

NEW
EPISODE 3



탐색의 제왕

로유진 장편소설

THE SECOND COMING OF AVARICE

- 탐식의 재림 -

- VOLUME 1 -

-AUTHOR-

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[A_Passing_Wanderer (Creative Novels)]

- STORY -

He was an addict, a loser, a despicable human being.

But, one fleeting dream that may not be a dream at all reawakens his
once-lost senses.

Possessing a very unique ability, he will use that, and the dream, to forge
his path in the world now known as the Lost Paradise.

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“The son of god Gula has returned.”

I was lost in the world of gambling.

I turned my back on my family and even betrayed my lover.

I wasted every day of my life.

It was a life of trash.

The reality told me thus:

That I would amount to nothing no matter what I did.

In order to change my pathetic life, I chose fantasy, instead.

Even then, it was the same story.

I wondered if salvation would come at the end of the long road.

But, I was forced to kneel down in defeat in front of a powerful entity.

The tower I built up with my own hands crumbled into nothingness.

Just for once, I dearly wished to know the truth about myself.

- Come closer, my child...

I will not hold back this time.



Chapter 1

Prologue

Splat!!

Her blood landed everywhere.

Her dazed gaze slowly drifted downward to the spear impaling her left chest.

Her pupils shook as she felt the coldness of the steel penetrating her heart. Her entire body lost strength and fell to the ground. She could hear the desperate, anguished cry of someone as the owner of the voice rushed towards the spearman. His speed was as fast as the ray of light.

The spearman flinched in surprise, and let go of the spear. That wasn't all, though. He spun around, and threw a punch to the enemy approaching from behind.

The victim toppled over from the impact. The spearman didn't stop and his bloodied fist landed on the victim again.

Pow!!

The side of his victim's head burst open in an instant.

However, even then, the spearman didn't stop.

Once, twice, thrice, again, and again...

He savagely roared out, and pounded on the head of his dead enemy, until the skull was crushed and the brain matter scattered everywhere.

Only then, he finally halted his fists. With a pair of bloodshot eyes, he took a quick survey of his surroundings. Then, he picked up his spear.

He stepped on the wet ground, soaked with mixture of brain matter and torn flesh.

The man resembling a demon dashed into the thick swirling fog without hesitation – into the swirling fog of ashes...



Cough.

The fallen woman heaved out a dry cough as she woke up. Her facial expression crumpled from the pain oozing from every pore of her body.

But, even her frown didn't last long.

She lifted her head and surveyed her surroundings.

“Is... anybody there...?”

A quiet, sorrowful wind blew by.

“Is... everyone... dead?”

She waited but no reply made its way back.

Kek.

She let off a sudden chuckle and began muttering as if she was singing a lullaby.

“Everyone's dead, everyone's dead...”

She thought that the burnt corpse near her was in a better shape than some others. For instance, there was a lump of meat that once used to be a human being slowly floating on the pool of blood not too far from her.

She looked around her vicinity one more time as disappointment dyed her expression.

Her throat began to itch.

She somehow managed to drag her upper body into a sitting position and spat out her saliva. Her complexion brightened ever so slightly. She slowly lifted her blurring sight towards the empty sky above.

'How did we...'

...How did she end up in such a miserable state?

One day, an alien race from another world intruded upon hers.

It was discovered a bit later on that this race had been chased away from their original home world.

After experiencing a bitter defeat, this race aimlessly wandered in the emptiness of the outer space for a very long time. Then, they invaded her planet in order to create a new home for themselves.

...In order to become the new lords of this world.

"Those despicable sons of whores."

This woman's identity was the princess of a certain kingdom that used to be under the Empire's protection.

The news of the alien's invasion reached her when she was six years old. And then, she heard the news of the mighty Empire falling at age ten. The Empire, boasting overwhelming scientific and magical prowess... The Empire, often referred to as the 'Never-Setting Sun', had fallen in four brief years.

Soon, the alien race took over the world, even going so far to destroy the deity worshipped by the Empire's denizens, promptly turning this whole planet into an owner-less Wild West of sorts.

Maybe, it started from around then.

Soon, many other races descended on this land bereft of its deity's protection. They had been waiting for a long time for an opportunity to devour this world.

The first invading alien race initiated their bloody invasion throughout the planet; meanwhile, their leader fashioned himself as the new god, too.

It was around then, when 'groups' from other worlds began appearing one by one as well.

There was a group uniting in the name of 'survival', another one marching forward under the banner of 'conquest'...

Recalling the various events of the past, the princess began chuckling softly.

The land once ruled by mankind was now a bloody warzone where many other alien races fought for supremacy.

As for the fate of the original inhabitants... they were pushed around this way and that, swept away helplessly by the whims of fate. Just like a flickering candle facing the wind.

Also making their appearance then, was the seven gods. The seven beings, born together during the birth of the planet, but for some reason or the other, failed to be recognised and worshipped by the inhabitants until now.

These seven gods promised the survival of the remaining original inhabitants, and the populace promised to worship them in return. And so, the deal was struck – yet, the aid from these gods were... quite funny, to say the least.

Their method of fighting back was to summon another race that most closely resembled the original inhabitants; then, form an army with them.

There was no other choice but to do this, however.

Even the mighty Empire had fallen in four years. So, what chance did her kingdom and its military have, a kingdom that needed the Empire's protection to begin with?

Besides, there weren't enough survivors as a result of the constant and bloody warfare, too.

"...Those rotten sons of whores."

She aimlessly stared into the sky and spat out curse words.

'We shouldn't have trusted them from the beginning.'

Actually, it wasn't so bad in the beginning.

The first one or two Earthlings summoned by the gods displayed astonishing growth

rate after receiving the grace of the seven gods.

However, their sphere of influence grew just as vast as well, and soon, the situation gradually shifted as they began isolating and persecuting the original inhabitants.

The reasons for this were many: they were separated by nationality, skin colour, dogma, and even, political backing.

But at the end of it all, the true culprit was 'benefits'.

When the division within the ranks of the summoned Earthlings deepened, it also caused a deep chasm to form within the once-united structures of the kingdom.

The alliance formed under the desire for survival was soon fractured into pieces, and the power structure rebuilt with so much sacrifice began to weaken once more from the internal conflict. Some even went as far as to denounce the new gods as well.

They were all truly unbelievable events, indeed.

But, was that all?

The majority of the Earthlings refused to participate in this final battle. They coldly ignored the desperate pleas to participate, and returned to their own home world, instead.

The princess's never-ending anger towards them was all because of this history.

"Sons of..."

She was about to swear out one more time, but then, she shut her mouth real quickly.

Splash... splash...

A soft sound echoed out within the rapidly-cooling graveyard of countless corpses. The sound approached closer and closer, until it eventually stopped by the spot right next to her.

A burnt-out corpse was there.

[I am surprised.]

And in front of this corpse stood a large darkness that defied all description.

[How amazing this is! I did not place much hope, yet you have survived this desperate battlefield...]

'He's an Earthling?' (princess)

As if to answer her question, the collapsed body of man slowly raised his head, albeit with much difficulty.

A powerful emotion welled up inside her, but soon, she had to swallow it back down.

...Because, the state of the man was horrific enough to make her nearly avert her gaze away.

The numbers may have been very, very small, but it wasn't as if no Earthlings had participated in the battle. For him to end up looking like that, he had honoured the agreement in his own way, it seemed.

When she thought like this, she began developing a sense of sympathy towards him, but at the same time, she thought it was such a loss, as well.

If all the other Earthlings were like this man...

[Although I'd like to praise your worthy actions for a while longer, regrettably, you do not have much left in your life span.]

The low-pitched voice seemed to shake her eardrums.

[You have honoured your side of the deal, so I shall honour mine. What is it that you wish?]

His weakened, blurred eyes gazed into the approaching darkness.

When his lips slightly parted open, the blood containing bits of his inner organs poured out. As if he couldn't even find his voice, only the noises of winds whistling by came out of his mouth.

[It is fine if you don't try to speak. I shall simply read your mind, instead... And so, do you wish to be revived?]

The princess suddenly felt an urge to laugh out loud here.

Did the darkness really ask the man if he wanted to be revived? Under the current circumstances?

What could he possibly do if he was revived, then?

Everything had been lost and destroyed already, so what was the point?

[That's not what you want? How foolish, when your life is hanging in the balance. In that case, what else do you wish for? Perchance, are you seeking wealth even in a situation like this? Perhaps, do you seek honour and glory?]

“.....”

[What did you say?]

The tone of the darkness's voice increased a great deal.

[You, wish to start all over again?]

Suddenly, a dense, suffocating sensation of ill omen grew heavily in the princess's heart.

[That is impossible!]

An enraged voice caused the air to ripple.

[No matter how great your achievement is, it is still unreasonable to ask for the reversal of time itself! And besides, you've only achieved such a small and insignificant feat, yet you wish to turn everything back to the beginning?]

“.....”

[How impudent! Maybe, if you had achieved feats similar to today's events dozens of times, it might have been possible. But, with what you have accomplished so far, it is not. Never mind your soul, not even an ounce of your flesh shall return to the past!]

“.....”

[How persistent! I shall be lenient, in lieu of the accomplishments you have achieved so far, and the fact that that your life is about to end soon. Speak of another wish.]

Then... heavy silence descended.

[...Why do you wish for such a thing?]

Maybe the sight of the man's head faltering was pitiful, the voice reverberating in the princess's ears seemed to have softened considerably.

[My child... Wish for your revival in haste. If that's your ardent wish, then wouldn't it be better for you to accomplish more feats in the future and then make the wish again?... Although, it isn't guaranteed if the wish will be granted or not.]

The shoulders of the man shook ever so slightly. She thought that he might be chuckling to himself. It was enough of a miracle to survive this hellish battlefield. Maybe, you could even call it 'heaven-defying' luck.

But then, he had to go and achieve feats similar to this dozens of times?

The man, the princess, even the owner of that voice, they all knew such a thing was impossible.

Then, the man slowly raised his head with a lot of difficulty. His lips moved softly.

[Your memories?]

“.....”

[...And you want your true *feelings* to...?]

“.....”

[If it's impossible for your soul and your body, then you'd like the *feelings* you felt here to be sent back?]

As if this wish was quite unexpected, another bout of silence descended.

[...To send back only the feelings associated with the memories... Certainly, feelings you've felt today are simply a part of the emotions you feel almost everyday.] (TL: I had

*a real trouble with this line. Although the raw sounded very philosophical and profound, at its core, it's just pure BS and I couldn't TL it into English without myself sounding like an a*s. So, this is what you'll get.)*

After a long bout of silence, the voice spoke to them once more.

[However, even that too is difficult.]

It was only for a moment, but the dying man's lips twitched.

[I am truly sorry.]

And that was the end. His slowly, lazily trembling shoulders finally stopped moving.

Plop.

His head slumped, never to rise again.

[How foolish...]

Out from the darkness, a hand-like *thing* reached out.

As if it had found this loss quite regretful, it slowly stroked the fallen man's head.

"I understand him." (princess)

The princess suddenly spoke up after watching this scene unfold from the beginning.

The hand of the darkness ceased stroking the man's head.

[And you... carry the royal bloodline.]

"That is correct, god Gula." (princess)

As if she found the whole notion of being a royalty quite funny, she loudly sniggered.

"The kingdom has fallen. I'm sure that the gates have been taken over by now, too. So, maybe, wouldn't it be better to die after experiencing such a horrendous event? I mean, it's been all neatly arranged, isn't it? Since his memories would be wiped clean because of the oath. Besides, he must've had a place to return to." (princess)

[No. This child didn't wish to return.]

Her eyes became round with surprise after hearing the weighty voice.

[He said that there's no place to call home even if he went back.]

"No place to call home..."

Those words managed to resonate with her heart. Just a tad.

Was this the case of 'misery loves company'?

With the destruction of her kingdom, she too had no place to call home anymore. A few stragglers probably managed to survive, but soon, their fate would become worse than that of livestock.

Because... humans were the losers of this war.

"In that case, why didn't you grant his wish?" (princess)

At her softly-muttered complaints, the darkness gently laughed.

[Utterly nonsensical. All results have causes. The result this child wanted was to interfere with the past regardless of the method.]

The princess chuckled bitterly. She couldn't really understand, nor did she want to understand it. No, it just sounded like an excuse to her.

[It is simply that, his achievements weren't enough to become the cause.]

"Regardless of that, you seem to be in regret about something, are you not?" (princess)

[Of course, it is regretful. This child, he was... He was originally born with the fate of the one who leads.]

"The one... who leads?" (princess)

The princess became quite shocked.

The agents of the seven gods, also referred to as the apostles – the seven seekers of

truth, chosen to fight against the monsters capable to destroying the entire world...

Of course, the problem was that only one of these so-called truth seekers participated in this battle.

[Indeed, he was one of the brightest shining stars. But, he managed to ruin all that with his own hands... Why do you humans only learn the bitterness of regret, when it's already far too late?]

Another bout of heavy silence visited the darkness.

The princess also closed her mouth. The reason why she forced herself to speak, was because she didn't feel like dying here feeling lonely.

It was just that she somehow had regained her consciousness. She knew all too well that she also didn't have a lot of time left, the moment she opened her eyes.

Her gaze slowly drifted towards the dead man by her side.

His pitiful end seemed incredibly tragic to her.

She couldn't tell this was true or not, but if he had wished for reversal of the time itself, then he must've had braved many truly dangerous life-or-death crises. But even his dedication was not enough to grant his wish.

He had fought like a dog, and died like one, without receiving the compensation he was promised.

"...Oh, dear god, Gula." (princess)

The princess hesitated ever so slightly, before reaching into her pockets.

"The wish of this Earthling, please... Grant it." (princess)

[Mm?]

"The promise of the King – you have not forgotten it, yes?" (princess)

The darkness was briefly mired in confusion, but right away, it stopped.

Her wide-open palm played host to a single necklace that featured intricate craftsmanship. Although it was stained with spots of blood here and there, none of those could diminish the bright light emanating from it.

[That is...]

“If you take the promise my father made and add it to the accomplishments this Earthling had achieved, wouldn’t it be enough to grant his final wish? Even if reversing time is difficult.” (princess)

[Is there a reason for you to go this far?]

“Of course.” (princess)

When the Earthlings crossed over, the royal family also promised to handsomely reward them.

There was no need for her to even consider those betraying b*stards who ran away while worrying only about their own necks. But, this Earthling in front of her eyes continued to tug at her conscience.

It was only correct and proper that the royal house would honour that promise, since this man had clearly honoured his. Also, this was the final act of kingly pride for the dying princess as well.

[What if your wish could be granted, instead?]

“And what can you do for me, then?” (princess)

The princess laughed out loudly.

One of the things she had realised during this lengthy war was that the so-called omnipotent gods were definitely no such beings. So, what could she wish for, in this already doomed world?

[I shall reiterate this, but this child can not physically go back in time.] [Only the intense emotions of yearning and regret... Even those, would only be transmitted to him as a fleeting dream. Not even as a transference of memories...] [He might end up treating it as nothing to fret over. Or, maybe, even as a dream he dreamt during the night and then, come morning, forget all about it.] [But, it is true that both you and

him will die in this place. Even then – are you saying you will still choose this path?]

As if to tick each checkbox of the confirmation process, the voice entered her ears several times.

It'd be a lie if she didn't develop a feeling of doubt in her heart. However... she was too exhausted. This war had gone on for so, so long. And during all this time, she had to endure as one of the last surviving leaders.

But now, she wanted to rest. She thought that it wouldn't be such a bad idea to return to nothingness and sleep forever.

'Only if all Earthlings were like you... '

...Then, she might not have any regrets.

[Is that how much you desire for his wish to be granted? Even at the expense of relinquishing your royalty?]

For the first time during this conversation, a genuine smile formed on her lips.

"Yes."

Her wish had been finalised.

[In that case, fine.]

It somewhat felt like a pair of wings spreading out within the darkness.

[Come closer, my child...]

Suddenly, her whole body felt empty. By the time she realised this change, her sights became blurry.

The whole world seemed to spin endlessly; and then, unknown matter rapidly approached her. The very last thing she got to see was...

[I'll be waiting in anticipation...]

...A small blue fragment rising up just above the dead man, and...

[...For the day I meet both of you again.]

...And, the darkness that was laughing out loudly in joy.

Chapter 2

A Son of a B*tch (1)

When he was a young boy, he believed that the colour of the entire world was green.

People were green-coloured. The streets were in the refreshing colours of the grass. Animals were deep green, skies were yellowish green – no matter where he looked, he found the spectrum of green plastered all over the world.

One of the early memories he had, was him paying a visit to a local zoo with his mother and his siblings.

Rather than walking around to look into the enclosures, he got on a tour bus along with his mom. The bus then entered an artificial safari. Paper bags filled with meat were hanging from the side of the vehicle.

The seat right next to the window was occupied by his eldest brother; while mom's thighs were taken over by his younger sister, only two years old back then. He recalled that he might've been feeling a little down that day, being unable to sit alongside with them, being the middle child and all.

Soon, the bus came to a stop in a field.

The animals, wild beasts, stopped lounging around in the field and on the rocky outcroppings as soon as they saw the bus and slowly made their way over here.

The animals shining in green began competing for the food. Seeing them jumping up and down reminded the boy of the game 'Whack A Mole,' so he ended up giggling out ever so slightly.

It was then.

There was one animal. Just one. It sat all alone on the top of the boulder like the king of pride, as the blinding and radiant sunlight bounced off of its hide.

The boy's smile was wiped away in an instant. Why?

‘The colour...?’

Unlike just about every other lifeform he had seen, it was not ‘green’.

Maybe the beast sensed the boy’s gaze? The eyes of the animal directly landed on the boy.

The boy stared back in pure trance, before an unfamiliar fear took a hold of him.

He quickly averted his gaze as dictated by his instincts. His breathing became shallow and difficult. His hands shook, so did his entire body. His heart pounded away in a frenzy. But, even as the feeling of terror gripped him tight, a terror no boy his age should’ve been able to contend with, a question still floated up to the top of his mind.

Why is that animal not green?

No, no. I must’ve have made a mistake.

The boy took big, big breaths and lifted his head to take a look outside again.

Then, it happened.

The window violently shook.

The animal should have been so, so far away, yet when did it approach the bus? And why did it ignore the meat and only aimed at one single window?

The beast bared its fangs and repeatedly tried to chew on the window frame right next to the boy.

The boy couldn’t understand what had transpired here in the proverbial blink of an eye. No. But he still managed to hide away in fright.

I need to run away.

Why is the bus still not moving?

I’m scared. I want to get away from here.

Mom? Mom. Mom! Mom!!

Just as he was about to burst into tears, a warm and gentle hand carefully shielded his eyes.

“You must’ve been really frightened, weren’t you?”

Her voice was as warm and gentle as the breeze of the late Spring.

Her words were brief, yet the boy instantly felt relaxed and comfortable. The boy jumped into the embrace of this woman without even looking up to see who it was.

“There, there now. It’s going to be alright. They have all moved away now... Ah, the bus is moving again.”

She gently patted his back. Her hands felt soft and ethereal. Even the boy’s heavy breathing became softer and relaxed.

Only then did the boy raise his head to take a look.

“Uh?”

Suddenly, her patting hands came to a stand still. She brought her face closer to the boy’s, then she started studying him with much curiosity, before gasping out in surprise.

“Oh, my goodness me... Really, now...”

When the boy tilted his head in confusion, the woman began to gently laugh.

“Your eyes. They are very beautiful.”

My eyes?

“Yes. They are beautiful. In the seven shades of the rainbow.”

The boy stared at her in confused silence, but she simply maintained her gentle laughter. Then, she let out a soft and wistful sigh.

“Only if you were a little older... No. Perhaps, it might be better if you grow up not being aware of it.”

Before long, the safari tour had come to an end. The passengers began disembarking, one by one, but the boy showed no sign of separating from the woman. Even she too hesitated, as if there was something with the boy that's holding her back.

She whispered to his ear:

“What is your name?”

“It, it's Seol...”

“Seol, is it? It's a pretty name.”

She then met the gaze of the mumbling boy and his blushing cheeks.

“I want to ask you something... When you are just a little bit older... If we somehow encounter each other again in the future, will you come with me?”

“With you, *noona*?”

“Yes. I'll definitely help you if you run into trouble in the future.”

Although he couldn't understand the context of her promise, the boy still silently nodded his head within the arms of the woman.

Soon, the voices of mom and his sister searching for the boy could be heard.

“Okay, I promise.”

A soft sensation touched his forehead before it disappeared.

“Let us meet again, little prince.”

...

As the boy departed from the bus while being accompanied by his mom, he continued to look behind him.

The woman was smiling brightly and waved her hands goodbye, until the boy was out of her sight.

Time moved on, and the boy became an adult. He had grown to the point that the special memories from that day had become faint and indistinct.

He lost the fear of the wild animals after he got older and perhaps, with just a bit of wisdom/foolhardiness getting to his head. It was here that he began to earnestly research his special condition.

What was this strange condition of his?

Why did he possess something no one else seemingly possessed?

At the end of the day, he was no closer to the truth, but still, he got to grips with this ability of seeing the world in green, that could be turned on and off at will.

The winds of change swept him away as soon as he began applying this power to his everyday life. However, when that ability suddenly disappeared, that was the day his life rapidly spiralled out of control.



The Seol-ark Land was a casino located in the city of Sokcho, in the Korean province of Gangwon.

Regardless of winning or losing, people robotically pressed the play button and flipped the cards, as the soundless gasps of joy and sorrow intermingled with one another.

“.....”

A young man was staring at the Blackjack table with a tense expression etched on his face. He took a quick glance at the dealer, but only got an expressionless poker face in return.

The young man stared at the table with an intensity befitting a predator waiting to devour its prey, before opening his mouth with great difficulty.

“St... No, wait!! Double down!”

As if the dealer found this call a path to his salvation from the lengthy, boring wait, he impatiently placed his hand on the deck.

The young man's throat clammed up. Sweat soaked him from his chin all the way down to his lower back.

However, completely disregarding his anxiety, the dealer's hand simply flipped the card.

The result was... the young man wrapped his hands around his head in despair.

Once more, joy and sorrow... they came and went.



"Oh, hey. Park *hyung*, you got lucky today?"

"Ohh, Mister Choi. Hello."

A bespectacled man shivering outside the casino with a cigarette hanging loose between his lips, shook his head in denial when a well-built man greeted him.

"Lucky? You know, my foot's more like it. I've only managed to break even. What about you, Mister Choi?"

"Yeah, me too. Also breaking even and nothing else besides. Today's not my day, it seems."

"I came outside to take a short break. My head's hurting and all, staring at one table for hours. I think this early morning cold winds will do me some good."

When the bespectacled guy feigned being ill, the well-built man let off a short chuckle.

"Yeah, I get you. Me too... Hmm?"

Just as Mister Choi slid his hand inside the pocket to fish for his own smokes, a loud shout broke the relative silence of the morning. When the surprised eyes of the two men sought out the source of that noise, they eventually found a young man not too far from them, holding a smartphone to his face.

Mister Choi frowned slightly, before tilting his head slightly.

"He looks kind of familiar, no?"

“Who?”

“That guy, with the phone over there. You know who that is?”

“Oh, him? Yeah, I know. I think he’s been coming here even longer than you, Mister Choi. If I remember correctly, the first time I saw him was probably around three, four years ago.”

Choi was inwardly thinking that indeed, Park *hyung* had been here the longest. He then looked at the youth with a somewhat stunned expression.

“Three, four years? Even though he’s so young?”

“Yeah... Not sure if he’s in the mid 20s now. That kid, he used to be really famous around these parts.”

A sign of certain regret could be spied on Mister Park’s face as he licked his lips. Meanwhile, Choi simply shrugged his shoulders.

“Really? I saw him play a couple of times, but I thought he wasn’t all that much.”

“He’s like that now, but for his first year, he was the business. Hell, back then, some people even tried their luck on the tables that guy did his thing.”

“Huh? I guess he used to have some skill, then?”

“No, no, it wasn’t like he had mad skills or not... Maybe I should’ve said that he knew exactly when to go all in. It was as if he knew exactly when to put everything on the table for the winning hand, you know what I’m saying? He also kept a strict rule he set for himself – he didn’t go overboard, always brought along a small amount every time he was here, and never more than that... I never got that feeling from him, that feeling you get when looking at an addict. Anyways, he was a weird one.”

“So, how can a guy like that, end up looking like that now?”

“I don’t know, myself. Oh, right. He said something about not being able to see it anymore, out of the blue. Or, some c**p like that...”

Park clicked his tongue and resumed sucking on his cigarette. The young man was still holding on to his phone. He looked so pitiful and desperate, as if he was pleading his

heart over the line or something.

Choi snorted out almost derisively.

“In any case, I’m not liking what I see here. He’s so young, yet he’s here gambling, instead of making money the old fashioned way.”

“Well, as long as you can walk, you’re allowed in here, no? And besides, let’s be honest here. You are still a young man, too.”

“Eiii~ I’ve passed forty, like, ages ago.”

“Does age really matter, anyways? This casino here is just a lowly gambling den with a fancy title, is all. The moment you set your foot inside, you lose what little sanity you have left. That’s it.”

“Oh well. That’s also true.”

Two men, feeling somewhat sick and tired of looking at that young man, began sharing meaningless jokes between each other.



“Dad! Please! This is the last time, so please, help me out just this once!”

– *“I’m hanging up. Don’t call again, you b*stard!”*

“But, dad!”

The line went dead after that. Swear words leaked out from the young man’s mouth almost automatically.

“Haah... I’m going f*cking crazy here.”

He even lost what little seed money he was able to scrounge up.

All he had left in his pocket was a handful of casino chips, and a couple of notes inside his wallet for the taxi fare. A small but tempting thought of ‘Should I go and try out the slots and recover whatever I can?’ entered his mind. However, if he lost that, then he’d have to walk home.

His eyes scanned the list of contacts on the phone's screen one more time. When the name 'Yu Seon-Hwah' showed up, he didn't even hesitate and called the number. Unfortunately, the time was still early in the morning, nay, still dawn, so no matter how long he waited, no one answered the phone.

He then accessed the banking app to check his bank balance but that only served to confirm the depressing truth. He could only sigh out after seeing the minus in front of the numbers.

"D**n it. Why aren't you answering your f*cking phone already..."

He stewed in anger for a long time, before suddenly tilting his head upwards to take in the heavens above. The early dawn's sky was still dark.

This youth was Seol.

Seol let off yet another sigh, and then, lifted his hand up high to call for a taxi.

"Hey, taxi!"

The taxi stopped in front, and the driver asked him.

"To where?"

"To Gangnam Station... no, wait a minute. Take me to the Nonhyeon Station, instead!"

"Get in."

Shortly afterwards, the taxi carrying Seol slipped into the early morning darkness.

Chapter 3

A Son of a B*tch (2)

“I have to find some seed money so that I can go back there.” (Seol)

Seol wandered around the front of the Nonhyeon Station for a while, trying to figure out what to do next, before finally making his move.

He was seemingly surrounded by enemies and obstacles from all sides, but there was one little hill he could still climb for help.



The alarm went off. It signaled the hour – half-past five in the morning. Yu Seon-Hwah slowly opened her eyes, and as if the night’s rest had refreshed her soul, she let off a pleased yawn and grandly stretched her limbs out.

The early morning sunlight, managing to seep past the curtains, brightly illuminated a small photo frame resting on top of the bedroom bureau.

It was an old photo of seven people, including Yu Seon-Hwah and her younger sister. A thin smile slowly bloomed on her lips as she gazed at the photo.

On the photo... there was Seol *ahjussi* with his stiff, uptight expression, who possessed a caring heart second to none; his wife who always treated Yu Seon-Hwah and her little sister as her real daughters, making sure the siblings had all their daily necessities well taken care of.

It wasn’t only those two, though. Three Seol siblings were in it too; the eldest boy, Seol Woo-Seok, who resembled his father the closest with that stiff, cold expression, but also possessing a genuinely warm heart; the last born girl, Seol Jin-Heui, with her open and outgoing personality. And then...

And a gentle-looking youth with a soft smile in the middle of the two. Then, there she was, leaning her head on this young man’s shoulders and smiling so radiantly.

“.....”

As she gazed at the photo, a shade of darkness crept into her complexion. And when she lifted her phone to take a look at the time, the shadow cast over her expression became ever so darker.



“You’re leaving already? Why don’t you at least have a cup of coffee before leaving?”
(Yu Seon-Hwah)

“I wanna do that too, sis. But, I really gotta go now. I need to hand in that darn project before the end of the day.”

“Okay, okay. You haven’t forgotten anything, right?” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

“C’mon now! I’m not a little kid anymore, you know! Okay, I’m going now! Bye!”

The front door closed shut, and the little sister’s hurried footsteps echoing in the corridor gradually became distant.

Left alone, Yu Seon-Hwah’s face carried a small smile as she finished her share of breakfast. Perhaps infected by the sister’s energy and that positive attitude, she felt motivated more than usual this morning. Also... for the past few days, things were going so well that she often had to pause to wonder if she wasn’t living in a dream or some such.

But regardless, she was definitely happy. If she were to disregard just one minor thing, that was.

After finishing up the breakfast, she began packing her lunch box with the leftovers. But then, she heard the gradually approaching footsteps in the corridor, and couldn’t help but giggle. There was a hurried knocking on the front door. She had a hunch something like this would happen, so she quickly unlocked the door and opened it.

“I told you. Didn’t I ask you if yo...” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Yu Seon-Hwah was about to lecture her little sister, only to freeze up on the spot.

“You thought I was Seung-Hye, didn’t you?” (Seol)

The person standing in front of Yu Seon-Hah wasn't her little sister. The man was wearing a worn-out and dilapidated set of old clothings, and as if he hadn't washed up in weeks, he reeked like a blocked up sewer, as well. And there were dark bags under his eyes, as if he had endured yet another all-nighter.

"You... Why are you here?" (Yu Seon-Hwah)

"Hey. How are you? It's been a while, hasn't it? Oh, wowsers. No matter when I show up, this place is always kept so clean and neat." (Seol)

Seol pushed his way inside the flat and took a look around, before spotting the leftover breakfast on the dining table. Then, he reached out with his dirty hands, shoved some down his mouth and nodded his head in appreciation.

"Tastes really great. I was starving anyways, so this is perfect. Hey, gimme breakfast." (Seol)

"....."

"I told you, gimme breakfast." (Seol)

"Who told you to come in?" (Yu Seon-Hwah)

The young man, Seol's eyes opened wider after sensing the undisguised hostility in her voice.

"What's the matter?" (Seol)

"This is my house, not yours. You just forced yourself into someone else's home, don't you get that?" (Yu Seon-Hwah)

"What are you talking about? Besides, since when did this place become yours? I know full well that my dad paid the security deposit for this place." (Seol)

"I've already paid that back in full, yet you come here talking about 'security deposit' only now? Don't you know how long it's been, since I took care of that debt? Besides, even if that was still the case, you don't have the right to be here." (Yi Seon-Hwah)

"...Hey, hey. Why are you acting like this? Especially with our shared history and all?" (Seol)

“Our shared history? Really?” (Yu Seon-Hah)

Yu Seon-Hah’s voice became even colder.

“Stop daydreaming. We no longer have any history. I don’t have any form of relationship with you. None at all.” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Her words eventually went beyond the cold and into venomous territory.

His eyes slowly rolled inside his sockets, before he grandly sighed out. Then, with a slight *Oopsie*, he lied down on the living room’s floor.

“Just gimme something to eat, will ya? I’m dying of starvation here. It took a lot out of me to walk all the way here, you know.” (Seol)

“Hey!! I’m not going to humour you anymore, so get up! Get up and leave! Before I call the police!” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

The young man, Seol, snorted out derisively. However, when Yu Seon-Hwah really pulled out her phone to call the cops, he hurriedly stood back up.

“L, let’s not overreact like this and talk. Just talk. I came here because I’ve got something to say to you. Honest.” (Seol)

“I’ve got nothing to say to you. If you really want to speak to me, then before that, go to that stupid casino right now and ask their security to ban you from entering that place first. Only then, I’ll think about talking to you again.” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

“Oh, come on now~. Why are so serious?” (Seol)

She felt like her heart might explode from all the pent-up frustration and anguish. Yu Seon-Hwah squeezed her eyes shut. She lowered her head, and drew in a long, heavy breath.

“...Get out.” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

“Wowsers. You really gonna keep acting like...?” (Seol)

Before he got to the end of his sentence, she screamed out, loud enough to puncture his ear drums. Finally, she could no longer hold back the repressed rage and it

exploded out.

“You think I don’t know why you’re here?! You came here to beg for more money, didn’t you?!” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Seol flinched as she accurately stabbed him in the mark.

“Hey, hey. What are you even...” (Seol)

He sheepishly tried to smile and mumble his way out of this. Unfortunately, an event similar to this one had happened before already. And not just once or twice, either.

It only had been a four months ago, when he came to see her. He got on his knees, desperately rubbed his hands for hours and apologised. She decided to trust him back then.

Seeing that ugly and perhaps even cowardly smile on his face, the feelings of revulsion Yu Seon-Hwah previously didn’t have suddenly welled up inside her.

“I can’t and I won’t give you a single dime. Not anymore. What did you say to me back then? ‘Let’s start again, together’. Really? You think I’m an idiot? What’s the matter, isn’t blowing away our security deposit from last time not enough for you?!” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Yu Seon-Hwah relentlessly shouted at him, before drawing heavy breaths. Dry heaves and coughs came out of her throat, now hoarse and cracked after a short burst of angry shouts.

Seol stood there, totally dazed. Outwardly, he seemed to have forgotten what he wanted to say thanks to her angry attitude, but upon a closer inspection, there was a thin but cruel smirk on his lips.

“You know, I’ve been a nice and patient guy until now, but you start acting like this? You ungrateful little b*tch...” (Seol)

Yu Seon-Hwah’s guilty thoughts of ‘Did I go overboard just now?’ lasted for only a brief second after hearing that. She even doubted her own ears for a moment there.

“What... what did you just call me?” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

“Huh. Are your earholes all blocked up with wax or something? Hey, you. You think I’m some d**n pushover? F*cking hell...” (Seol)

This was her very first time hearing him swear out like that. This sudden mental shock caused her mind to blank out.

