

Blackfield 341

Chapter 341: Very Tired (2)

After breakfast, Kang Chan was able to enjoy a moment of peace for the first time in a long while. Still sitting at the table, he looked at the whiteboard.

Where did Hwang Ki-Hyun get the coordinates?

How did the Libyan agents learn that the incident in Afghanistan wasn't just a mere kidnapping?

Why did the Quds show up in Africa? What about the attack on Song Chang-Wook?

While Kang Chan pondered these questions, Seok Kang-Ho walked toward him.

'Should I just beat up Abibu again like this bastard suggested?'

Abibu wouldn't survive another beating, though. He was nothing more than a chess piece that had been taken advantage of anyway. If anything, Kang Chan had to investigate where they were planning to build the next-generation energy facilities.

The NIS also had to get in touch with the agents in Egypt again to figure out how they discovered the coordinates. The submarines that Vasili mentioned had to be checked too.

Kang Chan glared at the whiteboard as if expecting it to answer.

"Coffee shop at the intersection, thirty minutes before lunch, right?" Choi Jong-Il asked, confirming the time.

"Yeah. We're all going together anyway, so why do you ask?"

"We need to plan out the perimeter security."

"You've met Smithen before, haven't you?"

"Yes."

Choi Jong-Il hadn't just met Smithen. Smithen was the main culprit behind a hostage situation in the past, so Choi Jong-Il likely knew him better than most people.

"Let's leave around eleven, then."

While Choi Jong-Il set a timer, Woo Hee-Seung approached them with a heavy expression.

'What is it?'

Woo Hee-Seung glanced at Choi Jong-Il as he reported, "An article on the Internet is claiming that the National Intelligence Service has arrested Abibu as the mastermind of the recent terrorist attack."

While observing Kang Chan's reaction, he continued, "It also says that you're currently torturing him and that he's at death's door now, Assistant Director."

What kind of bullshit is this?

Choi Jong-Il and Woo Hee-Seung looked more surprised than Kang Chan. Even though only a few people were aware of what Kang Chan had done to Abibu, an article about it somehow got published anyway.

“Can I see the article?”

“It’s on the computer over there.”

Kang Chan went to the desk that Woo Hee-Seung pointed to.

Go Gun-Woo, Kim Hyung-Jung, the interpreter, the recorder, the two armed agents in the interrogation room, the two suited agents, the medical team, and... who else?

His mind raced as he walked.

While Lee Doo-Hee moved out of the way, Kang Chan leaned his arms on the desk and tilted his upper body to look at the monitor.

The first thing he saw was a photo of him. He then saw a picture of Abibu smiling and shaking hands at the bottom.

Since the story was in breaking news form, Woo Hee-Seung had already told him most of what it contained.

Tsk!

Kang Chan glared at the monitor and stood back up.

This would officially turn the UIS, extremists, and all of Saudi Arabia against South Korea.

‘Who is it? Who would do this?’

As Kang Chan stood up and moved to the table, Seok Kang-Ho walked over and looked at the article.

“Huh? How did this get published?”

Seok Kang-Ho’s words echoed Kang Chan’s feelings.

Kang Chan put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it. He was relieved that Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook were in Europe right now.

“Hoo.”

While blowing out smoke, he immediately thought that the NIS could no longer be trusted. If he were to create his own organization, he would require a completely different source of information than theirs.

Grumbling, Seok Kang-Ho sat across from him. He then put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it.

“What are you going to do?”

“We’ll wait and see.”

“Now that the article’s out, there will be a hellish storm soon, won’t there?”

“Probably. Anyway, I’m going to make a call.”

Putting out his cigarette, Kang Chan picked up his phone and called Assistant Manager Kim.

- Hello?

“It’s me. Where are you?”

- The plane’s just left the Charles de Gaulle International Airport. We’re on our way back to South Korea.

Kang Chan’s heart sank.

He was just about to tell Assistant Manager Kim to make sure his parents wouldn’t see the news and to focus on their security.

“What? Why?”

- They feel bad for the agents for flying over to Europe while our nation was being hit with terrorist attacks. They insisted on it, so we had no choice...

Kang Chan looked outside the window.

The article seemed to serve as the nail in the coffin, proving that he was the one who committed the crime. Apart from being a target of terrorism, it would be hard for him to deal with the negative attention within Korea. It was impossible to stay away from TV, the internet, and phone calls forever.

“Is your flight heading straight to Seoul?”

- We have a layover in China.

“Then head to the base in Mongolia from China,” Kang Chan immediately decided. “You know President Kim Tae-Jin of Yoo Bi-Corp, right?”

- Yes, sir.

“He’ll be there to help you when you arrive. Heading back to South Korea right now isn’t a good idea. Can you prepare the flights and the helicopters?”

- I will ask for cooperation. Your parents will be quite surprised, though. I believe it would be best for you to break the news to them yourself.

“Connect me to them. Thank you.”

- Of course.

While listening to Assistant Manager Kim walking, Kang Chan let out a quiet sigh.

What would he even say?

- Hello?

Kang Dae-Kyung was the one on the line now.

Kang Chan felt bad. His parents had gone to Europe and now had to go to Mongolia when they were already on their way back home. He felt like he had become a troublemaker.

“Father, the situation isn’t too good in Korea right now. You should head straight to the South Korean base in Mongolia from China. I know Mother will be surprised, but I don’t know how to tell her about this.”

-Hmm.

Kang Dae-Kyung sounded as if he was contemplating.

- If that’s what you want, I’ll talk to your mother about it. We’re on the way to China right now. Should I discuss this with Assistant Manager Kim?

“Yes. Thank you, Father.”

- Everything else is fine, right?

“Of course.”

- I know you’re busy, but make sure you call your mother later, if not now.

“I will,” Kang Chan answered. He then called, “Father?”

- Yes?

“I’m sorry.”

- What for? Your mother will be happy.

Kang Dae-Kyung did his best to respond cheerfully.

The call ended afterward.

Under Seok Kang-Ho’s stare, Kang Chan looked up a new number and pressed the call button again.

- Hello?

“President Kim, this is Kang Chan.”

- You’ve been calling often these days. Do you want me to connect you to Kang sunbae? He’s not around right now, though...

“Not at the moment. My parents will probably be there in about twelve hours. They’re on their way back from Europe, but I told them to go there because I don’t think Korea is safe for them to be in right now.”

- What happened? Is there anything we can do from here?

“I’ll explain the details to you next time. Please tell Director Kang about this as well, and prepare a tent for them. Two agents will be accompanying them.

- Got it.

“Thank you.”

- I’ll do my best, so don’t worry too much.

After hanging up, Kang Chan put another cigarette in his mouth and lit it up.

“Didn’t you say you might end up taking the fight to Mongolia? Wouldn’t sending your parents over there put them in even more danger?”

“It’s better than staying here or in Europe right now. If we end up bringing the fight to Mongolia, we can just move them to China or Russia. As I’ve seen with Director Hwang and Director Song, South Korea isn’t really the most proactive country when it comes to fighting terrorism.”

Seok Kang-Ho nodded. “True. The agents here probably wouldn’t be able to pull the trigger even if they suspected someone is a suicide bomber.”

Kang Chan blew out a puff of smoke, seemingly letting out some of his frustrations. “Hoo.”

“Do you really think we can take the fight to Mongolia?,” Seok Kang-Ho wondered. “Our enemies aren’t stupid. They won’t walk across a desolate field just to blow themselves up.”

Even with the severity of the situation, Kang Chan couldn’t help but be surprised.

“What?” Seok Kang-Ho asked.

“How did you think of that?”

Seok Kang-Ho’s expression filled up with arrogance. “Hey! There you go again. Like I said, I’m better than Gérard.”

Suddenly walking over, Gérard asked, “What’s happening?”

Kang Chan told him about the article and what happened with Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook.

“If you go to Mongolia, the UIS and extremists will definitely target South Korea. It’ll be difficult to send a large force over,” Gérard replied.

It was similar to what Seok Kang-Ho said.

When did these assholes become so smart?

“Let’s just keep an eye on it for now,” Kang Chan ordered.

“Understood,” Gérard answered. He then smiled, the scar on his cheek stretching.

“What?”

“You really are amazing. Even the UIS is after you now. I like that you always see things to the end.”

“Things are already hectic enough, you fucking bastard. I don’t need your snarky remarks right now.”

“I’ll go pack. If we’re going, then let’s hurry up and leave already.”

Gérard looked rather excited.

“I thought you said you’re not coming to Mongolia,” Kang Chan commented.

“You’re going to make me come anyway, aren’t you?”

“What’s that fucker so excited about?” Seok Kang-Ho asked.

“He says he’s going to go pack his things and that we should hurry up and go if we’re leaving anyway,” Kang Chan answered.

“Fucking idiot! It’s not that easy!”

“He also said I’ll make him come.”

“Hm? Well, he’s not wrong. I’ll be back after I drop by at home. Phuhuhu!! suddenly feel hungry.”

Kang Chan shook his head.

Crazy bastards.

Go Gun-Woo sat across from Moon Jae-Hyun, a heavy expression on his face.

“The NIS leaking this information is fatal to national security,” Moon Jae-Hyun said.

Go Gun-Woo couldn’t even answer.

“How’s the situation?”

“Saudi Arabia’s unofficial channels demanding Abibu’s release have been completely cut off. They will probably release an official announcement soon.”

Moon Jae-Hyun groaned while rubbing his fingers together. “Hmm. Whatever the reason, beating Abibu up is inexcusable. I’m sure the assistant director knew that much.”

He pressed his lips together. Afterward, he asked, “What do you think? Is there a way out of this?”

“I can only think of two options. One is to show the evidence and announce that he’s the mastermind behind the terrorist attack. We can then say that he resisted so much during his arrest that he left us no choice.”

“That can be easily disproven during the trial, though.”

“If we announce that he was beaten, we’ll have a hard time cleaning up the mess. For now, we can only claim that Abibu is lying to dilute the terrorism case.”

Moon Jae-Hyun sighed again.

“What’s the other way?”

“We can negotiate with Abibu. According to him, he’s been receiving death threats for the information he’s given us. We can use that to get him to confess and announce that the violence was unavoidable because he was resisting arrest.”

“Why would he go along with that?”

“If you pardon him in return, he’ll comply.”

Moon Jae-Hyun shook his head.

“If we do that, we’ll also be covering up the terrorist attacks that killed Director Hwang and Director Song. The agents and soldiers’ sacrifices will be in vain as well.”

Go Gun-Woo was at a loss for words.

“We need Abibu’s word to stop this, but if we want him to comply, we will need to sacrifice our people and diplomatic missions.”

Seemingly coming to a realization, Moon Jae-Hyun then turned toward him. “Please protect the assistant director for now. Don’t let him go to Mongolia alone like he said in the interrogation room.”

“I’ll see to it.”

“How long do we have left before we have to release an official statement?”

“It depends on what Saudi Arabia’s official position will be. However, we believe that we should release one before the end of the day,” Go Gun-Woo responded.

They continued discussing the issue a bit further.

“Reporter Jo Seok-Do was the one who posted the breaking news story without permission from the higher-ups. If we force him to take it down now, it will only add to the suspicion.”

While Kim Hyung-Jung spoke on the phone, news reports continued to pop up on the monitor.

- Manager Kim, I’m more concerned about giving instructions to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the embassies than creating correction articles. As I said, we’re planning to negotiate with Abibu. Please meet with the assistant director and have him refrain from doing anything else.

Go Gun-Woo was speaking faster than usual. Despite having thick skin, he was clearly panicking.

“Understood, Director.”

- Have you spoken with him yet?

“Not yet. I’ll meet up with him now and call you back after.”

- Losing the assistant director at a time like this will be hard for us to bear. I need you to hurry and tell him what’s going on and hopefully reach a good decision.

“I’ll leave right away.”

After hanging up, Kim Hyung-Jung stood up and called Kang Chan.

“Assistant Director, are you still at the office? I’d like to stop by as soon as possible. I’ve got an urgent matter to discuss with you.”

- Understood.

He then ended the call, stood up from his seat, and called an agent over.

“Let me know as soon as you find Jo Seok-Do. Also, get me a list of the agents who were there when Abibu was arrested and a separate list of the people who were in the interrogation room, including the agents, medical team, and everyone at the police hospital where he was hospitalized.”

“Yes, sir.”

“One more thing. List down the names of those working on the payroll and those who could have been listening to our frequencies from the counter-terrorism team’s situation room at the time of his arrest.”

Kim Hyung-Jung walked out the door, then turned around.

“The article is targeting the assistant director. If something goes wrong, he might take the fall for this. Make sure you don’t leave anyone off the list.”

“Of course, sir,” the agent answered, looking even more upset than Kim Hyung-Jung.

The moment the syringe was pulled out, Smithen let out a deep breath.

“Was that too strong?” Sharlan asked.

“I believe we administered the right amount. He’ll start feeling the pain in his legs again if it wears off halfway, sir.”

While glaring at Smithen, Sharlan ordered, “Dress the chest wound and the bomb so they don’t find it.”

“We’ve prepared everything you asked for.” The man who had tossed the syringe in the trash pointed to the table. There were pants, a cotton tee, a casual jacket, and even socks on top of it.

“Where’s the detonator?”

“It’s remote.”

The man held up a square box the size of his fist.

“Set it up,” Sharlan instructed.

The other people in the room walked over to Smithen.

“Heeheehee!”

Smithen, who was already shirtless, seemed to find it funny that they were taking off the rest of his clothes.

His body was a mess, to say the least. His chest was riddled with chest wounds, and his thighs had burns centered around knife scars.

Snap. Tear.

The men deftly wrapped bandages with four C-4s around his waist, then secured it by tying it tightly.

Smithen gasped as if he had just felt something exhilarating. Sharlan, who was leaning on the table, watched him with a sharp gaze.

As soon as Kim Hyung-Jung sat down, Woo Hee-Seung brought him coffee and then left.

Silence permeated the room as Kim Hyung-Jung took out a cigarette, offered it to Kang Chan, and lit it.

“The director is planning to meet with Abibu,” Kim Hyung-Jung began.

Cigarette smoke swirled up into the ceiling vents.

“He’s going to have Abibu confess that he was behind the terrorist attacks and he resisted his arrest so hard that we had to resort to violence.”

“There’s no way Abibu will just accept that. What is he offering him?”

“A presidential pardon,” Kim Hyung-Jung said with difficulty.

Seeing Kang Chan’s expression darken, he quickly continued, “After much deliberation, the president and the director came to that decision. They couldn’t accept the idea of you going to Mongolia. That’s also the reason they asked me to convince you not to leave.”

Kang Chan sighed quietly.

Their plan would cover up the deaths of Hwang Ki-Hyung and Song Chang-Wook. It would also render their agents’ and soldiers’ sacrifices meaningless.

“Please take a break for now,” Kim Hyung-Jung insisted. “Abibu has asked us for protection, so he has no choice but to stay in Korea for the time being anyway.”

Kang Chan shook his head resolutely. “If the president pardons him, we’ll lose our chance to punish him.”

“But—”

“Manager Kim,” Kang Chan called, cutting Kim Hyung-Jung off. “Think about it. If you negotiate with that terrorist, everything will be over for South Korea. Every time we find ourselves in a similar situation in the future, we’ll be faced with a second or third Abibu. You’d negotiate with the man who killed our agents just because you’re afraid of terrorism?”

Kang Chan sighed loudly.

“Make an official announcement as soon as I leave for Mongolia.”

“That would mean losing you, Assistant Director, and possibly putting you under intense attack.”

“It’s still our best option. Tell the nation that I arrested Abibu based on the evidence we’ve gathered and that I’m sorry that something unfortunate happened during the arrest. No more, no less.”

“Assistant Director—”

“What about Director Hwang, Manager Kim? Director Song? Our fallen agents and soldiers?”

“That injustice brings tears to my eyes as well, but if we’re not careful, South Korea’s embassies and residents abroad will be targeted for terrorism. If we lose you, there’s no telling how many sacrifices will follow. We will avenge them, but you must bear with us this time.”

Kang Chan looked at Kim Hyung-Jung.

Their powerlessness and lack of experience in combating terrorism were the reasons they were in this situation. If they let themselves be defeated in this way, the terrorists would continue targeting them.

He was wrong for hitting Abibu. However, at a time when they had to strike at the first sign of terrorism, how could they negotiate with terrorists out of fear of hurting the diplomatic missions and people?

Kang Chan let out a long sigh. “Haaa.”

“We’re not used to handling terrorist attacks yet, Assistant Director,” Kim Hyung-Jung said. “If reports like this come out and there’s a bombing at Gangnam Station, our people won’t be able to handle it, and then all the blame will be pointed at you.”

What would have happened if Kang Chan hadn’t beaten up Abibu? What would they be able to tell the people if the motherfucker continued to insist he was innocent?

Would the Saudi Arabians have acknowledged that he was the mastermind behind the International Building incident?

Kang Chan took a long drag on his cigarette to stifle his frustration. “This isn’t right.”

“Sir, this is a matter for the president and the director to decide. Please just follow their requests this time.”

Kang Chan and Kim Hyung-Jung sighed at the same time.

A moment of silence followed.

“Alright. I’ll accept their decision, but please identify who leaked this information and why,” Kang Chan concluded. “Otherwise, whatever you do in the future, there will be suspicion among the agents.”

Kim Hyung-Jung sighed in relief.

Kang Chan continued, “I’ll have to excuse myself. I thought about canceling my plans, but if this is how we’re going to handle the situation, then I’m heading out now,”

When he turned around, Gérard and Choi Jong-Il stood up as well.

“Is it an urgent meeting?”

“You remember Smithen, right? We said we would have lunch together. I’m feeling pretty frustrated, so I’d like to blow off some steam beforehand.”

“Smithen? The manager of Gong Te automobile’s South Korean branch?”

“Yes.”

Kang Chan stood up.

“Smithen said he wanted to meet your parents the morning they left as well,” Kim Hyung-Jung said. It seemed he only remembered it now. “According to him, he’s pretty upset about your father stepping down from his position. He even asked where in Europe they were going.”

Kang Chan turned to Seok Kang-Ho, who grinned amusedly in response.

Chapter 342: We Won’t Take It Sitting (1)

Kang Chan arrived at the meeting point ten minutes early.

He took a seat on the terrace. A group of men and women with fierce gazes were sitting inside.

Without being told to, Gérard got up. “I’ll go order.”

“Do you think Smithen has gone over to the enemy?” Seok Kang-Ho asked.

“I’m not sure,” Kang Chan answered.

“But it is strange, isn’t it?”

When Kang Chan nodded, Seok Kang-Ho grinned, and his eyes glinted.

Just then, Gérard returned and sat down at the table. “Here’s your coffee.”

