

Children of an Age

an *Illang: The Wolf Brigade* fanfic

by **Rodo**

for *ardentaislinn*

NOW, I'LL LIVE by my own rules. The words reverberated in Im Joong-kyung's chest as he turned away, turned to leave behind everything that had been his life for the past five years. He felt light, despite the wounds from two battles and the armor he still wore. He felt free. What came next didn't matter. He could hear Jang Jin-tae breathe heavily behind him, could hear the crows caw outside. He could smell the decaying leaves scattered throughout the building and he felt the crisp cold of the sunny winter morning. He was alive, and with every step, the burden of his past became easier to bear.

A shot tore through the quiet. For a moment, Joong-kyung thought it had hit him. The thought didn't bother him much. He had made peace with his death long ago. That it should come at the hands of someone who had been a mentor to him felt oddly appropriate, even.

But the pain never came, and neither did he feel his body crumble. He simply stood still, waiting.

"You didn't think walking away from this life would be that easy, did you?" Jang Jin-tae said.

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The small fishing village of Sachon was not the kind of place where Lee Yoon-hee would have pictured herself settling down. It was small, quiet, intimate. The very opposite of Seoul. Everybody knew everybody else and Yoon-hee would be "the new girl" for the next forty years, at least. If she stayed that long. Her life had been so full of uncertainty for so long, she had never learned how to think of something as permanent. Everything was just "for now". But she wanted to try, for her brother and for herself. Sachon was the kind of place that might teach her.

Yoon-woo had fallen in love almost immediately. After his early years in a succession of cramped apartments and then his time confined to a hospital bed, he relished the wide open space. He loved going to school, making friends, running through the fields high above the shoreline. He liked watching the boats leave with the tide and playing in the old, abandoned buildings. In that one regard, Sachon was like Seoul. Only here, the buildings had been abandoned long before the sanctions. What was left of the local industry had learned to make do, as had Yoon-hee.

“Be careful when running, young man,” old Mrs. Kim would admonish Yoon-woo every other morning when she caught them on their way to the bus stop. “The roads haven’t been paved in ages.”

Yoon-woo never listened, and Yoon-hee couldn’t bring herself to fault him for it. “He’s just catching up on all the running he missed out on,” she’d answer.

The old lady would shake her head and cluck her tongue, then turn around to hide her smile. Mrs. Kim was a small, frail old lady, old enough to still remember some of the Korean War. Yoon-hee rented the upper story of her house, which Mrs. Kim no longer had any use for since her son had died. Her daughter had moved away long ago. What she had use for was someone to tell her stories to, someone to help her make kimchi, and young people to treat like the grandchildren she barely saw. Yoon-hee only had vague memories of her own grandmother, and Yoon-woo none, so it seemed they were a perfect match.

After dropping Yoon-woo off at the bus stop, Yoon-hee would go to work. If it was a Monday, Wednesday or Friday, she would go to the local library where she read storybooks to children and helped the elderly with the ancient computers. On Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays she’d work at the cafe that overlooked the harbor and whose decor was still stuck in the nineties. She’d even managed to make friends of a sort with Min-ji, her fellow waitress/barista, who dreamed of Seoul or Pyongyang, anywhere but Sachon, and who couldn’t understand why Yoon-hee did not.

It was a peaceful, mundane life. Something Yoon-hee would never have thought she wanted, back when she was still Kim Seo-hee and so eager to change the world, to rebel, to make her mark, to get revenge. She didn’t even know what she had been thinking back then anymore. She had just been angry. It was hard to be angry at anything in Sachon, where she could see rice paddies out of the bedroom window, where the fresh sea breeze made summer bearable. There were

no protests, no Sect, no police on the streets except for Officers Lee and Moon, who came by the cafe once or twice a week on their rounds to chat with the waitresses and have some coffee (an americano for Officer Lee, a latte for Officer Moon). Everything smelled faintly of salt instead of smoke and smog, and time was governed by the moon, not some atomic clock.

And yet, sometimes Yoon-hee felt haunted. Maybe it was because she'd lived in fear so long, running from the police, trapped in the bookshop. Maybe it was because she had seen him on the platform for a second, back when she and Yoon-woo had left Seoul behind. Sometimes, she felt as if somebody was watching her from the shadows when she walked home in the dark.

She never told anybody about it – she didn't want to feel silly – but she still prayed for him.

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“Hey, Im, we're going to the bar, want to come along?” Park Hye-won asked Im Joong-kyung, who still sat at his desk and glanced at the office clock over her shoulder. Five past six. His shift ended five minutes ago. Park Hye-won was still looking at him expectantly while her friend Choi Jin-woo was standing behind her and tapping his foot. Joong-kyung realized he'd taken too long to answer again and sighed.

“No,” he said, shaking his head with what he hoped was an embarrassed smile. “I'm not done yet.”

“Oh,” Park Hye-won said. The disappointment in her voice was faint but detectable. “Don't work too hard, Im. Police officers need to have time for a life too.”

He nodded again and turned as she did, looking back at the computer screen.

“I don't know why you keep asking,” he heard Choi Jin-woo say when he thought they were out of earshot. Im Joong-kyung had long ago noticed how the sound carried through the empty corridors after hours, but it seemed his colleagues had not.

“Why? Maybe one day he'll come out of his shell. He looks nice enough once you look past it all.”

Choi Jin-woo snorted. “Yeah, right. They do something to them in Special Unit, you know? Strip them of their humanity. That’s not a shell, that’s just his personality.”

Next followed a slapping sound – Park Hye-won probably slapped her friend on the arm. She tended to do that at times. “He’s human, just like us. And he’s having a hard time adjusting to a new unit and new work. I thought you of all people would understand that.”

Choi Jin-woo had specialized in financial crimes before being transferred to the newly created Office of Counter-Terrorism and Organized Crime, CTOC for short, one of the many changes made to the security and police apparatus in the wake of the downfall of the Public Security Department. The criminals he was used to dealing with were scammers and CEOs, not people with a body count. He fit into the new office about as well as someone who was used to shoot first, ask questions later.

“I think I understand what he is better than you do,” Im Joong-kyung heard him answer, then their voices and steps faded into the background noise of the Office’s building, along with the humming of fans and computers, the shuffling of uncounted feet and the buzzing of printers. Im Joong-kyung sighed and leaned back, his eyes still fixed to the words on the screen in a pretense of business.

The truth was, he was having trouble fitting in. He just wasn’t used to interacting with normal people anymore, as much as his new colleagues could be considered normal. They were all police, after all. Sometimes, he thought he had forgotten how to act normal. Unbidden, a picture rose to his mind’s eye. The skyline of Seoul from a cafe, a woman in a bright green coat at his side. Coffees in both their hands. He had thought that had been normal, but she had been as broken as he had.

“If she ever does something again, it will be on your head.”

A warning. One Im Joong-kyung wouldn’t forget. It was how he had ended up working for CTOC – two birds, one stone, Jang Jin-tae had said. He could keep an eye on Yoon-hee and also do what was required of him. He could keep Yoon-hee safe from the Wolf Brigade. His very own devil’s bargain. He paid with his soul and his reputation. Officially, this was akin to retirement for someone from the Special Unit, discharged from the Unit after one too many brushes with trauma, given a desk job where he could still be useful. Unofficially ... well, there was Yoon-hee’s name, buried in all the cases assigned to him. Surveillance of

former criminals who were given a deal when they turned on their organizations, but who were far from trusted. He knew all about her – her address, her two jobs, how her brother did in school. He knew some about her former colleagues too. Sometimes, he would even travel to where they lived – in addition to the reports he got from trusted informants. It was boring work, but at least he wasn't killing anybody anymore.

And then there was the other thing, the real reason he had such trouble with socializing with his new colleagues.

