NEW
EPISODE 1
로유진 장편소설

THE SECOND COMING OF AVARICE

– 탐식의 재림 –

- VOLUME 2 -

-AUTHOR-
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[A_Passing_Wanderer (Creative Novels)]

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Chapter 27
Mopping Up the Missions (1)

Seol spent a bit of time explaining to Yi Surl-Ah that Competence wasn't a drug, that he wasn't doping or anything like that. After convincing her somehow, he headed to the gym on the third floor.

For some reason, Agnes hadn't show up for a while. But, he figured that it didn't really matter – even if she wasn't around to supervise the proceedings, Seol still faithfully stuck to the diet and training regime she laid out and soldiered on alone.

After ending the physical training, he returned to his quarters and practiced his Magic Power Application while taking a break at the same time. Seol was a human being just like everyone else, so he found it easier and several dozen times more enjoyable to sit and meditate than do squats with barbells resting on his shoulders for hours on end, which was something he still hadn't gotten used to.

As for Magic Power Application, the more he practiced, the faster the speed of the energy flow became. The sense of unfamiliarity also gradually lessened until it was gone for good. Since moving it from the get-go wasn't an issue, he instead focused on accepting this energy as a part of his own body as well as exerting finer control over its flow.

It'd be past midday when he finished with meditation. Seol would head back down to the first floor, this time for the Job-related trainings.

These training missions may bookend the day's proceedings for him, but actually, Seol looked forward to them the most. It helped that he liked doing them as well. Sometimes, when he swung and stabbed his spear, his mind became free from all distracting thoughts. He felt that the hours were figuratively flying away in a blink in this state.

He even went and bought a spear to use during the training missions. It cost him a grand total of 580 Survival points.

A short spear was already provided for the Job related training missions, but he found

it a tad too short for his personal taste. Also, the fact that he couldn't bring it out of the missions played a key role in the decision to buy a spear of his own. If he were to continue using it at a later date, it seemed like a prudent thing to get used to the weapon as early as possible.

Seol focused on mastering three spear techniques – thrust, strike, and cut.

Although there were more techniques available, Seol chose to stick to these three only. Stabbing, swatting away, and slicing apart – he knew that the Seol of the dream managed to kill and destroy countless enemies with these three techniques alone.

While partaking in the training missions, Seol always adhered to four rules.

First, as Agnes told him to, he never used his Magic Power during training. Not even once.

Second, if his posture wasn't what he envisioned nor looking for, then that practice move didn't count, and he tried it again and again.

Three, he'd perform the same basic move at least 1250 times during the missions.

And finally, even if he was in the middle of hard training, he'd never neglect eating healthy food and proper rest.

He settled on the number 1250 simply because of the special Competence; since it gave 8 times the boost to the training's effects, wasn't it the same as him performing the move 10000 times in a single day?

By the time he was done with these training missions, his smartphone's clock would display past midnight. The end of the day's routine had come to an end at this point. He would return to his quarters completely drained, but his complexion remained bright. This continued on for several days and weeks. Of course, he had a good reason to smile all the time.

[Your Status Windows]

[1. General Information]
Summoned date: March 16th, 2017

Marking Grade: Gold
S*x/Age: Male/26
Height/Weight: 180.5 cm/72.8 kg
Current Condition: Good
Job: LV. 1 (Warrior)
Nationality: The Republic of Korea (Area 1)
Affiliation: N/A
Alias: 'Top of the pile'

[2. Personality]

1. Temperament:

– Short tempered.
– Patient. (Will endure and overcome pain and/or hardship)

2. Aptitude:

– Average. (Normal in every way; possesses no particular talent or qualities)

[3. Physical Level]
Strength: Low – High ↑2
Endurance: Low – High ↑2
Agility: Medium – Low ↑2
Stamina: Low – High ↑2
Magic: Medium – High
Luck: Medium – Low
Remaining Ability points: 1

[4. Abilities]

1. Innate abilities (2)

– Future Vision (Grade unknown)
– Nine Eyes (Grade unknown)

2. Job related abilities (2)

– Magic Power Application (Intermediate)
– Basic spearmanship: Thrust (Upper Intermediate), Strike (Intermediate), Cut (Intermediate)

3. Other abilities (0)

[5. Level of Cognition]
Moderate (Actions and thoughts are sensible; hard-working)/Intense Yearning/Chaotic (Many things are jumbled up and is impossible to unravel)

Seol's mood as he checked his Status Windows was one of contentment. His Physical Stats had risen by nine times. Just by relying on physical exercises, he had achieved the exact same results as drinking 9 Elixirs. He'd need 270,000 Survival points if he wanted to match that.

"Ouch…" (Seol)

While he was happily checking out his Status, the stinging pain coming from his hands made him deeply frown. He didn't have to look to see why it hurt – his hands must've been bruised badly again.

He began washing the aching hands with cold water, and his teeth began clattering all on their own.

'D*mn it, I thought my hands are calloused enough by now… ' (Seol)

Although he was complaining inwardly, he still appreciated the progress he had made; the first day he practiced with a spear, the skin ruptured and he was bleeding all over the place. He was in so much pain that day, right up to the moment he hit the sack and passed out.

'Should I take a shower, or just go to sleep as I am?' (Seol)

While Seol was wondering what to do next, he heard someone knock on his door.

"Who is it?" (Seol)

Seol opened the door, only for his eyes to open wide in surprise.

Past the doorway stood a woman wearing a French maid get-up, her hands demurely gathered in front; he could see her cold, strict eyes behind the pair of glasses and her slim, athletic figure as well her hair cleanly pulled up to a bun.

"Miss Agnes?" (Seol)

"It's been a while." (Agnes)

"What brings you here at this late hour…?" (Seol)

"There is something I'd like to talk to you about." (Agnes)

“Of course. Please come in.” (Seol)

“Thank you,” said Agnes in a polite manner and entered his room in a dignified stride.

“Ah, that’s right. Agnes?” (Seol)

Seol was guiding her into the room, before turning towards her direction as if he had remembered something just now.

“Yes?” (Agnes)

“How is your little teddy bear doing nowadays?” (Seol)

Pow!

Her lightning-fast fist landed squarely in the pit of his stomach. Seol toppled over and began wheezing in pain.

“Ouuuuch…” (Seol)

“You and that stupid teddy bear!!!” (Agnes)

Agnes cried out in anguish, which was quite unlike her, and her entire body began to shudder.

“I, I can’t, breathe…” (Seol)

“Godd*mn it!! Do you have any godd*mn idea what showed up in my Alias column in the Status Window because of you?!” (Agnes)

“S, still, my stomach…” (Seol)

She must’ve been royally p*ssed off, because she raised up her elbow very high in order to land an elbow drop on his back. However, she stopped after spotting something odd in the way he was clutching his stomach.

Seol wasn’t using his palm but the edges of his hands to press onto the stomach. Only then did she notice his bruised and messed up hands.

“…Aren’t you going to heal your hands?” (Agnes)

He managed to raise his head somehow and eked out a pained whimper. Agnes spat out a lengthy groan and shook her head.

“I see that you’re still persistent with your foolish ways. It will be better if you at least get some kind of basic treatment on the injury.”

She dragged Seol and sat him down on the bed, then pulled out a bottle of antiseptic, healing salve, and some bandages from a closet nearby. Seol didn’t even have a clue such things were there, so he was understandably stunned.

“Give me your hands.” (Agnes)

Seol obediently presented his hands. She knelt down in front of him.

“This room will aid you greatly in recovering your vitality, but has only a minimum effect on healing injuries. At least, if you were to take baths with the special ointments I’ve recommended, then…” (Agnes)

While opening the bottle of the antiseptic, she continued to talk to him. Watching her expertly clean his wounds, apply the salve, and bandage them in one go, a thin smile crept up on Seol’s lips.

He felt rather happy at the moment. Actually, it had been a rather long time since he felt this way. He enjoyed this new life of his, where he got to spend the whole day engrossed in the things that interested him, and still have someone to take care of him. It felt… ‘comforting’.

Even his personality was changing for the better. When he was still addicted to gambling, he was constantly on edge. The victim mentality took centre stage in his heart and caused him to choke up over nothing important; often, he’d get defensive and angry even if he was in the wrong.

However, Seol was changing gradually the longer he stayed in the Neutral Zone. Perhaps, it might be more correct to say that the old personality, the one Yu Seon-Hwah fell for all those years ago, was finally returning.

Whatever the case may have been, a new problem had risen up along the way; his mischievous side came back, too.

Agnes focused solely on wrapping the bandages around Seol’s hands, allowing him to

stare at the top of her head for a while. He then asked her a question out of the blue.

“I’m curious – how old are you, Miss Agnes?” (Seol)

“I’m 27.” (Agnes)

As she was almost done with the treatment, Agnes focused on that and didn’t pay attention when she answered him.

“Oh. You are a *noona* to me by one year, then.” (Seol)

“…Pardon?” (Agnes)

“I’m only 26, you see.” (Seol)

A frown quickly formed quickly on Agnes’s face. She was quite clearly taken off guard. She stared at Seol with a pair of eyes that seemed to imply, *Where are you going with this now?*

Actually, the word *noona* was as unfamiliar as it could possibly be for her.

“Uhm…”

Seol scratched his cheek in an awkward expression.

“It’s nothing, really. Only that, if it’s okay with you, I’d like to call you *noona* from now on.” (Seol)

“Let’s talskd t, traeeming…” (Agnes)

Agnes hurriedly spat out some incomprehensible words, before she quickly covered her mouth with an expression that screamed, *Oh, no!*

“Eh? ‘Taslskd traeeming’?” (Seol)

“Forgive me. I bit my tongue. I was talking about your training.” (Agnes)

Agnes cleared her throat with a fake cough and spoke properly this time.

“Ah. My training, is it?” (Seol)

At the mere mention of training, Seol's eyes began gleaming brightly. Seeing this, Agnes inwardly felt relieved. She didn't know why she felt that way, though.

She succeeded in changing the subject, but she still kind of resented Seol – her thoughts had been complicated for a little while now, yet he just had to say something totally unnecessary and make her feel even more conflicted than before.

A short while later, Agnes opened her mouth to speak.

"I've carefully considered this matter for a while." (Agnes)

Agnes never stopped caring about Seol's daily training, no. On the contrary, she couldn't appear before him precisely because there was nothing further she could do for him at this stage.

"Is it time for the new type of training?" (Seol)

Initially, there was no reason for her to be this meticulous on someone else's training. However, her pride as Seol's teacher played 30% of the decision, while 20% belonged to Cinzia's provocation.

"…Well, I wonder. You could say this is indeed a new type of training, in a way." (Agnes)

As for the rest, though – that was the fault of her own desires. A wish, a desire, that any Earthling in this place would harbour at least once in their lifetime.

Perhaps, she was seeking to find fulfillment through a substitute – for instance, '*only if I did things like this when I first arrived in the Neutral Zone*', or '*only if I did things that way, then I'd have…* '

She was pouring out her own avarice of pursuing the ideal perfection, the one she had failed to achieve herself.

"In a way… you say?" (Seol)

For the period of one month since Seol got his class, she watched him train by himself. Seeing him get better and better all alone, she felt envious, and…

"…Yes." (Agnes)

…And also, thankful.

She was thankful that he gave her the opportunity; she was thankful that he was patient enough to not partake in any other missions; she was thankful that he didn't give up halfway through; she was thankful that he didn't complain – much – and followed her advice without questioning it.

The youth sitting in front of her not only satisfied her avarice, she also satisfied her pride as a teacher as well. Perhaps that was why she no longer felt the need to compare Seol to Seong Shi-Hyun.

This youth was his own person. And that man was his own, too.

Simply put, the Seol she knew now was a survivor who had properly tread on the steps of the Neutral Zone, one at the time. Indeed, that was who he was.

And finally, the ends of those steps were within sights.

"Cutting to the chase, I believe you have performed enough training by now." (Agnes)

The role Agnes performed so far could be compared to being an automobile's steering wheel and its gear lever. Now, it was time to hand the control back to the owner.

"You've done truly well. You've endured wonderfully until now. I am being honest." (Agnes)

The chassis of the said automobile had been replaced with something even more sturdier than before.

"But, from now on, it's time to increase your combat experience." (Agnes)

The engine had been a high-performance unit, to begin with.

Seol erased the smile off his face.

"That means…" (Seol)

His voice was soft, almost inaudible.

Agnes adjusted her glasses.

The only thing remaining to do…

“It’s time to start doing the missions.” (Agnes)

…To storm the Autobahn and run free.

Chapter 28
Mopping Up the Missions (2)

It was early dawn, yet the Neutral Zone's plaza on the first floor was still packed with lots of people. Ever since everyone's classes had 'awakened', missions became that much more doable. Likewise, the survival rate had improved greatly as well.

Before the Awakening, not many dared to attempt 'Normal' difficulty missions. But now, as long as the party's composition was well thought out, such missions could be cleared without taking too much risks. One could even hear rumours floating around that a party had managed to successfully clear a 'Hard' mission.

There were three motivating factors that forced the survivors to become more proactive.

And those were 'succeed in more missions, earn more Survival points, and then, purchase better abilities or equipment'. Everyone could see that they were visibly getting stronger through spending their SP. Which led the survivors to be completely immersed in doing the missions.

One could say that this was like the famed Möbius strip; Cinzia had hit the bulls-eye on this one.

"*Yaaaawn~.*"

A man sitting inside the first floor's lounge area opened his mouth wide open to swallow whole an elephant and yawned loudly. He licked his lips and surveyed his surroundings, as if he was waiting for someone.

He lifted his head slightly when he heard the steady footsteps walking closer. His eyes grew a bit larger in anticipation as he looked up the staircase. But his curiosity lasted only for a brief second. He rested his chin on his elbow and disinterestedly studied the person who climbed down the staircase.

It was a young man holding a spear. Everyone knew who this guy was. The survivor sitting on the first spot, who also hogged all the spotlight after solo clearing a 'Hard'

mission.

Of course, that was in the past. Two months had passed by since then, and now, people no longer thought of him as someone special.

The spear-wielding youth's actions barely made any sense. He didn't perform any actual missions whatsoever. He only repeated the same basic training missions that yielded no rewards at all. It was only natural for everyone else to find his behaviour rather odd.

Lots of rumour swirled around the youth and his unexplainable ways, but even that lasted only for a little while before dying down completely. As he wasn't getting in anyone's way, people lost interest. And the fact that he had plenty of Survival points to begin with, there was seemingly no reason for him to do anything, anyway.

The thoughts of the man in the lounge arrived here, and he withdrew his attention completely.

'What's so fun about running all the time, anyways?… Huh?'

The man in the lounge suddenly realised there was a small change in the way the youth behaved today.

Now normally, he'd rip the mission parchment for the track running as soon as he got to the plaza and disappear from sight. However, for some reason, he was standing around in front of the noticeboard for a while now. Even where he stood was slightly different from the norm, too.

He finally selected a parchment and cautiously ripped it in half. He was gone the next second.

'The running mission isn't found on that part of the board, though?'

Could it be?

The man in the lounge got up. His eyes didn't leave the exact spot the youth was standing just now and ran there as if he'd grown a pair of wings.

'He took this one, here.'

The second row from the bottom, at the far right – the man took the mission parchment and took a look.

[Survive the assault of the Ape Dogs! (remaining number of attempts: 2/30)]
Fight three Ape Dogs in the jungle and survive!
Difficulty: Slightly easy
When successful: +40 SP
When unsuccessful: Death
*Cooperation possible (up to 2 people)

The man's brows creased up as he read the mission details.

✧✧✧

The place Seol ended up in was a jungle full of twisting vines and large, sprawling trees that blocked the heavens above.

He pulled out a small pouch from his bag. He lifted it above his head and shook it, causing pinkish powder to spill forth and disperse in the air.

The name of the pouch was 'smell of meat'. Sold in the stores of Neutral Zone, it had an effect of attracting monsters. It was one of the things Agnes said he should buy.

The thing was, in missions where one was asked to 'Survive in the wild', it was actually faster to kill every beast and monster found in the mission area, instead of trying to avoid them for the next two hours or whatever the time limit may be.

Excluding missions that didn't feature any combat, such as 'Find the correct path' or 'Escape the maze', Seol was planning to at least try every single one available on the board. So, this 'smell of meat' was an indispensable item if he wanted to speed up the clearing process.

While waiting, Seol emptied a vial of Competence down his throat. The ones he bought from the VIP store were already finished, so he bought a new batch from the regular store. He thought that four times the training efficiency was certainly better than not

having any.

The Ape Dogs had highly developed olfactory senses, so they should arrive at Seol's location pretty soon. Sure enough, sounds of rustling bushes began tickling his ears not too long afterwards.

The direction was to his side; Seol discarded the vial and held his spear tightly. The thicket rustled softly a few times before two Ape Dogs slowly emerged from the vegetation.

Covered entirely in black fur, the monsters possessed quite a large, hulking frame. Not only its four limbs, but the monster's entire frame was bulging with rippling muscles. They reminded Seol of a gorilla, but slightly smaller; its canine-like snout being the major difference.

One of the two Ape Dogs positioned itself in front of Seol's view. The other one slowly circled around to his side in an anti-clockwise direction, as if he was tempting Seol to look at it.

Seol swallowed his saliva while continuously glancing at the monsters. His throat was getting clammy, and thick sweat drops formed on his forehead. He hadn't felt fear when facing dozens of skeletons, yet he was now getting unbearably tense while facing only two dog-like monsters. It was a noticeable change in mindset compared to how he was like two months ago.

Even though he was feeling the heart-tightening anxiety, his brain never stopped working. The Magic Power circulating through his body at the same time transmitted into the spear as well, and the weapon began to hum ever so softly in his hands.

'Do I need to wait for them to make a move?' (Seol)

No, I must not.

If left alone, these two creatures would soon face each other, and that meant he'd have to contend with enemies in front and back at the same time. In that case, he might as well…

'The first to strike, wins the battle.' (Seol)

When he took aim with the spear, the leisurely-walking Ape Dog stopped in its tracks.

Just before he moved, Seol regulated his breathing.

Was it this difficult to take the very first step? He was inwardly astonished.

Seol wasn't even thinking of having a spectacular battle, like the ones he witnessed countless times in his dream. No, he only wished to fight accordingly to the training he received up until now.

'Let's do this.' (Seol)

He already got into the correct posture. His eyes gained renewed focus.

The moment he made up his mind, his left leg pushed off the ground hard while he thrust his arms out. The Ape Dog quickly dodged to the side and then, savagely pounced forward. The monster was keeping a close eye on the spear as well.

The spear would miss at this trajectory, without a doubt. But Seol wasn't waiting around doing nothing, either. As soon as he saw the monster dodge to the side, he shifted the grip he had on the spear.

The attack changed from 'Thrust' into 'Cut'.

The thrusting spear tip suddenly drew a sharp arc and sliced past the Ape Dog's throat. It felt like he was cutting through a hardened block of tofu. Seeing the blood spurt out from the wound, he swiftly jumped to his back; claws that tried to ambush him barely missed his waist and brushed past.

The Ape Dog's sneak attack failed by a hair's breadth; the monster slid across the ground before spinning its body around as if it was a drifting master, leaving behind claw trails on the dirt. Too bad, by the time it tried to look at the human, a sharp object was already digging into its head. The spear embedded itself deep into the monster's brain. The Ape Dog's body shook as it collapsed.

Seol had taken care of two Ape Dogs in the blink of an eye, but it was not over yet. He retracted the spear, now dripping with blood, and spun around like a cartwheel and slashed out.

'Strike!'

Slam!

The open maw of the remaining Ape Dog aimed at his back spew blood like a fountain in the air. The creature spun in the air couple of times before landing head first on the ground with a heavy thud. It wiggled around like a dying worm, before eventually going completely limp. Seol looked at the dead monster with a dumbfounded expression on his face.

He did guess that the third Ape Dog must be in hiding. Since it was written on the mission parchment that there were three of them, he suspected as much.

What really took him by surprise, though, was his unexpectedly high attacking power.

For a battle that psyched him up so much, it ended in such a whimper. At the moment, he couldn't help but find it quite funny, thinking back to how he had to continuously encourage himself to take the first step.

'And they didn't even look that weak either.' (Seol)

Before he knew it, the surroundings changed.

It was a victory worthy to be called 'perfect', yet Seol wasn't happy about it at all.

'Was there a need for me to step back and then thrust forward?' (Seol)

He replayed the battle in his head, step by step.

'When I was switching from Thrust to Cut… I could have taken care of both of them at the same time.'

Agnes said that these missions were also a form of training. Basic technique training alone could not fill a certain gap, she said. It was now time to go through various types of combat situations and earn valuable experience, she also said. The Survival points earned would only be an icing on the cake, she added.

'One more time.' (Seol)

Seol picked up the last remaining mission parchment with an excited face and ripped it in half.

Finally, the ignition was turned on.

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Currently, the survivor wielding the most influence within the Neutral Zone was, without a doubt, Odelette Delphine. Not only was she a much fancied holder of the 'Sorcerer' class, her initial starting SP of 7500 had given her a figurative pair of wings to soar highly as well.

She proceeded to purchase several abilities and equipment as soon as her Awakening was completed. Soon, she found herself being elevated to the status of the most talked-about in the Neutral Zone. Perhaps befitting her personality, though, she then chose to form her own party rather than enter someone else's.

The survivor from the same area as her, Leorda Salvatore and the area 7's Hao Win entered her party. Which meant that calling her group the top of the pile within the Neutral Zone wasn't an exaggeration. It was simply a fact.

"Who?" (Odelette Delphine)

"That man. The top ranked." (Leorda)

Odelette Delphine was looking at the unusually-excited Leorda with an intrigued face. Just what could agitate the normally-taciturn holder of the Archer class like this?

"Ah~. Was it since yesterday? I did hear that he began doing the missions again." (Odelette Delphine)

"But, that is…" (Leorda)

"Isn't it a good thing, though?" (Odelette Delphine)

"…Pardon?" (Leorda)

"I was expecting him to start making his move soon, anyways… In any case, I will personally go and talk to him. That man… Honestly, he was the number one person I wanted to recruit, you see." (Odelette Delphine)

Leorda could only feel a sense of frustration as he listened to the blueprint of a bright future coming from this still-naive teenage girl who hadn't figured out what was going on.

“That’s not the issue here.” (Leorda)

“? Then, what is?” (Odelette Delphine)

“Two days ago, every single ‘Easy’ and ‘Slightly easy’ mission on the board disappeared. Gone. That man cleared them all. Alone.” (Leorda)

“Hmm… Those two difficulties weren’t much to begin with, though?” (Hao Win)

Hao Win muttered in between his cigarette smokes while leaning back on his chair, both feet on the table. He seemed to imply that there was no need to fuss about things.

There were total of 9 different difficulty levels found on the board.

‘Basic.’

‘Very Easy’, ‘Easy’, and ‘Slightly Easy.’

‘Normal.’

‘Slightly Hard’, ‘Hard’, and ‘Very Hard’.

And finally, ‘Impossible.’

The remaining attempts available for missions rated ‘Very Easy’, ‘Easy’ and ‘Slightly Easy’ were almost all finished by now, due to the survivors flocking to clear them during the first month of their stay in the Neutral Zone. Not to forget, the number of attempts was low to begin with, so them disappearing completely was bound to happen sooner or later.

After their Jobs were awakened, survivors were now flocking to ‘Normal’ and ‘Slightly Hard’ missions. However, it was still fine because their number of attempts had increased rather dramatically to coincide the Awakening.

The number of attempts available for the next tier of difficulty was far lower in comparison. Of course, parties attempting ‘Hard’ difficulty were pretty low in number as well.

No, the real problem was…

“See, one-third of the remaining ‘Normal’ missions have disappeared since last night, too.” (Leorda)

“…What?” (Odelette Delphine)

Both eyes of Odelette Delphine shot up. If it was last night, she was in the middle of attempting to clear a ‘Hard’ mission with her party.

“It’s not only that. I personally went there and confirmed it… Even the ‘Slightly Hard’ missions are decreasing at a frightening pace.” (Leorda)

“What did you say?!” (Hao Win)

Hao Win had to lower his feet and sit upright.

“Didn’t I tell you this already? The whole plaza is in an uproar.” (Leorda)

“Let’s go.” (Hao Win)

“Let’s go and take a look!” (Odelette Delphine)

The man and the girl stood up from their respective seats simultaneously.

Odelette Delphine hurried to the first floor, only to run into a spectacle she failed to understand right away.

Dozens of survivors were surrounding one man while whispering to each other. In the middle of that crowd, Seol was busy ripping a piece of paper in half.

“What is going on…?” (Odelette Delphine)

Odelette Delphine became flustered as she saw Seol disappear. She was about to push the blocking bodies away and rush towards the noticeboard, only to stop dead in her tracks.

“What…?!” (Odelette Delphine)

The teenage girl couldn’t help but exclaim out in shock as Seol reappeared in the plaza.

Was that around one minute? It was definitely no more than two minutes… She even

felt scared after seeing the expressionless face he had as he walked up to the board and ripped up another parchment.

'What did he choose?' (Odelette Delphine)

When Seol disappeared again, she hurriedly checked the board.

[Survive against a Wendigo! (remaining number of attempts: 14/60)]
Fight a Wendigo inside a forest and survive!
Difficulty: Slightly Hard
When successful: +450 SP
When unsuccessful: Death.
*Cooperation possible (up to 4 people)

"I just heard that this is his sixth time doing that mission." (Leorda)

Leorda was standing by her side before she had the chance to notice it. He shook his head as a bitter chuckle escaped his mouth.

Delphine counted in her head – one, two, three, four… When she counted to 57, Seol returned to the plaza. The youth then proceeded to choose another mission.

Rarely did he attempt a mission only once; most of the time, he repeated it twice or three times before moving on. Some missions, he tried them well over five times.

Before she knew it, even she became one of the stunned spectators. Within the span of 20 minutes, she got to hear the sounds of the parchments being ripped in half twelve more times. Each mission was combat-related. No matter how one put it, Seol was clearing each mission at a frightening rate.

Two men watching on from the lounge could only click their tongues in amazement.

"Wow… Is that even humanly possible?"

"Dunno. But look, there he is. He did it again."

“How envious, being the Gold Mark and all.”

“Hah. And here I was, wondering why he hadn’t done anything until now. It’s like everything’s a pushover to him, right?”

Gold Mark? A pushover?

Agnes snorted in derision as she listened from the corner of the lounge.

‘What a bunch of fools.’

These two could never see the light of truth, even if they were sent to hell and back. While they fell for Cinzia’s tricks and concentrated on clearing the missions, Seol alone had to endure an unforgiving training regime.

Did Seol not want to clear missions and earn SP? Of course not. He really wanted to clear them as well. But he simply endured. The skills and abilities he piled on for the past two months without complaining were finally bearing delicious fruits now.

As if he had something to prove, Seol continued to appear and then disappear for a long, long time.

A soft, subtle smile floated on Agnes’s lips.

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[Break through the siege and survive! (Remaining number of attempts: 11/15)]
Survive the encirclement of the group of skeletons!
Difficulty: Hard
When successful: +1000 Survival points.
When unsuccessful: Death
*Cooperation possible (up to 6 participants)

‘Finally.’ (Seol)

Seol mopped up the available ‘Slightly hard’ missions in the next four days. And now, he was about to attempt the first ‘Hard’ mission. He already made up his mind which one he’d go for, so there was no hesitation.

The place he was teleported to was the underground cavern. Staring at that low ceiling, a strange sense of deja vu flooded in.

“It’s been a while.” (Seol)

Dozens of skeletons were glaring at him, just like before. Seol grinned slightly, before the look of resolute focus returned to his face while his body shifted into the correct stance.

The battle arena was small and confined; there was no room for retreat. The correct answer here was to not back off, but push forward.

The moment the skeleton wearing the helmet at the back opened its bony jaw, Seol pounced forward like a leopard.

When he powerfully thrust forward at the area with a large concentration of skeletons, dull cracking noises filled the cavern and shattered bits of bones flew about. He slapped away a blade trying to cut him from the side and thrust his spear at the exposed gap. The skeleton, with its head split open, shook around comically before crumbling into a heap.

He secured some space for himself in this fashion. Then, he proceeded to speedily kill the skeletons one by one as they attempted to rush to his position.

Seol’s style of battle was simple yet effective.

He first swatted away the incoming attack and relied on ‘Thrust’ to shatter the enemy’s head. If another attack came at him at the same time, he rapidly fell back, preyed on the timing when the attacks missed, and stabbed forward. He only aimed at the skulls specifically.

The shift in ‘Strike’ and ‘Thrust’ was as seamless as a flowing stream of water. His hand speed was genuinely quick as he continued to wield the spear non-stop.

The experience gained through hundreds of missions was helping Seol to grow even further than before.

In a blink, the frontline of the skeletons was decimated. And as the second line was getting pummeled into submission as well…

Just as he expected…

Roar!

The skeleton with the helmet let loose a loud roar from the back. It grabbed a huge axe and began madly running towards Seol's direction.

It was at this moment when Seol's heart shook and cried out.

How long…

Just how long… did he wait for this moment?

The number of simulations he ran inside his head amounted to several dozens. He was not going to make a single mistake here.

He swatted away the incoming attack of a small fry and took four quick steps back. At the same time, the helmet-wearing skeleton jumped in the air. The axe was pulled back and then, came down towards Seol's head. Right then, his eyes shone with a dangerous glint.

'Strike!'

The falling axe and the rising, spinning spear violently collided in the air.

SFX for a loud collision of metallic objects

The ear-ripping metallic screech bounced around the cavern.

The axe could not descend any further, nor could the spear deflect it away. However, something had changed, compared to before.

Screech… Creaak!!

Sparks flew off as the axe blade and the spear shaft grinded against each other. A short competition of strength soon developed as Seol bore the brunt of the skeleton's attack.

Vuoong!!

The monster's great power, enhanced by its fall, dissipated pretty quickly. However,

Seol's Magic Power constantly bubbled up like a spring that never dries, and supplemented his physical strength.

"Keuh-euheuh!"

Seol successfully shoved away the axe, and quickly seized upon the exposed opening; when a grandiose attack failed to connect, the resulting exposed gap would be equally grand.

The skeleton fell from the air after losing its balance, and Seol swiftly stabbed his spear forward into one of the skull's empty eye sockets.

Slam!

The helmet made up of bones flung away after the spear slammed into it. The skeleton began a drunken dance as it crumpled to the ground after more than half of its head was blown away.

"I did it!" (Seol)

Seol seldom shouted, but he did now out of excitement.

Swatting away and stabbing the skeleton – the event he could only dream about pulling off, he'd finally done in reality as well.

His complexion was filled with happiness as he eyed the heap of unmoving bones on the ground. The sense of accomplishment, a victory well earned, ballooned inside his heart. He thought that he'd never ever grow sick and tired of this joy for the rest of his life.

'Hang on a sec.' (Seol)

Suddenly, he pondered on what might have happened if he chose a different method to counter. Since he was aware of the opponent using a jumping attack, couldn't he have tried something else other than 'swatting away and stabbing' and still win in a simple, efficient manner?

Several possibilities continued to enter and leave his brain. He needed to try them out first to see what was what.

‘One more time!’ (Seol)

The desire to quickly fight the helmet-wearing skeleton filled him up, so he quickly brandished his spear towards the remaining monsters. A joyful smile never left his face, however.

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Seol continued to attack the encirclement ‘Hard’ mission over and over again.

He considered other survivors’ positions and left behind enough attempts for other missions, but for this skeleton mission, the thought of being polite not once entered his thought process. Every time he defeated the helmet-wearing skeleton, he felt as if the unseen weight weighing down on his shoulders were lifting up slowly but surely; as if he got to breathe freely again.

Unfortunately, the unavoidable problem eventually reared its head; since he was so enthusiastic about clearing the mission, the remaining number of attempts depleted quickly as well.

There was nothing Seol could do as there were only 12 attempts left to being with. Didn’t mean he had enough, though. On the contrary, he thought that he needed to do at least 50 more times before he’d be satisfied.

Naturally, Seol deliberated on what he should do. Then, on the last remaining attempt, he did something completely unheard of.

He defeated every single small fry found in the mission super fast while leaving behind only the helmet-wearing boss skeleton. There were plenty of opportunity to kill it, but Seol made sure not to fatally wound it.

“Get up, you b*stard.” (Seol)

Seol was glaring at the skeleton lying on the floor. On his hands, his spear and the skeleton’s axe. He found this sight of the monster not to his liking, so he used the end of the spear to tap its skull a few times, trying to make it stand.

“Stand up straight, Mister Skull.” (Seol)

When he kicked a bit hard, the skeleton noisily rolled away. Its helmet was missing and couldn't be found anymore. It was not hard to imagine the level of torture the monster had to go through simply by looking at the misaligned collarbones or several cracked ribs.

The skeleton flinched and began to shuffle about. It tried to push off against the ground with its trembling bones, and once up, swayed about unsteadily on its feet.

Seol then tossed the axe over to it and strode away, widening the distance between them. His sour expression showed how unsatisfied he was, as he continued to glare at the skeleton that kinda looked like it might keel over at any second.

The idea of one-on-one face-off he came up with was a brilliant one, if he could say so himself. Now, he was able to continuously fight to his heart's content without the pesky remaining number of attempts handicapping him.

For the first thirty times they fought, the skeleton seemed to be humouring Seol's whims. However, past the 50th time, it felt like the skeleton began to desperately resist him. Past the 60th, it visibly lost all motivation to even put up a fight.

Seol too had made several mistakes adjusting his strength during the fight and ended up damaging the skeleton here and there. Even considering that, the disappointment he felt was hard to describe in mere words.

"Please, please! Just do one more jumping attack, dude! A jumping attack, I say! You know, jump? Can you even understand me?" (Seol)

It was unknown whether the skeleton was listening to him or not. It simply raised the axe but then, one of its shoulder bones snapped and fell. The bone finally gave in and broke after the repeated abuse it had to endure.

The skeleton froze on the spot; its empty eye sockets sneaked a quick glance at Seol's direction.

"…Well, you still have your right arm." (Seol)

Clack, clack, clack, clack……

The skeleton powerlessly clattered its teeth. No one knew what it was trying to say, but it still sounded like a plea.

“Come on, let’s fight. Hurry.” (Seol)

In the end, the skeleton succeeded in grasping the axe as it squeaked and creaked noisily. It was as if it was forcing itself to overcome its limits. Although it was just a measly skeleton…

“Good. Come at me. I heard that an undead monster like you carry around unconditional hatred for all living things. So, show me.” (Seol)

Seol used his spear to beckon the monster.

“I’ll end this after twenty more times, okay?”

It was then, Seol momentarily thought that he could see the exposed spine of the skeleton flinch.

The skeleton standing around doing nothing finally moved its legs. It heaved the axe up high and began its rush.

However, its attack had none of its former viciousness nor conviction. No, it only looked wretched and miserable. Seol licked his lips and readied the stance for ‘Strike’.

And so, the skeleton unsteadily ‘ran’ towards Seol, and lifted its remaining arm over its head. Just as he was about to get ready to swat away the falling axe…

The skeleton simply let go of the axe as its arm fell down.

Seol’s attention was stolen away by the axe that flew past him. In that moment he wasn’t looking, the skeleton grasped the spear shaft as tightly as it could. Then, summoning whatever strength it could still bring forth, it slammed its own head on the spear tip.

The skull disintegrated, and the rest of the bones clattered to the ground. The way its remains piled up like that, one couldn’t help but feel that salvation had finally come to the poor monster.

Everything happened in the blink of an eye.

[You have successfully completed a ‘Hard’ difficulty mission.]
[1000 Survival points have been added to your tally.]
[Current SP: 85,280 SP]

Seol just stood there dumbfounded, his eyes blinking nonstop.

“…Huh.”

Chapter 29
Looking Back (1)

When Seol materialised back in the Neutral Zone's plaza, he got to hear the noises of people taking deep breaths from here and there. Actually, their expressions looked like they've just come across a scary ghost or something.

That was quite understandable, though. The longest he took to clear a mission was only around five minutes. Yet, he took several hours this time, so people were thinking that maybe he met an accident and got killed, whether through carelessness, or by a mistake.

But, here he was, unharmed and healthy, as if to taunt everyone looking on.

"Keh, kek! Ahahahaha!!" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Seol tried to clarify what happened, adding that it was all just a misunderstanding. That only caused Hyun Sahng-Min to beat the floor while guffawing his head off.

"The s, skeleton k, killed itself… Ahahaha…" (Shin Sahng-Ah)

Even Shin Sahng-Ah was in tears as she laughed her head off, her breaths eventually running ragged and short.

Seol found this scene a bit mystifying to behold, though.

Only two months had passed since the ending of the Tutorial. Yet, these two seemed to have gone through a rather remarkable transformation. Maybe it was the new attire they had on? They seemed *different,* and the aura exuding from them also had gone through a substantial change.

Shin Sahng-Ah and Hyun Sahng-Min laughed their hearts out, and then complained how difficult it was to talk to him for the last couple of months, never mind even seeing his face. So, the three of them chatted for a long time.

Hyun Sahng-Min's Job was 'Archer'. His quick wits and that active personality of his

combined to make the decision to not hold back on spending his SP as soon as the Awakening was completed. Which resulted him getting a head start over his peers and helped him earn more points as well. Consequently, he was now known as someone quite skillful in the Zone.

Although the team he worked for wasn't as amazing as Odelette Delphine's, Hyun Sahng-Min said they were steadily clearing the missions, so he was happy with where he was currently.

As for Shin Sahng-Ah, her life turned for the better after the Chamber of Awakening opened up. Her Job of Priest was a highly sought-after rare class, only losing out to that of a Sorcerer. Thanks to that, the moment her Job was revealed, the number of teams that tried to court her couldn't be counted at all. Some even tempted her with the promise of advance SP payment.

Shin Sahng-Ah entered the team that offered her the most amount of signing fee.

She was very proud of herself, saying that she was finally living like a normal human being now, only to be promptly shot down by Hyun Sahng-Min. He mocked her for showing off in front of Seol, who had far more points than she could ever dream of.

Seol simply smiled while listening to their banter. Realising that these two had adapted well and were carving out their own paths now put his mind at ease.

"Ah, right. What about Miss Yun Seo-Rah?" (Seol)

Seol suddenly remembered about her in the midst of listening to the duo's antics and asked them offhandedly. He met up with Yi Surl-Ah and her brother, Yi Sung-Jin, a few times in the last couple of months, but he hadn't seen Yun Seo-Rah once.

Hyun Sahng-Min stopped talking for some reason. Shin Sahng-Ah's complexion darkened at the same time. Seeing their reactions, Seol felt his heart skip for a moment.

"…Did she die?" (Seol)

"No, she's… more or less alive." (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min corrected Seol. But what he said sounded far more ominous. She was 'more or less' alive?

“Well, she… I think it’s really tough for her. With her right arm in that state…” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

Shin Sahng-Ah’s voice was full of pity.

Seol inwardly went, *Oh, c**p.*

Now that he thought about it, she lost her right arm’s mobility for good during the treasure hunt, all thanks to Kahng Seok and his cronies ambushing her. The image of her silently shedding tears next to the item draw machine floated back up to the top of his head.

Yun Seo-Rah received around 300 SP at the end of the Tutorial. That amount was way too short to endure two months of stay in the Neutral Zone. Even if she saved up like a madman and lived frugally, she couldn’t have enough to endure for more than a fortnight, at most.

“I think the Yi siblings have been constantly helping her out until now. Ah, that’s right. You also gave out some SP, didn’t you? Miss Shin Sahng-Ah.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“It was… only once, though.” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

Shin Sahng-Ah averted her gaze and hesitated slightly.

“I couldn’t heal her arm, maybe because my Job level is still too low… I tried to give her some of my points, but Miss Seo-Rah didn’t want to take them. And it feels like she’s been avoiding me for a little while now, too…” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

Listening to her voice getting progressively smaller, one got the impression that she was trying to come up with excuses. Actually, she was feeling ashamed for bragging about living pretty well nowadays.

Hyun Sahng-Min waved his hand about and said that there was no need to act like this. It was understandable for someone like Yi Surl-Ah, who was indebted to Yun Seo-Rah for her life. However, there was no reason for someone with a self-centered personality like him to go out of his way to help Yun Seo-Rah.

Even Seol had nothing much to say in this regard. Quite frankly, he had completely forgotten about this matter as he was too busy with the training regime until now.

After a lengthy bout of silence went by, Hyun Sahng-Min slowly got up from his seat.

“You shouldn’t worry about her too much. Sure, you can help her out if you’ve got some wiggle room yourself, but you know this too, don’t ya? That we’re all equally having a rough time out there, trying to fend for ourselves.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

That was also true. It could get pretty hectic trying to survive within the Neutral Zone. Looking after someone else in this place was basically a luxury very few could afford.

“Well, I should get going now. If we have a chance later, why don’t we do some missions together? I’m confident of being more helpful to you now, you see.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min lightly tapped on his crossbow and grinned.

“Me too. If you need any help, you can call on me anytime, regardless of when. I’ll cancel everything and run to your rescue.” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

Shin Sahng-Ah waved her hand goodbye as well and walked away.

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After separating from the two, Seol returned to the plaza. He was planning to have a go at the remaining untouched ‘Hard’ mission types right away. However, he was feeling a bit restless inside. So, he figured that, by immersing himself into clearing missions, he’d be able to forget about everything for a while.

The number of different Hard difficulty mission parchments found on the noticeboard was 11. All of them were combat missions, while the SP completion reward on offer varied greatly from 500 to 1000.

The ‘escape from encirclement’ mission Seol ran to the ground just so happened to be one of the most dangerous available among the Hard difficulty. Since he didn’t encounter any hardship completing that, he was confident of blitzing the remaining ones in no time.

Some time later…

The remaining attempts for the missions were 15 for every single type, but he only did six times each before moving on to the next one. Even still, he got to earn another

43500 Survival Points.

'This should be enough.' (Seol)

He could probably do more, but, after chatting to Shin Sahng-Ah and Hyun Sahng-Min, he decided not to monopolise. Their stories taught Seol of the harsh reality that, although completing missions became easier than before, there were very few who could afford to live as good a life as him among the survivors, even now.

For example, if four people cooperated and completed a mission rated 'Slightly hard' worth 300 SP, the reward would be split evenly according to the number of participants. Of course, the individual survival rate would go up, but at the same time, all their hard work would only result in a measly 75 points per participant.

The truth could be seen from the way Shin Sahng-Ah described her situation – someone as in demand as her didn't say that she was rich, but merely that she was "living like a human."

Seol wasn't too worried about others criticising him for hogging all the high-paying missions. But, there was this one thing he came to realise during the treasure hunt. Because he got too enthusiastic and swept away every coin he could find, Shin Sahng-Ah and Hyun Sahng-Min had to go through so much trouble. As for Yi Sung-Jin, the boy had to search throughout the night too, without rest.

As time went on, more and more teams would start attempting the Hard missions. Since he left behind more than half of each mission types, the survivors should not complain. Not too much, at least.

Besides, it wasn't as if there were no harder difficulty missions, either.

[You have successfully completed a 'Hard' difficulty mission.]
[950 Survival points have been added to your tally.]
[Current SP: 128,780 SP]

Seol clenched his fist tightly.

He decided to stop doing the missions for now. There was something else he needed to do first before moving on to the next difficulty.

'Very Hard' difficulty had a total of six missions. The lowest points payout was 10,000. That was ten times the reward of the most dangerous Hard missions. When he skimmed through the mission detail, it sounded rather challenging, as well.

From here onwards, a need to prepare beforehand couldn't be avoided anymore; not only a set of equipment such as armour and potions, but also, capable comrades as well, when necessary.

Right on top of the noticeboard, there was the lone 'Impossible' difficulty mission, but he didn't pay that any attention whatsoever. Although its payout was a humongous 172,800 points, the mission goal was completely, utterly absurd and no one would be able to clear that.

Seol turned around to leave.

There were several things he needed to prepare. But he already knew what needed to be bought first.

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The eighth floor.

As Seol stepped outside the VIP store, he had to do everything in his willpower to calm his wildly beating heart. Within his grasp were two small medicine vials.

They were Ambrosias – the mysterious liquid that would evolve one's already awakened abilities.

He didn't stop at that, though. Even after he bought both of the available vials of Ambrosia, he still had a fair amount of SP left, so he bought a bottle of Elixir for Magic Power as well. With the conclusion of this transaction, the VIP store no longer had Ambrosias or an Elixir to boost one's Magic Power for sale.

All thanks to their enormous price tags, Seol's Survival Points tally dropped all the way down to 38,780 in a single breath.

With the remaining points, he could've bought another bottle of Elixir. However, he held back with what could only be described as superhuman patience. He still needed these points to purchase his equipment, after all. He thought that, after getting himself the best equipment on sale, he'd be able to earn back the points in no time.

"Ehem."

However, no matter how hard he tried to restrain himself, he couldn't prevent a foolish grin from bursting out of his lips. He even momentarily thought that the entire world was blooming in a rosy colour.

'I should wait until I get to my room first… No, no. Waiting around might invite a disaster.'

He only had to climb up two flights of stairs, but Seol couldn't wait anymore. He drank both vials of Ambrosias in one go. Fearing that his other abilities might evolve instead, he fervently thought of 'Nine Eyes' and nothing else.

[Your Innate ability, 'Nine Eyes' is evolving.]
[The lower direction (1) of your Innate ability – Nine Eyes, the Black colour: Escape Immediately, has been unlocked.]
[Your Innate ability, 'Nine Eyes' is evolving.]
[The upper direction (1) of your Innate ability – Nine Eyes, the Gold colour: Golden Commandment, has been unlocked.]

Finally, he got to pull back the two layers of veil covering his ability. With this, he unlocked four out of five directions. The only one remaining was the 'right'.

Seol activated his ability right away and fell into deep contemplation.

Yellow colour was for 'Attention Required'.

Vermillion was for 'Do Not Approach'.

Crimson was for 'Immediate Retreat Recommended'.

As for the new colour, Black, it was for 'Escape Immediately'.

Judging from this, the newly unlocked colour, Black, was an extension of already available emergency warning signals.

'I get what's up with *Escape Immediately*, but… Golden Commandment?'

He pondered for a while, but he couldn't quite grasp what it did. That wasn't the only riddle he could not solve, however.

The 'lower' direction only opened up after he had unlocked the 'left' direction first. So, he thought that the 'upper' direction would also open up only after he unlocked the 'right' direction. The order of the things had been changed, as far as he could tell. Was it because the colours were on the opposite directions?

'How can I use it without knowing what it does…?'

Seol began walking again and climbed up the stairs, all the while shaking his head slightly.

But then…

'Gold colour?!'

His eyes shot open abruptly.

Beyond the tenth floor railing, he could see a clear and radiant golden glow, coming from a spot right in front of his quarters.

He hurriedly ran up, and found a person quietly waiting there. Seol's thought process dimmed just for a bit when he confirmed who it was from her back. She was certainly one of the last people he expected to see in the Neutral Zone.

"You've finally come." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

As if she sensed his approach, the business-suit wearing woman turned around to greet him.

"Hi." (Seol)

It was none other than Kim Hahn-Nah.

“Been a while.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

She smiled refreshingly. And sure enough, her entire body was bathed in golden hue.

Seol couldn’t help but be confused. For one, he was curious why she was here, and two, why was there a golden colour coming from her…?

“Can we go inside? It’s a bit awkward to talk out here and all.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Her friendly voice brought Seol back to reality. As soon as they entered his room, Kim Hahn-Nah couldn’t hide her astonishment.

“Oh my word~. It’s so grand in here. Honestly, I never dreamed that you’d end up using this room.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah’s facial expression implied that she wasn’t sure where to park her rear as she stood around, before she chose a spot on a comfy couch and settled down. Seol quickly sat on the opposite side. Seeing this, she burst out a fit of giggles.

“Why are you in such a hurry? What, are you that surprised to see me?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Yes, I am surprised.” (Seol)

“Hmm… Before we get started, I should go about appeasing that curiosity of yours, no? Fine. What would you like to know?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol almost blurted out ‘Why is your body glowing in a golden hue?’, but somehow was able to change his words at the last second.

“How did you get here?” (Seol)

“Well, because I know how to?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Hey.” (Seol)

“Just kidding. Of course, the Neutral Zone isn’t a place that anyone can just come and go as they please. However, I’m an exception, you see.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol stared at her without saying anything.

“You idiot. Didn’t you read the Invitation letter?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

The Invitation letter? What about it? Seol was about to ask her, before going “Ah.”

He just remembered that, in the gold stamp Invitation letter, there was a clause about him being able to bring along one ‘helper’.

“You don’t have to fret, okay? Miss Cinzia knows about me being here. I went through the proper procedures, so no *problemo*.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“In that case… That’s a relief.” (Seol)

Suddenly, Kim Hahn-Nah raised her hand.

“Hold on. Can you answer me one thing first?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“?”

“It’s about Miss Cinzia and Miss Agnes. Especially Agnes – she seems to be particularly interested in your growth for some reason?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Is that so?” (Seol)

“Yes, it is indeed so. Just what underhanded tricks did you use to flip those violent Sicilian gangsters over to your side?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol couldn’t help but doubt his own hearing just then. Violent? Gangsters?

Kim Hahn-Nah’s eyes went round when she saw his expression.

“My god, you didn’t know?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“……”

“You really had no idea? Those two are pretty infamous as the Battle Maniacs of the South.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“A battle maniac? You saying that Miss Agnes is a…?!” (Seol)

“Yeah. She’s the direct subordinate of the boss lady Cinzia, as well as the Sicilian organisation’s top executive. She’s even known as the demonic drill instructor, too. I’m pretty sure almost everyone in the Paradise has heard of her.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

As the explanation continued on, a certain sense of chill crept up on Seol’s backside. He had no idea that Agnes was such a big shot.

‘Maybe I, uh, I shouldn’t have teased her.’ (Seol)

“If you’re done asking me about stuff, shall we get to the main topic of my visit?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol nodded his head.

He was indeed curious as to know why she came here in the first place. There was still a month left to go before the Neutral Zone’s deadline, after all.

“Well, I came to cheer you on, and… I wanted to give you advice. Also, there’s something I need your help with, too. That’s why I’m here.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah took her glasses off and stared at Seol. Compared to how it was like back on the riverbank, the way she looked at him had softened considerably.

“First of all, I gotta praise you. You’ve exceeded all of my expectations. I honestly would never have guessed you were this excellent.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“I thought you were unhappy about using the golden stamp on me.” (Seol)

“That was back then. But, not anymore. The stamp wasn’t wasted on you. At all. Honest.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol felt an itch creeping up on his face hearing the constant stream of praises.

“Okay, so that’s the cheering bit done. What advice do you have for me?” (Seol)

When Seol sheepishly scratched his cheek, Kim Hahn-Nah grinned slyly.

“You did the right thing by stopping at the ‘Hard’ missions. You see, the difficulty spike in the ‘Very Hard’ missions is nothing to laugh about. You gotta prepare yourself properly first.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

But of course – Seol was expecting as much as well. Seeing that the rewards on offer jumped by ten times in value, the difficulty should rise just as much, too.

"And, you should find yourself reliable comrades. If I have a complaint to make, then you just stick to yourself too much." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"Comrades, huh…" (Seol)

"That's right. Odelette Delphine, Hao Win – I recommend these two people. I'm telling you this before you get the wrong idea – my suggestion isn't solely because of their skills." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"Then, why?" (Seol)

"They will certainly become a big help to you in the future, that's why." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

It was rather clear what Kim Hahn-Nah was implying here.

"Are you telling me to form a personal connection with them?" (Seol)

"That's one way of looking at it. In any case, you already have a link called 'fellow survivors from the same time period' going for you. I mean, there's nothing to lose by getting friendly with them, right?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"I get it with Delphine since she's a Sorcerer, but what about Hao Win?" (Seol)

"He's a big player in the darker side of the society; I heard that he's a top level executive in the biggest Triad in China." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol slowly facepalmed. Not only the Sicilian 'Battle Maniacs,' he had to deal with a man from a d*mn Chinese Triads, too? He would've never imagined getting mixed up with these sorts of people in his old life.

It was here that a thought popped up in his head.

"If I work together with those two, then could I challenge the Impossible mission and…" (Seol)

"No. Do not even think about challenging that one." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

He was just blurting out the possibility, but Kim Hahn-Nah promptly cut him off before he got anywhere with the idea. Seol could only smile bitterly.

“It’s that difficult, huh.” (Seol)

“Even I am not confident of my odds with that mission, I’ll have you know. At a bare minimum, only a large team consisting of Level 4 Earthlings or above should stand a chance of clearing that one. I mean, seriously now. Why would such a mission be available in the first place, I wonder? I just can’t figure it out.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

She complained bitterly, before turning her sharp gaze on him.

“Wait a minute. You are not thinking of trying your luck on that one, just because you’ve heard of someone clearing it in the past, right?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Someone cleared it before?” (Seol)

Now this was the first time he heard of it.

“Yeah, sure. In the entire history of the Zone, one guy did pull it off.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“But, how…?” (Seol)

Seeing Seol’s shocked expression, Kim Hahn-Nah simply snorted.

“Only a few knows about this. But that guy, he didn’t clear the mission in what you’d call a ‘proper’ fashion. He just got lucky, that’s all.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Even if it was down to luck, it still counts.” (Seol)

“That’s true, too. But whatever, do not ever attempt that mission. Got it? It’d be better to fight a monster from the world of the dead with your bare hands rather than attempting that mission.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah passionately voiced her opposition and slowly regulated her breathing. She shook her head, causing her ponytail to sway this way and that.

“I’m sure you’ll do what’s best for you, anyways…” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

She sneakily raised the end of her sentence and glanced at him.

Seol ignored that and asked her once more.

“Didn’t you say you need my help? What’s that about?” (Seol)

“…Well, it’s nothing big, really.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah hesitated slightly, which was unlike her, before opening her mouth.

“Again, let me make this clear. What I’m about to say from here onwards isn’t coming from me.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Okay, so from who is it, then?” (Seol)

“There’s a guy. One of my superior officers.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Your superior officer, is it… You mean, from Sinyoung?” (Seol)

Kim Hahn-Nah nodded her head and continued.

“Anyways. What I’m trying to say is, someone else other than me is asking you for a favour. Don’t wanna do it, fine. You don’t have to do it. But, if you do decide to go for it, there are plenty of benefits for me. You might also get to share in the loot, too.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“What’s the favour?” (Seol)

“You know Yun Seo-Rah, right?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah got to the main topic right away. Seol was taken back somewhat, though.

“You see, the person who invited Yun Seo-Rah is the person asking you for the favour. From Sinyoung.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Hold on, let me get this straight. You saying that your superior officer from Sinyoung invited Miss Yun Seo-Rah?” (Seol)

“That’s right. That person is known for having a discerning eye. Everyone he invited all turned out to be big hits, you see. He even resorted to using a silver stamp and invited her this time, so the expectations from the company is pretty high.” (Kim Hahn-

Nah)

“But…” (Seol)

“Right. You know this too, don’t you? At this rate, Yun Seo-Rah is going to fail. Understandably, my superior officer is a nervous shell of his former self, know what I mean?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Only then did Seol get the rough idea of what the favour could be.

“Let me get straight to the point – that person would like you to look after Yun Seo-Rah.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“That’s too unspecific, isn’t it? Do I need to give her 1000 Survival Points and be done with that? After all, she’d be able to leave the Neutral Zone with that.” (Seol)

“That would be worse than failing, actually. Okay, if I were to get more specific, he wants to see Yun Seo-Rah develop normally in the Zone, just like everyone else. Heal her arm if it’s possible, let her tag along when you go around clearing missions, etc, etc. Should I say, please play the role of a *jjeol*?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

A *jjeol*, was it… Seol inwardly let off a long groan. *(TL note at the end)*

Coincidentally, he got to hear about Yun Seo-Rah twice in one day.

Seol understood that her life in the Zone was fraught with extreme hardship. It wasn’t as if he had no plans of helping her out.

However.

…You know this too, don’t ya…

He also thought what Hyun Sahng-Min said back not too long ago wasn’t wrong, either.

Kim Hahn-Nah was waiting for Seol’s reply. She was still emitting the golden hue.

“…What do you think I should do?” (Seol)

“Me? As I said this before, I didn’t invite her…” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“I know that. What I’m asking you here is, as the person who invited me, not Yun Seo-Rah, what is your opinion on this matter?” (Seol)

Perhaps she didn’t expect to be questioned, her expression became somewhat dazed and lost. Soon enough, though, the corner of her lips arched up ever so slightly.

“Of course, I’ll be very happy if you do this one thing for me. I’ll be getting a nice little opportunity here, you know.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

There was a slight grin etched on her face as she spoke up, clearly enjoying herself.

“I understand. I can’t give you a definite answer, but I promise I’ll look into it.” (Seol)

“Hng. Not bad, you even know what to say to make me feel better, too.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

She muttered to herself, *Are you even the same gambling addict from back then?*, and continued on with what she wanted to say to him.

“In any case, consider it carefully. Yun Seo-Rah’s supposed to be a rising star invited by Sinyoung’s greatest talent scout. Making him owe you a favour would be a good thing for you, too.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“A favour, huh…” (Seol)

He hadn’t given much thought over the notion of Yun Seo-Rah being a potential rising star, but that did make sense. Back in the assembly hall, when he inadvertently spied on her Stats, he saw ‘Brilliant’ appearing on the ‘Personality’ column, after all.

Having finished what she wanted to say, Kim Hahn-Nah began standing up.

“That’s right, a favour. Well, there’s that saying, right? The Golden Rule, I mean.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Take ca… What did you say?” (Seol)

Seol was taken by surprise again and stared at her.

“You know, the Golden Rule.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

She winked at him and walked towards the exit of the room.

“Therefore whatever you desire for men to do to you, you shall also do to them; for this is the law and the prophets.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Is that… the Golden Rule?” (Seol)

“It’s a verse from the Gospel of Matthew. Verse 7:12. I never really thought of those words as altruistic babble, though. No, it’s much more closer to ‘give-and-take’, don’t you agree?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“……”

“Who knows? If you appear before her like a prince riding on a white horse and rescue her, she might ju~st fall hard for you. I mean, she’s pretty cute, right?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Of course, she was only joking.

However, Seol’s mute response seemed rather suspect. Feeling a bit embarrassed now, she fixed her high heel, lightly tapped on the floor with her feet, and opened the door. Before she slipped through the door, she turned around one more time.

“No need to see me off. Oh, and don’t forget the deal we have. You negotiate with me before anyone else when you leave the Neutral Zone.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Oh, uh… Right.” (Seol)

“Don’t get killed. I’ll be here in a month’s time to fetch you.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

She closed the door.

Although Kim Hahn-Nah was gone, Seol didn’t show any sign of movement. For a long time, he stood there and dwelled on everything she said. And then, dwelled on them some more.

…Even as the sounds of high heels getting further away disappeared altogether.

(TL: A jjeol or in Korean, “쩔” is a high level player in an online game who parties up with low level players to help them hunt mobs and accrue experience points. There is also a similar slang term in Korea called ‘bus’ but apparently, there is a minute difference between the two, and in some games, one or the other isn’t used by the player base.)

Chapter 30
Looking Back (2)

'The Golden Commandment, is it.'

Its meaning wasn't complicated and the phrase wasn't trying to imply anything deep, either. So, he only needed to interpret it as he heard it. However, he just couldn't link the original meaning of the phrase to his ability, 'Nine Eyes'. It didn't feel quite right.

Just like the 'right' and 'left' directions, there must be some kind of deeper meaning behind the way it was named like that. He thought about it dozens of times, but could only draw blank. The deeper he thought about it, the more complicated his head became.

In the end, he spent the whole night without a wink of sleep.

'I can't figure it out.'

Sleep didn't want to visit him. Eventually, Seol got exhausted stirring around the bed wide awake, and decided to postpone deciphering the 'Golden Commandment' to another time. He knew better than to force himself to a wrong conclusion here. In any case, he needed to find the proverbial loose string to yank out first if he wanted to unravel this mystery.

There were two ways he could think of that might resolve this quandary:

One, to open up the 'right' direction.

Just like how the 'left' direction was connected to 'lower' direction, the odds of 'upper' direction having a link with the 'right' was high. If he could find what the remaining three colours were, he might be able to narrow down the meaning of the golden colour.

'But, there are no more Ambrosias left… '

Two, the sole remaining method, was to find the truth by experimentation.

Having stared at the ceiling for the entirety of the night, Seol made up his mind and pushed himself off the bed.

The longer one stayed in the Neutral Zone, the harder it became to sense the hours passing by. Not only there were no watches in this place, most of the facilities stayed open 24 hours a day, which kind of made finding a spot without light shining on it a rarity within the Zone. Only the smartphone he received at the beginning of the Tutorial kept him up with the current date and time.

[05:17 AM]

Around this early morning hour, the always-crowded first floor plaza would be much more quieter.

Wondering if Yun Seo-Rah was there, Seol came down to the first floor only to find someone else's familiar back, instead.

'Yi Surl-Ah?'

He was about to call out to greet her but stopped. His half-opened mouth slowly closed shut.

Yi Surl-Ah was in the midst of taking a halting glance at the noticeboard.

It didn't seem as if she was here for that running mission again. A Basic difficulty mission could be repeated infinitely, so there were no need to worry about the mission parchments running out. So, if she was hesitating like that in front of the board, that could only mean that she was thinking of challenging a mission with a difficulty higher than 'Very easy'.

Her petite shoulders drooped in disappointment. Her head faltered, hinting that she was deeply devastated over something. Seol quickly walked over to her side.

"What should I do now…?" (Yi Surl-Ah)

"Miss Surl-Ah?" (Seol)

"Heukyahck?!?!" (Yi Surl-Ah)

When he called out to her out of the blue, a rather peculiar scream jumped out of her

mouth. She quickly turned around to face Seol. Her shocked expression calmed down quickly after seemingly losing ten years of her life through fright.

"*Orabeo-nim*!" (Yi Surl-Ah)

"Good morning. You here to try the running mission again? It's been a while since we ran side by side, so how about it?" (Seol)

"Oh… Well, shall we?" (Yi Surl-Ah)

She sounded really unwilling. Seol didn't miss the fact that she hesitated ever so slightly before answering him.

"What's wrong? Are you feeling unwell?" (Seol)

"Oh, no! Not at all. Uhm, it's like, I'm lacking in confidence, something like that? I haven't practiced a lot lately and stuff…" (Yi Surl-Ah)

She blurred the ends of her sentence and smiled awkwardly. Her smile was the usual one that seemed pure and innocent, but today, he picked up the hint of unnaturalness that she couldn't completely conceal. Her always-sunny complexion seemed very haggard as well.

'Mm?'

Seol carefully studied her appearance for a little while and tilted his head.

Now that he had taken a closer look at her, there were a few odd things about her. It had been slightly over a month since the Jobs were awakened, yet her attire remained the same as what she wore during the Tutorial. And having met up with Shin Sahng-Ah and Hyun Sahng-Min earlier on, this oddness came across as quite bizarre to him now.

Yi Surl-Ah's 'aptitude' wasn't bad when he took a peek at her Status Windows. Although it couldn't be called as desirable as 'Brilliant', he did remember seeing the description of 'jack of all trades' or something similar to that in her Aptitude column.

"Have you eaten breakfast yet?" (Seol)

When he asked her while thinking, *it can't be, right?*, she hurriedly nodded her head.

“O, of course!! I filled up before getti…” (Yi Surl-Ah)

SFX for a loud stomach rumble

With the exquisite timing, the loud cry of an empty stomach roared out for everyone to hear. And sure enough, it was not coming from Seol’s belly.

“……If I want to eat, I need to complete missions, you see…” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Quite unlike how she sounded just a minute ago, there was no energy in her voice now. Her pinkish neck slowly reddened up in the shade of sunset. Seol dazedly shifted his gaze over to the noticeboard.

As expected, she wasn’t here to do Basic difficulty missions. She was checking out the sections where ‘Very easy’ and ‘Easy’ missions were originally located. Unfortunately, there were no parchments left there. Because, Seol ended up completely exhausting what little remained a few days ago, that was why.

…Yi siblings are constantly helping out Yun Seo-Rah…

Suddenly, Seol recalled Hyun Sahng-Min’s words. And right away, it felt like a hammer struck him in the head.

‘Ahh…… ’

Now he understood the truth.

It wasn’t as if the Yi siblings failed to earn enough SPs for themselves. No, it was more like they couldn’t, as they were trying to look after Yun Seo-Rah, as well.