Kang Chan and Gérard were dressed in suits without a tie, while Seok Kang-Ho was in suit pants and a comfortable tee. He also had a combi jacket over his lap like a blanket.

Kang Chan picked up his coffee and took a sip. He then laughed softly.

Before he knew it, they were hanging out together, and the one who had been separated from them was coming to meet them.

If only Smithen had more guts, they would've been able to meet on better terms than they were now.

Kang Chan set down his cup of coffee.

“Captain,” Gérard bluntly called.

Kang Chan glanced at him, then followed his gaze.

Smithen was a tall American, so it was easy to spot him coming from afar.

Kang Chan's eyes glinted as he looked at Smithen.

Motherfucker!

He was acting strange, evidenced by his head swaying as he walked.

“Caaaptaaain.”

Smithen raised his hand and waved. He looked like he'd had a good drink.

“Gérard, did you get confirmation?”

“A silver van dropped him off at the subway entrance and left right after.”

While they spoke, Smithen entered the shop and walked to the terrace.

“Heeheehee, Captain.”

“Sit,” Kang Chan ordered.

Shuffle.

Smithen sat down in a large chair and put his hands on the armrests. He hadn't even said hello to Seok Kang-Ho and Gérard yet.

Kang Chan noticed that one of Smithen's eyes was red.

“How are you?”

“Good...?”

“Good? Why are you sweating so much when it's not even hot outside?”

“Me?”

“Yes, Smithen.”

Smithen looked at Seok Kang-Ho and Gérard and then back at Kang Chan.

Gérard rubbed the scar on his cheek in amusement. At the same time, Seok Kang-Ho's eyes glinted.

“Captain.”

Kang Chan had already been glaring at him even before Smithen called him.

“Smithen. Put your hands on the table.”

“What?”

“Put your hands on the table.”

Kang Chan didn't miss one of Smithen's eyes twitching.

The silver van that had dropped Smithen off turned right twice, driving into an alley that led to the back of the building that housed the coffee shop.

The road that they had taken was barely wide enough for two vehicles to pass. Moreover, the cars parked on one side of it made it even harder for them to speed up. Nevertheless, they still pushed onward.

Just as they were about to turn right where the alley split, a dump truck came straight out of the alley on the left.

Vrooom!

Seemingly intending to crash into the van, the dump truck continued to accelerate. It then collided with the van, pushing the latter nearly ten meters away.

Boom! Crash! Shatter!

Dash! Dash!

Fully armed counter-terrorism team agents in black suits rushed to the van.

Vrooom! Creak!

Right after, two black vans with “S.W.A.T.” written in white letters on their sides raced by.

“Tear it off!”

With guns pointed at the vehicle, the armed agents in suits peeled away the remaining glass and viciously ripped open the passenger door.

Bam! Bang! Bang! Creak!

Kim Hyung-Jung and two other agents jumped into the van, finding a man in the driver's seat sprawled out and covered in blood. They also saw two more men on the floor at the back, both of whom had a pistol in their waistbands. Near them were a machine gun and a bayonet.

“Tie them up! Cuff their wrists and thumbs so they can't use their arms or fingers! Bind their torsos and gag them too!” Kim Hyung-Jung instructed.

Once he had stepped out of the car, agents rushed in and tied up the unconscious men.

In addition to the wrist cuffs, they put small thumb cuffs on each hand and then secured their torsos with leather straps.

A huge commotion erupted outside.

From the terrace, they heard iron clattering, cars crashing, and a vehicle being violently shoved back.

Smithen looked at Kang Chan and then dropped his gaze again. He dragged his hand awkwardly across the table.

Click.

Seok Kang-Ho moved the pistol from his thigh under the jacket.

“Smithen, if you put your hands down, we’ll shoot a hole through your forehead,” Kang Chan warned with a smirk. “I was hoping we wouldn’t come to this, but the look on your face has convinced me otherwise.”

Smithen couldn’t handle the look in Kang Chan’s eyes.

“I doubt you’d target me or my parents on your own. This is your last chance. If you’ve been threatened to do this, tell me now.”

Smithen’s wavering eyes flicked to the front of the building. Kang Chan turned his head and followed his gaze.

The noise carried across the street.

People from the coffee shop peeked out of the alleyway in surprise, but Sharlan’s eyes remained glued on the terrace.

It didn’t matter. It didn’t matter if there had been a car accident or if there had been any other disturbance.

No matter how Kang Chan tried to avoid it, he wouldn’t be faster than Sharlan’s thumb pressing the button.

‘I’ll make sure you go to hell today!’

Sharlan had endured his horrific time in Loriam longing for nothing but this moment.

As a bonus, Seok Kang-Ho and Gérard were also sitting on the terrace of the coffee shop across the street. Sharlan found it a shame that he couldn’t kill Kang Chan himself, but he was already plenty happy with the way things were going.

That dumb Oriental! Dirty chink tried to win the favor of the team by treating Smithen well!

Asians were a structurally inferior race.

Even the best of them had their limits, just like Kang Chan now.

It was really over now.

“Goodbye.”

Sharlan's van was parked in the small gap between the buildings opposite the coffee shop. Hence, with a mere push of a button, he'd have a clear view of Kang Chan disappearing from the world without a trace.

He couldn't wait any longer.

Once everything was over, he could simply drive away in the van, which had the windows open to take the impact of the explosion.

Sharlan laughed savagely as he rubbed the switch in the backseat of the van. He touched the button multiple times, eyeing it like candy that he had been saving to eat.

Every time he softly nudged its tip with his thumb, an almost unbearable rush of pleasure swept through him.

At that moment, Kang Chan gazed at Sharlan's van.

'Smithen! You idiot!'

It was clear that Kang Chan had simply followed where Smithen was looking.

Feeling as if their eyes met, Sharlan shivered with a thrill of pleasure. It was even more stimulating to press the button while facing Kang Chan.

Smithen simply sat across from Kang Chan, yet he had done his job perfectly.

Kim Hyung-Jung dashed over.

"We found three men in the van, but they only had pistols and bayonets!"

Haah. Haah.

Kang Chan could hear his own breathing now.

His surroundings, including the cars passing by, seemed to slow down. Nevertheless, he didn't take his eyes off the van.

"Captain!" Gérard called.

Kang Chan quickly turned, finding Smithen crying.

With his hands still on the table, Smithen finally seemed to have recollected his bearings.

"Choi Jong-II! Tie him up!"

As soon as Kang Chan gave the order, Choi Jong-II and the agents, who were in the back of the terrace, rushed at Smithen.

The agents pinned his arms behind his back and pulled his clothes up. The bomb around his waist was the first thing they saw, followed by the gaping wounds in his chest.

Smithen pitifully stared at Kang Chan, like a chicken caught by the wings.

"Drag him inside!"

Kang Chan grabbed the terrace's railing and jumped over it.

Since everything happened on the terrace, Sharlan could see it all.

He didn't know how Kang Chan was reacting like that or when he had prepared it, but it was an excellent counter.

Sharlan smiled savagely, his thumb still on the switch.

He got goosebumps.

Once he had detonated the bomb, Kang Chan would be blasted into the air.

“Farewell, God of Blackfield!” Sharlan screamed. He pressed the button.

Click!

Click!

Kang Chan gripped the terrace's railing with his left arm. In the short moment that he was airborne, he had drawn the pistol strapped to his right ankle.

“Daye! The van on the opposite side!”

Seok Kang-Ho and Gérard jumped up from their seats, toppling the tables and chairs.

Click. Click. Click.

Sharlan pressed the button rapidly in succession, but nothing happened to Smithen, who was being dragged helplessly into the coffee shop.

“Get going! Get us out of here!”

Swish!

Sharlan tossed the switch aside and quickly picked up a gun from the ground.

Kang Chan, Seok Kang-Ho, and Gérard were heading straight toward him on the street, and three black special forces vehicles had appeared around the curve, their tires screeching.

Creeaaak! Creaak! Creeaaaak!

Boom!

Just as the van turned out of the alley, Kang Chan suddenly threw his hands in front of him.

Bang! Thud! Bang! Thud!

Blood splashed out of the driver and passenger's heads, causing the van to keep driving straight toward Kang Chan.

Vroom!

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Seok Kang-Ho and Gérard shot at its wheels, but it didn't slow down.

Bang! Boom! Bang, bang! Boom!

Kang Chan hit the tires.

Clunk! Crash! Clunk!

With its front tires blown out, the van bounced loudly but continued to steer toward Kang Chan.

In the blink of an eye, Kang Chan pushed Seok Kang-Ho and Gérard out of the way.

Yeah! That's it!

Hahahahaha!

If you don't want to go to hell alone, we can go together!

“God of Blackfield!”

Kang Chan was right in front of the shattered front windshield now.

Seok Kang-Ho and Gérard's shouts and gestures from the ground made everything even more dramatic.

Vrooom!

Amid the chaos, a black special forces vehicle suddenly rushed up.

Boom! Crash! Crack!

The van was already right in front of Kang Chan when it was pushed five meters to the side before finally stopping.

Kang Chan, Seok Kang-Ho, and Gérard immediately rushed forward. Kim Hyung-Jung, his subordinates, and the armed counter-terrorism members followed suit. In an instant, the van was surrounded.

The streets were cordoned off from vehicles and pedestrians alike.

Click, click, click!

Armed with pistols, Seok Kang-Ho and Gérard covered Kang Chan as he rushed into the van.

Crash! Crack!

Two armed agents chiseled away at the glass and warped doors with black axes.

Shatter!

Right after, Kang Chan was greeted by the van's devastated interior. He found Sharlan sprawled on the floor, covered in blood.

“Pull him out!”

Cleaning up this mess had to be prioritized. Kang Chan tossed Sharlan aside and ran to the special forces truck. The agents were pulling out the agent who had driven it.

“Ambulance! Hurry!”

They would have still come even if Kang Chan hadn't shouted, but he couldn't help but yell anyway. He knew how terrible it must have been to sit in the driver's seat and put the pedal to the metal.

Kang Chan could have avoided it, especially since he was in the zone and could hear himself breathing. However, the agent didn't remove his foot from the accelerator until the last second.

There was no way a member of the counter-terrorism team would wear a seatbelt. Hence, the impact the agent had felt couldn't possibly be weak.

Kang Chan went down on his left knee in front of the agent lying on the ground.

"Assistant Director Kang," the masked agent called with difficulty.

Weeoo! Weeoo! Weeoo! Weeoo!

"The ambulance is coming! You're fine!"

Kang Chan hadn't given the order. The radios, phones, and any frequencies within a one-kilometer radius had all been jammed, preventing the agents from using their radios. Hence, they made this call purely based on their judgment.

"You can't let terrorism win, sir."

Kang Chan looked down at the agent with a blank stare.

"No matter what anyone says, the agents all follow you, so don't ever back down. Please continue protecting South Korea."

The agent was still waiting for his answer when the paramedics rushed over.

Kang Chan thought of the recruit he had lost in Africa.

How could they have the same eyes?

Pat, pat.

Kang Chan tapped the agent's helmet. "Hurry back to your feet, got it? We took quite a hit, so we have to beat them back double."

The agent's consciousness faded.

As the paramedics ran forward, Kang Chan carefully stepped back.

The road was empty except for the bomb squad in front of the coffee shop.

They had neutralized the situation.

Kang Chan, Seok Kang-Ho, and Gérard put their pistols back on their ankles.

Vroom.

A van for Kang Chan rushed down the middle of the road.

His face would be exposed if he stayed here too long. The moment Kang Chan got in the car, Kim Hyung-Jung walked over and stood at the door.

“All the explosive devices have been cleared, so we’ll release the frequency hold in the area and order the snipers to head back. Radio and phone communication should soon be possible again.”

“Sounds good. I’ll go to the office.”

“Understood,” Kim Hyung-Jung replied with relief.

The van took off, quickly turning the corner and blending into the traffic.

“Ha! Sharlan, that fucking son of a bitch! Who did he think he was after? We should’ve twisted his neck earlier!” Seok Kang-Ho exclaimed, spewing out his unresolved frustration from earlier. “Whew! Our agents have an awesome sense of duty! I can’t believe he thought of crashing into that bastard’s van like that. He pulled it off so spectacularly, too.”

Kang Chan nodded in response.

The agents had done everything today as part of the counter-terrorism team.

Nothing could beat experience, after all.

The Itaewon crisis involving Wui Min-Gook, the suicide bombing incident, and the International Building terrorist attack made the team’s movements more sure and decisive.

“Look at the time. Although Samseong-Dong and Naegok-Dong were close by, it’s still amazing that we only needed fifteen minutes to prepare for this operation.”

“Right.”

“Hm? ‘Right’ isn’t enough! They did an amazing job!”

Kang Chan grinned and looked away from the window.

“Why don’t we have lunch at the office when we get back?”

“What? Lunch? Is it already that late? Whoa! It’s already one?! Well, how about we get some stir-fried octopus? The red goodness would taste fantastic with rice.”

“Do whatever you want.”

Seok Kang-Ho readily took Kang Chan’s bait. The van was now driving into the parking lot entrance of the office.

Chapter 343: We Won’t Take It Sitting (2)

“You’re saying this all happened in an hour?”

“Yes, sir.”

Go Gun-Woo took and then let out a deep breath.

“You took this on purpose under those circumstances?”

“I zoomed in from where the snipers were. Their faces are blurred and unrecognizable, so I’ll release it as soon as you give me permission.”

Go Gun-Woo incredulously looked up at Kim Hyung-Jung, who was standing in front of his desk.

“Manager Kim, what if... this turned out to be a simple incident?”

Instead of waiting for an answer, Go Gun-Woo continued, “Civilian communication systems, including phones and police radios, were shut down for nearly an hour without authorization. What if that guy named Smithen didn’t have a bomb? What if the guy driving the van was just giving him a ride? What if they were friends?”

“We used satellites to track the van’s movements and had a sniper confirm that the driver was a foreigner. Hence, we concluded that it was worth the risk if it meant stopping a potential terrorist attack.”

Go Gun-Woo still looked unconvinced. “Don’t you think it was too risky a gamble?”

“Director.”

“Go ahead.”

Despite having addressed Go Gun-Woo, Kim Hyung-Jung still found it hard to be straightforward.

“You shouldn’t hold back in front of me. If you’ve got something to say, please go for it. Only then will I understand your intentions.”

“Then let me be blunt, sir. The NIS counter-terrorism team is not a police force or the prosecutor’s office. It is an organization whose primary goal is to stop terrorism.”

With a determined expression, Kim Hyung-Jung added, “In response to your ‘what if,’ allow me to ask you this. Between a C-4 explosion in the middle of Gangnam, the death of the assistant director, the agents, and some innocent citizens, or injuring the people in the van, which would you choose, sir?”

Kim Hyung-Jung didn’t avoid Go Gun-Woo’s gaze.

“I know you have principles, sir. However, emphasizing principles as an administrator is different from the work of the NIS. It would be best for you to know that your opinion is the most important basis for the president when he makes his judgment.”

“I’m not sure what you mean by that last statement,” Go Gun-Woo replied. He looked as if he was expecting an explanation.

“I meant that the methods you suggest will ultimately be the most important factor in the president’s decision on counter-terrorism policy.”

“So you’re saying I should be bolder?”

“I’m sorry.” Kim Hyung-Jung looked down. However, he didn't deny it.

“Is this what the assistant director thinks?”

“The counter-terrorism agents of the Samseong-Dong created this plan themselves.”

Go Gun-Woo looked at the report, then back up.

“Manager Kim, if we do this, what do you think are the odds that we can prevent terrorism and punish Abibu?”

“I estimate our success chance to be around seventy percent.”

“Do you really think we should do whatever it takes to achieve our goals? Even if that means bending the rules?”

“The NIS is an organization that works behind the scenes, doing whatever it takes to protect Korea and its people. We are shadows in life and nameless stars in death.”

Go Gun-Woo sat motionless, staring at Kim Hyung-Jung.

“Director, we’re not an organization that operates against the people. We can’t be principled while dealing with enemies or the intelligence bureaus of other countries.”

Go Gun-Woo let out a deep sigh. “Haaa. Are you aware that if your ideals change and you turn against the people, no other organization will be able to keep the NIS in check?”

“I am.”

“I, too, have given instructions to say that the violence was part of the arrest process. Do you think I should do more than that?”

“Director.”

Go Gun-Woo’s face was unreadable. “There is still time. Please be honest with me.”

“You and the president are the ones who set the direction, not our agents, sir.”

The corners of Go Gun-Woo’s mouth twitched, but he didn’t reply.

Kim Hyung-Jung’s statement could come across as arrogant or dangerous. It was no different from saying that their agents would never do such a thing as long as the higher-ups did well.

“World powers are trying to put a stop to the Eurasian Rail and the development of next-generation energy plants. They’re not afraid to sponsor terrorist attacks or assassinate people through the DGSE or the DIA. If we don’t respond to them aggressively out of worry about what might happen later even though our own people have already been caught in the crossfire...”

Go Gun-Woo's gaze prompted Kim Hyung-Jung to be more straightforward.

"Our agents and soldiers will have to shed endless blood in vain."

"So you didn't approve of negotiating with Abibu either."

"I apologize, sir. Although I followed your order to stop the assistant director, I didn't feel comfortable doing so."

The corners of Go Gun-Woo's eyes twitched.

"I feel like I'm talking to the assistant director himself," he said as he stood up from his desk. "I'll meet with the president and let him know what we decide."

With Kim Hyung-Jung walking ahead of him, Go Gun-Woo left his office.

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

Kang Chan, who was sitting at the table, picked up his phone. He had just finished lunch and brushing his teeth.

"Hello?"

- It's Kim Hyung-Jung.

"Manager."

- Two of the criminals we caught in the vans are dead, while Smithen and the other terrorists are in the ICU. Smithen has stated that he was forced to cooperate with the attack.

Kang Chan had expected as much.

Seok Kang-Ho just observed Kang Chan's expression since Kang Chan couldn't tell him what was going on mid-call.

- Smithen has stab wounds on his chest and severe cuts and burns on his thighs.

"What about Sharlan?"

- He's in critical condition in the ICU.

"Please increase the perimeter around Sharlan and make sure no doctor can get near him unescorted. Let me know as soon as he regains consciousness."

- Understood.

Kang Chan hung up and relayed the conversation to Seok Kang-Ho.

"How did someone locked up in Loriam manage to get into South Korea?" Seok Kang-Ho muttered to himself.

"Romain probably sent him," Kang Chan answered.

"The DGSE guy?"

Kang Chan nodded. “Yes.”

“Doesn’t that mean Romain has decided to get rid of you altogether?”

“That’s right.”

“That son of a bitch...”

Seeing Kang Chan’s expression, Seok Kang-Ho shut his mouth.