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Summer was oppressive in the city, even at the shores of the river, but Im Joong-kyung kept up with his exercise regimen as usual. He was wearing shorts and his t-shirt was already wet with sweat as he jogged along the shore in the burning heat, with few other people as eager to move as he was on a hot Sunday afternoon. They were all sipping iced coffees in cafes if they could afford to, or sat in front of their fans. A part of him wished he could do the same. When he finally reached the park bench, he was out of breath. It felt as if he was trying to breathe water, the humidity was so high. With a sigh, he sat down next to the man who was already resting in the shade. Then he took his water bottle and almost emptied it in several large gulps.

“Why did you want to see me?” Im Joong-kyung asked, not looking at the man next to him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the book beside him, and the slightly ruffled suit he wore.

“You're not making any progress,” Jang Jin-tae told him. His voice cut through the air like ice.

“It's not like I'm not trying,” Joong-kyung tried to defend himself. “I'm not a spy. I'll contact you when I find something. Meeting me like this is unnecessary.”

Next to him, Jang Jin-tae leaned back like a cat on the prowl. The pose was supposed to look relaxed as he took the book and opened it, but all Joong-kyung could see was the threat. At the shore, two seagulls started to fight for some bits of trash, squawking and flapping their wings.

“Chae Jun-ho was found dead,” Jang Jin-tae finally said.

“Who?” The question burst out of him before he could stop himself. Joong-kyung truly had no idea who the man was. Not one of the people he knew from

his time in the Special Unit, nor one of the people he was surveilling or investigating.

“A barber. The only witness that could tie Kim Myung-bae to the Public Security Department case with more than circumstantial evidence.”

Now that was a name he knew. Kim Myung-bae – the former Police Commissioner – had become swept up in the case relatively early on. It had been his special forces that had assisted Public Security in their attempts to capture Joong-kyung. But the Commissioner had denied all allegations and instead insisted that Public Security had told him their help was needed for a legitimate operation. Half the people in his office still believed he told the truth and that Public Security had deceived him. The Commissioner had been very popular with the rank and file.

“I assume it wasn’t an accident.”

“If you want to call two bullets to the chest and one to the head an accident,” Jang Jin-tae replied, turning a page.

Im Joong-kyung kept staring at the gulls and took another gulp from his bottle. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Chae Jun-ho was one of Public Security’s people. The Director trusted him. He flipped on them because we could tie him to another murder.”

Meaning his name should be somewhere in the files at CTOC, along with his address and other relevant information and a case manager. Korea no longer trusted its reformed criminals to stay reformed, after all.

“I’ll see what I can find,” Joong-kyung promised, but he didn’t have much hope. Almost everyone at CTOC had the means and the opportunity, and a good chunk had a motive. None of them would be stupid enough to leave obvious trails.

“You do that, and see to it that you succeed this time,” Jang Jin-tae said. “I’m growing tired of waiting for you to deliver on your end of the bargain. Don’t keep disappointing me.”

With those words, the book snapped shut and Jang Jin-tae stood up. Joong-kyung watched him as he languidly ambled up the path, shielding his eyes against the sun and looking entirely harmless. If he didn’t know any better, Joong-kyung might believe it, but he knew the man too well. Jang Jin-tae was the most dangerous man he had ever met. He could have lived with disappointing him if it was just his life on the line, but that was no longer the case. He had to find something. The question was how.

With a sigh, Im Joong-kyung stood up sparing the gulls a last glance. They were still squabbling over a fast food wrapper, not in the least bothered by the heat. He took his bottle again, emptied it, and then jogged back home, trying and failing to find a solution to this problem as well as one for his main objective: finding sympathizers and collaborators of Public Security in the Office of Counter-Terrorism and Organized Crime. When he reached his apartment, he checked if the tape he'd fixed to the door in the corner was still in place – it was – then locked it behind himself twice. After another bottle of water, he went to the corner and took his notebook from its hiding place under a loose floorboard.

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Kim Dong-min:

Superintendent, born 1975, attended the police academy at the same time as Kim Myung-bae, but no known contact between the two. Spent his career fighting organized crime and had one of the best arrest rates, no known history of being involved in cases of corruption, which was why he was put in charge of CTOC, married, two children, the eldest going to university in the USA.

Jo Won:

Inspector, born 1980, worked under Kim Myung-bae between 2014 and 2017 before being transferred to Daegu. One disciplinary action due to hitting a suspect during interrogation. Specialized in mafia cases and human trafficking before the unification process, switched to arms smuggling after and was involved in 26 Sect-related investigations.

[Kim Myung-bae's man or another one of Jang's???

Choi Jin-woo:

Inspector, born 1996, specialized in financial crimes and was transferred to CTOC specifically to investigate the financial side of organized crime and terrorist organizations, has been working almost exclusively on Public Security

related cases since joining, graduated with a bachelor's degree in business from Seoul National University before joining the police.

[Has a crush on Park Hye-won]

Park Hye-won:

Inspector, born 2001, police family. Uncle's brother-in-law is one of the people implicated in the Public Security case as one of the SOU officers involved in the illegal operations. Worked primarily as an undercover operative before joining CTOC.

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The Office of Counter-Terrorism and Organized Crime had fifteen different inspectors, working in different teams, and another thirty officers. Then there were the administrators who handled archives and files, the IT people who fixed the machines and maintained the intranet and the staff that handled the cleaning. Altogether, there were around a hundred people who could conceivably have accessed the information that doomed Chae Jun-ho. Im Joong-kyung had notes on maybe half of them, cobbled together over the months he'd been working for CTOC from files and overheard conversations. And yet he was still no closer to finding the traitors within their midst when he walked into the office the following Monday. He nodded at Inspector Park, who smiled at him as if she was genuinely pleased to see him, and at Inspector Choi, who frowned at him in a way that made it very clear he wasn't. Inspector Jo – the most senior of the inspectors he shared an office with – wasn't in yet. He rarely was.

The first order of the day was, as always, to do the work he was actually being paid to do. There were reports to go through, emails to write and people to phone. It was dreary work, and not something Im Joong-kyung had ever had to do after graduating the academy. He hadn't excelled at it back then, but his grades had been good enough to pass. He was halfway through a formal request for the

financial details of one of his persons of interest when Inspector Jo finally arrived with a cup of iced coffee – Joong-kyung could hear the ice cubes rattling.

“Missed the subway again?” Inspector Choi asked pointedly when he walked past.

“The train broke down and repairs took a while,” Jo answered. By now he was just as used to ignoring Choi’s barbs as Joong-kyung was. Who cared that Jo was always late? He made up for it by working overtime, so it wasn’t as if he left his work undone.

The rest of the morning passed in companionable silence, for the most part. They all did their work. Joong-kyung finished the request and printed two copies – one for the judge, one for the files. Paper copies to guard against a blackout. In his second month with CTOC, the entire building had been without electricity for two hours once. He wouldn’t tell his colleagues, but working off the physical files he’d fetched from the archives, all alone on the roof with a notepad to take notes, had probably been his favorite workday so far.

When the clock hit one, both Choi and Park left for their break.

“What about you, Im?” Park asked. “Or we could buy you some take-away. The same as usual for you, right, Inspector Jo?”

Jo nodded without looking up from his screen.

Im Joong-kyung smiled and shook his head. “I’m almost done, but thank you for the offer.”

Inspector Park smiled back at him, then left. This time, their squabbling was drowned out by a group of officers passing at the same time. But Choi no doubt made some comments again. With a sigh, Joong-kyung got back to reading a report from one of the officers assigned to check up on Goo Mi-kyung periodically. There was another former Sect member who seemed to enjoy her retirement.

“She means well, you know?” Jo Woo said. He no longer looked at his screen. Instead, he focused on Joong-kyung as if he was trying to uncover all his secrets with a glance. Joong-Kyung wasn’t impressed by the attempt.

“I know.”

“And Choi Jin-woo doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

So Inspector Jo had been treated to Choi’s opinions on former Special Unit members as well. Joong-kyung wasn’t surprised. He just wondered where Jo was going with this. Joong-kyung nodded.