In order to complete a mission that paid out enough Survival Points for one to carry on living in the Zone, one would need to get the matching equipment and suitable abilities for one’s Job. Attempting a mission without those would be akin to throwing your life away.

If one had to lower the difficulty through a sheer lack of choice, then the rewards on offer was too low. Even then, if one continued to persevere and complete them, it’d be possible to amass a few handful of points. But for the Yi siblings, those points would have been spent in looking after Yun Seo-Rah, instead.

It'd only leave them towards a continuous downward spiral. On top of this, Yi Surl-Ah entered the Neutral Zone with only 46 points to her name. Her brother, Yi Sung-Jin, only 114 points. Since they had to support another person with their already struggling finances, their situation must've been in a downward slide for a long time by now.

'Godd*mn it.' (Seol)

Seol's hand clutched his spear tightly.

'…And I had no reason to even do those missions, either… ' (Seol)

He resolved himself not to repeat the mistake he made during the treasure hunt, yet he had done it again. He told himself to control his desires, yet, in the end, he thoughtlessly used himself as an example when making decisions.

Only if he paid little more attention. How could he fail so spectacularly to consider the possibility that the situation would be different for other survivors?

From Yi Surl-Ah's perspective, it must've been like him robbing her of the last lifeline she had been depending on until now.

"…I'm sorry." (Seol)

Hearing his sudden apology, Yi Surl-Ah's eyes grew wider and wider.

Of course, she was aware of it, too. There was no way she didn't know, since the stories about Seol were wide spread around the Neutral Zone nowadays.

"N, no! Don't say that!" (Yi Surl-Ah)

"I'm at fault. I'm the one who finished off all the easier missions." (Seol)

"*Orabeo-nim,* don't say that. Those mission papers aren't mine to begin with." (Yi Surl-Ah)

"……"

"More importantly, for the last two months, you didn't touch any of those missions, anyways. It's my fault for being lazy and not completing the missions more often, you

know. It's my fault instead." (Yi Surl-Ah)

Seeing her trying to console him, his hard-to-describe guilty conscience got heavier by another layer. She said that she had been lazy, but there was no way that could be true. No, it was far more likely that she was struggling desperately to survive.

"I heard that you are looking after Miss Yun Seo-Rah." (Seol)

"Oh, uhm… T, that is…" (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-Ah could only open and shut her mouth repeatedly as if she didn't know what to say. Her expression was asking him, *How did you find out?*

"How long has it been?" (Seol)

"Maybe… After entering the Neutral Zone… Around ten days after that…" (Yi Surl-Ah)

So, well over a month, huh.

Seol chuckled out bitterly.

She could've asked him for help during that time, at least once. But she didn't say anything, even when they met a few times to lap the track together. She didn't even show any signs of struggling, either. If no one told him of the Yun Seo-Rah situation, he might've never found out what was going on.

Seeing her helplessly lower her gaze, Seol's thoughts became very complicated.

'What should I do now?' (Seol)

Although he didn't give a definite answer to Kim Hahn-Nah, he was planning to help Yun Seo-Rah out, anyways. He thought that it wouldn't be such a bad idea to repay Kim Hahn-Nah's kindness, since he had received lots of benefits from her Gold Mark up until this point in time.

However, helping out the Yi siblings was out of his calculations. Of course, if he began supporting Yun Seo-Rah, the burden on the siblings would decrease considerably, but…

But, it was already too late. Others had leapfrogged far ahead of them by now. Never

mind catching up to them, could she and her brother even manage to gather 1000 points each before the end of the deadline?

While stewing inside the swirling mess of jumbled up thoughts, Seol got to confirm his disposition being 'Chaotic' one more time. Even though he thought he should aid them somehow, no small part of him didn't want to get involved here and just wanted to concentrate on completing missions, instead.

Should he help them, or not?

Encountering yet another crossroads in his path, Seol closed his eyes to contemplate.

It was then, he suddenly recalled a scene from almost two months ago.

…Let's run together!!

He remembered a scene of a girl who came to console him after seeing how shaken he was back then. It was of a girl who'd never forget her saviour and tried to repay the favour no matter what.

And then, that Bible verse Kim Hahn-Nah left behind entered his thoughts as well.

…Therefore whatever you desire for men to do to you, you shall also do to them.

He then decided to look at things from the siblings' perspective.

What if he ran into a situation similar to what the siblings, or even, Yun Seo-Rah was facing? Without a doubt, he'd be wishing for someone to come and help him out right about now.

…I never really thought of those words as altruistic babble, though. No, it's much more closer to 'give-and-take'…

Although it was only by a little bit, Seol thought he could understand where Kim Hahn-Nah's sentiment was coming from.

Maybe…

Just maybe, there could be a future that might unfold in the way Kim Hahn-Nah had been implying – a future, where Seol needed to receive help from someone else. Could

this girl in front of him be one of the potential 'someone else'?

No, that didn't matter. What did matter was his feelings on the subject, regardless of what might happen in the future. He didn't know why, but he wanted to help her.

He wasn't dealing with a b*stard like Kahng Seok here, either. Knowing the struggles this kind-hearted and warm girl was going through, he couldn't turn a blind eye anymore.

'It's not like I don't have a wiggle room, is it?' (Seol)

The moment he decided, Seol opened his eyes and spoke to her.

"Come. Let's run for a while." (Seol)

✧✧✧

Seol and Yi Surl-Ah began jogging on the track.

He completed his portion of the allocated laps first and waited for her to finish. Seeing her slowly inch closer to the finish line, he waved his hands in encouragement. She managed to get to the line, but before crossing it, she collapsed on the floor and began panting heavily. Seeing this, Seol grinned softly.

"It's only 30 laps, you know. I didn't know you were this unfit." (Seol)

"Doping is not allowed!" (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-Ah protested to the injustice of this situation.

"I'm telling you, it's not doping." (Seol)

While defending himself, Seol's lips formed a bitter smile. He remembered giving an advice that she should buy Competence, while being completely oblivious to her living conditions.

"How do you feel after you ran around for a while?" (Seol)

"It feels nice." (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-Ah smiled brightly on the ground as she regulated her breathing. Even though he forcibly dragged her in here, she wasn't dissatisfied at all.

"Well, then. Should I make you feel even better?" (Seol)

"…Pardon me?" (Yi Surl-Ah)

In the Neutral Zone, one could lend out or transfer Survival Points to another. Seol transferred 200 Survival Points from his account to Yi Surl-Ah.

"Uh? Uh, uh?! 200 points?" (Yi Surl-Ah)

"You've successfully cleared a mission, right? You should receive compensation for that." (Seol)

Seol jokingly said that, but her expression showed how apologetic and at a loss she was.

"Even still… If you give me so much points, then I…" (Yi Surl-Ah)

Her words only managed to make Seol surprised and flustered, instead. Just how difficult her stay in the Neutral Zone had been for her to act like that, over measly 200 points?

"What is your brother doing right now?" (Seol)

"Oh, Sung-Jin? He should be waking up soon, I think." (Yi Surl-Ah)

"In that case, go have a good breakfast with him. With 200 points, you should be able to enjoy a hearty meal once." (Seol)

"J, just once?! If I save up, I think we can stretch it out to ten days…" (Yi Surl-Ah)

"No can do. You will spend it all in one go. All 200 points." (Seol)

Seol resolutely cut her off.

For a short while, she didn't say anything. She simply stared at him with a dazed facial expression as if she hadn't finished processing this event quite yet.

“Once you’re done eating, come up to my quarters with your brother. Oh, and by the way, do you know where I can find Miss Yun Seo-Rah?” (Seol)

“O, orabeo-nim?” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-Ah unsteadily got up from the ground. She still looked like she hadn’t been able to tell whether she was in a dream or not.

“But, but, why?” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“Mm… Well, because I’m grateful to you?” (Seol)

“A, about what, exactly? I, I haven’t done anything…” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Seol sheepishly scratched his cheek as she stammered out.

“What do you mean, you haven’t? You ran with me back then, didn’t you?” (Seol)

When looking back, one could say that was indeed the case. Only by running together with her, Seol finally got to realise how weak he was. From that day on, he focused on improving himself like a madman. In a way, it was because of Yi Surl-Ah’s intervention that he had begun his intense training regime to get to where he was now.

Yi Surl-Ah couldn’t say anything for a little while longer. Only her lips parted and closed several times.

“Orabeo-nim.” (Yi Surl-Ah)

She somehow managed to squeeze out a word.

“Yes?” (Seol)

“Can you… turn around for a second?” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“Sure, why not. But, why?” (Seol)

“I… want to cry, but it’s embarrassing…” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Seol smiled gently. She was probably trying to express how grateful she was in her own way.

“Do what you want.” (Seol)

However, as soon as he turned around, he heard her crying out loudly. His heart nearly jumped out of his mouth in fright, and he quickly looked back, only to find Yi Surl-Ah squatting on the ground again while shedding thick tears of appreciation.

‘She’s really crying?!’ (Seol)

This time, it was Seol’s turn to panic, instead.

✧✧✧

After sending Yi Surl-Ah back to her place…

Seol headed off to the fifth floor.

He’d never stopped by this floor before. According to Yi Surl-Ah’s explanation, a sizeable lounge could be found there, and Yun Seo-Rah spent most of her time in that place.

Seol initially believed that, since that space was called a lounge, the facilities there shouldn’t be so bad, but…

“……” (Seol)

…As soon as he arrived there, he had to revise his thoughts immediately.

The circular lounge was indeed rather spacious and open. But there were only a handful of chairs to be found here. He couldn’t even begin to call this place a lounge at all.

When he pushed open the glass door and entered, he spotted a lone female figure lying quietly on the far corner of the room. She had a hood covering her head while her body was in a huddle.

Seol heard her cough. It sounded dry and scratchy. Seol placed his palm on the floor, and his body shivered slightly after sensing the coldness coming from the hard surface.

‘It’s really cold in here.’ (Seol)

She must be in a deep sleep; Seol walked towards her in loud-enough footsteps, but she still showed no signs of movement.

SFX for soft, steady breathing

While listening to her soft, nearly imperceptible breathing, Seol looked at her face and became utterly speechless.

Yun Seo-Rah's appearance too had changed a fair deal since the end of the Tutorial. Unfortunately, it was for the worse.

Her previously pale smooth cheeks were now yellowing and sunken. Her exposed wrist was so thin, he mistakenly thought he was looking at bones. He thought he was looking at a broken doll.

"…Miss Yun Seo-Rah?" (Seol)

Seol called out her name and placed his hand on her shoulder. Her body flinched a little, then.

"Miss Yun Seo-Rah." (Seol)

And when he gently shook her…

"…Ah-ahck!" (Yun Seo-Rah)

Suddenly, she sucked in a heavy breath; as if she was having a nightmare, a strained cry escaped from her lips, and she desperately hid her face with her left hand. She huddled even closer and began shaking like a leaf.

"What the…?" (Seol)

He thought he looking an abused child trying to not get hit anymore. Seol took a step back in astonishment.

"Are you alright?" (Seol)

"Euh… Euhah…!"

"Miss Yun Seo-Rah!!" (Seol)

“Uh, uhm?”

Abruptly, she raised her head. A pair of blurry, unintelligent eyes gazed at Seol.

“Heu-euh…”

She let off a pained whimper, and her eyes slowly closed again. Her entire body slumped, too. And when he called out to her again, she didn’t respond.

‘Is she unconscious?’ (Seol)

Her current state seemed too precarious to simply say she fell unconscious.

Seol quickly lifted her up. He only used his arms, yet he could barely feel her weight.

Leaving the fifth floor lounge, Seol immediately went to his quarters on the tenth. He thought that, since his room restored one’s stamina rapidly, simply by being there would help her regain her consciousness.

After carefully laying Yun Seo-Rah down on the bed, Seol was overcome with a feeling of helplessness.

Although he did bring her here, he hadn’t realised how bad her conditions actually were. Perhaps, that superior officer asking Kim Hahn-Nah for a favour must’ve realised that Yun Seo-Rah was on the brink, too.

‘Let’s confirm her status first.’ (Seol)

Seol activated his ‘Nine Eyes’.

[Yun Seo-Rah’s Status Windows]

[1. General Information]
Summoned date: March 16th, 2017
Marking Grade: Silver
S*x/Age: Female/20
Height/Weight: 166.2 cm/48.2 kg
Current condition: Heavily injured

Job: LV. 1 Warrior
Nationality: Republic of Korea (Area 1)
Affiliation: N/A
Alias: N/A

[2. Personality]
1. Temperament:
– Indifferent. (She's not easily interested in anything particular.)
– Despairing. (Has fallen into despair and gave up on herself, and has not looked after her own body.)
2. Aptitude:
– Brilliant. (Possesses a smart brain as well as good overall talents.)
– Highly observant. (Will carefully analyse and study items and events all around her.)

[3. Physical Level]
Strength: Extreme – Low ↓2
Endurance: Extreme – Low ↓1
Agility: Extreme – Low ↓3
Stamina: Extreme – Low ↓2
Magic: Low – High
Luck: Low – High
Remaining Ability points: 1.

[4. Abilities]
1.Innate abilities (0)
2. Job related abilities (0)
3. Other abilities (0)

[5. Level of Cognition]
Depressed (Deeply worried and/or frustrated; lacking in energy)/ Despair/ Pessimistic (Has a gloomy outlook on her life; is in mourning; is in despair)

"…What the hell?" (Seol)

Seol's brows furrowed in a deep frown.

Yun Seo-Rah's condition, confirmed through her Status Windows, was in a terrible state.

Chapter 31
A Misunderstanding (1)

Yun Seo-Rah. Current age, 20 years old.

A still-young woman, who got invited to the Paradise after getting discovered by Sinyoung's famed scout. The so-called *modern chic woman,* as coined by one very dead Lee Hyung-Sik.

Along with another Invited, Kahng Seok, she was seen as the top prospect for the March 2017 recruitment period.

She always displayed the habit of 'think first, act later' in everything she did; her thoughts or decision making were never swayed by emotions, and because of her personality, she held no interest towards other people's business.

Such characteristics meant she enjoyed a certain amount of advantage during the Tutorial, but once she lost her right arm, her situation drastically changed for the worse.

She was very much aware of her weakness in the context of the environments of the Neutral Zone, where cooperating with others was a must.

So, for one month straight, she focused solely on fixing her broken right arm. Unfortunately, she had no choice but to revise her strategy and focus on strengthening her fitness level instead after learning that her tally of SP, 317 points, wasn't even remotely enough to heal her wounds.

As an Invited, she already had acquired a fairly good understanding of what was going on in the Neutral Zone before coming here. That was why, before her Job awakened, she decided to focus on raising her physical stats. She knew that, as long as she could become a Sorcerer, or, even a Priest, then her problem would be solved.

Yun Seo-Rah did not let go of that sliver of hope, even when stuck in a hopeless situation. However, that got brutally cut off when her Job was set as a Warrior.

She left the Chamber of Awakening as if being chased away. And as expected, there was literally not a thing she could do in her current state.

She had spent every single SP she had by then. She even had to sell the bag she got as the starting bonus cheaply, too.

Even if she wanted to earn some points, no one wanted a Warrior with a crippled arm in their team.

Staying in a proper sleeping quarters became a luxury she could only dream of. She couldn't even afford to eat one meal a day, and her health continued to send out warning signals as a result. Starved of the necessary nutrients, her body got weaker and weaker with every passing day.

And with her weakened body, she couldn't even attempt those Basic missions that did give out small amount of points as rewards.

Her determination ran out a long time by then, and even enduring through nothing but sheer malice also eventually reached its limit, too. If it weren't for the Yi siblings that came to see her every other day, Yun Seo-Rah would've died of starvation already.

However, she knew that the siblings were also struggling desperately as well. So, she could not depend on them forever.

Sensing Yun Seo-Rah's discomfort, Yi Surl-Ah made a cautious but considered suggestion.

She said, *how about we speak to 'orabeo-nim'? Since he's a honest and hard-working man, he'd not abandon us callously at all.*

It'd be a lie if Yun Seo-Rah wasn't tempted by that suggestion. In the end, though, she shook her head and said no.

If he still owed her a favour or something, the story might have been different. Sure, he saved her life, but in return, she gave him the Revival potion. And their relationship came to an end there. At least, Yun Seo-Rah thought so that way.

She didn't mind if others called her out on her petty pride. Actually, she was too ashamed to go and speak to him by then.

Still, refusing to heed the suggestion of Yi Surl-Ah played heavily in Yun Seo-Rah's mind. And, not wanting to inconvenience the siblings any further, she discreetly changed her hiding place without telling them.

However, that night, Yun Seo-Rah ended up going through a terrifying and breathless ordeal.

She opened her eyes in the middle of the night to find three Western men. Two of them were restraining her arms, while the other one was sitting on top of her.

No matter where, it seemed that one would run into b*stards like Kahng Seok.

In the middle of her fiercely resisting them, the face belonging to the man on top of her came in closer to whisper.

"Hey, I heard that you're a cripple."

"You wanna keep living like this? Don't you wanna go to the Paradise?"

"Just behave yourself. We will feed you well and find you a warm bed to sleep on, too."

"Who knows? Maybe even a couple of points, too…"

The Survival Points.

The moment she heard those words, all strength automatically seeped out of her body. Naturally, her resistance weakened as well.

By the time she realised her mistake, she felt coldness touching her buttocks. When she regained her bearings, she found her underwear pulled down to her ankles already.

And when that man took off his pants while a thick, lecherous smile formed on his face, Yun Seo-Rah shook like a smartphone vibrating to alert the owner of an incoming call.

She shook hard as if someone poured a bucket of freezing water on her head in the middle of a harsh winter.

Like words of a snake tickling her ears, the man told her to open her mouth.

An hideously ugly object neared her face, yet her lips remained shut. She thought that, the moment she yielded here, everything would really come to an end for her.

No, a simple 'end' wouldn't be all. She feared falling even deeper into a bottomless abyss…

And so, she did not open her lips.

But, she did scream out with everything she had. She bit whatever she came in contact with and used her whole body to fight.

Her rewards were harsh swearings, along with fists and kicks. Even then, Yun Seo-Rah did not let up her crazed resistance.

Eventually, the men grew sick and tired, and abandoned her with a thick spit to her face.

She fixed her clothing and unsteadily made her way back to the fifth floor lounge. She then fell to the floor and got into a huddle.

A single drop of the warm, salty liquid she'd been holding back finally leaked out of her eye. The tears she'd been shedding inwardly began streaming out, and eventually, she burst out into uncontrollable sobs.

'Better if I just died.' (Yun Seo-Rah)

She was scared of falling asleep again because of the incident, but forced her eyes shut regardless. She thought that if she died here, like this, then she might not have any regrets.

She didn't care what happened anymore.

And so, Yun Seo-Rah fell into a fitful slumber. But, then…

"…*Miss Yun Seo-Rah?"*

Just as she was about to pay the ferryman to cross the river Styx…

"Miss Yun Seo-Rah."

…She took a look behind her.

And, she clearly saw him.

"Are you alright?"

She saw a certain young man offering his hand to her.

✧✧✧

While Seol was nursing Yun Seo-Rah, Yi Surl-Ah and Yi Sung-Jin arrived at his quarters.

The siblings entered his room hesitantly, and couldn't close their mouths after taking in the grand sights of the luxurious furnishing of the place that reminded one of a palace. They recovered quickly from the shock, though, after spotting Yun Seo-Rah whimpering on the bed, and approached her. Deep frowns were etched on their faces.

"She wasn't this bad two days ago…" (Yi Surl-Ah)

"Really?" (Seol)

"Yes. Why did she get so…?" (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-Ah looked anxious. Seol lightly held his chin, contemplating.

'What could be her problem?' (Seol)

With just a glance, he could clearly tell that Yun Seo-Rah was very sick. Even though he brought her to his quarters, thick perspiration continued to form on her forehead, and her breathing became rougher and rougher.

He thought that the current situation was marginally better, compared to when she failed to respond to him gently shaking her around. However, since he lacked proper medical knowledge, he could only remain in the dark. He still recognised the fact that she needed help.

Seol told the siblings he'd be back soon and left his room. When facing a situation he didn't know how to solve, there was only one person he could rely on.

After hearing his explanation, Agnes quickly called for another maid to join them.

The person to answer the call was unexpectedly none other than Maria. The blonde maid walked up to them in swagger, and when Agnes introduced her Job to Seol, she cocked an eyebrow, perhaps in disapproval of the revelation.

It turned out, Maria was a Level 4 Priest.

Not only that, she was a Priest specialising in healing who had walked a long road – from Lv.1 "Priest", Lv.2 "Deacon", Lv.3 "Clergyman", and to her current Lv.4 "High Priest".

Seol promptly returned to his quarters with the two maids in tow.

"This is… just so bloody fantastic." (Maria)

After checking out Yun Seo-Rah's condition, Maria spat out a short assessment.

"It's that bad?" (Seol)

"Never mind her right arm, looks like she's been starving herself for the past month or so. On top of her body and nerves being weakened to this state, she even got beaten up pretty good as well, so yes. It's bad." (Maria)

"She got beaten up?" (Seol)

"Yes. Seriously now… Don't know who hit her, but that person sure did a f*cking wonderful number on her." (Maria)

Maria leaked out a hollow chuckle. Hearing the real cause of Yun Seo-Rah's accelerated deterioration, Yi Surl-Ah covered her mouth in shock.

"You did the right thing by bringing her here, to your quarters. Without the effects of this room, she might have crossed the River of Lethe and would be tipping the wineglass of Forgetfulness by now." (Maria)

"How do we go about healing her…?" (Seol)

"If you want it, I can do it. But, strictly speaking, there's no need. If she spends next couple of days in this room while eating and resting well, she will recover fully." (Maria)

“Does that mean her right arm will be healed, as well?” (Seol)

Maria suddenly went very quiet and gazed at Yun Seo-Rah. Agnes also studied Yun Seo-Rah’s crippled right arm for a while before speaking up.

“Six stab wounds on the arm… Caused by a short but sharp dagger, it seems. The assailant even twisted the blade around in two of the wounds, too.” (Agnes)

“How long has it been?” (Maria)

“Over two months. Will it be tough even with ‘Moderate’ or ‘Massive’?” (Agnes)

“Why ask something you know the answer to already? ‘Light’ would have sufficed if the wound was treated right away, but… But, it’s too late now. You know that a wound gets progressively harder to heal the longer it is left untreated. If it’s a ‘Colossal’, it might be possible, but I’m not confident.” (Maria)

Agnes breathed out a soft sigh.

Meanwhile, Seol couldn’t hide his astonishment at the two maids who were able to figure out what happened two months ago with just one look.

A certain sense of anxiety was blooming in the corner of his heart at the same time, as well.

He couldn’t figure out the contents of the discussion since several words related to Maria’s profession were thrown around, but he still understood that fixing the right arm would be very difficult.

Maria stood up straight and shook her head, before shifting her gaze over to Seol.

“This arm is as good as dead. It’s past the simple ‘healing’ spell, requiring something on the level of ‘Revival’ at this point. So, instead of leaving it as is, I recommend amputation.” (Maria)

“…Excuse me?” (Seol)

“There’s no helping it. Unless we were in the Paradise, you won’t find a Priest better skilled than me within the Neutral Zone. However, even I find healing this arm difficult.” (Maria)

Seol was hoping, but just as expected, this injury couldn't be healed in the Neutral Zone. Maria didn't beat around the bush and conveyed the truth.

That wasn't the end of the bad news, though. There was still around a month left until the deadline, and Yun Seo-Rah's right arm could get even worse during this time.

"Is there… any other way?" (Seol)

Seol wasn't expecting to hear 'impossible' as the prognosis, and he could only chew on his blameless lower lip in frustration.

It was then.

"There is one other way." (Agnes)

A calm voice seemed to help him recover his senses. Agnes raised her body up from the bed, having concluded her examination of Yun Seo-Rah's arm.

"As Maria has implied, only a top ranker with a level higher than 5 can possibly heal this person's injury. However, out of the four Jobs, a Priest happens to be closest to the gods." (Agnes)

"……"

"I told you that you'll have to select a god to serve when your level rises to 5. Do you still remember?" (Agnes)

Seol nodded his head.

"The 'Colossal' is a very powerful holy spell a Priest can learn after reaching level 5." (Agnes)

"Didn't you say Miss Maria is level 4?" (Seol)

"Indeed, she wouldn't be able to use it under normal circumstances… But there are exceptions." (Agnes)

"Agnes? You should really shut the f*ck up now." (Maria)

Maria began glaring at Agnes. However, the latter maid only spared a cursory glance

as a reply, and her words did not stop.

“Between level 1 and level 4, a Priest will walk on a singular path without receiving the aid of other gods. The god in charge of the class will bestow the title of High Priest as the reward. When one becomes a High Priest, you’re then given a special privilege.” (Agnes)

“A special privilege?” (Seol)

“Yes. And that is to hold the Ceremony. It’s like begging the gods to allow one to use a high-level spell.” (Agnes)

Maria squeezed shut her eyes. Even the noise of teeth gnashing could be heard. Seol thought that she just whispered several curse words, too.

He eventually opened his mouth while looking at her.

“…Excus…” (Seol)

“Argh, I don’t wanna! Hell no! No freaking way!” (Maria)

“M, Miss Maria?” (Seol)

“I can’t hear you~. Alalalala~~ Ebebebebeh…” (Maria)

Maria repeatedly covered up her ears and uncovered them with her hands.

“C, can’t you help us? Please! I beg of you!” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-Ah couldn’t just keep watching, so she begged, but…

“F*ck, you better shut that piehole of yours.” (Maria)

Maria spat out in anger and became supremely irritated, causing Yi Surl-Ah to jump up in shock and hurriedly seek refuge behind Seol’s back. The maid’s sudden burst of sweary anger unnerved the Yi girl and she was unable to close her slack jaw.

Seol signaled the tearful girl to be quiet, and then, began slowly approaching Maria. The maid’s entire body began convulsing.

“Don’t come here! Don’t’ come closer to me!! Don’t you dare!!!” (Maria)

“Miss Maria, a word. Please.” (Seol)

“Argh, sh*t! Let go of me right now!” (Maria)

Since she showed signs of running away, Seol gently grasped her arms to stop her. Maria then threw her fists and resisted him. They landed on his chest, but seeing that they didn’t hurt too much, he figured that she wasn’t planning on hurting him.

“What will it take for you to help us?” (Seol)

“What the hell? Are you deaf? If it was within my ability, I might help you if you paid me lots of SP, but I’m telling you, I can’t do it!” (Maria)

“How about that Cere…” (Seol)

“F*ck the Ceremony. Don’t even bring that up again! I’m being this civil only because that crafty Miss Fox invited you here. That’s all! If you weren’t, I’d have bashed in your skull by now.” (Maria)

Seol nearly blurted out ‘This is you being civil?!’, but managed to force the words back down his throat. He thought he could finally understand, more or less, why she was practicing the vow of silence, but that wasn’t the important thing right now.

“I know I’m asking a lot of you. But, only you can do this, Miss Maria.” (Seol)

“And why should I?!” (Maria)

Maria shot back while still glaring back at him.

“You think a Ceremony is a thing where you just have to offer a couple of prayers and kowtow a few times? What about the right type of offerings? Where would those come from? And, why should I offer my own sh*t that I sweated blood and tears to gather, for a b*tch that I don’t even know? Hah, I’m not even affiliated with Sinyoung too, you know? You think that’s all? Do you even know what kind of negative rebound I must endure after performing a single Ceremony?” (Maria)

As if her emotions were running wild, she continued to spit out her words in anger. There were even glimpses of madness in her expression, and Seol became slightly

terrified by that, but he still looked into her eyes.

'Begging her without a plan will not work.' (Seol)

No, he had to convince her first.

"There is a certain verse in the Bible." (Seol)

Maria looked at him with an expression that said *What bullsh*t are you trying to say here*, while panting like crazy.

"Therefore whatever you desire for men to do to you…" (Seol)

"…You shall also do to them. Book of Matthews, verse 7:12. Gospel of Luke, verse 6:31. I know of it already." (Maria)

Maria quickly cut him off, and then chuckled hollowly as if she couldn't believe this.

"Seriously, I'm f*cking speechless. So, are you saying that a useless b*tch like her is going to owe me a…?" (Maria)

"It's not just Miss Yun Seo-Rah, though." (Seol)

This time, Seol cut her off.

"I'll be *grateful* to you, not to mention a certain Miss Kim Hahn-Nah, as well." (Seol)

His serious voice made Maria shut up and study the youth. She was still glaring at him, but her frown had softened up ever so slightly. It was as if she was caught off guard just now by what he said.

"What did you say? Who will?" (Maria)

As he suspected, him mentioning the name of Kim Hahn-Nah was the right call. Seeing a ray of hope finally shining here, Seol continued.

"You've heard of Miss Kim Hahn-Nah stopping by the Neutral Zone, yes?" (Seol)

"Sure." (Maria)

“She came to ask me for the favour then. Yes, it’s straight from her mouth.” (Seol)

“Ohh? F*cking hell. Dear lord. Oh, god *Luxuria*…” (Maria)

Maria’s head slowly faltered, and she planted her forehead on Seol’s chest. She then didn’t move for a good while afterwards.

As Seol stood there, worried about his pounding heart being discovered, her small hand slowly rose up to his view. She beckoned with her index finger.

“Give me a cigarette. And let go of my arms, too.” (Maria)

“Oh.” (Seol)

Seol quickly released her arms and pulled out a cigarette for her. He even lit it up.

“Fu-wooo…”

Maria slowly breathed out the smoke from her nostrils and her mouth, then her eyes began gleaming in dangerous and chilling light.

“For the next five minutes, you all shut your mouths. I’m already feeling like sh*t, so you better not squeak once. Got that?” (Maria)

She leaned against the wall and began staring at the ceiling. It was as if the cigarette was her breathing apparatus, because she continuously puffed the unhealthy smoke in and out. She also didn’t forget to lace the quiet air with various colourful swear words, too. Of course, Seol patiently waited for her to finish.

And eventually…

She flicked the cigarette b**t away and spat on the floor. She used her heel to stub the dying light out, causing Agnes to frown ever so slightly, but the latter maid chose not to raise an objection. Because, Agnes was well aware of the sacrifices a Priest had to make, never mind the dangers, when performing a Ceremony.

“Ha-aaaah… F*ck this sh*t…” (Maria)

Maria angrily combed her hair back and opened her mouth.

“82,010 points. No, since you gave me a cigarette, 82,000.” (Maria)

“M, Maria?!” (Agnes)

Quite unlike her, Agnes stammered out in surprise. Her facial expression showed how shocked she was, her open mouth and all.

Completely ignoring that reaction, Maria only paid attention to Seol.

“Let’s see… Your tally of Survival Points is… Way too bloody short. In any case, you wanna fix that girl’s arm, then you better earn 82,000 points and pay me upfront. After that, I’ll do it, a Ceremony or whatever.” (Maria)

Yi Surl-Ah mouthed a strained gasp. For a person who got flustered only with 200 points, a number like 82,000 was something she couldn’t even dream of.

Maria must’ve found that displeasing, because she raised her middle finger at Yi Surl-Ah. And then…

“That’s the end of our little talk. Don’t forget, I want exactly 82,000 points.” (Maria)

…She growled menacingly and turned around to leave.

SLAM!!

Right after Maria slammed the door shut, hard enough to almost shatter it, Yi Surl-Ah muttered out in a daze.

“82,000 points… That’s crazy. It’s too expensive.” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“You’re wrong. It’s not expensive at all.” (Agnes)

Agnes corrected her.

“Considering the materials involved, it’s not an unreasonable price at all. No, I honestly believe that Maria has asked for the absolutely lowest possible amount.” (Agnes)

“Is that so…” (Seol)

Seol asked back, a helpless smile forming on his face.

“I have no clue about what holding a Ceremony entails, but is there a reason why Miss Maria detests it so much?” (Seol)

“Mm… Let’s just say that she stands to lose a lot.” (Agnes)

Basically, a Ceremony was the type of ritual where one prayed to gods while making appropriate offerings. The greater the wish, the greater the need for higher quality offerings; if one prayed for something that did not match his or her level, then one would immediately receive backlash, as well.

For instance, if Maria wished to cast the ‘Colossal’ spell, which happened to be *the* top-tier level 5 Priest spell, she’d be confined to bed for the next seven days, suffering from a high fever. Then, a restriction of being unable to cast any spell for the next two weeks would be imposed on her as well.

“Most likely, as soon as the Ceremony is performed, she will leave the Neutral Zone.” (Agnes)

“She’s going to leave?” (Seol)

“Yes. If she heads to the main temple of the god she serves, then she can halve the duration of the restriction. More importantly, by offering prayers and recuperating her damaged body there, the odds of preventing the reduction in her physical stats, or the loss of her ability to cast spells altogether, increases significantly.” (Agnes)

“……” (Seol)

“That’s not all. Just the act of leaving the Neutral Zone alone will cause Maria to incur heavy losses as well.” (Agnes)

The fact was, maids found in the Neutral Zone weren’t volunteers working for free. Working in the Zone, as well as the survivors spending their points, earned the maids their own share of Survival Points as well. After leaving the Zone, they could swap these points for something called ‘achievement records’. If she were to leave before the Zone closed, then naturally, Maria had to give up on those benefits.

So, if she were to perform the Ceremony now, she had to swallow all those losses.

“That price of 82,000 points should be only for the offerings needed for the Ceremony itself and nothing else. You could say this is the result of her pride as a Priest, I

suppose. If you still believe that price is too much, even after I clarified her position, then there is nothing more I can say." (Agnes)

Hearing that strict and no-nonsense tone of Agnes's voice, Yi Surl-Ah could only lower her head in embarrassment.

Meanwhile, Seol was carefully thinking about a couple of things. He currently owned 38,580 points. Meaning, he needed to earn another 43,420 points.

'That's not going to be easy.' (Seol)

He had decided not to do anymore 'Hard' missions. And, in order to complete 'Very hard' missions, he'd need to prepare himself accordingly, which naturally meant he would need to spend some points there. Even if he were to go out now and find suitable partners, since the rewards would be divided equally among the number of participants, he wouldn't receive a lot as well.

'Why only after I purchased things from the VIP store…?' (Seol)

What an exquisitely ill-timed event this was. If he only knew when he still possessed over 120,000 points.

Agnes quietly studied Seol busy lamenting his poor luck, before bowing politely.

"No matter what you decide to do next, I wish you best of luck." (Agnes)

Agnes too left his room, leaving only the four of them in Seol's quarters.

Yi Surl-Ah began murmuring her apology with an ashamed face.

"I'm sorry… Because of me, you…" (Yi Surl-Ah)

Seol couldn't help but agree with her. After all, he wasn't a saint, nor was he a virtuous man. While being subjected to Maria's hysterics, he wondered several times why he should even do this in the first place.

However, whenever that happened, he recalled the old tale of Liu Bei and the old man, and reined in his impatience. The moment he gave up, everything he'd done up until that point would be wasted, but if he persevered till the end, he'd gain twice the benefits. *(TL note at the end)*

‘The Golden Commandment… Better not be a waste of my time, you hear me?’ (Seol)

Besides, the story might have been different if no one told him. He knew, and since he started this thing anyway, he was planning to see it to the end. He didn’t want to look back in regret later, that’s why.

Organising his thoughts up to here, Seol transferred another 300 points to Yi Surl-Ah.

“O, orabeo-nim?!” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“For now, stay and rest here. Buy something to eat for dinner with those points. When Miss Yun Seo-Rah wakes up, buy her something to eat, as well. Something easy to digest, like a bowl of gruel or something.” (Seol)

The Yi siblings became totally speechless from Seol’s considerations for them.

“W, what about you…?” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“I’ll go and earn some Survival Points. Don’t worry about me and wait here.” (Seol)

They stared, still dazed, as he picked up his spear.

If he activated his ‘Nine Eyes’ in that moment, he might have flinched in surprise. However, he was too focused on earning the points and he didn’t. He simply swung open the door to leave.

✧✧✧

He came down to the first floor plaza without a concrete plan, but as expected, there were no ready answers waiting for him there.

The only idea he could come up with was to continue doing the ‘Hard’ missions. There were ten missions available, and each mission had 9 attempts left.

If he carried on as he did, then he’d be able to earn 40,000 points. However…

‘Please stop looking at me like that… ’ (Seol)

The stares coming from the other people were no joke; the crowd weren’t saying anything out aloud, since they had nothing to say at the moment. But, if he tried to

attempt another ‘Hard’ mission, they would no doubt start whispering to each other again.

*D*mn it, it’s your fault for not trying out these missions in the first place!*

‘Sorry, but I’m also in a bind here.’ (Seol)

Seol firmed his resolve. But, just before he could reach out to a mission parchment, someone poked him on the back, and he had to turn around to see who it was.

“So, can you spare me some time for a cup of tea today?” (Odelette Delphine)

As soon as he turned around, a nightingale-like voice entered his ears like a pleasant song. A young female wearing a blue gown was looking at him with sparkling eyes.

It was Odelette Delphine, one of the two people Kim Hahn-Nah recommended that he should get friendly with.

“Or, are you going to refuse again?” (Odelette Delphine)

Since she asked him so innocently, Seol couldn’t refuse her.

“No, I have time.” (Seol)

“OK! Let’s head to that cafe over there. Everyone’s waiting for you.” (Odelette Delphine)

Seol was briefly confused by that statement, but after getting dragged to the cafe in question by her, he understood what she meant. There were four people sitting by a table, waiting for his arrival. Three of those faces, he sort of knew.

“Uh?” (Seol)

Seol checked the face of the thin man wearing a turban and exclaimed loudly.

“You thought I died?” (Tong Chai)

The guy who looked to be an Indian carried a thin smile as he spoke.

“Yes. Back then, you…” (Seol)

“Everyone said the same thing when I got back. All thanks to a certain someone.” (Tong Chai)

Delphine smiled brightly, before going, *Oops,* and stuck her tongue out.

“It turns out, ‘death’ isn’t the only result available if you fail that particular mission. Who knew.” (Odelette Delphine)

“You either die, or go back to the beginning and try again.” (Tong Chai)

“You don’t return to the plaza to start over again, correct?” (Seol)

“Indeed – simply back to the beginning of the maze. I thought I’d really die, trying to escape that accursed place… Well, it was a story from two months ago, anyway.” (Tong Chai)

It was easy to see from this conversation how much not invested Seol was in the ongoings of the Neutral Zone, unless it had to do with his training regime.

Sitting on the spot Delphine guided him to, Seol slowly took in the faces staring back at him.

“In any case, welcome. Just call me Mister Tong Chai.”

The man who said that was Tong Chai, from Area 5.

“…Leorda Salvatore.”

From Area 2, with a pair of sharp ash-grey eyes that resembled a wolf, Leorda Salvatore.

“It’s a pleasure. I’m Hao Win.”

The man slowly savouring his cigarette while resting his feet on the table, Hao Win from Area 7.

‘This guy is… ’ (Seol)

This man was the other survivor Kim Hahn-Nah spoke of. Wasn’t he supposed to be a top level boss in an underground organisation? Was it Triads or some such? What with

his neat and composed appearance, he didn't look like a thug at all.

And then…

"Finally!! My dream is about to become reality!" (Odelette Delphine)

…The lone Sorcerer, the second place holder in the Neutral Zone; the brightly-smiling and pleased-as-punch Odelette Delphine, from Area 2.

With the exception of one person, everyone here was someone Cinzia called out by name on the first day, back in the theatre.

(TL: the story of Liu Bei and the old man, in case you haven't realised it, comes from the Romance of the Three Kingdoms. The story goes, an old man asks Liu Bei, then 17 years old, to carry him across a river. Liu Bei agrees, and carries the old man across, only for the old man to declare that he forgot his bag on the other side of the river, asking Liu Bei to carry him back to the starting point. Then, the old man asks to be carried across the river again. Liu Bei complies without complaining. The old man is impressed and asks Liu Bei why he did as he was asked, and Liu Bei replies with a short line about the difference between "giving up and losing, and gaining twice the amount of benefits afterwards".)

Chapter 32
A Misunderstanding (2)

The gist of Odelette Delphine's offer was just as Seol suspected: she wanted him to join her team.

Judging from her description, he thought that the composition of the team itself seemed to be well thought out.

Hao Win was the Warrior of the group, Leorda and Tong Chai were the Archers, Delphine was the Sorcerer, and the last person Seol wasn't familiar with, acted as the Priest.

Considering that missions rated 'Hard' and 'Very Hard' had the cap of six participants max, it was as if they had deliberately left the final spot for Seol.

If things remained the same as before, Seol wouldn't even hesitate to say yes. Not only did this team feature two people Kim Hahn-Nah mentioned he should get friendly with, Seol himself was sensing that the time had come to find reliable comrades as well.

However, the situation was different now. Seol had to amass 82,000 points as quickly as possible.

'I'd be able to earn that much points even if I join this team, but… ' (Seol)

Obviously, he didn't want to sacrifice himself unconditionally. He wanted to fix Yun Seo-Rah's arm; he wanted to get himself some proper equipment; he also wanted to buy more Elixirs from the VIP store, too.

In other words, he wanted to have his cake and eat it. Others might call him a greedy fool, but he did not want to give up on any one of his desires.

In the end… he had to decide.

"I'm truly sorry, but… At the moment, it's difficult for the time being." (Seol)

There was a way for him to achieve the things he wanted. If Seol monopolised the remaining 'Hard' missions, he'd be able to earn more than enough points to cover the cost of the Ceremony, and still have some change. With that, he'd get equipment and recruit people to form a team. People might slag him off for this, but this was the best scenario Seol could think of.

"*Hing.*"

Maybe she didn't expect him to refuse her, Delphine looked crestfallen.

"Hmm…" (Hao Win)

Hao Win seemed as if he was not ready to accept Seol's answer just yet.

"I am well aware of how extraordinary you are. I acknowledge your skills, but the difficulty of the 'Very Hard' missions are nothing to laugh about. You alone will not be enough." (Hao Win)

"Yes, I know." (Seol)

"You say you know, yet… Ahh, is it because you do not like the composition of this team? Or were you planning to form your own?" (Hao Win)

"I haven't thought of forming a team yet. And, to be frank, I quite like the look of this team as well. I wouldn't mind doing missions with you, actually." (Seol)

"Then, why the refusal?" (Hao Win)

Hao Win gazed at Seol with a questioning pair of eyes. His expression showed how confused he was, and he continued to study Seol for a bit longer, before tilting his head.

"Now that I've taken a proper look, I see that you haven't bought any equipment, beside your spear. I'd imagine you were able to earn a massive amount of points by now… Did you invest them all into your abilities?" (Hao Win)

"No." (Seol)

Seol shook his head right away. He never planned to buy abilities from the stores, but did want to buy good equipment for himself. The situation got turned on its head before that could happen, though.

“I am even more confused, then. One more thing – if I didn’t see incorrectly a moment ago, you were planning to do another Hard mission, were you not?” (Hao Win)

The question was sharp and on point. Just like his stare was.

“You have exhausted one mission completely, but as for the others, you only did them six times each before moving on.” (Hao Win)

“……” (Seol)

“You could have finished them all, but left them behind in consideration of other survivors. At least, that’s what I thought until now.” (Hao Win)

“Mister Win!” (Odelette Delphine)

Delphine glared at Hao Win. Judging from the tone of his voice, she thought that he was trying to pick a fight with Seol.

“Sounds like you are saying that this young man’s at fault. If you did indeed mean that, I can not agree.” (Tong Chai)

Tong Chai stood up for Delphine.

“I’m not certainly trying to go against the decisions already taken. But, honestly speaking, I never really understood us also planning to perform each Hard mission six times and move on to the next one. The Neutral Zone is a place of competition. Should it not be, ‘first come, first served’ when it comes to missions?” (Tong Chai)

“I’m not saying it’s his fault. Simply put, I’m having a hard time understanding him.” (Hao Win)

Delphine stared at Hao Win who was waving his hand around in a show of frustration.

The first person to suggest Seol’s inclusion to the team might be her, but the one who vigorously championed for it was none other Hao Win.

Her team was indeed the best in the Neutral Zone on paper. However, they still had their share of issues. In short, they lacked offensive power.

For the time being, the team’s tactic was to have Hao Win stand in front as the

vanguard, while the two Archers kept the enemy movements in check. And, Delphine would sweep them away with her magic from the back. With this tactic, they were exposed to comparatively low risk per mission, although the time it took to clear one was little long.

However, new 'clear conditions' were added to 'Very Hard' missions. Simply staying on their backfoot and passively defending all the time would not work anymore. New conditions, such as 'ambush' and 'occupation', were added to each mission, forcing one to take the initiative and attack.

So, Hao Win argued that they would not be able to complete these missions with the tactic they have been employing until now. He passionately argued that they needed this youth's attack power.

So, why was this Hao Win questioning the youth like this?

"If you're a lone wolf type, I will respect that. However, I don't think you're one. You must've gathered a sizeable points tally by now, yet besides the spear, you haven't invested them on anything. It's like, you're only trying to hoard them and nothing else." (Hao Win)

Certainly, from the third person's perspective, Seol's story did sound rather odd when someone pointed out the strange bits like Hao Win had.

Seol let off a soft sigh.

"Just as you said it, I had quite a few Survival Points." (Seol)

"Had… A past tense?" (Hao Win)

"I spent most of it in the VIP store. Of course, I left some behind to buy new equipment for myself. Well, I was planning to buy, but then, my situation changed." (Seol)

"How so… Something happened?" (Hao Win)

Hao Win's attitude had softened ever so slightly.

"There's a situation, and I need to earn a lot of points as quickly as possible." (Seol)

Although this wasn't a story he should go around advertising, Seol felt that he owed

these people an explanation. So, he told them about Yun Seo-Rah's right arm, as well as Maria's Ceremony that required a large amount of Survival Points.

He hadn't had anyone to share his troubling thoughts with for a while, so when this opportunity presented itself, he ended up pouring out most of what was in his heart.

After listening to Seol's situation, everyone blinked non-stop and stared at him. Especially Hao Win, who looked totally dazed as if someone punched him in the face out of the blue.

"You had that kind of situation…" (Odelette Delphine)

Delphine sounded very sympathetic.

"Mm. I understand your situation. But, is there a reason for you to help that person out in the first place?" (Tong Chai)

Tong Chai asked Seol, sounding slightly confused.

"Unless she was your family member, a sibling, perhaps. But, to spend 82,000 points for someone from the same Area… That seems a bit too drastic, don't you agree?" (Tong Chai)

Seol scratched his head, unable to answer right away.

He had various reasons. Besides Kim Hahn-Nah requesting him, it was also a chance to test out the Golden Commandment as well. Of course, he also wanted to help her out, too… In any case, there was no need to tell these people absolutely everything.

"I received her help during the Tutorial, and… It's hard to say why. I just can't stop thinking about it." (Seol)

"You can't?" (Tong Chai)

"Yes. It is a bit of shame, too…" (Seol)

Seol muttered out as if he was complaining about something.

"Only if I knew what was going on a little bit sooner, things wouldn't have gotten this worse…" (Seol)

After hearing Seol's whisper, Hao Win's body shuddered ever so slightly. He drew his chin inward and quietly studied Seol for a while. It was as if he was looking at the youth in a new light.

"Who is this person you're trying to help?" (Hao Win)

Hao Win asked him. Compared to before, his voice and softened quite considerably.

"Her name is Miss Yun Seo-Rah…" (Seol)

"Yun Seo-Rah… Definitely a girl, then?" (Hao Win)

"Yes." (Seol)

"I see. That was why…" (Hao Win)

Hao Win let off a short groan and finally lowered his legs from the table.

"Oh, by the way, I don't think I've heard your name yet." (Hao Win)

"Seol… My name's Seol."

Hao Win sat up properly and gazed at the darkened complexion of the youth.

"I apologise for my earlier behaviour. Looks like I spoke too prematurely. I thought you didn't really associate yourself with anyone… I had no idea you had that kind of circumstances. Truly." (Hao Win)

"No, it's alright. Don't mind it." (Seol)

"Will you accept my apology?" (Hao Win)

Hao Win suddenly offered his hand. Seol reached out and shook it after being slightly bewildered by this gesture. Hao Win quietly nodded his head, and then, spoke up again.

"I understand." (Hao Win)

"…Pardon?" (Seol)

“Only if you knew sooner… The words of lingering attachment. I know how you feel, since I’ve experienced something similar myself.” (Hao Win)

Hao Win sounded rather lonely, then.

“Please, stop telling us that annoying love story of yours!! Please!” (Odelette Delphine)

“Huh? But, did you not sympathise with me when I told you the story for the first time?” (Hao Win)

“That’s for once or twice, you know! If you bring it up again today, it’ll be for the seventh time!!” (Odelette Delphine)

Delphine crumpled her expression and covered up her ears.

Seol alternated his gaze between the two, feeling rather pleasantly surprised. He thought their relationship was simply a cooperative one, but it seemed to be a lot more friendlier than expected.

Hao Win licked his lips as if he was unhappy about the missed chance and let go of Seol’s hand.

“Listen, friend. How much do you need for that Ceremony?” (Hao Win)

Hao Win asked Seol out of the blue. The youth quickly calculated in his head.

“43,720 points.” (Seol)

“43,720?… That might be doable.” (Hao Win)

What did he mean by ‘doable’?

Before Seol could ask, Hao Win clapped his hands once and drew the attention to himself.

“Let’s see. I know that we’ve prepared various things to entice this young man into our team… However, why don’t we do it this way?” (Hao Win)

“What way?” (Odelette Delphine)

Delphine asked in curiosity, causing Hao Win to point at the noticeboard.

“First of all, we invite him into our team. Then us six will clear Hard missions.” (Hao Win)

Delphine tilted her head, but still listened. Hao Win may possess an easy-going and pleasant personality, but he was never one to speak without thinking deeply about a subject.

“Except, we hand over our share of rewards to this youth.” (Hao Win)

“What did you say?” (Tong Chai)

“Bullsh*t.” (Leorda Salvatore)

Tong Chai strongly objected. Even Leorda, who had been keeping quiet until now, spat out his opinion in a cold voice.

“If you were planning to do whatever you want, why did you even form a team in the first place?” (Tong Chai)

“What the? Didn’t we agree that, in order to attempt ‘Very Hard’ missions, we need this youth’s ability?” (Hao Win)

“But, you changed the story, did you not?” (Tong Chai)

“Listen to me. My point is this – either we cooperate, or compete.” (Hao Win)

Hao Win then pointed at Seol.

“This friend here, Mister Seol, needs Survival Points for his personal reasons. He will do whatever it takes to earn them. Didn’t you see him getting ready to attempt the Hard missions just now?” (Hao Win)

“So, what about it? We can also do those missions, no? All we have to do is recruit another skillful Warrior.” (Tong Chai)

“It’s not the matter of skills. As far as the Very Hard missions are concerned, the positions of our team and this youth match up just fine, but for Hard missions, it’s a different story altogether.” (Hao Win)

“I can’t figure out what you’re trying to say here.” (Tong Chai)

“Think about it. Think about how long we need to clear one Hard mission, and then, how long this young man needs to clear one.” (Hao Win)

Tong Chai’s expression hardened visibly. Finally, he realised what Hao Win was trying to say.

Everyone here could remember it well. This youth cleared missions at a frightening speed. Not only that, all by himself, no less.

“I’ll say this right now. If we fail to pull this young man in now… How many more times will we be able to complete Hard missions, I wonder?” (Hao Win)

“Hmm…”

“At a minimum, five times? Ten times, if we’re fast enough?” (Hao Win)

“Even if that’s true, I feel that we wouldn’t be losing out too much still.” (Tong Chai)

“Indeed, we’d be able to still earn some points that way.” (Hao Win)

“There is something you are mistaken about, Hao Win.” (Leorda Salvatore)

Leorda abruptly cut in.

“As you say, if Seol becomes our comrade, it’d be a good thing for us. However, I can not agree with your assertion that only after he joins our team, we’d be able to attempt Very Hard missions.” (Leorda Salvatore)

“That’s the same story for this friend, too.” (Hao Win)

Hao Win didn’t even flinch as he lightly rebuffed the argument.

“Indeed, there is no doubt that our team is the best in the Neutral Zone. However, this friend here is the top survivor in the Zone. He is unmatched. Unrivalled. You think he won’t be able to form his own team? Or you think no team out there will welcome him with open arms?” (Hao Win)

If their team failed to pull Seol in, then later on, they would have to compete against

him or his team. Since Seol regained his fame and prestige a few days ago through his unbelievable actions, it'd be a lie to say they weren't feeling the pressure.

"So, the conclusion is this. 43,720 points? Let's think of it as contract signing fee. If we divide the cost among ourselves, it's what, around 8,700 per person? That much, we will be able to recoup very quickly as soon as we start doing the Very Hard missions." (Hao Win)

What Hao Win was arguing for was to recruit Seol to their team and avoid potentially having to compete with another strong team later down the line.

"Think about it carefully. Just completing one Very Hard mission with 50,000 points nets over 8,000 points for each of us." (Hao Win)

"Very good." (Odelette Delphine)

Delphine spoke up with an enthusiastic voice.

"In order to earn bigger profit later, invest now, is that it? I can agree to that. I enjoy competition, but for this once, I will instead choose to grab onto this opportunity. This fellow here, I've had my eyes on him for quite some time, you see." (Odelette Delphine)

"So she says. What about you?" (Hao Win)

Hao Win looked at Tong Chai, and the latter man slowly closed his eyes. Leorda did the same as well. Since the team's leader had spoken, it was the same thing as the scale having tilted to one way already.

"Oh, and about the contract fee we were planning to give him." (Hao Win)

As if he hadn't finished yet, Hao Win continued.

"With the exception of our Priest over here, let's lend 2000 points each to Seol. I'm sure you all have that much leeway?" (Hao Win)

"I thought we were finished with discussing the signing fee?" (Odelette Delphine)

Delphine hurriedly spoke up after sensing that Tong Chai was about to blow his top.

"Look, after he goes through that Ceremony or whatever, he will be left with nothing

to his name, correct? Don't you think this friend needs to get some proper equipment if he were to attempt Very Hard missions with us?" (Hao Win)

"Even still…" (Odelette Delphine)

"I'm saying, we are lending him, not giving the points away. Besides, Seol will be taking the vanguard position from now on, so can't you extend your favours just a little? By equipping this friend with best armour available, the odds of our survival also increases, no?" (Hao Win)

"Really, you don't know when to quit!" (Tong Chai)

Tong Chai angrily stood up. He then glared at Seol, who was just sitting there with an innocent look on his face.

"No need to say anymore. Show us what you're capable of." (Tong Chai)

"Excuse me?" (Seol)

"Hao Win over here is a man who will live and die by his principle. That's why he's saying all these things, but I'm different. I understand your situation, but I do not see the reason why I need to go out of my way to accommodate you." (Tong Chai)

Seol slowly nodded his head.

Actually, even he thought Hao Win's conditions were too good to be true. If he were able to move with a team, he'd be able to avoid being blamed for hogging everything for himself, and better still, he'd be able to monopolise the rewards as well.

On top of this, they wanted to lend him points to buy equipment, too. He was planning to buy equipment sooner or later anyway, so it was difficult to see this as him owing them a debt.

"However, I do understand some parts of Hao Win's arguments. That is why, you should display your skills to us. We have heard all the rumours, but I need to see it with my own two eyes. Convince me that you are worthy of investment." (Tong Chai)

Tong Chai passionately stated his case.

Prove himself?

‘That’s easy.’ (Seol)

Seol grasped the spear and stood up from his seat. Which caused Tong Chai, who had been glaring at him until now, to flinch and back off.

“H, hold on.” (Tong Chai)

“?”

“I didn’t mean that you should fight me. No, what I meant was, show me through those.” (Tong Chai)

Tong Chai pointed at the mission noticeboard.

“Oh.” (Seol)

“Keheum. I’ll go and bring a mission paper. Prepare yourself in the meantime.” (Tong Chai)

Tong Chai left the lounge.

While waiting for the turban-wearing man, Seol shifted his gaze over to Hao Win, who had a huge smile etched on his face.

“Why?” (Seol)

“Mm?” (Hao Win)

“Why are you going out of your way to help me?” (Seol)

Hao Win played a major role in talks progressing to this point. Seol lacked the ability of eloquent speech, and so, could only marvel at Hao Win’s sleek persuasion skills. But at the same time, the youth couldn’t understand the reason why. After all, the Chinese man was someone he’d never even talked to prior to this day.

“Well… I’m apologising for my initial misunderstanding…” (Hao Win)

The end of Hao Win’s words trailed off, which was quite unlike him. He then shrugged his shoulders.

“I don’t hate guys like you. A man who’s willing to brave dangers for the woman he loves! Actually, I wish to cheer you on, you see.” (Hao Win)

Seol nearly spat out the drink he was drinking, right then.

“L, love?!” (Seol)

“Hmm? Am I wrong?” (Hao Win)

“Definitely. I’m not even going out with her.” (Seol)

“But, you said you can’t stop thinking about her?” (Hao Win)

“That is…” (Seol)

…A person was withering away right in front of his face, so, quite obviously, he wouldn’t be able to stop thinking about it.

Seeing Seol’s complexion wane, Hao Win broke out in a hearty laughter.

“I don’t mind a shy type of love, but it’s better if you are upfront about it. Look, man. If it was someone totally unrelated to you, would you be going out of your way to gather 82,000 points? Weren’t you planning to forge ahead regardless of what others might think of you?” (Hao Win)

“B, but, that’s not it…” (Seol)

If he was interested in Yun Seo-Rah in the first place, he’d not have abandoned her until she fell into such a wretched state.

He only heard about her circumstances coincidentally. And just as coincidentally, Kim Hahn-Nah came to him to ask for the favour. He did completely forget about her while being immersed in the training regime, after all.

“I was the same as you. A long time has passed by since then, but I still regret it to this day. I never knew how important the other person was. Only after she left my side did I realise my mistake.” (Hao Win)

Whatever the case may have been, this Hao Win fellow deeply misunderstood something here.

“I also find you rather envious as well. You’ve realised it before it got too late, unlike me…” (Hao Win)

Hao Win’s reminiscing tone of voice nearly made Seol’s body to shrink back, but the youth summoned whatever willpower he could muster to stop that from happening.

At the same time, Tong Chai returned with a mission parchment. In order to enter a mission with others, they had to be in physical contact.

“In any case, that is the reason why I’m helping you.” (Hao Win)

Hao Win picked up a huge shield. After placing his arm over Seol’s shoulders, a big grin broke out on his face.

“You see, I’m a hopeless romantic.” (Hao Win)

And then… Accompanied by the sound of paper being torn, all six of them disappeared from the spot.

A short while later… To be more precise, two minutes and 47 seconds later.

Six people reappeared in the plaza.

With the exception of one, no, two people, the expressions on the rest showed how flabbergasted they were.

Hao Win was laughing his a*s off while keeling halfway to the floor; meanwhile, Seol was catching his breath after going all out for the first time in a while.

“…This… crazy……” (Leorda Salvatore)

Leorda’s expression was as if he just witnessed a scary monster rampaging around.

He saw it with his own eyes, but even then, he could hardly believe it. The youth carrying a spear dashed forward like a streak of lightning the very moment they teleported to the mission area. Then, he began beating the seven shades of monsters there without missing a beat.

He stabbed them with his speartip, then he smacked them around using the spear shaft – Leorda couldn’t forget the scene of one monster dying without fail every time

Seol wielded his weapon.

Leorda was well aware of the fact that Seol had completed the toughest mission in the 'Hard' difficulty, 'Breaking out of the siege', all by himself. But, this was… Now that he bore witness to the youth's prowess, it exceeded Leorda's wildest imaginations. Should he say the whole thing was… exciting? Soul-stirring, even?

"I'd have never imagined that I'd feel pity for the monsters during a mission." (Leorda Salvatore)

"I told you. Now can you understand everything I've said?" (Hao Win)

Hao Win continued to cackle at Leorda's expense. The latter man looked like he was totally fed up now as he shook his head.

The facial expression on the person who objected most voraciously, Tong Chai, was also quite something else to behold.

"Now that you saw the performance personally, what do you think, Mister Tong Chai?" (Hao Win)

Tong Chai stood there like a stone statue before abruptly shifting his gaze over to Seol.

"You're from Area 1, which means, you're from South Korea?" (Tong Chai)

"That's correct." (Seol)

"Have you been to the army?" (Tong Chai)

"I was a sergeant by the time I was discharged." (Seol)

"Ahh… I see…" (Tong Chai)

"?"

Seeing Tong Chai nod his head sagely, Seol couldn't help but get flustered. What sort of misunderstanding was this guy going through now?

Seol was about to clarify that he was nothing more than an administrative clerk, but Hao Win cut in before he could.

“So, now you agree with my proposition?” (Hao Win)

“I agree with you 100%. And I will invest 3000 points.” (Tong Chai)

Hao Win whistled, impressed, at that big amount.

“Wow. Isn’t the change in your attitude too sudden?” (Hao Win)

“But, of course. I’ve only recognised the fact that I’m not the driver, merely the passenger in this ride.” (Tong Chai)

Tong Chai smiled wryly and took off his turban. Then, he slightly lowered his head towards Seol.

“I hope you can buy the best equipment available. I am genuinely looking forward to trying out the Very Hard missions now.” (Tong Chai)

“Fufufu. What about you, Leorda?” (Hao Win)

“…I’ll also lend him 3000 points.” (Leorda Salvatore)

Leorda crossed his arms in front of his chest and averted his gaze.

“Oh, it seems that everyone is willing to show off a bit, no? Very good. Then, 4000 points from me.” (Hao Win)

“And 5000 points from me!” (Odelette Delphine)

Staying silent until then, Delphine suddenly piped up and, as if she was very excited about something, jumped up and down repeatedly before clutching onto Seol’s arm.

“Bus!!” (Odelette Delphine)

Panicking slightly, Seol looked down at her. While clinging onto his arm, she shouted out while her eyes sparkled brightly.

“Please, let me get on this bus!” (Odelette Delphine)

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She opened her eyes and was greeted by the blurry world. It was as if she was looking through a screen of water while being submerged underneath. The lights filling her vision remained bright, though.

“Ahh…” (Yun Seo-Rah)

Her eyes hurt. Yun Seo-Rah reflexively closed her eyes and sighed out inwardly.

‘I survived… ’ (Yun Seo-Rah)

She wished to die, actually.

She pulled her hands in almost instinctively, only to realise something was not quite right.

The sensation on the tips of her fingers were soft. Her back felt comfortable too, and most importantly, her body did not feel heavy at all. It always felt like it weighed a ton until now…

Right away, she opened her eyes like a person struck by lightning. And she was astonished by the sights of the room greeting her.

“Where is this…?” (Yun Seo-Rah)

She remembered making her way back somehow to that place on the fifth floor, the one that wasn’t furnished enough to be called a lounge. But now that she had opened her eyes, she found herself inside a palace, instead.

‘Maybe, I did die?’ (Yun Seo-Rah)

…But, just as she finished thinking like so, the door to the room clicked open.

“Uh? *Unni*?” (Yi Surl-Ah) *(TL: Unni = older sister, used by females)*

Yi Surl-Ah was returning to the room after buying something to eat, and seeing that Yun Seo-Rah had regained her consciousness, she quickly came to her side in a light trot.

“Uhm…” (Yun Seo-Rah)

“You are awake! How are you feeling?” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“Where… am I?” (Yun Seo-Rah)

“It’s heaven.” (Yi Sung-Jin)

Yi Sung-Jin abruptly butted in. Yun Seo-Rah went, *oh*, and was about to nod her head, but saw the pointy end of the food tray dig deep into the boy’s side and couldn’t help but be confused.

“Ouch! But why?!” (Yi Sung-Jin)

“She’s going to misunderstand you!” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“But, but! It is heaven in here, right?” (Yi Sung-Jin)

“T, that’s true, too…” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Now that Yi Surl-Ah thought about it, her little brother had a point there.

Yi Surl-Ah quickly cleared her throat a couple of times and, with a bright smile, placed the tray down. Yun Seo-Rah’s eyes opened up wide in shock after seeing some seriously appetizing grub on it. Saliva instinctively pooled in her mouth as the warm steam rose up from the delicious-smelling soup.

“Please, eat them. I’m sure you’re starving by now.” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“W, what about you two…?” (Yun Seo-Rah)

“We brought ours along as well, so don’t worry.” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“What is going on?” (Yun Seo-Rah)

Yun Seo-Rah’s mind was in a mess. She woke up and so many things seemed to have changed while she was out cold.

