

# Chapter 9

[Sender: The Guide]

[1. Escape from the assembly hall and arrive at the second floor waiting area of the main school building before the time runs out.]

[2. Remaining time: 03:59:38]

*KWANG!!*

The door seemed to almost break as the fierce pounding continued, and it issued a harsh metallic protest. No, it was better to describe that the door would break, very soon.

*KWANG, KWANG!!*

Even seeing with naked eyes, it was difficult to believe that this was really happening; the thick metal door was struck only twice, yet it caved in as if it was made up of paper. Several thick metal hinges were hanging dangerously loose, ready to fall at the slightest impact.

“W– we need to block that!!”

Rather than shouting, it was more like everyone fell into a frenzy.

The movements of humans when their lives were under threat were remarkably swift. Yi Seol-Ah picking up her chair and running towards the door signaled the beginning; dozens of bodies all rushed to the door.

Someone brought along unoccupied chairs, someone climbed up the stage to see if there was anything useful up there, while the rest simply used their bodies to push against the door.

“Kkheuk!”

The noisy, consecutive pounding on the door seemed to contain a certain amount of anger, and the force from the resulting impact managed to knock four, five guys away as if they weighed nothing.

“Move out of the way!”

Just in time, a group had brought down the pulpit from the stage and jammed it against the door. Although that alone wouldn't be enough to completely block the door, it was still better than nothing.

Chairs got piled up alongside the pulpit in the blink of an eye. On top of that, twenty-odd men propped the door up with everything they had. Soon, the door no longer looked like it'd break down. And, after a man placed a chair below the door handle like an improvised doorstop, the crowd began sighing out in genuine relief.

“Haa...”

Yi Seol-Ah stopped propping the door with her back and squatted down on the floor as if she was feeling dizzy.

Perhaps the sight of a young frail girl fighting desperately looked pitiful to him, as a middle-aged man spoke to her while wiping the sweat off his brows.

“You're very quick-witted for someone who is so young.”

He was speaking about her making the move first. People who acted after she had made hers nodded their heads in agreement. If it weren't for Yi Seol-Ah's quick actions, the door might have broken down by now.

Yi Seol-Ah didn't know how to respond and shyly lowered her gaze.

“No, it wasn't like that...”

“I froze up from the fear myself. But boy, was I shocked or what watching you react like that. When I realized, heh, I was also moving, you see.”

“Everyone did their best to help. I wouldn't have been able to block the doorway by myself.”

Yi Seol-Ah's embarrassed appearance helped to alleviate some of the tense atmosphere permeating within the assembly hall. Her gentle personality really did suit that bright and pretty appearance perfectly. Also, the fact that she was an Invited, as well as the first person to respond, were enough for the group to develop a favorable impression towards her.

Unfortunately, the event that happened just now was far too shocking to instill a warm and cordial atmosphere.

“So, what should we do next, then?”

Someone's resigned sigh-like muttering brought everyone back to reality. Some turned their expectant eyes towards Yi Seol-Ah's direction, but

even she was at a loss.

Soon, the collective gazes of the Contracted were focusing on the Invited.

Once the chaos had died down, Seol turned his attention back to his phone. Besides the message from the Guide, he had received two more. One of them happened to be the 'diary of an unknown student', his so-called bonus item.

[Sender: Unknown]

[#Assembly Hall (an excerpt from the Diary of an Unknown Student, page 2.)]

*....There was only one door in and out of the assembly hall. We did somehow block it up, but at the same time, we also ended up blocking our only way out.*

*Before long, the outside became quiet.*

*Sadly, my classmates were divided into two groups.*

*One group wanted to wait and see for a while longer, while the other group wanted to go outside to take a look...*

*By the time the infighting became heated, we forgot about the existence outside the walls.*

*....Soon, we all got to learn that 'that thing' was not a simple monster or a zombie.*

[#Assembly Hall (an excerpt from the Diary of an Unknown Student, page 3)]

*It was a total pandemonium. No other words could describe it.*

*The door we had desperately blocked became useless.*

*....During the chaos, I was able to somehow discover the 'hole'.*

'Hole?'

Seol was paying attention to the last line. But by the time he raised his head, the group of Contracted had somehow inched closer to his general location, almost managing to surround him.

“Wowzers. It's just the beginning, yet they aren't messing around. Look at the goosebumps on my arms!”

Kang Seok was busy rubbing his arm, but he seemed to have more than enough leeway as he spoke those words.

“Now that the door is all blocked up, I wonder what we should do next...”

His words and attitude raised hopes in the hearts of the Contracted that a quick solution to their problems would be found soon. However...

“Let's go. Let's just poke around here and there, see what's what.”

Kang Seok only took his lackeys, Yi Hyungsik and Jeong Minwoo, along with him, prompting those waiting for an answer to their prayers to be dumbstruck instead.

The bespectacled middle-aged man wearing a worn-out business suit — the man who praised Yi Seol-Ah earlier — hurriedly stepped in front of them.

“E— excuse me.”

“Hey, Hyungsik, check out the back of the stage. And Minwoo, you should...”

“Excuse me, young man!”

“...What, me?”

Kang Seok's reply arrived some breaths later.

The middle-aged man couldn't be sure if he made a mistake or not, but he felt that Kang Seok did that deliberately.

“What are you all trying to do?”

“Uh... Searching around the assembly hall?”

“Around the assembly hall?”

“Yeah. Like those guys.”

Kang Seok pointed towards the stage, where Yun Seora and the man named Hyun Sangmin — the man with the green baseball cap — were busy searching around, their heads turning this way and that while doing so.

“To find what, exactly?”

“Not really sure. Now that the exit is all blocked up, I guess we gotta find something, right? We don't know what might happen next, anyways.”

“Right, right. That's right. Of course.”

The middle-aged man nodded his head quite enthusiastically, necessitating him to catch the falling glasses and put it back on his nose.

“So, you want us to help as well?”

“Eh?”

Kang Seok frowned slightly.

“Why are you... Do what you want, mister. It's not like I'm the boss here or anything.”

“That's true. But, you guys, well, how should I say this... Hmm. You guys are different from us, isn't that right?”

“Sure, we're different. So, what is it that you want to say?”

The tone of Kang Seok's voice remained curt. He even sounded quite similar to how the Guide sounded when talking to the Contracted.

“What I'm trying to say here is, we should help each other out. That's all.”

The middle-aged man ignored the hostile tone and pleaded his case, but all he got back instead, was a dismissive chuckle.

“I'll have to *politely* decline. It'll get very annoying with more people clinging on us, so I don't want to.”

“What do you mean, annoying?”

“Whatever. You take care of your own business, okay? The three of us, we will go our own way.”

Kang Seok refused the middle-aged man's offer without hesitation and turned around to leave. The middle-aged man shouted out, “Hey, wait a minute, young man!”, but Kang Seok didn't bother and kept on walking away.

“What a petty bastard.”

Kang Seok's steps came to an abrupt halt. He stared at the ceiling for a moment or two, spat out a long sigh, and turned his head to look at the source of that name-calling.

He found a woman sitting with her knees tucked under her staring at him with venomous eyes. It was Shin Sang-Ah.

“What did you call me?”

“You're a selfish bastard. You only care about your own neck.”

“What the hell... Hey, you're wrong about that, though? I care about these two fellas too, you know?”

Kang Seok wrapped his arms around the shoulders of his lackeys as an oily smile formed on his lips. Shin Sang-Ah's eyes became even more hostile.

“Oww, man. Look at how she glares! You might kill someone with such eyes, lady.”

“Hey, isn't she that dumb woman who threw a tantrum just now? You know, asking for a bag of her own and shit.”

Yi Hyungsik and Jeong Minwoo giggled hoarsely at her expense. Didn't the old saying go along the line of 'the sister-in-law trying to stop the mother-in-law is more hateful than the mother-in-law beating you up'?

“Can't you see these people over here? There are women and children here!”

“I can see just fine. I've got good eyes, you know.”

Shin Sang-Ah shouted at him in anger, but Kang Seok didn't even bat an eye.

“And, and you three.... just want to survive all by yourselves?”

“What do you expect us to do when we're also in a hurry?”

“That's why we said we'd help, didn't we!?”

"God, how can you be this dense? Hey, listen up. We don't need your measly help nor do we want it in the first place. Stop trying to lump us with useless baggage like you."

"Useless baggage!?"

"Yep. You are nothing more than baggage. Even a blind fool can see that you're trying to leech off of us. So, shoo, shoo. Go away."

Shin Sang-Ah became flabbergasted and her mouth gradually opened up in disbelief.

"You three.... are you even human beings?"

"Oh? Maybe you're all parasites, then?"

Kang Seok sarcastically retorted right until the end. Shin Sang-Ah couldn't hold her anger anymore and stood right up, getting ready to slap him. Kang Seok snorted derisively and retracted his arms from the shoulders of his lackeys.

And just as the volatile situation was about to blow up, a young girl hurriedly jumped in between the two parties and intervened. It was none other than Yi Seol-Ah.

"Please, both of you, stop!"

Shin Sang-Ah opened her mouth to say something, but must have thought that it was unwise because she simply turned her head away instead, and said nothing. But her clenched fists were trembling in rage. Meanwhile, Kang Seok simply shook his head in derision.

"It's barely enough to get through this even when we're working together, yet why are you two fighting like this?"

"Working together, my ass."

Kang Seok shot back with a shout.

"We three, we go way back. Even before we got here, you know? That's why we came here with a plan of our own."

"But!"

"But, but, but. Kiss my butt, instead. Hey, you're also an Invited, so you should've realized it by now, too."

Kang Seok smirked and offered his hand to Yi Seol-Ah.

"Let's stop bickering over this, okay? Seol-Ah, why don't you join up with us? Your brother's Sungjin, right? I'll take him under my wings, too."

"...Why are you willing to let us tag along with your group?"

"That's obvious, isn't it? Unlike them, you two are going to be very helpful for us."

"You're a very callous person, aren't you?"

Yi Seol-Ah's expression showed how disappointed she was, while her words slowly but powerlessly leaked out of her mouth.

"I thought you were a good person, too..."

Kang Seok shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly and raised his hand up high.

"Hey, man! What about you?"

The 'you' he was referring to was a certain youth standing there minding his own business a short distance away from them— Seol.

"Don't you want to get this stupid Tutorial over and done with as soon as possible? I'm sure we'll finish up real fast if you join us."

Although the whole situation had turned out into a strange farce, it really didn't matter in the end. Right now, even an idiot could figure out Seol's unknown worth.

After all, he was someone not even the Guide couldn't talk down to. He was, in other words, someone special.

"Please, help us!"

Even Yi Seol-Ah pleaded with him.

"Please, help these people! Don't abandon them, please!"

Seol couldn't help but feel like he was stuck in a rock and a hard place, what with being singled out like this.

On one side, Kang Seok and on the other, Yi Seol-Ah.

And on one side, the Invited, and the other, the Contracted.

One side talked about the reality of the situation, while the other tried to appeal to his emotions.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, when faced with such a choice, Seol instinctively activated his ability. The entirety of the assembly hall was bathed in a cacophony of colors.

'What the...?'

For a moment there, Seol mistakenly thought that he was sinking into a sea of blood.

And no, it turned out that he didn't make a mistake.

The colors of the blocked-up exit had changed from orange to green; instead, it was Kang Seok who was shining in orange now. There was no color shining from Yi Seol-Ah at the same time.

However, Seol couldn't afford to mind these changes in color at this moment. Why?

Because, the entire floor was dyed in the deep shade of red, that was why. It was as if he was looking at a sea of blood.

'...Immediate retreat recommended, wasn't it?'

....Just as Seol thought this, a loud alarm bell went off inside his head.

*Bump!*

Suddenly, the wooden floor of the assembly hall quaked upwards. The aged wooden floorboards began tearing up, pieces violently flying off one by one. People had to perform unsteady dances while trying to regain their lost balance as the floor rumbled.

“W– what the hell!?”

“An earthquake?”

That line of thought proved to be far too lackadaisical for the current situation.

It happened in the blink of an eye.

The floor exploded as if a bomb had gone off. And from between the gaps of flying bits of wood, a lengthy and rotting arm shot out. There were six hook-like things attached to the end of this arm.

The arm drew a short but sharp arc in the air and came down to the floor, before grabbing the hair of the totally dazed and stiffly standing Yi Seol-Ah, proceeding to drag her down the newly-created hole.

“Kyaaaak!!”

Yi Seol-Ah's head slammed into the floorboard with vengeance and bounced up, and like a golf ball rolling towards the flag hole, she got rapidly sucked into the gaping black hole on the wooden floor.

“Noonaaaa!!!”

Yi Sungjin pounced on the upside-down pair of legs kicking helplessly in the air.

“Heeeelp!!”

That cry sobered up everyone right away, and the crowd rushed in to grab hold of Yi Sungjin, as he too was getting dragged into the hole as well. As the ten-odd pairs of hands tugged and pulled and yanked, shoes flew away, and then, even loose socks came flying.

Amongst the hectic chaos, somehow some people managed to grab Yi Seol-Ah's flailing legs and ankles, and from there, a desperate tug of war unfolded.

“Hold on!! Don't let go!”

“Pull up!! I said, pull them up!!”

The whole place descended into pure, unbridled chaos. Cries and shouts were roared out; no one dared to hold back as they struggled hard.

Even with the combined strength of ten plus men, Yi Seol-Ah couldn't be pulled out of the hole. They were being roughly rocked from side to side due to the sheer force pulling down from below, causing many to lose their grips and crash to the floor.

“Euahahah!”

“Hey! Don't let go!”

It was then.

*KYAAAAAAAK!*

The scream was definitely from Yi Seol-Ah, yet the horrifying screeching tone made it seemingly impossible for a human to issue such a sound.

*Splash!*

And from the hole, red liquid exploded upwards. It was like seeing a blender stuffed full of tomatoes switching on but with its lid not closed, and then, crushed bits of flesh and juice were flying off everywhere.

The crimson blood rained down like a small fountain.

“Noona!! Noonaaaa!!”

Her legs that were kicking and twisting until now, suddenly went dead straight and still. All of her ten toes curled up simultaneously; her thighs trembled; and then, just like a puppet with its strings cut, her knees folded. A certain sickening sensation of something being cut was transmitted to the hands of everyone trying to pull her back out.

The pulling force from below was suddenly gone. Everyone fell back hard on their rear ends with loud thuds.

Among them, a man was rubbing his aching butt. And while frowning, he took a look at his hands.

He was still holding onto a slender ankle. Below that, a smooth, rather shapely leg. Even further below, a blue skirt soaked in blood.

Beyond that... he couldn't see any other connecting body parts. All he could see was some remains of crushed intestines and bits of mangled flesh.

“Aaa....”

He saw the shape of something human slowly rising up from the hole in the floorboards.

“Aaah....”

Its long, unkempt hair seemed to dance around unrestrained, caked with blood and bits of human flesh from top to bottom.

“Aaah, ah....”

Its head was at least four times the size of a grown adult man's head. And there was a single giant eye that took up almost half of that large head.

“Ah, ah, ahhhhaaaack!!”

The man couldn't hold it back any longer and screamed. He got up as quickly as he could and ran for his life. He didn't know where to, but as long as he could get as far away from that creature as humanly possible, he'd be fine with that.

Soon, pure chaos descended on the assembly hall. There was no other fitting description. People got utterly, completely terrified by the creature's grotesque appearance, and while screaming their heads off, they scattered everywhere.

'...My, my thoughts are...'

When Seol regained his own wits, he found himself running towards the blocked up door.

'Why...'

It should be normal to hear all that crazy chaos unfolding all around him, yet, the noise got progressively less and less prominent, fading into nothingness. Everything seemed to crawl down to slow motion as well.

Everything, even the man busy pulling and chucking away the chairs blocking the exit; even the nightmarish creature that had fully revealed itself from the hole, extending its long limbs like a spider and starting its assault on the fleeing crowd....

Every one of these little things, they were unfolding in slow motion for him to watch without missing anything.

'Why...'

He found it very difficult to breathe. Sweat drops falling on his eyes spread out like paint and blurred his vision.

'Why...'

How many would die here today? The footing was already slippery from the blood. And it had also gotten sticky.

His body became heavier and his running speed gradually slowed down. He even had to wonder if he was aimlessly flailing his arms and legs here. Everything was in a total mess.

In the end, Seol stopped running and stood still, even though the exit was only a few steps away.

Suddenly, the stuffed up breath exploded out. He could hear his own escaping breath; the cold wind blowing in from the now-wide open exit caused his own boiling, seething body to relax. His heart continued to pound away in his chest.

Seol was well aware how stupid and dangerous it was to ignore the warnings of immediate retreat. It wasn't too late to run away, even now. Yet....

'Why... am I so calm?'

The acrid air stung his nose, his body was burning up, and he felt dizzy. And then, the familiar sensation of vertigo assaulting him went away.

The dreamy haziness dissipated almost immediately, and the surrounding world became clear again. Seol slowly closed his eyes.

The monster was busy feasting on a corpse, but it stopped and abruptly turned its head around. It spun around in a manner akin to the second hand of a clock and found a single man standing near the exit of the hall. It ran towards the man on all fours.

*Kheehick?*

Seeing that the man wasn't budging an inch, it tilted its head in confusion and craned its neck. And like how a person might appraise a plate of food before eating it, the monster studied Seol with great interest.

The foreign, unknown matter brushed by his cheeks and the disgusting odor assaulted his senses.

It was a rather familiar feeling and a welcoming smell.

His sensory perception became incredibly sharp. Seol's closed eyes cracked open a sliver. In front of his nose, a huge black vertical slit of a pupil, with bloodshot whites surrounding it was waiting.

And when his gaze met with that eye brimming full with the desire to kill...

“.....”

A relaxed smile broke out on Seol's lips.

*Keeick!*

The monster hurriedly retracted its neck.

His eyes still narrowed to a slit, he lightly kicked up the broken leg of the chair lying near the exit.

Whether to confront it or to show his back to it; he already had his answer; the Seol of the dream told him.

He told Seol that a creature like this, it was nothing to him. He even asked Seol, *you've overcome even more dangerous situations than this, haven't you?*

....Even the Seol from before the gambling, before he had lost his ability, said the same thing; now was the time to bet everything.

He snatched the leg of the chair spinning in the air. For some reason, it just felt right in his grasp.

And, even though it wasn't a spear, he still held it like one and got into a stance.

And shortly after that, both of his eyes widened.

## Chapter 10

Just as Seol took a step forward while pointing the sharp, broken edge of the chair leg at the monster...

*Kiiiiik!*

It flinched and cowered. The monster quickly retracted its head and pressed its crawling body flat to the ground. And when his airborne first step finally came down to the floor, it retreated in a flash, its reaction speed as quick as a boar that got stung by a scorching skewer.

The sneakily retreating monster looked very confused as if it couldn't quite figure out why it was running away like this.

*Grrrr....*

When the monster accepted the fact that it was getting suppressed by Seol's aura, its phlegm gurgled loudly in its throat. Its instincts were screaming out danger warnings.

This human in front of its eyes was incomparable to everyone else. If it attacked this man, then it would die.

The monster had already filled its belly to some extent. Also, there were lots of other prey running loose outside. There was no reason for the monster to brave this danger in here.

As soon as the monster made this decision, it rapidly escaped through the open door. Truly, it possessed quick wits and just as quick reflexes.

*Tk.*

The broken leg of the chair slipped out of Seol's hand and fell. Seol looked around the assembly hall's empty interior with a somewhat dazed face. He looked totally deflated right now.

Not a long time had passed, yet he could spot well over ten corpses lying in a pool of blood. Eventually, the hole that the monster crawled out from caught his attention.

'It's the hole from the diary.'

So, that was it then. The hole from the diary was that one.

Seol took another glance at the hall's exit. There was some hesitation, but he still chose to cross the floor and cautiously peered over the edge, now dripping wet with blood. Then, he carefully lowered himself inside.

[The Diary of an Unknown Student has been updated.]

Seol arrived at the basement floor. He decided to walk forward, at least for the time being. He must have overused his powers a bit as his mind and body felt quite fatigued.

The corridor bent 90 degrees up front, and he eventually arrived at the part where it was lined with doors set at a regular interval on either side. It seemed that the school had used this underground floor as the space for club meetings and activities. Seol pushed open the door with a colorful banner proclaiming "Go, anywhere!"

The room beyond was small and intimate, only about ten or fifteen square meters wide. Checking the posters hanging on the walls, it seemed that this room belonged to a travel club.

Seol lowered the golden bag from his shoulder and sat down against the wall.

As he sat there like a man in a trance, his once-hazy consciousness seemed to return to him bit by bit. It was as if he was waking up from a long dream.

And, soon enough...

'What was I even thinking...?'

The previously forgotten terror and disgust came crashing in one after the other. The smell of blood that he had blocked out of his mind with the help from the adrenaline rush caused him to gag out reflexively. When he recalled the appearance of the so-called *weakling* monster, his entire body began to shiver in fear.

However, all of this only lasted for a short moment. When he slowly gathered his breath, the shivering and the shaking came to a stop. Feeling his heart settle down, Seol couldn't help but form a wry smile.

Was the demonic destroyer Seol of the dream the real him? Or was the man shivering in fear right now the real him?

It all felt like he was experiencing Zhuangzi's 'Butterfly Dream'. [\[1\]](#)

Seol gritted his teeth and focused his mind, trying to organize what had happened so far.

The first thing to figure out was the question regarding his eyes.

The evolved ability called 'Nine Eyes'.... This managed to give Seol quite a bit of mental shock. After all, he had been living under the assumption that seeing the green color was all his eyes were capable of.

'No, it wasn't that there were no other colors, I just couldn't see them.'

The newly-unlocked colors were yellow, orange, and red. Just as important, there were other colors yet to be unlocked.

Kang Seok was shown in yellow color, the so-called 'Attention Required'; yet there was no color for Yi Seol-Ah. That meant he couldn't see her color yet.



Thinking about that girl, his thoughts became rather complicated. Her pleading shouts for help still rang around in his head. If he hadn't taken his time making up his mind, could that good-hearted girl still be alive by now?

[Mister Kang Seok, Mister Yi Hyungsik, and Mister Jeong Minwoo have arrived at the second-floor waiting area.]

"They got there already?"

The sudden announcement helped clear out Seol's mind somewhat.

[#Basement first floor, the club room (excerpt from the Diary of an Unknown Student, page 5)]

*I've somehow managed to hide in the basement, but tears keep pouring out of my eyes. I can't stop crying.*

*I can't forget the screams of my friends dying right in front of me.*

*What kind of a monster was that? And why.... Oh, God. Please, help me....*

*I cried for so long. Eventually, my stomach grumbled in hunger.*

*I knew this wasn't the right time nor the place, but still, I'm so hungry....*

Seol read the diary carefully before discovering that there was a file attached to it as well. He must have missed it before as things had been quite hectic. When he clicked on the file and opened it, Seol's eyes widened in surprise.

'A map?'

The attached file was actually the blueprint-like map of the entire school grounds. When he clicked on the 'main building', that portion of the map expanded in size and Seol could easily check out the building's interior layout.

His gaze fell on a spot by the second floor. This particular room was in a rectangular shape, and there were six blue blinking icons located on, or near the edges and lines demarcating the walls. However, he saw one of them change to red color, before ceasing to blink altogether.

*Knock. Knock.*

Seol was trying to figure out what those blue blinking icons could mean when he heard the sounds of knocking on the door. Surprised, Seol turned around to look and found the door briefly being bathed in a green hue before the color vanished completely.

—...He's not in here either?

"Who's there?"

Seol's sharp voice stopped the noise on the outside from moving away.

—Whew, I finally found you. Hey man, can I come inside? Oh, right. I'm not trying to threaten you or anything, so please, relax.

"..."

—If you don't feel comfortable with me joining you, just say so. I will leave you alone in peace.

"...Come in."

The door slowly creaked open.

"Thanks! I was actually worried that you'd tell me to scram or something."

The man entering the club room while speaking in a jovial tone was one of the eight Invited people—the one who wore a green baseball cap over his slightly long hair; his softly tanned complexion was slightly covered by a pair of sunglasses.

"Man, I had to work hard just to find you. I mean, the bloody footsteps were getting faint, and there were so many of these rooms here too... Oh, right. You also want a smoke?"

The man put his bag down on the floor and raised a small fuss, before suddenly presenting Seol with a packet of cigarettes. Wordlessly, Seol fished out his own packet. He still had one cigarette left.

"You smoke a hybrid? I don't like them. I hate those weird flavors, man."

He then proceeded to light Seol's cigarette. Soon enough, the two men were staring at each other while blue smoke lazily drifted in between them.

The man slowly opened his mouth.

"Should we introduce each other? I'm Hyun Sangmin."

“...Seol.”

“Seol? Kind of a girly name, don't you think? Is it a single-syllable name?”

“How did you find me?”

Seol changed the topic. Hyun Sangmin didn't seem to mind. He simply flicked the fingers holding the cigarette.

“I saw you at the assembly hall, entering the hole in the floor.”

“You remained in the hall, too?”

“No, no. I also ran for the exit, you see. But I came back.... Huh, you were in there the whole time?”

Seol nodded his head silently. Seeing this reply, Hyun Sangmin simply scratched his head. He then quickly continued on with his explanation.

At the critical juncture between life and death, the crowd was able to remove the pulpit and the piled-up chairs to yank open the exit door. The escaping people then scattered everywhere. Some headed off towards the front gate of the school, but the majority followed Kang Seok and ran to the front entrance of the main school building.

However, they encountered a new problem: the entrance was locked.

“It wasn't like we didn't have any time on our hands, though. You see, that monster looked like it would chase us down right away, but for some reason, it didn't.”

Hyun Sangmin took a look at Seol for a short while and then carried on.

“But, no matter what we did, kicking, pushing, shoving... Whatever the fuck we did, the door didn't budge. And we were getting all damn anxious and everything. And to make matters worse, the monster showed up as well. I'm telling you, it was no damn joke back then.”

“So, what happened?”

“Dunno. I was trying to pick up a rock or something in the nearby flower garden to crack the windows open, but when I saw the monster, I took off, man. I took the long way around and came back to the assembly hall.”

Hyun Sangmin lowered his sunglasses and smirked slightly.

“Since it attacked there once already, I figured it wouldn't show up there again.”

“And you happened to see me, and then decided to follow me?”

“Yep. Never in my wildest imagination did I think you'd enter the hole. I was understandably hesitating on what to do. But, when I got down there, you were long gone. So, I've been looking for you until now.”

“Why?”

“What? You really don't know?”

Hyun Sangmin prattled on. Of course, Seol too could more or less figure out the reason.

“It's simple, really. I want to join you. That's why I searched for you... So? What do you think? You want to ride alone or with me in tow?”

“...”

“If you are willing to let others tag along, well, how about me? But, I'm telling you this right now, I'm not planning to leech off you or anything like that.”

When Seol remained silent, Hyun Sangmin became more anxious than before.

“Alright, let me say this out loud. I can endure unfairness, but I can't stand losing out.”

Seol stared back somewhat confused by this statement. Hyun Sangmin killed off his cigarette and sat up straight.

“Listen, man. What I'm proposing here isn't an equal partnership. No, it's more like a *vertical* relationship.”

“A vertical relationship?”

“That's right. You let me tag along, then I'm gonna carry out your orders. And yeah, I'm willing to take on some amount of danger for you if you ask me to.”

Hyun Sangmin's proposal was simple and easy enough to understand.

'It's fine to use me.'

'I'm a pretty useful guy, so believe me and utilize me.'

Seol could just about understand why this man was willing to go this far, in this manner.

It was all because of Seol's Gold Mark. There was also the possibility that Hyun Sangmin had figured something out back in the assembly hall.

However, Hyun Sangmin wasn't a selfless good samaritan. Obviously, he would want something in return.

"What do you want in return?"

"Well, lots of things, but... For now, surviving and making my way to Paradise. That should suffice."

Seol studied Hyun Sangmin for a while.

"If you're a lone wolf, I will respect that. I also don't want to force the issue. I told you this before, didn't I? You don't want me, then I'll quietly go away."

He spoke up to here and slowly offered his hand.

[Hyun Sangmin's Status]

[1. General Information]

Summoned date: March 16th, 2017

Marking grade: Bronze

Sex/Age: Male/26

Height/Weight: 176.2 cm/65.8 kg

Current condition: Healthy

Class: LV. 0 (Invited)

Nationality: Republic of Korea (Area 1)

Affiliation: N/A

Alias: N/A

[2. Traits]

1. Temperament:

—Self-centered (Only seeks out benefits for himself)

2. Aptitude:

—Extraordinary (Far more excellent than average)

—Discerning eye (Possesses great instincts at determining the value of objects and people)

To be perfectly honest, Seol wasn't feeling "it". If it was someone like Yi Seol-Ah, then he wouldn't even hesitate and say yes in a heartbeat, but for Hyun Sangmin... well, nothing really seemed to pull Seol's attention.

However, there was one point about Hyun Sangmin that was rather similar to that now-deceased girl.

'I can't see his color.'

If his color was yellow— 'Attention Required'— then Seol would have refused right away. But the fact that he was not able to see Hyun Sangmin's color really played on Seol's mind.

Thinking to himself that it wouldn't be so bad to wait and see, Seol grasped Hyun Sangmin's offered hand and shook it.

"Nice!"

Hyun Sangmin smiled brightly as if he was genuinely happy.

"Nice, very nice! Now, I'm also a member of the best team in the world!"

If left alone for any longer, he might have broken out in a song and a dance. Hyun Sangmin eventually stopped making a fuss and got closer to Seol.

"So, what are you going to do now? Mind telling me what your plans are?"

Seol fell into deep contemplation. Since he possessed a map, going to the second floor waiting area would be a walk in the park if he decided to head there right away. Although that monster was still roaming around, as long as he used his ability, they would be able to avoid any danger.

Out of the blue, Seol recalled Kim Hannah's words and nearly burst out in a fit of laughter. She was right. She indeed made it so much easier for

him already, so he'd better survive this event or else.

Seol grabbed his bag as he stood up. Hyun Sangmin stared at him without saying anything.

"For now, let's get out of here."

\*

The two of them left the club room and continued down the long corridor. The door at the end of the corridor led to the underground parking lot. Of course, they couldn't spot a single parked car there.

While they crossed the parking lot, Hyun Sangmin continued to yap on and on. He asked about what Seol got from his box, he got 500 survival points or something, he had no idea where to even spend that so it must have been garbage, etc, etc.

Meanwhile, Seol walked forward while checking the map every now and then.

When Seol didn't even reply once, Hyun Sangmin became somewhat embarrassed and hurriedly cleared his throat.

"So, where are we going? Are you looking for a staircase?"

"No."

"Eh? Aren't we supposed to go to the second floor?"

"Sure, we are."

Seol shook his head while looking at his phone's screen.

"However, there's no need for us to go there right away."

"How come? Isn't it better to get there as soon as possible?"

"As soon as possible? Were we told anything regarding the order of arrival dictating things?"

"That is...."

That was a no. The message simply stated that they had to arrive at the destination before the time ran out. And they had over three hours and thirty minutes remaining.

Seeing Hyun Sangmin continuously blink his eyes in confusion, Seol felt a need to explain himself a bit more.

"Think about it. How long do you think you will need to get to the second floor waiting area from the assembly hall?"

"Dunno. If you ran with everything you had.... less than a minute, maybe?"

"That's correct. This school's assembly hall is constructed pretty close to the main building."

The objective of the mission was far too easy. Even a normal, unprepared person would be able to clear it.

"Don't you think that's a little strange? Even if you were delayed, the whole trip wouldn't have taken more than five minutes."

"Isn't it because the door was locked?"

"A locked door could be broken into, and that would be it. And you heard that announcement from before, right? Those three must've succeeded somehow. In other words, clearing this mission wouldn't take that long of a time."

"Then what about the monster?"

"Even if you consider that variable, you wouldn't need more than one hour. Two hours, tops. Four hours for a minute's worth of distance is just too much."

Didn't the Guide Han say something similar before, too?

*....It's not like it's hard to get here....*

He did say that. Truthfully, ten minutes were more than enough for Seol to find and arrive at the assembly hall. In the end, Seol only needed around four minutes to make his entrance, so it was as if he was given twice the amount of time he might need in order to accomplish his task.

So, what Seol found odd was that the distance he needed to cover got shortened, yet the time limit grew by several folds. There had to be a reason for that—a reason for a four-hour-long time limit.

Hyun Sangmin wasn't a fool, either. As if he too had realized something, he stopped talking and began rubbing his chin.

"So, what you're saying is, although the mission itself is simple and easy, we have been given way too much time... Is that right?"

"Also, we've been told that this is just the first mission. Which means, there will be a second mission, a third mission, so on and so forth. And..."

Also, the fact that they were told to gather on the second floor and not anywhere higher... As they walked, Seol added more of his thoughts.

"In any case, the main point is, there isn't a real need to get there as soon as possible. It'll be fine for us to get there after procuring what we might need later on. There are multiple ways to get to the second floor, as well."

"And how do you know that?"

Seol showed him the phone's screen. Hyun Sangmin came closer to take a look and spat out a loud snort.

"What the... isn't this a map? But, I didn't receive one, though?"

"I got it as my bonus. Okay, this is where we are going."

Seol tapped on the screen, and the map of the basement floor expanded.

"This underground level is connected to the entire school premise. Below the assembly hall, there are the clubrooms. After we cross this parking lot, we will arrive at the main building's basement."

Seol soon stopped his steps. He then proceeded to open a glass door, which led the two to see what lay beyond. Hyun Sangmin couldn't help but shout out in glee.

They saw a long and straight corridor. To the left, there was a staircase going up, while on the right, three doors labeled 'Library', 'Convenience Store', and 'Stationery'.

Hyun Sangmin's entire attention was devoted to the convenience store. Only now could he fully understand the point Seol had been making, the one that was teasingly within his reach but eluded him until now.

There were three things that a human couldn't do without if one wanted to continue living. One, three minutes without air. Two, three days without water. And three, three weeks without sustenance.

In other words, Seol came here with the purpose of solving the most basic need for one's survival.

"Well, I guess he's not a Gold Mark for nothing, huh."

Hyun Sangmin's gaping mouth didn't want to close. He couldn't hide his shock at all since he was only thinking of quickly getting to his destination ever since the details of the mission had been announced.

"I gotta stay with this guy. Doesn't matter what happens, I gotta, definitely. Kang Seok can't even lick this guy's boots, for crying out loud!"

It wasn't as if Hyun Sangmin carried any ill feelings towards Kang Seok and his crew. But there was an undeniable difference between Seol and those guys who simply ran to the main building. Should he say that the thought process was on another level altogether? It was to the point where Hyun Sangmin had to question whether Seol was the same human being as the rest of them.

"I thought it would be a tuck shop, but it turns out it's a convenience store. The students of this school must have had it real good."

"Hold up!"

Seol was about to enter the convenience store when his shoulders were grabbed by the visibly excited Hyun Sangmin, who then proceeded to lightly pound on his chest like a proud gorilla.

"Good. Great! Freaking amazing! I get it now. Let me handle this from now on."

"?"

"You were planning to go upstairs after sweeping this place clean, right?"

"Something like that. So?"

"What if there's something inside? It's times like this you're supposed to use me."

Declaring so, Hyun Sangmin sneaked inside the convenience store. However, most of the corridor's right side wall was made up of glass, so one could literally look inside the stores from the outside.

Shortly thereafter, Hyun Sangmin raised his hand and sent an okay signal, as if he had finally ascertained that everything was perfectly in order. Seol had already checked the place out with his ability, so he could only chuckle softly as he entered.

The first place they checked out was, of course, the convenience store. The place was smaller than they expected, but still, each of the shelves was stocked to the brim with various food items.

“Keh. This is so good. So damn good!”

Hyun Sangmin popped open the lid of a can of Cola and gulped it down.

“Hey, let's hurry up. It'll get very awkward for us if we take too long and the monster shows up.”

“Roger that!”

Hyun Sangmin seemed to be genuinely enjoying himself while robbing the store. Seol too began stuffing his bag with things like canned foods, sealed instant kimbap<sup>[2]</sup>, and others that were small but packed with energy.

And while they were busy sweeping everything away...

“Mm? What's going on?”

“What? What happened?”

Seol realized that something was off when he was about to stuff the bag with a bottle of water.

Although he was carefully arranging things as he shoved them inside the bag, there seemed to be a lot of space left over still. It was a similar story with the weight too. Since he had stuffed the bag with lots of things, it should weigh a ton by now, yet all he could sense was only a slight increase in the overall weight.

“...I guess even our bags got discriminated, huh.”

Hyun Sangmin was envious, seeing that his bag was already bursting at the seams.

In the end, Seol even had to sweep the daily necessities away into the bag just to make it seem near full. After they ransacked the convenience store clean, they began going through the library and the stationery store separately.

Unfortunately, the results weren't as encouraging. A map of the basement was discovered in the library, but they already had one, so it was of no use. It was the same story for the stationery shop; well, they certainly didn't need a notebook or a pen right now. They did pick up a few cutting knives just in case, and soon, they left the underground corridor for good.

Hyun Sangmin was whistling a tune as they climbed up the staircase, but when Seol gave him the signal, he quietened down right away.

When they got to the first floor, they ran into a huge ivory-colored metal door. The acrid odor of blood assaulted their noses when the door was creaked open ever so slightly.

[The Diary of an Unknown Student has been updated.]

“I think that's the place.”

“What place?”

“You know, the locked entrance I told you about. The door was locked, but I could look inside just fine, you see. I'm pretty sure of it now, seeing that staircase right over there. However....”

Hyun Sangmin deeply frowned.

“God damn it. A lot of people must've died here. They did gain the entry somehow, though, by the look of things.”

It was as he said; through the open gap, Seol could see bits of broken glass and splashes of blood lining the floor. The steps of the staircase going up were painted in such a thick amount of blood that it was hard to tell what their original color might have been.

[#Main Building, first floor, main entrance (an excerpt from the Diary of an Unknown Student, page 7)]

*The friend who stepped out first screamed. Another friend following out right after tried to stop in a hurry but slipped like someone being swept away.*

*Only after we lost two more of our friends did we realize the trick to the staircase....*

“You know, those stairs gives me the creeps. How about we forget about those, and carry on with our staircase, instead?”

Seol agreed with Hyun Sangmin's suggestion. Besides, they already had a staircase behind them that led up anyways, so no real need to utilize that one over there.

Most importantly, though—those steps were shining in a deep orange glow within Seol's vision—do not approach, in other words.

Seol carefully closed the door and turned around. They quietly but quickly mounted the stairs and soon, their destination came into view.

However, what greeted them by the entrance to the second floor wasn't another ivory-colored metal door. No, for some reason, several thick metal spikes stood there, blocking their progress.

'It shouldn't be like this.'

Seol checked the map one more time, but they were on the right path. This was the most direct route when considering the convenience store's location.

“Do we need to press something?”

Hyun Sangmin looked around but couldn't find anything resembling a button nearby.

Seol stared at the metal spikes for a bit, before his brows furrowed slightly.

'They don't have any colors to them?'

If they were not in green color, then it meant they were not 'normal'.

Seol tilted his head a bit, before reaching out with his hand.

And at the exact moment his hand touched the metal spike....

[1] This talks about a chapter from an ancient Chinese text called 'Zhuangzi'. If interested, you can find the Wiki [link here](#)

[2] Korean sushi roll.

## Chapter 11

[A new user has been registered.]

*Clang!!*

Accompanied by dull metallic clanks, the pointed ends of the metal spikes separated from the ceiling almost immediately and then retracted into the floor below with an even faster speed. As soon as those metal spikes were gone, the space in the front became a wide-open passageway they could enter.

“W-What the hell just happened? What did you do?”

Hyun Sangmin was full of questions as he tried to follow after Seol and walk past the area of the spike barrier.

*Slam!*

“Huh!?”

As soon as Seol walked past, the spikes shot right back up and slammed into the ceiling once more. Having become separated, Hyun Sangmin held onto the spike barrier and shouted out in alarm.

Seol also fell into a state of confusion. But he spotted a red button mounted on the interior wall near the barrier. He quickly pressed it, and the metal barrier squeaked noisily before retracting again, just as he suspected it might.

“D-Damn... Feels like I lost ten years of my life just now.”

Hyun Sangmin hurriedly entered past the barrier and rubbed his chest to calm his pounding heart.

[Mister Hyun Sangmin has arrived at the second-floor waiting area.]

Hearing that, Seol flinched slightly. He was caught off guard as he had forgotten about the automatic arrival announcements.

When he took a glance at Hyun Sangmin, he was only spitting out sighs of relief. It seemed that he had not noticed the announcement yet. Perhaps he missed it from all the shouting, as well as the sound of the metal barrier opening and closing.

“Oh! So you've finally arrived.... Hm?”

Kang Seok was waving his hand towards Seol, but when he spotted Hyun Sangmin, the ends of his sentence trailed off.

“...What the. You two decided to work together?”

Hyun Sangmin raised his head after hearing Kang Seok's rather unhappy tone of voice.

“What about you then?”

“Well, as you can see. We arrived here a long time ago.”

Kang Seok winked in a playful manner.

Seol looked around and found Yi Hyungsik and Jeong Minwoo as well.

The so-called waiting area reminded him of a regular high school corridor. With the exception of steel bars barricading the windows, everything looked the same. At the end of the passage to the left, there was another door, and to the right, a solid wall.

“This place is like a prison. . . . That monster can't possibly enter here, right?”

“It can't. Dunno why, but that thing can't seem to get past the metal barrier. No telling what will happen if there was no barrier, though.”

Kang Seok replied nonchalantly. Meanwhile, Hyun Sangmin was nodding his head along, before quietly asking back.

“Back then. . . . did you manage to open the door?”

“Not open, but more like *breaking* it down. Thanks to a certain someone high tailing it outta there, after throwing down rocks and flower pots all over the place.”

“You're blaming me?”

Hyun Sangmin's voice was icy cold. Kang Seok's eyebrows rose up before he smirked softly.

“No way! I told you this before, didn't I? I don't really care what you do unless it involves the three of us. As long as you don't hinder us in any way, it's fine.”

“ . . . ”

“Hmm. Maybe I sounded a bit rude just now. Sorry about that. I'm always like this. . . . Well, there's no reason for us Invited to be at odds with each other, right?”

“ . . . That's true.”

“Great! As an apology, I'll let you guys in on interesting info.”

Even Seol had to shift his attention to Kang Seok's direction after hearing the word, ‘info’.

Kang Seok's lips twitched when he realized that none other than this fancied ‘Gold Mark’ was paying attention to him. His posture suddenly became a bit stiffer and more arrogant compared to before.

“Now look closely. This here is the passage we came through.”

Kang Seok pointed to his back, and then pressed a button on the wall. The metal spikes retracted to the floor before shooting back up again. Hyun Sangmin muttered under his breath.

“So, it's not on the outside, but inside. . . .”

“That's right! That's where it gets interesting.”

Kang Seok clapped his hands.

“To put it simply, this entrance became mine as soon as I entered first. Only I can open or close the barrier.”

“What?”

“I only figured it out after entering here. The first one to enter through the barrier is given the right to control it. One person per barrier, though.”

“How does that even make sense?”

“If you don't believe me, why don't you try it out?”

Kang Seok stepped aside, allowing Hyun Sangmin to quickly press the button on the wall. However, there was no reaction from the barrier. He pressed it a second time, then a third, and then many more times afterwards, but the metal spikes didn't budge an inch.

Still half in doubt, Seol's eyes drifted towards the map on the phone, and he belatedly realized something. Out of the six blue icons blinking around the second-floor waiting area, four had now turned red. However, only one was red when he was in the club room.

“Was there a need to make three entrances yours?”



“Oh? How did you figure that out already?”

Seol's question caused Kang Seok to become visibly surprised.

“What's the matter? Don't you think it'll get more interesting later on? Oh, right. How about you make that other one yours?”

Kang Seok stared at Hyun Sangmin and pointed towards another barrier on the opposite side.

“Well, passages on this side all belong to us now, so you should take one from that side over there. All you have to do is to grab the spike. Simple, right?”

It seemed that Hyun Sangmin was quietly debating on it. He sneaked a glance at Seol, then slowly shook his head.

“I'm... gonna pass. I'm fine with simply being here and all.”

He and Seol then found a nice little spot for themselves and settled down.

“Oh well. Do whatever you want.”

Kang Seok and his two lackeys sat down too, but soon, they had to get back up again as Hyun Sangmin pulled out a new pack of cigarettes. The trio reached out and pleaded for a smoke, so Hyun Sangmin handed one to each while saying it was compensation for providing the info.

Then, just as Seol was digging through his own pockets to find a smoke too, Hyun Sangmin presented a whole bundle to him.

“How about smoking these?”

“Uhm...”

“I saw earlier that you were running out, so I packed in a few at the convenience store.”

Hyun Sangmin whispered quietly and gave Seol a thumbs-up.

Soon enough, the corridor was filled with the blue smoke rising from the five men.

Now that most of the tension had ebbed away, Seol's sight slowly blurred and he felt his eyelids had become much heavier than before. It wasn't like he had to endure an all-nighter, yet he felt quite drowsy. This was probably due to the fatigue accumulated from overusing his ability.

'Should I sleep for a bit?'

They had over three hours left until the time limit.

It seemed that sleep was the best means to cool down his overworked eyes and brain. He knew now wasn't the best time to close his eyes and drift away into the slumberland, but... He had regained his power somehow. It'd be deathly stupid if he lost it again through overuse.

Seol entrusted himself to the encroaching embrace of sleep.

And that was why he couldn't hear it.

\*

“...I can't tell whether he's got balls of steel or doesn't really care about the Tutorial.”

Seeing Seol's head droop ever so lower in sleep, a wry smile broke out on Kang Seok's face. He flicked the cigarette butt away and groaned out.

“Just when is this supposed to end? It'd be so much better if it ended soon.”

“We still have over three hours left.... Fuck this. Why are we waiting for four hours in a mission like this?”

Yi Hyungsik grumbled as he rechecked the mission details on his phone. Kang Seok silently agreed with that opinion and massaged his head with his interlocked hands.

“I'm so~ bored. I really hope someone comes through the path on this side.”

“What if no one else shows up?”

“Eii, no way. The rest of the Invited haven't shown up yet.”

“What, you mean that Yi Seol-Ah? She's already dead, isn't she?”

“Not that dumb bitch.... Ha, people who act like heroes always end up getting killed first.”

Kang Seok darkly muttered out those words, which made Jeong Minwoo lick his lips in regret.

“What a waste, though.”

“Yep, that I agree. But, then again, don't you worry. We still have one more left.”

“Who?”

“You know, the other one. What was her name? Yun Seora?”

“Ah, that arrogant girl?”

When Yi Hyungsik chimed in, the three of them giggled out in sync. Their laughter sounded leery and ominous.

“Whatever. Maybe I should catch up on some sleep myself.”

Kang Seok's yawn was large enough to nearly rip open his jaws. Just as he was about to lie down, something happened.

Out of the blue, noises containing both loud shouts and hurried footsteps could be heard from the distance. Kang Seok blinked his eyes a couple of times before shooting right back up. Excluding the sleeping Seol, everyone present scanned the barriers.

“Which one? Which one is it?”

Jeong Minwoo pointed towards the middle barrier on the opposite side. Since Seol had “taken” over the left barrier there, that particular one had no owner as of yet. Kang Seok seemed to be incredibly disappointed by this development as he looked at Hyun Sangmin.

“It's still not too late, though.”

“...I told you, I'm fine.”

Kang Seok spat out a sigh and stood there with his hands across his chest. His attitude was that of a man who had just found something interesting to spectate on.

The noise got closer very soon.

There were three people running up as if they were being chased by something—a middle-aged man, a woman, and a young girl. The middle-aged man was wearing a worn-out business suit and a pair of glasses, and was leading the woman holding the young girl's hand. His necktie danced uncontrollably as he ran up in a huff. It was none other than the man who asked for Kang Seok's help earlier on.

“Just a little bit further! Just a bit.... Huh!?”

He rounded the corner in a hurry, but as soon as he saw the metal spikes on top of the stairs, his steps came to an abrupt halt. He must not have considered the possibility of the path being blocked. Despair began to dye his expression pale.

Soon, though, he discovered Kang Seok past the spike barrier. The woman and the girl following him ran into the middle-aged man's back and awkwardly bounced back. And finally, sharp and familiar-looking hooks pounced on them. All these things happened at roughly the same time.

“Help us!!”

The bespectacled man ran up to the barrier without hesitation and shouted out.

“Let us in!!”

[A new user has been registered.]

With a loud clang, the metal barrier slid open. The wide-open entrance caused the expression of stupor to appear on the man's face. And when he turned around to look behind him while still carrying that expression....

“Help!”

...He couldn't help but flinch. Both his wife and daughter were already in the grips of the chasing monster.

“Help us!!! Help!! Dear!!”

“Dad!! Save us!! Daaaad!!!”

They pleaded, yet the man's steps were halting and retreating. When he met the gaze of the monster and its large, bloodshot eye...

“D-Dear... Hee, Heejin...”

He couldn't move. He was completely frozen up.

*Splat, splat!!*

Step by step, the sticky footsteps got nearer. The middle-aged man's expression distorted into an unsightly mess of tears, snot, and uncertainty. He cast his glance over to Kang Seok, asking for help again. However, the young man bluntly spat out.

“Quickly make up your mind, will you?”

“...Huh?”

“Are you going to come in or not? Make up your damn mind. You planning on killing us too?”

Was it because of Kang Seok's shouting or was it because of the threatening atmosphere emanating from him? Whichever case it may be, the middle-aged man finally made his decision and moved.

*Slam!*

“D-Dad!?”

“Dear!! No! Don't leave us!!”

The middle-aged man chose to enter the waiting area.

“Daaaaad!!”

“Don't abandon us!!! Dear!!”

A pair of jet-black hands grabbed the legs of the screaming mother and daughter. The man squeezed his eyes shut after seeing his family being lifted up into the air, hanging upside down.

*Rip!*

The sickening noise akin to a sheet of silk being ripped up in one go pierced his ears. The terrified, pained screams rang out loudly from the stairwell. The man collapsed on the floor and hurriedly covered his ears. He violently shook around on the dusty and unclean floor.

He never lifted his head up again.

Not until all the screams finally died down.

\*

It was only obvious that Seol would wake up from his light sleep due to all the unfolding chaos. By the time he fully regained his consciousness, the screams couldn't be heard anymore.

He hastily got up and took a look past the metal barrier, only to see the corpses of the mother and the daughter— both ripped in half.

What shocked Seol the most, though, was their expressions. Their expressions that hadn't eased even after they died. Their expressions, twisted and corrupted by the combination of pain and terror, despair and fury. It was plain to see their ardent desire to live, right up until their last breath.

“I, I, I... I don't, I don't know... I, I didn't do that, I'm not responsible...”

The middle-aged man remained on the floor, huddled and not moving, except that his entire body trembled and shook all the time.

“There... there was no helping it.... There was... nothing I could do...”

No one said anything, yet he continuously spat out incoherent babble while sobbing pathetically on the floor.

“Pfff.”

Out of the blue, a short burst of laughter leaked out from someone's lips. The middle-aged man's trembling came to a sudden halt, hearing that. Meanwhile, Kang Seok hurriedly covered up his mouth.

“Puhahahahaha!!!”

Even though he looked like he was trying to keep it in, in the end, he lowered his head and his shoulders shook from the unrestrained laughter. The middle-aged man's hands tightly clenched into fists, nails digging in under the skin.

A wise old saying said that if you weren't planning to give something to a beggar, you shouldn't at least kick his begging bowl. Recalling that old saying, a deep frown formed on Seol's face.

'He's actually laughing in a situation like this?'

It was then. They could all hear another metallic clang. Yun Seora walked in from the last remaining door that had no assigned “owner”.

As if she too had searched through the school premises, she was holding a handful of A4-sized papers. Just like back when she was in the assembly hall, she swept her gaze around the waiting area once, found a quiet spot for herself and settled down, before concentrating on a paper in her hand.

And with this, the confirmed number of survivors was seven. It was not even half of the starting 36.

Within the quiet silence, time continued to flow. Every now and then, they could hear some kind of chaos unfolding downstairs, but those died down eventually.

Seol came to a conclusion. There shouldn't be any more survivors left. However, his thought was proven wrong about 30 minutes before the time limit.

"We are almost there, everyone. We'll arrive there soon, so go up as quietly as possible."

Contrary to his expectations, more survivors showed up. And it wasn't just one or two, but a group of five. Seol even recognized two people.

One was Shin Sang-Ah, the woman who raised her voice at Kang Seok back in the assembly hall, and the other one was Yi Sungjin, the younger brother of Yi Seol-Ah. He didn't know what they went through, but they had successfully arrived at the destination.

Unfortunately, the path they had taken was occupied by Kang Seok and his cronies.

"Oh, wow, look who it is!"

Kang Seok blinked his eyes and theatrically exclaimed out in surprise.

"So, you managed to make it alive! The cry-baby has done it!"

"H-huh?"

Shin Sang-Ah had been climbing the steps cautiously, but finding the barrier, she fell into a state of confusion. Seeing the people beyond the metal spikes, she blankly muttered out a question.

"What... what is going on? Why is the path blocked?"

"Oh, that?"

Kang Seok smirked like a snake. It was as if the moment he'd been waiting for all his life had finally arrived. Seeing that oily smile, Shin Sang-Ah couldn't help but frown deeply.

"What?"

"What do you mean, what? I'm the owner of this barrier."

"The owner... of this barrier?"

Kang Seok burst out in laughter and began to gleefully explain things. It was as if he had transformed into a well-paid private tutor, and explained everything one by one, bit by bit, and in full gory detail.

Of course, his audience wouldn't be able to concentrate on this useless yammering. Shin Sang-Ah became even more anxious as she kept on looking back behind her. The tone of her voice became ever so urgent as well.

"I get it now, so you can open this barrier, right?"

"Oho, you're smarter than you look! Or maybe my explanation was just that good."

"I get it, so open up already!"

"Really now, how did you manage to get here? I mean, you're just a Contracted. I'm surprised you managed to evade the monster."

Kang Seok showed no indication that he heard her plea and seemed to be genuinely enjoying this situation.

"I, I don't know. We nearly got discovered, but this boy used something he got from the Random Box. We all escaped somehow during the confusion, okay?"

Shin Sang-Ah pointed at Yi Sungjin. The boy's complexion was still dark and aimless. It seemed that the death of his older sister had hit him real hard.

"Oh, well, I guess he's an Invited too. So at least it wasn't all luck."

"Okay, now. Open the barrier so that we can enter."

“Hmm...”

Kang Seok slowly opened his mouth.

“I don’t wanna.”

A truly disgusting smile crept up on his face.

## Chapter 12

“Are you crazy?! Open the barrier right now!!”

“Why should I? This here is my doorway. I decide what to do with it.”

“Why are you acting like this? Do you have any idea just what we had to go through to get here?”

“Aigoo~. So, you had to go through so much, huh? But, what should I do? According to a certain someone, I’m an egocentric, petty son of a bitch.”

Shin Sang-Ah gritted her teeth while listening to Kang Seok’s sarcastic remarks. She could more or less tell why this asshole was acting this way. Clearly, he was still holding a grudge against her for that verbal spat back in the assembly hall.

She held back her anger and spoke to him in a level voice.

“I apologize. I apologize for calling you names when we were in the assembly hall, so please open this barrier. It’s not just me here, too. These people haven’t done anything to you. You shouldn’t treat people’s lives as a joke.”

“Ooh... now that’s not what I expected to hear from you. Are you being honest?”

“...Of course.”

“Well, I guess I don’t have much choice here then. Fine. Prove it to me.”

“Prove it?”

“The other four with you, I’ll let them in. You stand back.”

Shin Sang-Ah’s jaw dropped to the floor. Her expression screamed, ‘what kind of an asshole would act like this?’ Unfortunately for her, Kang Seok’s expression showed how relaxed he was.

“You.... You....”

“What are you going to do? That monster might show up soon, you know~.”

Shin Sang-Ah didn’t expect Kang Seok to behave like this, and her face reddened up considerably as a result. However, with the exception of Yi Sungjin, the other three were looking at her with pleading eyes. Their stares were laden with a certain pressure. She gritted her teeth and took three, four steps back.

“Oh, wow, a martyr, aren’t you?”

Kang Seok exclaimed out loud as he pressed the release button. As soon as the barrier was lowered, the three rushed inside. Yi Sungjin stared at Shin Sang-Ah for a bit before belatedly trudging past the barrier as well. Only afterwards did the trio begin calling out to her, crying out her name out in a helpless manner. The barrier closed shut regardless.

However, Yi Sungjin suddenly reached out towards the button to press it. He’d been watching Kang Seok’s hand quite intently just now.

Of course, nothing happened. Seeing this, Kang Seok broke out in laughter.

“Don’t waste your time. Didn’t I tell you? Only I can open the barrier.”

Yi Sungjin suddenly pounced on Kang Seok. However, it couldn’t even be called a fight from the get-go. The teen boy got easily subdued by Yi Hyungsik and Jeong Minwoo, and he could only glare at Kang Seok in rage.

“Bastard, do you have a death wish? What, did that bitch tell you she’ll become your new sister or something?”

“Open... the barrier!”

“That’s up to me, and I kept my end of the deal.”

“...”

“Good job. You can go look for another path or something now. Good luck.”

Shin Sang-Ah couldn't bring herself to leave just like that. She scanned the inside of the waiting room, hoping for something or someone to save her, but that turned out to be a waste of time. The people inside were either spectating or looking unconcerned.

In the end, she turned around helplessly.

“Should I let you in?”

Hearing this, Shin Sang-Ah's steps came to a halt. She abruptly spun her head and shot Kang Seok a murderous look.

“Do you actually enjoy toying with people?”

“Yup. When would I ever get to have fun like this if it's not today?”

Kang Seok nonchalantly replied and gestured her to come closer.

“Stop being difficult and come over here. You saw me letting people in just now, right? I'm the kind of guy who keeps his promises.”

Hearing his words of keeping promises, Shin Sang-Ah was gripped by an intense bout of doubt and uncertainty. But thinking about the hardships she suffered to get here, she couldn't imagine looking for another path.

Plus, even if there was another path, she had to search for it alone. She figured it'd be better to get bitten by a rabid dog once.

She made up her mind and turned around to face him.

“...What do you want me to do?”

“I'm not asking for much. Just apologize for the things you said back in the assembly hall.”

“But I already did...”

“No, no, it was clear to anyone watching that you weren't sincere. Besides, I'm not the type to believe in apologies coming out of a person's mouth.”

“Then what do you want me to do?”

Shin Sang-Ah raised her voice when Kang Seok remained sarcastic to the end. He rubbed his chin as his eyes scanned her lecherously. Shin Sang-Ah did not possess the same sort of ‘fresh’ appeal as Yi Seol-Ah, but her skin was pale and smooth, and her rack was commendably voluptuous.

A sinister smirk formed on Kang Seok's lips.

“First, take them off.”

“...What?”

Shin Sang-Ah couldn't help but question her own hearing.

“Take your clothes off. Ah, I'm a nice guy, so I'll let you keep your panties. Cool?”

Hearing Kang Seok's 'benevolent' tone of voice, Shin Sang-Ah even forgot to close her wide-open mouth.

“I think I'll feel a little better if you perform a little show with a nude dance.... How about you twerk for me?”

“You... you insane... son of a bitch!”

“Don't wanna do it? Fine. Fuck off, then.”

Kang Seok shrugged his shoulders.

Shin Sang-Ah bit her lower lip until one could clearly see the teeth mark on her flesh. She inwardly mumbled, ‘This crazy son of a bitch.’

Then, her body shook from the belated sense of humiliation. Tears welled up in her eyes, ready to fall at any moment.

Unfortunately for her, that moment when her group ran into the monster still played heavily on her mind. What if, she went downstairs now and ended up encountering the monster again...?

“What are you waiting for? As I said, you can fuck off if you don't wanna do it.”

“...I'll do it.”

“Then hurry the hell up. I'll give you ten seconds to take your pants off. Starting now.”

When Kang Seok really started counting down, Shin Sang-Ah had no choice but to hurriedly undo her buttons. She hesitated when it came to pulling her pants down, but after hearing the rapid countdown, she still forced her jeans down all the while shaking like a leaf in the wind.

Kang Seok made a catcalling whistle as Shin Sang-Ah's bare thighs were revealed to the cold air.

“Hiyaa~, you've got a great figure. Your underwear is pretty cute too.”

Shin Sang-Ah squeezed her eyes shut, hoping this would lessen the humiliation she felt even by a tiny amount.

“What are you doing? Keep stripping, girl. I'm gonna count down again. . . Huh? Huuuuh!? It's the monster!! The monster!!”

Kang Seok suddenly cried out in alarm and pointed at the staircase behind her while hurriedly taking a step back. Shin Sang-Ah's eyes shot open in shock. She screamed in terror and tumbled forward in an ungainly fashion.

“Mommy!”

Out of reflex, she looked behind her, only to find nothing there. Rather than the monster, the staircase was as empty as it could possibly get. Sure enough, she could hear several loud and detestable chortles coming from beyond the barrier.

“Did you hear that? You heard that, right? She said Mommy! Mommy!! Hahahaha!!”

“Haha, that was fucking adorable. Kyak! Mommy!”

When Yi Hyungsik imitated Shin Sang-Ah's cries, Kang Seok and Jeong Minwoo burst into laughter. Lost for words, all Shin Sang-Ah could do was to let tears accumulate around the edges of her eyes.

“Sorry, sorry. I was just teasing you a bit. You looked really cute just now.”

*Too much.*

“Well~ now. It's time to remove your top, right?”

*This is too much.*

In the end, she couldn't hold it in any longer and broke down in tears.

“You're crying? Hey, now. You shouldn't cry, you know~. You gotta take your clothes off and dance for me before. . .”

Kang Seok clapped his hands boisterously and laughed before suddenly shutting his mouth. Unknowingly, a dark shadow was looming over him.

\*

Seol wasn't angry from the beginning. He initially planned to ignore the matter.

He was neither a saint nor a man of justice. Like most people, he was disinclined to interfere in other people's business. Even if he saw something he considered unjust, he would only frown and think, ‘Isn't that going too far?’

Unless it was someone he knew, Seol would never personally get up and do something for a total stranger.

However. . .

When his eyes landed on Yi Sungjin, or more specifically when he heard him whisper ‘help us’ as he was pinned down to the ground, he had a change of heart.

Perhaps it was a coincidence, but the scene happened to remind him of the time Yi Seol-Ah asked for help in the assembly hall.

Seol's emotions trembled. The small tremor soon spread out like some sort of a mutated butterfly effect and it violently quaked, eventually transforming into a rage.

That was why he stood up.

...Just like the day he had that dream.

...Just like the experience he had in the assembly hall.

[Innate Ability, Future Vision, has been activated.]

...Just like the way his emotions were leading him to.

“What? You also want to join in on the fun. . .?”

“That’s enough. Open the barrier please.”

Kang Seok dazedly stared up at Seol. He hadn't realized it until now, but Seol was taller than him.

“I'll open it. When I feel like it.”

“Open. The. Barrier.”

Kang Seok shut his mouth. Judging from his expression, it seemed like he just couldn't understand.

“Did you inhale something weird? Who the hell are you to order me around?”

“Open it.”

Kang Seok's complexion hardened.

For some strange reason, he found it difficult to meet Seol's gaze. Even his balls seemed to shrink a bit. He didn't want to admit it out loud, but Kang Seok was scared. It was as if he was staring at a choice of whether he should cross a line he should never even consider crossing in the first place.

His instincts forced him to press the button. However, just before he actually did that, Kang Seok's defiant streak reared its head. He couldn't help but think, ‘Why should I listen to this son of a bitch? Because he has a Gold Mark? What a fucking joke.’

Kang Seok arrogantly leaned his head back.

“I don't want to.”

The corners of his lips slowly wiggled and twitched.

“Listen here, I'm trying to stay friendly with all the Invited. Don't be an asshat and go away.”

Seol slowly raised his arm up, which prompted Yi Hyungsik and Jeong Minwoo to move as well. However, Kang Seok confidently stopped them by raising his own hand.

“What? You're gonna hit me? Fine, go ahead. If Almighty Gold Mark-nim wants to hit me, this lowly Silver Mark should just obediently get hit, no?”

“...”

“But remember this. The more you try to show off, the lesser I'll be inclined to open the... Kuk!”

*Thwack!*

Seol's fist slammed into Kang Seok's nose. Yi Hyungsik and Jeong Minwoo were taken by surprise but even they had to cry out in pain while grasping their noses. The speed at which Seol's fist flew was so scarily fast, they couldn't even see it.

“Y-you son of a.... Kuaaaak!!”

Kang Seok reflexively threw a fist of his own, but Seol simply snatched it off the air and twisted it hard. The force was so severe that Kang Seok's knees gave out in one go. Seol then proceeded to drag his arm and forcibly pressed the button.

The barrier slid open.

“Come in.”

Shin Sang-Ah carried a dazed expression as she stumbled into the waiting area, not even thinking of putting her pants back on. Only then did Seol release Kang Seok's arm.

[Miss Shin Sang-Ah has arrived on the second-floor waiting area.]

[The first Tutorial mission, 'Escape from the Assembly Hall', has concluded. Number of remaining survivors: 12.]

[A new message from the Guide has arrived.]

[The second mission of the Tutorial, 'Breaking Through Traps' has begun.]

They all heard the new announcements, and at the same time, the sturdy locked gate at the end of the corridor automatically undid itself. It seemed that, regardless of the remaining time, the next mission would be triggered right away once all the survivors arrived at the waiting area.

“Kuuuuk!”



Kang Seok rolled on the floor in a fit of pain. Then, he used the wall to support himself and got up. Still holding his twisted arm, he glared at Seol with murderous intent.

“You...!”

Kang Seok was about to shout out something, but then simply spun on his heels to leave.

“We'll see what happens later, you fucking son of a bitch!”

He picked up his own bag and hastily escaped through the now-open passage. Seeing him retreat, both Yi Hyungsik and Jeong Minwoo slinked away from sight.

Next, Yun Seora, who had been watching Seol silently, turned to leave.

“T... Thank you. Thank you so much...”

Thick teardrops fell from Shin Sang-Ah's eyes as she began to wail. Next to her, Yi Sungjin's head also dropped low.

However, the recipient of their gratitude, Seol, wasn't feeling all that good. He knew his actions were not entirely from his own will.

His rage failing to cool down drove him further into an even greater frenzy. He felt like destroying, rampaging, and making an utter mess of everything.

[Sender: The Guide.]

[1. Enter the classroom “3-1” on the fourth floor of the main building via annex's third floor before time runs out.]

[Remaining time: 01:57:56]

Two hours, and a time-limit type mission. After confirming the details of the next mission, Seol's eyes burned with a dangerous light.

“H-hey! Hold up!”

Seol unhesitatingly walked forward, and Hyun Sangmin hurriedly chased after him with two bags.

\*

[Area 1. The second mission is now commencing.]

A robotic voice made an announcement as images flickered on a massive semi-transparent screen. Several men and women were sitting in front of this screen, watching the proceedings unfold.

“It's only the second mission but... Damn it, I'm gonna lose my mind at this rate.”

“24 people died in the first stage? How does that even make sense? Why is every one of them such goddamn trash this time?”

When a bald, giant of a man spat out in anger, a woman wearing a purple robe next to him grumbled unhappily as well. However, when another woman wearing a business suit sitting in front swept her icy gaze over them, the duo shut their mouths up rather quickly.

“Really now. At this rate, the name 'Area 1' will become a huge joke. With March's overall assessment looking this bad, how are we supposed to endure until September?”

The bald giant couldn't resist and added a couple more sentences, but fearing that the business-suit woman would glare at him again, he hurriedly turned his attention to her.

“Anyone know what's going on in the other areas? Anyone hear anything?”

“Me.”

A young man with curly hair raised his hand.

“I overheard something while I was outside.... As far as clear speed is concerned, I hear Area 2 and Area 7 are neck and neck for the first place.”

“2 and 7? I get the Europeans, but what's up with those Chinese bastards?”

“What's the point in even asking? You already know what dirty tricks they are using over there. Their Invited all conspire together, and as soon as the Tutorial starts, they take all the Contracted hostage. I'm sure they are passing the missions while sacrificing the Contracted whenever necessary.”

The balding giant spat out a groan.

“...Fine. What about 2?”

"I heard they are the very example of perfection itself. A French girl named Odelette Delphine has taken over the show. With just pure skills, too. Well, her killing the phantom in front of everyone with the starting bonus she got during the first mission proved to be the decisive factor."

"Huh. What's her Mark?"

"Silver. Also, as soon as the second mission began, she succeeded in opening up the path to the computer classroom. She's bulldozing everything in her way. I think she won't even need an hour to get to the end. Maybe 50 minutes tops?"

"Wow, what is she, a monster? Europe really found a good seedling this time. What about the rest?"

"Area 5 is doing decent... but, it's so-so. They've had a 30-minute head start for the second mission compared us, so there's that."

The giant groaned out again.

"God damn it. At this rate, we aren't gonna have a single one remaining at the end of the Tutorial."

"No way. Don't forget, we have a Gold Mark. It looks like he even has the Diary of the Unknown Student. Surely he'll be able to clear it with no problems."

"You think so?"

"I mean, he chased that phantom away with nothing more than his glare, right?"

The curly-haired youth spoke with the aim of consoling the giant man, but the bald giant's face continued to show how disappointed he was as his eyes remained locked on the screen. Seol, as shown on the screen, was entering the annex via the pedestrian overpass connecting the two buildings.

"Hey, doesn't that guy look a bit pissed off right now? What the hell? What's the matter with him all of a sudden?"

The curly-haired youth raised a shrill voice of surprise.

As the mission name suggested, the location reserved for the 'Breaking Through Traps' wasn't supposed to be tackled willy-nilly. Yet, Seol didn't even stop to take a look at his phone and simply strolled right in.

"...Can we really trust a guy like that?"

The bald giant tapped the woman wearing the business suit.

"Hey, say something, Kim Hannah."

"Shut your damn mouth for once, okay?"

Kim Hannah spat out in a voice full of undisguised irritation. The giant man immediately realized that if he tried to provoke her any further, he'd be on the painful receiving end of the hysteria of an unmarried spinster.

The giant licked his lips as if he found the whole thing unsatisfactory, then got up from his seat. He figured he would rather go out for a smoke break than sit here and get pissed off at what was happening on screen.

\*

The bald, big guy wasted around 15 minutes smoking outside. But, when he was about to enter the room again...

*Clang! Clang!*

He spat out a disappointed groan after hearing the noisy metallic clangs coming from inside. He thought that a brainless idiot was repeatedly stepping into traps, activating them inadvertently. While shaking his head, he opened the door to enter.

*Clang!*

Then, he tilted his head, wondering if his eyes were playing tricks on him.

In truth, the second mission wasn't at all difficult for someone like this bald man. A highly trained Earthling would be able to clear it in around 30 minutes even if he was taking his time.

However, the ones doing the mission right now weren't trained Earthlings, but a bunch of weak, powerless civilians. These people hadn't even experienced a proper war.

The goal of the mission was simple enough — to stop the activation of various traps by fulfilling a set of conditions beforehand. Or, leave it to lady luck to decide. That should have been the case. However...

'He's evading, blocking, and deflecting!'

Not only did Seol not stop after performing those actions, he even deliberately triggered the traps that hadn't been activated yet. He was progressing forward while... destroying everything. It was like looking at an Earthling, not a powerless civilian.

A look of disbelief was etched on the bald man's face as he hurriedly got closer to the screen. At the same time, three sharp metal spears were shooting out towards Seol from the ceiling and from both the right and left sides.

*Clang! Claaaang!!*

It was unknown where Seol had acquired a steel beam, but regardless, he spun it like a cartwheel; soon, the audience was treated to the cacophony of metallic clangs as well as a beam of cold silvery light flickering on the screen.

The result was all there to see. The moment the spears from the right and left were sent flying, the spear from the ceiling brushed past Seol and pierced the ground. The woman wearing the purple robe stood up reflexively, her fists clenched in anticipation.

"Is he dead? No, did it miss?"

"No, he dodged."

The bald man closely watched the proceedings unfold, then confidently declared out loud.

"I'm sure of it. He slapped away the spears coming from both of his sides, and he was about to do the same to the one coming from the ceiling, but..."

"But?"

"...Dunno. It's like, his body couldn't keep up with what he wanted to do. In any case, I definitely saw him tilt his head out of the way... Oi, Kim Hannah! Just what's up with that guy?!"

The bald guy seemed to be shocked by his own words and belatedly shouted at Kim Hannah.

Kim Hannah remained quiet for a long while before suddenly opening her mouth.

"For the second mission... what's the record for the fastest clear time?"

"The record? You mean, Sung Shihyun-nim's legendary 29 minutes and 38 seconds?"

*Mm, mm.* The bald giant nodded his head as if he was proud of something. Meanwhile, Kim Hannah's head dropped low, and eventually, she began rubbing her face as if she was feeling quite fatigued all of a sudden.

"...This is crazy."

"What's crazy?"

[Area 1's second mission has been cleared.]

The expressions of everyone present became dumbfounded by the sudden announcement.

16 minutes, 24 seconds....

This was precisely the moment when history was rewritten.

## Chapter 13

The label above the classroom door read '3-1'.

Seol quietly opened the door. He looked to be in an overall pathetic condition while propping himself up with the metal spear serving as a makeshift cane.

His boiling-hot rage had cooled down by now, but the sense of emptiness filling him up after the end of his ability, Future Vision, was incredibly hard to endure. It was as if he was overcome with a bout of lethargy.

The new gathering area was a regular classroom that could be found in pretty much any school out there. Seol chose a chair and as soon as he sat down, he plopped down on the desk with a thud. His eyeballs hurt so much, he thought they might pop out at any moment now. He was also beset with intense fatigue..

And as he stayed there, barely moving, the door opened again and the classroom gradually became somewhat crowded.

The total number of casualties during the second mission: 0.

It was an obvious result, really. Seol ended up destroying every single trap there, so it was not a surprise that everyone got to clear it without a fuss.

The survivors took an unsure glance at Seol who was still collapsed on the desk. Well, they had to bear witness to some unbelievable scenes that were simply beyond their ability to describe, so understandably, they couldn't stop staring at him. They already had some thoughts as to how special Seol could be, but still, their imagination had been easily exceeded.

“Are you alright?”

After flawlessly performing his duty as the trustworthy bag shuttle, Hyun Sangmin asked with a lot of worry in his voice. Seol simply waved his hand to imply, ‘don't worry about me.’

Shin Sang-Ah entered the classroom in hesitating, faltering steps, then found a chair in a quiet corner for herself and settled down while hiding her face. Yun Seora arrived a bit later after that. Finally, Kang Seok and his lackeys showed up, signaling that all 12 survivors had gathered in the classroom.

“Well, well, well. I'm truly shocked.”

When that familiar voice suddenly popped out of nowhere, Seol's eyes shot right open.

“I couldn't have imagined you'd pass the second mission that quickly. Thanks to you all, my prestige has gone up a level in the meantime.”

Behind the teacher's podium stood the 'Guide' from the assembly hall, still wearing that butler outfit of his. Everyone stared at Han as if he was some sort of a phantom.

“I congratulate you on successfully arriving on the fourth floor. I have to ask, did you enjoy the proceedings of the first and second periods?”

His leisurely and bright tone of voice roused anger in the hearts of almost everyone present. But, they knew there was nothing they could do, so they simply had to swallow it back. Still, the breathing of the bespectacled, middle-aged man quickened noticeably.

“I'm here to give you all great news. There is only one mission remaining in the Tutorial.”

“There's another one?”

“Yes. But, there is genuinely no reason to fret. The reason being...”

The ends of the Guide's eyes arched upwards.

“...The remaining mission, it can actually become quite easy and enjoyable for everyone.”

“Easy and enjoyable...?”

“Yes. As long as you stick to the rules. All of you.”

When the Guide emphasized the words ‘all of you’, a dangerous smile crept up his face.

“Shall I start with the explanations, then? Ah, the mission this time is a little more complicated, and that is why I'm here. Besides, those announcements are so robotic and impersonal, no? Ahaha!”

For some reason, the Guide seemed to be in a really good mood.

“Overall, this mission's goal is similar to the ones you had to go through until now. You are tasked with reaching the sixth floor via the fifth floor. However, there are a few more additional rules to consider this time.”

The Guide picked up a piece of chalk and drew a small circle on the blackboard.

“This is a coin.”

“...”

“Have you heard of treasure hunt?”

“...”

“...I am beginning to truly appreciate the greatness of the teachers who teach those unresponsive students.”

The Guide's shoulders slumped forward rather theatrically, then, he played with his monocle.

“Fine. I shall finish the explanation and disappear from your sights as soon as possible. On the fourth and the fifth floor, there are many such hidden coins waiting to be found. You all are required to find and amass as many coins as possible before nightfall.”

He then began writing on the blackboard again.

1. The usages for the coins:

—Entry fee

—Lucky draws

“There is a place on the sixth floor where the gate leading to the Paradise is scheduled to open.”

The mere mention of entry to Paradise caused a small commotion to rise up.

“Unfortunately, there are no free lunches in the world. You will have to pay the appropriate entry fee. If you plan to enter the gate, you will need one hundred coins as the usage fee.”

“One, one hundred? You need that many?”

“Actually, that's not a lot.”

Han shook his head.

“The total number of hidden coins is 3000. With a little bit of leg work, finding 100 should be a cinch.”

Han spoke up to here, before letting out a gasp of “Ah!”

“Now that I think about it, there are coins hidden in this classroom too...”

Suddenly, the sound of a chair being slid across the floor could be heard. A woman stood up and took a quick stride towards the podium, then began rummaging through it. It was none other than Yun Seora. Soon, she straightened her back and sure enough, four yellowish coins rested on her palm.

Han showed some surprise after seeing a stack of papers clutched in Yun Seora's hand.

“I see that you have searched through the staff room on the first floor. Those documents were useless until past the third floor, but from here onwards, they should prove to be quite helpful.”

Still carrying an indifferent expression on her face, Yun Seora returned to her seat.

‘Did she find a map that shows where the coins are?’

If that were the case, then Yun Seora held an overwhelming advantage on this mission. Seol couldn't help but feel a bit envious.

Han continued on in the meantime.

“On the fifth-floor library, you will find an item draw machine.”

‘Item draw?’

The expressions of the people present became confused after hearing an unexpected announcement.

“Those of you who manage to amass lots of coins must use this machine! You will definitely be able to acquire many things that will aid you in your journey.”

“L-Like what, exactly?”

“You'll find out once you get there, but they will be things like food, consumable goods, etc, etc...”

For some reason, Han quietly stared at the person who asked the question, causing Shin Sang-Ah to lower her gaze in a hurry and cross her legs in a defensive manner.

“...Well, if your luck is good, then you might even receive a protective item of some kind. Also, weapons and spell balls as well...”

‘Weapons? Spell balls?’

Seol narrowed his eyes.

“Or, when you pour in a lot~ of coins in one go, you might find unique and special items. Items such as...”

Han deliberately stretched his sentence trying to create a sense of anticipation.

“...A legendary elixir that can bring the dead back to life.”

The devastated and downtrodden middle-aged man's gaze shot towards the front of the classroom. Even the dazed Yi Sungjin visibly flinched.

“Is, is that true?”

“Noona can be revived? Really?”

Han nodded his head at the two's hurried shouts.

“Of course. However, you need to meet lots of requirements first. It's definitely not going to be easy. You shouldn't take the act of reviving a dead person so lightly. ... Stop what you're doing this instant.”

Han's icy voice reverberated throughout the classroom. The middle-aged man with the worn-out business suit had shot out from his seat and was heading towards the exit, but he had to stop and hesitate.

“You won't find any coins even if you leave now. The treasure hunt will only commence precisely 30 minutes after I finish my explanations.”

Even though Han's words were simple to understand, the middle-aged man showed no signs of sitting down. He simply staggered towards the door and stopped right in front of it.

Han clicked his tongue in disapproval before spotting an oddity with the corner of his eye. It was Seol, who had raised his hand to ask a question.

“Please speak.”

“Why are things like weapons, defensive items, and spell balls available from the item draw machine?”

“Hmm? Conversely, is there a reason they shouldn't be available?”

“Why would we need items in a mission that's supposedly easy and enjoyable?”

“...Fufufu. I like these kinds of questions.”

The hardened expression of the Guide softened considerably.

“Such questions mean that the listener isn't just taking things at face value and is constantly evaluating the situation. ... For now, here is the answer to your question.”

Han winked once, pulled out his smartphone, and tapped on the screen.

[A message from the Guide has arrived.]

“I'm not lying to you. If all of you can cooperate together, this mission will become very easy to clear. And you will even get to enjoy it. I guarantee this.”

Han dropped the chalk and raised a finger.

“And also, if I were to provide you with one more helpful hint. ... Keep an eye out for the Hour of the Deceased, please. The Deceased carry an unending hatred for all living things, after all.”

“The Hour of the Deceased!?”

Seol hurriedly pulled out his phone to check the message.

[Sender: The Guide]

[1. Rules of the treasure hunt]

—Classroom 3-1 will be set as your safe zone from here onwards.

—The period between midnight till tomorrow midday will be designated as the Hour of the Deceased.

—The phantom, 'Gaekgwí', and the Deceased are unable to enter the safe zone.

[2. Requirements for gaining access to the sixth floor]

—Access will be granted with the 'sixth-floor key' that can be drawn on the item draw machine using 199 coins, or by paying 499 coins at the door.

[3. Requirements to activate the gate]

—The gate will appear in the middle of the sixth floor, 30 minutes after the access has been granted.

—When the access to the sixth floor has been granted, the metal barrier on the second floor will be removed immediately.

When Seol raised his head, Han was already long gone.

[The treasure hunt will begin in 30 minutes.]

Seol began gritting his teeth.

'Of course. I knew it.'

"Hey, this isn't what you said!"

Hyun Sangmin roared out in frustration.

"What? When we gain access to the sixth floor, the metal barriers on the second floor will be removed? Isn't that the same thing as saying that that goddamn monster will show up here sooner or later!?"

Seol was deeply worried about that as well. The 30-minute gap during the sixth-floor door opening and the gate ready to activate held all the potential to be absolutely fatal for everyone here. Besides, they had to worry about these so-called Deceased, as well.

"I mean, we can open the door to the sixth floor, and then come back here to wait out the 30 minutes, no?"

"What the fuck? What would you do if that damn Gaekgwi monster is waiting for you in front of this safe zone? What then?"

When someone voiced his opinion, Hyun Sangmin promptly shut that person down. Then he spat out a long groan.

"Wow.... Nothing is easy. Not a damn thing. What should we do now?"

"Well, it doesn't have to be so bad."

Seol spoke up.

"We go out and find as many coins as we can until midnight, then we wait until midday tomorrow. Then, we draw as many weapons and whatever we can from the item draw machine before opening the sixth floor...."

...Seol was about to finish his sentence with 'we might stand a chance then', but he couldn't, and instead simply clicked his tongue.

Yun Seora and the middle-aged man were no longer in the classroom. It was the same story for Kang Seok and his crew as well. Only seven people remained in the classroom.

"...Oh, well. Wanna eat something? We still have some time left to kill and all."

Seol wordlessly nodded his head. He was actually starving after going on a rampage earlier on, anyways. He felt like he needed to eat something in order to regain his strength.

When Seol poured out various food items from his bag, the eyes of everyone present, besides Hyun Sangmin, grew extra-wide in shock.

"Come. Let's eat together. Even you, Mister Yi Sungjin."

"I'm..."

"You won't find any coins even if you leave now. It'll be more beneficial for you in the long run to fill up your belly before you begin."

"I... Thank you..."

Hyun Sangmin didn't seem to be too happy about Seol being so considerate but didn't try to stop him. After all, the food provided wasn't his to begin with, and there was plenty to go around anyways. Also, some of the food, like the gimbap, would go bad in a few days' time. So they might as well give them away.

And so, even Yi Sungjin joined in, leaving behind only one person.

"What about you, Miss Shin Sang-Ah?"

Shin Sang-Ah remained sitting in the chair. Seol was about to ask why she wasn't joining them, but then, saw her desperately trying to hide her exposed lower half. He realized that her pants were still missing.

"I, I was too busy trying to enter.... I f-forgot...."

"Wouldn't it be okay to go and fetch it now?"

"...I'm scared...."

Seol took off his jacket and handed it over to her. Shin Sang-Ah expressed her deep gratitude, and after wrapping the jacket around her lower waist, she was finally able to stand again.

Afterwards, a silent and uneasy meal commenced.

"...You seem to have a good appetite."

Shin Sang-Ah spoke in a surprised voice while unwrapping the packet of a cold sandwich. She saw Seol swallow hotbars in one go, and then proceed to devour several onigiris as well.

'I wonder, since when did I have this much appetite?'

Seol was also slightly confused by this and tilted his head. Even though this was all instant food from a convenience store, it tasted really good.

The funny thing was that when he was still addicted to gambling, nothing tasted nice to his palette.... Well, the wise old people once said that hunger was king. Seol simply wolfed down the sandwich that Shin Sang-Ah personally took out from the packet without asking another question.

It was around here that a young man who seemed to be around the age of a university student asked Seol.

"Uhm... We should start collecting those coins soon, right?"

"Yes. You need to collect a minimum of 100 before you can pass."

The young man seemed to be waiting for Seol's reply, as he hurriedly continued on.

"That Guide said it, didn't he? That we could revive a dead person."

"Mm? Yes, he did."

"Actually, I came here with a friend of mine, but he... Uhm, so, like, the thing is..."

The ends of his sentence blurred as he kept stealing glances in Seol's direction.

"M-Me too!! I came here with an oppa I know well, but he, he tried to defend me and..."

A girl suddenly jumped into the middle of the conversation, but she too couldn't get to finish her sentence and could only grow tearful in expression. She even stared at Seol with pleading eyes.

Obviously, Seol stopped eating. He was feeling rather flabbergasted. He was already having a headache while wondering how he should go about clearing this mission, so what exactly were these people trying to say here? More importantly...

'What do they want from me now?'

"Hey, you! Let's just have a meal in peace. In peace, I say!"

Hyun Sangmin shouted out loudly in an unhappy voice.

"What do you all think you're doing? Seriously now!"

Hyun Sangmin furrowed his brows rather grandly as if to display how displeased he was.

"Can't you see how tired he is right now? Just let him enjoy his food in peace already! You aren't even supposed to provoke a dog during meals, let alone an actual human!"

"No, I'm just saying..."

"Just saying this and that. But, who cares!? You want to revive someone, then do it yourself, alright? Seriously, all you have to do is to find enough coins, anyway. What do you expect from him, then?"

His abrasive and rude words led the duo's necks to visibly redden from heat. They didn't say anything else as a retort, but the young man simply snorted out as if he was dumbfounded or something similar. The girl too was visibly displeased.

Meanwhile, Hyun Sangmin powerfully squeezed a packet of instant bread and popped it open, hard. If it weren't for Seol signaling with his eyes to take it easy, he might have started physically fighting the two.

The awkward meal eventually came to an end. Seol left the classroom and stepped into the corridor. It was almost time to begin the treasure hunt, but it was also because Hyun Sangmin had called him out there to have a chat.

"I'm telling you this right now, I can't stand people like those two and I won't go around with them."

Hyun Sangmin's voice was rather heated at the moment.

"What useless fucking idiots! You found them a path, and hell, you even fed them food. Yet they want even more? Don't they have any shame!?"

He glared in the direction of the classroom, unable to dissipate his simmering anger. But, he suddenly lowered his voice.

"You should be careful too."



“?”

“From where I'm sitting, it looks like those two think you're an easy mark or something. I apologize if you think I'm overstepping my boundaries. But things like this, you gotta cut off the head right from the beginning, if you know what I mean.”

Seol slowly nodded his head and then shook it slightly. Even if Hyun Sangmin didn't step forward just now, Seol knew he wasn't going to say something nice to those two as well. It would be the same story whether Future Vision was activated or not.

“A person's true nature is only revealed when he's pushed right to the edge, am I right? Now that their bellies are full, and they are feeling all nice and comfy, they are acting like a bunch of spoiled assholes. I don't like guys like Kang Seok, but that bastard's opinions aren't half wrong.”

“...”

“You continue being nice to them, and they'll eventually end up thinking that it's their birthright or something. Well, in any case... Don't ever trust those two stinking bitches, okay?”

[The treasure hunt will now commence.]  
[Remaining time until midnight 05: 29: 59]

People began leaving the classroom one by one, leading Hyun Sangmin to do a couple of fake coughs to clear his throat.

“Well, I'm sure you'll do what's best for you... Anyways, I'm going. See you back here around midnight, okay?”

He lightly tapped Seol on his shoulder, affixed the bag on his back and disappeared through the stairwell.

Almost instantly, the whole floor seemed to come alive with lots of activity. Seeing a person run past him in a hurry, Seol decided to concentrate on finding coins himself. He figured that by amassing as many coins as possible, a new path forward would open up for himself.

[The Diary of an Unknown Student has been updated.]

Seol stood there wondering where he should go first before he pulled out his phone when the message entered his ears.

[Sender: Unknown]

[#4th floor, the corridor in front of the classroom 3-1 (excerpt from the Diary of an Unknown Student)]

—4th floor, classroom 3-1, inside the teacher's podium (x4)

—4th floor, classroom 3-2, inside the 4th desk on the 2nd row (x1)

—4th floor, classroom 3-3, inside the 1st locker (x2)

—4th floor, classroom 3-4, on the window sills facing the corridor (x3)

...

...

“...Oh.”

## Chapter 14

Seeing the well-organized list, Seol's head automatically moved up and down in a nod of approval. He had no idea whose child this unknown student was, but he really did a fantastic job organizing it.

'Most likely a top of the class honor student...'

Now that he had leeway to spare, Seol no longer hurried and simply walked on the corridor in a relaxed gait. He found three, four people busily running around inside classroom 3-2, before spotting Shin Sang-Ah jumping up and down in joy while crying out “Yaaaaay!” inside 3-3. She then froze up like a deer in a headlight as soon as she saw him staring at her through the corridor window.

Seol procured three coins by the window sill of classroom 3-4, then entered 3-5 only to run into someone he didn't expect to find so soon.

It was Yun Seora. She was in the middle of searching every nook and cranny. She only took a cursory glance when she heard the classroom door slide open, before turning her attention back to the treasure hunt. She kept on opening and digging through every single desk in the classroom.

Seeing that, Seol couldn't help but tilt his head in confusion.

'Why is she searching every desk like that? Doesn't she already have a map?'

Seol's thoughts were only half correct. They both possessed maps, but the level of information contained within each one was quite different.

For instance, the information shown on the diary of the unknown student was as concise and precise as it could get, telling him 'classroom 3-5, 2nd desk in the 3rd row, x1' or '6th desk in the 5th row, x4'. However, Yun Seora's map only displayed vague hints, such as 'classroom 3-4, inside a desk'.

Unless it was something like a teacher's podium that would only ever be one in a classroom, she'd have to roll up her sleeves and do some hard labor, as the coins were hidden inside one of the many lockers or desks there.

Yun Seora finally found a single coin and became rather pleased with the result. She then dropped it inside her bag and turned around.

“?”

Then, she spotted Seol casually finding four coins that were hidden inside a desk near the door. She blinked her eyes several times in shock.

'Alright, let's see. Next is....'

Next, Seol headed to the classroom 3-6. By the time Yun Seora recovered from her shock and belatedly followed him, Seol had already swept the place clean.

'Too easy. Way too easy.'

Seol whistled and happily went about his task. He was deeply worried before, yet now that a path had opened up for him all of a sudden, he couldn't help but feel very happy and motivated here.

And so, he ransacked classroom 3-7 in the same manner. But as he was exiting the room, his steps came to an abrupt halt. Yun Seora was standing in front of the doorway.

Her gaze alternated between the wide-open door of a locker and her map, before shifting her gaze upwards to Seol. Although her face still more or less remained impassive as before, her eyes kept blinking nonstop. Inexplicably, Seol felt a wee bit scared, all of a sudden.

“...”

“...”

For some unknown reason, he even felt like he did something he shouldn't have and become a criminal in the process.

'...Maybe, I should leave 3-8 alone....'

He carefully sidestepped past Yun Seora and headed off to 3-9. His steps were quick and urgent, as the feeling of apologetic guilt pricked him.

However, while walking past 3-8.... He couldn't understand why Yun Seora chose to follow him instead of stopping by the classroom.

Seol was now beset with a sense of awkwardness and began to run. Sure enough, he could hear hurried footsteps following him from behind. Now genuinely flustered, Seol quickly entered classroom 3-9.

[Classroom 3-9, on top of the teacher's podium, x3]

[Classroom 3-9, above the TV cabinet, x1]

While Seol was pocketing the coins from the podium, Yun Seora charged forward as fast as an infantryman attacking his enemy and pounced on the TV cabinet. By the time Seol shifted his gaze towards her direction, her arm was already shooting up towards the top of the cabinet.

“...Ah.”

Unfortunately for her, her hand couldn't quite reach up there.

The TV cabinet itself was rather huge, and it easily exceeded two meters in height. In other words, it was tall enough to nearly touch the ceiling. It was obvious that Yun Seora and her height of around the middle of 160 cm would never reach up there.

....Even when she tried to stand on one foot,

....Even when she stood on tiptoes with both of her heels leaving the ground,

....Even when she jumped up and down on her not-so-new shoes.

....Her hand only swung around the empty air, so close and yet so far.

She kept doing that for a while. She could've just used a desk or a chair to stand higher, but...

Seol found her gasping and sweating while struggling like that very funny and adorable, and a short laughter broke out from his lips.

“Fu... Ahahaha...”

Her movements came to a standstill.

Seol hurriedly covered his mouth up, but it was too late by then. Yun Seora's head robotically turned around to face him, her expression dazed and lost.

Seol felt incredibly apologetic once more. He had no excuses to offer. Even though his personality might be on the wrong side of being blunt, he still knew he had made a big mistake just now.

Indeed, he knew that very well, yet....

Seol had to summon every ounce of willpower to suppress the laughter trying to explode out of his mouth. Should he say that the dam had been well and truly burst open? Her reactions of now were utterly, comically different to her normally indifferent expressions. He couldn't help but find it incredibly funny.

Didn't one of the old sayings go along the lines of, 'laughter would get progressively harder to block the more you try?'

'What should I do now?'

Seol felt like he'd explode in a fit of laughter if he tried to say something now. He gulped in lots of air, and while suppressing his laughter in the same way one would hold his breath, walked to the TV cabinet. He retrieved the coin and took a quick glance at her.

'What now? Why is she being so resentful like that?'

Seol carefully presented the recovered coin to her. She briefly looked at it resting on his palm before staring at him without saying anything. However, she seemed to be implying, 'Are you pitying me right now?'

“...”

“...”

A strange but awkward silence flowed between them. Seol was on the brink of going crazy. She needed to either take the damn coin or leave it, but the main thing was that she needed to make up her mind right now and leave the classroom so he'd get to finally break down and laugh his head off. Trying to suppress this laughter was killing him inside.

“T-Take it...”

In the end, Seol couldn't endure it and opened his mouth with great difficulty. However...

“...Ta, tak, tak, tahahahahaha!!!”

The laughter exploded out of his mouth even though he inwardly went, ‘Oh, crap!’

“No, wait! I mean, no! Take, ta, tahahaha...”

Yun Seora's complexion, visible through his desperately waving hands, was incomparably pale.

Now that he finally let the unstoppable laughter out of his system, the unavoidable reality hit him.

Yun Seora seemed rather nonplussed. Although her gaze was slightly lowered, she maintained that impassive expression of hers.

'She's feeling okay, I guess?'

Just as Seol was feeling relieved inwardly...

Sniff.

...He could hear a soft snuffle through her nose. Although the amount was small, her upturned eyes were wet with tears.

It seemed that her pride had been wounded. Her breathing became imperceptibly faster, and her facial muscles began twitching as well. Now that Seol took a closer look, she was also biting her lips ever so slightly.

She eventually wiped her eyes and turned on her heels to leave.

“Uhm...”

Seol continued to watch the silently departing back of Yun Seora, the coin still resting on top of his palm.

\*

On the fifth floor, just after the treasure hunt commenced.

Kang Seok directed his followers into the bathroom and locked the door behind him.

“What's the matter? ....Is it urgent? We gotta find those coins quickly, you know!”

Hearing Yi Hyungsik's words, Kang Seok's lips formed a wry smile.

“What are you so worried about? We can start looking for them later. Or just take it from those who have found some already.”

“You want to steal them?”

“Obviously.”

After hearing Kang Seok's declaration, Yi Hyungsik rubbed his nose. Perhaps still feeling the brunt of the pain experienced not too long ago, a low groan leaked out of his lips. Jeong Minwoo's complexion wasn't so good either.

“That bastard wouldn't sit still though. ....”

“That's right. I think it'll be better for us to collect them the normal way.”

Kang Seok raised his voice in anger after hearing the pathetic replies from his two lackeys.

“Fuck me, you get hit only once and are now shivering like some scared cats? Why don't you just chop off your balls right now? Idiots!”

“....”

“Eh? What's the matter with you two? Are you going to take that shit lying down? Really now?”

“B-But....!”

“I can't let this shit go. I gotta pay him back with interest. 10 times, no, 100 times more. Isn't that how human nature works?”

“...You have a plan or something?”

Jeong Minwoo asked, still sounding not entirely convinced. Kang Seok licked his lips in a rather ominous manner, rechecked that the door was locked, and then beckoned his lackeys to come closer.

