



멀다 멀다 이후의 세계

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MUNPIA

The World after the Fall

- 멸망 이후의 세계 -

- Volume 1 -

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[Light Novel Bastion]

- STORY -

This is the story of a man who refused to return to the past even after everyone else (apparently) did.

Prologue

Carpe Diem

“Yo, I'm about to wreck all of the punks that said they wanted to go back to the past. Capiche?”

— An excerpt from the records of 《Carpe Diem》, the last hope of mankind.

Prologue. Carpe Diem

The sky had darkened because of the existence of a giant tower. There were ruined buildings everywhere.

Intermittent screams and groans rang throughout. There was smoke rising everywhere.

And then silence.

The explanation was unsatisfactory.

It was literally the world after extinction.

Perhaps it was something that all of you were already aware of.

It's a pain in the ass to try and explain, so just take a look at the timeline below and you should understand the gist of it.

The year was 2018.

An enormous structure called the 《Nightmare Tower》 appeared in every city in the world, including Seoul.....

You know what, I've come to realize that trying to use a timeline is actually even more annoying. There were many popular fantasy novels in the 21st century and this story

is pretty similar to those, so I was wondering if I should even bother telling this story.

If I just go on telling the story in this way I'll just get bored, but I'll try and drag this on a bit.

Anyways, I'm guessing that I should probably come up with an excuse for what happened to humanity.

In regards to how it began, anyone could tell you that. It was 2018 on some day or another. A massive structure called the 《Nightmare Tower》 appeared in the skies above a peaceful city. There was no communication from the tower, so humans simply waited for it to start talking on its own. Basically, this is the story of an apocalyptic catastrophe.

Then one day, the tower called out to humanity.

《Tower Walker》 .

Or in short, those who were called 《Walkers》 .

They had received a 'message' from the tower and were summoned accordingly, being granted the strength and qualifications to fight in the tower.

It was a really childish message along the lines of 'If you want to prevent the destruction of humanity, respond to the tower's summons', but surprisingly, hundreds of thousands of people responded.

It was encouraging.

However, if you looked at the population ratio, it wasn't even 1 in 10,000. But, it was encouraging nonetheless to see so many people willing to fight for humanity.

Well, to be fair, if you looked at the 《Nightmare Tower》 's rewards, it's obvious that not everyone jumped in with good intentions.

To continue with what I was saying, those who responded to the tower could receive blessings from the 《Interface System》 , namely skills and items, which they could use to progress further into the interior of the 《Nightmare Tower》 .

The humans weren't very active at first. People were afraid of the unknown dangers inside, and the tower's message of 'humanity's destruction' wasn't a very concrete factor in their minds.

But during the midst of all that, the first Tower Impact happened.

The tower released a wave of monsters that decimated a third of the world's population.

I don't have to say anything more for you to understand.

It's a fairly cliché story where the Walkers, with the world on their shoulders, continued to enter and progress through the towers.

But of course, despite it being so cliché, it wouldn't simply end there.



The year is 2023.

Destined item, [Stone of Regression] Discovered.

Stone of Regression.

Chek, looking at it, it's quite the naming sense.

So everyone should understand what's going on by now.

It's a story that everyone should know very well.

When the world was about to get wrecked, the hero by some stroke of luck found an item, and going, "Oh what the hell," and used the item to go back to the past-- it's that kind of story.

A story that you would really only read about in novels became a reality when the [Stone of Regression] was discovered in 2023.

Going back to the past.

Don't get me wrong, it was a good thing.

But there was a slight problem.

"Damn it, send me back too!"

"Yeah, my life has become so fucked!"

"Yeah me too!"

"Yeah what the fuck, me too!"

It was that too many people went back as well. Jae Hwan looked at the people who decided to go back turn into a congregation of lights that flew up into the sky.

"Ha, there they go again."

"....."

"Were they the last ones?"

"That should be right."

Standing off to the side watching the scene, Yoonhwan replied.

They stood on the 98th floor of the tower, watching the lights fly away.

The distant group of lights was like a beautiful asteroid.

With hope of living a new life, the group of lights disappeared. They'll disregard everything about the time they spent in the destroyed future and return to the past to live the life they were originally supposed to.

A secure life. A safe life.

An easier life that had been stolen from them.

“How nice.”

“What do you mean ‘nice’?”

It's not that Jae Hwan didn't understand the hearts of those who desired to return back to the past.

Each one of them probably had suffered under unfair circumstances.

And it was pretty certain that many of them had wanted to become the world's 'hero'.

But Jae Hwan couldn't help but wonder. Had it ever even occurred to these heroes even just once.

The world they were abandoning. Did they ever consider the lives of those they were leaving behind in this world they had forsaken.

It had already been 10 years since the discovery of the [Stone of Regression] in the tower.

With the exception of the deceased Walkers, all of the Walkers had returned to the past. With a conservative estimate at thousands and a generous estimate at tens of thousands, all of the Walkers had given up on the present and had chosen to return to the past.

The [Stone of Regression] was the reward for clearing the 77th level.

It was a giant stone that blocked off the entrance to the 78th level.

They had realized that it was an item in the midst of everyone who were trying to smash the stone.

The item description for the Stone of Regression was as follows.

[Item Info]

Name : Stone of Regression

Rarity: Legendary

Effect : Time is turned back, and the user is returned back to the time when they were summoned by the tower. The user's memory is kept intact. It is possible to break it down and share the fragments.

At first, nobody believed it.

How could an item that allows you to go back in time even exist? Furthermore, how does it make sense that such an item could come from the Tower itself?

But on the other hand, there were people whose hands were itching.

Walkers were all people who had a taste of the transcendent realm that humans could reach with the help of the items and skills that the Tower could provide.

However, most Walkers did not receive the skills or items that they wanted, and were instead forced to choose either the next best thing or the lesser of two evils.

Those Walkers were the ones that felt the most intense temptations.

Consider this, what if you could go back in time knowing everything that would happen in the future?

"We can use it after breaking it down... with how big this is, a lot people could use it."

The first person to use the [Stone of Regression] was the advance team 《Blade Walker》's president, Sword Panic Hwang Inchan.

"Since it could be a lie, I'll try it first and let everyone know the results."

Those were Sword Panic's last words.

Jae Hwan was also present when that happened.

'Everyone was so stupid.'

If you think about it, it makes no sense, so why did nobody realize that.

There was no difference between a man saying 'I'll just go and die real quick, and then

I'll tell you guys the results' and 'I'll go back in time and then tell you guys the results.'

There was no one who had returned from the past.

Just like how there was no one who had returned from the dead.

The people became upset after Sword Panic Hwang Inchan disappeared.

There were some who kept wondering "did he really go into the past", while others surreptitiously collected some of the fragments of the [Stone of Regression] before putting them into their inventory.

Hwang Inchan never came back and the people grew more restless and began to ask more questions.

Why is it that Hwang Inchan who returned to the past was not returning to this world? Or, why is it that our current world hasn't been affected despite the fact that Hwang Inchan had already disappeared into the past?

The answer surprisingly came from the only Japanese person from the advance team, a middle school teacher by the name of Sakamoto.

"Maybe it's not guaranteed."

Sakamoto explored various possibilities, trying to explain what had happened using various scientific theories including the likes of string theory and parallel universes. In the end, he theorized that the current situation was one where 'the state of the cosmic temporal branch has been split.'

In other words, when Hwang Inchan disappeared into the past, the past world he went to split from the present world that he left.

"Hwang Inchan must have gone into the past. But the flow of time has been split, so we will not be able to meet him again."

Since the members of the advance team had very little knowledge of science, most of them didn't quite understand what he was saying.

But two things were certain.

Hwang Inchan had successfully made it back to the past, and that him doing so had no bearing on the current world.

“Japanese teacher sir, is it possible that Hwang Inchan did not go into the past?”

“Let's take a good look at the stone's description. Does it not say that it would 'send the user back in time'? There is one thing that I am sure of, and that is that the Tower's items have never once lied to me.”

Sakamoto's words were correct.

“I think that the Stone will send us all back in time, but each of us will be sent to a unique time branchline. Of course, all this is a hypothesis, so we can't exclude the possibility that we might all end up in the same timeline. Afterall, all of the items in the tower are beyond common sense.”

Having come to their senses, half of the advance team decided to use the Stone to return to the past right then and there.

The members of the advance team were just that greedy.

If they ended up falling into the same timeline, then everyone would end up having to compete with each other.

The later you came, the more you would lose. Nobody wanted to lose.

From that point on, humans lived with the words 'to return to the past' on their lips.

Here and there, everyone spoke only of returning to the past.

The only thought on people's minds was what they would do should they go back.

There were still people who wondered if going back too late would put them behind, while there were still others who believed that the advance team should at least go up a few more floors before returning. There were still others who decided to preemptively sell the [Stone of Regression] to the Walkers on the lower floors, while others set their sights on compiling a guidebook for when the Tower would open.

During the midst of that, the second Tower Impact happened.

The tower released a flood of monsters onto the Earth, this was known as the Tower Impact. Because of the Walkers, almost all life on the Earth was nearly extinguished.

The remaining Walkers had to make one of two choices.

Give up everything they had obtained thus far and return to the past with the [Stone of Regression] in hand, or stay here and die. Jae Hwan chose neither.

“These fuckers. Stop fucking leaving. What will happen to this world if all of you keep leaving?”

Jae Hwan didn't cave in to the splitting of 《Blade Walker》, and ascended the tower with a few other colleagues.

After many twists and turns, Jae Hwan was stonewalled on the 85th floor.

Most of the teammates that had stuck with him this far had died.

There was no way to go any farther.

Jae Hwan maintained a positive attitude, and went back down to the first floor to try and convince others to come with him. He only selected those he felt would not be tempted by the [Stone of Regression] and were determined to keep this world safe.

That's how humanity's last hope, 《Carpe Diem》, was formed.

It was an advance team composed of the last of the Walkers who chose not to return to the past and protect this world.

Leading them, Jae Hwan was able to break through the barrier that was the 85th floor.

So they climbed and climbed again.

Occasionally there were deaths, and there were also times when some would stumble across a fragment of the [Stone of Regression] and accidentally activate it.

Despite that, Jae Hwan stood strong.

And like that, he was now at the 98th floor.

Jae Hwan blamed the Walkers who had returned to the past.

If only just half of them had stayed. No, even if those advance team bastards had just not gone. This world wouldn't have degenerated this far.

Despite multiple Tower Impacts, humanity held on.

Many were killed, injured, and fell sick, but humanity still endured.

But now, it was unfair.

There were now only two remaining members of 《Carpe Diem》 .

Nevertheless, Jae Hwan did not give up.

“Let's go, Yunhwan-ah.”

As they knew, the 100th floor was the top of the tower.

There were now only two floors remaining.

After only two more floors, this hellish nightmare would end.

Humanity would be liberated.

This world could start over again.

That was what Jae Hwan believed. No, that's what he had believed.

“Yunhwan-ah?”

There was no reply.

"Hey."

The last hope along with Jae Hwan. The Smile Knight, Kim Yunhwan.

No matter what happened, no matter the circumstances, he would always persevere with a smile on his face, so his teammates had nicknamed him Smile Knight. But for some reason, that Smile Knight was no longer smiling.

“ Surely...”

Just where did that stone come from?

Jaehwan asked himself while looking at the small stone in Yunhwan's hands.

“Hey, you punk! Are you thinking of returning?”

He couldn't believe it.

Yunhwan silently lowered his head. The Jaehwan who looked like he was about to lunge at Yunhwan suddenly turned around.

“Fine, just go.”

“I'm sorry, Jaehwan-ah.”

“Just fuck off. Before I change my mind.”

Jaehwan walked alone to the door that led to the 99th floor.

Yunhwan stared at his back.

He still believed in him and wanted to follow him.

The door slowly opened, Jae Hwan's body already having halfway disappeared. Yunhwan staggered as he went to go lean on a pillar.

His breathing slowly got worse.

There was a small hole in his chest.

It was the work of the 98th floor's boss, Mass Guiltykas.

It wasn't an injury that could be healed simply by rubbing a potion on the wound. It was only possible if the rare priest class were here to heal him. However, priests had long since disappeared from this world.

His best friend would have noticed with just a glance.

The stone he held in his hand wasn't the [Stone of Regression] but a regular stone.

Yunhwan tightly grasped onto this ordinary stone in his hand. His wrists trembling, he felt the cold and rough texture. It was a feeling that you could only sense in this world.

This was something he had learned from Jae Hwan.

He had learned about this incredible nondescript stone from Jaehwan.

He had learned that this life that had become dirtied and destroyed by the Walkers who had abandoned the world without a trace of hesitation-- this very same life needed to be grasped tightly and must never be let go.

But, the time had come. It was time to let go.

Yunhwa's body faced towards the outside of the tower.

“Thank you for having been in this world, Jae Hwan-ah.”

The moment Yunhwan's tilted body fell off the tower, Jae Hwan's body which was halfway through came to a brief stop.

He silently wiped his face with his right hand.

He waited for his body to stop trembling.

His breathing slowly calmed down.

He didn't look back.

He alone climbed the stairs to the 99th floor.

His world wasn't finished just yet.

Chapter 1

10 Billion Thrusts (1)

Ten years had passed since then.

It was a long period of time.

Jae Hwan had spent that decade alone on the 99th floor.

He had brushed close with death nearly a thousand times.

There were many times where he had almost died climbing from the 1st floor to the 99th floor, but even if he were to add up all of those close encounters with death, the number still wouldn't exceed the amount of times he had almost died while on the 99th floor.

The 99th floor's boss, Frost Dragon Velkisas.

The breath attack from this dragon that had come from the 'Forgotten Land' pushed Jae Hwan to the limit and was very difficult to bear.

But that was just one factor.

Because of the dragon's hard scales, his sword had broken and his armor had been mangled. If it weren't for the gear he had obtained from other Walkers, he would have given up.

In particular, the Suppression Dragon Sword from the 85th floor, the Ice Demon Armor that Yunhwan had left behind, and the deceased Seoyul's Fire King's Bracelet were of great help.

Han Seoyul.

Her name suddenly appeared in Jae Hwan's mind.

Seoyul had died before reaching the 77th floor.



“Mr. Jae Hwan, are you planning to challenge it again?”

Asked Jay, Atopos' blacksmith.

Atopos, a pioneer town destroyed by the Harbinger Dragon Alteminus who was the boss of the 50th floor.

Even after Atopos was destroyed, humanity was still fine.

Although Walkers died or were injured and rushed down to the first floor on a daily basis, the humans did not give up hope.

Priests were arranged into rescue teams that were sent into various battlefields to rescue those who were no longer able to fight while the blacksmiths repaired equipments free of charge.

In such a town like that, old man Jay's <Jay's Workshop> still boasted the best service of all the smithies.

Jay was the last remaining blacksmith in Atopos.

“Mr. Jae Hwan?”

“Ah, yes. Sorry.”

Thinking of something else, Jae Hwan snapped to attention again.

"I have to go again. I really feel like I'll get it this time."

“Is that right?”

Jae Hwan replied while laughing.

“Yes, without a doubt.”

It was a lie. He was out of his league.

It was unclear how long it would take, or if he would ever be able to clear it at all.

But he had no choice to at least say something. It's because it didn't matter if he felt that he was out of his league.

Jay laughed.

Jay was a foreigner.

After having been brought to the tower, native languages became meaningless as everyone began to speak the official language of the tower, but the sense of cultural incongruence still remained despite the unification of language.

But Jae Hwan sensed that something had changed about Jay.

Handing Jae Hwan his Fire Dragon Sword, Jay said something in a passing voice.

“There aren't any more materials coming up from the lower floors nowadays. Although scarce, there was a stream of materials up until a few months ago.”

Jae Hwan nodded his head.

One week ago.

Jae Hwan had searched through every floor from the 1st floor all the way up to the 99th floor.

There were no living humans.

He had waited in the summoning area on the first floor for a week, but not a single human was summoned.

Maybe it was a sign that the human race had gone extinct.

All signs pointed to that fact.

Jae Hwan had lost count of how many years it had been. The Tower Impact had

occurred well over ten times.

There was no one who could have survived the Tower Impact more than ten times.

However, Jae Hwan found a clue to what could very well be a hidden piece.

In the passage that the giant [Stone of Regression] had once blocked, the same passage that led from the 77th to the 78th floor, was a message on the walls.

—Tower within the tower, nightmare within the nightmare.

It's just that he had no idea what that meant.

But to be fair, it's just one more thing about the tower that he had no clue about.

“ <Hairen's Potions> disappeared the day before yesterday.”

“Ah, Hairen...”

Hairen of <Hairen's Potions> and Jay of <Jay's Workshop> were the last two remaining support workers in Atopos.

Those who enter the tower do not age.

If either of them disappeared, it was one of two causes.

They either went to the past, or jumped off the tower.

Jae Hwan wanted to ask Hairen which of the two he chose.

But it was the same either way.

Jae Hwan sensed old man Jay's eye's withdrawing. Perhaps there weren't many days left where he could see Jay again.

“Jay, can you give me your Blacksmith skill?”

The sound of hammering stopped. The two exchanged stares for a moment.

An unknown amount of time passed. Jay nodded very slightly. Jae Hwan also nodded his head.

After a while, Jay began to hammer again.



At the 99th floor again.

Frost Dragon Velkisas spoke in an admiring tone when he saw the man come again.

—You are an amazing human. There hasn't been a single human to have challenged 99 floors alone.

A laugh escaped from Jae Hwan's mouth.

It was funny. The last thing to acknowledge and praise him wasn't a human like himself, but a monster.

“How do you feel knowing that your time has come?”

—Unfortunately for you, human, that's impossible.

“You never know. The scales you are so proud of have slowly cracked over time.”

Geureureu, the frost dragon let out a loud roar.

Jae Hwan's sword struck out towards the dragon's body.

A simple basic attack.

It was 'Thrust'.

Jae Hwan had started attacking the tower later than others. Because of that, he had missed out on the majority of hidden classes and hidden skills.

Because of that, Jaehwan devoted himself solely to one thing, and that was thrusting.

Thrust. Thrust and thrust again.

Perhaps people would have called him 'Jaehwan of the Thrust' since he had stabbed at the enemy more than 50 million times.

Jaehwan felt that his 'Thrusts' were changing.

Faster and more accurate.

His thrusts had gotten stronger.

Sixty million times, seventy million times... and one hundred million times.

As a result, Jae Hwan's 'Basic Ability' of Thrust ended up exercising the same amount of power as a hidden skill.

Additionally, since it wasn't actually a 'Skill', he didn't need to expend anything to use it.

However, it wasn't enough to deal with the Frost Dragon on the 99th floor. Thrusting out with tens or hundreds of times was only enough to merely scratch a scale.

Sometimes, however, one stab was enough to deliver a fatal injury.

'Ah, I can see it again.'

Jae Hwan's eyes clouded over, and his thrusts started to bear a strange momentum. It was neither fast nor slow—but it could not be dodged.

Puuk!

Kaaaaah!

The Frost Dragon cried out in pain.

Since when did it start.

The amount of times this exact situation had arisen was very frequent.

One million times, or perhaps once every ten million times.

But every once in awhile, a faint line would appear before Jae Hwan.

Jae Hwan would follow the line subconsciously.

If he successfully followed the line, he would be able to land hundreds, if not thousands of his usual thrust.

'Damn it, it's still not enough this time either.'

The Breath that the Frost Dragon was gathering up in its snout was enough to completely fill this level of the tower. To the Jae Hwan whose body was already in rags, this attack was a fatal move. His stamina was quickly dropping toward zero.

Jae Hwan desperately tried to avoid the Breath with all he had.

—I'm sorry, human. If there were only just ten more people like you, the tables could have been flipped this day.

"Shut up,"

—If the people of such an incredible person such as yourself had not lost sight in front of the [Nightmare's Stone] , the fate of your race could have been changed.

"Nightmare's Stone? What do you mean?"

The Frost Dragon did not reply.

A giant claw flew towards him.

"...It's coming again."