“*Oppa* helped us out.” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“Hyung helped us out.” (Yi Sung-Jin)

The siblings answered simultaneously.

“W, who?” (Yun Seo-Rah)

“That’s it for now. I’ll tell you everything once you finish them all~.” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-Ah pointed at the food tray.

There was no way Yun Seo-Rah would refuse. This was the first proper meal she had seen in over a month, after all. Unable to fight the desire, she hurriedly picked up the spoon.

‘Tastes… so good.’ (Seol)

This soup that seemed to melt on the tip of her tongue – how could it taste so wonderful?

Yun Seo-Rah’s whole being focused on the meal at hand, and after making sure nothing was wrong, the Yi siblings also dug into their food as well.

And so, as the trio silently enjoyed their meal, Yi Sung-Jin suddenly let off a long sigh. Yi Surl-Ah glanced at her brother, chopsticks caught between her lips.

“You shouldn’t sigh like that during meals, you know.” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“No, I know… It’s just that, I’m worried.” (Yi Sung-Jin)

“Mm?” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“I wonder if it’s really okay for us to keep staying here…” (Yi Sung-Jin)

Hearing her little brother’s depressed voice, Yi Surl-Ah tilted her head.

“If I were in hyung’s shoes, I think I’d be feeling a bit annoyed by us…” (Yi Sung-Jin)

“Y, you think so?” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“Ng. I mean, us staying here like this, we’re inconveniencing him, right? If we are

honest, didn't we like dump him with the responsibility of fixing Seo-Rah noona's arm, too?" (Yi Sung-Jin)

Yun Seo-Rah's left arm was moving nonstop but then, it froze mid-action as soon as the boy's words left his mouth. Yi Surl-Ah went, *Ah!,* but it was too late.

Even though Seol said he'd go and earn enough points, that amount was not something he could gather in one or two days. No, the odds of not gathering enough before the Neutral Zone's deadline approached were greater. It would do no one any good to raise an unrealistic expectation, so she didn't want to say anything.

"What are you talking about?" (Yun Seo-Rah)

"It, it's nothing. Don't worry, unni. Just finish your meal first." (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yun Seo-Rah silently put the spoon down, no longer eating. Yi Surl-Ah glared at her little brother, but she knew that the milk had been spilled already. In the end, she had to come clean about what happened.

"82,000 points?!" (Yun Seo-Rah)

"Yes. If we want to heal your arm, we need 82,000 points…" (Yi Surl-Ah)

It was such a nonsensical number, a helpless chuckle leaked out from Yun Seo-Rah's lips. Since she didn't even have 10 points for a simple meal to her name, she couldn't even begin to imagine the enormity of 82,000 points.

"What about him…?" (Yun Seo-Rah)

"He left a while ago. Said he'd be going out to earn some points…" (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yun Seo-Rah leaned her back against the wall. Her question's been answered, but the confusion in her head remained.

'Why?' (Yun Seo-Rah)

She couldn't understand it.

They only came from the same Area. Yet, he brought her to his own room. He then gave away those precious points, so she could have something to eat after waking up. And

then, he was trying to get her arm fixed as well.

'But, why?' (Yun Seo-Rah)

As a person who never cared about other people's business, Seol's helping hand felt so alien and not to mention, burdensome to her.

On the flip side, it did kind of feel a little *itchy*, too. Her head still questioned, but her body was certainly rejoicing at the goodwill being showered on her.

Now that she thought about it, she might have seen him during her sleep.

…Are you alright?

The face of the youth, reaching out to her.

'…I want to see him.' (Yun Seo-Rah)

When this thought formed in her head, Yun Seo-Rah's eyes blinked several times in surprise.

'What did I think about just now?' (Yun Seo-Rah)

"Uhm, unni? Please, don't be discouraged if orabeo-nim tells you it'll be difficult." (Yi Surl-Ah)

"I won't do that." (Yun Seo-Rah)

Yun Seo-Rah replied matter-of-factly at Yi Surl-Ah's baseless anxiety. She remained cold and detached, but still, knew how to remain courteous.

'However, what should I say to him once he comes back?' (Yun Seo-Rah)

It was then.

They could hear loud footsteps coming from the corridor.

✧✧✧

‘And I wanted to see what the Ceremony looked like, too… ’ (Seol)

Seol was sitting on the steps of the staircase while sighing out wistfully.

He and the new team successfully completed several Hard mission. They completed each mission six times, earning 43,500 extra points.

His clearing speed was also incomparably faster. Every team member fought in the manner Seol recommended, so it was small wonder that the missions were cleared much faster than before.

After earning enough points this way, Seol went to see Maria and requested her to hold the Ceremony.

She might have a dirty mouth, but Maria would never go back on her own word. She told him not to come inside the room since the god she served would descend during the Ceremony itself. She then swapped out of the maid uniform for an ice-white robe, and while clutching a sizeable bag full of stuff and being accompanied by two other maids, she went upstairs to Seol’s room.

By this time, even the two Yi siblings must’ve been chased out from the room, thought Seol.

In any case, knowing that he had resolved the situation somehow, he was feeling not too shabby at the moment.

“As I was saying…” (Hao Win)

…That was, if one discounted one exception.

All thanks to Hao Win, who was sitting next to him and yapped on and on seemingly without an end, Seol thought he might develop neurosis at this rate.

Originally, the team were supposed to meet up again tomorrow morning after Seol purchased suitable equipment for himself. However, Hao Win said he wanted to talk to the youth for a bit, and that ‘bit’ got extended to ‘forever’, instead.

It was fine for him to misunderstand all by himself, but then, he kept yammering on

and on about some nonsense.

…Such as, the stories of his past love.

“You see, women are creatures of emotions. See? They are different from us males.” (Hao Win)

“Sure…” (Seol)

“Your looks? Your body? Money? They do matter, sure. But, the most important thing is, it’s your heart, man. Your heart!” (Hao Win)

“Sure…” (Seol)

“How much does this man think about me? How much does he care about me? These things are important, you see? That’s all you need.” (Hao Win)

“Sure…” (Seol)

“Really now. You need to be more confident of yourself. I can help you out any time if you need me. I mean, such a wonderful opportunity has been created, so it should be a child’s play now. Am I right? So, how about it? Should I help you?” (Hao Win)

“Sure…” (Seol)

…Or, with substance-less lectures about the rules of dating.

Seol continued to mouth half-hearted replies. Now he could understand why Odelette Delphine looked so fed up back then.

‘Oh well, at least he’s not as terrifying as I feared, though.’ (Seol)

“Alright! I won’t stand out too much, and just set the mood up for you young ones. All you have to do is to match the timing, that’s all!” (Hao Win)

“…Eh?” (Seol)

Seol had been responding like a robot without thinking too much about it, and the conversation strayed off course by quite a lot while he wasn’t paying attention.

"…Match the timing?" (Seol)

Just before Seol could ask for a clarification, bright light exploded above their heads. When both men looked up, they saw soft and gentle rays of light up there. Which was odd, since the door to Seol's room should have been closed shut.

Hao Win slowly opened his mouth.

"Looks like it's over." (Hao Win)

"I should go and take a look." (Seol)

Seol got up and hurriedly ran to his room. For some reason, Hao Win decided to follow right behind, as well.

Arriving on the tenth floor, Seol could see that that door to his room was still closed shut. The two maids accompanying Maria were nowhere to be seen, other than the backs of the anxious Yi siblings hesitating there.

"Orabeo-nim!" (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-Ah spotted Seol and called out helplessly.

"What happened?" (Seol)

"I, I do not know! There was a sudden explosion of light, and, and, the two maids entered the room in a hurry, and…" (Yi Surl-Ah)

"How long has it been?" (Seol)

"Not long. Maybe, not even one minute…?" (Yi Surl-Ah)

Creak…

Before Yi Surl-Ah could finish, the door cautiously creaked open.

Chapter 33
A Misunderstanding (3)

Hot and stuffy air rushed out from the open door. Acrid and bitter odour of blood and sweat also faintly brushed by Seol's nose.

The two maids that entered before him were supporting the completely exhausted Maria from her sides while leaving the room.

Maria's previously-radiant blonde hair looked as if someone doused it with a bucket of cold water as drops of liquid fell from the strands. Her thin, white ceremonial robe was completely soaked through as it clung onto her figure and revealed more than a hint of her skin.

"Eurph…!"

From her cherry-coloured shapely lips, a mouthful of blood spewed out. The white robe rapidly got stained in the dark crimson hue.

"Miss Maria!" (Seol)

When Seol ran up to her, Maria weakly raised her head up. As if she was already suffering from a high fever, her once-pale cheeks were reddening up.

"Are you alright?" (Seol)

"F*ck it… Can't you see for yourself…?" (Maria)

"……"

"My head's ringing, so please don't shout near me… I really feel like I might die soon…" (Maria)

Maria coughed and vomited out two more mouthfuls of blood. She regulated her breathing, and then shot Seol with a fierce glare.

“Don’t forget.” (Maria)

“……”

“I did you a big favour with this.” (Maria)

Seol wasn’t a dummy so he quickly replied.

“I understand. I’ll never forget about today’s matter.” (Seol)

Maria lowered her head again. She was helped along by other maids and soon, they disappeared beyond the bottom of the stairs and out of sight.

Still worried, Seol continued to look on, before shifting his eyes away after hearing the loud exclamation of joy coming out from his quarters. It was the sound of the Yi siblings crying out.

“Time for the main character to make his entrance.” (Hao Win)

Hao Win lightly patted Seol’s back. Although the questions regarding why this guy followed him here remained, Seol was more curious to find out Yun Seo-Rah’s condition, so he hesitantly took his first step inside.

‘Ho-oh!’

Hao Win followed Seol into the room, and ended up gasping out in admiration after seeing the figure of the woman sitting on top of the bed.

The way she sat up on the bed while leaning slightly against the wall reminded him of a beautiful snowflower shyly blooming within a hidden crevice in the middle of winter.

She continuously raised her right arm and then lowered it. Her actions were somehow like that beautiful snowflower not knowing what to do when the rays of warm sunlight fell upon it, after it was forcibly taken out from its deep hiding place and into the open plain.

Indeed, I see why he fell for her. Hao Win silently mused to himself, and then he lightly pushed Seol forward. Thanks to that, the youth ended up stumbling a couple steps forward, which inevitably drew in the attention of Yun Seo-Rah. She flinched slightly and met the youth’s gaze.

“H, how are you feeling?” (Seol)

“……”

“Is your arm okay?” (Seol)

“……Ah.”

Her small but shapely lips parted ever so slightly, before closing shut again.

All sorts of thoughts and emotions raced in her eyes, but her lips could only tremble softly. Judging from her small and nearly indecipherable hand gestures, it seemed as if she desperately wanted to say something, but at the same time, she was at a loss as to how she should proceed. So much so, the ones watching on could feel their hearts melt into a puddle.

‘Keuh!’

Wasn’t this such a heartwarming scene? A wonderfully refreshing sight of romance?

Hao Win was deeply admiring this sight, but then…

“May I know how you managed to gather 82,000 points?” (Yun Seo-Rah)

…Her words brought him back to his senses.

Hao Win quickly stuffed a cigarette on his mouth and shoved his hands down inside the trouser pockets. Then, he cocked his head exactly at the angle of 30 degrees, and he jutted his chin out just a bit as if he was looking down on his opponent.

“Oh, that. This is…” (Seol)

“Hiya~~. Congrats, congrats.” (Hao Win)

Just before Seol could make the introduction, Hao Win seized initiative and stepped forward while walking in an extravagant fashion. He placed a hand on Seol’s shoulder and scanned the crowd.

“I see that you’re all nicely healed and stuff. You can move your arm now, yeah?” (Hao Win)

“Y, yes. It’s all thanks to Mister Hao Win…” (Seol)

“Sure, sure. It’s all good, all good. However…” (Hao Win)

The ends of Hao Win’s lips quivered slightly. As a clearly slimy smile effused on the older man’s face, Yi Surl-Ah couldn’t help but form a deep frown.

“We’ve held up our side of the bargain, so… It’s your turn to keep your side of the promise, no?” (Hao Win)

“Of course.” (Seol)

“Oh, good. You see, I just wanted to make sure. I mean, if you somehow forgot, things might have gotten a bit troubling for both sides.” (Hao Win)

“You don’t have to worry.” (Seol)

Seol confidently replied. He received a lot from them already, and he was planning to pay them back in full.

Too bad, that’s just from Seol’s perspective, though. The others, who weren’t aware of the details, could only tilt their heads in confusion from those ambiguous words.

“Uhm, excuse me… What promise are you talking about?” (Yi Surl-Ah)

And sure enough, Yi Surl-Ah took the bait.

“Oh, that…” (Seol)

“That’s right, it’s a promise.” (Hao Win)

Seol was about to explain himself, but Hao Win cut him off again.

“It’s nothing much. Let’s just say, it’s kinda like we made a deal?” (Hao Win)

He said it was “nothing”, yet the tone of his voice or the way he said it indicated otherwise.

“This friend here, I saw him running around like a headless chicken in the morning, you see? And I thought him working his b**t off like that didn’t look so nice. So, like,

after I heard his story, the good ol' me decided to lend a hand, so to speak." (Hao Win)

"In, in that case…" (Yi Surl-Ah)

"He said, there's this lass he needs to save, and that he needs 82,000 points for that. Keuh, so cool. So cool, I say! I was even moved to tears, so I had to ask my *family* to pitch in to meet that amount, you see!" (Hao Win)

"Y, your family?" (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-Ah's dumbfounded gaze landed on Seol, but he could only look back at her without saying anything.

Because, what Hao Win said wasn't wrong, technically. It was true that Hao Win did go out of his way to help and revealed himself to be a unashamed romantic at heart – his own words. And also, one could refer to one's teammates as "family", too.

It's just that, because Hao Win's back was facing her, she couldn't see the facial expression on his face, which was a bit of shame, really.

"But, here's the thing, little lady. We ain't running a charity operation here, so like, we have reached a proper~ business agreement between us gentlemen. Know what I mean?" (Hao Win)

In an instant, the whole room became deathly quiet. Seeing Hao Win cackle like some sort of a cartoon villain in an apparent display of joy, certainly got on the nerves of almost everyone present.

"Oh well. For today, celebrate. Celebrate away, I say. But from tomorrow onwards…" (Hao Win)

When he intentionally blurred the ends of his sentence, the unsettling atmosphere got heavier.

"In any case, you've got a lot~ of work to do. I'm sure you know very well that you gotta work hard to keep my family safe and sound, yeah?" (Hao Win)

That was also true. Delphine's team did want Seol's overwhelming attacking prowess, after all. And it was common sense for a Warrior to take to the frontlines.

“I know. I’ll see you tomorrow morning.” (Seol)

“Very good. I shall get out of your hair now… Oh, right.” (Hao Win)

Hao Win turned around to leave, before turning back again to face Yun Seo-Rah as if he just remembered something. She wasn’t a dummy – no, on the contrary, she was incredibly sharp. As if she had sensed what was going on, the seriousness on her expression was clear to see.

“Before I go, I should say my thanks first. Your name’s Yun Seo-Rah, right? Thanks a bunch.” (Hao Win)

“…What do you mean?” (Yun Seo-Rah)

Her voice was sharp enough to cut human flesh, but Hao Win simply cackled on.

“All thanks to you, lass, the number one man in the Neutral Zone has landed in my hands, you see!” (Hao Win)

Hao Win theatrically mimicked grabbing and fondling motions with his fingers and ominously laughed out.

It was only then Seol realised something was *very* off, but before he could respond, Hao Win’s rough hands violently grabbed his collars.

“A word of advice. Don’t even think about running away. If we don’t get back our investment here, then we’ll get it back in the Paradise. If not, then well, we’ll just get it when we’re back on Earth.” (Hao Win)

Seol was going to query what the heck was this all about, but once more…

“Oh, well… I haven’t met a fool who did that after hearing the name of the Triads before, so…” (Hao Win)

Hao Win released Seol’s collars, leaned in closer, and winked at him. With a refreshing smile on his face, he strode right past the confused and stunned Seol. Soon enough, the noise of the door closing was heard.

Seol fixed his clothes and let off a soft sigh. Not only was that man noisy, he was also quite indecipherable sometimes, as well.

In any case, today was the day for celebration. Yun Seo-Rah needed a few more days of recuperation, but by healing her arm, Seol certainly did wonders for Kim Hahn-Nah's reputation. Now that the most difficult task was over, the rest should be comparatively easy as pie.

Conveniently enough, it was now around dinner time. Seol was about to suggest that they should enjoy a feast to celebrate Yun Seo-Rah's recovery, but then…

"?"

…He couldn't help but fall into a deep confusion.

The complexions of both Yi Surl-Ah and Yi Sung-Jin were poor. They stood around like a pair of statues, gazing at Seol with eyes rapidly moistening up.

"Actually, I… thought it was strange…" (Yi Surl-Ah)

"Eh?" (Seol)

"Just how… You were able to gather so much points in such a short time… I was so curious…" (Yi Surl-Ah)

Her halting words were wet with emotions.

"All… All because of us…" (Yi Surl-Ah)

As if all strength abandoned her legs, Yi Surl-Ah suddenly plopped down on the floor. And finally, from her reddening eyes, thick tear drops began pouring out. Now in panic mode, Seol hurriedly waved his hands around in denial.

"No, no!! Wait a minute!! You guys are misunderstanding something!" (Seol)

"It's a m, misunderstanding?" (Yi Surl-Ah)

"That's right!" (Seol)

"But, you had to borrow the points, no?" (Yi Surl-Ah)

"But, uh, that…" (Seol)

Seol became rather speechless. Well, it was true that he did borrow the points. Suddenly, he didn't know where to even begin his explanation. However, as soon as Yi Surl-Ah's elegantly defined facial features began crumbling and soft sniffling noises came from her nose, Seol couldn't help but hurriedly blurt out.

"I didn't borrow a lot, though! I already took care of the 82,000 points, and they just added a few more so I can get a couple of equipment for myself, you know? I'll be able to make that up through a handful of missions." (Seol)

"R, really?" (Yi Surl-Ah)

"Of course!" (Seol)

"But, he said you fell into his hands…" (Yi Surl-Ah)

"He was just messing around. I'm telling you, you don't have to worry. Really." (Seol)

"But, what about you meeting up tomorrow morning…?" (Yi SUrl-Ah)

"Seriously now, it's nothing to worry about. I've joined his party, that's all. They needed my strength, so we're going to carry out missions together." (Seol)

It was at this point where Yi Surl-Ah completely broke down and cried even harder.

He had to use his *body* to get those points – that was how she took it, no matter how hard Seol tried to explain. She made up her mind simply through the actions of Hao Win.

'It's all because of me!' (Yi Surl-Ah)

The *orabeo-nim,* who was better than anyone in this place, had fallen so far to become nothing more than a meat shield, all because she had to flap her gums so insolently. The crashing tidal wave of guilt forced even more tears out from her eyes.

Since Seol had no idea of such dark thoughts taking nest in her head, all he could do was crumple to the floor, his soul abandoning him. The whole thing was like a lightning striking him out of the blue.

'But, why?!' (Seol)

The more he tried to pacify her, telling her that everything was okay, Yi Surl-Ah seemed to cry more and more.

“H, hey, Yi Sung-Jin…?” (Seol)

Seol shifted his gaze over to Yi Sung-Jin, wanting to egg him to do something about his sister, but the story for the Yi boy wasn’t any better. His head was lowered, his sight fixed to the ground, and his fists were tightly clenched and trembling – perhaps in rage.

‘What’s the matter with him now?’ (Seol)

Seol’s neck creaked noisily like a rusted machinery as he turned his head around.

Yun Seo-Rah was in the middle of wordlessly staring at Seol. When their gazes met, she flinched grandly and hurriedly avoided him, and then began glaring at the poor bed sheets.

It was the first time Seol saw such a display of raw emotion from a girl who always seemed taciturn and disinterested from the short time he had known her.

However, he felt a sense of deja vu when even Yun Seo-Rah began biting her lower lip.

“*Sob…*”

Yun Seo-Rah couldn’t hold back anymore, and she too began crying. She covered her face with those thin pair of hands, and her shoulders began quivering ever so gently.

“I’m… I’m sorry…” (Yun Seo-Rah)

She quietly sobbed, and after seeing her like that, Seol could only glare at the ceiling in helplessness.

‘That guy, really… ’ (Seol)

On a day well-suited for celebration, the whole room became a sea of wails, instead.

On the other hand, as the multiple choruses of crying escaped from the room, Hao Win let off a long smoke out from his lips as he leaned against the door, his arms across his chest. Now that his work was done, he flung the dying b**t of the cigarette away and

moved on.

The expression on his face as he climbed down the stairs was one of satisfaction.

He sniffed and wiped his nose once while slowly nodding his head.

'Yup, humans are emotional animals.' (Hao Win)

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The following morning.

Unable to win against the sorrowful atmosphere of his quarters, Seol made his escape at early dawn. He decided to get his gear ready in time for the meeting later in the morning.

'Let's see… The remaining points are… ' (Seol)

…14,780 points, although he gave 600 away for his guests and their meals for the day, so now, 14,180 remained. Yi Surl-Ah completely refused to take the points, but when he used Yun Seo-Rah's recuperation as the excuse, she took them with thick tears in her eyes.

'What should I buy?' (Seol)

Normally, the pricing of defensive equipment started from around 1000 points. Since they were designed to keep you alive for as long as possible, they were naturally quite expensive.

After entering the store, Seol looked around hesitantly, before an Asian maid discovered him and trotted to his position. She was a cute girl with braided hair.

"Hello there~! What brings you here today?" (the maid)

"I came to buy defensive gear." (Seol)

Hng~. The maid swept her gaze over Seol and nodded her head.

"What is your allotted budget?" (the maid)

“It’s around 14,000 points…” (Seol)

“Since you’re a Gold Mark, you get 30% discount! So, we can budget you for around 20,000 points, yes?” (the maid)

‘She knows who I am?’ (Seol)

Seol stared blankly for a bit, before asking her.

“By any chance, do I also get the first-place discount as well?” (Seol)

The maid smiled refreshingly.

“Why would you ask? Well, why don’t you ask for the ownership of the Neutral Zone while you’re at it?” (the maid)

But, of course. Seol knew that additional discount of 70% only applied to regular facilities. He still had to ask, though. Just in case.

“If it’s fine with you, may I act as your coordinator?” (the maid)

Although Seol didn’t mind looking around, there was no time. He was originally planning to come here last night, but all thanks to Hao Win causing a mayhem, he had to suffer the consequences the whole night. He even failed to calm them down.

“Please.” (Seol)

“Roger, roger! And the type of armour you’re looking for is?” (the maid)

“Uh… For the whole body?” (Seol)

“I see that your Job is Warrior. So, do you focus on mobility or defense?” (the maid)

“I guess, uh, mobility? Wait, I think defense is also important.” (Seol)

“Yes, yes~. And your weapon is a spear?” (the maid)

“Yes.” (Seol)

“You aren’t planning to change?” (the maid)

“Nope.” (Seol)

He wasn’t thinking of changing a weapon when he’d just about gotten used to it. Besides, his budget was already too tight, anyways.

“Roger that! I’m your coordinator, Aragaki Yuzuha!! Ikimaaaaasu!”

The maid suddenly raised her arm up high and ran deeper inside the store. Which left Seol with a slight sense of panic.

While the rustling noises of her searching for stuff resounded out from the back, Seol leisurely browsed through the available items on the list provided.

The names of the items appearing on the store’s list were pretty simple. For instance, the spear Seol bought from the store for 580 points was named the ‘Sharp and Sturdy Spear’. Although it featured no special attributes, Seol found its simplicity rather pleasing, and more importantly, its length nearly matched his own height – which he preferred – so he bought it right away.

“Here I am!” (Yuzuha)

The maid, Aragaki Yuzuha, brought along several articles, carried on both of her hands.

The first item to be shown off was an armour coloured in a deep brown hue.

“This here is the boiled leather armour. It’s the best one available here among the leather armours. After bringing the oil containing paraffin into boil, you repeatedly dip the leather in there for a few hours and then take it out. That makes the leather super strong, you know? Touch it and see for yourself.” *(TL: the author was kind enough to write the name of the armour in English. Thanks, Mister Author!)*

Seol touched the shoulder pad, and sure enough, not only was it stiff, it also felt reassuringly solid as well. He put a lot of strength on his fingers, but he still failed to bend the armour out of shape.

“That’s why, it offers great resistance against cutting attacks, but that still doesn’t mean it’s omnipotent, you know? If you receive an impact that the armour can’t handle, it’ll simply break apart, unable to disperse the force behind the attack, you see? So, you gotta be especially careful about attacks from blunt weapons!” (Yuzuha)

And then, she went, *That is why!!*, and presented the next thing in her hand. It was also an armour, formed from small and roundish metal rings interlocking with one another. However, to call it an actual armour, it seemed a bit too small.

“I strongly recommend that you put this on under the leather armour.” (Yuzuha)

“Is this the so-called chain mail?” (Seol)

“Wee~ll, it’s a wee bit, you know, small to call it a proper chain mail, but you can think of it as the miniaturised version. It’s lighter than normal, because it’s been designed for Sorcerers and Priests to wear under their robes, but still, its defensive capability is excellent. Even if your luck’s bad and the boiled leather armour gets broken, this little guy can save your life.” (Yuzuha)

Doubling the layers of armour – Seol thought that wouldn’t be such a bad idea, and so, he asked.

“How much for both?” (Seol)

“The boiled leather armour is 5,700 points, while this is 6,900. Ah, that’s the discounted price.” (Yuzuha)

“…The latter’s more expensive?” (Seol)

“Of course! That’s leather and this one’s metal, after all!” (Yuzuha)

“Mm.” (Seol)

“And then~.” (Yuzuha)

Thanks to Yuzuha’s rather excellent salesman skills, Seol ended up also buying leather protectors for his arms and shins, as well as leather gloves and long boots adorned with cleats.

“And~ the total is 13,980 points, dear customer!” (Yuzuha)

Seol didn’t say anything else and duly handed over the points; Yuzuha seemed to be very happy about that.

“♥ Kimochi~!” (Yuzuha)

"……"

The mini chain mail barely covered him from his shoulders to just below his navel. The boiled leather armour could be worn like a T-shirt, so putting it on wasn't very difficult. While he squatted down to replace his shoes with the leather long boots, Yuzuha busied herself by checking out his spear, before her eyes began narrowing to a slit.

'…I don't have anymore points left, though… ' (Seol)

"Are you properly maintaining your spear?" (Yuzuha)

"…Maintaining?" (Seol)

"Yes. I can see that the blade edges have become quite dull. Have you sharpened it ever since the day of purchase?" (Yuzuha)

"Do I really need to do that?" (Seol)

After hearing his reply, Yuzuha formed an expression of total disbelief. And then, asked him back.

"Do I really need to keep breathing?" (Yuzuha)

"……I guess I understand what you're trying to say." (Seol)

In the end, he had to spend another 20 points to buy a whetstone and a towel. All 14,000 points got sucked out from him in a blink.

"Thank you very much~! We still have the Named weapons available, so please, pay us a visit again after earning lot~s of points! Okay~?" (Yuzuha)

Leaving behind Yuzuha's words, Seol went down the stairs to the first floor. His body felt a bit hefty now, but at the same time, he was feeling a bit excited as well.

Buying equipment for himself indeed was a long time coming thing. Finally shedding the clothes he'd been wearing from Earth and kitting himself in the proper armour, his heart was stirring restlessly.

'I'll earn lots more points and make sure the kids get suited up properly, too.' (Seol)

Even before he'd noticed it, he was treating the Yi siblings and Yun Seo-Rah as kids he was looking after.

Seol found a quiet spot for himself on the first floor, and with a clumsy hand, began polishing the blade edges of the spear, while waiting for the arrival of his new party members.

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[Ambush (Remaining number of attempts: 10/10)]
Ambush and annihilate the group of Bugaboos walking past the mountain road!
Difficulty: Very Hard
When successful: +10,000 Survival Points
When unsuccessful: Death
*Cooperation possible (up to 6 people)

✧✧✧

Seol hid in the thicket over a small hill and stared at the mountainous trail not too far from him. There was a group of the so-called Bugaboos busy walking on the narrow path located between two hills. Even at a casual glance, there seemed to be at least over thirty of them.

A Bugaboo was an exceptionally furry monster that had a roughly human-like body but with a head of a bear. It was around 150 cm tall, but its entire body was made up of rippling muscles, so it was certainly not something one could take lightly.

Seeing their sharply-jutting out fangs and the scary claws on their hands and feet, even Seol tensed up.

'Also, why are they carrying so many weapons?' (Seol)

Not only such things as swords, shields and spears, he could see blunt weapons and bows and arrows, which he hadn't seen in a mission until now.

Most eye-catching, though, was this two-metre tall Bugaboo walking in the middle of the group. It carried a huge mace in one hand, and Seol judged it to be the leader of this group.

‘Good thing I didn’t try the mission alone.’ (Seol)

The thing about the difficulty spiking up incredibly high during the ‘Very Hard’ ranked missions was indeed true. He could now understand why the mission was called ‘Ambush’, as well. If he or his group were to clash head on with these creatures, they wouldn’t even last five minutes.

Finally, the group of Bugaboos were walking past below the hill Seol was hiding in.

‘Not yet.’ (Seol)

Right then, the once-quiet mountainside was filled with a powerful gust of wind. The stormy winds formed at the end of the narrow path and began to violently overturn everything as they rushed past, eventually pouncing on top of the Bugaboo monsters. This was, of course, all due to Delphine’s magic.

Khuwahk?

SFX for low growlings of monsters

The leader Bugaboo stumbled unsteadily, before falling on its b**t with a loud thud. It was the same situation for the other monsters. They all fell and rolled around the ground, their ranks completely collapsing.

As the wind slowly died down, Seol grasped his spear tightly. The leather of the glove seemed to glue to the spear shaft. He crouched and placed strength on his ankles, getting ready to pounce at a moment’s notice.

Not too long thereafter, a sharp whistling noise came from the hill on the other side. A Bugaboo, while trying to get back up, screamed in a shrill voice with an arrow stuck to its neck. Leorda Salvatore and Tong Chai, the two archers, began sniping the Bugaboos at the rear that carried bows.

The majority of the monsters hadn’t gotten back up yet. But those that did regain awareness of the situation turned their heads to look at the direction of the hill where the arrows were coming from. Hell, three were already up and running towards that direction.

It was right here that Seol raised his body up. He rushed down the hill like a streak of lightning and stabbed the head of a Bugaboo trying to get up. He pulled his spear out

before the dead monster's face greeted the ground, then in the blink of an eye, stabbed to his side, and caused a bloody hole to appear on the temple of another Bugaboo still regaining its balance.

Confirming that his attacks worked, Seol relentlessly used his spear. His role was to reduce the monsters' numbers as much as possible while their attention was robbed by Delphine's magic and the arrows from the two archers.

After sending six, seven monsters to hell literally in the blink of an eye, Seol quickly retreated. The Bugaboos finally realised that there was another enemy to their backs and tried to pounce on his position with their weapons.

From here onwards, a proper battle unfolded.

Seol deflected away the incoming blade with 'Strike' and rapidly attacked with 'Thrust', causing yet another monster to fly away while spewing blood. And as he went with 'Cut' to his side…

Clang!

With a loud metallic clang, his spear was blocked. A Bugaboo had raised its shield in time and managed to block him.

Unlike the undead skeletons, these Bugaboos did not stupidly try to rush in front. No, they spread to either side of him and tried to surround him.

Clang!

When his spear clashed with the axe of the monster, Seol's eyes widened in surprise. Not only the power behind the axe swing surprisingly great, even before he could counterattack, blades and spears of other monsters were already closing in on his position. When he managed to pull back and avoided getting hit, an axe came flying at him as if it was waiting for him to move.

And so, instead of attacking, Seol gradually got mired deeper into a defensive battle. Surrounded by six aggressive monsters and their weapons, he had no choice but to constantly be on the backfoot.

It wasn't only that, though – as he wholeheartedly concentrated on defending against the monsters' weapons, he flinched and came to an abrupt halt when an impact landed

on his chest.

An arrow couldn't penetrate his armour and bounced away. A Bugaboo holding a bow was taking aim at Seol and was pulling at the string.

It was then.

Swish, swish!!

Accompanying the clear sounds of air being parted, two monsters running up the hill screamed out. Arrows penetrated the back and the thigh of those monsters. Leorda began lending his aid just as Seol found himself in a spot of bother.

'But, they too have archers…!' (Seol)

Soon enough, Seol's eyes became wider still. From behind the archer's back, a pair of bronzed hands suddenly appeared and wrapped around the monster's neck like snakes, then a dagger sliced its neck open. As the dead Bugaboo collapsed, the sight of Tong Chai wielding the bloodied dagger was revealed.

It was like transferring aggro to and fro. When their rear became noisy, the monsters chasing after Seol had to stop and hesitate. On top of this, the arrows continuously flying in were enough to delay the Bugaboos, even if it was only for a second. Some of the arrows even managed to land in the monsters' weak spots and disabled them from continuing on.

Now that Leorda was helping out, while Tong Chai cut the number of enemy archers down, Seol stopped retreating up the hill, changed his grip on the spear shaft, and reverted from defending to attacking.

He rapidly took care of the blindly rushing pair of monsters with 'Thrust' and 'Strike', then went to town with the ones looking back in confusion. By the time he got back to the bottom of the hill, he managed to further kill two.

SFX for a monster's loud roar

It was at this point in time that the leader Bugaboo stopped observing in silence and stepped forward. It took aim at Seol, loudly roared out in anger, and raised its massive mace up high into the sky. It was understandably p*ssed off, seeing that over half of its subordinates were cut down in no time at all.

‘Should I dodge this?’ (Seol)

Even if it was Seol, he had no confidence of completely defending against this attack.

The monster’s mace descended violently enough to blow away the dust on the ground. In the following moments, just as Seol prepared to retreat, a dark shadow leapt in front of him.

Boom!

A thunderous metallic noise exploded out.

“Phu-euhp!” (Hao Win)

Hao Win wielding a large steel shield gritted his teeth as his feet slid on the ground. Seol quickly propped him up and opened his mouth.

“I was going to dodge that.” (Seol)

“And I’m trying to block it for you. Oopsie!” (Hao Win)

Hao Win shoved the mace away with his shield and retreated with Seol in tow.

“That d*mn Priest is always slow with his spells, you see.” (Hao Win)

Seol wondered what Hao Win was on about, but then, a semi-circular barrier with them in the centre suddenly materialised. The leader Bugaboo powerfully slammed its mace on this barrier, but other than it trembling violently for a bit, nothing else happened.

“Oh, well. His Magic Power must be pretty high, since the barrier is useful and all.” (Hao Win)

“Didn’t a few monsters go over to that side?” (Seol)

“I took care of them. But thanks to that, I kinda got held up before coming here to help you.” (Hao Win)

The leader Bugaboo and its ten-plus underlings surrounded the semi-transparent barrier. It was unknown how long this magical defense would last, so they needed to

do something about it. However, Hao Win seemed to be rather relaxed.

“In any case, aren’t you really amazing? How many did you take care of by yourself? Fourteen? Fifteen?” (Hao Win)

“It’s fourteen. Aren’t we in the middle of a battle?” (Seol)

“No need to sweat it. It’s about time our Miss Joker makes her entrance.” (Hao Win)

Hao Win pointed at the other hill. Seol could just about catch the glimpse of Odelette Delphine, currently decked out in a blue robe. She also happened to be aiming her wooden staff at the leader Bugaboo.

“*Ahbarh – Ahba – Ahbaritia.*” (Odellete Delphine)

Seol heard a loud buzzing noise. And at the same time, a sizzling ball of flames struck the head of the leader Bugaboo.

SFX for a monster’s surprised, pained roar

SFX for flames erupting

The flames caught on the monster’s fur and spread out quite rapidly. The leader dropped the mace to the ground, covered its face, and began rolling around on the ground like a madman.

“Take care of that big guy! We’ll take care of the rest of the small fries!” (Hao Win)

The protective barrier was still in place. Staying behind in the safe space, Seol began wildly stabbing the leader Bugaboo that was rolling around in pain. By the time the barrier became visibly thinner, there were several dozen bloody holes on the monster’s body.

There were other monsters still left, but their ranks had been broken into disorder a long time ago. Leorda continuously shot arrows with his bow, while Tong Chai went around silently with his dagger; Hao Win, too, was concentrating on relentlessly attacking his enemies as well.

For Seol, this first cooperative battle proved to be…

'…Easy.' (Seol)

It might have been a bit tough in the beginning while trying to aggro the monsters, but by enduring, things got progressively easier as time passed by. If he were alone, he'd never ever be able to clear this mission, no matter how hard he tried. Also, he thought that, if the composition of the team was off by just a little, this mission would've been a lot harder. This battle proved to him why a Sorcerer was valued so highly.

"You all worked hard!" (Odelette Delphine)

Right after the last creature fell, Delphine raised her hand from the hill over yonder and called out.

"A Sorcerer is really something else, isn't it?" (Seol)

When Seol spoke in an admiring tone, Delphine stopped jumping up and down in delight and tilted her head to the side. From her perspective, all she did was to cast two spells while receiving absolute protection. And she couldn't help but feel that he was being sarcastic, since he had not only blocked the combined attacks of the monster group, but also managed to eliminate almost half of them, too.

However, she became slightly abashed soon after realising that Seol was being sincere.

"Since you Warriors protected me, things were definitely easier." (Odelette Delphine)

Delphine humbly replied.

"So? How was it?" (Hao Win)

Hao Win shook the blood off his sword and excitedly asked.

"Playing with a team ain't bad, am I right?" (Hao Win)

Seol smiled in reply.

[You've successfully completed a 'Very Hard' difficulty mission!]
[1,667 Survival Points have been accredited to you.]
[Current SP: 1,847]

Chapter 34
The Golden Commandment

After entering Odelette Delphine's team, Seol's daily life had entered what one might call a period of stability. No, should it be more like, he was now on the right track?

In any case, he managed to pay off his debt in just two days. Clearing the 'Ambush' mission once paid out 1,667 SP, so by clearing it ten times, he was able to pay back the 15,000 points and still have lots left over. Even after all that, there were still five 'Very Hard' missions left to go.

What the team tried their hands next was a mission called 'Arrive at the destination within a soundless environment', and it gave out 20,000 points as reward. Clearing it just once netted Seol 3,334 points.

Now that the debt had been paid off, Seol was able to get lost in the fun of cooperative battles as well as the joy of amassing a lot of Survival Points, without a single worry.

Yun Seo-Rah's recovery was just as trouble-free. Like what Maria said earlier, simply by eating well and resting well, and with the added effect of Seol's quarters, her physical fitness level returned to normal in no time at all.

Only blight was that Seol couldn't help but be cognisant of her being uncomfortable around him.

There was this one incident not too long ago; when he returned to his room, he found it to be utterly spotless. The shelves were all neatly arranged, mirrors shone and reflected light brilliantly, and the toilet sparkled blindingly, too.

Seol dazedly looked around, only to spot Yun Seo-Rah sweating profusely while mopping the floor on all fours. Of course, he was quite shocked by this sight. Not only could he not figure out why she was cleaning the place, she was also in the middle of her recovery, too.

He hurriedly ran up to her and snatched the mop away, and asked her what on earth she was doing instead of resting. She only lowered her head in silence as her reply.

On another occasion, he returned after clearing a mission only to find Yun Seo-Rah missing from his room. And on top of the bed, he spotted four neatly-folded papers.

The contents of those letters started off with the expression of her gratitude as well as her apology for causing him so much trouble; they were so profoundly heartfelt and touching, he almost cried reading them. And the passage about the "debt being hers and hers alone, so she needs to pay it off herself" sounded especially grimly resolute.

Thinking to himself, *She wouldn't,* Seol went out to look for her, and ended up nearly falling over in fright after finding her bravely stalking towards Hao Win on the first floor. Which meant, he had to go through the event of picking up and carrying away the struggling Yun Seo-Rah.

It wasn't only that, though. Just taking care of Yun Seo-Rah alone was already headache-inducing, yet the Yi siblings went around causing problems as well. Seol found them loitering around in front of the noticeboard, apparently hoping to pay off the debt by themselves, so Seol had to bring them back with force, too.

'This can't go on.' (Seol)

Seeing that Yun Seo-Rah's condition had recovered fully, Seol thought that he should move on to the next step. No, he had no choice but to do that.

Seol only said he wanted to have a chat with them, yet the siblings were kneeling on the ground right in front of him. Yun Seo-Rah, who had been cautiously reading the mood from the side until then, also silently bent her knees and got down, too.

He told them to sit more comfortably, but they didn't budge. Judging from the way they continued to stare at the floor, they must've understood what they had done wrong. Seol spat out a lengthy groan.

"Just what were you thinking?" (Seol)

"B, but…" (Yi Surl-Ah)

"But?" (Seol)

"That man, Hao Win…" (Yi Surl-Ah)

"I told you, he's a good person. He's friendly, and… No, wait. Fine. Let's hear it. What

about Mister Hao Win? Did he say something else to you?" (Seol)

Yi Surl-Ah mumbled helplessly.

"I… overheard… by chance…" (Yi Surl-Ah)

"Okay, heard what exactly?" (Seol)

"That, well, he is a… He's really a gang member from Hong Kong's Triads. The biggest in the Chinese underground, no less…" (Yi Surl-Ah)

If there was one thing Seol came to realise about himself recently, he seemed to have developed a strange habit of glaring at the ceiling when something dismayed him or caused a sense of dumbfoundedness.

So, he stared at the ceiling of his room for a while, before shoving a cigarette between his lips.

"Yeah, sure. He's a Triads boss. Right." (Seol)

He more or less understood where the Yi girl was coming from. He too had a preconceived notion about Agnes and Hao Win when he initially heard of their affiliations. Most likely, they were really terrifying people. But, at least judging from what Seol knew, Hao Win was a man with a pleasingly outgoing personality.

"Okay, let's say he is. So what?" (Seol)

"H, hyung, we…" (Yi Sung-Jin)

"I know. I know that you want to help out somehow. It's a commendable idea, but I'm asking you again. What were you even thinking, looking at the noticeboard like that? Don't you know that all the missions up to 'Slightly Easy' difficulty have been exhausted?" (Seol)

They couldn't reply. They couldn't say anything even if they had ten mouths.

"Is it because of the debt? I've already took care of that. No, I'm in the middle of amassing points at the moment. The reason why I'm still doing missions with them is because I also need their strength. I can never clear 'Very Hard' missions by myself." (Seol)

"……"

"If you really want to help, then become stronger. Haven't you realised that you guys doing whatever you want is actually making my life really difficult instead?" (Seol)

"……"

"You guys don't have weapons. No armour. Not to forget, your Jobs aren't even in high demand, either. You literally have nothing, yet you want to tackle missions? You think 'Normal' difficulty missions are a cakewalk?" (Seol)

"We're sorry…" (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-Ah whimpered out an apology in a really tiny voice. It was her first time seeing *orabeo-nim* get so angry at them. Rather than feeling unhappy after receiving his scolding, she could only remain apologetic here, though. She very well knew that his anger stemmed from him being worried about her and her brother losing their lives.

Seeing their dispirited looks, Seol's anger cooled down a tad. If it were any other time, they might have raised a huge fuss, saying stuff about doing everything they can to show their gratitude and all…

'No, hang on.' (Seol)

Even then, a wrong deed was still a wrong deed.

"…Listen to me. I borrowed 15,000 points in total. That was for me to buy the necessary equipment so I could attempt clearing the Very Hard missions along with that man's team. In other words, I too have received help from Mister Hao Win." (Seol)

"Yes…"

"So, this is what's going to happen to you three. I'll lend my points to you. I'll train you too." (Seol)

"?"

"I'm telling you to become stronger." (Seol)

If they wanted to help him, they needed to become stronger, without a doubt. Flipping

that around, he was telling them that they were too weak to be of any help right now.

“You all understand that you’ve fallen far behind everyone else even if you start right away, right?” (Seol)

All three nodded their heads in sync.

“There’s no need to get depressed, though. Depending on what you do during the remaining time period, you can catch up to the rest, or even surpass them.” (Seol)

“R, really?” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“Only if you do as I say.” (Seol)

He wasn’t making an empty claim. It was an undeniable fact that Yun Seo-Rah and the Yi siblings were far behind everyone else. Even after receiving their Jobs, nothing had changed from the day they entered the Neutral Zone. To be more specific, they lacked the necessary points, so they couldn’t buy anything, including abilities.

However, Seol found that to be their advantage, instead.

Agnes once told him, *I do not recommend buying Applications from the stores.*

There was an old saying, a dangerous situation could also become one’s opportunity.

“You all know about the effects of this room, right?” (Seol)

“Yes, it’s a room only given to the first place ranker…” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“Right. And, take these.” (Seol)

Seol placed three vials in front of the kneeling trio. Yi Surl-Ah’s eyes widened instantly.

They were bottles of Competence.

They also happened to be the most expensive potions available in the regular stores. Not as good as the VIP store’s special Competence, they nevertheless still boasted four times the effect to any training done.

“It’s not going to be easy.” (Seol)

Seol told them in no uncertain tone.

“You will have to train really, really hard. I will help out, obviously, but once we start, it’ll be very harsh… It’s the same for you too, Miss Yun Seo-Rah.” (Seol)

Seol stopped looking at the siblings and shifted his gaze over to Yun Seo-Rah as he spoke. She froze mid-action of trying to open the stopper off the vial.

“Will it really be alright?” (Yun Seo-Rah)

She sounded much more determined than before.

“There is something I’ve realised after entering a party.” (Seol)

Seol replied.

“There are a lot of amazing people to be found inside the Neutral Zone.” (Seol)

Simple determination would never be adequate in this place.

“Mister Tong Chai, Leorda Salvatore, Odelette Delphine, Hao Win… Also, Mister Hao Win came here after years of preparation on Earth.” (Seol)

Seol did not want an answer that was neither here nor there.

“While you, Miss Yun Seo-Rah, couldn’t do anything for the past two months, these talented people poured in their best efforts to become stronger.” (Seol)

If she were to do this, she needed to do this properly. If not, she might as well give up now.

That was what Seol was implying.

“Honestly…” (Yun Seo-Rah)

Yun Seo-Rah’s voice was small as she spoke.

“I have no confidence of surpassing them as I am right now.” (Yun Seo-Rah)

But, for the first time ever, the woman who remained ever so quiet until now, so much

so that her presence sometimes couldn't even be sensed…

"But, even if it's late, I want to catch up to them." (Yun Seo-Rah)

…Revealed what was on her mind.

"I wish to become stronger." (Yun Seo-Rah)

…And, revealed her simple wish.

That was all he needed.

Yun Seo-Rah unhesitatingly drank the vial. Same for Yi Surl-Ah and her brother, Yi Sung-Jin.

Seol watched the Yi girl's cheeks puff up, before she swallowed the liquid down her throat. A sly grin emerged on his lips.

"You just entered the ranks of doped athletes, you know that?" (Seol)

"P, please don't say that…" (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-Ah blushed deeply.

Seol got up from his spot. The effects of the Competence would only last for 12 hours. Even a minute, a second, was too precious to waste.

Seol activated 'Nine Eyes' and spoke up.

"Yi Sung-Jin, you need to raise your fitness level first. Go down to the first floor, and find the 'Running No. 4' mission among the Basic difficulty. Start doing that until you collapse." (Seol)

"U, until I collapse?!" (Yi Sung-Jin)

"There's no helping it. There isn't enough time left, until you have to start doing the real missions, you know. When you're finished, come to the third floor gym." (Seol)

"Yes. I will!" (Yi Sung-Jin)

Yi Sung-Jin hurriedly ran out of the room. Seol took the remaining two women and, before heading to the third floor gym himself, sought out a certain maid.

“A… training, you say?” (Agnes)

Agnes tilted her head slightly.

“Hmm, I wonder. You’ll still be behind everyone even if you start doing the missions now…” (Agnes)

Hearing her rather unconvinced tone of voice, Seol quickly added his own.

“They haven’t bought any abilities from the stores. I believe they still have a chance.” (Seol)

“Not buying from the store through choice and being unable to buy because of the circumstances are not the same, Mister Seol.” (Agnes)

“I’m going to help them as well. They will continue to stay in my quarters, and I will make them use the same items that aid in the natural recovery that I’ve used.” (Seol)

“Mm.”

“I’ll also make them drink two bottles of the regular Competence a day. And I shall provide them with the necessary points to buy equipments, as well. Will it be still impossible?” (Seol)

“If you’re willing to do that much, then the story certainly changes a great deal.” (Agnes)

Finally, Agnes seemed to show a positive reaction.

“Will you help us out?” (Seol)

“I might be able to, but…” (Agnes)

Agnes cocked an eyebrow and swept her penetrating gaze over the two women.

“Have you fully explained my training methods to them yet?” (Agnes)

“Of course.” (Seol)

“In that case, I understand. Since it’s your personal request, I shall do my utmost best. However, if they decide to give up halfway, I shall not stop them.” (Agnes)

Agnes’s role within the Neutral Zone was a trainer, an instructor. If someone wanted to train under her, she wasn’t going to refuse outright. It’s just that, no one wanted to in the first place…

Seol paid for the usage of the gym and gathered his hands while watching the two girls follow in after Agnes. He was praying for their happiness in afterlife.

Well, Agnes was known as the Sicilia’s demonic instructor, after all.

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The merciless training regime commenced.

On the first day, both Yi Surl-Ah and Yi Sung-Jin broke down and cried.

The maid named Agnes whipped them and pushed them hard like a devil.

Even Yun Seo-Rah had to shed a small tear.

However, although she cried a little because of the toughness of the training, the biggest reason had to do with the sheer joy of it all.

It was tough, but she also enjoyed it. It was as if she was finally doing something meaningful – as if, things were finally, finally clicking into gear.

As she had already experienced nearly falling into pits of hell, she was indescribably happy from the joy a fulfilling day provided her with. It was as if she was living in a dream everyday.

And so, such dream-like days began changing her little by little, day after day.

[The personality trait, ‘Cool-headed’ has been created.]

She regained her lost personality, and…

[The personality trait, ‘Despairing’ has been removed.]

…Not only that, her desire to give up disappeared. Also…

[The personality trait, ‘Indifferent’ has been removed.]

…Also, she developed an interest in someone.

“……”

Late at night, while everyone else was asleep.

After returning from another day’s arduous training, Yun Seo-Rah lay on the bed but her eyes remained wide open and blinking nonstop.

Although her body was fatigued, sleep wasn’t forthcoming.

Like a habit, she sneaked a glance at a certain someone. And she stared at the youth lying on the floor to sleep silently and continuously.

He was the guy who never forgot to give her the Competence in the mornings and the afternoons.

He was the guy who brought along a few items and said that they would help with strengthening her body’s natural recovery rate.

He was the guy who never forgot to encourage her, saying that they would go and do the missions together as soon as she finished the training.

Although it was hard to understand why he sometimes slyly suggested that she should utter the words 'teddy bear' to Agnes, but regardless, he was…

'Someone I'm grateful to.' (Yun Seo-Rah)

Thanks to his generosity, she could rest in his quarters where even a short period of break would wash away all the fatigue.

On top of that, she didn't have worry about starving ever again, getting to fill her tummy with delicious food, instead.

From a certain point on, she began accepting his gestures of goodwill. The uncomfortable awkwardness gradually disappeared, and at the same time, the sense of gratitude grew larger and larger.

However…

'Why is he helping us?' (Yun Seo-Rah)

That was the last unanswered question burning a hole in her head.

Was it because he pitied them? Or sympathised with them?

Or, could it be…

'Because he's interested in me…?' (Yun Seo-Rah)

It was then, an unknown type of bashfulness assaulted her in full. No matter how hard she reasoned, it didn't make sense. She began chewing on her lower lip. Shaking her head while inwardly crying out, 'I don't know anymore!' was just an added bonus.

'…Seol-*nim*.' (Yun Seo-Rah)

Again, she began staring at the youth. Staring at one thing continuously might've been boring for some, but she never once took her eyes off him.

Eventually, she did close her eyes as the dawn approached, but her consciousness still refused the embrace of sleep.

…No, that wasn't strictly correct.

In reality, she was afraid of falling asleep.

She was afraid of waking back up on the fifth floor.

She was afraid of waking up and finding those three foreigners.

Whenever that happened, she desperately tried to recall a certain moment from that day.

"…*Are you alright?*"

She recalled the hand of Seol outstretched towards her.

She recalled that short memory deeply imprinted in her brain.

If she concentrated on that moment, before noticing it, she'd fall into a deep slumber. Usually, that had been the case.

'…This is a big problem.' (Yun Seo-Rah)

But, for some reason, she couldn't fall asleep tonight, no matter what. She tossed and turned on the bed for a little while longer, before eventually deciding to get up.

Ever so carefully, she took each step so others wouldn't wake up. Soon, she stood before the deeply snoozing Seol and gazed at him. A strange glint flashed by her eyes as she slowly directed her gaze lower down from his face.

'His hand.' (Yun Seo-Rah)

As soon as Yun Seo-Rah discovered his right hand, she lowered herself as if she was in trance. She then got down to the floor on all fours. She crawled like that to her new destination.

Just before she collided with his hand, she stopped. She closed her eyes and cautiously placed her nose against his palm.

Sniff.

A small noise leaked out as she took a sniff, and sure enough, she detected his scent. The scent coming from his hand.

Sniff, sniff.

Now that she got going, she ended up sniffing for the second and the third time.

She realised that she shouldn't be doing this. Yet, like an addict, she couldn't stop.

For Yun Seo-Rah, who could fall asleep only by recalling the events of that day for the past few nights, this was one temptation she could not win against.

'It's nice. Nice… ' (Yun Seo-Rah)

Seeing that the youth showed no signs of waking up, her actions became even bolder.

She placed her head on his palm and slowly moved it this way and that, then she even rubbed her cheek against his skin. His palm was large enough to hide her smallish face.

'It's… warm… ' (Yun Seo-Rah)

Sensing the comfort and security his large hand gave her, Yun Seo-Rah's eyes eventually grew heavy. Not too long after, a soft but regular breathing pattern emerged from her nose.

That night…

Seol had a dream.

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'…A dream?' (Seol)

Is this one of those lucid dreams, I wonder? mused Seol inwardly as he surveyed his new surroundings.

The scenery of his dream was quite breathtaking. He saw a beautiful small hill covered in a refreshing green hue and several different animals playing on it.

There was a bear, sitting on top of the hill and enjoying the gentle breeze; a squirrel darting through the branches of a tree; a deer drinking water from a stream…

While he spectated this scene, Seol's eyes landed on a particular animal that attracted his attention the most.

'Oh?'

It was a pig. Not only that, a small and very pink piglet, its body so plump and adorably cute.

'It's really small… Is it a newly born?' (Seol)

Seol found the way it slept while leaning against the grass incredibly cute, so he cautiously approached it. He wanted to take a closer look.

SFX for a piglet's steady breaths

Seeing it breathing out so softly like that, his entire body quivered in emotions.

In the end, he couldn't control himself any longer and gently poked the pinkish and squidgy body of the piglet with his index finger.

!!

The piglet's eyes shot open abruptly, and it hurriedly got back up to stare at Seol.

Kyu?

'TOO CUTE!' (Seol)

Seol screamed inwardly. When he slowly sat down on the ground, the piglet began retreating while carrying a scared, tearful expression.

'Nonono, come here, here. I'm not gonna hurt you.' (Seol)

Seol presented his right hand, causing the animal to lightly flinch and stop retreating away from him. Then, the piglet stared at his open palm.

'Come here… ' (Seol)

The piglet hesitated, before trotting closer to his position.

‘There, there.’ (Seol)

Seeing the animal lightly brush his palm with the flat of its nose, a grin automatically formed on his lips. When he carefully brushed its back, the piglet’s small tail began wagging, too.

‘Should just I keep it?’ (Seol)

Just as Seol was sincerely considering this, he noticed that something had changed.

‘Gold colour?’ (Seol)

The piglet’s pinkish hue of before had been replaced by a blinding gold colour, instead.

Kyu!

The piglet, while emitting the brilliant golden light from its body, raised one of its front paws at him – as if it was asking him to hug the creature.

‘Oh, oh, oh!!’ (Seol)

Seol, of course, hurriedly picked it up and hugged it. Yet it remained docile. He couldn’t hide his joy.

Well, there was that old saying, wasn’t there – that, among all types of dreams, ones with pigs were the best out there? And even more so, since the little piggy was gold, this dream must’ve been a really good one.

‘It’s mine.’ (Seol)

Seol smiled in satisfaction and tightly embraced the piglet squirming and digging in deeper into his arms.

‘I’ll never let go.’ (Seol)

Chapter 35
To Paradise (1)

When Seol opened his eyes in the wee hours of the morning, he fell into a state of panic.

He got to experience a thoroughly wonderful dream, yet ended up being roused from sleep by something slightly weighty pressing down on his chest. By the time he spotted Yun Seo-Rah sleeping soundly within his arms, a short cry of fright escaped from his mouth.

'How can a girl do this when we've done nothing but talk a few times?!' (Seol)

His thoughts bubbled up chaotically, but then, he realised that his own arms were hugging her tightly as well. For some reason… he thought her body felt rather comfortably warm.

"**SFX for Seol grunting as he tries to push Yun Seo-Rah off*"

When he tried to forcibly pry her off of him, Yun Seo-Rah simply…

"Mm-hmm……"

…Dug in even deeper into his arms and buried her head in his chest.

'There, there, little one. Daddy's here, so don't you worry about a thing… Eh?' (Seol)

Seol belatedly realised that he'd been patting her back and hastily removed his hand.

What am I even doing?! Seol dazedly looked down at the smiling face of Yun Seo-Rah as she rubbed her cheeks against him.

'…Could this be because of her unruly sleeping habits?' (Seol)

Even though he was panicking inwardly, he still managed to lift her up ever so gently and carried her back to the bed. When he placed the duvet on her, he spotted Yi Surl-

Ah lying alongside on the bed. The teen girl's limbs were spreadeagled as she enjoyed the sweetness of a deep, deep slumber. Only then did Seol figure out what happened here.

'Ah. So she was forced off the bed all thanks to Yi Surl-Ah's terrible sleeping habits, huh.' (Seol)

Yi Surl-Ah must've kicked around a lot, since her top was bunched up enough to expose most of her tummy. Seol chuckled softly, lowered her shirt, and covered her with the blanket as well. Seeing her giggle as she continued to slumber away, she must've been having a nice dream.

'I guess I should sleep a little further away from them tonight.' (Seol)

Although it was an unintentional mistake, he still did something he shouldn't have. If Yu Seon-Hwah found out what happened, just how saddened would she be?

"…Tsk." (Seol)

Almost immediately, he realised how wrong he was regarding that matter. Their relationship was already over a long time ago. It was only Seol who couldn't let go and forget about her.

'Is Seon-Hwah doing well, I wonder?' (Seol)

As Seol headed to the adjoining bathroom, his shoulders began slumping forward, feeling slightly depressed.

On the following dawn…

"……"

Seol woke up, only to be utterly dismayed by his new discovery.

He thought his chest felt heavy and opened his eyes, and sure enough, he found Yun Seo-Rah hugging him from the top. He couldn't help but wonder how she could've gotten here, since he was sleeping a fair distance away from the bed.

More importantly, he was sleeping on a couch. So, if she was forced off the bed and rolled on the floor to arrive where he was, it was still impossible to climb up and settle

down on top of him.

'…Is she sleepwalking?!' (Seol)

Suddenly growing fearful of Yun Seo-Rah, Seol slowly wiggled out from her embrace and got away from her.

'I have to find a safer place to sleep later on today… ' (Seol)

And so, Seol made up his mind as such.

When bedtime came later that day, Seol headed off to the bathroom. Since his room was already an excellent place to begin with, even the bathroom was spacious and more than comfortable enough to sleep in. Most importantly, there was a lock on the glass door, so as long as he locked it, no one could come in.

Next morning.

Seol was finally able to start the day as how it should be. Locking the door must've done the trick, since Yun Seo-Rah was not sleeping on top of him this time.

'I should start sleeping here from today onwards.' (Seol)

Well, it didn't really matter if he was in a bathroom. It was so big and clean, anyways. Also, as an added bonus, he could splash some water and wash his face as soon as waking up, too.

While grinning widely, Seol raised his body. He relaxedly stretched his limbs, and his gaze drifted towards the glass panel of the bathroom door.

"@%#$?!" (Seol)

…And he ended up grandly crying out in fright.

"Wha, what, what the, what the hell?!" (Seol)

Because, Yun Seo-Rah was glaring at Seol while sticking to the glass like a piece of gum. With her eyes completely bloodshot, to boot.

✧✧✧

Two weeks flew by as if it was nothing after the training commenced.

“We’ll take a ten-minute break.” (Agnes)

As soon as Agnes gave out her permission, several noises of people falling on their butts resounded out within the third floor gym. While looking at Yi Surl-Ah massaging her aching thighs, the maid-c*m-instructor fell into a deep thought, stroking her chin in the process.

‘She’s better than I expected.’ (Agnes)

At first, Agnes thought of this assignment as a nice little diversion to while away some free time, but gradually, her opinion changed.

Yi Surl-Ah’s nature suited the role of an Archer perfectly. Maybe because she used to compete in track & field events, she was fleet of foot and possessed a really high level of concentration.

More importantly, Yi Surl-Ah was quick-witted enough to pick up on things as soon as they were taught to her. The Archer class required one to be proficient in many different skill sets; in that regard, the compatibility between her and this Job seemed to be near perfect.

‘I do not know who invited her, but we definitely found a gem.’ (Agnes)

If she was nurtured well, then she could potentially break past the upper levels in the future.

Ending her evaluation there, Agnes then shifted her gaze over to Yun Seo-Rah, currently bent over and panting out heavily to the side.

‘As for her… I can’t be sure.’ (Agnes)

Agnes was uncertain. Not in a bad way, but definitely in a very good way. She could figure out how Yi Surl-Ah might turn out in the future, but it was almost impossible to even imagine what Yun Seo-Rah might achieve.

In other words, the depth of Yun Seo-Rah’s dormant potential was unfathomably deep.

Agnes dared not to pass a haphazard evaluation.

'Her physical fitness level increased surprisingly quickly. But her talents are even better.' (Agnes)

Perhaps, she could even reach the highest level out there, Agnes's thoughts came to a halt there, and a wry smile formed on her lips. She was getting ahead of herself; it was already quite difficult to reach the so-called upper levels, so the highest levels were not something most people could reach.

"Instructor?" (Yi Sung-Jin)

The voice of a young boy pulled Agnes out from her thoughts. She shifted her gaze over to him. Yi Sung-Jin was looking up at her while his entire body was soaked in sweat.

"Yes? What is it?" (Agnes)

"Uhm… Just what is 'Teddy Bear'?" (Yi Sung-Jin)

"……"

Agnes sucked in a deep breath, somehow calming herself down in the nick of time.

"I wonder. I'm not quite sure what you're talking about." (Agnes)

"Really? But, that's so strange. Seol *hyung* definitely said…" (Yi Sung-Jin)

When Yi Sung-Jin muttered to himself, Agnes's eyes became super-sharp.

"What is strange?" (Agnes)

"Oh, that. Seol hyung told me that if I say 'Teddy Bear' to you, you'll find it really funny." (Agnes)

Suddenly, the nearly inaudible sound of gnashing teeth leaked out from Agnes's mouth. Even Yun Seo-Rah and Yi Surl-Ah were looking on at the maid with curious expressions etched on their faces. They too heard something similar from Seol before.

"Uh? But, I heard it's supposed to be 'lilac', instead?" (Yi Surl-Ah)

“I heard it was ‘Little Bear’…?” (Yun Seo-Rah)

Even though the person in question was present, they nevertheless unwittingly went through with the public execution.

“…There is no need to waste your time on such nonsensical rubbish.” (Agnes)

Agnes replied without batting an eyelid because, in her mind, she had already murdered Seol several dozen times over.

“By an chance, do you know where *he* is right now?” (Agnes)

“You mean, hyung? He should be in the middle of clearing missions with his team.” (Yi Sung-Jin)

“I see. Well, I’ll have a little talk with him later on. In the meantime, let us continue with your training.” (Agnes)

Agnes spoke while cracking her knuckles. Yi Sung-Jin tilted his head in confusion while getting back up.

And, in the evening.

Three of them…

“I!!” (Agnes)

POW!!