“You know, you shouldn’t be acting like this to me. I mean, when you were going through so much sh*t and hardship, you clung to me like an annoying fly, yet now, you’re like this? I ain’t trying to sound like a petty b*stard or something, but have you forgotten about me taking care of you during the middle and high school? Hmm? You forgot those days when you’d aimlessly waste time wandering around the streets late at night, all crying and sh*t about wanting to see your dead parents? I still remember those days when your little sis came to me, crying and asking where you were and I’d go out looking for you whole night long.” (Seol)

A vile, disgusting taste clogged up Yu Seon-Hwah’s throat. She tried to hold it back down, but in its place, her eyes became wetter and hotter from this feeling of betrayal punching her in the gut.

“You remember when you had no money but still wanted to go overseas and study? Didn’t I postpone going back to school, just so you could use my admission fee as your own, instead? And after you left the country, didn’t I keep sending you more money that I earned from the part time jobs I took on, so you wouldn’t starve over there?” (Seol)

Those did indeed happen.

To pursue her dream, she wanted to study abroad, but the reality was, she was strapped for cash and it was an impossible dream.

She couldn’t tell anyone about her problems and continued to suffer in silent agony everyday. But this youth in front of her stepped forward to help back then.

She was so thankful for his sacrifice. And she also felt terrible about it, too, him having to delay going back to school himself, and using that money to help her out instead.

He was that kind of a person. He was dependable, he cared about her the deepest, and he was basically her most important pillar of strength, too. When they entered the same university together, and when he confessed to her shortly afterwards... she felt like she was walking on cloud nine.

She loved him so much. When they promised to spend the rest of their lives together, she thought nothing could go wrong for them in this world and that their happiness would last forever.

But...

How could a person end up like this? Just what conspired to ruin a man to such a degree?

Yu Seon-Hwah stood there and trembled like a lone leaf on a tree. She sniffed softly, before abruptly raising her head. Her expression showed that she had managed to regain some semblance of calm, but her nostrils and eyes were moist and swollen still.

“...You son of a b*tch.” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

“W, what?” (Seol)

Seol stopped feigning anger and began stuttering his words, then. Rather than getting angry, he was dumbstruck, instead. Why? Because, he knew just how much she hated swearing. She had never once uttered a single curse word in her entire life.

“How much was it?” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Her slightly-tearful voice sounded determined. It was as if she had finally made up her mind.

“Uh?” (Seol)

“How much was it? The money you gave me when I went overseas.” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

“Uhm... The admission fee was like, 500 thousand? And from the part time jobs, probably around 200 thousand?” (Seol) *(TL: In Korean currency.)*

“I’ll pay the admission fee back to your dad. You might have given me the money, but it was your dad’s money to begin with. As for that 200, here it is.” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Yu Seon-Hwah spoke curtly as if she was spitting out flames with each word and immediately switched her phone on.

“I sent it. It’s exactly 200 thousand, so check it.” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Seol let off a fake cough, and cautiously pulled out his phone. And after checking out his bank balance, he couldn't help smirk in delight.

"Wow, you have a lot of money now, don't you? Just how much do you make a month?"
(Seol)

"Are we finished now?" (Yu Seon-Hah)

She somehow squeezed out the voice, now wet with even more tears. Hearing her ominous-sounding words, the feeling of delight fled from Seol's mind almost immediately. But, he still shrugged his shoulders after shifting his gaze over to her.

"Hey, now. I never asked you for money, no? If others hear you, they might think I'm trying to steal from you or something." (Seol)

"...I've finished repaying all the debt with this. Right? Every dime?" (Yu Seon-Hwah)

"Well..... uh, I guess?" (Seol)

"If you've confirmed it, then get out. We have nothing tying us now. Not even debt." (Yu Seon-Hwah)

"You're starting this again?" (Seol)

In the end, Yu Seon-Hwah couldn't hold it anymore, and collapsed to the floor on her knees. Seeing her desperately rein her tears back in, Seol roughly scratched his oily and unkempt hair.

"Fine, fine. I'm leaving." (Seol)

Seol still had his shoes on; he hurriedly left the flat as if he was a thief escaping from the crime scene, afraid of his wrongdoings being exposed. However, his sense of accomplishment after getting the cash only lasted for a brief few seconds.

SFX for a sorrowful wail of a woman

When he heard the restrained yet heartbroken wail coming from behind the closed door, Seol suddenly felt like sh*t.

He ran outside the building and glared at the heavens above. As usual, the morning

sky was blue. It was such a clear and cloudless day, it managed to rouse a deep sense of irritation in his heart.

Then, all the accumulated fatigue he had forgotten rushed in.

He filled his empty stomach with food bought from a convenience store, and returned to his rented room. After switching on the light, he fell straight down on the dusty blanket, and closed his eyes.

...An unknown amount of time passed by.

The midday Sun had eventually moved westward, and the amber glow of the horizon was just about to be swallowed up by the encroaching darkness.

Wuong!

Suddenly, an indistinct vibration buzzed in the air, and then, circular ripples formed in that very spot.

The ripples gradually gathered to a single point, then in an instant, transformed into a blue object. And as if it was a lover kissing the precious one goodbye, it fell gently on the sleeping Seol's forehead.

It didn't take long, but the blue object slowly sank in below his skin as if it was sinking below the surface of water.

And then, it happened.

Flinch.

His dead-still sleeping body suddenly quivered and flinched.

“!!”

Seol abruptly opened his eyes.

Chapter 4

March 16th, 10:30 PM (1)

“GASP!!”

The very first thing he spotted was a dim light.

He tried to focus his blurry gaze three, four times. Only then, he could finally make out the overhead lightbulb he left on since his return earlier in the day.

Seol gasped and heaved uncontrollably for a little while, before hugging his knees tightly as the sensation of biting cold rushed in. Meanwhile, cold sweat soaked him to the bones.

“What was.....”

He managed to wipe away the sweat on his brows, but he couldn't stop his body from the constant and jittery shudder. However, his mind was, comparatively speaking, quite clear. It was just that the overwhelming emotions pounding his heart made breathing really difficult at this moment.

He forced his body to lean against the wall rather than lying back down. As soon as he did, the repressed gasp finally escaped from his lips.

“Oh, god...”

Seol closed his eyes.

A dream.

He had a dream – a dream a little bit different from the ones he usually had. No, make that ‘a lot’.

He felt as if he had personally experienced everything that happened within that dream. He even got to feel the most intimate emotions during those moments, too.

Looking at it logically, none of that made any sense. The dream itself contained things that were as far removed from the everyday life as he could imagine; the sparse scenery he witnessed intermittently was completely different from that of the modern world he knew. He even got to fight against creatures that were clearly not human in origin, either. In all likelihood, this dream could have been nothing more than utter nonsense.

But, what was this... 'feeling'?

The scene that stuck to his head the most, was the very last part of the dream. The dying man... he was full of regret.

Regret, remorse, lamentation, capped off with a long sigh... All those desperate and pitiful emotions he felt until the last of his breaths, didn't want to dissipate, and Seol's heart nearly broke.

Seol cracked his eyes open and surveyed his room.

There were blankets carelessly tossed around; dirty clothes draped over ramen boxes; empty bottles of liquor rolling on the floor, and packets of cigarettes discarded alongside them.

This sight felt so alien to him.

A head-splitting migraine suddenly began its assault. Almost reflexively, he got up and headed off to the bathroom in unsteady steps. He filled the basin with cold water and plunged his head into it. Almost immediately, he felt clear-headed.

When he couldn't hold his breath any longer, he lifted his head out from the water.

The face staring back in the mirror looked foreign to him. His eyes were sunken, and his complexion was pale, making him look like a man suffering from a deadly disease.

'Is this... really me?'

He slowly touched his own face, as light returned to his eyes.

His old face was nowhere to be seen, only to be replaced with one belonging to an addict wallowing in the pits of gambling and alcohol. It was like looking at the face of a dying man.

He didn't even try to wipe the water off his face as he left the bathroom. He angrily put on his jacket and shoved open the front door. His innards bitterly ached, but he thought that, unless he shoved something in there, he wouldn't be able to endure any longer.

He entered a nearby convenience store, but nothing particularly grabbed his attention. Well, he didn't leave his room to grab a bite, but simply because he couldn't stay still, after all. He managed to buy a can of beer instead, and he went on a long, aimless walk.

His aimless wandering brought him to a spot below a bridge spanning across the river Tancheon. In the past, he'd often come here to lament his stupidity and terrible luck whenever he lost money at the casino.

Seol poured the beer down his throat. His innards screamed, but it was better than nothing.

As he sat on the riverbank in complete silence, the emotions he'd been trying to ignore rushed back in like a tidal wave.

'Just where did it go wrong for me?'

Seol wordlessly stared at the dark waters of Tancheon.

It was around the time of elementary school when he accepted the fact that he was different from everyone else.

He nicknamed his ability 'Green Eyes' and thought he was a chosen one. He encouraged himself with the thoughts that something special and fantastical would happen to him sooner or later. When he looked back, those were indeed embarrassing stories of his childhood.

As he got older, he then learned the hard way that being different from everyone else was not as good as he thought, and that he needed to hide the difference as much as possible.

During all of his 26 years, he only got to discover four facts about his ability.

If he focused his attention on his eyes, living things and objects would shimmer in green.

Among those, there were things where the green colour would dissipate gradually even if he concentrated.

If something was in green, then nothing would happen.

However, if one didn't shine in green, or something else happened to the colourisation, then nothing good would happen well over 50% of the time.

Seol focused on the point of '50%'. Well, when looked at from different perspective, it was the same as something good might happen with the odds of less than 50%, instead.

He chose the casino to experiment with this.

Initially, he thought of the place as nothing more than a location for his experiments. He lost 60, 70% of the time, but he only brought along a hundred thousand Won every time. When he lost it all, he left without hesitation and regret. Although he wasn't happy, his loss was no different from blowing a weekly allowance of a college student.

The problem was with those days he actually had won something.

At one time, he even managed to win as much as 5 million Won.

He got to eat whatever he wanted to eat, buy those fancy clothes he could only drool over on online shopping websites, and he even replaced his computer to the latest model. And, he still had a lot left besides.

He got to taste the wonderful flavour of freely spending money.

And when he had tasted it, his life began to change.

The amount of time he frequented the casino increased explosively. The amount he brought along also increased many folds. He had forgotten the purpose of experimentation and focused solely on making money.

And as his obsession over gambling spiralled out of control, his ability simply vanished one day. Just like that.

It wasn't as if there were no prior warnings. When the usage of his ability increased by a lot, he'd often get headaches. The number of days he couldn't fall asleep increased

too, until he began suffering insomnia. As his condition worsened, the ability he could bring out with a simple thought needed a few minutes just for a hint of green to surface.

And eventually, he was laid out deathly ill for a while. After that, he could no longer 'see' green, even after concentrating for hours on end.

He lost his ability during the pursuit of his greed. However, he couldn't stop gambling.

...After all, he earned the money through it. Therefore, he'd be able to recoup everything, if he could just win one more time...

He disregarded and disparaged everyone trying to speak some sense into him. He was already addicted to gambling by then. The satisfaction he felt when winning was sweeter and more addictive than any pleasures known to men.

From thereon, Seol's life hit rock bottom.

And then, and then.....

Seol gritted his teeth. Suddenly, his mind wavered and the thoughts brimming with baseless pride and reckless defiance that shouted 'I shouldn't be feeling guilty like this!' reared their ugly heads.

But, whenever that happened, the raw emotions he felt during the dream rushed in and brutally crushed them all.

He then recalled the events of making Yu Seon-Hwah cry in the morning. Then, another powerful wave of emotions came crashing down, enough to make him absolutely dizzy.

*...A son of a b*tch...*

"No..."

The beer can slipped out of his hand and landed on the ground, spilling the golden liquid within.

'Why did I do that?'

The youth hid his face away in shame. He put strength on all of his fingers to crazily scratch at his face.

'Just why did I do something like that?!

He shouldn't have done that. He shouldn't have said those things.

"Godd*mn it..."

His heart felt like it was tearing into million pieces. Instead of dissipating from his consciousness, those emotions he felt during the dream ingrained themselves even deeper into his psyche. The emotions of regret felt beyond bitter as it ruthlessly cut at his heart; his eyes became warm and moist from the pain.

Now he understood the truth. The him now, him after losing the ability to 'see' green, was just a worthless b*stard with no redeeming qualities whatsoever.

'If only I never had that stupid ability to begin with!!'

The moment he acknowledged this fact...

In that moment, Seol could feel the persistent dregs of pride being cleanly swept out of his system.

"Keu... huhhuhuh..."

Suddenly, a low chuckle broke out from his lips. Slowly, it grew louder and louder, loud enough to burst open his lungs. Gradually, though... the laughter became pained sobs in the end.

"*Sob...* I'm, so sorry..."

He felt remorseful for everything he did. He felt tight-chested.

"I'm sorry, Seon-Hwah..."

Today, this grown up youth cried his heart out like a newborn baby.

'It's... it's better to die than living like this.'

He had been living like garbage. He had badly affected the lives of everyone who cared about him. Just how disappointed were they? Just how badly did he hurt them with his stupid actions? Just like what his little sister told him, it might have been better to take his own life for everyone else in the long run.

Seol slowly stood up from his spot. The slowly flowing river water seemed so alluring right about now.

He walked up to it in a trance, before looking down at the river. His still flowing teardrops fell on the surface, creating small ripples.

And then, his subtly trembling legs stepped into the cold water, all the while he fiercely glared at the river.

It was then.

“!!!”

Suddenly, the colour of the river changed.

From the area where Seol's feet was – or, more specifically, from the ripples created by his legs, 'green' slowly permeated outwards.

It was as if someone let a drop of paint fall into clear water. And then, the colour gradually spread out. The forgotten colour, the long-lost light, spread out to everywhere in a hurry.

Not only did it not stop at the river's edge, it spread over the support pillars as well, and eventually, to the rest of the bridge. The spot he'd been sitting wallowing in guilt just now was next, and then, even to the rest of the sky.

The whole world was dyed in green, just like back when he was a little kid.

Seol could only look on at this riot of dancing green colour occurring everywhere with a pair of teary eyes. He couldn't believe what was happening here all of a sudden.

“This, this is...”

Seol stood there like a thunder-struck man for a long time, before he consciously let go of his concentration. The world regained their original colours right away. When he

concentrated again, the green colour returned.

His ability...

“...It came back?”

Just like how it disappeared so abruptly all those years ago.

“It, it really came back?!”

Then, just as abruptly, it came back.

“But, but why?!”

He tried so hard to restore his ability in the past. The sense of loss he felt that day when it was gone couldn't be described in mere words.

Regardless, just what caused it to activate again?

Then, he recalled the mysterious dream one more time.

Now that he thought about it, the man in his dreams also used the same ability as his.

Seol desperately tried to recall the beginning of the dream now.

“.....”

But soon enough, he cautiously determined that there couldn't be a connection here. No matter how hard he mulled over it, the whole thing didn't make any logical sense at all.

Maybe, his subconscious desire to regain his lost ability was the trigger that reactivated it. This was actually more realistic and easier to swallow.

‘But... wait.’

However, on the flip side, that dream was indeed a strangely realistic one. Even the beginning was with the man sitting on the riverbanks of Tancheon, lamenting on his life choices while drinking beer.

Just like right now.

It was then.

As Seol fell deeper into his new-found confusion, he could hear the distinct knockings of high heels hitting the stones lining the ground.

Hearing that strangely rhythmical gait, his nerves became taut. His gaze automatically shifted to the origin of the sound. And there, Seol could definitely see it.

Out of everywhere still dyed in green, the shimmering light was gradually fading from one area.

It was to the direction of the approaching high heels.

Chapter 5

March 16th, 10:30 PM (2)

“You won’t drown even if you fall in there, you know.”

A pleasant voice rippled in the air. Her voice sounded louder than usual, perhaps owing to the fact that not one soul could be found nearby.

Shortly afterwards, the shape of a lone person broke out from the darkness and revealed herself.

She wore crisp and pure-white blouse, with a black jacket on top, and the so-called grey H-line skirt that proudly showcased the stunning figure. She completed the look of a typical business woman with a leather-bound bag as well.

“You see, it’s not all that deep around here, so unless you were planning to frolic in the water, then...”

Her voice trailed upwards as the words neared the end of her sentence. Although she was cosplaying as a serious business woman, the way she spoke was rather playful.

Seol slowly withdrew his feet from the water; at the same time, the unknown woman formed a faint smile.

“Are you perhaps Seol...”

“Who are you?” (Seol)

The woman chose not to finish her words, and instead approached him in a leisurely gait. With a practiced hand, she produced a business card and pushed it to him.

“This is me.”

Seol took a quick glance at the card.

Director Kim Hahn-Nah]

When Seol showed no indication to accept her card, Kim Hahn-Nah withdrew her hand as the atmosphere was getting kind of awkward between them. She instead presented him with a handkerchief.

“Use this. I personally find a grown man crying a bit too much.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Again, Seol didn’t accept her gesture and chose to wipe his face clean with his sleeves, instead. Others might have been somewhat miffed by Seol’s level of alertness, but she seemed to be rather intrigued by it.

“I once heard that a gambling addict wouldn’t budge an inch even if a pretty and *very* naked girl throws herself at him. I guess that was true.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol carefully studied the face of the intelligent beauty behind the pair of spectacles. He clearly remembered seeing her in that dream.

To be specific, he remembered seeing her during the dream’s very beginning. A strange woman approached the dream version of him as he sat by the riverbank drinking beer; she said that she had a *great* news to share with him.

It really did sound like a great news. She said, she’d enable him to earn more than enough money to pay back all of his debts, and still have lots left over. And that, if he was willing to work harder, he’d get to earn even more moolah, too.

The moment she handed over an envelope full of cash, the dream version of Seol was completely entranced.

He had to sign the ‘Contract’ in return, but the Seol of then couldn’t be any happier. After all, easy money suddenly found its way to his hands. Back then, he was even considering becoming a medical test subject for cold, hard cash.

He only got to find out that he got royally screwed over only after he signed on the

dotted line. He got dragged away to a *place* he'd never even heard of before, and it turned out that the Contract he signed was actually a slave contract.

Although this happened within the dream, when Seol recalled all the incredible and intolerable cruelty and hardships he had to endure, his teeth began gritting all on their own.

'No, hang on a minute here.' (Seol)

Seol suddenly realised something.

The things he had dismissed out of hand as a nonsensical dream were actually happening for real in front of his very eyes. When he came to recognise this crucial fact, the boiling emotions within his heart cooled down rapidly and his alertness only increased even further.

"You're a lot calmer than I expected." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"?"

"I thought you might show a reaction when I mentioned gambling just now." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

For sure, from Kim Hahn-Nah's perspective, his reaction was slightly out of her expectations. But she didn't know – Seol's attention happened to be focused elsewhere at the time.

"Oh, well. It's cool with me. This way, I'm sure our chat will progress that much smoother." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"Our chat, is it?" (Seol)

"Yes. I've come today to tell you about a really gre~at news." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Even though she was the one to say those words, Kim Hahn-Nah was giggling away in delight. Meanwhile, Seol couldn't disguise the shock on his face.

A really great news...

They were the exact words he heard in his dream. He was this close to accepting that

dream as the prediction of things to come rather than some random nonsense now.

“Well, now. How about...” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah slowly lowered the leather bag on her right arm to the ground. When the top flap “naturally” slid open, the contents within were spectacularly exposed to Seol’s sights. 50,000 Won notes were neatly packed to the brim inside the bag.

“...Taking a bet with me? How about it?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

She got down to business. This young man’s background had been thoroughly researched already; the only remaining thing was to pick the right timing to throw the bait.

The gambling addicts were some of the most easiest types to reel in. However, she always aimed to be as perfect and watertight as humanly possible. So, she picked those moments when the target would never be able to refuse the offer.

And that was precisely today.

Seeing how Seol was seemingly entranced by the sight of the bag’s contents, Kim Hahn-Nah became very confident of her success.

Seol slowly raised his head. Kim Hahn-Nah’s two hands gathered together, as if to urge him to hurry up with his answer.

“Not interested.” (Seol)

“Okay, and the game type is... Eh?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah suddenly stopped her sentence in a dumbstruck pause.

“I’ve quit gambling. Not interested.” (Seol)

Seol put some strength behind his words, which led Kim Hahn-Nah to regain her composure. She blinked her eyes a few times, before slightly tilting her head.

“Even though you could win all this money with just one bet?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“I said, not interested.” (Seol)

“What if I told you that I’ll give you the money, regardless of the results? If I remember correctly, I heard that the amount you owe is quite~ something...” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“I’ll take care of my own matters, thank you.” (Seol)

“In that case, aren’t you at least a bit curious why I’m acting like this?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“...”

“I’ll tell you everything. But in return, play a game with me for one round. Of course, regardless of the outcome, this money will still be yours.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

If Seol was being honest here, he was quite tempted by this offer.

Even at a quick glance, he could see over forty bundles of banknotes inside the bag. Seeing her confident and forthright attitude, she seemed trustworthy, and it certainly didn’t seem like that hearing her out at least once wouldn’t hurt anyone.

But, just as Seol was about to nod his head, an alarm bell went off in his head. The still-remaining emotions went on a messy and disorientating riot of refusal inside his mind.

Even then, he couldn’t bring himself to deny this strange feeling of *attraction*, though.

Going through this turmoil of confusing and opposing emotions, Seol could only breathe in deeply several times to calm down.

‘Did I almost... do something pretty stupid just now?’ (Seol)

No matter how vivid a dream was, you’d forget it as soon as you woke up. However, if Seol could remember this woman even now, that could only mean that she played an incredibly important role somewhere, somehow. He had to be extra cautious here.

“I refuse.” (Seol)

Oh, really? Kim Hahn-Nah whispered to herself.

Now this was an unexpected response. She thought he’d be jumping in with both of his feet as soon as his eyes opened up wide at the sight of the money. The Seol from

Kim Hahn-Nah's knowledge was just that kind of a man.

However, a situation such as this one wasn't entirely unprecedented, either. Every now and then, people like him would pop up – fools, who held out while hoping to squeeze out more benefits.

Kim Hahn-Nah adjusted her evaluation of Seol upwards by one level. She didn't dislike someone like that. After all, such a person was somewhat more preferable than those jumping in headlong without knowing what was going on first. Unfortunately...

'You've picked a wrong opponent, you fool.' (Kim Hahn-Nah)

This wasn't her first rodeo, so to speak. She had her own methods to deal with guys like him.

"Now, this is getting awkward..." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah pretended to cross her arms over her chest while depressing the inner pocket ever so slightly.

Then, a sound of a phone vibrating could be heard.

"Oh, please excuse me. I need to answer this." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

She pulled out her phone, and then, smoothly connected the earphone.

"Hello, this is Kim Hahn-Nah. Oh~, of course. I'm also in the middle of negotiating with the potential client as well... Yes, yes... Oh, is that so? I guess we're going to recruit that person instead, then?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah sneaked a quick glance at Seol, then...

"Of course! It's fine. My client said he's not interested, after all. In any case, I understand~. I'll withdraw from here as well." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

She then extracted the ear piece and smiled brightly.

"What a coincidence. I heard that the only remaining slot had been filled up just now." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah emphasized the words *only remaining*.

“But, since you have shown your lack of interest, I guess there’s nothing we can do now. I apologise for taking up your time. I sincerely pray that you’ll achieve everything you’ve set out to do.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah snatched her bag up from the ground and without a shred of hesitation, turned around to walk away. Her steps were light and airy.

She expected either one of the two things to happen here. Either he would stop her right away, or wait for a bit longer, before hurriedly running after her.

“Hold up.” (Seol)

Hearing that, Kim Hahn-Nah smirked.

“Yes? What is it, dear client?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

She turned her head partly around, while feigning some confusion. The facial expression of “Why did you call me?” was simply an added bonus.

‘Although you acted a little off from my calculations, you think the likes of you can win against me?’ (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Just as a victorious smile formed inside her head...

“As long as it’s not a Contract.” (Seol)

...Seol slowly opened his lips.

“As long as it’s not about a Contract, then, I’ll hear you out.” (Seol)

That was what he said.

That was all he said, yet after hearing him, all thought processes inside Kim Hahn-Nah’s brain came to a certain stop. Her mouth opened and closed several times, while she stared at him with a pair of dumbfounded eyes.

“...Excuse me?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

She somehow managed to eke out a reply.

“I’d like...” (Seol)

And his response...

“I’d like to receive the Invitation, not the Contract.” (Seol)

...Managed to completely shatter every imagined scenario in her head.

“...You.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Her previously-smiling face vanished straight away, as if it was nothing more than an illusion. She slowly removed her glasses while her expression became colder and colder.

“...Who the hell are you?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

The way she spoke transformed. Even a faint hostility could be felt from her voice.

“You know who I am.” (Seol)

Seol stopped using honorifics as well, since she too stopped. Her glaring eyes became narrower still.

“You from *that side* of the fence?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“You know that’s not true better than anybody.” (Seol)

She almost ended up acknowledging that suspicion without a basis.

It was around half a year ago, when Seol was chosen as one of the potential targets. He had not exhibited one suspicious behaviour during that time period.

Most importantly, though – if he had been to the other side even once, then the unmistakable aura of the ‘Mark’ should emanate from him. This alone proved that Seol had no direct relation with the other world.

Facing a situation she couldn’t have imagined in a million years, Kim Hahn-Nah was lost as to how she should proceed from here. This development was far too out of her

expectations.

“You expect me to believe you? When you can clearly distinguish between a Contract and an Invitation?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“So, what about it? Is “Invitation” a taboo word that shouldn’t have been mentioned in the first place?” (Seol)

Kim Hahn-Nah could only bite her lower lip at that cheeky response.

“I’m not in the mood, okay? Who was it? Who contacted you first?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“That’s not really important, is it?” (Seol)

Seol deliberately changed the topic.

The things he had spoken up to now were all from the dream – the things about the Contract and the Invitation. He only threw them out there as soon as he remembered. That was it.

However, there was no way Kim Hahn-Nah would know of this little fact. It was better to leave her stewing in her own misunderstanding. This was the only weapon Seol possessed that could subdue this woman.

“What is important is the fact that I want the Invitation, not the Contract.” (Seol)

Kim Hahn-Nah breathed in deeply.

“Fine. Don’t wanna talk? Then, don’t. I’m curious, but that doesn’t mean I have to hear it no matter the cost, anyway.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

One, two, three, four...

Kim Hahn-Nah inwardly counted up, and tried to calm her chaotic mind. However, she still couldn’t erase this feeling that she had been suckered into her opponent’s pace since a while ago.

“Separate from that, explain to me why you want an Invitation.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Obviously because, I’m not interested in signing a Contract and living like a d**n

slave.” (Seol)

Seol’s answer was simple. Kim Hahn-Nah’s brows quaked in anger.

“No, you better tell me why I should use up my precious Invitation on a worthless gambling addict like you!” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol hesitated ever so slightly, then.

Why was he treating things he saw in that stupid dream as reality? With that thought in mind, he couldn’t help but wonder if insisting on this matter was the right call to make.

It didn’t seem too late now; he could just tell her to never mind and pretend that none of this happened. After all, he had already decided to quit gambling. If he got an honest job and worked hard from now on, he’d be able to regain all the lost trust people had in him.

However...

When he declared that he was not interested in signing a Contract, the strong sense of ‘refusal’ he’d been feeling until now vanished, just like that. The strange and unexplainable attraction still remained strong, though.

Also, it’d be a lie to say that he wasn’t curious, either. There were things he wanted to confirm, as well.

Seol recalled the very last scene of the dream.

The emotions of regret pushed him from the back. It told him to go for it. Only then, could Seol fully figure out what that feeling of refusal from just now was all about. In order to go there, he had to absolutely refuse signing any Contract whatsoever.

He gritted his teeth, and concentrated incredibly hard to comb his memories.

“Not giving me an Invitation would only prove to be disadvantageous for you.” (Seol)

“What did you say?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“You said your name is Kim Hahn-Nah, a director from Shinyoung Pharmaceutical

Corporation, right?" (Seol)

"So what?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"That company is pretty famous for continuously developing new types of medicine for the last few years... Maybe, you guys have some kind of a fishy connection to that world?" (Seol)

The haymaker he threw while feeling half-unsure landed like a charm. He could tell, by seeing her once-leisurely expression crumbling away once more.

Seol didn't know anything about the other world, prior to having that dream. Which meant that the existence of the separate world was a top secret that the general public wasn't privy to know.

He didn't know whether she was forced into keeping this a secret, or willingly agreed to do so, but nevertheless, he figured that this was a weakness worth exploiting. And besides, the Seol of now was a civilian not under any kind of contractual obligations, so he didn't have to hold back.

"There's no need for me to walk around shouting at the top of my lungs, though. You know that the 21st Century is referred to as the Information Age, right?" (Seol)

"Are you threatening me?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"And just who was trying to lie first, here? Aren't we on an equal moral footing now?" (Seol)

"How laughable. You think anyone will believe you? Words of a bloody gambling addict?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"...Of course, that might be true." (Seol)

When Seol simply agreed with her assessment without a fuss, a sense of unease slowly bloomed in her heart. Just why was he being so relaxed from a while ago?

"But, will those *upstairs* think like that?" (Seol)

Suddenly, the sounds of gritting teeth could be heard.

“You couldn’t complete one little Contract, and couldn’t even keep such an important secret, either... I’m sure they will like it very much.” (Seol)

“You son of a b*tch!” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Finally, Kim Hahn-Nah dropped her facade. Seol knew he was getting really close. Well, a scammer swearing out could only mean that she was about to wave the white flag, after all.

He briefly entertained the thoughts of pushing a bit more, before giving up on the idea. He had whipped her enough, so it’d be better to gently soothe her now, instead. In the end, the final decision rested solely on her shoulders.

“Of course, I too don’t want to do any of that. Just an Invitation would suffice.” (Seol)

Seol took a small step back. Kim Hahn-Nah was still venomously grinding her teeth, though.

“The difference between a Contract and an Invitation is no laughing matter, you get that? I can complete Contracts with my authority, but an Invitation, I can’t.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Then, why did you say, your ‘precious Invitation’ just now?” (Seol)

*You motherf*cking as*hole*, Kim Hahn-Nah chewed on her lower lip.

“That, that f*cking *god* b*stard. You said there would come a time where I have to use it. And so, this is it?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah proceeded to ruthlessly downgrade a deity from another world to nothing more than an offspring of a female dog, while roughly scratching her once-neat hair.

“I’m not lying to you. Even I need to get a permission for a regular Invitation.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol shrugged his shoulders. Meeting his calm gaze, her boiling head also seemed to cool down gradually. Signing a Contract was simply a business deal. ‘Invitation’ carried a different connotation, but still, one could say it was an extension of that side of business, as well.

From that perspective, Seol managed to exceed Kim Hahn-Nah's imaginations. He should've been called a real find in the rough, rather than a throwaway slave. This feeling she got right now, was as if she had been talking to a veteran who had fought on that side for many years already.

Even though she knew that couldn't be the case.

Kim Hahn-Nah took in several more deep breaths, before switching on her phone. Before her thumb could press the Call icon, though, a powerful hesitation managed to stop her.

'Bloody hell, just how the f*ck did I end up with an as*hole like this guy...' (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Changing a potential Contract to an Invitation was no easy thing to do. No matter how craftily she weaved her tale, it'd be impossible to escape the questions later on. For a career-centric woman like Kim Hahn-Nah, such a blip on her record could not be tolerated.

She suddenly spoke to him, her thumb still hovering above the Call icon.

"You must agree to three conditions first." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Chapter 6

The Golden Stamp (1)

“Conditions?” (Seol)

Seol asked back.

“Are you going to do it or not?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Let’s hear it.” (Seol)

“Number one. You will swear to me right now that you have never ever set foot in that other world before. Right here.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Of course, I will do that. I swear to you.” (Seol)

“Number two. I want you to tell me your secret when I hand over the Invitation – the secret to this... inconsistency in you.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“I refuse.” (Seol)

Seol immediately refused.

“Ask for something else. I will not entertain questions about that topic again.” (Seol)

“Even if I were to give you a very special Invitation?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

A special Invitation? Seol was slightly tempted, but still shook his head.

“Still no. If I get to trust you a little more in the future, then maybe. But no.” (Seol)

...But, since he couldn’t be 100% sure, he left the door open a little.

Kim Hahn-Nah leaned her head back and while staring at the night sky, spat out a long sigh.

“...The final condition. After you’re admitted, you will always negotiate with me first before anybody else, regardless of what. Understood?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“What if I’m not admitted?” (Seol)

“Unless you’re the most worthless scumbag as*hole and an unlucky son of a b*tch, I’m pretty sure that ain’t gonna happen. I’m gonna make sure of that.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Her voice trembled from the shimmering heat of anger. Hearing that declaration, Seol quickly punched some numbers on his mental calculator. It seemed that Kim Hahn-Nah would not concede on the last point. If they failed to see eye to eye here, then, never mind receiving an Invitation, not even signing a Contract would become possible now.

‘I can see that she’s really attached to this Invitation, isn’t she...?’ (Seol)

Hearing her say the word ‘negotiation’, she definitely had thrown away any and all thoughts regarding the slave Contract now. After assessing his options, Seol decided to go for it.

“I accept.” (Seol)

“...Good.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah put her phone away. She let off a consecutive number of sighs while searching her inner pockets. And judging by how much her hand trembled, she must’ve found using *it* a very, very unfortunate occurrence.

There were four stamps caught neatly between her fingers emerging out from the jacket. One was coloured red, the other ones were bronze, silver, and finally, gold.

“Since you said you don’t want to sign the Contract...” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah removed the red stamp.

“As for the bronze... I can use it with my authority, but then again, that’s for the *public assets*. So, no. No need to even mention the silver, too.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

The way she spoke while *accidentally* waving around her middle finger got on Seol’s nerves a bit, but he endured. The sole remaining stamp was the gold-coloured one.

That was her so-called precious Invitation.

She tightly grasped the stamp with frustration and anguish on her face, before approaching Seol as if she was ready to devour him right on the spot.