“Come on closer.”

Yi Hyungsik and Jeong Minwoo came closer and paid attention.

“We will also go and collect those coins. We will do our best, right until midnight. Got it?”

“Uhm?”

“Keep listening, because this is where it will get interesting.”

Kang Seok lowered his voice to a whisper and explained his plan to the two.

“W-What did you say?”

Yi Hyungsik's mouth opened up wide in surprise.

“What... But, if that happens....”

“Keep your mouth shut.”

Kang Seok growled menacingly, causing Yi Hyungsik to promptly slam his lips shut.

“...Is there a reason for us to go this far?”

“Yeah, there's a fucking reason. That asshole came out swinging first, so it's only correct that we swing back even harder.”

“But... will it even work?”

“It's going to. Look, look!”

Seeing Jeong Minwoo tilt his head this way and that, Kang Seok smirked deeply.

“What do you think this is~?”

Kang Seok then pulled out two pieces of paper from his pocket and waved them in front of his lackeys' faces.

“What's that?”

“He's not the only one who received a starting bonus, know what I mean? If we succeed, then we'll be the ones controlling this place in no time.”

Kang Seok declared triumphantly, before slightly cocking his eyebrow.

“...So?”

While having his hands locked and fidgeting around, Jeong Minwoo shrugged his shoulders. Seeing this, Yi Hyungsik sighed out as if he couldn't help it, either.

“Good. No need to worry about a thing, boys. We only need what, 5, 10 minutes, tops? Now you get it, don't you?”

The two lackeys nodded their heads. Kang Seok began gritting his teeth.

“All we have to do is to defeat that fucker. When we grind that motherfucker to nothing, then we win.”

\*

[Remaining time until midnight: 00: 36: 12]

The end of the treasure hunt was getting nearer.

The total number of hidden coins might have been 3000, but that didn't mean all of them could be found at once. After the coins were discovered and taken away in an area, they respawned after a short amount of time elapsed. Seol got to find that out after seeing the diary of the unknown student getting updated numerous times.

Thanks to that, Seol had to roam the fourth and fifth-floor several times, but eventually, he got to stretch his limbs in the end.

He felt fulfilled. He worked tirelessly and got to find almost 1600 coins in the end. Specifically, a total of 1552 of them. There were twelve survivors participating in the hunt, so this was the same as him monopolizing over half of the available coins.

'I should probably go there now.'

After lightly tapping his bag, Seol headed upstairs. If he wanted to, he could keep finding the coins, but he was mindful of the time needed to use the item draw machine.

Now that cooperating with the others was out of the question, no one knew what could happen later on. So, rather than anxiously wait till it was midnight, he knew it was smart to make some kind of preparations.

As if others were still too busy with the treasure hunt, there was no one besides himself inside the fifth-floor library. The so-called draw machine kind of resembled one of those gacha machines<sup>[1]</sup> one could find commonly placed in front of stationery shops, the only difference being this one was somewhat larger.

[The list of items available to draw]

1. 1 coin to 9 coins: Food, daily necessities, a note from the Guide, medical supplies....
2. 10 coins to 49 coins: Relief supplies, souvenirs, various maps, a letter from the maid....
3. 50 coins to 99 coins: Weapons, defensive items, Survival Points, a brand new, cutting-edge smartphone....
4. 100 coins: Spell balls, random coin box (contains up to 1~499 coins)
5. 199 coins: Sixth-floor access key (100% odds)
6. 300 coins: SPECIAL

Seol fell into deep thought. He needed 100 coins as the usage fee, so he had to deduct that amount. And since he didn't know what would happen later, he had to reserve the amount to purchase the access key as well.

That left 1253 coins to play around with.

So, should he go for the “SPECIAL” four times, or only try that one out a couple times and get some spell balls instead?

He didn't think for too long.

First of all, he found the actions of Kang Seok and his crew rather suspicious. They ran into each other a few times during the hunt, yet they didn't try anything, seemingly only focusing on the treasure hunt and nothing else. However, they couldn't fool his eyes.

'I saw their colors.'

Originally, only Kang Seok emitted the yellowish color, but now, both Yi Hyungsik and Jeong Minwoo emitted the same yellow hue as well. In other words, he had to pay close attention to them. Since their colors were the same, it could only mean that they were cooking up something bad.

So, Seol naturally chose the latter option.

He needed a weapon of some kind. Indeed, he needed an all-conquering ace up his sleeve that could help him out, even if he found himself stuck in the worst possible situation imaginable.

Seol picked up the first coin, but he soon began swearing out inwardly. Why? Because he realized that manually inserting each coin one at the time was unexpectedly a lot of work, that's why.

"Goddamn it...."

A somewhat lengthy time later, Seol packed the drawn items into his bag while massaging his aching fingers.

The end result was actually quite satisfactory.

[Random coin box: contains 81 extra coins]

[Spell ball: Spider Web, x1]

[Random coin box: contains 136 extra coins]

[Spell ball: Poison Fog, x1]

[Spell ball: Ignite, x1]

[Random coin box: contains 292 extra coins]

[Spell ball: Hydrochloric Acid, x1]

[SPECIAL: Mirror of Understanding, x1]

He was especially happy with the results of two of the random boxes. Although it couldn't be called a massive success, he'd happily call that at least a mid-level success.

So he still had 1061 coins remaining. Even if he went for SPECIAL twice, he'd have 162 coins left over.

Seol decided to stop around there. This should be more than enough, but also, time was running out. As soon as the clock struck midnight, the so-called Hour of the Deceased would begin. So he should quietly return to the 'safe zone' and wait until midday tomorrow.

Seol's steps as he walked down the staircase were confident yet easy going. What he didn't expect to find was that classroom 3-1 was still deserted. It was the so-called safe zone, and there were less than 10 minutes before midnight, yet not even an ant could be seen.

Seol stood there wondering until he heard the classroom's sliding door noisily open up behind him.

"Uh? You were here already?"

Seol turned around while inwardly thinking, 'Of course, people should start showing up soon.'

The first one to enter was Hyun Sangmin, but he didn't look so good. A short while afterwards, Shin Sang-Ah trudged inside as well.

"What happened to you? I got nearly fucked up."

"M-Me too...."

"I mean, what the hell? It's like a crazy asshole swept away everything like a hurricane. Why is it this hard to find a single damn coin?"

"You're so right. You know, I shouldn't have been so fired up after finding a few in the beginning. I could only find 70 coins in the end."

Shin Sang-Ah complained while massaging her feet.

"You're worse than me though. I met the 100 coin requirement at least."

Hyun Sangmin's voice was rather weak as well.

Seol thought about it for a long while, before deciding to give Shin Sang-Ah 30 coins. Since he was already treating the remaining 162 as a reserve, he didn't even hesitate.

"Uhm....?"

Shin Sang-Ah's eyes grew larger.

"A-Are you giving these to me?"

The look in her eyes was already well past gratitude and into the territory of 'worshipping a savior'.

"Wha, what the heck? 30 coins in one go?"

"Please, take it. What, you also need some?"

"Holy shit. How many did you manage to find?"

Seol scratched his cheek sheepishly.

"...Enough to survive, I guess?"

Hyun Sangmin's expression showed how dumbfounded he was before he suddenly exploded in a fit of laughter as he fell back.

"Geez, so it was you."

"?"

"I knew it. It just didn't make any sense unless someone already swooped in and picked everything clean. I seriously searched everywhere, dude....! Uh-whew, so the guilty party wasn't Yun Seora, eh."

"Why? What's up with Yun Seora?"

"Mm? I thought you've realized it by now. I was thinking that she knew where all the coins were and was busy hogging them all for herself. I'm pretty sure it's not only me who thinks this way."

That made sense.

Hyun Sangmin added that he was now feeling bad after inwardly slagging her off for being a selfish bitch. This led to Seol to feel an even greater sense of guilt, knowing that he had inconvenienced everyone else, albeit it wasn't his intention to begin with.

[The Hour of the Deceased will commence from this point on.]

Finally, midnight arrived. As if the three of them had made a promise beforehand, they closed their mouths shut at the same time. However, there were only the three of them in the base even now.

"Where's everyone?"

"It's obvious, isn't it?"

Hyun Sangmin answered Seol's query while fishing out a cigarette.

"Even I was wondering whether I should return or not. In any case, I found 100 coins, so I decided to come back here, but.... Others probably aren't thinking the same way."

"You think so?"

"Yeah. They are probably like, just a bit more, a bit more and then.... They should be going crazy trying to find enough for the usage fee alone. And those trying to revive the dead, well, it seems that they don't even care anymore."

So that's how it was.

Although not as much as Seol, Yun Seora must've found a considerable number of coins for herself. What with the two of them sweeping away the majority of the available coins, there shouldn't be a lot remaining right about now.

So it was as obvious as daylight that the competition would only get worse. Seol never expected things to devolve in this manner while he was busy collecting the coins. No, he didn't even bother to think about it at all.

"Oh well. If they are worried about their lives, I'm sure they'll eventually show up sooner or later."

Hyun Sangmin murmured while sucking on his cigarette.

"What... are you going to do?"

Shin Sang-Ah asked while cautiously studying Seol's reaction.

Seol felt contradicting emotions in his mind. He didn't care much about Kang Seok and his crew, but when he thought about Yun Seora and Yi Sungjin, he couldn't help but feel uncomfortable.

"I guess... I should find the ones that I can."

"Yes. Let me help you."

Shin Sang-Ah agreed immediately while her expressions showed how relieved she was. Seeing this, Seol became ever so slightly curious about her Status window. And so, just as he was about to take a peek into it...

"Oww, goddamn it."

....Hyun Sangmin slowly stood up from his seat.

“I don't like this at all, but.... Yeah, I will lend a helping hand too. A promise is a promise, right?”

He spoke as if letting out a long groan and playfully pointed towards the door with his chin.

“Shall we go, Leader?”

....It happened then.

[1] A type of vending machine that typically dispenses capsuled toys

## Chapter 15

The fifth floor.

At the end of a corridor lined with various classrooms, there was a laboratory. Not one ray of light could escape from the resolutely-shut front door to the lab— only the soft rustling noises managed to intermittently leak out.

A certain teen boy was currently rummaging through the lab's interior. He cleared away the chemistry sets and other glass apparatuses on top of the tables and pulled out all of the books stored on the bookshelves. He was desperately searching for something.

But as time continued to tick by, the signs of anxiety slowly but surely crept into every little action he performed.

*Kiik.*

Suddenly, there was a noise.

However, the teen boy, Yi Sungjin, couldn't hear it due to the fact that he was turning a table upside down at that very moment. He intensely glared at and looked through all the fallen and shattered laboratory apparatuses. And he moved on, not even slowing down briefly to express his disappointment. He continued to mutter, ‘Coins, I need to find more coins.’

He deliberately didn't switch on the light. He thought that it'd be easier to spot those clear-yellow coins if the surroundings were darker.

*Tak.... Tak....*

Again, there were foreign noises. It was soft and low enough to miss if one didn't pay attention.

Yi Sungjin didn't pay any attention. His mind was full of thoughts of reviving his dead sister, Yi Seol-Ah. The Guide definitely said it— he would be able to bring his sister back to life if he got to amass lots of coins.

“Noona....”

The mental shock he received after witnessing the dead Yi Seol-Ah being pulled out was truly enormous. Although everything below her waist remained relatively fine, her upper torso was ripped to shreds and not much of her remained. Just thinking about his undeservedly murdered sister, his body seemingly shook off any hints of growing fatigue and regained its vigor once more.

It was said that the heavens would help those who helped themselves, and he soon discovered an object gleaming softly inside a sink. Yi Sungjin's eyes shot wide open and he reflexively reached out.

Unfortunately.... he was in too much of a hurry.

“Ah!”

The coin that he worked so hard to find, slipped out of his grasp and fell to the floor. It rolled and slid under the desk. The boy instantly jumped down and reached out with all his might, finally catching the wayward coin before it disappeared for good. Only then did he catch his breath again.

Outside the lab's windows, the world had become pitch dark. Only the cold, uncaring moonlight seeped through the glass and faintly illuminated the interior.

“Whew....”

It was only one coin, but this was clear evidence that his concerted effort was not in vain.

Time was already well past midnight, yet he still had a long road ahead. He didn't have the time to worry about the Hour of Deceased. No, he had to find more coins. Lots more. Yi Sungjin clenched the lone coin in his hand tightly and gritted his teeth.



*Tak....! Tak....!*

Yi Sungjin was about to push himself up from the floor but froze up instantly when he heard the noise. The noise seemed to brush by his senses, perhaps tauntingly calling out to him. His arms became tense and taut. His hands pressing down on the floor felt the deathly chill and goosebumps spread all over him.

In an instant, fifty thousand different thoughts raced past his brain. The sixteen-and-a-bit-year-old teen boy very slowly and cautiously raised his head. And when his sights were raised from the ash-colored floor just a tad, he forgot to breathe.

Just below the desk, he could see a pair of small feet, and above them, long, shapely legs. Legs, that trembled and stuttered as if they might falter at any moment.

Yi Sungjin was about to scream, but his eyes opened wider before his mouth could leak out a sound. Although he only saw the lower half, he found it rather familiar somehow. And when he recognized the blue skirt with dried blood on it, the boy's eyes opened even wider.

“N-Noona!?”

The stuttering legs stopped. And they slowly spun around as if they were looking for someone.

“Wwwwhhheeeerrreee....”

The voice sounded awful and Yi Sungjin was immediately repulsed by it, but to him, that wasn't important. He stood right up and....

“Noona? Is it you, Noona!? I'm here! N....”

...But he couldn't finish what he wanted to say.

The figure that had its back towards him and was slowly turning around was quite similar to Yi Seol-Ah. It had the same long flowing hair, and, and....

“N-Noona....?”

Something was wrong. Very wrong. He couldn't put his finger on it. Yet, this figure resembled his older sister so much...

Yi Sungjin's instincts were overcome with this hard to explain terror.

“Sssuuuunngggg-----Jjjjjiiiiinnnn--aaahhh.... Hhhhuuuu....”

*Plop.*

Suddenly, her neck skin wobbled and stretched like an empty sack. Only then did the boy understand the reason for the sense of disharmony—the ratio of her body parts didn't quite match up.

“N-Noona....”

He wanted to ask. He desperately wanted to ask why her body looked like that. He desperately wanted to ask if she was really his sister. However, his voice refused to come out.

“Hhhhuuuurrryyyy....”

As if this thing wanted to tell him something, the abrasive and dirty voice continued to leak out. ‘She’ had completely turned around now and was facing him, and when Yi Sungjin saw the empty eye sockets, his deeply-held breaths exploded out from his lungs.

“Euh-hark!!!”

Would stitching together several worn-out mops resemble that thing? Within the many holes found on its skin, dried-up clumps of blood and rotting meat scraps were seemingly shoved in together.

The meshed and torn flesh seemed to have hardened after the bits were forced together to their supposedly correct destinations, while the ripped skin seemed like it was sewn back together and was draped over whatever was underneath. It was truly a hellish, nightmarish appearance.

Piecing together the torn-away bits of limbs and flesh one by one would probably net a better looking, more palatable result than this.

“Euh, uwaaaaahhh!!”

Yi Sungjin unconsciously stumbled back, until his heels got entangled and he fell down on his butt. His legs madly kicked the air as he tried to widen the gap between himself and that thing.

It was then that the comparatively-normal looking legs stopped approaching him. ‘Her’ misaligned jaw that looked like it might fall off at any given moment began trembling up and down.

“L, llllssstteeennn... Hhhuurrryyy...”

Yi Sungjin's mind fell further into disarray. He thought that he'd be dead meat by now, yet why did this creature stop advancing? And, what was it trying to say to him?

It was here that a crazy thought popped up in his mind. He summoned what little courage he could.

“...Is, is it you, Noona?”

“...”

“Noona? Really? It is you, Noona!?”

“...Hhhuurrryyy... Sssttaannnddd...”

“...Hurry? Stand?”

While keeping his gaze firmly fixed on the creature, Yi Sungjin slowly got back up.

“Gggooo... oouuttsssiideee... Ffiiinnnddd...”

“Go outside? Find? You mean coins? Are you talking about coins? Don't worry. I, I haven't given up, and I'm still looking for them! I'll definitely bring you back...”

The thing shook its head with some difficulty. It was as if it was saying that's not it.

“Tittt... cccooommmiinnnggg... Ssoooooonnn...”

It weakly raised an arm somehow and pointed at the door.

“Cccooommmiinnnggg... tthhheeyyy aaarrreee....”

Although it was hard to understand what it was saying, the boy still got to realize something. ‘She’ was saying he needed to get out before something else showed up.

“Noona!! It is you, right!?”

“...”

“I'll definitely bring you back to life!! That is why...”

“Sssuunnnggg----Jjiiinnn---aaahhh...”

Yi Sungjin's tearful voice seemingly caused the thing's shoulders to tremble as well. From its empty eye sockets, blood-colored liquid slowly oozed out.

“Mmmuussttt...llliivveee... Oookkaaayyy...”

It was then.

Uwwwaaaahhhccckk!!!

An ear-shattering scream coming from somewhere outside the lab shook the corridor hard.

\*

“Mom!?”

Shin Sang-Ah jumped up in fright. Seol and Hyun Sangmin too wordlessly stared at each other.

“...Hey man, did you hear that?”

Seol nodded his head.

“Goddamn it! Why the hell can't they just come back after finding enough for themselves!?”

“Where did that come from?”

“Dunno. Could be from the fifth floor...”

Hyun Sangmin took off his cap and scratched his head.

Seol carefully slid open the door. The darkened corridor seemed rather ominous and eerie.

Although he had exited from the classroom, Seol had no idea what he should do now, since things were happening seemingly out of the blue. In the end, he chose to rely on his Nine Eyes once more.

The entire fourth-floor corridor was bathed in a green hue. Seeing this, Seol's gut feeling told him that the scream came from the fifth floor.

The three of them quickly climbed up the stairs. But soon after arriving on the fifth floor, they nearly collided into a teen boy running through the corridor. It was Yi Sungjin, and when he saw it was Seol, the boy's eyes opened wide.

"Mister Yi Sungjin? What's going on?"

"H-Hyung!"

Yi Sungjin suddenly grabbed Seol tightly.

"I, I saw her!! I saw Noona just now!!"

"Your noona!?"

But, how could that be? Yi Seol-Ah was already dead. She was the first one to lose her life back in the assembly hall, after all. Seol carefully appraised the kid, but he didn't seem to be suffering from any form of mental duress.

Seeing Seol's expression, Yi Sungjin quickly shook his head.

"No, no! Hang on! It's definitely her! Her hair, her dress, everything..."

Yi Sungjin sounded frantic and confused, but his words did make Seol think for a minute. Then, a thought of 'could it be?' brushed past his brain.

"Was it really Yi Seol-Ah?"

"Yes!! Her... appearance, it was a bit weird, but, but, she told me to quickly get out of there, and..."

'You son of a...' Seol somehow managed to swallow down the rising tide of curse words.

'The so-called Deceased are actually the people who died earlier in the day, aren't they?'

If what Yi Sungjin said was correct, then this could be the only explanation.

[The lock of the sixth-floor entrance has been disabled.]

[The gate will be activated in 30 minutes' time.]

[The second-floor metal barriers have been disabled.]

It was then that alarm bells began ringing out loudly from their smartphones.

"W-what the hell?"

Hyun Sangmin cried out in shock after checking out these rather unexpected messages.

"What the fuck!! Which insane motherfucker did this!?"

"What, what happened?"

Shin Sang-Ah asked Seol, but obviously, he too had no idea. Only that, his gut feeling was busy telling him that this wasn't the end, and there was more trouble yet to come.

'No. It'll be fine.'

The situation had suddenly turned a little chaotic, but Seol quietly controlled his emotions to calm them down. Running around like a headless chicken would only intensify the level of confusion. Besides, didn't he already make preparations for events such as this one?

For now, he decided to put aside the unanswered questions as there was something he needed to confirm first. Although he thought that there was a possibility that his suspicions might not be correct.

"Were you the one screaming just now, Yi Sungjin?"

"Eh? N-No. Not me. Right, I also came here after hearing that..."

"I, I thought it was a woman's voice..."

Shin Sang-Ah anxiously spoke up.

“In any case, it's not this kid, so what are we going to do next?”

Hyun Sangmin gritted his teeth.

“If we're going to search, then we should split up. Or, we go back right now.”

Seol had found one of the two people on his mind, so going back now to classroom 3-1, the safe zone, didn't sound like a bad idea.

“How about we split up into two groups of two and three? I mean, things could get dangerous.”

Seol was going to suggest going back, but then, Yi Sungjin took the initiative first and voiced his opinion. Seol looked at the boy with a surprised expression, and Yi Sungjin became somewhat sheepish.

“Ohh, I, uh... I also want to help you.”

“It's past midnight, thus things will definitely get dangerous. Also, the sixth-floor access has been granted as well. Returning to the safe zone might not be such a bad idea.”

“No. It's just that, I think my noona wanted me to find something...”

Although he said that, Yi Sungjin's voice suggested that he wasn't entirely convinced of it himself.

‘Find something?’

Seol's gaze sharpened. The surroundings became dyed in green. However, the color from one single spot dissipated almost immediately. The spot with no color whatsoever was the girl's toilet.

The light was switched off inside the toilet, but Seol confirmed a spot of blood on the floor right in front of the door. He slowly pushed it open. As if his senses were already familiarised with it, his nose reacted to the faint whiff of blood in the air.

By turning on the light, the group could see the interior of the bathroom quite clearly.

“Yun Seora?”

The figure collapsed on the bathroom floor was none other than Yun Seora. Her huddled and crumpled body was shaking and convulsing uncontrollably.

Seol got closer to her and ended up frowning deeply from what he saw. Even Hyun Sangmin issued a stunned gasp.

“What... What happened to her arm...?”

It was just as he said— Yun Seora's right forearm was completely mangled. As if someone had stabbed a knife and then went to town on the limb, the flesh on her arm was utterly torn up and destroyed. The bleeding was quite considerable too, and even her bones were visible to the naked eye.

“Miss Yun Seora? Miss Yun Seora!!”

Seol called out her name, but she didn't respond, simply convulsing over and over again.

“Please, move aside!”

Shin Sang-Ah hurriedly knelt down and took off her shirt. She ripped her top up, then proceeded to wrap the fabric around Yun Seora's shoulder and under her arm, and then securely tightened it. Her movements were well-practiced and quick as if she had performed actions like this countless times before. She then pushed open Yun Seora's eyelids and checked her eyes. A deep frown etched on her forehead.

“She's going through a shock. She will die soon if we let her be like this.”

“S—she will die!?”

“Yes! We need to do something! Anything!”

Shin Sang-Ah shouted out while repeatedly opening and closing Yun Seora's hand. However, Hyun Sangmin was comparatively calm as he spoke up.

“Since you've been on the treasure hunt for a while, you should know it. There ain't no infirmary on either the fourth or the fifth floor.”

“The item draw.”

Seol spoke up and the attention of the three was rapidly drawn to him. Now that they thought about it, 'medical supplies' was one of the listed

items on the draw machine.

“What do we need to draw from there?”

Only after asking this question, Seol realized that it was the wrong one. From the onset, no one knew what would come out of the machine.

“I’ll go and bring whatever comes out.”

Seol stood up while slinging his bag over his shoulder.

“What? You going alone?”

“What’s the matter?”

“Let’s not do it that way. How about this? This kiddo here and Miss will move Yun Seora over to the safe zone. Meanwhile, you spin that damn draw machine, and if we think we got the right crap, I’ll take it back to the safe zone. I’ll act as the go-between if need be.”

Seol found this suggestion quite logical, so although he knew that time was of the essence, he still nodded his head in appreciation. He was inwardly surprised as well—now that the metal barriers on the second floor were gone, that Gaekgwi monster would definitely show up sooner or later. Even then, Hyun Sangmin was keeping his promise.

“Let’s hurry up!”

Hyun Sangmin pushed Seol’s back.

Entrusting Yun Seora to the remaining two, Seol and Hyun Sangmin headed straight to the library. Perhaps fortunately, they didn’t run into the Deceased or the other people.

Unfortunately though, the medical supplies didn’t want to come out. They got to draw plenty of food and daily necessities. They even ended up receiving the ‘note from the Guide’. Sometime later, all they had to show for their effort was a couple of rolls of gauze, a bottle of antiseptic, some ointments, and a few other things. They were neither here nor there.

“Let me just take these along for now. What about you?”

“Go on ahead.”

“Okay. Don’t strain yourself, though. Ah, right. As soon as I deliver these, I’ll come back here right away. If I don’t show up within two minutes, then that means something bad has happened to me.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll rescue you.”

“Hah! Well, thanks for the sentiment, but I’m not playing here. I’m being serious.”

Hyun Sangmin was indeed dead serious, and he left the library like a streak of lightning.

Seol concentrated on drawing from the machine. He was quite confident that he’d be able to kill this Gaekgwi monster if it showed up. Right now, he wanted to procure medical supplies if it meant he could help just a bit more.

If Yun Seora died, then that would be the end of the road there.

He thought like this and continued to move his hands without rest until his movements suddenly came to a halt.

‘...Why am I doing this?’

She was a complete stranger to him. So what did it matter if she died or not? Sure, it would be a pity if she did die, but was there a reason for him to go this far? While even wasting his hard-earned coins?

He couldn’t understand it. He thought that it’d be nice if he could activate Future Vision right about now. Seol hesitated, yet returned to spinning the draw machine.

And so, he finally got his hands on some rolls of compression bandages, a hemostat, as well as vials of morphine. But then...

Seol realized that something was off. He thought that it was already well past the two-minute mark, yet Hyun Sangmin hadn’t returned.

“...”

Seol felt a certain sense of anxiety creeping in—after all, he thought that Hyun Sangmin was joking around and thus, didn’t pay much attention back then.

Now that he more or less got what he needed, Seol put them all in his bag and left the library.

When he climbed down the staircase and arrived on the fourth floor, he ended up running into quite an unexpected sight.

## Chapter 16

Seven people, consisting of Shin Sang-Ah, Yi Sungjin, Hyun Sangmin, and Yun Seora, as well as the three people Seol shared food with earlier on, were standing in the corridor right outside classroom 3-2. They seemed to be unable to enter the safe zone.

That wasn't the end, however.

Seol found three rather familiar figures outside classroom 3-1. Yi Hyungsik and Jeong Minwoo stood triumphantly, while Kang Seok was sitting on a chair, looking quite relaxed and pleased with himself.

"You finally showed up."

Kang Seok raised his hand and greeted Seol. Ignoring him, Seol walked closer and spotted Hyun Sangmin's darkened expression. Anger was evident on his face as well. Shin Sang-Ah also looked like she'd just had about enough of those three, too.

"...They say it's a spell that restricts access."

Hyun Sangmin glanced at Seol and groaned out.

'A spell that can restrict access?'

Just as he finished thinking this, Seol's steps came to a halt. No, that wasn't quite right—he couldn't go forward as if there was an invisible wall blocking his progress.

Seol lightly tapped on the seemingly empty air. Knock, knock. There was nothing in front of him, yet the sensation of knocking on a cement wall was transmitted to his hand.

"You're wasting your time. You see, I got this as a starting bonus. No one can enter without my permission."

Kang Seok slowly fidgeted around with his fingers. There was a half-torn piece of paper held between his index and middle finger.

"You haven't forgotten that my Mark was silver, right? Mister high-and-mighty Gold Mark."

Kang Seok giggled insidiously. Seol frowned slightly, instead.

"You opened the door to the sixth floor, didn't you?"

"Bingo."

"And why?"

"Mm? I got the key through the drawing machine. Don't you know that you will definitely receive the key if you spend 199 coins?"

Of course, Seol knew that. But, he was curious about the reason why Kang Seok would waste his coins getting that key in the first place. After all, what with Seol and Yun Seora taking away almost all the coins, Kang Seok and his goons couldn't have had the easiest time searching for the coins themselves.

It would have been tough just finding enough for their gate usage fee, so why...

"Ahh..."

It was then, a hypothesis formed in Seol's head. He reflexively turned his head around to look behind him—at the unconscious Yun Seora.

"Yup, as expected! I knew you were a smart guy!"

Kang Seok exclaimed in a display of pleasant surprise.

"Actually, I have to admit that this was a gamble with low odds of success. I mean, in order for us to succeed, two things had to happen, you know what I mean? If you had chosen never to leave this safe zone in the first place, then my plan would've been all for nothing."

"What are you saying?"

"However, I definitely knew you'd crawl out of here. Seriously now, a nice gentleman like you wouldn't just sit still on your ass after hearing that loud scream, am I right?"

"..."

“As for Yun Seora... Well, I was planning to approach her when the time was right, but for some reason, she was getting really fired up trying to find more coins. Oh, well! It was a good thing for us in the end, so it doesn't matter, right?”

Hearing this, the pieces finally fell to their intended places.

The first step of Kang Seok's plan was to get the sixth-floor access key. With three of them working together, finding 199 coins wouldn't have been that difficult.

After acquiring the key, Kang Seok kept a close eye on the situation.

From the very beginning, he never planned to hit Seol. No, he planned to attack Yun Seora the moment she revealed that she was in possession of the map.

The timing was important, but the main variable was still Yun Seora. Kang Seok had to try something, anything to separate her from Seol.

The original plan was to have one of their members assault either Yi Sungjin or some other poor sucker to draw Seol away, and in the meantime, the remaining two would attack the isolated Yun Seora. Her personality meant that even if there was some kind of an incident unfolding somewhere, she'd not care and thus, not make a move herself.

However, Yun Seora was focused on finding more coins well beyond the midnight mark. How could this situation be any better for Kang Seok and his goons?

So, the trio assaulted Yun Seora as she entered the girl's restroom. After robbing her of her coins, they went to the sixth floor before Seol reached the bathroom, and opened the door. Then, when Seol was still on the fifth floor, they came back down to the safe area and activated the restriction spell.

“All of you have lost your damned minds!”

Shin Sang-Ah loudly swore at them.

“You insane bastards! You crippled a person to this degree, just for some measly coins?”

“Nope~ That wasn't my original intention. I just wanted to knock her out. I swear that was all.”

Kang Seok defended himself as if he was being wrongly accused of the crime.

“But then, that girl was so damn persistent, you know what I mean? She grabbed onto the bag and didn't want to give it up, and that really pissed me off. So, that's why...”

The end of Kang Seok's sentence trailed off; Jeong Minwoo standing next to him giggled unsightly, and from seemingly out of nowhere, produced a dagger and performed a stabbing motion in the air. He too was an Invited, albeit as a Bronze Mark.

*KKKIIIEEHFFF—!!!*

With an exquisite ill-timing, a devilish roar resounded out from the distance. The complexions of almost everyone present paled. The very first monster they encountered upon the start of this journey, the one that gave them such a nightmare—the Gaekgwi was climbing up to where they were at this precise moment.

“Wow! Sounds like that thing is really pissed off, isn't it? Oh, well. It's been locked out down below all this time, so there's that.”

Kang Seok and his two cronies looked extremely relaxed.

“If you're waiting for the end of this spell's duration... Well, I feel like I should inform you right now, that you all should just give up.”

“Are you saying it'll last forever?”

“No ways. It's not that crazy of a cheat item. Not only the duration, but the size of the effective area is limited, actually. If I were to increase the area to its maximum permitted width, then it'll probably last around 8 minutes, tops? ...But what do you think will happen if I only keep the area to half its maximum size? Like, only around this part of the corridor.”

Kang Seok pointed once each towards the safe zone's front and rear entrances. Seol didn't reply. There was no need to after all; Kang Seok was implying that, when the spell's covered area decreased in size, the duration of the spell would increase instead.

“With that Gaekgwi coming up, you wouldn't be able to go to the sixth floor yourself, though?”

“Oh, that? You don't have to worry. You see, I'm a really lucky bastard. Look here.”

Kang Seok pulled out another piece of paper and waved it around the air.

“See? I've got another paper talisman with a spell written on it~!”

Seeing how he was playfully teasing Seol and others like that, it seemed this must've been his natural-born talent. Seol couldn't help but think that the reason the bastard turned out this way was all thanks to suffering a bad prenatal development or something similar.

"Please! Let us in!"

Someone behind Seol shouted out. It was the young man who tried to sneakily ask Seol to revive his dead friend, right before the treasure hunt commenced.

"Mm?"

"I, I haven't done anything wrong to you, have I?"

Hearing that, Seol couldn't help but chuckle bitterly.

'Are you trying to imply that I did something wrong then?'

Forming a fake expression that screamed "I didn't think about that!", Kang Seok opened his eyes wide and began rubbing his chin in a show of deep deliberation. Then, as if he was being a benevolent benefactor, he murmured rather loudly.

"Yes, indeed.... It could be so. I'm sure it's unfair to you like this. Fine! Good, good! You, you, and you. You three, I'll grant entry."

The trio glanced at each other, and then without any hesitation, ran forward. It was a repeat of the time when they were entering the second-floor safe zone as soon as the metal barrier was lowered. Only after rushing inside the safe zone did they begin spitting out sighs of relief.

And so, the moment Kang Seok had been waiting for finally came. He gazed at the others who remained outside the barrier with a relaxed smile.

'Huh....'

Seol inwardly issued a disappointed groan. It seemed that the lessons taught on the second floor weren't enough for these idiots.

'It's a good thing that I made preparations.'

Seol slowly reached inside his pockets, getting ready to finish this nonsense once and for all; but, before he could....

"So, what about you, little guy? Or you, Hyun Sangmin?"

Seol's hand stopped just before he could grasp the spell balls. It was unknown what he was thinking at the moment while he withdrew his empty hand from the pocket.

"You wanna die like this? Hey, you want to die to that Gaekgwi monster, the one that murdered your pretty and kind sister? Siblings, eh? Is it like, 'get one and you get another' kinda deal?"

"I, I...."

"Hey, man! Miss Yi Seol-Ah must be turning in her grave. I'm pretty sure she's fervently praying for me to save your hide right now."

Kang Seok confirmed that Yi Sungjin was trembling like a leaf, and then shifted his attention to Hyun Sangmin.

"And you... You did what you could already, right? No, wait a minute— could it be that you're feeling a guilty conscience or something? What the? I thought you were a realistic bastard like me? Was I wrong?"

"...."

"Just come in already. There ain't nobody here to tell you shit."

Kang Seok's words were as slick and seductive as the whispers of a viper. After hearing those persuasive words, Hyun Sangmin and Yi Sungjin kept staring at each other before shifting their gaze to a single man.

However, Seol simply stood there in silence.

The first one to make his move was Yi Sungjin. He resolutely shut his mouth and trudged onwards. He walked past the invisible barrier and entered the safe zone.

"Keke.... Still so young, yet so impressively decisive. Very good. You could even become a general in the future."

Kang Seok lightly tapped on the youth's shoulder. The boy didn't say anything and entered the classroom.

"However, you are more loyal than you look, aren't you, Hyun Sangmin?"

Even then, Seol didn't show any response. Seeing this, Hyun Sangmin licked his lips regretfully and pulled his cap low. After spitting out a low groan, he began moving as well.



“...Sorry.”

....After leaving behind that single word.

“Oh, hang on. How about giving me a smoke first?”

Kang Seok stopped Hyun Sangmin before the latter could enter the barrier.

“Don't forget the light.”

Only after Hyun Sangmin personally lit the cigarette for Kang Seok, was he allowed to enter. Kang Seok sucked in the cigarette smoke once; he then proceeded to feign shock after 'finding' Shin Sang-Ah standing there.

“What's the matter with you now? Did you become an exhibitionist all of a sudden after taking your pants off just once?”

Shin Sang-Ah gritted her teeth. Yi Sungjin and Hyun Sangmin's desertion was quite shocking, but there was a far graver matter of her own safety to worry about here. Thinking back to the confrontation that happened in the assembly hall, and the humiliation she had to suffer on the second floor, she just knew there was no way Kang Seok would make things easy for her now.

However, Kang Seok proceeded to shatter her expectations as if he was trying to show off.

“Hey, now! I was just joking, you know. Just a joke. I can tell that you ripped your shirt to stem Yun Seora's blood loss. That is commendable. But still, you keep standing there and you might come down with the flu, you know?”

Kang Seok then took off his cardigan and pushed it towards Shin Sang-Ah's direction. He waved it around slowly as if telling her to come and take it. She couldn't help but grow suspicious.

“You, doing this again. ...!”

“Nope. I'm not trying to lead you on. I promise.”

“But, why....?”

“Stop trying to make me say the obvious things. Take this and put it on, already. Don't you get it?”

“...Huh?”

“Man, this lady is really slow on the uptake, huh. I'm saying, you can also enter. Do I have to spell it out for you too?”

Shin Sang-Ah lightly swallowed her saliva. Why was he suddenly acting like this?

She could just about understand the reason why— most likely, they must've held a deep grudge against Seol, all because of what happened on the second floor.

Powerful indecision gripped her at that moment. Meanwhile, Seol still showed no signs of movement.

Shin Sang-Ah stood between Seol and Kang Seok as she weighed her options before a strange light flashed on her face for the briefest of brief moments. And then....

“Argh, my arm hurts.”

Just as Kang Seok lowered the offered cardigan just a tad, she moved her feet.

“That's right. That's right.”

She took a quick glance at Seol a couple of times, but her feet never stopped moving. Before long, she crossed the barrier. A strange smile formed on Kang Seok's face.

“Oh? So you really came, eh?”

“What do you mean....?”

“No, no. You did well. Take this before my arm falls off, will you?”

Kang Seok raised a small fuss while waving the cardigan around. Shin Sang-Ah glanced at Seol one more time, before reaching out. Just as her hand touched the offered clothing though, Kang Seok suddenly grabbed her arm and pulled her in close.

“Mommy!?”

Like someone falling face first, she fell forward and ended up in the still-seated Kang Seok's embrace.

“You like looking for your mom a lot, don't you?”

“W-what are you doing!?”

“Stay still, will you? You came here knowing this would happen already.”

“I, I...!”

*Thud, thud...*

The low vibration from the floors below continued to get closer. Shin Sang-Ah's stiff body flinched ever so slightly. Kang Seok's hand lightly patted her back, then slowly crept lower, past her slender waistline and eventually arrived at her petite, round rump.

“Or... You'd rather go back outside?”

She began to tremble even more when Kang Seok whispered in her ear. Gradually, all strength seemed to seep out from her. Even when he began roughly kneading her butt like rice dough, Shin Sang-Ah didn't mount any form of resistance.

“Now, do you feel like listening to what I'm saying?”

“...”

“You don't want to answer?”

“...Y-yes...”

When Shin Sang-Ah replied with honorifics, Kang Seok's complexion brightened to reflect his happiness.

“Uh-whew. My little bitch, look how soft and fluffy your ass is.”

*Slap, slap.*

Kang Seok lightly slapped her rear, causing Shin Sang-Ah to squeeze her eyes shut. Quite surprisingly though, she then carefully wrapped her arms around Kang Seok's back and dug deeper into his embrace. Seeing this, Yi Hyungsik and Jeong Minwoo wolf-whistled quite loudly. Kang Seok burst out in boisterous laughter when she began gently rubbing her cheek to his.

“Very good. See? If you had behaved this way from the beginning, everything would've been simpler. If you start making me feel happier by showing some aegyo<sup>[1]</sup> and stuff from now on, I'm gonna treat you right, you know?”

While constantly enjoying the riches of Shin Sang-Ah's body, Kang Seok then pointed his chin outside the barrier.

There were only two people remaining there— Seol and the currently-unconscious Yun Seora.

“So, how does it feel to be betrayed? Why don't you enlighten us, Mister Gold Mark?”

[Kang Seok's Status Window]

[1. General Information]

Summoned date: March 16th, 2017

Marking grade: Silver

Sex/Age: Male/29

Height/Weight: 178.8 cm/ 72.6 kg

Current condition: Good

Class: LV. 0 (Invited)

Nationality: Republic of Korea (Area 1)

Affiliation: N/A

Alias: N/A

[2. Traits]

1. Temperament:

—Maverick (Tries to do things the way he likes, regardless of others.)

—Self-centered (Vigorously pursues his own personal gains only.)

## 2. Aptitude:

—Gift of gab (Possesses great talent at talking and making speeches.)

—Sadism (Feels sexual gratification only after inflicting physical or psychological pain on another person.)

## [3. Physical Level]

Strength: Low (Intermediate)

Endurance: Intermediate (Low)

Agility: Low (High)

Stamina: Low (High)

Mana: Low (High)

Luck: Intermediate (Low)

Remaining ability points: 0

Seol was busy looking at Kang Seok's Status Window. He felt like he could understand just a little where it all went south for this idiot. Besides that 'gift of gab', he seemed to be suffering from a few noticeably negative traits.

“Hey, friend.”

Seol's brows furrowed slightly at that. ‘A friend, huh.’

“I feel really sorry for you.”

Kang Seok seemed to be genuinely sorry for Seol, judging from his facial expression.

“Why do you insist on living like that? Mm?”

He lightly tapped on Shin Sang-Ah's head and continued on.

“You don't seem to have any morals.”

“Morals?”

Kang Seok began chortling as if he had heard something funny.

“Aigoo~ my friend.... Ah, I get it, I get it. Really! There is a reason to be mindful when we're on Earth. There are laws and stuff, and if I don't follow them, I will end up behind bars. However....”

Kang Seok pointed at the ground below.

“However, this isn't Earth. Meaning, there's no reason for me to stay the same here. You too are an Invited, so you should know this by now, no? We're going to a brand new world? My ass! In the end, this is all just a fucking game, man! A game. And you're supposed to enjoy playing games.”

“A game, huh.”

“Yup. So, what's the point of keeping up with your morals here? Like, what's the fucking point of being the best, kindest, and the fairest in this place? There is no one here who gives a shit about those things. Only 'I' counts. I'm telling you, nobody cares.”

“Ahh, aheuck!”

Kang Seok suddenly grabbed Shin Sang-Ah's hair and yanked, causing her to gasp out in pain.

“Look at her. She's your proof. She only latched onto you for a bit so that she can leech off of you. I mean, you saw it with your own two eyes, right? How did she react when the situation changed just now?”

Shin Sang-Ah slowly averted her gaze.

“So, the point here is that, don't suffer losses. You have that much talent, and I can tell you got a quick brain in that head of yours too. So why

couldn't you just close your eyes and commit to the program?"

Seol continued to listen while standing there, his arms across his chest.

"You want to look after these weaklings? What a load of fucking bull crap. You think all those with power are evil, and weaklings are all pure, nice folks? You still think these losers are nice?"

Kang Seok passionately spat out his words.

"I can see that you've received some mental damage just now. But, you know what, don't be too discouraged, man. That's how~ the world operates. You're supposed to exceed the 'haves', and step on the 'have-nots'— that's the only way you can survive. You stay mindful of this guy and that girl, then sooner or later, you'll be bitten by all sorts of stray mutts. Only you'd end up dead."

Seol slowly closed his eyes. The words coming out of Kang Seok was something he too was thinking about recently.

"You still don't get it? What happened to Yi Seol-Ah earlier? And what's happening to you now?"

"..."

"You see, it's not that the 'one who's supposed to make it' are making it, but those who are willing to make it, are making it. Also, it's not that those supposed to fail are failing, it's just that they are destined to never make it. Simple."

"...Those who are destined to make it..."

"That's right!"

Kang Seok shouted out of the blue and extended his hand.

"Now that I've talked this much, I'm sure you get it now. So."

"?"

"Like true men, why don't we let bygones be bygones? As a symbol of starting over.... Ahh!"

As if he remembered something, Kang Seok withdrew his hand.

"I still should make you apologize, though."

Seol's eyes narrowed.

"An apology, huh."

"That's right, an apology. The spot you sucker punched me still hurts, you know?"

*Whew—*

Kang Seok spat out a sigh and loosened his shoulders.

"If you've really changed the way you think, I'm sure it's not that difficult for you to do something as small as making an apology, right?"

Seol quietly stared at Kang Seok.

"Well, it's a simple matter, anyway. All you have to say is one word— sorry. Then, we can become true friends afterward."

Seol took a glance at Yun Seora.

"Not her. You gotta leave her there."

Kang Seok must've noticed Seol's gaze because he spoke in no uncertain terms.

"I'll have to refuse your apology if it comes from a mindset where you're thinking that you can't help it if it means saving Yun Seora. You see, I really hate hypocrites."

Seol shifted his gaze away and then placed his left hand on the invisible barrier.

"...So..."

Kang Seok smirked; his mouth opened up progressively wider in a smile as if his long-held wish was finally getting granted.

"...So..."

Seol sounded as if he was desperately squeezing out his voice 'unwillingly'. Like a kid opening up his birthday present, the colors of Kang Seok's

expression brightened even more.

Seol held his breath, then clenched his fist.

“...Son of a bitch.”

“I was lyn... Huh!?”

Just as Kang Seok forgot what he was going to say and sat there stupefied, the safe area behind him became quite noisy.

“What the hell?”

Jeong Minwoo turned around to find out why it became so noisy over there.

And just as Seol was about to produce a spell ball from his pocket...

1. Basically means acting cute. You can check this Wiki article for more information — <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aegyo>

## Chapter 17

*SLAM!!*

“Keuk!”

Blood spilled on the ground. Jeong Minwoo's large frame tilted unsteadily to the side before falling down hard with a loud thud. Then, from the seemingly empty space, Hyun Sangmin's figure slowly revealed itself like a ghost. There was a steel bar clutched in both of his hands.

“What the...!?”

The utterly stunned Kang Seok tried to stand up from the chair, but he couldn't. Shin Sang-Ah was desperately clinging on to Kang Seok's waist with both of her hands tightly interlocked as if the ghost of Nongae<sup>[1]</sup> had come to possess her. She was also pushing down on him with all of her body weight.

“Sungjin!!”

She shouted out while lowering her head in a hurry.

“Uh? Oh! Right!”

Kang Seok had no choice but to watch on helplessly as a chair descended upon his unguarded face. Accompanied by a dull impact and a thud, his head snapped to the left.

“Kuaaaak...”

Kang Seok then slowly fell to the floor, his face dazed and frozen as a whimper leaked out of his mouth.

“...Who the hell do you think you are to say my sister's name?”

Yi Sungjin angrily spat out while carrying the chair.

Now left alone, Yi Hyungsik dazedly stared at Hyun Sangmin as the latter man spat on the floor in disgust.

“Take a nap.”

One swing of the steel bar later, Yi Hyungsik's upper torso spun as if he was performing a traditional dance, then he crumpled to the ground.

Seol could only stand there and stare at the three of them, still frozen in the middle of trying to throw a spell ball. As he continued to blink in a stupefied state, he ended up witnessing something... interesting.

Kang Seok was pulling out his other paper talisman even as his eyes were swimming from the impact to his head. He almost went unnoticed, but at that moment Shin Sang-Ah, baring her teeth like an angry lioness, pounced on him.

“Aaaaaak”

Her teeth tore into his flesh; Kang Seok threw his head wildly while screaming in pain. She didn't stop there though but proceeded to climb up on top of his writhing body and lifted her hands up high.

“In all my life, I... I...!”

*Slap!*

Her wide-open palm powerfully slapped Kang Seok's face.

“I’ve never, ever seen. ...!”

*SLAP!!*

“...A damn perv like you who's so fixated on a girl's naked body, you damn son of a bitch!!”

*Slam!*

Her third hit was an elbow drop roughly aimed at Kang Seok's nose. Blood exploded out from his nose.

Kang Seok was laid out on the floor like a dead frog, and when her elbow hit its mark, he began convulsing like a person having a seizure. But that must have not been enough to cool her anger, as Shin Sang-Ah stood up while breathing like an angry bull before lifting her foot up as high as she could.

“...She, she wouldn't...”

Seeing this, Hyun Sangmin flinched and stopped his actions of making sure that Yi Hyungsik and Jeong Minwoo would not get up again with the help from the steel bar meeting their faces. And he squeezed his eyes shut when her heel accurately slammed down on Kang Seok's family jewels.

“@%#%^%!!!!!!”

Perhaps Kang Seok had some energy left over as his scream was loud enough to tear open his own vocal cords.

Only then could Seol feel the restriction spell being deactivated. Since the owner of the spell lost consciousness, it was only natural that it would be canceled out.

Seol was able to regain his focus when he heard the wet, sticky footsteps coming from his rear.

It was the monster, Gaekgwi. It would've been strange if the creature didn't show up after such noisy chaos unfolded. Although Seol was confident in being able to kill the monster, he'd rather make sure that an unlucky accident wouldn't happen.

Seol hurriedly carried Yun Seora into the safe zone and then pulled the still-enthusiastic Shin Sang-Ah inside as well.

“Miss Shin Sang-Ah!! Miss Shin! Please, stop!”

“Let me go! Let me go, right now! Do you have any idea how much this bastard...!! I, I...!!”

“It's the monster! The Gaekgwi has shown up!”

“...Eh? ...!?! Mommy!!”

When Shin Sang-Ah confirmed the monster's terrifying outer appearance approaching them, her attitude did a 180 real fast and she jumped into Seol's arms. Somehow successfully calming her down, Seol carried her back into the safe zone, and only then could the four of them breathe long sighs of relief.

It felt like they had to go through a torrential storm, all thanks to a certain someone.

“Whew. First time ever hitting another person like that.”

Hyun Sangmin's hand, as it pulled out a cigarette, was unsteady. He offered what he extracted out from the packet first to Seol.

Seol was about to pull out his own but quietly accepted that instead.

“Hey, man! What are we going to do about those three outside the classroom?”

“... Should we bring them inside then?”

“You do that, and we are through.”

Hyun Sangmin bitterly spat out his opinion.

Not too long after, the two men looked at the corridor through the classroom window. The Gaekgwi had come closer before anybody had noticed, and was in the middle of slowly devouring Jeong Minwoo.

*Crunch, crunch.*

Seeing the monster chew and swallow the man headfirst, Seol could only feel the sense of astonished disgust.

“What happened just now?”

“Mm? Oh, that! Yeah, well, that boy and I exchanged a look, if you know what I mean. I was the one who signaled Miss Shin over here, though.”

“Did that really happen?” Seol felt rather dazed after hearing that since he genuinely had not noticed it. Hyun Sangmin chuckled, sounding rather pleased with himself.

“What? You thought we really betrayed you just now?”

“How did you signal each other?”

“Like this. I just had to show this off a bit, and...”

Hyun Sangmin began fiddling around with a half-torn piece of paper but, ‘it’ happened right then.

“K-kuuuuak!!”

Suddenly, the sliding door was flung open and Kang Seok’s face entered the classroom. His arm was clawing the floor, desperately trying to reel himself inside.

The two men couldn’t hide their surprise. To think that he was able to regain his consciousness so quickly after being pummeled like that. His endurance was indeed higher than average according to his Status Window, so that might have been enough to explain his resilience.

“Where the hell do you think you’re trying to enter!?”

As soon as she saw him, Shin Sang-Ah ran hard and kicked Kang Seok’s head like a ball.

“K-kuk!! P-please! H-help me!”

“Help you!? You bastard! Have you forgotten all the crap you did already!?”

“...P-please!”

“Get lost! Get lost!!!”

She stomped down on his hand that was desperately clinging onto the floor. In the end, he couldn’t continue holding on, and his body was sucked out of the doorway like a receding tidal wave.

Meanwhile, the Gaekgwi had finished devouring the two lackeys, and when it saw the bloodied Kang Seok, it reached out and grabbed him as if he was a delicious dessert.

“Hey! You, you devour that asshole slowly, okay!? You eat him piece by piece, got that!?”

The Gaekgwi blinked its large eye several times while hearing that. Then it proceeded to chew on Kang Seok from his feet onwards. Hyun Sangmin began shuddering after witnessing all this.

“I, uh, I didn’t know she was this insane.”

Seol almost ended up agreeing out aloud with him there.

“And well, there we go, that thing finishing everything up. Though, I hadn’t gotten my share of satisfaction yet.”

“Isn’t it enough just watching them die like that?”

“Well, I guess so... But still, how are we going to deal with that thing now?”

Hyun Sangmin sighed and covered his face.

They might have taken care of Kang Seok and his lackeys, but a new problem rose up to replace them: the monster Gaekgwi. If that thing decided to camp out in front of the safe zone’s door, then they had no answers to that at all. And it was obvious that they couldn’t just stay in the safe zone for thousands or ten thousand years either.

“In that case, we better kill it then.”

“Eh?”

Seol’s voice was refreshingly confident.

Kang Seok’s screams that grew louder and louder eventually stopped at a certain point. When Seol opened the window and took a look, he could see a dead body that was missing the entire lower section from below the chest.

Seol then lightly tapped on the window sills. The Gaekgwi spun its head around like a bolt of lightning, faced him, and opened its jaw wide while emitting a chilling, shrill cry.

Seol found the sight of the chewed-up human flesh stuck in between the monster's teeth rather disgusting and unappealing, so he quickly chucked in a spell ball down its basketball-hoop sized throat.

The desired result occurred right away; the Gaekgwi began showing an unusual reaction after swallowing the spell ball. It began falling down on the ground while all of its limbs began convulsing uncontrollably. Its large eye shook so hard that the hidden whites could be seen; out of his wide-open mouth, the monster belched out a thick, dark fog.

'I guess one ball wasn't enough.'

"What did you throw in there?"

"It's a spell ball called 'Poison Fog.'"

Seol answered rather briefly and pulled a couple more spell balls out from his pocket, before asking Hyun Sangmin a question of his own.

"Right. What was that thing earlier?"

"What thing?"

"You suddenly appearing out of thin air like that."

While speaking, Seol carefully took aim and threw another spell ball. The red-colored spell ball drew a small arc in the air and landed perfectly inside the Gaekgwi's mouth once more.

"Oh, that? I also got a paper talisman through my Random Box, you see. For concealment."

"Concealment, is it?"

Hyun Sangmin nodded his head while paying very close attention to the suffering Gaekgwi.

"I can stay invisible for a long time, but it gets canceled if I attack someone even just once."

"Didn't you say you only received 500 Survival points?"

"What the!? Hey, man, let that one go, will ya? In any case, I helped out, didn't I? And, I need to hold a hidden trump ca...."

*Boom!!*

Hyun Sangmin couldn't finish his sentence thanks to the sudden explosion. Hyun Sangmin mouthed, 'What the hell was that?' and quickly took a look outside the window, only to yank the sunglasses off his face.

*Kkkkkiiiiieeccckkk!!*

The Gaekgwi was rolling on the ground, evidently in a lot of pain. And whenever there were sounds of explosion coming from its innards, its entire body took on a reddish hue and began swelling up.

"You, you even had something like that!?"

"Well, I was going to use it just now, but you guys made a move first, so.... Oh, it's running away."

The Gaekgwi was doing whatever it could to scramble away, but Seol simply chucked another spell ball, which accurately landed on the fleeing monster's back. Next, an explosion of light occurred, and dozens of spiderweb-like things shot out, tightly binding the Gaekgwi to the spot.

"...."

It was about here that Hyun Sangmin decided to shut up and simply watch the proceedings unfold. All the enthusiasm he felt had been drained out of his system by now, and not only that, he was too worn out to feel shocked anymore.

'This should finish it off.'

The last spell ball landing on the monster transformed into a clear liquid and rained down on the monster that couldn't go anywhere.

"What happened!?"

Shin Sang-Ah asked after belatedly approaching them.

"I killed it."



Seol spoke while pointing at the corridor.

As it turned out, the most powerful spell ball of the four was the 'Hydrochloric Acid' one. It even melted that scary monster into nothingness in the blink of an eye.

Within the corridor, a mass of rotting flesh that was once the Gaekgwi could be found lying on the floor.

"Oh, wow.... Really...."

Seol explained himself further as the others showed disbelieving reactions.

"The Guide was right. By drawing a couple of spell balls each, we could've gotten to have fun with this mission. And well, I got lucky with the right combination of spells."

"Spell balls? Combination?"

"Yes. I spread the 'Poison Fog' inside its body, which served to strengthen the explosions caused by the spell 'Ignite'. I tied down the escaping Gaekgwi with the spell 'Spider Web', and then showered it with 'Hydrochloric Acid'."

"Oh, my...."

Shin Sang-Ah's mouth opened wide, and she quickly brought up her hand to cover it.

"...Isn't that a bit.... too cruel...."

Seol and Hyun Sangmin could only stare at her totally dumbfounded— even Yi Sungjin too, as he sat there with his back against the wall.

\*

Dawn was mercifully uneventful.

Inside the safe zone where only eight people now remained, two men were busy chatting to each other in a relaxed manner.

After that chaos had died down, Shin Sang-Ah regained her bearings and quickly treated Yun Seora's injuries. Thankfully, her life was spared, but Shin Sang-Ah had no confidence about the arm and said that there was nothing she could do anymore. Besides, the treatment itself had been delayed, which didn't help.

The four of them discussed, and they decided to stay put until midday. They were thinking about waiting for Yun Seora to regain her consciousness, but also, the main issue was with them all being just too damn fatigued to carry on any further.

While looking on at the trio of Yi Sungjin, Yun Seora, and Shin Sang-Ah softly snoring away, Seol quietly asked a question.

"I don't see that middle-aged man."

"Mm? Who?"

"You know, that guy with glasses."

"Oh, the guy who gave up on his fami.... *Cough*. Why? You wanna go out and look for him, too?"

Seol didn't reply, and simply chugged down a bottle of energy drink.

A short period of awkward silence flowed between them before Hyun Sangmin tapped a cigarette loose from the packet.

"Hey, man.... Can I ask you about something?"

"Mm?"

"Back then, when you were staring down at Kang Seok.... You were going to use those spell balls, weren't you?"

For the first time in a long while, a thin smile formed on Seol's formerly composed, serene face.

"You were planning to use one, but didn't, right?"

When Hyun Sangmin asked again to make sure, Seol simply nodded his head.

"Why did you do that? Well, the result was good, so there's that, but still."

"You said it before. Human beings would only reveal their true colors when pushed to a corner.... I just wanted to confirm with my own eyes."

This time, it was Hyun Sangmin's turn to become speechless.

Another bout of silence descended upon them. But, a short while later...

"Fuck, so did we pass or what?"

The two men laughed at the same time.

1. A historical figure from Korean-Japanese war. For more info you can check this Wiki link: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nongae>

## Chapter 18

The morning sun rose up but classroom 3-1 remained still and quiet.

The very first thing Seol did after waking up was to confirm that his Nine Eyes was still there; his vision became dyed in green before returning back to normal.

Seol felt relieved after his ability activated without an issue. Then, he came to realize that there were three people missing from the classroom. The bespectacled middle-aged man hadn't been seen since last night, but now, both Yun Seora and Yi Sungjin were gone as well.

"Where are they?"

The time was 09:47 AM. There was still over two hours left until midday, so the Hour of the Deceased should still be active right now.

"I'm sure they are fine."

Seol picked up his bag and the steel bar. Maybe because he and Hyun Sangmin ate a lot of food during the early morning hours, his innards were screaming out in bitter protest. Thankfully, toilets were located right near the stairwells of each floor, meaning the distance was rather mercifully short.

After Seol took care of nature's call and exited from the bathroom, he spotted Yi Sungjin walking down the stairs, looking visibly downtrodden. After spotting Seol himself, the boy hurriedly bowed his head.

"Good morning, Hyung."

"Yes, good morning to you, too. Did you sleep well?"

Yi Sungjin's smile seemed a bit awkward and weak as if he found Seol's politeness strange.

"It's alright if you drop the honorifics, you know..."

"Oh? That okay with you?"

Seol stopped using honorifics right away; he also noticed the boy's anxious demeanor as well. It was as if Yi Sungjin wanted to hurry up and get going.

"Still in the middle of the treasure hunt?"

"...Yes."

"How many did you find so far?"

"Uhm... If I count the ones I found after waking up this morning, then it's enough to pay for my passage."

Considering the fact that Seol and Yun Seora had monopolized the majority of the coins, this amount was nothing to scoff at. Seol could imagine just how hard the boy must've worked to find that many.

Seol carefully appraised the round, innocent-eyed teenager's face for a bit. Because of his slightly below average height and the baby fat still visible here and there, if he claimed to be a middle school freshman, anybody would be inclined to believe the boy. In hindsight, him hitting Kang Seok with a chair was a rather wonderfully mystifying act.

"Thanks for your help last night. I made it because of you."

"Ah, that's not true. That hyung did most of the work, anyway."

Although the boy said so, both Yi Sungjin and Shin Sang-Ah combined their strength to knock Kang Seok out. The boy might not have come up with the plan, but his role in it was still considerable.

"In any case, I didn't expect you to lend help."

“Of course I'd help. I too had to suffer because of him on the second floor.”

“Oh? You did it out of revenge, then?”

“No, rather than revenge.... I mean, he was deliberately indulging in only evil things. He had a really twisted, evil mind, you know?”

Seol chuckled slightly after hearing the teen's declaration. Indeed, Kang Seok was an evil man. As if he had more things to say, Yi Sungjin hesitated and mumbled softly.

“Besides.... I got a feeling that you would have resolved the matters by yourself, anyways....”

“Mm? Why do you think that?”

“I mean, you did kill that Gaekgi monster so easily. And, also....”

He hesitated again, before continuing on.

“I kinda thought that noona was telling me to find you.”

“Miss Yi Seol-Ah said that?”

“Yes.... No, I mean, it's just my gut feeling. I'll ask her after I revive her.”

Just the mere thought of his older sister must have made him happier because there was a radiant smile forming on Yi Sungjin's face. It was pleasing to see that the boy hadn't lost hope, so a warm smile also spread on Seol's face as well.

“Yeah, I'm also getting curious, too.”

Seol walked up the staircase. The boy's eyes dazedly chased after him going up. When Seol beckoned him to follow, Yi Sungjin hurriedly moved his legs.

“I, I think there aren't any more coins left on the fifth floor. And you don't have to....”

“Nope. There are no coins left on the fourth floor for sure. But there should be four more left on the fifth.”

Seol knew this because he had checked the Diary of the Unknown Student already.

“Eh?”

“Besides all that – how did you and your sister receive your Invitations?”

Seol quickly changed the topic. Although Yi Sungjin tilted his head while looking unconvinced, he still honestly retold his tale in full detail.

From the beginning when his mother was diagnosed with a terminal illness, and how the family had to go through a tough struggle for a while; how he had heard of a certain medicine that could cure the said disease existing in the 'Paradise' from the mouth of a person the family knew; finally, to how he and his sister got to receive their Invitations. When Seol asked about the matter of his schooling, Yi Sungjin mumbled some things and hurriedly glossed over it.

Seol found the remaining coins while listening to the story, and the two of them headed off to the library next.

The coins remaining in his possession was 885 – from the original amount of 1065, he gave 30 to Shin Sang-Ah, and he spent further 150 on trying to get the right medical supplies for Yun Seora. Now that there was no need to spend coins to open the sixth floor, even after deducting his passage fee, he could still freely spend 785 coins.

“I'll try my best, but I can't give you any guarantees, okay?”

Yi Sungjin looked like he still hadn't understood what was going on.

“I have nearly 800 coins on me. The 'Revival' should be listed under SPECIAL, so I should be able to spin the machine twice.”

Seol said as such while pushing open the library's door. Yi Sungjin's eyes grew very large.

“H, Hyung?!”

Belatedly regaining his senses, he quickly chased after Seol, but both of their steps came to an abrupt halt right afterwards.

There was someone here already. On the floor around the item draw machine, twenty-odd coins were strewn about, and near them, the owner of the coins was squatting on the ground, her hood pulled up to hide her face. Her right arm hung limp.

“Ah....”

Yi Sungjin gazed on at this sight with pitying eyes, before he proceeded to pick up all the coins on the floor. Seol approached Yun Seora and asked her in a soft voice.

“Are you feeling okay?”

Her head buried between her knees trembled slightly. Seol thought she might be raising her head, but it turned out that she was just shaking it, instead.

“Your right arm... You can't move it? At all?”

She silently nodded her head.

“Uhm, here...”

Yi Sungjin sheepishly entered into the conversation and cautiously reached out with his hands cupped together. Coins filled his hands.

Finally, Yun Seora raised her head. She blinked her reddened eyes several times. Tear marks were still visible on her cheeks. Her slowly rising left hand trembled visibly to the naked eye.

She received the coins with much difficulty and dropped her head again.

Seol gently grasped the shoulder of the panicking and flustered boy. He then shook his head quietly, which led the boy to slowly nod his head in understanding.

Seol then moved on, choosing to insert his coins into the machine in silence, instead. When he inserted the 300th coin, he could clearly hear Yi Sungjin gulping down a huge dollop of saliva. Seol looked down in time to see a familiar-looking item box fall down with a clung!

[A quill pen of flowing consciousness, x1]

'A quill pen?! What?'

...Whatever it was, it definitely wasn't what he wanted. Which meant that he only had one chance left. Getting a bit more tense now, Seol began inserting more coins to the machine.

The second SPECIAL he got was a box he hadn't seen before. His heart beat from anticipation as he opened the lid – only to find ten spell balls neatly arranged inside. Just to make sure, he picked each one up and carefully checked them out. Unfortunately, these balls seemingly weren't designed for things like reviving someone from the beginning. He found none that could help.

“...I'm really sorry.”

“I, it's fine. I know that you did this only out of your generosity...”

Although he said that, Yi Sungjin was noticeably despairing. The higher one's expectations were, the greater the disappointment one would suffer – the teen was trying his best not to show it, but tears were forming on his eyes.

But there was nothing either of them could do. The world didn't operate to their wishes and whims, after all. And all of the coins had been recovered by now, too.

Seol was wondering how should he go about consoling the boy, but ended up flinching when a finger poked him on the ribs.

“?! Oh, it was you, Miss Yun Seora.”

She suddenly offered her hand.

“Here...”

She didn't speak for long, but it was clearly audible. And on her small left hand, a miniature bottle wrapped up in paper could be found. Seol dazedly stared at both of them.

“This is the potion of revival.”

It was the first time Seol heard her speak a proper sentence. There was a certain coldness to her voice, but it was also rather pleasing to listen to as well, just like a cool wind brushing past one's ears.

“Are you... giving this to us?”

“Yes.”

This was unexpected. Why was this 'disinterest personified' doing an act of kindness out of the blue?

As if she had read Seol's facial expression, Yun Seora tried to clear up her position.

"I heard from the boy not too long ago. Yesterday..."

When Yun Seora shifted her gaze to Yi Sungjin's direction, the boy got flustered and raised his voice.

"I, I ran into her earlier during the treasure hunt! She, she asked me what was going on, so, I, uh..."

While he was speaking up, Yi Sungjin's eyes were completely fixated on Yun Seora's offered hand.

"Is it okay for us to receive this? What about your arm?"

"This item won't work on a living person. You'll understand once you read the paper."

"..."

Seol cautiously received the bottle. Her skin that came in contact with his was cold and very smooth.

Yun Seora spat out a long sigh and brushed past the two males to leave the library as if she was finished with her business here.

"I, uh, thank you so much!"

Yi Sungjin shouted out loudly.

"Thank you!! Really! Truly! Thank you!"

Tears were already flowing out from the boy's eyes as he bent his back forward 90 degrees.

"Thank you."

Seol too thanked her. She stopped walking, then.

"...Me, too."

She then bowed slightly as well, before quickly leaving the library for good.

'I guess she's a nice person, after all...'

Seol tilted his head slightly, before quickly unwrapping the paper around the bottle. If he delayed any longer, Yi Sungjin might die of anticipation right in front of his eyes.

[Requirements for usage]

1. To be used on the Deceased only!
2. A portion of the Deceased's body part.
3. The cancellation of the state of insubordination for the Deceased – "death of the Gaekgiwi."

"The first and the third requirements are met already, but... a portion of the body part?"

"I know where to find that!"

Yi Sungjin hurriedly pulled Seol along.

The place the boy led them to was a laboratory. However, as soon as the boy enthusiastically jumped inside the lab first, Yi Sungjin screamed out in fright. Seol held the steel bar tightly and entered too, only for a shocked gasp to escape from his mouth.

The middle-aged man, missing since last night, was lying on the floor – his body torn in half, from top of his head right down to his groin.

"He, he wasn't here last night, though?!"

Yi Sungjin fell even deeper into frightened confusion. However, Seol could roughly guess what happened here. Just by taking one look at that gruesome sight, it told him all he needed to know.

'Did they hate him that much...? To kill their husband, a father, like this...'

It was in stark contrast to Yi Seol-Ah, who allowed her younger brother to run away.

"Sssuuunnggg---Jjjiiiiinnn....?"

An ear-grating voice came from the corner of the lab. Seol and Yi Sungjin spotted a figure squatting down there, just like how Yun Seora did back in the library. Checking the appearance of this figure, Seol's brows instinctively furrowed. It was his first time seeing a Deceased, and sure enough, it was as grotesque as he had imagined.

"Noona!!!"

Yi Sungjin quickly recovered from the shock and jumped up and down.

“You can live again!! Really!”

“Lllllvvveee....?”

“This hyung, this hyung got the potion to revive you!!”

At the same time, Seol could feel his hand getting rapidly warmer. The miniature bottle in his hand began emitting bright light.

He didn't know what to do next, so he simply removed the cork to see what might happen – then, the clear liquid inside the bottle flowed out by itself and slowly danced in the air.

The way it wiggled like that, it seemed to be asking Seol who he wanted to revive. Seol pointed at Yi Seol-Ah. The liquid then smoothly flew over as if it understood his command. It disappeared as soon as coming in contact with the Deceased in the blink of an eye as if it got sucked in.

*Paat!*

A bright light exploded out from Yi Seol-Ah's figure. It was so blinding, Yi Sungjin near her had to squeeze his eyes shut.

However, Seol could still see a blurry but amazing sight unfolding amongst the cascading rays of brilliant light. He saw her wounds slowly disappear, and new flesh grew to replace the missing parts.

Then, with a sudden flash, the blinding light shower came to an abrupt end. At the spot where the light had died down, a girl was sitting on the floor, her eyes wide open and blinking non-stop. The previously-grotesque appearance was nowhere to be found, only to be replaced by the warmth and prettiness she used to have.

Finally, Yi Seol-Ah had been revived.

“N, Noonaaaa!!”

Yi Sungjin ran as if he was flying and embraced his older sister tightly.

The two of them must have more tears left to shed – Yi Seol-Ah remained confused for a while, but when she saw Yi Sungjin crying his eyes out, she too began sobbing as well.

Seol quietly left the laboratory while closing the door behind him. It was a moving reunion, but he didn't belong there.

He hesitated slightly, wondering whether he should leave them alone before he leaned against the door and crossed his arms. While listening to the siblings cry their hearts out, he fidgeted around with the steel bar.

He was staying, just in case a Deceased overheard their cries and sauntered over here.

\*

When Seol returned with the Yi siblings, chaos unfolded inside the safe zone. Hyun Sangmin was in the middle of chewing a piece of bread, but his jaw dropped so much that the piece actually fell out. Shin Sang-Ah's reaction wasn't all that much different from his.

“Seriously now. The revival thing was all true.”

After listening to a brief explanation, Hyun Sangmin laughed out loudly.

Seol handed over a packet of food from the convenience store to Yun Seora as well as to the Yi siblings, who had been expressing their gratitude non-stop since from a while ago. Seol completely ignored their thanks and began roughly chomping on a convenience store riceball, as if he was completely fed up.

When Hyun Sangmin threw him a questioning look, Seol finally relented and opened his mouth.

“I heard them thanking me a thousand times while coming here. Now I understand why some people develop neurosis.”

“Stop exaggerating.”

“No, it's the truth. It started to get annoying around the 300th time they thanked me. I told them it's enough, but they won't listen.”

Even then, the siblings were expressing their gratitude in a multitude of ways and gestures. Seol ended up facepalming, before pointing towards Yun Seora, who happened to be sitting away from them a light distance away.

“Miss Yi Seol-Ah?”

“Yes, yes! Thank you! I am truly grateful! How should I go about repaying your kindness? You revived me and helped me to meet my little brother again, so I'd like to somehow....”

“Wait, wait. I got you. I hear you, but here's the thing – I didn't find the revival potion, but she did. She gave it to me.”

Yun Seora stopped quietly biting into her sandwich and threw him a look of protest. Seol resolutely ignored her.

“Is that true?”

“Yes. If it weren't for Miss Yun Seora drawing the potion, reviving you wouldn't have been possible.”

“Y, yeah! That's right, noona! That lady gave the revival potion to Hyung!”

“Lady Yun Seora!”

Yi Seol-Ah finally left Seol's side. He breathed out a sigh of relief and changed his target to Yi Sungjin this time. He pulled out 100 coins and handed it over to the boy.

“Your noona's passage fee.”

“...Ahh!”

Yi Sungjin cried out as if he hadn't thought about that until now.

“Please, just stop.”

Seol pleaded.

“You don't need to thank me. In fact, don't even think to say thank you. You even mention 'tha' of 'thanks', I'm not going to give you these coins. Got it?”

“...”

“If you're grateful, then you quickly scoot over to Miss Yun Seora and tell her that. Just like your sister.”

Yi Sungjin carefully received the coins with both of his hands. And, like a good boy, he did as he was told and after joining his sister, combined together with her to land as many attacks of gratitude on poor Yun Seora as possible.

Only after somehow taking care of the crisis did Seol get to enjoy his meal in peace. Shin Sang-Ah and Hyun Sangmin simply giggled while watching this unfold.

“I might die of laughter here, you know? Just look at Miss Yun Seora's expressions.”

“Yeah, that's quite something else, really. By the way, hey man. How many coins do you have on you now? Besides the passage fee, that is.”

Seol replied '85'; Hyun Sangmin used his eyes to send him a signal, telling him to look to his side.

A trio of a man and two women couldn't participate in the relaxed mealtime, and they could only look on in daze from the corner of the classroom. Seeing them, Seol quietly asked Hyun Sangmin.

“Aren't they going to have a meal, too?”

“Oh, please. Why should I waste my precious food on those guys? Well, if they were my comrades-in-arms, sure, I might have spared some.”

Even Shin Sang-Ah nodded her head in agreement.

“And, also... Not too long ago, they asked me if I could spare them any coins.”

“Ah, that's right – their passage fees. They are short by how many?”

“All three of them combined, around twenty, maybe thirty.”

Hyun Sangmin whispered the information, before snorting out in dissatisfaction.

“What a bunch of shameless fools. Hey man, you aren't thinking of helping them out, right?”

“Don't help them. Like, never.”

For some reason, even Shin Sang-Ah piped in with a small voice.

After the incident on the second floor, her relationship with the trio had been soured somewhat. If they were like Yi Sungjin who at least tried to open the metal barrier, then who knows. However, as it was now, Shin Sang-Ah couldn't forget the looks of 'it'll be fine as long as you're not one of us' they gave her as soon as Kang Seok made his offer back then.

Even putting aside the fact that they actually didn't do anything at all, she lost what little favorable impression she had, from their selfish desires to survive at someone else's expense.

Seol didn't reply. Instead, he pulled out the remaining coins and handed them over to Hyun Sangmin.

"Mm?"

"You use them. There's still some time left before midday."

"You want me to spend them? On the draw machine?"

"If you're scared of the Deceased, then don't. However, I haven't spotted a lot of them so far."

Hyun Sangmin's expressions became rather strange just then.

"What the... I can really spend these?"

"I'm telling you, yeah. You can."

Seol didn't have anything else to draw from the machine, anyways. Also, since he had peeked into Hyun Sangmin's Status Window, Seol figured it would be smarter to look after him every now and then. Not to mention, if it weren't for Hyun Sangmin, Seol might not have been able to kill the Gaekgi, so this was sort of a reward as well.

"Seriously? You aren't gonna say anything about how I spend these, right?"

"Use them or throw them away – do whatever you feel like."

Since Seol said as much, there was no reason for Hyun Sangmin to refuse. With the coins in hand, the expression on his face resembled a naughty kid about to pull a prank. He then sneaked a glance to his side and left the classroom, his steps full of swagger.

"Let me go with you!"

Shin Sang-Ah stopped her meal and chased after him. The trio glared at Seol with resentful eyes and then, also left the classroom, clearly running after Hyun Sangmin and Shin Sang-Ah.

Now that those three had seen the coins exchanging hands, they no doubt would beg for some of them. Seol sniggered and began enjoying his meal in peace for a bit while spectating on Yun Seora and her troubles.

However, he nearly toppled over from his seat when the Yi siblings abruptly returned to his side instead. Yun Seora was ignoring them outright in the beginning, but in the end, even she couldn't endure and chased them away, while almost blowing up in anger.

However, didn't the old saying go something like 'even if the heavens fell, there would always be a spot for one to stand up?'

[A message from the Guide has arrived.]

Before long, the midday had arrived.

The message told them to gather on the sixth floor.

\*

When Seol got to the sixth floor, he ended up feeling rather disappointed. He was wondering what kind of layout he'd get to see, but as it turned out, the sixth floor was just a normal rooftop.

There was a round portal glowing in faint red light set up in the middle of the roof. The Guide, Han, and the blonde maid were standing next to the portal and waiting for the arrival of the survivors.

"Hee-yeah. Yes, yes! You've all finally arrived. I must congratulate you on successfully passing all of your missions."

Han gave them a formal greeting. He also looked like a happy man today as well. So much so, he felt like a somewhat different person from the Han of the assembly hall.

"Very good, very good! Now that everyone has gathered here, allow me to officially announce the completion of Area 1's Tutorial!"

*Clap, clap, clap, clap!*

The blonde maid silently clapped her hands. Of course, no one else followed her example.

As the awkward atmosphere descended on the rooftop, Seol was realizing there was a slight inconsistency to the Guide's declaration.

"Is this everyone?"



Because there were only six people on the rooftop. The trio of the man and two women were nowhere to be seen.

“From the beginning when 38 lives started this journey....”

While Han started gushing on and on about something, Seol approached Hyun Sangmin who was whistling out in a carefree manner and asked softly.

“What happened?”

“Mm? Oh, you mean, with the coins?”

“Those three people. Did you kill them?”

“What? No! ....I gave 55 coins to Shin Sang-Ah. I told her to draw whatever. And whatever she got, we split down the middle.”

“And the rest?”

“...I'm sure you all wish to enter the portal right away, but regrettably, you will have to wait a little longer. We need to complete the setting of your dispositions, and also.... Most importantly, we need to distribute the completion bonuses as well.”

Han was still in the middle of his speech. Hyun Sangmin stared at the Guide who seemed to have finally gotten around to the main topic while whispering in a low voice.

“So, what do you think I did?”

“?”

“If you promise me not to get mad, then I'll tell you.”

“I promise.”

“I threw them away. All thirty coins.”

Seol doubted his own hearing, then.

“You threw them away?”

“That's what I said. I chucked them down the toilet bowl and flushed them away.”

Hyun Sangmin lowered his sunglasses. Even his eyes were smiling now, too.

“Not only that, I did it while they were looking on! Dayum! What a shame. I wish I could've stayed and watched them throw a tantrum.”

Hyun Sangmin continued to giggle away.

## Chapter 19

“Will you please keep it down over there?”

The Guide issued a stern warning as soon as things became a bit noisy. Hyun Sangmin didn't say anything else and suppressed his laughter.

“First of all, let us commence with evaluating your level of cognition.”

As soon as those words were spoken out, a message popped up in front of everyone's vision.

[5. Level of Cognition]

Actions/Emotions/Disposition

“This is how it should look to you. From the left, Actions, Emotions, and Disposition. Well then, let's start by assessing your Actions.”

Suddenly, the left-most column began spinning up and down, just like how it was with a slot machine. Countless words flashed by.

“The first section reflects how you appear to others through your actions and speeches.”

As Han's explanation continued, the speed of the dizzying spin gradually slowed down. 'Righteous', 'Fussy', 'Temperamental', 'Disgusting'... all sorts of descriptors flashed by. Seol's column went back and forth between 'Moderate', 'Neutral', and 'Hypocritical' before finally stopping on the word 'Moderate'.

“What?”

Shin Sang-Ah responded to her evaluation as if it was the most absurd thing in the whole world.

“This can't be right! Is this really correct?!”

“I assure you, things will only get tougher for you if you are getting shocked already.”

Han chuckled to himself and clapped his hands. Then, the middle column began spinning this time.

“The middle column, 'Emotions', reflects your thought process or what you feel from facing certain events or phenomena. Out of the three, you could say it has the most variability.”

For Seol, the middle column came to a stop with the word 'Curiosity'. Seol nodded his head in agreement. He then saw Hyun Sangmin giggling to himself and couldn't help but get curious – what did he get as his assessment result?

“And finally.... The last column, 'Disposition'. This one has been raising a lot of controversy for a long time now.”

Seol didn't even have the time to check using 'General Observation' before the third and the final column began spinning.

“The 'Disposition' column indicates your inclination according to your overall personality. There have been numerous cases where this part simply repeats what's been shown on [Temperament] of your Status.”

Seol's heartbeat sped up. He was judged to be 'weak-willed' and 'short-tempered' before. Since he couldn't really dispute those, he had no choice but to unhappily accept them until now.

“However, there have been quite a few cases, where the ‘Disposition’ and [Temperament] didn't match.”

Han's voice became rather serious there.

“How could such a thing be possible? After many debates and research later.... We focused on the fact that [Temperament] was listed under [Traits], while ‘Disposition’ was listed under the [Level of Cognition]. And so, we arrived at a temporary conclusion.”

Words such as 'Altruistic', 'Selfish', 'Rational', 'Lethargic', 'Evil', 'Detestable' flashed by in front of Seol's eyes.... Until the spinning speed gradually slowed down.

“If your Temperament is a personality trait formed by interacting with the world at large, then....”

Seol's column heavily seesawed in between the words 'Moderate', 'Hot-headed' and 'Narrow-minded'.

“...Then, your Disposition should indicate your true nature; in other words, the foundation that forms the core of who you are. That's what we decided on.”

However, the column suddenly spun again wildly and landed on 'Chaos' instead.

“If you find that your Disposition and Temperament don't really match, or you find it disagreeable and that you're unhappy with the assessment, allow me to offer you this advice.”

Han's voice became as light as air once more.

“If you wish to change your Disposition, then you'd do well to try changing your Temperament first. You see, I personally hold the view that a good Temperament would naturally lead your Disposition towards the nicer path.”

*If you wish to change* – those words rang inside Seol's heart.

“On the flip side, your Disposition looks good, but your Temperament happens to be not? I can confidently say this – your Disposition too will slowly deteriorate and end up corrupted, eventually matching your Temperament.”

The implication was simple – he was saying that one should try to change one's Temperament before it negatively influenced one's Disposition.

And so, the evaluation came to an end. Seol carefully surmised his own evaluation results.

Moderate (Actions and thoughts are sensible) / Curiosity / Chaotic (Many things are jumbled up and is impossible to unravel)

[Your Status Window is being updated.]

'Chaotic...'

Although his head was tilting to a side ever so slightly, he could more or less understand why he ended up with that assessment.

No matter what, the contradiction coming from the disposition he used to have up until his early twenties, the disposition he revealed after falling into a gambling addiction and losing his ability, and finally, the disposition he suddenly gained after experiencing that dream, was as chaotic as one could imagine.

"Of course, that's not an easy thing to accomplish. The 'Disposition' has the lowest chance of changing, after all. Meaning, a person doesn't easily change."

Han winked a little here. It happened, then.

*Koong, Koong.*

Accompanied by loud thuds indicating that someone was coming up, the sixth-floor door was violently flung open. A clearly-incensed woman and a young man hesitantly following behind her entered the rooftop. They were the trio from before. No, one of them was missing now. The girl who pleaded with Seol to save her older brother was not among them.

"We've brought along the passage fee."

With an icy voice, the woman threw down the object in her hand. It was a wooden handle of a mop, one that could be found commonly in any janitor's closet. However, from where a mop head should've been, only blood managed to drip down to the floor.

Seol felt like he could hear the sorrowful wail of a woman coming from down below. However, the young man hurriedly closed the door behind him.

A strange but conspicuous light flashed by Han's monocle.

"What's the matter? Are we not allowed up here?"

"No. I shall acknowledge it."

Han simply smiled even when the woman spat out coldly. In the end, the two belated arrivals also had to go through the assessment of their own Level of Cognition.

As soon as that was completed, Han ordered everyone to line up in a row in front of the warp gate. The first one on the line was the last woman to arrive. She was glaring at Hyun Sangmin with venomous eyes. A deep grudge could be spied on them as well.

"Aigoo~, I'm sooo scared."

Of course, Hyun Sangmin didn't even bat an eyelid.

The woman then cast the coins off in a disgusted manner. However, Han showed off an incredible display of dexterity and caught every single one of them. And while maintaining a nonchalant smile, he pulled out a piece of document to read.

"Let's see... Ah, it was simple to calculate the points for Miss Oh Minyoung. You will receive 35 Survival Points."

"...Survival Points?"

"You haven't done anything during the first mission, so out of the possible 100, you get 0. No need to mention the second mission either – 0 out of the possible 150. In the third mission, you couldn't even find enough coins for your passage, so also 0. However... Just now, you have been judged to have struggled bitterly for your own survival, so 35 points were added to your tally. That is all."

"Where are we supposed to use these points, then?"

"You'll find out once you get there."

The woman, Oh Minyoung, glared at Han for a long, long time. She then wordlessly stepped through the warp gate and disappeared from the view. The next person was the young man who had followed Oh Minyoung up to the roof.

"You have 0 points."

Han's evaluation was short.

"You've done nothing. Literally, nothing. I can't even see one category where you might have earned a point or two."

The young man was clearly embarrassed as he stepped through the gate.

And so, the entry procedure carried on.

Yun Seora received 317 points. Shin Sang-Ah, 116. Hyun Sangmin, 302. Yi Sung-Jin, 114. As for Yi Seol-Ah, she could only receive 46 for the things she had done in the assembly hall. As people stepped through the gate and disappeared one by one, Seol's turn eventually arrived. Han began groaning out as soon as seeing Seol's face.

"Really now... I thought I was going to die while trying to calculate your points. Although it wasn't as difficult during the first mission, the second and third missions were really, really problematic for me. Especially so, during the second mission, when things became really, completely nonsensical."

“?”

“Not only were you not satisfied with breaking the all-time clear record, you then proceeded to destroy all of the traps as well as the mechanisms found there. Such an event is unprecedented.”

The tone of his voice was quite combative, but Han was beaming rather brilliantly.

“In any case, here is your points tally. During the first mission, 200 bonus points added after successfully chasing away the Gaekgwi from the assembly hall. Also, you made a correct move by going upstairs as soon as emptying out the convenience store. Since you were in possession of the diary, all you needed to do was to procure some food. So, 100 bonus points. Another 50 bonus points for rescuing Miss Shin Sang-Ah.”

That amounted to 350 points. Hearing this, Seol tilted his head.

“I thought 100 points was the maximum for the first mission?”

“That's only for the base points. If you perform certain actions that weren't included within the mission goals, you're eligible to receive bonus points if those actions fall under certain categories. These bonus points can be as much as double the amount of base points.”

Seol nodded his head in acceptance.

‘Is that why both Yun Seora and Hyun Sangmin have high scores?’

Just by receiving the points from the first mission, he had become the top scorer.

“For the second mission, the basic score is 150. 300 bonus points for the fastest clear in history. Another extra 300 points for destroying every trap and mechanism found. Total of 750 points.”

“...”

“For the third mission, the base points on offer are 150. 300 bonus points for finding as many coins as you have during the treasure hunt. 300 extra points for killing the Gaekgwi alone. 150 extra points for reviving Miss Yi Seol-Ah. 100 extra points for the act of giving out some of your coins to others, seen as an act of mercy. Total of 1050 points. When calculated together, 2150 points.”

Han spoke non-stop up to here, but he wasn't finished yet.

“And finally, possessing the Mark of Survival – which adds a 10 times multiplier. So, your total Survival points tally is 21500.”

Han folded the paper away and stared at Seol with an envious expression.

“...You must be very happy. Your points tally is the highest in history. You might even be able to use the VIP store as well.”

“The VIP store?”

“There is such a thing. You'll see once you get there. ... Oh, I almost forgot.”

Han suddenly displayed an extremely friendly attitude and leaned in closer to whisper something to Seol's ear. Seol began frowning somewhat after hearing the Guide out.

“I do have it in my possession. But, why...”

“I was only reminding you since you seem to have forgotten all about it. After all, you were lucky enough to draw them in the first place. Fufufu.”

Seol was about to ask something, but then, the blonde maid began pushing him from behind.

“H, hey! Wait a minute!”

“My role ends here.”

The last thing Seol got to see as he was being pushed into the warp gate was....

“I wish you best of luck in the Neutral Zone.”

...Han politely bowing his head, his hand placed on his chest.

\*

As soon as Seol entered the warp gate, he arrived inside a small room. Seven people who entered before him were waiting there.

The blonde maid was still pushing Seol forward while panting quite heavily. Once they were in, she let out a big sigh of relief and walked past everyone. She opened the exit door and pointed towards the passage beyond it, before walking first in light, airy steps.

The passageway was made up of marble. It was long and dark like a tunnel. The group simply followed the maid while remaining completely clueless as to where they were headed off to. But, when they spotted light from a distance, a certain sense of excitement began filling them up.

The maid arrived at the exit of the passage first and her steps came to a halt. She then softly opened her mouth.

—Korea, Area 1, cleared.

An unexpectedly clean and beautiful voice came out of her mouth.

'She could actually speak?'

As Seol stood there stewing in mental shock, several other clean and nice voices rang out from somewhere and entered his ears.

—Europe, Area 2, cleared.

—Germany, Area 3, cleared.

—North America, Area 4, cleared.

—Asia, Area 5, cleared.

—Africa, Area 6, failed.

—China, Area 7, cleared.

—South America, Area 8, failed.

—Oceania, Area 9, failed.

“That's a bit weird, isn't it?”

Hyun Sangmin muttered almost inaudibly.

“What is?”

“Six of those areas are the six continents, right? So how come Korea, Germany, and China get a separate area designation? Hey man, what do you think?”

Seol shook his head.

“Ah, she's moving again. Are we supposed to enter first?”

Hyun Sangmin's guess proved to be correct. Beyond the exit of the passage was a large and empty area, shaped like a high-end theatre. While walking on the red carpet, Seol took a look around him.

Towards the darkened front, he could sort of see a stage. Although the lights were off, there were some strange things on the walls that glistened and managed to illuminate the darkness a little bit. The ceiling was so high, he couldn't even see it properly.

The maid leading in front took the group towards a row of chairs located just before the stage. The number of chairs was exactly eight. After confirming that everyone had taken a seat, the blonde maid climbed up to the stage and disappeared behind the curtains.

That was the signal; Seol could hear many more footsteps coming from behind him.

“I guess they are from the Area 2. Was it Europe?”

Hyun Sangmin spoke as he turned his head around to look. Over thirty people were following a maid to their seats.

The place this maid led them to was a location a bit behind Seol's group. There was a total of 32 chairs. The unfamiliar maid also disappeared behind the curtains as soon as she was done leading them to their seats.

'So, that many people survived the European Tutorial.'

As Seol wordlessly checked them out, one of them also began looking at Seol. It was a woman sitting in the middle of the front row. No, perhaps it would be more correct to call her a girl, instead.

She possessed curly light brown hair and a pair of eyes bright enough to softly shimmer within this darkness. The rest of her face revealed with the aid of a white hairband holding her hair back was very memorable as well.

Seol ended up inadvertently focusing on her neck that reminded him of a beautiful orchid flower until he saw her waving her hand slightly in greeting. So, he inadvertently ended up greeting back with a slight nod as well.

Meanwhile, people continued to stream inside. Soon enough, Seol got to learn that the number of survivors differed greatly from area to area. Perhaps Hyun Sangmin thought of the same thing as he was constantly muttering to himself.

“We have eight people. Europe, 32. Germany, 10. North America, 11. Asia, 17...”

The queue of people steadily entering this large area briefly broke up. A short while afterwards, five men, all wearing the same type of black suits,

appeared from the passage. And there were three people following behind them as well – all women, and for some reason, their heads lowered.

“Huh. A group of five decked out in identical suits. . . . Oh, there are three more. So, a total of eight people from China, I guess?”

That was the end of the queue and no one else entered afterwards, no matter how long they waited.

“Does that mean there are no survivors from South America and Oceania?”

“Don't forget Africa, too. When transitioning from Area 5 to Area 7, there was a short gap there.”

Hyun Sangmin added his opinion while agreeing to Seol's guesses.

'So, that means. . . .'

The surroundings became quiet. Sitting inside this lengthy silence, Seol inexplicably began recalling Han's words from earlier on.

“You possess the notes from the Guide with you, yes? How about reading them and see what's written on them? Ah, I suggest that you read them while you're alone, if possible.”

Seol got that 'note' while drawing medical supplies. There were three of them, even. But, why did the Guide go out of his way to mention them? They weren't even the so-called SPECIALs, either.

Unable to calm his curiosity, Seol pulled his bag closer to open it. However, just as he was about to reach in. . .

The curtains hiding the stage were silently pulled to the side.

*Paat!!!*

Suddenly, blinding lights bathed the stage.

Not just Seol, but every survivor from the six continents dazedly stared at the brightly-lit stage.

## Chapter 20

Seol saw the blonde maid who guided him in Area 1. But she wasn't the only maid. A total of nine maids all wearing the same outfit stood there, their hands neatly folded and resting in front of their stomachs.

A lone woman sat in the middle of them all. This woman wasn't wearing a French maid outfit like the rest, which naturally drew everyone's attention towards her. It was unknown whether the lighting was to blame, but her silky hair reaching the arms of her chair had a bit of a sanguine hue.

A thick coat hung loosely from her shoulders; her eyes were closed and her arms crossed in front of her chest as if she was in a state of deep contemplation.

A short while later, all nine maids began clapping their hands in unison.

—Congratulations~ and celebrations~.

—When I tell everyone that you're in love with me~.

. . . They even started singing Cliff Richard's famous song

“What are they doing now?”

Someone from the back asked, sounding somewhat flabbergasted. Other people's reactions weren't all that different, either. They were all dumbfounded at this unexpected 'celebration' featuring a singing routine.

Eventually, the song came to an end. The eyes of the woman sitting in the middle half-opened. She slightly jutted her chin out, and as if she was appraising high-end luxury goods in a store, her eyes slowly swept across those sitting in the audience seats.

The inside of the theatre remained deathly silent. The reactions of those meeting her gaze were similar to one another – either they got nervous and lowered their heads, or sneakily averted their gazes. The sounds of saliva being swallowed could be heard here and there as well.

Her heated gaze that reminded one of a predator surveying its potential prey, caused subtle fear to rise up in the hearts of those meeting it.

Her crossed legs slowly unfurled. And when she elegantly stood up from her chair and walked leisurely towards the front, Seol got rather surprised by how tall she was – she was tall enough to stand shoulder to shoulder with a tall man.

The woman suddenly halted her steps and directed her gaze towards Seol's general direction. Or, to be more specific, towards where the survivors from Area 2 were seated. There, the girl who shared wordless greetings with Seol was raising her hand up in the air.

“Are you also a Tutorial guide?”

‘She can still ask a question even under such an atmosphere?’ thought Seol. He couldn't help but be impressed, and at the same time, slightly worried. Even he was feeling a certain unexplainable sense of danger from this woman. If he were to put it in words, she reminded him of a wild, untamed beast.

The tall woman didn't reply, simply standing there in utter silence and staring back. While her gaze never wavered, she reached inside the thick coat and fished out a cigarette. The light from flame catching on to the end of her smoke illuminated the darkness just enough for the scar extending from her eye down to her cheek to be highlighted in all of its glory.

If the girl was sensible enough to pick up on the awkward atmosphere, she would have lowered her hand already. But maybe she was either exceedingly brave or simply daring as she threw another question out instead.

“Or.... What should I call you? Who are you?”

The tall woman's head tilted slightly towards her back. A maid standing two spots to the left of Seol's blonde maid stepped forward.

“Area 2, Odelette Delphine.”

Upon hearing that name, the half-closed eyes of the tall woman opened up fully, and she shifted her gaze back to the girl, Odelette Delphine. Her red lips slowly parted and the thin blue smoke eased out.

“....Just call me Cinzia.”

The girl lowered her hand then.

“What have they been talking about?”

“That tall lady said that her name is Cinzia. And the person who asked the question must be named Odelette Delphine from Area 2.”

Shin Sang-Ah grumbled softly in a low voice, and Yi Seol-Ah proceeded to whisper back.

“Cinzia? Othello Delphine? What kind of names are those?!”

“I think Cinzia is an Italian name. And, um, it's not Othello, but Odelette....”

Yi Seol-Ah smiled awkwardly and tried to explain. However....

[The synchronization will now commence.]

Suddenly, a sharp and grating pain assaulted the brains of everyone sitting in the audience section without warning. Seol was in the midst of concentrating on Yi Seol-Ah's explanations and was caught off-guard. A heavy frown formed on his face as the pain attacked him relentlessly. Whimpers and moans came from pretty much everywhere as people began grasping their own heads.

Thankfully, the assault didn't last for long.

[The synchronization has been completed.]

As soon as that announcement was made, the pain washed away as if it was all a lie. Now suddenly freed from the brain-melting pain, the crowd fell into a state of chaotic confusion.

“I guess the synchronization was delayed somewhat. Oh well, I'm sure you can all understand me now.”

The tall woman who introduced herself as Cinzia was looking on as if she found this whole affair quite entertaining. She spoke so fluently that even native speakers would have been impressed. At a bare minimum, it sounded like Korean to Seol's ears.

Perhaps finding the stunned silence to her liking, the corners of Cinzia's mouth rose up.