“Told you to!!” (Agnes)

“Ouch?! M, Miss Agnes?! W, wait a minute!” (Seol)

“Do it!! In moderation!! (Agnes)

“Euhurk?! M, Miss Agnes!!” (Seol)

“Because of you!! The Alias!! In my Status Window!!” (Agnes)

“Ouch!! Help!!” (Seol)

“Have you!! Any idea!! How it’s!! Changed?!” (Agnes)

“S, stop!! I’m sorry!!” (Seol)

…Got to spectate Seol getting grandly beaten up by Agnes after she came to *visit* them late that night.

✧✧✧

Around the time when the trio almost finished with the fitness training as well as familiarising themselves to their individual Job-related abilities and Magical Power applications…

Agnes suggested that they should train in the mornings and perform missions in the afternoons from here onwards. From her perspective, they weren’t fully ready, although she did her best to train them as much as possible during the shortest time she was given.

However, Seol diligently supported them with things like Competence and other supplements, so they were ready in that regard. Just as important, they also had to clear missions and get used to how they operated quickly as well. Overall, Agnes wasn’t completely happy about a couple of things, but then again, she knew very well that experiencing actual combat formed an important part of training.

Seol bought the trio proper equipment on that day. He was planning to not spend more than 10,000 points on each of them, but unfortunately, he ended up running into Aragaki Yuzuha again at the store. And like a scary vampire, she sucked away the upper limit of 30,000 points in the blink of an eye. If he thought about the 30% discount, then he just ended up buying 43,000 points worth of stuff from her.

Yi Surl-Ah was rejoicing like a little kid that just got her first proper party dress. Yun Seo-Rah found the armours worn in the world of Paradise somewhat strange and unfamiliar, so she kept looking at herself. She even lightly swung her longsword around, and Seol couldn’t help but praise how proficient she looked doing that.

Even though the amount of points that could have bought him an Elixir disappeared just like that, Seol didn’t regret it. No, he was feeling rather liberated, instead.

‘I guess this is enough of me supporting them.’ (Seol)

Agnes made sure the trio received enough training, so now, all he had to do was to be there when they were attempting to clear the missions.

However, since his aim wasn't to earn points for clearing the missions but to simply help them, he was planning to do 'Normal' difficulty missions maybe three, four times together with them. He believed that should be plenty enough for the trio to get used to the combat situations. He was also pretty sure of the talent scout Kim Hahn-Nah mentioned before not being too happy about Seol following around his find and spoon-feeding Yun Seo-Rah and Co.

'Yeah, it's about time they start learning how to take care of business by themselves… Mm?' (Seol)

Seol was about to suggest to the trio that they should go check out some missions, but then, felt that something was off.

When he took a look around, he found a certain Oriental woman staring at the trio from a fair distance away. However, her gaze was not friendly at all.

'Who is she? And why is she…?' (Seol)

Although Seol couldn't remember her face, she also seemed kind of familiar. No, he thought he could just about barely recall who she could be.

Seol stared at her for a long, long time, before inexplicably remembering what Han the Guide said many moons ago.

"*…It was easy to calculate Miss Oh Min-Young's points…*"

'Ah.'

Seol finally remembered who she was. That woman passed the Tutorial after procuring enough coins right at the end of the treasure hunt.

Not only was she still alive, it seemed that she had successfully cleared quite a few missions as well, judging from all that gear on her.

But, Seol couldn't really understand why she was glaring at the blameless trio like that.

Not too long after, the woman turned around to leave. Seol activated Nine Eyes and

couldn't help but frown slightly. Oh Min-Young was glowing in the yellow hue.

'Should I let her be?' (Seol)

Seol deliberated, before slowly shaking his head. It could have been nothing, but nonetheless, he remained worried. Back then, wasn't Kahng Seok also glowing in the yellowish hue? At a bare minimum, some preparation might be in order, he figured.

Seol helped each of the trio to complete their first missions, and then, unbeknownst to everyone, called Hyun Sahng-Min over for a chat.

✧✧✧

[Breakthrough (Remaining number of attempts: 10/10)]
Break through the attacks of a Sprite, cross a bridge, and secure a bridgehead!
Difficulty: Very Hard
When successful: +60,000 SP
When unsuccessful: Death
*Cooperation possible (up to 6 people)

After Seol joined her team, Delphine and her teammates were able to cleanly sweep away every mission they encountered. Eventually, they decided to take on the most challenging mission available within 'Very Hard' difficulty. And, for the first time, they almost ended up losing one of their numbers.

A Sprite was a demonic fairy-like humanoid creature that was covered in a dress made out of grass. It was about half as tall as an adult human female, with several pairs of dragonfly-like wings coming out from its back.

Its outer appearance was quite stunningly beautiful, but as soon as the battle commenced, the team got to experience firsthand how plainly cruel and sinister this creature was.

One of the most irritating things about this monster was that it did not reveal its form and poured out long distance attacks non-stop from the other side of the bridge.

Three, four such attacks wouldn't have gotten on the team's nerves as much. However,

projectiles resembling bolts and arrows rained down on the team constantly, and to make matters worse, the Sprite even knew how to cast a wind magic that was almost a carbon copy of the tornado spell Delphine used every now and then. Hell, this abominable thing even used javelins as projectiles by launching them off several ballistas.

And to confound the matters even further, several obstacles and blockades were placed on top of the bridge itself in a zigzag pattern, making it even more infuriating to traverse it.

They chose to go with the tactic where they relied on the protection provided by Priest's Barrier and inched forward, while getting rid of the obstacles on the bridge one at a time.

However, in the middle of doing exactly that, the Barrier shattered, bringing forth a dangerous situation for the team. Hao Win was ready for this eventuality, so he used his massive shield to guard the others, but he got swept away and fell down after the Sprite used that aforementioned powerful wind magic.

Seol and Tong Chai stepped forward to rescue Hao Win, while Leorda Salvatore speedily brought up the rear. The latter man's aim was to divert aggro the three men ahead of him had attracted, even if it was only by a little bit. He was also thinking of sniping the enemy across the bridge if he found an opening as well.

Leorda used his amazing agility to climb over obstacles, only for a long javelin to fly out of a ballista and lodge itself in his stomach. By this time, Seol had successfully pulled Hao Win out of immediate danger and was free; the youth quickly rushed over and dragged the grievously wounded Leorda into safety.

Leorda's injury was quite serious; the whites of his eyes were showing as his body shook hard from the shock. Delphine poured a vial of very expensive healing potion she bought just in case on his wounds. If it weren't for his two layers of armour absorbing some of the force, even the healing magic of the Priest wouldn't have been enough to save his life.

Things seemed to have reached a stalemate of sorts, but then, quite unexpectedly, Seol found a path to victory – he used the spell balls he'd been saving for a rainy day. The first one he used was 'Poison Fog'; out of six remaining balls, he threw three of them at the opposing camp, and sure enough, a big commotion rose up from there.

And that short opening was their first and only opportunity to act. The team quickly checked their gear and made a run for it, and somehow crossed the bridge just in the nick of time.

It was a battle where they got lucky since no one considered the possibility that the Sprite could be weak against poison-type attacks.

Leorda gritted his teeth as he ran over to the coughing and wheezing Sprite, keeled over next to a small ballista.

While grabbing the creature, he asked the others to delay the completion of the mission for a minute or two, so he could get his revenge. Then, he proceeded to tie the creature up tightly on the ballista.

While watching Leorda slap around the cheeks of the monster, then do a several angry roundhouse kick to its belly, Seol was overcome with a strange sense of deja vu.

“Godd*mn it. We almost got done in, didn’t we?” (Hao Win)

Hao Win walked with a limp as he plopped down next to Seol.

“We got careless; our preparation wasn’t enough.” (Odelette Delphine)

Odelette Delphine’s expression was also dark.

“Right. We thought we were ready with what we had since there wasn’t much info provided on the mission, but hell, reality nearly proved to be anything but.” (Hao Win)

“I think it’s better for me to learn a couple of defensive spells, just in case. I thought it’d be enough for me to invest in attack magic spells only since we have a Priest among us…” (Odelette Delphine)

Delphine’s shoulders shrunk. She still couldn’t forget the sight of her flames from the fire magic she worked so hard to cast scatter away so easily by the Sprite’s wind magic.

“That might be a good idea. Casting Barriers in turn could make our lives a little bit more easier.” (Hao Win)

Hao Win agreed with her assessment.

“I should swap all my armours to metal ones, while we’re at it. Since I’ve got enough points to burn, I might as well get a couple of larger and stronger shields, too.” (Hao Win)

“You want to buy two shields?” (Seol)

“Well, there’s no helping it. I mean, the main objective of this mission is to cross this bridge as safely as possible, after all.” (Hao Win)

What Hao Win said made certain sense; the Sprite was quite strong when it came to long distance attacks, but the battle itself became more or less manageable once the team got close enough to the monster.

“Indeed. Crossing the bridge was nonsensically difficult, but in reality, we only have to make sure that Seol gets to the other side safe and sound, am I wrong?” (Tong Chai)

“But, that might not be the case, though. I think the reason why the close quarters fight ended up being easier than expected could be due to the poison.” (Odelette Delphine)

At Tong Chai’s agreement, Odelette Delphine raised her counterpoint.

“Hmm… Do you have anymore of those spell balls left?” (Hao Win)

“I have three remaining, but none of them are Poison Fog.” (Seol)

Seol shook his head regretfully.

“That means, there’s another thing I gotta worry about now. And, I can only learn a poison-type spell when I reach level 2, you know…” (Odelette Delphine)

Delphine spoke in a worried voice, before licking her lips.

“For now, let’s end today’s mission here. Let’s sufficiently strengthen ourselves at the stores and try this again tomorrow. Since now we know what to expect, it won’t be hard to figure out what to get for ourselves, no?” (Hao Win)

In the middle of the team discussing changes to their battle tactic, a loud scream exploded out behind them. The tied-up Sprite was shrieking out and desperately putting up a struggle. Seeing this, Tong Chai raised his hand to cheer Leorda on.

“More! Show that thing who’s the boss!” (Tong Chai)

“Don’t you worry! I’ll definitely make her suffer!!” (Leorda)

Leorda shouted out while not even bothering to look back, before proceeding to rip the wings of the Sprite in quite a violent manner. Seol thought that he must be incensed about almost getting killed, even now.

“Okay, cool. Great. Well, let’s end our self-reflection around here.” (Hao Win)

Hao Win cleared his throat with a fake cough and began grinning slightly while looking at Seol.

“Your friend, how is it going nowadays?” (Hao Win)

Seol was in the middle of wondering what he should buy next and was caught off guard. His eyes widened in confusion.

“Oh, my, my, my. Why are you playing possum all of a sudden? Leorda might take his sweet time over there, so, in the meantime, why not tell us what happened so far? How far have you gone?” (Hao Win)

“How far did I go where now?” (Seol)

“You’re now pretending to not understand me? Look here, my man. As a person who aided you, I have every right to hear the progress made in your current state of romantic affairs.” (Hao Win)

“My romantic affairs… By any chance, are you talking about Miss Yun Seo-Rah?” (Seol)

“That’s right! That lass!” (Hao Win)

Hao Win grinned in a lewd and suspicious manner as he puckered his lips.

“So, like, at a bare minimum, you’ve already done *slurpppp*~, right?” (Hao Win)

“S, slurp…?! You mean, a k, kiss?” (Seol)

“*Aigoo*, would you listen to this thick-headed guy?” (Hao Win)

Hao Win spat out a groan, and then…

"That is *smooch*~, and I'm talking about *slurppp*~. *Slurppp*~*!!*" (Hao Win)

…Then, he pointed at Odelette Delphine's boobs and spoke, before going 'Ohh!'

"Ahh, could it be that you're not into them 'rolling hills'? Then, maybe, you're more into the succulent 'delta', instead? So, is it more like, *chomp, chomp, glug, glug*?" (Hao Win)

When Hao Win began swirling his tongue around in a clearly lewd manner, Seol hurriedly covered the older man's mouth and sneaked a glance over at Odelette Delphine. There was every reason to think that she'd find this whole conversation displeasing.

"What are you guys talking about? What is it? Please let me in on it!" (Odelette Delphine)

However, the serious girl of a few moments ago was nowhere to be seen now, after she reverted back to being a sparkly-eyed teenager.

"M, Miss Delphine…" (Seol)

"I might not look it, but I'm pretty quick on the uptake, you know. So please hurry up with the story!" (Odelette Delphine)

Delphine dragged her b**t closer to sit near Seol and Hao Win.

Seol smacked his lips. Actually, he was worried about a couple of things and wouldn't mind discussing them with others.

"The thing is… Miss Yun Seo-Rah became a bit strange ever since that afternoon…" (Seol)

"How so?" (Hao Win)

"This one time, I woke up in the morning to find her sleeping in my arms." (Seol)

"Keuh!"

Hao Win let out an exclamation of admiration.

“And so? What happened next?” (Odelette Delphine)

Odelette Delphine snorted in excitement.

“I thought it was just her strange sleeping habit, so I took her back to her bed.” (Seol)

“What the hell? What’s the matter with you? A man should know when to push someone down!” (Hao Win)

“He’s right, you know? I also don’t like a vanilla guy.” (Odelette Delphine)

“N, no. That’s not it… *Cough.* In any case, I slept on the couch the following evening. Then, I woke up to find her sleeping soundly on top of me…” (Seol)

“Yup, it’s happening. It’s definitely happening.” (Hao Win)

“Don’t tell me you put her back in her bed again. If you did so, I’m gonna go around telling everyone that you’re gay.” (Odelette Delphine)

‘What’s the matter with these two?!’ (Seol)

What with them adding unnecessary ‘cheers’ every time he tried to say something, Seol was rapidly losing his motivation to talk. He even thought he was a fool, trying to discuss his worries with these people.

“It’s like a romance novel!” (Tong Chai)

Tong Chai exploded in a fit of loud laughter.

“I guess it does sound like that.” (Seol)

Seol grinned slightly, thinking to himself that at least he found someone who was more or less normal.

“And so? What happened next?” (Tong Chai)

“Pardon?” (Seol)

“Why are you trying to mumble your way out of this one? You started telling us the story, so naturally, you should get to the end.” (Tong Chai)

‘Even this guy… ’ (Seol)

Seol stared at Tong Chai with a pair of totally dumbfounded eyes, prompting the latter man to issue a long sigh.

“Really now. You truly know how to build up anticipation, don’t you? Fine, I understand. I’ll pay.” (Tong Chai)

“?”

“You should be honoured, because I’ve never spent my own dime on something like this.” (Tong Chai)

Before Seol could ask Tong Chai what he was talking about, the youth was interrupted by an alert announcing that 100 Survival Points had been accredited to his tally.

“I’m sure that’s enough, no? Well, then. Please, I’m anxious to find out what happened next, so tell us. It is a lot more interesting than I thought at first.” (Tong Chai)

“……Mister Tong Chai. I gotta ask, why did you give me your points?” (Seol)

When he was asked, Tong Chai removed his turban and nonchalantly replied.

“Mm? Weren’t you implying just now that, if we want to hear the rest of the story, we have to purchase the next chapter?” (Tong Chai)

“……”

Seol forgot what he wanted to say.

Chapter 36
To Paradise (2)

Yi Surl-Ah, Yi Sung-Jin, and Yun Seo-Rah.

The three of them were deeply engrossed in clearing missions lately. The deadline of the Neutral Zone closing down was fast approaching, that was why.

Since they needed 1000 Survival Points in order to enter the Paradise, it was not much of a stretch to say that the trio spent almost half of their day near the first floor noticeboard in order to accumulate the necessary amount.

Of course, Seol already told them that they shouldn't 'worry even if unable to amass 1000 points', but the three of them couldn't feel happy or content about their current circumstances.

It wasn't simply because they felt ashamed, though. As time passed, they began to realise the lengths Seol went to support them from behind, and the amount required to do so.

The most obvious proof was with them equipped from head to toe with expensive gear. Even though not much time remained until the end of the deadline, only around 30% of the survivors managed to buy a full set of matching armours. Just from this fact alone, the three of them became acutely aware of their advantageous position compared to other people.

So, the issue was with them learning how to survive on their own, rather than their pride, instead. Seol had done so much for them already, so if they failed to even earn 1000 points on their own, then they definitely lacked qualifications to be treated as a 'survivor' in this place. At a bare minimum, they wanted to prove that they were eligible to enter the Paradise on their own strength.

'I did it!' (Yi Surl-Ah)

After successfully completing a 'Normal' difficulty mission by herself, Yi Surl-Ah rejoiced wholeheartedly in front of the noticeboard. In reality, her being able to clear

such a mission alone wouldn't be seen as too big of an achievement at this point in time by other people.

However, considering how long ago it was when she started doing the missions, the rate of her growth was indeed explosive. On her first mission, she couldn't even pull back the strings of her bow properly out of sheer nervousness.

'Would he praise me?' (Yi Surl-Ah)

A smile bloomed on her face as she recalled the face of her *orabeo*-nim who constantly encouraged her to be more brave, assuring her that she was capable of doing this, and always taking the time to teach her things step by step, even though he should be feeling frustrated by her by now.

'This is fun.' (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-Ah began looking at the noticeboard with an innocent smile on her face.

Since much higher number of 'Normal' difficulty missions were made available initially compared to others, one could still find quite a few parchments left available on the board. Granted, there were only around six, seven attempts remaining per mission, but nevertheless, she planned to do them for a couple more times to work up some more courage and tackle 'Slightly Hard' missions later on.

'Let's go with this one.' (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-Ah finally ended her happy dilemma and reached out to a mission parchment, only for…

"Oh, my, look who it is? Been a while, hasn't it?"

…Only for her hand to come to a stop when a voice suddenly called out to her. An unfamiliar Oriental woman was standing behind Yi Surl-Ah even before anyone noticed it, her eyes narrowed to a slit like a venomous snake.

"Who… Ah." (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-Ah stuttered for a bit, before letting out a small exclamation. Although she failed to remember, she still thought that she recognised who this woman might be. Right at the end of the Tutorial, didn't she see this person on the rooftop?

“You’re from… the same Area as me, yes?” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“I see. I remember who you are so well, though.”

“Really?” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“Yeah. Weren’t you that kid who tried to show off and ended up as the first to get killed? Back in the assembly hall, I mean.”

The snide tone of the woman’s voice made Yi Surl-Ah’s expression to harden like a rock.

“You don’t know who I am, right?”

“M, my memory isn’t that good, you see.” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“Sure, that must be the case. Anyways. it’s nice to make your acquaintance. Name’s Oh Min-Young.”

“Y, yes. How do you do.” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-Ah’s complexion was clouded as she politely greeted back. This woman, Oh Min-Young, was not even bothering to disguise her antagonistic attitude present in her voice and in the way she glared at the girl.

“The deadline is fast approaching, so, have you earned enough points now?” (Oh Min-Young)

“No, not yet.” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“Really? You haven’t even amassed 1000 points yet?” (Oh Min-Young)

“Yes…” (Yi Surl-Ah)

As a matter of fact, Yi Surl-Ah was panicking slightly after sensing the woman’s intense malice towards her.

Oh Min-Young crossed her arms across her chest and swept her eyes over Yi Surl-Ah.

Perhaps to focus on mobility, Yi Surl-Ah’s outer wear consisted of a jacket made out of

flexible leather, while underneath that, one could spy a small chain mail-like armour reflecting the silvery light.

Her pants too looked like it was made out of high-quality leather; on her waist, a black belt with a Main-gauche attached loosely. And on her back, an impressive recurve bow and a quiver full of arrows…

Even at a conservative estimation, they must've totalled around 14,000 points. Oh Min-Young had tried to get some decent equipment for herself as well, so she immediately realised that, even if she sold everything she had on her, she still wouldn't be able to afford one defensive item on this girl's body.

"I guess things are working out for you nowadays." (Oh Min-Young)

"……"

"You don't mind if I take a look, right?" (Oh Min-Young)

Oh Min-Young took large strides and came closer, before reaching towards Yi Surl-Ah without permission. Taken by surprise, the latter tried to back away, but by then, her bow was already in the older female's hands.

"Uh, uh?" (Yi Surl-Ah)

"Wow. Yeah, I guess expensive things are the best, after all. How much was it?" (Oh Min-Young)

"I, I'm not sure? It can't be that much?" (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-Ah barely managed to force out an answer.

"Is that so?" (Oh Min-Young)

Oh Min-Young surveyed her surroundings for a bit, before a suspicious grin formed on her lips.

"In that case, how about giving me this bow?" (Oh Min-Young)

"……Ah?" (Yi Surl-Ah)

“You said it can’t be that much, didn’t you? Oh, no. I didn’t mean it as for free. You gimme this, then I’ll also help you out. Know what I mean?” (Oh Min-Young)

“N, no. I don’t need it. Thank you.” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“Don’t be like that. Didn’t you say you need to gather Survival Points? If you join my team, I’m pretty sure you’ll amass the amount really fast.” (Oh Min-Young)

Oh Min-Young pointed behind her back with her thumb. There were three Western men sitting by one of the lounge tables, looking on with what could be best interpreted as ‘interested’ expressions. One of them even grinned slyly and waved his hand at Yi Surl-Ah.

The truth was, the ones who attacked Yun Seo-Rah was these three. Of course, Yi Surl-Ah didn’t know this. However, she still sensed an unknown feeling of anxiety and wanted to leave as soon as possible.

“P, please, give it back.” (Yi Surl-Ah)

The restless Yi Surl-Ah reached out and grabbed her bow, trying to pull it back. Oh Min-Young strengthened her grip in response.

“What are you doing? Didn’t I say I’ll help you?” (Oh Min-Young)

“I don’t need it. Please give it back.” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“Okay, fine! I’ll – hey, I said, I’ll give it back!?” (Oh Min-Young)

When Yi Surl-Ah yanked hard, Oh Min-Young nearly toppled over from the force. The latter woman couldn’t hide her astonishment. She underestimated the younger girl’s physical strength, and ended up losing the bow before she could do anything about it.

“You……” (Oh Min-Young)

“I’ll be leaving now. Take care.” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Look at this cheeky little…? Thought Oh Min-Young, figurative flames erupting out from her eyes as she looked at Yi Surl-Ah’s departing back. Undisguised jealousy burned vividly in her eyes.

“Hey, you. How much do you charge each time?” (Oh Min-Young)

Her loud shout forced Yi Surl-Ah’s steps to come to an abrupt halt. She spun around so fast, her hair fluttered in the air. She began biting her lower lip.

“…What are you talking about?” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“You know, just. Kinda curious.” (Oh Min-Young)

Oh Min-Young mockingly smiled while speaking up.

“Someone like you, how much do you charge each time? 100 points? 200?” (Oh Min-Young)

“Wha, what did you say?!” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-Ah couldn’t help but suspect her own hearing just then.

“Just how many times did you do him, for that guy to buy you all these cool armours and stuff? Mm?” (Oh Min-Young)

At that undisguised attempt to ridicule her, Yi Surl-Ah’s eyes widened in shock.

“My *orabeo*-nim isn’t like that!” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“Ohhh, sure thing. What a f*cking joke. You think I don’t know that you live in the same place with him?” (Oh Min-Young)

“Why are you acting like this?” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-Ah’s anger shot up and her voice became shrill. Tears pooled on the edges of her eyes, seemingly to reflect the unfairness of this treatment.

They didn’t even know each other. Not only here in the Neutral Zone, but even back in the Tutorial, they didn’t even share a single word until this moment. Naturally, Yi Surl-Ah couldn’t understand why this woman was being so hostile to her.

“I told you, didn’t I? I want to help you. What’s the matter? You don’t want my help?” (Oh Min-Young)

“I don’t need your help!” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“Will you look at this little girl? How dare you raise your voice at me?” (Oh Min-Young)

At Oh Min-Young’s signal, the three men watching on from the lounge stood up. Sensing the mood had rapidly turned for the worse, Yi Surl-Ah began retreating step by step.

“This *unni* is going to teach you an easy way to earn points.” (Oh Min-Young)

“I, I don’t need it.” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“Aren’t you worried about making enough points in time? Don’t worry. Those guys give out lots of them.” (Oh Min-Young)

Hearing Oh Min-Young’s insidious words, Yi Surl-Ah’s expression became even more unsightly.

‘Why?’ (Yi Surl-Ah)

She hadn’t done anything to this woman, yet why…?

“There’s no need for you to act all innocent and like, you know? It’s too late for that.” (Oh Min-Young)

Yi Surl-Ah finally had enough of Oh Min-Young’s venom and was about to make her escape from there. But, then…

“You know, maybe you should stop *introducing* yourself. Don’t you agree?”

Suddenly, a man intruded in the middle of the two women. While Yi Surl-Ah got surprised by who it was, Oh Min-Young was frowning rather unhappily at this new development.

Because, he was the man who loved to wear a pair of sunglasses indoors as well as to put on a green baseball cap backwards – Hyun Sahng-Min.

Oh Min-Young began gritting her teeth.

“You…”

“Kyah. I wondered what was up after hearing a dog barking out loudly over here. Who would’ve guessed that it really was an actual b*tch?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“What did you just say?!” (Oh Min-Young)

“Ohh, my bad. My bad. You’re still a human being, so comparing you to an animal is unfair.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min raised his hands defensively and his expression showed he was genuinely sorry.

“So, if I remember correctly, your actual nickname was…” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

He then smoothly took his sunglasses off.

“…Was 10 points, right?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Tremble.

Oh Min-Young’s body trembled and she tried her very best to look composed.

“You should watch what you say, if you don’t want to end up as a bloody mess.” (Oh Min-Young)

“Oh, is that right?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min sneaked a glance at the lounge and sniggered dismissively.

“If you’re b*tching around here because of those three chumps… How about you looking over this way?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Oh Min-Young’s gaze followed his pointing chin, and she had to nervously swallow her saliva. Because, there was a group of four men glaring at her direction.

“You see, you ain’t the only one with friends around here… Oopsie, you aren’t a friend to those three. Is it more like a pet dog?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“Shut your mouth.” (Oh Min-Young)

Oh Min-Young glared at Hyun Sahng-Min with murderous eyes.

“I don’t want to see that disgusting face of yours, so get lost, you son of a b*tch.” (Oh Min-Young)

“But, I don’t wanna. Besides, you’re also a b*tch, aren’t you?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min cackled and dismissed her threats nonchalantly, before lightly tapping on the shoulder of Yi Surl-Ah.

“You are really, really envious of this girl, aren’t you?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“…N, no. Not really.” (Oh Min-Young)

Oh Min-Young flinched, her eyes opening up wider in a somewhat strange manner.

“I’m not envious of her at all! Why should I be envious of a girl who sells her body for some measly points?” (Oh Min-Young)

Although she tried to look composed, her voice was clearly trembling. On the other hand, Hyun Sahng-Min was completely relaxed.

“I told you, stop *introducing* yourself. You know she hasn’t done that and that’s why you’re being so b*tchy about it~~, no?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

‘What is he talking about this time?’ (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-Ah listened to this exchange while feeling anxious, before finally figuring it out. Her frown became even deeper as a result.

“Someone has to shake her a*s off the whole day long just to survive, yet here’s someone else who doesn’t have to~~.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

When Hyun Sahng-Min mocked her in a teasing tone of a voice…

“Shut. Up.” (Oh Min-Young)

Her voice thickly laden with murderous intention leaked out of her mouth. Too bad, Hyun Sahng-Min wasn’t going to stop just because of that.

“I’m sure you were a lot happier when this girl and her brother, as well as Yun Seo-Rah, were struggling to survive, right? You probably spied on them everyday and

consoled yourself, didn't you? While feeling a sense of pathetic superiority over them, thinking that at least you're better off than they were." (Hyun Sahng-Min)

"Y, you crazy son of a b*tch! When did I ever do that? Are you mentally ill?" (Oh Min-Young)

"You probably were hoping too, right? Like, waiting for the day these three would fall to the rock bottom just like you. It was you who gave those three the idea to *do* that, wasn't it?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

It was then, the dumbfounded Yi Surl-Ah's complexion darkened even further.

*"Yes. Seriously now... Don't know who hit her, but that person sure did a f*cking wonderful number on her."*

…Could it have been?

Yi Surl-Ah clenched her fists tightly without realising it and stared at the venomously-glaring Oh Min-Young.

"But, what will you do now? One day you run into them, and lo and behold, they are all living happily~ ever after! They are eating nice food, they are training so diligently, and even kitted out in such a great set of equipment, to boot! So, how can a bundle of inferiority complex such as yourself not feel the pangs of vicious jealousy stabbing at your heart?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

"I said, shut your godd*mn mouth, you son of a b*tch!!!" (Oh Min-Young)

Oh Min-Young screamed out that sounded almost like a plea. Her bloodshot eyes opened wide as if her eyelids were being torn open by her anguish.

"Just whose fault was it?!" (Oh Min-Young)

"Huh?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

"You, you made me like this!! Why did you only help them out? Why didn't you do the same for me?! I also struggled!! I, I too desperately fought and scratched and clawed my way to here!!" (Oh Min-Young)

She began babbling out almost incoherently now. Hearing this, Hyun Sahng-Min

snorted derisively.

“You should take a really good look at yourself first. Who would want to help you when you’re this b*tchy?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“What?! When did I ever wronged you?!” (Oh Min-Young)

“Your wrongs? There are quite a few, actually.” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“Y, you…?!” (Oh Min-Young)

Oh Min-Young spun around angrily towards the direction of the new voice, only to flinch rather grandly after seeing who it was – a woman wearing a white robe, her arms crossed against her chest, with a disdainful smirk etched on her lips.

“I helped you to get to the second floor, only for you to fall for that b*stard Kahng Seok’s schemes.” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

The identity of the woman who swept her bob-cut hair back was none other than Shin Sahng-Ah.

“Maybe the story might have been different, if you tried to press the door release button like Sung-Jin did. So, just who was the one that abandoned me behind to rot in the darkened corridor as if you couldn’t care any less? Mm?” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

After hearing her voice thickly laden with criticism and sarcasm, all Oh Min-Young could do was to move her lips up and down without making a sound.

“And that wasn’t all, right? Remember what happened on the fourth floor?” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“T, that was…” (Oh Min-Young)

“Oh, and let’s not forget, it wasn’t as if you gave away that Revival medicine for free like how Miss Yun Seo-Rah did, either.” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

Shin Sahng-Ah spat on the floor in an exaggerated manner and began grinning again.

“You’ve done nothing so far, figuratively speaking, yet you want us to help you?” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

“You… You…!” (Oh Min-Young)

Surrounded from all sides and verbally assaulted without a chance to say something, Oh Min-Young suddenly broke down and began sobbing. She crumpled to the floor and wailed out in pure sorrow.

However, Shin Sahng-Ah coldly glared on while not caring whether the woman cried or not. She did tear her stare away when shadows loomed near, though; the three men by the lounge finally came closer after noticing that things were not moving as they expected them to.

“Why don’t you guys stop there?”

A guy with a huge physique in the middle raised his voice and intervened.

“From what I heard, this whole thing amounts to nothing much at all, anyway. So, is there a need to raise such a fuss?”

“Sure, it’s nothing much. I just showed up here ‘cuz a mutt was making too much noise, that’s all. Since the owner showed up now, hopefully it’ll get more peaceful around here.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min retorted sarcastically, causing the big guy’s expression to crumple in anger.

“I know who you are. I suggest you better watch your mouth.”

“I guess it’s the case of ‘like the owner, like the dog’, eh. Why the f*ck you losers can’t stop talking about my mouth all the time?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“You wish to die pretty badly, I see.”

“You wanna have a go? You feeling confident, then?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min lightly tapped the crossbow slung on his back. Meanwhile, the big guy took a slow but contemplative look around his surroundings. There were not only Hyun Sahng-Min’s team, but Shin Sahng-Ah’s team to worry about, too. The man realised he was at a numerical disadvantage.

“…You, I shall remember you.”

“Oh, my, gawd. Why don’t you also say ‘better watch your back’ while you’re at it?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“Don’t you dare think that every Bronze Mark is equal. We’ll see the day we enter the Paradise.”

“*Aigoo*~ I’m so scared~.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min shuddered and shrunk back, causing Shin Sahng-Ah to break out in a fit of giggles. The big man quietly glared at them both for a long while, before taking Oh Min-Hyung away and disappeared from the view.

At last, some peace and quiet had come and allowed Yi Surl-Ah to release her tightly-held breath.

“Ha-aaaaaah…”

This whole event was truly, completely, utterly outside her scope of expectations – she would’ve never guessed that Oh Min-Young harboured such an ill will. She thought that a raging storm blew by just now or some such.

A short silence flowed by, before Hyun Sahng-Min lightly tapped the drooping shoulders of Yi Surl-Ah.

“Hey, you okay?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“Ah, y, yes!” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-Ah nodded her head urgently.

“A good thing that I came around looking for you. I was going like, *Just maybe*, but whew, what a relief. Anyways, you gotta be careful, okay? Those three, they are bad people.” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“I… Thank you. Really.” (Yi Surl-Ah)

She bowed her waist deeply to express her gratitude. Hyun Sahng-Min simply waved his hand around.

“No need for that. After all, Seol asked me for this favour, you know.” (Hyun Sahng-

Min)

"*Orabeo*-nim did?" (Yi Surl-Ah)

"Yup. He told me that Oh Min-Young chick seemed a bit suspicious, and so, he asked me if I minded letting you and your brother tag along for a while. I said, sure, why not." (Hyun Sahng-Min)

"Really? He asked me to look after Miss Yun Seo-Rah, though," said Shin Sahng-Ah, as she swept her gaze around the first floor. Hyun Sahng-Min nodded his head as if he knew about it already.

"Well, in any case. You planning to take a short break? If not, why not try a Slightly Hard mission with me and my team later on? Along with your brother, of course." (Hyun Sahng-Min)

"C, can we really?" (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-Ah's face brightened in an instant. If she could enter Hyun Sahng-Min's team, she wouldn't have to worry about another incident like this happening again.

"Don't worry about it. I've already got the consent from my teammates. Besides, do I look like someone who'll do things for free?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

"Oh… it wasn't like that?" (Yi Surl-Ah)

"But, of course." (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min nodded his head as if to imply there was no need to even ask such an obvious question.

"For doing this favour…" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

He pulled out the packet of cigarette while grinning widely.

"Seol promised to help us with a Hard mission, you see!" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

✧✧✧

The end of the deadline for the Neutral Zone that initially seemed so distant, had arrived before long.

The greatest achievement Seol accomplished during that time was to sweep away every single 'Very Hard' mission with his team.

They might have struggled greatly when attempting the most difficult mission for the first time, but after making adequate preparations, they were able to clear the same mission again in a comparatively safer manner.

It wasn't as if they didn't encounter any close calls, but still, none of them were as serious as Leorda Salvatore receiving a mortal injury.

And so, with them performing that mission successfully for the tenth time, the noticeboard had become completely barren of all the mission parchments.

"Finally. It's over." (Tong Chai)

Tong Chai took off his turban and tossed it to the ground, looking as if a weight was lifted off his shoulders.

"There is still one more mission left, though…" (Odelette Delphine)

Odelette Delphine stared at the very last mission parchment stuck on the top of the board with a longing expression on her face.

"I'll say this beforehand. If you are planning to tackle that mission, I am definitely not participating." (Tong Chai)

"Agreed. That thing is pure madness." (Leorda Salvatore)

Tong Chai and Leorda hurriedly let their opinions known.

"But, but… There is that additional bonus, though…" (Odelette Delphine)

"I also am against it. No matter how tasty the rewards look, that mission isn't worth it. Delphine, we should know when to differentiate between reckless bravado and actual bravery." (Hao Win)

Even Hao Win came out with a resounding no. All Delphine could do was to pout unhappily in the end.

"…Oh, well. Yes, it does seem completely impossible to clear, no matter how many times I look at it." (Odelette Delphine)

Although she couldn't completely give up on it, but still, she had to raise both of her hands in surrender.

After that, the six of them shared short but bittersweet goodbyes. They had went through a month-long life-or-death struggles together, so their bond had become pretty solid as a result.

In other words, Seol had pretty much met and exceeded the demand of Kim Hahn-Nah, the one about making important friends in this place.

"I was able to earn a lot of points thanks to you." (Tong Chai)

Seol shook hands with Tong Chai…

"I won't ever forget that you saved my life. If you run into trouble, come find me by the Sicilia." (Leorda Salvatore)

Leorda Salvatore told him bluntly.

"Well, we'll be seeing each other tomorrow one more time anyways." (Odelette Delphine)

Odelette Delphine winked playfully at him…

"Love is an emotion, my man. Don't forget that." (Hao Win)

…And he bumped fists with Hao Win.

"And even now, no one asked me what my name was…"

The nameless (?) Priest carried a lonely smile as he left.

Now left alone, Seol shifted his gaze back to the noticeboard.

He looked at the ‘Impossible’ mission one more time.

Not only was the reward on offer an enormous tally of 172,800 points, there was also an additional reward as well, just as Delphine said.

‘The VIP store… ’

Although his greed was acting up again, Seol still shook his head in resignation. He heard that a mid-sized army made up of Earthlings Level 4 and above could just barely clear this mission, so there was no chance in hell that he could clear it by himself.

Seol immediately gave up and turned around to leave.

The Neutral Zone would close on tomorrow; perhaps because there were so many things to get ready, his room was in a bit of noisy chaos.

‘Organise everything in the bag first, take with me what I can, return the smartphone before I leave, and spend all the points beside 1000… ’ (Seol)

Thinking about his points tally, Seol became rather pleased with himself. His teammates invested most of theirs on better equipment and abilities, but he had not spent a single dime and continued to hoard them. All thanks to that, his current tally was the highest it’s ever been.

However, they’d all become worthless by this time tomorrow, so he had to spend them today.

While organising the contents of his bag, Seol continued to suppress the feeling of regret bubbling in his heart. He knew that mission was truly hopeless, yet the image of that parchment still danced in front of his eyes.

If he successfully cleared that mission, then he’d be able to buy that one item that was seemingly forever out of his reach.

Seol did almost everything in his willpower to shake off that distracting thought.

“Three spell balls, the quill pen of flowing consciousness…” (Seol)

SFX for something dropping to the ground

And as he was absorbed in organising the contents of the bag, something fell from it and issued a soft rustle.

Chapter 37
To Paradise (3)

'What's this?'

Seol stared at the piece of paper that had fallen on the shelf.

'Oh, that's right. I got that from one of the Necessary Boxes… '

He remembered receiving it as one of his starting bonuses. Honestly, he had completely forgotten all about it. At that time, he was far too stunned by the revelation regarding his Nine Eyes. And afterwards, the food he pilfered from the convenience store hid this paper away from his view and it languished at the bottom of the bag.

He couldn't help but feel a bit flabbergasted by the fact that he had completely, utterly forgotten about this little… *thing,* until now.

"Hey, Sung-Jin?" (Seol)

"Yes?" (Yi Sung-Jin)

Yi Sung-Jin raised his head and looked at Seol, after he stopped emptying the contents of his bag to the ground.

"What was your Mark's grade again?" (Seol)

"It's Bronze." (Yi Sung-Jin)

"That means, you got a Random Box, right? Back at the assembly hall." (Seol)

"Yes, I did get one." (Yi Sung-Jin)

"What came out from there?" (Seol)

"It was a paper talisman. Why? Is something the matter?" (Yi Sung-Jin)

The boy replied without hesitation.

“I’m kinda curious here, but uh, the magic spell you can use with a talisman, can it be anything you want?” (Seol)

“No, not really. Mine had ‘Bind’ written on it.” (Yi Sung-Jin)

Seol looked back at the paper talisman resting on the shelf and began frowning slightly. This scrap of paper in front of his eyes was… almost completely blank.

“Is it possible for you to show me your talisman? If you still have it on you, that is.” (Seol)

“Oh, that. My bad, but I already used it up back in the Tutorial… We ran into that Gaeg-gwi monster as soon as we came out of our hiding place, you see.” (Yi Sung-Jin)

Yi Sung-Jin scratched the back of his head apologetically.

“Hmm… Is there anyone who still has their talisman until now, I wonder?” (Seol)

“I’m sure that everyone has used theirs up by now. I mean, the Neutral Zone’s about to close, anyway.” (Yi Sung-Jin)

“Huh? What does that mean?” (Seol)

“Uh? Ohh…… Well, they were starting bonuses, right?” (Yi Sung-Jin)

“What are you even talking about?” (Seol)

When Seol asked back in surprise, Yi Sung-Jin showed how stunned he was in response. The boy’s face said that he didn’t expect the youth to have no clue like this. After all, every Invited should’ve known about what was going to happen already – unless one didn’t really pay attention to the explanations provided beforehand.

“Uhm… Yeah, think of it like our phones. You heard that we gotta return them before leaving the Neutral Zone, right?” (Yi Ji-Hyuk)

“Yeah, I did.” (Seol)

“It’s like that. Both the starting bonuses or the phones, we didn’t earn them through

our own strengths, right?" (Yi Sung-Jin)

"Okay." (Seol)

"Things like that, either we return them before the Zone closes, or they automatically disappear when we leave. The Neutral Zone is a special area connected to the Tutorial, so items from there can be used here. But, we can't take them with us to the Paradise." (Yi Sung-Jin)

"We can still take the armours and weapons with us, though? Heck, I was planning to take my spell balls with me, too." (Seol)

"Armours and weapons are bought with your own points, so they are excluded. And you got those spell balls yourself after finding the right amount of coins in the treasure hunt, right? I mean, they are different from the starting bonuses given away without us actually having done anything yet." (Yi Sung-Jin)

This was the first time Seol heard about any of this. His expression became complicated as he took a look at the paper talisman on the shelf.

"Like, for instance, if you did something by using the starting bonus, that's acknowledged as you having achieved it yourself. But the bonuses themselves won't be counted." (Yi Sung-Jin)

What the boy was saying was that, by tomorrow, this talisman would become useless. Gone forever.

"Wait a minute. Does that mean this bag too…?" (Seol)

Yi Sung-Jin nodded his head as if it was par for the course.

'I nearly ended up making a huge mistake, didn't I?' (Seol)

Seol hurriedly took out all the things he carefully stored in the bag.

In the meantime, he was regretting the fact that he hadn't gotten the chance to use this talisman. And at the same time, he got curious as well.

…[You've acquired a Paper Talisman]…

The announcement message definitely said he acquired a "paper talisman". But, unlike the spell balls, not a single piece of information was written on the talisman itself, not even what kind of spells it might be able to cast.

He didn't think of this item as useless junk, though. After all, it was one of the Gold Mark's starting bonuses. At least, its worth should be incomparably higher than the bonuses of the Silver and Bronze Marks.

'Wish I had a clue… '

Seol slowly fell deeper into his thoughts.

"Are you making fun of me? Was your experience during the Tutorial that unpleasant? Are you trying to completely rip it to shreds, is that it? Just how did you even know what that man would need in here……?!"

Then, he remembered Han growling in anger after seeing the Necessary Boxes back in the assembly hall. The Guide looked so relieved when Seol told him that his Status Windows got updated, instead.

[Scanning for the most 'needed item' during the current situation… Please wait.]

Next, he remembered the message that came after opening the first Necessary Box…

"But that guy, he didn't clear the mission in what you'd call a 'proper' fashion. He just got lucky, that's all."

…And, even Kim Hahn-Nah's advice, too.

'Could it be… '

As soon as that line of thought entered his head, Seol fell into a serious dilemma. He slowly fingered the nearly-blank paper talisman, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down.

"Anyways… What did you get for your starting bonu… Eh?" (Yi Sung-Jin)

Yi Sung-Jin's words came to a halt, along with his hands that also stopped emptying his bag. Because, Seol was nowhere to be seen anymore.

"……Hyung?" (Yi Sung-Jin)

✧✧✧

[Siege (Remaining number of attempts: 1/1)]
Within 48 hours, annihilate the race of Guardians protecting the "Sanctuary" and destroy this impenetrable fortress!
Difficulty: Impossible
When successful: +172,800 SP, a one-time use VIP store coupon (1 per person)
When unsuccessful: Death
*Cooperation possible: up to 6 people.

Seol came down to the first floor, and he stared long and hard at the parchment stuck at the very top of the noticeboard. The usually-noisy plaza was empty and quiet today, as if everyone else was too busy sorting out their luggage to loiter around here.

'There's even a time limit, too… '

Seol slowly swallowed his saliva, reached up, and carefully took the mission parchment off the board.

Right now, this paper was no longer glowing in red hue like before. No, it was now in an orangey hue, which was one grade lower – 'Do Not Approach'.

His uncertainty only lasted for a brief moment.

The colour of 'Immediate Retreat Recommended' was now no longer there and that gave Seol a sliver of confidence.

'There's a chance I can survive this.'

The high level of danger was still present, but still.

Someone once said thus – there would be a time in one's life when he either had to take a step back, or to take that challenge head-on.

He squeezed his trembling eyes shut. Fingers gripping the mission parchments grasped it even tighter.

And… *rip.*

Accompanied by the sound of the paper cleanly ripping in half, Seol disappeared from the plaza.

✧✧✧

The location he teleported to was in the middle of a dense forest.

'Where is this?'

Seol hastily surveyed his surroundings, only to have his jaw nearly hit the ground in shock, instead.

'C, crazy son of a b*tch!'

His eyes took in the majestic sight of a magnificent yet absolutely huge mountain range. The cliffs seemed so precipitous and stiff as if they were expertly cut and shaped by a heavenly carving knife; the highest peak couldn't even be seen, as it was shrouded by thick clouds.

Things got worse, though.

He also could spot countless structures and defensive walls built in and around the mountainside, and they all seemed incredibly sturdy to him, making him truly

appreciate the impossible nature of this mission.

'How can anyone clear this mission?!'

This was no longer a problem solvable by a measly group of six survivors – even a well-organised army would find it hard to conquer this place. Only now did Seol realise what Kim Hahn-Nah was trying to warn him about.

Seol did his best to rein in his wildly pounding heart and cautiously began walking forward. The actual distance to his destination wasn't far, as it turned out. Since he had no idea what might happen, he thought it'd be for the best if he closed the distance as much as possible before trying out the paper talisman.

But, when he got a bit closer than before, he had no choice but to come to a very sudden stop.

He left 'Nine Eyes' on since the Neutral Zone's first floor.

And thanks to that, he could see the colour of the mountain range change suddenly from its initial light red to…

…Deep, deep red.

And then…

'W, what the hell?'

…Finally, to jet black.

The formless pressure those cliffsides gave out after they all suddenly changed to jet-black colour was so overwhelming that, simply by looking at them, Seol instinctively took a step back in fear.

Swish!

It was then, a sharp whistling noise pierced past his ear. Seol had been taking several retreating steps, but came to a stand still when that happened. And when he carefully wiped his cheek, he found blood on his palm.

[What an insolent little human you are! Ohohoho!]

A high-pitched but rather alluring voice of a female suddenly rang around the air.

Seol quickly looked around his surroundings as confusion dyed his expression. He couldn't see or sense anything around him, yet… What just happened?

No, this wasn't the right time to dwell on such matters. The colour black signified that he should escape right away. One wrong move, and he'd be dead real quick.

He recovered his wits and hurriedly pulled the blank paper talisman out. And then…

[I can't tell what foolish thoughts led you to this place, but!]

…And then, without a shred of hesitation, he ripped it in half.

[You've used the Necessary Talisman.]
[…But! As a Guardian, I can not sit idly by and simply watch your insolence!]
[Scanning for the most 'needed spell' for the current situation… Please wait.]
[The punishment for intruding upon this holy site is your dea… What?]

The voice and the message continuously rang around in his ears. But then, eventually…

[The spell, Limited Area: A Big Earthquake, has been activated.] *(TL: the name of the spell was written in English in the raw.)*
[An earthquake measuring 12 in magnitude will commence within the designated area.]

Wuong, wuong, wuong, wuong!!!

A massive barrier suddenly formed between the spot Seol was standing on and the mountainside. Then, this barrier expanded even further and completely surrounded the entire mountain range in the blink of an eye, with a membrane much, much thicker than any barrier Seol had seen up until now.

[W, what do you think you're doing, human?!]

The voice became urgent as this unexpected event continued to unfold.

Unfortunately for the owner of the voice, the actual spell hadn't even begun yet.

SFX for a massive rumbling of the ground

An indescribably terrifying roar attacked Seol's hearing. It was so loud that he lost all his hearing right away.

It was as if tens of thousands of fault lines were colliding with one another. And subsequently, the earth split…

The ground cracked apart like spider webs, and the whole mountain range began trembling.

KABOOM!!

The earth broke apart and exploded upwards.

Seol could only describe what he saw like that.

[Kyaaaaahck!!]

Almost at the same time, a figure of a woman swiftly emerged from one of the trees trapped behind the barrier as her hair whipped about.

This was no longer on the level of a mountain slide or something similar – no, the entire mountain range itself was cracking apart and was collapsing from top to bottom while the ground exploded non-stop.

As he stood outside the barrier in safety, Seol couldn't really tell whether it was his eyesight twisting around or the actual mountain was being shredded into pieces. That was how absurdly scary the destructive force of the spell was.

[Euhark? Euahaaaarck!!!!]

The mountains and the ground undulated and broke apart over and over again, causing this figure of female to jump up and down like a madwoman. However, the

quaking became even harsher, even more violent than before, and soon enough, even her screamings disappeared as well.

Seol dazedly looked on, before powerlessly collapsing to the ground. Witnessing this spectacle unfold right before his eyes, a nearly insurmountable fear had taken hold of his mind. Him sitting there on his knees, looking on while completely unscathed, that felt like a lie.

In the end, he squeezed his eyes shut and covered his ears.

When a calamity of such an unprecedented, heaven-changing scale descended, it didn't take long for *everything* trapped within the barrier to be utterly annihilated into oblivion.

✧✧✧

[You have successfully cleared the 'Impossible' difficulty mission.]
[You have received one One-time use VIP coupon.]
[172,800 Survival Points have been accredited to you.]
[Current Survival Points: 477,997.]

When the kneeling Seol opened his eyes after hearing those alerts resound in his ears, he was already back in the first floor plaza.

"Whew-ahhh…"

Seol breathed out a sigh of relief as if he almost lost ten years of his life just now. His shocked heart was still pounding away madly. He remained on the ground, working hard to regulate his heavy and rough breathing.

'It's just a mission. Yeah, it was nothing more than just a simple mission… '

After managing to calm his fears, Seol finally noticed a small piece of paper resting on his chest. And it was the one-time use VIP store coupon. It was only then he realised that he had succeeded. The emotion of pure joy rushed in.

Seol clenched his fist tightly. He was uncertain and hesitant even when he was about

to rip the mission parchment in half, but now that he managed to clear it, he was being overwhelmed by this sense of unadulterated joy and satisfaction.

After confirming the amount of SP he had, Seol got up to leave.

His comrades constantly advised him to invest in new armours and stuff, but he doggedly saved all of his points. And since he had received the extra rewards, he just knew that he'd never be able to get a good night's rest from regret if he didn't spend a dime and ended up leaving the Neutral Zone tomorrow.

While carefully carrying the coupon, Seol quickly ran up the stairs. He pushed the door to the eighth floor VIP store and entered, only to find that there was another customer here.

"Uh? You also came?" (Odelette Delphine)

It was none other than Odelette Delphine.

"What did you come to buy? I want to get an Elixir, but apparently, there isn't one for Magic Power anymore." (Odelette Delphine)

Seol half-listened to Odelette Delphine's complaints while hurriedly browsing the item list.

5. Divine Elixirs: 30,000 SP each – Strength x1, Endurance x1, Agility x1, Stamina x2, Luck x2

He was the one who bought all the available Magic Power Elixirs, but one bottle each of Agility and Luck Elixirs were gone as well. Seol's team mates had purchased them. They did invest in their armours and equipment, but that didn't mean that some of them lacked enough wiggle rooms to invest another 30,000 points on buying up the Elixirs.

"Miss Delphine, are you planning to buy one of these Divine Elixirs?" (Seol)

"Pardon? Oh, no, not really~. I'm not gonna buy them." (Odelette Delphine)

"I understand. Uhm, hey miss? Give me every single Divine Elixir left in your inventory, please!" (Seol)

"……Eh?" (Odelette Delphine)

A stupid-sounding gasp escaped from Odelette Delphine's mouth after hearing Seol's bold purchasing decision. 210,000 points disappeared in one go, as seven vials of Divine Elixirs entered Seol's hands.

"And then…" (Seol)

While he was saving his points, he had already made up his mind on what he wanted to buy. He only bought the Elixirs simply because he now had lots more points to burn all of a sudden.

10. Psychi's Tears: 250,000 SP, x1

"Give me the Psychi's Tears as well!" (Seol)

"Euh-ehhhhh?!" (Odelette Delphine)

With that, another 250,000 points were gone.

Now, the real problem began. Well, he wasn't planning to earn that one-time use VIP store coupon, after all.

3. Moirai's Souvenir: 600,000 SP, x1
4. Miyal's Branding Iron: 100,000 SP, x1
5. The Divine Stigmata: 300,000 SP, x1
6. The Seed of the World Tree: 400,000 SP, x1
7. Aphrodite's Sedge: 150,000 SP each, x5

Seol didn't even bother to look at the items cheaper than 100,000 points. His eyes remained fixed on these five items as he deliberated on his choice for a long time.

'Oh my god, heaven help me… ' (Seol)

Every single one of them possessed heaven-defying effects. After some deliberation, he had to tearfully exclude Miyal's Branding Iron and Aphrodite's Sedge from his

choice and move on.

'Let's see. Moirai's Souvenir, The Divine Stigmata, and the Seed of the World Tree…… ' (Seol)

After thinking about it seemingly for an eternity, Seol finally made up his mind.

"Give me… the Divine Stigmata…" (Seol)

There was only one reason for his decision.

Both the Moirai's Souvenir and the Seed of the World Tree possessed an overall effect that seemed to benefit a group of people more. Meanwhile, the Divine Stigmata seemed more geared towards helping out one individual rather than many.

As soon as Seol presented the One-time use coupon, the eyes of the maid in charge of the VIP store and Odelette Delphine went extra round in shock.

"O, oh my goodness?!" (the maid)

"Uwaaaah?!" (Odelette Delphine)

"Can I use this?" (Seol)

Seol's question caused the dumbfounded maid to nod her head.

"Yes, yes, you can take anything you want with this… B, bu, but, how?" (the maid)

"Wha, what is this? This, isn't this that?! Right? You, did you clear that mission?! But, but! How did you do that?!" (Odelette Delphine)

Ignoring the two flustered females, Seol tightly grasped the marble that shone in a brilliant blue hue. Then, he turned around and quickly left the store. He ran to his next destination, the regular store that sold weapons. He feared that, if he remained in the VIP store for a second longer, he'd not be able to forget about the other two items.

The points still remaining: 17,997.

Seol could hear Odelette Delphine desperately calling out to him from behind, but he was unable to answer her, as his head was filled with a singular thought of getting rid

of the remaining Survival Points as quickly as possible.

He spotted a handful of survivors browsing through the wares in the weapons store. Discovering Aragaki Yuzuha not too far from him, Seol raised his hand high and called out to her.

“Over here!” (Seol)

“Yes?” (Yuzuha)

Yuzuha trotted over to his side unhurriedly.

“How much is the most expensive spear in this store?” (Seol)

“The most expensive one? Then it’s… we have a spear that costs 22,500 points, but for you, it’ll be 15,750. In any case, how can I help you?” (Yuzuha)

Unless one was talking about armours or items designed for Sorcerers and Priests, one wouldn’t find high-priced weapons reserved for Warriors costing more than what one might find in the VIP store.

“Give it to me.” (Seol)

“…Eh?” (Yuzuha)

“Give me that spear. I’m buying it.”

“Oh, oh my!! You’re sooo cool, Mister Survivor!!” (Yuzuha)

Since all sales commissions counted towards her achievements, there was no way Yuzuha would hesitate and waste time here. She rapidly brought out a spear that shone in the most arresting silver light one could imagine, and then, bent her waist 90 degrees in gratitude.

And out of the remaining 2197 points, Seol spent them all, bar the 1000 he needed to leave the Zone. Only then, his shopping spree came to an end.

“Euhehehehe…” (Seol)

Seol continuously giggled like a madman as he climbed up the stairs, before covering

his mouth in hurry. Even if he felt like he was on cloud nine, his laughter sounded way too stupid for his own liking.

He decided to save the Divine Elixirs for a rainy day. He was thinking that he should use them only after he ran into some kind of a bottleneck when trying to get physically stronger. Since he had plenty more room to grow as he was, using these Elixirs now seemed like the height of stupidity, instead.

'As for the Divine Stigmata, I can only use it when I get to a temple… '

But, the remaining item could be used right away, no problem.

What a nice timing, then, as the night had approached and it was now time to hit the sack, anyway.

Seol returned to his quarters and finished packing things up. He switched off all the lights and headed to the bathroom. After chasing away Yun Seo-Rah who was hiding at the bottom of the bathtub, he lied down on the tub himself.

He stared at the clear liquid swirling around inside the small vial for a little while, before pulling the stopper out to drink every last drop of it.

As soon as the refreshing sensation of the liquid tickling his throat registered in his brain, he was hit by a powerful urge to sleep, perhaps to signal that the effects were already manifesting themselves.

Seol's expression was one of pure happiness as his eyes slowly closed shut.

He had no idea in his wildest dreams what might happen tomorrow morning.

Chapter 38
Miss Foxy (1)

"Magic Power."

If one were to talk about this mysterious power, there would be literally no end to the conversation. However, if one were to define it in the simplest terms, then it could be called the 'unique gift'.

In a world where its main god had been devoured by the marauding invaders and filled to the brim with endless battles fought by all sorts of creatures – this mysterious energy called Magic Power provided the only form of defense for the human race who had fallen to the very bottom of the food chain.

Excluding one or two extreme cases, all humans generally possessed some amount of Magic Power. An individual's growth potential was dictated by one's inborn talents or bloodlines, but without a doubt, humans were born with this power existing inside them already.

Pretty much everyone who used this power 'professionally' would say the same thing: it'd be for the best if one started training their Magic Power as early in their lives as possible.

This advice wasn't simply meant to imply the fact that one's available amount of Magic Power would increase from the training. One would also get to train the pathways in their bodies where the Magic Power flowed, the aptly named 'Circuit', as well.

Someone born with a great deal of this energy needed to pay an extremely close attention when they started their training. There had been several cases where the fragile Circuits couldn't endure the circulation of the Magic Power and tore up, or if conditions worsened, even ended up getting destroyed completely.

Just as one would temper the steel repeatedly to remove impurities as much as possible, the 'Circuit' would also strengthen gradually as a manageable amount of Magic Power constantly flowed through the pathway. Thus, training oneself from early on was indeed the right call to make.

However, the situation Seol faced was quite complicated.

His powers manifested when he was extremely young. A small pathway gradually formed when he followed his instinct and used his new-found power. Never did he once receive proper training; he didn't even consciously realise that he'd been abusing his power repeatedly.

And the moment he lost his power proved to be a critical point in his life.

Although he'd been using his Magic Power almost subconsciously, he still did rely on it for almost 20 years. Inevitably, the amount of energy he could wield had grown by a lot. However, thanks to him suddenly abusing his power constantly, the Circuit that had been barely holding on, was pushed to the brink and ended up breaking apart.

Thanks to 'Future Vision', his body instinctively 'remembered' new pathways that could be used alternatively. That led to Seol recovering his powers, but still, his old Circuit remained broken.

The reason why Seol chose the 'Psychi's Tears' was because, after learning 'Magic Power Application', he regularly explored how the Circuit of his body operated while meditating and ended up discovering the broken pathway.

[Psychi's Tears]

The renowned alchemist of Scheherazade, Psychi.

He took pity on a woman whose body was ruined by disastrous Magic Power training when she was still a young child.

For this woman, whose body continued to wither with the passing of every single day, Psychi relentlessly pursued knowledge and researched for a way, so she could get to live the life that she yearned for.

He went on a long journey to procure all the ingredients for his elixir, and after conquering many arduous trials and tribulations, he was able to taste the fruits of success. However, when he returned to the city of Scheherazade, the woman he

devoted his entire life to had already passed on from this world.

Many influential men desired to possess the results of his incredible journey, yet Psychi simply chose to head to the holy temple where the remains of the woman rested. There, he shed tears of sorrow and prayed.

He prayed that, even though he'd never see her again, at least let her receive this final gift from him.

The god was moved by this pure love that forsook one's honour and wealth, and saw fit to name this offering as the Psychi's Tears.

And thus, the Psychi's Tears was born – the miraculous item that perhaps exemplifies the purest essence of what alchemy is. The item that contained all of the knowledge a man gained throughout his entire life, from his youth to his old age.

✧✧✧

"Mm…"

Seol's sight was blurry. He blinked several times, causing the pooled secretion there to glide off his face.

He could hear the wet, splashing noises every time he tried to move. It almost felt like he was wading in a puddle of water or thick mud. His entire body felt sticky and heavy. Seol cautiously pushed his upper body up from the bathtub, only to begin retching out urgently.

"Euuuph…!"

The bitter, acrid odour of dried blood and rotting stench of filth combined to assault his nose. Seol continued to vomit for a while, and after recovering, he noticed all the filthy secretion and excrement filling up the tub alongside him. A deep frown formed on his face.

There were rotting black blood filled with remnants of his peeled skin; sickly yellow liquid that could be either his sweat or puss; real, bona fide c**p; and finally, completely unidentifiable floating hardened pieces of *something*…

All these disgusting and smelly excrements were doing their best to throw a party inside the tub. There were so much of these "substances" in the tub, Seol could scarcely believe that they all came out of his own body.

'I made the right call, sleeping in the bathtub… '

Seol held his breath while opening the taps. The warm water rushed out and managed to dislodge the hardened excrement, slowly washing them away.

Seol decided that, might as well, he'd take a bath too. He had a feeling that, once he leaves the Neutral Zone, taking a warm bath like this would be a luxury he might not be able to afford in a long, long while. Also, he wanted to get rid of all the dirty things off him as soon as possible, too.

He proceeded to pour the bathing supplements that aided with one's natural recovery and dipped his body down in the warm water. He stayed there for over 30 minutes and scrubbed his whole body clean twice. Only then did he feel fully refreshed.

Seol felt a lot more satisfied after seeing his much-cleaner reflection in the mirror. Before long, though, he fell into quiet contemplation. Now that he got rid of all the disgusting things off of him, it was time to confirm the effects of the Psychi's Tears.

'Mm… '

He realised that the flow of his Magic Power became even more smoother. Even though he never felt the flow was slow to begin with, it was still akin to someone who used 3G finally moving to LTE and discovering a brand new world out there or some such.

Seol soon figured out the reason from checking out his Circuit. Not only his previously-broken pathway had been mended in full, the overall length of his Circuit had become far greater as well. Also, impurities blocking the pathway had been cleared away, which effectively meant that the overall width of the Circuit had increased several folds, too.

More importantly, since the amount that could flow through the Circuit increased, the vigour at which it flowed also strengthened in turn.

If he were to compare his previous flow of Magic Power to a cute little stream of water trickling out from a valley, now it was like a majestic river that snaked and raged around quite freely.

And indeed, he found it even easier to control his Magic Power. Goosebumps broke out from his skin after he realised how refreshing it felt as the energy spread around and enter even the tiniest acupuncture points all over his body.

From hereon, Seol would be able to output far more Magic Power than what his current stats alluded to.

[Your Status Window]
[4. Abilities]
3. Other abilities (1)
– Reinforced Circuit (Superior)

'Would being born again as a new person feel like this, I wonder?'

Seol grinned after he checked his Status Window.

A strange set of coincidences led him to this point in time. If his Job had been a Sorcerer, he'd probably think that this was one of the greatest lucky chances he encountered in his life, something he'd most likely never encounter again.

However, Seol could only think about the recovery of his old pathway and remained oblivious of the actual truth.

✧✧✧

As soon as morning arrived, Seol ended up facing a storm of chaos. Odelette Delphine went around advertising the fact that he managed to successfully clear the Impossible mission, that was why. Thanks to her, he had to repeat the same line over and over again as he made his way down to the first floor.

"What is the meaning of this chaos?" (Cinzia)

If it weren't for Cinzia making her timely entrance along with all the maids on the first floor plaza, Seol would've spent the rest of his day explaining things.

After receiving an explanation on what happened, even she got stunned, however. She

took a quick look at the completely-empty noticeboard and a wry smile broke out on her lips.

“Looks like I owe Agnes an apology.” (Cinzia)

Overhearing that, the corners of Agnes’s lips curled up a little.

A little bit of time later, a simple exit procedure commenced.