Jae Hwan reflexively took a backstep, avoiding the attack before he fled.

The Frost Dragon failed to kill him.



Another five years passed.

[Return of the Legend! You have succeeded in hunting 'The King of the Frost Dragons Velkisas' alone!]

[You have achieved an impossible deed by your power alone!]

[New Title! You have received the title 'Nightmare of the 99th Floor'.]

[You have received the item 'Ice Dragon Sword'.]

[Your level has reached the limit.]

[Your level has reached the limit.]

[Your level has reached the limit.]

[Your level has reached the limit.]

The giant body of the Frost Dragon was disappearing.

—I admit, you're quite the amazing guy.

“Speak. What exactly is the [Nightmare's Stone] ?”

—You already know the answer.

Jae Hwan, he want to know more. The information he had right now wasn't enough to formulate a substantial answer.

—You'll come to know everything on the final floor.

The Frost Dragon spoke no more.

Jae Hwan waited until the Frost Dragon's body completely disappeared into a silvery powder before he got up.

Jae Hwan looked at the entrance to the final floor.

It was already incredibly difficult to kill the Frost Dragon, he couldn't begin to imagine how much more difficult it would be to fight the boss on the final floor.

Still, Jae Hwan did not stop.

《100》

Jae Hwan looked at the number on the door.

He swept his hand across the dust that had accumulated on the number.

Memories of the tens of years he had spent in the tower began to flit through his mind.

'If Jay knew he definitely would have been happy.'

Jay's bright smile appeared before his eyes.

Jae Hwan opened the door leading up to the 100th floor.



Stepping onto the 100th floor, Jae Hwan felt like he had arrived inside a state-of-the-art situation room in an apocalyptic film.

To be more precise, it was on the scale of tens or even hundreds of times as big as one you would see in a movie. There were hundreds of thousands of holographic panels switching through the various places of the tower. There was even a screen that displayed Jae Hwan.

He was currently making a dazed expression.

“Oh gosh, you've already arrived. Of course I already knew you would arrive.”

Jae Hwan nervously looked around.

However, he couldn't figure out where the voice was coming from.

“Ah ah, Please don't be so nervous. I forgot to tell you an important message, please wait right there for a bit. Although these things looks really nice on the outside, it's actually just an antique, so it's a pain in the neck to try and finagle with.”

After waiting for a bit, a screen popped up in front of Jae Hwan.

[Congratulations. You have cleared the 294th world's tutorial level from the very beginning.]

[Your incredible achievement will be permanently recorded in the immortal library known as the 《Akashic Records》 , and will be preserved for viewing by the sovereigns of the 《Great Lands》 .]

Jae Hwan's head was clouded in confusion.

‘What is this saying?’

Chapter 2

10 Billion Thrusts (2)

Tutorial Game?

Everything he had done until now was part of a tutorial game?

A figure walked out from one of the hologram panels floating in the air.

“Hyuuu, it's finished... uhhah.”

Jae Hwan looked at the emerging figure.

“Iyaaaah! I am finally able to look at you directly!”

The fussy being had a body like that of a human's, but had a head of a lion. Besides that, is that a bowler hat sitting atop his lion's mane?

Lion Head spoke.

“Wow, surprise! I was really surprised. I've never seen anyone reach the 100th floor of the tutorial by themselves.”

“...what kind of sick joke is this?”

“Keuuh, what a rough way of speaking. Truly a Walker whom the sovereigns of the 《Great Lands》 are fascinated with!”

“What are you?”

“Ah ha, introductions are a bit late.”

Lion Head took off the small bowler hat sitting in the middle of his mane and bowed in a polite manner.

“I am the demon Beastrain. I am the master of the 294th world's 《Nightmare Tower

» and tutorial game, the one that you have just cleared.”

Game. A tutorial game at that.

He hadn't misheard.

This was a tutorial game.

A game with the extinction of the human race at stake.

In an instant, Jae Hwan's eyes misted over. All kinds of emotions were causing turmoil within. The logical part of himself trying to accept this new reality and his unstemmed flow of emotions were conflicting with each other.

An unknown amount of time passed.

Jae Hwan's eyes returned to normal. No, they had become colder and more calculating than before.

Beastrain had an inquisitive expression on his face.

“Uhra, looks like your recovery is really fast?”

Jaehwan looked at Beastrain with an expressionless face.

If he wasn't able to overcome his shock, he wouldn't have been able to conquer the tower on his own.

“You said this is a tutorial game, then do you mean to say that there is a full game after this?”

“Keu, and you have a good comprehension. You're very unique. Most Walkers who get to this point aren't usually sane and talk with their swords.”

“What kind of game is this?”

“It's a game like the one you've seen.”

The beast-like, Lion head Beastrain let out a loud laugh.

Tat, the sound of fingers dancing on a set of buttons resulted in the hologram panels acting in concert to form a larger screen.

<Tower 1st Floor>

Standing amidst the crowd was Jae Hwan.

“What's this, isn't this just like a game?”

It was the scene when Jae Hwan had first been summoned to this game.

<Tower 7th Floor>

There were three people standing in one party.

Someone was talking.

“I am Yunhwan. Next to me is Seoyul.”

It was the first time he had met Yunhwan and Seoyul.

<Tower 32nd Floor>

After a month, Jae Hwan was able to overcome the Shadow Cave, coming out looking ragged, but none the worse for wear.

It was the first time his 'Thrust' first grew.

<Tower 54th Floor>

Jae Hwan, and the people around him.

“Hello everyone, I am Jae Hwan. I'm from Seoul, South Korea and my class is Swordsman.”

It was when he joined the strongest advance team, 《Blade Walker》 .

<Tower 66th Floor>

While fighting the boss, Succubus, Jae Hwan glanced at the woman by his side.

How could he have forgotten.

It was the first time he realized he loved this person.

<Tower 76th Floor>

In the midst of a pile of undead bones, Jae Hwan tightly grasped a woman by his chest while screaming.

He felt like his chest was being torn.

He had lost Seoyul to the Death Knight.

<Tower 77th Floor>

There were people disappearing in a flurry of light.

Furious anger.

It was when the [Stone of Regression] was first discovered and 《Bladewalker》 was dissolved.

<Tower 85th Floor>

The loud cheering of those who had broken through the Ice Demon that was the 85th floor.

When humanity's last hope, 《Carpe Diem》, was formed.

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<Tower 98th Floor>

Mass Guiltykas.

•••••

When he lost Yunhwan and was left alone.

<Tower 99th Floor>

Where not too long ago, he had singlehandedly slain the Frost Dragon.

This...

Even the level headed Jae Hwan was at a loss for words.

Everything he had done, every word he had ever spoken, it was all here, recorded and stowed away.

“An epic drama spanning over the course of 30 years. I was really happy that you existed. Carrying out the same thing day after day, a story like yours really puts a dent in my boredom. You won't know when, but the sovereigns of the 《Great Lands》 will watch your performance.”

Beastrain was incessantly blabbing on.

‘What are the Great Lands, and who are these sovereigns.’

There were many things that Jae Hwan wanted to ask, but he remained patient.

“What are you trying to say?”

“It's simple. You can play through this whole game one more time.”

Beastrain continued.

"Of course, your memories will be kept in tact if you choose to do so. It's a special privilege only for the you who cleared the tutorial game. Haha, isn't that great? It's like something straight out of a novel from your world. An absolute reset with your memories intact! How's it sound? Don't you already feel enticed by that prospect?"

Jae Hwan was at a loss.

It was a reward.

The final reward for clearing the Tower wasn't the salvation of mankind.

No, now that he thought about it, the Nightmare Tower never said anything along those lines now did it?

Nothing.

The Tower never said anything about a 'Final Reward'.

It was only a fabrication of human hope.

It was only something the humans had thought up. Humans had thought that clearing the contents of the Tower would lead to either salvation for humanity or a corresponding reward.

All of a sudden, humanity saw a goal in the bleak sky.

Humans were powerless, but attacking the tower was something they could do.

The reward for clearing the tower was right before Jae Hwan.

A reward given only to one person: Jae Hwan.

“Do you want to try and redo everything up til now?”

“Well, it would be similar! There would be some slight differences.”

Jae Hwan couldn't accept throwing away everything he had worked for. All this time he had been fighting for this world. To save the world that everyone else had abandoned.

To never give up this world no matter what.

It was this pride and ambition that allowed him to survive as the only remaining one in this tower. But now, the reward for clearing the tower in this world was to give up on it.

“That is to say, you'll return me to the past.”

Jae Hwan's voice turned cold.

“You should already know. I refuse to return to the past.”

Beastrain gave him a strange look.

“The past? You're talking about the past?”

“That's right.”

Beastrain let out an insane laughter.

“What's so funny?”

“Hahaha! Seeing that I guess that's what you would assume. You're the kind of guy that'll never choose to return to the past. If you were, you would have never made it this far. Ahahahaha!”

Beastrain kept on laughing. Then, after a long period of time, he suddenly stopped,

“Let me reveal to you a very clear and cruel fact.”

He started to talk in an eerie, machine-like voice.

“Whether it's an item in this tower, or an item in the outside world, even an item in the 《Great Lands》, there is no method to return to the past.

Chapter 3

10 Billion Thrusts (3)

There's no way to go back to the past?

“What are you saying? There should be an item in this tower that allows you to go back in time...”

At that moment, Jae Hwan's chest went cold.

Beastrain had said.

There was no way to go back into the past from the present.

But Beastrain had also said something else.

He had said that it was possible for Jae Hwan to redo everything all over again.

It was a contradiction.

Jae Hwan could only think of one way to reconcile that contradiction.

The Tower, 66th floor.

Jae Hwan had fought against [Nightmare] , a lesser succubus.

The advance team had wasted a lot of time trying to get through the 66th floor. Not even the Ice Demon on the 85th floor was as difficult.

The Succubus created an illusionary world. Those with weaker minds would fall prey to the Succubus' tricks.

The 66th floor became an orgy.

Walkers who succumbed to the Succubus' fantasy committed sins after sin against their fellow Walkers.

Jae Hwan was well aware of the terror of the Nightmare's ability.

He had once nearly killed a female Walker while under the effects of the Succubus.

“Nightmare's Stone.”

Hearing what Jae Hwan said, Beastrain's eyes widened.

“How do you know about that item? That's not information you can get from within the tower.”

“The Frost Dragon told me.”

“Oh dear, I'm in trouble, really. That's not information you should know of just yet.”

Beastrain silently mumbled.

...that's why the AI algorithms need to be worked on a bit more. This is what happens when you blindly let out whatever monster you feel like. Damn these [Producer] guys.

Seeing Beastrain mumble to himself, Jae Hwan spoke up.

“Those who used the Stone of Regression did not go back to the past.”

Thinking for a bit, Beastrain looked at Jae Hwan with a resolute expression on his face.

“What, you're the first Walker to clear the tower alone, if it's that much, you should qualify. That's right. What you're thinking about is correct.”

Clicking his tongue, Beastrain clacked away with his fingers again before the hologram panels changed once more.

“The item you found on the 77th floor is not the [Stone of Regression] , but instead the [Nightmare's Stone] . It's an item that traps the user in an inescapable dream, it's a very unique item.”

The holographic panels displayed the figures of many Walkers suspended in the air.

Sword Panic's Hwang Inchan, Science Teacher Sakamoto...

All of the Walkers who were thought to have gone back to the past were there.

They were all ensnared in the Nightmare's dream living out their fantasies.

Beastrain looked as though he were enjoying himself.

“However, I haven't lied. ‘In a way’ they have gone back to the past.”

Jae Hwan was speechless.

Looking at it from another perspective, he was right.

They were those who had given up on the present and gone back.

Those who gave up the relationships they had forged without batting an eye. Those that ignored ‘the world that others see’ and deemed ‘the world that I see’ as the most important thing in the world.

For those people, being trapped in the Nightmare's Dream was no different from what they saw anyways.

“Huhu, now that I think about it, you people of the 294th world are a strange race. You guys were absolutely amazing up until the 77th floor. Many worlds have challenged the tower, but no world has ever been able to break through the various levels of the tower with such great results like you and your people. Considering how long this game has been going on, you guys were incredible.”

That was what it was like. Up until the 77th floor.

“Considering how long the tutorial game was going on, I was beginning to think that it was getting stale. I thought it was a past crisis or something that this 《Nightmare Tower》 had made, but I really couldn't tell since I hadn't really been following along.”

The hologram panels displayed all those who had used the [Stone of Regression]. They

were people who had turned into lights and flown up into the sky. Those that had become slaves to time.

“You humans have been the only race so obsessed with time.”

Watching the lights disappear, Jae Hwan muttered.

“Yup, who knows.”

Beastrain nodded towards him.

“Ja, it was to the point that I was very curious about...”

Jae Hwan cut off Beastrain.

“So are you going to make me play again?”

“Haha, have I finally grabbed your attention?”

“Regardless, it would be without sending me back into the past.”

“Well, yes. The solution is...”

Jae Hwan nodded his head.

“That's right, because of you asshole, I've finally figured out what this tower is.”

“Huh?”

Jae Hwan had been wondering for a long time.

Why had a sky-piercing tower suddenly appeared one day?

And what was up with that message?

[Congratulations! You have been designated as a 《Tower Walker》 to challenge the 《Nightmare Tower》 and save the human race. Do you choose to be summoned?]

[Yes / No]

He had chosen to be summoned then.

That was why he was here.

He moved his hand across the interior wall of the tower. He felt the cold, stoney texture of the wall.

He had spent more time in the tower than on Earth. But over the years, he had never once seen any [item] as large as this object. Now it was time to change the way he perceived things. Jae Hwan stood still and focused on the tower. He thought of the tower. He thought of everything he had tread upon and set eyes upon inside the tower.

How long had it been.

Jae Hwan started to feel sick, his head was pounding and he felt as though there were something breaking inside of him. It wasn't long before the name of an item appeared before him.

[Item Information]

Name : Nightmare Tower - Tutorial Mode

Effect : Temporary 'Fortress of Regret'. The second creation of the nightmare maker Nightmare [Myullock] . The summoned people are put into the dream produced by the Nightmare.

“This tower, is a giant [Nightmare's Stone] .”

Jae Hwan spoke.

“I've been in 'Nightmare's Dream' produced by this tower the whole time. From the very start, ever since I've been summoned to this tower.”

Silence pervaded the room for a brief moment.

Beastrain's neck was down so that his face could not be seen. After a moment,

Beastrain's body began to tremble before he threw his head backwards.

“ Haha, hahahahat! Ahahahahahat!”

Beastrain let out an unrestrained laughter that shook the tower. But laced inside his laughter was undisguised anger.

“Looks like this is a genius, really. How many times have you surprised me now?”

Beastrain's fingers became a flurry, prompting the holographic panels to change once more. Having only displayed the interior of the tower, the panels began to show the outside.

Jae Hwan was stupefied.

Jae Hwan let go of everything on his mind and solely stared at the screen. The outside world was still in tact.

The cities and the people. The world that he thought had been destroyed due to the Tower Impact was still fine.

Nobody had died.

“As you can see, nobody has died yet. I haven't even started the 'real game' yet, so if everyone died, wouldn't it be too difficult?”

Beastrain continued.

“Huhu, nobody has died, are you not surprised? Of course, it's good news for those who have such peculiar things as 'friends' or 'family'.”

All of those who had been summoned as Walkers were being taken care of in medical institutions. It seemed like the government had stepped in and had settled things. Amidst all of those patients on screen, he saw himself.

It was unbelievable to see his peaceful face.

Though decades had passed, his face had stayed the same.

“It may have been decades here in the tower, but only a month had passed in the real world.”

Jae Hwan nodded.

'Is that so. This is inside the Nightmare's dream. Compared to the decades spent in here, only moments have passed outside.

Of course, this would only be true if the holographic panels that Beastrain had displayed to Jae Hwan were true.

Jae Hwan lacked the ability to distinguish between the truth and the illusion.

Of the words Beastrain had spoken, he couldn't tell what was true and what was false.

In addition, the other side had already deceived humans more than once.

All of the panels turned off at the same time.

“Oh boy, you've taken up more of time that I thought you would. Anyways, now that you know everything, I believe you have nothing to lose by taking my proposal. You will not go back to the past. I'm just going to start the game all over again.”

With a refreshed look on his face, Beastrain entered something into the air.

“Phew, it's been fun.”

Something entered Jae Hwan's vision.

[The game master will momentarily end the tutorial game. You will be returned back to your homeworld, the 294th world, and will be allowed to rejoin the game with your memories intact. Do you accept this proposal?]

[Yes / No]

Jae Hwan looked at the screen and made his choice.

—He rejected the proposal.

Chapter 4

10 Billion Thrusts (4)

“...What is it?”

Beastrain's lion eyebrows wriggled.

“Ah ha, that's right. You get to keep your memories as a reward for clearing the tutorial, but you want something more, right?”

With a 'tak', Beastrain tapped his forehead while putting on a pleasant smile.

“Good. Since it's you after all, you do indeed deserve it. What is it that you desire? A hidden item? A hidden skill? Or is it even a hidden class that you want?”

However, from Jae Hwan's mouth came something that he could never comprehend.

“I don't want anything.”

“Then why...”

For the first time, Beastrain's face was tinged with embarrassment.

“I'm going to kill you and head to the next floor.”

Hearing that, Beastrain had an awkward look on his face.

“The next floor... did you say the next floor? There is no such thing. This is the end of the tower. What makes you think that there's another floor?”

“I've decided that I'm no longer going to believe anything you say.”

“Haa, you don't believe me anymore? Even after having shown you so much evidence...”

Beastrain made a tired face.

“I suppose there's no other way. You can never win against me. Between the you that had only just cleared the tutorial game and, well-- me, there's an insurmountable gap like the one between a human and a dragon.”

“That's not a very big gap.”

Jae Hwan grasped the Suppression Dragon Sword that he obtained from the 85th floor in one hand and the Frost Dragon Sword he obtained from the 99th floor in the other.

72 times.

Jae Hwan challenged Beastrain 72 times in the span of two months and didn't manage to land a single blow. And whenever a battle ended, he would leave after a disgraceful defeat. Who knows why, but Beastrain did not kill him. Jae Hwan used everything at his disposal-- every skill, ability, and everything he had learned.

But he was not Beastrain's opponent.

He couldn't even touch Beastrain.

Jae Hwan took out the remaining potions he had obtained from <Hairen Potion> and rubbed his wounds with the potions. He also took out the remaining Holy Water he had and let his body soak in it. His fatigue quickly faded away. He even visited <Jay's Workshop> again.

“I've returned, Jay.”

Nobody answered.

The first time he lost to Beastrain, Jaehwan visited Atopos on the 50th floor and arrived at an empty <Jay's Workshop>. He had gradually learned the Blacksmithing skill just for this occasion. However, he felt numb to the fact that this day had come. His last remaining friend had left. He was truly alone now. Jae Hwan picked up the hammer that had been left behind by his friend.

The Tower, 100th floor.

While chewing his fingernails, Beastrain watched the hologram panels depicting Jae Hwan hammering away.

It was difficult.

It was the first time he had faced such an awkward situation.

The problem of [Cultivating] the goods so that they could be raised up and safely adapt to the 《Great Lands》 .

Ever since Beastrain had become a [Farmer] assigned to oversee the process, this was the first time he had ever run into such problems.

‘I need to be patient. That guy is the [Product] I need to sell. And a very special product at that.’

He had set the 《Nightmare Tower》 in other worlds before, but this was the first time he had ever encountered this situation.

‘Just why does he not want to play the game? I've already told him that I'd give him anything he wanted.’

Because of one Walker, he was forced to deal with the only setback he's ever had since the start of his career. Whining, Beastrain grasped his head. The cultivation of the products would usually start to kick off during the second phase. The [1st Phase] was to weed out the undesirable until only the best products were left by making them go through the 'Tutorial Game'. In the [2nd Phase] , the best products are selected to play through 'The Game' and grow. The purpose of the ‘Tutorial Game’ and the [1st Phase] is to select the seeds while the purpose of 'The Game' and the [2nd Phase] is to grow the selected seeds with water and fertilizer. So because of Jae Hwan, Beastrain hasn't been able to start the actual game and the 2nd phase for three months. With complete disregard for Beastrain’s feelings, Jae Hwan hammered away, the hologram panels ringing out with the sound banging.