“W, wait?!” (Seol)

“What? Aren’t we finished talking now? You wanted an Invitation, right?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“What is that gold stamp, then...?” (Seol)

“It’s my life, you b*stard!! My life!!” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah shouted at him, and then snatched the retreating Seol’s left arm. As if she was stabbing him with a dagger, she planted the golden stamp on the back of his left hand.

Suddenly, a golden light exploded. This golden light shone upwards, but, just like the receding flood water, the light dissipated from the top and eventually became dark, instead.

Feeling completely mystified, Seol shifted his gaze down to the back of his hand. Right in the middle, a small, round mark was emitting a reddish golden light from there. Although it disappeared quite rapidly as if being sucked under his skin, the sight still remained quite mesmerising.

Before he realised it, though, an envelope slapped him in the chest. Seeing how luxuriously packaged it was, he guessed that this was the Invitation letter.

“The Gate will open at 10:30 PM, tonight. It’s around two hours from now, so if you want to sort out your personal affairs, then go and do it. I don’t really care if you read the Invitation letter or not.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

While clutching the bag full of money, Kim Hahn-Nah abruptly turned on her heels to leave. Just as she took several steps away, she trembled noticeably, and turned around to glare at him one more time.

“You... No matter what, you gotta survive, got that? I don’t care what you do, you better survive and get admitted, understand?!” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“?”

“I did so much for you already, so if you die *there*, let’s see what happens! I’ll get back every little thing you owe me by whatever means possible, understand?!” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

She must’ve been really, really angry. Kim Hahn-Nah’s voice was laced thick with incredible killing intent. But still, she rapidly disappeared into the darkness.

Seol plopped down on his b**t. It felt like a wild storm just swept by a second ago. He danced along to the tune being played at the time, but with it having ended, he sure felt completely drained now.

Seol clenched and loosened his left fist a couple of times before shifting his focus to the Invitation letter. There was one letter neatly folded inside the envelope.

For some reason, he ended up recalling his past while feeling rather proud of himself. He had never ever received an invitation before, either in his life or during that dream of his, but now that he held one, this was quite a different kind of feeling to him.

Seol carefully unfolded the letter.

Greetings!

We’d like to sincerely thank you for accepting the Invitation to enter the ‘another world connected to ours’, the Lost Paradise.

The Lost Paradise is a world just for the small number of chosen people.

A world full of heart-pounding adventure and blindingly-bountiful treasures! A world where the living, breathing legendary artifacts and fierce competition for them still exists!

This Invitation letter will guide the honourable guest to the steps of Eden, to leave behind the drudgery of everyday lives!

*This Invitation letter is only issued to an honourable guest with the approval of the golden stamp.

*The opening time for the gate is 10:30 PM, March 16th, 2017. We strongly recommend that by this time, the honourable guest should find a quiet area without any witnesses present.

*This Invitation letter is required during the confirmation of the Marking as well as the starting bonus giveaway. Do not lose this letter during the admittance, and please bring it along with you.

*This Invitation letter allows the honourable guest to bring along another person as an aide.

“Ah. C**p.” (Seol)

Seol stopped reading every little word of the letter, and took a look at the phone’s screen. The time was already well past eight and was racing towards nine.

‘I don’t have a lot of time remaining.’

Seol complained slightly, before a wry smile formed on his lips. Kim Hahn-Nah told him to sort out his personal affairs, but he didn’t have a lot to begin with. His family had disowned him, and there was no one he could call a particularly close friend, either.

Even if he didn’t contact anyone for one, two months straight, he knew that others wouldn’t care. No, maybe they would be happier in the knowledge that he wasn’t bothering them.

In any case, the remaining time seemed neither here nor there. She didn’t even tell him to prepare things beforehand, too.

It was around here that he recalled Yu Seon-Hwah.

“...”

Seol shoved the Invitation letter inside his pocket and got up from his seat. All of a

sudden, he felt like there was not enough time left.

The first place he headed off to was a local dry sauna. He scrubbed every part of his dirty body clean, and got a quick haircut by the barber's within the sauna. One hour flew by, just like that.

He couldn't even get to enjoy this long-time-coming refreshed feelings before he arrived super-fast back to his rented room, fast enough to give superheroes a run for their money. He switched to the cleanest set of clothes he could find, stopped by an ATM to withdraw 2 million Won, caught a taxi, and headed off to Nonhyun-dong.

While on his way there, he was beset with a constant worry.

Did he have to go and meet her? She would definitely not want to see his mug ever again. Seol hurt Yu Seon-Hwah badly with his stupid and ill tempered words. But, before he left, he wanted to apologise to her. Even if that meant getting a well-deserved slap in the face.

His heart pounded louder and faster the closer he got to Yu Seon-Hwah's place. But, he somehow reined in his wildly beating heart and pressed the doorbell. No matter how long he waited, there was no response, though. He knocked several times, but it was as still as an empty church.

He had less than ten minutes remaining.

'Is she still at work?'

Seol fiddled around with his phone, before sitting down on the staircase leading to the corridor.

'Am I doing the right thing, I wonder?'

Now that he had come this far, he could no longer call that dream a stupid, childish nonsense. Well, the things he saw and experienced in the dream had become reality, after all. He wanted to shout out in a fit of uncertain frustration, but his anxiety was far greater for that.

The proverbial milk had been spilt already; the die had been cast, etc, etc. Regardless of what would happen next, he had to brave it.

Since he was already neck-deep in this now, Seol decided to see his situation in a positive light. He thought that, wouldn't it be fine to do something, anything, with that bravery he showed off back when he tried to drown himself?

Just as he made up his mind, the clock reached 10:30 PM. Seol looked around his vicinity, and saw no one.

Tting!

Almost at the same time, he heard a chime coming from the elevator. He saw the triangular green light with '1' coming up on the elevator panel. Someone was coming up.

Before he lost the chance, Seol hurriedly pulled out the paper bag containing 2 million Won. Then, while kneeling, shoved the bag inside the mail slot in the door.

As he finished doing that, a circular light appeared right above Seol's position and swallowed him up, before vanishing without a trace. This happened in the blink of an eye.

Shortly afterwards, the elevator doors opened and a lone woman stepped out. Yu Seon-Hwah seemed slightly exhausted as she unlocked the front door and entered her place, her face looking depressed.

She took an energy-less step forward, only to gently kick something.

"Mm?"

Her eyes opened wider after spotting a weighty paper bag by her feet. She checked what was inside – and proceeded to quickly look behind in stunned silence.

All she could find was the lonely darkness quietly settling down on the empty corridor of the apartment.



The cold air tickling his toes must've been the culprit for the chill the sleeping Seol felt. He absentmindedly searched for his blanket, but the only thing his wandering fingers could grasp was a pillow.

He hugged the pillow real tight but the chill remained. Unfortunately, now that his brain had woken up, it didn't want to go back to sleep. It let this fact known with a small but insistent migraine.

In the end, Seol opened his eyes.

Feeling somewhat lost, he took a look around. No matter how many times he looked, though – this place was still his rented room.

Surprised, Seol hurriedly looked at the back of his left hand. It was clean. He carefully studied it, but not a single indication of any Mark being there could be seen.

“Ha. Hahaha...”

A bitter chuckle escaped from his lips.

“It was all a dream?”

He chuckled hoarsely to himself before lying down flat on the floor.

“Right. But, of course. Why would a measly old me get to... D**n it! Are you trying to make fun of me or something...?”

Like a man who had lost his mind, he stared at the ceiling for a long while, before switching on the television.

–... The temperature was dropping below the freezing point before, but at the moment, Seoul's temperature is hovering around 2.4 Celsius. It's higher than same time yesterday...

The darkened screen gradually flickered into life and the clear voice of a weather-girl entered his ears. But rather than watching the TV, Seol grabbed his cigarette packet and lightly shook it. He pulled out one of the two remaining cigarettes and stuck it between his lips, before changing the channel.

– Sinyoung Pharmaceuticals has announced that they have developed a new medicine...

Seol's gaze chased away the faint blue smoke and landed on the TV's screen.

The news channels were carrying the stories of new medications entering the market as their top headline for the past few days. Since Seol's own *dream* had been so vivid, he naturally ended up paying attention to the news piece.

– Located in the city of Seoul, the Sinyoung Pharmaceuticals is a medical research firm established four years ago for the purpose of developing new medicines. More expectations are being placed on them as they have shown concrete results today as well...

The image on the screen changed, and a man wearing an unkempt white lab gown showed up.

–... It possesses the characteristics of antioxidants that suppress the origin of the inflammation, as well as boosting the level of testosterone in the blood...

Maybe it was because of the cigarette smoke, Seol's dizziness seemed to intensify. He crawled towards the nearest window, reached out, and opened it wide. He immediately felt a bit better when the cold wind hit him in the face.

He leaned against the wall, before sliding down to a squat in a quiet, absentminded daze. He stared at the TV spitting out unimportant and indecipherable babble and almost out of habit, reached down to his pocket.

“!!!”

He flinched. His hand stopped. He felt as if every single cell in his left hand had woken

up back to life.

Slowly, ever so slowly...

Very slowly, he pulled out the object caught between his fingers. A familiar paper envelope revealed itself.

It was the Invitation letter.

Seol abruptly raised his head as soon as his phone began vibrating.

[The message from the Guide has arrived. We recommend that all the Contracted & Invited guests confirm the message immediately.]

Seol instinctively stood up after that robotic announcement hit his eardrums. When he hurriedly looked outside his window, his jaw became slack.

“What the...?”

Chapter 7

The Golden Stamp (2)

He saw the desolate streets.

Something seemed a bit inadequate in that description of the scenery laid out before him, though. For one, he couldn't spot a single person nor a moving vehicle outside.

What he saw was a dreary and bleak cityscape with nary a moving ant in sight. Even the sky above was the shade of dull grey.

'Wasn't a dream, but all real?!

Realising this, Seol nearly flew towards the smartphone and picked it up. He realised that it wasn't even his.

[Identity confirmed. The registration of the user has been completed.]

A robotic voice came from the device and the screen lit up next. He hurriedly tapped on the letter icon blinking on the corner, and texts appeared on the screen.

[Sender: the Guide]

[1: Arrive at the Nakwon High school's assembly hall before the time runs out.] [2: Remaining time: 00:09:45]

The contents were simple, but how considerate of them, there was an image attached to the message as well. It turned out to be a map. He checked, and found that his current location wasn't too far from his new destination.

Seol slapped his own cheeks, hard. Of course, his face stung quite a lot. He was trying to see if he could wake up with that, but also wanted to use the pain to reaffirm that this was indeed happening for real, as well.

“...Ouch.”

He rubbed his aching cheeks and cautiously pushed the front door open to leave.



While he walked, an unexplainable tension continued to rear its ugly head every now and then. Besides the loneliness born out of feeling like the last man on earth, it felt like he was walking around while the world around him had been frozen in time.

Finding his way around wasn't difficult at all. He simply followed the direction indicated on the map, and needed only two minutes to arrive at the destination.

The eye-catching plaque shouting out 'Nakwon High' hung next to the wide-open front gates of the school. (TL: "Nakwon" = *paradise in Korean*)

'What an ironic name.' (Seol)

"That name stinks."

An unexpected voice surprised Seol, and he quickly looked to his side. He didn't even know when she had arrived, but there was a girl with a hoodie standing there.

Their eyes met. Her flawless pale skin indicated her young age, but her arched up brows seemed to indicate her rather fierce personality.

Just as Seol got this impression of uncaring disinterest from her expressionless face, she brushed past him. Both of her hands were shoved deep within the pockets as she quickly stepped past the open gates. She seemed to be in a hurry for some reason.

'Anyways. The white roof, right?' (Seol)

The attached map said this was the location, but that didn't mean this very spot was the meeting point. Seol looked around and found the assembly hall over yonder. He approached it, and could hear the murmurs of people coming from within.

Seol climbed up the steps, only to come to an abrupt halt. An unexpected person was standing by the entrance to the hall, that was why.

To be more specific, a blonde woman wearing a full-on French maid outfit was graciously beckoning Seol over. It was as if she was saying, *please, over here, welcome, sir...*

“Uhm... Am I supposed to enter through here?” (Seol)

Nod, nod.

The blonde woman silently nodded her head and smiled brightly. But, when Seol tried to walk past her, she trotted to his front and blocked his path. She quietly stared at him and suddenly reached her hand out.

“?”

Seol tilted his head in confusion. Then, the blonde woman’s lips opened without letting out a sound. She used the index fingers and thumbs of her hands to form a rectangle and then, reached out to him again. It was as if she was telling him to hand *it* over. Unfortunately, Seol could only stand there, his eyes blinking in further confusion.

“What is it that you want from me?” (Seol)

As if Seol was making her frustrated, the blonde maid narrowed her eyes in an elegant manner. Her cheeks even puffed up, and her lower lip stuck out in a slight pout, too. This only caused Seol to fall further into the state of confusion.

“She wants your Invitation letter! Or your Contract papers!”

As he stood there wondering what to do, someone shouted out from the inside the hall. Seol took a look, and found a guy sitting on a chair inside the assembly hall, giggling out while spectating what was happening out here. Finally going ‘Oh!’, Seol pulled his Invitation letter out from the pocket and handed it over.

“*Hng.*” (the maid)

The woman received the letter and opened it while carrying a prim expression. While Seol stood next to her wondering whether that *hng* was her trying to say something

or simply was her short snort, the maid's expression gradually froze up.

She looked at the Invitation letter.

Then, she looked back at Seol.

Her wide open eyes slowly closed shut. She carefully folded the Invitation letter back, gathered both of her hands in front of her chest, and slowly lowered herself in a deep bow. It was an elegant yet dignified greeting.

Suddenly, the entire assembly hall fell into silence. The attentions of everyone who had arrived here before Seol focused on the newest arrival. Completely disregarding all those stares, the blonde maid pointed towards the left side of the hall and guided the flustered and even more confused Seol there.

The maid guided him towards an empty chair, and bowed politely once more, before smoothly retreating away as if she was riding on skates while never turning her back to him. She still didn't say a single word, yet her attitude towards him had definitely changed.

"What's the matter with her? Why is she acting like that all of a sudden?"

"I wonder. She didn't do that when I showed up."

The eyes of two particular men landed on the new arrival, Seol. But all he could feel at that moment was the sense of being confused and flustered.

Even though he had come here in that super-vivid dream, in reality, this was his actual first time. And certain things were progressing rather differently compared to the dream, too.

So, of course he was flustered. That was why he decided to divert his attention and try to suss out his new environment, instead.

The number of people gathered in the assembly hall was well over 30. What's especially noticeable was that, they were divided into left and right sides, as if to separate the two.

The left side with Seol in it only had eight people in total – six males and two females. They were furnished with chairs to sit on, and the general atmosphere was relaxed

and easy going.

On the contrary, the right side had almost thirty people, but they were either sitting on the floor or standing up. And he could see that they were anxious, too.

“It must be fate, meeting in a place like this, so why don’t we introduce ourselves to each other?”

A man of the left group suddenly spoke up, as if he found all this waiting around thing quite boring. He was the one giggling at Seol just now.

His loud and manly voice managed to attract the attention of everyone present. The front part of his hair was slicked back to reveal his equally manly face. A faint smile formed on his lips as if he enjoyed being the centre of attention.

“Nice to meet you all. Name’s Kahng Seok. And these two guys over here... Hey, guys. Introduce yourselves.”

“I’m Lee Hyung-Sik.”

“Jeong Min-Woo.”

It was unclear if they were friends before coming here, or became friends after arriving. Two men briefly introduced themselves. Seol inwardly assigned nicknames to both of them, since their physical traits were rather distinct. The former was the ‘Skinny’, and the latter, the ‘Fatty’. As for the first guy to speak up, he was assigned the nickname, the ‘Rock’.

“What’s your name?” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok’s next target was the woman wearing the hoodie, the one Seol ran into at the school’s gate.

She seemed to be completely uninterested. It was as if she wasn’t even listening to what was being said around her surroundings, only immersing herself on the phone’s screen. In other words, she was ignoring the question. Kahng Seok scratched his head and awkwardly smiled.

“She must be one of those *chic modern women*. Without a doubt.” (Lee Hyung-Sik)

Lee Hyung-Sik chimed in for a bit, there.

“It’s getting kinda embarrassing here... Isn’t there anyone willing to save me?” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok’s gaze landed on the remaining woman of the group. She tightly squeezed the hand of a teen boy sticking close to her and awkwardly smiled.

“Oh... my name is Yi Surl-Ah.”

“So, it’s Miss Surl-Ah, then. And the gentleman next to you is?” (Kahng Seok)

“It’s my little brother, Yi Sung-Jin.” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Upon hearing the words little brother, Kahng Seok seemed to get more interested.

“You two are blood siblings?” (Kahng Seok)

“Yes, we are.” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“May I ask how old you are? I mean, you two seem a bit too young to be here and all. Oh, my apologies if I invaded your privacy.” (Kahng Seok)

“Oh, no. It’s fine. I’m eighteen and Sung-Jin is two years younger than me.” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“Wow.”

Kahng Seok let out a surprised gasp as if he found this fact quite surprising. He quickly formed a beaming smile and offered his hand.

“Oh, that means I can drop the formal speech. I’m twenty nine this year. Since we all have received Invitation letters, let’s get along well. Think of me as a reliable uncle.” (Kahng Seok)

“Oh, uhm... Thank you very much.” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-Ah shyly shook his hand. Her graceful appearance and that shyness reminded Seol of a freshly picked beautiful flower, and he couldn’t take his eyes off her for a moment or two. Even Kahng Seok didn’t let go of her hand for a while.

The remaining two were Seol, as well as a man wearing a green cap and a pair of sunglasses.

The cap-wearing man was busy moving his lips up and down as if he was chewing on a gum, while listening to music via earphones stuck to his ears. His legs also moved along to the beat, it seemed, lending to an overall impression of him being a bit of restless busybody. He also didn't introduce himself as if such things didn't interest him.

Seol quietly gathered his focus and stared at Kahng Seok. The green light appeared on him for a brief moment, before dissipating.

The odds of nothing good happening by mixing up with him was high enough. In the end, Seol turned his head away.

He got pretty flustered when entering the assembly hall, but as time passed, he had gradually calmed down.

The Seol of the dream was standing on the right side of the hall, which meant that things were different now. Just what was that golden stamp and why did it warrant such a different treatment? He tried to go through the memories once more for answers, but he couldn't recall anything.

'I'll get to find out, eventually.' (Seol)

When he checked the phone for time, he saw the countdown tick from "00:00:01" to "00:00:00".

"It's time."

Suddenly, a voice came from the front of the hall. On the stage, a tuxedo-wearing man walked up to the fore in a dignified, disciplined manner. Everyone present was quite surprised, since there was no one there just a second ago.

The stylishly dressed man sported a clean and neat hairstyle, as well as a monocle over his eye. He raised a hand towards the blonde maid standing by the entrance.

"Is this everyone?"

The maid shook her head softly, pointed towards the group on the right side of the

hall, and then, raised four fingers up.

“Four people... Well, it’s fine. We can’t wait any longer, so just close the door and unleash *it*.”

When the blonde maid showed some sign of hesitation, the man who kind of resembled the head butler narrowed his eyes.

“I’m the Guide. It’s not very difficult to get here. Which means, those who can’t even adhere to the schedule, aren’t needed here.”

In the end, the maid obediently lowered her head and quietly closed the door shut. She then produced a smartphone and tapped away for a little while.

Meanwhile, the man on the stage clapped his hands twice to draw the attention towards himself.

“Welcome. I am called Han, tasked with guiding all of you this time around. You can call me ‘the Guide’.”

Han spoke up to here and beckoned the maid with his finger. She quickly ran to his side, while her blonde ponytail danced in the wind.

“First of all, the Contract documents, please. How many do we have? A total of twenty eight... Quite a lot, isn’t it? And we have eight Invitation letters this time?” (Han)

The Guide didn’t even take a look at the bundle of the Contracts and simply shoved them underneath his jacket. However, he still held the letters tightly in his hand.

The Guide played with his monocle.

“Ehh, firstly, let us confirm the identities of those present today. Although we have the Invitation letters here, it’s meaningless if we don’t personally confirm.”

The silence still remained inside the assembly hall. The Guide simply smirked.

“I’m sure that you’re curious about many things. But, let us follow the protocol, shall we? Everyone present here, please, think of bringing up your Status Windows, or simply yell Status in your minds. It’s fine to say it out loud, as well.” (Han)

'Status Windows? Status?' (Seol)

Just as Seol thought like this...

In the empty air right in front of his eyes, a sudden avalanche of texts came crashing down.

[Your Status Window]

[1. General Information]

Summoned date: March 16th, 2017.

Marking Grade: Gold

S*x/Age: Male/26

Height/Weight: 180.5 cm/80.6 kg

Current Condition: Good

Job: LV. 0 (Invited)

Nationality: Republic of Korea (Area 1)

Affiliation: N/A

Alias: N/A

[2. Personality]

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 – Medium

Stamina: Low – Low

Magic: Medium – High

Luck: Medium – Low

Remaining Ability points: 0

[4. Abilities.]

1. Innate abilities (2)
 - Future Vision (Grade Unknown)
 - ?? (Grade Unknown)
2. Job related abilities (0)
3. Other abilities (0)

[5. Level of Cognition]

- Will be available after the conclusion of the Tutorial event.

“Ohh...”

“W, what the hell is this?”

People began gasping out loudly in surprise everywhere. Seol was no exception. Although he had seen this tens, hundreds of times before in his dream, now that he was experiencing it personally, this did really feel quite a lot *different*.

“What is this ‘innate abilities’ thing? Hey, Hyung-Sik, what does yours say?” (Kahng Seok)

“Excuse me? Do you possess an Innate ability by any chance?” (Han)

The person who answered Kahng Seok wasn’t Hyung-Sik, but the Guide, Han. Kahng Seok didn’t expect his words to be overheard from so far, so he got flustered while he shook his head in denial.

“N, no, I don’t have one. I was just curious.” (Kahng Seok)

“Oh... But, of course. It’s only normal for you to not have an innate ability. That’s how it is with humans all the time. You don’t have to mind that section in the Windows.” (Han)

Han smiled brightly as he spoke.

“Well, then. Let’s stop being surprised, shall we? This time, please reveal the grades of your Markings. Just like before, just think about it or speak it out loud, and it will be done. Do not worry, I won’t be able to see anything besides what’s been revealed.”

(Han)

The assembly hall got a bit noisy. But, Seol was still intensely staring at his Status Window.

The Guide definitely said that it was normal to not have any Innate abilities. However... the Windows in front of Seol's eyes showed that he had them. Two, as a matter of fact.

'Future Vision? And what's with the question marks?' (Seol)

He suspected that the ability to see the green colour was somehow related to this development, but why was there a pair of question marks?

"Let's see... Since we don't have a lot of time remaining, I shall just directly move to the next step in the procedure. Miss Yi Surl-Ah, Mister Yi Sung-Jin, Mister Lee Hyung-Sik, Mister Jeong Min-Woo, and Mister Hyun Sahng-Min? You all have the bronze Marks, yes? Oh, indeed you do." (Han)

Five people out of the left side's eight, nodded their heads before staring at the Guide with somewhat befuddled eyes.

The Guide asked and answered his own question, then he threw five Invitation letters in the air. Suddenly, the letters shone brightly before transforming into five bronze-coloured bags that fell down to the ground. Just like a fancy magic trick.

"The bronze Marks will only receive one Random Box as per the regular bonus item rules. You could also have asked for the bonus of bringing along a helper, but I see that none of you have done so, regrettably."

The blonde maid picked the five bronze-coloured bags and handed them over to their respective owners. Meanwhile, the Guide unfolded two more Invitation letters. While reading the contents, he carried on.

"We advise you to immediately activate your bonus items right away. The Tutorial will begin soon, so it'd be a pity if you died without using them... Ohh?"

The Guide, Han's eyes always maintained a level of disinterest, but a small glint of surprise flickered in them now.

"Hoh. We have two silver Marks. I'm genuinely looking forward to guiding all of you.

Mister Kahng Seok? Miss Yun Seo-Rah?" (Han)

"Yes!" (Kahng-Seok)

Kahng Seok shouted out energetically. The hoodie-wearing girl, Yun Seo-Rah, simply nodded her head once.

"For the silver Marks, two regular Random Boxes, and special bonus items unique to the Invited, will be provided. Mister Kahng Seok won't receive the special bonus item, but there is one for Miss Yun Seo-Rah."

This time too, the Invitation letters became bags as they fell down to the floor. If there was one thing different, then the bags were silver-coloured rather than bronze.

The blonde maid moved around quite a lot, like a busy worker bee. Meanwhile, the eyes of the Guide landed on one man. And that was Seol, still stupidly staring at the empty air in front of his eyes.

"Please, reveal the grade of your Marking, sir." (Han)

Han's voice sounded low, but it contained an undeniable power. Seol was too preoccupied with the whole Innate abilities thing until then, but when the voice powerfully reverberated within his eardrums, he quickly snapped out of his daze and asked back.

"R, reveal my Marking's grade, is it?" (Seol)

"Yes. Oh, it's fine now, so... Hmm?!" (Han)

The Guide suddenly stopped his words and stared hard.

"What..."

His eyes grew very large as he stared at Seol, or to be more specific, at his revealed Marking's grade.

"It's gold?!" (Han)

Just in time, the blonde maid finished distributing the bags. She lightly trotted to the stage and gently poked the waist of the dumbstruck Guide with her elbow.

“Oh!” (Han)

Finally regaining his senses, Han lightly coughed and cleared his throat while lowering his gaze.

The remaining piece of paper in his hand – he became overtly cautious as he slowly unfolded the Invitation letter. He read the contents top to bottom without leaving anything out, and then, leaked out a long sigh.

“We have a... very important guest this time.” (Han)

His voice was quiet. But, still – the noisy clamour came to a dead stop and dozens and dozens of eyes focused on one person. Seol could actively feel his cheeks reddening right about now.

“I’d like to apologise. It is my first time guiding a gold Mark, after all... No, even in history, there has been only one prior event like today’s. I’ve only heard about it until now.” (Han)

Seol wondered if this gold Marking thing was such a shocking matter. Han’s words didn’t even sound like an excuse, just some babblings of a stunned man, instead.

When the blonde maid giggled softly, Han cleared his throat again.

“Alright, let’s carry on, shall we?” (Han)

He lightly threw Seol’s Invitation letter. The paper exploded into a brilliant shower of light before transforming into a single bag.

And there were six things written on the tag of the golden bag.

Three regular bonus items, plus three special bonus items unique to the Invited – quite unlike any other Invitation letters; Kim Hahn-Nah made sure to pack hers to the brim, it seemed.

“For the gold Marking... Oh.” (Han)

Han’s jaw dropped after he read the list of bonus items.

Chapter 8

The Awakening (1)

The Guide remained shocked for a considerable amount of time, being unable to complete his sentence. Then, his lips began twitching in an ugly manner, before he hurriedly covered up his monocle with his hand. Seol still got to see the lens emit some sort of light before it was covered, though.

“What the f*ck. The one who invited that man, are you watching right now?” (Han)

The Guide growled quite menacingly.

“What is the meaning of this? Why do you even require the presence of a Guide, if you plan on doing things this way?” (Han)

It seemed that Han was really ticked off.

“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.....?!” (Han)

Suddenly, the light from the lens vanished. The Guide issued a short but sharp groan, and began chewing his lips.

Completely and utterly disregarding Han, the blonde maid simply picked up the golden bag and gracefully brought it to Seol. Han didn't try to interfere, but his complexion was visibly complicated.

Just what was in this bag, then? Seol couldn't help but become quite curious now. Even the taciturn Yun Seo-Rah craned her neck slightly to sneak a better look.

Seol confirmed that there were six items listed on the tag attached to the bag.

- Necessary Box, x3
- Survival Points, 5,000 points
- Mark of Survival, x1

– Diary of an unknown student, x1

The first thing to attract Seol's gaze was the so-called 'Necessary Box'. He heard that both the bronze and silver Marks got Random Boxes. His had a different name.

"Please, open and apply your bonuses here." (Han)

Unlike before, Han's voice seemed to possess far more urgency than before. Since he was planning to do that anyways, Seol slowly unlocked and opened the bag.

[5000 Survival Points has been accredited to you.]

[You have secured (1) Mark of Survival.]

[The diary of an unknown student is currently being updated.]

The smartphone buzzed and vibrated in his pocket, but Seol couldn't feel it. Why? Because, his attention had been stolen away by the three boxes with all sorts of intricate symbols and runes covering them, neatly tucked to the bottom of the bag.

"There should be three boxes inside the bag. You can just open them. Nothing complicated to worry about." (Han)

Han tried to add some explanations in a friendly manner, but he failed to hide his eagerness to see what were inside those boxes.

"Eii, dayum. All this suspense is really killing me here. Hey, excuse me? Is it fine if we open the box together?" (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok, who had been staring at Seol's bag with barely-disguised greed, stood half way up from his chair. It was right then.

"Sit back down." (Han)

A powerful but still well-mannered voice slammed into Kahng Seok's eardrums.

"I mean, I was just..." (Kahng Seok)

“I told you to sit back down.” (Han)

Han’s voice sounded incredibly cold. Kahng Seok nervously swallowed his saliva and parked his b**t back down on the chair.

The Guide, Han, snorted out once, and then began fiddling with his monocle.

“...His bonuses are reserved only for that person. They are things you, Mister Kahng Seok, should neither see nor even desire.” (Han)

Han then shifted his gaze back to Seol.

The assembly hall fell into the grips of the deathly silence yet again. Not even the sounds of breathing could be heard now.

As for Seol...

Each of the boxes were no bigger than an adult’s clenched fist. Pressured by the silent stares, Seol reached inside, and carefully opened the first box.

[The Necessary Box (x1) has been opened!]

[Scanning for the most ‘needed item’ during the current situation... Please wait.]

[The awakening of the Innate ability, “??”, has been initiated.]

When Seol blinked his eyes once, new messages began popping up one after the other.

[Your Innate ability, Future Vision, is responding to the awakening of the new ability!]

[The Innate ability, “??”, has evolved into “Nine Eyes”.]

[The central direction (1) of your Innate ability – Nine Eyes, the Green colour: General Observation, has been fully unlocked.]

[Please confirm through your Status Window.]

‘Green colour? General Observation?’

Hearing the announcement that he should check the Status Window, Seol raised his head. Which led him to peek at the top of Yun Seo-Rah’s craning head.

[Yun Seo-Rah's Status Window]

[1. General Information]

Summoned date: March 16th, 2017

Marking Grade: Silver

S*x/Age: Female/20

Height/Weight: 166.2 cm/53.4 kg

Current Condition: Good

Job: LV. 0 (Invited)

Nationality: Republic of Korea (Area 1)

Affiliation: N/A

Alias: N/A

[2. Personality]

1. Temperament:

- Cool headed. (Her actions and thoughts are not swayed by emotions and is always calm.)
- Indifferent. (She's not easily interested in anything particular.)

2. Aptitude:

- Brilliant. (Possesses a smart brain as well as good overall talents)
- Highly observant. (Will carefully analyse and study items and events all around her.)

She must've sensed his gaze – Yun Seo-Rah raised her head then, and Seol almost reflexively cried out. He quickly averted his gaze, but her Status Window didn't disappear from his sight. It wasn't just her general information and her personality, either – her physical level, talents, and even her consciencial awareness were laid bare.

Not knowing what happened, Yun Seo-Rah could only tilt her head.

From Seol's perspective, this whole thing felt absurd. Didn't Han say that one's Status Window couldn't be observed by others without permission from the person herself?

[Yi Surl-Ah's Status Window]

[1. General Information]

Summoned date: March 16th, 2017

Marking grade: Bronze

S*x/Age: Female/18

Height/Weight: 160.6 cm/49.8 kg.

Current Condition: Good

Job: LV. 0 (Invited)

Nationality: Republic of Korea (Area 1)

Affiliation: N/A

Alias: N/A

[2. Personality]

1. Temperament:

- Virtuous (Possesses a fine, gentle, and benevolent personality.)
- Deeply caring. (Possesses deep love and care.)
- Dependent. (Unconsciously seeks someone to depend on.)

2. Aptitude:

- A jack-of-all-trades. (Good at various activities.)
- High concentration. (Can focus 100% of her concentration while performing an action.)

When Seol sneaked a glance at Yi Surl-Ah to make sure, he also got to see her Status Window, as well. Now feeling somewhat befuddled, Seol was about to raise his hand when he realised his mistake and quickly lowered it.

“Yes? Are you curious about something, sir?” (Han)

However, the Guide didn't miss Seol's actions.

“Have you opened your boxes?” (Han)

“...Yes, I have.” (Seol)

Seol's throat suddenly dried up. He couldn't be sure why, but he thought that not

saying anything right now was for the best. So, he decided to change the topic slightly.

“I just received a message to confirm with my Status Windows, so...” (Seol)

“Oh, I see. Your Status Windows, is it...” (Han)

Han’s anxious expression seemed to brighten up in an instant.

“So, what was updated? Your attributes? Or maybe, abilities?” (Han)

When Seol wordlessly stared at Han, the Guide awkwardly laughed. Seeing that reaction, it wasn’t all that difficult for Han to figure it out.

“Oh, my. Please, excuse my thoughtless behaviour. You do not have to worry. As long as you don’t permit it, not only me, but no one else alive in this world can take a peek at your Status Windows.”

The Guide was inwardly breathing a sigh of relief while saying this. A Necessary Box usually gave out something outrageous to those who were privileged enough to open them, after all. Not only personal attributes, abilities, but also physical statuses as well, all of them were fair game. So, to hear that Seol only got to hear his Status had been upgraded, this wasn’t much to fret over.

Of course, this line of thought was only possible because Han had no idea just what kind of an ability had awakened inside Seol at this very moment.

When the probing eyes of the Guide had left him, Seol hurriedly opened the remaining boxes – both of them at the same time.

[Your Innate ability, Nine Eyes, is evolving further.]

[The left directions (3) of the Innate ability ‘Nine Eyes’ has been unlocked: Yellow – ‘Attention Required’, Vermillion – ‘Do Not Approach’, and Crimson – ‘Immediate Retreat Recommended’.]

[You have acquired the ‘Paper Talisman’.]