Cinzia offered a short praise for everyone, complimenting them for all their hard work for the last three months. Afterwards, the survivors paid 1000 SP and returned their smartphones.

After all that was said and done, the first floor was filled with the noises of heavy steel doors being dragged open.

“Go through there, and the Paradise you’ve all been itching to enter is waiting for you.” (Cinzia)

Cinzia spoke as she pointed towards the dark corridor.

“There won’t be anyone guiding you out, since we’ll have to remain behind and deactivate the Neutral Zone. However, I’m sure there aren’t any dumb f*ckers among you who can’t even cross a simple corridor, right?” (Cinzia)

Perhaps realising that she was making a joke, some survivors began chuckling in response.

“Well, nothing will happen anyways. We even prepared an open banquet area for you outside and all. All you have to do is to wait for those coming to fetch you. After that, negotiate, sign a contract, whatever… In any case, you’ll find simple meals ready for you on the tables placed outside. Quietly enjoy your breakfast and wait there.”

Cinzia then pulled out a packet of cigarettes as if she was done with her speech, before opening her mouth again.

“Oh, and a request, if I may… at least for today, don’t fight.” (Cinzia)

She momentarily stopped talking in order to pull a cigarette out with her teeth, then continued on with a surprisingly serious tone of voice.

“I’m advising you to let the events of the Neutral Zone be bygones. Today’s a day to celebrate, isn’t that right?” (Cinzia)

She lit the cigarette up, inhaled deeply, and a little while later, let the white smoke ease out from her nostrils and open lips.

“Especially you, the Invited… I know very well how powerful your backers are. Being able to flaunt one’s right to mobilise that many Marks, I’m sure they possess quite a bit of influence here.” (Cinzia)

“……”

“However, it’d be better for you to abandon petty grudges you have before leaving this place. Remember that.” (Cinzia)

There was a sound of someone snorting derisively coming from the crowd.

“Even though I made such a nice little request, you’d inevitably see some bloodshed on the first day… Oh, well. The moment you step foot outside this place, you’re no longer my concern, so do what you will.” (Cinzia)

Cinzia *tsk, tsked* and continued on while brushing her bangs upwards.

“With that, I declare the official closure of the Neutral Zone.” (Cinzia)

For the first time ever, she began smiling softly.

“It was a real chore to look after you lot. Let’s not meet ever again.” (Cinzia)

She then spun around and left.

‘Is that the end?’ (Seol)

Seol stared at the departing back of Cinzia, before surveying his surroundings. Others around him were showing similar reactions.

“Why are you still here?” (Cinzia)

It was then, that woman’s sharp voice dug into their ear canals one more time.

“Why aren’t you leaving already? Do we have to hold your hands, too?” (Cinzia)

Only then did the survivors began moving one by one. They shuffled towards the direction Cinzia pointed towards.

‘So, it’s… really ending.’ (Seol)

Seol stared at one of the maids following Cinzia. Maybe she sensed his gaze, Agnes turned to gaze back at him. He dazedly waved his hand at her, and she replied him with the usual – the dignified, silent bow.

“Let’s get going~! Off we go!” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-Ah excitedly grabbed Seol’s arm and tugged at him.

‘Really, this is it?’ (Seol)

Even while being dragged away, Seol kept on glancing behind him. He didn’t want to miss a thing.

Desperately, he took in the sights of the Neutral Zone.

‘I did run on the track like crazy, didn’t I?’ (Seol)

He saw the mission noticeboard, now empty.

He also saw the lounge tables where he sat together with his teammates to have a chat, or to discuss strategy for their next mission.

‘I practiced Strike, Thrust, and Cut like crazy, too.’ (Seol)

…The gym where he trained like there was no tomorrow under Agnes’s guidance; the stores he’d been windowshopping, wondering if there was anything eye-catching; the restaurant that he always ate in; and even his sleeping quarters that had been filled with the laughters and voices of the Yi kids staying with him…

The memories of the past three months rapidly entered and left his brain.

The place where he desired for a change – the place where he was finally able to change.

The place that would forever remain in his memories, got further and further away from him until it became small enough to be hidden from his view with just a single fist. And soon, the darkness of the corridor swallowed the lights from the plaza and nothing could be seen anymore.

“Ah.” (Seol)

Seol was about to reach out, only to realise belatedly that Yi Surl-Ah was still holding onto his arm.

“…Orabeo-nim?” (Yi Surl-Ah)

Yi Surl-Ah tilted her head. Most of the survivors had left the corridor already, yet the youth was still hesitating to leave.

“Uhm… Yeah, let’s go.” (Seol)

Seol turned around to leave, yet he remained conflicted.

‘But, why?’ (Seol)

He had been waiting for the end of the Neutral Zone for so long, yet…

‘Why…?’ (Seol)

Only a few steps more, and he’d be entering the Paradise, yet…

‘…Why am I not happy?’ (Seol)

Only then, Seol understood why: he was unhappy about the fact that he had to leave the Neutral Zone.

Before he could do something about this realisation, the darkness was suddenly pulled back from his surroundings. The brilliant sunlight stung his eyes, and warm, humid breeze brushed past his skin.

Reflexively, Seol narrowed his eyes and slowly raised his hand.

The first thing he saw was the sky dyed in soft reddish hue under the blazing sun. And below that, a vast expanse of desolate plain cloaked in the muddy brown hue of

nothingness. The plain stretched so far and wide, Seol momentarily thought that he could even see the end of the world where the heaven and the earth met.

'So, this is… ' (Seol)

…The Paradise.

Indeed, he was now standing on the Lost Paradise, where there was nothing as far as the eyes could see.

"I thought as much – it was a tower." (Yi Sung-Jin)

Yi Sung-Jin's jaw didn't want to close as he looked upwards behind him.

A lone white tower stood on this desolate landscape. Its massive size made one shrink back from its majesty, yet one also couldn't help but think it was also rather beautiful as well.

"Why don't we have breakfast, now that we took a look around?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min suddenly intruded on the trio as Seol dazedly stared at his new environment.

Just as Cinzia said, there were several wooden tables set up outside the tower with food placed on top.

"Can you see the person coming to fetch you?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Seol slowly swept his gaze over to the crowd. It was quite noisy there, as if people coming to fetch the survivors were already mixed up with them.

Seol slowly shook his head while looking at some people bumping their shoulders while crying out, "Amigo!" He couldn't see Kim Hahn-Nah anywhere.

"I don't think she's here yet." (Seol)

"Me too. Well, let's go over there. Everyone's gathered over that side." (Hyun Sahng-Min)

At the table Hyun Sahng-Min directed the youth to, Shin Sahng-Ah and Yun Seo-Rah

were already waiting for them.

“Anyways. For a place called the Paradise, it’s nothing much to look at, right?” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

“Do you know where we are? Besides the tower, there’s absolutely nothing around here.” (Shin Sahng-Ah)

As the meal commenced, people began chatting amongst themselves. Hyun Sahng-Min complained that the guy who invited him was running late, while Shin Sahng-Ah revealed her worries of being a Contracted, but then, said she was reasonably confident of her chances since she was now a Priest.

Seol didn’t eat anything, only fidgeting the wooden cup containing some sort of a drink.

Only Yun Seo-Rah quietly studied Seol’s bitter mood for a while, before gently poking him with her finger.

“?”

Seol flinched and turned to look, and Yun Seo-Rah cautiously pointed behind him. Hao Win, sitting alongside his teammates, was waving at him.

Seol asked for others’ permission and left the table to head over there.

“Your guy hasn’t arrived yet?” (Hao Win)

“Yes, she’s not here yet. What about you, Mister Hao Win?” (Seol)

“I told them to take their time. I thought I might get a bit emotional today for some reason.” (Hao Win)

Seol immediately identified with that sentiment and nodded his head.

“In any case, can you do something about this little lady over here with her head turned all the way around? She’s been like this for a while.” (Hao Win)

The little lady Hao Win referred to was naturally Odelette Delphine. Her arms remained locked across her chest while she didn’t even spare Seol a glance. Both her

cheeks were puffed up unhappily, too. Anyone could easily tell that she was royally p*ssed off from this sight.

“Miss Delphine?” (Seol)

“Hmpf.”

“Are you still cross with me?” (Seol)

“HMPH!”

Odelette Delphine continued to snort unhappily, leading Tong Chai to roar out in laughter.

“Honestly, I can’t still believe it. You actually cleared the Impossible mission with nothing more than a single talisman.” (Tong Chai)

“I wasn’t entirely sure about it. You could say that I had no plan, actually…” (Seol)

Seol subconsciously rubbed his left cheek and shuddered. That thing, whatever it was, brushing past his cheek was probably meant to scare him.

However, what if the enemy aimed for his vital spots from the get-go?

He wouldn’t even be able to stand in this place right now.

No matter how many times he replayed that scene in his head, he knew that he was this close to death back then.

“I nearly died… And I can’t even remember what the hell I was thinking of back then, when challenging that mission.” (Seol)

“So he says, Delphine. How about you stop being angry now?” (Hao Win)

“Even then!” (Odelette Delphine)

Odelette Delphine spun around on her seat and stared at Seol and slammed the table with her hands.

“You could’ve said something!” (Odelette Delphine)

“But, if you died, then I…” (Seol)

“Even then~~~~~~!!” (Odelette Delphine)

She jumped up from her seat, and…

“I also wanted to do that Impossible mission, too~~~~~!!” (Odelette Delphine)

She then ran up to Seol and grabbed hold of his arms before clinging onto him.

“I also really, really wanted to get my hands on the VIP store coupon~~~!!” (Odelette Delphine)

“……”

“You’re so cheap, doing it all alone~. My VIP coupon~~!” (Odelette Delphine)

“…Ahahaha…”

A laughter burst out from Seol’s mouth as he watched her cute whining. She reminded him of a little sister whimpering and complaining bitterly, and he just couldn’t help himself.

“You’re such a dummy, Mister Seooooolllll…” (Odelette Delphine)

She looked so adorable while complaining like that, so Seol lightly pinched her cheeks and pulled. She stared at him with unhappy eyes, and a sound of leaking air came out from her mouth.

“Buoooo…… Uh?” (Odelette Delphine)

And then, as if she discovered something, her eyes opened even wider, and she jumped up and down. She waved around her hands and called out.

“Here!! I’m over here!!” (Odelette Delphine)

She ran away in airy steps. Seol thought that the person who invited her must’ve arrived. With a content smile on his lips, Hao Win retracted his gaze from Odelette Delphine and chuckled loudly.

“She’s so full of energy, isn’t she?” (Hao Win)

“She sure is.” (Seol)

“And you finally smiled.” (Hao Win)

“Pardon?” (Seol)

Seol quickly touched his face. Did he just smile?

“Well, you see, I thought that your face had this really depressing look for a while now~.” (Hao Win)

“Ah… Did I?” (Seol)

Now that he thought about it, the depression he felt after leaving the Neutral Zone seemed to have elevated just a tad. Just like how Hao Win implied – through Odelette Delphine’s boundless energy and enthusiasm, he was now feeling just a bit better.

“Well, well, well. I won’t make you stay for long, so let’s just share a drink or two.” (Hao Win)

“I will. Thank you.” (Seol)

Seol nodded his head.

Although he got to make many good memories in the Zone, he couldn’t stay there for the rest of his life, either. If there was a beginning, then naturally there would be an end, as well. And now, it was time for a new adventure to begin.

His mind felt much lighter when he thought like this.

“Very good. Now, everyone, cheers~.” (Hao Win)

Although Odelette Delphine had left, Leorda Salvatore, Tong Chai, and Hao Win was still here.

And, just as four cups were about to clang together…

Chapter 39
Miss Foxy (2)

Crash!

Seol heard the noise of someone falling over, and then, a small commotion rose up from behind him.

He took a look, and immediately, his eyes widened in surprise.

The first two things entering his view were a chair and Hyun Sahng-Min falling and rolling on the ground. Then, he saw Shin Sahng-Ah and Yun Seo-Rah standing up from their seats in utter shock. And in front of them, four men giggling in an unsightly manner.

“What are you doing?!” (Yi Surl-Ah)

“Don’t! Get back!” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Just as Yi Surl-Ah was about to step out, Hyun Sahng-Min shouted at her from the ground.

“Son of a b*tch… This is really humiliating… Kkeuk!” (Hyun Sahng-Min)

The leader of the group then kicked Hyun Sahng-Min’s midriff as the latter tried to push himself up. Hyun Sahng-Min fell and rolled on the ground again.

“Huh, you think this is embarrassing, eh?”

The leader spoke with a mocking voice, before tapping on Hyun Sahng-Min’s chin with his foot.

“So, you know all about humiliation, huh. Why didn’t you quietly offer your apology when I asked you nicely, in that case? You’d have avoided all this humiliation in the first place. Don’t you think so, amigo?”

Seol stood up from his seat while deeply frowning.

'Oh Min-Young?' (Seol)

He saw Oh Min-Young sticking very close to one of the men, a burly guy, and cackling like a villain while looking on at what was happening. Her arms across her chest and a gloating expression etched on her face, too.

"I do feel sorry for you since you look like a worm and all, so I'll give you one more chance. Apologise to those two. Hurry up."

"……"

"I also don't want to do this. But you see, me, or my brothers, can't really hold ourselves back when someone does bad things to us."

The leader's words caused the burly guy to giggle derisively.

"You apologise from the bottom of your heart, and then I'll forget all about today's matter."

Hyun Sahng-Min began gritting his teeth.

"What the f*ck… You the guy who invited that b*stard?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

"What if I am?"

"What a godd*mn joke. A guy with a big-a*s physique prattling on like a little girl. You think you're the only Inviter around here?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

"Ohh! That's right, you're also an Invited. I forgot."

Rather than sounding like he had genuinely forgotten about it, the leader acted as if he couldn't care any less.

"But, have you ever thought about this before?"

The leader squatted low to the ground and met Hyun Sahng-Min's eyes.

"It's not that your Inviter is running late, it's just him not deciding to show up in the

first place."

"What?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

"You asking me why? Because, he could also get humiliated if he tries to step forward like a fool, you see."

The leader's husky voice gradually became lower. The knife scar on his cheek wiggled slightly as he grinned, his yellowing teeth revealed to the world as he did so.

"You'd do well to remember. Never take us Cartel boys lightly. Not every Bronze marks are equal, get my drift…?"

Suddenly, another commotion unfolded behind the leader. When he looked behind him, he found a youth busy pushing past his underlings to come closer.

"Oh?"

The leader's eyes opened wider as he stood back up.

"It's you."

The leader raised his hand and waved away his boys as they tried to intervene.

"What is going on here?" (Seol)

Seol's cold voice caused the leader to form an interesting facial expression.

"What a surprise. Not even another Inviter, but the Rookie himself steps forward."

'A Rookie?' (Seol)

"Mm… Now that I take a look at you, you do kinda look like a player."

Seol continued to glare at the leader. The latter man raised his hands in a shrugging gesture and began speaking in a jovial tone.

"Oh, this? It's nothing. My little brother over there, he suffered a lot at the hands of this guy here, or so I'm told. That's why I'm just repaying the favour."

“You should stop.” (Seol)

“Hmm? Is there a reason why I should? I’m just paying back what’s owed and there’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Miss Cinzia said so already. Let the matters of the Neutral Zone be bygones.” (Seol)

“Cinzia? Ohh… That’s just some random b*tch spewing c**p. We are very sensitive towards the matters of our brothers, you see. Haven’t you heard, blood is thicker than water?”

Seol’s brows quivered slightly. Did this guy really call Cinzia, a boss from an organisation that possesses a great deal of influence in the South, a b*tch?

There were only two explanations for this. Either this guy was a brave idiot, or the organisation backing him was as big as Cinzia’s.

“This isn’t a matter that an Inviter such as yourself should get involved with.” (Seol)

“I don’t agree with that notion at all. Besides, technically, the Neutral Zone also exists as a part of the Paradise, am I right? Or, am I wrong?”

The leader looked around him and asked, prompting his underlings to guffaw out, including the burly guy and Oh Min-Young. She laughed so hard, she might choke on her own spit at that rate.

The joke wasn’t even all that funny to begin with, but she must’ve been laughing hard just to spite the others. What a disgusting sight it was.

“Okay. Now, if you’re done, I’d like the third wheel to go away. I still have things to do.”

“I’m not the third wheel.” (Seol)

The leader dusted his hands and turned around, only to come to a standstill.

“What did you say?”

“I asked Hyun Sahng-Min for the favour.” (Seol)

“Wait a minute. Wait, wait. Wait~~.”

The leader raised his hands theatrically and suddenly raised a fuss before taking several large strides to get closer to Seol.

“So, are you saying that you asked that man to torment my little brother? Is that it?”

“No, I didn’t ask him to…” (Seol)

“Doesn’t matter. You say you are related to this thing, right?”

The leader took Seol’s silence as his tacit agreement and rubbed his hands together, before placing a hand on the youth’s shoulder.

“Hey, man… This is me giving you my sincerest advice. Do you know what is the most important thing you gotta remember in the Paradise?”

“……”

“It’s what you say, man. Your words. You gotta watch your mouth around this place.”

The leader lightly tapped on his lips and continued to speak.

“I will ask you again, so think long and hard before answering, okay? Doesn’t matter what your story is, you said you’re not the third wheel in this mess, didn’t you?”

“I already told you that.” (Seol)

When Seol replied without hesitation, a huge grin formed on the face of the leader.

“Okay. Ok~ay! So, that’s how it was. In that case, our story changes a bit.”

The leader became so happy, he even began lightly humming in pure joy as well.

“I thought I might get a Bronze Mark as a stooge or something, but now… A real, bona fide Gold Mark just rolled into my lap. Heh!”

Then, he sat down on one of the empty chairs and beckoned Seol. Hyun Sahng-Min was already long gone from his thought process, it seemed.

“Take a seat. Let me listen to your story. While we eat, no?”

The leader began shoving food found on the table down his mouth. Seol quietly stared at him, sensing that something wasn't quite right. The way his attitude had changed was one thing, and there was that oily smile of his, too.

"What are you doing, Rookie? I told you to sit down."

More importantly, Seol didn't like the way this guy was acting, as if he knew something about the youth.

Seol took a glance at Hyun Sahng-Min, still pinned to the ground. The grinning burly guy was pushing down on him with a foot. Oh Min-Young was to his side, her foot stepping on Hyun Sahng-Min's hand, also carrying a distorted smile on her face.

'And why is she enjoying this so much?' (Seol)

Seol couldn't really understand it, but he knew he couldn't do anything at the moment. As long as Hyun Sahng-Min was held captive, he couldn't make a rash move.

In the end, he sat down on the opposite side to the leader.

"Very good… Oh, where's my manners? I haven't introduced myself yet, right? Names Salcido. Olivier Salcido."

Salcido reached out with his hand.

And when Seol also reached out and grabbed the offered hand…

"!!"

Suddenly, he was greeted with pain as his hand was being gripped really tightly. Seol hurriedly injected some strength in his hand. Salcido simply gripped even tighter as if he didn't even find it challenging enough to care.

"Very nice to meet you. What's your name, by the way?" (Salcido)

"…Keuk."

"I said, what's your name, eh? Ehehehe…" (Salcido)

Just before he cried out, Seol instinctively circulated his Magic Power. The energy

rapidly coursed through his internal Circuit, flowed through his right arm, and arrived at his right hand.

“Oh?”

However, Salcido was an Earthling who had stayed in the Paradise for over a year and a half already. He quickly sensed the change and activated his own Magic Power. His initial plan was to break this new kid’s spirit, but he also believed that he’d never lose to a complete newbie who didn’t know anything.

That was how it was supposed to be.

But then…

“Wha, what?” (Salcido)

Salcido gasped out in shock. Not only his own energy was being rapidly extinguished, Seol’s aura was growing bigger and bigger at a frightening rate.

‘Not only the amount, but I even lose to the flow’s speed, too?!’ (Salcido)

Logically, such a thing was completely impossible.

In the blink of an eye, the situation had reversed. Salcido began sweating buckets as the pressure on his hand grew more and more.

“Eee…… Eeek!” (Salcido)

He couldn’t even say anything out aloud since he had his reputation to worry about. Meanwhile, Seol simply stared at the deeply frowning Salcido with an expressionless face.

It was then, the others sensed that something was off. It was unimaginable for a Level 3 Earthling to lose to a youth who was still only at Level 1, but seeing Salcido’s complexion turn for the worse, they suspected something did go wrong somewhere.

Two of the goons accompanying Salcido secretly exchanged signals and nodded their heads. One of them tried to sneak up on Seol, only for his steps to come to a halt after someone grabbed his shoulder.

“Hello there, friends.” (Hao Win)

It was none other than Hao Win.

“Who the f*ck are you?”

“I’m a friend of that friend, let’s put it like that.” (Hao Win)

“Is that right? Why don’t you remove your hand first, unless you don’t want to live anymore?”

“Ohh, so scary. But, I can’t do that.” (Hao Win)

Hearing Hao Win’s playful tone, the man’s eyes narrowed to a slit.

“…You an Invited?”

“Correct answer.” (Hao Win)

“Whatever. You should know when to quit, if you know what’s good for you. You’ll regret it when you find out who we are.”

“Maybe. But I don’t know who you small fries are. But then…” (Hao Win)

Hao Win grinned and let off a thin wisp of air. Just as he placed his head near the man’s ear…

There was a loud noise of a table being pushed aside.

Salcido couldn’t hold back anymore and shoved the table upwards, using that momentary confusion to break free from Seol’s grasp.

“You son of a w***e!” (Salcido)

Salcido succeeded in pulling his hand back, and he shouted out loudly. However…

Slam!!

Seol got to witness the following: the legs of the unsteady table planting back down to the ground, Salcido’s face slamming into the table’s surface, and a high heel forcing the

hapless Cartel man's head into the wooden surface from the back of his head.

"You finished your breakfast yet?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

The voice sounded familiar. Seol confirmed her long legs, as well as the grey H-line business woman's skirt, and raised his head immediately.

And he saw Kim Hahn-Nah retracting her leg and placing her hands on her waist.

"Kkeuh… W, which motherf*cker did that…?" (Salcido)

Salcido frowned deeply and lifted his head with much difficulty.

"Oh, you haven't? Wanna eat some more?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Unfortunately for him, Kim Hahn-Nah reached out faster than a streak of lightning and slammed his face down on the plate of food one more time.

SFX for plates shattering into pieces

The impact was great enough for the plate to shatter.

The banquet area soon fell into utter silence as the new entrant to the banquet made her presence known.

The burly guy pressing down on Hyun Sahng-Min stood there blinking his eyes in shock. The mid-boss Salcido was taken care of in one breath, and two of his older brothers were being held back by Hao Win as well.

The burly man couldn't figure out what was going on, but he also realised that he shouldn't be standing there doing nothing.

"You crazy b*tch!!"

So, the burly man tried to hit Kim Hahn-Nah with his fist, but…

Two SFXs for a knife flying in the air, then something exploding

A spinning dagger flew from somewhere and the burly man's fist exploded into a gory mess, instead.

“Uwaaaahk?!”

Salcido’s entire body shuddered as he watched the burly man fall to the ground. He managed to move his face to the side and found the woman wearing the business suit pressing his head down to the table. He sucked in his breath after confirming who it was.

“Kim… Kim Hahn-Nah!” (Salcido)

“Hi~. Been a while, no?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

She finally released his head and grinned widely. She walked around the table and sat down next to Seol. She then rested her chin on her hand and leisurely stared at Salcido.

“You’re still up to your old tricks, aren’t you?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“What did you say?” (Salcido)

“How brave of you. Just whose Invited were you trying to steal away?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“…I’ve no idea what you’re talking about.” (Salcido)

Salcido managed to raise his upper torso up, but he was still shuddering noticeably.

“I was only…” (Salcido)

“Ahhh, so you’re trying to imply that you’ve been wronged here unfairly, is that it?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah snorted briefly and cut short this conversation.

“My bad. Okay, so. It’s all sorted now, so go on. Get lost.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah dismissively waved her hand about. Salcido just stood there and gnashed his teeth while glaring daggers at her.

However, what was going on here?

Salcido, who was so full of himself only a minute ago, didn’t dare to utter a word of

defiance in front of her.

"…I'll be going then." (Salcido)

"Good idea." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"But, we'll see each other soon enough. I'm thinking, we'll have a chance to meet again pretty soon." (Salcido)

Salcido pushed himself up unsteadily to his feet.

Unfortunately for him, Kim Hahn-Nah didn't plan to let him off that easily.

"Stop, What did you just say to me?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Her cold, sharp voice entered his ears, but Salcido ignored her and continued to walk away.

Kim Hahn-Nah grinned and beckoned with her finger.

"Shin Hahn-Sung?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"Yes, *noonim*." (Shin Hahn-Sung) *(TL: noonim = noona + nim)*

"If that f*cker doesn't stop in three steps, gift him with a new breathing hole by his temples, okay?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"Understood." (Shin Hahn-Sung)

A man with curling hair, Shin Hahn-Sung replied while spinning a dagger around, before taking on an attacking posture. Salcido's steps came to a halt, then.

"You godd*mn fox of a woman! Are you insisting on doing this?" (Salcido)

"You said it yourself, didn't you? But, there's no reason to drag this out, is there? Let's just end it here." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"……"

"Why are you suddenly imitating a mute as*hole now? Weren't you planning to go on

a war with us? Wasn't that it?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Flinch.

Salcido shuddered after receiving her cold, hard stare and lowered his gaze.

"Uhm… I made a mistake just now. I had no such intentions. I shall apologise." (Salcido)

"You 'shall'? Since when were you on the same social standing as me? Did you forget your brain somewhere or something?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"I, I apologise." (Salcido)

"Still forgetting something, haven't you?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"…I apologise, 'ma'am'." (Salcido)

Hng~. Kim Hahn-Nah let out a soft snort and shrugged her shoulders.

"Okay, fine. But, you weren't planning to leave just like that, were you?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"T, that is…" (Salcido)

"I mean, you should take responsibilities before leaving, no? You've got zero manners, you know? It's because of people like you that your Cartel is saddled with such rotten reputation, don't you understand that?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah's pointed criticism caused Salcido's brows to prick up in anger.

"Better lower your gaze or else." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Of course, he ended up lowering his head again.

"So, how should we go about fixing this mess…?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah mumbled to herself before shifting her gaze over to the burly man rolling on the ground, clutching his bleeding stump of an arm. She even pretended to be seriously deliberating on something.

“Okay. You can leave, but not with him. You understand why, don’t you?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“……”

“You did interfere first while mouthing some c**p about Neutral Zone this and that. I’m just going to reciprocate that.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Bu, but!” (Salcido)

“If you’ve got a complaint, lodge it to Sinyoung directly, okay?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

As soon as she mentioned ‘Sinyoung’, Salcido’s expression looked as if he just saw the scariest demon in his imagination.

“Sin, Sinyoung?” (Salcido)

“But, of course. I’m here because of Sinyoung’s directive, after all. Since we’re here now, I might as well fix your uncouth manners, too.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“I… I understand, in that case.” (Salcido)

“B, bro?!”

The burly man’s tear and snot-stained face became frozen in shock. Salcido did his best to avoid meeting that painful gaze.

“Fine. All sorted, so you can leave now.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Bro! Brother!”

The burly man called out in desperation, but Salcido hurriedly left the banquet area along with his goons. It was as if he was making a bid for his freedom with his life on the line.

“And then… you.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah’s next target was Oh Min-Young. When the attention landed on her all of a sudden, Oh Min-Young began retreating several steps.

“Is anyone among you in a contract with her? If you’re here, then I want to talk to you.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

When Kim Hahn-Nah asked while sweeping her gaze around the crowd, a smart-looking man hurriedly ran up to her side.

“You’re the one?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Y, yes, ma’am.”

“That woman named Oh Min-Young, I’d like you to leave her to me. I’m sure you have some ideas as to why?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Y, yes, ma’am. I got a call this morning.”

The smart-looking man nodded his head repeatedly.

“Is that so? Well, we wouldn’t really do something like this, but my company president is very unhappy at the moment, you see?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“I completely understand. She’s his daughter, after all.”

“Very good. I’ll explain to her about the cancellation of her contract so you can leave now. As it was promised to you, you will receive a suitable compensation soon.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you very much.”

The smart-looking man bowed his waist 90 degrees, before disappearing like the wind from the area.

“Whew~.”

Kim Hahn-Nah let off a soft sigh, then locked her arm with Seol’s.

“Sorry. Am I a bit late?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Looking at her wink like that, Seol forgot all about closing his slack jaw.

The Sinyoung Pharmaceuticals.

Kim Hahn-Nah, the department head.

Those two facts were the only things Seol knew about her until now.

But, after witnessing her sort out the situation in the proverbial blink of an eye, Seol got to figure out just a little bit more about the position Kim Hahn-Nah occupied in the Lost Paradise.

Chapter 40
Glorious Shackles, Perilous Freedom

Salcido's group left as if they were running away, and the guy Oh Min-Young was contracted with also disappeared from the view without raising a fuss.

They certainly did not wish to get on Sinyoung's bad side, but whatever the case may be, the end result was that the burly guy and Oh Min-Young had been abandoned by their supposed backers.

Didn't matter whether one was an Invited or a Contracted, it was not that hard to imagine what would happen to them without their backers protecting them anymore.

"You, clench your teeth real tight, got that?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Pow!

Blood exploded out from the burly guy's nose.

Now that the situation was reversed, Hyun Sahng-Min was like a fish swimming in water. He begged Kim Hahn-Nah for a chance to get even, and as soon as hearing the words 'Don't kill them' came out from her mouth, he proceeded to punch the burly guy in the face.

The burly guy was already too numb to notice the punch, and he collapsed to the ground like a piece of falling paper.

"Hey, you f*cking son of a b*tch, how do you feel now, eh?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

As if that one punch wasn't enough to satisfy him, Hyun Sahng-Min straddled on top of the burly guy and began pounding on him.

"You never imagined this is how it'll end, right? You f*cking as*hole!!" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

The fists containing all of his emotions crushed the burly guy's nose before completely

turning the bone into soft mush. The punches continued to hit the mark; soon, the burly guy went limp while the whites of his eyes showed.

Hyun Sahng-Min breathed out heavily while wiping his nose. He wasn't done yet, though. With a pair of still-burning eyes, he looked around, and…

"Where do you think you're going?!" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

"Ah-ahck?!"

He ran like a wild beast and snatched the hair of Oh Min-Young, who had almost managed to inch her way out of danger zone.

"Weren't you stepping on my hand real hard just now? Ah?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Slap!

With that clear slapping noise, her head spun around hard enough as if it wanted to fly away from her neck.

"You clench your teeth, too." (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min forcibly made her face the right direction, before headbutting her, hard.

"Euh-heuph!!" (Oh Min-Young)

Her eyes wide open now, Oh Min-Young covered her mouth with both of her hands and fell hard to the ground.

Her pained screams couldn't escape from her broken mouth. She rolled around on the ground before bursting out in tears.

And as Hyun Sahng-Min began kicking her like a soccer ball, Seol was inwardly wondering what he should do here.

How should he describe this…?

Those two were indeed in the wrong… But, Seol thought that Hyun Sahng-Min was going just a bit overboard.

Even then, asking Hyun Sahng-Min to stop was a problem in itself, too.

"…*Me, I can endure unfairness, but I can definitely not stand losing out, man.*"

He said those things when they first met. One could technically argue that the reason why Hyun Sahng-Min ended up in the present situation was all because Seol asked him for a favour. So, trying to stop him now would be more or less like betraying him, in a way.

"Sahng-Min-*ah.* Enough. That is enough. Please stop."

It was then, a middle-aged man came out from the crowd and hurriedly approached Hyun Sahng-Min to grab his arm.

"Eish, who the hell… Oh, it's you, ahjussi!" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

Hyun Sahng-Min angrily shook his arm loose and shouted at the man.

"Why did you show up so late?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

"I'm sorry. Really. There was something I had to do."

"Do you even know what happened to me just now?" (Hyun Sahng-Min)

"I know. I understand, so let's stop for today, okay? She's a property of Sinyoung now, so if you damage her too much, we gotta reimburse them."

Seol didn't like the term 'property', but thankfully, Hyun Sahng-Min did stop his beatings after that. The middle-aged man quietly pushing Hyun Sahng-Min away was his Inviter.

"No need to feel sorry for her." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah's voice remained icy cold.

"There should be more than a few people wanting to beat her up, you see." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"Really?" (Seol)

“Yep. That incident of Yun Seo-Rah getting beaten up? That woman incited the Cartel boys to do it.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“?”

“You didn’t know? I thought you already figured it all out. She was the one telling them her arm was damaged. She was the one leading them on, telling those idiots to attack Yun Seo-Rah, baiting the poor kid with the promise of some free points. That was all that b*tch’s handiwork.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Seriously?” (Seol)

Seol dumbfoundedly stared at Oh Min-Young, currently pouring out her tears on the ground. What little sympathy he had for her flew away in an instant.

“That wasn’t all, though. Didn’t she kill the other girl in the Tutorial to steal away her coins? One hit at the back of the head with a mop! Pop!” (Shin Hahn-Sung)

The youth with the curly hair suddenly butted in. The way he kept on smiling, he gave off an impression of being a pleasant fellow, almost to the point where Seol found it scarcely believable that he destroyed the burly guy’s hand with nothing but a dagger.

This youth saw Seol looking at him and began raising a big fuss.

“Ahh! Hello there!! My name is…” (Shin Hahn-Sung)

“Hey, Shin Hahn-Sung? Why don’t you carry those two back to our carriage, mmkay?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Just as Shin Hahn-Sung tried to weasel his way into the conversation, Kim Hahn-Nah suddenly assumed her characteristic prim and stiff expression.

“Che. Always making me do things you find annoying.” (Shin Hahn-Sung)

“Oh, so should I do it?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Fine. I’m going.” (Shin Hahn-Sung)

Shin Hahn-Sung complained as her sharp glare landed on him.

“That’s why you haven’t found a husband yet…” (Shin Hahn-Sung)

“What did you just say?!” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

But, before Kim Hahn-Nah could rage on, Shin Hahn-Sung quickly made his escape while dragging away the unconscious burly guy and the bitterly resisting Oh Min-Young.

Kim Hahn-Nah began gnashing her teeth as she glared at the curly haired youth, now already nothing more than a small speck in her view.

“That b*stard really wanna…?!” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

She must’ve sensed Seol’s stare, because she then suddenly calmed her heaving breaths and changed her expression.

“Have you eaten breakfast yet? Should we talk after you had something to eat first?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol slowly shook his head. He lost his appetite after experiencing quite a few unexpected events right after leaving the Zone.

As if she was expecting this sort of response, Kim Hahn-Nah proceeded to sweep away the mess of plates off the table. It was here that she finally spotted Yun Seo-Rah standing there awkwardly near them and smiled quite brightly at her.

“Miss Yun Seo-Rah? I’m sorry, but we gotta have a bit of private chat between Seol and I.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“……”

“Shin Hahn-Sung should return pretty soon, so why don’t you grab an empty table and wait for him?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Although the bushes were beat, it was pretty clear what was being implied here. Yun Seo-Rah was no dummy, either. She didn’t seem too satisfied, but after glancing at Seol for a moment or two, she quietly turned around to leave.

Kim Hahn-Nah waited and watched on as Yun Seo-Rah gradually walked further away, before latching herself tightly to Seol’s side.

“!?”

And the youth got to feel the softness of her curves as she pressed against his elbow. Just before the flustered youth could pull his arm away…

“Listen carefully, okay? While we talk, I’ll show you two sets of contract papers.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah’s voice became much lower in tone.

“Two sets?” (Seol)

“That’s right, two. And when I place my hand on top of a document and start talking, you gotta be skeptical of everything I say, okay?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“What are you talking about?” (Seol)

“I don’t have the time to explain it to you. I was supposed to take care of Yun Seo-Rah’s contract too, but I got a sudden order to let Shin Hahn-Sung take care of that, instead. I’ll try to obstruct him, but what with his slick tongue and all, he’ll definitely b**t in, so be mindful of that.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

In the middle of her speech, Kim Hahn-Nah signaled to Seol with her eyes. He didn’t think much about it and took a simple glance around him, before his expression became weird.

Now that some amount of time had passed by, all of the survivors as well as those who had invited them or signed contract with them were here. And even though most of them were in the middle of negotiating with other survivors, some were sneaking glances at him, and a few were openly staring at him from afar.

“And they are the ones wishing for our negotiation to fail.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah narrowed her eyes rather prettily and whispered to Seol with a grave voice.

“You… You should know of your worth.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Noo-nim! I’m back~!” (Shin Hahn-Sung)

It was right then a joyful voice entered their ears.

'He's back already?' (Seol)

Accompanied by Yun Seo-Rah, the curly-haired youth was walking closer to them while carrying an affable smile.

"And why are you sitting near us?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Shin Hahn-Sung was about to occupy a seat on the opposite side to them, before an awkward smile crept on his face.

"Well, I just want to see the skills of the famed senior of mine?" (Shin Hahn-Sung)

"You should stop the unfunny comedy routine and take care of your own contract signing, okay? Why are you trying to weasel your way into our conversation here?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"Oww, come on now, there's a plenty of space here, so please share~." (Shin Hahn-Sung)

"I told you to scram. You better listen while I'm still being civil." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"Oww, don't be like that. In the end, both him and Miss Seo-Rah will sign up with Sinyoung anyways." (Shin Hahn-Sung)

"And how do you know that?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Hearing her icy tone of voice, Shin Hahn-Sung displayed a bit of surprised expression.

"It's not like that?" (Shin Hahn-Sung)

"Don't you ever think that I don't know what's going on here. I've already figured out why the higher-ups sent you here with me. However, I believe I've already explained my position enough times by now." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"Well, that is…" (Shin Hahn-Sung)

"Of course, I'll do my utmost best today. But the final decision rests with him, understand? Don't forget, he's not a Contracted, but an Invited. Got that?" (Kim Hahn-

Nah)

"…I got it. Fine. I'll go away." (Shin Hahn-Sung)

'He gave up more easily than I thought?' (Seol)

He was supposed to cling on incessantly, yet the depressed-looking Shin Hahn-Sung turned around to leave.

However, Seol soon realised that he was underestimating this curly-haired youth. Why? Because, he simply dragged another table and placed it close enough to Seol's until they were actually in a touching distance, that was why.

Kim Hahn-Nah glared at Shin Hahn-Sung in a show of disbelief. Seol thought that, after witnessing the curly-haired youth sit down on his spot with a carefree attitude, this guy had to have a substantially thick skin.

There was one more thing Seol failed to figure out, though. And that was Yun Seo-Rah choosing a seat very close to him, rather than opposite to Shin Hahn-Sung's.

"I've kept you waiting, miss. I'm sure you're curious about why I'm here instead of the Director, yes?" (Shin Hahn-Sung)

With an attitude that seemed to imply he didn't mind whether other party was listening in on or not, he began the contract negotiation.

"Well, the Director was embarrassed pretty badly. I'm sure you can guess the reason why…" (Shin Hahn-Sung)

Yun Seo-Rah lowered her head a little.

"In any case, I'm also here to convey the message from the President." (Shin Hahn-Sung)

Those words caused her to raise her head; her eyes gained renewed light.

"…Directly from him?" (Yun Seo-Rah)

"Yes. It's not that long, though. Well, it's a no-frills, no-fat, refreshingly direct message, actually. You know what our President is like, right?" (Shin Hahn-Sung)

Yun Seo-Rah nodded her head to indicate that he should go on.

Shin Hahn-Sung cleared his throat with a fake cough and spoke up.

“First of all, I congratulate you on entering the Paradise. To be honest, I did not wish for you to step foot into this world, but now that things had turned out this way, I shall respect your choices.” (Shin Hahn-Sung)

“……”

“However, your actions during the Tutorial and the Neutral Zone proved to be rather disappointing. Most likely, if you hadn’t received that young man’s aid, you wouldn’t even have cleared the Neutral Zone. Your older sister is most embarrassed by you.” (Shin Hahn-Sung)

Yun Seo-Rah’s body flinched just a little, then.

“I won’t say anything long. If you wish to remain in this world, then show me that you’re prepared.” (Shin Hahn-Sung)

Shin Hahn-Sung spoke up to here and placed a dagger on the table.

“When you get to the carriage, you’ll find those two from earlier all tied up and waiting. That burly guy and the woman. Remember them?” (Shin Hahn-Sung)

“…Yes.” (Yun Seo-Rah)

“You must kill those two in the presence of the President and Lady Yun Seo-Hui. With your own hands.” (Shin Hahn-Sung)

Seol couldn’t help but question his own hearing just then. She needed to do what now?

“The President added that, if you’re unable to do even that, you should stop dreaming about entering Sinyoung, and that he’d even use force to make you go back to Earth.” (Shin Hahn-Sung)

Seol thought that Yun Seo-Rah would at least take a second or two to make her decision.

Unfortunately, she didn’t.

“I don’t care about the man, but is there a reason for me to kill that woman as well?” (Yun Seo-Rah)

“Of course. If you want reasons, there are plenty. That much, I can tell you without holding back.” (Shin Hahn-Sung)

“I’ll do it.” (Yun Seo-Rah)

She didn’t even hesitate as she picked up the dagger.

“In that case, it’s all good.” (Shin Hahn-Sung)

Shin Hahn-Sung smiled and pulled the contract out.

“This here is a temporary contract. As soon as you perform the task assigned to you just now, this contract will come into effect.” (Shin Hahn-Sung)

Yun Seo-Rah took her time to peruse the contents of the contract before promptly signing on the dotted line.

“Then, right away, I should…” (Yun Seo-Rah)

“Ahh, wait a minute, please.” (Shin Hahn-Sung)

Shin Hahn-Sung raised both hands while looking a bit troubled by her willingness.

“It’s just that, there’s the condition of you performing the deed in front of the President, so… Although I can vouch for you, I’m sure you prefer to be certain, no?” (Shin Hahn-Sung)

Yun Seo-Rah agreed with his notion.

Looking relieved now, Shin Hahn-Sung said his job was completed. Then, while resting his chin on both of his hands, he began gazing at the table next to his.

“…Uh-whew.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah spat out a lengthy groan before producing two bundles of contracts as well as a pen.

"…First of all, I'd like to say that you did wonderfully in there." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

She then studied Seol for a bit.

"Also, thank you. Thanks for keeping the promise of negotiating with me first." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"Well, it's… nothing." (Seol)

She noticed that Seol was kind of getting embarrassed by her words, so without further ado, she placed the two contracts side by side on the table.

If the contents of the contract on left seemed neatly summarised, then the one on the right side had small texts utterly filling up the page space top to bottom.

When he took a quick glance at both, he couldn't help but feel a bit odd. Especially the contract on the right – the more he read, the more his head tilted at the oddly restrictive clauses.

If he were to be more specific, then this contract was choke-a-full with wordings that could be interpreted either way.

Just as he discovered the words 'Kim Hahn-Nah' on the left document and 'Sinyoung' on the right, he could hear her continuing on.

"You already understand why the survivors leaving the Neutral Zone must sign a contract right away, right?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Indeed, he could more or less figure out why, without hearing an explanation.

No matter how well one might pass the Tutorial or the Neutral Zone, when facing the gigantic stage called the Lost Paradise, one would be no different to a lost child wandering the edges of a river. In other words, this was the time where one needed both support and protection.

Of course, even now, a clear difference between the Contracted and the Invited existed. If the former was one-sidedly 'do as told', then the latter was more like 'via mutual agreement'. If an Invited didn't like the terms offered, then he or she could simply get up and leave the negotiating table.

“Mm… Well, then. Should I start with Sinyoung’s offers, first?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah started with her sales pitch.

“First of all, the moment you sign the contract with Sinyoung, the organisation will immediately pay you $450,000 as your signing fee. Not in installments, but in one go.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

‘$450,000?!’ (Seol)

Seol couldn’t hide his shock at the amount. As someone who grew up in your typical lower middle-class household, he’d never imagined having that much money.

“It’s too early for you to be this surprised, you know.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah crossed her arms in front of her chest and continued on with a business-like tone of voice.

“Sinyoung will support you in three key areas. First of all, financially. The moment you sign the contract, you’ll have become an employee of Sinyoung, whether it’s here in the Paradise or back on Earth. And every fortnight, $5000 will be deposited to your bank account. So, the monthly salary will be $10,000. Not to forget, you will also receive performance and merit based bonuses, along with regular year-end bonuses, based on the going rate set by the HR of the organisation. And, you will also receive mission clear payouts as well as danger pay, too, while you’re here in the Paradise. As an aside, those should easily exceed your monthly salary. Of course, that’s provisional to you passing the on-the-job probation period first.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah rattled off the offered terms quite quickly.

“Secondly, they promise to provide you with an entire set of matching equipment for free every time you level up. It’s the same even when you go on a team exploration or on a military expedition. And, they also promise you that, if types of equipment that suits your needs drop during a mission, then they are willing to let you have the first refusal.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol slowly swallowed his saliva. The more he heard the offers, the less suspicious he was becoming. Or, at least that’s how he felt.

“And, it seems like you enjoy training.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Training? What do you mean?” (Seol)

He wasn’t expecting to hear that.

“Right. Sinyoung possesses a training facility that’ll not lose to anyone in this world. If you want, Sinyoung’s top Earthling will personally train you. And I assure you, that person’s skills are a cut above Agnes’s.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

He tried to listen while remaining skeptical, but it was getting harder and harder to do so.

“Let me assure you once more, these terms being offered, it’s unprecedented in the entire history of Sinyoung. Even that legendary Seong Shi-Hyun didn’t enjoy this kind of acknowledgment, you know?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Just as she said, these terms were ridiculously good. Honestly, Seol was deeply tempted. As long as he signed on the dotted line, he’d be able to walk on a firm, solid path, whether that be on Earth or here in the Paradise.

“And then… As you can see, the contract’s duration is for four years.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

It was at this point that Kim Hahn-Nah placed her hand on the Sinyoung’s contract papers.

…When I place my hand on top of a document and start talking, you gotta be skeptical of everything I say, okay?

Seol was in the midst of heavy dilemma, but his thought process came to an abrupt halt as soon as that happened.

From here onwards… This would be the real thing.

“You might feel that this is more like a slave contract, but it’s definitely not. It takes an average of around 4-5 years for a talented Earthling to rise up to higher levels. If you consider that fact, you can probably tell Sinyoung rates you very highly. In other words, Sinyoung is willing to throw everything and the kitchen sink to ensure that you’ll rise up to the higher levels in less than four years.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

…So, this was indeed a slave contract. They would initially accept him while pretending to value him greatly, then observe his growth for the next four years before

deciding on what to do with him.

"And, the terms of this contract isn't static. As long as your level rises higher, we can always change the terms contained within for the better." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

…Conversely, it could also get worse.

"Also, about that thing regarding them wanting to support you… Well, let me be honest with you here. You can think of this as an advance payment. At a bare minimum, you gotta reciprocate as much as you've received in the Paradise. This is human nature, after all. Sinyoung is a business entity, don't forget; a huge organisation, a corporation no less, is investing so much into your future. So, wouldn't it be only right for you to reward them accordingly? Am I wrong?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"……"

"Well, you don't have to worry about it. Remember, Sinyoung isn't a place where you'd end up having nothing to do but sucking on thumbs, anyways. Most likely, you'll end up completely overworked for the next one, two years." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

…What if he failed to reciprocate as much as he received?

"And finally… Sinyoung is, not just in name only, the most powerful organisation in the Lost Paradise, bar none. I'm sure you've felt it after seeing what happened. Cinzia and the Sicilians? Salcido and his Cartel? They are nothing more than a bunch of stray cats in front of a real tiger. Sinyoung has swept everyone away once already; so, even other famed organisations have no choice but to lower their heads and listen to what Sinyoung has to say.

"In other words, Sinyoung can become the most secure shield for you in your time of need." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

…And because of that, they would certainly have a lot of enemies as well.

"Kkyah, oh my. Hahn-Nah noo-nim, your sales pitch is really great." (Shin Hahn-Sung)

Shin Hahn-Sung let out a squeal of admiration. His expression indicated how pleased he was.

Meanwhile, Kim Hahn-Nah gently lifted her hand away from the document. So, Seol

shifted his gaze over to the other contract.

“Oh, and as for this contract… Well, I don’t have anything too particular to say.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol decided to ask her instead.

“Now that I think about it, why are there two contracts for me?” (Seol)

“Mm? Haven’t I tell you already? That golden stamp wasn’t Sinyoung’s property.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah’s eyes went extra round as she feigned ignorance.

“That Gold Mark, I got that directly from a temple of a god.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“From a temple of a god?” (Seol)

“Yeah. From the temple of Gula.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“…What?” (Seol)

This time, it was Seol’s eyes that went much wider at the mention of a name he wasn’t expecting to hear.

“Yeah, Gula. One of the seven gods supporting humanity in the Paradise.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Wait a minute. Which means, you as a middleman, I’ll be signing a contract directly with a god?” (Seol)

“Technically, yeah, something like that…” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah looked troubled as she lightly tapped on the table with her finger.

“Actually, even I’m not sure.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“About what?” (Seol)

“It’s true that I did receive the stamp. But what I heard back then was something along

the lines of, there will be a time where I must use the stamp so I should hold onto it carefully, stuff like that. And it so coincidentally ended up being used on you. If you want clarification on this matter, I think it might be better for you to directly ask Gula." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah shrugged her shoulders.

"In any case, that's not the most important matter right now. So, you've browsed through this contract already… Right?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

At a first glance, Seol could tell that this one didn't even contain half of what Sinyoung was offering.

"You'll see that what little support mentioned in there comes from under my name, but if you compare it to Sinyoung's, you should realise that it's not nearly as much." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

She was right about that.

However, one couldn't say that the offered terms were all bad. It didn't try to restrict him for instance, nor demanded anything from him in return, either. And he didn't have to belong to any organisation as well.

Although Kim Hahn-Nah's name was included in the contract, it was only up to the point of her providing personal protection whenever she could. The biggest, and perhaps the only advantage this contract had over the other one was that, it promised Seol complete freedom.

"It can't be helped, right? The support implied on this contract is no more than Sinyoung acknowledging all your accomplishments, past, present and in the future; they will also try to keep an amicable relationship with you for the foreseeable future. That's all. So, if you want more than that, then sign over here." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah presented the Sinyoung's contract papers.

"Well now, noo-nim is making sure of everything, no? I'll personally make a glowing report back to the Director." (Shin Hahn-Sung)

"Keep your pie-hole shut. Can't you see I'm in the middle of something?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Yes, ma’am! I shall keep my hole shut!” (Shin Hahn-Sung)

Disregarding Shin Hahn-Sung’s noisy chatter, Seol deliberated on his choices.

The terms offered by Sinyoung were, no matter how much he dissected it, incredibly tempting. There were several traps hidden in the clauses, but after hearing Kim Hahn-Nah’s brief persuasion, it seemed like that everyone else was doing something similar in the Paradise, anyways.

So what if he had to go under someone’s umbrella? They wouldn’t dispose of him, just like that. Surely not. If he showed how diligent he is, wouldn’t they at least acknowledge his efforts?

And since he didn’t enter the Paradise with some lofty ambition driving him, only this insatiable curiosity instead, he couldn’t help but think that way.

However, something just didn’t feel right.

For some reason, his heart was saying no again.

A giant presence, one he couldn’t sense too clearly right now, was trying to reach out to him from the depths of the hidden darkness. That’s how he felt.

‘Besides, Kim Hahn-Nah wouldn’t have said those words earlier, either… ’ (Seol)

Should he choose the path of glorious shackles, or that of perilous freedom?

Seol remained confused and uncertain in front of this crossroads, both directions filled with boundless possibilities. So, out of habit, he activated Nine Eyes.

‘…D*mn.’

And for the first time since the negotiation began, he ended up in dismay. He couldn’t help it, though.

Yellow, vermillion, crimson, or even black…

If any one of these colours showed up, he was planning to not even consider that contract. That was what his ability was for, no?

Unfortunately, both contracts didn't shine in the four hues of danger.

One of the two did shine in the golden hue, though, while the other one didn't have any colour whatsoever.

This was a first for him.

"So, what will you do?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Standing on the fork of crossing paths…

"…I…" (Seol)

Seol realised that he was now facing one of the most important decisions in his life.

Chapter 41
My Name Is…

Even if he squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again…

Even if he deactivated and then reactivated Nine Eyes…

It remained the same no matter how many times he repeated those actions.

The contract with Kim Hahn-Nah's name on it glowed in a golden hue, while Sinyoung's was devoid of any.

'And why are you shining in gold, of all things…?'

He got to learn a new fact that this 'Golden Commandment' didn't only apply to humans, but to objects, too.

In any case, he couldn't be sure of what to do here, based only on what he was seeing and hearing.

He lacked enough information to make up his mind on one contract, while for the other one, he couldn't even figure out what it all meant.

He couldn't be sure of anything, but…

"I'll sign on this one." (Seol)

After a lengthy deliberation, Seol chose Kim Hahn-Nah's contract.

"Huh?"

Shin Hahn-Sung's expression showed how stunned he was by Seol choice.

"Ahh!"

Meanwhile, Yun Seo-Rah was completely taken by surprise and became quite flustered.

“Can you tell us the reason?” (Shin Hahn-Sung)

Shin Hahn-Sung raised his voice, and Kim Hahn-Nah didn’t try to stop the curly-haired youth. Instead, she lowered her head a little as her expression hardened, showing how shocked she was at the moment. Of course, she was putting on a performance, though.

“Do you not like the terms offered?” (Shin Hahn-Sung)

“No, that’s not actually it. Your terms are so amazingly good that it’s to the point where I’m feeling burdened by their weight.” (Seol)

“It is alright if you are honest with us. Such as, if there’s a clause that you don’t like, or…” (Shin Hahn-Sung)

“Not at all. I’m truly grateful that you have evaluated me so highly. However…” (Seol)

As Seol blurred the ends of his sentence, he sneaked a glance in Kim Hahn-Nah’s direction. He only continued on after confirming the corners of her lips arching up ever so slightly.

“…I’ve a certain personal reason for this choice. I can only feel remorse at refusing to sign such a wonderful contract. Not to mention, I should apologise to you as well.” (Seol)

He tried to condense his explanations to as few a word as possible. His considered but firm refusal implied that they should stop here before things got any more awkward than necessary.

Shin Hahn-Sung of course knew that, but he couldn’t back off like this. He leaned forward with a determined expression on his face.

“Please, hear me out. It would be a lie if we didn’t consider your future potential, but more than that, we also truly appreciate what you’ve done for us.” (Shin Hahn-Sung)

“……”

“Sinyoung is an organisation that strictly rewards those who deserve it. Especially, your selfless actions of aiding this Miss, the last born of the President, we will definitely not forget about it. And actually, there are quite a few of us looking at you favourably within the organisation, too. Myself included.” (Shin Hahn-Sung)

The sweet words of temptation began pouring out from Shin Hahn-Sung's honey-dipped tongue. Too bad for him, Kim Hahn-Nah had already placed her hand on one of the contracts.

'Doesn't that also mean there are some people who don't want me there, too?' (Seol)

He had roughly figured out that the relationship between Yun Seo-Rah and Sinyoung was a complicated one.

Out of the blue, Seol felt the sensation of touch softly wrapping around his right arm.

"Go with us, please…" (Yun Seo-Rah)

A pleading voice entered his ear canals. Yun Seo-Rah's stare trying to penetrate into Seol's soul was dyed in the emotions of anxiety.

"I, I'll do my best…" (Yun Seo-Rah)

'Your best in what exactly…?' (Seol)

What could she even mean by that? Seol reined a fit of laughter almost breaking out of his mouth. Yun Seo-Rah's expression was far too serious for him to use a smile as his reply.

'This is a meaningless dilemma, isn't it?' (Seol)

He didn't base his decision on Nine Eyes. And no, he didn't rely on his emotions, nor on logic, either.

However, there was this one reason, something hard to describe in mere words.

'…Gula.'

[*Come closer, my child…]*

…The lingering memories from that dream. By this time, he had almost forgotten most

of the contents. But the last moments still remained vivid in his head.

The final moments. The man he suspected to be himself made a request, yet it was denied. But in the end, Seol received 'emotions' in the form of a dream.

He was curious. He wanted to find out how the request of his dream version was met.

Of course, that wasn't all. He took into consideration both the warnings of Kim Hahn-Nah, as well as the golden stamp belonging to the temple of Gula.

Also, there was this hard-to-understand fear in his heart that, once he signed up with Sinyoung, he'd get to live a life that was not much different to the one he experienced in the dream.

He sure as hell didn't want to be abused like a slave, and also didn't really feel like being used as well.

Even if the road ahead might get hard and arduous, he wanted to live this life on his own terms.

So, he just had to shake his head to say no.

"We, we can really treat you well…" (Yun Seo-Rah)

Yun Seo-Rah's voice entering his ears sounded more tearful than before. Shin Hahn-Sung let off a soft sigh.

"Why don't we do this, then?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Just as Seol picked up the pen with some difficulty, Kim Hahn-Nah broke her silence and spoke up.

"Give us some time." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"Time?" (Seol)

"Yeah. Well, we will need some time to adjust the contract, and you'll also need more time to dwell on things, right? And, you also need to go back home, too." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol was about to sign on the dotted line, but the mere mention of 'home' sobered him right away.

'Home.'

He realised that over three months had passed by already. What happened back home on Earth? His family? What about Yu Seon-Hwah? Were they worried about him after he disappeared without telling them anything?

"That's right. It's not a bad idea to give yourself some time to think things over." (Shin Hahn-Sung)

Shin Hahn-Sung quickly voiced his opinion.

Seol nodded his head to express his consent. Kim Hahn-Nah pocketed the contracts and stood up from her seat.

"Seol and I will be heading to the temple, but what about you two?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"I shall take Miss Yun back to Sinyoung's HQ. After all, the President is waiting for her there. We'll just go our separate ways at the city of Scheherazade." (Shin Hahn-Sung)

As Shin Hahn-Sung stood up, Seol too vacated his seat. He hadn't a clue on what this temple and that Scheherazade were all about, but it seemed that he could go home for sure.

When he looked around, the negotiation talks were still ongoing everywhere.

He couldn't spot Shin Sahng-Ah anywhere; Hyun Sahng-Min was in the middle of an important-looking talk, his arms moving about to illustrate his points.

Yi Surl-Ah was also in the middle of a lengthy talk with an unknown male. When her gaze met Seol's, she tried to stand up from her seat, but he simply waved his hand at her to indicate she shouldn't. He didn't want to interrupt her negotiation, after all. She must've understood his intentions, because she sat back down while giggling to herself.

"Should we wait for them?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah asked him, but Seol slowly shook his head.

It wasn't as if he didn't want to be around them anymore, but… Their own paths were being laid out now, and he didn't want to insert himself into their lives when it wasn't really necessary anymore.

'I'm sure we will see each other again.' (Seol)

As long as they survived, they should, in the future.

Seol took in the sights of the Neutral Zone for one last time, before slowly turning around to leave.

✧✧✧

Since he heard that the method of transportation was a carriage, he thought it would be nothing more than a wooden cart being pulled by a couple of horses. But he got a pretty big surprise after seeing the actual thing.

This four-wheeled carriage was far closer to a luxury coach as it was covered in all four sides.

Seol dazedly stared at the leather and velvet-like fabric covering the roof section, before shifting his curious gaze over to four strange animals tied to the front of the coach and studied them with some interest.

Their overall appearance was similar to a horse, but their sharp ears and humped back gave off an impression of a camel, instead.

Shin Hahn-Sung forced the two people tied up near the driver's seat of the coach to drink a certain substance, and in the meantime, Kim Hahn-Nah climbed aboard.

"What are you two doing? Come on up." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol and Yun Seo-Rah exchanged glances as they climbed aboard the coach. There were two bench seats facing each other inside.

Kim Hahn-Nah parked her rear on the spot facing Seol, while Yun Seo-Rah sat down right next to the youth.

Shortly afterwards, Kim Hahn-Nah closed the door, and body of the coach shook a little, indicating that they were setting off. It only shook around in the beginning, and

once they were on the move, the ride had become much more comfortable.

When they gained some speed, Kim Hahn-Nah opened her mouth.

“We will need around 40 minutes to get to our destination. We just have to travel along the path of Zahrah, you see.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Zahrah?” (Seol)

“It’s just the name of a road leading to Scheherazade. Don’t worry about it, though! I haven’t heard of news of monsters or other races attacking travelers on the Zahrah for the past year or so.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol tilted his head slightly. He still had no idea what was what, but these were things he had to learn about eventually.

SFX for hooves beating on the ground

The coach speedily crossed the barren wasteland. During the ride, Seol was kept entertained by his companions.

Kim Hahn-Nah told him to let her know the place on Earth he wanted to teleport back to as soon as they arrived at their destination, before explaining things such as what he had to do after arriving there, the method of coming back once back on Earth, etc, etc.

There were many things that caught Seol’s interest among them. And one of those was the revelation that the flow of time here was different to that of Earth’s with the ratio of 3:1.

Meaning, Seol spending three months inside the Neutral Zone would equate to a month on Earth.

Besides those, Kim Hahn-Nah also talked about stuff that could be brought back from Earth to Paradise. And, perhaps staying vigilant of Yun Seo-Rah’s presence, she didn’t forget to sell Sinyoung’s advantages every now and then as well. Every time that happened, Yun Seo-Rah looked at him with pleading eyes and/or tried to encourage his decision making with her soft voice. Seol couldn’t help but feel a bit of pressure from this approach.

“Looks like we’re almost there.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah opened the coach’s door and peeked outside before muttering out.

Seol too peeked his head out past the open door, and as fierce winds whipped his hair about, his jaw nearly dropped to the floor.

The enormous earth-coloured fortress walls blindingly reflected the sunlight as they stood tall.

After confirming Seol’s expression, a smile crept up on Kim Hahn-Nah’s face.

“Welcome to Scheherazade.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

✧✧✧

The coach slowed down and continued on for another five minutes after going past the tall wall’s entryway, before eventually coming to a halt.

They then heard light knocks against the door, and Shin Hahn-Sung’s voice telling them that they had arrived.

“We should disembark here, then.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah sent him a signal with her eyes and climbed out of the coach first.

Seol was about to follow after her, only to promptly realise why she sent him such a signal. Yun Seo-Rah was still holding onto his arm, that was why.

“I should get going now. Thank you for the past three months. It’s been fun.” (Seol)

How could she block him, since he was trying to go home? When he carefully extracted his arm, she didn’t try to stop him. But, only until his wrist, though.

Just as Seol’s right hand was about to leave her grasp, she carefully held onto him.

“Uhm…” (Yun Seo-Rah)

“M, Miss Yun Seo-Rah?” (Seol)

"…I'd like to see you again." (Yun Seo-Rah)

Unlike before, she let her desire be heard in a clear voice.

The first time he met her, her eyes seemed so cold and distant, yet for them to be this wet with emotions – Seol felt rather lost and hesitated slightly.

"Yes, me too." (Seol)

Only then did she let his arm go. She never stopped looking at him even until the moment he finally left the coach for good. Seol closed the door behind him while licking his dried lips.

'It's like I'm abandoning a kid or something… ' (Seol)

The coach started and moved away. Seol's gaze continued to linger on the back of the coach as it slowly gained distance, before turning away to take in the sights of Scheherazade, the most prosperous city within the territory controlled by humanity.

Kim Hahn-Nah was waving her hand at him from the top of a stone staircase. And Seol could see behind her a spire so tall and upright, it seemed to pierce the heavens above.

While mounting the steps, Seol realised that the spire, or the tower, was made up of a strange construction material that emitted this pale hue that didn't seem quite right to be called white.

"That is the temple of Luxuria. Out of the seven gods, she's the one in charge of healing skills used by the Priests." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Upon hearing that, Seol could see that countless people going in and out of the entranceway supported by huge pillars. Most of them were wearing the same ice-white robe Maria wore when she prepared herself for the Ceremony.

"In that case, could Maria be still here?" (Seol)

"I think she's already left, though? Well, her recovery has ended already, and she can't return to the Neutral Zone, anyways." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"Okay. To where?" (Seol)

“To the South.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah waltzed straight past the entrance. Upon entering, Seol was greeted by long corridors to both his sides, and in front, a slightly darkened assembly hall. He spotted a woman sitting behind a counter of some sort before the hall.

That woman lifted her tired eyes and stared as Kim Hahn-Nah approached her.

“What brings you here?”

“We came to use the transfer gate here.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah presented a piece of paper to this woman.