“It sure is much more preferable to filter them out at least once, right? If they started yapping on and on like a bunch of goddamn parrots, I'd have been really pissed off by now.”

Her steps rang around loudly as she started walking again.

“As a show of respect for you all not raising a fuss regarding the synchronization, let me inform you of something important before we start. I don't like beating around the bush. Also, you should have a general idea what this place is by now. So, I'll get straight to the point.”

Cinzia took a couple more steps forward and spoke up in a low but powerful voice.

“This place is the sanctuary created through the combined powers of the seven deities, called the Neutral Zone.”

Seol recalled Han's words after hearing that. The butler did wish for Seol to enjoy the kiss of lady luck in the Neutral Zone, didn't he?

“And in this place, all of you shall be given the chance to prove that you are capable of surviving in the Paradise. You've all received your Survival Points, right?”

Seol's points tally was 21500. Han confidently declared that it was the highest in history.

“Long story short, you must increase your points to over 1000. That is the only way to leave this Neutral Zone. Although we've prepared various methods to increase your points tally, we are not going to mind other ways you cook up yourselves. However, you only have one month to do so.”

A small commotion began rising up. After all, most of them present here heard that, as soon as they cleared the Tutorial, they would be allowed to enter Paradise. So, this was contrary to what they were promised.

Of course, there were few here that displayed a relaxed demeanor as well. These were the people who got to hear a more in-depth explanation beforehand, so they knew what was going on already.

“If you fail to gather the points in a month's time...”

“What is the meaning of this?”

The loud voice of dissent came from Area 4. A man with an imposing physique and a beard stood up from his seat. However, Cinzia only spared him a cursory glance.

“Hmph... If you don't want to regurgitate that burrito you shoved down your throat before you got here, you'd better sit your ass back down. I really hate being asked a question in the middle of my sentence.”

The bearded man blinked his eyes in surprise for a few seconds before his expression crumpled in anger.

“The hell did you say? Watch your mouth, you spaghetti bitch!”

Cinzia threw her head back in a loud fit of laughter.

“Certainly a barbaric Mexican, ain't ya? You from the Sinaloa, right?”

“How do you know...”

“It's obvious. Out of those with the authority to recruit, the only one who can mass mobilize the Bronze Marks is found there.”

Cinzia's laughter abruptly came to halt and she beckoned with her index finger. The fourth maid from the left stepped forward and handed over a piece of paper to her.

“Let's see. I'm getting curious here if your results match that mouth of yours.”

Cinzia took a look at the paper, and a mocking smile formed on her lips.

“0 points? What? Is this real?”

The maid quietly nodded her head.

“You're not even a Red Mark. Getting a 0 as a Bronze...”

Cinzia threw away the paper and coldly looked at the burly Mexican.

“I can't bother to talk to you again. Sit back down, burrito.”

“You...!”

“Sit. Otherwise, I'm going to make the ones who invited you regret it.”

The abrupt change in the tone of her voice was so eerie and terrifying that it roused goosebumps on all who heard it. The Mexican man shrunk back in an instant and collapsed back down to his seats unsteadily.

“...I think you're all misunderstanding something here.”

Cinzia continued to smoke without saying anything for while before sweeping her gaze across the audience seats with eyes belonging to a wild beast.

“The official title of this land is Lost Paradise. Got that?”

She emphasized the last part of her words. Specifically, the name.

“Did you all think that because it's called 'Paradise' that you'd get to ride in roller coasters and have a jolly good time? You all better wake up. If I were to compare this place to Earth, then the land you're about to step into is a battlefield full of gunshots and explosions happening every single



day. This is a warzone, where you will be permitted to survive only after your enemies are all dead.”

She flicked the butt of the cigarette away and crossed her arms again.

“Just because you managed to somehow escape from a weakling monster, you think you got the right to bark at me? Don't you get the meaning behind the Tutorial? Don't get cocky. You better not fool yourselves into thinking that things you'll encounter in Lost Paradise are around the same level as what you experienced in the Tutorial.”

The reality of the situation must have sunk in as the small commotion died down almost immediately.

“That's right. If you understood, then keep your mouths shut, you useless bunch of woodpeckers.”

It was at this moment that a giggle escaped out from Seol's lips. He was seriously concentrating on Cinzia's words but couldn't help himself when she blared out the woodpecker bit. He realized he made a mistake right away and tried to cover his mouth – but he had already become the center of attention by then.

“You're...”

A strange glimmer flickered in Cinzia's eyes.

“Oh, I see. Indeed, you may find all of this rather... adorable.”

“?”

“But, you should try to understand too. No matter how careful the selection process was, there will always be some dirt that manages to escape the filtering.”

Seol was expecting to hear an earful, but upon hearing her voice that seemingly asked for his understanding, he could only feel confusion.

“Well, this place will be the end of that anyways.”

Cinzia shifted her gaze back to Area 4's direction and giggled.

“You are going to go through a lot of hardship, that's for sure. To get to 1000 points from 0, now that isn't going to be a walk in the park.”

Hearing this, several people began to flinch noticeably.

“This is the consequence of your own actions. Who told you to get a free pass through the Tutorial?”

Even Yi Seol-Ah's complexion wasn't so good. Her points only amounted to 46.

“Now that we're here, we might as well get the awards ceremony done and dusted too. If there's someone deserving of punishment, then there should be others deserving of rewards....”

Cinzia let off a lengthy groan and reached into her inner coat pocket.

“From now, if I call out your name, stand up. Area 5, Tong Chai?”

A thin man wearing a white turban stood up.

“You already meet the requirements. If you want, you can enter Paradise right away.”

“I choose to remain.”

“Then, take this.”

Cinzia threw something at Tong Chai. He easily snatched it off the air and asked her, full of curiosity.

“What's this?”

“What, a member of the assassination squad is asking for info?”

An unreadable smile formed on Tong Chai's face as he sat back down.

“If you're really curious, then ask your maid standing behind me later. Area 2, Salvatore Leorda.”

This time, a man with a buzz-cut stood up.

Cinzia didn't bother to say anything and simply threw something at his way. The unexpectedly-youthful man caught it, bowed slightly, and sat back down on his seat.

“Area 7, Hao Win.”

One of the identically-kitted Chinese men, a man with good physique and looking somewhere around in the mid-thirties, stood up.

“Seeing how you carry yourself, I can easily guess where you're from. So, will you be staying?”

“That is a foolish question. I will be staying, of course.”

The man named Hao Win smiled refreshingly.

“Okay. And then... Area 2, Odelette Delphine.”

“I'm also staying.”

The girl answered right away. She quickly caught the thrown item that drew a long arc in the air. She checked it and then, promptly raised her hand up high again.

“Excuse me for a second!”

“Mm?”

“I think you gave me the wrong one because it says No.2 on the plate.”

“Nope. I know full well that you earned 7500 points.”

Shocked and impressed gasps came from the various parts of the audience. Most of the crowd here stared at the girl with the white hairband with disbelieving eyes.

“If I deduct the 1000 Survival points you got as your starting bonus, then your original points tally is 6500. And your Silver Mark got you a Mark of Survival with the 5 times multiplier. So, you earned 1300 points during the Tutorial. Am I right?”

“Y, yes, you are right...”

“How regretful. That amount would have been enough to get you to the top of the rankings. But this time, it's only enough for the second place.”

The girl's jaw dropped. Quite likely, she hadn't thought of the possibility that someone else could've surpassed her in the points tally.

“Wait a minute? Didn't I also receive some Survival points as the starting bonus?”

Now that he thought about it, Seol did receive 5000 points in the assembly hall as starting bonus. It seemed that the points he got back then were not subjected to the multiplier effect of the Mark of the Survival. In any case, that meant the actual total of Seol's Survival points was not 21500, but 26500, instead.

“Area 1...”

“I'm staying.”

Seol quickly got up from his seat. The back of his head was getting really itchy right about now.

“How many points did that guy receive, then?”

“You shouldn't even ask. Just tallying up the original points alone, it's 2150. It's higher than yours by 850.”

“W, wow...”

“Doesn't she know any shame?!”

Seol inwardly complained while catching the incoming object. It was a key with a golden numeral '1' engraved on the attached plate.

“You know, I find it really amazing.”

Cinzia unexpectedly displayed a certain amount of admiration.

“It's already impressive that your tiny country earned the right to recruit people independently, but now a second Irregular has appeared...”

Thanks to her declaration, the eyes that fell on Odelette was now firmly fixed on Seol. He really wanted to decline all this attention.

Finally, Cinzia gave out a signal, prompting the maids to hurriedly descend from the stage and move to either side of the audience area.

“What are you all doing? Stand up!”

Seol was about halfway down to his chair, but he had to stand back up again.

"The countdown to the month's deadline has begun already. What, you want me to spoon feed you everything you need before you'll starting moving your asses?"

Hearing this, Seol quickly picked up his bag.

The blonde maid was waiting for him in a different doorway than the one he used to enter the theatre. It was as if she was telling him to use this one now.

\*

Everyone formed the same sort of surprised expressions once they exited from the theatre and took in the sights unfolding before their eyes.

The so-called Neutral Zone reminded one of a super-massive department store with its spectacular interior. The ground floor was shaped in a huge circle, and wherever they looked, they could find lounges and shops as well as other facilities. And none here could even start figuring out just how many floors, interconnected with spiraling staircases, there were above their heads.

They couldn't exit from the Neutral Zone yet, but it wasn't hard to imagine how this place might've looked from the outside – like the legendary Tower of Babel, a tall and round tower.

Seol found an empty chair inside one of the ground floor's lounges and settled down to survey the area around him. The most eye-catching object within this 'lobby' was a giant noticeboard set up next to a fountain in the middle of the floor. On this board, there were countless pieces of paper that resembled paper talismans stuck to it. And a healthy crowd of people had gathered in front.

Seol decided to go and check out that later, once things had calmed down a little bit. So, he sat here and organized his thoughts.

He was initially thinking of leaving the Neutral Zone right away. Since he already possessed the qualifications, he believed that there was no real need to waste his time here. However, the other four people who had amassed over 1000 points all chose to remain. They didn't even show a hint of hesitation, either.

And also, didn't that man Hao Win say it out loud, too? He said that was a 'foolish question'.

'Okay, then. What did I dream about this place....?'

....He couldn't remember anything about this place at all.

There must be a reason why all four of them said they'd rather remain here. In times like this, Seol couldn't help but grow resentful of Kim Hannah.

Seol remained sitting there while rubbing his face, unsure of what to do next. He felt someone approaching him and raised his head.

"How do you do?"

The woman greeting him with dignified elegance as soon as their eyes met, was decked out in a rather familiar attire. Seeing her neatly tied hair, as well as the pair of spectacles sitting on her nose, Seol easily recognized her – she was the second maid standing to the left on the stage.

'She's from... Area 2, isn't she?'

"Hi. Is there anything I can help you with?"

"I'm called Agnes. If it's okay with you, I'd like the honor of guiding you around this facility."

Now that was a wonderful thing to hear. But it also raised a question in Seol's head.

"I thought we were supposed to find the necessary info by ourselves?"

"Indeed that is the case. However, we are tasked with providing basic information. And also, providing more information on our own volition isn't against the rules."

Seol figured that this nice treatment had something to do with his Gold Mark. He nodded his head in acceptance. Being guided around, instead of stumbling around by himself, certainly saved him a lot of time.

"Thank you for your help. I'll be in your care, then."

"Ahh, in that case...."

Just as Agnes's complexions brightened, she began glancing behind Seol with a stiffened face. He looked behind and found the blonde maid from the Tutorial standing there. Not only that, there was a... *refreshing* smile on her face too. Agnes did her best to reciprocate a smile on her own.

"M, Maria... Of course, I know that Area 1 isn't my jurisdiction. But the Tutorial has ended already. Isn't it fine to yield this little thing to me this time?"

The blonde maid, Maria, continued to smile radiantly. Meanwhile, she began raising her middle finger. Agnes's expression hardened instantly.

“What's the meaning of that gesture?”

“Excuse me~.”

“?”

“Don't fuck around, please.”

“...You're still as coarse as ever, I see.”

Agnes let off a soft but resolute hurumph before silently bowing to Seol and leaving without saying anything else.

“Still with that disgusting habit of trying to wag your tail everywhere, you Sicilian bitch.”

Seol couldn't help but doubt his own hearing. He had already confirmed that the blonde maid could speak just fine, but to see such hardcore swearing jumping out of that adorable and radiant face of hers was just....

“Well, then. Allow me to guide you.”

“...You are pretty good. With talking, I mean.”

“Ahh, that. I am currently practicing the vow of silence, you know.”

“The vow of... silence?”

“Yes. I'm trying to fix this bad habit of mine. You see, my words tend to not get filtered by my brain and just jump out of my mouth first.”

Maria was implying that she talked without thinking. Somehow, Seol could see that.

“Well, uh... I'll be in your care, then.”

When Seol stood up from his seat, Maria began tugging at the corners of his clothes. Then, she pointed towards the inside of the lounge area. The facilities there resembled a café.

“Before we get started... Would you like to buy me something to drink from there first?”

“...”

Seol turned around to call for Agnes. Maria jumped up and down in alarm.

“Wait, wait!! Okay, fine. Fine! But, what's wrong with buying me something to drink?!”

“But, why should I...?”

“Scrooge. You have a lot of Survival Points, don't you?”

Seol blinked his eyes a couple of times. While she was begging him to buy her something, she mentioned the Survival Points. Why?

“Does that mean you have to use Survival Points to use the facilities in this place?”

“Yes. Within the Neutral Zone, Survival Points act as the sole currency. In order to eat, sleep, and buy things to wear, you need Survival Points for all of those.”

Seol furrowed his brows. Not just needing to amass lots of points but also needing to spend them—now that would spike the difficulty upwards rather steeply.

“How do you gather more Survival Points?”

Rather than a verbal answer, Maria pointed at the noticeboard, instead. There was still a healthy crowd of people in front of it.

“By taking on the missions placed on that noticeboard and clearing them, you'll be eligible to receive points as rewards. That's the normal way of getting the points.”

“The normal way, huh...”

“The Survival Points can be loaned out or transferred to others, too.”

A bitter smile formed on Seol's face. By connecting what Maria said to Cinzia's words of 'we are not going to mind other ways you cook up yourselves', Seol could make a pretty good guess here. Most would go about solving their problems by getting a loan or, more likely, resorting to robbery.

“Since I told you, you’ll buy me something, right?”

“I refuse.”

“Ehhh? But, why?”

“I’ll have to conserve my points. It’s not like they fall down from the sky or something.”

“But, why so stingy?! You know you will get free accommodation and food, so how come?”

Seol tilted his head, wondering what she was on about now.

Maria sneakily looked around her and began whispering to his ear.

“Even here, you’ll see lots of discrimination, you know. The Contracted has to pay the full amount when using the facilities found here, but that’s not the case for the Invited, right? The Bronze Marks get 10% discount, the Silver Marks gets 20% discount, and...”

“If that’s the case...”

“As a Gold Mark, you get 30% off on every available facility here. On top of that, you were the highest-ranked survivor. So, not only are you given an exclusive residence, but you also receive 70% discount when utilizing the services of certain shops and restaurants.”

When Seol stared at her in disbelief, Maria nodded her head quite animatedly.

And as it turned out, she was telling the truth.

The cheapest drink available cost one Survival Point. Maria chose a drink that cost 10 points, but as soon as he showed off his Gold Mark and the plate attached to his key, he didn’t even have to pay a single point.

“You really made a wise decision to stay behind, you know.”

As they were headed off to his residence located on the upper floors, Maria suddenly told him thus. Her expression was one full of happiness as she sucked in the drink through the straw.

“You see, it’s really difficult to return to the Neutral Zone once you leave. Since you already have secured your right to leave, you might as well suck out every little benefit you can from here, right?”

“And what benefits are there that can make my stay worthwhile?”

“The VIP store.”

Maria answered him right away and pulled out a pamphlet from seemingly out of nowhere.

“This here is the list of some of the things you can buy from the VIP store.”

Seol’s eyes grew wider and wider in surprise as he scanned contents of the list.

## Chapter 21

The biggest difference between the area where the Tutorial took place and the Neutral Zone was the facilities available at the latter. If Seol were to get technical about it, then the Neutral Zone could only exist in Paradise and nowhere else.

He could definitely agree to the notion of this sanctuary being very special – after all, the seven deities combined their might to create this place.

Seol sensed that they paid a considerable amount of attention to the safe integration and adaptation of the survivors. Such a thing was easy to figure out when recalling the initial reactions of who all saw this place for the first time. Even he thought he was looking at a high-end department store. The plaza located in the middle of the ground floor or the mock cafés where one could buy something to drink were good examples of that.

However, such considerations could only be extended so far. Just with a casual glance, he spotted several items that people from modern Earth wouldn’t have the chance to see or use in their everyday lives.

But that was to be expected. Paradise wasn’t as scientifically advanced as Earth, and its culture was different as well.

In other words, certain things to remind one about what to come was essential – all in order to minimise the sense of incongruence one might feel during their initial days spent outside the walls of the Neutral Zone.

The upper floors were solely reserved for those who managed to amass more than 1000 points during the Tutorial. When looking down from the guardrail of the winding corridor, one could easily take in nearly everything happening below. That proved to be quite a view.

Seol couldn't hide his anticipation, wondering what it would be like inside the room.

Maria led him to a door with 'I' engraved on it. Seol opened it and entered the room beyond – only to struggle very hard to keep his jaw shut that threatened to drop to the floor.

The floor space of the so-called room was as wide open as an ocean; so much so, he couldn't even figure out how big this place was. And as his eyes took in the many luxurious paintings and sculptures decorating the walls and pockets of space, as well as the gorgeous chandelier hanging high in the ceiling, he couldn't help but mistakenly believe that this room ought to have belonged to a king.

For all of his 26 years of life, Seol had never ever stepped foot inside any room or space as luxurious as this one. He had clapped his eyes on something this grand only through the magic of the internet. As a comparison, probably the legendary Ambassador Suite of Brunei's Empire Hotel – supposedly there were only two such rooms in the world – would be able to rival the level of opulence seen here.

Seol took his time checking out this room that was obviously far too large to be called a mere room, before sitting down on the edge of the equally-too-large-for-one-person bed and decided to relax for a bit.

His elation lasted for a brief moment, though. Finding himself all alone in such an expansive room, he ended up getting bored quite quickly. What was the point of such a wide-open space and all this luxury? There was no TV here. No fridge. No computer, too.

The only object that operated on electricity he had on his person was the smartphone he got at the beginning of the Tutorial, used to receive the missions and the like.

....He had basically nothing to do here. So, he ended up checking out the pamphlet Maria left behind once more. And as he browsed through it, his eyes remained wide in surprise, but the expression on his face was getting more and more complicated in the meantime.

\*Greetings to you!

The Neutral Zone operates a very special store for those of you with plenty of Survival Points burning a hole in your pocket!

The VIP store possesses three distinct characteristics that separate it from other stores within the Zone:

Firstly, this is a very unique store created through the combined guidance of the seven deities.

Secondly, the products from this store won't be restocked ever again once it's been purchased.

And finally, the number of people who have used the services of this store can be counted on one hand.

Although the pricing on each item might be unimaginably high, we can confidently guarantee their effects.

The following are the list of items purchasable from the VIP store.  
We eagerly look forward to your patronage, so see you soon!

—VIP Item List

1. Ambrosia: 30,000 SP each, x2
2. Pneuma's Sky Boots: 50,000 SP per pair, x1
3. Moira's Souvenir: 600,000 SP, x1
4. Miya's Branding Iron: 100,000 SP, x1
5. Divine Elixirs: 30,000 SP each – Strength x1, Endurance x1, Agility x2, Stamina x2, Magic x1, Luck x3
6. The Divine Stigmata: 300,000 SP, x1
7. The Seed of the World Tree: 400,000 SP, x1
8. Saintes Mesures of Sidus: 80,000 SP, x1
9. Aphrodite's Sedge: 150,000 SP each, x5
10. Psychi's Tears: 250,000 SP, x1

There were only ten items on the list, but every single one of them possessed outstanding effects. The obvious problem was, of course.... The prices were incredibly, absurdly, nonsensically, sky-high.

'Crazy....'

He felt like swearing out here. Just looking at that 'Moira's Souvenir' told him seemingly everything he needed to know.

Were they actually being serious here? Wasn't this like making fun of him or something, by showing off an item so profound and desirable, only to declare loudly, 'Ohh, look how expensive it is!! Kekeke!!'

'Just who in their right minds can afford things this expensive?!'

....He kept thinking like this, yet he couldn't just forget about it. Especially so, he couldn't let go of his interest in the first and the fifth items on the list.

The 'Ambrosia' was supposedly a 'drop' of morning dew that forcibly evolved one of the awakened abilities to the next level. As for the Divine Elixirs, they were miraculous medicines that increased the physical stats by one level higher. Their pricing seemed reasonable too, comparatively speaking.

Currently, out of the possible five directions, Seol's Nine Eyes had opened up the central and the left directions. If he could drink two Ambrosias, then he'd get to open two more directions out of the remaining three. Which meant...

Seol would be that much closer to unraveling the mystery that he had to live with for the last 26 years.

'...I shouldn't be wasting time like this.'

The time period of one month was not long at all. No, he thought it was far, far too short. He felt the sense of urgency take over his thought process.

After picking up the bag, Seol left the room.

\*

Back on the ground floor.

There was still a crowd in the plaza there, but it was much smaller than when Seol first came out of the theatre.

Seol took a look around to see if he could find anyone he was familiar with, only to realize that other people were, for some reason, inching away from him. Thanks to that, he was able to approach the noticeboard in peace.

As Maria had mentioned earlier, the board was choke-a-full with numerous parchments. After deciding on the mission to undertake, one just had to take its parchment and rip it in half. That would teleport the person to space where the given mission took place.

There was this one rule that had to be adhered to, though. There were many missions available here that allowed the survivors to band together in order to complete. However, one couldn't form a party where more than half of the minimum required number of participants were from the same Area as him- or herself. In other words, one was forced to cooperate with survivors from other Areas.

Seol wasn't thinking of forming a party now, anyways. Thinking like this, he quickly took a sweeping look at the board.

[Survive on a mountainside (remaining number of attempts: 14/15)]

Avoid the fangs of a starving beast and survive for the next two hours within the mountainside!

Difficulty: Very Easy

When successful: +10 Survival Points

When unsuccessful: N/A

\*Cooperation not allowed

'Nope. Pass.'

It was an easy mission, but the reward on offer was too low. What Seol wanted was a mission that could be done in the shortest amount of time while also having the highest possible rewards. And if it was safe to boot, then there would be nothing more he'd ask for.

What with his numerous prerequisites, his search didn't go easily; but there were literally hundreds of missions available here, so it was only a matter of time.

Soon enough, he spotted a certain mission parchment.

[Find your path inside a maze! (remaining number of attempts: 90/90)]

Escape from an underground maze in six hours! If you end up in the wrong path...

Difficulty: Normal

When successful: +100 Survival points

When unsuccessful: Starting from the beginning again or death

\*Cooperation allowed (up to two people)

Just by looking at the reward, he wasn't too keen on it. However, he could repeat it as much as he wanted to, and more importantly, he liked the fact that he could potentially rely on his innate ability. The mission explanation implied that he could die if he entered the wrong path. However, wouldn't it be fine if he only stuck to the paths that shone in green?

It was certainly worth a shot.

Seol made up his mind and took one parchment out from the thick bundle. He checked the time with his smartphone; it was 11:31 AM. After confirming the time, he ripped the paper in half.

A bright light exploded and he felt a strong suction force sucking in from his midriff. Seol closed his eyes and opened again a bit later. He realised that he was now standing inside a cavern.

The novelty of his new surroundings wore off really quickly, though. He tightly grasped the steel bar and cautiously surveyed the immediate area around him. However, even after one, two minutes of solid waiting, not a single thing showed up.

He breathed a sigh of relief and shifted his gaze to his front. There were five big holes in the wall, shaped like entrances.

As soon as he activated his Nine Eyes, things unfolded as he suspected it might; the hole to his far-left glowed in green; the middle three glowed in yellow; while the right-most one was in the hues of orange.

Seol stepped forward in this slightly-bending cavern and entered the left entrance.

\*

[You have completed the 'Normal' rated mission.]

[100 Survival points has been awarded.]

[Current SP: 26600 SP]

With the announcement ringing in his ears, Seol's vision was filled with the sight of the ground floor plaza. As soon as he made out of the maze, he was transferred back to the Neutral Zone.

The clock on his phone displayed 12:56 PM – he only needed one hour and 25 minutes to complete a 6-hour mission.

He only walked in the direction dictated by his innate ability, so he didn't encounter anything that could've been called 'dangerous'. Clearing the mission took a bit longer than he'd liked because it was his first time attempting it. However, he figured that as soon as he became familiar with it, he might be able to finish the maze in less than one hour.

Seol nodded his head, now convinced. He then returned to the noticeboard in a hurry to rip up the mission parchment for the maze once more.

And so, he proceeded to vanish and return to the plaza several more times.

After he completed the mission that nominally needed six hours to complete six more times, a couple of unexpected problems rose up.

The first problem was that the number of attempts remaining had decreased quite noticeably. This was because the other survivors witnessed Seol continuously completing this particular mission; they figured that it must've been easier than they initially feared, and one or two people began trying their luck. After all, for a regular survivor, 100 Survival points amounted to one-tenth of their aim, so the allure was indeed great.

And the second problem was....

“Euhck....”

A sharp pain momentarily bore through his brain. Seol had no choice but to halt his hands from ripping up another mission parchment. There was no need to even mention what this pain signified. He was all too acutely familiar with it, after all.

It was a warning. Or, perhaps, an omen.

He had been using 'Nine Eyes' for over six hours straight now, so it wasn't all that surprising for his brain to cry out in anguish.

'But, I still need to do a few more....'

The level of pain wasn't all that great if he thought about it.

However, back in the past, back a few years ago when he proceeded to ignore similar warning signs.... He ended up wallowing in the harsh reality of losing his ability and suffering the consequences of it.

'Now that I think about it, my whole body kind of feels fatigued, too.'

No matter how important evolving his ability was, if the ability itself was lost through recklessness, then that would be the worst way to waste his time, ever. He didn't want to repeat the mistake of losing his ability ever again.

In the end, Seol returned the mission parchment back to the board, and decided to take a break in his room upstairs.

\*

Seol woke up from his slumber feeling completely refreshed. Not only his head, but his entire body felt alive and rejuvenated. His body, which did feel a bit heavy – although not to the extent of feeling like a mountain – felt quite normal now.

Maria explained that there was definitely a reason why expensive rooms cost so much. There were dozens of rooms in the Neutral Zone but their pricing varied to quite a ridiculous degree.



According to her, the cheap rooms were only good for sleeping, but as the price increased, the environment found in the rooms gradually became more 'beneficial' towards the survivor trying to rest there.

More importantly, Seol's room was one of its kind in the whole Zone. Even if he rested as long as everyone else, he'd get to enjoy the effects of a rest that seemingly had lasted for several times longer.

The phone's display now showed 11:12 PM.

'I slept for around five hours, huh.'

Seol pulled out the convenience store food from the bag. He could eat for free in the restaurants, but he couldn't waste the time going there to order and eat. While chewing on a sandwich, he organized his thoughts.

'The efficiency is too poor.'

Including the break, he spent 11 hours to earn 600 Survival points. If he earned 1200 points in 24 hours, then in a month, that would be 36,000 points. He might be able to somehow afford two Ambrosias at this rate, but...

'The problem is with the remaining number of attempts.'

Seol knew very well that it was impossible to go and repeat the same mission over and over again. He also needed to consider those people who would try to follow whatever he painstakingly chose to do next as well.

Seol felt the distinct need to revise his strategy. The two prerequisite conditions of 'short time requirement/high rewards upon completion' were non-negotiable, but he thought he could forego his safety. No, he had to forget about it. Why? Higher the danger, higher the payout, that was why.

Honestly, he was very much tempted by what was on offer at the VIP store. Besides, he was told that once he left, it'd be exceedingly difficult to return to the Neutral Zone, too. So, he earnestly wanted to at least drink the Divine Elixir as soon as possible.

He wondered whether he should visit the other stores, too. But, he just shook his head in the end. Really now, he couldn't afford to waste a single point, so what was there for him to possibly buy?

However, he couldn't neglect to make thorough preparations. So, Seol pulled his bag closer and began inspecting its contents.

'Let's see.... The quill pen of flowing consciousness is... not for combat. And this Mirror of Understanding is for.... Damn it, it's only useful against the Deceased!'

There wasn't a mission to get rid of the walking dead in the Tutorial, nor would the survivors be given such a mission in the first place, so why...

Fortunately, though, he possessed a box full of spell balls. He only needed four of these balls to take care of that terrifying Gaekgwi, so he was sure of these coming in handy in the near future.

Seol extracted the familiar combination of Poison Fog, Ignite, Spider Web, and Hydrochloric Acid and put them in his pockets. Then, he headed towards the ground floor.

The hour may have been late, yet there were still twenty-plus people loitering around the plaza. Even the second-place Odelette Delphine and Hao Win could be seen among them as well.

When the 'first place' Seol made his entrance, both of them turned around to meet him as if they had a prior agreement. However, Seol was too preoccupied with earning more Survival points, so he failed to notice their actions. He simply poured his attention on the noticeboard.

"Excuse me."

Just as Seol's gaze headed upwards, Odelette Delphine called out to him.

"Uhm, yes?"

Seol tilted his head slightly. She was fidgeting with a strand of her brown hair – unlike the first time he saw her, she seemed to be in a slight bind over something.

"Did you know? Do you perchance remember Mister Tong Chai?"

"Mister Tong Chai, you say.... You mean, the man wearing a turban?"

"Yes. He was the fifth-place finisher. That man.... I think he has met his doom."

"...Met his doom? He's dead?"

A survivor who managed to amass more than 1000 points during the Tutorial died already? Now that was something Seol couldn't just gloss over.

"That one. I think he died while attempting that mission."

The mission parchment Odelette pointed at was the very same mission Seol was repeating earlier in the day.

“Indeed, there is a warning that you might die, but... Why do you think he's dead?”

“It's been six hours since he disappeared, but he hasn't returned yet.”

“Mmm. I'm not so sure about that... No matter what, to say he died while attempting something as simple as this Normal difficulty mission is a bit...”

Odelette's expression became complicated when she heard his words.

“Something as simple... I see. Well, will you be attempting the same mission again?”

“Ah, no. I was thinking of trying my hands on a different mission this time.”

Seol shifted his gaze back to the noticeboard. Odelette Delphine stood there licking her lips for a little while longer, before opening her mouth again.

“Can you spare some time to share a cup of tea with me?”

....

Although her suggestion didn't sound so bad – meeting a girl possessing an amazing beauty late at night – Seol had something far more pressing to attend to first. He needed to select a new mission and attempt it at least once.

“I apologize, but there is something I really need to confirm first... If it's not too much trouble, can I take a rain check?”

Seol spoke while considering the fact that she was a foreigner. After listening to his formal rejection, Odelette formed a wistful expression.

“I guess it can't be helped, then”

She turned around to leave.

Seol resumed checking the board out – then, he thought what if, and activated his ability.

Most of the mission parchments placed lower down on the board didn't emit any color, but as he raised his gaze upwards, he saw yellow, vermillion and crimson, in that ascending order.

'Does that mean missions found higher up on the board are harder?'

Seol then stared in disbelief at the mission parchment dyed in deep crimson color located at the very top of the board which proudly boasted the mission reward of 172,800 points. However, his gaze spotted something odd nearby and stayed there. Among the sea of orange, there was one mission parchment dyed in yellow.

'1000 Survival points as the mission reward?'

The difficulty was one step above the 'Slightly Hard' – 'Hard'. Remaining attempts? 15 out of 15. Most importantly, there was no time limit, either.

As he looked up at that piece of paper, greed filled up Seol's expression.

## Chapter 22

[Break through the siege and survive! (Remaining number of attempts: 15/15)]

Survive the encirclement of the group of skeletons!

Difficulty: Hard

When successful: +1000 Survival points.

When unsuccessful: Death

\*Cooperation possible (up to 6 participants)

'A siege? Skeletons?'

The mission parchment screamed 'danger' even through a cursory glance. The fact that the mission allowed up to six people to form a party told the same story, as well. Quite likely, Seol would find himself surrounded from all sides the moment he ripped the parchment in half.

However, no matter how long he stared, the mission's color remained yellow. And that color, without a doubt, signified that he should pay attention. Seol stood there, hesitating somewhat thanks to the word 'siege', but then he remembered that Kang Seok also glowed in yellowish color as well. If the creatures he'd encounter were on that guy's level, then...

'I have to take the risk.'

If he could survive and succeed, then he could potentially earn up to 15,000 points. He'd get to amass almost half of his goal of 34,000 points with this one mission alone. Besides, other survivors showed no sign of even touching this parchment, so it seemed perfect for his current situation.

'I should still be careful, though.'

After making up his mind, Seol pulled out all the spell balls in his possession.

'Will poison work against skeletons?'

Seol deliberated for a while, before deciding to use them even if they proved to be ineffective. He did confirm the crucial fact during killing the Gaekgwi, that the poisonous fog seemed to possess some elements of explosive gas. If he combined that with Ignite, then there was a good chance that he'd reap huge benefits – just like the last time.

'So, it should be better to combine these two...'

He carefully checked each of the spell balls and divided them into two groups – ones that would be used in combination and the rest that would be used by themselves. It was a shame that there were no spell balls related to holy or divine magic.

It'd be a lie if he wasn't feeling nervous. Still, he shoved the spell balls inside his pockets and grasped the steel bar as tightly as he could, before ripping the parchment up with his teeth.

The already-familiar sensation brushed past him and the scenery changed in an instant.

The location for this mission was set inside an underground cavern-like space. His vision immediately took in the ceiling above that seemed far too low for his liking.

“...”

And, right in front of his eyes... Several dozens of skeletons stood there, as he expected they might, and were glaring at the intruder.

'They all look rather hostile, don't they...'

The disparity between what he saw in things like video games and that of reality was as great as heaven and earth.

Whatever the case may have been, his plan was to start his assault with a bang. Seol pulled out the combination of Poison Fog and Ignite – the very combo that worked so splendidly against the Gaekgwi – and was about to throw the two, before his hands hastily froze mid-action.

“...Huh.”

Suddenly, he had a thought. He was standing in a completely different environment compared to when he was killing the Gaekgwi. He glanced behind him and saw a solid wall. There wasn't a lot of space around him, and worst of all, there was no room to retreat.

But, he was thinking of using a poisonous gas here? And to make it explode, too?

He nervously swallowed down his saliva after realizing how close he got to inadvertently killing himself. From the very beginning, things were going sideways.

*Kwaaahhhaa!!!*

Right at the back of the undead horde, a skeleton wearing a battle helmet roared out. Then, dozens of 'normal' skeletons began to repeatedly clatter their teeth in unison; they raised their weapons and began inching closer to Seol's position.

Realizing how urgent his situation had become, Seol quickly chucked the Ignite spell ball first. It caused a small explosion and knocked out two skeletons. Maybe because it was used independently, its overall prowess was far lesser than what he was hoping for.

Seol tried to remain calm and pulled out his second combination from the pocket – Spiderweb and the Hydrochloric Acid.

The thrown spell ball rapidly spun in the air, before tens of silvery threads exploded out. Ten-odd skeletons were tied up by these threads. Seol chucked the Acid ball a beat later; the acidic liquid rained down on the immobile monsters. The skulls, ribs, pelvic bones, femurs, etc, got melted in the blink of an eye, taking care of the first wave.

The overall effect was more or less acceptable, but the problem was that he still had to take care of twenty-plus remaining skeletons. These monsters continued to advance forward while their teeth noisily clattered, even though the flames from Ignite spread around and caught a few of them on fire.

All these were still within Seol's calculations, though. He had to decrease their numbers as much as he could before he was pushed up against the wall. While cautiously retreating, Seol pulled out more spell balls from his pocket.

Strong beams of light exploded out from the fourth ball he threw in the air.

With a loud buzz, the ball exploded in a blinding shower of arcing electricity which spread out to everywhere, causing a chain reaction of sorts. The skeletons trembled non-stop before they collapsed to the ground like puppets with their strings cut. Somehow, Seol managed to bring down the second wave.

*Guaaaah*

From the back, the helmet-wearing skeleton roared out in anger once more. Since it seemed to be the leader of this undead horde, its anger was more or less understandable, what with its subordinates decreasing by over half in only a few breaths' time.

The leader skeleton grasped a large ax and rushed forward, before powerfully kicking off from the ground.

The boney hand arced back and then, shot downward as if the monster wanted to slice apart the rude intruder in one go.

Seol didn't expect the enemy to perform an aerial assault like that and stood there blinking in a daze. Meanwhile, the distance between him and the monster shrunk rapidly. He was about to pull three more spell balls out but had to urgently raise the steel bar to defend himself, instead.

Although he was slightly caught off-guard, as long as he could defend this attack and hit the skeleton with lots of spell balls, then he'd be...

*CLANG!!*

Seol's body tilted to one side rather unexpectedly. His eyes grew wide in disbelief.

The airborne attack that carried the downward momentum contained destructive power that easily exceeded his expectations. The angle of defense allowed him to deflect the descending ax, but at the same time, the impact force shoved his own arm away as well.

The ax was swung again in a diagonal line and smacked away Seol's steel bar like it was nothing. Then, it swung back towards his now-exposed ribcage.

His eyes instinctively spun and took in the sight of the powerful arc the ax was drawing. Seol's head blanked out, then.

*I'm going to die here?*

*Just like this? Really?*

*But, it was only 'Attention Required', wasn't it?*

*I still have spell balls left to use, and I am not in a disadvantageous position yet....!*

As thousands of thoughts entered and left his head, his instincts screamed out. It told him it was too late now.

Seol gave up on counter-attacking right away and spun around with what little reflex he could muster up. While exposing his back, he crouched forward as much as he could.

*Slice!!*

The sharp blade of the ax didn't cut the intruder's back but sliced up the object slung across his shoulders – the thick bag that contained pretty much every little thing from a certain convenience store.

At the same time, the skeleton's head was reflected on the smooth, polished surface peeking out from underneath the gap cut open by the ax.

Suddenly, a light beam shot out from the bag and penetrated the skeleton's eye sockets.

*Kieeeeeee!*

The skeleton screamed. Seol nearly toppled over from the impact but managed to prop himself up by placing his hands against the wall. He turned his head around to look. Although he was dazed and stunned silly, he still got to see the skeleton screaming out in pain as it was burning away. The moment of quick thinking had saved his neck, but he couldn't hide his shock from the sudden change of situation.

'W, what happened?'

He managed to survive, but that didn't mean his troubles were over. He quickly pulled the bag that served as a wonderful shield to his front and rummaged through its contents. He then figured out the cause of the change. A beam of bright light was coming from the sliced gap of the bag.

“...Oh.”

The Mirror of Understanding. It was the SPECIAL item he drew from the drawing machine, supposedly for dealing with the Deceased.

Thinking ‘what if’, Seol pulled the mirror out and shined its light on the still-burning skeleton with the helmet. Every single bone on its body began to change color right away. Very soon, the monster completely became ash and scattered away like dust.

It wasn't the only that monster, though. Even the ones trapped within the Spiderweb, even the ones hastily retreating... as soon as the light touched them, they turned into ash while crying out in sorrowful wails.

He only had to shine the light once around the cavern, but the tens of skeletons all became dust in less than one minute.

When all of its targets were gone, the mirror's surface cracked as if to signal that it had achieved what it was designed for.

[You have successfully completed a 'Hard' difficulty mission.]  
[1000 Survival points has been added to your tally.]  
[Current SP: 28,100 SP]

\*

When Seol returned to the plaza, a small commotion rose up.

After the 'first placed survivor' vanished from the plaza, the crowd quickly checked what mission he had chosen, only to be shocked out of their minds. Not even one person among them dared to attempt a Normal difficulty mission yet, but this youth was challenging a Hard difficulty already? Not only that, all by himself?

The opinions were evenly split. Some were saying that he had bitten off more than he could chew, while others said that they should wait and see. And as everyone could see, Seol returned to the plaza in less than five minutes.

Since there was only one possibility upon failure of the mission, which was death, his re-emergence meant only one thing.

"I can't believe it."

Hao Win muttered out softly in disbelief.

It could be said that Hao Win's surprise was on a different level compared to other survivors here. He had managed to complete a few missions already, and while doing so, he got to form a certain view, an educated guess of sorts, regarding how one should go about surviving in the Neutral Zone.

He was convinced that, if he wanted to undertake missions, he would have to make adequate preparations first by purchasing various items through many stores found here. And also, even if he could form a party with other people possessing similar level of abilities as himself, he should not, under no circumstances, attempt to clear missions that had difficulty rating higher than 'Normal', at least not for now.

That was probably why Odelette Delphine went to chat with the first-placed young man from Korea. Of course, she still got refused rather grandly, though.

But that man from Korea had complete a mission with a difficulty rating two rungs higher than 'Normal' this quickly?

"How did he do it? Is able to use magic already... Hmm?"

Hao Win was thinking of inching closer to Seol and ask, but he ended up tilting his head instead. Seol was standing in the same spot, unmoving like a stone sculpture. There was a strange, awkward atmosphere surrounding him.

It was as if Hao Win was looking at a soldier who barely managed to return from a bloody and brutal warzone. When Hao Win took a closer look, the golden bag he was so envious of was split almost in half, and Seol's expression seemed to be lost and contemplative at the same time.

Then, Seol began moving his feet in silence.

The crowd could only stare at the back of the young man wordlessly climbing up the staircase in unsteady steps.

\*

Seol couldn't recall how he returned to his room. His head hurt and he felt dizzy as if he had too much to drink. Upon regaining his focus, he found his entire body soaked in cold sweat.

A chill crept up his back. His breathing seemed normal on the surface, but his heart kept pounding. His throat felt so dry and clammy that he thought it might crack into pieces at any second. He pulled out a two-liter bottle of water and drank from it non-stop.

His Adam's apple danced up and down for a long time. Seol drank almost half of the bottle in one go, then forced his shaking legs to move. Soon, he fell on top of the bed.

Only then, this sensation of returning alive from the abyss came washing over him. Honestly speaking, had he ever felt this enervated since the Tutorial began?

*Tok, tok...*

He heard someone knocking on the door and raised his head, but then, decided not to care and dropped his head back down the sheets. He didn't feel like talking to anyone at the moment.

The knocking continued for a while, but when there was no response, it stopped.

Seol just lay there and wordlessly stared at the ceiling. The checkered pattern on the ceiling above seemed to be spinning in his view.

How much time went by?

The thick and enduring silence continued on. Seol's fearful and shocked eyes slowly closed until only a sliver remained open.

'Did I place too much blind faith in my ability?'

The parchment was glowing yellow. He thought he could definitely clear the mission given his previous experience with Kang Seok.

'Or was I too careless?'

It wasn't that he thought it would be a walk in the park. He knew it would be very dangerous. He simply thought that he could handle the risk.

'Maybe, I was too relaxed...'

But didn't he make preparations? He checked each spell ball and even divided them into possible combinations....

Seol thought up to here, and then....

'Was I too hasty...?'

....He completely closed his eyes shut.

The more he tried to analyze his actions, the more foolish he looked to himself.

At least, he had successfully completed the mission. Or, more correctly, he could only manage to barely clear it. The wrong choices he made came back to bite him in the ass and he nearly lost his life. Actually, being able to return alive and in one piece was a miracle in itself already.

His 'Nine Eyes' didn't lie. When he thought about it carefully, that mission was on the level where he could have cleared it if he was being very careful. He even had in possession the necessary answer to clear the mission, too.

What would've happened if he pulled the Mirror of Understanding out the moment he got there? Whether it was a Deceased or a skeleton, they both were undead, so why couldn't he think of this obvious similarity beforehand?

Or, what would've happened if he came up with different types of spell ball combinations?

Only by relying on that pathetically small level of experience of killing the Gaekgwi, he went and picked the Poison Fog as his first line of attack out of the ten spell balls in his possession. Meanwhile, he didn't even stop to consider just what kind of location he might find himself in after the teleportation.

In the end, his mind was to blame. He pretended to be not relaxed. He pretended to be not overconfident. His mind, his greed, blinded him with the need to amass the Survival Points as quickly as possible.

At a bare minimum, he wouldn't have acted this complacent back during the Tutorial.

'...No, that's not right, is it?'

Even back then, was there anything he did with his own power?

More and more questions naturally reared their ugly heads as Seol was pulled along by this chain of logic.

When he chased away the Gaekgwi at the assembly hall, was that through his own power? Or, when he broke past the second mission full of traps alone?

They were both due to his 'Future Vision' ability. He didn't even know how to activate that thing right now. And more importantly, it wasn't as if Seol made the conscious choice to act. He was simply overwhelmed by the emotions at the time.

And when he killed the Gaekgwi?

That was only possible because of the absolute safety the safe zone provided.

What about when he earned the highest amount of points during the Tutorial, then? That was all thanks to the diary of an unknown student.

Most likely, he had become too cocky. As soon as he stepped into the assembly hall, he got recognized as the holder of the hallowed Gold Mark and everyone was super respectful of him. Everyone tried to follow after his footsteps and some even worshipped him. Even the smallest things he did garnered so much attention. They all said that he was someone very special.

He must've been enjoying all this attention, this acknowledgment of his being, even though outwardly he denied it, did not want it, didn't even like it....

## [2. Traits]

### 1. Temperament:

- Weak-willed. (Possesses a weak will, thus unable to make decisions alone nor sticks to ones already made)
- Short-tempered.

### 2. Aptitude:

- Average. (Normal in every way; possesses no particular talent or qualities)

## [3. Physical Level]

Strength: Low (Low)

Endurance: Low (Extreme)

Agility: Low (Intermediate)

Stamina: Low (Low)

Magic: Intermediate (High)

Luck: Intermediate (High)

Remaining Ability Points: 0

In reality, he was weak. If one took away this and that, then he had nothing and was nothing.

He already knew what happened to him the moment he lost his ability. He knew so well what kind of useless wastrel he was, yet... Also, wasn't he given so much more this time? Besides his own supernatural ability?

“You stupid son of a bitch...”

He found it hard to endure this sense of shame.

Seol stood right back up and gripped the water bottle the other way, then he poured the water over his head. The cooling liquid rained down from his head, rushed past his face and wetted his upper torso. This was him mocking himself. He told himself, ‘you find yourself in a such a favorable position, so much better than compared to other people, yet is this all you can do?’

Even after the bottle emptied, Seol remained standing there with his eyes closed. He focused on every drop of water falling from the tips of his hair. When he did this for a long time, that whirlwind of boiling emotions deep inside the pit of his stomach began to cool down just a tad.

Only then did he reopen his eyes.

“Fuuuu....”

The light of greed was completely gone from his eyes now and the original glow returned.

'This can't go on.'

He began reflecting from the very beginning, a detail by every small detail. Not just when he started doing the missions, but the moment he stepped foot inside the Neutral Zone.

'Why am I so hung up on getting the Ambrosia?'

His obsession started the moment when Maria handed over the pamphlet... No, that wasn't quite right. He knew the existence of the VIP store even before he got here.

[Maybe you might be able to use the VIP store...]

....The Guide, Han.

When Seol recalled Han's face, he also remembered something he'd forgotten until now. Why did that guy choose that time to whisper those words to Seol? Why did he go out of his way to mention the VIP store in the first place?

The water drops still fell from Seol as he moved to grab the bag. He flung it open and rummaged through the contents until he found three neatly-folded pieces of paper inside.

He picked one up and cautiously unfolded it.

## Chapter 23

—A Note from the Guide (49/50)

### 1. Advice to remember when in the Neutral Zone

Do you wish to quickly increase your physical level?  
Why not use the special 'Competence'?  
Available in: the VIP store

Again, another mention of the VIP store.

'Competence?'

Now that he had taken a look, the note turned out to be just that, a note that had neither a beginning nor a proper ending.

Seol still decided to leave his room, however. The only way to satisfy his curiosity was to check this Competence with his own two eyes.

The VIP store was located on the eighth floor. When he pushed the door open, he found a small room, a counter, and a maid sitting behind it. Her eyes grew wide as soon as she saw him.

“Eh?”

“?”

“Oh, my apologies. I didn't expect to see a survivor to enter through those doors so soon. ... Are you perhaps here to window shop?”

“Is this the VIP store?”

“If you wish to purchase an item, please enter through here.”

The maid pointed towards a small door to her side. It seemed that there was another room behind the one they were in.

“Unfortunately, it isn't possible to window shop in this store. You also need a minimum of 30,000 SP to enter, as well. If you're curious about the products available in here. ...”

“Do you have an item called Competence on sale?”

Seeing the maid about to pick up a familiar-looking pamphlet, Seol hurriedly interjected. The maid flinched and stopped. She then spotted the piece of paper gripped in his hand and an unreadable light flickered in her eyes.

“Ah~ of course. The Guide's... Well, then. The story changes a little bit in that case. Please give me the note.”

After receiving the Guide's note, she opened up the huge closet right behind her. The interior of this wooden closet was packed full with rows upon rows of adult finger-sized potion bottles.

The maid pulled one out and placed it on the counter. Seol stared at this small bottle containing a milky white substance. He activated 'Nine Eyes' but couldn't see any color.

“You will also find Competence in the regular stores down below. However, they pale in comparison to the ones found in this VIP store – the price, the effects, etc.”

“What differences are there?”

“Mm. ... Well, the most expensive Competence you can find in the regular stores is priced at 250 SP. Its effects last for 12 hours. The maximum amount of boost you will receive is four times the normal. That's not so bad if you consider the cost-effectiveness. Don't you agree?”

“....”

“Oh, you meant the VIP store's? There isn't even a need to say it out loud because the potion's effects and its duration are doubled. For a low, low price of 400 SP, the duration lasts for 24 hours while you receive eight times the boost! Training one single day will give you the same results as training for eight days straight, guaranteed.”

Seol had to wonder whether he made a mistake when he thought the tone of her voice shifted subtly as if to ask, 'You'll buy it, right? You will definitely buy it after this sales pitch, right?'

“Isn't that just impossible? How can such a thing be. ...”

Seol displayed a strong sense of disbelief. While she was laughing with her eyes, the maid's overall expression was calm and composed.

“This is the Neutral Zone.”

“Yes, so?”

“This is the divine sanctuary created through the combined might of the seven deities. As long as you are trying to complete the tasks found within this zone, no effort will be spared in supporting you.”



“....”

“Of course, a part of this zone's reason for existence is to test you. But the main objective is to help you develop your skills even further and to increase the odds of your survival outside.”

The maid tilted her head slightly to the side and smiled radiantly.

“...That's what I'd like to say, but well, it's true that this potion is a little bit peculiar. Only 60 bottles are made available during each of the Neutral Zone's openings. Also, not everyone can buy one. There are even restrictions placed where one needs to bring along these 'notes' from the Guide. That's just in case an Invited hears of the potion's existence before arriving at the Neutral Zone.”

Seol thought about this carefully. He felt like he could see the answer to his quandary. Until now, he had been blinded by the VIP store to have realized it, but the words 'trying to complete the tasks found within this zone' continued to tug at his mind.

“Will you buy one?”

The maid placed both of her hands on her waist and confidently asked him. Seol organized his thoughts for a bit, then raised his head to meet her gaze.

“Yes.”

\*

After leaving the VIP store and heading back to his room, Seol ran into someone he was rather familiar with. And that was Yi Seol-Ah, looking somewhat anxious as she paced up and down in front of his door.

“Miss Yi Seol-Ah?”

“Orabeo-nim!” (TL: Highest form of honorific used to denote one's elder brother, used by females)

“Orabeo-nim?”

While Seol stood there confused, Yi Seol-Ah ran to him with a look of worry on her face.

“Are you alright? Are you really alright?”

“W, what do you mean...?”

“You looked like you were in pain before. I was worried, so I followed you and tried to see if you were okay, but you weren't in your room...”

Seol realized that the knocking noise he heard earlier belonged to Yi Seol-Ah. She was most likely referring to the time when Seol came back looking haunted after completing the 'Hard' difficulty mission. He was out of it back then, so he must have looked rather odd. Seol could understand now why she was behaving this way.

“...Have you been crying?”

“Crying?” Seol unconsciously touched around his face and found that the spring water he poured on himself hadn't fully dried yet.

“...I guess so.”

“B, but, why?”

“Because I'm pathetic.”

“Orabeo-nim isn't pathetic at all!”

Yi Seol-Ah jumped up and down on the spot. She hurriedly scuttled towards him and carefully grasped hold of his arms.

“N, no, you are simply amazing, that's all. You even completed a Hard mission by yourself. Because of that, a huge chaos is unfolding downstairs.”

Seeing her worry-filled eyes staring up at him, Seol felt like he was feeling a little bit better than before. Just a little. He slowly shook his head.

“That mission was not something I should've tried in the first place.”

“The mission was... that difficult?”

“I attempted it without even realizing my own limits. And I almost died because of it. To be honest... it's a miracle that I'm standing here.”

Yi Seol-Ah was about to say something, but she chose not to after seeing Seol's deeply wounded facial expression.

“I shouldn't have carried on like that. I shouldn't have tried that mission. Until now, I've only...”

His furrowed brows deepened even more. He closed shut his mouth for a second or two, the sounds of gritting teeth escaping from between his lips.

"I was... using my own life as collateral in a stupid gamble."

*And I even swore to myself I'd never, ever gamble again...*

"O, Orabeo-nim..."

Yi Seol-Ah fidgeted and fretted about while wondering whether there was something she could do to aid him. She then grasped his sleeves a bit tighter and tugged. Seol raised his downtrodden eyes, only to find Yi Seol-Ah and her gentle smile looking back.

"Would you like to run with me for a while?"

"Uhm, excuse me?"

"Yes, we should have a foot race!"

Seol ended up slightly panicking after that suggestion literally came out of nowhere.

"A race? Why a race, all of a sudden...?"

"Running is really great, you see! Your mind clears up when you're in the middle of your strides, and you'll definitely feel better after sweating a lot."

"But, uh, there is no space around here to run, though? And to run on the corridors is just..."

"Take a look at this~."

[A foot race (Number of available attempts: ∞/∞)]

Lap the track ten times!

Difficulty: Basic

When successful: none

When unsuccessful: none

\*Cooperation possible (up to 6 people)

These were the contents from the mission parchment the girl produced. And it wasn't just one or two pages, either – she was holding at least thirty of them. Seol looked at the bundle with a dazed expression, prompting her to go, 'Oops!' and explain herself.

"It's okay. The number of attempts for this mission is infinite, so I think it doesn't really matter if I take a few more than usual."

"But still, isn't that a bit too much...?"

"Oh. Uh, well, I need to run around for a while before I go to bed, or I won't be able to fall asleep."

She poked her tongue out and waved around the mission parchment slightly. Seeing her bright, innocent smile, Seol couldn't bring himself to say no.

The method of 'cooperating' was rather simple. Whether it was by holding hands or touching shoulders, it was fine as long as there was some kind of body contact when the parchment was torn in half.

The location they moved to was an athletic field. It was no bigger than what one might find in a middle school. Seol thought that doing ten laps around the track found here shouldn't be too hard, but well, he had to revise his assessment soon enough.

"W, was my fitness level this terrible?!"

He had no problems up to fourth and fifth laps. However, he began gradually slowing down on the sixth lap, and by the time he barely managed to complete the seventh, he couldn't even see Yi Seol-Ah's back anymore, never mind thinking of catching up.

He couldn't even tell whether he was running on the track or the track was running him out; his breathing was beyond rough, and his heart pounded incredibly hard while loudly demanding more and more oxygen to be delivered. Sweat poured out from his back as if it was raining, and a bittersweet odor leaked out from his throat.

"I... I... I can't... do... this!"

He wanted to plop down on the floor and pass out, but then again, that would be just too embarrassing. Why? Yi Seol-Ah had already finished all of her 10 laps and was waiting by the start/finish line while carefully regulating and calming down her breathing, that was why.

However, this was unsurprising. For many, many years, his body had been poisoned by the constant stream of late-night gambling, alcohol intake,

and non-stop smoking. So, there was no way he would be in a healthy state at all, especially when he never exercised in the first place.

“Change the way you breathe! Don't breathe through your mouth, but through your nose! Like this, *hu-hu, ha-ha! Hu-hu, ha-ha!*”

Seol heard her encouragements and gritted his teeth. Only now, the answer that was just within his reach became crystal clear.

Just like his own words muttered out not too long ago, Seol had been doing things by simply gambling with his life as the collateral. Sure, he had received a favorable hand thanks to his Gold Marking, but if one single thing went wrong somewhere, then he'd end up dead without a doubt – like when he collapsed from the skeleton's jumping attack, for instance.

Also, the maid was right, too. The Neutral Zone wasn't designed to be a place where you must find a way to survive. No, it was designed to help one learn how to survive.

Everything had an order to follow.

Seol finally managed to complete all ten laps and stopped just before the finish line. He crumpled to the floor like a collapsing building, and roughly wheezed in and out. Yi Seol-Ah trotted to where he was and advised him to slowly regulate his breathing, before tilting her head a bit, looking somewhat surprised.

“I didn't expect Orabeo-nim's fitness level to be this low...”

“H, how come.... Miss... Yi Seol-Ah... can run... so well?”

“Well, I've been delivering milk in the early mornings, you see? I did that for about one year straight.”

“Sounds... rough...”

“Oh no, not at all! I've always enjoyed running, you know? Even when I was at school, I entered the athletics club and ran track and field almost everyday~.”

Yi Seol-Ah drew a victory sign with her fingers. Seol always thought her demure, shy demeanor and her good looks matched up pretty well, but as it turned out, she was a bona fide athlete, instead. He gladly accepted her extended helping hand while opening his mouth.

“Thank you.”

“Eh?”

She became flustered as his gratitude came out from nowhere.

“My mind's a lot clearer now.”

“Oh, I... It was nothing. If I was able to help somehow, then I'm glad.... Besides, you... have saved me, so.... I should be, instead....”

She quickly lowered her gaze and her cheeks reddened softly. Seeing her at a loss and not knowing how to respond, a certain streak of mischievousness tickled Seol's fancy.

“In any case, thank you.”

“N, no. It's nothing at all....”

“Thank you. I mean it.”

“No, it's really nothing at all. It's me who's....”

“I really don't know how I should repay this debt to you.”

“...Orabeo-nim.”

Yi Seol-Ah puckered her lower lip in a pout and cutely glared at him.

“You are doing this only because of what Sungjin and I did, yes?”

“Am I busted?”

Seol winked at her and stood up straight.

This was quite surprising. During the run itself, he felt like a dying man, but now that it was over, his mood had improved dramatically.

“It's not bad, this running thing.”

“Right? Running is easily the best way to increase your fitness level. It increases your lung capacity, improves the way your lungs function, and it

strengthens your heart. Plus, it even improves your blood circulation!”

Seol's eyes gradually grew wider as he listened to the virtues of running. He genuinely had no idea that something as simple as running could be this beneficial.

“In that case, shall we run together one more time?”

“Mm... I'm happy with that, but...”

Yi Seol-Ah tilted her head this way and that before she spoke to him in a low voice.

“You have to drop the honorifics, okay?”

Seol let off a soft chuckle at her unexpected request.

\*

After ending the running session with Yi Seol-Ah, Seol rechecked the noticeboard, and sure enough, he could see them. Right at the bottom of the board, he found huge stacks of parchments with 'Basic' written on them. With no Survival Points offered up as rewards, everyone had been ignoring them until now.

Seol revised his plans completely. The first thing he did was to visit the VIP store again. He then ignored the pleas of the maid there and bought the remaining 59 bottles of Competence. After drinking a bottle, he began running again.

'Healthy citizens make a strong nation!'

Shouting the famous slogan that encouraged people of Korea to exercise, Seol solely focused on improving his fitness level. He figured that before he could start doing any missions, he needed to be healthy and fit.

As days passed, other survivors began to think Seol's actions were odd. After all, to their eyes, he possessed enough abilities to solo a Hard-ranked mission. Even so, he was only doing 'Basic' training regimes that offered no rewards. Not only that, he was repeating them over and over, completely stopping other missions.

Seol also found it pretty hard in the beginning. His weak physique demanded rest way too often. And inevitably, he grew bored of repeating the same thing all the time. He was constantly haunted by thoughts that told him, 'This is enough, you can stop now.'

However, when he sensed the gradual change his body was going through, he was able to throw away all doubts and temptations.

On the same track that he could barely run around ten times at the start of it all, now he could complete the distance without decreasing his speed one bit. His breathing would be ruffled only a little, too. In the end, he thought this wasn't going to be enough, so he proceeded straight into the next training mission.

And that was to run 20 laps around a slightly longer track. There was one thing different for this 'mission' than the previous one, though – there was a reward of 1 SP. Regardless, he repeated this mission diligently for a while, and he could feel his body developing ever so gradually.

Maybe it was all due to the effects of the Competence potion, he could definitely feel the improvements the more he exercised. And since the results were so tangible and palpable, he no longer found the training routine monotonous and boring anymore. They had become much more interesting and fun. Every time he succeeded when he thought he couldn't, every time he endured and achieved his goal, something within him was changing.

He got addicted to this euphoria of success. And he began pouring all of his focus on training like a madman. He spent two-thirds of a day strictly on training.

The big reason why he could continue doing this, though, was his room – the room that Maria personally declared as the 'best in the Neutral Zone for resting'. Just one hour of rest washed away all the fatigue, and he only had to sleep for four hours to recover his stamina completely.

Soon, Seol realized that time was too precious to waste on anything else and thus became interested in how to recover his stamina even faster. Since there were potions like Competence, he figured there could be something else similar to improve one's recovery rate as well.

He didn't hesitate to spend his SP in this regard. After all, he had no other place to spend these points, what with his meals and sleeping quarters being free to use. Soon, his exercise time increased to nearly 20 hours. He believed that he had finally begun making good use of the great starting conditions he was given, not just relying on them as if they were his crutch.

Yes, he felt envious of other survivors forming teams to tackle various missions. He still felt some attachment towards the Ambrosias, too.

But, when he ran around with all his might, all the negative thoughts filtered out of his system and he could control his mind better. He was determined not to take on any missions until he felt confident enough to tackle them again.

And so, two weeks went by, just like that.

For everyone else, it was 14 days, but for Seol, the past two weeks were more like 112 days, instead.

\*

“He's insane.”

Cinzia concluded as so while watching the footage. She was resting her chin on one hand at the same time. On the screen, Seol was running on the track without taking a break.

“Spending half of the month only on training his basic fitness. ... Hah. I really did not expect that someone like him would pop up. I'm sure the gods are really happy right about now.”

“Shouldn't we think about informing the survivors soon?”

The maid courteously waiting behind her spoke up. It was Agnes, the maid who offered to guide Seol around in the beginning, only to be kicked to the curb rather rudely by Maria.

“What? Oh, you mean the fake deadline?”

“The Neutral Zone is in turmoil at the moment. The deadline has been shortened far too drastically. If the survivors learn of the original deadline, then...”

“Then? What can they realistically do?”

Cinzia extracted a cigarette from her inner pocket. Agnes expertly lit it up.

“Don't worry about it. We'll just relax and wait and then tell them, 'Oh, you're all so pitiful. I decided to generously extend the deadline'. Simple.”

“But still...”

“Enough.”

Agnes shut her mouth right away. A thin smoke slowly drifted out of Cinzia's mouth.

“There's no problem. Besides, didn't I already send the word out that the Neutral Zone's deadline will be left to my discretion?”

“There has been a debate as to whether you changing the rules as you please is wise...”

“Hmph. Well, then. Tell me, what do you think would have happened if I told them that they can stay in here for three months?”

Agnes could only sigh out after being on the receiving end of that pointed question.

“It's too obvious. They would take it bloody easy. I mean, even those with 0 points would only need to get 30, 40 points a day to pass. Don't you know just how much price we had to pay to establish this Neutral Zone? You think I'll just sit here and watch such a thing unfold?”

“That is... true, as well.”

Agnes reluctantly agreed.

“Even the most worthless fool can complete the Normal difficulty mission by the deadline as long as they build themselves up step by step. More promising eggs would be able to go beyond that. You've heard of Sung Shihyun who started off from the Basic difficulty and cleared the 'Impossible' difficulty on the final day, right?”

“Yes, I've heard the story.”

“That's right. This place is designed to speed up growth. But what's the point of telling them that it's important when they don't even bother?”

“...”

“Hearing it thousands of times is far worse than seeing it once. If they can't feel it and sense it by themselves, there's no point telling them the truth hundreds of times. At least now, with the short deadline, they're forced to desperately give their all.”

“But they will reach their breaking point soon” was what Agnes was about to say, but she kept silent and just lowered her head. She didn't 100% agree with this notion of forcing people because there weren't enough of them voluntarily going for the optimal. But she didn't have any sound rebuttals to offer. The countless cases of the past Neutral Zone openings were ample enough proof of Cinzia's assertion.

Most importantly, though – the manager in charge of the summons of March 2017 was Cinzia. Besides the basic rules that needed to be adhered to, the rest was left to her sole discretion.

“Well, I shouldn't be saying those words out aloud, right? I too used to complete these missions like a loon, after all.”

Cinzia returned her gaze to the screen and licked her lips slightly. Rather than dissatisfied, she looked somewhat envious, instead. Agnes covered her mouth and smiled softly.

“If I trained as hard as he did when I came to this place... Then, I’d be twice as strong as I am by now.”

“I also think so.”

“Ho? Even the famous Agnes thinks so?”

“Of course. Every time I’m faced with my limits, I have regrets. If I could buy a chance to start from the beginning, then I would not hesitate to spend millions and millions.”

Cinzia smiled brightly. She seemed to be really enjoying this.

“Returning in time, huh. That’s an interesting topic. So, how would you do things differently?”

“Mm, first, I’d try to amass as many Survival Points as possible in the Tutorial. Then once I reach the Neutral Zone, I’d drink one bottle of Competence from the VIP store every day while fully utilizing the sleeping quarters provided to the top survivor. Since I’d have points left over even after that... well, I’d probably do the same thing that man is doing right now.”

“That’s right. That’s why I’m kinda envious.”

Cinzia nodded her head and shifted her gaze away from the screen. Within the eyes of Agnes busily staring at the footage, an odd desire was visibly burning bright.

“I guess your instincts as a craftsman haven’t gone away. It’s fine if you wish to help him out.”

Cinzia’s sudden consent made Agnes blink her eyes in surprise.

“Pardon? Ah. But, that man is...”

“I know, he was invited by Miss Foxy... Here’s the thing, though. I’ve heard of something interesting.”

While still smoking her cigarette, the ends of Cinzia’s lips began arching upwards.

## Chapter 24

“Interesting information?”

“That man... He might not be affiliated with Sinyoung.”

Upon hearing Cinzia’s straight-forward declaration, Agnes’s slim, shapely eyebrows furrowed noticeably.

“But that can’t be. Kim Hannah definitely...”

“Yes, Miss Foxy is affiliated with Sinyoung. But what’s important is that the gold stamp wasn’t issued by them.”

“What do you mean?”

“Our investigation revealed that the Temple of Gula has granted her the stamp.”

Agnes lowered her head and closed her eyes. She did this out of habit whenever she needed to reorganize her thoughts.

“To have another Gold Mark appear when Sung Shihyun is still missing... So? Don’t you think it’s all a bit fishy?”

“...”

“Of course, nothing’s certain. Well, it really doesn’t matter even if Miss Foxy guides him to Sinyoung. They and we, Sicilia, might not be in a cooperative relationship, but we’re still in an amicable position with them, after all.”

Agnes raised her head. Unfitting for her usual taciturn expression, there was a glint of a strange light in her eyes.

“In that case...”

“I’ll deal with Maria for you. That girl won’t be opposed to the idea, anyways.”

“Will it really be fine for me to get involved? With my personality, I will undoubtedly go all out once I start.”

“Right back at you, Drill Sergeant Agnes. You’ll have to give it your all, or else.”

Cinzia's expression became somewhat sinister.

“Sung Shihyun was an Irregular with a Gold Mark, and that man is also a Gold Mark Irregular. Conditions are seemingly the same. But if there is one thing different compared to how things were two years ago, then it'd be the trainers involved, isn't... Ah, right, I guess Sung Shihyun was personally trained by an ‘Executor’, so I guess there would be some differences.”

Cinzia didn't miss the brief flash of fury rising up on Agnes's face.

“If you think you can do it, then go for it. Show me what the Sicilia's infamous demonic instructor, the conqueror of the South, has to offer.”

“In case that man becomes a powerful enemy that stands in our way at a later juncture, please do not blame me.”

Agnes bowed her head in a respectful manner and quietly made her exit from the room.

“...Hmph. Did I push her a little too hard?”

Cinzia exhaled the cigarette smoke and chuckled to herself.

\*

[Foot Race (Number of available attempts: oo/oo)]

Run around the track until you collapse from fatigue!

Difficulty: Basic

When successful: +10 SP

When unsuccessful: N/A

\*Cooperation not allowed

*Hoo-hoo, haa-haa, hoo-hoo, haa-haa...*

Seol was running on the track with a completely empty mind while utilizing the breathing method Yi Seol-Ah had taught him. By now, he had long gotten rid of the habit of keeping count the number of laps he'd done. He simply did as the mission required from him – run until collapsing from the exhaustion.

After a certain point, he stopped noticing his body improving. There was only one reason why he continued to train like a madman and that was to win the competition against himself. Like now.

He maintained the highest speed he could muster and lapped the track dozens of times; yet, as if he was trying to run around the endless ocean, he saw no signs of the finish line.

It was quite obvious that Seol's stamina wouldn't be infinite. No matter how hard he struggled, he would eventually reach his limit.

When that happened, temptations would quickly flood in. They'd whisper, ‘You've done enough. Take a short break. It'll be fine to walk for a bit, why don't you slow down a little...’

When he was so short of breaths that he felt like he'd die at any second, everything around him seemed to fade away. Even taking one step forward became excruciatingly difficult. It was as if a giant wall was blocking his progress. It was telling him that this was as far as he could go.

“...”

Suddenly, a drop of tear leaked out from the corner of his eye. He wanted to cry.

He wanted to cry because it was so hard. He knew it was pathetic, but he still wanted to collapse on the floor and cry his eyes out. Then, maybe, just maybe, he'd feel a lot better.

Other survivors were too busy completing various missions, yet why was he here, doing this thankless work all by himself? It wasn't as if anyone would acknowledge the hard work and sacrifice he had put in. No, he began to regret the fact that he entered this place in the first place.

“Kkheuck!”

Seol resolutely held back his tears. He gritted his teeth and endured. Whenever he was on the brink of falling to those whispers, he felt an unpleasant sense of déjà vu.

For some reason, he felt like he would fall into his old habit of gambling again if he couldn't overcome this here. He'd rather die than fall back into that hateful state ever again.

He thought that wishing for a change when he couldn't even win against himself was an unfunny joke not worth repeating.

This desire, this drive to 'not admit defeat' became the motivating force that ensured he would never falter.

Just recalling the days when he was lost to the ecstasy of gambling boiled his blood and enraged him. Remembering back to how badly he ended up disappointing his family and how he made Yoo Seonhwa cry, he gritted his teeth. He hated himself so much that he could even start harming his own body.

His rage transformed into the whip of stubbornness that mercilessly pounded on his legs.

“Kuaaaaaak!”

He reached out with his hands; his feet powerfully kicked the ground as if he was trying to jump over a wall.

Unbelievably, his outstretched leg didn't falter, and it stepped on the ground with strength and stability.

Right in that moment, a strange feeling wrapped around Seol's senses. The wall that had been resolutely prohibiting his approach until now, became a trusty and secure foothold as he jumped over it and landed on top.

Seol moved his leg one last time, before finally faltering to the ground and rolled ungainly along the track's surface. Even then, he tried to run again and his arms and legs flailed about, only to feel vomit rushing up his throat.

“Ueeeeeeck!”

Seol continued to puke while tears fell down his face nonstop.

The retching eventually ended, and he powerlessly rolled onto his back. He closed his eyes, wanting to enjoy the remaining traces of ecstasy that overwhelmed his senses just now for a bit longer.

[ 'Basic' difficulty mission has been successfully completed. ]

[ 10 Survival points have been accredited to you. ]

[ Current SP: 2840 SP ]

Meanwhile, Seol's energyless hands slowly but tightly clenched into fists.

[ Your personality trait, 'Weak-willed' has been erased. ]

[ Your stamina level has risen from 'Low (Low)' to 'Low (Intermediate)' . ]

The track disappeared from his view, and the familiar sight of the Neutral Zone's interior entered his view.

“?”

Seol was teleported back to the plaza while still on his back. He raised his head slightly when a shadow loomed over him.

His slowly rising eyes spotted someone's rather shapely legs first. Then, he even got to see the ends of the garter belt crossing her inner thighs, just hidden beneath her dress. And when his sights dug in just a little bit higher, a piece of frilly fabric with a cute teddy bear sewn in front that seemed to be protecting the most secretive and important area...

“...Lilac?”

*Kuk.* With a grunt, a pair of legs hurriedly backtracked.

Seol nodded his head, thinking that was one very cute bear. Then, after spotting Agnes's cold glare penetrating through her glasses, he began to panic. But how was that possible? After all, she looked like one of those uber-strict head maids working for some historically-important household...

“I beg your pardon. I did not expect you to be teleported back while lying on the ground...”

Agnes coughed to clear her throat and quite abruptly presented Seol a cup with some kind of liquid in it. Seol was feeling thirsty anyway, so he gladly accepted it and smiled.

Soon, the cool and refreshing liquid slid down his throat. It felt as if a little bit of his energy had returned immediately. He pushed off the ground and stood up.

“Thank you. I was actually...”

“It's 10 SP.”

*It wasn't free?!*

Seol was about to argue that he was being forced into buying something he didn't really need but swallowed his words right back down as soon as he felt the changes taking place within his body.



“Oh.”

The cold liquid sliding down his throat suddenly felt warm and gentle once it arrived in his stomach. A truly refreshing sensation spread throughout every corner of his body and gently massaged all the accumulated fatigue away. Instead of topping up his spent energy, the liquid seemed to enhance his own surging vitality.

“This is...?”

“It's nothing much. If you rest for a little longer, you should be able to move as usual.”

Agnes stopped there for a second and stared at Seol.

“And also, although I fully understand your intentions, it'd be for the best that you no longer drink the stamina recovery potion for the time being.”

“Why?”

Seol was surprised. Rather than 'How did you know', his surprise was more of 'Why shouldn't I?'

“But, if I want to increase my training time...”

“I never thought I, as a trainer, would say this, but...”

Agnes fixed her glasses on her nose.

“You need to decrease the length of your training time.”

“You're telling me to... train less?”

“Yes.”

Agnes readily agreed with his answer as if she was waiting for it.

“It may sound presumptuous of me, but through my observation of the past two weeks, I have come to the conclusion that your training routine has gone beyond the realm of simple fitness training and is now harming your body instead. Your body needs time to cool down properly through regularly scheduled breaks. However, you're punishing it even before it can get adequately ready. It is almost to the point of cruelty.”

Her cold analysis left Seol speechless.

“You have been using recovery potions to forcibly regain your stamina... Although it's fine to use it every once in a while, continuous intake over a prolonged period of time will not help you at all. Resting well is also part of a proper training routine. The more your fatigued body repeats recovering stamina through natural means, the faster your natural recovery rate will get. Now is the time you let your body get used to recovering naturally.”

“I... I see.”

“From here onwards, rather than relying on recovery potions that instantly replenish your stamina, I strongly advise you to use various items that aid you in natural recovery. For example, there are refreshments, special scented oils for bathing, plants or scented candles to place near your pillow, and others.”

Agnes also added that such items would also have positive effects on his endurance, strength, and agility.

Seol could only nod his head in a daze. He was currently lost among the influx of information, not knowing what to make of it. He knew she wanted to give him important advice, but right now, that dang teddy bear from before merrily danced inside his brain and he couldn't concentrate properly.

“If it's not too inconvenient for you...”

Completely unaware of what Seol was thinking at the moment, Agnes quietly continued on with her words.

“Will you grant me the honor of guiding you? Please.”

She said something very similar on the first day Seol arrived on the Neutral Zone. However, the nuance of her words was a little different this time.

“It'd be my honor.”

Seol had no reason to refuse, so he didn't.

“There is one thing that I'm curious about.”

As they climbed up the staircase, Agnes asked him.

“Why do you not eat at the restaurants, and instead, choose the food items you found in the Tutorial's convenience store? You can utilize the services of the restaurants for free.”

Her voice sounded like she was admonishing him somewhat. Seol sheepishly scratched his cheek.

“Well, uh... I thought I didn't have a lot of time to waste, so...”

“That will not do. Just as proper rest is important, so are your meals. Your body needs more nutrients as you train, yet you've been eating those unhealthy junk food...”

Agnes shook her head in disappointment. Eventually, their steps came to a halt.

They arrived on the third floor. Through the glass door, they could see a wide-open space filled with various exercise equipment. Even though there was no treadmill insight, it was still better kitted out than some of the best gyms out there.

“Running for two weeks... And you have been taking the special Competence daily, so that equates to almost four months of constant training. I believe that you are at least fit to a certain degree now.”

It was at this point that Seol became sure; this strict-looking maid, who just so happened to possess a taste in cute underwear, had knowledge of everything that occurred inside the Neutral Zone.

“Running isn't the only form of training. In order to evenly raise your physical stats, I recommend that you try other types of training as well.”

Seol agreed with that idea. He was thinking of starting other basic training besides running, anyways. Agnes was introducing him to this facility because of that reason as well. Of course, it wouldn't be free to use this place, though.

“How much is it to use this place?”

“Ten points per day, but if you pay for a week in advance, then it's discounted to 50. Also, if you wish to hire a full-time trainer to aid you in your training, it will cost you further one extra meal a day.”

Seol had been paying close attention and ended up doubting his own hearing. Seeing that dumbfounded expression on his face, Agnes hurriedly added something else.

“You see, the cuisine offered here in the Neutral Zone is really delicious.”

Although Seol couldn't really understand what she meant by that exactly, he decided to accept it as her way of saying she'd help him for free. Even he knew that having a trainer beside you while training made a huge difference. Besides, he could tell Agnes was fired up about something.

Feeling something was slightly odd, Seol activated 'Nine Eyes', but she didn't emit any color. In other words, she wasn't necessarily trying to harm him.

Seol carefully assessed his situation before opening his mouth.

“By any chance, are there any other maids beside you who can also train me?”

Agnes tilted her head slightly.

“It's not impossible to find one, but... Are you perhaps not satisfied with me?”

“No, not at all.”

Seol denied the notion and quietly took a deep breath.

“I'd like someone who possesses excellent skillset, but also someone who can train me without holding back.”

Agnes adjusted her glass; the glare from the light reflected off the lens rather sharply.

“...In that case, there is no need to introduce anyone else.”

Her eyes remained fixed on Seol as she quietly gathered her hands in front of her chest. He thought that there was a trace of smirk on her lips.

“It is quite embarrassing to say this out aloud, but I am also referred to as the Sicilia's demonic instructor.”

“Demonic instructor... That's good.”

“Will you be fine with it? I was planning to be gentle with you at first.”

Her words seemed to be implying, ‘Do you think you can handle it?’ Seol replied without hesitation after hearing such a naked provocation.

“Let me pay the Survival points first.”

Exactly 10 minutes later...

Seol was regretting everything he had said while figuratively beating the ground up in anguish.

The nickname of 'demon' wasn't just for show. The moment the training began, Agnes pushed him to the brink without mercy. It was to the point that Seol began missing the pain he felt while he was running laps around the track.

He even ended up protesting during the training by saying, "Isn't this too harsh? Didn't you say something about taking a break?"

And the reply he got was, "You can rest after the training is over. No one said you could take a break in the middle of your training!"

Another thing he couldn't bring himself to understand was her suddenly getting violent in the middle of the training.

"I told you to keep your eyes forward!"

*Slap!*

Her thin stick sharply landed on Seol's shoulders with a loud slap.

"Again! One!"

Seol panted non-stop as he fixed his grip on the barbell resting on his trapezoid muscles. While doing squats, the so-called must for training the muscles on the lower body, Seol was suffering from the kind of pain that felt like his thighs were being cut up with a dull knife.

"Two!"

"Kkheueueu....!"

When he somehow managed to lower his hips, the stick slapped him hard on the back once more.

"You are bending your knees, yet why are they sticking out beyond your toes? Straighten yourself!"

'I've never seen someone as vicious as you!'

Seol was screaming inside. He didn't say anything since he knew that getting hit would help with increasing his endurance. But still, he had no idea she would be this heartless. Was it because he inadvertently sneaked a peek at that laced lilac teddy bear underwear?

Meanwhile, Agnes sharply shouted out.

"Again!"

Unfortunately, Seol's quaking thighs couldn't hold on any longer and he fell on his butt.

"...What do you think you're doing?"

Agnes's icy cold voice 'politely' entered his eardrums.

"*Hua, Hua!*"

Not caring one bit, Seol began massaging his aching thighs. He was getting seriously worried about blood coalescing there and then bursting out of the skin or something.

"Hmph." Agnes let off a snort and crossed her arms against her chest.

"Only with this much... If you'd like, I can go a little easier on you. Well, I think I'm being sufficiently gentle even now."

"You....!"

"If this is not to your liking, I can introduce you to someone else at any time."

The corners of Agnes's lips curled up. Seol barely managed to swallow the curse words almost jumping out his mouth and lowered his head.

"...No, it's fine. Let's continue."

"Let me say this one more time. I won't go easy on you during the duration of your training."

"This is what I wanted. I'll just shout out some gihap and continue on."

"Gihap, is it... What you need right now isn't some random shouts, but the willpower to endure. In any case, let us continue. Please, stand up."

Seol spat out a lengthy groan after hearing her.

"Ah! Is it fine if my gihap is a bit peculiar?"

When he asked her while still massaging his thighs, Agnes's eyes became narrower than a slit.

“Are you trying to buy yourself time? You can do whatever you want with your gihap, but you will need to hurry and stand up, please.”

‘Damn it! Damn it!!!’

Seol stood back up while gritting his teeth. Meanwhile, she simply hoisted the barbell on his shoulders. And then. . .

“No matter what type of training you perform, the two most important things are your posture and your breathing pattern. One!”

He timed his gihap with the count.

‘Li!’

‘Li? That's indeed a peculiar gihap. Two!’

‘Lac!’

‘? One...?’

‘Li!’

‘....Two.’

‘Lac!’

Suddenly, the counting came to an abrupt stop. When Seol turned his head around to look, he found Agnes glaring at him with her face completely dyed red. She was furtively grasping the hems of her dress, and the stick in her hand was trembling ever so slightly as well. She seemed to be very flustered at the moment.

Suddenly, Seol felt quite satisfied for some reason. He slyly threw out a question.

“Why did you stop counting?”

“W, w, w, what... What are you saying...?!”

“Is there a problem with my posture?”

“N, no! That's not the issue!”

“Oh, you mean, with my gihap? You said I can do whatever I want with my gihap, so... Ah, right. Let me change it to something else.”

Seol raised the white flag when Agnes threateningly raised the stick up high. Of course, he had no desire to end things here.

“Please, train properly. One!”

“Teddy!”

“Two!”

“Bear!”

Again, the counting stopped.

A short moment later. . .

*SLAP!*

From the third floor gym, a sticky slapping noise resounded out.

\*

After Agnes entered his life, Seol's way of living in the Neutral Zone underwent yet another noticeable change. The biggest change, of course, had to do with his haphazard training regime. Now, he was working off on a well-defined and thought-out training routine.

Now he could say that, although the length of the time spent had decreased, the overall quality of the training had been increased several folds.

Strength, endurance, agility, and stamina – the severity of the training regime targeting these four key areas remained cruel enough for him to resort to throwing out multiple expletives. However, thanks to his fitness level raised through the constant running, he could cling on more or less.

Also, Agnes showed much diligence and even mapped out his activities outside training, including his diet and methods of resting, etc.

Since the instructor displayed the kind of zeal only seen when polishing a valuable but still-rough diamond, Seol too was motivated to reciprocate that dedication and worked hard. Not only that, the special Competence with the eight times the effects were added on top, so naturally, he grew at an explosive pace.

Indeed, his fitness and stats continued to improve. Not only that, his body would now cool down rapidly from the state of sweaty exhaustion soon after the training ended. The transformation felt so alien to him, Seol sometimes had to wonder whether this was his own body or not.

While Seol constantly and rapidly grew under the guidance of Agnes, the 30th morning finally arrived on the Neutral Zone.

For other people, it was 30 days, but for Seol, it was more like 240 – almost eight months of hardcore training.

On this day, the situations of those who had made preparations and those who hadn't would be changed somewhat.

## Chapter 25

On the morning of the 30th day.

As planned, Cinzia made the announcement of the deadline being extended by another two months. She sounded like she was being generous towards everyone, and that led many of the survivors to breathe out a sigh of relief. After all, most of them had failed to gather 1000 points until now.

Of course, not everyone displayed the same reaction.

“What is it, Hao Win?”

Cinzia knew that Hao Win was staring at her for a long time, but she decided to reply only now and shifted her own gaze towards the man in the black suit.

Hao Win's eyebrows rose up ever so slightly.

“It's nothing, really. Just that....”

“Just that?”

“It's different from what I've heard.”

“Wasn't it originally three months to begin with?” Hao Win seemed to have found a way to imply those words without saying them out aloud. Of course, he had no real reason to reveal the truth and get on Cinzia's bad side.

“Is that so? What a shame. I don't know which moron told you those things, but you must have not heard that I'm the general manager this time around.”

“If you say something like that, then I guess there's nothing more to say.”

Hao Win shrugged his shoulders and turned around, breaking eye contact. Cinzia then casually swept her gaze across the rest of the survivors.

“So, how was the first month of your stay in the Neutral Zone?”

Her question was met with nothing but silence.

The reality of the survivors' situation was that no matter how many of them gathered to form a team, none could crack a single 'Normal' difficulty mission.

“Unless you're a complete moron, I'm pretty sure you began to realize the harsh truth by now. 'Ah, I'm really worthless. If I leave this place now, I will die right away'. You must have thought about such things, no? Don't you think so, burrito?”

The burly Mexican man who complained about not being let into Paradise avoided meeting her gaze in embarrassment.

“Looks like you've all woken up by now.”

Cinzia seemed to be satisfied by their reactions as the tone of her voice softened just a tad.

“Now that you've become aware of your own reality, surely you're more willing to listen now than ever before. Most of you probably have amassed at least some Survival Points by now, correct?”

That was indeed the case. Pretty much everyone did nothing but complete missions like madmen. Even those who entered the Zone with 0 points had amassed a few hundred points at this point.

“Well, I've prepared a gift for all of you.”

At the mere mention of a 'gift', the eyes of the survivors opened up wide in anticipation.

“For tomorrow only, the Chamber of Awakening will open up for you. And inside this Chamber of Awakening, you will get to meet the seven gods that rule this world. Not only that, you will receive 'classes' that best suit your situation as well as your disposition. Simply put, you will be able to use mana from that moment on.”

*Whisper, whisper*

The once-quiet theatre grew noisy in an instant.

“Once you receive your class, it should become easier for you to figure out what kind of missions you should take on or what kind of roles you should play during cooperative missions. Also...”

Cinzia's eyes arched up.

“...The Survival Points you've earned so far will become even more valuable.”

Several questions came flying at her from the audience seats. Unlike the first day, Cinzia patiently answered every single one of them.

Meanwhile, Agnes was sighing softly in the sidelines. She could already tell what would happen in the Neutral Zone after the Awakening.

Just as Cinzia suggested, the moment one's class was assigned, one would be able to use mana. Naturally, that meant one would have to learn how to utilize it and receive specialized training tailored to their new class. This matter could be resolved easily through SP.

One just had to purchase 'Ability' and 'Mana Application' from the stores.

But that was the core of the issue – the survivors would become stronger too easily. But they would hit the limit to their growth just as quickly. It'd be more correct to say that one would forever be stuck at a certain level and never improve by relying on this method.

The gap between relying only on what's shown on the Status Windows and perceiving the 'truth' on your own was absolutely huge. And that gap would only grow wider and wider as one's levels increased.

Perhaps, Cinzia was aiming for this – to turn those who spend SP as soon as the Awakening was completed into a useable combat force as soon as possible. In other words, those who 'knew what they were doing' would be left alone, while those who had no clue at all would be, well, ushered around like that.

Cinzia's methods of doing things were too ambiguous to truly label it wrong, and likewise, Agnes couldn't definitely pick faults with her decision-making process. After all, it all boiled simply down to matters of differing opinions.

More importantly, since Cinzia was the general manager of the Neutral Zone this time around, it was her prerogative on how she'd 'raise' this flock of young hatchlings.

\*

Seol was glad to hear about the extension of the deadline by another two months. Now he'd be able to use up all the Competence he had bought already without feeling the urgency.

He could use any items he bought here in Paradise, but that was outside these safe walls. The Neutral Zone was constructed solely for the purpose of ensuring the survival of newbies and the training of future combatants. There was no better place to use the Competence than here.

“Your class will be determined tomorrow in the Chamber of Awakening.”

Agnes spoke as she cut into a slab of juicy T-bone steak. Seol had agreed to her suggestion and stopped eating junk food spirited away from the convenience store. He now ate proper meals from the restaurant.

Doing that caused him to feel deep regret over two matters. The first regret was all to do with him not coming here sooner.

Not only did the food taste amazing, but they also provided the right amount of necessary nutrients. It didn't simply fill him up; he felt like his body was visibly getting healthier. Of course, the tastier the food, the more expensive it got, but such things didn't matter to Seol at all.

The second was that he should never fool around Agnes when it came to food. There was this one time not too long ago when Seol inadvertently broke the promise of buying her a meal once every day.

She coldly told him, “You had your meal alone, I see. Why don't we get started training right away?”

Then, she proceeded to not talk to him for the next four days. When he thought about how much he had to sweat while trying to appease her cold, simmering fury, well...

“What's on your mind?”

“...Well, uh, the thing is, I've already made up my mind about which class I want.”

Seol quickly came up with an answer. Agnes sighed softly.

“You don't get to choose your class. It's chosen for you.”

“Oh... Is that so?”

“The seven gods that rule over this world debate among themselves before granting survivors a class out of these four beginner ones – Archer, Magician, Priest, and Warrior.”

Hearing this, Seol tilted his head slightly.

“Only four? That's not as many as I expected.”

“That's only in the beginning. Depending on how your level progresses, countless other class paths will become available to you.”

Agnes elegantly chewed on the meat and swallowed it before continuing on.

“For instance, let's say a level 1 Warrior uses a sword as his main weapon. Then, he levels up to 2. His class title will change to 'Swordsman' from then on. If he used an ax, then he will become an 'Axe Warrior' instead. It is the same for the Archer class. If you rely on short swords or daggers as your main attack weapon, then when you reach level 2, your class will become 'Assassin'.”

In other words, only the initial stages would be the same, and the evolution of classes would entirely depend on how one developed themselves. After carefully thinking about a few things, he couldn't help but become curious.

“What would happen when you're chosen as a Magician but you level up using a sword all the time?”

“You'd become a Level 2 Magic Swordsman, but I wouldn't recommend going down that route. It's very difficult to dig just one well, after all.”

Indeed, raising one's stats accordingly to suit the class bestowed made sense. There was no point in becoming a jack-of-all-trades that wasn't good at any one thing. Seol nodded his head in agreement, while Agnes continued on with her explanations.

“Also, when you level up to 5, the dividing line separating the lower class and higher class combatants, you will be asked to choose which god you wish to serve. That is the moment when the class path you have chosen becomes critically important. It is the same story when you reach Level 7.”

“I have to choose a god?”

“Mm... Think of it this way. Your class will either evolve or become even more specialized to suit the powers of the gods you choose. For now, this much information should suffice.”

Seol's brows furrowed slightly. He thought this whole 'class' situation would be something a bit simpler, but it turned out to be far more complex than he bargained for.

“As for our future training schedule...”

Seol thought that whatever the case may have been, he'd get to figure it out eventually as he carried on. However, as soon as he heard Agnes, he became quite tense. Whenever Agnes mentioned 'training', his body automatically reacted in this manner.

“You must inform me immediately as soon as your class has been chosen. We will need to tailor your training to match that.”

“Are you talking about the class-specific training as well as mana training?”

“Yes. You know about them already.”

“I heard about them today. If it's only those...”

“I strongly do not recommend buying the Applications from the stores for that purpose.”

Seol was slightly taken back by her sterner-than-usual tone.

“Learning how to use mana and basic skills related to your class – those can be learned via regular training. They aren't difficult at all, so there is no point in wasting your SP on them. Not to mention, you also have the Special Competence so you will definitely learn them all in no time.”

“...”

It felt like there was another reason for her to forbid him from buying the Applications, but Seol decided not to pry. One of the things he learned during the last few weeks under her tutelage was that he'd end up with gold in his pocket if he just listened to her.

“From now on, your fitness training will only take place during the morning. During the afternoon, you will learn how to use mana.”

Seol was about to ask her when he'd get to start doing the missions but stopped.

He already made up his mind that he'd only do so once his lost confidence returned on its own. Although there was a certain sense of anxiety, a sort of urgency, he endured and told himself to wait for a little while longer.

'I won't be able to come back here again, remember that.'

There should be a good reason why Agnes was ordering him like so. Since Seol knew next to nothing about the world outside, it wasn't wise to disregard her recommendations at all.

Seol slowly licked his lips, before lowering his fork.

"I guess we'll only decide after my class is chosen tomorrow."

Agnes nodded her head as if she was satisfied with that answer.

\*

Next morning, the Chamber of the Awakening opened up.

Every single survivor was told to come to the eighth floor and stand in a queue. The corridor wasn't long enough to accommodate everyone, so the queue had to snake down the staircase, as well.

The process seemed rather simple. People who entered first emerged from the chamber not even after 30 seconds passed by while looking a bit lost and dazed. Although there were some differences among the survivors, the shortest time was 15 seconds, while the longest took around one minute.

The queue decreased quite rapidly as a result. Yi Seol-Ah was deeply worried about not receiving a class, but once she emerged from the Chamber, she seemed to be in a strange state, just like everyone else before her.

"I'm an Archer now."

"An Archer?"

As Seol chatted to her, over half of the survivors had already received their class. It was not a definite thing, but from what Seol overheard, most of them had received the class that favored close-quarter battles – in other words, the Warrior class.

Next up was the Archer class. There were a few survivors with the Priest class assigned as well. However, Seol hadn't heard of a single Magician so far.

If there was one odd thing about this whole process, it was that different classes equated to different reactions when exiting from the Chamber. While those with the Warrior class walked around seemingly fine, those with Archer classes like Yi Seol-Ah looked quite troubled by something. In the case of Shin Sang-Ah, who received the Priest class, she looked to be in a sorry state as she exited from the Chamber.

"What about mana? Can you sense it?"

"Uhm, not sure yet.... It feels like my body is a little bit warmer than before, but...."

Yi Seol-Ah rubbed her chest and stomach while tilting her head this way and that, looking somewhat unconvinced. It was at this point in time that Seol got jolted by the loud, abrupt opening of the door and the sound of someone falling over in a heap.

When he lifted his gaze to see what happened, Seol saw a young female barely standing on her two feet coming out from the Chamber. She couldn't walk properly and swayed uneasily, before falling on her knees and hands. She started heaving for breaths uncontrollably. Her entire back was soaked in sweat.

"Haa, haa..."

She needed a little bit of time, but eventually, Odelette Delphine managed to stand back up. She leaned her head back slightly and placed her hands on her chest and stomach. It was as if she was standing there contemplating something.

'Could she have...?'

While Seol was pondering about Odelette's class potentially being a Magician, his turn finally came.

Before he entered the Chamber, his eyes met Odelette's. Her curiosity filled eyes seemed to be egging him on to enter already. She seemed to be waiting around to find out what kind of a class Seol would end up with.

"Are you feeling alright?"

Seol asked out of courtesy. Odelette Delphine giggled.



“It's like I'm pregnant or something.”

Seol smiled back and entered the Chamber.

As soon as he closed the door behind him and turned around...

'...Huh?'

The Chamber's interior changed.

Everything was white. No, it was more correct to say that this space contained no color at all. It was to the point where he couldn't tell if he was standing on something or was floating in the empty air.

Since he teleported around countless times all thanks to the mission parchments, Seol was able to get used to this abrupt change pretty quickly, but he could not get rid of the wonderment he was feeling at the moment. Still holding the door handle with one hand, he slowly surveyed his surroundings. Suddenly, several large *things* appeared in this space and entered his view.

And they were stone statues. The doorway was right in the middle of the encirclement of the seven 10 meter-tall stone statues.

[He is finally here.]

[Let us commence with his Awakening first.]

As these powerful voices resounded in his head, Seol felt as if a giant hand came to rest on top of his head. He flinched as all his nerves felt like they were being pricked. All the hair on his skin stood up.

“Ah!”

Was this how it felt like to be sucked in by a vacuum cleaner? Seol could feel his pores opening up one by one.

This sensation of being sucked in lasted only for a short while.

Something changed within him.

Inexplicably, the place just below his navel became quite itchy. It felt like a seedling of energy was slowly blooming there, before it rapidly boiled over and began enlarging in size. It didn't even take five seconds for the sapling to turn into a thick vine.

[Ho? With this much mana... he should at least be ‘Intermediate (High)’, no?]

[He has an Innate Ability.]

[I see. I get it now!]