Seol couldn’t see this talisman at the moment. Because, he was far too occupied to notice it. Seol was under the belief that he could only see green until now, so the mental shock he received was similar to someone violently hitting him on the back of his head.

...You have beautiful eyes...

...Yes, they are beautiful. In the seven shades of a rainbow...

Seol inexplicably remembered something from his distant past, something he had almost forgotten. The whispers of a woman he couldn't even remember the face of, brushed past his brain cells like a lightning.

'H, hold up. Red, orange, yellow, green..... ' (Seol)

"Excuse me."

While Seol was in the midst of his stormy thoughts, someone from the right side of the assembly hall piped up with a voice smaller than a mosquito buzzing around.

Han was still rubbing his chest while feeling rather relieved with himself. His eyes immediately shifted towards the group of the Contracted. A young woman sporting a bob-cut hair was dusting her b**t while standing up.

"Uhm, is it, possibly..."

"What is it? We're just about ready to begin, too." (Han)

His attitude was markedly different from when interacting with the Invited. Hearing his voice full of annoyance akin to chasing away a pesky bug, a certain sense of dissatisfaction formed on the woman's face.

"You are not giving us anything?"

"?"

"You know, like those bags those people just got."

The Guide let off a cynical chuckle, and then replied immediately.

"Yes. You don't get anything." (Han)

“B, but why not?”

“Those bonus items are reserved for the Invited only.” (Han)

It was a simple and articulate answer, but still, the woman’s expression became a deep frown.

“Why is there a difference?”

“It’s simple.” (Han)

The Guide smiled softly and his right hand pointed towards his right – the left side of the hall.

“These guests have been invited here after going through a strict evaluation.” (Han)

Next, Han’s left index finger pointed to his left, the right side of the hall, in a somewhat accusatory manner.

“And you people got dragged here because of the Contracts.” (Han)

“No, that’s not what I meant!”

“Besides, didn’t you, Miss Shin Sahng-Ah, receive ample compensation back in *reality*? Hmm?” (Han)

With the timely arrival of that question, the woman with bob-cut hair, Shin Sahng-Ah, became utterly lost for words. She sat back down with a reddened face, but that wasn’t the end.

“Really? Is that all you gonna say?”

A man from the group of the Contracted stood up in indignation. Seeing how fierce his eyes were, not to mention his rather well-developed physique, he looked like someone who knew how to get down and dirty if it needed to be.

“And what else do you want now?” (Han)

Finally, a look of irritation formed on Han’s face.

“Ah? Can’t you provide a proper explanation on what this bullsh*t is, Contract or whatever? You told us to gather around here, yet what the hell do you think you’re doing?”

A few people here and there began to quietly agree with the nameless man.

Such a complaint was bound to occur sooner or later. After all, ever since he had appeared, the so-called Guide was paying attention only to the left side of the hall, where the Invited were.

They were already feeling unsure and anxious, yet now, after being treated like a bunch of invisible fish out of water, it was not very strange to see them spit out their dissatisfaction in the open. Unfortunately for them, this wasn’t the place to voice their problems, neither was Han the correct person to complain to.

“You know what, stop wasting time and get us some chairs, too. My legs are aching from all that standing around.”

“That’s right! Now that I see, you look like still a young man, so, how can you even think that it’s good to discriminate people like this?”

When more and more voices began chiming in, some amount of confidence and energy began filling up the expression of the nameless man. He glared at the Guide, waiting for a response.

As for Han, he was simply smirking back at them.

“...Sometimes, we get people like you. Those who don’t know their place, those who only know how to bark and nothing else.” (Han)

“What did you say?”

“Well, I do understand you. I don’t know which deplorable b*stard reeled you in, but you must’ve jumped in first without even waiting to listen to an explanation – after being blinded by money and the promised reward.” (Han)

The nameless man flinched.

“Whatever the case may be, you have already signed the Contract, haven’t you? As long as you are here, you don’t have a choice but to follow my guidance. If you want to

complain, then you should meet up with the person you signed the Contract with later on and do so.” (Han)

“So, what you’re saying is, I should jump when I’m ordered to, is that right?”

“Pretty much, correct.” (Han)

“We don’t deserve to know, so we better shut up and do as told?”

“Again, correct deduction. Very encouraging.” (Han)

“*Aigoo*~~. What should we do, then? Because I don’t feel like doing that.”

“Well, if you feel that way.” (Han)

Seeing the nameless man’s rebellious attitude, Han simply pointed at the lone exit of the assembly hall with his index finger.

“You can simply leave.” (Han)

“What the, you stinking son of a b*tch. You think I won’t leave?”

The nameless man venomously shot back and turned to address the group, shouting out loudly at them.

“He’s telling us to leave, so let’s leave, then! Tell them to do whatever the hell they want and let’s go!”

Then, three or four began hesitantly standing up. Ultimately, though, the number of those preparing to move was small.

“What are you all doing? I’m saying, we should leave, now!”

Even after the nameless man urged the crowd, no one else budged. And when the majority didn’t move, even those who did stand up began sitting back down. Sure, there was the awkward atmosphere to consider, but also, it wasn’t as if every Contracted here didn’t receive an explanation or two before coming here.

“Hah, screw this. What a bunch of dumb cowards.”

The nameless man muttered a few choice words, and then, angrily stomped his way towards the exit. The blonde maid with her quick wits was already there; she carefully creaked the door open. The man turned around, spat on the floor of the assembly hall, and made his exit.

“Is there anyone else who wishes to leave?” (Han)

The Guide asked, but no one else made a move. The maid silently closed the door and locked it.

Han didn't say anything else. He simply stared at the door with an expression of someone finding it all rather amusing. As this strange silence continued, the crowd alternated their gazes between the exit and the Guide for a while.

And so... a minute went by like that. And just as the second minute was about to tick by...

They all could hear the hurried and scared running steps approaching the door. And then...

The door handle was desperately yanked at from the outside.

“Open the door!! Open the door!!!!!”

Then, there was heavy pounding on the door.....

*“Y, you f*cking sons of b*tches!!!! Open!! Please!! Pleeeeeaaase!!! Ah, aaaaaahhhh!!!”*

The noises from the outside got suddenly cut off – both the screams of that nameless man, the pounding on the door...

“Well, I knew that would happen. Alright, in any case. Everyone, let's all get started. The time's already this late and all.” (Han)

The Guide smiled brightly and tapped an icon on his smartphone.

[You have received a new message from the Guide.]

[The Tutorial's first mission, 'Escape from the Assembly Hall', will now commence!]

[The diary of an unknown student has been updated.]

"I pray for an enjoyable school life for all of you." (Han)

Han placed his right hand across his chest and politely bowed. And then...

"Everyone, I wish you all, a good fortune." (Han)

...He vanished into the thin air, just like when he made his first appearance. Not just him, but the blonde maid, as well.

Now left seemingly abandoned, people began standing up in haste, one by one.

And just as someone was about to shout out...

KWAHNG!!

An impact noise on a different scale from the previous pounding rocked the exit door, instantly silencing the uproar before it could even start.

One of the door's hinges couldn't endure the impact and broke off from the wall, hitting the ground with a sharp metallic clang. The door had been securely locked up, yet it was forced open just a crack before it was closed shut again.

The silence that settled within this confusion was deafening.

None of them knew what to do next. Only the instinctive reaction of the mouths silently bobbing up and down continued.

"....."

Of course, Seol too didn't remain still as this confusion unfolded. He picked up the empty golden bag, slung it over his shoulder, and got up from his chair. He didn't forget to keep his eyes on the door, however.

Because, the door was no longer shining in green, but in the colour of orange.

Chapter 9

The Awakening (2)

[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]

KWAHNG!!

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.

KWAHNG, KWAHNG!!

Even seeing with naked eyes, it was difficult to believe that it 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 Surl-Ah picking up her chair and running towards the door signaled the beginning; dozen bodies all rushed towards there, too.

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 certain amount of

anger, and the resulting impact force 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 door stop, the crowd began sighing out in genuine relief.

“Ha-ah...”

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

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

“Hey, there. Even though you're so young, you are very quick witted, indeed.”

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 Surl-Ah's quick actions, the door might have broken down by now.

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

“No, it wasn't like that...” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“I froze up from the fear, myself. But boy, was I shocked or what, watching you react like that. When I realised, 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 Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-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 to a T. Also, the fact that she was an Invited, as well as the first person to respond, were enough for the group to develop a favourable 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 Surl-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 had become 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 had forgotten about the existence outside the walls.

...We all got to learn that, that ‘thing’ was not a simple monster or a zombie soon enough, though.

[#Assembly Hall (an excerpt from the diary of an unknown student, page 3)]

It was pandemonium. No other words could describe it.

The door we had desperately blocked had become useless.

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

'A hole?'

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

"Wowsers. It's just the beginning, yet they aren't messing around. Look at the goosebumps on my arms!" (Kahng Seok)

Kahng 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 should we do next..." (Kahng Seok)

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." (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok only took his lackeys, Lee Hyung-Sik and Jeong Min-Woo, 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 Surl-Ah earlier – hurriedly stepped in front of them.

"E, excuse me."

“Hey, Hyung-Sik, check out the back of the stage. And Min-Woo, you should...” (Kahng Seok)

“Excuse me, young man!”

“...What, me?” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng 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 Kahng Seok did that deliberately.

“What are you all trying to do?”

“Uh... Searching around the assembly hall?” (Kahng Seok)

“Around the assembly hall?”

“Yeah. Like those guys.” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok pointed towards the stage, where Yun Seo-Rah and the man named Hyun Sahng-Min – 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.” (Kahng Seok)

“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?”

Kahng Seok frowned slightly.

“Why are you... Do what you want, mister. It’s not like I’m the boss here or anything.”
(Kahng Seok)

“That’s true, 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?” (Kahng Seok)

The tone of Kahng 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 is 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.” (Kahng Seok)

“What do you mean, annoying?”

“Whatever. You take care of your own business, okay? Us three, we will go on our way.”
(Kahng Seok)

Kahng 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 Kahng Seok didn’t bother and kept on walking away.

“What a petty b*stard.”

Kahng 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 Sahng-Ah.

“What did you call me?” (Kahng Seok)

“You’re a selfish b*stard. You only care about your own neck.” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“What the hell... Hey, you’re wrong about that, though? I care about these two fellas too, you know?” (Kahng Seok)

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

“Oww, man. Look at how she glares! You might kill someone with such eyes, lady.” (Lee Hyung-Sik)

“Hey, isn’t she that dumb woman who threw a tantrum just now? You know, asking for a bag of her own and sh*t.” (Jeong Min-Woo)

Lee Hyung-Sik and Jeong Min-Woo 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’? *(TL note at the end)*

“Can’t you see these people over here? There are women and children here!” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“I can see just fine. I’ve got good eyes, you know.” (Kahng Seok)

Shin Sahng-Ah shouted at him in anger, but Kahng Seok didn’t even blink an eye.

“And, and you three... just want to survive all by yourselves only?” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“What do you expected us to do, when we’re also in a hurry?” (Kahng Seok)

“That’s why we said we’ll help, didn’t we?!” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“My good lord. 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.” (Kahng Seok)

“Useless baggage?!” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“Yep. You are nothing more than baggage. Even a blind fool can see that you’re trying to leech off us. So, shoo, shoo. Go away.” (Kahng Seok)

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

“You three... are you even human beings?” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“Oh? In that case? Maybe you’re all parasites, then?” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok sarcastically retorted right until the end. Shin Sahng-Ah couldn’t hold her fury anymore and stood right up, getting ready to slap him. Kahng 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 Surl-Ah.

“Please, both of you, stop!” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Shin Sahng-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, Kahng 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?” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“Working together, my a*s.” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok shot back with a shout.

“Us three, we go way back. Even before we got here, you know? That’s why, we came here with a plan of our own.” (Kahng Seok)

“But!” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“But, but, but. Kiss my b**t, instead. Hey, you’re also an Invited, so you should’ve realised it by now, too.” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok smirked and offered his hand to Yi Surl-Ah.

“Let’s stop bickering over this, okay? Surl-Ah, why don’t you join up with us? Your brother’s Sung-Jin, right? I’ll take him under my wings, too.” (Kahng Seok)

“...Why are you willing to let us tag along with your group?” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“That’s obvious, isn’t it? Unlike them, you two are going to be *very* helpful for us.”
(Kahng Seok)

“You’re a very callous person, aren’t you?” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-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...” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Kahng Seok shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. And then, raised his hand up high.

“Hey, man! What about you?” (Kahng Seok)

‘You’ being, a certain youth standing there minding his own business a short distance away from them.

It was 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.” (Kahng Seok)

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!” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Even Yi Surl-Ah pleaded with him.

“Please, help these people! Don’t abandon them, please!” (Yi Surl-Ah)

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, Kahng Seok and on the other, Yi Surl-Ah.

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

One side talked 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 the cacophony of colours.

‘What the...?’ (Seol)

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 colours of blocked-up exit had changed from orange to green; instead, it was Kahng Seok who was shining in orange now. There was no colour shining from Yi Surl-Ah at the same time.

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

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

‘...Recommended to make a hasty retreat, wasn’t it?’ (Seol)

...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. And 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 went 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.

This 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 Surl-Ah, proceeding to drag her down the newly-created hole.

“KKYAHCK!!” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Her 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 Sung-Jin)

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

“Heeeeelp!!” (Yi Sung-Jin)

That cry sobered up everyone right away, and the crowd rushed in to grab hold of Yi Sung-Jin, as he was also 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 Surl-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 Surl-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.

SFX for a loud, terrified scream of a woman

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

Splash!

And from the hole, crimson 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 to everywhere.

The crimson blood rained down like a small fountain.

“Noona!! Noonaaaa!!” (Yi Sung-Jin)

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 all 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 b**t. 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.

And then...

“Aaa.....”

He saw a 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 the half of that large head.

“Ah, ah, ahhhhaaaack!!”

The man couldn’t hold back it 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 to everywhere.

‘...My, my thoughts are... ’ (Seol)

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

‘Why... ’ (Seol)

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... ’ (Seol)

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

‘Why... ’ (Seol)

How many would die here today? The footing was already slippery from the blood. It was also sticky, too.

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?’ (Seol)

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 a second hand of a clock, and found a single man standing near the exit of the hall. It ran there on all fours.

Kheehick?

Seeing that the man not 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 odour 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 desire to kill...

“.....”

A relaxed smile broke out on Seol's lips.

Keeeick!

The monster hurriedly retracted its neck.

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

To confront it, or to show it his back; 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 have 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 eyes of Seol opened up wide.

Chapter 10

The Large Group of Humans (1)

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

Kkeeeick!

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 like it was very confused right about now, as if it couldn't quite figure out why it was running away like this.

Growl...

When the monster accepted the fact that it was getting suppressed by Seol's aura, 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.

Ttuk.

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 on the pool of blood. Eventually, the hole that 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 stepped into it.

[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’ve overused his powers a bit, since 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 sides. 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 colourful banner proclaiming “Go, anywhere!”

The room beyond was small and intimate, only about three or four *pyungs* wide. Checking the posters hanging on the walls, it seemed that this room belonged to a travel club. (TL: 1 *pyung* = 3.3 square metres)

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 that order. The smell of

blood 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 shivering in fear.

However, all of this only lasted for a short moment. When he slowly gathered his breaths, the shivering and 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, instead?

It all felt like he was experiencing the *Zhuangzi's* 'the Butterfly Dream' right now.

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

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

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

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

The newly-unlocked colours were yellow, vermillion, and crimson. Just as important, there were other colours yet to be unlocked.

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

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

[Mister Kahng Seok, Mister Lee Hyung-Sik, and Mister Jeong Min-Woo 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 of an unknown student carefully, before discovering that there was a file attached to it as well. Things were quite hectic not too long ago, so he must’ve missed it. When he clicked on the file and opened it, Seol’s eyes became wide 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 changed to red colour, 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 green hue before the colour vanished completely.

"...He's not in here, either?"

"Who's there?" (Seol)

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

"Whew, 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." (Seol)

The door slowly creaked open.

"Thank you! I was actually worried just now that you'd tell me to scam or something."

The man entering the club room while speaking in a jovial tone was one of the eight Invited – he 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. Hate those weird flavours, man.”

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

The man slowly opened his mouth.

“Should we introduce each other? Name’s Hyun Sahng-Min.”

“...It’s Seol.”

“Seol? Kinda girly name, don’t you think? Is it a single syllable name?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“How did you find me?” (Seol)

Seol changed the topic. Hyun Sahng-Min 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.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“You remained in the hall, too?” (Seol)

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

Seol nodded his head silently. Seeing this reply, Hyun Sahng-Min simply scratched his head. He then quickly continued on with his explanations.

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 to everywhere. Some headed off towards the front gate of the school, but the majority followed Kahng 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 Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min took a look at Seol for a short while, and then carried on.

“But, no matter what we did, kicking, pushing, shoving... Whatever the f*ck we did, the door didn’t budge. And we were getting all d**n anxious and everything. And to make matters worse, the monster showed up, too. I’m telling you, it was no d**n joke back then.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“So, what happened?” (Seol)

“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 a long way around and came back to the assembly hall.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min lowered his sunglasses and smirked slightly.

“Since it attacked there once already, I figured it wouldn’t show up there again.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“And you happened to see me, and then decided to follow me.” (Seol)

“Yep. Never in my wildest imaginations 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.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“Why?” (Seol)

“What the? You asking cuz you don’t know?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min 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?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“.....”

“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.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

When Seol remained silent, Hyun Sahng-Min became more anxious than before.

“Alright, let me say this out loud. Me, I can endure unfairness, but I can definitely not stand losing out, man.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Seol stared back somewhat confused by this statement. Hyun Sahng-Min 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.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“A vertical relationship?” (Seol)

“That’s right, man. You let me tag along, then I’m gonna carry out your orders, man. And yeah, I’m willing to take on some amount of danger for you if you ask me to.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min’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 utilise 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 golden Mark. There was also the possibility that Hyun Sahng-Min had figured something out back in the assembly hall, too.

However, Hyun Sahng-Min wasn’t a selfless good Samaritan. Obviously, he would want something in return.

“What do you want in return?” (Seol)

“Well, lots of things, but... For now, surviving and making my way to the Paradise. That should suffice.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Seol studied Hyun Sahng-Min 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.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

He spoke up to here, and slowly offered his hand.

[Hyun Sahng-Min's Status]

[1. General Information]

Summoned date: March 16th, 2017

Marking grade: Bronze

S*x/Age: Male/26

Height/Weight: 176.2 cm/65.8 kg

Current condition: Good

Job: LV. 0 (Invited)

Nationality: Republic of Korea (Area 1)

Affiliation: N/A

Alias: N/A

[2. Personality]

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 Surl-Ah, then he wouldn't even hesitate and said yes in a heartbeat, but, as for Hyun Sahng-Min, well... Nothing really seemed to pull Seol's attention.

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

'I can't see his colour.'

If his colour was yellow – the 'Attention Required' – then Seol would have refused right away. But the fact of him not being able to see Hyun Sahng-Min's colour really played

on Seol's mind.

Thinking to himself that it wouldn't be so bad to wait and see, Seol grasped the offered hand of Han Sahng-Min and shook it.

"Nice!" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min smiled brightly as if he was genuinely happy.

"Nice, very nice! Now, I'm also a member of the best team in the world!" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

If left alone for any longer, he might have broken out in a song and dance. Hyun Sahng-Min 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?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Seol fell into a 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'd be able to avoid any danger.

Out of the blue, Seol recalled the words of Kim Hahn-Nah 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 Sahng-Min stared at him without saying anything.

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



The two of them left the club room and continued down on 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 Sahng-Min 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've been garbage, etc, etc.

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

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

"So, where are we going? Are you looking for a staircase?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

"No." (Seol)

"Eh? Aren't we supposed to go to the second floor?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

"Sure, we are." (Seol)

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

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

"How come? Isn't it better to get there as soon as possible?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

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

"That is....." (Hyun Sahng-Min)

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 Sahng-Min 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?" (Seol)

"Dunno. If you ran with everything you had... less than a minute, maybe?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

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

The objective of the mission was far, 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.” (Seol)

“Isn’t it because the door was locked?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

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

“Then, what about the monster?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“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.” (Seol)

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

...It’s not very difficult 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 of the 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 must’ve been a reason for that – a reason for four hours long time limit.

Hyun Sahng-Min wasn’t a fool, either. As if he too had realised 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?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“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...” (Seol)

Also, the fact that they were told to gather on the second floor and not anywhere

higher... While walking, 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.” (Seol)

“And how do you know that?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Seol showed him the phone’s screen. Hyun Sahng-Min 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?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“I got it as my bonus. Okay, this is where we are going.” (Seol)

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 club rooms. After we cross this parking lot, we will arrive at the main building’s basement.” (Seol)

Seol soon stopped his steps. He then proceeded to open wide a glass door, which led the two to see what lay beyond. Hyun Sahng-Min 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 labelled ‘Library’, ‘Convenience Store’, and ‘Stationery’.

Hyun Sahng-Min’s entire attention was devoted towards 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 Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min'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. Kahng Seok can't even lick this guy's boots, for crying out loud!' (Hyun Sahng-Min)

It wasn't as if Hyun Sahng-Min carried any ill feelings towards Kahng 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 Sahng-Min 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've had it real good." (Seol)

"Hold up!" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Seol was about to enter the convenience store when his shoulders were grabbed by the visibly excited Hyun Sahng-Min, 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." (Hyun Sahng-Min)

"?"

"You were planning to go upstairs after sweeping this place clean, right?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

"Something like that. So?" (Seol)

"What if there's something inside? It's times like this you're supposed to use me." (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Declaring so, Hyun Sahng-Min 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 Sahng-Min 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 were stocked to the brim with various food items.

“Keh. This is so good, man. So dayum good!” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min 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.” (Seol)

“Roger that!” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min seemed to be genuinely enjoying himself while *robbing* this store. Seol too began stuffing his bag with things like canned foods, sealed instant *Gimbaps*, and others that were small but packed with energy. (TL: “gimbap” = rice balls stuffed with veggies and meat, wrapped in sheets of nori/laver)

And while they were busy sweeping everything away...

“Mm? What’s going on?” (Seol)

“What? What happened?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Seol realised 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 Sahng-Min)

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

When they got to the first floor, they ran into a huge ivory-coloured metal door. The acrid odour of blood assaulted their noses when the door was creaked open ever so slightly. *(TL: For all the readers from Europe, Korea follows American way of assigning floors. 1st floor in Korea = ground floor in EU, 2nd floor in Korea = 1st floor in EU, etc.)*

[The diary of an unknown student has been updated.]

"I think that's the place." (Hyun Sahng-Min)

"What place?" (Seol)

"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 Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min deeply frowned.

"God d*mn it. A lot of people must've died here. They did gain the entry somehow, though, by the look of things." (Hyun Sahng-Min)

It was as he said; Seol could see through the open gap 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 colour 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 realise 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?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Seol agreed with Hyun Sahng-Min’s suggestion. Besides, they already had a staircase behind them that led up anyways, so no real need to utilise that one over there.

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

Seol carefully closed shut 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-coloured metal door. No, for some reason, several thick metal spikes stood there, blocking their progress.

‘It shouldn’t be like this.’ (Seol)

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 Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min 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 colours to them?’

If they were not in green colour, 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...

Chapter 11

The Large Group of Humans (2)

[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 even faster speed. As soon as those metal spikes were gone, the space in front became a wide-open passageway they could enter.

“W, what the hell just happened? What did you do?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min was full of questions as he tried to follow after Seol and walk past.

Slam!

“Huh?!”

As soon as Seol walked past first, though, the spikes shot right back up and slammed into the ceiling once more. Suddenly becoming estranged, Hyun Sahng-Min held onto the spike barrier and shouted out in alarm.

Seol too fell into a state of confusion, but then, 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 they might.

“Dayum... Feels like I lost ten years of my life to mental shock just now.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min hurriedly entered past the barrier and rubbed his chest to calm his pounding heart.

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

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

When he took a glance at Hyun Sahng-Min, he was only spitting out relieved sighs instead, apparently not noticing the announcement yet. Seol thought that it was possible to miss the message due to shouting as well as the metal barrier opening and closing.

“Oh! So you’ve finally arrived... Uh?” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok was waving his hand towards Seol, but when he spotted Hyun Sahng-Min, the ends of his sentence trailed off.

“...What the. You two decided to help each other out?” (Kahng Seok)

Hyun Sahng-Min raised his head after hearing Kahng Seok’s rather unhappy tone of voice.

“What about you, then?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

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

Kahng Seok winked in a playful manner.

Seol looked around, and found Lee Hyung-Sik and Jeong Min-Woo as well.

The so-called waiting area reminded him of any ol’ regular corridors one could find in a middle or a high school. With the exception of steel beams barricading the windows, everything else seemed the same. At the end of the passage to the left, there was another door, while to the right, a solid wall.

“The place is like a prison... That monster can’t possibly enter here, right?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“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.” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok replied nonchalantly. Meanwhile, Hyun Sahng-Min was nodding his head along, before quietly asking back.

“Back then... did you manage to open the door?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“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.” (Kahng Seok)

“You blaming me for something?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min’s voice was icy cold. Kahng 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 us three. As long as you don’t hinder us in any way, it’s fine.” (Kahng Seok)

“.....”

“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 loggerheads with one another, no?” (Kahng Seok)

“...That is true.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“Alright! As an apology, I’ll let you guys in on an interesting info.” (Kahng Seok)

Even Seol had to shift his attention to Kahng Seok’s direction after hearing the term, ‘info’.

Kahng Seok’s lips twitched when he realised that none other than this fancied ‘gold Mark’ was paying him attention. His posture suddenly became a bit more stiff and arrogant compared to before.

“Now look closely. This here is the passage we came through, okay?” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng 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 Sahng-Min muttered under his breath.

“So, it’s not on the outside, but inside...” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“That’s right! That’s where it gets interesting.” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng 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.” (Kahng Seok)

“What?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“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.” (Kahng Seok)

“How does that even make sense?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“Why don’t you try pressing the button to find out?” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok stepped aside, allowing Hyun Sahng-Min to quickly press the button on the wall. But, there was no reaction from the barrier. He pressed it for the second time, then 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 realised something. Out of the six blue icons blinking around the second floor waiting area, four had now turned red. Only one was red when he was in the club room.

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

“Oh? How did you figure that one out already?” (Kahng Seok)

Seol’s question caused Kahng 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?” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok stared at Hyun Sahng-Min and pointed towards another barrier on the

opposite side.

“Well, passages 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?” (Kahng Seok)

It seemed that Hyun Sahng-Min 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.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

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

“Oh well. Do whatever you want.” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok and his two lackeys sat down too, but soon, they had to get back up again. Because, Hyun Sahng-Min pulled out a new packet of cigarette, that’s why. The trio reached out and pleaded for a smoke, so he handed one each while saying this was for providing the info.

And then, when Seol was digging through his own pockets to find a smoke too, Hyun Sahng-Min presented a whole bundle to him.

“How about smoking these?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“Uhm...” (Seol)

“I saw before that you were running out, so I packed in a few at the convenience store.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min 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 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.

‘Sleep for a while, or not?’ (Seol)

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."
(Kahng Seok)

Seeing Seol's head droop ever so lower in sleep, a wry smile broke out on Kahng Seok's face. He flicked the cigarette b**t away and groaned out.

"Just when is this supposed to end? It'd be so much better if it ended soon." (Kahng Seok)

"We still have over three hours left... F*ck this. Why are we waiting for four hours in a mission like this?" (Lee Hyung-Sik)

Lee Hyung-Sik grumbled as he rechecked the mission details on his phone. Kahng Seok silently agreed with that opinion, and massaged his head with his interlocked hands.

"I'm s~o bored. I dearly hope someone will come up using the path on this side soon."
(Kahng Seok)

"What if no one else shows up?"

"Eii, come on. Besides, the rest of the Invited hasn't shown up yet." (Kahng Seok)

"What, you mean that Yi Surl-Ah? She's already dead, isn't she?"

"Not her... What a stupid little b***h she was. Whatever. All those stepping up like some sort of a hero always gets killed first, right?" (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok darkly muttered out those words, which made Jeong Min-Woo lick his lips in regret.

“What a waste, though.” (Jeong Min-Woo)

“Yep, that I agree. But, then again, don’t you worry. We still have one more left.” (Kahng Seok)

“Who?”

“You know, the other one. What was her name? Yun Seo-Rah?” (Kahng Seok)

“Ah, that modern chic girl?” (Lee Hyung-Sik)

When Lee Hyung-Sik chimed in, the three of them giggled out in sync. Their laughters sounded leery and ominous.

“Whatever, guys. Maybe I should catch some Zs myself.” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok’s yawn was large enough to nearly rip his jaw open wider. But, 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. Kahng 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?” (Kahng Seok)

Jeong Min-Woo 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. Kahng Seok seemed to be incredibly disappointed by this development as he looked at Hyun Sahng-Min.

“It’s still not too late, though.” (Kahng Seok)

“...I told you, I’m fine.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Kahng Seok spat out *Uh-whew*, and stood there with his hands across his chest. His attitude was 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 pair of a man and a woman, and a young girl. The middle aged man wearing a worn out business suit and a pair of glasses were 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 Kahng 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've not considered the possibility of the path being blocked, and thus despair began to dye his expression pale.

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

“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 us!!”

...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. And when he met the gaze of the monster and its large, bloodshot eye...

“De, dear..... My, my child...”

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

SFX for wet, sticky footsteps

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

“Quickly make up your mind, will you?” (Kahng Seok)

“Uh..... Uh.....?”

“I’m saying, make up your mind to enter or not, right now. You planning to kill us all, too?” (Kahng Seok)

Was it because of Kahng Seok’s shouting, or the threatening atmosphere emanating from his back? 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 had 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 breaths.

"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.

"Kek." (Kahng Seok)

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, Kahng Seok hurriedly covered his mouth up.

“Kek, keh, ahahahahaha!!!” (Kahng Seok)

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 clenched tightly into fists, nails digging in under the skin.

The wise old *they* once said that, even if you were not 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 could actually laugh in a situation like this?’ (Seol)

It was then, they could all hear another metallic clang. Yun Seo-Rah walked in from the last remaining door that had no assigned “owner.”

As if she too had searched through the school premise, she was holding a handful of A4 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 there, before concentrating on the paper.

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 thought that, at least as far he could tell, there shouldn't be any more survivors left. However, his thought was proven wrong when only around 30 minutes remained on the time limit.

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

Contrary to his expectations, more survivors showed up. And it wasn't just one or two, either – a group of five, as a matter of fact. Among them, Seol knew two.

One was Shin Sahng-Ah, the woman who raised her voice at Kahng Seok back in the assembly hall, and other one was Yi Sung-Jin, the younger brother of Yi Surl-Ah. Regardless of what they did, there they were, successfully arriving at their destination.

It was truly unfortunate then, that they chose to utilise the path occupied by Kahng Seok and his cronies.

“Oh, my gosh. Look who it is!” (Kahng Seok)

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

“So, you managed to make it alive! A cry baby has done it!” (Kahng Seok)

“Eh? Eh?” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

Shin Sahng-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 an question.

“What... what is going on? Why is the path blocked?” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“Oh, that?” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng 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 Sahng-Ah couldn't help but frown deeply.

“What now?!” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“What do you mean, what? I'm the owner of this barrier.” (Kahng Seok)

“The owner... of this barrier?” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

Kahng Seok burst out in laughter and began to gleefully explain things. It was as if he had transformed into a well-paid private tutor – he 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 Sahng-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?” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“Oho, aren’t you a smart cookie, unlike how you look? Was my explanation that good?” (Kahng Seok)

“I get it, so open up already!” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“*Hiyaa~* Really now, how did you manage to show up here? I mean, for a Contracted, you even managed to evade the monster?” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng 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 Sahng-Ah)

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

“Oh, of course. Yeah, sure. He’s an Invited too, wasn’t he? So, at a minimum, it wasn’t all down to luck, was it.” (Kahng Seok)

“Okay, now. Open the barrier so that we can enter.” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“Hmm...”

Kahng Seok slowly opened his mouth.

“But, I don’t want to?” (Kahng Seok)

A truly disgusting smile crept up on his face.

Chapter 12

The Record in History

“Are you crazy?! Open the barrier right now!!” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“Why should I? This here is my doorway. I choose when I open or close it.” (Kahng Seok)

“Why are you acting like this? Do you have any idea just what we had to go through to get here?” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“*Aigoo~*. So, you had to go through so much, huh? But, what should we do? I’m an egocentric and a petty son of a b*tch, according to some woman.” (Kahng Seok)

Shin Sahng-Ah gritted her teeth while listening to Kahng Seok’s sarcastic remarks. She could more or less tell why this as*hole was acting this way, after all – 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 apologise. I apologise for calling you names when we were in the assembly hall, so please open this barrier. It’s not just me here, too. And these people haven’t done anything to you, either. You know, you shouldn’t treat people’s lives as a joke.” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“Ohh... Aren’t you a bit different from the assembly hall, when you were so full of righteous anger and all that? Are you being really serious and honest right now?” (Kahng Seok)

“...Yes.” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“Now you mention it, well, I guess I don’t have much choice here, then. Fine. Prove it to me.” (Kahng Seok)

“Prove it?” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

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

Shin Sahng-Ah’s jaw dropped to the floor. Her expression screamed *what kind of an as*hole would act like this?* Too bad for her, Kahng Seok’s expression showed how relaxed he was, instead.

“You..... You.....” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

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

Shin Sahng-Ah didn’t expect Kahng Seok to behave like this, and her face reddened up considerably as a result. However, with the exception of Yi Sung-Jin, 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.

“Ohh, wow. Really, aren’t you a Good Samaritan? A Good Samaritan, I say!” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok exclaimed out loudly, and he pressed the release button. As soon as the barrier was lowered, the three rushed inside. Yi Sung-Jin dazedly stared at Shin Sahng-Ah for a bit, before belatedly trudging past the barrier as well. Only then the trio began calling out to her, crying out her name out in a helpless manner; the barrier closed shut regardless.

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

Of course, nothing happened. Seeing this, Kahng Seok broke out in a laughter of ridicule.