Kang Chan looked out the window.

Romain hadn’t even taken away his position as deputy director-general yet, so why had he tried to use Sharlan to kill him? If he used the DGSE, their attack would’ve been more precise and intense.

Kang Chan seemed to have found a connection and was getting closer to it, yet for some reason, he still couldn’t see it.

‘This doesn’t match what the ambassador said either.’

Kang Chan recalled what Lanok had told him.

‘If we get rid of Sharlan, the Star of David will have one less thing to worry about. On the other hand, if we keep him around, he’ll continue being a nuisance who can reveal their secrets at any moment.’

If so, Romain, who was most certainly a member of the Star of David, would have already killed Sharlan, not sent him to South Korea like this.

What was it? What was going on?

Kang Chan continued to glare out the window.

Moon Jae-Hynu pushed himself up from his desk.

“Shall we take a walk?”

The promenade was one of his favorite places to go for private talks.

The two entered the promenade through a door at the back of his office. A short distance from them, Jeon Dae-Geuk followed in silence, and a bit farther away, suited bodyguards could be seen.

After about ten minutes of listening to Go Gun-Woo, Moon Jae-Hyun gestured to a bench. “Let’s take a seat.”

He then sat down and waited for Go Gun-Woo to sit.

“You must have been quite offended,” Moon Jae-Hyun commented.

“It was more like being hit with a stinging slap. It startled me awake.”

Moon Jae-Hyun chuckled, and Go Gun-Woo smiled.

“In the past, Director Hwang had said something similar. He said he would do all the dirty work, so I should keep my hands clean.”

“Sir, I’m still not sure. I feel like we might be unsealing a monster that shouldn’t be unsealed.”

Moon Jae-Hyun nodded after hearing Go Gun-Woo’s words.

“When I told Director Hwang that, he replied that if I didn’t use the power of the NIS now, someone in power would eventually use it with ill intentions.”

Go Gun-Woo pressed his lips together.

“What do you think, Director?”

Go Gun-Woo looked at Moon Jae-Hyun. “I believe this is something you should decide, Mr. President.”

He expected the president to agree.

“Right now, I agree with Director Hwang. The country has gained a priceless opportunity, and the stakes are too high. Someone has to play the villain against the enemy even if the cost is painful and blood is shed. Moreover, I feel it is my duty as president to take responsibility for this.”

Moon Jae-Hyun stood up, his expression firm.

“I’ll leave this up to you, Director. You will decide what the NIS will look like in the future. I chose one of the most capable people I know in this world to lead the NIS, and I trust in my decision.”

Go Gun-Woo stood up from his seat and sighed.

“Sir, could you just give me five more hours?”

Moon Jae-Hyun slowly looked around their surroundings before finally fixing his gaze on Go Gun-Woo.

“I have entrusted the NIS to you for the rest of my term. You’ve got two years left,” Moon Jae-Hyun replied with a determined expression.

Counter-terrorism team barracks.

As the agents stood by their respective beds, Go Gun-Woo walked in with two attendants.

“Attention! Salute!”

As Kang Myung-Gu commanded, the agents saluted Go Gun-Woo, who nodded in response.

“At ease!”

“No need to be so stiff. Let’s relax,” Go Gun-Woo said.

“Rest!”

The agents relaxed into more comfortable positions, but their stances remained rigid.

The room wasn't too bad.

Go Gun-Woo was walking into the back of the waiting room when he stopped and saw an empty bed and locker.

“What happened to the agent using this bed...?”

“He turned into a star during the suppression of the International Building terrorist attack, sir,” Kang Myung-Gu, who was following behind with another attendant, replied.

Go Gun-Woo raised his hand to sweep the empty bed. He then walked over and opened the locker.

Despite laying down their lives for their nation, agents like the one who used to occupy this bed came to his desk as a one-page report, the unrecoverable pain their families felt delivered to him on a single sheet of paper. The same was true for those who were deployed around the world.

“Your name and rank.”

“I am special agent Kang Myung-Gu of the counter-terrorism team, sir.”

Go Gun-Woo looked at Kang Myung-Gu and the agents standing next to their beds.

“I'd like to ask you one question,” he said.

Kang Myung-Gu gave him an intense look.

“The agents who turned into nameless stars during the International Building incident... what do you think they wanted most?”

Finding the question unexpected, Kang Myung-Gu tilted his head, unable to respond.

“I heard you all rush into the sites of terrorist attacks first and come out last. I wanted to know what you and your fallen brothers wanted when you all ran to the scene.”

After a moment of silence, Kang Myung-Gu asked, “May we tell you our resolve in chant?”

“You have a chant?”

“We do.”

“If it will serve as your answer, please do.”

Kang Myung-Gu turned to the agents and quickly looked at them.

“Attention!”

Thud!

The agents simultaneously stood straight.

Kang Myung-Gu's voice echoed in the room. “Our motto!”

“Taegukgi! Take my soul! Motherland! Take my blood!”

Their chant was short and strong, and the determination in their words dug into Go Gun-Woo's heart like a stake, rendering him speechless.

Silence enveloped the barracks. A moment later, with a determined gaze, he said, "Moving forward, we will definitely face many hurdles. Nevertheless, I will not forget your chant. You have given me the courage to meet with the president. I will lead the NIS with the knowledge that we have agents like you to rely on."

Go Gun-Woo looked more relaxed now than when he had entered.

The International Building incident caused quite a stir. However, the Nonhyeon-Dong terrorist attack in broad daylight along with the articles about Abibu caused an even louder buzz.

When the president's emergency press conference was announced, local and foreign reporters flocked to the newsroom.

As Moon Jae-Hyun entered, flashes immediately went off.

Standing on the podium, he raised his gaze and looked straight ahead.

"First of all, I would like to express my regret for having to hold a press conference about unfortunate events twice in a row."

It was time people left work. Hence, many were listening to the press conference through radios and TVs.

Moon Jae-Hyun glanced at the manuscript on the podium and then looked up with a firm expression.

"South Korea's National Intelligence Service has arrested Saudi Arabian Prince Mohammed Abdullah Abibu as the mastermind of the terrorist attack on the International Building."

Stunned exclamations from the reporters could be heard over the airwaves.

"The evidence we have gathered that incriminate him includes radio interception from the NIS and our military, radios from the terrorists we have neutralized, and a tablet connected to the CCTVs of the International Building. We also have Prince Abibu's confession."

The flashes were so loud that it was almost hard to speak.

"The NIS has received a confession from Prince Abibu that there would be another attack today in addition to the last raid in Mongolia. Hence, we made all the necessary preparations against it. Earlier at eleven-thirty today, we arrested all the perpetrators of the attempted terrorist attack in Nonhyeon-Dong."

The press conference room lapsed into heavy silence.

"Contrary to the reports of the alleged assault in the news, Prince Abibu stubbornly resisted during the arrest, which led to unavoidable injuries."

Flash! Flash! Flash! Flash!

“We still don’t know if Prince Abibu was motivated by personal greed or simply planned the attack to further Saudi Arabia’s next energy initiative given his status.”

The screen showed the reporters tapping away rapidly on their laptops.

“These two terrorist attacks, as well as the raid on our base in Mongolia, have caused the Republic of Korea incalculable monetary losses and the unfortunate sacrifices of the members of the NIS counter-terrorism team, the 606’s Special Forces Unit, and the 35th Brigade.”

Moon Jae-Hyun looked at the manuscript on the podium and looked back up.

“My fellow citizens, they have committed an unprecedented crime against our nation. For that reason, I ask for your cooperation, patience, and understanding while we do what must be done to protect our homeland and sovereignty.”

Flash, flash, flash, flash!

The flashes didn’t go off as much as they did in the beginning, perhaps because they thought it was the usual end of the announcements.

“Moreover…”

Moon Jae-Hyun paused for a moment and spoke toward the camera with a stern face.

“As the President of the Republic of Korea, I hereby inform the government of Saudi Arabia that Prince Abibu has violated the territory and sovereignty of the Republic of Korea, threatened the lives and safety of our people, and murdered our soldiers trying to defend our sovereignty and territory.”

The president of South Korea was lodging a formal protest against the Saudi Arabian government during a press conference?

The flustered reporters could be seen panicking and checking with neighboring reporters for confirmation.

“If, according to the results of the investigation, any organization or country has anything to do with the terrorist attack by Prince Mohammed Abdullah Abibu, the government of the Republic of Korea will make sure that they pay the price for their actions. Consider yourselves warned.”

Flash. Flash. Flash, flash.

Shortly after the press conference ended and Moon Jae-Hyun was shown leaving the room, a screen flashed into the studio with the words “Breaking News.”

[At the end of the president’s announcements, a video of the terrorist incidents in Nonhyeon-Dong earlier today was released.]

The video began with blurred faces.

Chapter 344: Made Up His Mind (1)

Du du du du du du du!

Deep in the night, a helicopter with bright lights kicked up dust as it landed in front of the South Korean base in Mongolia.

Kang Chul-Gyu was already waiting outside.

No matter who had come to the base, Kang Chul-Gyu had always greeted them inside. This time, however, he came out to greet their guests himself.

Kim Tae-Jin, Nam Il-Gyu, Yang Dong-Sik, and the DMZ team members stood behind him, while the foreman cautiously watched them further from the back.

Two women and two men got out of the helicopter. Their bags and the supplies that the base lacked were then unloaded.

The four moved toward the base, seemingly being chased by the wind generated by the propellers.

Kang Chul-Gyu stepped forward.

“Welcome, everyone. My name is Kang Chul-Gyu.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Kang Dae-Kyung, and this is my wife.”

“You’ve traveled a long way to get here.”

“I apologize for the inconvenience.”

“Not at all. Why don’t we head inside first?”

Kang Chul-Gyu gestured toward the gate and then looked at Assistant Manager Kim and Cha Min-Jeong.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Kim Seok-Jae. NIS.”

“I’m Cha Min-Jeong.”

“Kang Chul-Gyu.”

The two shook hands with Kang Chul-Gyu with honored expressions.

“Let’s head inside for now.”

“Yes, sir.”

As the group entered the barracks, the helicopter lifted off, its engine roaring.

Du du du du du du du!

Kang Chul-Gyu led them to the barracks around thirty meters into the base. As if under strict guard, the DMZ team double and even tripled-encircled Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook.

The foreman, who was pushed back a little, tilted his head in curiosity but quickly returned to the barracks when Yang Dong-Sik gazed at him.

Creak.

“This is it.”

The DMZ team member waiting in front of the barracks opened the door for them. As they stepped inside, the dust and wind outside dissipated, replaced by a cozy feeling.

“There are three rooms inside. I know it won’t be the most comfortable, but please make yourselves at home. It also has a separate dining room where you can have some ramyeon if you’re hungry.”

Kang Chul-Gyu led the way through the barracks himself.

“This is Kim Tae-Jin, President of Yoo Bi-Corp.”

“Nice to meet you,” Kim Tae-Jin greeted as he shook hands with Kang Dae-Kyung. Yoo Hye-Sook simply bowed.

“This is Nam Il-Gyu, and this is Yang Dong-Sik.”

They also shook hands with Kang Dae-Kyung and exchanged bows with Yoo Hye-Sook.

“Seo Sang-Hyun, Joo Chul-Bum.”

More introductions followed.

Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook tilted their heads while looking at Joo Chul-Bum. However, they didn’t say anything else. His tanned face and beard made him hard to recognize at first glance.

“If you ever feel uncomfortable, please let any of us know.”

Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook bowed their heads repeatedly in gratitude.

“You’ve come a long way, so please get some rest for now. We’ll see you again tomorrow morning.”

Kang Chul-Gyu led everyone out.

Kang Dae-Kyung, Yoo Hye-Sook, Assistant Manager Kim, and Cha Min-Jeong looked around the room together.

“Goodness!” Yoo Hye-Sook exclaimed. The room was so neatly organized.

There were iron bed frames and wardrobes in both corners, and the room was fragrant.

The four returned to the sofa and sat down together.

“Would you like a cup of tea?”

“Do we have any green tea?”

Assistant Manager Kim stood up and rustled around. He then returned with bags of green tea in mugs.

Kang Dae-Kyung looked around the living room.

“So our son used to stay here?”

Yoo Hye-Sook’s face showed mixed emotions.

The mugs were placed in front of the four.

It was a long flight, and sleeping on the plane had only tired her out she couldn't sleep.

"I knew Kang sunbae was here, but I didn't expect him to welcome us in himself," Assistant Manager Kim commented.

"Right? I was so nervous when I shook his hand earlier," Cha Min-Jeong responded.

"Is he a famous person?" Kang Dae-Kyung asked.

"I doubt there's anyone in the National Intelligence Service or South Korea's special forces who doesn't know him," Assistant Manager Kim replied.

Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook exchanged glances. Earlier, they had gotten the impression that Kang Chul-Gyu was the easiest person to talk to in this place.

"There are many stories about him that have been passed down like legends, but what struck me was the respect our instructors had for him. President Kim Tae-Jin and the special forces soldiers have so much respect for him."

"I see."

It didn't seem like Assistant Manager Kim's impression of Kang Chul-Gyu was getting through to Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook.

After about twenty minutes of small talk, Yoo Hye-Sook said, "Honey, I think I can still hear the helicopter."

Everyone laughed.

"I'm going to go wash up first."

Cha Min-Jeong followed her, but Yoo Hye-Sook insisted she stay seated before leaving for the room. About twenty minutes later, she came back out looking refreshed.

"They must have made a new bathroom in the room. I can still smell the cement from the toilet."

"Really?"

Kang Dae-Kyung stood up.

It was time to sleep.

Kang Chan was sitting at the table with Gérard, looking out the window.

Every building in sight now had lights turned on, much like the cars lining up the streets.

Click.

Gérard lit the cigarette in Kang Chan's mouth.

“Hoo.”

He had been sitting at the table and staring out the window since dinner, which was five hours ago. Gérard was no different. He sat across from Kang Chan, occasionally bringing him coffee and cigarettes in complete silence.

On the globe, Korea was as small as a stroke of a brush, yet it was even further divided in half by a line that cut through it.

The big, strong, and rich countries had always pushed their nation around or bought them out. As a result, others had begun to think that they could pressure them or punch them into doing whatever they wanted.

After a long moment of contemplation, Kang Chan finally made up his mind.

“Gérard.”

“Oui,” Gérard answered.

For the first time in the past five hours, they had finally spoken to each other.

“I’m thinking of launching a preemptive strike.”

Gérard grinned, causing the scar on his cheek to stretch.

“We’ll take out key UIS officers.”

“What about Romain and Josh?”

“We’ll use Russia, China, and Germany’s intelligence bureaus. We’ll wage an all-out intelligence war.”

Kang Chan flicked his cigarette into the ashtray and looked at Gérard.

“What are you doing here anyway?”

“I wanted you to know that, at the very least, you have me and Daye, that idiot...”

It seemed like Gérard had more to say, so Kang Chan simply wordlessly lifted his mug with the same hand holding his cigarette instead of speaking.

Cold instant coffee had its unique sweetness to it.

“I don’t want you to be lonely, Captain.”

“Punk.”

Kang Chan raised his gaze while waiting for Gérard to continue.

“At the International Building, and when we captured Sharlan earlier today...”

Where is this bastard getting at?

Kang Chan silently looked at Gérard.

“I realized that the officers and agents here are following you just as Daye and I do.”

Kang Chan stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray. “So?”

“If you say we’re going to attack the UIS, we will. If you want to beat up Romain and Josh, we’ll help you do that.”

“That’s the plan.”

“You’re worried, though, aren’t you?”

“Me? About what?”

“Me, Date, and the agents and soldiers who’ll have to lay down their lives.”

Kang Chan looked at Gérard in surprise.

“Choy, Krak, me, Daye, and the South Korean agents and soldiers I’ve seen these past few days—none of us are afraid of being deployed to an operation or a battle.”

“You’re being dramatic. My heart aches for those we’ve lost, but losing men has never made me fear operations.”

Kang Chan put another cigarette in his mouth.

Click.

The glass reflected the light of the lighter, then—like a TV changing channels—the red glow of the cigarette and smoke.

“That’s a relief, then.”

This asshole is playing with people’s feelings.

Kang Chan looked back outside the window.

“Sometimes when I’m with you, I get chills.”

What? What is he trying to say now?

Feeling Kang Chan’s stare, Gérard gave him a mischievous expression and took out another cigarette.

“When you shout at us to survive in the most dangerous circumstances, when your eyes glint while leading an operation, and when you hold the sacrifices of your men close to your heart.”

“Well, I am a bit cool,” Kang Chan joked, but it only made his skin crawl.

Gérard didn’t bother to hide his disbelief.

“I’ve never met someone who didn’t want to be in an operation with you. Even the ones who cringe when they hear about the dangers of the operation will grab hold of more magazines if I tell them you’re in charge.”

Gérard blew out a long stream of cigarette smoke. He then added, “I just wish you had more confidence in your orders. ‘I’m sorry you had to sacrifice yourself, but this operation must succeed. I believe in you.’”

Kang Chan slowly turned his head.

“We have all lived at gunpoint and even ran toward it. What gives us the most strength is knowing that we have you in front of us and behind us and that you trust us.”

Afterward, Gérard looked out the window.

“Gérard.”

“Yes.”

Gérard looked back at Kang Chan.

“Tsk! Are you trying to pretend to be cool?”

“Hm? I wasn’t. Aren’t I better than Daye, though? That asshole would probably boil water for ramyeon even at a time like this.”

There was no denying that.

Kang Chan chuckled. Gérard joined him.

“Anyway, those UIS bastards probably think they can get away with messing with you,” Gérard said.

Pft.

The glass captured Kang Chan’s laugh and then, as if surprised by his gaze, quickly reflected the neon signs.

It was just after breakfast.

Step, step. Step, step.

The sound of footsteps echoed outside the makeshift city.

“Haah, haah.”

The group had a total of twenty-five men divided into four rows.

Each step they took, the movement of their arms, and the sway of their heads seemed to have been measured to the millimeter with a ruler.

Step, step. Step, step.

Deep in the mountains, the chill of the early March morning made the men's breaths turn white.

"Haah, haah. Haah, haah."

They had already completed forty laps.

They had run more than sixteen kilometers, but Cha Dong-Gyun had no intention of slowing them down or stopping.

Sweat drenched their foreheads and trickled down their cheeks to their chins.

"If you're not confident, you can leave!" Cha Dong-Gyun shouted.

None of the determined soldiers responded.

"First Airborne Forces!"

"Hoorah!" the soldiers responded.

"Second Airborne Forces!"

"Hoorah!"

"Third Airborne Forces!"

"Hoorah!"

Step, step. Step, step.

Park Chul-Soo, who was sitting in the passenger seat of the jeep, shook his head.