“They’re both young. They don’t know what it’s like, not like we do. What this job does to you after a while.”

Joong-kyung wanted to say that he was barely any older than Inspector Choi, that he didn’t know what Jo was talking about, but the truth was that he did. He knew it better than Jo, probably. He’d killed innocent girls and seen how children killed themselves in the name of a hopeless cause. For a moment, he wondered what Jo had seen in those years that he’d chased human traffickers. Something bad enough to make someone who seemed as genial as him hit a suspect. But maybe the nice older colleague was just a role he played, like Joong-kyung played the harmless man who just wanted to be left alone and do his job.

“What I’m trying to tell you is this,” Jo continued with an apologetic smile on his face and his intense eyes still focused on Joong-kyung. “Take all the time you need. I know they sent you to therapy and all that, but some things need time, not a shrink. Get more sociable on your own time. Or don’t. But you really should try to keep an eye on your work-life balance. Take it from someone who’s been there; working yourself to death won’t help. I’ve seen how often you work overtime, so don’t bother denying it. Get a hobby and go home on time. Watch some baseball, feed pigeons in the park, read, doesn’t matter. Just don’t work. Only makes it worse.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Joong-kyung answered, and with that, the conversation was over. It was the most Inspector Jo had ever said to him. Was he suspicious because Joong-kyung spent so much time at the office? Or was he genuinely worried? Well, it wasn’t as if working less was an option when you had two jobs instead of one. With a sigh, he skimmed the rest of the report, then dutifully printed it, took his stack of papers and left the office.

Two doors down, Im Joong-kyung could already hear the voice of Superintendent Kim Dong-won. He was on the phone, so Joong-kyung waited in the corridor, awkwardly leaning against the wall as people walked past, too far away to listen in. There were too many people around who would catch him eavesdropping.

Finally, the talking ceased with an air of finality and Joong-kyung moved to knock on the door.

“Enter.”

Joong-kyung did and nodded at the superintendent. He was a square man in his fifties with the eyes of a hawk. One of those men who took to leadership like

they were born for it. He worked overtime more often than most of his colleagues, and always set a good example. He was the type of man you couldn't help but respect, even if you disliked him, like Im Joong-kyung.

"Im, what is it?"

"I've got a request for the financial details that a judge needs to sign off on," he told him.

"Something serious?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. He's been spending a lot of money recently and I'm not sure where it came from. If he's getting himself into debt, we need to keep a closer watch, and if he's getting money from places he shouldn't—"

"Understood. It's all in the request?"

Im Joong-kyung nodded, then he waited as his superior officer read every word he'd painstakingly patched together that morning. Kim Dong-won was thorough and methodical, not the type of man who tolerated incompetence. And not the type of man to trust his subordinates without checking up on them. Finally, Joong-kyung saw him nod.

"I'll deal with it," he promised. "Anything else?"

Joong-kyung shook his head.

"You're due for one of your trips again soon, aren't you?"

"Not yet."

"Make sure not to leave the paperwork to the last minute again, will you?"

Joong-kyung nodded obediently, then Superintendent Kim motioned for him to leave. Outside of the office, Joong-kyung felt like breathing a sigh of relief but repressed the urge. He still had work to do. The rest of the files in hand he went downstairs, to the archive. He nodded at the custodian on the way, then walked through the stacks, adding the documents where they belonged, always mindful of the cameras. Hopefully nobody would check that he busied himself in an isle where he had no business being, shuffling around papers as if he did.

Chae Jun-ho's file was easily found, but it was thinner than Joong-kyung had expected. He leafed through it too fast to read it all, scanning for the information he needed. It had already been updated to include his death, a file number for his homicide was on the first page, along with basic personal information about his case. An address, a photo, a case officer ... no one from his office ... the next pages were surveillance information and the like, but the farther he looked, the more Joong-kyung realized that the file wasn't just slim, it was too slim. He reached the

end and there were no copies of his interrogation protocols, no signed confession, nothing that pointed to him turning on Public Security and the Commissioner.

Either someone had been very sloppy, or someone had removed part of the file from the archives, erasing the evidence that Kim Myung-bae had ever been involved with Public Security. Finally, Im Joong-kyung had a place to start.

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“You know, I really don’t get you,” Min-ji said. When Yoon-hee turned towards her, she saw that she was staring out of the window forlornly. There was nothing much to see. The boats were still out, the children were still in school and most people were at work, except for Mrs. Lee and her friends, who were drinking their coffees and chatting in the corner. There were only two lonely boats bobbing in the harbor like they were asleep and a seagull dozing on the quay.

“What is there to get?” Yoon-hee asked.

“Why you’re here. Why you would live here, willingly, when you lived in a big city with plenty of people and bars and museums...”

“You like museums?”

Min-ji spared her a halfhearted glare. “That’s not the point. I’d like to have the *option*, you know?”

Yoon-hee hummed. “I had the options and decided they weren’t for me.”

“But *why*?”

Yoon-hee sighed and stared out of the window as well, trying to come up with a non-answer that didn’t stray too close to the truth. “Some people like the peace and quiet. Seoul was too exciting for me.”

Min-ji looked like she was about to answer, but in that moment, the door to the cafe opened and Officers Moon and Lee walked in, nodding at the middle-aged women in the corner and smiling at Min-ji and Yoon-hee. She smiled back.

“A latte and an americano, as usual?” Min-ji asked, and both men nodded.

Min-ji and Yoon-hee went to work while Moon and Lee remained at the counter, watching them. They did this every time, and it had taken Yoon-hee some time to get used to it. She still didn’t like being watched by a policeman, even one as unassuming as middle-aged Officer Lee, with his crow’s feet and round nose.

“Anything new?” Min-ji asked as she handed Officer Lee his americano.

“Nothing much,” Officer Moon answered. His colleague simply handed over the money before he joined the women in the corner, whose chatter rose to a crescendo when he arrived. “That’s his cousin,” he added, when he noticed Yoon-hee’s confused look. “They’re going to be talking for a while.”

“Still glad you live in a place as claustrophobic as Sachon now?” Min-ji joked.

“I’m still adjusting,” Yoon-hee replied, then handed Officer Moon his latte.

“Is everything going well?” Officer Moon asked. “With adjusting? You have a brother, right? How is he doing?”

“He’s doing well. He likes it here.” More than Yoon-hee did. “Thank you for asking.”

“If you need help, you can ask me, you know that, right?”

Out of the corner of her eye, Yoon-hee saw Min-ji roll her eyes. Officer Moon was not the most subtle of men. They had both noticed that he paid more attention to her than Officer Lee did.

“Just ask her out already!” Min-ji teased him. Officer Moon blushed, and for a second, Yoon-hee found herself contemplating the idea. He wasn’t bad looking, but there was something about him... Yoon-hee found it hard to put her finger on it. It was something hungry, ambition maybe. It gave him a predatory air that Yoon-hee didn’t like. Ironic, considering the last man she had been interested in had been described as a wolf in man’s clothing to her. But Joong-kyung hadn’t been like that. He had reacted with violence when necessary, but it never originated from within him. Not like a wolf at all. Like a guard dog, maybe.

Officer Moon gave her his best wide smile and raised his eyebrows in question. With a sense of dread, Yoon-hee donned her best apologetic smile and shook her head. She kept her eyes on his face, cataloging the way his face fell subtly, before he re-gained control of his features and replaced the wide smile with a more measured one that was sharper and full of false self-confidence.

“Do you have a boyfriend back in the big city?” he asked. “If so, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“No,” Yoon-hee said. “I just don’t want that right now. I just want it to be me and Yoon-woo.”

For some reason, that comment made Min-ji perk up, but she bit her lip instead of voicing what was on her mind, distracting Officer Moon with chatter and gossip until Officer Lee collected him and they both went off, to return in a few days for another cup of coffee.

“So it was a guy!” Min-ji cried once they were gone.

“What was a guy?” Yoon-hee asked.

“The reason why you left Seoul. I should have guessed.”

