

## **The Tower 177**

### Chapter 177

Explorations spanned the vast 17,700 km<sup>2</sup> Putorana Plateau in Russia, led by challengers and Task Forces from various countries. The Russian Association's Base Transceiver Station had detected a massive energy signature in the vast mountainous region at specific coordinates, which helped them locate Reverse's headquarters.

The Putorana Plateau had faced sudden abnormal climate changes a few years ago, transforming it into a snowy region year-round. Task Forces struggled to locate enemy positions amid the constant snowfall, making the operation more challenging.

"It's completely dead. It's not working at all." Baek Kang-Woo, part of the Korean Task Force, checked his communication device, clenching his teeth.

Kim Kang-Won, the commander of the Army Special Operations Forces Challenger Unit of ROK-SWCG (Republic Of Korea-Special Warfare Challenger Group), instructed his unit members and immediately checked the walkie-talkie.

- This is Eagle, requesting transmission confirmation.

- This is White Tiger, confirmed.

Kim Kang-Won's facial expression, which had been stiff, eased a bit upon hearing the immediate response. Although all external communications were down, the walkie-talkies still worked at their specific frequency. Putting on his goggles to secure visibility, he braced himself against the raging snowstorm.

"Enemies spotted," said Kim Kang-Won.

Though they were dressed in white and not clearly visible, he could definitely notice some movements.

"Let's close in," said Kim Kang-Won.

Their feet sank deep into the snow-covered ground. Their Health Points decreased rapidly, and fatigue accumulated. Despite the harsh conditions, the members of SWCG, consisting entirely of challengers, moved swiftly. Baek Kang-Woo and the other challengers were no exception. They swiftly approached the enemy positions and stormed into them all at once.

Babababam—!

The heated bullets pierced the enemies' hearts, and Baek Kang-Woo's sword slit a few enemies' throats. Sadly, there were no challengers among the fallen, only civilians. However, they couldn't hesitate to kill them, as they were enemies still.

- Kill them immediately if you see them. They have grenades.

The grenades could destroy everything within a 10-meter radius. Unless they were a safe distance away or neutralized by skilled individuals like Baek Kang-Woo or Kim Kang-Won, they could cause significant damage.

"There's an underground entrance over there," Kim Kang-Won said.

Having subdued all the enemies, they discovered a staircase leading underground and entered slowly.

"Check the front and back carefully," said Kim Kang-Won.

While the outside was covered in white snow, the inside was filled with darkness. Soon, flashlights and red laser dots crowded the ground and the walls.

"Halt," Kim Kang-Won said.

The walls were slick with blood. Kim Kang-Won touched the blood with his finger.

'The blood froze due to the cold.'

He shone the light on the floor and noticed the marks of something being dragged.

'Looks like something hard was dragged...'

"It's human blood."

"It seems like someone was attacked here. They collapsed, and the cold did the rest. Their corpse was dragged away after," said Kim Kang-Won.

Kim Kang-Won shone the light further down the corridor. The passage seemed endless as the light failed to reach the other end of the corridor.

"We're going in," said Kim Kang-Won.

The bright red blood stains grew darker, appearing everywhere. Despite walking for a while, they failed to find anything in this labyrinth-like underground base. Kim Kang-Won continuously changed the communication frequencies to check the positions of the Task Forces from other countries. Even the Task Forces from other countries, a considerable distance from them, had also entered the underground base.

'The scale of this underground base exceeds imagination.'

As they walked, Kim Kang-Won felt an increasing sense of unease. His instincts told him that they shouldn't spend too much time here.

"Let's pick up the pace," said Kim Kang-Won.

While moving swiftly forward, Baek Kang-Woo raised his hand.

"Stop, everyone. What's the matter?" Kim Kang-Won asked, looking at Baek Kang-Woo.

"I hear a kid crying. Somewhere inside," said Baek Kang-Woo.

Baek Kang-Woo had a sensitive hearing, so he quickly moved toward the sound's origin. The room was enclosed in iron bars. Kim Kang-Won and Baek Kang-Woo locked eyes and nodded.

"We're going in," said Kim Kang-Won.

Bam!

Baek Kang-Woo smashed the doorknob with his fist and entered while his teammates guarded the rear. The inside of this prison cell-like room was larger than expected, and it had another, smaller iron cage. Inside it was a boy lying on the floor on the verge of dying. When Baek Kang-Woo tried to approach the boy, Kim Kang-Won stopped him.

Clang—

He aimed the muzzle of his loaded gun at the boy's head.

"Get out and stay outside with the rest of the group," said Kim Kang-Won.