"Did Dong-Gyun have an argument with his wife?"

Kwak Cheol-Ho hid a smile, unable to answer.

"Why is he working the men so hard so early in the morning? How are they going to do their next training exercises after this?"

Park Chul-Su grinned while glancing at the makeshift city at the end of the road.

"It's because of Han Jae-Guk, isn't it?"

"I think so."

Unlike when they were joking, the expressions of Park Chul-Su, Kwak Cheol-Ho, and the deputy in the driver's seat were serious.

"The first time we did live ammo training, Captain..." Kwak Cheol-Ho trailed off and glanced at Park Chul-Su.

"Let's just call him Captain. It's embarrassing and awkward to call him Assistant Director when it's just us. And damn you, punk! Don't say that and then check my reaction! It makes me seem like a prick!"

Hiding another smile, Kwak Cheol-Ho said, "What he said feels more and more true every day."

“What did he say?”

“He said that he needed men who could survive any situation. To be honest, I thought he was exaggerating at the time, but the more operations we go on and the more brothers we lose, the more I painstakingly understand what he means.”

Remembering the horrible and desperate battles they had fought in Africa, Park Chul-Su nodded. “That’s true.”

He then glanced at Kwak Cheol-Ho. The way he stood with his rifle slung over his shoulder exuded poise and ease.

He wasn’t putting on a front. Although he looked relaxed, Park Chul-Su knew he could pull the trigger at any moment.

“Give me a cigarette,” Park Chul-Su said.

Kwak Cheol-Ho looked at Park Chul-Su with wide eyes.

“Do you have any?”

“You shouldn’t be smoking right now, sir,” Kwak Cheol-Ho said.

“It’s not for me.”

In the distance, they could hear Cha Dong-Gyun calling the men and the airborne forces answering loudly.

“I want to give it to the general.”

Kwak Cheol-Ho pulled out cigarettes and a lighter, then handed them to Park Chul-Su.

“Help me out,” Park Chul-Su said.

Park Chul-Su held out his arm, and Kwak Cheol-Ho assisted him out of the jeep.

He walked with difficulty. The deputy in the driver’s seat rushed over and supported Park Chul-Su’s left arm.

Park Chul-Su forced himself to walk down the path to the makeshift city until he reached the spot that offered the best view.

He then put the cigarette in his mouth and lit it.

Click, click.

He propped himself up on his elbows and braced his upper body. With the pain too much to overcome, he frowned as he lit the cigarette.

A smoke that was different from the white air he breathed rose from his mouth and the end of the cigarette.

“Put it over there for him.”

Kwak Cheol-Ho carefully took the cigarette Park Chul-Su gave him in front of the downhill view of the makeshift city.

Kwak Cheol-Ho held Park Chul-Su's arm again.

"General," Park Chul-Su said quietly. "I'm sure you're watching them right now."

In the distance, he could see the water vapor rising from Cha Dong-Gyun and his men.

"This guy here too."

Kwak Cheol-Ho looked down. He then slowly raised his gaze to the sky.

"They've already grown so much. They've become men who will emerge successful anywhere in the world." Park Chul-Su frowned as he lifted his upper body. "You're the reason they've gotten this far and can now fight for their rightful place today."

He then forced his arm up and saluted up toward the sky.

Afterward, he heard Cha Dong-Gyun yell, "Back to the base!"

Park Chul-Su put his arm down, turned around with difficulty, and headed toward the jeep.

"Is that live ammo training?"

"Yes, sir."

"Isn't it unfair to just ask the men to run? I don't think I could obey those kinds of orders either."

"Only Lieutenant Cha goes on the live ammo drills."

Vroom.

As the jeep started up, Park Chul-Su looked at Kwak Cheol-Ho in surprise.

"If we join them right from the get-go, the training will be a mess."

Vroom, vroom.

Park Chul-Su grinned and looked at the sky above the barracks.

These wonderful bastards!

Their behavior now was a clear demonstration of what General Choi Seong-Geon had wanted them to be.

Park Chul-Su kept blinking his tears away

Chapter 345: Made Up His Mind (2)

When the day dawned, Kang Dae-Kyung felt as if he had passed out and woken up from a deep sleep.

It was early morning, with sunlight filtering through the window, warm air, and the pleasant sound of Yoo Hye-Sook's breathing.

He carefully looked at her. Ever since they had moved into their nice, fancy house, she hadn't been sleeping well.

When he began to see dark shadows in the corners of her smiling face, he disconnected the TV, phone, and internet out of worry. However, since then, Yoo Hye-Sook had slowly begun to lose her smile.

‘Is she depressed?’

Kang Dae-Kyung was scared.

Yoo Hye-Sook did not have the best health, so he couldn’t help but fear that she would faint.

He carefully stroked Yoo Hye-Sook’s hair. ‘Thank you, dear.’

Unlike before they were married, she now had wrinkles around her eyes, hollowed cheeks, and other signs of the years she had spent with him.

She chose Kang Dae-Kyung, who had nothing back then. They had unwaveringly stayed together since.

Yoo Hye-Sook showed the same conviction when she gave birth to Kang Chan. While she was crying in front of the ICU, she found the strength to stand up and hold their son.

This tearful and emotional woman was surprisingly strong and resilient when it came to her husband and child.

Yoo Hye-Sook looked at Kang Dae-Kyung with sleepy eyes. “Hm? Do I need to get up?”

“No, it’s okay.”

“I’m still so sleepy, Honey.”

“It’s okay. You’ve got nothing to worry about. Go back to sleep.”

“Thank you.”

Kang Dae-Kyung softly stroked Yoo Hye-Sook’s head.

He didn’t know how long it had been since he last saw her sleeping so deeply.

She would keep tossing and turning in bed back at their new home in Hannam-Dong—which was protected by agents—and at the hotel in Europe. Now, she was sleeping soundly on an iron bed in the middle of the Mongolian wilderness.

It was time to wake up. He couldn’t have both of them sleep in late.

Kang Dae-Kyung carefully got up from the bed.

Dressed in comfortable cotton pants and a shirt, he quietly walked out into the living room.

“Good morn...”

Kang Dae-Kyung put his index finger to his lips, gesturing at Assistant Manager Kim, who greeted him, to keep it down.

Cha Min-Jeong looked at the room in surprise, then brought her gaze back to him.

“She’s not sick. She’s probably just catching up on her sleep debt. I don’t know how long it’s been since she slept soundly, so I’m letting her stay in bed,” Kang

Dae-Kyung whispered as he walked over to the table against the wall and poured himself some water.

Cha Min-Jeong nodded. “That’s a huge relief.”

Seeing her relieved expression made Kang Dae-Kyung feel bad. “I’m sorry.”

He was grateful that an NIS agent—someone who was supposed to be doing important work for the country—was so understanding of Yoo Hye-Sook. However, at the same time, he felt guilty for bringing her to this place.

“Shall we join you for breakfast later, then?”

Kang Dae-Kyung glanced at the clock and then looked at the room where Yoo Hye-Sook was sleeping.

“Why don’t we eat first?”

The three silently made their way out of the barracks.

Swiish!

The wilderness air swept past them as if to say, “Welcome, you’ve never seen dirt dust before, have you?”

The grimy smell of dirt and the chill of the wind greeted them. However, Kang Dae-Kyung didn’t hate it. It was a bit refreshing.

When they turned the corner of the barracks, a man about Kang Dae-Kyung’s age bowed politely to him in greeting.

“Good morning.”

“You too.”

Bowing back, Kang Dae-Kyung couldn’t hide his surprise. The base that the darkness had hidden last night was now clearly visible.

A massive structure surrounded by scaffolding stood tall in front of the base. Men armed with rifles were on top of it.

Even the man who greeted him had a rifle on his back and a bayonet attached to his upper left arm, seemingly saying, “What are you looking at?”

He also had pistols and knives strapped to his waist.

Kang Dae-Kyung looked away and took a deep breath in.

Step, step.

At that moment, Kang Chul-Gyu and Kim Tae-Jin walked over to him.

Kang Chul-Gyu’s short hair swayed with the wind, the wrinkles on his face indicating that the years had not been merciful to him.

They exchanged greetings first.

“You’re up early.” Kang Chul-Gyu smiled. “It must have been a tough night.”

“Not at all. I slept well thanks to your hospitality,” Kang Dae-Kyung politely responded.

“Where is Mrs. Yoo, though?”

“Ah! She’s tired from the long trip. It’s been a while since she slept soundly, so I let her sleep in. I’m sorry.”

“No need for apologies. Will you be having breakfast with your wife?”

“If it’s alright with you...” Kang Dae-Kyung trailed off.

Kang Chul-Gyu softly said, “You can call me Director Kang.”

“I see. If it’s alright with you, then why don’t we have breakfast together, Director Kang?”

“Sounds fine. This way, please.”

Kang Chul-Gyu led the way. Kim Tae-Jin, Kang Dae-Kyung, Assistant Manager Kim, and Cha Min-Jeong followed.

Once inside the dining hall, Kang Dae-Kyung followed Kang Chul-Gyu’s lead and put food on a plastic-covered plate.

Kang Chul-Gyu and Kang Dae-Kyung sat across from one another at a long table. Kim Tae-Jin, Assistant Manager Kim, and Cha Min-Jeong sat beside them.

The food was similar to those served in the cafeteria at Kang Dae-Kyung’s previous company.

It was awkward, but the atmosphere wasn’t too bad. While eating, Kang Chul-Gyu answered Kim Tae-Jin’s occasional questions.

Eventually, they finished their meal.

“Since Mrs. Yoo is still sleeping soundly, would you like to have coffee with me?”

“That would be great.”

Kang Dae-Kyung was not lacking in social experience.

The best way to get rid of the awkwardness was to keep meeting in person until it was gone.

Kang Dae-Kyung stood up and followed Kang Chul-Gyu.

Step, step.

Kang Chul-Gyu took Kang Dae-Kyung above the entrance of the barracks.

“This is the best view we’ve got.”

It hadn’t been that long since the sun rose, yet it was already blazing hot.

“That’s the factory where we’ll be processing denadite and cetinium. The right side leads to Russia, and the back leads to China.”

While Kang Chul-Gyu was showing Kang Dae-Kyung around, one of the agents walked up the stairs.

Assistant Manager Kim and Cha Min-Jeong hurried forward to take the tray he brought and serve everyone a mug of instant coffee.

Kang Dae-Kyung took a sip of the coffee and looked around his surroundings.

The Mistral, machine guns, wilderness, and the armed soldiers...

He felt as if someone had plucked him out of thin air and thrown him out onto the open plains of old Manchuria.

This was the first time Kang Chan had found Vasili speechless.

He didn't speak for at least three breaths.

- Monsieur Kang. Wouldn't it be better to discuss something like this in person? I'll get in touch with Yang Bum, and we'll fly over to you immediately. You can give us that much time, can't you?

Kang Chan didn't know Vasili could speak in such a requesting tone.

Grinning, he looked out the window. His demand to get rid of Romain and Josh must have been that serious.

"Sure. Let me know when we'll meet."

- Will do.

Kang Chan put the phone down and relayed their conversation to Seok Kang-Ho and Gérard, who were watching intently.

"Vasili and Yang Bum are on their way here. They want to meet with me first to discuss the plan."

He said it twice, once in French. At the same time, he considered getting another interpreter.

"Who's joining the team?"

"Well, to start with, there's the three of us and the three over there."

Seok Kang-Ho and Gérard followed Kang Chan's gaze at Choi Jong-Il, Woo Hee-Seung, and Lee Doo-Hee.

"Based on the size of our enemies' forces, we can bolster our numbers with Cha Dong-Gyun's men."

Kang Chan's French came out first like a habit now. Gérard nodded.

"Gérard, I want you to get the satellite operators to gather information on every country's intelligence bureaus. Get the UIS organization chart and find out who the top dogs are, where they are, and where their main force is."

"Yes, sir."

“Starting today, the NIS will be reporting about UIS organizations by country. I’m also sending in the 606 and the counter-terrorism team to strike them all at once if necessary.”

“Is that possible?”

“Yes.”

“Got it. I’ll head inside now.”

Gérard left with a satisfied smile. Kang Chan then brought Seok Kang-Ho up to speed.

“With how the atmosphere is, I don’t think we’ll have any problems getting permission for the operation.”

“We’ll see. Our ideas and the politicians’ may be different.”

“It’s not like you’re going to quit just because they disagree.”

Kang Chan smirked, feeling like he’d been caught.

He was talking to Seok Kang-Ho when he received a call from Vasili.

- I’ll fly in tomorrow at noon, Korean time. Let’s have lunch together.

“Where?”

- You choose. Ludwig will be joining us, but you should leave room for one more just in case.

“Got it.”

Kang Chan didn’t bother asking who the other person might be. If Vasili was going to tell him, he would’ve already told him.

- If you want, you can also ask the newly appointed head of the NIS to come.

Before Kang Chan could respond, the call ended. It was becoming a habit that he didn’t even get mad now.

Kang Chan immediately called Kim Hyung-Jung. He felt bad about putting another burden on the already busy man, but it was something he couldn’t put off or pass on to someone else.

The call was immediately answered.

- I’m on my way to the Director right now. I’ll stop by on the way there.

“I see. I’ll be expecting you, then.”

Samseong-Dong wasn’t that far, so it didn’t matter who made the trip.

After thirty minutes, Kim Hyung-Jung arrived at the office. Upon hearing about Kang Chan’s plan, he failed to hide his surprise.

“What can we gain from attacking the UIS’ headquarters? I need to be able to convince the director when I see him.”

“The UIS is no different from any other organization. Its head directs the attacks but doesn’t carry them out. We’re just showing them that we will eliminate those who give the order to launch terrorist attacks, just like what we did in Libya. It will be effective.”

Kim Hyung-Jung nodded, somewhat getting his point.

“Tomorrow at noon, Vasili, Yang Bum, and Ludwig will be flying in. There might be one more, but I didn’t hear who it was.”

“Pardon?”

Kim Hyung-Jung looked nearly thrice more surprised than he did when Kang Chan told him that he was going to attack the UIS headquarters.

“Why are those big fish coming over?”

“Because I’m planning to eliminate Josh and Romain.”

Kim Hyung-Jung blankly stared at Kang Chan.

“Manager Kim, if you’d like, you can attend tomorrow’s meeting at noon. You won’t have much of a say there, though.”

Kim Hyung-Jung’s shock was reflected in the sigh he let out.

“Have you found the reporter who wrote the article?”

“Ah! Yes, we have. We’re currently following him and checking who he’s been in contact with based on the phone records he used. We’ll probably have an outline of who gave him the information by tomorrow.”

Kim Hyung-Jung also told Kang Chan that Sharlan had not yet woken up from his coma.

“Assistant Director, why don’t you come with me to see the Director?”

Kang Chan looked at Kim Hyung-Jung for a moment, then nodded and stood up. Considering the nature of this operation, he knew he would have to meet Go Gun-Woo at least once anyway.

Go Gun-Woo’s reaction wasn’t that different from Kim Hyung-Jung’s.

He asked how they’d benefit from attacking the UIS headquarters and then asked Kang Chan if he could go with him to see the President in exactly the same way Kim Hyung-Jung had asked him to.

Now, he had reached the final stage.

Kang Chan stood up with Go Gun-Woo and Kim Hyung-Jung.

They passed five roadblocks before they entered the premises of the Blue House.

While driving in, they saw people in suits standing at equal intervals. There were also sixteen people on each side of the round entrance ramp. Soldiers stood on one side, and police officers stood on the other.

[Please step out of the car,] someone ordered through a microphone.

Once the car had stopped, the secretary got out and greeted Go Gun-Woo.

“Please come this way.”

Before getting out of the way, Kim Hyung-Jung pinned an ID to Kang Chan’s shirt. Go Gun-Woo and Kim Hyung-Jung then wore theirs on their left chests.

It was a darker green than the color of grass.

When they stepped on the carpet and entered the President’s Office, they saw Moon Jae-Hyun stepping away from his desk.

“Welcome.”

The three men bowed, and Moon Jae-Hyun reciprocated it.

“Let’s talk somewhere cooler.”

Moon Jae-Hyun took them to a large table in the backyard.

“You’ve been working hard lately, Assistant Director Kang,” Moon Jae-Hyun said as he sat down.

Kang Chan just nodded in response.

This was the president of a whole country. Moon Jae-Hyun seemed to have realized that Go Gun-Woo wouldn’t have brought Kang Chan along just so he could say hello.

Moon Jae-Hyun continued with some small talk until the tea was set down on the table. The instant it became quiet, he turned to Go Gun-Woo.

“Mr. President, the Assistant Director has proposed a surprise attack on the UIS headquarters to take out their leader,” Go Gun-Woo said.

Moon Jae-Hyun quickly looked at Kang Chan.

“Moreover, tomorrow at noon, the heads of the Russian, Chinese, and German intelligence bureaus will be visiting our country. I’m told there may be one more person, but the assistant director hasn’t confirmed who it is yet.”

Moon Jae-Hyun sighed quietly.

“Assistant Director Kang.”

“Sir.”

“Are you confident?”

Kang Chan wasn’t sure if it was because Moon Jae-Hyun was the president or he simply had guts, but he was asking questions completely different from Go Gun-Woo and Kim Hyung-Jung.

“I apologize to you and the soldiers, who will be risking your lives, for saying this, but if we go out there and fail, we will be humiliated.”

Seeing Kang Chan’s expression, Moon Jae-Hyun continued, “I’ll reassign all the necessary troops to your counter-terrorism team. That way, we won’t need to get approval to deploy them overseas.”

Go Gun-Woo and Kim Hyung-Jung seemed more surprised than Kang Chan.

“I believe in the judgment, ability, and performance that you have shown us so far. If you ask for it, I’d even put my position as President on the line and provide you with fighter jets and more.”

“Mr. President!” Go Gun-Woo called in surprise.

However, Moon Jae-Hyun kept his eyes on Kang Chan.

“I want to show them clearly and unequivocally what will happen if they ever threaten our people, our homeland, and our sovereignty again. For that reason, this operation must not fail.”

So he has already thought about it!

At that moment, Kang Chan realized that Moon Jae-Hyun was already planning to retaliate.

“Mr. President, this could turn into an all-out war,” Go Gun-Woo warned. He sounded as if he was panicking, but rightfully so. After all, the threat of war was already just around the corner.

Moon Jae-Hyun turned his gaze from Kang Chan to Go Gun-Woo.

“On our soil, they took our people hostage and murdered our soldiers and agents. If I find that acceptable because they’re soldiers, because they’re agents, then I don’t deserve to be president.”

In just two sentences, Moon Jae-Hyun seemed to have bent Go Gun-Woo to his will.

