. He already knew it was impossible.

Iran was determined to find the mastermind behind the terrorist attack. The eyes of the entire world were focused on Tehran. It wasn't the right time to make reckless moves to find an agent missing in action during a mission.

Moreover, intelligence agents were always meant to exist in the shadows. Even if Kwon Taekjoo had died in the line of duty, it would be impossible to officially recover his body. In some cases, his existence might have to be denied altogether. They were devoted to their country, yet could be abandoned at any time for the sake of national interest. Such was the fate of an agent.

"Huuuh... His father also died in the line of duty, his brother too... He's the only one left now. His mother, she can't even sleep peacefully because she's always worried about him. Huuh, she asked me to take good care of him, to check on him from time to time even when she's no longer around. What am I supposed to say to her if something happens to him? How could I even face her? What do I tell her? Huuuh...."

Sobbing, Yoon Jong-woo finally collapsed to his knees. He grabbed Director Kwak's legs and continued to weep bitterly.

"After everything he's done! The country can't treat him like this! We are citizens of this country too... They can't just throw him away like a used battery. Huuhhh...."

We work in the shadows but strive for the light.

Anonymous devotion to freedom and truth.

Endless loyalty and dedication to the nation and its people.

The organization's mottos, which had long emphasized the quiet dedication of its staff over the decades, felt especially bitter today.

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Yoon Jong-woo stepped into the dark house. He didn't bother taking off his shoes or turning on the lights, and instead, crouched down while clutching his bag. Now that he was alone, the sorrow he had been suppressing welled up uncontrollably. He buried his face in his bag and sobbed quietly.

All day, he couldn't stop thinking about Kwon Taekjoo. Naturally, he also remembered the first time they had met. After winning an international hacking competition hosted by an American IT company, he had received countless job offers. Among them was one from the National

Intelligence Service (NIS). He had always harbored romantic ideas about being a white-hat hacker since he was young, so he didn't deliberate for long.

Right after finishing his internship training, he was sent directly into the field. For support team members like Yoon Jong-woo, they were paired one-on-one with field agents, known as black ops agents, to back them up. His fellow trainees gradually found their partners, grumbling here and there, but ultimately adjusting to their work.

But Yoon Jong-woo's partner hadn't shown up for days. With no other assignments, he had sat idly at his desk for a while. Then, out of the blue, he had been thrown into a remote field support mission. It had been his first real operation, and he had been frozen with nerves when the person on the other end of the communications line had spoken first.

[Is that you? The newbie they just brought in?]

He hadn't been sure if he should consider that a greeting, but the casual tone and bluntness had thrown him off. Kwon Taekjoo's first impression hadn't been great. Even during the operation, Kwon Taekjoo had rejected all of Yoon Jong-woo's suggestions, only demanding information and acting entirely on his own. As a partner, he had been the worst kind — a complete lone wolf. It had felt like a dark cloud had descended on Yoon Jong-woo's once-bright future.

He had met Kwon Taekjoo in person not long after the operation had ended successfully. He had been writing a report when someone had suddenly approached him.

Kwon Taekjoo's face had been a mess, with cuts and bruises everywhere. He had looked him over silently for a while before offering his opinion.

'Hmm. I don't know about anything else, but you seem somewhat useful.'

'...Sorry, what?'

'Do you want to go eat? What do you like?'

Kwon Taekjoo had insisted on buying Yoon Jong-woo some meat, even though Jong-woo had said he was fine. Sitting across from him had felt so awkward and uncomfortable that he had wished the meal would end quickly. Kwon Taekjoo had been no different; suddenly, he had wrapped a bite of food and handed it to Yoon Jong-woo. Jong-woo, taken by surprise, had accepted it and eaten, only to be bombarded with criticism as if Taekjoo had been waiting for that moment.

'Stop picking at your food and eat up. You should also work out. In this field, stamina equals ability.'

Then Taekjoo had stuffed his own cheeks full of food until they bulged.

With his solid build, bold personality that some might have called rude, adventurous spirit, relentless drive, and even leadership, Taekjoo had been someone completely different from Yoon Jong-woo from the very start. The thought of having to work with him for the foreseeable future had depressed Jong-woo, and as he had drunk the alcohol handed to him, he had firmly resolved to submit his resignation.

Kwon Taekjoo had put the soon-drunk Yoon Jong-woo into a taxi first. Thankfully, Taekjoo had said he would stay and have a few more drinks and hadn't accompanied him. As Jong-woo had lazily nodded off, Taekjoo, who had been watching him quietly, had suddenly leaned down and stared directly at him. Jong-woo had expected more scolding, but Taekjoo had merely tousled his hair lightly. Even that had felt annoying.

'You worked hard. It was your first time, so you must have been all over the place, but you really did your best to cover for me. Thanks to you, it went smoother than usual. Let's keep it up from now on.'

There were plenty of things to be dissatisfied with, yet just those few words of encouragement made Jong-woo's heart melt. Maybe it was because there wasn't a trace of insincerity in Taekjoo's words.

That's how Jong-woo ended up working closely with Taekjoo. It was around that time that the others began to feel sorry for him. After all, Jong-woo was supposed to be in a support role, working from the rear, but Taekjoo kept dragging him out into the field. A few times, Jong-woo even narrowly escaped death. Each time, he vowed to quit the National Intelligence Service for good.

There were many moments when he really should have resigned. If he had, maybe he wouldn't have to bear the sadness he felt now.

As each mission was completed, a strange sense of accomplishment grew. He couldn't boast about it to anyone, and no one would know, but the thought of doing something important for the country filled his chest with pride. There was a sense of relief from having protected what had seemed like an ordinary day to some, and a sense of duty that it would always be that way. It made him feel like he had become someone truly remarkable.

Would he still be able to feel that pride in the future? Could he manage on his own, without Taekjoo? He wasn't sure.

Jong-woo curled up even smaller, sniffling. He had cried so much that his head felt numb, and it was hard to keep his eyes open. Exhausted both mentally and physically, he closed his eyes wearily. He didn't even have the energy to drag himself to bed.

Just as he was about to drift off into a distant sleep, his phone rang. He wanted to ignore it, but then thought it might be Taekjoo. He hurriedly checked his phone. It wasn't the caller he had hoped for, but Jone-woo leaped up before he could even feel disappointed. It was almost a reflex. Clearing his throat, he answered the call.

"Hello?"

[Oh, Jong-woo. I'm sorry for calling so late. Did I wake you?]

It was Taekjoo's mother. The moment Jong-woo heard her voice, tears welled up again, and his nose started to sting.

"No, it's fine, ma'am. How have you been?"

[I'm doing fine. But why does your voice sound like that? Are you feeling unwell?]

Even though Jong-woo tried to sound calm and cheerful, it didn't take long for him to be found out. He awkwardly laughed and scratched his neck nervously.

"Oh, my voice? Actually, I caught a cold."

[Oh no, really? Have you been to the hospital? Are you taking your medicine? You need to be extra careful when you're living alone. There's no one to look after you.]

"I'm fine, really. I've been eating well and taking my meds. I still have a lot of the side dishes you made for me last time."

[You still have those? You must not be eating at home much, huh?]

"No, I'm eating plenty. You just made so much last time."

[I see. Well, just to be safe, make sure you smell it before you eat. If anything seems off, don't hesitate to throw it away. You don't want to get sick from eating it.]

"Yes, I'll keep that in mind."

[Oh my, listen to me going on. You must be tired, Jong-woo, and here I am talking too much. It's nothing important, but... have you seen Taekjoo recently? I haven't been able to reach him for a few days. He did say he'd be busy for a while.]

Jong-woo had expected her to ask about Taekjoo. She often asked about him like this before. Normally, he could just give some excuse and that would be enough. But this time, his lips trembled, and he struggled to get the words out.

Fearing that he might start crying, Jong-woo pressed his lips together tightly and answered.

"Oh, Taekjoo? Well... I don't know the details, but I think he went on a sudden business trip."

[Really? I couldn't even reach the ambassador either.]

"Yeah, I think Taekjoo must have gone with the ambassador. There seems to have been some issue in Russia."

[Is it because of that terrorist attack? I heard something bad happened in Iran or somewhere.]

"Ah... yes, you're right. But Taekjoo didn't go to Iran. There's a possibility that it was a terrorist attack targeting the Russian president, so there was an urgent recall for all the diplomatic envoys. I think they'll both be back once things settle down. Since it's such a sensitive issue, it's probably hard for them to contact anyone right now."

[I suppose that makes sense.]

Even though Taekjoo's mother accepted the explanation, she still couldn't feel at ease. Jong-woo, as usual, tried to reassure her with a final comment.

"I'll let you know as soon as Taekjoo gets back..."

However, before he could finish speaking, his throat tightened. He quickly pulled the phone away from his ear and took a deep breath. He

needed a moment before he could continue.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I suddenly started coughing. I'll let Taekjoo know you called as soon as he gets back and tell him to call you right away. Please don't worry too much, ma'am."

[Could you do that? I'm always grateful.]

"Oh no, it's nothing. Ma'am, I just put some water on to boil, so..."

[Oh, right. Let's end it here, then.]

"Take care of yourself."

[You too, Jong-woo. Rest well. We'll talk again soon.]

The call ended shortly after. Silence filled the room again, as if everything had gone completely still. The awkward, forced smile on Jong-woo's face disappeared as quickly as the conversation had.

He lowered his head, staring down at his silent phone. Even though he knew it was pointless, he tried calling Taekjoo anyway. But before the ringing could even start, the automated voice message informed him that the customer was unreachable. In an instant, his eyes welled up with tears.

But only for a moment. Suddenly, the front door rattled violently with loud bangs. Startled, Jong-woo couldn't even wipe away the falling tears.

It was far too late for someone to be visiting. Maybe it was a drunk person who had come to the wrong apartment. As he considered this, the uninvited guest pounded on the door again, this time more aggressively, as if they were ready to break it down.

"Wh-who...?"

He tried to gather strength in his voice, but before he could finish asking, there was a loud crash. The front door was pulled outward, and with a violent ripping sound, the entire lock was torn off.

"Hik!"

The door swung open, and the intruder revealed himself. A towering figure, exuding a chilling aura, stood there. His sharp eyes were filled with a deadly intensity.

"Yev..."

Just as the shocked Jong-woo began to speak, Zhenya stormed inside, grabbing Jong-woo's jaw in an instant. Before he could even react, he was slammed against the wall. Instinctively, Jong-woo grabbed Zhenya's arm with both hands.

"Hik... Yevgeny... ssi."

{Where is Taekjoo?}

Zhenya skipped all formalities and asked bluntly. It seemed he already knew about Taekjoo's disappearance. Tears welled up in Jong-woo's

eyes as he anxiously looked up at Zhenya.

{S-Sunbae...}

But Zhenya's patience had worn thin, and he slammed Jong-woo against the wall again. The back of his head hit the surface, causing a ringing pain throughout his skull. Before the pain even subsided, Zhenya's fist crashed into the wall beside his face. Jong-woo stifled his sobs and hastily tried to speak.

{Sunbae... sunbae...}

Yet again, he couldn't finish his sentence and broke down, crying aloud. A thick vein pulsed visibly on Zhenya's previously calm forehead. His pupils contracted sharply, resembling anything but a human's gaze. At the same time, the grip on Jong-woo's neck tightened further, crushing with terrifying force.

{Ugh... Hik... I-I can't... breathe...}

Jong-woo struggled, drooling as he gasped for air, his eyes slowly rolling back. Zhenya pushed him to the brink, then abruptly let go. Jong-woo collapsed to the floor, clutching his throat as he coughed uncontrollably.

{Cough, cough... S-Sunbae's vitals... hic... they haven't been detected at all. H-He stayed behind... to finish the mission. There were chain explosions, and everything around him was wiped out, h-hic, including the car he was in. They haven't found anyone matching his description yet... and the bodies they recovered... hic, they're in such bad shape, it'll take time to identify them... hic, w-what do we do, Yevgeny-ssi? What do we do about Sunbae?}

Jong-woo stammered out an explanation, but his words were a jumbled mess, mixed with sobs, making it hard to understand. The only clear part was that Taekjoo had gone on a mission and been caught in an unforeseen disaster.

Zhenya shook his head slowly, as if denying the possibility, before roughly grabbing the back of Jong-woo's neck and hauling him to his feet.

{Lead me there before I destroy everything.}

{Hic, w-where...}

Before Jong-woo could respond, Zhenya shoved him out of the door. A cold, hard gun barrel pressed against the back of his head.

{To NIS.}

\*\*\*

In the dark of the night. Yoon Jong-woo's car entered the rear gate of the National Intelligence Service (NIS). Armed security personnel, who were standing by, blocked the way. The car obediently followed their guidance and stopped on one side. Shortly after, the engine turned off, and Yoon Jong-woo stepped out of the driver's seat, raising both arms. Immediately, all guns pointed toward the passenger seat as if it had been prearranged. When Zhenya got out from that side, he was surrounded as if they were closing in on him. The tension heightened simply from the act of stepping onto the ground.

{Let's go, Mr. Yevgeny.}

Yoon Jong-woo led the way. As the two of them started walking, the security personnel slowly stepped back, clearing the path. Thanks to having tipped off Director Kwak in advance, the situation was handled smoothly, but it was still a sensitive time. The NIS was keen to avoid any unnecessary military conflict that could spark a diplomatic incident.

In front of the entrance, Director Kwak's secretary was waiting. After a slight bow, he extended his hand towards Zhenya and asked for understanding.

{I'm sorry, but for the safety of both sides, we ask for your cooperation.}

{...Mr. Yevgeny.}

Yoon Jong-woo looked at Zhenya with a troubled expression. Zhenya shoved the gun he was holding into Yoon Jong-woo's chest. Then, without a word, he silently extended both arms. Director Kwak's secretary cuffed his wrists.

{This way.}

The two walked side by side down the dark hallway, heading toward the director's office. Seeing that all the CCTV cameras were turned off, it seemed Zhenya's visit hadn't been reported to the higher-ups. It was a risky secret meeting for Director Kwak as well. Of course, if today's events became an issue later, he could simply claim that he had quietly summoned Zhenya to investigate suspicions of collusion with Kwon Taekjoo.

When the secretary knocked on the office door, permission to enter was granted from inside. The security personnel stayed outside while the secretary, Yoon Jong-woo, and Zhenya entered the office. Director Kwak rose from his seat to greet Zhenya.

{Welcome, Ambassador. I was about to request your presence, considering the situation.]

{What happened to Taekjoo?}

Zhenya cut straight to the point. Even while restrained with handcuffs, his characteristic intimidation had not diminished one bit. It was as if the air around him was gradually freezing.

Director Kwak, facing Zhenya in silence, finally spoke.

{Information about our personnel is classified, and I can't disclose it.}

{I'll ask again. Is Taekjoo alive?}

{I believe I already told you I can't answer that.}

{If you make me ask one more time, this building will be gone by the end of today.}

Zhenya growled in a low voice. Director Kwak was well aware that Zhenya was no mere diplomat. He knew all too well that Zhenya had once been a notorious FSB agent, of the atrocities he had committed, and of the reason even the Kremlin was wary of him. He also

understood that Zhenya wasn't someone concerned about cleaning up messes, and if things went south, he might very well shoot that rumored Anastasia right inside the NIS.

Even so, Director Kwak didn't back down easily. He needed to know why Zhenya kept interfering in NIS matters. Allowing anyone to recklessly meddle in affairs that were almost sacred to the government was unacceptable.

{Before that, would you explain your relationship with our employee? That seems to be the order of things and the proper protocol.}

Zhenya's jaw clenched in anger. Yoon Jong-woo glanced anxiously between him and Director Kwak.

In the next instant, Zhenya yanked his arms, breaking the handcuffs in one swift motion. Director Kwak's secretary, shocked, tried to restrain him. With a single swift movement, Zhenya knocked him unconscious.

At the sound of the secretary collapsing, the security personnel burst through the door. In a panic, Yoon Jong-woo aimed Zhenya's gun at them. His arms trembled uncontrollably.

“Get out.”

Director Kwak gave the order to the security personnel, but they didn't budge in the tense standoff.

“Don't make this worse,” he added.

Reluctantly, with disapproving looks, they closed the door and withdrew. Yoon Jong-woo let out a sigh of relief, lowering his trembling arms.

But Zhenya didn't seem like he intended to stop. With a fierce, determined look, he strode toward Director Kwak. Yoon Jong-woo hurriedly tried to stop him.

{Mr. Yevgeny! No! Violence is not the answer!}

Just as Zhenya was about to brush off the bothersome Yoon Jong-woo, the office intercom suddenly rang. All three of them froze, staring at the intercom. Who could be calling at such a late hour?

Zhenya gestured with his chin for Director Kwak to answer it. This time, even Director Kwak didn't resist. He pressed the response button and took the call.

“Yes, this is Kwak Yeong-han.”

[This is Tehran.]

At the mention of the familiar location, all their eyes met. Director Kwak struggled to maintain his composure as he responded.

“Yes, go ahead.”

[We've found an unidentified body with physical characteristics similar to the person you're looking for. Male, 183 cm tall, 76 kg, RH+B blood type, of Asian descent, correct?]

“...Where was it found?”

[The location matches the last known area of the missing person. Northern Tehran, where the final chain of explosions occurred.]

“I understand. Send over the data, and I’ll review it and get back to you.”

Director Kwak, barely keeping his composure, rubbed his forehead in distress. Yoon Jong-woo turned pale, shaking his head in disbelief.

{What are they saying? What are they talking about?!}

Sensing the grim atmosphere, Zhenya grabbed Yoon Jong-woo by the collar and shook him violently. Yoon Jong-woo, dazed, stammered as he delivered the devastating news with a trembling voice.

{A body... They found a body in Tehran... and they think it might be my senior.}

{ End of vol. 2 }

Transl. —Zaww.

## **CODEANA PART TWO VOL. 3-4**

### **Nameless Star**

**Dark red = korean dialogue. Gray = flashbacks**

**{ } = spanish/english/persian dialogue**

### **9. 一先後: First There, Last Out**

A heavy silence descended on the private plane bound for Iran. No one dared move hastily, and not even a whisper could be heard.

Everything was unnervingly still.

Zhenya's pale face was reflected in the dark window. Though carefully sculpted and strikingly beautiful, there was no expression, no warmth — just like a wax figure. Zhenya was entirely fixated on one thought, without closing his eyes for even a moment.

*'A body... They found a body in Tehran... and they think it might be my senior.'*

Kwon Taekjoo had disappeared. He no longer existed in this world. Never again would anyone see or touch him. That single fact was something Zhenya struggled to grasp. The first loss in life was something he simply couldn't accept.

He scowled bitterly. Something unknown kept rising from within. This utterly repulsive sensation was truly the first of its kind.

Yoon Jong-woo was unusually dispatched to Tehran. He was sent to confirm the identity of a body presumed to be Kwon Taekjoo. Of course, this was an entirely unofficial move. Director Kwak made it clear that

aside from identifying the body, he couldn't offer Yoon Jong-woo any support or protection. As a result, Yoon Jong-woo left the country under the guise of a private traveler, not as a National Intelligence Service employee.

Without Zhenya's private plane, he wouldn't have been able to leave for Iran so quickly.

As soon as Yoon Jong-woo had stepped out of Director Kwak's office, he had burst into uncontrollable sobs.

*'Ahh... sunbae... sunbae... I should've stopped you. I should've told you to quit back then, when you said you were going to quit after returning anyway.'*

Yoon Jong-woo had wept bitterly as he vented. Zhenya couldn't understand, as it had been in Korean and mixed with thick sobs. But judging by the repeated use of the word "sunbae," it seemed to have been about Kwon Taekjoo. Zhenya had grabbed the back of Yoon Jong-woo's neck and forced him upright, staring quietly into his eyes. His gaze had demanded an explanation, and Yoon Jong-woo had swallowed his tears and spoken haltingly.

*{He said he felt guilty about being selfish, doing something his mother didn't want him to do. That even if it wasn't a problem now, it would be later on... His personal life was already chaotic and overwhelming, so he figured it wouldn't be such a loss to leave this job behind. He said he just wanted to live his own life. This really was supposed to be his last mission.}*

Yoon Jong-woo explained that Kwon Taekjoo had planned to quit the NIS after this mission. Zhenya couldn't believe it. Kwon Taekjoo had always clashed with him over this work. He was someone whose sense of duty was so great that his mother and his lover had always taken a backseat.

Had he experienced some sudden change of heart in the last few weeks?

*'Is there something you want from me?'*

*'No. Except for you doing absolutely nothing.'*

Suddenly, Zhenya recalled the conversation they had not long ago. Kwon Taekjoo had always urged him not to get involved in his affairs. Zhenya couldn't understand it. If he had helped, things would have gone faster, and Kwon Taekjoo himself would have been more comfortable. Why not?

*'Don't twist my words. What I'm saying is, don't put yourself at risk under the pretense of doing something for me.'*

*'At risk? Me?'*

*'I know what kind of relationship you have with your family. I'm not going to meddle and tell you to reconcile with them or get along. That's entirely up to you, and it's not my place to dictate that. But I can't stand to see you at odds with them because of me anymore.'*

*'You're mistaken about something, Taekjoo. Even without you in the picture, my relationship with them is beyond repair. They're not the kind of people who could interfere with my life, nor would they dare to.'*

*'Even so, your roots are still there.'*

Maybe it started after he returned from Cuba. Kwon Taekjoo seemed more contemplative than ever. Sometimes, he'd stare at Zhenya with a troubled expression. When he worried unnecessarily about Zhenya and his family's repeated clashes, it was absurd yet oddly stirred something within him.

Perhaps that was why Kwon Taekjoo volunteered for the Tehran mission. To make up for his failure in Vladivostok. Given his nature, he probably wanted to tie up any loose ends, even if it was late. Once he resolved everything, he likely planned to come for Zhenya. After quitting the National Intelligence Service, neither of them would have any reason to oppose each other anymore.

Was Kwon Taekjoo planning to spend the rest of his life with Zhenya?

*'I've made my decision. I'll tell you everything when I get back. All the things I haven't been able to say until now. So this time, don't follow me recklessly or try to get involved unnecessarily. Just wait quietly.'*

Was his decision to resign from the NIS? All because he didn't want Zhenya as an enemy?

*'As soon as I finish, I'll come for you. Okay, Zhenya?'*

He made that promise, bounding Zhenya's hands and feet, making it impossible to follow, and vanished completely. Now, he was in a place Zhenya could no longer reach. Forever. No — until Zhenya saw it with his own eyes, he refused to accept it.

He clenched his fists tightly, and blood welled up where his nails dug into his skin. He couldn't feel the pain. In fact, ever since hearing the news about Kwon Taekjoo, all his senses had dulled. On the other hand, his nerves were so sharp that even the slightest noise or change in the air set him on edge.

He grabbed whatever painkillers he could find, something he usually avoided. He'd lost count of how many pills he'd taken. Whether the medication was ineffective or not, the splitting headache and the crushing pain in his chest wouldn't go away. Everything felt foreign and unfamiliar, leaving him unsure of how to cope.

Finally, the private plane arrived at the military airfield in Tehran. As soon as it landed, Zhenya seized Yoon Jong-woo by the collar, dragging him forward without warning.

Yoon Jong-woo couldn't even walk on his own, stumbling along as he was pulled.

Although the control on all civilian flights and travelers had been tightened in the aftermath of the terror incident, it had nothing to do with Zhenya. For one, he held the position of a Russian diplomat, and he was also related by blood to Bazim, a key figure in the Russian

delegation. Thanks to this, Yoon Jong-woo's entry into the country was smooth as well.

The two got into a pre-arranged car and headed to a morgue on the outskirts of Tehran. It was said to be where unidentified victims of the terror attack were placed.

Their minds were focused solely on seeing Kwon Taekjoo as soon as possible. Anxious, they kept pressing on the accelerator. Since the engine started, the car had not stopped for even a moment, speeding down the road. With his nerves on edge, the constant sobbing sound from beside him made his temper flare. Ever since hearing the news about Kwon Taekjoo, Yoon Jong-woo had been in a state of nonstop tears. Although nothing had been confirmed yet, he acted as if the world had already ended, which Zhenya found rather irritating.

{It would be wise to quiet down before I throw you out.}

Zhenya warned in a cold voice. At that, Yoon Jong-woo hugged his bag tighter and buried his head in it. He made a strained sound, trying to stifle his sobbing. Even that was annoying, but Zhenya said nothing more.

The car they were riding in soon arrived at the designated location. It was already well past midnight. Perhaps because of the late hour, the surroundings felt particularly quiet and eerie. It might have also been due to preconceived notions about the morgue.

An employee who had been waiting outside greeted them. "Unofficial procedure" meant that everything was being handled through a broker without the request of the South Korean government or the approval of the Iranian government. This was why they had to be extra cautious, wary of being seen or discovered.

{Welcome. We've been expecting you. But this person is...?}

The facility employee regarded Zhenya with a puzzled expression. It seemed the broker had only mentioned that someone from Korea would be arriving. Expecting an East Asian visitor, they were taken

aback by the sight of a tall Westerner. Yoon Jong-woo, anxious that the deal might fall through, quickly stepped in to address the situation.

{Ah, this person is the family representative. The family couldn't come in person, so he's here in their place. It's been approved by the higher-ups, so you don't need to worry.}

{I see. Please, follow me.}

The employee quickly dropped their suspicion and led the way. The group entered the morgue through a side door connected to the incineration yard in the backyard. To reach the mortuary, they had to pass through five or six security gates.

Securing the bodies so tightly might have seemed overzealous, akin to protecting valuable assets, but there was a logical basis for it. A large-scale terror attack had paralyzed an entire country, leaving behind unidentified victims who likely shouldn't have been at the scene — potential terror suspects. If someone like Kwon Taekjoo had entered the country under a false identity, avoiding suspicion would be even more challenging. Without the personal contact they had established, verifying his body would have been nearly impossible.

The morgue was in a building with two underground floors and four above ground. The area they were guided to was on the second basement floor. Even after descending all the way down, they had to walk a long distance further in. It might have been an illusion, but it felt as though the temperature dropped with each step they took.

{There are many bodies here that are not intact.}

The employee explained the situation. Even the bodies they had managed to recover were incomplete. Yoon Jong-woo started sniffing again, then tripped over his own feet and fell. Zhenya instinctively grabbed him by the back of the neck, pulling him up.

Dangling in Zhenya's grasp, Yoon Jong-woo sobbed uncontrollably. With a weary look, Zhenya shoved him away.

{This way.}

Soon, they stood in front of the most secluded mortuary room. The employee opened the door and turned on the light. The fluorescent bulb, covered in dust, flickered continuously. The walls were smeared with mold and mysterious stains, and gray cobwebs hung in every corner. The air reeked of rotting flesh and burnt odors.

{The body you need to check is in here.}

The employee pulled out one of the drawers. With a clanking sound, a body wrapped in cloth slid out. The pungent smell of burnt charcoal and decay filled the room. Yoon Jong-woo instinctively covered his nose and mouth, turning his head away. Struggling to compose himself, he looked back at the body bag, his eyes trembling. The size was strangely small to be Kwon Taekjoo's body.

{Why... why is there so little...?}

{As I mentioned, the damage was severe. Do you still wish to confirm?}

The tone implied that they didn't recommend it. With tears welling up in his eyes, Yoon Jong-woo looked at Zhenya. Zhenya, who hadn't taken his eyes off the body bag, unhesitatingly unzipped it.

Before they could mentally prepare, the grotesque remains were revealed. The face had melted away in the intense flames, making it impossible to distinguish the eyes, nose, or mouth. Below the knees, everything was gone — whether it had been burned away or lost during transport, it was unclear. What remained was nothing but charred, brittle flesh, crumbling at the slightest touch.

“Ugh...!”

Yoon Jong-woo finally broke down, retching violently as tears poured from his eyes. No matter how hard he tried to calm himself, his stomach kept churning, forcing up bitter bile.

Zhenya stood frozen, unmoving. His gaze, too, remained fixed on the body. Every second stretched into what felt like eternity.

How much time had passed? Suddenly, Zhenya reached for the body's head. The employee, who had been silently watching from the side, gasped in shock and tried to stop him.

{What are you doing? You can't touch that!}

Zhenya swatted the employee away with one hand. The employee's body flew helplessly into the wall. After hitting the back of their head hard, they collapsed and lost consciousness.

Without hesitation, Zhenya brought his nose close to the body's head. Even though it was impossible to detect any scent due to the overpowering smell of burning, he stubbornly sniffed.

{Yevgeny-ssi... ugh, ugh...}

Yoon Jong-woo, who had been desperately trying to intervene, suddenly retched and expelled yellow bile. His legs buckled beneath him, and he dropped to the floor on all fours, unable to control the violent heaves that consumed him. He wanted to fight it, to regain control, but his body refused to listen. Hot tears streamed down his cheeks, mingling with the snot that dripped from his nose.

Zhenya's pale hands were stained with ash, pus, and blood, but he didn't care. He continued examining every inch of the corpse. He counted each remaining finger and even checked the faint traces of the nails.

*Is this really Taekjoo? This?*

Was it because he didn't want to believe it? He had thought that as soon as he saw the body, he would immediately recognize it as Kwon Taekjoo. But no matter how much he looked, he couldn't be sure.

After inspecting the charred remains, he suddenly checked the inner thigh. Although the skin had melted away under the intense heat, the groin area, protected by the contact of both legs, was less damaged. The skin had shriveled a bit, but the shape was still relatively intact. He rubbed away the soot covering the skin with his fingers.

But the mark that should have been there was missing. The tattoo Zhenya had carefully inked onto the inside of Taekjoo's thigh was nowhere to be found.

"...This isn't Taekjoo."

He muttered, almost breathless. Since it was in Russian, Yoon Jong-woo didn't understand what Zhenya had said. He just stared at him in confusion.

Once again, Zhenya repeated, "This isn't Taekjoo," before suddenly straightening up and storming out. Yoon Jong-woo, having no idea what was going on, staggered to his feet and followed him.

{Yevgeny-ssi! Haah... Mr. Yevgeny! Where are you going?!}

Zhenya got into the car without any explanation. Yoon Jong-woo, panicked that Zhenya might leave him behind, barely managed to scramble into the car as well. As soon as he did, the car shot out onto the road. Zhenya's eyes were filled with blind rage as he repeatedly slammed on the gas pedal.

\*\*\*

"....."

When he regained consciousness, he was enveloped in deep, damp darkness. Beyond the cold wall, there were constant groans and sobbing from an unknown source. Occasionally, there were sharp, tearing screams and wails.

The dull noises that throbbed inside his skull would fade, only to return and pulse again. His consciousness flickered in and out like a dying lightbulb. It was difficult to stay fully aware.

He squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them again. The floor, where his cheek was pressed, was damp. He struggled to breathe and took a deep breath of air, only for an unpleasant smell to fill his lungs. A

metallic scent, or maybe the stench of blood — an odor of death long settled in this place. It was the smell left behind by decayed ideals and extinguished justice.

Shivering, he tried to move his body, which felt as heavy as a thousand pounds. His wrists and ankles were tightly bound behind his back, preventing any movement. Yet, he managed to wriggle his head and shoulders enough to sit up, leaning against the wall. His head spun the moment he moved. The intense dizziness made him retch.

“Ugh... Hah, hah...”

His vision shattered into pieces, and he shut his eyes tightly. Even with such slight movements, his muscles screamed in pain.

He waited for the nausea to subside, then opened his eyes again. Slowly, he rolled his eyes, trying to take in his surroundings. The small, dim space, barely two pyeong (about 7 square meters), contained only Kwon Taekjoo. There were no windows. The only exit was the iron door, firmly shut. The bars at the top of the door gave a hint of the place's identity.

A prison.

He didn't know how he had ended up there. He couldn't remember anything at all. He tried to dredge up his last memories, but it was useless. His mind was a blank, rejecting any thoughts. Forcing himself to think only brought on a crushing headache.

“Kghh....”

He clenched his molars, swallowing the pain. With each breath, he could taste faint traces of blood. Even the vibrations of his heartbeat brought him agony.

How much time had passed? The sound of footsteps echoed from outside. It wasn't a hallucination — someone was approaching. The presence became clearer until a shadow flickered beyond the bars. Instinctively, he straightened his body and glared at the iron door. Soon,

a man's face appeared through the bars. The man, presumably a guard, widened his eyes in surprise.

{This bastard's awake!}

It was strange. The language he heard was completely foreign, yet he understood every word of it. A higher-ranking man leaned in after the first one. His eyes were harsh, revealing his cruel nature at a glance.

{Open the door.}

{Yes, sir.}

The two guards entered the cell. Their uniforms bore name tags that read "Ahmad" and "Omar." Ahmad, the superior, strode toward Kwon Taekjoo and stomped on his shoulder without hesitation.

"...Ugh."

{Your name.}

Kwon Taekjoo clenched his lips tightly in defiance, glaring up at Ahmad. In response, Ahmad pressed down harder on his shoulder, trying to break his will. His jaw tensed with anger.

{I said, your name!}

{I don't know.}

Unyielding, Kwon Taekjoo refused to back down, so Ahmad kicked him hard in the face. His body, which had barely managed to sit upright, was violently thrown to the ground.

Ahmad then placed his boot on Kwon Taekjoo's throat, pressing down. A dry cough escaped as his airway constricted. Spit pooled at the edge of his chin.

{I'll ask you again. Where are you from?]

Kwon Taekjoo, still glaring at Ahmad, shook his head defiantly. He responded in Persian, clear and firm.

{I told you, I don't know.}

{You bastard!}

Ahmad kicked furiously due to Kwon Taekjoo's uncooperative attitude. His foot repeatedly struck Taekjoo's side. Instinctively, Taekjoo curled up, tightening his abdomen to take a defensive stance.

He silently endured the onslaught of attacks for a while, then suddenly struck Ahmad with his knee. Ahmad, who had momentarily lost his balance from kicking, fell helplessly. He hit the back of his head on the floor and grabbed his head in pain.

{Have you lost your mind?!}

Omar, who had been watching from behind, charged in, swinging his baton. Taekjoo twisted his upper body to dodge the incoming blow, then practically threw himself at Omar, knocking him down. Omar collapsed without resistance, and Taekjoo quickly pinned him down by pressing his shoulder against Omar's neck.

{Ugh, ack... Help! Help!}

Omar screamed, flailing his limbs. Other guards rushed over at the sudden commotion. They were briefly startled by the unexpected scene, but soon began to beat Taekjoo with their batons. Taekjoo clenched his teeth and stubbornly endured until a blow to the back of his head made him go limp. In the meantime, Ahmad, now recovered, vented his anger by hitting and kicking Kwon Taekjoo.

His blurry vision wavered wildly, following the limp movements of his body. In his muffled ears, he could faintly hear Ahmad's harsh breathing and curses echoing.

{Where the hell did you come from, you bastard? Attacking a guard without any fear?}

The guards seemed unaware of Kwon Taekjoo's name or origin. Taekjoo himself didn't know his own name, nationality, or why he had been captured and brought there. It felt as though his brain had overheated and stopped functioning properly.

*Who am I?*

He faintly questioned himself before slipping into unconsciousness.

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*Thud.*

The door to the hospital room rattled loudly. Bazim, who had been eating, hurriedly pulled out a pistol and aimed it at the doorway. The door handle slowly turned, and the guard, who had been slumped against the other side of the door, collapsed inward. The person who casually stepped over the body was none other than Zhenya. He walked straight towards Bazim, completely unfazed by the gun pointed at him. Bazim's eyes widened in disbelief.

"Yevgeny? What are you doing here?"

He had barely survived the terror attack, and Bazim's condition was far from fine. His head and waist were wrapped in bandages, and his arms and legs were in casts. His face was covered with plasters and gauze.

Yet, Zhenya didn't bother to ask about Bazim's condition. Instead, he immediately revealed the reason for his visit.

"I need you to find someone."

"..Someone?"

Bazim tilted his head in confusion. Then, suddenly remembering someone, he muttered, "No way..."

"You mean that Korean spy?"

"Do you know him?"

Zhenya caught hold of Bazim's words. A sudden ferocity appeared on his previously expressionless face, as if he was ready to snap Bazim's neck on the spot if he didn't answer properly. He wasn't the type to hesitate, even if his opponent was his own flesh and blood.

"How do you know him, Bazim?"

Zhenya leaned in closer, his dark figure enveloping Bazim like a looming shadow. His blue eyes glinted coldly, reminiscent of sharp ice crystals. It was as if he had long since lost all sense of reason. Had the taste of blood finally pushed him over the edge into madness?

He had that same look when he had returned from the Kremlin's orders to slaughter all of Anastasia's developers. A calm right before the rampage. He was only barely restraining himself, just for a moment, but he could explode at any time. Instinct blared a warning not to provoke him carelessly.

"Have you run into him?"

The next question was almost an interrogation. His pale hand abruptly covered the muzzle of the gun, and slowly twisted Bazim's hand, gun barrel and all. Resistance was useless; in the end, the gun muzzle pressed firmly under Bazim's chin.

"What did you do to him?"

With a chilling voice, Zhenya half-pulled the trigger. Even the slightest jolt would set off the gun. In this life-or-death situation, Bazim, who had been holding his breath, raised his arm in a cast as if to show he understood. He then complied, revealing what Zhenya wanted to know.

"...There was nothing I could do. A terrorist attack broke out while we were en route from the airport to the presidential palace, and everyone was too busy fleeing. Up until that point, he wasn't in sight. It wasn't until I split off with the president to head toward a secure zone that he appeared. At first, I thought he might be behind the attack, but it didn't seem that way. If he were one of the terrorists, he wouldn't have let me live. My guess is that his real target was North Korea's biologist."

"You just stood by and let him go?"

Zhenya tilted his head, as if to ask why Bazim hadn't pulled a gun on him like he was doing now. Bazim let out a long sigh, muttering reluctantly.

"I couldn't subdue him. His movements were like a cheetah's."

He looked both embarrassed and frustrated. In truth, Kwon Taekjoo was far from weak enough for Bazim to handle. Even if Bazim's guards had surrounded him, Taekjoo could have broken through on his own. The individual Taekjoo had targeted was safely transferred on the day of the attack. Once again, Taekjoo had fulfilled his mission. So, he should have returned by now with his usual sheepish smile. But why hadn't they heard any news from him? "Did he end up dead?"

Bazim hit the mark bluntly. Zhenya's eyes, which had wandered for a moment in thought, flickered with malice. Clenching his jaw, he shook his head slowly.

"Like I said, I'm going to find him."

"....Ha. I'm afraid I can't help you. Look at me. Even finding our missing team members is straining our resources. Iran's also in an uproar trying to track down those behind the attack, so we can't move freely..."

"If it won't work, then we'll just have to make it work."

Zhenya abruptly yanked his hand away, sending the gun Bazim was holding flying across the room.

As if he had no further business, Zhenya turned and walked away without a second thought. Bazim could easily imagine him going directly to Iran's Supreme Leader to issue threats. Such a blatant display of disrespect toward someone revered as a divine representative would do more than strain alliances; it could start a war. Bazim clutched his throbbing head.

"Wait, hold on."

Showing a willingness to compromise, Bazim watched as Zhenya halted mid-step. Calming him down, Bazim proposed an idea.

"I'll add him to the Russian delegation's rescue list. If he turns up in a hospital anywhere, or if his body is discovered, I'll be notified

immediately. Given that the attack happened during the summit, Iran will want to compensate for the diplomatic disaster by prioritizing the search for our people. Even if it's only his ashes they find."

"....."

"But you need to understand this: if he's already been captured or is even slightly linked to the attack, we'll be forced to abandon him. You get what I mean, right?"

"Just pray, Bazim."

"What?"

"Pray that he's alive somewhere. That way, the things you're worried about won't come true."

"Yevgeny!"

Bazim lunged to grab Zhenya again, half-rising from his bed in desperation.

"It's a sensitive time. If you act rashly now, you'll endanger yourself and our family.

You'd be committing an unforgivable crime against your own country."

Zhenya gave a derisive snort, looking back at Bazim with an oddly twisted expression, a smile seemingly condensed from pure fury.

"Family? Country? You're still expecting me to show loyalty to that? How many times have I told you I don't care what happens to any of that? All I care about is getting back what's mine safely. So pray, Bazim. Pray that there's not a single scratch on my property."

The strange smile quickly faded, replaced by a cold, detached gaze. It was as if he were looking at something less than garbage, something he wouldn't waste another second on.

"If you want to live, you'd better make sure you weren't the one who laid a hand on what's mine."

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Yoon Jong-woo was practically confined to a lodging in Tehran. Each time he looked out the window, he was reminded that he was in Iran, though it still felt surreal. The past few days had passed in such a chaotic blur that his mind remained hazy.

As soon as they arrived in Iran on Zhenya's private jet, they visited the morgue. Without hesitation, Zhenya examined one of the bodies and firmly declared it was not Kwon Taekjoo. Yoon Jong-woo had no idea what made him so certain.

{Mr.Yevgeny, are you sure that body isn't him? Really?}

Jong-woo had followed Zhenya, pressing for answers, but received none. Zhenya simply drove silently to a hospital without explaining why they were going or whom they intended to meet.

Upon arrival, Zhenya left Jong-woo behind and went in alone. Jong-woo tried to follow, but the soldiers guarding the entrance blocked his way. With no other option, he returned to the car to wait.

He then gathered some tissues that Zhenya had used to wipe his hands and sealed them in a zip-lock bag along with a hair sample from the morgue. He didn't want to rely solely on Zhenya's instincts to declare the body wasn't Kwon Taekjoo. He preferred to cross-check, just in case. Of course, more than anyone, Yoon Jong-woo desperately hoped Zhenya's hunch was right and that no DNA evidence of Kwon Taekjoo would be found on what he had collected.

Before long, Zhenya had returned to the car, still looking dissatisfied, as though he hadn't achieved what he had intended. He had offered no explanation about whom he had met or what he had verified, simply bringing Jong-woo to his current lodging.

{Where...}

Without a word, Zhenya had set a laptop in front of Jong-woo, switched it on, and headed straight to the bathroom. Soon, the sound of the shower running had echoed from within. Sitting like a sack of rice, Yoon Jong-woo had glanced at the laptop screen. It had been locked with an

unfamiliar encryption, which had piqued his curiosity. After a brief moment of hesitation, Jong-woo had begun deactivating the series of security programs.

Zhenya had emerged from the bathroom just as the system had finished booting. Reviewing the encryption bypass records, he had given a slight nod and remarked, ‘*Not bad.*’ Without warning, he had tossed a tablet at Jong-woo. It contained satellite data from a recently launched Iranian internet network, existing communication satellites, and information from a well-known private company dealing in military intelligence and satellite data for various countries.

{*This...?*}

*{Start by combing through the area where Taekjoo was last seen. Don't waste time moping — find a trace of him, even if it's just his shadow.}*

Before he left, headquarters had warned Yoon Jong-woo repeatedly not to do anything reckless. Gathering intelligence in a foreign country without authorization from superiors was a dangerous endeavor for an intelligence officer. If he were caught by local authorities, it could cost him his job — though if that was the worst of it, he’d be lucky. Jong-woo himself would face severe penalties, not to mention the possibility of escalating into a diplomatic incident.

Yet, despite all that, he wanted to believe Kwon Taekjoo was alive somewhere, rather than lost. Doing something, however small, felt better than sitting idly, waiting for news. He couldn’t shake the thought that his partner might desperately need his help.

So, for days on end, Jong-woo shut himself in the room, hacking into the satellites Zhenya had designated. He pinpointed the time and location where Kwon Taekjoo was last seen, gathering as much CCTV footage from the area as he could. Iran wasn’t as saturated with CCTV or dash cams as South Korea, but even a slim lead was worth pursuing.

Meanwhile, Zhenya periodically went out. Some days, he returned in the same attire he’d left in; other days, his clothes were disheveled and

stained. Each time, he carried the faint smell of something like metal, wind, or perhaps blood. With every return, he handed Jong-woo an assortment of flash drives or phones from unknown sources.

Jong-woo diligently backed up the information they contained. Through these, he gained access to Iran's government networks, including investigation files from the police and even footage from body cams taken at the scene.

Yoon Jong-woo, exhausted and running on no sleep, was fixated on finding Kwon Taekjoo. He started by analyzing dashcam, body cam, and CCTV footage from the time of the final explosion, carefully calculating the exact timestamps. Then, he compiled every recording near the blast site, aligning them by time and location. Setting Kwon Taekjoo's physical features as a search parameter, he built a 3D model to track any matching silhouette. After hours of searching, he managed to isolate a few clips that stood out. He meticulously reviewed each one, tracing Taekjoo's path.

**“...Huh?”**

After watching the footage countless times, Yoon Jong-woo's quiet gasp broke the silence. Zhenya, who had finally dozed off sitting upright after days without rest, immediately opened his eyes.

{What is it?}

{Look here, Mr. Yevgeny.}

Jong-woo said, quickly angling his laptop toward him. He pressed the space bar, playing the edited clip.

At the time of the explosion, Kwon Taekjoo had been inside an armored vehicle. The intense blast sent him flying into a nearby alley along with the passenger door. But the thick smoke obscured everything afterward.

Jong-woo quickly switched to another angle, showing footage from a CCTV camera capturing the opposite side of the alley. The camera quality wasn't great, and dark smoke blurred the view. Jong-woo highlighted a faint outline in the video. Only then did a shape lying on

the ground come into focus, slowly shifting, then rising unsteadily. The figure, staggering weakly, disappeared into a nearby building.

Replaying the footage several times, Yoon Jong-woo confirmed with certainty,

{He took cover inside the building, which is why he didn't show up on CCTV or get detected by the police.} {And after that?}

{This is hours later.}

Jong-woo pulled up another video, recorded just before dawn. A police car and an ambulance appeared in front of what looked like an apartment building. Paramedics entered and soon came out, carrying a person. Though the distance was considerable, there was no mistaking it — it was Kwon Taekjoo.

Kwon Taekjoo lay motionless until he was loaded into the ambulance, his arms limp at his sides. Had he lost consciousness? Relentlessly, Zhenya's eye pursued the ambulance as it sped off, following the police car until both vehicles disappeared from view.

{Where is this place?}

{I checked. It's about 3.8 km away from the crime scene. They must have been mindful of the CCTV and random inspections, so it looks like they stayed inside buildings, moving from one to another. A resident in the apartment reported to the police, saying an intruder had broken into their home. Apparently, the intruder didn't cause any harm but was unconscious and bleeding heavily from the head. I also traced the ambulance transporting him.}

The road CCTV footage soon resumed, showing the police car and ambulance that had passed earlier. Yoon Jong-woo continued to track them through each new clip. Finally, both vehicles arrived at a military hospital. Given the emergency situation, it wasn't unusual for a military hospital to accept a civilian. However, it was unsettling that Kwon Taekjoo, obviously a foreigner at a glance, still didn't appear on any list of injured individuals.

{Is he still there?}

{I'm not sure. It doesn't seem like any admission procedure was completed. I haven't found any sign of him leaving that hospital either. You don't think something went wrong there, do you?}

Yoon Jong-woo mumbled gloomily, his eyebrows furrowing. He wanted to deny it, but the situation didn't allow for optimism. If Kwon Taekjoo had woken up safely, he would have escaped on his own by now. The fact that he hadn't meant he was either still unconscious or unable to leave. Just thinking about that made it unbearable.

Zhenya immediately sprang up from his seat. All he could think of was turning the hospital inside out if he had to, to get Kwon Taekjoo back.

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When he opened his eyes again, his body was swaying without his control. He tried to steady himself, moving his legs in a weak attempt to find balance. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't find anything to hold onto. He barely managed to touch the ground with his toes before he stumbled heavily, causing his whole body to twist, the restraint on his bound arms tightening painfully.

“...Ugh.”

His arms were cuffed, suspended from an iron bar on the ceiling. Every movement scraped the cuffs against the bar, producing a squeaking sound. The air around him reeked of metal and blood. The tiled floor was smeared with dark red stains. His foggy mind sent repeated signals that he needed to escape immediately.

Forcing his drooping head up, he looked around. The dark ceiling loomed as if it would collapse and swallow him whole. He had no idea how much time had passed, where he was, or why he was in this state again. Nothing registered properly.

He shook his head and squeezed his eyes shut before opening them again, bringing his blurry vision slightly into focus. Gradually, he began to make out the surroundings of the room.

Unlike the concrete walls of the detention room he'd first woken up in, this place was tiled on all sides. There were no windows to the outside. The thick iron door was built so no one could see in. The smell of sewage strongly suggested it was an underground facility.

It was an airtight space where sound would hardly escape, but any noise inside would echo loudly, amplifying the fear.

On one side of the room were a bathtub and a water faucet, while on the opposite side sat a metal desk and chair. On top of the desk lay various metal tools — pliers, a hammer, and hooks. Altogether, it looked like an interrogation room disguised as a torture chamber.

{Awake?}

After some time, Kwon Taekjoo looked straight ahead. Ahmad and Omar were sitting side by side, smoking cigarettes. Soon, Ahmad got up with a smirk, his shadow — appearing twice as large as usual — sliding across the wall and overlapping with Kwon Taekjoo's silhouette.

Ahmad abruptly grabbed Kwon Taekjoo's chin.

{How do you like it? I thought I'd bring you to a more private place since you seemed to enjoy secret games.}

Ahmad's face drew closer, and the tip of his cigarette singed the soft hairs on Kwon Taekjoo's cheek, a faint burnt smell spreading.

{We'll be spending the whole night here, just the two of us. After all, people tend to share any secret with someone close to them. Who knows? Once we get friendly, maybe you'll spill all your secrets.}

Ahmad let go of Kwon Taekjoo's face with a dismissive shove, sending his bound body swinging. The clash of metal as the cuffs scraped against the iron bar sliced through the air, clawing at the room's atmosphere.

Kwon Taekjoo swallowed a pained breath, glaring at Ahmad with fierce determination. If he could just free his wrists, he looked ready to tear him apart without a second thought. Ahmad, savoring the look, reached out and toyed with the tools on the table.

{Don't be so afraid. It might actually be more fun than you think. Depending on your attitude, this could go a lot easier.}

Ahmad kept up the ominous tone, attempting to intimidate Kwon Taekjoo. By now, any ordinary prisoner would be pleading, apologizing, or at the very least desperately trying to explain their innocence. Even the bravest would falter when faced with such absolute isolation.

But Kwon Taekjoo's spirit showed no sign of breaking. The more he was cornered, the more his defiance and animosity seemed to intensify. Ahmad could tell he was different from any prisoner he'd dealt with before. It was as if he'd been through such situations many times before, either familiar with these threats or trained to remain unfazed even in extreme fear. A newfound curiosity sparked in Ahmad's otherwise bored expression.

{You're tough, aren't you? For us to have a productive conversation, you'll need to open up, starting from the inside.}

Ahmad picked up a sharp tool and began honing its edge against thick leather.

{So, you don't know your name, age, or nationality? Are you saying you've lost all your memories? People who have something to hide always act like they know nothing that could be used against them.}

He trailed off, glancing back at Kwon Taekjoo. Even at the sight of the gleaming blade, Kwon Taekjoo didn't flinch; he simply held his breath, remaining utterly still.

{No matter how much I dig, there's no record of your entry. Like a rat, just where, when, and how did you sneak into this country? I've thought about it thoroughly, and there's only one conclusion. Probably, the reason you insist you don't know your name or origin has something to do with that.}

Ahmad seemed already convinced of some theory, one Kwon Taekjoo could hardly guess. Truthfully, he remembered nothing — who he was, what he did, or where he lived. Even when he tried to recall, his mind remained shrouded in a murky fog.

It felt like he was lost in an endless mist.

{You, you were involved in the recent terror attack, weren't you?}

{Terror?}

{Oh, are you going to pretend you don't know about that either?}

Ahmad sneered openly. Although Kwon Taekjoo had no memory of who he was, where he came from, or why he was on the run, he was aware that the country was in a state of emergency. News of terror attacks was constant everywhere. Still, he hadn't considered that he might be connected to it. Was he not?

He tried to piece together his memories. The first thing he recalled was regaining consciousness in an alley. For some reason, he was severely injured and couldn't move at all. Pure survival instinct drove him to hide in a nearby building. That was his last memory.

The next time he awoke, he was in a hospital. When he sat up in shock, medical staff approached to administer a sedative. He barely held out before drifting back into unconsciousness. The following time he opened his eyes, he was here, in a place that seemed reserved for serious criminals, where law and rights held no sway. Judging by the situation, it appeared they suspected him of being a terror suspect.

{You've got a mouth, so explain. If you're innocent, why were you lurking at the terror site? Unidentified, armed, and you even attacked the police!}

Ahmad suddenly shouted. His yell echoed throughout the detention center, likely sounding like the roar of a beast to those further away.

{Answer me! Who sent you here?}

Ahmad pressed a sharp tool under Kwon Taekjoo's chin. Any wrong move, and his skin would undoubtedly be cut.

Kwon Taekjoo, however, only became more composed, piecing together clues. From Ahmad's aggressive questioning, it was clear that he, too, had no idea of Taekjoo's identity. The fact that his fingerprints hadn't revealed his identity or any entry record suggested he must have entered the country illegally. Given that he'd been found with severe injuries, fleeing from the police near the scene of a terror attack, it wasn't surprising they suspected him of involvement.

The problem was that no memory related to the incident surfaced. It was as if someone had detonated a bomb in his mind, erasing everything. All he knew about himself now was that his senses were intensely sharp, his body moved deftly under attack, he had high endurance, and he could speak quite a few languages.

What kind of person had he been? And for what purpose had he come here?

{This bastard... won't respond unless I make him, huh?}

Ahmad's sharp voice reached Kwon Taekjoo's ears just as something warm began to trickle down his neck. It seemed the blade had finally sliced through his skin.

Blood slid down his collarbone, staining his prison uniform as it spread. Ahmad gave a satisfied grin, letting the tool in his hand hover near Taekjoo's skin, barely grazing it, as he slowly dragged it down to his chest.

The blade then caught on the collar of his shirt. Ahmad met Taekjoo's pitch-black eyes, engaging in a tense standoff before, without warning, slashing downward. With a few angry gestures, he tore open the shirt, ripping the pants and underwear until they hung in shreds. As the tattered fabric fell to the floor, Taekjoo found himself stripped, defenseless in this brutal room, completely bound. Even the strongest would feel vulnerable.

In this aspect, Ahmad was a skilled interrogator, knowing exactly how to break someone before questioning even began.

Ahmad's gaze swept over Taekjoo's bare body, exposed like meat in a butcher's shop.

Then he sneered and didn't hold back his mockery.

{This bastard... from the chest up, you could pass for a woman. What, are you going to start producing milk if I squeeze?}

He grabbed one of Taekjoo's pecs, then slapped it hard enough for a loud smack to echo. A red handprint bloomed on his smooth skin. Omar, watching from behind, let out a crude laugh. This was clearly routine for them, crushing prisoners' dignity and mental strength until they got the answers they wanted.

Ahmad smirked at Taekjoo's unwavering expression despite the degrading treatment. He gave a slight nod, almost encouraging him to keep resisting. Then, with both hands, he held Taekjoo's face and forcibly pried open his mouth, inspecting his palate, the insides of his cheeks, and deep down his throat.

Ahmad prodded with his thumb beneath the tongue, checking if anything was hidden there.

Nothing stood out particularly. No poison, like those supposedly used by terrorists or intelligence agents, was found either.

After meticulously inspecting both ear canals, Ahmad signaled something to Omar. In response, Omar swiftly hooked a rope around Kwon Taekjoo's waist, connecting it to the bar above. As Taekjoo's lower body lifted, his hips were raised into the air. Omar walked behind him, grabbing Taekjoo's buttocks and spreading them wide. It seemed like Taekjoo struggled to bear it, his molars grinding tightly together.

{Do you know how dangerous a blind, reckless person can be? They don't even realize when their own body is at risk. They'll use every hole as a hiding spot. The ones who shove drugs up there and die when it bursts on the road — they're the lucky ones, at least their bodies remain intact. But the ones who hide bombs or vault keys in the wrong place end up in a state you can't even look at. I have no reason to delicately extract things from criminals like that, one hole at a time.}

After rambling on for a while, Ahmad spat onto the inside of Taekjoo's buttocks. He then jabbed his index finger into the cavity, pressing further inside. Tension flared along Taekjoo's jawline. The sound of his teeth grinding escaped from his tightly clenched lips.

“Damn it...”

{Oh? Now you’re thinking about talking?}

Hearing the low curse, Ahmad grinned as he continued prodding the cavity without restraint. The unfamiliar sensation kept making Kwon Taekjoo’s lower abdomen tense up, causing the muscles to reflexively tighten around the intrusion. Ahmad let out a small laugh.

{Look at that? Just a bit of probing, and you’re already clenching up. Where did you pick up these habits?]

Ahmad was about to dig in even harder when Omar, standing nearby, noticed a tattoo and asked, {What’s this?} He pointed to a mark inked on the inside of Taekjoo’s thigh.

{What...what does this say?}

{Not sure. Looks like Cyrillic.}

{Cyrillic? That’s the script they use in Russia?}

{Yes.}

{So, what’s this mean? Is this guy Russian?}

{Hard to say. But being cautious wouldn’t hurt.}

The two guards exchanged murmurs, casting wary looks at Kwon Taekjoo. If he were indeed part of a Russian delegation, his presence at the crime scene, his severe injuries, and even his possession of a firearm wouldn’t be an issue. The only strange part was the lack of any formal identification or immigration record. However, that too could be explained if Russia had chosen to keep his presence confidential for their own reasons.

If their guess was correct, treating him roughly like this could have serious diplomatic repercussions, regardless of how justified their investigation might seem.

{First, check if Russia is looking for an Asian person like this.}

{Yes, understood.}

Following his orders, Omar quickly left the interrogation room, leaving only Ahmad and Kwon Taekjoo in the dimly lit space. Ahmad studied Taekjoo's face, his expression one of perplexity.

{So, you're Russian?}

Even as he spoke, Ahmad tilted his head, as if he couldn't quite believe it. He clicked his tongue, clearly unsatisfied with the situation.

{Well, then. I guess we'll have to treat you carefully until things are certain. Don't worry too much; there are plenty of ways to have some fun without leaving marks.}

Ahmad, speaking with a sinister tone, walked over to the table where his tools lay. He set down the knife he had sharpened earlier and began to rummage for a replacement, mumbling all the while.

{How can you just trust a Russian, anyway? Am I right? There's no guarantee they're not involved in this attack. After all, the enemy is often closest at hand, and it's usually the ones you trust who stab you in the back.}

After his speech, Ahmad picked up a solid baton, suddenly slathering it with Vaseline. Taekjoo watched Ahmad approaching him, his eyes filled with anxiety.

{What are you planning, you bastard!}

{I told you, didn't I? I'll make it look clean.}

Ahmad whispered from behind, then suddenly dragged his tongue from the back of Taekjoo's neck up to his ear, sending chills throughout Taekjoo's entire body.

{Extracting the truth is surprisingly simple. Probe and prod, and eventually, it'll all leak out.}

One of Taekjoo's cheeks was abruptly pulled to the side, and his entrance was met with a hard, familiar sensation. From its feel, he could tell it was the baton Ahmad had picked up moments earlier.

{Taming someone like you is nothing for me. Once your pride is broken, you lose everything. When's the last time you cried?}

{...What?}

{Consider today a reset.}

Without warning, Ahmad pressed the baton in. It caught momentarily at the entrance before forcing the area open as it pushed inside.

"Aagh...!"

{When scum like you end up in my hands, there are only two outcomes. Either the truth you're hiding bursts out from inside you and you die, or you spill it beforehand. Which one will it be?}

"Ha, ugh!"

Ahmad grinned as he jabbed his baton repeatedly in and out of Kwon Taekjoo. The sudden, intense expansion and the rough thrusting pain made Taekjoo's knees buckle. His fists clenched tight, going pale.

Ahmad then struck Taekjoo's tense ass hard, driven by defiance. When Taekjoo's tension momentarily crumbled, Ahmad seized the opportunity to dig further into his gut.

"Agh! Hmh, damn it...ugh!"

Despite trying to hold it in, groans kept slipping out. His body, desperate to withstand the relentless waves of pain, squirmed continuously. Whether from the overwhelming stimulation, heat surged through his entire body. Oddly, he found himself strangely familiar with the sensations and changes within him, leaving him confused. Had

Kwon Taekjoo been subjected to this kind of torture many times before?

The baton, which seemed like it would bore a hole through his gut, was abruptly yanked out. With it, Kwon Taekjoo's writhing body jerked violently.

“Hah... ha... ugh... fuck...”

{So, how about now? Do you feel like spilling it?}

{For fuck's sake, I told you, I don't know! How many times do I have to say it!}

Ahmad snorted at Taekjoo's irritated shout, tapping Taekjoo's cheek with the baton, slick with melted petroleum jelly.

{If you don't know, we'll just have to make sure you find out. Looks like it's going to be a very long night, don't you think?}

The words were almost unbearable to hear, filled with despair.

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{Hey! Who are you to do this?}

The hospital director's secretary blocked Zhenya, who had barged in unannounced. Ignoring the secretary, Zhenya strode purposefully into the office. As the secretary grabbed Zhenya's arm, it was twisted abruptly, and their own hand was knocked against their nose. Before they could regain their senses, they were flung out into the hallway.

Zhenya closed the door quietly and turned around. Another secretary, who had seen everything, hurriedly called for security. Yet no response came, no matter how often they pressed the call button. Zhenya had already taken care of them upon entering the hospital.

Watching Zhenya approach, the secretary quickly picked up the phone, likely intending to call the police. But their face soon turned dark with

dread, as Zhenya grasped them by the neck before they could even connect the call. The secretary struggled to remove Zhenya's hand, but he was immovable, lifting the secretary off the floor until their feet dangled.

{Ugh... p-please... spare me...}

Zhenya's gaze was nothing but cold and unyielding. Feeling his life on the line, the secretary raised his hand and pointed toward the director's office. Zhenya immediately released him and walked toward the closed door.

He grabbed the doorknob, but it didn't budge, as it was locked. Faint voices could be heard from inside. The hospital director, seemingly aware of the commotion, was pleading with the police to send help quickly. Letting go of the knob, Zhenya kicked the door without hesitation. The lock tore apart instantly, and the door swung open as if it were made of paper. The director gasped, fumbling to grab a gun, but his hands shook so badly that the barrel quivered.

{Who... who are you? Why are you doing this?}

{I'm looking for someone.}

Zhenya closed the distance between them in a single step. Panicked, the director hastily pulled the trigger. In an instant, the bullet shattered a decorative piece behind Zhenya. He continued advancing undeterred, while the director, now terrified, fired repeatedly.

No matter how precisely he aimed, every bullet missed Zhenya, who moved with such agility that he seemed more beast than human. In an instant, Zhenya closed the distance and twisted the director's hand. The gun discharged, shattering a ceiling light.

{Hah...hah...! I've called the police!}

{You'll need to stay alive until they get here.}

He threw the director's last-ditch threat right back at him and tightened his grip on the director's wrist.

{Aagh! Let... let go of my hand...!}

{A week ago, at night, there was an Asian patient brought in here.}

{A... a week ago? How... how should I know...?! Aagh! Wait, wait! It's just... so many patients were admitted that night because of the terror attack!}

{So, you don't know?}

{No, no! I'll tell you! I'll tell you! Ugh... you're talking about the Asian the police brought in, right? He's the only one fitting that description in our hospital.}

As the explanation continued, a twitch developed beneath Zhenya's eye. His deep blue pupils narrowed, darkening almost to black. A foreboding, dark aura radiated from him. At this point, the condition of the director's now hyperextended wrist seemed irrelevant — Zhenya looked ready to tear his throat out.

{I... I don't know the details. The police asked us not to keep any records and only to provide emergency care... They took him back as soon as the treatment was done.}

{What were his injuries?}

{Lacerations, burns, aagh! Ugh... a few fractures, and signs of a concussion, from what I recall.}

{Where could the police have taken him?]

{Ugh... I... I wouldn't know! We just followed their instructions and treated the patient, that's all, sir.}

Without a word, Zhenya twisted his arm a bit more, and a cracking sound echoed from the director's right arm. The director stamped his feet, pleading.

{Aagh! I'll tell you! I'll tell you everything! I don't know for sure, but he was likely taken to Evin Prison. I heard they couldn't confirm his identity. Usually, those like him are taken there for interrog—aaagh...!}

Zhenya tightened his grip on the arm in his hand before finally letting it go. The director clutched his throbbing right arm, begging for his life.

Evin Prison was a notorious facility in Iran, known for detaining anti-government protesters. It was a human rights black hole where assaults and torture, under the guise of interrogation, were openly practiced. If Kwon Taekjoo was indeed imprisoned there, as the director suspected, his treatment would be predictably brutal.

“How dare they....”

Zhenya rushed out of the director’s office. There was no time to waste — he had to retrieve Kwon Taekjoo before he suffered further harm.

The hospital staff, busy cleaning up the chaotic exam and treatment rooms, stepped back when Zhenya appeared again. Focused on his destination, he seemed like a fighter jet, primed for bombing. Just brushing past him felt life-threatening.

As Zhenya exited the hospital, police sirens could be heard from afar, closing in due to a series of emergency calls from the director and staff. Ignoring it, he climbed into the

back seat of the car, where Yoon Jong-woo sat in the driver’s seat, glancing nervously into the rearview mirror.

{Mr. Yevgeny... what do we do? It’s the police.}

{Drive.}

{W-what? W-where to?}

{Anywhere.}

Zhenya responded casually and pulled something out from beneath his feet — a bazooka.

By then, police cars had arrived and lined up in formation outside the hospital, blocking their escape route. A loudspeaker ordered them to surrender.

{Come out with your hands up!}

{If you resist, we'll shoot!}

Several warning shots were fired, proving the threat wasn't just talk. Yoon Jong-woo ducked in fear, looking anxiously at Zhenya as if to ask if they were really going to make a run for it.

{Or do you want to get out?}

{No! I'm going!}

Yoon Jong-woo clenched his eyes shut and floored the gas pedal, knowing what horrors could await if he got caught alone by the Iranian police. As the car lurched forward, the police opened fire.

“Argh!”

Yoon Jong-woo hunched low beneath the steering wheel, barely maintaining control as he dodged and swerved. With limited visibility, he crossed the center line a few times before jerking the car back on course. A bullet shattered the rear window, grazing just below his ear and lodging in the dashboard. The fear was so intense, his scream got sucked right back down his throat.

Even as the car rocked violently, Zhenya remained steady, firing the bazooka without hesitation. He didn't seem concerned about any consequences. Each shot struck its mark, causing police cars to swerve off-road or collide with one another. Some spun out, eventually flipping over.

Anything in his way was removed without a second thought. Wherever Zhenya passed, chaos followed. Fading into the dark night, Yoon Jong-woo began to understand why Kwon Taekjoo and Zhenya had grown so close, so quickly.

\*\*\*

In the dim light that flickered endlessly, shadows cast on the mold-stained walls appeared and disappeared, echoing the dark atmosphere.

Inside the damp, enclosed space, the grating sound of metal scraping metal reverberated without end.

“Ugh... a-ah... ah!”

Ahmad had suspended Kwon Taekjoo from a metal bar and was relentlessly tormenting him. His baton, slick with fluids, was shining all the way to the handle from the violent handling. Slipping out of his hand, the baton clattered to the floor with a loud thud.

“Haah... haah...”

Kwon Taekjoo, barely hanging on, took in ragged breaths, feeling as though there wasn’t enough oxygen to fill his lungs. His brutalized hole throbbed, painfully swollen, and raw. His ears, cheeks, shoulders, chest, cock, balls, and knees were inflamed, flushed a deep red from the brutal heat of it all. His sweat-slicked skin gleamed, and the muscles he’d clenched to endure trembled as if they might give out. Yet, his life force pulsed with defiance in this oppressive place.

Ahmad stretched his stiff wrist as he approached Kwon Taekjoo, lifting his slumped face up to meet his gaze. Those sharp eyes still burned with a fierce yellow flame of anger, veins visibly bulging on his forehead, and his jaw muscle tightly clenched. Despite everything he had endured, his gaze still seethed with unbroken defiance.

{Anastasia? Is that your lover's name?}

Ahmad’s tone was mocking, as though trying out a different approach. Since he’d spotted the tattoo meaning *my Anastasia* on Taekjoo’s inner thigh, he hadn’t stopped with the taunts.

{If that’s the case, maybe I could arrange a little reunion for you two right here.}

Ahmad’s whisper was taunting, but Taekjoo didn’t reply. He only jerked his head away from Ahmad’s grip. Unfazed, Ahmad twisted his ear painfully, forcing him to face him again, his expression full of sinister delight.

{Or maybe it's your nickname?}

“.....”

{No matter how much I try to break you, you keep resisting, don't you? I fucked your hole just to see how long it would take before you cracked, yet you took it all with such eagerness. It was almost as if you enjoyed that brush with death earlier. You're quite responsive, aren't you? Someone's clearly taught you how to appreciate it. If you were a whore, it would explain that mysterious background of yours.}

Ahmad sneered, toying with Taekjoo's earlobe. Kwon Taekjoo, who had been glaring at him with murderous intensity, suddenly let out a small chuckle.

{Are you laughing?}

{You look incredibly curious with all your nonsense, staring at me so intently.}

In a tone as sharp as a knife, the remark hit home. His mocking gaze traveled from Ahmad's visibly swollen cock back up to his face.

{Your dick looks like it's about to burst.}

{You bastard...!}

With a smack, his head snapped to the side. Blood trickled from his nose, staining his philtrum and lips as he lowered his head, silently suppressing his breath. Then, he extended his red tongue and slowly licked his own blood. Ahmad, watching this scene, frowned. His slightly parted lips twitched as he struggled to exhale in short, choppy breaths. His cock gave an involuntary jerk, reacting unmistakably.

{Instead of fucking me with some useless baton, why don't you punish me with your cock instead?}

{...What?}

{Your body looks pretty heated up. No one's watching anyway, right?}

{Cut the crap.}

{Not like I'll remember any of this later, anyway. They probably brought me here in secret because they had something to hide back in Russia. Who would care if I mess around with some guy like you? You're just doing your job, aren't you? Isn't that right?}

{You sneaky bastard... you're desperate to get fucked, aren't you?}

{Took you this long to figure it out?}

Kwon Taekjoo lifted one corner of his mouth into a shallow smile. Sweat-dampened skin, ragged breathing, the sharp scent, even the air warmed around them — everything was charged, creating a perfectly carnal atmosphere.

Ahmad, who had been watching with a blank expression, let out a small chuckle and approached.

{I like guys with your kind of strong spirit. The tougher they are, the more satisfying it is to break them.}

Without warning, Ahmad grabbed Kwon Taekjoo by the throat, licking the blood trailing down to his chin in reverse. Ahmad's breath was hot against Taekjoo's upper lip. Taekjoo subtly turned his head away, avoiding him, but Ahmad raised an electric shock device to Taekjoo's cock in warning.

{Try anything funny, I dare you.}

Immediately after, Ahmad ran his tongue fully along Taekjoo's lips, then forcefully entwined it with his. When Taekjoo leaned back, Ahmad gripped the back of his head hard enough to hurt, rubbing his lips roughly against Taekjoo's, as if daring him to resist.

He pressed the shock device against Taekjoo's groin, further asserting control.

Ahmad's bulging cock rubbed roughly against Taekjoo's thigh, his hands grabbing Taekjoo's chest with enough force to leave marks. The front of Ahmad's pants quickly became wet, spreading dampness to Taekjoo's thigh. Even a dog in heat wouldn't cling so desperately to him like this.

In response, Kwon Taekjoo pulled Ahmad's tongue into his mouth, sucking on it. Ahmad flinched, startled by Taekjoo's unexpected enthusiasm. Unfazed, Taekjoo teased Ahmad's tongue with his own, lightly biting and twisting to draw it in further. Ahmad's once-stiff, unyielding tongue quickly softened, and his once-steady breath grew ragged.

Soon, Ahmad, out of breath, pulled his lips away. Taekjoo exhaled heavily, his gaze lowered as he looked back at him.

{How much have you fooled around for your tongue skills to be like this? Are you really a whore?}

{Why don't you check for yourself? If I really were a whore, do you think I'd only be good at sucking your tongue?}

At the unexpected offer, Ahmad wavered for a moment. But he soon saw right through Kwon Taekjoo's intentions and smirked.

{...I'm not stupid enough to do something that risky.}

Kwon Taekjoo didn't look disappointed. He simply held Ahmad's fingers, which lingered around his thick lips and tongue, as though savoring the touch. When he suddenly bit down on the fingers that had been pressing against the inside of his mouth, Ahmad jerked back in shock.

{I told you to stop with the tricks!}

{You're such a coward.. Why not quit stalling and get serious already? What are you going to do if your junior walks in on us?}

Provoked by the taunt, Ahmad finally lost his patience and pulled down his pants. The hurriedly exposed cock was predictably unimpressive — often, those of his kind fall into sexual obsession for that reason.

{Quickly.}

{Ha, you sly bastard. Eager, aren't you?}

With a grin, Ahmad spread Kwon Taekjoo's legs and positioned himself between them, pressing his aroused cock against the swollen opening.

Right on cue, Taekjoo tensed the muscles in his ass, covering the entry point. Unable to stand the teasing any longer, Ahmad threw the shock device aside, using his now-free hands to spread Taekjoo's cheeks open. Finally, he pressed the tip to the barely parting opening, his breath heavy with anticipation. His eyes had long since softened and melted from the heat of his desire.

Just as Ahmad, fully wound up, was about to push inside, Kwon Taekjoo suddenly tightened his knees around Ahmad's waist. It seemed like he was too eager for it, Ahmad chuckled nervously. {Calm down.} But as Taekjoo's grip on him grew tighter, Ahmad started to panic. He tried to break free, but Taekjoo's legs had him pinned, leaving him completely trapped.

{Let go, damn it! Aren't you going to let me go?}

Sensing danger, Ahmad began hitting Taekjoo's thighs and hips, but it was no use. The more he struggled, the stronger Taekjoo's hold became, like a vice closing around his torso.

{You bastard, let go! I said let go... ack!}

Using his natural agility, Taekjoo jerked his head forward, slamming it into Ahmad's. Ahmad staggered back, clutching his forehead, stunned by the unexpected blow. In that instant, Taekjoo grabbed the overhead metal bar, hoisting himself upward. His legs moved from Ahmad's waist to his neck, tightening around his throat, ruthlessly choking off his air.

{Hiik, hick... Hnng...!}

Ahmad's mouth opened, but he couldn't even scream as he writhed, sounds bubbling up from deep within. His fingers scratched against Taekjoo's skin in desperation, but the weak assault didn't last long. With a sudden twist of his legs, Taekjoo snapped Ahmad's neck. Ahmad's eyes rolled back, and his body slumped lifelessly.

Taekjoo released the hold around Ahmad's neck, and Ahmad collapsed to his knees, crumpling onto the floor. Stretching out his foot, Taekjoo snatched the key ring dangling from Ahmad's waistband. He kicked it into the air and deftly caught it in one smooth motion.

Twisting his bound wrists, he used the key to unlock the handcuffs. His arms, chafed raw from days of being cuffed, were covered in scratches.

“Haah...”

He rubbed his sore wrists and took a deep breath, spitting onto the floor to clear the lingering taste from his mouth. Even that didn’t rid him of the foul aftertaste. He nearly retched as bile crawled up his throat, feeling as though his insides were turning over. Acidic saliva leaked from his mouth, trailing down his chin as his stomach churned.

It took him a while to compose himself. Who was he, really? And why had he been forced to endure this? The questions burned in his mind, but there was no time for answers now. His only focus was to escape this hellish place.

First, Kwon Taekjoo stripped Ahmad of his uniform and put it on. Although it was wide in the chest and short in length, it was a minor issue compared to his clearly different skin tone and appearance. If he ran into any other guards, his escape would immediately be exposed. Was there any way he could get out of here without running into anyone?

To do that, he’d first need a sense of the entire prison layout. If he could reach the security control center, he might find an escape route.

As he was pulling the cap down over his head and planning his next move, he heard footsteps outside.

{Senior. The warden is calling for you. I’m coming in.}

It was Omar’s voice. Before Taekjoo could react, the door swung open, and Omar froze, stunned at the unexpected scene. He then let out a yell, “You!” Without hesitation, Taekjoo grabbed a baton from the floor and threw it hard at him. It spun through the air, striking Omar squarely on the head. Omar collapsed without a sound.

Taekjoo dragged Omar’s body back into the interrogation room, where he relieved him of his radio, gun, keys, and handcuffs, stuffing them into his pockets. He then locked the door from the outside. As he stepped

out into the hallway, he noticed a CCTV camera on the ceiling. Keeping his head low, he passed under it, knowing he couldn't afford to linger for even a second. He had to keep moving.

His shadow slid swiftly along the dimly lit walls.

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The warden of Evin Prison squinted as he read through the documents Zhenya had brought. There were two in total. One was an official Russian rescue list, and the other was an order from the government to immediately transfer custody of any East Asian detainee. It had already been confirmed that Zhenya was a Russian diplomat, and that the detained East Asian man bore a strong resemblance to someone on Russia's rescue list. The only issue was that the prisoner's current condition was unknown. If the government was searching for him with this level of urgency, he had to be someone important, and any harm to him could spell trouble. To avoid future complications, the warden decided to stall for time.

{We do have an East Asian in custody, but we'll need further verification to confirm if he's the one you're looking for. Besides, our investigation isn't yet complete. The lights are out for the night, and all inmates should be asleep by now, so perhaps you could return tomorrow for the transfer...} Zhenya interrupted.

{You didn't harm him, did you?}

{What? No, harm him? In this day and age, that's... no, of course not....}

{If he's not, I suggest you release him immediately. Words are all you're getting from me right now.}

{But we have procedures too, and showing up out of the blue to demand we hand him over, well, that's—}

Before the warden could finish his sentence, a pale hand flashed before his eyes, faster than he could blink. He froze, unable to make a sound, as Zhenya's forefinger and middle finger came to rest directly on his wide, staring eyes.

{Your tongue's too long. I did say words would be my last approach.}

The fingers looked ready to pierce right through his eyeballs. Feeling the foreign texture of Zhenya's fingers against the surface of his eyes sent shivers down his spine. They pressed so close that his fingerprints might have imprinted on them. Swallowing hard, the warden barely managed to speak.

{G-Give me just a moment....!}

Zhenya didn't pull back. He simply said, {Call him now.}

The warden, nearly forgetting to breathe, fumbled across the table, seemingly reaching for the receiver. Zhenya handed it to him, and as he did, his fingers scraped slightly against the warden's eyes. Tears streamed down the warden's face.

He finally managed to call the duty office. After a moment, the line connected, and the guard on duty picked up.

{This is the warden. There's an East Asian prisoner who came in a few days ago, right?}

Bring him here immediately. Just do it, don't argue with me! Hurry!}

When the call ended, Zhenya finally withdrew his hand. Despite only having touched his eyes, the warden felt an unsettling pressure there.

{It'll only be a moment. The detention block isn't far from here, so he should arrive within ten minutes.]

The warden said, wiping away the tears as he bowed obsequiously. Zhenya, silent, kept his gaze fixed on the entrance. Any moment now, Kwon Taekjoo would appear through that door. He'd boasted that he'd handle everything on his own, only to end up confined in a place like this. Zhenya wondered what expression he'd make when they finally locked eyes. Each passing second felt like an eternity.

The warden felt much the same. He kept nervously glancing at the clock, knowing that if the duty officer didn't bring the East Asian inmate within the promised ten minutes, his own neck could be on the line. All he could do now was try to buy time.

{Ah, that's right! We keep the prisoners' belongings stored here separately. Would you like to see them?}

{...Belongings?}

Zhenya's gaze, which had been fixed at the doorway, immediately turned toward the prison director. Seizing the opportunity, the director quickly rose, asking him to wait a moment. Being physically apart from Zhenya at last allowed him to breathe a bit easier.

The director opened a cabinet on one side and pulled out a plastic bag. The prisoners' belongings were always stored there for safekeeping until they were processed. Occasionally, valuable items were found among them, and if a prisoner was meant to "disappear" permanently, the evidence would be destroyed starting from this point.

{Here it is.}

The director placed the bag in front of Zhenya and then took a seat at the farthest distance possible from him.

Zhenya immediately opened the bag. Inside were items of clothing crumpled up haphazardly. Some were nearly burnt and torn to shreds, but they matched the size of the clothes Kwon Taekjoo usually wore. There was also an empty magazine handgun and a knife Zhenya himself had once gifted to him.

Zhenya nearly buried his face in the bag of belongings, inhaling deeply. The acrid scent of gunpowder and smoke hit him immediately, followed by a faint but familiar trace of Kwon Taekjoo's scent lingering on the items.

Kwon Taekjoo was here, so close. Just a little longer. Once they met, Zhenya planned to embrace him tightly and never let go, intent on making him pay for all the confusion and chaos he'd caused. Just

imagining that moment made his fingertips tingle, and he felt an overwhelming warmth spreading from within.

Then, suddenly, a loud crash echoed, shaking the entire building. Zhenya and the prison director's gazes met in mid-air. Just as Zhenya wondered if it had been a mistake, another bang followed, then another, and yet another, with dust falling from the ceiling. Flashing emergency lights illuminated the entire building as a blaring alarm began to ring. The phone in the previously silent director's office also started ringing fiercely. Zhenya had a bad feeling.

{...Taekjoo.}

Murmuring his name, Zhenya sprang from his seat and rushed out.

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“Ah, this is just a nightmare.”

Kwon Taekjoo stood pressed against the wall, observing the empty hallway. It was late, and there didn't seem to be any signs of movement. The problem, however, was the CCTV installed on the ceiling. Despite the prison's outdated facilities, the surveillance system was state-of-the-art, designed to capture every movement with minimal blind spots. Perhaps they'd experienced a high frequency of escape attempts here.

Unlike typical buildings, there was no sewer system or ventilation shaft in sight, leaving him with nowhere to hide. Escaping this prison unnoticed seemed nearly impossible.

His only choice was a straightforward approach. He could only hope the guards didn't find his presence suspicious.

Keeping his movements quiet, he walked slowly down the hall, fully aware of the CCTV tracking his every step. On the monitors in the security room, he would look like just another guard in uniform, so avoiding suspicion was crucial.

Determining the direction of the exit wasn't difficult. The security doors and walls became thinner, and the windows grew larger as he proceeded. The lighting in the hallways was also becoming brighter — a clear sign he was getting closer to freedom.

Kwon Taekjoo moved by instinct but wondered why he felt so familiar with the situation. From the moment he regained consciousness, he kept asking himself endlessly: *Who am I, and what kind of person was I? Why did subduing others and finding escape routes feel so natural? What had brought him to Iran, and how did he end up being chased?*

His body bore countless scars, both large and small, beyond the recent injuries he had sustained. It seemed as if he'd been exposed to hostile environments like the recent terror attacks for a long time. Was he a soldier? Or, considering his possible connections to Russia, perhaps he'd been a mercenary or some kind of operative.

Did he have a family? A home to return to? Questions piled up, one after another. But he couldn't recall a single clue related to them. He pushed himself too hard, desperate to remember anything, but in the end, a headache surged through him. It wasn't the pain from the wound on the back of his head but rather a crushing pressure squeezing his brain.

"Ugh..."

His vision shook for a moment, and he leaned against the wall briefly. Tilting his head back, he took a deep breath, and soon cold sweat covered his body.

Kwon Taekjoo was running on instinct, but once he got out, where could he go? Did he have anywhere to return to? A sense of despair crept in. He wasn't even sure the world beyond the prison walls would be any safer. He couldn't guarantee his enemies wouldn't be waiting for him there.

He shook his head. Even if greater dangers awaited outside, it seemed better than staying here and waiting to die. Kwon Taekjoo wasn't the type to sit around hoping for some transcendent being to save him. Life

flowed ever onward. When you stumbled and lost its current, you just had to pick up the pace and catch up.

So rather than standing still, he had to keep moving, even if only one step at a time. If he didn't escape now, another opportunity might never come.

Kwon Taekjoo pulled his hat lower over his face and walked briskly. Security doors kept appearing, but he passed through them with ease, using Ahmad's ID card and keys.

Of course, not everything went smoothly. He turned a corner without hesitation, then suddenly paused and backed up. Peeking his head out just enough, he surveyed the scene across from him. The first thing that caught his eye was a double-layered iron door. Two guards stood on either side of it. Beyond the door, he saw a long corridor leading to another building. Although it was hard to make out at night, the fresh outdoor air suggested it was indeed the passage to the outside.

The guard inside the double doors was grinning as he looked at his phone. Beyond him, in the corridor, another guard was dozing off in his chair. It seemed that the security had become lax; not only was it nearly impossible for any prisoner to escape, but even if someone did manage to break out of their cell, they wouldn't consider this area as an escape route.

After a moment's thought, Kwon Taekjoo rummaged through his pocket. Soon enough, he fished out a gold tooth, likely something Ahmad had taken from another inmate.

He toyed with the gold tooth in his hand before tossing it lightly on the floor. The tooth made a faint noise as it hit the ground, causing the guard who'd been absorbed in his phone to tilt his head in curiosity. Noticing the gold tooth on the floor, the guard slowly approached the wall where Kwon Taekjoo was standing close by.

{Who dropped something like this?}

The guard muttered to himself, glancing around as he reached for the tooth. At that instant, Kwon Taekjoo grabbed his arm and yanked him

forward, slamming his face into the wall. He followed up with a sharp knee to the guard's side. Taken completely off guard, the guard couldn't even gasp before freezing up. Kwon Taekjoo struck the guard's nape with a swift chop, causing him to lose consciousness, then dragged him behind the wall and took the access card for the double doors.

All that remained was the guard on the other side of the double doors, the one who had been dozing. After taking a moment to catch his breath, Kwon Taekjoo walked confidently toward the doors. Now it was a race against time. His pace quickened.

{Hm? Where'd you go without a word?}

Just as Kwon Taekjoo reached the double doors, the drowsing guard suddenly woke up, raising his head.

“...Ah.”

{I asked, where did you go?}

Kwon Taekjoo couldn't respond hastily. If he spoke, the guard would immediately know he wasn't his colleague. As the strange silence stretched on, the guard slowly rose from his chair. The tension in the air thickened.

{Huh? You're... not Muhammad, are you?}

The guard moved closer to the door, squinting at the name on the uniform.

{Ahmad? What are you doing here? Where's Muhammad?}

“.....”

{You little punk, something's not right. Take off that hat.}

When Kwon Taekjoo didn't budge, the guard jabbed his baton through the bars, knocking Taekjoo's hat up to reveal his face.

{Huh? You...?}

Just as the guard's face started to turn blank with confusion, Kwon Taekjoo yanked the baton, pulling the guard forward so that his nose slammed into the bars. Without hesitation, he struck the guard's face with the baton, causing him to clasp his left eye with both hands.

{Ah! My eye!}

The guard staggered, groaning in pain, then in a burst of rage, pulled out his gun.

{I'm going to kill you!}

Enraged, the guard tried to fire the weapon without thinking. At that moment, a deafening explosion shook the space, filling Kwon Taekjoo's vision with white light. Instinctively, he dropped to the ground, covering his head with both arms. While he lay on the floor, the blasts continued three or four more times, causing the entire building to shake. Finally, an alarm started blaring throughout the prison.

**“Cough... what the fuck?”**

Through the thick cloud of dust, he raised his head. The ceiling lights had gone out, and darkness blanketed the space, leaving him barely able to make out anything within arm's reach.

The explosion had apparently forced the double doors wide open, creating enough of a gap for him to slip through. Where the guard had been standing moments before was now a pile of rubble. Kwon Taekjoo retrieved the guard's gun from the debris.

{Fire!}

Someone's shrill voice echoed in the distance. Kwon Taekjoo didn't fully understand what was happening, but the ensuing chaos worked in his favor. Without delay, he sprinted down the corridor. Guards were frantically running around, trying to assess the situation, too distracted to notice him.

It seemed like an actual fire had broken out; the temperature was rising rapidly, and the air had become stifling. Prisoners, jolted awake, began

screaming for help. Meanwhile, the explosions continued unabated. The entire prison had turned into a living hell.

Kwon Taekjoo sprinted through the chaos, but suddenly, a section of the ceiling collapsed. He barely managed to dodge by rolling out of the way.

“TAEKJOOOO.”

As he tried to stand up and run again, a sound, like a beast howling, echoed from somewhere. He flinched involuntarily and glanced back. Beyond the pitch-black darkness and dust, there was nothing noticeable. The noise that seemed to have grabbed his ankle was no longer there.

He stood there in a daze for a moment before snapping back to reality. There was no more time to waste. Turning away from whatever lay behind him, Kwon Taekjoo dashed once more into the engulfing darkness.

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When he exited the warden’s office, the corridor had already become a scene of utter chaos. Every light was out, and the relentless explosions made the building tremble continuously. Cracks were forming in the ceiling and walls, with debris raining down. Alarms blared throughout the building, while flashing lights on the walls and searchlights from the guard towers interfered with visibility.

Where had these explosions started? Could Kwon Taekjoo really be attempting an escape? Was he trying to slip away amidst the confusion?

Even as these thoughts crossed his mind, he strode further into the prison. Any security door he encountered, he either forced open with brute strength or neutralized by shooting it. The guards he came across were either fleeing or struggling with outdated fire extinguishers to put out flames. Prisoners trapped in their cells pressed their faces against the narrow bars, crying out for someone to save them.

{Fire!}

A piercing scream spurred Zhenya forward. Toxic gas was clearly thickening in the air. He hurried down the chaotic corridor, peering into each cell one by one. Yet, there was no sign of Kwon Taekjoo anywhere. With so many cells and the poor visibility, he feared he wouldn't be able to find him in time. Frustration gnawed at him, feeling like he was walking deeper into an endless abyss. If Kwon Taekjoo was waiting at the end of it, though, perhaps it wasn't such a terrible path to follow.

Not long after, a series of explosions sounded, and the ceiling came crashing down. Trapped prisoners howled and screamed from all directions.

If Kwon Taekjoo was tied up and trapped somewhere, it would be nearly impossible, even for him, to make it out alive. Zhenya had almost caught up to him, he'd thought he was closer than ever — would he lose him again like this? A guttural roar of frustration burst from him.

“TAEKJOOOO.”

Calling Kwon Taekjoo's name, he pushed deeper and deeper inside. The suffocating air clung to his throat, slowly choking him, and even keeping his eyes open was becoming painful. Yet, he couldn't stop moving forward.

Then, suddenly, Zhenya froze. Through the acrid gas, he thought he caught a faint, familiar scent. Was it just his imagination?

Was his desperation making him lose touch with reality? He looked around hastily, but he couldn't sense anyone nearby.

“Taekjoo...”

Muttering softly, Zhenya spun around and began following the faint scent he'd detected in the air. It was a gamble, nothing more.

Soon, he started noticing unconscious guards scattered along his path. Each of them was still breathing. It was Kwon Taekjoo's style — deliberately avoiding lethal blows while targeting just the right points to incapacitate. Zhenya grew more certain with each step that Kwon Taekjoo was indeed somewhere nearby.

He pursued Kwon Taekjoo's scent relentlessly, rushing through the chaotic prison interior filled with fire and successive explosions.

Anything that blocked his path — whether objects or people — was broken down or thrown aside without hesitation. He flung open the final door in front of him.

Just then, as Zhenya suddenly appeared, a police car responding to the emergency braked sharply. But it was no use — the bumper clipped Zhenya. Stumbling from the impact, Zhenya, who had been charging straight ahead, abruptly turned around. His wide-open eyes flashed with an unsettling gleam, something that didn't seem quite human.

{Hey, are you... alright?}

The police officer leaned out from the driver's seat to ask, but Zhenya, who had been silently staring at him, took off running again without a word. The officer kept calling out to him, but Zhenya didn't seem to hear.

The area in front of the prison was pure chaos. Police officers and firefighters who had arrived urgently were tangled up with panicked guards and some fleeing inmates. People were running around in complete disorder, making it impossible even for fire trucks to enter properly.

{Step back! You there, step back!}

He shook off the police who tried to control him and chased after Kwon Taekjoo. But quickly came to a hesitant stop. Kwon Taekjoo's scent had suddenly vanished. Right at that spot, a paramedic stood looking around with a bewildered expression, as if searching for something — like an ambulance, perhaps.

Suddenly, the memory resurfaced of when Kwon Taekjoo had fled in a stolen fire truck after discarding the blueprint for *Anastasia*. Could he have used the same method this time as well?

{Mr. Yevgeny! Are you okay?}

Yoon Jong-woo, who had been waiting outside, drove up to Zhenya. Zhenya, who had been staring silently, suddenly grabbed him by the

collar.

{Ah! What are you doing!}

{Where's Taekjoo?}

{Huh? Sunbae? Did you see him?}

{I asked you — did you see Taekjoo or not?}

{...No, I mean, suddenly there was a loud explosion, and people just started pouring out...}

{Get out.}

Zhenya pulled Yoon Jong-woo out without a second thought, then immediately checked his phone in the driver's seat. But there was still no response from the tracking device.

With frustration, he threw the phone aside and climbed into the driver's seat. Yoon Jong-woo, sensing the situation, took the passenger seat. The car took off before he could even close the door, heading straight for the prison's main gate. Before long, they encountered a police car blocking the way.

{Stop the car!}

The officer waved his baton insistently, ordering them to turn off the engine and get out. But while they delayed, Kwon Taekjoo was likely getting farther away.

Ignoring the officer's repeated signals, Zhenya stomped on the gas pedal. The car surged forward, pushing through the line of police cars like a barricade. Yoon Jong-woo shrieked, clutching his head.

The suspicious behavior prompted more police cars to pursue them, their sirens blaring. After several warnings, some officers even fired warning shots. But Zhenya only increased the speed, maneuvering wildly, his mind focused solely on where Kwon Taekjoo might be hiding. He scanned for any abandoned ambulances or fire trucks or anything that seemed familiar along the way.

After driving for a while, a massive statue appeared in view, surrounded by a roundabout that split off into five different paths.

"Hah... hah..."

Zhenya finally released the breath he had been holding, scanning the five paths with a nervous gaze. Unable to contain his rising frustration, he struck the steering wheel. It tilted sideways under his angry grip. Yoon Jong-woo, who had been hiding his head the entire time, cautiously raised his head, his eyes widening at Zhenya's unfamiliar expression.

Anxious and uncertain, Zhenya continued to glance back and forth between the five roads, his lost, desperate gaze resembling that of a child stranded in a vast, foreign land.

## 10. Run Go Run

Kwon Taekjoo used a small wire to unlock the front door. Once inside, he paused briefly by the entrance, listening for any signs of life. Thankfully, it seemed empty.

Just in case someone came home unexpectedly, he wrapped a piece of wire around the lock so the door couldn't be opened easily from the outside. Then he headed to the bathroom and took a shower. Dark soot, dust, and blood flowed down his body as the water cascaded from his head.

After thoroughly cleaning even the insides of his ears, he threw on whatever clothes he could find. Toweling his damp hair, he sat down on the sofa.

A deep sigh escaped him. He wanted nothing more than to lie down and rest, but fresh blood was seeping from the wound on his side, making that impossible.

He took out the medical kit he'd grabbed from the ambulance. It contained more specialized supplies and tools than a regular first aid kit.

He pulled out antiseptic and sutures. Clenching a thick roll of bandages between his teeth, he poured antiseptic on the gaping, bleeding wound. Even that made his jaw tighten and veins rise on his forehead. Taking a deep breath, he pressed the wound firmly with gauze. Then, with a syringe, he injected a local anesthetic around the wound. Each step was agonizing, but it was nothing compared to stitching up raw, unanesthetized flesh.

"Ugh... ngh..."

He clenched down on the bandage as he sewed up the wound, his fingers trembling from the intense pain. Maybe he should have sought

safer medical care, but with this much blood loss, he would have collapsed before getting far.

After struggling to finish the sutures, he applied gauze to seal the wound. Another shaky sigh broke free. He had clenched down on the bandage so hard that even his molars and gums ached.

As he quickly tidied up the medical kit, he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror on the case. He looked terrible. It was impressive, in a way, that he was still running around in this state. He could only hope his body would hold out until he reached safety. Perhaps due to the inflammation throughout his body, he was still running a mild fever. He found some antibiotics and injected himself, then tossed back a few fever-reducing pills.

With the immediate crisis managed, he felt a pang of hunger. Rubbing his now gaunt stomach, he headed to the kitchen. Opening the refrigerator, he found cold lavash and a type of vegetable curry called *Ghormeh sabzi*. Without bothering to heat them, he shoved the food into his mouth. His priority was to fill his stomach and conserve energy.

As he chewed, he scanned the morning newspaper lying on the edge of the dining table. The front page covered last night's explosion and fire at Evin Prison. Investigators had tentatively concluded that the attack was a terrorist act by the Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K). Since the prison mainly held anti-government figures, it appeared that the attack was aimed at freeing them. There were speculations linking IS-K to a recent large-scale armed attack in Tehran targeting Iranian and Russian leaders. The incident had allowed numerous inmates, including suspects in the Tehran attack, to escape.

IS-K was known as one of the most extreme and violent groups among jihadists. Even before the Tehran attack, they had carried out simultaneous shootings and suicide bombings at places like the Khomeini Mausoleum and the parliament.

As he read, he recalled hearing that IS recruited new members globally through social media, often targeting impressionable young people. The group would bring in young foreigners, regardless of their country of origin, to train them as revolutionaries or use them as hostages.

Had Kwon Taekjoo himself been one of them? If that were true, it would explain his fluency in Persian, his exceptional combat skills, and his presence at the Tehran attack site.

But he couldn't accept it. Had he really taken part in senseless violence against innocent people for some absurd cause?

Just thinking about it left him feeling uneasy and repulsed. What kind of mind could carry out such acts, and under what circumstances?

“Ugh...!”

As he tried to confront the essence of his identity, another headache hit. A powerful, intermittent pressure pulsed in his brainstem, squeezing out fragments of memories hidden behind a thick wall. Brief flashes surfaced, though he couldn't be sure whether they were real or imagined.

Images appeared: him in military gear, armed, crossing a dark sea by boat; rappelling from a helicopter into a dense forest; racing across a vast snowy landscape on skis, as though being chased. Each scene surfaced like a disjointed film reel, isolated from the others.

And amidst these disjointed images, unrelated voices echoed repeatedly, droning through his skull. The sounds grew so intense that he wondered if he was losing his mind, unable to stop the hallucinations by will alone.

*‘Congratulations on passing. I knew you could do it, son.’*

*‘Take good care of your mother.’*

*‘Wanna go out with me?’*

*‘Congratulations on completing your first mission.’*

*‘...Why do you keep trying to run away? It’s not like I’m trying to kill you.’*

*'Nice to meet you. I'm Olga.'*

*'Where are you, sunbae? Are you okay? People are saying you were here last night. The vibe at headquarters is insane right now — everyone's treating you like a full-blown terrorist!'*

The swarm of memories that sprouted up in his mind triggered an intense headache. His head felt packed with thoughts he couldn't control, the pressure building until his vision began to spin. It felt as if his head might explode at any moment.

"Argh... damn it..."

He clutched his head, writhing from the pain, as if his mind had overloaded and his breathing grew shallow. Flashes of light flickered constantly before his eyes. Every attempt to force a memory out brought on the same agony.

"Urgh..."

Finally, he stumbled to the bathroom, retching as he gripped the toilet, throwing up everything he'd eaten. His convulsing stomach threatened to force even more out through his narrow throat, and the twisted, churning pain inside him was unbearable.

"Haa... haa..."

He clung to the toilet, dry-heaving for a while longer before catching his breath. Cold sweat ran down his spine and neck. Squeezing his eyes shut, he tried to steady his breathing, and gradually, his vision cleared back to normal.

He barely managed to stand on his trembling legs, then clutched the sink, catching his breath before washing his face and brushing his teeth. He rinsed his mouth repeatedly, scrubbing his tongue and the insides of his cheeks, but the nauseating taste lingered stubbornly.

He wiped his mouth roughly with the back of his hand and left the bathroom, heading straight for the room with the computer. Sitting down in front of it, he powered it on, and as the boot sequence started, a password prompt appeared.

He searched through the desk and shelves and quickly found the owner's birth date. He entered the numbers, but the screen displayed a message: "Incorrect password." Observing the belongings more closely, he opened a drawer and found a photo of a man and a woman who seemed close. They were smiling, holding a cake together — probably taken on some special occasion.

Kwon Taekjoo's attention was drawn to the wall clock in the background of the photo. It was a digital clock that displayed the date, day of the week, and time. Squinting, he carefully read the date on the clock in the picture. He entered that number as the password, and finally, the lock was lifted. Fortunately for him, the owner of this room seemed to be a romantic. He smirked, about to brush off the thought, when a memory unexpectedly flitted through his mind.

*'Hey, your birthday's coming up. Is there anything you want?'*

At the same time, a tingling sensation ran through his inner thigh, specifically where a tattoo in Cyrillic script was inked.

*My Anastasia.*

The tattoo unmistakably read those words. The unrefined script suggested it was hand-etched by someone. What could it mean? Was *my* referring to Taekjoo himself, or to someone else entirely?

He unconsciously continued down this line of thought but shook his head. He couldn't afford to get lost in stray thoughts. Staying in one place too long was dangerous when you're on the run.

He immediately connected to the internet. His current location: Tehran, Iran. The first priority was securing his safety. Ultimately, he planned to return to his homeland, where he could finally uncover his true identity.

The problem was the distance to Korea, and his unclear status would make entry nearly impossible. Tehran had a South Korean embassy, but if he were considered a criminal, the embassy was far from a safe haven. He couldn't be sure they'd protect someone accused of terrorism.

He had to find somewhere else. A place safer than Iran. A location close enough to move to in his current physical state, yet still a place he could eventually leave for Korea.

Where could he go? He pulled up a world map on the monitor, searching for a refuge that fit his criteria. Crossing multiple borders without identification or funds would be nearly impossible. Northeast Asians were rare in the Middle East, making him conspicuous no matter how carefully he hid. Only one option remained.

Türkiye.

In a world ideologically polarized, Türkiye was neither a complete ally nor a sworn enemy of any one side. A place where Europeans and Asians coexisted and could move freely in and out. It seemed like the best choice.

Resolved, Kwon Taekjoo deleted his browsing history, shut down the computer, and quietly left the apartment.

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*In the vast, white snowfield, I spotted a small black dot. At first, I wondered if it was just a rock, but as I kept my eyes on it, I noticed it twitching faintly. I wasn't sure if I had actually seen it move, so I tried to get closer to check it out. Suddenly, the dot dashed away swiftly, its long, sturdy legs propelling it through the snow, leaving tiny trails behind. It was a rabbit.*

‘Zaika?’

*I murmured, almost whispering. The rabbit paused mid-stride, pricking its long ears and gazing intently in my direction. Almost*

*without realizing it, I took a step forward, inching closer to the creature.*

*Startled, the rabbit bolted away again. Driven by instinct, I chased after it, my initially hesitant steps quickly morphing into a full sprint. My pupils narrowed, just like a predator tracking its prey.*

*I soon found myself at the edge of a forest thick with birch trees. The black rabbit ducked and weaved through the densely packed trunks. The dark shadows on the tree bark created illusions, making it harder to follow its trail.*

*When the chase became difficult, I decided waiting was the best strategy. I cut through the birch forest, positioning myself to block the rabbit's path. As it rushed toward me, I spread my arms wide to block its escape route. In that moment, the rabbit leapt into the air, its limbs elongating as it transformed into a black panther. It soared effortlessly over my head. Dazed, I stood still for a moment before gritting my teeth and resuming the chase with renewed determination. I didn't know why, but something deep inside me urged me to pursue it.*

*Before long, a steep cliff appeared ahead. The chase had been successful; the panther was trapped, hesitating near the edge. I didn't rush. Instead, I gradually slowed my pace and approached it cautiously.*

*As I finally came to a stop in front of the panther, a sudden gust of wind blew through, causing me to instinctively close my eyes. When I opened them again, I heard a fluttering sound fill the air. The black panther had vanished, replaced by a hawk that soared into the sky. It rose quickly with the wind, leaving me no time to react.*

*'Stop right there!'*

*I shouted, unwilling to let it slip away. I sprinted toward higher ground, climbing the increasingly steep ridge with my bare hands. Urgency coursed through me as I reached for a rough outcrop, but I slipped, struggling to find a solid grip.*

*Barely regaining my balance, I glanced down. Below me lay a dizzying view of a sprawling cityscape. The ridge I'd been climbing had somehow transformed into a skyscraper. Hundreds of police cars, their red lights flashing, surrounded the base of the towering building, while helicopters hovered above, sweeping searchlights over the scene.*

*The black hawk swiftly reached the top of the skyscraper. When it folded its large wings, its form transformed into a human figure — Kwon Taekjoo. He stood precariously at the edge, wearing a bizarre character mask. The searchlights from the helicopters zeroed in on him, and soon, red dots from snipers' laser sights lit up across his body.*

*'Drop your weapon and surrender. Drop your weapon and surrender.'*

*A mechanical voice blared from below, accompanied by loud sirens. Kwon Taekjoo complied, tossing the gun in his hand. It flew past me, quickly falling to the ground. In the next instant, bullets rained down, piercing him. There was no time to stop it.*

*In a flash, Kwon Taekjoo, now bloodied, plunged downward. As he fell past me, time seemed to slow. For a brief moment, it felt as if we were suspended in a vacuum, just the two of us. Blood pooled beneath the crooked character mask he wore, and his pale lips moved faintly from behind it.*

*'Zhenya.'*

*I quickly stretched out my arms to catch him, but heartbreakingly, my fingertips couldn't even graze him. Kwon Taekjoo's body continued to plummet, shattering upon impact.*

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*".....!"*

Zhenya's eyes flew open. His vision rapidly expanded, and a slight dizziness washed over him. His heart pounded irregularly, and his breath, now rough, echoed in his ears. He felt unsettled. Annoyed, he tried to sit up, but a wave of nausea surged. He clenched his teeth and swallowed back the bile. Tilting his head back, he covered his eyes with his hand. Perhaps he had been too tense; even his fingertips were tingling. His deliberately drawn-out exhale trembled awkwardly.

As he slowly opened his eyes, his eyelashes were unusually damp. The nape of his neck and his back were also wet. Had he been sweating in his sleep?

He rarely dreamed, and nightmares were even more uncommon. He usually fell asleep as if his consciousness was cut off, only to wake up once his strength had recovered, which made his sleep quality high. Nightmares were remnants of an unconscious mind reserved for those who knew fear. Only people who worried over losing something precious were swayed by such illusions. He had never once felt that kind of fear in his life.

That is, until he met Kwon Taekjoo.

Where could Taekjoo be right now? Was he as restless as Zhenya himself? Was he thinking of him, even a little? If so, why had there been no word from him until now? His concern for his indifferent lover gradually turned into a bitter feeling.

Just then, his phone rang suddenly. He quickly picked it up to check the caller. Disappointingly, it was a call from Bazim. Normally, he would have rejected the call without hesitation, but maybe there was some good news to come from him. Holding onto a sliver of hope, he answered the call.

"What is it?"

*[Yevgeny. Was this really your doing?]*

Bazim questioned him abruptly, his voice anxious. Before heading to Evin Prison, he had obtained a cooperation letter from him. He had

refrained from using his usual force solely to hand Kwon Taekjoo over as quickly and smoothly as possible.

But just as Zhenya visited the prison, trouble broke out. Following the recent fire, Taekjoo had vanished once again, leaving Zhenya chasing shadows. Although Zhenya himself was more disheartened by the situation than anyone else, it was absurd to have someone immediately accuse him, asking if it was his fault.

"As if."

*[So, you're saying no? Are you sure?]*

"Why ask if you won't believe me?"

*[Ha... then act in a way I can believe. You said you'd keep it quiet if I cooperated. Why did you make a mess of that hospital? And getting into a needless firefight with the police? Why go to such lengths just to find one person?]*

"That 'one person' isn't exactly easy to catch."

It had already been two days since they lost track of Kwon Taekjoo. So far, there was no trace of his whereabouts. They were combing through every civilian CCTV footage, just as they had when they first started tracking him, but all they had discovered was that he had ditched the stolen ambulance near a fire station and escaped.

He hadn't made any contact with the National Intelligence Service, the South Korean embassy, or Yoon Jong-woo. It was strange. If Taekjoo had escaped on his own and was hiding somewhere, Zhenya had expected he would have contacted them by now. Given that the mission was over, his priority should be getting back safely.

Yet, it had been a full two days without any word from him. Could he have been captured while on the run and held somewhere again? But if that were the case, there should have been some trace of his arrest. Zhenya had been listening in on police communications around the clock, but there was no report about anyone resembling Kwon Taekjoo.

"If you want to get rid of me quickly, stop wasting time harassing me and cooperate properly. Like I said, once I get what's mine, I'll leave."

He ended the call unilaterally, ignoring the callback that came immediately after.

He stood up and walked out of the room. Yoon Jong-woo was slumped on the sofa in the reception room, his neck twisted at an odd angle, completely knocked out. It was practically the same as if he had fainted. Since arriving in Iran, he hadn't had a decent night's sleep, so it wasn't surprising. Despite his clumsy appearance, he was useful in his own way. Zhenya thought he was starting to understand why Kwon Taekjoo had kept him around so closely.