“It wasn’t a guy,” Yoon-hee tried to argue, but Min-ji wasn’t listening. She was staring out of the window again, probably imagining her having a sordid or tragic affair, an abusive boyfriend or a terrible break-up. Yoon-hee sighed and cleaned the cups.

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I’ve run out of patience.

The note had been in his mailbox last evening when he returned from work. Im Joong-kyung knew who had written it, even though it hadn’t been signed.

I’ve run out of patience.

He had tried to find more clues, but he’d run into a dead end again. He didn’t have a good reason to look at the security footage from the archive, but he’d sneaked in after hours, only to find the surveillance footage for the entire building had been lost to a technical problem – or so the technician had said when Joong-kyung had gone to him with the excuse of thinking someone had removed something from his desk. The officer working Chae’s case was a dead end as well. Either he was innocent, or he knew that he was being watched. In the end, Joong-kyung had even requested the digital file, but it had been just as empty as the physical one. Someone had been both fast and thorough, erasing all evidence.

I’ve run out of patience.

And Joong-kyung had run out of time, it seemed. What did Jang Jin-tae mean? Would Joong-kyung find an assassin in his bedroom when he went home? Or would he just pretend he had never existed? Was it just another warning? And what would happen to Yoon-hee? His brain kept trying to calculate all the possibilities as he stared at his screen at work, but no solution presented itself. He was supposed to be working, but even that was a challenge when his body was as taut as a bowstring, ready to spring into action at the slightest sign of danger.

“Hey, Im,” Inspector Jo called from the door. Joong-kyung wanted to jump out of his skin but forced himself to be calm. “Why did you want to look at the file of Chae Jun-ho?”

The question took him by surprise so much, he couldn't answer for a few moments. Instead, he stared at Jo Won's face, looking for any trace that the innocent question was not innocent at all. He didn't find any.

"No particular reason. The name just popped up in one of my files," Joong-kyung lied.

Inspector Jo nodded. "And?"

Joong-kyung shrugged. "It was all but empty."

"Really?" Jo sounded surprised, raising his eyebrows. "Can't have been that important, then."

Im Joong-kyung forced himself to smile and nodded. Then he watched his colleague walk back out of the room as if nothing of note had happened while his heart beat against his ribs. He had a trace again. He just hoped that it wasn't too later after all.

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Luck was not on his side, Im Joong-kyung thought for the umpteenth time that day. It was really incredible how much luck was not on his side. If he were a religious man, he might think he was cursed.

"What do you mean, Inspector Jo has left?" Joong-kyung asked, cursing himself silently when he heard the way his voice shook with emotion.

Choi Jin-woo scowled. "I don't know. He's gone on some assignment. Surveillance, a bust, I don't know. Nobody tells me anything. The superintendent said he'd be back in a couple of days."

Joong-kyung took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. Why did everything have to go wrong? This entire assignment had been a disaster from start to finish, and there was nothing he could do but sit in his seat and wait for the ball to drop. He just hoped it would be Jo returning, not Jang Jin-tae making a move.

With a last glare, Inspector Choi went back to whatever he was working on, and Joong-kyung was forced to do the same. The coffee he had fetched was cooling rapidly while he tried his best to concentrate on going through the financial statements that had finally been subpoenaed. He knew he should have handed them over to Choi, but comparing endless, repetitive numbers was the most calming activity he could think of. And so he tried his best to lose himself among the withdrawals and money transfers. After two hours, it had almost

worked. His heart rate was back to normal, and his muscles barely any more tense than usual when he was at work. Park was still out, and Choi was sighing and scoffing at his own desk. This was probably the most companionable they had ever been, each hunched over their own numbers and united in the desire for an algorithm that could reliably take over their work.

A small ping from his computer alerted Joong-kyung to the arrival of an email. For a moment, he was almost glad for an excuse not to look at numbers anymore. Then he saw who had sent it: Moon Do-hyun. The man who reported on Yoon-hee. Another report wasn't due for another week. With a pounding heart, Joong-kyung opened the email.

Subject: Urgent!

I'm sending this to you now instead of next week because I believe it might be time-sensitive. Today, I saw a strange man (not local) linger outside of the subject's place of work, staying in a side street for several hours (passed him on two different occasions). Working hypothesis is that he might be an old associate waiting to contact her when she's alone. Please advise on course of action.

Joong-kyung stared at the email for a couple of seconds. Jang Jin-tae's hard eyes drifted through his mind, the way he was in single-minded pursuit of his goals, pushing aside doubts and using failures to reaffirm instead of re-examine. *I've run out of patience.* Yoon-hee standing in front of that wall, waiting to die because it was the only thing she could do.

"If she ever does something again, it will be on your head."

She wouldn't, Jang Jin-tae knew that as well as Joong-kyung. He hadn't wanted to kill her to prevent other people from dying. He had wanted to kill her because she had done bad things, because she had worked against him, because she had managed to tease a fraction of humanity out of a man who had long tried to forget that he was one.

Im Joong-kyung stood up abruptly, so abruptly that Choi Jin-woo looked up from his files and stared at him with narrowed eyes.

"Hey, what's—"

Joong-kyung waved him off and hastened out of the office, down the corridor and into Superintendent Kim's office. His superior looked at him with cold eyes

and a raised eyebrow. For a second, Joong-kyung wondered if he had interrupted something, but there was nobody else in the office, nobody on the phone, only a file opened on the desk.

“Yes, Inspector Im?” Kim Dong-min asked.

“I need to leave.”

“It’s a little early for that, wouldn’t you agree?” The sarcasm was new, but Joong-kyung had no time for it. Yoon-hee was in danger. He had to go.

“On a trip,” he explained. “I received a report from one of my informants. It’s potentially time-sensitive.”

The superintendent stared at him and Joong-kyung was uncomfortably reminded of Jang Jin-tae. But he had spent years weathering worse than disapproval and stood his ground. His face remained impassive and his stance sure.

“Very well,” Kim Dong-min said. “If it’s time-sensitive, there’s nothing to be done. But do the paperwork before you leave.”

Im Joong-kyung nodded, then turned around, back to his office. Choi Jin-woo eyed him suspiciously when he walked back in, straight to his computer. He was still logged in and the email still open. Hopefully Choi had had the decency not to exploit that uncharacteristic show of weakness. Joong-kyung acted as if he didn’t care either way and composed a reply.

Subject: Re: Urgent!

Stand by and surveil from a safe distance. I am on my way. Will meet you at a place of your choosing tomorrow.

The reply arrived less than five minutes later, not that Joong-kyung had counted. The office clock had ticked incessantly above his head. When he opened the email, it contained coordinates and a time. Joong-kyung noted them down, logged out of his accounts, and walked out the office to get the forms he had to fill out. For once, Inspector Choi didn’t say a word. Joong-kyung was glad. One problem less to deal with.

*

Im Joong-kyung knew he should feel tired, but he didn’t. He had barely slept that night and on the train, and not at all the rest of the way to the meeting place.

He had eaten some, but not as regularly as he had for the past few months. It was easy to fall back into old habits. Back with the Special Unit, he had learned to subsist on adrenaline alone while he was on a mission, to rest and eat when there was time. His body knew what to do, as did his mind. He was a wolf, a predator.

He was a human being, and he was worried about Yoon-hee. He'd tried to tell himself that if Jang Jin-tae had wanted to kill her immediately, she would be dead. No, the lurking man was a message. One meant for him. And because he cared about Yoon-hee, he had no choice but to react. He'd prepared at night, taken one of his old guns out of its hiding place, and gotten on the first train he could. Then he had found a car rental and driven the rest of the way to the meeting point that his GPS pointed him towards. In his mind, he'd turned over words, weighing them against each other and trying to find the right ones for any possible situation. He'd stretched his muscles too, in case he needed to talk with his fists, not his mouth.