[He must have opened his eyes when he was still young.]

[There is a trace of him losing his power at least once before.]

[How regretful, how regretful...]

Several different voices resounded in his head – a voice that sounded supremely arrogant; a thunderous voice seemingly filled with rage; a lazy voice filled with annoyance; a sensuous voice that stirred one's hidden desires...

However, Seol didn't even have enough leeway to mind the voices. That energy was rising up like a wiggling wyrm and proceeded to course through every nook and cranny of his body.

As the unfamiliar sensation of the unknown energy stormed throughout every orifice and hidden depth of his entire being, he couldn't even think straight.

[Indeed, it is a waste. During the time he lost his ability, his mana had also regressed a great deal. If only that didn't occur...]

[He might have surpassed ‘Low-High’ by now.]

[It can't be helped. He wouldn't even have been cognizant of mana in that planet of his.]

[Let us make our decision right away. Without a doubt, it is Magician, yes?]

[Agreed. No debate necessary.]

[Two Magicians in a row... A rich harvest. A rich harvest, indeed...]

It felt like the world around Seol was spinning endlessly. However, even though his head felt like it was stuck in a dizzying loop, he still clearly

heard the word 'Magician'. He summoned what little willpower he could and pinched his thigh real hard.

“Spear....”

When he managed to murmur out a sound, the surroundings fell silent for a while.

[...Spear?]

[What a peculiar man. He wishes to become a Warrior.]

[Now that I took another look, he does possess a great potential as a Warrior as well. I am unwilling to give up on this path.]

[Mmm. Certainly.... I can see his compatibility. He might not suit the class of 'Magician', after all.]

[What are you all talking about? With his talents, he can become a Unique Ranker in no time!]

[Difficult. It is truly difficult....]

*Goddamn it. I don't care what it is, just make up your minds already!*

Seol fervently prayed in his head. He wanted to get out of this place as soon as possible. His body didn't feel fatigued, yet, the longer he remained here, the harder it was to stand upright – like, he was under some kind of hypnosis or something.

[Why don't you all stop? Have you forgotten that the longer one stays, the higher the cost of the contribution?]

[Why don't we bestow the class this child wants?]

[No!]

[That is enough. We shall decide with a vote.]

Seol forced his eyes to open after realizing that they were about to come to a decision. His vision was blurry as if the liquid had gotten into his eyes.

['Magician.']

['Magician.']

['Warrior.']

['Magician.']

['Warrior.']

['Warrior.']

Three 'Magician' votes, and three 'Warrior' votes.

[...Gula. Why haven't you said anything?]

*Gula?* Even though he was barely standing there, Seol tried to comb his memories. That name sounded way too familiar....

[I...]

As Seol got to hear the rest of the voice, he instinctively knew that it was finally over. He grasped the door handle and barely managed to turn it.

\*

The cold air outside cooled his body down rapidly. He had no idea that the Neutral Zone was this cold until now. Seol leaned against wall and flinched in shock after sensing the cold wetness on his back. His entire body was soaked in sweat.

He felt encumbered. Meanwhile, that energy stirring and wildly roaming inside his body was settling down in the spot between his heart and just below his navel. He felt drowsy as well, but just by the virtue of being able to breathe freely, his condition was gradually improving.

“Fwuooo....”

Seol opened his eyes to find dozens of pairs of eyes dazedly staring at him. Now that he thought about it, his exit from the Chamber was no different from how Odelette Delphine made hers.

“I knew this would happen.”

Odelette Delphine was waiting for Seol while sitting on the floor.

“I'm guessing that you're now a Magician as well.”

Perhaps she was feeling a lot better now since she could ask him while forming an expression that said, ‘I knew it.’

Seol carefully regulated his breathing and quietly opened his mouth to speak.

## Chapter 26

“A Warrior?”

Seol nodded his head at Agnes’s question. Just as he had been ordered to, he informed her of his class as soon as it was bestowed to him.

“I see.” Agnes nodded back while inwardly breathing a wistful sigh.

If one were to rate the values of different classes, then the 'Magician' class possessed an unmatched brilliance that no others could hope to match. Not only did this class boast incredible firepower, but it also came with the inherent advantage of cheat-like flexibility, allowing for the rapid adaptation to the situation at hand.

On top of that, it was a rare class too. It would be difficult to find even one out of 100 candidates. In order to become a 'Magician', one's Mana stat had to be 'Intermediate (Low)' at a bare minimum. Not to mention, one's personality trait and the talent had to be suitable as well.

In reality, the average Mana value of the survivors entering the Neutral Zone was only at 'Low (Low)'. It was only par for the course that their Mana stat would be that low since they had been living on Earth with its advanced technology.

So, it was only natural that finding a Magician among them would be difficult. And it was definitely not an exaggeration to say survivors with the Magician class would be treated as a nobility regardless of where they showed up.

It was a similar story for Priests as well. The basic requirements were for one to possess Mana stat of at least 'Low (Intermediate)' and Luck stat of 'Intermediate (Low)'.

Priests were well-recognized as an important class as they had supportive abilities such as healing, detoxification, and removal of curses. Since such abilities were in high demand, the presence of a Priest was welcomed by pretty much everyone.

'If he was at least an Archer...'

Archers also formed an important and necessary fighting force in an expedition. After all, the ability to track, scout, and sense the enemy’s movements were indispensable.

Of course, this didn't mean that 'Warriors' didn't play an important role. The issue had to do with the abundant supply – there were just too many of them. Taking one look at the class distribution among the March's Neutral Zone entrants told everything one needed to know in that regard.

86 people entered the Neutral Zone on the first day, and currently 78 still remained. Among them, there were four Priests, one Magician, and 22 Archers. The remaining 51 were Warriors.

Some even joked that all Warriors had to do was be a meat shield. This wasn’t entirely a joke as a Contracted who didn't show any redeeming qualities often ended up as a meat shield.

'Regardless, all I have to do is train him well.'

Agnes carefully fixed her expression so as to not reveal her thoughts. Then, she handed Seol a piece of paper.

“I understand. Let us begin with training your mana first.”

[Reacting to Mana (remaining number of attempts: oo/oo)]  
Sense your Mana!

Difficulty: Basic  
When successful: N/A  
When unsuccessful: N/A  
\*Cooperation possible (up to 6 people)

The parchment contained one of the new missions that appeared on the noticeboard after the Awakening was completed. Although he took the parchment since Agnes was giving it to him, he was feeling a bit skeptical as well.

'Sense my mana, is it?'

A firm, heavy energy had taken root inside his body. This thing didn't feel alien to him anymore. Not only could he sense it very clearly, but he also thought that he'd be able to circulate this energy inside his body as long as he concentrated.

“Okay. I'm off.”

While remaining not wholly convinced, Seol ripped the parchment in half and disappeared from the spot.

Agnes looked on. The space Seol teleported to was an artificially created space where the density of mana was thicker than usual and helped one's training by stimulating the energy hidden within. Even if one was a Warrior, one would still be able to sense mana coursing through their body.

Agnes became slightly worried, wondering how should she go about guiding him after the mana training came to an end. She was about to turn around to leave, but then her movements came to an abrupt halt.

Seol had reappeared on the same spot.

"I succeeded."

Agnes blinked several times as she stared at the relaxed youth.

"You... succeeded already?"

"Yes. It was easier than I thought. As soon as I got there, I..."

"What did you say?!"

Agnes's brows angrily shot up.

"I told you not to buy the Application method from the store, haven't I?"

Her misunderstanding made sense. Since she had an errand to run in the morning and couldn't be at the Awakening, Agnes had mistakenly thought that Seol's mana was somewhere around 'Low (Extreme)' or 'Low (Low)'.

Seol stared back at her confused before raising his own voice in denial.

"I didn't do that!"

"And what didn't you do?"

"I never went to the store."

"I find that hard to believe. If you feel confident, can you show me your Status Window? Just show me your class-related abilities."

"Ah, that's right, we can do that."

Seol readily agreed and revealed the relevant portion of his Status Window. Agnes, who remained suspicious even when he strongly denied it, could only be dumbfounded after reading the information.

[4. Abilities]

2. Class-related abilities (0)

If Seol had bought 'Mana Application', then the '0' would have changed to '1'. No matter how many times she looked, it was still a resolute '0'.

"...Oh."

"I told you, I didn't."

Seeing her flustered and not knowing what to do, a smile of satisfaction crept on Seol's face. For the first time in a while, he got himself a good opportunity here.

"...I beg your pardon. I seem to have made a mistake."

"No, it's fine. So, what should we do next?"

Agnes nodded her head. She was about to pull out another mission parchment before hesitating slightly.

"Can you circulate your mana?"

"You mean, right here?"

"Yes."

She was thinking of teaching him about the fundamentals of using mana but decided to keep her mouth shut for now. Although she confirmed the truth with her own two eyes, she still couldn't bring herself to believe it. If this was happening for real, then there was something she needed to confirm first.

Seol corrected his posture and closed his eyes.

*Wiggle.*

The energy inside him twisted and quivered. Immediately, it began to course through his body according to his will. It circulated freely by following the unseen pathways of his body – to the tips of every finger, to the ends of every toe, all the way up to the crown of his head.

Seol enjoyed this smooth gliding sensation. He was also slightly amazed by this development. It hadn't been that long since the Awakening, yet he couldn't feel one iota of resistance. No, he only felt a sense of intimate familiarity.

It was as if this energy was a best friend he grew up with since his childhood.

Seol circulated this energy around him a few more times and opened his eyes as messages suddenly began popping up.

[The Class Ability, 'Mana Application', has been created.]

[Your Innate Ability, 'Future Vision', is responding to the creation of the new ability!]

[The Class Ability, 'Mana Application (Lowest)', has evolved to 'Mana Application (Intermediate)']

[Please confirm through your Status Window.]

“Ohh?”

Agnes was half in doubt, but as soon as she saw Seol's reaction, her suspicion was confirmed.

“Has Mana Application been created?”

“Yes.”

Agnes began massaging her temples. She hoped that this wouldn't be the case. She prayed, even. Unfortunately, there was only one reason why a situation like this could occur.

“You... refused the Magician class, didn't you?”

“Well, I didn't really refuse it, per se...”

“You didn't?”

“The gods were debating between the Warrior and the Magician classes. They voted, and the end result was 'Warrior'. Well, I did say I wanted to use a spear before that though.”

Hearing that, Agnes's expression became frozen. Seol's words had forced her to recall a certain person's face.

Sung Shihyun. Another Irregular from Area 1.

'How could they be so similar to each other?'

She didn't mean to, yet she ended up comparing the two. The road they walked on and the direction they were walking towards were just too similar.

No, there were some differences. Many knew about the famous tale of Sung Shihyun refusing to become a Magician and stubbornly choosing the life of a Warrior. However, Seol said that the gods had to take a vote to choose his class.

'...This is.... This isn't a matter I can interfere with.'

Agnes decided to give up on worrying about it. But, one thing was for sure – she'd have to change the plan she had in mind in its entirety.

She initially envisioned the mana training to last around a week, yet it was completed in less than 5 minutes.

So what was next?

“We will begin your class-related training right away.”

But, before that, she added a condition.

“You are not allowed to use your mana.”

\*

[Stabbing (remaining number of attempts: ∞/∞)]

Learn the Thrust!

Difficulty: Basic

When successful: N/A

When unsuccessful: N/A

\*Cooperation possible (up to 6 people)

Seol surveyed his new surroundings. There were only two things visible on the flat plain he was standing on – a scarecrow with a target draped over it, and a spear lying next to it on the ground.

Seeing that weapon, Seol suddenly felt quite happy. He felt like he had missed it. His heart even began beating faster.

The spear was around 1.5 meters long, making it a short spear. Seol joyfully studied the weapon's sleek and smoothly flowing shaft and its pointy tip reflecting the bright sunlight in an X. He then carefully picked it up.

Every hair on his body stood up; his shoulders tightened.

'Learn to thrust, huh.'

Seol got into a suitable spot in front of the scarecrow and while standing a bit awkwardly, grasped the spear's shaft with both of his hands. Then, he thrust forward with some power.

The spear tip pierced the target and sunk in deeply.

“....”

He missed the bullseye by a little bit. Seol pulled the spear out and tilted his head this way and that, his expression showing the level of dissatisfaction he was feeling at the moment.

Next, he held the spear with only the right hand and attempted to stab the target. He tried this three times, but the results were all bad. Not only was the depth of penetration shallower than before, his aim each time was off by a lot.

'This isn't right.'

Seol desperately combed through his memories.

Normally, a person would start forgetting the dream he had as soon as one woke up. Only some parts of the dream would remain etched in memory. However, a scene so shocking or a scene that kept on repeating itself would not be forgotten and be firmly imprinted into one's brain.

More importantly, he wasn't merely a spectator watching those events happen. He had experienced it personally.

There was a reason he chose the Thrust as his first training mission – he was drawn to it.

The Seol of the dream always carried around a spear, and he utilized the Thrust the most. The number of enemies that fell from a single stab piercing into their exposed gaps was too numerous to count. So, his body should be able to remember it.

'I'm not supposed to rely only on my arm strength... I need to move my entire body.'

He changed his posture. He strengthened his right hand and grasped the lower part of the spear tighter. The spear shaft came to rest on his left palm. He grasped it without using too much strength. The spear tip seemed to waver a little. In this state, Seol took aim at the target.

'...Not yet.'

Something didn't feel right. He looked down and found his right foot slightly out in front, pointing to his flanks. He repositioned the foot by pulling it back and glared at the scarecrow.

After a moment of silence that was neither too long or too short, he kicked the ground hard.

His left foot shot out first. His right foot followed next as he stretched out his left arm. Accompanying the sensation of his right arm shoving away, Seol thrust his spear forward.

*Swish!*

A crisp sound cut through the air.

Just before the spear struck the target, the back of his left hand facing the ground spun halfway up and pointed towards the sky. The spear tip spun as well, and it accurately struck the middle of the target.

A satisfyingly heavy feeling was transmitted through his hands. Confirming that the spear had penetrated much deeper than before, an equally deep smile formed on Seol's face as well.

[Class Ability, 'Basic Spearmanship – Thrust [Low (Extreme)]' has been generated.]

[Your Innate Ability, 'Future Vision', is responding to the creation of the new ability!]

[Class Ability, 'Basic Spearmanship – Thrust [Low (Extreme)]', has evolved into 'Basic Spearmanship – Thrust [Intermediate (High)]'!]

[Please confirm your Status Window.]

As the message cascaded down, the surrounding scenery changed. The scarecrow disappeared, and the spear in his hands also dissipated away.

“...Huh?”

‘Damn it,’ Seol mused wistfully and took a look at the plaza of the Neutral Zone. He wanted to feel that sensation for a bit longer.

‘I’ve barely done anything...’

Seol opened and clenched his fists several times, still left wanting for more before falling deeply into thought.

What if he used that thrust against the skeleton that attacked him by jumping in the air?

At that time, Seol chose to defend himself. No matter how many times he dissected his choice of action, he was far too carefree. The skeleton simply knocked Seol's steel bar away and left him defenseless.

‘If I stabbed back at that time...’

Eventually, Seol shook his head. Since the monster was airborne, it wouldn't have been able to dodge the thrust, but he still had to consider the possibility that he might miss his target as well.

Also, even if he succeeded in landing a blow with the thrust, what would happen if the ax swinging down didn't sway and continued on the trajectory to split his head open?

‘Relying only on a simple thrust isn't the answer.’

The basics of spearmanship were to prey on the opponent's openings. And if there were none, he would simply have to make one.

So, back in that situation against the skeleton, how should he go about creating an opening?

The answer was obvious; the monster had shown him what to do already.

‘I have to do the same thing. I’ll knock his axe away first and then stab the skeleton.’

Reorganizing his thoughts as so, Seol swept his gaze across the noticeboard. His slow-moving eyes found the parchment he was looking for.

[Swatting (remaining number of attempts: ∞/∞)]

Learn the Strike!

Difficulty: Basic

When successful: N/A

When unsuccessful: N/A

\*Cooperation possible (up to 6 people)

Seol ripped that paper up right away.

\*

Even though his class had been decided Seol's daily life hadn't changed. He got addicted to the joy that his new training regime brought him and concentrated on it like a madman.

Seol's morning routine looked like this:

As soon as he opened his eyes, he drank a vial of the Special Competence. After breakfast, he ran on the track as a light after-meal exercise.

Most of the time, he ran alone, but there were times when he ran together with Yi Seol-Ah.

Yi Seol-Ah couldn't hide her shock. She was able to run past Seol like it was nothing the first time they ran together, but from some time onwards, he stopped lagging behind. And today, he even managed to overtake her.

‘T, That's impossible!’

They must have run 10 laps or so already. No matter how hard she pushed, the distance between the two was widening instead of diminishing.

In the end, she reached her physical limit.

“O, Orabeo-nim!!”

Hearing her pitiful cry, Seol turned his body around to face her.

“A, aren't you tired yet?”

“Hm, don't know. Maybe? If it's too much, why don't you rest for a bit?”

He replied to her with a nonplussed expression while lightly running on the spot. He was obviously implying he had energy left in the tank and that he'd simply been matching her pace.

Yi Seol-Ah bit her lower lips.

She managed to finish the laps but only after a considerable amount of time. She panted heavily for a while, before asking him with a disbelieving expression.

“H, how did you do it?”

“Mm?”

“It, it's only been two months... but you're faster than me...”

“Oh, that?”

Seol told her about Competence. Since he heard that it could also be purchased from the regular store, he figured that Yi Seol-Ah should also be able to enjoy its effects. Of course, the regular one wasn't as good as the VIP store's.

After hearing the explanation, Yi Seol-Ah's expression was frozen in a daze. It seemed that she didn't even know of Competence's existence until now.

When he advised her to buy one even if she didn't want to spend her Survival Points, she squeezed her eyes shut. Her cheeks reddened gradually, then, out of the blue, she lifted her clenched fists up high towards the sky and shouted out.

“No doping!! Absolutely not!”

## Chapter 27

Seol spent a bit of time explaining to Yi Seol-Ah that Competence wasn't a drug, that he wasn't doping or anything like that. After convincing her somehow, he headed to the gym on the third floor.

For some reason, Agnes hadn't shown up for a while, but he figured that it didn't really matter. Even if she wasn't around to supervise him, Seol still faithfully stuck to the diet and training regime she laid out.

After ending the physical training, he returned to his quarters and practiced mana application while taking a break at the same time. Seol was a human being just like everyone else, so he found it easier and several dozen times more enjoyable to sit and meditate than do squats with barbells resting on his shoulders for hours on end.

As for mana application, the more he practiced, the faster the speed of the energy flow became. The sense of unfamiliarity also gradually lessened until it was gone for good. Since moving it from the get-go wasn't an issue, he instead focused on accepting this energy as a part of his own body as well as exerting finer control over its flow.

It would be past midday when he finished with meditation. Seol would head back down to the first floor, this time for the class-related training.

This was the last training task for the day, and Seol looked forward to it the most. Sometimes, when he swung and stabbed his spear, his mind became free from all distracting thoughts. He felt that the hours were figuratively flying away in a blink in this state.

He even went and bought a spear to use during training. It cost him a grand total of 580 Survival points.

A short spear was already provided for the class-related training missions, but he found it a tad too short for his personal taste. Also, the fact that he couldn't bring it out of the missions played a key role in the decision to buy a spear of his own. If he were to continue using it at a later date, it seemed like a prudent thing to get used to the weapon as early as possible.

Seol focused on mastering three spear techniques – the thrust, the strike, and the cut.

Although there were more techniques available, Seol chose to stick to these three only. Stabbing, swatting away, and slicing apart – he knew that the Seol of the dream managed to kill and destroy countless enemies with just these three techniques.

While partaking in the training missions, Seol always adhered to four rules.



First, as Agnes said, he never used his mana. Not even once.

Second, if he wasn't satisfied with his posture, then that practice move wouldn't count, and he would redo the move again.

Third, he would perform the same basic move at least 1250 times during the missions.

And finally, even if he was in the middle of hard training, he would never neglect to eat healthy food and proper rest.

He settled on the number 1250 simply because of Special Competence. Since it gave 8 times the boost to the training's effects, wasn't it the same as him performing the move 10000 times in a single day?

By the time he was done with these training missions, his smartphone's clock would display past midnight. The end of the day's routine had come to an end at this point. He would return to his quarters completely drained, but his complexion remained bright. This continued on for several days and weeks. Of course, he had a good reason to smile all the time.

[Your Status Windows]

[1. General Information]

Summoned date: March 16th, 2017

Marking Grade: Gold

Sex/Age: Male/26

Height/Weight: 180.5 cm/72.8 kg

Current Condition: Good

Class: LV. 1 (Warrior)

Nationality: The Republic of Korea (Area 1)

Affiliation: N/A

Alias: Top Graduate

[2. Traits]

1. Temperament:

—Short-tempered.

—Patient. (Will endure and overcome pain and/or hardship)

2. Aptitude:

—Average. (Normal in every way; possesses no particular talent or qualities)

[3. Physical Level]

Strength: Low (High) ↑2

Endurance: Low (High) ↑2

Agility: Intermediate (Low) ↑2

Stamina: Low (High) ↑2

Mana: Intermediate (High)

Luck: Intermediate (Low)

Remaining Ability points: 1

[4. Abilities]

1. Innate Abilities (2)

—Future Vision (Grade unknown)

—Nine Eyes (Grade unknown)

2. Class Abilities (2)

—Mana Application (Intermediate)

—Basic Spearmanship: Thrust [Intermediate (High)], Strike (Intermediate), Cut (Intermediate)

3. Other abilities (0)

[5. Level of Cognition]

Moderate (Actions and thoughts are sensible; hard-working) / Intense Yearning / Chaotic (Many things are jumbled up and is impossible to unravel)

Seol's mood as he checked his Status Windows was one of contentment. His physical stats had risen by nine times. Just by relying on physical exercises, he had achieved the exact same results as drinking 9 Elixirs. He'd need 270,000 Survival points if he wanted to match that.

“Ouch. . .”

While he was happily checking out his Status, the stinging pain coming from his hands made him deeply frown. He didn't have to look to see why it hurt – his hands must've been bruised badly again.

He began washing the aching hands with cold water, and his teeth began clattering all on their own.

'Damn it, I thought my hands are calloused enough by now. . .'

Although he was complaining inwardly, he still appreciated the progress he had made; the first day he practiced with a spear, the skin ruptured and he was bleeding all over the place. He was in so much pain that day, right up to the moment he hit the sack and passed out.

'Should I take a shower, or just go to sleep as I am?'

While Seol was wondering what to do next, he heard someone knock on his door.

“Who is it?”

Seol opened the door, only for his eyes to open wide in surprise.

Past the doorway stood a woman wearing a French maid get-up, her hands demurely gathered in front; he could see her cold, strict eyes behind the pair of glasses and her slim, athletic figure as well her hair cleanly pulled up to a bun.

“Agnes?”

“It's been a while.”

“What brings you here at this late hour. . .?”

“There is something I'd like to talk to you about.”

“Of course. Please come in.”

“Thank you,” Agnes said in a polite manner and entered his room in a dignified stride.

“Oh yeah, Agnes.”

Seol was guiding her into the room before turning towards her direction as if he had remembered something just now.

“Yes?”

“How is your little teddy bear doing nowadays?”

*Pow!*

Her lightning-fast fist landed squarely in the pit of his stomach. Seol toppled over and began wheezing in pain.

“Ouuuuch. . .”

“You and that stupid teddy bear!!!”

Agnes cried out in anguish, which was quite unlike her, and her entire body began to shudder.

“I, I can't, breathe. . .”

“Goddamn it!! Do you have any goddamn idea what showed up in my Status Window's Alias column because of you?!”

“S, still, my stomach. . .”

She must've been royally pissed off because she raised up her elbow very high in order to land an elbow drop on his back. However, she stopped after spotting something odd in the way he was clutching his stomach.

Seol wasn't using his palm but the edges of his hands to press onto the stomach. Only then did she notice his bruised and messed up hands.

“...Aren't you going to heal your hands?”

He managed to raise his head somehow and eked out a pained whimper. Agnes spat out a lengthy groan and shook her head.

“I see that you're still persistent with your foolish ways. It will be better if you at least get some kind of basic treatment on the injury.”

She dragged Seol and sat him down on the bed, then pulled out a bottle of antiseptic, healing salve, and some bandages from a closet nearby. Seol didn't even have a clue such things were there, so he was understandably stunned.

“Give me your hands.”

Seol obediently presented his hands. She knelt down in front of him.

“This room will aid you greatly in recovering your vitality, but has only a minimal effect on healing injuries. At least, if you were to take baths with the special ointments I've recommended, then...”

While opening the bottle of the antiseptic, she continued to talk to him. Watching her expertly clean his wounds, apply the salve, and bandage them in one go, a thin smile crept up on Seol's lips.

He felt rather happy at the moment. Actually, it had been a rather long time since he felt this way. He enjoyed this new life of his, where he got to spend the whole day engrossed in the things that interested him and still have someone to take care of him. It felt... 'comforting'.

Even his personality was changing for the better. When he was still addicted to gambling, he was constantly on edge. The victim mentality took center stage in his heart and caused him to choke up over nothing important; often, he'd get defensive and angry even if he was in the wrong.

However, Seol was changing gradually the longer he stayed in the Neutral Zone. Perhaps, it might be more correct to say that the old personality, the one Yoo Seonhwa fell for all those years ago, was finally returning.

Whatever the case may have been, a new problem had risen up along the way; his mischievous side came back, too.

Agnes focused solely on wrapping the bandages around Seol's hands, allowing him to stare at the top of her head for a while. He then asked her a question out of the blue.

“I'm curious – how old are you, Agnes?”

“I'm 27.”

As she was almost done with the treatment, Agnes focused on that and didn't pay attention when she answered him.

“Oh. You are a noona to me by one year, then.”

“...Pardon?”

“I'm only 26, you see.”

A frown quickly formed quickly on Agnes's face. She was quite clearly taken off guard. She stared at Seol with a pair of eyes that seemed to imply, ‘Where are you going with this now?’

Actually, the word noona was as unfamiliar as it could possibly be for her.

“Uhm...”

Seol scratched his cheek in an awkward expression.

“It's nothing, really. Only that, if it's okay with you, I'd like to call you noona from now on.”

“Let's talk about training...”

Agnes hurriedly spat out some incomprehensible words before she quickly covered her mouth with an expression that screamed, ‘Oh, no.’

“Talk about training?”

“Forgive me. I bit my tongue. I was talking about your training.”

Agnes cleared her throat with a fake cough and spoke properly this time.

“Ah. My training, is it?”

At the mere mention of training, Seol's eyes began gleaming brightly. Seeing this, Agnes inwardly felt relieved. She didn't know why she felt that way, though.

She succeeded in changing the subject, but she still kind of resented Seol – her thoughts had been complicated for a little while now, yet he just had to say something totally unnecessary and make her feel even more conflicted than before.

A short while later, Agnes opened her mouth to speak.

“I've carefully considered this matter for a while.”

Agnes never stopped caring about Seol's daily training, no. On the contrary, she couldn't appear before him precisely because there was nothing further she could do for him at this stage.

“Is it time for the new type of training?”

Initially, there was no reason for her to be this meticulous on someone else's training. However, her pride as Seol's teacher played 30% of the decision, while 20% belonged to Cinzia's provocation.

“...Well, I wonder. You could say this is indeed a new type of training, in a way.”

As for the rest, though – that was the fault of her own desires. A wish, a desire, that any Earthling in this place would harbor at least once in their lifetime.

Perhaps, she was seeking to find fulfillment through a substitute – for instance, 'only if I did things like this when I first arrived in the Neutral Zone', or 'only if I did things that way, then I'd have...'

She was pouring out her own avarice of pursuing the ideal perfection, the one she had failed to achieve herself.

“In a way... you say?”

For the period of one month since Seol got his class, she watched him train by himself. Seeing him get better and better all alone, she felt envious, and...

“...Yes.”

....And also, thankful.

She was thankful that he gave her the opportunity; she was thankful that he was patient enough to not partake in any other missions; she was thankful that he didn't give up halfway through; she was thankful that he didn't complain – much – and followed her advice without questioning it.

The youth sitting in front of her not only satisfied her avarice, she also satisfied her pride as a teacher as well. Perhaps that was why she no longer felt the need to compare Seol to Sung Shihyun.

This youth was his own person. And that man was his own, too.

Simply put, the Seol she knew now was a survivor who had properly tread on the steps of the Neutral Zone, one at a time. Indeed, that was who he was.

And finally, the ends of those steps were within sights.

“Cutting to the chase, I believe you have performed enough training by now.”

The role Agnes performed so far could be compared to being an automobile's steering wheel and its gear lever. Now, it was time to hand the control back to the owner.

“You've done truly well. You've endured wonderfully until now. I am being honest.”

The chassis of the said automobile had been replaced with something even sturdier than before.

“But, from now on, it's time to increase your combat experience.”

The engine had been a high-performance unit to begin with.

Seol erased the smile off his face.

“You mean...”

His voice was soft, almost inaudible.

Agnes adjusted her glasses.

The only thing remaining to do...

“It's time to start doing the missions.”

....To storm the Autobahn and run free.

## Chapter 28

It was early dawn, yet the Neutral Zone's first-floor plaza was still packed with people. Ever since everyone's classes had 'awakened', missions became that much more doable. Likewise, the survival rate had improved greatly as well.

Before the Awakening, not many dared to attempt 'Normal' difficulty missions. But now, as long as the party's composition was well thought out,

such missions could be cleared without taking too much risk. One could even hear rumors floating around that a party had managed to successfully clear a 'Hard' mission.

There were three motivating factors that forced the survivors to become more proactive.

And those were 'succeed in more missions', 'earn more Survival points', and then 'purchase better abilities or equipment'. Everyone could see that they were visibly getting stronger through spending their SP, which led the survivors to be completely immersed in doing the missions.

One could say that this was like the famed Möbius strip; Cinzia had hit the bulls-eye on this one.

“Huaaam~.”

A man sitting inside the first floor's lounge area opened his mouth wide and yawned loudly. He licked his lips and surveyed his surroundings as if he was waiting for someone.

He lifted his head slightly when he heard the steady footsteps walking closer. His eyes grew a bit larger in anticipation as he looked up the staircase. But his curiosity lasted only for a brief second. He rested his chin on his elbow and disinterestedly studied the person who climbed down the staircase.

It was a young man holding a spear. Everyone knew who this guy was. The survivor sitting on the first spot, who also hogged all the spotlight after solo clearing a 'Hard' mission.

Of course, that was in the past. Two months had passed by since then, and now, people no longer thought of him as someone special.

The spear-wielding youth's actions barely made any sense. He didn't perform any real missions whatsoever. He only repeated the same basic training missions that yielded no rewards at all. It was only natural for everyone else to find his behavior rather odd.

Lots of rumor swirled around the youth and his unexplainable ways, but even that lasted only for a little while before dying down completely. As he wasn't getting in anyone's way, people lost interest. Add in the fact that he had plenty of Survival points to begin with, people understood that there was seemingly no reason for him to do anything.

The thoughts of the man in the lounge arrived here, and he withdrew his attention completely.

'What's so fun about running all the time, anyways? ...Huh?'

The man in the lounge suddenly realized there was a small change in the way the youth behaved today.

Normally, he'd rip the mission parchment for the track running as soon as he got to the plaza and disappear from sight. However, for some reason, he was standing around in front of the noticeboard for a while now. Even where he stood was slightly different from the norm, too.

He finally selected a parchment and cautiously ripped it in half. He was gone the next second.

'The running mission isn't found on that part of the board, though?'

Could it be?

The man in the lounge got up. His eyes didn't leave the exact spot the youth was standing just now and ran there as if he'd grown a pair of wings.

'He took this one, here.'

The second row from the bottom, at the far right – the man took the mission parchment and took a look.

[Survive the Assault of the Ape Dogs! (remaining number of attempts: 2/30)]

Fight three Ape Dogs in the jungle and survive!

Difficulty: Slightly Easy

When successful: +40 SP

When unsuccessful: Death

\*Cooperation possible (up to 2 people)

The man's brows creased up as he read the mission details.

\*

The place Seol ended up in was a jungle full of twisting vines and large, sprawling trees that blocked the heavens above.

He pulled out a small pouch from his bag. He lifted it above his head and shook it, causing a pinkish powder to spill forth and disperse in the air.

The name of the pouch was 'smell of meat'. Sold in the stores of Neutral Zone, it had an effect of attracting monsters. It was one of the things Agnes said he should buy.

The thing was, in missions where one was asked to 'Survive in the wild', it was actually faster to kill every beast and monster found in the mission area, instead of trying to avoid them for the next two hours or whatever the time limit may be.

Excluding missions that didn't feature any combat, such as 'Find the correct path' or 'Escape the maze', Seol was planning to at least try every single one available on the board. So, this 'smell of meat' was an indispensable item if he wanted to speed up the clearing process.

While waiting, Seol emptied a vial of Competence down his throat. The ones he bought from the VIP store were already finished, so he bought a new batch from the regular store. He thought that four times the training efficiency was certainly better than not having any.

The Ape Dogs had highly developed olfactory senses, so they should arrive at Seol's location pretty soon. Sure enough, sounds of rustling bushes began tickling his ears not too long afterwards.

The direction was to his side; Seol discarded the vial and held his spear tightly. The thicket rustled softly a few times before two Ape Dogs slowly emerged from the vegetation.

Covered entirely in black fur, the monsters possessed quite a large, hulking frame. Not only its four limbs, but the monster's entire frame was bulging with rippling muscles. They reminded Seol of a gorilla, but slightly smaller; its canine-like snout being the major difference.

One of the two Ape Dogs positioned itself in front of Seol's view. The other one slowly circled around to his side in an anti-clockwise direction, as if he was tempting Seol to look at it.

Seol swallowed his saliva while continuously glancing at the monsters. His throat was getting clammy, and thick sweat drops formed on his forehead. He hadn't felt fear when facing dozens of skeletons, yet he was now getting unbearably tense while facing only two dog-like monsters. It was a noticeable change in mindset compared to how he was like two months ago.

Even though he was feeling the heart-tightening anxiety, his brain never stopped working. The mana circulating through his body at the same time transmitted into the spear as well, and the weapon began to hum ever so softly in his hands.

'Do I need to wait for them to make a move?'

*No, I shouldn't.* If left alone, these two creatures would soon face each other, and that meant he'd have to contend with enemies in front and back at the same time. In that case, he might as well. ...

'The first to strike, wins the battle.'

When he took aim with the spear, the leisurely-walking Ape Dog stopped in its tracks.

Just before he moved, Seol regulated his breathing.

Was it this difficult to take the very first step? He was inwardly astonished.

Seol wasn't even thinking of having a spectacular battle, like the ones he witnessed countless times in his dream. No, he only wished to fight accordingly to the training he received up until now.

'Let's do this.'

He already got into the correct posture. His eyes gained renewed focus.

The moment he made up his mind, his left leg pushed off the ground hard while he thrust his arms out. The Ape Dog quickly dodged to the side and then, savagely pounced forward. The monster was keeping a close eye on the spear as well.

The spear would miss at this trajectory, without a doubt. But Seol wasn't waiting around doing nothing. As soon as he saw the monster dodge to the side, he shifted the grip he had on the spear.

His attack changed from the 'Thrust' into the 'Cut'.

The thrusting spear tip suddenly drew a sharp arc and sliced past the Ape Dog's throat. It felt like he was cutting through a hardened block of tofu. Seeing the blood spurt out from the wound, he swiftly jumped to his back; claws that tried to ambush him barely missed his waist and brushed past.

The Ape Dog's sneak attack failed by a hair's breadth; the monster slid across the ground before spinning its body around as if it was a drifting master, leaving behind claw trails on the dirt. Too bad, by the time it tried to look at the human, a sharp object was already digging into its head. The spear embedded itself deep into the monster's brain. The Ape Dog's body shook as it collapsed.

Seol had taken care of two Ape Dogs in the blink of an eye, but it was not over yet. He retracted the spear, now dripping with blood, and spun around like a cartwheel and slashed out.

'Strike!'

*Slam!*

The open maw of the remaining Ape Dog aimed at his back spew blood like a fountain in the air. The creature spun in the air a couple of times before landing head first on the ground with a heavy thud. It wiggled around like a dying worm, before eventually going completely limp. Seol looked at the dead monster with a dumbfounded expression on his face.

He did guess that the third Ape Dog must be in hiding. Since it was written on the mission parchment that there were three of them, he suspected as much.

What really took him by surprise, though, was his unexpectedly high attacking power.

For a battle that psyched him up so much, it ended in such a whimper. At the moment, he couldn't help but find it quite funny, thinking back to how he had to continuously encourage himself to take the first step.

'And they didn't even look that weak either.'

Before he knew it, the surroundings changed.

It was a victory worthy to be called 'perfect', yet Seol wasn't happy about it at all.

'Was there a need for me to step back and then thrust forward?'

He replayed the battle in his head, step by step.

'When I was switching from the Thrust to the Cut... I could have taken care of both of them at the same time.'

Agnes said that these missions were also a form of training. Basic technique training alone could not fill a certain gap, she said. It was now time to go through various types of combat situations and earn valuable experience, she also said. The Survival points earned would only be an icing on the cake, she added.

'One more time.'

Seol picked up the last remaining mission parchment with an excited face and ripped it in half.

Finally, the ignition was turned on.

\*

Currently, the survivor wielding the most influence within the Neutral Zone was, without a doubt, Odelette Delphine. Not only was she a much fancied holder of the 'Magician' class, but her initial starting SP of 7500 had also given her a figurative pair of wings to soar highly.

She proceeded to purchase several abilities and equipment as soon as her Awakening was completed. Soon, she found herself being elevated to the status of the most talked-about in the Neutral Zone. Perhaps befitting her personality, though, she then chose to form her own party rather than enter someone else's.

The survivor from the same area as her, Leorda Salvatore, and the area 7's Hao Win entered her party. Which meant that calling her group the top of the pile within the Neutral Zone wasn't an exaggeration. It was simply a fact.

"Who?"

"That man. The top-ranked."

Odelette Delphine was looking at the unusually-excited Leorda with an intrigued face. Just what could agitate the normally-taciturn holder of the Archer class like this?

"Ah~. Was it since yesterday? I did hear that he began doing the missions again."

"But, that is..."

"Isn't it a good thing, though?"

"...Pardon?"

"I was expecting him to start making his move soon, anyways.... In any case, I will personally go and talk to him. That man... Honestly, he was the number one person I wanted to recruit, you see."

Leorda could only feel a sense of frustration as he listened to the blueprint of a bright future coming from this still-naive teenage girl who hadn't figured out what was going on.

"That's not the issue here."

"? Then, what is?"

"Two days ago, every single 'Easy' and 'Slightly easy' mission on the board disappeared. Gone. That man cleared them all. Alone."

“Hmm... Those two difficulties weren't much to begin with, though?”

Hao Win muttered in between his cigarette smokes while leaning back on his chair, both feet on the table. He seemed to imply that there was no need to fuss about things.

There was a total of 9 different difficulty levels found on the board.

'Basic.'

'Very easy', 'Easy', and 'Slightly Easy.'

'Normal.'

'Slightly hard', 'Hard', and 'Very Hard'.

And finally, 'Impossible.'

The remaining attempts available for missions rated 'Very Easy', 'Easy' and 'Slightly Easy' were almost all finished by now, due to the survivors flocking to clear them during the first month of their stay in the Neutral Zone. Not to forget, the number of attempts was low to begin with, so them disappearing completely was bound to happen sooner or later.

After their Jobs were awakened, survivors were now flocking to 'Normal' and 'Slightly Hard' missions. However, it was still fine because their number of attempts had increased rather dramatically to coincide the Awakening.

The number of attempts available for the next tier of difficulty was far lower in comparison. Of course, parties attempting 'Hard' difficulty were pretty low in number as well.

No, the real problem was....

“See, one-third of the remaining 'Normal' missions have disappeared since last night, too.”

“...What?”

Both eyes of Odelette Delphine shot up. If it was last night, she was in the middle of attempting to clear a 'Hard' mission with her party.

“It's not only that. I personally went there and confirmed it... Even the 'Slightly Hard' missions are decreasing at a frightening pace.”

“What did you say?!”

Hao Win had to lower his feet and sit upright.

“Didn't I tell you this already? The whole plaza is in an uproar.”

“Let's go.”

“Let's go and take a look!”

The man and the girl stood up from their respective seats simultaneously.

Odelette Delphine hurried to the first floor, only to run into a spectacle she failed to understand right away.

Dozens of survivors were surrounding one man while whispering to each other. In the middle of that crowd, Seol was busy ripping a piece of paper in half.

“What is going on...?”

Odelette Delphine became flustered as she saw Seol disappear. She was about to push the blocking bodies away and rush towards the noticeboard, only to stop dead in her tracks.

“What...?!”

The teenage girl couldn't help but exclaim out in shock as Seol reappeared in the plaza.

Was that around one minute? It was definitely no more than two minutes.... She even felt scared after seeing the expressionless face he had as he walked up to the board and ripped up another parchment.

'What did he choose?'

When Seol disappeared again, she hurriedly checked the board.

[Survive against a Wendigo! (remaining number of attempts: 14/60)]



Fight a Wendigo inside a forest and survive!

Difficulty: Slightly hard

When successful: +450 SP

When unsuccessful: Death.

\*Cooperation possible (up to 4 people)

"I just heard that this is his sixth time doing that mission."

Leorda was standing by her side before she had the chance to notice it. He shook his head as a bitter chuckle escaped his mouth.

Delphine counted in her head – one, two, three, four... When she counted to 57, Seol returned to the plaza. The youth then proceeded to choose another mission.

Rarely did he attempt a mission only once; most of the time, he repeated it twice or three times before moving on. Some missions, he tried them well over five times.

Before she knew it, even she became one of the stunned spectators. Within the span of 20 minutes, she got to hear the sounds of the parchments being ripped in half twelve more times. Each mission was combat-related. No matter how one put it, Seol was clearing each mission at a frightening rate.

Two men watching on from the lounge could only click their tongues in amazement.

"Wow... Is that even humanly possible?"

"Dunno. But look, there he is. He did it again."

"How envious, being the Gold Mark and all."

"Hah. And here I was, wondering why he hadn't done anything until now. It's like everything's a pushover to him, right?"

Gold Mark? A pushover?

Agnes snorted in derision as she listened from the corner of the lounge.

'What a bunch of fools.'

These two could never see the light of truth, even if they were sent to hell and back. While they fell for Cinzia's tricks and concentrated on clearing the missions, Seol alone had to endure an unforgiving training regime.

Did Seol not want to clear missions and earn SP? Of course not. He really wanted to clear them as well. But he simply endured. The skills and abilities he piled on for the past two months without complaining were finally bearing delicious fruits now.

As if he had something to prove, Seol continued to appear and then disappear for a long, long time.

A soft, subtle smile floated on Agnes's lips.

\*

[Break through the siege and survive! (Remaining number of attempts: 11/15)]

Survive the encirclement of the group of skeletons!

Difficulty: Hard

When successful: +1000 Survival points.

When unsuccessful: Death

\*Cooperation possible (up to 6 participants)

'Finally.'

Seol mopped up the available 'Slightly hard' missions in the next four days. And now, he was about to attempt the first 'Hard' mission. He already made up his mind which one he'd go for, so there was no hesitation.

The place he was teleported to was the underground cavern. Staring at that low ceiling, a strange sense of déjà vu flooded in.

"It's been a while."

Dozens of skeletons were glaring at him, just like before. Seol grinned slightly before the look of resolute focus returned to his face while his body shifted into the correct stance.

The battle arena was small and confined; there was no room for retreat. The correct answer here was to not back off but push forward.

The moment the skeleton wearing the helmet at the back opened its bony jaw, Seol pounced forward like a leopard.

When he powerfully thrust forward at the area with a large concentration of skeletons, dull cracking noises filled the cavern and shattered bits of bones flew about. He slapped away a blade trying to cut him from the side and thrust his spear at the exposed gap. The skeleton, with its head split open, shook around comically before crumbling into a heap.

He secured some space for himself in this fashion. Then, he proceeded to speedily kill the skeletons one by one as they attempted to rush to his position.

Seol's style of battle was simple yet effective.

He first swatted away the incoming attack and relied on the 'Thrust' to shatter the enemy's head. If another attack came at him at the same time, he rapidly fell back, preyed on the timing when the attacks missed, and stabbed forward. He only aimed at the skulls specifically.

The shift between the 'Strike' and the 'Thrust' was as seamless as a flowing stream of water. His hand speed was genuinely quick as he continued to wield the spear non-stop.

The experience gained through hundreds of missions was helping Seol to grow even further than before.

In a blink, the frontline of the skeletons was decimated. And as the second line was getting punneled into submission as well...

Just as he expected...

*Roar!*

The skeleton with the helmet let loose a loud roar from the back. It grabbed a huge axe and began madly running towards Seol's direction.

It was at this moment when Seol's heart shook and cried out.

How long...

Just how long... did he wait for this moment?

The number of simulations he ran inside his head amounted to several dozens. He was not going to make a single mistake here.

He swatted away the incoming attack of a small fry and took four quick steps back. At the same time, the helmet-wearing skeleton jumped in the air. The axe was pulled back and then, came down towards Seol's head. Right then, his eyes shone with a dangerous glint.

'Strike!'

The falling axe and the rising, spinning spear violently collided in the air.

*Clang!*

The ear-ripping metallic screech bounced around the cavern.

The axe could not descend any further nor could the spear deflect it away. However, something had changed compared to before.

*Kiik, Kiiik...!*

Sparks flew off as the axe blade and the spear shaft grinded against each other. A short competition of strength soon developed as Seol bore the brunt of the skeleton's attack.

*Woong!!*

The monster's great power, enhanced by its fall, dissipated quickly. However, Seol's mana constantly bubbled up like a bottomless spring and supplemented his physical strength.

"Kuuuuuek!"

Seol successfully shoved the axe away and quickly seized the opening that was created; when a grandiose attack failed to connect, the resulting exposed gap would be equally grand.

The skeleton fell from the air after losing its balance, and Seol swiftly stabbed his spear forward into one of the skull's empty eye sockets.

*Chunk!*

The helmet made up of bones flung away after the spear slammed into it. The skeleton began a drunken dance as it crumpled to the ground after more than half of its head was blown away.

"I did it!"

Seol seldom shouted, but he did now out of excitement.

Swatting and stabbing the skeleton – the event he could only dream about pulling off, he'd finally done in reality as well.

His complexion was filled with happiness as he eyed the heap of unmoving bones on the ground. The sense of accomplishment, a victory well earned, ballooned inside his heart. He thought that he'd never ever grow sick and tired of this joy for the rest of his life.

'Hang on a sec.'

Suddenly, he pondered on what might have happened if he chose a different method to counter. Since he was aware of the opponent using a jumping attack, couldn't he have tried something else other than 'swatting and stabbing' and still win in a simple, efficient manner?

Several possibilities continued to enter and leave his brain. He needed to try them out first to see what was what.

'One more time!'

The desire to quickly fight the helmet-wearing skeleton filled him up, so he quickly brandished his spear towards the remaining monsters. A joyful smile never left his face, however.

\*

Seol continued to attack the encirclement 'Hard' mission over and over again.

He considered other survivors' positions and left behind enough attempts for other missions, but for this skeleton mission, the thought of being polite did not once enter his mind. Every time he defeated the helmet-wearing skeleton, he felt as if an unseen weight weighing down on his shoulders was lifting up. He finally felt like he could breathe again.

Unfortunately, the unavoidable problem eventually reared its head; since he was so enthusiastic about clearing the mission, the remaining number of attempts depleted quickly as well.

There was nothing Seol could do as there were only 12 attempts left to being with. But he still wasn't satisfied. On the contrary, he thought that he needed to do at least 50 more times before he'd be satisfied.

Naturally, Seol deliberated on what he should do. Then, on the last remaining attempt, he did something completely unheard of.

He defeated every single small fry found in the mission super fast while leaving behind only the helmet-wearing boss skeleton. There were plenty of opportunities to kill it, but Seol made sure not to fatally wound it.

"Get up, you bastard."

Seol was glaring at the skeleton lying on the floor. In his hands were his spear and the skeleton's axe. He found the sight of the monster not to his liking, so he used the end of the spear to tap its skull a few times, trying to make it stand.

"Stand up straight, Skellie."

When he kicked a bit hard, the skeleton noisily rolled away. Its helmet was missing and couldn't be found anymore. It was not hard to imagine the level of torture the monster had to go through simply by looking at the misaligned collarbones or several cracked ribs.

The skeleton flinched and began to shuffle about. It tried to push off against the ground with its trembling bones, and once up, swayed about unsteadily on its feet.

Seol then tossed the axe over to it and strode away, widening the distance between them. His sour expression showed how unsatisfied he was, as he continued to glare at the skeleton that kinda looked like it might keel over at any second.

The idea of one-on-one face-off he came up with was a brilliant one, if he could say so himself. Now, he was able to continuously fight to his heart's content without the pesky remaining number of attempts handicapping him.

For the first thirty times they fought, the skeleton seemed to be humoring Seol's whims. However, past the 50th time, it felt like the skeleton began to desperately resist him. Past the 60th, it visibly lost all motivation to even put up a fight.

Seol too had made several mistakes adjusting his strength during the fight and ended up damaging the skeleton here and there. Even considering that, the disappointment he felt was hard to describe in mere words.

"Please, please! Just do one more jumping attack! You know, that jumping attack you do? Can you even understand me?"

It was unknown whether the skeleton was listening to him or not. It simply raised the axe but then, one of its shoulder bones snapped and fell. The bone finally gave in and broke after the repeated abuse it had to endure.

The skeleton froze on the spot; its empty eye sockets sneaked a quick glance at Seol's direction.

“...Well, you still have your right arm.”

*Clack, clack, clack, clack....*

The skeleton powerlessly clattered its teeth. No one knew what it was trying to say, but it still sounded like a plea.

“Come on, let's fight. Hurry.”

In the end, the skeleton succeeded in grasping the axe as it squeaked and creaked noisily. It was as if it was forcing itself to overcome its limits. Although it was just a measly skeleton. ...

“Good. Come at me. I heard that an undead monster like you carry around unconditional hatred for all living things. So, show me.”

Seol used his spear to beckon the monster.

“I'll end this after twenty more times, okay?”

It was then, Seol momentarily thought that he could see the exposed spine of the skeleton flinch.

The skeleton standing around doing nothing finally moved its legs. It heaved the axe up high and began its rush.

However, its attack had none of its former viciousness nor conviction. No, it only looked wretched and miserable. Seol licked his lips and readied the stance for the 'Strike'.

And so, the skeleton unsteadily 'ran' towards Seol, and lifted its remaining arm over its head. Just as he was about to get ready to swat away the falling axe. ...

The skeleton simply let go of the axe as its arm fell down.

Seol's attention was stolen away by the axe that flew past him. In that moment he wasn't looking, the skeleton grasped the spear shaft as tightly as it could. Then, summoning whatever strength it could still bring forth, it slammed its own head on the spear tip.

The skull disintegrated, and the rest of the bones clattered to the ground. The way its remains piled up like that, one couldn't help but feel that salvation had finally come to the poor monster.

Everything happened in the blink of an eye.

[You have successfully completed a 'Hard' difficulty mission.]

[1000 Survival points have been added to your tally.]

[Current SP: 85,280 SP]

Seol just stood there dumbfounded, his eyes blinking nonstop.

“...Huh.”

## Chapter 29

When Seol returned to the Neutral Zone's plaza, he was met with the sounds of people taking huge gulps. They looked like they had just seen a ghost.

That was quite understandable. The longest he took to clear a mission was only around five minutes. Yet, he took several hours this time, so people were thinking that maybe he met an accident and got killed, whether through carelessness or by a mistake.

But, here he was, unharmed and healthy as if to taunt everyone looking on.

“Ha, ahahahaha!!”

Seol tried to clarify what happened, adding that it was all just a misunderstanding. That only caused Hyun Sangmin to beat the floor while laughing his head off.

“The s, skeleton k, killed itself. ... Ahahaha....”

Even Shin Sang-Ah was in tears as she joined in on laughing, her breaths eventually running ragged and short.

Seol found this scene a bit mystifying. Only two months had passed since the ending of the Tutorial. Yet, these two seemed to have gone through a rather remarkable transformation.

Perhaps it was their new outfits, but even their aura seemed to be different.

Shin Sang-Ah and Hyun Sangmin laughed their hearts out and then complained how difficult it was to talk to him for the last couple of months, never mind even seeing his face. So, the three of them chatted for a long time.

Hyun Sangmin's class was 'Archer'. His quick wits and that active personality of his combined to make the decision to not hold back on spending his SP as soon as the Awakening was completed.

As a result, he got a head start over his peers in earning more Survival Points, and now he was known as a quite skillful survivor.

Although the team he worked with wasn't as amazing as Odelette Delphine's, Hyun Sangmin said they were steadily clearing missions.

As for Shin Sang-Ah, her life turned for the better after the Chamber of Awakening opened up. Her Priest class was a highly sought-after rare class, only losing out to that of the Magician. Thanks to that, the moment her class was revealed, the number of teams that tried to court her couldn't be counted. Some even tempted her with the promise of advance SP payment.

Shin Sang-Ah entered the team that offered her the most amount of signing fee.

She was very proud of herself, saying that she was finally living like a normal human being now, only to be promptly shot down by Hyun Sangmin. He mocked her for showing off in front of Seol, who had far more points than she could ever dream of.

Seol simply smiled while listening to their banter. Realizing that these two had adapted well and were carving out their own paths now put his mind at ease.

"Ah, right. What about Miss Yun Seora?"

Seol suddenly remembered about her in the midst of listening to the duo's antics and asked them offhandedly. He met up with Yi Seol-Ah and her brother, Yi Sungjin, a few times in the last couple of months, but he hadn't seen Yun Seora once.

Hyun Sangmin stopped talking for some reason. Shin Sang-Ah's complexion darkened at the same time. Seeing their reactions, Seol felt his heart skip for a moment.

"...Did she die?"

"No, she's... more or less alive."

Hyun Sangmin corrected Seol. But what he said sounded far more ominous. She was 'more or less' alive?

"Well, she.... I think it's really tough for her. With her right arm in that state...."

Shin Sang-Ah's voice was full of pity.

Seol inwardly went, 'Oh, crap.'

Now that he thought about it, she lost her right arm's mobility for good during the treasure hunt, all thanks to Kang Seok and his cronies ambushing her. The image of her silently shedding tears next to the item draw machine floated back up to the top of his head.

Yun Seora received around 300 SP at the end of the Tutorial. That amount was way too short to endure two months of stay in the Neutral Zone. Even if she saved up like a madman and lived frugally, she couldn't have enough to endure for more than a fortnight, at most.

"I think the Yi siblings have been constantly helping her out until now. Ah, that's right. You also gave out some SP, didn't you? Miss Shin Sang-Ah."

"It was only once, though."

Shin Sang-Ah averted her gaze and hesitated slightly.

"I couldn't heal her arm, maybe because my class level is still too low.... I tried to give her some of my points, but Miss Seora didn't want to take them. And it feels like she's been avoiding me for a little while now, too...."

Listening to her voice getting progressively smaller, one got the impression that she was trying to come up with excuses. Actually, she was feeling ashamed for bragging about living pretty well nowadays.

Hyun Sangmin waved his hand about and said that there was no need to act like this. It was understandable for someone like Yi Seol-Ah, who was indebted to Yun Seora for her life. However, there was no reason for someone with a self-centered personality like him to go out of his way to help Yun Seora.

Even Seol had nothing much to say in this regard. Quite frankly, he had completely forgotten about this matter as he was too busy with the training regime until now.

After a lengthy bout of silence went by, Hyun Sangmin slowly got up from his seat.

“You shouldn't worry about her too much. Sure, you can help her out if you've got some wiggle room yourself, but you know this too, don't ya? That we're all equally having a rough time trying out there, trying to fend for ourselves.”

That was also true. It could get pretty hectic trying to survive within the Neutral Zone. Looking after someone else in this place was basically a luxury very few could afford.

“Well, I should get going now. If we have a chance later, why don't we do some missions together? I'm confident of being more helpful to you now, you see.”

Hyun Sangmin lightly tapped on his crossbow and grinned.

“Me too. If you need any help, you can call on me anytime, regardless of when. I'll cancel everything and run to your rescue.”

Shin Sang-Ah waved her hand goodbye as well and walked away.

\*

After separating from the two, Seol returned to the plaza. He was planning to have a go at the remaining untouched 'Hard' mission types right away. However, he was feeling a bit restless inside. So, he figured that, by immersing himself into clearing missions, he'd be able to forget about everything for a while.

The number of different Hard difficulty mission parchments found on the noticeboard was 11. All of them were combat missions, while the SP completion reward on offer varied greatly from 500 to 1000.

The 'escape from encirclement' mission Seol ran to the ground just so happened to be one of the most dangerous available among the Hard difficulty. Since he didn't encounter any hardship completing that, he was confident of blitzing the remaining ones in no time.

Some time later...

The remaining attempts for the missions were 15 for every single type, but he only did six times each before moving on to the next one. Even still, he got to earn another 43500 Survival Points.

'This should be enough.'

He could probably do more, but, after chatting to Shin Sang-Ah and Hyun Sangmin, he decided not to monopolize. Their stories taught Seol of the harsh reality that, although completing missions became easier than before, there were very few who could afford to live as good a life as him among the survivors, even now.

For example, if four people cooperated and completed a mission rated 'Slightly hard' worth 300 SP, the reward would be split evenly according to the number of participants. Of course, the individual survival rate would go up, but at the same time, all their hard work would only result in a measly 75 points per participant.

The truth could be seen from the way Shin Sang-Ah described her situation – someone as in demand as her didn't say that she was rich, but merely that she was “living like a human.”

Seol wasn't too worried about others criticizing him for hogging all the high-paying missions. But, there was this one thing he came to realize during the treasure hunt. Because he got too enthusiastic and swept away every coin he could find, Shin Sang-Ah and Hyun Sangmin had to go through so much trouble. As for Yi Sungjin, the boy had to search throughout the night too, without rest.

As time went on, more and more teams would start attempting the Hard missions. Since he left behind more than half of each mission types, the survivors should not complain. Not too much, at least.

Besides, it wasn't as if there were no harder difficulty missions, either.

[You have successfully completed a 'Hard' difficulty mission.]

[950 Survival points have been added to your tally.]

[Current SP: 128,780 SP]

Seol clenched his fist tightly.

He decided to stop doing the missions for now. There was something else he needed to do first before moving on to the next difficulty.

The 'Very Hard' difficulty had a total of six missions. The lowest point payout was 10,000 points. That was ten times the reward of the most dangerous Hard difficulty missions. When he skimmed through the mission detail, it sounded rather challenging, as well.

Clearly, he would need to make thorough preparations to challenge them. Not only would he need to acquire a set of armor and potions but also capable comrades.

Right on top of the noticeboard, there was the lone 'Impossible' difficulty mission, but he didn't pay that any attention whatsoever. Although its payout was a humongous 172,800 points, the mission goal was completely, utterly absurd that no one would be able to clear it.

Seol turned around to leave.

There were several things he needed to prepare. But he already knew what needed to be bought first.

\*

The eighth floor.

As Seol stepped outside the VIP store, he had to do everything in his willpower to calm his wildly beating heart. Within his grasp were two small medicine vials.

They were Ambrosias – the mysterious liquid that would evolve one's already awakened abilities.

He didn't stop at that though. Even after he bought both of the available vials of Ambrosia, he still had a fair amount of SP left, so he bought a bottle of Divine Elixir, which would raise his Mana stat by one stage.

With this, the VIP store no longer had Ambrosias or mana-boosting Divine Elixir for sale.

All thanks to their enormous price tags, Seol's Survival Points tally dropped all the way down to 38,780 in a single breath.

With the remaining points, he could have bought another bottle of Divine Elixir. However, he held back with what could only be described as superhuman patience. He still needed these points to purchase his equipment, after all. He thought that, after getting himself the best equipment on sale, he'd be able to earn back the points in no time.

“Ehem”

However, no matter how hard he tried to restrain himself, he couldn't prevent a foolish grin from bursting out of his lips. He even momentarily thought that the entire world was blooming in a rosy color.

'I should wait until I get to my room first. ... No, no. Waiting around might invite a disaster.'

He only had to climb up two flights of stairs, but Seol couldn't wait anymore. He drank both vials of Ambrosias in one go. Fearing that his other abilities might evolve instead, he fervently thought of 'Nine Eyes' and nothing else.

[Your Innate ability, 'Nine Eyes' is evolving.]

[The lower direction (1) of your Innate Ability – Nine Eyes, Black color: Escape Immediately, has been unlocked.]

[Your Innate ability, 'Nine Eyes' is evolving.]

[The upper direction (1) of your Innate ability – Nine Eyes, Gold color: Golden Commandment, has been unlocked.]

Finally, he got to pull back the two layers of veil covering his ability. With this, he unlocked four out of five directions. The only one remaining was the 'right'.

Seol activated his ability right away and fell into deep contemplation.

Yellow was 'Attention Required'.

Orange was 'Do Not Approach'.

Red was for 'Immediate Retreat Recommended'.

Black was 'Escape Immediately'.

Judging from this, the newly unlocked color, Black, was an extension of already available emergency warning signals.

'I get what's up with Escape Immediately, but... Golden Commandment?'

He pondered for a while, but he couldn't quite grasp what it did. That wasn't the only riddle he could not solve, however.

The 'lower' direction only opened up after he had unlocked the 'left' direction first. So, he thought that the 'upper' direction would also open up only after he unlocked the 'right' direction. The order of the things had been changed, as far as he could tell. Was it because the colors were on opposite directions?

'How can I use it without knowing what it does...?'

Seol began walking again and climbed up the stairs, all the while shaking his head slightly.

But then...

'Gold color?!'

His eyes shot open abruptly.

Beyond the tenth floor railing, he could see a clear and radiant golden glow, coming from a spot right in front of his quarters.

He hurriedly ran up and found a person quietly waiting there. Seol's thought process dimmed just for a bit when he confirmed who it was from her back. She was certainly one of the last people he expected to see in the Neutral Zone.

"You're finally here."

As if she sensed his approach, the business-suit wearing woman turned around to greet him.

"You're..."

It was none other than Kim Hannah.

"It's been a while."

She smiled refreshingly. And sure enough, her entire body was bathed in a golden hue.

Seol couldn't help but be confused. For one, he was curious why she was here, and two, why was there a golden color coming from her...?

"Can we go inside? It's a bit awkward to talk out here and all."

Her friendly voice brought Seol back to reality. As soon as they entered his room, Kim Hannah couldn't hide her astonishment.

"Wow~. It really is nice here. Honestly, I never dreamed that you'd end up using this room."

Kim Hannah's facial expression implied that she wasn't sure where to park her rear as she stood around before she chose a spot on a comfy couch and settled down. Seol quickly sat on the opposite side. Seeing this, she burst out a fit of giggles.

"Why are you in such a hurry? What, are you that surprised to see me?"

"Obviously."

"Hmm... Before we get started, I guess I should appease that curiosity of yours. Fine. What would you like to know?"

Seol almost blurted out 'Why is your body glowing in a golden hue?', but somehow was able to change his words at the last second.

"How did you get here?"

"Well, because I know how to?"

"Hey."

"Just kidding. Of course, the Neutral Zone isn't a place that anyone can just come and go as they please. However, I'm an exception, you see."

Seol stared at her without saying anything.

"You idiot. Didn't you read the Invitation letter?"

"The Invitation letter? What about it?" Seol was about to ask her, before going "Ah."

He just remembered that, in the gold stamp Invitation letter, there was a clause about him being able to bring along one 'helper'.

"You don't have to fret, okay? Miss Cinzia knows about me being here. I went through the proper procedures, so there's no problem."

"That's a relief..."

Suddenly, Kim Hannah raised her hand.

"Hold on, it's my turn to get an answer."

"?"

"It's about Miss Cinzia and Miss Agnes. Especially Agnes – she seems to be particularly interested in your growth for some reason."

"Is she?"

"Yes. Just what underhanded tricks did you use to flip those violent Sicilian gangsters over to your side?"



Seol couldn't help but doubt his own hearing just then. Violent? Gangsters?

Kim Hannah's eyes went round when she saw his expression.

"Oh my, you didn't know?"

"..."

"You really had no idea? Those two are pretty infamous as the Battle Maniacs of the South."

"A battle maniac? Miss Agnes is...?"

"Yeah. She's the direct subordinate of Boss Cinzia and Sicilia's top executive. She's even known as the demonic drill instructor. Almost everyone in Paradise knows about them."

As the explanation continued on, a certain sense of chill crept up on Seol's backside. He had no idea that Agnes was such a big shot.

'Maybe I, uh, I shouldn't have teased her.'

"If you're done asking me about stuff, shall we get to the main topic of my visit?"

Seol nodded his head.

He was indeed curious as to know why she came here in the first place. There was still a month left to go before the Neutral Zone's deadline, after all.

"Well, I came to cheer you on, and.... I wanted to give you advice. Also, there's something I need your help with."

Kim Hannah took her glasses off and stared at Seol. Compared to how it was like back on the riverbank, the way she looked at him had softened considerably.

"First of all, I gotta praise you. You've exceeded all of my expectations. I honestly would never have guessed you were this excellent."

"I thought you were unhappy about using the golden stamp on me."

"That was back then. But, not anymore. The stamp wasn't wasted on you. At all. Honest."

Seol felt an itch creeping up on his face hearing the constant stream of praises.

"Okay, so that's the cheering bit done. What advice do you have for me?"

When Seol sheepishly scratched his cheek, Kim Hannah grinned slyly.

"You did the right thing by stopping at the 'Hard' missions. You see, the difficulty spike in the 'Very Hard' missions is nothing to laugh about. You have to prepare yourself properly first."

But of course – Seol was expecting as much as well. Seeing that the rewards on offer jumped by ten times in value, the difficulty should rise just as much, too.

"And, you should find yourself reliable comrades. If I have a complaint to make, then you just stick to yourself too much."

"Comrades, huh..."

"That's right. Odelette Delphine, Hao Win – I recommend these two people. I'm telling you this before you get the wrong idea – my suggestion isn't solely because of their skills."

"Then why?"

"They will certainly become a big help to you in the future, that's why."

It was rather clear what Kim Hannah was implying here.

"Are you telling me to form a personal connection with them?"

"That's one way of looking at it. In any case, you already have a link called 'fellow survivors from the same time period' going for you. I mean, there's nothing to lose by getting friendly with them, right?"

"I get it with Delphine since she's a Magician, but what about Hao Win?"

"He's a big player in the darker side of the society; I heard that he's a top level executive in the biggest Triad in China."

Seol slowly facepalmed. Not only the Sicilian 'Battle Maniacs,' he had to deal with a man from a damn Chinese Triads, too? He would've never

imagined getting mixed up with these sorts of people in his old life.

It was here that a thought popped up in his head.

"If I work together with those two, then could I challenge the Impossible mission and..."

"No. Do not even think about challenging that one."

He was just blurting out the possibility, but Kim Hannah promptly cut him off before he got anywhere with the idea. Seol could only smile bitterly.

"It's that difficult, huh."

"Even I'm not confident with that mission. At a bare minimum, only a mid to large-sized team of Level 4 or above Earthlings would be needed to have a chance of clearing it. Really, I don't know why the gods would have such a mission here in the first place."

She complained bitterly before turning her sharp gaze on him.

"Wait a minute. You are not thinking of trying your luck on that one, just because you've heard of someone clearing it in the past, right?"

"Someone cleared it before?"

Now this was the first time he heard of it.

"Yeah, sure. In the entire history of the Zone, one guy did pull it off."

"But, how...?"

Seeing Seol's shocked expression, Kim Hannah simply snorted.

"Only a few know about this. But that guy, he didn't clear the mission in what you'd call a 'proper' fashion. He just got lucky, that's all."

"Even if it was down to luck, it still counts."

"That's true, too. But whatever, do not ever attempt that mission. Got it? It'd be better to fight a monster from the world of the dead with your bare hands rather than attempting that mission."

Kim Hannah passionately voiced her opposition and slowly regulated her breathing. She shook her head, causing her ponytail to sway this way and that.

"I'm sure you'll do what's best for you, anyways..."

She sneakily raised the end of her sentence and glanced at him.

Seol ignored that and asked her once more.

"Didn't you say you need my help? What's that about?"

"...Well, it's nothing big, really."

Kim Hannah hesitated slightly, which was unlike her, before opening her mouth.

"Again, let me make this clear. What I'm about to say from here onwards isn't coming from me."

"Okay, so from who is it, then?"

"One of my superiors."

"One of your superiors... You mean from Sinyoung?"

Kim Hannah nodded her head and continued.

"Anyways. What I'm trying to say is, someone else other than me is asking you for a favor. If you don't wanna do it, fine. You don't have to. But if you do decide to go for it, there are plenty of benefits for me. You might also get to share in the loot, too."

"What's the favor?"

"You know Yun Seora, right?"

Kim Hannah got to the main topic right away. Seol was taken back somewhat, though.

"You see, the person who invited Yun Seora is the person asking you for the favor. From Sinyoung."

“Hold on, let me get this straight. You’re saying that your superior officer from Sinyoung invited Miss Yun Seora?”

“That’s right. That person is known for having a discerning eye. Everyone he invited all turned out to be big hits, you see. He even resorted to using a silver stamp and invited her this time, so the company’s expectations are high.”

“But...”

“Right. You know this too, don’t you? At this rate, Yun Seora is going to fail. Understandably, my superior officer is a nervous shell of his former self.”

Only then did Seol get the rough idea of what the favor could be.

“Let me get straight to the point – that person would like you to look after Yun Seora.”

“That’s too unspecific, isn’t it? Do I need to give her 1000 Survival Points and be done with that? After all, she’d be able to leave the Neutral Zone with that.”

“That would be worse than failing, actually. Okay, if I were to get more specific, he wants to see Yun Seora develop normally in the Zone, just like everyone else. Heal her arm if it’s possible, let her tag along when you go around clearing missions, etc, etc. Basically, I want you to carry her.”

Carry... Seol inwardly let off a long groan.

Coincidentally, he got to hear about Yun Seora twice in one day.

Seol understood that her life in the Zone was fraught with extreme hardship. It wasn’t as if he had no plans of helping her out.

However.

[You know this too, don’t you?]

He also thought what Hyun Sangmin said back not too long ago wasn’t wrong, either.

Kim Hannah was waiting for Seol’s reply. She was still emitting the golden hue.

“...What do you think I should do?”

“Me? As I said this before, I didn’t invite her...”

“I know that. I’m asking the person who invited me what her opinion is.”

Perhaps she didn’t expect to be questioned, her expression became somewhat dazed and lost. Soon enough, though, the corner of her lips arched up ever so slightly.

“Of course, I’ll be very happy if you do this one thing for me. I’ll be owed a debt.”

There was a slight grin etched on her face as she spoke up, clearly enjoying herself.

“I understand. I can’t give you a definite answer, but I promise I’ll look into it.”

“Hng. Not bad, you even know what to say to make me feel better, too.”

She muttered to herself, ‘Are you even the same gambling addict from back then?’ and continued on with what she wanted to say to him.

“In any case, consider it carefully. Yun Seora’s supposed to be a rising star invited by Sinyoung’s greatest talent scout. Making him owe you a favor would be a good thing for you, too.”

“A favor, huh...”

He hadn’t given much thought over the notion of Yun Seora being a potential rising star, but that did make sense. Back in the assembly hall, when he inadvertently spied on her Stats, he saw ‘Brilliant’ appearing on the ‘Personality’ column, after all.

Having finished what she wanted to say, Kim Hannah began standing up.

“That’s right, a favor. Well, there’s that saying, right? The Golden Rule.”

“Take ca... What did you say?”

Seol was taken by surprise again and stared at her.

“You know, the Golden Rule.”

She winked at him and walked towards the exit of the room.

“Therefore whatever you desire for men to do to you, you shall also do to them; for this is the law and the prophets.”

“Is that... the Golden Rule?”

“It's a verse from the Gospel of Matthew. Verse 7:12. I never really thought of those words as altruistic babble, though. No, it's much more closer to 'give-and-take', don't you agree?”

“...”

“Who knows? If you appear before her like a prince riding on a white horse and rescue her, she might just fall hard for you. I mean, she's pretty cute, right?”

Of course, she was only joking.

However, Seol's mute response seemed rather suspect. Feeling a bit embarrassed now, she fixed her high heel, lightly tapped on the floor with her feet, and opened the door. Before she slipped through the door, she turned around one more time.

“No need to see me off. Oh, and don't forget the deal we have. You negotiate with me before anyone else when you leave the Neutral Zone.”

“Oh, uh... Right.”

“Don't get killed. I'll be here in a month's time to fetch you.”

She closed the door.

Although Kim Hannah was gone, Seol didn't show any sign of movement. For a long time, he stood there and dwelled on everything she said. And then, dwelled on them some more.

....Even as the sounds of high heels getting further away disappeared altogether.

## Chapter 30

'The Golden Commandment is it...'

Its meaning wasn't complicated and the phrase wasn't trying to imply anything deep, either. So, he only needed to interpret it as he heard it. However, he just couldn't link the original meaning of the phrase to his ability, 'Nine Eyes'. It didn't feel quite right.

Just like the 'right' and 'left' directions, there must be some kind of deeper meaning behind the way it was named like that. He thought about it dozens of times, but could only draw a blank. The deeper he thought about it, the more complicated his head became.

In the end, he spent the whole night without a wink of sleep.

'I can't figure it out.'

Sleep didn't want to visit him. Eventually, Seol got exhausted stirring around the bed wide awake and decided to postpone deciphering the 'Golden Commandment' to another time. He knew better than to force himself to a wrong conclusion here. In any case, he needed to find the proverbial loose string to yank out first if he wanted to unravel this mystery.

There were two ways he could think of that might resolve this quandary:

One, to open up the 'right' direction.

Just like how the 'left' direction was connected to 'lower' direction, the odds of 'upper' direction having a link with the 'right' was high. If he could find what the remaining three colors were, he might be able to narrow down the meaning of the golden color.

'But there are no Ambrosias left...'

Two, the sole remaining method, was to find the truth by experimentation.

Having stared at the ceiling for the entirety of the night, Seol made up his mind and pushed himself off the bed.

The longer one stayed in the Neutral Zone, the harder it became to sense the hours passing by. Not only were there no clocks in this place, but most of the facilities also stayed open 24 hours a day, which kind of made finding a spot without light shining on it a rarity. Only the smartphone he received at the beginning of the Tutorial kept him up with the current date and time.

[05:17 AM]

Around this early morning hour, the always-crowded first-floor plaza would be much quieter.

Wondering if Yun Seora was there, Seol came down to the first floor only to find someone else's familiar back, instead.

'Yi Seol-Ah?'

He was about to call out to greet her but stopped. His half-opened mouth slowly closed shut.

Yi Seol-Ah was in the midst of taking a halting glance at the noticeboard.

It didn't seem as if she was here for the running mission. A Basic difficulty mission could be repeated infinitely, so there was no need to worry about the mission parchments running out. If she was hesitating like that in front of the board, that could only mean that she was thinking of challenging a mission with a difficulty higher than 'Very Easy'.

Her petite shoulders drooped in disappointment. Her head faltered, hinting that she was deeply devastated over something. Seol quickly walked over to her side.

“What should I do now...?”

“Miss Seol-Ah?”

“Heukyahck?!?”

When he called out to her out of the blue, a rather peculiar scream jumped out of her mouth. She quickly turned around to face Seol. Her shocked expression calmed down quickly after seemingly losing ten years of her life through fright.

“Orabeo-nim!”

“Good morning. You here to try the running mission again? It's been a while since we ran side by side, so how about it?”

“Oh... Well, shall we?”

She sounded really unwilling. Seol didn't miss the fact that she hesitated ever so slightly before answering him.

“What's wrong? Are you feeling unwell?”

“Oh, no! Not at all. Uhm, it's like, I'm lacking in confidence, something like that? I haven't practiced a lot lately and stuff...”

She blurred the ends of her sentence and smiled awkwardly. Her smile was the usual one that seemed pure and innocent, but today, he picked up the hint of unnaturalness that she couldn't completely conceal. Her always-sunny complexion seemed very haggard as well.

'Mm?'

Seol carefully studied her appearance for a little while and tilted his head.

Now that he had taken a closer look at her, there were a few odd things about her. It had been slightly over a month since classes were awakened, yet her attire remained the same as what she wore during the Tutorial. And having met up with Shin Sang-Ah and Hyun Sangmin earlier on, this oddness came across as quite bizarre to him now.

Yi Seol-Ah's 'aptitude' wasn't bad when he took a peek at her Status Windows. Although it couldn't be called as desirable as 'Brilliant', he did remember seeing the description of 'jack of all trades' or something similar to that in her Aptitude column.

“Have you eaten breakfast yet?”

When he asked her while thinking, ‘it can't be, right?’, she hurriedly nodded her head.

“O, of course!! I filled up before getti...”

*Growl.*

With the exquisite timing, the loud cry of an empty stomach roared out for everyone to hear. And sure enough, it was not coming from Seol's belly.

“....If I want to eat, I need to complete missions, you see...”

Quite unlike how she sounded just a minute ago, there was no energy in her voice now. Her pinkish neck slowly reddened up in the shade of sunset. Seol dazedly shifted his gaze over to the noticeboard.

As expected, she wasn't here to do Basic difficulty missions. She was checking out the sections where 'Very Easy' and 'Easy' missions were originally located. Unfortunately, there were no parchments left there. That was because Seol ended up completely exhausting what little remained a few days ago.

—...Yi siblings are constantly helping out Yun Seora...

Suddenly, Seol recalled Hyun Sangmin's words. And right away, it felt like a hammer struck him in the head.

'Ahh. ....'

Now he understood the truth.

It wasn't as if the Yi siblings failed to earn enough SPs for themselves. No, it was more like they couldn't as they were trying to look after Yun Seora as well.

In order to complete a mission that paid out enough Survival Points for one to carry on living in the Zone, one would need to get the matching equipment and suitable abilities for one's class. Attempting a mission without those would be akin to throwing your life away.

If one had to lower the difficulty through a sheer lack of choice, then the rewards on offer were too low. Even then, if one continued to persevere and complete them, it'd be possible to amass a few handfuls of points. But for the Yi siblings, those points would have been spent in looking after Yun Seora, instead.

It'd only leave them towards a continuous downward spiral. On top of this, Yi Seol-Ah entered the Neutral Zone with only 46 points to her name. Her brother, Yi Sungjin, had only 114 points. Since they had to support another person with their already struggling finances, their situation must've been in a downward slide for a long time by now.

'Goddamn it.'

Seol's hand clutched his spear tightly.

'....And I had no reason to even do those missions either....'

He resolved himself not to repeat the mistake he made during the treasure hunt, yet he had done it again. He told himself to control his desires, yet, in the end, he thoughtlessly used himself as an example when making decisions.

Only if he paid little more attention. How could he fail so spectacularly to consider the possibility that the situation would be different for other survivors?

From Yi Seol-Ah's perspective, it must have been like him robbing her of the last lifeline she had been depending on.

"...I'm sorry."

Hearing his sudden apology, Yi Seol-Ah's eyes grew wider and wider.

Of course, she was aware of it, too. There was no way she didn't know since the stories about Seol were widespread around the Neutral Zone nowadays.

"N, no! Don't say that!"

"I'm at fault. I'm the one who finished off all the easier missions."

"Orabeo-nim, don't say that. Those mission papers aren't mine to begin with."

"...."

"More importantly, for the last two months, you didn't touch any of those missions, anyways. It's my fault for being lazy and not completing the missions more often, you know. It's my fault instead."

Seeing her trying to console him, his hard-to-describe guilty conscience got heavier by another layer. She said that she had been lazy, but there was no way that could be true. No, it was far more likely that she was struggling desperately to survive.

"I heard that you are looking after Miss Yun Seora."

"Oh, uhm... T, that is...."

Yi Seol-Ah could only open and shut her mouth repeatedly as if she didn't know what to say. Her expression was asking him, 'How did you find out?'

"How long has it been?"

"Maybe.... After entering the Neutral Zone.... Around ten days after that...."

'So, well over a month, huh.' Seol chuckled out bitterly.

She could've asked him for help during that time, at least once. But she didn't say anything, even when they met a few times to lap the track

together. She didn't even show any signs of struggling, either. If no one told him of the Yun Seora situation, he might've never found out what was going on.

Seeing her helplessly lower her gaze, Seol's thoughts became very complicated.

'What should I do now?'

Although he didn't give a definite answer to Kim Hannah, he was planning to help Yun Seora out, anyways. He thought that it wouldn't be such a bad idea to repay Kim Hannah's kindness since he had received lots of benefits from her Gold Mark up until now.

However, helping out the Yi siblings was out of his calculations. Of course, if he began supporting Yun Seora, the burden on the siblings would decrease considerably, but...

But, it was already too late. Others had leapfrogged far ahead of them by now. Never mind catching up to them, could she and her brother even manage to gather 1000 points each before the end of the deadline?

While stewing inside the swirling mess of jumbled up thoughts, Seol got to confirm his disposition being 'Chaotic' one more time. Even though he thought he should aid them somehow, no small part of him didn't want to get involved here and just wanted to concentrate on completing missions, instead.

Should he help them, or not?

Encountering yet another crossroads in his path, Seol closed his eyes to contemplate.

It was then, he suddenly recalled a scene from almost two months ago.

[...Let's run together!!]

He remembered a scene of a girl who came to console him after seeing how shaken he was back then. It was of a girl who'd never forget her savior and tried to repay the favor no matter what.

And then, that Bible verse Kim Hannah left behind entered his thoughts as well.

*....Therefore whatever you desire for men to do to you, you shall also do to them.*

He then decided to look at things from the siblings' perspective.

What if he ran into a situation similar to what the siblings, or even, Yun Seora were facing? Without a doubt, he'd be wishing for someone to come and help him out right about now.

[I never really thought of those words as altruistic babble, though. No, it's much more closer to 'give-and-take']

Although it was only by a little bit, Seol thought he could understand where Kim Hannah's sentiment was coming from.

Maybe....

Just maybe, there could be a future that might unfold in the way Kim Hannah had been implying – a future, where Seol needed to receive help from someone else. Could this girl in front of him be one of the potential 'someone else'?

No, that didn't matter. What did matter was his feelings on the subject regardless of what might happen in the future. He didn't know why, but he wanted to help her.

He wasn't dealing with a bastard like Kang Seok. Knowing the struggles this kind-hearted and warm girl was going through, he couldn't turn a blind eye anymore.

'It's not like I don't have a wiggle room, is it?'

The moment he decided, Seol opened his eyes and spoke to her.

“Come. Let's run for a while.”

\*

Seol and Yi Seol-Ah began jogging on the track.

He completed his portion of the allocated laps first and waited for her to finish. Seeing her slowly inch closer to the finish line, he waved his hands in encouragement. She managed to get to the line, but before crossing it, she collapsed on the floor and began panting heavily. Seeing this, Seol grinned softly.

“It's only 30 laps, you know. I didn't know you were this unfit.”

"Doping is not allowed!"

Yi Seol-Ah protested to the injustice of this situation.

"I'm telling you, it's not doping."

While defending himself, Seol's lips formed a bitter smile. He remembered giving advice that she should buy Competence, while being completely oblivious to her living conditions.

"How do you feel after you ran around for a while?"

"It feels nice."

Yi Seol-Ah smiled brightly on the ground as she regulated her breathing. Even though he forcibly dragged her in here, she wasn't dissatisfied at all.

"Well, then. Should I make you feel even better?"

"...Hm?"

In the Neutral Zone, one could lend out or transfer Survival Points to another. Seol transferred 200 Survival Points from his account to Yi Seol-Ah.

"Uh? Uh, uh?! 200 points?"

"You've successfully cleared a mission, right? You should receive compensation for that."

Seol jokingly said that, but her expression showed how apologetic and at a loss she was.

"Even still.... If you give me so much points, then I...."

Her words only managed to make Seol surprised and flustered instead. Just how difficult had her stay in the Neutral Zone been for her to act like that over measly 200 points?

"What is your brother doing right now?"

"Oh, Sungjin? He should be waking up soon, I think."

"In that case, go have a good breakfast with him. With 200 points, you should be able to enjoy a hearty meal once."

"J, just once?! If I save up, I think we can stretch it out to ten days...."

"No can do. You will spend it all in one go. All 200 points."

Seol resolutely cut her off.

For a short while, she didn't say anything. She simply stared at him with a dazed facial expression as if she hadn't finished processing this event quite yet.

"Once you're done eating, come up to my quarters with your brother. Oh, and by the way, do you know where I can find Miss Yun Seora?"

"O, Orabeo-nim?"

Yi Seol-Ah unsteadily got up from the ground. She still looked like she hadn't been able to tell whether she was in a dream or not.

"But, but, why?"

"Mm.... Well, because I'm grateful to you?"

"A, about what, exactly? I, I haven't done anything...."

Seol sheepishly scratched his cheek as she stammered out.

"What do you mean, you haven't? You ran with me back then, didn't you?"

When looking back, one could say that was indeed the case. Only by running together with her, Seol finally got to realize how weak he was. From that day on, he focused on improving himself like a madman. In a way, it was because of Yi Seol-Ah's intervention that he had begun his intense training regime to get to where he was now.

Yi Seol-Ah couldn't say anything for a little while longer. Only her lips parted and closed several times.

"Orabeo-nim."



She somehow managed to squeeze out a word.

“Yes?”

“Can you... turn around for a second?”

“Sure, why not. But, why?”

“I... want to cry, but it's embarrassing...”

Seol smiled gently. She was probably trying to express how grateful she was in her own way.

“Do what you want.”

However, as soon as he turned around, he heard her crying out loudly. His heart nearly jumped out of his mouth in fright, and he quickly looked back, only to find Yi Seol-Ah squatting on the ground again while shedding thick tears of appreciation.

'She's really crying?!

This time, it was Seol's turn to panic, instead.

\*

After sending Yi Seol-Ah back to her place...

Seol headed off to the fifth floor.

He'd never stopped by this floor before. According to Yi Seol-Ah's explanation, a sizeable lounge could be found there, and Yun Seora spent most of her time in that place.

Seol initially believed that, since that space was called a lounge, the facilities there shouldn't be so bad, but...

“...”

....As soon as he arrived there, he had to revise his thoughts immediately.

The circular lounge was indeed rather spacious and open. But there were only a handful of chairs to be found here. He couldn't even begin to call this place a lounge at all.

When he pushed open the glass door and entered, he spotted a lone female figure lying quietly in the far corner of the room. She had a hood covering her head while her body was in a huddle.

Seol heard her cough. It sounded dry and scratchy. Seol placed his palm on the floor, and his body shivered slightly after sensing the coldness coming from the hard surface.

'It's really cold in here.'

She must be in a deep sleep; Seol walked towards her in loud-enough footsteps, but she still showed no signs of movement.

*Zzzz*

While listening to her soft, nearly imperceptible breathing, Seol looked at her face and became utterly speechless.

Yun Seora's appearance too had changed a fair deal since the end of the Tutorial. Unfortunately, it was for the worse.

Her previously pale smooth cheeks were now yellowing and sunken. Her exposed wrist was so thin, he mistakenly thought he was looking at bones. He thought he was looking at a broken doll.

“...Miss Yun Seora?”

Seol called out her name and placed his hand on her shoulder. Her body flinched a little, then.

“Miss Yun Seora.”

And when he gently shook her...

“...Ah-ahck!”

Suddenly, she sucked in a heavy breath; as if she was having a nightmare, a strained cry escaped from her lips, and she desperately hid her face with her left hand. She huddled even closer and began shaking like a leaf.

“What the...?”

He thought he looking an abused child trying to not get hit anymore. Seol took a step back in astonishment.

“Are you alright?”

“Euh... Euhah...”

“Miss Yun Seora!!”

“Uh, uhm?”

Abruptly, she raised her head. A pair of blurry, unintelligent eyes gazed at Seol.

“Huuua...”

She let off a pained whimper, and her eyes slowly closed again. Her entire body slumped, too. And when he called out to her again, she didn't respond.

'Is she unconscious?'

Her current state seemed too precarious to simply say she fell unconscious.

Seol quickly lifted her up. He only used his arms, yet he could barely feel her weight.

Leaving the fifth-floor lounge, Seol immediately went to his quarters on the tenth. He thought that, since his room restored one's stamina rapidly, simply by being there would help her regain her consciousness.

After carefully laying Yun Seora down on the bed, Seol was overcome with a feeling of helplessness.

Although he did bring her here, he hadn't realized how bad her conditions actually were. Perhaps, that superior officer asking Kim Hannah for favor must've realized that Yun Seora was on the brink, too.

'Let's confirm her status first.'

Seol activated his 'Nine Eyes'.

[Yun Seora's Status Windows]

[1. General Information]

Summoned date: March 16th, 2017

Marking Grade: Silver

Sex/Age: Female/20

Height/Weight: 166.2 cm/48.2 kg

Current condition: Heavily injured

Class: LV. 1 Warrior

Nationality: Republic of Korea (Area 1)

Affiliation: N/A

Alias: N/A

[2. Traits]

1. Temperament:

—Indifferent. (She's not easily interested in anything particular.)

—Despair. (Has fallen into despair and gave up on herself, and has not looked after her own body.)

2. Aptitude:

—Brilliant. (Possesses a smart brain as well as good overall talents.)

—Highly observant. (Will carefully analyze and study items and events all around her.)

[3. Physical Level]

Strength: Extreme-Low ↓2

Endurance: Extreme-Low ↓1

Agility: Extreme-Low ↓3

Stamina: Extreme-Low ↓2

Mana: High-Low

Luck: High-Low

Remaining Ability points: 1.

[4. Abilities]

1. Innate Abilities (0)

2. Class Abilities (0)

3. Other Abilities (0)

[5. Level of Cognition]

Depressed (Deeply worried and/or frustrated; lacking in energy) / Despair / Pessimistic (Has a gloomy outlook on her life; is in mourning; is in despair)

“...What the hell?”

Seol's brows furrowed in a deep frown.

Yun Seora's condition, confirmed through her Status Windows, was in a terrible state.

## Chapter 31

Yun Seora. Current age, 20 years old.

A young woman, who got invited to Paradise after being scouted by Sinyoung.

The so-called *picky and arrogant woman* as coined by the dead Yi Hyungsik.

Along with another Invited, Kang Seok, she was seen as Area 1's top seedling for the March recruitment period.

She always displayed the habit of 'think first, act later' in everything she did; her thoughts or decision making were never swayed by emotions, and because of her personality, she held no interest in other people's business.

Such characteristics meant she enjoyed a certain amount of advantage during the Tutorial, but once she lost her right arm, her situation drastically changed for the worse.

She was very much aware of her weakness in the context of the environments of the Neutral Zone, where cooperating with others was a must.

So, for one month straight, she focused solely on fixing her broken right arm. Unfortunately, she had no choice but to revise her strategy and focus on strengthening her fitness level instead after learning that her tally of SP, 317 points, wasn't even remotely enough to heal her wounds.

As an Invited, she already had acquired a fairly good understanding of what was going on in the Neutral Zone before coming here. That was why, before her Class awakened, she decided to focus on raising her physical stats. She knew that, as long as she could become a Magician or even a Priest, then her problem would be solved.

Yun Seora did not let go of that sliver of hope, even when stuck in a hopeless situation. However, that got brutally cut off when her Class was set as a Warrior.

She left the Chamber of Awakening as if being chased away. And as expected, there was literally not a thing she could do in her current state.

She had spent every single SP she had by then. She even had to sell the bag she got as the starting bonus cheaply, too.

Even if she wanted to earn some points, no one wanted a Warrior with a crippled arm in their team.

Staying in a proper sleeping quarter became a luxury she could only dream of. She couldn't even afford to eat one meal a day, and her health continued to send out warning signals as a result. Starved of the necessary nutrients, her body got weaker and weaker with every passing day.

And with her weakened body, she couldn't even attempt those Basic missions that did give out a small amount of points as rewards.

Her determination ran out a long time by then and even enduring through nothing but sheer malice also eventually reached its limit. If it weren't for the Yi siblings that came to see her every other day, Yun Seora would've died of starvation already.

However, she knew that the siblings were also struggling desperately as well. So, she could not depend on them forever.

Sensing Yun Seora's discomfort, Yi Seol-Ah spoke up carefully.

She said, 'How about we speak to 'Orabeo-nim'? Since he's honest and hard-working, he wouldn't abandon us callously.'

It'd be a lie if Yun Seora wasn't tempted by that suggestion. In the end, though, she shook her head and said no.

If he owed her a favor, the story might have been different. Sure, he saved her life, but in return, she gave him the Revival potion. And their relationship came to an end there. At least, Yun Seora thought so that way.

She didn't mind if others called her out on her petty pride. Actually, she was too ashamed to go and speak to him by then.

Still, refusing to heed the suggestion of Yi Seol-Ah played heavily in Yun Seora's mind. And, not wanting to inconvenience the siblings any further, she discreetly changed her hiding place without telling them.

However, that night, Yun Seora ended up going through a terrifying and breathless ordeal.

She opened her eyes in the middle of the night to find three Western men. Two of them were restraining her arms, while the other one was sitting on top of her.

No matter where, it seemed that one would run into bastards like Kang Seok.

In the middle of her fiercely resisting them, the face belonging to the man on top of her came in closer to whisper.

"Hey, I heard that you're a cripple."

"You wanna keep living like this? Don't you wanna go to Paradise?"

"Just behave yourself. We will feed you well and find you a warm bed to sleep on, too."

"Who knows? Maybe even a couple of points, too...."

Survival Points. The moment she heard those words, all strength automatically seeped out of her body. Naturally, her resistance weakened as well.

By the time she realized her mistake, she felt coldness touching her buttocks. When she regained her bearings, she found her underwear pulled down to her ankles already.

And when that man took off his pants while a thick, lecherous smile formed on his face, Yun Seora shook like a smartphone vibrating to alert the owner of an incoming call.

She shook hard as if someone poured a bucket of freezing water on her head in the middle of a harsh winter.

Like words of a snake tickling her ears, the man told her to open her mouth.

A hideously ugly object neared her face, yet her lips remained shut. She thought that the moment she yielded here, everything would really come to an end for her.

No, a simple 'end' wouldn't be all. She feared falling even deeper into a bottomless abyss....

And so, she did not open her lips.

But, she did scream out with everything she had. She bit whatever she came in contact with and used her whole body to fight.

Her rewards were harsh swearings, along with fists and kicks. Even then, Yun Seora did not let up her crazed resistance.

Eventually, the men grew sick and tired and abandoned her with a thick spit to her face.

She fixed her clothing and unsteadily made her way back to the fifth-floor lounge. She then fell to the floor and got into a huddle.

A single drop of the warm, salty liquid she'd been holding back finally leaked out of her eye. The tears she'd been shedding inwardly began streaming out, and eventually, she burst out into uncontrollable sobs.

'It'd be better if I just died.'

She was scared of falling asleep again because of the incident but forced her eyes shut regardless. She thought that if she died here, like this, then she might not have any regrets.

She didn't care what happened anymore.

And so, Yun Seora fell into a fitful slumber. But, then....

"...Miss Yun Seora?"

Just as she was about to pay the ferryman to cross the river Styx...

"Miss Yun Seora."

....She took a look behind her.

And, she clearly saw him.

“Are you alright?”

She saw a certain young man offering his hand to her.

\*

While Seol was nursing Yun Seora, Yi Seol-Ah and Yi Sungjin arrived at his quarters.

The siblings entered his room hesitantly, and couldn't close their mouths after taking in the grand sights of the luxurious furnishing of the place that reminded one of a palace. They recovered quickly from the shock, though, after spotting Yun Seora whimpering on the bed, and approached her. Deep frowns were etched on their faces.

“She wasn't this bad two days ago...”

“Really?”

“Yes. Why did she get so...?”

Yi Seol-Ah looked anxious. Seol lightly held his chin, contemplating.

‘What could be her problem?’

With just a glance, he could clearly tell that Yun Seora was very sick. Even though he brought her to his quarters, thick perspiration continued to form on her forehead, and her breathing became rougher and rougher.

He thought that the current situation was marginally better, compared to when she failed to respond to him gently shaking her around. However, since he lacked proper medical knowledge, he could only remain in the dark. He still recognized the fact that she needed help.

Seol told the siblings he'd be back soon and left his room. When facing a situation he didn't know how to solve, there was only one person he could rely on.

After hearing his explanation, Agnes quickly called for another maid to join them.

The person to answer the call was unexpectedly none other than Maria. The blonde maid walked up to them in swagger, and when Agnes introduced her class to Seol, she cocked an eyebrow, perhaps in disapproval of the revelation.

It turned out that Maria was a Level 4 Priest.

Not only that, she was a Priest in healing who had walked a long road – from Lv.1 “Priest”, Lv.2 “Deacon”, Lv.3 “Clergyman”, and to her current Lv.4 “High Priest”.

Seol promptly returned to his quarters with the two maids in tow.

“This is... so bloody fantastic.”

After checking out Yun Seora's condition, Maria spat out a short assessment.

“It's that bad?”

“Never mind her right arm, it looks like she's been starving herself for the past month or so. On top of her body and nerves being weakened to this state, she even got beaten up pretty good as well, so yes. It's bad.”

“She got beaten up?”

“Yes. Seriously now... Don't know who hit her, but that person sure fucked her up.”