“A Level 1… The place he’s returning to is Area 1… Oh, it’s his first time using this service?”

“He exited the Neutral Zone today.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Aaah. That’s right. Today was… In any case, we have to establish a new return point, then. Over here!”

The woman read the paper with squinting eyes, before suddenly raising her hand up high. An Asian man with black hair appeared from somewhere beyond the corridor and hurriedly came over. The reception lady (?) asked this new guy.

“You’re from the Area 1, correct?”

“Yes.”

When she asked while handing over a piece of paper, the Asian man nodded his head.

“Then, help me to set the coordinates.”

“Let’s see. Area 1, Seoul, the district of Seodaemun, the suburb of Hongeun… Ah, this shouldn’t be too hard.”

The Asian man smiled.

“I have a place in the suburb of Eungam, you see.”

“I’ll be relying on you, then. And, also…”

The woman stared straight at Seol.

“You weren’t planning to head back to Earth looking like that, yes?”

“We’d like to utilise the storage service.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah replied as if it was par for the course.

“Since you’re Level 1, it’s for free. Here. Please use room number 8. You know how it works, yes?”

“I’ve explained to him already.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“You’re a commendable guide, then.”

The woman handed over a small key with a plaque while looking rather relieved.

Seol received the key and walked down the path to his right. The interior further in was divided into several tall floors with walls glowing in an amber hue. And he saw many doors, each easily exceeding over two metres in height. He found a door with a silver ‘8’ shining on the front and entered the room.

The items of the Lost Paradise couldn’t be taken back to Earth, with the exception of a few. Which meant that he had to store his things away before leaving, and temples happened to be the most secure place to do so. While the asking fee was exorbitant, as his stuff would be protected by the divine power, the security was pretty much the best out there.

However, only up to Level 2 could use this service for free. Once he became a Level 3, at which point he’d be considered as an actual, true combat force, he’d have to spend something called ‘achievement records’ if he wanted to use either the transfer gate or the storage service.

He propped his two spears against the wall, and took off his armours. He still had the clothes he wore from Earth, but they were far too tattered now. What a relief it was, since Kim Hahn-Nah and her discerning fashion sense brought along some clothes and underwear for his usage.

‘I forgot to thank her.’ (Seol)

Seol finished getting dressed and checked his items one last time. He had to leave behind Elixirs as well as the Divine Stigmata. He was slightly worried about them being stolen, but since a god was personally protecting the temple, he thought he should believe the security of this place for now.

He finished sorting through his articles and left the storage room before locking the door. The silver ‘8’ on the door then changed its colour to gold. From here onwards, only Seol could open this door. Even if someone else came in possession of the door’s key, it would still not open.

While walking on the corridor, Seol fell into a deep thought.

He couldn’t really believe that he was returning to Earth this easily. Why? Back inside the dream, ‘he’ couldn’t return to Earth even after a considerable length of time passed by since his departure from the Neutral Zone. The dream version of him missed home a lot during the early part of his life here. Was this yet another difference between Contracted and Invited?

Seol couldn’t help but feel a bit of regret. He may have accepted the fact that he had to leave the Neutral Zone. But, leaving behind the attachments formed through interactions proved to be another problem altogether.

‘What are the kids doing now, I wonder?’

Did they sign their contracts alright? They probably wanted to go back home, too. Should he have waited for them to finish and leave together?

At least, he should’ve said goodbyes before leaving. He only signaled to them with his eyes because he didn’t want to disturb them, but now, he was feeling a bit of regret doing that.

When Seol got back to the reception, the Asian man was no longer there. Only Kim Hahn-Nah and the reception lady (?) were waiting for him.

The lady beckoned the youth to come closer.

“Show me the back of your hand, please.”

When Seol wordlessly presented his left hand, she placed another paper with a complicated diagram drawn on its surface there and pressed it tightly to his skin.

"And with this, your return coordinates have been set. Whenever you use the transfer gate from here onwards, you will always arrive at the address you provided us. If you plan to move house, you need to tell us right away. Or we might end up causing an unnecessary chaos on Earth."

"I understand." (Seol)

Seol replied and returned the key. Kim Hahn-Nah explained previously that he needed to do that once he was done with storing his items. The lady opened her eyes slightly wider before giving him a slip with a number '8' written on it.

"Hmm… I'm sure you heard the explanations already, but still, don't forget to take good care of this slip. And also, you know that, after retrieving your stored items, you need to confirm the colour of the number on the door, yes?"

"Yes. From gold to silver." (Seol)

"Correct. If the colour remains gold, that means you left something behind. Unless you wish to extend the period of the storage service, things will get mighty complicated for both sides, so please, check thoroughly."

The reception lady (?) sounded rather resentful about something. She then handed two more pieces of paper to Seol.

"One of these is used when you wish to return to the Paradise. You've performed missions back in the Neutral Zone, so you should know that when you tear this in half, a transfer portal will open for you. People who doesn't possess any Markings whatsoever won't be able to see the portal nor feel its presence, but still, I recommend finding a quiet place with no one else nearby."

"What about the other one…?" (Seol)

"It's the list of items you can bring back from Earth. It's your first time, so peruse the list and familiarise yourself with the contents."

Seol carefully tucked both papers inside his pocket.

“Whew, whew, whew, whew! All finished! Now then, you just need to sign over here…”

The lady pushed forward yet another paper, a document this time, for Seol to sign while sounding as if they were finally near the finish line. It was a non-disclosure agreement, forbidding Seol from revealing anything even remotely related to the Lost Paradise to other people on Earth.

Such an agreement was also covered by the divine powers, so the moment it was signed, the god’s powers ensured that the terms would be enforced no matter what. One could tell how much thought had been given to maintaining the secrecy.

He already knew as much from the dream. And Kim Hahn-Nah explained it too during the coach ride, so Seol signed the document without too much fuss. Honestly, there were a few things that irritated him slightly. But as these processes had to be performed for someone wanting to use the transfer gate for the first time, he said nothing and endured.

“Very good. Please head inside the assembly area behind me and use the gate there.”

Finally, he was allowed to leave.

“You finished much faster than I thought.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Well, there wasn’t anything too complicated, after all.” (Seol)

“Okay, let’s go.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah stepped forward first.

“……”

Just before he entered the assembly hall, Seol took the last lingering look behind him and sighed out softly. But, before he could enter…

SFX for rushed footsteps

Suddenly, echoes of hurried footsteps rang out, and…

“Wait for me!” (Yun Seo-Rah)

…And, a familiar voice called out to him.

Seol turned around in surprise. Kim Hahn-Nah too was rather puzzled as well.

“Why is she here…?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

They saw her leave with the coach not too long ago, so…

The woman supporting her body with her arm against the wall near the entrance while panting heavily was none other than Yun Seo-Rah.

She looked relieved after finding out that Seol hadn’t left yet. She regulated her heavy breathing, swallowed her saliva, and shouted out a question.

“Your name!” (Yun Seo-Rah)

“?”

“Please… tell me your name!” (Yun Seo-Rah)

Seol’s expression hardened considerably, then.

“Seo…”

His mouth opened reflexively, before closing shut again. His lips quivered uncontrollably.

“Seol…”

“But that… Isn’t that your surname?” (Yun Seo-Rah)

He was about to say his name was Seol. But suddenly, his eyes grew wider and wider.

His heart was beating wildly now. His sight blurred.

“B, but, how?” (Seol)

“When you entered the second floor in the Tutorial, there was an alert. I heard your name then, but I forgot… The alert said, Mister Seol…… something, had arrived on the second floor.” (Yun Seo-Rah)

“Ah.”

So, in the end, someone did hear the alert.

“I always thought it was strange. Your name was definitely three words, yet you kept calling yourself ‘Seol’ all the time…” (Yun Seo-Rah)

“T, that is…” (Seol)

Her words hit the bullseye, and Seol began stuttering.

“You name… Can you please tell me your full name?” (Yun Seo-Rah)

Seol closed his eyes shut.

Quite inexplicably, the days he spent in the Neutral Zone brushed past his consciousness.

In the mornings, he ate breakfast with Yi Surl-Ah, Yi Sung-Jin, and Yun Seo-Rah.

Then, he met with his teammates on the first floor and discussed the day’s schedule and battle tactics.

They did their best to complete various missions.

When they successfully cleared missions, they would head off to a lounge and chat over refreshing drinks.

He sometimes met with Shin Sahng-Ah and Hyun Sahng-Min, and asked them how they were doing.

He then returned to his quarters, share the day’s activities with his roommates, before falling asleep……

Didn’t matter how many times he recalled them, those were good memories.

When he opened his eyes, he found Yun Seo-Rah quietly waiting for him, her breathing now normal.

“M, my name, it’s…” (Seol)

His throat dried up. If his heart pounded any harder, it might explode out of his chest.

It'd be three, maybe four years since he willingly revealed his full name.

An all-too familiar sensation of vertigo finally left him, allowing Seol to take a deep breath.

His trembling lips parted and let the air out.

"My name is…" (Seol)

And, finally…

Seol…

"…Ji-Hu."

…Was now Seol Ji-Hu.

"My name is Seol Ji-Hu."

He stared straight at Yun Seo-Rah and smiled dimly.

✧✧✧

As he was walking past the assembly hall and towards the gate.

"Was there a reason to hesitate telling her your full name?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah asked him.

"Now that I think about it, I was getting kind of curious, too. Why did you always say your name was Seol? I mean, that's your surname, right?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol Ji-Hu kept on walking resolutely for a while, before slowly opening his mouth.

"…I was Seol."

"Ng?"

“For the last 3-4 years, I was Seol.”

Kim Hahn-Nah’s expression reflected how confused she was. She wouldn’t know, of course. It was the story from the days when he was still addicted to gambling, after all.

His family disowned him.

His title gradually changed from ‘son’ to ‘idiot’, then to ‘b*stard’, then finally, even a ‘lying as*hole’. In the end, never mind being referred to his name, he wasn’t even treated like a human being anymore.

The distance between him and his love also widened.

And he even got called a son of a b*tch by her.

Before he knew it, no one was calling him by his name.

And he stopped telling others what his full name was, too.

Only that, back in the casino, some people called out to him using Mister Seol, Seol hyung, etc, etc.

And so, Seol began accepting that as his name.

“Mm… Okay. So, why did you decide to reveal your full name, then?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol Ji-Hu momentarily stopped walking.

“Not sure.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

His gaze drifted up to the ceiling, unable to come up with a sound explanation even though he tried.

“I’m not sure. It’s just…” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“Just?”

“I thought that, now I can… No, maybe I can’t be certain of that, but…” (Seol Ji-Hu)

Seol Ji-Hu slowly lowered his gaze back down.

“At least, I thought that, if it’s Miss Yun Seo-Rah…” (Seol Ji-Hu)

He swept up the back of his long hair and smiled wryly.

“……I should be able to tell her my name without being embarrassed about it.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

Chapter 42
Spilled Milk (1)

“I’ve deposited some money into your bank account.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Just as they arrived near the transfer gate, Kim Hahn-Nah told Seol Ji-Hu.

He had been dazedly looking at the massive oval-shaped portal and was caught off-guard. His eyes widened in surprise.

“Money? But, I haven’t…” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“It’s not the contract signing fee. You’ll only get that after signing the contract, of course.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah cut him off before he went any further.

“Just think of it as a small gift from me saying thanks. I’ll be able to move around a bit easier now all thanks to you.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Uh, sure… But, is it okay for me to receive this money?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“Of course. This is the reward that you totally deserve, so don’t sweat it and spend as you like.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Uhm, thanks.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“What do you mean, thanks? I should be the one thanking you. Anyways, go confirm it once you arrive on the other side. I’ve taken only a little bit out of my own allowance, so don’t get your hopes up too much. In any case, there are things you gotta take care of first, am I right?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

She was right about that. Not only did he have financial debt to pay for, there were so many other forms of debt he had to clear up, too.

“Thanks, I appreciate it.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“Okay. You can spend it in any shape or form you want, but put out the urgent fires first, okay? Not on useless stuff. Making sure that there won’t be any trouble back on Earth is one of the tenets the Earthlings must adhere to.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol Ji-Hu stood before the gate. The blue-coloured substance gently waving in front of him emitted a blindingly arresting light.

“It should be around the middle of April when you return. I’ll spend another day here before going back to Earth. I’ll give you a call in… about eight hours later in the Earth time.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol Ji-Hu’s attention was focused solely on the portal in front of him, and he could just barely nod his head to show he had heard her, before he cautiously stepped forward to enter. Almost right away, the back of his left hand began emitting bright light, and then, an even brighter light, powerful enough to blind the onlookers, swallowed him.

As the youth was gradually enveloped by the brilliant light, Kim Hahn-Nah shouted out while waving her hand.

“You better answer my call, okay? If you don’t, I’m gonna march straight to your home! Seol Ji-Hu!” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

As the sensation of being sucked in took over, Seol Ji-Hu closed his eyes.

✧✧✧

When he opened his eyes, he could see the familiar sight of his rented room.

He was inwardly worried whether he could really come back home, and that he’d not end up in some weird destination instead, but the end result was a resounding success. Seol Ji-Hu didn’t know who that man was, but that guy definitely did calculate the coordinates accurately.

His relief lasted only for a brief moment, however. Seol Ji-Hu frowned deeply and covered his nose. A seriously foul stench suddenly assaulted his senses, that was why. When he swept his gaze around, he couldn’t help let out a shocked gasp. This place was an utter mess.

He opened the windows to let the fresh air in. Seol Ji-Hu took a deep breath and wordlessly studied the streets outside. He spotted college students giggling and talking among themselves as they walked, a taxi slowly driving down the hill…

'I'm back.'

He could more or less appreciate the fact that he was back on Earth for real.

'What time is it?'

Seol Ji-Hu instinctively rummaged through his pockets only to realise that his phone was nowhere to be found.

"…Ah."

He remembered that the mobile phone was one of the items prohibited from entering the Paradise. Which meant that it had been left behind in front of Yu Seon-Hwah's place a month ago. He probably left his bank card there as well.

Thinking of confirming the time, Seol Ji-Hu had no choice but to switch his old laptop on. It was thickly coated with dust, but thankfully, it turned on without a problem.

17th April, Monday
09:14:07 AM

'I was summoned on the 16th of March… '

It seemed that the time difference between the Earth and the Paradise being around 1 to 3 was correct. Now that he confirmed the time, Seol fell into a slight dilemma.

'What should I do now?'

It wasn't that he had nothing to do, but he had way too many things to do, instead.

There was a reason why Kim Hahn-Nah told him to come back to Earth. She demanded that he made sure accessing the Paradise from Earth would be a trouble-free affair

moving on. If he was reported as missing for some reason, then there would be a lot of headaches for everyone involved.

In that regard, one could say that Seol Ji-Hu was already able to move around quite freely. Unless he was the one contacting them first, his family or Yu Seon-Hwah would never call him on their own volition. They hadn't called him in the last few years, after all. Even his close friends stopped talking to him a long time ago.

'…Wait, that's not something to be happy about, is it.'

He needed to right all the wrongs he committed, one by one. And in order to do so, he needed money. He could now understand why Kim Hahn-Nah left him with some cash.

'Okay, firstly… '

Seol Ji-Hu connected to the internet wirelessly. He accessed his bank account online, and when he saw the amount there, he gasped out in shock.

"What?! ₩150 million?!" *(TL: In dollars, around $133,000)*

It was a sum with seven zeroes. He was thinking of a couple thousand bucks, so this amount completely shocked him.

"What the heck… That woman, she said it's from her allowance, so how come…"

Since he didn't know how much Kim Hahn-Nah made in a month, or how much her combined asset could be, perhaps it wasn't that strange for him to react in this manner.

Seol Ji-Hu continued to look at the laptop's monitor and not long after that, spotted the transaction history of Yu Seon-Hwah transferring ₩2 million. That sobered him up in an instant. *(TL: around $1,766)*

He did return the money on that day, but he had 'borrowed' from her lots more besides that amount. When he checked the transaction history for the past three, four years, a bitter chuckle escaped from his mouth.

'I gotta pay her back first.'

It took him quite a bit of time to tally up every cent he owed, but he persevered and carried on.

‘Dad paid back around ₩28 million… Mom, ₩16 million… Hyung lent me 2.2 mil… My younger sister, Jin-Heui, 600 thousand… Ah, right. I stole her notebook and her car too, didn’t I?’

He had already sold that notebook at a flea market, and he left that car in a pawn shop near the casino. As the details of his past wrongdoings reared their ugly heads in his head, his guilty conscience swelled up uncontrollably. He might end up paying back more than necessary, but he didn’t want to ask anything from them in return.

He finalised the amount he took from Yu Seon-Hwah and got a nasty shock.

‘I, I borrowed this much from her?’

Even a casual calculation said it was around 46 million. He had no idea during the time when he was taking small bites here and there, but now that he finished tallying them up, the amount was no laughing matter at all.

‘Where would she even find that much money to being with… ’

Seol Ji-Hu sighed. Suddenly, the amount of ₩150 million seemed rather inadequate. Of course, he wasn’t going to hold back here. After all, only by resolving all of his previous financial indiscretions, would he be able to properly move on and take the first step in his new life.

‘In any case, I don’t even have a phone or my bank card… ’

If there was a silver lining here, then that would be him having only his phone and the lone bank card he frequently used on person that day. He managed to dig out his nearly-forgotten wallet from the corner of his room and put on his shoes, before taking his leave.

The first place he stopped by was the bank. He immediately got a new card to replace the lost one, and paid in full ₩30 million he borrowed from the money lenders. And then, he withdrew the rest of ₩120 million in cash. He got 24 bundles of ₩50 thousand bills, each bundle containing 100 notes.

He grabbed a taxi as soon as exiting the bank.

He had taken care of the most urgent fire first.

His pockets were full, too.

His next destination?

Obviously, it was the casino.

✧✧✧

As soon as he arrived at the Seol-ark Land Casino, Seol Ji-Hu asked the security staff to ban him permanently from entering the premises.

Fearing that he might run into someone who recognised him there, he hurriedly stopped by the nearby pawn shop to recover the car. The interest had piled up pretty high, but he was happy enough to get the car back. His little sister used to go on and on about driving, so their father went and bought this car for her when she got admitted to a very famous university. It may not have been an expensive model, but it had a sentimental value.

Now that he had a car, he no longer needed a taxi. While driving back to the family home, he stopped by at a computer store and bought the latest, top-of-the-line notebook as well.

Seol Ji-Hu parked the car at an adequate-enough place, and he walked up to the front gate of the family's house as his heart pounded away.

He saw the doorbell, but his hands didn't want to rise up.

He briefly entertained the idea of leaving everything behind here and just leave before he was seen. He didn't think about the possibility of this event happening, but now that he was here, he no longer felt confident enough to face his family.

He spent the next several dozen minutes in front of the house. His hands repeatedly rose up to the bell before falling back down again. In the end, though, Seol Ji-Hu took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

Maybe his knocking was too soft, because there was no reaction.

'Maybe no one's home?'

He swallowed his saliva and slowly keyed in the door code. He then heard the gate

unlock.

He cautiously stepped inside the building, but then, he had to come to an abrupt stop. A man wearing a pair of glasses stood on the stairs to the second floor and was looking back at him with an unfriendly expression on his face.

“H, hyung.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

He was Seol Woo-Seok, his older brother.

“Y, you haven’t left for work yet…?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“……”

Seol Woo-Seok glared at him, before silently turning around and went back upstairs.

Slam!!

Soon, the sound of a door slamming shut that was loud enough to make Seol Ji-Hu flinch, resounded out.

‘…But, of course.’

His expectations took a knock just now, but then again, he was in no position to expect anything else to begin with. He still wanted to apologise, though. He figured that it’d be for the best to finish his thing and leave as soon as possible.

He placed an envelope filled with money in front of Seol Woo-Seok’s room, and then headed straight to his little sister’s room.

He found Seol Jin-Heui sound asleep on her bed wearing nothing but a sleeveless shirt and an underwear. She was drooling, too.

‘Yeah, skipping Monday morning lectures was an important ritual for her, wasn’t it.’

Regardless, she possessed keen senses. So, he very carefully pulled the sheets to cover her up, then placed the notebook on her desk. He pulled out the car keys and ₩5 million and tucked them inside her handbag, too. And just as he was about to creep out of her room…

“Hey, you.” (Jin-Heui)

Her voice still sounded sleepy, but at the same time, it was also definitely not friendly.

“What do you want?” (Jin-Heui)

Accompanied by the sounds of fabric rustling, Seol Jin-Heui kicked the sheets and got up. Seol Ji-Hu flinched slightly.

“Y, you were awake?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“I said, what do you want? How dare you enter someone’s room without permission?” (Jin-Heui)

She stepped away from the bed and strode towards him, before her eyes fell on her desk.

“I was wondering what the hell you were doing… You came here to give me this?” (Jin-Heui)

“Uh? Uh, yeah.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

Seol Jin-Heui began frowning as if seeing his face made her nauseous.

“Stop making me laugh.” (Jin-Heui)

She suddenly grabbed the notebook and threw it away hard. It landed on the ground with a loud thud and bounced around.

“Take it and get lost.” (Jin-Heui)

“W, wait. Jin-Heui-*ah…*” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“Jin-Heui-ah, my foot. I don’t care, so get the hell out of here, right now!!” (Jin-Heui)

She stomped in closer to Seol Ji-Hu and angrily pushed him. He wasn’t planning to resist her to begin with, so he backpedalled several times before landing hard on his b**t.

Not even bothering to see if he was hurt or not, she snorted derisively and picked up

her handbag.

“What a f*cking laughable man you are. What’s the matter? Did you win some money in that casino or something? Why would a d*mn thief like you think about his little sister out of the blue?” (Jin-Heui)

Her expression remained mocking as she took a look inside, and then…

“??”

She saw the bundle of notes amounting to ₩5 million as well as the car keys, and she cocked up an eyebrow. She blinked a couple of times, and then, lifted her head.

“Big brother?” (Jin-Heui)

She wasn’t speaking to Seol Ji-Hu.

Before anyone had noticed it, Seol Woo-Seok was entering the room. With an envelop in his hand.

He was worried that Seol Ji-Hu might cause a problem and quickly came here, but upon encountering a situation that could be described as the total opposite to what he was worried about, all he could do was to alternate his gaze between his siblings.

“…What is this?” (Seol Woo-Seok)

His voice sounded hard, firm. He threw the envelope on the floor, causing the bills inside to spill out. Seol Jin-Heui’s eyes opened up wider.

“What, what the hell?! How much is this?” (Jin-Heui)

She began counting, then her jaw nearly dropped to the floor.

“50 mil…” (Jin-Heui)

And then, she looked back into the handbag.

“55 million?!” (Jin-Heui)

There was the car keys, too. And the notebook, as well.

“Hi-ya~. You really hit jackpot, didn’t you?” (Jin-Heui)

“Jin-Heui-ah. Return everything back to him.” (Seol Woo-Seok)

When Seol Woo-Seok spoke in a cold tone, Seol Jin-Heui shot a glare at him.

“Why? Are you mad?” (Jin-Heui)

“It’s obvious. He got this money through gambling.” (Seol Woo-Seok)

“It’s still money, isn’t it? No! I won’t give it back!” (Jin-Heui)

Seol Woo-Seok reached out to snatch the cash away from her grasp, but she yanked away the handbag and the envelope with money in it, before shoving them both underneath her clothes to hug them tightly.

“Seol Jin-Heui!!” (Seol Woo-Seok)

“What?!” (Jin-Heui)

“You really want that dirty money?” (Seol Woo-Seok)

“Dirty or not, this money rightly belongs to this family! It belongs to us in the first place, don’t you get that? Don’t you know how much dad and mom are struggling nowadays?” (Jin-Heui)

When the two Seol siblings’ emotions began running high, Seol Ji-Hu hurriedly intervened and separated them apart. He didn’t come here to watch them fight. He at least needed to resolve this misunderstanding before doing anything else.

“Hyung, Jin-Heui-ah, You guys got it wrong. I didn’t get that money through gambling.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

Seol Jin-Heui stopped arguing with her oldest brother, and spun her head to face him.

“F*ck off.” (Jin-Heui)

She snorted as if the whole notion genuinely made her laugh.

“If you were planning to lie, then make it more convincing, okay? Ah, maybe you stole

this? Did you rob a bank or something?" (Jin-Heui)

"I'm telling you the truth." (Seol Ji-Hu)

Seol Ji-Hu pleaded with a frustrated expression on his face.

"I stopped gambling. I've already asked the casino to ban me from entering the place. And the money's from a commission… No, it's from the work I did." (Seol Ji-Hu)

"You stopped gambling?" (Jin-Heui)

"A lifetime ban from entering the casino?" (Seol Woo-Seok)

Seol Woo-Seok and Seol Jin-Heui asked at the same time.

"I stopped gambling about a month ago. And today, I came here straight after asking Seok-ark Land to permanently ban me from stepping foot in that place. Please believe me." (Seol Ji-Hu)

Seol Ji-Hu explained as clearly as he could. However, it wasn't the issue of them not understanding him, but rather, everything to do with trust.

"So, what you're saying is, you stopped gambling, you voluntarily asked to be permanently banned, and this money is legit, is that right?" (Seol Woo-Seok)

As if he found the idea just too unbelievable, Seol Woo-Seok asked again.

"Stop f*cking wasting my time, okay? You think I'll fall for your lies again?" (Jin-Heui)

Seol Jin-Heui retorted derisively.

"Oh, so, when we begged you to get the entry ban, you didn't even pretend to listen. And when we tried to do it for you instead, didn't you throw an almighty tantrum? You expect us to believe you now?" (Jin-Heui)

"Jin-Heui-ah…" (Seol Ji-Hu)

"Hah? How dare you make that face in front of me?! What? You thought that, just because you brought home some money, I'd start fawning all over you or something? You thought I'd start calling you oppa again? Stop dreaming, you b*stard. This is this,

and that is that. This money is something that belongs to this family to begin with!" (Jin-Heui)

Seol Woo-Seok cut his little sister off there.

"…I'll confirm it." (Woo-Seok)

His glare was full of suspicion as he switched on his smartphone. Three, four ringings later, Seol Woo-Seok opened his mouth.

"Is this the Seol-ark Land? Yes, yes. I'd like to ask for a person to be banned from entering your… Ah, I'm his older brother. His name is Seol Ji-Hu… Come again?" (Woo-Seok)

Seol Woo-Seok's voice became progressively louder.

"He asked to be permanently banned? Today? He himself did?" (Woo-Seok)

Seol Jin-Heui quietly listened from the side and became dazed herself.

"In, in that case, is it possible to find out when was the last time he entered your… Yes, the last time… It was the sixteenth of March?!" (Woo-Seok)

A short while later, Seol Woo-Seok hung up. Seol Jin-Heui's attitude had softened a tad, but she still continued to glare at Seol Ji-Hu.

Seol Woo-Seok spoke up as if he was still unconvinced.

"…I still can't believe this." (Woo-Seok)

"Hyung. Really, I…" (Seol Ji-Hu)

"No, wait. Fine. Let's say you were telling the truth. Then, just where did you get this money from?" (Woo-Seok)

"Uh? That, that's from…" (Seol Ji-Hu)

"I heard that Seon-Hwah gave you 2 million a month ago." (Woo-Seok)

He knew about that? Seol Ji-Hu could only open and close his mouth, unable to say

anything.

“I also heard that you returned everything later that night, too… You had not a single coin to your name, so how can you earn this much money in a month without resorting to gambling? Not only that, you brought a notebook and the car keys, too.” (Woo-Seok)

They were rather sharp and pointed questions. Even Seol Jin-Heui found it strange after hearing them.

“Wait, isn’t that the top gaming notebook? That’s incredibly expensive, too…” (Jin-Heui)

She began taking a closer look at the thrown notebook, and sure enough, her suspicion grew even stronger.

Seol Ji-Hu realised his mistake, then. Should he chalk this one to his desires getting the better of him? He remembered his little sister loved to play games, so he shelled out over ₩3 million to buy the best gaming notebook found in the shop. How could he have ever guessed that the d*mn thing would end up being a potential source of trouble?

‘What should I do now?’ (Seol Ji-Hu)

In the end, he had no choice but to bluff his way out of this one. If he hesitated and wasted time here, they would start suspecting him with something else completely unrelated.

“That’s why I’m here today, to talk to you about what’s going on.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

He carefully squeezed out each and every single word. If he just said whatever that came to his mind, they would latch onto the holes in his story pretty quickly. So, Seol Ji-Hu cautiously chose what he wanted to say.

“I was introduced to a job through a person I know. It pays quite well.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“Just what kind of work pays this much?” (Jin-Heui)

“Oh, that. I got lucky, that’s all. Something big happened and I received a large bonus.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“…Horse racing? Or sports betting?” (Woo-Seok)

“Hyung, no.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“If not, then lottery?” (Woo-Seok)

Seol Ji-Hu rubbed his face. He got to confirm one more time what his family thought about him. But, how could he blame them? He deserved it, after all.

“This money has nothing to do with gambling.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“You. Can you repeat everything you said in front of mom and dad?” (Woo-Seok)

Doing that was a part of Seol Ji-Hu’s original plan, but it had changed now. His hyung or his little sister might not be able to spot the fault in the story, but he could foresee his father asking many uncomfortable questions already.

“I’d like to do that, but I must be on my way.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“He’ll be home, soon.” (Woo-Seok)

“It’s only because I’m really busy, you know? I was working outside the office today, that’s why I’m here. So, please, speak to dad about me. Please?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“What do you want me to say to him?” (Woo-Seok)

“Very soon, I’ll be going out of town for a while. The duration could be as much as one, maybe over two months. You won’t be able to contact me during that time, but don’t worry about me.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

He managed to explain, albeit just barely. Both hyung and his little sister still seemed confused, but there was no helping it. Seol Ji-Hu couldn’t tell them anything concrete even if he wanted to.

“I gotta go. I’m running behind schedule. I’ll come by next time to properly greet mom and dad.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

Seol Ji-Hu forced out a smile and bade his goodbyes. He opened the door, climbed down the flight of stairs, and opened the front door.

But, until he closed the door…

Never mind trying to stop him, he couldn't even hear them call out his name. Of course, he used the excuse of being busy, but still…

"……"

For some reason, he felt like all his vigour was leaving his body.

[*You thought that just because you brought home some money, I'd start fawning all over you or something?*]

His sister's words, spoken to him when his mind was in too much of chaos to hear her, finally landed their lethal blow.

As if they knew that he deserved the pain, the blow landed real hard and deep.

'I wanted to… apologise properly… ' (Seol Ji-Hu)

He was too busy coming up with excuses that he couldn't even get to say sorry once.

His first step didn't work out as he wanted to, but he still had one more person to apologise to.

Seol's head remained lowered as he trudged towards the nearest subway station.

His shoulders drooped powerlessly, too.

Chapter 43
Spilled Milk (2)

Seol Ji-Hu continued to wander aimlessly on a certain street.

Not because he didn't know what he wanted to do… he was hesitant. Hesitation gripped him tightly and prevented him from taking that last step.

For a while, he walked the same street over and over again. Eventually, his steps cautiously slowed to a stop as if he was standing on slippery ice. And while standing still, he took a look inside a certain coffee shop through its front window.

His gaze was directed beyond the tables and chairs, to a young woman preparing coffee beyond the counter.

She was Yu Seon-Hwah.

…She was truly beautiful.

Her clear eyes seemed to imply how honest she was; the light shining within those eyes was calm yet passionate; her slender hands cautiously handled the hot water; the soft and warm radiance whenever she smiled…

Was that guy confessing to her? A man receiving a mug of coffee from her hesitantly pushed forward his phone. Yu Seon-Hwah's eyes opened up a little wider, but she still managed to shake her head softly enough for her neatly-tucked-in hair to gently brush her neck.

The man still tried to present her with his phone, but only after she bowed her waist did he withdraw his disappointed hand. Even though she seemed a bit troubled, never once did Yu Seon-Hwah lose her charming smile.

The shop's door issued a ring, and the rejected man walked out.

Seeing that man's back trudge away, Seol Ji-Hu felt a certain amount of unexplainable deja vu.

He took in several breaths and reached out towards the door handle, only to freeze on the spot again.

He would've reached the door if he let his hand inch forward just a little bit more. However, the distance between himself and the door to the shop suddenly felt so wide and impossible to close, and it grabbed hold of him tightly.

"……"

In the end, he withdrew his hand and placed it on his chest. That was when he felt it.

…His pounding heart.

His fear.

✧✧✧

The tables would be filled with patrons right past the lunch hour. But, after four in the afternoon, the shop would usually become less crowded.

After the man who had been occupying a certain table for a long time finally left, a waitress finished tidying up his table, returned to the counter, and began speaking to her co-workers.

"Body, six points."

Then, another waitress who was busy with wiping clean one of the display shelves, began laughing her head off.

"Wow, how generous of you. Face, three points."

"Fashion sense, five points."

Finally, a different waitress stopped organising the vibration bells and chimed in as if she was waiting for this chance. She then clicked her tongue.

"A total of 14 points. How unfortunate, but rejected!"

"Girls?!" (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Yu Seon-Hwah stopped operating the POS terminal and turned around to face the waitresses. They stopped their chat and then, began giggling non-stop.

Seeing this Yu Seon-Hwah slowly shook her head.

“It’s not that much fun, though.” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

“Eii, unni should stop being coy, you know? We all know that you’re secretly enjoying this.”

“What do you mean, enjoying what? I just find it a little troubling, that’s all. If you continue to…” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

“That’s only because you’re such a stonewall, you know? By the way, Manager Yu? Wasn’t that second person to confess today?”

“It was ten people last week… At this rate, we might have a new record?”

Seeing three waitresses chat among themselves in clear excitement, Yu Seon-Hwah could only sigh softly to herself.

The truth was, she was blessed with outstanding beauty, so there were quite a few men who would approach her and ask her out during the day.

Also, there would be no man alive who would simply walk by disinterested after hearing her comforting voice and the way she gracefully carried herself.

Such events kept occuring every single day, so the three girls working as part-time waitresses here began assigning points to all the potential suitors asking her out.

One of them was tasked with the body, another one with the face, while the last girl, with the so-called fashion sense. They began critiquing without anyone’s permission; they even arbitrarily decided that the top combined points should be 30, too.

Of course, Yu Seon-Hwah told them to stop and behave themselves, but in a strange twist of logic, the girls began arguing in their defence that, if any guy wished to date their respected manager, then he had to score at least 24 points or higher.

As an aside, out of hundreds of men who tried their luck, 25 had been the highest score so far. For something these girls started as a bit of joke, as a way to kill some time, the

three of them were rather strict in their judging criteria.

In any case, Yu Seon-Hwah herself wanted this critique panel to disband with immediate effect. After all, no matter how careful these girls were, there was bound to be a slip-up sooner or later, and the customer might overhear them, which would naturally lead to a huge headache.

“Ohh! We might have our third candidate for the day!”

“Where, where?”

“Right outside. Look, there he is. He’s been standing there for the past hour or so, hesitating like that.”

“You’re right. Should we take a closer look?”

They only pretended to listen to her and never really tried to heed her warnings.

Seeing the three girls huddle around and began whispering amongst each other, Yu Seon-Hwah decided to ignore them completely. The owner of the shop often called the girls ‘the three no-answer stooges’ and at this very moment, she sort of understood where that sentiment was coming from.

In the meantime, one of the girls with an arrogant expression studied the youth outside, before suddenly going “Hul?” and blinked her eyes several times.

The guy outside was tall. His chest and biceps were sturdy. He possessed the type of a body that this girl preferred, the one where the muscles were tough yet agile and smooth without looking like a bodybuilder’s. The girl’s lips loosened in a foolish grin.

“Hi~ya. His b**t and his waist are so dreamy! Body, ten points!”

She then turned her head towards another girl rubbing her chin like an arrogant old man. This girl had a really high standard and so far, never had issued a single nine pointer, never mind the perfect ten. It was not for nothing she was tasked with judging the face.

“…Hmm, he’s okay. Eight points.”

“I knew you’d do that!”

“Knew what?”

“I knew that you like guys with softer, more delicate looks.”

“What do you mean? Look, that guy’s face is manly enough, don’t you think so?”

She went, *Mm, mm,* nodded her head, and smiled in satisfaction.

“Well, we might have the highest point scorer of all time if this keeps up. So, how about his fashion sense?”

“…Ten points… No, nine. His shoes are a bit of mismatch.”

“Ohh? I get her, but what’s up with you?”

“You know, that top he’s wearing? That one alone should cost a few hundred thousands.” *(TL: In Won, not in dollars.)*

“Hiieck.”

The girls gasped in surprise, before one of them tilted her head.

“Wait a minute, didn’t you say before that you hate name brands?”

“No, it all depends on how you wear the name brands, okay? It’s not the same with you buying the most expensive stuff out there so you can show off, and someone carefully choosing and picking the right combination like him.”

“R, really? I can’t tell.”

“With him, well, I think either a pro coordinator got him to wear those, or he could be someone really interested in fashion. Even though he looks simple and plain on the outside, he can’t fool my eyes. He’s got a killer fashion sense.”

An evaluation that bordered on gushing praises was made.

“Let’s see. 10 points, 8, and 9…”

“27 points! The history has been rewritten!”

The girls clapped their hands, and one of them spun around to look at Yu Seon-Hwah, in the middle of concentrating on her job and not minding whether they were throwing a party or not.

“Unni! Manager! It’s a 27! Finally, we have a guy who can bring down your unwavering wall!”

“…Girls.” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Yu Seon-Hwah’s voice became heavy. There was a limit to her keeping quiet and ignoring them. She finally decided to teach these girls an unforgettable lesson today.

“I told you girls to stop this, didn’t I? How would he feel if he hears you and your……” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Her words blurred and the tone went up the moment her eyes drifted to the outside of the shop. Yu Seon-Hwah froze up in the middle of her speech.

But, that was to be expected. The girls spoke of a guy who could bring down her wall, but that person turned out to be someone who had already done that once.

“…I… Wait. I’ll be back soon.” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Yu Seon-Hwah took off her hat, grabbed her handbag, and hurriedly walked out from behind the counter.

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Ring, the doorbell issued a ring once more.

Seol Ji-Hu stopped wasting time and momentarily held his breath.

Yu Seon-Hwah, still wearing the shop’s uniform, was now standing in front of him.

He felt his entire body, starting from the fingertips, freezing up after being subjected to her cold eyes.

“…You even decided to show up at my place of work.” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

“Seon-Hwah.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“Follow me. I don’t want to raise a fuss here.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

Yu Seon-Hwah declared as so and began walking towards the backstreet without waiting for his consent. He had no choice but to follow after her.

A short while later, Yu Seon-Hwah stopped walking in front and turned around to face him. Seol Ji-Hu too reflexively stopped.

“……”

She stared at him for a long time without saying a word.

Seol Ji-Hu’s head slowly lowered as if he was a criminal who knew his crimes. For some reason… he found it hard to look at her in the eye.

There were only six, maybe seven steps between him and her. However, he sensed this wordless pressure that forbade him getting closer.

The first person to break the silence was Yu Seon-Hwah.

“First of all, take these.” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Seol Ji-Hu received his old bank card and the mobile phone and his expression became slightly dazed.

“T, thanks. I had forgotten about them…” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“You forgot? No, you were just trying to create an excuse for yourself. You were being clever, because I said I’ll call the police.” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

“No, really. I did forget them.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“Stop. Fine. So, why are you here today?” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Her voice remained cold.

“You left behind ₩2 million that night.” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

“…Yeah.”

“Now that you thought about it, you want that money after all, is that it? What? Should I give it to you, then?” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

“N, no. That’s not it. The thing is…” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“Fine. I’ll give you. I’ll give it to you, so…” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Yu Seon-Hwah pulled ₩2 million, cash, from her handbag and thrust them out as if she was about to throw them away. It seemed that she had the cash ready just in case Seol Ji-Hu came to visit her one day.

“Take it, and please leave, right now. I need to go back to work.” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Her voice, filled with resentment and anger, tore into his body and began stabbing his innards like a dagger.

“Take this, and never appear before me ever again.” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

She used to be a kind, loving girlfriend once upon a time.

“This is the last time I’ll turn blind eye. Don’t ever think another cheap ploy like this will work in the future.” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

It felt like she went past the point of despising him and into the realm of hating him now.

‘Get a grip, get a grip… ’ (Seol Ji-Hu)

He stood there, his lips flapping helplessly for a while, before he was able to squeeze out some words with considerable difficulty.

“I’m sorry… for coming to see you during your work.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“?”

“There was something I have to say to you… But, I thought that, if it’s not today, then I won’t be able to… S, so, like, I…” (Seol Ji-Hu)

Seol Ji-Hu began biting his lips. This was not it. This was wrong. Even he could tell this was gibberish. There were so many things he wanted to say to her, but his head

became an untidy mess that was impossible to unravel.

Slowly.

He had to do it, slowly.

Today was the last day.

Unlike with his family, he had to end it with Yu Seon-Hwah today.

Seol Ji-Hu made up his mind once more; only then did some calmness return to his heart.

“I know you’re really busy, but is it possible for us to talk? Ten minutes, five, no, even three minutes will be fine.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“……”

A short bout of silence later, Yu Seon-Hwah retracted the hand carrying the money. He raised his gaze, a little more hopeful, but her eyes remained cold and critical.

“You want to talk?” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

“Yes…”

“Just how many more times do I have to tell you? If you want to talk to me, then go to the casino and apply for a ban there! I told you that I’d consider talking to you afterwards.” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

“I, I already have.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

Seol Ji-Hu quickly replied. Yu Seon-Hwah’s brows pricked up.

“What did you say?” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

“I’ve already applied for the lifetime ban. I did that in the morning before coming here.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“……Hah.”

She let out a long sigh and stared at the sky.

She closed her eyes, and even clicked her tongue. It was as if she was dealing with someone beyond saving. Although she didn't say outright "You are lying, aren't you?" Seol Ji-Hu thought that he could still hear those words.

"I'm telling you the truth. Please believe me." (Seol Ji-Hu)

Yu Seon-Hwah bit her lower lip after hearing him plead. She then pulled her phone out and switched it on.

"Hello? Is this Seol-ark Land counseling office? Ah, hello there. I'm calling you today to ask you for a favour, to confirm the presence of a name in the list of people banned from entering your premises. His name is Seol Ji-Hu…" (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Seeing her confirm the truth by phoning the casino, he felt something bitter rising up in the back of his throat. Just how much pain and misery did he cause back then for his family and Yu Seon-Hwah to have memorised the number for the casino?

"He's already on the list? Today, he himself…?" (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Yu Seon-Hwah's hardened expression crumbled a little.

"T, thank you." (Yu Seon-Hwah)

She ended the call and stared at him with eyes full of distrust.

"You…"

She blinked her eyes quickly and wetted her dry lips.

"…What did you want to talk about?" (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Although it was only by a little, her voice sounded less chilly than before.

This was the final chance, one he'd never have again. Seol Ji-Hu worked up his courage.

"I'm sorry!" (Seol Ji-Hu)

He bowed his waist as much as he could. His gaze was immediately filled with the view

of the concrete.

“What did you say?” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

“I’m truly… truly sorry.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

His left hand held the envelope with money much, much tighter.

“I… know that… I behaved like a son of a b*tch… But, but still, I… I wanted to ask for your forgiveness…” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“……”

“All those times I lied to you… disappointed you… made you go through hell… hurt you with sh*t I said… I wanted to… apologise to you…” (Seol Ji-Hu)

As his words stuttered out, the corners of his eyes began to sting. Seol Ji-Hu gritted his teeth and endured.

“I’m sorry…” (Seol Ji-Hu)

He continued to beg for her forgiveness.

He couldn’t do one of those moving and simple but concise apologies. No, that’d be more like him insulting her dignity.

The longer she remained quiet and the more he spoke, he felt his throat clam up.

“I used to…” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

It was then.

“Yes. I used to hope that a day like today would happen.” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Her quiet but heavy voice entered his brain. He focused all of his being and listened.

“Of course, I reflected a lot, too. I am partially to blame for things turning out this way. I shouldn’t have given you any money when you asked me for the first time. I should’ve listened to your mom and your dad back then.” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Seol Ji-Hu forgot what he wanted to say.

“I… I believed that you’d revert back to how you were some day. And so, I think I waited for you with that single ray of hope until now. No, wait. Maybe this is me making more excuses.” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

He felt like biting his own tongue as her calm, composed voice continued on. He wanted to shout out and say that it was all his fault.

If she was scolding him and pouring out insults like his sister, then perhaps he could’ve endured and accepted her words. But having heard such a calm, composed voice, he simply didn’t know what to do anymore.

Yu Seon-Hwah cautiously asked him.

“Those things you said… Are they all true?” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

“…Yes…” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“You really came here to apologise to me?” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Nod, nod.

“Well, then.” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Yu Seon-Hwah relaxedly walked to where he was, and extended her hand out.

“Then… take this.” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

The moment he saw her pushing the wads of note to him, Seol Ji-Hu got to find out what the taste of despair was like.

“S, Seon-Hwah…” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“Please take it, if you are truly being honest.” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

The emotions reflected in her eyes seemed a little complicated, but that was it.

The reason for her to offer this money to him was quite clear: the severing of the final thread of connection they shared.

“If you truly thought like that, then… Rather than words, please show me with your actions.” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Now, the meaning behind her action changed. It was no longer “Take this and disappear from my sight” but now, “Please, don’t make my life any harder.”

He realised then; there was a deep emotional chasm existing between them that could never be healed again.

Seol Ji-Hu’s neck began trembling as the moment had finally arrived.

He couldn’t accept this money.

The moment he did, then it’d be over for good.

No, it was already over.

He knew this, yet he still couldn’t easily accept the money.

Yu Seon-Hwah let off a soft sigh and in the end, she carefully tucked the money in his pocket.

“Thank you for applying to be banned. I’m sure your parents will be happy to hear that. And Woo-Seok oppa and Jin-Heui, too……” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Yu Seon-Hwah quietly lowered her own eyes after watching him stare at the ground all this time.

“I’m… too tired. I’m a little upset, yes, and to be honest, I don’t think I can sincerely forgive you in the state that I am in.” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

“……”

“However, if you have truly changed back, then… I want you to press forward, work hard, and live well as if you were trying to show me all the progress you’ve made. If so, don’t you think that one day, we would be able to talk to each other with smiles on our faces?” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

…One day.

Yu Seon-Hwah had formed a thick bond with the Seol family when she was still a young child. So, it was rather obvious that he would run into her during family reunions and national holidays in the future.

However, he knew, and she knew too – what she said wasn't meant to imply that they could try one more time.

An unknown amount of time went by.

"…You're right." (Seol Ji-Hu)

Seol Ji-Hu finally forced his head to rise up. His eyes remained fixed to the ground, however.

"Thank you for believing me." (Seol Ji-Hu)

As ever, Yu Seon-Hwah was a kind person. She treated him in a way that was incomparably kinder than when he went to see his family.

It would have been hard for her to believe him after he had lied to her so many times already.

Yet, she believed him once more.

Not only that, by not using any harsh language and telling him stuff in a roundabout way, she was being considerate towards him, too.

Indeed, he was well aware of this, but…

"This 2 million… I understand. I'll take it. I understand what you're trying to say." (Seol Ji-Hu)

…But, his heart ached even more than before.

Seol Ji-Hu sniffed in deeply and began fidgeting with his right hand the money she gave him. He still had to give her back what was hers.

"Still… Take this from me." (Seol Ji-Hu)

He raised his left arm carrying the envelope with money and opened his left palm.

And then…

“Uh?” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

She formed an expression of confusion and looked down at his hand. Then…

“…What?” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Her eyes that remained composed until now widened in surprise.

Her mouth opened in daze. He could immediately tell that she couldn’t believe what was happening. She even took a step back in shock.

At this rate, she looked like she’d refuse the money, just like how his siblings did. So, he reached out and grabbed her hand to place the envelope there. Her skin felt so soft. So much so that he never wanted to let go.

“I, I should go.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

However, he could only be satisfied with holding her hand for this short moment. He did his best to force out a smile. Meanwhile, Yu Seon-Hwah still looked stunned.

“You, but… how?” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

“I won’t appear before you again. So, uh…… Take care of yourself.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

Seol Ji-Hu turned around and ran out of the street.

He began running hard as this unbearable emotion filled him up.

“…Ah.”

Everything seemed to happen so fast. Yu Seon-Hwah belatedly recovered her wits and instinctively confirmed the contents of the envelope. It was packed full of bills with the images of Shin Saimdang. She gasped out in shock one more time. *(TL note at the end)*

“He, he… N, no wait. What…?” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Yu Seon-Hwah was deeply mired in confusion for a while, before she hurriedly switched her phone on.

“Woo-Seok oppa? Yes, yes… By any chance… He did come? What time?” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Her voice continued to grow louder.

“55 million Won?!” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

– *“Yeah. Not only that, he brought back Jin-Heui’s car and bought a new notebook, too.”* (Seol Woo-Seok)

“But, that doesn’t make sense. Where did he get that money from?” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

– *“I don’t know. He assured me that he didn’t earn that through gambling, but…”* (Seol Woo-Seok)

“But…”

– *“Right. I know. Remember that day when he came to borrow money from you? I called the Seol-ark Land to confirm and they said the last time he was there, it was Thursday, sixteenth of March. Which means, he didn’t get that money through gambling…”* (Seol Woo-Seok)

“W, what was the date again?” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

– *“March sixteenth. In any case, he said the money was from an honest source. But, he said he was busy and had to go. I guess he went to see you…”* (Seol Woo-Seok)

16th of March.

‘No, it can’t be.’ (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Yu Seon-Hwah was no longer listening to Seol Woo-Seok’s voice.

“N, no, wait. This, it can’t be…” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

The envelope fell on the ground, and the money spilled out.

However, Yu Seon-Hwah didn’t even take a second look at that, and ran out of the street herself.

“Ji-Hu!” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

She looked around her and called out desperately.

“Seol Ji-Hu!!”

Unfortunately, Seol Ji-Hu’s back could not be seen anymore.

(TL: Shin Saimdang is a historical figure in Korean literature, who was a writer, an artist, a poet and a calligraphist. She’s from the 16th century AD, and her image can be seen on the Korean ₩50,000 bill.)

Chapter 44
The Place He Needs To Be

Seol Ji-Hu couldn't remember how he got back to his room. He staggered up the stairs and with an emotionless face, opened the front door.

The light of dusk drew a lengthy shadow and hid his aged laptop below the window that was framed in dying orangey glow.

He leaned against the wall and fell to the floor without an ounce of energy, before he closed shut the laptop he left on in the morning. He suddenly felt like a fool, thinking back to when he was busy calculating all those sums.

…Just a little bit.

It'd be a lie if he wasn't just a tiny little bit expectant. However, the gap between reality and his imaginations proved to be too wide for him to bridge. The reality was cold and harsh, as if it occupied the opposite end of the scale from where his imagination sat.

His old habit reared its head; he pulled out a cigarette and began puffing out blue smokes.

Cough, cough.

His throat felt scratchy. His eyes stung. Maybe because of that, the tears he'd been holding back began streaming down.

[You think I'll fall for your lies again?]

How could he resent anyone…

[…Horse racing? Or sports betting?]

Or, how could he blame anyone?

[Please take it, if you are truly being honest.]

The view of the entire world seemed to have turned 90 degrees. His temple hit the floor, and Seol Ji-Hu stared at the tilted room in a silent daze.

His head was too chaotic to feel the pain. His breathing too was unsteady.

Everything felt wrong. It was as if everything was telling him that he shouldn't be here.

'I've no place left here.'

The moment this thought entered his head, his fuzzy, unfocused eyes regained some of the lost clarity.

He did find a place he could go not too long ago, didn't he?

'The Lost Paradise.'

Indeed, if it was that place…

His hand rummaged through his pockets until he found a small slip of paper.

For a while, he fidgeted around with it. He wanted to rip it up right away, but… he was still waiting for a certain woman to give him a call first.

Now that he took a look at himself, his condition wasn't so good as well. Seol Ji-Hu's body shuddered from the sudden coldness rushing into his bones. He figured that he'd feel better after getting some sleep.

Sniff, he sniffed slightly as he crawled on the floor and dug underneath the worn

blankets.

Within this cold room, only the deathly stillness kept him company.

'…I'm… lonely.'

He pulled the blanket over his head and quietly closed his eyes.

On the other hand…

– *"The number you have dialled is not available at present. Please leave your message after the beep…"*

"And why is this guy not picking up his phone?!"

Kim Hahn-Nah angrily switched her phone off and frowned in unhappiness.

"Could he have dined and dashed? No, he didn't look that stupid to begin with…"

She licked her lips and contemplated for a little while longer, before picking up her handbag to leave her residence.

"You think I won't be able to find you because you hid yourself?"

✧✧✧

Kim Hahn-Nah arrived outside his house. She pressed the doorbell and knocked on the door, but the whole place was eerily quiet.

'He's not home?'

Kim Hahn-Nah closed her eyes and concentrated. She then clearly sensed his aura coming from the inside. Her expressions crumpled in an instant.

Knock, knock!!

"Hey! Open the door! I know you're in there! Seol Ji-Hu!"

Kim Hahn-Nah's voice rose up as she knocked on the door. She even began chewing on her lower lip.

Oh, so he was playing hard to get, was that it?

Seething with anger, she grabbed the doorknob and turned it, hard.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have given him the money?”

…But then, the door opened up without offering any resistance.

‘…It was open all this time?’

Rather than surprised, she suddenly felt foolish for wasting the last five minutes standing outside the door while doing stupid little things. Kim Hahn-Nah entered while looking around, only to cover her nose in a hurry as nausea viciously assaulted her.

A truly disgusting odour, formed from the combination of stale cigarettes, rotting food, clothes that hadn’t been washed in ages, as well as other unidentifiable smell, attacked her senses.

When she took a look around the state of the room, she found it to be a truly disgusting sight to behold. The cigarette butts piling up high atop a plate reminded her of a hedgehog, for instance.

Kim Hahn-Nah felt an urge to vomit rush in, so she quickly made her way to the kitchen sink, only for her eyes to open even wider in shock.

“Blergh…”

In the end, she began retching. For someone like her who obsessed over her hygiene like a maniac, this room was a trash pit that made her feel disgusted and uncomfortable.

“Blergh, bleeeergh…”

She continued to retch several times more, before shifting her tearful eyes to look behind her. Only then did she spot Seol Ji-Hu sleeping on the floor with a blanket covering his entire body.

“Y, you crazy b*stard!”

Kim Hahn-Nah strode angrily to where he was.

“Hey, wake up!”

She used the tip of her feet to push the blanket off, but froze still afterwards.

“*Groan… Moan… Groan…*”

She heard him moaning out in pain. He was breathing with much difficulty as well. His hair was soaked with sweat and clung to his scalp, and she spotted large sweat drops on his neck, too.

“What on earth…”

Kim Hahn-Nah’s anger cooled down in an instant. She squatted down and placed her palm on his forehead, and felt his temperature. He was boiling hot.

“……”

She had no idea that he was sick, so she felt foolish and apologetic for suspecting him.

“…Idiot. How can you not get sick when sleeping in a room like this?”

She muttered out in defeat and quietly sighed out. She took another sweeping look at the place and then, shook her head.

“Uh-whew… You were fine back in Paradise, but why are you like this on Earth?”

She spoke to herself as if she couldn’t help it, and stood back up.

“Even if it’s cold, endure it for a while. Let me start by getting some fresh air in here. I might also get sick from this room if I don’t do something right now.”

She proceeded to fling open the window as wide as it could be opened, and rolled up both her sleeves. As if she was getting ready to exert some effort after a long while of not doing so, she stretched her back and loosened her neck muscles.

“Okay, let’s see… Where should I get started first?”

✧✧✧

Seol Ji-Hu had a dream. It was a kind of a dream that he hadn't had in a long time. But it was a good one.

Yu Seon-Hwah came to see him and began nursing him. She even scolded him for the messy state of his room. She dragged him to the corner and then began cleaning the mess.

While the washing machine did its thing, she went out and bought stuff like the dishwashing soap, air freshener, and some other cleaning products. She washed his clothes, then tidied up the kitchen, washed all the dirty dishes, threw away the rotting rubbish, cleaned out the fridge, mopped the floor, wiped the windows clean, and even got around to cleaning the bathroom.

She spent the next several hours on completely transforming his entire residence. Then, saying she was hungry, she cooked ramen. Seeing her stand in the kitchen with her ponytail gently swaying about, Seol Ji-Hu felt warm and fuzzy inside. It was as if he had went back in time, back to when everything was okay.

If there was one thing he couldn't quite understand, then that would be her wearing a business suit. Why wasn't she in her uniform? Yu Seon-Hwah had never once wore a business suit until now…

Suddenly, his nose picked up on the spicy but delicious smell. Saliva began pooling on the tip of his tongue.

Seol Ji-Hu swallowed his saliva as the sleepiness left him, and he blinked his eyes several times.

'It wasn't a dream?'

He quickly raised his upper body.

"Oh, will you look at this guy?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

A rather particular prim tone of voice entered his ears. Kim Hahn-Nah narrowed her eyes and stared at him while carrying the tray with ramen on it.

"You sure can smell food like a sniffer dog, can't you?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Kim Hahn-Nah?!” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“If you’re up, then come and have some.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“What are you doing here…?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“I told you, didn’t I? If you don’t answer my call, then I’d come barging into your place.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah replied matter of factly.

Seol Ji-Hu dazedly surveyed his surroundings. And his jaw nearly hit the floor after realising that his trash pit room had been transformed into a spotless living quarters.

‘Was my place this spacious?’

He spotted plates neatly arranged on the shelves, and the floor seemed to glisten like marble. There was an unfamiliar but nice scent permeating in the air too. This place was well past the level of being a nice place to be in, and straight into the territory of ‘My Sweet Home’.

“…You thinking of starting a new career?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“What are you even talking about?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah sourly retorted to his question.

Seol Ji-Hu massaged his forehead.

“So, it was you…” (Seol Ji-Hu)

He thought it was Yu Seon-Hwah, though…

“That’s right, you idiot. Have you any idea how many trash bags I… Wait a minute? What is up with that slightly disappointed tone of voice?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“N, no ways. You’re mistaken. I’m grateful. Really.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

He flinched and quickly denied it while waving his hands around. Kim Hahn-Nah snorted once.

“That’s right. You better be grateful. How can you even think about sleeping in a place like this? It was probably full of germs and stuff. Euh!” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

She shuddered as if just imagining it gave her the chills and put the tray down on the small table. She then sneaked a glance at him.

“You don’t want? I cooked two packets, you know?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Warm steam invitingly rose up from the pot. And after a pair of wooden chopsticks were placed before him, there was no way he could refuse now. And when he thought about it, he hadn’t eaten anything since the morning.

Indeed, he was feeling hungry. So, he decided to fix that first before thinking about anything else.

Sluuurp.

‘It’s good.’

The noodles were perfectly chewy, and the soup itself was on the right side of being spicy, with the chopped spring onion bits adding a layer of refreshing aftertaste as well.

Kim Hahn-Nah began giggling after seeing the youth focus on wordlessly hoovering up the ramen.

“You like it?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Yeah.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“Well, I’ve got some skills when it comes to making ramen. Anyways, enjoy yourself.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Okay, thanks.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

The two of them concentrated on the meal at hand for a while. And sure enough, the noodles were finished pretty quickly.

“It’s not really enough for both of us, right?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah licked her lips and with an unsatisfied face, she looked at Seol Ji-Hu enjoying the spoonful of the ramen soup.

“How about some rice to go with the soup?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Yeah, that sounds… Ah, but there’s no…” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“I’ve already bought some instant rice. I got them when I went out to buy extra trash bags, you see.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah went to the kitchen and brought out packets of instant rice. She must’ve had them warmed in the convenience store, because they were rather cold to his touch.

They dumped the rice into the ramen soup and shared the rest of the meal among themselves. *(TL note at the end.)*

Once his stomach was full, he felt sated and a bit sleepy as well. Even though he just woke up, his eyelids felt like they weighed thousands of tons. Seeing him like this, Kim Hahn-Nah smirked.

“You aren’t a kid anymore, but you’re getting sleepy because you’re full?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

She then took the tray with the empty dishes away, before bringing a bag of medicine.

“Hey, let me do that.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“Don’t bother. You’re still sick, you know. I bought some medication, so take those and rest up. We’ll talk tomorrow.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol Ji-Hu closed his mouth. The thing he hated the most was needles, and the thing he hated the second most was taking medication. It might have something to do with a trauma from his childhood.

Kim Hahn-Nah hummed as she washed the dishes, only to get royally ticked off when she found out that he didn’t even bother to take a single medication. She forced him to take some pills, and after that, she said she’d talk to him tomorrow, then turned around to leave. It was getting late and she also needed to get some rest, too.

“I’ll be going now. Get some rest, okay? And don’t you dare not answer my call again.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Just as she was about to leave, she felt him suddenly grab her hand.

“Kim Hahn-Nah.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“What?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Don’t go. Please.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“……What did you say?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah couldn’t help but flinch after hearing his pleading tone of voice.

Well, it was already in the middle of the night, so…

A thought that said perhaps coming here was a mistake entered her head.

“I…” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“Hey.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah turned around to face him and firmly stated her position.

“You’re an Invited, and I’m your Inviter.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“I know.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“If you know, then you shouldn’t behave like this. Don’t you think you’re being a bit inconsiderate here? Do I look that easy to you?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

She began sounding quite a bit p*ssed off. Seol Ji-Hu stared at with his eyes blinking non-stop as if to show he had no idea what she was on about, before his tired voice left his mouth.

“I want to go back.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“…Ng?”

“Right now, I want to go back.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

It was Kim Hahn-Nah’s turn to blink her eyes. Her neck skin reddened up from embarrassment only for a brief moment. The moment she confirmed the strange fervor in the youth’s eyes…

“Let’s go. Right now. I mean, we have the means, right?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

…Her own eyes narrowed to a slit.

‘No way. Can it be…?’ (Kim Hahn-Nah)

As a matter of fact, she had been feeling that something odd was up. She also found it strange that the youth was unusually quiet during the mealtime, too.

What she initially worried about was Seol Ji-Hu not wanting to go back to Paradise after coming back to Earth. However, the truth turned out to be the exact opposite of that.

Not even one full day had passed, yet Seol Ji-Hu wanted to go back to the Lost Paradise already.

The most convincing evidence was his complexion, which was now full of vigour as soon as he mentioned going back. She felt that the way he held her hand was like someone dearly holding onto the sole remaining lifeline. Kim Hahn-Nah began thinking that…

…That this wasn’t right.

…That this was dangerous.

Every now and then, one would find people like this; people who were seduced by the charms of the Lost Paradise and discarded their lives here on Earth. It was kinda like putting the horse before the cart, in a way.

Such Earthlings would lose their lives pretty earlier on, ten times out of ten. They would get drunk on the adrenaline provided by the battles of the Paradise, and end up seeking out progressively more dangerous assignments, that’s why.

Other Earthlings called those kind of people the Paradise junkies.

Now normally, Kim Hahn-Nah should've welcomed his desires to return to Lost Paradise with open arms, but the thing was, Seol Ji-Hu wasn't some simple Contracted, nor was he a disposable pawn that could be thrown away after being used once or twice.

No, he was an Earthling that could become her trustworthy support and an important partner in the future. Indeed, he was more like a rough gemstone she needed to nurture very carefully.

She wanted Seol Ji-Hu to balance both of his lives in here as well as over there; she definitely didn't want to see him get addicted to the Paradise.

Besides, he only went there once, and he spent most of his time inside the Neutral Zone; it was rare to see someone who wanted to return to Paradise only after experiencing so little.

'Something must've happened here.'

Remembering Seol Ji-Hu's past, she could think of a couple of things that might have happened.

"You can't." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah firmly refused him.

"But, why not?" (Seol Ji-Hu)

"At the bare minimum, you gotta finalise the contract first." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"Give it to me. Let me sign it right now." (Seol Ji-Hu)

"You think that's the end just because you signed it? I've got lots of things to say to you, and besides, aren't you curious about some things, too? What about your future plans, too?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"…I'll figure it out once I get there." (Seol Ji-Hu)

Seol Ji-Hu's fervor cooled down a lot after hearing her angry voice.

"In any case, you can't. I want to get some sleep, too! Do you have any idea how tired I

am trying to tidy this place up?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol Ji-Hu forgot what he wanted to say now, his expression one of apology.