As it turned out, he couldn't drive all the way. He had to walk the last couple of hundred meters up to a viewing spot north of the village. There was little there, except for the view of the sea. Even the view of the village was blocked by a couple of large boulders. A good fifteen meters below the cliff, the sea rushed towards the shore relentlessly. Up where Joong-kyung stood, harsh winds tormented what little plant life had made its home on the cliffs. In the middle of the grassy outcropping lay a large, flat stone with a smooth surface that was probably used as a resting spot, but Joong-kyung didn't feel like resting. It was afternoon by now. Almost time. And so he waited.

It was ten minutes past the agreed time when he heard steps on the path leading to the outcropping. They sounded strong and measured, not hasty or nervous. Joong-kyung abandoned the view and turned around. The man walking towards him wore a black jacket that looked far too warm for the weather. His face was shadowed by a baseball cap. He walked like a professional, like a tiger on the prowl, not like a police officer who spent his time walking his beat. In an instant, Joong-kyung changed his own stance, planting his feet securely on the ground, putting his left shoulder forward. The man finally came to a halt a couple of feet from Joong-kyung, standing a good head taller than him. When he lifted his face, Joong-kyung finally got a good look at his face, and the last flicker of hope that this was Moon Do-hyun expired. The face had little in common with that of the handsome police officer.

“Im Joong-kyung?” the man asked. He stood unnaturally still, like a snake about to strike.

“You’re Jang’s man, I presume?”

The man smiled. It was an ugly kind of smile that exposed even uglier truths. “No idea who you’re talking about.”

“And Moon Do-hyun?”

“The cop? He just told me where to find you. Did what he was supposed to, then went on his merry way.”

A set-up. Im Joong-kyung felt a shiver down his spine, despite the heat. Officer Moon had been in on it. Jo – it must have been. The excuse for why he had looked into Chae Jun-ho had been flimsy to begin with, no wonder he hadn’t believed a word. He just had to check to see that none of Joong-kyung’s files contained his name. Keeping it under wraps was easy enough for him, he had proven that already.

“And you work for?” Time, that was what he needed. A chance, an opening. More information. He was in a remote place, maybe one that had seen more than once suicide, a good place to get rid of someone. Especially someone who still had to see a psychiatrist once a month.

“As if you don’t know already. You should be able to at least guess. I wouldn’t be here if you hadn’t gotten close.”

Joong-kyung tried to calculate his chances. He’d left his gun in his car. There had been no way to conceal it, since he wore a light summer shirt. His opponent’s unusual choice of attire pointed to the fact that he might not have left his weapon behind. At least a knife, Joong-kyung thought. He was stronger too, going by his built. The question was if he was faster.

“Not as close as you think.”

“Just an unlucky bugger, then,” the man surmised, and moved his hand towards the small of his back.

There was nowhere to go. The outcropping was too narrow. There were no walls to hide behind, no armor to protect him. Joong-kyung had only one thing on his side: speed. They moved at the same time. Joong-kyung saw the gun, but he was already in motion, sprinting towards the man. Getting close was his only chance to counter an attack. At a distance, he had no chance against a gun.

The shot was deafening, and the impact painful, but to stop was to die. He had minutes, seconds, depending on how bad the wound was, until the adrenaline

could no longer keep him going against blood loss and pain. Joong-kyung balled his fist and hit the man straight in the solar plexus. With the left, he grabbed the gun hand, trying to loosen the grip. But his opponent was no amateur. After a second's worth of reorienting himself, he caught himself and tried to kick Joong-kyung's leg out from under him while gripping his shirt with his free hand. Joong-kyung evaded, the man followed, and so they stumbled across the outcropping like a demented pair of dancers, clinging to each other and the gun. Joong-kyung frantically tried to find a solution. He didn't have *time*—

He stumbled, and so did the man. They had reached the precipice. For a moment, the man's eyes left Joong-kyung and darted to the roaring sea below. It was not a mistake Joong-kyung made. A quick jab to the chin and his opponent's head snapped back. A twist to his grip on the gun hand and the muscles cramped, releasing the gun. The man had lost his weapon and his balance, and Joong-kyung could see him fall as if in slow motion. For a split second, cold, calculating triumph surged through him. Then it vanished, as he felt himself dragged down into the abyss as well; he'd forgotten the other fist was still clenched in his shirt.

As he hit the dark waves, Joong-kyung thought of Yoon-hee.

*

“How was school?” Yoon-hee asked her brother that evening when he came home from school, toeing off his shoes at the door. The rice was almost done, and she'd already arranged the side dishes on the kitchen table in their cramped little apartment. The upper story of Mrs. Kim's house consisted of only two rooms and a small bathroom. The smaller room in the back served as their bedroom, the larger one at the front contained a kitchenette, what passed for a dining table and a few bookcases, cupboards and an old wardrobe that contained some things that belonged to Mrs. Kim's late son.

“Good,” Yoon-woo said with a smile, before launching into a far more exiting tale about how he and his friends explored the caves near the school at low tide. Yoon-hee felt vaguely concerned that something might happen to him one of these days, but she couldn't very well lock him up. All she could hope for that his friends who had grown up in these parts knew what they were doing.

It was a calm evening. The heat might finally break that night. At least that's what she hoped. Summer was nice, but she was ready for fall to arrive.

A thump against the door drew her out of her reverie and Yoon-woo halted in telling his story. At least it had sounded like it had been the door. Or maybe an animal had gotten into the walls again. That was an eerie thing about living in the countryside she might never get used to. Odd sounds whose origin she couldn't accurately pinpoint.

"Anyway—" Yoon-woo continued, but the thump interrupted him again.

Yoon-hee stood up, worried that something had happened to Mrs. Kim. Her cellphone was in her handbag hanging off a hook near the door. In her mind, she was already preparing to call 119, her heartbeat accelerating with every step. Then she opened the door gingerly, preparing for the worst.

For a good second, she froze, not believing what she saw. It wasn't Mrs. Kim at all, or a raccoon dog. Propped up against the wall, legs awkwardly bend against the railing of the staircase lay a man she had never thought she'd see again. He no longer wore the aviator jacket that she remembered, just a white shirt and dark pants. His head was braced against the wall and his eyes looked at her in an exhausted, relieved way that was at odds with everything she knew about him. Then she noticed the dark stain at his left side that he awkwardly tried to conceal with a cradled arm. Yoon-hee gasped.

"What is it?" Yoon-woo asked, a couple of steps behind her. Then he, too, could see. That was enough to snap Yoon-hee out of her trance.

"Clear the floor in the living room," Yoon-hee ordered. "We need to get him inside."

"But—"

"And get the first aid kit."

Her eyes were still fixed to Joong-kyung's as they fluttered. She couldn't hear Yoon-woo move. "Now!" she snapped.

Yoon-woo ran into the apartment the moment Yoon-hee reached out under Joong-kyung's arms to awkwardly drag him inside. He didn't resist, just braced his head against her chest. She could feel his breath stutter against her collarbone. This close, she realized he was wet and smelled of the sea. She hadn't noticed before. What the hell had happened to him? And why was he here in the first place?

"Shouldn't we call the police?" Yoon-woo asked when they'd reached the living room.

"No police," Joong-kyung murmured. His eyes were closed now and Yoon-hee could see that he was about to pass out. Now that he was inside, in the light, she

could see the dark stain on his shirt, and it scared her more than anything had since Han had forced her to frame him at the exhibition. She was no doctor. She knew a little from her time with the Sect, but that was when she had no other choice.

“I know two officers,” she told him in what she hoped was a reassuring tone. “They’re alright.”

“No...” Joong-kyung said. “No. Corrupt.”

“An ambulance, then?”

He shook his head, or tried to. He was lying flat on his back at this point, so it looked more like it was lolling from side to side. “Gunshot. Don’t know who to trust.” *Except you*, she thought he might add. There was a simple choice before her. Do what every normal person would do and call for help, or do what criminals did and try to take care of it herself. She had already made the choice when she helped him inside, she knew, as he had known she would when he came to her door.