Maria leaked out a hollow chuckle. Hearing the real cause of Yun Seora's accelerated deterioration, Yi Seol-Ah covered her mouth in shock.

“You did the right thing by bringing her here. Without the effects of this room, she might have crossed the River of Lethe and would be tipping the wineglass of Forgetfulness by now.”

“How do we go about healing her...?”

“If you want, I can do it. But, strictly speaking, there's no need. If she spends the next couple of days in this room while eating and resting well, she will recover fully.”

“Does that mean her right arm will be healed, as well?”

Maria suddenly went very quiet and gazed at Yun Seora. Agnes also studied Yun Seora's crippled right arm for a while before speaking up.

"Six stab wounds on the arm. . . . Caused by a short but sharp dagger, it seems. The assailant even twisted the blade around in two of the wounds too."

"How long has it been?"

"Over two months. Will it be tough even with 'Moderate' or 'Massive'?"

"Why ask something you know the answer to already? 'Light' would have sufficed if the wound was treated right away, but. . . . But, it's too late now. You know that a wound gets progressively harder to heal the longer it is left untreated. If it's a 'Colossal', it might be possible, but I'm not confident."

Agnes breathed out a soft sigh.

Meanwhile, Seol couldn't hide his astonishment at the two maids who were able to figure out what happened two months ago with just one look.

A certain sense of anxiety was blooming in the corner of his heart at the same time, as well.

He couldn't figure out the contents of the discussion since several words related to Maria's profession were thrown around, but he still understood that fixing the right arm would be very difficult.

Maria stood up straight and shook her head before shifting her gaze over to Seol.

"This arm is as good as dead. It's past the simple 'healing' spell, requiring something on the level of 'Revival' at this point. Instead of leaving it as is, I recommend amputation."

"...Excuse me?"

"There's no helping it. We aren't in Paradise. You won't find a Priest better skilled than me within the Neutral Zone. But even I find healing this arm difficult."

Seol was hoping, but just as expected, this injury couldn't be healed in the Neutral Zone. Maria didn't beat around the bush and conveyed the truth.

That wasn't the end of the bad news, though. There was still around a month left until the deadline, and Yun Seora's right arm could get even worse during this time.

"Is there... any other way?"

Seol wasn't expecting to hear 'impossible' as the prognosis, and he could only chew on his blameless lower lip in frustration.

It was then.

"There is one other way."

A calm voice seemed to help him recover his senses. Agnes raised her body up from the bed, having concluded her examination of Yun Seora's arm.

"As Maria said, only a Level 5 High Ranker can heal her injury. But it just so happens that the Priest class is the closest to the gods."

"..."

"I told you that you'll have to select a god to serve when you reach Level 5. Do you remember?"

Seol nodded his head.

"'Colossal' is a very powerful holy spell a Priest can learn after reaching level 5."

"Didn't you say Miss Maria is level 4?"

"Indeed, she wouldn't be able to use it under normal circumstances.... But there are exceptions."

"Agnes? You should really shut the fuck up now."

Maria began glaring at Agnes. However, the latter maid only spared a cursory glance as a reply, and her words did not stop.

"A Priest who walks on a singular path without receiving the aid of other gods will be bestowed the High Priest class. When one becomes a High Priest, you're given a special privilege."

"A special privilege?"

"Yes. That is the power to hold a Ceremony. It's like begging the gods to allow one to use a high-level spell."

Maria squeezed shut her eyes. Even the noise of her teeth gnashing could be heard. Seol thought that she just whispered several curse words, too. He eventually opened his mouth while looking at her.

“...Excus...”

“Ah, no! Hell no! No freaking way!”

“M, Miss Maria?”

“I can't hear you~ Lalalala~~ Ebebebebeh...”

Maria repeatedly covered up her ears and uncovered them with her hands.

“C, can't you help us? Please! I beg you!”

Yi Seol- Ah couldn't just keep watching, so she begged, but...

“Fuck, keep your piehole shut.”

Maria spat out in anger and became supremely irritated, causing Yi Seol- Ah to jump up in shock and hurriedly seek refuge behind Seol's back. The maid's sudden burst of swears anger unnerved the Yi girl and she was unable to close her slack jaw.

Seol signaled the tearful girl to be quiet, and then, began slowly approaching Maria. The maid's entire body began convulsing.

“Don't come here! Don't come closer to me!! Don't you dare!!!”

“Miss Maria, a word. Please.”

“Argh, shit! Let go of me right now!”

Since she showed signs of running away, Seol gently grasped her arms to stop her. Maria then threw her fists and resisted him. They landed on his chest, but seeing that they didn't hurt too much, he figured that she wasn't planning on hurting him.

“What will it take for you to help us?”

“What the hell? Are you deaf? If it was within my ability, I might help you if you paid me lots of SP, but I'm telling you, I can't do it!”

“How about that Cere...”

“Fuck the Ceremony. Don't even bring that up again! I'm being this civil only because Miss Foxy invited you here. That's all! If you weren't, I'd have bashed in your skull by now.”

Seol nearly blurted out 'This is you being civil?!', but managed to force the words back down his throat. He thought he could finally understand, more or less, why she was practicing the vow of silence, but that wasn't the important thing right now.

“I know I'm asking a lot of you. But, only you can do this, Miss Maria.”

“And why should I?”

Maria shot back while still glaring back at him.

“You think a Ceremony is a thing where you just have to offer a couple of prayers and kowtow a few times? What about the right type of offerings? Where would those come from? And, why should I offer my own shit that I sweated blood and tears to gather for a bitch I don't even know? I'm not even affiliated with Sinyoung! You think that's all? Do you even know what kind of negative rebound I have to endure after performing a single Ceremony?”

As if her emotions were running wild, she continued to spit out her words in anger. There were even glimpses of madness in her expression, and Seol became slightly terrified by that, but he still looked into her eyes.

'Begging her without a plan will not work.

No, he had to convince her first.

“There is a certain verse in the Bible.”

Maria looked at him with an expression that said, ‘What bullshit are you trying to say here’, while panting like crazy.

“Therefore whatever you desire for men to do to you...”

“...You shall also do to them. Book of Matthews, verse 7:12. Gospel of Luke, verse 6:31. I know of it already.”

Maria quickly cut him off, and then chuckled hollowly as if she couldn't believe this.

"Seriously, I'm fucking speechless. So, are you saying that a useless bitch like her is going to owe me a....?"

"It's not just Miss Yun Seora, though."

This time, Seol cut her off.

"I'll be grateful to you, not to mention a certain Miss Kim Hannah."

His serious voice made Maria shut up and study the youth. She was still glaring at him, but her frown had softened up ever so slightly. It was as if she was caught off guard just now by what he said.

"What did you say? Who will?"

As he suspected, him mentioning the name of Kim Hannah was the right call. Seeing a ray of hope finally shining here, Seol continued.

"You've heard that Miss Kim Hannah stopped by the Neutral Zone, right?"

"Sure."

"She came to ask me for the favor then. Yes, it's straight from her mouth."

"Oh, fuck. Dear lord. Oh, god Luxuria...."

Maria's head slowly faltered, and she planted her forehead on Seol's chest. She then didn't move for a good while afterwards.

As Seol stood there, worried about his pounding heart being discovered, her small hand slowly rose up to his view. She beckoned with her index finger.

"Give me a cigarette. And let go of my arms, too."

"Oh."

Seol quickly released her arms and pulled out a cigarette for her. He even lit it up.

"Fu-wooo...."

Maria slowly breathed out the smoke from her nostrils and her mouth, then her eyes began gleaming in dangerous and chilling light.

"For the next five minutes, you all shut your mouths. I'm already feeling like shit, so you better not squeak once. Got that?"

She leaned against the wall and began staring at the ceiling. It was as if the cigarette was her breathing apparatus because she continuously puffed the unhealthy smoke in and out. She also didn't forget to lace the quiet air with various colorful swear words, too. Of course, Seol patiently waited for her to finish.

And eventually....

She flicked the cigarette butt away and spat on the floor. She used her heel to stub the dying light out, causing Agnes to frown ever so slightly, but the latter maid chose not to raise an objection. Agnes was well aware of the dangers and sacrifices a Priest had to bear to perform a Ceremony.

"Haaaaa... Fuuuuck...."

Maria angrily combed her hair back and opened her mouth.

"82,010 points. No, since you gave me a cigarette, 82,000."

"M, Maria?!"

Quite unlike her, Agnes stammered out in surprise. Her facial expression showed how shocked she was, her open mouth and all.

Completely ignoring that reaction, Maria only paid attention to Seol.

"Let's see.... Your tally of Survival Points is.... Way too bloody short. In any case, you wanna fix that girl's arm, then you better earn 82,000 points and pay me upfront. After that, I'll do it, a Ceremony or whatever."

Yi Seol-Ah mouthed a strained gasp. For a person who got flustered only with 200 points, a number like 82,000 was something she couldn't even dream of.

Maria must have found that displeasing because she raised her middle finger at Yi Seol-Ah. And then....



"That's the end of our little talk. Don't forget, I want exactly 82,000 points."

....She growled menacingly and turned around to leave.

*SLAM!!*

Right after Maria slammed the door shut, hard enough to almost shatter it, Yi Seol-Ah muttered out in a daze.

"82,000 points.... That's crazy. It's too expensive."

"You're wrong. It's not expensive at all."

Agnes corrected her.

"Considering the materials involved, it's not an unreasonable price at all. No, I honestly believe that Maria has asked for the absolutely lowest possible amount."

"Is that so...."

Seol asked back, a helpless smile forming on his face.

"I have no clue about what holding a Ceremony entails, but is there a reason Miss Maria detests it so much?"

"Mm.... Let's just say that she stands to lose a lot."

Basically, a Ceremony was the type of ritual where one prayed to gods while making appropriate offerings. The greater the wish, the greater the need for higher quality offerings; if one prayed for something that did not match his or her level, then one would immediately receive backlash, as well.

For instance, if Maria wished to cast the 'Colossal' spell, which happened to be the top-tier Level 5 Priest spell, she'd be confined to bed for the next seven days, suffering from a high fever. Then, a restriction of being unable to cast any spell for the next two weeks would be imposed on her as well.

"Most likely, as soon as the Ceremony is performed, she will leave the Neutral Zone."

"She's going to leave?"

"Yes. If she heads to the main temple of the god she serves, then she can halve the duration of the restriction. More importantly, by offering prayers and recuperating her damaged body there, the odds of preventing the reduction in her physical stats or the loss of her ability to cast spells altogether increases significantly."

"...."

"That's not all. Just the act of leaving the Neutral Zone alone will cause Maria to incur heavy losses as well."

The fact was, maids found in the Neutral Zone weren't volunteers working for free. Working in the Zone, as well as the survivors spending their points, earned the maids their own share of Survival Points as well. After leaving the Zone, they could swap these points for something called 'achievement records'. If she were to leave before the Zone closed, then naturally, Maria had to give up on those benefits.

So, if she were to perform the Ceremony now, she had to swallow all those losses.

"That price of 82,000 points should be only for the offerings needed for the Ceremony itself and nothing else. You could say this is the result of her pride as a Priest, I suppose. If you still believe that price is too much, even after I clarified her position, then there is nothing more I can say."

Hearing that strict and no-nonsense tone of Agnes's voice, Yi Seol-Ah could only lower her head in embarrassment.

Meanwhile, Seol was carefully thinking about a couple of things. He currently owned 38,580 points. Meaning, he needed to earn another 43,420 points.

'That's not going to be easy.'

He had decided not to do anymore 'Hard' missions. And, in order to complete 'Very Hard' missions, he'd need to prepare himself accordingly, which naturally meant he would need to spend some points there. Even if he were to go out now and find suitable partners, since the rewards would be divided equally among the number of participants, he wouldn't receive a lot as well.

'Why only after I purchased things from the VIP store....?'

What an exquisitely ill-timed event this was. If he only knew when he still possessed over 120,000 points.

Agnes quietly studied Seol busy lamenting his poor luck, before bowing politely.

“No matter what you decide to do next, I wish you best of luck.”

Agnes too left his room, leaving only the four of them in Seol's quarters.

Yi Seol-Ah began murmuring her apology with an ashamed face.

“I'm sorry.... Because of me, you....”

Seol couldn't help but agree with her. After all, he wasn't a saint, nor was he a virtuous man. While being subjected to Maria's hysterics, he wondered several times why he should even do this in the first place.

However, whenever that happened, he recalled the old tale of Liu Bei and the old man and reined in his impatience. The moment he gave up, everything he'd done up until that point would be wasted, but if he persevered till the end, he'd gain twice the benefits.

“The Golden Commandment.... Better not be a waste of my time, you hear me?”

Besides, the story might have been different if no one told him. He knew, and since he started this thing anyway, he was planning to see it to the end. He didn't want to look back in regret later, that's why.

his thoughts up to here, Seol transferred another 300 points to Yi Seol-Ah.

“O, Orabeo-nim?!”

“For now, stay and rest here. Buy something to eat for dinner with those points. When Miss Yun Seora wakes up, buy her something to eat, as well. Something easy to digest, like a bowl of gruel or something.”

The Yi siblings became totally speechless from Seol's considerations for them.

“W, what about you....?”

“I'll go and earn some Survival Points. Don't worry about me and wait here.”

They stared, still dazed, as he picked up his spear.

If he activated his 'Nine Eyes' at that moment, he might have flinched in surprise. However, he was too focused on earning the points and he didn't. He simply swung open the door to leave.

\*

He came down to the first-floor plaza without a concrete plan, but as expected, there were no ready answers waiting for him there.

The only idea he could come up with was to continue doing the 'Hard' missions. There were ten missions available, and each mission had 9 attempts left.

If he carried on as he did, then he'd be able to earn 40,000 points. However....

'Please stop looking at me like that....'

The stares coming from the other people were no joke. The crowd wasn't saying anything out aloud since they had nothing to say at the moment, but if he tried to attempt another 'Hard' mission, they would no doubt start whispering to each other again.

*Damn it, it's your fault for not trying out these missions in the first place!*

'Sorry, but I'm also in a bind here.'

Seol firmed his resolve. But, just before he could reach out to a mission parchment, someone poked him on the back, and he had to turn around to see who it was.

“So, can you spare me some time for a cup of tea today?”

As soon as he turned around, a nightingale-like voice entered his ears like a pleasant song. A girl wearing a blue gown was looking at him with sparkling eyes.

It was Odelette Delphine, one of the two people Kim Hannah recommended that he should get friendly with.

“Or, are you going to refuse again?”

Since she asked him so innocently, Seol couldn't refuse her.

“No, I have time.”

“Okay! Let's head to that café over there. Everyone's waiting for you.”

Seol was briefly confused by that statement, but after getting dragged to the cafe in question by her, he understood what she meant. There were four people sitting by a table, waiting for his arrival. Three of those faces, he sort of knew.

“Uh?”

Seol checked the face of the thin man wearing a turban and exclaimed loudly.

“You thought I died?”

The guy who looked to be an Indian carried a thin smile as he spoke.

“Yes. Back then, you. . .”

“Everyone said the same thing when I got back. All thanks to a certain someone.”

Delphine smiled brightly, before going. Oops, and stuck her tongue out.

“It turns out, 'death' isn't the only result available if you fail that particular mission. Who knew.”

“You either die or go back to the beginning and try again.”

“You don't return to the plaza to start over again, correct?”

“Indeed – simply back to the beginning of the maze. I thought I'd really die, trying to escape that accursed place. . . . Well, it was a story from two months ago, anyway.”

It was easy to see from this conversation how much not invested Seol was in the ongoings of the Neutral Zone unless it had to do with his training regime.

Sitting on the spot Delphine guided him to, Seol slowly took in the faces staring back at him.

“In any case, welcome. Just call me Tong Chai.”

The man who said that was Tong Chai, from Area 5.

“...Leorda Salvatore.”

From Area 2, with a pair of sharp ash-grey eyes that resembled a wolf, Leorda Salvatore.

“It's a pleasure. I'm Hao Win.”

The man slowly savoring his cigarette while resting his feet on the table, Hao Win from Area 7.

'This guy is. . .'

This man was the other survivor Kim Hannah spoke of. Wasn't he supposed to be a boss in an underground organization? Was it Triads or something? What with his neat and composed appearance, he didn't look like a thug at all.

And then. . .

“Finally!! My dream is about to become a reality!”

Area 2's Odelette Delphine, the lone Magician and the second place holder of the Neutral Zone, smiled brightly.

With the exception of one person, everyone here was someone Cinzia called out by name on the first day, back in the theatre.

## Chapter 32

The gist of Odelette Delphine's offer was just as Seol suspected: she wanted him to join her team.

Judging from her description, he thought that the composition of the team itself seemed to be well thought out.

Hao Win was the Warrior of the group, Leorda and Tong Chai were the Archers, Delphine was the Magician, and the last person Seol wasn't familiar with acted as the Priest.

Considering that missions rated 'Hard' and 'Very Hard' had the cap of six participants max, it was as if they had deliberately left the final spot for Seol.

If things remained the same as before, Seol wouldn't even hesitate to say yes. Not only did this team feature two people Kim Hannah mentioned he should get friendly with, Seol himself was sensing that the time had come to find reliable comrades as well.

However, the situation was different now. Seol had to amass 82,000 points as quickly as possible.

'I'd be able to earn that many points even if I join this team, but...'

Obviously, he didn't want to sacrifice himself unconditionally. He wanted to fix Yun Seora's arm, get himself some proper equipment, and also buy more Divine Elixirs from the VIP store.

In other words, he wanted to have his cake and eat it. Others might call him a greedy fool, but he did not want to give up on any one of his desires.

In the end... he had to decide.

"I'm truly sorry, but... At the moment, it's difficult for the time being."

There was a way for him to achieve the things he wanted. If Seol monopolized the remaining 'Hard' missions, he'd be able to earn more than enough points to cover the cost of the Ceremony and still have some change. With that, he'd get equipment and recruit people to form a team. People might slag him off for this, but this was the best scenario Seol could think of.

"Hng."

Maybe she didn't expect him to refuse her, Delphine looked crestfallen.

"Hmm..."

Hao Win seemed as if he was not ready to accept Seol's answer just yet.

"I am well aware of how extraordinary you are. I acknowledge your skills, but the difficulty of the 'Very Hard' missions are nothing to laugh about. You alone will not be enough."

"Yes, I know."

"You say you know, yet... Ahh, is it because you do not like the composition of this team? Or were you planning to form your own?"

"I haven't thought of forming a team yet. And, to be frank, I quite like the look of this team as well. I wouldn't mind doing missions with you, actually."

"Then why the refusal?"

Hao Win gazed at Seol with a questioning pair of eyes. His expression showed how confused he was, and he continued to study Seol for a bit longer, before tilting his head.

"Now that I've taken a proper look, I see that you haven't bought any equipment besides your spear. I'd imagine you were able to earn a massive amount of points by now... Did you invest them all into your abilities?"

"No."

Seol shook his head right away. He never planned to buy abilities from the stores but did want to buy good equipment for himself. The situation got turned on its head before that could happen though.

"I am even more confused, then. One more thing – if I didn't see incorrectly a moment ago, you were planning to do another Hard mission, were you not?"

The question was sharp and on point. Just like his stare was.

"You have exhausted one mission completely, but as for the others, you only did them six times each before moving on."

"..."

"You could have finished them all, but left them behind in consideration of other survivors. At least, that's what I thought until now."

"Mister Win!"

Delphine glared at Hao Win. Judging from the tone of his voice, she thought that he was trying to pick a fight with Seol.

"Sounds like you are saying that this young man's at fault. If you did indeed mean that, I can not agree."

Tong Chai stood up for Delphine.

"I'm not certainly trying to go against the decisions already taken. But, honestly speaking, I never really understood us also planning to perform each Hard mission six times and move on to the next one. The Neutral Zone is a place of competition. Should it not be, 'first come, first served' when it comes to missions?"

"I'm not saying it's his fault. Simply put, I'm having a hard time understanding him."

Delphine stared at Hao Win who was waving his hand around in a show of frustration.

The first person to suggest Seol's inclusion to the team might be her, but the one who vigorously championed for it was none other Hao Win.

Her team was indeed the best in the Neutral Zone on paper. However, they still had their share of issues. In short, they lacked offensive power.

For the time being, the team's tactic was to have Hao Win stand in front as the vanguard, while the two Archers kept the enemy movements in check. And, Delphine would sweep them away with her magic from the back. With this tactic, they were exposed to comparatively low risk per mission, although the time it took to clear one was a little long.

However, new 'clear conditions' were added to 'Very Hard' missions. Simply staying on their backfoot and passively defending all the time would not work anymore. New conditions, such as 'ambush' and 'occupation', were added to each mission, forcing one to take the initiative and attack.

So, Hao Win argued that they would not be able to complete these missions with the tactic they have been employing until now. He passionately argued that they needed this youth's attack power.

So, why was this Hao Win questioning the youth like this?

"If you're a lone wolf type, I will respect that. However, I don't think you're one. You must've gathered a sizeable points tally by now, yet besides the spear, you haven't invested them on anything. It's like, you're only trying to hoard them and nothing else."

Certainly, from the third person's perspective, Seol's story did sound rather odd when someone pointed out the strange bits like Hao Win had.

Seol let off a soft sigh.

"Just like you said, I had quite a few Survival Points."

"Had... Why the past tense?"

"I spent most of it in the VIP store. Of course, I left some behind to buy new equipment for myself. Well, I was planning to buy, but then, my situation changed."

"How so.... Something happened?"

Hao Win's attitude had softened ever so slightly.

"There's a situation, and I need to earn a lot of points as quickly as possible."

Although this wasn't a story he should go around advertising, Seol felt that he owed these people an explanation. So, he told them about Yun Seora's right arm, as well as Maria's Ceremony that required a large amount of Survival Points.

He hadn't had anyone to share his troubling thoughts with for a while, so when this opportunity presented itself, he ended up pouring out most of what was in his heart.

After listening to Seol's situation, everyone blinked non-stop and stared at him. Especially Hao Win, who looked totally dazed as if someone punched him in the face out of the blue.

"You had that kind of situation..."

Delphine sounded very sympathetic.

"Mm. I understand your situation. But, is there a reason for you to help that person out in the first place?"

Tong Chai asked Seol, sounding slightly confused.

"Unless she was your family member, a sibling, perhaps. But, to spend 82,000 points for someone from the same Area.... That seems a bit too drastic, don't you agree?"

Seol scratched his head, unable to answer right away.

He had various reasons. Besides Kim Hannah requesting him, it was also a chance to test out the Golden Commandment as well. Of course, he also wanted to help her out, too.... In any case, there was no need to tell these people absolutely everything.

"I received her help during the Tutorial, and.... It's hard to say why. I just can't stop thinking about it."

"You can't?"

"Yes. It is a bit of shame, too...."

Seol muttered out as if he was complaining about something.

“Only if I knew what was going on a little bit sooner, things wouldn't have gotten this bad....”

After hearing Seol's whisper, Hao Win's body shuddered ever so slightly. He drew his chin inward and quietly studied Seol for a while. It was as if he was looking at the youth in a new light.

“Who is this person you're trying to help?”

Hao Win asked him. Compared to before, his voice had softened quite considerably.

“Her name is Yun Seora....”

“Yun Seora.... Definitely a girl, then?”

“Yes.”

“I see. That was why....”

Hao Win let off a short groan and finally lowered his legs from the table.

“Oh, by the way, I don't think I've heard your name yet.”

“Seol.... My name's Seol.”

Hao Win sat up properly and gazed at the darkened complexion of the youth.

“I apologize for my earlier behavior. Looks like I spoke too prematurely. I thought you didn't really associate yourself with anyone.... I had no idea you had that kind of circumstance. Truly.”

“No, it's alright. Don't mind it.”

“Will you accept my apology?”

Hao Win suddenly offered his hand. Seol reached out and shook it after being slightly bewildered by this gesture. Hao Win quietly nodded his head, and then, spoke up again.

“I understand.”

“...Pardon?”

“Only if you knew sooner.... The words of lingering attachment. I know how you feel since I've experienced something similar myself.”

Hao Win sounded rather lonely, then.

“Please, stop telling us that annoying love story of yours!! Please!”

“Huh? But, did you not sympathize with me when I told you the story for the first time?”

“That's for once or twice, you know! If you bring it up again today, it'll be for the seventh time!!”

Delphine crumpled her expression and covered up her ears.

Seol alternated his gaze between the two, feeling rather pleasantly surprised. He thought their relationship was simply a cooperative one, but it seemed to be a lot friendlier than expected.

Hao Win licked his lips as if he was unhappy about the missed chance and let go of Seol's hand.

“Listen, friend. How much do you need for that Ceremony?”

Hao Win asked Seol out of the blue. The youth quickly calculated in his head.

“43,720 points.”

“43,720? ....That might be doable.”

What did he mean by 'doable'?

Before Seol could ask, Hao Win clapped his hands once and drew the attention to himself.

“Let's see. I know that we've prepared various things to entice this young man into our team... However, why don't we do it this way?”

“What way?”

Delphine asked in curiosity, causing Hao Win to point at the noticeboard.

“First of all, we invite him to our team. Then us six will clear Hard difficulty missions.”

Delphine tilted her head but still listened. Hao Win may possess an easy-going and pleasant personality, but he was never one to speak without thinking deeply about a subject.

“Except, we hand over our share of rewards to this youth.”

“What did you say?”

“Bullshit.”

Tong Chai strongly objected. Even Leorda, who had been keeping quiet until now, spat out his opinion in a cold voice.

“If you were planning to do whatever you want, why did you even form a team in the first place?”

“What, didn't we agree that we need this youth's ability in order to attempt 'Very Hard' missions?”

“But, you changed the story, did you not?”

“Listen to me. My point is this – either we cooperate or we compete.”

Hao Win then pointed at Seol.

“This friend here, Mister Seol, needs Survival Points for personal reasons. He will do whatever it takes to earn them. Didn't you see him getting ready to attempt the Hard missions just now?”

“So, what about it? We can also do those missions, no? All we have to do is recruit another skillful Warrior.”

“It's not a matter of skill. As far as the Very Hard missions are concerned, the positions of our team and this youth match up just fine, but for Hard missions, it's a different story altogether.”

“I can't figure out what you're trying to say here.”

“Think about it. Think about how long we need to clear one Hard mission, and then, how long this young man needs to clear one.”

Tong Chai's expression hardened visibly. Finally, he realized what Hao Win was trying to say.

Everyone here could remember it well. This youth cleared missions at a frightening speed. Not only that, all by himself, no less.

“I'll say this right now. If we fail to pull this young man in now... How many more times will we be able to complete Hard missions, I wonder?”

“Hmm...”

“At a minimum, five times? Ten times, if we're fast enough?”

“Even if that's true, I feel that we wouldn't be losing out too much still.”

“Indeed, we'd be able to still earn some points that way.”

“There is something you are mistaken about, Hao Win.”

Leorda abruptly cut in.

“As you say, if Seol becomes our comrade, it'd be a good thing for us. However, I can not agree with your assertion that only after he joins our team, we'd be able to attempt Very Hard missions.”

“That's the same story for this friend too.”

Hao Win didn't even flinch as he lightly rebuffed the argument.

“Indeed, there is no doubt that our team is the best in the Neutral Zone. However, this friend here is the top survivor in the Zone. He is unmatched. Unrivaled. You think he won't be able to form his own team? Or you think no team out there will welcome him with open arms?”

If their team failed to pull Seol in, then later on, they would have to compete against him or his team. Since Seol regained his fame and prestige a few days ago through his unbelievable actions, it'd be a lie to say they weren't feeling the pressure.

“So, the conclusion is this. 43,720 points? Let's think of it as a contract signing fee. If we divide the cost among ourselves, it's what, around 8,700

per person? That much, we will be able to recoup very quickly as soon as we start doing the Very Hard missions.”

What Hao Win was arguing for was to recruit Seol to their team and avoid potentially having to compete with another strong team later down the line.

“Think about it carefully. Just completing one Very Hard mission with 50,000 points nets over 8,000 points for each of us.”

“Very good.”

Delphine spoke up with an enthusiastic voice.

“In order to earn a bigger profit later, invest now, is that it? I can agree to that. I enjoy competition, but for this once, I will instead choose to grab onto this opportunity. This fellow here, I’ve had my eyes on him for quite some time, you see.”

“So she says. What about you?”

Hao Win looked at Tong Chai, and the latter man slowly closed his eyes. Leorda did the same as well. Since the team’s leader had spoken, it was the same thing as the scale having tilted to one way already.

“Oh, and about the contract fee we were planning to give him.”

As if he hadn’t finished yet, Hao Win continued.

“With the exception of our Priest over here, let’s lend 2000 points each to Seol. I’m sure you all have that much leeway?”

“I thought we were finished with discussing the signing fee?”

Delphine hurriedly spoke up after sensing that Tong Chai was about to blow his top.

“Look, after he goes through that Ceremony or whatever, he will be left with nothing to his name, correct? Don’t you think this friend needs to get some proper equipment if he were to attempt Very Hard missions with us?”

“Even still...”

“I’m saying, we are lending him, not giving the points away. Besides, Seol will be taking the vanguard position from now on, so can’t you extend your favors just a little? By equipping this friend with the best armor available, the odds of our survival also increases, no?”

“Really, you don’t know when to quit!”

Tong Chai angrily stood up. He then glared at Seol, who was just sitting there with an innocent look on his face.

“No need to say anymore. Show us what you’re capable of.”

“Huh?”

“Hao Win over here is a man who will live and die by his principle. That’s why he’s saying all these things, but I’m different. I understand your situation, but I do not see the reason why I need to go out of my way to accommodate you.”

Seol slowly nodded his head.

Actually, even he thought Hao Win’s conditions were too good to be true. If he were able to move with a team, he’d be able to avoid being blamed for hogging everything for himself, and better still, he’d be able to monopolize the rewards as well.

On top of this, they wanted to lend him points to buy equipment, too. He was planning to buy equipment sooner or later anyway, so it was difficult to see this as him owing them a debt.

“However, I do understand some parts of Hao Win’s arguments. That is why you should display your skills to us. We have heard all the rumors, but I need to see it with my own two eyes. Convince me that you are worthy of investment.”

Tong Chai passionately stated his case.

Prove himself?

‘That’s easy.’

Seol grasped the spear and stood up from his seat. Which caused Tong Chai, who had been glaring at him until now, to flinch and back off.

“H, hold on.”

“?”



"I didn't mean that you should fight me. No, what I meant was, show me through those."

Tong Chai pointed at the mission noticeboard.

"Oh."

"Kuhum. I'll go and bring a mission paper. Prepare yourself in the meantime."

Tong Chai left the lounge.

While waiting for the turban-wearing man, Seol shifted his gaze over to Hao Win, who had a huge smile etched on his face.

"Why?"

"Mm?"

"Why are you going out of your way to help me?"

Hao Win played a major role in talks progressing to this point. Seol lacked the ability of eloquent speech, and so, could only marvel at Hao Win's sleek persuasion skills. But at the same time, the youth couldn't understand the reason why. After all, the Chinese man was someone he'd never even talked to prior to this day.

"Well... I'm apologizing for my initial misunderstanding..."

The end of Hao Win's words trailed off, which was quite unlike him. He then shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't hate guys like you. A man who's willing to brave dangers for the woman he loves! Actually, I wish to cheer you on, you see."

Seol nearly spat out the drink he was drinking, right then.

"L, love?!"

"Hmm? Am I wrong?"

"Definitely. I'm not even going out with her."

"But, you said you can't stop thinking about her?"

"That is..."

....A person was withering away right in front of his face, so, quite obviously, he wouldn't be able to stop thinking about it.

Seeing Seol's complexion wane, Hao Win broke out in hearty laughter.

"I don't mind a shy type of love, but it's better if you are upfront about it. Look, man. If it was someone totally unrelated to you, would you be going out of your way to gather 82,000 points? Weren't you planning to forge ahead regardless of what others might think of you?"

"B, but, that's not it..."

If he was interested in Yun Seora in the first place, he'd not have abandoned her until she fell into such a wretched state.

He only heard about her circumstances coincidentally. And just as coincidentally, Kim Hannah came to him to ask for the favor. He did completely forget about her while being immersed in the training regime, after all.

"I was the same as you. A long time has passed by since then, but I still regret it to this day. I never knew how important the other person was. Only after she left my side did I realize my mistake."

Whatever the case may have been, this Hao Win fellow deeply misunderstood something here.

"I also find you rather envious as well. You've realized it before it's too late, unlike me..."

Hao Win's reminiscing tone of voice nearly made Seol's body to shrink back, but the youth summoned whatever willpower he could muster to stop that from happening.

At the same time, Tong Chai returned with a mission parchment. In order to enter a mission with others, they had to be in physical contact.

"In any case, that is the reason why I'm helping you."

Hao Win picked up a huge shield. After placing his arm over Seol's shoulders, a big grin broke out on his face.

"You see, I'm a hopeless romantic."

And then, accompanied by the sound of paper being torn, all six of them disappeared from the spot.

A short while later.... To be more precise, two minutes and 47 seconds later.

Six people reappeared in the plaza.

With the exception of one, no, two people, the expressions on the rest showed how shocked they were.

Hao Win was laughing his ass off while keeling halfway to the floor; meanwhile, Seol was catching his breath after going all out for the first time in a while.

“C... Crazy...”

Leorda's expression was as if he had just witnessed a terrifying monster.

He saw it with his own eyes, but even then, he could hardly believe it. The youth carrying a spear dashed forward like a streak of lightning the very moment they teleported to the mission area. Then, he began beating the seven shades of monsters there without missing a beat.

He stabbed them with his speartip, then he smacked them around using the spear shaft – Leorda couldn't forget the scene of one monster dying without fail every time Seol wielded his weapon.

Leorda was well aware of the fact that Seol had completed the toughest mission in the 'Hard' difficulty, 'Breaking out of the siege', all by himself. But, this was.... Now that he bore witness to the youth's prowess, it exceeded Leorda's wildest imaginations. Should he say the whole thing was... exciting? Soul-stirring, even?

“I'd have never imagined that I'd feel pity for the monsters during a mission.”

“I told you. Now can you understand everything I've said?”

Hao Win continued to cackle at Leorda's expense. The latter man looked like he was totally fed up now as he shook his head.

The facial expression on the person who objected most voraciously, Tong Chai, was also quite something else to behold.

“Now that you saw the performance personally, what do you think, Mister Tong Chai?”

Tong Chai stood there like a stone statue before abruptly shifting his gaze over to Seol.

“You're from Area 1, which means you're from South Korea?”

“That's correct.”

“Have you been to the army?”

“I was a sergeant by the time I was discharged.”

“Ahh... I see...”

“?”

Seeing Tong Chai nod his head sagely, Seol couldn't help but get flustered. What sort of misunderstanding was this guy going through now?

Seol was about to clarify that he was nothing more than an administrative clerk, but Hao Win cut in before he could.

“So, now you agree with my proposition?”

“I agree with you 100%. And I will invest 3000 points.”

Hao Win whistled, impressed, at that big amount.

“Wow. Isn't the change in your attitude too sudden?”

“But, of course. I've only recognized the fact that I'm not the driver, merely the passenger in this ride.”

Tong Chai smiled wryly and took off his turban. Then, he slightly lowered his head towards Seol.

“I hope you can buy the best equipment available. I am genuinely looking forward to trying out the Very Hard missions now.”

“Fufufu. What about you, Leorda?”

“...I'll also lend him 3000 points.”

Leorda crossed his arms in front of his chest and averted his gaze.

“Oh, it seems that everyone is willing to show off a bit, no? Very good. Then, 4000 points from me.”

“And 5000 points from me!”

Staying silent until then, Delphine suddenly piped up and, as if she was very excited about something, jumped up and down repeatedly before clutching onto Seol's arm.

“Bus!!”

Panicking slightly, Seol looked down at her. While clinging onto his arm, she shouted out while her eyes sparkled brightly.

“Please, let me get on this bus!”

\*

She opened her eyes and was greeted by the blurry world. It was as if she was looking through a screen of water while being submerged underneath. The lights filling her vision remained bright, though.

“Ahh...”

Her eyes hurt. Yun Seora reflexively closed her eyes and sighed out inwardly.

'I survived...'

She wished to die, actually.

She pulled her hands in almost instinctively, only to realize something was not quite right.

The sensation on the tips of her fingers was soft. Her back felt comfortable too, and most importantly, her body did not feel heavy at all. It always felt like it weighed a ton until now....

Right away, she opened her eyes like a person struck by lightning. And she was astonished by the sights of the room greeting her.

“Where is this...?”

She remembered making her way back somehow to that place on the fifth floor, the one that wasn't furnished enough to be called a lounge. But now that she had opened her eyes, she found herself inside a palace, instead.

'Maybe, I did die?'

....But, just as she finished thinking like so, the door to the room clicked open.

“Uh? Um?”

Yi Seol-Ah was returning to the room after buying something to eat, and seeing that Yun Seora had regained her consciousness, she quickly came to her side in a light trot.

“Uhm...”

“You are awake! How are you feeling?”

“Where... am I?”

“It's heaven.”

Yi Sungjin abruptly butted in. Yun Seora went, oh, and was about to nod her head, but saw the pointy end of the food tray dig deep into the boy's side and couldn't help but be confused.

“Ouch! What?!”

“She's going to misunderstand you!”

“But, but! This place *is* heaven, isn't it?”

“T, that's true, too...”

Now that Yi Seol-Ah thought about it, her little brother had a point there.

Yi Seol-Ah quickly cleared her throat a couple of times and, with a bright smile, placed the tray down. Yun Seora's eyes opened up wide in shock after seeing some seriously appetizing grub on it. Saliva instinctively pooled in her mouth as the warm steam rose up from the delicious-smelling soup.

“Please, eat them. I’m sure you’re starving by now.”

“W, what about you two...?”

“We brought ours along as well, so don’t worry.”

“What is going on?”

Yun Seora’s mind was in a mess. She woke up and so many things seemed to have changed while she was out cold.

“Oppa helped us out.”

“Hyung helped us out.”

The siblings answered simultaneously.

“W, who?”

“That’s it for now. I’ll tell you everything once you finish them all~.”

Yi Seol-Ah pointed at the food tray.

There was no way Yun Seora would refuse. This was the first proper meal she had seen in over a month, after all. Unable to fight the desire, she hurriedly picked up the spoon.

‘Tastes... so good.’

This soup that seemed to melt on the tip of her tongue – how could it taste so wonderful?

Yun Seora’s whole being focused on the meal at hand, and after making sure nothing was wrong, the Yi siblings also dug into their food as well.

And so, as the trio silently enjoyed their meal, Yi Sungjin suddenly let off a long sigh. Yi Seol-Ah glanced at her brother, chopsticks caught between her lips.

“You shouldn’t sigh like that during meals, you know.”

“No, I know.... It’s just that, I’m worried.”

“Mm?”

“I wonder if it’s really okay for us to keep staying here....”

Hearing her little brother’s depressed voice, Yi Seol-Ah tilted her head.

“If I were in Hyung’s shoes, I think I’d be feeling a bit annoyed by us...”

“Y, you think so?”

“Ng. I mean, us staying here like this, we’re inconveniencing him, right? If we are honest, didn’t we dump him with the responsibility of fixing Seora Noona’s arm, too?”

Yun Seora’s left arm was moving nonstop but then, it froze mid-action as soon as the boy’s words left his mouth. Yi Seol-Ah went, Ah!, but it was too late.

Even though Seol said he’d go and earn enough points, that amount was not something he could gather in one or two days. No, the odds of not gathering enough before the Neutral Zone’s deadline approached were greater. It would do no one any good to raise an unrealistic expectation, so she didn’t want to say anything.

“What are you talking about?”

“It, it’s nothing. Don’t worry, unni. Just finish your meal first.”

Yun Seora silently put the spoon down, no longer eating. Yi Seol-Ah glared at her little brother, but she knew that the milk had been spilled already. In the end, she had to come clean about what happened.

“82,000 points?!”

“Yes. If we want to heal your arm, we need 82,000 points....”

It was such a nonsensical number, a helpless chuckle leaked out from Yun Seora’s lips. Since she didn’t even have 10 points for a simple meal to her name, she couldn’t even begin to imagine the enormity of 82,000 points.

“What about him...?”

“He left a while ago saying he'd be going out to earn some points...”

Yun Seora leaned her back against the wall. Her question's been answered, but the confusion in her head remained.

'Why?'

She couldn't understand it.

They only came from the same Area. Yet, he brought her to his own room. He then gave away those precious points, so she could have something to eat after waking up. And then, he was trying to get her arm fixed as well.

'But, why?'

As a person who never cared about other people's business, Seol's helping hand felt so alien and not to mention, burdensome to her.

On the flip side, it did kind of feel a little itchy. Her head still questioned, but her body was certainly rejoicing at the goodwill being showered on her.

Now that she thought about it, she might have seen him during her sleep.

[...Are you alright?]

The face of the youth, reaching out to her.

'...I want to see him.'

When this thought formed in her head, Yun Seora's eyes blinked several times in surprise.

'What did I think about just now?'

“Uhm, unni? Please, don't be discouraged if Orabeo-nim tells you it'll be difficult.”

“I won't do that.”

Yun Seora replied matter-of-factly at Yi Seol-Ah's baseless anxiety. She remained cold and detached, but still, knew how to remain courteous.

'But what should I say to him once he comes back?'

It was then. They could hear loud footsteps coming from the corridor.

\*

'But I wanted to see what the Ceremony looked like...'

Seol was sitting on the steps of the staircase while sighing out wistfully.

He and the new team successfully completed several Hard mission. They completed each mission six times, earning 43,500 extra points.

His clearing speed was also incomparably faster. Every team member fought in the manner Seol recommended, so it was small wonder that the missions were cleared much faster than before.

After earning enough points this way, Seol went to see Maria and requested her to hold the Ceremony.

She might have a dirty mouth, but Maria would never go back on her own word. She told him not to come inside the room since the god she served would descend during the Ceremony itself. She then swapped out of the maid uniform for an ice-white robe, and while clutching a sizeable bag full of stuff and being accompanied by two other maids, she went upstairs to Seol's room.

By this time, even the two Yi siblings must've been chased out from the room, thought Seol.

In any case, knowing that he had resolved the situation somehow, he was feeling not too shabby at the moment.

“As I was saying...”

....That was, if one discounted one exception.

All thanks to Hao Win, who was sitting next to him and yapped on and on seemingly without an end, Seol thought he might develop neurosis at this rate.

Originally, the team was supposed to meet up again tomorrow morning after Seol purchased suitable equipment for himself. However, Hao Win

said he wanted to talk to the youth for a bit, and that 'bit' got extended to 'forever', instead.

It was fine for him to misunderstand all by himself, but then, he kept yammering on and on about some nonsense.

....Such as, the stories of his past love.

“You see, women are creatures of emotions. See? They are different from us males.”

“Sure....”

“Your looks? Your body? Money? They do matter, sure. But the most important thing, it's your heart. Your heart!”

“Sure....”

“How much does this man think about me? How much does he care about me? These things are important, you see? That's all you need.”

“Sure....”

“Really now. You need to be more confident in yourself. I can help you out any time if you need me. I mean, such a wonderful opportunity has been created, so it should be a child's play now. Am I right? So, how about it? Should I help you?”

“Sure....”

....Or, with substance-less lectures about the rules of dating.

Seol continued to mouth half-hearted replies. Now he could understand why Odelette Delphine looked so fed up back then.

'Oh well, at least he's not as terrifying as I feared, though.'

“Alright! I won't stand out too much, and just set the mood up for you young ones. All you have to do is to match the timing, that's all!”

“...Eh?”

Seol had been responding like a robot without thinking too much about it, and the conversation strayed off course by quite a lot while he wasn't paying attention.

“...Match the timing?”

Just before Seol could ask for clarification, bright light exploded above their heads. When both men looked up, they saw soft and gentle rays of light up there. This was odd since the door to Seol's room should have been closed shut.

Hao Win slowly opened his mouth.

“Looks like it's over.”

“I should go and take a look.”

Seol got up and hurriedly ran to his room. For some reason, Hao Win decided to follow right behind, as well.

Arriving on the tenth floor, Seol could see that that door to his room was still closed shut. The two maids accompanying Maria were nowhere to be seen, other than the backs of the anxious Yi siblings hesitating there.

“Orabeo-nim!”

Yi Seol-Ah spotted Seol and called out helplessly.

“What happened?”

“I, I don't know! There was a sudden explosion of light, and, and, the two maids entered the room in a hurry, and....”

“How long has it been?”

“Not long. Maybe, not even one minute...?”

*Creak....*

Before Yi Seol-Ah could finish, the door cautiously creaked open.

## Chapter 33

Hot and stuffy air rushed out from the open door. The acrid and bitter odor of blood and sweat also faintly brushed by Seol's nose.

The two maids that entered before him were supporting the completely exhausted Maria from her sides while leaving the room.

Maria's previously-radiant blonde hair looked as if someone doused it with a bucket of cold water as drops of liquid fell from the strands. Her thin, white ceremonial robe was completely soaked through as it clung onto her figure and revealed more than a hint of her skin.

"Ueek...!"

From her cherry-colored shapely lips, a mouthful of blood spewed out. The white robe rapidly got stained in the dark crimson hue.

"Miss Maria!"

When Seol ran up to her, Maria weakly raised her head up. As if she was already suffering from a high fever, her once-pale cheeks were reddening up.

"Are you alright?"

"Fuck.... Can't you see for yourself....?"

"...."

"My head's ringing, so please don't shout near me.... I really feel like I might die soon...."

Maria coughed and vomited out two more mouthfuls of blood. She regulated her breathing and then shot Seol a fierce glare.

"Don't forget."

"...."

"I did you a big favor with this."

Seol wasn't a dummy so he quickly replied.

"I understand. I'll never forget about today's matter."

Maria lowered her head again. She was helped along by other maids and soon, they disappeared beyond the bottom of the stairs and out of sight.

Still worried, Seol continued to look on before shifting his eyes away after hearing the loud exclamation of joy coming out from his quarters. It was the sound of the Yi siblings crying out.

"Time for the main character to make his entrance."

Hao Win lightly patted Seol's back. Although the questions regarding why this guy followed him here remained, Seol was more curious to find out Yun Seora's condition, so he hesitantly took his first step inside.

'Ho!'

Hao Win followed Seol into the room and ended up gasping out in admiration after seeing the figure of the woman sitting on top of the bed.

The way she sat up on the bed while leaning slightly against the wall reminded him of a beautiful snowflower shyly blooming within a hidden crevice in the middle of winter.

She continuously raised her right arm and then lowered it. Her actions were somehow like that beautiful flower not knowing what to do when the rays of warm sunlight fell upon it after it was forcibly taken out from its deep hiding place and into the open plain.

'Indeed, I see why he fell for her.' Hao Win silently mused to himself, and then he lightly pushed Seol forward. Thanks to that, the youth ended up stumbling a couple of steps forward, which inevitably drew in the attention of Yun Seora. She flinched slightly and met the youth's gaze.

"H, how are you feeling?"

"...."

"Is your arm okay?"

"...Ah."

Her small but shapely lips parted slightly before closing shut again.

All sorts of emotions flashed in her eyes, but her lips could only tremble softly. Judging from her small and nearly indecipherable hand gestures, it seemed as if she desperately wanted to say something, but at the same time, she was at a loss as to how she should proceed. So much so, the

ones watching on could feel their hearts melt into a puddle.

'Man!'

Now how heartwarming and wonderfully refreshing was this!

Hao Win was deeply admiring this sight, but then...

"May I know how you managed to gather 82,000 points?"

...Yun Seora's words brought him back to his senses.

Hao Win quickly stuffed a cigarette in his mouth and shoved his hands down his trouser pockets. Then, he cocked his head exactly at the angle of 30 degrees and jutted his chin out just a bit as if he was looking down on his opponent.

"Oh, that. This is..."

"Hiya~. Congrats, congrats."

Just before Seol could introduce Yun Seora to Hao Win, Hao Win seized the initiative and stepped forward while walking in an extravagant fashion. He placed a hand on Seol's shoulder and scanned the crowd.

"I see that you're all nicely healed and stuff. You can move your arm now, yeah?"

"Y, yes. It's all thanks to Mister Hao Win..."

"Sure, sure. It's all good, all good. But..."

The ends of Hao Win's lips twisted up slightly. As a clearly slimy smile surfaced on his face, Yi Seol-Ah couldn't help but form a deep frown.

"We've held up our side of the bargain, so... It's your turn to keep your side of the promise, no?"

"Of course."

"Oh, good. You see, I just wanted to make sure. I mean, if you somehow forgot, things might have gotten a bit troubling for both sides."

"You don't have to worry."

Seol confidently replied. He received a lot from them already, and he was planning to pay them back in full.

Of course, that was just from Seol's perspective. The others, who weren't aware of the details, could only tilt their heads in confusion from those ambiguous words.

"Uhm, excuse me... What promise are you talking about?"

And sure enough, Yi Seol-Ah took the bait.

"Oh, that..."

"That's right, it's a promise."

Seol was about to explain himself, but Hao Win cut him off again.

"It's nothing much. Let's just say, it's kinda like we made a deal?"

He said it was "nothing", yet the tone of his voice or the way he said it indicated otherwise.

"This friend here, I saw him running around like a headless chicken in the morning, you see? And I thought him working his butt off like that didn't look so nice. So, after I heard his story, I decided to lend him a hand."

"T, Then..."

"He said there's this girl he needs to save and that he needed 82,000 points for that. Cool, so cool! I was so moved that I even asked my family to pitch in to meet that amount!"

"Y, your family?"

Yi Seol-Ah's dumbfounded gaze landed on Seol, but he could only look back at her without saying anything.

What Hao Win said wasn't wrong, technically. It was true that Hao Win went out of his way to help and he really did reveal himself to be an unashamed romantic. Also, one could refer to one's teammates as "family", too.



But because Hao Win had his back to her, she couldn't see his facial expression.

"But, here's the thing, little lady. We aren't running a charity operation, so we reached a proper business agreement. Know what I mean?"

In an instant, the whole room became deathly quiet. Seeing Hao Win cackle like some sort of a cartoon villain in an apparent display of joy certainly got on the nerves of almost everyone present.

"Oh well. For today, celebrate away! But from tomorrow onwards..."

When he intentionally blurred the ends of his sentence, the unsettling atmosphere got heavier.

"In any case, you've got a lot~ of work to do. I'm sure you know very well that you gotta work hard to keep my family safe and sound, yeah?"

That was also true. Delphine's team did want Seol's overwhelming attacking prowess, after all. And it was common sense for a Warrior to take to the frontlines.

"I know. I'll see you tomorrow morning."

"Very good. I'll get outta here now.... Oh, right."

Hao Win turned around to leave, before turning back again to face Yun Seora as if he just remembered something. She wasn't stupid – no, on the contrary, she was incredibly sharp. As if she had sensed what was going on, the seriousness of her expression was clear to see.

"Before I go, I should say my thanks first. Your name's Yun Seora, right? Thanks a bunch."

"...What do you mean?"

Her voice was sharp enough to cut human flesh, but Hao Win simply cackled on.

"All thanks to you, the number one man in the Neutral Zone has landed in my hands!"

Hao Win theatrically mimicked grabbing and fondling motions with his fingers and ominously laughed out.

It was only then that Seol realized something was off, but before he could respond, Hao Win's rough hands violently grabbed his collars.

"A word of advice. Don't even think about running away. If we don't get back our investment here, then we'll get it back in Paradise. If not, then, well, we'll just get it when we're back on Earth."

Just as Seol was about to ask what the heck he was on...

"Well, I've yet to meet a fool who would do that after hearing the name of the Triads..."

Hao Win released Seol's collars, leaned in closer, and winked at him. With a refreshing smile on his face, he strode right past the confused and stunned Seol. Soon enough, the noise of the door closing was heard.

Seol fixed his clothes and let off a soft sigh. Not only was that man noisy, he was also quite indecipherable sometimes, as well.

In any case, today was the day for celebration. Yun Seora needed a few more days of recuperation, but by healing her arm, Seol certainly did wonders for Kim Hannah's reputation. Now that the most difficult task was over, the rest should be comparatively easy as pie.

Conveniently enough, it was now around dinner time. Seol was about to suggest that they should enjoy a feast to celebrate Yun Seora's recovery, but then....

"?"

....He couldn't help but fall into deep confusion.

The complexions of both Yi Seol-Ah and Yi Sungjin were poor. They stood around like a pair of statues, gazing at Seol with eyes rapidly moistening up.

"Actually, I... thought it was strange..."

"Eh?"

"Just how.... You were able to gather so many points in such a short time.... I was so curious...."

Her halting words were wet with emotions.

"All... All because of us..."

As if all strength abandoned her legs, Yi Seol-Ah suddenly plopped down on the floor. And finally, from her reddening eyes, thick teardrops began

pouring out. Now in panic mode, Seol hurriedly waved his hands around in denial.

“No, no!! Wait a minute!! You guys are misunderstanding something!”

“It's a misunderstanding?”

“That's right!”

“But, you had to borrow the points, right?”

“Yeah, but...”

Seol became rather speechless. It was true that he borrowed points. Suddenly, he didn't know where to even begin his explanation. However, as soon as Yi Seol-Ah's elegantly defined facial features began crumbling and soft sniffing noises came from her nose, Seol couldn't help but hurriedly blurt out.

“I didn't borrow a lot. I already took care of the 82,000 points, and they just added a few more so I can get a couple of equipment for myself. I'll be able to make that up through a handful of missions.”

“R, really?”

“Of course.”

“But he said you fell into his hands...”

“He was just messing around. I'm telling you, you don't have to worry. Really.”

“But, what about you meeting up tomorrow morning...?”

“Seriously now, it's nothing to worry about. I've joined his party, that's all. They needed my strength, so we're going to carry out missions together.”

It was at this point where Yi Seol-Ah completely broke down and cried even harder.

He had to use his *body* to get those points – that was how she took it, no matter how hard Seol tried to explain. She made up her mind simply through the actions of Hao Win.

“It's all because of me!”

In Yi Seol-Ah's mind, her orabeo-nim, who was better than anyone else in the Neutral Zone, had fallen to become a mere meat shield all because she spoke up carelessly. The crashing tidal wave of guilt forced even more tears out from her eyes.

Since Seol had no idea what she was thinking, he tilted his head in confusion. The whole thing was like a lightning striking him out of the blue.

“Why?!”

The more he tried to pacify her, telling her that everything was okay, the more she seemed to cry.

“Yi, Yi Sungjin...?”

Seol shifted his gaze over to Yi Sungjin, wanting to egg him to do something about his sister. However, Yi Sungjin wasn't much different.

With his head was lowered, he had his fists clenched tightly while shaking in rage.

“What's the matter with him?”

Seol's neck creaked noisily like a rusted machine as he turned his head around.

Yun Seora was in the middle of wordlessly staring at Seol. When their gazes met, she flinched grandly and hurriedly avoided him and then began glaring at the poor bed sheets.

It was the first time Seol saw such a display of raw emotion from a girl who always seemed taciturn and disinterested from the short time he had known her.

However, he felt a sense of *deja vu* when even Yun Seora began biting her lower lip.

“Sob...”

Yun Seora couldn't hold back anymore, and she too began crying. She covered her face with those thin pair of hands, and her shoulders began quivering ever so gently.

"I'm... I'm sorry..."

She quietly sobbed, and after seeing her like that, Seol could only glare at the ceiling in helplessness.

"That guy, really..."

On a day well-suited for celebration, the whole room became a sea of wails, instead.

On the other hand, as the multiple choruses of crying escaped from the room, Hao Win let off a long smoke out from his lips as he leaned against the door, his arms across his chest. Now that his work was done, he flung the dying butt of the cigarette away and moved on.

The expression on his face as he climbed down the stairs was one of satisfaction.

He sniffed and wiped his nose once while slowly nodding his head.

"Yup, humans are emotional animals."

\*\*

The following morning,

Unable to win against the sorrowful atmosphere of his room, Seol made his escape at early dawn. He decided to get his gear ready in time for the meeting later in the morning.

"Let's see.... The remaining points are...."

....14,780 points, although he gave 600 away for his guests and their meals for the day, so now, 14,180 remained. Yi Seol-Ah completely refused to take the points, but when he used Yun Seora's recuperation as the excuse, she took them with thick tears in her eyes.

"What should I buy?"

Normally, the pricing of defensive equipment started from around 1000 points. Since they were designed to keep you alive for as long as possible, they were naturally quite expensive.

After entering the store, Seol looked around hesitantly before an Asian maid discovered him and trotted to his position. She was a cute girl with braided hair.

"Hello there~! What brings you here today?"

"I came to buy defensive gear."

"Hm~." The maid swept her gaze over Seol and nodded her head.

"What is your allotted budget?"

"It's around 14,000 points...."

"Since you're a Gold Mark, you get a 30% discount! So, we can budget you for around 20,000 points, yes?"

"She knows who I am?"

Seol stared blankly for a bit before asking her.

"By any chance, do I also get the first-place discount as well?"

The maid smiled refreshingly.

"Why? Do you want the ownership of the Neutral Zone too?"

Of course, Seol knew that the additional discount of 70% only applied to regular facilities. He still had to ask though, just in case.

"If it's fine with you, may I act as your coordinator?"

Although Seol didn't mind looking around, there was no time. He was originally planning to come here last night, but all thanks to Hao Win causing mayhem, he had to suffer the consequences the whole night. He even failed to calm them down.

"Please."

"Roger, roger! And what type of armor are you looking for?"

“Uh... For the whole body?”

“I see that your class is Warrior. So, do you focus on mobility or defense?”

“I guess, uh, mobility? Wait, I think defense is also important.”

“Yes, yes~. And your weapon is a spear?”

“Yes.”

“You aren't planning to change it?”

“Nope.”

He wasn't thinking of changing a weapon when he'd just about gotten used to it. Besides, his budget was already too tight, anyways.

“Roger that! I'm your coordinator, Aragaki Yuzuha!! Ikimaaaaasu!”

The maid suddenly raised her arm up high and ran deeper inside the store. Which left Seol with a slight sense of panic.

While the rustling noises of her searching for stuff resounded out from the back, Seol leisurely browsed through the available items on the list provided.

The names of the items appearing on the store's list were pretty simple. For instance, the spear Seol bought from the store for 580 points was named the 'Sharp and Sturdy Spear'. Although it featured no special attributes, Seol found its simplicity rather pleasing, and more importantly, its length nearly matched his own height – which he preferred – so he bought it right away.

“Here I am!”

The maid, Aragaki Yuzuha, brought along several articles, carried on both of her hands.

The first item to be shown off was an armor coloured in a deep brown hue.

“This here is the boiled leather armor. It's the best one available here among the leather armors. After bringing the oil containing paraffin into a boil, you repeatedly dip the leather in there for a few hours and then take it out. That makes the leather super strong! Touch it and see for yourself.”

Seol touched the shoulder pad, and sure enough, not only was it stiff, it also felt reassuringly solid as well. He put a lot of strength on his fingers, but he still failed to bend the armor out of shape.

“That's why, it offers great resistance against cutting attacks, but that still doesn't mean it's omnipotent, you know? If you receive an impact that the armor can't handle, it'll simply break apart, unable to disperse the force behind the attack, you see? So, you gotta be especially careful about attacks from blunt weapons!”

And then, she went, That is why!!, and presented the next thing in her hand. It was also an armor, formed from small and roundish metal rings interlocking with one another. However, to call it an actual armor, it seemed a bit too small.

“I strongly recommend that you put this on under the leather armor.”

“Is this the so-called chain mail?”

“Wee~ll, it's a wee bit, you know, small to call it a proper chain mail, but you can think of it as the miniaturized version. It's lighter than normal because it's been designed for Magicians and Priests to wear under their robes, but still, its defensive capability is excellent. Even if your luck's bad and the boiled leather armor gets broken, this little guy can save your life.”

Doubling the layers of armor – Seol thought that wouldn't be such a bad idea, and so, he asked.

“How much for both?”

“The boiled leather armor is 5,700 points, while this is 6,900. Ah, that's the discounted price.”

“...The latter's more expensive?”

“Of course! That's leather and this one's metal, after all!”

“Mm”

“And then~.”

Thanks to Yuzuha's rather excellent salesman skills, Seol ended up also buying leather protectors for his arms and shins, as well as leather gloves and long boots adorned with cleats.

“And~ the total is 13,980 points, dear customer!”

Seol didn't say anything else and duly handed over the points; Yuzuha seemed to be very happy about that.

“♥ Kimochi~!”

“....”

The mini chainmail barely covered him from his shoulders to just below his navel. The boiled leather armor could be worn like a T-shirt, so putting it on wasn't very difficult. While he squatted down to replace his shoes with the leather long boots, Yuzuha busied herself by checking out his spear, before her eyes began narrowing to a slit.

'...I don't have any points left, though...'

“Are you properly maintaining your spear?”

“...Maintaining?”

“Yes. I can see that the blade edges have become quite dull. Have you sharpened it ever since the day of purchase?”

“Do I really need to do that?”

After hearing his reply, Yuzuha formed an expression of total disbelief and asked back.

“Do I really need to keep breathing?”

“...I guess I understand what you're trying to say.”

In the end, he had to spend another 20 points to buy a whetstone and a towel. All 14,000 points got sucked out from him in a blink.

“Thank you very much~! We still have Named weapons available, so please, pay us a visit again after earning lot~s of points! Okay~?”

Leaving behind Yuzuha's words, Seol went down the stairs to the first floor. His body felt a bit hefty now, but at the same time, he was feeling a bit excited as well.

Buying equipment for himself indeed was a long time coming thing. Finally shedding the clothes he'd been wearing from Earth and kitting himself in the proper armor, his heart was stirring restlessly.

'I'll earn lots more points and make sure the kids get suited up properly, too.'

Even before he'd noticed it, he was treating the Yi siblings and Yun Seora as kids he was looking after.

Seol found a quiet spot for himself on the first floor, and with a clumsy hand, began polishing the blade edges of the spear, while waiting for the arrival of his new party members.

\*

[Ambush (Remaining number of attempts: 10/10)]

Ambush and annihilate the group of Bugaboos walking past the mountain road!

Difficulty: Very Hard

When successful: +10,000 Survival Points

When unsuccessful: Death

\*Cooperation possible (up to 6 people)

\*

Seol hid in the thicket over a small hill and stared at the mountainous trail not too far from him. There was a group of the so-called Bugaboos busy walking on the narrow path located between two hills. Even at a casual glance, there seemed to be at least over thirty of them.

A Bugaboo was an exceptionally furry monster that had a roughly human-like body but with a head of a bear. It was around 150 cm tall, but its entire body was made up of rippling muscles, so it was certainly not something one could take lightly.

Seeing their sharply-jutting out fangs and the scary claws on their hands and feet, even Seol tensed up.

'Also, why are they carrying so many weapons?'

Not only such things as swords, shields, and spears, he could see blunt weapons and bows and arrows, which he hadn't seen in a mission until now.

Most eye-catching, though, was this two-meter tall Bugaboo walking in the middle of the group. It carried a huge mace in one hand, and Seol judged it to be the leader of this group.

'Good thing I didn't try the mission alone.'

The thing about the difficulty spiking up incredibly high during the 'Very Hard' ranked missions was indeed true. He could now understand why the mission was called 'Ambush', as well. If he or his group were to clash head on with these creatures, they wouldn't even last five minutes.

Finally, the group of Bugaboos was walking past below the hill Seol was hiding in.

'Not yet.'

Right then, the once-quiet mountainside was filled with a powerful gust of wind. The stormy winds formed at the end of the narrow path and began to violently overturn everything as they rushed past, eventually pouncing on top of the Bugaboo monsters. This was, of course, all due to Delphine's magic.

*Guak*  
*Grrrr, Grrrrrr*

The leader Bugaboo stumbled unsteadily, before falling on its butt with a loud thud. It was the same situation for the other monsters. They all fell and rolled around the ground, their ranks completely collapsing.

As the wind slowly died down, Seol grasped his spear tightly. The leather of the glove seemed to glue to the spear shaft. He crouched and placed strength on his ankles, getting ready to pounce at a moment's notice.

Not too long thereafter, a sharp whistling noise came from the hill on the other side. A Bugaboo, while trying to get back up, screamed in a shrill voice with an arrow stuck to its neck. Leorda Salvatore and Tong Chai, the two archers, began sniping the Bugaboos at the rear that carried bows.

The majority of the monsters hadn't gotten back up yet. But those that did regain awareness of the situation turned their heads to look at the direction of the hill where the arrows were coming from. Hell, three were already up and running towards that direction.

It was right here that Seol raised his body up. He rushed down the hill like a streak of lightning and stabbed the head of a Bugaboo trying to get up. He pulled his spear out before the dead monster's face greeted the ground, then in the blink of an eye, stabbed to his side, and caused a bloody hole to appear on the temple of another Bugaboo still regaining its balance.

Confirming that his attacks worked, Seol relentlessly used his spear. His role was to reduce the monsters' numbers as much as possible while their attention was robbed by Delphine's magic and the arrows from the two archers.

After sending six, seven monsters to hell literally in the blink of an eye, Seol quickly retreated. The Bugaboos finally realized that there was another enemy to their backs and tried to pounce on his position with their weapons.

From here onwards, a proper battle unfolded.

Seol deflected away the incoming blade with 'Strike' and rapidly attacked with 'Thrust', causing yet another monster to fly away while spewing blood. And as he went with 'Cut' to his side...

*Clang!*

With a loud metallic clang, his spear was blocked. A Bugaboo had raised its shield in time and managed to block him.

Unlike the undead skeletons, these Bugaboos did not stupidly try to rush in front. No, they spread to either side of him and tried to surround him.

*Clang!*

When his spear clashed with the axe of the monster, Seol's eyes widened in surprise. Not only the power behind the axe swing surprisingly great, even before he could counterattack, blades and spears of other monsters were already closing in on his position. When he managed to pull back and avoided getting hit, an axe came flying at him as if it was waiting for him to move.

And so, instead of attacking, Seol gradually got mired deeper into a defensive battle. Surrounded by six aggressive monsters and their weapons, he had no choice but to constantly be on the backfoot.

It wasn't only that, though – as he wholeheartedly concentrated on defending against the monsters' weapons, he flinched and came to an abrupt halt when an impact landed on his chest.

An arrow couldn't penetrate his armor and bounced away. A Bugaboo holding a bow was taking aim at Seol and was pulling at the string.

It was then.

*Swish, swish!!*

Accompanying the clear sounds of air being parted, two monsters running up the hill screamed out. Arrows penetrated the back and the thigh of those monsters. Leorda began lending his aid just as Seol found himself in a spot of bother.

'But, they also have archers...!'

Soon enough, Seol's eyes became wider still. From behind the archer's back, a pair of bronzed hands suddenly appeared and wrapped around the monster's neck like snakes, then a dagger sliced its neck open. As the dead Bugaboo collapsed, the sight of Tong Chai wielding the bloodied dagger was revealed.

It was like transferring aggro to and fro. When their rear became noisy, the monsters chasing after Seol had to stop and hesitate. On top of this, the arrows continuously flying in were enough to delay the Bugaboos, even if it was only for a second. Some of the arrows even managed to land in the monsters' weak spots and disabled them from continuing on.

Now that Leorda was helping out, while Tong Chai cut the number of enemy archers down, Seol stopped retreating up the hill, changed his grip on the spear shaft, and reverted from defending to attacking.

He rapidly took care of the blindly rushing pair of monsters with 'Thrust' and 'Strike', then went to town with the ones looking back in confusion. By the time he got back to the bottom of the hill, he managed to further kill two.

*Guaaaak!*

It was at this point in time that the leader Bugaboo stopped observing in silence and stepped forward. It took aim at Seol, loudly roared out in anger, and raised its massive mace up high into the sky. It was understandably pissed off, seeing that over half of its subordinates were cut down in no time at all.

'Should I dodge this?'

Even if it was Seol, he had no confidence in completely defending against this attack.

The monster's mace descended violently enough to blow away the dust on the ground. In the following moments, just as Seol prepared to retreat, a dark shadow leapt in front of him.

*Boom!*

A thunderous metallic noise exploded out.

“Puhup!”

Hao Win wielding a large steel shield gritted his teeth as his feet slid on the ground. Seol quickly propped him up and opened his mouth.

“I was going to dodge that.”

“And I'm trying to block it for you!”

Hao Win shoved the mace away with his shield and retreated with Seol in tow.

“That damn Priest is always slow with his spells, you see.”

Seol wondered what Hao Win was on about, but then, a semi-circular barrier with them in the center suddenly materialized. The leader Bugaboo powerfully slammed its mace on this barrier, but other than it trembling violently for a bit, nothing else happened.

“Oh, well. His mana must be pretty high since the barrier is useful and all.”

“Didn't a few monsters go over to that side?”

“I took care of them. But thanks to that, I kinda got held up before coming here to help you.”

The leader Bugaboo and its ten-plus underlings surrounded the semi-transparent barrier. It was unknown how long this magical defense would last, so they needed to do something about it. However, Hao Win seemed to be rather relaxed.

“In any case, aren't you really amazing? How many did you take care of by yourself? Fourteen? Fifteen?”

“It's fourteen. Aren't we in the middle of a battle?”

“No need to sweat it. It's about time Joker makes her entrance.”

Hao Win pointed at the other hill. Seol could just about catch the glimpse of Odelette Delphine, currently decked out in a blue robe. She also happened to be aiming her wooden staff at the leader Bugaboo.

“Avar – Ava – Avaritia.”

Seol heard a loud buzzing noise. And at the same time, a sizzling ball of flames struck the head of the leader Bugaboo.

*Guaaaaaaak!*

*Crackle.* The flames caught on the monster's fur and spread out quite rapidly. The leader dropped the mace to the ground, covered its face, and began rolling around on the ground like a madman.

"Take care of that big guy! We'll take care of the rest of the small fries!"

The protective barrier was still in place. Staying behind in the safe space, Seol began wildly stabbing the leader Bugaboo that was rolling around in pain. By the time the barrier became visibly thinner, there were several dozen bloody holes on the monster's body.

There were other monsters still left, but their ranks had been broken into disorder a long time ago. Leorda continuously shot arrows with his bow, while Tong Chai went around silently with his dagger; Hao Win, too, was concentrating on relentlessly attacking his enemies as well.

For Seol, this first cooperative battle proved to be...

'...Easy.'

It might have been a bit tough in the beginning while trying to aggro the monsters, but by enduring, things got progressively easier as time passed by. If he were alone, he would have never been able to clear this mission, no matter how hard he tried. Also, he thought that, if the composition of the team was off by just a little, this mission would've been a lot harder. This battle proved to him why a Magician was valued so highly.

"You all worked hard!"

Right after the last creature fell, Delphine raised her hand from the hill over yonder and called out.

"A Magician is really something else, isn't it?"

When Seol spoke in an admiring tone, Delphine stopped jumping up and down in delight and tilted her head to the side. From her perspective, all she did was to cast two spells while receiving absolute protection. And she couldn't help but feel that he was being sarcastic, since he had not only blocked the combined attacks of the monster group, but also managed to eliminate almost half of them, too.

However, she became slightly abashed soon after realizing that Seol was being sincere.

"Since you Warriors protected me, things were definitely easier."

Delphine humbly replied.

"So? How was it?"

Hao Win shook the blood off his sword and excitedly asked.

"Playing with a team ain't bad, right?"

Seol smiled in reply.

[You've successfully completed a 'Very Hard' difficulty mission!]

[1,667 Survival Points have been accredited to you.]

[Current SP: 1,847]

## Chapter 34

After entering Odelette Delphine's team, Seol's daily life had entered what one might call a period of stability. No, perhaps he should say it was on the right track.

In any case, he managed to pay off his debt in just two days. Clearing the 'Ambush' mission once paid out 1,667 SP, so by clearing it ten times, he was able to pay back the 15,000 points and still have lots left over. Even after all that, there were still five 'Very Hard' missions left to go.

What the team tried their hands next was a mission called 'Arrive at the destination within a soundless environment', and it gave out 20,000 points as reward. Clearing it just once netted Seol 3,334 points.

Now that the debt had been paid off, Seol was able to get lost in the fun of cooperative battles as well as the joy of amassing a lot of Survival Points, without a single worry.

Yun Seora's recovery was just as trouble-free. Like what Maria said earlier, simply by eating well and resting well, and with the added effect of Seol's quarters, her physical fitness level returned to normal in no time at all.

The only thing was that Seol couldn't help but notice her being uncomfortable around him.

Once, he returned to his room to find it cleaned spotless. The shelves were all neatly arranged, mirrors shone and reflected light brilliantly, and the



toilet sparkled blindingly too.

Seol dazedly looked around, only to spot Yun Seora sweating profusely while mopping the floor on all fours. Of course, he was quite shocked by this sight. Not only could he not figure out why she was cleaning the place, but she was also in the middle of her recovery too.

He hurriedly ran up to her and snatched the mop away and asked her what on earth she was doing instead of resting. She only lowered her head in silence as her reply.

On another occasion, he returned after clearing a mission only to find Yun Seora missing from his room. And on top of the bed, he spotted four neatly-folded papers.

The contents of those letters started off with the expression of her gratitude as well as her apology for causing him so much trouble; they were so profoundly heartfelt and touching, he almost cried reading them. And the passage about the “debt being hers and hers alone, so she needs to pay it off herself” sounded especially grimly resolute.

Thinking to himself, ‘She wouldn’t’, Seol went out to look for her and ended up nearly falling over in fright after finding her bravely stalking towards Hao Win on the first floor. He then had to go through the event of picking up and carrying away the struggling Yun Seora.

It wasn’t only that though. Just taking care of Yun Seora alone was already headache-inducing, yet the Yi siblings went around causing problems as well. Seol found them loitering around in front of the noticeboard, apparently hoping to pay off the debt by themselves, so Seol had to bring them back with force, too.

‘This can’t go on.’

Seeing that Yun Seora’s condition had recovered fully, Seol thought that he should move on to the next step. No, he had no choice but to do that.

Seol only said he wanted to have a chat with them, yet the siblings were kneeling on the ground right in front of him. Yun Seora, who had been cautiously reading the mood from the side until then, also silently bent her knees and got down, too.

He told them to sit more comfortably, but they didn’t budge. Judging from the way they continued to stare at the floor, they must’ve understood what they had done wrong. Seol spat out a lengthy groan.

“Just what were you thinking?”

“B, but...”

“But?”

“That man, Hao Win...”

“I told you, he’s a good person. He’s friendly, and... No, wait. Fine. Let’s hear it. What about Mister Hao Win? Did he say something else to you?”

Yi Seol-Ah mumbled helplessly.

“I... overheard... by chance...”

“Okay, heard what exactly?”

“That, well, he is a... He’s really a gang member from Hong Kong’s Triads. That’s the biggest Chinese underground organization...”

If there was one thing Seol came to realize about himself recently, it was that he seemed to have developed a strange habit of glaring at the ceiling when something dismayed him or caused a sense of dumbfoundedness.

So, he stared at the ceiling of his room for a while, before shoving a cigarette between his lips.

“Yeah, sure. He’s a Triads boss. Right.”

He more or less understood where the Yi girl was coming from. He too had a preconceived notion about Agnes and Hao Win when he initially heard of their affiliations. Most likely, they were really terrifying people. But, at least judging from what Seol knew, Hao Win was a man with a pleasingly outgoing personality.

“Okay, let’s say he is. So what?”

“H, Hyung, we...”

“I know. I know that you want to help out somehow. It’s a commendable idea, but I’m asking you again. What were you even thinking, looking at the noticeboard like that? Don’t you know that all the missions up to ‘Slightly Easy’ difficulty have been exhausted?”

They couldn’t reply. They couldn’t say anything even if they had ten mouths.

"Is it because of the debt? I've already taken care of that. No, I'm in the middle of amassing points at the moment. The reason I'm still doing missions with them is that I also need their strength. I can never clear 'Very Hard' missions by myself."

"..."

"If you really want to help, then become stronger. Haven't you realized that you guys doing whatever you want is actually making my life really difficult instead?"

"..."

"You guys have no armor, no weapon. Your classes aren't even in high demand. You literally have nothing, yet you want to tackle missions? You think 'Normal' difficulty missions are a cakewalk?"

"We're sorry..."

Yi Seol-Ah whimpered out an apology in a really tiny voice. It was her first time seeing Orabeo-nim get so angry at them. Rather than feeling unhappy after receiving his scolding, she could only remain apologetic here, though. She very well knew that his anger stemmed from him being worried about her and her brother losing their lives.

Seeing their dispirited looks, Seol's anger cooled down a tad. If it were any other time, they might have raised a huge fuss, saying stuff about doing everything they can to show their gratitude and all...

'No, hang on.'

Even then, a wrong deed was still a wrong deed.

"...Listen to me. I borrowed 15,000 points in total. That was for me to buy the necessary equipment so I could attempt clearing the Very Hard missions along with that man's team. In other words, I too have received help from Mister Hao Win."

"Yes..."

"So, this is what's going to happen to you three. I'll lend my points to you. I'll train you too."

"?"

"I'm telling you to become stronger."

If they wanted to help him, they needed to become stronger, without a doubt. Flipping that around, he was telling them that they were too weak to be of any help right now.

"You all understand that you've fallen far behind everyone else even if you start right away, right?"

All three nodded their heads in sync.

"There's no need to get depressed, though. Depending on what you do during the remaining time period, you can catch up to the rest, or even surpass them."

"R, really?"

"Only if you do as I say."

He wasn't making an empty claim. It was an undeniable fact that Yun Seora and the Yi siblings were far behind everyone else. Even after receiving their classes, nothing had changed from the day they entered the Neutral Zone. To be more specific, they lacked the necessary points, so they couldn't buy anything, including abilities.

However, Seol found that to be their advantage, instead.

Agnes once told him, 'I do not recommend buying Applications from the stores.'

There was an old saying, a dangerous situation could also become one's opportunity.

"You all know about the effects of this room, right?"

"Yes, it's a room only given to the first place ranker..."

"Right. Take these."

Seol placed three vials in front of the kneeling trio. Yi Seol-Ah's eyes widened instantly.

They were bottles of Competence.

They also happened to be the most expensive potions available in the regular stores. Not as good as the VIP store's special Competence, they nevertheless still boasted four times the effect on any training done.

"It's not going to be easy."

Seol told them in no uncertain tone.

"You will have to train really, really hard. I will help out, obviously, but once we start, it'll be very harsh. ... It's the same for you too, Miss Yun Seora."

Seol stopped looking at the siblings and shifted his gaze over to Yun Seora as he spoke. She froze mid-action of trying to open the stopper off the vial.

"Will it really be alright?"

She sounded much more determined than before.

"There is something I realized after entering a party."

Seol replied.

"There are a lot of amazing people to be found inside the Neutral Zone."

Simple determination would never be adequate in this place.

"Mister Tong Chai, Leorda Salvatore, Odelette Delphine, Hao Win. ... Also, Mister Hao Win came here after years of preparation on Earth."

Seol did not want an answer that was neither here nor there.

"While you, Miss Yun Seora, couldn't do anything for the past two months, these talented people poured in their best efforts to become stronger."

If she were to do this, she needed to do this properly. If not, she might as well give up now.

That was what Seol was implying.

"Honestly. ..."

Yun Seora's voice was small as she spoke.

"I have no confidence in surpassing them as I am right now."

But, for the first time ever, the woman who remained ever so quiet until now, so much so that her presence sometimes couldn't even be sensed. ...

"But, even if it's late, I want to catch up to them."

...revealed what was on her mind.

"I want to become stronger."

She revealed her simple wish.

That was all he needed.

Yun Seora unhesitatingly drank the vial. Same for Yi Seol-Ah and her brother, Yi Sungjin.

Seol watched the Yi girl's cheeks puff up before she swallowed the liquid down her throat. A sly grin emerged on his lips.

"You just entered the ranks of doped athletes, you know that?"

"P, please don't say that. ..."

Yi Seol-Ah blushed deeply.

Seol got up from his spot. The effects of Competence would only last for 12 hours. Even a minute, a second, was too precious to waste.

Seol activated 'Nine Eyes' and spoke up.

"Yi Sungjin, you need to raise your fitness level first. Go down to the first floor, and find the 'Running No. 4' mission among the Basic difficulty. Start doing that until you collapse."

"U, until I collapse?!"

"There's no helping it. There isn't enough time left, until you have to start doing the real missions, you know. When you're finished, come to the third floor gym."

"Yes. I will!"

Yi Sungjin hurriedly ran out of the room. Seol took the remaining two women and, before heading to the third-floor gym himself, sought out a certain maid.

"Training, you say?"

Agnes tilted her head slightly.

"Hmm, I wonder. You'll still be behind everyone even if you start doing the missions now..."

Hearing her rather unconvinced tone of voice, Seol quickly added his own.

"They haven't bought any abilities from the stores. I believe they still have a chance."

"Not buying from the store through choice and being unable to buy because of the circumstances are not the same."

"I'm going to help them as well. They will continue to stay in my quarters, and I will make them use the same items that aid in the natural recovery that I've used."

"Mm"

"I'll also make them drink two bottles of the regular Competence a day. I will also provide them with the necessary points to buy their equipment. Will it be still impossible?"

"If you're willing to do that much, then the story certainly changes a great deal."

Finally, Agnes seemed to show a positive reaction.

"Will you help us out?"

"I might be able to, but..."

Agnes cocked an eyebrow and swept her penetrating gaze over the two women.

"Have you fully explained my training methods to them yet?"

"Of course."

"In that case, I understand. Since it's your personal request, I shall do my utmost best. However, if they decide to give up halfway, I shall not stop them."

Agnes's role within the Neutral Zone was a trainer, an instructor. If someone wanted to train under her, she wasn't going to refuse outright. It's just that, no one wanted to in the first place....

Seol paid for the usage of the gym and gathered his hands while watching the two girls follow in after Agnes. He was praying for their happiness in the afterlife.

Well, Agnes was known as the Sicilia's demonic instructor, after all.

\*

The merciless training regime commenced.

On the first day, both Yi Seol-Ah and Yi Sungjin broke down and cried.

The maid named Agnes whipped them and pushed them hard like a devil.

Even Yun Seora had to shed a small tear.

However, although she cried a little because of the toughness of the training, the biggest reason had to do with the sheer joy of it all.

It was tough, but she also enjoyed it. It was as if she was finally doing something meaningful – as if, things were finally, finally clicking into gear.

As she had already experienced nearly falling into pits of hell, she was indescribably happy from the joy a fulfilling day provided her with. It was as if she was living in a dream every day.

And so, such dream-like days began changing her little by little, day after day.

[The personality trait, 'Cool-headed', has been created.]

She regained her lost personality, and...

[The personality trait, 'Despair', has been removed.]

...Not only that, her desire to give up disappeared. Also...

[The personality trait, 'Indifferent', has been removed.]

...Also, she developed an interest in someone.

“...”

Late at night, while everyone else was asleep.

After returning from another day's arduous training, Yun Seora lay on the bed but her eyes remained wide open and blinking nonstop.

Although her body was fatigued, sleep wasn't forthcoming.

Like a habit, she sneaked a glance at a certain someone. And she stared at the youth lying on the floor to sleep silently and continuously.

He was the guy who never forgot to give her the Competence in the mornings and the afternoons.

He was the guy who brought along a few items and said that they would help with strengthening her body's natural recovery rate.

He was the guy who never forgot to encourage her, saying that they would go and do the missions together as soon as she finished the training.

Although it was hard to understand why he sometimes slyly suggested that she should utter the words 'teddy bear' to Agnes, but regardless, he was....

'Someone I'm grateful to.'

Thanks to his generosity, she could rest in his quarters where even a short period of break would wash away all the fatigue.

On top of that, she didn't have to worry about starving ever again, getting to fill her tummy with delicious food, instead.

From a certain point on, she began accepting his gestures of goodwill. The uncomfortable awkwardness gradually disappeared, and at the same time, the sense of gratitude grew larger and larger.

However....

'Why is he helping us?'

That was the last unanswered question burning a hole in her head.

Was it because he pitied them? Or did he sympathize with them?

Or, could it be....

'Because he's interested in me....?'

It was then, an unknown type of bashfulness assaulted her in full. No matter how hard she reasoned, it didn't make sense. She began chewing on her lower lip. Shaking her head while inwardly crying out, 'I don't know anymore!' was just an added bonus.

'....Seol-nim'

Again, she began staring at the youth. Staring at one thing continuously might've been boring for some, but she never once took her eyes off him.

Eventually, she did close her eyes as the dawn approached, but her consciousness still refused the embrace of sleep.

....No, that wasn't strictly correct.

In reality, she was afraid of falling asleep.

She was afraid of waking back up on the fifth floor.

She was afraid of waking up and finding those three foreigners.

Whenever that happened, she desperately tried to recall a certain moment from that day.

“...Are you alright?”

She recalled the hand of Seol outstretched towards her.

She recalled that short memory deeply imprinted in her brain.

If she concentrated on that moment, before noticing it, she'd fall into a deep slumber. Usually, that had been the case.

'...This is a big problem.'

But, for some reason, she couldn't fall asleep tonight, no matter what. She tossed and turned on the bed for a little while longer, before eventually deciding to get up.

Ever so carefully, she took each step so others wouldn't wake up. Soon, she stood before the deeply snoozing Seol and gazed at him. A strange glint flashed by her eyes as she slowly directed her gaze lower down from his face.

'His hand.'

As soon as Yun Seora discovered his right hand, she lowered herself as if she was in trance. She then got down to the floor on all fours. She crawled like that to her new destination.

Just before she collided with his hand, she stopped. She closed her eyes and cautiously placed her nose against his palm.

*Sniff.*

A small noise leaked out as she took a sniff, and sure enough, she detected his scent. The scent coming from his hand.

*Sniff, sniff.*

Now that she got going, she ended up sniffing for the second and the third time.

She realized that she shouldn't be doing this. Yet, like an addict, she couldn't stop.

For Yun Seora, who could fall asleep only by recalling the events of that day for the past few nights, this was one temptation she could not win against.

'It's nice. Nice....'

Seeing that the youth showed no signs of waking up, her actions became even bolder.

She placed her head on his palm and slowly moved it this way and that, then she even rubbed her cheek against his skin. His palm was large enough to hide her smallish face.

'It's... warm....'

Sensing the comfort and security his large hand gave her, Yun Seora's eyes eventually grew heavy. Not too long after, a soft but regular breathing pattern emerged from her nose.

That night....

Seol had a dream.

\*

'...A dream?'

*Is this one of those lucid dreams, I wonder?* Seol mused inwardly as he surveyed his new surroundings.

The scenery of his dream was quite breathtaking. He saw a beautiful small hill covered in a refreshing green hue and several different animals playing on it.

There was a bear, sitting on top of the hill and enjoying the gentle breeze; a squirrel darting through the branches of a tree; a deer drinking water from a stream...

While he spectated this scene, Seol's eyes landed on a particular animal that attracted his attention the most.

'Oh?'

It was a pig. Not only that, a small and very pink piglet, its body so plump and adorably cute.

'It's really small... Is it a newly born?'

Seol found the way it slept while leaning against the grass incredibly cute, so he cautiously approached it. He wanted to take a closer look.

*Zzz... zzzz...*

Seeing it breathing out so softly like that, his entire body quivered in emotions.

In the end, he couldn't control himself any longer and gently poked the pinkish and squidgy body of the piglet with his index finger.

-!!

The piglet's eyes shot open abruptly, and it hurriedly got back up to stare at Seol.

*Kyu?*

'TOO CUTE!'

Seol screamed inwardly. When he slowly sat down on the ground, the piglet began retreating while carrying a scared, tearful expression.

'Nonono, come here, here. I'm not gonna hurt you.'

Seol presented his right hand, causing the animal to lightly flinch and stop retreating away from him. Then, the piglet stared at his open palm.

'Come here...'

The piglet hesitated, before trotting closer to his position.

'There, there.'

Seeing the animal lightly brush his palm with the flat of its nose, a grin automatically formed on his lips. When he carefully brushed its back, the piglet's small tail began wagging, too.

'Should just I keep it?'

Just as Seol was sincerely considering this, he noticed that something had changed.

'Gold color?'

The piglet's pinkish hue of before had been replaced by a blinding gold color, instead.

*Kyu!*

The piglet, while emitting the brilliant golden light from its body, raised one of its front paws at him – as if it was asking him to hug the creature.

'Oh, oh, oh!!'

Seol, of course, hurriedly picked it up and hugged it. Yet it remained docile. He couldn't hide his joy.

Well, there was that old saying, wasn't there – that, among all types of dreams, ones with pigs were the best out there? And even more so, since the little piggy was gold, this dream must've been a really good one.

'It's mine.'

Seol smiled in satisfaction and tightly embraced the piglet squirming and digging in deeper into his arms.

'I'll never let go.'

## Chapter 35

When Seol opened his eyes early in the morning, he fell into a state of panic.

He got to experience a thoroughly wonderful dream, yet ended up being roused from sleep by something slightly weighty pressing down on his chest. By the time he spotted Yun Seora sleeping soundly within his arms, a short cry of fright escaped from his mouth.

'How can a girl do this when we've done nothing but talk a few times?!'

His thoughts bubbled up chaotically, but then he realized that his own arms were hugging her tightly as well. For some reason... he thought her body felt rather comfortably warm.

“Argh...”

When he tried to forcibly pry her off of him, Yun Seora simply...

“Mmm....”

....Dug in even deeper into his arms and buried her head in his chest.

'There, there, little one. Daddy's here, so don't you worry about a thing.... Eh?'

Seol belatedly realized that he'd been patting her back and hastily removed his hand.

‘What am I even doing?!’ Seol dazedly looked down at the smiling face of Yun Seora as she rubbed her cheeks against him.

'....Could this be because of her unruly sleeping habits?'

Even though he was panicking inwardly, he still managed to lift her up ever so gently and carried her back to the bed. When he placed the duvet on her, he spotted Yi Seol-Ah lying alongside on the bed. The teen girl's limbs were spreadeagled as she enjoyed the sweetness of a deep, deep slumber. Only then did Seol figure out what happened here.

'Ah. So she was forced off the bed all thanks to Yi Seol-Ah's terrible sleeping habits, huh.'

Yi Seol-Ah must have kicked around a lot since her top was bunched up enough to expose most of her tummy. Seol chuckled softly, lowered her shirt, and covered her with the blanket as well. Seeing her giggle as she continued to slumber away, she must've been having a nice dream.

'I guess I should sleep a little further away from them tonight.'

Although it was an unintentional mistake, he still did something he shouldn't have. If Yoo Seonhwa found out what happened, just how saddened would she be?

“...Tsk.”

Almost immediately, he realized how wrong he was regarding that matter. Their relationship was already over a long time ago. It was only Seol who couldn't let go and forget about her.

‘I wonder if Seonhwa’s doing well...’

As Seol headed to the adjoining bathroom, his shoulders began slumping forward, feeling slightly depressed.

On the following dawn....

“....”

Seol woke up, only to be utterly dismayed by his new discovery.

He thought his chest felt heavy and opened his eyes, and sure enough, he found Yun Seora hugging him from the top. He couldn't help but wonder how she could have gotten here since he was sleeping a fair distance away from the bed.

More importantly, he was sleeping on a couch. So, if she was forced off the bed and rolled on the floor to arrive where he was, it was still impossible to climb up and settle down on top of him.

'....Is she sleepwalking?!'

Suddenly growing fearful of Yun Seora, Seol slowly wiggled out from her embrace and got away from her.

'I have to find a safer place to sleep later on today....'

And so, Seol made up his mind as such.

When bedtime came later that day, Seol headed off to the bathroom. Since his room was already an excellent place to begin with, even the bathroom was spacious and more than comfortable enough to sleep in. Most importantly, there was a lock on the glass door, so as long as he locked it, no one could come in.

Next morning.

Seol was finally able to start the day as how it should be. Locking the door must have done the trick since Yun Seora was not sleeping on top of him this time.

'I should start sleeping here from today onwards.'

Well, it didn't really matter if he was in a bathroom. It was so big and clean, anyways. Also, as an added bonus, he could splash some water and wash his face as soon as waking up, too.

While grinning widely, Seol raised his body. He relaxedly stretched his limbs, and his gaze drifted towards the glass panel of the bathroom door.



“@/%#\$?!”

....And he ended up grandly crying out in fright.

“Wha, what, what the, what the hell?!”

Because, Yun Seora was glaring at Seol while sticking to the glass like a piece of gum. With her eyes completely bloodshot, to boot.

Two weeks flew by as if it was nothing after the training commenced.

“We’ll take a ten-minute break.”

As soon as Agnes gave out her permission, several noises of people falling on their butts resounded out within the third-floor gym. While looking at Yi Seol-Ah massaging her aching thighs, the maid-cum-instructor fell into deep thought, stroking her chin in the process.

'She's better than I expected.'

At first, Agnes thought of this assignment as a nice little diversion to while away some free time, but gradually, her opinion changed.

Yi Seol-Ah's nature suited the role of an Archer perfectly. Maybe because she used to compete in track and field events, she was fleet of foot and possessed a really high level of concentration.

More importantly, Yi Seol-Ah was quick-witted enough to pick up on things as soon as they were taught to her. The Archer class required one to be proficient in many different skill sets; in that regard, the compatibility between her and this class seemed to be near perfect.

'I do not know who invited her, but they definitely found a gem.'

If she was nurtured well, then she had the potential to become a High Ranker.

Ending her evaluation there, Agnes then shifted her gaze over to Yun Seora, currently bent over and panting out heavily to the side.

'As for her.... I can't be sure.'

Agnes was uncertain. Not in a bad way, but definitely in a very good way. She could figure out how Yi Seol-Ah might turn out in the future, but it was almost impossible to even imagine what Yun Seora might achieve.

In other words, the depth of Yun Seora's dormant potential was unfathomably deep. Agnes dared not to pass a haphazard evaluation.

'Her physical fitness level increased surprisingly quickly. But her talents are even better.'

*Perhaps, she can even become a Unique Ranker...* Agnes's thoughts came to a halt there, and a wry smile formed on her lips. She was getting ahead of herself.

It was already difficult to become a High Ranker. Becoming a Unique Ranker wasn't something anyone could do.

“Instructor?”

The voice of a young boy pulled Agnes out from her thoughts. She shifted her gaze over to him. Yi Sungjin was looking up at her while his entire body was soaked in sweat.

“Yes? What is it?”

“Uhm... Just what is 'Teddy Bear'?”

“...”

Agnes sucked in a deep breath, somehow calming herself down in the nick of time.

“I wonder. I'm not quite sure what you're talking about.”

“Really? But, that's so strange. Seol Hyung definitely said...”

When Yi Sungjin muttered to himself, Agnes's eyes became super-sharp.

“What is strange?”

“Oh, that. Seol Hyung told me that if I say 'Teddy Bear' to you, you'll find it really funny.”

Suddenly, the nearly inaudible sound of gnashing teeth leaked out from Agnes's mouth. Even Yun Seora and Yi Seol-Ah were looking on at the maid with curious expressions etched on their faces. They too heard something similar from Seol before.

“Huh? But, I heard it's supposed to be 'lilac' instead.”

"I heard it was 'Little Bear'....?"

Even though the person in question was present, they nevertheless unwittingly went through with the public execution.

"...There is no need to waste your time on such nonsensical rubbish."

Agnes replied without batting an eyelid because, in her mind, she had already murdered Seol several dozen times over.

"By any chance, do you know where he is right now?"

"You mean, Hyung? He should be in the middle of clearing missions with his team"

"I see. Well, I'll have a little talk with him later on. In the meantime, let us continue with your training."

Agnes spoke while cracking her knuckles. Yi Sungjin tilted his head in confusion while getting back up.

And, in the evening

Three of them...

"I!!"

*POW!!*

"Told you to!!"

"Ouch?! Agnes?! W, wait a minute!"

"Do it!! In moderation!!"

"Euhurk?! Agnes!!"

"Because of you!! The Alias!! In my Status Window!!"

"Ouch!! Help!!"

"Have you!! Any idea!! How it's!! Changed?!"

"S, stop!! I'm sorry!!"

...Got to spectate Seol getting grandly beaten up by Agnes after she came to visit them late that night.

\*

Around the time when the trio almost finished with the fitness training and familiarized themselves with their Class Abilities and mana application...

Agnes suggested that they should train in the mornings and perform missions in the afternoons from here onwards. From her perspective, they weren't fully ready, although she did her best to train them as much as possible during the short time she was given.

However, Seol diligently supported them with things like Competence and other supplements, so they were ready in that regard. Just as important, they also had to clear missions and get used to how they operated quickly as well. Overall, Agnes wasn't completely happy about a couple of things, but then again, she knew very well that experiencing actual combat formed an important part of training.

Seol bought the trio proper equipment on that day. He was planning to not spend more than 10,000 points on each of them, but unfortunately, he ended up running into Aragaki Yuzuha again at the store. And like a scary vampire, she sucked away the upper limit of 30,000 points in the blink of an eye. If he thought about the 30% discount, then he just ended up buying 43,000 points worth of stuff from her.

Yi Seol-Ah was rejoicing like a little kid that just got her first proper party dress. Yun Seora found the armors worn in Paradise somewhat strange and unfamiliar, so she kept looking at herself. She even lightly swung her longsword around, and Seol couldn't help but praise how proficient she looked doing that.

Even though the amount of points that could have bought him a Divine Elixir disappeared just like that, Seol didn't regret it. No, he was feeling rather liberated, instead.

'I guess this is enough of me supporting them.'

Agnes made sure the trio received enough training, so now, all he had to do was to be there when they were attempting to clear the missions.