Ggang - Ggang -

He was banging his sword with a hammer, the sound of hammering only growing louder.

‘I'm going to go crazy.’

Beastrain was constantly battling with his inner self, constantly quashing his desire to just end the game.

‘Should I just close my eyes and kill him? But if I just kill him, then the [Harvesters] will have a fit.’

The 《Nightmare Towers》 were created by the [Producers] known as ‘Nightmares’, and by utilizing the energy from the 《Illusion Tree》 roots and trunks, they are able to induce dreams in other people.

Simply speaking, all of the dreams and illusions in the tower were powered by the 《Illusion Tree》 .

In other words, dying inside the tower won't actually kill anyone unless some special means are utilized to destroy the soul.

However, who knew.

As a demon, Beastrain had already gone through three moltings and now possessed the power of a '3rd Stager', which meant that there would naturally be a big difference in strength between Beastrain and Jae Hwan who had only just completed the tutorial and was yet to become even a '1st Stager'.

Killing him before the beginning of the actual game could damage his soul and result in him becoming a vegetable.

‘That's also a difficulty.’

If that were to happen, his clients, the sovereigns known as the [Harvesters] from the 《Great Lands》 , would become angry.

The sovereigns who were interested in Jae Hwan were not few. It was to the extent that there were even some who were willing to offer a ridiculously high price even before an auction would begin.

The Walker who cleared the 99th floor alone.

It was an unprecedented achievement not able to be found anywhere in the whole system.

‘Those Nightmare bastards tricked me into buying this trash tower. What the hell kind of control device is this?’

The 《Nightmare Tower》 that Beastrain was in possession of was a first generation creation.

‘You can't terminate the game without the Product's consent, truly a stupid system.’

This wouldn't have happened if he had used a 3rd Generation Tower. A 3rd Generation Tower had the capability to end the tutorial game without inflicting any damage to the products.

But there was nothing he could do now.

Poverty is sin.

He couldn't complain, this was the last Tower he could find at a reasonable price.

Having been told that it was the work of a [Virtuoso] class Nightmare, he was robbed blind.

They hadn't lied-- it was indeed the work of a master Nightmare, but not only was it a prototype, it was an older tower. For now, he could do nothing but deal with the tower. It was a tower that half worked and half didn't, but he used it because its performance when it did work was good.

‘When this is all over, I'm gonna go argue no matter what.’

Recalling the Nightmares that had sold him the tower, he couldn't help but grind his teeth.

And like that, another month passed.

“Look, are you not tired yet?”

Beastrain yawned as he lightly took on Jae Hwan's attack. Although Jae Hwan's attacked swarmed Beastrain, not a single hair on his body was touched.

“Look, if you just play the game, then you'll benefit, I'll benefit, your world will benefit, and everyone you know will benefit. Why do you insist on not playing?”

Jae Hwan didn't reply.

“I know that everything seems like an illusion after your experience with the Frost Dragon, but I'm telling you, there's no point in you doing this. I know a lot has happened, but based on your dealings with me so far, can you really say that I'm evil? If you really want to fight me, then you're still going to have to play the game and then go to the 《Great Lands》 before waiting another ten years.”

Jae Hwan silently put down his sword.

“Ah, please, please just say something. Is there anything that you want? I've already said I'd give you hidden items and hidden skills!”

From how Beastrain saw it, this human known as Jae Hwan made no sense.

Why was he staging such a meaningless assault?

But contrary to what Beastrain thought, Jae Hwan's actions were not meaningless.

Jae Hwan hadn't just been sitting around doing nothing for these past 3 months.

There were several reasons why Jae Hwan still hadn't given up during this tutorial game.

First, completely outside of Beastrain's expectations, Jae Hwan's soul was undergoing a period of change.

Because Beastrain was linked to the Nightmare Tower through the 《Illusion Tree》 from the outside world, he couldn't quite sense that Jae Hwan's soul was metamorphosing.

Chapter 5

10 Billion Thrusts (5)

[User Information]

Name : Jae Hwan

Level : 100 (Level Cap Reached!)

Title : (EX) Nightmare of the 99th Floor

Class : Swordsman

Unique Ability : (EX) Spirit

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[Status Information]

Strength : 100 (Stat limit has been reached!)

Agility : 100 (Stat limit has been reached!)

Health : 100 (Stat limit has been reached!)

Will : 100 (Stat limit has been reached!)

Magic : 100 (Stat limit has been reached!)

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The user information displayed by the Interface System. Jae Hwan had spent years on trying to maximize all of his stats. Thirty years to be exact. By the end of it, all of his numbers maxed out. Those numbers were the products of history itself. However, Jae Hwan had been thinking of something for some time.

‘Humans, can humans really be distilled down to just these numbers?’



How long had it been.

Jae Hwan's eyes had started witnessing strange things. He had first thought that it was a hallucination. He didn't know when, but at some point, Jae Hwan realized that the strange things he had started to see was the essence of what made up the world. They

were like fine particles similar to rugged granules of sugar or the pixels on a screen. They were ever changing, constantly taking on different shapes and structures. His Thrusts had started to change around that time as well. He felt a strange incongruence whenever he used the basic skill 'Thrust'. The simple, strict motions of the Thrust had started to loosen up in Jae Hwan's eyes. As Jae Hwan kept repeating the Thrust, he felt as though some sort of forgotten 'sense' was awakening from within. It was a feeling indicative of 'being alive'.

Jae Hwan named this ability [Doubt] for convenience.

Vision to dissect the world and dig deep down to the very essence of the world.

This was the power of [Doubt] .

Unfortunately, Jae Hwan did not know how to use [Doubt] .

Seupat - tupp!

Beastrain easily caught Jae Hwan's swift Suppression Dragon Sword with just his hand. Beastrain spoke in an annoyed voice.

“Jae Hwan-ssi, please listen. I ask that you please answer.”

Even still Jae Hwan did not reply back.

“Haa, I'm actually going to go crazy.”

Beastrain huffed as he sighed in exasperation.

“I already said you wouldn't be going back into the past. Please, just end the tutorial so the real game can start.”

There were two reasons why Jae Hwan did not want to end the tutorial. One of the reasons was the demon right in front of him, Beastrain. At some point, Jae Hwan had realized that there was some unknown reason that prevented Beastrain from killing him.

‘I don't know what it is, but for some reason, Beastrain is unable to kill me.’

Maybe it was because he needed Jae Hwan's permission before the tutorial could end, but him not killing Jae Hwan was proof. Since he opened the tower, then he should have the power to close the tower, but Beastrain did not. No, rather, there was a reason why he couldn't. So for Jae Hwan, Beastrain was the best training partner he could use for teaching. By constantly challenging Beastrain, Jae Hwan was able to quickly adapt more to the changes taking place inside of him. He was taking Beastrain out for a ride.

'Ah, I'm losing my mind. The delivery deadline is going to be arriving soon... '

What was he to do. All he could do was pester Jae Hwan over and over again.

"Please look, Jae Hwan-ssi! Could you please just answer? Huh?"

"What are you saying?"

Having extricated his sword from Beastrain's grip, Jae Hwan started to talk.

"Haa, behold, you finally speak. Seeing as how you haven't spoken in a month, I had thought that something had gone wrong with your psyche. If there were any problems with the precious [Product] ... no no, that's not right."

Beastrain stuttered and stumbled through his sentence.

"This is good. So tell me, what is it that you want? I'll give you whatever it is that you desire. And please don't give me that 'I'll kill you and go to the next floor' bullshit please."

Hearing those words, Jae Hwan stopped swinging his swords for the first time.

'He took the bait.'

Jae Hwan had been waiting for this time to come. He had spent the last month constantly sharpening his blade. He had been waiting for the demon before his eyes to get angry. Because Beastrain couldn't withstand his own anxiety, Jae Hwan had waited for the day where he would take on the bait by himself.

"Then I would like to ask you something."

"Uht, what is it?"

Color returned to Beastrain's face.

“Is there finally a room for negotiation?”

“Who knows, that'll depend on you.”

Beastrain's expression crumpled.



Having worried for a long time, Beastrain simply sighed and began to talk in rapid fire mode.

“Don't be too alarmed Jae Hwan-ssi. Your universe does not simply consist of just one dimension.”

“That I know.”

“...uh, you already know?”

Jae Hwan frowned.

“Are you taking me for a fool?”

Truth be told, Jae Hwan didn't actually know. Most of the more advanced scientific theories he knew was what he had heard from the middle school science teacher that had climbed the tower with him, Sakamoto.

At that time, he had become aware of many different kinds of astrophysical things. Parallel universes, multiverses, superstring theory...

Of course, there was only one thing that Jae Hwan, as an outsider to the scientific world, was sure of.

It was that once astrophysics and other sciences reached an incredibly advanced state, it was no different from magic.

“So when putting together what you said, are you saying that this universe consists of the 《Great Lands》 and an infinite number of 《Deviations》 ?”

“Yup.”

According to Beastrain, the universe consisted of one main dimension known as the 《Great Lands》 with a bunch of 《Deviations》 that branched out from it. Earth was one of the smaller planets within one of the various 《Deviations》 . Beastrain had designated Earth as the 294th world. After listening to Beastrain's explanation, Jae Hwan promptly sent it to the back of his mind.

“So this 《Nightmare Tower》 is a tool to allow Walkers to [adapt] to the environment of the 《Great Lands》 so as to prepare them for when they move there.”

“That is correct.”

“So only the Walkers who have passed both the tutorial game and the actual game are allowed to step into the 《Great Lands》 .”

"Correct. As expected your comprehension is really good."

Beastrain intentionally avoided using terms such as 'Cultivating' and 'Harvesting'. It was because he knew how the other party would react should he hear such words. Jae Hwan continued to ask more questions.

"When you say [adapt] , what do you mean? Do you mean that they're getting stronger?"

Beastrain shook his head.

“It's so that the Walkers can become acclimated to the 《Interface System》 in the Great Lands.”

“...Do you mean when we get items or skill and look at our Status and such?”

“Simply put, yes.”

Beastrain had a smile on his face.

“Many of the races that arrive straight at the 《Great Land》 die soon after arrival because of their failure to adapt to the system. To prevent such a thing from happening, the 《Nightmare Tower》 was created. By allowing Walkers to play through the ‘Tutorial Game’ and the ‘Main Game’ built into the tower, the Walkers will learn how to use the system of the 《Great Lands》 and thereby increase their survival rates. Demons like me play a supporting role in the whole process.”

Looking at Jae Hwan listen intently to his explanation, Beastrain couldn't help but feel admiration for him, even though he also felt nervous as well. It was because he had never seen such a calm and level-headed Product before. All of the products he had cultivated thus far would usually deny the reality of the situation or fall prey to some sort of schizophrenic attack. But the Jae Hwan before him was calmly listening to his story. It was as though he were born to play this game. However, Beastrain was actually quite pleased with that fact.

“I have one more question I want to ask.”

“Go ahead.”

“Why do you bother to 'do this'?”

Beastrain laughed in response to Jae Hwan's question. In fact, since the start of this question and answer session, Beastrain knew that this question would come up. Beastrain had cultivated many products over the past hundreds of years. Some had become incredible powers in the 《Great Lands》 while others died without even leaving their souls intact.

However, most of them always ended up asking the same question.

—Why do you 'do this'?

Beastrain raised his head.

“I don't know what you mean. Are you curious as to why I operate this 《Nightmare Tower》 ?”

“That's right.”

“Who knows. I don't think that you actually want to know or are actually curious.”

Beastrain continued to speak with a smile on his face.

“As opposed to wondering ‘why do you operate the Nightmare Tower’, I think you're more curious as to ‘why did you bring the Nightmare tower to this Deviation and to this Planet out of all the other options out there’, am I right?”

Chapter 6

10 Billion Thrusts (6)

Jae Hwan did not answer. Seeing as how Jae Hwan did not answer, Beastrain felt joy in his heart. It was now that his favorite moments would come.

“To be frank, there is no real reason. It's just a coincidence that your world was chosen.”

It was a huge tragedy that simply happened by chance. Most Products would refuse to accept it. They would rant and rave, 'why was it that my race was the one to have such bad luck befall them?' or 'No! I must find out why!' Sin, fate, gods. They would attempt to find the cause of all this misfortune, trying to link anything that might have been the cause. But there was no reason.

Everything was just a coincidence.

“... an accident?”

“That is correct. It just so happened that the Nightmare Tower found your world and started the game there. There is no cause or reason. Everything happens according to the flow, things just happen. It's the same as neither you nor I knowing why we were born in this world.”

Beastrain continued.

“It wouldn't be wrong for you to think that you're unlucky. A demon comes to your peaceful world and then puts down a Nightmare Tower and instigates a period of miserable deaths, I'd be very resentful.”

Jae Hwan did not reply.

“However, think about this. It's not like you would have lived forever if it weren't for my appearance. No sir. Some day, you'll be dead. Of course, it would be different for everyone with accidents or natural disasters and all that. Even if you live a lucky life and manage to steer clear of all that, you'd still die due to age. All things in this universe will eventually die, all beings of every race will eventually die. Regardless of

your intentions, a tragic end is what awaits us all.”

Beastrain spoke with a momentous voice.

This moment was the climax.

This was the moment where he would witness the expression on the Product's face after having been exposed to the inevitable truth. It was going to be the face of a Product in despair, desperately seeking out an answer to why things happened the way they did. It was one of Beastrain's favorite scenes.

“If you see it from that perspective, then you might even think you had pretty good luck. This coincidence is an opportunity for you to leap into a new world. You'd be able to turn an inevitable worthless death into something of meaning. Instead of dying in some unknown world in an unknown 《Deviation》 without even learning about anything pertaining to the greater world, you could go to the Great Lands and accomplish many great achievements, letting your name...”

“I get it, stop with the useless chatter.”

“...Huh?”

Beastrain paused, unable to trust his ears.

“First of all, I don't care about all that stuff.”

“Then just what...”

“It seems like you don't quite get it, so let me repeat.”

“Th,that's right.”

The initiative of the conversation suddenly changed.

“I don't care about the philosophical garbage you just spouted about coincidences and why you chose this world, no, I care about why one day you said to yourself 'Oh well, might as well just operate this Nightmare Tower'. What reward do you get for doing all this?”

“Th, that...”

Beastrain was taken aback. What reward would he get for all of this. Not only did Jae Hwan see past Beastrain's eloquent distraction, he went straight for the important questions without even moving an eyebrow.

“...That, I'm just something like a service volunteer. It's something that someone needs to do, so I volunteered. Ha ha.”

Jae Hwan narrowed his eyes in response to Beastrain's awkward laughter...

‘A service volunteer...’

Jae Hwan stared at the strange, dust-looking particles floating over the head of Beastrain. As the ability known as [Doubt] got stronger, Jae Hwan could carefully discern the different kind of particles. Some particles would quietly sit where they were, while others would actively move around. The particles orbiting around Beastrain were particularly noticeable. The particles would interact with Beastrain before making unique patterns. Afterwards, they would quickly leave the tower before disappearing. To Jae Hwan, the arrangement of particles resembled something like a string. It seemed like Beastrain was sharing a conversation with someone else in a distant place.

‘Sovereign..... your message... send...’

‘Product... cultivating... harvesting... still...’

‘... I'll never kill him...’

‘...Great... Land... you... will... conversation...’

‘...I can't delay anymore... but...’

Jae Hwan opened his mouth again.

“...Is that right. Let's go back to the original conversation.”

“Sure.”

Cool sweat ran down Beastrain's back.

“You mentioned these 'Sovereigns' the other time.”

“That's right.”

An inevitable topic became the focus. This was the first time he had ever had such a long conversation with a Product that hadn't even played through the actual game, so Beastrain was starting to get worried that his tongue might slip and accidentally mention Harvesting and Products. Beastrain swallowed his saliva.

“Who are those guys? Are they kings?”

“Looking at them as though they were kings is close enough. The Sovereigns are the rulers of the 《Great Lands》. Those who clear the Main Game and step into the 《Great Lands》 are usually sent invitations by the sovereigns.”

“...Invitation?”

Hearing Jae Hwan gain interest, Beastrain's eyes started to glitter. There has never been a product that expressed disinterest in the sovereigns of the 《Great Lands》. Your future was dependent on which sovereign you chose to serve.

‘Not even he can ignore it.’

Beastrain opened his mouth, laughing.

“Of course, not everyone is invited. Only the strong are invited. However, if you beat my tower, then it's guaranteed that you'll join the faction of a mighty sovereign.”

He was trying to feed his product's ego. That was the first step. However, there was no reply from Jae Hwan.

Beastrain continued to speak, his voice tinged with nervousness.

“If you listen to my words, I swear on my, the demon Beastrain's honor, that your future will be secure. In other words, if you, Jae Hwan-ssi, want to enter the faction of a mighty sovereign, then I will do everything I can to help you do so. To be fair, it'll only be relevant when you've finished through the Main Game.”

The end of Jae Hwan's lips twitched.

'He sounds like an insurance salesman.'

After a long gap, Jae Hwan put forth a question.

"How can I guarantee that you're not lying?"

Thinking that he had a bite or something, Beastrain's lips slightly went up.

"What, it's ok if you don't believe. If you don't believe me after everything I've said, then there's not much more I can do."

Jae Hwan nodded.

"I understand. We'll just do things your way."

"Have you made up your mind?"

"After ten days. I'll leave after ten days."

Chapter 7

10 Billion Thrusts (7)

Ten days later.

While lying down on the ground of the 100th floor, the demon Beastrain was watching the hologram panels whilst swearing. The hologram panels were displaying Jae Hwan.

“Haha, fuck...”

Jae Hwan was still just hammering away. Tang - tang sounds resounded through the speakers.

“.....that demon-like jerk.”

Sitting next to Beastrain was a pile of information about the 《Great Lands》 that Jae Hwan had requested. Of course, any references to cultivation, products, harvesting, and culturing were omitted. In other words, half-baked information.

‘Even if he's clever, he shouldn't have picked up on anything.’

The demon beastrain.

A middle-class demon ranked 8152.

His friends in the real world called him the [Crafty Gentleman] . This demon with such a lofty nickname was currently suffering at the hands of a mere human. If his fellow demons were to hear about this, he would be a laughingstock for hundreds of years. If it weren't for the message from the Harvester, he probably wouldn't be so troubled.

[Don't kill the product no matter what, just put it in the Main game. Even in the Great Lands, it is a rare and incredible achievement for someone to clear the hellish tutorial of the 1st Generation towers on their own, which means that with proper grooming the product can reach an incredible level. However, if there is even the slightest damage to the product's spirit due to your negligence, then this time or in the future,

I will never have any dealings with you.]

'I just need to be a little bit more patient. Just a little bit more, it's almost over now.'

Beastrain messed around with the panels and called forth a different panel than the one he was watching.

[Activating the Communications Network «Little Brother» .]

Beastrain laughed under his breath.

'Let's see, what video should I upload this time. That's right, let's show them the last video where he killed the Frost Dragon.'

Installing the «Nightmare Tower» on the 294th world was a huge gamble for Beastrain. And his gamble now felt like he had made a huge jackpot. If this operation succeeds, then after his fourth metamorphosis and greater demon status, he might even get noticed by someone through [Big Brother] and become an official, allowing him to eat and sleep without worries for the rest of his life.

Beastrain was almost certain. That was because he was receiving a flood of messages through the [Big Brother] affiliated communication network «Little Brother» .

[Sovereign of Destruction 'Siegfried' likes your video.]

[Sovereign of Gold 'Inix' likes your video.]

[The Immortal Sovereign 'Abraxas' has sent you a message.]

[The Wood Sovereign 'Illaenus' has sent you a message.]

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"Wahahahat, these sovereign brats sure are making a ruckus!"