“What a f*cking waste of time. Didn’t I tell you? Only I can open the barrier.” (Kahng Seok)

Wordlessly, Yi Sung-Jin pounced on Kahng Seok. However, it couldn’t even be called a fight from the get-go. The teen boy got easily subdued by Lee Hyung-Sik and Jeong Min-Woo, and he could only glare at Kahng Seok in barely contained rage.

“Look at this idiot b*stard here. You feel like dying today? What, did that b*tch tell you she’ll become your new sister or something?” (Kahng Seok)

“The barrier... Open it!!!” (Yi Sung-Jin)

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

“.....”

“You worked hard, didn’t you. Well, you should look for another path or something. I don’t care, so do whatever you want. Have a nice day.” (Kahng Seok)

Shin Sahng-Ah couldn’t bring herself to leave just like that. She scanned the inside of the waiting room, hoping for something to save her, but that turned out to be a waste of time. The people inside were either simply watching on, or showed little to no interest.

In the end, she had turn around, utterly helpless.

“Should I let you in?” (Kahng Seok)

Shin Sahng-Ah’s steps came to a halt. She abruptly spun her head and shot Kahng Seok with a murderous glare.

“Do you actually enjoy toying with people?” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“Yup. When would I ever get to have fun like this, if it’s not today?” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok nonchalantly replied and beckoned her to come closer.

“Stop being difficult and why don’t you come closer? You saw me letting people in just now, right? I’m the kind of guy who keeps his promises.” (Kahng Seok)

Hearing his words of keeping promises, Shin Sahng-Ah was gripped by an intense bout of doubt and uncertainty. She had to go through so much to get here, so to find another path was just...

And, even if there was another path, she had to search for it alone. In that case, 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.

“...And what do you want me to do so you’ll let me through?” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“I’m not asking for much. For the things you said back in the assembly hall, apologise in full.” (Kahng Seok)

“But... I already apologised, didn’t I?” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“No, no, no. Anyone can see that you didn’t mean it just now. Besides, I’m not the type to believe in apologies coming out of a person’s mouth.” (Kahng Seok)

“So? What do you want me to do instead, then?!” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

Shin Sahng-Ah raised her voice when Kahng Seok remained sarcastic to the end. He rubbed his chin, but his eyes looking at her took on a rather sinister and sexual undertone. Shin Sahng-Ah may not possess the same sort of “fresh” appeal as Yi Surl-Ah; but, her skin was pale smooth, plus her rack was commendably voluminous as well. Therefore, a villainous smirk formed on Kahng Seok’s lips.

“For now, take them off.” (Kahng Seok)

“...What?” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

Shin Sahng-Ah couldn’t help but question her own hearing, just then.

“Take your clothes off. Ahh, I’m a nice guy, so I’ll let you keep your panties. Cool?” (Kahng Seok)

Hearing Kahng Seok’s mock ‘benevolent’ tone of voice, Shin Sahng-Ah even forgot to close her wide-open mouth.

“I’m thinking that, you start dancing around naked might soothe my troubled mind or something... How about you do the twerking for me?” (Kahng Seok)

“You... You insane... son of a b*tch!!” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“Don’t wanna do it? Fine. F*ck off, then.” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok shrugged his shoulders.

Shin Sahng-Ah bit her lower lip until one could clearly see the teeth mark on her flesh, as she inwardly mumbled the words, *You insane a*shole!!*

And then, her body shook from the sense of humiliation rushing in like a tidal wave. Tears welled up on her eyes, ready to fall at any moment.

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

“What are you waiting for? I said, if you don’t wanna do it, then get the hell away from there.” (Kahng Seok)

“...I’ll do it.” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“If you’re gonna, then hurry the f*ck up. I’ll give you ten seconds for taking your pants off. Starting, now.” (Kahng Seok)

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

Kahng Seok couldn’t help but perform a wolf whistle as her bare, smooth thighs were revealed to the cold air.

“*Hiyaa~*, you got a great figure, don’t you? Your underwear’s pretty cute, too.” (Kahng Seok)

Shin Sahng-Ah squeezed her eyes shut. She thought that this might let her feel a smidgeon less humiliation.

“What are you doing? Keep stripping, girl. I’m gonna count again... Huh? HUUUUH?! It’s the monster!! The monster!!” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok suddenly cried out in alarm and pointed at the staircase behind her while hurriedly taking a step back. Shin Sahng-Ah’s eyes shot wide open in shock; she screamed in terror and tumbled forward in an ungainly fashion.

“Mommy!” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

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. And 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! Mommyyyy!! Euhahahaha!!” (Kahng Seok)

“Fu-hat!! She’s so f*cking adorable!! Kyack!! Mommy!” (Lee Hyung-Sik)

Kahng Seok and Jeong Min-Woo laughed out loudly and applauded Lee Hyung-Sik’s perfect imitation of her cries. Stupefied into silence, all Shin Sahng-Ah could do was to let tears accumulate around the edges of her eyes.

“Sorry, sorry. I was just teasing you for a bit. You looked really cute just now.” (Kahng Seok)

Too much.

“Well~ now. It’s time to remove your top, right?” (Kahng Seok)

This is too much.

In the end, she couldn’t hold it 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...” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok clapped his hands boisterously and laughed, before suddenly shutting his mouth. A dark shadow was looming over him in that moment.



Seol wasn’t angry to being with. He initially planned to shut out everything happening around him.

He was not a Good Samaritan, a man of justice and all that; just like how it was with most people, he was disinclined to interfere in other people’s business. He might go as far as frown a little after seeing some unfair things happen, while thinking, “That’s going too far, isn’t it?”

Unless it was someone he knew, Seol wouldn’t personally get up and do something for a total stranger. Definitely not.

However...

It happened when his eyes landed on Yi Sung-Jin. Or, more specifically, it was when he heard the whispers of “Help us” coming from the mouth of Yi Sung-Jin currently being pinned down to the ground. Should he chalk all of it up to coincidence, because this scene just so happened to remind him of the time when Yi Surl-Ah asked him for help back in the assembly hall.

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

That was why he stood up.

...Just like the moment he got to dream that *dream*.

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

[Innate ability, the Future Vision, has been activated.]

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

“What now? You also want to join in on the fun...?” (Kahng Seok)

“That is enough from you. Open the barrier now, please.” (Seol)

Kahng Seok dazedly stared up at Seol. He hadn’t realised it until now, but Seol was taller than he was.

“I’ll open it. When I feel like it.” (Kahng Seok)

“Open. The. Barrier.” (Seol)

Kahng Seok shut his mouth up. Judging from his expression, he couldn’t seem to understand what was going on here.

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

Seok)

“Open it.” (Seol)

Kahng 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 well, Kahng Seok was feeling scared of this guy. If he was being honest here, 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 that, Kahng Seok’s defiant streak reared its head: why should he follow the order of this unknown a*shole?

Was it because he was the so-called gold Mark? What a f*cking joke.

Kahng Seok arrogantly leaned his head back.

“I don’t want to.” (Kahng Seok)

The corners of his lips slowly wiggled and twitched.

“What a f*cking a*shole. And here I was, planning to be in a cordial relationship with you, because of us being the same Invited and all, yet who knew you have a bleeding heart mentality?” (Kahng Seok)

Seol slowly raised his arm up, which prompted Lee Hyung-Sik and Jeong Min-Woo to move as well. However, Kahng Seok confidently stopped them by raising his own hand.

“What? You planning to hit me? Fine, go ahead. Since it’s the most important Mister Gold Mark hitting me, this lowly me with a worthless Mark should just obediently get hit, no?” (Kahng Seok)

“.....”

“However, remember this. The more you try to show off, the lesser I’ll be inclined towards opening the... Keuk!” (Kahng Seok)

Slam!

Seol's fist slammed into Kahng Seok's nose. Lee Hyung-Sik and Jeong Min-Woo 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..... Kyaaaachk!!" (Kahng Seok)

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

"Come inside." (Seol)

Shin Sahng-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 Kahng Seok's arm.

[Miss Shin Sahng-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 announcement, 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 as long as all the survivors arrived at the waiting area.

SFX for pained whimpers of grown men

Kahng Seok was rolling on the floor in a fit of pain. He used the wall to support himself and somehow managed to stand up. Still holding his twisted arm, he glared at Seol full of murderous intent.

“You...!!” (Kahng Seok)

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

“You... We’ll see what happens later, you f*cking son of a b*tch!” (Kahng Seok)

He picked up his own bag and hastily escaped through the now-open passage. Seeing him retreat like that, both Lee Hyung-Sik and Jeong Min-Woo too slinked away out of sight.

Afterwards, it was Yun Seo-Rah’s turn to leave, although she stopped and stared at Seol wordlessly for a while before moving away.

“T... Thank you. Thank you so much...” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

Thick drops of tears fell from Shin Sahng-Ah’s eyes, before she began wailing in honest. Next to her, Yi Sung-Jin’s head also dropped low.

Unbeknownst to them, though, the recipient of their gratitude, Seol, wasn’t feeling all that good at the moment. He was painfully reminded of the fact that his actions were not entirely from his own will.

And also, his rage failing to cool down only drove him further into an even greater frenzy. He felt like destroying, rampaging, and making an utter mess of something. Anything. 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. Seol’s eyes confirming the details of the phone burned in a dangerous light.

“H, hey!! Hold up, man!” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Seol unhesitatingly walked forward. Hyun Sahng-Min hurriedly picked two bags and chased after him.



[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... D**n it, I’m gonna lose my mind at this rate!”

“24 people died by the first hurdle?! How does that even make sense? Why is every one of them such a g*****n trash this time?”

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

“Really now. If this carries on, being called the ‘Area 1’ will become a huge joke in time. With the March’s overall assessment looking this bad, how are we supposed to endure until September?” (the bald giant)

The bald giant couldn’t resist and added a couple more sentences, and fearing that the business-suit woman would glare at him again, hurriedly turned his attention this way and that.

“Anyone know what’s going on in other areas? Anyone with a news?” (the bald giant)

“I know a bit.”

A young man with a curly hair raised his hand.

“I overheard something while I was outside... As far as clear speed is concerned, I hear the areas 2 and 7 are neck and neck for the first place.” (the curly haired young man)

“2 and 7? I get it with Europeans, but what’s gotten into those Chinese b*stards?” (the bald giant)

“What’s the point asking me that? 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 the Contracted hostage. I’m sure they are passing the missions while sacrificing the Contracted whenever necessary.” (the curly haired young man)

The balding giant spat out a groan.

“...Fine. What about 2?” (the bald giant)

“I heard they are the very example of perfection itself. A French girl named Odelette Delphine has taken over the show there, apparently. And only by using nothing but her own skills, no less. 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.” (the curly haired young man)

“Huh. What’s her Mark?” (the bald giant)

“A silver. And then, as soon as the second mission began, she succeeded in opening up the path to the computer classroom in one go. She’s bulldozing everything out of her way, it seems. I think she won’t even need a hour to get to the end. Maybe, 50 minutes, tops?” (the curly haired young man)

“Wow. She’s a beast, isn’t she? I guess the European b*stards found a proper good egg this time. What about the rest?” (the bald giant)

“Area 5 is also making a noise about doing rather well... But, it’s so-so. They have the 30 minute head start for the second mission compared to our people, so there’s that.” (the curly-haired young man)

The giant groaned out again.

“God d**n it. At this rate, we aren’t gonna have a single one remaining at the end of the Tutorial, no?” (the bald giant)

“Come on, now. We have a gold Mark, don’t forget. Besides, he even possesses the diary of the unknown student, so surely, he’d be able to clear it with no problems.” (the curly haired young man)

“You think so?” (the bald giant)

“I mean, he chased that phantom away with nothing more than his glare, right?” (the curly haired young man)

The curly-haired youth spoke with the aim of consoling the big 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, hey... Doesn’t that guy look a bit p*ssed off right now? What the hell? What’s the matter with him all of a sudden?” (the curly haired youth)

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 Hahn-Nah.”

“Shut your d**n mouth for a while, okay?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah spat out in a voice full of undisguised irritation. The big man immediately realised that, if he tried to provoke her any further here, then he’d be on the painful receiving end of the hysteria of an unmarried spinster.

The big man licked his lips as if he found the whole thing unsatisfactory, and got up from his seat. He thought that it’d be far more preferable to go for a smoke break outside rather than sit here and get p*ssed off at what was happening on screen.



The bald big guy wasted around 15 minutes outside while chain smoking. 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!!!

And 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 sweet a*s time.

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

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

'He's evading, blocking, and deflecting?!' (the bald giant)

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 were 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 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? Just passed him by?!”

“No, he dodged.” (the bald giant)

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...” (the bald giant)

“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... Eiii, what the f*ck, Kim Hahn-Nah!! Just what’s up with that guy?!” (the bald giant)

The bald guy seemed to be shocked by his own words, and belatedly shouted at Kim Hahn-Nah.

Kim Hahn-Nah remained quiet for a long while, before suddenly opening her mouth.

“For the second mission... what is the fastest clear record in history?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“The record? Wasn’t that by Mister Seong Shi-Hyun? The legendary 29 minutes and 38 seconds?” (the bald giant)

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

“...This is crazy.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“What’s crazy?” (the bald giant)

[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 would be rewritten.

Chapter 13

A Dangerous Treasure Hunt (1)

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

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

His boiling-hot rage had cooled down by now; however, the sense of emptiness filling him up right after his ability, Future Vision, ended 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 on 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 vertigo, as well.

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?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

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

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

“Well, well, well. I’m truly shocked.” (Han)

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.” (Han)

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 a phantom or some such.

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

His leisurely and bright tone of voice roused anger in the hearts of the 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 a great news. There is only one mission remaining in the Tutorial.” (Han)

“There’s another one?”

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

The ends of the Guide’s eyes arched upwards.

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

“Easy, and enjoyable...?”

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

When the Guide emphasized the words ‘All of you’, a dangerous smile crept up on his

face.

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

The Guide seemed to be in a really good mood, for some reason.

“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.” (Han)

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

“This is a coin.” (Han)

“.....”

“Perchance, have you heard of the treasure hunt?” (Han)

“.....”

“...I am beginning to truly appreciate the greatness of the teachers teaching those unresponsive students.” (Han)

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 of these hidden coins, waiting to be found. You all are required to find and amass as many coins as possible before nightfall.” (Han)

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.” (Han)

The mere mention of entry to the 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.” (Han)

“One, one hundred? You need that many?” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“Actually, that’s not a lot.” (Han)

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)

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...” (Han)

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 Seo-Rah. 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 Seo-Rah’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.” (Han)

Still carrying an indifferent expression on her face, Yun Seo-Rah returned to her seat.

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

If that was the case, then Yun Seo-Rah 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, you **MUST** use this machine! You will definitely be able to acquire many things that will aid you in your journey.” (Han)

“L, like what, exactly?” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“You’ll find out once you get there, but, things such as food, consumable goods, etc, etc.....” (Han)

For some reason, Han quietly stared at the person who asked the question, causing Shin Sahng-Ah to lower her gaze in 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...” (Han)

‘Weapons? Spell balls?’ (Seol)

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)

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

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

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

“Is, is that true?” (the middle-aged man)

“My *noona* can be revived? Really?” (Yi Sung-Jin)

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)

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." (Han)

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

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

"Please speak." (Han)

"What is the reason for weapons, defensive items, and spell balls being available from the item draw machine?" (Seol)

"Hmm? Conversely, is there a reason why they shouldn't be available?" (Han)

"Why would we need those items in a mission that's supposedly easy and enjoyable?" (Seol)

"...Fufufu. I like these kinds of questions." (Han)

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)

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, too. I guarantee this.” (Han)

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.” (Han)

“The Hour of the Deceased?!” (Seol)

Seol hurriedly pulled out his phone to check the message.

[Sender: the Guide]

[1. Rules of the treasure hunt]

- The 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, ‘*Gaeg-gwi*’, and the deceased are unable to enter the safe zone.

[2. Requirements for gaining the 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.’ (Seol)

“Hey, this isn’t what you said, is it?!” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min roared out in frustration.

“What? When we gain the access to the sixth floor, the metal barriers on the second floor will be *removed*? Isn’t that the same thing as saying that god d*mn monster will show up here sooner or later?!” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

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 f*ck? What would you do if that d**n *Gaeg-gwi* monster is waiting for you in front of this safe zone? What then?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

When someone voiced his opinion, Hyun Sahng-Min promptly shot that person down. Then he spat out a long groan.

“Wow... Nothing is easy at all. Not a d**n thing. What should we do now?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“Well, it doesn’t have to be so bad.” (Seol)

Seol spoke up.

“We go out and find as much coins as we can until midnight, then we wait until midday

tomorrow. Then, we draw as much weapons and whatever we can from the item draw machine, before opening the sixth floor.....” (Seol)

...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 Seo-Rah and the middle-aged man were no longer in the classroom. It was the same story for Kahng Seok and his crew, too. Only seven people remained in the classroom.

“...Oh, well. Wanna eat something? We still have some time left to kill and all.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

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 Sahng-Min, grew extra wide in shock.

“Come. Let's eat together. Even you, Mister Yi Sung-Jin.” (Seol)

“I'm...” (Yi Sung-Jin)

“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 before you begin.” (Seol)

“I... Thank you...” (Yi Sung-Jin)

Hyun Sahng-Min didn't seem to be too happy about Seol being so considerate, but still, didn't try to stop him. After all, the food provided weren't his to begin with, and then, there was plenty to go around, as well. Also, some of the food, like *gimbap*, would go bad in a few days time so might as well eat them.

And so, even Yi Sung-Jin joined in, which left behind only one person.

“What about you, Miss Shin Sahng-Ah?” (Seol)

Shin Sahng-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 realised that her pants were still missing.

“I, I was too busy trying to enter... I f, forgot...” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“Wouldn’t it be okay to go and fetch it now?” (Seol)

“...I’m scared...” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

Seol took off his jacket and handed it over to her. Shin Sahng-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 Sahng-Ah)

Shin Sahng-Ah spoke in a surprised voice while unwrapping the packet off 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)

Seol was also slightly confused by this and tilted his head. Even though these were instant foods from a convenience store, they tasted really good.

The funny thing was, when he was still addicted to gambling, nothing tasted nice to his palette... Well, the wise old ‘they’ once said that hunger was king; Seol simply wolfed down the sandwich Shin Sahng-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, yes?”

“Yes. You need to collect a minimum of 100 before you can pass.” (Seol)

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.” (Seol)

“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 at 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, then. He was feeling rather flabbergasted. He was already having a headache while wondering how should he go about clearing this mission, yet, what were these people trying to say here? More importantly...

‘What do they want from me now?’ (Seol)

“Hey, you! Let’s just have a meal in peace. In peace, I say!” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min shouted out loudly in an unhappy voice.

“What do you all think you’re doing? Seriously now!” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min 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!” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“No, I’m just saying...”

“Just saying this and that. But, who cares?! You want to revive someone, then do it yourselves, alright? Seriously, all you have to do is to find enough coins, anyway. What do you expect from him, then?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

His abrasive and rude words led the two’s neck skins 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 some such. The girl too was visibly displeased, as well.

Meanwhile, Hyun Sahng-Min powerfully squeezed a packet of an instant bread and

popped it open, hard. If it weren't for Seol signaling with his eyes to take it easy, he might've 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 also, Hyun Sahng-Min called him out there to have a chat as well.

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

Hyun Sahng-Min's voice was rather heated at the moment.

"What useless f*cking idiots! You found them a path, and hell, you even fed them food. Yet they want even more? Don't they have any shame?!" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

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

"You should be careful, too." (Hyun Sahng-Min)

"?"

"From where I'm sitting, it looks like those two think you're an easy mark or something. I apologise if you think I overstepped my boundary, but things like this, you gotta cut off the head right from the beginning, know what I'm saying?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Seol slowly nodded his head, and then shook it slightly. Even if Hyun Sahng-Min 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 the 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 bunch of spoiled a*sholes. I don't like guys like Kahng Seok, but that b*stard's opinions aren't half wrong." (Hyun Sahng-Min)

"....."

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

b*tches, okay?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

[The treasure hunt will now commence.]

[Remaining time until midnight 05: 29: 59]

People began leaving the classroom one by one, leading Hyun Sahng-Min 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?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

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 should he 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.” (Seol)

Chapter 14

A Dangerous Treasure Hunt (2)

Seeing that well-organised list, Seol's head automatically moved up and down in a nod. He had no idea who's child this unknown student could've been, but well, this was very well-organised, indeed.

'Most likely a honour student, top of the class and all that...' (Seol)

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; he then spotted Shin Sahng-Ah jumping up and down in joy while crying out "Yaaaaay!!" inside 3-3. She then froze up like a deer in 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, and entered the 3-5, only to run into someone he didn't expect to find so soon.

It was Yun Seo-Rah. 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)

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

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

Unless it was something like a teacher's podium, which there would only ever be one

in a classroom, she'd have to roll up her sleeve and do some hard labour when the coins were hidden inside one of the many lockers or desks there.

Yun Seo-Rah 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. Her eyes blinked several times in shock.

‘Alright, let’s see. Next is... ’ (Seol)

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

‘Too easy. Way too easy.’ (Seol)

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 the classroom 3-7 in the same manner. But, as he was exiting the room, his steps came to an abrupt halt. Yun Seo-Rah 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 had become a criminal in the process.

‘...Maybe, I should leave 3-8 alone... ’ (Seol)

He carefully sidestepped past Yun Seo-Rah 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 Seo-Rah 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 the 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 on the podium, Yun Seo-Rah 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." (Yun Seo-Rah)

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

The TV cabinet itself was rather huge, and it easily exceeded two metres in height. In other words, it was tall enough to nearly touch the ceiling. It was obvious that Yun Seo-Rah 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, 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...” (Seol)

Her movements came to a stand still.

Seol hurriedly covered his mouth up, but it was too late by then. Yun Seo-Rah’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, and he found it incredibly funny.

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

‘What should I do now?’ (Seol)

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)

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 definitely awkward silence flowed between them. Seol was this close to breaking down, though – she needed to either take the d**n coin or not – 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...” (Seol)

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

“.....A, gah, gah, ahahahahaha!!!”

The laughter exploded out of his mouth, even though he inwardly went *Oh, c**p!*

“No, wait! I mean, no! Gah, hahahaha...” (Seol)

Yun Seo-Rah'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 Seo-Rah seemed rather nonplussed. Although her gaze was slightly lowered, she maintained that impassive expression of hers.

‘She's feeling okay, I guess?’ (Seol)

Just as Seol was feeling relieved inwardly...

Sniff.

...He could hear her softly sniff through her nose. Although the amount was small, her upturned eyes were wet with tears.

It seemed that, perhaps 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 biting her lips ever so slightly, too.

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

“Uhm...” (Seol)

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



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

Kahng 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!” (Lee Hyung-Sik)

Hearing Lee Hyung-Sik’s words, Kahng 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.” (Kahng Seok)

“You want to steal them?” (Lee Hyung-Sik)

“Obviously.” (Kahng Seok)

After hearing Kahng Seok’s declaration, Lee Hyung-Sik 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 Min-Woo’s complexion wasn’t so good, either.

“That b*stard wouldn’t sit still, though...” (Lee Hyung-Sik)

“That’s right. I think it’ll be better for us to collect them the normal way.” (Jeong Min-Woo)

Kahng Seok raised his voice in anger after hearing the two’s pathetic replies.

“F*ck me, you get hit only once and are now shivering like some scared cats? Why don’t you chop off your balls right now or something? Idiots.” (Kahng Seok)

“.....”

“Eh? What’s the matter with you two? Are you going to take that sh*t lying down?”

Really now?" (Kahng Seok)

"B, but...!"

"I can't let this sh*t go. I gotta pay him back with interest. Ten times, no, 100 times more. Isn't that how human nature works?" (Kahng Seok)

"...You have a plan or something?" (Jeong Min-Woo)

Jeong Min-Woo asked, still sounding not entirely convinced. Kahng 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." (Kahng Seok)

Lee Hyung-Sik and Jeong Min-Woo came closer and paid attention.

"We will also go and collect those coins. We will do our best, right until midnight. Got it?" (Kahng Seok)

"Uhm?"

"Keep listening, because this is where it'll get interesting." (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok lowered his voice to a whisper and explained his plan to the two.

"W, what did you say?" (Lee Hyung-Sik)

Lee Hyung-Sik's mouth opened up wide in surprise.

"What the? But, if that happens..." (Lee Hyung-Sik)

"Keep your mouth shut." (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok growled menacingly, causing Lee Hyung-Sik to promptly slam his lips shut.

"...Is there a reason for us to go this far?" (Jeong Min-Woo)

"Yeah, there's a f*cking reason. That a*shole came out swinging first, so it's only

correct that we swing back even harder.” (Kahng Seok)

“But... will it even work?” (Jeong Min-Woo)

“It’s going to. Look, look!” (Kahng Seok)

Seeing Jeong Min-Woo tilt his head this way and that, Kahng Seok smirked deeply.

“What do you think this is~?” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng 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.” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok declared triumphantly, before slightly cocking his eyebrow.

“...So?” (Kahng Seok)

While having his hands locked and fidgeting around, Jeong Min-Woo shrugged his shoulders. Seeing this, Lee Hyung-Sik 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?” (Kahng Seok)

The two lackeys nodded their heads. Kahng Seok began gritting his teeth.

“All we have to do is to defeat that f*cker. When we grind that motherf*cker to nothing, then we win.” (Kahng Seok)



[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 get 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, 1552 of them. There were twelve survivors participating in the hunt, so this was the same as him monopolising over half of the available coins.

'I should probably go there now.' (Seol)

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 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 beside himself inside the fifth floor library. The so-called draw machine kind of resembled one of those gacha machines 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 a 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 on, 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 of times and get some spell balls, instead?

He didn't think for too long.

First of all, he found the actions of Kahng 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 colours.'

Originally, only Kahng Seok emitted the yellowish colour, but now, both Lee Hyung-Sik and Jeong Min-Woo emitted the same yellow hue as well. He had to pay them close attention, in other words. Since their colours 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 realised that manually inserting each coin one at the time was unexpectedly a lot of work, that's why.

"Godd*mn it..." (Seol)

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 a mid-level success or some such.

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 well. 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 was confident yet easy going. What he didn't expect to find was that the classroom 3-1 was still deserted. It was the so-called the safe zone, and there was 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?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Seol turned around while inwardly thinking, *Of course, people should start showing up soon.*

The first one to enter was Hyun Sahng-Min, but he didn't look so good. A short while afterwards, Shin Sahng-Ah trudged inside as well.

"What happened to you? I got nearly f*ck all." (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“M, me too...” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“I mean, what the hell? It’s like a crazy a*shole swept away everything or something. Why is it this hard to find a single d**n coin?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“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 Sahng-Ah)

Shin Sahng-Ah complained while massaging her feet.

“You’re worse than me, though. I did meet the 100 coin requirement, at least.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min’s voice was also rather weak as well.

Seol thought about it for a long while, before deciding to give Shin Sahng-Ah 30 coins. Since he was already treating the remaining 162 as a reserve, he didn’t even hesitate.

“Uhm...?”

Shin Sahng-Ah’s eyes grew larger.

“A, are you giving me these?” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

The look in her eyes were already well past gratitude and into the territory of ‘worshipping a saviour’.

“Wha, what the heck? 30 coins in one go?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“Please, take it, Miss. What, you also need some?” (Seol)

“Holy sh*t. How many did you manage to find?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Seol scratched his cheek sheepishly.

“...Enough to survive, I guess?” (Seol)

Hyun Sahng-Min’s expression showed how dumbfounded he was, before he suddenly exploded in a fit of laughter as he fell back.

“Aigoo~, so it was you.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“?”

“I bloody knew it. I knew it didn’t make any d**n sense, unless someone already swooped in and picked everything clean. I seriously searched everywhere, dude...! Uh-whew, so the guilty party wasn’t Yun Seo-Rah, eh.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“Why? What’s up with Yun Seo-Rah?” (Seol)

“Mm? I thought you’ve realised it by now, too? I was thinking that she knew where all the coins were and was busy hogging them all for herself or something. I’m pretty sure it’s not only me who thinks this way.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

That made sense.

Hyun Sahng-Min added that he was now feeling bad after inwardly slugging her off for being a selfish bi*tch – which led to Seol feeling 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 made a promise beforehand, they closed their mouths shut at the same time. However, there were only three of them in the base, even now.

“Where’s everyone?” (Seol)

“It’s obvious, isn’t it?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min 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.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“You think so?”

“Yeah. They are probably like, a just 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, they don’t even care anymore, it seems.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

So, that’s how it was.

Although not as much as Seol, Yun Seo-Rah 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 Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min murmured while sucking on his cigarette.

“What... are you going to do?” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

Shin Sahng-Ah asked while cautiously studying Seol’s reaction.

Seol felt contradicting emotions in his mind. He didn’t care much about Kahng Seok and his crew, but when he thought about Yun Seo-Rah and Yi Sung-Jin, he couldn’t help but feel uncomfortable.

“I guess... I should find the ones that I can.” (Seol)

“Yes. Let me help you.” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

Shin Sahng-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, godd*mn it.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

...Hyun Sahng-Min 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?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

He spoke as if letting out a long groan and playfully pointed towards the door with his chin.

“Shall we go, Mister Leader?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

...It happened, then.

Chapter 15

A Dangerous Treasure Hunt (3)

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 tops of the tables and pulled out all 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.

SFX for a sliding door opening

Suddenly, there was a noise.

However, the teen boy, Yi Sung-Jin, couldn't hear it due to the very fact that he was turning a table upside down at that same 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 gotta 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 Sung-Jin didn't pay attention. His mind was full with the thoughts of reviving his

dead sister, Yi Surl-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...” (*TL: noona = older sister*)

The mental shock he received after witnessing the dead Yi Surl-Ah being pulled out was truly enormous. Although 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 vigour once more.

It was said that the heavens would help those who helped themselves – he soon discovered an object gleaming softly inside a sink. Yi Sung-Jin’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 Deceased and stuff. No, he had to find more coins. Lots more. Yi Sung-Jin clenched the lone coin in his hand tightly and gritted his teeth.

Tak...! Tak...!

Yi Sung-Jin 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 raised his head. And when his sights were raised from the ash-coloured 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 Sung-Jin was about to scream, but his eyes opened wider first, before his mouth could leak out a sound. Although he only saw the lower half, he found it rather familiar, somehow. And when he recognised 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.

“Wwwwwhhhheeeerrreee.....”

The voice sounded awful and Yi Sung-Jin 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...”

...And, he couldn't finish what he wanted to say.

The figure with its back to him, and slowly turning around, was quite similar to Yi Surl-Ah. Such as, those long flowing hair, and, and...

“N, noona...?”

Something was wrong. Very wrong. He couldn't put his finger on it. Yet, this figure resembled so much like his older sister...

Yi Sung-Jin's instincts were overcome with this hard to explain terror.

“Ssssuuunnngggg—-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.

"Hhhhuuuurrrryyyy....."

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 Sung-Jin 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*; 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 Sung-Jin unconsciously stumbled back, until his heels got entangled and he fell down on his b**t. His legs madly kicked the air as he tried to widen the gap between himself and that thing.

It was then, 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, llliiisssttteenenn..... #\$\$%@... Hhhuuurrrryyy.....”

Yi Sung-Jin’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 head. He summoned what little courage he could.

“...I, is it you, noona?”

“.....”

“Noona? Really? It is you, noona?!”

“...Hhhuuurrrryyy..... sstttaaannnddd...”

“...Hurry? Stand?”

While keeping his gaze firmly fixed on the creature, Yi Sung-Jin slowly got back up.

“Gggooo... ooouuttsssiideee... Fffiiinnnddd...”

“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.

“Iiitt... cccooommmiiinnnggg... sssooooonnn...”

It weakly raised an arm somehow and pointed at the door.

“Cccooommmiiinnnggg... ttthhheeyyy aaarrreee.....”

Although it was hard to understand what it was saying, the boy still got to realise something. ‘She’ was saying, he needed to get out of here before something else showed up.

“Noona!! It is you, right?!”

“.....”

“I’ll definitely bring you back to life!! That is why...”

“Sssuuunnnggg—Jjjiinnn—aaahhh...”

Yi Sung-Jin’s tearful voice seemingly caused the thing’s shoulders to tremble as well. From its empty eye sockets, blood-coloured liquid slowly oozed out.

“Mmmuussttt... llliiivveee... ookkkaaayyy...”

It was then.

Uwwwaaaahhhhccckk!!!

An ear-shattering scream coming from somewhere outside the lab shook the corridor, hard.



“Mommy?!” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

Shin Sahng-Ah jumped up fright. Seol and Hyun Sahng-Min too wordlessly stared at each other.

“...Hey man, did you hear that?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Seol nodded his head.

“Godd*mn it! Why the hell can’t they just come back after finding enough for themselves?!” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“Where did that come from?” (Seol)

“Dunno. Could be from the fifth floor...” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min 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, as soon as arriving on the fifth floor, they nearly collided into a teen boy running on the corridor. It was Yi Sung-Jin, and when he saw it was Seol, the boy's eyes opened wide.

"Mister Yi Sung-Jin? What's going on?" (Seol)

"H, hyung!!" (Yi Sung-Jin)

Yi Sung-Jin suddenly grabbed Seol tightly.

"I, I saw her!! I saw noona just now!!" (Yi Sung-Jin)

"Your noona?!" (Seol)

But, how could that be? Yi Surl-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 Sung-Jin quickly shook his head.

"No, no! Hang on! It's definitely her! Her hair, her dress, everything..." (Yi Sung-Jin)

Yi Sung-Jin 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 Miss Yi Surl-Ah?" (Seol)

"Yes!! Her... appearance, it was a bit weird, but, but, she told me to quickly get out of there, and..." (Yi Sung-Jin)

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?’ (Seol)

If what Yi Sung-Jin 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, alarm bells began ringing out loudly from their smartphones.

“W, what the hell?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min cried out in shock after checking out these rather unexpected messages.

“What the f*ck!! Which insane motherf*cker did this?!” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“What, what happened?” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

Shin Sahng-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 – that there was more trouble yet to come.

‘No. It’ll be fine.’ (Seol)

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; there was something he

needed to confirm first, although he thought that his suspicions might not be correct.