"You, get some sleep first. You looked like you'd fall asleep right away a minute ago, too. And… well, when it's time for us to go back, I'll make you go even if you don't want to." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"…I got it…" (Seol Ji-Hu)

In the end, Seol Ji-Hu waved his white flag.

A short while later…

The light of the room was turned off.

A complicated expression formed on Kim Hahn-Nah's face as she watched the sleeping Seol Ji-Hu and his steady breathing.

She stood at the front entrance and deliberated for a while, before she settled down on a spot a bit of distance away from him. She draped the jacket around her like a duvet.

She was worried about him running off to the Paradise without her knowing. Her sharp senses would snap her out of sleep even if there was a minute disturbance, so she trusted that and decided to stay.

As his protector, she had to prevent him from 'escaping' into the Paradise at all costs.

'Really now, what a troublesome guy to look after.'

Kim Hahn-Nah stared at him for a long while, before closing her eyes as a yawn left her mouth.

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Kim Hahn-Nah woke up first in the early dawn, confirmed that Seol Ji-Hu was still asleep, and quietly took a shower. She originally planned to lightly wash up, but had shed way too much sweat the day before cleaning this pigsty of a room, so it couldn't be helped.

She didn't want to wake him, so she took her clothes inside the bathroom with her, but then, the noises of the water must've woken him anyways; by the time she got out, Seol Ji-Hu was sitting up while rubbing his eyes.

The morning sun had already rose past the horizon when he finished washing up as well.

She then dragged the youth out of his house and took him to a small diner located in some forgotten backstreet, so they could have some breakfast.

While waiting for the food to arrive, she demanded that he tell her everything that had happened yesterday. Seol Ji-Hu wasn't really keen on revealing them, but still told her everything. After hearing his story, her reactions were quite dramatic, to say the least.

"W, what?! You spent over ₩100 million yesterday?!" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"……"

"How can you be that stupid? Are you even the same person?! Are you even that first-ranked survivor?!" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"……"

"Hey, you!! I told you to think about the difference in the time, didn't I?! What would they think when a gambling addict like yourself showed up after a month of silence with ₩5-60 million in tow, claiming to have given up on gambling completely out of the blue?! Ah?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah was this close to losing her sh*t, and she nearly jumped up from her seat. She thought that he'd use the cash wisely; that was why she deposited some in his account to begin with. A guy who was so thoughtful and capable of solving all those difficult tasks quite easily back in the Paradise, did a 180 as soon as he returned to Earth. She could hardly believe how dumb he was.

"You dumb idiot b*tard really went and did it…" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah massaged her neck as she wallowed in the pits of despair.

"…It's not like I don't understand where you're coming from, okay? But, in that case, you should've just showed up with 2-30 million first or something. You should've

gradually mend your old ties by apologising first, saying you've quit gambling for good, that you'd work hard to repay them, but you're too busy so you'll call them later on, etc, etc… What, you thought you could get back on their good grace in one shot? Your relationships broke down years ago, remember?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Her continuous stream of correct opinions caused Seol Ji-Hu to wordlessly scratch the back of his head. Even if he had ten mouths, he'd still have no excuses to offer right now.

"Haaaaaah…"

Kim Hahn-Nah spat out lengthy groans over and over again, before glaring at him.

"This can't go on." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"?"

"Although you haven't signed the contract yet, as soon as you do, I'm going to invoke the privilege of the protector." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"The privilege of the protector?" (Seol Ji-Hu)

"You want to make it right with your family. Correct?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol Ji-Hu nodded his head as if that was obvious.

"I'm not planning to interfere with how you live your private life, but I'll be intervening in this matter, okay?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

The food arrived then, so Kim Hahn-Nah's dissatisfaction had to pause for a while.

"Let's eat. We'll talk while we eat." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah scooped some soup up with her spoon and continued on.

"Now, listen. Among my subordinates, there is this guy who went there when he was just a university student. He did okay, carved himself a nice little career, became famous and then got scouted by Sinyoung in the end. He even got married not too long ago, too." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“You even get married in that side?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“Sure, there are some people who do, but that’s not what I’m saying.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah waved her hand around to emphasize the fact that it wasn’t what she wanted to talk about.

“Anyways. He married a girl who’s not involved with that world, know what I mean? So, what do you think happened?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“I wonder. Isn’t it a bit, you know, dangerous? He could get discovered, right?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“You think so? You see, his actual life is going pretty nicely. He comes to work in the mornings and transfer to that side, spends a couple of days there and comes back, but it’s only the late afternoon over here. If he were to get delayed that side, then he would simply tell her that he’d been putting in some overtime. If he needs some extra time that side, then he just tells her that he’s going on a business trip.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“But, his wife could show up at the company, though?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

Kim Hahn-Nah shrugged her shoulders.

“So? What’s the problem? We just have to show her her husband working at the office.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“What if she shows up unannounced, or there’s an emergency?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“Even those are not a problem. If something happens to his household or his family, the company will be notified immediately. We’ll tell her that he’s working outside the offices, and at the same time, one of our guys will transfer to the other side and bring him back.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“You really are thorough in managing your people, aren’t you?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“That’s the power of my company. And well, that’s one of the reasons why I will be looking after you, too.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol Ji-Hu nodded his head and agreed with her. The tone of Kim Hahn-Nah’s voice was a bit combative, but he didn’t mind hearing her out. Rather than her interfering,

it sounded more like she was going to help him out, instead.

“In any case, what you’re saying is that, you’ll invoke this privilege of the protector, right?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“That’s right. Actually, I don’t even really need to invoke the privilege in the first place. This is one of the responsibilities people like me, who were granted the rights to scout, must carry out.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Rights to scout?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“That’s right. You think the rights are granted for free to us? Naturally, we have the responsibilities and duties to perform.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah began munching on the rolls of kimbap before going *Oops,* after seeing the youth’s vacant expression. Since he was so outstandingly capable back in the Paradise, she would sometimes think that he had figured most things out by himself already, and gloss over some stuff.

“Even if it’s called rights, it’s not that impressive. It’s like, we can use the stamps, and get to figure out whether you’re involved with that world or not – that much, I guess?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“You can do that?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“Of course. Without such a thing, why would I have believed you back then? Just because you swore in your mother’s name or something?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Ok, so how do you tell, then?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“Gimme your hand.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol Ji-Hu opened his right palm and presented it to her. But she shook her head.

“Not your right hand. The hand where I planted that stamp.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol Ji-Hu opened his left palm and tilted his head. From his perspective, it was just a hand with nothing on it and he couldn’t see anything special there.

However, it must’ve been different to Kim Hahn-Nah, because she was nodding her

head rather sagely.

“Yeah, I can see it pretty clearly now. It must be that vivid because you’re a Gold Mark.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“You can see something on my hand?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“Yup. There are three ways to distinguish those who are involved with that world and those who are not.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

She licked the chopstick and unfurled her index, middle, and the ring fingers.

“Firstly, you recognise a person’s face. Even you can do this, too. Secondly, you can take a look at the other’s Marking. But the drawback to this method is, you don’t know exactly where the Marking might be. Sometimes, you might find it in some weird place, you know?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol Ji-Hu became slightly curious on what those weird places could be.

“The last one is to sense the ‘aura’.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“The aura?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“There’s this distinctive aura emitted from the Marks, you see. I have to be close enough to feel it, though. And I have to really concentrate, too.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol Ji-Hu became deeply intrigued as they began discussing a topic related to the Paradise.

“In any case… I guess my story got sidetracked by a lot, no?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah clicked her tongue and pulled out the contract as well as a pen from her inner pocket.

“My point is this. I want you to balance your life over here as well as the one over there, just like that subordinate I told you about.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“That is…” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“Listen. I’ve been living on that side for far longer than you have. And also, got to meet

lots more people than you, too. Hell, I'm someone who seduces others into entering that place, you know?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Suddenly, the tone of her voice became lower in the middle of her speech.

"I'll be honest with you here. Ever since I began as a broker, I've never imagined that I'd say these words out aloud." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah took a big gulp of water, adjusted her glasses and continued.

"I'm convinced of it after seeing how you acted last night. You may not need it when you're on the other side, but when you're here, you need a strict management." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"……"

"More importantly, I'll not sit idly by and watch the guy I invited get addicted to that side and flounder around like a fool. Got that?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah spoke up to here and placed the contract in front of Seol Ji-Hu.

"If you understand me and feel confident that you can do this, then sign the contract." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol Ji-Hu remained quiet, before picking up the pen. And just as he pulled the contract in closer…

"Don't forget." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Her voice was sharp.

"The place you need to be is here." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

(TL: Ok, here's the thing with the Korean dining culture – they dump/mix rice into pretty much anything remotely soup-y. If you don't know how Korean dining table is arranged, then it's usually bowls of rice, and some kind of soup for each diners, there's a plate of kimchi to share as well as other side dishes. Most, if not everyone, mix the bowl of rice with the soup to eat. Mixing cold rice – usually leftover rice – into the

ramen soup is something of a tradition in South Korea.)

Chapter 45
To Paradise, Once More

Seol Ji-Hu carefully checked out the contract from Gula. Not one word had been changed from when he first read it. Of course, judging from the personality she displayed until now, Kim Hahn-Nah wouldn't try to pull a fast one like that.

Seol Ji-Hu finished browsing through the contract and signed on the dotted line. And as he returned the contract to her, he spoke.

"Now that I've signed the contract, I want to ask you about something." (Seol Ji-Hu)

"?"

"Don't you work for Sinyoung?" (Seol Ji-Hu)

"Yeah, I do." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"Why did you say those things back then? Wouldn't it be more advantageous for you if I ended up signing with them?" (Seol Ji-Hu)

Kim Hahn-Nah carefully but professionally folded the contract and hid it inside her jacket, before cocking an eyebrow.

"I was wondering why you haven't asked me that yet. But, shouldn't you have asked that question before signing up? What if you have a change of mind after hearing what I had to say?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"You'd have said things in such a way to make sure that I don't change my mind, anyway. Well, I just wanted to hear your honest words without worrying about how you'd change the story." (Seol Ji-Hu)

"…Well, you seem to get smarter when it comes to things like this, huh." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah shot him a prim glare and took off her glasses. She even put the spoon

down and began lightly tapping the table with her index finger.

“Okay, fine. It’s a long story, but since you want to hear it, I’ll tell you. Do you know what the current situation is like for Sinyoung?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol Ji-Hu was about to ask, “Weren’t they the biggest organisation in the Paradise?” but held back. The way she asked her question, it sounded like something pretty serious was going on here.

“They are stuck between a rock and a hard place, going nowhere fast.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah rested her chin on the back of her hand and gazed at the outside of the diner with half-closed eyes. Her face, as reflected on the glass, looked rather bitter.

“Their situation is really complicated right now. Sinyoung had lost their most powerful combat force, and they are also losing their justification for being there, too. It’s not as if their foundation has become weak enough to be shaken around, but on the flip side, they can’t deny that they have indeed been weakened considerably compared to the past. I’m curious, but have you read the Romance of the Three Kingdoms before?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

She came out of nowhere with that one, but Seol still nodded his head.

“Cao Cao succeeded in ‘securing’ the young emperor, thereby creating the firm foundation for himself to control the empire, right? Sinyoung did something similar. A year ago – no, wait. Three years ago in that place’s time flow, the very first rebellion happened within the human alliance.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah lowered her voice and continued on.

“To be more specific, a certain kingdom wanted the Earthlings to become more proactive, and they formed an alliance of sorts with other like minded kingdoms, and tried a method that was a bit more forceful than before. As a result, several organisation rebelled openly against their unreasonable demands. An entire region rose up to resist this push, so surely you can imagine how big of a rebellion it was.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“A region? Which one?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“The South… The resistance movement formed around the South as its centre. And in the end, a war broke out. Those guys were defeated… in the blink, and… pushed to the brink… Ah.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

In the middle of her speech, Kim Hahn-Nah went, *Ah!* She forgot about the pact to never to speak about the secrets of the Paradise and ended up doing precisely that.

Seol Ji-Hu waved his hands around briefly to show her it was fine.

“Did every Earthling participate in the rebellion?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“No~pe. Some participated, but there were some who supported the royal families. However, most were neutral.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah then placed her hand on her chest.

“It was right around, then. Sinyoung had remained neutral until that time, but they declared their support of the royal family and entered the fray.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

She then raised two of her fingers.

“There were two reasons why Sinyoung decided to intervene. The first thing was, of course, for profit. And secondly, they were confident of winning.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

As if she was feeling thirsty, Kim Hahn-Nah took large gulps of the cold water.

“Phew~. Of course, even Sinyoung didn’t possess the military might to subdue a rebellion of that size by themselves. However, even though they were small in number, there were some Earthlings who supported the royal families, so they joined in. Sinyoung also persuaded their allies to participate as well. Then, using those events as the pivotal point, they began persuading other neutral organisations into participating, too. And most importantly…” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

To signify the importance of what she was about to say, her expression hardened noticeably.

“They let loose a very, very high-leveled ranker into the battlefield.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

To be acknowledged as a top ranker in the Lost Paradise, one had to be level 7 or above. Not everyone could level up that high, and there were only a handful of such

individuals in the whole of the Paradise.

“His name is Seong Shi-Hyun.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seong Shi-Hyun…… Seol Ji-Hu repeated that name inwardly. He had heard of this name before. From the way she had crossed her arms against her chest, it seemed that Kim Hahn-Nah wasn’t happy about something there.

“Sinyoung was encouraged by Seong Shi-Hyun’s combat prowess, and through him, they were able to achieve a sweeping victory against the rebellion. The royal families wished to push forward with the momentum and even destroy the rebellion’s headquarters, but Sinyoung didn’t want that. No, they came up with a nice-sounding pretext of giving the other side a chance, saying that the continuous fight between humans would only weaken the influence of mankind on the planet. So, they went ahead with ceasefire negotiations.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

No matter how good a pretext sounded, it’d always remain as a pretext. It meant that Sinyoung had already started their machinations on the political landscape of the Paradise well before the negotiations began.

“In the end, the royal families promised to allow complete freedom of the Southern region under the condition that all the remaining rebels were relocated there.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Mm… Isn’t that the same thing as the rebels ultimately getting what they wanted in the first place?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“If you look at the result only, sure. However, you could also say that they were exiled there, too. I’m sure you’ve heard by now that the South is always mired in warfare, right?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol Ji-Hu had heard the condensed version before – that there were currently four different species calling the Paradise their home, and that the humans were the weakest of them.

“The South is pretty much the frontlines of the war. It’s the most dangerous area, in other words.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Ah.”

Seol Ji-Hu let out a gasp of shock. Because, he now understood who had gained the most out of the rebellion from those two sentences she uttered out.

"That's right. It's the same thing as Sinyoung sending all their rival influences down to the South to act as their meat shield. And thanks to that, Sinyoung got to increase their political clout back in the Capital without a single worry. And they even had the royal family in their back pocket, so what would they have to fear now, right?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah spoke the last sentence with a slight hint of disdain before slowly leaning her back against the chair.

"However, no flower blooms forever… Not everything was plain sailing for them, you see. About two years ago in the flow of time that side, a new problem occurred, one nobody saw coming." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"A problem, you say?" (Seol Ji-Hu)

"It was Seong Shi-Hyun." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

It was that name again.

"Well, him… Why he did what he did, even I can't figure it out. Some said he had a falling-out with Sinyoung's management, some said the royal family made their move after getting worried about Sinyoung's growing influence, or maybe even Seong Shi-Hyun's own greed got the better of him…" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"Just what kind of a person is this Seong Shi-Hyun, anyway?" (Seol Ji-Hu)

"I can't speak about his identity here. But know this, he isn't a nice guy. His abilities are indeed a real deal, but I remember him being incredibly arrogant, and that he used to do whatever he felt like. What's important is that, he went ahead with a certain military expedition against other's wishes, spectacularly failed that, and went missing ever since." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"Dead?" (Seol Ji-Hu)

"That's the thing – no one knows. Just because he's 'dead' that side, that doesn't mean he's dead this side too, you know? However, he's completely disappeared without a trace over that side and over here, too." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol Ji-Hu agreed with the notion that it did sound rather bizarre and opened his mouth to speak.

“I guess that with Seong Shi-Hyun going missing, Sinyoung got affected pretty badly, right?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“But, of course. That guy was what you’d call an Irregular.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah nodded her head.

“No matter which organisation, there is a limit to how much manpower you can mobilise at once for individual requests and missions. The reason why Sinyoung was able grow at an explosive rate was because of the full support from the royal family. Of course, Sinyoung had to listen to the royal family’s demands in return. And the nearly impossible missions or difficult tasks were taken care of by Seong Shi-Hyun, you see.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

However, with the disappearance of that Seong Shi-Hyun, it became harder to carry out the demanding tasks set out by the royal families. And so, the foundation Sinyoung relied on to grow more influential and wealthy began to rock unsteadily.

Understanding as such, Seol Ji-Hu’s eyes narrowed to a slit.

“I think I can understand where the rebellion was coming from. Just how ridiculous were the demands made by the royal family? I get where they are coming from, but wouldn’t you normally make the request after seeing what the current situation is like?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“Right… That’s how you’d normally do that, but…” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

For some reason, Kim Hahn-Nah blurred the ends of her words. It was as if she was trying to be vague about something.

“In any case, that’s where this story ends. Actually, this isn’t something you should be aware of, right now. But, I should answer that question you asked me earlier.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah coughed to clear her throat and stared straight at Seol Ji-Hu.

“After the powerful combat potential called Seong Shi-Hyun had gone missing,

Sinyoung has become incredibly busy. They have way too many business interests to look after, and they gotta keep an eye on the royal family, too. Even I'm supposed to handle eight different assignments right now." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"Eight?" (Seol Ji-Hu)

Seol Ji-Hu could only leak out a hollow chuckle. He even thought whether it was fine for her to be here or not.

"And then, in the midst of this madness, a new Irregular has appeared. Of course, that's you. The paths you walked, the things you've done and achieved, they are remarkably similar to Seong Shi-Hyun's. Well, if you are Sinyoung, how would you respond?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"I'll probably try to scout me." (Seol Ji-Hu)

"Obviously. But having lost Seong Shi-Hyun once, they would make sure they are prepared this time. You felt it too when you took a look at their contract, right? Every single clause promising to support you were traps that would've shackled you real good. Sure, they would help you get stronger, but they will also turn you into a puppet that only moved according to Sinyoung's wishes." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

He had been expecting something like that already, but now that he heard the truth straight from her, it certainly felt a bit different than before. Kinda like his body was shuddering or something.

'But, why me?'

"If I were to be honest, you're like a really tasty prey as you are now." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol Ji-Hu stared blankly at Kim Hahn-Nah.

He understood now why he shouldn't sign up with Sinyoung, but her helping him out was a different matter altogether. At the end of the day, Kim Hahn-Nah still worked for Sinyoung, after all.

"And finally, the reason why I'm helping you like this." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

She locked her fingers.

“Well, you can criticise me for being materialistic if you want. That gold stamp was my private property. And besides, I didn’t want others to steal you from me.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Steal?”

“Ng. If I coerced you into joining Sinyoung, then sure, they would’ve praised me for it. They’ll promote me as my reward, too. But, that would be all, right? The moment you join the company, the higher-ups would do anything to possess you. And since I don’t have any power, you’ll end up being taken from me.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah then raised both her hands in a slight shrug.

“If that was the case, then wouldn’t it be much more profitable for me if you didn’t join and grow stronger outside the company? Mu~ch more, right? You grow powerful and strong and start supporting me, then I’d get to have a proper say within Sinyoung, you know what I mean? Uhuhuhuhu.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“T, that’s how it was?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“That’s right! I raised this guy, he’s friendly with me, he only deals with me, etc, etc. You wanna ask this guy for a request, then talk to me first. Keuh~.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah’s neck shrunk back slightly and her shoulders started to tremble a little as if the thought alone made her very excited.

Now that he heard her story, he kind of agreed with her there. However, the rosy future of her dreams could only take place on the condition that Seol Ji-Hu grew up to become someone with great power. Honestly, he felt burdened by her expectations.

“I think you’re thinking too highly of me.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“Hmm.”

Seeing the youth smile awkwardly, Kim Hahn-Nah pouted slightly.

“Indeed. You do make me worried from how you acted this side, you know?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

She began giggling and that brought out a soft but genuine smile from him as well.

The two of them continued on with their breakfast and chatted about what they needed to do for their happy future on the other side.

“Don’t think too hard about this.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

As they left the diner and headed back to his place, Seol Ji-Hu fell into a deep thought. So, Kim Hahn-Nah offered a bit of advice.

“You’re still only a level 1. No one is expecting you to do something incredible. So, you should just focus on getting used to the life on that side for the next couple of years. You can even think of it as playing a game.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Playing a game?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“Right. Like video games. Like, you log in during a bit of free time – kinda like that? Of course, it’d be your main line of work, though.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol Ji-Hu recalled hearing something similar to this before.

[*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.*]

But, unlike when Kahng Seok said those things, Seol Ji-Hu didn’t feel disgusted this time. No, he thought that it wouldn’t be so bad to view this whole thing just as Kim Hahn-Nah had said. Everyone had different ways to enjoy themselves, after all.

As they walked back to his place, they encountered an ahjumma busy sorting through the trash in front of the building where he lived. She was a cleaning lady he had seen a few times while he went about his business in the past.

The ahjumma was mouthing off her discontent while trying to sort out the mountainous pile of trash, before spotting the youth and the glasses-wearing woman, and tilted her head a little. Seol Ji-Hu felt guilty about all the c**p there, so he quickly bowed to her and ran inside his room.

After entering his home, they began preparing themselves to return to the Lost Paradise.

“This thing, is it fine to leave it behind here?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“Do what you feel like.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

After taking out all the prohibited items, Kim Hahn-Nah produced a small slip of paper from her pocket.

“Well, then. It’s finally time for us to head back to Paradise you so desperately wanted to return to.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Seol Ji-Hu smirked and pulled his own slip of paper out. It was here that Kim Hahn-Nah spoke to him one more time.

“I’m asking this for your own good, but you know what you need to do once we go back there, right?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Yes, I know.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“Okay. Let’s go, then.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Rip.

Along with the noise of the paper being torn, a circular light appeared in the empty air. Kim Hahn-Nah was swallowed up by this light from her head down to her feet and disappeared from sight in an instant.

Seol Ji-Hu observed this with great curiosity before deciding to rip his own paper – but then, he stopped.

He spotted his smartphone, discarded to the corner of the room. After Yu Seon-Hwah gave it back to him, he didn’t even get around to charging it, so it was currently turned off.

‘The place I need to be… ’

He felt a sudden urge to confirm something. If he switched that phone on, wouldn’t calls from his family or Yu Seon-Hwah arrive?

It didn’t take too long for him to realise how embarrassingly unrealistic that wish was.

‘…There’s no way they’d contact me, anyway.’

Seol Ji-Hu let off a lengthy sigh, before ripping the transfer paper in half.

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“Uh-whew, why are there so much trash here, I wonder… Mm?”

Ahjumma continued to complain to herself as she sorted out the trash before she sensed the presence of someone behind her. She turned around to take a look.

A beautiful woman with a pretty dress was standing there while holding an envelope in one hand. She must’ve come here the first thing in the morning, because her hair was still damp.

When their gazes met, she politely greeted the ahjumma.

“Hello there, auntie.” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

“Aigoo, hello to you too. It’s been a while… Wait, I did see you for a little bit yesterday, so it’s not a while, is it?”

The ahjumma greeted the young woman warmly as if they were familiar with each other.

“Besides that, you also came today? I thought you decided to not to come here anymore.”

“Yes, I have a business here today.” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Yu Seon-Hwah displayed an uneasy smile.

“By any chance, have you seen the guy who stays in room 405?” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

“Ahh… Him? Yes, I’ve seen him.”

A light gleamed in Yu Seon-Hwah’s eyes.

“Is he home?” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

“Well, that. Maybe, around 30 minutes after you left yesterday? One hour? Anyways. He came home around that time after you left. I want to tell him that you stopped by,

but he seemed so tired and troubled, so…"

Yu Seon-Hwah's mouth hung open a little.

Yesterday, after Seol Ji-Hu ran off, she chased after him right away. There was something she just had to confirm. So, she paid the taxi driver extra just to get to Seol Ji-Hu's place as soon as possible.

The problem was that he hadn't come back home. She waited for a long time, yet he didn't show up.

If she knew he'd come so soon afterwards, then she should've waited here. She couldn't have guessed that he'd come home after she left. He must've wandered around the streets aimlessly before stumbling back home, somehow.

"I think he's in there, now. But, what should I do… Aigoo…"

"What's wrong?" (Yu Seon-Hwah)

"It's something a bit scandalous for me to say, but… I wonder if it'll be fine?"

"I'm sure it'll be fine. Please feel free to speak." (Yu Seon-Hwah)

"I saw him enter not too long ago, but some pretty lady was sticking very close to him, you see."

"Pardon?"

As soon as spotting Yu Seon-Hwah's facial expression, the cleaning lady hurriedly added a few more words.

"I'm not sure what's going on. That lady borrowed some cleaning equipment last night, saying that she's going to clean out the room number 405. She was speaking in such a curt and straightforward manner, even though she looks like a fox. All this trash, it's from that room, you know?"

"……"

"D, did I overstep my boundaries?"

"…No, not at all." (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Yu Seon-Hwah said her goodbyes and hurriedly entered the building. She quickly ran up the stairs. She wasn't feeling something as petty as jealousy. It was definitely not lingering attachment, either.

However.

As she listened to the story from the ahjumma, the various possibilities she thought of was converging into one situation she hoped it would not happen.

If what she saw yesterday was not wrong, then…

'No, he mustn't.'

He had finally regained himself, yet this…

If her suspicions were proven to be correct, then she swore to herself that she'd save him no matter the cost, as she arrived at the door to the room 405.

"Ji-Hu-*yah*!"

Thud, thud!

"Seol Ji-Hu!"

She pounded on the door for a while, but there was no response.

Yu Seon-Hwah bit her lower lip and fished out a key from her handbag. He gave her this key a while back, saying that she should use it in an emergency.

She knew that she shouldn't do this, but now wasn't the time to argue about the finer points. She inserted the key in the lock and heard it unlatch.

Yu Seon-Hwah pushed the door wide open but didn't enter. Because, as soon as she saw the interior, she displayed the expression of stupefaction.

She heard just now from the ahjumma that he was in his room, yet…

"Ji, Ji-Hu…"

There was no one in the room.

Not even a trace of a human's presence.

The room was empty.

Yu Seon-Hwah dazedly looked around the room, before she suddenly spotted items that didn't belong here. They were items for women. She could tell that those obviously didn't belong to Seol Ji-Hu.

Yu Seon-Hwah squeezed her eyes shut before quietly closing the door. She locked the door again and stood in the same spot for a long time.

"…You idiot…"

A short while later…

Yu Seon-Hwah breathed in deeply as if she had made her mind up over something. And with a grim expression on her face, she switched her phone on.

Only a handful of rings went by before the call was picked up, and a voice that sounded artificial came out from the speaker.

– *"Miss S, Seon-Hwah?"*

"Yes, it's me." (Yu Seon-Hwah)

– *"Oh, my goodness! Is it really you, Miss Seon-Hwah? Really, it's you?"*

"Yes, it's me. There's something I'd like to talk to you about." (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Yu Seon-Hwah spoke with a heavy voice before taking a look around her. She then brought the phone very close to her mouth and began whispering for a while.

– *"…Pardon? W, what did you say?"*

"That's what I'll be doing." (Yu Seon-Hwah)

– *"Wait, wait a minute. Miss Seon-Hwah?"*

“I can’t speak at length at the moment. As for the details…” (Yu Seon-Hwah)

Yu Seon-Hwah blurred the ends of her words and bit her lip again.

A short moment of silence later…

– *“…The things you said, are they coming from your heart?”*

Chapter 46
First Experience (1)

Experiencing something for the first time would always be a special moment.

How should Seol Ji-Hu go about explaining this sensation of traveling to Paradise? Just like sinking into the depths of the ocean, it felt like his entire body had become heavy and sluggish.

Seol Ji-Hu quietly closed his eyes. And shortly afterwards, he felt his body emerging out into the open air. When he opened his eyes, the transfer gate from the temple was behind him, still emitting that mysterious light.

“You’re finally here.” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

He also saw Kim Hahn-Nah waiting for him.

And so, he had returned to the Lost Paradise. This would be his second time entering this world.

Seol Ji-Hu presented his slip to the counter and received a key in return. He quickly made his way to the storage to retrieve his gear. He confirmed that the gold ‘8’ changed to silver, returned the key, and exited from the temple.

Kim Hahn-Nah was waiting for him by the entrance, and when she saw him, she opened her mouth to speak.

“Did you check everything?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

“Yeah.”

“Well, in that case…” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Fuwoo… She suddenly let out a long sigh and formed a deeply wistful expression.

“But, it’s not too late, you know?” (Kim Hahn-Nah)

He was about to ask her what she was talking about, but then, she silently signaled him with her eyes. It was only for a brief moment, but he didn't miss her eyes drifting to her right.

"Mm. Well, honestly, I just want to enjoy myself and relax for a little while longer." (Seol Ji-Hu)

"In that case, there's not much I can do, I guess. But, please do give me a call when you change your mind, okay? Sinyoung's doors will always remain open for you." (Kim Hahn-Nah)

Kim Hahn-Nah presented him with an ivory-coloured bag. It contained supplies that she had prepared for him under her own name.

It was far inferior compared to what Sinyoung was offering, but then again, it was still better than nothing. Also, it was a bit much for a level 1 like himself to receive them, too. So, Seol Ji-Hu gratefully accepted the supplies.

"Will it be fine if I don't accompany you?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"No, it'll be fine. I know you're really busy, anyways." (Seo Ji-Hu)

"Then, how about only until the South gate?" (Kim Hahn-Nah)

"I said, I'm fine." (Seol Ji-Hu)

A woman persistently sticking to the clearly irritated man – of course, they were putting on an act for others to see. When she was in the Paradise, Kim Hahn-Nah had to be seen as loyal to Sinyoung.

'Seriously. I have to do some weird things, don't I?' (Seol Ji-Hu)

They shared short farewells and went their separate ways. They had already discussed about everything he needed to know back on Earth, and also, he was aware of how busy Kim Hahn-Nah was, too.

He wasn't a little kid anymore, so he didn't want to waste her valuable time with unimportant stuff.

'So, this is Scheherazade… ' (Seol Ji-Hu)

The uniform rows of earth-coloured stone buildings, clean and well-maintained avenues, and finally, throngs of people going about their daily lives wherever he looked; as befitting the capital of a kingdom, this place was overflowing with vitality. He found it hard to believe that there was a war going on somewhere just from the mood of this place.

Also, many fantastical structures such as castles, towers, and military barracks that couldn't be seen on modern Earth caught his curious gaze.

What would the shops sell here? What about the blacksmiths? There were other temples around here, too. He was so, so curious about many things.

If it were up to him, then he'd spend at least a day or so to sightsee what this city had to offer, but Seol Ji-Hu first had to resolve this urgent problem called "leave this place as soon as possible."

Scheherazade was the most prosperous city within the territory controlled by humans, and indeed, Sinyoung's headquarters was also located here. In other words, this city was their backyard.

Seol Ji-Hu couldn't help but feel a bit aggrieved by the fact that he had to leave this perfectly-fine city behind and go somewhere else, as if he was being chased away. But, what could he do? Sinyoung was obsessively observing every move he made. If he didn't want to become their puppet, then he had to go to a place where their influence didn't reach.

He walked while looking around and eventually arrived at the South gate.

There was a huge open stone gate, and next to it, stables and horse-pulled carriages…

'…Can you even call those carriages?!'

Seol Ji-Hu blinked his eyes in dumbfoundedness.

Unless one had no money, it was this world's common knowledge to utilise the services of carriages when moving from one city to another. But well, he couldn't help but panic a bit after spotting rows upon rows of worn out, rickety wooden carts parked there, instead of the covered coach he rode in when he left the Neutral Zone.

Out of all these, carriages with flaps on either sides to block out some of the elements

looked a bit better than the most. Seol Ji-Hu stood there, wondering what he should do next, before cautiously walking over to a man lying on a stack of hay while chewing on a grass stalk near one such 'carriage'.

"Hello, there." (Seol Ji-Hu)

"Mm?"

The man was staring at the heavens with a bored expression, but as soon as a shadow loomed over him, raised his upper body right away. He was a local, with bronze-coloured skin, a mustache, and somewhat dishevelled hair.

The number of the Paradise's original residents had decreased considerably ever since the war broke out, but still, there were quite a few that had survived. With the exception of those who directly participated in the military affairs, most of the residents who had lost their homes carried on living while getting involved in the Earthling's activities, such as farming or operating various shops, etc, etc.

For instance, this man here – after evacuating to Scheherazade, he switched his job to a wagoneer to make his ends meet.

"You an Earthling?"

"Pardon? Ah, yes, I am." (Seol Ji-Hu)

"Where do you want to go?"

"To the city of Haramark, if possible." (Seol Ji-Hu)

"Haramark, you say?"

The previously-disinterested expression of the man crumpled in an instant.

"No good, then. I only go as far as to Zahrah."

"Uhm… Why?" (Seol Ji-Hu)

"Because, it's uncertain, that's why. You don't often hear the news of an attack taking place on the road to Zahrah, but to Haramark…"

The man slowly shook his head and his large hair, and then…

“Anyways, you say you want to go to Haramark, huh?”

“That’s correct.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“In that case, wait for a bit. Oi~ii! Maktan!”

As soon as this guy raised his hand and shouted out, a bald man sitting a bit of distance away from them turned his head around. And Seol Ji-Hu began despairing in his heart right away. Because, the bald guy was the driver of a wooden wagon that looked like it was designed to ferry goods.

“Why are you calling me? I’m about to set off.” (Maktan)

“You have a spot left?”

“There will always be a spot left.” (Maktan)

“Very good. This fella here, he wishes to go to Haramark.”

The man named Maktan showed some irritation as he walked closer, before he started studying Seol Ji-Hu.

“You must be an Earthling.” (Maktan)

“Of course he is. Can’t you see that? You really need to ask?”

“Shut your piehole, man. I heard you ask the same question earlier on, okay?” (Maktan)

Maktan’s tone was curt, causing the man with the unkempt hair to chuckle out in embarrassment.

“I’ll calculate your fee separately, okay? 30 copper coins to Zahrah, but if it’s to Haramark, then 300 copper coins up front.” (Maktan)

The price jumped by ten times in a single breath. Of course, Seol Ji-Hu immediately realised that price included the compensation for the danger to Maktan’s life, as well.

Maktan continued to study the Earthling youth in front of him before adding a few

more words.

“Hmm… But, if you’re willing to work as a mercenary, then I’ll halve your fee to Haramark.” (Maktan)

“A mercenary, is it?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“To guard the wagon, man. As a guard. I know many safe paths to that city, but two, three times out of ten, I always end up getting attacked, you see!” (Maktan)

Seol Ji-Hu understood then. He nodded his head and loosened the mouth of his bag. If there was an attack, he’d not be able to stand still and watch, anyways. In that case, might as well make it cheaper for himself.

Currency of this world was also included among the list of things Kim Hahn-Nah was supporting him with. When he opened the money purse, a handful of coins emitting silver luster revealed themselves.

‘She said there are 100 silver coins, didn’t she?’ (Seol Ji-Hu)

The basic currency in circulation of the Paradise was the copper coins and then, nickel coins. 100 copper coins got you a single nickel coin.

Above that, there were the silver coins. A single silver coin was worth 1000 copper coins. Or, ten nickel coins.

And then, you got white silver coins, gold coins, and even platinum coins, but those things were matters still very far away for him right now.

When Seol Ji-Hu handed over a silver coin, Maktan’s eyes became super large in an instant. While giving Seol the change of 8 nickel coins and 20 copper coins, he raised his head up and looked at the sky. The sun was about to touch the middle of the heavens.

“If I push hard, we might reach Zahrah before the end of the day.” (Maktan)

“What about from Zahrah to Haramark?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“If everything’s smooth and trouble-free during the trip, two days. If we’re unlucky, be prepared to spend four nights outside.” (Maktan)

“Four days…” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“Let’s get going. I was going to set off right away.” (Maktan)

Maktan lightly pushed the back of Seol Ji-Hu.

“By the way, it hasn’t been that long since you got here, right?” (Maktan)

“What gave you that idea?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“There ain’t a lot of Earthlings who reply to us politely like you, you see.” (Maktan)

Maktan sheepishly scratched his philtrum for a bit, before lightly slapping Seol on the shoulder.

‘…Who’d have thought it’s this bad?’ (Seol Ji-Hu)

Seol Ji-Hu carefully climbed up to the back of the carriage, no, the wooden wagon. There were wooden benches on either side of the wagon, but they were only barely enough to lean his back against.

However, his heart was still pounding really fast.

‘I’m really nervous, aren’t I.’ (Seol Ji-Hu)

The story might have been different if he was doing this right after he left the Neutral Zone. But now that he went to Earth and came back, he found it harder to come to grips with the reality of the situation where he was using a horse-drawn wagon to travel to another city.

Should he say he was getting rather nervous?

‘It’s like some kind of a lie, isn’t it?’ (Seol Ji-Hu)

However, it also didn’t feel so bad, either. Well, at the least, he was feeling more comfortable being here, compared to when he was on Earth.

Shortly afterwards…

“Giddy-up!!”

Along with Maktan's loud shout, Seol Ji-Hu's body tilted to the side as the wagon pulled away.

Seol slowly grasped the railing and quietly stared at the city of Scheherazade as it grew smaller in his view.

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Haramark was a city located towards the South of the human's territory.

There were two reasons why Seol Ji-Hu chose this city as his destination.

Firstly, it was the only city where Sinyoung's reach didn't extend to, and secondly, Earthlings were allowed free rein in this place, which was quite unlike any other regions.

Of course, if there were good points, then there were bound to be bad ones, too.

One of them was the security of this place, which was so bad that Haramark had earned the nickname of the City of Crime.

A royal family also existed in this city, and they at least tried to enforce some sort of rules, but the truth was, they had pretty much stopped interfering with the Earthlings' affairs a long time ago. It couldn't be helped, since all those organisations who participated in the rebellion had been forced to re-allocate their headquarters to this city.

The other bad point was that this city was very close to the frontlines. Sure, warfare and the Earthlings went hand in hand, but Seol Ji-Hu was only a level 1.

The reason why he was still going there, though… Well, technically speaking, the Haramark Castle was not located near the border regions.

As far as security was concerned, everywhere was pretty much the same, with the exception of Scheherazade. And because of the warfare raging on between the humans and the alliance of the extraterrestrial beings and other species, he figured that the most powerful humans wouldn't have the time to pay attention to this place and its ongoings.

Kim Hahn-Nah thought for a while regarding this matter, before agreeing to let Seol go to Haramark on the condition that he'd not travel further South.

And so, he entrusted his wellbeing to the rickety wooden cart with a heart full of expectations and hope, but around the two-hour mark, his b**t started to ache.

He had grown sick and tired of watching the scenery pass by. Well, there was nothing to see anyway, since it was just the same desolate wasteland everywhere he looked.

'I'm bored… '

If he knew someone on this trip, then he might have started a conversation at least; he ended up thinking about his friends and the Yi siblings multiple times as the wagon continued on.

Seol Ji-Hu watched the brown scenery pass by while resting his chin on his hands, before shifting his gaze to the other passengers.

There were three other people riding on the wagon, besides himself and the driver, Maktan. They were travelers just like him, and judging from their attire, they were Earthlings, too.

The bald African dude sitting next to Seol Ji-Hu while yawning out constantly, boasted a huge physique and was kitted out in sturdy-looking armours. Also, his huge battle axe and its sharp edges caught his interest.

For some reason, this guy was eyeing the passenger on the opposite side with narrowed eyes.

Seol Ji-Hu followed after that man's eyes and took a look first at a young-ish man with a kind face and well-combed blonde hair sitting on the other side. He seemed to be a Priest, judging from the white priest get-up and the discoloured cape on his back.

And next to him was an attractive woman with a set of wild red hair as well as a longbow on her back. She had her arms across her chest, and her legs crossed as well, her head rhythmically nodding in slumber.

Just as Seol Ji-Hu discovered hints of freckles on her nose, a husky voice of the African man suddenly came from beside him. The axe warrior was studying the woman as his back inclined slightly.

Her sleep must not have been that deep, as she slowly raised her head to glare with a crumpled expression.

“What, me?”

Her unhappy tone of voice implied how irritated she was by the man’s attempt to wake her up, just as sleep was about to embrace her.

“That’s right. You. Your bow is pretty good, isn’t it?”

The woman maintained her cold expression, but the corners of her eyes arched up slightly.

“Well, I was in Scheherazade because of this guy, after all.”

“Because of a bow?”

“There were this and that to take care of, too.”

“I can see that it’s a longbow designed for war… You, by any chance, are you a level 4?”

The woman shook her head.

“Nope. Level 3. I’m a Tracer.”

“Ohh, a tracker, huh. Different than how you look.”

She coyly narrowed her eyes at the black man’s amazed exclamation.

“Did you wake me up because you wanted to ask me that?”

“Well, I was curious, that’s all.”

“Don’t make me laugh. If you’re done asking me questions, then I’d like to go back to my beauty sleep.”

Hearing her thorny reply, the black man grinned slyly.

“Why are you reacting like this when you know what’s up already? How much?”

What is he talking about now? Since he was getting bored anyway, Seol Ji-Hu was focusing on this conversation, only to tilt his head slightly.

"…Eh-whew."

The woman spat out a lengthy groan as if she saw this coming a mile away. She breathed in heavily for a bit, before pointing at her mouth.

"Five coins. Nickels."

"Aren't you a confident one. What about going all the way?"

She swept her gaze all over the axe-wielding warrior before snorting out.

"It's pretty hard to find a muscle brain with substance to back it up."

"You will only find out if it's the right length or not after taking a look, right?"

The axe warrior slapped his sizeable thigh a couple of times, but the woman shook her hand around.

"Don't want to. Don't have a hobby of doing it on a moving wagon."

"I'll add one more nickel coin. How about it?"

"I still don't want to. If you don't like it, forget about it, then. I wouldn't have agreed if it weren't for my tight budget after I bought this bow."

The large warrior licked his lips then quickly pulled out the coins from his inner pocket before tossing them at her. The woman lightly caught them all and yawned out loudly. After getting up from her spot, she scratched the back of her head while signaling to Seol Ji-Hu with her chin.

"Excuse me, let's switch."

Seol Ji-Hu dazedly swapped the seat with her. She then placed her side on the big warrior's thigh.

"How about touching?"

“You can’t go low. And the moment you put your hand on my head, I’m going to kill you.”

“Holy cow. Aren’t you a fierce one?”

The warrior chuckled jovially before inserting his large hand under the woman’s top.

Fondle, fondle.

The youth dazedly watched on, before realising that the woman had lowered her head on the warrior’s crotch, and ended up hiccupping out of sheer shock. He belatedly turned his eyes away.

‘W, what the hell are they doing now?!’ (Seol Ji-Hu)

His heart began pounding hard. Was this the so-called culture shock? The inside of his brain became blank like a sheet of white paper after seeing something he couldn’t have imagined in his wildest dreams.

The Priest was watching all this unfold with a disinterested expression. But, when he saw the young man next to him blush heavily while visibly panicking, a soft grin replaced that bored expression.

“First time?”

“?”

“First time seeing something like this?”

“…Oh, yes. It is.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

The Priest glanced at Seol Ji-Hu’s two spears and spoke in a surprised tone of voice.

“But, you look to be at least a level 2… Have you been staying in Scheherazade all this time?”

Seol Ji-Hu managed to recover his wits just enough to nod his head.

“Huh. So, you were a gentleman, eh? So, it’ll be your first time traveling to Haramark, then?”

“That’s correct.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

Was Seol making a mistake when he thought that the Priest’s teasing voice sounded a bit like he was mocking the youth?

“If it’s your first time, please let them have some fun. Unlike Scheherazade, in Haramark, the idea of romance still burns strong, you see.”

Seol nearly blurted out “Romance, my foot” but he somehow held back the urge.

“You know how it is. There’s no television, there’s no computers, whatever. So, what is there for us to do here? Sure, you might think we’ve got all those explorations and expeditions, but it’s not like we can go on those all the time, now can we? In the end, we eat, drink, and f*ck~. We end up being more faithful towards our basic instincts. Those are the only things we have as pastime, after all.”

Seol Ji-Hu couldn’t really sympathise with that notion, but he continued to nod his head. Well, he had to do something here, since the sucking noise coming from the other side was really getting on his nerves at the moment.

See, the thing was, Seol Ji-Hu thought it was infinitely preferable to focus on chatting to a friendly Priest with a happy grin on his face, rather than looking at the pair of crazed and uninhibited man and woman going at it in a… public space.

The young Priest continued to talk excitedly, before going, *Oops,* and offered his hand.

“Name’s Alex. I’m a level 3 Investigative Priest. From Area 4. You?”

Seol Ji-Hu hesitated slightly, before shaking the offered hand.

“Name’s… Seol. I’m a level 1 Warrior, from Area 1.”

“Eh? Level 1?” (Alex)

Alex’s jaw dropped to the floor, before laughing out loudly. He placed his hand on his forehead.

“Oh my lord, now I get it. You weren’t a gentleman, but a newbie!” (Alex)

Alex then lightly poked the youth in the ribs with his elbow as a lewd grin formed on

his face.

“Well, when you get to Haramark, you will definitely get a shock of your life.” (Alex)

Seol Ji-Hu could only smile awkwardly after seeing Alex’s giggling eyes.

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The trip became a lot less boring once Seol began chatting to Alex. As for the Priest, he got way too excited by the fact that the youth continued to listen to his stories, so he began telling Seol all sorts of things.

In the meantime, the wagon left the area of desolate wasteland and entered a new region.

They arrived at Zahrah after sunset, just as Maktan said they would.

After hearing that this was a village, Seol imagined that Zahrah would be a collection of small rural homesteads with equally small number of residents, but he got quite surprised by the size of the place.

Alex explained that there were well over 1000 residents living here, and that one could even find government offices, inns, and markets in the village. He also said that one could find most of the daily necessities in the markets as well. But he also emphasized that this village had been receiving support from Scheherazade, and other villages were not like this one at all.

Feeling fatigued from riding on the wagon for the whole day, Seol Ji-Hu went straight to the rented room in the inn after dinner.

As this would be his first proper night spent in the Lost Paradise, this occasion should’ve held a lot of sentimental value, but it turned out to be rather disastrous, instead.

The building itself was rather flimsy, and thanks to that, Seol got to hear the axe warrior and the Tracer lady going at it the whole night long. Blocking his ears didn’t prevent him from hearing the panting groans of the man nor the moans of the woman.

In the end, he couldn’t get to rest properly, and while carrying a totally fatigued face,

he climbed aboard the wagon as it got ready to depart in the early dawn.

Seol Ji-Hu couldn't help but feel a bit angry at the man and woman giggling and talking to each other, but as soon as the trip got underway and the wagon left Zahrah, such thoughts slowly evaporated from his mind.

The further they traveled, the scenery changed more and more. The reddish soil of the wasteland was gradually covered up by grass and plants, and soon, even trees made their appearances. It didn't take long after that for trees tall enough to block out the sky to appear, too.

The road became rougher as well. But seeing the changing scenery while drinking in the smell of nature had its own appreciable charm. After he breathed in the cool, clean air, the sleep that he didn't get to enjoy earlier on slowly crept up on Seol.

If there was another thing that had changed, then that would be the attitudes of the axe warrior and the Tracer woman had changed as they got closer to Haramark.

The axe warrior didn't try to initiate lewd conversations any longer, while the Tracer woman sat quietly as her eyes became sharper and focused.

"Get some sleep. It'll be fine. We should be okay for the next half a day or so." (Alex)

Seol Ji-Hu's eyes closed softly after getting the permission from Alex. It was only yesterday when he thought the Archer lady sleeping on the wagon was something pretty amazing, but now, he was confident that he'd fall asleep just like she had done.

'I wish we could arrive at Haramark as soon as possible… '

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And so… how much time passed by?

"…What happened?"

"Keep your voices down."

"Wake him up…"

"Wait, that…"

Seol was still half-asleep when he thought he heard voices. Then, he felt someone shake him by his shoulder.

When he woke up from his nap, the first thing he saw was a dark forest. And, although it was just his intuition, it seemed that the wagon was moving at a far quicker speed for some reason.

“Wake up, Seol!” (Alex)

“Mister Alex?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“You up? Uh?”

“Where…?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

Just before Seol could finish his question, Alex placed his finger against his lips and signaled that he should keep his voice down. Seol Ji-Hu closed his mouth shut and surveyed his surroundings.

‘A forest?’

That wasn’t the only alarming thing, though.

The large warrior was fidgeting around with his axe, as an uneasy expression remain etched on his face.

More importantly, the Archer lady had her ear pressed tightly to the floor of the wagon at the moment.

She was concentrating hard; anxiety was easy to see in her facial expression.

(TL: The currency as the author wrote here gave me a bit of trouble translating. The word used for nickel could also be translated as “100 copper” or “white copper”. Usually, there would be the accompanying Hanja letters to clarify it, but the author didn’t provide them. It’s the same story for white silver and platinum. I had a chat with the editor, and we decided to just go with what you see on this chapter.)

Chapter 47
First Experience (2)

He wasn't imagining things.

SFX for winds blowing across

The gust of wind blowing past Seol Ji-Hu's ear stung as if a piece of sandpaper was dragged across his face. Two horse-like creatures were already running at full-tilt, yet Maktan was still whipping them hard, his urgent voice roaring out.

"This doesn't feel good, does it?"

The big African warrior clicked his tongue and put on a battle helm with a flat top that kind of resembled a bucket. He then shouted out.

"Did you have to use this road through the forest?!"

"This road is my lifeline! There was no problem nine days ago!" (Maktan)

Maktan replied without looking back.

"How long have you been using this road, then?"

"Three months!" (Maktan)

"Godd*mn it! You'd have spread lots of your trace around here within those three months!"

The Warrior complained under his breath and lowered his body.

"Seol, you should get down, too." (Alex)

Alex bent down and pulled Seol down to the floor as well.

"Listen to me. From now on, do not leave my side. Understand?" (Alex)

Not a hint of mischievousness could be seen in Alex's expression now as he spoke in a grave voice. His serious, focused eyes only served to further tighten Seol Ji-Hu's chest.

Seol Ji-Hu knelt down on the floor and lowered his body, his grip on the two spears tightening. At the same time, he activated Nine Eyes.

'Son of a… '

He somehow held back the cuss from escaping from his mouth. The entire forest was in the shade of vermillion; the immediate vicinity all in the shades of deep, deep orange.

Do Not Approach.

However, he was already inside the danger zone. This would be his first time encountering such a situation.

He should've prevented the wagon from entering this forest in the first place. But, he fell asleep and didn't even know that he was being delivered into the open mouth of a tiger.

Seol Ji-Hu was about suggest that they needed to get out of here real fast, but shut his mouth after seeing Maktan whipping his rides hard while sweat continuously poured down the guy's frowning face. The wagon was already running at full speed way before he even woke up.

'What should I do now?' (Seol Ji-Hu)

It should be considered something of a happy occurrence that the forest wasn't in black or complete shade of red – 'Escape Immediately' or 'Immediate Retreat Recommended'. But this vermillion colour presented enough of danger already. After all, he nearly got burned from underestimating the threat posed by the 'yellow' colour in the past, didn't he?

As his complexion hardened, Alex to his side was in the middle of taking out a palm-sized crucifix.

The surroundings were rather eerily quiet… other than the sounds of hooves pounding on the ground and Alex's quiet murmuring as he chanted his spell.

As this unbearable silence continued on, the big African guy began gritting his teeth. Meanwhile, the Tracer woman didn't show any hints of moving from the position of her ear glued to the floor of the wagon.

"Say something."

"……"

"Hey! The distance, the direction, the number of them! Anything is fine, so say something!"

"…I don't know."

"What?"

"I don't know. I can't tell."

She lifted her head back up and formed a confused expression.

"I can definitely hear a strange noise mixed in among the rest, but… it's too faint and I can't grasp it."

"Hah?! Are you sure you're a Tracer?"

The Warrior spat out some words of exasperation, causing the Archer woman to narrow her eyes in anger.

"What are you trying to imply?"

"F*ck, man. You say you're a level 3, but how can you not know anything?"

"Shut your mouth! Do I look like a high level ranker to you? What do you expect me to do here, when I need to be on the actual ground to hear anything?"

Her pride must've been wounded, because she shot right back at him. The Warrior looked as if he had nothing else to say and only spat out lengthy groans.

"Decide fast! Do we keep running or do we stop? Hurry!" (Maktan)

Maktan asked with an anxious voice.

“D*mn it. What choice do we have? Stop the wagon!”

“No! Keep running!”

As soon as the big man voiced his opinion, the woman sharply opposed him. Maktan was about to yank on the reins to stop the wagon, so quite understandably, he ended up spitting out a cuss word.

The big black dude looked at the woman with a dumbfounded expression, before growling at her like a wild beast.

“This crazy b*tch. You want to fight me when we’re in this situation?”

“It’s you who don’t know sh*t. What will you do when we stop and get surrounded?”

“How do you know that there ain’t no ambush waiting for us up ahead? So, we stop and get down from the wagon!”

“Stop, both of you!” (Alex)

Unable to take it anymore, Alex finally intervened. The crucifix in hand was emitting a calm, gentle light now.

“Doesn’t matter whether it’s a team or an expedition, Archers always take the lead. Let’s just listen to her for the time being, okay? What do you say, Hugo?” (Alex)

Seeing that Alex addressed the big man by name, they must’ve known each other.

After pacifying Hugo, Alex then turned to study the Archer woman.

“I should place priority on your opinions as you’re an Archer, but even I think it’ll be better for us to stop at an adequate place and find out what we’re dealing with first. We can only come up with a strategy if we know what we’re up against.” (Alex)

“I know that, too. But look around, there aren’t any adequate place to stop.”

The Archer woman replied unhappily before biting her lower lip.

“It’s like we’re being led around. I can feel that something isn’t right.”

Alex's brows quivered.

"F*ck me! Did you hear her just now? You're supposed to be an Archer, yet you're busy mouthing off about your gut feelings?!" (Hugo)

Hugo cried out in anger. If it weren't for that fact that he was crouched real low to the floor, he might have jumped up and down with that big physique of his.

Alex maintained his patience as he opened his mouth.

"If you're relying on gut instinct, I can't place my trust in you. The odds are half-half. It's better for us to stop the wagon immediately and figure out what's going on right away." (Alex)

The Archer woman snorted and turned around to face the other direction.

"Fine. However, you need to give me 30, no, 15 seconds. I can't be certain, but we might be facing a group of Riders."

Alex didn't disagree with that. What she said made perfect sense, but also, in case the Archer's words were proven to be correct, then stopping the wagon would be tantamount to committing suicide.

"Maktan! Don't stop the wagon abruptly, but slow down gradually! So you can set off at a short notice, got it?" (Alex)

"Got it!"

"Alright! But… what…?" (Alex)

Alex turned around to face the Archer once more, before falling into a state of dazement from what he saw. The eyes of the woman were gleaming in soft light before that light disappeared. She then cautiously raised her torso up and peeked her head past the railings.

"What the f*ck? What the hell are you doing?! Lower your head, now!" (Hugo)

Hugo freaked out. She utterly disregarded him while surveying her surroundings, before nodding her head.

“I think we aren’t being herded around. It should be fine to slow down.”

“Herded or not, I said, lower your godd*mn head!” (Hugo)

“Seriously, stop shouting, will you?!”

The Archer covered her ears and showed how annoyed she was.

“Are you an idiot? If I were to get sneak attacked, then that driver would’ve been hit first!”

Hugo became even more dumbfounded than before. His mouth opened and closed a couple of times, before an expression of suspicion formed on his face.

“You… You really a level 3?” (Hugo)

“Ha-ah.”

The woman spat out a groan. It was as if she didn’t know what to do with him. She then placed a hand on her waist and opened her mouth.

It happened then.

SFX for things flying

Along with the faint whispers of air being split apart…

“In any case…”

…Her words came to a sudden stop.

Her eyes that had been mocking Hugo suddenly spun around. She then began faltering theatrically. Her head and her shoulders slowly trembled, before she fell face first to the floor.

Her body trembled only for a second before it went limp. She was dead.

Alex’s face crumpled unsightly as soon as spotting a lengthy needle sticking out of back of the woman’s head.

“This stupid b*tch?!” (Hugo)

Hugo angrily cried out as well.

Seol Ji-Hu couldn’t wrap his head around on what just happened. The woman who was so full of confidence only until a second ago died in the blink of an eye. It was as if he was having a bad nightmare.

Alex extracted the needle out and frowned deeply.

“Wait a minute. This, can it be…?” (Alex)

Next, they heard the pained cries of animals coming from the front.

Just as Seol went, *Oh, c**p*, the wagon tilted, and then, overturned on the side.

“Uwaaahhh?!” (Alex)

Alex was flung away, both of his arms helplessly flailing in the air.

Seol Ji-Hu, too, was thrown in the air. Before he knew it, he was sent flying. He was still gripping his spears tightly; as the sensation of his tummy being sucked in hit him, he clearly saw ‘it’ – Maktan’s neck thrown backwards and his arms powerlessly dancing in the air, with a needle stuck in his forehead.

The wagon overturned and the surviving trio was thrown out from the back. Seol Ji-Hu managed to land safely in the bushes and rolled on the ground to dissipate the momentum.

“F*ck this sh*t!! Riders my a*s!! It’s the gdd*mn Moles!!” (Hugo)

Seol heard Hugo roar out at the top of his lungs, but the youth had no time to mind that. Before he had the chance to take a breather, four pale-white hands shot out from the earth below, each of them carrying sharp daggers.

“!!”

He didn’t even have the time to see them take a swing at him; he let go of the spears and rolled further away. He bounced right back up at the end of the tumbling action and took a look at the spot he was in and saw the four daggers stabbing there. He felt

a chill run down his back.

However, picking up his spears took priority over him freaking out and asking what the hell were those.

He snatched up the nearest spear and rapidly stabbed the ground where those four hands jutted out from.

STAB!!

He felt the spear pierce past the soft earth and then, dig into something more substantial. It was almost as if he had stabbed into a large radish.

He then stabbed forward even harder and rotated the spear shaft. Right away, two of the four hands coming out from the ground went crazy as if they were having a seizure.

When that happened, the other two hands began pushing up on the ground as if they wanted to come out from there.

“Not so fast.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

Seol pulled the spear out and rapidly stabbed the ground again, causing the other hands to do that dying dance as well.

“Seeeoooll!! Huuugo!!” (Alex)

Seol quickly turned around as soon as he heard the urgent cry.

Alex hadn’t been able to get up yet; he was bitterly resisting against two hands sprouting from the ground as they restrained him. His arms and shoulders were quaking hard from the struggle, but the daggers were closing in gradually.

Due to the overturning of the wagon, their distance was greater than Seol expected it to be. He pulled the spear out, and thick coating of blood at the tip of his weapon drew an arc in the air.

He quickly circulated his Magic Power through his reinforced Circuit. He focused his power in his right arm and threw the spear as hard as he could.

Swish!

The spear carrying his overwhelming Magic Power flew past Alex and dug deep into the ground.

“Uwahck?!”

Alex reflexively turned his head away, only to blink his eyes in shock. He then realised that his hands no longer felt the pulling from under the ground. He hurriedly yanked his arms loose and got up from the spot.

“Huh?” (Hugo)

Hugo belatedly arrived there before staring at Seol with an equally surprised face. Then, he shouted out.

“Over there! Your left leg!!” (Hugo)

Seol was bending down to pick up the other spear, but as soon as he heard the warning, he jumped right up. Another dagger swept past where his foot was. He landed back on his feet and stabbed the ground, but when he felt movement below again, he lifted his left leg up.

He dodged the hand with the dagger with his swift footwork and stabbed the ground with his spear. Soon, the soil was dyed in the colour of blood.

“Ohh?” (Hugo)

When Seol took care of four, maybe five unknown assailants in one go, Hugo began grinning with an expression that said, “Would you look at this kid go?”

He then burst out in a raucous laughter, raised his giant axe up high, before slamming that heavy weapon down to the ground.

KWAHNG!!

What came out next was the impact noise that couldn’t possibly have been made by an axe. Seol’s eardrums shook hard. The earth exploded up and blasted away, leaving behind the air rippling clearly visible to the naked eye. He couldn’t tell whether that was Hugo’s Magic Power or one of his abilities, but if that was from purely his physical strength, then that was one of the most electrifying displays of power he had ever seen.

“This is the best method in dealing with godd*mn Moles.” (Hugo)

Hugo beamed brightly while resting the axe against his shoulder. Seol couldn’t understand that guy’s relaxed behaviour since they were still in the middle of a battle, but it seemed Alex did understand.

“Nice! Well done, Hugo! Now, it’s our turn!” (Alex)

Alex quickly picked up the crucifix off the ground as his eyes burned in anger.

“You sons of b*tches. The moment you all show your faces above ground, it’ll be your funeral.” (Alex)

The meaning behind those words revealed itself soon afterwards. With the spot where Hugo slammed his axe down as the central point, over ten pairs of arms broke out from the ground in a disorderly fashion.

“Alex!” (Hugo)

Hugo gripped his axe tightly and shouted out.

“I know!” (Alex)

Alex spat out a short breathless gasp, placed a hand on his side to press down a wound there as he pushed forward his crucifix.

“*Luxu, Lu, Luxuria!!*” (Alex)

Suddenly, a blinding light exploded forth from the crucifix. And at the same time, the creatures emerging out from the ground all froze up mid-action.

“Oh, yeah. Time to pull out some vegetables, then.” (Hugo)

Hugo ran forward as if he had gained wings and yanked at one of the arms from the ground. Then, a strange monster with two arms and two legs that resembled a trunk of a tree but with animal hide covering its body was pulled out from its hiding spot.

Hugo easily bisected the stiffly-frozen monster, then without taking a break, went around repeating the action of pulling and killing the monsters.

Soon, the duration of the spell came to an end, allowing these strange monsters to fully emerge above ground. By this time, though, their numbers had been whittled down to only seven. Also, they were all staggering around as if they were suffering from concussion.

Seol continued to be vigilant against the ground near his feet, but Alex spoke to him in a relaxed tone.

“It’s fine. It’s already over.” (Alex)

“Over? What do you mean?” (Seol)

“Right. See, these Moles instinctively hate Magic Power. These b*stards will emerge above ground as soon as you pour in enough Magic Power where they are hiding.” (Alex)

“Moles?” (Seol)

Alex formed a wry smile at Seol’s follow up question. However, the youth saved his life just now, so answering this much was nothing.

“Think of them as land-bound fish. They move around by swimming underground, you see.” (Alex)

Seol Ji-Hu tilted his head to the side. He couldn’t even imagine how anything could swim underground.

“In any case. They failed to kill us through their sneak attack, so it’s the end for them. Hugo is a level 4 Barbarian Warrior. Moles attacking from below the ground might have proven to be an irritating nuisance, but fighting them above ground is as easy as taking candies from a baby.” (Alex)

Alex pointed to his front. Hugo was treating these crazed monsters called Moles like a bunch of unruly children. Seeing the big man swing around his axe and cut them down one by one, even Seol felt his mind getting freed from anxiety.

Alex continued on.

“Actually, Moles are really crafty and sneaky b*stards. And these particular things must’ve fought against the Earthlings a couple of times already.” (Alex)

“How can you tell?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“Simple. Where do you think these monsters got their hands on the daggers?” (Alex)

“…Ah.”

“They must’ve also figured out that we had an Archer among us, because they hid deep underground and tried to confuse us. We’d have discovered them the moment they got near the surface, after all. They spread around and waited for an opening, and when that happened, fired those needles. As soon as they killed one of us, they attacked us properly.” (Alex)

“What scary b*stards.” (Seol)

“I know, right? But that stupid Archer woman!” (Alex)

Alex spat out angrily, before coughing out to clear his throat. It was a waste of time to bad-mouth a dead person, after all.

“In any case, that’s not all. Since they usually form a herd, they move around in large packs, and then… Ehehehe.” (Alex)

Alex began laughing strangely and moved his pointing finger away from Hugo towards Seol. The youth glanced down at himself, and his jaw dropped from the surprise. He spotted four needles stuck in the middle of his chest armour. He had been sniped during the battle, it seemed.