It's not like the sovereigns had just simply pressed 'like' or had sent a message on a whim. No, sovereigns were not such careless people. Everything they did carried

significance and weight.

It was almost certain that the minions under their respective sovereigns were moving on their behalf.

But that didn't matter.

Their actions were the will of the sovereign.

It meant that all of the sovereigns from the Great Lands were paying attention to his cultivation.

It was a once in a lifetime opportunity for any demon.

When he found the peaceful Earth of the 294th world, Beastrain felt as though he were a main character coming across a tremendous stroke of fortune.

It was a safe world with nothing that could hinder his cultivation.

It was a world without the interference of the angels known as [Growers] that held a similar job, but most of all, he was still in contact with Big Brother and therefore received proper permissions to carry out his work.

He immediately went to Big Brother to receive permission before approaching the [Creators] of the tower known as the Nightmares.

'Just thinking about them pisses me off. Those damn Nightmares.'

The amount of flattery he had to give to the Nightmares wouldn't have been necessary if things were the usual.

Normal [Cultivators] simply borrowed a tower and returned it when they were done.

But things were a little different this time around.

He had lived frugally as a middle class demon, but now that he was about to become a greater demon and become a [Specialized Cultivator], his pride just wouldn't let him run around borrowing a tower whenever he needed one.

Owning a tower.

That was every demon's dream.

In order to purchase a tower with a good cost to effectiveness ratio, he listened to the Nightmare's ridiculous requests and even ended up paying an absolute fortune. At first, he had thought that he finally had a pretty good tower to his name.

It was the second tower ever created by the Nightmare crafter that had created the [Master] class Tower, Mullock.

The tower was so old that the year it was created was unknown and the tower itself was created when Mullock had yet to be a master craftsman, but the performance wasn't bad.

'Everything is fine except the obsolete control device.'

Above all, if the sovereigns saw that a product was groomed in a [Master] Tower, then they would be extremely satisfied.

But his good fortune didn't end there.

The race living on the 294th world was an incredibly outstanding product.

They displayed a tremendous 'adaptation' and would act as though they were natural born for the game. 'Adaptation' was a core talent necessary to become a strong figure and step into the 《Great Lands》 .

Beastrain had seen many products belonging to the 'human' race, but this was the first time he had seen humans that could so easily adapt to the game.

'The sovereigns are gonna drool.'

But his good fortune only lasted until the 77th floor. Something that he had completely not expected happened on the 77th floor. Many of the products fell for the trap on the 77th floor and were eliminated.

Beastrain was astounded.

'No, just what the hell?!'

Many of the products that he had already assigned prices to were suddenly all eliminated by the trap on the 77th floor. Beastrain was desperate.

'[Stone of Regression], this kind of? Such an asshole item wasn't in the tower manual!'

When he spoke to Jae Hwan, he had acted as though it was all part of his plan, but to be honest, the [Stone of Regression] was not a part of the tower that he was even aware of.

He was a bit concerned since the Nightmare Mullock was a bit of an eccentric, but he didn't think that there would be something like this!

He wanted to get rid of that item right away, but since he was someone who was in contract with the 《Akashic Records》, once his actions of clearing obstacles that made it easier for products to clear the tower were exposed, his reliability as a Cultivator would drop to the ground.

A race that abandons the 'present', falling for the temptation of the past.

The sovereigns of the 《Great Lands》 wouldn't accept such cowards. There wouldn't be a past nor a future for such people when living in the 《Great Lands》, a land drenched in blood.

They idolized the present.

Watching the humans go back to the past one at a time through the [Nightmare Stone], Beastrain couldn't help but think.

His life, no his demon life was over.

The moment he had purchased the tower was the moment he no longer had the means to pay back his debts.

He just wanted to quit with the cultivating and go to sleep somewhere.

There were still some Products left, but it was too late for them to clear the tower.

The desperate Beastrain set the time dilation at the top of the tower to the maximum setting possible and guzzled down some spirit wine. He was only going to take a break for a day or two, but he ended up drinking too much wine and ended up being knocked out for a few weeks.

‘This, fuck?!’

It may have only been a few weeks in the 《Great Lands》 , but it was a decade in the tower.

It was clear that nobody would be able to survive in the tower now.

But how exactly did this happen?

The cultivation process wasn't over yet!

Dragging his hangover-stricken body, Beastrain quickly pulled up the images displayed on the hologram panels.

One day... Two days... One week... One year... Ten years... 30 Years.

And in the end there was one surviving human.

Beastrain was astounded.

An average product couldn't last more than 10 years in the Nightmare Tower. He felt like his psyche was collapsing. This product hadn't just survived in the Nightmare Tower for 30 years, but had even cleared the 99th floor on his own. Even his soul was exceptionally clear.

Beastrain trembled at the realization.

‘It happened! It happened! This is him! This guy is the one I say!’

He had cleared the last floor of the Nightmare Tower by himself, a floor that was hell itself.

It was something never before seen in the real world.

He even acquiesced to all of the bully-like product's demands.

It was such a precious product, that he wasn't even sure how much to price him at.

It would be difficult if there were even a scratch.

[Ignis, the God of Flames wishes to have a one-on-one conversation with you. Do you wish to reply?]

"Huh? Ignis?"

Beastrain snapped to attention.

"Damn it, even the gods as well?"

Just as sovereigns needed products to increase the strength of their own factions, gods needed products in order to allow their incarnations to be born.

It's just that gods would usually nurture their own avatar bodies— they already had covenants with the [Angels] in the material world.

The sovereigns would generally deal with [Demons] while the gods would deal with the [Angels] .

It was an implicit industry rule.
But this rule was now being ignored.

[You have accepted Ignis-nim's call request.]

Ignis : Hey why was your reply so late. Do you wanna get beat up?

Beastrain :... what rude fellow did you choose as your avatar this time?

Beastrain was not in a good mood. Even if you borrowed a god's identity and became a proxy, there's still a basic etiquette that you need to follow.

Ignis : Fuck, it's me you punk

Beastrain : who is this...

Ignis : Did you go blind? Can't you tell by looking at the ID?

You don't say!

Beastrain : Perhaps, are you Ignis-nim himsel?!

Ignis : Oh now this bitch little demon is finally crawling to this god. Are you ignoring me right now?

Beastrain : No, definitely not. I would never dare.

Ignis : I saw the video you uploaded.

Beastrain : Y-you saw that?!

Ignis : Fuck, just tell me the truth.

Beastrain : ... yes sir...

Ignis : That tower is operated by you, right? Are you playing a joke? How can a human runt clear a 1st Generation Tower on his own?

Beastrain : ... It's not a fabrication.

Ignis : Hey, there's no need for that is there? Just tell me the truth. I won't disclose what you tell me.

Beastrain : I said it's not a lie.

Ignis : Alright, come look at this will you? How much are you gonna sell for?

Beastrain : I-I'm not selling.

Ignis : Fuck, I asked how much you were going to sell for, so tell me how much you're going to sell for! Just name a price, anything goes!

[The conversation has ended.]

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[Ignis, the God of Flames, has sent you a message.]

[Ignis, the God of Flames, has sent you a message.]

[Ignis, the God of Flames, has sent you a message.]

[Ignis, the God of Flames, has sent you a message.]

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[You have disconnected from the communications network 《Little Brother》]

Beastrain's heart did a flip.

'I freaked out, even the gods are interested in this runt. Even a god like Ignis at that...'

Ignis was a top god amongst gods. It was just a testament to how valuable the product is.

A special product? No, a super special product.

Thinking about reaching his 4th metamorphosis and become a greater demon, Beastrain's heart began to calm down.

'It's finally about to become a new day.'

Nightmare Tower 100th floor, the following day.

Jae Hwan meticulously analyzed the information that Beastrain had provided him. Beastrain couldn't help but ask a question.

"Did you finish?"

"Yeah. Thanks I guess."

His lips constantly rising, Beastrain couldn't help but talk.

"Huhu, since you've memorized everything, are you going to be...?"

"Might as well."

Beastrain typed something into the air. A familiar window appeared before Jae Hwan.

[The Gamemaster desires to end the Tutorial Quest. You will be sent back to your home planet of the 294th world with your memories intact. Would you like to accept?]

[Yes / No]

Jae Hwan raised his Suppression Dragon Sword.

"...What are you doing?"

"You should know just by looking."

—Your request has been denied.

"From now on, I will be hunting you."

Chapter 8

10 Billion Thrusts (8)

Beastrain looked at Jae Hwan with an incredulous look on his face.

“Haaa... I expected something to happen considering the way things were going. This is the first time I've ever met someone like you.”

“I've listened to a lot of similar chatter up until this point.”

With the Frost Dragon Sword and the Suppression Dragon Sword in either hand, Jae Hwan exuded a dark aura. Jae Hwan's mental aura congregated at the tips of his swords.

“However, this is my answer.”

As though he were giving up, Beastrain threw up both of his hands into the air.

“Aigoo, fine we'll just do things your way.”

Jae Hwan's swords rushed towards Beastrain.

The next moment.

A strange circle suddenly appeared under Jae Hwan before something growing bigger came out of the circle with a dazzling light, restraining Jae Hwan's movements. It was a plant bred on the 91st floor of the Tower: Black Ironwood.

“If we had just done this earlier, we would be on friendlier terms. Don't you think so?”

“...what are you saying? Regardless, without my consent, you can't end the game, right?”

“What, don't you think there might be another way?”

“So you plan to torture me.”

Jae Hwan had a resolute expression on his face.

“Climbing this far, I've witnessed a hell within a hell. Do you think you have what it takes to torture me?”

“Huuu, is that so. Well, you could say I do.”

Beastrain laughed with a smirk on his face.

“That's right, I've already long since given up on receiving your consent.”

“What?”

“I'll ask you one thing this time. Do you perhaps think that this tutorial game will go on indefinitely?”

“Surely you don't mean...”

“Huhu, that's exactly what I mean. As things currently stand, the 《Nightmare Tower》 is programmed to automatically end the Tutorial 100 days after it is cleared.”

‘Of course this damn human delayed the time of delivery by a large margin.’

Beastrain thought to himself.

“The reason why I gave you ten days was because I wanted the game to end in the safest and most natural way possible. What I'm trying to say is that I was trying to prevent you from doing anything stupid. So all Jae Hwan-ssi needs to do is just sit tight and wait for the Main Game to begin.”

Beastrain didn't seem to be lying.

In fact, from the beginning the tower's actions weren't very strange. It was because you could feel small tremors coming from many parts of the tower. It was an obvious sign that the game was going to end.

Seeing Jae Hwan lowered his head, Beastrain couldn't help but feel a strange sense of

victory. Though his plans had been stonewalled over and over again, the man in front of him no longer had any choice but to quietly accept his fate.

“Demon Beastrain.”

“Yes?”

“They call you the 'Crafty Gentleman' in the 《Great Lands》 . Am I correct?”

“...You are, but how do you know this?”

“Having lived for 784 years, you've gone to exactly 128 worlds to carry out your dirty [Cultivation] with a yawn on your face. I couldn't help but be a little puzzled at the bullshit you spouted about helping me enter the faction of a great sovereign.”

“J-just how did you know that?”

Beastrain looked at Jae Hwan with a look of disbelief.

“What, you look rather startled that I've heard about you growing various [Products] and whatnot, no?”

“You, just how...”

“You're planning to just hand me over to the Sovereign of Darkness [Harvester] , right? Of course, in return, you'd receive some enormous reward necessary for your fourth metamorphosis or something like that.”

Jae Hwan said while staring up at the Tower's ceiling.

The [Doubt] that he had been sharpening and polishing for the past 100 days was, for the first time, was shining bright. His suspicion and doubt that finally enable to just barely scratch the true essence of the world.

Jae Hwan had wandered around the tower, listening to the voices of the frenzied essence particles.

Doubt opened up his eyes to a new world, and this new world had told him a story.

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[...Sovereign of Darkness, the cultivation of the Product's 1st stage is nearly complete. The down payment...]

[...the Product is of an extremely high grade. Of my 784 years of work, I have never seen anything like this...]

[...when this transaction is over, I'll finally break through the 4th metamorphosis and become a greater demon. If you just let me complete the cultivation process...]

. . . .
“.....You, just who the hell are you?”

“Who am I. I'm just a Product that you've kept here in this tower for decades.”

Jae Hwan began to feel that the binding force of the materials restraining him were weakening. It was another power belonging to [Doubt] . With suspicion and doubt, by denying the existence of the physical, the structure and integrity is weakened.

“It won't be the same starting from now, but...”

Cutting through the air, two swords flew out at the same time.

Beastrain barely escaped, a long cut appearing on his left forearm. The impossible had become possible. His opponent was a newbie Walker who had only just cleared the Tutorial.

Beastrain was a demon that had gone through his 3rd metamorphosis.

If his opponent wanted to leave a scratch, they must at least be an absolutely elite 1st class Player.

‘Perhaps, an Overadapter?!’

A term used to refer to Products that display growth beyond the bounds of common sense.

‘Why would an Overadapter, in my Tower...’

Maybe in the Main Game, but no Overadapter has ever appeared in the Tutorial Game. It was a talent belonging to the highest grade even in the 《Great Lands》.

The Sovereign of Darkness' delighted gaze appeared in his mind.

‘Even still, it's only a stage 1 Adapter. If I can just restrain him for a little longer, the Tutorial will come to an end.’

Beastrain bit his lips.

“Anything you do is useless! In the end, playing the Main Game is inevitable! Even if you rebel against me, it's you who'll ultimately incur the biggest loss!”

“I guess I'll just have to see what happens then.”

Stemming from the tip of the Frost Dragon's Sword was Jae Hwan's specialty, the Thrust!

Was it even proper to still call it a simple 'Thrust'?

From start to finish, the complete movement of the blade...

It was the ‘Thrust’ that he had come to believe after cutting away the chaff with [Doubt] and distilling the essence of the move with [Doubt] once more.

And like that he came to a realization.

If there is nothing more to Doubt, then what state would a human reach?

‘I [Understand] Thrust.’

It was no longer just a Thrust.

It was like a beam of light, a sudden flash of brilliance.

Blood spilled from Beastrain's body.

His eyes grew wide as though they were about to rip out of his sockets.

“No way, a stage 2 Adapter?!”

This speed, this destructive power...

It would have been impossible if he hadn't already reached the level of stage 2 Adapter.

Throughout the entire history of the world, there had never been a stage 2 Adapter in the Tutorial Game.

Beastrain could no longer afford to be careless. If Jae Hwan had really reached the level of Stage 2 Adapter, then Beastrain absolutely needed to utilize the power from his body in the material world.

Beastrain hastily increased the synchronization ratio to 80% in order to borrow more power from his true body.

An incredible amount of spiritual power flooded through Beastrain's body.

A black light began to shine from Beastrain's body.

It was the aura of a demon that had already completed its 3rd metamorphosis.

A demon's 3rd metamorphosis was oftentimes said to be comparable to the 3rd Stage Adaptation, but the truth is that the two have some differences. Most Adapters would never win against a demon of similar metamorphosis.

It was because there was almost always a significant time gap between a man and a demon.

From Beastrain's hand shot out a Claw that made a mess of Jae Hwan's body. Whether it be battle sense or raw power, Jae Hwan was outclassed in both.

It was not easy to deal with the power of a demon who had lived for hundreds of years.

A fountain of blood gushed out from Jae Hwan's body, his strength quickly falling to less than half of his full power.

“Just obediently surrender!”

Under the pressure of Beastrain's aura, Jae Hwan's legs went stiff.

Truly demons were a powerful race.

The chances of Jae Hwan winning were highly uncertain.

The particles making up the tower seemed to be on the verge of collapse.

‘So it ends like this.’

Even until the very end, Jae Hwan tried to Thrust.

The aura kept pressing down on Jae Hwan, not allowing him to stand up.

Keep thrusting, shoot out one's sword and thrust.

Just how many time has he Thrust his sword. A billion times, twenty billion times?

Only Jae Hwan's body knew the answer.

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At that moment, a vivid and clear line appeared before Jae Hwan.

There had been times where this had happened in the past.

It was when he had fought the Frost Dragon on the 99th floor. Other times when he was on the verge of life or death, Thrusting his sword during a time of crisis.

At those times he would find a faint line.

Every time he saw the line he would swing his sword in the trajectory of the line. It was something that would only appear whenever he forgot about it.

‘Is that it.’

Jae Hwan's body trembled in excitement.

In front of the Claw flying towards his body, Jae Hwan resigned himself. With that, he cut himself off from everything.

He had learned. He had mastered it. He had believed. All of those myths and misconceptions.

He let go of all the things that he had learned to be 'true' or 'definite'. A power with endless numbers. Numbers and coefficients. Even souls were nothing but slaves to them.

But Jae Hwan's body was thinning away.

All of the data attached to Jae Hwan was disintegrating. Everything pertaining to Jae Hwan's Status. Force, Health, Focus, Agility, Luck... all of the skills and the stats he had accumulated were disappearing.

Everything that had quantified his existence as a human was sloughing off Jae Hwan's body.

An existence of literal [Selflessness] .

As the extraneous particles glowed and faded away, all that was left was the pure, unadulterated essence soul of Jae Hwan. It was the feeling of being born anew. He was no longer just a data or a result of an unknown coefficient of existence. He was a living, breathing, human being.

'So this is it.'

Jae Hwan thought to himself.

'This is what it means to be a true, pure human.'

A glowing light burst forth from Jae Hwan's body.

Beastrain stared at the scene with his mouth wide open. Even for someone who had

lived for 784 years, this was the first time he had ever seen this.

“Oh my God. Just what the hell is that?!”

Beastrain realized that he had been mistaken about something.
He wasn't just an [Adapter] .

There was something even more terrifying than an [Adapter] .

It was a topic with such a high strength of taboo that everyone avoided it.

It wasn't something that would shake the Great Land, but rather, something that would just utterly destroy it.

Those from the Great Lands had coined them this term:

[Awakened]

Chapter 9

10 Billion Thrusts (9)

Awakened.

He had thought that it was impossible, but how else could he describe the scene before his eyes. If he's not an Awakened, then what the hell is he?

But he didn't have the luxury to remain startled. Thousands of blade light beams aimed towards Beastrain were flying towards him.

The pressure on Beastrain began to grow stronger and stronger. He threw out multiple Claws in panic in order to block the beams.

Block, block, and block once more.

But it was only after he had successfully blocked every strike that he realized that it was too late.

".....Just what is this?"

He suddenly felt as though he were being ripped apart.

There were no signs of a lethal injury on Beastrain's body. But if that was the case, where did he get attacked?

"Don't worry. You probably won't die. But it's probably more painful than dying."

Jae Hwan had not attacked Beastrain's soul, but rather the line that came outside of the tower and led to his soul. Jae Hwan didn't know exactly what it was, but he knew that it was a link from the 《Great Lands》 .

A line connecting the body and the soul.

Jae Hwan's Thrusts had torn that link into shreds.

"Keuaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Beastrain was writhing in indescribable pain.

This was the last time he would ever hear it.

Jae Hwan spoke up while panting.

“Humans are not mere objects that you can just buy or sell like you bastards think. We are not Products that can be quantified by level or status; we are not animals that can be assigned a value based on such ridiculous standards.”

The 《Nightmare Tower》 was now shaking at a rate visible to the naked eye. Jae Hwan kept speaking.

“I refuse to play along with the scenario that you had designed for me any longer. I'm going to break everything here and go onto the next floor. I'll climb higher and higher and witness this damned world that you and your kind have made until the very end.”

Beastrain was mortified at this Product that he had groomed. Not even 4th Stage Adapters exuded the same sort of pressure as the Jae Hwan who stood right before his eyes did.

An Awakened that had reached the realm of [Selflessness] .

An existence that could not be quantified by the System, an existence whose very being had no base. The master of the Tower, Beastrain, could not longer read the stats of the Jae Hwan in front of him.

[User Info]

Name : ????????????????

Title : ????????????????

Class : ????????????????

Unique Ability : ????????????????

Acquired Skill : ????????????????