“Our precious young citizens shed blood to protect our country and represent our people. No matter what their duties are, their deaths are upsetting and painful.”

Moon Jae-Hyun turned away. “They, too, are children of South Korea.”

He’s out here saying heartwarming words again.

Moon Jae-Hyun’s eyes were red, yet they showed his determination.

“Assistant Director Kang.”

“Sir.”

“This is not revenge. Rather, I believe this will be more of a lesson to the world about what happens to those who threaten our nation.”

“Mr. President,” Kang Chan called.

“Yes?”

Go Gun-Woo and Kim Hyung-Jung looked quickly at Kang Chan and Moon Jae-Hyun.

“We have the best soldiers and agents.”

Seeing the hope in Moon Jae-Hyun’s eyes, Kang Chan continued, “With them, I believe we will get the best possible results.”

Go Gun-Woo looked like he didn’t know what to think anymore.

Chapter 346: Are You Ready? (1)

Yoo Hye-Sook, who woke up late, came out with Cha Min-Jeong looking embarrassed.

Kang Dae-Kyung was under a truck, wearing work clothes he had gotten from somewhere.

“Honey.”

“Hm? You’re up? Just a second.”

Kang Dae-Kyung crawled out on the floor, his face smeared with oil residue.

“What are you doing?”

“Donating my skills. Why should I waste my time resting around?”

Yoo Hye-Sook looked at him pitifully, but Kang Dae-Kyung smiled.

“I noticed that all the cars here have carbureted engines. You know I’m good with cars. I thought it would perform much better with a little tinkering, so....”

“Sorry, Honey. You have to do this just because I can’t adjust to our new home.”

Kang Dae-Kyung looked at Yoo Hye-Sook. “That’s a misunderstanding.”

“Hm?”

“I was talking to Director Kang, and he said this is important. That’s why I’m doing this.”

Yoo Hye-Sook wiped her red eyes and looked at Kang Dae-Kyung.

“Don’t be like that. We’re still young. We can’t play around and depend on our son yet.” Kang Dae-Kyung wiped his nose with his glove. He then said, “Weirdly, I feel at ease here. I feel like whatever was weighing on my heart has disappeared.”

“You feel that way too? Honey, I haven’t slept this well in a long time.”

“That’s strange. I also slept quite well. Doesn’t this place feel strangely relaxing?”

Yoo Hye-Sook nodded sincerely. “It does. Should I help out in the kitchen, then?”

Kang Dae-Kyung looked at her with concern. “Will you be okay?”

Just then, Kang Chul-Gyu and Kim Tae-Jin came out of the barracks.

“How was your night?”

“I’m sorry. I slept in.”

Everyone laughed at her abashed expression.

“You must be hungry.”

“I’m okay. Miss Min-Jeong prepared some soup for me.”

“I see. Well, I was just about to take a look around. Would you like to join me?”
Kang Chul-Gyu offered.

Since Yoo Hye-Sook looked awkward, Kang Dae-Kyung took off his gloves and joined them.

First, they stopped by the cafeteria and the warehouse. Afterward, they went up to the sentry post above the barracks near the main gate and looked around the whole place. From where they were, they could see Yang Dong-Sik standing on top of the scaffolding, pulling up a long pipe from below with no safety harness.

“Hey! You son of a...” Yang Dong-Sik, who had been shouting, shut his mouth when Kang Chul-Gyu shook his head.

The wind ruffled Kang Chul-Gyu’s hair as he looked at Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook before running to the site.

Kang Dae-Kyung tilted his head. The way Kang Chul-Gyu scanned his surroundings from above the barracks seemed familiar.

‘Where have I seen that before? I’m sure I haven’t met him.’

Something about his eyes and expression tickled Kang Dae-Kyung’s heart.

“Hey! You son of a... dog! Do your work properly! You little mother clucking hen...!” Yang Dong-Sik yelled.

His strange words made everyone burst out laughing and distracted Kang Dae-Kyung.

As they left the Blue House, Go Gun-Woo suddenly asked, “Assistant Director Kang, do you have time for a bowl of naengmyeon?”

“Sure,” Kang Chan replied. He could eat a bowl of naengmyeon even if he wasn’t too hungry.

Go Gun-Woo informed the agent who was driving where the restaurant was.

The agents spoke to the rest of the convoy through a radio. Soon, the van in front of them turned, and the cars and vans behind it followed suit.

“I visited the counter-terrorism team’s barracks.” Go Gun-Woo looked at Kang Chan as he added, “I listened to them chant their motto.”

Kang Chan wondered what Go Gun-Woo, who had probably only ever fought with the pen his entire life, felt when he heard their motto.

“Our agents couldn’t have shown me their will and determination any clearer.”

The restaurant was not too far from the Blue House. Soon, the agents got out of the car and checked the entrance and the inside. It was still early spring for this summer meal, and it was in the middle of the afternoon, so the establishment was quiet.

“Manager Kim, have the agents take turns standing guard so they can eat.”

“Copy.”

Inside, they found a table and chairs in the center and a room to the right.

Kang Chan and Go Gun-Woo entered the room first. Kim Hyung-Jung issued orders to the agents before following suit.

“This place makes delicious hoe naengmyeon,” Go Gun-Woo commented.

“I’ll go with that, then.”

“I’ll have the same.”

As Go Gun-Woo suggested, the three ordered hoe naengmyeon. Afterward, they poured the soup from the kettle, which a waiter had left, and took a sip each.

Go Gun-Woo seemed like he had something to say, but he stayed silent.

The atmosphere was still awkward.

Go Gun-Woo took off his glasses and set them to the side, rubbing his temples. He was understandably tired.

“It has been exactly sixteen years since I first came to this restaurant,” Go Gun-Woo said as he lowered his hand. “I used to pass by this place on the way to and from work....”

There was no way a former prime minister couldn’t eat at this establishment because he couldn’t afford a bowl. He couldn’t possibly be afraid of paying the bill for all the times he had eaten here on credit either.

Go Gun-Woo added seasoning, sugar, vinegar, and mustard to the three bowls in front of him. He then poured a bit of the cold broth into them.

“It’s quite flavorful when eaten like this. Anyway, let’s eat.”

Their group began eating their hoe naengmyeon.

They were served enough portions that they had to hold the bowl with both hands.

Kang Chan and Kim Hyung-Jung finished almost at the same time, while Go Gun-Woo still hadn’t even eaten half of his yet.

“Pour some of the hot broth into the seasoning, and you’ll create another delicacy.”

With a recommendation like that, how could they refuse?

Kang Chan and Kim Hyung-Jung poured the soup over the remaining seasoning and drank it.

Dang! This is good!

The spicy broth was so good that Kang Chan laughed in disbelief. Soon, he set down the bowl, satisfied.

“I still find it hard to shake off my principles.” Go Gun-Woo put down his chopsticks in front of his half-eaten bowl of naengmyeon.

“It was at this restaurant. I was eating lunch with a civil petitioner when someone came in and splashed soup on my face. He asked how I could be bribed with such a small meal.”

The story made the naengmyeon in Kang Chan’s stomach turn.

Surely Go Gun-Woo wasn’t just saying this because he wanted him to suffer from indigestion.

Kang Chan looked Go Gun-Woo directly in the eyes.

“That person was mad at me because of something I was spearheading at the time. I think that’s when I began to stick closer to the rules.”

People really were different. Kang Chan thought Go Gun-Woo could have just stood up and smacked that rude person with a bowl or a kettle. How could he spend sixteen years after that incident afraid to stray from principles?

“Assistant Director Kang.”

“Sir.”

“From now on, I will lead the NIS with the determination to be splashed with soup every day. That is what this naengmyeon means to me.”

Go Gun-Woo looked at Kang Chan and Kim Hyung-Jung.

“I will do my best to make the NIS second to none in the world, so please continue to help me.”

“Yes, sir,” Kang Chan replied.

If it were up to him, though, he would much rather break the wrist of the person throwing soup at him than get splashed every day.

After lunch, Yoo Hye-Sook began to work in the kitchen.

Just as Assistant Manager Kim helped Kang Dae-Kyung, Cha Min-Jeong readily helped Yoo Hye-Sook.

“Mrs. Yoo, if you do this, we won’t be able to face the assistant director,” Nam Il-Gyu pleaded.

“It’s fine. He’d be glad to know I can help in this way,” Yoo Hye-Sook firmly replied.

“Please at least let yourself rest until you’ve recovered from your travels before helping us,” Kim Tae-Jin insisted.

“I slept well this morning, so I already feel refreshed. I’ll rest when I’m tired. Thank you for your concern, though.” she answered politely.

When it came time for dinner, Kang Chul-Gyu, Kang Dae-Kyung, Kim Tae-Jin, and Nam Il-Gyu walked into the kitchen.

“Come on in!” Yoo Hye-Sook greeted them all with a bright face.

Whatever she was cooking smelled delicious.

Starting with Kang Chul-Gyu, they put rice in their bowls and sat down.

The food was so good that, after taking his first bite, Nam Il-Gyu looked toward the kitchen. “This is delicious!”

“Shouldn’t we try to stop her?” Kim Tae-Jin asked, still concerned.

“She told me earlier today that she’s felt more at ease since we got here. This is how she expresses her desire to stay here longer,” Kang Dae-Kyung replied.

That night, everyone had a delicious and happy dinner.

Jokes were passed around, and laughter erupted around the table.

After his meal with Go Gun-Woo and Kim Hyung-Jung, Kang Chan visited the Jeungpyeong special forces team with Seok Kang-Ho, Choi Jong-Il, Woo Hee-Seung, and Lee Doo-Hee. The soldiers were happy to see them.

They told him that Park Chul-Su had come to visit, but they unfortunately missed each other.

“Would you like some coffee?” Kwak Cheol-Ho asked.

“Doesn’t that go without saying?” Seok Kang-Ho joked.

As the others lit a fire in a barrel, which had been cut in half, Kwak Cheol-Ho brought out a tray with paper cups on it.

“Here’s the coffee!”

When drunk outside, instant coffee strangely had a different taste.

Kang Chan took out a cigarette. Everyone else also began to smoke.

The sun had long since set over the mountains, but the sky was still quite bright.

Kang Chan was pleased to see the men. They reminded him of the battles they had endured together. He couldn't be happier to be with them.

"Are you heading back now?" Cha Dong-Gyun asked.

"Yeah," Kang Chan replied. He then added, "There's going to be an operation soon."

"Will you be going as well?"

Kang Chan nodded.

Cha Dong-Gyun and Kwak Cheol-Ho couldn't hide their smiles.

"The operation will be dangerous."

"Understood."

Kang Chan chuckled.

An international special forces team.

What better way to prove that they were one than to have a glint in their eyes and a smile on their faces when leaving for an operation? Especially one that was dangerous.

One would only expect to see such an expression from a team that had been through horrific, grueling combat over and over again.

"We'll be deployed for it soon. I don't know how many are going, though. It might only require four people, but it could need everyone here."

Cha Dong-Gyun and Kwak Cheol-Ho focused on his words as if listening to a strategy plan.

"Don't let the men know yet. I'll update you once we've gotten more information. Take care of yourselves."

"Don't worry, sir," Cha Dong-Gyun replied.

"Let's have another cigarette before leaving."

"Sure."

Seok Kang-Ho pulled out another cigarette and offered it to Kang Chan. He then flicked the lighter on.

Click.

Go Gun-Woo's Office, National Intelligence Service headquarters.

"Where is the assistant director?" Go Gun-Woo asked.

"I heard he went to Jeungpyeong," Kim Hyung-Jung replied.

The two were sitting in an adjoining conference room, where they wouldn't have to worry about being eavesdropped on.

“Manager Kim, are you sure about this report? This could be even more cruel than death.”

“I've checked it myself three times.”

“Hmm.”

Go Gun-Woo's gaze was glued to the papers.

For a moment, silence filled the room, punctuated only by the sound of him flipping through the documents.

“Director Jeon Sang-Woo has many followers and connections. The fallout won't be pretty, and since we're launching a preemptive strike against the UIS, the arrow could easily be deflected toward Assistant Director Kang Chan.”

“I've taken that into consideration, Director,” Kim Hyung-Jung replied heavily. “Even so, Director Jeon has crossed the line by giving over intel about our operations in Libya to the opposing lawmakers so they could start an internal federal investigation.”

Go Gun-Woo looked at the documents again.

“If these five people go out of office, how much damage will we have to deal with?”

“The Foreign Affairs Division would be shaken from the roots.”

Go Gun-Woo tilted his head.

“The International Energy Conference is just around the corner. What if we delay this a bit longer?”

“Director, that risks allowing the UIS attack to be leaked beforehand. Director Jeon Sang-Woo had no access to classified information related to Abibu, yet he still managed to give that intel to a reporter.”

Go Gun-Woo rubbed his forehead as his expression turned grim. “Are you implying that besides these five, they also had someone handing them classified information?”

“I think Director Jeon simply actively checked for secrets that were not related to his work.”

Go Gun-Woo narrowed his eyes at Kim Hyung-Jung. “Is our information management that lax?”

“Directors can access it.”

“Don't we have a record of the people who opened the documents?”

“When I checked it, I found out that he had summoned an employee from the investigation room to his office. The computerized data showed that Abibu was injured during his arrest, which is probably how he found out about it.”

Go Gun-Woo sighed again.

Factions were the problem.

Jeon Sang-Woo had created a party, managed those under him, and gathered the necessary materials while forming connections with the opposing party’s politicians and reporters by providing them with information.

“This is a shame for the agents who died serving our country.”

Go Gun-Woo nodded.

“Arrest them, and proceed as planned,” he then ordered.

“Understood,” Kim Hyung-Jung replied.

“Manager Kim,” Go Gun-Woo called. “Is there anything you expect from me as the director of the NIS? Or are there any qualities I should have?”

The question came out of the blue. However, Kim Hyung-Jung thought this was simply Go Gun-Woo trying his best.

“Director, if it’s alright, please speak more informally toward me and the other employees.”

“Informally?”

“Just give us a chance to get to know you a little better. Outside formal settings, please be more relaxed with the counter-terrorism team agents...”

“You’d like me to be more comfortable with you as well?”

“Yes, sir.”

“That’s difficult.”

Kim Hyung-Jung didn’t know what to say.

After leaving the NIS, Kim Hyung-Jung immediately went to the office in Samseong-Dong.

On the road, he called a number. The recipient immediately picked up.

“Gather all the special agents and have them stand by until I arrive,” he ordered.

All he had to do now was meet up with the agents in Samseong-Dong and arrest Foreign Affairs Division Director Jeon Sang-Woo and the five NIS employees who had collaborated with him on the leak.

There was no end to their tasks.

They had just dealt with multiple terrorist attacks, yet now they had to bring down someone who had leaked classified information.

Kim Hyung-Jung looked at the driver's seat.

Without a moment's rest, he had searched for plots of lands to connect the Eurasian Rail to, met up with Kang Chan, and had now come all the way here.

With darkness settling in, lights began to fill the streets, each vying for attention.

Kim Hyung-Jung looked out the car window.

He could see the dark sky above the rows and rows of buildings.

'Director Hwang, Director Song, are you watching?'

He was human. He got tired just like everyone else.

However, whenever he did, he recalled his horrific experiences in Mongolia. These days, he also thought of Hwang Ki-Hyun and Song Chang-Wook.

Then, out of habit, he would think of Kang Chan.

Kim Hyung-Jung secretly smirked like Kang Chan. He had been practicing, but he couldn't get it down.

It was rush hour.

The roads were blocked, so the car couldn't move fast enough.

He felt rushed, but there was nothing he could do about this.

Chapter 347: Are You Ready? (2)

The next day, around noon, a staggering amount of information came in from Russia, China, and Germany.

The NIS agents also continued to send a steady stream of information from their respective designated countries.

Kang Chan believed in them. They were paying with their blood and risked their lives to get him this information.

He compared the information that he had received from other countries with the ones that had come from the NIS agents.

"Doesn't this feel a little strange?"

Gérard wrote names in red on a large map.

This punk! Why does he write like a fucking toddler?

It wasn't important right now, though.

"The entire UIS leadership and their troops are in Afghanistan. Based on their numbers alone, this is going to be an all-out war."

That wouldn't be easy.

Kang Chan tilted his head and stared at the names on the map and the approximate number of troops.

The UIS core leadership and troops seemed to be gathering in a single location.

“I wonder if they’re planning a major counterattack for capturing Abibu?”

“Gérard, it must have cost a lot of money to get those bastards all there. See if you can find their funding source.”

“Yes, sir,” Gérard replied, then immediately went inside.

Kang Chan smirked and looked at the map.

Abibu was most likely the one who funded them before he got captured. Hence, if the organization wanted more funds, they would have to show their loyalty to him first. However, since Abibu was in captivity right now, some other asshole had to be paying for all this.

Kang Chan kept his eyes on the map.

Considering the size of their forces, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that they wanted war.

Besides, the UIS was not a national power. Even if they suddenly attacked South Korea, it would be considered a quarrel between South Korea and a terrorist organization, not a war between nations.

This was completely unexpected.

Even with all the Jeungpyeong soldiers, the 606, and the counter-terrorism team, he still wouldn’t be able to guarantee victory.

Kang Chan was doing some calculations in his head when Choi Jong-II approached him.

“It’s time.”

Kang Chan stood up. “Make sure you get all the information.”

“Copy,” Seok Kang-Ho replied.

Kang Chan then left the office and headed to the underground parking lot. They then drove to the Seongnam Airfield.

More than four vans were traveling with him.

‘Isn’t this too much?’

Kang Chan looked ahead and behind them, then back at Choi Jong-II.

“We received special orders from the Director. He’s probably more concerned now that the former External Affairs director has been arrested.”

“That must be a lot of work for the special agents.”

“It’s okay,” Choi Jong-II, who was sitting next to Kang Chan, replied. “Ever since the attack on Director Hwang, everyone has been on high alert, so whenever we’re summoned for an emergency, they’re all rushing to take the job.”

Kang Chan glanced out the window.

He still hadn't gotten revenge for the unjust deaths of Hwang Ki-Hyun and Song Chang-Wook. He still hadn't even identified the person who was supposed to get the OTP.

'One at a time.'

War? Right now, he was more afraid of the UIS causing shootouts and detonating bombs freely within Korea than he was of war.

The roads weren't too bad.

The intimidating sight of the big black vans and the black sedan in between them caused people on the sidewalks and the drivers to stare.

Twenty minutes before noon, they arrived at Seongnam Airfield.

They were going to have lunch at a restaurant nearby.

They had booked the establishment for the entire day, and Kang Chan had already been informed that the agents had the entrance and perimeter under complete lockdown.

After driving through the airport building and onto the runway, Kang Chan got out of the car.

"Got a cigarette?" he asked.