“We’ll talk about this later,” she said.

Joong-kyung nodded.

“I can’t guarantee that I know what I’m doing.”

“I know.”

After a moment’s silence, Yoon-hee turned to her brother, who looked at her as if he didn’t recognize his own sister. And maybe he didn’t. She had always made sure to keep this side of her hidden around him.

“The first aid kit,” she reminded him gently. “And close the front door.”

*

“Are you sure you’re fine?” Min-ji asked.

“I will be, don’t worry,” Yoon-hee assured her as she watched her brother get ready for school. He pretended there wasn’t an unconscious man on their living room floor, just like they both pretended they had slept more than a few hours last night.

“Do you need anything from the pharmacy?”

“Yoon-woo will go later.” It wasn’t even a lie. They needed more painkillers, bandages, and antiseptics. Min-ji thought she was talking about a migraine, of course, or maybe uncommonly bad period cramps she didn’t want to mention out of politeness.

“And you’ll be fine until then?”

“Yes, I’ll close the blinds and lie down. It’s better than painkillers anyway.”

“If you say so.” Min-ji paused for a bit. “I hope you’ll get better,” she finally added.

“Thank you. And I’m really sorry I can’t come in today.”

“No worries. Bye.”

“Bye.”

And with that, the phone conversation ended and Yoon-hee took a deep breath. Yoon-woo was staring at her.

“What?” she asked.

Yoon-woo looked away. “Is he going to live?” he asked, his voice subdued. They had talked a little last night. Yoon-hee had had to make sure Yoon-woo knew that there was no other choice. And that Joong-kyung was nobody to fear, even if he looked more like a gangster than a policeman (and he was one now, Yoon-hee had found a badge in his back pocket).

“He has made it this far, and he’s stubborn.” Yoon-hee didn’t mention that he’d also been unconscious for over ten hours now, and that she’d found bruising on his shoulders and a nasty head wound when she’d examined him closer. The gunshot had gone clean through his side. Two centimeters farther out and it would have only been a light graze. It was infection that worried her, and the head wound. If he had broken his skull... But those worries were hers, not Yoon-woo’s. He needed to go to school and act like nothing was wrong. “He just needs rest.”

Yoon-woo nodded, but he didn’t seem convinced. Still, they said their goodbyes, Yoon-hee gave him money for the pharmacy and they both pretended everything was going to be alright. It was an old, familiar dance. Yoon-hee had always pretended nothing bad was happening around her when she visited him in the hospital, and Yoon-woo had pretended he wasn’t months away from dying. They had both known better, even then.

Outside, she heard Yoon-woo talk to Mrs. Kim, but now that her brother was gone, it was time to examine her patient again, this time in the daylight that streamed through the window. Im Joong-kyung looked pale and drawn, but his chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm. She lay down beside him on the bare floor and stared at him. He had lost some weight, she thought. His cheeks had been a little fuller in her memory. His torso was littered with scars big and small, but none of them looked new. She was tempted to reach out to see how they felt, but

it felt wrong to do so. An invasion of his privacy when he was helpless. Still, the urge would not leave her.

A knock on the door interrupted her musings. “Yoon-hee, dear? Your brother mentioned you have a migraine. Can I do anything to help?” It was Mrs. Kim and her nurturing instincts.

“No!” she called back, her eyes still glued to Joong-kyung. “I just need to rest! Thank you!”

“Don’t hesitate to call me if you need anything.”

“I’ll keep it in mind.”

Yoon-hee listened carefully to the hesitant steps on the stairs and hoped Mrs. Kim wouldn’t decide a migraine was reason enough to fetch the second key. In her mind, she followed the steps as the old woman walked back into her house and rummaged through her kitchen drawers before everything went quiet.

“Who was that?”

The question surprised her. She had kept watching him, but there had been no sign that he was awake. His eyes were still closed and his breathing slow. Had he been awake the whole time while she was lying next to him?

“Mrs. Kim, my landlady.”

Joong-kyung hummed and opened his eyes. He didn’t turn towards her, focusing instead on the ceiling. “How am I?”

“I’m not sure,” Yoon-hee admitted. “The gunshot isn’t as bad as I’d feared. I’ve seen people with worse who still made it. You had me worried when you didn’t wake up. You hit your head pretty hard. What happened?”

“I fell off a cliff.”

It sounded like a joke, but Joong-kyung said it in such a sober tone she understood it to be the truth. He wasn’t one to joke in situations like these either. Still, a cliff... “How?”

Joong-kyung turned his head towards her. He winced when he put weight onto his head wound but didn’t turn back. His eyes were clear and warm, a mystery, like always. “I was supposed to meet a source, but it was a trap. I’ve been looking into... things. They wanted to take me out of the equation.”

“In Sachon?” she asked incredulously. There was nothing in Sachon. It was the reason she’d moved here in the first place. Nothing but her. “Is someone after me? After Yoon-woo?”

Joong-kyung held her gaze. “I don’t think so. I can’t guarantee it, but I don’t think so. I think you were just a convenient way to get me out of the way, make me disappear.”

The word “disappear” jogged a memory in her mind. A memory she had resisted dwelling on for half a year now. A memory she’d tried to forget. A memory that lingered in the dark corners of her mind, waiting. She was supposed to disappear too. That she hadn’t was only thanks to him. Then there was the man with the cold, calculating eyes, who prided himself in his capacity for violence.

“Was it that man?”

“No,” Joong-kyung answered, and this time there was no room for doubt in his voice. “It’s not his style, sending someone like that. The man on the cliff wasn’t one of the Wolf Brigade. He didn’t fight like one.”

“Then who?”

“I don’t know.” Words that sent a chill down her spine. “I don’t know who’s behind it. I only know two people who are involved in it. And both are police. The person behind it is too, in all likelihood. It’s why I couldn’t go to a hospital.”

“And that man?”

The answering sigh was deep and world-weary. “He might help. He might not. But I don’t want to go back unless I have to.”

Yoon-hee was perhaps the only person who understood why that was. Im Joong-kyung had fought so hard, and despite his strength, he was also fragile in some respects. And that man had come close to shattering him. She felt a sad smile spread on her face as she lay on the floor next to him, and without thinking, she reached out and lay her hand in his. His eyes widened slightly in surprise, but he responded by intertwining his fingers with hers.

*

Despite his best efforts, Yoon-hee could see that it would take Joong-kyung more than a day or two to recover. None of the wounds were life-threatening, but it became obvious that he did have a concussion, and he was nowhere near fighting form. If he wanted to face the people who had tried to kill him, he needed to be. And so she had decided (and told him in no uncertain terms) that he was going to stay at least a week. Joong-kyung had argued, but it was a

perfunctory protest, seemingly done more out of an effort to not put her in any trouble. As if it wasn't too late for that.

Yoon-woo took to their guest, at least, after his initial reluctance. Joong-kyung had offered to teach him how to play cards, and that had been all Yoon-hee had seen of both of them for the rest of the second evening.

"It's no bother," Joong-kyung told her the next day. "I'm used to it. We used to play cards to pass the time, back at the Special Unit."

An odd bit of information, and one that humanized the faceless soldiers. She pictured them sitting around an overturned cardboard box in some ruin, with half their armor on, dealing cards and smoking, like gangsters in movies.

Joong-kyung was a smoker too. She learned it by watching him fidget with his fingers in a way she'd come to associate with some of the fighters of the Sect when they'd been holed up in some hideout after their supplies of cigarettes ran out. But he never said a word. Never asked her to buy him some. He was as pleasant and unobtrusive a house guest as she'd figured he would be. Always attentive, always kind. Never loud or demanding. He spent most of his days reading, he said. To pass the time, to heal and to stay quiet. He slotted himself into their lives as if he had been a part of them forever. By the fourth day, Yoon-woo was telling *him* about his day, not Yoon-hee.