“Were you the one screaming just now, Mister Yi Sung-Jin?” (Seol)

“Eh? N, no. Not me. Right, I also came here after hearing that...” (Yi Sung-Jin)

“I, I thought it was a woman’s voice...” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

Shin Sahng-Ah anxiously spoke up.

“In any case, it’s not this kid, so what are we going to do next?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min gritted his teeth.

“If we’re going to search, then we should split up. Or, we go back right now.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Seol had found one of the two people on his mind, so going back to the safe zone now – to the classroom 3-1 – 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.” (Yi Sung-Jin)

Seol was going to suggest going back, but then, Yi Sung-Jin took the initiative first and voiced his opinion. Seol looked at the boy with a surprised expression, and Yi Sung-Jin became somewhat sheepish.

“Ohh, I, uh... I also want to help you.” (Yi Sung-Jin)

“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.” (Seol)

“No. It’s just that, I think my noona wanted to me to find something...” (Yi Sung-Jin)

Although he said that, Yi Sung-Jin’s voice suggested that he wasn’t entirely convinced of it himself.

‘Find something?’ (Seol)

Seol's gaze sharpened. The surroundings became dyed in green. However, the colour from one single spot dissipated almost immediately. The spot with no colour whatsoever was the girl's toilet.

The light was switched off inside the toilet; 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 Seo-Rah?”

The figure collapsed on the bathroom floor was none other than Yun Seo-Rah. 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 Sahng-Min issued a stunned gasp.

“What the f*ck... What happened to her arm...?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

It was just as he said – Yun Seo-Rah's right forearm was completely mangled. As if someone 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 Seo-Rah? Miss Yun Seo-Rah!!” (Seol)

Seol called out her name, but she didn't respond, simply convulsing over and over again.

“Please, move aside!” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

Shin Sahng-Ah hurriedly knelt down and took off her shirt. She ripped her top up, then proceeded to wrap the fabric around Yun Seo-Rah'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 Seo-Rah's eyelids and checked the eyes. A deep frown etched on her forehead.

“She's going through shock. She will die soon if we let her be like this.” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“S, she will die?!”

“Yes! We need to do something! Anything!” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

Shin Sahng-Ah shouted out while repeatedly opening and closing Yun Seo-Rah’s hand. However, Hyun Sahng-Min was comparatively calm as he spoke up.

“Since you did the treasure hunt, you should know it by now – there ain’t no infirmary on either the fourth or fifth floor.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“The item draw.” (Seol)

Seol spoke up and the attention of the three rapidly dawned on 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?” (Seol)

Only after asking this question, Seol realised that it was a wrong one. From the onset, no one knew what would come out of the machine.

“I’ll go and bring whatever comes out.” (Seol)

Seol stood up while slinging his bag over his shoulder.

“What? You going alone?” (Hyun Sahn-Min)

“What’s the matter?” (Seol)

“Let’s not do it that way. How about this? This kiddo here and Miss will move Yun Seo-Rah over to the safe zone. Meanwhile, you spin that d**n draw machine, and if we think we got the right c**p, I’ll take it back to the safe zone. I’ll act as the go-between if it needs be.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Seol found this suggestion quite logical, so, although he knew time was of 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 *Gaeg-gwi* monster would definitely show up sooner or later. Even then, Hyun Sahng-Min was keeping his promise.

“Let’s hurry up!” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min pushed Seol's back.

Entrusting Yun Seo-Rah to the remaining two, Seol and Hyun Sahng-Min headed straight to the library. Perhaps fortunately, they didn't run into the Deceased or 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', too. Some time later, all they had to show for their effort was a couple of rolls of gauze, a bottle of antiseptic, and some ointments, etc, etc. They were neither here nor there.

"Let me just take these along for now. What about you?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

"Go on ahead." (Seol)

"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." (Hyun Sahng-Min)

"Don't worry, I'll rescue you." (Seol)

"Hah! Well, thanks for the sentiment, but I'm not playing here. I'm being serious." (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min 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 *Gaeg-gwi* 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 Seo-Rah 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?' (Seol)

She was a complete stranger to him. So, what did it matter if she died or not? Sure, it'd

be a pity if she did die, but was there a reason for him to go this far? While wasting his hard-earned coins, even?

He couldn't understand it. He thought that it'd be nice if he activated the 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 realised that something was off. He thought that it was already well past the two minute mark, yet Hyun Sahng-Min hadn't returned.

“.....”

Seol felt a certain sense of anxiety creeping in – after all, he thought that Hyun Sahng-Min was joking around and thus, didn't pay attention back then.

Now that he more or less got what he needed, Seol put them all in the 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

A Dangerous Treasure Hunt (4)

Seven people, consisting of Shin Sahng-Ah, Yi Sung-Jin, Hyun Sahng-Min and Yun Seo-Rah, as well as three people Seol shared food with earlier on, were standing on 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. Lee Hyung-Sik and Jeong Min-Woo stood triumphantly, while Kahng Seok was sitting on a chair, looking quite relaxed and pleased with himself.

"You finally showed up." (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok raised his hand and greeted Seol. Ignoring him, Seol walked closer and spotted Hyun Sahng-Min's darkened expression. Anger was evident on his face as well. Shin Sahng-Ah looked like she'd had just about enough of those three, too.

"...They say it's a spell that restricts access." (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min glanced at Seol and groaned out.

'A spell that can restrict access?' (Seol)

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 cement 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." (Kahng Seok)

Kahng 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 a silver, right? Mister high-and-mighty gold Mark.” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok giggled insidiously. Seol frowned slightly, instead.

“You opened the door to the sixth floor, didn’t you?” (Seol)

“Bingo.” (Kahng Seok)

“And why?” (Seol)

“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?” (Kahng Seok)

Of course, Seol knew that. But, he was curious of the reason why Kahng Seok would waste his coins getting that key in the first place. After all, what with Seol and Yun Seo-Rah taking away almost all of the coins, Kahng Seok and his goons couldn’t have had the easiest time searching themselves.

It would have been tough just finding enough for their gate usage fee, so why...

“Ahh...” (Seol)

It was then, a hypothesis formed in Seol’s head. He reflexively turned his head around to look behind him – at the fainted Yun Seo-Rah.

“Yup, as expected! I knew you were a smart guy!” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng 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.” (Kahng Seok)

“What are you saying?” (Seol)

“However, I definitely knew you’d crawl out of here. Seriously now, a nice gentleman like you wouldn’t just sit still on your a*s after hearing that loud *Uwaaaachk*, am I right?” (Kahng Seok)

“.....”

“As for Yun Seo-Rah... 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?” (Kahng Seok)

Hearing this, the pieces finally fell to their intended places.

The first step of Kahng 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, Kahng Seok kept a close eye on the situation.

From the very beginning, he never planned to hit Seol. No, he planned to attack Yun Seo-Rah the moment she revealed that she was in possession of the map.

The timing was important, but the main variable remained Yun Seo-Rah. Kahng Seok had to try something, anything to separate her from Seol.

The original plan was to have one of their members assault either Yi Sung-Jin or some other poor sucker to draw Seol away, and in the meantime, the remaining two would attack the isolated Yun Seo-Rah. 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 Seo-Rah was focused on finding more coins well beyond the midnight mark. How could this situation be any better for Kahng Seok and his goons?

So, trio assaulted Yun Seo-Rah as she entered the girl's restroom. After robbing her of her coins, they went to 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 lost your d**n minds!” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

Shin Sahng-Ah loudly swore at them.

“You insane b*stards! You crippled a person to this degree, just for some measly coins?” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“No~pe. That wasn’t my original intention. I just wanted to knock her out. I swear, that was all.” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok defended himself as if he was being wrongly accused of a crime.

“But then, that girl was so d**n persistent, you know what I mean? She grabbed onto the bag and didn’t want to give it up, and that really p*ssed me off. So, that’s why...” (Kahng Seok)

The end of Kahng Seok’s sentence blurred; Jeong Min-Woo standing next to him giggled unsightly, and then, from seemingly out of nowhere, produced a dagger and performed a stabbing motion in the air. He too was an Invited, albeit as the 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 *Gaeg-gwi* was climbing up to where they were at this precise moment.

“Wow. Sounds like that thing is really p*ssed off, isn’t it? Oh, well. It’s been locked out down below all this time, so there’s that.” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok and his two cronies were the very example of relaxed demeanor, even then.

“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.” (Kahng Seok)

“Are you saying it’ll last forever?” (Seol)

“No ways. It’s not that crazy 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?... However, what do you think will happen, if I only keep the area to half its maximum size? Such as, only around this part of the corridor.” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok pointed once each towards safe zone’s front and rear entrances. Seol didn’t reply. There was no need to, after all; Kahng Seok was implying that, when the

spell's covered area decreased in size, the duration of the spell would increase, instead.

"With that *Gaeg-gwi* coming up, you wouldn't be able to go to the sixth floor yourself, though?" (Seol)

"Oh, that? You don't have to worry. You see, I'm a really lucky b*stard. Look here." (Kahng Seok)

Kahng 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~!" (Kahng Seok)

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 b*stard turned out this way was all thanks to suffering a bad prenatal development or something close to it.

"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?" (Kahng Seok)

"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?' (Seol)

Forming a fake expression that screamed "I didn't think about that!", Kahng 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." (Kahng Seok)

The three men and woman 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

area as soon as the metal barrier was lowered. Only after rushing inside the safe zone did they began spitting out sighs of relief.

And so, the moment Kahng Seok had been waiting for finally came. He gazed at the remaining few outside the barrier with a relaxed smile.

‘Huh...’ (Seol)

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)

Seol slowly reached inside his pockets, getting ready to finish this nonsense once and for all; but, before he could...

“So, what about you, Mister Student? Or you, Hyun Sahng-Min?” (Kahng Seok)

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 *Gaeg-gwi* monster that murdered your pretty and kind sister? Siblings, eh? Is it like, ‘get one and you get another’ kinda deal?” (Kahng Seok)

“I, I...” (Yi Sung-Jin)

“Hey, man. Miss Yi Surl-Ah must be spinning in her grave. I’m pretty sure she’s fervently praying for me to save your hide right now.” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok confirmed that Yi Sung-Jin was trembling like a leaf, and then shifted his attention to Hyun Sahng-Min.

“And you... You did what you could already, right? No, wait a minute – could it be that you’re feeling guilty conscience or something? What the? I thought you were a realistic b*stard like me? Was I wrong?” (Kahng Seok)

“.....”

“Just come in already. There ain’t nobody here to tell you sh*t.” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok's words were as slick and seductive as the whispers of a viper. After hearing those persuasive words, Hyun Sahng-Min and Yi Sung-Jin kept staring at each other before shifting their gazes to a single man.

However, Seol simply stood there in silence.

The first one to make his move was Yi Sung-Jin. He resolutely shut his mouth and trudged onwards. He walked past the invisible barrier and entered the safe zone.

"Kek... Still so young, yet so impressively decisive. Very good. You could even become a general in the future." (Kahng Seok)

Kahng 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 Sahng-Min?" (Kahng Seok)

Even then, Seol didn't show any response. Seeing this, Hyun Sahng-Min licked his lips regretfully and pulled his cap low. After spitting out a low groan, he began moving as well.

"...Sorry." (Hyun Sahng-Min)

...After leaving behind that single word.

"Oh, hang on. How about giving me a smoke first?" (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok stopped Hyun Sahng-Min before the latter could enter the barrier.

"Don't forget the light." (Kahng Seok)

Only after Hyun Sahng-Min personally lit the cigarette for Kahng Seok was he allowed in. Kahng Seok sucked in the cigarette smoke once; he then proceeded to feign shock after 'finding' Shin Sahng-Ah standing there.

"What's the matter with you now? Did you become an exhibitionist all of a sudden after taking your pants off once?" (Kahng Seok)

Shin Sahng-Ah gritted her teeth. Yi Sung-Jin and Hyun Sahng-Min's desertion was

quite shocking, but there was a far more grave 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 Kahng Seok would make things easy for her now.

However, Kahng 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 Seo-Rah’s blood loss. That is commendable. But still, you keep standing there and you might come down with a flu, you know?” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok then took off his cardigan and pushed it towards Shin Sahng-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...!” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“Nope. I’m not trying to lead you on. I promise.” (Kahng Seok)

“But, why...?” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“Stop trying to make me say the obvious things. Take this and put it on, already. Don’t you get it already?” (Kahng Seok)

“...Uh?” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“Man, this lady is really slow on the uptake, huh. I’m saying, you can also come in here. Do I have to spell it out for you too?” (Kahng Seok)

Shin Sahng-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.

A powerful indecision gripped her, then. Meanwhile, Seol still showed no signs of movement.

Shin Sahng-Ah stood between Seol and Kahng Seok as she weighed up her options before a strange light flashed by on her face for the briefest of brief moments. And

then...

“Argh, my arm hurts.” (Kahng Seok)

Just as Kahng Seok lowered the offered cardigan just a tad, she moved her feet.

“That’s right. That’s right.” (Kahng Seok)

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 Kahng Seok’s face.

“Oh? So you really came, eh?” (Kahng Seok)

“What do you mean...?” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“No, no. You did well. Take this before my arm falls off, will you?” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok raised a small fuss while waving the cardigan around. Shin Sahng-Ah glanced at Seol one more time, before reaching out. Just as her hand touched the offered clothing, though – Kahng Seok suddenly grabbed her arm and pulled her in close.

“Mommy?!” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

Like someone falling face first, she fell forward and ended up in the still-seated Kahng Seok’s embrace.

“You like looking for your mom a lot, don’t you?” (Kahng Seok)

“W, what are you doing?!” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“Stay still, will you? You came here knowing this would happen already.” (Kahng Seok)

“I, I...!”

Thud, thud...

The low vibration from the floors below continued to get closer. Shin Sahng-Ah’s stiff body flinched ever so slightly. Kahng Seok’s hand, lightly patting her back, slowly crept lower, past her slender waistline and eventually, arrived at her petite, round rump.

“Or... You’d rather go back outside?” (Kahng Seok)

She began trembling even more when Kahng Seok whispered in her ear. Gradually, all strength seemed to seep out from her. Even when he began roughly kneading her b*tt like rice dough, Shin Sahng-Ah didn’t mount any form of resistance.

“Now, do you feel like listening to what I’m saying?” (Kahng Seok)

“.....”

“You don’t want to answer?” (Kahng Seok)

“...Y, yes...”

When Shin Sahng-Ah replied with honorifics, Kahng Seok’s complexion brightened to reflect his happiness.

“Uh-whew. My little b*tch, look how soft and fluffy your a*s is.” (Kahng Seok)

Slap, slap.

Kahng Seok lightly slapped her rear, causing Shin Sahng-Ah to squeeze her eyes shut. Quite surprisingly, though – she then carefully wrapped her arms around Kahng Seok’s back, and dug deeper into his embrace. Seeing this, Lee Hyung-Sik and Jeong Min-Woo wolf whistled quite loudly. Kahng Seok burst out in a boisterous laughter when she began gently rubbing her cheek to his.

“Very good. See? If you behaved this way from the beginning, everything would’ve been simpler. If you start making me feel happier by showing some *aegyo* and stuff from now on, I’m gonna treat you right, you know?” (Kahng Seok)

While constantly enjoying the riches of Shin Sahng-Ah’s body, Kahng Seok then pointed his chin outside the barrier.

There were only two people remaining there – Seol and the currently-unconscious Yun Seo-Rah.

“So, how does it feel to be betrayed? Why don’t you enlighten us, Mister Gold Mark?” (Kahng Seok)

[Kahng Seok's Status Window]

[1. General Information]

Summoned date: March 16th, 2017

Mark grade: Silver

S*x/Age: Male/29

Height/Weight: 178.8 cm/ 72.6 kg

Current condition: Good

Job: LV. 0 (Invited)

Nationality: Republic of Korea (Area 1)

Affiliation: N/A

Alias: N/A

[2. Personality]

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:

- A gift of gab (Possesses great talent at talking and making speeches.)
- Sadism (Feels sexual gratification only after inflicting physical or psychological pain to another person.)

[3. Physical Level]

Strength: Low – Medium

Endurance: Medium – Low

Agility: Low – High

Stamina: Low – High

Magic: Low – High

Luck: Medium – Low

Remaining ability points: 0

Seol was busy looking at Kahng Seok's Status. 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." (Kahng Seok)

Seol's brows furrowed slightly at that. *A friend, huh.*

"I feel really sorry for you." (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok seemed to be genuinely sorry for Seol, judging from his facial expression.

"Why do you insist on living like that? Mm?" (Kahng Seok)

He lightly tapped on Shin Sahng-Ah's head and continued on.

"You don't seem to have any morals." (Seol)

"Morals?" (Kahng Seok)

Kahng 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's laws and stuff – and if I don't follow them, I will end up behind bars. However..." (Kahng Seok)

Kahng Seok pointed at the ground below.

"However, this isn't Earth. Meaning, there's no reason for me to stay the same here. You are an Invited too, so you should know this by now, no? We're going to a brand new world? My a*s. In the end, this is all just a f*cking game, man. A game. And you're supposed to enjoy playing games." (Kahng Seok)

"A game, huh." (Seol)

"Yup. So, what's the point of keeping up with your morals here? Like, what's the f*cking point of being the best, kindest, and the most fair in this place? There is no one here who gives a sh*t about those things. Only 'me' counts. I'm telling you, nobody cares." (Kahng Seok)

"Ahh, aheuck!" (Shin Sahng-Ah)

Kahng Seok suddenly grabbed Shin Sahng-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?" (Kahng Seok)

Shin Sahng-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?" (Kahng Seok)

Seol continued to listen while standing there, his arms across his chest.

"You want to look after these weaklings? What a load of f*cking bull. You think all those with power are evil, and weaklings are all pure, nice folks? You still think these losers are nice?" (Kahng Seok)

Kahng 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." (Kahng Seok)

Seol slowly closed his eyes. The words coming out of Kahng Seok was something he too was thinking about recently.

"You still don't get it? What happened to Yi Surl-Ah earlier? And what's happening to you now?" (Kahng Seok)

"..."

"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..." (Seol)

"That's right!" (Kahng Seok)

Kahng 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.” (Kahng Seok)

“?”

“Like true men, why don’t we let bygones be bygones. As a symbol of starting over... Ahh.” (Kahng Seok)

As if he remembered something, Kahng Seok withdrew his hand.

“I still should make you apologise, though.” (Kahng Seok)

Seol’s eyes narrowed.

“An apology, huh.” (Seol)

“That’s right, an apology. The spot you sucker punched me still hurts, you know?” (Kahng Seok)

Whew – Kahng 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?” (Kahng Seok)

Seol quietly stared at Kahng Seok.

“Well, it’s a simple matter, anyway. All you have to say is one word – sorry. Then, we can become true friends afterwards.” (Kahng Seok)

Seol took a glance at Yun Seo-Rah.

“Not her. You gotta leave her there.” (Kahng Seok)

Kahng 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 mindspace where you’re thinking that you can’t help it if it means saving Yun Seo-Rah. You see, I really hate hypocrites.” (Kahng Seok)

Seol shifted his gaze away and then, placed his left hand on the invisible barrier.

“...Mi...” (Seol)

Kahng Seok smirked; his mouth opened up progressively wider in a smile as if his long-held wish was finally being granted.

“...Mi...” (Seol)

Seol sounded as if he was desperately squeezing out his voice ‘unwillingly’. Like a kid opening up his birthday present, the colours of Kahng Seok’s expression brightened even more.

Seol held his breath, then clenched his fist.

“...Michinnom.”

“I was lyin... Huh?!” (Kahng Seok)

Just as Kahng Seok forgot what he was going to say and sat there stupefied, the safe area behind him became quite noisy.

“What the hell?” (Jeong Min-Woo)

Jeong Min-Woo 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...

Chapter 17

A Dangerous Treasure Hunt (5)

SLAM!!

“Kheuck!”

Blood spilled on the ground; Jeong Min-Woo’s large frame tilted unsteadily to the side, before falling down hard with a loud thud. And from the seemingly empty space, Hyun Sahng-Min’s figure slowly revealed itself like a ghost. There was a steel bar clutched in both of his hands.

“What the...?!” (Kahng Seok)

The utterly stunned Kahng Seok tried to stand up from the chair, but he couldn’t. Shin Sahng-Ah was desperately clinging on to Kahng Seok’s waist with both of her hands tightly interlocked, as if the ghost of Nongae had come to possess her. Also, she was pushing down on him with all of her body weight, as well.

“Sung-Jin-*ah*!!” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

She shouted out while lowering her head in a hurry.

“Uh? Oh! Right!” (Yi Sung-Jin)

And so, Kahng Seok had no choice but to watch on helplessly as a chair descended upon his unguarded face. Accompanied by a dull impact noise, his head snapped to the left.

“G, geuwaaaahhh...”

Kahng 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 utter out my sister’s name?” (Yi Sung-Jin)

Yi Sung-Jin angrily spat out while carrying a chair.

Now left alone, Lee Hyung-Sik dazedly stared at Hyun Sahng-Min as the latter man spat on the floor in disgust.

“Hey, man. Why don’t you take a nap.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

One swing of the steel bar later, Lee Hyung-Sik’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. And as he continued to blink in stupefied state, he ended up witnessing something quite... extraordinary.

Kahng Seok, even as his eyes were swimming from the impact to his head, was pulling out his other paper talisman, almost unnoticed; at that moment, Shin Sahng-Ah, baring her teeth like an angry lioness, pounced on that hand holding the talisman.

“Euh-waaaaack!!” (Kahng Seok)

Her teeth tore into his flesh; Kahng Seok threw his head wildly while screaming in pain. She didn’t stop there, though – she then proceeded to climb up on top of his writhing body and lifted her hands up high.

“In all my life, I... I...!” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

Slap!

Her wide open palm powerfully slapped Kahng Seok’s face.

“I’ve never, ever seen...!” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

SLAP!!

“...A d**n perv like you who’s so fixated on a girl’s naked body before, you d**n son of a b*tch!!” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

Slam!

Her third hit was an elbow drop roughly aimed at Kahng Seok’s philtrum. Blood

exploded out from his nose.

Kahng Seok was laid out on the floor like a dead frog, and when her elbow hit, he began convulsing like a person having a seizure. However, that must have not been enough to cool her anger – Shin Sahng-Ah stood up while breathing like an angry bull, and then, lifted her foot up as high as she could.

“...No, she wouldn’t...” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Seeing this, Hyun Sahng-Min flinched and stopped his actions of making sure that Lee Hyung-Sik and Jeong Min-Woo 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 Kahng Seok’s family jewels.

“@%#%^%!!!!!!” (Kahng Seok)

Maybe he had some energy left over, because Kahng Seok’s scream was loud enough to tear open his own vocal cords.

Only then, Seol could feel the restriction spell being deactivated. Since the owner of the spell lost consciousness, it was only natural that it would be cancelled.

Seol was able to regain his focus when he heard the wet, sticky footsteps coming from his rear.

It was the monster, *Gaeg-gwi*. It would’ve been strange if the creature didn’t show up after so much noisy chaos unfolded here already. Although Seol was confident of killing the monster, he’d rather make sure that an unlucky accident wouldn’t happen.

Seol hurriedly carried Yun Seo-Rah into the safe zone, and then pulled the still-enthusiastic Shin Sahng-Ah inside as well.

“Miss Shin Sahng-Ah!! Miss Shin! Please, stop!” (Seol)

“Let me go! Let me go, right now! Do you have any idea how much this b*stard...!! I, I...!!” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“It’s the monster! The *Gaeg-gwi* has shown up!” (Seol)

“...Eh?...?!?! Mommy!!” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

When Shin Sahng-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, 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 Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min'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?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

"? Should we bring them inside, then?" (Seol)

"You do that, and we are through." (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min bitterly spat out his opinion.

Not too long after, the two men looked at the corridor through the classroom window. The Gaeg-gwi had come closer before anybody had noticed, and was in the middle of slowly devouring Jeong Min-Woo.

Crunch, crunch.

Seeing the monster chew and swallow the man from his head first, Seol could only feel the sense of astonished disgust.

"What happened just now?" (Seol)

"Mm? Oh, that. Yeah, well. Me and the boy over here exchanged some eye signals, you know what I mean? I was the one who signaled Miss Shin over here, though." (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Did that really happen? Seol felt rather dazed after hearing that, since he genuinely had not noticed it. Hyun Sahng-Min chuckled, sounding rather pleased with himself.

“What? You thought we really betrayed you just now?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“How did you signal to each other?” (Seol)

“Like this. I just had to show this off a bit, and...” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min began fiddling around with a half-torn piece of paper – but, ‘it’ happened right then.

“K, khhhh-euhhh!!” (Kahng Seok)

Suddenly, the sliding door was flung open and Kahng 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, 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?!” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

As soon as she saw him, Shin Sahng-Ah ran hard and kicked Kahng Seok’s head like a ball.

“K, keok!! P, please! H, help me!” (Kahng Seok)

“Help you?! You cheeky b*stard! Have you forgotten all the c**p you did already?!” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“...P, please!” (Kahng Seok)

“Get lost! Get lost!!!” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

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 Gaeg-gwi had finished devouring the two lackeys, and when it saw the bloodied Kahng Seok, it reached out and grabbed him as if he was a delicious dessert.

“Hey! You, you devour that a*shole slowly, okay?! You eat him piece by piece, got that?!”
(Shin Sahng-Ah)

The Gaeg-gwi blinked its large eye several times while hearing that. Then, it proceeded to chew on Kahng Seok from his feet onwards. Hyun Sahng-Min began shuddering after witnessing all this.

“I, uh, I didn’t know she was this insane.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Seol almost ended up agreeing out aloud with him there.

“And well, there we go, that thing finishing everything up. I hadn’t gotten my share of satisfaction yet, though.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“Isn’t it enough just watching them die like that?” (Seol)

“Yeah, actually, you’re right. I guess this is a fine end, too... But still, f*ck this, man. How are we supposed to deal with that thing now?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min sighed and covered his face.

They might have taken care of Kahng Seok and his lackeys, but a new problem rose up to replace them: the monster Gaeg-gwi. 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, ten thousand years, either.

“In that case, we better kill it, then.” (Seol)

“Eh?”

Seol’s voice was refreshingly confident.

Kahng 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 below the chest.

Seol then lightly tapped on the window sills. The Gaeg-gwi spun its head around like a bolt of lightning, faced him, and opened wide its jaw 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 Gaeg-gwi 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, 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.' (Seol)

"What did you throw in there?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

"It's a spell ball called 'Poison Fog'." (Seol)

Seol answered rather briefly and pulled a couple more spell balls out from his pocket, before asking Hyun Sahng-Min a question.

"Right. What was that thing earlier?" (Seol)

"What thing?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

"You suddenly appearing out of thin air like that." (Seol)

While speaking, Seol carefully took aim and threw another spell ball. The red-coloured spell ball drew a small arc in the air and landed perfectly inside the Gaeg-gwi mouth once more.

"Oh, that? I also got a paper talisman through my Random Box, you see. For concealment." (Hyun Sahng-Min)

"Concealment, is it?" (Seol)

Hyun Sahng-Min nodded his head while paying very close attention to the suffering Gaeg-gwi.

"I can stay invisible for a long time, but it gets cancelled if I attack someone just once." (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“Didn’t you say you only received 500 Survival Points?” (Seol)

“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 c...” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Boom!!

Hyun Sahng-Min couldn’t finish his sentence thanks to the sudden explosion. Hyun Sahng-Min mouthed *What the hell was that?* and quickly took a look outside the window – only to yank the sunglasses off his face.

Kkkkiiiiieecccckkk!!

That terrifying monster Gaeg-gwi was rolling on the ground, evidently in a lot of pain. And whenever there were the sounds of explosion coming from its innards, its entire body took on a reddish hue and began swelling up.

“You, you even had things like this?!” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“Well, I was going to use it just now, but you guys made a move first, so... Oh, it’s running away.” (Seol)

The Gaeg-gwi was doing whatever it could to scramble away, but Seol simply chucked another spell ball, which accurately landed on the fleeing monster’s back. An explosion of light occurred next, and dozens of spider web-like things shot out, tightly bounding the Gaeg-gwi to the spot.

“.....” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

It was about here that Hyun Sahng-Min 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.’ (Seol)

The last spell ball landing on the monster transformed into clear liquid and rained down on the monster that couldn’t go anywhere.

“What happened?!” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

Shin Sahng-Ah asked after belatedly approaching them.

“I killed it.” (Seol)

Seok 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 Gaeg-gwi could be found lying on the floor.

“Oh, wow... Really...” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

Seol explained himself further as the others showed disbelieving reactions.

“The Guide was right. By drawing a couple of spell balls, we could’ve got to have fun with this mission. And well, I got lucky with the right combination of spells.” (Seol)

“Spell balls? Combination?” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“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 Gaeg-gwi with the spell ‘Spider Web’, and then showered it with Hydrochloric Acid.” (Seol)

“Oh, my...” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

Shin Sahng-Ah’s mouth opened wide, and she quickly brought up her hand to cover it.

“...Isn’t that a bit... too cruel...” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

Seol and Hyun Sahng-Min could only stare at her totally dumbfounded – even Yi Sung-Jin 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 Sahng-Ah regained her bearings and quickly treated Yun Seo-Rah's injuries. Thankfully, her life was spared, but Shin Sahng-Ah had no confidence about the arm – saying 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 of waiting for Yun Seo-Rah to regain her consciousness, but also, the main issue was with them all being just too d**n fatigued to carry on any further.

While looking on at the trio of Yi Sung-Jin, Yun Seo-Rah, and Shin Sahng-Ah softly snoring away, Seol quietly asked a question.

“I don't see that middle-aged man.” (Seol)

“Mm? Who?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“You know, that guy with glasses.” (Seol)

“Oh, the guy who gave up on his fami... Cough. Why? You wanna go out and look for him, too?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Seol didn't reply, and simply chugged down a bottle of energy drink.

A short period of awkward silence flowed between them, before Hyun Sahng-Min tapped a cigarette loose from the packet.

“Hey, man... Can I ask you about something?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“Mm?” (Seol)

“Back then, when you were staring down at Kahng Seok... You were going to use those spell balls, weren't you?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

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?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

When Hyun Sahng-Min 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.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“You said it before. Human beings would only reveal their true colours when pushed to a corner... I just wanted to confirm with my own eyes.” (Seol)

This time, Hyun Sahng-Min became speechless.

Another bout of silence descended upon them. But, a short while later...

“F*ck, man. So, did we pass or what?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

The two men laughed out at the same time.

Chapter 18

Rewards Befitting One's Achievements (1)

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 his Nine Eyes was still there; his vision was dyed in green, before returning back to normal.

Seol felt relieved after his ability activated without an issue. Then, he came to realise that there were three people missing from the classroom. The glasses wearing middle-aged man hadn't been seen since last night, but now, both Yun Seo-Rah and Yi Sung-Jin were gone as well.

'Where are they?' (Seol)

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)

Seol picked up his bag and the steel bar. Maybe because he and Hyun Sahng-Min 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 Sung-Jin walking down the stairs, looking visibly downtrodden. After spotting Seol himself, the boy hurriedly bowed his head.

"Good morning, *hyung*." (Yi Sung-Jin)

"Yes, good morning to you, too. Did you sleep well?" (Seol)

Yi Sung-Jin'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...” (Yi Sung-Jin)

“Oh? That okay with you?” (Seol)

Seol stopped using honorifics right away; he also noticed the boy’s anxious demeanor as well. It was as if Yi Sung-Jin wanted to hurry up and get going.

“Still in the middle of the treasure hunt?” (Seol)

“...Yes.” (Yi Sung-Jin)

“How many did you find so far?” (Seol)

“Uhm... If I count the ones I found after waking up this morning, then it’s enough to pay for my passage.” (Yi Sung-Jin)

Considering the fact that Seol and Yun Seo-Rah had monopolised 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 Kahng Seok with a chair was a rather wonderfully mystifying act.

“Thanks for your help last night. I made it because of you.” (Seol)

“Ah, that’s not true. That *hyung* did most of the work, anyway.” (Yi Sung-Jin)

Although the boy said so, both Yi Sung-Jin and Shin Sahng-Ah combined their strength to knock Kahng 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 a help.” (Seol)

“Of course I’d help. I too had to suffer because of him on the second floor.” (Yi Sung-Jin)

“Oh? You did it out of revenge, then?” (Seol)

“No, rather than revenge... I mean, he was deliberately indulging in only evil things. He had a really twisted, evil mind, you know?” (Yi Sung-Jin)

Seol chuckled slightly after hearing the teen’s declaration. Indeed, Kahng Seok was an evil man. As if he had more things to say, Yi Sung-Jin hesitated and mumbled softly.

“Besides... I got a feeling that you would’ve resolved the matters by yourself, anyways...” (Yi Sung-Jin)

“Mm? Why do you think that?” (Seol)

“I mean, you did kill that Gaeg-gwi monster so easily. And, also...” (Yi Sung-Jin)

He hesitated again, before continuing on.

“I kinda thought that noona was telling me to find you.” (Yi Sung-Jin)

“Miss Yi Surl-Ah said that?” (Seol)

“Yes... No, I mean, it’s just my gut feeling. I’ll ask her after I revive her.” (Yi Sung-Jin)

Just the mere thought of his older sister must’ve made him happier, because there was a radiant smile forming on Yi Sung-Jin’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)

Seol walked up the staircase. The boy’s eyes dazedly chased after him going up. When Seol beckoned him to follow, Yi Sung-Jin hurriedly moved his legs.

“I, I think there’s no more coins left on the fifth floor. And you don’t have to...” (Yi Sung-Jin)

“Nope. There are no coins left on the fourth floor for sure. But, there should be four more left on the fifth.” (Seol)

Seol knew this, because he had checked the diary of the unknown student already.

“Eh?” (Yi Sung-Jin)

“Besides all that – how did you and your sister receive your Invitations?” (Seol)

Seol quickly changed the topic. Although Yi Sung-Jin 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 Sung-Jin 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 Sahng-Ah, and he spent further 150 on trying to get the right medical supplies for Yun Seo-Rah. 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?” (Seol)

Yi Sung-Jin 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)

Seol said as such while pushing open the library’s door. Yi Sung-Jin’s eyes grew very large.