Choi Jong-Il handed him a cigarette and lighter.

Click.

"Hoo."

The smoke drifted out onto the runway.

A cup of coffee would have been perfect right about now.

Looking ahead, Kang Chan grinned.

Getting involved with Gong Te automobile for Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook had led him all the way here, standing on the runway of Seongnam Airfield.

It felt more strange to be here now than being born again.

Kang Chan slowly looked around.

Agents in black suits and sunglasses stood in a perfect circle around him. Choi Jong-Il, Woo Hee-Seung, and Lee Doo-Hee stood right next to him.

"Do you need anything?"

"No," Kang Chan replied.

He had fought so many battles with Choi Jong-Il, and most of them pitted them against terrible people.

The UIS? Were they even aware of the determination in the hearts of the agents? The sense of duty that ran deeper than the blood coursing through the veins of the National Intelligence Service's counter-terrorism team?

Did they think they could defeat the determination of the 606, who threw themselves into the line of fire at the International Building, and the members of the Jeungpyeong special forces team, who dropped eleven meters upside down just to complete their objectives?

Kang Chan exhaled. He remembered the size of the UIS' army.

There would be no agent or soldier who would refuse to go, but sacrifices would be unavoidable.

“Sir,” Choi Jong-Il called, cutting through his thoughts. Kang Chan looked up and saw a sleek-looking private plane descending in the distance.

Less than five minutes later, it landed on the runway.

Creaaak! Creak!

White smoke billowed from the rear wheels, followed by a loud engine roar.

Errrrrng.

Upon reaching the end of the runway, the plane slowly turned toward Kang Chan.

If it was a military plane, Kang Chan would have known its model and performance. Unfortunately, he found private planes difficult to recognize.

The airplane creaked to a stop in front of him. After a moment, its door opened.

As Kang Chan walked over, Vasili, wearing a suit, stepped out. He had a sharp expression.

“Welcome,” Kang Chan greeted.

Once off the plane, Vasili looked back. Yang Bum soon followed him out of the aircraft.

Smiling, Kang Chan shook hands with the two. He wasn't expecting them to fly over together.

While they exchanged greetings, Vasili's gaze remained on the door of the plane, seemingly still waiting for someone.

Doubting that Vasili had brought a gift or something, Kang Chan followed the man's gaze and soon looked back at him. Sherman was getting off with a complicated look on his face.

“He's the extra person I told you might come,” Vasili explained.

Sherman was already here. There was no need to make him uncomfortable, so Kang Chan didn't question it.

“It's been a while.”

“Indeed.”

Sherman's eyes glinted at Kang Chan's casual tone, but he didn't mention it.

“Let's wait over there.”

Vasili glanced at the agents standing to the side. He then smiled strangely.

The four walked to the car.

If Kang Chan knew they would be coming together, he would have prepared some tea for them.

He wistfully remembered Lanok bringing black tea to the tarmac.

Just then, Choi Jong-Il approached Kang Chan. Quietly, he asked, "Would you like some tea?"

Yang Bum understood Korean, but he didn't act surprised since it would look tacky.

"You brought tea?" Kang Chan asked in a way that only Choi Jong-Il could hear, making it seem as if he was giving important instructions.

Vasili, Yang Bum, and Sherman looked over, wondering what was going on.

"We have everything in the vans, even instant coffee. Would you like us to prepare some for you and your guests?"

"Yes. Thank you."

Damn it!

Kang Chan thought Choi Jong-Il should've mentioned this earlier while he was smoking.

Vasili and Sherman stared at him, seemingly wondering, about what they were talking about so secretively.

Choi Jong-Il turned and nodded. Two agents then brought a thermos and teacups.

"Let's have some tea, shall we?"

Vasili came forward with a characteristic expression.

Glug.

It was midday. On the tarmac in the afternoon sun, they poured tea into cups placed on the trunk of the sedans.

Kang Chan wanted instant coffee, but the scent of the black tea that Choi Jong-Il had served them wasn't too bad either.

"Give us some cigarettes too," he requested.

Choi Jong-Il quietly set down a pack of cigarettes and a lighter right next to the tea cups.

"Cigarette?" Kang Chan offered.

"Absolutely."

Vasili and Yang Bum held out their hands. Sherman refused.

Click, click, click.

A gust of wind blew past them, making it difficult to light the cigarettes.

However, a man should be able to light a fire even in the face of a typhoon.

After lighting his cigarette, Kang Chan handed it to the next person.

Vasili gave Kang Chan a sarcastic look, then turned away and lit his cigarette with his back to the wind.

Coward!

“Hoo.”

Vasili turned back around as Kang Chan blew out smoke.

It was Yang Bum’s turn. Since he was looking at Kang Chan, his back was luckily already to the wind anyway.

They drank black tea and smoked cigarettes, saying nothing in particular.

After about ten minutes, a larger plane descended to the runway.

Five minutes later, Ludwig stepped out of it.

“Monsieur Kang.”

“Welcome.”

As Ludwig hugged him, Kang Chan felt a jab in his heart.

Lanok should’ve been here with them, not in that dark, ominous place in Loriam.

Kang Chan sighed. He then led Ludwig to the car.

Ludwig greeted Vasili, Yang Bum, and Sherman.

“Would you like some tea?”

“Why don’t we head to the restaurant now instead?” Ludwig suggested.

Kang Chan looked at Choi Jong-Il. Soon, a large van, the kind that celebrities usually rode, pulled up in front of them.

“Let’s go.”

There wasn’t anything else to do, so they stepped into the van and left immediately. After leaving the airport, they drove along the main road for a while, then a smaller road, then a dirt road.

Ludwig smiled meaningfully as he looked back at the car moving in front of him and behind him. It was as if he was telling Kang Chan, “You’ve become this important.”

After about ten minutes of driving up the mountain road, the car stopped in a spacious parking lot.

The sign at the entrance read “Flaming Duck.” Kang Chan was glad it was in Korean because it was cringey.

However, he soon remembered that Yang Bum could also read Korean.

Feigning ignorance, Kang Chan guided the group into the establishment.

Armed agents could be seen patrolling the parking lot and the perimeter of the building, which was guarded by agents in suits and sunglasses.

Once inside, Kang Chan glanced at Choi Jong-Il.

The hall was as huge as a sports field, but it only had one large, rectangular table that obviously looked luxurious. There wasn’t any need to go through all this trouble.

Kang Chan felt like a hillbilly who had won the lottery and invited his friends over to show off his money.

Anyhow, the table was already set. There was no point in complaining now, so Kang Chan quietly moved over to it.

“Shall we eat first?”

“That would be great.”

Kang Chan nodded, and Choi Jong-Il gestured at his men.

Three women dressed as restaurant staff brought out some food. Kang Chan could tell by the way they moved and the look in their eyes that they were also agents.

A charcoal grill was rolled over, followed by a duck that looked like it had been bathed in sesame oil.

HSSSS.

These kinds of people usually didn't have much interest in food, so eating was just a ritual for them.

However, today was different. Ludwig gladly took a portion of the roasted duck, and Vasili moved his fork differently than usual.

While they were eating, they were also served meat broth and kal-guksu.

However, none of them touched the alcohol today.

Once everyone had leaned back in their seats with satisfied faces, the table was cleared, and tea, coffee, cigarettes, cigars, and ashtrays were placed in front of each person.

Everyone in the dining room and the kitchen then quietly left.

Kang Chan drank coffee. Yang Bum and Vasili took cigarettes while Ludwig picked up a cigar.

Soon, Vasili looked at Kang Chan sharply. “Monsieur Kang. As per the information we've sent over to you, the UIS have been gathering in Afghanistan, and they number over twelve hundred. Do you still intend to attack?”

The asshole clearly had more to say.

As Kang Chan gazed at him, Vasili added, “If an army of that size moves in South Korea, North Korea and Japan will be the first ones to react. If and when they do, we'll have an unwanted war on our hands. One more thing.”

Vasili glanced around the table.

“To keep such a huge battle between Korea and the UIS, we need to keep the UN's eyes and ears closed.”

Kang Chan blew out a puff of smoke and stubbed his cigarette out in the ashtray.

“Vasili, the fact that you've thought that far means you've already come up with a plan, so why don't you just reveal it instead of stalling?”

Vasil laughed coldly. "You're making me feel the woes of being a supporting character again."

Yang Bum and Ludwig smiled, while Sherman remained expressionless.

"Yang Bum can take care of North Korea, and the UN..."

Vasili looked at Sherman.

Under the four men's stares, Sherman coughed and glanced at Kang Chan.

"We'll take care of the UN, but we do have a request."

Sherman naturally didn't come all the way here just to have some flaming duck. However, the way they all discussed things first without Kang Chan made him feel displeased.

Kang Chan glared at Vasili.

"Sherman was already going down to the runway when I picked him up. The enemy of your enemy is a friend. In the intelligence world, it's not uncommon to shake a hand that had once pointed a gun at you."

Vasil didn't look too happy to be giving an excuse.

"Monsieur Kang," Ludwig kindly addressed him.

"We need Sherman's assistance in eliminating Josh and Romain. Moreover..."

Ludwig looked at Sherman for a moment. He seemed to be saying not to argue with anything he was about to say.

"It's just as important to get Lanok out of Loriam as it is to eliminate Romain."

Well, if they could get Lanok out...

Kang Chan slowly turned to Sherman.

"Tell me what you want."

"Unlike South Korea, we've been terrorized in disgrace, so our government wants to show the voters something before next year's presidential election."

"Sherman, just get to the point."

Kang Chan picked up another cigarette and lit it.

Click.

He then put it set it on the ashtray.

"We'll take out the Taliban and Al-Qaeda leaders who fled to Afghanistan."

Kang Chan looked at Sherman in disbelief.

Given America's military might and the capabilities of the US Special Forces, there was no need for him to be telling Kang Chan this.

Under Kang Chan's stare, Sherman, with an awkward expression, added, "We want the maximum effect with the minimum number of people."

“Spell it out for me.”

“I need sixteen special forces soldiers to make a perfect kill and come back without a single wound.”

Pft.

This crazy asshole wanted Kang Chan to kill the enemy leader, who would be guarded by one thousand two hundred people, and come back in one piece?

Kang Chan stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray in disbelief.

“Sherman, asking me to put my men on the line to ensure that not a single US Special Forces soldier is hurt is a ridiculous condition. You either don’t have Special Forces experience or you’ve gone crazy for campaigning.”

“But Lanok...”

“Sherman,” Kang Chan interrupted, causing Sherman to look at him. “If Romain or France lays a finger on the ambassador, France will have the most horrible man in the world as an enemy.”

Kang Chan glanced at Vasili, Yang Bum, and Ludwig. He then continued, “You should also consider how absurd it is to ask a special forces team trying to kill the UIS leadership, who would be surrounded by twelve hundred people, to never get hurt.”

Sherman looked around, seemingly asking for help.

“Mr. Kang Chan,” Yang Bum called him by his Korean name. “I would like to ask you to make a concession.”

His sudden use of the Korean language caused Vasili, Ludwig, and Sherman to glance back and forth between Kang Chan and Yang Bum curiously.

“The key that Sherman holds is very important right now. Most likely, the funds that UIS have amassed in Afghanistan are coming from the Star of David.”

I knew it!

These guys had been following the trail of money as well.

“Perhaps not against Josh, but we’ll also need Sherman’s help in tricking Romain.”

“The DGSE will target Sherman, then.”

“He likely believes that the presidential election is more important than that.”

Yang Bum glanced at Sherman and then back at Kang Chan.

“Sherman aside, I and these two other gentlemen with us have all agreed to follow you. Please try to save Vasili some face.”

Kang Chan wordlessly looked at Yang Bum and then at Sherman.

“I can’t refuse Vasili’s request.”

Vasili quickly looked between Kang Chan and Yang Bum.

“If you can convince our neighbors to allow our warplanes to bomb Afghanistan, we’ll accept your terms.”

Sherman’s expressions hardened, unable to answer.

Vasili, Yang Bum, and Ludwig looked on with amusement.

Chapter 348: Sorry, Mother (1)

Sherman, who had looked away for support from the others, looked back at Kang Chan. “Monsieur Kang, your terms include eliminating Romain and rescuing Lanok. Wouldn’t it be fair to take that into account?”

“Sherman.”

Sherman’s eyes showed his displeasure.

“The UIS has twelve hundred men,” Kang Chan rebutted. “It’s hard to take them on with just special forces teams. If you’re uncomfortable with my terms, send fighter jets from the US.”

“Hmm.”

Sherman looked at the doorway, seemingly calculating his profit and loss.

Meanwhile, Kang Chan addressed another issue.

“Mr. Yang Bum, I’m thinking of deploying the troops from the base in Mongolia as well. Can I ask you to guard the base during this operation?”

“As long as the Russian side is taken care of, consider it done,” Yang Bum replied. Kang Chan looked at Vasili.

“I’ll take care of it,” Vasili said with a pointed look.

Now, only Sherman was left. The four naturally all turned to him.

“Very well, we’ll go through China. I’ll handle the UN and Afghanistan’s neighbors,” Sherman answered decisively, bringing an end to their crucial negotiation.

“How will you get Romain to move?” Kang Chan asked.

“We’ll say the FBI is investigating the IMF head, who is from France, for alleged sex trafficking. Even if it’s just to negotiate, Romain will have no choice but to make a move.”

Scary bastards!

Kang Chan couldn’t believe the savagery of these people, who had been in this business for so long.

“How will you rescue the ambassador?” he queried.

Sherman turned to Ludwig.

In turn, Ludwig explained, “We’ll be sending a GSG-9 team to Africa and have them support the rebel forces in Congo, Monsieur Kang.”

He then turned to Vasili as he spoke.

“Our weapons will be entering the Central African Republic. Not officially, of course, but through an arms deal. I’m sure the DGSE will have enough intel to understand why this is happening.”

Germany and Russia could do it, but what about China?

Kang Chan gazed at Yang Bum.

“Once Josh is out of the picture, China will divert all economic cooperation with France to the UK,” Yang Bum stated. “This would completely block the purchase of the raw materials needed to power the collider, not to mention the TGV, their high-speed railroad that spans across China.”

“One more thing, Monsieur Kang,” Ludwig said afterward. “All of France’s intelligence funds deposited in Switzerland will be exposed and seized. In doing so, the French regime itself might even change.”

Kang Chan laughed in disbelief. Curious, he asked, “If you have these methods, why did you just watch the ambassador get imprisoned in Loriam?”

“Like I said, we wanted to make the Star of David take action,” Vasili explained. “Unfortunately, Lanok chose you to be his successor. We are only following his wishes. Don’t forget that whatever happens after this will fall on your and Korea’s shoulders.”

This asshole had a nice way with words.

Kang Chan didn’t expect Vasili to speak kindly. However, did he really have to say that Lanok choosing Kang Chan as his successor was unfortunate?

He looked around the room, then picked up a cigarette and placed it in his mouth.

Click.

The room remained silent as he lit the cigarette and set down the lighter.

“Vasili.”

Vasili gave him a questioning look, seemingly asking, “What did I do?”

However, Kang Chan didn’t see any reason to argue with him. After all, Vasili was simply staying true to his nature.

“Although I don’t know the laws of intelligence bureaus, let me make one thing clear. While I’m following the ambassador’s footsteps and leading this meeting...”

The four patiently waited for him to continue.

“If anyone here is ever in danger, that becomes our most important and urgent matter.”

“That’s a bit sentimental for our hero to say.”

“Maybe,” Kang Chan responded curtly, “but if we succeed in building a next-generation energy facility in South Korea, aren’t you thinking of building one in Russia, China, Germany, and Switzerland afterward?”

Sherman quickly looked up as if greed had gotten the better of him. No one spared him a glance, though.

“If this is going to set the course of the world economy for the next hundreds of years, and if we’re destined to stay on this path for a long time...” Kang Chan blew out a puff of smoke. “We should have this much trust in each other. Hence, after we’re done building a next-generation energy facility in South Korea, I’ll cooperate in the construction of similar facilities in each of your countries.

“How touching,” Vasili retorted, breaking the heartwarming moment.

Son of a bitch.

Vasili raised his teacup, and Yang Bum and Ludwig raised their cigarettes and cigars.

“Will you be in charge of this operation, Monsieur Kang?”

“Yes.”

“How risky. I won’t be able to watch what’s going on because I’m so scared,” Vasili grumbled as he set his cup down.

“I will put Andrei and thirty Spetsnaz members under your command. Consider it a sign of respect and admiration for your country standing up to a terrorist organization like the UIS. Once this operation is over, the Russian government will announce everything I just said now.”

“On that note, do you remember Jiang Kanglin?” Yang Bum asked.

Kang Chan nodded. How could he forget one of the people who had trained alongside him in France?

“I will send him and thirty Snow Wolves over.”

Kang Chan grinned.

“Leon and thirty GSG-9 members will be joining you too,” Ludwig added.

That was more than what Kang Chan anticipated.

Sherman seemed more flustered than Kang Chan.

“That’s not what we agreed on.”

Before Sherman could further protest, Vasili cut him off. “The US will have a higher chance of getting the achievement you so desire with South Korea’s special forces, the Spetsnaz, White Wolves, and GSG-9 working together. What’s the issue?”

He continued, “If we pull this off, the Star of David won’t be able to just freely swing its tail around anymore. That’s why this operation must succeed. In the meantime, as Monsieur Kang requested, we will get rid of Josh and Romain and bring Lanok out.”

Time passed as they discussed other details. At one point, Sherman tried to interject about the next-generation energy facilities, but Vasili brutally cut him off.

The NIS agents who had been dispatched to Islamic countries were busy risking their lives to find out why the UIS had amassed nearly a thousand two hundred combatants in Afghanistan, where their leader was located.

NIS Egyptian branch office.

The Egyptian branch manager shook his head. “It’s too dangerous.”

All the previous agents had been shot to obtain the satellite coordinates last time. The only ones left unscathed were two new recruits.

“Sir, if we just keep monitoring the informant and he gets taken out because of our nonaction, we’ll lose the tail. Aren’t we being ordered to figure out how they got the coordinates because they need the intel? I’ll head out with the new guys.”

The branch manager shook his head again. How could he send two rookies with Um Ji-Hwan, whose right forearm and shin were injured? It was too risky a plan, even if it meant they could find a vital informant.

“That guy isn’t just some random informant. He’s an A-lister. He has a direct line to Greek military intelligence.”

“Um Ji-Hwan, you still haven’t gotten the hang of this place yet. Even if I allow you to go, our two rookies aren’t familiar with the terrain. Don’t you know the situation we’re in? With everyone else injured, we don’t have anyone who can help you.”

The branch manager was not only Um Ji-Hwan’s senior. He was also a veteran in Egypt-related fieldwork. Everything he had said made sense.