The most difficult moment came later, and it didn't involve Joong-kyung at all. After that first day that they had spent lying on the floor of her apartment together, talking in hushed tones and silently enjoying each other's company, Yoon-hee had gone back to work. He was no longer in any immediate danger and it would look suspicious if she missed more than one or two days. Which meant she had had to steel herself for the inevitable.

Officers Moon and Lee entered the cafe as usual, and as usual, exchanged pleasantries. Yoon-hee did her best to seem as friendly as always, all the while hoping that any hints of coldness might be interpreted as residual awkwardness after rejecting Moon's advances.

Those advances puzzled her even more now that she knew. Had he hoped to get closer to keep an eye on her? Or did he get off on having power over the girls he went out with? Had he hoped his initiative might net him a promotion?

"Did you hear about the abandoned car?" Officer Lee asked them when Min-ji handed him his coffee.

"No," they both said.

“Oh, it’s an interesting mystery. Someone drove up to the old rock, but they never got back. A rental car and no sign of the driver.”

“That’s not a mystery,” Min-ji snorted, raising an eyebrow at the officers.

“It gets better,” Lee continued. “We found a gun in the car. No sign of a suicide letter. The guy who rented the car was a police officer from Seoul.”

“Still not a mystery,” Min-ji insisted. “He wouldn’t be the first to kill himself there.”

“Who kills themselves that way if they’ve got a gun?” Lee asked.

“Someone who thinks drowning is preferable to shooting?” Yoon-hee countered. She kept watching Officer Moon through the entire exchange from the corner of her eye, and he kept watching her.

“No suicide note,” Officer Lee said.

“Not everyone writes one,” Min-ji argued. “Maybe he had said everything he wanted to say and just wanted to find a pretty, quiet place to die. It happens.”

“Whatever the case,” Officer Moon interjected. “They’re going to fish someone out of the water in the next weeks or months, no doubt.”

On that, they could all agree. Only Yoon-hee knew that it wouldn’t be the driver of the car. Joong-kyung wasn’t worried by the exchange when she told him about it later, after Yoon-woo had gone to bed.

“It was inevitable,” he told her.

“If I’d gone, I could have fetched the gun, at least.”

Joong-kyung shook his head. “Too much risk. You could have been seen. Once I’m back in Seoul, I know where to get another.”

They sat together on the floor of the living room, propped up against the wall. Joong-kyung was wearing some of the ill-fitting clothes that used to belong to Mrs. Kim’s son and that smelled of the old wardrobe. It reminded Yoon-hee of that time in the shop when she’d told him the story of Little Red Riding Hood. Then and now, she’d felt as if doom pressed down on her.

“You’ll leave soon, won’t you?”

Joong-kyung hummed. There was no use in trying to dissuade him. It was how he was. When he was on a mission, he saw it through to the end.

“Don’t leave without saying goodbye,” Yoon-hee finally told him.

Joong-kyung didn’t answer, but when it was time, he did say goodbye. First to Yoon-woo, who deflated slightly before leaving to play with his friends. Then, when they were alone and it was time to say goodbye to her, he didn’t seem to

find the words. He just looked into her eyes as if they contained the answers to all his questions.

Slowly, cautiously, Yoon-hee moved towards him. His eyes looked sad and lonely and lost, and everything in her screamed to cling to him, to protect him from the world, even if she knew it was no use. He had to leave. And so instead, she put a hand on his chest and reached upwards, pressing her lips against his in a tender kiss. He just stood there, stiffly, but when she moved back, Yoon-hee heard him sigh regretfully.

“Don’t die,” she told him.

Then Im Joong-kyung left.

*

The room was dark. Inspector Jo Won lived alone and his apartment looked the part. The cupboards were filled with instant ramen, old papers littered most available surfaces and what wasn’t covered in paper had been collecting dust for a while. Im Joong-kyung was uncomfortably reminded of his own apartment, which would look like this if he ever managed to live in it for more than a couple of months.

He hid himself in the bedroom and waited patiently. Jo should still be at work, so he busied himself checking his backup gun and let his eyes roam over the shelves and the overflowing laundry basket, until finally, he heard a key turn in the front door. Jo stepped into his home without caution, letting the door fall shut behind him with a weary sigh.

Im Joong-kyung moved. He left his hiding place, lifted his gun and swerved around the corner. Inspector Jo froze when he saw the barrel of a gun pointed at him. And when he saw who held it, his eyes widened in astonishment.

“Inspector Im!” he called. “What are you—”

“You know exactly why I’m here.”

Jo just stared in disbelief. “Look, the last thing I heard was that you’d vanished. We’ve got you listed as a missing person. The superintendent said you’d left on an urgent matter and that you never checked back in. They found your car abandoned in the middle of nowhere. That’s all I know.”

“Who do you work for?” Im Joong-kyung asked. Because he doubted Jo Won was working alone. There was always the possibility that he’d decided to act out of loyalty to his old boss, but Jo was no leader. He was a follower.

“The Office of Counter-Terrorism and Organized Crime,” Jo spat out. He was starting to get irritated. Good, Im Joong-kyung thought. He might let something slip that way.

“Who else?”

Jo stared at the gun. Joong-kyung could see sweat forming on his forehead. “Nobody. Else,” he hissed, emphasizing both words. “I don’t know what you want from me.”

“Chae Jun-ho.”

“What?”

“You asked me about Chae Jun-ho and why I was looking into him. You know what I’m talking about.”

Joong-kyung saw the exact moment it dawned on Jo. His eyes widened even more, and his breath hitched. “I don’t know who that is.”

He lifted the gun a fraction. It pointed at Jo’s head now, not his chest.

“I really don’t know!” Jo insisted. “I don’t know who that is. The superintendent said you looked him up in the database and he was wondering why, so he asked me to ask you. I told him whatever it was you said to me. That he came up in some of your files, right? That wasn’t what happened was it?”

Thoughts raced through Joong-kyung’s mind. Either Jo was a great actor, or he was telling the truth. He knew what he should do, what Jang Jin-tae would do. Take out one potential threat, then focus on another. Leaving Jo alive was leaving his back open to attack. But if he was innocent... if he wasn’t working with Kim Dong-min on purpose...

“Chae Jun-ho was the key witness tying Kim Myung-bae to the Public Security Affair,” Joong-kyung said.

“So, what, you think I killed him?”

“No,” Joong-kyung answered, keeping his eyes on the target. “I think you set me up to get murdered. I didn’t end up on that cliff by accident. One of my contacts in the local police contacted me about suspicious behavior around a person of interest. He chose the meeting place. Someone else showed up. And all that just after I’d started looking into Chae Jun-ho.”

“It wasn’t me, I swear!” Jo insisted. He was pleading now. “You’ve known me for months now. Do I strike you as the kind of guy who would do such a thing?”

“Impressions can be deceiving.”

“In my case, they’re not. Look around you! If I was dirty, wouldn’t I live in a better place than this?”

It wasn’t about money, Joong-kyung realized. Jo wasn’t on the take. But if what he said was true... Superintendent Kim Dong-min was famous for being incorruptible. Whatever the case, it was about ideology, or about friendship.

“You worked for Kim Myung-bae for three years.”

“And he was a shitty boss,” Jo snorted. “He liked things neat when reality is messy. He kept one eye on a promotion too, always.”

Joong-kyung hummed as if he was considering it. In truth, he had made his choice already. “So you want me to believe that Kim Dong-min is a rat? You should have come up with a better excuse.”

That startled Jo. “No, I don’t think so. I don’t think he was involved. He isn’t the type. You know him.”

Did he? Im Joong-kyung couldn’t rightly say. Kim Dong-min was better at keeping up a facade than any of the other officers he had worked with. He was the perfect policeman. Who he was underneath all that, Joong-kyung didn’t know it. Jo was a lazy man with a sense of justice. Choi liked two things, neatness and Inspector Park. And Inspector Park was young and wanted to leave her mark. But the superintendent was a cipher. A cipher with unrestricted access to all digital files and all areas of the building. He had the means. He had the opportunity. It was the motive that was missing.