However, since his aim wasn't to earn points for clearing the missions but to simply help them, he was planning to do 'Normal' difficulty missions maybe three, four times together with them. He believed that should be plenty enough for the trio to get used to the combat situations. He was also pretty sure of the talent scout Kim Hannah mentioned before not being too happy about Seol following around his find and spoon-feeding Yun

Seora and Co.

'Yeah, it's about time they start learning how to take care of business by themselves.... Mm!'

Seol was about to suggest to the trio that they should go check out some missions, but then, felt that something was off.

When he took a look around, he found a certain Oriental woman staring at the trio from a fair distance away. However, her gaze was not friendly at all.

'Who is she? And why is she....?'

Although Seol couldn't remember her face, she also seemed kind of familiar. No, he thought he could just about barely recall who she could be.

Seol stared at her for a long, long time before inexplicably remembering what Han the Guide said many moons ago.

"...It was easy to calculate Miss Oh Minyoung's points...."

'Ah.'

Seol finally remembered who she was. That woman passed the Tutorial after procuring enough coins right at the end of the treasure hunt.

Not only was she still alive, but it seemed that she had successfully cleared quite a few missions as well, judging from all that gear on her.

But, Seol couldn't really understand why she was glaring at the blameless trio like that.

Not too long after, the woman turned around to leave. Seol activated Nine Eyes and couldn't help but frown slightly. Oh Minyoung was glowing in a yellow hue.

'Should I let her be?'

Seol deliberated, before slowly shaking his head. It could have been nothing, but nonetheless, he remained worried. Back then, wasn't Kang Seok also glowing in the yellowish hue? At a bare minimum, some preparation might be in order, he figured.

Seol helped each of the trio to complete their first missions, and then, unbeknownst to everyone, called Hyun Sangmin over for a chat.

\*

[Breakthrough (Remaining number of attempts: 10/10)]

Break through the attacks of a Sprite, cross a bridge, and secure a bridgehead!

Difficulty: Very Hard

When successful: +60,000 SP

When unsuccessful: Death

\*Cooperation possible (up to 6 people)

After Seol joined her team, Delphine and her teammates were able to cleanly sweep away every mission they encountered. Eventually, they decided to take on the most challenging mission available within 'Very Hard' difficulty. And, for the first time, they almost ended up losing one of their numbers.

A Sprite was a demonic fairy-like humanoid creature that was covered in a dress made out of grass. It was about half as tall as an adult human female, with several pairs of dragonfly-like wings coming out from its back.

Its outer appearance was quite stunningly beautiful, but as soon as the battle commenced, the team got to experience firsthand how plainly cruel and sinister this creature was.

One of the most irritating things about this monster was that it did not reveal its form and poured out long-distance attacks non-stop from the other side of the bridge.

Three, four such attacks wouldn't have gotten on the team's nerves as much. However, projectiles resembling bolts and arrows rained down on the team constantly, and to make matters worse, the Sprite even knew how to cast wind magic that was almost a carbon copy of the tornado spell Delphine used every now and then. Hell, this abominable thing even used javelins as projectiles by launching them off several ballistas.

And to confound the matters even further, several obstacles and blockades were placed on top of the bridge itself in a zigzag pattern, making it even more infuriating to traverse it.

They chose to go with the tactic where they relied on the protection provided by Priest's Barrier and inched forward while getting rid of the obstacles on the bridge one at a time.

However, in the middle of doing exactly that, the Barrier shattered, bringing forth a dangerous situation for the team. Hao Win was ready for this eventuality, so he used his massive shield to guard the others, but he got swept away and fell down after the Sprite used that aforementioned

powerful wind magic.

Seol and Tong Chai stepped forward to rescue Hao Win, while Leorda Salvatore speedily brought up the rear. The latter man's aim was to divert the aggression the three men ahead of him had attracted, even if it was only by a little bit. He was also thinking of sniping the enemy across the bridge if he found an opening as well.

Leorda used his amazing agility to climb over obstacles, only for a long javelin to fly out of a ballista and lodge itself in his stomach. By this time, Seol had successfully pulled Hao Win out of immediate danger and was free; the youth quickly rushed over and dragged the grievously wounded Leorda into safety.

Leorda's injury was quite serious; the whites of his eyes were showing as his body shook hard from the shock. Delphine poured a vial of very expensive healing potion she bought just in case on his wounds. If it weren't for his two layers of armor absorbing some of the force, even the healing magic of the Priest wouldn't have been enough to save his life.

Things seemed to have reached a stalemate of sorts, but then, quite unexpectedly, Seol found a path to victory – he used the spell balls he'd been saving for a rainy day. The first one he used was 'Poison Fog'; out of six remaining balls, he threw three of them at the opposing camp, and sure enough, a big commotion rose up from there.

And that short opening was their first and only opportunity to act. The team quickly checked their gear and made a run for it, and somehow crossed the bridge just in the nick of time.

It was a battle where they got lucky since no one considered the possibility that the Sprite could be weak against poison-type attacks.

Leorda gritted his teeth as he ran over to the coughing and wheezing Sprite, keeled over next to a small ballista.

While grabbing the creature, he asked the others to delay the completion of the mission for a minute or two, so he could get his revenge. Then, he proceeded to tie the creature up tightly on the ballista.

While watching Leorda slap around the cheeks of the monster, then do a several angry roundhouse kick to its belly, Seol was overcome with a strange sense of déjà vu.

“Goddamn it. We almost got done in, didn't we?”

Hao Win walked with a limp as he plopped down next to Seol.

“We got careless. We didn't prepare properly.”

Odelette Delphine's expression was also dark.

“Right. We thought we were ready with what we had since there wasn't much info provided on the mission, but hell, reality nearly proved to be anything but.”

“I think it's better for me to learn a couple of defensive spells, just in case. I thought it'd be enough for me to invest in attack magic spells only since we have a Priest among us...”

Delphine's shoulders shrunk. She still couldn't forget the sight of her flames from the fire magic she worked so hard to cast scatter away so easily by the Sprite's wind magic.

“That might be a good idea. Casting Barriers could make our lives a little bit easier.”

Hao Win agreed with her assessment.

“I should swap all my armor to metal ones while we're at it. Since I've got enough points to burn, I might as well get a couple of larger and stronger shields, too.”

“You want to buy two shields?”

“Well, there's no helping it. I mean, the main objective of this mission is to cross this bridge as safely as possible, after all.”

What Hao Win said made sense; the Sprite was quite strong when it came to long-distance attacks, but the battle itself became more or less manageable once the team got close enough to the monster.

“Indeed. Crossing the bridge was nonsensically difficult, but in reality, we only have to make sure that Seol gets to the other side safe and sound, am I wrong?”

“But, that might not be the case, though. I think the reason why the close-quarters fight ended up being easier than expected could be due to the poison.”

At Tong Chai's agreement, Odelette Delphine raised her counterpoint.

“Hmm... Do you have anymore of those spell balls left?”

“I have three remaining, but none of them are Poison Fog.”

Seol shook his head regretfully.

“That means, there's another thing I gotta worry about now. And, I can only learn a poison-type spell when I reach level 2, you know...”

Delphine spoke in a worried voice, before licking her lips.

“For now, let's end today's mission here. Let's sufficiently strengthen ourselves at the stores and try this again tomorrow. Since now we know what to expect, it won't be hard to figure out what to get for ourselves, no?”

In the middle of the team discussing changes to their battle tactic, a loud scream exploded out behind them. The tied-up Sprite was shrieking out and desperately putting up a struggle. Seeing this, Tong Chai raised his hand to cheer Leorda on.

“More! Show that thing who's the boss!”

“Don't you worry! I'll definitely make her suffer!!”

Leorda shouted out while not even bothering to look back, before proceeding to rip the wings of the Sprite in quite a violent manner. Seol thought that he must be incensed about almost getting killed, even now.

“Okay, cool. Great. Well, let's end our self-reflection here.”

Hao Win cleared his throat with a fake cough and began grinning slightly while looking at Seol.

“Your friend, how is it going nowadays?”

Seol was in the middle of wondering what he should buy next and was caught off guard. His eyes widened in confusion.

“Oh, my, my, my. Why are you playing possum all of a sudden? Leorda might take his sweet time over there, so, in the meantime, why not tell us what happened so far? How far have you gone?”

“How far did I go where now?”

“You're now pretending to not understand me? Look here, my man. As a person who aided you, I have every right to hear the progress made in your current state of romantic affairs.”

“My romantic affairs... By any chance, are you talking about Miss Yun Seora?”

“That's right! That girl!”

Hao Win grinned in a lewd and suspicious manner as he puckered his lips.

“So, like, at a bare minimum, you've already done slurpppp~, right?”

“S, slurp...?! You mean, a k, kiss?”

“Aigoo, would you listen to this thick-headed guy?”

Hao Win spat out a groan, and then...

“That is smooch~, and I'm talking about slurppp~. Slurppp~!!”

...Then, he pointed at Odelette Delphine's boobs and spoke, before going 'Ohh!'

“Ahh, could it be that you're not into them 'rolling hills'? Then, maybe, you're more into the succulent 'delta', instead? So, is it more like, chomp, chomp, glug, glug?”

When Hao Win began swirling his tongue around in a clearly lewd manner, Seol hurriedly covered the older man's mouth and sneaked a glance over at Odelette Delphine. There was every reason to think that she'd find this whole conversation displeasing.

“What are you guys talking about? What is it? Please let me in on it!”

However, the serious girl of a few moments ago was nowhere to be seen now, after she reverted back to being a sparkly-eyed teenager.

“M, Miss Delphine...”

“I might not look it, but I'm pretty quick on the uptake, you know. So please hurry up with the story!”

Delphine dragged her butt closer to sit near Seol and Hao Win.

Seol smacked his lips. Actually, he was worried about a couple of things and wouldn't mind discussing them with others.

"The thing is... Miss Yun Seora became a bit strange ever since that afternoon..."

"How so?"

"This one time, I woke up in the morning to find her sleeping in my arms."

"Keuh!"

Hao Win let out an exclamation of admiration.

"And so? What happened next?"

Odelette Delphine snorted in excitement.

"I thought it was just her strange sleeping habit, so I took her back to her bed."

"What the hell? What's the matter with you? A man should know when to push someone down!"

"He's right, you know? I also don't like a vanilla guy."

"N, no. That's not it... *Cough*. In any case, I slept on the couch the following evening. Then, I woke up to find her sleeping soundly on top of me..."

"Yup, it's happening. It's definitely happening."

"Don't tell me you put her back in her bed again. If you did, I'm gonna go around telling everyone that you're gay."

"What's the matter with these two?!"

What with them adding unnecessary 'cheers' every time he tried to say something, Seol was rapidly losing his motivation to talk. He even thought he was a fool, trying to discuss his worries with these people.

"It's like a romance novel!"

Tong Chai exploded in a fit of loud laughter.

"I guess it does sound like that."

Seol grinned slightly, thinking to himself that at least he found someone who was more or less normal.

"And so? What happened next?"

"Pardon?"

"Why are you trying to mumble your way out of this one? You started telling us the story, so naturally, you should get to the end."

"Even this guy..."

Seol stared at Tong Chai with a pair of totally dumbfounded eyes, prompting the latter man to issue a long sigh.

"Really now. You truly know how to build up anticipation, don't you? Fine, I understand. I'll pay."

"?"

"You should be honored because I've never spent my own dime on something like this."

Before Seol could ask Tong Chai what he was talking about, the youth was interrupted by an alert announcing that 100 Survival Points had been accredited to his tally.

"I'm sure that's enough, no? Well, then. Please, I'm anxious to find out what happened next, so tell us. It is a lot more interesting than I thought at first."

".....Mister Tong Chai. I gotta ask, why did you give me your points?"

When he was asked, Tong Chai removed his turban and nonchalantly replied.

"Mm? Weren't you implying just now that, if we want to hear the rest of the story, we have to purchase the next chapter?"

“...”

Seol forgot what he wanted to say.

## Chapter 36

Yi Seol-Ah, Yi Sungjin, and Yun Seora.

The three of them were deeply engrossed in clearing missions lately. The deadline of the Neutral Zone closing down was fast approaching, that was why.

Since they needed 1000 Survival Points in order to enter the Paradise, it was not much of a stretch to say that the trio spent almost half of their day near the first-floor noticeboard in order to accumulate the necessary amount.

Of course, Seol already told them that they shouldn't worry even if they couldn't amass 1000 points, but the three of them couldn't feel happy or content about their current circumstances.

It wasn't simply because they felt ashamed, though. As time passed, they began to realize the lengths Seol went to support them from behind, and the amount required to do so.

The most obvious proof was with them equipped from head to toe with expensive gear. Even though not much time remained until the end of the deadline, only around 30% of the survivors managed to buy a full set of matching armors. Just from this fact alone, the three of them became acutely aware of their advantageous position compared to other people.

So, the issue was with them learning how to survive on their own, rather than their pride, instead. Seol had done so much for them already, so if they failed to even earn 1000 points on their own, then they definitely lacked qualifications to be treated as a 'survivor' in this place. At a bare minimum, they wanted to prove that they were eligible to enter Paradise on their own strength.

'I did it!'

After successfully completing a 'Normal' difficulty mission by herself, Yi Seol-Ah rejoiced wholeheartedly in front of the noticeboard. In reality, her being able to clear such a mission alone wouldn't be seen as too big of an achievement at this point in time by other people.

However, considering how long ago it was when she started doing the missions, the rate of her growth was indeed explosive. On her first mission, she couldn't even pull back the strings of her bow properly out of sheer nervousness.

'Will he praise me?'

A smile bloomed on her face as she recalled the face of her orabeo-nim who constantly encouraged her to be more brave, assuring her that she was capable of doing this, and always taking the time to teach her things step by step, even though he should be feeling frustrated by her by now.

'This is fun.'

Yi Seol-Ah began looking at the noticeboard with an innocent smile on her face.

Since much higher number of 'Normal' difficulty missions were made available initially compared to others, one could still find quite a few parchments left available on the board. Granted, there were only around six, seven attempts remaining per mission, but nevertheless, she planned to do them for a couple more times to work up some more courage and tackle 'Slightly Hard' missions later on.

'Let's go with this one.'

Yi Seol-Ah finally ended her happy dilemma and reached out to a mission parchment, only for...

“Oh, my, look who it is? Been a while, hasn't it?”

....Only for her hand to come to a stop when a voice suddenly called out to her. An unfamiliar Oriental woman was standing behind Yi Seol-Ah even before anyone noticed it, her eyes narrowed to a slit like a venomous snake.

“Who.... Ah.”

Yi Seol-Ah stuttered for a bit, before letting out a small exclamation. Although she failed to remember, she still thought that she recognized who this woman might be. Right at the end of the Tutorial, didn't she see this person on the rooftop?

“You're from... the same Area as me, right?”

“I remember you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Weren't you that kid who tried to show off and ended up as the first to get killed? Back in the assembly hall, I mean.”

The woman's sneering tone made Yi Seol-Ah's expression stiffen.

“You don't know who I am, right?”

“M, my memory isn't that good.”

“Yeah, I'm sure. Anyways. it's nice to make your acquaintance. I'm Oh Minyoung.”

“Ye, yes, nice to meet you.”

Yi Seol-Ah's complexion was clouded as she politely greeted back. This woman, Oh Minyoung, was not even bothering to disguise her antagonistic attitude present in her voice and in the way she glared at the girl.

“The deadline is fast approaching, so, have you earned enough points now?”

“No, not yet.”

“Really? You haven't even amassed 1000 points yet?”

“No...”

As a matter of fact, Yi Seol-Ah was panicking slightly after sensing the woman's intense malice towards her.

Oh Minyoung crossed her arms across her chest and swept her eyes over Yi Seol-Ah.

Perhaps to focus on mobility, Yi Seol-Ah's outer wear consisted of a jacket made out of flexible leather, while she had a small silvery chainmail underneath it.

Her pants also looked like it was made out of high-quality leather; on her waist was a black belt with a Main-gauche attached loosely. Finally, on her back was an impressive recurve bow and a quiver full of arrows...

Even at a conservative estimation, they must have totaled around 14,000 points. Oh Minyoung was decently equipped herself, but she wouldn't be able to afford even one of Yi Seol-Ah's equipment even after selling all of her equipment.

“I guess things are working out for you nowadays.”

“...”

“You don't mind if I take a look, right?”

Oh Minyoung took large strides and came closer before reaching towards Yi Seol-Ah without permission. Taken by surprise, the latter tried to back away, but by then, her bow was already in the older female's hands.

“Uh, uh?”

“Wow. Yeah, I guess expensive things are the best, after all. How much was it?”

“I, I'm not sure? It can't be that much.”

Yi Seol-Ah barely managed to force out an answer.

“Is that so?”

Oh Minyoung surveyed her surroundings for a bit, before a suspicious grin formed on her lips.

“In that case, how about giving me this bow?”

“.....Ah?”

“You said it can't be that much, didn't you? Oh, no. I didn't mean it as for free. You gimme this, then I'll also help you out. Know what I mean?”

“N, no. I don't need it. Thank you.”

“Don't be like that. Didn't you say you need to gather Survival Points? If you join my team, I'm pretty sure you'll amass the amount really fast.”

Oh Minyoung pointed behind her back with her thumb. There were three Western men sitting by one of the lounge tables, looking on with what could be best interpreted as 'interested' expressions. One of them even grinned slyly and waved his hand at Yi Seol-Ah.

The truth was, the ones who attacked Yun Seora were these three. Of course, Yi Seol-Ah didn't know this. However, she still sensed an unknown



feeling of anxiety and wanted to leave as soon as possible.

"P, please, give it back."

The restless Yi Seol-Ah reached out and grabbed her bow, trying to pull it back. Oh Minyoung strengthened her grip in response.

"What are you doing? Didn't I say I'll help you?"

"I don't need it. Please give it back."

"Okay, fine! I'll – hey, I said, I'll give it back!?"

When Yi Seol-Ah yanked hard, Oh Minyoung nearly toppled over from the force. The latter woman couldn't hide her astonishment. She underestimated the younger girl's physical strength and ended up losing the bow before she could do anything about it.

"You. ...."

"I'll be leaving now. Take care."

'This little. ....' Flames flickered in Oh Minyoung's eyes as she looked at Yi Seol-Ah's departing back. Undisguised jealousy burned vividly in her eyes.

"Hey, you. How much do you charge each time?"

Her loud shout forced Yi Seol-Ah's steps to come to an abrupt halt. She spun around so fast, her hair fluttered in the air. She began biting her lower lip.

"...What are you talking about?"

"You know. Kinda curious."

Oh Minyoung mockingly smiled while speaking up.

"Someone like you, how much do you charge each time? 100 points? 200?"

"Wha, what did you say?!"

Yi Seol-Ah couldn't help but suspect her own hearing just then.

"Just how many times did you do him, for that guy to buy you all these cool armor and stuff? Mm?"

At that undisguised attempt to ridicule her, Yi Seol-Ah's eyes widened in shock.

"Orabeo-nim isn't like that!"

"Oh, please. You think I don't know that you live in the same place as him?"

"Why are you acting like this?"

Yi Seol-Ah's anger shot up and her voice became shrill. Tears pooled around the edges of her eyes, seemingly to reflect the unfair treatment she was receiving.

They didn't even know each other. Not only here in the Neutral Zone, but even back in the Tutorial, they didn't even share a single word until this moment. Naturally, Yi Seol-Ah couldn't understand why this woman was being so hostile to her.

"I told you, didn't I? I want to help you. What's the matter? You don't want my help?"

"I don't need your help!"

"Will you look at this little girl? How dare you raise your voice at me?"

At Oh Minyoung's signal, the three men watching on from the lounge stood up. Sensing the mood had rapidly turned for the worse, Yi Seol-Ah began retreating step by step.

"This unni is going to teach you an easy way to earn points."

"I, I don't need it."

"Aren't you worried about making enough points in time? Don't worry. Those guys give out lots of them."

Hearing Oh Minyoung's insidious words, Yi Seol-Ah's expression became even more unsightly.

'Why?'

She hadn't done anything to this woman, yet why....?

"There's no need for you to act all innocent and like, you know? It's too late for that."

Yi Seol-Ah finally had enough of Oh Minyoung's venom and was about to make her escape from there. But, then...

"You know, maybe you should stop introducing yourself. Don't you agree?"

Suddenly, a man intruded in the middle of the two women. While Yi Seol-Ah got surprised by who it was, Oh Minyoung was frowning rather unhappily at this new development.

Because, he was the man who loved to wear a pair of sunglasses indoors as well as to put on a green baseball cap backward – Hyun Sangmin.

Oh Minyoung began gritting her teeth.

"You..."

"Kyah. I wondered what was up after hearing a dog barking out loudly over here. Who would've guessed that it really was an actual bitch?"

"What did you just say?!"

"Ohh, my bad. My bad. You're still a human being, so comparing you to an animal is unfair."

Hyun Sangmin raised his hands defensively and his expression showed he was genuinely sorry.

"So, if I remember correctly, your actual nickname was...."

He then smoothly took his sunglasses off.

"...10 points, right?"

*Tremble.*

Oh Minyoung's body trembled as she tried her very best to look composed.

"You should watch what you say if you don't want to end up as a bloody mess."

"Oh, is that right?"

Hyun Sangmin sneaked a glance at the lounge and sniggered dismissively.

"If you're bitching around here because of those three chumps.... How about you looking over this way?"

Oh Minyoung's gaze followed his pointing chin, and she had to nervously swallow her saliva. There was a group of four men glaring at her direction.

"You see, you ain't the only one with friends around here.... Oopsie, you aren't a friend to those three. Is it more like a pet dog?"

"Shut your mouth."

Oh Minyoung glared at Hyun Sangmin with murderous eyes.

"I don't want to see that disgusting face of yours, so get lost, you son of a bitch."

"But, I don't wanna. Besides, you're also a bitch, aren't you?"

Hyun Sangmin cackled and dismissed her threats nonchalantly, before lightly tapping on the shoulder of Yi Seol-Ah.

"You're just jealous of this girl, aren't you?"

"...N, no. Not really."

Oh Minyoung flinched, her eyes opening up wider in a somewhat strange manner.

"I'm not jealous of her at all! Why should I be envious of a girl who sells her body for some measly points?"

Although she tried to look composed, her voice was clearly trembling. On the other hand, Hyun Sangmin was completely relaxed.

"I told you, stop introducing yourself. You know she hasn't done that and that's why you're being so bitchy about it~~, no?"

'What is he talking about this time?'

Yi Seol-Ah listened to this exchange while feeling anxious, before finally figuring it out. Her frown became even deeper as a result.

"Someone has to shake her ass off the whole day long just to survive, yet here's someone else who doesn't have to~~."

When Hyun Sangmin mocked her in a teasing tone of a voice....

"Shut. Up."

Her voice thickly laden with murderous intention leaked out of her mouth. Too bad, Hyun Sangmin wasn't going to stop just because of that.

"I'm sure you were a lot happier when this girl and her brother, as well as Yun Seora, were struggling to survive, right? You probably spied on them every day and consoled yourself, didn't you? While feeling a sense of pathetic superiority over them, thinking that at least you're better off than they were."

"Y, you son of a bitch! When did I ever do that? Are you mentally ill?"

"You probably were hoping too, right? Like, waiting for the day these three would fall to the rock bottom just like you. It was you who gave those three the idea to do that, wasn't it?"

It was then, the dumbfounded Yi Seol-Ah's complexion darkened even further.

[Yes. Seriously now.... Don't know who hit her, but that person sure fucked her up.]

....Could it have been?

Yi Seol-Ah clenched her fists tightly without realizing it and stared at the venomously-glaring Oh Minyoung.

"But, what will you do now? One day you run into them, and lo and behold, they are all living happily~ ever after! They are eating nice food, they are training so diligently, and even kitted out in such a great set of equipment, to boot! So, how can a bundle of inferiority complex such as yourself not feel the pangs of vicious jealousy stabbing at your heart?"

"I said, shut your goddamn mouth, you son of a bitch!!!"

Oh Minyoung screamed out that sounded almost like a plea. Her bloodshot eyes opened wide as if her eyelids were being torn open by her anguish.

"Just whose fault was it?!"

"Huh?"

"You, you made me like this!! Why did you only help them out? Why didn't you do the same for me?! I also struggled!! I, I too desperately fought and scratched and clawed my way to here!!"

She began babbling out almost incoherently now. Hearing this, Hyun Sangmin snorted derisively.

"You should take a really good look at yourself first. Who would want to help you when you're this bitchy?"

"What?! When did I ever wrong you?!"

"Your wrongs? There are quite a few, actually."

"Y, you...?!"

Oh Minyoung spun around angrily towards the direction of the new voice, only to flinch rather grandly after seeing who it was – a woman wearing a white robe, her arms crossed against her chest, with a disdainful smirk etched on her lips.

"I helped you to get to the second floor, only for you to fall for that bastard Kang Seok's schemes."

The identity of the woman who swept her bob-cut hair back was none other than Shin Sang-Ah.

"Maybe the story might have been different if you tried to press the door release button like Sungjin did. So, just who was the one that abandoned me behind to rot in the darkened corridor as if you couldn't care any less? Mm?"

After hearing her voice thickly laden with criticism and sarcasm, all Oh Minyoung could do was to move her lips up and down without making a sound.

"And that wasn't all, right? Remember what happened on the fourth floor?"

"T, that was...."

“Oh, and let's not forget, it wasn't as if you gave away that Revival medicine for free like Miss Yun Seora.”

Shin Sang-Ah spat on the floor in an exaggerated manner and began grinning again.

“You've done nothing so far, yet you want us to help you?”

“You... You...!”

Surrounded from all sides and verbally assaulted without a chance to say something, Oh Minyoung suddenly broke down and began sobbing. She crumpled to the floor and wailed out in pure sorrow.

However, Shin Sang-Ah coldly glared on while not caring whether the woman cried or not. She did tear her stare away when shadows loomed near, though; the three men by the lounge finally came closer after noticing that things were not moving as they expected them to.

“Why don't you guys stop there?”

A guy with a huge physique in the middle raised his voice and intervened.

“From what I heard, this whole thing amounts to nothing much at all, anyway. So, is there a need to raise such a fuss?”

“Sure, it's nothing much. I just showed up here 'cuz a mutt was making too much noise, that's all. Since the owner showed up now, hopefully it'll get more peaceful around here.”

Hyun Sangmin retorted sarcastically, causing the big guy's expression to crumple in anger.

“I know who you are. You better watch your mouth.”

“Like owner, like dog, huh. What's my mouth got to do with any of you fucks?”

“You have a death wish?”

“What, you wanna have a go? You're confident?”

Hyun Sangmin lightly tapped the crossbow slung on his back. Meanwhile, the big guy took a slow but contemplative look around his surroundings. There were not only Hyun Sangmin's team, but Shin Sang-Ah's team to worry about, too. The man realized he was at a numerical disadvantage.

“...You, I'll remember you.”

“Ha, why don't you also say 'better watch your back' while you're at it?”

“Don't you dare to think that every Bronze Mark is equal. We'll see the day we enter Paradise.”

“Aigoo~ I'm so scared~.”

Hyun Sangmin shuddered and shrunk back, causing Shin Sang-Ah to break out in a fit of giggles. The big man quietly glared at them both for a long while before taking Oh Minyoung away and disappearing from the view.

At last, some peace and quiet had come and allowed Yi Seol-Ah to release her tightly-held breath.

“Haaaaa...”

This whole event was truly, completely, utterly outside her scope of expectations – she would've never guessed that Oh Minyoung harbored such an ill will. She thought that a raging storm blew by just now or some such.

A short silence flew by before Hyun Sangmin lightly tapped Yi Seol-Ah's drooping shoulders.

“Hey, you okay?”

“Ah, y, yes!”

Yi Seol-Ah nodded her head urgently.

“A good thing that I came around looking for you. I was going like, Just maybe, but whew, what a relief. Anyways, you gotta be careful, okay? Those three, they are bad people.”

“I... Thank you. Really.”

She bowed her waist deeply to express her gratitude. Hyun Sangmin simply waved his hand around.

“No need for that. After all, Seol asked me for this favor.”

“Orabeo-nim did?”

“Yup. He told me that Oh Minyoung chick seemed a bit suspicious, and so, he asked me if I minded letting you and your brother tag along for a while. I said, sure, why not.”

“Really? He asked me to look after Miss Yun Seora, though,” said Shin Sang-Ah, as she swept her gaze around the first floor. Hyun Sangmin nodded his head as if he knew about it already.

“Well, in any case. You planning to take a short break? If not, why not try a Slightly Hard mission with me and my team later on? Along with your brother, of course.”

“C, can we really?”

Yi Seol-Ah's face brightened in an instant. If she could enter Hyun Sangmin's team, she wouldn't have to worry about another incident like this happening again.

“Don't worry about it. I've already got the consent from my teammates. Besides, do I look like someone who'll do things for free?”

“Oh... it wasn't like that?”

“But, of course.”

Hyun Sangmin nodded his head as if to imply there was no need to even ask such an obvious question.

“For doing this favor...”

He pulled out the packet of cigarette while grinning widely.

“Seol promised to help us with a Hard mission!”

\*

The end of the deadline for the Neutral Zone that initially seemed so distant had arrived before long.

The greatest achievement Seol accomplished during that time was to sweep away every single 'Very Hard' mission with his team.

They might have struggled greatly when attempting the most difficult mission for the first time, but after making adequate preparations, they were able to clear the same mission again in a comparatively safer manner.

It wasn't as if they didn't encounter any close calls, but still, none of them were as serious as Leorda Salvatore receiving a mortal injury.

And so, with them performing that mission successfully for the tenth time, the noticeboard had become completely barren of all the mission parchments.

“Finally. It's over.”

Tong Chai took off his turban and tossed it to the ground, looking as if a weight was lifted off his shoulders.

“There is still one more mission left, though...”

Odelette Delphine stared at the very last mission parchment stuck on the top of the board with a longing expression on her face.

“I'll say this beforehand. If you are planning to tackle that mission, I am definitely not participating.”

“Agreed. That thing is pure madness.”

Tong Chai and Leorda hurriedly let their opinions known.

“But, but... There is that additional bonus, though...”

“I also am against it. No matter how tasty the rewards look, that mission isn't worth it. Delphine, we should know when to differentiate between reckless bravado and actual bravery.”

Even Hao Win came out with a resounding no. All Delphine could do was to pout unhappily in the end.

“...Oh, well. Yes, it does seem completely impossible to clear, no matter how many times I look at it.”

Although she couldn't completely give up on it, she had to raise both of her hands in surrender.

After that, the six of them shared short but bittersweet goodbyes. They had gone through month-long life-or-death struggles together, so their bond had become pretty solid as a result.

In other words, Seol had pretty much met and exceeded the demand of Kim Hannah, the one about making important friends in this place. "I was able to earn a lot of points thanks to you."

Seol shook hands with Tong Chai...

"I won't ever forget that you saved my life. If you run into trouble, come find me by the Sicilia."

Leorda Salvatore told him bluntly.

"Well, we'll be seeing each other tomorrow one more time anyways."

Odelette Delphine winked playfully at him...

"Love is an emotion, my man. Don't forget that."

....And he bumped fists with Hao Win.

"And even now, no one asked me what my name was..."

The nameless(?) Priest carried a lonely smile as he left.

Now left alone, Seol shifted his gaze back to the noticeboard.

He looked at the 'Impossible' mission one more time.

Not only was the reward on offer an enormous tally of 172,800 points, there was also an additional reward as well, just as Delphine said.

'The VIP store...'

Although his greed was acting up again, Seol still shook his head in resignation. He heard that a mid-sized army made up of Level 4 Earthlings and above could just barely clear this mission, so there was no chance in hell that he could clear it by himself.

Seol immediately gave up and turned around to leave.

The Neutral Zone would close on tomorrow; perhaps because there were so many things to get ready, his room was in a bit of noisy chaos.

'Organize everything in the bag first, take with me what I can, return the smartphone before I leave, and spend all the points beside 1000....'

Thinking about his points tally, Seol became rather pleased with himself. His teammates invested most of theirs on better equipment and abilities, but he had not spent a single dime and continued to hoard them. All thanks to that, his current tally was the highest it's ever been.

However, they'd all become worthless by this time tomorrow, so he had to spend them today.

While organizing the contents of his bag, Seol continued to suppress the feeling of regret bubbling in his heart. He knew that mission was truly hopeless, yet the image of that parchment still danced in front of his eyes.

If he successfully cleared that mission, then he'd be able to buy that one item that was seemingly forever out of his reach.

Seol did almost everything in his willpower to shake off that distracting thought.

"Three spell balls, the quill pen of flowing consciousness..."

*Plop.*

And as he was absorbed in organizing the contents of the bag, something fell from it and issued a soft rustle.

## Chapter 37

'What's this?'

Seol stared at the piece of paper that had fallen on the shelf.

'Oh, that's right. I got that from one of the Necessary Boxes....'

He remembered receiving it as one of his starting bonuses. Honestly, he had completely forgotten all about it. At that time, he was far too stunned by the revelation regarding his Nine Eyes, and afterwards, the food he pilfered from the convenience store hid this paper away from his view and it languished at the bottom of the bag.

He couldn't help but feel a bit surprised by the fact that he had completely forgotten about it until now.

“Hey, Sungjin?”

“Yes?”

Yi Sungjin raised his head and looked at Seol after he stopped emptying the contents of his bag to the ground.

“What was your Mark's grade again?”

“Bronze.”

“That means, you got a Random Box, right? Back at the assembly hall.”

“Yes.”

“What came out from there?”

“It was a paper talisman. Why? Is something the matter?”

Yi Sungjin replied without hesitation.

“I'm kinda curious, but uh, the magic spell you can use with a talisman, can it be anything you want?”

“No, not really. Mine had 'Bind' written on it.”

Seol looked back at the paper talisman resting on the shelf and began frowning slightly. This scrap of paper in front of his eyes was... almost completely blank.

“Is it possible for you to show me your talisman? If you still have it on you, that is.”

“Oh, that. My bad, but I already used it up back in the Tutorial. ... We ran into that Gaekgwi monster as soon as we came out of our hiding place.”

Yi Sungjin scratched the back of his head apologetically.

“Hmm... I wonder if there's anyone who still has their talisman...”

“I'm sure that everyone has used theirs up by now. I mean, the Neutral Zone's about to close anyways.”

“Huh? What does that mean?”

“Hm? Oh, well, they are starting bonuses, right?”

“What do you mean?”

When Seol asked back in surprise, Yi Sungjin showed how stunned he was as if the thought of Seol not knowing about it didn't cross his mind.

After all, it was common sense for every Invited. Well, not unless they didn't pay attention to any of the explanations provided beforehand.

“Uhm... Yeah, think of it like our phones. You heard that we have to return them before leaving the Neutral Zone, right?”

“Yeah.”

“It's like that. Both the starting bonuses and the phones aren't things we earned through our own efforts.”

“Right.”

“Things like that, either we return them before the Neutral Zone closes, or they automatically disappear when we leave. The Neutral Zone is a special area connected to the Tutorial, so items from there can be used here, but we can't take them with us to Paradise.”

“But can't we bring the armors and weapons with us? Heck, I was planning to take my spell balls with me, too.”

“Armors and weapons are bought with your own points, so they are excluded. And you got those spell balls yourself after finding the right amount of coins in the treasure hunt, right? I mean, they are different from the starting bonuses given away without us actually having done anything yet.”

This was the first time Seol heard about any of this. His expression became complicated as he took a look at the paper talisman on the shelf.

“For instance, if you did something by using the starting bonus, that's acknowledged as you having achieved it yourself. But the bonuses themselves won't be counted.”

What Yi Sungjin was saying was that Seol's talisman would be useless come tomorrow.

“Wait a minute. Does that mean this bag too...?”

Yi Sungjin nodded his head as if it was obvious.

'I nearly ended up making a huge mistake.'

Seol hurriedly took out all the things he carefully stored in the bag.

In the meantime, he was regretting the fact that he hadn't gotten the chance to use this talisman. And at the same time, he got curious as well.

....[You've acquired a Paper Talisman]....

The announcement message definitely said he acquired a "paper talisman". But, unlike the spell balls, not a single piece of information was written on the talisman itself, not even what kind of spells it might be able to cast.

He didn't think of this item as useless junk, though. After all, it was one of the Gold Mark's starting bonuses. At least, its worth should be incomparably higher than the bonuses of the Silver and Bronze Marks.

'Wish I had a clue....'

Seol slowly fell deeper into his thoughts.

[Are you making fun of me? Was your experience during the Tutorial that unpleasant? Are you trying to completely rip it to shreds, is that it? Just how did you even know what that man would need in here.....?!]

Then, he remembered Han growling in anger after seeing the Necessary Boxes back in the assembly hall. The Guide looked so relieved when Seol told him that his Status Windows got updated, instead.

[Scanning for the most 'needed item' during the current situation. ... Please wait.]

Next, he remembered the message that came after opening the first Necessary Box. ...

[But that guy, he didn't clear the mission in what you'd call a 'proper' fashion. He just got lucky, that's all.]

....And, even Kim Hannah's advice, too.

'Could it be....'

As soon as that line of thought entered his head, Seol fell into a serious dilemma. He slowly fingered the nearly-blank paper talisman, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down.

"Anyways... What did you get for your starting bonu... Eh?"

Yi Sungjin's words came to a halt, along with his hands that also stopped emptying his bag. Seol was nowhere to be seen anymore.

".....Hyung?"

\*

[Siege (Remaining number of attempts: 1/1)]

Within 48 hours, annihilate the race of Guardians protecting the "Sanctuary" and destroy this impenetrable fortress!

Difficulty: Impossible

When successful: +172,800 SP, a one-time use VIP store coupon (1 per person)

When unsuccessful: Death

\*Cooperation possible: up to 6 people.

Seol came down to the first floor, and he stared long and hard at the parchment stuck at the very top of the noticeboard. The usually-noisy plaza was empty and quiet today as if everyone else was too busy sorting out their luggage to loiter around here.

'There's even a time limit, too....'

Seol slowly swallowed his saliva, reached up, and carefully took the mission parchment off the board.

Now, this parchment was no longer glowing in red like before. No, it was now in an orangey hue, which was one grade lower – 'Do Not Approach'.

His uncertainty only lasted for a brief moment.

The color of 'Immediate Retreat Recommended' was now no longer there and that gave Seol a sliver of confidence.

'There's a chance I can survive this.'



The high level of danger was still present, but still.

Someone once said thus – there would be a time in one's life when he either had to take a step back or to take that challenge head-on.

He squeezed his trembling eyes shut. Fingers gripping the mission parchments grasped it even tighter.

*Tzzzt*

Accompanied by the sound of the paper cleanly ripping in half, Seol disappeared from the plaza.

\*

The location he teleported to was in the middle of a dense forest.

'Where is this?'

Seol hastily surveyed his surroundings, only to have his jaw nearly hit the ground in shock, instead.

'S, shit!'

His eyes took in the majestic sight of a magnificent yet absolutely huge mountain range. The cliffs seemed so precipitous and stiff as if they were expertly cut and shaped by a heavenly carving knife; the highest peak couldn't even be seen, as it was shrouded by thick clouds.

Things got worse, though.

He also could spot countless structures and defensive walls built in and around the mountainside, and they all seemed incredibly sturdy to him, making him truly appreciate the impossible nature of this mission.

'How is anyone supposed to clear this mission?!'

This was no longer a problem solvable by a measly group of six survivors – even a well-organized army would find it hard to conquer this place. Only now did Seol realize what Kim Hannah was trying to warn him about.

Seol did his best to rein in his wildly pounding heart and cautiously began walking forward. The actual distance to his destination wasn't far, as it turned out. Since he had no idea what might happen, he thought it'd be for the best if he closed the distance as much as possible before trying out the paper talisman.

But, when he got a bit closer than before, he had no choice but to come to a very sudden stop.

He left 'Nine Eyes' on since the Neutral Zone's first floor.

And thanks to that, he could see the of the mountain range change suddenly from its initial light red to...

....Deep, deep red.

And then...

'W, what the hell?'

....Finally, to jet black.

The formless pressure those cliffsides gave out after they all suddenly changed to jet-black color was so overwhelming that, simply by looking at them, Seol instinctively took a step back in fear.

*Swish!*

It was then, a sharp whistling noise pierced past his ear. Seol had been taking several retreating steps but came to a halt when that happened. And when he carefully wiped his cheek, he found blood on his palm.

[What an insolent little human you are! Ohohoho!]

A high-pitched but rather alluring voice of a female suddenly rang around the air.

Seol quickly looked around his surroundings as confusion dyed his expression. He couldn't see or sense anything around him, yet... What just happened?

No, this wasn't the right time to dwell on such matters. The black color signified that he should escape right away. One wrong move and he would be dead.

He recovered his wits and hurriedly pulled the blank paper talisman out. And then...

[I can't tell what foolish thoughts led you to this place, but!]

....And then, without a shred of hesitation, he ripped it in half.

[You've used the Necessary Talisman.]

[...But! As a Guardian, I can not sit idly by and simply watch your insolence!]

[Scanning for the most 'needed spell' for the current situation... Please wait.]

[The punishment for intruding upon this holy site is your dea... What?]

The voice and the message continuously rang around in his ears. But then, eventually...

[The spell, Limited Area: Great Earthquake, has been activated.]

[An earthquake measuring 12 in magnitude will commence within the designated area.]

*Woong, woong, woong, woong!!!*

A massive barrier suddenly formed between the spot Seol was standing on and the mountainside. Then, this barrier expanded even further and completely surrounded the entire mountain range in the blink of an eye, with a membrane much, much thicker than any barrier Seol had seen up until now.

[W, what do you think you're doing, human?!]

The voice became urgent as this unexpected event continued to unfold.

Unfortunately for the owner of the voice, the actual spell hadn't even begun yet.

*Rumble!*

An indescribably terrifying roar attacked Seol's hearing. It was so loud that he lost all his hearing right away.

It was as if tens of thousands of fault lines were colliding with one another. And subsequently, the earth split...

The ground cracked apart like spider webs, and the whole mountain range began trembling.

*KWANG!*

The earth broke apart and exploded upwards.

Seol could only describe what he saw like that.

[Kyaaaaak!!]

Almost at the same time, a figure of a woman swiftly emerged from one of the trees trapped behind the barrier as her hair whipped about.

This was no longer on the level of a mountain slide or something similar – no, the entire mountain range itself was cracking apart and was collapsing from top to bottom while the ground exploded non-stop.

As he stood outside the barrier in safety, Seol couldn't really tell whether it was his eyesight twisting around or the actual mountain was being shredded into pieces. That was how absurdly scary the destructive force of the spell was.

[Uaaak! Uaaaaaak!!!]

The mountains and the ground undulated and broke apart over and over again, causing this figure of female to jump up and down like a madwoman. However, the quaking became even harsher, even more violent than before, and soon enough, even her screamings disappeared as well.

Seol dazedly looked on, before powerlessly collapsing to the ground. Witnessing this spectacle unfold right before his eyes, a nearly insurmountable fear had taken hold of his mind. Him sitting there on his knees, looking on while completely unscathed, that felt like a lie.

In the end, he squeezed his eyes shut and covered his ears.

When a calamity of such an unprecedented, heaven-changing scale descended, it didn't take long for everything trapped within the barrier to be annihilated into oblivion.

[You have successfully cleared the 'Impossible' difficulty mission.]

[You have received one One-time use VIP coupon.]

[172,800 Survival Points have been accredited to you.]

[Current Survival Points: 477,997.]

When the kneeling Seol opened his eyes after hearing those alerts resound in his ears, he was already back in the first-floor plaza.

“Huaaaa....”

Seol breathed out a sigh of relief as if he almost lost ten years of his life just now. His shocked heart was still pounding away madly. He remained on the ground, working hard to regulate his heavy and rough breathing.

‘It’s just a mission. Yeah, it was nothing more than just a simple mission...’

After managing to calm his fears, Seol finally noticed a small piece of paper resting on his chest. And it was the one-time use VIP store coupon. It was only then he realized that he had succeeded. The emotion of pure joy rushed in.

Seol clenched his fist tightly. He was uncertain and hesitant even when he was about to rip the mission parchment in half, but now that he managed to clear it, he was being overwhelmed by this sense of unadulterated joy and satisfaction.

After confirming the amount of SP he had, Seol got up to leave.

His comrades constantly advised him to invest in new armor and stuff, but he doggedly saved all of his points. And since he had received the extra rewards, he just knew that he’d never be able to get a good night’s rest from regret if he didn’t spend a dime and ended up leaving the Neutral Zone tomorrow.

While carefully carrying the coupon, Seol quickly ran up the stairs. He pushed the door to the eighth floor VIP store and entered, only to find that there was another customer here.

“Uh? You also came?”

It was none other than Odelette Delphine.

“What did you come to buy? I want to get a Divine Elixir, but apparently there isn’t one for mana anymore.”

Seol half-listened to Odelette Delphine’s complaints while hurriedly browsing the item list.

5. Divine Elixirs: 30,000 SP each – Strength x1, Endurance x1, Agility x1, Stamina x2, Luck x2

He was the one who bought all the available Mana Power Elixirs, but one bottle each of Agility and Luck Elixirs were gone as well. Seol’s teammates had purchased them. They did invest in their armors and equipment, but that didn’t mean that some of them lacked enough wiggle rooms to invest another 30,000 points on buying up the Elixirs.

“Delphine, are you planning to buy one of these Divine Elixirs?”

“Pardon? Oh, no, not really~. I’m not gonna buy them.”

“I understand. Uhm, hey miss? Give me every single Divine Elixir left in your inventory, please!”

“...Eh?”

A stupid-sounding gasp escaped from Odelette Delphine’s mouth after hearing Seol’s bold purchasing decision. 210,000 points disappeared in one go, as seven vials of Divine Elixirs entered Seol’s hands.

“And then...”

While he was saving his points, he had already made up his mind on what he wanted to buy. He only bought the Elixirs simply because he now had lots more points to burn all of a sudden.

10. Psychi’s Tears: 250,000 SP, x1

“Give me the Psychi’s Tears as well!”

“Ehhhhh?!”

With that, another 250,000 points were gone.

Now, the real problem began. Well, he wasn’t planning to earn that one-time use VIP store coupon, after all.

3. Moirai’s Souvenir: 600,000 SP, x1

4. Miya’s Branding Iron: 100,000 SP, x1

5. Divine Stigmata: 300,000 SP, x1

6. Seed of the World Tree: 400,000 SP, x1
7. Aphriso's Sedge: 150,000 SP each, x5

Seol didn't even bother to look at the items cheaper than 100,000 points. His eyes remained fixed on these five items as he deliberated on his choice for a long time.

'Heaven help me....'

Every single one of them possessed heaven-defying effects. After some deliberation, he had to tearfully exclude Miya's Branding Iron and Aphriso's Sedge from his choice and move on.

'Let's see. Moira's Souvenir, Divine Stigmata, and Seed of the World Tree.....'

After thinking about it seemingly for an eternity, Seol finally made up his mind.

"Give me.... the Divine Stigmata..."

There was only one reason for his decision.

Both the Moira's Souvenir and the Seed of the World Tree possessed an overall effect that seemed to benefit a group of people more. Meanwhile, the Divine Stigmata seemed more geared towards helping out one individual rather than many.

As soon as Seol presented the One-time use coupon, the eyes of the maid in charge of the VIP store and Odelette Delphine went extra round in shock.

"O, oh my!"

"Ueeeh!"

"Can I take it?"

Seol's question caused the dumbfounded maid to nod her head.

"Yes, yes, you can take anything you want with this.... B, bu, but, how?"

"Wha, what is this? This, isn't this that?! Right? You, did you clear that mission?! But, but! How did you do that?!"

Ignoring the two flustered females, Seol tightly grasped the marble that shone in a brilliant blue hue. Then, he turned around and quickly left the store. He ran to his next destination, the regular store that sold weapons. He feared that, if he remained in the VIP store for a second longer, he'd not be able to forget about the other two items.

The points still remaining: 17,997.

Seol could hear Odelette Delphine desperately calling out to him from behind, but he was unable to answer her, as his head was filled with a singular thought of getting rid of the remaining Survival Points as quickly as possible.

He spotted a handful of survivors browsing through the wares in the weapons store. Discovering Aragaki Yuzuha not too far from him, Seol raised his hand high and called out to her.

"Over here!"

"Yes?"

Yuzuha trotted over to his side unhurriedly.

"How much is the most expensive spear in this store?"

"The most expensive one? Then it's.... we have a spear that costs 22,500 points, but for you, it'll be 15,750. In any case, how can I help you?"

Unless one was talking about armors or items designed for Magicians and Priests, one wouldn't find high-priced weapons reserved for Warriors costing more than what one might find in the VIP store.

"Give it to me."

"...Eh?"

"Give me that spear. I'm buying it."

"Oh, oh my!! You're the best!"

Since all sales commissions counted towards her achievements, there was no way Yuzuha would hesitate and waste time here. She rapidly brought

out a spear that shone in the most arresting silver light one could imagine, and then, bent her waist 90 degrees in gratitude.

And out of the remaining 2197 points, Seol spent them all, bar the 1000 he needed to leave the Zone. Only then, his shopping spree came to an end.

“Euhehehehe...”

Seol continuously giggled like a madman as he climbed up the stairs, before covering his mouth in a hurry. Even if he felt like he was on cloud nine, his laughter sounded way too stupid for his own liking.

He decided to save the Divine Elixirs for a rainy day. He was thinking that he should use them only after he ran into some kind of a bottleneck when trying to get physically stronger. Since he had plenty more room to grow as he was, using these Elixirs now seemed like the height of stupidity, instead.

'As for the Divine Stigmata, I can only use it when I get to a temple...'

But, the remaining item could be used right away, no problem.

What a nice timing, then, as the night had approached and it was now time to hit the sack, anyway.

Seol returned to his quarters and finished packing things up. He switched off all the lights and headed to the bathroom. After chasing away Yun Seora who was hiding at the bottom of the bathtub, he lied down on the tub himself.

He stared at the clear liquid swirling around inside the small vial for a little while, before pulling the stopper out to drink every last drop of it.

As soon as the refreshing sensation of the liquid tickling his throat registered in his brain, he was hit by a powerful urge to sleep, perhaps to signal that the effects were already manifesting themselves.

Seol's expression was one of pure happiness as his eyes slowly closed shut.

He had no idea in his wildest dreams what might happen tomorrow morning.

## Chapter 38

Mana.

If one were to talk about this mysterious power, there would be no end to the conversation. However, if one were to define it in the simplest terms, then it could be called a 'unique gift'.

After the invaders devoured the Chief Deity, this power was the only method of resistance the humans had against the alien races.

Excluding one or two extreme cases, all humans generally possessed some amount of mana. An individual's growth potential was dictated by one's inborn talents or bloodlines, but without a doubt, humans were born with this power existing inside them already.

Pretty much everyone who used this power 'professionally' would say the same thing: it'd be for the best if one started training their mana as early in their lives as possible.

This advice wasn't simply meant to imply the fact that one's available amount of mana would increase from the training. One would also get to train the pathways in their bodies where the mana flowed, the so-called 'Circuit'.

Someone born with a great deal of this energy needed to pay close attention when they started their training. There had been several cases where the fragile Circuits couldn't endure the circulation of the mana and tore up. In some cases, their Circuits were destroyed completely.

Just as one would temper the steel repeatedly to remove impurities as much as possible, the 'Circuit' would also strengthen gradually as a manageable amount of mana constantly flowed through the pathway. Thus, training oneself from early on was indeed the right call to make.

However, the situation Seol faced was quite complicated.

His powers manifested when he was extremely young. A small pathway gradually formed when he followed his instinct and used his new-found power. Never did he once receive proper training; he didn't even consciously realize that he'd been abusing his power repeatedly.

And the moment he lost his power proved to be a critical point in his life.

Although he'd been using his mana almost subconsciously, he had been relying on it for almost 20 years. Inevitably, the amount of energy he could wield had grown by a lot. However, thanks to him suddenly abusing his power constantly, the Circuit that had been barely holding on was pushed to the brink and ended up breaking apart.

Thanks to 'Future Vision', his body instinctively 'remembered' new pathways that could be used alternatively. That led to Seol recovering his powers, but still, his old Circuit remained broken.

The reason why Seol chose 'Psychi's Tears' was because, after learning 'Mana Application', he regularly explored how the Circuit of his body operated while meditating and ended up discovering the broken pathway.

[Psychi's Tears]

The renowned alchemist of Scheherazade, Psychi.

He took pity on a woman whose body was ruined by disastrous mana training when she was still a young child.

For this woman, whose body continued to wither with the passing of every single day, Psychi relentlessly pursued knowledge and researched for a way to give back the life she yearned for.

He went on a long journey to procure all the ingredients for his elixir, and after conquering many arduous trials and tribulations, he was able to taste the fruits of success. However, when he returned to the city of Scheherazade, the woman he devoted his entire life to had already passed on from this world.

Many influential men desired to possess the results of his incredible journey, yet Psychi simply chose to head to the holy temple where the remains of the woman rested. There, he shed tears of sorrow and prayed.

He prayed that, even though he'd never see her again, at least let her receive this final gift from him.

The god was moved by this pure love that forsook one's honor and wealth that they saw fit to name this offering as Psychi's Tears.

And thus, the Psychi's Tears was born – the miraculous item that perhaps exemplified the purest essence of alchemy. The item that contained all of the knowledge a man gained throughout his entire life, from his youth to his old age.

\*

“Mm...”

Seol's sight was blurry. He blinked several times, causing the pooled secretion there to glide off his face.

He could hear the wet, splashing noises every time he tried to move. It almost felt like he was wading in a puddle of water or thick mud. His entire body felt sticky and heavy. Seol cautiously pushed his upper body up from the bathtub, only to begin retching out urgently.

“Euuuph...!”

The bitter, acrid odor of dried blood and the rotting stench of filth combined to assault his nose. Seol continued to vomit for a while, and after recovering, he noticed all the filthy secretion and excrement filling up the tub alongside him. A deep frown formed on his face.

There was rotting black blood filled with remnants of his peeled skin; sickly yellow liquid that could be either his sweat or puss; real, bona fide crap; and finally, completely unidentifiable floating hardened pieces of something...

All these disgusting and smelly excrements were doing their best to throw a party inside the tub. There were so much of these “substances” in the tub, Seol could scarcely believe that they all came out of his own body.

'I made the right call, sleeping in the bathtub....'

Seol held his breath while opening the taps. The warm water rushed out and managed to dislodge the hardened excrement, slowly washing them away.

Seol decided that he might as well take a bath too. He had a feeling that, once he leaves the Neutral Zone, taking a warm bath like this would be a luxury he might not be able to afford in a long, long while. Also, he wanted to get rid of all the dirty things off him as soon as possible, too.

He proceeded to pour the bathing supplements that aided with one's natural recovery and dipped his body down in the warm water. He stayed there for over 30 minutes and scrubbed his whole body clean twice. Only then did he feel fully refreshed.

Seol felt a lot more satisfied after seeing his much-cleaner reflection in the mirror. Before long, though, he fell into quiet contemplation. Now that he got rid of all the disgusting things off of him, it was time to confirm the effects of Psychi's Tears.

'Mm...'

He realized that the flow of his mana had become even smoother. Even though he never felt the flow was slow to begin with, it was still akin to someone who used 3G finally moving to LTE and discovering a brand new world out there or some such.

Seol soon figured out the reason from checking out his Circuit. Not only was his previously-broken Circuit fixed, but the overall length of his Circuit had become far greater as well. Also, the impurities blocking the pathway had been cleared away, which effectively meant that the overall width of the Circuit had increased several folds, too.

More importantly, since the amount that could flow through the Circuit increased, the vigor at which it flowed also strengthened in turn.

If he were to compare his previous flow of mana to a cute little stream of water trickling out from a valley, now it was like a majestic river that snaked and raged around quite freely.

And indeed, he found it even easier to control his mana. Goosebumps broke out from his skin after he realized how refreshing it felt as the energy spread around and enter even the tiniest acupuncture points all over his body.

From hereon, Seol would be able to output far more mana than what his current stats alluded to.

[Your Status Window]

[4. Abilities]

3. Other abilities (1)

—Reinforced Circuit (Superior)

'I wonder if this is what the famous Bone Marrow Cleansing feels like.'

Seol grinned after he checked his Status Window.

A strange set of coincidences led him to this point in time. If his Job had been a Sorcerer, he'd probably think that this was one of the greatest lucky chances he encountered in his life, something he'd most likely never encounter again.

However, Seol could only think about the recovery of his old pathway and remained oblivious of the actual truth.

\*

As soon as morning arrived, Seol ended up facing a storm of chaos. Odelette Delphine went around advertising the fact that he managed to successfully clear the Impossible mission, that was why. Thanks to her, he had to repeat the same line over and over again as he made his way down to the first floor.

"What is the meaning of this chaos?"

If it weren't for Cinzia making her timely entrance along with all the maids on the first-floor plaza, Seol would've spent the rest of his day explaining things.

But after receiving an explanation on what happened, even she got stunned. She took a quick look at the completely-empty noticeboard and a wry smile broke out on her lips.

"Looks like I owe Agnes an apology."

Overhearing that, the corners of Agnes's lips curled up a little.

A little bit of time later, a simple exit procedure commenced.

Cinzia offered a short praise for everyone, complimenting them for all their hard work for the last three months. Afterwards, the survivors paid 1000 SP and returned their smartphones.

After all that was said and done, the first floor was filled with the noises of heavy steel doors being dragged open.

"Go through there and the Paradise you've all been itching to enter will be waiting for you."

Cinzia spoke as she pointed towards the dark corridor.

"There won't be anyone guiding you out since we'll have to remain behind and deactivate the Neutral Zone. But I'm sure you lot are more than capable of walking through a corridor."

Perhaps realizing that she was making a joke, some survivors began chuckling in response.

"Well, nothing will happen anyways. We even prepared an open banquet area for you outside and all. All you have to do is to wait for those coming to fetch you. After that, negotiate, sign a contract, whatever.... In any case, you'll find simple meals ready for you on the tables placed outside. Quietly enjoy your breakfast and wait there."

Cinzia then pulled out a packet of cigarettes as if she was done with her speech, before opening her mouth again.

"Oh, and a request, if I may.... at least for today, don't fight."

She momentarily stopped talking in order to pull a cigarette out with her teeth, then continued on with a surprisingly serious tone of voice.

"I'm advising you to let the events of the Neutral Zone be bygones. Today's a day to celebrate, isn't that right?"

She lit the cigarette up, inhaled deeply, and a little while later, let the white smoke ease out from her nostrils and open lips.

"Especially you, the Invited.... I know very well how powerful your backers are. Being able to flaunt one's right to mobilize that many Marks, I'm sure they possess quite a bit of influence here."

"..."

"But it would be better for you to abandon petty grudges you have before leaving this place. Remember that."

There was a sound of someone snorting derisively coming from the crowd.

"Even though I made such a nice little request, you'd inevitably see some bloodshed on the first day.... Oh, well. The moment you step foot outside this place, you're no longer my concern, so do what you will."

Cinzia clicked her tongue and continued on while brushing her bangs upwards.

"With that, I declare the official closure of the Neutral Zone."

For the first time ever, she began smiling softly.

"It was a real chore to look after you lot. Let's not meet ever again."

She then spun around and left.

'Is that the end?'

Seol stared at the departing back of Cinzia, before surveying his surroundings. Others around him were showing similar reactions.

"Why are you still here?"

It was then, that woman's sharp voice dug into their ear canals one more time.

"Why aren't you leaving already? Do we have to hold your hands, too?"

Only then did the survivors began moving one by one. They shuffled towards the direction Cinzia pointed towards.

'So, it's.... really ending.'

Seol stared at one of the maids following Cinzia. Maybe she sensed his gaze, Agnes turned to gaze back at him. He dazedly waved his hand at her, and she replied him with the usual – the dignified, silent bow.

"Let's get going~! Off we go!"

Yi Seol-Ah excitedly grabbed Seol's arm and tugged at him.

'Really, this is it?'

Even while being dragged away, Seol kept on glancing behind him. He didn't want to miss a thing.

Desperately, he took in the sights of the Neutral Zone.

'I did run on the track like crazy, didn't I?'

He saw the mission noticeboard, now empty.

He also saw the lounge tables where he sat together with his teammates to have a chat, or to discuss strategy for their next mission.

'I practiced the Strike, Thrust, and Cut like crazy, too.'

....The gym where he trained like there was no tomorrow under Agnes's guidance; the stores he'd been windowshopping, wondering if there was anything eye-catching; the restaurant that he always ate in; and even his sleeping quarters that had been filled with the laughter and voices of the Yi siblings staying with him....

The memories of the past three months rapidly entered and left his brain.

The place where he desired for a change – the place where he was finally able to change.

The place that would forever remain in his memories, got further and further away from him until it became small enough to be hidden from his view with just a single fist. And soon, the darkness of the corridor swallowed the lights from the plaza and nothing could be seen anymore.

"Ah."

Seol was about to reach out, only to realize belatedly that Yi Seol-Ah was still holding onto his arm.



“...Orabeo-nim?”

Yi Seol-Ah tilted her head. Most of the survivors had left the corridor already, yet the youth was still hesitating to leave.

“Uhm... Yeah, let's go.”

Seol turned around to leave, yet he remained conflicted.

'But, why?'

He had been waiting for the end of the Neutral Zone for so long, yet...

'Why....?'

Only a few steps more, and he'd be entering Paradise, yet...

'....Why am I not happy?'

Only then, Seol understood why: he was unhappy about the fact that he had to leave the Neutral Zone.

Before he could do something about this realization, the darkness was suddenly pulled back from his surroundings. The brilliant sunlight stung his eyes, and a warm, humid breeze brushed past his skin.

Reflexively, Seol narrowed his eyes and slowly raised his hand.

The first thing he saw was the sky dyed in soft reddish hue under the blazing sun. And below that, a vast expanse of desolate plain cloaked in the muddy brown hue of nothingness. The plain stretched so far and wide, Seol momentarily thought that he could even see the end of the world where the heaven and the earth met.

'So, this is...'

...Paradise.

Indeed, he was now standing on Lost Paradise, where there was nothing as far as the eyes could see.

“I thought as much – it was a tower.”

Yi Sungjin's jaw didn't want to close as he looked upwards behind him.

A lone white tower stood on this desolate landscape. Its massive size made one shrink back from its majesty, yet one also couldn't help but think it was also rather beautiful as well.

“Why don't we have breakfast, now that we took a look around?”

Hyun Sangmin suddenly intruded on the trio as Seol dazedly stared at his new environment.

Just as Cinzia said, there were several wooden tables set up outside the tower with food placed on top.

“Can you see the person coming to fetch you?”

Seol slowly swept his gaze over to the crowd. It was quite noisy there as if people coming to fetch the survivors were already mixed up with them.

Seol slowly shook his head while looking at some people bumping their shoulders while crying out, “Amigo!” He couldn't see Kim Hannah anywhere.

“I don't think she's here yet.”

“Me too. Well, let's go over there. Everyone's gathered over that side.”

At the table Hyun Sangmin directed the youth to, Shin Sang-Ah and Yun Seora were already waiting for them.

“Anyways. For a place called Paradise, it's nothing much to look at, right?”

“Do you know where we are? Besides the tower, there's absolutely nothing around here.”

As the meal commenced, people began chatting amongst themselves. Hyun Sangmin complained that the guy who invited him was running late, while Shin Sang-Ah revealed her worries of being a Contracted, but then, said she was reasonably confident of her chances since she was now a Priest.

Seol didn't eat anything, only fidgeting the wooden cup containing some sort of a drink.

Only Yun Seora quietly studied Seol's bitter mood for a while before gently poking him with her finger.

“?”

Seol flinched and turned to look, and Yun Seora cautiously pointed behind him. Hao Win, sitting alongside his teammates, was waving at him.

Seol asked for others' permission and left the table to head over there.

“Your guy hasn't arrived yet?”

“Yes, she's not here yet. What about you, Hao Win?”

“I told them to take their time. I thought I might get a bit emotional today for some reason.”

Seol immediately identified with that sentiment and nodded his head.

“In any case, can you do something about this little lady over here with her head turned all the way around? She's been like this for a while.”

The little lady Hao Win referred to was naturally Odelette Delphine. Her arms remained locked across her chest while she didn't even spare Seol a glance. Both her cheeks were puffed up unhappily, too. Anyone could easily tell that she was royally pissed off from this sight.

“Miss Delphine?”

“Hmpf.”

“Are you still angry?”

“HMPH!”

Odelette Delphine continued to snort unhappily, leading Tong Chai to roar out in laughter.

“Honestly, I can't still believe it. You actually cleared the Impossible mission with nothing more than a single talisman.”

“I wasn't entirely sure about it. You could say that I had no plan, actually...”

Seol subconsciously rubbed his left cheek and shuddered. That thing, whatever it was, brushing past his cheek was probably meant to scare him.

However, what if the enemy aimed for his vital spots from the get-go?

He wouldn't even be able to stand in this place right now.

No matter how many times he replayed that scene in his head, he knew that he was this close to death back then.

“I nearly died. ... And I can't even remember what the hell I was thinking of back then, when challenging that mission.”

“So he says, Delphine. How about you stop being angry now?”

“Even then!”

Odelette Delphine spun around on her seat and stared at Seol and slammed the table with her hands.

“You could've said something!”

“But, if you died, then I...”

“Even then~~!!”

She jumped up from her seat, and...

“I also wanted to do that Impossible mission, too~!!”

She then ran up to Seol and grabbed hold of his arms before clinging onto him.

“I also really, really wanted to get my hands on the VIP store coupon~~~!!”

“...”

“You're so cheap, doing it all alone~. My VIP coupon~~!”

“...Ahahaha...”

Laughter burst out from Seol's mouth as he watched her cute whining. She reminded him of a little sister whimpering and complaining bitterly, and

he just couldn't help himself.

“You're such a dummy, Seooooooooo!!!!...”

She looked so adorable while complaining like that, so Seol lightly pinched her cheeks and pulled. She stared at him with unhappy eyes, and a sound of leaking air came out from her mouth.

“Buoooo... Uh?”

And then, as if she discovered something, her eyes opened even wider, and she jumped up and down. She waved around her hands and called out.

“Here!! I'm over here!!”

She ran away in airy steps. Seol thought that the person who invited her must've arrived. With a content smile on his lips, Hao Win retracted his gaze from Odelette Delphine and chuckled loudly.

“She's so full of energy, isn't she?”

“She sure is.”

“And you finally smiled.”

“Pardon?”

Seol quickly touched his face. Did he just smile?

“Well, you see, I thought that your face had this really depressing look for a while now~.”

“...Me?”

Now that he thought about it, the depression he felt after leaving the Neutral Zone seemed to have elevated just a tad. Just like how Hao Win implied – through Odelette Delphine's boundless energy and enthusiasm, he was now feeling just a bit better.

“Well, well, well. I won't make you stay for long, so let's just share a drink or two.”

“I will. Thank you.”

Seol nodded his head.

Although he got to make many good memories in the Zone, he couldn't stay there for the rest of his life, either. If there was a beginning, then naturally there would be an end, as well. And now, it was time for a new adventure to begin.

His mind felt much lighter when he thought like this.

“Very good. Now, everyone, cheers~.”

Although Odelette Delphine had left, Leorda Salvatore, Tong Chai, and Hao Win was still here.

And, just as four cups were about to clang together...

## Chapter 39

*Crash!*

Seol heard the noise of someone falling over, and then, a small commotion rose up from behind him.

He took a look, and immediately, his eyes widened in surprise.

The first two things entering his view were a chair and Hyun Sangmin falling and rolling on the ground. Then, he saw Shin Sang-Ah and Yun Seora standing up from their seats in utter shock. And in front of them, four men giggling in an unsightly manner.

“What are you doing?!”

“Don't! Get back!”

Just as Yi Seol-Ah was about to step out, Hyun Sangmin shouted at her from the ground.

“Son of a bitch... This is really humiliating... Kkeuk!”

The leader of the group then kicked Hyun Sangmin's midriff as the latter tried to push himself up. Hyun Sangmin fell and rolled on the ground again.

"Huh, you think this is embarrassing, eh?"

The leader spoke with a mocking voice, before tapping on Hyun Sangmin's chin with his foot.

"So, you know all about humiliation, huh. Then why didn't you quietly offer your apology when I asked you nicely? You'd have avoided all this humiliation in the first place. Don't you think so, amigo?"

Seol stood up from his seat while deeply frowning.

'Oh Minyoung?'

He saw Oh Minyoung sticking very close to one of the men, a burly guy, and cackling like a villain while looking on at what was happening. Her arms across her chest and a gloating expression etched on her face, too.

"I do feel sorry for you since you look like a worm and all, so I'll give you one more chance. Apologize to those two. Hurry up."

"..."

"I also don't want to do this. But you see, my brothers and I can't really hold ourselves back when someone does bad things to us."

The leader's words caused the burly guy to giggle derisively.

"You apologize from the bottom of your heart and then I'll forget all about today's matter."

Hyun Sangmin began gritting his teeth.

"Fuck... You're the guy who invited that bastard?"

"What if I am?"

"What a joke. A guy with a big physique prattling on like a little girl. You think I don't have a backer?"

"Ohh! That's right, you're also an Invited. I forgot."

Rather than sounding like he had genuinely forgotten about it, the leader acted as if he couldn't care any less.

"But, have you ever thought about this before?"

The leader squatted low to the ground and met Hyun Sangmin's eyes.

"It's not that your Inviter is running late, it's just him not deciding to show up in the first place."

"What?"

"Why, you ask? It's because he could also get humiliated if he tries to step forward like a fool."

The leader's husky voice gradually became lower. The knife scar on his cheek wiggled slightly as he grinned, his yellowing teeth revealed to the world as he did so.

"You'd do well to remember. Never take us Cartel boys lightly. Not every Bronze Marks are equal, got it...?"

Suddenly, another commotion unfolded behind the leader. When he looked behind him, he found a youth busy pushing past his underlings to come closer.

"Oh?"

The leader's eyes opened wider as he stood back up.

"It's you."

The leader raised his hand and waved away his boys as they tried to intervene.

"What's going on here?"

Seol's cold voice caused the leader to form an interesting facial expression.

"What a surprise. Not even another Inviter, but the Rookie himself steps forward."

'Rookie?'

"Mm... Now that I take a look at you, you do kinda look like a player."

Seol continued to glare at the leader. The latter man raised his hands in a shrugging gesture and began speaking in a jovial tone.

"Oh, this? It's nothing. My little brother over there, he suffered a lot at the hands of this guy here, or so I'm told. That's why I'm just repaying the favor."

"You should stop."

"Hm? Is there a reason why I should? I'm just paying back what's owed and there's nothing wrong with that."

"Miss Cinzia said so already. Let the matters of the Neutral Zone be bygones."

"Cinzia? Ohh... That's just some random bitch spewing crap. We are very sensitive towards the matters of our brothers, you see. Haven't you heard, blood is thicker than water?"

Seol's brows quivered slightly. Did this guy really call Cinzia, a boss from an organization that possesses a great deal of influence in the South, a bitch?

There were only two explanations for this. Either this guy was a brave idiot, or the organization backing him was as big as Cinzia's.

"This isn't a matter that an Inviter such as yourself should get involved with."

"I don't agree with that notion at all. Besides, technically, the Neutral Zone also exists as a part of Paradise. Am I right or am I wrong?"

The leader looked around him and asked, prompting his underlings to guffaw out, including the burly guy and Oh Minyoung. She laughed so hard, she might choke on her own spit at that rate.

The joke wasn't even all that funny to begin with, but she must've been laughing hard just to spite the others. What a disgusting sight it was.

"Okay. Now, if you're done, I'd like the third wheel to go away. I still have things to do."

"I'm not the third wheel."

The leader dusted his hands and turned around, only to come to a standstill.

"What did you say?"

"I asked Hyun Sangmin for the favor."

"Wait a minute. Wait, wait. Wait~."

The leader raised his hands theatrically and suddenly raised a fuss before taking several large strides to get closer to Seol.

"So, are you saying that you asked that man to torment my little brother? Is that it?"

"No, I didn't ask him to...."

"Doesn't matter. You say you are related to this thing, right?"

The leader took Seol's silence as his tacit agreement and rubbed his hands together, before placing a hand on the youth's shoulder.

"Hey, man... This is me giving you my sincerest advice. Do you know what is the most important thing you gotta remember in Paradise?"

"..."

"It's what you say. Your words. You gotta watch your mouth around this place."

The leader lightly tapped on his lips and continued to speak.

"I will ask you again, so think long and hard before answering, okay? Doesn't matter what your story is, you said you're not the third wheel in this mess, didn't you?"

"I already told you that."

When Seol replied without hesitation, a huge grin formed on the face of the leader.

"Okay. Ok~ay! So, that's how it was. In that case, our story changes a bit."

The leader became so happy, he even began lightly humming in pure joy as well.

"I thought I might get a Bronze Mark as a stooge or something, but now... A real, bona fide Gold Mark just rolled into my lap. Heh!"

Then, he sat down on one of the empty chairs and beckoned Seol. Hyun Sangmin was already long gone from his thought process, it seemed.

“Take a seat. Let me listen to your story. While we eat, no?”

The leader began shoving food found on the table down his mouth. Seol quietly stared at him, sensing that something wasn't quite right. The way his attitude had changed was one thing, and there was that oily smile of his, too.

“What are you doing, Rookie? I told you to sit down.”

More importantly, Seol didn't like the way this guy was acting, as if he knew something about the youth.

Seol took a glance at Hyun Sangmin, still pinned to the ground. The grinning burly guy was pushing down on him with a foot. Oh Minyoung was to his side, her foot stepping on Hyun Sangmin's hand, also carrying a distorted smile on her face.

'And why is she enjoying this so much?'

Seol couldn't really understand it, but he knew he couldn't do anything at the moment. As long as Hyun Sangmin was held captive, he couldn't make a rash move.

In the end, he sat down on the opposite side to the leader.

“Very good. ... Oh, where's my manners? I haven't introduced myself yet, right? Name's Salcido. Olivier Salcido.”

Salcido reached out with his hand.

And when Seol also reached out and grabbed the offered hand. ...

“!!”

Suddenly, he was greeted with pain as his hand was being gripped really tightly. Seol hurriedly injected some strength in his hand. Salcido simply gripped even tighter as if he didn't even find it challenging enough to care.

“Very nice to meet you. What's your name, by the way?”

“...Keuk.”

“I said, what's your name, eh? Ehehehe...”

Just before he cried out, Seol instinctively circulated his mana. The energy rapidly coursed through his internal Circuit, flowed through his right arm, and arrived at his right hand.

“Oh?”

However, Salcido was an Earthling who had stayed in Paradise for over a year and a half already. He quickly sensed the change and used his own mana. His initial plan was to break this new kid's spirit, but he also believed that he'd never lose to a complete newbie who didn't know anything.

That was how it was supposed to be.

But then...

“Wha, what?”

Salcido gasped out in shock. Not only his own energy was being rapidly extinguished, but Seol's aura was growing bigger and bigger at a frightening rate.

'I'm losing in both the amount and the flow speed?!'

Logically, such a thing was completely impossible.

In the blink of an eye, the situation had reversed. Salcido began sweating buckets as the pressure on his hand grew more and more.

“Eee..... Eeek!”

He couldn't even say anything out aloud since he had his reputation to worry about. Meanwhile, Seol simply stared at the deeply frowning Salcido with an expressionless face.

It was then, the others sensed that something was off. It was unimaginable for a Level 3 Earthling to lose to a youth who was still only at Level 1, but seeing Salcido's complexion turn for the worse, they suspected something did go wrong somewhere.

Two of the goons accompanying Salcido secretly exchanged signals and nodded their heads. One of them tried to sneak up on Seol, only for his steps to come to a halt after someone grabbed his shoulder.

“Hello there, friends.”

It was none other than Hao Win.

“Who the fuck are you?”

“I’m a friend of that friend, let’s put it like that.”

“Is that right? Why don’t you remove your hand first, unless you don’t want to live anymore?”

“Ohh, so scary. But I can’t do that.”

Hearing Hao Win’s playful tone, the man’s eyes narrowed to a slit.

“... You an Invited?”

“Correct answer.”

“Whatever. You should know when to quit if you know what’s good for you. You’ll regret it when you find out who we are.”

“Maybe. But I don’t know who you small fries are. But then. ...”

Hao Win grinned and let off a thin wisp of air. Just as he placed his head near the man’s ear. ...

There was a loud noise of a table being pushed aside.

Salcido couldn’t hold back anymore and shoved the table upwards, using that momentary confusion to break free from Seol’s grasp.

“You son of a bitch!”

Salcido succeeded in pulling his hand back, and he shouted out loudly. However. ...

*Slam!!*

Seol got to witness the following: the legs of the unsteady table planting back down to the ground, Salcido’s face slamming into the table’s surface, and a high heel forcing the hapless Cartel man’s head into the wooden surface from the back of his head.

“You finished your breakfast yet?”

The voice sounded familiar. Seol confirmed her long legs, as well as the grey H-line business woman’s skirt, and raised his head immediately.

And he saw Kim Hannah retracting her leg and placing her hands on her waist.

“Kkeuh. ... W, which motherfucker did that. ...?”

Salcido frowned deeply and lifted his head with much difficulty.

“Oh, you haven’t? Wanna eat some more?”

Unfortunately for him, Kim Hannah reached out faster than a streak of lightning and slammed his face down on the plate of food one more time.

*Clang!*

The impact was great enough for the plate to shatter.

The banquet area soon fell into utter silence as the new entrant to the banquet made her presence known.

The burly guy pressing down on Hyun Sangmin stood there blinking his eyes in shock. The mid-boss Salcido was taken care of in one breath, and two of his older brothers were being held back by Hao Win as well.

The burly man couldn’t figure out what was going on, but he also that he shouldn’t be standing there doing nothing.

“You crazy bitch!!”

So, the burly man tried to hit Kim Hannah with his fist, but. ...

*Whish! Plonk!*

A spinning dagger flew from somewhere and the burly man’s fist exploded into a gory mess, instead.

“Uwaaaahk?!”

Salcido’s entire body shuddered as he watched the burly man fall to the ground. He managed to move his face to the side and found the woman

wearing the business suit pressing his head down to the table. He sucked in his breath after confirming who it was.

“Kim. ... Kim Hannah!”

“Hi~. Been a while, no?”

She finally released his head and grinned widely. She walked around the table and sat down next to Seol. She then rested her chin on her hand and leisurely stared at Salcido.

“You’re still up to your old tricks, aren’t you?”

“What did you say?”

“How brave of you. Just whose Invited were you trying to steal away?”

“...I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Salcido managed to raise his upper torso up, but he was still shuddering noticeably.

“I was only...”

“Ahhh, so you’re trying to imply that you’ve been wronged here unfairly, is that it?”

Kim Hannah snorted briefly and cut short this conversation.

“My bad. Okay, so. It’s all sorted now, so go on. Get lost.”

Kim Hannah dismissively waved her hand about. Salcido just stood there and gnashed his teeth while glaring daggers at her.

But what was going on here?

Salcido, who was so full of himself only a minute ago, didn’t dare to utter a word of defiance in front of her.

“...I’ll be going then.”

“Good idea.”

“But, we’ll see each other soon enough. I’m thinking, we’ll have a chance to meet again pretty soon.”

Salcido pushed himself up unsteadily to his feet.

Unfortunately for him, Kim Hannah didn’t plan to let him off that easily.

“Stop. What did you just say to me?”

Her cold, sharp voice entered his ears, but Salcido ignored her and continued to walk away.

Kim Hannah grinned and beckoned with her finger.

“Shin Hansung?”

“Yes, Noonim.”

“If that fucker doesn’t stop in three steps, gift him with a new breathing hole by his temples, okay?”

“Understood.”

A man with curling hair, Shin Hansung replied while spinning a dagger around before taking on an attacking posture. Salcido’s steps came to a halt, then.

“You goddamn fox, are you really going to do this?”

“You said it yourself, didn’t you? There’s no reason to drag this out. Let’s just end it here.”

“...”

“Why are you suddenly imitating a mute asshole now? Weren’t you planning to go on a war with us?”

*Flinch.*

Salcido shuddered after receiving her cold, hard stare and lowered his gaze.



“Uhm... I made a mistake just now. I had no such intentions. I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry? Since when were you on the same social standing as me? Did you forget your brain somewhere or something?”

“I, I apologize.”

“Still forgetting something, aren’t you?”

“...I apologise, Ma’am”

“Hng~.” Kim Hannah let out a soft snort and shrugged her shoulders.

“Okay, fine. But, you weren't planning to leave just like that, were you?”

“T, that is...”

“You should take responsibility before leaving, no? Where are your manners? It's because of people like you that the Cartel is saddled with such rotten reputation.”

Kim Hannah's pointed criticism caused Salcido's brows to prick up in anger.

“Better lower your gaze or else.”

Of course, he ended up lowering his head again.

“So, how should we go about fixing this mess...?”

Kim Hannah mumbled to herself before shifting her gaze over to the burly man rolling on the ground, clutching his bleeding stump of an arm. She even pretended to be seriously deliberating on something.

“Okay. You can leave, but not with him. You understand why, don't you?”

“...”

“You did interfere first while mouthing some crap about Neutral Zone this and that. I'm just going to reciprocate that.”

“Bu, but!”

“If you've got a complaint, lodge it to Sinyoung directly, okay?”

As soon as she mentioned 'Sinyoung', Salcido's expression looked as if he just saw the scariest demon in his imagination.

“Sin, Sinyoung?”

“But, of course. I'm here because of Sinyoung's directive, after all. Since we're here now, I might as well fix your uncouth manners, too.”

“I... I understand, in that case.”

“Hyu, Hyungnim?!”

The burly man's tear and snot-stained face became frozen in shock. Salcido did his best to avoid meeting that painful gaze.

“Fine. All sorted, so you can leave now.”

“H, Hyungnim!”

The burly man called out in desperation, but Salcido hurriedly left the banquet area along with his goons. It was as if he was making a bid for his freedom with his life on the line.

“And then... You.”

Kim Hannah's next target was Oh Minyoung. When the attention landed on her all of a sudden, Oh Minyoung began retreating several steps.

“Is anyone among you in a contract with her? If you're here, then I want to talk to you.”

When Kim Hannah asked while sweeping her gaze around the crowd, a smart-looking man hurriedly ran up to her side.

“You're the one?”

“Y, yes, ma'am”

“That woman named Oh Minyoung, I'd like you to leave her to me. I'm sure you have some ideas as to why?”

“Y, yes, ma'am. I got a call this morning.”

The smart-looking man nodded his head repeatedly.

“Is that so? Well, we wouldn't really do something like this, but my company president is very unhappy at the moment, you see?”

“I completely understand. She's his daughter, after all.”

“Very good. I'll explain to her about the cancellation of her contract so you can leave now. As it was promised to you, you will receive a suitable compensation soon.”

“Yes, ma'am. Thank you very much.”

The smart-looking man bowed his waist 90 degrees, before disappearing like the wind from the area.

“Whew~.”

Kim Hannah let off a soft sigh, then locked her arm with Seol's.

“Sorry. Am I a bit late?”

Looking at her wink like that, Seol forgot all about closing his slack jaw.

Sinyoung Pharmaceuticals.

Kim Hannah, the department head.

Those two facts were the only things Seol knew about her until now.

But, after witnessing her sort out the situation in the proverbial blink of an eye, Seol got to figure out just a little bit more about the position Kim Hannah occupied in Lost Paradise.

## Chapter 40

Salcido's group left as if they were running away, and the man Oh Minyoung was contracted to also disappeared from the view without raising a fuss.

They certainly did not wish to get on Sinyoung's bad side, but whatever the case may be, the end result was that the burly guy and Oh Minyoung had been abandoned by their supposed backers.

It didn't matter whether one was an Invited or a Contracted. Now that they had lost their backers, it was easy to imagine what would happen to them.

“Clench your teeth real tight, got it?”

*Thwack!*

Blood spurted out from the burly guy's nose.

Now that the situation was reversed, Hyun Sangmin was like a fish swimming in water. He begged Kim Hannah for a chance to get even, and as soon as hearing the words 'Don't kill them' came out from her mouth, he proceeded to punch the burly guy in the face.

The burly guy was already too numb to notice the punch, and he collapsed to the ground like a piece of falling paper.

“Hey, you fucking son of a bitch, how do you feel now, huh?”

As if that one punch wasn't enough to satisfy him, Hyun Sangmin straddled on top of the burly guy and began pounding on him.

“You never imagined this is how it'll end, right? You fucking piece of shit!!”

The fists containing all of his emotions crushed the burly guy's nose before completely turning the bone into soft mush. The punches continued to hit the mark; soon, the burly guy went limp while the whites of his eyes showed.

Hyun Sangmin breathed out heavily while wiping his nose. He wasn't done yet, though. With a pair of still-burning eyes, he looked around, and...

“Where do you think you're going?!”

“Aaaahk?!”

He ran like a wild beast and snatched the hair of Oh Minyoung, who had almost managed to inch her way out of danger zone.

“Weren't you stepping on my hand real hard just now? Ah?”

*Slap!*

With that clear slapping noise, her head spun around hard enough as if it wanted to fly away from her neck.

“You clench your teeth, too.”

Hyun Sangmin forcibly made her face the right direction, before headbutting her, hard.

“Euup!!”

Her eyes wide open now, Oh Minyoung covered her mouth with both of her hands and fell hard to the ground.

Her pained screams couldn't escape from her broken mouth. She rolled around on the ground before bursting out in tears.

And as Hyun Sangmin began kicking her like a soccer ball, Seol was inwardly wondering what he should do here.

How should he describe this. ...?

Those two were indeed in the wrong. ... But, Seol thought that Hyun Sangmin was going just a bit overboard.

Even then, asking Hyun Sangmin to stop was a problem in itself, too.

[...Me, I can endure unfairness, but I can definitely not stand losing out.]

He said those things when they first met. One could technically argue that the reason why Hyun Sangmin ended up in the present situation was all because Seol asked him for a favor. So, trying to stop him now would be more or less like betraying him.

“Sangmin, stop. That's enough.”

It was then, a middle-aged man came out from the crowd and hurriedly approached Hyun Sangmin to grab his arm.

“Eish, who the hell. ... Oh, it's you, Ahjussi!”

Hyun Sangmin angrily shook his arm loose and shouted at the man.

“Why did you show up so late?”

“I'm sorry. Really. There was something I had to do.”

“Do you even know what happened to me just now?”

“I know. I understand, so let's stop for today, okay? She's a property of Sinyoung now, so if you damage her too much, we have to reimburse them.”

Seol didn't like the term 'property', but thankfully, Hyun Sangmin did stop his beatings after that. The middle-aged man quietly pushing Hyun Sangmin away was his Inviter.

“No need to feel sorry for her.”

Kim Hannah's voice remained icy cold.

“There should be more than a few people wanting to beat her up, you see.”

“Really?”

“Yep. That incident of Yun Seora getting beaten up? That woman incited the Cartel boys to do it.”

“?”

“You didn't know? I thought you already figured it all out. She was the one telling them her arm was damaged. She was the one leading them on, telling those idiots to attack Yun Seora, baiting the poor kid with the promise of some free points. That was all that b\*tch's handiwork.”

“Seriously?”

Seol dumbfoundedly stared at Oh Minyoung, currently pouring out her tears on the ground. What little sympathy he had for her flew away in an instant.

“That wasn't all, though. Didn't she kill the other girl in the Tutorial to steal away her coins? One hit at the back of the head with a mop! Pop!”

The youth with the curly hair suddenly butted in. The way he kept on smiling, he gave off an impression of being a pleasant fellow, almost to the

point where Seol found it scarcely believable that he destroyed the burly guy's hand with nothing but a dagger.

This youth saw Seol looking at him and began raising a big fuss.

“Ah! Hello there!! My name is...”

“Shin Hansung? Why don't you carry those two back to our carriage, mmkay?”

Just as Shin Hansung tried to weasel his way into the conversation, Kim Hannah suddenly assumed her characteristic prim and stiff expression.

“Che. Always making me do things you find annoying.”

“Oh, so should I do it?”

“Fine. I'm going.”

Shin Hansung complained as her sharp glare landed on him.

“That's why you haven't found a husband yet...”

“What did you just say?!”

But, before Kim Hannah could rage on, Shin Hansung quickly made his escape while dragging away the unconscious burly guy and the bitterly resisting Oh Minyoung.

Kim Hannah began gnashing her teeth as she glared at the curly haired youth, now already nothing more than a small speck in her view.

“That bastard...”

She must have sensed Seol's stare because she then suddenly calmed her heaving breaths and changed her expression.

“Have you eaten breakfast yet? Should we talk after you had something to eat first?”

Seol slowly shook his head. He lost his appetite after experiencing quite a few unexpected events right after leaving the Zone.

As if she was expecting this sort of response, Kim Hannah proceeded to sweep away the mess of plates off the table. It was here that she finally spotted Yun Seora standing there awkwardly near them and smiled quite brightly at her.

“Miss Yun Seora? I'm sorry, but we gotta have a bit of private chat between Seol and I.”

“....”

“Shin Hansung should return pretty soon, so why don't you grab an empty table and wait for him?”

Although the bushes were beat, it was pretty clear what was being implied here. Yun Seora was no dummy, either. She didn't seem too satisfied, but after glancing at Seol for a moment or two, she quietly turned around to leave.

Kim Hannah waited and watched on as Yun Seora gradually walked further away, before latching herself tightly to Seol's side.

“!?”

And the youth got to feel the softness of her curves as she pressed against his elbow. Just before the flustered youth could pull his arm away...

“Listen carefully, okay? While we talk, I'll show you two sets of contract papers.”

Kim Hannah's voice became much lower in tone.

“Two sets?”

“That's right, two. And when I place my hand on top of a document and start talking, you gotta be skeptical of everything I say, okay?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I don't have the time to explain it to you. I was supposed to take care of Yun Seora's contract too, but I got a sudden order to let Shin Hansung take care of that, instead. I'll try to obstruct him, but what with his slick tongue and all, he'll definitely butt in, so be mindful of that.”

In the middle of her speech, Kim Hannah signaled to Seol with her eyes. He didn't think much about it and took a simple glance around him before his expression became weird.

Now that some amount of time had passed by, all of the survivors, as well as those who had invited them or signed a contract with them, were here. And even though most of them were in the middle of negotiating with other survivors, some were sneaking glances at him, and a few were

openly staring at him from afar.

“And they are the ones wishing for our negotiation to fail.”

Kim Hannah narrowed her eyes rather prettily and whispered to Seol with a grave voice.

“You. . . You should know of your worth.”

“Noonim! I'm back~!”

It was right then a joyful voice entered their ears.

‘He's back already?’

Accompanied by Yun Seora, the curly-haired youth was walking closer to them while carrying an affable smile.

“And why are you sitting near us?”

Shin Hansung was about to occupy a seat on the opposite side to them, before an awkward smile crept on his face.

“Well, I just want to see the skills of the famed senior of mine?”

“You should stop the unfunny comedy routine and take care of your own contract signing, okay? Why are you trying to weasel your way into our conversation here?”

“Oww, come on now, there's plenty of space here, so please share~.”

“I told you to scram. You better listen while I'm still being civil.”

“Oww, don't be like that. In the end, both him and Miss Seora will sign with Sinyoung anyways.”

“And how do you know that?”

Hearing her icy tone of voice, Shin Hansung displayed a bit of surprised expression.

“It's not like that?”

“Don't you ever think that I don't know what's going on here. I've already figured out why the higher-ups sent you here with me. However, I believe I've already explained my position enough times by now.”

“Well, that is. . .”

“Of course, I'll do my utmost best today. But the final decision rests with him, understand? Don't forget, he's not a Contracted, but an Invited. Got that?”

“...I got it. Fine. I'll go away.”

‘He gave up more easily than I thought?’

He was supposed to cling on incessantly, yet the depressed-looking Shin Hansung turned around to leave.

However, Seol soon realized that he was underestimating this curly-haired youth. He dragged another table over and placed it close enough to touch Seol's.

Kim Hannah glared at Shin Hansung in a show of disbelief. Seol thought that, after witnessing the curly-haired youth sit down on his spot with a carefree attitude, this guy had to have a substantially thick skin.

There was one more thing Seol failed to figure out, though. And that was Yun Seora choosing a seat very close to him, rather than opposite to Shin Hansung's.

“I've kept you waiting, Young Lady. I'm sure you're curious about why I'm here instead of the Director, yes?”

With an attitude that seemed to imply he didn't mind whether the other party was listening in on or not, he began the contract negotiation.

“Well, the Director was embarrassed pretty badly. I'm sure you can guess the reason why. . .”

Yun Seora lowered her head a little.

“In any case, I'm also here to convey the message from the President.”

Those words caused her to raise her head; her eyes gained renewed light.

“...Directly from him?”

“Yes. It's not that long, though. Well, it's a no-frills, no-fat, refreshingly direct message, actually. You know what our President is like, right?”

Yun Seora nodded her head to indicate that he should go on.

Shin Hansung cleared his throat with a fake cough and spoke up.

“First of all, I congratulate you on entering Paradise. To be honest, I did not wish for you to step foot into this world, but now that things have turned out this way, I shall respect your choices.”

“...”

“However, your actions during the Tutorial and the Neutral Zone proved to be rather disappointing. Most likely, if you hadn't received that young man's aid, you wouldn't even have cleared the Neutral Zone. Your older sister is most embarrassed by you.”

Yun Seora's body flinched just a little, then.

“I won't say anything long. If you wish to remain in this world, then show me that you're prepared.”

Shin Hansung spoke up to here and placed a dagger on the table.

“When you get to the carriage, you'll find those two from earlier tied up and waiting. That burly guy and the woman. Remember them?”

“...Yes.”

“Kill them in front of the President and Lady Yun Seohui. With your own hands.”

Seol couldn't help but question his own hearing just then. She needed to do what now?

“The President added that you shouldn't even dream about coming to Sinyoung if you're unable to do even that. He said he would even use force to make you go back to Earth.”

Seol thought that Yun Seora would at least take a second or two to make her decision.

Unfortunately, she didn't.

“I don't care about the man, but is there a reason for me to kill that woman as well?”

“Of course. If you want reasons, there are plenty. That much, I can tell you without holding back.”

“I'll do it.”

She didn't even hesitate as she picked up the dagger.

“In that case, it's all good.”

Shin Hansung smiled and pulled the contract out.

“This here is a temporary contract. As soon as you perform the task assigned to you just now, this contract will come into effect.”

Yun Seora took her time to peruse the contents of the contract before promptly signing on the dotted line.

“Then, right away, I should...”

“Ahh, wait a minute, please.”

Shin Hansung raised both hands while looking a bit troubled by her willingness.

“It's just that, there's the condition of you performing the deed in front of the President, so... Although I can vouch for you, I'm sure you prefer to be certain, no?”

Yun Seora agreed with his notion.

Looking relieved now, Shin Hansung said his job was completed. Then, while resting his chin on both of his hands, he began gazing at the table next to his.

“...Ehew.”

Kim Hannah spat out a lengthy groan before producing two bundles of contracts as well as a pen.

“...First of all, good job.”

She then studied Seol for a bit.

“Also, thank you. For keeping the promise of negotiating with me first.”

“Well, it's... Nothing.”

She noticed that Seol was kind of getting embarrassed by her words, so without further ado, she placed the two contracts side by side on the table.

If the contents of the contract on the left seemed neatly summarized, then the one on the right side had small texts utterly filling up the page space top to bottom.

When he took a quick glance at both, he couldn't help but feel a bit odd. Especially the contract on the right – the more he read, the more his head tilted at the oddly restrictive clauses.

If he were to be more specific, then this contract was choke-a-full with wordings that could be interpreted either way.

Just as he discovered the words 'Kim Hannah' on the left document and 'Sinyoung' on the right, he could hear her continuing on.

“You already understand why the survivors leaving the Neutral Zone must sign a contract right away, right?”

Indeed, he could more or less figure out why, without hearing an explanation.

No matter how well one might pass the Tutorial or the Neutral Zone, when facing the gigantic stage called the Lost Paradise, one would be no different to a lost child wandering the edges of a river. In other words, this was the time where one needed both support and protection.

Of course, even now, a clear difference between the Contracted and the Invited existed. If the former was one-sidedly 'do as told', then the latter was more like 'via mutual agreement'. If an Invited didn't like the terms offered, then he or she could simply get up and leave the negotiating table.

“Mm... Well, then. Should I start with Sinyoung's offers, first?”

Kim Hannah started with her sales pitch.

“The moment you sign this contract with Sinyoung, the organization will immediately pay you 500 million won as a signing fee. Not in installments, but in one go.”

'500 million won?!'

Seol couldn't hide his shock at the amount. As someone who grew up in your typical lower-middle-class household, he'd never imagined having that much money.

“It's too early for you to be this surprised, you know.”

Kim Hannah crossed her arms in front of her chest and continued on with a business-like tone of voice.

“Sinyoung will support you in three key areas. First, financially. The moment you sign the contract, you'll become an employee of Sinyoung, whether it's here in Paradise or back on Earth. And every two weeks, five million won will be deposited to your bank account. In other words, you'll have a monthly salary of ten million won. You will also receive performance and merit-based bonuses along with regular year-end bonuses based on the going rate set by the HR. You will also receive mission clear payouts as well as payment for any danger you beared during your missions in Paradise. These should easily exceed your monthly salary. Of course, that's provisional to you passing the on-the-job probation period first.”

Kim Hannah rattled off the offered terms quite quickly.

“Secondly, they promise to provide you with an entire set of matching equipment for free every time you level up. It's the same even when you go on a team exploration or on a military expedition. And, they also promise you that, if types of equipment that suits your needs drop during a mission, then they are willing to let you have the first refusal.”

