



The man sat placidly in a utilitarian metal chair, staring straight ahead at a barren wall of cinder block. His arms were in his lap, but they showed no tension. No indication of what he knew was to come.

Positioned in the center of the room, he and his chair were the sole occupiers of the space. No desks, no bookshelves, and certainly no decorations on the rough concrete that surrounded him. Just him. The only break was a stainless steel pipe that hung just above his head, with what looked like a shower nozzle on the end.

Behind a thick pane of glass on the left wall, three men stared at him intently, waiting on the inevitable.

Standing behind the two seated men, Dr. Chin Mae-jung watched the soul inside the room, and wondered, *What goes through a man's mind when death is near, and stalking?* That was imprecise, and not fitting of his scientific background. Not stalking. Coming in for the payment in full with the certitude of an avalanche. Not the death of a teenager in a car crash, or a soldier in a gunfight, where both felt invincible right up until the windshield shattered or the bullet tore through the body, ripping the soul free in the span of a heartbeat. No, a death where one *knew* it was coming. Staring you in the face. An inexorable slide to the abyss that one can't stop. What goes through a man's head? Did he think about his family? His life? A

favorite memory? How could he sit there so patiently, knowing he was going to die?

The inside of the room was cold, with condensation seeping through the walls. The same cold Dr. Chin Mae-jung had dealt with his entire professional life, but he certainly hadn't expected to test his child on a living, breathing human being. He had enjoyed the scientific research he'd accomplished within these walls, but honestly, given a choice, he thought the manner of death he was about to impose as a result of his research to be grotesque.

But that might not matter in an hour, because he would be forced to prove he'd succeeded. And would most likely die just like the man in the chair. He wondered if he'd go out with the same placid expression on his face. The same calm.

The man in the chair wasn't chained to it. There was nothing keeping him in place. He was free to run around like a rat attempting to avoid a snake, shouting and yelling at the injustice, and yet he did not. The only thing keeping him in the chair was his own shame.

Once the chief scientist for North Korea's nuclear ambitions, he had overseen a test that had collapsed the mountain that contained it with the force of a magnitude seven earthquake, crushing hundreds, shattering years of developmental technology, and setting back Kim Jong-un's quest to be a nuclear power.

It wasn't his fault. He'd told the command the risks when they wanted to test a hydrogen bomb. But that mattered little now.

The world debated why North Korea had paused its nuclear tests. Was it sanctions, the threat of violence on behalf of the United States, or was North Korea playing some level of 3-D chess? The answer was more mundane: They simply couldn't. Which made the Supreme Leader angry, leading to the application of blame.

Leading to the man in the chair.

This execution served a dual purpose, as it was testing a new form of nerve agent, one that became inert after an hour of exposure to the atmosphere. Something Kim Jong-un wanted very badly.

Talking heads across the world theorized about North Korea's nuclear ambition, but they consistently missed the point of why Jong-un was working to achieve it. Nuclear weapons were a boogeyman only to the West, as there were plenty of ways to provide the same or greater deaths, and North Korea worked hard to achieve those goals as well. The world just didn't seem to care about that.

North Korea had upward of five thousand tons of chemical and biological munitions—enough to ensure more deaths than any number of nuclear bombs could accomplish—but their use came at a cost, as, once fired, they made the terrain uninhabitable, just like nuclear weapons. Kim Jong-un looked at the problem holistically, and wanted a solution. The nuclear program was designed to keep the United States from conducting a preemptive attack, something the chemical and biological weapons had inexplicably failed to do, but his end state was a reunified Korean peninsula under his command. To do that, he needed to kill a great many people, breaking the back of the despised South Korean regime, but not in such a way that he couldn't occupy the terrain afterward.

Which is where Chin's research came in. He'd worked on the weapon for years, solely as a functionary of the North Korean state. He'd never thought about where it would be used, or more precisely, whom it would kill.

Kim Jong-un had labeled every weapon he made with some outlandish title, but in this case, he'd kept it secret, calling it the same name as one of his ballistic missiles on the off chance it would end up in some intelligence chatter. Chin's weapon was called the Hwasong, like the Hwasong-12 missile, or the newly launched Hwasong-15, but unlike the missile systems, it wasn't given a number. It was given a color—red.