{Hey.}

Even when he called out, Yoon Jong-woo didn't wake up right away. How could someone working for an intelligence agency be so slow? Zhenya, looking displeased, gave the table a light kick. Yoon Jong-woo jolted awake, rubbing his knee where it had hit the table.

{Ah! Mr. Yevgeny! What time is it...}

{Did you check on what I asked?}

{Oh, I've been keeping an eye on it, but... this time the area's too large to cover.

Nothing particularly noticeable has come up yet.}

Yoon Jong-woo lowered his head, looking ashamed. At least he wasn't sniffling like before, likely reassured that Kwon Taekjoo was alive.

{Why does Taekjoo keep running?}

{....Huh? Well, because he's being chased, isn't he?}

{Chased? By whom?}

Yoon Jong-woo started to reply but then looked blank, realizing that technically Taekjoo wasn't on the run. Though he had been detained in Evin Prison under suspicion of terrorism, Zhenya's cooperation letter had cleared him of those charges. While Taekjoo had broken out during

the chaos of a fire, the Iranian government was no longer actively pursuing him.

Several media outlets had even reported that the prison's system was still paralyzed due to the incident, and the prison authorities were struggling to confirm who had been killed, injured, or escaped. If Taekjoo was aware of this, then why was he still on the run?

{With his freedom, he could ask for help as much as he wanted. The South Korean embassy isn't even that far. If something was holding him back, he could have at least reached out to you.}

Zhenya pressed on, puzzled. As he said, if Taekjoo were secure, he would have immediately notified someone of his survival. If he couldn't make it back on his own, he'd need support from headquarters. There was even an exchange base in Iran to assist deployed agents. Yet, they hadn't heard anything from Taekjoo there either.

{I even checked all my personal emails and gaming accounts just in case, but there's no sign of him anywhere. I even called his mother earlier to check in, but she was the one asking if I'd heard from him.}

A foreboding feeling crept in. Taekjoo had been well enough to drive over 20 kilometers on his own, and yet, he hadn't reached out to anyone — not even his mother. Despite any circumstance, he had always been diligent about checking in on her. What could this mean?

It was becoming clear that Zhenya needed more definitive information about Taekjoo's condition. He had to speak with the person who had last seen him.

He grabbed his coat without hesitation.

{Wait! Where are you going?}

{Keep looking. Report to me as soon as you find anything.}

With a quick, one-sided instruction to Yoon Jong-woo, who was awkwardly trying to follow, Zhenya left the hotel.

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Omar couldn't fall asleep easily, tossing and turning throughout the night. His fellow guard, Ahmad, had died during an interrogation with a prisoner, and the relentless investigation had taken a toll on him. Omar, under orders from the prison warden, had gone to retrieve him and had testified honestly that Ahmad had already been unconscious when he arrived. He also recounted that he'd been knocked out by an inmate's attack and knew nothing of what had occurred afterward.

During the investigation, Omar had heard about an Asian prisoner whom Ahmad had harassed. Strangely, the prisoner's name had appeared on a Russian clemency list, and on the day of the fire, a high-ranking Russian diplomat had come personally to receive him.

The prison administration, while struggling with the prisoner's disappearance, seemed secretly relieved. Everyone knew all too well how merciless Ahmad had been in torturing inmates, and the Asian prisoner had endured at least four sessions of his interrogation. If the Russian side learned of this, they would likely raise issues of human rights violations. In this current state of disappearance, they could at least claim that any injuries might have happened during his escape.

The authorities tentatively concluded that Ahmad's cause of death was smoke inhalation from the fire. Only after Omar swore to keep silent about everything was he allowed to go free.

{Hah...}

He sighed, just about to turn over again when he sensed something unsettling. Turning his head, he stiffened, his gaze fixed on a pair of fierce blue eyes glowing brightly in the dark. He felt as if he'd encountered a ghost, his body freezing in place. Was it an animal? No, it was undoubtedly human. But how had this person gotten in? The door should have been locked.

With every unanswered question, his fear grew larger. The figure approached his bed, their gaze piercing right through him. They pulled a chair close and sat down, never breaking eye contact with Omar.

Every movement was calm and leisurely, yet there was an undeniable air of intimidation.

Omar's limbs locked up on their own. This was the overpowering presence that only someone who'd spent a lifetime breaking others' spirits could exude. If he responded clumsily, he'd die. If he tried to resist or deceive this person, he wouldn't survive.

{I'll ask each question only once, so just answer.}

Perhaps it was due to extreme fear, but the questioning voice sounded particularly chilling. Unable to open his mouth, he quickly nodded.

{The missing East Asian prisoner — you remember?}

{W-what? Ah, yes! Yes!}

His tongue kept rolling back toward his throat, and he barely managed to squeeze out a reply.

{Was there anything unusual about him?}

{Unusual, you mean...?}

{I said, just answer.}

The other's eyes turned even more sharp. It felt as if a blade was pressed right in front of him, and even breathing was done with extreme caution.

Omar racked his brain in an attempt to survive. The man was looking for the missing East Asian prisoner. Though he had previously sworn to keep all information about him secret, now that his life was at risk, he felt it was all meaningless.

{I-I know he was suspected of terrorism. At the time of his capture, he was armed, and his identity was unclear, so after emergency treatment, he was transferred to our prison. The hospital mentioned he had suffered severe head trauma, so they weren't sure if he could testify properly... He definitely couldn't explain who he was or where he'd come from.}

The man who had been listening quietly tilted his head. Omar sensed he was getting closer to the information the man wanted, so he carefully added his own opinion.

{He seemed frustrated and confused himself. Honestly, he could have come up with any excuse in that situation, but he insisted he didn't know anything until the end. I really thought he might have lost his memory.}

{Lost... his memory?}

{...I'm not certain, though.}

He cautiously stepped back. Immediately, the man's piercing gaze shot down at him. Omar quickly fell to his knees, rubbing his hands together in desperation.

{Sir! I swear I did nothing wrong! I only followed orders from above! I never laid a finger on that person.}

{You?}

The man seized on his words sharply, making Omar flinch as if struck.

{So, others laid a finger on him?}

{Th-that man is already dead! He paid for his crimes! If you're curious about who he was, I'll tell you everything. Just please spare my life!}

{What did he do?}

{W-what? He only questioned...}

{This country isn't known for being so gentlemanly. Especially that prison — it's either you come out dead or come out broken. Isn't that right?}

{No, sir! That's a misunderstanding! I swear by Allah, I did nothing!}

{If that's true, then may your god have mercy on you.}

The man muttered something incomprehensible, then suddenly seized Omar's chin, forcing his mouth open. Omar tried to resist, clamping his

mouth shut, but it was futile. Soon, a mysterious pill was forced into his mouth, pressing hard against his stiff tongue. The man's grip held his mouth shut, leaving him unable to swallow or spit it out, while his nose and mouth were both covered. As oxygen dwindled, his lungs began to gasp desperately for air, causing the pill in his mouth to slide down his throat against his will. The powerful drug took hold, and Omar's eyes rolled back as he lost consciousness.

The man let go of Omar's head, allowing it to drop. Just then, his quiet phone started ringing. When he tapped the call button, Yoon Jong-woo's urgent voice boomed.

{Mr. Yevgeny! Where are you? I've tracked the sunbae's movements! He's heading to Tabriz, likely on his way to Türkiye!}

Upon hearing this news, Zhenya left Omar's house as silently as he had arrived.

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The border between Iran and Türkiye, Tabriz, was once a key hub on the ancient Silk Road, and to this day, it remains a central point for transportation and trade between the two countries. Kwon Taekjoo, dressed in a black niqab that only revealed his eyes, watched the movements at the immigration checkpoint.

Perhaps because it was far from the capital, Tehran, the border inspections weren't very strict, despite a recent large-scale terror attack that shook the nation. Maybe the culprits had been identified, and the alert level had dropped.

Iran and Türkiye are countries with active political and economic exchange, so security at the border was not particularly tight. The border guards wore relaxed expressions, even greeting tourists and traders heading toward Türkiye.

It was said to be relatively easy to cross from Iran to Türkiye — if you were a foreigner with a clear identity or goods that had been declared in advance.

But Kwon Taekjoo, who did not fall into any of these categories, would have to attempt an illegal crossing. In his way stood a long, high barrier stretching over 220 kilometers, built to block Kurdish armed groups and refugees. The latest surveillance systems operated around it, making it impossible to sneak through.

The safest option seemed to be hiding in a cargo truck.

Tabriz had Iran's largest bazaar, which facilitated active logistics and trade with neighboring countries. Trucks were everywhere throughout the city.

Kwon Taekjoo took a seat in a modest restaurant, scanning for a suitable truck. Even if he managed to cross into Türkiye, he had no idea how long it would take to reach the city. He needed to eat well in advance to avoid exhaustion during the journey.

{Are you going to eat all of this by yourself? Isn't it too much?}

The restaurant owner, who came over to take his order, looked at him with wide eyes. He simply nodded in response. The owner asked again, {Are you really ordering all of this?} He nodded once more. Only then did the owner head to the kitchen, casting frequent glances at Kwon Taekjoo as he went.

It wasn't just because he had ordered so much food.

In Iran, it's rare to see people wearing a niqab that only reveals the eyes or a full-body covering like a chador. However, such attire is mandatory in neighboring Afghanistan, so his appearance didn't stand out — except perhaps for the fact that an Afghan woman traveling alone without a male guardian, with a build that was unusually large for a woman, naturally drew some attention.

It wasn't just the restaurant owner who was intrigued. A man at the opposite table kept sizing up Kwon Taekjoo with a suspicious look. His gaze only broke when the restaurant owner placed food in front of him.

{Heading to Kayseri again? I won't see you for another week, then.}

{Why? Are you already missing me?}

The man replied playfully, reaching to pat the restaurant owner on the hip. She brushed his hand away and returned to the kitchen, but the man kept his eyes on her until she disappeared. As he turned his gaze, he met Kwon Taekjoo's eyes and grinned. From within the niqab, Kwon Taekjoo discreetly raised his middle finger.

[Hey there, miss, if you're going on a long journey, you should eat plenty.]

Soon, Kwon Taekjoo's ordered dishes filled the table. He gave the restaurant owner a slight bow and began eating.

The challenge was that he had to lift the niqab and carefully push the food in without getting any sauce on the inside. He grumbled to himself about how impossible it was to eat, sleep, or even relieve himself in this outfit.

After quickly filling up, he left the payment on the table and exited. He didn't have much money left; just enough to buy some water to sustain him until he reached his destination. Finding a suitable shop, he headed toward the bazaar.

He bought a bottle of water and was just stepping outside when he noticed some men entering the restaurant he'd just left. They seemed to be looking for clues at the spot where he had sat. When they found nothing, they turned to the owner, showing her a photo on their phone and asking questions. After a moment's hesitation, she pointed toward the bazaar.

He immediately turned his back and dashed into the bazaar. It didn't seem like a false alarm; the men were following him. From a quick glance, he saw that one was a nearly two-meter-tall Caucasian, while the other was a bespectacled East Asian. He didn't know who they were, but their intense demeanor suggested they were formidable. He needed to escape.

The bazaar, over five kilometers long, was practically a maze. Recalling the map he'd memorized, he changed direction constantly, trying to shake them. His pursuers split up, each following him from a different path.

Who were they? Police, perhaps? What possible reason did they have to target him? The more he thought about it, the more confused he became.

Breathless from running, he slipped into a nearby restroom. The tall Caucasian had nearly caught up and walked past the entrance, then suddenly stopped, retracing his steps to peer inside. It was as if he had a tracking device on Kwon Taekjoo, following him with eerie precision. Hearing the footsteps draw closer, Kwon Taekjoo stepped backward, holding his breath, then bolted through the back door leading to an alley.

The alley was lined with shops selling spices from around the world. The strong scents in a kaleidoscope of colors were almost overwhelming. Perhaps due to the olfactory overload, his pursuer, who had been following so closely, seemed to falter at the fork in the road, momentarily disoriented. It was as if he had just missed a critical clue.

From afar, Kwon Taekjoo watched the scene and quickly sprinted away, avoiding their gaze. The distance between him and his pursuers grew wider. He could even see the exit just ahead. He was about to make his escape when suddenly, a loud voice echoed from behind.

"Taekjooo!"

Could it be his pursuer's voice? He couldn't be sure. He didn't even know whose name was being called. But the sudden shout made his heart drop.

He didn't understand what was happening.

Hesitating momentarily, Kwon Taekjoo took a few steps back, then broke into a full sprint toward the exit once more. Even as he ran, his heart pounded loudly, thudding in his chest. Why? Why on earth? He asked himself, yet continued to run, driven by an unsettling feeling.

Finally, the exit was right in front of him. A large cargo truck was parked there. Without a second thought, he jumped into the passenger seat. The driver's eyes grew wide in surprise at the sudden intrusion, and Kwon Taekjoo was equally startled — by coincidence, the truck driver was the lecherous man he had just seen at the restaurant.

Kwon Taekjoo quickly covered the man's mouth and held a finger to his own lips. The driver, eyes still wide, slowly nodded in understanding.

Then, in a gesture meant to reassure him, the driver raised both hands and waved them gently. Even so, Kwon Taekjoo continued to keep a wary eye on him, occasionally glancing out the passenger window.

He was anxious, unsure when the pursuer might catch up.

{Are you being chased?}

The driver suddenly asked. When Taekjoo didn't reply, the driver reached over and began groping his thigh. He seemed convinced Taekjoo was a woman, likely because he was wearing a niqab. Perhaps he even assumed Taekjoo was an Afghan refugee, judging by his increasingly arrogant demeanor.

{Need some help?}

The driver grinned lewdly, reaching up to grab Taekjoo's chest. All the same, this man or any other. The driver's hand slid down from his thigh to his groin, where it encountered something unexpected. He looked puzzled, casting a curious glance at Taekjoo.

In response, Taekjoo pressed something hard against the driver's crotch. The man, who had been staring down at his own lap in confusion, gasped and quickly withdrew his hands. A solid handgun was now pressing menacingly into his groin.

{Start driving.}

Taekjoo ordered in a deep voice. He nudged the driver's groin with the barrel, pressing, {Hurry.} The man paled and quickly set the truck in motion.

The truck headed straight toward the border control area. Massive dump trucks were lined up, waiting to cross the border, and they naturally joined the line. The driver, complying with Taekjoo's instructions, couldn't hide his unease.

{If they catch us, I'll be in trouble too.}

{Then you'd better make sure everything goes smoothly. Or there might be other problems before that.}

Taekjoo threatened, moving the gun from the man's groin to his side. As they approached the checkpoint, Taekjoo glared in silent warning, then lay down low under the seat. His gun was now pointed at the driver's knee. With the dark niqab covering his face, his presence was barely noticeable.

{Good day, officers, thank you for all you do!}

The driver came to a stop at the signal from the soldier and greeted him warmly. Just as usual, he handed over his passport and transit permit without hesitation. The soldier responded casually, {Headed to Kayseri?} and barely checked the cargo.

{Drive safely, then.}

{Yes, thank you.}

{Clear!}

The soldier shouted loudly, banging on the truck's cargo area. The driver swallowed nervously and slowly crossed the border. Immediately, Kwon Taekjoo sat up and aimed at his temple, yanking off the stifling niqab.

{Ah! P-please, put that dangerous thing down, sir. I'll cooperate willingly, okay?}

{We'll see about that. Just keep driving.}

{W-where to?}

{You said you were going to Kayseri. Let's go there, for now.}

With a miserable expression, the driver pressed down on the gas pedal. Hoping to reach their destination as quickly as possible, he sped the truck away from Iran.

\*\*\*

Zhenya was combing through the entire bazaar. Any spot that might hide Kwon Taekjoo — trash bins, meat storage rooms — he searched thoroughly. Yet, Kwon Taekjoo was nowhere to be found.

He'd caught a trace of his scent and chased him recklessly, but upon reaching the spice market, he'd lost even that faint clue. Had Kwon Taekjoo calculated his moves up to this point? His target was an agent skilled in evasion, far from easy to capture. The bazaar was vast, complex, and bustling with people, making finding the disguised Kwon Taekjoo like searching for a needle in the desert.

"Haah... haah..."

Reaching the exit without spotting him, Zhenya's heart pounded, as though it might burst through his chest. Not even hunting reindeer or tigers had driven him to run this hard. He scanned the faces passing by, bewildered, but his focus was scattered, making it hard to register any of them clearly.

Meanwhile, lines of travelers, merchants, and heavily loaded trucks were crossing the border. Had Kwon Taekjoo already slipped into Turkey? Or had he panicked and fled back into some corner of Iran? He couldn't be sure. He felt more lost than ever on where or how to find him.

Zhenya called out his name the whole time he was pursuing him. He called, and called, shouting his name over and over, hoping Kwon Taekjoo might stop and respond.

But Kwon Taekjoo didn't surrender. Had he really forgotten everything? Zhenya, himself — did he even remember who he was? If Kwon Taekjoo kept running like this, forgetting everything... then what?

Just when Zhenya thought he almost had him, Kwon Taekjoo would vanish into thin air, slipping away like air whenever he tried to grasp him. A mirage would have been less frustrating. "Taekjoo!"

He shouted, his voice ringing out in the emptiness, only to echo back faintly in reply.

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After a long, 1200-kilometer drive, they finally arrived in Kayseri. Despite driving nonstop, it had taken a full fifteen hours. Passing through rugged highlands with towering snowy mountains and an average altitude of 3,200 meters, their bodies ached all over. This area was sometimes called the "Siberia of Turkey." Indeed, it was a harsh land, covering 21% of the country's area, with few people due to the unforgiving terrain and barren land. That meant there hadn't been many places to stop and rest. Kwon Taekjoo, focused on keeping an eye on the driver, and the driver, driven purely by survival instinct, hadn't thought to rest at all.

The truck finally pulled into an open lot near a travelers' lodge. Dump trucks and buses lined both sides, making it look like a large parking area.

Nearby, there was a building serving as both a rest stop and a lodge, along with a gas station. Behind it stretched a bustling market filled with crowds. The driver shut off the engine, pulled the brake, and announced their arrival with a much more subdued demeanor than before.

{We've arrived, sir.}

{Good. You did well.}

Rubbing his stiff neck, Taekjoo acknowledged the driver's efforts. The man's face brightened at the praise.

{So, if it's alright, I'll just be on my way...}

{Not before we settle things.}

{W-what... settle what?}

Before the driver could finish his sentence, Taekjoo's fist struck him. He clutched his jaw, groaning in shock, as Taekjoo glared, offering a cold warning.

{You shouldn't go around putting your hands where they don't belong. It really pisses people off.}

{I'm... I'm sorry.}

{Ah, come to think of it, you even touched my chest, didn't you?}

The driver cried out in shock, covering his face with both arms. At that moment, Kwon Taekjoo's fist landed on his arm, sending a jolt strong enough to make the entire arm tingle. Had it struck his face, his jawbone would surely have caved in.

{Please, spare me. It's all my fault, sir.}

The driver shut his eyes tight and begged, his voice trembling. Kwon Taekjoo said, {Who said anything about killing you?} then took out a pill and held it out. The driver, opening one eye slightly, looked at the pill skeptically.

{What... what is this, sir?}

{Take it.}

{Excuse me?}

{I said, take it. It won't kill you.}

{No... uh...}

{Or what, do you want me to knock you out another way?}

At Kwon Taekjoo's question, the driver quickly shook his head and gulped down the pill. He opened his mouth wide and even flipped his tongue to prove he had swallowed it completely. Soon, his eyelids began

to droop, opening and closing slowly, and his pupils became unfocused. Before long, he was nodding off and finally slumped over the steering wheel.

It was a sleeping pill Kwon Taekjoo had brought from the medical kit, just in case. It was proving to be quite useful. Given how tired the driver must have been, one pill should let him sleep soundly for at least 10 hours.

After stepping out of the truck, Kwon Taekjoo headed briskly toward the rest stop building.

Kayseri, a trade city in central Turkey, was just over 200 kilometers from the capital, Ankara. It had been a major hub for transportation since the Byzantine era, and it primarily traded goods from the Anatolian region that Kwon Taekjoo had been passing through. With the busy movement of goods, it was an ideal spot for him to briefly go into hiding or make his next move.

His only worry was that someone might be tracking him. The pursuers he had encountered at the Grand Bazaar in Tabriz didn't look Iranian at all. Were they members of the group he was once affiliated with? Or was he now on an international wanted list? Either way, Turkey didn't seem like the safest place to hide.

He entered the marketplace and blended into the crowd, walking aimlessly while trying to gather his thoughts. He remembered infiltrating Tehran for some reason and then getting caught up in an unexpected terrorist attack. When he woke up, he had no recollection of what had happened. It seemed the head injury had caused his memory to vanish. It wasn't common, but such things did happen. Apart from that, he had no issues with arithmetic, language skills, or physical ability.

His ability to sense danger acutely, instinctively search for escape routes, and easily subdue most opponents suggested he was far from being an office worker or a tourist. Considering his multilingual skills, he thought he might be a diplomat. The cuneiform tattoo on his thigh and the news about an Eastern man missing from the Russian

government led him to think he might have been a mercenary who had once worked for them.

He wasn't certain either way. He had no idea if whoever was looking for him intended to save him or apprehend him for punishment. Until his memories returned, he figured he'd have to keep running.

Perhaps Kwon Taekjoo had been a covert operative or a special forces soldier for a government. The fragmented memories that kept surfacing involved him completing missions that seemed almost impossible. He'd plunged into the deep sea with nothing but an oxygen tank, free-fell through pitch-black skies to hit a narrow target below, and climbed sheer cliffs and skyscrapers with his bare hands.

He had countless memories of being pursued, surrounded, and confined by various military and police forces from different countries — only to eventually escape. He also remembered running across an endless snowy field, lungs burning, as bullets rained down around him. But he couldn't tell what was real and what was illusion. He wasn't even sure if returning to Korea was the right decision.

Lost in thought, he walked until he accidentally bumped into someone coming from the opposite direction.

{Ouch! You should watch where you're going.}

As the man exaggerated his reaction, his bodyguards prepared to intervene. Kwon Taekjoo immediately tensed, assuming a defensive stance. The man glanced at him, eyes widening in recognition.

{You...?}

It seemed the man knew him, though Kwon Taekjoo had no memory of him at all.

{It's been a while, hasn't it? How've you been? What brings you all the way here?}

The man grabbed both of Kwon Taekjoo's hands and shook them enthusiastically. His English had a subtle Spanish accent. He was a handsome Hispanic man, with thick hair, dark eyebrows, deep brown

eyes tinged with a warm, sunset glow, and smooth skin. His constant smile gave him a notably easygoing impression. Had they met before?

Even though Kwon Taekjoo remained silent, the man didn't seem to mind. Instead, his eyebrows drooped, and he looked at Kwon Taekjoo with genuine sympathy.

{Ah, but your face is worse off than last time. Looks like you didn't get proper medical treatment, either. Was this latest job really that rough?}

{You... know me?}

He asked cautiously, and the man raised his eyebrows. After a moment of puzzlement, he chuckled and shook his head, saying, {What?}

{You've forgotten already? It's me, Matthias. Matthias Pérez.}

Showing familiarity, Matthias lightly tapped Kwon Taekjoo on the shoulder with his fist. Kwon Taekjoo frowned, repeating his question.

{I asked if you know me.}

His scowl deepening to his nose, Matthias raised both hands in a gesture of innocence.

He then looked Kwon Taekjoo over from head to toe, puzzled, muttering to himself,

{Does he have a twin?}

{We met two months ago, didn't we? Have you forgotten already?}

{We met? Where?}

{Hmm, in Cuba? Or should I say Mexico?}

Kwon Taekjoo had no idea what he was talking about. It was odd enough that someone in Russia was officially looking for him and that he, a Korean, was staying in Iran. Now, this stranger was bringing up Cuba and Mexico, too. What exactly had Kwon Taekjoo been up to?

Matthias, who had been silently watching the bewildered Taekjoo, smiled with his eyes.

{It seems a lot has happened since then. For now, why don't we go somewhere to talk slowly? We can treat those wounds as well — you never know; I might jog your memory.}

“.....”

Kwon Taekjoo glared at Matthias with wary eyes. Why was this foreigner so willing to help him? Meeting two months ago? They didn't seem close enough to be acquaintances, let alone friends. Could he trust this carefree-looking guy and go along with him?

Despite his reluctance, his stomach growled loudly. He hadn't eaten anything but bottled water in 15 hours, so it was no wonder. Matthias chuckled slightly.

{Ah, we'd better get you something to eat first.}

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The two entered Matthias's hotel room. The bodyguards who accompanied Matthias stayed outside the door, not following them in.

Matthias hummed a tune as he stood by the minibar, picking up two bottles from the array of liquor on display. He turned to Kwon Taekjoo.

{Wine or whiskey?}

Without replying, Kwon Taekjoo walked over to the window. He pressed his back firmly against the wall next to it, scanning the outside for any suspicious activity. Even after confirming there was no one tailing them, he continued checking around the room for surveillance cameras or wiretaps.

The whole way to the hotel, he had kept his eyes on the window, not letting his guard down for even a moment. Perhaps it was a type of occupational habit.

{Why not drink both?}

Shrugging, Matthias brought both the wine and whiskey to the table. Kwon Taekjoo only returned to the sitting area after thoroughly inspecting both bathrooms. Even then, he hesitated to sit on the sofa.

To ease Taekjoo's wariness, Matthias pulled a gun out of each pocket and placed them on the table, with the grips pointed toward the center so either of them could reach. Only then did Kwon Taekjoo set his own Glock down beside him and take a seat across from Matthias. Matthias's outdated handgun looked noticeably less precise, like an old relic.

{Surprised you're still alive, lugging around that antique.}

{Maybe it's a relic to some, but not to everyone.}

Despite Matthias's teasing, Kwon Taekjoo didn't flinch. Instead, he spread his legs wide and crossed his arms, holding his head high as he stared back at Matthias. Chuckling, Matthias poured himself some whiskey.

{You know, I noticed before — you've got a lot of confidence.}

{Like it takes confidence to knock you down.}

[That sounded a little suggestive, you know.]

Matthias's eyes glinted mischievously, but Kwon Taekjoo didn't so much as raise an eyebrow. Matthias wondered what it would take to chip away at that fortress of a face. Smirking, he handed Taekjoo a glass.

{Here, you must be thirsty. Drink up.}

"....."

{Wow, so suspicious. Fine, I'll go first.}

Matthias downed the whiskey he had initially offered to Kwon Taekjoo. After finishing his own, he dangled the two empty glasses to show they were drained.

Kwon Taekjoo poured himself a drink and took a sip, all the while scrutinizing Matthias over the rim of his glass. From head to toe, Matthias was immaculately put together, his pristine luxury suit, flashy accessories, and a demeanor that seemed effortlessly relaxed. Had he really been someone who associated with this kind of person in the past? A loss of memory shouldn't have been enough to change his tastes or beliefs, right?

{On the run again, are you?}

Just as Taekjoo completed his assessment, Matthias asked with a meaningful gaze. Taekjoo tilted his head.

{Again?}

{Yeah. When we first met, you were on the run too.}

{From whom?}

{Hmm... broadly speaking, the Cuban government?}

Kwon Taekjoo let out a mirthless laugh. Russia, Iran, and now Cuba? Was his past self some sort of international terrorist? Could he truly be unrelated to militant groups like IS? He wondered if it would even be safe to return to Korea... or if he even had a place to go back to. His mind started to spin with questions.

Matthias observed Taekjoo's face closely. Ever since they had encountered each other in the market, Matthias had sensed something was different about him. Now, he was sure. But he didn't show it, instead casually asking about Zhenya.

{Anyway, what brings you here? I don't see Psikh. Did you come alone this time?}

{Psikh?}

Psikh was Russian slang for "psycho." From the tone, it sounded like a nickname for someone both Matthias and Kwon Taekjoo knew, but Taekjoo couldn't think of anyone it could be.

{Who's that?}

{Oh, come on. Did you eat something bad?}

{I asked who it is.}

{You seriously don't remember? You and I met through Psikh. Or, to be precise, you accompanied him to my deal.}

{I was close with that guy?}

{How should I know? I have no idea why you chose to hang around with Psikh.}

Matthias lightly shook his head, drawing a line. Kwon Taekjoo struggled to recall any memory of "Psikh," his mind overwhelmed by the flood of unexpected information.

"Psikh... Psikh..."

His heart pounded inexplicably. It felt like he had missed something monumental. A chill swept over him, draining the blood from his veins.

*'Remember one thing: Psikh Bogdanov.'*

*'Psikh Bogdanov?'*

*'In Russia, he's like a 'nuclear weapon.' Avoid him if you can. And if you ever cross paths, don't try to go against him.'*

Just then, a memory pierced through a thick wall in his mind. He couldn't remember who had warned him to stay away from Psikh, nor the exact circumstances of that conversation. But the emotions of that moment surged back vividly. His heart started pounding fiercely, his fingertips tingling.

*'He's technically a government official. But he's deeply involved in the arms industry and has quite a reputation. In the underground world, where private arms deals thrive, there's no one who doesn't know his name.'*

He had been warned — clear as day — to keep his distance from Psikh. And yet, why had he, Kwon Taekjoo, ended up associating with him?

"Ugh..."

A sudden spike of pressure pulsed through his head. The wounded part of his skull throbbed with sharp pain and a wave of heat.

{Hey, are you alright?}

Matthias reached out, but Taekjoo, reeling from a surge of nausea, slapped his hand away. Matthias yelped, shaking his now-reddened hand in mock pain. Then, raising his hands in a gesture of harmlessness, he slowly sat back down, eyeing Taekjoo as if he were a cornered animal. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, wrapped some ice from the bucket in it, and handed it to Taekjoo.

Kwon Taekjoo grabbed the ice pack irritably and pressed it against his throbbing wound. Leaning back on the sofa, he took a deep breath, letting the nausea that had crept up his throat gradually settle.

Matthias, watching him with a concerned expression, cautiously asked,

{Did something happen?}

{.....}

Kwon Taekjoo didn't respond. Unfazed, Matthias gently asked again, his tone soft enough to melt even the hardest defenses.

{Where were you coming from earlier?}

{When I came to my senses, I was in Tehran.}

Taekjoo replied in a subdued voice. Matthias was well aware of the recent news of a massive terrorist attack in Tehran. The incident had heightened tensions in Turkey as well, especially since it had occurred just before a trilateral summit between Iran, Russia, and Turkey, casting a shadow over international relations.

And now, Taekjoo was telling him that he had been at the scene. What had happened to him there? Matthias's mind buzzed with questions.

{Do you know why you were there?}

Taekjoo only nodded slightly in response. The visible injuries hinted he might have been unlucky enough to get caught in the attack — or perhaps, was somehow involved in it.

Lost in thought, Matthias was startled when Taekjoo tentatively began,

{By any chance... do you know about Anastasia?}

{Anastasia?}

Taekjoo quickly nodded, his piercing gaze suggesting a genuine curiosity. Matthias leaned back, scratching his thick eyebrows.

{Not sure. Are you asking about a person, or something else?}

{Something else? Could it be something other than a person?}

{You really don't remember anything, do you?}

The last words were barely more than muttering to himself. Kwon Taekjoo wore an uneasy expression, as if he'd exposed some weakness.

After a moment of hesitation, Matthias leaned forward and clapped his hands lightly. {Alright. I don't have a clue what's going on either, but it seems like taking care of your injury should be the priority right now. And while we're at it, we can figure out if there's anything wrong with your memory. Okay? Let's go to the hospital and get a proper checkup. That way, I'll know how to help you.}

{Help me? Why would you?}

{Come on, we introduced ourselves. I can't just turn my back as if we're strangers, can

I? Only a scumbag would abandon a brother in trouble.}

Taekjoo's expression showed his reluctance, but Matthias disregarded it and instructed his secretary to schedule a hospital appointment. After ending the call, he tapped his wristwatch and clicked his tongue softly.

{Room service is running late. Why don't you go ahead and take a shower first?}

{Forget it.}

{Oh, don't refuse. You look like you could use some rest. It'll definitely be warm and refreshing.}

Matthias whispered softly. No other temptation could have sounded sweeter.

After a moment's hesitation, Kwon Taekjoo reached over the table, took Matthias's pistol, and held it up clearly in front of Matthias's eyes before tucking it into his waistband and heading to the bathroom. As soon as he shut the door, he locked it securely.

Matthias shook his head with a chuckle. When the sound of the shower running filled the room, he poured himself a glass of wine, swirling it slowly. The dark red wine slipped smoothly along the polished surface of the glass.

Now that he thought about it — what was his name anyway? He had only ever regarded him as Psikh's associate and didn't recall a proper introduction with him. All Matthias knew was that he was Korean and held a rather special place in Psikh's life.

Psikh had always ignored Matthias's requests to meet, yet one day, he suddenly reached out. He offered a deal to trade certain goods in exchange for guaranteeing someone's safety. Since it wasn't a particularly difficult request, Matthias accepted without much thought. At the time, he'd half-expected a mysterious, Mata Hari-like femme fatale. But what Psikh actually brought was this rugged-looking Asian man.

Now, here was that "man of Psikh's" standing before Matthias once again, looking just as disheveled as when he'd fled from Cuba. For some reason, Psikh was nowhere to be seen, and the man seemed to have no memory of Psikh or even who he himself was.

What did Psikh call him again?

'Ah... oh, ah, ah, yes... Zhenya... haa.. nngh..'

'Ah, yes... Taekjoo...ngh... Taekjoo...'

'Ah... yes, stop... that's... enough... Zhenya...'

'Ah...nghh.. Taekjoo... Taek...'

Memories of Psikh and Taekjoo's wild sessions of sex came rushing back. Even though they knew there were CCTVs all over Matthias's yacht and villa, they threw caution to the wind, fucking wherever they pleased. They were so loud and reckless that even Matthias, usually unfazed, had been rendered completely speechless.

{...Taekjoo.}

Yes, that was definitely the name. Kwon Taekjoo referred to Psikh as Zhenya. Matthias didn't know the details, but it was clear they shared a deep connection that went beyond mere sexual partners. Psikh's preference for a male partner didn't particularly surprise him; in their world, unconventional tastes were the norm.

Even back then, Kwon Taekjoo had never truly let his guard down, just as he hadn't now. He would shoot a wary glance at the CCTVs every time.

*'Hey, over there. Isn't that a camera?'*

*'...What a preference.'*

Zhenya had only given a quick glance toward the CCTV that Kwon Taekjoo had been concerned about and had clicked his tongue dismissively. Then he had gently grasped Taekjoo's chin, turning his face back to him. When Taekjoo's gaze had wandered again toward the camera, unable to stay focused, Zhenya had abruptly shifted positions so that Taekjoo's body was atop his own. With a quick motion, he had hooked Taekjoo's legs over his knees, spreading them wide and exposing Taekjoo's body fully to the ceiling camera. Both Taekjoo's rigidly aroused form and Zhenya's own, pressed firmly against him, had been clearly visible.

*'Hey, wait, we're being recorded!'*

*'They want to watch, so let them watch all they want.'*

Zhenya had flashed a mischievous grin before thrusting himself deeply into Kwon

Taekjoo. Taekjoo's back had arched subtly, and his head had fallen back to rest on Zhenya's shoulder. Zhenya had savored the tightness, his lips grazing Taekjoo's ear as he had taken his time.

He had begun to place gentle kisses on Taekjoo's ear and cheek, moving his hips in slow, deep thrusts.

With each deliberate movement, Taekjoo's body had quivered, bound to Zhenya, while Zhenya occasionally looked up, locking eyes with the camera, almost as if to put on a show. His movements had been strong, visible through Taekjoo's abdomen, which had tensed and swelled with each thrust before contracting tightly once again. The intense contact had made every sensation precise, leaving no question of where Zhenya was hitting or how deeply.

The once-reserved Kwon Taekjoo had been above Zhenya, gasping and moaning, his body falling apart. With each deep thrust, he had clutched Zhenya's thighs, but it seemed harder for him to hold back, and he had finally wrapped his arms around Zhenya's neck, pulling him close for an unrestrained kiss. Their tongues had met and intertwined fervently, then parted only to collide again, each kiss as if to rob the other of breath. The fervor had been like a physical clash. Yet, amid it all, Zhenya's rhythm had never slowed; if anything, it intensified.

*'Ha... Taekjoo...'*

*'Ah, haa... yes...'*

Gentle, languorous moans had filled the air as they had rubbed their chins and foreheads together, a tender gesture that suggested they were leaning on each other to ride out the intense waves of pleasure. Matthias couldn't believe his eyes; the infamous Psikh had been showing such vulnerability and intimacy with someone else. It had dawned on him that he had been silently observing the scene unfold, breath held, completely captivated from start to finish.

In that moment, Matthias felt a glimmer of understanding for Psikh. Witnessing Taekjoo's normally sharp, hardened features soften and

break like a ripe fruit ignited a primal desire within him. Who would have ever guessed that Taekjoo had such a side?

Did Psikh know where Kwon Taekjoo was right now? Or that he had completely forgotten about Psikh?

An unexpected wild card had fallen right into Matthias's hands. What would Psikh offer this time? A satisfied smile spread across Matthias's lips.

## 11. 가까운 远方

(So Near, Yet So Distant)

*'I'll be back soon. Don't fight while I'm gone.'*

*The voice giving this reminder was low and steady. When I looked up, a blurred figure of a man stood over me, looking down. His face was indistinct. I just blinked in silence as the man reached out, gently patting my cheek. The touch was firm yet warm. The weight of the hand resting on my head and the man's words caused slight ripples in the air — all of it felt familiar. And it was dearly missed.*

*This was the one who had once lifted me high, close to the sky. The one who taught me that learning to ride a bike required a few falls. The one who showed me the exhaustion of dribbling a ball solo across to the opposite goal. Soon, the hazy silhouette sharpened into a complete figure. It was my father.*

*'Can't you take the day off and stay with me today? It's a holiday!'*

*'When I'm done with work, I'll play with you as much as you want. Be good, okay, my son?'*

*'...That's a lie. You're always busy. You hardly even come home.'*

*My father always made promises he couldn't keep, and I couldn't hide my disappointment, often pouting in frustration. Each time, he crouched down to my level, offering comfort to ease my hurt feelings.*

*'Taekjoo, do you remember what I said about the work I do?'*

*'To protect the country.'*

*'Yes. When I go out and protect the country, our family stays safe, and you can play without any worries.'*

*'Why is it only my father who protects the country? Why do you have to do it alone?'*

*'Hmm... All adults are protecting the country; they just have different ways of doing it. It's a responsibility we must all bear as citizens.'*

*It was a story too difficult and complex for my younger self to understand. My father said I would understand someday, without going into detail. Around that time, someone who had been watching quietly from behind stepped forward and gently tugged at my shoulder.*

*'Don't worry, Father. I'll explain it well.'*

*A calm and gentle voice, slightly lower, fell beside me. When I glanced back, the once-blurry figure became clearer. A boy with a kind expression smiled slightly at me. He invited me to come play with him.*

*'And take good care of your mother. I trust you, my sons.'*

*After his last request, a family photo appeared in one corner of the pitch black darkness. In it, my father wore a military uniform, my mother smiled brightly, and me and my brother, each bearing a resemblance to one parent, stood beside them. Familiar scenes from our home spread before my eyes, filled with vivid colors.*

*The last moment with my father was no different from any other morning. He left the house after his usual words of advice and never returned. Before long, his figure disappeared from the family photo, and my mother's once-bright face lost its expression.*

*It was around then that I began to feel my brother had changed. Perhaps he felt it was now his duty to protect the family in our father's absence. He became quieter, spent more time lost in thought, and increasingly kept things hidden from our mother.*

*When my brother enrolled in the academy and defied our mother for the first time, she fell ill for days. On the night of his commissioning, she stayed up all night in worry.*

*He always comforted her gently, never once showing a sign of exhaustion or resentment. Perhaps he felt that this was his responsibility, a price he had to pay for going against her only wish.*

*'When I set sail this time, I won't be able to return for two months. Look after Mom for me.'*

*Every time he set sail, he left me with this same message. It was no different on the day of his passing.*

*A posthumous medal of honor was awarded in front of his portrait. The media lauded our family, spanning three generations from our grandfather's time, as recipients of the medal, praising our noble, honorable sacrifice. But to those left behind, promotions, medals, and the world's applause offered little comfort.*

*Now, the family photo on the wall only showed my mother with a darkened expression and me, expressionless, the two of us alone. The house had fallen into an almost painfully quiet solitude.*

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With a slow blink, he opened his eyes. An unfamiliar ceiling filled his vision. Was it a dream? No, it was a fragment of the past, a part of Kwon Taekjoo's own life.

He lay there for a moment, and memories of his childhood resurfaced. His father, often absent, his sudden death, his brother who followed in his footsteps as a soldier, and the misfortune that repeated itself for the family. Even his mother, clutching him at his brother's funeral, pleading that he was all she had left.

That was as far as his memories went. Even then, it was incomplete. What kind of life had Kwon Taekjoo himself lived since?

"Fuck... this is unbearable."

Maybe it was the overwhelming flood of memories. His head throbbed with a severe headache, and he felt a sudden wave of nausea rising.

With both arms wrapped around his head, he waited for the intense pain to subside. His legs kept slipping on the sheets as they thrashed in agony. The sharp, grinding ache gnawed at his nerves, forcing him to grab the pillow and throw it away in frustration. It felt like his brain was being crushed to the point of bursting.

Once a headache began, it would last for dozens of minutes. As soon as it finally eased, he staggered out of bed, desperate for fresh air.

He flung open the closed window, revealing a village of sharp, jagged rock formations. Colorful hot air balloons added to the village's unique ambiance.

*{What is this place?}*

*{Goreme. It's a landscape shaped by volcanic ash deposits, eroded by rain and groundwater, forming this terrain. People settled here and made it their home, completing the scenery. It's a collaboration between nature and humanity. Pretty impressive, huh?}*

*{Impressive, my foot. You said you were busy, but it looks like you're just busy playing around.}*

*{I am busy. I'm here on business, after all. Tourists tend to attract less suspicion, you know.}*

*{So, you're admitting you do things that would make people suspicious?}*

*{Look at this face and my resources, my friend. We're well past the legal threshold by now, don't you think?}*

Matthias smirked and winked as he explained why he had come to the place. Kwon Taekjoo's fist had clenched involuntarily.

*{... You're serious about helping, right?}*

*{Or what? You're going to hit me with that fist?}*

*{As you can see, I'm barely holding back. But you're my only lifeline, so I figured I'd let you live.}*

*{How thoughtful. Don't worry, Taekjoo. Once we wrap things up here, I'll find a way to get you back to Korea. Just relax and wait. Let me know if you need anything.}*

True to his word, Matthias treated Kwon Taekjoo generously. He provided him with a high-quality accommodation, fine clothes, food, alcohol, and even a reliable handgun.

But the more Matthias provided, the more suspicious Kwon Taekjoo became. What exactly did Matthias do to have so much money, and how had Kwon Taekjoo ended up entangled with him? Matthias himself admitted his business wasn't exactly legitimate, so it was impossible to guess what kind of work he was involved in. Judging by the sheer number of bodyguards constantly protecting Matthias, it was clear he had plenty of enemies. Associating with a guy like that wouldn't usually be beneficial, but right now, even a rotten rope was something he needed to cling to.

He scratched the back of his head and took a sip of water to soothe his throat. Even a slight tilt of his head made the wound on his scalp throb.

The day after he met Matthias, Kwon Taekjoo went straight to a local hospital for an examination. The doctor ran various tests, asking him all sorts of questions, and concluded that he had likely suffered memory loss due to a head injury. Through an MRI, he even showed Taekjoo the shriveled state of his hippocampus, the part of the brain associated with memory. Although the doctor said his memories would gradually return over time, there was a rare chance that some memories could be permanently lost.

Most memories are products of experiences and accumulated moments. Certain memories play a crucial role in survival as well. For someone like Kwon Taekjoo, who was always on the run, memory-based information was precious.

Maybe that was why he felt uneasy, even though he was told all he needed to do was wait. Matthias wasn't doing him any harm, and for now, resting under his protection would be enough, yet the feeling of impatience wouldn't go away. It felt like he was forgetting something very important. But what?

He kept thinking, searching for an answer, when a knock sounded on the door. He turned his head to stare at the closed door, but didn't respond.

Regardless, the lock clicked from outside, and Matthias brazenly opened the door and walked in. Immediately, the water bottle went flying and struck Matthias's forehead.

Matthias let out a playful yelp.

{Ouch! What, you were awake? Then why didn't you answer?}

{Consider yourself lucky it was just a water bottle I had in hand. What's with barging in like that?}

Without a hint of shame, Matthias defended himself, unfazed.

{When you didn't get up with the sun high overhead, I got worried. How was I supposed to know your condition didn't take a sudden turn for the worse overnight? Remember what the doctor said — that it's a miracle you even managed to hold up?}

{You secretly wish I hadn't, don't you?}

{Come on. Even I'd rather not deal with a corpse; that's messy. So, did you just wake up? You sure sleep a lot.}

{Thanks to someone, I barely slept at all.}

He shot Matthias a look filled with disgust, and Matthias, catching the meaning, chuckled slyly.

{Oh, you heard?}

{Wasn't that the point?}

Given the unusual terrain where the hotel was built, he hadn't expected the same level of comfort or service as similar hotels. But wasn't at least a minimal level of soundproofing a standard? He couldn't get any decent sleep all night, hearing Matthias and his partners having sex without any filtering through the walls.

Even as he openly threw shade at Matthias, Matthias grinned without a hint of remorse.

{If I'd known, I would've invited you to join in.}

{Sorry, but I'm not into sharing my partners.}

{Really? I wasn't insisting we share.}

Kwon Taekjoo frowned and asked, {Then what kind of nonsense is that?} Had he really forgotten that he had slept with a man? Or was he unexpectedly firm in his tastes? Either way, Matthias found it entertaining to watch.

{I'm about to have lunch. Want to join me?}

{I'd rather you let me use your phone first.}

{Phone? To call who?}

{My mother.}

Matthias looked taken aback by the unexpected answer, and Kwon Taekjoo scratched the back of his neck, looking a bit awkward.

{Your mother? The woman who gave birth to you?}

{Who else would it be?}

{No, it's just... did you remember anything else?}

{A bit. She's probably really worried right now. You've got at least one hard-to-trace line, right?}

Matthias nodded without hesitation, then took a phone out from inside his jacket and handed it over, waving for Kwon Taekjoo to take it as he stared blankly.

{Wait, you're just giving it to me?}

{Would you rather I be stingy and take it back?}

{What about you?}

{You think I only have one phone?}

Kwon Taekjoo's suspicion only deepened, and he grabbed the phone with a dissatisfied expression. But when he tried to unlock it, it required both fingerprint and iris recognition. With an irritated sigh, he held it back out to Matthias, who slipped in close, covered Kwon Taekjoo's hand with his own to complete the fingerprint scan, then leaned in to let the phone scan his iris. This constant closeness was getting on his nerves.

Kwon Taekjoo shook Matthias's hand off like he was swatting away a bug, then gestured with his head toward the door, signaling for him to leave. Matthias responded, {I'll wait for you in the dining room,} and quietly exited the room. Waiting until Matthias's presence had fully faded, Kwon Taekjoo tapped on the keypad, carefully inputting his mother's number from memory and hesitantly pressing the call button.

Soon, the familiar ringing began. After a moment, his mother's voice came through, sounding bewildered by the unfamiliar caller ID.

*[...Hello?]*

“Mother, it’s me.”

*[Oh, Taekjoo? Oh, thank you, Lord. Thank you... What on earth happened? It's been over two weeks without any word. Do you know how worried I've been? If I hadn't heard from you by today or tomorrow, I was planning to go back to Korea.]*

She poured out her relief-laced scolding. If it had been over two weeks since he last contacted her, she had every reason to worry. But what did she mean by saying she was planning to go back to Korea? Was she currently somewhere else?

“A lot has happened, here and there.”

*[Yes, I heard a bit from Jong-woo. He said there was a terrorist attack in Iran, and you were called to Russia along with the Ambassador. Is that matter resolved now?]*

Jong-woo? The name didn't match anyone he could recall. He'd only recovered memories from around the time of his university admission, so perhaps it was someone he met later? If this person communicated with his mother, then they must have been close to him.

But why did his mother take it as normal that he'd been summoned to Russia with “the Ambassador”? Who exactly was this “Ambassador” she mentioned?

Besides, if he had gone to Russia with this Ambassador over two weeks ago, why had he been found alone in Iran? Could the Ambassador have also been part of the official Russian delegation? Had he been openly working for this person? Was that why his name had appeared on the official list of those Russia had sought to rescue? Questions and hypotheses swirled in his mind.

After a long silence, his mother brought him back,

*[Taekjoo?]*

“Oh, yes. There are still a few loose ends to tie up, but there's nothing for you to worry about. Are you doing well? No health issues?”

*[Of course not. Who should be worrying about whom here? Your aunt's surgery went well, and she's recovering faster than expected. If everything continues as it has, she should be able to return home in a month or two.]*

If she meant his aunt who lived abroad, it could only be his aunt in Canada. Had she undergone surgery? Was his mother staying in Canada to look after her? If so, that was a relief.

*[Is the Ambassador doing well too? I haven't been able to contact him either, and it's been worrying me.]*

“Oh... is that so?”

*[Yes. Even when he used to return to his home country, he'd still make time to call now and then. But this time, it seems he hasn't had a chance at all. That's when I realized it must be a really serious situation.]*

For some reason, his mother seemed to have developed a personal connection with this so-called Ambassador. Referring to Russia as “his home country” clearly implied that this Ambassador was Russian. Had Kwon Taekjoo been working under him all along? But then, what reason would his mother have to be in contact with her son’s boss?

Was it possible that this Russian Ambassador was a woman?

Suppressing his confusion, he did his best to sound calm.

“Oh, it’s nothing that serious. But there may be times when communication is hard to reach since security monitoring will increase to prevent information leaks. I just wanted to let you know in advance, so you wouldn’t worry.”

*[All right. But this really isn't dangerous, is it?]*

“Of course not. There’s no danger here. I’m not even in Iran.”

*[I'll trust you on that.]*

“Please do. I should probably go now.”

He was trying to end the call quickly, worried he might slip and say something wrong, when his mother, in a softer, steadier voice, said,

*[Taekjoo?]*

“Yes?”

*[If it ever gets too hard to bear, don’t hesitate to leave it all behind — responsibilities, ideals, whatever it is — and come back to me. There’s no shame in that.]*

“What are you saying all of a sudden?”

*[It’s just a mother’s worry. Remember this, all right? Nothing in this world is more important than your life. I’m fine with you just as you are; you don’t have to do anything extraordinary. Just don’t push yourself too hard.]*

Her words reminded him of his father and older brother, both long gone. And he found himself wondering how he’d ended up disregarding his mother’s one and only wish, finding himself in such a dangerous situation.

“Understood. You take good care of yourself too, Mother.”

*[Yes. And give my regards to the Ambassador as well.]*

“All right. Take care.”

After ending the call, Kwon Taekjoo began to sift through the newly gathered information, one piece at a time. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t remember anyone named Jong-woo. They didn’t seem like someone he’d known around the time of his university entrance. Was this person someone he’d met in his professional life? If his mother felt close enough to mention him in such a way, they must have known each other for more than a year or two.

Then there was the other mysterious figure.

“The Russian Ambassador...”

Had Kwon Taekjoo worked in a diplomatic office? Could that explain his ability to speak multiple languages? Was the tattoo on his inner thigh connected to this as well?

He decided to check the internet on his phone. If this Ambassador was a high-ranking official, he figured a quick search might bring up a photo. Seeing the person’s face might jog his memory.

However, he couldn’t access the internet. He tried moving around a bit in case it was a reception issue, but it was no use. It seemed Matthias had blocked data access. Perhaps this was a precaution against potential surveillance, especially considering he’d mentioned being on a business trip. Left with no other option, Taekjoo deleted the phone’s usage history.

He tossed the phone onto the bed and perched himself on the windowsill. His mind was cluttered with unanswered questions. If he’d been an aide to the Russian Ambassador, why would he have illegally entered Iran? What was the meaning of the tattoo on his body? And who was this “Jong-woo”? Up until his college years, he’d led a typical life. When did his life start veering off its stable course? Was there some kind of catalyst?

He couldn’t find answers to any of these questions. Frustrated, he knocked the back of his head lightly against the window. He had the unsettling feeling that he was missing something essential — some critical piece of the puzzle.

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Yoon Jong-woo was busy analyzing various CCTV footage angles and quality levels from a hotel in Tabriz. He meticulously reviewed the faces of everyone who had passed through the area in recent days, but there was no sign of anyone resembling Kwon Taekjoo.

He'd hardly slept, glued to the monitor for days on end, so his eyes felt dry and sore. Even the slightest blink sent stinging pain through his eyelids. He reached for his eye drops out of habit, but when he pressed the bottle, nothing came out — it seemed he'd already emptied it.

While lightly stretching his neck and shoulders, he looked around the empty guest room. The space, with only Yoon Jong-woo in it, was utterly quiet. Since losing Kwon Taekjoo at the Grand Bazaar, Zhenya had grown sharper. He barely stayed at the hotel anymore, only stopping by late at night to check if any new information had come in before heading back out. There was no hint as to where he was going or when he would return. His already few words had become even scarcer.

“Haa...”

The lack of progress in the investigation was discouraging.

According to what Zhenya had discovered, it seemed that Kwon Taekjoo had amnesia due to a traumatic head injury. Research indicated that memories lost due to trauma gradually return over time, though there were cases where the loss was permanent. They hoped Kwon Taekjoo would be among those who recovered, and firmly believed it, yet the unease remained.

Of course, the person most confused right now was likely Kwon Taekjoo himself. They couldn't be sure how much he remembered, but seeing as he didn't respond to Yoon Jong-woo's calls, it seemed that at least the past ten years of his memories had vanished.

How disoriented he must feel if he'd forgotten even joining the National Intelligence Service. Losing consciousness, then waking up in Iran, being falsely accused of terrorism and abruptly detained — escaping with difficulty, only to have no idea where to go next. The current Kwon Taekjoo was not the same person Yoon Jong-woo knew, so it was hard to guess what he might be doing or where he might be now.

“Sunbae... where are you, really?”

With a sigh, he murmured, covering his face with both hands.

The fact that Kwon Taekjoo made it to Tabriz meant he was likely planning to cross into Türkiye. The lack of any news from Zhenya suggested he hadn't been captured by the border patrol. If this were the Kwon Taekjoo of before, he would have used disguise techniques or tried to sneak through, possibly even resorting to force for a direct breakthrough if necessary.

But now, he probably didn't have a decent weapon, nor was he equipped for the kind of disguise that could fool everyone. Or was he?

Yoon Jong-woo buried his head back in the monitor, studying the CCTV footage. Amid the bustling crowd, there were many Muslim women mingled throughout. In Iran, women typically wore hijabs or chadors, but since this was a border area, some were dressed even more conservatively. Several women wearing burqas, completely covered from head to toe, stood out.

Perhaps...? Yoon Jong-woo erased all the previously targeted data he'd set up to find Kwon Taekjoo. Then, he adjusted the settings to only scan for Kwon Taekjoo's height and gait and started reviewing the footage again.

Just then, his phone rang. So focused, he startled slightly without realizing it. It was the notification for an incoming message. With a hopeful rush, he grabbed his phone. But it wasn't the long-awaited message from Kwon Taekjoo. Instead, it was a text from his mother checking in.

— *Jong-woo, how are you? I keep worrying since you didn't sound well the last time we talked. Did your cold go away? Make sure you're eating well. Have a good day.*

Kwon Taekjoo often complained that his mother seemed ready to give everything, liver and all, to Zhenya, who she thought was his superior. Yet, in truth, she had always looked after her son's subordinates, including Yoon Jong-woo, with warm concern. She would welcome him gladly whenever he visited, often checking in with him first, and would always prepare enough side dishes for him as well. And because of that, Yoon

Jong-woo felt a constant heaviness whenever he saw her. He'd been complicit in Kwon Taekjoo's deception toward his mother all this time. Now, in a situation where his whereabouts were unclear, he'd have to take the lead in spinning more lies.

After a moment of hesitation, Yoon Jong-woo pressed the call button. The dial tone sounded twice before Kwon Taekjoo's mother answered.

*[Oh, Jong-woo?]*

“Yes, Mother. It’s me, Jong-woo. Are you doing well?”

*[Of course. I’m doing just fine. And you? Have you recovered from your last illness?]*

“Yes. I think I was just a little tired, but I’m feeling much better now.”

*[Really? You still don’t sound entirely yourself. If only I were in Korea, I’d call you over and cook for you. It’s such a shame.]*

“Please, later. I’m really eating and sleeping well.”

*[Good to hear. Are you busy with something similar to what Taekjoo’s been up to? He did reach out to me recently, just briefly. He said he wouldn’t be able to get in touch for a while.]*

“What? He did?”

Startled by the unexpected news, he shot to his feet, hitting his knee on the edge of the table. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he gripped his phone tightly with both hands.

“Mother! So, you mean he called? You actually spoke to him?”

*[Yes. Hasn’t he been in touch with you?]*

“No, not yet... When exactly did he... When did he call, exactly?”

He asked in a rush, his words coming out disorganized. She sounded a bit taken aback.

*[He called early this morning. It was around 1 a.m. my time. He said he's doing fine and that I shouldn't worry. Apparently, he still has a lot to sort out on the Russian side, and it's a sensitive time, so he can't call often. We didn't talk for long. Why? Is something wrong?]*

If Kwon Taekjoo reached out to his mother, he must have remembered at least his family situation: that his father and older brother had both passed away in the line of duty, leaving just him and his mother, who worried terribly about his safety.

“Oh, it’s just that his usual number hasn’t been working well. By the way, Mother, do you happen to remember which number he called from?”

*[Hmm... I think it showed up as ‘Caller ID restricted’ or something. Why? Is it urgent?] “Well, there’s something I need to ask him.”*

*[Is that so? If you wait, won’t Taekjoo eventually reach out to you as well?]*

“...Probably. But if he calls again, could you tell him to contact me? And maybe remind him of my number in case he doesn’t remember.”

*[Alright, I’ll do that.]*

“Thank you, Mother. I’ll see you later.”

*[Yeah, take care, Jong-woo. See you in Korea.]*

“Yes, Mother,” Jong-woo replied just as the call was ending. Suddenly, the hotel door burst open without warning. Startled, a scream escaped him.

Zhenya stepped in, frowning. His face looked fierce enough to bury someone right there. It seemed he hadn't had any luck on this outing either. Normally, Yoon Jong-woo would have barely made his presence known, lips pressed tightly together, but he quickly approached him.

{Mr. Yevgeny! Great news. I just spoke with Sunbae's mother, and she said he called her and assured her he's safe!}

{...Taekjoo did?}

{Yes! The call came with a restricted caller ID, but if he reached out to his mother to let her know he's alright, maybe some of his memories have returned?}

[So, where exactly is Taekjoo now?!]

[Oh, his mother didn't seem to know either. I had told her earlier that Sunbae was on an official trip to Russia with you to ease her worries. Since she didn't notice anything unusual when speaking with him, he must have played along, letting her believe he was in Russia as she understood.]

This meant Kwon Taekjoo had regained some memory of his family. What if Taekjoo hadn't lost his memories completely, just pieces here and there? If he remembered his ties to the NIS, surely he would've reached out to Jongwoo by now. But Jongwoo hadn't heard a word. So maybe, if Zhenya just waited a little longer, Taekjoo might come to him instead.

He shook his head. It felt impossible to stay put without confirming Taekjoo's situation with his own eyes. Chasing him down and holding him within reach seemed to be the only way to feel assured.

{Can that line be traced?}

{I'll give it a try.}

Yoon Jong-woo immediately set to work, hacking Taekjoo's mother's phone to backtrace recent calls. It was something he did regularly at the National Intelligence Service, so it was easy. Reviewing the results, his expression dropped.

{As expected, it looks like a burner phone.]

[What's the origin?]

{The origin's bouncing across several regions. It seems the phone has an anti-trace system. Whose phone could he have used to call?}

Scratching the back of his head, Yoon Jong-woo said, {One moment,} and pulled out a USB. Plugging it into his laptop, he launched a specific program. With international crime organizations recently ramping up their security systems, investigative agencies had begun developing their own response programs. Yoon Jong-woo used one of these to remove interference signals from the trace, narrowing the error range.

{Hmm... most likely Türkiye. Slightly south of Ankara.}

So, he had crossed into Türkiye. The problem was that over half a day had passed since Kwon Taekjoo spoke to his mother. Even if they chased him immediately, there was no guarantee he was still in Ankara. They couldn't search the vast city of Ankara blindly; they needed a more solid lead.

Just as his thoughts deepened, Yoon Jong-woo let out a low exclamation. Zhenya's gaze immediately shifted toward him.

{One more thing. I found out how Sunbae managed to leave Tabriz without getting caught on CCTV. Take a look at this.}

Yoon Jong-woo offered his laptop to Zhenya, then finished entering the new settings he had adjusted before contacting Taekjoo's mother.

When he pressed enter, a silhouette in the CCTV footage turned green. All videos containing the silhouette sequentially appeared, divided on the screen. The figure seemed to be wearing something over their head — likely a niqab.

{Is this... Taekjoo?}

{I can't be sure, but this person is the closest match to Sunbae so far. If he's been wearing a niqab the whole time, it explains why we couldn't spot him on the footage or recognize him.}

{Where did he go?}

Instead of responding, Yoon Jong-woo zoomed in on the most recent footage. A cargo truck was parked near the bazaar exit. Soon, the person in the niqab sprinted out of the bazaar and leapt into the truck's passenger seat. It was a brief moment, but the running form and quick movement into the truck were all too familiar. It was Kwon Taekjoo — there was no doubt.

{This truck here. Getting into this truck was the last footage I found of him.}

Yoon Jong-woo paused the footage and pointed to the truck's license plate. The image wasn't clear enough to read every number, but by compiling other footage, they could likely identify the vehicle type and some of the plate numbers.

Zhenya immediately took a photo of the truck on the screen and sent it somewhere. Then he called the recipient, issuing instructions as soon as they picked up.

{It's me. That truck I just sent, check who the driver is and where it's headed. Prepare the private jet. Yes, right now.}

Understanding the situation, Yoon Jong-woo tidied up the table, shoving his laptop and gear into his bag. He hoped that this time, they could finally reunite with Kwon Taekjoo.

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While Taekjoo was resting in the room, a commotion erupted outside. He went to the window and looked down. It seemed the entire hotel had been rented out for some business deal, as unfamiliar cars were lined up, all luxury sedans. Soon, men in suits filed out of the cars in unison. Some waited by the vehicles, while others stationed themselves at the building entrance, surveying the surroundings. They all wore dark sunglasses and were armed with rifles, exuding a dangerous air.

Only a few entered the hotel— about three or four. A middle-aged man led the way, followed by men who appeared to be his assistants or bodyguards.

Kwon Taekjoo moved away from the window and approached the door, pressing his ear to it to focus on the noise beyond. Soon, he sensed the earlier group passing through the hallway. Given the narrow design typical of hotels in the Anatolia region, which lacked elevators, it seemed they were making their way up the stairs to the rooftop.

Those people were clearly from the underground world. Were they the guests Matthias had mentioned?

Late that morning, while Taekjoo was having breakfast, Matthias, dressed to the nines, came down to the dining area. He casually took someone else's juice without asking, then threw out irrelevant questions about whether the food suited him or if he was sure he didn't need to go to the hospital.

*{How long are you staying here?}*

*{I plan to leave this afternoon. I have a guest arriving soon, so once the deal's wrapped up.}*

Setting his fork down, Taekjoo had crossed his arms, deciding to be direct now that the topic had come up.

*{What exactly is it that you do?}*

*{Hm? I told you, didn't I? I'm in business. I have quite a few regular clients in this area.}*

*{And what exactly is that business?}*

*{Curious? I didn't think you'd be so interested in me.}*

Matthias had smiled brightly, eyes crinkling, evading the question as usual. His habit of being constantly flanked by armed guards had led Taekjoo to wonder if he was involved with the mafia. Though he acted

lighthearted and easygoing as if drunk, Matthias rarely drank much. There was only one possible reason for his strangely unfocused gaze.

*{An addict's business isn't exactly a well-kept secret.}*

*{Do I smell?}*

Matthias had pretended to sniff himself and laughed, making no effort to explain or deny it. If anything, he wore a look that said he assumed Taekjoo had already figured it out.

Of course, knowing Matthias dealt drugs didn't change anything. There was no legal way for Kwon Taekjoo to return to Korea anyway. Getting mixed up with a criminal wasn't ideal, but there was no guarantee that he'd been much different before losing his memory. Besides, Matthias was the only person he could rely on now. His safety was tied to Matthias's.

Taekjoo kept alert to the situation beyond the door. Matthias's so-called guests were stereotypical mafia types, with their self-important swagger, clothing, tattoos displayed on their hands and necks, and their uniquely decadent air. The stench of alcohol, drugs, and stale cigars clinging to them was proof enough of who they were.

Since Türkiye is home to many ethnic groups, it was said that the mafia factions there are diverse and their numbers are considerable. They do anything profitable, from money laundering to drug sales, smuggling, violence, kidnapping, and human trafficking. Some even collude with politicians, acting as political thugs, making it nearly impossible to wipe them out completely.

Matthias had assured that the deal would be over quickly. So he optimistically believed he could leave right after receiving the goods, regardless of who the customer was. Just as he was stepping back from the doorway to prepare for a quick departure, a certain smell in the air stopped him in his tracks.

It was familiar. Heavy and deep, like burning leaves, with a hint of aroma at the end. Suddenly, his heart began to race.

Why? Was there someone he knew in that mafia group?

He flung the door open and looked toward the hallway. The guests had already gone up to the rooftop. The scent of cigar smoke he had caught earlier lingered even stronger now, confirming it hadn't been a figment of his imagination. His heart pounded even louder in response.

What could it be? As he stood there, bewildered, Matthias walked down the hallway opposite, flanked by his bodyguards. When his gaze met Kwon Taekjoo's, who had been openly peeking out into the hall, Matthias winked. Silently mouthing the words *Take it easy. I'll be done soon*, he and his guards then ascended to the rooftop through the same hallway the mafia group had taken moments before. Though curious about the familiar cigar scent, Taekjoo decided to observe for now.

He closed the door and went back inside the room, then moved to the window again to watch the mafia's movements. It didn't mean much; it was simply a habitual action. He thought about how he might confirm the source of that cigar scent from earlier.

The sky outside was vividly blue, not a cloud in sight. Below, jagged rock formations rose sharply, blending with colorful hot air balloons to create a unique landscape. Everything was strangely peaceful.

How much time had passed? Suddenly, gunshots and screams echoed from the rooftop. Mafia members waiting outside quickly rushed into the building.

“...What’s going on?”

Kwon Taekjoo immediately opened the window, leaning out to look up toward the rooftop. Someone with their hands raised was pressed against the railing.

It was Matthias. His voice, attempting to calm the situation, was entirely drowned out by the agitated shouts of someone else. The language was Turkish, so he couldn't understand what was being said. From the tone, it seemed the deal had gone wrong.

Matthias was in danger. Glancing around, Taekjoo grabbed all the large cushions from the bed and sofa, tossing them onto the car below. Meanwhile, Matthias, now cornered, cast a worried glance downwards. As soon as their eyes met, Taekjoo gestured for him to jump. Matthias gave him a look as if to say, *Are you insane?* Just then, the agitated individual fired blindly, raging wildly. Hesitating no more, Matthias finally shut his eyes tightly and leapt.

{Ugh!}

“Ha!”

Kwon Taekjoo stepped onto the windowsill and, in a swift motion, grabbed Matthias’s arm as he fell, absorbing some of the impact as they both dropped onto the car roof. The cushions he’d thrown earlier softened the landing, but pain still throbbed through his body as if he’d been crushed.

Without a moment to ease the pain, Kwon Taekjoo drew his gun and shot at the mafia members rushing to the fence. As his magazine emptied, he grabbed Matthias’s gun, who was groaning beside him, and continued to take down the approaching mafia. Soon, he ran out of bullets again. They needed to get out of there immediately.

Kwon Taekjoo grabbed Matthias by the collar, shoving him into the back seat. As he climbed into the driver’s seat, he made sure to grab a rifle lying on the ground. The remaining mafia members fired wildly. Steering with one hand, he turned the car around, firing back as he went. Tossing the rifle to Matthias, who had finally gathered his senses, he shouted,

{Do something!}

The mafia, who had been waiting at the town entrance, noticed something was wrong and blocked their path. Kwon Taekjoo floored the accelerator, bursting through them. Inevitably, the mafia’s cars gave chase. Just when he felt hopeless about how to shake them, backup arrived from behind.

These reinforcements, who seemed to be Matthias's bodyguards, attacked the mafia from the rear, pulling them away from Taekjoo's car.

They managed to escape Göreme in that moment. Only then did Matthias fully regain his senses, struggling to sit up. Blood was pooling from wounds on his shoulder and side, possibly from a bullet. Without properly stopping the bleeding, Matthias rummaged through his pocket, pulling out a syringe with an unknown substance that appeared to be heroin, known for its potent painkilling effect. Injecting it directly into his arm, Matthias looked at the rearview mirror with a grin.

{Want some?}

{No thanks. What the hell happened? You said it was a client. Did they turn out to be undercover police or something?}

{As if. Public officials here aren't that dedicated.}

{So, what was it? Did you mess with the mafia boss's woman or something?}

{You watch too many movies. I don't need to target that kind of woman; there's no shortage of others, my friend.}

{Still, you seem like the type who'd go for that kind anyway.}

Taekjoo mocked him openly, but Matthias just smirked, clearly feeling the drug's effects. His eyes were hazy, and he looked a mess, even drooling slightly.

{I heard there was intense infighting within the organization. It seems there was a minor misunderstanding. I'd handed everything over to the group managing the transaction, but now they're calling me an accomplice of the traitor who had a change of heart. Guess I got caught in the crossfire.}

Matthias chattered lightheartedly, as though he'd been merely dragged into the chaos.

People had died, and he himself had nearly joined them, yet he was grinning recklessly.

It didn't seem to be just the drugs. It was almost as if the scent of blood excited him.

Kwon Taekjoo shook his head, muttering, "Crazy." Just then, Matthias gripped the driver's seat and suddenly leaned his face close.

{Anyway, thanks for saving me, friend. You're quicker on your feet than I thought. Ever considered becoming a bodyguard? I'll pay you as much as you want.}

{Not interested. I just can't stand being in debt to anyone.}

He cut him off firmly. In truth, he'd been uncomfortable with Matthias's one-sided generosity. Matthias didn't seem like someone who would offer goodwill without expecting something in return. Taekjoo couldn't shake the feeling that, one day, Matthias would present him with a bill.

While it hadn't been intentional, rescuing Matthias had lightened the burden of debt he felt toward him. Of course, that would change if this debt wasn't genuine.

{I mean it for any other debts too.}

He warned subtly, hinting that he wouldn't tolerate any tricks. Matthias chuckled, patted the headrest of the driver's seat, and leaned back.

{All right. I'll keep that in mind.}

{So, where are we going now?}

{The Turkish government won't make an issue of a few dead mafia members. This was practically a case of self-destruction caused by their own infighting. Quite a few big shots secretly wish for them to disappear without a trace.}

It was obvious enough. These were people who thrived in the shadows; it was hard to distinguish which side was in the wrong. Living so close to death, their passing would hardly raise questions. Taekjoo was beginning to understand why Matthias had arranged the meeting on the outskirts instead of a central location. There was no need to create unnecessary witnesses.

Then, Matthias suddenly said, {Still...} and handed his phone over. The map on the screen displayed a destination — a private airfield.

{There's no way I'm flying to Mexico in this state, so I need to rest somewhere for a bit. I have a villa in Istanbul. Once we get there, I'll make sure your escape route is secure too, so don't worry.]

Istanbul. A city bordering Greece and embracing the Mediterranean, it offered an open sea escape route. With plenty of tourists, including Koreans, it was an ideal place to hide.

Kwon Taekjoo told Matthias, {Take a break,} and then quickly headed towards his destination.

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Yoon Jong-woo continuously looked around. The mansion, showcasing the distinctive splendor of Baroque style from its exterior, was equally intricate and majestic inside. Positioned behind a fortress said to have been built in the 6th century, the mansion was heavily guarded both inside and out, giving the feeling of a Sultan's summer palace. He felt so overwhelmed by its grandeur and atmosphere that his mouth kept gaping open, and his shoulders hunched. Who could possibly own such a place? Curiosity mingled with fear inside him.

While he was distractedly taking in the sights, the distance between him and Zhenya widened. All around, guards had turned their gaze toward Yoon Jong-woo. Although they were called guards, their exposed tattoos, intimidating expressions, and casually displayed firearms reminded him more of the mafia than anything else. Afraid of drawing suspicion, he quickly followed after Zhenya.

Soon, the two of them arrived at a large door. The man guarding it knocked on the closed door, and they soon heard permission to enter from within.

The man personally swung open both doors. Beyond them lay a spacious reception room. Paintings adorned the walls as if they had

taken pieces straight out of an art museum, and each corner held an antique statue. A chandelier hung from the ceiling, extending all the way down over the sofa table in the center. It was the very height of luxury.

A man seated in the prime spot on the large sofa seemed to be the owner of the mansion. He had a solid build and an affable appearance, but there was something striking in his gaze. The man beckoned them to enter with a flick of his finger. The moment they stepped inside, the stifling air hit them, making it hard to breathe. The scent was a mix of drugs, cigars, and other indefinable things. Yoon Jong-woo swallowed hard. Zhenya strode in without hesitation.

As Yoon Jong-woo tried to follow, the man guarding the door blocked his way, seemingly instructing him to wait there. Nodding nervously, he stayed put.

In the meantime, Zhenya approached the gray-haired man and took a seat beside him. The man extended his hand for a handshake first.

{Long time no see, Psikh.}

{Last time I saw you, you looked rough. Looks like striking out on your own agrees with you a lot more than being a lapdog for the Kremlin, huh?}

{Of course. Loyalty to a greedy master only leads to a dog's death.}

Zhenya twisted a smirk onto his lips as he clasped the man's hand. The man, smiling slightly, gave him a light handshake and then gestured to his subordinates. They promptly brought a cigar and whiskey for Zhenya.

The man was Erkan, a Turkish mafia boss from a North Cyprus-based organization. His network wasn't limited to Türkiye alone; it extended to places like the UK and Russia, which was how he'd connected with Zhenya.

{So, you're looking for someone?}

Erkan asked directly. Zhenya had informed him in advance before coming to Türkiye, believing there was no group as swift and relentless as the mafia when it came to finding people.

{He's more deceitful than you could imagine, so I'd like him found as quickly as possible.}

{Must be quite a character if Psikh himself is asking for help. Who exactly is this guy?}

{You don't need to know that. How long will it take?}

Erkan leaned back slowly, sinking deep into the sofa. He took a long, indulgent drag on his cigar, looking smug.

{Finding him isn't a problem, but my guys aren't exactly known for bringing people back in one piece. It's not a woman, but is there a particular reason why not even a finger should be harmed?}

{Just find him. I'll handle taking him back myself.}

{Well, if that's the case. Just wait a few days. I'd move right away, but it'd draw attention.}

The Kurds have been causing trouble again.)

{Trouble?}

{They got into a fight among themselves, and a few ended up dead — of all places, they had to stir things up in a tourist area. Every time something like this happens, the authorities crack down, pretending to restore order, and innocent organizations like ours get raided. If we want to keep our business running, we have to lie low and avoid any unnecessary fire.}

The source of this information was likely a high-ranking political or judicial official. In this place, it was common knowledge that the ties between law enforcement and the underworld were so close that it was practically as if the mafia had ascended to the presidency.

Since there wasn't time to wait for the crackdown to ease, Zhenya considered finding Taekjoo himself. Just as he was about to feel disappointed, Erkan mentioned an unexpected figure.

{From what I hear, Matthias Pérez has been getting involved with the Kurds.}

{Matthias Pérez? Is he here?]

Erkan nodded. It wasn't particularly surprising that Matthias was coming in and out of Türkiye for drug deals. His connection with the Kurdish mafia was likely an extension of that. What puzzled Zhenya, however, was why Erkan would bring him up so suddenly. It didn't seem like he was merely sharing the latest news about a mutual acquaintance.

{We can't help but keep a close eye on someone of his caliber when he shows up in our territory — just as everyone here knows that Psikh, you, are also present.}

Zhenya had anticipated as much. For the mafia, expanding and protecting their territory was paramount. They tended to react sensitively and with caution to any new power that appeared. If he wanted to avoid unnecessary conflict, he'd have to follow their rules in their domain. Above all, he had to remember not to cause any trouble on their turf.

Matthias appeared to be causing issues that had everyone's attention on him. Knowing his nature, he probably relished the attention and would even be enjoying the situation.

{So, what exactly are you trying to say?}

{Word is, lately Pérez has been hanging around with an Asian guy.]

{...An Asian? Do you know what he looks like?}

{I don't know that much. All I heard is that Pérez only survived that chaos because of this Asian.}

There was no solid reason to assume that the Asian tagging along with Matthias was Kwon Taekjoo. In fact, there was little evidence to support such a guess. But what if, by some chance, Kwon Taekjoo had met Matthias? Matthias would no doubt extend abundant goodwill to him, understanding his value based on their past dealings.

And for Kwon Taekjoo, there was no reason to refuse Matthias's help. He had no one else to rely on, and Matthias was the only person he'd met who might know him from before he'd lost his memory.

{If you're curious, why not go see for yourself?} Erkan smiled with a cryptic expression.

{He's likely in a tough spot after losing one of his clients. Why don't you pay Perez a visit — and pass along my regards?}

{What?}

{Word is, Pérez would do anything if you asked him, Psikh. He's completely obsessed with the toys you make. It shouldn't be hard to slip in my message while you're at the negotiating table with him.}

Erkan's real aim seemed to be seizing the profits the Kurdish mafia had missed out on. If he moved personally, he'd be suspected of meddling in their internal conflict, so he intended to sit back and enjoy the spoils from a safe distance. Zhenya's lips curved in a faint smile.

{If that information is truly valuable.}

{Of course. Even Psikh wouldn't gamble on mere rumors. I also heard that another survivor emerged from that disaster. Who knows? That person might have seen the Asian you're looking for.}

Zhenya toyed with his whiskey glass with long fingers. Normally, he'd take his time here, calculating if this was a worthwhile deal and whether there was more he could extract from the other party. But his patience, stretched thin as it was, had already worn through.

{Where is he? This survivor.}

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Late at night, in a general hospital in Tabriz, the door to the previously quiet ICU opened. Until just moments ago, this place had been under

strict surveillance.

The police stationed in the corridor had disappeared. No alarm sounded to signal an intruder.

Inside the hospital room, a patient with multiple gunshot wounds was groaning in pain. Each time he breathed, there was a wet, gurgling sound from his throat. His head, chest, abdomen, and legs were all wrapped in bandages without exception. He was barely clinging to life, sustained only by a respirator and medication.

Without a sound, a shadow slipped along the wall as someone entered the ICU. Soon, a dark figure loomed over the patient's face, casting a thick shadow. The patient, who had been moaning, slowly lifted his drooping eyelids. As he faced the imposing presence, he gasped, swallowing nervously. Simultaneously, the heart rate monitor by his bedside spiked.

{There was a shootout not long ago, right? I heard there was an Asian man there.}

A voice, cold and full of menace, echoed from the shadowed figure. Sensing the danger, the patient struggled, thrashing his body. But as both a witness and the central figure in the recent shootout, he had been restrained, his limbs bound. Each time he writhed, the cuffs on his arms and legs clanged loudly.

The truly despairing part was that, despite the commotion, neither medical staff nor police came running. The patient's biological rhythms grew erratic, triggering an alarm, yet the surroundings remained unsettlingly silent.

{Is this the guy?}

The unidentified intruder shoved a cellphone in front of the patient. When the patient only blinked, neither confirming nor denying, the intruder grabbed his jaw with a crushing force, making his head feel like it would explode.

{Ugh... ugh...!}

{Look carefully. This guy disappeared with Matthias, didn't he?}

Sensing a threat to his life, the patient desperately tried to focus. No matter how much he wanted to beg for mercy, his voice couldn't escape properly because of the respirator. His breathing became labored, and his vision started to blur. If he let his consciousness slip now, it felt certain he would die.

The patient squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them again, forcing himself to focus on the cellphone in front of him. The screen displayed a photo of an Asian man, whose face was hard to forget after even a fleeting glance. He was sure he had seen this man before.

He nodded vigorously. When the intruder asked, {Are you certain?} he blinked quickly in confirmation. Finally, the intruder released his grip from the patient's throat.

Just as quietly as he had entered, the intruder left the ICU. The patient, who had been tense and frozen with fear, relaxed and slipped back into unconsciousness. Gradually, his erratic heart rate began to stabilize, and the ICU returned to a calm, as though nothing had happened. The scent of disinfectant filled the room, with only a faint trace of the intruder's distinctive cigar lingering.

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*Sunlight filtered through the gauzy curtains, filling the room with a soft warmth that created a peaceful atmosphere. The gentle warmth settling over my body was both ticklish and comforting.*

*I held a fragrant apple in my hand. As I bit into it, a burst of sweet and tart juice filled my mouth, pleasantly tingling at the corners of my jaw. After swallowing the crisp fruit, I took another big bite, but juice spilled, dripping down my chest. Instinctively, I straightened up, watching as the clear droplets slid slowly along my collarbone. When I tried to wipe it away with the back of my hand, both my chest and hand only became stickier.*

*I made a slightly annoyed expression when a shadow loomed over me. A warm, soft tongue touched my damp hand. I looked up, meeting a pale face close to mine. Our bodies brushed together, and a cool sensation spread where we touched, icy blue eyes locking intently with mine.*

'.....'

*I held that blue gaze as I took another bite of the apple. Once more, juice flowed down, dampening my fingers.*

'Taekjoo.'

*Soft, gentle lips grazed my damp hand, producing light, quiet sounds as they pressed down. A sweet apple scent lingered in each gentle breath.*

*Then, a bright red tongue traced slowly between my fingers. Through it all, the piercing blue eyes never left my face.*

*Abandoning the half-eaten apple, I grasped a handful of my partner's hair. Those eager eyes, filled with longing for me, gently closed, thick lashes quivering and tickling my cheek. His large body leaned closer, without any weight or pressure, wrapping around me in a perfectly comfortable embrace.*

*I buried my head against his neck, inhaling his scent. My heartbeat, which had been calm and steady, quickened. A pale hand cupped my cheek, and a moment later, our lips met. His tongue pressed in, tasting of sweet apple, before our tongues intertwined fervently, leaving only the tangy, raw taste of breath.*

*As my body gradually relaxed, a restless heat burned inside me. I took a deep breath, steadying my rising emotions, and slid my hand over his neck, gently stroking the nape as we pressed even closer. He breathed heavily, his voice hoarse as he rested his forehead against my cheek. His sharp nose brushed constantly along my jaw and neck, taking in my scent, as if ready to bite down at any moment. I soothed him, feeling my own heart pound.*

*'Take it slow. There's no need to rush.'*

*I whispered, as if soothing an excited beast, lightly touching his ear. He furrowed his brows and exhaled a sigh-like breath. When I gently kneaded his earlobe, goosebumps spread from the rim of his ear down to the nape of his neck.*

*"Haah, Taekjoo."*

*He fixed his gaze on me, his massive body moving in a fluid wave. His blue eyes blazed, as though burning with an inner flame. As I moved to close the distance between our lips, he blocked it with his hand. In response, I took one of his fingers into my mouth and stubbornly licked it, pressing my sharp teeth against the skin and teasing the back of his finger with my thick tongue, grazing each wrinkle as if to count them. Even that faint stimulation made a searing heat shoot straight to my core. Every cell in my body clearly understood what that was a prelude to.*

*He had been catching his breath quietly from behind my restraining hand when he suddenly lunged forward. My arms were lifted and pinned, my legs spread open without hesitation. He pulled my wet hand toward him and positioned it at his closed hole. Preparing the entrance before sex was naturally part of the process, but having to do it myself — with my own fingers, slick with saliva and juice, and under his instruction — felt foreign and awkward. My whole body bristled with the unfamiliar sensation.*

*"Ah, ugh... wait, this feels strange... hold on, ugh..."*

*'No, it doesn't feel strange, Taekjoo.'*

*A pale hand covered mine. Long fingers traced over the tight folds at the entrance, pressing down on my hand, applying more pressure. Just pressing against the entrance like that sent a tingling sensation through my calves.*

*Finally, he overlapped his own fingers with mine and firmly pushed them inside. The entrance opened without resistance, snugly encircling both fingers. The soft inner walls of my abdomen twitched*

*slightly with anticipation, warmly enclosing my skin. A soft chuckle escaped from beside my head.*

*'Do you feel it? Just a little push like this, and it welcomes you.'*

*"Ugh... shut up."*

*'You want me with your whole body, yet you always act so shy.'*

*"Who...?"*

*'Is that not true?'*

*He slowly pulled his fingers out, letting his fingertips scrape against the inner lining. Reflexively, my abs tightened, and my toes curled. The inner walls contracted, clinging tightly to his fingers as if reluctant to let go.*

*"Hmn? When you're gripping me like this?"*

*"Just... stop teasing and do it properly if you're going to."*

*'Yeah. It's much cuter when you're this honest.'*

*'Crazy bastard. What's cute about... ah....!'*

*Our tangled fingers pushed deeper inside, and the sensation of my hole tightly wrapping around his fingers was so vivid that it left me flustered. The feeling of pushing into myself, yet not entirely by my own choice, felt surprisingly foreign.*

*He lifted my fingertips, then scraped over the spot where I was most sensitive, pressing and stroking repeatedly. No matter how hard I tried to endure it, my hips quivered, trembling on their own. I clenched my teeth, trying to hold back, but muffled moans continued to slip out.*

*"Mmgh... ugh... damn it, how long are you going to keep messing around?"*

*'Don't rush. Both your cock and hole are thoroughly enjoying this, Taekjoo. Take it a bit slower and savor it.'*

*His knee pressed against my back, folding my body almost in half. With one hand still held by him, I had to balance myself on my opposite shoulder, causing blood to rush to my face and making it hard to think straight. My mind grew hazy, yet the sensation of being filled became sharper.*

*Through my blurry vision, I could see his pale face gradually drawing closer. If I didn't stop him, he would likely lick my ass without hesitation. As his tongue neared my sensitive skin, my hole reflexively tightened. He laughed with a glint in his eye. As I impulsively clenched my fist, a warm tongue touched my hole, sending a shiver through my body. My fist turned white, trembling.*

*"Ugh... there's no need to lick there..."*

*But he paid no heed, moving his tongue skillfully. The soft flesh brushed and pressed against my fingers inside.*

*The skin around the entrance felt as if it were melting. It tingled and sent jolts through me, making my hips twist repeatedly.*

*As the saliva mixed, the inside softened even further. He casually increased to three fingers, swirling around my finger in a circular motion. Lowering his head further, he licked along my perineum, then continued to take each side of my balls into his mouth, sucking them gently in turn.*

*My flushed ears rubbed repeatedly against the Cabana cushion, getting squashed.*

*"Stop... ah... ngh..."*

*With a pop, he let go, his lips leaving with a faint sound, releasing my balls that had been teased in his mouth, bouncing back with elasticity.*

*'...Haah, stop?'*

*'Ngh... hurry up, your...'*

*'What do you want me to do, Taekjoo?'*

*'Ugh, don't ask... just hurry...'*

*Growing impatient, I pulled him closer. When the head of his cock met my entrance, his body seemed to swell with anticipation.*

*Swallowing hard, I braced myself for the sweet disaster about to unfold. My entire body tensed up, as if trying to put up a weak defense.*

*He, restraining his urge to dive in, pressed forward slowly. The inner walls, stretched to their limit, seemed to welcome him, clinging and tightening around his cock. He chuckled, as if in disbelief.*

*'Taekjoo. Taekjoo...'*

*Though I would've preferred to be taken fast and frantically, he kept calling my name, moving his hips deeply and languidly. He pressed in slowly, from tip to base, and thoroughly filled me, then pulled back with the same patience. Because of that, I could feel every angle, every place that his cock touched and rubbed inside me.*

*'Ngh... don't... do that...'*

*'Haah, why? Isn't this the kind of love-making that suits a couple?'*

*'Ah... it's weird... just, do it like you usually do.'*

*'Oh, you're complaining. Hmm, should I fuck you so deep you can't even breathe?'*

*'Ngh... faster...'*

*His lips curled into a smirk. In the next moment, he gripped both of my arms tightly and began pounding into me with explosive force. Our thighs collided loudly, with such intense friction that bruising wouldn't have been surprising.*

*"Ah! Ah... ngh... there... there... haah... ngh!"*

*'Haah... Taekjoo... is this finally satisfying for you? Hm?'*

*"Ah... gently, ngh... ah! Ugh, haah... ngh!"*

*'You keep saying faster, then gentler — hah — what am I supposed to follow?'*

*'Damn it, ah! Ugh, stop... there... ngh!'*

*'Taekjoo... Taekjoo...'*

*The voice calling my name endlessly echoed in my ears. He pressed his head against my neck, as if barely able to endure it.*

*Overwhelmed with an unfamiliar, swelling emotion, I pulled him closer with desperation. But even that felt insufficient. I wanted to merge with him even more completely, to be filled in every intimate corner without a trace left untouched.*

\*\*\*

**“Hah!”**

When his eyelids opened, the bright ceiling suddenly came into view. His lashes fluttered as his eyelids trembled, and he let out a held breath, tightly shutting his eyes again. Cold sweat trickled down his flushed skin, dripping down as his heart pounded so fiercely it made his chest ache.

*Was it a dream?* It must have been. Otherwise, he would never have clung to a man like that — especially not begging to be fucked.

And yet, everything in the dream had felt so vivid. The warmth, the humidity, even the sensations that had lingered seemed etched into his body, including the touch that had swept over him. He couldn't recall the other's face at all, nor the voice that had urgently called his name. Who was he, anyway? Was he even real? Or was it just an illusion his mind had conjured in the dream?

He felt chills, realizing he had never imagined something like that in his life. It was truly a nightmare.

He'd had countless dreams before. Maybe they weren't all dreams — perhaps they were memories he'd somehow lost along the way.

Sometimes, when he woke up, certain parts would resurface vividly in his mind, while others would fade, leaving only faint traces like this.

“Haa...”

Running his hands over his damp face, he paused as a strange sensation arose from below. His groin felt uncomfortably tight, and the blanket covering him had risen slightly. No way... was he actually aroused from that kind of dream? A dream of being fucked by another man?

“Ridiculous!”

Kwon Taekjoo pressed down on his cock with a pillow, frustrated. Not that it would do much to calm things down. Was it because he hadn't properly taken care of his needs for a while that even the faintest stimulus would set him off? It irritated him how his body was so unnecessarily responsive.

Running his fingers through the back of his hair in agitation, he stomped over to the bathroom and turned the shower on full blast, dousing himself in cold water. But even the cold couldn't completely cool down the heat that spread from below.

Taekjoo sighed softly, pressing his forehead against the wall as he wrapped his hand around himself, beginning to stroke slowly. He wasn't some hormone-crazed teenager, yet even his self-touch made him ache from within.

“Fuck...”

Clenching his teeth, he stifled his groans. Growing impatient to ease the tension, his hand moved faster, rougher. His fingernails scraped against his skin as he rushed, sending a chill up his spine. Even the fine hairs along his ears stood on end.

“Ugh, ah... ngh...”

Gathering his composure, he brought his thumb gently along the sensitive head, stroking in slow circles. His body responded by twitching with pent-up desire, frustrated with the insufficient sensation. The tingling pleasure didn't spread fully but rather built up heavily in his lower abdomen.

Muttering curses, he instinctively reached for his chest, kneading it roughly. Feeling no relief, he pinched and twisted his nipples, pushing his hips against the curve of his hand. Finally, the intense heat began to ebb away. His hips and thighs brushed more forcefully against his hand with each movement.

*Just a little more. Almost there.*

Biting his plump lower lip anxiously, the slow, throbbing pleasure that started in his cock spread up his abdomen, along his spine, up his neck, and finally to the back of his mind. His breathing grew ragged as his vision blurred, a dizzy haze filling his head.

**“Ah... ngh...”**

Suddenly, a wave of ecstasy crashed over him, tightening his body in anticipation. Taekjoo thrust into his hand as hard as he could, pressing the tip of his cock against the smooth tiles of the wall. With a primal growl, he unleashed a torrent of thick, hot cum that shot out of him, splattering against the wall in heavy, uncontrollable bursts. The intensity left him gasping, his body trembling from the explosive release.

His deeply tensed abdominal muscles softened, rising and falling with each panting breath. His shoulders and chest heaved, expelling shallow gasps. The heat that had burned throughout his body quickly dissipated, leaving behind cold sweat.

**“Haah... haah...”**

Kwon Taekjoo leaned his head against the wall, catching his breath. It felt strange. Though he'd finally reached release, there was still a lingering dissatisfaction. Could it be that masturbation alone wasn't

enough to appease his frustration? It seemed like his body craved a deeper, more substantial stimulus.

He ran his hands wildly through his hair, attempting to shake off the residual heat. Splashing a handful of cold water on his face, he scrubbed his body thoroughly, trying to wash away every trace of sensation. But no matter how much he scrubbed, the redness on his chest, pinched and bruised, wouldn't fade. Clicking his tongue, he threw on the robe he'd prepared and stepped outside. He also threw open the closed window to ventilate the room.

Through the large window frame, the landscape of Istanbul stretched out in full view. The blue waters of the Bosphorus Strait, separating the Asian and European regions, opened up the vista. To the left lay the Mediterranean Sea, while the Black Sea flowed to the right. Under a cloudless, bright blue sky, white yachts and cruises dotted the shimmering sea.

Right after escaping from Cappadocia, they took a small plane to Istanbul. Matthias mentioned he often spent summers at this villa. A private yacht was prepared, and he invited Taekjoo to enjoy it freely if he wished.

However, Matthias himself was bedridden, recuperating after dislocating his shoulder and sustaining a gunshot wound during their escape. Kwon Taekjoo had also been examined by Matthias's personal doctor, having twisted his wrist while rescuing Matthias. It was merely a sprain, so it didn't hinder his movement. He supposed he was surprisingly resilient. Ideally, he wanted to return to Korea immediately without delay, but he couldn't very well press his ailing benefactor to hurry up, so he had no choice but to wait a little longer.

Before long, there was a knock at the door. He stayed silent, waiting. Just as expected, the lock clicked open, and the door swung wide. He grabbed a candle from the windowsill and hurled it. Matthias, who had been brazenly letting himself in, dodged it with a quick, {Whoa!}

{Oh, you were awake?}

{Why do you keep barging in without permission?}

{Why do you keep ignoring me? Are you secretly hoping I'd break in?}

{It would have been nice if I'd thrown a knife instead.}

Matthias chuckled, picking up the fallen candle. Winching a bit, he let out a small groan as his injured side twinged. Placing the candle on a nearby table, he lit it with a prepared lighter, filling the room with the rich scent of blackberry.

{I told you, it's not to be rude. It's out of concern. It's only natural to worry if the guest I brought in doesn't make a sound from inside — is he dead or alive?}

{Do you really have room to talk, weakling?}

Kwon Taekjoo sneered, but Matthias just grinned. He poured himself a glass of whiskey from the bar in the corner and then pointed his glass toward Taekjoo.

{You really are resilient. Cushioned, too.}

Though spoken playfully, there was a distinctly suggestive undertone. His gaze slid from Taekjoo's neck down to his chest, where the robe had slipped open to reveal the reddish handprints left on his skin. Taekjoo discreetly adjusted his robe, pulling it closed as he asked Matthias why he had come.

{Why are you here? Shouldn't you be resting in bed?}

{Thank you for worrying, but I can't skip meals just because I'm unwell. Let's have a meal together.}

{Can't we eat separately?}

{How could we avoid each other while staying in the same house? I've always learned that guests should be treated well.}

{Is that how you ended up in this mess?}

{Why are you like this? When it comes to that matter, I'm a victim too.}

Matthias set his glass down on the table and left the room first, not forgetting to add a statement that Kwon Taekjoo couldn't refuse.

{Come down. Let's also discuss your return arrangements.}

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Kwon Taekjoo and Matthias sat across from each other at the spacious dining table. The room had a sunroom-style layout with glass walls, offering a great view and abundant natural light. A gentle sea breeze flowed through the slightly open window.

Matthias brazenly opened a bottle of wine, ignoring his doctor's strict warning to refrain from alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs for a while. He filled his own glass first and then offered one to Kwon Taekjoo.

{Care for a drink?}

{Why don't you save that kind of trick for your women?}

{Just a glass of wine; hardly a trick. I'm only trying to lighten the stiff atmosphere.}

{Isn't it fine the way it is? How much softer do you want it to be?}

{Right now, it's... I'd say bleak, past the point of simple calm.}

Matthias swirled his glass slowly, his expression insincere, eyebrows raised coyly. Kwon Taekjoo looked him over with a disapproving gaze. The guy who had been whining about being unwell was now holed up at the villa under the pretense of recovery, unnecessarily styling his hair and adorning himself with all kinds of accessories. Each time their eyes met, Matthias's flirtatious glances grated on his nerves.

{Honestly, any more 'softening' would just be disgusting. We're both men, after all.}

When Kwon Taekjoo expressed his disgust, Matthias burst into hearty laughter, muttering a cryptic {Fascinating.} His persistent avoidance of the main topic, paired with his constant smirking, was starting to wear thin.

{Stop playing around and get to the point. How much longer do I have to wait?} {Impatient as always. Pretending to rest a bit wouldn't be so bad, would it? Besides, you probably don't even have all your memories back yet.}

Kwon Taekjoo crossed his arms firmly. He was determined to get a clear answer this time. He couldn't keep delaying his return indefinitely, nor was he the type to sit around waiting for his memories to fully return.

Kwon Taekjoo was about to ask Matthias if he genuinely intended to help him. A vibration sounded from somewhere, drawing both their gazes to Matthias's phone simultaneously. After checking the caller ID, Matthias pursed his lips. Was it the call he'd been waiting for? Yet, instead of answering, he flipped the phone face down.

{You can take it if you need to.}

{Oh, it's not urgent.}

{If it's something sensitive, I can give you some space.}

{You know, sometimes it's good to keep people waiting a bit. It raises my value, so to speak.}

It was ironic that he, who had women rotating in and out of his life like clockwork, suddenly decided to play hard-to-get.

Kwon Taekjoo gave Matthias a look of disdain as he piled kaymak and honey on simit bread and chewed it up. The pan-fried eggs that came alongside were spooned up hastily, but even though they were sunny-side-up, they left his throat feeling blocked. He had no idea how long he'd been away from Korea, but he sorely missed a hot, spicy soup. He tried to settle for chorba, a tomato soup, but it offered little comfort.

{You've got an interesting expression there.}

Matthias remarked, chuckling. Taekjoo responded with his middle finger and poured strong coffee down his throat, coating his stomach that felt greasy. It would've been even better if it were iced coffee — maybe he'd ask for some ice to chill it. As he licked his lips and glanced toward the kitchen, Matthias tapped the table to grab his attention.

{Come on, tell me something about yourself.}

{You high on drugs or something? I'd need memories to share anything.}

{But you said you remember your family.}

{And that means I should pour out my family history to you?}

{Hmm... so nothing else has come back? I need to know what you were doing in Korea and who's after you so I can prepare a new passport that fits the situation. I don't want to hear that you got caught and lost everything right after I went to the trouble of helping.}

It seemed Matthias genuinely knew little about Kwon Taekjoo. If Matthias had wanted to uncover his identity, he could have easily done so, especially while they were living together. Obtaining fingerprints or DNA would have been effortless. If Matthias still hadn't found anything, that might mean Kwon Taekjoo's identity was deeply concealed.

It seemed necessary to piece together whatever fragments of clues there were to get closer to the truth.

{First of all, tell me about when you first met me.}

{Hmm? I thought I'd already told you everything.}

{Try to be more detailed. You really hadn't known me before then?}

{Right. That was the first time I saw you.}

{So, you're saying your business had nothing to do with me?}

Matthias nodded calmly. Kwon Taekjoo was certain that if he'd been involved with drugs, resisting the temptation as he did now would've been far more difficult.

{You said I was already being chased by the Cuban government then. Are you telling me you really don't know why? Not even a guess?}

{I told you, I don't know.}

{And you decided to help someone you knew nothing about, not even why they were on the run? You could be labeled an accomplice if things went wrong.}

Kwon Taekjoo raised an eyebrow, his expression questioning Matthias's supposed altruism. Matthias neither confirmed nor denied, only shrugged, a sly smile suggesting he was fine with whatever Kwon Taekjoo wanted to think.

So far, Matthias had acted like a remarkably decent person, providing Kwon Taekjoo with a comfortable place to sleep, quality food, and various conveniences. According to Matthias, they had only met once, and even that was because of someone named Psikh.

Could it be that Matthias was so wealthy he was both magnanimous and generous? Would he still act this devoted if Kwon Taekjoo offered him nothing in return? No — that much was clear. Almost no one offers kindness without some return, especially not a future drug lord. Such a notion would make even a passing dog laugh.

{You said I came here with that Psikh guy. What kind of person is he?}

{Oh, Psikh? Let's call him an arms dealer. He only handles weapons he personally crafts.}

"An arms dealer, huh..."

He muttered to himself. Just the name "Psikh" sounded ominous, but to think he was an arms developer. Had Kwon Taekjoo worked in the military-industrial sector? Or maybe as an illegal broker? The arms industry operates in both the public and the shadows, with no regard for whether the products sold are used legally or criminally. If he had indeed been involved in that field, it wouldn't be strange for a government to want him.

Then, how had he become entangled with Psikh? And what about the Russian ambassador his mother had mentioned? If even a high-ranking

diplomat was involved, could it mean Psikh's arms trade reached the level of Russian national interests?

The most recent memory Kwon Taekjoo could recall was being admitted to the mechanical engineering department at a university in Korea. Perhaps, while studying the mechanics and design of machines, he developed an interest in weaponry. He might have solidified his career choice after handling weapons firsthand during his military service. He tried piecing together the scattered information in his mind, forming a tentative structure.

Watching him in silence, Matthias suddenly provided another clue.

{He's also closely tied to the mafia.}

{Mafia?}

The unexpected connection made his thoughts stall. His tattoo on the inside of his thigh tingled slightly. It was his only remaining tattoo, though there were traces of a large design that he'd had removed from just above his hip. Could those tattoos somehow be linked to the mafia?

It didn't surprise him that Matthias or Psikh had close mafia ties. But it was unsettling to think that he, Kwon Taekjoo, had suddenly veered into such a dark path. Was it some belated act of rebellion against the world? Had he been unable to bear the shock of losing both his father and his older brother?

Although he had lost his memories, it was bewildering how disconnected he felt from a past that once defined him. The confusion was overwhelming. By this point, he was beginning to doubt whether Matthias was telling him the whole truth.

{If you're lying to me, even a little...}

{Lying? Why would I?}

{.....}

{Believe it or not, Psikh is also a government official.}

The additional comment made his face contort. Matthias, watching his reaction, chuckled quietly before breaking into hearty laughter.

{Are you messing with me right now?}

He jumped to his feet, causing the tableware on the table to clatter noisily. If he'd been within reach, he would have grabbed him by the collar and shaken him.

{Unbelievable, right? It sounds absurd, doesn't it? But it's all true. That's the kind of person Psikh is, the one you're curious about.}

{...What?}

He glared at Matthias with skeptical eyes. Matthias was still grinning, but he didn't seem to be joking.

What kind of government official is close to the mafia and even develops and sells weapons himself? Well, given Russia's national character, it's not impossible for former mafia members to advance to high-ranking positions. After all, the country was practically under mafia control until the 1990s.

But the more he learned about Psikh, the harder it became to fully connect with the person he'd once been. Trying to link his last memories of himself with the version of him that could blend seamlessly with Psikh now felt daunting.

Just then, Matthias's phone rang. He didn't bother to check the caller; it seemed he already knew who it was.

Despite being ignored repeatedly, the caller refused to give up. The vibrations would stop briefly, only to start ringing again.

{Why don't you just answer it?}

{Hmm. Maybe I should.}

Matthias leisurely tapped the call button, then brought the phone to his ear, lowering the volume naturally.

{Oh, what's the occasion? Reaching out to me first like this.}

His voice, which had previously seemed indifferent, now sounded genuinely pleased. A mischievous grin spread across his face.

*[They say you're in Türkiye right now.]*

{And how did you figure that out? You swore we'd never cross paths again, but secretly missed me, didn't you?}

*[Everyone seems to know you're there.]*

{I had no idea I was so popular.}

*[I need to meet you for a moment.]*

{Mind getting straight to the point?}

*[Let's discuss it in person.]*

{Not sure. I'm not in the best shape at the moment.}

He was acting like he was in worse condition than he actually was. His dislocated shoulder wasn't so severe that it interfered with his daily life. Was he just trying to avoid meeting the person on the other end?

*[I might as well show up as one of your clients this time around.]*

The caller must have said something significant; the corner of Matthias's mouth twitched slightly. It was such a subtle reaction that you'd only notice if you were watching closely.

{Oh, so scary.}

Matthias continued with exaggerated nonchalance, though his fingers idly running over the knife on the table suggested he was carefully weighing something.

Kwon Taekjoo pretended not to care but listened intently to Matthias's conversation. There was little to actually hear — just the faint timbre of the caller's voice and the murmur of sound reaching his ear. For some reason, he couldn't help but stay focused. His heart pounded as if he were eavesdropping on something forbidden, trying not to let Matthias notice.

{Fine, then. I'll set a time and let you know.}

*[Just so you know, my patience isn't all that impressive.]*

{Got it. Still, I have my pride, so let me at least prepare to welcome a guest properly.}

It seemed he was wrapping up the call, and Kwon Taekjoo chewed on his hard bread, watching him. But when Matthias let out an "ah," he paused mid-bite.

{Of course, you're welcome to come empty-handed, but if you insist on bringing a gift, I'll gladly accept.}

Matthias kept up his playful tone until the end of the call.

{He ignored me with a scoff when I was desperate, but now he's in a frenzy to see me the moment I made him sweat a little.}

He dropped a vague hint about the caller to Kwon Taekjoo. Was it an ex? The voice sounded more like a man than a woman, but without hearing clearly, it was hard to be sure. And Matthias being bisexual couldn't be ruled out either.

{He wants to drop by for a bit. Would you mind stepping out if that's okay?}

{Is that necessary? If I stay in my room, he won't even know that I'm here.}

{We might have a rather... intense, physical conversation.}

Matthias winked. It brought back memories of Cappadocia, where Matthias had invited women to his room next door, indulging in alcohol and drugs, reveling in nightlong escapades. Kwon Taekjoo had tried to ignore it, but the unrelenting banging on the shared wall and constant moans had kept him up all night. If Matthias and this caller shared a similar history, there was no guarantee such a scene wouldn't repeat itself.

Besides, Kwon Taekjoo had plenty he wanted to investigate secretly. Relying too much on Matthias, even if he was indebted to him, would

mean giving him control over his own fate. There was no guarantee Matthias wouldn't eventually stab him in the back.

He agreed to Matthias's suggestion readily.

{Fine. I was starting to get a bit restless myself; this works out well.}

{Go out and take a passport photo, and grab something you like to eat. Since you're in Istanbul, you should enjoy the romance of a port city. I'll arrange some security for you, too.}

Calling it security was just another way of saying surveillance. Even with his memory wiped, he was still capable of looking after himself.

{Forget the security...}

Kwon Taekjoo jabbed at an innocent piece of bread with his fork. His lips trembled as if words were about to leave them, but his mouth hesitated, subtly frowning as he struggled to speak his mind. Watching his awkwardness, Matthias Pérez seemed to grasp the situation and let out an {Ah.} With a snap of his fingers, he summoned his subordinate, giving a command. The subordinate then placed cash, a card, and a phone in front of Kwon Taekjoo.

{I've installed an anti-tracking app on the phone, so use it freely. You can choose any car from the garage.}

{...Just keep a tab. I'll pay it all back later.}

Kwon Taekjoo muttered curtly instead of saying thanks. He was the type who couldn't stand being in debt to others, and it seemed he wasn't skilled at expressing his emotions, either.

{Suit yourself. I have to go greet some guests now. Make sure to take a good picture.}

Matthias Pérez slowly got up, winking as he did. When Kwon Taekjoo grimaced, Matthias laughed and exited the dining room.

Kwon Taekjoo rose from his seat as well. Stepping out into the hallway, he asked the guard stationed there where the garage was. Without a

word, the guard led him to the garage entrance and then returned to his post.

Did he lead him to the right place? It looked more like a large warehouse than a garage. Feeling uncertain, he pressed a button on the wall to open the door. As the shutter slowly rose, the lights automatically switched on. The interior was reminiscent of a supercar showroom. The cars lined up in perfect order radiated an undeniable presence, each one distinct in color.