Seol slowly swallowed his saliva. The more he heard the offers, the less suspicious he was becoming. Or, at least that's how he felt.

“And, it seems like you enjoy training.”

“Training? What do you mean?”

He wasn't expecting to hear that.

“Right. Sinyoung possesses a training facility that won't lose to anyone in this world. If you want, Sinyoung's top Earthling will personally train you. And I assure you, that person's skills are a cut above Agnes's.”

He tried to listen while remaining skeptical, but it was getting harder and harder to do so.

"Let me assure you once more, these terms being offered, it's unprecedented in the entire history of Sinyoung. Even that legendary Sung Shihyun didn't enjoy this kind of treatment."

Just as she said, these terms were ridiculously good. Honestly, Seol was deeply tempted. As long as he signed on the dotted line, he'd be able to walk on a firm, solid path, whether that be on Earth or here in the Paradise.

"And then. ... As you can see, the contract's duration is for four years."

It was at this point that Kim Hannah placed her hand on the Sinyoung's contract papers.

[...When I place my hand on top of a document and start talking, you gotta be skeptical of everything I say, okay?]

Seol was in the midst of a heavy dilemma, but his thought process came to an abrupt halt as soon as that happened.

From here onwards. ... This would be the real thing.

"You might feel that this is more like a slave contract, but it's definitely not. It takes an average of around 4-5 years for a talented Earthling to rise up to higher levels. If you consider that fact, you can probably tell Sinyoung rates you very highly. In other words, Sinyoung is willing to throw everything and the kitchen sink to ensure that you'll rise up to the higher levels in less than four years."

....So, this was indeed a slave contract. They would initially accept him while pretending to value him greatly, then observe his growth for the next four years before deciding on what to do with him.

"And, the terms of this contract aren't static. As long as your level rises higher, we can always change the terms contained within for the better."

....Conversely, it could also get worse.

"Also, about that thing regarding them wanting to support you. ... Well, let me be honest with you here. You can think of this as an advance payment. At a bare minimum, you gotta reciprocate as much as you've received in Paradise. This is human nature, after all. Sinyoung is a business entity, don't forget; a huge organization, a corporation no less, is investing so much into your future. So, wouldn't it be only right for you to reward them accordingly? Am I wrong?"

"..."

"Well, you don't have to worry about it. Remember, Sinyoung isn't a place where you'd end up having nothing to do but sucking on thumbs, anyways. Most likely, you'll end up completely overworked for the next one, two years."

....What if he failed to reciprocate as much as he received?

"And finally. ... Sinyoung is indisputably the most powerful organization in Lost Paradise. I'm sure you've felt it after seeing what happened. Cinzia's Sicilia? Salcido's Cartel? They are nothing more than a bunch of stray cats in front of a real tiger. Sinyoung has swept everyone away once already, so even other famed organizations have no choice but to lower their heads and listen to what Sinyoung has to say."

"In other words, Sinyoung can become the most secure shield for you in your time of need."

....And because of that, they would certainly have a lot of enemies as well.

"Kyah, oh my. Hannah noonim, your sales pitch is really great."

Shin Hansung let out a squeal of admiration. His expression indicated how pleased he was.

Meanwhile, Kim Hannah gently lifted her hand away from the document. So, Seol shifted his gaze over to the other contract.

"Oh, and as for this contract. ... Well, I don't have anything too particular to say."

Seol decided to ask her instead.

"Now that I think about it, why are there two contracts for me?"

"Mm? Haven't I told you already? That golden stamp wasn't Sinyoung's property."

Kim Hannah's eyes went extra round as she feigned ignorance.

"That Gold Mark, I got that directly from a temple."

"From a temple?"

"Yeah. From the temple of Gula."

"...What?"



This time, it was Seol's eyes that went much wider at the mention of a name he wasn't expecting to hear.

"Gula. She's one of the seven gods supporting humanity in Paradise."

"Wait a minute. Does that mean I'll be signing directly with a god with you as a middleman?"

"Technically, yeah, something like that...."

Kim Hannah looked troubled as she lightly tapped on the table with her finger.

"Actually, even I'm not sure."

"About what?"

"It's true that I did receive the stamp. But what I heard back then was that there will come a time when I will have to use the stamp so I should hold onto it carefully. It so coincidentally ended up being used on you. If you want clarification on this matter, I think it might be better for you to directly ask Gula."

Kim Hannah shrugged her shoulders.

"In any case, that's not the most important matter right now. So, you've browsed through this contract already.... Right?"

At first glance, Seol could tell that this one didn't even contain half of what Sinyoung was offering.

"You'll see that what little support mentioned in there comes from under my name, but if you compare it to Sinyoung's, you should realize that it's not nearly as much."

She was right about that.

However, one couldn't say that the offered terms were all bad. It didn't try to restrict him for instance, nor demanded anything from him in return, either. And he didn't have to belong to any organization as well.

Although Kim Hannah's name was included in the contract, it was only up to the point of her providing personal protection whenever she could. The biggest, and perhaps the only advantage this contract had over the other one was that it promised Seol complete freedom.

"It can't be helped, right? The support implied on this contract is no more than Sinyoung acknowledging all your accomplishments, past, present and in the future; they will also try to keep an amicable relationship with you for the foreseeable future. That's all. So, if you want more than that, then sign over here."

Kim Hannah presented Sinyoung's contract papers.

"Well now, Noonim is making sure of everything, no? I'll personally make a glowing report back to the Director."

"Keep your pie-hole shut. Can't you see I'm in the middle of something?"

"Yes, ma'am! I shall keep my hole shut!"

Disregarding Shin Hansung's noisy chatter, Seol deliberated on his choices.

The terms offered by Sinyoung were, no matter how much he dissected it, incredibly tempting. There were several traps hidden in the clauses, but after hearing Kim Hannah's brief persuasion, it seemed like that everyone else was doing something similar in Paradise, anyways.

So what if he had to go under someone's umbrella? They wouldn't dispose of him, just like that. Surely not. If he showed how diligent he is, wouldn't they at least acknowledge his efforts?

And since he didn't enter the Paradise with some lofty ambition driving him, only this insatiable curiosity instead, he couldn't help but think that way.

However, something just didn't feel right.

For some reason, his heart was saying no again.

A giant presence, one he couldn't sense too clearly right now, was trying to reach out to him from the depths of the hidden darkness. That's how he felt.

'Besides, Kim Hannah wouldn't have said those words earlier, either....'

Should he choose the path of glorious shackles or that of perilous freedom?

Seol remained confused and uncertain in front of this crossroads, both directions filled with boundless possibilities. So, out of habit, he activated Nine Eyes.

'...Damn.'

And for the first time since the negotiation began, he ended up in dismay. He couldn't help it, though.

Yellow, orange, red, black...

If any one of these colors showed up, he was planning to not even consider the contract. That was what his ability was for, no?

Unfortunately, both contracts didn't shine in the four hues of danger.

One shined gold.

The other didn't have any color whatsoever.

This was a first for him.

"So, what will you do?"

Standing on the fork of crossing paths...

"...I..."

Seol realized that he was now facing one of the most important decisions in his life.

## Chapter 41

Even when he squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again... even when he deactivated and then reactivated Nine Eyes... it remained the same.

Kim Hannah's contract was gold, while Sinyoung's was colorless.

'And why are you shining in gold, of all things...?'

One thing he got to learn was that the 'Golden Commandment' applied to objects, not just people.

In any case, he couldn't be sure of what to do here, based only on what he was seeing and hearing.

He lacked enough information to make up his mind on one contract, while for the other one, he couldn't even figure out what it all meant.

He couldn't be sure of anything, but...

"I'll sign on this one."

After a lengthy deliberation, Seol chose Kim Hannah's contract.

"Huh?"

Shin Hansung's expression showed how stunned he was by Seol's choice.

"Ahh!"

Meanwhile, Yun Seora was completely taken by surprise and became quite flustered.

"Can you tell us the reason?"

Shin Hansung raised his voice, and Kim Hannah didn't try to stop the curly-haired youth. Instead, she lowered her head a little as her expression hardened, showing how shocked she was at the moment. Of course, she was putting on a performance.

"Do you not like the terms offered?"

"No, that's not actually it. Your terms are so amazingly good that it's to the point where I'm feeling burdened by their weight."

"It is alright if you are honest with us. If there's a clause that you don't like..."

"Not at all. I'm truly grateful that you have evaluated me so highly. But..."

As Seol blurred the ends of his sentence, he sneaked a glance in Kim Hannah's direction. He only continued on after confirming the corners of her lips arching up ever so slightly.

"...I have a certain personal reason for this choice. I can only feel remorse at refusing to sign such a wonderful contract. Not to mention, I should apologize to you as well."

He tried to condense his explanations to as few a word as possible. His considered but firm refusal implied that they should stop here before things got any more awkward than necessary.

Shin Hansung knew that, but he couldn't back off like this. He leaned forward with a determined expression on his face.

"Please, hear me out. It would be a lie if we didn't consider your future potential, but more than that, we also truly appreciate what you've done for us."

"..."

"Sinyoung is an organization that strictly rewards those who deserve it. Especially, your selfless actions of aiding Young Lady, the President's youngest daughter, we will definitely not forget about it. In fact, there are quite a few of us looking at you favorably already. Myself included."

The sweet words of temptation began pouring out from Shin Hansung's honey-dipped tongue. Too bad for him, Kim Hannah had already placed her hand on one of the contracts.

'Doesn't that also mean there are some people who don't want me there, too?'

He had roughly figured out that the relationship between Yun Seora and Sinyoung was a complicated one.

Out of the blue, Seol felt the sensation of touch softly wrapping around his right arm.

"Come with us, please..."

A pleading voice entered his ear canals. Yun Seora's stare trying to penetrate into Seol's soul was dyed in the emotions of anxiety.

"I, I'll do my best..."

'Your best in what exactly...?'

What could she even mean by that? Seol reined a fit of laughter almost breaking out of his mouth. Yun Seora's expression was far too serious for him to use a smile as his reply.

'This is a meaningless dilemma, isn't it?'

He didn't base his decision on Nine Eyes. He didn't rely on his emotions nor his logic.

There was one reason that he couldn't say out loud.

'Gula.'

[Come closer, my child...]

....The lingering memories from that dream. By this time, he had almost forgotten most of the contents. But the last moments still remained vivid in his head.

The final moments. The man he suspected to be himself made a request, yet it was denied. But in the end, Seol received 'emotions' in the form of a dream.

He was curious. He wanted to find out how the request of his dream version was met.

Of course, that wasn't all. He took into consideration both the warnings of Kim Hannah, as well as the golden stamp belonging to the Temple of Gula.

Also, there was this hard-to-understand fear in his heart that, once he signed up with Sinyoung, he'd get to live a life that was not much different from the one he experienced in the dream.

He sure as hell didn't want to be abused like a slave and also didn't really feel like being used as well.

Even if the road ahead might get hard and arduous, he wanted to live this life on his own terms.

So, he just had to shake his head to say no.

"We, we can really treat you well..."

Yun Seora's voice entering his ears sounded more tearful than before. Shin Hansung let off a soft sigh.

"Why don't we do this, then?"

Just as Seol picked up the pen with some difficulty, Kim Hannah broke her silence and spoke up.

“Give us some time.”

“Time?”

“Yeah. Well, we will need some time to adjust the contract, and you'll also need more time to dwell on things, right? And, you also need to go back home, too.”

Seol was about to sign on the dotted line, but the mere mention of 'home' sobered him right away.

'Home.'

He realized that over three months had passed by already. What happened back home on Earth? His family? What about Yoo Seonhwa? Were they worried about him after he disappeared without telling them anything?

“That's right. It's not a bad idea to give yourself some time to think things over.”

Shin Hansung quickly voiced his opinion.

Seol nodded his head to express his consent. Kim Hannah pocketed the contracts and stood up from her seat.

“Seol and I will be heading to the temple, but what about you two?”

“I shall take Miss Yun back to Sinyoung's HQ. After all, the President is waiting for her there. We'll just go our separate ways at the city of Scheherazade.”

As Shin Hansung stood up, Seol too vacated his seat. He hadn't a clue on what this temple and that Scheherazade were all about, but it seemed that he could go home for sure.

When he looked around, the negotiation talks were still ongoing everywhere.

He couldn't spot Shin Sang-Ah anywhere; Hyun Sangnin was in the middle of an important-looking talk, his arms moving about to illustrate his points.

Yi Seol-Ah was also in the middle of a lengthy talk with an unknown male. When her gaze met Seol's, she tried to stand up from her seat, but he simply waved his hand at her to indicate she shouldn't. He didn't want to interrupt her negotiation, after all. She must have understood his intentions because she sat back down while giggling to herself.

“Should we wait for them?”

Kim Hannah asked him, but Seol slowly shook his head.

It wasn't as if he didn't want to be around them anymore, but... Their own paths were being laid out now, and he didn't want to insert himself into their lives when it wasn't really necessary anymore.

'I'm sure we will see each other again.'

As long as they survived, they should, in the future.

Seol took in the sights of the Neutral Zone for one last time, before slowly turning around to leave.

\*

Since he heard that the method of transportation was a carriage, he thought it would be nothing more than a wooden cart being pulled by a couple of horses. But he got a pretty big surprise after seeing the actual thing.

This four-wheeled carriage was far closer to a luxury coach as it was covered in all four sides.

Seol dazedly stared at the leather and velvet-like fabric covering the roof section, before shifting his curious gaze over to four strange animals tied to the front of the coach and studied them with some interest.

Their overall appearance was similar to a horse, but their sharp ears and humped back gave off an impression of a camel, instead.

Shin Hansung forced the two people tied up near the driver's seat of the coach to drink a certain substance, and in the meantime, Kim Hannah climbed aboard.

“What are you two doing? Come on up.”

Seol and Yun Seora exchanged glances as they climbed aboard the coach. There were two bench seats facing each other inside.

Kim Hannah parked her rear on the spot facing Seol, while Yun Seora sat down right next to the youth.

Shortly afterwards, Kim Hannah closed the door, and the body of the coach shook a little, indicating that they were setting off. It only shook around in the beginning, and once they were on the move, the ride had become much more comfortable.

When they gained some speed, Kim Hannah opened her mouth.

“We will need around 40 minutes to get to our destination. We just have to travel along Zahrah.”

“Zahrah?”

“It's just the name of a road leading to Scheherazade. Don't worry about it though! I haven't heard news of monsters or other races attacking travelers on Zahrah for the past year or so.”

Seol tilted his head slightly. He still had no idea what was what, but these were things he had to learn about eventually.

*Clack, Clack.*

The coach speedily crossed the barren wasteland. During the ride, Seol was kept entertained by his companions.

Kim Hannah told him to let her know the place on Earth he wanted to teleport back to as soon as they arrived at their destination, before explaining things such as what he had to do after arriving there, the method of coming back once back on Earth, etc, etc.

There were many things that caught Seol's interest among them. And one of those was the revelation that the flow of time here was different to that of Earth's with the ratio of 3:1.

Meaning, Seol spending three months inside the Neutral Zone would equate to a month on Earth.

Besides those, Kim Hannah also talked about stuff that could be brought back from Earth to Paradise. And, perhaps staying vigilant of Yun Seora's presence, she didn't forget to sell Sinyoung's advantages every now and then as well. Every time that happened, Yun Seora looked at him with pleading eyes and/or tried to encourage his decision making with her soft voice. Seol couldn't help but feel a bit of pressure from this approach.

“Looks like we're almost there.”

Kim Hannah opened the coach's door and peeked outside before muttering out.

Seol too peeked his head out past the open door, and as fierce winds whipped his hair about, his jaw nearly dropped to the floor.

The enormous earth-colored fortress walls blindingly reflected the sunlight as they stood tall.

After confirming Seol's expression, a smile crept up on Kim Hannah's face.

“Welcome to Scheherazade.”

\*

The coach slowed down and continued on for another five minutes after going past the tall wall's entryway, before eventually coming to a halt.

They then heard light knocks against the door, and Shin Hansung's voice telling them that they had arrived.

“We should disembark here, then.”

Kim Hannah sent him a signal with her eyes and climbed out of the coach first.

Seol was about to follow after her, only to promptly realize why she sent him such a signal. Yun Seora was still holding onto his arm, that was why.

“I should get going now. Thank you for the past three months. It's been fun.”

How could she block him, since he was trying to go home? When he carefully extracted his arm, she didn't try to stop him. But, only until his wrist, though.

Just as Seol's right hand was about to leave her grasp, she carefully held onto him.

“Uhm...”

“M, Miss Yun Seora?”

“...I'd like to see you again.”

Unlike before, she let her desire be heard in a clear voice.

The first time he met her, her eyes seemed so cold and distant, yet for them to be this wet with emotions – Seol felt rather lost and hesitated

slightly.

“Yes, me too.”

Only then did she let his arm go. She never stopped looking at him even until the moment he finally left the coach for good. Seol closed the door behind him while licking his dried lips.

'It's like I'm abandoning a kid or something...'

The coach started and moved away. Seol's gaze continued to linger on the back of the coach as it slowly gained distance, before turning away to take in the sights of Scheherazade, the most prosperous city within the territory controlled by humanity.

Kim Hannah was waving her hand at him from the top of a stone staircase. And Seol could see behind her a spire so tall and upright, it seemed to pierce the heavens above.

While mounting the steps, Seol realized that the spire, or the tower, was made up of a strange construction material that emitted this pale hue that didn't seem quite right to be called white.

“That is the Temple of Luxuria. Out of the seven gods, she's the one in charge of healing skills used by the Priests.”

Upon hearing this, Seol could see countless people going in and out of the entranceway supported by huge pillars. Most of them were wearing the same ice-white robe Maria wore when she prepared herself for the Ceremony.

“In that case, could Maria be still here?”

“I think she's already left, though? Well, her recovery has ended already, and she can't return to the Neutral Zone, anyways.”

“Okay. To where?”

“To the south.”

Kim Hannah waltzed straight past the entrance. Upon entering, Seol was greeted by long corridors to both his sides, and in front, a slightly darkened assembly hall. He spotted a woman sitting behind a counter of some sort before the hall.

That woman lifted her tired eyes and stared as Kim Hannah approached her.

“What brings you here?”

“We came to use the transfer gate here.”

Kim Hannah presented a piece of paper to this woman.

“A Level 1.... The place he's returning to is Area 1.... Oh, it's his first time using this service?”

“He exited the Neutral Zone today.”

“Aaah, that's right, today's the day... In any case, we have to establish a new return point, then. Over here!”

The woman read the paper with squinting eyes, before suddenly raising her hand up high. An Asian man with black hair appeared from somewhere beyond the corridor and hurriedly came over. The reception lady(?) asked this new guy.

“You're from the Area 1, correct?”

“Yes.”

When she asked while handing over a piece of paper, the Asian man nodded his head.

“Then help me calculate the coordinates.”

“Let's see. Area 1, Seoul, Seodaemun District, the suburb of Hongeun... Ah, this shouldn't be too hard.”

The Asian man smiled.

“I have a place in the suburb of Eungam, you see.”

“I'll be relying on you, then. And, also...”

The woman stared straight at Seol.

“You weren't planning to head back to Earth looking like that, yes?”

“We'd like to utilize the storage service.”

Kim Hannah replied as if it was par for the course.

“Since you're Level 1, it's for free. Here. Please use room number 8. You know how it works, yes?”

“I've explained to him already.”

“You're a commendable guide, then.”

The woman handed over a small key with a plaque while looking rather relieved.

Seol received the key and walked down the path to his right. The interior further in was divided into several tall floors with walls glowing in an amber hue. And he saw many doors, each easily exceeding over two meters in height. He found a door with a silver '8' shining on the front and entered the room.

The items of Lost Paradise couldn't be taken back to Earth, with the exception of a few. This meant that he had to store his things away before leaving, and temples happened to be the most secure place to do so. While the asking fee was exorbitant, as his stuff would be protected by divine power, the security was pretty much the best out there.

However, one could only use this service for free at Level 1 and 2. Once one became Level 3, at which point he'd be considered as an actual, true combat force, he'd have to spend something called 'achievement points' if he wanted to use either the transfer gate or the storage service.

He propped his two spears against the wall and took off his armors. He still had the clothes he wore from Earth, but they were far too tattered now. What a relief it was, since Kim Hannah and her discerning fashion sense brought along some clothes and underwear for his usage.

'I forgot to thank her.'

Seol finished getting dressed and checked his items one last time. He had to leave behind Elixirs as well as the Divine Stigmata. He was slightly worried about them being stolen, but since a god was personally protecting the temple, he thought he should believe the security of this place for now.

He finished sorting through his articles and left the storage room before locking the door. The silver '8' on the door then changed its colour to gold. From here onwards, only Seol could open this door. Even if someone else came in possession of the door's key, it would still not open.

While walking on the corridor, Seol fell into deep thought.

He couldn't really believe that he was returning to Earth this easily. Why? Back inside the dream, 'he' couldn't return to Earth even after a considerable length of time passed by since his departure from the Neutral Zone. The dream version of him missed home a lot during the early part of his life here. Was this yet another difference between Contracted and Invited?

Seol couldn't help but feel a bit of regret. He may have accepted the fact that he had to leave the Neutral Zone. But, leaving behind the attachments formed through interactions proved to be another problem altogether.

'What are the kids doing now, I wonder?'

Did they sign their contracts alright? They probably wanted to go back home, too. Should he have waited for them to finish and leave together?

At least, he should've said goodbyes before leaving. He only signaled to them with his eyes because he didn't want to disturb them, but now, he was feeling a bit of regret doing that.

When Seol got back to the reception, the Asian man was no longer there. Only Kim Hannah and the reception lady(?) were waiting for him.

The lady beckoned the youth to come closer.

“Show me the back of your hand, please.”

When Seol wordlessly presented his left hand, she placed another paper with a complicated diagram drawn on its surface there and pressed it tightly to his skin.

“And with this, your return coordinates have been set. Whenever you use the transfer gate from here onwards, you will always arrive at the address you provided us. If you plan to move house, you need to tell us right away. Or we might end up causing unnecessary chaos on Earth.”

“I understand.”

Seol replied and returned the key. Kim Hannah explained previously that he needed to do that once he was done with storing his items. The lady opened her eyes slightly wider before giving him a slip with a number '8' written on it.

“Hmm. ... I'm sure you heard the explanations already, but still, don't forget to take good care of this slip. And also, you know that, after retrieving your stored items, you need to confirm the color of the number on the door, yes?”

“Yes. From gold to silver.”

“Correct. If the color remains gold, that means you left something behind. Unless you wish to extend the period of the storage service, things will get mighty complicated for both sides, so please, check thoroughly.”

The reception lady(?) sounded rather resentful about something. She then handed two more pieces of paper to Seol.

“One of these is used when you wish to return to Paradise. You've performed missions back in the Neutral Zone, so you should know that when you tear this in half, a transfer portal will open for you. People who don't possess any Markings whatsoever won't be able to see the portal nor feel its presence, but still, I recommend finding a quiet place with no one else nearby.”

“What about the other one...?”

“It's the list of items you can bring back from Earth. It's your first time, so peruse the list and familiarise yourself with the contents.”

Seol carefully tucked both papers inside his pocket.

“Whew, whew, whew, whew! All finished! Now then, you just need to sign over here...”

The lady pushed forward yet another paper, a document this time, for Seol to sign while sounding as if they were finally near the finish line. It was a non-disclosure agreement, forbidding Seol from revealing anything even remotely related to the Lost Paradise to other people on Earth.

Such an agreement was also covered by the divine powers, so the moment it was signed, the god's powers ensured that the terms would be enforced no matter what. One could tell how much thought had been given to maintaining the secrecy.

He already knew as much from the dream. And Kim Hannah explained it too during the coach ride, so Seol signed the document without too much fuss. Honestly, there were a few things that irritated him slightly. But as these processes had to be performed for someone wanting to use the transfer gate for the first time, he said nothing and endured.

“Very good. Please head inside the assembly area behind me and use the gate there.”

Finally, he was allowed to leave.

“You finished much faster than I thought.”

“Well, there wasn't anything too complicated, after all.”

“Okay, let's go.”

Kim Hannah stepped forward first.

“...”

Just before he entered the assembly hall, Seol took the last lingering look behind him and sighed out softly. But, before he could enter...

*Tap, tap, tap, tap.*

Suddenly, echoes of hurried footsteps rang out, and...

“Wait for me!”

....And, a familiar voice called out to him.

Seol turned around in surprise. Kim Hannah too was rather puzzled as well.

“Why is she here...?”

They saw her leave with the coach not too long ago, so...

The woman supporting her body with her arm against the wall near the entrance while panting heavily was none other than Yun Seora.

She looked relieved after finding out that Seol hadn't left yet. She regulated her heavy breathing, swallowed her saliva, and shouted out a question.

“Your name!”

“?”

“Please... tell me your name!”

Seol's expression hardened considerably.



“Seo...”

His mouth opened reflexively, before closing shut again. His lips quivered uncontrollably.

“Seol...”

“But that... Isn't that your surname?”

He was about to say his name was Seol. But suddenly, his eyes grew wider and wider.

His heart was beating wildly now. His sight blurred.

“H, how...”

“When you entered the second floor in the Tutorial, there was an alert. I heard your name then, but I forgot... The alert said, Mister Seol... something has arrived on the second floor.”

“Ah.”

So, in the end, someone did hear the alert.

“I always thought it was strange. Your name was definitely three words, yet you kept calling yourself 'Seol' all the time...”

“T, that's...”

Her words hit the bullseye, and Seol began stuttering.

“You name.... Can you please tell me your full name?”

Seol closed his eyes shut.

Quite inexplicably, the days he spent in the Neutral Zone brushed past his consciousness.

In the mornings, he ate breakfast with Yi Seol-Ah, Yi Sungjin, and Yun Seora.

Then, he met with his teammates on the first floor and discussed the day's schedule and battle tactics.

They did their best to complete various missions.

When they successfully cleared missions, they would head off to a lounge and chat over refreshing drinks.

He sometimes met with Shin Sang-Ah and Hyun Sangmin and asked them how they were doing.

He then returned to his quarters, share the day's activities with his roommates, before falling asleep.....

It didn't matter how many times he recalled them, those were good memories.

When he opened his eyes, he found Yun Seora quietly waiting for him, her breathing now normal.

“M, my name, it's...”

His throat dried up. If his heart pounded any harder, it might explode out of his chest.

It'd be three, maybe four years since he willingly revealed his full name.

An all-too familiar sensation of vertigo finally left him, allowing Seol to take a deep breath.

His trembling lips parted and let the air out.

“My name is...”

And, finally....

“...Jihu.”

...Seol was now Seol Jihu.

“My name is Seol Jihu.”

He stared straight at Yun Seora and smiled dimly.

\*

As he was walking past the assembly hall and towards the gate.

“Was there a reason to hesitate telling her your full name?”

Kim Hannah asked him.

“Now that I think about it, I was getting kind of curious, too. Why did you always say your name was Seol? I mean, that's your surname, right?”

Seol Jihu kept on walking resolutely for a while, before slowly opening his mouth.

“...I was Seol.”

“Hm?”

“For the last 3-4 years, I was Seol.”

Kim Hannah's expression reflected how confused she was. She wouldn't know, of course. It was the story from the days when he was still addicted to gambling, after all.

His family disowned him.

His title gradually changed from 'son' to 'idiot', then to 'bastard', then finally to 'lying asshole'. In the end, never mind being referred to his name, he wasn't even treated like a human being anymore.

The distance between him and his love also widened.

And he even got called a son of a bitch by her.

Before he knew it, no one was calling him by his name.

And he stopped telling others what his full name was, too.

Only that, back in the casino, some people called out to him using Mister Seol, Seol Hyung, etc, etc.

And so, Seol began accepting that as his name.

“Mm... Okay. So, why did you decide to reveal your full name, then?”

Seol Jihu momentarily stopped walking.

“Not sure.”

His gaze drifted up to the ceiling, unable to come up with a sound explanation even though he tried.

“I'm not sure. It's just...”

“Just?”

“I thought that now I can... No, maybe I can't be certain of that, but...”

Seol Jihu slowly lowered his gaze back down.

“At least, I thought that, if it's Miss Yun Seora...”

He swept up the back of his long hair and smiled wryly.

“...I should be able to tell her my name without being embarrassed about it.”

## Chapter 42

“I deposited some money into your bank account.”

Just as they arrived near the transfer gate, Kim Hannah told Seol Jihu.

He had been dazedly looking at the massive oval-shaped portal and was caught off-guard. His eyes widened in surprise.

“Money? But, I haven't...”

“It's not the contract signing fee. You'll only get that after signing the contract.”

Kim Hannah cut him off before he went any further.

“Just think of it as a small gift from me saying thanks. I'll be able to move around a bit easier now all thanks to you.”

“Uh, sure... But, is it okay for me to receive this money?”

“Of course. This is the reward that you totally deserve, so don't sweat it and spend as you like.”

“Uhm, thanks.”

“What do you mean, thanks? I should be the one thanking you. Anyways, go confirm it once you arrive on the other side. I've taken only a little bit out of my own allowance, so don't get your hopes up too much. In any case, there are things you gotta take care of first, am I right?”

She was right about that. Not only did he have financial debts to pay off, but there were also other forms of debt he had to clear up.

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

“Okay. You can spend it in any shape or form you want, but put out the urgent fires first, okay? Not on useless stuff. Making sure that there won't be any trouble back on Earth is one of the tenets the Earthlings must adhere to.”

Seol Jihu stood before the gate. The blue-colored substance gently waving in front of him emitted a blindingly arresting light.

“It should be around the middle of April when you return. I'll spend another day here before going back to Earth. I'll give you a call in... about eight hours later in the Earth time.”

Seol Jihu's attention was focused solely on the portal in front of him, and he could just barely nod his head to show he had heard her, before he cautiously stepped forward to enter. Almost right away, the back of his left hand began emitting bright light, and then, an even brighter light, powerful enough to blind the onlookers, swallowed him.

As the youth was gradually enveloped by the brilliant light, Kim Hannah shouted out while waving her hand.

“You better answer my call, okay? If you don't, I'm gonna march straight to your home! Seol Jihu!”

As the sensation of being sucked in took over, Seol Jihu closed his eyes.

\*

When he opened his eyes, he could see the familiar sight of his rented room.

He was inwardly worried whether he could really come back home, and that he'd not end up in some weird destination instead, but the end result was a resounding success. Seol Jihu didn't know who that man was, but that guy definitely did calculate the coordinates accurately.

His relief lasted only for a brief moment, however. Seol Jihu frowned deeply and covered his nose. A seriously foul stench suddenly assaulted his senses, that was why. When he swept his gaze around, he couldn't help let out a shocked gasp. This place was an utter mess.

He opened the windows to let the fresh air in. Seol Jihu took a deep breath and wordlessly studied the streets outside. He spotted college students giggling and talking among themselves as they walked, a taxi slowly driving down the hill...

'I'm back.'

He could more or less appreciate the fact that he was back on Earth for real.

'What time is it?'

Seol Jihu instinctively rummaged through his pockets only to realize that his phone was nowhere to be found.

“...Ah.”

He remembered that the mobile phone was one of the items prohibited from entering Paradise. Which meant that it had been left behind in front of Yu Seon-Hwah's place a month ago. He probably left his bank card there as well.

Thinking of confirming the time, Seol Jihu had no choice but to switch his old laptop on. It was thickly coated with dust, but thankfully, it turned on without a problem.

17th April, Monday  
09:14:07 AM

'I was summoned on the 16th of March...'

It seemed that the time difference between the Earth and the Paradise being around 1 to 3 was correct. Now that he confirmed the time, Seol fell into a slight dilemma.

'What should I do now?'

It wasn't that he had nothing to do, but he had way too many things to do, instead.

There was a reason why Kim Hannah told him to come back to Earth. She demanded that he made sure accessing Paradise from Earth would be a trouble-free affair moving on. If he was reported as missing for some reason, then there would be a lot of headaches for everyone involved.

In that regard, one could say that Seol Jihu was already able to move around quite freely. Unless he was the one contacting them first, his family or Yoo Seonhwa would never call him on their own volition. They hadn't called him in the last few years, after all. Even his close friends stopped talking to him a long time ago.

'...Wait, that's not something to be happy about, is it.'

He needed to right all the wrongs he committed, one by one. And in order to do so, he needed money. He could now understand why Kim Hannah left him with some cash.

'Okay, first....'

Seol Jihu connected to the internet wirelessly. He accessed his bank account online, and when he saw the amount there, he gasped out in shock.

“What?! ₩150 million?!”

It was a sum with seven zeroes. He was thinking of a couple thousand at most, so this amount completely shocked him.

“What the heck.... That woman, she said it's from her allowance, so how come....”

Since he didn't know how much Kim Hannah made in a month, or how much her combined asset could be, perhaps it wasn't that strange for him to react in this manner.

Seol Jihu continued to look at the laptop's monitor and not long after that, spotted the transaction history of Yoo Seonhwa transferring ₩2 million. That sobered him up in an instant.

He had returned the money in cash, but he had 'borrowed' from her lots more besides that amount. When he checked the transaction history for the past three, four years, a bitter chuckle escaped from his mouth.

'I have to pay her back first.'

It took him quite a bit of time to tally up every cent he owed, but he persevered and carried on.

'Dad paid back around ₩28 million.... Mom, ₩16 million.... Hyung lent me 2.2 mil.... Jinhee, 600,000.... Ah, right. I stole her laptop and her car too.'

He had already sold the laptop at a flea market, and he left that car in a pawn shop near the casino. As the details of his past wrongdoings reared their ugly heads in his head, his guilty conscience swelled up uncontrollably. He might end up paying back more than necessary, but he didn't want to ask anything from them in return.

He finalized the amount he took from Yoo Seonhwa and got a nasty shock.

'I, I borrowed this much from her?'

Even a casual calculation said it was around 46 million. He had no idea during the time when he was taking small bites here and there, but now that he finished tallying them up, the amount was no laughing matter at all.

'Where did she even find that much money to begin with....'

Seol Jihu sighed. Suddenly, the amount of ₩150 million seemed rather inadequate. Of course, he wasn't going to hold back here. After all, only by resolving all of his previous financial indiscretions, would he be able to properly move on and take the first step in his new life.

'In any case, I don't even have a phone or my bank card....'

If there was a silver lining here, then that would be him having only his phone and the lone bank card he frequently used on person that day. He managed to dig out his nearly-forgotten wallet from the corner of his room and put on his shoes, before taking his leave.

The first place he stopped by was the bank. He immediately got a new card to replace the lost one, and paid in full ₩30 million he borrowed from the money lenders. And then, he withdrew the rest of ₩120 million in cash. He got 24 bundles of ₩50 thousand bills, each bundle containing 100 notes.

He grabbed a taxi as soon as exiting the bank.

He had taken care of the most urgent first.

His pockets were full, too.

His next destination?

Obviously, it was the casino.

\*

As soon as he arrived at the Seorak Land Casino, Seol Jihu asked the security staff to ban him permanently from entering the premises.

Fearing that he might run into someone who recognized him there, he hurriedly stopped by the nearby pawnshop to recover the car. The interest had piled up pretty high, but he was happy enough to get the car back. His little sister used to go on and on about driving, so their father went and bought this car for her when she got admitted to a very famous university. It may not have been an expensive model, but it had sentimental value.

Now that he had a car, he no longer needed a taxi. While driving back to the family home, he stopped by at a computer store and bought the latest, top-of-the-line notebook as well.

Seol Jihu parked the car at an adequate-enough place, and he walked up to the front gate of the family's house as his heart pounded away.

He saw the doorbell, but his hands didn't want to rise up.

He briefly entertained the idea of leaving everything behind here and just leave before he was seen. He didn't think about the possibility of this event happening, but now that he was here, he no longer felt confident enough to face his family.

He spent the next several dozen minutes in front of the house. His hands repeatedly rose up to the bell before falling back down again. In the end, though, Seol Jihu took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

Maybe his knocking was too soft because there was no reaction.

'Maybe no one's home?'

He swallowed his saliva and slowly keyed in the door code. He then heard the gate unlock.

He cautiously stepped inside the building, but then, he had to come to an abrupt stop. A man wearing a pair of glasses stood on the stairs to the second floor and was looking back at him with an unfriendly expression on his face.

“H, Hyung.”

He was Seol Wooseok, his older brother.

“Y, you haven't left for work yet...?”

“...”

Seol Wooseok glared at him before silently turning around and going back upstairs.

*Slam!!*

Soon, the sound of a door slamming shut that was loud enough to make Seol Jihu flinch, resounded out.

'...Of course.'

His expectations took a knock just now, but then again, he was in no position to expect anything else to begin with. However, he still wanted to apologize. He figured that it'd be for the best to finish his thing and leave as soon as possible.

He placed an envelope filled with money in front of Seol Wooseok's room and then headed straight to his little sister's room.

He found Seol Jinhee sound asleep on her bed wearing nothing but a sleeveless shirt and underwear. She was drooling, too.

'Yeah, skipping Monday morning lectures was an important ritual for her, wasn't it.'

Regardless, she possessed keen senses. Seol very carefully pulled the sheets to cover her up, then placed the laptop on her desk. He pulled out the car keys and ₩5 million and tucked them inside her handbag too. And just as he was about to creep out of her room...

“You.”

Her voice still sounded sleepy, but at the same time, it was also definitely not friendly.

“What do you want?”

Accompanied by the sounds of fabric rustling, Seol Jinhee kicked the sheets and got up. Seol Jihu flinched slightly.

“Y, you were awake?”

“Who the hell are you to enter my room without my permission?”

She stepped away from the bed and strode towards him. Then, her eyes fell on her desk.

“I was wondering what the hell you were doing... You came here to give me this?”

“Huh? Uh, yeah.”

Seol Jinhee began frowning as if seeing his face made her nauseous.

“What a joke.”

She suddenly grabbed the laptop and threw it hard. It landed on the ground with a loud thud and bounced around.

“Take it and get lost.”

“W, wait. Jinhee..”

“Jinhee, my ass. I don't care, so get the hell out of here, right now!!”

She stomped in closer to Seol Jihu and angrily pushed him. He wasn't planning to resist her in the first place, so he backpedaled several times before landing hard on his butt.

Not even bothering to see if he was hurt or not, she snorted derisively and picked up her handbag.

“What a fucking joke. What, you finally won some money at the casino? Why else would a damn thief like you suddenly think about his little sister?”

Her expression remained mocking as she took a look inside her handbag...

“??”

She saw the bundle of bills amounting to ₩5 million as well as the car keys, and she cocked up an eyebrow. She blinked a couple of times and then lifted her head.

“Big brother?”

She wasn't speaking to Seol Jihu.

Before anyone noticed, Seol Wooseok was entering the room with an envelope in his hand.

He was worried that Seol Jihu might cause a problem and quickly came here, but upon encountering a situation that could be described as the total opposite to what he was worried about, all he could do was to alternate his gaze between his siblings.

“...What is this?”

His voice sounded hard and firm. He threw the envelope on the floor, causing the bills inside to spill out. Seol Jinhee's eyes widened.

“What, what the hell?! How much is this?”

She began counting, then her jaw nearly dropped to the floor.

“50 mil...”

And then, she looked back into the handbag.

“55 million?!”

She then remembered the car key and the laptop as well.

“Ha... you must have hit a jackpot, huh?”

“Jinhee, return everything back to him.”

When Seol Wooweok spoke in a cold tone, Seol Jinhee shot a glare at him.

“Why? Are you mad?”

“It's obvious. He got this money through gambling.”

“It's still money, isn't it? No! I won't give it back!”

Seol Wooseok reached out to snatch the cash away from her hands, but she yanked the handbag away and the envelope with money in it before shoving them both underneath her clothes to hug them tightly.

“Seol Jinhee!!”

“What?!”

“You really want that dirty money?”

“Dirty or not, this money rightly belongs to this family! It belongs to us in the first place, don't you get that? Don't you know how much dad and mom are struggling nowadays?”

When the two Seol siblings' emotions began running high, Seol Jihu hurriedly intervened and separated them apart. He didn't come here to watch them fight. He at least needed to resolve this misunderstanding before doing anything else.

“Hyung, Jinhee, you guys got it wrong. I didn't get that money through gambling.”

Seol Jinhee stopped arguing with her oldest brother and spun her head to face him.

“Fuck off.”

She snorted as if the whole notion genuinely made her laugh.

“If you were planning to lie, then make it more convincing, okay? Ah, maybe you stole this? Did you rob a bank or something?”

“I'm telling you the truth.”

Seol Jihu pleaded with a frustrated expression on his face.

“I stopped gambling. I've already asked the casino to ban me from entering the place. And the money's from a commission... No, it's from the work.”

“You stopped gambling?”

“A lifetime ban from entering the casino?”

Seol Wooseok and Seol Jinhee asked at the same time.

“I stopped gambling about a month ago. And today, I came here straight after asking Seorak Land to permanently ban me from stepping foot in that place. Please believe me.”

Seol Jihu explained as clearly as he could. However, it wasn't the issue of them not understanding him, but rather, everything to do with trust.

“So, what you're saying is, you stopped gambling, you voluntarily asked to be permanently banned, and this money is legit, is that right?”

As if he found the idea just too unbelievable, Seol Wooseok asked again.

“Stop fucking wasting my time, okay? You think I'll fall for your lies again?”

Seol Jinhee retorted derisively.

“Oh, so, when we begged you to get the entry ban, you didn't even pretend to listen. And when we tried to do it for you instead, didn't you throw an almighty tantrum? You expect us to believe you now?”

“Jinhee...”

“Hah? How dare you make that face in front of me?! What? You thought that just because you brought home some money, I'd start fawning all over you or something? You thought I'd start calling you Oppa again? Stop dreaming, you bastard. This is this, and that is that. This money is something that belongs to this family to begin with!”

Seol Wooseok cut his little sister off there.

“...I'll confirm it.”

His glare was full of suspicion as he switched on his smartphone. Three, four ringings later, Seol Wooseok opened his mouth.

“Is this the Seorak Land? Yes, yes. I'd like to ask for a person to be banned from entering your... Ah, I'm his older brother. His name is Seol Jihu... Come again?”

Seol Wooseok's voice became progressively louder.

“He asked to be permanently banned? Today? Personally?”

Seol Jinhee quietly listened from the side and became dazed herself.

“In, in that case, is it possible to find out when was the last time he entered your... Yes, the last time... It was the sixteenth of March?!”

A short while later, Seol Wooseok hung up. Seol Jinhee's attitude had softened a tad, but she still continued to glare at Seol Jihu.

Seol Wooseok spoke up as if he was still unconvinced.

“...I still can't believe this.”

“Hyung. Really, I...”

“No, wait. Fine. Let's say you were telling the truth. Then, just where did you get this money from?”

“Uh? That, that's from...”

“I heard that Seonhwa gave you 2 million a month ago.”

“He knew about that?” Seol Jihu could only open and close his mouth, unable to say anything.

“I also heard that you returned everything later that night, too... You didn't have a single coin to your name, so how can you earn this much money in a month without resorting to gambling? Not only that, you brought a laptop and a car key.”

They were rather sharp and pointed questions. Even Seol Jinhee found it strange after hearing them.

“Wait, this is that super expensive gaming laptop...”

She began taking a closer look at the thrown laptop, and sure enough, her suspicion grew even stronger.

Seol Jihu realized his mistake, then. Should he chalk this one to his desires getting the better of him? He remembered his little sister loved to play games, so he shelled out over ₩3 million to buy the best gaming laptop found in the shop. How could he have ever guessed that the damn thing would end up being a potential source of trouble?

“What should I do now?”

In the end, he had no choice but to bluff his way out of this one. If he hesitated and wasted time here, they would start suspecting him with something else completely unrelated.

“That's why I'm here today, to talk to you about what's going on.”

He carefully squeezed out each and every single word. If he just said whatever that came to his mind, they would latch onto the holes in his story pretty quickly. So, Seol Jihu cautiously chose what he wanted to say.

“I was introduced to a job through a person I know. It pays quite well.”

“Just what kind of work pays this much?”

“Oh, that. I got lucky, that's all. Something big happened and I received a large bonus.”

“...Horse racing? Or sports betting?”

“Hyung.”

“Lottery?”

Seol Jihu rubbed his face. He got to confirm one more time what his family thought about him. But how could he blame them? He deserved it, after all.

“This money has nothing to do with gambling.”

“You. Can you repeat everything you said in front of mom and dad?”

Doing that was a part of Seol Jihu's original plan, but it had changed now. His hyung or his little sister might not be able to spot the fault in the story, but he could foresee his father asking many uncomfortable questions already.

“I'd like to do that, but I have to go.”



“He'll be home soon.”

“It's only because I'm really busy. I was working outside the office today, that's why I'm here. So, please, speak to dad for me. Please?”

“What do you want me to say to him?”

“Very soon, I'll be going out of town for a while. The duration could be as much as one, maybe over two months. You won't be able to contact me during that time, but don't worry about me.”

He managed to explain, albeit just barely. Both Hyung and his little sister still seemed confused, but there was no helping it. Seol Jihu couldn't tell them anything concrete even if he wanted to.

“I gotta go. I'm running behind schedule. I'll come by next time to properly greet mom and dad.”

Seol Jihu forced out a smile and bade his goodbyes. He opened the door, climbed down the flight of stairs, and opened the front door.

But, until he closed the door...

Never mind trying to stop him, he couldn't even hear them call out his name. Of course, he used the excuse of being busy, but still...

“...”

For some reason, he felt like all his vigor was leaving his body.

[You thought that just because you brought home some money, I'd start fawning all over you or something?]

His sister's words, spoken to him when his mind was in too much of a chaos to hear her, finally landed their lethal blow.

As if they knew that he deserved the pain, the blow landed real hard and deep.

'I wanted to.... apologize properly....'

He was too busy coming up with excuses that he couldn't even get to say sorry once.

His first step didn't work out as he wanted to, but he still had one more person to apologize to.

Seol's head remained lowered as he trudged towards the nearest subway station.

His shoulders drooped powerlessly, too.

## Chapter 43

Seol Jihu continued to wander aimlessly on a certain street.

It wasn't that he didn't know what to do. He was just... hesitant. Hesitation gripped him tightly and prevented him from taking that last step.

For a while, he walked the same street over and over again. Eventually, his steps cautiously slowed to a stop as if he was standing on slippery ice. While standing still, he took a look inside a certain coffee shop through its front window.

His gaze was directed beyond the tables and chairs, to a young woman preparing coffee beyond the counter.

It was Yoo Seonhwa.

....She was truly beautiful.

Her clear eyes seemed to imply how honest she was; the light shining within those eyes was calm yet passionate; her slender hands cautiously handled the hot water; the soft and warm radiance whenever she smiled....

Was that guy confessing to her? A man receiving a mug of coffee from her hesitantly pushed his phone forward. Yoo Seonhwa's eyes opened up a little wider, but she still managed to shake her head softly enough for her neatly-tucked-in hair to gently brush her neck.

The man still tried to present her with his phone, but only after she bowed her waist did he withdraw his disappointed hand. Even though she seemed a bit troubled, never once did Yoo Seonhwa lose her charming smile.

The shop's door issued a ring, and the rejected man walked out.

Seeing that man's back trudge away, Seol Jihu felt a certain amount of unexplainable déjà vu.

He took in several breaths and reached out towards the door handle, only to freeze on the spot again.

He would've reached the door if he let his hand inch forward just a little bit more. However, the distance between himself and the door to the shop suddenly felt so wide and impossible to close, and it grabbed hold of him tightly.

“...”

In the end, he withdrew his hand and placed it on his chest. That was when he felt it.

His pounding heart.

And his fear.

\*

The tables would be filled with patrons right past the lunch hour. But, after four in the afternoon, the shop would usually become less crowded.

After the man who had been occupying a certain table for a long time finally left, a waitress finished tidying up his table, returned to the counter, and began speaking to her co-workers.

“Body, six points.”

Then, another waitress who was busy with wiping clean one of the display shelves began laughing her head off.

“Wow, how generous of you. Face, three points.”

“Fashion sense, five points.”

Finally, a different waitress stopped organizing the vibration bells and chimed in as if she was waiting for this chance. She then clicked her tongue.

“A total of 14 points. How unfortunate, but rejected!”

“Girls?!”

Yoo Seonhwa stopped operating the POS terminal and turned around to face the waitresses. They stopped their chat and then began giggling non-stop.

Seeing this Yoo Seonhwa slowly shook her head.

“Is it really that fun?”

“Eii, stop being so coy, Unni. We all know that you're secretly enjoying this.”

“What do you mean? Enjoying what? I just find it a little troubling, that's all. If you continue to...”

“That's only because you're such a stonewall. By the way, Manager Yoo, wasn't that the second person to confess today?”

“It was ten people last week.... At this rate, we might have a new record!”

Seeing three waitresses chat among themselves in clear excitement, Yoo Seonhwa could only sigh softly to herself.

The truth was, she was blessed with outstanding beauty, so there were quite a few men who would approach her and ask her out during the day.

Also, there would be no man alive who would simply walk by disinterested after hearing her comforting voice and seeing the way she gracefully carried herself.

Such events kept occurring every single day, so the three girls working as part-time waitresses here began assigning points to all the potential suitors asking her out.

One of them was tasked with the body, another one with the face, and the last one with fashion sense. They began critiquing without anyone's permission; they even arbitrarily decided that the top combined points should be 30.

Of course, Yoo Seonhwa told them to stop and behave themselves, but in a strange twist of logic, the girls began arguing in their defense that any guy who wished to date their respected manager should score at least 24 points.

For the record, out of hundreds of men who tried their luck, 25 had been the highest score so far. For something these girls started as a bit of joke, the three of them were rather strict in their judging criteria.

In any case, Yoo Seonhwa herself wanted this critique panel to disband with immediate effect. After all, no matter how careful these girls were, there was bound to be a slip-up sooner or later, and the customer might overhear them, which would naturally lead to a huge headache.

“Ohh! We might have our third candidate for the day!”

“Where, where?”

“Right outside. Look, there he is. He's been standing there for the past hour or so, hesitating like that.”

“You're right. Should we take a closer look?”

They only pretended to listen to her and never really tried to heed her warnings.

Seeing the three girls huddle around and began whispering amongst each other, Yoo Seonhwa decided to ignore them completely. The owner of the shop often called the girls 'the three no-answer stooges' and at this very moment, she sort of understood where that sentiment was coming from.

In the meantime, one of the girls with an arrogant expression studied the youth outside, before suddenly gasping and blinking her eyes several times.

The guy outside was tall. His chest and biceps were sturdy. He possessed the type of a body that this girl preferred, the one where the muscles were tough yet agile and smooth without looking like a bodybuilder's. The girl's lips loosened in a foolish grin.

“Hi~ya. His butt and his waist are so dreamy! Body, ten points!”

She then turned her head towards another girl rubbing her chin like an arrogant old man. This girl had a really high standard and so far, never had issued a single nine pointer, never mind the perfect ten. It was not for nothing she was tasked with judging the face.

“...Hmm, he's okay. Eight points.”

“I knew you'd do that!”

“Knew what?”

“I knew that you like guys with softer, more delicate looks.”

“What do you mean? Look, that guy's face is manly enough, don't you think so?”

She nodded her head and smiled in satisfaction.

“Well, we might have the highest point scorer of all time if this keeps up. So, how about his fashion sense?”

“...Ten points.... No, nine. His shoes are a bit of mismatch.”

“Ohh? I get her, but what's up with you?”

“You know, that top he's wearing? That one alone should cost a few hundred thousand.”

“Hiik.”

The girls gasped in surprise before one of them tilted her head.

“Wait a minute, didn't you say before that you hate name brands?”

“No, it all depends on how you wear them, okay? It's not the same with you buying the most expensive stuff out there so you can show off, and someone carefully choosing and picking the right combination like him.”

“R, really? I can't tell.”

“With him, well, I think either a pro coordinator got him to wear those, or he could be someone really interested in fashion. Even though he looks simple and plain on the outside, he can't fool my eyes. He's got a killer fashion sense.”

An evaluation that bordered on gushing praises was made.

“Let's see. 10 points, 8, and 9...”

“27 points! The history has been rewritten!”

The girls clapped their hands, and one of them spun around to look at Yoo Seonhwa, in the middle of concentrating on her job and not minding whether they were throwing a party or not.

“Unni! Manager! It's a 27! Finally, we have a guy who can bring down your unwavering wall!”

“...Girls.”

Yoo Seonhwa's voice became heavy. There was a limit to her keeping quiet and ignoring them. She finally decided to teach these girls an

unforgettable lesson today.

"I told you girls to stop this, didn't I? How would he feel if he hears you and your..."

Her words blurred and the tone went up the moment her eyes drifted to the outside of the shop. Yoo Seonhwa froze up in the middle of her speech.

But, that was to be expected. The girls spoke of a guy who could bring down her wall, but that person turned out to be someone who had already done that once.

"...I... Wait. I'll be back soon."

Yoo Seonhwa took off her hat, grabbed her handbag, and hurriedly walked out from behind the counter.

\*

*Ring.* The doorbell issued a ring once more.

Seol Jihu stopped wasting time and momentarily held his breath.

Yoo Seonhwa, still wearing the shop's uniform, was now standing in front of him.

He felt his entire body, starting from the fingertips, freezing up after being subjected to her cold eyes.

"...You even decided to show up at my place of work."

"Seonhwa."

"Follow me. I don't want to raise a fuss here."

Yoo Seonhwa declared as so and began walking towards the backstreet without waiting for his consent. He had no choice but to follow after her.

A short while later, Yoo Seonhwa stopped walking in front and turned around to face him. Seol Jihu too reflexively stopped.

"..."

She stared at him for a long time without saying a word.

Seol Jihu's head slowly lowered as if he was a criminal who knew his crimes. For some reason... he found it hard to look at her in the eye.

There were only six, maybe seven steps between him and her. However, he sensed this wordless pressure that forbade him getting closer.

The first person to break the silence was Yoo Seonhwa.

"First of all, take these."

Seol Jihu received his old bank card and the mobile phone and his expression became slightly dazed.

"T, thanks. I had forgotten about them..."

"You forgot? No, you were just trying to create an excuse for yourself. You were being clever because I said I'll call the police."

"No, really. I did forget them."

"Stop. Fine. So, why are you here today?"

Her voice remained cold.

"You left behind ₩2 million that night."

"...Yeah."

"Now that you thought about it, you want that money after all, is that it? What? Should I give it to you, then?"

"N, no. That's not it. The thing is..."

"Fine. I'll give you. I'll give it to you, so..."

Yoo Seonhwa pulled ₩2 million, cash, from her handbag and thrust them out as if she was about to throw them away. It seemed that she had the cash ready just in case Seol Jihu came to visit her one day.

"Take it and please leave, right now. I need to go back to work."

Her voice, filled with resentment and anger, tore into his body and began stabbing his innards like a dagger.

“Take this, and never appear before me ever again.”

She used to be a kind, loving girlfriend once upon a time.

“This is the last time I'll turn a blind eye. Don't ever think another cheap ploy like this will work in the future.”

It felt like she went past the point of despising him and into the realm of hating him now.

'Get a grip, get a grip....'

He stood there, his lips flapping helplessly for a while before he was able to squeeze out some words with considerable difficulty.

“I'm sorry.... for coming to see you during your work.”

“?”

“There was something I have to say to you.... But, I thought that, if it's not today, then I won't be able to... S, so, like, I...”

Seol Jihu began biting his lips. This was not it. This was wrong. Even he could tell this was gibberish. There were so many things he wanted to say to her, but his head became an untidy mess that was impossible to unravel.

Slowly.

He had to do it, slowly.

Today was the last day.

Unlike with his family, he had to end it with Yoo Seonhwa today.

Seol Jihu made up his mind once more; only then did some calmness return to his heart.

“I know you're really busy, but is it possible for us to talk? Ten minutes, five, no, even three minutes will be fine.”

“....”

A short bout of silence later, Yoo Seonhwa retracted the hand carrying the money. He raised his gaze, a little more hopeful, but her eyes remained cold and critical.

“You want to talk?”

“Yeah....”

“Just how many more times do I have to tell you? If you want to talk to me, then go to the casino and apply for a ban there! I told you that I'd consider talking to you afterwards.”

“I, I already have.”

Seol Jihu quickly replied. Yoo Seonhwa's brows pricked up.

“What did you say?”

“I've already applied for the lifetime ban. I did that in the morning before coming here.”

“.....Hah.”

She let out a long sigh and stared at the sky.

She closed her eyes and even clicked her tongue. It was as if she was dealing with someone beyond saving. Although she didn't say outright “You are lying, aren't you?” Seol Jihu thought that he could still hear those words.

“I'm telling you the truth. Please believe me.”

Yoo Seonhwa bit her lower lip after hearing him plead. She then pulled her phone out and switched it on.

“Hello? Is this Seorak Land counseling office? Ah, hello there. I'm calling you today to ask you for a favor, to ask whether someone is banned from entering your premises. His name is Seol Jihu....”

Seeing her confirm the truth by phoning the casino, he felt something bitter rising up in the back of his throat. Just how much pain and misery did he cause in the past for Yoo Seonhwa and his family to have memorized the casino's number?

“He's already on the list? Today, he himself...?”

Yoo Seonhwa's hardened expression crumbled a little.

“T, Thank you.”

She ended the call and stared at him with eyes full of distrust.

“You...”

She blinked her eyes quickly and wetted her dry lips.

“...What did you want to talk about?”

Although it was only by a little, her voice sounded less chilly than before.

This was the final chance, one he'd never have again. Seol Jihu worked up his courage.

“I'm sorry!”

He bowed his waist as much as he could. His gaze was immediately filled with the view of the concrete.

“What did you say?”

“I'm really, really sorry.”

His left hand held the envelope with money much, much tighter.

“I... know that... I behaved like a son of a bitch... But, but still, I... I wanted to ask for your forgiveness...”

“...”

“All those times I lied to you... disappointed you... made you go through hell... hurt you with shit I said... I wanted to... apologize to you...”

As his words stuttered out, the corners of his eyes began to sting. Seol Jihu gritted his teeth and endured.

“I'm sorry...”

He continued to beg for her forgiveness.

He couldn't do one of those moving and simple but concise apologies. No, that'd be more like him insulting her dignity.

The longer she remained quiet and the more he spoke, he felt his throat clam up.

“I used to...”

It was then.

“I used to hope that a day like today would happen.”

Her quiet but heavy voice entered his brain. He focused all of his being and listened.

“Of course, I reflected a lot too. I'm partially to blame for things turning out this way. I shouldn't have given you any money when you asked me for the first time. I should have listened to your mom and your dad back then.”

Seol Jihu forgot what he wanted to say.

“I... I believed that you'd revert back to how you were someday. So I waited for you with that single ray of hope until now. No, wait. Maybe this is me making more excuses.”

He felt like biting his own tongue as her calm, composed voice continued on. He wanted to shout out and say that it was all his fault.

If she was scolding him and pouring out insults like his sister, then perhaps he could've endured and accepted her words. But having heard such a calm, composed voice, he simply didn't know what to do anymore.

Yoo Seonhwa cautiously asked him

“Those things you said... Are they all true?”

“...Yes...”

“You really came here to apologize to me?”

*Nod, nod.*

“Well, then.”

Yoo Seonhwa relaxedly walked to where he was and extended her hand out.

“Then... take this.”

The moment he saw her pushing the wads of note to him, Seol Jihu got to find out what the taste of despair was like.

“S, Seonhwa...”

“Please take it, if you are truly being honest.”

The emotions reflected in her eyes seemed a little complicated, but that was it.

The reason for her to offer this money to him was quite clear: the severing of the final thread of connection they shared.

“If you truly thought like that, then... Rather than words, please show me with your actions.”

Now, the meaning behind her action changed. It was no longer “Take this and disappear from my sight” but now, “Please, don't make my life any harder.”

He realized then; there was a deep emotional chasm existing between them that could never be healed again.

Seol Jihu's neck began trembling as the moment had finally arrived.

He couldn't accept this money.

The moment he did, then it'd be over for good.

No, it was already over.

He knew this, yet he still couldn't easily accept the money.

Yoo Seonhwa let off a soft sigh and in the end, she carefully tucked the money in his pocket.

“Thank you for applying to be banned. I'm sure your parents will be happy to hear that. And Wooseok Oppa and Jinhee too.....”

Yoo Seonhwa quietly lowered her own eyes after watching him stare at the ground all this time.

“I'm... too tired. I'm a little upset, yes, and to be honest, I don't think I can sincerely forgive you in the state that I am in.”

“...”

“However, if you have truly changed back, then... I want you to press forward, work hard, and live well as if you were trying to show me all the progress you've made. If so, don't you think that one day, we would be able to talk to each other with smiles on our faces?”

....One day.

Yoo Seonhwa had formed a thick bond with the Seol family when she was still a young child. So, it was rather obvious that he would run into her during family reunions and national holidays in the future.

However, he knew, and she knew too – what she said wasn't meant to imply that they could try one more time.

An unknown amount of time went by.

“...You're right.”

Seol Jihu finally forced his head to rise up. His eyes remained fixed to the ground, however.

“Thank you for believing me.”

As ever, Yoo Seonhwa was a kind person. She treated him in a way that was incomparably kinder than when he went to see his family.

It would have been hard for her to believe him after he had lied to her so many times already.

Yet, she believed him once more.

Not only that, by not using any harsh language and telling him stuff in a roundabout way, she was being considerate towards him, too.

Indeed, he was well aware of this, but...

"This 2 million... I understand. I'll take it. I understand what you're trying to say."

...But, his heart ached even more than before.

Seol Jihu sniffed in deeply and began fidgeting with his right hand the money she gave him. He still had to give her back what was hers.

"But... at least take this."

He raised his left arm carrying the envelope with money and opened his left palm.

Then...

"Huh?"

She formed an expression of confusion and looked down at his hand.

"...What?"

Then, her eyes that remained composed until now widened in surprise.

Her mouth opened in a daze. He could immediately tell that she couldn't believe what was happening. She even took a step back in shock.

At this rate, she looked like she'd refuse the money, just like how his siblings did. So, he reached out and grabbed her hand to place the envelope there. Her skin felt so soft. So much so that he never wanted to let go.

"I, I should go."

However, he could only be satisfied with holding her hand for this short moment. He did his best to force out a smile. Meanwhile, Yoo Seonhwa still looked stunned.

"You, but... how?"

"I won't appear before you again. So, uh.... Take care of yourself."

Seol Jihu turned around and ran out of the street.

He began running hard as this unbearable emotion filled him up.

"...Ah."

Everything seemed to happen so fast. Yoo Seonhwa belatedly recovered her wits and instinctively confirmed the contents of the envelope. It was packed full of bills with the images of Shin Saimdang. She gasped out in shock one more time.

"He, he... N, no wait. What...?"

Yoo Seonhwa was deeply mired in confusion for a while before she hurriedly switched her phone on.

"Wooseok Oppa? Yes, yes... By any chance.... He did come? When?"

Her voice continued to grow louder.

"55 million Won?!"

—Yeah. Not only that, he brought back Jinhee's car and bought her a new laptop.

"But, that doesn't make sense. Where did he get that money from?"

—I don't know. He assured me that he didn't earn it through gambling...

"But..."

—Right. I know. Remember that day when he came to borrow money from you? I called the Seorak Land to confirm and they said the last time he was there, it was Thursday, March 16th. That means he really didn't get that money through gambling...

"W, what was the date again?"

—March 16th. In any case, he said the money was from an honest source. But, he said he was busy and had to go. I guess he went to see you...

March 16th.

'No, it can't be.'



Yoo Seonhwa was no longer listening to Seol Wooseok's voice.

“N, no, wait. This, it can't be...”

The envelope fell on the ground, and the money spilled out.

However, Yoo Seonhwa didn't even take a second look at that and ran out of the street herself.

“Jihu!”

She looked around her and called out desperately.

“Seol Jihu!”

Unfortunately, Seol Jihu's back could not be seen anymore.

## Chapter 44

Seol Jihu couldn't remember how he got back to his room. He staggered up the stairs and opened the front door with an emotionless face.

Underneath the window dyed in an orangey hue, the light of dusk drew a lengthy shadow and cast a shadow over his aged laptop.

Seol Jihu leaned against the wall and closed his laptop shut. He suddenly felt like a fool, thinking back to when he was busy calculating all those sums.

‘...Just a little bit.’

It'd be a lie if he wasn't just a tiny little bit expectant. However, the gap between reality and his imaginations proved to be too wide for him to bridge. The reality was cold and harsh as if it occupied the opposite end of the scale from his imagination.

His old habit reared its head; he pulled out a cigarette and began puffing out blue smoke.

*Cough, cough.*

His throat felt scratchy. His eyes stung. Maybe because of that, the tears he'd been holding back began streaming down.

[You think I'll fall for your lies again?]

How could he resent anyone....

[...Horse racing? Or sports betting?]

Or, how could he blame anyone?

[Please take it, if you are truly being honest.]

The view of the entire world seemed to have turned 90 degrees. His temple hit the floor, and Seol Jihu stared at the tilted room in a silent daze.

His head was too chaotic to feel the pain. His breathing too was unsteady.

Everything felt wrong. It was as if everything was telling him that he shouldn't be here.

'I have no place left here.'

The moment this thought entered his head, his fuzzy, unfocused eyes regained some of the lost clarity.

He did find a place he could go not too long ago, didn't he?

'Paradise.'

Indeed, if it was that place....

His hand rummaged through his pockets until he found a small slip of paper.

For a while, he fidgeted around with it. He wanted to rip it up right away, but... he was still waiting for a certain woman to give him a call first.

Now that he took a look at himself, his condition wasn't so good as well. Seol Jihu's body shuddered from the sudden coldness rushing into his bones. He figured that he'd feel better after getting some sleep.

*Sniff.* He sniffed slightly as he crawled on the floor and dug underneath the worn blankets.

Within this cold room, only the deathly stillness kept him company.

'...I'm... lonely.'

He pulled the blanket over his head and quietly closed his eyes.

On the other hand...

—The number you have dialed is not available at present. Please leave your message after the beep...

“And why is this guy not picking up his phone?!”

Kim Hannah angrily switched her phone off and frowned in unhappiness.

“Could he have dined and dashed? No, he didn't look that stupid to begin with...”

She licked her lips and contemplated for a little while longer, before picking up her handbag to leave her residence.

“You think I won't be able to find you because you hid yourself?”

\*

Kim Hannah arrived outside his house. She pressed the doorbell and knocked on the door, but the whole place was eerily quiet.

'He's not home?'

Kim Hannah closed her eyes and concentrated. She then clearly sensed his aura coming from the inside. Her expressions crumpled in an instant.

*Knock, knock!!*

“Hey! Open the door! I know you're in there! Seol Jihu!”

Kim Hannah's voice rose up as she knocked on the door. She even began chewing on her lower lip.

Oh, so he was playing hard to get, was that it?

Seething with anger, she grabbed the doorknob and turned it, hard.

“Maybe I shouldn't have given him the money?”

...But then, the door opened up without offering any resistance.

'...It was open all this time?'

Rather than surprised, she suddenly felt foolish for wasting the last five minutes standing outside the door while doing stupid little things. Kim Hannah entered while looking around, only to cover her nose in a hurry as nausea viciously assaulted her.

A truly disgusting odor, formed from the combination of stale cigarettes, rotting food, clothes that hadn't been washed in ages, as well as other unidentifiable smell, attacked her senses.

When she took a look around the state of the room, she found it to be a truly disgusting sight to behold. The cigarette butts piling up high atop a plate reminded her of a hedgehog, for instance.

Kim Hannah felt an urge to vomit rush in, so she quickly made her way to the kitchen sink, only for her eyes to open even wider in shock.

“Blergh...”

In the end, she began retching. For someone like her who obsessed over her hygiene like a maniac, this room was a trash pit that made her feel disgusted and uncomfortable.

“Blergh, bleeeergh...”

She continued to retch several times more, before shifting her tearful eyes to look behind her. Only then did she spot Seol Jihu sleeping on the floor with a blanket covering his entire body.

“Y, you crazy bastard!”

Kim Hannah strode angrily to where he was.

“Hey, wake up!”

She used the tip of her feet to push the blanket off but froze still afterwards.

“Uuu... uuuuu...”

She heard him moaning out in pain. He was breathing with much difficulty as well. His hair was soaked with sweat and clung to his scalp, and she spotted large sweat drops on his neck, too.

“What on earth...”

Kim Hannah's anger cooled down in an instant. She squatted down and placed her palm on his forehead, and felt his temperature. He was boiling hot.

“...”

She had no idea that he was sick, so she felt foolish and apologetic for suspecting him.

“...Idiot. How can you not get sick when sleeping in a room like this?”

She muttered out in defeat and quietly sighed out. She took another sweeping look at the place and then, shook her head.

“Ehew.... You were fine back in Paradise, but why are you like this on Earth?”

She spoke to herself as if she couldn't help it, and stood back up.

“Even if it's cold, endure it for a while. Let me start by getting some fresh air in here. I might also get sick from this room if I don't do something right now.”

She proceeded to fling open the window as wide as it could be opened and rolled up both her sleeves. As if she was getting ready to exert some effort after a long while of not doing so, she stretched her back and loosened her neck muscles.

“Okay, let's see.... Where should I get started first?”

\*

Seol Jihu had a dream. It was a kind of a dream that he hadn't had in a long time. But it was a good one.

Yoo Seonhwa came to see him and began nursing him. She even scolded him for the messy state of his room. She dragged him to the corner and then began cleaning the mess.

While the washing machine did its thing, she went out and bought stuff like dishwashing soap, air freshener, and some other cleaning products. She washed his clothes, then tidied up the kitchen, washed all the dirty dishes, threw away the rotting rubbish, cleaned out the fridge, mopped the floor, wiped the windows clean, and even got around to cleaning the bathroom.

She spent the next several hours on completely transforming his entire residence. Then, saying she was hungry, she cooked ramen. Seeing her stand in the kitchen with her ponytail gently swaying about, Seol Jihu felt warm and fuzzy inside. It was as if he had gone back in time, back to when everything was okay.

If there was one thing he couldn't quite understand, then that would be her wearing a business suit. Why wasn't she in her uniform? Yoo Seonhwa had never once wore a business suit until now....

Suddenly, his nose picked up on the spicy but delicious smell. Saliva began pooling on the tip of his tongue.

Seol Jihu swallowed his saliva as the sleepiness left him, and he blinked his eyes several times.

“It wasn't a dream?”

He quickly raised his upper body.

“Oh, will you look at this guy?”

A rather particular prim tone of voice entered his ears. Kim Hannah narrowed her eyes and stared at him while carrying the tray with ramen on it.

“You sure can smell food like a sniffer dog, can't you?”

“Kim Hannah?!”

“If you're up, then come and have some.”

“What are you doing here...?”

“I told you, didn't I? If you don't answer my call, then I'd come barging into your place.”

Kim Hannah replied matter of factly.

Seol Jihu dazedly surveyed his surroundings. And his jaw nearly hit the floor after realizing that his trash pit room had been transformed into spotless living quarters.

'Was my place this spacious?'

He spotted plates neatly arranged on the shelves, and the floor seemed to glisten like marble. There was an unfamiliar but nice scent permeating in the air too. This place was well past the level of being a nice place to be in, and straight into the territory of 'My Sweet Home'.

"...You thinking of starting a new career?"

"What are you even talking about?"

Kim Hannah sourly retorted to his question.

Seol Jihu massaged his forehead.

"So, it was you. ..."

He thought it was Yoo Seonhwa, though. ...

"That's right, you idiot. Do you know how many trash bags I... Wait a minute? Why do you sound disappointed?"

"N, no way. You're mistaken. I'm grateful. Really."

He flinched and quickly denied it while waving his hands around. Kim Hannah snorted once.

"That's right. You better be grateful. How can you even think about sleeping in a place like this? It was probably full of germs and stuff. Euh!"

She shuddered as if just imagining it gave her the chills and put the tray down on the small table. She then sneaked a glance at him.

"You don't want? I cooked two packets, you know?"

Warm steam invitingly rose up from the pot. And after a pair of wooden chopsticks were placed before him, there was no way he could refuse now. And when he thought about it, he hadn't eaten anything since the morning.

Indeed, he was feeling hungry. So, he decided to fix that first before thinking about anything else.

*Shunurp.*

'It's good.'

The noodles were perfectly chewy, and the soup itself was on the right side of being spicy, with the chopped spring onion bits adding a layer of refreshing aftertaste as well.

Kim Hannah began giggling after seeing the youth focus on wordlessly hoovering up the ramen.

"You like it?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I've got some skills when it comes to making ramen. Anyways, enjoy yourself."

"Okay, thanks."

The two of them concentrated on the meal at hand for a while. And sure enough, the noodles were finished pretty quickly.

"It's not really enough for both of us, right?"

Kim Hannah licked her lips and with an unsatisfied face, she looked at Seol Jihu enjoying the spoonful of the ramen soup.

"How about some rice to go with the soup?"

"Yeah, that sounds... Ah, but there's no..."

"I've already bought some instant rice. I got them when I went out to buy extra trash bags, you see."

Kim Hannah went to the kitchen and brought out packets of instant rice. She must've had them warmed in the convenience store, because they were rather cold to his touch.

They dumped the rice into the ramen soup and shared the rest of the meal among themselves.

Once his stomach was full, he felt sated and a bit sleepy as well. Even though he just woke up, his eyelids felt like they weighed thousands of tons.

Seeing him like this, Kim Hannah smirked.

“You aren't a kid anymore, but you're getting sleepy because you're full?”

She then took the tray with the empty dishes away, before bringing a bag of medicine.

“Hey, let me do that.”

“Don't bother. You're still sick, you know. I bought some medication, so take those and rest up. We'll talk tomorrow.”

Seol Jihu closed his mouth. The thing he hated the most was needles, and the thing he hated the second most was taking medication. It might have something to do with childhood trauma.

Kim Hannah hummed as she washed the dishes, only to get royally ticked off when she found out that he didn't even bother to take a single medication. She forced him to take some pills, and after that, she said she'd talk to him tomorrow, then turned around to leave. It was getting late and she also needed to get some rest, too.

“I'll be going now. Get some rest, okay? And don't you dare not answer my call again.”

Just as she was about to leave, she felt him suddenly grab her hand.

“Kim Hannah.”

“What?”

“Don't go. Please.”

“...What did you say?”

Kim Hannah couldn't help but flinch after hearing his pleading tone of voice.

Well, it was already in the middle of the night, so...

A thought that said perhaps coming here was a mistake entered her head.

“I...”

“Hey.”

Kim Hannah turned around to face him and firmly stated her position.

“You're an Invited, and I'm your Inviter.”

“I know.”

“If you know, then you shouldn't behave like this. Don't you think you're being a bit inconsiderate here? Do I look that easy to you?”

She began sounding quite a bit pissed off. Seol Jihu stared at with his eyes blinking non-stop as if to show he had no idea what she was on about before his tired voice left his mouth.

“I want to go back.”

“...Hm?”

“Right now, I want to go back.”

It was Kim Hannah's turn to blink her eyes. Her neck skin reddened up from embarrassment only for a brief moment. The moment she confirmed the strange fervor in the youth's eyes....

“Let's go. Right now. I mean, we have the means, right?”

....Her own eyes narrowed to a slit.

‘No way. Can it be...?’

As a matter of fact, she had been feeling that something odd was up. She also found it strange that the youth was unusually quiet during the mealtime.

What she initially worried about was Seol Jihu not wanting to go back to Paradise after coming back to Earth. However, the truth turned out to be the exact opposite of that.

Not even one full day had passed, yet Seol Jihu wanted to go back to Paradise already.

The most convincing evidence was his complexion, which was now full of vigor as soon as he mentioned going back. She felt that the way he held her hand was like someone dearly holding onto the sole remaining lifeline. Kim Hannah began thinking that...

....That this wasn't right.

....That this was dangerous.

Every now and then, one would find people like this; people who were seduced by the charms of the Lost Paradise and discarded their lives here on Earth. It was kinda like putting the horse before the cart.

Such Earthlings would lose their lives pretty early on, ten times out of ten. They would get drunk on the adrenaline provided by the battles of Paradise and end up seeking out progressively more dangerous assignments.

Other Earthlings called these kinds of people the Paradise junkies.

Normally, Kim Hannah would have welcomed his desire to return to Paradise, but Seol Jihu wasn't a simple Contracted nor was he a disposable pawn that could be thrown away after being used once or twice.

No, he was an Earthling that could become her trustworthy support and an important partner in the future. Indeed, he was more like a rough gemstone she needed to nurture very carefully.

She wanted Seol Jihu to balance both of his lives here as well as over there; she definitely didn't want to see him get addicted to Paradise.

Besides, he only went there once, and he spent most of his time inside the Neutral Zone; it was rare to see someone who wanted to return to Paradise only after experiencing so little.

'Something must have happened here.'

Remembering Seol Jihu's past, she could think of a couple of things that might have happened.

"You can't."

Kim Hannah firmly refused him.

"But, why not?"

"At the bare minimum, you have to finalize the contract first."

"Give it to me. Let me sign it right now."

"You think that's the end just because you signed it? I've got lots of things to say to you, and besides, aren't you curious about some things, too? What about your future plans?"

"...I'll figure it out once I get there."

Seol Jihu's fervor cooled down a lot after hearing her angry voice.

"In any case, you can't. I want to get some sleep, too! Do you have any idea how tired I am trying to tidy this place up?"

Seol Jihu forgot what he wanted to say now, his expression one of apology.

"Just get some sleep. You look like you're about to fall asleep at any second anyways.... Plus, when it's time for us to go back, I'll make you go even if you don't want to."

"...Okay."

In the end, Seol Jihu waved a white flag.

A short while later...

The light of the room turned off.

A complicated expression formed on Kim Hannah's face as she watched the sleeping Seol Jihu and his steady breathing.

She stood at the front entrance and deliberated for a while before she settled down on a spot a bit of distance away from him. She draped the jacket around her like a duvet.

She was worried about him running off to Paradise without her knowing. Her sharp senses would snap her out of sleep even if there was a minute disturbance, so she trusted that and decided to stay.

As his protector, she had to prevent him from 'escaping' into Paradise at all costs.

'Really now, what a troublesome guy to look after.'

Kim Hannah stared at him for a long while before closing her eyes as a yawn left her mouth.

\*

Kim Hannah woke up first in the early dawn, confirmed that Seol Jihu was still asleep, and quietly took a shower. She originally planned to lightly wash up but had shed way too much sweat the day before cleaning this pigsty of a room, so it couldn't be helped.

She didn't want to wake him, so she took her clothes inside the bathroom with her, but then, the noises of the water must've woken him anyways; by the time she got out, Seol Jihu was sitting up while rubbing his eyes.

The morning sun had already risen past the horizon when he finished washing up as well.

She then dragged the youth out of his house and took him to a small diner located in some forgotten backstreet, so they could have some breakfast.

While waiting for the food to arrive, she demanded that he tell her everything that had happened yesterday. Seol Jihu wasn't really keen on revealing them but still told her everything. After hearing his story, her reactions were quite dramatic, to say the least.

"W, what?! You spent over ₩100 million yesterday?!"

"..."

"How can you be that stupid? Are you even the same person?! Are you even that first-ranked survivor?!"

"..."

"Hey, you!! I told you to think about the difference in the time, didn't I?! What would they think when a gambling addict like yourself showed up after a month of silence with ₩5-60 million in tow, claiming to have given up on gambling completely out of the blue?! Ah?"

Kim Hannah was this close to losing her sh\*t, and she nearly jumped up from her seat. She thought that he'd use the cash wisely; that was why she deposited some in his account to begin with. A guy who was so thoughtful and capable of solving all those difficult tasks quite easily back in Paradise, did a 180 as soon as he returned to Earth. She could hardly believe how dumb he was.

"You dumb idiot... you really went and did it..."

Kim Hannah massaged her neck as she wallowed in the pits of despair.

"...It's not like I don't understand where you're coming from, okay? But, in that case, you should have just shown up with 2-30 million first or something. You need to gradually mend your old ties by apologizing first, saying you've quit gambling for good, that you'd work hard to repay them, but that you're too busy so you'll call them later on, etc, etc... What, you thought you could get back on their good graces in one shot? Your relationships broke down years ago, remember?"

Her continuous stream of correct opinions caused Seol Jihu to wordlessly scratch the back of his head. Even if he had ten mouths, he'd still have no excuses to offer right now.

"Haaaaaah..."

Kim Hannah spat out lengthy groans over and over again, before glaring at him.

"This can't go on."

"?"

"Although you haven't signed the contract yet, as soon as you do, I'm going to invoke the protector's privilege."

"The protector's privilege?"

"You want to make it right with your family. Correct?"

Seol Jihu nodded his head as if that was obvious.

"I'm not planning to interfere with how you live your private life, but I'll be intervening in this matter, okay?"

The food arrived then, so Kim Hannah's dissatisfaction had to pause for a while.

"Let's eat. We'll talk while we eat."

Kim Hannah scooped some soup up with her spoon and continued on.

"Now, listen. Among my subordinates, there is this guy who went there when he was just a university student. He did okay, carved himself a nice little career, became famous and then got scouted by Sinyoung in the end. He even got married not too long ago, too."

"You even get married in that side?"

"Sure, there are some people who do, but that's not what I'm saying."

Kim Hannah waved her hand around to emphasize the fact that it wasn't what she wanted to talk about.

"Anyways. He married a girl who's not involved with that world, know what I mean? So, what do you think happened?"

"I wonder. Isn't it a bit, you know, dangerous? He could get discovered, right?"

"You think so? You see, his actual life is going pretty nicely. He comes to work in the mornings and transfer to that side, spends a couple of days there and comes back, but it's only the late afternoon over here. If he were to get delayed that side, then he would simply tell her that he'd been putting in some overtime. If he needs some extra time that side, then he just tells her that he's going on a business trip."

"But, his wife could show up at the company, right?"

Kim Hannah shrugged her shoulders.

"So? What's the problem? We just have to show her her husband working at the office."

"What if she shows up unannounced or there's an emergency?"

"Even those are not a problem. If something happens to his household or his family, the company will be notified immediately. We'll tell her that he's working outside the offices, and at the same time, one of our guys will transfer to the other side and bring him back."

"You really are thorough in managing your people, aren't you?"

"That's the power of my company. And well, that's one of the reasons why I will be looking after you, too."

Seol Jihu nodded his head and agreed with her. The tone of Kim Hannah's voice was a bit combative, but he didn't mind hearing her out. Rather than her interfering, it sounded more like she was going to help him out, instead.

"In any case, what you're saying is that, you'll invoke this privilege of the protector, right?"

"That's right. Actually, I don't even really need to invoke the privilege in the first place. This is one of the responsibilities people like me, who were granted the rights to scout, must carry out."

"Rights to scout?"

"That's right. You think the rights are granted for free to us? Naturally, we have the responsibilities and duties to perform."

Kim Hannah began munching on the rolls of kimbap before going *oops* after seeing the youth's vacant expression. Since he was so outstandingly capable back in Paradise, she would sometimes think that he had figured most things out by himself already and gloss over some stuff.

"Even if it's called rights, it's not that impressive. It's like, we can use the stamps, and get to figure out whether you're involved with that world or not – that much, I guess?"

"You can do that?"

"Of course. Without such a thing, why would I have believed you back then? Just because you swore in your mother's name or something?"

"Ok, so how do you tell, then?"

"Give me your hand."

Seol Jihu opened his right palm and presented it to her. But she shook her head.

"Not your right hand. The hand where I planted that stamp."

Seol Jihu opened his left palm and tilted his head. From his perspective, it was just a hand with nothing on it and he couldn't see anything special there.

However, it must have been different to Kim Hannah because she was nodding her head rather sagely.

"Yeah, I can see it pretty clearly now. It must be that vivid because you're a Gold Mark."

"You can see something on my hand?"



“Yup. There are three ways to distinguish those who are involved with that world and those who are not.”

She licked the chopstick and unfurled her index, middle, and ring fingers.

“Firstly, you recognize a person's face. Even you can do this. Secondly, you can take a look at the other's Marking. But the drawback to this method is, you don't know exactly where the Marking might be. Sometimes, you might find it in some weird place, you know?”

Seol Jihu became slightly curious what those weird places could be.

“The last one is to sense the 'aura'.”

“The aura?”

“There's this distinctive aura emitted from the Marks. You have to be close to the Mark and concentrate hard to feel it though.”

Seol Jihu became deeply intrigued as they began discussing a topic related to Paradise.

“Ah, I got sidetracked. Anyways...”

Kim Hannah clicked her tongue and pulled out the contract as well as a pen from her inner pocket.

“My point is this. I want you to balance your life over here as well as the one over there, just like that subordinate I told you about.”

“That's...”

“Listen. I've been living on that side for far longer than you have. I also got to meet a lot more people than you. Hell, I'm someone who seduces others into entering that place.”

Suddenly, the tone of her voice became lower in the middle of her speech.

“I'll be honest with you here. Ever since I began as a broker, I've never imagined that I'd say these words out aloud.

Kim Hannah took a big gulp of water, adjusted her glasses and continued.

“I'm convinced after seeing how you acted last night. You may not need it when you're on the other side, but when you're here, you need strict management.”

“...”

“More importantly, I won't sit back and watch the man I invited get addicted to that side and flounder around like a fool. Got that?”

Kim Hannah spoke up to here and placed the contract in front of Seol Jihu.

“If you understand me and feel confident that you can do this, then sign the contract.”

Seol Jihu remained quiet, before picking up the pen. And just as he pulled the contract in closer...

“Don't forget.”

Her voice was sharp.

“The place you need to be is here.”

## Chapter 45

Seol Jihu carefully checked out the contract from Gula. Not one word had been changed from when he first read it. Of course, judging from the personality she displayed until now, Kim Hannah wouldn't try to pull a fast one like that.

Seol Jihu finished scanning the contract and signed on the dotted line. As he returned the contract to her, he spoke.

“Now that I've signed the contract, I want to ask you about something.”

“?”

“Don't you work for Sinyoung?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Why did you say those things back then? Wouldn't it be more advantageous for you if I ended up signing with them?”

Kim Hannah carefully but professionally folded the contract and hid it inside her jacket before cocking an eyebrow.

"I was wondering why you haven't asked me that yet. But shouldn't you have asked that question before signing the contract? What if you have a change of mind after hearing what I have to say?"

"You'd have said things in such a way to make sure that I don't change my mind anyway. Well, I just wanted to hear your honest words without worrying about how you'd change the story."

"...You seem to get smarter when it comes to things like this, huh."

Kim Hannah shot him a prim glare and took off her glasses. She even put the spoon down and began lightly tapping the table with her index finger.

"Okay, fine. It's a long story, but since you want to hear it, I'll tell you. Do you know what the current situation is like for Sinyoung?"

Seol Jihu was about to ask, "Aren't they the biggest organization in Paradise?" but held back. The way she asked her question, it sounded like something pretty serious was going on here.

"They are stuck between a rock and a hard place, going nowhere."

Kim Hannah rested her chin on the back of her hand and gazed at the outside of the diner with half-closed eyes. Her face, as reflected on the glass, looked rather bitter.

"Their situation is really complicated right now. Sinyoung lost their most powerful combat force, and they are also losing their justification for being there. It's not as if their foundation has become weak enough to be shaken around, but on the flip side, they can't deny that they have indeed been weakened considerably compared to the past. I'm curious, but have you read the Romance of the Three Kingdoms before?"

She came out of nowhere with that one, but Seol still nodded his head.

"Cao Cao succeeded in 'securing' the young emperor, thereby creating the firm foundation for himself to control the empire, right? Sinyoung did something similar. A year ago – no, wait. Three years ago in that place's time flow, the very first rebellion happened within the human alliance."

Kim Hannah lowered her voice and continued on.

"To be more specific, a certain kingdom wanted the Earthlings to become more proactive, and they formed an alliance of sorts with other like-minded kingdoms and tried a method that was a bit more forceful than before. As a result, several organizations rebelled openly against their unreasonable demands. An entire region rose up to resist this push, so surely you can imagine how big of a rebellion it was."

"A region? Which one?"

"The South.... The resistance movement formed around the South as its center. And in the end, a war broke out. Those guys were defeated.... in the blink, and.... pushed to the brink.... Ah."

In the middle of her speech, Kim Hannah went, 'Ah!' She forgot about the pact to never to speak about the secrets of Paradise and ended up doing precisely that.

Seol Jihu waved his hands around briefly to show her it was fine.

"Did every Earthling participate in the rebellion?"

"No. Some participated, but there were some who supported the royal families. However, most were neutral."

Kim Hannah then placed her hand on her chest.

"It was right around then. Sinyoung had remained neutral until that time, but they declared their support of the royal family and entered the fray."

She then raised two of her fingers.

"There were two reasons Sinyoung decided to intervene. The first thing was, of course, for profit. And secondly, they were confident in winning."

As if she was feeling thirsty, Kim Hannah took large gulps of the cold water.

"Phew~. Of course, even Sinyoung didn't possess the military might to subdue a rebellion of that size by themselves. However, even though they were small in number, there were some Earthlings who supported the royal families, so they joined in. Sinyoung also persuaded their allies to participate as well. Then, using those events as the pivotal point, they began persuading other neutral organizations into participating. And most importantly...."

To signify the importance of what she was about to say, her expression hardened noticeably.

"They let loose a single Unique Ranker into the battlefield."

To be acknowledged as a Unique Ranker in Paradise, one had to be level 7 or above. Not everyone could level up that high, and there were only

a handful of such individuals in the whole of Paradise.

“His name is Sung Shihyun.”

Sung Shihyun... Seol Jihu repeated that name inwardly. He had heard of this name before. From the way she had crossed her arms against her chest, it seemed that Kim Hannah wasn't happy about something there.

“Sinyoung was encouraged by Sung Shihyun's combat prowess, and through him, they were able to achieve a sweeping victory against the rebellion. The royal families wished to push forward with the momentum and even destroy the rebellion's headquarters, but Sinyoung didn't want that. No, they came up with a nice-sounding pretext of giving the other side a chance, saying that the continuous fight between humans would only weaken the influence of mankind on the planet. So, they went ahead with ceasefire negotiations.”

No matter how good a pretext sounded, it'd always remain as a pretext. It meant that Sinyoung had already started their machinations on the political landscape of Paradise well before the negotiations began.

“In the end, the royal families promised to allow complete freedom of the Southern region under the condition that all the remaining rebels were relocated there.”

“Mm... Isn't that the same thing as the rebels ultimately getting what they wanted in the first place?”

“If you look at the result only, sure. But you could also say that they were exiled there too. I'm sure you've heard by now that the South is always mired in warfare, right?”

Seol Jihu had heard the condensed version before – that there were currently four different species calling Paradise their home and that the humans were the weakest of them.

“The South is pretty much the frontlines of the war. In other words, it's the most dangerous area.”

“Ah.”

Seol Jihu let out a gasp of shock. He now understood who had gained the most out of the rebellion from those two sentences she uttered out.

“That's right. It's the same thing as Sinyoung sending all their rival influences down to the South to act as their meat shield. And thanks to that, Sinyoung got to increase their political clout back in the Capital without a single worry. And they even had the royal family in their back pocket, so what did they have to fear now, right?”

Kim Hannah spoke the last sentence with a slight hint of disdain before slowly leaning her back against the chair.

“However, no flower blooms forever... Not everything was plain sailing for them, you see. About two years ago in the flow of time that side, a new problem occurred. One that nobody saw coming.”

“A problem, you say?”

“Sung Shihyun.”

It was that name again.

“Well, him... even I can't figure it out why he did what he did. Some say he had a falling-out with Sinyoung's management, and others say the royal family made their move after getting worried about Sinyoung's growing influence. Or maybe, Sung Shihyun's own greed got the better of him...”

“Just what kind of a person is this Sung Shihyun, anyway?”

“I can't speak about his identity here. But know this, he isn't a nice guy. His abilities are indeed a real deal, but I remember him being incredibly arrogant, and that he used to do whatever he felt like. What's important is that he went ahead with a certain military expedition against other's wishes, spectacularly failed that, and went missing ever since.”

“He's dead?”

“That's the thing – no one knows. Just because he's 'dead' on that side, that doesn't mean he's dead this side too. However, he's completely disappeared without a trace over that side and over here, too.”

Seol Jihu agreed with the notion that it sounded rather bizarre and opened his mouth to speak.

“I guess that with Sung Shihyun going missing, Sinyoung got affected pretty badly, right?”

“But, of course. That guy was what you'd call an Irregular.”

Kim Hannah nodded her head.

“No matter which organization, there is a limit to how much manpower you can mobilize at once for individual requests and missions. The reason

Sinyoung was able to grow at an explosive rate was because of the full support from the royal family. Of course, Sinyoung had to listen to the royal family's demands in return. And the nearly impossible missions or difficult tasks were taken care of by Sung Shihyun."

However, with the disappearance of that Sung Shihyun, it became harder to carry out the demanding tasks set out by the royal families. And so, the foundation Sinyoung relied on to grow more influential and wealthy began to rock unsteadily.

Understanding as such, Seol Jihu's eyes narrowed to a slit.

"I think I can understand where the rebellion was coming from. Just how ridiculous were the demands made by the royal family? I get where they are coming from, but wouldn't you normally make the request after seeing what the current situation is like?"

"Right.... That's how you'd normally do that, but...."

For some reason, Kim Hannah blurred the ends of her words. It was as if she was trying to be vague about something.

"In any case, that's where this story ends. Actually, this isn't something you should be aware of, right now. But, I should answer that question you asked me earlier."

Kim Hannah coughed to clear her throat and stared straight at Seol Jihu.

"After the powerful combat potential called Sung Shihyun became missing, Sinyoung became incredibly busy. They have way too many business interests to look after, and they have to keep an eye on the royal family too. Even I'm supposed to handle eight different assignments right now."

"Eight?"

Seol Jihu could only leak out a hollow chuckle. He even thought whether it was fine for her to be here or not.

"And then, in the midst of this madness, a new Irregular has appeared. Of course, that's you. The paths you walked, the things you've done and achieved, they are remarkably similar to Sung Shihyun's. Well, if you are Sinyoung, how would you respond?"

"I'll probably try to scout me."

"Obviously. But having lost Sung Shihyun once, they would make sure they are prepared this time. You felt it too when you took a look at their contract, right? Every single clause promising to support you were traps that would've shackled you real good. Sure, they would help you get stronger, but they will also turn you into a puppet that only moved according to Sinyoung's wishes."

He had been expecting something like that already, but now that he heard the truth straight from her, it certainly felt a bit different than before. Kinda like his body was shuddering or something.

"But, why me?"

"If I were to be honest, you're currently a juicy prey waiting to be devoured."

Seol Jihu stared blankly at Kim Hannah.

He understood now why he shouldn't sign up with Sinyoung, but her helping him out was a different matter altogether. At the end of the day, Kim Hannah still worked for Sinyoung, after all.

"And finally, the reason I'm helping you like this."

She locked her fingers.

"Well, you can criticize me for being materialistic if you want. That gold stamp was my private property. And besides, I didn't want others to steal you from me."

"Steal?"

"Mn. If I coerced you into joining Sinyoung, then sure, they would've praised me for it. They'll promote me as my reward too. But, that would be all, right? The moment you join the company, the higher-ups would do anything to possess you. And since I don't have any power, you'll end up being taken from me."

Kim Hannah then raised both her hands in a slight shrug.

"If that was the case, then wouldn't it be much more profitable for me if you didn't join and grow stronger outside the company? Mu~ch more, right? You grow powerful and strong and start supporting me, then I'd get to have a proper say within Sinyoung, you know what I mean? Uhuhuhuh."

"T, that's how it is?"

"That's right! I raised this guy, he's friendly with me, he only deals with me, etc, etc. You wanna ask this guy for a request, then talk to me first.

Keuh~.”

Kim Hannah's neck shrunk back slightly and her shoulders started to tremble a little as if the thought alone made her very excited.

Now that he heard her story, he kind of agreed with her there. However, the rosy future of her dreams could only take place on the condition that Seol Jihu grew up to become someone with great power. Honestly, he felt burdened by her expectations.

“I think you're thinking too highly of me.”

“Hmm.”

Seeing the youth smile awkwardly, Kim Hannah pouted slightly.

“Indeed. You do make me worried from how you acted this side, you know?”

She began giggling and that brought out a soft but genuine smile from him as well.

The two of them continued on with their breakfast and chatted about what they needed to do for their happy future on the other side.

“Don't think too hard about this.”

As they left the diner and headed back to his place, Seol Jihu fell into deep thought. So, Kim Hannah offered a bit of advice.

“You're still only Level 1. No one is expecting you to do something incredible. So, you should just focus on getting used to life on that side for the next couple of years. You can even think of it as playing a game.”

“Playing a game?”

“Right. Like video games. You log in when you have a bit of free time, kinda like that. Of course, it'd be your main line of work, though.”

Seol Jihu recalled hearing something similar to this before.

[My ass. In the end, this is all just a fucking game, man. A game. And you're supposed to enjoy playing games.]

But unlike when Kang Seok said those things, Seol Jihu didn't feel disgusted this time. No, he thought that it wouldn't be so bad to view this whole thing just as Kim Hannah had said. Everyone had different ways to enjoy themselves, after all.

As they walked back to his place, they encountered a middle-aged woman busy sorting through the trash in front of the building where he lived. She was a cleaning lady he had seen a few times while he went about his business in the past.

The woman was mouthing off her discontent while trying to sort out the mountainous pile of trash. She then spotted the youth and the glasses-wearing woman and tilted her head a little. Seol Jihu felt guilty about all the crap there, so he quickly bowed to her and ran inside his room.