“And then, they possess enough intelligence to assign different roles, too. Ah, don’t worry about it. Those who’d been sniping us should have ran away by now.” (Alex)

Alex saw Seol scanning the area and stopped the youth from making a move, before tilting his head in puzzlement.

“Hmm. But, this is really strange. I haven’t heard of the news that Moles have popped up near Haramark until now.” (Alex)

“I’m finished!” (Hugo)

Hugo squeezed and popped the head of the last Mole with his bare hands, before shouting out with his arms raised up high.

“Nicely done, Hugo.” (Alex)

“Nicely, my a*s. This was way too easy. But, besides all that. You okay, my man?” (Hugo)

Hugo took large strides and came in closer before asking Alex. The young Priest smiled weakly.

“Actually, I got hit once.” (Alex)

“In that case, hurry up and heal yourself first. You can only thank this guy when you’re alive, know what I mean?” (Hugo)

“Fu-hat! Yeah, you’re right.” (Alex)

Alex plopped down on the ground before producing a small vial. While the Priest was grunting on the ground, Hugo strutted a little while studying Seol Ji-Hu.

“Hey, man. I saw your fancy footwork just now. You sure you’re only a level 1?” (Hugo)

“Yeah, I was wondering about that myself. I’d be more inclined to believe that Seol is actually a level 3 and the Archer was level 1.” (Alex)

Alex spoke with an anguished face as he tipped the healing liquid from the vial on his wounds. Hugo nodded his head as if he agreed with that assessment.

“What a crazy bi*tch she was. I’ve never seen a Tracer like her before. I thought I might die from frustration, you know?” (Hugo)

“That woman, she wasn’t a Tracer.” (Alex)

Alex chuckled softly.

“Of course, she wasn’t even a level 3, either. At a push, a level 2? Not only that, recently leveled up, too.” (Alex)

“What did you say?” (Hugo)

Hugo asked back with a disbelieving face. Alex breathed out softly as if the pain had lessened a great deal and answered the big man.

“I definitely saw it. It was only for a moment, but her eyes were shining. If I’m correct, then that’s not the ability ‘Farsight’ but most likely, ‘Eagle Eye’. You know that ‘Farsight’ is the must-learn ability for Archers when they reach level 3, right?” (Alex)

“Wait a d*mn minute here. Now that I think about it, ‘Eagle Eye’ is something you learn when you hit level 2……” (Hugo)

Hugo dazedly muttered to himself, before his expression crumpled.

“Godd*mn it!! She’d been lying to us since the beginning!” (Hugo)

“Well, come on now. You know that there are plenty of people lying about their levels in Haramark. I mean, you see a ton of idiots coming up with all sorts of excuses when you ask them to show you their Status Windows.” (Alex)

“D*mn it. How did she even get that longbow, then? Her equipment also looked pretty good, too.” (Hugo)

“She probably got a good sponsor or something.” (Alex)

Alex sounded confident of his findings as he stood back up. And then, he turned towards Seol.

“Seol? An advice, if you will. We might have won today, but this wasn’t what you’d call a good victory. Of course, you fought well above anyone’s expectations, but for me and Hugo, this was a bad fight.” (Alex)

Seol Ji-Hu nodded his head. He roughly understood what Alex was trying to say here.

If everyone acted according to both Hugo’s and Alex’s opinions, then these enemies would’ve been dealt with quite painlessly. Even if an Archer was tasked to head up a team, this would be the result when the right to make the final decision was given to someone not qualified for such a task.

Through this experience, Seol got to engrave this lesson right down to his bones.

“Che. If I knew we were facing Moles, I wouldn’t even have broken out in sweat.” (Hugo)

Hugo continued to complain bitterly.

“Who knew we’d be up against Moles? But… in any case.” (Alex)

Alex looked around his vicinity, and his shoulders drooped helplessly. Maktan and the Archer woman was dead, and the wagon was smashed to bits.

“And we’re, like, in the smack bang middle of the way, too…… Uh-whew.” (Alex)

However, Alex didn’t lose hope and asked the question, anyway.

“Anyone with a bright idea?” (Alex)

Of course, no one raised their hands.

“……”

“……”

“……”

The big guy, the youth, and the Priest spat out a long groan almost at the same time.

Chapter 48
Haramark

Should they continue on, or go back to Zahrah?

Alex and Hugo debated for a long time regarding this crucial matter. Because the incident had taken place smack bang in the middle of the way, it was hard for them to come to a quick decision.

Seol Ji-Hu didn't try to say anything. He figured that, rather than someone like him who knew too little offering up opinions and waste time, it'd be far better to listen to the decisions of the two veterans with lots more experience, instead.

The duo talked for a while and in the end, the decision was made to go forward.

They agreed that, rather than go back and wait for another Archer and a wagon, and therefore waste even more time and money, it'd be simpler to just walk the rest of the way to their destination.

Seol Ji-Hu also agreed. He was slightly worried about walking that much distance, but he decided to trust his overall endurance, something he took great pains to train back in the Neutral Zone.

"Alright. We leave, but before that, let's take what we can." (Hugo)

After the agreement was reached, Hugo suddenly spoke up about a different matter.

"I'm going to look at the Archer woman, so you two go rummage what you can." (Hugo)

Hugo whistled to himself as he turned around to walk away.

"I'm going to pick up the daggers the Moles dropped, so Seol, please take care of Maktan's end." (Alex)

Alex, too, quickly made his move. Seol Ji-Hu wondered what that guy was doing, only to see him bend down to pick up the daggers the dead Moles had dropped. Meanwhile,

Hugo was dragging the corpse of the Archer woman out of the wreckage of the wagon. Only then did the youth understand what was going on here.

They were looting the dead. Indeed, they were 'stealing' the personal artifacts from the dead.

Maktan's body was lying in front of the broken wagon, with a needle stuck in his forehead, and his eyes still wide open. Seol Ji-Hu found it hard to reach out with his hands. Rather than him feeling disgusted or scared by the human corpse, he was simply feeling apologetic.

But, he was someone Seol met only yesterday. The youth didn't really harbour any particular feelings toward the dead man, neither bad nor good.

However, this man carried out his given role right until the end. He trusted the Earthlings riding on his wagon to do theirs, too. Seol was supposed to guard him, but in the end, he couldn't protect the man.

"Mm? What's the matter? Why are you hesitating?" (Hugo)

Hugo walked up to Seol with a beaming face.

"D*mn. That girl was loaded, man. She had so much stuff on her beside that longbow! Come, take a look!" (Hugo)

The big Warrior pushed forward a handful of mixed items. Seol Ji-Hu received them almost out of reflex and then ended up frowning a little. The bow and arrows were a given, but then, he saw not only the defensive equipment, but even a ladies' underwear among the loot.

Thinking *There's no way*, he turned his head to look, and sure enough, he saw the completely naked back of the Archer lying face down in dirt.

It was the same story for Maktan. Rigor mortis must've made moving the body difficult, yet Hugo was expertly stripping the dead driver's unmoving body.

"Hugo." (Seol)

"Mm? Oh, it's you, Seol? What's up?" (Hugo)

“Is there a need to strip him off his clothes, and for that matter, his underwear, too?” (Seol Ji-Hu)

“Of course. Sure, they won’t sell that high, but every cent counts.” (Hugo)

Hugo replied straightforwardly as if he didn’t understand why anyone would ask this question.

“Still…” (Seol)

“Still this and still that. You worried that a dead body might catch a cold or something?” (Hugo)

Hugo laughed out at his own joke, before his expression calmed down. He spoke to Seol in a serious voice.

“Look, man. You gotta be decked out in proper armours and stuff if you wanna be acknowledged as a Warrior. And when your level rises up, you need to buy new equipment, but then, their price increases by so much that they actually physically hurt you, know what I mean? Money don’t fall from trees, my man. We save up every cent like this until we can afford the stuff we need.” (Hugo)

Now that Seol heard this, this notion also made some sense. Still, some hesitation remained in his heart. Hugo cackled after sensing the youth’s moods.

“There ain’t nobody here to praise you for being a noble person, Seol. What do you think will happen if you leave the corpses untouched here? The stuff will either get damaged as the wild beasts snack on the bodies, or some other lucky sobs would stumble by and loot them, anyways.” (Hugo)

“……”

“If you still feel guilty, then think this way. You sell this sh*t and get yourself a better weapon. And then, when you encounter Moles next time, kill every single motherf*cker you see. That is the best way to appease the souls of the departed. Okay?” (Hugo)

Hugo eventually located the money purse and grinned brightly. Among the mixture of copper and nickel coins, there was a single silver coin.

“Here, take.” (Hugo)

Hugo extracted the silver coin and, after taking a look to his side, gave the coin to Seol.

“This is…” (Seol)

It was Seol’s coin, given to Maktan as the fee for his ride.

“Hey, man. Hurry up. His back is turned around right now.” (Hugo)

“But…” (Seol)

“It’s fine. Fine, I say.” (Hugo)

Hugo pushed the silver coin down the youth’s pocket. He then placed his index finger across his lips and went *Shh,* with a smile on his face.

“The thing is, I also got back the payment I gave that girl when we were fooling around, you see! Ehehe.” (Hugo)

Hugo giggled and also added that, by accepting this, Seol was an accomplice now, and that they’d keep it a secret from Alex before turning around to leave.

Seol Ji-Hu was about to follow after the big man, but he stopped. His expression became complicated after looking at the naked body of Maktan.

‘…This kind of world… ’ (Seol Ji-Hu)

The youth slowly reached down and pulled the needle out. Then he closed the dead man’s eyes. He heard others calling out to him to hurry up. He increased his pace and caught up with them.

Today, he almost figured out a little bit of what this world, the Lost Paradise, was all about.

✧✧✧

They eventually escaped from the forest, and continued to march onwards. Walking for the whole day was never going to be an enjoyable or fulfilling experience, though.

When the night descended, Seol Ji-Hu got to experience camping outside in the Paradise for the first time. Staying up as a guard during the night was also a first since he left the military, too.

Those were probably the reason why his entire body ached and his head felt like it weighed a ton when he woke up in the morning. He hadn't experienced such stiffness and pain ever since he left the first ranker's quarters in the Neutral Zone.

He told himself that this was something he had to get used to anyways, and continued on with the march without complaining once. Becoming friendly with Hugo along the way was an unexpected bonus. He could be a bit of hot-blooded guy, but when the youth got to know him better, he proved to be as outgoing and friendly as Alex was.

Hugo, too, looked favourably at the youth. He believed in the notion that Warriors had to be tough b*stards, and so, he found Seol to his liking as the youth never once complained even when the marching speed periodically picked up without a single explanation. Also, when the big guy got bored and began talking about some random c**p, the youth listened with great interest, which meant Hugo could only grow even more friendly towards Seol.

In this fashion, days went by, and as the fourth day on the road was coming to a close…

The trio left the rolling hills and came to face a plain that seemed to stretch forever. And at the distant end of the road leading to the city of Haramark, the dying glow of the sunset cast its amber hue on the stone walls, so small and far away in their view.

It was Haramark.

Just as Maktan said, the unlucky trio took four days to get to their destination.

Hugo raised both of his arms up high and shouted out in happiness.

"As soon as I arrive, I'm gonna go straight to 'Eat, Drink And Enjoy'. Oh, right. What about you two?" (Hugo)

Hugo tipped an imaginary cup down his lips and asked his companions. Alex said that he'd like to take a break and refused right away.

"But, why?! Parting ways after sharing a glass or two is manly, don't you think?" (Hugo)

“You’re a Warrior, so you may have abundant stamina, but I’m a Priest, you know? And besides, I gotta stop by at the temple and make the urgent report first.” (Alex)

“Eh? It’s not like we were on an expedition, so why a report?” (Hugo)

“Come on now. Moles appeared in the vicinity of Haramark. This is something I need to alert the others as soon as possible.” (Alex)

“Ahh, I forgot. You’re right.” (Hugo)

Hugo massaged his forehead and shifted his glance over to Seol.

“Seol, what about…” (Hugo)

“Hey, you said that this is your first time in Haramark, right?” (Alex)

Even before Hugo could finish his words, Alex butted in first.

“Uh, yes, it is.” (Seol)

“Of course, having a cold one isn’t such a bad idea, but… the ‘Eat, Drink And Enjoy’ is… Hmm. Yeah, it may not suit you, after all.” (Alex)

“What are you talking about?” (Seol)

“Oh, it’s just a pub. A multi-purpose pub, if you will.” (Alex)

Alex added that he’d find out if he went there personally, before smiling awkwardly.

“In any case, if you wish to rest up well, then allow me to recommend you to an inn that I know. People go there to sleep for the night, so it’ll be sufficiently quiet for you. It’s a bit rundown, but it should be fine for your needs.” (Alex)

“Ah, thank you.” (Seol)

“No need to thank me. Well, let’s get going.” (Alex)

“Che.”

Hugo pouted unhappily. Seol couldn’t help but chuckle at the antics of the big man who

acted like a spoiled little kid – inwardly, of course.

If there was a meeting, then there would also be a parting, too.

When the trio arrived at Haramark, they shared brief farewells and went their separate ways.

Hugo's feelings must've been hurt by this, or maybe he was simply sulking, whatever – he just threw out a cold goodbye and turned around to leave. Alex spat out a lengthy groan and led Seol to the inn he was talking about.

"I'm worried about Hugo." (Seol)

"Don't mind him. He might be narrow-minded, and does whatever he feels like in that moment, but he isn't the type to harbour grudges or ill feelings. You buy him a drink later on, and I promise you, he's going to smile like a dog munching on a bone." (Alex)

After hearing Alex's words, Seol formed a gentle smile.

Now that he had finally arrived in the city, he wanted to take a look around, but well, he was far too exhausted right now. Rather than sightseeing, he dearly wished to hit the bed with a warm blanket wrapped around him.

"Welcome to Haramark, my friend." (Alex)

Alex and Seol shared a long, friendly handshake, and the Priest left with the parting words of "Let's meet again in the future."

Now left alone, Seol Ji-Hu cautiously pushed open the inn's door and entered. An elderly woman taking a nap behind the ground floor counter slowly cracked open an eyelid.

"What brings you here?"

"Oh, someone I know recommended this place, so…" (Seol)

"Alone?"

"Yes." (Seol)

“A single bedroom will cost ya 10 bronze coins for the night. If you want a better accommodation, we have special rooms. They’ll cost ya 20 bronze coins, however.”

“Give me that special room.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

After paying up 20 coins, Seol received a key, and by following the old woman’s directions, he went up the stairs to the upper floor.

The so-called special room was narrow, but quite unexpectedly, clean and tidy. He even spotted a small potted plant that aided in one’s natural recovery placed on top of a closet next to the bed. He also liked that there was an old wooden desk just below the window and two chairs next to it.

Although it was nowhere near as sophisticated as the accommodations found in the Neutral Zone, he still thought that such an analogue-like rustic sensibility wasn’t too bad, either.

Seol Ji-Hu put his bag down and laid down on the bed. For a while, he stared at the aged ceiling without making a noise.

He had encountered an incident mid-way, but besides that, he was able to conclude the rest of the trip without running into other distractions.

He fought alongside strangers, befriended them, and went their separate ways.

‘However, I’m sure we will meet each other some day.’

He did feel a bit empty, but at the same time, he saw it as yet another part of the adventure that he should enjoy and get used to.

As the bed creaked a little under his weight, his eyes slowly closed. Remembering the cold grass beneath his body when he was camping outside, this bed felt incomparably soft and comfortable.

Soon enough, the youth’s entire body slackened like a wet cotton, and he drifted into a deep slumber.

✧✧✧

Around the time the sun had risen to the middle of the sky.

Seol Ji-Hu also woke up. He thought he'd wake up in the morning, but perhaps due to the fatigue of the forced march, he ended up sleeping for a long time. However, thanks to that, he felt light and ready to go. Beside his empty stomach, that was. Even his heavy head had returned to how it was before.

When he cracked open the window, a gentle breeze blew in. He settled down on the window sill, and while drinking in the fresh air, he looked at the city of Haramark with great interest.

Scheherazade had been filled with countless earth-coloured buildings, but here in Haramark, the architecture was varied and colourful, to say the least. White, grey, reddish brown…

'What should I do now?'

Now that he was here, he needed to do something. Seol deliberated for a little while, before closing the window shut. He put the bag down on the desk and sat on the chair.

He opened the mouth of the bag and saw a few different things inside.

'This thing… He said that I'd get quite a lot of money if I sell this, right?'

The longbow designed to be used in warfare – it was the most valuable item out of the stuff looted from the dead bodies. Hugo wanted it, but Alex offered it to Seol as a way to console the youth as his first-ever trip to Haramark turned into an unbridled disaster.

Besides that, there were five daggers, a leather jacket the Archer wore, as well as a silver coin, to boot.

Seol suddenly recalled the bright face of Hugo as he said the seemingly-useless Archer woman had three Silver coins on her. The youth placed that Silver coin he secretly got from the big man along with the rest of his money.

'The Elixirs, and the Divine Stigmata… Now that I think about it, do I need to stop by the temple as well?'

He didn't have a need to go to a temple now if it was just for the Divine Stigmata. It was something he could use only when he was at a higher level.

The Divine Stigmata branded a person with a trace of divinity, allowing one to receive a god's blessing, which would lead to one unlocking special Jobs and skillsets.

However, one would have to go through the trials and tribulations the god sent down, as well.

Whatever the case may be, he couldn't stay idle for long. Kim Hahn-Nah told him to take this whole thing as a game. If the Lost Paradise was indeed a game, then what would he have done?

'Gather information.'

Picking up his bag, Seol Ji-Hu went downstairs to the ground floor. Before leaving, he returned the key and asked the old woman the direction to the plaza. She simply pointed to her left.

"When you exit the inn, go left. Soon you will find a big road. Follow that and you'll arrive at the main plaza."

He followed her directions. As soon as exiting the inn, he went left and found that big road.

If his first step was taken in Scheherazade, then it was time to take yet another one here.

The youth felt his heart palpitate faster as he thought about what kind of adventure he'd find in Haramark and who he'd end up meeting.

On the other hand, he was fully aware of the fact that the world operated in a certain way and things wouldn't work out in the fashion he expected them to.

✧✧✧

The appearance of Haramark was the exact opposite of Scheherazade in certain areas. If the Capital seemed lively and energetic, then Haramark felt chaotic and on edge at the same time. If he were to explain the reason for this mood, then it might have

something to do with the unrestricted freedom afforded to the residents here.

There were plenty of structures found in the city, but they were arranged in such a chaotic and disorderly fashion, they almost managed to make him feel dizzy. It was to the point where Seol Ji-Hu found it hard to tell where he was. The roads were uneven and pockmarked. They were dirty too, with wet straws liberally strewn about and muddy puddles found everywhere.

'I will probably have a hard time trying to remember the directions in this place.'

Most importantly, the atmosphere in the city was different. Perhaps because he heard that it was called the city of crime, every passerby seemed to possess a shady countenance.

A short while later, he went past a cracked and damaged wall adorned with graffiti that he couldn't decipher, and arrived at an open space.

The wide, circular area was teeming with people, and their noisy calls to others only seemed to further add to the chaos and confusion.

Seol's eyes sparkled when he discovered the noticeboard in the middle of the plaza.

'There's one here, too.'

He couldn't understand why there was a noticeboard with missions attached to it back in the Neutral Zone, but maybe it was to prepare the survivors for this arrangement.

He walked closer to the noticeboard while feeling happy for no reason, and almost out of reflex, took a look at the mission parchment located right at the top.

– Appearances of Moles near Haramark confirmed.

Below that single line of text, there were an identifying branding and a name. It said, 'the Temple of Luxuria, from Investigative Priest Alex'.

And when he saw the parchment below that one, Seol hurriedly took a second look at

it with disbelieving eyes.

– Reconnaissance of the Forest of Denial
– A mission issued by the Royal Family
– Reward, details of negotiation by mutual agreement
*Sicilia, Cinzia

‘So, Miss Cinzia is also in Haramark.’

He lowered his gaze further down. From here onwards, no matter what he chose to do, he had to do it in a team. Trying to act alone like back in the Neutral Zone would be tantamount to committing suicide.

It wasn’t hard to locate the advertisements for hiring helpers, but Seol Ji-Hu’s eyes narrowed to a slit. There were so many parchments here that they were basically overlapping one another, and some were even completely covered up by other parchments, too.

‘Requesting for a Priest level 2 or higher… Recruiting Warriors level 3 or higher… So, it’s requesting for Priests, but recruiting for Warriors, huh. Hiring porters… There was a job for porters, too?’

“Hmm…”

There were so many here that trying to read them only gave him a case of migraine. Finding a mission that suited his condition was also going to be a challenge.

In the end, he had to activate Nine Eyes. It was okay to manually read each one, but there was no reason for him to not to use an ability he already possessed.

The noticeboard changed into various colours. One thing that caught his attention was the fact that most of the board were in the shades related to alerting him to the potential dangers. The colour yellow was the most dominant one, and vermillion could be seen here and there as well. Hell, there was even a single crimson parchment, too.

‘This one’s even telling me to run away, too… Mm?’

Seol Ji-Hu licked his lips and continued to rummage through the parchments before his hands came to an abrupt halt.

His hands stopped by at one of the slips that was hidden underneath the others. He nearly went past it while thinking it was yellow colour, but the blinding light coming from it attracted his gaze.

Indeed, the paper was gleaming attractively.

'It's gold colour!'

The Golden Commandment.

He didn't expect to see a gold colour here.

Seol Ji-Hu's eyes grew wider as he took a closer look at the parchment.

Chapter 49
Carpe Diem (1)

– Carpe Diem is searching for a new member.

A single line of text on the parchment and nothing else – not even an address. However, Seol still liked the fact that it seemingly didn't speak of any restrictions whatsoever.

'Going there straight away is foolish.'

It was always better to have plenty of information at hand.

Seol Ji-Hu left the plaza and began walking around without a destination in mind. He was thinking of walking into the first restaurant he spotted to take care of his brunch.

As he looked around his surroundings, he eventually spotted a worn, shabby wooden signboard in the distance.

'Eat, Drink And Enjoy.' *(TL: Written in English in the raw.)*

Eat, drink, and enjoy. *(TL: This bit was written in Korean in the raw.)*

Alex said that place was a multi-purpose pub yesterday. Hugo wanted to come here along with everyone, but Alex said no right away to the idea.

'I guess the Synchronisation doesn't translate signboards, huh.'

Seol Ji-Hu tilted his head slightly, before heading straight to the pub.

He pushed open the door with anticipation bubbling in his heart, and was immediately greeted by the noises of people loudly talking to each other. At the same time, his nose was assaulted by the combined odour of cigarettes, booze, and sweat, as well as some other unidentifiable smell.

When he stepped inside, he was faced with a tightly-packed 'saloon' that one might see in a movie set in the Wild West. People were sitting around round wooden tables, noisily chatting among themselves with booze in their hands, or whispering softly with serious looks on their faces.

Seol Ji-Hu stepped in and walked past the ash and cigarette butts on the floor, before his eyes nearly popped out of his sockets when a woman sped past him, her blonde hair dancing in the air as she did so.

She wore the type of a brassiere that exposed over half of her abundant bosom, and not only that, a pair of pink stockings and the matching garter belt; and her swaying derrière was in full display through her see-through underwear.

She wasn't the only one, though. He finally spotted many more ladies kitted out in just as shockingly revealing outfits walking around here and there in the pub.

'…This was the meaning of enjoy in the name, huh.'

He kind of understood what Alex meant when he said that this place wouldn't really suit Seol.

'It's not like I don't like this, though.'

He just wasn't used to it, that was all.

A short while later, Seol finally found an empty spot by the corner of the bar, and he cautiously settled down there. It was perhaps obvious that he shouldn't really expect a speedy customer service in a place like this one.

Seol Ji-Hu spent some time observing the variety of beverage bottles on display on the shelves, before spotting a slightly-thin man resting his chin on his elbow on the far side of the bar. Seeing that the man was decked out like a bartender, he obviously worked here.

"Excuse me." (Seol)

"?"

The man with a bored face and a cigarette hanging loose in his lips glanced back at Seol.

“I’d like to ask you a couple of questions.” (Seol)

The man breathed out the cigarette smoke and slowly straightened his bent back. He then trudged closer to Seol and asked with half-closed eyes.

“You want to order something?” (bartender)

Seol wasn’t a dummy; he immediately figured out that the bartender was telling him to buy or order something, if he wanted his questions to be answered.

“What’s good to eat here?” (Seol)

“A light meal, or something more fulfilling?” (bartender)

“Something more fulfilling, please. Haven’t had breakfast yet, you see.” (Seol)

The bartender opened his eyes a little wider.

“How does a bowl of tasty soup, a loaf of soft bread, and a lightly spiced grilled sausage sound to you?” (bartender)

“Sounds good.” (Seol)

“Ah, right. We also serve a big serving of steak, too.” (bartender)

“Give me that as well. Rare.” (Seol)

The bartender silently gazed at Seol. Seeing this, the youth produced a Silver coin and presented it before the man. Only then the bartender smiled amiably and returned 8 nickel coins as change.

“Looks like I’ll have to roll my sleeves up for the first time in a while. Wait here.” (bartender)

The bartender entered the kitchen, and soon, emerged with the bowl of soup and a large loaf of bread first.

The old saying went that hunger was the best appetiser there was; the food tasted amazing. Seol Ji-Hu finished the savoury soup and the soft bread in the blink of an eye. The skewered sausage was overflowing with juicy fat, and when he bit into it, the

succulent meaty taste exploded in his mouth.

The bartender exited the kitchen while carrying the still-sizzling steak on top of a metal plate, before stopping still with a surprised expression on his face after seeing the youth busy licking his fingers in satisfaction.

“Y, you seemed to enjoy the food.” (bartender)

“Yeah, they were really good. Give me that as well.” (Seol)

‘…Was my cooking skill this good?’ (bartender)

The bartender was taken aback by the sight of the youth unhesitantly cutting into the steak and shoving the meat into his mouth. He still managed to take a bottle of booze from the shelf, though.

“This is on the house. Its alcohol percentage is low, but it’s pretty sweet and should go well with the food.” (bartender)

Seol’s mouth was full with meat so he could only nod his head as his thanks. He then grabbed the bottle and chugged the liquid down. A feeling of satisfaction filled him up as the thick aroma of raw honey melted on his tongue. Tasty food possessed this ability to enlighten the mood no matter the occasion.

“First time seeing you in Haramark.” (bartender)

The bartender asked, his expression more relaxed then before.

“I arrived yesterday. It’s my first time in the city.” (Seol)

“From Scheherazade?” (bartender)

“Yes, that’s correct.” (Seol)

“Aha. Oh, right. You said you wanted to ask me some questions, right?” (bartender)

Seol Ji-Hu nodded his head and asked.

“Is there any work to be found in Haramark? I don’t mind whatever it is.” (Seol)

“Hmm, I wonder? If you’re not talking about part-time jobs, then… How about visiting the plaza? There should be quite a few jobs listed on the noticeboard.” (bartender)

“I was there just now, but there weren’t a lot of jobs I could take.” (Seol)

“In that case, you should start as a porter first. You go around together with others and get some experience, learn a few things from them, and eventually raise your levels and grab some proper gear along the way.” (bartender)

The bartender glanced at Seol’s spears and continued on.

“A Warrior gotta be at least level 3 if he wants to try his luck joining an expedition. Well, unless you are in a team already, that is.” (bartender)

“So that’s how it was.” (Seol)

“Ah, I remember now that Samuel’s team was looking for a new member…” (bartender)

Seol Ji-Hu played around with the booze bottle with his fingers a little before asking the bartender.

“Do you perchance know Carpe Diem?” (Seol)

“Mm? Carpe Diem?” (bartender)

The bartender’s eyes widened slightly as if he didn’t quite understand where this question was coming from.

“Of course I know. If you don’t who Carpe Diem is, then you’d be considered a spy from elsewhere in Haramark. I mean, aren’t they the ones that live for today?” (bartender)

“?”

‘Carpe Diem’ literally meant ‘seize the day’; however, the bartender said that the ‘group’ lived for today.

“What are they like?” (Seol)

“Mm… Carpe Diem is a team made up of four, no, wait – three people. No need to mention how skilled they are, of course. Even the Sicilians and the Triads would

occasionally request them with missions, after all. As a team, they would rank in the top five in Haramark, no question about it." (bartender)

They were an amazing group of people, as it turned out. Haramark was a bustling, thriving city on its own right. So, if a group was ranked as one of the best in this city, it meant that even if the entire Paradise was taken into account, they would still be rated as one of the best.

"Every member is known for their good skills, but most importantly, their leader is someone quite remarkable, you see. He's a high level ranker, actually." (bartender)

"Where do I find Carpe Diem?" (Seol)

"Why? You wish to join them?" (bartender)

Seol Ji-Hu nodded his head, prompting the bartender to shake his head around wildly.

"Better give that notion up. That team is…" (bartender)

But, he blurred the ends of his words and spat out a soft groan, instead. The bartender then lowered his head slightly.

"…Don't mind me. I'm not in a position to say anything, anyway." (bartender)

The youth got to hear the location from the bartender. Saying thanks for the food, Seol got up and left the pub.

✧✧✧

After leaving the pub and walking for around ten minutes, Seol found himself in front of his destination.

There were no signboards. Seol thought the bartender's words of "An old white building, about so-so in size" was a pretty unfriendly description, but now that he was here, there was only one white building in the entire neighbourhood.

Seol got closer to the building and took a peek inside the ground floor before letting out a soft gasp of admiration.

'A training facility?'

He got to glimpse the sight of a gym that easily exceeded the one found in the Neutral Zone. The entire ground floor was converted to facilitate indoor training, it seemed.

'I wanna get back to training again… '

Seol heard that second floor was the reception office, and sure enough, there were worn-down stone steps to the side of the structure. *(TL note at the end)*

As he looked up, he continued to chew his blameless lower lip. As he approached ever closer to the steps, his heart began beating faster and faster.

'Maybe I shouldn't have asked.'

If he didn't know anything, then he might have marched straight in, full of spirit. No matter how hard he thought about it, there was no reason for this team to accept him. Even if he considered it from their perspective, the end result remained the same.

He suddenly recalled Odelette Delphine, the Sorcerer girl always seemingly full of too much energy. If she were in his shoes, would she be hesitating like this?

'I mean, I'm not a little kid anymore, too.'

It was obvious that he'd be refused, but he simply couldn't just let the lone 'Golden Commandment' opportunity slip through his fingers yet.

He needed to at least give it a shot, regardless of what might happen.

Seol ended his thoughts there and rapidly climbed up the stairs. He stared at the closed-shut second floor door for a little while, before knocking on it.

"Who's there?"

He heard a voice coming from inside.

"Come in. The door's open."

The voice sounded a bit less than enthusiastic, actually.

Seol Ji-Hu breathed in deeply and pushed the door open wide. And then, saw it.

…The tilted face of a woman staring at him as she sat on an old, old couch with her back to him.

“Who’re you? I’ve never seen your face before.”

Her skin was pure-white as if she’d painted herself with milk; her black hair was long enough to reach the floor. More importantly, though – her clean, pure and elegantly-shaped eyes, and a cigarette hanging loose between those softly-pink lips……

‘Eh?’

Seol’s eyes blinked as he stood there completely dumbfounded. The woman with a cocked eyebrow began frowning deeply after seeing him behave like this.

“I said, who the hell are you, you dumb sh*t?”

She even started swearing right off the bat, too. The woman reminded Seol of Maria – should that be chalked down to him momentarily being confused?

“Who is it?”

Sounds of heavy footsteps could be heard, then a big African dude suddenly showed up from around the corner.

The big guy and Seol looked at each other, and opened their mouths simultaneously.

“Seol!”

“Hugo?”

Hugo must’ve emerged from a shower or something, since water still dripped off him.

“You… Ah, what the hell. In any case, come on in! Come inside.” (Hugo)

Hugo gestured with his hands before actually pulling Seol Ji-Hu inside, and made the youth sit down on the couch. The woman looked at him while puffing out the cigarette smoke.

“What the hell. So, you two knew each other?” (?)

“I told you yesterday, didn’t I? There was a guy I came to Haramark with.” (Hugo)

“I thought it was Alex, though?” (?)

“Not just Alex. I told you there was another guy.” (Hugo)

Hnng, the woman nodded and swept her gaze over Seol, before letting out a small *Ahh!*

“Is he that newbie you were talking about? Coming to Haramark for the first time and stuff?” (?)

Hugo ignored the woman and talked to Seol, instead.

“Seol, what brings you here? I’m really surprised to see you here, you know?” (Hugo)

“Yes, me too. I had no idea that you were a member of Carpe Diem, Mister Hugo.” (Seol)

Hiiick~! A rather adorable scream came from the side. The woman hugged herself with her arms and formed a scared expression as if something horrified her.

“Euh~, hey you. Can’t you do something about the way you speak? It’s been so long since I last heard polite speech and it’s giving me these nasty goosebumps.” *(TL: MC has been using polite speech and proper honorifics until now.)*

“…Ignore that girl. Besides all that. What brings you here?” (Hugo)

“…Oh.”

Seol glanced at the woman who was wearing a sleeveless white T as well as a pair of hot pants, and started talking.

“I came here after finding the notice for a job posting.” (Seol)

“A job posting?” (Hugo)

Hugo’s eyes grew extra wide, and he turned his head to look at the woman.

“Did we ever place a job posting before?” (Hugo)

The woman shrugged her shoulders.

“Beats me. But I did hear that, what with the old man retiring and all, we would search for a substitute.” (?)

“Who told you that?” (Hugo)

“Don’t be an idiot. Who do you think it was? It was Dylan, obviously… Anyways.” (?)

The woman killed her cigarette by rubbing it against the ashtray and disinterestedly told Hugo.

“Hugo? You ask him to leave, okay~?” (?)

“You want him to leave?” (Hugo)

“Obviously. How can he enter our team? We ain’t gonna humour a newbie, right?” (?)

As expected, joining them was not possible. Seol thought as much, but the reality still tasted bitter in his mouth.

The woman lit up a new cigarette and cocked an eyebrow. Because, Hugo was deliberating on some things with a serious look on his face. It was a rare thing to see this idiot whose brain was entirely made up of muscles to think this hard.

Just as Seol Ji-Hu was about to get up from the couch, Hugo reached out and grabbed the youth’s arms.

“Wait, wait. You came here after checking out the job posting, right? Then, wait for a little while longer, okay?” (Hugo)

His next words surprised the woman even more.

“What?! Hey! You want to admit a level 1 to our team?!” (?)

“Keep quiet, will you? Hey, man. Seol, our leader should be here any second, so can you wait for him? I’ll put in some good words for you.” (Hugo)

“Hah!”

The woman spat out an exasperated groan of disbelief.

It was then. The door creaked open, and…

“Mm? A customer?”

Seol heard a deep, husky, and rather dignified voice coming from there.

Seol Ji-Hu turned his head towards the doorway, and spat out a shocked gasp at the sight of the man entering the premises.

He was a darkish man carrying a brown envelope in his hand, and he also happened to boast an enormous physique. He was taller than Hugo by another head, and his body, packed to the brim with muscles, could’ve come straight from an NBA player. *(TL note at the end)*

A devil would show up if it was mentioned, as they say. Hugo raised his hand and welcomed the man in.

“Oh, good timing, Dylan!” (Hugo)

“Who is he? A client?” (Dylan)

“A Mister level 1 Warrior saw one of our job postings and came to pay us a visit~.” (?)

The woman spoke with a tired voice while resting her chin on her hands.

“A level 1?” (Dylan)

Dylan tilted his head in confusion.

“Job postings… Hmm. I must’ve posted those a while ago.” (Dylan)

Dylan studied the youth in front of his eyes with unfathomably deep eyes. Seol Ji-Hu began feeling a strange sense of pressure as the man swept his gaze all over him.

‘This guy… He’s the genuine high level Archer?’ (Seol)

He looked more like a Warrior simply from his physique alone.

Dylan spoke up soon afterwards.

“Well, it doesn’t matter.” (Dylan)

The woman looked like she’d been punched in her gut as she faced Dylan.

“You being serious?” (?)

“Yeah, I am. It’s true that we’re looking for a new team member, and I haven’t placed any restrictions on who may join us. That is why it’s not a problem.” (Dylan)

“…Hey. I know that you’re the leader and all. But still, aren’t you supposed to listen to other’s opinions, too?” (?)

“We just have to ‘look’ at the person, That’s all. The old man personally said those words, Cho Hong.” (Dylan)

With that, the woman named Cho Hong shut her mouth. She still frowned unhappily while puffing on her cigarette, though.

“Tsk. Do what you want. Besides that, what happened to the job?” (Cho Hong)

“I can’t even call it a job, actually. I just popped into the Triads for a bit, that’s all.” (Dylan)

“I heard that they just welcomed a new executive there.” (Cho Hong)

“Right. I checked him out, so I could remember his face. His name is Hao Win. He’s a pretty friendly character.” (Dylan)

Dylan toothily grinned.

‘Hao Win?’ (Seol)

When a familiar name was mentioned, Seol’s eyes glittered for a second.

‘Mister Hao Win is also in Haramark?’ (Seol Ji-Hu)

“In that case… Ah. Where’s my mind at, I wonder.” (Dylan)

Dylan was about to settle down on another couch, before he hurriedly got back up again.

A bit later, Dylan reappeared from around a corner while carrying a pair of tea cups with steam rising up. He handed one over to Seol and grinned.

“A guest came by, but I’ve forgotten all about being a good host. My apologies.” (Dylan)

“No, it’s alright. Thank you.” (Seol)

Seol Ji-Hu carefully received the cup. Dylan sipped the tea first, and a frown formed on his face.

“Don’t mind it if the tea tastes a bit bland, okay? I’ve been practicing making tea lately, but I can’t seem to get any better.” (Dylan)

Seol smiled softly at Dylan’s gentle voice. The youth sensed the other man was trying to be considerate, basically telling him to relax.

“Okay, listen, man. Dylan…” (Hugo)

Hugo was about to b**t in, but Dylan raised his hand to stop him.

“I’ve heard a bit about you from Hugo. You must be Seol, the level 1 Warrior. First time in Haramark, huh?” (Dylan)

“That’s correct.” (Seol)

“Summoned March this year, yeah?” (Dylan)

“That’s also correct.” (Seol)

“Oh, so you might know Hao Win, then. He too graduated from the March class, apparently.” (Dylan)

Finally, they moved into the main topic. Seol thought that he’d be chased out of this place, but it seemed like they would at least listen to his story first.

Could this be thanks to Hugo? Seol Ji-Hu inwardly promised to buy the man a drink at a later stage and stared straight at Dylan.

“Okay, Seol. Do you know what kind of a team ours is?” (Dylan)

“I’ve heard some things.” (Seol)

“From where? From who?” (Dylan)

“From ‘Eat, Drink And Enjoy’. I didn’t ask the person’s name, so I can’t be sure.” (Seol)

Dylan nodded his head. The youth didn’t just show up with no plan whatsoever, but actually bothered to gather some basic information first. Considering that he had exited from the Neutral Zone not too long ago, this would’ve been considered a plus point. At least, it said that the youth was the type to think things through.

“Cool. Well, then. How were your records in the Tutorial and the Neutral Zone like?” (Dylan)

“My records?” (Seol)

“Well, you can tell us the amount of Survival Points you got at the end of the Tutorial, and up to how far you went with the mission’s difficulty in the Neutral Zone, that sort of stuff.” (Dylan)

Dylan raised his tea cup, signaling to the youth to relax and be open.

Seol Ji-Hu spoke up.

“The total amount of Survival Points I earned at the end of the Tutorial was 26,500.” (Seol)

Dylan was about to tip the cup towards his lips, but…

“As for the missions in the Neutral Zone, I’ve cleared up to the Impossible difficulty.” (Seol Ji-Hu)

…His hands came to a stop.

Hugo’s nervously jittery legs also stopped shaking around.

It weren’t only those two, though.

Even Cho Hong, who was grandly yawning out while covering her mouth with her hand until then, began glaring at him, too.

(TL: If you've forgotten, let me refresh your memories – I'm from the region where we use Commonwealth's system of assigning floors. Which means, my second floor is third floor for those who follow the American standard.)

Chapter 50
Carpe Diem (2)

The inside of the Carpe Diem's office had become deathly quiet in an instant. It was as if time had come to a stand still. Everyone stopped moving and stared at one person.

From disbelief to suspicion, from suspicion to glares that were definitely not friendly at all…

The atmosphere in the room continued to grow colder and colder.

Seol Ji-Hu felt his heart become heavier from the unspoken pressure emanating from this uncomfortable silence. He had expected there would be some sort of a response, but he didn't know it would be this bad.

"Euh, euhahahaha!" (Hugo)

Suddenly, Hugo started laughing his head off.

"Hiya~. Who knew you had a sick sense of humour like that? I guess I should change how I look at you now, eh?" (Hugo)

He cackled and lightly patted Seol on the shoulder. However, everyone present here could see from his exaggerated laughter and movements, the big guy was trying to somehow defuse this dangerous situation and treat it as a tactless humour of a rookie.

"Oi." (Cho Hong)

Her voice sounded growly, threatening.

Cho Hong slowly corrected her posture. She locked her hands, her legs parted slightly, and her back bent forward a little.

"Hey, let me tell you something. You showing up here today, that's not a problem, in all honesty." (Cho Hong)

It was as if she was trying not to sound angry, but the tone was really too low for a woman's voice. And the pitch remained chillingly flat as well.

"Job posting. Yeah, you could have seen that and came to talk to us. Just like Dylan said, there are no restrictions, after all. That's all fine and good." (Cho Hong)

Her eyes, visible behind her flowing black hair, gleamed coldly.

"The thing is…" (Cho Hong)

Her eyes, seemingly fixed to the floor, emitted a chilling light so scary that it made people avert their gazes instinctively.

"If you showed up here, the office of Carpe Diem, just to throw around unfunny jokes, then… Then, as a person who has to listen to you, my position will have to change somewhat, get my drift?" (Cho Hong)

"Cho Hong!" (Hugo)

"Shut up, Hugo." (Cho Hong)

Cho Hong replied sharply, pulled the cigarette out from her lips, and slowly breathed out the blue smoke. She then stared straight at Seol Ji-Hu and spoke.

"I'll give you another chance. Right now, I'm willing to overlook this matter as a noob who wants to join us cracking a cute little lie and nothing more." (Cho Hong)

Hugo sighed out in relief.

"So. This time, don't utter bullsh*t and speak the truth." (Cho Hong)

Cho Hong stopped there and remained silent. Seol Ji-Hu nodded his head as his response, and opened his mouth to speak.

"Excluding the points I received as the starting bonus as well as the multiplier, the original points tally I had at the end of the Tutorial was 2,150." (Seol)

Hugo's complexion hardened.

"The highest difficulty missions in the Neutral Zone that I cleared with my own skills

were rated 'Very Hard'. I did succeed in clearing the Impossible, but that was just due to luck, not my own skill." (Seol)

Cho Hong's brows began quivering.

"Ohhh. So, you saying that you really did have 26,500 points, and somehow did clear the Impossible mission, is that it?" (Cho Hong)

A strange smile formed on her face as she lifted her b**t off the couch ever so slightly.

"That's correct." (Seol)

"Ahh, really now?" (Cho Hong)

It was right then.

POW!

As soon as he blinked, Seol Ji-Hu saw the back of Dylan's hand that was as big as a pot's lid right in front of his nose. Not only that, Cho Hong's fist blocked by that hand, too.

'But, when?!' (Seol)

He failed to even notice her throwing a punch, never mind her arm moving before that. He felt the chill run down his back, not from the fact that he nearly got hit by her, but the fact that he couldn't even see it coming.

"Dylan!!" (Cho Hong)

"Violence isn't the answer, Cho Hong. The old man repeatedly told you to curb that temper of yours, didn't he?" (Dylan)

"But, that b*stard…!" (Cho Hong)

"Seol." (Dylan)

Dylan succeeded in placating Cho Hong for the time being and called out to Seol Ji-Hu. No, the youth thought that he was being called, but that turned out to be false.

"Seol. Seol… Ah." (Dylan)

Dylan was actually muttering that name out while trying to remember something. He then lightly slapped his own closely-cropped head.

“I was wondering why that name sounded so familiar… Hao Win… Right. So, that was you.” (Dylan)

“What are you talking about?” (Hugo)

This time, it was Hugo who asked.

“Hao Win was talking about a certain guy. Apparently, among those summoned for this year’s March selection, a ‘Super Rookie’ made his appearance, or so I’ve been told by him. I’ve heard the name in passing, but I think it could have been Seol. D*mn it, why couldn’t I have thought about that as soon as I saw him?” (Dylan)

“Wha, what?!” (Cho Hong)

Cho Hong’s head swivelled, and she looked at Dylan.

She then began laughing nervously, her neck trembling slightly. Her face remained disbelieving as she raised her voice.

“D, Dylan? What are you saying? If you come out like that, it’s like this whole thing is true, so stop it.” (Cho Hong)

She must’ve been really freaked out, because her voice was quivering noticeably now.

“I understand. I also thought it was a bunch of baloney when I heard it the first time, too.” (Dylan)

Dylan chuckled as if he found this whole thing rather interesting and got up from his seat.

“I guess I’ll just confirm it for myself, then.” (Dylan)

He leisurely went off to somewhere and when he returned, he was carrying a large, clear crystal ball. He placed it on the coffee table and placed his hand on top – and then, the crystal began emitting light.

‘What could that be?’ (Seol)

Seol Ji-Hu's curiosity perked up at seeing an object he had not seen before.

A short while later, the crystal's entire surface was enveloped in a soft glow. And at the same time…

– *"Uh? For Dylan to give me a call first, isn't this a pleasant surprise?"* (Cinzia)

…A voice of a person leaked out from it. That uniquely haughty, mezzo-soprano tone of voice sounded rather familiar to the youth's ears.

"I heard that you've returned to Haramark recently. I'm calling you to congratulate you on successfully concluding the Neutral Zone, among other things." (Dylan)

– *"Congratulating me, huh. Indeed, that's a nice notion. You have any idea how much I missed the air of Paradise?"* (Cinzia)

"I too was shocked after learning that you were being put in charge of the Neutral Zone, Cinzia." (Dylan)

– *"Other than being bored out of my skull, it wasn't so bad. A couple of interesting things happened too, and that kept me entertained in the meantime."* (Cinzia)

"Interesting things, you say?" (Dylan)

– *"…Oh, my? Did you call me because you were also curious about that?"* (Cinzia)

A cackling laughter came out from the crystal ball.

Seol Ji-Hu dazedly stared at the crystal. Ever since his arrival in Haramark, one thing or other managed to surprise him constantly.

That was Cinzia on the other side. She sure looked like someone pretty powerful when he first saw her in the Neutral Zone. But after seeing Dylan chatting so easily to someone even Kim Hahn-Nah referred to as a big shot in Paradise, the youth had no choice but to view the big man in a new light now.

– *"It isn't just you asking about this matter, you know? I've been repeating this sh*t over and over again like a d*mn parrot, and I think I've probably memorised everything by now. It's like, I've become a call centre employee here."* (Cinzia)

“I’d also like to hear the story, if you don’t mind.” (Dylan)

– *“Well, it’s not like I mind. It’s something that’s bound to spread around, anyways. And I do owe this and that to Carpe Diem, too.”* (Cinzia)

Cho Hong got up and sidled up right next to the crystal ball.

– *“Huh? Cho Hong? Is that you?”* (Cinzia)

“Hey. Been a while.” (Cho Hong)

– *“Sure thing. Feels like I haven’t seen you in ages.”* (Cinzia)

“Okay, fine. I know, so please hurry up with the story!” (Cho Hong)

Cho Hong urged Cinzia to move on.

– *“Fine, fine. Took first place with a points tally of 26,500. Solo cleared the Neutral Zone’s missions up to Hard difficulty. Formed a team with five others afterwards and successfully cleared all of the Very Hard difficulty missions. And relying on a truly out-there method, solo cleared the Impossible mission, too. Finally, one of only two Gold Marks in history. Are you happy now?”* (Cinzia)

When the Gold Mark was mentioned, the sounds of salivas being swallowed could be heard in the office.

“…Thank you for telling us that. I’ll reciprocate the favour soon.” (Dylan)

– *“It’s not a problem. Lots of people already know this, anyways. Oh, and, we might be seeing each other pretty soon, too. I’ll be sending someone over there not too far from now.”* (Cinzia)

The crystal ball stopped glowing after that.

The manager of the Neutral Zone for the March selection confirmed the story.

It’d be hard for anyone to suggest that a leader of an organisation, Cinzia, was spewing nonsense for fun. Even more so, if one knew what her personality was like.

No matter how deeply they thought about it, it was impossible.

Yet, the impossibility had become a reality.

“Son of a…” (Cho Hong)

Cho Hong finally began to breath again and plopped down on the couch with an expression of someone who saw a true monster.

Meanwhile, Hugo could only mutter to himself, “Woah, woah” with a small voice.

“A Gold Mark… is it?” (Dylan)

Dylan sipped on the tea and organised his thoughts for a while, before slowly opening his mouth.

“Looks like I’ll have to change how we go about things.” (Dylan)

“?”

“Seol.” (Dylan)

Dylan put the teacup down and spoke with a serious face.

“I now know what kind of person you are. There are many things we’re curious about, and what with this being such an unbelievable story to begin with, please do try to understand where we’re coming from, okay?” (Dylan)

Dylan’s calm voice seemed to possess this mystifying ability to calm all those listening to him.

“It’s fine.” (Seol)

“Thanks. Mm, right. About the job posting.” (Dylan)

Dylan stopped there and wordlessly stared at Seol. The youth stiffened slightly in nervousness as the big guy studied every square inch of his face.

A short moment of silence later, Dylan continued on.

“I’d like to hear your honest answer to my question.” (Dylan)

“Of course.” (Seol)

“Alright. What was your reason for choosing us?” (Dylan)

This question took Seol by surprise.

“With that kind of a record, you could’ve chosen any of the powerful organisations in the Paradise and they’d welcomed you with open arms. I’m wondering why you chose to come to Haramark and knock on Carpe Diem’s door instead of theirs.” (Dylan)

Seol Ji-Hu became speechless, then. What Kim Hahn-Nah told him wasn’t something he’d walk around telling everyone he met, and also, he couldn’t come out and say, “I activated my Nine Eyes in front of the noticeboard, and the parchment you placed there was glowing in gold colour signifying the Golden Commandment.”

“Uhm……”

Seol Ji-Hu hesitated for a long time, before replying with an awkward smile on his face.

“Well, I like you training facility…” (Seol Ji-Hu)

Dylan slowly closed his eyes.

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“Haaaaaah…”

Seol Ji-Hu returned to ‘Eat, Drink And Enjoy’, found a place to sit, and began grandly sighing out.

The pub remained as noisy as before. But he didn’t care about that at the moment. His head was filled with the recollections of the moment he got rejected to notice his surroundings.

[My bad, but looks like we can’t work together.] [And if I were to give you an advice, you should leave Haramark as soon as possible. You will find many good teams in other cities. Starting in those places might be a better choice for you.]

Seol Ji-Hu couldn’t say anything to those simple yet resolute and firm rejection.

In the end, he could only return to the pub and mournfully sip on the alcoholic beverage.

He came to Haramark full of dreams, yet his current situation, having nowhere else to go, seemed too pitiful even to his own eyes.

Seol Ji-Hu rested his chin on his hand and pouted with a worried expression etched on his face. If only it weren't for Sinyoung… He might have joined up with a good team in Scheherazade by now and be away on an adventure already.

'Maybe, I should've just joined Sinyoung in the first place?' (Seol)

If he did, then he would have received incredible amount of support, and just as importantly, along with Yun Seo-Rah who said she'd do her best…

"Tsk."

Seol Ji-Hu licked his lips and took a swig out of the bottle. He was so happy and content while in the Neutral Zone, but now that he was outside, he sure felt like a fool now.

Also, he knew that he couldn't continue to do nothing and suck on his thumbs forever, even though he had a bit of money on him.

'I wanna do something.' (Seol)

The issue was with his low level.

He was a level 1. More importantly, there was no team stupid enough to let a novice Warrior join them when there were so many of them out there to begin with.

'There's nothing I can do, I guess. I gotta start from the bottom as a porter and work my way up… ' (Seol)

Just as he pulled out a cigarette and lit it up while feeling a bit uneasy…

Slam!

There was a loud noise of someone hitting the table, and then…

"Everyone, your attention, please!"

A man's loud shout brought a bout of silence into the once-noisy establishment.

Seol Ji-Hu took a glance and saw a man standing there with a hand raised up in the air. He was built quite lean, and his long hair extended down to his waist.

"Is there a skilled Warrior or a Priest among you? Ah, I'm also searching for a porter as well, so it does not matter if your level is low."

"What are you talking about, Samuel?"

A guy sitting on the table next to the man, Samuel, asked while chewing on a snack. Samuel lowered his hand and answered.

"It's a mission issued by the royal family. We'll be scouting the Forest of Denial." (Samuel)

"Eii, f*ck that. Why would I go to that godforsaken place?"

The guy mouthed some snide remarks and went back to mind his own business. Others displayed roughly a similar attitude. Some shook their heads, while a few others began smirking derisively.

However, Seol Ji-Hu was different. He activated Nine Eyes as soon as hearing that a porter would be hired, and the result was – Samuel had no colour on him.

'Should I?' (Seol)

At least, there were no colours related to danger here. Also, he was not really in a situation to be picky.

He should try to grasp every opportunity that had presented itself. Seol moved, thinking that at the bare minimum, he should listen to what other party had to say before deciding.

Samuel showed complete disregard towards the reactions of his fellow pub goers, but when he saw Seol Ji-Hu's approach, a bright smile lit up on his face.

"Oho! Our first lucky person arrives." (Samuel)

"I heard that you're looking for a porter." (Seol)

“Indeed. You have any prior experience?” (Samuel)

“No, this will be my first time.” (Seol)

“First time?” (Samuel)

Samuel looked a bit troubled, then.

‘Will this be a no, too?’ (Seol)

“I agree!” (Alex)

It was then, Seol Ji-Hu heard a rather familiar voice. Samuel turned around to look.

“You know this guy, Alex?” (Samuel)

“Yup. And I’m completely onboard with this idea. And I guarantee that you won’t regret it.” (Alex)

Seol Ji-Hu blinked his eyes after hearing the name Alex. There was a familiar young man wearing a Priest outfit sitting around Samuel’s table waving his hand at him.

“If Alex guarantees it, then I guess it’s not so bad. Alright, then! Come join us here!” (Samuel)

Samuel nodded his head and pulled Seol Ji-Hu into one of the empty seats.

“Alex.” (Seol)

“Good to see you again. I had no idea that we’d run into each other so quickly.” (Alex)

“Yes, me too.” (Seol)

“I’m actually a member of Samuel’s team, you see. By the way… I see that you’re a man at the end of the day. Hehehehe.” (Alex)

Alex began grinning in a sly manner.

“Woah, woah. I can see that you two are pretty familiar with each other, so why don’t you give us a chance to say hello, too?” (Samuel)

Samuel waved his hand around between the two youths and reached for a handshake.

“Hey, there. Name’s Samuel, leader of this team. I’m a level 4 Pathfinder.”

“I’m Seol. A level 1 Warrior.”

“Keuh-heu! I’m telling you, an Easterner always knows how to be super polite, man!” (Samuel)

Samuel then triumphantly pointed to his left. A brunette woman with curly hair as well as a woman with short, bright platinum blonde hair sat to his side.

“You already know Alex, so I’ll exclude him. Firstly, this lady here~ She’s Klara. A level 2 Hunter. And next to her is~ Grace. She’s a level 3 Shield-Swordswoman. In a way, you could say that she’s a senior.” *(TL: “Shield-Swordswoman” is the literal TL.)*

Two women raised her hands at the same time and waved at him. Seol Ji-Hu also raised his head and waved back, prompting the two ladies to giggle among themselves. For some reason, they kept stealing glances at his way.

“Oh, yeah. You said it’ll be your first time as a porter?” (Samuel)

“Yes.” (Seol)

“It’s not going to be a tough job, actually. We’ll be asking you every now and then to take care of some small things, but on the whole, just think of your job as carrying our luggage around for the entire duration of the expedition.” (Samuel)

“Is that all I have to do?” (Seol)

Seol Ji-Hu tilted his head slightly, thinking this would be too simple if that were the case.

“Mm! Of course, there are a few rules you gotta stick by. First of all, you can’t fall behind in the middle of the trip. It’d get real troublesome if you end up holding us back, you know what I mean? And then, you shouldn’t rashly jump into a fight, too. Things might get complicated, and we aren’t expecting a porter to fight for us, either. So, how about it? It’s easy, right?” (Samuel)

“Yes, it sounds easy.” (Seol)

“Good! Now, let’s talk about splitting our rewards. First of all, a porter has no right to ask for any relics recovered during an expedition. Do you agree?” (Samuel)

Seol Ji-Hu had no idea what this ‘relic’ thing could be, but still agreed nonetheless. This was a rule every Earthling should be aware of already, but since it would be Seol’s first time as a porter, Samuel was actually going out of his way to explain things to the youth.

“Good. As for other rewards, we split everything equally.” (Samuel)

“Really?” (Seol)

Seol was taken back by this proposal. He was thinking that he’d be nothing more than a glorified slave but now that he heard the terms, it was better than he expected.

“You’re splitting equally even with a porter?” (Seol)

“Obviously. A porter is still a member of the team, isn’t it?” (Samuel)

Samuel looked befuddled, as if he couldn’t quite understand why the youth was asking this question, which only led Seol further down the Confusion Avenue. However, the Pathfinder quickly realised what happened here, and a wry smile formed on his face.

“Yeah, I heard that there are some teams out there that treat their porters like slaves, but I’m not one of them. You’re an Earthling like me, and you are just trying to earn some experience, after all.” (Samuel)

He was implying that, in the Lost Paradise, the relationship between a team and a porter was a mutually beneficial one.

“You help us and let us focus on the expedition, and we will protect you from the danger. Okay?” (Samuel)

“I understand.” (Seol)

“However, don’t expect to be treated too nicely, okay? You being a part of the team will make it a bit easier for the rest of us, but if you weren’t here, then we’d have carried our own luggage, anyway.” (Samuel)

When considering the fact that, regardless of whether one was a Contracted or an

Invited, most of the Earthlings would start as a porter, Samuel's words were being rather considerate.

"Okay, now. Time to get to the main topic at hand." (Samuel)

Samuel formed a sly smile and then, he suddenly got very close to Seol's ear in order to whisper something.

"I hope that you didn't think I'd be really going on a recon to the Forest of Denial." (Samuel)

Hearing that hushed whisper, Seol Ji-Hu's expression became hard to read as well.

"Oh. Of course, we will carry out our mission, no problem. However… Oopsie. We should finish our chat elsewhere." (Samuel)

Samuel whispered up to there and pointed to the exit of the pub with his chin.

"Follow us. Let's talk somewhere a bit quieter. When you hear what I have to say, even you'll think that you've stumbled upon a jackpot. I guarantee it." (Samuel)

Samuel winked and shouted out, "Let's get out of here!" before energetically standing up from his seat.

"Let's go. Decide after hearing us out. If you don't like what you hear, then you can opt to leave afterwards." (Alex)

Alex also voiced his opinion. Seol Ji-Hu wondered whether there really was a need to change the venue, but he didn't say anything and got up as well.

Alex stood up with a happy smile on his face and muttered out.

"I've got a good feeling about this expedition." (Alex)

"How come?" (Seol)

"Because, we're getting a level 3 Warrior as a porter, that's why. You wouldn't find something so ridiculous in any other teams around these parts." (Alex)

"I'm a level 1, though?" (Seol)

“Sure, sure.” (Alex)

Alex giggled hoarsely.

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In Carpe Diem’s office.

After Seol Ji-Hu left, the office remained eerily quiet for some time.

Each of them had a lot to think about. Dylan stared outside and continued to suck hard on his cigarette, while Hugo formed a facial expression that cried out ‘I don’t understand what happened.’

“Eiii, sh*t. How f*cking embarrassing.” (Cho Hong)

Cho Hong laid down on the couch and continued to complain.

“Really now? F*ck me. Just how the hell did he clear it?” (Cho Hong)

While Cho Hong continued to voice her dissatisfaction, Hugo finally opened his mouth to ask.

“Dylan, I still don’t get it.” (Hugo)

Cho Hong quickly shot him a glare from the corner of her eyes. Hugo waved his hand around to indicate that he knew.

“I’m not saying I’m not gonna follow your decision, since you’re our leader and all, but I still don’t get it, you know? I mean, isn’t he good enough for us to accept?” (Hugo)

“Not at all.” (Dylan)

Dylan made a simple reply.

“If you consider our team’s unique *nature,* you should realise why we can’t have him join us.” (Dylan)

“But, still…” (Hugo)

“What we need is a Warrior who can boost our combat potential right away. A newbie will be difficult, in other words.” (Dylan)

Dylan finished there and continued to puff on his cigarette.

“Dylan!” (Hugo)

“Hugo, that’s enough.” (Cho Hong)

Cho Hong butted in while scratching her head.

“The current leader of Carpe Diem is Dylan. The old man personally appointed him. Let’s not waste time arguing about this anymore.” (Cho Hong)

“I know that you are right, but man. Uh-whew.” (Hugo)

Hugo sighed as if he was still ruing the missed opportunity. Dylan eventually killed the cigarette and slowly opened his mouth.

“He had such clear eyes.” (Dylan)

Cho Hong and Hugo turned their confused faces towards Dylan.

“What are you talking about, all of a sudden? Did some of the old man rub off on you or something?” (Hugo)

“Hehe. Maybe. In any case, that guy named Seol. It is a bit regrettable. I understand where Hugo’s coming from.” (Dylan)

“That’s right! So, like, let’s bring him under our wings! Weren’t we newbies once upon a time, too?” (Hugo)

“Seol is a blank canvas.” (Dylan)

Dylan calmly replied.

“He’s a huge blank canvas, unsullied by any paint whatsoever. I can’t even begin to fathom how big the dimensions of this canvas is, so how can I, or for that matter, anyone else, carelessly throw some paint around on it?” (Dylan)

“What the hell. Talk in a way so I can understand what you’re on about, will ya?” (Hugo)

Hugo complained bitterly, causing Dylan to form a slight smirk.

“I acknowledge that he’s incredible, but he’s still a level 1. He doesn’t know a lot, so he’s bound to make a few mistakes, too.” (Dylan)

“That, is, why!” (Hugo)

“That is why he can’t join teams like ours.” (Dylan)

Hugo was shouting out at the top of voice from sheer frustration, only to fall utterly dazed from those words.

Dylan continued on.

“This is the most important time for Seol. This is the time when his future path will be determined, when his unbelievable potential starts to reveal itself.” (Dylan)

“Are you saying we aren’t good enough for him?” (Hugo)

“Rather than us not being good enough, it’s more to do with who we are. We always fight with our lives on the line. We’ve experienced all sorts of sh*t and have grown cynical in the process, too. What would a guy like Seol learn from us, then?” (Dylan)

Dylan’s calm explanations meant Hugo couldn’t come up with anything.

“This is how I see it. Perfectly covering for his mistakes from behind, and leading him from the front while teaching him all he needs to know… Seol needs to join a team like that. Which means, at the bare minimum, that ain’t us.” (Dylan)

“Sure, me and Cho Hong are no good, but still, we have you and the old man…” (Hugo)

Hugo spoke with a voice clearly less vociferous than before.

“I’m not that confident of making it work. And you know that the old man is about to retire soon.” (Dylan)

Dylan firmly stated his position, and let off a long sigh.

“Alright. Let’s stop talking about this matter and move on. We should get going, anyways.” (Dylan)

“To where?” (Cho Hong)

Choi Hong asked this time.

“Work. It’s a request from Samuel’s team. Hugo, get up, man. Let’s go.” (Dylan)

Hugo licked his lips and slowly nodded his head.

“Okay, fine. I think I get it now. Anyway, what work are we talking about here?” (Hugo)

“Looks like we’ll have to hear it straight from the horse’s mouth. But, he did say it’ll be a pretty delicious deal for all of us.” (Dylan)

“Well, if it’s that b*stard, there’s definitely a merit in hearing him out. Where are we meeting him?” (Hugo)

“In a certain inn. Maybe he’s got some kind of a plan all worked out. In any case, let’s get going.” (Dylan)

Dylan pushed the door of the office open to leave, his other hand in his pocket.

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