They seemed to scream, *Look at me!* He covered his eyes and sighed.

"...Crazy bastard."

He chose the most modest-looking car and drove out of the villa. Surveillance quickly caught up with him. Though they didn't follow him too closely, a particular vehicle consistently appeared in his side mirror. Even under the guise of protecting him, he found it unwelcome.

As soon as he reached the older part of the town, he parked in a convenient spot. The trailing cars didn't pull over behind him but continued on their way. He blended into the bustling shopping district, where the crowd was thick. The surveillance team soon resumed following him from a slight distance. It was clear they planned to report his every move back to Matthias.

A thought crossed his mind — *what would they do if he suddenly tried to run?* Would they go to any lengths to catch him? Could that be called protection? Depending on how they reacted, he could get a glimpse into Matthias's true intentions.

Kwon Taekjoo inspected the movement of his trackers, pressing into the rows of storefronts. They passed by naturally, not stopping just because he did. They weren't amateurs.

In that case, he took out his phone and, like any tourist, began taking pictures of the surrounding scenery. Perhaps worried that they'd appear in his photos, the trackers moved out of the camera's angle, pretending to browse nearby goods.

Taking advantage of the moment, he bolted down a narrow path between an outdoor café and a candle shop, weaving quickly through the alley bustling with tourists.

Before long, he heard a commotion behind him. Glancing back, he saw his trackers pushing through the crowd, now aware of his escape.

So, they weren't simply here to protect him. He smirked and kept running. Despite being chased, his blood was pumping, and he felt a thrill that he couldn't quite understand.

As he dashed forward, narrowly avoiding pedestrians and obstacles, an unexpected problem appeared. Coming toward him was a tour guide holding a flag, leading a large group of tourists. The path was narrow, leaving no clear way to dodge.

{Ah!}

{Eek!}

Tourists, anticipating a collision, raised their arms to shield their heads and screamed. Still moving at full speed, Kwon Taekjoo barely avoided contact by running along the side wall. When he finally landed back on the ground, he nearly collided with the person at the end of the group. He swiftly grabbed the man's shoulder, spun him out of the way, and landed safely. Apologizing to the startled tourist, he continued his escape.

Soon after, his trackers reached the group and struggled to push their way through.

Meanwhile, Kwon Taekjoo reached an open shopping area. Rounding a corner, he scanned the buildings. He noticed a row of buildings with rain gutters running down the walls and connecting with an L-shaped elbow pipe.

Using his natural agility, he grabbed hold of the elbow pipe and pulled himself up onto the roof. His trackers arrived just in time to see him vanish and looked around in confusion. With the crowd and shops filling the street, it was impossible to spot him. Eventually, they split up

to search, with some heading into nearby alleys and others entering shops.

While they searched, Kwon Taekjoo leaped from one rooftop to another, quickly leaving the area. When taller buildings appeared, he effortlessly jumped and grabbed onto the upper floor's ledge. Once inside, he slipped out the back door, avoiding attention. Though he hadn't fully recovered from his injuries, the exercise felt surprisingly refreshing, as if he hadn't had a workout like this in ages.

At last, Kwon Taekjoo arrived at an internet café. Although he could now access the internet on the phone Matthias had given him, it was too risky, as he might be tracked. If he couldn't even trust himself, trusting others was out of the question.

Internet cafés in Turkey looked quite different from Korean PC rooms, but the gaming posters on the walls suggested decent equipment. After handing cash to the owner, he pointed to a secluded spot, and the owner nodded readily, keeping a close eye on his every move. Other patrons couldn't help but glance at the conspicuous foreigner. Clearly, he couldn't stay long.

As soon as he sat down, he connected to the internet and searched "Russian ambassador." Several names appeared, but one in particular stood out.

He was distinctly different in age from the others and had such a striking appearance that one might mistake him for an actor or model. Yevgeny Vissarionovich Bogdanov, the Russian ambassador to South Korea. Could he be the ambassador his mother mentioned? He wasn't sure.

He then accessed a Russian portal site and typed in Ambassador Bogdanov's name. Oddly, there was little information about his activities in Russia. The last news report on him dated back three years to his appointment as the Russian ambassador to South Korea. Typically, someone in his position would have every diplomatic statement and event covered in the news, but this was strange. Had it been intentionally erased?

Of course, that wasn't the only question he had.

"They gave the ambassador position to someone this young?"

No matter how he looked at it, the Russian ambassador to South Korea seemed excessively young. No — calling him "young" almost felt like an understatement. When Kwon Taekjoo first saw the photo, he thought it must be from the ambassador's early years. Yet, there were no images showing him at an older age. He checked the date of birth: the ambassador was four years younger than Kwon Taekjoo himself. Ambassadors typically represented their nations as seasoned diplomats, chosen for their experience, even if Russia's governance seemed haphazard at times or their focus on diplomatic relations with South Korea was minor. He couldn't help but wonder what led to the appointment of such a rookie as the Russian ambassador to South Korea.

After a moment of thought, Kwon Taekjoo searched another name.

"Vissarion Bogdanov...."

He remembered that Russians use patronymics as middle names. Yevgeny Vissarionovich Bogdanov's name suggested that his father was Vissarion from the Bogdanov family.

As he pressed enter, new search results appeared. The father, Vissarion, had far more media coverage than his son. Most prominently, he had once served as the head of Gazprom, Russia's state-owned gas company. Many articles depicted the Bogdanov family as power players behind the scenes in Russia. Seeing the records of Vissarion and his sons, Kwon Taekjoo could believe it.

The eldest son, Vladimir, took over the energy sector, including Gazprom, following Vissarion's lead. The second son, Bazim, was known as one of the president's closest associates and had risen to become Russia's de facto second-in-command. And then there was the third son, Yevgeny, a high-ranking diplomat. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that this one family held sway over the entire nation.

How did Kwon Taekjoo get entangled with the third son of such a family? And who on earth was that person named Psikh? The more he uncovered, the more complicated it all seemed.

He decided to go back to the beginning. The Tehran attack was reported to have occurred just before a summit between the Iranian and Russian leaders. Could Ambassador Bogdanov have been part of the delegation? Or had he stayed in South Korea, with Kwon Taekjoo sent as his representative? If he looked at it that way, it made sense that Kwon Taekjoo's name was added to the list of those to be rescued by Russia. But the unresolved issue was why the ambassador's aide's entry records hadn't appeared.

“Yevgeny Vissarionovich Bogdanov....”

He turned back and stared intently at the photo of the Russian ambassador, murmuring the name several times as if testing its familiarity. Yet, it still felt as foreign as when he'd first seen it.

Suddenly, he rubbed his sternum with a fist. There was a sudden, inexplicable heaviness there.

“What’s this? Did I get indigestion?”

He pressed his sternum a few more times, moving up slightly and tapping at his chest. His chest felt tight, like blood flow was blocked, and his heart thumped uncomfortably fast. He couldn’t make sense of it — was he just low on stamina?

He forced himself to ignore his physical state, focusing instead on the monitor, trying to decide what else he should investigate.

Absentmindedly glancing down at the taskbar, he noticed various games installed on the screen. One game caught his eye as he scrolled without much thought. It didn’t immediately recall any specific memory of his, yet there was a strange sense of *déjà vu*. Had he been into games like this?

With uncertainty, he clicked to open the game. A login screen appeared, prompting for an ID and password. As if on impulse, he started typing a

string of letters that came to mind.

## Cherry boy

\*\*\*

A red LaFerrari Aperta hurtled forward, crashing through a sturdy iron gate. Despite the collision, the driver floored the accelerator, pushing the gate violently open. One side broke off completely, while the other clung to the frame, dangling. Even the high-end luxury car, worth billions, showed visible damage from the impact.

Yet the driver didn't slow down, racing straight to the front of the mansion. Only when the car hit the stone steps and the railing did it finally come to a stop. Guards waiting nearby rushed to surround the intruder, aiming dozens of guns at him.

The driver's door swung open, and a man stepped out. It was Zhenya. Unfazed by the weapons pointed at him, he climbed the stone steps with a calm expression. When the car door opened again, all the guns trained on Zhenya's back shifted to the passenger side. Yoon Jong-woo, who had tried to slip out quietly, froze on the spot.

Soon, Mathias emerged from the mansion to greet them. Dressed sharply in a white suit, he opened his arms in welcome to Zhenya.

{Welcome, my friend. It's been a while, hasn't it?}

Mathias alone seemed calm amid the rising tension. Zhenya brushed past him, striding into the mansion. The guards tried to stop his advance, but Zhenya twisted their arms aside with quick movements. Watching this, Mathias chuckled.

{Quite a dramatic way to say hello.}

Before Mathias even finished speaking, Zhenya had disappeared from view. Soon after, sounds of breaking objects and screams echoed from inside. As he searched for something, he left nothing untouched — neither object nor person blocking his path remained unscathed.

{Yes, Mr. Yevgeny! Wait for me!}

Yoon Jong-woo forced the words out, his face pale. Jong-woo, who looked like he might collapse any moment, staggered toward Matthias while he was eyeing him curiously.

{Your companion has changed. Your taste is getting weirder.}

Yoon Jong-woo awkwardly greeted Matthias, who was openly scanning him from head to toe. His arms, clinging tightly to his bag, were trembling. He didn't even dare to adjust his glasses, which had slipped down to the tip of his nose. Matthias stared at him and then grinned.

{Welcome, friend. Care for a drink? Or would you prefer tea? Turkey has some decent coffee, too.}

{Oh, um, I... I was with Mr. Yevgeny...}

{Are you planning to join that madman in tearing down my house?}

{No, no...! I just, um...}

{Wouldn't it be better to wait with me and enjoy some refreshments?}

His tone was kind, but it carried a subtle pressure. Yoon Jong-woo pressed his lips together and nodded repeatedly. Matthias led Yoon Jong-woo into a small room. Even as they moved, the sound of doors and furniture being yanked and tossed about continued. Gunshots echoed in succession.

Each time, Yoon Jong-woo's shoulders flinched. Unlike him, Matthias remained composed, as if he hadn't heard anything.

Matthias said, {This way,} and guided Yoon Jong-woo to the sitting room, giving him a gentle push on the back. He smoothly slipped the gun from Yoon Jong-woo's waistband as they walked, leaving him no time to react. Matthias handed the gun to one of his men and then, with a gracious expression, personally seated Yoon Jong-woo in a chair.

He even poured tea into Yoon Jong-woo's cup himself.

{I'm going to step out and have a quick chat with Psikh. Just sit back and enjoy yourself for a while.}

Yoon Jong-woo, pale with anxiety, could only nod. Matthias gave him a bright smile before leaving the sitting room. Moments later, his subordinates took their positions in front of Yoon Jong-woo, blocking his path.

Once outside, Matthias sought the source of the ongoing noise. By now, Zhenya had likely finished searching the first floor and moved up to the second.

The ceiling thumped constantly, and the sound of breaking glass echoed. He followed the staircase up to the second floor. Both the landing and the hallway were in disarray, littered with broken furniture and decorations.

Matthias encountered Zhenya in the hallway, but Zhenya brushed past him, entering the next room. It seemed he wouldn't be satisfied until he'd inspected every room. From the brief phone call, it had been clear he was tense, but Matthias hadn't expected him to storm in with such a grim expression. Was finding Kwon Taekjoo really such an urgent matter? Judging by the state he was in, one might think Kwon Taekjoo held Zhenya's very life in his hands.

{Hey, friend, what's with the lack of manners?}

Matthias tried to draw Zhenya's attention, but Zhenya ignored him as if he hadn't heard. Soon, Zhenya charged into the room Kwon Taekjoo had been using. The guards tried to stop him again, but Matthias waved them off and followed him in.

Zhenya, frowning, stood frozen in the middle of the room. The room was filled with the scent of burning candles. After a moment of hesitation, he abruptly approached the bed, yanking the pillow and blanket toward him with one hand. Then, without warning, he buried his face in them, inhaling deeply. Unsatisfied with this alone, he began to carefully inspect the sheets and the surrounding area of the bed.

With Zhenya's relentless movements, the desk, table, and chairs were all knocked over without care. Even the carpet underneath was half-torn and flipped.

Not finding what he wanted there, he went into the attached bathroom and searched around for a while longer. Matthias, watching with his arms crossed, knocked on the open door. A sharp gaze, like a knife, flew over and pierced him.

{What do you think you're doing, breaking other people's things like this, huh?}

Matthias put on a mock expression of indignation. Only then did Zhenya pause, running a hand through his tousled hair. As he slowly turned toward Matthias, the air seemed to tighten, as if pulled taut by a drawn bow. His unwavering gaze seemed to demand if Matthias truly knew nothing.

{What's this, really? What exactly are you looking for?}

{I heard you've been hanging around with an East Asian recently.}

{Well, this town sure spreads rumors fast. Actually, maybe it's just me getting more popular — I didn't even know you were here until you called.}

{Stop deflecting. I won't ask twice.}

{Alright. But as for an East Asian... was one of the women I hooked up with East Asian?}

{I was high at the time, so my memory's pretty hazy.}

Matthias scratched his neck indifferently. Zhenya's face grew even colder. It looked like he'd leap forward and snap Matthias's neck if he saw the slightest opening. Even so, Matthias just smirked.

{Why? Does it have to be a specific 'someone'?}

{Where is that Asian?}

{I told you, I don't know who you're talking about. I'd need to know the full story — who you're looking for and why — if you want my help.}

{You don't know?}

{Nope.}

{You'll be held accountable for those words.}

The words sounded almost like a declaration of war. A chuckle escaped Matthias.

{Barging in here and demanding accountability, huh?}

He hummed playfully, tilting his head and shrugging his shoulders with exaggerated indifference. A thick vein pulsed on Zhenya's forehead as he watched, his pupils narrowing. It looked as if he was ready to sink his teeth into Matthias at any moment.

It was at that moment.

{Mr. Yevgeny!}

Yoon Jong-woo's urgent voice came from downstairs. Zhenya and Matthias's gazes simultaneously turned toward the door, and soon enough, Yoon Jong-woo was hurriedly rushing up to them.

{Look at this!}

Driven by urgency, Yoon Jong-woo thrust his phone forward. When Matthias looked at it with a curious expression, Jong-woo warily angled the screen toward Zhenya instead. A notification window appeared on the screen, but since it was entirely in Korean, understanding it was difficult. Yoon Jong-woo whispered in a low voice, just enough for Zhenya to hear.

{This is a notification from my game account. I haven't logged into this game in a long time, you know?}

{So?}

{But just now, someone logged into the account. It says they accessed it from an unauthorized device and IP address, and a verification message was sent. There was even a time when sunbae tried to contact me through this account before.}

{Can you check the login location?}

{Yes. Right now, it's showing as Russia, but since an IP can easily be rerouted, I'll need to confirm the actual login location more thoroughly.}

{Handle it within ten minutes.}

Zhenya, who had issued the order unilaterally, strode off purposefully. Yoon Jong-woo quickly followed, calling out, {Wait, I'm coming with you!}

{What, you're leaving without even having a cup of tea?}

Matthias called out loudly after them, but Zhenya left without a word of farewell or even a look back. He climbed into his car, which he had left running. Yoon Jong-woo, afraid he'd be left behind, hurriedly jumped into the passenger seat. The car made a wide turn in reverse and then accelerated quickly as it sped away from the villa.

They'd come in as they pleased and left just the same. Matthias let out a dry laugh, almost in disbelief. His security guards moved to take aim at the car's rear, but Matthias waved them off. After all, if the person Zhenya was frantically searching for was Kwon Taekjoo, then he would have to come back eventually, one way or another.

Just as he was turning around, feeling somewhat optimistic, Matthias's secretary hurried over with an anxious expression.

{What is it?}

When he asked, feeling wary, he received unexpected news.

{The target has disappeared.}

\*\*\*

The LaFerrari stopped right in the middle of the older part of the town in La Ferraria. Zhenya and Yoon Jong-woo abandoned the car and dashed into the alley. They burst into an internet café marked on the map, where the owner approached them, saying something. Ignoring him, they scanned each patron carefully.

They tugged at collars to check faces and pinched skin if they were unsure, causing grumbling complaints to flare up around them.

But Kwon Taekjoo was nowhere to be found. Another wild goose chase, perhaps?

{Is this really the place?}

{Yes, I'm sure...}

Yoon Jong-woo replied, glancing repeatedly at his phone with a troubled expression. The only person who might log into his old game account was Kwon Taekjoo. Jong-woo had quit the game ages ago, and its dwindling player base had nearly led to server shutdown. If Taekjoo's memory was frozen a few years back, he might be unaware of this, making it plausible he'd try to reach out through that account. After all, he'd done the same when things went wrong in Russia, leading to a warrant from headquarters. Was it a pointless hope?

{I'm sorry.}

Yoon Jong-woo apologized, preemptively resigned. Zhenya, who had been regarding him with disapproval, suddenly noticed something. Carefully, he removed it from Yoon Jong-woo — a strand of hair. It was dark, slightly wavy, and unusually thick.

*'What kind of guy has hair this silky? It's unnecessarily glossy too.'*

*'But you like it, Taekjoo.'*

*'Who says I do?'*

Yet Kwon Taekjoo was always fidgeting with Zhenya's hair whenever he found a moment. When Zhenya fell asleep first or woke up late, Taekjoo would endlessly toy with his hair, only to quickly withdraw whenever Zhenya stirred awake, pretending nothing had happened.

He would hold Kwon Taekjoo close, rubbing his face against his head. His thick, subtly wavy hair was soft and comforting, like a plush blanket.

The hair he removed from Yoon Jong-woo was very similar to Kwon Taekjoo's. Unless Yoon Jong-woo had been carrying it around all this time, or unless Zhenya had missed it, it most likely transferred from Matthias's villa.

{Taekjoo... it's definitely him.}

{...Sorry? What do you mean?}

Without offering Yoon Jong-woo any explanation, Zhenya kept fiddling with the strand of hair in his hand, even bringing it to his nose to sniff it. Yet, it was far from enough to detect Kwon Taekjoo's scent.

{Hey, you two! What do you think you're doing in my shop?}

At that moment, the internet café owner approached them, pointing and shouting. It wasn't unreasonable, given that they had barged in, turned the place upside down, and hadn't even paid.

{If you don't leave immediately, I'm calling the police!}

Zhenya grabbed the shouting man by the collar, lifting him clean off the ground so that his feet dangled in midair. Holding the terrified man steady, Zhenya shoved a photo of Kwon Taekjoo in his face. The man glanced at the picture on the phone screen, then nodded repeatedly. He gestured toward a secluded corner.

Yoon Jong-woo quickly went over and politely asked the current user if he could have a moment. Then he started reviewing the PC's usage history.

{The usage history was wiped an hour ago. It's something sunbae always does!}

Yoon Jong-woo exclaimed with certainty. It seemed clear that Kwon Taekjoo had been here about an hour ago. Afterward, where had he gone? Had he returned to Matthias's villa? If Kwon Taekjoo were genuinely cooperating with Matthias, he wouldn't have needed to stop by here to use the internet.

The fact that he chose to operate independently suggested that Kwon Taekjoo didn't completely trust Matthias. It also implied he might not

return to Matthias's side.

One hour was more than enough time for Kwon Taekjoo to vanish again. They had to catch him before he disappeared from their sight once more. \*\*\*

As he stepped out of the car, Matthias strode toward him purposefully. It was as if he'd been waiting anxiously, his expression a blend of barely concealed relief rather than true welcome.

{What's with all the fuss?"}

Kwon Taekjoo asked, eyeing Matthias skeptically as he approached with such urgency.

"How could I not? You suddenly disappeared without a word — I was worried."

Kwon Taekjoo folded his arms, frowning. He was no child, and Matthias wasn't his guardian, yet here he was, acting excessively protective. Taking advantage of the moment, he questioned Matthias.

{Well, who told you to follow me?}

{Follow you? I was only trying to protect you in case things got dangerous.}

Matthias replied shamelessly, as expected. It was clear that pushing the matter further wouldn't lead to a straightforward conversation. With a shrug, Kwon Taekjoo let it slide.

{I just wanted to spend some time alone.}

{Where were you coming from, anyway?}

{There's no need for you to know that.}

{Oh, that hurts. I was so worried you might have been snatched up by some shady people.}

{Yeah, sure.}

Kwon Taekjoo brushed him off, heading inside the villa, with Matthias trailing close behind, peppering him with questions.

{You're really not going to tell me where you went?}

{I just went around sightseeing. There's a lot of interesting stuff at the market.}

he said, holding up a plastic bag and giving it a little shake. Inside were a variety of items wrapped in bright red packaging, mostly Korean foods like ramen.

{What on earth did you buy? Did you even eat food?}

{This is it. From now on, I'll take care of my own meals, so don't worry. Right now, I'd just like to wash up and rest.}

As Kwon Taekjoo started up the stairs to the second floor, he suddenly stopped, saying, "Oh, right," as he remembered something. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a small envelope and handed it to Matthias.

{What's this?}

{A passport photo. You told me to get it taken.}

Matthias opened the envelope and took out the photo. Even though it was for a passport, Kwon Taekjoo's expression was intensely blank, as if he were staring down the camera in a standoff. Matthias couldn't help but let out a quiet laugh.

{Looks good.}

{Does it?}

Kwon Taekjoo replied indifferently, then turned to go before pausing again. Glancing back at Matthias, he asked,

{Did something happen while I was out?}

{...Why the sudden question?}

{The front gate is all banged up. It looks like someone rammed into it.}

{Oh, just a passing car had a minor accident. Beginner driver, apparently.}

Matthias replied casually as if it were nothing. Kwon Taekjoo nodded, accepting the explanation, and continued up the stairs.

As Kwon Taekjoo walked down the second-floor hallway, an odd sense of unease crept over him. For some reason, the windows seemed to have been replaced with new ones, and the decorations that had been scattered here and there were now nowhere to be found. Something had clearly happened.

Kwon Taekjoo stepped into his room and stood near the door, scanning the interior. The scent of the candle he had turned off due to a headache was so strong it nearly numbed his sense of smell. The table, lighting fixtures, and bedding were all arranged differently from how he'd left them when he last departed.

It wasn't unusual for the staff to come in and clean, given how large the villa was. But Kwon Taekjoo found himself wondering why they would bother to tidy a room he had already left perfectly organized. Moreover, the carpet, which had been perfectly fine, was now completely replaced. Out of curiosity, he ran his hands across the new carpet and even flipped it over. He was checking for surveillance devices. Nothing stood out to him.

“.....”

Pausing to think for a moment, Kwon Taekjoo glanced down the hallway. Just as usual, Matthias's bodyguards were on duty, standing guard. Motion-sensing CCTVs were operational in various places. After closing the door, he continued to observe the situation outside the window. Four guards were stationed at the entrance, and CCTV cameras were also installed on the outer walls of the building.

Each room in the villa came with its own private bathroom. Since the drain pipes passed through the bathroom ceiling, it looked like the safest route if one wanted to move around undetected by the guards or the cameras.

The moment he made his decision, Kwon Taekjoo entered the bathroom and stepped up onto the bathtub. He lifted the ceiling inspection panel, revealing a straight drainpipe. Biting down on an emergency flashlight, he quickly climbed up into the ceiling. As expected, the drainpipes connected from one bathroom to another, but the space was so cramped that he had to crawl on his belly to move through. Silently, he slithered forward, passing through several rooms.

He counted the rooms he crossed in his mind, stopping when he reached the fifth. He carefully lifted the inspection panel for that room. There was no sign of movement below. Sliding smoothly down, he glanced around to confirm no one was present. Aimed downward, his flashlight revealed the room, which was shrouded by double curtains that would likely prevent anyone outside from noticing his presence.

The room Kwon Taekjoo had secretly entered was Matthias's study. He had already confirmed that there were no CCTVs installed here. No matter how wary of intruders one might be, no one would put surveillance cameras or listening devices in a space they frequently occupied. The more secrets one harbored, the less inclined they would be to have their every move recorded.

Without hesitation, Kwon Taekjoo approached the office desk, slipping his hand under the bottom of a drawer and retrieving something. It was the cellphone he had received from Matthias.

He retrieved the phone, tape and all, and pocketed it before returning to his room the same way he had come. Crawling through the dust-filled ceiling had left him looking disheveled. First, he put the cellphone on charge and took a shower. The curiosity of what might be recorded on the phone set his heart racing. Without even drying his hair, he threw on a robe and stepped out.

The phone's battery had only charged to about 20%, but he couldn't wait any longer and impatiently powered it on. Fortunately, the recorder had worked as intended, and several missed recordings appeared on the device. Plugging in his wired earphones, he immediately played the files.

Small, repeated noises came through. He turned the volume up to the maximum. Soon, sporadic bursts of chaotic sounds filled his ears. There were crashing and breaking noises, as if something was being thrown and smashed. Then came the sound of bones twisting, accompanied by screams that pierced his eardrums. His ear hairs prickled at the sound of glass shattering, and suddenly, the image of the newly replaced windows and cleared hallway flashed through his mind.

What exactly had happened here? He focused more intently on the recording. The distant crashing sounds grew louder until they were almost right in front of him. It was as if an unknown intruder had barged right into Matthias's study, where the recorder had been placed. There was a loud noise of a door slamming open.

Was he too immersed? Kwon Taekjoo's heart was pounding as if he were actually hiding in that room. Unconsciously holding his breath, he strained to catch every sound beyond his earphones. The intruder, breathing heavily, rummaged through the study, searching frantically — from the bookshelves to the display cabinet, the bathroom, and behind the chairs. They showed no hesitation in searching the lair of a heavily armed drug lord's heir. Could they be the police?

There was no voice from the intruder at all, only the sound of harsh, hurried breathing echoing repeatedly. It reminded Kwon Taekjoo of a hunting dog, panting after relentlessly chasing its prey for dozens of kilometers. A shiver ran down his spine. An inexplicable sense of unease gnawed at him. Did he somehow know this person?

The intruder, apparently not finding what he sought in the study, left the room. Several minutes later, Matthias's voice could be heard.

*{Hey, friend, what's with the lack of manners?}*

The intruder ignored him, opening the door to another room. Matthias followed him, still protesting.

*{What do you think you're doing, breaking other people's things like this, huh?}*

Undeterred, the intruder continued to wreak havoc around the villa. At that point, Kwon Taekjoo, too, began to wonder who this person was, what they were up to, and what they could possibly be looking for.

{*What's this, really? What exactly are you looking for?*}

{*I heard you've been hanging around with an East Asian recently.*}

The intruder's voice suddenly came through. Something inside Kwon Taekjoo dropped with a heavy thud. Startled, he even forgot to breathe. *What... was this?*

Why? His confusion intensified. The voice, coming from above, was eerily calm but carried a chilling energy. Its slow, slightly wavering tone had a distinctive quality. It was the kind of voice you would never forget if you heard it even once.

He tried to focus, to catch more details, but his heartbeat was pounding so wildly that it was hard to concentrate. Just as he was about to rewind the playback to listen to the part he had missed, he heard a knock on the door. Startled, he pulled out the earphones, and Matthias's voice called out, {Taekjoo.} Taekjoo threw his robe over the phone, covering it, and strode toward the door. He had been so engrossed in listening that he hadn't noticed anyone approaching or calling his name. When he opened the door, Matthias was standing there, looking puzzled.

{*What's going on?*}

{*You tell me. I've been calling you, but you didn't respond.*}

{*Oh, I was in the shower.*}

He lied smoothly, unfazed. Matthias's gaze slid slowly from Kwon Taekjoo's damp hair down his body. When his eyes drifted a bit too low, Taekjoo knocked on the door frame to divert his attention.

{*So, what do you want?*}

{*Oh... It's just that lying around for recovery is making me restless, you know? I called for a masseur; want to join me for a hammam session?*}

A hammam was a traditional Turkish bathhouse where one could enjoy a series of treatments, including bathing, sauna, scrubbing, foam massage, and a full-body massage, all in one course.

{Once you try it, it'll take all your fatigue away.}

Matthias's offer sounded highly indulgent, almost decadent. Although it wasn't exactly appealing, there was no reason to refuse. After all, the bodyguards wouldn't accompany him to the bathhouse, and at least there, Matthias would be unarmed. He had an answer he needed to get from him.

{You go ahead and wait. I'll come down as soon as I'm ready.}

{Looks like you're all set though.}

{Just give me ten minutes.}

{Alright, then. See you downstairs.}

Matthias turned away without a word. Watching him head down to the first floor, Kwon Taekjoo closed the door, went back to the sofa, and pulled out his phone from under his robe. He put in his earbuds and pressed play again.

*{Well, this town sure spreads rumors fast. Actually, maybe it's just me getting more popular — I didn't even know you were here until you called.}*

*{Stop deflecting. I won't ask twice.}*

*{Alright. But as for an East Asian... was one of the women I hooked up with East Asian?}*

*{I was high at the time, so my memory's pretty hazy.}*

The "Asian" this unwelcome guest was looking for seemed to be Kwon Taekjoo himself. Yet Matthias played dumb, acting as though he had no idea. Was he trying to protect Taekjoo, or simply hiding something from the other person? It was unclear.

*{Why? Does it have to be a specific 'someone'?}*

*{Where is that Asian?}*

*{I told you, I don't know who you're talking about. I'd need to know the full story — who you're looking for and why — if you want my help.}*

*{You don't know?}*

*{ Nope. }*

*{You'll be held accountable for those words.}*

*{Barging in here and demanding accountability, huh?}*

The more Kwon Taekjoo listened to the intruder's voice, the stronger his sense of déjà vu became. Where had he heard that voice before? Although the man spoke fluent English, there was a noticeable Russian accent. Was he Russian? And why was he looking for Kwon Taekjoo? The questions only continued to multiply.

After a brief silence, a new voice interrupted.

*{Mr. Yevgeny!}*

*“...Huh?”*

An unexpected name had been mentioned. It was a name he'd been mulling over all day, making it even more vivid. Yevgeny. Yevgeny Vissarionovich Bogdanov. The face of the pretty-boy Russian ambassador to South Korea, which he'd seen in search results, immediately came to mind. The voice, previously just an odd memory, now seemed to match that face perfectly. It was hard to believe they could be different people.

The Russian ambassador to South Korea had personally come looking for an Asian man. No — Kwon Taekjoo felt sure the person he was after

was him. But why? Even if someone he had at his disposal had briefly gone missing and then been found, would he really come himself to retrieve him? Did Kwon Taekjoo know a secret about the ambassador? Or perhaps he possessed something of value to him?

*'So this is the hideout you've made for yourself? You ought to have dug deeper — deep enough that I couldn't find you.'*

For some time now, flashes of memory had resurfaced whenever a spark ignited in his head. But this time, the experience was different. A vague memory, coupled with the echo of a voice, resurfaced.

*'What's wrong? Do you honestly think it's over for you? Surely you anticipated that there would be a cost for everything you've done.'*

In his memory, Kwon Taekjoo was lying helpless on the ground. His opponent trampled over him, unconcerned whether he'd die right then and there.

*'Spying wasn't enough for you — you had to add breaking and entering, assault, terrorism, theft, impersonation of an official, and even public property damage to your list of accomplishments... Quite a variety of offenses you've racked up.'*

The air around him was tinged with the mocking tone, as vivid as if he were reliving it. Along with it came the fear and hopelessness that had overtaken him back then.

*'None of that really matters. But you should've at least heeded my warning. I spelled it out clearly — don't touch what's mine. Was that so hard?'*

The condescending tone, the arrogance, the voice's twisted, sneering cadence — it all clicked. He knew exactly who owned that voice.

*'You better start thinking hard about how you're going to survive.'*

“Ugh...!”

It felt as if a warning siren were blaring in his mind. Something sharp, like a spike, stabbed through his throbbing brainstem mercilessly. Gripping his aching head, his whole body trembled. Even clenching his teeth wasn't enough to stifle his groans, and soon he was drenched in sweat.

“Damn it... fuck...!”

Writhing in pain, he threw his phone across the room. Even after that, the headache lingered, leaving him groaning for a while. The echo of mocking laughter continued to reverberate in his ears.

“Haah, haah...”

Eventually, he managed to break free from the pain, teetering on the edge of unconsciousness. Memories of his past, laden with the torment they invoked, would surface without warning, only to dissipate just as quickly. He hated not being able to control it. Frustrated, he raked his fingers through his hair.

Once he calmed down, he began to piece his thoughts together. Although everything remained unclear, one thing seemed certain: Kwon Taekjoo and the Russian ambassador did not share a friendly relationship. To Matthias or his mother, he might have appeared as a loyal subordinate, but in reality, it was highly likely that he had been a spy. That would explain why his resurfacing memories were laced with references to espionage. The sharp reaction of fear whenever he heard the ambassador's voice or saw his face was likely an instinctive response, branded into him.

Kwon Taekjoo had approached the Russian ambassador as a spy. Eventually, his cover was blown, and he must have escaped with something that could deal a fatal blow to the ambassador or his family. If that were true, it would explain why the Russian government and Ambassador Yevgeny were so determined to capture him.

Of course, this was all based on intuition, just a theory. To verify anything, he would need more concrete clues. A few of those answers

seemed likely to come from Matthias. Putting his robe back on, he left the room.

Descending to the villa's basement, he spotted a large, gleaming glass door. The guard stationed there opened it for him. As he expected, no other guards were in sight.

The moment he stepped inside the hammam, a wave of heat and heavy humidity clung to his skin. Aside from the cedar-wood sauna room, the place was covered in marble. Clicking his tongue, he walked toward the sound of water. Matthias, already relaxing in the pool, raised his hand lazily.

{Oh, you're here. Want a drink?}

{I'll pass. Don't want to end up flat on my face.}

{Alright, then.}

Setting his glass aside, Matthias climbed out of the pool. He gestured to the pair of marble beds lined up next to each other, as if to demonstrate by lying on one first. It didn't seem all that appealing, but Kwon Taekjoo shrugged off his robe and took his place on the bed beside him.

{You'll like it.}

Matthias grinned and rang a small bell set off to the side. Two masseurs soon entered the room. To his relief, the atmosphere wasn't nearly as decadent as he had feared.

The masseurs bowed silently before scooping warm water from the bath and pouring it over the two men. It felt like a hot water rinse across his back, and the marble bed, gently heated, quickly relaxed his tense muscles. He'd been missing the heated floors of Korea's *ondol* rooms, and this felt like a small consolation.

A little while later, a thick layer of foam was placed over their bodies. The masseurs used thin cloths, puffed like balloons, to gently rub the foam over them. The sensation was a bit ticklish and not entirely satisfying, but since it was part of the routine, Kwon Taekjoo endured it

quietly. Meanwhile, Matthias let out a soft groan, thoroughly savoring the calm sensation.

Just as he was contemplating the right moment to ask his questions, Matthias spoke up first.

{How about we leave here tomorrow?}

{Suddenly?}

Kwon Taekjoo turned to him sharply, and Matthias nodded calmly.

{Yeah. Seems I'll need to return home sooner than expected. We could go to Mexico together first, then you can head to Korea from there. In Mexico, you'll have all the freedom you need for whatever you're planning. It'll be a lot easier to disguise your identity, too.}

{..Mexico...}

Why was Matthias, usually so unhurried, suddenly eager to leave? Was it because of the Russian ambassador who showed up today? Was he trying to protect Kwon Taekjoo from that man? And if so, what was Matthias gaining in return? Perhaps the leverage Kwon Taekjoo had taken against the ambassador?

He kept thinking, but Matthias interrupted, pressing for an answer.

{Not interested?}

{...No. I don't really mind.}

{Great. Then let's head out early tomorrow morning.}

Satisfied, Matthias raised his hand, and the masseurs poured warm water over their bodies, rinsing off the soft foam as it washed down their skin.

{Shall we go for a massage now?}

The masseurs covered their bare bodies with towels. Matthias used his towel to dry himself off, then wrapped it around his waist to cover the lower half of his body.

Kwon Taekjoo followed suit and moved to the massage room with him, sensing it was the right move.

The lighting in the massage room was noticeably dimmer than in other areas, set low to create a profoundly relaxing atmosphere. Lying down on the prepared leather bed, Kwon Taekjoo watched as the same masseurs entered and lit aromatic candles. Breathing in the scent, his head grew drowsy, and his entire body went limp with relaxation.

What was it he wanted to ask Matthias again? As his eyes began to close, he tried to sift through the foggy recesses of his mind, but his thoughts grew duller with each passing moment. Before long, his eyelids fell shut.

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Whenever he wrapped up work, he'd make a beeline for the sauna. It felt like a well-deserved reward for his weary body, which often felt like a limp rag. As the enveloping heat wrapped around him, a wave of relief and accomplishment would wash over him, melting away the tension and soothing his frayed nerves. After sweating it out, he'd indulge in a refreshing shower before collapsing into bed, where he would sleep like the dead for days. During those precious moments, he would drift off into a dreamless slumber, utterly exhausted.

In the depths of his peaceful slumber, a shadow drifted across him. A moment later, he felt a considerable weight settle over him, firm yet gentle. The sensation was unmistakable — the scent, the warmth, the way soft strands of hair brushed against his shoulder and neck — it all felt achingly familiar. He didn't need to open his eyes to know who it was. Taekjoo fought against the pull of sleep, but his eyelids remained heavy and unyielding. Instead, he could only let out soft groans, his voice muffled beneath the comforting presence that enveloped him.

The person nuzzled into the back of Kwon Taekjoo's head, his neck, and his shoulders, planting kisses along the way. Whenever he seemed on

the verge of drifting back to sleep, they would pull at his skin or nip him lightly, coaxing him awake with an intimate persistence.

'...Taekjoo.'

A whisper of his name made him exhale deeply. Reaching a hand back, he stroked the other's hair. For all their assertiveness, they relaxed against his touch, leaning their cheek into his hand, like a loyal dog quietly awaiting its master's affection.

'...evgeny?'

"Mmm..."

Kwon Taekjoo groaned softly, but the sound startled him awake. His vision cleared, though still slightly blurred. He realized the weight pressing down on him wasn't just a remnant of a dream or hallucination — it felt all too real. Turning his heavy head to the side, he was met with a swift hand that gently redirected him to face that person. A pair of lips pressed against his, and as he kept his teeth tightly clenched, the liquid meant to be poured into his mouth mostly spilled down his chin. The other person sighed in frustration and then licked Kwon Taekjoo's damp lips, lingeringly.

For reasons he couldn't understand, his mind was fogged over. Gathering his scattered senses, he shoved the person persistently touching him and shook his head vigorously, trying to regain his composure. His skull rang with a pounding echo.

{...Damn it, what fuck is this?}

{Ah, you're awake?}

Matthias grinned, speaking in a low tone. His eyes were slightly unfocused, suggesting he was high on something yet again. Kwon Taekjoo looked around, rolling his eyes to scan the room. They were still in the massage room, though now the scent had become almost sickeningly overpowering, and the massage therapists were nowhere in sight. The lighting, dim and tinged with red, created an unsettling

atmosphere. Kwon Taekjoo couldn't recall when or how he had fallen asleep.

Matthias leaned in, kissing along Kwon Taekjoo's ear and neck, then pressed his own cock repeatedly against Kwon Taekjoo's groin. Matthias's erect cock ground urgently against Kwon Taekjoo's, pressing thickly.

{What do you think you're doing? Get off.}

{Taekjoo, have you ever thought about working as my personal bodyguard? I'd treat you well. You wouldn't be disappointed with the benefits.}

As he whispered into Kwon Taekjoo's ear, Matthias licked his earlobe and even pushed his tongue firmly into his ear canal, his hands greedily grabbing and squeezing Taekjoo's chest and ass. The sound of his increasingly heated breaths was utterly revolting.

{...Enough.}

With a heavy arm, Kwon Taekjoo reached around Matthias's neck. Matthias smirked, asking, {You like it here?} He wedged his cock between Taekjoo's tightly pressed thighs, grinding eagerly while moaning in apparent satisfaction. His cock rubbed against Taekjoo's groin and even grazed the inner crevice. Taekjoo clenched his teeth hard.

Gathering his strength, Taekjoo tightened his arm around Matthias's neck, and in one swift motion, he rolled them both off the bed. Their bodies tumbled to the floor together. Matthias cried out in shock, but as Taekjoo pinned him down with his knee against Matthias's throat, Matthias snapped back to his senses. Feeling his airways cut off, Matthias reached desperately for the gun that had fallen nearby. Just as his fingers brushed the handle, Taekjoo's fist struck him hard in the solar plexus. Matthias gasped, his body convulsing from the impact, as if his ribs might have cracked.

{Don't pull this crap again. Next time, I won't miss.}

Kwon Taekjoo pressed his fist against Matthias's chest in a clear warning. The heat in Matthias's cock cooled instantly. Despite the aggressive groping, Taekjoo's lack of reaction left Matthias feeling deflated. Awkwardly, Matthias raised both hands in a gesture of surrender.

{Alright, I apologize for my rudeness. I got carried away. Who can pass up a tempting piece of fruit, after all?}

{Shut up and just answer my questions.}

Taekjoo pressed his knee harder against Matthias's neck. Even as his face turned beet red and veins bulged on his forehead from the lack of air, Matthias chuckled, nodding in reluctant submission.

{Hah... What are you so curious about?}

{I heard the Russian Ambassador to Korea was here today.}

{Huh? How did you know that? Were you spying or something?}

{There's nothing stopping me from doing what you do.}

Matthias snorted, then admitted, {Yeah.}

{He was here. Looking for you.}

Looking for Kwon Taekjoo. So, was it true that he had betrayed the Russian ambassador and fled? And just what was the nature of his relationship with Matthias?

Kwon Taekjoo threw a question at Matthias, something he couldn't figure out alone.

{What's the connection between that guy and Psikh?}

{What? You're not asking because you already know?}

{Enough with the evasions. Just answer.}

{Ugh... alright, alright. I'll cooperate, so ease up, will you? I'm about to lose it.}

Matthias tapped at Kwon Taekjoo's leg, which felt like it was about to snap his neck. Even with his life at risk, he couldn't resist joking around. Kwon Taekjoo loosened his leg slightly, and Matthias took a long breath, finally releasing the air blocked in his lungs. Then, without hesitation, he revealed the answer Taekjoo was after.

{Yevgeny Vissarionovich Bogdanov. He's Psikh.}

{...What?}

So Yevgeny, the third son of the powerful Bogdanov family and a high-ranking diplomat in Russia, was *Psikh*? Suddenly, Matthias's mention of Psikh being both close to the mafia and an official of the Russian government flashed back into his mind. If all of this were true, the gaps in Taekjoo's fragmented memories were finally beginning to fall into place.

Yet a new question emerged. Matthias seemed to have a closer relationship with Psikh than Kwon Taekjoo did. So why hadn't he handed Taekjoo over to him, despite Psikh's relentless pursuit? Was he trying to gain leverage by uncovering Psikh's weaknesses through Taekjoo?

{Are you trying to hide me or protect me?}

{Who knows?}

Matthias let his answer trail off, prompting Taekjoo to tighten his grip on his throat again.

{Answer me.}

{At first, I thought I might hide you for protection.}

Matthias replied, coughing slightly, though the smirk hadn't faded from his face.

{All I want now is to shield you from the rest of the world.}

As Kwon Taekjoo made an unreadable expression, Matthias reached out and lightly brushed his thigh, almost tickling him. Even with his life on the line, he couldn't help but pull such stunts.

Kwon Taekjoo stretched out his arm and grabbed Matthias' pistol. Then, aiming the gun at Matthias, he ordered, {Get up.} Matthias raised his hands and stood. Taekjoo threw a robe at him, which Matthias obediently put on. Immediately, he picked up a bath towel and approached Taekjoo. The barrel of Taekjoo's gun pressed firmly against his forehead.

{What are you doing?}

{Flaunting your dick carelessly anywhere isn't exactly gentlemanly behavior.}

Matthias calmly wrapped the towel around Taekjoo's waist, flashing a faint smile despite the gun resting steadily against his head. *Such a considerate man, truly.* Taekjoo thought sarcastically.

{Get out.}

Kwon Taekjoo shoved Matthias toward the exit. The barrel of his gun was aimed squarely at the back of Matthias' head. Matthias slowly opened the door and stepped outside, where a guard on standby hastily raised his rifle. Kwon Taekjoo pressed closer to Matthias and commanded,

{Put down the gun and step back.}

Matthias nodded as if to signal agreement. His guard had no choice but to lower the rifle slowly and back away. Kwon Taekjoo nudged the rifle on the floor out of reach with a kick, then continued forward, pushing Matthias ahead as they climbed the stairs. Inside, more guards swiftly encircled them, dozens of gun barrels pointed directly at Kwon Taekjoo.

{Hey, hey, back up. Step back, all of you. Someone's going to get hurt. Move aside, over there.}

Matthias intervened, ordering his guards to back away. Looking bewildered, they hesitantly cleared a path. Kwon Taekjoo led Matthias to the second-floor study, and as they reached the door, he shoved Matthias inside. Matthias opened it and entered, with Kwon Taekjoo following him in and locking the door from the inside. Perhaps due to

the effects of the drugs, Matthias seemed amused, chuckling as if he was enjoying himself.

{So, what now, Taekjoo?}

{Make a call.}

{To who?}

{To Psikh.}

At the unexpected request, Matthias' eyes widened. Then he tilted his head slightly, scratching his eyebrow.

{That doesn't sound like a very good idea.}

{I'll be the judge of that. Make the call.}

Kwon Taekjoo pressed the gun barrel against Matthias' forehead. Matthias pouted before pulling out his phone and following Taekjoo's orders. He set it to speaker mode and placed it on the desk. The name displayed on the screen in Spanish read "Psico." A long, slow dial tone began. Holding his breath, Kwon Taekjoo waited for the other party to answer. For some reason, his heart started pounding loudly again.

{No answer.}

In the end, the call didn't go through. It wasn't even that late — why wasn't he picking up? Just as Matthias reached out to try calling again, a familiar loud noise filled the air. It was the sound of helicopter rotors. Both Kwon Taekjoo and Matthias turned their eyes toward the window. Sure enough, a bright light cut through the dark sky. A helicopter was speeding toward the villa, and guards stationed outside fired bullets into the air.

The helicopter retaliated with its minigun, drawing closer by the second. Inside, a figure was visible at a glance: it was Yevgeny Visarionovich Bogdanov Psikh.

{...What the...}

{Take cover!}

As Matthias shouted, the helicopter's minigun fired. Kwon Taekjoo and Matthias hurriedly dove behind the desk. Even the bulletproof glass of the window couldn't withstand the relentless gunfire. It shattered into thousands of pieces, scattering shards across the room. The forceful wind from the propellers whipped the broken glass, curtains, and everything inside the room into disarray. It was impossible to keep their eyes open.

"Taekjoo!"

Amid the deafening roar of the wind, a familiar voice cut through, causing Kwon Taekjoo to instinctively flinch, his body freezing up. He couldn't understand what was happening.

In a moment of clarity, he turned toward the window to return fire, only to find himself face-to-face with Psikh. Psikh, too, stopped shooting as their eyes locked. Despite the chaos of the wind and noise, they stared at each other for what felt like an eternity.

In that moment, it was as if they were trapped together in a vacuum. He was so shocked that he forgot to breathe.

A rolling bottle of alcohol bumped into Kwon Taekjoo's leg, breaking the spell. Without hesitation, he lifted his gun and aimed at Psikh. Psikh's eyes widened slightly, but only for a second before he suddenly extended his hand, causing Kwon Taekjoo's shoulder to instinctively twitch.

"Come here."

The commanding tone, though firm, sounded somehow pitiful. Kwon Taekjoo furrowed his brows, stepping back. Psikh's face twisted into a more visible expression of distress.

Meanwhile, Matthias' guards had regrouped and focused their fire on the helicopter, creating flashes as bullets struck its surface. The helicopter's rotors wavered, nearly brushing against the building's outer wall.

{Taekjoo, come here!}

Psikh continued reaching out, even as bullets rained down. Kwon Taekjoo felt confused. If Psikh truly intended to kill him, firing the minigun at him would have been the easiest way. Yet, Psikh had half his body leaning out of the helicopter, stretching his arm out desperately. The gesture seemed so urgent. Had Kwon Taekjoo hidden something that valuable from him? Was Psikh risking his life just to keep him alive until he could retrieve it?

What truly held Kwon Taekjoo's attention, though, were the emotions reflected in Psikh's blue eyes. To Taekjoo, it looked like *yearning*. A deep, aching sorrow.

As if drawn by some invisible force, he took a step toward Zhenya, only for someone to clutch his leg. Turning blankly, he saw that Matthias was pulling him back.

{Hey, Taekjoo. It's dangerous!}

Taekjoo looked between the grip Matthias had on his leg and Zhenya's outstretched hand. Zhenya shouted, his voice more intense.

“Taekjoo!”

His mind raced, his heart pounding fiercely. What should he do? What could he do? The situation was so chaotic that his thoughts tangled, leaving him unable to reach a decision. Going with Psikh would be like walking into a trap, but he couldn't fully trust Matthias either.

Just as his indecision reached its peak, a familiar voice stopped him in his tracks. The voice came from inside the helicopter.

“Sunbaeee!”

Its owner, wearing a headset, was seated in the pilot's seat, though Taekjoo couldn't see their face from his position.

{Ahhh! Mr. Yevgeny, I can't hold on any longer!}

A moment later, the voice let out a panicked scream. Just then, a memory flashed through Kwon Taekjoo's mind.

*'If we keep this up, we're really going to die! We're going to die! Ah, we're going to die!*

*Are you listening, you crazy bastard?'*

**“...Yoon Jong-woo?”**

That was the owner of the gaming account he'd accessed on an online forum. It was also the same name his mother had mentioned. Could they be the same person?

If they were close enough to share an account, they must have had quite a bond, especially if Yoon Jong-woo and Kwon Taekjoo's mother even exchanged personal updates.

As he hesitated, the guards' gunfire grew more intense. Bullets ricocheted off the window where Taekjoo was standing, puncturing the helicopter's body. In that moment, Taekjoo made up his mind and took a decisive step toward the helicopter. Matthias grabbed his clothes again.

{Taekjoo! Are you really going? Do you even know how dangerous he is?}

{And you're any different?}

Matthias was momentarily speechless. Kwon Taekjoo shook off his grip in one swift motion and ran toward the helicopter. Psikh opened his arms wide and pulled Taekjoo into a tight embrace, immediately pointing his gun at Matthias.

*Death.*

At that exact moment of realization, Matthias froze, and a rocket launcher blasted the helicopter. It quickly took off, and moments later, something rolled out from it. Recognizing it, Matthias dove to the side. Soon after, an intense explosion shook the entire building, shattering every window and door in the villa.

When he finally came to his senses, the entire room was destroyed, except for the spot where Matthias stood. He remained there, staring

blankly at the helicopter flying into the distance. It felt empty, like losing something he'd never had. Dust from the ceiling sprinkled onto his head, jolting him back to reality. Suddenly, a chuckle escaped him.

{The great Psikh has fallen in love. He's fallen in love.}

He shook his head in disbelief, an incredulous smile spreading across his face.

**{ End of vol. 3 }**

**{ Vol. 4 }**

## 12. Rewind Time

After dropping the bomb into the villa, the helicopter ascended high into the sky. Soon, an explosion erupted below, sending thick black smoke billowing upward. Only then did Zhenya release his grip on the minigun's trigger. The entire time, Kwon Taekjoo had been pressed close to Zhenya, motionless. Zhenya, noticing this, looked down at Taekjoo's face with a puzzled expression. For some reason, Taekjoo's eyes were closed, and he was groaning softly, his body limp.

“Taekjoo...?”

Zhenya grasped his shoulder and pulled him slightly away. He could now see that Taekjoo's face was drenched in sweat. Zhenya quickly inspected him and noticed that his pant leg, where it pressed against his thigh, was soaked through. The metallic scent in the air told him what it was — blood. It seemed Taekjoo had been hit by gunfire from below just as he'd leaped into the helicopter.

Zhenya laid Taekjoo flat and pressed a towel to the wound. He leaned close to Taekjoo's nose and mouth to check his breathing and pulse. Turning around to check, Yoon Jong-woo, who had been watching the dire scene, had gone pale.

“Sunbae! Sunbae, are you okay?”

Zhenya motioned for Yoon Jong-woo to come closer. Jong-woo crawled over, fumbling, and Zhenya tugged his belt loose and wrapped it tightly around Taekjoo's thigh. Then he grabbed Jong-woo's trembling hands and pressed them firmly on the wound. For support, he shoved a box of ammunition under Taekjoo's injured leg, then grabbed the first aid kit. In his haste, the contents scattered. Picking out gauze and bandages, he secured them around Taekjoo's thigh to stanch the bleeding more effectively.

“...Sunbae, please stay with us.”

Yoon Jong-woo, on the verge of tears, reached a hand toward Taekjoo's shoulder.

Zhenya, however, swatted Jong-woo's hand away, pulling Taekjoo into a tight embrace. His grip was so strong that a groan of pain slipped from Taekjoo.

The helicopter flew endlessly through the dark, cloud-filled skies over Türkiye.

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### **( *Flashback* )**

Kwon Taekjoo had never wanted to live like his father or older brother. While their lives may have been glorified and worthy of admiration to the outside world, they left lasting scars on the family left behind.

Because of that, Taekjoo thought his mother's worries for him were unfounded.

He enrolled in a college suited to his usual academic performance. Although he wasn't particularly interested in his major classes, they didn't completely clash with his aptitude either. Both his school life and friendships were decent. He figured it wouldn't be so bad to graduate and find a job related to his major. Like others his age, he didn't have any deep concerns about the future or extraordinary ambitions.

He took a break from school after two years to fulfill his military service. Though he wanted to enlist in the Marine Corps to take on the challenge, he joined the regular Army at his mother's insistence. However, within less than six months, he started to feel disillusioned. It felt like he was wasting time in an endless loop of meaningless drills.

Then, by chance, he came across a recruitment notice for Special Forces noncommissioned officers. Since active-duty soldiers were eligible to apply, he decided to give it a shot without much hesitation. He passed easily, placing first in both the written and physical tests. All the other successful applicants were tough, able-bodied men, but quite a few raised the white flag during the intense four-month training. A

significant number also dropped out during the three-month training for beginners after commissioning. Despite facing his physical limits daily through grueling exercises, his mind had never been clearer. The extreme physical pain left no room for other worries or stray thoughts. Perhaps that's why he became even more immersed.

The only problem was the mandatory four-year service period after commissioning.

Taekjoo had kept his special forces enlistment a secret from his mother from the start. Because of this, his mother assumed he'd discharge soon and return to school. As he grew more anxious about how he would explain it to her, he received an unexpected call from the upper command.

Dressed in his full formal uniform for the first time in a while, he headed to the brigade commander's office. Usually, he would only meet a brigadier general or higher-ranking officer if he were receiving an excellence award, so the sudden summons was puzzling.

Before entering the office, he adjusted his uniform, firmly pressing down the black beret on his head. After taking a deep breath, he knocked on the door. Permission to enter came from inside. As soon as he stepped through the door and closed it, he saluted crisply.

"Unity! Sergeant Kwon Taekjoo. You called for me."

"Yes, come in."

The brigade commander greeted him with a smile. Beside him sat the chief of staff, and across from them was an unfamiliar civilian. The man in a black suit scrutinized Taekjoo from head to toe as he stood by the door.

"Is this the operative?"

"Yes. He's only in his second year of service but excels in infiltration, assassination, guerrilla warfare, special reconnaissance, intelligence operations, and rescue missions. Among his peers, he's been promoted the fastest and has already received numerous commendations."

"Moreover, his family has a long history of military honors. He's sharp, too, a perfect fit for the type of talent you're looking for."

The brigade commander and chief of staff spared no praise when describing Taekjoo's military record. Listening to them, the man continued to assess Taekjoo with an appraising gaze before finally speaking.

"Would you, by any chance, be interested in working for the country in a different capacity?"

"I'm already working for the country."

"Haha, yes, of course. But what I'm proposing involves more covert and direct operations."

The man chuckled and handed him a business card. It bore the unfamiliar company name "Eulji Networks" and the title "Sales Manager, Kim Dong-myung." Taekjoo instinctively felt that the name was likely an alias.

Later, he searched the company name online but found hardly any information. His hunch proved correct.

Not long after, Taekjoo's unit granted him a two-day special leave. He immediately went to the address on the business card, only to find a rundown commercial building. It was almost a ruin, with every office space vacant except for one on the fourth floor occupied by "Eulji Networks." At a glance, it looked like a staffing agency.

When Kwon Taekjoo knocked on the door, there was no response. He tried turning the doorknob just in case, and the door opened without resistance. Inside, a middle-aged woman was enjoying a game of Go-Stop. After glancing briefly at Kwon Taekjoo, she shifted her gaze back to the monitor and asked:

"What brings you here?"

"I came on a referral."

He handed her a business card. She glanced at it, then made a phone call, saying, “**They’ve arrived,**” and hung up shortly after. Then, she gestured with her chin towards a worn-out sofa for Kwon Taekjoo.

“Wait there for a bit.”

That “bit” stretched into several hours. When lunchtime arrived, she stepped out and returned with two rolls of kimbap for him. By the time regular office hours ended, she shut down her computer and packed up to leave without hesitation. Then, she placed a key in front of Kwon Taekjoo.

“Lock up with this key and leave it in the flowerpot outside the door.”

“Excuse me? How long am I supposed to wait here?”

“You’ll find out.”

Leaving only those enigmatic words, the woman exited the office. As even her footsteps faded, a profound silence settled around him. Kwon Taekjoo sat there, alone in the empty office, utterly baffled. As midnight approached, even the distant sounds of cars grew scarce. In the thickening silence, his ears became more sensitive. Because of that, he clearly sensed the arrival of a car that pulled up and stopped in front of the building.

Kwon Taekjoo rose from his seat and looked outside through the tinted window film. A black car was parked at the building entrance. No one got out, and there were no people around. The car just remained there, waiting.

It was time for action. For some reason, he felt his blood racing. Kwon Taekjoo quickly went down the stairs, and as he did, the driver of the black sedan stepped out. He, too, wore a black suit and dark sunglasses, just like the man who had previously come to meet Kwon Taekjoo. Without a word, the driver opened the back door. Kwon Taekjoo quietly got into the car and took the blindfold the man handed him.

The car drove for a long time, leaving the dark alleys behind. To make it impossible for him to gauge the route, they took several narrow streets in succession, even circling a block repeatedly. Eventually, they reached their destination, and just as before, the driver got out first to open the door. Following his lead, Kwon Taekjoo, still blindfolded, walked down a long hallway.

They stopped in front of a door. After the driver knocked, a voice from inside called them to enter. It wasn't the voice of the man who had visited him before. Kwon Taekjoo opened the door and stepped inside. The interior felt much brighter than the hallway.

"**Why the need for a blindfold?**" chuckled the man in the office when he saw Kwon Taekjoo. He casually waved off the driver, who had escorted Kwon Taekjoo all the way. The driver gave a silent bow and left, closing the door behind him.

"**You can take that off now.**"

At the man's permission, Kwon Taekjoo removed the blindfold, and bright light flooded his vision.

The first thing he noticed was the nameplate on the desk: *Lim Dae-hyung, Director of Intelligence Operations*. The emblem of the National Intelligence Service was engraved next to it. Kwon Taekjoo looked up and met the gaze of the man behind the nameplate — a middle-aged man with a genial expression who greeted him first.

"**Nice to meet you. The fact that you've come this far means you're ready to commit yourself to the nation, isn't that right?**"

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Kwon Taekjoo slowly opened his eyes. His blurred vision revealed a white ceiling and a row of IV bags hanging above him. He followed the tubes down with his gaze until a familiar head came into view. He tried moving his fingers, and sensing his movement, the figure lifted his

head in a daze. His swollen, red-rimmed eyes and bright red nose made for quite a sight. “Sunbae!”

“...Yoon Jong-woo?”

“Do you remember me?”

“What happened to your face? You got even uglier.”

“Ugh, sunbaeee!”

Overcome with emotion, Yoon Jong-woo wrapped Kwon Taekjoo in a tight hug. When Kwon Taekjoo let out a pained “Ah,” from the pressure on his injured leg, Jong-woo quickly let go. Looking down at the source of the pain, he saw his leg wrapped in bandages. It seemed he’d been grazed by a bullet while escaping from Matthias’s villa.

Memories of that tense escape flooded his mind: the moments of indecision between Matthias and Psikh, the desperate longing in Psikh’s voice calling out to him, and that split second when, uncertain yet compelled, he launched himself toward Psikh. He recalled how Jong-woo’s familiar voice had urged him to overcome his hesitation. When he finally landed in Psikh’s arms, an unexpected wave of relief washed over him, perhaps because Psikh’s embrace was wide enough to envelop him completely.

How much time had passed since then? Where was he now, how had Jong-woo come here, and where was Psikh?

As he regained consciousness, a cascade of questions surfaced. He doubted his mind would feel clear until he retrieved all of his memories. Once again, a sharp pain throbbed in his head, and he exhaled a long sigh.

He’d dreamt of something from long ago — or rather, it was a fragment of a lost memory. While reconstructing it, he remembered how he’d ended up as a special forces operative and eventually joined the National Intelligence Service. He had accepted the NIS’s special

recruitment offer on the spot. It was a time when he felt exhilaration from pushing himself to the limit and achieving goals that seemed impossible. Adding the pretext of ‘national interest’ to his thrill-seeking had only made it harder to refuse.

He’d told his mother that he’d been preparing for the civil service exam while in the military and had passed the level-7 administrative exam. She wasn’t disappointed even when he said he wouldn’t be returning to university; her only son had secured a stable job, and that alone seemed to make her content.

Following six months of further training, he was deployed. The assignments he received were more varied and unconventional than anything from his special forces days — missions where success was mandatory, no matter what. Although physically demanding, the thrill he felt upon completing each mission was incomparable. He’d never experienced such an intense rush in his life.

After spending several years alone, he was eventually assigned an assistant — Yoon

Jong-woo, a prodigy who had won a world hacking competition. When they first met, Jong-woo was highly cautious, clumsy, and easily frightened. And as the memories slowly came back to him, he realized that Jong-woo was still that same cautious, clumsy, and fearful person, but one who now possessed a boundless loyalty.

Tears welled up in Yoon Jong-woo’s eyes as he looked down at Kwon Taekjoo, eventually spilling down his cheeks, fogging up his glasses.

“Hey, you dumbass. Why are you crying?”

“But... but, sunbae, you... you...”

“Ah, I can’t watch this.”

Kwon Taekjoo sat up abruptly. Jong-woo tried to stop him with a worried “Wait, wait!” but Taekjoo ignored him. He reached over, grabbed a towel from the table, and tossed it to Jong-woo, who buried his face in it, sobbing for a while longer.

Jong-woo looked like he'd been through a lot. The kid should have been tucked safely behind a desk in support, yet here he was in Turkey — and with Psikh, no less. The questions piling up in Taekjoo's mind were countless.

He glanced around. The room was oddly spacious and luxurious, but it didn't feel like a hotel or hospital. Nor was it anything like Matthias's villa. Did Psikh arrange this place?

Why would he go to such lengths? Right now, Jong-woo was the only person he trusted, so he decided to gather as much information from him as possible.

“More importantly, why are you here?”

“Me? I came looking for you, sunbae.”

“Was that an order from HQ?”

“...Yeah, something like that.”

Jong-woo’s answer was a bit vague, and Kwon Taekjoo’s eyes narrowed.

“Of all people, they sent *you*?”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Why am *I* of all people here?”

“You really don’t know?”

“That’s cold. I went through a lot of trouble finding you, you know.”

“Looking at you, it sure seems that way.”

“Sunbae, that’s too much. Really.”

Jong-woo glared at him, breathing heavily in frustration. By now, the tears in his eyes had dried. Taekjoo couldn’t help but let out a smirk as he asked a few more questions.

“I’m not entirely sure right now, but... I’m still with the NIS, right?”

“Yes, of course!”

“And I went to Iran on official duty?”

“Right. You were assigned to escort a high-ranking North Korean defector to the embassy, but then got caught up in a terrorist attack staged by a third party.”

“So that mission was a failure, too?”

“No way. Who do you think you are? You’re the ace of the NIS, with a 100% mission success rate! You’d never leave a job half-done. It was an extension of one that nearly fell apart — the only one you almost couldn’t complete. You volunteered to finish it yourself. Even amidst the chaos in Iran, you managed to hand off the North Korean defector to another agent, who got them safely to the embassy. The defector is now with their family and preparing for asylum.”

Listening to Jong-woo’s explanation cleared up a significant part of the puzzle he hadn’t been able to figure out. As a black ops agent, his identity had been erased from official records, leaving no trace of him anywhere. That explained his proficiency in multiple languages, his heightened sense of caution, his quick reflexes, and his exceptional crisis-handling skills.

But now, with his own identity confirmed, another question arose.

“Then who the hell is that Russian ambassador?”

“Oh? You remember Yevgeny-ssi?”

“...No, I only know he’s a Russian ambassador. My mother even talks like I work for him.”

"Ah, that's because you lied to her, telling her you work at the Russian Embassy in Korea. You know she doesn't want you working for the NIS, so Yevgeny-ssi's just playing along."

"And is he actually the Russian ambassador to South Korea?"

"Surprisingly, yes."

"Then I don't get it. Why would a Russian ambassador go along with my cover story?"

What's his deal with me anyway?"

"Um... apparently, you two are friends."

"Who says that?"

"Sunbae did."

"I actually went and said I'm friends with that bastard?"

Instead of responding verbally, Yoon Jong-woo just nodded. Judging from his blank expression, it didn't seem like he was trying to trick or play with Kwon Taekjoo.

When did Kwon Taekjoo, exactly, become friends with the third son of a powerful

Russian family? If Yoon Jong-woo was to be believed, then Psikh — a high-ranking

Russian diplomat and black-market arms dealer — had not only played along with Kwon Taekjoo's elaborate lie but had also traveled all this way to save him. But why? His imagination, already strained, found it hard to comprehend. A sudden throb began to build in his head for no discernible reason.

"How on earth did I even meet that bastard?"

In response to Kwon Taekjoo's continued questioning, Yoon Jong-woo began recounting how, several years ago, Taekjoo had embarked on a solo mission to Russia. During that mission, he had mistaken Psikh, then an FSB operative, for a partner and ended up spending time with him — nearly dying by his hand at one point. Taekjoo barely made it back alive, reuniting with Yoon Jong-woo. Psikh, who'd followed them, eventually had a change of heart and helped them, resolving all the issues. In the process, Taekjoo's mother discovered he worked for the National Intelligence Service, and later, when Psikh was posted to Korea as the Russian ambassador, he added Taekjoo to the embassy staff list. His mother, thinking Psikh was her son's superior, had been warmly looking after him in their private interactions.

The more he listened, the more confused Kwon Taekjoo felt. It seemed he'd have to go over everything again, step by step.

"Wait, hold on! You're saying that guy was in the FSB?"

"Yes. And he was even part of the infamous Alpha Spetsgruppa, operating as a one-man team."

Lowering his voice in a conspiratorial whisper, Yoon Jong-woo filled in more details, causing Kwon Taekjoo to frown.

"And I almost died because I mistook him for a colleague?"

"You almost didn't make it that time."

"And yet he came all the way to Korea to help me?"

"That's right! I'm not sure why, but Yevgeny-ssi even helped you escape and later helped you catch the real culprit. After that, he came to Korea as the ambassador, became close with your mother, and even visited your home regularly."

Kwon Taekjoo struggled to make sense of Yoon Jong-woo's story. It felt like a critical piece was missing, throwing the whole explanation

slightly off-balance. He suppressed his unease and asked again, carefully.

"So... you're telling me that I nearly died at the hands of this Yevgeny or whatever, then somehow ended up friends with him, and now I'm pretending to work under him just to keep my mother in the dark?"

"Yes, exactly."

"And that guy came all the way to Korea just to play along?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"How would I know?"

Yoon Jong-woo replied with a carefree smile. Taekjoo sighed and reached out to place a hand on Yoon Jong-woo's shoulder, saying,

"Jong-woo."

"Yes?"

"Do you even realize what kind of nonsense you're spouting right now? At least try to say something that makes sense."

"Argh! It might be hard to believe, but I'm telling you, it's all true!"

Yoon Jong-woo clenched his fist, looking aggrieved. Now wasn't the time for him to be making up wild stories; besides, Yoon Jong-woo was not skilled at lying.

So, all that he'd heard so far must be true. But how could that be? Kwon Taekjoo had never maintained a personal connection with someone involved in one of his missions before. Even in cases where he'd spent the night with a target to gain influence, it was strictly professional.

That was how it had to be. Personal feelings were never supposed to interfere with his duty, and Kwon Taekjoo himself wasn't meant to exist in that realm.

But then, how had he ended up bringing someone he'd once met as an enemy all the way to Korea? If Psikh had come for revenge, at least that would make sense. Yet, in that case, why would Psikh build a friendship with Taekjoo's mother, join in Taekjoo's deception, and risk his life to find him?

The unresolved questions made him sigh in frustration until a sudden thought crossed his mind.

"Oh, what about the tattoo on my leg?"

"Tattoo? You got a tattoo, Sunbae? Where is it?"

Yoon Jong-woo looked over Kwon Taekjoo's body, clearly hearing about the tattoo for the first time. They'd been to saunas together a few times, had fallen asleep at each other's houses after late nights out, and had even gone swimming nearly naked. If it was an old tattoo, there was no way Yoon Jong-woo wouldn't have noticed.

Kwon Taekjoo pulled at the skin on his thigh, showing the tattoo on the inner part. Yoon Jong-woo leaned in closely to get a good look.

"Oh? It's real! Isn't that Cyrillic? When did you get this? Tattoos are banned according to

NIS regulations. I mean, we've bathed and swum together, and I never saw it."

"Is that so? Maybe I got it recently."

"The lines are clear enough that it seems that way. But what does it say?"

Yoon Jong-woo inspected the tattoo curiously, even slyly touching the area with the tattoo. Could he really not have known about it? If Kwon

Taekjoo had broken the rules to get this tattoo, it must have a significant meaning.

"Do you happen to know anything about '*Anastasia*'...?"

Just as he said this, he detected a presence outside the door, followed by it suddenly bursting open without a knock. Both Kwon Taekjoo and Yoon Jong-woo turned to look toward the door, where none other than Zhenya stood. The moment he saw Yoon Jong-woo's head close to Kwon Taekjoo's groin, Zhenya's face hardened icily.

Zhenya's cold glare then shifted to Kwon Taekjoo, as if demanding an explanation for what he'd just walked in on. Was that really the look he was giving him?

{Ah, Mr. Yevgeny! I was just about to tell you that Sunbae woke up...}

Yoon Jong-woo rose cheerfully, oblivious to the tension, but Zhenya strode over and forcefully pushed him aside. It looked like a light shove, yet Yoon Jong-woo stumbled out of the way, collapsing. Seeing this, Kwon Taekjoo clenched his fists and lunged forward.

"You... you bastard!"

Kwon Taekjoo swung a fist at Zhenya, but Zhenya's hands quickly grabbed his face. Taekjoo struck at his side and arm, but Zhenya didn't budge. He simply stared at Kwon Taekjoo with an intense gaze, then suddenly brought his lips down onto Taekjoo's. Before he could react, their lips collided. The unexpected move left him completely frozen.

"Ow! Ugh—!"

Yoon Jong-woo, who had just gotten up while rubbing his sore backside, screamed at the strange sight unfolding before him. Snapping back to his senses, Taekjoo tried to push Zhenya away. But Zhenya stood firm like a rock, refusing to budge. Taekjoo punched him repeatedly, desperate to break free, but it was futile. Even trying to pry off the fingers gripping his face proved useless.

Zhenya stubbornly licked Taekjoo's tightly sealed lips with his thick tongue. When Taekjoo wouldn't open his mouth, Zhenya bit down on his lower lip. Taekjoo's mouth instinctively opened with a gasp, and Zhenya's tongue forced its way inside, pressing down to the back of his throat, threatening to cut off his air. Reacting instinctively, Taekjoo bit down hard on the intrusive flesh. Zhenya flinched and pulled back, leaving a faint taste of blood in Taekjoo's mouth.

**“Hah... hah... What the hell do you think you’re doing?”**

Taekjoo growled in a low voice, his gaze murderous. His entire body was tense, ready to strike at any moment.

Zhenya, too, steadied his breathing, glaring back at Taekjoo with an oddly resentful look, as if he was blaming him.

*Why?*

{Mr. Yevgeny, you can’t act like this! Koreans don’t greet each other with a kiss!}

Yoon Jong-woo grabbed Zhenya’s arm, trying to intervene. But without breaking eye contact with Taekjoo, Zhenya suddenly seized Yoon Jong-woo by the throat. Yoon Jong-woo choked, struggling desperately against Zhenya’s grip.

“What the fuck are you doing? Let him go!”

“.....”

“I said, let him go.”

Taekjoo’s voice was sharp, his brow furrowed in fury. Zhenya ignored his warning and continued to squeeze Jong-woo’s neck. In one swift motion, Taekjoo struck Zhenya’s inner elbow with the side of his hand, causing his grip to loosen just enough for Jong-woo to slip to the floor. Not missing a beat, Taekjoo twisted Zhenya’s arm forward, forcefully pulling him in his direction. Holding Zhenya’s arm twisted outward to restrain him, Taekjoo gestured toward the door with his chin.

**“Jong-woo, wait outside.”**

"But..."

"I said go. I'll be fine!"

{M-Mr. Yevgeny, Sunbae is still recovering. He doesn't even remember everything yet, right? Don't forget that. Please, both of you, don't fight.}

Yoon Jong-woo reminded Zhenya repeatedly of Kwon Taekjoo's condition as he stood up. Even as he walked out, he kept glancing back at the two, hesitating. With a sigh, Taekjoo nodded as if to reassure him not to worry.

After Yoon Jong-woo left, looking on the verge of tears, the door closed quietly behind him. No sound indicated his steps fading away. Although he left, it was obvious he'd be hovering anxiously outside the door.

Zhenya made no attempt to resist. Even as his arm twisted painfully beyond its normal range, he didn't let out so much as a groan. He merely allowed Kwon Taekjoo to hold onto him without struggle, just letting himself be drawn in as Taekjoo pulled him. Sensing something strange, he looked at Zhenya. By now, Zhenya had buried his head against Taekjoo's neck, his sharp nose almost brushing his skin. Then, Zhenya took a deep breath.

"...Taekjoo."

A sigh-like exhale escaped from him, a weary yet yearning breath. Was it because of that? An unknown feeling spread rapidly inside his chest. At the same time, goosebumps prickled across his skin. Reflexively, he shoved Zhenya back. Startled,

Taekjoo snapped out of his trance, submerged moments before in that lingering mood.

"Back off. It's gross."

He frowned, his expression hardening. It felt undeniably awkward and uncomfortable to be pressed close like that with another man. Maybe Zhenya, being a foreigner, didn't mind that kind of contact, but Kwon Taekjoo certainly did. He even wondered if he'd somehow grown lenient enough to allow hugs and kisses between his friends.

Zhenya looked incredulous, as if he'd heard something ridiculous, a small laugh escaping him. Yet there was a hint of hurt in his expression.

"Did you forget everything?"

Zhenya asked in a tone of disbelief.

"Do you really not remember anything? You forgot so easily?"

He frowned in disappointment, a flash of unfamiliar despair appearing briefly in his eyes.

"This isn't right."

Zhenya slowly shook his head, cornering Kwon Taekjoo.

"You told me to trust you. You said you'd handle everything and return on your own."

"....."

"You said you'd come back for me. Was it your plan to abandon me like this forever?"

Faced with repeated reproach, he didn't know how to respond. Kwon Taekjoo couldn't guess what kind of relationship he had with Zhenya or what promise he might have made before leaving for Iran. Was he supposed to apologize first in situations like this?

"Look, I'm sorry, but honestly, I don't remember anything about you. I really don't understand why you're acting like this."

At his less-than-sincere apology, Zhenya's brows knitted in frustration. He looked Kwon Taekjoo over with a displeased gaze, and then suddenly lunged forward, wrapping him tightly in a hug. His chest compressed instantly, making it hard to breathe.

"Ah, come on. I told you — back off...!"

Kwon Taekjoo found it difficult to shake off the man clinging to him with such tenacity.

Zhenya's larger physique and immense strength rendered any attempt to escape futile. The more Taekjoo struggled, the tighter Zhenya's grip

became. Even if they were indeed close friends, Taekjoo couldn't help but feel that Zhenya's reaction was a bit extreme for a mere reunion. Just how strong could he be? Despite his delicate face, his overwhelming strength quickly drained Taekjoo. Having never been overpowered by anyone before, he was thoroughly thrown off.

Zhenya buried his head against Kwon Taekjoo's neck, rubbing his nose there as Taekjoo struggled to break free. Then, he brought his lips close to Taekjoo's flushed ear, brushed his tongue slowly along his cheek, and finally licked across his lips.

"Wait, hold... mmph...!"

The moment Taekjoo's mouth opened in shock, their lips met again, and Zhenya's hot tongue forced its way inside.

Zhenya pressed down hard on Kwon Taekjoo's tongue as he resisted, digging deeper, grazing the back of his throat, making him gag.

Kwon Taekjoo's chest heaved as he retched, his mouth filling with the sharp taste of saliva at both corners. Zhenya drank up even that, as if desperate to claim every part of him — his heat, his breath. Taekjoo's futile struggles didn't let up, even as he frantically punched at Zhenya's elbow and kicked him several times in the side. But Zhenya remained unmoved, his relentlessness so intense it felt as if he intended to choke Taekjoo to death.

Every ounce of breath being sucked away left Taekjoo starving for oxygen. His head quickly grew foggy, and his consciousness started to fade. Bit by bit, his resistance weakened, his arms going limp. It was then, still lost in the kiss, that Zhenya suddenly froze. Looking down, he saw the bandage on Taekjoo's thigh, now soaked in bright red. The fierce struggle must have reopened his wound.

"Taekjoo?"

"What the hell... is wrong with you?"

Panting heavily, Kwon Taekjoo mumbled faintly, then slipped into unconsciousness. His hands, which had been pushing Zhenya away, fell limply onto the bed.

"Taekjoo!"

Zhenya patted his sweat-soaked cheek, calling his name again, but Kwon Taekjoo didn't respond. Alarmed, Zhenya quickly checked his condition. Taekjoo's whole body was now feverish, his shoulders and chest heaving with each breath, and he gasped continuously through his parted lips. These were bad signs.

Zhenya shot to his feet and rushed out of the room. Yoon Jong-woo, who had been lingering nervously by the door, flinched as Zhenya brushed past him, striding purposefully down the hall with a look of urgency. Left alone, Yoon Jong-woo glanced around the room before hurrying to Kwon Taekjoo's side.

“Sunbae!”

As Kwon Taekjoo's consciousness faded, Yoon Jong-woo's urgent calls grew distant.

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They called a doctor to examine Kwon Taekjoo. The doctor disinfected his reopened wound, replaced the bandages, and added antipyretics and anti-inflammatory medication to the IV. He advised allowing Taekjoo to rest deeply until he woke on his own. The gunshot wound itself wasn't as dangerous as the potential for sepsis, so they needed to watch for any signs of inflammation.

In reality, Kwon Taekjoo's injury wasn't severe. However, he had lost a lot of blood and was physically weakened, which meant his recovery would be slow. His complexion was visibly poor. He hadn't been eating or resting properly. And why would he? One day, he had suddenly lost all his memories, unable to remember even who he was, left to wander in a void.

“Please, Sunbae... get better soon.”

Yoon Jong-woo sat by his bed, waiting for him to wake. Even though it seemed that Kwon Taekjoo was simply in a deep sleep, as the day wore on without any signs of consciousness, Yoon Jong-woo grew increasingly anxious. He found himself peering at Taekjoo's face every few seconds, growing gloomier each time. His restless hands continuously massaged Taekjoo's arms.

How much time had passed? Suddenly, his phone buzzed. Startled, he checked the message, which was from headquarters. After entering the designated code, he read the message: it was asking when he would return and if he had any updates to report.

He sighed. Yoon Jong-woo's leave was exactly one week. The mission given by headquarters was simple and unofficial: travel to Iran and confirm the status of Kwon Taekjoo's body. But Zhenya had insisted Taekjoo was alive, and he had pursued every trace of him relentlessly. It had already been three weeks since he'd blindly followed Zhenya. He had used up his summer leave and all his remaining personal days to hold out this long, but now he had no other options.

Since he'd found Kwon Taekjoo, maybe he should contact Director Kwak. After all, Kwak was Taekjoo's direct superior and had even allowed Yoon Jong-woo to accompany Zhenya to Iran, despite the chaos he'd caused. Surely he'd understand the situation. To return home without trouble, Yoon Jong-woo would need some support from headquarters.

Making up his mind, Yoon Jong-woo searched for Director Kwak's number. He was just about to hit the call button when the door opened without warning, startling him as if he'd been caught in the act.

{H-Huh! Yevgeny, sir. You're still awake?}

Without a word, Zhenya's eyes trailed over Yoon Jong-woo, whose thumb, trembling, was awkwardly pressed against his phone screen. Zhenya stepped closer, peering at his phone. As Zhenya's shadow fell over him, Yoon Jong-woo's shoulders instinctively tensed.

{What do you think you're doing?}

{Pardon? Oh, uh... I was just about to report back to headquarters that I'd found my senior. Given the nature of being a Black ops Agent, prolonged unexplained absences can lead to some unfortunate misunderstandings. Once we return, they'll probably investigate where he was and what he was doing, and it'll be a whole ordeal...}

Listening in silence, Zhenya held out his hand. Confused, Yoon Jong-woo raised his brows. "Huh?" he said, uncertain. Zhenya didn't elaborate and kept watching him intently, his hand held out steadily. After a moment, Yoon Jong-woo, eyeing him warily, hesitantly placed his phone in Zhenya's hand. Still staring directly at him, Zhenya clenched the phone tightly, causing cracks to radiate out from where his thumb pressed.

{Oh!}

{Did I say you could do that?}

Zhenya's voice was chilling as he glared at Yoon Jong-woo. The phone made a snapping sound as it broke further in Zhenya's hand. He tossed the shattered remains back at Yoon Jong-woo, who caught them, stunned.

{Huh? Who said you could?}

{S-Sorry. But if we don't report in advance, he could end up listed as missing in action. Then his mother would be contacted, and once a person's ID is erased, it's a hassle to restore...}

{Let them. He already said he's done with that job, anyway.}

{Well, that's true... But that was a decision he made in the past. Once he's back to himself, he should make his own decision again, shouldn't he?}

Zhenya's jaw tensed at Yoon Jong-woo's response, and a vein popped on his usually smooth forehead. His pupils, darkening to the point of looking pitch-black, bore down on him with an intensity that was suffocating.

{This is your last warning. Don't even think about doing anything stupid.}

He growled the words with barely parted lips. Yoon Jong-woo, intimidated, drew his neck back. He had assumed that once they found Kwon Taekjoo, they would all return to Korea together. Surely, that's what Taekjoo would want, too. But was Zhenya planning something else?

Then, unexpectedly, Zhenya made a suggestion to the bewildered Yoon Jong-woo.

{Maybe it's about time for you to head back.}

{Me? By myself?}

{Yes. By yourself.}

It sounded as if he were saying that Yoon Jong-woo had served his purpose and should just leave. Zhenya was known to be so capricious, but this seemed excessive.

But still, Yoon Jong-woo summoned all his courage to protest.

{Sunbae still doesn't have all his memories back, and his health isn't stable yet...}

{What difference does it make if you're by his side?}

{It could... It could make all the difference. Right now, I'm the only one he remembers. If I leave too, he'll feel even more ungrounded! He might push Mr. Yevgeny even further away!}

Yoon Jong-woo clenched his fists tightly and shouted, closing his eyes in anticipation of something bad. Surprisingly, no impact came. He opened his eyes cautiously and saw Zhenya's face, full of frustration. Startled, he quickly looked down.

Zhenya nodded toward the doorway, signaling for Yoon Jong-woo to leave. As Yoon Jong-woo hesitantly stood up and moved slowly, Zhenya kicked the chair he had been sitting on. Unable to resist, Yoon Jong-woo reluctantly stepped outside.

Left alone, Zhenya quietly looked down at the sleeping Kwon Taekjoo. New scars, ones he hadn't seen before, were visible on Kwon Taekjoo's

body. Zhenya was *angry*. He couldn't accept that something had happened to Kwon Taekjoo without his knowledge.

Kwon Taekjoo had always returned eventually, in one form or another. Whenever he wanted, Zhenya would monitor his every move or follow him, so he had never worried. Not once had he imagined that Kwon Taekjoo could vanish from the world.

With that arrogance, he had let Kwon Taekjoo go, secretly waiting for him to come back as he had promised. He had spent more than a few unsightly days pacing by the window.

Perhaps Zhenya had been too rattled while searching for Taekjoo. Now that Kwon Taekjoo was finally in front of him, his patience had evaporated. Zhenya was acutely aware of Taekjoo's condition and understood that the memories he had lost wouldn't simply return. Yet, witnessing Kwon Taekjoo push him away, acting guarded and distant, twisted his insides into knots, making it hard for him to control his tumultuous emotions. His dwindling patience was stretched to its breaking point, revealing its limitations time and again.

He gripped Kwon Taekjoo's hand tightly and rested his forehead on it. He could no longer give him up to anyone else. He resolved that he wouldn't let Kwon Taekjoo run wild on his own anymore. Zhenya vowed, again and again, to keep him close, always within his sight.

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*A deep, resonant foghorn jolted me from my thoughts. As I looked around, pitch-black darkness enveloped me. Glancing down, I saw the waves crashing white against the side of the ship, and the rhythmic vibrations underfoot confirmed my location. I took a deep breath, the sharp, briny scent of the sea filling my senses as always. Where had this ship departed from? And where was it heading? I stared vacantly at the rolling waves.*

*The faint hum of machinery broke the heavy silence, a sound coming from the communicator in my ear.*

*'So, how are you enjoying the romantic night sea?'*

*It was a familiar voice — Yoon Jong-woo. Was I on duty right now? The tension eased from my previously expressionless face, and my lips curved into a faint smile.*

*'Not bad. It's loud, chaotic, and somehow boring too.'*

*As soon as I finished speaking, the surroundings brightened. Groups of people gathered here and there, chatting, laughing, and walking by. It was an unremarkable yet peaceful scene. Blending into the crowd, I strolled deeper into the ship.*

*Just then, someone coming up the stairs bumped into my shoulder. The man, his face flushed red, roughly pushed me aside and headed toward the deck. For a brief moment, his bloodshot eyes caught mine, and he looked familiar. Standing there dazed, I watched him hurry away, feeling a sudden, irrational urge to follow.*

*He ran frantically, reaching the railing and looking utterly trapped, unable to decide what to do. Noticing me behind him, he immediately brandished a knife.*

*'Don't come closer!'*

*For some reason, I felt I knew this man. The entire situation was strange and laced with a strong sense of déjà vu.*

*'I said, don't come closer!'*

*He snarled, slashing the knife wildly through the air. Locking eyes with him, I drew a gun from my waistband. Aiming the barrel at him, I watched his desperate gaze shift briefly past me to something behind. It was a subtle movement, but unmistakable. I spun in that direction and pulled the trigger.*

*'Agh!'*

*A woman, hit by the bullet, clutched her injured hand and collapsed to the floor. Her gun fell, clattering away as her ivory coat quickly stained with dark red blood.*

*Right after, a loud splash sounded from behind me. I turned back to the railing where the man had stood, but he was gone. Rushing to the edge, I looked down at the black seawater. He reappeared, breaking through the foam, swimming in the opposite direction of the ship. Ahead, I could see an old, unlit wooden boat approaching from that side.*

*With a heavy sigh, I moved toward the woman, who was shakily bringing an unknown pill to her mouth. I struck her neck swiftly, knocking her out. Then, to prevent her from making any further drastic attempts, I stuffed a handkerchief into her mouth and cuffed her uninjured arm securely to the railing.*

*After I finished the task, I stood up and let out a light yell before sprinting toward the railing.*

*'Ha-ah!'*

*With no more ground beneath me, I leaped over the railing and dove into the open sea below. The dense water surged around me, pulling me deep into its depths. I plunged further into the pitch-black darkness, losing sight of the bottom. As I reached what felt like the extreme point of descent, where it seemed like I'd entered a vacuum, I began to move my limbs to swim back up to the surface.*

*But then, my left foot snagged on something. I kicked harder, trying to shake off the obstruction, but instead, my entire body was suddenly pulled downward. I swung my arms out wide, but it was no use. I was being drawn deeper into a distant, unreachable place.*

*Desperately, I flailed my arms and legs, but something wrapped tightly around both of my legs prevented any movement. Looking down in annoyance, I froze. What was clutching my legs wasn't seaweed — it was Chief Lim.*

*'.....!'*

*Bubbles escaped my parted lips in shock. I was running out of oxygen. Desperately, I twisted my leg, trying to shake off Chief Lim, but he held on, pulling me further down into the darkness with all his strength. Confusion clouded my mind, but I couldn't simply let myself be dragged down. Summoning the last of my strength, I kicked Chief Lim away and hurriedly swam upward.*

*Just as I thought I was nearly at the surface, a heavy mechanical sound loomed over me. I instinctively glanced back and saw the bottom of a submerged cruise ship, with massive propellers spinning on either side, closing in right before my eyes.*

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“...Ugh!”

His eyes shot wide open. Beads of sweat, gathered on his forehead, trickled slowly down his temple. His entire body trembled with a terrifying sensation, leaving his limbs stiff, unable to move even a finger. A faint exhale slipped from his slack mouth. He clenched his eyes shut and opened them again, finally regaining control over his frozen body.

His head was in disarray from the strange nightmare. Memories emerged erratically, a chaotic surge, making it hard to tell what was real and what was illusion. Each time he woke from a vivid dream like this, he felt as though he hadn’t slept at all.

As he wiped his damp face with both hands, he sensed someone nearby. Turning his head sharply, he saw Zhenya sitting in a chair. He was sitting still next to the bed, watching Kwon Taekjoo with a vacant expression. How long had he been sitting there like that?

“.....”

“.....”

For a while, they simply stared at each other, as if time itself had stopped. Eventually, Zhenya set down the cigar he’d been holding. No wonder the air felt so thick — it was because of that cigar. Now that he

noticed it, the unique scent of the cigar hit him even more distinctly: rich, smoky, with a sharp sweetness. Suddenly, a chill crept up the back of his neck. He'd had a strange reaction to the smell of cigars when he'd been with

Matthias, and now it was happening again. No, this time, it was even more unsettling.

When Zhenya abruptly stood, the scent of the cigar grew stronger, almost as if it surrounded him, moving in waves with each of his movements.

Without thinking, Kwon Taekjoo raised himself halfway up, on guard. His breaths naturally grew shallower.

Zhenya, noticing the clear sign of discomfort, hesitated before suddenly reaching for the table. He picked up a damp cloth and brought it to Kwon Taekjoo's face without warning. The cold touch made him wince, his neck reflexively drawing back. Zhenya paused, studying Kwon Taekjoo's expression. When Taekjoo didn't push him away, Zhenya resumed his gentle wiping. Despite the fierce intensity in his eyes, which seemed capable of scorching a hole through Taekjoo, his touch was unexpectedly tender. Nevertheless, his expression remained taut, hinting at underlying frustration.

As Kwon Taekjoo's face grew cleaner, Zhenya didn't hesitate to move the cloth down to his neck. The cold, damp cloth against his hot skin made him shiver involuntarily. He let out a small sound of protest, but Zhenya persistently continued wiping his neck.

He couldn't figure this guy out. For all his delicate features, there was something about Zhenya that made him hard to like. His attempts at care were awkward, clumsy, and rough. Even his blue eyes held a lingering resentment instead of any real sympathy. How did he end up entangled with someone like him? He'd lost so many memories, and there was so much he wanted to know, but Zhenya was definitely at the center of his questions.

The scent of the cigar grew stronger, making his head ache. His heart was pounding so hard it almost felt like his stomach was churning. Both his breathing and pulse had turned erratic.

“Enough.”

He tilted his head away, brushing off Zhenya’s hand. Zhenya’s hand, now without a purpose, found its way to Kwon Taekjoo’s arm and started wiping his sweat-sticky skin firmly. Even though Kwon Taekjoo had refused, Zhenya was relentless. Maybe he’d grown up pampered, never having to consider anyone else’s wishes — a spoiled brat who pushed his own way, regardless of anyone’s objections.

Before he knew it, Kwon Taekjoo grabbed the damp cloth that had worked its way up to his armpit.

“I’ll do it myself.”

He didn’t know how close they had been before he lost his memory, but for now, this guy just felt unfamiliar and awkward, making him want to keep his distance. Even if Zhenya felt hurt, he couldn’t help it. Just as expected, Zhenya, deprived of the cloth, hesitated, fidgeting with his now-empty hands.

Ignoring him, Kwon Taekjoo glanced around.

“Where’s Jong-woo?”

“Why? Are you worried I might have eaten your precious junior?”

“...What? Just call him. I have something to discuss with him.”

“Only with him?”

“What?”

He frowned at the sudden comment, wondering if he’d misheard the Russian.

“Barely escaped death, and he’s the only one you’re so eager to see?”

Taekjoo couldn’t help but let out a bitter laugh at Zhenya’s absurd remark. Zhenya sounded like a petulant child, constantly whining at every opportunity. It was clear he felt annoyed that Taekjoo remembered Jongwoo but not him, yet there was little Taekjoo could do about it. Zhenya hadn’t even taken the time to explain their relationship

or what had transpired between them, unlike Jongwoo. Was he planning to keep whining like this?

"Hey, why exactly are you upset?"

Zhenya looked at him with an incredulous expression, but Kwon Taekjoo had had enough.

"Look, I'm sorry I can't remember you, but if anyone's confused and frustrated right now, it's me, not you. I didn't choose to end up like this, so why do you keep complaining?"

"Ha. You're all bark for someone who almost vanished after making promises you couldn't keep. Are you seriously saying it wasn't what you wanted? No, Taekjoo. You brought this on yourself. I was left helpless against your one-sided decision. And now you can't handle a little frustration? Apologizing? That's not how someone who's actually sorry would act."

"So, what promise did I make to you, exactly? How about at least explaining what kind of relationship we supposedly had? Do you think whining like a child is going to solve anything?"

He shouted so fiercely that his whole body felt like it was vibrating. Anger surged at

Zhenya's insistence on blaming only Kwon Taekjoo. Zhenya wasn't as heated; he

simply shook his head stubbornly, gazing down at Kwon Taekjoo with an unreadable expression.

"No. You're the one who forgot, so go ahead and piece it all together yourself."

Unbelievable. Was it even possible that Kwon Taekjoo had been friends with someone this twisted? He couldn't believe it.

"And you're telling me you were my friend? Are you sure?"

"For someone who remembers nothing, you sure are quick to trust what others say. If I told you I was your lover, would you believe that too?"

“What the hell are you saying?”

Kwon Taekjoo’s face twisted in irritation. Zhenya gave him a mocking look, as if he’d proven a point. Except for his first encounter with Yoon Jong-woo after joining the NIS, most of his memories were hazy. The gaps had only been filled by Jong-woo’s explanations, which he trusted, yet it felt unsettling, as if Zhenya had seen right through him.

Biting his lower lip, he clenched his fists.

“I’m going back to Korea.”

“To do what?”

“To return to NIS.”

“You’re going to return to NIS?”

Zhenya openly sneered, pressing him to elaborate on this escape plan, as if mocking its absurdity.

“And how exactly do you plan on getting to Korea?”

“I’ll find a way. If I contact headquarters, they can arrange a new passport, and there’s probably an embassy nearby.”

“You think I’d just sit back and watch that happen?”

“If you won’t let me leave, what’s next — locking me up?”

“Nothing’s stopping me.”

Zhenya’s face grew cold as he spoke with a chilling threat. The level of possessiveness seemed excessive for someone claiming to be a friend. Kwon Taekjoo had a feeling that whatever relationship they’d had, it hadn’t developed smoothly or under normal circumstances — especially given they’d started as enemies.

Suddenly, Zhenya reached out his hand. Startled, Kwon Taekjoo swatted it away. The next moment, Zhenya’s fist landed hard against the wall above his head. The grinding sound of Zhenya’s clenched teeth and his barely restrained breaths hinted at barely contained anger.

“..Taekjoo. Stop testing my patience.”

Muttering under his breath, Zhenya abruptly left. The door, which he'd flung open harshly, slammed shut with a loud bang, making the air vibrate from the force.

“Huh? What the fuck is his problem?”

Kwon Taekjoo clicked his tongue in disbelief. Zhenya looked as if he'd been slapped after being the one to make threats in the first place. He was constantly angry over Kwon Taekjoo's inability to remember him. How his past self had ended up entangled with someone so overbearing was beyond him.

His gaze drifted to the ashtray, which was piled high with ashes. Cigars burned much slower than cigarettes, so the amount of ash implied Zhenya had been sitting there a long time. The way Zhenya had been so insistent on Kwon Taekjoo remembering him, as if waiting with bated breath, made him wonder if he'd known something like the code to Zhenya's secret safe.

Clicking his tongue again, he resumed wiping his body with the towel. He would have liked a full shower to feel refreshed from head to toe, but his injured thigh made that impossible. When he moved his leg slightly, pain shot through it, and he clicked his tongue in irritation, leaning his head back.

Just then, there was a knock at the door. The door opened slightly, and Yoon Jong-woo peeked in. When his eyes met Kwon Taekjoo's, he brightened.

“You're up. You should eat, Sunbae.”

Yoon Jong-woo carefully approached the bed, holding a tray, while Taekjoo silently checked on his condition. Thankfully, it appeared that while he'd been unconscious, Zhenya hadn't taken the opportunity to rough Jong-woo up.

“How many days have I been out?”

"About three. Your stamina dropped a lot, and you couldn't fight off the effect of the medication. But during recovery, you need to watch for inflammation, so it's best not to overdo it and get plenty of rest."

Yoon Jong-woo set the tray down as he sat in a chair. Taekjoo's stomach felt hollow from all the constant sleeping. He quickly opened the lid.

Even though he hadn't expected much, the soup looked greasy at a glance. Reluctantly, he pressed his lips together, but with the resolve to get back on his feet soon, he scooped up a spoonful and put it in his mouth. The seafood brought a refreshing savoriness, but that was quickly overpowered by a rich, creamy taste. He knew he'd need to force himself to eat to regain his strength, yet his spoon slowed down significantly. The more he ate, the more nauseated he felt, and his mouth naturally turned down at the corners.

"They say your digestive function isn't back to normal yet, so you'll have to stick to things like this for a while."

He nodded along to Yoon Jong-woo's reassurance but couldn't bring himself to take another bite. His stomach felt empty, but his mind rejected the thought of more food.

"I'm craving *yukgaejang*."

"Me too."

"Or a good hangover soup."

"That would be delicious."

"I'd settle for a bite of ramen."

"Now that you mention it, I feel like I can smell ramen from somewhere."

Yoon Jong-woo agreed with each comment, playfully sniffing the air. Taekjoo chuckled, then asked, "Have you eaten anything yourself?" and

Jong-woo patted his stomach in response. It was clear that Zhenya hadn't let him go hungry or mistreated him during his stay. In fact, it was Zhenya who had brought him here and offered him a comfortable refuge. Despite his troublesome ways, there was a hint of loyalty in him after all.

"...He's a guy you can't figure out."

"Sorry?"

"Nothing, forget it. More importantly, where are we? Still in Turkey?"

"No, we're in Greece."

"Greece?"

"Yes, after the conflict, we brought you here. Staying there could have caused a lot of problems. Who knows what demands Turkey might have made to keep things quiet?"

"Oh, right. Speaking of which, Matthias... they say he's the son of a Mexican drug lord?"

"Yes, that's right. Matthias Pérez. But how do you know him?"

"He says he helped me escape after I finished my work in Cuba. Apparently, he knew Psikh from before and did it at his request."

"Ah... so that's why you were in Mexico at that time."

Yoon Jong-woo nodded as if he finally understood. Encouraged by the flow of the conversation, Taekjoo decided to clear up something else he was curious about.

"Psikh.... is the guy from earlier?"

"Yeah, I've heard that's what people usually call Yevgeny-ssi."

"The Psikh I know is supposed to be the third son of a prominent Russian family. He's got a knack for weapons development and primarily deals in that trade in the underworld, which has brought him close to the mafia. Officially, he's a Russian government official, right? And from what you told me, the guy is currently the Russian ambassador to South Korea and, before that, was practically a one-man unit for the FSB?"

Yoon Jong-woo nodded earnestly. No matter how much Taekjoo thought about it, there was just no reason for him to ever have gotten close to Zhenya. If Kwon Taekjoo had gone to Russia on official business, Zhenya, being connected to the FSB and an influential family, would be an enemy, not an ally. In fact, he had once nearly lost his life by mistaking him for a partner. Just the fact that the man was now the Russian ambassador to South Korea suggested he hadn't cut ties with his homeland or family.

When it came to work, he always kept personal and professional matters strictly separate. He never built personal ties with people he met in official capacities. Especially not with someone who was practically an enemy. There was only one possible way that could happen.

"Could it be that I knew him even before I went to Russia?"

"No, I don't think so."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because at that time, you told me to look into Yevgeny-ssi's background. If you'd known him before, you wouldn't have needed to ask."

"True enough."

In short, Kwon Taekjoo hadn't known Zhenya before his first mission to Russia, where he mistakenly took him for a partner and ended up working alongside him. Despite nearly being killed by Zhenya at one point, Taekjoo somehow managed to survive. Now, they were on familiar terms, with Zhenya even helping him deceive his mother and visiting his home. But was any of that truly possible? He felt certain there was an important piece of the puzzle he was missing.

"So, why did I go to Russia back then?"

"It was to find a weapon called 'Anastasia,' a joint creation between North Korea and Russia."

"What? Anastasia?"

"Yes. You asked me about 'Anastasia' the other day. The only Anastasia I know of is the last Russian princess and that weapon. I don't recall you ever mentioning another one."

He had never been particularly moved by the story of the ill-fated princess. So it was more likely that the 'Anastasia' inked in his tattoo referred to the latter. For a brief moment, he wondered if he'd once had a lover named Anastasia, but he would never have done something as foolish as tattooing her name on himself. Of that, Kwon Taekjoo was certain.

Of course, even if the 'Anastasia' tattoo represented a weapon, the question still remained — why would he go so far as to have it inked on his body? Usually, tattoo designs or words are chosen because they hold significant meaning or importance to the person.

The more he thought about it, the more frustrated he felt, rather than finding clarity. It seemed unlikely he'd be able to solve this by mulling over it for just a day or two. In cases like this, it was best to set aside the difficult questions for now and take care of the immediate tasks at hand.

"So... have you reported to headquarters yet?"

“No. I haven’t had the chance.”

“Why?”

“My phone’s broken...”

“You have a laptop, don’t you?”

“I do, but there’s no internet here.”

“Fuck.”

What kind of era was it, one without the internet? Was it because Matthias and Zhenya had so much to hide? They might as well dig a hole in the ground and live there in secrecy.

“Then go out for a bit. There must be internet cafés in Greece. If you get in touch with the Chief Lim, he’ll handle it somehow.”

“Ah...”

At the mention of Chief Lim, Yoon Jong-woo visibly hesitated, glancing sideways and avoiding eye contact.

“What was that?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Is there something going on with the Chief?”

“Why? Did you remember something?”

“No. It’s just that you’re acting strangely. And as it happens, I dreamt of the Chief recently, and it left me feeling unsettled.”

“Oh, I see.”

"Cut the sidestepping — just tell me if something's up."

"No? There's nothing going on, really."

Yoon Jong-woo exaggeratedly waved his hands in denial, postponing the issue of reporting back to headquarters.

"Let's report to NIS after you've fully recovered. It's not like they're going to understand all our circumstances, and right now, you can't move easily with your leg in pain."

Jongwoo was right; returning to work immediately wasn't feasible, particularly since Zhenya appeared unwilling to let Taekjoo leave. And considering the NIS's focus on discretion, they were unlikely to take extreme actions merely to save two of their agents.

Ruffling the back of his hair in frustration, he asked subtly,

"Jong-woo, what's your take on him?"

"Who?"

"That Yevgeny guy, or whatever his name is. Do you think I can trust him? He seems to start fights at the drop of a hat, gets offended easily for a grown man... I mean, there's no way I could've been friends with someone like that. Even his look is just..."

"Yevgeny-ssi might be a little intimidating and unpredictable, but I wouldn't worry if I were you."

"What do you mean by, '*I don't have to worry?*'"

"I just mean, he's not the kind of person who'd do anything bad to *you*, at least."

"And how would you know that?"

“Well, if it weren’t for Yevgeny-ssi, I never would’ve found you. I thought for sure that you had died during your mission, and headquarters had all but given up. But Yevgeny-ssi pulled out all the stops to find you.”

When an agent on a covert mission finds themselves in peril, their country or organization often disavows any connection for the sake of national security — a necessary sacrifice for the greater good. Kwon Taekjoo had never taken offense to this. As Jongwoo mentioned, he wouldn’t have made it this far without the NIS’s help. Throughout his escape, Taekjoo felt keenly aware of his own limitations. He had navigated numerous crises while constantly on the run, so who could say that his pursuers hadn’t encountered similar obstacles?

That was why he felt so unsettled. What could he have that was worth Zhenya going to such lengths to track him down? Even if he truly was Zhenya’s lifeline, was it normal for Zhenya to kiss him the moment they met again? Was Russia really a place where affection was so abundant that physical contact was excessive, no matter the gender?

With no immediate solution to the discomfort, he could only tug at his hair in frustration.

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It was late at night. Unable to sleep, Taekjoo eventually sat up. Just lying there to rest was making him too restless to endure. His thoughts kept piling up, making his head ache and filling him with unease.

He threw back the blanket and started to get up, but hesitated. Yoon Jong-woo was curled up asleep near his feet. Despite being told repeatedly to go sleep comfortably in his own room, he wouldn’t listen. Whether it was because he was scared of Zhenya or worried about Kwon Taekjoo, he couldn’t tell. Noticing him drooling on his blanket, Taekjoo gave him a nudge.

“Hey. If you’re going to stay here, just come up and sleep properly.”

“Mmm... But it’ll be uncomfortable for you...”

Mumbling sleepily, Yoon Jong-woo slowly crawled up onto the bed. He stealthily pulled a pillow over, rested his head, and snugly wrapped himself in the blanket, falling right back to sleep as if he’d never woken up. Honestly, he had not a hint of caution in him. Maybe that very dullness was what made him more resilient to stress.

Shaking his head, Kwon Taekjoo grunted as he moved toward the edge of the bed, reaching for the crutches leaning against the wall. The doctor had advised him not to move around, but his back hurt too much to lie down any longer. It’s not like he was paralyzed from the waist down, and he had no intention of relieving himself in his bed.

He carefully hoisted himself up on the crutches. Having been on crutches more than a few times, he didn’t find balancing difficult. By now, the pain had lessened enough that he could move without much discomfort. The only frustration was that he couldn’t move as quickly or smoothly as he’d like.

Laboriously, he made his way to the window. Opening the curtains, he found the world outside pitch-black. There wasn’t a single noticeable building or structure; he figured that come morning, he’d have a clear, unobstructed view of the Mediterranean Sea. It also meant they were perched on a sheer cliffside.

With a small sigh, he shuffled toward the bathroom connected to the room. The ceiling was high, and the marble floor amplified each step, echoing loudly with every movement.

He barely made it to the bathroom, pausing to catch his breath. Just from that short walk, sweat was already soaking down his back. He fumbled for the light switch on the wall and let out a sigh. The toilet was still a considerable distance away from the door. By the time he passed the sink, the bathtub, and the shower to reach the toilet, his whole body felt sticky.

“Fuck, this place is ridiculously big.”

He grumbled as he pulled down his pants, but maneuvering with just one hand in such an awkward position made it hard to undress. Shifting uncomfortably, he managed to slide his underwear down halfway.

All of a sudden, the familiar scent of a cigar wafted through the air. He whipped his head around, startled, to see Zhenya standing at the bathroom door. He was almost like a ghost with the way he moved so silently, never making a sound. The sight was frustrating, and he frowned, snapping,

“What is it?”

“What are you doing here?”

“Can’t you tell? Came to drain the tank. Now get out.”

“Why so shy all of a sudden? You don’t mind using public restrooms just fine.”

“It’s not about shame; I’m telling you to get lost so you don’t have to see something gross.”

“Oh, I didn’t know you cared so much about my thoughts.”

As always, talking to Zhenya only seemed to tighten a knot in Kwon Taekjoo’s chest. Somehow, the more he spoke, the more the conversation derailed, veering off in strange directions, never progressing. It was entirely because Zhenya had this habit of interpreting everything however he pleased. Even now, he was tilting his head slightly, wearing a strangely pleased look as if he’d heard something good.

“...Fine, then, enjoy the show all you want.”

Giving up on trying to push him away, Kwon Taekjoo refocused on doing his business. Or, at least, he tried. Suddenly, Zhenya’s familiar scent grew stronger, and a shadow loomed over his head. He turned around, half-dreading it, only to find Zhenya standing right behind him. Did he seriously take that sarcastic invitation to *enjoy the show* literally? Or was he just doing this to make Taekjoo uncomfortable on purpose? That damned Russian.