After entering his home, they began preparing themselves to return to Paradise.

“This thing, is it fine to leave it behind here?”

“Do what you feel like.”

After taking out all the prohibited items, Kim Hannah produced a small slip of paper from her pocket.

“Well, then. It's finally time for us to head back to Paradise you so desperately wanted to return to.”

Seol Jihu smirked and pulled his own slip of paper out. It was here that Kim Hannah spoke to him one more time.

“I'm asking this for your own good, but you know what you need to do once we go back there, right?”

“Yes, I know.”

“Okay. Let's go, then.”

*Rip.*

Along with the noise of the paper being torn, a circular light appeared in the empty air. Kim Hannah was swallowed up by this light from her head down to her feet and disappeared from sight in an instant.

Seol Jihu observed this with great curiosity before deciding to rip his own paper – but then, he stopped.

He spotted his smartphone, discarded to the corner of the room. After Yoo Seonhwa gave it back to him, he didn't even get around to charging it, so it was currently turned off.

'The place I need to be...'

He felt a sudden urge to confirm something. If he switched that phone on, wouldn't calls from his family or Yoo Seonhwa arrive?

It didn't take too long for him to realize how embarrassingly unrealistic that wish was.

'...There's no way they'd contact me, anyway.'

Seol Jihu let off a lengthy sigh before ripping the transfer paper in half.

\*

"Ehew, why is there so much trash here... hm?"

The middle-aged woman continued to complain to herself as she sorted out the trash. It was then that she sensed the presence of someone behind her. She turned around to take a look.

A beautiful woman with a pretty dress was standing there while holding an envelope in one hand. She must have come here the first thing in the morning because her hair was still damp.

When their gazes met, the beautiful woman politely greeted her.

"Hello there, Auntie."

"Aigoo, hello to you too. It's been a while... Wait, I did see you for a little bit yesterday, so it's not a while, is it?"

The middle-aged woman greeted the young woman warmly as if they were familiar with each other.

"Besides that, you also came today? I thought you decided to not to come here anymore."

"Yes, I have a business here today."

Yoo Seonhwa displayed an uneasy smile.

"By any chance, have you seen the guy who stays in room 405?"

"Ahh... Him? Yes, I've seen him."

A light gleamed in Yoo Seonhwa's eyes.

"Is he home?"

"Well, that. Maybe, around 30 minutes after you left yesterday? One hour? Anyways. He came home around that time after you left. I want to tell him that you stopped by, but he seemed so tired and troubled, so..."

Yoo Seonhwa's mouth hung open a little.

Yesterday, after Seol Jihu ran off, she chased after him right away. There was something she just had to confirm. So, she paid the taxi driver extra just to get to Seol Jihu's place as soon as possible.

The problem was that he hadn't come back home. She waited for a long time, yet he didn't show up.

If she knew he'd come so soon afterwards, then she would have waited here. She couldn't have guessed that he'd come home after she left. He must have wandered around the streets aimlessly before stumbling back home somehow.

"I think he's in there, now. But, what should I do.... Aigoo..."

"What's wrong?"

"It's something a bit scandalous for me to say, but... I wonder if it'll be fine?"

"I'm sure it'll be fine. Please feel free to speak."

"I saw him enter not too long ago, but some pretty lady was sticking very close to him, you see."

"Pardon?"

As soon as she spotted Yoo Seonhwa's facial expression, the cleaning lady hurriedly added a few more words.

"I'm not sure what's going on. That lady borrowed some cleaning equipment last night, saying that she's going to clean out room 405. She was speaking in such a curt and straightforward manner, even though she looks like a fox. All this trash, it's from that room, you know?"

“...”

“D, did I overstep my boundaries?”

“...No, not at all.”

Yoo Seonhwa said her goodbyes and hurriedly entered the building. She quickly ran up the stairs. She wasn't feeling something as petty as jealousy. It was definitely not lingering attachment, either.

However.

As she listened to the story from the cleaning lady, the various possibilities she thought of were converging into one situation she hoped would not happen.

If what she saw yesterday was not wrong, then...

'No, he can't.'

He had finally regained himself, yet this...

If her suspicions were proven to be correct, then she swore to herself that she'd save him no matter the cost. With this in mind, she arrived at the door to room 405.

“Jihu!”

*Thud, thud!*

“Seol Jihu!”

She pounded on the door for a while, but there was no response.

Yoo Seonhwa bit her lower lip and fished out a key from her handbag. He gave her this key a while back, saying that she should use it in an emergency.

She knew that she shouldn't do this, but now wasn't the time to argue about the finer points. She inserted the key in the lock and heard it unlatch.

Yoo Seonhwa pushed the door wide open but didn't enter. Because, as soon as she saw the interior, she displayed the expression of stupefaction.

She heard just now from the cleaning lady that he was in his room, yet...

“Ji, Jihu...”

There was no one in the room.

Not even a trace of human presence remained.

The room was empty.

Yoo Seonhwa dazedly looked around the room before she suddenly spotted items that didn't belong here. They were items for women. She could tell that those obviously didn't belong to Seol Jihu.

Yoo Seonhwa squeezed her eyes shut before quietly closing the door. She locked the door again and stood in the same spot for a long time.

“You idiot...”

A short while later...

Yoo Seonhwa breathed in deeply as if she had made her mind up over something. And with a grim expression on her face, she switched her phone on.

Only a handful of rings went by before the call was picked up, and a voice that sounded artificial came out from the speaker.

—Miss S, Seonhwa?

“Yes, it's me.”

—Oh, my goodness! Is it really you, Miss Seonhwa?

“Yes, it's me. There's something I'd like to talk to you about.”

Yoo Seonhwa spoke with a heavy voice before taking a look around her. She then brought the phone very close to her mouth and began

whispering for a while.

—...Pardon? W, what did you say?

“That's what I'll be doing.”

—Wait, wait a minute. Miss Seonhwa?

“I can't speak at length at the moment. As for the details...”

Yoo Seonhwa blurred the ends of her words and bit her lip again.

A short moment of silence later...

—...The things you said, are they coming from your heart?

## Chapter 46

Experiencing something for the first time would always be a special moment.

The sensation of going to Paradise was... somewhat like sinking into the depths of the ocean. Seol felt his entire body becoming heavy and sluggish.

After quietly closing his eyes, Seol Jihu felt his body emerging out into the open air. When he opened his eyes, the transfer gate from the temple was behind him, still emitting that mysterious light.

“You're finally here.”

He also saw Kim Hannah waiting for him.

He had finally returned to Paradise. This would be his second time entering this world.

Seol Jihu presented his slip to the counter and received a key in return. He quickly made his way to the storage to retrieve his gear. He confirmed that the gold '8' changed to silver, returned the key, and exited from the temple.

Kim Hannah was waiting for him by the entrance, and when she saw him, she opened her mouth to speak.

“Did you check everything?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, in that case...”

*Huu...* She suddenly let out a long sigh and formed a deeply wistful expression.

“It's not too late, you know?”

He was about to ask her what she was talking about, but then, she silently signaled him with her eyes. It was only for a brief moment, but he didn't miss her eyes drifting to her right.

“Mm. Well, honestly, I just want to enjoy myself and relax for a little while longer.”

“In that case, I guess there isn't much I can do then. But please do give me a call when you change your mind, okay? Sinyoung's doors will always remain open for you.”

Kim Hannah presented him with an ivory-colored bag. It contained supplies that she had prepared for him under her own name.

It was far inferior compared to what Sinyoung was offering, but then again, it was still better than nothing. Also, it was a bit much for a Level 1 like himself to receive them, too. So, Seol Jihu gratefully accepted the supplies.

“Will it be fine if I don't accompany you?”

“No, it'll be fine. I know you're really busy, anyways.”

“Then, how about only until the South gate?”

“I said, I'm fine.”

A woman persistently sticking to the clearly irritated man – of course, they were putting on an act for others to see. When she was in Paradise, Kim Hannah had to be seen as loyal to Sinyoung.



'Seriously. I have to do some weird things, don't I?'

They shared short farewells and went their separate ways. They had already discussed about everything he needed to know back on Earth, and also, he was aware of how busy Kim Hannah was, too.

He wasn't a little kid anymore, so he didn't want to waste her valuable time with unimportant stuff.

'So, this is Scheherazade...'

The uniform rows of earth-colored stone buildings, clean and well-maintained avenues, and finally, throngs of people going about their daily lives wherever he looked; as befitting the capital of a kingdom, this place was overflowing with vitality. He found it hard to believe that there was a war going on somewhere just from the mood of this place.

Also, many fantastical structures such as castles, towers, and military barracks that couldn't be seen on modern Earth caught his curious gaze.

What would the shops sell here? What about the blacksmiths? There were other temples around here, too. He was so, so curious about many things.

If it were up to him, then he'd spend at least a day or so to sightsee what this city had to offer, but Seol Jihu first had to resolve this urgent problem called "leave this place as soon as possible."

Scheherazade was the most prosperous city within the territory controlled by humans, and indeed, Sinyoung's headquarters was also located here. In other words, this city was their backyard.

Seol Jihu couldn't help but feel a bit aggrieved by the fact that he had to leave this perfectly-fine city behind and go somewhere else, as if he was being chased away. But, what could he do? Sinyoung was obsessively observing every move he made. If he didn't want to become their puppet, then he had to go to a place where their influence didn't reach.

He walked while looking around and eventually arrived at the South gate.

There was a huge open stone gate, and next to it, stables and horse-pulled carriages....

'...Can you even call those carriages?!'

Seol Jihu blinked his eyes in dumbfoundedness.

Unless one had no money, it was this world's common knowledge to utilise the services of carriages when moving from one city to another. But well, he couldn't help but panic a bit after spotting rows upon rows of worn out, rickety wooden carts parked there, instead of the covered coach he rode in when he left the Neutral Zone.

Out of all these, carriages with flaps on either sides to block out some of the elements looked a bit better than the most. Seol Jihu stood there, wondering what he should do next, before cautiously walking over to a man lying on a stack of hay while chewing on a grass stalk near one such 'carriage'.

"Hello, there."

"Mm?"

The man was staring at the heavens with a bored expression, but as soon as a shadow loomed over him, raised his upper body right away. He was a local, with bronze-colored skin, a mustache, and somewhat disheveled hair.

The number of the Paradise's original residents had decreased considerably ever since the war broke out, but still, there were quite a few that had survived. With the exception of those who directly participated in the military affairs, most of the residents who had lost their homes carried on living while getting involved in the Earthling's activities, such as farming or operating various shops, etc, etc.

For instance, this man here – after evacuating to Scheherazade, he switched his job to a wagoner to make his ends meet.

"You an Earthling?"

"Pardon? Ah, yes, I am."

"Where do you want to go?"

"To the city of Haramark, if possible."

"Haramark?"

The previously-disinterested expression of the man crumpled in an instant.

"No good, then. I only go as far as to Zahrah."

“Uhm... Why?”

“Because, it's uncertain, that's why. You don't often hear the news of an attack taking place on Zahrah road, but the Haramark road on the other hand....”

The man slowly shook his head and his large hair, and then...

“Anyways, you say you want to go to Haramark, huh?”

“That's correct.”

“In that case, wait for a bit. Oi~ii! Maktan!”

As soon as this guy raised his hand and shouted out, a bald man sitting a bit of distance away from them turned his head around. And Seol Jihu began despairing in his heart right away. Because, the bald guy was the driver of a wooden wagon that looked like it was designed to ferry goods.

“Why are you calling me? I'm about to set off.”

“You have a spot left?”

“There will always be a spot left.”

“Very good. This fella here, he wants to go to Haramark.”

The man named Maktan showed some irritation as he walked closer, before he started studying Seol Jihu.

“You must be an Earthling.”

“Of course he is. Can't you see that? You really need to ask?”

“Shut up. I heard you ask the same question earlier on, okay?”

Maktan's tone was curt, causing the man with the unkempt hair to chuckle out in embarrassment.

“I'll calculate your fee separately, okay? 30 copper coins to Zahrah, but if it's to Haramark, then 300 copper coins up front.”

The price jumped by ten times in a single breath. Of course, Seol Jihu immediately realised that price included the compensation for the danger to Maktan's life, as well.

Maktan continued to study the Earthling youth in front of him before adding a few more words.

“Hmm... But, if you're willing to work as a mercenary, then I'll halve your fee to Haramark.”

“A mercenary, is it?”

“To guard the wagon as a guard. I know many safe paths to that city, but I get attacked two, three times out of ten.”

Seol Jihu understood then. He nodded his head and loosened the mouth of his bag. If there was an attack, he'd not be able to stand still and watch, anyways. In that case, might as well make it cheaper for himself.

Currency of this world was also included among the list of things Kim Hannah was supporting him with. When he opened the money purse, a handful of coins emitting silver luster revealed themselves.

'She said there are 100 silver coins, didn't she?'

The basic currency in circulation of Paradise were the copper coins and the nickel coins. 100 copper coins were worth a single nickel coin.

Above that, there were the silver coins. A single silver coin was worth 1000 copper coins or ten nickel coins.

Above that were the white silver coins, gold coins, and even platinum coins, but those things were matters still very far away for him right now.

When Seol Jihu handed over a silver coin, Maktan's eyes became super large in an instant. While giving Seol the change of 8 nickel coins and 20 copper coins, he raised his head up and looked at the sky. The sun was about to touch the middle of the heavens.

“If I push hard, we might reach Zahrah before the end of the day.”

“What about from Zahrah to Haramark?”

“If everything's smooth and trouble-free during the trip, two days. If we're unlucky, be prepared to spend four nights outside.”

“Four days...”

“Let's get going. I was going to set off right away.”

Maktan lightly pushed the back of Seol Jihu.

“By the way, it hasn't been that long since you got here, right?”

“What gave you that idea?”

“There ain't a lot of Earthlings who reply to us politely like you, you see.”

Maktan sheepishly scratched his philtrum for a bit, before lightly slapping Seol on the shoulder.

'...Who'd have thought it would be this bad?'

Seol Jihu carefully climbed up to the back of the carriage, no, the wooden wagon. There were wooden benches on either side of the wagon, but they were only barely enough to lean his back against.

However, his heart was still pounding really fast.

'I'm really nervous, aren't I.'

The story might have been different if he was doing this right after he left the Neutral Zone. But now that he went to Earth and came back, he found it harder to come to grips with the reality of the situation where he was using a horse-drawn wagon to travel to another city.

Should he say he was getting rather nervous?

'It's like some kind of a lie, isn't it?'

However, it also didn't feel so bad, either. Well, at the least, he was feeling more comfortable being here, compared to when he was on Earth.

Shortly afterwards...

“Giddy-up!!”

Along with Maktan's loud shout, Seol Jihu's body tilted to the side as the wagon pulled away.

Seol slowly grasped the railing and quietly stared at the city of Scheherazade as it grew smaller in his view.

\*

Haramark was a city located towards the south of the human's territory.

There were two reasons why Seol Jihu chose this city as his destination.

Firstly, it was the only city where Sinyoung's reach didn't extend to, and secondly, Earthlings were allowed free rein in this place, which was quite unlike any other regions.

Of course, if there were good points, then there were bound to be bad ones, too.

One of them was the security of this place, which was so bad that Haramark had earned the nickname of the City of Crime.

A royal family also existed in this city, and they at least tried to enforce some sort of rules, but the truth was, they had pretty much stopped interfering with the Earthlings' affairs a long time ago. It couldn't be helped, since all those organisations who participated in the rebellion had been forced to re-allocate their headquarters to this city.

The other bad point was that this city was very close to the frontlines. Sure, warfare and the Earthlings went hand in hand, but Seol Jihu was only a Level 1.

The reason why he was still going there, though... Well, technically speaking, the Haramark Castle was not located near the border regions.

As far as security was concerned, everywhere was pretty much the same, with the exception of Scheherazade. And because of the warfare raging on between the humans and the alliance of the extraterrestrial beings and other species, he figured that the most powerful humans wouldn't have the time to pay attention to this place and its ongoing.

Kim Hannah thought for a while regarding this matter, before agreeing to let Seol go to Haramark on the condition that he'd not travel further South.

And so, he entrusted his wellbeing to the rickety wooden cart with a heart full of expectations and hope, but around the two-hour mark, his butt started to ache.

He had grown sick and tired of watching the scenery pass by. Well, there was nothing to see anyway, since it was just the same desolate

wasteland everywhere he looked.

'I'm bored....'

If he knew someone on this trip, then he might have started a conversation at least; he ended up thinking about his friends and the Yi siblings multiple times as the wagon continued on.

Seol Jihu watched the brown scenery pass by while resting his chin on his hands, before shifting his gaze to the other passengers.

There were three other people riding on the wagon, besides himself and the driver, Maktan. They were travelers just like him, and judging from their attire, they were Earthlings, too.

The bald African dude sitting next to Seol Jihu while yawning out constantly, boasted a huge physique and was kitted out in sturdy-looking armours. Also, his huge battle axe and its sharp edges caught his interest.

For some reason, this guy was eyeing the passenger on the opposite side with narrowed eyes.

Seol Jihu followed after that man's eyes and took a look first at a young-ish man with a kind face and well-combed blonde hair sitting on the other side. He seemed to be a Priest, judging from the white priest get-up and the discoloured cape on his back.

And next to him was an attractive woman with a set of wild red hair as well as a longbow on her back. She had her arms across her chest, and her legs crossed as well, her head rhythmically nodding in slumber.

Just as Seol Jihu discovered hints of freckles on her nose, a husky voice of the African man suddenly came from beside him. The axe warrior was studying the woman as his back inclined slightly.

Her sleep must not have been that deep, as she slowly raised her head to glare with a crumpled expression.

"What, me?"

Her unhappy tone of voice implied how irritated she was by the man's attempt to wake her up, just as sleep was about to embrace her.

"That's right. You. Your bow is pretty good, isn't it?"

The woman maintained her cold expression, but the corners of her eyes arched up slightly.

"Well, I was in Scheherazade because of this guy, after all."

"Because of a bow?"

"There were this and that to take care of, too."

"I can see that it's a longbow designed for war.... You, by any chance, are you a Level 4?"

The woman shook her head.

"Nope. Level 3. I'm a Tracer."

"Ohh, a tracker, huh. Different than how you look."

She coyly narrowed her eyes at the black man's amazed exclamation.

"Did you wake me up because you wanted to ask me that?"

"Well, I was curious, that's all."

"Don't make me laugh. If you're done asking me questions, then I'd like to go back to my beauty sleep."

Hearing her thorny reply, the black man grinned slyly.

"Why are you reacting like this when you know what's up already? How much?"

"What is he talking about now?" Since he was getting bored anyway, Seol Jihu was focusing on this conversation, only to tilt his head slightly.

"...Ehew."

The woman spat out a lengthy groan as if she saw this coming a mile away. She breathed in heavily for a bit, before pointing at her mouth.

"Five coins. Nickels."

"Aren't you a confident one. What about going all the way?"

She swept her gaze all over the axe-wielding warrior before snorting out.

"It's pretty hard to find a muscle brain with substance to back it up."

"You will only find out if it's the right length or not after taking a look, right?"

The axe warrior slapped his sizeable thigh a couple of times, but the woman shook her hand around.

"Don't want to. Don't have a hobby of doing it on a moving wagon."

"I'll add one more nickel coin. How about it?"

"I still don't want to. If you don't like it, forget about it, then. I wouldn't have agreed if it weren't for my tight budget after I bought this bow."

The large warrior licked his lips then quickly pulled out the coins from his inner pocket before tossing them at her. The woman lightly caught them all and yawned out loudly. After getting up from her spot, she scratched the back of her head while signaling to Seol Jihu with her chin.

"Excuse me, let's switch."

Seol Jihu dazedly swapped the seat with her. She then placed her side on the big warrior's thigh.

"How about touching?"

"You can't go low. And the moment you put your hand on my head, I'm going to kill you."

"Ha, aren't you a fierce one?"

The warrior chuckled jovially before inserting his large hand under the woman's top.

*Fondle, fondle.*

Seol Jihu dazedly watched on before realizing that the woman had lowered her head on the warrior's crotch. Seol Jihu ended up hiccupping out of sheer shock. He belatedly turned his eyes away.

"W, what the hell are they doing now?!"

His heart began pounding hard. Was this the so-called culture shock? The inside of his brain became blank like a sheet of white paper after seeing something he couldn't have imagined in his wildest dreams.

The Priest was watching all this unfold with a disinterested expression. But, when he saw the young man next to him blush heavily while visibly panicking, a soft grin replaced that bored expression.

"First time?"

"?"

"First time seeing something like this?"

"...Oh, yes. It is."

The Priest glanced at Seol Jihu's two spears and spoke in a surprised tone of voice.

"But you look like you're at least Level 2.... Have you been staying in Scheherazade all this time?"

Seol Jihu managed to recover his wits just enough to nod his head.

"Huh. So, you were a gentleman, eh? So, it'll be your first time traveling to Haramark?"

"That's correct."

Was Seol making a mistake when he thought that the Priest's teasing voice sounded a bit like he was mocking the youth?

"If it's your first time, let them have some fun. Unlike Scheherazade, in Haramark, the idea of romance still burns strong, you see."

Seol nearly blurted out "Romance, my foot" but he somehow held back the urge.

"You know how it is. There's no television, no computer, whatever. So, what is there for us to do here? Sure, you might think we've got all these explorations and expeditions, but it's not like we can go on those all the time. In the end, we eat, drink, and fuck. We end up being more faithful towards our basic instincts. Those are the only things we have as pastime, after all."

Seol Jihu couldn't really sympathise with that notion, but he continued to nod his head. Well, he had to do something here, since the sucking noise

coming from the other side was really getting on his nerves at the moment.

See, the thing was, Seol Jihu thought it was infinitely preferable to focus on chatting to a friendly Priest with a happy grin on his face, rather than looking at the pair of crazed and uninhibited man and woman going at it in a... public space.

The young Priest continued to talk excitedly, before going, 'Oops', and offered his hand.

"Name's Alex. I'm a Level 3 Investigative Priest. From Area 4. You?"

Seol Jihu hesitated slightly before shaking the offered hand.

"I'm... Seol. I'm a Level 1 Warrior from Area 1."

"Eh? Level 1?"

Alex's jaw dropped to the floor before laughing out loud. He placed his hand on his forehead.

"Oh, oh, now I get it. You weren't a gentleman, but a newbie!"

Alex then lightly poked the youth in the ribs with his elbow as a lewd grin formed on his face.

"Well, when you get to Haramark, you will definitely get a shock of your life."

Seol Jihu could only smile awkwardly after seeing Alex's giggling eyes.

\*

The trip became a lot less boring once Seol began chatting to Alex. As for the Priest, he got way too excited by the fact that the youth continued to listen to his stories, so he began telling Seol all sorts of things.

In the meantime, the wagon left the area of desolate wasteland and entered a new region.

They arrived at Zahrah after sunset, just as Maktan said they would.

After hearing that this was a village, Seol imagined that Zahrah would be a collection of small rural homesteads with equally small number of residents, but he got quite surprised by the size of the place.

Alex explained that there were well over 1000 residents living here, and that one could even find government offices, inns, and markets in the village. He also said that one could find most of the daily necessities in the markets as well. But he also emphasized that this village had been receiving support from Scheherazade, and other villages were not like this one at all.

Feeling fatigued from riding on the wagon for the whole day, Seol Jihu went straight to the rented room in the inn after dinner.

As this would be his first proper night spent in Paradise, this occasion should've held a lot of sentimental value, but it turned out to be rather disastrous, instead.

The building itself was rather flimsy, and thanks to that, Seol got to hear the axe warrior and the Tracer lady going at it the whole night long. Blocking his ears didn't prevent him from hearing the panting groans of the man nor the moans of the woman.

In the end, he couldn't get to rest properly, and while carrying a totally fatigued face, he climbed aboard the wagon as it got ready to depart in the early dawn.

Seol Jihu couldn't help but feel a bit angry at the man and woman giggling and talking to each other, but as soon as the trip got underway and the wagon left Zahrah, such thoughts slowly evaporated from his mind.

The further they traveled, the scenery changed more and more. The reddish soil of the wasteland was gradually covered up by grass and plants, and soon, even trees made their appearances. It didn't take long after that for trees tall enough to block out the sky to appear, too.

The road became rougher as well. But seeing the changing scenery while drinking in the smell of nature had its own appreciable charm. After he breathed in the cool, clean air, the sleep that he didn't get to enjoy earlier on slowly crept up on Seol.

If there was another thing that had changed, then that would be the attitudes of the axe warrior and the Tracer woman had changed as they got closer to Haramark.

The axe warrior didn't try to initiate lewd conversations any longer, while the Tracer woman sat quietly as her eyes became sharper and focused.

"Get some sleep. It'll be fine. We should be okay for the next half a day or so."

Seol Jihu's eyes closed softly after getting the permission from Alex. It was only yesterday when he thought the Archer lady sleeping on the wagon was something pretty amazing, but now, he was confident that he'd fall asleep just like she had done.

'I wish we could arrive at Haramark as soon as possible...'

\*

And so... how much time passed by?

"...What happened?"

"Keep your voices down."

"Wake him up..."

"Wait, that..."

Seol was still half-asleep when he thought he heard voices. Then, he felt someone shake him by his shoulder.

When he woke up from his nap, the first thing he saw was a dark forest. And, although it was just his intuition, it seemed that the wagon was moving at a far quicker speed for some reason.

"Wake up, Seol!"

"Alex?"

"You up? Uh?"

"Where...?"

Just before Seol could finish his question, Alex placed his finger against his lips and signaled that he should keep his voice down. Seol Jihu closed his mouth shut and surveyed his surroundings.

'A forest?'

That wasn't the only alarming thing, though.

The large warrior was fidgeting around with his axe, as an uneasy expression remain etched on his face.

More importantly, the Archer lady had her ear pressed tightly to the floor of the wagon at the moment.

She was concentrating hard. Anxiety was easy to see in her facial expression.

## Chapter 47

He wasn't imagining things.

*Whish.* The gust of wind blowing past Seol Jihu's ear stung as if a piece of sandpaper was dragged across his face. Two horse-like creatures were already running at full-tilt, yet Maktan was still whipping them hard, his urgent voice roaring out.

"This doesn't feel good, does it?"

The big man clicked his tongue and put on a battle helm with a flat top that kind of resembled a bucket. He then shouted out.

"Did you have to use this road through the forest?!"

"This road is my lifeline! There was no problem nine days ago!"

Maktan replied without looking back.

"How long have you been using this road then?"

"Three months!"

"Goddamn it! You'd have spread lots of your trace around here in those three months!"

The Warrior complained under his breath and lowered his body.

"Seol, you should get down too."

Alex bent down and pulled Seol down to the floor as well.

"Listen to me. From now on, do not leave my side. Understand?"

Not a hint of mischievousness could be seen in Alex's expression now as he spoke in a grave voice. His serious, focused eyes only served to further tighten Seol Jihu's chest.

Seol Jihu knelt down on the floor and lowered his body, his grip on the two spears tightening. At the same time, he activated Nine Eyes.

'Son of a...'

He somehow held back the cuss from escaping from his mouth. The entire forest was in the shade of orange.

Do Not Approach.

However, he was already inside the danger zone. This would be his first time encountering such a situation.

He should have prevented the wagon from entering this forest in the first place, but he had fallen asleep and didn't even know that he was being delivered into the open mouth of a tiger.

Seol Jihu was about to suggest that they get out of here fast but shut his mouth after seeing Maktan whipping his rides hard while sweat continuously poured down the guy's frowning face. The wagon was already running at full speed way before he even woke up.

'What should I do now?'

It should be considered something of a happy occurrence that the forest wasn't in black, 'Escape Immediately', or red, 'Immediate Retreat Recommended'. But this orange color presented enough danger already. After all, he nearly got burned from underestimating the threat posed by the 'yellow' color in the past.

As his complexion hardened, Alex to his side was in the middle of taking out a palm-sized crucifix.

The surroundings were rather eerily quiet... other than the sounds of hooves pounding on the ground and Alex's quiet murmuring as he chanted his spell.

As this unbearable silence continued on, the big man began gritting his teeth. Meanwhile, the Archer still had her ear glued to the floor of the wagon, not showing any signs of moving.

"Say something."

"..."

"Oi! The distance, the direction, the number of them! Anything is fine, so say something!"

"...I don't know."

"What?"

"I don't know. I can't tell."

She lifted her head back up and formed a confused expression.

"I can definitely hear a strange noise mixed in among the rest, but... it's too faint and I can't grasp it."

"Hah?! Are you sure you're a Tracer?"

The Warrior spat out some words of exasperation, causing the Archer woman to narrow her eyes in anger.

"What are you trying to imply?"

"Fuck, man. You say you're a Level 3, but how can you not know anything?"

"Shut your mouth! Do I look like a High Ranker to you? What do you expect me to do here when I need to be on the actual ground to hear anything?"

Her pride must've been wounded because she shot right back at him. The Warrior looked as if he had nothing else to say and only spat out lengthy groans.

"Decide fast! Do we keep running or do we stop? Hurry!"

Maktan asked with an anxious voice.

"D\*mn it. What choice do we have? Stop the wagon!"

"No! Keep running!"



As soon as the big man voiced his opinion, the woman sharply opposed him. Maktan was about to yank on the reins to stop the wagon, so quite understandably, he ended up spitting out a cuss word.

The big black man looked at the woman with a dumbfounded expression before growling at her like a wild beast.

"This crazy bitch. You want to fight me when we're in this situation?"

"It's you who don't know shit. What will you do when we stop and get surrounded?"

"How do you know that there isn't an ambush waiting for us up ahead? So, we stop and get down from the wagon!"

"Stop, both of you!"

Unable to take it anymore, Alex finally intervened. The crucifix in hand was emitting a calm, gentle light now.

"It doesn't matter whether it's a team or an expedition, Archers always take the lead. Let's just listen to her for the time being, okay? What do you say, Hugo?"

Seeing that Alex addressed the big man by name, they must have known each other.

After pacifying Hugo, Alex turned to study the Archer.

"I should place priority on your opinions as you're an Archer, but even I think it'll be better for us to stop at an adequate place and find out what we're dealing with first. We can only come up with a strategy if we know what we're up against."

"I know that. But look around, there isn't any adequate place to stop."

The Archer woman replied unhappily before biting her lower lip.

"It's like we're being led around. I can feel that something isn't right."

Alex's brows quivered.

"Fuck me! Did you hear her just now? You're supposed to be an Archer, yet you're busy mouthing off about your gut feelings?!"

Hugo cried out in anger. If it weren't for that fact that he was crouched real low to the floor, he might have jumped up and down with that big physique of his.

Alex maintained his patience as he opened his mouth.

"If you're relying on gut instinct, I can't place my trust in you. The odds are half-half. It's better for us to stop the wagon immediately and figure out what's going on right away."

The Archer snorted and turned around to face the other direction.

"Fine. However, you need to give me 30, no, 15 seconds. I can't be certain, but we might be facing a group of Riders."

Alex didn't disagree with that. What she said made perfect sense, but also, in case the Archer's words were proven to be correct, then stopping the wagon would be tantamount to committing suicide.

"Maktan! Don't stop the wagon abruptly, but slow down gradually! So you can set off at a short notice, got it?"

"Got it!"

"Alright! But... what...?"

Alex turned around to face the Archer once more before falling into a state of daze from what he saw. The eyes of the woman were gleaming in soft light before that light disappeared. She then cautiously raised her torso up and peeked her head past the railings.

"Ah, hey! What are you doing? Sit down!"

Hugo freaked out. She utterly disregarded him while surveying her surroundings. Then, she nodded her head.

"I think we aren't being herded around. It should be fine to slow down."

"Herded or not, I said, lower your goddamn head!"

"Seriously, stop shouting, will you?!"

The Archer covered her ears and showed how annoyed she was.

“Are you an idiot? If I were to get sneak attacked, then that driver would've been hit first!”

Hugo became even more dumbfounded than before. His mouth opened and closed a couple of times, before an expression of suspicion formed on his face.

“You... Are you really Level 3?”

“Ha.”

The woman spat out a groan. It was as if she didn't know what to do with him. She then placed a hand on her waist and opened her mouth.

It happened then.

*Psh! Psh!*

Along with the faint whispers of air being split apart...

“In any case...”

...Her words came to a sudden stop.

Her eyes that had been mocking Hugo suddenly spun around. She then began faltering theatrically. Her head and her shoulders slowly trembled before she fell face-first to the floor.

Her body trembled only for a second before it went limp. She was dead.

Alex's face crumpled unsightly as soon as spotting a lengthy needle sticking out of the back of the woman's head.

“You idiot!”

Hugo angrily cried out as well.

Seol Jihu couldn't wrap his head around on what just happened. The woman who was so full of confidence only until a second ago died in the blink of an eye. It was as if he was having a bad nightmare.

Alex extracted the needle out and frowned deeply.

“Wait a minute. This, can it be...?”

Next, they heard the pained cries of animals coming from the front.

Just as Seol went, ‘Crap,’ the wagon tilted and then overturned on the side.

“Uaaahhh?!”

Alex was flung away, both of his arms helplessly flailing in the air.

Seol Jihu, too, was thrown in the air. Before he knew it, he was sent flying. He was still gripping his spear tightly; as the sensation of his tummy being sucked in hit him, he clearly saw 'it' – Maktan's neck thrown backwards and his arms powerlessly dancing in the air, with a needle stuck in his forehead.

The wagon overturned and the surviving trio was thrown out from the back. Seol Jihu managed to land safely in the bushes and rolled on the ground to dissipate the momentum.

“Fuck! Riders my ass! It's the goddamn Moles!!”

Seol heard Hugo roar out at the top of his lungs, but the youth had no time to mind that. Before he had the chance to take a breather, four pale-white hands shot out from the earth below, each of them carrying sharp daggers.

“!”

He didn't even have the time to see them take a swing at him; he let go of the spear and rolled further away. He bounced right back up at the end of the tumbling action and took a look at the spot he was in and saw the four daggers stabbing there. He felt a chill run down his back.

However, picking up his spear took priority over him freaking out and asking what the hell those were.

He snatched up his spear and rapidly stabbed the ground where those four hands jutted out from.

*STAB!!*

He felt the spear pierce past the soft earth and then dig into something more substantial. It was almost as if he had stabbed into a large radish.

He then stabbed forward even harder and rotated the spear shaft. Right away, two of the four hands coming out from the ground went crazy as if they were having a seizure.

When that happened, the other two hands began pushing up on the ground as if they wanted to come out from there.

“Not so fast.”

Seol pulled the spear out and rapidly stabbed the ground again, causing the other hands to do that dying dance as well.

“Seeeoooo!!! Huuugo!!”

Seol quickly turned around as soon as he heard the urgent cry.

Alex hadn't been able to get up yet; he was bitterly resisting two hands sprouting from the ground as they restrained him. His arms and shoulders were quaking hard from the struggle, but the daggers were closing in gradually.

Due to the overturning of the wagon, their distance was greater than Seol expected it to be. He pulled the spear out, and thick coating of blood at the tip of his weapon drew an arc in the air.

He quickly circulated his mana through his Reinforced Circuit. He focused his power in his right arm and threw the spear as hard as he could.

*Swish!*

The spear carrying his overwhelming mana flew past Alex and dug deep into the ground.

“Uwahck?!”

Alex reflexively turned his head away, only to blink his eyes in shock. He then realized that his hands no longer felt the pulling from under the ground. He hurriedly yanked his arms loose and got up from the spot.

“Huh?”

Hugo belatedly arrived there before staring at Seol with an equally surprised face. Then, he shouted out.

“Over there! Your left leg!!”

Seol was bending down to pick up the other spear, but as soon as he heard the warning, he jumped right up. Another dagger swept past where his foot was. He landed back on his feet and stabbed the ground, but when he felt movement below again, he lifted his left leg up.

He dodged the hand with the dagger with his swift footwork and stabbed the ground with his spear. Soon, the soil was dyed in the color of blood.

“Ohh?”

When Seol took care of four, maybe five unknown assailants in one go, Hugo began grinning with an expression that said, “Would you look at this kid go?”

He then burst out in a raucous laughter, raised his giant axe up high, before slamming that heavy weapon down to the ground.

*KWANG!!*

What came out next was the impact noise that couldn't possibly have been made by an axe. Seol's eardrums shook hard. The earth exploded up and blasted away, leaving behind the air rippling clearly visible to the naked eye. He couldn't tell whether that was Hugo's mana or one of his abilities, but if that was from purely his physical strength, then that was one of the most electrifying displays of power he had ever seen.

“This is the best method in dealing with the goddamn Moles.”

Hugo beamed brightly while resting the axe against his shoulder. Seol couldn't understand that guy's relaxed behavior since they were still in the middle of a battle, but it seemed Alex did understand.

“Nice! Well done, Hugo! Now, it's our turn!”

Alex quickly picked up the crucifix off the ground as his eyes burned in anger.

“You sons of bitches. The moment you all show your faces above ground, it'll be your funeral.”

The meaning behind those words revealed itself soon afterwards. With the spot where Hugo slammed his axe down as the central point, over ten pairs of arms broke out from the ground in a disorderly fashion.

“Alex!”

Hugo gripped his axe tightly and shouted out.

“I know!”

Alex spat out a short breathless gasp, placed a hand on his side to press down a wound there as he pushed forward his crucifix.

“Luxu Lu Luxuria!!”

Suddenly, a blinding light exploded forth from the crucifix. And at the same time, the creatures emerging out from the ground all froze up mid-action.

“Oh, yeah. Time to pull out some vegetables, then.”

Hugo ran forward as if he had gained wings and yanked at one of the arms from the ground. Then, a strange monster with two arms and two legs that resembled a trunk of a tree but with animal hide covering its body was pulled out from its hiding spot.

Hugo easily bisected the stiffly-frozen monster, then without taking a break, went around repeating the action of pulling and killing the monsters.

Soon, the duration of the spell came to an end, allowing these strange monsters to fully emerge above ground. By this time, though, their numbers had been whittled down to only seven. Also, they were all staggering around as if they were suffering from concussion.

Seol continued to be vigilant against the ground near his feet, but Alex spoke to him in a relaxed tone.

“It's fine. It's already over.”

“Over? What do you mean?”

“Right. See, these Moles instinctively hate mana. These bastards will emerge above ground as soon as you pour in enough mana where they are hiding.”

“Moles?”

Alex formed a wry smile at Seol's follow up question. However, the youth saved his life just now, so answering this much was nothing.

“Think of them as land-bound fish. They move around by swimming underground.”

Seol Jihu tilted his head to the side. He couldn't even imagine how anything could swim underground.

“In any case. They failed to kill us through their sneak attack, so it's the end for them. Hugo is a Level 4 Barbarian Warrior. Moles attacking from below the ground might have proven to be an irritating nuisance, but fighting them above ground is as easy as taking candies from a baby.”

Alex pointed to his front. Hugo was treating these crazed monsters called Moles like a bunch of unruly children. Seeing the big man swing around his axe and cut them down one by one, even Seol felt his mind getting freed from anxiety.

Alex continued on.

“Actually, Moles are really crafty and sneaky bastards. And these particular things must have fought against the Earthlings a couple of times already.”

“How can you tell?”

“Simple. Where do you think these monsters got their hands on the daggers?”

“...Ah.”

“They must have also figured out that we had an Archer among us because they hid deep underground and tried to confuse us. Otherwise, we would have discovered them the moment they got near the surface. They spread around and waited for an opening before firing those needles. As soon as they killed one of us, they attacked us properly.”

“How scary....”

“I know, right? But that stupid Archer woman!”

Alex spat out angrily before coughing out to clear his throat. It was a waste of time to bad-mouth a dead person, after all.

“In any case, that's not all. Since they usually form a herd, they move around in large packs, and then.... Ehehehe.”

Alex began laughing strangely and moved his pointing finger away from Hugo towards Seol. The youth glanced down at himself, and his jaw dropped from the surprise. He spotted four needles stuck in the middle of his chest armor. It seemed he had been sniped during the battle.

“And then, they possess enough intelligence to assign different roles, too. Ah, don't worry about it. Those who'd been sniping us should have ran away by now.”

Alex saw Seol scanning the area and stopped the youth from making a move, before tilting his head in puzzlement.

“Hmm. But, this is really strange. I haven't heard of news that Moles have popped up near Haramark until now.”

“I'm finished!”

Hugo squeezed and popped the head of the last Mole with his bare hands, before shouting out with his arms raised up high.

“Nicely done, Hugo.”

“That was way too easy. Rather than that, you okay?”

Hugo took large strides and came in closer before asking Alex. The young Priest smiled weakly.

“Actually, I got hit once.”

“In that case, hurry up and heal yourself first. I won't be able to thank you if you're dead.”

“Puhah! Yeah, you're right.”

Alex plopped down on the ground before producing a small vial. While the Priest was grunting on the ground, Hugo strutted a little while studying Seol Jihu.

“Hey, man. I saw your fancy footwork just now. You sure you're only Level 1?”

“Yeah, I was wondering about that myself. It would be easier to believe that Seol is Level 3 with that Archer being Level 1.”

Alex spoke with an anguished face as he tipped the healing liquid from the vial on his wounds. Hugo nodded his head as if he agreed with that assessment.

“That damned bitch. I've never seen a Tracer like her before. I thought I might die from frustration, you know?”

“That woman, she wasn't a Tracer.”

Alex chuckled softly.

“And she obviously wasn't a Level 3, either. She was Level 2 at best, and she probably leveled up recently too.”

“What?”

Hugo asked back with a disbelieving face. Alex breathed out softly as if the pain had lessened a great deal and answered the big man.

“I definitely saw it. It was only for a moment, but her eyes were shining. If I'm correct, then that's not the ability 'Thousand-Mile Eyes' but the 'Eagle Eye'. You know that Thousand-Mile Eyes is a must-learn ability for Archers when they reach Level 3, right?”

“Wait a damn minute here. Now that I think about it, 'Eagle Eye' is something you learn when you hit Level 2....”

Hugo dazedly muttered to himself before his expression crumpled.

“Goddamn it!! She's been lying to us since the beginning!”

“Well, come on now. You know that there are plenty of people lying about their levels in Haramark. I mean, you see a ton of idiots coming up with all sorts of excuses when you ask them to show you their Status Windows.”

“Damn it. How did she even get that longbow, then? Her equipment also looked pretty good too.”

“She probably got a good sponsor or something.”

Alex sounded confident of his findings as he stood back up. And then, he turned towards Seol.

“Seol? An advice, if you will. We might have won today, but this wasn't what you'd call a good victory. Of course, you fought well above anyone's expectations, but for me and Hugo, this was a bad fight.”

Seol Jihu nodded his head. He roughly understood what Alex was trying to say here.

If everyone acted according to both Hugo's and Alex's opinions, then these enemies would've been dealt with quite painlessly. Even if an Archer was tasked to head up a team, this would be the result when the right to make the final decision was given to someone not qualified for such a task.

Through this experience, Seol got to engrave this lesson right down to his bones.

“Che. If I knew we were facing Moles, I wouldn't have even broken a sweat.”

Hugo continued to complain bitterly.

“Who knew we'd be up against Moles? But... in any case.”

Alex looked around his vicinity, and his shoulders drooped helplessly. Maktan and the Archer woman was dead, and the wagon was smashed to bits.

“And we're right in the middle too... chew.”

However, Alex didn't lose hope and asked the question anyway.

“Anyone with a bright idea?”

Of course, no one raised their hands.

“...”

“...”

“...”

The big guy, the youth, and the Priest spat out a long groan almost at the same time.

## Chapter 48

Should they continue on, or go back to Zahrah?

Alex and Hugo debated for a long time regarding this crucial matter. Because the incident had taken place smack bang in the middle of the way, it was hard for them to come to a quick decision.

Seol Jihu didn't say anything. He knew he had little experience when it came to things like this and left the decision to the two veterans.

The duo talked for a while and in the end, the decision was made to go forward.

They agreed that rather than going back and waiting for another Archer and wagon, and therefore waste even more time and money, it'd be simpler to just walk the rest of the way to their destination.

Seol Jihu also agreed. He was slightly worried about walking that much distance, but he decided to trust his overall endurance, something he took great pains to train back in the Neutral Zone.

“Alright. We leave, but before that, let's take what we can.”

After the agreement was reached, Hugo suddenly spoke up about a different matter.

“I'm going to look at the Archer woman, so you two go rummage what you can.”

Hugo whistled to himself as he turned around to walk away.

“I'm going to pick up the daggers the Moles dropped, so Seol, please take care of Maktan's end.”

Alex, too, quickly made his move. Seol Jihu wondered what that guy was doing, only to see him bend down to pick up the daggers the dead Moles had dropped. Meanwhile, Hugo was dragging the corpse of the Archer woman out of the wreckage of the wagon. Only then did the youth understand what was going on here.

They were looting the dead. Indeed, they were 'stealing' the personal artifacts from the dead.

Maktan's body was lying in front of the broken wagon, with a needle stuck in his forehead, and his eyes still wide open. Seol Jihu found it hard to reach out with his hands. Rather than him feeling disgusted or scared by the human corpse, he was simply feeling apologetic.

But, he was someone Seol met only yesterday. The youth didn't really harbor any particular feelings toward the dead man, neither bad nor good.

However, this man carried out his given role right until the end. He trusted the Earthlings riding on his wagon to do theirs, too. Seol was supposed to guard him, but in the end, he couldn't protect the man.

“Mm? What's the matter? Why are you hesitating?”

Hugo walked up to Seol with a beaming face.

“Damn. That girl was loaded, man. She had so much stuff on her beside that longbow! Come, take a look!”

The big Warrior pushed forward a handful of mixed items. Seol Jihu received them almost out of reflex and then ended up frowning a little. The

bow and arrows were a given, but then, he saw not only the defensive equipment, but even a ladies' underwear among the loot.

Thinking, 'There's no way', he turned his head to look, and sure enough, he saw the completely naked back of the Archer lying face-down in the dirt.

It was the same story for Maktan. Rigor mortis must have made moving the body difficult, yet Hugo was expertly stripping the dead driver's unmoving body.

"Hugo."

"Mm? Oh, it's you, Seol? What's up?"

"Is there a need to strip him off his clothes, and for that matter, his underwear, too?"

"Of course. Sure, they won't sell that high, but every cent counts."

Hugo replied straightforwardly as if he didn't understand why anyone would ask this question.

"Still..."

"Still this and still that. You worried that a dead body might catch a cold or something?"

Hugo laughed out at his own joke before his expression calmed down. He spoke to Seol in a serious voice.

"Look, man. You gotta be decked out in proper armor if you wanna be acknowledged as a Warrior. And when you level up, you need to buy new equipment, but the price increases exponentially that they actually physically hurt you. Money don't fall from trees, my man. We save up every cent like this until we can afford the stuff we need."

Now that Seol heard this, this notion also made some sense. Still, some hesitation remained in his heart. Hugo cackled after sensing the youth's moods.

"There ain't nobody here to praise you for being a noble person, Seol. What do you think will happen if you leave the corpses untouched here? The stuff will either get damaged as the wild beasts snack on the bodies, or some other lucky sobs would stumble by and loot them, anyways."

"..."

"If you still feel guilty, then think this way. You sell these and get yourself a better weapon. And then, when you encounter Moles next time, kill every single motherfucker you see. That is the best way to appease the souls of the departed. Okay?"

Hugo eventually located the money purse and grinned brightly. Among the mixture of copper and nickel coins, there was a single silver coin.

"Here, take it."

Hugo extracted the silver coin and, after taking a look at his side, gave the coin to Seol.

"This is..."

It was Seol's coin, given to Maktan as the fee for his ride.

"Hey, hurry up. His back is turned around right now."

"But..."

"It's fine, it's fine."

Hugo pushed the silver coin down the youth's pocket. He then placed his index finger across his lips and went 'sh' with a smile on his face.

"The thing is, I also got back the payment I gave that girl when we were fooling around, you see! Ehehe."

Hugo giggled and also added that Seol was now an accomplice and that he should keep it a secret from Alex.

Hugo then turned around to leave. Seol Jihu was about to follow after the big man, but he stopped. His expression became complicated after looking at the naked body of Maktan.

'This kind of world...'

The youth slowly reached down and pulled the needle out. Then he closed the dead man's eyes. He heard others calling out to him to hurry up. He increased his pace and caught up with them.

Today, he almost figured out a little bit of what this world, Paradise, was all about.

\*

They eventually escaped from the forest, and continued to march onwards. Walking for the whole day was never going to be an enjoyable or fulfilling experience, though.

When the night descended, Seol Jihu got to experience camping outside in Paradise for the first time. Staying up as a guard during the night was also a first since he left the military, too.

Those were probably the reasons his entire body ached and his head felt like it weighed a ton when he woke up in the morning. He hadn't experienced such stiffness and pain ever since he left the first ranker's quarters in the Neutral Zone.

He told himself that this was something he had to get used to anyways, and continued on with the march without complaining once. Becoming friendly with Hugo along the way was an unexpected bonus. He could be a bit of hot-blooded guy, but when the youth got to know him better, he proved to be as outgoing and friendly as Alex was.

Hugo, too, looked favorably at the youth. He believed in the notion that Warriors had to be tough bastards, and so he found Seol to his liking as the youth never once complained even when the marching speed periodically picked up without a single explanation. Also, when the big guy got bored and began talking about some random crap, the youth listened with great interest, which meant Hugo could only grow even more friendly towards Seol.

In this fashion, days went by, and as the fourth day on the road was coming to a close...

The trio left the rolling hills and came to face a plain that seemed to stretch forever. And at the distant end of the road leading to the city of Haramark, the dying glow of the sunset cast its amber hue on the stone walls, so small and far away in their view.

It was Haramark.

Just as Maktan said, the unlucky trio took four days to get to their destination.

Hugo raised both of his arms up high and shouted out in happiness.

"As soon as I arrive, I'm gonna go straight to 'Eat, Drink And Enjoy'. Oh, right. What about you two?"

Hugo tipped an imaginary cup down his lips and asked his companions. Alex said that he'd like to take a break and refused right away.

"But, why?! Parting ways after sharing a glass or two is manly, don't you think?"

"You might have energy left over since you're a Warrior, but I'm a Priest. Besides, I have to stop by the temple and make a report."

"Eh? It's not like we were on an expedition, so why a report?"

"Come on now. Moles appeared in the vicinity of Haramark. This is something I need to alert the others about as soon as possible."

"Ahh, I forgot. You're right."

Hugo massaged his forehead and shifted his glance over to Seol.

"Seol, what about..."

"Hey, you said that this is your first time in Haramark, right?"

Even before Hugo could finish his words, Alex butted in first.

"Uh, yes, it is."

"Of course, having a cold one isn't such a bad idea, but... the 'Eat, Drink And Enjoy' is... Hmm. Yeah, it may not suit you, after all."

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, it's just a pub. A multi-purpose pub, if you will."

Alex added that he'd find out if he went there personally, before smiling awkwardly.

"In any case, if you wish to rest up well, then allow me to recommend you to an inn that I know. People go there to sleep for the night, so it'll be sufficiently quiet for you. It's a bit rundown, but it should be fine for your needs."

"Ah, thank you."

"No need to thank me. Well, let's get going."

"Che."



Hugo pouted unhappily. Seol couldn't help but chuckle at the antics of the big man who acted like a spoiled little kid – inwardly, of course.

If there was a meeting, then there would also be a parting, too.

When the trio arrived at Haramark, they shared brief farewells and went their separate ways.

Hugo's feelings must've been hurt by this, or maybe he was simply sulking, whatever – he just threw out a cold goodbye and turned around to leave. Alex spat out a lengthy groan and led Seol to the inn he was talking about.

"I'm worried about Hugo."

"Don't mind him. He's narrow-minded and might do whatever he wants, but he isn't the type to harbor grudges or ill feelings. You buy him a drink later on, and I promise you, he's going to smile like a dog munching on a bone."

After hearing Alex's words, Seol formed a gentle smile.

Now that he had finally arrived in the city, he wanted to take a look around, but well, he was far too exhausted right now. Rather than sightseeing, he dearly wished to hit the bed with a warm blanket wrapped around him.

"Welcome to Haramark, my friend."

Alex and Seol shared a long, friendly handshake, and the Priest left with the parting words of "Let's meet again in the future."

Now left alone, Seol Jihu cautiously pushed open the inn's door and entered. An elderly woman taking a nap behind the ground floor counter slowly cracked open an eyelid.

"What brings you here?"

"Oh, someone I know recommended this place, so..."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"A single bedroom will cost ya 10 bronze coins for the night. If you want a better accommodation, we have special rooms. They'll cost ya 20 bronze coins, however."

"Give me that special room."

After paying up 20 coins, Seol received a key, and by following the old woman's directions, he went up the stairs to the upper floor.

The so-called special room was narrow, but quite unexpectedly, clean and tidy. He even spotted a small potted plant that aided in one's natural recovery placed on top of a closet next to the bed. He also liked that there was an old wooden desk just below the window and two chairs next to it.

Although it was nowhere near as sophisticated as the accommodations found in the Neutral Zone, he still thought that such an analog-like rustic sensibility wasn't too bad, either.

Seol Jihu put his bag down and laid down on the bed. For a while, he stared at the aged ceiling without making a noise.

He had encountered an incident mid-way, but besides that, he was able to conclude the rest of the trip without running into other distractions.

He fought alongside strangers, befriended them, and went their separate ways.

'However, I'm sure we will meet each other someday.'

He did feel a bit empty, but at the same time, he saw it as yet another part of the adventure that he should enjoy and get used to.

As the bed creaked a little under his weight, his eyes slowly closed. Remembering the cold grass beneath his body when he was camping outside, this bed felt incomparably soft and comfortable.

Soon enough, the youth's entire body slackened like wet cotton, and he drifted into a deep slumber.

\*

Around the time the sun had risen to the middle of the sky.

Seol Jihu also woke up. He thought he'd wake up in the morning, but perhaps due to the fatigue of the forced march, he ended up sleeping for a long time. However, thanks to that, he felt light and ready to go. Beside his empty stomach, that was. Even his heavy head had returned to how it was before.

When he cracked open the window, a gentle breeze blew in. He settled down on the window sill, and while drinking in the fresh air, he looked at the city of Haramark with great interest.

Scheherazade had been filled with countless earth-colored buildings, but here in Haramark, the architecture was varied and colorful, to say the least. White, grey, reddish brown. . .

'What should I do now?'

Now that he was here, he needed to do something. Seol deliberated for a little while, before closing the window shut. He put the bag down on the desk and sat on the chair.

He opened the mouth of the bag and saw a few different things inside.

'This thing. . . He said that I'd get quite a lot of money if I sell this, right?'

The longbow designed to be used in warfare – it was the most valuable item out of the stuff looted from the dead bodies. Hugo wanted it, but Alex offered it to Seol as a way to console the youth as his first-ever trip to Haramark turned into an unbridled disaster.

Besides that, there were five daggers, a leather jacket the Archer wore, as well as a silver coin.

Seol suddenly recalled the bright face of Hugo as he said the seemingly-useless Archer woman had three Silver coins on her. The youth placed that Silver coin he secretly got from the big man along with the rest of his money.

'The Elixirs and the Divine Stigmata. . . Now that I think about it, do I need to stop by the temple as well?'

He didn't have a need to go to a temple now if it was just for the Divine Stigmata. It was something he could use only when he was at a higher level.

The Divine Stigmata branded a person with a trace of divinity, allowing one to receive a god's blessing, which would lead to one unlocking special classes and skillsets.

However, one would have to go through the trials and tribulations the god sent down, as well.

Whatever the case may be, he couldn't stay idle for long. Kim Hannah told him to take this whole thing as a game. If Paradise was indeed a game, then what would he have done?

'Gather information.'

Picking up his bag, Seol Jihu went downstairs to the ground floor. Before leaving, he returned the key and asked the old woman the direction to the plaza. She simply pointed to her left.

"When you exit the inn, go left. Soon you will find a big road. Follow that and you'll arrive at the main plaza."

He followed her directions. As soon as exiting the inn, he went left and found that big road.

If his first step was taken in Scheherazade, then it was time to take yet another one here.

The youth felt his heart palpitate faster as he thought about what kind of adventure he'd find in Haramark and who he'd end up meeting.

On the other hand, he was fully aware of the fact that the world operated in a certain way and things wouldn't work out in the fashion he expected them to.

\*

The appearance of Haramark was the exact opposite of Scheherazade in certain areas. If the Capital seemed lively and energetic, then Haramark felt chaotic and on edge at the same time. If he were to explain the reason for this mood, then it might have something to do with the unrestricted freedom afforded to the residents here.

There were plenty of structures found in the city, but they were arranged in such a chaotic and disorderly fashion, they almost managed to make him feel dizzy. It was to the point where Seol Jihu found it hard to tell where he was. The roads were uneven and pockmarked. They were dirty too, with wet straws liberally strewn about and muddy puddles found everywhere.

'I will probably have a hard time trying to remember the directions in this place.'

Most importantly, the atmosphere in the city was different. Perhaps because he heard that it was called the city of crime, every passerby seemed to possess a shady countenance.

A short while later, he went past a cracked and damaged wall adorned with graffiti that he couldn't decipher and arrived at an open space.

The wide, circular area was teeming with people, and their noisy calls to others only seemed to further add to the chaos and confusion.

Seol's eyes sparkled when he discovered the noticeboard in the middle of the plaza.

'There's one here, too.'

He couldn't understand why there was a noticeboard with missions attached to it back in the Neutral Zone, but maybe it was to prepare the survivors for this arrangement.

He walked closer to the noticeboard while feeling happy for no reason, and almost out of reflex, took a look at the mission parchment located right at the top.

—Appearances of Moles near Haramark confirmed.

Below that single line of text, there was an identifying branding and a name. It said, 'the Temple of Luxuria, from Investigative Priest Alex'.

And when he saw the parchment below that one, Seol hurriedly took a second look at it with disbelieving eyes.

—Reconnaissance of the Forest of Denial

—A mission issued by the Royal Family

—Reward, details of negotiation by mutual agreement

\*Sicilia, Cinzia

'So, Miss Cinzia is also in Haramark.'

He lowered his gaze further down. From here onwards, no matter what he chose to do, he had to do it in a team. Trying to act alone like back in the Neutral Zone would be tantamount to committing suicide.

It wasn't hard to locate the advertisements for hiring helpers, but Seol Jihu's eyes narrowed to a slit. There were so many parchments here that they were basically overlapping one another, and some were even completely covered up by other parchments.

'Requesting for a Priest Level 2 or higher.... Recruiting Warriors level 3 or higher.... So, it's requesting for Priests, but recruiting for Warriors, huh. Hiring porters.... There was a job for porters, too?'

“Hmm....”

There were so many here that trying to read them only gave him a case of migraine. Finding a mission that suited his condition was also going to be a challenge.

In the end, he had to activate Nine Eyes. It was okay to manually read each one, but there was no reason for him to not to use an ability he already possessed.

The noticeboard changed into various colors. One thing that caught his attention was the fact that most of the board were in the shades related to alerting him to the potential dangers. The color yellow was the most dominant one, and orange could be seen here and there as well. Hell, there was even a single red parchment, too.

'This one's even telling me to run away, too.... Mm?'

Seol Jihu licked his lips and continued to rummage through the parchments before his hands came to an abrupt halt.

His hands stopped by at one of the slips that was hidden underneath the others. He nearly went past it while thinking it was yellow color, but the blinding light coming from it attracted his gaze.

Indeed, the paper was gleaming attractively.

'It's gold!'

The Golden Commandment.

He didn't expect to see a gold color here.

Seol Jihu's eyes grew wider as he took a closer look at the parchment.

## Chapter 49

—Carpe Diem is searching for a new member.

There was a single line of text on the parchment and nothing else – not even an address. However, Seol still liked the fact that it seemingly didn't speak of any restrictions whatsoever.

'Going there straight away is foolish.'

It was always better to have plenty of information at hand.

Seol Jihu left the plaza and began walking around without a destination in mind. He was thinking of walking into the first restaurant he spotted to take care of his brunch.

As he looked around his surroundings, he eventually spotted a worn, shabby wooden signboard in the distance.

'Eat, Drink And Enjoy.'

Eat, drink, and enjoy. Alex said that this place was a multi-purpose pub yesterday. Hugo wanted to come here along with everyone, but Alex said no right away to the idea.

'I guess the Synchronization doesn't translate signboards, huh.'

Seol Jihu tilted his head slightly before heading straight to the pub.

He pushed open the door with anticipation bubbling in his heart and was immediately greeted by the noises of people loudly talking to each other. At the same time, his nose was assaulted by the combined odor of cigarettes, booze, and sweat, as well as some other unidentifiable smell.

When he stepped inside, he was faced with a tightly-packed 'saloon' that one might see in a movie set in the Wild West. People were sitting around round wooden tables, noisily chatting among themselves with booze in their hands, or whispering softly with serious looks on their faces.

Seol Jihu stepped in and walked past the ash and cigarette butts on the floor, before his eyes nearly popped out of his sockets when a woman sped past him, her blonde hair dancing in the air as she did so.

She wore the type of a brassiere that exposed over half of her abundant bosom, and not only that, a pair of pink stockings and the matching garter belt; and her swaying derriere was in full display through her see-through underwear.

She wasn't the only one, though. He finally spotted many more ladies kitted out in just as shockingly revealing outfits walking around here and there in the pub.

'...This was the meaning of 'Enjoy' in the name, huh.'

He kind of understood what Alex meant when he said that this place wouldn't really suit Seol.

'It's not like I don't like this, though.'

He just wasn't used to it, that was all.

A short while later, Seol finally found an empty spot by the corner of the bar, and he cautiously settled down there. It was perhaps obvious that he shouldn't really expect a speedy customer service in a place like this one.

Seol Jihu spent some time observing the variety of beverage bottles on display on the shelves, before spotting a slightly-thin man resting his chin on his elbow on the far side of the bar. Seeing that the man was decked out like a bartender, he obviously worked here.

"Excuse me."

"?"

The man with a bored face and a cigarette hanging loose in his lips glanced back at Seol.

"I'd like to ask you a couple of questions."

The man breathed out the cigarette smoke and slowly straightened his bent back. He then trudged closer to Seol and asked with half-closed eyes.

"You want to order something?"

Seol wasn't a dummy; he immediately figured out that the bartender was telling him to buy or order something if he wanted his questions to be answered.

"What's good to eat here?"

"A light meal or something more fulfilling?"

"Something more fulfilling, please. Haven't had breakfast yet, you see."

The bartender opened his eyes a little wider.

"How does a bowl of tasty soup, a loaf of soft bread, and a lightly spiced grilled sausage sound to you?"

"Sounds good."

“Ah, right. We also serve a big serving of steak too.”

“Give me that as well. Rare.”

The bartender silently gazed at Seol. Seeing this, the youth produced a Silver coin and presented it before the man. Only then the bartender smiled amiably and returned 8 nickel coins as change.

“Looks like I'll have to roll my sleeves up for the first time in a while. Wait here.”

The bartender entered the kitchen, and soon, emerged with the bowl of soup and a large loaf of bread first.

The old saying went that hunger was the best appetizer there was; the food tasted amazing. Seol Jihu finished the savory soup and the soft bread in the blink of an eye. The skewered sausage was overflowing with juicy fat, and when he bit into it, the succulent meaty taste exploded in his mouth.

The bartender exited the kitchen while carrying the still-sizzling steak on top of a metal plate, before stopping still with a surprised expression on his face after seeing the youth busy licking his fingers in satisfaction.

“Y, you seemed to enjoy the food.”

“Yeah, they were really good. Give me that as well.”

‘...Was my cooking skill this good?’

The bartender was taken aback by the sight of the youth unhesitantly cutting into the steak and shoving the meat into his mouth. He still managed to take a bottle of booze from the shelf, though.

“This is on the house. Its alcohol percentage is low, but it's pretty sweet and should go well with the food.”

Seol's mouth was full with meat so he could only nod his head as his thanks. He then grabbed the bottle and chugged the liquid down. A feeling of satisfaction filled him up as the thick aroma of raw honey melted on his tongue. Tasty food possessed this ability to enlighten the mood no matter the occasion.

“First time seeing you in Haramark.”

The bartender asked, his expression more relaxed than before.

“I arrived yesterday. It's my first time in the city.”

“From Scheherazade?”

“Yes, that's correct.”

“Aha. Oh, right. You said you wanted to ask me some questions, right?”

Seol Jihu nodded his head and asked.

“Is there any work to be found in Haramark? I don't mind whatever it is.”

“Hmm, I wonder? If you're not talking about part-time jobs, then... How about visiting the plaza? There should be quite a few jobs listed on the noticeboard.”

“I was there just now, but there weren't a lot of jobs I could take.”

“In that case, you should start as a porter first. You go around together with others and get some experience, learn a few things from them, and eventually raise your levels and grab some proper gear along the way.”

The bartender glanced at Seol's spear and continued on.

“A Warrior's gotta be at least Level 3 if he wants to try his luck joining an expedition. Well, unless you are in a team already, that is.”

“So that's how it was.”

“Ah, I remember now that Samuel's team was looking for a new member...”

Seol Jihu played around with the booze bottle with his fingers a little before asking the bartender.

“Do you perhaps know Carpe Diem?”

“Mm? Carpe Diem?”

The bartender's eyes widened slightly as if he didn't quite understand where this question was coming from.

“Of course I know. If you don't know Carpe Diem is, then you'd be considered a spy from elsewhere in Haramark. I mean, aren't they the ones who live for today?”

“?”

'Carpe Diem' literally meant 'seize the day'; however, the bartender said that the 'group' lived for today.

“What are they like?”

“Mm... Carpe Diem is a team made up of four, no, wait – three people. There's no need to mention how skilled they are, of course. Even Sicilia and Triads would occasionally request them with missions. As a team, they would rank in the top five in Haramark, no question about it.”

They were an amazing group of people, as it turned out. Haramark was a bustling, thriving city on its own right. So, if a group was ranked as one of the best in this city, it meant that even if the entire Paradise was taken into account, they would still be rated as one of the best.

“Every member is known for their good skills, but most importantly, their leader is someone quite remarkable. He's a High Ranker, as you might expect.”

“Where do I find Carpe Diem?”

“Why? You wish to join them?”

Seol Jihu nodded his head, prompting the bartender to shake his head around wildly.

“Better give that notion up. That team is...”

But, he blurred the ends of his words and spat out a soft groan, instead. The bartender then lowered his head slightly.

“...Don't mind me. I'm not in a position to say anything, anyway.”

The youth got to hear the location from the bartender. Saying thanks for the food, Seol got up and left the pub.

\*

After leaving the pub and walking for around ten minutes, Seol found himself in front of his destination.

There were no signboards. Seol thought the bartender's words of “An old white building, about so-so in size” was a pretty unfriendly description, but now that he was here, there was only one white building in the entire neighborhood.

Seol got closer to the building and took a peek inside the ground floor before letting out a soft gasp of admiration.

'A training facility?'

He got to glimpse the sight of a gym that easily exceeded the one found in the Neutral Zone. The entire ground floor was converted to facilitate indoor training, it seemed.

'I wanna get back to training again...'

Seol heard that the second floor was the reception office, and sure enough, there were worn-down stone steps to the side of the structure.

As he looked up, he continued to chew his blameless lower lip. As he approached ever closer to the steps, his heart began beating faster and faster.

'Maybe I shouldn't have asked.'

If he didn't know anything, then he might have marched straight in, full of spirit. No matter how hard he thought about it, there was no reason for this team to accept him. Even if he considered it from their perspective, the end result remained the same.

He suddenly recalled Odelette Delphine, the Magician girl who always seemed full of too much energy. If she were in his shoes, would she be hesitating like this?

'I mean, I'm not a little kid anymore.'

It was obvious that he'd be refused, but he simply couldn't just let the lone 'Golden Commandment' opportunity slip through his fingers yet.

He needed to at least give it a shot, regardless of what might happen.

Seol ended his thoughts there and rapidly climbed up the stairs. He stared at the closed-shut second-floor door for a little while, before knocking on it.

—Who's there?

He heard a voice coming from inside.

—Come in. The door's open.

The voice sounded a bit less than enthusiastic, actually.

Seol Jihu breathed in deeply and pushed the door open wide. And then, saw it.

...The tilted face of a woman staring at him as she sat on an old, old couch with her back to him.

“Who're you? I've never seen your face before.”

Her skin was pure-white as if she'd painted herself with milk; her black hair was long enough to reach the floor. More importantly, though – her clean, pure and elegantly-shaped eyes, and a cigarette hanging loose between those softly-pink lips....

'Eh?'

Seol's eyes blinked as he stood there completely dumbfounded. The woman with a cocked eyebrow began frowning deeply after seeing him behave like this.

“I said, who the hell are you, you dumb shit?”

She even started swearing right off the bat, too. The woman reminded Seol of Maria – should that be chalked down to him momentarily being confused?

“Who is it?”

Sounds of heavy footsteps could be heard, then a big black man suddenly showed up from around the corner.

The big guy and Seol looked at each other and opened their mouths simultaneously.

“Seol!”

“Hugo?”

Hugo must have emerged from the shower or something as water was still dripping off him.

“You. ... Ah, first, come on in!”

Hugo gestured with his hands before actually pulling Seol Jihu inside. He then made the youth sit down on the couch. The woman looked at him while puffing out cigarette smoke.

“What, so you two know each other?”

“I told you yesterday, didn't I? There was a guy I came to Haramark with.”

“Wasn't that Alex?”

“Not just Alex. I told you there was another guy.”

“Hmm...” The woman nodded and swept her gaze over Seol, before letting out a small “Ahh!”

“Is he that newbie you were talking about? Coming to Haramark for the first time?”

Hugo ignored the woman and talked to Seol instead.

“Seol, what brings you here? I'm really surprised to see you here, you know?”

“Yes, me too. I had no idea that you were a member of Carpe Diem, Hugo.”

‘Hiik~!’ A rather adorable scream came from the side. The woman hugged herself with her arms and formed a scared expression as if something horrified her.

“Uuuu~ Hey you. Can't you do something about the way you speak? It's been so long since I last heard polite speech and it's giving me these nasty goosebumps.”

“...Ignore that girl. Besides all that. What brings you here?”

“...Oh.”

Seol glanced at the woman who was wearing a sleeveless white T as well as a pair of hot pants and started talking.

"I came here after finding the notice for a job posting."

"A job posting?"

Hugo's eyes grew extra-wide, and he turned his head to look at the woman.

"Did we ever place a job posting before?"

The woman shrugged her shoulders.

"Beats me. But I did hear that, what with the old man retiring and all, we would search for a substitute."

"Who told you that?"

"Don't be an idiot. Who do you think it was? It was Dylan, obviously. ... Anyways."

The woman killed her cigarette by rubbing it against the ashtray and disinterestedly told Hugo.

"Hugo? You ask him to leave, okay~?"

"You want him to leave?"

"Obviously. How can he enter our team? We ain't gonna humor a newbie, right?"

As expected, joining them was not possible. Seol thought as much, but the reality still tasted bitter in his mouth.

The woman lit up a new cigarette and cocked an eyebrow. She saw that Hugo was deliberating on something with a serious look on his face. It was a rare thing to see this idiot whose brain was entirely made up of muscles to think this hard.

Just as Seol Jihu was about to get up from the couch, Hugo reached out and grabbed the youth's arms.

"Wait, wait. You came here after checking out the job posting, right? Then, wait for a little while longer, okay?"

His next words surprised the woman even more.

"What?! Hey! You want to admit a Level 1 to our team?!"

"Keep quiet, will you? Hey, Seol, our leader should be here any second, so can you wait for him? I'll put in some good words for you."

"Hah!"

The woman spat out an exasperated groan of disbelief.

It was then. The door creaked open, and...

"Mm? A customer?"

Seol heard a deep, husky, and rather dignified voice coming from there.

Seol Jihu turned his head towards the doorway and spat out a shocked gasp at the sight of the man entering the premises.

He was a darkish man carrying a brown envelope in his hand, and he also happened to boast an enormous physique. He was taller than Hugo by another head, and his body, packed to the brim with muscles, could have come straight from an NBA player.

A devil would show up if it was mentioned, as they say. Hugo raised his hand and welcomed the man in.

"Oh, good timing, Dylan!"

"Who is he? A client?"

"A Level 1 Warrior saw one of our job postings and came to pay us a visit~."

The woman spoke with a tired voice while resting her chin on her hands.

"A Level 1?"

Dylan tilted his head in confusion.

"Job postings. ... Hmm. I must have posted those a while ago."

Dylan studied the youth in front of his eyes with unfathomably deep eyes. Seol Jihu began feeling a strange sense of pressure as the man swept his gaze all over him.



'He is... a High Ranker Archer?'

He looked more like a Warrior simply from his physique alone.

Dylan spoke up soon afterwards.

"Well, it doesn't matter."

The woman looked like she'd been punched in her gut as she faced Dylan.

"You being serious?"

"Yeah, I am. It's true that we're looking for a new team member, and I haven't placed any restrictions on who may join us. That is why it's not a problem."

"...Hey. I know that you're the leader and all. But still, aren't you supposed to listen to other's opinions too?"

"We just have to 'look' at the person, That's all. The old man personally said those words, Chohong."

With that, the woman named Chohong shut her mouth. She still frowned unhappily while puffing on her cigarette though.

"Tsk. Do what you want. Besides that, what happened to the job?"

"I can't even call it a job, actually. I just popped into the Triads for a bit, that's all."

"I heard that they just welcomed a new executive there."

"Right. I checked him out, so I could remember his face. His name is Hao Win. He's a pretty friendly character."

Dylan toothily grinned.

'Hao Win?'

When a familiar name was mentioned, Seol's eyes glittered for a second.

'Hao Win is also in Haramark?'

"In that case.... Ah. Where's my mind at, I wonder."

Dylan was about to settle down on another couch, before he hurriedly got back up again.

A bit later, Dylan reappeared from around a corner while carrying a pair of teacups with steam rising up. He handed one over to Seol and grinned.

"A guest came by, but I've forgotten all about being a good host. My apologies."

"No, it's alright. Thank you."

Seol Jihu carefully received the cup. Dylan sipped the tea first, and a frown formed on his face.

"Don't mind it if the tea tastes a bit bland, okay? I've been practicing making tea lately, but I can't seem to get any better."

Seol smiled softly at Dylan's gentle voice. The youth sensed the other man was trying to be considerate, basically telling him to relax.

"Oi, Dylan."

Hugo was about to butt in, but Dylan raised his hand to stop him.

"I've heard a bit about you from Hugo. You must be Seol, the Level 1 Warrior. First time in Haramark, huh?"

"That's correct."

"Summoned March this year, yeah?"

"That's also correct."

"Oh, so you might know Hao Win then. He too graduated from the March class, apparently."

Finally, they moved into the main topic. Seol thought that he'd be chased out of this place, but it seemed like they would at least listen to his story first.

Could this be thanks to Hugo? Seol Jihu inwardly promised to buy the man a drink at a later stage and stared straight at Dylan.

“Okay, Seol. Do you know what kind of a team ours is?”

“I’ve heard some things.”

“From where? From who?”

“From ‘Eat, Drink And Enjoy’. I didn’t ask the person’s name, so I can’t be sure.”

Dylan nodded his head. The youth didn’t just show up with no plan whatsoever, but actually bothered to gather some basic information first. Considering that he had exited from the Neutral Zone not too long ago, this would’ve been considered a positive. At least, it said that the youth was the type to think things through.

“Cool. Well, then. How were your records in the Tutorial and the Neutral Zone like?”

“My records?”

“Well, you can tell us the amount of Survival Points you got at the end of the Tutorial, and up to how far you went with the mission’s difficulty in the Neutral Zone, that sort of stuff.”

Dylan raised his teacup, signaling to the youth to relax and be open.

Seol Jihu spoke up.

“The total amount of Survival Points I earned at the end of the Tutorial was 26,500.”

Dylan was about to tip the cup towards his lips, but...

“As for the missions in the Neutral Zone, I’ve cleared up to the Impossible difficulty.”

...His hands came to a stop.

Hugo’s nervously jittery legs also stopped shaking around.

It wasn’t only those two, though.

Even Chohong, who was grandly yawning out while covering her mouth with her hand until then, began glaring at him, too.

## Chapter 50

The inside of the Carpe Diem’s office had become deathly quiet in an instant. It was as if time had come to a standstill. Everyone stopped moving and stared at one person.

From disbelief to suspicion, from suspicion to glares...

The atmosphere in the room continued to grow colder and colder.

Seol Jihu felt his heart become heavier from the unspoken pressure emanating from this uncomfortable silence. He had expected there would be some sort of a response, but he didn’t know it would be this bad.

“U, Uhahaha!”

Suddenly, Hugo started laughing his head off.

“Hiya~. I didn’t know you had such a sense of humor! I guess I should change how I look at you now, eh?”

He cackled and lightly patted Seol on the shoulder. However, everyone present here could see from his exaggerated laughter and movements that the big guy was trying to somehow defuse this dangerous situation and treat it as a tactless joke of a rookie.

“Oi.”

Her voice sounded threatening.

Chohong slowly corrected her posture. She locked her hands, her legs parted slightly, and her back bent forward a little.

“Hey, let me tell you something. You showing up here today, that’s not a problem, in all honesty.”

It was as if she was trying not to sound angry, but the tone was really too low for a woman’s voice. And the pitch remained chillingly flat as well.

“Job posting. Yeah, you could have seen that and came to talk to us. Just like Dylan said, there are no restrictions, after all. That’s all fine and good.”

Her eyes, visible behind her flowing black hair, gleamed coldly.

“The thing is...”

Her eyes, seemingly fixed to the floor, emitted a chilling light so scary that it made people avert their gazes instinctively.

“If you showed up here, the office of Carpe Diem, just to throw around unfunny jokes, then... Then, as a person who has to listen to you, my position will have to change somewhat, get my drift?”

“Chohong!”

“Shut up, Hugo.”

Chohong replied sharply, pulled the cigarette out from her lips, and slowly breathed out the blue smoke. She then stared straight at Seol Jihu and spoke.

“I’ll give you another chance. Right now, I’m willing to overlook this matter as a rookie who wants to join us cracking a cute little lie and nothing more.”

Hugo sighed out in relief.

“So. This time, don’t utter bullshit and speak the truth.”

Chohong stopped there and remained silent. Seol Jihu nodded his head as his response and opened his mouth to speak.

“Excluding the points I received as the starting bonus as well as the multiplier, the original points tally I had at the end of the Tutorial was 2,150.”

Hugo’s complexion hardened.

“The highest difficulty missions in the Neutral Zone that I cleared with my own skills were rated ‘Very Hard’. I did succeed in clearing the Impossible, but that was just due to luck, not my own skill.”

Chohong’s brows began quivering.

“Ohhh. So, you saying that you really did have 26,500 points, and somehow did clear the Impossible mission, is that it?”

A strange smile formed on her face as she lifted her butt off the couch ever so slightly.

“That’s correct.”

“Ahh, really now?”

It was right then.

*POW!*

As soon as he blinked, Seol Jihu saw the back of Dylan’s hand that was as big as a pot’s lid right in front of his nose. Not only that, Chohong’s fist blocked by that hand, too.

‘But, when?!’

He failed to even notice her throwing a punch, never mind her arm moving before that. He felt the chill run down his back, not from the fact that he nearly got hit by her, but the fact that he couldn’t even see it coming.

“Dylan!!”

“Violence isn’t the answer, Chohong. The old man repeatedly told you to curb that temper of yours, didn’t he?”

“But, this bastard...!”

“Seol.”

Dylan succeeded in placating Chohong for the time being and called out to Seol Jihu. No, the youth thought that he was being called, but that turned out to be false.

“Seol. Seol... Ah.”

Dylan was actually muttering that name out while trying to remember something. He then lightly slapped his own closely-cropped head.

“I was wondering why that name sounded so familiar... Hao Win... Right. So, that was you.”

“What are you talking about?”

This time, it was Hugo who asked.

“Hao Win was talking about a certain guy. Apparently, among those summoned for this year's March selection, a 'Super Rookie' appeared. I've heard the name in passing, but I think it might have been Seol. Damn it, why couldn't I have thought about that as soon as I saw him?”

“Wha, what?!”

Chohong's head swiveled, and she looked at Dylan.

She then began laughing nervously, her neck trembling slightly. Her face remained disbelieving as she raised her voice.

“D, Dylan? What are you saying? If you come out like that, it's like this whole thing is true, so stop it.”

She must have been really freaked out because her voice was quivering noticeably now.

“I understand. I also thought it was a bunch of baloney when I heard it the first time, too.”

Dylan chuckled as if he found this whole thing rather interesting and got up from his seat.

“I guess I'll just confirm it for myself, then.”

He leisurely went off somewhere and when he returned, he was carrying a large, clear crystal ball. He placed it on the coffee table and placed his hand on top – and then, the crystal began emitting light.

‘What’s that?’

Seol Jihu's curiosity perked up at seeing an object he had not seen before.

A short while later, the crystal's entire surface was enveloped in a soft glow. And at the same time...

—Oh? For Dylan to give me a call first, isn't this a pleasant surprise?”

....A voice of a person flowed out from it. That uniquely haughty, mezzo-soprano tone of voice sounded rather familiar to the Seol Jihu's ears.

“I heard that you returned to Haramark recently. I'm calling you to congratulate you on successfully concluding the Neutral Zone.”

—Congratulating me, huh. Indeed, that's a nice notion. You have any idea how much I missed the air of Paradise?

“I was also shocked after learning that you were being put in charge of the Neutral Zone, Cinzia.”

—Other than being bored out of my mind, it wasn't so bad. A couple of interesting things happened too, and that kept me entertained in the meantime.

“Interesting things, you say?”

—...Oh? Did you call me because you were also curious about that?

Cackling laughter came out from the crystal ball.

Seol Jihu dazedly stared at the crystal. Ever since his arrival in Haramark, one thing or another managed to surprise him constantly.

That was Cinzia on the other side. She sure looked like someone pretty powerful when he first saw her in the Neutral Zone. But after seeing Dylan chatting so easily to someone even Kim Hannah referred to as a big shot in Paradise, Seol Jihu had no choice but to view Dylan in a new light.

—You're not the only one to have asked me about this. I've been repeating the same shit over and over again like a damn parrot. By this point, I think I've probably memorized a script. It's like I've become a call center employee.

“I'd also like to hear the story, if you don't mind.”

—Well, it's not like I mind. It's something that's bound to spread around, anyways. And I do owe a few debts to Carpe Diem too.

Chohong got up and sidled up right next to the crystal ball.

—Oh? Chohong? Is that you?

“Hey. Been a while.”

—It really has. Feels like I haven't seen you in ages.

“Okay, fine. I know, so please hurry up with the story!”

Chohong urged Cinzia to move on.

—Fine, fine. Took first place with a points tally of 26,500. Solo cleared the Neutral Zone's missions up to Hard difficulty. Formed a team with five others afterwards and successfully cleared all of the Very Hard difficulty missions. And relying on a truly out-there method, solo cleared the Impossible mission, too. Finally, one of only two Gold Marks in history. Are you happy now?

When the Gold Mark was mentioned, the sounds of saliva being swallowed could be heard in the office.

“...Thank you for telling us that. I'll return the favor soon.”

—It's not a problem. Lots of people already know this, anyways. Oh, we might be seeing each other pretty soon too. I'll be sending someone over there not too long from now.

The crystal ball stopped glowing after that.

The manager of the Neutral Zone for the March selection confirmed the story.

It'd be hard for anyone to suggest that a leader of an organization, Cinzia, was spewing nonsense for fun. Even more so, if one knew what her personality was like.

No matter how deeply they thought about it, it was impossible.

Yet, the impossibility had become a reality.

“Son of a...”

Chohong finally began to breathe again and plopped down on the couch with an expression of someone who saw a true monster.

Meanwhile, Hugo could only mutter to himself, “Woah, woah” with a small voice.

“A Gold Mark... is it?”

Dylan sipped on the tea and organized his thoughts for a while, before slowly opening his mouth.

“Looks like I'll have to change how we go about things.”

“?”

“Seol.”

Dylan put the teacup down and spoke with a serious face.

“I now know what kind of person you are. There are many things we're curious about, and what with this being such an unbelievable story to begin with, please do try to understand where we're coming from, okay?”

Dylan's calm voice seemed to possess this mystifying ability to calm all those listening to him.

“It's fine.”

“Thanks. Mm, right. About the job posting.”

Dylan stopped there and wordlessly stared at Seol. The youth stiffened slightly in nervousness as the big guy studied every square inch of his face.

A short moment of silence later, Dylan continued on.

“I'd like to hear your honest answer to my question.”

“Of course.”

“Alright. What was your reason for choosing us?”

This question took Seol by surprise.

“With that kind of a record, you could have chosen any of the powerful organizations in Paradise and they would have welcomed you with open arms. I'm wondering why you chose to come to Haramark and knock on Carpe Diem's door instead of theirs.

Seol Jihu became speechless, then. What Kim Hannah told him wasn't something he'd walk around telling everyone he met, and also, he couldn't come out and say, “I activated my Nine Eyes in front of the noticeboard, and the parchment you placed there was glowing in gold color signifying the Golden Commandment.”

“Uhm....”

Seol Jihu hesitated for a long time, before replying with an awkward smile on his face.

“Well, I like your training facility....”

Dylan slowly closed his eyes.

\*

“Haaaaaah...”

Seol Jihu returned to 'Eat, Drink And Enjoy', found a place to sit, and began grandly sighing out.

The pub remained as noisy as before. But he didn't care about that at the moment. His head was filled with the recollections of the moment he got rejected to notice his surroundings.

[My bad, but looks like we can't work together.]

[And if I were to give you advice, you should leave Haramark as soon as possible. You will find many good teams in other cities. Starting in those places might be a better choice for you.]

Seol Jihu couldn't say anything to this simple yet resolute and firm rejection.

In the end, he could only return to the pub and mournfully sip on the alcoholic beverage.

He came to Haramark full of dreams, yet his current situation, having nowhere else to go, seemed too pitiful even to his own eyes.

Seol Jihu rested his chin on his hand and pouted with a worried expression etched on his face. If only it weren't for Sinyoung.... He might have joined up with a good team in Scheherazade by now and be away on an adventure already.

'Maybe, I should've just joined Sinyoung in the first place?'

If he did, then he would have received an incredible amount of support, and just as importantly, along with Yun Seo-Rah who said she'd do her best....

“Tsk.”

Seol Jihu licked his lips and took a swig out of the bottle. He was so happy and content while in the Neutral Zone, but now that he was outside, he sure felt like a fool now.

Also, he knew that he couldn't continue to do nothing and suck on his thumbs forever, even though he had a bit of money on him.

'I wanna do something.'

The issue was with his low level.

He was a Level 1. More importantly, there was no team stupid enough to let a novice Warrior join them when there were so many of them out there to begin with.

'There's nothing I can do, I guess. I gotta start from the bottom as a porter and work my way up....'

Just as he pulled out a cigarette and lit it up while feeling a bit uneasy....

*Slam!*

There was a loud noise of someone hitting the table, and then....

“Everyone, your attention, please!”

A man's loud shout brought silence into the once-noisy establishment.

Seol Jihu took a glance and saw a man standing there with a hand raised up in the air. He was built quite lean, and his long hair extended down to his waist.

“Is there a skilled Warrior or a Priest among you? Ah, I'm also searching for a porter as well, so it does not matter if your level is low.”

“What are you talking about, Samuel?”

A guy sitting on the table next to the man, Samuel, asked while chewing on a snack. Samuel lowered his hand and answered.

“It's a mission issued by the royal family. We'll be scouting the Forest of Denial.”

“Eii, fuck that. Why would I go to that godforsaken place?”

The guy mouthed some snide remarks and went back to mind his own business. Others displayed roughly a similar attitude. Some shook their heads, while a few others began smirking derisively.

However, Seol Jihu was different. He activated Nine Eyes as soon as hearing that a porter would be hired, and the result was – Samuel had no colors on him.

‘Should I?’

At least, there were no colors related to danger. Also, he was not really in a situation to be picky.

He should try to grasp every opportunity that had presented itself. Seol moved, thinking that at the bare minimum, he should listen to what the other party had to say before deciding.

Samuel showed complete disregard towards the reactions of his fellow pub-goers, but when he saw Seol Jihu’s approach, a bright smile lit up on his face.

“Oho! Our first lucky person arrives.”

‘I heard that you’re looking for a porter.’

“Indeed. You have any prior experience?”

‘No, this will be my first time.’

“First time?”

Samuel looked a bit troubled, then.

‘Will this be a no, too?’

“I agree!”

It was then, Seol Jihu heard a rather familiar voice. Samuel turned around to look.

“You know this guy, Alex?”

“Yup. And I’m completely on board with this idea. And I guarantee that you won’t regret it.”

Seol Jihu blinked his eyes after hearing the name Alex. There was a familiar young man wearing a Priest outfit sitting around Samuel’s table waving his hand at him.

“If Alex guarantees it, then I guess it’s not so bad. Alright, then! Come join us here!”

Samuel nodded his head and pulled Seol Jihu into one of the empty seats.

“Alex.”

“Good to see you again. I had no idea that we’d run into each other so quickly.”

“Yes, me too.”

“I’m actually a member of Samuel’s team, you see. By the way... I see that you’re a man at the end of the day. Hehehehe.”

Alex began grinning in a sly manner.

“Woah, woah. I can see that you two are pretty familiar with each other, so why don’t you give us a chance to say hello, too?”

Samuel waved his hand around between the two youths and reached for a handshake.

“Hey, there. Name’s Samuel. I’m the leader of this team. I’m a Level 4 Pathfinder.”

“I’m Seol. A level 1 Warrior.”

“Kuheu! I love how polite Asians are!”

Samuel then triumphantly pointed to his left. A brunette woman with curly hair as well as a woman with short, bright platinum blonde hair sat to his side.

“You already know Alex, so I’ll exclude him. Firstly, this lady here~ She’s Clara, a Level 2 Hunter. And next to her is~ Grace, a Level 3 Shield

Swordswoman. In a way, you could say that she's your senior.”

Two women raised her hands at the same time and waved at him. Seol Jihu also raised his head and waved back, prompting the two ladies to giggle among themselves. For some reason, they kept stealing glances at his way.

“Oh, yeah. You said it'll be your first time as a porter?”

“Yes.”

“It's not going to be a tough job, actually. We'll be asking you every now and then to take care of some small things, but on the whole, just think of your job as carrying our luggage around for the entire duration of the expedition.”

“Is that all I have to do?”

Seol Jihu tilted his head slightly, thinking this would be too simple if that were the case.

“Mm! Of course, there are a few rules you gotta stick by. First of all, you can't fall behind in the middle of the trip. It'd get troublesome if you end up holding us back, you know what I mean? And then, you shouldn't rashly jump into a fight, too. Things might get complicated, and we aren't expecting a porter to fight for us, either. So, how about it? It's easy, right?”

“Yes, it sounds easy.”

“Good! Now, let's talk about splitting our rewards. First of all, a porter has no right to ask for any artifacts recovered during an expedition. Do you agree?”

Seol Jihu had no idea what this 'artifact' thing could be but still agreed nonetheless. This was a rule every Earthling should be aware of already, but since it would be Seol's first time as a porter, Samuel was actually going out of his way to explain things.

“Good. As for other rewards, we split everything equally.”

“Really?”

Seol was taken back by this proposal. He was thinking that he'd be nothing more than a glorified slave but now that he heard the terms, it was better than he expected.

“You're splitting equally even with a porter?”

“Obviously. A porter is still a member of the team, right?”

Samuel looked befuddled as if he couldn't quite understand why the youth was asking this question, which only led Seol further down the Confusion Avenue. However, the Pathfinder quickly realized what happened here, and a wry smile formed on his face.

“Yeah, I heard that there are some teams out there that treat their porters like slaves, but I'm not one of them. You're an Earthling like me, and you are just trying to earn some experience, after all.”

He was implying that, in Lost Paradise, the relationship between a team and a porter was a mutually beneficial one.

“You help us and let us focus on the expedition, and we will protect you from the danger. Okay?”

“I understand.”

“However, don't expect to be treated too nicely, okay? You being a part of the team will make it a bit easier for the rest of us, but if you weren't here, then we'd have carried our own luggage, anyway.”

When considering the fact that most of the Earthlings would start as a porter regardless of whether one was a Contracted or an Invited, Samuel's words were being rather considerate.

“Okay, now. Time to get to the main topic at hand.”

Samuel formed a sly smile and then, he suddenly got very close to Seol's ear in order to whisper something.

“I hope that you didn't think I'd be really going on a recon to the Forest of Denial.”

Hearing that hushed whisper, Seol Jihu's expression became hard to read as well.

“Oh. Of course, we will carry out our mission, no problem. However.... Oopsie. We should finish our chat elsewhere.”

Samuel whispered up to there and pointed to the exit of the pub with his chin.

“Follow us. Let's talk somewhere a bit quieter. When you hear what I have to say, even you'll think that you've stumbled upon a jackpot. I guarantee it.”



Samuel winked and shouted out, "Let's get out of here!" before energetically standing up from his seat.

"Let's go. Decide after hearing us out. If you don't like what you hear, then you can opt to leave afterwards."

Alex also voiced his opinion. Seol Jihu wondered whether there really was a need to change the venue, but he didn't say anything and got up as well.

Alex stood up with a happy smile on his face and muttered out.

"I've got a good feeling about this expedition."

"How come?"

"Because we're getting a Level 3 Warrior as a porter. You wouldn't find something so ridiculous in any other teams around these parts."

"I'm a Level 1 though."

"Sure, sure."

Alex giggled hoarsely.

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In Carpe Diem's office.

After Seol Jihu left, the office remained eerily quiet for some time.

Each of them had a lot to think about. Dylan stared outside and continued to suck hard on his cigarette, while Hugo formed a facial expression that cried out 'I don't understand what happened.'

"Eiii, shit. How fucking embarrassing."

Chohong laid down on the couch and continued to complain.

"Really? Fuck me. Just how the hell did he clear it?"

While Chohong continued to voice her dissatisfaction, Hugo finally opened his mouth to ask.

"Dylan, I still don't get it."

Chohong quickly shot him a glare from the corner of her eyes. Hugo waved his hand around to indicate that he knew.

"I'm not saying I'm not gonna follow your decision since you're our leader and all, but I still don't get it. I mean, isn't he good enough for us to accept?"

"Not at all."

Dylan replied simply.

"If you consider our team's unique nature, you should realize why we can't have him join us."

"But still..."

"What we need is a Warrior who can boost our combat potential right away. A newbie isn't suitable."

Dylan finished there and continued to puff on his cigarette.

"Dylan!"

"Hugo, that's enough."

Chohong butted in while scratching her head.

"The current leader of Carpe Diem is Dylan. The old man personally appointed him. Let's not waste time arguing about this anymore."

"I know that you are right, but man. Ehew."

Hugo sighed as if he was still ruing the missed opportunity. Dylan eventually killed the cigarette and slowly opened his mouth.

"He had such clear eyes."

Chohong and Hugo turned their confused faces towards Dylan.

“What are you talking about, all of a sudden? Did some of the old man rub off on you or something?”

“Hehe. Maybe. In any case, that guy named Seol. It is a bit regrettable. I understand where Hugo's coming from.”

“That's right! So, like, let's bring him under our wings! Weren't we newbies once upon a time, too?”

“Seol is a blank canvas.”

Dylan calmly replied.

“He's a huge blank canvas, unsullied by any paint whatsoever. I can't even begin to fathom how big the dimensions of this canvas is, so how can I, or anyone else for that matter, carelessly throw some paint around on it?”

“What the hell. Talk in a way so I can understand what you're on about, will ya?”

Hugo complained bitterly, causing Dylan to form a slight smirk.

“I acknowledge that he's incredible, but he's still a Level 1. He doesn't know a lot, so he's bound to make a few mistakes, too.”

“That, is, why!”

“That is why he can't join teams like ours.”

Hugo was shouting out at the top of voice from sheer frustration, only to fall utterly dazed from those words.

Dylan continued on.

“This is the most important time for Seol. This is the time when his future path is determined and when his unbelievable potential starts to reveal itself.”

“Are you saying we aren't good enough for him?”

“Rather than us not being good enough, it's more to do with who we are. We always fight with our lives on the line. We've experienced all sorts of shit and have also grown cynical in the process. What would a guy like Seol learn from us, then?”

Dylan's calm explanations meant Hugo couldn't come up with anything.

“This is how I see it. Perfectly covering for his mistakes from behind, and leading him from the front while teaching him all he needs to know. ... Seol needs to join a team like that. Which means, at the bare minimum, that ain't us.”

“Sure, Chohong and I are no good, but still, we have you and the old man. ...”

Hugo spoke with a voice clearly less vociferous than before.

“I'm not that confident in making it work. And you know that the old man is about to retire soon.”

Dylan firmly stated his position, and let off a long sigh.

“Alright. Let's stop talking about this matter and move on. We should get going anyways.”

“To where?”

Choi Hong asked this time.

“Work. It's a request from Samuel's team. Hugo, get up, man. Let's go.”

Hugo licked his lips and slowly nodded his head.

“Okay, fine. I think I get it now. Anyway, what work are we talking about here?”

“Looks like we'll have to hear it straight from the horse's mouth. But, he did say it'll be a pretty delicious deal for all of us.”

“Well, if it's that bastard, there's definitely merit in hearing him out. Where are we meeting him?”

“At this inn. Maybe he's got some kind of a plan all worked out. In any case, let's get going.”

Dylan pushed the door of the office open to leave, his other hand in his pocket.