Beastrain shouted amidst the excruciating pain he was experiencing.

“Please stop, please! The next floor..... there's no such thing as a next floor!”

“No, there is. It's there, the next floor.”

Jae Hwan hadn't attacked Beastrain while rambling on about some 'next floor' for no reason.

"There must be."

From the 1st floor to the 99th.

When Jae Hwan had scoured the tower in order to find other survivors, he had come across a strange graffiti-like statement on the wall of the passage leading towards the 78th floor.

Tower within the tower. Nightmare within the nightmare.

There were also clues like this.

The Tower, 66th floor. On the back of the chair that Succubus, the boss of the 66th Floor, sat on was an engraving.

[Eventually, all Nightmare Towers will be nothing more than imitations of the 'First Nightmare' that sits atop the 《Illusion Tree》 . In recent, my work induces in me only one thought. With every attempt to borrow the power of the First Nightmare, I am confronted with the same problem. Every Tower that I have created serves only as 'roots' to maintain the 'First Nightmare' on top of the 《Illusion Tree》 .]

It was the engravings of a frustrated craftsman.

Jae Hwan was almost completely certain that this graffiti, this engraving, was a clue that hinted towards a hidden piece that existed in the tower. There was a similar graffiti on the 47th floor.

[And so I dared to arrive at a most profane and blasphemous thought. In order to witness the secret of creation, must we climb the 《Illusion Tree》 that exists in the center of the Great Lands? Then after climbing the 'Trunk' and traversing the 'Branches', would we come face to face with the 'First Nightmare' at the top of the 《Illusion Tree》 ?]

The first time he had seen these, Jae Hwan did not know what they meant. Jae Hwan had thought they were secrets of the tower that would be revealed to him once he reached the 100th floor. However, once he realized what this tower was, Jae Hwan saw these scribbles and engravings in completely new light.

Jae Hwan understood right away.

These were the memos of the creator of this 《Nightmare Tower》 , Mullock.

Of course, it would be impossible to decipher the true meaning behind all of these scribbles with just his own knowledge alone. But that didn't mean that he didn't achieve anything.

Tower within the tower, nightmare within the nightmare.

The Illusion Tree's roots, branches, and trunk.

And at the top of it all, the 'First Nightmare'.

All of this pointed to one fact.

'The world is connected.'

However, it was just a hypothesis. Nevertheless, it was a hypothesis well worth checking out.

Jae Hwan took a look at the ceiling of the 100th floor before using a Thrust. A crack appeared on the ceiling. Beastrain let out a scream.

"NOOO! MY TOWER! OOAAAAAH!"

Again, again, and again.

Through [Doubt] , Jae Hwan could see all things clearly.

The particles that made up the tower and the movement of powerful energy that sustained the integrity of it all. And the enormous flow of energy that kept entering the tower.

From upstream to downstream. The endless ocean of energy that spread endlessly. And this here was the end of it all. Jae Hwan was sure. If he were to follow this flow of energy, he would be able to reach the secret of the world.

The 100th floor was not the end.

'If this is the root, then there must be a trunk.'

A white light began to leak through the cracks in the ceiling.

"You can't! If you go through there you'll never again.....!"

"Take care."

Who knows, maybe one day he might play through the Main Game as Beastrain had originally intended.

But not now.

The information he had was too little and the strength he possessed was too weak.

Fighting against the demon Beastrain with his current self wouldn't be too hard, but he thirsted for more knowledge and he desired to get stronger.

The white light slowly engulfed Jae Hwan.

He jumped directly into the middle of the light.

He did not return to the past.

And he did not return to the world that he had left.

His choice-- the world he chose was that of the present.

The moment of the now, the present that he lived in.

The path he chose was one where he walked forward.



After watching Jae Hwan disappear with a futile expression on his face, Beastrain painfully moved his body to operate the hologram panels.

Something that should have never happened had happened.

A [Stage 1 Product] had Awakened in the Tutorial Game, then had busted through the ceiling and left the Tower.

'C'mon [Big Brother] needs to be informed..... '

But it was too late.

The Tutorial Game was collapsing. Moreover, all means of communication had broken down.

'Damn it, perhaps? No..... I SAID NO!'

As the link between his body and soul had been cut, communication with the outside world was impossible. His soul was forever trapped within the 《Illusion Tree》 .

An unlinked soul left in a collapsing world would result in the destruction of the soul alongside the destruction of the world.

'It can't end like this.....!'

He abandoned the message he was about to write to [Big Brother] and looked towards the lighted passage that Jae Hwan had disappeared into.

And in the next moment, the 《Nightmare Tower》 collapsed.

[The details of the Tutorial Game will now be settled.]

[Settling.....]

[An unexpected error has occurred during the settlement process.]

[Settlement failed.]

[Searching for any remaining Walkers in the «Nightmare Tower» .]

[Searching.....]

[There are no Walkers currently present in the «Nightmare Tower» .]

[Game Clear Fail!]

[The Tutorial Game has now completely ended.]

Chapter 10

Witch of Slaughter (1)

[Climb the Illusion Tree if you wish to grow stronger. That is, if you are confident in maintaining your sanity.]

—Sovereign of Steel, Heoyu

Episode 2. Witch of Slaughter

A rainforest without end.

It was a dense forest of broad-leafed trees.

The sun was hanging in the sky, its sweltering heat sticking to his body as though they were small, white granules.

He had been wandering for some time.

Jae Hwan wiped off the sweat flowing down his face and took a look around.

'I finally found it.'

The size of the footsteps along the ridge near the bushes were similar to Jae Hwan's. Even if it wasn't humans that left them behind, it would have at least been a group of alien bipedal creatures.

It had already been a month since the 《Nightmare Tower》 had been destroyed. Jae Hwan continued to travel through the rainforest that had no end in sight. He wasn't exactly sure where he was.

But, he was certain that he was somewhere in the 《Great Lands》, it's just that he was unclear of the exact location.

When he first arrived, the intense forest heat made him think that he had arrived in

the 'Flame Zone', the hottest zone of the twelve zones in the 《Great Lands》 described in the information that Beastrain had given him. But no matter where he looked, there weren't any 'Flaming Trees' unique to the Flame Zone. He figured he'd be able to figure things out as he looked around, or so he thought to himself as he walked around.

He often encountered monsters resembling those he fought in the tower. However, all of the monsters here shared one characteristic: they all had horns on their heads. Those who didn't have a lot could have one, and those who had a lot would have up to five.

But it didn't matter since nothing could be Jae Hwan's opponent.

The strongest monster he had faced so far was a five-horned wolf. Even with Jae Hwan's Thrust, it did not die in one hit. After holding onto its stomach while moving about, it finally died after receiving a few more thrusts.

'All of the monsters here are weak.'

It was because of the fact that he had spent 15 years fighting the Frost Dragon. He couldn't figure out if he himself was strong or if the monsters were weak. However, even if Jae Hwan had only encountered monsters until now, things had changed.

Before long, Jae Hwan saw what could be a group of intellectual creatures.

They wore white robes like ancient monks, but had green skin and sported a pair of insect-like antennae.

" Mortal human##### whatever #####"

"For what reason## uncomfortable ###."

It was hard to understand what they were saying (though their words didn't exactly sound pleasant), but they were dressed up in clothes and seemed to be intellectual creatures, so he attempted to approach them and communicate with them.

However, even with [Doubt] , he couldn't quite understand their language structure. The ones who acted first were the aliens at the head of the group.

"### Horn! ##" They seemed to be pointing their fingers (they clearly looked like fingers) at the monster horns attached to Jae Hwan's belt. He was able to obtain them after killing a five horned wolf.

"This?"

"## Mortal human### five horned wolf###"

"That's right. I'm a mortal human, and these are horns."

But it seemed like he could understand some what they were saying.

"### the horn!"

Some of the bipedal aliens creatures approached Jae Hwan.

The movements of their waving antennae made it seem like they were wary of Jae Hwan.

'Why did they suddenly approach me?'

"#####"

He just couldn't understand a word they were saying.

But it did seem like they were yammering about the horn.

Worried, Jae Hwan shook the horns and spoke.

"This is good. Let's trade. I'll give you these, in exchange, tell me where this place....."

Suddenly, the other party drew their swords and charged. It wasn't a simple threat. The movements of their swords clearly carried murderous designs. Looking at that scene, Jae Hwan looked towards the sky with a vacant look on his face.

There was an object similar to the sun floating about.

The weather was hot.

"Alright look."

Jae Hwan said as he he dodged a slash.

"You antennae freaks."

He exclaimed as he dodged another swing.

"Hey, if you do that again you're all dead."

He threatened as he dodged a third sword.

"Die."

It wasn't long before the alien strangers ended up on the forest floor, their bodies turning to white dust. Their blue blood spilled out of the remaining powder that was their flesh. While grabbing onto the antennae of the last remaining alien, Jae Hwan asked it a question.

"I have something to ask you. Where is this place?"

"How### a human#"

Jjuuuuuk!

"I said where am I."

"Illusion Tree ### chaos ###"

Jjuuuuuk!

"Say it in a way I can understand. "Who are you? Are you a demon?"

"### we are the great house of Nokm##....." Jjuuuuuk!

"I said to speak in a way I would understand."

"Heuu##uh, heuu###uh."

Jjuuuuuk!

"Hueuuh kaaah!"

Jjuuuuk!

Jjuuuuk!

Jjuuuuk!

Just how many times did he grab and pull on the antennae. The alien's eyes rolled up until they showed only the whites. Eventually, the alien said something he could completely understand.

"Human. Must. Kill."

Those were the alien's last words.

The alien bit down on its own tongue and collapsed onto the floor, turning into white dust soon after.

'Oh, turns out they're not as weak as I thought.'

An act of suicide devoid of all signs of hesitation as though the alien were expecting to come alive again. Jae Hwan couldn't help but be impressed with the alien's resolution, so he grabbed the dead alien's antennae and stuck them into a mound of dirt in the forest. However, the antennae turned into white powder and were destroyed.

Unfortunately, he wasn't able to glean any useful information, but there were still some things he had determined based on the little bits and pieces he had obtained.

It was exactly the luggage they were carrying on their bodies.

Most of the things they were carrying were useless, but there was one thing that wasn't, and it was the little pouch that was currently hanging off of Jae Hwan's waist. By analyzing the object with [Doubt] , he was able to look at the item information.

[Item Information]

Name: Small Dimensional Bag

Effect : Allows the user to store many things in a small space. Provides a space of two

cubic meters.

'It seems to be an item that serves the same role as an inventory.'

Ever since Jae Hwan had dropped out of the 《Nightmare Tower》, everything related to the Interface System, like the Inventory, had disappeared. But if Beastrain wasn't lying, he had told Jae Hwan that the Interface System was available for use all throughout the 《Great Lands》.

Perhaps it was because of the strange experience he had gone through moments before he had left the tower.

The event where his physical body had melted away and had been made anew.

That was also probably the reason why he had to use [Doubt] to look at item information. With the elimination of the Interface System, the [Appraise Item] function had become useless.

Being in such a situation, the Dimensional Bag couldn't have arrived at a more timely moment.

Jae Hwan packed the rest of the unknown items he had looted from the aliens and put them in his bag.

"What is this? Is it a gem?"

He wasn't sure if they were some sort of craftsmen, but regardless, each of the aliens were in possession of neatly cut gems. The most plentiful gems were blue with red gems closely following suit. There were also two black gems which he retrieved from the luggage of the last alien whose antennae he had been tugging.

Who knows, maybe it was quite a valuable gem as well.

Jae Hwan stored everything in his bag.

'Now, I should throw away the rest of this.'

The rest of the equipment that the aliens were wearing or in possession of was too bulky to fit in the bag. He was worried about how he would dispose of these. Suddenly, the Frost Dragon Sword dangling from Jae Hwan's waist began to let out an 'oong oong'

cry.

"Again?"

Oong oong.

"Ok ok I get it."

He wasn't sure why, but ever since he had left the 《Nightmare Tower》, the Frost Dragon Sword had started to act strange. A black light began to cover the translucent blade.

It was as though it had acquired sentience or something, but when it encountered something special, it would cry out 'oong oong'.

Specifically, when it was feeling hungry like it was now.

Jae Hwan pulled out the Frost Dragon Sword and stabbed it into the pile of equipment. The Frost Dragon Sword's blade split open like a mouth, and began to devour the aliens' pile of equipment. It turned black as though it were possessed by a spectre...

Jae Hwan looked at the sword with an interested look on his face. A brilliant black light would flash every time it successfully consumed an item. Since it looked like it was getting stronger, it probably wasn't a bad thing.

'Hmmm.....'

To be frank, it wasn't like he was completely unaware of what was going on with the Frost Dragon Sword. However, because of that suspicion, he just left it alone. It was also because there was something more important going on.

It was the last thing he had obtained after killing the aliens.
It was the map of the forest area.

The map he was looking at was completely different than the ones he had seen on Earth, but with the help of [Doubt] it wasn't much of a problem.

He read the name of the map.

'How should I read this? Illu... sion tree. Cha... os? Is this how I should be reading it?'

The words 《Illusion Tree - Chaos》 were written at the top of the map. Something that Beastrain had mentioned in the past came to mind.

"The Illusion Tree is located in the center of the 《Great Lands》 . The purpose of that tree... hmph hmph, this information isn't too important, and it's something you'll gradually come to know."

Even the graffiti in the tower that Myullock had left behind had contained writings about the Illusion Tree.

[... Every Tower that I have created serves only as 'roots' to maintain the 'First Nightmare' on top of the 《Illusion Tree》 ...]

Based on these clues, it was highly likely that the original 《Nightmare Tower》 was a place linked to the 《Illusion Tree》 . Then this place that he had arrived at by piercing through the 《Nightmare Tower》 could very possibly be close to the location of the 《Illusion Tree》 .

The thing that he knew for certain was that this place he was in was not described in the information that Beastrain had given him.

'Damn demon punk.'

It was likely that the aliens were heading towards the 'X' marked on the map. There was a very high chance that it was a community or some sort of village. After a long time of looking at the map, Jae Hwan was only just barely able to figure out where he was.

'For now, I need information about this place.'

He had been lucky up until now and had only encountered weak enemies, but there was no guarantee that things would remain the same in the future. It was unlikely that enemies in the future would be as weak as the horned beasts or the green-skinned aliens. It was urgent that he meet the residents of this world and extract as much information as possible. Since this was a new world, he would have to approach everything as though he were an absolute beginner. It would ensure his safety as he

moved forward.

Of course, that didn't mean that he was going to come to an amicable agreement with the world.

Learn about the world, but don't compromise with it.

It was this same principal that served as a driving force for Jae Hwan to defeat the 《Nightmare Tower》 and eventually came to the various bits of enlightenment required to break through the 《Nightmare Tower》 .

'Who knows if there are others that had been able to break through the tower like me.'

If possible, Jae Hwan wanted to see the figure of a living human. At the very least, humans who had survived the long nightmares and shedded off the title of 'Product' might be here.

Beastrain had once said something along these lines:

'The race known as humans is widely dispersed in the 《Fringelands》 . The 294th world is only one of many where there are humans.'

If what he said was true, then that would mean that there were already a considerable amount of humans in the 《Great Lands》 .

Jae Hwan wondered.

What were the humans behaving like in those world? Also, what were they thinking of? What did the humans in those worlds find meaning in...

Thoughts like that were what he wondered.

The shaking of the large, broad-leafed trees suddenly stopped.

"Found it."

The sounds of footsteps rang out from somewhere in the forest, the sounds of weapons accompanying it.

There was no doubt as to who these footsteps belonged to. The owners must surely be the same people who had left those footprints that Jae Hwan had found not too long ago.

From amidst the bushes emerged a party of four or five people who seemed to be hunting a familiar looking horned beast.

They were humans.

Chapter 11

Witch of Slaughter (2)

Kang Hoon, the leader of the clan Red Fox, was in a good mood today. It had been a really long time since a good prey had been caught.

"Everyone hold your position, just as practiced!"

"Yup!"

The people listened to Kang Hoon and surrounded the behemoth in an orderly fashion. They had surrounded a medium-sized unicorn.

'Just one for now.'

It was a powerful monster often found all throughout 《Chaos》 .

One of the many so-called [Horned Beasts] that sported horns.

The One-Horned Beast was a name given to beasts with one horn, and in the Great Lands, was a difficult monster to deal with unless one was an [Adapter] .

Typically speaking, a Stage 1 Adapter was able to deal with one One-Horned Beast. Of the current team, only Kang Hoon was a Stage 1 Adapter.

'They should still be able to deal with it without me.'

Basically, a party of five normal people should be able to handle a single One-Horned Beast. However, this party was a bit special.

The five of them, Kang Hoon included, were members of the hunting clan 'Red Fox'.

Although everyone aside from Kang Hoon were [Non-Adapters] , they were a team of good seeds that could hunt the One Horned Beast. It wouldn't be long before all of them were reborn as Stage 1 Adapters.

[Leader, are you really going to continue?]

[That's right.]

[But that girl seems to have some sort of background..... would it really be ok?]

[Don't worry. I'll take responsibility for anything that happens.]

Kang Hoon looked at the trembling lady sitting next to him and smacked his lips. She

was the only foreigner to the group.

Her body was wrapped in a black, silken robe, but her beauty could not be concealed. Small glimpses of white skin and her scarlet hair could be seen in between the gaps of her robe. In particular, the small ornaments she unknowingly displayed attracted the gazes of those around her.

Nobody would think that they were of low-quality goods.

'How splendid.'

Hunting specialist clan Red Fox.

In fact, they weren't out hunting monsters, but in fact, they were out to hunt 'Adapters'. It was a fact that most everyone in the area was aware of. However, a naive prey had suddenly fallen into their grasps.

If there was one point to take into consideration, it was that he didn't know the girl's background, but it wasn't something that he was too concerned about. It was because he had turned on a Spirit Power Meter before he had joined the party.

'It says she's a [Non-Adapter] .'

It was highly likely that if she had a background, it wouldn't be anything special. Needless to say, it was likely that her accessories were obtained by using her beauty to seduce other men.

Kang Hoon greedily took in the sight of the woman whose skin showed through.

'Hehe, who knows how many times it had worked before, but it won't work this time.'

At that moment, the lady who seemed to have made a mistake, shouted.

"Oh my, I'm sorry!"

"Haha, it'll be ok."

Kang Hoon said while laughing and pulling out a knife from his leather chest armor.

'This girl.'

It may have been the first time the girl went out on a hunt like this, but everything she was doing was full of mistakes. Not only did she not realize what position she was in, but she kept on grasping the wrong timing for her attacks, driving away her allies like

she was doing now. It was this woman who had lured the One-Horned Beast that they were fighting.

'I'll turn a blind eye just this once since she's cute.'

But after a moment, the woman lured another One-Horned Beast to their position.

"Oh my, I'm sorry!"

"It's alright. Rather, this is good, We'll just kill em all at once!"

They could deal with up to two monsters.

Since Kang Hoon was a peak 1st Stage Adapter, he alone was strong enough to deal with two One-Horned Beasts at the same time. He was getting bored, so he liked this situation better.

One-Horned Beast get, woman get.

Everything was fine up to that point. In other words, everything was fine until the number of One-Horned Beasts numbered three. The woman who had lured a third One-Horned Beast spoke once again.

"Omo, my bad!"

"...Be careful next time."

Kang Hoon spoke in a grave voice.

Three One-Horned Beasts was too much even for him.

'What the hell is she doing?'

In just a short amount of time, there were suddenly three One Horned Beasts. It was baffling, just where were these One-Horned Beasts sprouting out from? Thankfully, they were just One-Horn beasts, if by chance a Two-Horned Beast were to appear...

"Omo, sorrrrrryyyyyy—!"

In the distance was a woman waving her arms, an angry looking monster running after her. A monster appeared while smashing through the trees. Its incredible height would easily reach at least ten feet. On its head were 'two' horns.

“...What is that bitch doing?!”



There was someone watching the scene from a far off distance.
It was Jae Hwan.

'They'll all die at this rate.'