Determined not to get caught up in it, he stubbornly tried to focus on relieving himself. But Zhenya's intense gaze was making it difficult, and things weren't exactly flowing as they should.

"...What the hell."

He stroked himself lightly, trying to ease things along. Although he could feel the slight tingling urge, nothing was coming out but a weak trickle. Was there something wrong with his kidneys or bladder? Maybe something went wrong when they anesthetized him during surgery for that gunshot wound?

Was he actually going to need a catheter? The thought reminded him of his last hospital stay, and he was beginning to worry. Just then, a pale hand shot out from his side, and before he could even turn around, Zhenya's broad frame was pressed against his back. He felt Zhenya's smooth face resting on his shoulder, and when he turned his head, he was staring directly into those piercing blue eyes. *What did he think he was doing?*

*Don't tell me...* He tried to twist away, but Zhenya's hand was already holding him firmly.

"Hey, don't!"

"Let me help."

"I said, stop!"

"Don't act tough when you can't even stand properly."

Was it the unfamiliar body heat? Or simply because it was someone else's hand? Either way, the sensation in his cock became much more sensitive. Even though all Zhenya did was gently hold him, the hair on the back of his neck stood up, and goosebumps prickled along his cheeks.

"Ugh... I said let go."

"Shh. You wouldn't want your colleague to wake up, would you?"

He thought of Yoon Jong-woo, who was asleep in the bed. If he made too much noise here, even the typically oblivious Jong-woo would wake up.

The last thing he wanted was for his junior to see him tangled up with another man in such a strange way.

Kwon Taekjoo bit his lower lip and tried to pull Zhenya's hand away, gripping his arm in an effort to break free. But this hardly deterred Zhenya, who simply pressed his chin against Taekjoo's shoulder to hold him in place and began gently stroking to encourage him. The sensation grew intense, a dull ache building until, at last, he released a stream of urine with a relieving sound. The mix of satisfying relief and faint pain brought a stifled groan to his lips.

“...Hngh...”

Zhenya calmly continued to stroke him, an oddly intimate gesture, almost as if he were soothing him. It felt inappropriate to let another man handle him in such a way, but he was wary of jerking away, afraid the urine would splash everywhere. A part of him didn't want to escape the deep relief that made his whole pelvis ache with satisfaction.

His ears burned red with shame. He wondered if it would've been better to just ask Jong-woo for help — or even resort to using a catheter. Silently cursing himself, he suppressed his regrets.

Before long, the stream stopped. Strangely, he felt a pang of disappointment, which immediately alarmed him. Had Zhenya sensed it? He heard a faint chuckle in his ear. Zhenya's tongue slid across the edge of his ear, and he whispered softly,

“Want me to keep going?”

*What?* The question stunned him, and, as if on its own, a tingling sensation shot through his cock.

“Not a chance. Get lost.”

He quickly shoved Zhenya off. His body twitched with lingering frustration, as though unsatisfied. He'd almost gotten swept up in the moment.

He pulled up his pants roughly and moved to the sink. Leaning on his crutches, he scrubbed his hands vigorously. Meanwhile, Zhenya showed

no intention of washing his own hands. Finding it strange, he glanced at the mirror and saw Zhenya staring at his hand, lost in thought. A hot flush crept over his face for no good reason.

"Ugh, disgusting. Why are you staring at your hand? Come wash it."

At Kwon Taekjoo's urging, Zhenya slowly made his way over to the sink. He was so leisurely that just watching him was enough to make anyone's patience snap. With an exasperated sigh, Kwon Taekjoo grabbed his hand, pulling it roughly. Then he scrubbed Zhenya's hand with soap, washing every finger clean.

All the while, he felt an obvious gaze on him from the side. When he moved his eyes, he met those piercing blue eyes, staring at him intently, as always.

Yet, for some reason, Zhenya didn't appear as confrontational as he had before. It felt strangely out of character to see Zhenya obediently following Taekjoo's lead. His pale blue eyes shone with an unwavering devotion directed solely at Kwon Taekjoo. Had he been too harsh before? Suddenly, a touch of softness began to creep into his heart.

Even after turning off the water, Kwon Taekjoo continued to look down at Zhenya's hand for a while.

"I'm sorry, but I don't know you at all. I don't remember anything."

The unexpected apology took Zhenya by surprise, causing his eyes to widen. As he continued drying the man's hands with a towel, he pressed on.

"I don't remember any promises I made, or what you meant to me. Even if you resent me and blame me now, I can't properly reflect on it because I can't remember what I did wrong. So for now, just wait. When I regain my clarity, feel free to blame me. If I come to understand my faults, I'll allow you to unleash your anger on me until you feel at peace."

Taekjoo glanced at Zhenya, who found the situation amusing, smirking as he shook his head.

"Oh, why. I'll try to remember as quickly as possible. Is asking you not to nag me until then so ridiculous?"

"Taekjoo, I guess you forgot this too, but you never had much credibility to begin with."

Zhenya sneered in a biting tone. No credibility? Him, Kwon Taekjoo? He was stunned. Since when had he, in just a few years with NIS, become someone who threw around empty promises?

"I can't trust what you say just like that."

Zhenya, who showed a resolute distrust, suddenly gripped his face. Taekjoo tried to shake it off, saying not to, but the man's hand didn't budge this time either.

Instead, he grasped Taekjoo even tighter, quietly studying his face. With that pretty face thrust so close, Taekjoo's breath caught on its own. For a moment, he lost track of the situation, staring blankly at the man.

In the next instant, the man's face drew closer, pressing his lips firmly against Taekjoo's. The man's unique scent intensified. Was it a shock? Taekjoo's heart pounded wildly. Clenching his lips shut, he held his ground, but Zhenya ran his tongue from his lips to his cheek. "Ugh," he groaned in disgust.

"What the hell are you doing, you crazy bastard?"

"Don't get it, huh? Frustrating and confusing, right? Same here. So, put up with at least this much."

Zhenya, whining like a child, pressed and rubbed Taekjoo's lower lip with his thumb before releasing him. Then, he abruptly turned and left the bathroom. Taekjoo shouted after him, dumbfounded.

"So, what's the plan? You gonna keep acting like an asshole? Hey, you!"

He threw a towel at the man, who walked off without responding. The towel fluttered a bit before falling to the ground. That enigma of a man just kept doing baffling things. A rush of frustration rose within him at this unsolvable problem. Surely, that's why his heart was pounding erratically.

In the mirror, his own oddly flushed face stared back. With his wet hand, he wiped the mirror.

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*Small white fragments plopped beneath the water's surface, and I stared intently, trying to make sense of what they were. Attached to those sinking pieces were smooth fingernails.*

*Fingers?*

*I jolted awake, and a photo came into focus as if a spotlight had zeroed in on it. The image showed a corpse covered with a white cloth, its swollen fingers grotesquely cut at the first joints.*

*'Dominic Morgan. He was an elite agent the U.S. intelligence agency dispatched to Russia. Four days ago, his body was found along the riverbank. He had been on a solo mission to identify Anastasia's true identity.'*

*A familiar voice echoed in my mind as an image of Dominic flickered briefly before disappearing.*

*'Take over for Agent Morgan and find Anastasia.'*

*The surroundings brightened, the desk with the photograph coming into view first, followed by Chief Lim sitting across from me. Gradually, the familiar office came to life.*

*Chief Lim tossed a passport my way. I caught it instinctively and glanced at the personal information inside.*

*'Sakamoto Hiro?'*

*'I heard that a contract was signed for the construction of an LNG facility between a Japanese energy company and Gazprom, Russia's state-owned gas company. Itochu, an international trading*

*company, played a significant role in securing that contract. Sakamoto Hiro is their European regional manager.'*

*My mission was clear: uncover the true nature of Anastasia, a powerful weapon birthed from a collaboration between Russia and North Korea.*

*Russia wasn't exactly familiar territory for me, and I felt a knot of unease in my stomach.*

*But I couldn't refuse. This was work that needed doing. Up to that point, I, Kwon*

*Taekjoo, had tackled every mission assigned to me with unwavering dedication. Just because the area was unfamiliar didn't mean I should back down. Who knows? It might even turn into an exciting adventure. 'One thing to keep in mind — Psikh Bogdanov.' Chief Lim's warning cut through my thoughts.*

*'To get close to Russian bigwigs, you won't be able to avoid meeting him, but avoid it if you can. And if you do, don't try to take him on.'*

*I took his warning seriously. I was curious about the man known more by the name "Psikh" than his own, but I had no intention of letting that curiosity lead me into trouble.*

*Don't die.*

*With that ominous send-off from Chief Lim, I left the office.*

*In an instant, the scene shifted. I recognized the unique sights passing by the window and the Cyrillic letters on the signs. I was in Moscow. The car turned from a clogged road into a narrow alley.*

*Where are we going?*

*Just as I pondered that, the car skidded to a stop, and bullets rained down from all directions.*

*I swung the door open and bolted, escaping the unexpected ambush. There was no time to analyze who was chasing me or why. They pursued me relentlessly, no matter how many turns I took.*

*After a frantic sprint, I slipped into an abandoned building. The attackers arrived shortly after, and I found myself like a rat in a trap. Pressing my back against a pillar, I scrambled to devise an escape plan.*

*Then, just like that, the gunfire ceased. Confused, I peeked out from my hiding spot. I saw assailants sprawled across the floor in various positions. The silence was unnervingly suspicious.*

*What happened? Did someone else arrive? Were they an ally or an enemy?*

*As I grappled with that confusion, a warning bell rang in my mind. Before I knew it, a larger shadow loomed over me. This was bad news.*

*Instinct kicked in, and I moved to strike first, but my arm was twisted, and my chin slammed against the floor. I'd never been subdued so swiftly, the surprise leaving me frozen in place.*

*From my upside-down view, I spotted a pair of crocodile leather shoes with sharply pointed toes. A dense, overpowering scent filled my nose, nearly numbing it. It was the unmistakable smell of cigars. I recognized that scent, just like the chilling, dominating aura that seemed to suppress everything around it.*

*'There's something dirty on my shoe. Would you mind taking it off?'*

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**“...Psikh?”**

He mumbled the name, barely conscious, and Yoon Jong-woo beside him replied, **“Yes?”** Still groggy, Kwon Taekjoo couldn't immediately make sense of the situation. When he murmured, “Huh?” Yoon Jong-

woo echoed, “**Yes?**” They were the very definition of dumb and dumber. By now, it seemed morning had broken again. Kwon Taekjoo tilted his head, sitting up.

“I had a weird dream.”

It was so vivid it felt real, but he couldn’t be certain whether it was something that had actually happened in the past. Had Zhenya really committed such brutal acts? Considering that Zhenya was Psikh and had close ties with the mafia, it was likely he wouldn’t hesitate to harm people. Yet, it was hard to believe, especially since Zhenya had shown Kwon Taekjoo his own peculiar form of kindness.

When he observed how Zhenya treated Yoon Jong-woo, he certainly resembled the notorious Psikh from the rumors. But then, why did he act so differently toward Kwon Taekjoo, restraining himself and behaving in an oddly affectionate manner?

“Hey, about that guy, Yevgeny...”

He was just about to ask Yoon Jong-woo if he could shed any light on the matter when he sensed a shift in the air and glanced toward the door without thinking. Zhenya was leaning there, as if he had been there all along.

“Ahh!”

“Aah!”

As Kwon Taekjoo yelped, Yoon Jong-woo, startled, joined in, hunching his shoulders. Zhenya looked at them with disdain.

“W-What the...! You scared me! You could at least announce yourself!”

“What, were you two sharing some big secret?”

Zhenya’s displeased gaze slid over Kwon Taekjoo and then settled on Yoon Jong-woo. Under that sharp stare, Yoon Jong-woo shrank back slightly, subtly averting his eyes. Did Zhenya perceive him as an easy mark just because they were around the same age? No, it seemed more

like a petty, childlike jealousy — like a kid throwing a tantrum at the thought of losing their best friend to someone new.

“So, what’s going on?”

Zhenya’s gaze finally returned to Kwon Taekjoo.

“Since you’re up, how about breakfast?”

“No thanks. I’ll have something later....”

Kwon Taekjoo was about to decline, feeling awkward about eating together, when Yoon Jong-woo’s stomach growled. Embarrassed, Jong-woo quickly covered his stomach. But it was no use; his stomach only growled louder in defiance. Taekjoo suddenly recognized that he hadn’t even bothered to check if his junior was eating or resting properly, hiding behind his own injury as an excuse. What kind of senior was he?

“Yoon Jong-woo, at least you should go eat.”

“What? Me? Alone? And what about you, Sunbae?”

“I just got up. What do you think I could eat?”

In fact, he didn’t have much of an appetite because he had just woken up. Last night’s dreams had been unsettling, and he intended to spend some quiet time alone to clear his head. At least, that had been the plan until his own stomach growled as well. Had Zhenya heard it? As he glanced over at him, Zhenya let out an exaggerated sigh.

“Why don’t you try being reasonable? There’s a limit to how much foolishness one can endure.”

With a tone full of dissatisfaction, the man threw his words at them before turning away. Kwon Taekjoo glared at the back of his head, annoyed.

“Hey, does that jerk always talk so annoying?”

“More scary than annoying, I’d say.”

“Scary, my foot. That young bastard constantly looks down on people like he’s something special. Thinks he’s all that just because he has a pretty face?”

“It’s funny you noticed his face. I haven’t had a good look at Yevgeny-sси’s face myself.”

“Don’t be intimidated, idiot. It’s because you shrink away over the smallest things that guys like him walk around so high and mighty.”

“...So it’s true, the less people know, the bolder they become.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. Let’s stop standing around here and go eat something. You need food to get your strength back. Should I grab the wheelchair for you?”

“No need. Lying down all day makes me stiff. Besides, I need to do some rehab exercises anyway. I can push through this level of pain.”

Yoon Jong-woo shook his head, clearly giving up. Then he handed a crutch to Kwon Taekjoo, who took it with ease. Even with memory loss, his natural athleticism and adaptability were still unmatched.

The two had just exited the bedroom when they both paused, almost in sync, at the faint smell wafting from somewhere.

“...Wait. That smell!”

Yoon Jong-woo sniffed openly, following the scent to its source. Soon he pointed toward the kitchen with a gesture. By then, Kwon Taekjoo was already moving at top speed toward it.

When they both arrived in the kitchen, Zhenya was standing by the counter. The enticing aroma was clearly coming from the pot in front of him. Almost unconsciously, Kwon Taekjoo moved closer to him. Zhenya cast him a brief glance before turning his attention back to the pot.

Inside, a spicy ramen broth, the kind that resonates with every Korean's soul, was bubbling away. His mouth watered fiercely; he swallowed, but his mouth stayed wet.

"Where did you get this? Do you actually eat stuff like this?"

With his gaze fixed firmly on the pot, he asked. Zhenya only scoffed in response, not bothering to reply. On any other day, that attitude would have irritated Kwon Taekjoo, but under the spell of the tantalizing aroma, he couldn't care less.

When the noodles reached the perfect level of firmness, Zhenya turned off the heat.

Then, with a nod, he motioned Taekjoo to the table. Taekjoo obediently sat where Zhenya gestured, his eyes never leaving the pot. He waited, fully focused, until Zhenya brought it over and set it in front of him.

Yoon Jong-woo, as if drawn by some invisible force, approached and took a seat beside him.

The two of them were utterly captivated by the ramen's heavenly aroma, whispering in awe.

"This has to be for me, right?"

"Yes, Sunbae. I think it is. It smells incredible."

"Wait a minute, you fool. Didn't I tell you that as an NIS agent, you're supposed to be suspicious of food offered by strangers?"

"But it smells too good! Besides, Yevgeny-ssi's only unfamiliar to you because you lost your memory; you two were close before."

"...Are you sure about that?"

"Yes, definitely. Now's the time, Sunbae. If you don't eat it now, the noodles will get soggy."

Yoon Jong-woo's desperate plea sounded sweeter than any flattery. Swallowing hard, Taekjoo glanced at Zhenya's expression. Zhenya gave him a nod toward the pot, urging him to dig in. There was no reason to hesitate any longer. He twirled the noodles around his fork and leaned in, capturing the bite just before the noodles slipped away. It was like a rush of life flowing into him. His head felt clearer, as though fresh blood surged into his previously foggy mind.

"How is it? How is it, Sunbae?"

Yoon Jong-woo was anxiously watching him. Taekjoo took a sip of the broth, then quickly pushed the pot toward him. Jong-woo attacked it like a starved dog but paused mid-bite, his face paling.

"What's wrong? Eat, you fool! This stuff is amazing."

"No, no, you should have more, Sunbae. You need to recover quickly."

"Why are you tearing up while saying that...?"

Kwon Taekjoo looked up, half-expecting the reason. Zhenya, arms crossed, glared at Yoon Jong-woo with a look so fierce it could kill. If Yoon Jong-woo had taken a bite of his noodles, it seemed Zhenya might've snapped his neck before he even swallowed. Reluctantly, he licked his lips and quietly set his fork down.

"Hey, don't be so petty about food. It's not like this costs much."

Zhenya clicked his tongue, looking incredulous. Dismissing him, he grabbed another pack of ramen from a nearby pile and handed it to Yoon Jong-woo, tilting his chin toward the stove, silently urging him to cook it himself.

{I'll just eat it like this.}

Maybe he just couldn't bring himself to stand next to Zhenya. Yoon Jong-woo started crunching on the uncooked ramen, savoring it straight from the pack. His face lit up with sheer delight at the taste of

the seasoning powder. Meanwhile, Zhenya frowned, as if he were witnessing something utterly bizarre.

Had he really never seen anyone eat raw ramen? Perhaps he didn't view anything uncooked as real food. These aristocrats were truly something else. Shaking his head in disbelief, Kwon Taekjoo was about to dive back into his ramen when he paused. No matter who the other person was, he felt it was only right to offer some.

"But aren't you going to eat? Should I give you a bite?"

"That's not food; it's practically a biochemical weapon."

Zhenya narrowed his eyes and stated firmly. A biochemical weapon? Does he just not handle spicy food well? If that were the case, it was surprising.

"You say that, but you were keen to prepare it. And it tastes good, too."

"That's because *you* like it."

"Ramen? I wouldn't say I especially like it."

Ramen was just food to eat when he needed something quick and easy to fill him up. And even then, it was mostly when he was abroad. In Korea, he usually ate the meals his mother prepared or dined out, and ramen was hardly a choice when dining out.

But Zhenya didn't believe him.

"You're never honest with me. You go crazy every time you see ramen."

Every time? Had he made a fool of himself like this before? He tilted his head briefly, then refocused on his ramen, finishing the entire pot in no time, without leaving a single drop of broth. Feeling full and refreshed, his mood naturally improved.

"Thanks for the meal, Yevgeny."

"It's Zhenya."

Zhenya corrected him, sounding annoyed. His real name was Yevgeny, and Yoon Jong-woo also addressed him that way, so what was the

problem? Being called by his real name had to be better than the nickname Psikh, right?

Leaning slightly toward Yoon Jong-woo, he whispered.

"Hey, why do you call him Yevgeny, but he hates it when I do? His name is Yevgeny, isn't it?"

"Yes, but you've always called him Zhenya."

"Zhenya?"

"Yes. It's a nickname."

"A... what?"

It sounded absurd. Maybe Jongwoo had been spouting nonsense, too caught up in his ramen. Of course, in Western culture, nicknames were often used more than real names, especially between close friends. But there was no way he'd ever call this towering man by such a warm nickname. Even if they were close friends, wasn't that just too embarrassing?

"How long are you planning to stay so close like this?"

Suddenly, Zhenya displayed an expression of irritation. Taekjoo snapped back to reality, realizing he'd been whispering to Jongwoo with their heads touching. But still, wasn't Zhenya's jealousy a bit excessive?

Just then, a car horn honked from somewhere outside. All three of them flinched and looked toward the window. Who could that be? Judging by Zhenya's expression, it didn't seem like they were expecting any guests.

The horn blared again, repeatedly. The irritating noise heightened their senses, and Zhenya's expression changed instantly. He strode toward the window, but Kwon Taekjoo quickly pulled him back.

"Hey, it's risky out there. We don't even know who's outside. Why would you try to look?"

"....."

Zhenya looked down at the arm Kwon Taekjoo was holding, as though he'd seen something odd. Was he overreacting, treating him like a kid? Embarrassed, Taekjoo was about to let go when a sudden, loud crash rang out — a sound you'd only hear when something heavy collided with something solid.

At that point, Zhenya moved to the window, gently parting the curtain to survey the situation outside. His eyes narrowed.

The same crashing sound continued as before. Letting the curtain drop, Zhenya walked off without a word of explanation, and a sense of foreboding spurred Kwon Taekjoo and Yoon Jong-woo to follow him in haste.

Zhenya grabbed a rifle hanging by the entrance and loaded it right there. Then he yanked open the door, pointing the muzzle toward the main gate. That's when Kwon Taekjoo and Yoon Jong-woo finally understood the source of the noise. A white Rolls-Royce was ramming into the gate, trying to force its way through. Zhenya was about to pull the trigger, taking aim at the unexpected intruder.

{Mr. Yevgeny, wait! It's Miss Olga!}

Suddenly, Yoon Jong-woo threw himself onto Zhenya, holding him back. Zhenya shoved Yoon Jong-woo away, locking his aim on the Rolls-Royce breaking through the gate.

*Olga?* Olga. Where had he heard that name?

The Rolls-Royce sped up the driveway, ready to plow through anything in its path. Zhenya stood firm, unmoved, facing it head-on. Yoon Jong-woo kept pleading, {Stop, please!} in mounting panic.

At last, the car came to a stop right in front of the entrance. The driver's door opened, and with a loud pop, an umbrella unfolded. Kwon Taekjoo watched intently as Olga stepped out, holding the umbrella.

{It's been a while, everyone.}

Olga, unfazed by the rifle aimed at her, leisurely climbed the steps. She smiled at Yoon Jong-woo, who was holding Zhenya back with all his strength, and asked, {How have you been?} Yoon Jong-woo's panicked expression instantly softened into a goofy grin.

{Good! Miss Olga, how have you been?}

It was as if he had an invisible tail wagging excitedly. Zhenya shook off Yoon Jong-woo easily with a swing of his rifle and pointed the muzzle right in front of Olga again.

{What are you doing here?}

{I heard Taekjoo was here.}

Zhenya shot a glare at Yoon Jong-woo, who averted his eyes and looked down, trying to avoid Zhenya's gaze.

{Take her and get out. Before I pull the trigger.}

Zhenya warned, his nose wrinkling in irritation. His finger pulled the trigger close to the breaking point. Yoon Jong-woo was sweating profusely, looking helpless, while Olga remained completely unfazed.

{Who are you to order me around? I'm here to see Taekjoo, not you.}

Hearing his name mentioned again, Kwon Taekjoo couldn't just stand by any longer. He hobbled over on his crutch, moving to Zhenya's side. Noticing his presence, Zhenya briefly relaxed his guard, watching him closely, while Olga casually greeted him.

{Taekjoo, so you're alive?}

{You know me too?}

{Of course! It's me, Olga. Olga Vissarionova Bogdanov.}

Olga leaned in close to him, her gaze asking as if he could ever forget someone as striking as her. Kwon Taekjoo's brows furrowed even more.

{Bogdanov? So you're related to him?}

“Yes, that’s right, Sunbae. Miss Olga is Mr. Yevgeny’s one and only sister.”

Yoon Jong-woo replied on her behalf. Kwon Taekjoo looked her up and down with a skeptical expression.

{You don’t look like him at all.}

{Thanks for the compliment.}

Olga smiled, clearly pleased. Just what part of that was a compliment? Kwon Taekjoo wanted to object, but Olga gave him no chance, casually linking her arm with his.

{Shall we go in and have some tea first?}

No sooner had they taken a single step than the barrel of a rifle pressed firmly against the back of Olga’s head.

{Who gave you permission?}

Yoon Jong-woo let out a small gasp, paling instantly. Although her life was hanging by a thread, Olga merely sighed. It seemed necessary to intervene before a disaster unfolded right before him. Taekjoo raised his hand, shielding the muzzle of Zhenya’s rifle.

{Hey. Isn’t she your sister?}

{I’ve never thought of her that way.}

{What are you talking about? Blood ties don’t just disappear because you deny them.}

Does someone need to teach you even that?}

“**Crazy bastard,**” Taekjoo muttered. At that, Zhenya’s previously cold expression softened strangely. The barrel that had been threatening Olga tilted slightly.

{What? What’s with you all of a sudden?}

{Have your memories... returned, Taekjoo?}

“What?”

Taekjoo frowned at the unexpected question, and Zhenya also tilted his head, looking uncertain. Watching the scene, Yoon Jong-woo gave an awkward smile and gestured for everyone to come inside.

{Let's go in first. As Miss Olga suggested, why don't we sit down and talk over some tea?}

{...Oh... yeah, okay.}

{Let's go, Taekjoo.}

{Hey, let go of my arm.}

{No need to refuse. I'll help you.}

{It's not refusing; it's declining. Let go — you're in the way. I can walk faster on my own.}

He pulled his arm out of Olga's grip and motioned for her to lead the way. With a resigned shrug, Olga complied. Yoon Jong-woo said, {This way,} and guided her inside. Taekjoo quietly followed, but for some reason, Zhenya didn't hurry to catch up.

"What are you doing? Hurry up."

He urged Zhenya, who was staring at him absently, to move along. Zhenya finally set down the rifle he'd been holding and obediently walked beside Kwon Taekjoo. He always acted on his own terms, yet followed along without complaint in moments like these. Each time Taekjoo glanced back, he found Zhenya's gaze meeting his. What kind of relationship had they really had?

When they reached the kitchen, Yoon Jong-woo was heating water for tea. Olga was already seated at the table, idly handling a piece of fruit in front of her.

{Miss Olga, this one's refreshing and tasty. You must be tired from the trip, so try one.}

{Hmm... It's too tough to eat with the skin on.}

{Oh, then should I peel it for you?}

Without a moment's rest, Yoon Jong-woo started peeling the apple, practically playing the role of a servant attending to a noble lady. Watching him openly display his fondness for her, and Olga freely letting him, was slightly irritating.

{So, why did you call her here?}

At Zhenya's prompting, Yoon Jong-woo's hands noticeably slowed, as if he'd suddenly hit a buffer.

{There better be a good reason.}

{Yeah. Why did you call her? It doesn't look like the host here is all too happy about it.}

{Well... I thought it might help, even a little, for you to regain your memory. Miss Olga has been really worried about you, after all. And she probably knows more than I do about how you got involved with Mr. Yevgeny in Russia.}

Yoon Jong-woo poured out his explanation almost defensively, and Olga nodded along in agreement.

{One way or another, recovering your lost memory is the top priority, right? And for that, we need help from all sides. From what I hear, Taekjoo doesn't remember that guy at all. The two of you didn't fight while I was gone, did you?}

Olga pointed alternately between Zhenya and Kwon Taekjoo with an empty fork. How did she know? Having been seen through so thoroughly, he was left at a loss for words. Zhenya's gaze grew even sharper. Yoon Jong-woo, pressing his lips together, quietly set the peeled apple down in a dish. Olga speared a piece and ate it, saying, {Obvious, isn't it?} Then she added,

{Aren't you curious? About what kind of relationship you had with him?}

{I heard we were enemies at one point, then became friends.}

{Friends?}

Olga's eyes widened, and she suddenly burst into loud laughter. The unexpected reaction left him bewildered. So, was he not even friends with Zhenya? Not friends, yet he'd let him into his home and introduced him to his mother? Could it be that his mother had been used as leverage against him? To control him like a puppet? Once this thought took hold, his imagination spiraled.

Before his strange suspicions went any further, he pressed Olga.

{Is that wrong? Then what is it?}

{Well... I can't quite decide if it's best to tell you the truth or not. It might be a shock to the current Taekjoo.}

Was being cryptic some kind of Russian trait? Neither Zhenya nor Olga ever gave a straightforward answer.

{Have you seen a doctor?}

{I heard one visited while I was unconscious.}

Kwon Taekjoo looked at Yoon Jong-woo, as if for confirmation, but Olga shook her head to clarify.

{No, I mean a psychiatrist.}

{A psychiatrist? Who has time for that? I'm lucky to still be breathing.}

{Judging by your state, that's apparent.}

The slightly mocking tone seemed to be a family trait. Truly, both the brother and sister were people he'd rather not have gotten involved with. What had Kwon Taekjoo done in the past to end up close to people like this? The curiosity and frustration churned within him.

{Then, let's start by meeting a specialist to discuss the treatment and consider ways for improvement together.}

Without consulting Kwon Taekjoo, Olga made this decision unilaterally.

## 13. Until It's Done

A psychiatrist visited late in the afternoon. He requested to speak with Kwon Taekjoo alone, as his consciousness was clear enough to allow for a one-on-one conversation. This was to assess the patient's condition more thoroughly and avoid any potential interference from those around him.

However, Zhenya did not accept this request. Instead, he stood firmly by the window, arms crossed. In case he disrupted the consultation, Olga and Yoon Jong-woo decided to step back and watch from a distance.

With everyone's attention focused, they briefly explained the circumstances to the doctor. The incident involved being caught up in a terrorist attack in Iran during a work-related trip, sustaining a head injury, and, upon regaining consciousness, being unable to remember even his own name. The doctor, who had been listening quietly, nodded as he confidently explained:

{It's called dissociative amnesia. You may have heard of it before. It often occurs suddenly after a head injury or intense stress. In the patient's case, he sustained a head injury in the attack and hasn't remembered anything since, so it may be trauma-induced. Also, the fact that he couldn't recall his name, occupation, or reason for being there when he regained consciousness points to a general loss of memory about his identity and life. In such cases, patients like him cannot remember who they are, where they've been, who they spoke with, what they did, what thoughts they had, or what emotions they felt.}

This was something he had somewhat expected. However, it was unsettling since it was a symptom he had never experienced, despite countless injuries over the years. Occasionally, they had heard of other agents suffering severe head trauma, which not only erased memories but also caused cognitive issues. Still, it was hard to believe that something similar had happened to him; it was simply bewildering.

{In fact, this type of general memory loss is quite rare. It mainly appears in people who have experienced extreme stress or conflict, such as witnessing a horrific accident, going through war, or being a victim of sexual assault. Because of this, there are certain things that the patient and caregivers should be cautious about...}

The doctor looked at Zhenya, Olga, and Yoon Jong-woo one by one, as if offering a word of caution. "Caregivers" was an unusually intense term.

{For some patients with dissociative amnesia, there's a high likelihood of PTSD occurring when they suddenly recall the event that triggered the memory loss or when they find themselves in a similar situation. Even if they've entirely forgotten the incident itself, their behavior might still be influenced by it later on. For example, someone who was attacked in an underground parking lot may avoid entering one, even if they can't remember the incident clearly. It's a kind of defense mechanism to protect oneself from extreme stress. Recovering lost memories is important, but it's also crucial to avoid triggering PTSD in the process. Rushing to restore the patient's memories could be harmful.}

As if in unison, Olga and Yoon Jong-woo's gazes shifted toward Zhenya, but he remained completely unfazed by their reproachful looks.

{If the patient's memory loss is purely due to trauma or the stress of witnessing the terror attack, then simply being removed from that environment might help the memories return more quickly. The patient mentioned having dreams or occasional flashbacks during daily life. That can be seen as a sign of the brain's recovery process. In most cases of memory loss, resolving the underlying conflict usually restores the memories.}

{That's reassuring, but sometimes it's hard to tell if the memories that come back are real or just imagined. And even if they do return, they often come back scattered like puzzle pieces, without connecting coherently.}

{I see. That must be unsettling and confusing for you. In those moments, verifying the memories through others' testimonies or material evidence can help you feel more at ease. Make sure to

communicate openly with the caregivers, and caregivers, whenever necessary, provide the patient with objective facts or evidence to give him confidence in his memories.}

The doctor looked back and forth between the three of them again, as if reminding them. It seemed that, having left the terror incident behind and with his head injury nearly healed, all that was left was to recover his memory. In fact, fragments of his memory surfaced daily, which was a positive sign.

However, the doctor warned against being overly optimistic.

{Of course, in very rare cases, patients can lose important memories entirely. For instance, there are reports of parents who forget the fact that they've lost a beloved child. Sometimes, memory loss is accompanied by dissociative fugue.}

{Dissociative fugue?}

{In your case, it seems different, as you've come to recognize who you are. However, there are people who, after losing their memories, never try to reclaim their identity and live as if they're someone else entirely.}

{Isn't that the kind of thing that only happens in movies?}

{It actually happens in real life, which is why it became a movie trope. Dissociative fugue refers to a condition where, in an attempt at emotional escape from a traumatic event, someone adopts a new identity. This usually leads to major identity confusion and even impairs professional abilities.}

The doctor looked at Kwon Taekjoo over his glasses, as if silently asking if he had experienced anything like this. Even when he didn't remember who he was, he handled firearms without hesitation. When escaping or hiding, he naturally calculated how to make use of his surroundings. So, he thought this was unlikely to be relevant to him.

Just then, Olga, who had been listening quietly, asked a question.

{Is there a specific medical treatment?}

{As I mentioned, a supportive environment is most important, followed by options like hypnosis or medication. To prevent the onset of PTSD, long-term psychological therapy would also improve the prognosis. Since the patient isn't a resident here, it would be best to return to his home country for more comprehensive treatment. There would also be more witnesses or evidence there to help verify his memories.}

Glancing at Zhenya, he felt a pang of unease. A few days ago, he had mentioned returning to Korea to rejoin the National Intelligence Service, which had led to a disagreement with him. Zhenya met his gaze, his face looking unusually pensive.

The doctor emphasized the importance of the process of treatment and recovery.

{At any rate, the one who is most confused and afraid right now is the patient. The pressure and anxiety of having to fill in the blanks in his memory must be overwhelming.

It's possible that his mind developed a psychological defense mechanism to shield him from painful experiences or memories of conflict. Only by overcoming that barrier can true treatment begin. Caregivers should avoid suggesting any specific memories to him. Otherwise, false memories might be created. It's essential to ensure that he isn't subjected to extreme anxiety.}

{Yes. I'll keep that in mind.}

Olga nodded earnestly. Yoon Jong-woo dropped his head, looking somewhat downcast. Though Kwon Taekjoo had initially encouraged him to share, Jong-woo now seemed to regret revealing so much so quickly. He appeared concerned that his eagerness might have unintentionally caused more trouble.

Just as Kwon Taekjoo opened his mouth to offer reassurance, Zhenya abruptly crossed the sitting room and left without a word. The others exchanged puzzled glances, unsure of what had just happened. The doctor, who had been observing Zhenya's departure, adjusted his glasses and remarked:

{And one more thing. Most patients recover their memories naturally, but there are some who never reclaim their lost past. They're unable to break through the barrier in their minds.}

{A barrier in their minds?}

The doctor elaborated further, presenting an unexpected possibility.

{Our bodies have a stronger self-preservation instinct than we think. Memories of traumatic events that were terrifying enough to threaten one's life might be permanently lost.}

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After the doctor left, they discussed what to do next. Olga offered her opinion eagerly.

{Why don't you stay here at least until your leg heals? Since your mother isn't in Korea either, there's no need to rush. Jong-woo can arrange a way for you to return by speaking with the NIS, and if that doesn't work out, I'll help. Jong-woo, you've already cleared things with the NIS, right?}

{Well... things have been so hectic, so...}

{You didn't? It's not like you seem busy with anything else.}

Yoon Jong-woo scratched the back of his head awkwardly. His face looked troubled. Olga, watching him intently, widened her eyes in surprise.

{Wait, don't tell me... did *he* stop you from doing it?}

Yoon Jong-woo didn't respond; he just pursed his lips. Olga jumped up, clearly exasperated.

{So, it's not enough that he's holding Taekjoo here; now he's keeping you here too?}

{No, it's not like that. Mr. Yevgeny actually told me to leave ages ago, but I decided to stay. Taekjoo can't really move on his own right now, and before you arrived, he didn't remember Mr. Yevgeny at all. I couldn't just leave them alone in that situation.}

Listening to this, Kwon Taekjoo felt a surge of curiosity about Zhenya's true intentions. Wasn't Zhenya interested in helping him recover his memory as quickly as possible? With Jong-woo around, Taekjoo wouldn't require as much attention, and Jong-woo could even assist in bringing back his lost memories. So why was Zhenya so eager to push Jong-woo away? What was he planning by staying alone with Taekjoo?

Could it be that Zhenya was concerned Jong-woo might accidentally reveal his own secrets while they revisited the past? But that didn't seem like Zhenya's style — he wasn't the type to be so paranoid.

As Taekjoo pondered Zhenya's motives, he glanced toward the doorway — and there was Zhenya, standing there and startling him like a ghost.

“Argh!”

“Argh! What? What happened, Taekjoo?”

Yoon Jong-woo shrieked along with him, clinging to Kwon Taekjoo in fright, while Olga simply stared at her brother, unfazed.

He always moved around so silently. Taekjoo calmed his startled heart and observed Zhenya, wondering if he had overheard their conversation. They hadn't exactly been badmouthing him, but guilt pricked his conscience. The atmosphere grew oddly tense.

Ignoring the others entirely, Zhenya fixed his gaze squarely on Kwon Taekjoo and spoke.

“It's time for your disinfecting.”

“Oh, uh. I'll come.”

Leaning on his crutches, Taekjoo awkwardly attempted to stand. Jong-woo and Olga followed suit, but Zhenya strode directly toward Taekjoo.

Jong-woo, caught off guard, instinctively sank back onto the sofa in surprise. Without missing a beat, Zhenya bypassed Jong-woo and lifted Taekjoo, crutches and all, as if nothing else mattered.

"Hey, hold on! What are you doing?"

"It'll be morning by the time you make it."

"Ugh, no matter how big this place is, it's not that big! I'll walk on my own!"

"And how long would that take, crawling along like a slug?"

"Just put me down. I can walk by myself! Listen to me, you idiot!"

Kwon Taekjoo struggled in embarrassment, flailing his limbs in resistance, but Zhenya didn't budge. He simply picked Taekjoo up and leisurely walked out of the room. Kwon Taekjoo, his neck veins bulging, yelled at him.

"Hey, you bastard! I said I'd walk! Why are you so damn stubborn?"

"Why? Would you like me to throw you out that window instead?"

Zhenya frowned, coming to an abrupt stop. Right beside them, a window was wide open, and the wind rushed in, making his hair flutter relentlessly. Beyond the window, a sheer drop fell away into the endless expanse of the sea. If Zhenya was indeed the infamous "Psikh," Taekjoo knew he would have no trouble following through on whatever he had in mind.

The cold certainty of that thought caused Kwon Taekjoo's bravado to vanish in an instant. His body, which had been tense and resisting, slowly relaxed, as if the very air had changed around them.

"What a ridiculous bastard," he muttered to himself, glaring at the innocent wall. Only then did Zhenya resume walking. The bedroom felt unusually far away.

As he was carried like an object, Taekjoo couldn't help but steal a glance at Zhenya's face. Though his expression was unreadable, there was a quiet stubbornness etched into his features. He would look so much

more approachable if he smiled, Taekjoo thought — almost regretting the thought the moment it crossed his mind.

Then, as though on cue, their eyes met. Taekjoo flinched, startled, as if caught in the act of something he wasn't supposed to be doing. Zhenya, who had been staring at him with that same blank expression, slowly lowered his gaze. For a fleeting moment, a quiet sadness flickered across his face — something that made it impossible for Taekjoo to look away.

It was only when Zhenya gently set him down on the bed that Taekjoo realized they had reached the bedroom. For a brief moment, as his face was near Zhenya's neck, he was hit with a stronger, more distinct scent —an odd mix of stale cigar smoke, fragrant pine, and damp wood. His heart pounded, a strange flutter rising in his chest. As their bodies finally separated, Taekjoo felt an unexpected sense of loss.

Zhenya knelt on one knee in front of Taekjoo. Sunlight streamed through the window behind him, making his platinum-blond hair shimmer with an almost ethereal glow. Each of his long eyelashes seemed to catch the light, and his blue-gray eyes had turned a soft, translucent aquamarine, as though they were carved from crystal. How could someone so beautiful be so unnaturally strong?

Lost in the quiet wonder of Zhenya's face, Taekjoo was caught completely off guard when Zhenya suddenly leaned in. Their faces were now so close, Taekjoo could feel the warmth of his breath, each exhale soft against his skin.

A beat late, Taekjoo jerked back in alarm.

"W-what are you doing?"

"It seemed like you wanted a closer look. No?"

"What nonsense. Just do the treatment."

"Hmm... alright."

Zhenya prepared the medical kit, looking a bit disappointed. Had he been too sharp in his response? He had no idea what Zhenya expected,

or how else he was supposed to react.

The wound on his thigh had healed remarkably well in just a few days. The bullet hadn't lodged in, and thanks to the initial emergency care, it was recovering without issue. Taekjoo had always been quick to bounce back; even as a child, he'd been no stranger to injury, but he rarely needed the full recovery time that doctors or hospitals recommended. Back then, he had been reckless, trusting in his body's resilience, and would often volunteer for the next mission the moment he was discharged. Headquarters had never objected to a soldier willing to push himself to the limit.

But this... this kind of care, this level of attention, felt completely foreign. Zhenya examined his wound every single day without fail — unwrapping the bandages, checking the injury, and reapplying treatments when needed. He was meticulous, watching for any signs of infection with an almost clinical precision. Zhenya handled his body with an expertise that made Taekjoo wonder just how much experience he had with this kind of thing... and why he seemed to know exactly what to do.

"I've been curious — do you have a medical license or something...?"

"Why would I need that?"

Zhenya lifted his eyes, looking at him as if to ask why such basic tasks like stitching, dressing, or injections would require a license. Taekjoo, with a skeptical expression, subtly pulled his leg closer. Zhenya firmly held his calf and continued disinfecting the wound.

"Don't worry. I'll get rid of *that* soon enough."

He said this in a reassuring tone. But who was worried about what? *That*... could he be talking about Olga? Zhenya seemed to think of her as an unwelcome guest, but for Taekjoo, her presence had been a relief. She gave him someone new to talk to, and she seemed likely to help him recover his lost memories, along with Yoon Jong-woo. Above all, she was someone who operated on common sense, and he didn't have to watch his words around her, which he found refreshing. He even

thought that staying with her might help him recover both his memories and his health a bit faster.

Perhaps Olga could even help him recall memories that Yoon Jong-woo hadn't been able to uncover. Somehow, she just seemed to get the whole weird, hidden dynamic between him and Zhenya.

"What's the point in doing all that? Especially when someone went through the trouble of coming all the way here."

"Why? Don't tell me *that's* to your liking? Or maybe you actually remembered something?"

When Kwon Taekjoo defended Olga, Zhenya sneered, displeased. Why did he have to be so twisted? Taekjoo sighed softly and tried to reason with him.

"If, like you said, I have to stay stuck here until I'm fully healed, it's obviously better to have more people around than just the two of us."

"You like having other people around?"

"Of course. I won't be bored, and if we chat now and then, maybe my memory will come back faster."

It was a comment made without much weight or meaning. Regardless of gender, having more people around meant there'd be more to talk about and things to do, so it seemed better.

"You must have been pretty bored until now."

But then, Zhenya suddenly shot back in a cold tone. His eyes held a look of disappointment or perhaps something akin to resentment. What now?

"I was bedridden for days, of course I've been bored. So what, why are you being moody all of a sudden?"

"You really don't know?"

"No, I don't. I have no idea, so just explain it to me clearly, will you?"

"Ha... look at your attitude, Taekjoo. Notice how differently you treat me compared to the others. How long are you planning to keep this up? Just how long am I supposed to put up with this?"

Taekjoo opened his mouth to say something but paused, closing it again. Zhenya's complaint sounded like he was just whining about being left out when Taekjoo hung out with other people but not him.

Then again, it was true that Taekjoo was laid-back with Yoon Jong-woo and Olga but kept a distance with Zhenya. He couldn't exactly deny it.

Come to think of it, why did Taekjoo feel so at ease around Olga, almost as much as with Yoon Jong-woo? Was it just that they communicated well? Or was it because Olga was a woman? That didn't quite sit right either, since he didn't keep that same distance with Matthias.

For some reason, he kept becoming more aware of Zhenya. The guy's presence was like some kind of vague, nagging threat, putting him on edge — an instinctive warning.

"I never would've forgotten. Even in my last moments, I would've remembered you, Taekjoo."

After voicing his frustration, Zhenya got up and left the room. The door swung open so harshly it seemed like it might break off its hinges.

A moment later, Yoon Jong-woo peeked his head around the doorway. Observing  
Taekjoo's expression, he quickly approached and asked,

"Are you alright, sunbae?"

"Yeah."

"Did you and mr. Yevgeny argue again? The atmosphere was ice-cold out there."

"When is that guy not like that?"

He fell back onto the bed with an annoyed sigh escaping him.

"Haa... What on earth did I do to him? Why is he so sulky and moody all the time?"

He tried to force his scattered thoughts together, but nothing clicked. The idea of loyalty so deep that someone would remember another until the very end — could that even happen between people with no blood ties?

Every time he faced Zhenya, it felt like staring at an unsolvable puzzle — no formula, no clear path, no easy answer. Zhenya just kept sulking, and even though Taekjoo wanted to figure it out, he had no idea where to start. The frustration was building up, and he found himself running a hand through his hair in exasperation.

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Outside Taekjoo's bedroom, Olga was waiting for Zhenya. When he tried to walk past her despite clearly seeing her, she called him back.

"Let's talk."

"There's nothing to talk about."

"Well, I have something to say, so listen."

When she informed him unilaterally, Zhenya whipped around to face her, his gaze fierce and a vein standing out on his jaw.

"Why do you keep challenging me? Do you have a death wish?"

"I'm not afraid of dying. It's not like I'd live that long anyway. But even if you hurt me, do you think Taekjoo will still like you as much as before?"

Zhenya frowned, as though he'd heard something absurd. Taekjoo and Olga had no connection. The idea that Taekjoo would hate him if he hurt Olga felt nonsensical. But Olga continued, sounding certain.

"I've already spent time with Taekjoo, met his mother several times, and I'm even related to you by blood. If you harm me with your own hands, Taekjoo will never forgive you. He'll distance himself from you even more and come to fear you."

A scoff escaped Zhenya. He looked at her with a bewildered expression, wondering what gave her such confidence. Of course, Taekjoo didn't want him estranged from his family or brothers. He wouldn't be pleased if Zhenya went so far as to kill one of them. But that didn't mean he'd never want to see him again over something like that. Taekjoo already understood the kind of person he was.

As if she could see straight through him, Olga pressed on.

"Are you so sure? Do you really believe that Taekjoo would accept you as he did before, even if you became a murderer who kills his own blood? Right now, Taekjoo doesn't even know who you are or what kind of relationship you had with him. No, he wouldn't. It'd be too hard to accept."

"What do you know..."

He ground his teeth. Olga's habit of belittling him and trying to lecture him was infuriating. Yet he couldn't fully deny her words, which only irritated him more. It felt as if he were shackled by invisible chains, trapped.

Olga sighed, seeing her brother's frustration. Her tone softened as she added,

"Get real. To Taekjoo, you're practically a stranger now. His memories of you have completely disappeared. What are you expecting to achieve by demanding he remember you on the spot? If you're his so-called lover, then help him regain his memories instead."

"Yes, lover. So even if he lost all his memories, he should've remembered me."

He couldn't accept the idea that he had been forgotten so easily. After all the ways he had ingrained himself in Taekjoo's life, it was hard to admit that it had all been for nothing.

"Stop being unreasonable. It's not like he forgot you on purpose. Why are you pushing someone who's already struggling more than anyone?"

"If you don't want to forget, then you won't. It'll be engraved in your bones, etched into your soul."

Olga held her head in frustration. Talking to him was impossible. It always was. Zhenya constantly displayed hostility toward others and trusted no one but himself. His thoughts always centered around his own perspective, so naturally, he struggled to understand or empathize with others. It suited him, she thought — just a man who had grown in size and age, nothing more.

Olga scoffed, saying, "How '*special*' could this relationship have been?" Zhenya looked at her with an icy glare, as expected.

"All you did was abduct him to your isolated island, threaten him, and forcefully push until he surrendered. That's all your relationship was, wasn't it?"

"Even if you downplay it like that, it doesn't change the fact that Taekjoo is my lover."

"And he's forgotten all of it."

Olga reminded, gently steering the conversation back to its core. She seemed more intent on persuading him than on criticizing. Zhenya tilted his head, as if waiting for her to continue.

Olga clarified further to make her point clear.

"The doctor said most memories would return, but some might not. Do you think it would be a good thing for Taekjoo to remember everything he went through with you? I don't think so. The time before he accepted you must have been nothing but pain and suffering. The fact that he doesn't recall your troubled past could actually be an opportunity. This time, you can try building your relationship with more patience, gentleness, and consideration — like people who fall in love the normal way."

"Rebuild our relationship?"

"Yes. Instead of pressuring him to remember who you are, try to make him fall for you again — this time, in a way that's truly loving. If you take it slow, Taekjoo won't feel threatened or guarded, and he might even find it easier to accept that you were his lover."

Zhenya didn't fully grasp the idea. He was a man who barely understood common emotions, let alone complex feelings of romance. All he'd ever done was act on impulse, charging forward and overwhelming the other person until it was too much to bear.

The doctor had warned against forcibly trying to trigger specific memories or contaminating the patient's mind. But if those memories were only painful, wouldn't it be better to let them lie dormant? No one needed to live burdened by a past filled with such distress.

"If it wasn't something truly precious or beautiful, wouldn't it be better to just cut out those painful memories — for both of you?"

It must have been a pretty tempting offer. Zhenya, who had been listening without a word, narrowed his eyes suspiciously at Olga.

"What are you planning?"

"Planning? What are you talking about?"

"Why are you pretending to help me?"

"I'm not helping you; I'm helping Taekjoo. I owe him in several ways. If you and Taekjoo break up, I'd lose three friends, which would be a big loss for me. If this is the price of having a foolish brother, I might as well settle it now."

Olga added more comments that were difficult to understand.

"Besides, I liked the ending of the 'Koschei' story that Taekjoo came up with. So this time, I thought I might try being the clever beauty myself."

"Beauty?"

Zhenya frowned as if he'd just heard something strange. Olga didn't mind and gave a sly, meaningful smile.

"Or maybe a 'Baba Yaga' disguised as a beauty?"

She was genuinely curious. Even if the knight wasn't stuck in the same predicament as before, would he still end up falling in love with the monster?

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"So you're saying I told you I'd quit the National Intelligence Service after this operation wraps up?"

Kwon Taekjoo asked again, looking utterly unconvinced. It was the third time he'd asked the same question. Yoon Jong-woo gave a weary nod.

"Yes, that's what you said."

"Why?"

"Uh? How should I know? It was so out of the blue."

"Don't tell me..."

"Don't tell you what?"

"Did I have a kid somewhere?"

"What? Are you serious, sunbae?"

Yoon Jong-woo practically jumped out of his seat. He didn't question why the conversation had taken such an odd turn; instead, he looked as if this was exactly the kind of thing he'd expect from Kwon Taekjoo.

Kwon Taekjoo muttered with an uncertain look.

"No, what I mean is, if it's not something like that, then it doesn't make sense for me to have anyone more important than work. I even lied to

my mom just to keep going, even though she tried so hard to stop me."

"Well, sure... but then why wouldn't I know about it?"

"If I told you, you'd spill every detail to my mother, and then she'd be interrogating me about what kind of girl it is, wouldn't she?"

"Ah, that explains it. You've definitely softened up, Sunbae."

Yoon Jong-woo nodded, readily agreeing, as he rubbed his chin and recalled just how much Kwon Taekjoo had changed recently.

"But why are you assuming there's a kid involved? Did something else come to mind?"

"No. I keep having strange dreams."

"Strange dreams?"

"They might be memories, actually... There's this cute little kid that keeps showing up in them. Every time they see me, they cry, but when I pick them up and pat them, they calm down. They cling to me so tightly, like they never want to let go. It made me wonder if I knew them from somewhere. And when I think back on other dreams, it almost feels like I really did have a child."

"What?! So, somewhere out there, my niece or nephew already exists?  
Was it a boy?  
Or a girl? Don't tell me they look like you!"

"What do you mean, 'don't tell me'?"

"Just, you know... babies are cutest when they're calm and sweet..."

"Didn't look anything like me. Just from the look of them, I couldn't tell if it was a boy or a girl. The kid had light blond hair."

"Blonde? Was the kid of mixed race? Then is my sister-in-law a foreigner?"

"Mixed race... maybe. The kid doesn't seem Eastern at all."

They were speculating about Yoon Jong-woo's nonexistent nephew when, suddenly, there was a knock at the door. However, it was purely a formality; before they even granted permission to enter, the door burst open.

{What are you both doing holed up in here? Aren't you feeling stifled?}

Olga said, gesturing with her head toward the outside. Dressed in a thin beach dress over her swimsuit, she looked ready to go swimming. Yoon Jong-woo cast a pleading look at Kwon Taekjoo, his eyes shining with rare enthusiasm. Certainly, even a day or two of rest would make anyone restless. Having barely left the villa since their arrival, he figured now might be the perfect chance to get some fresh air.

{Alright. Let's go, then.}

{Yes! Time for some swimming!}

Yoon Jong-woo cheered, leaping up with excitement. He had hardly ever shown any interest in water before, practically a landlubber. Clicking his tongue in amusement, Kwon Taekjoo followed him outside, where the glass door leading to the backyard was already open. Though they had been staying at the villa for a week, he hadn't even known about the swimming pool. The moment they stepped into the backyard, the distinct scent of pool water greeted them. Soon, their eyes fell upon a sizeable outdoor pool. With about ten sunbeds, parasols, and even a poolside bar, it looked like something straight out of a resort.

Beyond the pool in the backyard, the blue Mediterranean stretched endlessly. The warm sunlight poured down without obstruction, and the gentle breeze from all directions pleasantly cooled their skin.

The sky was flawlessly blue, without a single cloud. The clear, tranquil surface of the pool perfectly reflected the sky. Occasionally, the sound of water rippling softly tapped at their ears.

{Come over here, both of you. The sun is really nice today.}

At the sound of Olga's voice, Yoon Jong-woo snapped back to reality. She was already lying on a sunbed in her swimsuit. Busy marveling at the pool facilities, he quickly averted his gaze, his cheeks and ears flushing a bright red. Kwon Taekjoo tapped Jong-woo's hip with his crutch and then settled down on the sunbed next to Olga. Lying beneath the fluttering parasol, feeling the soft breeze, he felt a refreshing relief from the pent-up tension. How did he, a civil servant, end up mingling with the elite in such a luxurious space?

Had Kwon Taekjoo really drifted so far from the ideals of modesty he once held?

While he was lost in these thoughts, Olga suddenly held out a bottle of tanning cream.

{Could you apply this for me?}

It seemed she was well-practiced in commanding others without bothering to consider their wishes.

{Are you really asking a patient to do this? Use him instead.}

He said, tossing the tanning cream over to Yoon Jong-woo. Jong-woo fumbled awkwardly, as if he had just been handed a hot stone.

{Me? Y-you want me to do it? I-I've never done anything like this before...}

{Hurry up. It needs to be applied evenly.}

Olga said, bouncing her legs impatiently. She didn't seem to care whether it was Kwon Taekjoo or Yoon Jong-woo doing the application. Jong-woo swallowed nervously, crouching beside her. He pulled a pair of silicone gloves from his pocket, the same ones he used when applying medicine to Kwon Taekjoo, put them on, and then began to gently spread the cream over Olga's skin. His eyes stayed fixed somewhere in the distance. *No wonder he'd never managed to date anyone*, Kwon Taekjoo thought, clicking his tongue as he looked over at the poolside bar, wondering if there was something to drink.

Just as he debated going into the kitchen, attendants emerged from the building, arranging a spread of finger foods, drinks, and cocktails. They even placed a large, flat basket filled with colorful foods and cocktails floating in the pool, the kind of setup you'd only see in honeymoon resort pamphlets.

{Who are those people?}

{They're the attendants that someone had dismissed, but I called them back. We're not here just for a short stay; how could we manage comfortably without anyone to help?}

It was clear the one feeling inconvenienced wasn't Kwon Taekjoo, the patient, but Olga herself. She seemed to have no intention of lifting a finger. Typical of those aristocratic types.

Kwon Taekjoo scanned the area, keeping an eye out for any other nobles who might be lurking nearby. Zhenya hadn't been seen since morning. Was he still asleep? Or maybe he just didn't like swimming?

{Why? Are you looking for someone?}

It seemed he'd been looking around for too long, as Olga suddenly hit the nail on the head. Trying to appear unfazed, he kept his tone as calm as possible.

{Looking? For what?}

{Seems like you're disappointed someone's not around.}

{Disappointed? More like unsettled.}

Scoffing, Kwon Taekjoo reached for a beer bottle with a slice of lemon in it, but Olga easily snatched it away.

{What do you think you're doing, a patient like you? That could lead to an infection.}

{An infection? From this little injury? So you expect me to just sit here watching you drink?}

{Here, try this instead.}

Olga handed him a lemon-flavored soda. Though he wasn't thrilled, he grudgingly took it. Meanwhile, Olga and Yoon Jong-woo cheerfully clinked their beer bottles together in a toast. They looked like a pair of cockroaches.

{Are you curious?}

As he gulped down the rest of the soda, Olga abruptly posed the question. He stopped, mid-drink, and looked over at her.

{Curious about what?}

{About what kind of relationship you had with that guy.]

Olga smiled, her eyes narrowing slightly. It was as if she were teasing him, hinting that she knew the answer all too well. Kwon Taekjoo shrugged, turning his head away with a nonchalant expression.

{Well, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious. I still remember nothing about him, yet he keeps dropping hints that I should. From what I've pieced together and heard, we were apparently very close, though under normal circumstances, he's exactly the type of person I'd never keep near me. Unless, of course, I became utterly debased in those two or three years I don't remember.}

Olga smirked quietly as she listened. Watching her, Yoon Jong-woo practically melted like butter in a hot pan, though there was something unsettling in her smile.

{Want me to tell you? About what kind of relationship you two had?}

{Why do you and that guy keep skirting around it? If you're going to say something, just say it; if not, then don't.}

{Hmm... I'd be more than willing to tell you if you were ready, Taekjoo.}

{Then go on.}

{But are you sure you want to hear it just like this?]

Feigning concern, Olga cast a glance at Yoon Jong-woo, as if to ask whether it was okay to reveal the details in front of a third party. Kwon Taekjoo snorted dismissively. {He and I already know everything about each other anyway, so go ahead.}

Olga tilted her head slightly as if this were nothing out of the ordinary. Then, without much hesitation, she shared the truth about the relationship between Zhenya and Kwon Taekjoo.

{You were lovers.}

{What? Who?}

{That guy and Taekjoo. They were in love with each other.}

At her follow-up clarification, both Kwon Taekjoo and Yoon Jong-woo choked violently. As the two of them coughed and spluttered, Olga openly showed her annoyance, recoiling in visible distaste.

Kwon Taekjoo and Yoon Jong-woo finally managed to stop coughing and stared at each other in bewilderment. Their chins were wet from the drinks they had just spluttered all over themselves. Completely taken aback, Yoon Jong-woo timidly closed his knees together and used his hands to cover his center.

"Sunbae! I never knew you were like that!"

"I didn't know either, idiot!"

They yelled at each other, with Olga between them, as she furrowed her brows and stood up to step into the pool.

After dropping a bombshell like that, she casually floated on the water, as if nothing had happened.

*Lovers? Him and Zhenya? Not just close friends, but in love with each other? How? Since when? Why? How on earth did it happen?*

Questions ricocheted endlessly in his mind. Unless Olga was playing a cruel joke, this revelation was harder to believe than anything else he'd encountered so far.

He retraced his memories. His first love had been as ordinary as anyone else's, and his relationships had always been with women. He'd attended an all-boys middle and high school, went on to study at an engineering college filled mostly with men, and served in the military for several years, yet he'd never once had anything beyond camaraderie with another man. Even in his line of work, whenever he had to seduce targets or those around them, or on the rare occasion he spent the night with someone, it was always with women.

So how did it happen with Zhenya? The stories about his past, which he'd heard from Yoon Jong-woo, had all made sense to him. It was only his relationship with Zhenya that was riddled with questions, and he never would have imagined the answer could be something like this.

{There's no way. Absolutely not.}

Kwon Taekjoo stared at Olga with hollow eyes, as though deeply shocked. He shook his head repeatedly. Olga casually replied as she picked up a shrimp from the basket floating on the pool.

{Isn't love the very thing that makes the impossible possible?}

His chest felt tight, almost suffocating. His lungs seemed to constrict, making it hard to breathe. His mind went blank, as though it had given up on trying to process this, while his heartbeat raced faster than ever.

{I... I need to rest.}

He staggered to his feet. Yoon Jong-woo half rose and asked, "**Should I help you back?**" Waving him off, Kwon Taekjoo hobbled back into the villa on his own, leaning on his crutch. Confronted with such an overwhelming revelation, he felt disoriented and needed time to gather his thoughts alone. He had to verify if Olga's claim was true or if she was simply mistaken.

As he wandered through the corridor, still trying to make sense of it all, he noticed a group of servants gathered near the entrance. And then,

suddenly, Zhenya walked inside. Startled, Kwon Taekjoo yelled without thinking.

"Aagh!"

"...Hm? Jumping like that, are we?"

Zhenya frowned, scanning Kwon Taekjoo from head to toe. Taekjoo cleared his throat awkwardly, and, out of politeness, asked,

"Where'd you go?"

"Out," came the vague reply.

Not that he actually cared about where Zhenya had gone, but his habit of keeping everything so ambiguous was frustrating. Kwon Taekjoo looked him over with a slight irritation, and his gaze soon landed on the envelope Zhenya held. He noticed the neck of a bottle peeking out, likely indicating he'd gone out to buy alcohol.

"Why? Want a drink?"

Zhenya asked, perhaps assuming that Kwon Taekjoo was eyeing his liquor. When Taekjoo quickly declined with a simple "Nah," Zhenya seemed a bit disappointed, his expression shifting ever so slightly. In reality, his face barely changed, but for some reason, it appeared that way — perhaps because Taekjoo had just heard the outrageous claim that this man had once been his lover.

Unable to shake the thought, Taekjoo glanced at Zhenya again. His skin seemed even fairer and smoother than usual under the abundant sunlight. Shadows from his long lashes brushed his cheeks, swaying slightly in the gentle breeze. Beneath those lashes, his aquamarine eyes glinted, almost gem-like, clearly reflecting Kwon Taekjoo's own face. He found his gaze lingering on the elegant lines from Zhenya's high nose down to his lips. The longer he held eye contact, the more it seemed like Zhenya's deep blue pupils darkened.

Objectively, Zhenya's delicate face hadn't changed at all, but somehow, today it felt different. Was it the clothes? The flowing, lightweight shirt

softened his form, making his usually imposing frame seem less intimidating.

So, he and Zhenya had been lovers? Not just a fleeting, impulsive encounter, but a legitimate relationship — one even acknowledged by Zhenya's own family? He'd even introduced Zhenya to his mother? It was like something out of a movie: had he really fallen in love with an enemy — an enemy who just so happened to be a man?

As hard as it was to accept this revelation, it explained everything. It explained why Zhenya had spared Kwon Taekjoo, a foreign spy; why he'd come all the way to Korea to help him clear his name and even played along in deceiving his mother. It explained why he'd gone to such great lengths to find Taekjoo after he had disappeared without a trace.

Zhenya's disappointment in Kwon Taekjoo for being the only one who didn't remember him, or how he'd impulsively hugged him tight and tried to kiss him — all of it made sense. Because they were lovers, after all. When people who fight like cats and dogs slowly become aware of each other, eventually even locking eyes, it happens so often it's practically a cliché... but Kwon Taekjoo, himself?

No matter how hard he tried to understand, the question circled back to him like a repeating melody.

“Would you like to drink with me?”

As he was brooding alone, Zhenya brought out the alcohol he'd bought, redirecting his attention. Zhenya's white, slender hand held the large bottle lightly, shaking it gently. Taekjoo's throat moved on its own.

His tone, urging him for an answer, was as sweet and soft as if he were urging him to join him. Taekjoo shook his head vigorously. “No! I... I left something in my room!”

He gave a clumsy excuse and hurriedly headed toward the bedroom. Like a malfunctioning robot, the same arm and leg kept moving forward

in sync. If he hadn't had crutches, he probably would have taken a spectacular fall.

Zhenya tilted his head as he watched Kwon Taekjoo's strangely dazed figure walk away.

He had never seen Taekjoo look this absent-minded. Even when he had rejected Zhenya, even when he eventually accepted their relationship, Taekjoo hadn't been this flustered.

But the outside of his ear was definitely red. His eyes looked hazy, and his throat visibly moved. These were signs Kwon Taekjoo often showed when he was drawn to Zhenya.

*'Make Taekjoo fall for you again. This time, like a real lover. If you approach him slowly, he won't be startled or defensive, and he'll more easily accept the fact that he was your lover.'*

Suddenly, Olga's far-fetched suggestion came to mind. He had doubted it was even possible, but seeing Kwon Taekjoo's reaction made him think there might be some truth to it.

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*I ran and ran through the pure white snowfield, the biting cold air stinging my lungs with each breath. It felt as though I was either being chased by something or chasing after something, but I couldn't tell which. My breath came out in short, white bursts, filling the frigid air, and everything around me was so dark I couldn't even tell where the path would end. The ridgelines of the mountains and the birch trees seemed to draw closer, only to pull away again, stretching on forever. It was a world of perfect black and white, an endless expanse where I couldn't find any kind of anchor.*

*Just as the ache in my chest reached its limit, something overtook me from behind. It covered my entire body in a darkness that had no distinct form. I struggled to break free, thrashing my arms and legs,*

*but they were completely ensnared, held down by something I couldn't see. It felt like a heavy boulder had been placed on my back, pressing down on my head, and no matter how hard I fought, it wouldn't let go. The harder I struggled, the tighter the grip became. It felt like the weight of the world itself was pressing down on me, squeezing my organs flat, making it harder to breathe.*

*But in contrast to the crushing pressure, the touch of the darkness was unnervingly soft. Sometimes it felt like animal fur, other times like smooth, unfeeling flesh. It pressed down on me mercilessly, whispering my name in a voice I thought I recognized.*

'Taekjoo.'

*Goosebumps erupted on my cheeks, and the fine hairs in my ears stood on end. That voice... I knew it. I had to. But I couldn't place it. The words were so familiar, so haunting.*

'Who is it? Who was that?'

'Are you really going to leave like this?'

*The voice continued, its sweetness laced with something else — something darker.*

*My breath caught in my throat as my airways constricted, and I choked, thrashing harder in a desperate attempt to break free. My body felt trapped in some kind of vice, and nothing I did seemed to improve the situation.*

'No, you can't leave like this, Taekjoo.'

*The voice in my ear turned bitter, almost resentful, and it burrowed deep into my skull, echoing in my mind like a cursed whisper. I couldn't take it anymore.*

'Stop showing up already! You're such a nuisance!'

*My own voice rang out, sharp and angry. But it wasn't something I'd said — it was like it came from somewhere else, somewhere deeper inside of me. I had no control over it.*

*The instant my words cut through the air, the weight on my back disappeared. The grip around my body loosened, and the suffocating pressure lifted. I gasped for air, confused and disoriented. When I turned my head, there — standing in the shadows — was a child.*

*Its blue eyes glistened with tears, too many to count, and its small form trembled. The face... I couldn't make out the features, but I knew it was a child.*

*The child sniffled once, then burst into a sharp, anguished cry. And before I could react, before I could do anything, it vanished into the darkness.*

*I stood there, frozen, helpless, watching the spot where it had been. I hadn't even had the chance to stop it.*

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“.....!”

He opened his eyes. The now-familiar ceiling came into view. Another dream. Unlike the previous ones, this dream wasn't clear. Everything was hazy and abstract, making it impossible to understand what it was about, who was there, or what it meant.

Feeling unsettled, he gulped down some water. But the pounding in his chest didn't ease. It wasn't just a heartbeat — it was as if his heart was plummeting with each heavy thud. An uneasy feeling, like he had missed something important, crept over him.

He scratched the back of his head and slowly pushed himself out of bed. A quick wash might help shake off the lingering discomfort. At least he could make it to the bathroom on his own now, even if he was still limping along. The doctor would probably have been concerned to see him moving like this, but Taekjoo wasn't one to dwell on advice. He just

couldn't stand the thought of relying on someone else for help — it made him feel restless, like something was crawling under his skin.

After covering the wound on his thigh with a waterproof dressing, he stepped into the shower. The cool water cascaded over him, soothing the tension in his muscles as it ran from his head down his body. Slowly, he ran his hand over his face, as if trying to wash away the fog in his mind. He slapped his cheeks lightly with both hands, hoping to shake off the drowsiness that still clung to him.

Just as he finished rinsing off and turned to step out, a figure appeared in his peripheral vision. He froze, startled. At the doorway stood Zhenya — silent as always, with that unsettling way of appearing without a sound. He had no idea how long Zhenya had been standing there or how he managed to move so quietly. Irritation flared up, and without thinking, Taekjoo snapped.

"Ah, damn it! You're not a ghost, so could you make some noise when you move around?"

"Lost your memory, and now your courage, too?"

Zhenya sneered without a hint of apology or embarrassment. Even if that wasn't his intention, it came across that way. Whatever he said always sounded mocking, as if his way of speaking was fundamentally twisted.

Kwon Taekjoo clicked his tongue, then suddenly realized he was completely naked. The way Zhenya blatantly stared at his body made him even more self-conscious. Hurriedly, he tried to change the subject, discreetly covering his lower body with the towel wrapped around his neck.

"So, uh, did you sleep well?"

"More or less. It wasn't a bad night."

He nodded without much weight to it. He wanted to steer Zhenya's attention elsewhere, but no suitable topic came to mind. If only he hadn't known that Zhenya was his lover, he'd have told him to leave, but he couldn't bring himself to treat him carelessly. Meanwhile, water

continued dripping from his hair. Trying to dry it meant exposing himself even more, and he was caught in a dilemma. As he stood there, hesitating awkwardly, Zhenya strode over.

"Here, give it to me."

"It's fine. I can handle..."

As he struggled to refuse Zhenya's help, he accidentally dropped the towel, leaving him completely bare despite all his efforts.

"Then should I help you down there?"

Zhenya's gaze held a mocking glint. Taekjoo stood there quietly, shaking his head.

Zhenya picked up the fallen towel and placed it on his wet hair.

Zhenya's hands were larger than Taekjoo had expected, perhaps because of his height. The way Zhenya gently rubbed the towel over his hair, soaking up the moisture, felt oddly familiar. Even the way he quietly wrapped the towel's edges around both ears.

Their eyes met suddenly, and Zhenya's gaze was unexpectedly calm. Time seemed to freeze for a moment, as though he were entranced.

Just then...

"Sunbae! Where are you?"

Yoon Jong-woo's strong voice rang from outside, jolting him back to reality. A slight furrow appeared between Zhenya's brows.

"Are you taking care of your business? Need any help?"

Yoon Jong-woo's voice grew louder as he neared the bathroom. It would be better if he didn't see him in this state.

"Let's go. I'm hungry."

He patted Zhenya's shoulder and headed out first. Yoon Jong-woo's eyes went wide as he saw Kwon Taekjoo, still not fully dressed.

"Were you showering by yourself? You should've called me. It must have been uncomfortable..."

Yoon Jong-woo's words trailed off gradually, and his gaze shifted away from Kwon Taekjoo, drifting over his shoulder. His face turned pale in an instant.

When Kwon Taekjoo glanced back, he saw that Zhenya's face held no particular expression. Calmly, Zhenya stepped forward and draped a robe over Kwon Taekjoo's shoulders. Sliding his hand around his waist, Zhenya even tied the robe's belt for him. "I've prepared breakfast with your favorite dishes." He murmured, his eyes crinkling.

Kwon Taekjoo watched Zhenya leave, then turned his attention to Yoon Jong-woo, who was sweating profusely, his eyes roaming the floor without finding a place to settle.

"Hey, why are you trembling so much? That guy seems to be a decent person after all, doesn't he?"

"A... decent person? Sunbae, you're just not in your right mind right now; that's why you think that."

"Not in my right mind? From my own experience, he doesn't seem as bad as you made him out to be. He's not overly violent, and surprisingly, he's cooperative at times."

"You must be in love. That's why you're seeing him through rose-colored glasses...."

"What did you say, you little...?"

As he reached to grab Yoon Jong-woo by the collar, the robe slipped open, leaving him exposed. Yoon Jong-woo, feigning innocence, gave a mock salute to Kwon Taekjoo's lower half.

"Hello, there. Did you sleep well? You're looking rather lively this morning."

With an exaggerated politeness, Yoon Jong-woo adjusted Kwon Taekjoo's robe and set a pair of underwear on the bed for him. "Better put this on," he said, turning away with a contrived gesture that was all too obvious. Ever since he'd learned about Kwon Taekjoo's relationship with Zhenya, he'd been acting like this. No matter how hard he tried to seem unaffected, it was clear he couldn't help but notice. Even Kwon Taekjoo himself found his mind wandering whenever he looked at Zhenya, so it was only natural that Yoon Jong-woo would find it hard to act indifferent too.

Wearing only his underwear and a robe, Kwon Taekjoo stepped out of his room. For some reason, the servants Olga had summoned were lingering hesitantly in front of the dining room.

It seemed they'd been chased out by Zhenya. Olga was nowhere to be seen, possibly still asleep. At the wide kitchen counter, Zhenya was busy cooking something.

Sunlight streaming through the window cast shadows over Zhenya's broad back, emphasizing the contours of his muscles. His shoulder blades and spine created shifting shadows that deepened and lightened as he moved. The loosely tied black apron added an odd allure that drew Kwon Taekjoo's gaze.

"Sunbae?"

Yoon Jong-woo suddenly waved a hand in front of his face, snapping him out of it. "...Oh, right. Let's sit, sit down. Ahem."

Regaining his composure, he took his seat. Just then, Zhenya looked over at Kwon Taekjoo, his gaze resting on him in silence. Did he always have to stare so intensely?

As Taekjoo tilted his head in question, Zhenya placed a cup of coffee in front of him. He took a sip, raising an eyebrow in surprise. The coffee was perfect — exactly how he liked it. When he looked up at Zhenya,

the other man tilted his chin slightly, either in a mocking gesture or as if to show off. Either way, it was irritating.

"So, what's that smell?"

"Dare I hope... is that *yukgaejang* I'm smelling? Or maybe beef soup?"

As he and Jong-woo whispered with growing anticipation, Zhenya scooped something up and handed it to him. By all accounts, it was indeed *yukgaejang*. Where did he even manage to find this rare treat? With a look of awe, Kwon Taekjoo glanced at Zhenya, who let out a scoffing chuckle. It was becoming clear: Zhenya had quite the ego.

A glance at the counter revealed a package of instant *yukgaejang*. No wonder — he had gone on a solo shopping spree a few days ago, probably hunting down Korean groceries. Even so, the fact that he'd gone out of his way to prepare something tailored to Taekjoo's tastes was remarkably endearing.

With a slight smile, he offered his thanks.

"Thanks. I'll enjoy it."

Just as he was about to take a big spoonful, he felt an intense gaze beside him. Turning his head, he saw Yoon Jong-woo, unable to take his eyes off Kwon Taekjoo's bowl. Smacking his lips, Kwon Taekjoo turned to Zhenya with a request.

"Hey, could you give him some too?"

"And why should I?"

"He looks like he really wants some."

"That's not my problem."

"Oh, come on. There seems to be plenty left in the pot. You and your sister won't be eating it anyway. Don't be stingy about food, seriously."

Zhenya gave Yoon Jong-woo a disapproving glare. Feeling intimidated, Yoon Jong-woo quickly added, "It's okay, Sunbae. I actually like this a

lot," and began nibbling on a blini that the servants must have prepared. Even cattle chewing cud wouldn't have looked so resigned.

Kwon Taekjoo nudged his head toward Yoon Jong-woo, urging Zhenya to relent. With a deep sigh, Zhenya grudgingly poured some of the leftover soup into a bowl and tossed it over to Yoon Jong-woo. While Kwon Taekjoo's serving was full of rich chunks of beef and taro stems, Yoon Jong-woo's bowl held little more than a few strands of bracken. Yet he drank it eagerly, as if it were some kind of life-giving nectar.

Watching his junior trying to enjoy a meal under such strained circumstances left Kwon Taekjoo feeling a bit guilty. He scooped a generous amount of meat and vegetables from his own *yukgaejang* and transferred it to Yoon Jong-woo's bowl.

"Honestly, you bastard. Eat up."

"Oh, Sunbae, I'm really fine..."

As the two shared a rare, warm moment, a piercing gaze settled on them. Unsurprisingly, Zhenya was glaring down at them, arms crossed, with a frosty expression. What had him so riled up? Was it because he'd shared the meal Zhenya prepared with Yoon Jong-woo? That was the only explanation that came to mind, and Kwon Taekjoo found himself wondering if he was really dating someone so petty.

Kwon Taekjoo looked uncomfortable, and Yoon Jong-woo whispered in a voice only he could hear. He sounded like he was firing off rapid rounds.

“Sunbae, please don’t call me a bastard in front of Mr. Yevgeny.”

“What? Why not?”

“There are... reasons.”

Zhenya openly showed his displeasure, glaring at Yoon Jong-woo with an intense look.

In an attempt to lighten the mood, Yoon Jong-woo joked, “**This *yukgaejang* is really delicious!**” giving a thumbs-up. But despite his

heartfelt effort, Zhenya's prickly gaze didn't soften.

{Did everyone sleep well?}

Just then, Olga appeared. The attention of all three people turned instantly to her. Olga was dressed from head to toe, ready to go out, as if she were about to go sightseeing.

{Good morning, Olga. Did you sleep well?}

{Yes. But what are you eating? Ugh, that smell.}

Olga leaned closer to Kwon Taekjoo's bowl of *yukgaejang* and grimaced, visibly repulsed. She held her nose openly and even coughed. Kwon Taekjoo, as usual, scolded her behavior.

{What kind of manners are those, holding your nose in front of someone else's food?}

{You make a face every time you see Russian food.}

{I'd rather go a little early than live my whole life eating that stuff.}

Kwon Taekjoo responded shamelessly and deliberately dug into the *yukgaejang*. His thin cheeks quickly puffed up as he stuffed his mouth full. After finishing the entire bowl, leaving not a single drop, he cleansed his palate with strong coffee. Watching this, Zhenya smiled, softening his lips slightly, though it was impossible to tell what exactly he found so satisfying.

{If you're finished, could you clean it up quickly? I can't stand it — it makes me cough.}

Olga said, signaling to the staff. Following her command, the empty dishes were removed, and tea, fruit, butter, honey, and blini were served. Zhenya and Olga, seated at the table, began transferring them to their plates, slicing them elegantly with knives. Even a single blueberry was neatly picked up with a fork and placed in the mouth, and though nothing had stained their lips, they repeatedly dabbed at the corners of their mouths with the napkins on their laps.

Yoon Jong-woo watched them, almost mesmerized. In contrast, Kwon Taekjoo muttered, looking thoroughly annoyed.

“Damn aristocratic types.”

Suddenly, Zhenya met his gaze. Kwon Taekjoo felt a pang, wondering if Zhenya had understood him. But from that moment, Zhenya’s demeanor became slightly odd. He began moving his fork and knife with even more leisurely, refined gestures, as if to say, *If you want to watch, go ahead and enjoy.* Surprisingly, it was Olga who seemed more offended.

{Kwon Taekjoo, did you just curse?}

{Who said I cursed? You’re accusing an innocent person here.}

{It sounded like cursing, from the tone.}

Olga looked over at Yoon Jong-woo as if seeking confirmation. Yoon Jong-woo laughed awkwardly, attempting to explain.

{If we’re being technical, it wasn’t exactly a curse. Haha.}

“Hm...”

Olga cast a doubtful glance but didn’t press further since Yoon Jong-woo had vouched for him. She simply took a sip of her tea, then asked her brother curtly,

{The yacht we used before. Do we still have it?}

{Why?}

{The stars look nice tonight, and the wind is perfect. Since we’re in Greece, let’s go enjoy a yacht tour.}

{Why are you talking nonsense? Have you forgotten why we’re gathered here?}

{No way. Taekjoo’s here to recuperate, isn’t he? But recuperating doesn’t mean lying around like a corpse all day, you know? If you keep

someone like Taekjoo cooped up constantly, he'll end up either going mad or running away. Isn't that right, Taekjoo?}

Olga shot Kwon Taekjoo a desperate glance, silently urging him to give a nod. Zhenya, too, put down his fork and knife, his eyes fixed on Taekjoo with quiet intensity. There was an odd feeling in the air, as though, if Taekjoo consented, he would somehow get exactly what he desired — though there was no logical reason to believe that would be the case.

{A yacht tour? That sounds good. Even though I'm not quite up for swimming yet, I can move around more easily now, and with the weather this nice, it'd be great to get some fresh air.}

Zhenya frowned, letting out a "hmpf," clearly uninterested. Olga set a boundary, telling him not to spoil the mood.

{If you don't want to come, just hand over the keys. We can go by ourselves.}

Without a word, Zhenya stared at Kwon Taekjoo before getting up and leaving the kitchen. It was hard to tell if that meant he was okay with it or against it. Yoon Jong-woo exchanged a puzzled glance with him, tilting his head, when Olga clapped her hands together. Then, with a bright smile and an excited tone, she urged the two of them on.

{Alright, since it's decided, both of you get ready!}

{Huh? That guy still hasn't answered, you know?}

{What are you talking about? He said he understands.}

Had they even been in the same room? When Olga suggested that if he wasn't going to come, he should at least hand over the yacht keys, Zhenya didn't say a word. He just glanced at Kwon Taekjoo, let out a soft sigh, and stood up. How were they supposed to take that as agreement?

{When did that guy say he understands?}

{Well, he didn't say 'no' or 'I don't want to.' He sighed, too, like he was giving up on his own preferences. It's a positive response if you think about it.}

Olga shrugged, as if to say, *Does it really need explaining?* It was strange how Zhenya hardly ever expressed clear likes or dislikes, rarely changed his expression, and yet everyone was supposed to guess at his feelings. How did Kwon Taekjoo end up interested in someone so stoic and emotionally detached? Were they really in a relationship? Or had they just been physically involved? No, no, what a ridiculous thought. The idea of being intimate with another man was already hard to believe. It was as if the world itself were playing tricks on him.

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The group went back to their rooms to get ready quickly. Olga, however, took a full 30 minutes just to put on a hat and sunglasses.

By the time she joined them, Zhenya was still nowhere to be seen. Maybe he was really planning to sit this one out. Just as they began to assume he wasn't coming, Zhenya appeared.

He was wearing a blue shirt and white shorts that reached just above his knees. With his bangs falling low over his forehead, he looked surprisingly youthful. His skin seemed to glow, making them wonder if he'd put on something fresh. Though he looked annoyed, his level of grooming rivaled Olga's.

Had Kwon Taekjoo been staring without realizing it?

"Let's go."

The moment Zhenya spoke, putting on his sunglasses, Kwon Taekjoo snapped out of his daze.

"Ah, uh, yeah."

Flustered, Kwon Taekjoo hurried his steps, moving on crutches as if he were walking on his own two legs. A few times, his crutch barely touched the ground, though he didn't even notice.

They boarded a prepared car and headed to the nearby harbor, where a massive yacht was docked, visible from a distance. A vessel of this size must cost at least tens of billions of won, yet Zhenya and Olga treated it

like just another car — it was like they lived in a completely different world.

{Hurry up!}

{Yes, Ms. Olga! Coming!}

Excited, Olga dashed ahead, with Yoon Jong-woo following quickly, taking on the role of photographer. He snapped ten, twenty shots from the same spot with similar poses.

Watching this, Kwon Taekjoo clicked his tongue and was just about to get up on his crutches when he suddenly felt himself lifted into the air. Zhenya's familiar scent grew stronger as he was pulled close.

"Ugh!" he gasped, freezing up. Despite his body tensing up and making him heavier, Zhenya effortlessly held him in his arms.

"Hey, what are you doing? Everyone's watching!"

"You may have lost your memory, but you're still easily embarrassed, Taekjoo."

"What nonsense. I'm just uncomfortable, that's all."

"Isn't that the same thing?"

Zhenya tilted his head, as if he didn't understand, and continued to carry Kwon Taekjoo onto the yacht. He ignored Taekjoo's demands to be put down and walked to the bow, finally setting him on a comfortable sofa where the breeze gently blew.

Their eyes met at close range. In the soft wind, Zhenya's ivory hair shimmered and fluttered. His blue eyes looked especially clear, and as he lowered them, his thick eyelashes fluttered like wings in the breeze.

*He really is beautiful...*

{Jong-woo! Over here, over here!}

Just as Kwon Taekjoo found himself getting caught up in the moment, Olga's voice interrupted. Startled, he quickly pushed Zhenya's shoulder

and turned his head away. Moments later, Olga and Yoon Jong-woo came running toward them, chatting noisily.

Olga held onto the wide-brimmed hat that looked ready to fly off at any moment and sat down in a spot with a clear view of the sea. Then, with everyone watching, she began shifting her poses slightly and immersing herself in taking photos. Now that he thought about it, her suggestion of a yacht tour, under the guise of considering others, seemed purely self-serving. It was clear she needed companions just to tag along for her own amusement.

Shaking his head, Kwon Taekjoo glanced over at Zhenya, who seemed to radiate an intense, icy aura as he glared at his sister. Realizing Zhenya's fists were clenched tightly, Kwon Taekjoo gently patted them in an attempt to calm him.

"Hey, hey. She's your sister, your sister."

Zhenya's gaze drifted down to Kwon Taekjoo's hand. The fierce look that had seemed ready to burn his sister softened in an instant. With Kwon Taekjoo, he was oddly submissive, almost... innocent in his reactions. It was like training a puppy.

On a whim, Taekjoo patted the seat beside him. Zhenya took the spot without hesitation, then looked at Kwon Taekjoo as if waiting for his next instruction.

"This... is nice, being out here."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah. Being cooped up for days was driving me crazy; it's refreshing."

"Hm."

Zhenya didn't comment further, only watched Taekjoo's profile with quiet admiration. With Zhenya's unblinking gaze on him, a subtle itch crept up along Taekjoo's cheek.

Soon, the yacht set sail. Its large hull absorbed much of the wave's movement, creating barely a ripple of vibration. A refreshing breeze

gently tapped against his skin, the wind threading through his hair and soothing his scalp with its coolness.

Hearing a clinking sound, Taekjoo glanced over to see Zhenya pouring whiskey. For no particular reason, his gaze landed on the glass against Zhenya's lips, then moved to the slow, rolling motion of his throat, and finally the rich aroma of the whiskey wafted over. Without realizing it, Taekjoo swallowed dryly.

"Want a drink?"

Zhenya offered the half-finished whiskey. The wound on Taekjoo's thigh hadn't completely healed yet; the doctor had repeatedly warned him against alcohol and smoking. But maybe just a sip would be fine.

Nodding in surrender, he accepted the glass, took a small sip, and swallowed slowly. The deep flavor filled his mouth, and he savored the lingering taste.

"You have decent taste."

"Naturally."

Zhenya smirked and poured another glass, then lightly clinked it against Taekjoo's. With a slight grin, Taekjoo swirled the whiskey gently in his own glass.

"Seems like rich people all live the same way — breathtaking views, opulent villas, using yachts like they're ordinary cars, private jets."

"You never know where or how you'll become a target, so they build bunkers in multiple places. Yachts and private jets are the most private business spaces."

Somehow, that remark sounded like Zhenya was confessing to using his private spaces — villas, yachts, and private jets — for all sorts of illegal activities. Thinking about Matthias didn't change that impression much, either.

How had he ended up with someone like Zhenya, a complete rogue for a lover? Before, his relationships had always been smooth, uncomplicated. Even if he'd been drawn in by Zhenya's looks, the man

was still just that — *a man*, and a much larger one at that. Even if he'd been drunk, shouldn't his instincts have raised some kind of warning?

After a long, silent stare, Zhenya looked back with a puzzled expression.

"Why are you looking at me like that, Taekjoo? Do you like my face?"

The smugness, without a hint of embarrassment, made Taekjoo frown.

"What are you talking about? Every time I look at you, I realize just how bold I must have been in the past."

"Are you remembering anything?"

"Not yet. Still trying."

He finished off the rest of his whiskey. Once he'd started, a single sip was never enough.

Before long, the yacht docked somewhere. Olga and Yoon Jong-woo wandered in and out of the cabin, while Taekjoo and Zhenya continued to enjoy their drinks. They didn't exchange much conversation, but sitting side by side in silence felt nice.

Clear ocean stretched below them, each layer visible down to the deepest depths. White yachts dotted the water, and behind the harbor rose a cluster of snow-white buildings, with bright blue rooftops contrasting the sky. The whole scene was so beautiful and surreal, like something out of a postcard or painting. Relaxing like this, after those frantic days on the run, felt almost unreal.

It was hard to tell how much time had passed before Zhenya, who had been watching Taekjoo with quiet intensity, suddenly stood up. It seemed an important call had come through. As Zhenya stepped away to answer, his face softened in a way Taekjoo hadn't expected. Could he even *smile* like that? Blinking in surprise, Taekjoo watched as Zhenya continued the conversation, his tone unusually warm and cheerful.

Who could he be talking to? If it were an official call, Zhenya probably wouldn't be speaking so softly. The moment Kwon Taekjoo's attention sharpened without him even realizing it, Zhenya turned around. Their eyes met before Taekjoo could look away. Caught in the act of

eavesdropping, Taekjoo quickly cleared his throat and looked away, his face flushing with the awkwardness of it.

Right after that, Zhenya approached him. It seemed the call hadn't ended yet. Was he going to ask Taekjoo to give him some privacy? As he speculated, Zhenya unexpectedly held out his phone.

"Take it."

"Huh? Who is it?"

Without any explanation, Zhenya gestured at the phone. With a suspicious look, Taekjoo took it and checked the caller ID. It was saved in Russian as *Little Woman*. Who could that be?

"Hello, this is Taekjoo speaking."

*[Oh my, Taekjoo?]*

Unexpectedly, Taekjoo heard his mother's voice. He looked at Zhenya in surprise, but Zhenya merely stood there, arms crossed, looking down at him with a smug expression and a slight tilt to his nose. Although caught off guard, Taekjoo continued the call calmly.

"Oh, yes, Mother. What's going on?"

*[What do you mean, 'what's going on'? It's been days since I last heard my son's voice. You said it would be hard to stay in touch for a while, but with no news at all, of course, I worried. If it hadn't been for the ambassador helping me get in touch, I'd have been out of my mind wondering if something happened to you.]*

His mother immediately began a flurry of concerned scolding. Even if he'd wanted to make the call, Zhenya's watchful eye had kept him from trying. Zhenya had even gone so far as to break Yoon Jong-woo's phone. Taekjoo shot him a frustrated glance, but Zhenya merely shrugged, his expression innocent as ever.

"Ah, I've just been a bit busy with work. How are you doing, Mother? Nothing out of the ordinary, I hope?"

*[Oh, I'm doing well. Your aunt's feeling much better, too. She's been eager to see you when things calm down a bit, asking you to come visit. I wonder if the ambassador has been to Canada before? It'd be lovely if he came with you, Taekjoo. Being a diplomat, he must have traveled all over.]*

Her tone was lively throughout. Normally, she'd still be anxious even after his explanation, but maybe Zhenya's little lie had put her mind at ease. With this positive change in her, it was hard to ignore his influence. According to Yoon Jong-woo, Zhenya had become close friends with his mother, visiting her house often. Taekjoo felt both grateful and a bit impressed.

“I’ll ask him. Things here are almost wrapped up, so once they’re quiet, I’ll either head back to Korea or come to you. Don’t worry too much.”

*[Alright. The ambassador said the same thing. I feel safe as long as you’re by his side.]*

It was a relief, but he couldn’t help but wonder how they managed to communicate. Had his mother suddenly become fluent in Russian? Or was Zhenya’s Korean exceptionally good? When he was with Yoon Jong-woo or Olga, they usually spoke English, and when he whispered something to Yoon Jong-woo, Zhenya would often glare, asking what they were saying, so he’d assumed he didn’t know any Korean.

“Okay, I’ll check in again soon. Stop worrying about me and take care of yourself first, Mother.”

*[Yes, I’ll call you again.]*

“Alright, take care.”

*[Pass on my regards to the ambassador, too.]*

“Yes, I will,” Taekjoo said as he ended the call. When he returned the phone, Zhenya raised his eyebrows, clearly curious about what his

mother had said.

"She sends her regards. She also said to bring you along to visit Canada once things here are settled."

He passed on his mother's message straightforwardly. Zhenya chuckled, staring at the phone, even though the call had long ended. His expression was soft enough that anyone would've mistaken Taekjoo's mother for his lover. Watching Zhenya's tender gaze made Taekjoo feel oddly ticklish inside.

"By the way, how much Korean do you know? I feel like I've been doing all the talking in Russian."

"I don't know."

"Oh, come on. You definitely understand. Just seeing you talk with my mother, it's clear you're good. You've been assigned to the Russian Embassy in Korea for two years now, right? By that time, wouldn't you at least pick up some of the local language? And I doubt my mother mastered Russian in that short time."

"Communication doesn't always require language."

"What nonsense is that? So you really don't know any Korean?"

"Taekjoo."

"That's just my name."

"Mother?"

Zhenya muttered it, sounding somewhat uncertain. He must've paid attention to how Taekjoo kept calling her "Mother." Judging by his pronunciation, it seemed Zhenya might actually be telling the truth about not knowing Korean. But then, how had he managed to hold conversations with her, and even speak to her on the phone? Were they communicating in English? But Taekjoo's mother wasn't very fluent in

English either. As Taekjoo pondered this further, Zhenya suddenly blurted out an unexpected word.

"Bastard." ( bastard. Also means baby)

...What?

He stared at Zhenya, stunned. Was this what it felt like to have a foreigner curse right in front of you? Zhenya seemed to savor the word "bastard," rolling it around as if it were something sweet. Had they really called each other "this bastard" or "that bastard" in their relationship? Was Kwon Taekjoo really *that* shameless?

"Hyung."

Amid the confusion, Zhenya pointed at Kwon Taekjoo with his finger. He knew he was older than Zhenya, and given their relationship, it wasn't surprising that Zhenya would use that term. But when Zhenya said *hyung* with that expression, Kwon Taekjoo felt the hairs in his ears prickle.

"Ahem, is that it?"

"Why would I need to know any more Korean than that?"

As if people assumed he had learned Russian just for the sake of some grand achievement.

"Yeah, good job. You really tried hard. So impressive, I could cry."

When Kwon Taekjoo sarcastically mocked him, Zhenya tilted his chin up subtly. His shoulders spread wide, and his chest swelled with pride. Even the corners of his mouth seemed to twitch with a smirk. Was he seeing things? Or had Zhenya genuinely mistaken the sarcasm for praise?

Feeling uneasy at the unexpected reaction, Olga approached. She seemed to be getting bored of taking photos by now.

{Taekjoo! Come play with us!}

{Go play by yourselves.}

{Did we come all the way out on a yacht just to sit here?]

{What am I supposed to do, being injured? I can't swim, and the spa's too much hassle.}

{Hmm. Then how about we have a fishing contest?}

{Fishing?}

{Yeah. That doesn't have anything to do with your leg.}

Olga looked to Zhenya, as if asking for his agreement. Zhenya already seemed annoyed by the interruption to their time together; his frown didn't show any signs of easing. Olga, undeterred, continued with her fishing challenge.

{It's a contest! Whoever catches the most fish in an hour gets to make the loser do whatever they say!}

{Oh, like a king's game!}

Before they knew it, Yoon Jong-woo, who had followed her, chimed in. A contest? And the winner could boss the others around? It was an idea he found irresistible.

{What do you think?}

He looked to confirm Zhenya's thoughts. Zhenya must have liked the terms of the challenge, as his previously harsh gaze softened considerably. He made his decision quickly.

{Alright. But no complaining from the losers.}

It was easy to imagine what would happen if Zhenya won. Right there, Olga and Yoon

Jong-woo might find themselves unceremoniously tossed into the sea. Yoon Jong-woo had no real chance, and who knew what absurd demands Olga would make if she came out on top. So, for the sake of

everyone's sanity and peace, Kwon Taekjoo made a firm resolve: he must win.

{I'll get things ready. Everyone, come to the stern,} Olga announced unilaterally, disappearing into the cabin, likely to adjust her outfit for fishing.

Once again, Zhenya moved to lift him, but Kwon Taekjoo pressed against his chest to stop him. When their eyes met, he shook his head and, holding onto Zhenya's arm, said, "Just hold me like this." Zhenya looked down at the hand Kwon Taekjoo held on his arm, as though seeing something unfamiliar.

"Let's go."

Kwon Taekjoo gave Zhenya's arm a slight pull. Only then did Zhenya apply enough strength to help him up. With one hand on his crutch and the other holding onto Zhenya's arm, Kwon Taekjoo made his way to the stern. Despite the considerable distance from end to end, the support made it manageable.

At the designated spot, four fishing rods were already set up. To accommodate Kwon Taekjoo's injured leg, a high chair had also been prepared. While attaching bait to his hook, Olga reappeared, fully outfitted from head to toe in a style fit for fishing, just as expected.

{Here to put on a fashion show?}

{Don't you know TPO?}

Olga brushed off Kwon Taekjoo's jab without issue. Another attendant was handling the bait on her fishing rod. Gripping her prepared rod, Olga made her proclamation.

{I'm not going easy on you, Taekjoo.}

{Don't go crying later.}

He responded in a tone that showed how absurd he found it. Olga blew the whistle hanging around her neck, then cast her fishing line into the water without hesitation. Not surprising.

The three men soon followed, casting their lines toward the clear sea.

With fish visibly darting around beneath the surface, it didn't take long before Kwon Taekjoo's float started bobbing up and down. With a quick jerk, he hooked a fish and swiftly reeled it in. Before long, a vibrantly colored, mottled fish emerged above the water.

He removed the wriggling fish from the hook and tossed it into the bucket, flashing a deliberately smug grin at his competitors. Zhenya and Olga turned their heads with a huff, while Yoon Jong-woo looked on in admiration.

Fishing had been a common activity with his father and older brother when he was young. Some days, they caught so many fish that they ended up releasing the ones they didn't need. Whenever he caught a big one, he'd go on about it for days, regaling his mother with tales of his "heroic" feats. Even if his mind lost the memories, his body hadn't forgotten.

Kwon Taekjoo's one-man show continued in this manner. He was unstoppable. As soon as he cast his line, he'd catch a fish as thick as his forearm, sometimes even reeling in two or three at once. It was almost like a performance.

Watching him anxiously, Olga finally voiced her complaint.

{Wait a minute, Taekjoo! What did you do to the bait?}

{Amateurs always blame their tools. Told you, pick your fights wisely.}

{No matter how I look at it, it's suspicious. Why are all the fish biting on your line?]

{This is what they call 'fishing luck.' Seriously, it's always those with good luck who get it.}

Kwon Taekjoo clicked his tongue at the three who hadn't caught a single fish yet. His bucket was already full. When he tossed in the fish he'd just unhooked, it flopped so hard that the other fish spilled out onto the deck.

{There must be a big coral reef over there. Switch spots with me!}

{Hey, isn't it a bit much to cheat against an injured man who can barely move?}

{And it's not cheating to play the victim only when it suits you?}

Kwon Taekjoo laughed it off and willingly switched spots. Just then, Yoon Jong-woo managed to catch a small, palm-sized fish. But despite her new spot, Olga's fishing line remained still.

The same was true for Zhenya. He paid no attention to Kwon Taekjoo's smirk or Olga's frustrated huffing, staring intensely at the water as if his glare alone would make a fish bite. The siblings were clearly hothouse flowers, with little skill in survival.

The outcome of the match was practically decided.

{Hey, isn't it about time to wrap this up?}

{...Shh.}

Kwon Taekjoo instinctively fell silent at Zhenya's low whisper. The next moment, the sound of splashing water broke the surface as Zhenya yanked his fishing rod with all his strength. The rod bent so sharply it seemed on the verge of snapping.

Kwon Taekjoo, Yoon Jong-woo, and Olga froze, watching Zhenya. Without changing his expression, he held his ground, engaging in a fierce tug-of-war with whatever creature was hooked. Just when they wondered if they should step in, Zhenya steadied his stance and pulled, using his core strength to lift the rod. Moments later, a massive fish erupted from the water, flapping wildly through the air. Water sprayed everywhere, forcing the trio to shield their eyes. Kwon Taekjoo reflexively opened his arms to catch the massive creature hurtling toward him.

"Ah!"

The fish in his arms was brimming with energy, thrashing about with its powerful tail, which slapped relentlessly against Kwon Taekjoo's

chin and chest.

Unable to hold on, he finally dropped it to the floor, where it flopped and wriggled its thick body violently. Yoon Jong-woo and Olga shrieked and hopped in place in shock.

The chaos on deck subsided only after Kwon Taekjoo pinned the fish down with his crutch, and Zhenya stabbed a sharp knife into its gills, ending its life in one swift motion. Kwon Taekjoo finally lifted his crutch from the now limp, bloodied fish, wearing a look of mild distaste on his face.

{Wow! Isn't this a bluefin tuna? Do these get caught here too? It's got to be at least a meter long!}

Yoon Jong-woo, who had just been startled, swallowed as he chattered away. Just as he guessed, the fish Zhenya had caught looked like a northern bluefin tuna. Usually, those types of fish are caught far out at sea, so it was surprising how he managed to reel one in from this close to shore.

{Who's the one with all the luck now?}

Zhenya asked with a proud grin. Whether it was before or now, his pretty face hadn't changed, though it made one want to give him a good smack.

{Still, this time, Taekjoo won the bet. Both by the number of fish and by weight. No objections, right?}

Olga clapped her hands, declaring the winner. Though Zhenya looked less than pleased, he didn't argue. He simply crossed his arms and looked at Kwon Taekjoo with an interested expression.

{So, what is it you want, Taekjoo?}

{Well. I'll have to think about it.}

{Just so you know, asking to be sent back to Korea isn't an option.}

He hadn't really thought the bet was significant enough to warrant such a bold request. But cutting Taekjoo off preemptively made him feel irritated. Zhenya's smug attitude, as if he could read Taekjoo's mind, didn't sit well with him either. {Whatever. I'm hungry. Let's get something to eat.}

{Alright, I'll arrange for the meal. I'm going to shower first.}

With a wave, Olga slipped inside the cabin. Zhenya took off his gloves and looked back at Kwon Taekjoo, who was standing idly.

"What?"

"Aren't you going to clean up?"

Getting splashed while fishing was routine. Staying on a yacht meant your clothes could get wet anytime, but seeing him act so prim and proper was just annoying. Taekjoo waved it off, telling him not to worry.

"You go first. I'll rest a bit longer."

"Fine, then."

Zhenya left without protest. Meanwhile, Yoon Jong-woo couldn't take his eyes off the bluefin tuna Zhenya had caught.

"Even Russians eat this as sashimi, right? But there's no way they'd cook it properly. Is there any cho-gochujang around?"

"Enough with the cho-gochujang talk. Come over here."

"Yes. But is it okay to leave it out like this?"

Mesmerized by the bluefin tuna, he moved even slower than usual. Kwon Taekjoo suddenly yanked Yoon Jong-woo by the ear.

"Ouch, ouch! That hurts, Sunbae!"

"Get your head on straight, you idiot."

“What did I do?”

Yoon Jong-woo rubbed his burning ear with a resentful look. Taekjoo sighed.

“Did you come here to mess around?”

“Well, why else would you go on a yacht if not to relax? We’re not here to work.”

“Ha, such a simple-minded fool.”

Kwon Taekjoo sighed as he glanced around. No one seemed to be watching them. Leaning closer to Yoon Jong-woo, he whispered quietly.

“Have you tried contacting the department chief?”

“...No. Mr. Yevgeny smashed my phone, and there’s no internet at the villa, so I couldn’t. And they won’t even let us go out freely.”

“Are you just going to sit around? You could at least try asking Olga for help.”

“What if that puts her in danger too? Just because Mr. Yevgeny is her brother doesn’t mean he’d go easy on her.”

Yoon Jong-woo’s concern wasn’t unfounded, judging by the way Zhenya had treated Olga so far. Though Olga seemed more level-headed and friendly than Zhenya, it was hard to be sure she’d help them escape. Without clear memories of Zhenya, Kwon Taekjoo couldn’t fully trust Olga either.

“Why don’t you ask Mr. Yevgeny directly, Sunbae? No matter how he is, he wouldn’t harm his lover, would he?”

“Lover... Hah. If he were willing to grant that kind of request, he wouldn’t have shot it down so quickly after the bet just now. Bringing it

up again would only make things worse."

"Then what do we do?"

"Do you think I joined in on this luxury for no reason?"

Yoon Jong-woo looked puzzled. Kwon Taekjoo gestured for him to come closer. As Yoon Jong-woo leaned in, Taekjoo put an arm around his neck and whispered.

"Later, when the timing is right, you'll get off here."

"What? Get off here? Are you planning to abandon me in the middle of the ocean again?"

*...Again? When did I ever?*

Kwon Taekjoo put on an innocent face. Yoon Jong-woo glared at him, clearly exasperated, with his lower lip sticking out slightly. Relaxing his expression, Kwon Taekjoo continued explaining his plan.

"There's an emergency boat here. Use it to get to the embassy or find another way to contact headquarters. We need to coordinate how and when to return, or we'll be in trouble. I don't think Zhenya's planning to let us go easily, and if we stay too long, it could become an issue. Right now, we're mingling with someone influential in Russia, and I don't see that ending well for us."

Yoon Jong-woo bit his lip in silence. It was true — Kwon Taekjoo had once been questioned by headquarters under suspicion of colluding with Zhenya. There was no need to remind Taekjoo, who had lost his memory, but Yoon Jong-woo knew he was right: nothing good would come from getting too deeply entangled in Russian affairs.

"I'll keep an eye on Zhenya here, so find a good moment to slip away."

"And what excuse should I use for leaving?"

"There are plenty of excuses. Say you've got an upset stomach or something."

"Will they believe it?"

"They have to."

"I can't make myself have diarrhea just for a role."

"But you could trigger your gag reflex to throw up, couldn't you?"

"What, Sunbae!?"

As he lightly tapped Yoon Jong-woo on the back, Kwon Taekjoo thought to himself. He had to find a way to send Yoon Jong-woo back to the mainland first. Staying near Zhenya might keep him safe for now, but he couldn't guarantee what would happen afterward. He couldn't keep doing whatever Yevgeny wanted just because the man had once been his lover.

Kwon Taekjoo and Yoon Jong-woo both had places they were meant to return to. The mission given to him would only be completed after that.

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After washing up, Kwon Taekjoo came out to find that a meal had been prepared. The dining table was filled to the brim with dishes made from freshly caught ingredients. He felt full just looking at it.

Once again, Olga appeared in a new outfit. TPO might matter, but her energy was limitless. Yoon Jong-woo, who had been eagerly anticipating bluefin tuna sashimi, picked up a piece and trembled with emotion as he savored it. Since he planned to blame a stomachache later as an excuse, Kwon Taekjoo let him indulge. It seemed like a good idea to soften Zhenya up a bit before then. He offered a glass of wine that had been set aside, hoping it might help ease the tension.

"Want some?"

"Sure."

Zhenya readily held out his glass. Kwon Taekjoo poured wine for him first and was just about to fill his own glass when Zhenya naturally took the bottle and poured Kwon Taekjoo's wine with smooth, graceful movements that held his gaze.

They observed each other over their glasses, slowly sipping the wine. Though he'd tasted it a few times before, he couldn't remember it ever being this fragrant.

{Oh no!}

As they were gazing intently at each other, Olga suddenly gasped in alarm. Startled, Kwon Taekjoo looked at her.

{What's going on all of a sudden?}

{I left my medication back at the villa.}

{What medication?}

{My angina medication. I need to take it on time.}

Come to think of it, Kwon Taekjoo had heard she had a chronic illness. It seemed it was a heart condition. For heart patients, skipping medication was not an option, as a life-threatening crisis could happen at any time. So, indeed, this was a serious situation.

But something about Olga's fuss seemed oddly unnatural. Yoon Jong-woo, who had been darting his eyes around nervously, started to respond enthusiastically.

{Oh no, how awful! What should we do? This is serious! Should I go get it for you?}

{No, no. Jong-woo, you don't even know where the medicine is. No matter how urgent it is, I can't let an unfamiliar man rummage through a lady's room.}

It was almost as if they were putting on a skit. Zhenya looked at the two of them with disgust, as if their cringeworthy act was hard to watch. It was the kind of look you give when you wonder if someone ate

something wrong. Kwon Taekjoo figured he would probably need to step in himself.

{How careless. You should have taken care of that before worrying about your clothes.}

{Exactly,} Olga replied, putting on a pitiful expression, even drooping her eyebrows.

Jong-woo's antics made sense, but he couldn't figure out what Olga was scheming.