“Turn around,” Joong-kyung ordered.

Jo did as he was told. “Are you going to kill me now?” he asked with a tremor in his voice. “I thought you were different, you know. But maybe Choi was right.”

Instead of an answer, Joong-kyung hit him over the head with the butt of his gun. Then he zip-tied Jo’s hands and feet, gagged him and dragged him over to his bed, tying him to the heater next to it. Jo still hadn’t woken up when he left the apartment.

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The Special Unit looked the same as it had when he had last seen it. Unassuming entrances, rotting buildings, a hiding place for wild animals. But there was always someone on watch, and this time was no different. Im Joong-kyung had just made the first steps into the interior of the building when the shadows around him started to move. He recognized the man who stood before him, but there was no sign of recognition in the other's face.

"You no longer have any business here," the former friend said.

"I have the information he told me to get," Joong-kyung answered. "He'll want to hear it, and he'll want to hear it now."

The two men stared at each other. It was the other one who blinked first. Then he moved aside, allowing Joong-kyung to go deeper into the complex, into the lair of the Wolf Brigade. All the while, he could feel their eyes on him. If he so much as twitched wrong, he would be dead before he hit the floor.

Jang Jin-tae was in his office. He didn't look surprised to see Joong-kyung, but then again, he never looked surprised. His face was frozen into a grim expression that only anger could crack.

"You've got quite the nerve," Jang Jin-tae told him with a raised eyebrow. "First you don't do what you're supposed to and then you disappear. And don't think I don't know exactly where you disappeared."

"You wanted to know who the mole in CTOC is. I can tell you."

For a long moment, Jang Jin-tae just stared at him. "I'm listening."

"Kim Dong-min."

To his credit, Jang Jin-tae didn't even twitch. Instead, he asked a simple question. "Do you have evidence?"

"Only circumstantial."

"That's not enough. You don't expect me to go to my superiors with this, do you?"

"No," Joong-kyung admitted. "I was lured to Sachon by my informant – Officer Moon Do-hyun. He arranged the meeting place and never showed. Instead, someone came to kill me."

Jang Jin-tae scoffed slightly when he heard that. He didn't know how close it had been. "So you've got evidence against some nobody from the countryside."

"He wouldn't have done it on his own accord. Someone must have put him up to it. Someone who knew he was working with me. Someone who had the power to offer him something in exchange. He's an ambitious man. If you put

some pressure on him, he'll tell you what you need to hear," Joong-kyung argued. He didn't bother to explain how he knew the last part. There was no need to tell Jang about Yoon-hee and the week he had spent on her living room floor.

"Someone like a superintendent in Seoul, you mean?"

Joong-kyung nodded. "And then there's Inspector Jo," he said, before explaining what had happened earlier. Jang Jin-tae raised his eyebrows when he heard that Jo was still alive, and his shoulders sagged in what might have been disappointment. Joong-kyung didn't want to speculate. All he wanted was to leave this mess behind him. All he wanted was peace.

"Very well," Jang Jin-tae finally said. Then he called for his second, and the Wolf Brigade started to move.

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People stopped in their tracks when Im Joong-kyung walked into the office the day after everything, as if the last week and a half hadn't happened. He earned himself some curious looks and whispers, but nobody cared enough to stop him. There were bigger things to worry about. Now that their superintendent had been arrested for tampering with an investigation and destroying evidence, the entire Office was in peril. Not that Joong-kyung cared.

When he arrived at his own office, all that greeted him was silence. Inspector Jo was there, on time for once. And he'd apparently already had time to talk with Choi and Park. Not even the optimistic Park could muster a smile when she saw him. Joong-kyung tried not to care.

"So, you're a mole," Choi finally spat out. "Should have figured."

Instead of answering, Joong-kyung went to his desk and booted up his computer. He dreaded the amount of work that must have been accumulating while everything happened.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" Inspector Park asked. It seemed they wouldn't just let him work. And so Joong-kyung straightened his back and turned to his two younger colleagues.

"I did my job."

"You mean you spied for the Special Unit," Choi poked.

"There was a suspicion that someone was tampering with the evidence against former police personnel in the wake of the Public Security Affair. I was supposed

to find out who. I did.” And that was all there was to it, really, as far as they were concerned. Nobody but Jang Jin-tae needed to know why he did what he did.

“Well, you have the wrong man,” Inspector Park said. “The superintendent isn’t like that. He would never take money.”

But he had. Not much, but he had. Just a little something to sweeten the deal, enough for his daughter to go to university in the US and secure his family’s livelihoods should he be caught. It just hadn’t been his main motivation. Jang Jin-tae had invited Joong-kyung to listen in on the interrogation because he knew Kim Dong-min the best. In the end, he’d done it because he believed he was doing the right thing, that the Special Unit was a danger to the country and that Kim Myung-bae had only done what he thought was right. He’d wanted to protect those whom he thought innocent from a government conspiracy. He had also insisted that he had nothing to do with Chae Jun-ho’s death and suggested that it had been someone who had a grudge against him for a different reason. But even if they couldn’t charge him with the murder, Officer Moon’s testimony was enough to get him convicted for attempted murder.

“He confessed,” Joong-kyung told her plainly. He took no pleasure in watching her face fall. Kim Dong-min had been one of her heroes, he supposed. And watching your heroes fall was never pleasant. It was a feeling Im Joong-kyung was all too familiar with.

“When will you go back to the Unit?” It had been Inspector Jo who asked the question. He’d been quiet so far, and Joong-kyung wondered what was going on in his mind. His face, usually open for anyone to read, was closed off. When he lifted his hand to drink from his coffee cup, Joong-kyung could see the bruises on his wrists.

“I’m not.”

That surprised the others. “So you’re here to make sure the rest of us isn’t crooked, either?” Choi accused him.

“No. I’m working here, like you.”

Choi snorted. He clearly didn’t believe him. Park Hye-won didn’t either. As for Jo Won, he looked inscrutable, one eyebrow raised as if he was thinking. Maybe he hadn’t made up his mind yet. Maybe he was less willing to believe in Kim Dong-min because he’d spent a night in interrogation after he’d been used to figure out how much of a danger Joong-kyung was to the superintendent. It

didn't really matter. Im Joong-kyung was no longer part of the Special Unit. Jang Jin-tae had finally let him go.

"I didn't think you'd do it," Jang Jin-tae had told him when they stood outside in the dawn, smoking their cigarettes after the interrogation. "But you did."

A year ago, he'd have added a "good job" too, Joong-kyung had thought. "Can I leave now?" he had asked.

For a moment, Jang Jin-tae had looked at him. "We're done with the interrogation."

"That's not what I'm talking about."

More silence, as the nicotine had begun to do its work. "Unless there's more problems at CTOC, yes," Jang Jin-tae conceded.

"And Lee Yoon-hee?" Joong-kyung had had to know. When he closed his eyes, he still felt the memory of her lips on his. He wanted nothing more than for her to be happy. She was a good person. She should be.

"Very well."

Joong-kyung had nodded, then he had stubbed out his cigarette against the wall and turned. He hadn't looked back as he left, and Jang Jin-tae hadn't stopped him. Not this time.

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The week after Joong-kyung had left, Yoon-hee breathed a sigh of relief when Officer Lee entered the cafe alone and in an unusually sober mood. He ordered his coffee and didn't chat, earning himself a confused glance by Min-ji. But Yoon-hee knew what it meant, and it was as if a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. The excited whispers that spread through the village in the wake of Officer Moon's disappearance felt like a spring breeze rustling through leaves to her, soothing her nerves.

Still, she had to wait a while. Until one day, when she was almost home, Mrs. Kim stopped her at the gate.

"You've got a visitor," she said, as if "visitor" was a dirty word.

Yoon-hee saw him standing on the stairs, in almost the same spot where she'd found him the last time. When he spotted her, a shy smile spread on his face.

At the bottom of the stairs, Yoon-hee smiled back.