They seemed to have been holding on while fighting against the One-Horned Beast, but as soon as the Two-Horned Beast appeared, they began to fall apart. Jae Hwan was a bit disappointed. Because he was in the Great Lands, he had thought that everyone would be insanely strong, but watching them fight made him wonder just how in the world had they been able to clear the 《Nightmare Tower》 .

'There's also a strange woman over there.'

He couldn't quite tell if she was trying to help with the hunt, or ruin the hunt.

'But it looks like that woman is the strongest of the group. Are they not on the same side?'

Jae Hwan was stuck in a rut.

He wanted to help out, but he couldn't come to an easy decision because he wasn't exactly sure of what the situation was like.

'I'll just wait a bit longer for now.'



Koong!

After a long time, the three One-Horned Beasts collapsed.

Though he had struggled, he managed to take care of them on his own.

'Now, there's only that one guy left.'

If Kang Hoon wasn't at the peak of Stage 1 Adaptation, and if the Two-Horned Beast in front of him had matured more, he would have already died multiple times. Even the intermediate rank skill that the clan master had helped him get from the top clan,

[Fire Monarch's Sect] , was a huge help.

Intermediate rank skill, [Fire Monarch's Breath] .

Since Adapters of the 1st Stage were unable to apply their own spirit power to their swords, the skill known as the [Fire Monarch's Breath] was an indispensable skill for Adapters of the 1st Stage since it blessed the Adapter's sword with the Burning Flame of the Fire Monarch, allowing the Adapter's combat power to double in strength.

The Burning Flame wasn't visible to the eye yet since his skill level was too low, but it was enough to help him get to where he currently was.

Although he had begun to feel dizzy, Kang Hoon was convinced that he could somehow win with just a little bit more power.

A Two-Horned Beast, if he could take care of it, it would be an extremely fortuitous harvest.

Even if he can't steal the girl's items, if he could just get the horns off this beast.....

"I'll help too! Hee yab!"

"Keu huk"

Kang Hoon shuddered as he saw the woman's dagger enter his thigh as the woman tripped and fell onto the floor. The woman had an apologetic look on her face as she apologized.

"Haha, I'm sorry!"

"You fucking bitch!"

"A fucking bitch?! That's way too mean. I was trying to help!"

The Two-Horned Beast approached. Incoming Horn.

With a loud klang, Kang Hoon's sword broke. The Two-Horned Beast's shadow eclipsed Kang Hoon's entire body.

"FUUUUCK!"

Then in the next moment. A brilliant beam of light traversed through the forest in a straight line.

The Two-Horned Beast that was charging towards Kang Hoon suddenly let out a roar as its huge body collapsed.

Pwahahaha!

The Two-Horned Beast's blue bodily fluids splashed onto Kang Hoon's face. Kang Hoon's mind wasn't able to keep up with what was going on.

As the body of the beast that had covered the sun began to fade away, the first to appear was a blade exuding a mighty black aura. A blade possessed by a terrifying spirit that made your skin crawl.

One glance was all you needed to recognize how great the sword was.

Everyone stopped breathing. Just who was the owner of this sword? The owner of the sword stepped into the sunlight, revealing his face. Looking at the owner, Kang Hoon couldn't help but sigh.

He looked like someone who had been trapped in a room for several decades. He looked like a slovenly bag of garbage, someone that Kang Hoon absolutely could not acknowledge as the sword's owner.

After inspecting the man up and down, Kang Hoon came to his senses and asked a question.

"Wh-who are you?!"

But to Jae Hwan, what he heard was something like the following:

"\$Wh\$o#^?!"

With that, all Jae Hwan could think about was the fact that nothing he had faced up until this point was easy, and would continue to be not easy.



After a few moments, Jae Hwan finally succeeded in some simple communication with the other party. It was all thanks to pushing [Doubt] to the limit.

"Excuse me, but did you say you were called Jae Hwan?"

"Yes."

"And you say that you're just a passerby?"

"Yes."

“On top of that, you're not well-versed in the language spoken here?”

"Yes."

“So strange. Language barriers in this place are extremely rare...”

"Yes."

“...then are you really ok with this? Letting my party take the Two-Horned Monster's body?”

"Yes."

“No take backs?”

"Yes."

"Hahat, cool cool!"

Kang Hoon laughed with a big smile on his face, his visage exuding joy. There was no reason for him not to be in a good mood. He had hunted a freaking Two Horned Beast today! On top of that, the body was in pristine condition and wholly in his possession.

"Ehahahat, ehahahat!"

Kang Hoon was all smiles as he prepared to leave. While carefully observing Kang Hoon, Jae Hwan opened his mouth to speak.

"Looks like that put you in a good mood."

“How could it not! It's a freaking Two-Horned Beast! Are you perhaps not knowledgeable of the Two-Horned Beast?”

"Yes."

“...hahahat! Nice joke!”

Kang Hoon's eyebrow twitched.

'To meet such a pushover! Although the way he doesn't use a respectful way of talking to me is a little unpleasant... '

The party was able to get One-Horned Beasts and a Two-Horned Beast.

It was without a doubt an impossible feat without the blessings of a god. A Non-Adapter wouldn't even be able to scratch its hide while even a 1st Stage Adapter would have a trouble landing a hit. That was a Two-Horned Beast. Even with the combined strength of everyone in the party, it would have been impossible to hunt the monster. Some might even say something like the following:

But wouldn't you not know how things might turn out unless you persisted all the way until the end?

Those were the words of the naive.

The current 《Interface System》 in this world was more than capable of accurately depicting the outcome of a battle.

The Status Skill could accurately measure and display the 'Strength' stat. Those with higher stats and better skills would win.

That was how battles were determined in this world.

Because of this simple system, it was near impossible for miracles such as 'comebacks' to happen.

But Kang Hoon became the subject of such a miracle today.

Having 'defeated' the Two-Horned Beast, Kang Hoon thought that he might be able to upgrade into a 2nd Stage Adapter once he returned.

The girl who was watching this exchange from a distance and had only made mistakes during the hunt, this girl named Mino felt like she was having a stomachache.

[TLN: In the raw, Mino's name has a Hanja 美露, which means something like Treacherous Seductress]

'Ahu, so close. Ah what a waste, I feel like I'm going to die... '

She was an assassin of the Black Forest Sect, one of the ten great sects.

In the underground world of assassins, she was a well known figure known as the 'Witch of Slaughter'.

Chapter 12

Witch of Slaughter (3)

The 'Witch of Slaughter' is joining a party to hunt a One-Horned Beast?

Anyone who would have heard that would have cried laughing.

She was someone who could solo a Three-Horned Beast and was a significantly a high level Adapter. If she had actually joined the party, then she would have done so for only one reason.

'Please take this request.'

Red Fox clan.

Criminals who were well known in the area as ruthless 'Adapter Hunters'.

She had received a commission from some Adapter that had asked her to 'hunt' the guys from Red Fox. The problem was that this request wasn't officially commissioned through the Black Forest Sect.

The assassins from the Black Forest Sect were, in principle, not allowed to receive individual commissions.

That was why she didn't personally raise her hand, but instead lured monsters so that they would do the dirty work for her. If her identity were to be revealed, she would be in big trouble.

'Ah, are you serious…… I thought luring the Two-Horned Beast would be the end of it.'

Innate skill [Entice] .

It was due to this skill that she received the nickname 'Witch of Slaughter'. Thanks to this ability, she was able to lure easily the nearby monsters over to her.

Everything was fine and working out according to plan.

That was, until a stuttering, 'wandering passerby' suddenly appeared out of nowhere and destroyed the Two-Horned Beast.

'Wandering Passerby? Bullshit!'

Mino looked at the bodies that Kang Hoon and his men were carrying.

Mino was still recalling the scene where the man called Jae Hwan struck down the

Two-Horned Beast in one blow. Mino had a clearer view than anyone else of that blow. Well to be fair, as long as you searched, you could find people who could kill a Two-Horned Beast. The problem was how the man killed the monster.

‘He just stabbed and killed it.’

Killing a Two-Horned Beast without using any skills.

Is that even possible?

It was impossible not only for Mino, but for most Adapters as well. If it was the leader of Mino's Black Forest Sect then it might be possible, but what was someone with such strength doing here.

‘Is he perhaps someone from a great family?’

She had heard that some people from the 《Great Lands》 would come to 《Chaos》 as a form of training.

‘No, there are no indicators that point to that. Just what is he here for then?’

Those people from big families usually move while being escorted by many people, wore specific types of clothing, and walked in a unique way, so they could usually be spotted at a glance. No matter how you looked at it, this man was not a member of a famous family. Then just what exactly is his identity?

—Skill activation has failed.

—Skill activation has failed.

In order to find an answer to that question, Mino used the assassin exclusive skill [Precise Appraisal] . But it was like the skill was broken and it wouldn't activate properly no matter what she did.

‘Damn it, not this again. This is why I need better skills.’

It was because of this that she needed to measure things by eye and use a secret item that the [Black Forest Sect] was in possession of in order to reveal the man's information.

Eventually, she was able to come to two pieces of information.

One, he hadn't learned any sort of footwork skill at all.

‘His gait is too clunky. If he was strong enough to kill a Two-Horned Beast with one thrust, then he should have learned some sort of footwork or movement

technique……'

Footwork and movement techniques were some of the most important passive skills to have in the 《Great Lands》 .

It was because if you ever met an opponent stronger than you, it was important to be able to flee without turning your back. Otherwise, it wouldn't take for you to die in this place.

However, that man didn't seem to have learned such a skill at all.

But that wasn't the only unusual thing about him.

Two, his spirit power levels indicated that he was a [Non-Adapter] .

The man's spirit power levels surprised Mino. The Black Forest Sect provided their assassins with a dedicated tool for accurately measuring spirit power. It was in case a mark hid their spirit power using some sort of skill. A measuring device that not even higher level Adapters could hide from. The measurement of the man's spirit power displayed on the device was lower than anyone else in the entire area.

It didn't seem like he had learned any skills and his spirit power was zero.

But even with that, he was able to strike down a Two-Horned Beast?

Mino was in a state of utter confusion.

"Let's rest here before we go."

The leader, Kang Hoon, dragged three of his men a short distance away and sat down. Soon, a hawk made from spirit power suddenly flew towards the sky. Messenger Bird Skill. It seemed to be for the purposes of reporting their harvest to the clan. Mino sat next to Jae Hwan on a fallen tree.

She settled into silence.

Mino couldn't stand it anymore and opened her mouth.

"You, who are you?"

"……"

"I, I saw you kill a Two-Horned Beast in one go."

She thought she had asked a thoughtful question, but there was no reply. Mino ignored being polite and quickly asked another question.

"It wouldn't be easy to find an Adapter who could kill a Two-Horned Monster with a

single stab even if you were to search through all of 《Chaos》 . Where are you from?"

"..... 《Chaos》 , what is that?"

What is Chaos?

"Are you messing with me?"

"Nope."

"Then how could you not know what Chaos is? What's your identity?"

But no matter what, there was no response.

".....do you perhaps not understand what I'm saying?"

Additionally, it looked like he was someone suffering from language barriers.

There was a chance that he didn't understand what she meant by identity. Mino had attempted to explain what the word 'identity' meant.

But it wasn't easy. It's not like she had ever seriously meditated on the word 'identity' before.

The word 'identity' that she knew of was one derived from the information displayed through the 《Interface System》 . A window that displayed an individual's real name, status information, affiliation, and skills.

'Haa, somehow.'

It would be simple to explain to him what she meant by 'identity' if she were to show him her status window, but Adapters showing others their information wasn't something that happened often. Disclosing one's skills and status information was the same as sharing all of one's weaknesses with the other party.

Besides, she was an assassin from the Black Forest Sect.

In the end, Mino decided to share with him non-essential information displayed on her status window. However, when she tried to display her status window, she pressed the wrong button and a different window than the one she had meant to display appeared in the air.

"This is my ident....."

[Individual Information]

Name : Han Mino

Height : 165 cm

Weight : 47kg

Three Sizes : 36 - 24 - 34

Breast Size : 65D

Keynotes : Has a beauty mark by her left eye and has an eye-catching small speck under her right breast. Other than that, her butt...

"Euaaaaaaah!"

A window with information on one's physical characteristics!

The startled Mino immediately closed the window.

While nodding, Jae Hwan opened his mouth to speak.

"So that's how it is. I've learned your 'identity' well."

Her face flushed red, Mino shouted at Jae Hwan.

"Y-you already knew what I meant by 'identity'!"

"I never said I didn't."

"Then were you ignoring me this whole time?"

"It's not like that."

"Then you talk too! That way it'll be fair!"

"...my three sizes?"

"No! Your identity!"

Looking at Mino throwing a fuss, Jae Hwan' lips twitched.

In reality, there were different reasons why Jae Hwan was hesitant.

Identity.

As soon as Jae Hwan heard that word, something shook inside of him. He wasn't quite sure what to say about himself. On Earth, he was a son to some and a friend to others. He went to a university and had been a member of some clubs. He had worried about

things like finding a job, the current state of the country, and other things about his future.

But he forgot all of those things the moment he entered the tower.

Those memories were instead replaced by the experiences and hardships he had suffered through with new friends and colleagues.

Yoonhwan, Seoyul, Jay...

But by the time the tutorial game ended, they had all disappeared like a mirage. The memories he had retained as a reward for clearing the tutorial. Now he was the only one who remembered those thirty years of pain and suffering, of laughter and joy. His teammates, his friends— they would continue to live on, but they were no longer his teammates, his friends. None of them would remember Jae Hwan.

Like that, everything and everyone he knew had left him.

The past, the future, and his own destiny.

Despite that, he was still here, alive and well.

But who was he?

"...I have no memories."

It was perhaps the most honest answer Jae Hwan could give.

An honest answer. A lonely answer.

But of course, Mino interpreted that answer in a completely different way.

"You're taking me for a fool right now, aren't you?"

".....?"

"Did you think that replying with 'I'm suffering from amnesia' in such a serious tone would result in me replying with 'Ah, of course, that makes sense!'?"

"I never said I have amnesia though."

"Didn't you just say you have?!"

Mino was fuming.

'Does he think he's think he's an [Abyss Champion] or something?'

To be fair, it's not like there aren't people here in 《Chaos》 that suffer from amnesia. But it was rare to find someone like this guy who had lost all of his memory. There

would only be one kind of person who had lost their memory to that extent. The champions who came down from 《Abyss》, which was located right above 《Chaos》. Their Status windows were all broken and displayed nothing.

Real name, affiliation, nothing.

But no matter how much she looked at him, he did not look like a strong warrior from 《Abyss》.

Oong oong.

It was at that moment that the sword in Jae Hwan's hand began to cry. She had noticed that it was a special sword the moment she had laid eyes on it, but for it to even cry as well?

Even more surprising things happened next.

"I get it, so stop whining."

As if answering to the sword's cries, Jae Hwan fished something out his bag. The sword's blade split apart like a mouth and began to devour the objects that Jae Hwan gave to the sword. Mino's eyes momentarily shook.

'Soul Weapon!'

A Soul Weapon was a weapon that not only grew by consuming other items, but was also a weapon that few people in the 《Great Lands》 were in possession of.

If his sword was a Soul Weapon, then it would explain Jae Hwan's ridiculous strength. Killing a Two-Horned Beast in one blow.

It would be possible if the Soul Weapon's attack power was at a monstrous level. Indeed, it wasn't the man's own strength that allowed him to kill the Two-Horned Beast in one blow, but the sword's. It was the power of the sword that killed the monster.

Mino quickly took a glance at where Kang Hoon and the Red Fox were resting.

Fortunately, they were talking amongst themselves and had not seen what had happened. Mino laughed at Jae Hwan inside her heart.

'He sure is relaxed.'

It didn't matter what the other party's identity was at this point. The fact that he so unabashedly revealing his Soul Weapon meant that he was naive and not versed in

how to act before an unknown company.

Soul Weapons may be powerful, but there was only so much one could accomplish by relying on a weapon.

Even if he didn't die today, someday his lack of caution and immaturity would result in him being killed.

Of course, it wasn't any of Mino's concern.

She was only here to fulfill the request given to her.

'The problem is that I failed to fulfill the request.'

The Red Fox clan members had started to approach them.

Seeing the delighted looks on their faces, it looked like they were discussing some good things.

Mino suddenly came up with an amazing idea.

An amazing plan to put the cheeky bastard who saw her three sizes against the guys from Red Fox, allowing her to complete her commission.

Seeing Jae Hwan dust off his butt as he got up, Mino swiftly grabbed onto him.

"Omo, a moment please!"

".....?"

"I couldn't tell earlier because of the situation....."

Something soft and squishy pushed itself up against Jae Hwan's arm. He tried to extricate his arm from Mino's grasp, but she refused to let go.

"Jae Hwan-ssi! You're Jae Hwan-ssi, right?"

Jae Hwan looked at Mino with a quizzical look on his face since she started to talk to him in a strange voice.

'Is she a lunatic?'

He had to stop and seriously consider if this woman was still the same woman who had been bragging about her three sizes just moments before.

"Do you remember me Jae Hwan-ssi? It's me, Mino! Han Mino! We were hunting together last time..... you said you would hunt with me again the next time around,

do you remember?"

Hunt?

He tried to recall where he had heard her voice before, but couldn't recall where he had heard her voice before. It had only been a month since he had cleared the tower and had arrived here in this place.

"Sorry, but"

Kook!

But before Jae Hwan could finish what he was saying, Mino nudged her elbow into his side. Mino winked her left eye. Looking at what she was doing, Jae Hwan opened his mouth to try and speak.

"I don't know you."

The atmosphere surrounding Kang Hoon and his party members took a strange turn. Some of them had been laughing. Mino bit her lips until they were white.

'That's right, this was it, wasn't it?'

She looked as though she had failed to do something that she was supposed to do. Regardless, everything until now had been within Mino's predictions.

"Omo, you mean to say that you don't remember who I am?"

"Yes."

"I see, I thought as much."

".....?!"

Jae Hwan furrowed his eyebrows.

Mino opened her mouth with a big smile on her face.

"Jae Hwan-ssi, you don't happen to have amnesia, do you?"

Chapter 13

Witch of Slaughter (4)

"Jae Hwan-ssi, you don't happen to have amnesia, do you?"

Jae Hwan carefully inspected Mino's face.

She had a beautiful face.

A beautiful woman insisting that he was suffering from amnesia.

"Didn't I say it wasn't amnesia?"

Even still, Mino spoke with a smile on her face.

"That's right. Then can I ask you a question? It's something you should know if you don't have amnesia."

"...is that right."

"Our current location, do you know where this is?"

From the beginning, Jae Hwan couldn't speak.

What could he say? There were a lot of things he had picked up here and there of course. But of the information he had picked up, he wasn't sure what the most accurate answer would be.

As Jae Hwan fell into silence, the party members exchanged strange expressions with each other. Their interests were focused on what was going on. Not willing to make an embarrassing remark, Jae Hwan did not say a word.

Mino's voice suddenly resounded in Jae Hwan's head.

[The answer is 'Chaos'.]

Since he had no other choice, Jae Hwan replied with the answer he was provided.

"...Chaos?"

"Hm, so you already knew?"

Looking at Mino's smiling face, Jae Hwan couldn't help but have a strange feeling. She was a strange woman who went around bragging about her breast size.

[I wasn't sure, but you really didn't know?]

While looking at Jae Hwan, Mino's eyes took on a playful look.

"It's really strange. I could have sworn it was amnesia."

[Seriously, you're very strange. How do you not know this?]

He heard two voices at the same time.

Mino was using the [Whisper] Skill to learn more about Jae Hwan. It allowed her to say something out loud but relay a different message to the recipient. She was using a unique skill to pass on her message.

Having put on a show, Mino laughed on the inside.

"Well, let me ask you another question."

"...sure, I guess."

"Does Jae Hwan-ssi know where 《Chaos》 is located?"

There was no way he would know.

Once again, Mino's voice resounded in Jae Hwan's head when he fell silent.