{Maybe I should go on my own. But I'm so scared, I don't know what to do.}

{Ah! Then I'll go with you, Ms. Olga!}

{Oh, would you? But once we get off, it'll be hard to come back, and you'd be ruining your yacht tour just for me.}

{It's no problem. I was starting to feel a bit of a stomachache myself. I think it's food poisoning.}

{Really? You should see a doctor right away! People can die from food poisoning, you know.}

They continued exchanging awkward, forced lines back and forth.

Even kindergarten children's skits probably wouldn't be this awful.

Zhenya looked at the two of them with absolute disdain before turning to Kwon Taekjoo. "So, what will it be? Are you going back too?"

In a moment of surprise, Kwon Taekjoo grabbed onto Zhenya's collar. Zhenya's eyes widened in astonishment, and Kwon Taekjoo laughed awkwardly as he tried to cover up.

"I mean, don't you think there's no point for us to go too?"

"....."

"It's been a while since we've come out, and ... And the sunset here seems like it would be pretty nice."

He averted his eyes to the side as he added the comment, feeling chills creep up his cheeks at his own words. From across the table, Olga's eyes sparkled as she watched, making him feel even more embarrassed.

"Hmm. So, you want to be alone with me that much, huh?"

Zhenya dropped his dazed expression and twisted his lips into a smirk, lifting his chin slightly and spreading his chest wide. Watching his smug posture twisted Kwon Taekjoo's mood.

He clicked his tongue softly and gave Yoon Jong-woo a look, signaling him to go. Yoon Jong-woo nodded, stuffed a big piece of tuna belly into his mouth, and stood up. Olga calmly said she'd get ready and slipped off toward the cabin. Soon, only Kwon Taekjoo and Zhenya were left at the table. Zhenya leaned forward, propping his chin on one hand and bending his whole body toward Kwon Taekjoo. His stare was so intense it felt like it could drill holes wherever it landed.

Not wanting Zhenya to see through his guarded thoughts, Kwon Taekjoo mumbled awkwardly.

"Getting some time alone, just the two of us, isn't so bad, right?"

"Yeah, just the two of us," Zhenya echoed Kwon Taekjoo's words as if savoring them.

Seeing the look of anticipation on his face made Kwon Taekjoo feel a small prick of guilt.

Zhenya continued to gaze at him, utterly absorbed. Then, without a word, he suddenly stood up and disappeared. Maybe he went to the restroom. Kwon Taekjoo used the time to finish off the remaining wine and food, while mulling over what needed to be done next.

First and foremost, he needed to buy Yoon Jong-woo at least half a day after he got to the mainland to move around freely. Sooner or later, he'd also have to have an open and honest conversation with Zhenya — one that was long overdue. If Zhenya had truly been his lover in the past,

and Taekjoo no longer remembered it, they would need to figure out what came next for them.

After a while, Olga and Yoon Jong-woo came back up to the deck. Kwon Taekjoo got up to see them off.

{Don't worry about us and enjoy some alone time, Taekjoo.}

{Why would I worry about you? Just get going.}

{Oh? Acting like you don't mean it.]

{Oh, I absolutely mean it. So hurry up and get lost.}

{You're just eager to spend time alone with your lover, aren't you?}

{Whatever.}

Seeing his expression, Olga chuckled, clearly amused. Her eyes half-lidded, she slyly probed him for any hidden feelings.

{Ever wonder if that person was really your lover? Don't you question how you could've possibly loved someone like that?}

{Did you learn mind-reading?}

{Would I really need mind-reading for that? Sure, he's only got his looks going for him, but if anyone could handle him, it'd be you, Taekjoo. He's impossible to read, his next move is unpredictable, and he's often moody... Just think of him as a big child. For him, showing his feelings is like showing his weaknesses, so if he's upset, he'll just act out.}

{Is that temper of his what you call throwing a tantrum? If he throws two more of those, the house might blow away.}

{Exactly. Anyway, my brave warrior, make sure this ends happily, okay?}

{What on earth are you talking about?}

{Oh, you'll see.]

Olga smiled slyly, her expression loaded with hidden meaning. Whether it was her or her brother, their sneaky ways were always a bit unsettling.

As Kwon Taekjoo nudged her along, urging her to leave, he noticed that six motorboats had been lowered onto the water, and the staff began boarding them one after another. Just then, Zhenya appeared, and Kwon Taekjoo turned to him, asking for an explanation.

"What's all this?"

"You said you wanted to be alone, didn't you, Taekjoo?"

"What?"

He hadn't meant that they'd be left completely alone, without even the staff. It seemed Zhenya had seriously misunderstood his words, probably why he'd been acting so flirtatious. But it was already too late to stop things.

{See you tomorrow, Sunbae!}

Yoon Jong-woo, playing up his stomachache excuse, waved cheerfully and stepped off the yacht. Olga followed, winking repeatedly as she left.

{Then, we'll head off first. You two can take your time, chat a bit, and enjoy yourselves.}

"Stop chattering and disappear already."

Zhenya narrowed his eyes in exasperation. Olga scoffed and then quietly disembarked from the yacht. The six boats slowly drifted away from the yacht. From a distance, Kwon Taekjoo shot a meaningful look at Yoon Jong-woo, as if to remind him of something. Yoon Jong-woo nodded, his face set in a solemn expression.

As the engine noises of the boats faded away, the sound of the waves crashing grew louder, echoing in their ears. Kwon Taekjoo, who had been watching only the back of Zhenya's head, said, "Let's go up." In response, Zhenya suddenly swept him into his arms just as Taekjoo had tried to limp forward, once again taking the lead. It was surprising, but with no one around to see them, Taekjoo found it oddly comfortable and let it go.

He thought, *maybe this guy really is a surprisingly affectionate and devoted partner.* After all, Zhenya had settled down in Korea — a place

he had no ties to — just to be close to him. He had been actively involved in reassuring Taekjoo's mother, scouring everywhere to find him when he couldn't confirm if he was even alive, procuring foods that suited his tastes, and focusing on every glance and gesture.

Taekjoo suddenly felt he could understand, just a little, why Zhenya had been hurt by his forgetfulness. Zhenya had done so much, yet Taekjoo had forgotten it all and tried to keep his distance; it must have felt cruel. He felt a pang of guilt for no reason, and Zhenya even seemed a little pitiful to him.

Zhenya gently set Kwon Taekjoo down on the soft cabana. As they got close, Taekjoo found himself quietly studying Zhenya's face. Reaching out, he brushed aside the bangs that nearly poked into Zhenya's eyes. For some reason, that simple act made Zhenya's eyes slowly flicker toward him, as if searching for Taekjoo's true intentions. The intense desire in Zhenya's gaze was so clear it left Taekjoo flustered.

"I... heard from Olga," Taekjoo started awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck.

"That you and I were... involved in *that* kind of relationship."

Zhenya didn't seem surprised. He simply looked at Taekjoo with a calm expression and replied, "That's right." When Taekjoo glanced at him again, Zhenya smirked, his lips stretching slightly.

"So that's why you've been so cautious around me? Only now realizing it?"

The mocking look in Zhenya's eyes and tone was almost taunting, yet he seemed oddly pleased.

"How long... have we been like that?"

"Three years."

"W-what?"

"Is that so surprising?"

"How did that even happen?"

"What kind of question is that?"

Zhenya furrowed his brow slightly, clearly confused by which part of his story had prompted the question "How?"

"It's just that... I've never felt attracted to another guy before, especially not some tall, gruff man. I still can't picture it. What exactly did you do to me?" Zhenya snorted, as if he found the question completely absurd.

"You really forgot everything... even though you were the one who first grabbed onto me."

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

Zhenya declared it with unwavering confidence. Kwon Taekjoo himself was the one who had approached him first? Zhenya was attractive, anyone could see that, but his looks were in no way feminine enough to be mistaken for a woman. His imposing build alone made it hard to even notice his pretty face.

Yet, Taekjoo was apparently the one who made the first move. What on earth had happened? It felt like there were too many missing pieces to the story. To think he'd been in a relationship with Zhenya for three whole years — it was overwhelming to even consider where to begin piecing it all together.

As Taekjoo sat there, feeling lost, Zhenya expressed a mockingly bitter complaint.

"You were always like that. Rough with me, trying to make me submit to you, yet, ironically, wanting to be free yourself, wandering around instead of staying by my side. You always expected me to deal with it."

"Me? Really?"

"What? Are you planning to play dumb now that you've forgotten everything?"

Could it really be true that he had treated Zhenya so roughly? Suddenly, a vivid image flashed in his mind — of himself restraining Zhenya and resorting to violence.

Had he forced Zhenya into submission, only to leave him behind afterward, cutting off all contact, and then returning at some point to repeat the same thing? Just how much of a complete jerk had he been?

Though Kwon Taekjoo hadn't had much experience with dating, the relationships he'd been in had always ended amicably. Most of the people he dated seemed to feel overlooked, claiming he never made them a priority — and that, ultimately, became the reason things ended. He always respected their feelings, never pushing to hold on when they wanted to let go. He swore he would never be unreasonable with anyone. But now, he wondered if his actions had been influenced by something deeper. Was it because the other person was a man that he had behaved so freely?

He twisted his mind in every direction, trying to squeeze something — anything — from his limited imagination. Maybe he'd been so drunk that he got caught up in the guy's good looks, or maybe he was so high that he couldn't even tell the difference between men and women. Or perhaps he'd gone mad with lust, isolated with him in some extreme situation where they were the only two people around... However he looked at it, he could only assume his senses had been compromised somehow.

Anyway, if they'd been together for three years, they must have slept together, right? He took a long look at Zhenya, from head to toe. Zhenya looked back at him as if to ask if there was anything else he needed to know. Kwon Taekjoo's gaze drifted to those impossibly long eyelashes. His skin was flawlessly pale, his ears and fingertips faintly flushed, giving him a generally pretty look, though he was unmistakably a man. Even the front of his loose pants showed a noticeable bulge.

Did seeing something like that stir something in him? Was it possible that Kwon Taekjoo's tastes could stretch far enough to include

attraction to men? Or was it simply that he had never met someone like Zhenya before — someone who, for reasons he couldn't quite put into words, made him feel something now that he hadn't experienced with anyone else?

"Taekjoo. I can practically hear the gears turning in your head."

"...I was just trying to remember. Just little moments, really, but some things keep coming back to me in flashes."

"Memories? They come back in flashes?"

"I can't say for sure it was you, but I've had dreams a few times, replaying moments of dating or getting close to someone. And the other person seemed to be a man."

"So, there was another guy besides me?"

"No. That's impossible, so I'm pretty sure it was you. By the way, does my mother know about us?"

"Hmm. If the little woman found out, wouldn't she be pleased? She likes me."

"The little woman?"

"Yeah. Taekjoo, she once said that if you'd been born a girl, she'd want me as her son-in-law."

Zhenya squinted his eyes with a sly smile.

"You bastard, are you seriously calling my mother 'the little woman'? That's no way to talk about an elder, idiot!"

At Taekjoo's outburst, Zhenya's eyes widened, and then he burst into hearty laughter. After a long laugh, he finally calmed down, muttering as if a little tipsy.

"Yeah. Now that's the Taekjoo I know."

Taekjoo's heart began pounding wildly on its own. Lately, his heartbeat had been growing more erratic like this; perhaps it was a sign of

arrhythmia.

Around that time, the sky started turning a golden yellow. The slowly descending sun scattered countless glimmers across the water's surface. For a while, Kwon Taekjoo silently watched the scene. Zhenya, too, quietly gazed at Taekjoo, whose cheeks and eyes were tinged red in the light of the sunset.

"I'm going to have to put in a lot of effort."

He muttered softly as he looked at the sunlit sea. When he turned his head, his eyes met Zhenya's right away.

"I think I never properly thanked you. For coming to save me."

"Now, of all times?"

Zhenya looked surprised. Kwon Taekjoo gave him a wide grin, showing his even teeth, and began to speak openly.

"Yeah, now of all times. I'd thought I'd been abandoned. Just assumed it was a hardship I'd have to endure on my own. But honestly, it was too much. I couldn't remember who I was, everything around me was chaotic, I was being chased for reasons I didn't understand, and my body kept breaking down... I just wanted someone to come and take me away. Even though my memory isn't fully intact, I think this was the first time. That someone actually came to save me."

The moment he'd come face-to-face with Zhenya at Matthias's villa, his heart had pounded madly, but he'd also felt an unexplainable sense of relief. Even though he wasn't sure of Zhenya's identity or their relationship, his heart relaxed without reservation. If not, he would never have thrown himself into Zhenya's arms so willingly.

"So... thank you. For finding me so persistently. For eventually coming to get me."

"....."

Zhenya gazed silently at Kwon Taekjoo before suddenly leaning in close. Without giving him a chance to react, he cupped Taekjoo's face.

“Wait...!”

He tried to pull back, but their noses brushed, and then Zhenya’s lips pressed firmly against his. Zhenya’s warm breath slipped in through the slight gap in Taekjoo’s parted lips. Neither of them closed their eyes, and their gazes stayed locked at such a close distance.

Zhenya’s eyes flicked back and forth between Taekjoo’s, as if seeking permission. Taekjoo closed his eyes and yanked Zhenya’s collar toward him. In that instant, Zhenya threw himself into Taekjoo and deepened the kiss, their lips pressing and parting in rhythmic motions. Lips that had fully overlapped pulled away briefly, only to meet again, tilting their heads for an even closer fit. Zhenya’s scent overwhelmed Taekjoo, muddling his senses. Oddly, he didn’t feel any resistance at all. Rather, the desire that had been building within him ignited, burning even more fiercely.

Taekjoo grabbed the back of Zhenya’s head, his tongue tangling intensely with Zhenya’s. Zhenya’s breath grew rougher, his skin clearly radiating more heat. Complying fully with Taekjoo’s lead, Zhenya reciprocated passionately, alternating between suckling his tongue and his plush lower lip. Their mingled breaths and sticky saliva flowed between them, and little by little, Taekjoo’s body seemed to melt.

“Ah, Taekjoo...”

“Mmm...”

Zhenya ran his hand slowly up Taekjoo’s side, finally grasping his chest firmly. Then he slid between Taekjoo’s legs, pressing his hard cock subtly but insistently against him.

He opened his eyes to the steady sensation of firm cock pressing against his groin. Zhenya’s hair shone radiantly in the red glow of the sunset. Warm light was spilling over his back and shoulders as well. Using the brightness as an excuse, Kwon Taekjoo let his eyelids slide shut again. Since he was already caught up in this, maybe he could indulge in a little more of Zhenya. After all, Zhenya seemed to want it just as much, and he didn’t feel bad about it either.

He'd never had strong reservations about physical contact with others. Especially considering they were lovers — maybe spending time together like this would even bring back forgotten memories. As he continued rationalizing, he impulsively grabbed Zhenya's hips. Zhenya let out a soft laugh.

The two of them pressed urgently against each other, grinding their cocks together and entwining their tongues. But even that wasn't enough. Soon, Zhenya's hand slipped inside Taekjoo's pants, wrapping around his cock. As their lips parted with a quiet smack, Zhenya's mouth trailed down, brushing against Taekjoo's chin and neck.

"Mmm... ah..."

With his large hand wrapped around Taekjoo's cock, Zhenya stroked him gently, as if he instinctively knew every spot that made Taekjoo shudder. Unable to stop himself, Taekjoo's hips jerked, grinding against Zhenya's hand. Each finger seemed to ignite a new spark, sending waves of sweet pleasure through him. He exhaled a heated breath as his cheeks flushed bright red.

Taekjoo lazily traced his fingers along Zhenya's ear, urging him on. Zhenya, who had his head buried in Taekjoo's neck, lifted his gaze. Taekjoo looked down at him intently, tugging on his ear slightly. Zhenya yielded, leaning in to kiss him again. Taekjoo wrapped his arms around Zhenya's neck, naturally positioning himself on top. As their lips parted, Zhenya lifted his head, trying to kiss him once more. Taekjoo chuckled and gently pushed down on Zhenya's shoulder.

"Come to think of it, I did win that fishing bet."

"...Ah, right, you did."

"The winner gets to call the shots, remember?"

A playful smile spread across Taekjoo's face, and Zhenya chuckled along with him.

"I guess that's how it works."

Zhenya lifted both hands, showing that he was surrendering. A sly curve appeared on Taekjoo's lips. How interesting that he'd give in so easily. Now, how should he play this?

"First, open your mouth."

Following Kwon Taekjoo's instruction, Zhenya opened his mouth, revealing an even row of teeth, with sharp canines standing out. Behind them, his moist tongue moved slowly, almost as if enticing him to come and taste.

"Stick your tongue out, too."

Kwon Taekjoo tapped Zhenya's cheek lightly with his fingertips. Zhenya chuckled softly and then obediently extended his tongue.

"Good. Stay still and behave yourself."

With a satisfied smile, Taekjoo leaned down, capturing Zhenya's tongue in his mouth. He took his time, giving it a slow, intense pull before releasing it, then ran his tongue over Zhenya's, guiding the kiss with practiced ease. Zhenya's lips twitched up in reaction, clearly enjoying it, his eyelids fluttering as his lashes trembled each time Taekjoo sucked on his tongue or pressed down firmly. Amused by Zhenya's honest responses, Taekjoo gently stroked his cheek with his thumb.

Zhenya let out a soft groan, drawing Taekjoo's tongue in return. After a moment, Taekjoo pulled away, teasing the inside of Zhenya's upper lip with his tongue. Then, moving to his philtrum, he let his tongue linger, causing Zhenya's long lashes to quiver again, tickling his cheek. It sparked a satisfying sense of dominance within him.

Continuing the fervent kiss, Taekjoo's hips picked up speed. In response, Zhenya tightened his hand around Taekjoo's cock, the gentle pressure of his firm fingers only amplifying his excitement.

Taekjoo's hips moved with increasing intensity, grinding roughly against Zhenya's hand, which adjusted with light movements to coax him closer to release. Zhenya's breathless murmurs of "Taekjoo" echoed in his ear, and he placed kisses along Taekjoo's heated skin, trailing from his earlobe down to his neck.

Then, Zhenya's lips sealed over a spot where a mosquito bite had left a faint mark, drawing a long kiss from him. The sensation sparked a tingling warmth, instinctively making Taekjoo's shoulders scrunch. Unfortunately, Zhenya's lips left the spot just as quickly. His mouth continued downward, planting kisses from Taekjoo's shoulder to his chest, eventually lapping gently at his nipple. As he continued, a pleasant sensation shot down Taekjoo's spine, reminiscent of the prickling from the bite. When Zhenya's mouth simultaneously closed over the bite and his nipple, his upper body buckled forward, the growing heat inside him condensing heavily, pooling with a thick, palpable weight.

"Hah... ah... ungh... mmm..."

Kwon Taekjoo let out a series of frantic moans. Zhenya pulled him closer, pressing Taekjoo's cock against his own defined abs, continuously stroking the now slick head with his thumb. Kwon Taekjoo's cock moved swiftly, sliding between the clear ridges of Zhenya's abdominal muscles. The movement, intense and precise, caused his flushed tip, glistening with precum, to throb, creating a highly visual stimulus. Zhenya licked his lower lip and tilted his head down towards Kwon Taekjoo's cock.

"Ahh... ngh...!"

In that instant, Kwon Taekjoo's body stiffened, and he climaxed in a heated release.

Overwhelmed by intense shivers, he squeezed his eyes shut, his body trembling. Slowly, he opened his eyes and looked at Zhenya, who kept blinking as his face was streaked with Taekjoo's release. Some had even gotten into his eyes.

"Hey, sorry! You okay?"

"...Taekjoo. It seems like you've been holding back for quite a while, huh?"

"I got a little too excited all of a sudden... let me see."

"As if this was the first time."

Zhenya softened his damp lips into a sly smile. Without hesitation, he wiped the fluid from his face with his hand and then licked it off, unbothered. Kwon Taekjoo recoiled in shock, shouting out.

"Hey! Why the hell are you eating that?"

Grabbing Zhenya's cheeks with one hand, he urged him to spit it out. In response, Zhenya pulled Taekjoo closer by the arm and whispered, "Come here." Taekjoo hesitated briefly but allowed himself to be drawn in. Leaning close to his ear, Zhenya whispered softly.

"Good thing your body remembers me."

Really? He hadn't been sure he could even get aroused by a man. But here he was, swept up in the moment, fully erect and even reaching climax. Penetration might be another story, but with the way he felt now, he thought even that might be possible. His heated body showed no signs of cooling down, though he wasn't quite sure how to proceed. Was he supposed to treat this just like he would with a woman?

"...So, what do we do next?"

"If you've forgotten, I'll teach you everything again, one step at a time."

The whisper sent shivers through his ear, and his throat bobbed involuntarily. Taekjoo responded with a soft "Okay," then pressed a series of kisses to Zhenya's cheek as he slid his hand into Zhenya's pants. Just from Taekjoo's release on his own abdomen, Zhenya's cock felt like it was about to burst. As Taekjoo gently stroked him, his hand was soon damp with precum. With Zhenya's large build, it made sense for everything to be proportionate, but the impressive size still left him slightly daunted. But he couldn't show hesitation now — not in front of someone who had even licked up his release.

He pressed his lips along Zhenya's neck, steadily working his way down as he continued to knead him. Zhenya let out a soft, contented hum, the sound oddly pleasant to Taekjoo's ears.

"...Mm. Taekjoo."

Letting out a pleased murmur, Zhenya unbuckled his pants. As Kwon Taekjoo wrapped his hand around Zhenya's cock, Zhenya subtly thrust his hips, pressing himself firmly into Taekjoo's palm. At the same time, he grabbed Taekjoo's ass tightly. Something heavy and intense dropped within Taekjoo.

*What was this?* He froze, caught off guard by the sudden, unfamiliar sensation.

As if sensing his hesitation, Zhenya raised his upper body slightly and brought his mouth to Taekjoo's earlobe, licking and gently tugging it. "Keep going," he murmured. The husky, almost metallic urgency in his tone urged Taekjoo's hand to move again. Zhenya leaned in, pressing soft kisses to Taekjoo's ear, encouraging him with each touch.

Zhenya's hand continued to knead Taekjoo's ass, gradually working its way inward. He gently pulled one cheek aside, letting his fingers brush over the hidden entrance. Taekjoo flinched, his body tensing immediately.

"Just like the first time."

Already lost in the moment, Zhenya chuckled quietly, pressing his tongue firmly into Taekjoo's ear, while his hand traced more deliberately along the crease between Taekjoo's cheeks. Taekjoo reflexively grabbed his hand.

"Wait."

"Shh. It's fine; just relax."

Zhenya lifted the corners of his mouth in a quick smirk, soothing Taekjoo with assurances. But Taekjoo's rigid body didn't ease up; if anything, he began trembling. A surge of emotion rose within him, unstoppable.

*{When's the last time you cried? Consider today a reset.}*

His mind was suddenly flooded with memories of the damp, oppressive prison cell, the harsh clinking of handcuffs with each restrained

movement, the leering gazes watching him, and the torturous pain inflicted on his body. It all came rushing back, vivid and unrelenting.

*{When scum like you end up in my hands, there are only two outcomes. Either the truth you're hiding bursts out from inside you and you die, or you spill it beforehand. Which one will it be?}*

A surge of nausea welled up from deep within. Tension hardened his jaw.

"Stop."

He tightened his grip on Zhenya's wrist, which was still fumbling around his hole with reckless abandon. Zhenya, oblivious to the gravity of the situation, childishly continued pressing kisses on him. Just as Zhenya's fingers tried to force their way insistently deeper into his hole, something foul inside surged up all at once. It felt like the crude rod invading his body shot up his throat, striking his brain directly.

"Damn it, I said stop!"

He shouted suddenly, his hands pushing Zhenya away with force. Zhenya stammered, wide-eyed, his gaze flickering between Kwon Taekjoo's face, searching for some explanation. Taekjoo's complexion had gone pale.

"...Taekjoo?"

Sensing something unusual, Zhenya reached out to check on Kwon Taekjoo. Taekjoo slapped his hand away roughly, saying, "Don't come near me." His body was trembling violently, almost as if it were seized by convulsions.

"Taekjoo, what's wrong?"

"Stay back. Don't..."

Repeating the same words over and over, Taekjoo suddenly clamped a hand over his mouth. Then, despite his weakened state, he frantically stumbled out of the cabana. He barely made it a few steps before his knees buckled, forcing him to the ground.

"Taekjoo!"

As Zhenya tried to approach, Taekjoo raised a hand to stop him. He struggled back to his feet, limping as he made his way to the railing. When he tripped again, he even resorted to crawling on all fours. Finally reaching the railing, he leaned over and vomited, his entire body heaving.

Zhenya quickly followed and grabbed Taekjoo by the shoulder, turning him around. Taekjoo's eyes were dull and lifeless, devoid of any vitality.

"Taekjoo, what's happening to you?"

Behind Zhenya's worried voice, another voice echoed faintly, followed by fragmented memories flashing through Taekjoo's mind.

*'With breasts that big, it's like they're begging to be sucked.'*

*'Maybe I should test if a person can die from just from getting raped. You're going to die here today, anyway.'*

*'If you want to walk out of this room on two legs, it'd be better to moan and shake your ass or howl like a dog in heat. I get even more excited when someone tries to resist me fearlessly. I can only be satisfied after I've crushed that cute defiance completely.'*

Fragments of unknown memories seemed to rip through his mind. His skull felt like it would burst, and the intense pressure triggered waves of nausea.

"Let me go! You bastard, I'll kill you. I'll kill you all, you sons of bitches!"

"Zaika. Calm down..."

*'Come on, cry for me, Zaika.'*

"Screw off, damn it!"

Zhenya's face and jaw were struck by Taekjoo's wild flailing. He tried to restrain him by force, but Taekjoo only fought harder. Zhenya was

scratched all over by the frantic struggle, and his clothes were torn in the process.

"Goddamn it... damn it..."

"Taekjoo!"

After thrashing about for a while, Kwon Taekjoo suddenly lost consciousness. Alarmed, Zhenya patted his cheek, but Taekjoo did not wake up.

"Taekjoo. Taekjoo..."

Zhenya, caught off guard, hugged Taekjoo and carried him into the control room. It felt like his whole body had been engulfed in flames, only to be doused in ice-cold water. He was drenched in sweat, his mind reeling with flashing alarms. He didn't know what had driven Taekjoo to this point, but right now, his only thought was to keep him alive. Fearing he might lose him again, he held Taekjoo tightly in his arms.

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"What's going on?"

When they arrived at the villa, Olga greeted the two, both surprised and concerned to see them return so soon.

Without offering any explanation, Zhenya circled around the car and lifted Kwon Taekjoo from the back seat. Taekjoo's limbs hung limp, and he seemed unconscious. His complexion looked terrible.

"Taekjoo? What happened? Did something go wrong on the yacht?"

Olga kept pressing Zhenya with questions, but he didn't respond. Ignoring her, Zhenya carried Taekjoo straight to the bedroom, with Olga hurrying after him.

He laid Taekjoo neatly on the bed. His face was completely drained of color. His forehead felt as though it were burning, and his entire body was soaked in cold sweat. He was dressed in nothing but a loosely draped robe. Faint red marks were visible on his exposed skin. Olga furrowed her brows and cornered her silent brother.

"Why is Taekjoo like this? Did you do something to him? Did you force yourself on him or something?"

Zhenya kept his gaze fixed on Taekjoo, saying nothing. His expression was one of deep shock. She couldn't tell what had happened between the two, but since Zhenya had been the last person with Taekjoo, she could only assume he'd somehow been responsible.

"The doctor warned you! You're not supposed to trigger memories that might bring back his PTSD! Is it so hard to act like a considerate partner for once? You really are unbelievable!"

As her accusations continued, Zhenya grabbed Olga by the arm. Ignoring her protests, he dragged her to the doorway. With a push, he forced her out of the room, and Olga stumbled, losing her balance.

"You...!"

"Ms. Olga!"

Yoon Jong-woo, who was returning from an errand, rushed over immediately. Not understanding the situation, he helped Olga to her feet, glancing nervously at Zhenya. Then, noticing Kwon Taekjoo lying on the bed, he gasped in shock.

"Sunbae!"

There was no response from Taekjoo. Even from a distance, it was clear that he didn't look well. Had something happened on the yacht? Perhaps he'd even gotten into a physical fight with Zhenya. Seeing Zhenya's cold, ghostly expression only fueled Jong-woo's worst suspicions.

{What's going on, Mr. Yevgeny? Why is Taekjoo like that?}

As Jong-woo approached him, Zhenya shoved him back hard in the chest. The immense force sent Jong-woo sprawling backward, landing on his backside.

{..Shut up. If you keep talking, I'll kill you.]

With a chilling gaze, Zhenya looked down at the two of them before slamming the door shut. The lock clicked firmly from inside.

Jong-woo and Olga exchanged dumbfounded looks. Up until the moment they'd left the yacht, Taekjoo and Zhenya hadn't seemed on bad terms. It was baffling to imagine what could've happened in such a short time.

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The two of them sat across from each other, both looking grave. Three hours had passed since Taekjoo and Zhenya returned, yet the locked door showed no signs of opening.

It didn't appear that a physical fight had taken place between Taekjoo and Zhenya. The only visible marks on Taekjoo's body seemed to be remnants of intimacy, without any bruising or swelling. It was also unlikely that Taekjoo had attempted to escape from the middle of the ocean.

Olga silently observed Jong-woo, who looked as pale as a sheet. He'd gone out as soon as they returned to the villa, saying he needed to visit a hospital. She'd assumed he'd made up the sudden illness as an excuse to give them space, but it seemed there was another purpose to his trip. When she abruptly called his name — Jong-woo —he jumped, startled all the way to his shoulders.

{...Yes, yes?}

{Where have you been?}

{As I mentioned, I went to the hospital...}

{I know that was a lie. Where are you coming from?}

{Ah, well...}

Yoon Jong-woo shifted his eyes uncomfortably, nervously picking at the back of his hand. Watching him quietly, Olga attempted to reassure him.

{I won't say a word to *that* person.}

Yoon Jong-woo hesitantly met her gaze, searching for confirmation in her expression. {Don't you trust me?}

{Of course I trust you! But... my senior instructed me to move quietly.}

{If it's for Taekjoo, I'll help in any way I can. Even if it means making a deal to get out of here.}

Olga's voice was steady and resolute. After a long pause, Yoon Jong-woo let out a deep sigh, his shoulders slumping as he finally confessed.

{I went to report back to headquarters. My senior was worried that if he stayed out of contact for too long, it might cause issues later. If we need to return to Korea, we'll have to request support.}

{So, what did the NIS say?}

{...I haven't received a response yet. With the internet speed here, accessing the main system is nearly impossible, and getting to the embassy in Athens would take at least ten hours. I sent an email to the director as an urgent measure, but... the response from headquarters will probably be complicated. Right now, it's difficult to categorize this as a kidnapping or detention. Even if it were, self-extraction is typically protocol. If he were moving with a VIP or handling critical items, it'd be a different story, but that's not the case.}

Olga nodded in understanding, murmuring thoughtfully, her expression clouded with concern.

{So, Taekjoo plans to leave again.}

{His last memory is from four years ago, from the time he was staying in Korea. It seems he intends to return to familiar places and gradually

recover his memories. He also seems eager to finish up any tasks he took on before then.}

{It won't be easy. Slipping away from that person's watchful eye is no simple feat.}

{Yes, that's true.}

Yoon Jong-woo lowered his head with a resigned expression. In truth, it seemed nearly impossible to escape Zhenya's grip without conflict or without anyone getting hurt, especially given the current situation, with no support from headquarters.

If Zhenya found out about Kwon Taekjoo's plan, he would surely be furious. It was certain he wouldn't understand why, after barely making it back alive, Taekjoo would choose to leave him again.

As he worried about what to do, Yoon Jong-woo spoke up with difficulty.

{...Actually, I'm more concerned about something else than the escape.}

{Something else?}

{He keeps asking for the director who was his direct superior in the past.}

{His former superior? Why?}

I'm not sure how much you know, Miss. Olga, but his mission in Russia was essentially a trap. His higher-ups feared their corruption would be exposed, so they sent him to a deadly situation. His direct superior, the director, was deeply involved in all of it.

Although Taekjoo never showed it, he must have been devastated. He relied on and respected that director as if he were his late father or older brother.}

It was hard to imagine the depth of betrayal Taekjoo must have felt, knowing that not only had his trusted superior been corrupt, but had also sent him into a deadly situation. Although Kwon Taekjoo was not one to easily reveal his wounds, the internal scars borne by someone

who kept their pain to themselves were often deeper than visible injuries.

Eventually, Taekjoo would recall these memories, and he would be hurt all over again. Additionally, the mental and physical suffering he endured while tangled with Zhenya during the process of being abandoned by his superior would come flooding back. The idea of him regaining his memories no longer felt simple or welcome.

{In any case, recalling that time means he'll have to relive the betrayal and that pain all over again.}

Being branded a criminal upon returning to his homeland, after repeatedly facing death in an unfamiliar world, was enough to leave him traumatized. And to learn that the person behind it all was the superior he had trusted made it inevitable for him to feel profound disillusionment.

Yet, Taekjoo hadn't quit his job but instead returned to his position. Yoon Jong-woo attributed this decision to Taekjoo's convictions.

{I think he wanted the reassurance that he wasn't wrong. He wanted to believe that all his work — sometimes hurting others in the process — wasn't for anyone's private gain but for the benefit of his country. That belief kept him going, so his efforts wouldn't feel wasted or misguided.}

For Taekjoo, it had been a path that demanded setting aside his mother's concerns and sacrificing personal happiness. The pride of dedicating himself to a cause greater than himself — his nation and its people — had surely driven him. How hollow it would feel if he learned his efforts had merely served someone else's selfish interests.

Now, with his very foundation shaken, the memories resurfacing might hit even harder than the original events. Yoon Jong-woo's worry and anxiety were completely understandable. Olga's concerns about the relationship between Taekjoo and Zhenya were no different.

{If only he could selectively erase the bad memories forever, but for now, he'll have to endure them. I wish Taekjoo had someone to support

him emotionally. Is there anyone who could do that? Maybe his mother?}

{His mother wasn't so much someone Kwon Taekjoo could rely on, but rather someone he felt the need to protect.}

When stress or emotional pain was extreme, it was better to release it openly rather than bottling it up alone. For that, it helped to have someone to lean on emotionally, typically family, friends, or a partner. But the only person near Kwon Taekjoo was his mother, whom he constantly worried about. His friendships had mostly faded since joining the National Intelligence Service, and Zhenya, his partner, was not the type to empathize fully with Kwon Taekjoo's suffering. In fact, it was a relief if Zhenya didn't provoke or push him into a breakdown as he frequently did now.

Olga let out a deep sigh.

{Let's call the doctor again tomorrow and arrange a session. I'll talk to that guy about it.} {Yes, thank you.}

{Please, there's no need to thank me. And I don't know anything about you trying to contact the NIS. Reaching out like that would only draw unwanted attention from that guy, so avoid making any direct attempts. If there's a way to get Taekjoo and you back to Korea, I'll find it.}

At Olga's request, Yoon Jong-woo nodded repeatedly, feeling as though a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

{You must be tired from all the sneaking around. Go wash up and get some rest.}

{Yes, and good night to you too, Miss Olga.}

Yoon Jong-woo bowed and was just about to leave the kitchen when he hesitated, his gaze fixed on a shadow cast on the floor.

{...Jong-woo?}

Olga turned to look at Yoon Jong-woo with a puzzled expression. At that moment,

Zhenya, who had been leaning against the wall, slowly stepped forward, blocking Jong-woo's path. His shadow engulfed Jong-woo in an instant. It was impossible to know how long he had been standing there or how much he had overheard.

{So, you were plotting behind my back like this?}

{Ye-yev, Mr. Yevgeny, it's not... I mean...}

Jong-woo stammered, his jaw trembling with fear as he tried to explain.

Zhenya abruptly clamped a hand around his throat, his piercing blue eyes narrowing dangerously. {Kwon Taekjoo will suffer if his memories resurface, is that what you think?}

He tilted his head, his voice chilling. Jong-woo clung to Zhenya's arm with both hands, barely holding himself up. His limbs shook uncontrollably as he balanced on his tiptoes, trying desperately to endure the grip.

{...Ugh. He keeps bringing up Director Lim. He still thinks that man is his superior. Remembering what happened back then — it's like being betrayed twice. It'll hurt him, no doubt.}

{So?}

{Mr. Y-Yevgeny. Please, let go first. Let's... talk about this...}

As his breath grew short, Yoon Jong-woo tapped at Zhenya's hand, but he didn't budge. Olga then forcefully pushed her brother.

"Let go of him!"

Zhenya easily twisted Olga's wrist, making her cry out in pain. Frustrated, she kicked his leg and scolded him sharply.

"Do you only think about yourself? You think we're doing this just to spite you? We're worried and struggling over how we can help Taekjoo!"

"And who do you think you are?"

"And what about you? Are you even a decent partner? Taekjoo's sudden breakdown was because of you, wasn't it? Or am I wrong?"

Zhenya couldn't muster a response to Olga's scathing words. His jaw clenched with anger, and a thick vein bulged across his once-smooth forehead. The tension was so high it seemed a single spark could turn deadly, yet Olga didn't back down.

"I made it clear, didn't I? Some memories are better left forgotten! If you didn't want to become such a horrific memory, maybe you should have done better."

{O-Olga...}

"Are you that upset that Taekjoo doesn't remember you? He's still trying to accommodate you, even thinking of you as his partner, but you can't even bear with him for a moment? And you call yourself his partner? How long are you going to act like a child? Isn't it natural to worry about hurting someone you care about? That should be your concern, not ours!"

"I thought I warned you to stop acting up if you didn't want to die."

Zhenya let go of Yoon Jong-woo with a shove, then suddenly seized Olga by the throat and lifted her into the air. She struggled in pain, but still managed to glare defiantly at her brother. On the floor, where he'd been coughing and gasping, Yoon Jong-woo finally saw what was happening and clung desperately to Zhenya's leg.

{No, please, Mr. Yevgeny! Stop! Let her go!}

"Zhenya."

Amid Yoon Jong-woo's pleading, Kwon Taekjoo's voice suddenly echoed faintly. For a moment, it was so indistinct that Zhenya wondered if he'd imagined it. His grip on Olga's neck loosened, causing her to fall limply to the floor. Yoon Jong-woo crawled over to her on his knees, asking,

{Miss Olga, are you alright?}

Zhenya turned around in a daze. Taekjoo wasn't there. Had he misheard?

"Zhenya."

Then the voice called out to him again. Zhenya hurried out of the kitchen, his steps quickening into a sprint.

He flung open the bedroom door to find Kwon Taekjoo lying beneath the bed, as if he'd fallen while trying to rush out in response to the commotion. Zhenya darted over and pulled Taekjoo into a fierce embrace, clutching him so tightly it was as if he feared he might disappear. Taekjoo, weakly nestled in Zhenya's arms, felt his rapid breaths tickling his ear. Zhenya, as if trying to merge with him, pressed his forehead to Taekjoo's neck, over and over. In response, Taekjoo gave him a faint pat on the back of his head.

"Still fighting like kids, and waking me up. Let's stop and go somewhere quiet."

"Taekjoo..."

"Hm? Somewhere quiet."

Taekjoo murmured sleepily. They had given him a sedative to calm his episode, and its effects were clouding his mind. His hand, which had been stroking Zhenya's head, slowly slipped away. Zhenya caught his hand and held it tightly, nodding repeatedly.

Now that he had Taekjoo back, he wanted to have him entirely. He wanted to be the only one Taekjoo looked at, thought about, and remembered. He didn't want to yield a single moment of him to anyone else.

His deep blue eyes glinted with a fervent, almost blind resolve.

## 14. Blackout

*'What... is this place?'*

*I looked around, feeling completely lost. I was standing alone in a perfectly square room, with no idea of where I was or how I'd gotten here. As I took a step forward, the air seemed to compress sharply, and the space twisted around me. A suffocating pressure gripped my chest. Then, in a split second, a deafening boom sounded, and the ground beneath me crumbled. Every window shattered, and the shards flew through the air like scattered petals.*

*'Aaaah!'*

*Before I could even react, I plummeted into the pitch-black void below. The floating glass shards sliced at my skin as they passed, and debris rained down from above, mercilessly pummeling me. The fall ended with a violent crash into the ground. It felt as though my life could have ended right there, and it wouldn't have surprised me in the least.*

*Soon, sirens blared from every direction. Rescue teams, fire trucks, and ambulances arrived one after the other. Crowds gathered, and people on stretchers were carried away somewhere. I forced myself to sit up, a ringing sound echoing in my ears. I shook my head, trying to clear the fog in my mind.*

*It felt as though every bone in my body had shattered; my limbs hung limply.*

*Then, I heard it — the roar of an accelerating car coming from behind me. I turned sharply to see headlights cutting through the darkness, a car racing toward me at full speed, its high beams blinding. I couldn't make out the driver.*

*Scrambling to my feet, I bolted. I had no idea who was chasing me, why I was being pursued, or even where I was running to — I just*

*ran. I sprinted down a narrow path, my shoulders scraping against the walls on either side. The car kept up, relentlessly pursuing me, either racing ahead or swerving behind.*

*Finally, the narrow path opened into a wide plaza, beyond which a river flowed in steady waves. Gritting my teeth, I ran toward it with everything I had.*

*But as soon as I stumbled out of the alley, a car barreled in from the side, slamming into me. With a loud thud, my body was thrown high into the air. The car that had charged toward me continued past, crashing through the guardrail and plunging into the river. Dark, icy water surged into every crevice of my body as I was sucked into the river's depths.*

*The car's heavy mass churned the water violently, dragging everything down to the riverbed. No matter how desperately I thrashed, I was powerless against the pull, sinking deeper and deeper. My lungs ached as my breath ran out. Summoning every ounce of strength I had, I kicked my limbs and finally broke through to the surface.*

*'Gah — fuck...'*

*I coughed raggedly, feeling as though my organs might spill out with each breath. Bent over on all fours, I wheezed, my lungs burning as if they'd been crushed.*

*Slowly, I got to my feet and looked around, warily. Somehow, in a mere moment, night had fallen. The once-blaring sirens had completely vanished, leaving only the distant rumble of a passing train.*

*I turned toward the sound and saw that the riverside path had disappeared, replaced by an unexpected set of train tracks. A train rolled up and stopped right in front of me. Warm air billowed out from the cars, tempting me with bright lights and glimpses of inviting seats through the windows.*

*Without hesitation, I climbed aboard. The train doors closed, and it began to move, heading somewhere unknown. Outside the foggy windows, dense birch forests and empty, desolate plains passed by in succession.*

*I staggered along the narrow corridor, moving from the dining car, where dishes clinked softly, through the private compartments, the first-class section, and then the second and third-class compartments. Eventually, I reached the conductor's compartment. I knocked on the closed door. Despite myself, my body moved like it was on autopilot. There was no response from inside. Maybe the conductor was somewhere else on the train. I hadn't seen anyone who looked like a conductor on my way here.*

*As I puzzled over this, a dark shadow loomed over the door. Thinking it might be the conductor, I turned without hesitation. In an instant, I saw someone — and a fierce impact struck my head. My vision spun, and I collapsed to the floor, my view slowly turning crimson as blood crept across my sight.*

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'...Ah!'

*My eyes flew open. Gasping for air, I coughed violently until I could breathe again, my limbs trembling from the tension still coursing through me.*

*A nightmare? Somehow, each scene had seemed disjointed and illogical. I hadn't realized the oddity or surreal nature of it until now.*

*Absentmindedly, I touched the back of my head where I'd been struck in the dream. Naturally, there was no pain. Letting out a long breath, I gazed out the window. The birch forest I'd seen in the dream was passing by quickly, giving way to endless, open snowfields.*

*Where was I now? And what was I traveling on?*

*'Did I... wake up?'*

*Just as I started to wonder, a presence I hadn't noticed spoke up. I jumped and turned to my side. It was Zhenya, gripping the steering wheel and meeting my gaze with a slightly bemused expression. Oh, it was just Zhenya. My heart, which had tensed up, quickly eased.*

*But how had I ended up in this guy's car? I was certain I'd been in Greece. Yet outside the window, only an endless, desolate plain stretched on. There was no way this was Greece.*

*'...I had a strange dream.'*

*'Yeah, you slept soundly, all relaxed.'*

*'If someone's groaning, maybe give them a nudge to wake them up, would you?'*

*'Why? You looked like you were having a great time, so I left you to it.'*

*Zhenya twisted the corners of his mouth, smiling mischievously. Did he assume that the only time someone moans in their sleep is when they're having a dirty dream? He was acting as if he'd never experienced a nightmare in his life.*

*'What on earth is in that head of yours?'*

*I clicked my tongue and looked out the window again. By then, the car had entered a dense forest.*

*'Where exactly is this?'*

*Zhenya didn't respond. He just drove roughly before abruptly stopping on a sloped incline. Pressing my forehead against the window, I looked around. There wasn't a single sign of civilization — not even a cabin.*

*What exactly did he plan to do here? I looked at Zhenya with a puzzled expression. 'Get out.'*

*Without a word of explanation, Zhenya got out of the car first. An icy wind rushed in through the door he'd left open. The chill was so*

*sharp that my teeth chattered uncontrollably. Only then did I notice I was wearing nothing but a thin shirt.*

*Shivering, I followed Zhenya out. Meanwhile, Zhenya had taken something from the trunk. Watching in silence, I saw him wrap himself in a long fur coat that reached down to his ankles. Then, Zhenya promptly shut the trunk. Was that seriously all he'd brought? Still, it seemed unfair that Zhenya alone got to bundle up so comfortably. How selfish.*

*'What the hell, you jerk. Is it fine as long as you're warm?'*

*Feeling a pang of resentment, I complained. Zhenya, however, paid no attention, simply letting the fur coat flutter as he strode off. In this unfamiliar place, I had a feeling that losing Zhenya meant being stranded for good. Irritated, I hurried after him, calling, 'Wait up!' But the snow was knee-deep, making each step a struggle. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't catch up to Zhenya. The distance between us only kept growing.*

*'Hey, wait up! Ugh!'*

*I didn't get far before I tripped and fell hard. It felt like I was stuck in the mudflat, unable to move an inch. Groaning, I managed to pull myself free and tried to walk again, but Zhenya was nowhere to be seen.*

*'What's going on? Are you messing with me? It's not funny.'*

*I raised my voice in irritation. My shout only echoed back to me, with no reply from Zhenya. I silently held my breath, trying to follow his presence, but nothing could be sensed.*

*Panicking, I jumped to my feet and ran in the direction Zhenya had gone. When I reached the edge of the slope, it felt as though a massive wind was pushing me forward. I looked down. An endless cliff yawned wide below me, its dark, gaping maw seemingly endless.*

*'...Zhenya?'*

*Could he have gone down there? Or maybe he slipped? If that's the case, how could I save him? Questions and confusion filled my mind in an instant.*

*Suddenly, a sharp pain seized my neck. Instinctively, I turned around. A black silhouette briefly flashed in my vision before a heavy wooden beam slammed into my head. I couldn't even scream before collapsing to my knees. The assailant then shoved me over the edge of the cliff.*

*As I tumbled down the steep drop, I didn't take my eyes off the dark silhouette. Through the branches of the trees, sunlight filtered in, briefly illuminating the assailant's face. It was Zhenya.*

\*\*\*

".....!"

The view opened up sharply. His heartbeat pounded violently, and the sound of his own labored breathing roared in his ears. His body was stiff as stone, trembling uncontrollably, and he couldn't move a single finger at will. Every cell in his body tightened, tingling with tension.

Desperately, he tried to draw in air to breathe more easily. But no matter how hard he inhaled, he couldn't pull in as much as he needed. It felt like a ringing echoed repeatedly in his head. Even the slightest movement of his gaze brought on intense dizziness. His pulse raced as if it would break through his skin.

"Ugh... ugh..."

Writhing in pain, a large hand reached out from beside him. When that hand covered his eyes, an odd sense of calm washed over him. His eyelids, which had been twitching open with convulsions, gradually closed.

"Taekjoo. Breathe."

A quiet, soothing voice echoed near his ear. It was Zhenya. Following his lead, Taekjoo slowly exhaled the breath that had been caught in his lungs.

"Haah...."

"Good. Once more."

"Haaah..."

The turbulent pounding of his heart calmed as if by magic. The pressure that had muffled his hearing lightened, clearing his senses, and his trembling subsided.

Zhenya slowly withdrew his hand. As Taekjoo's vision steadied, the unfamiliar ceiling came into full view. This definitely wasn't the villa in Greece.

As he tried to turn toward Zhenya, he let out a groan at the damp sensation. He'd sweated so much that the sheets were completely soaked.

Barely managing to roll onto his side, Taekjoo turned his gaze toward Zhenya. He was sitting in a chair beside the bed, looking as though he'd been there the whole time. Taekjoo couldn't tell how long he had been asleep, but it seemed likely Zhenya had been keeping watch. Quietly, Taekjoo opened his mouth to speak, but his voice came out weak and fractured.

"...Zhenya."

As he reached out his hand, Zhenya clasped it, brushing his cheek against the back of Taekjoo's hand. His skin felt cooler and rougher than before.

Taekjoo closed his eyes once and opened them. Throughout, Zhenya's gaze remained fixed on him, and somehow, Taekjoo felt at ease. Almost like a complaint, he began to confide in him.

"I had a strange dream. I woke up from it only to find myself in another dream... I kept getting chased."

Zhenya didn't respond. He simply pressed his lips to Taekjoo's hand, gently caressing his palm as if to tickle it.

"Where are we?"

At Taekjoo's question, Zhenya stared at him quietly. His expression didn't change much, but there was a subtly disappointed look in his eyes. The answer came a beat later. "Odinokiy."

"Odinokiy?"

He asked, just in case, but it was still an unfamiliar name. For somewhere Zhenya thought he should recognize, it didn't seem to be a famous city like Seoul or Moscow.

"Taekjoo, it's the place where you and I stayed."

At that added explanation, Taekjoo murmured, "Ah." Although it didn't completely satisfy his curiosity, it sounded rather romantic.

"So, this isn't Greece, right? Are we in Russia?"

"Administratively, yes. But no one can intrude here without my permission."

Was he implying that this entire area was his property? Taekjoo wasn't even surprised. What he was actually curious about was something else.

"How did we get here? I didn't have my passport or anything, and I was unconscious the whole time."

"That was nothing."

Zhenya shrugged with an indifferent look. Considering his power and wealth, it didn't seem impossible. On the other hand, it felt oddly anticlimactic to think that he could cross into Russia so easily, especially after the recent hardships he'd endured crossing the border into Iran.

"Looks like my past self had quite the impressive lover."

"Absolutely."

Even at the slightly mocking tone, Zhenya raised his chin proudly. Was he just socially inept?

"My back hurts. Help me sit up."

Taekjoo shook the hand Zhenya was holding. Zhenya quietly pulled him up, supporting his back and even thoughtfully propping a pillow behind him. Groaning, Taekjoo shifted and leaned back against the pillow.

For a moment, he recalled the recent events. The clearest memory was of being alone with Zhenya on the yacht. After sending Olga and Yoon Jong-woo back, they'd ended up in a strange, intimate atmosphere while talking. It hadn't been intentional. It was more like he'd been swept along by the mood.

He hadn't had sex in a long time, was in a pretty buoyant state, and was curious if things would actually go that far with him. Or maybe it was just a weak excuse for his instinctive desire to be with him.

Without much hesitation, he'd been ready to fuck with Zhenya until, suddenly, a past incident resurfaced in his mind. He clearly remembered being interrogated in an Iranian prison, being questioned about who he was, where he came from, and why. As a black-ops agent, intense questioning and torture weren't uncommon, and he was somewhat immune to it. But that time, he'd been violated sexually in a way he hadn't experienced before. Back then, he'd been solely focused on escaping, with no chance to examine or process his feelings, but it seemed the trauma had run deeper than he'd realized.

The moment Zhenya's hand had touched the sensitive area between his thighs, the sensation of that torture had vividly overlapped. He couldn't even see his partner properly, as a sickening wave had washed over him. He had hardly been able to breathe, nearly hyperventilating. Clawing at his own neck in agony, he remembered Zhenya holding him tightly, as if to restrain him completely. He recalled resisting Zhenya, struggling against him for a long time.

He had found calm right after Zhenya abruptly kissed him. Zhenya had bitten down on his lips and tongue, forcing a tranquilizer into Taekjoo's mouth as he had struggled to pull away. Then, he had held him down, restraining his arms and legs, soothing him by stroking his hair until all resistance faded.

*'Taekjoo, calm down. No one can hurt you anymore. I won't let anyone lay a finger on you.'*

When his strength had completely drained and even his eyelids began to droop, Zhenya's voice had echoed repeatedly in his ears. Before long, he had slipped into unconsciousness. Zhenya must have been just as shaken by the unexpected situation.

Rubbing the back of his ear, Taekjoo apologized first.

"About... what happened on the yacht, I'm sorry. I suddenly remembered something unpleasant."

"...Something unpleasant?"

Zhenya tilted his head, looking curious. They were supposed to be lovers, but was there any need to tell him about something like that? It would only add to his worries. On the other hand, making up a vague excuse could end up hurting him, as if Taekjoo had rejected him for a trivial reason. After some deliberation, he decided to reveal it indirectly.

"It's obvious, isn't it? Captured agents during covert operations, they don't exactly get treated well. I don't remember much, but they questioned me relentlessly for days, asking who I was, where I came from, and what my purpose was."

He explained it as lightly as he could, as if it were no big deal. Since Zhenya was part of the FSB, he could probably guess the situation without needing the details. As an agent, that kind of risk was just part of the job.

Just as he was about to suggest they put the past behind them, Zhenya exuded a chilling aura. The warmth in his gaze had turned sharp and

steely in an instant.

"Who laid a finger on you, Taekjoo?"

"Relax, damn it. If it were him, I would've sent him to hell already."

"What exactly happened to you?"

"It's not something worth hearing, and I don't particularly want to dwell on it either."

"....."

"Anyway, I might have another episode. I'm not as stable as I seem, so let's take things slowly from now on. Got it?"

He spoke to Zhenya as if he were soothing a child. After all, Zhenya was much younger than him, and from what Taekjoo had observed, handling him gently tended to make him more compliant. Sure enough, after a long silence, Zhenya let out a deep sigh and finally said, "Alright." Given the circumstances, his feelings seemed understandably conflicted.

For a moment, Taekjoo listened to the sounds outside the bedroom. Noticing this, Zhenya turned his head as well, picking up on the hint.

"What happened with Jong-woo and Olga? It looked like the three of you were fighting."

After losing consciousness on the yacht, he woke up again in the bedroom. Zhenya, Yoon Jong-woo, and Olga were nowhere to be seen. Only their voices could be heard just outside the bedroom, one after another. Though he couldn't make out the exact conversation, the tense vibrations in the air told him that the three of them were arguing fiercely. He figured he should stop them before things got out of hand.

"Did you leave them there? Did you at least tell them we'd be coming here?"

"Why should I?"

"You didn't hurt them, did you?"

Zhenya snorted, rolling his eyes to the side. He was visibly annoyed with Kwon Taekjoo for worrying about others even in this situation, but it didn't seem like he'd done anything he'd regret. "Then never mind."

He pulled back the blanket and sat up. Limping on his still-healing leg, he made his way to the window. Just like in his dream, a vast expanse stretched out beyond the window. In the distance, he could see the blue sea, and to the side, there was a hill substantial enough to be called a mountain. The densely planted birch trees in the area drew his gaze. It was an exceptionally serene and peaceful scene.

But something puzzled him — there wasn't a single other building in sight. There weren't even the usual utility poles.

"You and I... stayed here?"

"Yes. Taekjoo, after you finished work, you'd always come here to spend time. No one could interrupt you, and you weren't tied down by anything."

He nodded, understanding. After enduring intense work, he'd often hole up at home for days to recharge. It wouldn't have been any different just because he had a partner.

Here, he felt he could fully unwind. He imagined himself lazing around, eating whatever he felt like, then passing the time fishing or hunting if he got bored. He could easily picture the days he'd spent with Zhenya here. "But when you say no one could interrupt..."

"This is my island. A space entirely my own."

So that means it's an uninhabited island? An incredulous laugh escaped him. He moved silently behind Kwon Taekjoo, draping a thick blanket over him. The soft fur curled around him, reminiscent of the fur coat from his dream. Zhenya then hugged Kwon Taekjoo and, without hesitation, pressed his lips to the back of his head.

Feeling awkward and a bit embarrassed, Kwon Taekjoo instinctively shrank his neck.

Zhenya, in response, leaned in further and rubbed his face against Kwon Taekjoo's hair. The ticklish display of affection sent chills up his cheek, making the small hairs inside his ears stand on end.

"Last time, you promised to come back for me as soon as your mission was over. You told me to stay here quietly and wait, not to do anything, and that you'd return safely."

"And then you heard the news that I'd died?"

Instead of answering, Zhenya simply nodded. His sharp nose brushed lightly against Kwon Taekjoo's scalp. "That tickles, you brat," Kwon Taekjoo muttered, turning halfway toward him. In one swift motion, Zhenya lifted Kwon Taekjoo and set him on the windowsill. They stared at each other intently for a while. For a moment, it felt as if time had stopped. It was Kwon Taekjoo who ended the strange standoff, giving a small laugh as he tapped Zhenya's cheek.

"I bragged so loudly, and then just went and died out of nowhere. When you finally found out I was alive and came running after me, I looked at you like you were a stranger. It must've been a shock."

"Seemed like you were teasing me."

Zhenya gave a faint, tired smile. As Kwon Taekjoo gently stroked his jaw, Zhenya's eyes widened. There was a rather provocative look in them.

To keep the atmosphere from becoming overly suggestive, Kwon Taekjoo pinched his cheek. Zhenya's eyes widened in surprise at the unexpected gesture. His sudden change of expression was endearing, making Kwon Taekjoo chuckle softly.

"Have you managed to get any sleep lately? You look completely worn out."

"Who are you worried about, Taekjoo?"

"I haven't seen you sleeping or eating. Are you even human?"

"Are you looking down on me?"

"Looking down on you? I'm just worried, idiot."

He gave Zhenya's cheek a playful shake before letting go. With little strength in his hands, he couldn't have held on longer even if he'd wanted to. Maybe it was the effect of the sedative, or maybe it was the fatigue from being moved around while he slept, but a heavy tiredness washed over him.

"This place — it's somewhere we won't be disturbed, right?"

"Yes."

"Then let's get more sleep. I need to rest. I'm exhausted."

"As much as you need."

With the blanket wrapped around him, Zhenya lifted Kwon Taekjoo and carried him back to the bed. As Kwon Taekjoo lay down, burying his head into the pillow, he subtly pulled Zhenya's arm closer. Zhenya followed without resistance, embracing Kwon Taekjoo from behind, entwining his leg around Taekjoo's injured one as if to support it.

With his body fully relaxed, Zhenya's embrace felt as comforting as a warm blanket.

Kwon Taekjoo's heavy eyelids finally closed. Zhenya, too, rested his head against the back of Taekjoo's neck and slowly shut his eyes. It was a rare moment of perfect rest. For a while, the gentle sound of their breathing filled the mansion.

He slowly opened his eyes. Each sense gradually awakened, and everything felt calm. It had been a long time since he'd slept so soundly, without even a dream. As he slowly rolled his eyes, he took in his surroundings. He vaguely remembered waking up briefly to talk with Zhenya. If he remembered correctly, Zhenya had mentioned that this was his island.

Turning his head, he sensed the presence of another's breath close by. Zhenya, fast asleep, filled his field of vision. He had curled his large

frame tightly, nestling into Kwon Taekjoo's embrace. The arm around his waist was heavy and solid, leaving no room to pull away, yet Zhenya's relaxed, slackened face looked simply gentle and beautiful. With his bangs falling over his eyes, he looked even younger than he was. With each breath, his long, thick eyelashes fluttered slightly. Even his once rough-looking skin appeared smooth and radiant now.

Could he touch him? Before he could fully decide, his fingers found their way to Zhenya's cheek. At that moment, Zhenya's eyelids lifted almost as if on cue, revealing clear blue eyes that reflected Kwon Taekjoo's dazed face.

"...Taekjoo?"

"Oh, um, did you sleep well?"

Awkwardly greeting him, Kwon Taekjoo saw Zhenya's lips curve into a long smile, his eyes narrowing slightly. *Fuck, he looks gorgeous.*

"Am I really that pretty?"

"Are you insane? Spouting nonsense first thing in the morning."

"Shyness must be in your nature. Go on, do as you wish."

"What... what are you even saying..."

Zhenya blinked in a way that seemed almost exaggerated. The sunlight streaming in through the window made his hair and eyelashes glimmer in an almost surreal way, making his eyes seem even clearer. How could a person's features give off such a mysterious glow?

As Kwon Taekjoo stared blankly, Zhenya coaxed him with a gentle nudge.

"Don't just steal glances. If you want to touch, go ahead, Zaika."

"Who said I wanted to? Let go. I need to go to the bathroom."

He tapped Zhenya's arm wrapped around his waist. Zhenya, however, didn't release him so easily and instead nuzzled his head into Kwon Taekjoo's.

"Ah, I'm in a hurry."

When he grumbled in irritation, Zhenya chuckled and moved aside. He moved to help Kwon Taekjoo stand, as if ready to lift him in his arms again, but Kwon Taekjoo pushed him away.

"No need. I should start moving on my own, for the sake of my recovery."

When Kwon Taekjoo refused Zhenya's help, Zhenya's expression shifted to one of stubbornness. It was as if he'd grown accustomed to treating Kwon Taekjoo like a doll, and now that the doll seemed to want to move on its own, Zhenya looked a little disappointed. But Kwon Taekjoo, undeterred, got out of bed and headed for the door.

Zhenya followed closely behind, like a parent trailing a child taking its first steps.

Just outside the bedroom, he noticed a large door nearby, which he assumed led to the bathroom.

"This is it?"

Zhenya nodded.

"Wait here."

"Suddenly acting shy, are we?"

"Let's have some boundaries, please."

Kwon Taekjoo shut the door in Zhenya's face, stopping him from following him inside. Zhenya didn't force the door open, but he also made no move to leave.

Turning around, he took in the bathroom. As expected, it was excessively spacious. He let out a sigh.

"It'd take half a day just to get to the toilet."

Shaking his head, he walked over to the toilet, glancing around out of habit. The first thing he noticed was a window on the opposite wall, revealing a clear blue sky beyond. Strangely, the narrow window was barred. In a densely populated area, that might make sense, but on a

deserted island, there was little risk of thieves. It seemed unlikely that a wild animal would sneak in through such a high window. Was this building originally a prison repurposed into a mansion? Or was this just Zhenya's strange taste?

He knocked on the wall beneath the window. It produced a solid, heavy sound, as if it were built against a retaining wall. He couldn't quite grasp the structure of the place.

After finishing his business, he washed his hands. His reflection in the mirror looked worn and haggard. His hair was completely flattened and sticking up in odd places. He couldn't stand his appearance any longer, so he decided to shower and quickly shed his clothes.

He stepped under the showerhead and turned on the water. Contrary to his worries about only cold water being available, warm water pleasantly poured over his skin. Scrubbing his face thoroughly, he felt refreshed all the way to his head. As he reached for the shower gel, a familiar scent wafted up. On closer inspection, it was a product he often used. It seemed it wasn't a lie that he had spent time here with Zhenya before he lost his memory.

*To think I'd fall in love with someone who was practically an enemy. When it comes to relationships, I've always preferred stability, even if it might be a bit dull. Have my preferences changed without me realizing it? Even as fragmented memories surfaced, his lingering questions all centered around Zhenya. This curiosity kept drawing his eyes to him.*

After finishing his shower, he opened a nearby cabinet and grabbed a towel, roughly drying his hair and body. He searched further and found a disposable razor, which he preferred over electric razors due to his frequent travels.

He took the razor, shaved, and brushed his teeth. As he was about to put his toothbrush away, he noticed another toothbrush nearby, giving him a strange feeling. It almost looked as though they had settled in here.

Running a hand through his damp hair, he glanced at himself in the mirror and was struck by how unfamiliar his reflection seemed.

Although freshly showered, he looked as if he hadn't bathed in days, with despair and anger clouding his eyes. Was he seeing things? Just as he moved a hand to rub his eyes, a wave of dizziness hit him, turning his vision a murky yellow.

"....."

It felt as if his brain were being squeezed, and the overwhelming dizziness made it impossible to stand. The familiar but ever-unsettling headache intensified.

He shut his eyes tight, and suddenly, a scene played out in his mind like a projection. He saw a man rifling through towels in the bathroom, tearing them with a razor to make a crude rope. The man tied a clip to one end and hurled it toward the high window.

The clip hit the bars and fell, but he kept trying, nervously glancing back at the door. After several attempts, the clip finally caught on the bars. Pulling it taut, the man climbed the wall, using the improvised rope to haul himself up toward the bars. His feet slipped multiple times, but he kept going, straining until he reached the window. With a desperate jump, he grabbed onto the bars and tried to pry them loose, swinging his body back and forth.

But the thick bars didn't budge, and in the end, he lost his grip, falling heavily to the floor. Determined, his eyes blazing, he grabbed the drainpipe from the sink and smashed it against the wall, clawing at broken tiles with his bare hands. But behind the wall, he uncovered only solid stone. Exhausted, the drainpipe slipped from his hand.

"....."

Kwon Taekjoo stared blankly at his hand. It felt as if the vibration from slamming a solid wall through the drain pipe was now resonating through his entire body. The man who had been so desperate to escape this strange bathroom was, without a doubt, the Kwon Taekjoo of the past. What on earth had happened here?

Zhenya had described this place as though it were a paradise just for the two of them. While staying here, they had reaffirmed their feelings

for each other, and afterward, even while living in Korea, they would often come here on vacation as soon as their busy schedules allowed. But why, in the memories that suddenly surfaced, had he tried so recklessly to escape from this place?

"Taekjoo?"

Zhenya's voice suddenly echoed from outside. He flinched without meaning to. It seemed the guy had sensed something was off.

When there was no response, the door was banged on loudly.

"Taekjoo!"

In the end, Zhenya kicked the door open and entered. He froze as soon as he saw

Kwon Taekjoo sitting on the floor, his face pale. Then, without hesitation, he rushed over and grabbed Taekjoo's shoulders.

"What happened?"

"Oh, I just got dizzy all of a sudden."

Zhenya quickly looked over Taekjoo, his gaze checking for any injuries. He also glanced around the bathroom, trying to figure out what might have happened inside.

"Did anything come back to you?"

He asked, meeting Taekjoo's eyes again. There was a slight hesitation in his tone, almost as if he was worried that memories of the past might have returned. His cautious gaze shifted between Taekjoo's eyes, as if trying to discern the truth.

If he were honest, perhaps he could find out why his past self had tried so hard to escape this place. Yet Taekjoo shook his head.

"No. I told you, I just got dizzy. Maybe I took too long in the shower."

The gap between the story Zhenya had told him and the memories that had suddenly surfaced was too wide. He couldn't tell which was closer to the truth, and although it would make sense to trust Zhenya as his

partner, he wanted to wait just a bit longer to see if more of his own memories resurfaced. He still didn't fully trust that Zhenya wouldn't taint his recollections.

"Get up."

Wordlessly, he accepted Zhenya's help. Zhenya sat him down on one side of the bathroom and even helped him put on his underwear. As Zhenya's hands slid up the sides of his legs, just barely grazing them, Taekjoo felt his breath hitch. His body tensed ever so slightly.

Zhenya easily pulled up his underwear and then shoved a T-shirt over Kwon Taekjoo's head without any particular care. The forceful way he went about it shattered the tension from just moments ago in an instant. Taekjoo's face burned from the friction at his neckline.

"Ow! That hurts, damn it! You say you're taking care of me, but you lack any finesse."

"You're getting angry over the strangest things again."

"What was that?"

"Let's go eat now."

Zhenya unceremoniously pulled Taekjoo up to his feet. Dragged along without any choice, Taekjoo glanced back over his shoulder. Just like any other partner, Zhenya treated him with care, and the mansion was full of traces that he had stayed here. Even the underwear he wore fit him perfectly, and the fresh T-shirt was one he used to wear often during his military service. Then why?

An inexplicable sense of *déjà vu* made his heart pound strangely.

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"There really isn't anyone else living here, right? No one coming and going?"

He muttered as he gazed vacantly out the window. Despite watching for quite a while, he hadn't seen a single soul. At most, a few birds would flap by now and then.

"I told you, no one can come in without my permission."

Zhenya placed a mug in front of Taekjoo. The aroma of good coffee filled the air. Blowing gently on the hot coffee, Taekjoo took a sip.

A pleasant warmth spread from Kwon Taekjoo's mouth throughout his entire body. The flavor and aroma were perfectly to his taste. Could this be something Zhenya naturally came to understand just by being his partner?

"Delicious."

Zhenya chuckled as if it were obvious, then turned toward the counter. He opened all the cupboards to show Kwon Taekjoo.

"What do you want for dinner?"

Inside the cupboards were various instant foods from Korea. There were all kinds of ramen, military rations, and ready-to-eat meals that only needed heating. He couldn't help but wonder where Zhenya had managed to procure all of it.

"What's all this?"

"Well, *someone* had been complaining nonstop about not being able to stomach Russian food, saying it was too greasy. He even grumbled that he couldn't last a single day here without feeling queasy, insisting they'd head back to Korea right away."

He didn't remember saying that, but there was no denying it. Having grown up eating only his mother's cooking, he quickly felt bloated if he went without Korean food. While abroad, he forced himself to eat the local cuisine, but each time, he felt as if his stamina drained faster than usual.

When it came to personal time with his partner, there was no way he'd tolerate food that didn't suit his taste.

But then again, had he really acted like a child, complaining about side dishes to his younger lover? How unbecoming of an adult. They say love makes everyone a little childish, but this... this felt downright pathetic.

"So, what would you like, Taekjoo?"

"Let's see... that one labeled *gamjatang* looks good."

Zhenya frowned slightly, scanning the instant meals. He clearly didn't know which one was *gamjatang*.

"The red one, right there in the middle. The red one."

"They're all red."

Glaring at the sea of red-packaged items, he grumbled, "Why is all Korean food like this?" A sudden memory flashed in his mind — back in Greece, Zhenya had boiled ramen while covering his nose and mouth. Even then, it was clear the Korean food had been prepared specifically for Taekjoo. Zhenya must really not be able to handle spicy food. But then, what did he eat when he was living in Korea? The question lingered.

"...Fine, then let's go with the white one, the second one from the left."

"But you wanted the red one."

"I like the white one too. At least you can handle that one, right?"

He got up and moved closer to Zhenya, then picked out the *Galbi-tang* himself and placed it on the counter. He flashed a small smile at Zhenya, who looked at him with a puzzled expression.

"Might as well eat together."

It felt awkward and itchy, but Kwon Taekjoo decided he'd try treating Zhenya like he had with his past girlfriends. Suddenly, Zhenya pulled him into a tight hug — tight enough that it wouldn't have been surprising if his ribs cracked. "Can't breathe," Taekjoo said, but Zhenya only held him closer, clinging even more. Maybe he was overwhelmed by the sudden display of affection. Perhaps he wanted to let out the feelings he'd been bottling up and indulge in a bit of comfort.

“Alright, alright,” he said, patting the back of Zhenya’s head. While Zhenya struggled to calm himself, Taekjoo took out a suitable pot and poured in the *Galbi-tang*. He hadn’t expected much, but large chunks of meat poured out, and the rich aroma of the soup began to fill the air, making his mouth water and his stomach tighten with hunger.

He pulled four packs of instant rice from the cupboard and put them in the microwave. Even as he brought the heated rice to the table and poured water, Zhenya refused to let go of his back. How had he ended up dating someone so needy? He’d never even liked clingy types before.

“Alright, alright, let’s eat now. I’m starving,” he coaxed, patting Zhenya’s arm, which was wrapped around his shoulders. Zhenya finally let go, rubbing his face against the back of Taekjoo’s head before pulling away. Instead of sitting down right away, he went over to the fridge and grabbed something.

“Oh, even kimchi?”

It felt like he’d just struck gold. It wasn’t just *baechu kimchi* (cabbage kimchi), but there was *kkakdugi* (cubed radish kimchi) too. He immediately popped open the lid and tasted one piece. Though it was slightly fermented, it was exactly to his taste. No, it wasn’t just that — it tasted familiar, like his mother’s cooking.

“...Wait, this..?”

“The little woman packed it as a gift. She switches up the ingredients depending on the season.”

“Kimchi’s not something you give to just anyone, so my mom must really be fond of you.”

Grinning, he tipped the kimchi container, pouring some kimchi and juice into the *Galbi-tang*. Zhenya frowned as the soup took on a cloudy hue.

“Why do you keep turning food into garbage?”

“Garbage? That’s rude. People who know how to really enjoy their food eat it this way.”

"Even a dog wouldn't touch this."

Ignoring the continuous criticism, Taekjoo mixed the rice in and dug in eagerly. The rich flavor of the *Galbi-tang* blended with the spicy and tangy kimchi, making the meal even more appetizing. He felt like he could eat bowl after bowl. He nudged Zhenya's bowl, urging him to eat as well. With a small sigh, Zhenya picked up his spoon and began sipping the broth quietly, keeping his eyes downcast and occasionally pressing a napkin to his lips even though there was nothing on them. His overly restrained behavior made Taekjoo feel slightly exasperated.

"Come on, try it with this."

He picked up a piece of *kkakdugi* and placed it on Zhenya's spoon. Zhenya froze momentarily, stiffening. Maybe he disliked the idea of eating from someone else's spoon because he was raised like a gentleman.

"It tastes better when we eat it together," Taekjoo said to Zhenya, who was giving him a wary look. With another sigh, Zhenya put the piece of *kkakdugi* in his mouth. His thin cheeks puffed up slightly as he held the small radish cube in his mouth, hesitating before finally moving his jaw to chew.

But his movements were excruciatingly slow. When he finally managed to swallow it, he quietly covered his mouth with his fist, stifling a cough. His neck and ears flushed red, betraying his discomfort.

"What? Are you bad with spicy food?"

Seeing Zhenya's lips swell slightly in response to the spice made Taekjoo burst into laughter. Zhenya shot him a resentful glare, his eyes watery.

"Funny, huh? It always plays out like this."

"I honestly didn't know you couldn't handle spice."

Suppressing his laughter, Taekjoo handed Zhenya a glass of water, which he gulped down quickly to cool his mouth.

"If you can't eat it, just say so. Why do you keep eating like a kid who's afraid of being disliked? Did me and my mother make you walk on eggshells?"

Clicking his tongue, Taekjoo went to the fridge to grab some ice. He found a tray of ice cubes for chilling and took one out, then leaned casually against the table. Holding Zhenya's chin, he gently tilted his head up. Zhenya obediently looked up at him, offering his face without resistance. Taekjoo lightly rubbed the ice along Zhenya's swollen lips, which quickly became glossy as the ice melted from the warmth of his skin. Somehow, it felt as though Zhenya's lips were softly holding onto both the ice and Taekjoo's fingers.

Raising his gaze from Zhenya's lips, he met the blue eyes staring right back at him. They exchanged glances for a moment. Then, breaking the tension, Zhenya took the ice cube between his lips, and at the same time, pulled Taekjoo by the waist, guiding him down from the table onto his lap.

"...It's been a while since I had it, so maybe it's a bit spicy."

Kwon Taekjoo, who had been gently touching Zhenya's cheek with damp fingers, took hold of his earlobe. Then, he slowly leaned in, licking the ice Zhenya held between his lips. The cold sensation teasingly dampened his mouth.

He repeatedly licked the ice, then, once it had melted to a smaller size, pushed it into Zhenya's mouth with his tongue. Zhenya gave a soft, satisfied moan, swallowing the cold, warm intruders eagerly. Between their tangled tongues, the icy fragment disappeared completely.

They parted briefly, gazing into each other's eyes. Zhenya's blue eyes now reflected a blazing crimson passion. When Taekjoo drew back a bit, Zhenya lunged forward, pushing him down onto the table. Taekjoo met Zhenya's fierce advances with his whole body, returning the heated kiss just as passionately.

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Later, after their meal, Taekjoo sat on the couch in the living room, browsing through dusty books. He had wondered why there weren't any books in such a large house, only to discover a stack hidden in a basement storage room. Yet, there was something unsettling: all of the covers were pink, decorated with hearts, lace, and roses. The titles hinted that every single one was a romance novel. Were they Olga's? Or could Zhenya's tastes run in this direction after all? Flipping through a few pages, he sighed and closed the book.

As he tossed it aside, Zhenya's face, hidden behind it, came into view. His already full lips were now noticeably swollen — a consequence of their seemingly endless kissing that had begun mid-meal. Taekjoo had been kissed so deeply and for so long that his lips felt numb, as if they'd been anesthetized. Throughout it, Zhenya clung close, rubbing his cheek against Taekjoo but never taking things any further. He had simply stayed locked onto Taekjoo's lips, eagerly sucking and tasting. In the end, Taekjoo had run out of breath and pushed him away first. Only then did Zhenya reluctantly relent, though not without biting Taekjoo's cheek hard before letting go.

Scratching at the faint bite mark on his cheek, Taekjoo reflected. He'd told Zhenya they'd take things slowly, but every time the mood became intense, he found himself swept up without a second thought.

Was it really okay to keep diving into things like this? Zhenya constantly created these suggestive situations, and every time, Taekjoo fell right into them. He tried to rationalize it, reminding himself that Zhenya was his lover and that this was all part of trying to recover his memories. But wasn't this getting a bit out of hand?

Of course, Taekjoo wasn't exactly the type to hold back either. When the moment felt right, he wasn't opposed to a one-night stand if the chemistry was there. But when it came to something more meaningful, something that went beyond a passing connection, he understood the importance of being careful — of not leading anyone on or risking causing hurt along the way.

"Ah, forget it."

He scratched the back of his head, not sure what was right anymore. If, by any chance, his memories didn't fully return, would he still have to maintain a relationship with Zhenya as a lover? It would be difficult to feel the same way about someone he couldn't even remember. But pretending as if nothing had ever happened seemed far too cruel to Zhenya.

Looking around, he stood up, consciously trying to distract himself from the tangled thoughts. Soon, he noticed a piano placed off to the side. Along with the large string instrument standing next to it, he wondered if playing music was a hobby. He imagined Zhenya's long, white fingers elegantly pressing the keys — it would probably be quite a sight.

Sitting down, he lifted the piano cover. He had never formally learned how to play. There had just been a piano at home during his childhood, and his mother would occasionally play it for him. Because of that, his fingers moved over the keys with extreme caution. He pressed a few keys meaninglessly, and suddenly sensed someone behind him.

When he turned around, Zhenya had quietly come closer and was leaning his upper body slightly forward. As Zhenya's head moved in over his shoulder, their ears brushed naturally.

At the same time, Zhenya's hand slid under Kwon Taekjoo's, their hands layered together.

"Have you forgotten how to play, too? I taught you so many times."

Zhenya's voice, tinged with amusement, echoed a little too clearly. Kwon Taekjoo looked directly at Zhenya's face, now much closer than before. Meeting his gaze, Zhenya placed his own hand over Taekjoo's and began pressing the keys. Even though his fingers were merely resting underneath Zhenya's, the pleasant sound each movement produced made it feel as though he were playing himself. Zhenya then slipped his left hand between Taekjoo's side and added harmony, creating a smooth, compelling melody.

After playing for a while, Zhenya slowly withdrew his hand and lightly clasped Kwon Taekjoo's wrist. Without consciously thinking about

which keys to press, Taekjoo allowed his fingers to move on their own, effortlessly blending with Zhenya's accompaniment.

It was an ingrained experience — a memory.

Had he learned to play the piano from Zhenya, sitting so close that their warmth and breath seemed to blend together? It felt like something straight out of a romantic date.

Lost in the lingering resonance of the music, he finally came to his senses when he heard a low chuckle from Zhenya.

“Seems like your body is smarter than your head, huh? Your head forgot everything, but your body remembers. Playing piano — and other things, too.”

Zhenya's expression was mischievous as he hinted at the “other things.” Nobles sure did love their innuendos; even when they pretended otherwise, they couldn't help but tease at every opportunity. Zhenya had also changed into a large silk blouse, its frills and delicate fabric making it look almost... delicate, in a way. Did men really wear things like this? The blouse hung from his broad shoulders, its long, flowing sleeves almost reaching his hands, giving him an unexpected air of elegance despite his towering frame. His naturally tousled hair softened his features even more.

But this time, Kwon Taekjoo had no intention of giving in so easily. He clenched his jaw and purposefully looked away from Zhenya.

Feigning interest, he gestured with his chin toward the string instrument beside the piano.

“What's that? A cello?”

“Double bass.”

“Can you play that too?”

“It's normal to handle a few instruments.”

He spoke as if it was as natural as breathing, like eating three meals a day. If it were Taekwondo, that'd be something, but where would he

even use musical skills?

“Why? Want to hear it?”

“If it’s a double bass, you can’t play it solo, right? I don’t know a thing about concertos.

I’m just amazed I managed to play the piano earlier.”

With a chuckle, Zhenya moved behind the double bass. The instrument that had looked so huge fit right into his embrace. Resting it against his shoulder, he began to play. A deep, resonant melody unfurled slowly, vibrating through the room from within. The movement of his pale fingers along the strings was refined and graceful.

Kwon Taekjoo got up and moved to a nearby sofa, hugging a large cushion and resting his head on it.

As if responding to Taekjoo’s silent encouragement, Zhenya fully immersed himself in the performance. The majestic, subtly melancholy piece filled the drawing room. For some reason, a tight feeling formed in Taekjoo’s chest.

Moonlight seeped through the glass panels of the ceiling and walls, casting a soft glow over Zhenya’s ivory-colored hair and skin, creating an almost dreamlike scene.

When the piece ended, Zhenya lifted his previously lowered gaze and looked at Taekjoo, curious to see his reaction.

“Thanks, my ears were treated well. You’re seriously good.”

“Of course.”

“...This might sound random, but...what were we like?”

Was that an unexpected question? Zhenya, who had been holding his head high with pride, looked momentarily puzzled.

“What do you mean, what were we like?”

“Just, you know...normally. I feel like we must’ve argued a lot.”

“Would you call it arguing?”

Zhenya chuckled softly and began recounting some of Taekjoo's past misdeeds.

"Taekjoo, you often got mad for no clear reason. You'd scold me, saying I didn't get it, asking how much you'd have to explain for me to understand. Guess I built up a lot of patience thanks to you."

Getting mad at his lover, who was four years younger, for not understanding — hearing this made him feel like his past self had been awful. Of course, their different upbringings and cultural mindsets would naturally create differences. Listening to Zhenya, Taekjoo couldn't help but feel disappointed in who he used to be.

On the other hand, he felt uncertain. He was usually prone to anger, but he didn't think he'd ever lost his temper without reason. Moreover, when he reflected on Zhenya's usual behavior, he thought it was unlikely that Zhenya was merely an innocent victim in all this.

"...Are you sure you didn't do anything wrong?"

"Do something wrong? Me?"

Zhenya looked astonished, as if he'd just heard something absurd. Then he continued, pinpointing Kwon Taekjoo's malicious behavior.

"You stormed off in anger every time, only coming back to me once you'd calmed down.

I've gotten used to just waiting."

Was Kwon Taekjoo always such an avoidant person? He felt ashamed. He remembered the former lovers who had resented him, saying they were always the ones left waiting. Because of this, he'd never been able to stay with anyone for even half a year. And yet, it had been three years with Zhenya — was it because Zhenya had incredible patience? Or was his heart far deeper than Kwon Taekjoo had realized?

"Yet you managed to stick around."

"I told you, Taekjoo. No matter where you go, I'll follow you."

Kwon Taekjoo silently stared intently at Zhenya, who calmly met his gaze. After a long pause, he finally nodded.

“Alright.”

Zhenya furrowed his brows, tilting his head in puzzlement, clearly wondering what exactly Taekjoo had suddenly understood. But Kwon Taekjoo continued his seemingly out-of-the-blue remarks.

“I’ll try.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I still don’t remember anything, but... with everything my mother said, and what Jong-woo told me, along with the traces I’ve left here... every piece of evidence points to you being my lover. So, I’ll try to accept you, somehow.”

“Only now, all of a sudden? If anyone overheard, they’d think you were making some grand sacrifice.”

“You may not understand, but for me, having a boyfriend takes a monumental decision.

It’s just... something I can barely make sense of.”

“Hah...”

Zhenya scoffed, exasperated.

He still didn’t quite know how he’d ended up in this tangled relationship with Zhenya. Yet, seeing how he was helplessly drawn to him despite having no memories, it didn’t seem entirely impossible. If that was the case, then he had no choice but to make a decision he could live with, even once his memories returned.

“That grand commitment... I can’t just let it go to waste just because I don’t remember.”

Zhenya folded his arms, as if wondering what exactly Kwon Taekjoo was trying to say. Kwon Taekjoo declared with even more conviction.

“While I’m here, I’ll focus solely on you.”

Since things had come this far, he intended to confront it head-on. Perhaps that decision gave him some quiet satisfaction, because the

brief flicker of irritation on Zhenya's face softened, giving way to a serene expression — as if an angel had quietly descended.

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"Let's go."

He opened the door first, motioning for Zhenya to follow. He was tired of staying indoors and decided to explore the island. He thought that if he familiarized himself with the surroundings while taking a walk, perhaps his memories might return. Zhenya watched Kwon Taekjoo limp with a hint of reluctance.

"I know you can't sit still for even a second, but you shouldn't push yourself."

"How little do you think of me? Before, I'd get around just fine in worse shape than this."

"Come on," he added, deliberately taking larger strides. Zhenya sighed and reluctantly followed. In truth, Kwon Taekjoo's gait was surprisingly steady considering the extent of his injuries and recovery period; he could likely even manage a sprint if he wanted. If he didn't have that level of resilience and recovery, he wouldn't have lasted even a year in the field.

"This island... it's a lot bigger than it looks, huh?"

Walking across what seemed like endless meadows, he shared his thoughts. Looking out from the mansion, he'd thought the island might be around the size of *Dokdo*, but now it felt more comparable to *Ulleungdo*. Maybe even larger, given that they could ski, fish, and hunt here. No wonder Zhenya reacted as though he'd lost his mind when he suggested a casual walk around the island.

Still, the idea of living alone on such a vast island — no matter how much one might enjoy solitude — was hard to fathom for an average

person.

“How long have you been living here?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t counted.”

“Why did you buy this island?”

“I needed a place to live quietly. Somewhere no one would disturb me.”

Kwon Taekjoo nodded, not so much in agreement but because this answer was more or less what he had expected.

“Did you come on dates here before we got together? I imagine some people would have found it uncomfortable. Or maybe... most didn’t mind?”

“No. I’ve never brought anyone here.”

Zhenya replied firmly. As Kwon Taekjoo glanced at him, he added:

“I’ve never dated anyone else, either.”

“...Oh, is that so.”

He didn’t seem to be saying it just to sound flattering. In fact, it was hard to picture Zhenya going on dates with anyone. Of course, Kwon Taekjoo couldn’t be the only person charmed by Zhenya’s appearance. But with his destructive nature and unusual way of thinking, a typical romance seemed improbable.

Then again, he seemed remarkably open when it came to physical matters. He was skilled in handling his partner, setting the mood effortlessly — his touch and timing were impeccable.

Maybe he hadn’t dated, but he’d done everything else? For someone with such a pretty face, he was shockingly indulgent.

“What?”

“What?”

“That look on your face.”

“Oh... I just can’t decide whether I should be happy or feel guilty about being your one and only date.”

“Is it an honor? Are you moved?”

“...How do you make it sound like that? You strange

bastard.” Clicking his tongue, Kwon Taekjoo resumed

walking.

The two continued onward, passing a yellowed field readying itself for late autumn, until they reached a dense birch forest. Shafts of dazzling sunlight split through the straight trees, casting shadows and enveloping them in a cool, refreshing air. Kwon Taekjoo took a deep breath, his chest swelling. The fragrant air released by the undergrowth filled his lungs, leaving him feeling invigorated to his core.

“Good”

“Do you like it here?”

“Hmm? Well, the air is refreshing, it’s quiet... it’s a perfect place to rest.”

“So, do you like it, Taekjoo?”

“It’s your island. What does it matter if I like it?”

With a smirk, Kwon Taekjoo walked ahead. Zhenya didn’t follow immediately, just stood rooted in place, as if lost in thought. Taekjoo couldn’t guess what was on his mind.

They walked through a forest they had traversed countless times on hunts and climbed a slope. They kept going, intending to get a high vantage point to look over the island, until they reached a cliff. This was the spot where, long ago, Kwon Taekjoo had fallen while fleeing from intruders. Later, when Zhenya came searching for him, Taekjoo, barely conscious, had used his last bit of strength to grab Zhenya’s collar. He was the only person who had ever pleaded for life from Zhenya, who was as close to death incarnate as one could get. That day, as Zhenya

carried Taekjoo back to the mansion, he'd been tormented by countless conflicting thoughts and emotions.

Now, Kwon Taekjoo stood at the cliff's edge, looking down into the steep, yawning abyss. Zhenya stood beside him, carefully asking:

"Does it bring back any memories?"

"Hm? No. Was there something that happened here?"

Kwon Taekjoo wore an expression as if he had no idea what was going on. Zhenya, who had been watching him closely, shook his head. His mood was complex, a mix of relief and something harder to place. Taekjoo seemed to have completely forgotten the humiliation at Odinokiy, which should have been a comfort, but instead, it left Zhenya with a strange emptiness. No, it wasn't just emptiness — it was closer to anxiety.

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Afterward, the two of them spent their days like they were on an extended holiday. Free from the constraints of time, they ate whenever they were hungry and napped when they felt full. They sprawled out on the sofa, watching classic movies or old sports games. Sometimes, they'd play music together clumsily, or sit by a campfire under the stars, drinking late into the night. On lazy afternoons, they'd even spend half the day lounging by the stove.

Every moment, Kwon Taekjoo was full of endless questions. Beyond the surface details he'd learned about Zhenya, there was so much he wanted to know.

"What do you like?"

Once, Kwon Taekjoo asked the question lightly, without much weight, and Zhenya raised an eyebrow, looking puzzled. Maybe it was too vague a question. Kwon Taekjoo was about to clarify, but then Zhenya unexpectedly gave a nod toward him. The unexpected answer made Kwon Taekjoo's neck prickle.

"Ah, come on. I mean something besides people, you punk. Like a favorite food or something."

"I don't have one."

Without even giving it a thought, Zhenya answered flatly, then suddenly flashed a mischievous grin. He then draped himself over Kwon Taekjoo, who was lying down.

Zhenya began to nibble on Kwon Taekjoo's now reddened ear, all while grabbing at his firm ass.

"Now, if we are on *this* topic, that's a different story."

"Always looking for a chance to pull something, aren't you?"

Kwon Taekjoo brushed Zhenya's hand away as if swatting at a fly, then stubbornly pressed on, rubbing his bright red ear with the back of his hand.

"Isn't there at least some food you eat often?"

"...Persistent, aren't you?"

"I'll make it for you."

"You?"

A look of disbelief appeared in Zhenya's eyes. Kwon Taekjoo felt confident in front of him, who seemed unimpressed.

"Yeah, I can do it. Just name anything you want."

With a reluctant expression, Zhenya revealed that he enjoyed *ukha*, a Russian fish soup. The moment Kwon Taekjoo heard that, he went out to fish. He caught more than enough, cleaned the fish himself, and began making the soup. After all, he felt it would be nice to serve his lover a delicious meal for a change, instead of always being the one eating.

The problem was that he was absolutely terrible at cooking. He could hardly remember if he'd ever even tried *ukha* before. So, he had to rely

on pictures and recipes, trying his best to make it look authentic. After all, if you boil it long enough, anything should taste good.

As the fish simmered, a milky broth emerged. He carefully took a spoonful to taste. Immediately, he grimaced.

"Ugh, that's disgustingly bad."

Sticking out his tongue in disgust, he made a face. Zhenya, who had sidled up next to him at some point, looked into the pot without a word. Kwon Taekjoo held out a spoonful for him to try as well. It was probably fishy and bland, but Zhenya didn't show any reaction. Instead, he just let out a faint, mysterious smile.

"Why are you reacting like that?"

"Even if you've lost your memory, your cooking skills are still the same, Taekjoo."

"It's because I've never made this before."

"Would it be any different if it were something you had made before? You're optimistic, I'll give you that."

"Ugh, just eat it and appreciate the effort, you punk."

Muttering to himself, Kwon Taekjoo sprinkled a generous amount of salt into the soup to adjust the seasoning. He then poured the ukha into a large bowl and carried it over to the dining table.

Kwon Taekjoo took a deep breath as he looked at the soup in front of him. It took all his courage to scoop up a spoonful and bring it to his mouth. But maybe he had added too much salt at the end — the soup that once tasted bland and fishy was now unbearably salty. He quickly gulped down water to wash away the taste. Just as he was about to warn Zhenya not to eat it, he noticed Zhenya quietly continuing to scoop the soup into his mouth, smiling faintly as he ate.

Was he eating it simply because his lover had made it with such effort? Kwon Taekjoo had expected Zhenya to coldly criticize it as inedible, but instead, Zhenya's unexpected reaction made him seem endearing. It felt like Kwon Taekjoo was seeing him in a new light.

He slowly got up, braced himself on the table, and leaned over toward Zhenya. Zhenya stopped mid-spoonful and looked up. At that moment, Kwon Taekjoo planted a quick kiss on his lips. Zhenya's eyes widened in surprise. With a grin, Kwon Taekjoo sat back down and continued to eat the unpalatable soup.

"Now it's not so bad."

He wore a mischievous smile, and Zhenya, who had been watching him silently, suddenly lunged across the table. The impact sent Kwon Taekjoo's chair toppling backward. In an instant, Zhenya was on top of him, devouring him with kisses, as though intent on stealing every last breath from his lungs. The lingering pain from the fall and his lingering hunger faded into oblivion. *This must be what newlywed life felt like*, he thought.

"Slow down, will you? I'm not going anywhere."

Kwon Taekjoo chuckled weakly, patting Zhenya, then confidently climbed on top of him, gently and passionately taking control of their kiss.

Zhenya clutched tightly at the collar of Kwon Taekjoo's shirt as he received his tender, affectionate kisses. Each time Kwon Taekjoo made his heart flutter, a corresponding feeling of unease grew inside him. Zhenya couldn't be certain that Kwon Taekjoo would stay once he regained all his memories from their time on Odinokiy Island. They had overcome their unfortunate past and become lovers, but that memory — likely a haunting nightmare — would eventually return to Kwon Taekjoo. Perhaps it would be better if those painful memories were lost forever, even if it meant erasing all the good memories they had made together.

Zhenya couldn't know when Kwon Taekjoo would regain his full memory or whether he would be able to endure the turmoil and challenges that would come with it. This uncertainty weighed on him, even as he cherished each dreamlike day they spent together. It felt as if he were walking on a sheet of thin ice under the warm spring sun.

## 15. Turn On

"What, where are you going?"

Kwon Taekjoo's gaze stayed locked on Zhenya, unable to look away. Zhenya had appeared unexpectedly, dressed in uniform. Was it the official FSB uniform? Normally, an ambassador wouldn't also serve with a special forces unit, but in Russia, it wasn't all that surprising.

"I need to go to Moscow for a bit."

Zhenya replied, adjusting his cap. The shadow cast by the brim made his already sharp nose and jawline appear even more pronounced.

But Moscow? Had he been called in by the higher-ups? What could it be? Anything that would prompt the Russian government to mobilize the FSB likely wasn't favorable for South Korea.

"How long will it take?"

At the follow-up question, Zhenya stared at Kwon Taekjoo. For some reason, the corner of his mouth seemed to lift slightly in a smirk.

"Why? What?"

"Are you really going to miss me that much?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Nothing to be embarrassed about. No need to feel sad, either. It won't even take a full day."

No matter what Kwon Taekjoo said, Zhenya seemed to interpret it however he pleased. It was hard to tell if he had high self-esteem or if he was just arrogant.

"It's fine if you come back very late, or take your time, you know?"

"Just don't end up crying because you miss me."

Zhenya smirked, teasing, as he moved closer. He placed his hand on the head of the bed where Kwon Taekjoo was sitting, effectively trapping him within his arms. Yet, Taekjoo felt no intimidation, only a sort of fascination at the surreal sight so close in front of him.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"You really have to ask?"

At the blunt reply, Zhenya's eyes narrowed slightly, his lips curling into a pleased smile. He'd never seen anyone pull off a uniform this well. Though his father and brother had always looked distinguished in their formal attire, he'd never stared at them in awe like this. Zhenya seemed born to showcase a uniform.

Taekjoo lightly lifted Zhenya's cap.

"A guy like you has no business looking this dazzling."

He muttered as if to himself, but Zhenya took hold of Taekjoo's chin and pressed their lips together in one smooth motion. Just as it seemed to be a sweet kiss, something unknown was pushed into his mouth.

Taekjoo paused and looked at him.

Zhenya then withdrew briefly, took a sip of water, and pressed their lips together again. Taekjoo quietly swallowed the water and pill that slipped into his mouth, his Adam's apple bobbing as he did.

Even so, Zhenya meticulously explored every corner of Kwon Taekjoo's mouth with his tongue, as if to make sure. Kwon Taekjoo, watching him closely, slowly closed and opened his eyelids, looking languid and as if his energy had drained.

"Get plenty of rest."

Zhenya whispered into his dazed ear. Once Kwon Taekjoo's eyes fully closed, he pulled the blanket over him and stepped back.

After he left the room, the door closed quietly. Not long after, the sound of a helicopter's propellers echoed, causing the windows to shake.

"....."

As the distinct noise faded, Kwon Taekjoo's eyes snapped open. He got up immediately and went to the bathroom to force himself to vomit. The pill, still lodged in his esophagus, was expelled in full. Feeling nauseated, he continued to retch several more times.

"Ha...."

He wiped the saliva from his mouth with the back of his hand and steadied his breathing. His lover had tried to put him to sleep with a sedative just to sneak out; it seemed Zhenya didn't trust him much. Part of him wondered why Zhenya was going to such lengths — what he was so concerned about. There was plenty he needed to check while Zhenya was away.

With a sense of urgency, he quickly got to his feet and left.

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Zhenya's helicopter descended at the FSB headquarters. Once he stepped out onto the landing pad, a familiar figure was waiting for him — Bazim's aide.

"Welcome."

Zhenya barely acknowledged the greeting as he headed inside. The aide escorted him to the director's office. After a knock, permission to enter was granted. It was Bazim's voice.

Inside, the director had ceded the head seat to Bazim and was seated beside him. Zhenya offered no salute to Bazim or even to the director, his superior. Instead, he simply walked to the seat across from the director, crossed his long legs, and sat down. Yet, no one pointed out his lack of decorum; they simply looked at him curiously, wondering why he'd shown up in uniform so unexpectedly.

Zhenya crossed his arms and got straight to the point.

"What's going on?"

Despite it being his first meeting with Bazim since they'd last seen each other in Iran, Zhenya didn't bother with formal greetings. Bazim didn't seem to expect any, either.

"I heard you brought that Korean spy."

Bazim abruptly mentioned Kwon Taekjoo. It seemed all the information had already been shared with the director as well. When Zhenya had crossed from Greece to Russia, he had presented Kwon Taekjoo as his personal assistant to secure entry permission, so it wasn't surprising. Besides, he'd long known that both the Russian government and certain families were watching his every move.

With a nonchalant expression, Zhenya tilted his head.

"And?"

"The Kremlin knows, too."

"Knows what?"

"That you're supporting that Korean spy. They know he snuck into Vladivostok like a rat, trying to dig up our secrets, and that he was the one who smuggled out North Korea's biologist in Iran."

Despite the tense atmosphere, Zhenya's demeanor remained unchanged. If anything, he looked irritated, as though bored by the same predictable story. Bazim let out a heavy sigh.

"The Kremlin is on edge lately. War might break out soon."

"...War?"

At the unexpected news, Zhenya's brows furrowed. His next words came out in a twisted tone.

"Did they find some way to tie their long-standing enemies to the Tehran terror incident?"

Figured this was their chance?"

It seemed he'd hit the mark. Bazim and the director exchanged a silent glance. Even without solid evidence, they would find any excuse to use it as a pretext for war. The Kremlin had long harbored ambitions of restoring the former territories of the Russian Empire, stretching over Finland and Poland.

He couldn't believe they were still dreaming up such absurd fantasies. Leaning back, Zhenya let out a quiet scoff.

"He's finally lost his mind, hasn't he?"

"And the timing couldn't be better."

Bazim nodded wearily. He, too, seemed unenthusiastic about the prospect of war. As a top-ranking authority and a member of the most powerful and wealthy Bogdanov family in Russia, he had more to lose than to gain from such a gamble. War brought no guarantees — history was proof enough of that.

Leaning forward, Bazim locked eyes with Zhenya.

"The Kremlin wants to test your loyalty."

Zhenya's lips curved into a lopsided smile.

"They expect me to join in on their insane war games?"

"If it's inevitable, wouldn't it be better to end it swiftly, overwhelmingly?"

"If they don't start anything, there's nothing to lose."

Bazim fell silent, his lips set firmly. The FSB director, practically the Kremlin's loyal servant, was here as its eyes and ears. Zhenya knew this better than anyone, yet he didn't mince his words.

"Bazim, you don't seem particularly eager for this, either."

"The Kremlin's will is my will. That's our family's resolve, and it should be yours too."

"That's why you're just the Kremlin's lapdog."

Zhenya laughed coldly and made his stance perfectly clear.

"I'm not giving them anything. Tell them to stop drooling over it."

A heavy silence followed. Surprisingly, it was the director who broke the tense quiet. Rising suddenly, he drew a gun and aimed it directly at Zhenya's head. The atmosphere turned vicious in an instant, yet neither Zhenya nor Bazim flinched. They simply glared at each other in silence.

Before long, a red laser beam shone through the window. Several beams converged, focusing on Zhenya's chest and forehead as if on cue.

"You're going to give it up, brother. This is my final warning as family."

Even with his life on the line, Zhenya didn't budge. He tilted his head, glancing at the director's gun, and muttered,

"Then let me give you one last warning too, as

*family.*" He turned his gaze toward Bazim,

smirking.

"I made sure to leave a little surprise running back home before I left."

At the significant statement, Bazim and Director exchanged glances once more. Zhenya added conviction to the "no way" that must have crossed their minds.

"That's right. If you don't act in time, it'll be launched eventually, even if I breathe my last."

"What on earth have you been up to?"

The director, who had been silently listening, suddenly shouted, his anger flaring. Bazim also grew serious, his face hardening as he waited for Zhenya's response. Zhenya gave a brief laugh and readily answered.

"Anastasia — the one you've been so curious about."

Bazim and Director Kwak's faces went pale. Knowing better than anyone the expected performance of *Anastasia*, they were more horrified.

If Zhenya really had developed *Anastasia* and already set it in motion, there was nothing they could do. *Anastasia* was so fast that no air defense system could intercept it, and precise enough to hit its target with no margin of error. It boasted the destructive power of a nuclear bomb. The moment it hit, whether it was the Kremlin or the FSB headquarters, it would vaporize without a trace.

Zhenya stood up without hesitation. The lasers that had been aimed at his head and chest moved in perfect unison to follow him. Looking down at the frozen Bazim, Zhenya made his intentions clear once again.

"I can't give you anything. Don't you dare try to take it from me. If you try to force it, you'll pay the price."

"Yevgeny. Are you really going to go this far?"

"It seems you're mistaken. I haven't done anything yet, Bazim. So, do your best to keep it that way."

After delivering his ultimatum, he turned and left. Neither Bazim, Director, nor the agents on standby for any possible engagement dared to move as Zhenya walked out on his own two feet.

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By the time Zhenya returned to Odinokiy Island, the sun was dipping low on the horizon. As he flew overhead, he noticed a piece of fabric fluttering in the wind near the birch forest. Recognizing what it was at a glance, he shook his head. *Of course, he never waits quietly.*

As soon as the helicopter landed on the rooftop, he headed for the birch forest he'd just seen. Between the tightly packed trees, he spotted a figure dangling in midair. It was Kwon Taekjoo, tangled in a paraglider. It seemed he'd crash-landed in the trees again and had been stuck there

ever since. His attempt to cut himself loose had failed, as evidenced by the combat knife stuck vertically in the ground below. It was no different from the times he had tried desperately to escape Odinokiy in the past.

With his arms crossed, Zhenya looked up at Kwon Taekjoo.

"What are you doing up there?"

"Oh... you're here? You came pretty fast."

Kwon Taekjoo greeted him, looking a bit sheepish, and awkwardly explained his situation.

"Well, I was bored being on my own... so I rummaged through the storage and found a paraglider. Thought I'd take a spin around the island... I was curious about what's around it."

Zhenya shook his head and picked up the knife from the ground. Just as he had before, he hurled it straight at Kwon Taekjoo. The knife flew swiftly and sliced through the parachute cord with precision. Kwon Taekjoo flinched as he fell toward the ground, but Zhenya caught him easily with outstretched arms. Kwon Taekjoo had curled up in anticipation of a rough landing, but his body relaxed when he realized he wasn't hurt. His tightly shut eyes slowly opened. Realizing he was unharmed, he let out an annoyed huff, as usual.

"Ugh, I thought I was about to get hit by that knife! Hey, if you're going to save me, could you at least do it safely...?"

"Your body's cold. Did you go for a swim in the sea?"

Kwon Taekjoo gave an awkward laugh and avoided eye contact at the question.

"The sun... was nice and warm."

"Whether in the past or now, all you think about is escaping."

"Come on, I wasn't trying to run away."

"You may have forgotten, but there's no way to escape this island on your own, Taekjoo. The wind, the currents — they won't let you leave."

No matter what you do, you'll always end up back here."

Kwon Taekjoo let out a low sigh, as if he finally understood why his attempts at surfing and paragliding always ended so absurdly.

Zhenya lifted him and started back toward his mansion. Feeling embarrassed, Kwon Taekjoo squirmed in his arms.

"Hey, I can walk. Put me down."

"Seems like someone's embarrassed."

With a mocking tone, Zhenya set him down as if tossing him. Then, pretending to be annoyed, he strode off toward the mansion. Trying to appease him, Kwon Taekjoo hurried to catch up, saying, "Wait up." But having swum in the sea and spent hours tangled in the tree, his body wasn't cooperating. The gap between them kept growing with every step he took.

"Ugh, it's freezing out here. Did everything go okay with the outside stuff?"

"Why ask if you don't really care?"

"What's that supposed to mean, you brat? I'm asking because I'm curious."

"Hmm."

"So... are you really going to stay here? I mean, this is just a villa, right? You have a main house somewhere else?"

"I'll be staying here. Both you and I."

Zhenya looked back at Kwon Taekjoo and declared firmly. It was a warning — and a

threat — that he'd better give up on any thoughts of escaping early. The chilly undertone in his voice made it clear he was deeply offended. He seemed hurt, as if his lover, whom he'd even put to sleep with medicine, was trying to deceive him and escape.

"Hey, I was wrong, okay? Calm down."

"Who said I was angry?"

"Come on, you're totally mad."

"You really take me lightly, don't you?"

"It's not that... Here, with no internet or phone, I just wanted to reach out to Jong-woo briefly and come back. Can you imagine how worried Jong-woo and Olga must be? Both of us disappeared from that tense scene. I'm also concerned about that idiot Jong-woo, hoping he made it back safely to Korea. And, you know, I wanted to check in with my mom..."

Without even hearing out the rest of his explanation, Zhenya turned away sharply. Kwon Taekjoo half-jogged after him, not stopping his chatter as he tried to placate him.

"This island... it's pretty amazing once you look around. It's so big — there are mountains, islands, the sea, and even a little lake-like thing. It's still autumn, so there are a lot of plants and flowers. What's it like in summer? Probably a bit like Switzerland? In winter, it might feel like Iceland. I even saw some animals earlier. It was something like a reindeer, and it was walking around with its baby."

This was Kwon Taekjoo's unique way of calming down his lover. Though he always thought there was nothing in him that resembled the little woman, in these moments, hints of her peeked out from him. He would get chatty, even a bit playful. It was a side of him that only ever showed up to Zhenya without a drop of alcohol involved. Kwon Taekjoo's one-sided chatter continued all the way until they arrived back at the mansion. Silently, Zhenya set water on the *pechka* stove, while Kwon Taekjoo instinctively wrapped himself in a nearby fur blanket. Despite talking nonstop along the way, his lips had turned a pale blue from the cold, and he was shivering uncontrollably.

Zhenya went straight to the bathroom and began filling the tub with hot water. When he noticed Taekjoo quietly following him, Zhenya gave him a look that clearly said, "Get in." Without any hesitation or shame, he shed his wet clothes and sank into the tub. He must have been quite

chilled, as he immediately dove in. The water sloshed over the rim, splashing onto Zhenya's shoes.

"Wash."

Just as Zhenya turned to prepare some tea, he heard a voice.

"Yevgeny."

The sudden call made him pause. When he looked back, Kwon Taekjoo was leaning against the edge of the tub, looking up at him.