“H, hyung?!” (Yi Sung-Jin)

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 Sung-Jin)

Yi Sung-Jin gazed on at this sight with pitying eyes, before he proceeded to pick up all the coins on the floor. Seol approached Yun Seo-Rah and asked her in a soft voice.

“Are you feeling okay?” (Seol)

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?” (Seol)

She silently nodded her head.

“Uhm, here...” (Yi Sung-Jin)

Yi Sung-Jin sheepishly entered into the conversation and cautiously reached out with his hands cupped together. Coins filled his hands.

Finally, Yun Seo-Rah 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 Sung-Jin 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?’ (Seol)

...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.” (Seol)

“I, it's fine. I know that you did this only out of your generosity...” (Yi Sung-Jin)

Although he said that, Yi Sung-Jin 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 Seo-Rah.” (Seol)

She suddenly offered her hand.

“Here...” (Yun Seo-Rah)

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.” (Yun Seo-Rah)

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?” (Seol)

“Yes.” (Yun Seo-Rah)

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 Seo-Rah tried to clear up her position.

“I heard from the boy not too long ago. Yesterday...” (Yun Seo-Rah)

When Yun Seo-Rah shifted her gaze to Yi Sung-Jin’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...” (Yi Sung-Jin)

While he was speaking up, Yi Sung-Jin’s eyes were completely fixated on Yun Seo-Rah’s offered hand.

“Is it okay for us to receive this? What about your arm?” (Seol)

“This item won’t work on a living person. You’ll understand once you read the paper.” (Yun Seo-Rah)

“...”

Seol cautiously received the bottle. Her skin that came in contact with his was cold and very smooth.

Yun Seo-Rah 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 Sung-Jin)

Yi Sung-Jin shouted out loudly.

“Thank you!! Really! Truly! Thank you!” (Yi Sung-Jin)

Tears were already flowing out from the boy’s eyes as he bent his back forward 90 degrees.

“Thank you.” (Seol)

Seol too thanked her. She stopped walking, then.

“...Me, too.” (Yun Seo-Rah)

She then bowed slightly as well, before quickly leaving the library for good.

‘I guess she’s a nice person, after all... ’ (Seol)

Seol tilted his head slightly, before quickly unwrapping the paper around the bottle. If he delayed any longer, Yi Sung-Jin 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 Gaeg-Gwi.”

“The first and the third requirements are met already, but... a portion of the body part?” (Seol)

“I know where to find that!” (Yi Sung-Jin)

Yi Sung-Jin 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 Sung-Jin 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 Sung-Jin)

Yi Sung-Jin 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... ’ (Seol)

It was in stark contrast to Yi Surl-Ah, who allowed her younger brother run away.

“Sssuuunnnggg—Jjjiinnn...?”

An ear-grating voice came from the corner of the lab. Seol and Yi Sung-Jin spotted a figure squatting down there, just like how Yun Seo-Rah 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 Sung-Jin)

Yi Sung-Jin quickly recovered from shock and jumped up and down.

“You can live again!! Really!” (Yi Sung-Jin)

“Llliiivvveee...?”

“This hyung, this hyung got the potion to revive you!!” (Yi Sung-Jin)

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 do you want to revive?* So, he pointed at Yi Surl-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.

SFX for bright lights exploding out

A bright light exploded out from Yi Surl-Ah’s figure. It was so blinding, Yi Sung-Jin 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 *paht!*, 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 Surl-Ah had been revived.

“N, noonaaaa!!” (Yi Sung-Jin)

Yi Sung-Jin ran as if he was flying and embraced his older sister tightly.

The two of them must have more tears left to shed – Yi Surl-Ah remained confused for a while, but when she saw Yi Sung-Jin 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 Sahng-Min was in the middle of chewing a piece of bread, but his jaw dropped so much that the piece actually fell out. Shin Sahng-Ah’s reaction wasn’t all that much different from his.

“Seriously now. The revival thing was all true.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

After listening to a brief explanation, Hyun Sahng-Min laughed out loudly.

Seol handed over a packet of food from the convenience store to Yun Seo-Rah 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 Sahng-Min 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.” (Seol)

“Stop exaggerating.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“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.” (Seol)

Even then, the siblings were expressing their gratitude in multitude of ways and gestures. Seol ended up facepalming, before pointing towards Yun Seo-Rah, who happened to be sitting away from them a light distance away.

“Miss Yi Surl-Ah?” (Seol)

“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...” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“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.” (Seol)

Yun Seo-Rah stopped quietly biting into her sandwich and threw him a look of protest. Seol resolutely ignored her.

“Is that true?” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“Yes. If it weren’t for Miss Yun Seo-Rah drawing the potion, reviving you wouldn’t have been possible.” (Seol)

“Y, yeah! That’s right, noona! That lady gave the revival potion to hyung!” (Yi Sung-Jin)

“Lady Yun Seo-Rah!” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-Ah finally left Seol's side. He breathed out a sigh of relief and changed his target to Yi Sung-Jin this time. He pulled out 100 coins and handed it over to the boy.

"Your noona's passage fee." (Seol)

"...Ahh!" (Yi Sung-Jin)

As if he hadn't thought about that until now, the boy went *Oh, d**n it! I forgot!* Just as the boy was about to say something else...

"Please, just stop." (Seol)

Seol pleaded with the boy.

"Do not even think of saying 'thank you'. Don't even bow to me. You even mention 'tha' of 'thanks', I'm not going to give you these coins. Got it?" (Seol)

"....."

"If you're grateful, then you quickly scoot over to Miss Yun Seo-Rah and tell her that. Just like your sister." (Seol)

Yi Sung-Jin 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 Seo-Rah as possible.

Only after somehow taking care of the crisis did Seol get to enjoy his meal in peace. Shin Sahng-Ah and Hyun Sahng-Min simply giggled while watching this unfold.

"I might die of laughter here, you know? Just look at Miss Yun Seo-Rah's expressions." (Shin Sahng-Ah)

"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." (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Seol replied '85'; Hyun Sahng-Min used his eyes to send him a signal, telling him to look to his side.

A trio of two men and a woman couldn't participate in the relaxed meal time, and they could only look on in daze from the corner of the classroom. Seeing them, Seol quietly

asked Hyun Sahng-Min.

“Aren’t they going to have a meal, too?” (Seol)

“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.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Even Shin Sahng-Ah nodded her head in agreement.

“And, also... Not too long ago, they asked me if I could spare them any coins.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“Ah, that’s right – their passage fees. They are short by how many?” (Seol)

“All three of them combined, around twenty, maybe thirty.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min 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?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“Don’t help them. Like, never.” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

For some reason, even Shin Sahng-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 Sung-Jin who at least tried to open the metal barrier, then who knows. However, as it was now, Shin Sahng-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 Kahng Seok made his offer back then.

Even putting aside the fact that they actually didn’t do anything at all, she lost what little favourable 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 Sahng-Min.

“Mm?”

“You use them. There’s still some time left before midday.” (Seol)

“You want me to spend them? On the draw machine?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“If you’re scared of the Deceased, then don’t. However, I haven’t spotted a lot of them so far.” (Seol)

Hyun Sahng-Min’s expressions became rather strange just then.

“What the... I can really spend these?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“I’m telling you, yeah. You can.” (Seol)

Seol didn’t have anything else to draw from the machine, anyways. Also, since he had peeked into Hyun Sahng-Min’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 Sahng-Min, Seol might not have been able to kill the Gaeg-gwi, so this was sort of a reward as well.

“Seriously? You aren’t gonna say anything about how I spend these, right?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“Use them or throw them away – do whatever you feel like.” (Seol)

Since Seol said as much, there was no reason for Hyun Sahng-Min 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 Sahng-Ah)

Shin Sahng-Ah stopped her meal and chased after him. The trio glared at Seol with resentful eyes and then, also left the classroom, clearing running after Hyun Sahng-Min and Shin Sahng-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 while, while spectating on Yun Seo-Rah and her troubles.

However, he nearly toppled over from his seat when the Yi siblings abruptly returned to his side instead. Yun Seo-Rah 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, 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)

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!" (Han)

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 realising there was a slight inconsistency to the Guide's declaration.

'Is this everyone?' (Seol)

Because, there was only six people on the rooftop. The trio of two men and a woman were nowhere to be seen.

"From the beginning when 38 lives started this journey..." (Han)

While Han started gushing on and on about something, Seol approached Hyun Sahng-Min who was whistling out in a carefree manner and asked softly.

"What happened?" (Seol)

"Mm? Oh, you mean, with the coins?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

"Those three people. Did you kill them?" (Seol)

"What? No!... I gave 55 coins to Shin Sahng-Ah. I told her draw whatever. And whatever she got, we split down the middle." (Hyun Sahng-Min)

"And the rest?" (Seol)

"...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)

Han was still in the middle of his speech. Hyun Sahng-Min 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?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

"?"

"If you promise me not to get mad, then I'll tell you." (Hyun Sahng-Min)

"I promise." (Seol)

“I threw them away. All thirty coins.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Seol doubted his own hearing, then.

“You threw them away?” (Seol)

“That’s what I said. I chucked them down the toilet bowl and flushed them away.”
(Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min 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 watch them throw a tantrum.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min continued to giggle away.

Chapter 19

Rewards Befitting One's Achievements (2)

“Will you please keep it down over there?” (Han)

The Guide issued a stern warning as soon as things became a bit noisy. Hyun Sahng-Min didn't say anything else and suppressed his laughter.

“First of all, let us commence with evaluating your level of cognition.” (Han)

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, should we start assessing your 'Actions' first?” (Han)

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.” (Han)

As Han's explanation continued, the speed of the dizzying spin gradually slowed down. Words such as 'Righteous', 'Fussy', 'Temperamental', 'Disgust'...'Moderate', 'Right in the middle', and even 'Hypocrite' flashed by Seol's column, before it stopped on the word 'Moderate'.

“Hul.”

Shin Sahng-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?!” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“I assure you, things will only get tougher for you if you are getting shocked already.” (Han)

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’ve ended up feeling, when facing certain events or phenomena. Out of the three, you could say it has the most... *variety*.” (Han)

For Seol, his middle column came to a stop with the word ‘Curiosity’ showing up. Seol nodded his head in agreement. Then, he saw Hyun Sahng-Min giggle 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.” (Han)

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.” (Han)

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)

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 [Personality], while

‘Disposition’ was listed under the [Level of Cognition]. And so, we arrived at a temporary conclusion.” (Han)

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...” (Han)

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.” (Han)

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)

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.” (Han)

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.” (Han)

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; hard-working)/Curiosity/Chaotic (Many things are jumbled up and is impossible to unravel)

[Your Status Window is being updated.]

‘Chaotic...’ (Seol)

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 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)

Han winked a little here. It happened, then.

Thud, thud.

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. However, one of them was missing now. The girl who pleaded with Seol to save her *Oppa* was not among them.

“We’ve brought along the passage fee.”

The woman’s voice was icy as she 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.

It was around here that Seol thought he could hear a sorrowful wail of a female coming from down below. The young man hurriedly closed shut the door behind him, though.

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)

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 Sahng-Min with venomous eyes. Even deep grudge could be spied in them as well.

"*Aigoo~*, I'm sooo scared." (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Of course, Hyun Sahng-Min 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.

"Now, let's see here... Actually, the calculations for Miss Oh Min-Young were simple. You shall receive 35 Survival Points." (Han)

"...Survival Points?" (Oh Min-Young)

"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." (Han)

"Where are we supposed to use these points, then?" (Oh Min-Young)

"You'll find out once you get there." (Han)

The woman, Oh Min-Young, 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 Min-Young up to the roof.

“You have 0 point.” (Han)

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.” (Han)

The young man was clearly embarrassed as he stepped through the gate.

And so, the entry procedure carried on.

Yun Seo-Rah received 317 points. Shin Sahng-Ah, 116. Hyun Sahng-Min, 302. Yi Sung-Jin, 114. As for Yi Surl-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.” (Han)

“?”

“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.” (Han)

The tone of his voice was quite combative, but Han was beaming rather brilliantly.

“In any case, here’s your points tally. During the first mission, 200 bonus points added after successfully chasing away the Gaeg-gwi 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 Sahng-Ah.” (Han)

That amounted to 350 points. Hearing this, Seol tilted his head.

“I thought 100 points was the maximum for the first mission?” (Seol)

“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.” (Han)

Seol nodded his head in acceptance.

‘Is that why both Yun Seo-Rah and Hyun Sahng-Min have high scores?’ (Seol)

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.” (Han)

“.....”

“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 Gaeg-gwi alone. 150 extra points for reviving Miss Yi Surl-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)

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)

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.” (Han)

“The VIP store?” (Seol)

“There is such a thing. You’ll see once you get there... Oh, I almost forgot.” (Han)

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...” (Seol)

“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.” (Han)

Seol was about to ask something, but then, the blonde maid began pushing him from behind.

“H, hey! Wait a minute!” (Seol)

“My role ends here.” (Han)

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)

...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?’ (Seol)

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 Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min muttered almost inaudibly.

“What is?” (Seol)

“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?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Seol shook his head.

“Ah, she’s moving again. Are we supposed to enter first?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min’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 Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min 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.’ (Seol)

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 Sahng-Min 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...” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

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?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

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?” (Seol)

“Don’t forget Africa, too. When transitioning from Area 5 to Area 7, there was a short gap there.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min added his opinion while agreeing to Seol’s guesses.

‘So, that means...’ (Seol)

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.

PAHT!!!

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

Rewards Befitting One's Achievements (3)

Seol found the blonde maid that guided him during the Area 1 Tutorial on the stage. It wasn't only her, though – a total of nine maids all wearing the identical outfit stood there, their hands neatly folded and resting in front of their stomachs.

And a lone figure was sitting in the middle of them all. This figure, a female, wasn't kitted out in 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 the smooth waterfall of hair cascading from her slightly lowered head seemed to have taken on 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~. *(TL note at the end)*

...They were even breaking into songs, too.

“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, though – the song came to its natural 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 possessed a good sense to pick up on the awkward atmosphere, she'd have lowered her hand already. However, maybe she was either exceedingly brave or simply daring – 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 are they talking about until now?” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“That tall lady said that her name is Cinzia. And the person who asked the question must be named Odelette Delphine from Area 2.” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Shin Sahng-Ah grumbled softly in a low voice, and Yi Surl-Ah proceeded to whisper back.

“Cinzia? Othello Delphine? What kind of names are those?!” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“I think Cinzia is an Italian name. And, uhm, it’s not Othello, but Odelette...” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-Ah smiled awkwardly and tried to explain. However...

[The synchronisation 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 Surl-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 synchronisation 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 synchronisation was delayed somewhat. Oh well, I’m sure you can all understand me now.” (Cinzia)

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’ve 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 godd*mn parrots, I’d have been really p*ssed off by now.” (Cinzia)

Her steps rang around loudly as she started walking again.

“As a show of respect for you all not raising a fuss regarding the synchronisation, 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)

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.” (Cinzia)

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?” (Cinzia)

Seol’s points tally was 21500. Han confidently declared that it was the highest in the written 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.” (Cinzia)

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 the 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...” (Cinzia)

“What the f*ck is the meaning of this?”

The loud voice of dissent came from Area 4. A man with imposing physique, and a beard to match, stood up from his seat. Cinzia only spared him a cursory glance, though.

“Hmph... If you don’t want to regurgitate that burrito you shoved down your face before you got here, you’d better sit your a*s back down. I really hate being asked a question in the middle of my speech.” (Cinzia)

The bearded man blinked his eyes in surprise for a few seconds, before his expression crumpled in anger.

“What the f*ck? Watch your mouth, you spaghetti b*tch!”

Cinzia threw her head back in a loud fit of laughter.

“Certainly a barbaric Mexican, ain’t ya? You from the Sinaloa, right?” (Cinzia)

“How the f*ck do you know that...?”

“It’s obvious. Out of those with the authority to recruit, the only one who can mass mobilise the bronze Marks are found there, after all.” (Cinzia)

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)

Cinzia took a look at the paper, and a mocking smile formed on her lips.

“0 points? What the? Is this real?” (Cinzia)

The maid quietly nodded her head.

“It’s not even the red Mark, yet to get 0 as a bronze...” (Cinzia)

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.” (Cinzia)

“You...!”

“Sit the f*ck down, before I find out who invited you and f*ck him up, too.” (Cinzia)

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)

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 the Lost Paradise. THE Lost Paradise. Got that?” (Cinzia)

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 f*cking warzone, where you will be permitted to survive only after your enemies are all dead.” (Cinzia)

She flicked the b**t of the cigarette away and crossed her arms again.

“However, 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 f*ck around. You better not fool yourselves into thinking that things you’ll encounter in the Lost Paradise is around the same level as what you experienced in the Tutorial.” (Cinzia)

Only now the *reality* of it must’ve hit home – the small commotion died down almost immediately.

“That’s right. If you get me, then keep your mouths shut, you useless bunch of woodpeckers.” (Cinzia)

It was at this moment that a giggle escaped out from Seol’s lips. He was seriously concentrating on Cinzia’s words, but then, couldn’t help himself when she blared out the woodpeckers bit. He realised he had made a mistake right away, and tried to cover his mouth – but, by then, he was the centre of the attention already.

“And you...” (Cinzia)

Before she could say anything, a strange glimmer could be seen in Cinzia’s eyes.

“Oh, I see. Indeed, you may find all of this rather... adorable.” (Cinzia)

“?”

“But, you should try to understand, please. No matter how careful the selection process was, there will always be some dirt that manage to escape the filtering.” (Cinzia)

Seol was expecting to hear an earful, yet upon hearing her voice that seemingly asked for his understanding, he could only feel confusion.

“Oh well, even such nonsense would come to an end here, anyways.” (Cinzia)

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 ain’t going to be a walk in the park, you feel me?” (Cinzia)

Several people began flinching noticeably, then.

“This is the consequence of your own actions. Who told you to get a free pass through the Tutorial, eh? No one, that’s what.” (Cinzia)

Even Yi Surl-Ah’s complexion wasn’t so good. Her points only amounted to 46.

“Now that we’re here, 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, too...” (Cinzia)

Fwoooooo... Cinzia let off a lengthy groan and reached into her inner coat pocket.

“From here on, those with names I call out – stand up. Area 5, Tong Chai?” (Cinzia)

A thin man wearing a white turban stood up.

“You already meet the requirements. If you want, you can enter the Paradise right away.” (Cinzia)

“I choose to remain.” (Tong Chai)

“Then, take this.” (Cinzia)

Cinzia threw something at this Tong Chai. He easily snatched it off the air and asked her, full of curiosity.

“This is?” (Tong Chai)

“What the? A member of the death squad is asking for more info?” (Cinzia)

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.” (Cinzia)

This time, a man with a salt-and-pepper hair cut in short, sporty style stood up.

Cinzia didn’t bother to say anything and simply threw something at his way as well. The unexpectedly-youthful man caught it, bowed slightly, and sat back down on his

seat.

“Area 7, Hao, Win.” (Cinzia)

One of the identically-kitted Chinese men, a man with good physique and looking somewhere around in the mid thirties, stood up this time.

“Seeing how you carry yourself, I can easily guess where you’re from. So, will you be staying?” (Cinzia)

“That is a foolish question. I will be staying, of course.” (Hao Win)

The man named Hao Win smiled refreshingly.

“Okay. And then... Area 2, Delphine, Odelette.” (Cinzia)

“I’m also staying.” (Odelette Delphine)

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!” (Odelette Delphine)

“Mm?” (Cinzia)

“I think you gave me the wrong one, because it says No.2 on the plate.” (Odelette Delphine)

“Nope. I know full well that you earned 7500 points.” (Cinzia)

Shocked and impressed gasps came from the various parts of the audience seats. 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?” (Cinzia)

“Y, yes, you are right...” (Odelette Delphine)

“But, how regretful. That amount would’ve been enough to get you to the top of the

rankings. However, this time, it's only enough for the second place." (Cinzia)

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?' (Seol)

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 was 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..." (Cinzia)

"I'm staying." (Seol)

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?" (Odelette Delphine)

"You shouldn't even ask. Just tallying up the original points alone, its 2150. It's higher than yours by 850." (Cinzia)

"Oh, wowsers. That's amazing..." (Odelette Delphine)

'Doesn't she understand the notion of being embarrassed?!' (Seol)

Seol inwardly complained while catching the incoming object. It was actually a key – and there was a golden numeral '1' engraved on the attached plate.

"You know, I find it really amazing." (Cinzia)

Cinzia unexpectedly displayed a certain amount of admiration.

"Not only your tiny nation earned the rights to recruit people independently, it even ended up producing an Irregular such as yourself, too..." (Cinzia)

Thanks to her declaration, all attention that used to be focused on Odelette was now firmly fixed on Seol. He really want to say 'hell no' to any more of this unwanted

attention right now.

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!” (Cinzia)

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 a*ses?” (Cinzia)

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 organised 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...?' (Seol)

...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 Hahn-Nah.

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 recognised her – she was the second maid standing to the left on the stage.

'She's from... Area 2, isn't she?' (Seol)

"Hi. Is there anything I can help you with?" (Seol)

"I'm called Agnes. If it does not bother your important self, I'd like the honour of guiding you around this facility." (Agnes)

Now that was a really 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?" (Seol)

“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.” (Agnes)

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.” (Seol)

“Ahh, in that case...” (Agnes)

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 just once?” (Agnes)

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?” (Agnes)

“Excuse me~.” (Maria)

“?”

“Don’t f*ck around, please.” (Maria)

“...You’re still as coarse as ever, I see.” (Agnes)

Agnes let off a soft but resolute *hng!*, silently bowed to Seol, and left without saying anything else.

“Still with that disgusting habit of trying to wag your tail everywhere, you little Sicilian b*tch.” (Maria)

Seol couldn’t help but doubt his own hearing. He had already confirmed that the blonde maid could speak just fine, but then, to see such hardcore swearing jumping

out of that adorable and radiant face of hers was just...

“Well, then. Allow me to guide you.” (Maria)

“...You are pretty good. With talking, I mean.” (Seol)

“Ahh, that. I am currently practicing the vow of silence, you know.” (Maria)

“The vow of... silence?” (Seol)

“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.”

She was implying that she’d often open her mouth without thinking. Somehow, Seol could agree with that.

“Well, uh... I’ll be in your care, then.” (Seol)

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 cafe’s, somewhat.

“Before we get started... Would you like to buy me something to drink from there first?” (Maria)

“...”

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?!” (Maria)

“But, why should I...?” (Seol)

“Scrooge. You have a lot of Survival Points, don’t you?” (Maria)

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, in order to use any of the facilities here, you gotta spend Survival

Points?” (Seol)

“Yes. Within the Neutral Zone, the 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.” (Maria)

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?” (Seol)

Rather than a verbal answer, Maria pointed at the noticeboard, instead. There was a healthy crowd of people in front of it, still.

“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.” (Maria)

“The normal way, huh...” (Seol)

“The Survival Points can be loaned out or transferred to others, too.” (Maria)

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?” (Maria)

“I refuse.” (Seol)

“Ehhh? But, why?” (Maria)

“I’ll have to conserve my points. It’s not like they fall down from the sky or something.” (Seol)

“But, why so stingy?! You know you will get free accommodation and food, so how come?” (Maria)

Seol tilted his head, wondering *what is she 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 Mark gets 10% discount, the Silver gets 20% discount, and...”
(Maria)

“If that’s the case...” (Seol)

“As a Gold Mark, you get 30% off on every available facility here. On top of that, you were the highest ranked survivor, too. So, not only are you given your exclusive residence, you also receive 70% discount when utilising the services of certain shops and restaurants as well.” (Maria)

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 to buy 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.” (Maria)

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 exceedingly 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, don’t you think so?” (Maria)

“And what benefits are there that can make my stay worthwhile?” (Seol)

“The VIP store.” (Maria)

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.” (Maria)

Seol's eyes grew wider and wider in surprise as he scanned contents of the list.

Chapter 21

A Star Shining Again (1)

The biggest difference between the area where the Tutorial took place and this 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 the Lost 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 or something. The plaza located in the middle of the ground floor, or mock cafes 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.

It couldn't be helped, after all. The Paradise was a different planet altogether where scientific progress had not advanced to the same level as to that of Earth, never mind the two enjoying very different cultures and mindset 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 his or her 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 '1' 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 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 a expansive room, he ended up getting lonely/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. Moirai's Souvenir: 600,000 SP, x1
4. Miyal'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. Sidus's Divine Strength: 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 'Moirai'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 on 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 realise 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 the 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 organised 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 making 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... D**n 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 Gaeg-gwi, 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." (Odelette Delphine)

Just as Seol's gaze headed upwards, Odelette Delphine called out to him.

"Uhm, yes?" (Seol)

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?" (Odelette)

"Mister Tong Chai, you say... You mean, the man wearing a turban?" (Seol)

"Yes. He was the fifth place finisher. That man... I think he has met his doom."
(Odelette)

"...Met his doom? He's dead?" (Seol)

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." (Odelette)

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'd dead?"
(Seol)

"It's been six hours since he disappeared, but he hasn't returned yet." (Odelette)

"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..." (Seol)

Odelette's expression became complicated when she heard his words.

"Something as simple... I see. Well, will you be attempting the same mission again?"
(Odelette)

"Ah, no. I was thinking of trying my hands on a different mission this time." (Seol)

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?” (Odelette)

...

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 apologise, but there is something I really need to confirm first... If it's not too much trouble, can I take a rain check?” (Seol)

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” (Odelette)

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 colour, but as he raised his gaze upwards, he saw yellow, vermilion 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 colour 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

A Star Shining Again (2)

[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 colour remained yellow. And that colour, without a doubt, signified that he should pay attention. Seol stood there, hesitating somewhat thanks to the word ‘siege’, but then, he remembered that Kahng Seok also glowed in yellowish colour 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 potentially, he might be able to swallow up 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 wasn’t this just 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 Gaeg-gwi, 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, though.

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 Gaeg-gwi – 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 Gaeg-gwi. 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 realising how close he got to inadvertently killing himself. From the very beginning, things were going sideways.

Kwaaahhhaaa!!!

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.

Realising 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 effectiveness 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 *Bzzz!*, 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.

Guoouwaack!

It was here that the skeleton with the helmet at the rear 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 axe and rushed forward, before powerfully kicking off from the ground.

The axe-holding 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 axe, but at the same time, the impact force shoved his own arm away as well.

The axe 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 axe 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.

Right away, Seol gave up on counter-attacking 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 axe 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 axe.

Suddenly, a light beam shot out from the bag and penetrated the skeleton's eye sockets.

SFX for the skeleton's extremely loud scream

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 from detaching itself from his body. However, he was definitely not prepared for this very sudden change in the current situation.

'W, what is going on here?'

In any case, he was alive. Of course, that wasn't the end to his deadly problems, though. He quickly pulled the bag that served as a wonderful shield, to his front and rummaged

through its contents, before figuring out the cause of the change: a beam of bright light coming from the sliced gap of the bag.

“...Oh.”

It was from the Mirror of Understanding. The item listed under SPECIAL from that drawing machine, supposedly for those Deceased that attacked out of malice.

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 colour 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)

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, then 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 the reason why Odelette Delphine went to chat to the first-placed young man from Korea. Of course, she still got refused rather grandly, though.

However, how did that man complete a mission with a difficulty rating two rungs higher than ‘Normal’ this quickly?

“How did he do it? Could he be able to perform magic already... Hmm?” (Hao Win)

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 this weirdly awkward atmosphere surrounding him at the moment.

It was as if Hao Win was looking at a soldier returning from a bloody and brutal warzone who had barely managed to preserve his life. 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 was pounding away like a mad drummer. His throat felt so dry and clammy, he thought that it might crack into pieces at any second. He pulled out a two litre 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?

Knock, knock...

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 did pass by as he lay there?

The thick and ennuing silence continued on; Seol's fearful and shocked eyes slowly closed, until only a sliver remained open.

'Did I place too much blind faith?'

The parchment was glowing in yellow. He thought he could definitely clear the mission. He had a precedence called Kahng Seok to give him the necessary confidence.

‘Or, was I too careless?’

No, he didn’t think it’d be a walk in the park. He knew it would be very dangerous. He simply thought that he could take the risk, that was all.

‘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 analyse 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 a*s 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 Gaeg-gwi, 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 Gaeg-gwi 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 Gaeg-gwi?

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 recognised 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. Personality]

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 – Medium

Stamina: Low – Low

Magic: Medium – High

Luck: Medium – Low

Remaining Ability Points: 0

In reality, he was this weak. If one took away this and that, then he literally 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?

“I'm such a useless son of a b*tch...”

He found it hard endure to 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 favourable 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. *Drop, drop*, 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 Star Shining Again (3)

– A note from the Guide (49/50)

2. 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.

“Oh, my?”

“?”

“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?” (The maid)

“Is this the VIP store?” (Seol)

“If you wish to purchase an item, please enter through here.” (The maid)

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...”
(The maid)

“Do you have an item called Competence on sale?” (Seol)

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.” (The maid)

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 colour.

“You will also find the 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.” (The maid)

“What differences are there?” (Seol)

“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?” (The maid)

“.....”

“Oh, you meant the VIP store’s? There isn’t even a need to say it out loud, you know? Because, the potion’s effects and its duration are doubled, that’s why. For a low, low price of 400 SP, the duration lasts for 24 hours, while you’ll receive eight times the

boost! Training one single day will give you the same results as training for eight days straight, guaranteed.” (The maid)

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)

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.” (The maid)

“Yes, so?” (Seol)

“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.” (The maid)

“.....”

“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)

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. And also, not everyone can buy one, as well – there are even restrictions placed where one needs to bring along these ‘notes from the Guide’. That’s just in case an Invited heard of the potion’s existence before arriving at the Zone.” (The maid)

Seol thought about this carefully. The answer to his quandary seemed just within his grasp – the answer he had forgotten about because his desire towards the VIP store’s things had blinded his eyes from everything else. The maid’s words of ‘trying to complete the tasks found within this zone’ continued to tug at his mind.

“Will you buy one?” (The maid)

The maid placed both of her hands on her waist and confidently asked him. Seol organised his thoughts for a bit, and then, raised his head to meet her gaze.

“Give me one.” (Seol)



After leaving the VIP store and heading back to his room, Seol ran into someone he was rather familiar with. And that was Yi Surl-Ah, looking somewhat anxious as she paced up and down in front of his door.

“Miss Yi Surl-Ah?” (Seol)

“*Orabeo-nim!*” (TL: Highest form of honorific used to denote one’s elder brother, used by females)

Eh? Orabeo-nim?

While Seol stood there confused, Yi Surl-Ah ran to him with a look of worry in her face.

“Are you alright? Are you really alright?” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“W, what do you mean...?” (Seol)

“You looked to be in a really terrible state not too long ago. I was so worried about you, and I tried to see if you were okay, but you weren’t in your room...” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Seol realised that the knocking noise he heard earlier belonged to Yi Surl-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’ve looked rather odd. Seol could understand now why she was behaving in this manner.

“By any chance... Have you been crying?” (Yi Surl-Ah)

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.” (Seol)

“B, but, why?” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“Because, I thought I was a pathetic fool.” (Seol)

“*Orabeo-nim* isn’t pathetic at all!” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-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.” (Yi Surl-Ah)

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.” (Seol)

“The mission was... that difficult?” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“I attempted it without even realising my own limits. As a result, I almost died. In all honesty... It’s a miracle that I’m standing here.” (Seol)

Yi Surl-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...” (Seol)

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 a collateral in a stupid gamble.” (Seol)

And I even swore to myself I’d never, ever gamble again...

“O, *orabeo-nim*...” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-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 Surl-Ah and her gentle smile looking back.

“Would you like to run with me for a while?” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“Uhm, excuse me?” (Seol)

“Yes, we should have a foot race!” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Seol ended up slightly panicking after that suggestion literally came out of nowhere.

“A race? Why a race, all of a sudden...?” (Seol)

“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.” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“But, uh, there is no space around here to run, though? And to run on the corridors is just...” (Seol)

“Take a look at this~.” (Yi Surl-Ah)

[A foot race (Number of available attempts: 2/2)]

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.” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“But still, isn’t that a bit too much...?” (Seol)

“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?!' (Seol)

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 Surl-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 odour leaked out from his throat.

'I... I... I can't... do... this!' (Seol)

He wanted to plop down on the floor and pass out, but then again, that would be just too embarrassing. Why? Yi Surl-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!*" (Yi Surl-Ah)

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 favourable 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 Surl-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...” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“H, how come... Miss... Yi Surl-Ah... can run... so well?” (Seol)

“Well, I've been delivering milk in the early mornings, you see? I did that for about one year straight.” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“Sounds... rough...” (Seol)

“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 fields almost everyday~.” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-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.” (Seol)

“Eh?”

She became flustered as his gratitude came out from nowhere.

“My mind's a lot clearer now.” (Seol)

“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...” (Yi Surl-Ah)

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.” (Seol)

“N, no. It’s nothing at all...” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“Thank you. I mean it.” (Seol)

“No, it’s really nothing at all. It’s me who’s...” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“I really don’t know how I should repay this debt to you.” (Seol)

“...*Orabeo-nim*.” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-Ah puckered her lower lip in a pout and cutely glared at him.

“You are doing this only because what Sung-Jin and I did, yes?” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“Am I busted?” (Seol)

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.” (Seol)

“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, not to mention it also improves your blood circulation...” (Yi Surl-Ah)

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?” (Seol)

“Mm... I’m happy with that, but...” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-Ah tilted her head this way and that, before she spoke to him in a low voice.

“As long as you drop the honorifics, I’ll definitely run together with you.” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Seol let off a soft chuckle at her unexpected request.



After ending the running session with Yi Surl-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!’ *(TL note at the end)*

Disregarding everything else for now, Seol focused on improving his fitness level first. He figured that, before he could start doing any missions, he needed to be healthy and fit.

And as the days wore on, other survivors began to think Seol’s actions were rather odd. After all, to their eyes, he possessed enough abilities to solo a mission ranked Hard. Yet, there he was, doing the ‘Basic’ training regime that offered no rewards, and not only that, he was repeating it over and over again. He even completely stopped doing other missions, too.