Um Ji-Hwan looked down in frustration.

An informant had asked for their help. This could be their last chance to find out how they got the satellite coordinates and where the clues came from.

The branch manager was well aware of that, but right now, they were too short-handed. They could call for reinforcements, but doing so out of the blue was easier said than done.

“How well do you speak Egyptian?” the branch manager suddenly asked the new recruits.

“I can understand most of the expletives.”

“And your background?”

“I used to be part of the 606, then the counter-terrorism team for two years.”

The branch manager turned to the other recruit this time

“I’m confident in my English, and I can order in Egyptian. I was a member of the Third Airborne Forces and the 606.”

“Go make me some coffee.”

Anyone listening to their conversation would have thought that the Third Airborne Forces and the 606 were barista training schools.

As ordered, the two recruits walked to the corner and poured instant coffee and hot water into paper cups. The aroma of instant coffee wafted through the office.

A few moments later, they came back with a cup in each hand, putting them down in front of the branch manager and Um Ji-Hwan.

“Has there been any other contact?” the branch manager asked.

“Jung sunbae is following the informant as we speak. We can capture him as soon as you give the order,” Um Ji-Hwan replied.

The branch manager sighed.

The Jung sunbae that Um Ji-Hwan had mentioned had been shot in the chest and could barely walk. Nevertheless, he was still relentlessly following the informant.

“It could be the opposite. This could be a trap to get us there. If we find ourselves in a dangerous situation, you, the two rookies, and I...”

The branch manager was unable to finish. While holding the cup of coffee, he looked around

“Permission to speak, sir,” one of the new recruits said.

“Go ahead. What is it?”

“I lost one of my colleagues in the terrorist attack on the International Building. If I can do anything to prevent more sacrifices, even though I’m unfamiliar with this place, I hope you reconsider whether my safety is really more important than the wellbeing of our nation,” the recruit who was confident in his Egyptian said.

“You punk.”

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“Give me a cigarette.”

The branch manager took the cigarette pack and lighter that the rookie handed over. He then glared at the three.

“You all smoke, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir.”

The branch manager handed them all a cigarette.

Click.

He then flicked the lighter on and held it out.

As a soldier and an agent of the NIS, it was an honor to have a senior light their cigarettes for them.

Um Ji-Hwan and the two agents politely moved closer.

“Hoo. Think about it this way. It’s not just about risking your lives. Don’t forget that you’re also important assets to the country.”

“Yes, sir,” the two recruits answered cautiously.

The branch manager sighed deeply, blowing out cigarette smoke at the same time. He, too, had a bloody gauze on his nape and a thick bandage wrapped around his back.

“So, are we going to get the informant?” Um Ji-Hwan asked.

The branch manager glanced at Um Ji-Hwan. While making calculations, he bit his lower lip.

His eyes showed the many storms that he had weathered.

After taking another drag on his cigarette, he exhaled. “Hoo.”

This would be a gamble. Helping the informant, who had come to them for help, wasn’t safe.

However, finding out how he had gotten the satellite coordinates and why the UIS had assembled an army was worth putting their lives on the line for.

Requesting for backup?

The branch manager shook his head.

Every NIS branch in Africa, Egypt, and the Middle East was undermanned right now. They had never been this active before.

The most they had ever done before was look for spies. Whenever there was a conflict, armed or otherwise, they would always retreat.

He was grateful and proud of the battle in Libya.

It was a sign of how important their home country, South Korea, considered the agents they had dispatched all around the world.

“Hoo.”

The branch manager stubbed his cigarette out in a paper cup.

After seeing off Vasili and the others at the Seongnam Airfield, Kang Chan headed straight to the Samseong-Dong office. He wanted to meet Kim Hyung-Jung, who was probably eagerly awaiting the details of the meeting.

He thought about asking for a meeting with Moon Jae-Hyun and Go Gun-Woo first, but he didn't want to seem disrespectful to Kim Hyung-Jung.

The situation was clear. All that was left was figuring out why the UIS had gathered such a large army. Unfortunately, neither Vasili, Yang Bum, Sherman, nor Ludwig had a clear answer.

As an organization grew larger, so did its members' vested interests and greed.

Arriving at Samseong-Dong, Kang Chan immediately went up to the fifth floor.

“Thank you for coming.”

Kang Chan entered the office and told Kim Hyung-Jung, who had been waiting, everything that had happened over lunch.

With all their time together, Kang Chan thought Kim Hyung-Jung would've gotten used to it by now, yet his eyes still widened at him.

“Are you really planning to send in fighter jets?”

“Given the enemy's numbers, bombing is a must.”

“That's true.”

It was difficult to accept, but Kim Hyung-Jung had no other choice. His answer reflected his feelings.

“I'll head back to my office now.”

“Okay. I'll call you as soon as I'm done.”

“Please do.”

After parting ways with Kim Hyung-Jung, Kang Chan drove back to his office.

“How was it?” Seok Kang-Ho curiously greeted. “Would you like some coffee?”

“After I wash up,” Kang Chan replied.

He hung up his jacket, then went to the restroom to brush his teeth and wash his face.

“Whew!”

He looked at his glinting eyes in the mirror. He had gotten used to seeing this face.

The water dripped and soaked the front of his shirt, but he didn't care.

‘Are you confident?’ he asked his reflection.

They were up against twelve hundred hostiles, and the battlefield would be set in Afghanistan.

Russia, China, and Germany would be sending special forces teams. Meanwhile, the United States would be hanging on their tails.

This massive operation even required fighter jets.

Kang Chan had fought countless battles, and after being reborn, he had been in operations that made Kim Hyung-Jung shudder. The last time he had been in Afghanistan, he had gone against six hundred Quds.

Yet this battle was still on an entirely different level.

It was one thing to fight six hundred Quds charging straight at them and another to face one thousand two hundred UIS members in an area they had complete control over.

Moreover, commanding a large-scale operation was easier said than done. Just because one could drive a 2.5-ton truck nicely didn’t mean they could suddenly pull a 25-ton dump and trailer at will.

Kang Chan knew better than anyone that, in combat, a commander’s mistakes could cost the lives of their men.

Things were escalating. Just as he had decided to eliminate the leadership, the enemies gathered in Afghanistan.

It felt like a strange, uncomfortable weight had settled on his shoulders and refused to fall off.

Kang Chan grabbed a towel from the rack and wiped his face.

Pft.

He wouldn’t quit now, though. If someone else had told him about this issue, he would’ve said immediately that they should attack the enemies and show them what their country could do.

Kang Chan’s gaze on his reflection turned into a glare.

‘I’ll send every last one of them to the God of Death. They will never get to aim their guns my way.’

He smirked.

When he came out of the restroom, he noticed that Seok Kang-Ho had set two mugs on the table.

“Did the meeting not go well?” Seok Kang-Ho asked.

“No, why?”

“You didn’t look too happy.”

Kang Chan sat down at the table and looked out the window. “I was just worried about the enemies’ numbers. I’ve never gone against an army that large.”

Seok Kang-Ho grinned and lifted his mug.

“Gérard said you seem worried about the soldiers having to sacrifice themselves. Is that right?”

Kang Chan glanced at Seok Kang-Ho.

This guy had exchanged a conversation that complicated with Gérard? How?

Kang Chan’s question was quickly answered. He saw a man in formal attire coming out of the office with Gerard.

It seemed the interpreter, who had lost two fingers, had visited them.

Seeing him bow in greeting, Kang Chan grinned.

“The NIS hired him.”

“When?”

“Well, he just got here this morning. Didn’t Manager Kim tell you? When I complained about how uncomfortable it is to not be able to talk to each other due to the language barrier, they decided to hire him to interpret for us and the agents assigned to the satellites.”

Kim Hyung-Jung was so busy that he must have forgotten.

The interpreter had come at the best time. Kang Chan liked most that he could trust him since they had already fought together.

“Gérard, did you get anything from the satellites?”

“We’ve been scanning the suspicious areas, but we haven’t found anything concrete.”

The interpreter relayed Kang Chan and Gérard’s conversation to Seok Kang-Ho.

This was nice.

“Keep at it.”

“I told them as much. I’ll keep monitoring them too.”

Kang Chan nodded.

Once Kim Hyung-Jung was done with his meeting with Go Gun-Woo, they would begin the operation.

Kang Chan looked at the sky.

Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook’s faces suddenly came to mind. He wondered how they were doing.

He missed them terribly.

Kang Chan could only hope that Yoo Hye-Sook wasn’t crying...

Just then, he was shaken from his thoughts at the sound of the office door opening.

Already?

Much to his surprise, it was Kim Hyung-Jung.

Chapter 349: Sorry, Mother (2)

“Say that again?”

“Once Um sunbae and I catch the informant and get the information from him, we’ll head back to the headquarters immediately. If it’s deemed unsafe, we’ll flee to the safe house.”

“Where’s the safe house?”

“At the AI Galago intersection.”

“What if it’s inaccessible?”

“The camouflage shop on AI Galasa.”

“Weapons?”

“Pistols on my left ankle and waist, and a bayonet on my right ankle.”

The Egyptian branch manager checked the magazines and then strapped a pistol to his waist. When he lifted his shirt, the others noticed that one side of the bandages wrapped around his waist was stained with blood.

“Um Ji-Hwan.”

Um Ji-Hwan raised his head. “Sir.”

“You know, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

Confused by their conversation, the two recruits glanced at the two men.

As the branch manager’s eyes blazed, Um Ji-Hwan pressed his lips together.

Um Ji-Hwan now knew why the branch manager had asked his seniors the same question before they left on missions in the past.

‘Keep your juniors safe.’

‘Of course, sir.’

He would do his best to protect them so they, in turn, could relay their experience to the next generation.

“Check your radios.”

They all pressed a button on their radios.

Chk, chk, chk, chk.

They were ready to go.

“This is such a risky operation that I didn’t even report it because I doubt it would have been approved. So if you want out, sit down quietly. We won’t shame you for it.”

The branch manager gave Um Ji-Hwan and the two rookies a serious expression.

After a moment of silence, he turned toward the door.

“I’ve made the report to the president as well. We’ve never deployed fighter jets for overseas bombing before, so we still have to go through the chain of command and legal procedures,” Kim Hyung-Jung said with a heavy face.

“Anyway, after I reported to the president, the Jeungpyeong special forces, the 606, and the NIS’s counter-terrorism team were put on standby. The NIS will dispatch them as soon as we’ve determined the number of personnel.”

Kang Chan sharply glared at the map of Afghanistan on the whiteboard.

“Manager Kim, can I meet with the commander of the counter-terrorism team, the 606, and the Jeungpyeong special forces?”

“Where would you like to meet?”

The office wasn’t the best location.

“How about the conference room under the NIS? Would that be possible?”

“Yes. When would you like to hold it?”

“Around ten tomorrow morning.”

“Consider it done. I’ll update you once we’ve prepared everything.”

Twice during their conversation, Gérard came out and quickly scribbled the names of the enemy leaders and their estimated forces on the map.

They were getting closer to deployment.

In a restaurant with a second floor that overlooks the first floor.

“He’s in there.”

The senior agent following the informant had a pale face. If he wasn’t breaking out in a cold sweat and his eyes weren’t open, Um Ji-Hwan would have thought that he was dead.

“There are three customers in there right now. If you include the kitchen staff, the servers, and the owner, then we’re looking at six people. More might be hiding somewhere.”

The senior agent gritted his teeth and gripped the window sill. He looked like he could barely keep himself on his feet.

“We’ve spent ten years trying to catch this guy. Considering he's been hiding since the last shootout and reached out to us first, there’s about an eighty percent chance he’s on our side.”

When Um Ji-Hwan turned to the restaurant, the senior agent tapped his shoulder.

“It could be a trap. We’ll have raided their base, so we can’t even give an excuse.”

Um Ji-Hwan had never seen so much determination in the eyes of a dying man.

He looked so frustrated for being unable to go in himself, so angry for having to send his juniors in, and... so enraged for being unable to die.

‘I’ll bring the informant back as soon as possible.’

Um Ji-Hwan looked into the agent’s eyes and shared his blazing determination as well.

It was like a war zone.

Information flooded in from Russia, China, Germany, and even the United States.

Rukha district, near the Panjshir River and along Saricha Road.

The mountainous terrain had plenty of places where enemies could hide. They had to watch out for underground tunnels, too.

Gérard busily brought documents to Kang Chan. “Captain, they have way too many fucking snipers.”

The information that the Americans had sent contained a rough estimate of the number of snipers and a list of those they knew for sure.

Snipers were a pain in the ass, especially those holed up in mountainous areas. They were one of the deadliest enemies on the battlefield.

The Quds alone had over thirty snipers. Including the snipers from other organizations, Rukha was infested with sixty in total. The problem was the damn Quds, the organization with the most veterans in the world.

“Whew. We’ve only identified sixty. There have to be some who are assigned to protect their leadership. Mark them on the map for now, and put the lists in a USB. I’ll take it to the meeting tomorrow.”

“Understood,” Gérard answered, then went back inside the office.

The gathering of the UIS had defied common sense enough that even Seok Kang-Ho stared at the map in disbelief.

“Cap, doesn’t it look like they’re preparing for a long war?”

Kang Chan nodded. “You’re right, but this is not a matter of how long the war is. Considering their numbers, they’ve probably brought serious firepower with them too. We haven’t even seen their missiles or other weapons yet. Also...”

After a brief pause, he continued, “Intelligence bureaus are bound to detect such a large army. I doubt they’re there to attack South Korea, but there has to be a reason why they’re doing this shit. We need to know what that is so we can deal with them properly.”

Seok Kang-Ho glared at the map.

Sixty special forces snipers. One thousand two hundred soldiers in total.

They were likely composed of more than just common militia.

Sixty out of one thousand two hundred didn’t seem that much, but the snipers had been in the special forces. That meant they had experience of anywhere from seven to fifteen years. It was a lot of pressure.

What were they trying to do?

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

Just then, Kang Chan’s phone rang, breaking him out of his thoughts.

“Hello?”

- I’ve scheduled an initial briefing at ten tomorrow morning. As you’ve requested, it’ll be held in the underground conference room of the NIS. Two of the combat squadron majors will be there as well.

“Will that not pose a problem with secrecy?”

- The NIS can vouch for the two majors.

“I see. I’ll see you tomorrow, then. Oh, right. Is Sharlan still unconscious?”

- They believe that he has become so drug-dependent that he’ll die as soon as they take him off the respirator. I’ll check again.

That son of a bitch.

Kang Chan didn’t want to give him a nice death. If he had to, he would even twist his neck just before he died.

“Please tell them to keep him on oxygen. I want to at least be able to watch him die.”

- Got it.

Putting the phone down, Kang Chan looked at the map again.

Should I beat Abibu up again?

Kang Chan shook his head.

There was no knowing how Abibu would react if he knew that the UIS had gathered in Afghanistan.

Um Ji-Hwan left the building with a rookie.

The sun beat down on the people walking beneath it like a spear, causing them to smell of spices and sweat—strong and distinctive.

The jumble of cars, people, antiques, and bric-a-brac lining the roads was as busy and cluttered as it smelled.

Chk.

“Move in. Don’t overdo it.”

Following the instructions that came from the radio, Um Ji-Hwan glanced at the rookie and began to cross the street.

His nerves were on edge, but he pretended to be calm. he stepped forward.

The road was narrow, and the shop was small.

In front of a dark ochre-colored wooden door, Um Ji-Hwan looked at the new agent once more.

‘Ready?’

Looking at the new agent’s firm eyes, Um Ji-Hwan reached forward.

The information that South Korea, Kang Chan, and Seok Kang-Ho were waiting for could be in there. If it could put a stop to the terrorist attacks and tell them why the UIS had gathered, then he wanted to do whatever he could to obtain it.

Creaaak.

He opened the door and walked in. After the initial rush of darkness, four tables slowly came into view. Two of them were occupied.

Um Ji-Hwan quickly scanned the restaurant. Afterward, his gaze fell on the table with a lone customer.

The chilly atmosphere seemed to be warning his instincts.

Three sets of piercing eyes glared at him from a table further into the establishment.

Even though a customer had entered, the owner just watched anxiously.

‘Something’s wrong!’

He wanted to pull his pistol out. However, he wasn’t an outlaw in the wilderness. He needed to find out what was going on.

Um Ji-Hwan looked at the rookies and turned to the restaurant owner.

Click!

At that moment, he heard the sound of a gun coming from the tables.

Slam! Crash!

Um Ji-Hwan ran into the rookie.

Click!

Right after, he pulled out the gun from his waist.

Du du du du! Pow pow pow pow!

The enemy's guns sparked.

Bang! Thud! Bang! Thud!

Um Ji-Hwan shot two hostiles down.

If only his right arm hadn't been wounded...

At the same time, the new agent fired three rounds at the remaining one.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

“Secure the informant!” Um Ji-Hwan shouted.

He felt a tingling sensation in his head and the right side of his chest, but he couldn't pay it any attention.

Bam!

The new agent tugged on the sleeve of the man sitting alone.

Crash!

Just then, the doors shattered, and a mass of men came sprawling onto the restaurant floor.

Um Ji-Hwan aimed at them.

The branch manager and the rookie were tangled up with three Egyptian men, brandishing bayonets.

Jab! Jab! Jab! Jab!

He didn't even get to pull the trigger. The branch manager was already stabbing one of the enemies in the neck with his bayonet, and the new agent was stabbing another in the heart.

‘Huh? Why is...?’

Thud!

Um Ji-Hwan fell to his knees.

“Hey! Hey, punk! Um Ji-Hwan!”

The bloodied branch manager held him up. Um Ji-Hwan could barely see the sunlight coming through the door.

“Arrrgh.”

He wanted to speak. However, instead of words, blood spilled out of his mouth, followed by a gurgle and more blood.

“Take him upstairs! Hurry!” the branch manager shouted. In response, the two rookies dragged the informant out the door.

They had secured the informant. He had done his mission.

Um Ji-Hwan hoped that they could stop the terrorist attacks with the information from the informant and find out why the UIS had assembled an army.

Kang Chan and Seok Kang-Ho would take care of the rest.

“Hey! Come on! Hang in there! Hey! Um Ji-Hwan!”

As if sunlight was filling their surroundings, Um Ji-Hwan’s vision turned white.

‘Ah! When you’re in a foreign country, make sure to have soup with your meals, hm? Take care of yourself.’

He could hear his old mother’s voice, who was holding onto his hand tightly in front of the small house.

‘Sorry, Mother.’

‘What are you talking about? Everyone’s been telling me I’m so lucky to have you as my son!’

He wondered if she hated or resented him, whom she had been given no choice but to raise while working in the market, freezing on cold days and melting on hot days.