The faceless bureaucrat next to the lone telephone in the control room said, "What are you waiting for?"

Turning his eyes from the man in the chair, Chin wanted to say, "For you to get the hell out of my life." He couldn't, of course. The

bureaucrat had the ear of the Supreme Leader, and as such, he held Chin's life in his hands.

Chin said, "The command."

"You have it."

Chin leaned over the desk and pressed an innocuous red button. One of many on the control panel. He rose slowly, knowing what he was going to see. What was unknown was what he would feel in an hour.

A gray mist sprang out of the stainless steel nozzle above the man's head, the only reaction from the man in the chair being his glancing up at the droplets spackling his skull. It spewed its odorless, colorless death for a fraction of a second, but it was enough.

The three men in the control room leaned forward, two unsure of what they would see. One not wanting to see it.

The man in the chair sat still for another second, dropping his head into his chest. Five seconds passed with no response. The bureaucrat looked at Chin, about to form a question, when the man's legs shot out.

The prisoner jumped up, staring at the panel of glass, and shouted. Chin saw the effects taking hold. The man's face became necrotic, turning blue. He yelled something else, and then fell to the floor. His body began bucking up and down, his legs kicking the ground as if that would stop the climb of the neurotoxin, every muscle in his being receiving signals to contract. Including the lungs.

The man began frothing at the mouth, his entire body vibrating, his hands slapping the floor. Chin saw the dark stain of his bowels releasing forcefully, an embarrassing sight, and Chin wondered if these two functionaries would see the same thing when he entered the room.

Within thirty seconds, the man ceased movement. The bureaucrat said, "And now we wait."

An hour later, Chin was dressed in a chemical/biological suit and descending the stairs to the chamber. He put his hand on the door latch, wanting yet again to tell the men in the control room to initiate

the vacuum protocol and follow-on decontamination of the room, but he knew that wasn't going to happen. The whole point was to see if his creation worked.

He turned the handle and swung the door open, hearing a slight exhale of air, as if the dead man in the room were sighing. He knew he'd now contaminated the entire hallway with the death in the room.

Or not.

He walked to the body, the breath from his mask rasping out, a labored effort to keep him alive. He glanced up at the window and saw the two functionaries staring at him intently. Chin checked the body and said, "He's dead," then realized nobody could hear him. He glanced up again, and saw the primary bureaucrat motion for him to remove his mask. He didn't want to.

But he did.

He stood tense for a moment, waiting on the symptoms. Waiting on what he didn't understand. For all of his work on the weapon, he had no idea what it would feel like to be killed by it. He took two deep breaths, then began running, sprinting back out of the room. He charged up the stairs, his forward motion designed to keep from him the awful truth that he was dead. He barged into the control room, breathing heavily and sweating.

The two men looked at him in horror, one leaping out of his chair, wondering if he'd brought the death with him. Chin saw the reaction and felt the anger flow, reminding him he was alive.

He took two more breaths, looked at his hands, and said, "You can calm down. The trial was a success. You can go into that room now as well. If you want."

The bureaucrat sagged back in his chair, shaking his head, a slow smile spreading on his face. He said, "The Leader will be pleased."

Chin nodded, then realized he'd had no thoughts before he'd removed the mask. No grand visions of his life. No fond recollections before he faced his eternal solution. He'd been simply paralyzed with the fear of death. He remembered the man in the chair, and the fact

brought him shame. He was sure the man had thought more on his death than he had. Sure that man held more honor than he did.

The bureaucrat picked up the phone, telling Chin his work was done and waving him away. Chin staggered toward the door, still amazed he was alive, and heard the bureaucrat say into the phone, “It was a success. Tell the contact we will transfer it at his location. But tell him it will cost him much more than he expected.”

Chin left the room, not thinking of the words the man had said into the phone. Not realizing there was profit to be made from what he’d designed, profit that would help alleviate the pain of the sanctions imposed on his country. He was only thinking that he was still alive. At least for a few more days in the Hermit Kingdom.

It would be later, when he saw the deaths, that he would realize he was but a pawn in a game of someone else’s choosing.