[The answer is Illusion Tree. Chaos exists within the 'trunk' portion of the 《Illusion Tree》.]

Jae Hwan looked at Mino and answered.

"Chaos exists within the trunk of the Illusion Tree."

When Jae Hwan answered the second question correctly, the Red Fox party members' interest in them rapidly disappeared. It looked like they were thinking something like 'oh what the hell, it was nothing.'

Kang Hoon took up the reins and tried to resolve whatever problem may have risen

up.

“Haha, looks like Mino-ssi seems to have misunderstood something. Isn't that right, Jae Hwan-ssi?”

Jae Hwan silently nodded while Mino spoke out again.

"It seems so. I guess there was a misunderstanding. I'm really sorry Jae Hwan-ssi."

Although those words did come out of her mouth, what Jae Hwan heard in his head was different.

[I don't know who you are or why you don't know such basic and fundamental things. But there are two things that I know for sure. First, I know that you do not want to draw too much attention to yourself. Second, you are very strong.]

Jae Hwan silently listened to what she was saying.

[I think we can strike up a decent deal, what do you think?]

Regardless, he felt as though things felt good.



After some time, Jae Hwan listened to the information that Mino had for him.

One, the members of this party was an unsavory lot.

Two, for personal reasons, Mino had to 'annihilate' this party by any means necessary.

Three, Mino was currently unable to reveal who she was and what she do for personal reasons.

Four, if the party wasn't taken care of by tonight, then the ones to die would be Jae Hwan and Mino.

In the end, the current situation could be summarized by the following thought:

‘She's asking me to kill all of them.’

However, he could not condone or accept such a request.

It wasn't a good idea to judge these people based on the report given to him by someone who was clearly prejudiced against them. For example, the blacksmith Jay from the Nightmare Tower looked like a gangster, but turned out to be a good man.

[It doesn't matter, you'll find out soon. Those punks, it won't be long before they set their sights on you. Well, your belongings that is.]

And like that, the night began to descend.

Since the light was starting to fade, the one to suggest camping outdoors was the leader, Kang Hoon. If they were to go a bit farther, they would soon arrive at a village. But despite that, they insisted that everyone make camp for the night since traveling in the darkness could attract dangerous monsters.

Jae Hwan pretended to go to sleep and used [Doubt] .

It wasn't long before he started to hear a conversation being held in secret.

[Are you for real leader?]

[That's right. I inspected it closely to confirm and that weapon is without a doubt a 'Soul Weapon'.]

[If it's a Soul Weapon...]

[Yes, a weapon that grows stronger by devouring other equipment. A weapon of enormous value that the sovereigns of the Great Lands use.]

[Ha, a weapon that even the sovereigns use!]

[That sword is incredibly strong.

Anyways, you guys understand? This is an enormous opportunity.]

Jae Hwan sighed to himself. In the end, everything was playing out like the woman had said it would.

'No matter how you look at it, the Soul Weapon they are referring to is my sword.'

It was a bit surprising. If what Beastrain had told him was correct, the items from the 《Nightmare Tower》 were considered garbage compared to the items that appeared in the 《Great Lands》 . It was thanks to that information that Jae Hwan hadn't expected his items to garner attention.

'It must be a pretty good sword.'

He did think that his sword's ability to eat whatever he fed it was fairly impressive,

but he didn't think that it would be as amazing as the others made it out to be. 'Should I just say I didn't have any other swords I could use?'

"The party members continue to speak."

[But leader. Isn't that guy really strong?]

[Of course he's strong.]

[He was someone who killed a Two-Horned Beast in one blow. How could we win against him?]

[You kids only know one but not two.]

Kang Hoon spoke again as he lightly laughed.

[Didn't you guys see how he killed the Two-Horned Beast?]

[Yes... that, something went syupat, and then.]

[That punk, he killed a Two-Horned Beast with a single thrust]

[What?]

The man responded with a confused voice.

[How was that possible?]

[It's impossible of course. And let me assure you, even if you were to flip over all of 《Chaos》, those who could kill a Two-Horned Beast in one blow with a simple stab can be counted on one hand.]

[Th-then doesn't that mean he's far more powerful than we thought?!]

[Wow you are actually really dense... hey stop sitting on your ass and turn on the spirit power measure device and see what his spirit power is at.]

[Yes sir!]

A few moments later.

[H-huh? Leader. It says that this guy's spirit power is the same as a Non-Adapter. It's even lower than mine!]

[Right? See I told you, I knew it was going to be like this.]

Kang Hoon snickered to himself.

[Then just how did that guy kill a Two-Horned Beast?]

[Have you already forgotten about what we were talking about a few moments ago?]

[Uh... you don't mean?!]

[It's exactly what I mean.]

[S-soul Weapons are that powerful?!]

[From what I know, most, if not all, Soul Weapons come from the 《Abyss》 . Even you should know some things about the Abyss, right?]

[You mean the 'branches' of the Illusion Tree, right? That 《Abyss》 ?]

[That's right. I'm talking about that Abyss.]

[Then if it's something from the 'branches'...]

The branches. Having heard the conversation, Jae Hwan laughed.

‘How surprised would they be if they found out that I brought this from the root.’

It was at this point that Jae Hwan had unintentionally obtained most of the information that he was looking for. In the process of getting swept up in this whole debacle, Jae Hwan figured out the structure of the Illusion Tree and the location where he was at.

The root's 《Nightmare Tower》 .

The trunk's 《Chaos》 .

The branches' 《Abyss》 .

The Illusion Tree was separated into three major categories.

‘The Nightmare Tower that I was in was but one of the myriad roots of the 《Illusion Tree》 .’

He had travelled through the 'root' and into the 'trunk'.

Like that, he arrived in the 'trunk' known as 《Chaos》 .

The party members continue to talk in hushed voices.

[But leader, just how did that guy get his hands on a Soul Weapon? If by chance he came down from Abyss...]

[But then why would he do that? Do you think that Abyss is your backyard or something?]

[If not that, then could he be a native born Adapter from a Grand Family? It's possible since he has a Soul Weapon.]

[Those who come here from a Grand Family are required to first report that they're coming. From what I know, the most recent message is from the Nokmyeong guys, but does this guy look like he'd be from Nokmyeong?]

[That's true. I heard that the Nokmyeong guys have antennae on their heads.]

Kang Hoon nodded his head.

[Plus, there's a pretty conclusive evidence that he's not from a big family.]

[What is that?]

[It's smell.]

[What do you mean by smell?]

[Don't you think he has a strange scent around him.]

[Perhaps, this...?]

Kang Hoon laughed while tapping his nose.

[That's right. Dream scent.]

[The dream scent usually comes from the 'root' or the 'branches'... Then that means that this guy must be from one of the two places. So he is either an [Abyss Champion] or a beginner]

Jae Hwan gulped.

He didn't know that there was such a scent.

[There's no way that he's a powerhouse from Abyss. Does it make sense for someone from Abyss to be a Non-Adapter.]

[Then if so, doesn't that make him a beginner?]

Nobody replied back, but the atmosphere said that everyone already knew the answer. Following their desires, the men began to move.

[...what about the woman?]

[Just do as you see fit. This is more important.]

[Hm, then we'll take care of the woman.]

The men finally began to move.

'This is how things were to go after all.'

What Mino said was right.

These guys were the bad guys.

He had expected it, but he hadn't thought that they would so easily act according to the bad guy archetype. It was because he didn't expect it that he was taken aback.

It's just how things worked out in life.

But maybe it was because they didn't do it all the time.

At that time, something rolled up against him.

"Uhmonah!"

Boing, it felt like a woman's chest had bumped into his right elbow. It was without a doubt the size 65D chest.

"Oh dear, I didn't know that you were sleeping here Jae Hwan-ssi. At least change your expression."

[What do we do! Those guys are starting to make their move!]

"Omo! Jae Hwan-ssi! Those guys are taking out their swords!"

[Hurry, do what we went over!]

"Ggayak! Save me! Jae Hwan-ssi!"

[Wow so cheap, are you gonna keep the promise you made?]

Their original plan was to turn on these guys and fight them. On Jae Hwan's end of the bargain, the conditions he had to fulfill were as follows.

'Wait, Red Fox! 'Huhu, I am an [Abyss Champion] here to punish you.'

But there was no reason for him to say something so stupid. He didn't know what an [Abyss Champion] was, but for her to want to use that title and make him do her dirty work was a bit shameless.

[Ah, what are you doing! Those guys are running at us with swords!]

Mino urgently cried.

Jae Hwan just shrugged his shoulders.

Strictly speaking, Jae Hwan didn't actually agree to her terms. Everything was just a one-way agreement that Mino made.

A sword flew into the sky.

"Kill them!"

Flustered, Mino looked at Jae Hwan and rolled her eyes. The party members stabbed their swords into the ground where they were standing.

Mino shouted.

"What are you doing! Take out your weapon! That black sword, take it out! Use that to get rid of them!"

"I don't have it."

"What?!"

"I said I don't have it."

Jae Hwan silently pointed towards Kang Hoon. Mino's eyes widened like saucer plates. The Soul Weapon that should have been in Jae Hwan's possession was in Kang Hoon's hands.

No, why is it over there?

"I let him borrow it earlier."

"WHAT? WHY THE FUCK?!"

"He said he wanted it while he was on watch."

"You let him borrow your Soul Weapon for that reason?!"

Naturally, he wouldn't have lent his weapon for that kind of reason. In fact, it was for a different reason that Jae Hwan lent out his sword.

'Now I can observe this girl's true abilities.'

Looking at the other party's rushing swords, Jae Hwan simply laughed.

Chapter 14

Witch of Slaughter (5)

Kang Hoon was laughing with a leery smile on his face.
The men surrounded Mino, menacingly holding onto their swords.

“Stay calm. I'll make you feel good really soon.”

Mino closed her eyes and lowered her head.
At first glance, it seemed like a human who had given up on everything. However, the assassins of the Black Forest Sect would have known better. Whenever she looked like that, what happened to her enemies in the next few moments...
Mino's hands moved at the same time when the three men began to run towards her. They were disposed of before anyone could noticed anything.
The three men trembled like they had been struck by lightning before collapsing onto the ground. Each of the men had a dagger sticking out of their chests.
Kang Hoon's expression stiffened.

"Sorry. I guess I threw them too hard. I think my temper flared up a little bit."

Mino laughed in a playful way before she spoke in a blanched tone.

“The monster hunting failed... my teammate doesn't listen... the Soul Weapon is in the hands of a tough guy... is there anything that'll go according to plan... nothing?”

Though it was a playful voice, Kang Hoon felt his heart skip a beat.

“That sword, won't you return it back to its owner?”

“...If I don't want to?”

"I'm not too sure, but if such a sword were in the hands of a guy with such an overwhelming amount of negative intentions, who knows what I might do."

“I'm far more deserving of this sword than that guy.”

“Is that so? Then I guess I have no choice.”

Mino threw off her black robe, revealing the uniform of the Black Forest Sect. On the collar of her outfit flashed an insignia with seven daggers.

“From this moment, you are going to suffer from an unfortunate series of events.”

Kang Hoon looked at her for a moment before speaking in a despondent voice.

“That's right. You were the ‘Witch of Slaughter.’”

“Whaaaaat, you already knew?”

“...how could I not know. From the beginning, you were able to 'entice' monsters so easily, it would be weird not to know.”

Kang Hoon sounded like he was grinding his teeth.

Mino muttered while grasping onto her forehead.

“Haaa, damn it. Leader is going to give me another earful...”

A bloody aura burst out from Mino's body shortly afterwards. A considerable amount of spirit pressure that many Adapters would never be able to reach exploded out from the the 'Non-Adapter' Mino's body. Kang Hoon's face paled.

“So it's true, I had heard that the assassins of the Black Forest Sect were able to control their spirit power at will.”

“You seem to be knowledgeable on that topic.”

“...just who submitted this commission to the Black Forest Sect?”

“What does it matter who sent the commission? The amount of Non-Adapters who want to kill you guys is absolutely overflowing in the entirety of 《Chaos》.”

“Who, why would the Black Forest Sect move for those guys...”

Kang Hoon's muttering trailed off as he realized something.

“Perhaps, was this a personal request?”

“Hmmm.”

“If that's true, then you, the Witch of Slaughter, will never be able to deal with 'us'.”

“What?”

Mino felt that something about the atmosphere had changed. The air in the surrounding grass had seemed to be off since awhile ago.

In other words, there were a considerable amount of strange spirit powers lingering about in the area.

But there was a town not too far away, and the presences were scattered about, so she paid them no heed. It was highly likely that they were other Adapters returning after a hunt.

But the scattered Adapters eventually gathered into one group.

Mino's complexion changed for the first time.

The possibility of Kang Hoon assembling more people and asking for help when he was on the guard duty passed through her mind. Kang Hoon snickered.

“The Black Forest Sect's Witch and a human who could kill a Two-Horned Beast in one strike, did you really think that I wouldn't call for help?”

“...”

“But if I knew how easy it would be to get my hands on this Soul Weapon, I wouldn't have called so many people.”

A night where the darkness had descended. Black silhouettes appeared one at a time against the green forest. They numbered more than a dozen people. Strong humans who had reached at least 1st Stage Adaptation. There were also a handful of Stage 2 Adapters.

Amongst the shadows that had appeared, there was even someone who not even Mino was confident in facing one on one. It was a man wearing a fox fur cloak and a hood covering his eyes.

“So even you, Black Fox, had come?”

“Witch of Slaughter.”

“You seem to have quite a bit of free time on your hands nowadays.”

“Think of it as an honor, half of the Red Fox are here to hunt you.”

Black Fox Klent.

There weren't many people who didn't know this name. He was a 3rd Stage Adapter possessing great power and was also the clan master of the Red Fox.

“...what a damn great honor.”

That being said, the situation for her was very bad.

It was the start of a bloody confrontation.

The moment one party moved, the battle would start. Mino counted the number of enemies, and without taking a single look at her back, she asked a question.

“Hey you, amnesiac, no, Abyss Champion-nim. You there?”

A voice replied from behind her.

“I'm here.”

“Sorry for calling you that in this circumstances.”

“...”

“I wanted to paint a picture where 'a strong abyss warrior beat the crap out of the Red Fox gang'.”

“I know.”

“...seriously?”

In response to Mino's surprised voice, Jae Hwan spoke his lines in a monotone, robotic voice.

“I've been waiting for you, Red Fox! Huhu, I am an [Abyss Champion] here to punish

you.”

“...what the heck, you didn't say your lines even though you had them memorized this whole time?”

“Maybe if you wrote better lines, I might have been motivated to recite them.”

Mino laughed with a large grin on her face.

“So that's why you were so unwilling to cooperate. I guess it's my fault for coming up with those lines without consulting you.”

Although Mino was smiling and laughing, the tone of her voice had not loosened up at all.

“Well then, I sincerely apologize.”

They were words that held many meanings.

Jae Hwan looked up and down at Mino's back.

Jae Hwan knew as well. She didn't have a large amount of malice directed towards him, nor he towards her. But things didn't just end there with her apology.

Mino bit her lips before speaking up again.

“It might be too late, but escape now while you can.”

“Why?”

“I won't be able to protect you.”

It was the last bit of Mino's conscience.

But Mino knew.

It would be impossible for the man known as Jae Hwan to escape.

With the level of footwork he possessed, he would never be able to escape this many pursuers. No matter how far he got, he would still end up dead.

So Mino tossed something behind her.

“What is this?”

“Stone of Return. You'll be able to escape to the nearby fort if you use it. There's only

one, so you might as well use it."

"What about you?"

Mino did not answer.

Jae Hwan looked down at the item known as the 'Stone of Return'. It looked somewhat familiar. The overall appearance of it resembled the stone that he abhorred the most. But this stone wasn't something that would send you to the past.

This stone was something that could save someone's 'present'.

This was a stone for those who wanted to survive today and carry onwards once more tomorrow.

'Yoonhwan.'

Jae Hwan recalled the name of his best friend and teammate.

The name of a friend he had failed to save on the Nightmare Tower's 98th Floor.

Yoonhwan had tightly grasped onto a stone then as well.

Yoonhwan had pretended that it was the [Stone of Regression], but Jae Hwan knew the truth. That stone was a stone that takes you nowhere.

But what if he could have shoved this stone within Yoonhwan's tight grasp at that time?

Before he knew it, Jae Hwan was tightly grasping the stone as though that stone was the answer to everything. Almost like it was alive, the stone's texture entwined Jae Hwan's fingers. Jae Hwan opened his mouth to speak.

"Excuse me, but I have something I want to ask."

"...What is it?"

Without any hesitation, he asked Mino a strange question.

"If you had the opportunity to go back in time and return to the past, would you?"

Mino made dumbfounded expression.

"...did you really have to ask that question given the circumstances?"

He wanted to know what kind of person she was.

Despite what she said, she answered his question without a shred of hesitation.

She didn't concern herself with such questions.

"Of course, there's no way I would go."

"Why?"

"I've lived very diligently until now."

She didn't explain any more than that, but Jae Hwan could feel the life that she had led within those short words.

"If I die, then I'll die today. I refuse to go back to the past."

Who knows why.

But when she heard her talk about whether or not she would die today, his heart beat with an unknown passion. Did she know? Did she know that the simple answer she gave would forever change the course of her destiny?

"That's enough, if that's her answer, then it's enough."

Jae Hwan touched her shoulder and walked forward.

Mino looked at Jae Hwan's back with a blank look on her face.

Although she was trembling, she realized the immense power in Jae Hwan's steps. She had never felt such an immense feeling of danger before in her entire life.

"You will not die today."

Chapter 15

Witch of Slaughter (6)

"Wait, you don't even have a sword!"

"I have another one."

Jae Hwan retrieved another sword from his dimensional bag. It was the Suppression Dragon Sword that he won from the 88th floor of the Nightmare Tower.

Mino exclaimed.

"With just that kind of sword...!?"

The battle began before she could even finish what she was saying. The Adapters who were hiding in the bushes rushed out towards Jae Hwan.

They were all Adapters who had gone through their own ordeals in order to reach where they were today. And they all possessed a skill that was difficult to deal with.

Mino recognized the skill at first glance.

'Fire Monarch's Fourteen Currents!'

The Fire Monarch's Fourteen Currents was a skill commonly used by those of the [Fire Monarch's Sect] of the ten sects that reside in 《Chaos》. If trained to the limit, the user would be able to sweep the battlefield with a blazing sword of fire. Mino's complexion darkened.

'That means the Fire Monarch's Sect is selling their skills to lower clans.'

The forest became engulfed in flames. The flame of the Fire Monarch that devours all things in its path. The crazy foxes jumped around amidst the sea of flames. Jae Hwan silently prepared himself as he faced the flames.

Mino knew what Jae Hwan was going to do.
That was why she tried to stop him.

There's no way he could contend against the Fire Monarch's Fourteen Currents with a simple thrust.

But looking at what happened next, Mino couldn't believe her eyes.

No, she couldn't help but doubt all of her senses.
The rules of time were being broken right before her eyes.

[Selflessness]

Though brief, she was able to see an incredible scene by standing next to Jae Hwan. All of the blades approaching Jae Hwan seemed to slow down. Jae Hwan seemed to weave between the sea of blades like a fish in the water.

'... I wonder if I'm dreaming.'

It looked like Jae Hwan would get ripped apart should even the slightest strike touch him, but not a single strike so much as grazed him. It was like Jae Hwan simply wasn't there.

[Doubt]

There was a path through the sea of blades that only Jae Hwan could see. A path through the myriad blades that only those who doubted the world could see. It wasn't too long before Jae Hwan's sword began to move.

He Thrusted.

It was neither slow nor fast.
Like a flow of music that dances in its own precise and accurate way, Jae Hwan launched his attack. A flash like lightning lit up the darkness of the night.

Five or six Red Fox clan members ran away with scattered screams.

"Bastard! Kill him!"

The flustered Red Fox members paired up in order to increase their defenses. The Fire Monarch's Fourteen Currents attacked Jae Hwan from the north, east, south, and west.