‘You’re not hurt anywhere, are you? Whenever I see you in my dreams, I get so upset that I can’t even eat anything all day.’

Despite her hunched back, she had insisted that she would carry his bags and followed him out to watch him get in the car in front of the house.

‘When are you coming back this time?’

‘Mother, I’m not sick at all, so don’t be too worried.’

‘Hm! What is it? Why are you saying that?’

“Hey! Punk! Um Ji-Hwan!”

Gritting his teeth, the branch manager carried Um Ji-Hwan on his shoulder. However, Um Ji-Hwan’s head drooped helplessly.

There was more than enough material to go around in the office.

On a laid-out map of the Rukha district, they plotted the enemy’s troop positions according to the satellites and the data from the intelligence bureaus. As a result, they gained a general outline of the situation.

“Let’s go get dinner already,” Seok Kang-Ho grumbled while the interpreter rolled up his sleeves and analyzed the information.

It was already getting dark outside.

“Order for yourself.”

“Fine. Don’t regret it later.”

As Seok Kang-Ho turned to Woo Hee-Seung, Kang Chan’s phone began to ring.

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

What was going on?

When he picked up, the uneasiness hanging on his shoulders suddenly became stickier.

“Hello?”

- It’s Kim Hyung-Jung.

His voice sounded unusually grave.

As Kang Chan took a deep breath, Kim Hyung-Jung continued speaking.

- We just got a report that our agents in Egypt have managed to secure an informant connected to the satellite coordinates. The report stated that an arms trafficker named Ivan Dmitriyevich Lebedev was trying to sell the OTP to Russia.

“He must be a big fish if he’s making deals like that.”

- He’s a well-known figure around the world. On another note, my source also gave me another piece of information on the condition of protection, but I haven’t confirmed it yet.

“What is it?”

- He says the UIS has raised an army because they’re planning to declare a new independent state in Afghanistan, and they’ve planned simultaneous terrorist attacks around the world to coincide with it. The OTP is to launch missiles at that time.

Those crazy bastards!

Kang Chan looked at the map on the whiteboard in disbelief. However, he realized right after that the UIS was certainly capable of accomplishing such a feat.

- Assistant Director Kang.

Kim Hyung-Jung’s tone seemed to have quieted down further.

This had to be the reason Kang Chan felt iffy. He waited for him to continue.

- The report came in along with the news that Agent Um Ji-Hwan had been killed in the process of securing the informant.

Kang Chan turned to Seok Kang-Ho, who was talking to Woo Hee-Seung about the dinner menu.

- They conducted the operation undermanned. Since there is currently a severe shortage of agents in the Middle East and Africa, we couldn’t send them reinforcements immediately.

Kang Chan let out a low sigh.

“I understand.”

- I will contact you again.

“Thank you.”

Kang Chan put the phone down and turned around.

“What was that?”

Seok Kang-Ho approached him with a grin.

“What’s with that look?”

“Daye.”

Kang Chan’s expression made Seok Kang-Ho’s smile disappear.

Choi Jong-Il, Woo Hee-Seung, Lee Doo-Hee, and the interpreter, who was heading to the whiteboard with some materials, all focused on Kang Chan.

“We found an informant in Egypt. They’ve secured important intel.”

The moment the word “Egypt” was said, Seok Kang-Ho’s eyes glinted.

“Ji-Hwan was killed in action.”

Seok Kang-Ho gritted his teeth so hard that his cheeks trembled.

As a moment of heavy silence descended on the room, Seok Kang-Ho walked over to the table, sat down, and lit a cigarette.

His behavior made how he felt clear—frustrated, angry, upset, and sad.

Seok Kang-Ho flicked the lighter on.

Click. Click.

This was why letting someone in one’s heart was scarily difficult in this line of work.

“Hoo.”

The cigarette smoke he spat out swirled upward toward the vent.

Chapter 350: It’s A Hard Battle (1)

No one spoke during dinner. All they could hear was the occasional clatter of forks, knives, and chopsticks.

We just had to eat pork cutlets at a time like this.

Kang Chan sliced the meat first out of habit, alternating between eating the pork and rice with chopsticks.

While Kang Chan was putting the two remaining pieces in his mouth, Seok Kang-Ho quietly asked, “Do you know who Ji-Hwan was dealing with?”

“They probably don’t know for sure yet.”

“Captain, could you look into those motherfuckers?”

Kang Chan chewed his pork and sighed.

Although everyone was pretending to be focused on eating, their eyes and ears were on Kang Chan.

“Daye.”

“Yes.”

Seok Kang-Ho put down his chopsticks and looked at Kang Chan.

“I’m also upset, but if we go around avenging the deaths of those killed in legitimate operations or battles, we’ll be no better than a gang. We can’t use the special forces team for something like this, especially when they weren’t killed unjustly and they were trying to secure an informant.”

Seok Kang-Ho looked at his leftover pork cutlets with a stiff expression.

The fact that he didn’t finish his meal said a lot about how he was feeling at the moment.

Kang Chan recalled the battle in Africa where they lost a rookie. If Daye hadn’t stopped him then, he would’ve killed the guy acting sarcastic for sure.

Seok Kang-Ho probably felt so frustrated that he couldn’t breathe. He likely wanted to destroy the organization that killed Um Ji-Hwan, too.

“Fuck!”

The interpreter, who was whispering his interpretations to Gérard, looked at the pork cutlets with a surprised face.

“Well, just this once,” Kang Chan said.

Seok Kang-Ho looked up in surprise. After listening to the interpreter, Gérard grinned.

He continued, “The battle with the UIS is not related to it. According to the information they gathered at the cost of Ji-Hwan’s life, they’re rebel forces, not militias.”

Kang Chan had experienced this all too well in Africa.

He knew how dangerous and brutal rebels could be, especially those who claimed to lead tribes and those trying to set up new governments.

Seok Kang-Ho and Gérard didn’t need him to tell them that.

“Steel your resolve. Make sure Ji-Hwan’s sacrifice doesn’t cost you the lives of the Jeungpyeong special forces team I was thinking of entrusting to you.”

“I understand.”

Kang Chan smiled at Seok Kang-Ho’s uncharacteristically serious tone.

Due to the atmosphere, they ended dinner without finishing their meals.

“Clean everything up, then let’s have some coffee.”

As Kang Chan suggested, they all stood up and cleared the table. In the meantime, Seok Kang-Ho went to the corner and made some instant coffee.

Since they had eaten and were making coffee, they craved a smoke too.

Gérard, who was still at the table, offered Kang Chan a cigarette. The two smoked first.

“It’s my first time seeing Daye like that.”

Kang Chan nodded.

It was probably difficult. Gérard had suffered from this as well. He even considered retiring because of it.

Seok Kang-Ho walked to the table, holding the tips of two paper cups overlapping between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand, and one in his left.

He could have used a tray or something else to support them. Kang Chan wondered if Seok Kang-Ho was doing that because it was more comfortable for him.

Anyhow, coffee was served.

The three sat at the table and wordlessly drank coffee and smoked.

“When do you plan on leaving?” Kang Chan asked.

“I don’t know, maybe in about three days,” Gérard replied.

The interpreter, sensing the tension, kept his distance. Hence, Kang Chan relayed the conversation to Seok Kang-Ho.

“Stay alert and on your toes. Make sure you don’t miss anything until we leave.”

“Yes, sir. Anyway, I’ll be inside.” Gérard went to the room where the agents were.

Kang Chan extinguished his cigarette and glanced at Seok Kang-Ho.

At a time like this, it was better to just leave him alone than offer clumsy consolation.

They stared out the window quietly, just as Kang Chan had done with Gérard a few days ago.

About an hour or so passed.

Kang Chan picked up his phone and looked for a number before pressing the call button.

- Hello?

“President Kim, it’s Kang Chan.”

- Ah! Things must be busy over there. How’s the situation?

“There’s a lot to do. What about Mongolia?”

- It’s the same here. What’s going on?

“I’d like to speak with Director Kang. Is he there?”

- Just a minute.

Soon, Kang Chul-Gyu spoke into the phone.

-Hello?

“It’s me.”

After Kang Chan replied, Kang Chul-Gyu kept an awkward silence. They hadn't gotten to know each other well enough to ask for greetings yet, so Kang Chan was honestly more comfortable with this than having a casual conversation.

“We're planning to attack the UIS headquarters in Afghanistan. We estimate their numbers to be around one thousand two hundred. From what we've heard, they're trying to form a new government, but I think there's more to it.”

A silence different from before fell over the phone.

It was interesting. One could sense the other person's emotions through their inaudible breathing.

“They've got about sixty snipers, most of them from special forces units. We don't know how many civilians are among them.”

- What's the objective?

“Eliminate their entire leadership.”

Kang Chul-Gyu's steady breathing followed.

- What about our side?

“Thirty each from the Jeungpyeong special forces, NIS counter-terrorism team, 606, Spetsnaz, White Wolves, and GSG-9.”

- If we go, who's going to keep this place safe?

Showing his experience, Kang Chul-Gyu only asked the necessary questions.

“China and Russia have agreed to cover the area for the time being, but it won't hurt to leave some basic security.”

- If that's the case, including me...

Kang Chul-Gyu trailed off, seemingly doing a head count.

- There will be twenty of us. How will we get there?

“I'll contact you as soon as we have a location and transportation. We'll definitely be leaving in the next three days, though.”

- I see.

The call ended.

Kang Chan set the phone down. Leaving Seok Kang-Ho at the table, he turned to the whiteboard.

They had done all preparations.

At the cost of his life, Um Ji-Hwan had fulfilled his mission.

While the interpreter, who had come from the inner room, input new information on the map, Kang Chan stared at it, unmoving.

After just one undoubtedly rough night, Seok Kang-Ho was back to his old self.

Choi Jong-Il and the interpreter looked relieved, but Kang Chan and Gérard didn't mention anything.

The hurt of losing someone close to one's heart never went away.

Seok Kang-Ho wasn't over it.

Just like how Kang Chan and Gérard had acted in Africa, he was forcing himself to be his usual self because he was afraid that his emotions would hurt the other members of the team.

"Be safe out there," Seok Kang-Ho said when Kang Chan stood up.

Kang Chan gave him a wave and left the office.

After stopping in Samseong-Dong, Kang Chan and Kim Hyung-Jung headed straight to the NIS headquarters in Naegok-Dong.

They arrived about ten minutes before ten. Nevertheless, the entire group was already waiting in the underground conference room.

Soon after entering the room, Kim Hyung-Jung introduced Kang Chan to the two majors in Air Force uniforms. "Assistant Director, this is Park Seung-yong and Major Lee Ki-Do of the Air Force Operations Command. Majors, this is NIS Assistant Director Kang Chan."

The introductions after that were simple and easy. Kang Chan already knew Cha Dong-Gyun, and he had already gone on operations with Kang Myung-Gu, the commander of the counter-terrorism team, and Jeong Won-Min of the 606.

"Please take a seat," Kim Hyung-Jung said.

They all sat down comfortably.

Once Kang Chan was seated, Kim Hyung-Jung plugged in a USB to his laptop. He then waited for the beam projector on the ceiling to start up and then turned off the lights.

A map appeared on the screen in the room.

"This is a map of Afghanistan," Kang Chan said.

Everyone looked at the map.

"There is an estimated one thousand two hundred UIS in the Rukha district. We plan to kill the entire UIS leadership responsible for the attack on the International Building and the raid on our base in Mongolia."

The two majors glanced at Kang Chan and looked back at the screen. More information popped up, each accompanied by an explanation from Kang Chan.

After about half an hour, the briefing was over, and the lights were turned back on.

"Assistant Director Kang, there are many constraints on our fighter jets' ability to bomb the target. Have you considered that?" Park Seung-yong asked.

“The US will be handling cooperation with neighboring countries, the UN, and any aerial refueling needed between trips. We have also arranged for the fighter jets to be stationed at a nearby Chinese air base.”

“North Korea could provoke us.”

“China and Russia will take care of that.”

Park Seung-yong glanced at Lee Ki-Do and turned back to Kang Chan. He seemed to be doubtful of the plan, but he didn't ask any further questions.

“There are many variables. Even so, we will leave in three days. Please keep this information classified. I'm telling you all of this in advance because I'd like for you to choose the soldiers to deploy in advance.”

A moment of silence permeated the room.

Afterward, Park Seung-yong and Lee Ki-do asked a few more questions before standing up. They both said their farewells and were led out by Kim Hyung-Jung.

Kang Chan sat back down with the others. “Let's have a cup of coffee before leaving. Some cigarettes, too.”

He took out a pack and handed one to each of the men before flicking on the lighter.

As expected, a whirlwind of cigarette smoke was sucked into the ceiling vent.

This was Kang Chan's first time seeing Jeong Won-min and Kang Myung-Gu's faces.

At the International Building, he only saw them with their masks on. They parted ways right after the operation.

“The enemies have sixty special forces snipers. Also...”

Kang Chan told them about his agreement with the US special forces.

“How many will be selected?”

“Thirty per team.”

Cha Dong-Gyun, Jeong Won-min, and Kang Myung-Gu nodded.

“This is by no means easy. The enemy's numbers, the snipers, the terrain... everything is against us. However, if we let those responsible for the terrorist attacks on our country go, we will continue to face attacks in the future.”

Just as Kang Chan finished, Kim Hyung-Jung returned.

A few questions and answers were exchanged, but it didn't last too long.

Kang Chan left the conference room and went to Samseong-Dong with Kim Hyung-Jung. They had a lot of things to prepare and pack.

Returning to the office way after lunch, Kang Chan called for Seok Kang-Ho first.

“What is it?”

“Take this.”

Kang Chan pulled an envelope out of his inside pocket and placed it on the table.

Raising his gaze from the envelope, Seok Kang-Ho asked, “What is this?”

“It’s Ji-Hwan’s mother’s address and some money. The death notice was sent this morning. You should go and console her.”

Seok Kang-Ho swallowed, unable to speak.

“She’s an elderly woman who lives alone. Now that she has lost her son, she may have lost interest in living, too. For Ji-Hwan’s sake, go and give her the strength to live.

A stiff silence followed.

“If you’re not confident, you don’t have to go.”

“I’ll go.”

Seemingly having made up his mind, Seok Kang-Ho picked up the envelope.

“We’ll be departing the morning after tomorrow.”

“Got it.”

“Daye.”

“Yes,” Seok Kang-Ho responded with a heavy expression.

“It’s gonna be a hard battle. I need someone to lead the Jeungpyeong special forces team... I need the Seok Kang-Ho I know. I’m sure that’s what Ji-Hwan would have wanted too.”

“Captain,” Seok Kang-Ho called. When Kang Chan gazed at him, he added, “Thank you.”

“There’s a team of bodyguards waiting for you in the basement. Make sure you stick with them.”

Seok Kang-Ho stood up and grabbed his jacket. On his way to the door, he paused.

Right before he left, he bowed down toward the table.

Fuck. His heart must be breaking apart.

Kang Chan took out a cigarette and put it in his mouth.

Pork belly, some wrapped vegetables, long cucumbers, red peppers, garlic, sour kimchi, gochujang, brown doenjang, and rice.

While Cha Seung-Ho and Cha Seong-Ho busily moved their chopsticks, Han Kyung-Mi quickly picked up a piece of meat.

“You should eat too instead of just cooking,” she said as she put the meat in Cha Dong-Gyun’s mouth.

“You eat first. I’ll eat after grilling this.”

Hissss. Hiss.

Cha Dong-Gyun put more meat on the grill. Unfortunately, the grill was too small to handle both the children’s stomachs.

“How long will this training take?” Han Kyung-Mi casually asked, but there was a hint of anxiety on her face.

After seeing the hostage rescue situation in Afghanistan and the news broadcast about the terrorist attack on the International Building, she became more fearful.

“I don’t know either. Here, eat this.”

Han Kyung-Mi ate the piece of meat that Cha Dong-Gyun handed to him with the tongs.

“Honey.”

“Hm?”

Cha Dong-Gyun put the cooked meat on the children’s plates and raised his gaze.

“Should we have another kid?”

“Why? I thought you were firmly against it since it could be another boy.”

“I just... I thought that would be the only way to make sure you come back safely from training...” Han Kyung-Mi trailed off.

“Why are you making the kids feel anxious? It’s okay. Go on and eat, boys,” Cha Dong-Gyun reassured them.

“Mom.”

Cha Seung-Ho picked up a slice of meat on his plate with his chopsticks and placed it on top of Han Kyung-Mi’s rice bowl.

“Look. The kids are doing better than you.”

“That’s only because you’re here! They never listen to me when you’re away!” Han Kyung-Mi retorted with a bright expression, clearly trying her best to keep her emotions in check. Cha Dong-Gyun smiled. He was grateful to have her as his wife.

Hissss. Hiss. Hissss.

“Honey.”

“What?”

“Let’s have a third child when you come back from this training.”

Cha Dong-Gyun looked at Han Kyung-Mi mischievously. “Are you serious?”

“Of course! Just come back safely. We’ll have a third, fourth... maybe even more.”

Cha Dong-Gyun chuckled in disbelief. “You boys heard, didn’t you? Mom says she’s going to make you a little brother.”

“Dad! The meat’s burning!”

“Huh? Oh. That’s not good.”

Cha Dong-Gyu flipped the pork belly. Han Kyung-Mi gazed at him pitifully.

Kang Chul-Gyu, who had just received another call from Kang Chan, put the phone down.

“Did you get a departure date?” Kim Tae-Jin asked. Kang Chul-Gyu nodded.

“The helicopter will pick us up tomorrow afternoon.”

He glanced at his watch.

“Sir, please let me go this time,” Kim Tae-Jin solemnly requested.

“I’ve already picked the twenty people who’ll be going. You’re the only one who can take care of this place while we’re gone anyway. Also, the assistant director requested two people in particular.”

The situation left them with no other choice. Aware of that, Kim Tae-Jin didn’t insist any further.

“I’m sure you’ll do a good job, but be extra careful not to let the Mongolian border guards and construction workers get any ideas.”

“Yes, sir.”

Kang Chul-Gyu smiled. “This reminds me of the old days.”

“I really wanted to follow you out back then, sir.”

“I wanted to take you too.”

“Really?”

Kang Chul-Gyu nodded.

“Then why did you leave me behind?”

“It was just the circumstances. Also, Dae-Geuk, your senior, was quite insistent.”

Kim Tae-Jin broke into laughter.

“Tae-Jin.” Kang Chul-Gyu called. He said his name the same way he had done in the past.

“Sir.”

“Thank you for letting me experience this kind of day again.”

Kim Tae-Jin awkwardly scratched his forehead. “I don’t deserve such praise. I haven’t done anything to earn it.”

Kang Chul-Gyu exhaled quietly.