"What is it?"

"Want to join?"

The unexpected invitation made Zhenya's brow furrow. It was a blatant attempt at seduction — completely unlike Kwon Taekjoo. Though they'd had countless trysts in the bathroom, it was almost always Zhenya who barged in uninvited. Each time, Kwon Taekjoo had begrudgingly gone along with it, but he had never initiated something like this. Was he trying to soothe Zhenya somehow? Or was he simply so cold that he wanted to borrow his warmth?

This unfamiliar side of Kwon Taekjoo left Zhenya unable to move closer or back away.

"You need to wash up too, don't you?"

Kwon Taekjoo scratched his ear slightly and invited him again, his dark eyes boldly fixed on Zhenya. A droplet of water clung precariously to his flushed earlobe before it dropped into the bath with a soft splash. Zhenya's lips twisted upward oddly, an incredulous sigh slipping out.

"Don't want to? If you don't, then just for—"

In an instant, something snapped deep within Zhenya, and he lunged at Kwon Taekjoo, pressing a fierce kiss that was nearly painful.

"Mm—!"

With a splash, their bodies tangled and fell together. There was no time to notice where lips met — whether it was nose, upper lip, lower lip, or chin. His kisses were rough and hurried, lips locking tightly and pulling at Kwon Taekjoo's mouth, even drawing his tongue into a deep pull. Kwon Taekjoo tapped Zhenya's cheek, as if asking him to slow down, but Zhenya paid no mind and stubbornly kept kissing him.

The only breath he could catch was in the brief moment he twisted his head to press their lips together again. Each clash of their lips stirred the water into agitated waves. They clung to each other with such intensity that water splashed around them, each droplet breaking their senses into fragments. Sight blurred by closeness, the sounds of the splashing water, and the thick scent in the air all heightened their desire to explore every inch of each other.

Soon, Zhenya's lips were swollen from the intensity, and he ran his tongue over them before pushing it deeply into Kwon Taekjoo's mouth. He tangled his tongue with Kwon Taekjoo's, driving it back until Taekjoo's face flushed bright red before finally pulling away, only to feel Taekjoo's softened tongue tentatively return the touch.

Their tongues wrestled back and forth, each refusing to yield, their hands gripping each other's faces and hair with a desperate roughness. When they finally pulled apart, gasping for breath, they both panted heavily, shoulders rising and falling in sync as they remained pressed so close their noses nearly brushed. Neither could pull their gaze away from the other.

Kwon Taekjoo, whose hand had been firmly holding Zhenya's cheek, gently traced his thumb along it, savoring Zhenya's breath as he brushed his lips across Zhenya's, tempting him for more. As Zhenya dove in for another passionate kiss, Kwon Taekjoo cupped his face, fully responding to the deepening kiss.

Zhenya kept kissing him insistently, tugging off his soaked clothes in the process. Kwon

Taekjoo took each moment their lips parted to help him undress, at one point parting Zhenya's uniform jacket and pressing his face against his exposed neck. A breathy, half-laugh escaped Zhenya.

"You really like this outfit, don't you?"

"I'd probably have poor eyesight if I didn't."

They exchanged jokes as they kissed again, slower this time, the urgency from before easing into a languid, unhurried rhythm. The once-frantic splashes of water softened into a gentle lapping that tickled their ears. Zhenya took his time, nibbling at Kwon Taekjoo's lips, then drew his tongue along the ridge above his lips, drawing him closer as he did. Before long, Kwon Taekjoo naturally settled atop him.

Following Zhenya's lead without hesitation, Kwon Taekjoo pressed his lips across Zhenya's face. Zhenya traced his hand along Taekjoo's straight back, letting out a faint chuckle.

"Taekjoo, you're acting so obediently. Were you feeling lonely?"

"You didn't know? All I've wanted since this morning was to get you undressed."

"Oh, really?"

Zhenya tilted his head up to place a light kiss on Taekjoo's lips, brushing his lips against his like gentle knocks. Taekjoo took his time, running his tongue along Zhenya's lips, savoring his now-softened tongue with a lingering kiss. Zhenya let out a pleased, throaty hum, a shiver running down his cheek.

They continued their teasing kisses, caressing each other's ears and tracing fingers down each other's backs. Before long, Zhenya pressed his now-hard cock against Taekjoo's, grinding with a heavy pressure. They were both already aroused, and even the slightest touch sent waves of pleasure rippling through them.

At some point, Kwon Taekjoo began moving his hips of his own accord, the two of them pressing relentlessly against each other. Their heads felt hazy, a faint dizziness settling over them as they pulled each other close, lips meeting repeatedly with fierce intensity.

"Hah... hold on a second."

"A second?"

Zhenya asked with a feigned innocence, letting his hand drift down Kwon Taekjoo's body. His pale, large hand traced slowly from his neck, over his chest, and down to his abdomen.

As his fingers skimmed over Taekjoo's chest, they brushed lightly against his nipples, sparking a shudder from Taekjoo, who twisted his hips in frustrated yearning.

A satisfied smile spread across Zhenya's lips.

"Oh, so you still remember where you like being touched?"

"What are you saying? All you're doing is tickling me."

"Pretending not to know? As if you're not waiting for me to give you exactly what you want."

Zhenya supported Kwon Taekjoo by holding him around the waist, helping him sit up with his knees bent. He then pulled Taekjoo's arm over his shoulder, drawing him close and pressing Taekjoo's chest fully against himself. As Zhenya's hot tongue circled over Taekjoo's once-flat nipple, Taekjoo's breath caught, pulling inward. In response to the contact, he teased and stimulated the soft nub, rolling it gently under his tongue.

"Ugh, mm... hey, don't... really..."

Despite his words, Taekjoo's upper body pressed even closer, his arm almost encircling Zhenya's head. Zhenya's lips twitched in a grin, and he took a generous bite of the soft flesh. A sharp, tingling sensation radiated from deep within Taekjoo's chest, causing his waist to tremble slightly.

"Ah... mm, ngh... ha..."

With a faint pop, Zhenya lifted his lips from the small mound, leaving distinct bite marks around the areola, a result of his occasional nibbles.

"Ha... seems like you can't keep your hips still, Taekjoo."

"Nnh, mmh..."

With each breath, Kwon Taekjoo's chest rose and fell visibly, his flushed nipple glistening, coated with saliva like syrup.

Zhenya nuzzled the area with the tip of his sharp nose.

"Want me to suck more? Hmm? Taekjoo?"

"Ah... don't ask things like that..."

"Then you'll have to show some love to this one too."

He pressed his cock firmly between Taekjoo's thighs, pushing himself between the muscular legs until his cock nestled snugly in the tight space. A prominent vein pulsed along Zhenya's forehead as he felt the pressure.

"Ah..."

Zhenya moaned in satisfaction at the tight squeeze, then bit down on Taekjoo's chest again, firmly holding his lower back to prevent him from pulling away. At the same time, he moved his hips, pressing his cock against Taekjoo's inner thigh. The once-silent bathroom filled with the chaotic splashes of water breaking around them.

"Ah... ah... mm, ngh..."

"Ah... ngh... fuck..."

Overwhelmed by the sensations from above and below, Taekjoo gripped his thighs tightly together, trying to resist the urge to part them. The pressure intensified, and Zhenya's brow furrowed, his low moans stirring Taekjoo's excitement further.

Lights flashed before his eyes, as if his brain was buzzing, every cell in his body melting under the heat. Before long, their bodies were tightly entwined.

"Ah... mm... ngh!"

"Ugh... ngh... ah!"

They both came at the same time. Clinging tightly to each other, Kwon Taekjoo and Zhenya shuddered, lingering in the afterglow as the heat of

their bodies swiftly cooled, leaving them trembling.

“Hah... ah... mm...”

Taekjoo rested his head on Zhenya's shoulder, breathing heavily. His warm breaths grazed Zhenya's neck. With each steadyng breath from Zhenya, Taekjoo's body rose and fell with his, giving him a strangely comforting and secure feeling.

Zhenya pressed his lips to Taekjoo's quiet neck, murmuring, “Taekjoo.” Taekjoo, relaxed in the languid atmosphere, finally responded.

“...yeah?”

“Taekjoo.”

“Yeah?”

“Taekjoo.”

Zhenya continued to call his name, his lips brushing lightly, almost tickling. A soft laugh escaped Taekjoo. “What?”

“One more time.”

Zhenya grasped Taekjoo's softened cock and coaxed him, urging a reply. With a resigned sigh, Taekjoo nodded. Zhenya immediately shifted positions, pressing Taekjoo against the wall of the tub. Holding his arms behind his back, Zhenya restrained him, preventing any movement.

“Hey, what are you doing all of a sudden?”

“Taekjoo. Taekjoo...”

Zhenya pinned Taekjoo firmly between himself and the wall, calling his name in an almost desperate tone. Without hesitation, he nipped at Taekjoo's earlobe, his warm tongue teasing the sensitive skin. The sensation made Taekjoo shiver involuntarily. Meanwhile, Zhenya's cock pressed forward between Taekjoo's legs.

His cock brushed against Taekjoo's as it moved back and forth, grinding firmly against him. Zhenya leaned even closer to fully meld their bodies, pressing Taekjoo against the wall until his chest was pushed tightly against it. Taekjoo's sensitive nipples, pressed against the coarse tiles, felt a strange mix of discomfort and pleasure as they rubbed against the rough surface.

"Ah — wait, hold on. This... it's scraping, it feels weird... damn it!"

"Hah... Taekjoo... Taekjoo..."

Despite Taekjoo's urgent protests, Zhenya seemed oblivious, completely lost as he planted breathless kisses on the back of Taekjoo's neck and thrust harder against him.

It was as if Taekjoo's voice didn't reach him. The sound of splashing water echoed, relentless.

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Later, Taekjoo absently touched his chest. Even a light brush of his fingers made it sting. Had the skin rubbed raw? Why Zhenya had to obsessively latch onto his chest every time was beyond him. Groaning, he shifted where he lay slumped over the table. Every joint in his body felt like it was screaming. Whether it was from drifting too long at sea, getting chilled by biting winds, or purely from his tussle with Zhenya, he couldn't be sure.

It was just foreplay, yet his body felt utterly drained. He wondered if he'd end up bedridden for days if they actually went all the way. He used to think of sex as a straightforward affair, but did it feel so different because his partner was a man? His earlier assumption that he could keep things casual and detached seemed woefully naïve.

"Ugh..."

His thighs throbbed where Zhenya's cock had rubbed against them. Glancing down, he noticed that the tattooed area between his legs was

not only red but mottled. By tomorrow, it'd probably be bruised.

He couldn't help but think back on his choices: getting a tattoo, a forbidden act for agents, and planning to leave the National Intelligence Service once his final mission was done. Had his past self been hopelessly in love with Zhenya?

Lifting his head, he looked at Zhenya standing by the counter. His back, broad and pale, was covered in scratches. Taekjoo had clawed at him in frustration, leaving Zhenya with a patchwork of marks. Yet Zhenya, unfazed, was casually cooking something. For some reason, his back looked almost... cheerful.

"Hey," Taekjoo called.

"The tattoo on my body — that was your doing, wasn't it?"

"That was my birthday gift."

"How does tattooing my body become a birthday gift for you? It's not even your name."

With a puzzled expression, he furrowed his brow. Zhenya smiled and, responded playfully.

"Huh? Should I have carved my name on you instead? Would that have been better?"

If it came to it, he looked ready to carve his own name on the remaining side. Kwon Taekjoo shot a fierce look at him, vehemently objecting.

"That's not what I meant, you jerk!"

Regardless, Zhenya turned away, thoroughly pleased. A faint hum even escaped from him. Really, no matter what was said, he always took it in whatever way suited him best.

Scars left on the body could be considered badges of honor, but anything beyond that was just unnecessary scribbling. He had always thought so, and that belief hadn't changed. So had he compromised his normally unyielding principles just because his lover had asked? Was it because he was planning to retire soon? Was that the consideration

behind his agreement? Just how significant had Zhenya become in Kwon Taekjoo's life? Admittedly, having a "male lover" was itself a once-in-a-lifetime decision.

As these questions lingered, a familiar smell tickled his nose.

"Hmm? This smell... Is that... kimchi stew?"

"Your nose is as sharp as a dog's."

Zhenya brought over the whole pot of kimchi stew. Even though it was an instant meal, the chunks of meat and kimchi were generous, and the thick, rich broth looked mouth-watering.

Zhenya then brought another dish to his own spot, placing it down — a light pumpkin-colored soup. The smell alone was enough to make Kwon Taekjoo's stomach churn.

"This is delicious. You should try it with me, why don't you?"

"The things you enjoy are practically biochemical weapons, Taekjoo."

Zhenya narrowed his eyes in disgust. Calling kimchi stew a biochemical weapon? Really?

"Who knew you had such a delicate baby's palate, huh, you bastard?"

He laughed, half in disbelief, mocking him. Just then, Zhenya leaned over and, without warning, pressed a quick kiss to his lips. Caught off guard, Kwon Taekjoo's laughter faded.

"W-what? All of a sudden?"

"All you've been doing is going on about babies every time you open your mouth."

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

"Don't lie, you jerk."

"It might embarrass you, but it's true. You'd say 'baby, baby' at the end of every sentence, looking at me so pitifully."

"...I don't remember that."

"Hmm?"

"Are you serious? Was I out of my mind?"

He criticized his past self like he was talking about someone else entirely. Zhenya chuckled, shaking his head. Whether something bad had happened to him outside or he'd misunderstood that Kwon Taekjoo had been planning to escape, he had seemed on edge for a while. Now, though, he appeared to have calmed down.

Seeing Zhenya in a good mood put Taekjoo at ease, too. He figured, given the circumstances, he might as well decide to take a real break. There was no guarantee his memories would fully return just by going back to Korea right now, and there wasn't anything he could do there immediately, either.

"I won't go anywhere alone now."

"...All of a sudden?"

"Either way, I can't leave here without your permission. With my boyfriend insisting on staying together, I don't see any reason to stubbornly head back. And with things as they are, I doubt I could even work if I returned. It'd be nice if you'd at least let me contact headquarters or Yoon Jong-woo, though..."

He glanced at Zhenya's expression, testing the waters. Zhenya gave him a look that said, *Of course, that's how it is*. Feeling sheepish, Taekjoo shook his head.

"Never mind, forget it. Do it when you feel like it."

"Why are you suddenly acting so well-behaved? Are you trying to make me drop my guard so you can stab me in the back again?"

"Do you ever hold back from talking like that to your lover?"

Zhenya shot him a mocking look. Was his past self really such an expert at double-crossing his lover? Did he lie every time he opened his mouth? Feeling a little awkward, Taekjoo scratched his cheek.

"I'm just trying to accept things as they are."

"Accept things as they are? Accept what?"

"Well, somehow, it feels like I never really earned much trust from my so-called boyfriend. You say you'll never let me go, and what choice do I have? It's only natural you'd be like this. I went off, promising I'd be back soon, only to end up practically dead with no memory, making you worry. It's all a mess of my own making, so I'll deal with it."

"You'll 'deal with it'?"

"Yeah. Until my memories fully return, I'll just stay here with you. Jong-woo's probably already reported everything to headquarters. He even said the last mission I took on was wrapped up successfully. You mentioned that, even before, whenever I finished a big job, I'd come here to take a vacation with you. Maybe if I just stay and go about things like we used to, those lost memories will come back naturally?"

Zhenya listened in silence, but instead of looking pleased that Kwon Taekjoo had agreed to stay with him, he seemed to be lost in thought, as though something weighed heavily on his mind.

Observing Zhenya's expression, Taekjoo asked casually,

"By the way, what did we even do together when we came here?"

"We made endless bets. Fishing, skiing, hunting, rock-paper-scissors..."

"Rock-paper-scissors? What kind of boring bet is that? What was at stake?"

"The winner got a wish granted."

Since childhood, Taekjoo had always had an intense competitive streak. If he decided to do something, he had to come in first. The tougher the opponent, the more fired up he'd get. Zhenya would have been the perfect match for that drive — or rather, he probably stoked it like no one else.

"So what did I wish for?"

"You never got to make a wish. You kept losing to me."

“Don’t make me laugh. Even if my memory’s not perfect, do you have to lie every time you open your mouth?”

“It’s true, Taekjoo. The only time you ever beat me was in rock-paper-scissors — just that once. But even then, you got tired and never fulfilled your wish.”

“Seriously? No matter how close we are, I wouldn’t have let you win on purpose. There’s no such word as ‘hold back’ in my vocabulary. But to think that all I could win against you was a game of rock-paper-scissors... I refuse to believe it.”

“Deny it all you want, but the truth won’t change.”

“What was the wish I couldn’t fulfill back then?”

“Leaving me behind here.”

Zhenya replied matter-of-factly, so it didn’t register immediately. Leaving his lover behind had been his wish? Had Kwon Taekjoo really been such a terrible person in the past? Could someone’s character really deteriorate so completely over just a few years? Was it possible he’d been confused simply because his partner was male? Even so, if he hadn’t wanted to take responsibility, he shouldn’t have gotten involved in the first place. He should’ve gotten what he wanted and then decided to leave.

Even just today, Zhenya had come to fetch him, as if accustomed to it, from the birch forest. Explaining the island’s peculiarities, he had hinted that there was no use in trying to leave on his own. Wasn’t that proof enough of Kwon Taekjoo’s countless past escape attempts and failures?

“Sorry.”

Scratching the back of his neck, he apologized straightforwardly. Zhenya stepped back, raising an eyebrow, surprised.

“Since losing your memory, you’ve been apologizing a lot more. Before, you were too busy demanding what you’d done wrong and blaming everything on me.”

“Sorry for that too. I’ll do better from now on.”

Kwon Taekjoo apologized again, humbly asking for forgiveness. Zhenya was briefly taken aback by this unfamiliar side of him, but soon a bright smile curved up at the corner of his lips.

“Fine, then.”

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After showering, Kwon Taekjoo was nowhere to be seen. Guessing he might have fallen asleep, Zhenya headed to the bedroom, only to find the bedding still neatly arranged as it had been. Passing by the lone mug left by the stove, he checked the sitting room as well, but Kwon Taekjoo wasn’t there either, nor on the sofa by the window where he occasionally took naps.

Just in case, Zhenya looked out the window. And there he was — Kwon Taekjoo, whom he’d been searching for all this time, sitting by a campfire, gazing blankly up at the sky.

“.....”

Watching him for a moment, Zhenya grabbed some whiskey and stepped outside. Though he must have sensed Zhenya approaching, Kwon Taekjoo didn’t bother to look back.

It was only when Zhenya sat down beside him that Kwon Taekjoo cast a quick, sidelong glance his way before turning his gaze back to the deep, dark night sky. “It seems like there’s no pollution here at all. There are so many stars.”

He looked up at the sky. Stars of all sizes filled the endless, cloudless expanse, as if embroidered into the heavens, glittering and competing with each other, almost as if they might tumble down at any moment.

Zhenya took a swig of the whiskey he'd brought and handed the bottle to Kwon Taekjoo, who accepted it without hesitation, taking a long drink.

He then passed the bottle back to Zhenya, but when Zhenya tried to take it, Kwon Taekjoo held on, refusing to let go right away. Their eyes met, and Kwon Taekjoo looked intently into Zhenya's, as though trying to read his thoughts.

"Are you... sure you're not hiding anything from me?"

At the sudden question, Zhenya raised an eyebrow. What did he mean? Why would he ask something like that out of the blue? Had Kwon Taekjoo figured something out, or had a new memory surfaced? Zhenya silently assessed his intentions. "Why do I keep feeling like you're hiding something from me?"

"What are you talking about? I don't know where that's coming from."

"No? Then answer me. Why did you go out this time? Is something going on outside?"

It seemed he'd been curious, wondering where Zhenya had gone, fully dressed in uniform. But Kwon Taekjoo didn't need to know, nor did he need to worry about it.

Kwon Taekjoo continued pressing, unwilling to let Zhenya's silence slide.

"I noticed there are anti-air missiles installed around the island. Are you... in some kind of danger?"

"Why are you trying so hard to know?"

"What kind of question is that? When you're with someone, it's natural to be curious about things."

He crossed his arms, remaining silent. Frustration built in Kwon Taekjoo, but then he suddenly paused, a look of realization crossing his

face. He let out an “Ah” just as Zhenya delivered a final remark, effectively ending the questioning.

“I’ve never asked. Not once. Where you go or what you do.”

“...You really know how to leave someone speechless.”

Kwon Taekjoo rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly, then redirected his gaze toward the sky to change the subject.

“Do you think we’ll be able to see the northern lights from here?”

Zhenya nodded casually, and Kwon Taekjoo’s face brightened with interest, his dark eyes seemingly sparkling, though it might have been Zhenya’s imagination.

“Hope we can see it together.”

Zhenya, with a faint smile, almost as if enchanted, moved closer to Kwon Taekjoo. Shadows deepened over Kwon Taekjoo’s face. He let out a small, weak sigh but didn’t resist as Zhenya pressed a light kiss on his lips, then pulled back, holding Kwon Taekjoo’s gaze. Kwon Taekjoo looked calmly into his blue eyes for a moment before suddenly tousling Zhenya’s hair.

“You’re surprisingly affectionate, aren’t you?”

“...Affectionate?”

Zhenya tilted his head, unfamiliar with the word. He couldn’t imagine himself being associated with something like that.

“Cute, I mean.”

Kwon Taekjoo lightly patted Zhenya’s cheek and then pressed a quick kiss on his lips, playfully rubbing his ear as well.

Zhenya felt disoriented. The Kwon Taekjoo who’d lost his memory was distinctly different from before. Now, simply because Zhenya was his partner, he was tender and kind, perhaps the way he’d been with former lovers.

If that was the case, maybe it wouldn't be so bad if Kwon Taekjoo never regained his memory. Then he'd continue treating Zhenya with this gentle consideration, feeling sorry and acting so earnestly, just like now. It might even be better if he could forget all the bitter history between them, remaining simply as a thoughtful partner by Zhenya's side.

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The two men pushed and pulled each other forcefully, like two bulls locked in a territorial battle, as they entered the mansion. They kept touching and drawing each other closer, as if trying to rid themselves of the cold clinging to their bodies. One swept his hand up the back of the other's neck, gripping his hair, while their cheeks brushed together in a desperate search for warmth. They couldn't even wait to take off their clothes before hastily pressing their lips together. With the light buzz of alcohol and the warmth of the pechka, their bodies heated up quickly.

Zhenya suddenly lifted Kwon Taekjoo up. Naturally, Taekjoo wrapped his legs around Zhenya's waist and pulled him close, skillfully continuing the kiss. Zhenya eagerly accepted Taekjoo's tongue as it pressed into his mouth.

They hadn't taken more than a few steps before Taekjoo's back hit the wall. Despite the intense collision, their lips remained locked as they hungrily devoured each other. Pressed against the wall, Taekjoo gently patted Zhenya, who was coming at him with the eagerness of a youth discovering pleasure. He tapped Zhenya's cheek, silently urging him to slow down, then took the lead, letting his own tongue leisurely stroke and soothe Zhenya's.

"Taekjoo..." Zhenya gasped.

But that only fueled Zhenya's excitement. Breathing heavily, he kept pressing Taekjoo against the wall, moving a few steps before slamming into it again, then repeating the cycle, only to hit the doorframe the next time. When Taekjoo let out a soft "Ah" in pain, Zhenya briefly pulled back to check his expression.

Zhenya's blue eyes were blazing with intense passion, which made Taekjoo laugh, amused that he could hold himself back so well in such a

state.

"Are you a moody teenager? I'm not going anywhere. Let's just relax and enjoy."

With that, he stroked Zhenya's cheek with his thumb. Zhenya, without replying, alternated his gaze between Kwon Taekjoo's eyes. For a moment, the guy's shoulder jerked sharply, and then he lunged forward, crashing into Kwon Taekjoo again. Their lips met fiercely, and Kwon Taekjoo's gums tingled from the impact. He couldn't help but let out a small chuckle, then began to control the speed of the kiss as he intensely sucked on the guy's tongue and lips. Each time their lips broke apart with a soft *smack*, short breaths escaped. Zhenya, seemingly reluctant to let go, quickly pressed his lips back to Kwon Taekjoo's.

The loss of air made his head spin. As the lack of oxygen in his body grew, his skin became hotter.

"Slowly, okay? Slowly, Zhenya."

He repeatedly coaxed Zhenya, easing the explosive energy of the kiss. He held the guy's face with both hands and stubbornly kissed him over and over. Each time, Zhenya's lips twitched upwards in a playful grin. His eyes even squinted shut, looking incredibly beautiful. Unable to hold back any longer, Kwon Taekjoo dove in and kissed him first. Zhenya let out a soft laugh, his breath brushing against Kwon Taekjoo's Adam's apple. His desire to savor the guy more intensely grew uncontrollably, making him feel restless.

Eventually, Zhenya sat on the edge of the bed. Kwon Taekjoo knelt up, facing him, and slowly traced his hand down Zhenya's neck and chest. His hand quickly caught the edge of Zhenya's shirt. As he placed his lips on Zhenya's cheek and ear, he tore the shirt open, exposing the thick, muscular torso beneath. The buttons flew off violently, and Zhenya's well-defined abs were fully revealed. An eagle tattoo on his body sharply glared at Kwon Taekjoo. He smirked while poking at the eagle's eye.

"It's really glaring at me."

"Then teach it a lesson."

Zhenya smirked and subtly wrapped his hand around the back of Kwon Taekjoo's thigh, pulling him in. Fixing his gaze on Zhenya's smooth face, Kwon Taekjoo undid his belt and zipper. Zhenya tilted his head slightly, watching the scene unfold. His Adam's apple visibly bobbed as he swallowed, holding his breath and waiting patiently — he looked unbearably endearing.

"How should I teach it a lesson?"

Kwon Taekjoo murmured, tossing his shirt aside, then suddenly pressed down on Zhenya's shoulder. In an instant, he climbed on top of him, grasping his chest firmly. He brought the two rounded areas close together, slowly rubbing the bulge in his pants against them.

"Huh?"

Realizing what was happening, Zhenya supported his head with one hand and Kwon Taekjoo's back with the other. Kwon Taekjoo rubbed himself against Zhenya's chest eagerly, licking his full lower lip. Finally, unable to resist any longer, he pulled down his underwear and freed his aroused cock. It sprang out, firm and pulsing. He positioned himself carefully, pressing it between Zhenya's chest, and began to move his hips. The firm contours provided a sweet satisfying pressure.

"Haah... ngh... ah..."

Kwon Taekjoo continued to slide his cock over the tattoo with an aggressive new design. Between Zhenya's firm chest, the flushed tip of his cock kept poking up. The reddened head, with its slit flaring open, leaked translucent precum. Watching intently, Zhenya met Kwon Taekjoo's gaze with a sultry look, then slowly opened his mouth. Seeing the moist, red interior made Kwon Taekjoo's Adam's apple bob visibly.

Kwon Taekjoo's cock pressed deeper, and Zhenya adjusted, lowering his chin and extending his tongue to lick the tip each time it approached. The teasing strokes made Kwon Taekjoo furrow his brow in tense anticipation. His grip on Zhenya's chest and the movement of his hips noticeably grew more intense.

Zhenya gave the flushed tip a small kiss now and then. Each time he did, Kwon Taekjoo's body would sway with pleasure. His dark eyes were long since dyed with a vivid red heat, and he moved his hips as if forgetting about the injury in his leg.

"Ah... ngh, hah... ugh, hah..."

Clenching his teeth, he pushed toward the climax. In a moment of misalignment, his cock slid over Zhenya's chest and right into his mouth. It drove all the way to the back of Zhenya's throat, making him cough lightly. The sudden tightness around Kwon Taekjoo's cock provided a subtle sensation. Unable to pull back, his body shook with a shudder, and his head tilted back.

"Ugh..."

His body trembled with a sharp and overwhelming pleasure. His spine stiffened as a hot, tingling sensation struck him from head to toe. Deep within Zhenya's throat, Kwon Taekjoo released, spilling thick, white fluid down his throat, some even seeming to slip into his windpipe. Zhenya coughed repeatedly, his face flushed entirely red and eyes moist, bringing Kwon Taekjoo back to reality.

"Sorry, did that scare you?"

Flustered, he gently touched the wet corners of Zhenya's eyes. Zhenya shook his head, nuzzling his cheek against Kwon Taekjoo's hand. The wet lashes tickled his palm. Feeling a strange sense of warmth, he held Zhenya's face and covered it with kisses.

As Zhenya quietly accepted the kisses, he pulled Kwon Taekjoo's boxers down to his knees. Kwon Taekjoo quickly caught his hand, glancing to the side with a hint of embarrassment.

"I... I don't remember how we had sex last time. Did I take the lead?"

There was a note of disbelief in his voice, as though he was certain he'd never be the one on the bottom for anyone. Since they were both flushed and overheated at this point, there was no need to ruin the mood by clarifying the truth. Letting him believe whatever he wanted wouldn't be so bad, considering he remembered nothing.

"We took turns with each other."

Kwon Taekjoo nodded at this response, which was neither a full lie nor the complete truth. He seemed reassured, interpreting it as taking turns in equal measure.

"Since you've forgotten everything, I'll teach you again, one thing at a time, Taekjoo."

Supporting Kwon Taekjoo's back, Zhenya laid him down on the bed in one swift motion. Then he continued to kiss him leisurely, all the while gently stroking his spent cock. Kwon Taekjoo let out a quick breath through their joined lips, a suppressed groan escaping. Soon, his once-tense body began to soften, subtly moving closer.

Zhenya, who had been caressing Kwon Taekjoo's cock all along, suddenly turned his body over. At the same time, he tightened his grip on Taekjoo's hips, lifting his lower body. Kwon Taekjoo, still bewildered, used his hands to brace himself against the bed. Then he flinched and drew his shoulders in as Zhenya abruptly spread him open and buried his face in his ass without hesitation. When the deepest part of him became damp and warm, his spine stiffened.

The unfamiliar sensation left him at a loss.

"Ah, wait...!"

He reached his arm back to try to push Zhenya's face away, but Zhenya paid no mind, licking firmly along the crease with his entire tongue. Each time Zhenya's tongue brushed against him, his hole would twitch and tighten reflexively.

"Ugh... mm... I don't really..."

"You liked it before, Taekjoo. Just trust me."

Zhenya gently pushed away Kwon Taekjoo's resisting hand, then opened his mouth to envelop the surrounding skin. He pressed his soft tongue firmly against the sensitive entrance, coaxing it to relax, and the sensation of his taut muscles yielding left his fingers and toes curling.

Even as he clenched his teeth to stifle it, muffled moans kept slipping out.

"Ah... ugh... no, stop..."

Kwon Taekjoo even shook his head as he groaned, but that only made Zhenya cling tighter, relentlessly working his tongue against the softened hole. Hot breaths spread inside his hole, causing Kwon Taekjoo's back to shudder uncontrollably.

The repeated motion left his flushed ears pressed hard into the pillow. Zhenya took in every reaction with his gaze, using his tongue to gradually open him up. He continued to stroke and tease Taekjoo's cock. Under the dual assault, Taekjoo's resistance crumbled with each passing second.

"Ahh, ah... mm, ah..."

Soft groans filled the room, so warm and pervasive it felt like it was melting into his ears. Behind him, Zhenya let out a low growl as he licked along Kwon Taekjoo's back. His cock had become so hard it couldn't even bend. Gripping Taekjoo's hips as if to quench an insatiable thirst, he hungrily sucked at the delicate skin around the entrance. The sound of skin being sucked echoed continuously throughout the bedroom.

Taekjoo's cock, held tightly by Zhenya, was so hard it felt like it might burst. He desperately wanted to be stimulated harder, to finish quickly. The heat building up inside him, without any release, was driving him to the brink of madness.

"Mmm... Zhenya... Zhenya..."

He reached a hand back, grabbing Zhenya's wrist. When he gently tugged, Zhenya looked up, his lips glistening with saliva. With a bright red tongue, Zhenya licked his lips and gazed up at Taekjoo. The empty hole he left behind now throbbed on its own, expressing a deep, lingering ache.

"... Hurry..."

"Are you getting impatient already, Taekjoo?"

Zhenya chuckled softly and lifted his knee. His massive cock began to rub slowly against the crease of Taekjoo's ass. Just the thick head pressing against him made his whole body tingle. He swallowed nervously, wondering if he could take something so large, yet every other concern faded away, overwhelmed by the intense heat coursing through his body. At that moment, he felt he wouldn't mind even if he got hurt.

"Zhenya. Hurry."

Zhenya continued to rub himself slowly, observing Kwon Taekjoo's condition. There didn't seem to be any signs of him tensing up or hyperventilating, as had happened in Greece.

"Relax."

Zhenya pressed down on the back of Kwon Taekjoo's neck, causing his abdomen to swell. Kwon Taekjoo squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his fists tightly. Finally, Zhenya, who had been merely tracing along the cleft of his ass, brought the tip of himself firmly to the entrance.

Even with just a gentle push, the skin around the entrance softly yielded inward.

Zhenya's breathing grew tighter, while Kwon Taekjoo gritted his teeth, bracing himself for the pain to come. He was so tense that his whole body trembled, as if he were facing torture rather than intimacy.

With a sigh, Zhenya took some gel from the bedside table and applied it along Kwon Taekjoo's cleft. As the cold, slippery substance trailed down, Kwon Taekjoo's back stiffened even more in response. The gel slipped down the crevices of his buttocks, pooling at the bend of his knees as it followed the divide of his thigh muscles.

Zhenya, who had been passively watching the erotic scene, licked his dry lips and began rubbing himself again. A damp, frictional sound arose from their skin pressing together. Kwon Taekjoo remained rigid, completely silent.

Abruptly, Zhenya leaned his upper body over and aligned himself against Kwon Taekjoo's back, placing his lips softly on the warm nape of his neck. He continued to press his lips down in tickling kisses, then suddenly bared his teeth and bit into the scent-laden nape. The unexpected pain made Kwon Taekjoo let out a brief groan. Taking advantage of this moment, Zhenya thrust himself fully in.

"...Ahh!"

A cry, almost like a scream, escaped from Kwon Taekjoo. The sudden heaviness in his lower abdomen made it hard for him to breathe. He felt as though any careless movement might tear his hole that had stretched so wide.

"Ahh, fuck....."

"Still letting out curses, I see."

Zhenya frowned at the intense tightness, then chuckled incredulously. Kwon Taekjoo struggled to recover from the shock. Though he was quite used to violence and resilient to it, the pain of penetration was unexpectedly shocking. There seemed to be little pleasurable about this compared to normal sex, yet he found it remarkable that his cock was still rock hard.

Zhenya pushed his lower body in closer, rubbing against the joined area. Kwon Taekjoo's insides throbbed with a dull ache near his navel, forcing him to hold his breath, his face and even the tips of his ears flushing bright red.

"Taekjoo, you still need to breathe."

With a slight smile, Zhenya murmured, then unhesitatingly buried his head in Kwon Taekjoo's hair. His cock, which had filled Taekjoo's insides completely, was drawn out. The sudden emptiness created a vivid sense of release, making Taekjoo's inner walls twitch. In the next moment, Zhenya's cock slammed back in, grinding ruthlessly against his inner lining.

"Ahhh!"

As he cried out, something dripped slightly from him. Was it urine? In his confusion, Zhenya pressed in again without giving him any pause.

“Agh, ugh, ahh, hah...”

“Taekjoo, Taekjoo...”

Zhenya, seemingly losing control, repeated Kwon Taekjoo’s name with desperate persistence. The slap of their bodies echoed as Zhenya’s hips collided with Taekjoo’s, reddening his skin and numbing it from the impact. Both his inner walls and the edges scraping against Zhenya’s rough cock burned as if scorched. The feeling was both unbearable and left him wanting more of this reckless intrusion.

Zhenya mercilessly teased his ears and nape, driving him harder with each thrust. Then, as his cock continued to pound in deeply, it hit a sensitive spot, drawing a sudden, intense reaction from Kwon Taekjoo, who had been groaning weakly until now.

“Ahh! There, ahh, what... huh!”

“Here? Huh? Taekjoo...”

Zhenya groaned breathlessly, pressing his whole body down to control Taekjoo’s writhing. He persistently targeted the place Taekjoo was most sensitive to, knowing exactly how and where to apply pressure to make him react. Of course, for Kwon Taekjoo, whose memories were all but erased, the pleasure Zhenya was inflicting upon him would feel shockingly unfamiliar.

Pressing Kwon Taekjoo down with his weight, Zhenya relentlessly twisted and thrust, targeting a specific spot inside with consistent pressure, which made Taekjoo writhe and struggle.

“Ah... fuck, ah... ugh, ah...!”

“Taekjoo, do you like it? Huh? You like it when I do this, don’t you?”

“Ah... ah... Zhenya...!”

Desperately calling Zhenya’s name, Kwon Taekjoo gasped for control. Zhenya pressed gentle kisses on his shoulder, but didn’t compromise on

the speed and depth with which he moved below. His cock, buried deeply, scraped and tugged harshly against the clinging inner walls as it withdrew. The tingling pleasure seemed to pull his mind out of him entirely.

Kwon Taekjoo grabbed Zhenya's head, pulling him close so their cheeks pressed together, hot against each other. Gripping Zhenya's fine hair tightly, he buried his face against Zhenya's cheek. His breath and groans trembled against Zhenya's skin, urging him on even more.

The massive mattress rippled with the intensity of Zhenya's quick and forceful pace, relentlessly aiming for the same spot. The friction of their bodies created a rough sound as they met over and over. Kwon Taekjoo's eyes grew unfocused as the electric current surged from his core outward. The pleasure was so overwhelming that his body acted out contradictory urges — to push Zhenya away even as he pulled him in.

Before long, Zhenya's whole body drove forward with abandon. As he thrust deeply inside, his cock pulsed violently, making Taekjoo's vision go white.

“Ahh... ahh...!”

“Ah...!”

Kwon Taekjoo trembled uncontrollably, groaning messily, his neck strained. Zhenya soon let out a growl, gritting his teeth. His sweat-dampened back rose and fell as each muscle beneath the skin tensed and flexed independently.

“Ahh...”

Even after Zhenya had filled Kwon Taekjoo's insides with his thick essence, he continued to thrust a few more times, as if ensuring total possession. The overwhelming sensation left Taekjoo's skin prickling with pleasure that bordered on unsettling.

Kwon Taekjoo, trembling, let his limbs fall limp, barely managing to breathe. His lungs felt achingly sore, and his entire body was so

drained, slick with sweat and goosebumps, that he could hardly muster the strength to move a finger.

Zhenya, pressed close to him, slowly pulled back, withdrawing himself from Taekjoo's insides at an agonizingly slow pace. Just as he was about to pull out completely, Taekjoo's hole tightened, gripping his tip and refusing to let go. Zhenya raised his brows in surprise, looking down at Taekjoo's silent, sweat-dampened head.

After a moment, Kwon Taekjoo turned slightly, glancing back. His cheeks and ears were flushed deep red, and his glazed eyes held a newly awakened desire.

“...Hey. Let’s do it again.”

A small laugh escaped Zhenya. It was unlike Kwon Taekjoo to initiate, or to ask for more. He usually knew that Zhenya would keep going until he was worn out. How bold could someone get after losing their memory?

With a smile, Zhenya’s initially wide eyes

softened. “Of course, we can do it as much  
as you want.”

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They went at it over and over, until Taekjoo’s release, initially thick, had thinned to a clear fluid. Kwon Taekjoo’s skin was marked all over from Zhenya’s bites and suckles. Bruises formed on his wrists, ankles, and thighs where he had been firmly held down, and he felt as if the fierce heat between them had melted his thoughts to a sluggish blur. Lost in the relentless passion, neither could spare a thought for their circumstances or their relationship.

But still, it didn’t feel like enough. Kwon Taekjoo wanted something more intense, enough to drown out any remaining sense of self.

"Ha... Zhenya..."

Completely worn out, Kwon Taekjoo reached for Zhenya's hand, drawing it to him. Zhenya, who had been letting him lead, suddenly froze when he felt Kwon Taekjoo guide his hand to his own neck.

"Ha... please... hurry..."

Kwon Taekjoo, rarely impatient, pressed Zhenya's hands over his own neck. Repeatedly urging him to hurry, he tightened around Zhenya's cock, which pulsed in response.

Veins stood out on Zhenya's smooth forehead and jaw.

Still, Zhenya resisted with all his strength. Kwon Taekjoo covered Zhenya's hands with his own, tightening his grip around his neck. Yet even that didn't seem enough for him; he furrowed his brow bitterly, growling in frustration.

Watching this unfold, something snapped inside Zhenya. In the next moment, he tightened his grip around Kwon Taekjoo's neck. Gasping for breath, Kwon Taekjoo started to choke, his legs slipping over the edge of the bed as he writhed in discomfort. Every cell in his body clenched. Saliva trickled down his jaw, tensed from the exertion.

Each time Zhenya clenched around his neck, his hole convulsed, squeezing the cock it held tightly. Overwhelmed by the intense pleasure surging through him, he struggled to maintain control.

"Ah... Taekjoo... Taekjoo..."

Zhenya groaned, his brow furrowed tightly in an expression of restrained agony. Kwon Taekjoo, too, convulsed under the onslaught of pleasure, gasping for air. He held onto Zhenya's arms, determined not to let his hands slip away.

"Kh... ugh... hh... hoo... kkh..."

"Ha... uh... ugh... hah... ooh..."

As oxygen became scarce, Kwon Taekjoo's vision began to spin. A thick, dizzying sensation rushed from his head down to his toes, and a strange thrill took over, as if his breath would stop any moment.

Suddenly, a chill ran down his spine, covering his body with goosebumps. In his dazed state, he jerked slightly and then abruptly released a clear stream. Soon, both Zhenya's abdomen and the bedding beneath were soaked.

"Hah... hh... hh..."

Even while trembling uncontrollably, Kwon Taekjoo continued to pull Zhenya close. Zhenya, too, leaned his forehead against Kwon Taekjoo's, pressing firmly on his stomach and letting out a satisfied groan.

"Ha... uh... ngh... Taekjoo..."

Gradually, the steady flow of fluid from Kwon Taekjoo slowed, and the strength in his hands gripping Zhenya eased. As his hands fell away, Zhenya came back to himself.

Kwon Taekjoo's eyelids were now tightly shut, and faint tear tracks lined the corners of his eyes.

"...Taekjoo?"

Alarmed, Zhenya quickly checked his breathing. Though slightly irregular, Kwon Taekjoo's breath was steady and clear. Pressing his ear to Taekjoo's chest, he confirmed the heartbeat, feeling it pound against his ear with intense force. Only then did Zhenya feel relief, resting his head against Kwon Taekjoo's shoulder. As his body cooled, a cold sweat formed.

His hands, which had clenched around Kwon Taekjoo's neck, tingled with lingering numbness. Even when he purposely balled them into fists, a slight tremor persisted.

"....."

He gazed at Kwon Taekjoo's face, unconscious in deep sleep. Since that time when he'd nearly stopped Kwon Taekjoo's breath with his own hands, he found himself unable to harm him recklessly. Kwon Taekjoo, too, had never again asked to be choked as he did now. On the contrary, he seemed uneasy about wrapping anything around his neck, even a scarf or tie.

It was clear the experience had been traumatic for them both.

In Zhenya's arms, Kwon Taekjoo was no different from the man he had always known. His scent, voice, body heat, preferences, and the gentle tone he used when he was happy — all of it remained the same.

Yet, he wasn't entirely the same. Kwon Taekjoo still didn't remember the painful past they shared, nor the memories that bound them together. All he did was struggle to accept the fact that Zhenya was his lover.

Isn't that enough? As long as he didn't leave Zhenya behind, disappearing off somewhere alone. It didn't matter if he couldn't recall or even recognize the weight of their shared past. With enough time and effort, Zhenya could make him fall in love all over again.

But then, why?

Why did he feel so restless, even while spending precious time alone with Kwon Taekjoo, who had become unusually tender? It felt like he was losing something. As if a deep, unreachable void was expanding inside, emptying him without his awareness. An unfamiliar sense of anxiety fed on that emptiness, growing larger each day.

It was as if an unknowable sense of loss had carved a gaping hole in his chest. Trying to shake off that unsettling feeling, Zhenya wrapped his arms tightly around Kwon

Taekjoo. He buried his head in Taekjoo's chest, holding him so close he couldn't move. There seemed to be no other way to drive away the strange, oppressive anxiety weighing on him.

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*A faint pull stirred me from my sleep. The familiar, firm grip of hands around mine brought a small smile to my face. I opened my eyes, as I expected to find Kwon Taekjoo leading me somewhere, holding my hand tightly. I followed him silently, letting him guide me wherever he wished.*

*Kwon Taekjoo didn't speak, didn't even look back at me. I tugged on his hand, hoping to catch his attention, but it was useless.*

*'Hey, Taekjoo. Where are we going?'*

*I finally broke the silence after a while of walking. But he didn't respond. He didn't even glance back. He kept moving, increasing the space between us until our hands slipped apart. I reached for him again, but this time, it was harder than I expected to make contact.*

*'Taekjoo?'*

*I stretched my arm as far as I could, but all I could manage was a light brush of my fingertips against his. The distance between us kept growing, no matter how much I reached.*

*I tried to catch up, pushing myself to take long strides, but my body refused to cooperate. It was as if something was holding me back. I looked down and saw my ankles sinking into the thick snow that had piled up. I tried to push forward, but with each step, my knees sank deeper. By the next step, my thighs were submerged.*

*I raised my head in panic. Kwon Taekjoo, completely unaware of my struggles, was gliding effortlessly over the ice, moving away from me like he was floating, while I remained stuck.*

*'Taekjoo!'*

*I shouted, my voice echoing through the vast emptiness. But he didn't stop. I pushed harder against the snow, but it only rose higher, now up to my chest, then to my neck.*

*This was dangerous. I might have to stop. But without hesitation, I took one more step toward Kwon Taekjoo, who was still retreating, distant and unreachable.*

*In that moment, my body was suddenly pulled down, swallowed by the cold, vast depths. A pure white silence enveloped me.*

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When he opened his eyes, he saw a familiar ceiling. It was the bedroom inside the mansion. Had it all been a dream? It felt strange since he rarely had any dreams, be they nightmares or pleasant ones. What had it been about?

He tried to trace it back in his mind, but his chest felt strangely empty. Kwon Taekjoo was nowhere to be seen. Instinctively, he tried to sit up, but hesitated; his limbs wouldn't move as he wanted. When he yanked his arm, it clanked, pulling his other arm with it. He looked down to examine his wrists. His arms and legs were chained, fixed tightly to the bed.

What was going on? He glanced down toward the foot of the bed. Kwon Taekjoo was sitting on a chair placed there, watching him. He wasn't bound, yet he showed no intention of helping Zhenya out of his restraints; he just passively observed Zhenya's attempts to free himself.

“...Taekjoo?”

Zhenya's gaze held a question, seeking an explanation. Soon, a frown formed on his face — the look in Kwon Taekjoo's eyes seemed oddly cold.

It was as if he had become a completely different person from the night before. Zhenya wondered if this was another dream, but the sensation of the chains around his wrists was too vivid. A bad feeling crept over him.

“What is this? Suddenly acting like this isn't funny.”

“I remember everything.”

“What?”

Zhenya's heart thudded loudly, an unsettling rhythm. Kwon Taekjoo's pitch-black eyes were dark and unfathomably deep.

Before Zhenya could react, a phrase like a death sentence fell from Taekjoo's lips.

“I remember everything you did to me.”

{ End of vol. 4 }

Transl. —Zaww.

# **CODEANA PART TWO VOL. 5**

## **Nameless Star**

**Dark red = korean dialogue. Gray = flashbacks**

**{ } = spanish/english/persian dialogue**

### **16. Return To Zero**

"I remember everything you did to me."

Kwon Taekjoo's eyes sharpened, his dark pupils filled with an unfathomable resentment. It felt as if an invisible, massive wall had risen before him, blocking his path. He swallowed, overwhelmed by a sense of distant disconnection. Something had gone terribly wrong, but he had no idea where to start or how to fix it. The extreme shift that had happened overnight left him in a daze.

His only thought was that he had to catch Kwon Taekjoo immediately. He needed to hold him, at least for now, to ensure he wouldn't disappear again.

He tried to get up quickly, but his limbs were tightly bound, leaving him unable to move. Normally, he could have broken free from such restraints in an instant, but today his head felt heavy and his body limp. Glancing around for the cause, he soon spotted a syringe rolling on the table. Had Taekjoo injected him with a sedative while he was asleep? He would have noticed, but perhaps he had let his guard down because it was Kwon Taekjoo.

"Taekjoo. Untie this."

He forced himself to speak calmly, but Taekjoo ignored him, continuing his tirade.

"What were you planning? No matter how much of my memory was lost, how could you try to deceive me like that? Did you really think I wouldn't find out? How much of an idiot did you take me for?"

"...Taekjoo."

"Every time those memories come back, I'm filled with disgust and horror. That I was played by you, that I nearly died at your hands, and the humiliations I suffered after being caught by you again... I thought it would have been better if I had died. But now you're telling me that we're lovers? That I accepted you? Or was it that I gave in to your threats out of sheer resignation?"

"I told you to untie this."

"What? Are you going to try and force me with your strength again?"

"Ha..."

"Feel wronged? About what?"

Kwon Taekjoo pressed on, his voice dripping with bitter sarcasm.

"You mocked me while pretending to be my ally, betrayed me, raped me, and left me half-dead by the cold riverbank. Back then, didn't you not care whether I lived or died? All of that is as clear as if it happened yesterday, but now you're upset because it's all in the past?"

Zhenya's lips pressed tightly together. Everything Kwon Taekjoo pointed out was true. Back then, the two were nothing more than enemies. To Zhenya, Kwon Taekjoo was just another thief who came to steal his *Anastasia* like the others.

Zhenya's feelings toward Kwon Taekjoo had been nothing more than mild curiosity. He hadn't cared if Kwon Taekjoo lived or died. If his dull life could be filled with even a brief moment of amusement, that would be enough. So, he had followed him, pretending to be an ally. Watching Kwon Taekjoo recklessly charge ahead, unaware that his life was in danger, seemed so insignificant and laughable.

If Zhenya had torn Kwon Taekjoo apart and killed him back then, no one would have objected — not the Kremlin, nor even South Korea,

who had sent him. Just as Zhenya had destroyed other intruders, Kwon Taekjoo was supposed to be thoroughly broken and discarded, in true "Psikh" fashion. Yet, he was spared. It didn't matter if he died, but even if he survived, it was the same.

They were meant to pass each other by. That is, until Kwon Taekjoo defied expectations and reappeared. His persistence, his refusal to back down, and the way he returned to retaliate once more piqued Zhenya's interest. It was irresistible. There was no intention, no purpose, but he was drawn to him.

"Without thinking about your own faults, you raped me again, imprisoned me, and then tried to strangle me. Is that why you hesitated last night? Because you were afraid I'd remember the past? Afraid that your pathetic little act would be exposed?"

Kwon Taekjoo's face twisted in anger as he cornered Zhenya. His rage was overwhelming, as if it was melting his brain.

Zhenya needed to explain, to clear up Taekjoo's misunderstanding. But the memories that had resurfaced during the night were all from the past — things he had done before he even realized his attraction to Taekjoo, before they had become lovers. And yet, all of it had been tolerated the moment Taekjoo declared that he would no longer run away. Had Taekjoo's memories not reached that point?

"...Is that all you remember?"

"What more do I need to remember? How much filthier does it need to get?"

"....."

"Ever since I lost my memory, I've been wondering how I ended up with someone like you. But after recalling those revolting moments, the answer became clear."

Zhenya tried to argue, feeling that he couldn't let Kwon Taekjoo jump to conclusions like this. But Kwon Taekjoo shook his head, as if he had already found the answer to the questions that had plagued him since the accident.

"I just gave up."

"What?"

"I got tired of running away, so I let it all go. No matter where or how I hid, you would always come after me. And I had people I needed to protect."

He had reluctantly accepted Zhenya. There was no other reason.

"No matter where I went, you'd always follow me. I was probably tired of running away.

To stop that, I had to make some compromise with reality. So, I decided to stay with you. I might not be thrilled about it now, but I wanted to make you live like a decent human being."

Kwon Taekjoo said that, clearly. But it didn't matter to Zhenya. Even if Kwon Taekjoo had no other choice, and had only accepted him because there were no other options, nothing would change.

"But in the end, you chose me, Taekjoo."

"Chose you? How is that a choice? There were no right answers."

"....."

"If not, answer me. Did I ever want you first?"

"Countless times."

On that question, Zhenya could answer with certainty. Even if Kwon Taekjoo had reluctantly accepted Zhenya, their relationship was undeniably that of lovers. Every time Kwon Taekjoo went on an overseas trip, he apologized, and once the work was done, he always returned to Zhenya's side. When his body ached with desire, he would come to Zhenya first. He would get angry when Zhenya disappeared for days without contact, and even showed jealousy when he heard that his family was pushing for an arranged marriage. Yet, Kwon Taekjoo still tried to deny everything.

"It wasn't just a misunderstanding?"

"Misunderstanding?"

Zhenya's brows furrowed. No matter how much Kwon Taekjoo had forgotten about how they became lovers, his attitude was far too aggressive. It felt as if Kwon Taekjoo had decided that there was no way the two of them could have ever truly loved each other, given their twisted past.

"Have I ever told you I loved you?"

No, Kwon Taekjoo had never once said such a thing. And neither had Zhenya. To Zhenya, that word — praised as the ultimate value by all of humanity — held little meaning. He had simply wanted Kwon Taekjoo and wanted to keep him by his side. From the moment Kwon Taekjoo shared his feelings, they became lovers. They were already connected; what more proof was necessary?

When Zhenya didn't respond, Kwon Taekjoo quickly made a judgment.

"I haven't, right?"

Frustration bubbled up. Kwon Taekjoo's attempt to deny everything and act as if none of it had happened felt unbearably cruel.

"If you're so sure, then shoot me with that gun. That'll make everything clear."

Kwon Taekjoo stood up abruptly. He strode over to the bed and pressed the muzzle of the gun against Zhenya's forehead without hesitation. Zhenya looked up at Kwon Taekjoo without resistance. His cold, pale blue eyes bored into Kwon Taekjoo's indifferent face.

As Kwon Taekjoo glared at Zhenya and half-pulled the trigger, he suddenly jerked his hand away at the last moment.

"Even if I did want you, it must have been because I was temporarily insane. I was pushed to the edge, into an extreme situation, so I must've lost my mind. Back then, anyone would have been desperate. It didn't matter if it was you or someone else."

In that isolated world, they had no one else to talk to but each other. Would they still have been drawn to one another if not for such

circumstances?

It was hard to deny. But wasn't it because Kwon Taekjoo was Kwon Taekjoo and Zhenya was Zhenya that they had ended up in such a situation? It was all in the past, and those events had undeniably happened, yet the Kwon Taekjoo standing in front of him was dismissing all of it as if it never occurred. Just because he didn't remember didn't mean everything that had happened could be invalidated. Zhenya's jaw clenched audibly. His once-wavering eyes turned cold, and he yanked his arms against the chains until his skin paled where the metal met flesh.

"Taekjoo, untie me."

"Ah, now you're showing your true colors. This is more like the 'Psikh' I know. Have you been threatening me like this the whole time? Using my mother's safety as leverage?"

Oh, is that why you came to my house? To show that you could hurt her at any moment?"

"What a pathetic story you've come up with. It's an absolute flop."

"If I'm wrong, then explain yourself."

"Do you even want to listen?"

Zhenya's displeasure was clear. Kwon Taekjoo glared at him without replying, then abruptly ran a hand through his hair. His gaze, which had been fixed on Zhenya, was tossed into the air. After a moment of contemplation, he tucked the gun into his waistband and declared:

"I'm leaving."

"You think I'll let you?"

Zhenya's words were defiant. Kwon Taekjoo's lips twisted into a bitter smile.

"I don't need your permission. From now on, I'll do things my way."

He clenched his fists. The chains around his wrists rattled loudly as they were yanked. Ignoring the sound, Kwon Taekjoo opened a nearby

drawer and pulled out the helicopter's ignition key, which he had always kept there.

"You're going to leave me behind again, just like this?"

"I'm just going back to the way things were."

With that cold reply, Kwon Taekjoo walked out of the bedroom without hesitation. His large strides held not even a hint of reluctance.

"Taekjoo!"

Zhenya shouted from the bottom of his gut, desperately calling out to the man leaving him behind. He thrashed about, violently struggling against the heavy chains binding his limbs. But the harder he fought, the tighter the chains pulled, digging into his skin. His joints cracked under the strain. He wanted to break the bed to free himself, but the lingering effects of the drugs made it impossible.

Meanwhile, the sound of the helicopter's propellers filled the air, their loud thrum causing even the windows to vibrate slightly. The helicopter, now airborne, began to cut swiftly across the vast sky. Zhenya, watching it through the window, let out a roar like he had done once before.

"Taaaaaekjooooo!"

But his desperate cry didn't reach Kwon Taekjoo. It only echoed back, a hollow sound returning in waves.

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The quiet front door creaked open, triggering the motion sensor light. As he stepped into the familiar space, Kwon Taekjoo felt his already weary body sag even further. He barely managed to kick off his shoes and step inside. The house was deathly silent, as his mother had been away for some time and Kwon Taekjoo himself had just returned after months. Cold drafts swept across the floor.

Dragging his feet, he finally collapsed onto the sofa in the living room. A cloud of dust that had accumulated in his absence rose and scattered. The tickling sensation in his nose caused a dry cough to escape his throat. He lifted an arm to cover his eyes, and a long sigh slipped out.

The moment he escaped Odinokiy, local support centers had provided him with protection and assistance. No major forces or pursuers had followed him as he crossed from Russia into China. The escape process had been surprisingly smooth, considering what he had prepared himself for.

When he arrived at Incheon Port, Yoon Jongwoo had been waiting for him. The moment Yoon had seen Kwon Taekjoo, he had become emotional and ran to him, pulling him into a tight embrace.

*'Sunbae!'*

*'What the hell, man. That's gross.'*

*'Are you okay? Where have you been all this time? You didn't get hurt, did you?'*

*'Hurt? What are you talking about? Were you worried?'*

*'Of course I was worried!'*

*'You think I'm the type to die easily? You're too young to be worrying like some old man.'*

Kwon Taekjoo had ruffled Yoon Jongwoo's hair roughly. It was the kind of touch that could easily yank out some hair, and Yoon Jongwoo had yelled in protest. Just like always, Taekjoo had kicked him lightly on the ass, telling him not to make a fuss.

*'Let's go home. I'm exhausted.'*

*'If I go bald, it'll all be your fault, you know that?'*

*'Baldness is genetic, not my fault.'*

*'Hey, are you insulting my dad right now?'*

*'Nah, your father has a dignified look, so it's fine.'*

They had bantered like usual as they got into Yoon Jongwoo's car. Jongwoo had passed along the message from the headquarters, saying that Taekjoo was allowed to return home for now. When asked when he returned to Korea, Yoon Jongwoo explained that he had come back immediately after Zhenya and Kwon Taekjoo had disappeared, and that he had reported everything to the higher-ups, including the fact that Kwon Taekjoo was alive and all the other relevant details.

Taekjoo had listened silently, staring out the window. The familiar scenery he had seen for over 30 years had felt strangely foreign. He lowered the window, letting the wind brush against his face. Yoon Jongwoo, noticing his mood, had slowed the car down. The outside air, with its temperature, humidity, and faint smell of Korea, had filled Taekjoo with a sense of deep relief and a strange stirring in his chest. It had felt like he had returned from a very long journey.

Before long, Yoon Jongwoo's car had arrived in front of Taekjoo's home. Jongwoo handed him some seolleongtang (ox bone soup) he had bought in advance and urged him earnestly.

*'Don't think about anything tonight. Just get some rest. And if you need to go to the hospital, call me. I'll take you.'*

*'Do you still think I'm a patient? As you can see, I'm perfectly fine now.'*

He had waved Jongwoo off, about to get out of the car, but hesitated for a moment. Jongwoo had looked at him curiously. Taekjoo stared at him blankly for a few seconds before suddenly blurting out a confession.

*'Jongwoo, I remember everything now.'*

*'What? What do you mean, you remember everything?'*

*'I remember why I went to Russia, what happened there, and what Chief Lim was planning to do to me. It all came back.'*

*'Oh...'*

Jongwoo had fumbled for words, clearly unsure of what to say. His expression had shown concern, as if he feared that this newly resurfaced past might have opened fresh wounds for Taekjoo. Seeing Jongwoo's pale face, Taekjoo had squeezed the back of his neck, causing blood to rush back into his face.

*'I'm just telling you, idiot. Why are you reacting like that?'*

*'...Are you okay, sunbae?'*

*'What's there to not be okay about? It's all in the past now. Or what? Did you do something wrong to me, and that's why you're acting so nervous?'*

*'Of course not! I've always been the victim here!'*

*'Then it's fine. Get going.'*

When Jongwoo tried to follow him out of the car, Taekjoo had waved him off. Only after Taekjoo tapped the car's body, signaling him to leave, had Jongwoo reluctantly driven away, casting one last worried glance at him. Taekjoo had stood there for a moment, watching the car disappear, before heading inside.

"....."

He slowly ran a hand down his face. He hadn't realized how vast and quiet the house was until now. With his mother away as well, the house felt unusually empty and hollow.

Lying there doing nothing, random thoughts began to creep in. No matter how much he tried to block them out, it was useless.

The last day in Odinokiy came to mind. After passing out from the exhaustion of a night of strenuous intimacy, fragments of forgotten memories had resurfaced. The memories, which had returned without any warning, as if they were part of a dream, spread through his mind like wildfire.

He recalled the covert operation to capture a North Korean spy in Busan and how he had left for Russia to uncover the identity of *Anastasia*, a collaboration between Russia and North Korea. Things had gone awry as soon as he arrived in Moscow, leading to his abduction by the wrong people, which was when he first encountered Psikh (Zhenya). Due to an error from headquarters, which had sent him the wrong photo, Taekjoo had mistaken Zhenya for an ally and was promptly betrayed. From then on, Zhenya's twisted interest in him resulted in the brutal violation of both his body and mind until that interest waned.

The past Kwon Taekjoo had sought revenge, going so far as to find the blueprints for *Anastasia* and destroy them, only to be captured by Zhenya again. He had been dragged to Odinokiy, where he had barely survived multiple brushes with death.

That dawn, as the memories overwhelmed him, his head felt like it was going to explode. Writhing in pain on the floor, he had retched repeatedly. The thought that just hours before, he had kissed and slept with the person who should have been torn apart made him feel violently sick. Seeing Zhenya's peaceful, sleeping face beside him had made his insides churn. He couldn't believe he had been in a relationship with such a person. It had felt as though the entire world was deceiving him.

Even just thinking about that time filled him with nausea. It felt like bugs were crawling all over his body, inside his veins, in every place Zhenya had touched.

"Ugh... fuck."

Barely holding back the bile, he threw a pillow across the room in frustration. He took deep breaths, but his harsh breathing and unsettled stomach showed no sign of calming. He abruptly sat up, and the overwhelming nausea surged again. Clapping a hand over his mouth, he ran to the bathroom. As soon as he opened the door, he clutched the toilet and vomited, though only sour bile came out.

As he clutched his head in frustration, he suddenly caught a whiff of Zhenya's scent. Startled, he looked around, but the house was as quiet as ever, with no signs of anyone else.

Just to be sure, he pressed his nose against his skin. Maybe it was his imagination, but it felt like Zhenya's scent had clung to his body.

"...Shit, shit."

Kwon Taekjoo tore off his clothes as if ripping them apart and ran straight under the shower. Then, as if trying to erase the traces of Zhenya left on him, he washed and washed obsessively.

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He woke up, groggy, as if he had fainted. His back hurt from lying down too long, and his head throbbed. He couldn't tell how much time had passed. His stomach didn't even feel hungry anymore due to continuous vomiting. He stared blankly at the ceiling before sitting up.

He went into the room and took out his personal phone from the drawer. The phone, which had likely died a long time ago, was connected to the charger. As soon as the battery reached 1%, he turned it on. After waiting for a while, a list of missed calls appeared. Most of them were from his mother. He figured it was about time for her to start worrying.

He immediately pressed the call button. The familiar ringing tone ended, and the voice he had been waiting for came through.

*[Taekjoo?]*

"Yes, mother."

*[Where are you?]*

"At home. I finished work and came back to rest."

His mother still thought Kwon Taekjoo was on a long-term business trip in Russia, so he gave a vague, similar answer. He could feel the subtle relief in her voice, knowing her son had returned home.

*[I see, you've worked hard. You're not feeling unwell anywhere, are you?]*

"No."

*[Have you been eating well?]*

"What, do you think I'm a child? Of course, I've eaten."

*[If I were home, I'd at least cook you some hot soup.]*

"Come on, I told you I've eaten. How are you, though? Have you been doing well?"

*[Yes. Your aunt is finally stable, so I was thinking it's about time to come back.]*

Her voice remained calm throughout. Despite the fact that he hadn't been in touch much, she didn't seem to worry or feel anxious like before. It was thanks to Yoon Jong-woo and Zhenya, who reassured her on his behalf. He wondered if he should be thankful to them for at least that. Just as he thought of him, his mother brought Zhenya up.

*[By the way, didn't the Ambassador come back with you? I haven't heard from him at all.]*

"...Oh, he still has some work left over there."

*[Really? Is it okay for you to come back alone?]*

"Yeah. It has nothing to do with me. It's a family matter on his side."

*[I see. Is there something going on with his family?]*

"Why are you worrying about that? He's just a stranger."

*[What? How can you say the Ambassador is a stranger?]*

"We're not related by blood, nor are we tied by anything on paper. He's clearly a stranger."

*[Honestly, who did you take after to be so cold? How often did we see the Ambassador over the years? Every season, every holiday, every birthday — we've spent how many years together? To me, he's practically like family.]*

"Family, my ass..."

*[If the staff member acts like this, who do you think the Ambassador will rely on? Don't tell me he's not planning on coming back at all. I heard the Ambassador's term is usually around two years, and with that major incident in Russia... That's usually when they make big personnel changes.]*

His mother was genuinely worried. To her, Zhenya was her only son's superior. Her habit of trying to take good care of him was just a part of her supportive nature. Of course, Zhenya seemed to have built a close personal bond with her during his stay in Korea. But that was only because she didn't know that Zhenya was Taekjoo's lover, nor what Zhenya had done.

"...I'm not sure about that yet."

*[Even if something like that happens, make sure to tell him to drop by at least once.*

*[Even if it's to say goodbye, we should properly thank him for everything.]*

He gave a half-hearted, "Yeah," in response to her persistent request. Immediately, a scolding followed.

*[Ugh, why do you always react like this, no matter what I say?]*

"I get it, I get it. Just go rest now. I'll call you again."

*[Alright. Make sure you eat properly.]*

"Yes."

He hurriedly ended the call. After confirming his mother's unwavering fondness for

Zhenya, he felt awkward for no reason. Zhenya had clearly wronged Kwon Taekjoo, and all he had done was make him pay the price he deserved, yet he felt as if he'd done something wrong.

Had the chains been loosened by now? Was that monstrous guy lying there, exhausted and still tied up after all these days? No way.

Feeling unexpectedly soft-hearted, he grew unsettled and ruffled his hair in frustration.

"Screw it! Who cares!"

As his heavy breathing subsided, the house fell silent again. He brushed his hand across his face in irritation and glanced at his phone again, wondering if there might be something there to jog his imperfect memory.

For some reason, the gallery was taking up a significant amount of memory. Suspicious, he checked the saved images.

"What the hell is this?"

His brows furrowed. No wonder — the folder contained thousands of photos and dozens of videos. And they weren't downloaded from somewhere; they were all original recordings.

He took a deep breath before examining the images in the folder. The first file was so blurry that he couldn't tell what had been captured. The camera seemed to have shaken. Puzzled, he scrolled through the files rapidly. Suddenly, Zhenya's face filled the screen. His heart skipped a beat, but he quickly moved to the next file.

In the next few images, Zhenya's face gradually distanced from the camera, eventually showing him peacefully asleep with his eyes closed. Had the camera been set to burst mode? He couldn't understand what was so special about someone sleeping that warranted so many pictures.

He scrolled further. The first photo in the next set was another unidentifiable scene. It looked like the ceiling of a bathroom, or perhaps the drain on the floor. He quickly swiped through the pictures, and once again, Zhenya's face dominated the screen.

"God, damn it! That scared the crap out of me."

He almost dropped his phone. He clutched his chest, staring at the screen. Zhenya's mouth had white cream smeared around it. Suspicious, Taekjoo scrolled a few more photos. Like before, Zhenya's face gradually moved away, and Kwon Taekjoo's own reflection appeared in the background, captured in the mirror while grinning and holding his phone toward Zhenya. He seemed to be laughing at Zhenya's messy, bird-nest hair.

The final image in that series was of Zhenya, completely naked, brushing his teeth. It ended with that.

The beginning was always the same, no matter when the photos had been taken. Since images are stored in reverse order, it was safe to assume every session had ended in a similar fashion. It was easy to

imagine what Zhenya had done to Taekjoo after catching him secretly taking pictures.

"Well, isn't that just a movie in the making, huh?"

He shuddered. He couldn't believe he'd been in such an embarrassing relationship. In his memory, he had always believed he'd had a mature, level-headed romance, so why only with Zhenya...?

He debated whether to continue revisiting these records, wondering if it might cause irreversible emotional damage.

Just as he was about to stop, he decided to push a little further. He needed to figure out how he had ended up in such an intimate relationship with someone who was practically his mortal enemy.

Taking a deep breath, he braced himself to relive those cringeworthy moments.

As he scanned through the pictures, a common theme became apparent. Most of the photos were taken when Zhenya was asleep or preoccupied with something else. Whether he was cooking ramen with scratch marks all over his pale, broad back, taking a shower, or swimming, it was clear that all of these were secretly taken by Kwon Taekjoo himself.

Neither of them had a preference for taking or being in photos. So why did he find Zhenya so captivating that he filled his gallery with countless images?

"Oh, great. Even videos."

He clicked on one of the videos hidden among the images. It showed Zhenya swimming across a large pool. Kwon Taekjoo himself could be seen lounging on a sunbed, watching. The two feet occasionally peeking into the frame and the beer bottle by the corner confirmed this.

Zhenya surfaced with a splash at the edge of the pool, water droplets scattering as his chest tattoo filled the screen. The camera shook for a moment, and then there was a soft, frictional sound. A low moan escaped his own mouth.

"Ah!"

He yelled and hurriedly tried to stop the video. His hands fumbled clumsily as he tried to calm his racing heart.

*[Enough.]*

*[When are you going to stop just watching?]*

*[I'm exhausted. I can't even move a finger.]*

*[You're so weak.]*

*[Whose fault is that, huh? Whose fault?!]*

In the video, Kwon Taekjoo's leg playfully nudged Zhenya's shoulder. Zhenya grinned and grabbed his ankle, biting his calf before letting go. Like a crocodile dragging its prey, Zhenya pulled Taekjoo into the water. With nothing to hold on to, Taekjoo's body slid helplessly toward the pool.

*[Stop it. Don't. Hey, my phone!]*

The video ended with a sudden camera tilt, showing a drastic shift from the water's surface to the air. The dull noise that followed likely came when Taekjoo had thrown the phone in a desperate attempt to save it. The scratch on his phone's corner finally made sense.

"Seriously, what was I thinking?"

Irritated, he skipped the video. Before long, a picture of Zhenya sipping water appeared.

He couldn't fathom what the intent had been behind taking that picture. Trying to understand his past self, he scrutinized the image closely. The location appeared to be a restaurant. The table and side dishes in the background looked familiar, likely a seafood stew place they frequented.

He focused on Zhenya again. Zhenya was quietly sipping water, his nose, the skin under his eyes, and the area near his ears faintly reddish. Had he eaten something spicy? It wasn't likely that the two of them had gone there alone. If his mother had been with them, she wouldn't have forced Zhenya to eat seafood stew.

As he retraced his memory, a faint recollection began to surface, perhaps triggered by the visual clues. It had been his mother's birthday, and they had gone out to eat. Since his mother loved seafood, they'd gone to their regular spot without much thought.

He hadn't intended to invite Zhenya. He simply came home after work, and there Zhenya was, greeting him alongside his mother.

*'Since the ambassador is here, shall we just have dinner at home today? It won't take long to prepare some rice and soup.'*

*'Come on, who makes their own birthday meal? Plus, I'm hungry. I can't wait. Right, Ambassador?'*

He had kicked Zhenya's foot under the table and gestured toward his mother, urging Zhenya to nod. Completely clueless, Zhenya had simply nodded silently. Finally, his mother had relented on her insistence to prepare the birthday meal herself. Thus, Zhenya was also included in their family outing.

*'There's nothing here that the ambassador would enjoy; let's go somewhere else.'*

*'It's my mother's birthday. On a day like this, the guest of honor should eat their favorite food. What do you want? Steamed dish? Soup?'*

His mother had stared blankly at the menu hanging on the wall, filled with worry, even though no new menu items would suddenly appear. As she had hesitated between seafood soup and steamed seafood, a staff member approached to set the table with simple side dishes and water. Then he had pulled out an order pad and asked politely.

*'What can I get for you?'*

*'Is the mild seafood stew something that children can eat?'*

His mother had asked the staff for confirmation. Since Kwon Taekjoo was born, this had been a question never once asked in their household. He and his brother had devoured a bowl of kimchi stew with rice since they were seven — typical Korean kids.

The staff member had looked at the three of them seated at the table with a puzzled expression, as if wondering where the “*child*” was among them. The answer had come a bit late.

*'Seafood stew might be a bit spicy for kids. The regular taste is about as spicy as a standard ramen. If it's milder than that, it won't taste good.'*

If the regular taste had been comparable to spicy ramen, then mild would likely have been akin to plain ramen. Regardless, it had been torture for Zhenya.

*'Come on, it's not going to work out anyway. Just give us one mild seafood stew in the medium size and one children's pork cutlet.'*

*'One medium seafood stew with mild spice and one children's pork cutlet, is that correct?'"*

The staff had confirmed the order, and he had nodded readily. His mother had fidgeted as she watched the staff member walk away.

*'Still, since the ambassador came to celebrate my birthday, I feel bad only serving pork cutlet.'*

*'Don't worry about it. This kid eats it well.'*

*'No, kid again? No matter how young the ambassador is and how poor his Korean is, he is still your superior, right? You shouldn't be rude to someone older than you.'*

*'Okay, okay, I got it.'*

Another round of scolding had followed for not listening attentively. Just when his ears had started to get tired, the food they had ordered arrived. Kwon Taekjoo had proudly lifted the pork cutlet with both hands and placed it reverently in front of Zhenya. *'Ambassador, here is your special pork cutlet. Please chew it well and enjoy.'*

He had even bowed his head as if presenting to royalty. His mother, watching Taekjoo with a glance, had smiled and told Zhenya to eat well. Zhenya had also closed his eyes and smiled slightly before quietly picking up the fork and knife. With an endlessly elegant demeanor, he had cut the pork cutlet and delicately taken a small piece to put in his mouth. His quiet savoring of the food had made it seem like he was slicing a steak at a fine dining restaurant.

*'Ambassador, is it to your liking?'*

*'It's quite good.'*

Zhenya had replied, gently closing his eyes. This had been a question his mother always threw at him whenever he ate, so he understood it without the need for translation. His mother had finally felt relieved and watched him eat with satisfaction.

He had shaken his head and served some seafood stew to his mother. Then he quickly took his share and began eating. While he was eating diligently, he had felt a penetrating gaze from the side. Turning his head, he had seen Zhenya observing him, while Taekjoo was now enthusiastically picking at the seafood with both hands. Then he glanced at his mother, who was neatly eating with just chopsticks.

Zhenya had seemed suspicious as to why seafood stew had to be eaten so barbarically.

Smack, Taekjoo had licked his lips and wiped his hands clean with a wet tissue. Then he had used his chopsticks to pick the flesh from a monkfish, exposing its white, tender meat.

*'This side is less spicy. Want to try?'*

He had placed the white meat on Zhenya's fork. Zhenya had looked skeptical but reluctantly put the monkfish meat in his mouth.

*'How is it? Is it good?'*

*'Hmm. Considering how it looks.'*

Zhenya slowly chewed the piece of meat in his mouth. Watching him, his mother beamed with satisfaction, saying it must have tasted good. Kwon Taekjoo, too, had felt oddly excited that Zhenya was trying a new Korean dish.

*'Want me to cut some more for you?'*

*'I'll pass.'*

Zhenya had lowered his gaze as he politely declined, swallowing the meat he had been holding in his mouth. Then, he had leisurely begun cutting the remaining pork cutlet.

*'Oh my, a phone call... I'll just step out for a moment. Ambassador, please take your time,'* his mother had excused herself as she stood up from the table. Kwon Taekjoo watched her hurriedly leave the restaurant and then shifted his gaze back to Zhenya.

But something had seemed off about the way Zhenya was cutting the pork cutlet — his movements had been oddly rushed. Even the way he had been chewing, stuffing pieces into his mouth, was unusually frantic. As if that hadn't been enough, he had hastily mixed the untouched salad

and shoved a handful into his mouth. By then, his ears had turned noticeably red, with no way of hiding it.

*'Ah, this spice-weak bastard. Is that really too spicy for you? Even a kid could handle it.'*

Kwon Taekjoo had clicked his tongue in frustration and filled Zhenya's glass with water. He had been about to hand it over when he had hesitated, a mischievous thought crossing his mind. He had pulled the glass back, just out of Zhenya's reach. A sly smile had spread across Kwon Taekjoo's face.

*'Hey, say 'please.' Then I'll give it to you.'*

*'What do you mean by that?'*

The next moment had been captured in a video. Zhenya had gasped, swallowing hard, glaring at Kwon Taekjoo's phone. His reddened lips had seemed to swell slightly.

*'Quit the talk and just say "please." Isn't it spicy?'*

Kwon Taekjoo had shaken the cup of water, dangling it in front of him, making his demand. The video had been filled with Kwon Taekjoo's own laughter. He had been giggling so much that the camera angle wobbled along with him. Zhenya, with a suspicious look, had pulled out his phone. It seemed he had been trying to translate the word "please" that Kwon Taekjoo had kept asking him to say. But even with a translation, English, which didn't have formal language, would only interpret it as a request to "give."

*'Hmm... 'Juseyo'?'*

*'Yeah, that's it.'*

Kwon Taekjoo had chuckled as he handed over the cup. Zhenya had quickly snatched it and cooled down his burning mouth. In the video, Kwon Taekjoo let out an exasperated sigh, tore open a fresh wet towel,

and wiped Zhenya's flushed lips. The annoyed expression Zhenya had worn because of the lingering spiciness had melted away as if by magic. He had obediently accepted Kwon Taekjoo's touch, almost like a child.

*'How am I supposed to deal with a guy weaker than a kid?'*

The video ended with Kwon Taekjoo's muttered comment to himself.

**"What the hell?"**

Kwon Taekjoo groaned, running a hand through his hair in frustration. Sure, they say love makes people act childish, but he never imagined he'd be one of them. He'd mostly dated older people, and even with those his age, they'd always been so independent. It wasn't often that he found himself taking care of someone so completely, as he did with Zhenya.

Come to think of it, he'd always gotten dumped by those independent people, tired of his detachment. It suddenly dawned on him just how indifferent and selfish he had been in relationships.

Even so, Kwon Taekjoo continued scrolling through the photos and videos saved on his phone. Every time, he shuddered, letting out a pained groan, yet he couldn't stop himself.

After looking through them for a while, he reached the photos from last year. One picture showed the backs of his mother and Zhenya standing together. Judging by the ingredients prepared on the counter, it must have been around a holiday. His mother offering Zhenya some freshly made side dishes, and Zhenya bowing his head gratefully to accept them, were captured one after another. It was a scene so harmonious, they could have easily passed as a family.

"....."

Scratching his head, he glanced through the remaining photos. Every image showed moments spent with Zhenya on vacations, with no end in sight.

He finally closed the gallery and checked his call log. The only names that showed up were his mother, Yoon Jong-woo, and Zhenya. Out of them, Zhenya's name dominated the list. There were even times when Kwon Taekjoo had called him every minute, like he was chasing him.

There was no denying that Zhenya had already deeply embedded himself in Kwon Taekjoo's life. It seemed impossible to explain the past two years without mentioning him. The countless files stored in his phone, left behind by his past self, were proof of that.

And yet, Zhenya was still someone Kwon Taekjoo couldn't fully come to terms with. Why had his past self accepted him? What part of Zhenya had managed to tear down the walls Kwon Taekjoo had so carefully built up?

*'...Is that all you remember?'*

Suddenly, Zhenya's face from that night, tied up on the bed, flashed in his mind. When Kwon Taekjoo had grown cold overnight, Zhenya had looked as if his world was falling apart.

*'Are you going to abandon me again like this?'*

What had he meant by that? Had Kwon Taekjoo abandoned him before?

*'Taekjoooo!'*

Zhenya's desperate voice calling his name vividly came back to life. Kwon Taekjoo tried to shake it off, but the more he did, the clearer Zhenya's panicked expression became.

*"Ah, damn it! I don't know!"*

Kwon Taekjoo tossed the phone he had been holding carelessly aside and headed to the kitchen. After sleeping for days, it felt like his stomach was stuck to his back. He needed to eat something, anything, for survival.

He opened the fridge. It was filled with side dishes his mother had prepared. He took out a container and picked out some dried anchovies

to eat. If his mother had seen him, she would have slapped him on the back, but since he was alone, there was no need to hold back. Thankfully, the side dishes didn't seem spoiled.

He grabbed a few more side dishes and then started looking for some instant rice. When he opened the cupboard, he saw the usual dishes they used. Since it had just been him and his mother after his father and brother left, the dishware had become more minimal, just enough for two people.

But among the usual two-person set, he noticed some bowls and cups he hadn't seen before. There was also a large fork, something that two people would never need. Could it be Zhenya's? Naturally, he thought of Zhenya, who always stabbed his food with a fork. The fork in the utensil holder was big enough to fit Zhenya's large hands. The rose pattern engraved on the handle was unmistakably his mother's taste.

What had his mother felt when she bought new dishware for the blue-eyed uninvited guest who frequently showed up? Kwon Taekjoo figured she must have been happy. He couldn't help but wonder just how deeply that monster had rooted himself in his life and whether it was even possible to completely cut him out.

"...Haa."

He threw the fork back into the drawer and shut it. Right now, everything Zhenya had done felt so fresh, like it had happened just yesterday. He had no energy to think deeply about their relationship. It was hard to say when his lost memories would return, or if this anger he felt would subside once he regained all of them. For now, what mattered was regaining control of his own life. Everything else was secondary.

Early in the morning, he showered and shaved. After that, he pulled a freshly laundered shirt and suit from his closet. He put them on, along

with a pair of shoes polished to a shine, and stepped outside. In the elevator mirror, Kwon Taekjoo looked more put-together than ever.

He got into the car that had been sitting in the underground parking lot for days. He worried it wouldn't start, but fortunately, the battery hadn't died. Though the car was covered in dust inside and out, he figured he'd get it washed on the way back.

He drove out of the parking lot. Determination was etched in his eyes as he glanced in the rearview mirror.

As he drove down a familiar road, a white building came into view. It was the NIS headquarters. At the entrance, a security camera scanned the car and driver to confirm they were pre-registered. Soon, the barrier lifted. Apparently, the system hadn't yet processed his supposed death.

He glided into the underground parking lot and parked in a suitable spot. As he got out and headed for the elevator, he glanced at a particular parking space. It was where Chief Lim usually parked his car. Now, a different, unfamiliar vehicle occupied the spot. That small change seemed to confirm that the memories Kwon Taekjoo had been trying to deny, the ones dredged up in Odinokiy, were all real.

He tightly pressed his lips together and turned his gaze straight ahead. As he tapped the card key, which also served as his ID, on the door, the lock immediately disengaged. He opened the door and walked steadily inside the building.

The structure and facilities of the headquarters hadn't changed much. Only the department name and the location of the office had changed from what Kwon Taekjoo remembered. Because of that, he had to wander around a bit to find his new department, as Yoon Jong-woo had informed him.

Director's Office of the Foreign Intelligence Bureau. After staring at the unfamiliar department name for a while, he knocked on the closed door. Soon, permission to enter came from inside. As he entered, the

director's secretary stood up with a surprised look. It was because he had come without an appointment.

"What brings you here?"

"I'd like to see the director. Is he in?"

"Ah, please wait a moment."

The secretary, who had asked for understanding, knocked on the back door and quietly went inside. Soon, he could hear the secretary informing the director of Kwon Taekjoo's visit. The voice of Kwak Younghan, his immediate superior, was mixed in. Even though it was a voice he had heard countless times, it felt unfamiliar because he couldn't remember the person.

Shortly after, the secretary came back out. Leaving the office door slightly open, he gestured inside.

"You may enter."

"Yes."

After exchanging a brief greeting, he stepped into the director's office. The door closed behind him. After a slight bow, he raised his head and saw the nameplate on the large desk. Kwak Younghan, Director of the Foreign Intelligence Bureau. The man sitting behind it must have been Director Kwak. He had seen his face in photos, but meeting him in person felt different. Feeling awkward, he stiffly opened his mouth.

"Hello, Director."

"Why are you here already when I told you to rest as much as you need?"

"I've had enough rest."

Director Kwak shook his head, as if Kwon Taekjoo was incorrigible, and gestured to the sofa across from him.

“Would you like to sit?”

“I’m fine.”

“According to Yoon Jong-woo’s report, you were badly injured.”

“That’s also fine.”

In response, Director Kwak simply nodded. He must have already heard from Yoon Jong-woo that Kwon Taekjoo was suffering from memory loss due to the trauma. It was clear from his stiff expression and speech that his memory was still incomplete.

Director Kwak took the lead in the conversation, trying to help Kwon Taekjoo lower his guard.

“I didn’t tell you to rest just for your well-being. If your memory hasn’t fully returned, it will be difficult for you to handle your duties if you return to work right away.”

“I’m not saying I want to return to work immediately either.”

“Is that so?”

Director Kwak looked surprised. He then leaned forward and asked with a hint of curiosity.

“So, are you here to discuss your previous retirement plans?”

“No. I’m sorry for being indecisive, but I’d like to reconsider that matter slowly as well.” Though Kwon Taekjoo had expressed his intent to retire when his memory was intact, he still couldn’t find a compelling reason for it. He couldn’t easily figure out why he had been so resolute in his decision. Therefore, he planned to delay making any decisions about it until he was certain once again that he wanted to quit.

Director Kwak nodded as if he respected that. Now, a hint of curiosity about the real reason for Kwon Taekjoo’s visit was evident on his face. Kwon Taekjoo didn’t keep him waiting long.

“I came today because I have a favor to ask you, Director.”

“A favor, huh. It would be good if it’s something I can do.”

Director Kwak’s tone subtly grew more guarded. Kwon Taekjoo brought up the main issue, reassuring him there was no need for concern.

“There’s someone I want to meet.”

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In the attorney’s consultation room, there was a single metal desk placed in the center. Thick iron bars lined the window, and along the walls, spare chairs were neatly arranged. The space, which was closest to the outside world yet completely isolated within the prison, gave off a peculiar atmosphere.

Kwon Taekjoo sat in a chair, waiting for someone. As the wait dragged on, he glanced around aimlessly when he sensed movement beyond the iron door. Soon, a prisoner entered the consultation room, escorted by a prison guard. The man in prison garb was none other than Lim Daehyung. He looked older and thinner than Kwon Taekjoo remembered.

Facing Kwon Taekjoo, Lim Daehyung flashed his characteristic smile. Kwon Taekjoo simply watched him without expression as Lim sat down in front of him.

Kwon Taekjoo had asked Director Kwak for permission to meet Lim Daehyung. Since Lim had been convicted of espionage, their meeting was strictly regulated. Especially since Kwon Taekjoo was an intelligence agent, any unnecessary suspicion could arise.

The fact that he met Lim Daehyung alone would surely be recorded, and their conversation might even be closely monitored. But despite all that, he had to meet Lim at least once.

“It’s been a while. How have you been?”

Lim Daehyung greeted him first.

Kwon Taekjoo didn’t respond. Lim chuckled at his silence, treating him like a sulking child.

“You came all the way here, and you won’t even return my greeting. You must still hold a lot of feelings toward me, huh?”

“There’s no such thing as feelings left for you.”

“For someone with no feelings, you sure look upset. Your complexion doesn’t seem too good, either.”

“That’s none of your concern.”

When Kwon Taekjoo kept his guard up, Lim Daehyung burst into laughter.

“I was curious as to why you wanted to see me. You’re the type who never looks back once you’ve decided something, right?”

Lim spoke as though he knew Kwon Taekjoo well. Indeed, after Kwon Taekjoo had joined the National Intelligence Service, they had always worked together. Lim had been the only roof and fence for Kwon Taekjoo, who had no one else to trust or rely on. Although he’d relentlessly piled on work, at the time, Kwon Taekjoo had felt proud, as it seemed like a sign of recognition. Perhaps that’s why it had been more shocking to find out that Chief Lim had pushed him into a corner.

As if nothing had happened, Chief Lim inquired about his mother.

“So, how’s your mother doing?”

“I’ve always thought you talk a lot of nonsense. You’re not really curious about that, are you?”

Despite Kwon Taekjoo’s sharp reply, Chief Lim merely smirked. Raising his hands nonchalantly, Chief Lim stared quietly into Kwon Taekjoo’s

eyes. Even when faced with the obvious hostility directed at him, he remained unfazed. He was that kind of brazen man.

“Something must have happened, huh.”

Chief Lim easily read Kwon Taekjoo’s state just by looking at his face. But Taekjoo didn’t let himself be swept away by Chief Lim’s pace and asked sharply.

“Why did you do it?”

“Hm?”

“Why did you do that to me?”

Chief Lim wore a puzzled expression at the sudden question. Leaning back slowly in his chair, he studied Kwon Taekjoo again. It took a while before he finally spoke.

“That’s odd. Didn’t the reasons already come out long ago? Surely you didn’t come all the way here just to hear it again... Did you suddenly need someone to blame?”

“I know what you plotted and what you were trying to gain from it.”

“And?”

“I don’t think I ever heard why you suddenly felt the need to do it, or why it had to be that way.”

Lim Daehyung chuckled with a deflating sound. He shrugged his shoulders and answered as if it wasn’t a big deal.

“It’s a common story. To hide a small truth, you need a bigger lie. And to cover up that big lie, you need an even bigger, uglier one. The first thing I tried to turn a blind eye to was just a tiny truth.”

“And that small thing was enough to break your conviction?”

“Conviction? Conviction, huh... I, too, was once full of zeal when I was young, like you. I believed that with my own hands, I would make this country strong, and that my sacrifice would protect my family and make the world a safer place. But now? Do you really think that's possible?”

For some reason, Kwon Taekjoo couldn't answer. A civil servant works for the country. And the true owners of that country are the people. Therefore, the work Kwon Taekjoo did was, ultimately, for the people. It was this belief that had gotten him through countless moments and kept him from wavering.

Did Lim Daehyung think differently? As if testing out a strange word, Chief Lim muttered "*patriotism*" under his breath repeatedly.

“Patriotism is great. It's the perfect justification for destroying and harming others. But did you really believe that what you were doing was for the country? Were you that naive?”

“What are you trying to say?”

“You know what I mean. There are times when, while working, you feel a sense of doubt. You're running around in the name of patriotism, but is this really in the best interest of the nation? Is it truly for the safety of all citizens? Or is it just a clever ruse serving the interests of a select few? When you start doubting, it's either time to leave or time to prepare to join that select group.”

When working in public service, there are times when you have to turn a blind eye to or ignore the dirty secrets of the powerful. Especially in an intelligence agency like the National Intelligence Service, where one does not have the authority to refuse the orders of those in power. Could Kwon Taekjoo truly say that all the work he had done so far had been solely for the peace of the nation? Could he confidently state that the information he had personally gathered through his hard work had always been used justly?

It was a dilemma that every intelligence officer faced at least once. Serving the organization often meant gradually becoming a mere tool

for those in power.

“I felt doubt. By the time I tried to return to who I originally was, it was too late. My parents had passed away, my family had scattered, and I’d lost contact with my friends. Not a single person who knew the real me was left. The achievements and career I had so fiercely built? There wasn’t a single place where I could boast about them. A different job? A different life? That was never possible. Who would take an entirely blank résumé? My footsteps had disappeared from any record.”

It was a lament that any intelligence officer could empathize with. Since joining the National Intelligence Service, Kwon Taekjoo had lost contact with his friends. His meetings with relatives and military buddies had also significantly decreased. He couldn’t openly share details about his work life, and as the frequency of meetings dwindled, so did the closeness. Around that time, all his friends had been graduating from college and finding jobs, making it even harder to find common ground. It felt like living in a completely different world.

Even so, Kwon Taekjoo had accepted it as his fate. Agents like him led nomadic lives. They lived their entire lives hiding the truth, even from their closest family and lovers. The only way to return to a normal life was retirement. Even then, the condition was to remain silent about the past spent as a black ops agent.

For someone with so many secrets, no one would ever approach him with open arms. Surviving without becoming completely isolated was not an easy feat. Could anyone endure a life of solitude, sacrificing everything with no one acknowledging it? Lim Daehyung shook his head.

“Noble and sacred sacrifices for the country. How many people do you think stay in the field just for such glory? At first, sure, they might join with those idealistic thoughts. But eventually, they start looking higher up. If they don’t, their lives will be meaningless, without any proof of their existence. Such a hollow life... You might be able to endure it by reminiscing about your past glories, but what about your family? What about the people around you?”

“.....”

“I’m not asking you to understand my choices. Nor am I asking for your forgiveness. But I’d like you to think about it at least once. Will you ever be able to live a quiet life as an ordinary citizen? Will you have no regrets living that kind of life? Or should you, even now, aim for something higher?”

The despicable excuse made Kwon Taekjoo’s blood boil. Yet, he couldn’t bring himself to refute Chief Lim’s argument, and that frustrated him. His clenched fists turned pale as they trembled.

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“Hey! Why are you sitting here all by yourself, being so gloomy again, sunbae?”

Before Yoon Jong-woo could even sit down, he snatched the soju bottle away. He personally filled Kwon Taek-joo’s empty glass, he grumbled, “Can’t you wait for just a moment?” Taekjoo smiled broadly and greeted him, “You’ve arrived, huh?”

Yoon Jong-woo shot Kwon Taekjoo a sidelong glance, as if annoyed, and asked a passing server for an extra glass. The server quickly brought another glass.

“Did you wait long?”

“Not really.”

That was a lie. He had already emptied two bottles of soju by himself. Yoon Jong-woo counted the empty bottles with an exasperated expression.

“Whoa, are you sure it’s okay to drink this much already? Won’t your wound get worse?”

"Wound? That healed a long time ago."

He moved his leg, showing the spot where he had been injured. During his stay on Zhenya's island, the injury had healed quickly, and now he could even jog lightly. Though he was naturally resilient, this time, resting well had significantly contributed to his recovery. Yoon Jong-woo couldn't help but be amazed at Kwon Taekjoo's remarkable recovery.

"Wow, that's unbelievable. How did you heal so fast? You were shot, after all."

"You just need to train. I told you to exercise."

"You make it sound easy. But you can't ignore the fact that some people are born with better stamina and muscles. No matter how much I train, I won't turn into someone like you."

"At least walk a bit while you're making excuses."

Yoon Jong-woo pouted his lips and mumbled something incomprehensible to himself. Kwon Taekjoo poured more soju into his emptied glass.

"I met Chief Lim."

"...What?"

Yoon Jong-woo was taken aback by the sudden news. His mouth hung open, and it was unclear whether it was soju or saliva that was dribbling out. Kwon Taekjoo pulled out a tissue and handed it to the dumbfounded Yoon Jong-woo.

"Why are you so surprised? I just wanted to confirm if my memories were accurate."

"Why didn't you just ask me? Did you really have to meet that guy to check?"

"There were other things I wanted to ask him."

Yoon Jong-woo quietly shifted his gaze, studying Kwon Taekjoo's expression. As expected, his face showed signs of deep concern. Having lost his memory, Kwon Taekjoo must have just realized that Chief Lim had betrayed him, which surely left him in turmoil.

Yoon Jong-woo, unsure of how to offer any comfort, hesitated as Kwon Taekjoo continued speaking.

"Somehow, this time feels a bit strange."

"...Sorry? What does?"

"Honestly, while working in this field, I've faced death countless times. Every time, I'd scrape by, survive, and report the results like nothing happened. Then, after a short break, I'd head back to work... That's just how this job spins, like a wheel."

"And now?"

"It's not that I didn't know that or that it's anything new, but for some reason, I felt a bit empty."

"You, sunbae?"

"Why? Can't I feel a bit empty?"

"Well, if you're not fueled by passion, what are you?"

"Passion, huh. Maybe it's because I'm getting old? Now, it feels like all that's left is stubbornness. I waste my energy for nothing because I can't let go of my temper."

Yoon Jong-woo, who had been silently listening, tilted his head and said with curiosity,

"That's interesting."

"What is?"

"I heard that losing your memory can change how you think, even mellow out your personality. If that's the case, maybe amnesia isn't all bad...."

Kwon Taekjoo flicked Yoon Jong-woo's forehead with a spoon. Yoon Jong-woo covered the spot with both hands, whining and overreacting in pain.

"Ow! That hurts! I take it back. You haven't mellowed at all; your temper is still the same."

"Anyway, I can't explain it exactly, but even when I lost my memory, I somehow managed to hang on with just the determination to return home. I believed once I got back here, everything would be solved. After barely surviving all the ups and downs, I finally returned, only to find a stranger sitting in my boss's chair, Chief Lim had been dismissed and is serving his sentence, and my mother in Canada is more worried about some jerk who deserves to be torn apart than about her own son. I don't even know what's what anymore, and I'm left wondering why I went through all that hell."

"Ah..."

Yoon Jong-woo felt like he could somewhat understand Kwon Taekjoo's confusion.

Even if his lost memories returned, it wouldn't be easy to accept all of them at once. There would be parts of the past he'd rather deny. For Kwon Taekjoo, Chief Lim's betrayal and absence, along with Zhenya's presence, seemed to fall into that category.

Yoon Jong-woo himself still found it hard to believe that Zhenya had become friends with Kwon Taekjoo — let alone that they had been lovers. It was still shocking to him, so he couldn't imagine how much worse it must have been for Kwon Taekjoo.

He thought about how Kwon Taekjoo had completely forgotten about his lover, and wondered if he could ever love that person the same way

again just because someone told him they used to date. Especially when all Kwon Taekjoo had left were the worst memories of that person.

“Come to think of it, what happened to Yevgeny-ssi?”

When he naturally asked about Zhenya’s situation, Kwon Taekjoo noticeably flinched. Then, he quickly put on a casual expression.

“What do you mean, how?”

“You didn’t come together, did you? There’s no way Yevgeny-ssi would have let you come alone.”

“I just left him there. The bad memories kept coming back, and I couldn’t stand looking at that bastard’s face anymore.”

Yoon Jong-woo nodded repeatedly, murmuring, “Ah,” finding it difficult to come up with a response. It wasn’t surprising, considering he didn’t know anything about what Kwon Taekjoo had gone through with Zhenya or how the two had ended up becoming lovers.

He could only vaguely guess that given Zhenya’s violent tendencies and their circumstances at the time, human rights violations must have been a common occurrence.

If the memories of that time were dominating Kwon Taekjoo’s present mind, even being in the same space as Zhenya would be unbearable. The problem was Zhenya’s condition. It was unlikely that he had just let Kwon Taekjoo go so easily. And it wasn’t like Kwon Taekjoo would have persuaded him nicely. What if he fired a missile in a fit of anger? That’d be the start of an unexpected war between Korea and Russia.

Lost in his ridiculous imagination, Yoon Jong-woo nervously glanced around, his body trembling with fear of what might come next. Kwon Taekjoo frowned at the sight of him.

“What’s with you? Do you need to pee?”

“No. I’m just worried.”

“Worried? About who? Don’t tell me that bastard? Seriously, you’ve got a lot of things to worry about, kid. That bastard’s no child — he’ll be just fine.”

Kwon Taekjoo barked loudly. His reaction hit a nerve, like it struck a bullseye. With veins bulging in his neck, he shouted so fiercely that Yoon Jong-woo couldn’t say otherwise and just played along.

“...Well, yeah, but still. Russia’s been a bit noisy lately, you know. Something about war or whatever.”

“War?”

It seemed like Kwon Taekjoo hadn’t heard anything about it. Understandable, given that he’d been so focused on recovering his memories that he hadn’t paid attention to world affairs. Yoon Jong-woo glanced around before leaning in close and whispering to Kwon Taekjoo.

“Well, Russia has been reacting aggressively to the dissolution of the federation for a while now, right? They’ve been eyeing neighboring countries, wanting to go back to the pre-Cold War era. Plus, their continuous interactions with Iran, China, and North Korea have been interpreted as an effort to justify invasions with their support and solidarity. HQ even analyzed that the Baekdu Mountain microorganism was part of their grand ambitions. Even if they don’t develop it into a biochemical weapon, it could cause a pandemic until a proper treatment is developed.”

Kwon Taekjoo’s face darkened with concern. Russia’s moves were directly tied to the Bogdanov family’s actions.

“Then is Yevgeny... joining the war too?”

“Yevgeny-ssi is definitely a part of their intelligence agency, so even if he doesn’t fight directly, he’ll probably be providing weapons, at the very least.”

When staying in Odinokiy, Zhenya had gone out wearing the FSB uniform. Even while serving as the Russian ambassador to South Korea, it seemed he hadn't completely severed ties with the FSB. Being part of the Alpha Group there meant that in the event of a war, he would likely be on the front lines. Even if his family's influence kept him out of the fiercest battles, there was a good chance he would provide weapons like *Anastasia*.

He was born and raised that way. Kwon Taekjoo knew he should never have gotten involved with someone like him, even by accident. Was it really right to keep maintaining a relationship with such a person?

Yoon Jong-woo glanced at Kwon Taekjoo's increasingly serious face and cautiously spoke up.

“But according to Miss Olga, Yevgeny-ssi isn’t interested in those things.”

“What things?”

“Things like the glory of the family or the prosperity of Russia. So apparently he’s under pressure to prove his loyalty.”

Even in Kwon Taekjoo’s memories, Zhenya couldn’t be easily defined as being on any particular side. He had come to rescue “Sakamoto Hiro” on his family’s orders, but then left him behind without a second thought. Even after learning that Kwon Taekjoo was a spy for South Korea, Zhenya didn’t eliminate him. Instead, he acted like Kwon Taekjoo’s partner and spared no support. It seemed like the Bogdanov family treated him as an outcast. Perhaps the only thing Zhenya trusted and followed was his own instincts. As Kwon Taekjoo recalled this, he suddenly muttered, “That bastard.”

“Huh?” Yoon Jong-woo widened his eyes in surprise. But Kwon Taekjoo was so deep in his own thoughts that he didn’t notice.

He remembered the conversation he’d had with Zhenya at Odinokiy. It seemed Zhenya wasn’t on good terms with his family. No, more like he didn’t care at all about their opinions.

Suddenly, his head throbbed again. Memories of when Olga had visited the mansion, the fierce argument he had with Zhenya, and the time he was injured during the assault on the island while Zhenya was away flooded back. The rifle they had taken from the attackers was the same model used by Russian special forces. It meant that either the Russian government or the Bogdanov family was willing to use force to subdue Zhenya. The debris from aircraft and bombs scattered around the island was proof of how many attacks had been directed at Zhenya.

*'No one comes here without my permission.'*

Zhenya always said with confidence. Considering the high-tech defense system on his island, it wasn't just empty boasting. Odinokiy had been turned into a fortress, which also meant complete isolation. Had Zhenya truly judged that this was fine?

How much had Zhenya helped Kwon Taekjoo over the years? The things Zhenya had done while following him around might have been mere amusement to Zhenya, but to Russia, they were acts of treason. Kwon Taekjoo hadn't fully considered the sacrifices Zhenya might have made to stay by his side. A feeling of unease lingered.

Could Zhenya have influenced Kwon Taekjoo's decision to leave NIS? Was it because he no longer wanted to feel indebted or guilty toward Zhenya?

**"Do you really not know why I decided to quit this job?"**

**"No. You never told me the reason."**

**"Was there no particular incident affecting my personal life at the time? Something significant that might have caused a big change in how I thought?"**

Yoon Jong-woo thought carefully before exclaiming, **"Ah,"** as if he had figured something out.

**"Remember I told you that you were deployed to Vladivostok before the operation in Iran? It was a joint operation between South Korea, the**

U.S., and Japan, but things went wrong, and the operation was exposed. Of all the agents who infiltrated, you were the only one who returned alive.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, it turns out that the reason you survived was because of Yevgeny-ssi’s involvement. We didn’t fully understand the details, but I heard that Yevgeny-ssi helped you escape. Because of that, you were even suspected of colluding with Yevgeny-ssi.”

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Kwon Taekjoo stood frozen in front of Zhenya’s house for a long time. Zhenya was both a Russian diplomat and a member of a powerful family, and his original affiliation was with the FSB. The National Intelligence Service (NIS) had every reason to suspect him, especially when he had suddenly appeared in a mission zone. The fact that Kwon Taekjoo, someone who had a personal connection with Zhenya, was the only one to return alive made it nearly impossible to avoid accusations of collusion.

What had Kwon Taekjoo himself thought back then? The incident in Vladivostok had indeed been suspicious enough to warrant HQ’s doubts. Still, after all the trust he had built up through years of pushing his body to the limit, it must have been disheartening to see it crumble in an instant. He might have even been furious with Zhenya for risking everything to save him. The sense of helplessness likely weighed heavily on him, knowing that instead of protecting his lover, he had made things even more dangerous.

Just as Zhenya had sacrificed everything to keep Kwon Taekjoo by his side, perhaps Kwon Taekjoo should have done the same. Trying to hold onto everything was nothing but selfishness.

‘Taekjoooooo!’

Zhenya’s voice, filled with despair, echoed in his mind. The image of those blue eyes, clouded with both resentment and hopelessness,

remained etched into his heart. Kwon Taekjoo couldn't forget it.

He hesitated for a moment but then reached for the door handle. The lock required both a pre-registered fingerprint and iris scan to open. With little expectation, he grasped the handle. The system responded with a clear mechanical sound as his fingerprint was recognized. Then, he looked into the lens, and a red laser slowly scanned his iris. Moments later, the door unlocked. Stunned, Kwon Taekjoo pulled the door open, and the faint glow of the light from outside vanished as the door swung inward. The security system had been disengaged for an approved visitor.

It hit him once more just how many enemies Zhenya must have. Like Odinokiy, this house was built with a high level of security. The fact that his fingerprint and iris had been registered meant he must have visited frequently — enough for Zhenya to trust him with access. And yet, standing here, it felt like he was stepping into this place for the first time.

Inside the house, everything was dark and eerily quiet, as if no one had been there for a long time. The air was stale, suffocating from having remained stagnant for so long. He decided to start by pulling back the blackout curtains and opening the windows to let in some fresh air.

Finally, the house brightened up, and he slowly took in his surroundings.

In the living room, there was a large enough sofa that could easily accommodate two grown men. Behind it stretched a long, open-style kitchen counter. There was no sign of use, not even a trace of moisture. He opened the refrigerator. It was filled with familiar containers of side dishes. Every single dish inside was made without any red pepper flakes or red pepper paste. The pantry was packed with various instant foods and ramen, just like what he had seen at Odinokiy's mansion.

He sighed and moved toward the bedroom. In the spacious room, there was only one solitary bed. It was so large that it would be hard to find unless ordered specially. It didn't seem like Zhenya would have gotten something like that just for himself, considering how still and peaceful he was when he slept.

“.....”

Why thoughts of his sleeping habits came to mind so naturally was beyond him. Feeling irritated, he ruffled the back of his hair and headed to the dressing room connected to the bedroom. Familiar clothes were hanging on the open racks. A few suits were mixed in. They were all Kwon Taekjoo's clothes. Had he stayed here and left for the headquarters when summoned? With a sense of disbelief, he opened the bottom drawer. Neatly folded underwear and socks caught his eye, organized just like in the military.

“...I had really settled in, hadn't I.”

Mocking his past self, he entered the bathroom. There were two of everything: toothbrushes, razors, skin lotion, and so on. Perhaps due to the homeowner's exceptional height, the showerhead was placed quite high, and the bathtub was large enough for a teen to swim in.

The more he looked around the house, the more traces of the two living together were evident. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say it was practically a shared household. A bitter taste lingered in his mouth for no reason.

He came back to the bedroom and picked up a book from the desk. It was a practical book on space science. He casually sat on the bed and opened the folded page. After skimming the contents for a moment, he shifted his posture, pulling a cushion over to lean against it.

But something felt off. It lacked the soft, warm embrace he had subconsciously expected.

‘Taekjoo.’