Seol also found it pretty hard in the beginning, as well. His weak physique demanded rest way too often. And inevitably, he grew bored of repeating the same thing all the time. Constantly, the tempting thoughts that whispered *This is enough, so I should stop now* entered and harassed his resolve.

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 realised 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 must've been 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)

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.” (Cinzia)

“Ma’am, 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?” (Cinzia)

“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...” (Agnes)

“Then? What can they realistically do?” (Cinzia)

Cinzia extracted a cigarette from her inner pocket. Agnes expertly lit it up.

“No need to sweat over such matters. Just relax and wait, and then, I’ll just say ‘I find you all pitiful, so I’ll just extend the deadline’. Simple.” (Cinzia)

“But, still...” (Agnes)

“Enough.” (Cinzia)

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?” (Cinzia)

“There has been a debate as to whether you changing the rules as you please is wise...” (Agnes)

“Hmph. Well, then. Tell me, what do you think would’ve happened if I told them that they can stay in here for three months?” (Cinzia)

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 sh*t unfold?” (Cinzia)

“That is... true, as well.” (Agnes)

Agnes barely agreed with Cinzia there.

“Even if you’re a worthless scum, you’d still be able to complete the Normal difficulty mission by the deadline, as long as you’ve been building yourself up step by step. More promising eggs would be able to go beyond that, even. Do you know the story of Seong Shi-Hyun, who started off from the bottom and successfully cleared the ‘Impossible’ difficulty on the final day of the deadline?” (Cinzia)

“I’ve more or less heard of his legends.” (Agnes)

“That’s right. This place is designed to speed up the individual’s growth. However, what’s the point of telling them that it’s important, when they don’t even bother?” (Cinzia)

“.....”

“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 f*cking point telling them the truth hundreds of

times. At least now, with the short deadline, they are diligently and desperately doing the missions.” (TL note at the end)

Agnes was about to say, *But, soon they will reach their breaking point*, but didn't and just lowered her head. She didn't 100% agree with this notion of forcing people to choose the 'second best' if there weren't enough of them voluntarily going for the 'best'. 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, after all.

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)

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.” (Cinzia)

“I also think the same as you, ma'am.” (Agnes)

“Ho? Even the famous Agnes thinks so, too?” (Cinzia)

“Of course. In the recent months, I felt a sense of regret whenever I had to face up to my personal limits. If I could buy a chance to start from the beginning, then I would not hesitate to spend millions and millions.” (Agnes)

Cinzia smiled brightly. She seemed to be really enjoying this.

“Regressing, huh. That's an interesting topic. So, how would you do things differently?” (Cinzia)

“Good question, ma'am. I'll try to amass as much Survival Points as possible during the Tutorial, and then, while in the Neutral Zone, I'd drink one bottle of Competence from the VIP store everyday. I'd fully utilise the sleeping quarters only given to the top survivor, and since I'd also have many more points left over... Perhaps, I might end up

acting similar to how that man is behaving right now.” (Agnes)

“That’s right. That’s why I’m kinda envious.” (Cinzia)

Cinzia nodded her head and shifted her gaze away from the screen. Within the eyes of Agnes busy staring at the footage, an odd desire was visibly burning bright.

“I guess your instincts of a *craftsman* hasn’t gone away, huh. It’ll be fine if you wish to help him out.”

Agnes began blinking her non-stop in surprise after hearing Cinzia’s sudden consent.

“Pardon? Ah. But, that man is...” (Agnes)

“I know already. He was invited by that crafty woman... Here’s the thing, though. I’ve heard of a really interesting tidbit.” (Cinzia)

While still smoking her cigarette, the ends of Cinzia’s lips began arching upwards.

(TL: ‘체력은 국력이다’ is a slogan invented sometime during the late 1960s and the early 70s to encourage more people to take up exercise, I presume, by the Korean government. It has become a catchphrase that pretty much all Koreans know by now. Although the official English translation is the one I’ve included in the chapter, it directly translates to “one’s fitness is the strength of the nation”.)

(TL: “Hearing it thousands of times is far worse than seeing it once” is a Korean proverb 백문이 불결일견. I’ve actually never heard of it until this novel, though. Go figure. Anyway, it means “seeing is believing.”)

Chapter 24

The Hidden Potential Revealing Itself (1)

“An interesting information?” (Agnes)

“That man... Most likely, he’s not affiliated with Sinyoung.” (Cinzia)

Upon hearing Cinzia’s straight-forward declaration, Agnes’s slim, shapely eyebrows furrowed noticeably.

“But, that can’t be. Kim Hahn-Nah definitely...” (Agnes)

“Sure, that crafty fox is affiliated with Sinyoung. However, what’s more important is the fact that the gold stamp wasn’t issued by them.” (Cinzia)

“Excuse me?” (Agnes)

“The investigation of his circumstances has revealed that the Temple of Gula had granted her the stamp, instead.” (Cinzia)

Agnes lowered her head and closed her eyes. She did this out of habit whenever she needed to reorganise her chaotic thought process.

“To have another Gold Mark appear, when Seong Shi-Hyun is still missing... So? Don’t you think it’s all a bit fishy?” (Cinzia)

“.....”

“Of course, nothing’s certain. Oh, well. It really doesn’t matter if that crafty fox guides the Gold Mark towards Sinyoung’s direction or not. They and we, Sicilia, might not be in a cooperative relationship, but still, we are in an amiable position with them, so there’s that.” (Cinzia)

Agnes raised her head. Unfitting for her usual taciturn expression, there was a glint of strange light in her eyes.

“In that case...” (Agnes)

“I’ll pacify Maria for you. That girl isn’t going to oppose this idea, anyways.” (Cinzia)

“Will it really be fine for me to get involved? My personality dictates that, once I start, I must dedicated myself completely to the task at hand.” (Agnes)

“Right back at you, Drill Sergeant Agnes. You’ll have to give it your all, or else.” (Cinzia)

Cinzia’s expression became somewhat sinister.

“Seong Shi-Hyun was an Irregular with a Gold Mark. And that man is also a Gold Mark Irregular. Conditions are seemingly the same. However, if there is one thing different compared to how things were two years ago, then it’d be the trainers involved, isn’t it... Ah, right. Since Seong Shi-Hyun was personally trained by the ‘the one who leads’, should I expect to see a marked difference, I wonder?” (Cinzia)

Cinzia didn’t miss the too-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, who had conquered the South, has to offer.” (Cinzia)

“In case that man becomes a powerful enemy that stands in our way at a later juncture, please do not blame me.” (Agnes)

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)

Cinzia exhaled the cigarette smoke and chuckled to herself.



[A foot race (Number of available attempts: 2/2)]

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 with a completely empty mind on the track while utilising the breathing method Yi Surl-Ah had taught him. He had long gotten rid of the habit of keeping count the number of laps by now. He simply did as the mission required from him – run until collapsing from the exhaustion.

From a certain point onwards, he couldn't even notice anymore that his body was gradually improving further and further. There was only one reason why he continued to train like a madman, though – and that was to win the competition against himself. Like now.

He maintained as high a speed as he could 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 flood in, fast. They whispered, *you've done enough, run after taking a small break, it'll be fine to walk for a bit, why don't you slow down for a while...*

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 a certain sense of disgusting déjà vu creep up on him.

Something told him that, if he couldn't 'win' here, then he'd fall into his bad old habit of gambling in the not so distant future. 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 Yu Seon-Hwah cry – all those things made him grit his teeth in anguish. He hated himself so much, he could even start harming his own body at this point.

His rage transformed into the whip of stubbornness that mercilessly pounded on his legs.

“Khuooowwaa!!”

He reached out with his hands; his feet powerfully kicked the ground.

As if he was trying to jump over a wall... in order to overcome this 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.

SFX for vomit

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 – Middle’.]

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?” (Seol)

Flinch!

Her 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 panicking. How was such a thing even possible, though? After all, she looked like one of those uber-strict head maids working for some historically-important household, so...

“I beg your pardon. I did not expect you to be teleported back while lying on the ground...” (Agnes)

Agnes coughed to clear her throat, and quite abruptly, presented him a cup with some kind of liquid in it. Seol was feeling really thirsty anyway, so he gladly but sloppily 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...” (Seol)

“It’s 10 SP.” (Agnes)

It wasn’t free?!

Seol was about to argue that he was being forced into buying something he didn’t really need, but then, had to swallow his words right back down as soon as he felt the changes taking place within his body.

“Oh.” (Seol)

The cold liquid sliding down his throat suddenly felt warm and gentle once it arrived in his tummy. 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...?” (Seol)

“It’s nothing much. If you rest for a little longer, the range of your mobility should be, mostly, back to normal.” (Agnes)

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.” (Agnes)

“Why?” (Seol)

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...” (Seol)

“Even I, ever since becoming a trainer, would’ve never imagined saying these words.” (Agnes)

Agnes fixed her glasses on her nose.

“You need to decrease the length of your training time.” (Agnes)

“You’re telling me to... train less?” (Seol)

“That is, more or less, correct.” (Agnes)

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 regular scheduled breaks. However, you’re punishing it even before it can get adequately ready. It is almost to the point of cruelty.” (Agnes)

Her cold analysis left Seol speechless.

“You have been using recovery potions to forcibly regain your stamina... Although using once or twice is fine, continuous intake over a prolonged period of time will no longer help you. Resting well also forms a 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. Thus, now is the time you let your body get used to recovering naturally.” (Agnes)

“I, uh... guess so.” (Seol)

“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, instead – things such as refreshments, special scented oils for bathing, plants or scented candles placed near your pillow, etc.” (Agnes)

Agnes also added that such items should also show minute but positive effects on not just his stamina, but also his endurance, strength, and agility as well.

Seol could only nod his head in a daze. He was currently lost among this 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...” (Agnes)

Completely unaware of what Seol was thinking at the moment, Agnes quietly continued on with her words.

“Pray tell, will you grant me the honour of guiding you?” (Agnes)

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.

“I’ll be grateful.” (Seol)

Seol had no reason to refuse, so he didn’t.

“There is one thing that I’m curious about.” (Agnes)

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 utilise the services of the restaurants for free.” (Agnes)

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...” (Seol)

“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)

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 equipments. Even though there was no treadmill in sight, 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.” (Agnes)

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.” (Agnes)

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 to use this place?” (Seol)

“Ten points per day, but if you pay for a week in advance, then it’s discounted to 50. Also,” said Agnes. “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.” (Agnes)

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.” (Agnes)

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 colour. 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 besides you, Miss Agnes, who can also train me?" (Seol)

Agnes tilted her head slightly.

"It's not impossible to find one, but... Are you perhaps not satisfied by my presence?" (Agnes)

"No, not at all. Actually, that's not it." (Seol)

Seol denied the notion, and he quietly took a deep breath.

"I'd like someone who possesses excellent skillset, but also someone who can train me without holding back." (Seol)

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, I'm afraid." (Agnes)

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." (Agnes)

"The demonic instructor... That's good." (Seol)

"Truthfully, will it be alright? I was originally planning to be gentle with you during the initial stages." (Agnes)

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.” (Seol)

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!” (Agnes)

Slap!

Her thin stick sharply landed on Seol’s shoulders with a loud slap.

“Again! One!” (Agnes)

Seol panted non-stop as he fixed his grip on the barbell resting on his trapezoid muscles. While doing the 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!” (Agnes)

“Kkheueueu.....!” (Seol)

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!” (Agnes)

‘I’ve never seen someone as vicious as you!! Seriously now!!’ (Seol)

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!” (Agnes)

Unfortunately, Seol’s quaking thighs couldn’t hold on any longer and he fell on his b**t.

“...What do you think you’re doing?” (Agnes)

Agnes’s icy cold voice ‘politely’ entered his ear drums.

“Pant, pant!”

Not caring one jot at all, Seol began massaging his aching thighs. He was getting seriously worried about blood coalescing there and then bursting out of the skin or something.

Hng.

Agnes let off a snort and crossed her arms against her chest.

“Only with this much... If you’d like, should I go a little easier on you? Well, I think I’m being sufficiently gentle even now.” (Agnes)

“You...!” (Seol)

“If you don’t like it, I can always recommend someone else for you anytime.” (Agnes)

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." (Seol)

"Let me say this one more time. I shall not go easy on you during the duration of your training." (Agnes)

"This is what I wanted. I'll just shout out some *gihap* and continue on." (Seol) *(TL note at the end)*

"*Gihap*, is it... What you need right now isn't some random shouts, but your willpower telling you to endure. In any case, let us continue. Please, stand up." (Agnes)

Seol spat out a lengthy groan after hearing her.

"Ah! Is it fine if my *gihap* is a bit peculiar?" (Seol)

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." (Agnes)

'D**n it! D**n it!!!' (Seol)

Seol stood back up while gritting his teeth. Meanwhile, she simply hoisted the barbell on his shoulders. And then...

"No matter what types of training you perform, the two most important things are your posture and your breathing pattern. One!" (Agnes)

He timed his *gihap* with the count.

"Li!" (Seol)

"Li? That's a peculiar *gihap*, indeed. Two!" (Agnes)

"Lac!" (Seol)

"? One...?" (Agnes)

"Li!" (Seol)

".....Two." (Agnes)

"Lac!" (Seol) *(TL note at the end)*

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 in 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?" (Seol)

"W, w, w, what... What is the meaning of...?!" (Agnes)

"Is there a problem with my posture?" (Seol)

"N, no! That's not the issue!" (Agnes)

"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)

Seol raised the white flag when Agnes threateningly raised the stick up high. Of course, he had no desire to end things here, though.

"Please, train properly. One!" (Agnes)

"Teddy!" (Seol)

"Two!" (Agnes)

"Bear!" (Seol)

Again, the counting stopped.

A short moment later...

SLAP!

From the third floor gym, a sticky slapping noise resounded out to everywhere.



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 was 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.

(TL: The Korean word “기합 – gihap”, can mean a few different things, but in this case, it’s used to denote those short shouts you often hear during martial arts practice.)

(TL: In case you haven’t noticed, MC is shouting out “lilac” but broken into two parts.)

Chapter 25

The Hidden Potential Revealing Itself (2)

On the morning of the 30th day.

As planned, Cinzia made the announcement of the deadline being extended by another two months after ordering every Survivor to gather in the Neutral Zone's theatre. She sounded like she was being magnanimous towards everyone, and that led many of the survivors to breathe out a sigh of relief. Most of them had failed to gather 1000 points until now, that was why.

Of course, not everyone displayed the same reaction.

"What is it, Hao Win?" (Cinzia)

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 black suit.

Hao Win's eyebrows rose up ever so slightly.

"It's nothing, really. Just that..." (Hao Win)

"Just that?" (Cinzia)

"It's different from what I've heard." (Hao Win)

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. He had no real reason to reveal the truth and get on Cinzia's bad side, after all.

"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." (Cinzia)

"If you say something like that, then I guess there's nothing more for me to add." (Hao Win)

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 Zone?” (Cinzia)

Only silence replied back – the inside of the theatre was completely devoid of sound.

The reality of these survivors’ situation was that, no matter how many had gathered to form a team, none could crack a single ‘Normal’ difficulty mission yet.

“Unless you’re an irredeemable moron, I’m pretty sure you have begun to realise the harsh truth by now, haven’t you? ‘Ah, so I was this worthless. If I go outside now, then I will die right away’. You must’ve thought about such things, no? Hey, what about you, burrito?” (Cinzia)

The burly Mexican man who complained about not being let into the Paradise avoided meeting her gaze in embarrassment.

“Looks like you’ve all woken up by now.” (Cinzia)

Cinzia seemed to be satisfied by the reactions, because the tone of her voice softened just a tad.

“Now that you’ve become aware of your own reality, surely you’re much more willing to listen than ever before. Most of you probably have amassed some Survival Points by now. Correct?” (Cinzia)

That was indeed the case. Pretty much everyone did nothing but to complete the missions like possessed men and women until now, after all. 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.” (Cinzia)

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 ‘Jobs’ that best suit your situation as well as your disposition. Simply put, you will be able to use your magical powers from that moment on.” (Cinzia)

Rustle, rustle...

The once-quiet theatre grew noisy in an instant.

“Once you receive your ‘Job’, 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 the cooperative missions. And also...” (Cinzia)

Cinzia’s eyes arched up.

“...Also, the Survival Points you’ve earned so far will become even more valuable pretty soon.” (Cinzia)

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 on the sidelines. She could already tell what would happen in the Neutral Zone after the Awakening.

Just as Cinzia has eluded to, the moment one’s Job was assigned, one would be able to utilise his or her magical power. That also meant that, inevitably, one would have to receive specialised training on how to use it properly, as well as the training specifically tailored to suit the new Job. Such matters could be resolved quite easily through spending one’s SP. One just had to purchase either ‘Abilities’ or ‘Magic Power Application’ from the stores and study them.

But that was the core of the issue – one could become stronger too easily. Unfortunately, they would hit the limit to their growth just as quickly, too. 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 opinion.

More importantly, though – as Cinzia was the general manager of the Neutral Zone this time 'round, 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.

Yes, he could still use any items, including the Competence, bought in the Neutral Zone outside as well, but then again, that was 'outside' these safe walls. The Neutral Zone was constructed solely for the purpose of ensuring the survival and the training of the future combatants, which meant that there would no better place out there than here to safely use the Competence.

“Your job will be determined tomorrow in the Chamber of Awakening.” (Agnes)

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 a deep regret over two matters, though.

The first regret was all to do with him not coming here sooner.

Not only the food tasted amazing, they also provided the right amount of necessary nutrients as well. It didn't simply fill him up; he felt like his body was visibly getting healthier, too. Of course, the tastier the food, the more expensive it got, but such things didn't matter to Seol at all.

Second regret 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 everyday.

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?” (Agnes)

“...Well, uh, the thing is, I’ve already made up my mind about which Job I want.” (Seol)

Seol quickly came up with an answer. Agnes sighed softly.

“You don’t get to choose your Job, but it’s chosen for you.” (Agnes)

“Oh... Is that so?” (Seol)

“The seven gods that rule over this world debate among themselves before granting you a Job out of these four beginner classes – Archer, Sorcerer, Priest, or Warrior.” (Agnes)

Hearing this, Seol tilted his head slightly.

“Only four? That’s not as many as I expected.” (Seol)

“That’s only in the beginning. Depending on how your level progresses later on, countless other Job paths will become available to you.” (Agnes)

Agnes elegantly chewed on the meat and swallowed it before continuing on.

“For instance, let’s say the level 1 Warrior uses a sword as the main weapon. Then, he levels up to 2. Then, his Job title will change to ‘Swordsman’ from then on. If you prefer axes, then you will become ‘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 the level 2, your Job will become ‘Assassin.’” (Agnes)

In other words, only the initial stages would be the same, and the evolution of Jobs 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 Sorcerer but you level up using a sword all the time?” (Seol)

“You’d become a Level 2 Magic Swordsman, but I wouldn’t recommend going down such a route. It should be very difficult to dig just one well, after all.” (Agnes)

Indeed, raising one’s Stats accordingly to suit the Job bestowed made sense. There was no point of becoming a jack of all trades that weren’t so good at any one thing by trying his hands on this and that. 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 Job path you have chosen becomes critically important. It is the same story when you reach the Level 7.” (Agnes)

“I must choose a god?” (Seol)

“Mm... Think of it this way. Your Job will either evolve or become even more specialised to suit the powers of the gods you choose. For now, this much information should suffice.” (Agnes)

Seol’s brows furrowed slightly. He thought this whole ‘Job’ 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...” (Agnes)

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 Job has been chosen. We will need to tailor your training to match that.” (Agnes)

“Are you talking about the Job-specific training as well as Magic Power training?” (Seol)

“Yes. You know about them already.” (Agnes)

“I heard about them today. If it’s only those...” (Seol)

“I strongly do not recommend buying the Applications from the stores for that

purpose.” (Agnes)

Seol was slightly taken back by the sterner than usual tone of her voice.

“Learning how to use magic and basic skills related to your Job – 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 forget, you also have the special Competence as well, so you will definitely learn them all in no time.” (Agnes)

“.....”

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, just by following Agnes’s suggestions and recommendations, he’d get to earn quite a lot, so to speak.

“From now on, your fitness training will only take place during the morning. During the afternoon, you shall learn about using your Magic Powers.” (Agnes)

Seol was about to ask her when he’d get to start doing the missions, but had to stop. He already made up his mind that he’d only do that once the 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.’ (Seol)

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 Job is chosen tomorrow.” (Seol)

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 Surl-Ah was deeply worried about not receiving a Job, 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." (Yi Surl-Ah)

"An Archer, you say?" (Seol)

As Seol chatted to her, over half of the survivors had already received their Job classes. It was not a definite thing, but from what Seol could overhear, most of them had received the class that favoured close quarters battle – in other words, Warrior class.

Next up was the Archer class. There were a few survivors with Priest class assigned as well. However, Seol hadn't heard of a single Sorcerer so far.

If there was one odd thing about this whole process, different Jobs 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 Surl-Ah looked quite troubled by something. In the case of Shin Sahng-Ah, who received the Priest class, she looked to be in a sorry state as she exited from the Chamber.

"What about your Magic Power? Can you sense it?" (Seol)

"Uhm, not sure yet... It feels like my body is a little bit warmer than before, but..." (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-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.

"Pant, pant..."

She needed a little bit of time, but eventually, Odelette Delphine managed to stand back up. She leaned her head back ever so slightly, and placed her hands on her chest and stomach. It was as if she was standing there contemplating about something.

'Could she have...?' (Seol)

While Seol was pondering about Odelette's Job potentially being a Sorcerer, 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)

Seol asked out of courtesy. Odelette Delphine giggled.

"It's like I'm pregnant or something." (Odelette Delphine)

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 colour 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 metre-tall stone statues.

[He has finally come.] [Let us commence with his Awakening first.]

Almost the same time as those 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.

“Hur-urck?!”

Was this how it might feel like when sucked in head first by a vacuum cleaner? Or, should he describe this sensation as each of his cells opening up one by one?

The 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 magical power... It's at least as much as 'Mid - High', is it not?]
[He is born with a natural talent.] [Now I see. I get it now.] [He must've opened his eyes when he was still young.] [There is a trace of him losing his power at least once before.] [How regretful. So 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 magical powers had also regressed a great deal. If only that didn't occur...] [He might have possessed 'High – Mid' by now.] [It can't be helped. He wouldn't even have been cognisant of his own magic powers in that planet of his.] [Let us make our decision right away. Without a doubt, it is... 'Sorcerer', yes?] [Agreed. No debate necessary.] [Two Sorcerers 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 'Sorcerer'. He summoned what little willpower he could and pinched his thigh real hard.

"Spear..." (Seol)

When he managed to murmur out a sound, the surroundings fell silent for a while.

[...Spear?] [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 'Sorcerer', after all.] [What are you all talking about? With his talents, a little bit of hard work would ensure he'll climb up to the highest rankings in no time!] [Difficult. It is truly difficult...]

*Godd*mn 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 a hypnosis or something.

[Why don't you all stop? Have you forgotten that 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 realising that they were about to come to a decision. His vision was blurry, as if liquid had gotten into his eyes.

['Sorcerer:'] ['Sorcerer:'] ['Warrior:'] ['Sorcerer:'] ['Warrior:'] ['Warrior:']

Three 'Sorcerer' 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)

Odelette Delphine was waiting for Seol while sitting on the floor.

"I'm guessing that you're now a Sorcerer as well." (Odelette Delphine)

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

The Hidden Potential Revealing Itself (3)

“A Warrior?” (Agnes)

At the third floor gym.

Hearing Agnes’s question, Seol nodded his head as a reply. Just as he was ordered to, he informed her of his Job as soon as it was bestowed to him.

“So, that’s how it is,” said Agnes, while inwardly breathing a wistful sigh.

If one were to rate the values of different Jobs, then the ‘Sorcerer’ class possessed an unmatched brilliance that no others could ever hope to match. Not only this class boasted incredible firepower, it also came with the inherent advantage of the cheat-like flexibility, allowing for the rapid adaptation to the situation at hand.

Also, it was rare class, too – it’d be difficult to find even one out of 100 candidates. In order to become a ‘Sorcerer’, one’s Magic Power stat had to be at least ‘Mid – Low’ at a bare minimum. Not to forget, one’s personality trait and the talent had to be suitable as well.

The reality was, the average Magic Power value of the survivors entering the Neutral Zone would only be at ‘Low – Low’. It was only par for the course that their Magic Power would be that low, seeing that they had been living on Earth with its advanced technology until now.

So, it was only natural that finding a Sorcerer among them would be difficult. And it was definitely not an exaggeration to say the survivor with the Job of Sorcerer would be treated as a nobility regardless of where he’d show up.

It was a similar story for Priests, as well. The basic requirements were for one to possess Magic Power stats of at least ‘Low – Mid’ or higher, and Luck of ‘Mid – Low’ or higher. A Priest played a crucial role as this class could heal various wounds, but also performed other important support roles such as detoxification and removal of curses. Since such abilities were in high demand, the presence of a Priest was

welcomed by pretty much everyone.

‘And it’s not even an Archer...’ (Agnes)

Archers also formed an important and necessary fighting force in a military expedition. After all, Archers were skilled in tracking and scouting, as well as their abilities to sense enemies’ approach would be indispensable, as well.

Of course, this didn’t mean that ‘Warriors’ didn’t play an important at all. The issue was to do with the abundant supply – there were just too many of them around. Taking one look at the Job distribution among the March’s Neutral Zone entrants told everything one needed to know in that regard.

86 people entered the Zone on the first day, and currently, 78 still remained. Among them, one Sorcerer, four Priests, 22 Archers and the rest, 51, were Warriors.

Some even joked that Warriors only had to perform their ‘job as a meat shield’ well. If a Contracted didn’t show any redeeming qualities, then that person would most likely end up as a meat shield for sure.

‘Regardless, all I have to do is train him well.’ (Agnes)

Agnes carefully fixed her expression, lest it showed what she was thinking about, and handed over a piece of paper to Seol.

“I understand. Let us begin with training your Magic Power first.” (Agnes)

[Reacting to Magic Power (remaining number of attempts: 2/2)]

Sense your Magic Power!

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 received the parchment since she

was giving it to him, he was feeling a bit skeptical as well.

‘Sense my Magic Power, is it?’ (Seol)

Well, there was this heavy, firm energy that had taken root inside his body. This thing didn’t feel alien to him anymore. Not only could he sense it very clearly, he even thought that, as long as he concentrated, he’d be able to circulate this energy inside his body.

“Okay. I’m off.” (Seol)

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 Magic Power 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 the Magic Power coursing through the body there. Eventually.

Agnes became slightly worried, wondering how should she go about guiding him after the Magic Power training came to an end. She was about to turn around to leave, but then, her movements came to an abrupt halt. Because, Seol reappeared on the same spot.

“I succeeded.” (Seol)

Agnes blinked several times as she stared at the relaxed youth.

“You... succeeded already?” (Agnes)

“Yes. It was easier than I thought. As soon as I got there, I...” (Seol)

“What did you say?!” (Agnes)

Agnes’s brows angrily shot up.

“I have told you to not to buy the Applications from the stores, haven’t I?” (Agnes)

Indeed, it was a possibility that he’d commit such a blunder, at least once. Since she had an errand to run in the morning and couldn’t be at the Awakening, Agnes had

mistakenly thought that Seol's Magic Power 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!" (Seol)

"And what didn't you do?" (Agnes)

"I never went to the stores." (Seol)

"I find that hard to believe. If you feel confident, can you show me your Status Window? Just show me your Job related abilities." (Agnes)

"Ah, that's right, we can do that." (Seol)

Seol thought that this would be a good idea and revealed the relevant Status Window. Agnes, who remained suspicious even when he strongly denied it, could only be dumbfounded after reading the information.

[4. Abilities]

2. Job related abilities (0)

If Seol had bought 'Magic Power Application', then the '0' would've been '1', instead. No matter how many times she looked, it was still a resolute '0'.

"...Oh." (Agnes)

"I told you, I didn't." (Seol)

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 made a mistake." (Agnes)

"Nah, it's fine. So, what should we do next?" (Seol)

Agnes nodded her head. She was about to pull out another mission parchment before hesitating slightly, and then, stayed her hand.

“Can you circulate your Magic Power?” (Agnes)

“You mean, right here?” (Seol)

“Yes.” (Agnes)

She was thinking of teaching him about the fundamentals of using Magic Power, 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 within him twisted and quivered. And right away, it began coursing 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, and all the way up to the crown of his head.

Seol really enjoyed this smooth gliding sensation. He was also slightly amazed by this development, as well. 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 Job related ability, 'Magic Power Application' has been created.]

[Your Innate ability, 'Future Vision', is responding to the creation of the new ability!]

[The Job related ability, 'Magic Power Application (lowest)' has evolved to 'Magic Power Application (intermediate)']

[Please confirm through your Status Window.]

“Ohh?” (Seol)

Agnes was half in doubt, but as soon as she saw Seol’s reaction, her suspicion was confirmed.

“Has Magic Power Application been created?” (Agnes)

“Yes, it has.” (Seol)

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 Job of ‘Sorcerer’, didn’t you?” (Agnes)

“Well, I didn’t really refuse it, though...” (Seol)

“You didn’t?” (Agnes)

“The gods were debating between the Warrior and the Sorcerer classes. They voted, and the end result was ‘Warrior’. Well, I did say I wanted to use a spear before that, though.” (Seol)

Hearing that, Agnes’s expression froze still. Seol’s words had forced her to recall a certain person’s face.

Seong Shi-Hyun. Another Irregular from Area 1.

‘How could they be so similar to each other?’ (Agnes)

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 Seong Shi-Hyun refusing to become a Sorcerer 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 Magic Power training to last around a week, yet it was completed in less than 5 minutes.

So, then. What next?

“We shall go straight to your Job related training, next.” (Agnes)

But, before that, she added a condition.

“You are not allowed to use your Magic Power.” (Agnes)



[Stabbing (remaining number of attempts: 2/2)]

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 metres 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)

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)

Seol desperately combed through his memories.

Normally, a person would start forgetting the dream he had as soon as waking up in the morning. But, there would be some parts that remained stuck in the memory. 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, though, didn't he experience those things? He wasn't simply a spectator watching those events happen. In the dream, that was.

There was also a reason why he chose this training mission first – he was drawn to it.

The Seol of the dream always carried around a spear, and he utilised stabbing 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.

‘Don't just rely on my arm strength, but... That feeling, it was of me moving my entire body.’ (Seol)

He changed his posture. He strengthened his right hand and grasped the lower part of the spear tighter. The spear shaft came to rest ever so slightly on the palm of his left hand, before he lightly grasped it without much strength. The spear tip seemed to

waver a little. In this state, Seol took aim at the target.

‘...Not yet.’ (Seol)

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 bout of silence that was neither long or short, he kicked the ground, hard.

His left foot shot out first. And then, the right arm followed next and stuck close by, stretching the left arm forward. Accompanying the sensation of his right arm shoving away, Seol thrust his spear forward.

Swish!

The whistle cutting through the air sounded crisp and clear.

Just before the spear struck the target, the back of his left hand facing the ground spun half way 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.

[Job related ability, ‘Basic Spearmanship – Thrust (lowest)’ has been generated.]
[Your Innate ability, ‘Future Vision’ is responding to the creation of the new ability!]
[Job related ability ‘Basic Spearmanship – Thrust (lowest)’ has evolved into ‘Basic Spearmanship – Thrust (upper intermediate)’!]
[Please confirm through the Status Window.]

As the message cascaded down, the surroundings changed. The scarecrow disappeared, and the spear in his hands also dissipated away.

“...Huh?”

*D*mn 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, actually.

'And I haven't done anything yet, too...' (Seol)

Seol opened and clenched his fists several times, still left wanting for more, before falling deeply into a 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 lackadaisical. The skeleton simply knocked Seol's steel bar away and left him defenseless.

'If I stabbed back at that time...' (Seol)

Eventually, though, 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 axe swinging down didn't sway and continued on the trajectory to split his head open?

'Relying only on the simple thrust isn't the answer.' (Seol)

The basics of spearmanship was to prey on the opponent's openings in defense. But if there were none, then he'd have to make one.

So, back in that situation against the skeleton, how should he go about making that opening?

The answer was obvious; the monster had shown him what to do already.

'I gotta do the same. Knock the axe away first and then stab the skeleton.' (Seol)

Reorganising his thoughts as thus, Seol swept his gaze across the noticeboard. And indeed, his slow-moving eyes found the parchment he was looking for.

[Swatting (remaining number of attempts: 2/2)]

Learn the Strike!

Difficulty: Basic

When successful: N/A

When unsuccessful: N/A

*Cooperation possible (up to 6 people)

Seol ripped that paper up in half right away.



Even though his Job had been set, Seol's daily life hadn't changed. He got addicted to the joy that the new training regime provided him with, and concentrated on that 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 the light after-meal exercise.

Most of the time, he ran alone, but there were times when he ran together with Yi Surl-Ah as well.

She couldn't hide her shock, though. She was able to run past Seol like it was nothing the first time they ran together, but from some time onwards, he didn't fall behind her. And eventually, he even managed to overtake her today.

'T, that's impossible!' (Yi Surl-Ah)

They must've done 10 laps or so already. No matter how hard she pushed, the distance between the two was widening instead of diminishing.

In the end, her physical limits arrived first.

"O, *orabeo-nim!!*" (Yi Surl-Ah)

Hearing her pitiful cry, Seol turned his body around to face her.

“A, aren’t you tired yet?” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“Hmm, dunno. Maybe? If it’s too much, why don’t you rest for a bit?” (Seol)

He replied to her with a nonplussed expression on his face while lightly running on the spot. He was obviously implying that he had lots of leeway here, and that he’d been simply matching her pace. Yi Surl-Ah bit her lower lips.

She managed to finish the laps, but only after a considerable time later. She panted heavily for a while, before asking him with an disbelieving expression.

“H, how did you do it?” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“Mm?” (Seol)

“It, it has only been two months... But, you’re faster than me...” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“Oh, that?” (Seol)

Seol told her about the Competence. Since he heard that it could also be purchased from the regular stores, he figured that Yi Surl-Ah should also be able to enjoy its effects. Not as good as the VIP store’s version, but still.

After hearing the explanation, Yi Surl-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!”



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