"But he's not wearing anything! Besides, he has no weapons," said Baek Kang-Woo.

The boy, indeed, seemed defenseless. Besides, it seemed like the boy had gone through abuse. However, Kim Kang-Won had witnessed too many of Reverse's atrocities. Therefore, his intuition told him to kill the boy right away.

"Can you speak, child?" When Kim Kang-Won asked the boy in Russian, the boy nodded slowly.

"S-save... me..." drawled the boy.

Kim Kang-Won hesitated to pull the trigger at the boy's plea.

"Please... Please save me..." said the boy.

'That's right. There's nothing this child can do...'

Clenching his lips, Kim Kang-Won lowered the gun.

"All right," Kim Kang-Won muttered.

Looking at the boy and Kim Kang-Won from the side, Baek Kang-Woo sighed in relief and gestured to Kim Kang-Won, asking whether it was okay to approach him. Kim Kang-Won nodded and allowed him.

"Tell them we will rescue the trapped child," said Kim Kang-Won.

"Understood," Baek Kang-Woo replied.

Pizz—

- This is Eagle. We're rescuing a child who was trapped.

-This is White Tiger. We are also reducing a trapped—

Baaam!

They heard an abrupt explosion through the walkie-talkie. A startled team member looked at Kim Kang-Won and Baek Kang-Woo. In the meantime, Baek Kang-Woo had entered the iron cage and covered the child with a coat. As if synced with that explosion, the boy's stomach turned red.

'Oh no...!'

As the skin on the boy's stomach split, flames erupted.

"Get out of there immediately—."

Kwaahhhhh—!

That team member's words couldn't travel far before flames engulfed the room.

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"Everything is set now. But, there might be unexpected variables that I'm not aware of... Well, honestly, this is my first time directly connecting dimensions, so who knows?" Sevrino's words sounded discouraging, but his face was full of confidence and curiosity.

"Don't worry. It might be interesting in its own way, don't you think?" Pleta asked.

"What do you mean, interesting? Anyway, can we use it now?" Cain asked.

"Yes, you can give it a try. Since it hasn't been that long since Lee Shin entered, you guys might be able to meet him there," Sevrino said.

"Let's get going, Leader! It would be fun to ask Mr. Lee Shin to take us on an Earth tour, wouldn't it?" Pleta seemed very excited.

"Don't get too excited," said Cain.

Cain seemed lost in thought for a while before he looked at Laurent.

"I just remembered that Lee Shin asked me to watch over this place. I also have my business here..." Cain muttered.

"You worry too much. Go ahead. I'll take care of it," Laurent replied.

Satisfied with Laurent's words, Cain turned and headed toward the gate.

"Then, off I go," said Cain.

"Oh, why don't you two hold hands before you go, just in case you get separated..." Sevrino said.

Cain and Pleta, with determined looks, held each other's hands and entered the Dimension Gate. The background flashed white, and a snowy white plain appeared before them. The two frowned at the pouring snowflakes.

"Wasn't the weather here supposed to be good?" Pleta asked Cain.

"I can't even see the Dimension Gate," said Cain nervously.

Pleta quickly looked around, opened her mouth wide in a panic, and stared blankly at Cain.

"Oh my gosh... That's right. Did we end up somewhere not on Earth?" Pleta asked.

"We can't be sure of that yet. Let's first look around," Cain replied calmly.

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Crack— Bam!

The ice barrier blocking one side of the area shattered into pieces and fell off. The SWCG members huddled on the other side of the barrier and sighed in relief.

"Are you all right?" Kim Kang-Won asked.

Baek Kang-Woo nodded.

"Thank you, Sir," said Baek Kang-Woo.

Baek Kang-Woo had sensed the danger, and seconds before the explosion, he had swiftly moved back. Kim Kang-Won used his ability to create an ice barrier and protect them from harm. Both now wore grim expressions, weary of Reverse's vicious acts.

"How could they put a bomb inside a child..." Baek Kang-Woo muttered.

"These guys are really insane," said Kim Kang-Won.

"What on earth are they hiding? We didn't even detect the bomb," Baek Kang-Woo asked.

"How about that other location? Are they all right?" Kim Kang-Won asked.

"Yes, there was some damage there too, but they safely got through it," Baek Kang-Woo replied.

"We need to be more careful," Kim Kang-Won replied.

The Korean Task Force resumed their advance. The underground base's size surpassed expectations, and its twisted maze-like interior made advance recon difficult. After establishing communication, they learned that the other Task Forces were also exploring places in detail, but there seemed to be no progress.

'Damn it. Are we in the wrong place?'

No matter how much they searched, they failed to even find a trace of the kidnapped challengers. Moreover, it looked like this place was abandoned long ago.