After moving and turning for a while, a memory surfaced. Whenever he had sat on the bed or sofa reading, Zhenya would invariably come over. Zhenya would sit beside him, gently pressing his shoulder against Kwon Taekjoo's, often burying his nose randomly in Taekjoo's hair or ear. Reluctantly, he leaned on Zhenya like a giant cushion and continued reading his book. Each time, Zhenya held him without much resistance, occasionally pressing his lips against his ear, the back of his neck, or his

shoulders. Sometimes, he nuzzled into Taekjoo's thick hair, playing around.

*'Wait. Just let me finish this page.'*

When Zhenya's hand would subtly slip under his shirt, Kwon Taekjoo would gently soothe him with those words. Zhenya never pushed back. He would just silently wait while massaging Taekjoo's stomach or chest.

Zhenya's patience usually wore thin when he started tugging on Taekjoo's nipples or nibbling on his ear. When Kwon Taekjoo shrank his shoulders or neck in response, Zhenya would seize the opportunity, sliding his hand into Taekjoo's pants, firmly grasping his responding cock. His long fingers would move skillfully, stimulating Taekjoo's cock in a way that left him with no choice but to surrender. Zhenya knew exactly which spots Taekjoo was most sensitive to and how to touch him to make him feel good.

*'Even a puppy would have more patience than you.'*

*'Taekjoo.'*

Zhenya would call his name repeatedly in a pleading tone, ultimately overpowering Kwon Taekjoo every single time.

"Hah..."

The overly vivid memory replayed before his eyes like a scene too real to ignore. No matter how much he tried to block it out, his efforts were in vain. It was just a recollection of the past, yet his skin tingled where Zhenya had touched, and a slow warmth spread through his belly where Zhenya's body had been.

"Ah, damn it!"

He scratched the back of his head in frustration. It felt like he was trapped in a

hyper-realistic studio, secretly being filmed on hidden camera. Despite his lingering anger toward Zhenya, everything around Kwon Taekjoo

was proving that his relationship with Zhenya wasn't casual, adding to his confusion.

What was he supposed to do in this situation? Accepting Zhenya had been his own choice in the past — did that mean he had to take responsibility for it? Even if he wasn't in the mood right now, did that mean he should start acknowledging Zhenya?

Shaking his head, he headed back to the living room. Then, suddenly, another memory surfaced. Once he began recalling things, memories from that period started springing up one after another, like bamboo shoots after rain. From the time when the guy didn't choose his words while talking to his mother and got into a fight, to the big fight they had when Zhenya tried to stop Kwon Taekjoo from going to work.

It had been during a time when he was deeply discouraged for failing to complete his mission. He had promised Zhenya that they would take a vacation together once the operation was over. Zhenya, who had been patient for so long, naturally assumed that Kwon Taekjoo would spend time with him. But the headquarters had devised a new plan to cover the previous failure, and Kwon Taekjoo had been called back. He had wanted to make up for his earlier mistake at all costs.

However, Zhenya hadn't back down easily.

*'You said it was over.'*

*'...We lost the target. That's why the operation was temporarily closed.'*

*'So? You're leaving?'*

*'It's my job.'*

*'Is it that important? That job?'*

*'What do you think?'*

Kwon Taekjoo always believed in strictly separating public and private matters. In situations where they clashed, public duty should always

take priority. That time was no different.

*'Can't you tell the difference? Stop whining like a child.'*

He had snapped at Zhenya, who was blocking his path. Zhenya couldn't hide his disappointment. As if he had expected it, Zhenya's habitual resignation and barely suppressed anger stirred within him.

*'I'm barely holding myself back from locking you up again.'*

It suited Psikh better to subdue with force rather than patience. Just because Zhenya had become Kwon Taekjoo's lover didn't mean his inherent nature had disappeared. Yet, Zhenya stubbornly suppressed his true nature and clung to Kwon Taekjoo.

*'Don't go.'*

*'I have to.'*

*'Taekjoo. Stop testing my patience.'*

*'If it's so hard for you to hold back, why don't you grab anyone and roll around with them! That's your specialty, isn't it?'*

He spat the words out, driven by frustration. Zhenya's face, which had been filled with anger, suddenly drained of energy. He looked devastated.

*'Do I seem that pathetic to you?'*

It had clearly been a mistake. But at that moment, Kwon Taekjoo couldn't bring himself to apologize sincerely. He hadn't wanted to ruin the situation with personal emotions. His mind had been fixated on fixing his mission.

*'How far do I have to go to meet your expectations? All you do is tell me what not to do. Am I supposed to sit like a dog and wait patiently until you throw me a bone? Should I just be grateful for the little pity you show me?'*

Zhenya had continued to push Kwon Taekjoo, who had stubbornly tried to assert his own will. He had chosen to ignore Zhenya's words, thinking that any further argument would only hurt them both.

*'Let's talk when I get back.'*

*'No. I don't think that's going to work.'*

*'Please just—!'*

*'Don't I have the right to refuse too? No, Taekjoo. I won't let you.'*

Zhenya had finally used force to stop Kwon Taekjoo from leaving. But out of fear of being hated again, Zhenya hadn't completely restrained him.

*'Don't show yourself in front of me for a while. Or I'll kill you.'*

As Kwon Taekjoo had shoved past Zhenya, his eyes had fallen on the food Zhenya had prepared specifically for him. The unexpected thoughtfulness had twisted his heart with overwhelming emotion. Trying to maintain balance with someone like Zhenya, who didn't even have the concept of a normal life or a typical relationship, must've been truly exhausting.

How did Kwon Taekjoo end up forgiving someone like him and keeping him by his side? That was something he still didn't know. Nor did he know when Zhenya began to look different to him.

One thing was clear though — Kwon Taekjoo had let him into his world, grew deeply fond of him, and even planned to quit the NIS, the agency he had been so dedicated to, for Zhenya's safety. Even now, with his memory somewhat incomplete, he couldn't stop worrying about leaving Zhenya alone.

*'I just gave up.'*

*'What?'*

*"I got tired of running away, so I let it all go. No matter where or how I hid, you would always come after me. And I had people I needed to protect."*

To make that argument valid, he shouldn't have whined to Zhenya drunkenly. He vividly recalled the restless days when he couldn't reach Zhenya, who had said he was going to Russia. Later, he found out it was because of an arranged engagement forced by Zhenya's family.

He had tried to convince himself that he had no choice but to accept Zhenya, but when he had heard about the engagement, he had felt uneasy. Didn't he originally wish that Zhenya would give up on him and return to his country as soon as possible? He couldn't even understand his own feelings, so he had drunk himself into a stupor.

*'Ugh... damn it, you always do whatever you want...'*  
*'...Taekjoo?'*

*'Ugh... if you're going to leave, just get lost already. Stop messing with me and dragging things out.'*

*'I don't understand. Shouldn't I be the one angry here? Are you trying to preempt me or something?'*

Zhenya's confused expression had been clear — he hadn't been used to Kwon Taekjoo's drunken outbursts. Taekjoo, in his drunken stupor, had pinched Zhenya's cheek and muttered nonsensical complaints.

*'Engagement? No way, you bastard.'*

*'...What? Is that what this is about?'*

*'No matter what you say, I won't give up. Even if it means you'll be lonely by yourself.'*

In his drunken state, Kwon Taekjoo had exposed his childish inner thoughts. He hadn't wanted to let go of anything — not his work, nor Zhenya — because he simply couldn't bring himself to do it.

*'Can't you just look at me? Just you...'*

He begged Zhenya to give him a break, pleading not to be abandoned because, for now, he couldn't let go of anything. It had been pathetic, really — an adult, four years older than Zhenya, acting this way.

With a groan, he covered his face with both hands. Why were even those useless memories coming back to him so vividly? He trembled with embarrassment.

*'If you want to be possessive, if you want to control me, do it. Follow me, track me, see where I am, who I'm meeting, what I'm doing.'*

*'...What?'*

*'If you hate the idea of a meaningless engagement or marriage, then just wreck it openly. I'll find it adorable.'*

*'What the hell are you talking about out of nowhere?'*

*'Didn't you say it was impossible? That if I disappear or vanish, you'd kill me?'*

*'Me? I said that?'*

*'You threatened me in every language you could think of. You cried all night, begging me not to leave you.'*

*'Th-that's ridiculous! I would never!'*

*'But you did, Taekjoo.'*

Maybe he had been a bit worn out. At some point, he had started feeling weary of the monotony of his daily life. Even in the face of crises or difficult missions, nothing had excited him the way it used to.

Then he had met Zhenya. Zhenya had been unlike anyone Kwon Taekjoo had ever encountered. Every time he had faced off against him and tasted his own limits, his heart had raced unnaturally. His blood had boiled, pumping violently through his veins, making him feel more alive

than ever before. Every moment with Zhenya had been excruciatingly intense, and he had realized that no greater thrill existed for the rest of his life. And then Zhenya, unexpectedly, had confessed his pure affection.

*'Don't get anxious. I won't disappear. The only time I won't be by your side is when you're dead.'*

That bizarre reassurance had oddly put him at ease. Apparently, he had been more anxious than he had realized. Thinking back, during the time he had been captured and held in Odinokiy by Zhenya, even though he had kept telling himself to escape, he had felt a strange sense of peace. He had forgotten the passage of time, his circumstances, and even enjoyed the aimless calm, wondering how long it would last. In his entire life, he had never lived such a simple, monotonous existence.

Zhenya was the first hardship in Kwon Taekjoo's life, his first defeat, an irreplaceable source of excitement, desire, and contradictory comfort. The thought of ending things with Zhenya left him feeling uneasy, as if he owed a great debt. No matter how many excuses he made, Zhenya was someone he had chosen in the past. Whether he liked it or not, the right thing was to bring him back by his side and figure things out from there. This time, he had to go get him before it was too late.

With determination, Kwon Taekjoo took out his phone and made a call. The dial tone rang a few times before it stopped, and soon, the voice he had been waiting for answered.

*[Taekjoo?]*

The person surprised by the sudden call was none other than Olga.  
“Yeah. How've you been?”

*[Where are you? Where are you calling from? Are you safe?]*

“Where else? I'm at home.”

*[I thought that guy dragged you off]*

“He did, but I managed to shake him off and leave. I’ve remembered everything.”

A soft gasp escaped from Olga. Without needing much explanation, she seemed to grasp the general situation, understanding why Kwon Taekjoo had left Zhenya behind.

*[So, it's come to that in the end.]*

Olga sighed deeply, muttering to herself. Then, in an attempt to prevent any misunderstanding, she defended Zhenya.

*[I know you must be upset, thinking he tricked you on purpose, but that part's not his fault. I was the one who suggested it. Jong-woo and I were worried that if you remembered the bad memories, you'd get hurt again. We hoped that, if possible, only the good memories would come back, and the painful ones would stay buried.]* “You optimistic fools. Did you really think that would go the way you wanted?”

*[I guess it was too much to hope for. You must have been pretty shocked, huh?]*

“When I saw that guy sleeping soundly next to me, I seriously wanted to kill him.”

Though he meant it, Kwon Taekjoo let out a shallow laugh. She didn’t stop there and continued with a wry confession.

*[To be honest, I was curious too.]*

“What?”

*[I wondered if you would fall in love with that guy again, even without the memories of the past.]*

“What? Were you testing me, brat?”

*[Testing? That's too harsh. I just wanted you to experience a sweet love. Is that so wrong?]*

Olga brazenly defended herself. In truth, it would have been better not to know what happened before Kwon Taekjoo became Zhenya's lover. Just recalling the memories that had been wiped clean was as painful as living through them again.

But no matter how terrible they were, those memories couldn't be erased forever. Their relationship was forged by overcoming such a terrible connection. If the past were forgotten, it wouldn't feel the same. Life is the accumulation of memories from the moment you're born. If some part of those memories is cleanly cut out, Kwon Taekjoo himself wouldn't be the same as before.

*[Either way, it must have been a huge shock. I'm sorry. The doctor warned us, but we acted on our own.]*

“As long as you know. But I didn’t call to get an apology.”

*[Then what is it?]*

“I was wondering how Zhenya is doing.”

*[That guy?]*

Olga responded with surprise, which made him feel a bit embarrassed, and he clicked his tongue.

*[Who knows? Maybe he’s wasting away after being dumped twice by his first love.]*

She teased with an endlessly light tone, clearly enjoying herself as the witness to this dramatic love triangle.

“Quit joking. You haven’t heard anything new?”

*[I’m not joking. Honestly, Taekjoo, it’s like you think I’m some kind of inseparable sister or something. Like I’ve told you many times, we’re*

*worse than strangers. Why do you keep asking me about him?]*

“Still, you’re the only one in your family who cares about that guy.”

*[Maybe that’s why my family’s men are starting to avoid me too. But things are definitely tense around here. Strangers keep coming and going from the house, and there are constant calls for my father and brothers... It’s a sign that something big is about to happen.]*

“I heard. They say a war might break out.”

*[It’s still just rumors, but it seems like they want to flex their power now that the rumors are spreading. I keep hearing that guy’s name pop up in conversations between my father and brothers. If they were to showcase the weapons that guy created and threaten war, the tension would be on a whole different level. The enemy might back down early out of fear.]*

“But he doesn’t seem willing to cooperate.”

*[Well, apparently, he hasn’t taken a single step off that island. It seems like the family is trying to persuade him, but would that really work? I’ve heard they’ve sent fighter jets to the island, and some have already been shot down.]*

Taekjoo imagined Zhenya, standing alone on that isolated island, fending off the relentless attacks aimed at forcing him to surrender.

Had he been injured by now? Was he blaming Taekjoo for abandoning him? Or was he still waiting, thinking that Taekjoo would come back to get him? These thoughts crowded his mind.

*[I’d like to find out more, but I can’t contact him, and there’s no way to reach that island.]*

*So, they say no news is good news.]*

Olga’s lamentations continued, and Taekjoo listened quietly. Then, with determination, he made a serious request.

“I need you to help me with something.”

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It had been a long time since he last visited the National Cemetery. This time, it wasn't for his father's or brother's memorial day or any holiday, and he came without his mother. In his hand, he held lilies — flowers Zhenya had once tried to offer.

He passed the cenotaph, which honored the spirits of the nation's martyrs. The gravestones lined up in neat rows caught his eye, each engraved with words like "honor," "sacrifice," and "glory." Taekjoo once thought his future would be the same. It wasn't such a bad fate, he had told himself. At least it wouldn't be a life wasted. But today, the weight of those words felt different than before.

"I'm here, Father."

He greeted his father as he arrived at the gravestone. Like the others, it bore inscriptions of his father's service and accolades. Had his father and brother considered their deaths honorable in their final moments? Had they lived without any regrets?

There was a time when Taekjoo thought living like them would be meaningful. After all, with only one life to live, it was better to dedicate it to something significant than to waste it on nothing. He had briefly abandoned that path to attend a regular university, solely because of his mother. But in the end, not even concern for his mother could stop his eventual rebellion.

"A lot has happened lately. My head's a mess trying to figure out what's right... but I hate complications. So, I've decided to focus on just one thing. That's how I'm going to move forward."

For the first time, he opened up about his thoughts in front of his father's grave. He wasn't seeking understanding or making excuses. It was just a way to reaffirm his own resolve.

He let go of the complex web of thoughts and focused on one simple question: When his final moment came, would he be able to close his eyes without regret, believing he had lived a decent life? He suspected there would be one person who would come to mind.

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Director Kwak reviewed the North Korea trends report with a serious expression. Through a reliable line, word had come that Russia was on the verge of declaring war, and it seemed that China and North Korea were openly preparing to provide support. Although these countries were united by socialist ideology, their strengthened alliance was of no benefit to Northeast Asia, and especially detrimental to South Korea's security. It was nothing but a significant threat. In response, meetings were held one after another to solidify the cooperation between South Korea, the U.S., and Japan and to prepare for any potential crisis. Tensions between nations were rising daily.

The Director of National Intelligence met with the president almost daily. Today, Director Kwak was also scheduled to attend a presidential meeting to discuss various response measures.

Before that, he was reviewing the relevant documents when a sudden knock sounded. Glancing at the clock, he realized it was almost time to leave.

“Come in.”

As expected, Director Kwak’s secretary entered and bowed slightly.

“Director, the car is ready.”

“Alright. Let’s go.”

He gathered his tablet and jacket and left the office. When he descended to the underground parking lot, the official car was waiting. He boarded the car immediately.

“Let’s get going so we’re not late.”

Director Kwak’s secretary glanced at his wristwatch again as he made the request. The driver nodded and quietly maneuvered the car out of the parking lot. The secretary half-turned toward the back seat to inform him of the estimated arrival time.

“We should arrive in about 20 minutes.”

“Got it.”

Director Kwak nodded and looked at his tablet again. He felt quite tense about presenting a status report in front of the president and the senior officials. Given the gravity of the situation, he needed to be cautious with every word he spoke.

“Hm? Why are we taking this route?”

How much time had passed? While rechecking the prepared materials, the secretary in the passenger seat asked the driver a question. It didn’t just feel like they had taken a wrong turn.

At that moment, the driver suddenly reached toward the passenger seat. It happened so fast that there was no time to react. The secretary slumped over, unable to even scream. Was this an attack? Director Kwak, startled, hurried to pull out his gun.

“It’s me, Director.”

A familiar voice was heard. With a confused expression, Director Kwak looked into the rearview mirror. The driver’s familiar eyes met his. It was Kwon Taekjoo.

“You?”

It seemed that he had disguised himself as a driver to avoid drawing attention. But Director Kwak couldn’t understand why he had to go to such lengths.

“What on earth are you doing?”

“I have something to tell you. Don’t worry about the secretary; he’ll wake up soon.”

“If you had something to say, why didn’t you just come to headquarters directly? This could become a serious problem later. Surely, you don’t

think I'm unaware of that?"

"If you decide to make it a problem, then yes, it will be."

Kwon Taekjoo replied, indifferent to what might happen to him. His personality had always been one to use any means necessary to achieve his goals. As a black ops agent, it was an excellent trait. However, his impulsive action now was nothing more than a reckless kidnapping attempt.

Director Kwak sighed and glanced at his wristwatch.

"Five minutes. No more than that."

"It'll be over before then."

"Alright. What are you curious about?"

"The Baekdu Mountain microorganisms we received from Iran — where and how are they being used now?"

Director Kwak raised his eyebrows, surprised. But he didn't give a clear answer to the question.

"Your mission ended with handing over Park Jung-ho. What happens after that is not your concern."

"I believed what I was doing was for the greater good. At the very least, I didn't think I was suffering for the benefit of a specific group. Is that correct?"

Kwon Taekjoo's sharp eyes pierced through the rearview mirror. He wanted to confirm whether the missions he had risked his life for, forsaking his personal life, had truly served the country — or even humanity. Could it be that the convictions that had supported him through the process of losing and regaining his memory were now faltering?

Director Kwak hesitated, choosing his words carefully.

“It’s not something I can give a definite answer to. Just securing the microorganisms was enough to fulfill our mission. What happens after isn’t our business. It’s a complicated matter. Revealing the existence of those microorganisms to the world right now isn’t necessarily the right answer.”

During the joint operation in Vladivostok, they had emphasized preventing the new pathogenic microorganisms from being used for evil purposes. However, even after successfully obtaining the Baekdu Mountain microorganisms, the information hadn’t been made public. It seemed that there was still no clear plan for when or how it would be disclosed. For Kwon Taekjoo, it was a bitter realization — he had risked his life for something that now felt meaningless.

“Sometimes, I wonder... is what I’m doing really for the people? Or is it just for the safety and benefit of a select few in power?”

“That’s possible. But, it’s all about how you look at it. Either way, it’s ultimately for the country.”

“If only I could have kept going with that kind of blind faith.”

Kwon Taekjoo’s self-deprecating remark left Director Kwak in silence. He wasn’t unaware of the disillusionment his agents sometimes felt. There are times when things don’t go as originally intended. And, after all, South Korea’s intelligence agency had never had a history of full independence.

“Your memory, has it returned?”

“Yes.”

“So, now you’re going to quit?”

“That was the plan, so I think I will.”

Director Kwak slowly nodded. Losing a skilled agent like Kwon Taekjoo was a huge loss. Finding someone as fearless and capable as him again would be nearly impossible. If he could stop him, he would. But there

was no justification to re-enlist someone who had returned on their own after the country had already abandoned them once.

“That’s unfortunate. It’s hard to replace someone like you.”

“That’s true.”

At Kwon Taekjoo’s confident reply, Director Kwak let out a chuckle. With a faint smile, he reconfirmed the real reason Kwon Taekjoo had come.

“Is that all you came to say? Surely, you didn’t go through all this trouble just to throw your resignation in my face?”

“I heard that before I left for Iran, I was suspected of collusion. What’s going to happen with that?”

“Officially, you’re listed as killed in action, so no charges can be brought against you.”

“And Ambassador Bogdanov?”

“He’s unlikely to make an issue of it right now. The Vladivostok operation may have failed, but after that, you completed the Iran mission with flying colors, and your supposed death proved your innocence. Besides, there are more pressing matters at hand.”

“So, if he wanted to, he could still cause trouble at any time.”

Director Kwak raised his eyebrows and shrugged, as if to say, “Isn’t that how things work up top?” Then, as if dismissing it as a concern, he responded with a question. “As far as I know, Ambassador Bogdanov isn’t even in Korea right now?”

As long as Zhenya didn’t return to Korea, there would be no way to charge him, even if they wanted to. After all, as a Russian diplomat, Russia would never hand him over willingly. The issue would arise if he chose to re-enter the country.

Zhenya's only mistake was one: he had tried to save his lover by interfering in official matters. Someone's love can become a crime. There was only one way out of that dilemma.

Director Kwak, concerned about Kwon Taekjoo's firm decision, asked a question. It was a question rooted in knowing what a former agent's life might look like when returning to being a regular citizen.

"Are you sure about this? Even if you leave, it won't be easy to live an ordinary life.

There will be more temptations and threats than you think."

"I'm prepared for that. And if things go south, you could help me out a bit."

"Me?"

"Yes. From what I saw, it seems like my resignation hasn't been processed yet."

"That's because your presumed body is still in Iran, and Yoon Jong-woo, who was dispatched to verify the body, hasn't submitted his report."

"Well then, get the report from Jong-woo and maybe give me a star as a parting gift."

"A star? You mean a medal?"

"No, I don't need a medal. I'm not interested in that."

"Then?"

"An unnamed star."

Director Kwak tilted his head in confusion.

The "unnamed star" was nothing more than a symbolic honor, meant to commemorate agents who had devoted themselves to the country. It symbolized noble but lonely sacrifices, unrecognized and uncelebrated by anyone.

Seeing Director Kwak's bewildered expression, Kwon Taekjoo explained further.

"I want to live differently from now on. For that, I think it's better if my existence is completely erased from this world. The country wouldn't bring back someone they've already declared dead. So, just treat it as if I died in Iran, and please don't leave any trace of my achievements or name anywhere. I'd prefer if you thought of me as someone truly dead."

What Kwon Taekjoo wanted wasn't just retirement. It was the complete freedom that came with death. The man, Kwon Taekjoo, would live and breathe somewhere, but Agent Kwon Taekjoo would be buried forever in the past. He seemed ready to give up all the glory he had achieved.

"If I'm unlucky, that might actually happen."

"What do you mean by that?"

"From this moment on, everything I do is my decision alone and has nothing to do with the South Korean government or the National Intelligence Service (NIS)."

Kwon Taekjoo continued speaking in riddles. It seemed like he had some sort of plan, but the implication was clear — if you didn't want to get involved, it was best not to ask.

Director Kwak exhaled deeply and responded.

"I sincerely hope your future unfolds in the light."

"If it can, I'd prefer that. I've spent enough time running around in the shadows, suffocating in the damp."

"Alright. So, where are you headed now?"

"There's someone who's been waiting anxiously for me."

"Hmm. I guess saying 'see you later' isn't appropriate, is it?"

“Probably not.”

They exchanged banter as if they were joking. As Kwon Taekjoo opened the door and began to exit, Director Kwak offered one last farewell.

“You’ve worked hard all this time.”

Kwon Taekjoo simply nodded in acknowledgment without saying a word. He quietly stepped out and quickly disappeared into the crowd of people heading home.

## 17. In The End

Bazim sat in his office, massaging his temples. After several sleepless nights, his head felt heavy. He instinctively reached for his whiskey, but paused when he saw the empty glass. The bottle was also empty. With a sigh, he rubbed his aching head again.

Recently, his worries had deepened because of the president's long-held desire to reclaim lost territories. For a while, the president had been waiting for the right opportunity, and the discovery of a new microorganism in North Korea had rekindled his ambitions to restore past glory — even if it meant going to war. The terror attacks experienced in Iran provided justification, adding fuel to the fire. The president relentlessly pressured Bazim and the other officials daily.

However, Russia wasn't in any condition to wage war. Thanks to its oil and natural gas exports, the country was still running a trade surplus, but once war broke out and Western economic sanctions were imposed, revenues would plummet. Massive military expenditures would follow, the ruble's value would crash, and the national finances would quickly spiral into bankruptcy.

The president was consumed by the fantasy that he could swiftly overpower his opponent. However, no country desired Russia's expansion of power. If neighboring nations united under ideological alliances and aligned based on their interests, the war would inevitably drag on.

A prolonged war would weaken the justification for the conflict and damage the country. There was no guarantee that the current regime would remain intact. The Bogdanov family would face immense pressure to bear the astronomical costs of the war and would also be burdened with its consequences.

Of course, it was important for Russia to signal that it remained a formidable force. But the question was whether war was the only way

to achieve this. The Bogdanov family had been merchants for generations, and it was clear that the losses would far outweigh the gains in this war. Even if the president managed to restore the territories of the former Russian Empire, it could take decades to see any tangible benefits. No matter how you calculated it, the result was a loss.

Yet the only reason for embarking on such an absurd war was the president's sheer will. His power, almost dictatorial, was absolute. The Bogdanov family, including Bazim, owed their current influence entirely to his trust. To maintain the family's position, they had no choice but to fulfill the president's grand but foolish dreams. The only way to minimize the damage was to act quickly, and for that, they needed Zhenya's "Anastasia."

Whether Zhenya had truly completed "Anastasia" was uncertain. They only speculated that he had a decisive weapon ready, given that he had built an unprecedented defense system capable of thwarting all attempts to approach or destroy Odinokiy. Witnessing the reality of "Anastasia" might not even be a desirable situation. Its vague, terrifying power might be more effective as a deterrent by merely existing.

The president was desperate to seize "Anastasia." The war was merely an excuse — his real fear was that as long as "Anastasia" existed, he could never be the sole, unrivaled absolute ruler.

The problem was that Zhenya was not easily subdued. It was hard to persuade someone who desired neither power nor wealth. In Zhenya's case, even using force was impossible. He had severed all communication channels directed at him. No matter what method was tried, every attempt to spy on him or approach Odinokiy had failed. Until Zhenya left the island himself, there was no way to exchange a single word with him.

Bazim had considered the option of completely isolating Zhenya and waiting until he surrendered on his own. However, Odinokiy was no different from a natural fortress. Zhenya could easily procure enough

food by fishing or hunting, and the lack of electricity wouldn't cause him any significant discomfort.

There was only one way — to block the gas pipeline connected to the island. However, Bazim knew from his long experience that when pushed to the edge, Zhenya would choose death over surrender, and in his final moments, he wouldn't quietly disappear alone.

With the mounting pressure increasing day by day, Bazim had no time to relax. He had no idea how to resolve this issue. It was a matter so crucial that it could topple the power he had painstakingly built over the years.

*Sigh...*

As he sighed from the suffocating frustration, his phone suddenly rang. It was the line he used for urgent communication only with the President. Though no one was watching, Bazim immediately straightened his posture, cleared his throat, and answered the call.

“Yes, Your Excellency.”

*[I thought I told you to report first before I had to call? Any progress on the Psikh side?]*

“I apologize. The resistance from Psikh is stronger than expected, and we’re struggling to approach Odinokiy. We are considering alternative solutions.”

*[How do you expect to accomplish great things by wasting time like this? I told you to use any means necessary. Losing a small island like that is nothing when you consider the land we plan to reclaim.]*

“Yes, I understand what you mean.”

*[You're not hesitating because of your blood ties, are you?]*

“Of course not.”

*[You seem a bit too relaxed for that. I've never doubted your loyalty, Bazim.]*

“I apologize for causing you concern, Your Excellency.”

*[Remember, this is about setting an example for the world. It's a chance to solidify our position as the strongest nation on the globe. You can't afford to waste a single moment.]*

“Absolutely.”

*[As long as we confirm the existence of ‘Anastasia,’ it doesn’t matter what happens to the guard. After all, ‘Anastasia’ originally belonged to Russia. It’s only right we take back what was ours.]*

Regardless, he was his family, yet the president gave the order to eliminate Zhenya without hesitation. Bazim’s expression hardened.

“Yes. I will keep that in mind.”

*[Don’t disappoint me, Bazim.]*

The call with the President was coming to an end. However, it didn’t seem like the line had completely disconnected. There was no proper signal indicating the call had ended, only a faint noise that suggested someone might be eavesdropping.

Bazim narrowed his eyes, and his voice dropped to a low growl.

“Who is this?”

At his question, the other party chuckled softly.

*[You have a good intuition for someone who’s usually so dull. Bazim Vasilievich Bogdanov. You remember me?]*

The voice coming through the line felt oddly familiar. It was a voice he had heard somewhere before, but the accent was not typical of a Russian. As Bazim racked his brain in silence, his eyes widened in realization.

“Don’t tell me... that Korean spy?”

*[Your memory is impressive. So, you'll remember what I said to you.]*

“What do you mean?”

*[The only reason I spared you in Iran was for one reason only. If you weren't Yevgeny's kin, you would have been a dead man by now. I trust you won't deny that?]*

“What do you want to say?”

*[I've heard you're preparing for war? The President is in a frenzy to take 'Anastasia' back, even if it means eliminating Yevgeny.]*

“Do you really think you can eavesdrop on me and get away with it?”

While continuing the call with Kwon Taekjoo, Bazim reached under his desk. He was about to press the emergency button. During his time as the second-in-command, he had faced numerous life-threatening situations, and he had made thorough preparations for them.

Just as he was about to press the button, a sharp sound came from the window behind him. It seemed like a bullet had been fired from somewhere. Fortunately, the window was made of bulletproof glass, so it wasn't penetrated. However, it was too early to be relieved. Shortly after, another bullet flew into the same spot as before. The second shot shattered the window, which had already lost its integrity from the first impact, and destroyed the emergency alarm. Thanks to a high-level suppressor, the gunshot sound was not audible. The noise of the window shattering wasn't loud enough for the guards outside to notice, either.

“Don't do anything stupid. The next one won't miss.”

Upon hearing the warning, Bazim slowly turned around. A red laser point touched the center of his forehead. He scanned the windows of the building across the street, but he couldn't spot the sniper anywhere.

*[What do you want?]*

“What do you think? I want you to do nothing. I know what you found in North Korea, and I know what you’re planning to do with it. It’s already fallen into our hands as well. We might be slower than you, but we’ll find a way soon. The power you’re deluded into thinking is yours alone will soon be rendered useless.”

*[Killing me won’t change anything.]*

“That’s not something you can say for sure yet. Yevgeny told me the Bogdanov family is full of merchants, right? That means they’re good at calculations. That’s why they’d abandon a kid who wouldn’t benefit the family, shamelessly extend their hand as if nothing happened, and now try to steal what belongs to him.”

*[...I asked what you want.]*

“I already told you. I want you to do nothing. Don’t you know how reckless and pointless what you’re trying to do is? Are you really going to jump into a fire you can clearly see?”

Kwon Taekjoo repeatedly condemned Bazim’s actions. Already feeling disillusioned, Bazim’s anger flared at the mocking words.

*[Even if it’s a fire, I can’t stop. I don’t have the power to do that!]*

“Power is a matter of will.”

Kwon Taekjoo responded nonchalantly, then added firmly.

“I’m making this clear. If you or your family ever try to use Yevgeny again, I won’t just stand by. Think carefully. Next time, there won’t be any warnings. I can be anywhere, and I can kill you anytime.”

As soon as Kwon Taekjoo finished speaking, another bullet flew through the hole in the glass and destroyed Bazim’s phone. The red laser dot that had been hovering over his forehead disappeared. It seemed Kwon Taekjoo had left.

“Titov! Titov!”

Bazim called out for his secretary in an irritated voice. His secretary hurriedly rushed in.

“What is it, sir?”

The secretary, having no idea why he was called, swallowed hard upon seeing the state of the wrecked office.

“Are you all right, Congressman?”

“There’s a Korean spy nearby. Find him!”

Bazim roughly shoved the secretary away as he approached to check on him. The secretary, taken aback, quickly responded, “Yes!” and rushed out. Soon after, the guards waiting in the hallway ran out of the building and began searching for the spy, who had already disappeared.

Still seething, Bazim slammed his fist in frustration on the desk.

Meanwhile, Kwon Taekjoo arrived at Zhenya’s armory. Before going to meet Bazim, he had stopped by to pick up a sniper rifle and explosives.

Keeping his surroundings in check, he entered a run-down bookstore. He meticulously searched, just in case, but there were no signs that anyone had been there recently. Dust rose with each step, tickling his nose. He covered his mouth with the back of his hand to suppress a cough.

In front of the empty bookshelf was a familiar telephone. He turned the rotary dial and entered the password. Zhenya had told him that he frequently changed the password at random intervals to prepare for the possibility of the armory’s location being discovered. For that reason, Zhenya hadn’t readily shared the password with him. Kwon Taekjoo had tried the dial just to be sure, and as he entered his date of birth, his ears burned for no reason.

“Ha... crazy bastard.”

He didn’t know when Zhenya had started using his social security number as the password. For someone who didn’t trust others, it was surprisingly careless. But it didn’t matter; if he died in the line of duty, the number would be erased anyway.

He approached the smoothly opened bookshelf and grabbed the necessary firearms and explosives from the shelves displaying various weapons. He could only hope that he wouldn't have to use them.

Just as he was checking if there was anything else he needed, he heard the sudden noise of propellers outside. It seemed that the person he was waiting for had arrived on time. He hurriedly closed the armory and went outside. Even in the dark, the bright pink helicopter stood out, making him frown. Soon, the helicopter's propellers slowly came to a stop, and Olga stepped out. Even in this situation, she was dressed in a tight-fitting uniform, like the protagonist of an action movie.

"Taekjoo. I'm here."

"...You're here."

With a slightly reluctant expression, he looked her up and down. The serious look on her face almost made him want to laugh, despite the fact that they were in a life-threatening situation.

Confirming that Olga was acting as usual, he scanned the road covered in darkness and shadow. He was checking to make sure they weren't being followed.

"Nobody followed you, right?"

"I lost them all on the way, so there's nothing to worry about."

Olga confidently answered as she tossed her long hair over her shoulder. Maybe it was just the nature of their family, but while running with their lives on the line, these Bogdanov people seemed to act like they were enjoying a spy game.

Olga, shaking her head at Kwon Taekjoo, handed him the helicopter's ignition key with a hint of concern.

"Are you sure about this?"

"About what?"

"You haven't made contact with him, and he doesn't even know you've returned. What if you head to the island and get bombarded?"

"I'll just have to trust my luck. Things haven't always gone terribly for me."

He spoke nonchalantly, shrugging his shoulders. It was true; there was no guarantee that Zhenya wouldn't attack just because Olga's helicopter was approaching. By now, Zhenya was likely on edge due to the repeated incursions and would probably retaliate harshly against anyone attempting to approach recklessly. He might even mistake Olga's helicopter for a family ploy to deceive him.

But there was no other choice. It was Kwon Taekjoo who had left him there, so it was his responsibility to retrieve him. He couldn't leave him isolated forever. He couldn't let Zhenya believe he'd been abandoned by the world, his family, or his lover.

"Oh, right. Bazim has issued a warrant for your arrest across all of Russia. If you don't make it to Odinokiy safely, you could end up a fugitive for the rest of your life. And I won't be able to help you much longer."

"I figured this would happen when I went to threaten him. I didn't care, though. People tend to tap into superhuman strength when they're cornered."

"You're already cornered enough, warrant or not. There's no room left to back up."

"Not much I can do. Once I meet Zhenya, we'll figure something out, won't we?"

"Are you sure you won't regret this?"

"I've regretted plenty already."

Olga tilted her head, puzzled by his cryptic words. But he didn't intend to explain further. He simply ruffled her hair gently and said, "Thanks for everything." It felt like a final farewell.

"Good luck."

Olga wished him well as he climbed into the helicopter. She didn't bother with a "See you again," knowing that with a warrant issued against him, even if Kwon Taekjoo made it to Odinokiy safely, it was impossible to know when she'd see him again.

Kwon Taekjoo nodded silently in response and sat in the cockpit. Soon, the propellers started turning slowly, generating a strong gust of wind. Olga clasped her hands together, watching the helicopter rise into the air.

She could only hope that this new chapter would end with a happy conclusion, just like before.

Kwon Taekjoo headed straight for Odinokiy . Although he reassured Olga by saying he would leave everything to fate, in truth, there was no other choice. He had no option but to hope that Zhenya would recognize him in the helicopter. As he flew over the endless ocean, his thoughts focused solely on Zhenya.

There was no room for any other concerns. He worried about how Zhenya, abandoned once again, might have been faring. He imagined him sitting idly day and night, and the thought weighed heavily on him. Had Zhenya not followed him to Korea because he had been too deeply hurt? Had the once tenacious man grown weary and finally given up on both Kwon Taekjoo and their relationship? Or was he so trapped on the island that escape was impossible?

The more he thought about it, the more he realized how lonely Zhenya's fate had been. From a young age, abandoned by his family, he had decided to become a monster. He had only gained recognition by destroying others, and now, he was pressured to give up everything for the prosperity of his family and country — a true outcast.

Zhenya lacked basic humanity. The rules that governed normal social behavior didn't apply to him. He struggled to understand or accept others. Yet, despite all this, Zhenya had at least tried to understand Kwon Taekjoo, his lover. He had made great efforts, trying not to anger him, though Kwon Taekjoo had often snapped at him. He had been too

focused on his own desires, leaving his young lover neglected. And when confronted about it, he had only lashed out, saying that this was just how he was.

Kwon Taekjoo had assumed Zhenya would hold on. Unlike his past lovers, Zhenya was strong and had many resources. He was used to being alone, so Kwon Taekjoo didn't think he would struggle too much. Looking back, the guilt he felt toward Zhenya hadn't been that overwhelming. But now, as he reflected on his past mistakes, all he could do was sigh.

"Ha... I'm such a piece of trash."

He scratched his ear roughly. He had thought he was being more considerate in this relationship, but it had all been a delusion. Imagining what it would be like if their roles were reversed, he realized how incredible it was that Zhenya had lasted this long.

While Kwon Taekjoo was lost in self-reflection, something appeared in the distance. He spotted several aircraft with their lights off, blending into the darkness. He could barely make out their presence through faint, blinking lights. Putting on special goggles, he confirmed the shapes: they appeared to be military helicopters. He immediately counted two visible units. From their direction and stealthy approach, it was clear they were trying to infiltrate Odinokiy .

Kwon Taekjoo increased his speed and followed closely behind the helicopters. They soon noticed his presence and split to either side. They seemed hesitant to attack, probably recognizing Olga's pink helicopter and unsure of its intent. Shortly after, a transmission came in from one of the helicopters.

*—This is a military operation. Rear helicopter, state your affiliation and destination.*

Kwon Taekjoo ignored it. Even if he gave a rough excuse, they would try to confirm whether Olga, the owner, was on board. Having witnessed a secret military operation, if a member of the Bogdanov family wasn't on board, they might immediately launch an attack.

*—This is your final warning. This is a military operation. The rear helicopter must identify its affiliation and destination. Failure to comply will result in being deemed hostile, and we will open fire.*

When there was still no response, the warning tone became more forceful. Then, one of the helicopters made a wide turn in the air to confront Kwon Taekjoo's helicopter. The other one followed closely behind. It seemed ready to fire at the slightest hint of anything suspicious.

*'Hey. What's up with the pink helicopter?'*

*'Doesn't it look better like this? Helicopters are usually so ugly.'*

*'Just because you put stripes on an ugly pumpkin doesn't turn it into a watermelon.'*

*You're the one borrowing it, but you sure have a lot to say about its looks. This thing may look cute, but it can be pretty fierce. You make a girl cry, and it'll make you shed blood. Something like that. Try to speak nicely.'*

Kwon Taekjoo remembered Olga winking as she handed him the helicopter's keys. Just as she had assured him, her helicopter was no ordinary mode of transport. It was equipped with missiles only seen on specialized military helicopters.

Without hesitation, Kwon Taekjoo fired a missile ahead and switched to emergency flight mode, quickly lowering altitude. The helicopter in front wobbled violently from the unexpected attack. The one pressing from behind rushed to pursue and began returning fire. Minigun bullets pinged against the windshield, sparks flying. Kwon Taekjoo pulled the control stick with all his might, attempting a sharp ascent. At the same time, he charged head-on towards the still-dazed helicopter in front. The distance between the two helicopters closed rapidly, and the bullets fired from behind began hitting the helicopter in front as well. The faces of the startled pilots became clear through the shaking view.

**“Damn it! Let’s see who dies first!”**

Charging recklessly as if they were about to collide, Kwon Taekjoo pulled up just before the crash. The helicopter that had been firing from behind soared up in response. However, due to its delayed ascent, its landing gear clipped the rotor of the helicopter ahead. The damaged rotor sent the helicopter spiraling towards the dark blue sea. Soldiers aboard began parachuting out one by one.

By the time the rear helicopter regained stability, Kwon Taekjoo’s pink helicopter was flying right in front of it. Kwon Taekjoo smiled broadly at the pilot in the opposing cockpit, mouthing the words, *Goodbye*.

Immediately, the remaining missile launched and struck the opposing helicopter. With a massive explosion, it disintegrated in midair. The debris tumbled into the darkness, while half-inflated yachts and parachutes floated chaotically on the surface of the water.

**“Phew...”**

Kwon Taekjoo patted the helicopter as if praising it.

**“Not bad at all.”**

Even so, the helicopter was riddled with bullet marks. The windows were cracked in a spiderweb pattern, and a draft of wind slipped in, likely through a puncture in the fuselage. No matter how tightly Kwon Taekjoo gripped the controls, the helicopter couldn’t fly straight, swaying unsteadily. The rotors didn’t spin smoothly either, making a subtle rattling sound. Glancing upward, he saw part of the rotor blade had been chipped away, as if gnawed by the bullets from the minigun. At least it hadn’t hit the fuel tank, he thought, thankful for small mercies.

They had fought like a fighter jet in a combat helicopter. It had worked, but barely. It had been incredibly dangerous. Could he even make it to Odinokiy safely in this condition?

As he continued the precarious flight, he spotted an island in the distance. From its location and shape, it had to be Odinokiy . But for

some reason, there were no lights visible. Had he not turned on the lights at the mansion? Had the Russian government cut the power? Was Zhenya deliberately lying low in the dark, watching quietly? Or was he in such critical condition that he couldn't even turn the lights on?

*'Why are you trying to leave me? It's not like I'm trying to kill you.'*

Suddenly, Kwon Taekjoo recalled a moment from the past, when Zhenya had clung to him. He had looked just as confused about why he wanted to keep Kwon Taekjoo by his side, and why Kwon Taekjoo kept trying to run away. Zhenya hadn't even been able to express that he simply wanted Kwon Taekjoo to stay with him.

*'I've been waiting all this time. Day after day, hour by hour, testing my patience every second.'*

Zhenya had endured countless dangers and isolation alone since childhood. He had told Kwon Taekjoo that, despite it all, he had been waiting for him to come and rescue him. He had held out hope for Kwon Taekjoo, hope that he had never had even for his parents or family. And yet, Kwon Taekjoo had left him in this perilous place, rejecting him even as he cried out his name in torment.

"Zhenya..."

Kwon Taekjoo pushed the throttle to its maximum. The sudden acceleration flung the helicopter forward. The flight remained unstable, on the verge of crashing at any moment, as he neared the island.

Then, anti-aircraft missiles mounted on the cliffside began locking onto the intruder. The defense system was so strong that even fighter jets couldn't penetrate it. Trying to break through in a mere helicopter was like diving into a volcano without any protection. Still, he had to try.

He barely dodged the first missile, only to have another come right after. Gasping for breath, he continued to dodge, alternating between sharp ascents and descents. The problem was that the missiles didn't simply disappear when they missed; they continuously adjusted their course, tracking the target in real time. They wouldn't stop until either the helicopter's power was depleted or the missiles exploded.

Left with no choice, Kwon Taekjoo retreated beyond the island's defensive range. Still, the missiles that had already launched continued pursuing the helicopter. He dove sharply, dragging the missiles with him. Just as the landing gear skimmed the water's surface, he yanked the control stick hard, plunging the missiles deep into the sea. The helicopter, its power nearly spent, struggled to rise, bouncing helplessly off the surface. When he finally managed to get airborne again, the speed had dropped drastically.

“Damn it, just look at this!”

Kwon Taekjoo shouted in frustration. But as soon as he approached the island, dozens of missiles were launched, as expected. Watching the missiles swarm towards him like a hive of bees, he hastily blinked the helicopter's lights. He was sending out a Morse code signal, hoping Zhenya would recognize it from wherever he was. Meanwhile, the missiles were closing in fast. He yanked the controls.

“Fuck..!”

But the helicopter didn't respond as he wanted. The fuel warning light was blinking on the display. It seemed it had run out of fuel after the non-stop flight from the outskirts of Moscow to Odinokiy in northern Siberia.

There was no escape. A sense of early despair stiffened his entire body.

“Zhenyaaaa...!”

He screamed desperately towards the mansion hidden in the darkness. Immediately after, the missiles struck the helicopter, exploding violently.

\*\*\*

*Zhenya.*

At the sound of someone calling his name, Zhenya opened his eyes. He raised his head and looked around, but there was nothing but the suffocating darkness. Was it a hallucination? Even as he doubted it, he took a deep breath. Other than the pervasive smell of gunpowder, there was no other scent to be noticed.

Had it been another dream? He had been plagued by endless dreams for a while now. Kwon Taekjoo always appeared in them. Sometimes he would come to rescue Zhenya, who had reverted to his six-year-old self, and at other times, he would walk away from him with a face full of hatred. Whenever Zhenya reached out to try to hold onto him, he always woke up alone, in the middle of a suffocating silence.

He clenched his fists tightly. Should he not have let Kwon Taekjoo go just like that? Should he chase after him now and bring him back? His mind swung back and forth countless times.

Suddenly, an alarm went off. It seemed the Kremlin had sent its rats again. Zhenya rose from his seat and moved toward the window. Pulling back the curtains, he peered into the dim sky and saw the lights of a helicopter approaching the island. The strange thing was that this helicopter looked nothing like a military one and was smaller in size.

He examined the helicopter again through binoculars. It was an attack helicopter equipped with missiles, but clearly not military. Its exterior was painted pink. Could it be Olga?

Even if it was, Zhenya had no intention of stopping the defense system. If it was Olga, she would have already heard about what happened to those who tried to infiltrate Odinokiy. If she still dared to approach, she would have to serve as an example, showing that no one is exempt from the rules. Moreover, just because it was Olga's helicopter didn't guarantee that she was the one on board, so caution had to be maintained.

As Zhenya watched silently, his brow furrowed. The helicopter's lights were blinking in an unusual pattern. Was it a malfunction? Or was it trying to send some kind of signal? The flashing lights looked exactly like Morse code.

*—Zhenya...*

Zhenya translated the blinking light into Morse code. It was strange. There was no way Olga would know Morse code, much less call him by his nickname.

With suspicion in his eyes, Zhenya continued reading the rapidly blinking light.

*—Here to get you.*

The message made Zhenya's face turn pale.

*“Kwon Taekjoo...?”*

There was only one person in the world who could say such words to him. He was momentarily stunned, but then his heart sank with the realization that he needed to stop the defense system immediately. He tossed the binoculars aside and dashed to the underground control room. In his rush, he hurriedly shut down the already activated system.

But there was nothing he could do about the missiles that had already been launched. The moment he cut the power, a thunderous explosion echoed. When he flung the window open and looked outside, the helicopter's lights were nowhere to be seen. Instead, the vivid image of something exploding brightly against the pitch-black night sky imprinted itself on his mind. The wreckage, engulfed in flames, helplessly plummeted into the valley beyond the mountain.

*No...*

A groan-like whisper escaped from his gaping mouth. His wide-open eyes refused to blink. He felt glued to the ground, unable to move.

In the next moment, he bolted from the room and sprinted across the desolate plains. The distance to the valley where the helicopter had crashed was too far to travel on foot, but he ran blindly, over and over again. His blue pupils, filled with deep darkness, tightened with focus. Nothing in his sight mattered anymore. His mind had blocked out all thoughts, except for one.

Kwon Taekjoo had come back.

The growing certainty only deepened his despair. Without knowing it was him, without realizing that he had finally come to take him away, he had ruthlessly attacked. Could Kwon Taekjoo still be alive? Would he call out his name again, as he had before?

He passed through the eerily calm plains and the birch forest, which had suddenly grown still. The animals that had begun their nocturnal activities fled at the unexpected sound of footsteps. The reindeer grazing under the moonlight watched his frantic silhouette in silence. The bright moon, growing farther away with each step, and the peaceful forest both felt cruel to him.

“Hah, hah...”

At last, he reached the edge of the island. Peering down into the deep valley, he saw what appeared to be the wreckage of the helicopter. It was charred black and twisted beyond recognition. There was no way to confirm if anyone had survived. In fact, he couldn't even be certain if any remains were intact.

“Taekjoo.....”

Muttering as if grasping for breath, he set out searching blindly. He even lifted the still-hot debris with his bare hands and slid down the steep cliffs, thoroughly inspecting the surroundings. But there was no trace of Kwon Taekjoo — not even the shadow of a person.

“Taekjoo!”

In his growing anxiety, he shouted Kwon Taekjoo’s name at the top of his lungs. The echo climbed back up the distant valley, dispersing into the emptiness.

“Answer me, Taekjoo!”

Desperately calling out Kwon Taekjoo’s name, he wandered the vast valley. The darkness and stillness, once as familiar and natural as breathing, now felt cruel. He wandered aimlessly, lost like a child. He

had no sense of where to go or where to even start searching for Kwon Taekjoo.

Could it be... had he ended up destroying Kwon Taekjoo with his own hands? Had he erased him from this world forever?

“Taekjoooo!”

As if to deny reality, he called out Kwon Taekjoo's name repeatedly. He couldn't bear to lose him in such an absurd and senseless way. He couldn't allow Taekjoo to leave his side like this, without his permission.

“.....”

How long had he wandered? Something finally caught Zhenya's eye. Hanging on a long branch below the cliff was a black object swaying in the wind. It was the backpack Kwon Taekjoo often carried. It had no distinctive features aside from its black color, but the randomly placed badge made it clear who the owner was.

Staring blankly at it, he sank to his knees. In the end, he had destroyed Kwon Taekjoo with his own hands.

*'Don't worry. The only time I won't be by your side is when you're dead.'*

There was no longer any reason to live. He didn't want to spend the rest of his life groaning in emptiness and loss. He pulled out a pistol from his chest and, without hesitation, brought it to his temple. He was about to pull the trigger without a second thought.

*Zhenya.*

He heard someone calling his name again from somewhere. He jerked his head around.

Still, nothing was visible. His eyes darted around frantically, searching for any trace.

Soon, a fluttering piece of pink fabric caught his eye over the ridge. It was a parachute.

He ran toward it. Afraid that if he blinked, it would disappear like a mirage, he didn't even close his eyes. He stumbled and fell several times for not paying proper attention to his surroundings, but that didn't matter.

Out of breath, he arrived in front of the parachute. His lungs felt crushed, and his breath came out in ragged gasps.

The parachute was partially tangled in the branches and floating in the lake beside it. The situation didn't look good. He dived into the lake, frantically gathering up the wide-spread parachute. As he desperately searched the dark waters, his fingers brushed against something. It seemed like a person. He tore through the parachute's tangled fabric and cords. Kwon Taekjoo, the person he had been so desperately searching for, emerged from within. It looked like he hadn't been able to deploy the parachute properly in his rush to escape.

He pulled the unconscious Kwon Taekjoo into a tight embrace. There was no response. His body was ice-cold. Zhenya pressed his ear against Kwon Taekjoo's nose to check for breathing. There was no detectable breath. In a panicked motion, he placed his ear to Kwon Taekjoo's chest. There wasn't even a faint heartbeat. He ripped off the wet clothes, running his hands over Kwon Taekjoo's cold skin. There was still body heat left. It seemed his heart had only stopped recently.

"Taekjoo, wake up."

He slapped Taekjoo's cheeks to try and wake him, but there was no response. He had to revive him somehow before he ran out of time.

Zhenya laid Kwon Taekjoo flat beside the lake and attempted CPR. As he pressed hard on his chest, Taekjoo's body jolted lifelessly. Zhenya repeatedly massaged his heart while checking his complexion. It was an unfamiliar experience, one he had never tried before. He wasn't sure if he was doing it right or just going through the motions.

He pinched Kwon Taekjoo's nose and tried mouth-to-mouth. As he blew forcefully into his lungs, Taekjoo's chest swelled with the air. Zhenya repeated the action several times, determined to transfer all his breath into him. Sweat quickly pooled all over his body. Without rest, he

massaged Kwon Taekjoo's heart, gave him breath, and rubbed his cold skin, hoping he would wake up. Watching him remain unconscious tore Zhenya apart. Every wasted second felt unbearably painful. It wasn't hard to take someone's life. But saving one was excruciatingly difficult.

"Taekjoo, please get up."

Shaking with despair, Zhenya slammed his fists down on Kwon Taekjoo's chest. At that moment, something convulsed beneath his left ribs. Kwon Taekjoo's body jolted violently in response.

*Cough.*

Kwon Taekjoo coughed repeatedly, spitting out water, then turned to the side to vomit. Zhenya hurriedly pried his mouth open to secure his airway and patted his back.

After vomiting up all the water he had swallowed, Kwon Taekjoo collapsed weakly. His consciousness seemed to have returned, as he was now panting and coughing in short breaths.

"Ha, shit... I almost died."

"Taekjoo."

Zhenya, who had been stunned by the unbelievable sight, suddenly pulled Kwon Taekjoo into a tight embrace. His barely functioning lungs that were beginning to recover were crushed, making it hard for him to breathe.

"Ugh, let go a bit. Ah, damn. At this rate, I'll really die by your hands, you idiot."

"Taekjoo, Taekjoo..."

Regardless of what Kwon Taekjoo said, Zhenya just kept repeating his name as he held Taekjoo's face in his hands. His touch was cautious, as if afraid that Taekjoo might vanish if he wasn't gentle. Zhenya's large, pale hands trembled uncontrollably. Seeing Zhenya's panicked expression, Kwon Taekjoo cursed under his breath, then suddenly

grabbed him by the collar. Zhenya's eyes widened in surprise at the unexpected move.

"What kind of relationship is this? Constantly having our lives on the line, running, rolling around... Other people say everything becomes sweet once they start a relationship, but for us, all we ever smell is gunpowder."

Kwon Taekjoo grumbled irritably, glaring at Zhenya with eyes full of frustration. He pulled Zhenya's collar even tighter.

"I told you not to give up, you bastard."

"...Taekjoo?"

"I don't want to be given up on. Not by you."

Zhenya's blue eyes filled with confusion. And it was because he had never once considered giving up on Kwon Taekjoo. He had merely decided to endure, even though he couldn't understand him at all, because Taekjoo said he needed time. He waited until the day Taekjoo would come for him like he did now. His shallow patience had worn thin, and at times he felt an overwhelming urge to end everything, but he held on, not wanting to be hated by Taekjoo again.

But now, instead of praising him for enduring, Kwon Taekjoo was angry, asking why Zhenya gave up on him. He had complained about being chased after, about being restrained, and now he was furious that Zhenya had waited patiently.

Perhaps Kwon Taekjoo realized how absurd his words sounded after he said them. Seeing Zhenya's bewildered face, Taekjoo's own face flushed, and he mumbled in a dissatisfied tone.

"If this is what love is, then so be it."

Zhenya tilted his head in confusion. The statement was so sudden that he didn't quite process what Kwon Taekjoo had said. Did he always blurt out things like that so forcefully?

"If this damn mess is love, then I love you, you bastard."

At that confession, Zhenya's eyes grew wide with surprise. It was as if he had heard something unimaginable. He froze. Kwon Taekjoo, seeing Zhenya's stunned expression, grabbed his ear and pulled him in for a kiss. With a quiet smack, their lips parted for a brief moment, and in a breathy whisper, Taekjoo repeated, "I love you."

Zhenya collapsed on top of Kwon Taekjoo, hugging him tightly and kissing him. It was as if he wanted to fill Taekjoo's lungs with his own breath, as if he intended to devour every last bit of air from his body. Even the brief moments when their lips parted felt too long and too painful, so they desperately clung to each other.

In the black darkness, surrounded by endless silence and the acrid smell of gunpowder, they exchanged feelings clearer than any oath.

Their silhouettes merged into one as they staggered into the mansion. Kwon Taekjoo leapt up, wrapping his legs around Zhenya's waist as if it were second nature. Zhenya grinned slyly, pressing Taekjoo against the wall. Pinned between the wall and Zhenya, Kwon Taekjoo's delicate hair was tangled in Zhenya's grip as they kissed passionately. Even though his head was already spinning from the intensity of the kiss, it didn't feel like enough. His throat burned with thirst, and as soon as their lips parted, they immediately sought each other again, over and over.

As Zhenya rushed to press his tongue into Kwon Taekjoo's mouth, an unexpected battle ensued. Their tongues wrestled with each other, pushing and being pushed, before ending up tangled near their upper lips, which made them both burst into laughter. Zhenya, who had been desperately clinging like a boy with newfound desire, gazed at Taekjoo, who was giggling uncontrollably.

"...I'm cold, idiot."

Taekjoo pulled on Zhenya's ear as if telling him not to stop. Immediately after, Zhenya fiercely pressed his lips onto Taekjoo's, causing a sharp pain. Wincing slightly, Taekjoo let out a bemused chuckle, then, as if giving in, tilted his head and sealed their lips tightly together. Zhenya's thick tongue pressed against the roof of Taekjoo's mouth, pushing all the way back to his throat. Instinctively, Taekjoo's chest arched upward,

but Zhenya held him down, eagerly swallowing his tongue, which was lashing out.

As if quenching a long drought, Zhenya gathered Taekjoo's plump lower lip and tongue into his mouth, sucking greedily. When Taekjoo groaned as if his tongue might be pulled out, Zhenya finally let it go, only to push his own tongue back into Taekjoo's mouth, exploring every corner with feverish intensity.

Zhenya caressed the even alignment of Taekjoo's teeth and his sharp canines, inhaling every breath Taekjoo exhaled, along with the saliva pooling in his mouth. His strong tongue scraped and pressed against Taekjoo's until he was drained of strength. It was a stubborn, insistent kiss, almost like a plea for all the hardships he had endured.

Kwon Taekjoo, possibly shivering from being soaked, kept pulling Zhenya closer. Zhenya gladly let him, moving toward the fireplace. He slowly laid Taekjoo down on the fur rug covering the floor, and Taekjoo shuddered, letting out a low groan. Raising his body temperature was urgent now.

While Taekjoo clung to him, half-conscious, Zhenya continued kissing him. He rubbed his hands over Taekjoo's chilled skin to create frictional heat.

But that alone wouldn't be enough to warm him. Zhenya decided he needed to light the fireplace. Just as he tried to get up, Taekjoo pulled on his collar, demanding more kisses. His once-sharp eyes were now unfocused, as if he was no longer fully present. When Zhenya touched his goosebump-covered cheek, Taekjoo let out a low moan.

"Ugh..."

"Taekjoo, hold on."

Zhenya gently patted his cheek in reassurance, then lit the fireplace. The small flames soon roared to life as oil was added, and the heat quickly spread through the room. Though the flames calmed Taekjoo's previous restlessness, his body still trembled as if in a seizure.

Zhenya stood and walked to the lounge, retrieving the bottle of vodka he had been drinking earlier and a thick blanket. Returning, he took a sip of vodka, then leaned down to Taekjoo, offering him a drink. Taekjoo, smelling the alcohol, eagerly pulled him into a kiss. As their lips met, Zhenya gently poured the vodka from his mouth into Taekjoo's. Taekjoo gulped it down with his Adam's apple bobbing, drinking the now-warm vodka like a man who had stumbled upon an oasis in a desert. Finally, he choked slightly and let out a few coughs.

"...Cough..."

As their lips parted, Zhenya ran his tongue from Kwon Taekjoo's wet lips to the side of his cheek in a long lick. The moment Kwon Taekjoo's coughing subsided, he grabbed Zhenya's face and kissed him again. He persistently licked every corner of Zhenya's red mucous membranes until the taste of vodka remaining in Zhenya's mouth completely disappeared. Zhenya, in turn, held Kwon Taekjoo's daring tongue between his teeth, sucking on it hard to intensify the sensation. As if hunting each other, they fiercely and roughly bit each other's lips and tongues.

In the brief moment their lips separated, they frantically kissed each other's faces, jaws, and ears, without caring who initiated it. It was as if they were trying to make up for the time they'd missed, and savoring each other's scent and warmth, their movements were breathless and hurried. No matter how much they touched, it still wasn't enough.

When his back hit the floor, Kwon Taekjoo flinched. The floor hadn't warmed up enough yet. Clear goosebumps appeared on his damp skin. Just exhaling made his pale blue lips tremble.

"Taekjoo, are you cold?"

Zhenya asked, pressing his lips to Kwon Taekjoo's ear. He deliberately inhaled deeply, taking in Kwon Taekjoo's scent. Kwon Taekjoo pulled Zhenya's head closer and urged him on.

"At this rate, I'll freeze to death from hypothermia. Warm me up, quickly."

As soon as he finished speaking, Kwon Taekjoo personally unzipped Zhenya's pants. Zhenya playfully pressed down on Kwon Taekjoo's hand with his hips and fully captured his Adam's apple with his mouth. Kwon Taekjoo let out a low groan and squirmed beneath him in response to the unexpected tease. Zhenya tightened his lips around Kwon Taekjoo's larynx, licking it with his tongue, then sucked hard. Despite being a familiar sensation, Kwon Taekjoo's lower body twitched in reaction as if it were still new.

Zhenya planted several kisses on Kwon Taekjoo's reddened skin, then removed his shirt. His hair got tangled as it brushed against his collar. Zhenya buried his face in Kwon Taekjoo's now messy hair, rubbing his nose against it repeatedly.

"That tickles, you bastard."

Kwon Taekjoo laughed dryly and pushed Zhenya's face away. But Zhenya grabbed Kwon Taekjoo's wrist and shamelessly licked his palm. The odd mix of ticklishness and an erotic sensation made Kwon Taekjoo furrow his brow. Zhenya sucked on the trembling fingers, gripping Kwon Taekjoo's exposed chest tightly. The dark skin beneath Zhenya's fingers briefly turned white, only to return to its natural color. When Zhenya squeezed again, this time red marks shaped like his fingers were left behind.

"...Ugh, that hurts."

"Haven't been touched in a while, so it's probably swollen up?"

"What the hell, swollen my ass...!"

Kwon Taekjoo was about to retort in exasperation but clamped his mouth shut as Zhenya suddenly bit down on his right nipple. Zhenya's lips firmly squeezed the soft flesh, followed by his warm, slick tongue completely covering it. The ticklish stimulation made Kwon Taekjoo's back arch instinctively. As Zhenya grinded into his left nipple, Kwon Taekjoo couldn't hold back a moan.

"Mmn..."

At his honest reaction, Zhenya's lips curled into a smile, and he began sucking on the nipple more forcefully. The explicit suction sound echoed as a tingling sensation spread from Kwon Taekjoo's chest to deep below his abdomen. The ticklish feeling at his lower belly made him press his knees together, tightening around Zhenya's waist. To Zhenya, it seemed like Kwon Taekjoo's body was begging for more.

"They're too flat to suck on."

"Hnnngh... what the hell... s-stop... wait, ahh!"

Despite his words, Kwon Taekjoo's chest puffed up, clinging to Zhenya's mouth. In response to this expectation, Zhenya's tongue teased the cracked surface of the nipple. Overwhelmed by the undeniable pleasure, Kwon Taekjoo's lower body jerked involuntarily, his muffled moans escaping.

"Ah... ugh, mnh..."

As Zhenya nibbled on his now hardened nipple, he watched Kwon Taekjoo's face. His temperature had risen, and a subtle redness spread around his eyes, cheeks, and ears. With a pop, Zhenya lifted his mouth from Kwon Taekjoo's nipple and ran his tongue across his chest to the other side. He firmly took the trembling left nipple into his mouth while slipping his hand inside Kwon Taekjoo's pants. The tight belt and buckle snapped open, seemingly about to burst. In contrast to the rough invasion, Zhenya's touch as he wrapped his hand around Kwon Taekjoo's cock was incredibly gentle.

"Haah... nnnh..."

Wherever Zhenya's hands touched, heat seemed to follow like a ghost. There was no need to ask where or how he wanted to be touched. Zhenya caressed every inch of Kwon Taekjoo's body, alternating between soft and rough strokes, as if playing an instrument. Sweet moans continually spilled from Kwon Taekjoo's lips, filled with arousal.

Zhenya pinched Kwon Taekjoo's erection between his thumb and index finger, gently sliding up and down. Occasionally, he rubbed the slit,

coated with precum, with his thumb. Each time, Kwon Taekjoo's hips bucked in response. When Zhenya teased his nipples again with his tongue, Kwon Taekjoo twisted his body, letting out a deep moan. And this time was no exception.

"Haaah... mmng..."

"Haah, Taekjoo. Feels good, huh?"

"Ugh, stop teasing and just... hurry. Hurry... ah!"

Suddenly, Zhenya pulled his hand away and lifted his mouth from Kwon Taekjoo's nipple. As the pleasant stimulation disappeared all at once, Kwon Taekjoo's body trembled with frustration. His lower half instinctively thrusted into empty air. Zhenya's lips curled into a long, teasing smile as Kwon Taekjoo grabbed his shoulders tightly, protesting.

"Haa... haah... what are you doing?"

"Don't be impatient, Taekjoo. The night is long anyway."

Zhenya muttered while licking his red lips with his tongue. Without warning, he lifted Kwon Taekjoo's legs and pressed them against his chest. Kwon Taekjoo's hips naturally rose high, and his thighs were now completely pressed against his torso. The pressure on his lungs made him let out a grunt, and his face flushed red as blood rushed to his head.

Using one arm to pin Kwon Taekjoo's legs in place, Zhenya's hand wandered along the crevice of his ass. He gently teased the wrinkles around the tight hole before kneading the scrotum and stroking upwards along the length of his cock. The ticklish sensation made Kwon Taekjoo's legs twitch, while his nipples, brushing against his knees, sent shivers of pleasure through him.

"Mmgh..."

Zhenya pushed Kwon Taekjoo's legs further, causing his chest to flatten against his knees. With his nose inches away from his exposed hole, Zhenya teasingly licked over it. His tongue traced every delicate wrinkle

before making soft suctioning sounds as it latched onto the tender flesh. The thin skin was sucked up before being released, and Zhenya continued swirling his tongue around the hole, occasionally pressing the tip inside, loosening the tension. The sensation of wet, slippery warmth around the sensitive area made Kwon Taekjoo grit his teeth.

“Ahh... ngh, mmph, ugh...”

Even though he tried to hold back, his broken moans slipped through. Kwon Taekjoo wanted Zhenya to stop, yet at the same time, he wished for him to go further and mess him up even more. His trembling hand reached out to grab Zhenya's.

“Ahh, Zhenya, hurry, please...”

“Hah, Taekjoo, you're so impatient.”

“Fuck, stop messing around...”

“There we go. That's more like you.”

Kwon Taekjoo, who had been whimpering just moments ago, now flared up with frustration. Zhenya chuckled at Kwon Taekjoo's temperament, clearly enjoying every bit of it.

Soon after, Zhenya let himself fall completely onto Kwon Taekjoo, whose body was overflowing with desire. Kwon Taekjoo hugged him tightly, as if he would never let him go. Zhenya nibbled on Kwon Taekjoo's now chilled ear, slipping his fingers deep into the softened entrance. The sudden intrusion made Kwon Taekjoo flinch visibly. To ease the tension, Zhenya thrust his tongue into Kwon Taekjoo's ear, making him shudder and gulp down a shaky breath. While his focus was distracted, Zhenya resumed stirring the tight hole with his fingers.

The slick, warm walls clung tightly to Zhenya's fingers, hotter than usual as if Kwon Taekjoo's body was trying to compensate for the lost warmth.

“Haa... Zhenya... Zhenya...”

Kwon Taekjoo, now impatient, gripped Zhenya's hair. Even Zhenya was nearing his limit. He grabbed Kwon Taekjoo's arms, pinning them to the floor as he pulled his hips back. As soon as he unzipped his pants, Zhenya's erect cock sprang free. He began rubbing himself against Kwon Taekjoo's cock. The anticipation caused Kwon Taekjoo's entire body to shiver, and his hole, now rubbing against Zhenya's cock, clung desperately like a suction cup, producing a dry sensation.

"Haah... calm down, Zaika."

Zhenya struggled to catch his breath as he tried to soothe Kwon Taekjoo. Thick veins stood out on his once smooth forehead and jaw. He gripped his throbbing cock, and aimed it directly at Kwon Taekjoo's entrance. The hole, which had just been twitching moments ago, shrank tight in an instant.

"Ugh..."

"You need to relax. Hm? Come on, relax."

Zhenya lightly slapped Kwon Taekjoo's ass, which had tensed up in anticipation of the coming ordeal. Kwon Taekjoo's body flinched but loosened up for a brief moment. Seizing that instant, Zhenya plunged his cock in.

As his hole expanded to its limit, the inner walls squeezed tight. Unbothered, Zhenya moved his hips in circular motions, gradually stretching the inside. The thick cock pushed in, filling the once empty space in Kwon Taekjoo's belly. Kwon Taekjoo gritted his teeth, swallowing his moans as his face turned even redder, holding his breath.

"Hah, Taekjoo. It's too tight. Are you going to stop breathing too?"

Feigning comfort, Zhenya pressed in deeper. The still-tight inner walls strained to open up and struggled to take in Zhenya's cock. Sweat poured out from every pore of Kwon Taekjoo's body.

"Ahh... shit, aren't you done yet?"

“Ugh, you’re already complaining? I’m barely halfway in.”

Telling him to relax again, Zhenya slapped Kwon Taekjoo’s round butt. The firm cheeks bounced, delivering subtle stimulation to the cock lodged inside. Red handprints were now clearly visible on Kwon Taekjoo’s smooth skin. Kwon Taekjoo shook his head in frustration. Zhenya pressed his lips against him insistently as he lowered his hips, his cock rubbing against Kwon Taekjoo’s inner walls as it burrowed even deeper. Each slow, heavy thrust made Kwon Taekjoo feel like his stomach — and even his throat — was being completely stuffed. The force and weight of Zhenya’s thrusts pressed down on Kwon Taekjoo, who was bent in half.

“Wait, hold on. Hey, my back... Ahh!”

Kwon Taekjoo, who had been trying to resist, suddenly threw his head back. It was because Zhenya, without warning, thrust his entire cock inside. Zhenya had pinned Kwon Taekjoo’s wrists down and was now lying completely on top of him. In this particular position, Zhenya’s cock was buried entirely inside his fully exposed hole, leaving no room to spare. It felt like Kwon Taekjoo’s back might snap at any moment.

“Ugh, ugh...”

“What was that, Taekjoo? What did you say?”

Zhenya responded belatedly, rubbing against their connected parts. The cock inside twisted, scraping against the smooth inner walls. Delaying any further would only cause more blood to rush to his head. Even breathing became difficult as his throat was constricted.

“Ahh, just do it faster... faster....”

“Alright, I will.”

A faint smile spread across Zhenya’s lips. In the next moment, he began rapidly thrusting his hips. The cock, which had nearly withdrawn with only the tip remaining inside, rammed back in, forcing the inner walls to stretch open with abandon. Each time Zhenya’s pelvis slammed into Kwon Taekjoo’s flattened ass, it drove his knees into his chest, crushing

his nipples against his thighs. Despite the ache in his back, the odd pleasure surged from deep within his chest and abdomen.

“Ahh, ugh, ugh... Ah! Damn it, ah!”

Memories of countless moments shared with Zhenya — when they exchanged body heat and kissed — flooded back. The two of them had often gotten excited and would fuck, no matter the time or place. They were like animals in heat.

Of course, just because these memories resurfaced didn’t mean Kwon Taekjoo was any more accustomed to the sensation of Zhenya’s cock twisting around inside his belly. Everything still felt as jarring and unfamiliar as if it had only been days since they last had sex.

“Ahh, I feel like I’m going to burst, ahh! Damn it, ahhh!”

“Hah, ugh, hah...”

Zhenya panted heavily, but his gaze never left Kwon Taekjoo, who responded eagerly to each of his movements. It was as if Zhenya was trying to imprint every detail of his distorted expressions onto his memory, or perhaps extract the faintest traces of ecstasy from his twisted face.

Zhenya’s cock thrust in, changing angles with each movement, digging deeper and deeper. The once smooth entrance had started to swell and grow warm from the relentless friction. Every time he plunged in to the base, the convulsing inner walls clung tightly, and when he withdrew, they twitched, as if reluctant to let him go. The sweet tightness made Zhenya’s mind sizzle.

As Zhenya continued to pound into Kwon Taekjoo, the inner walls occasionally trembled, squeezing his cock tightly. Though he pretended not to notice, Zhenya slowly adjusted his aim. Soon, when he hit a specific spot, Kwon Taekjoo’s whole body jerked as if an electric shock had surged through him.

“Ahh...!”

Kwon Taekjoo's anxious gaze fumbled its way toward Zhenya. Zhenya locked eyes with him, then pulled Kwon Taekjoo's knees up, wrapping his legs tightly around him. Naturally, Kwon Taekjoo's lower body was lifted into the air, leaving him scrambling to support his upper half with his arms.

"Don't... don't do that yet... Ahh...!"

Kwon Taekjoo tried desperately to stop him, but it was futile. Zhenya rested Kwon Taekjoo's ankles on his shoulders and held onto his legs tightly as he quickly thrust in and out. He relentlessly aimed for the spot that always sent shockwaves through Kwon Taekjoo, driving into it with merciless precision.

The pleasure erupted from deep inside, shooting straight up to his head. The tingling sensation that accompanied the pain overwhelmed him like a storm, making it impossible to think clearly. Kwon Taekjoo's hands, which were barely supporting him, clawed sharply at the surface beneath him. His face, which had flushed earlier, now twisted as every nerve awakened to the sharp, sweet pain. Saliva dripped from his chin.

"Damn it, fuck, ahh, ugh, ah, ahh, ugh, ahhh...!"

"Hah... Taekjoo... You like it here, don't you?"

"Ahh! Sl-slow down, ahh, fuck, I can't... ahhh!"

His reason was completely gone, and he whimpered mindlessly. His vision spun, turning yellow and then white, making him dizzy. The sharp electric currents that started deep in his abdomen quickly gathered inside his cock, surging up his spine and exploding in his mind. His whole body was burning hot, and his once pale skin flushed red.

Zhenya absorbed every detail of Kwon Taekjoo's helplessly crumbling form. His head swam, a sign that he wasn't getting enough oxygen. As his rationality blurred, all that remained was the intense red heat of lust that consumed his body.

The friction between their flesh grew slicker with every thrust. The resistance inside Kwon Taekjoo had softened, and each time Zhenya plunged in, his entrance wrapped around him smoothly, drawing him in deeper. When Zhenya tried to pull away, the tight grip clung to him like a suction cup, revealing its disappointment with a deep, yearning grip.

He wanted to go even deeper, to mark a permanent place inside Kwon Taekjoo.

Increasing his speed, Zhenya pounded relentlessly into the opening. The intense friction between Kwon Taekjoo's buttocks and Zhenya's pelvis echoed with loud smacks. Their skin stuck and peeled away rapidly, with bright red marks where they collided. Flesh clung to his cock as it was yanked out, only to be driven back in again, deeper each time.

Suddenly, Zhenya hit a spot deep inside, sending a shockwave through Kwon Taekjoo's spine. The force of it reverberated through his brain, causing his entire body to stiffen. The lingering intensity made his suspended hips tremble uncontrollably in midair.

"Haaah... uhh... uhh..."

"Taekjoo."

At the low call, Kwon Taekjoo barely managed to look at Zhenya. As soon as their eyes met, Zhenya thrust into the same spot once more.

"Haaah, ugh, uh..."

"Taekjoo."

As if reminding Kwon Taekjoo who was bringing him such intense pleasure, Zhenya continued to press into him. Kwon Taekjoo's cock trembled.

"Haaa, haaah... haa..."

"Taekjoo, my Zaika."

The repeated name sounded more heart-wrenching than any whispered words of affection. As if Zhenya was engraving it deep into Kwon Taekjoo, commanding him not to forget and to remember this moment.

Kwon Taekjoo gritted his teeth. Soon after, his body convulsed again and again, trembling all over. His stiffened cock twitched, releasing thick spurts of semen. The cloudy liquid splattered across Kwon Taekjoo's flushed cheeks, chest, and abdomen.

"Haa, haaah..."

While he was basking in the afterglow, Zhenya turned Kwon Taekjoo over onto his stomach, gently guiding his trembling body. As Kwon Taekjoo's previously floating body settled on the fur beneath him, he let out a tired groan, rubbing himself against the fur beneath his belly. Zhenya covered him from above, pulling Kwon Taekjoo's arms and shoulders close as he guided his cock between his ass.

"Ugh, uh..."

"Taekjoo."

Calling his name softly, Zhenya pressed his lips to Kwon Taekjoo's hair, ear, and shoulder, all while pushing his hips slowly down, easing his way inside. Kwon Taekjoo's loosened entrance took him in without resistance.

"Aah..."

"Haa... So good. So good, Taekjoo."

With his face buried in Kwon Taekjoo's thick hair, Zhenya moved slowly, letting his cock slide in and out of the heated walls. The sensitive lining of Kwon Taekjoo's insides brushed against him as he went deeper, pressing into sensitive spots and then retreating, teasing with slow, deliberate thrusts. As if responding, Kwon Taekjoo's ass clenched slightly around Zhenya's cock. Though they usually preferred fast and rough sex, moments like this, where they explored each other slowly, weren't bad either.

"Haa, ugh, mm..."

"Mm... Taekjoo."

Their bodies pressed together, skin sticky with sweat, blending their scents as their breaths mingled in the air. Zhenya's eyelashes brushed against Kwon Taekjoo's cheek.

Kwon Taekjoo, groaning softly, held Zhenya's face and kissed him. Zhenya, moving his hips slowly, accepted the kiss before naturally shifting positions. Now lying on their sides, face-to-face, he draped Kwon Taekjoo's thigh over his waist. Then, Zhenya, who had been moving leisurely until then, suddenly thrust all the way in, burying himself to the hilt.

"Aah!"

The unexpected deep thrust caused Kwon Taekjoo's lower abdomen to bulge. His hole, which had been pleasantly expanding and contracting, was suddenly stretched to its limit, trembling uncontrollably.

"Taekjoo, hold me."

Zhenya, pressing kisses onto Kwon Taekjoo's sharp jawline, begged playfully.

"Shit, do you really have to act all spoiled in moments like this..."

"Mm, Taekjoo."

After Zhenya repeatedly pleaded, Kwon Taekjoo clicked his tongue in irritation but pulled Zhenya close. Zhenya immediately embraced him, wrapping his arms tightly around Kwon Taekjoo's waist. In that moment, the cock buried deep inside Kwon Taekjoo slid out. Yet, the head was still nestled inside, preventing any true sense of release.

Just as the empty walls twitched in discomfort, Zhenya's cock slid back in all at once. In a short time, he attacked the hole from various angles, ruthlessly stabbing into Kwon Taekjoo's insides. Kwon Taekjoo tried to hold on, clutching Zhenya tighter, but in the end, scream-like moans escaped him.

"Aah! Ugh, haa, ahh, ugh!"

"Haah, haah, Taekjoo, haah..."

Amidst the pleasure that overwhelmed his senses, the position shifted again. Zhenya, without stopping his thrusting hips for even a second, manipulated Kwon Taekjoo however he pleased. When Kwon Taekjoo came to his senses, he found himself lying on his back, looking up at the ceiling with Zhenya beneath him.

Zhenya, having wrapped his arms around Kwon Taekjoo's shoulders to hold him in place, resumed thrusting his hips upward. Each time, Kwon Taekjoo's lower body was lifted into the air and then dropped with the weight of his own body, making the cock feel as if it were being driven deeper inside him.

Kwon Taekjoo's cock, which had already climaxed once, had regained its full vigor. The swollen cock twitched with each forceful thrust from below, the heat building to the point that his entire pelvis ached.

"Aah! Slow down, ugh! Slow, ahhh!"

Kwon Taekjoo tried pounding his fists against Zhenya's rock-hard thighs, but Zhenya, burying his head into Kwon Taekjoo's shoulder, relentlessly hammered his hips against him. Zhenya's heavy breathing and growls echoed without pause. The sweat-drenched skin of both bodies clung and peeled apart with sticky sounds, filling Kwon Taekjoo's vision with a blinding white haze.

Then, with a loud slap, Zhenya smacked Kwon Taekjoo's ass with his pelvis, forcefully driving his cock deeper. As if that wasn't enough, he ground his hips down as he released thick spurts of semen deep inside Kwon Taekjoo's belly.

"Haaah, huuuh...!"

Kwon Taekjoo roughly grabbed Zhenya's hair and, as his hips thrust forcefully into the air, he let out a deep groan. His senses became

acutely sharp, his whole body tingling with sensitivity down to his fingertips and toes. Yet, nothing came from his own cock.

“...Taekjoo? Did you finish?”

“Haaa, haaa...”

Kwon Taekjoo collapsed completely onto Zhenya, sobbing softly for a long while. Zhenya held his trembling body tightly, repeatedly kissing the goosebump-covered nape of his neck and shoulders. The trembling only subsided after quite some time had passed.

Drenched in exhaustion, Kwon Taekjoo groped clumsily at Zhenya's face. Zhenya lightly brushed his own face against Taekjoo's hand, kissing each of his fingers one by one. When Kwon Taekjoo slightly turned his head, pressing their foreheads together, Zhenya instinctively tilted his head for a kiss. Due to their position, their lips only brushed together in light touches, barely meeting. Zhenya seemed dissatisfied, glancing back and forth between Kwon Taekjoo's eyes. His blue eyes shimmered with an incongruous longing, causing the corners of his lips to twitch involuntarily.

Kwon Taekjoo let out a long sigh, playfully tapping the tip of Zhenya's nose.

“Were you lonely?”

“...Lonely?”

“You missed this hyung a lot, didn't you?”

“Seeing you is always something within my control.”

“Look at this. There's still so much I need to teach you.”

Kwon Taekjoo shook his head slowly and rolled off Zhenya's body. As their chests touched, Zhenya's cock, still inside Taekjoo's belly, slid out, followed by the thick, sticky semen trickling out slowly.

Repulsed by the sensation, Kwon Taekjoo opened his eyes again and stared at Zhenya.

As Kwon Taekjoo said "Ah," Zhenya, not understanding, gave a confused look. Kwon Taekjoo ran his thumb over Zhenya's lips, repeating "Ah" again. Only then did Zhenya slowly open his mouth. Kwon Taekjoo gripped the back of Zhenya's head, leaning in slowly to press his lips against Zhenya's. He plunged his tongue roughly into Zhenya's crimson mouth, entwining it with Zhenya's wet tongue in a deep kiss.

Zhenya let out a low moan, his lips twitching upward in delight. The sense of complete conquest and euphoria made Kwon Taekjoo's ears burn with heat.

Their lips parted with a soft sound, but Zhenya immediately tilted his head back for another kiss. Their bodies moved in sync, swaying in a pleasant rhythm, caught up in the sweet intoxication of the moment.

After what felt like an eternity, Kwon Taekjoo finally pulled away. Zhenya, however, chased after his lips, wanting more. Annoyed but amused, Kwon Taekjoo pinched Zhenya's lips and scolded him.

"You hadn't even started a proper fire, there's no smell of food in the house. Are you trying to freeze to death?"

"Die? From just a little cold? Also a human can live for days without food."

"You crazy bastard. Just because people call you a monster doesn't mean you're an actual monster. You still need to maintain your body heat."

"Why are you suddenly so angry?"

"I'm not angry, you idiot. I'm worried."

Kwon Taekjoo shot Zhenya a disapproving look. It was frustrating that even when he expressed concern, Zhenya interpreted it as anger. But instead of feeling annoyed, Taekjoo felt pity for Zhenya, who was so bad at reading emotions.

Zhenya, observing Kwon Taekjoo's expression, broke into a smile. His eyes narrowed slightly, and his long lashes fluttered down. It seemed

like Zhenya had finally recognized the concern and affection in Taekjoo's eyes.

"Taekjoo, I didn't know you cared about me so much."

With a sly grin, Zhenya suddenly grabbed Taekjoo's ass. "What the—?" Taekjoo protested, but Zhenya simply planted a kiss on his cheek and whispered.

"Yeah, I was lonely."

"You said you didn't even know what loneliness was."

Taekjoo retorted, grabbing Zhenya's arm in disbelief. But Zhenya, unfazed, continued to caress Taekjoo's ass, his fingers sliding effortlessly between his cheeks. With just a slight touch of his finger, the hole opened without any trouble.

"I was cold. And hungry."

"Hey, don't you dare try to sneak that in..."

Kwon Taekjoo tried to remove Zhenya's hand, but Zhenya was quicker, yanking Taekjoo's arm hard. As a result, their bodies were now fully intertwined. Zhenya subtly spread Kwon Taekjoo's legs with his knee and started to rub his already erect cock against Taekjoo's wet crevice. Then, he wrapped Taekjoo's thigh with his arm, securing him, and pressed his lips against the back of his neck.

"So, I want you to feed me and keep me warm, Taekjoo."

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After a few rounds of ejaculation, he was completely sprawled out. Consciousness faded in and out, only to return faintly and slip away again.

During that time, Zhenya showered Kwon Taekjoo's body with kisses, pressing his lips all over him. Occasionally, he buried his face in Taekjoo's jet-black hair, inhaling his scent deeply. It was as if Zhenya needed to repeatedly confirm that the quietly sleeping Taekjoo by his side was real.

Later, Zhenya brought a blanket to cover Kwon Taekjoo, though he himself didn't rest for a moment. As usual, while smoking a cigarette, he inspected and treated the scars left on Kwon Taekjoo's body one by one.

When he noticed the tattoo inside Taekjoo's thigh was still intact, Zhenya buried his face there without hesitation. He sucked so hard that bite marks formed around the tattoo. In time, the bruises would turn dark.

Kwon Taekjoo groaned and woke up, disturbed by the constant fidgeting. His hazy eyes fluttered open, and he forced out a voice that was hoarse and cracked.

"I'm thirsty."

As usual, Zhenya grabbed Kwon Taekjoo's shoulders and turned him around for a kiss. The whiskey Zhenya had in his mouth moistened Taekjoo's parched lips. Time and again, he would give alcohol or cigarettes to his lover who complained of thirst. It was absurd, but at that moment, even that kind of relief was necessary, so Taekjoo gulped it down. After feeding him a full glass in the same manner, Zhenya handed him a cigar. Taekjoo silently accepted and smoked, only to break into a dry cough. It must have been a while, as the smoke felt especially harsh.

"What do you even like about smoking this?"

"Because you like it."

"Me?"

When Taekjoo gave him a puzzled look, Zhenya also tilted his head in confusion.

"From the moment we first met, you reacted intensely to this smell, didn't you?"

"That's because it was the smell I caught when I almost died, and since you move so silently, that smell was the only way I could recognize you."

Zhenya's lips twitched at the explanation. No way. Sure enough, he lifted his chin slightly and muttered something strange.

"You even say some admirable things sometimes."

"What kind of nonsense are you talking about now?"

"Whenever you smelled this, it meant I was around, and that excited you."

The pounding of his heart from fear and from anticipation were completely different things. Taekjoo had no idea where to even begin explaining. In fact, he doubted Zhenya would believe him no matter how much he explained. Zhenya had a habit of interpreting things however he pleased.

"If you don't really like it, there's no need to keep smoking it, right? What's so great about it?"

"I've come to like it. Since then."

Zhenya replied casually, but somehow, it sounded romantic. It felt as though Zhenya wanted to keep something that made Kwon Taekjoo react, as if to hold on to his attention. Taekjoo glimpsed Zhenya's desire to keep his focus on him.

Every time he discovered that kind of sentiment in a monster like Zhenya, Kwon Taekjoo couldn't help but sigh.

"Good grief. And I went around leaving a guy like this behind."

"Suddenly?"

"I've been thinking about it for a while. The anxiety I've been carrying, the reason I keep fighting with you — it all boils down to one thing. It's

because I can't give up my job."

"I told you I'd accept it."

Zhenya cut him off, clearly exasperated at the same conversation coming up again. He didn't want to waste time on a discussion that was bound to go in circles.

"No. I can't do this anymore."

"What do you mean, you can't?"

Zhenya furrowed his brow. His gaze was wary, as if bracing for Kwon Taekjoo to suggest breaking up again. Taekjoo sighed once more and ruffled Zhenya's hair.

"I'm quitting. My job."

"...What?"

"I don't really have any reason to cling to it anymore, and my mother's worried... Besides, if I can't even protect my own lover, what business do I have protecting a country?"

He quietly studied Zhenya's reaction. He expected Zhenya to grin ear to ear, but instead, Zhenya looked shocked, as if this was something he had never imagined. He even seemed skeptical of Kwon Taekjoo's sudden declaration.

"Why are you saying this all of a sudden?"

"What do you mean? I'm telling you I'm not going anywhere and I'm staying here to be with you. Isn't that what you wanted? Or are you sick of it already and can't stand the thought?"

"Your job, your mother. They're all things you swore you could never give up, Taekjoo. You always said working was what kept you alive. And now, suddenly, you're quitting?

What's your angle? Do you want something from me?"

"You really don't trust me, do you?"

With a sigh, Taekjoo pinched Zhenya's cheek. Even with his face pinched, Zhenya's suspicious gaze didn't waver. Taekjoo then pulled him closer, knocking their foreheads together.

"How could a clueless guy like you ever understand the boundless grace of a big-hearted **hyung** like me?"

"Taekjoo, what the hell are you talking about?"

"You've been the one who's sacrificed all this time, so now it's my turn. Since I'm jobless for once, I'll stick around and play with you until you get sick of me!"

Zhenya alternated his gaze between Kwon Taekjoo's eyes, as if trying to figure out whether this was an attempt to deceive him or simply calm him down. His gaze was so intense and serious that it almost made Taekjoo laugh.

"Why? Don't believe me? Need some collateral?"

Taekjoo chuckled, pulling Zhenya's hand and placing it squarely on his chest. Without warning, Zhenya squeezed his chest tightly and pressed his entire body against him. The pressure made Taekjoo's chest burn, as though the skin was about to tear. Then, Zhenya covered Taekjoo's mouth with his own, making it hard to breathe.

"Hey, wait, mmm, I can't breathe...!"

As Taekjoo tried to turn his head away in desperation, Zhenya grabbed his face and forced him to face forward again. His cheeks were squeezed, making his lips protrude.

Zhenya pressed his tongue against Taekjoo's puffed lips, sealing his entire mouth.

Taekjoo's already labored breathing grew even more erratic as Zhenya exhaled deeply into his mouth. Feeling suffocated, Taekjoo tried to tap Zhenya's arm and pushed at him with his knees, but it was useless. Zhenya, acting like a malfunctioning machine, seemed determined to steal every breath from Taekjoo. Zhenya's eyelashes trembled uncontrollably, as though he was lost in the moment.

Struggling, Taekjoo accidentally kicked over the ice bucket. Ice spilled out noisily onto the floor. Zhenya's eyes flicked toward it. Shaking his head, Taekjoo sensed something ominous. A mischievous smile crept across Zhenya's face.

"Hey, don't. I really hate that kind of stuff."

"Hate what?"

"Just... don't do anything."

"What do you mean, Taekjoo?"

"Whatever thought just popped into that head of yours — don't do it."

"Why? You said you'd play with me. As much as I want."

Zhenya picked up a piece of ice that had slid near him. He held it up right in front of Kwon Taekjoo's face, spinning it slowly while grinning mischievously. "Hmm?" Zhenya's voice was playful, a teasing tone clearly present.

**"Hyung."**

For a moment, Taekjoo doubted his ears. Zhenya had once listed "hyung" as one of the Korean words he knew. It had been puzzling at the time, but now, Taekjoo wondered if Zhenya had misunderstood the term, thinking it was a kind of affectionate nickname, like "bastard (*Saekki*)."  
Seeing the shock on Taekjoo's face, Zhenya seemed to confirm something in his mind.

"You like how it sounds, don't you, *hyung*?"

"Are you crazy... Stop it!"

"What is it that you keep telling me to stop?"

"Just don't do anything, anything at all!"

"The more you tell me not to, the more I want to. You're just so bad at being honest." The man repeatedly fiddled with the ice in his hand and then slowly rubbed it against Kwon Taekjoo's bluish nipple. At the cold sensation, Kwon Taekjoo flinched and clenched his molars. A chill ran through his feverishly sticky body.

"Hngh...!"

"Look at this. So expectant."

He pressed down on Kwon Taekjoo's swollen nipple with the edge of the ice until it flattened. Kwon Taekjoo turned his head, trying his best to endure the unfamiliar sensation. The more he tried, the more his body swayed in sync with each stimulus, reacting faithfully to the touch. Zhenya engraved every minute change in his mind, pressing the ice so forcefully against the nipple that it sank in slightly.

"Ha... Stop... no, don't... ngh!"

"Strange? Don't like it?"

When Zhenya lifted the ice from Kwon Taekjoo's chest, his entire body shuddered again. As he traced downwards over his defined abs, every spot the ice passed twitched. Zhenya wedged the ice into Kwon Taekjoo's navel, slowly twisting it left and right, then abruptly withdrew his hand. With a growing sense of anxiety, Taekjoo raised his head and glanced down. The next moment, something cold pressed firmly against his perineum.

"Hngh! What are you doing, you crazy bastard?!"

"Hmm? Since you looked like you were enjoying it to death, I'm just fulfilling your expectations as a lover. Why?"

With an angelic face, he whispered like a devil. Then, using the ice he had been sliding over the perineum, he caressed both of his balls, as if kneading them. The cold, wet sensation repeatedly brushed over the sensitive area, sharpening every nerve in his body. Despite trying to hold back, moans kept slipping through his clenched teeth.

"Haa... ahh, stop."

“Stop?”

Zhenya placed the ice, now smaller from the warmth, into Kwon Taekjoo's navel. The ice fit snugly into the shallow dip, like a puzzle piece. As the folds curled inside gradually became damp, a coolness spread from his lower abdomen to the top of his head.

Zhenya slowly lowered his head. His hair brushed against Taekjoo's goosebumped skin, and the sharp edge of his nose pressed firmly against the abs as he moved downward. Soon after, he began licking the ice piece. The sharp edge of the ice inside the navel pressed firmly, producing a faint but peculiar sensation. Taekjoo's knees involuntarily buckled from the unfamiliar feeling.

“Ahh... please, stop...”

The ice crystal melted quickly between the rising body heat and Zhenya's tongue, pooling around his navel. With each flick of Zhenya's tongue, the wet friction echoed. He licked and burrowed persistently as if to unravel the knot of Taekjoo's navel. An indefinable, tingling sensation spread throughout his abdomen, coiling tightly within his groin. Moaning, Taekjoo fidgeted, shifting his legs.

“Hngh... ah, th-that...!”

“...Haa, Taekjoo. Don't like it? Do you really want me to stop? Hmm?”

Zhenya flicked Kwon Taekjoo's now-erect cock, which was pressing against his own jaw. A drop of precum beaded at the tip. Snickering, Zhenya extended his tongue, lightly grazing the drooling slit. The chill from his ice-cooled tongue touched the peak of sensation, drawing a thick groan from Kwon Taekjoo.

“Huugh... ugh...”

Kwon Taekjoo's cock throbbed with desire, craving the tingling stimulation. Zhenya slid his fingers between Taekjoo's cheeks, teasing the loosened hole. Glancing up, he studied Taekjoo's face before slowly opening his mouth. Taekjoo raised his hips, pushing his rigid cock into Zhenya's crimson mouth. Apparently, that wasn't enough for him — he

grabbed Zhenya's face with both hands, pressing it firmly against his groin.

The smooth, cool lining of Zhenya's mouth wrapped around him completely. A prickling sensation shot up Taekjoo's spine, making every hair on his body stand on end.

Simultaneously, his hole tightened around Zhenya's fingers.

Just as Zhenya was about to delve deeper with his finger, Taekjoo gripped his head tightly, moving it up and down as he drove himself in harder. His cock scraped against the rough roof of Zhenya's mouth before plunging into his throat, pressing deep against the soft tissue. The bulge created by Taekjoo's tip stretched a spot in Zhenya's neck. Reflexively gagging, Zhenya's upper body swelled as he struggled. With a dry cough, Taekjoo's cock slid back, reluctantly withdrawing. A drop of precum slipped into Zhenya's windpipe, making him choke and cough, one burst after another.

"Hah... You're really desperate, Taekjoo."

"Pfft, wasn't that exactly the reaction you were aiming for?"

"Let's take it slow. The night is long."

"Slow? After getting me all worked up like this? You've had your fun on your terms."

Kwon Taekjoo smeared his saliva-coated cock across Zhenya's cheek. His previously sharp gaze had softened, thick with lust. Taekjoo licked his full lower lip and demanded, unashamedly:

"Open wide, pretty."

Zhenya's eyes widened. Taekjoo responded with a languid hum, gently stroking his earlobe. Zhenya smirked, quietly opened his mouth, and lowered his tongue. Taekjoo's cock slid over the red carpet of Zhenya's tongue, disappearing inside. Veins bulged across Zhenya's smooth forehead.

Nevertheless, he stubbornly endured, taking Kwon Taekjoo's cock into his mouth.

Occasionally, he would tighten his lips and throat, delivering intense stimulation. Kwon Taekjoo gripped his hair tightly, thrusting quickly and impatiently. Zhenya drew him in deeply, then let his cock slide out, encouraging him to climax as he sucked. He even used his long fingers to prod his hole, digging relentlessly into sensitive spots. From the front, and then the back, the relentless pleasure overwhelmed Kwon Taekjoo, leaving him undone.

"Ha... ah... ngh... ah, fuck, shit, mm... ah..."

As Kwon Taekjoo thrust upward quickly, his pelvis pressed fully against Zhenya's face, and Zhenya's nose was buried roughly into his lower abdomen. At the same time, Zhenya's fingers gripped his prostate as if to crush it. Kwon Taekjoo's tense body convulsed in response.

"Ah... ah..."

Even his lips trembled, pitifully so. From deep in Zhenya's throat, where Kwon Taekjoo was buried, came the sound of something pouring out, and then the gulps as he eagerly swallowed it down. Coming to his senses, Kwon Taekjoo hurriedly pushed at Zhenya's shoulders, trying to pull himself free.

"Ngh... ngh... idiot, don't swallow it, don't... ah."

But Zhenya stubbornly pulled Kwon Taekjoo's hips and thighs closer, even burying his face further into him as Taekjoo tried to pull away. Kwon Taekjoo's body trembled with an indescribable shame, his hips shaking slightly.

Even after the streams from Kwon Taekjoo had subsided, Zhenya continued to tighten his throat without pause. Each time, Taekjoo's hips clenched involuntarily, gripping Zhenya's fingers and naturally pressing his prostate, delivering another wave of sensation. A deep sigh escaped Taekjoo, who looked at Zhenya with a helpless expression.

Zhenya slowly withdrew Taekjoo's cock from his throat, where it had been buried. It now hung limp, coated with saliva and an unidentifiable mixture of fluids after reaching climax. When Zhenya pulled his fingers out from Taekjoo's hole, a long strand of thick liquid clung, stretched

from inside him. Zhenya rubbed it against Taekjoo's thigh, smiling with satisfaction, while Taekjoo protested in disgust.

"Ugh... damn it. Why the hell would you eat that?!"

"Weren't you treating me like a baby so I could drink your milk?"

"Who said anything about treating you like a baby?"

"You always play innocent."

Zhenya chuckled and sat up, causing Taekjoo's exhausted body to collapse against his chest. Holding him, Zhenya spread his still-tender hole with his index and middle fingers, gazing hungrily at the glistening inner membrane.

"Fuck, enough. If this keeps up, I'm going to actually pass out."

"And how much do you think I've been holding back? I'm far from done, Taekjoo."

"Well, now I'm not going anywhere, am I? We've got all the time in the world."

Kwon Taekjoo tried to reason with him in an exhausted voice, but it was futile. Zhenya, aroused from sucking him, stood with his own cock trembling in eager anticipation. His cock was raw and red from the relentless friction. Though it seemed tender enough to hurt with even the slightest touch, Zhenya unhesitatingly pressed his swollen head against Kwon Taekjoo's hole.

"Wait... ah!"

Before he could protest, Zhenya's thick cock pushed firmly in between his long fingers.

Kwon Taekjoo's mouth snapped shut on its own. Even after burying himself to the base, Zhenya kept his fingers inside, gently brushing his thumb over Taekjoo's thick perineum and bending his fingers to graze sensitive areas. Then, he began a steady rhythm, driving in with a consistent pace that sparked waves of sensation. With his insides stretched to their limits, different kinds of pleasure collided without

pause. Every hair stood on end, and his lips, moving of their own accord, emitted broken moans.

"Ha! Ah... ngh... oh, fuck, like that, ah... don't... ngh, like that, ah..."

"Ha... your body... ngh... it squeezes so tight... Taekjoo."

Zhenya grinned and increased his pace, leaving Kwon Taekjoo's mind melting from the overwhelming stimulation. His entire body felt like a bundle of nerve endings; even light touches or faint friction sent waves of aching pleasure through him. Tingling sensations seemed to rise endlessly from deep inside him, spreading through his body until he could only let out helpless sounds, as if trapped in an unending punishment.

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He woke slowly, the remnants of deep sleep clinging to him as his mind struggled to make sense of his surroundings. Since coming to Odinokiy Island, the days had blurred together. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd eaten properly. One moment, it felt like he'd been sitting by the *pechka* for hours, and the next, he'd been soaking in the bath. He'd fallen into deep, almost unconscious sleep countless times, and every time he awoke, Zhenya was there, exploring his body. Sometimes, he responded, rolling together with him; other times, too exhausted, he let Zhenya do as he pleased and slipped back into sleep.

The aftermath left him barely able to lift a finger as his mind began to clear. In his head, he'd already leapt up to quench his thirst and wash up, but his limbs felt glued to the bed. Every inch of him ached as if he'd just completed a grueling mission. It wouldn't be surprising if his body was covered in small cracks from the strain.

In truth, Kwon Taekjoo's hips and lower thighs, endlessly pummeled by Zhenya, as well as his back, which had been pressed and twisted

relentlessly, ached even with each breath. Without a doubt, he was probably bruised blue and purple, just like some time in the past.

He turned his head to the side with difficulty, letting out a dry sound. His arm felt especially heavy, and he noticed Zhenya had fallen asleep, somehow managing to curl his large body against Taekjoo's side. Zhenya was naturally using Taekjoo's arm as a pillow, clutching his waist tightly. It was possible Taekjoo's lack of mobility was entirely due to Zhenya's grip.

"Hey, Zhenya."

He forced himself to speak. His voice was hoarse and sounded like metal scraping. He tried to clear his throat, but it didn't help much.

Zhenya didn't budge. Eyes shut tight, his smooth face looked annoyingly calm as he exhaled in even, soft breaths. Taekjoo glared at his irritatingly serene face, then shook his shoulder.

"Hey, wake up. Aren't you hungry?"

His voice cracked pathetically as he shook the arm Zhenya was lying on. Finally, Zhenya exhaled deeply and opened his eyes slowly, as if he'd slept incredibly well. His eyelids fluttered smoothly open, and his long lashes fanned out like peacock feathers.

His blue eyes sparkled brightly, clear as ever. *Fuck, he is annoyingly beautiful.* Just seeing his pretty face first thing in the morning melted away some of Taekjoo's lingering irritation.

"Taekjoo. You look like hell."

The look Zhenya gave him and that single line shattered the moment's romantic mood.

"What the hell? And whose fault is that?"

"Oh, here we go. You keep blaming me, even though you were practically crying from how good it felt."

“Enjoying it once or twice is one thing, but when I say stop, you should actually stop.” “You’re just never honest, are you?”

Zhenya chuckled and shook his head. It felt like a heavy lump of dough was pressing down on Taekjoo’s chest. Could he really live peacefully with someone like him? He could already picture the countless hardships that lay ahead. Despite just waking up, he already felt exhausted.

“...Alright, enough. Just get your head off me and help me up.”

Kwon Taekjoo gave his shoulder another shake to dislodge Zhenya’s head. Zhenya looked at him with a hint of displeasure, but begrudgingly sat up. Then, gathering up the nearby blankets, he wrapped Taekjoo’s body and scooped him up with ease. Taekjoo flailed in surprise.

“Hey, who said to carry me? I just wanted help getting up.”

“So I can hear you complain again?”

With a dismissive huff, Zhenya carried Taekjoo outside the room. After their sessions, which often left him utterly exhausted, Taekjoo’s legs would give out, and he’d end up collapsing on the spot. He’d usually pepper Zhenya with complaints afterward, and it seemed Zhenya had decided to handle it his own way this time.

Gently, he set Kwon Taekjoo, still wrapped in blankets, onto a chair in the kitchen. As soon as his weight settled on his hips, a deep, dull ache shot up his spine. He let out a quiet groan, and Zhenya gave him a smug look as if to say, *I told you so*.

“What? Who’s to blame for this, huh? Who?”

“Are you really going to blame me? Weren’t you the one clinging and begging for more after leaving me alone all this time?”

“Right, whatever you say.”

“See, you get sarcastic when you run out of things to say.”

"Sounds like someone else I know. Just give me some water first."

Taekjoo made a beckoning gesture, desperate for a drink. Zhenya obligingly retrieved a bottle of cold water from the fridge. Taekjoo's eyes followed it eagerly, his throat bobbing as he reached out. But just as he was about to grab it, Zhenya pulled the bottle back out of reach.

"What? Why?"

"Aren't you forgetting something?"

Forgetting something? Seriously? He let out a long sigh and shot Zhenya a look of exasperation.

"Hey. Seriously, could you stop rubbing my lips like that? They're all chapped, and it hurts even when I just touch them lightly. And your lips look awful, too."

"I didn't mean for you to kiss me."

Zhenya tilted his head with an expression that looked almost innocent. Then, narrowing his eyes, he teased, "How lewd." Taekjoo thought he was asking for the sort of gentle, affectionate touch shared between lovers after a sweet night together. But no?

"Then what!"

He shouted in irritation, feeling defensive for no reason. With a relaxed gesture, Zhenya gently swirled the bottle of water that looked as precious as honey. With his eyes, he looked down at Kwon Taekjoo, who seemed like a helpless cat outside a fish shop.

"Taekjoo, you know that Korean phrase you taught me?"

"I'm asking you for it."

"That's not what I meant."

"Give it."

"It was longer than that."

*Smartass. Just has to have a perfect memory for pointless things.*

"....."

Kwon Taekjoo pressed his lips together tightly, glaring at Zhenya. The guy met his gaze calmly, stubbornly holding his ground. In the next moment, Taekjoo lunged forward, trying to snatch the water bottle. But Zhenya easily avoided it, lifting his arm. Taekjoo flailed his hands, half-rising from his seat, but again Zhenya effortlessly pulled the bottle out of reach. Taekjoo then climbed up onto his chair to try grabbing it, but Zhenya only switched the bottle to his other hand.

Panting, Taekjoo finally raised his hands in surrender.

"Alright, fine."

With this obedient declaration of defeat, Zhenya crossed his arms, his expectant gaze settling on Taekjoo's lips.

"Hand it over, you jerk!"

Taking advantage of Zhenya's brief moment of distraction, Taekjoo swiftly snatched the water bottle. Before it could be taken back, he turned halfway around and drank the entire bottle on the spot. He felt moisture quickly restoring his parched body, and the fogginess in his head cleared up, leaving him feeling refreshed. A satisfied sigh escaped him.

Zhenya looked at Taekjoo with a hint of disapproval.

"So, you were teasing me after all."

"Teasing? No."

"Then why do you hate saying that phrase so much?"

"Well, it's because it's something a young guy says to his elder."

"Elder?"

"Yeah. You're the kid, I'm the elder."

Kwon Taekjoo pointed alternately at himself and Zhenya to clarify.

"Now that we're on the subject, there's a four-year age gap between us. When you were just an embryo, I was already ruling the playground. Got it? This **hyung**'s eaten way more bowls of rice than you have..."

He trailed off, feeling oddly ridiculous talking about rice bowls with a blond, blue-eyed foreigner. Clicking his tongue, he lowered the hand he had been using to point at Zhenya. Watching Taekjoo with an unfathomable expression, Zhenya arrived at an unusual conclusion.

"So, you really want me to call you '**hyung**,' huh?"

"No. Not really."

"That's not true. You looked happy every time I called you that."

"I wasn't happy; I was embarrassed. It felt... itchy."

"Embarrassed, my foot. Taekjoo, just admit it. You're dying to marry me, aren't you?"

"What?"

"You're anxiously worrying that I might get engaged, feeling jealous, acting all sulky..."

Are you afraid I'll fall out with my family because of it? Isn't that it?"

The face of the guy babbling nonsense looked overly pleased. He seemed almost relieved, as if he had finally found an answer to a long-standing curiosity.

The way Kwon Taekjoo jokingly referred to himself as "**hyung**" had gone far beyond distant; it had drifted off to some unreachable place. Left alone, Zhenya's imagination could have stretched to the other side of the Milky Way. It was so absurd that he lost both the will to retort and the drive to correct the guy's misguided delusions.

"Ah, this punk. I keep calling you pretty, and your ego just grows endlessly, huh?"

He grumbled in a tone full of disbelief. Zhenya, floating high on his own amusement, replied, "Am I really that pretty?" tilting his head slightly to the side as he gave a soft smile. Since this guy would interpret anything

however he pleased, Taekjoo gave up on correcting him. Besides, it was hard to reprimand a smiling face.

"Think whatever you want. But give me something to eat. I'm really on the brink of starving."

He patted his hollow stomach. Not even a rumbling sound came from within. It truly felt like his stomach was stuck to his back. He hadn't eaten properly in Korea, and whatever he did manage to eat, he soon threw up, so it wasn't surprising.

With a satisfied expression, Zhenya turned around and began choosing food to feed Kwon Taekjoo. Soon, he placed two instant porridges — requiring only reheating — into the microwave. He then stood in front of it, watching the food as it cooked. The sight brought to mind the photos stored on Taekjoo's phone: countless images of Zhenya's back, standing just like this. He had once wondered why he had so many of those photos, but now he understood. Perhaps he'd been happy — seeing this person awkwardly inserting himself into Taekjoo's life, making clumsy efforts just for his sake, and even the moments of comfort he found in waiting for him.

He watched Zhenya as if he were a little drunk. He wished he could capture this moment in a photo, but he'd lost all his belongings when the helicopter crashed.

He snapped back to attention as the microwave's alarm went off. Zhenya brought over the warm porridge, now in a bowl, to the table. It was a porridge mixed with eggs and vegetables, looking somewhat like baby food.

"You're not under the impression that I like this stuff, are you?"

"What do you mean?"

"If not, then why did you stash it like that?"

"This is the most edible Korean food they sell here."

"Are you serious?"

Taekjoo gave Zhenya a doubtful look. Without replying, Zhenya took a refined spoonful of porridge and put it in his mouth, satisfaction evident on his face. He wiped his mouth with a tissue, pressing it firmly against his lips, and quietly finished the whole bowl. The way he ate made the instant porridge look like gourmet soup.

After setting down his spoon, Zhenya unexpectedly looked up, meeting Taekjoo's gaze. Taekjoo, pretending he hadn't been watching, continued to eat his now-cold porridge in big spoonfuls. Within a few bites, his bowl was empty, yet he still felt a hollow emptiness inside.

"No meat?"

"Quite the appetite for the morning."

"Morning? I haven't eaten properly in days. And am I the one with a big appetite? You're just the one who barely eats. Picking at food like a bird — it's not like we're on some kind of emergency mission. Does that even register in your body?"

Zhenya's energy efficiency was almost unnaturally high. For his size, he barely ate, always consuming less than Taekjoo, yet his stamina was far better. It was a mystery how he didn't lose muscle with such minimal intake, and his physique somehow remained intact. No wonder he was a bit of a monster, though it irked Taekjoo.

"Wait here."

Zhenya gathered the empty bowls and went back to the counter. Taekjoo watched him in silence, resting his chin on his hand. Even with small movements, Zhenya's finely tuned muscles flexed visibly, almost as if intricately woven together. His physique was something that would be nearly impossible to sculpt deliberately. Maybe it was his height or the long stretch of his neck and limbs, but despite his muscle mass, he somehow didn't look bulky — it was fascinating.

After letting his gaze travel over Zhenya's form, Taekjoo noticed the red marks left on his pale skin. From his neck down to his waist, clear bite marks and nail scratches were scattered across his body. Despite Taekjoo keeping his nails trimmed short, his lack of awareness during

these moments left Zhenya's skin marred after each time they slept together.

"Doesn't that hurt?"

".....?"

"Your back, I mean."

Zhenya glanced over his shoulder and gave a brief, "Ah." Then, as if it were nothing, he tossed a frozen tomahawk steak into the oven and replied in a casual tone.

"My lover wants to leave his mark on my body in any way he can. There's nothing I can do about it."

He smiled, looking pleased. Anyone could see that those marks were closer to scars than anything romantic, but he seemed to treat them as if they were just simple love bites. Considering how Zhenya got even more excited when Taekjoo bit him in anger, it didn't come as a surprise.

"Yevgeny."

Zhenya, who had been selecting a drink to go with the meal, turned around with a puzzled look. It seemed strange to hear his full name since Taekjoo usually called him "Zhenya." Without answering, he glanced over Taekjoo's mood first. For such a monstrous person, he'd often display a surprisingly soft devotion. Taekjoo let out a quiet sigh and asked gently,

"Do you really like me that much?"

"...Hm? That's pretty out of nowhere, Taekjoo."

"All the people I've been with before, friends and all... They got tired of waiting, said they felt like they weren't my number one priority, and walked out on me. But here you are, sticking around despite the way I treat you. It's a bit of a mystery."

"There's no reason for me not to."

Zhenya replied without much hesitation, his definitive tone making Kwon Taekjoo look at him with a puzzled expression.

"I told you, didn't I? I like a partner who's strong-willed and rebellious. Someone resilient enough not to break, even if handled roughly."

"Oh, really? You make it sound like those types are rare. I heard that person who almost became your fiancée was just as tough."

Feeling a bit disappointed, Taekjoo's voice took on a mocking edge. Zhenya's eyes narrowed slightly, and the corners of his mouth lifted in a long, smooth line.

"Yeah, just like how you're acting so possessive right now."

"Possessive? What are you talking about?"

"Well, if you weren't, you wouldn't keep bringing up something that's already over."

For a moment, Taekjoo lost the timing to respond — he'd been caught off guard. He hadn't meant to, but without realizing it, he kept bringing up the past. Was he still bothered by Zhenya's former engagement? Was he really so persistent?

"There aren't many like you, who hang on so stubbornly. I used to find it amusing, wondering, '*Is he done yet? Has he finally given up?*' That was how it all began." "Watching someone struggling near death is 'fun' to you? You're completely insane."

Taekjoo didn't hold back his colorful criticism, directing it toward the smirking Zhenya. Zhenya continued undisturbed.

"Besides, if that so-called 'treatment' you're talking about is your special treatment for me, I really have no reason to refuse it."

"Special treatment?"

"I was your first mission partner, wasn't I? That's where it all started."

"That was because of some corrupt superior's scheme..."

"And yet, didn't you end up trusting and relying on me quite a bit? That's probably why you felt so betrayed."

Zhenya might have been right. Despite constantly doubting and being wary of him, Taekjoo had gradually come to depend on Zhenya, taking advantage of the information and support he provided. Occasionally, he had even thought, *So this is why people have partners.*

It hadn't been his choice. Forced to stay by Zhenya's side, Taekjoo had endured endless hardships, only to realize that it had all been a trap, a deception. He had felt a deep sense of disillusionment, frustration, and anger. He struggled with disappointment in himself, plagued by relentless self-reproach. And he had felt a profound sense of betrayal toward Zhenya, whom he had briefly considered a comrade.

"Is that all, hm? You even begged me to save your life, despite how many times I nearly killed you."

"That's just survival instinct. I doubt you've ever pleaded with anyone to save you."

"That's something only weak and powerless people do."

"Of course you'd think that."

"That was the first time you showed weakness to me, Taekjoo."

"...What?"

"Or should I say, would you rather have died? You said being dead was better than staying with me, didn't you? For someone who so easily gave up on life, you certainly clung to me, shedding every last defense."

Taekjoo had never begged anyone to save him in his life. Embracing death had always been a given; survival by any means wasn't his goal. He saw death in the line of duty as fate. He thought only of surviving on his own, completing his mission on his own, and returning on his own. The only one he could rely on was himself.

However, while he was with Zhenya, Kwon Taekjoo secretly hoped for his support or assistance. Even if his consciousness had been faint, it was true that he had clung to him to survive. Kwon Taekjoo wondered when he had become so reliant.

“You even begged me not to give up on you. And you’re still doing it now.”

“What am I doing?”

“Weren’t you actually afraid? That I might have given up on you. That, like everyone else, I’d eventually collapse and leave you.”

“.....”

“I think I mentioned it before. In my life, there’s been no thrill greater than you, no entertainment more intense.”

Zhenya placed one hand on the table, leaning forward slowly. His soft lashes lowered, setting the mood. His gaze grew somehow moist and tender. For someone who claimed never to have been in a relationship, how had he picked up such a skill?

*Was he about to kiss him?* At the moment Taekjoo anticipated and parted his lips, a mechanical beep sounded, signaling the end of cooking in the oven. Zhenya gave a small laugh at Taekjoo’s disappointed expression, then turned and walked to the oven. When he took out the perfectly grilled steak, its rich aroma filled the entire kitchen.

Zhenya placed the steak on a suitable plate and set it down in front of Kwon Taekjoo, pouring a glass of wine and passing it to him.

“So, what’s your plan now?”

“What plan?”

He picked up his knife and fork and quickly began slicing into the steak. At that moment, his focus was solely on the meal.

“The NIS — are you really planning to quit?”

“I told you, I already quit. I’m unemployed now.”

He answered nonchalantly and took a big piece of steak into his mouth. Although it was frozen, so perhaps not as fresh, it was freshly grilled and quite satisfying. The seasoning was just right, too.

Zhenya crossed his arms, watching as Kwon Taekjoo stuffed his cheeks with steak until they bulged.

“You said that job excites you.”

“I didn’t say excitement — I said it made me feel truly alive.”

Zhenya shrugged, his expression as if asking what the difference was. Although the saying goes that a small word choice can make a big difference, there was no way to make him understand.

“Well, that was when I didn’t know you. But now without you, it just doesn’t feel fun anymore.”

“I told you I’d chase after you, no matter where you are.”

“There’s no need to go that far, especially if it means sacrificing your life.”

“Sacrifice?”

Zhenya repeated the word as if he’d encountered a foreign term. Taekjoo clarified it in a way he’d find easier to accept.

“Oh, right. Not a sacrifice, but a loss. Following me around, betraying your homeland, cutting ties with your family. You’re only adding more enemies when you already have enough. You can’t keep living like that forever.”

“That’s nothing new. My homeland and I have been on bad terms for a long time, and the same goes for my family. I’ve always had plenty of enemies. You quitting the NIS won’t solve those issues.”

“You’re right, but... even if you’re fine with it and used to it, I don’t like it. It puts you in danger.”

Zhenya tilted his head with a puzzled expression, as if the thought of being in danger had never even crossed his mind. Did he really believe himself to be some invincible, immortal being? Honestly, while he might be strong, in Taekjoo's eyes, he seemed like a child wandering by the water's edge.

Taekjoo grinned and pinched Zhenya's cheek out of the blue. Zhenya's eyes went wide. "Thinking it over, I realized there's no bomb quite like you. I never know when you'll go off, or how dangerous it'll be. Even minor incidents turn into disasters when they involve you. Being around you is never boring."

"Hm... well, if that's the case."

Zhenya let out a soft chuckle and lifted his head, spreading his shoulders wide, as expected. His partner had called him a bomb and described his involvement as a disaster, yet Zhenya took it as a compliment. Taekjoo gave his smug nose a quick pinch before letting go.

"...Taekjoo?"

"It's seriously hard work turning you into a decent person. Anyway, if your country keeps making you the ambassador to Korea, I could stay by your side as your personal bodyguard. And if they decide to cut you loose, I can look for other work. But for now, I'm thinking of taking a break until things settle down a bit."

"Didn't you say you weren't going to work?"

"I'm not, but that doesn't mean I can just sit around idly. A person should at least exercise or volunteer, do something. If you just stay still, you'll wear out and rust."

Zhenya furrowed his brow as though he'd just heard nonsense. Taking a break but not lazing around — it sounded absurd. If Yoon Jong-woo were here, he'd probably have agreed with him for once.

"Let's do it together. Whatever it is, together."

Kwon Taekjoo nodded gently, as if comforting, and picked up a piece of meat, offering it to Zhenya. Zhenya, eyeing him suspiciously, eventually lowered his head and took the steak.

It was at that moment.

"Wait."

Zhenya suddenly grabbed Kwon Taekjoo's hand and looked around cautiously. Sensing something strange, Kwon Taekjoo held his breath and focused on the surrounding sounds. Zhenya strode to the window. He didn't look outside recklessly, only lifting a corner of the curtain slightly to survey the scene beyond. With the unusual tension in the air, Kwon Taekjoo rose silently as well.

After observing the outside for a while, Zhenya delivered unwelcome news.

"It seems a pest has crawled in."

It seemed someone had managed to break in while Zhenya had turned off the defense system. Kwon Taekjoo tossed him a handgun that was carelessly lying on the dining table. Then he quickly went down to the storage room, sweeping various firearms, weapons, and explosives into a backpack and carrying a few in his arms before returning to the kitchen.

In the meantime, Zhenya had retrieved something to wear. He easily caught the rifle that Kwon Taekjoo threw to him. They instinctively and swiftly prepared for combat, knowing exactly what to do without a word.

Zhenya, who finished getting ready first, put the only tactical vest on Kwon Taekjoo. When Kwon Taekjoo shook his head and tried to remove it again, Zhenya fastened the belt tightly. Then he pressed the main switch to turn off all the lights in the house.

The two positioned themselves against the wall next to the window and checked the situation outside. With the sudden darkness, the intruders seemed to halt their movement as well. The figures that had been

moving quietly in the shadows now disappeared, likely hiding in the terrain outside, observing their reaction.

"I'll go out and divert them."

"Then at least wear this."

Kwon Taekjoo tried to take off the vest again, but Zhenya grabbed his hand firmly.

"I won't die, Taekjoo."

That single, confident statement inexplicably eased Kwon Taekjoo's mind. An ungrounded trust grew within him, believing that Zhenya would safely return to his side.

Reluctantly, he placed a helmet with bulletproof goggles on Zhenya's head, tapping it with his fist to ensure it was securely in place.

"No matter what, that blond hair of yours stands out too much. I'll cover you."

Zhenya nodded and was about to turn away, but Kwon Taekjoo grabbed him by the collar and pulled him back. He placed a quick kiss on Zhenya's lips, catching him off guard. Zhenya's eyes widened in surprise.

"...Taekjoo?"

Taekjoo tightened the loose helmet strap firmly and spoke resolutely.

"Don't you dare get hurt."

"Hurt? Me?"

"There's nothing worthwhile about you other than that pretty face and body, so don't go out there and get any scratches." Zhenya chuckled at his words.

"Who's one to talk? Taekjoo, you'd better be careful too. If you tear your stomach open, you'll be out of commission for at least a month."

They exchanged the playful lines they'd shared once in the past, then kissed lightly again. With a touch of lingering reluctance, Zhenya slowly backed away before quickly heading toward the back door. Kwon Taekjoo watched him go, then mounted a night vision scope on his sniper rifle and loaded the ammunition. His dark eyes sharpened with focus.

He descended to the basement, keeping close to the wall. A narrow window led to the outside, making it an ideal spot for picking off intruders. He stacked nearby crates as a support and slid the rifle barrel through the narrow bars. Closing his left eye and looking through the scope, he saw shadowy figures stealthily approaching. They were all armed, about twenty in total.

It was clear the enemy knew about Zhenya's air defense system. Up until a moment ago, there had been no sound of helicopters. Could they have arrived by inflatable boat? Only one organization would conduct an operation like this: the Russian military. It seemed the Kremlin had deployed special forces to capture or eliminate Zhenya in order to seize *Anastasia*, hidden somewhere on this island.

He couldn't let himself be an easy target. He was determined not to let anyone who threatened Zhenya get away alive.

Around that time, a loud engine roared from the back of the estate. It seemed Zhenya was driving an ATV, trying to lure the enemies out into the open field. The intruders, who had been hidden in the darkness, immediately opened fire on him. Kwon Taekjoo watched the bursts of muzzle flash through his night vision scope and, without hesitation, pulled the trigger.

"Agh!"

"Argh!"

Several of the intruders fell, clutching their arms or legs. Right after, Zhenya's ATV mercilessly ran over them. The writhing figures lay limp, some with limbs broken like shattered toys. Kwon Taekjoo grimaced

but quickly steadied his aim. He narrowed his eyes, took a breath, and fired without hesitation whenever an enemy entered his range.

As gunfire erupted all around, Zhenya maneuvered the ATV with near-acrobatic skill, throwing bombs. The enemies hiding in lower ground scrambled to avoid the blasts, only to be struck by the ATV or Kwon Taekjoo's bullets. Some were killed instantly in the explosions.

The problem was their sheer numbers. He had thought a single squad had infiltrated, but after wiping out one team, another group of the same size appeared. They poured all their firepower toward Zhenya.

Dodging the onslaught, Zhenya sped toward the mountain. As he passed the mansion, he glanced in the direction of the basement where Kwon Taekjoo was hiding.

It was an action to confirm Kwon Taekjoo's safety. Responding to this, Kwon Taekjoo landed headshots on the intruders chasing after Zhenya one by one.

Gradually, the intruders began to realize there was another presence besides Zhenya. A portion of those pursuing him split off from the main group, scattering in all directions. Kwon Taekjoo continued firing diligently as he pursued them, but he couldn't take them all down.  
“Fuck.”

He immediately stood up and rushed up the stairs. Just then, he heard the sound of glass shattering, followed by something flying into the house — a grenade. Dodging the chain of explosions, he kept running, but another grenade landed right in front of him. In a split-second slide, he grabbed it and flung it toward the door. The grenade exploded, blowing the doorway and windows to pieces. Screams erupted from the enemies hiding nearby.

But that wasn't enough to take them down. The attackers, using their numbers, tightened their encirclement. Through the blown-out door and window frames, more enemies poured in, rapidly ascending the stairs to gain a strategic advantage. Gunfire concentrated toward the

staircase as he ascended, dodging the bullets and heading for the rooftop, where the helipad was. He closed the heavy metal door and slid under the helicopter, aiming at the doorway.

For a moment, the sound of pursuit quieted. But then, with a deafening bang, the entire door was blown off. It seemed the enemies had used a small bomb to blast it away. Gunfire erupted through the scorched doorframe, mowing down the advancing enemies in seconds.

The ones providing cover from behind tried to retaliate, but he rolled out of the way and threw a grenade. The violent explosion silenced the entire area instantly.

“Haa, haa...”

He lay there catching his breath, but the distant sound of gunfire from the forest brought him back to his feet. Even in the dense darkness, he could clearly see the flashes from gunfire and the glow of muzzle flares. Zhenya was charging forward, with enemy forces constantly trailing him.

“Zhenya...”

Anxiously, he kept watching, when suddenly something flew up from behind him. He quickly turned his head to see a grappling hook latch onto the rooftop railing from outside the mansion. The rope attached to the hook tightened, followed by the rapid whirring of a reel. It was clear the enemies were attempting to infiltrate the rooftop directly.

Kwon Taekjoo bit back a curse as he ran toward the opposite railing. Without hesitation, he leapt over the edge. Just then, enemies who had surged up to the rooftop fired their rifles in a frenzy. The blind shots only further shredded the bodies of their already fallen comrades.

As he jumped off the opposite railing, Taekjoo quickly hooked onto a line to evade enemy eyes, kicking against the wall to build momentum with each bounce. By the third push, he gathered enough force to smash through a second-floor window. The sudden shatter of glass drew the enemies searching the rooftop, who belatedly rushed to look down below.

"Second floor!"

The hurried footsteps of three or four men echoed down the staircase. In the next moment, the floor they were standing on collapsed with a crash. The enemies plunged to the first floor with no time to react. A dark silhouette loomed over the heads of those who lay groaning in shock from the fall — it was Kwon Taekjoo.

"Hello."

He flashed a grin at the enemies sprawled on the floor in agony. As some of them struggled to reach for their guns, he mercilessly pulled the trigger.

"Ahhh!"

Kwon Taekjoo didn't release his finger from the trigger until all movement ceased and the magazine was empty. Soon, silence settled around him like the calm after a storm.

"Whew..."

After dealing with the intruders, Taekjoo looked out the window, his face tired. He couldn't detect any other presence around the mansion anymore — only the sporadic sounds of gunfire and explosions echoed from far away. Whether those fierce noises came from Zhenya or the enemies, they were proof enough that Zhenya was still alive.

Taekjoo tapped out the empty magazine from his rifle and slotted in a fresh one. He also tightened the loosened laces of his shoes. "Well, time to go rescue the princess."

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Meanwhile, Zhenya continued to lead the enemies toward the mountainside. The intruders, relentlessly pursuing him with gunfire, quieted down as they reached the halfway point. They seemed to have decided that, rather than exhausting themselves chasing an ATV, it was better to lie in wait somewhere and ambush him from behind. It was a

reasonable calculation, as Zhenya didn't plan to keep luring them on a chase indefinitely; he needed to confirm why there was no more gunfire coming from the mansion. He had to wrap things up quickly.

He stopped in front of a nearby cabin. Inside, various skiing supplies were neatly stored. He grabbed a pair of skis that could operate even on grassy slopes and slung his sniper rifle over his shoulder.

After his quick preparations, Zhenya left the ATV and descended the slope. He knew the surrounding terrain perfectly, to the point he could reach the mansion with his eyes closed. He was also fully aware of which paths had the least friction and where the enemies were likely hiding.

It was a reckless act, if anything. The surroundings were so dark that he couldn't see an inch ahead, and he hadn't turned on his headlamp to avoid detection. The enemies were surely waiting, alert for any sign of a target. There was a chance they'd spot him with night vision before he even saw them. If gunfire came from all sides, even Zhenya wouldn't make it out unscathed.

Yet Zhenya began his daring descent without hesitation. His skis glided over the smooth grass, picking up speed. He adjusted the goggles Kwon Taekjoo had given him, activating the thermal imaging system. He fired at rapidly passing targets in his field of vision. Thanks to the silencer, the shots made no sound, but startled animals scattered, agitating the tense intruders. Gunfire erupted from various directions in response.

He tracked the direction and distance from the echoes of the shots, firing back. One intruder, clad in infrared-blocking gear, let out a final scream as he fell.

He hit another enemy hiding in the opposite direction in the same way.

Soon, the enemies realized Zhenya's method of attack and ceased firing. Silence fell once again. Red laser sights began to appear, one by one, locking onto Zhenya. Even as he descended swiftly, he fired toward the lasers that skimmed his chest and head, dropping the enemies with precise hits.

The number of lasers aimed at Zhenya was dwindling, but the situation was far from favorable. The lasers that had narrowly missed him were closing in, more accurately targeting his head and chest. No matter how erratically he adjusted his descent and speed, the persistent red beams followed closely, brushing across his body. A hastily fired shot even grazed the front of his skis.

Finally, the red lasers were precisely locked onto him. Then, the sound of massive propellers came from somewhere. The gusts stirred by a helicopter caused the trees to sway violently. The enemies hidden all around looked up in unison. Zhenya, too, raised his head toward the source of the noise. Soon, a familiar helicopter appeared in his line of sight.

Who was holding the control stick? Kwon Taekjoo or an intruder? He observed the scene for a moment, and then the helicopter's searchlight turned on, illuminating the area like daylight. The faces of the hidden intruders were exposed in stark detail. In contrast, the silhouette of the helicopter pilot grew more defined and shadowed.

Just from that, Zhenya noticed that Kwon Taekjoo had come to help and grinned.

Zhenya quickly threw off his skis, leaving only his boots on, and started running up the mountain. His speed through the trees was almost inhumanly fast. Even on the incline, his momentum showed no sign of slowing.

The intruders, whose hiding spots had suddenly vanished, began firing wildly at the helicopter's searchlight. Bright flashes burst from the underside of the helicopter. Still, the helicopter focused solely on exposing their positions, making no move to return fire, even though it could have obliterated the entire area if it wanted to.

A barrage of gunfire followed. One operative threw away his empty magazine and was just about to load a fresh one. At that moment, a dark shadow loomed behind him, shifting with an eerie presence so large it could be mistaken for a beast the size of a house. Stunned, he turned his head, only to have a hole pierced through his skull with a sharp bang.

“Odin (1).”

Muttering softly to himself, Zhenya leaped over a boulder and rushed toward the next operative. He grabbed the operative, who was frantically trying to avoid the helicopter’s spotlight, from behind by the neck and twisted sharply. In an instant, the man’s neck snapped, and he collapsed.

“Dva (2).”

Just then, bullets began pouring from behind a tree across from him. Using the subdued operative as a shield, Zhenya ducked, then slipped his gun barrel between the mangled arms of the corpse to return fire. Soon, the attack from the opposite side ceased.

“Tri (3).”

He continued counting in an even tone, when suddenly a grenade came flying his way. Sensing its approach, he quickly shifted his position. He disappeared into the shadows, where the terrain and the helicopter’s spotlight maximized the concealment.

The person who had just thrown the grenade grabbed another, ready to toss it. As he pulled the pin, a bullet from somewhere blew off his elbow.

“Agh!”

The operative fell, screaming, only to look up in horror at something above him. There, standing on a tree branch, Zhenya smirked, watching him like a predator eyeing trapped prey. The backlight outlined his sharp features, creating an eerie atmosphere.

“Chetyre (4).”

“Aaaaah!”

With a bloodcurdling scream, the grenade he failed to throw detonated. Having taken out four operatives in a matter of moments, Zhenya straightened and looked around. One remained. Kwon Taekjoo’s helicopter was still circling above, scanning for the final target.

Before long, the helicopter's spotlight illuminated a ravine, where a silhouette, hiding and holding its breath, suddenly bolted away in terror. It seemed the last operative, now alone and out of ammunition and explosives, had realized he stood no chance.

Zhenya jumped down from the tree, picked up a rifle lying on the ground, and hurled it forcefully at the fleeing figure. The rifle spun through the air and landed directly at the operative's feet, tripping him up. Entangled with the rifle, he tumbled helplessly, rolling down the hill.

Zhenya leaped forward to approach him. The lone surviving operative, his leg broken, was groaning in pain as he desperately tried to crawl away. A pitch-black shadow engulfed his entire body — a silhouette so ominous it could be mistaken for the Grim Reaper himself. The battered operative begged for his life.

“Please... spare me, plea—”

Without hesitation, Zhenya stomped down on the back of the man's head, slamming him to the ground. The enemy's body, which had been trembling violently, soon went limp.

“Pyat' (5).”

And with that, a deathly peace returned once more to Odinokiy Island.

Taking a quiet breath, Zhenya looked up at the helicopter hovering overhead. The strong wind whipped his platinum-blond hair and clothes in bright, dramatic waves. He gestured for the helicopter to come closer. Kwon Taekjoo, peering down at him from the window, hurriedly motioned back, signaling that the ladder wasn't ready yet.

Undeterred, Zhenya sprinted toward the incline. The helicopter circled above him, gradually lowering its altitude to follow his path. Using his running momentum, Zhenya leapt, grabbing hold of the helicopter's footstep with both hands. Bracing with only his arms, he steadily pulled himself up until he was on board. And, predictably, the reprimands started pouring out.

“Hey, you crazy bastard! Do you always have to take such stupid risks? Do you think you're really invincible or something?!”

Though neither of them had sustained any serious injuries, Kwon Taekjoo was already venting his anger. Without a word, Zhenya grabbed his face, tilted it back, and pressed their lips together impulsively.

“Mmmph! Hmph! You..... crazy idiot, I’m still flying!”

Kwon Taekjoo tried to pull his face away in irritation, but Zhenya held his lips firmly, drawing him back insistently. Cold, metallic breaths and warm saliva mingled repeatedly. Each exhale came with a low, throaty growl, likely fueled by the adrenaline of the recent carnage. Only after a long, lingering moment did Zhenya finally release him.

“Ugh, the taste of blood,” Kwon Taekjoo muttered in disgust, wiping the blood from his cheek with his shoulder. Zhenya simply wrapped his arms around him from behind the pilot’s seat, resting his head on Kwon Taekjoo’s shoulder and gripping the controls alongside him. With Kwon Taekjoo guiding, the helicopter soon reached the landing pad by the mansion. Lowering the helicopter slowly, Kwon Taekjoo shut off the engine and immediately scanned Zhenya from head to toe.

“Are you hurt anywhere?”

“You always ask the strangest questions.”

“Don’t act tough, you idiot. They were practically showering you with bullets. Are you really okay?”

Kwon Taekjoo’s expression was serious with concern, while Zhenya merely squinted his eyes and grinned slyly. Shaking his head as if exasperated, he muttered,

“Unbelievable.”

“Am I that precious to you?”

Zhenya clicked his tongue, his face melting into a soft expression, a stark contrast to the brutal killer he’d been moments before.

“Yeah, sure, you’re just *so* precious to me, you bastard.”

Kwon Taekjoo clicked his tongue in mock annoyance, then reached out to pinch both of Zhenya’s cheeks, making his face look ridiculous,

before giving him a quick peck. Just as he was pulling back, Zhenya lunged, capturing Kwon Taekjoo's lips with sudden intensity. Pinning Kwon Taekjoo's cheeks with both thumbs, he pried his lips open and pushed his own tongue in. Zhenya's forceful tongue pressed deep, nearly blocking his throat, leaving him momentarily breathless.

Kwon Taekjoo started coughing repeatedly into Zhenya's mouth, but Zhenya swallowed it all without hesitation. He pressed his tongue firmly against Kwon Taekjoo's, which resisted and wriggled under him, savoring every part. He sucked insistently on the soft tip of his tongue, drawing out the kiss until Kwon Taekjoo finally tapped his arm urgently, signaling him to stop.

"Hah... hah... Kissing like that could actually kill someone, you lunatic."

"You're the one who always provokes me first, yet somehow it's my fault."

Kwon Taekjoo waved a dismissive hand, not even bothering to argue back. Zhenya, who had been planting kisses all over his hands, cheek, and the corners of his mouth, casually shifted over to the pilot's seat. Leaning close, he let his lips linger near Kwon Taekjoo's ear, teasingly nuzzling for a while.

The sky above was jet-black, scattered with stars so dense it looked as though they might rain down at any moment. Among them, an aurora shimmered, like a curtain of light in the same shade as Zhenya's eyes.

"...Damn, so beautiful."

Kwon Taekjoo muttered under his breath.

"Hmm?"

Zhenya looked up, catching his gaze. It was clearly a comment about the aurora, but Kwon Taekjoo, half-expecting it to be misinterpreted, looked directly at him and repeated, "**Beautiful.**" Understanding the implication, Zhenya flashed a grin and leaned in for another kiss, but Kwon Taekjoo blocked him with a hand to the face.

“What now? This isn’t over, is it? As long as your people are here, they’ll keep coming.”

“Hmm... maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to fulfill the Kremlin’s long-standing ambition.”

“Fulfill it? How?”

Kwon Taekjoo looked at Zhenya, puzzled. Zhenya leaned back slowly, a sly grin spreading across his face.

“They’ve long wondered whether *Anastasia* might still be alive or if she’s sleeping forever. They’re terrified she might suddenly appear and strip them of everything they’ve hoarded so far. They’re so desperate they can’t help but send out a welcoming committee to greet her. What else can I do but arrange a meeting with *Anastasia* in person?”

The sharp glint in his clear blue eyes grew even fiercer.

## 18.The Answer Is

The Kremlin had been struck just over ten minutes ago. Russia was thrown into chaos after a missile attack bypassed not only anti-air radar but every layer of its security systems. Emergency alerts blared across Moscow, and military and police forces entered a state of high alert, setting up a defensive perimeter within a 10-kilometer radius of the Kremlin. Major roads leading to Moscow were closed off, and citizens were evacuated to safe shelters. Fire and emergency response teams were dispatched for fire control and rescue operations, leading to a mass of congested vehicles in the Kremlin area.

The President and cabinet members, who were in a meeting during the shelling, dispersed according to emergency protocols. The President escaped through an emergency corridor in the meeting room, heading to a secure bunker — a fortress among fortresses that could withstand even a nuclear attack. Even if completely isolated from the outside, it was equipped for survival for a full year. There was an ample supply of drinking water and emergency rations, as well as air purification systems and heating units. It was the very first structure the President had commissioned when planning the blueprint for territorial recovery.

The President drank vodka as if it were water, his expression betraying his shock at the completely unexpected blow. Had he been in his office instead of the meeting room, he might have been killed on the spot. The missile that struck the Kremlin had been precise enough to target specific locations with pinpoint accuracy.

He paced back and forth in the bunker's lounge, his face visibly tense. When a soft knock sounded, he froze. Then a voice came from outside: "Your Excellency, it's Bazim." Relieved, the President exhaled deeply before shouting as Bazim entered.

"What took you so long to get here?!"

"My apologies, sir. I was delayed while investigating the truth behind this attack."

"Alright, so whose doing is this? Just what kind of heinous bastard would do something like this?"

"We don't have enough information to be certain yet, but based on the missile debris and the launch angle, it doesn't appear to have been fired from abroad."

"What? Then, are you saying it's a coup?"

The president's voice wavered with instability. His grip on his glass tightened considerably. A rebellion was the thing he feared and guarded against the most.

Especially at a time like now, with war on the brink — if internal division arose, it would ruin everything he'd worked for. A rebellion at such a critical moment of impending war was unthinkable, and it must not happen.

The president looked around the room with unfocused eyes.

"Who the hell could it be? What kind of bastard would dare... Could it be Lebedev? He seemed displeased with the preemptive strike, trying constantly to step back. I let him fatten up for too long. Or is it Ivanov? Ivanov was just at the meeting earlier. Come to think of it, that guy didn't let go of his phone the entire time. His gaze was also suspicious. Yes, it could be him... or perhaps Illyin? He kept challenging my orders, saying this isn't the time for war. The Chief Commander — he might be the one. I kept scolding him for wasting military resources, and he must have finally harbored resentment."

The president continued his rapid-fire muttering, as if his mind had blurred from the shock. Although it seemed he was losing control, it wasn't the first or second time he'd suffered from nervous exhaustion. It was a familiar scene, and the Chief of Staff and the Head of Security exchanged looks of shared frustration. Unlike them, however, Bazim simply observed their frail and timid leader, who seemed all but withered.

The president's dream of reclaiming lost territory was, in reality, no different from his own fear. His display of aggression was a facade, an attempt by a tyrant, accustomed to oppression, to hide his anxieties and dread.

Then, with a sudden, certain conviction, he declared,

"...Ah, yes. I'd forgotten about Psikh. He's the only one who would dare pull something like this. He is the one, right?"

Bazim did not respond. He, too, suspected that Zhenya was likely behind this latest attack. This bombardment was likely the final warning after previous threats — a retaliation for the president's repeated incursions on Odinokiy Island. If they weren't prepared to face civil war, they had to consider their response carefully. Given that Zhenya was likely holding *Anastasia*, countering with force would be the worst possible choice. That man had no interest in fame or national prosperity, nor did he fear death. If the moment came, he would press the launch button for *Anastasia* without hesitation.

And yet, the president, his judgment clouded, seemed determined to make the worst choice possible.

"This time, we'll show him a lesson he won't forget. We must ensure Psikh never dares act recklessly again. Send out the fighter jets immediately!"

"Sir, you must be cautious. This could easily escalate into civil war."

"Civil war? Nonsense. Psikh is just an individual. Surely the greatest army on Earth, the Russian military, can handle a mere traitor! The whole world is watching me after this attack, and more than ever, we need to show our strength!"

The president stubbornly insisted, spitting with rage. Yet despite his command to launch the jets, his aides remained frozen, cautiously exchanging glances.

"What are you waiting for? Go and wipe him out!"

"Sir, fighter jets won't be effective. We've already deployed several. If we launch a futile attack, it will only cost us the forces we've painstakingly gathered. What's more, while this began with a missile, if we respond in kind, he will retaliate even more fiercely. And don't you also believe he's hiding *Anastasia*?"

Bazim calmly tried to persuade the president, but the president remained stubborn.

"Just keep pouring it on until that bastard's ammunition runs out! Don't give him any chance to use that '*Anastasia*' weapon; push him hard! How could a single individual withstand this kind of material offensive?"

"If this goes wrong, we could all die. Moscow itself, maybe even all of Russia, could disappear."

Bazim raised his voice in warning. In the next instant, a loud slap echoed, and his head jerked to the side. The president, unable to contain his anger, had struck his cheek. The chief of staff and head of security, who witnessed the scene, quickly looked away. The president glared at Bazim, breathing heavily.

"Are you protecting him just because he's family? Is your blood too thick to let you kill him?"

"...I am merely prioritizing this country's safety above all else."

"If that's the case, you should listen to me more. I am the Kremlin, *I am* Russia. Don't ever question my orders again. Make sure I don't have to remember that Psikh is a blood relative of my dear friend."

The president grabbed Bazim's lowered chin, lifting it. Staring directly into his eyes with an intense gaze, he made his point crystal clear.

"If you fail to handle this matter properly, you and the entire Bogdanov family will be branded as traitors. All the achievements you've built up until now will be reduced to nothing. Understood?"

The president released Bazim's chin with a forceful jerk, leaving nail marks where he'd gripped. Then he roughly wiped his hands with a wet

wife, muttering in dissatisfaction.

"Filthy mutts. I flatter them a little, and they forget their place, acting above themselves."

The air inside the shelter grew ice-cold. Just then, the chief of staff's phone rang, breaking the uncomfortable silence. Startled, the chief quickly answered. After a few responses, he turned and conveyed the news the president had been waiting for, his face brightening.

"Your Excellency, we've made contact with your family!"

"Give it to me."

The president gestured impatiently to take the phone. The chief approached to hand it over, but in that moment—

A metallic click froze everyone in their tracks. The president looked back at Bazim with disbelief. The chief of staff, approaching to give the phone, and the head of security, standing at a distance, both stared at Bazim in shock. Bazim had quietly drawn a gun and was now aiming it at the back of the president's head.

"You? What are you doing?"

"Please reconsider, Your Excellency. This is not something to decide on a whim. The fate of the nation is at stake."

"You filthy bastard, how dare you—"

Before the president could finish, Bazim pulled the trigger without hesitation. The act happened so quickly that the advisors didn't have time to react. Or perhaps, they had no intention of reacting at all. Everyone stood there, staring blankly down at the president's body, now lifeless on the ground, the once all-powerful leader of the nation lying sprawled out, his vitality snuffed out in an instant.

Bazim wiped the blood streak that had splattered across his cheek with the back of his hand, smearing it messily. He looked down at the president's corpse, his gaze devoid of warmth.

"Take it away."

No one dared question his order. The chief of staff covered the body with a blanket, and the head of security discreetly called in additional guards.

The guards, unaware of the full situation, simply moved the president's body as instructed. Until that moment, Bazim kept his indifferent gaze fixed on the blood-stained floor. Standing beside him, the chief of staff spoke hesitantly.

"Um... What should we do about the order to send the fighter jets?"

"I never gave such an order."

"Yes, understood, sir."

The chief of staff gave a slight bow and quietly stepped back. Now alone, Bazim looked up at the ceiling, swallowing hard. Then he walked across the marble floor, stained with thick blood, into the president's office. Each step left red footprints in the shape of his soles — a path tread by all who had once occupied this place.

He looked around the office, now in ruins from shellfire, and stood by the window. Beyond it, summoned military forces were setting up multiple layers of barricades. He sat on the corner of the desk, silently observing the scene. Only the occasional shouts from commanders, the clatter of soldiers' boots, and the clicks of their firearms broke the silence. It was as if the world were holding its breath in anticipation of a coming storm.

Rubbing his rough hands over his tired face, he let out a long sigh. The exhaustion of it all suddenly weighed on him. For now, he thought he should rest. A new dawn would break tomorrow.

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It was a weekend filled with the warmth of spring. In an upscale neighborhood in LA, a long line of cars stretched out from early

morning. A long-awaited wedding was set to take place in the home of a famous tech company founder. The ceremony had been postponed for nearly two years due to the pandemic, pregnancy, and childbirth. The bride and groom had already built a life together, and a healthy daughter had been born to them. Today, the day of the wedding, was also their daughter's very first birthday.

The ceremony was held at a community center. The center's entire front was made of glass, perfect for enhancing the ambiance of an outdoor party. The doors were opened wide well in advance. The spacious garden was decorated with white ribbons and fresh flowers, and tables and chairs for the reception were set up. A podium had been arranged for an orchestra, and at its center stood a three-tiered cake. Instead of elaborate candles or toppers, the cake was adorned with printed photos of the three main characters of the day. They looked like a close-knit, happy family.

For an event hosted by the head of a top 100 U.S. corporation, the atmosphere was relatively informal. The music playing and the food prepared were familiar and comforting to all the guests. Private security guards, hired for safety, stayed strictly within their cars or nearby buildings. The hosts even offered refreshments to local police patrolling the area.

Guests gathered in small groups, exchanging greetings and catching up with each other. They also admired the family photos displayed throughout the venue, offering their best wishes for the family's future. Colleagues of the couple had launched a drone early on to capture the wedding from above, and some even burst into the bridal suite with an action camera.

{Mom, guess who's here?}

At the strange voice from the door, the bride looked up. The bride in the pure white dress was none other than Yoo Na-hyun. She spotted her daughter, brought in by her colleagues, and smiled warmly. Her daughter, dressed in a white gown matching her mother's, even had angel wings on her back.

In unison, the colleagues said, {Congratulations on your wedding!} and handed the baby to Na-hyun.

{Thank you, everyone.}

Yoo Na-hyun expressed her thanks as she quickly embraced her daughter. The baby, held in her mother's arms, let out a joyful laugh.

**“My little princess, you look even more angelic today.”**

Na-hyun gently nuzzled her nose against the baby's. The baby responded with happy sounds, reaching up to touch her mother's cheek. Her vivid green eyes sparkled, clearly pleased with her mother's dressed-up appearance. Na-hyun welcomed the baby's touch, unconcerned about her makeup getting smudged.

As she chatted with her colleagues and took photos with them, her husband, Noah, poked his head into the room in the middle of greeting guests.

{Na-hyun, your mom's here.}

At his quiet announcement, Na-hyun sprang to her feet. Soon, two Korean women entered the waiting room under Noah's guidance.

**“Na-hyun!”**

**“Mom? You said you might not make it because of the flight cancellations!”**

Na-hyun, in slight disbelief, took her stepmother's hands, and she greeted her younger sister with a nod. Her sister looked at Na-hyun's baby, who was in her arms, and said, **“Hello there.”** The baby gave her aunt, whom she had only seen over video calls, a bright, innocent smile.

**“How could I not come to your wedding? Eun-hyun helped me find a connecting flight, and our Noah even sent a car to pick us up from the airport.”**

“Thank you so much. That must have been a hard trip; I’m so grateful you made it.

Riley, say hi to Grandma.”

“Hello, little one.”

Na-hyun’s stepmother extended her hand to Riley, who grabbed her index finger and shook it as if they were shaking hands. Watching this, everyone burst into warm laughter.

{I’ll head back out to finish getting ready. See you soon, Mom!}

Sensing the mood, Noah quietly ushered the colleagues out of the room. Thanks to this, the once-bustling bridal waiting room now held only Na-hyun, her stepmother, her sister, and Riley. Her stepmother, absorbed in watching her granddaughter’s playful antics, eventually turned her gaze to Na-hyun, who looked as if all her troubles and worries had faded away, smiling brightly. Her stepmother’s face softened, though a tinge of sadness lingered.

“Your father would have been so proud if he were still here.”

“He’s watching over us from the heavens, I’m sure of it.”

“I’ve always felt sorry for you. I couldn’t take good care of you, and I left you too lonely.”

“Come on now. I’m fine. Didn’t we agree to stop apologizing to each other?”

Na-hyun comforted her stepmother. All those struggles were now things of the past. If they wanted to move forward, they needed to let go of the pain from the past. Especially for Riley’s sake, she decided to look only toward a bright future.

“Hey, Mom, don’t make things gloomy on such a happy day. Cheer up, sis.”

“No, no, it’s just... it’s such a special day, so I keep thinking about your father. I’m sure it wasn’t easy getting here. I’m grateful that you are here.”

Her sister, who resembled their father, smiled warmly, saying it was no trouble at all.

Then, as if something had just come to mind, she mentioned something unexpected. “Oh, by the way, I think another friend from Korea is here. Did you get a chance to say hello?”

Na-hyun was taken aback. She had no idea. After all, she had no friends left in Korea, as she had severed those ties before entering university. She hadn’t even sent invitations to her former college classmates she had briefly reconnected with at a reunion a few years back. It was too far for anyone to attend, and she didn’t expect anyone to come, either. Except for one person, Kwon Taekjoo.

Retracing her memories, she had sent the wedding invitation to Kwon Taekjoo’s old address. She wondered if it was received properly and if perhaps Taekjoo might come, so she reached out. However, the call never went through, and even months later, the messages remained unread. The last time she tried calling, all she heard was a recorded message saying the number didn’t exist.

Then, she heard news about Kwon Taekjoo. The reunion organizer mentioned that it seemed he had passed away. The exact cause of death was unknown to him as well.

It was a turbulent time, with one incident after another. Before the effects of the pandemic had even fully faded, the Russian president visited Iran and got caught in a massive terrorist attack. Later that same year, a coup took place, and the government was overthrown. He remembered Kwon Taekjoo’s boss, a blonde foreigner who served as the Russian ambassador. Had Kwon Taekjoo, too, been swept up in the chaos and met his end?

She cried for days on end over this unexpected tragic news. With childbirth imminent, she couldn't go to Korea to confirm it herself. Concerned, Noah had sent someone to verify Kwon Taekjoo's status. His registration was listed as canceled due to death. The old house, where he'd once lived with his mother, was empty. Upon hearing this, Na-hyun grew worried about Kwon Taekjoo's mother, who was now left alone. She'd lost her husband and both her sons, and now faced days she'd have to endure alone.

"...Unni?"

Had she fallen too deep into her thoughts? Her younger sibling brought her attention back. Even her adoptive mother looked at Na-hyun with concern, asking,

"Is something wrong?"

"No, it's nothing. I just don't think we'll have any guests coming from Korea."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah. Are you sure you're not mistaken, Eun-hyun? There were quite a few Asian Americans among the people I used to work with."

"Is that so?"

Her sibling scratched her head, looking uncertain. She calmed her nerves, which had been startled for no reason. That the phrase "a friend from Korea" immediately brought Kwon Taekjoo to mind made her chuckle and shake her head.

Just then, Riley let out an excited noise, reaching out with his chubby hand towards something.

{Riley? Are you happy?}

Na-hyun laughed along with Riley, gently touching her forehead. But Riley wasn't looking at her; her gaze was fixed somewhere behind her, staring endlessly. She kept stretching out her short arms and waving them. With a puzzled expression, Na-hyun turned her head. But there was nothing there — not even a butterfly.

"What is it?"

"...I was just wondering what she's looking at."

"Should we take Riley with us? It seems like it's about to start."

"Can I ask that favor, Mom?"

"Oh, you silly thing, of course."

Just as Riley's foster mother opened her arms gladly to take her, Riley started flailing her limbs, refusing to let go.

Her gaze was still fixed on something behind Na-hyun. At that, Na-hyun turned fully around.

Her eyes widened as she caught sight of two men walking in the distance. Riley continued waving her arms toward them, calling out, "Kyaa, kyaa." One of the men walking side by side was tall with platinum blond hair, while the other had black hair. Even in suits, their trudging steps looked all too familiar.

"...Kwon Taekjoo?"

A name, almost like a whisper, slipped from her lips. Her heart started pounding wildly. Kwon Taekjoo was already dead, yet she felt a baseless certainty that the man walking away could be him.

"Na-hyun?"

"Sister?"

“Oh, um, just a moment...”

Mumbling incoherently, Yoo Na-hyun left the waiting room with Riley in her arms. The hem of her dress dragged on the floor, almost causing her to stumble as she headed outside unsteadily. Her younger sister quickly grabbed her skirt to help.

“What’s wrong, Sister?”

{Na-hyun?}

Noah, who had come to escort Na-hyun, looked at her in surprise. He supported her and Riley, who both looked as if they might collapse, and asked what was going on.

{Na-hyun, what’s happening?}

{Wait, can I see the guestbook for a moment?}

{Of course.}

Without further questions, Noah guided her to the guestbook. By then, a few guests waiting outside began to notice her.

Na-hyun handed Riley to Noah and flipped through the guestbook backward. Her fingers trembled uncontrollably. She clenched her fists, then opened them, trying to steady her fingertips, but it was no use.

One page, then another, she turned until she suddenly stopped. Noah, who had been peering over the guestbook with her, let out a quiet gasp.

{It’s in Korean?}

A heavy breath escaped Yoo Na-hyun as she closed her eyes tightly, then opened them again. A faint glisten of tears welled up in her eyes.

— *Congratulations on your wedding. The baby looks healthy, too. Wishing you happiness.*

The hastily scrawled handwriting was unmistakably Kwon Taekjoo’s. Even in college, when teased for his poor handwriting, he would argue

he'd rather spend his time on something else than improving his penmanship. There was no doubt it was his.

{Na-hyun? What's wrong?}

As tears filled Na-hyun's eyes, Noah grew uneasy. Her foster mother, sister, and Noah's family gathered around, repeatedly asking what was wrong. The guests, too, expressed concern, wondering if she was all right.

{No, it's nothing.}

Na-hyun shook her head, forcing a smile. But, in the end, she couldn't hold back the tears, pressing her face into her bouquet as she wept quietly. Noah held her gently, comforting her. Riley reached out with his chubby hands, wiping his mother's tear-streaked cheek.

Na-hyun leaned her cheek against Riley's small hand, kissed it, and confessed honestly.

{I'm just so happy. A friend I wished would come was here, it seems. I thought I'd never see him again.}

{Really? That's good to hear.}

Noah patted her back, relieved. Those who had been worried exchanged soft smiles.

When Na-hyun stopped crying, Noah wrapped his arm around her waist and whispered.

{Shall we begin the wedding, so that friend's blessing isn't wasted?}

{Yes.}

Na-hyun's tearful eyes curved into a bright smile — a truly happy one. Holding hands with Noah and Riley, she headed toward the cake, glancing back briefly. There was no sign of the people she'd hoped to see. Everything she thought she'd seen vanished like a mirage. Facing forward again, she took another step toward her future, silently wishing Kwon Taekjoo well.

Wherever he was, she wished him freedom. And that, like her now, he was happy.

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"Birds of a feather, stuffing their faces together."

A sudden complaint came from behind a newspaper. The server, who had just set down coffee and milk tea, looked curiously at the man behind the newspaper. Soon, as the man folded the newspaper, his gaze met the server's. The sharp-eyed Asian man was none other than Kwon Taekjoo.

{Oh, I wasn't talking to you.}

{Here's the milk tea and coffee you ordered. Is there anything else you need?}

The server looked down at Kwon Taekjoo with a dissatisfied expression, clearly angling for a tip. While Kwon Taekjoo hesitated, wondering how much to give, Zhenya casually tossed a bill onto the table. The server, who had absentmindedly picked up the bill, widened his eyes. With a wave, Zhenya gestured for him to leave as he moved his milk tea closer.

{Call me if you need anything else.}

The server quickly changed his expression and left the table without hesitation. Ignoring this, Zhenya placed two sugar cubes in his milk tea, stirring slowly. He looped a finger through the delicate handle and quietly savored his tea, exuding an almost annoyingly elegant and aristocratic air.

"Why'd you give him a tip bigger than the cost of the drinks, you idiot? Got too much money on your hands?"

Zhenya paid no attention to Kwon Taekjoo's scolding, sipping his milk tea. Really, with more money than he'd ever be able to spend in his

lifetime, what harm was there in wasting it freely? Given its less-than-clean origins, he almost felt it should be spent as extravagantly as possible. Since he was enjoying this indulgent scene thanks to it, maybe it wasn't his place to complain.

Right after attacking the Kremlin, Zhenya left Odinokiy. Not long after, he heard that the Russian president had died from unspecified causes. Though Taekjoo was concerned about him being suspected as the mastermind behind the assassination, Zhenya was confident it wouldn't happen. He was certain no one would credit him with such an achievement.

Though he had some doubts, events unfolded just as Zhenya expected. Russian media refrained from clarifying whether the president's death was due to an explosion, a chronic illness, or an unexpected sudden death. Even the interim government wasn't actively seeking an assassin. Only outside sources buzzed noisily about the sudden death of Russia's highest leader, with all manner of speculation and rumors spreading. Across Russia, people oppressed under the tyrannical regime began protesting and raising their voices. Thanks to the unsettled political atmosphere, they were able to leave Russia relatively easily.

Taekjoo still felt uneasy, wondering if Zhenya might later be accused of assassinating the president. If that happened, he'd never be able to return to Russia. It was, after all, his homeland and the place where Odinokiy, where he and Kwon Taekjoo had spent so much time, was located. The thought of never being able to return was disappointing, and Zhenya felt no differently.

"Are you really okay with running away like this? You liked that island quite a bit. What if someone else takes it over while you're gone? Didn't you hide *Anastasia* there, too?"

"The system there will run smoothly even without me, so it doesn't matter. And even if someone does manage to break through the security and invade, it'd be pointless. Without knowing how to operate *Anastasia*, it's nothing more than a hunk of scrap metal."

Just like how Anna Anderson, who once claimed to be Anastasia, was just an ordinary woman until she presented various pieces of evidence

and testimony...

"Are you really sure about this? It's only a matter of time before they find out it was your doing."

"The timing's off for the Kremlin to have gone down from my bombardment. That's the frustrating part."

"Are you disappointed because you missed the chance to be a killer?"

"More than I couldn't introduce that person to '*Anastasia*.' Either way, if someone had a hand in his death, it should be safe for a while. So don't worry, Taekjoo."

Zhenya was unreservedly optimistic. He seemed convinced that someone he suspected had assassinated the president. Kwon Taekjoo also sensed, if vaguely, that something along those lines had occurred. Right after the Russian president's death, all the national projects he had been leading were halted. The wars justified by the restoration of imperial territories and retaliation against terrorism were also suspended. He thought that perhaps someone with different intentions than the late president had taken advantage of the chaos to eliminate him. Since there had been no clear upheaval of power afterward, the assassin was likely one of the existing power players.

Of course, the fact that Bazim turned out to be the assassin was somewhat unexpected. He was undeniably the president's confidant and close friend. The president's power was his power as well, so he had no need to recklessly risk an uprising. Perhaps his position as a lifelong second-in-command made it different for him.

Whether it was because of the power Bazim had built over time or the backing of the Bogdanov family, no one questioned the president's death. In fact, it was curious to think how things could remain so quiet if it were only heart failure that had killed him.

While the chaos in Russia settled, the two of them constantly changed passports as they roamed around the world. From Central Asia near

Russia to Africa, Europe, and even small island nations, they traveled everywhere, finally arriving in the United States after a full year.

Calling it hiding or escape might not be quite right; it was practically a luxury tour. They blended in with countless tourists to visit historical sites and famous landmarks, spent an entire month on a cruise, or secluded themselves in a remote mountain cabin for days at a time, enjoying the quiet together. They even started a newly launched online game side by side and nearly conquered an entire server.

Taekjoo spent every day on edge, wondering if any force might be pursuing them, growing tense even at the sight of patrolling soldiers and police. But gradually, even that anxiety began to subside.

Wherever the two of them stayed or whatever they tried to do, there were no restrictions. No one seemed to be looking for them specifically. Gradually, they grew accustomed to a life where nothing happened.

They had come to the United States solely to attend Na-hyun's wedding. Normally, a busy time might have prevented them, but now that they were both effectively unemployed, there was no reason not to attend her marriage. Zhenya wasn't entirely pleased about it, but when it came to choosing outfits, he was more dedicated than anyone. Taekjoo had to change his clothes several times due to Zhenya's strange persistence.

*'Hey, take it easy. It's not like we're the ones getting married.'*

*'Why, would you like that?'*

*'What the hell are you talking about? I just mean let's dress simply.'*

*'How long do you plan to keep hiding your true feelings, Taekjoo?'*

Zhenya had clung to him suddenly, claiming that no grand proposal was necessary. Swept up in his insistence, Taekjoo had ended up dealing with things in the cramped dressing room. He really shouldn't have gone into a space that small with him in the first place. The white suit, designed for formal events, had looked almost as if it were part of Zhenya's skin, fitting him so perfectly that, well... Taekjoo drank his

now-cold coffee, reflecting on his past shame with fresh embarrassment.

They were at a cafe, where they'd stopped for breakfast, when Taekjoo found a newspaper someone had left behind. On the front page was an article about the upcoming Russian presidential election. It was called an election, but there was little doubt Bazim would become the next president. Russia had always operated that way, in both design and practice.

"How do you feel?"

"Hmm?"

At the sudden question, Zhenya tilted his head, resting his chin on his arm and giving a mischievous smile.

"What's it like, being related to the next president?"

"What does that have to do with me?"

"When a new president takes office, everyone from their distant relatives to a friend's friend lives in luxury. That's why everyone scrambles to get someone connected to them into office. I mean, we talked about aristocrats and princes, but now you're practically part of an actual royal family."

"It has nothing to do with me. After all, it's Bazim's choice."

"Of course it is."

Zhenya shrugged as Taekjoo gave him a skeptical look.

"Still, I wouldn't say there's no upside at all."

"See? You like it a little, don't you?"

"Bazim's always been fairly lenient as long as no one messes with his things. He's only ever cared about his rivals. I don't need power, and if Bazim, who values practicality, sees his family as a shield rather than a threat, then I shouldn't have to worry about annoying pests getting in my way anymore."

"That's assuming you never go up against him."

"No, Bazim won't let it come to that. He's more fearful than he appears — always worrying about what he could lose."

"He's lenient as long as no one covets what's his, huh... But would that still apply if his reputation were at stake?"

"Reputation?"

"You know how public officials often get dragged down by scandals involving their family members — parents, siblings, children. And let's not forget you are his *dear* brother who is notoriously troublesome on a global scale. A man who'll chop off someone's head like it's a bean sprout if he's in a bad mood, leaving a trail of wreckage behind. Plus, has a male lover, which is something your country openly despises."

They joked around, half-joking and half-serious. Zhenya spoke up, as if it were no big deal.

"If anyone causes trouble....."

"If anyone causes trouble?"

"Just bring Bazim down. That's all."

Was that something to say so casually? Taekjoo glanced around the area unnecessarily.

It was then that, out of nowhere, Zhenya's phone rang. Startled, Taekjoo flinched.

"Ah, damn. That scared me."

Unlike Kwon Taekjoo, who was visibly shocked, Zhenya just glanced at his phone, rolling his eyes, showing no particular intention to answer the call.

"Who is it?" he asked, looking at Zhenya's phone. The caller was none other than Bazim.

"Hey. This guy. Doesn't it feel like he's bugged your phone or something?"

"Impossible."

"Then what's with this perfect timing? He called right after we mentioned him."

"I told you, it's impossible."

Zhenya replied firmly again. For someone who constantly eavesdrops and spies on others to claim no one could possibly do the same to him — it was audacious, but maybe he had his reasons. Looking back, those who tried to trail Zhenya never had a good ending. Even the highly advanced technology of the National Intelligence Service could barely track him. He was certainly unsettling as an enemy but reassuring as an ally.

"Aren't you going to answer?"

"I can ignore it."

"It's been almost a year since he last called, hasn't it?"

"So what?"

"What if something happened to your father?"

"Even if it did, it doesn't matter."

Still, he was his father. The idea that his father's news wouldn't even reach him — did they treat each other as if they didn't exist? The more Taekoo learned, the more messed up that family seemed.

Propping his chin on his arm, Kwon Taekjoo stared blankly at Zhenya before suddenly reaching out and, without a second thought, pressed the call button on the phone.

*[It's me.]*

As the call connected, Bazim's voice came through. Zhenya didn't respond, crossing his arms and staying silent. Kwon Taekjoo glanced at

him, then switched the phone to speaker mode, signaling with his eyes for Zhenya to reply.

“...What do you want?”

Zhenya finally answered reluctantly.

*[Where are you?]*

“No reason to tell you.”

*[Isn't it about time you came back?]*

“After you've had your fun while I was gone? What's missing now that you need me?”

*[Father's health has gotten much worse.]*

“So what? Oh, and tell Volodya congratulations. Seems like the day he finally gets rid of the old man is just around the corner.”

Did he truly not care if his father lived or died? Thinking about the things the Bogdanov family had done to Zhenya, his resentment made sense, but there was a part of Taekjoo that wondered if he'd regret it later. What was wrong with Bisarion exactly? Was it just old age? The “Volodya” Zhenya mentioned was a nickname for his eldest brother, Vladimir. Maybe he was a bit closer to Vladimir than the rest. Listening in on this exchange between brothers stirred small curiosities.

Bazim sighed deeply, then continued his efforts to persuade Zhenya.

*[Whenever you change your mind, come back. I've arranged everything here. I even promise not to set foot on your island again. If you want, I'll set up a place for you wherever you like...]*

“Oh? Starting to feel scared now that I'm out of sight?”

[.....]

“When, and how, will I come to ruin what's yours? Does that thought keep you on edge?”

*[Yevgeny.]*

Was that really Bazim's plan, to draw Zhenya back with such an obvious tactic? They say that when someone reaches the peak of power, they start watching their back. Maybe he wanted to keep his biggest threat within sight. After all, unseen enemies often inspire the most fear.

How could people be this shameless? It wasn't enough to throw a kid into the jaws of death just to boost the family's prestige — they'd used him for all the dirty work, tried to steal his weapons whenever they had the chance, and never once offered a sincere apology. Of course they hadn't.

"You still haven't learned. When you're asking someone for a favor, an apology should come first."

Kwon Taekjoo suddenly chimed in. Bazim paused, startled by the unexpected but oddly familiar voice.

*[...And who are you?]*

"Cut the cheap tricks. If you want something from him, show a little respect. Consider yourself warned — I'll be watching."

Without waiting for a reply, Kwon Taekjoo ended the call. Zhenya looked at him, bewildered.

"Since when did you get so close with Bazim, Taekjoo?"

"That's the point you're focusing on? We just had a few run-ins before."

"You... had run-ins?"

"Ugh, it's just a figure of speech. What are you imagining? Look at you — watching dramas with my mom has made you think all sorts of strange things!"

"When did you even meet him?"

Zhenya's questioning continued, his eyes narrowing as if to figure out the truth. It was one of those misunderstandings that often happened

when Korean expressions were translated literally into Russian. Kwon Taekjoo sighed deeply and answered honestly.

“I just ran into him at the scene of a terrorist attack. And I paid him a brief visit before I came to pick you up.”

“You went to see Bazim? What for?”

“What do you think? To warn him that if he messed with you again, I wouldn’t let it slide.”

At Taekjoo’s blunt reply, Zhenya’s blue eyes went wide. With a sense of foreboding, he raised a hand and said, “Hold on!” But it was too late — Zhenya, like an arrow released from a bow, lunged across the table and wrapped his arms around Kwon Taekjoo. Cups and dishes clattered to the floor as they slid off, drawing the attention of everyone in the cafeteria.

“Hey... Everyone’s watching. This is embarrassing.”

“Ah, Taekjoo...”

Zhenya ignored the onlookers, rubbing his face against Taekjoo’s neck and murmuring his name over and over, unable to hide his overwhelming joy. Honestly, did he really need to act this pleased just because someone took his side?

“You’re getting needier by the day, you bastard.”

Taekjoo gave Zhenya a gentle pat on the back, thinking that maybe he himself was the one who had turned Zhenya into this. So he could only stick around until Zhenya got his bearings again.

Kwon Taekjoo met the eyes of each person in the shop who shot them unpleasant glances. His cold gaze made everyone quickly look away. Even the server who had been coming over to clean up hesitated and retreated.

“Hey, let’s not do this here for everyone to see...”

Taekjoo tried to pull Zhenya back, as he was pressing his lips against Taekjoo’s cheek and ear. If left alone, he’d be liable to go even further,

heedless of who was watching. Not that stopping him would make him let go so easily.

Zhenya kept planting small kisses on Taekjoo's cheek and edging closer to his lips.

Taekjoo turned his head away, pulling back desperately to avoid Zhenya's advances.

"Hmm? Are you listening to me?"

Holding out a bit longer, he finally called Zhenya's name.

"Zhenya."

The trailing tone of his voice sounded like a mix of coaxing and persuading. Zhenya paused and looked up, their eyes meeting as usual.

"Want to go to Korea?"

He said it as casually as he might suggest going back to their lodgings. Zhenya's face filled with surprise at the sudden suggestion, as if he thought he'd misheard.

"All of a sudden?"

"We've been overseas for a year now, and I'm starting to miss kimchi stew. I want to go to a sauna and warm up, too."

"If that's all you're after, we don't have to go all the way to Korea, do we?"

"My mom would love to see you. She might not say it, but she really misses you."

As a last resort, he mentioned his mother. At that, Zhenya, who had been making an inscrutable expression, paused and thought for a moment. For all his grumbling, Taekjoo's mother had always been unconditionally kind to Zhenya — the only person besides Taekjoo who had shown him genuine warmth. It seemed that this connection meant something to him.

"You really can't shake your mama's boy tendencies, can you?"

“Come on, it’s not like that.”

“No need to be embarrassed. If you missed the little woman’s gentle touch, you should have just said so sooner.”

Zhenya smirked and leaned back, still interpreting everything in his own way. He got up, and his voice sounded unusually bright as he said, “Let’s go.”

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*A residential area in Ontario, Canada.* Though it was just early autumn, snow was already piling up all around. In a region where half the year was practically winter, it was no surprise that snow began falling early in autumn. This was her second year living there, so she was used to it by now.

Kwon Taekjoo’s mother stood by the fogged-up window, gazing outside repeatedly. Normally, it would be time for the letter she’d been expecting to arrive. But today, there were noticeably fewer cars passing by the house, and the mail carrier hadn’t shown up. She looked toward the distant road, but there wasn’t even a car resembling a post office van in sight.

The news reported that early snowfall had shut down many roads. After hearing this, she went out in the morning to clear the snow from in front of the house, but it seemed pointless. Snowplows were reportedly beginning to work on major roads from the afternoon onward, so there was no way to know how much longer she’d have to wait.

“Hey, standing watch like that isn’t going to make it come any faster. Come over here and have some tea.”

Kwon Taekjoo’s aunt, who couldn’t bear to see her sister waiting by the window, called her inside. Taekjoo’s mother responded with a quiet

“Alright,” but she stayed rooted in the same spot, unwilling to move.

It was about a year ago when she had suddenly received a call from Kwon Taekjoo. Without any further explanation, he asked her to stay in Canada a little longer until he came to get her himself. He assured her there was nothing to worry about, that every issue had been resolved, but that time was needed. He added that he was safer than anyone else, so she shouldn’t worry, and promised that he would reveal everything to her openly when they met.

After they had hung up, she had tried calling him back immediately, but the recorded message said the number was no longer in service. She had tried calling Zhenya as well, but that line, too, had been out of reach. Feeling uneasy, she had reached out to Yoon Jong-woo for more information. Yoon Jong-woo’s answer had been vague:

*‘Since it’s him, he’ll definitely keep his promise, so this time, please trust and wait for him.’*

Taekjoo’s mother had hesitated for a moment before asking just one question.

*‘Is the ambassador with Taekjoo?’*

*‘Yes, I believe so.’*

It was around the time she’d heard the shocking news that the Kremlin in Russia had suddenly been attacked and even the president had been killed. She worried that Zhenya might be connected to the event, or that the repercussions could put him in danger, but no further news came. After much contemplation, she decided, for the first time, to simply trust her son. The fact that Kwon Taekjoo wasn’t alone, but was with Zhenya, strangely reassured her.

After that, her life in Canada proceeded quite smoothly. Her sister had made a full recovery, and with no one in particular to look after, her life grew more relaxed. In an environment almost cut off from the outside world, she enjoyed a peaceful, stress-free time. The two sisters, who

had been close since childhood, could easily pass the day just chatting about various things.

During that period, postcards arrived sporadically. They had no sender's name, only brief updates in hard-to-read handwriting. Sometimes, even Kwon Taekjoo himself had trouble recognizing his own writing, but his mother could decipher it with ease.

Each postcard featured a different background in its photograph. They were sent just before Kwon Taekjoo and Zhenya would leave each city.

The last piece of mail she received wasn't a postcard, but a letter. It mentioned that they'd arrived in the United States and planned to stay there for about a week. Unexpectedly, a small photo was enclosed. It showed a happy, smiling Asian bride surrounded by many people. After a moment of close examination, she realized it was Na-hyun, Kwon Taekjoo's college friend. She recalled hearing that Na-hyun was living in America and would be getting married soon. Apparently, her wedding had been delayed due to various circumstances, and by now, she even had a sweet baby.

The joy in the photo seemed to convey itself fully. Perhaps Kwon Taekjoo felt the same way. If he had attended his friend's wedding, it was reassuring to think his own life was peaceful as well.

Inside the envelope, there was one more photo. She flipped it over and let out a quiet exclamation.

“Oh my...”

It was a selfie, seemingly taken by Zhenya. Kwon Taekjoo stood behind him, looking in the mirror while adjusting his tie. They seemed to be preparing to attend Na-hyun's wedding. Kwon Taekjoo wore a simple white shirt and black jacket, while Zhenya had on a flowing silk shirt and a white jacket adorned with intricate gold embroidery. The two of them looked so elegant that they could have been mistaken for the main attraction at the wedding.

She was just beginning to anticipate the next letter. She wondered if they were still in the United States, or if they'd already moved on to

another country by now.

"Hey, your tea is getting cold."

"Yeah, got it."

Just as she was about to turn away at her sister's nagging, Kwon Taekjoo's mother couldn't shake off her hesitation and looked out the window again. Her eyes widened as if she had spotted something.

"Sister, I think it's time for me to head home."

Kwon Taekjoo's mother only moved her lips, keeping her gaze fixed outside. Her tone lacked any sense of reality, as if she were speaking in a dream. Her sister gave her a puzzled look, questioning her statement.

"All of a sudden?"

"Yes... I think it's about time."

"Won't you feel lonely if you go back? Isn't Taekjoo away on a trip?"

Kwon Taekjoo's mother just smiled in response, her eyes still fixed on something outside. Her sister, puzzled, moved closer to look out the window too. There, trudging through the snow that had piled up to waist height, she saw her nephew approaching. Right behind him was a strikingly handsome foreigner, who seemed to be nearly two meters tall. The two of them were bickering the entire way to the house. Watching them, Kwon Taekjoo's mother smiled more warmly than ever.

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As always, Chuseok was approaching. Taekjoo's mother insisted that she had to make some pancakes for the holiday and set out to do some grocery shopping. She had just finished a thorough cleaning of the house, which had been empty for a long time. Though Taekjoo had tried

to persuade her to get takeout this year, she held firm to her holiday tradition.

Kwon Taekjoo followed his mother with an expression of pure boredom. She didn't expect more from him than to carry the bags, and he knew it. The market, bustling with people preparing for the national holiday, was so crowded they were practically swept along by the flow. It was almost impossible not to brush shoulders with others.

Though she only intended to get ingredients for a few pancakes, his mother ended up stopping at every stall. Soon, Taekjoo had his hands full carrying all the groceries. Was she planning to throw a feast? All this fuss was thanks to an uninvited guest who had arrived unexpectedly.

"Oh? What's this? Are these side dishes too? Korean food really does have a lot of red in it!"

The unexpected guest, who was clinging to his mother's arm and chatting nonstop, was none other than Olga. She hadn't contacted them at all lately, but suddenly appeared that morning, fully dressed in a hanbok, complete with traditional ornaments and an elegant jade ring. Taekjoo couldn't even imagine where she had managed to find all those items.

"All of these are types of kimchi."

"All of this is kimchi? No way."

"There are so many kinds, aren't there? Apparently, there are even more than this. I read somewhere that there are over a hundred varieties. Do you have anything like this in Russia?"

Taekjoo's mother, looking excited, started explaining the different kinds of kimchi to Olga, telling her the names and main ingredients of each type she pointed to. Somehow, despite the language barrier, she and Olga managed to understand each other — just as she had with Zhenya, even though they only spoke Korean and Russian, respectively. At this

point, Taekjoo began to suspect that his mother might secretly have picked up some Russian.

"Don't worry, Taekjoo. I'll make sure she's sent back by tonight."

Zhenya, standing beside him, assured him while glaring quietly at his sister. Although they were both acting as "porters" on this trip, Zhenya didn't have a single bag in his hands.

"...I doubt that'll happen."

"What? You think I can't handle it?"

"No. Look at all these bags and at my mother's mood. Trust me, you two are stuck here for at least two nights and three days. She won't let her go until she's put on at least three more kilograms."

With a resigned expression, Taekjoo took a step forward again, while Zhenya reluctantly followed, still shooting his sister an annoyed look.

As Olga walked happily arm-in-arm with Taekjoo's mother, she suddenly pointed to a vendor.

"Oh! I know what this is! Hotteok! It's Korean traditional pancakes!"

"Yes, that's right — Hotteok. Do you want to try one?"

Before Olga could respond, Taekjoo's mother ordered a *hotteok*. Freshly made, it was handed to her in a paper cup. Olga accepted it eagerly and immediately began snapping pictures to document the experience.

"Ambassador, would you like one as well?"

Taekjoo's mother offered a *hotteok* to Zhenya, who accepted it with a surprisingly cheerful smile. He sniffed it first, then opened his mouth, deciding it was safe to eat. Taekjoo quickly stopped him.

"Hey, wait. You can't eat that right away."

Zhenya looked at Taekjoo with a puzzled expression, eyeing him up and down as if trying to understand his reasoning. Just as Taekjoo was

about to warn him that it was hot, Zhenya suddenly held his own *hotteok* up close to Taekjoo's face.

"What's this?"

"Isn't this what you meant?"

"What are you talking about, all of a sudden?"

"In your country, isn't it polite to offer food to your elders first?"

Taekjoo let out an impressed "Oh." It was almost touching to hear Zhenya talk about manners. Zhenya, in turn, brought the *hotteok* right up to Taekjoo's lips, adding with a grin,

"I also noticed in the drama that the little woman likes, couples

often do this." Then he smiled, his eyes narrowing in amusement.

"A form of affection, right? So that's why you keep offering me ramen, huh, Taekjoo?"

The truth was, Taekjoo had only ever offered him ramen to mess with him, just to watch him try to hide how spicy it was. But if Zhenya wanted to interpret it as affection, Taekjoo saw no need to correct him.

Blowing on the *hotteok* that Zhenya kept pressing close to his mouth, Taekjoo finally handed it back. Zhenya tilted his head, watching him curiously.

"Such a fussy gesture, Taekjoo."

"What's fussy about it? It's hot inside even if it doesn't look it. If you bite in carelessly, you'll burn your mouth and tongue. Now, go ahead and eat."

"So, it's hot on the inside, even though it looks cool... Is that a self-description?"

"What the fuck are you talking about!"

Taekjoo burst out in exasperation, making both Olga and his mother turn to look at him with wide eyes. Passersby in the bustling market glanced over as well. Flustered, Taekjoo smiled awkwardly and nodded at them. Meanwhile, Zhenya, oblivious to the attention, examined the *hotteok* that Taekjoo had cooled for him, grinning with obvious satisfaction. Judging by his pleased expression and the way he held his chin up, it seemed like he'd drawn some ridiculous conclusion yet again.

"...What's with you?"

"Can't resist a little indirect kiss, can you? I didn't realize you were so eager. If you want a kiss that badly, you could just say so."

"Every time you open your mouth, it's nonsense, isn't it?"

Ignoring Taekjoo's look of disgust, Zhenya bit into the *hotteok*, which had cooled to the perfect temperature. As he savored it, he looked down at Taekjoo with a mocking glint in his eyes, even licking the sticky filling off his lips with a flick of his red tongue. Taekjoo had gone to the trouble of cooling it down so Zhenya wouldn't burn himself, but it was clear Zhenya had thoroughly misinterpreted his intentions. Feeling that arguing further would only raise his blood pressure, Taekjoo shook his head and strode ahead. Zhenya trailed behind him, chuckling and teasing Taekjoo about how easily embarrassed he was.

Meanwhile, Taekjoo's mother entered a nearby rice cake shop she frequented to buy rice flour for making *songpyeon*. The shop owner recognized her and greeted her warmly.

"Oh, welcome!"

"Hello, how have you been?"

"Ah, very well! You must have been busy — I hadn't seen you in so long, I was worried you might have been unwell."

"Oh, I was just visiting my sister for a bit."

"Ah, that's right. Your sister lives abroad, doesn't she? Oh? And who's this young lady...?"

As the shop owner exchanged greetings with Taekjoo's mother, she curiously looked over at Olga, who was busy snapping photos. Her gaze swept over Olga from head to toe, and before Taekjoo's mother could answer, she made a hasty assumption.

"Oh my! Is this your daughter-in-law? So your son is finally getting married?"

"Ah... does it seem that way?"

Taekjoo's mother replied vaguely, which only deepened the misunderstanding. Oblivious, Olga simply kept smiling brightly. Watching her, both Taekjoo's mother and the shop owner began showering her with compliments, remarking on how lovely she was.

"Mother, can't we just buy the rice cakes ready-made?"

Kwon Taekjoo, who had just arrived at the rice cake shop, tried one last time to make his point. The shop owner looked back and forth between him and Olga, then laughed with pure delight.

"Oh my, you two look so good together! Such a beautiful couple!"

A shiver ran down his spine. He slowly turned around, moving like a rusty machine. Zhenya was casually munching on a *hotteok* with a disinterested look. When their eyes met, Zhenya raised his eyebrows as if to ask if Taekjoo had something to say. Taekjoo quietly sighed in relief and patted his chest. If Zhenya had understood what the shop owner had just said, not only the shop but the entire market might have gone up in flames. He was worried because he knew Zhenya could be quite jealous while pretending not to be.

Olga, who had been smiling brightly all along, asked Kwon Taekjoo about the conversation that had taken place.

"Taekjoo, what were you two talking about?"

"It's nothing important."

"Really? Should I use a translator? If I start using one, your mother might also find out about it — would you be okay with that?"

Olga lightly waved her phone. Taekjoo knew he had to prevent his mother from discovering the existence of translation apps, solely because of Zhenya's tendency to say whatever he wanted without any filter in front of her.

"...It seems she mistook you for my fiancée."

"Are you crazy?"

"It wasn't me! She just assumed..."

Olga raised her hand as if she didn't want to hear any more, pressing her forehead and pretending to feel faint.

"Oh, I think I've heard something way too shocking. It's making me uncomfortable."

"Hey, I'm not thrilled about this either!"

"Of course you aren't. After all, you like men, Taekjoo."

"It's not that I like men, it's just..."

He felt a sharp ache at the back of his neck, like his blood flow had suddenly surged to his head. He wanted to snap back but quickly realized it would be a pointless argument and gave up. Just then, his mother stepped out of the store.

"Well, take care, and enjoy the holiday."

"Thank you. Please get home safely."

With a gentle hand placed over her dress's collar, Olga bowed respectfully and followed his mother out. Now burdened with an additional 5 kilograms of rice cakes, Kwon Taekjoo clicked his tongue

and trailed after the two of them. The rice cake shop owner came out to see them off, giving Taekjoo a playful wink as he left.

"Finally fulfilling your filial duty, huh? Your mother's lifelong wish was to have a daughter-in-law. You better live happily together."

It seemed his mother hadn't corrected the misunderstanding until the very end. Taekjoo felt a pang of guilt but tried not to show it. He gave a sheepish smile and pulled on Zhenya's collar, saying, "Let's go." Zhenya followed obediently but kept looking back at the rice cake shop.

"What's up, idiot?"

"That woman... why does she keep smiling at you?"

"She was giving us her blessing, wishing us a happy life."

Taekjoo held out his hand toward Zhenya, who was loaded with bags. Zhenya just stared blankly, not immediately understanding the gesture. When Taekjoo gently brushed his thumb over the back of Zhenya's hand, Zhenya finally got it and placed his hand on Taekjoo's, holding it as if to support him. Now, one arm felt significantly lighter. Though Zhenya still needed clear hints to catch on, it made Taekjoo feel like all the effort to teach him was worth it.

"Here, help carry some of this, too. Let's try to live 'happily ever after,' shall we?"

With a grin, Taekjoo tugged on Zhenya's hand. Suddenly, Zhenya leaned in, bringing his face uncomfortably close. Taekjoo barely managed to turn his head in time to avoid contact. Zhenya didn't give up, persistently leaning closer. Taekjoo twisted his head from side to side to dodge him, limited by the hand Zhenya still held. After a while, both were panting, shoulders heaving, locked in a stubborn stand-off.

"Hah... hah... Everyone's watching, you crazy bastard!"

"You're the one who proposed in public and now you're backtracking?"

"Who proposed...!"

Before he could even finish speaking, Zhenya lunged, seizing the moment. Stumbling backward in a hurry, he tripped and fell backward toward the emergency stairs of the shopping complex. Zhenya immediately toppled over him, and their lips met. The bags that had been filling both hands crashed to the ground. At least Zhenya instinctively wrapped a hand around his neck, preventing a concussion. But was that really something to be grateful for?

Glaring at Zhenya in irritation, he pulled the guy close, locking his arms around his head. The damage was done, and he was willing to let things go as they might. Zhenya let out a sweet breath, vibrating softly in his throat.

People continued walking by, oblivious to the two hidden by the stairway. The marketplace was as loud and bustling as ever, as if nothing had happened at all.

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“How old are you that you still go tripping and falling? Watch where you’re going for once!”

His mother let out a stream of scolding while tidying up the bruised fruits. Thanks to Zhenya’s intense display of affection, neither his body nor his belongings had come out unscathed.

Kwon Taekjoo, wearing an embarrassed expression, muttered as he pulled out the broken green onions and the shattered onion bits.

“It’s because there were too many people. I was trying not to fall, but ended up getting hurt even worse. And really, Mother, you’re so indifferent. Aren’t you worried about your hurt son?”

“Worried? A grown man scraping his knees is what I should worry about? Good grief!

Are you ever going to stop being so clumsy? Just put that down and go disinfect it!”

He grumbled in vain, only to receive an extra dose of scolding. Zhenya and Olga, sitting beside the mother and son, simply sipped their tea with amusement.

“Judging by her scolding, she hasn’t aged a bit. Her voice has only gotten stronger.”

“Why are you grumbling so much? Hurry up and put some ointment on it!”

“Fine, fine, I’m going.”

Unable to resist his mother’s nagging, he got up from his seat. Just as he was leaving the kitchen, the doorbell rang. He went to the intercom and looked at the screen. Yoon Jong-woo’s beaming face filled the display.

*[Mother! It’s me! Jong-woo’s here!]*

Yoon Jong-woo’s booming voice was loud enough to echo through the entire apartment. With an unimpressed look, Kwon Taekjoo glared at him on the screen.

“What’s this? Mother, did you invite him too?”

“Jong-woo’s parents went on a trip to Europe. He said he was going to spend the holiday quietly on his own, so I told him to come and have a meal with us.”

His mother’s voice rang out from the kitchen. As if. Kwon Taekjoo narrowed his eyes skeptically.

“That’s a load of nonsense. A total lie.”

Grumbling to himself, he went to the front door. Somehow, every holiday, Zhenya, Olga, and Yoon Jong-woo would end up coming and going from his place as if it were their own.

At this point, it was practically a yearly tradition.

When he opened the door, Yoon Jong-woo stood there with a huge smile, holding a basket of fruit in one hand and a large bouquet of flowers in the other.

"Sunbae, it's been a while! How have you been?"

Yoon Jong-woo greeted him with a typical, rehearsed line, his eyes darting around busily as if searching for something. When he couldn't spot the person he was looking for, he craned his neck to peek further into the house. Kwon Taekjoo quickly snatched the gifts out of his hands.

"Thanks. I'll let my mother know you stopped by. Have a great holiday and travel safe."

"Huh? You're just going to send me off?"

"Holidays are meant to be spent with family at home."

Smiling, he started to push Jong-woo out. Yoon Jong-woo, flustered, grabbed onto the doorframe to hold his ground.

"Wait! Hold on! Your mother invited me to join you all for a meal! I haven't even greeted her yet — how can you just throw me out like this, Sunbae?"

"Which is why I said I'll let her know you came by."

Just as Kwon Taekjoo's teasing was reaching its peak, someone approached. It was Olga.

{Jong-woo!}

Immediately, Yoon Jong-woo's mouth dropped open, a grin spreading wide. So that was the real reason he was here. With renewed strength, he slipped free from Kwon Taekjoo's grip. Standing face-to-face with Olga, his eyes, nose, and mouth practically melted with happiness.

{It's been a while. How have you been?}

{Yes! And how have you been, Miss Olga? Has your health been a bit better?}

{My health is always the same, you know. What can I do about this tragic fate?}

{Oh no, Miss Olga...}

{I think there's a certain charm to living as a delicate beauty.}

{Well, yes, that's true.}

{What do you mean, 'yes, that's true'?}

Kwon Taekjoo chided Yoon Jong-woo, who was completely entranced, agreeing like a fool. Yet neither Olga, with her hands clasped together like a tragic heroine, nor Yoon Jong-woo, who seemed ready to give up anything for her, seemed to hear a word Taekjoo was saying.

{More importantly, how do I look today?}

Olga spread her arms, as if she'd never been sorrowful, and spun around on the spot. Jong-woo clapped enthusiastically and showered her with praise.

{Wow, Miss Olga! All dressed up, you look like a fairy!}

It was too much to keep watching. Taekjoo gave Jong-woo a firm kick, shoving him inside.

“Tone it down, seriously. It’s disgusting to watch.”

“What did I do, Sunbae?”

“Shameless. Quit blocking the way and get inside already.”

Yoon Jong-woo pouted slightly, then suddenly handed over an envelope. With his hands already full, Kwon Taekjoo couldn't take it right away and asked what it was.

“Sunbae, it’s your new ID and related documents.”

“Oh... it’s already here?”

“Already? It just *now* came out. You’ve been inconvenienced all this time. It seems the process was complicated since it had to be handled discreetly.”

While he had roamed overseas and even after returning to Korea, he had lived under a temporary identity. Having worked as an operative for so long, he was used to living under someone else’s name. But each time he returned, he felt like he was picking up his own life where he’d left it — even though that life had, in truth, come to a permanent halt a year ago. It was his decision, and he didn’t regret it, but it stirred a strange feeling.

“Can I really call this a ‘new life’? You know about it, the Director knows about it, and anyone involved knows about it.”

“For now, maybe, but time will take care of that, won’t it? Officially, at least, a period has been put on your past life. And now, even if something happens in the country, you won’t get dragged into it. Don’t you miss it, though? All your academic and professional history is erased.”

“Well, none of that really matters anymore.”

“The Director says to live a good, honest life. Don’t let anything from the past come back up.”

Yoon Jong-woo folded the document envelope neatly and slipped it into Kwon Taekjoo’s pants pocket. Then, saying, “Ah, I’m hungry,” he promptly took off his shoes and stepped inside.

Kwon Taekjoo stood in the entryway, looking down at the document envelope tucked into his pocket. Director Kwak had agreed to his request, and as a result, his original resident registration number had been deleted. The National Intelligence Service’s record that he had died in action while on a mission in Iran remained unaltered. According

to Yoon Jong-woo, a nameless star was newly engraved on the main hall of the new headquarters, and on that day, the staff took a moment to honor the memory of their fallen colleague.

In truth, not much had changed in Kwon Taekjoo's life itself. He had briefly informed his mother about recent events and hinted that his original resident registration would be canceled due to his resignation. His mother said she could accept all the changes as long as her only son would no longer be involved in dangerous work.

In any case, Kwon Taekjoo's occupation had never been publicly disclosed, and after joining the National Intelligence Service, he had not actively maintained relationships with family or close acquaintances, so establishing a new life was relatively easy. Only the fundamental question of how he would live from now on remained.

"Taekjoo, what are you doing just standing there?"

While the kitchen bustled with Yoon Jong-woo's arrival, Zhenya, noticing Kwon Taekjoo had been gone for quite a while, came out to find him. Receiving his new ID had almost stirred up mixed feelings, but seeing him chased those thoughts away entirely.

"No, it's nothing. Let's go in."

He grinned and started toward the kitchen again, but Zhenya abruptly grabbed his wrist. Then he gazed blankly at the scraped palm that had been injured when he fell.

"You haven't even treated it yet."

"It's nothing worth treating. It'll heal on its own."

Small scrapes like these were so common that Kwon Taekjoo barely noticed them. But Zhenya thought otherwise. Without hesitation, Zhenya leaned in and licked the wound, his gentle tongue meticulously tracing over the scrape. Sometimes, it seemed like he took care of Kwon Taekjoo's body more attentively than Kwon Taekjoo himself did. Kwon Taekjoo ruffled Zhenya's hair roughly. Zhenya looked up at him, puzzled.

All of Zhenya's questions, curiosity, and interest had always been directed in one direction. Beneath it all lay a deep, steadfast affection that seemed uncharacteristic of him. There were moments when life felt empty or his thoughts grew heavy, but it seemed unlikely that he would ever regret his choice. No, he wouldn't.

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The table was overflowing with food, so much so that they had to stack small dishes atop larger ones, just like at a traditional Korean table setting. Kwon Taekjoo's mother hadn't prepared this much food since inviting his father's colleagues over when he was still alive. It was hard to know where to start, or if they'd even be able to try everything.  
“There’s not much, but please help yourselves.”

“Oh, Mother, not much? This table looks like it’s about to collapse! I feel like royalty today!”

“Jong-woo, you helped a lot with the prep. I’ll pack some food for you to take home later.”

“Thank you, Mother. I’ll enjoy it.”

Yoon Jong-woo, smiling with easygoing cheer, was met with a disapproving look. As he raised his spoon with a wide grin, he suddenly flinched. But it wasn’t due to Kwon Taekjoo’s glare. It was because Zhenya, seated beside him, was glaring daggers at him.

{Ah, uh... Mr. Yevgeny, please, have some more.}

“Hey, how long are you going to keep using formal language? You two are friends, right?”

"Friends? What friends...!"

"Oh, really? Jong-woo, are you the same age as the ambassador?"

As Yoon Jong-woo leapt up, trying to deny it, his mother clapped her hands, delighted.

She looked back and forth between Yoon Jong-woo and Zhenya with utter satisfaction. Yoon Jong-woo let out an awkward chuckle.

"It's just a coincidence that we were born in the same year, that's all. Ha ha ha."

"So there's no reason to keep feeling awkward. If you're going to come to our house like this often, you'll keep running into him, right? How long are you going to keep doing that? He's not an ambassador or anything anymore."

"That's exactly why it's scarier! Since he has nothing to lose now, who knows what he might do!"

"...Huh? Are you saying you're afraid of the ambassador?"

Their mother tilted her head, looking curiously at Zhenya. Zhenya met her gaze with a gentle smile. The faint concern in her expression softened instantly.

"Is it because the ambassador is so tall? He's such a kind person."

"Ha ha, ha... I just get nervous around foreigners."

Yoon Jong-woo tried to cover up clumsily, grabbing food and stuffing it into his mouth. His cheeks were full to bursting, and he raised his thumbs, saying it was delicious while clapping his hands nonstop. Their mother beamed at his enthusiastic praise, offering him more food and refilling his empty glass.

"Stop staring and eat your food."

Kwon Taekjoo lightly nudged Zhenya's foot under the table. Only then did Zhenya's gaze, which had been fixed intensely on Yoon Jong-woo, shift to Kwon Taekjoo. He gestured at the food, urging him to eat. Zhenya picked up his fork without much interest and lifted some japchae noodles from his plate. The thin noodles slipped right off. Their mother sighed softly at the sight. Zhenya simply looked at Kwon Taekjoo wordlessly.

"Haa."

Kwon Taekjoo grabbed a generous amount of japchae with his chopsticks and placed it in Zhenya's bowl. Zhenya then twirled the noodles neatly with his fork and took a bite. He could manage just fine if he tried, yet he insisted on fussing.

Their mother pushed some ribs and jeon toward Zhenya, telling him to have some of that, too. As soon as he finished his plate, Zhenya quietly fixed his gaze on Kwon Taekjoo. With a sigh, Kwon Taekjoo piled side dishes onto Zhenya's rice bowl until it was stacked high. Olga watched her brother with a look of open disdain, but Zhenya paid no attention, simply spearing a well-prepared piece of rib and putting it into his mouth.

Olga sneered as if she couldn't believe what she was seeing.

"Not a romance but practically raising a child, aren't you, Taekjoo?"

"And whose fault is it that this guy's just a big overgrown kid?"

Taekjoo frowned.

A member of the Bogdanov family had no room to talk, he thought. Zhenya, who'd been listening quietly, raised his chin slightly. Seeing that, Olga's expression twisted.

"A big kid? Even as a figure of speech, how could you see him as a child? You've got some nerve."

"Big talk, considering you passed him off to me so easily."

"We never passed him off. You just decided to pick him up on your own."

"Oh, really? If you abandoned him once, then leave him alone; why keep dragging things out?"

"I never did that."

"A moment ago, it was 'we.' You're quick to change your tune."

"Are you going to keep this up? Are you picking a fight?"

"You're the one who started it. So why bother coming over and seeing things you'd rather not?"

Muttering as if to himself, Taekjoo picked up a piece of meat and placed it in Zhenya's bowl. Yoon Jong-woo darted his eyes nervously between Kwon Taekjoo and Olga as their standoff continued, struggling to swallow even as he chewed thoroughly. Meanwhile, Zhenya quietly continued eating, as if it were none of his concern.

"Look at this. Aren't these *songpyeon* dumplings made by the ambassador just beautiful?"

As his mother picked up a piece of *songpyeon*, the tense atmosphere quickly dissipated. The dumpling in her chopsticks was perfectly shaped and balanced, almost machine-made in its precision. It seemed there was nothing he couldn't make well by hand. The *songpyeon* made by Kwon Taekjoo, Yoon Jong-woo, and Olga looked half-finished, resembling deformed dumplings, making Zhenya's perfectly crafted one stand out even more.

"In Korea, there's a saying that if you make *songpyeon* beautifully, you'll have a beautiful child. The ambassador is already so handsome, so his child would naturally be beautiful too."

Smiling, his mother explained. Zhenya instinctively looked over at Kwon Taekjoo, and Olga glanced over with a curious expression. Both seemed

intrigued, wondering what she was saying while holding the *songpyeon* for so long.

{Oh, in Korea, there's a belief that if you make *songpyeon* or dumplings well, you'll have beautiful children. Taekjoo's mother was saying that since Mr. Yevgeny has such skillful hands, his child would be beautiful too.}

Despite Taekjoo choosing not to translate, Yoon Jong-woo blurted out an explanation. Zhenya, who had been quietly listening, chuckled and tilted his head at Taekjoo's mother.

"Well, we'll have to wait and see about that. Your son, after all, isn't exactly blessed with skilled hands."

Caught off guard by the unexpected remark, Olga choked, coughing violently. This lunatic had no filter, even at the dinner table.

"Oh my, are you okay?"

{Miss Olga, are you alright? Here's a tissue.}

His mother and Yoon Jong-woo, not understanding Zhenya's words, worried over Olga, while Kwon Taekjoo shot Zhenya a sharp look, silently telling him to watch his mouth.

Zhenya raised an eyebrow, as if asking what he'd done wrong.

Once Olga regained her composure, his mother tried to remember where they'd left off and looked back at Zhenya. Trying to avoid further strange conversation, Taekjoo abruptly stood up, drawing everyone's gaze.

"Looks like we're all done eating. Let's start cleaning up."

"What's the rush? We have guests here."

"Oh, the smell of food sticks around. We should clean up quickly and take a break, or we'll be up till dawn."

"Then, how about we play *yut* for the dishes? It'd be fun to introduce Mr. Yevgeny and Miss Olga to a traditional Korean game."

Yoon Jong-woo suggested brightly, clearly not planning on going home anytime soon.

"Why bother with a game when we have a dishwasher?"

"We still have to rinse everything first. And there's so much today that we'll need multiple cycles, right? Running the dishwasher all night would be a hassle."

Kwon Taekjoo was about to argue that it was pointless, but his mother readily agreed. "Shall we go for it then, to really set the holiday mood?"

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(T/N : Yutnori is a traditional Korean game where players roll four wooden sticks to move their pieces around a board. The goal is to move all your pieces from start to finish before your opponents. The game is played by interpreting the stick toss results, which dictate how many spaces you move each turn.)

Before he knew it, the game of *yut* had begun. With five players, Taekjoo's mother and Olga teamed up, while the other three each played solo.

They determined the order with a game of rock-paper-scissors and started throwing the sticks. Somehow, every time his mother and Olga tossed, they rolled a *yut* or a *mo*. The two of them quickly advanced, moving two pieces at a time right from the start. In contrast, Yoon Jong-woo kept rolling *gae* consistently, making him wonder how he could be so unlucky in a game that depended solely on chance and quick

decisions. Kwon Taekjoo, who went next, also mainly rolled *gae*, but it wasn't a huge problem, as he used Yoon Jong-woo's markers as stepping stones to advance. Watching Taekjoo repeatedly land on his markers, Yoon Jong-woo finally voiced his frustration.

"Ah, come on, Sunbae. That's just cheap."

"Cheap? I've got to survive too, you know."

As the two of them bickered, Zhenya took his turn, tossing the sticks. He rolled a *yut*, capturing the piece that had leapt ahead by trampling over Yoon Jong-woo. And that wasn't the end of it. Every time Taekjoo rolled *gae*, Zhenya would roll *gae* as well; when Taekjoo rolled *geol*, Zhenya would get *geol*. Occasionally, after *mo*, Zhenya would roll a *geol*, just so he could deliberately catch up to Taekjoo's marker sitting in the third space, capturing it while taking a wide loop around.

As a result, not only Yoon Jong-woo and Taekjoo, but even Zhenya himself, could barely make any progress forward.

It was just a simple game of *yut*, but frustration boiled over.

"Hey, you jerk! Go your own way! Why do you keep going out of your way to capture my pieces?"

"How can I avoid you when you're right in front of me?"

"What did you say, bastard? Are you trying to drag us both down?"

"Taekjoo. There are plenty of ears listening... no shame at all, huh?"

Zhenya, even with his collar being grabbed, smirked slightly. He then used his thumb to rub the inside of Kwon Taekjoo's wrist, almost as if tickling it. Taekjoo couldn't understand what on earth he might have said to provoke such a smug reaction from Zhenya, nor why the guy looked so self-satisfied.

Meanwhile, Olga, thoroughly entertained, ignored the two of them and focused on the game. Her hand seemed to fit together as if by magic.

"Alright, with this, we'll carry on! And another turn!"

In an instant, four of the game pieces gathered in one spot. Yoon Jong-woo, still stuck at the starting point, tried to stop Olga.

{Hey! Miss Olga, that's a bit greedy!}

{It's all or nothing in life!}

The tide turned quickly. Feeling anxious, Yoon Jong-woo shoved his piece forward in frustration.

“Come on, catch up! Hurry up and get there!”

“Ah, you keep grabbing me! How am I supposed to do anything if you keep holding me back, Sunbae?”

Yoon Jong-woo, nearly in tears, moved his piece up to the fifth square. Olga and his mother's four pieces were just four squares ahead. Kwon Taekjoo alone now had the chance to send them all back to the start and claim the lead.

With a desperate gaze, Kwon Taekjoo looked at Zhenya. Zhenya tossed the *yut* sticks indifferently. He landed a *yut* (a favorable roll). Taekjoo watched anxiously, hoping against hope. On the bonus roll, he scored a *do* (another favorable roll), just as Taekjoo had feared.

“...No.”

“For some reason, Taekjoo, the more you say ‘no,’ the more I want to do it.”

Taekjoo shook his head desperately, but Zhenya, without hesitation, moved forward and captured Taekjoo's piece. Given another turn, he threw the *yut* sticks again. This time, he rolled a *geol*, positioning his piece right in the center. Swallowing his frustration, Taekjoo quickly strategized. If his mother and Olga passed through the center and landed exactly at the starting point, Zhenya would need to roll a *geol* on his next turn to capture all four of their pieces for Taekjoo to have a chance at victory. But the problem was that Zhenya seemed dead set on capturing Taekjoo instead. As it was, enemies were everywhere, and even their combined efforts might not be enough.

Olga threw the *yut* sticks with all her might. They clicked and clattered as they fell. When an unusual roll came up, Olga tilted her head, puzzled.

{Huh? What's this?}

“Oh, a *baekdo*.”

{Miss Olga, you'll have to move one space back.}

{Hm? If I move back...]

Olga's eyes slowly shifted, and soon she noticed Zhenya's piece right behind her own. With a sly, triumphant smile, she moved her piece back, sending Zhenya's piece flying off the *yut* board. Zhenya looked stunned, letting out a disbelieving sigh. Taekjoo's mother threw the *yut* sticks for an extra roll.

Amazingly, she rolled a *mo* (the highest roll), securing an instant victory for them.

“Yes! We won!”

Olga exclaimed. Savoring the thrilling victory, she hugged Taekjoo's mother tightly, rubbing her cheek against hers. Taekjoo's mother, laughing brightly, patted Olga's back.

“I really should have had a daughter.”

{Huh? What did Taekjoo's mom just say?}

{She thinks you're so lovely, she wishes you were her

daughter.} Yoon Jong-woo translated quickly, with a bit

of sentiment.

Olga blinked, then laughed out loud.

“Consider me your daughter. Who knows, we might actually become family someday.”

“If you’re going to keep this up, just go home already.”

“Oh? Is this how people in Korea kick out their guests?”

“How many times do I have to tell you? You’re not a guest, you’re an uninvited nuisance.”

As Kwon Taekjoo and Olga continued to bicker, his mother and Yoon Jong-woo blinked, staring intently at him, curious about what Olga was chattering about in Russian. Unable to translate it directly, Taekjoo improvised.

“She’s... thanking you for being so nice.”

“Huh? But isn’t ‘thank you’ in Russian ‘spasibo’? That didn’t sound anything like it.”

“Just get the gist, you bastard.”

He snapped back at Yoon Jong-woo, who was picking at every detail. At that, Zhenya, who had been quietly watching, slowly looked back and forth between the two. Seeing that Yoon Jong-woo went pale, he quickly explained that what Taekjoo said was, technically, an insult. Zhenya still seemed doubtful. Desperate, Yoon Jong-woo grabbed Taekjoo’s pant leg, pleading for him to explain. With a sigh, Taekjoo stood up, and as expected, Zhenya’s gaze followed him. Taekjoo jerked his head toward the kitchen.

“Get up. You lost, so it’s time to wash the dishes.”

Zhenya glanced over at Yoon Jong-woo, dissatisfied, wondering why he was the only one exempt from the dish duty when all three of them had returned to the starting point.

“If my mom and Olga are talking alone, at least he should join them so there’s someone who can actually understand.”

“Hm...”

“Besides, wouldn’t it be nice to have some alone time with me, too?”

At this, Olga made a clear sound of disgust, looking visibly uncomfortable. Taekjoo's mother and Yoon Jong-woo glanced at her, puzzled.

Unfazed, Taekjoo gave Zhenya another look to follow him, and he headed into the kitchen. Standing by the sink, Zhenya quickly came up behind him, wrapping his arms around Taekjoo in a sudden embrace. Resting his head on Taekjoo's shoulder, he pressed his forehead against the back of Taekjoo's neck, rubbing it softly. Zhenya's breaths seemed a bit unsteady, almost excited.

"That game, *Yutnori*, is pretty fun."

"Fun? What's so fun about it? It just makes me mad."

"It lets me catch you as much as I want."

"Hah... You really do have strange tastes."

"You're hardly one to talk."

He roughly tousled Zhenya's hair that tickled his face, then raised his head and kissed him on the cheek. In response, Zhenya immediately turned to press their lips together. "No," he said, pushing him back, but the man stubbornly leaned in again, layering their lips once more. As the laughter of his mother, Olga, and Yoon Jong-woo echoed nearby, he surrendered sweetly to him.

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The next afternoon, they all visited the National Cemetery. Having drunk heavily until dawn and used it as an excuse to avoid going home, the three of them stayed. As usual, Olga was dressed in a black mini dress with a cape and carried a lace parasol. It was a different design from the one she'd worn before. Had she intentionally picked out something new?

Yoon Jong-woo, grinning widely, volunteered to take photos. Olga shifted subtly in front of him, adjusting her poses. They took hundreds

of photos in just one spot, occasionally bringing his mother in for shots together. Maybe thanks to this, his mother, who usually looked somber whenever she visited his father and brother, didn't lose her smile.

After observing them briefly, he turned to face forward. In front of his father's grave stood a tombstone inscribed with "*Grave of Army Colonel Kwon Ho-hyun*." He had been only forty-five at the time of his death. Perhaps it was the most noble and honorable end for a soldier. Kwon Taekjoo, too, had reached this peaceful day because of his father's sacrifice, and as a citizen, he was indebted to him. But for the family left behind, his absence was a long, profound sorrow. Thinking of his father always brought a mix of pride and resentment.

As he stood there in silence, Zhenya placed a white lily at the base of the tombstone.

Watching him quietly, Taekjoo finally spoke.

"I've always wondered. What kind of life my father led. Even after experiencing the life left for the family after he died, what made my brother choose to become a soldier. Is protecting the country so meaningful that it's worth giving up personal safety or happiness?"

Zhenya raised an eyebrow, seemingly surprised; Taekjoo had never voiced these thoughts before. Shrugging, Taekjoo added,

"I thought... maybe if I put myself in the same position, I might understand it a little better."

That was why, long ago, Taekjoo couldn't take his eyes off a recruitment notice for a special forces unit he happened to see. It was also why he hadn't hesitated when the National Intelligence Service unexpectedly offered him a position. At the same time, it backed up his previous statement that he didn't have any special sense of patriotism.

After a pause, Zhenya asked,

"So, did you understand?"

Without hesitation, Taekjoo shook his head.

"No. I'm not either of them. Just because our situations are similar doesn't mean I can fully empathize with their feelings."

"Yet you managed to endure?"

"It wasn't so bad. Testing my limits, completing missions that seemed impossible — it gave me a sense of accomplishment, boosted my self-efficacy, and was more thrilling than anything else."

A faint smile appeared on Zhenya's lips.

"Sounds like something a masochist would say."

"Who's a masochist? How can you say that in front of someone's father, you bastard?"

"Come on, Taekjoo. If he had ears, he'd already know everything we do together."

The shameless reply left him momentarily speechless. This time, he couldn't even call it a leap in logic. With a huff, he lightly punched Zhenya on the shoulder, indicating he'd had enough. Zhenya just laughed, looking oddly pleased despite the playful hit. Gradually, his expression grew serious as he asked,

"But even so, you're really going to give it up?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Working for the country might indirectly protect me and my family, but I'm not really there. Everything I've accomplished so far has been for my own satisfaction — none of it's recorded, nor should it be. Suddenly, I'm questioning what it all means. Nearly losing my life brought me back to my senses. If I'm suffering so deeply that I'd rather be dead, what value do honor or patriotism really have? I'm even starting to doubt if what I believed was right was ever truly just. It's just time to walk away from it all."

He laid out the thoughts and conclusions he had turned over alone all this time. Zhenya, who had been listening quietly, offered an

unexpected observation.

"Took you long enough to figure that out. It wasn't exactly a hard problem."

"Right? If I hadn't met you, I'd probably still be lost."

"Am I your answer?"

For a moment, Zhenya's pale eyes seemed almost transparent with intrigue. Taekjoo hadn't thought of it that way before, but he didn't see any need to disappoint him. Scratching his chin, he paused thoughtfully, then replied, as if it didn't matter much either way.

"Well... maybe you're not the textbook answer, but so what. We have a saying that even if you go a roundabout way, you'll still reach Seoul."

"What does that mean?"

As expected, Zhenya frowned, clearly unimpressed by the vague response despite his quick intuition. Taekjoo grinned and tousled Zhenya's hair playfully. His expression had never looked so carefree.

"I'm saying I'm satisfied with you as my answer."

Zhenya's blue eyes, which had widened for a moment, softened, his eyelids lowering halfway as his gaze became gentle. It was a look that promised a kiss.

**"Mother! What's this? There's a flower blooming here I haven't seen before!"**

Yoon Jong-woo, who had been walking toward the grave, abruptly turned and led his mother and Olga to the opposite side. His determined voice echoed through the quiet cemetery.

With a quiet laugh, Taekjoo held Zhenya's chin as he drew closer and lightly kissed him. The blazing sunset, filtered through their joined lips, cast a warm halo that embraced the two lovers.

In this sacred place honoring noble spirits, Taekjoo made a promise to leave his past self behind and move forward. His heart beat with

pleasant anticipation for a new life. Whatever that life might be, he felt that with Zhenya by his side, he would no longer feel lonely or weary.

**{ THE END }**

**Transl. —Zaww.**