Pizz— Pizz—

- Alpha team, there is a laboratory here. We are going to enter.

They heard a transmission from the American Task Force.

‘A laboratory...?’

Kim Kang-Won and the group didn’t stop advancing; soon, their walkie-talkie beeped again.

- Damn it! It's a trap! The test subject is moving. That guy just broke the mana suppressor by force and is fleeing right now!

Pizz—

- The test subject has white hair and brown eyes. He took our sword and is using it. From now on, he is our designated target. The target is... a black shadow... Argh!"

Pizz— Pizz—

Kim Kang-Won urgently tried to communicate back, but there was no response from the American Task Force.

"Hmmm... A black shadow..." Kim Kang-Won muttered.

The members of the Korean Task Force seemed very nervous now.

"Could it be Yu-Min Hyung...?"

"Didn't that challenger have black hair?"

"Well, that's how it was before the disappearance."

"Let's just quickly join them inside, just in case."

"Yes, Sir."

The Korean Task Force rushed inward as fast as they could, and they could feel the vibrations more clearly as they went further. The test subject was seemingly fighting the entire Task Force alone.

"I can hear people screaming."

"We're very close."

"Prepare for combat."

The noise and screams soon subsided in the darkness, leaving only silence. When one of the members gulped and loaded his gun, everyone could hear it. The fear that the enemy might respond to this sound and rush in made their hearts beat like a drum.

"Prepare the mana-suppressing barrier. And take out the big KM-6 sniper rifle," Kim Kang-Won ordered in a whisper.

One of the members quickly took out the KM-6 sniper rifle from the Subspace Pocket and quickly prepared for sniping.

"He is at the end of this corridor," said Kim Kang-Won.

Kim Kang-Won and Baek Kang-Woo took small steps to move forward.

'He must be aware of our presence. If he really is Cha Yu-Min, a narrow space would be more dangerous for us... In that case, we should activate the mana-suppressing barrier and retreat right away.'

'If he is really Yu-Min Hyung... would I be able to defeat him?'

Kim Kang-Won and Baek Kang-Woo organized their complicated thoughts and kept their gazes fixed ahead. Kim Kang-Won aimed his rifle toward the end of the long corridor.

"On three, I will shoot," said Kim Kang-Won.

"Yes, Sir," Baek Kang-Woo replied.

Gulp.

After Kim Kang-Won gulped, he slowly started counting.

"One," said Kim Kang-Won.

Baek Kang-Woo held a sword in each hand; he tightened his grip on them and glared ahead.

"Two," said Kim Kang-Won.

Slowly, he pulled back the trigger. A black shadow suddenly rushed toward them from the darkness.

"Three," said Kim Kang-Won.

Bang— Bang— Bang!

The shadow seemed like a part of the darkness, and the bullets seemingly hit the air. As the bullets struck the shadow, frost formed over the shadow, slightly slowing it down.

"Shoot!" Kim Kang-Won ordered.

Bang—!

The 30mm mana-piercing bullet accurately hit the shadow.

Baaam—!

It seemed like a solid hit because flames had erupted, and the shadow had been pushed back.

"Yes, we got h—" Kim Kang-Won said.

He couldn't finish the sentence because a shadow spike had burst out from the ground, piercing the gunner's rifle and shoulder before disappearing.

"Park Ha-Jin! Are you all right?" Kim Kang-Won asked in shock.

"Yes, I'm all right, Sir!" Park Ha-Jin replied.

"Damn it! Get up right now and activate the mana-suppressing barrier!" Kim Kang-Won shouted.

The black sword strikes kept coming from the front. Baek Kang-Woo barely blocked them and entered the barrier.

"It's activating!" Baek Kang-Woo shouted.

The mana-suppressing barrier was now active. The shadow tried to barge in, but the barrier blocked it, and the task force members retreated in peace.

"Where are we going?" Baek Kang-Woo asked.

"We're heading to the large common area we passed by earlier. We're going to break through the ceiling there," said Kim Kang-Won.

This place was overflowing with darkness; it was a battlefield of the enemy's choosing. It wasn't suitable for Kim Kang-Won and the Task Force to fight here.

"Request support to come to that location! We need to attack him at once. Otherwise, he will pick us off one by one," said Kim Kang-Won.

"Yes, Sir!"

"By the way, is that really Cha Yu-Min?" Kim Kang-Won asked.

Baek Kang-Woo used to be Yu-Min's comrade, so Kim Kang-Won thought he would know.

"Well, I think so... The shadow physically seems like Yu-Min Hyung," Baek Kang-Woo replied.