The Fire Monarch's Fourteen Currents took on the shape of a fiery cross and surrounded Jae Hwan.

The cross encased Jae Hwan in a fiery prison.

Anyone other than Jae Hwan would only be able to sit still and suffer from the flames. He could see the triumphant faces of the Red Fox members.

But after a moment, the outline of Jae Hwan's body through the wavering flames appeared.

"...How?"

Jae Hwan stood there like the flames did not affect him. That wasn't all.

[Comprehension]

The flames of the Fire Monarch's Fourteen Currents lost its power and gathered at the tip of his sword. They obeyed Jae Hwan's will like they had originated from his sword. His sword was like an untamed python ready to leap.

Something big was about to happen.

Feeling a sense of foreboding, the clan master of the Red Fox clan, Black Fox Klent, shouted.

"Everyone run!"

The beginnings of a thrust began to unfold itself from Jae Hwan's sword.

No, such a thing couldn't be called a thrust.

The oxygen in the air condensed and momentarily came to a standstill.

In that briefest of silence, every Adapter, even Black Fox Klent, had trouble breathing and their lungs felt like they were collapsing. The 3rd Stage Adapter Klent had felt this suffocating feeling several times in his life.

It was when he stood before the strongest of the ten sect leaders of Chaos.

The condensed oxygen exploded and a sea of flames burst forth from his sword. The flame did not distinguish between plants nor men, and all were swept up in its fiery rage.

Equipments and broken pieces of wood were scattered by the wind. Screams of pain were buried under the deafening sounds of the tempest.

Only charred ruins were left in the fire's wake. The charred embers of what used to be a large tree collapsed onto the forest lawn with a loud thud. And Mino watched everything from beginning to end.

She finally realized.

The reason why the man known as Jae Hwan easily conceded the body of a Two-Horned Beast wasn't because he was an idiot.

He didn't take out his Soul Weapon and so brazenly feed it items because he was naive and complacent.

The reason why he didn't run despite the overwhelming number of enemy Adapters wasn't because he was insensitive to the danger around him.

All of it was because he was overwhelmingly strong.

Having barely escaped by climbing atop a tree, Black Fox Klent muttered under his breath with an expression like his soul had left his body.

“...where the hell did this guy come from?”

He had arrived due to a suspicious report about the discovery of a ‘Soul Weapon’ during the [Witch Hunt] . If it were true, then it would be a great windfall.

But when he arrived, he was faced with a monster.

Not only did he block the Fire Monarch's Fourteen Currents, but he made the skill his own and turned the momentum of the the flames against Klent. With just that one move, more than half of the combatants were crippled.

He had never thought that an Adapter could ever neutralize and then utilize the

intermediate level skill of a 3rd Stage Adapter with their own physical abilities.

But after the skill was dismantled, he had never seen the skill used in that way before. He didn't dare assume what level it was at.

Sensing Klent's gaze on him, Kang Hoon stuttered.

"Th-this is impossible!"

"Everyone fall back."

Kang Hoon grit his teeth.

"I have the Soul Weapon. If you use this weapon that could strike down a Two-Horned Beast in one blow, then you can beat him."

Klent took a look at the weapon that Kang Hoon had claimed to be a 'Soul Weapon.'

"Absurd. The difference in skill is too large."

"That's not true!"

Not willing to admit that they had lost, Kang Hoon rushed towards Jae Hwan. He saw the outline of Jae Hwan's body through the flames.

Kang Hoon immediately activated one of his skills.

Tightly grasped in his hand was the sword that had killed a Two-Horned Beast in one strike.

If it's with this, then surely—.

But despite putting all of his power into his strikes, all of his swings missed. It was the attacks of a desperate man. Sounds of a sword vainly slashing through the air rang out one after the other. An overwhelming difference in power.

The power behind the swings gradually whittled away. The blade of the sword that had been enveloped in Kang Hoon's skill was tightly gripped between Jae Hwan's fingers.

Why?

The moments that had led up to this point flashed through Kang Hoon's head like a spear.

After graduating from the tower, he wandered through the 《Great Lands》 before crossing over a dangerous obstacle and finally arriving here in 《Chaos》. Through blood, sweat and tears, he gained and improved his skills and finally increased the values of his Status. He joined Red Fox and started to hunt Adapters. He had endured the pointed fingers and cursing jeers of other Adapters, but despite that, he had climbed to his current position.

It was a hard fought life.

It was because of that that he refused to admit that they had lost.

Kang Hoon remembered the value of Jae Hwan's spirit power displayed on the measuring device.

[Target Spirit Power Value : 154]

Considering that the Spirit Power of a Stage 1 Adapter was 1000, it was a terribly low figure.

The enemy in front of his eyes was, without a doubt, a Non-Adapter.

"Just how could he... with that Value..."

Kang Hoon looked at Jae Hwan with a blank gaze while muttering his thoughts

Value.

It was a term he hadn't heard in awhile.

He remembered trying to raise his level in order to raise the Values associated with his various stats.

The hellish days spent in the tower.

The days where he did everything he could to improve his stats or obtain items so as

to put himself at mere inches above the competition.

Jae Hwan understood what Kang Hoon was thinking.
It was because he understood that he spoke up.

"This is why you are weak."

"...What?"

One step, two steps.

Kang Hoon unintentionally recoiled backwards as Jae Hwan approached. He couldn't understand the abyss of Jae Hwan's eyes. It wasn't something he could understand. It wasn't something that could be quantified by Value or by Description. By the time he came back to his senses, Kang Hoon was already on his knees. Jae Hwan extended his hand and wrested the sword out of Kang Hoon's hands. With the hilt in his hand again, Jae Hwan pointed the blade towards the fleeing Red Fox clan members.

Thrust.

Unlike the previous times, his stance was serious and solemn.
It was as if he were trying to demonstrate what a real thrust was like.

Kang Hoon trembled, his expression like that of a man who knew of the disaster to come.

"...You, just what the hell are you?"

Kang Hoon's eyes were overcome with despair at the same time a brilliant light shot out of Jae Hwan's sword.

It was a small yet intense beam of light, as though it were targeting the world.

Klent looked behind him while running and his heart jumped in surprise.

But it was too late.

"Impossible..."

With a hole in his chest, Klent crumpled onto the floor.

Similar sounds emanated from all throughout the surrounding forest area.

It was the last thing that Kang Hoon ever saw.



It was amidst the darkness of the night. The starlight gently fell through the cracks in the forest canopy.

In the forest was a bonfire, its crackling embers briefly floating into the sky before winking out of existence.

Staring off into the distant sky, Mino couldn't help but recall something that she had experienced many years ago.

'Mino, you are not suited to be an assassin.'

They were the words that the head of the Black Forest Sect had told Mino on the day that she had first failed a mission. To be precise, those were the words that the sect leader had told Mino every time she failed a mission. The sect leader always said. That human weakness would be the end of her.

Mino wanted to deny those words.

It was for that reason that she took on personal requests even though she would be violating regulations.

She accepted requests to eliminate evil-doers. Maybe she could even learn something from the actions of the evil-doers.

Like that, it was half a year. And by annihilating parties of thieves and rapists, she earned the nickname 'Witch of Slaughter'. But on this day, Mino wanted to ask one thing.

'Look leader, did you know? It was because I hadn't acted like an assassin that I had survived.'

Mino looked at Jae Hwan who was leaning on a nearby tree trunk. He was silently feeding his weapon.

The more she looked, the more she couldn't help but think how bizarre this man was.

'Just who could he be?'"

The brilliant battle that the man had starred in would never be wiped from her mind. It was the first time she had seen and felt such might. It was so amazing that she couldn't help but be embarrassed by the fact that she had told him to run away while handing him a Stone of Return.

"Excuse me."

After hesitating for some time, Mino opened her mouth to speak.

"But what exactly is your identity?"

Jae Hwan looked up at Mino for a brief moment before concentrating on his sword again.

"Why are you suddenly using honorific terms?"

"That's not important right now."

Mino impatiently opened her mouth again.

"...I seriously can't help but wonder, can't you tell me?"

"My identity."

While looking at Mino, Jae Hwan thought of something before he broke out into laughter. Then he started talking.

"You already know my identity."

"What?"

"Surely, you haven't forgotten already, have you?"

A disappointed expression. Mino was in a state of confusion. Did he already tell me? Then when did he tell me?

But no matter how hard she tried to think, nothing came to mind.

Seeing Mino become engrossed in her own thoughts, Jae Hwan shook his head and spoke up.

“Well well well, it looks like you're suffering from amnesia.”

“What?”

“That's a relief. I thought I was the only one here with amnesia.”

A few moments later, Mino realized something and her face paled.

“...wo-wow, are you seriously...”

Never did she expect him to throw her own words back at her again like this.

After Mino's heart started beating again somehow, she spoke up in a loud voice.

“You're so petty.”

Jae Hwan didn't bother to pretend like he didn't hear anything.

“...give me back the Stone of Return I gave you earlier.”

“I don't have it.”

“What? Why?”

“I lost it.”

“Do you know how expensive that is?!”

Seeing as how Mino was about to ramble on, Jae Hwan went to go feed more equipment to his sword. A wajajak wajajak sound harmoniously blended with Mino's voice to create a strange ensemble. It was a sound that brought about a strange peace.

What words could express this moment?

It was very strange, but at that moment, Jae Hwan felt like he was being whisked away to a time long ago that he had forgotten.

A cool breeze blew through his head, refreshing his mind. Jae Hwan stuck his Frost Dragon Sword into the ground and looked up into the sky. He could see the black night sky through the broad-leafed trees.

It was a very mysterious thing.

Even the stars and the sky were visible in this place as well.

He was wondering if this night sky that he was looking at was the same night sky that he had been looking at his entire life. It was some sort of lifeline for Jae Hwan that proved that he was a human in this unsubstantial life.

"Are you really that curious as to what my identity is?"

Hearing Jae Hwan's question, Mino suddenly stopped yammering like it was magic.

"I'll tell you once so listen close."

Mino suddenly snapped to attention like a child obsessed and enthusiastically nodded her head.

Jae Hwan opened his mouth.

"I'm a human."

"...are you messing with me right now?"

Although she replied in anger, Jae Hwan asked a question.

"You, are you a human?"

"Of course I'm a human! That's not what I meant..."

Jae Hwan burst into laughter.

"Then that's all."

"What?"

"I said it's fine with that."

"What nonsense..."

Even though she was about to complain, she took a look at the side of Jae Hwan's head and forgot what she was going to say.

The wind blew once more from an unknown direction.

They couldn't tell where it was coming from.

It was a wind blowing from a world that she had never been to.

She had never seen someone who looked so lonely.

Although she thought that he was only spouting nonsense, she was able to read the mood after looking at his face for some time and closed her mouth. In that silence she began to think to herself.

'I see, I suppose that could be it' and

'Seriously, is it really ok with just that'?

The sounds of breathing and the silent cries of the sword could be heard in sync under the carpet of stars.

Under the starlight, Jae Hwan stuck his hand in his pocket. His fingers entwined a small stone.

It was small but had an exquisite texture. A cold but 'real' stone. No matter when or where you used it, it would return you to a location rooted in reality. The stone itself seemed to be urging the user that the only place of return should be here in the real world.

Holding onto the stone, Jae Hwan recalled the days that had already passed. It was of a time when there was no tower or Stone of Regression.

Though sometimes times were tough and sometimes times were good, it was a time when nobody had chosen to return to the past and run away from the present.

It had been a month since he had left the tower.

It was also the first time that Jae Hwan had met a human.

Chapter 16

Silver Imprisonment (1)

[What could someone who has never been to Chaos know about the Great Lands?... Why? Afterall, I've never been there either.]

—Lazy Sovereign Gainak.

It was the next morning, and both Jae Hwan and Mino were walking towards the nearby fort. Along the way, Mino asked Jae Hwan a question with a flustered voice.

“...what did you want to hear?”

“Your story.”

“What kind of story?”

“I was hoping to hear about when you cleared the Nightmare Tower.”

A story about a lonely journey. Considering how long the path before them was, it was only natural that a conversation topic would come up.

It was something that Mino was hoping would happen as well.

The problem was the nature of the topic.

“Isn't it kind of rude to suddenly ask a question like that?”

Asking another Adapter about what had happened to them in the Nightmare Tower was an unspoken taboo. Rather than calling the 《Nightmare Tower》 by its name, ‘Nightmare Tower’, most people referred to it as the root of the Illusion Tree.

Nobody wanted to recall the days when they were nothing but mere [Products]. Even though eight years had passed since Mino had cleared the Nightmare Tower, she

would still often have nightmares about it. A nightmare where she, as a survivor, would climb out of the damnable 'root' of the 《Illusion Tree》 .

“What if you tell me in exchange for me saving your life?”

It was not surprising that things turned out this way. After grinding her teeth, Mino finally spoke up.

“...I guess I have no choice.”

Mino paused like she was carefully choosing her words before speaking up again.

“It’s something you probably wouldn't be interested in, but the name of my home 'world' is Arkal.”

Like that, Mino began to recount her tale.

It had been ten years.

Mino recalled the day when the 《Nightmare Tower》 first appeared in her home world, World 7651.

But now, she couldn't quite remember what the tower looked like. The world that she had used to live in was normal, the world that the tower had come to find was normal.

An item mass produced for the sake of cultivating, the Nightmare Tower.

But the towers being mass produced didn't make that the deaths and suffering of the people who climbed the tower insignificant.

In the end, she had somehow miraculously cleared the 100 floors of both the Tutorial Game and the Main Game. On the 100th floor, Mino and her colleagues met the 'Demon' [Cultivator] in charge of that tower.

Mino would never forget the words that the Demon had said with bored eyes.

—Aah, this is difficult. You're all [Non-Adapters] .

By now, Mino and Jae Hwan had arrived at the thickest part of the forest, an area with lush greens that blocked their view. It was a forest where one could easily lose their way if they weren't careful. Jae Hwan asked a question.

"What happened after?"

Mino bit her lips. She looked unwilling to speak.

"It's a very obvious story. A simple story where a normal girl leaves the root and wanders about in the 《Great Lands》 ."

"Is it hard for you to say more?"

Mino let out a deep sigh.

"...if you really want to know, then I'll talk."

Even to this day, Mino still hadn't forgotten the joy she had felt when she first set foot in the 《Great Lands》 .

The demon had said at that time.

—In the Great Lands, both money and education are worthless. The only thing of value there is a high 'Value'.

To her, it seemed like a promised land that followed a long nightmare. Mino had thought that everything would then resolve itself. All that was left to do was to live an extravagant life with the skills and items she had received from the tower.

She was mistaken.

The Great Lands was not the paradise flowing with milk and honey that the demon had made it out to be. There, Mino had to collect more skills instead of money, and she had to build them up instead of an education. Furthermore, emphasis and value were placed on higher order Adapters, making the native humans from other worlds obsolete.

More quantity, more power, and more Value.

In the end, Mino was a [Non-Adapter] who did not fit any of those requirements. When put on the food chain, Mino had the weakest skills and the lowest amount of spirit power. An expendable on the battlefield, a plaything for higher order Adapters... a life

worse than death. After that, Mino's life remained the same. Mino was constantly on the run.

“The rest isn't something I should talk about. It's a matter between those who've come to 《Chaos》 .”

Mino had a grimace on her face, making it clear that her memories were painful to recall.

“You, you have a really cruel mind. To make someone recall these kinds of memories.”

“I'm sorry, but it was something I really needed to hear.”

Actually, it wasn't even Mino's story that Jae Hwan needed to hear. What Jae Hwan wanted was a general grasp of an Adapter's journey after they cleared the Nightmare Tower. It was a cruel thing for Mino who essentially became the representative of all Adapters...

“...then we're done. Let's say that I've repaid the favor with this. Now that I've gotten it off my chest, it wasn't as difficult as I thought it would be. Perhaps it's because so much time has passed.”

Even though Mino had just finished a difficult story, she had a lighthearted expression on her face. She was like a person who had flipped over the last page of a novel that they had been reading for a very long time.

After she finished recounting her tale, they finally left the grove they were walking through and entered another one. Evergreen forest with thin leaves quickly replaced the thick and broad-leafed trees of the deciduous forest that they had just been in. Then Mino spoke up as though she had been waiting to say something.

“Well then, isn't it your turn?”

“My turn?”

“It's only fair. Since I gave my back story, shouldn't you do so as well?”

From saying that she was paying back a favor, her tone of voice did a quick 180.

"You're still curious as to what my identity is?"

Mino's eyes smiled in response.

"Not at all, I just want to hear your story."

What she was saying was ridiculous. If you looked at it from a certain perspective, it would be a story that made up someone's identity. It was only natural that his story would reveal his identity. This woman was more suited to being called a fox than the actual members of the Red Fox Clan.

"Did you forget? I'm an amnesiac."

"...what amnesia. Are you still sulking about what happened yesterday?"

Jae Hwan silently shook his head. Looking at Jae Hwan, Mino's eyes took on a peculiar gaze. She remembered that this man knew absolutely nothing about 《Chaos》. Thinking about it, it was definitely something strange. There were many people outside of Chaos who knew nothing about it, but how was it that there was someone in Chaos that knew nothing about Chaos?

If it was the Chaos that she knew of, then it was impossible.

"You, your memories from when you entered Chaos, is that why you don't remember anything from when you were in the 《Great Lands》?"

"Well, it's something like that."

Since he had never been to the 《Great Lands》 it wasn't wrong to say that he had no memories of ever being there. But hearing what he said, Mino looked at him with an expression she had never had before. That's sort of—

"If that's true, then I can't help but envy you."

It was the expression of someone who was genuinely envious.

"What?"

"I truly am jealous of you who does not remember."

She spoke with a very dry tone. Jae Hwan questioned her as he did not understand.

"What is so envious about having no memories?"

"Those who reside here would without a doubt be envious of you."

"Why?"

Mino did not answer. The distant spires of the fort walls and the large battlements of the wall slowly came into view through the now sparsely populated evergreen trees. Their destination was slowly drawing closer.

"Gorgon Fortress. It's the largest fort in the surrounding area."

Jae Hwan felt a strange mood while looking at such a magnificent fort. Even in 《Chaos》 there were people who flocked together and formed communities resulting in such a fortress to be built. At first glance, one would think that the world possessed a scant amount of residents.

— It's a matter between those who've come to 《Chaos》

Jae Hwan suddenly felt curious. What were Mino's circumstances that she ended up coming to a place like this? Jae Hwan arbitrarily asked Mino about her 'circumstances', but after a few moments passed, he realized that he had made a mistake.

"...you're wondering 'why' I came to Chaos?"

Her voice was icy cold. Mino's face held an expression that she had never made before.

"You, if you realize what you are asking, you will regret it."

Mino rebuffed Jae Hwan and walked ahead of him with heavy footsteps. They finally exited the forest and approached the giant medieval castle walls of the fort. He had never seen a fort as big as this before in his entire life. If he were to compare Atopos, the city that humanity had built on the 50th floor of the tower, to Gorgon Fortress, it would be like comparing a country village to a city. The varied colors of the bricks that

made up the fortress walls reminded Jae Hwan that this fort's history would most likely be very long.

But at the fort's entrance was a strange existence. There was a large circle drawn at the entrance.

Jae Hwan felt a strange grating sensation somewhere down his spine. He knew of a similar place like this. It was the same structure as the 《Nightmare Tower》's 1st floor summoning area.

"Euuh, I don't want to die!"

"Save me!"

Above that humble circle stood naked people occasionally bending their waists forward. Some were crying while covering their breasts while others were groaning in pain. Their faces were full of despair as though they had received a fatal attack. There were some other people who looked as though they were asleep, but Jae Hwan could tell the truth with one glance. They looked like they all had different expression, but in actuality, all of their expressions held the same meaning. Jae Hwan knew very well when people would make that kind of expression.

The circle started to glow again, and a few moments later, new people had appeared. People whose bodies were soaked with fear and couldn't stop trembling.

Screaming, cursing, loneliness and despair...

Jae Hwan felt goosebumps tingle up his spine.

"What..."

"Do you know now? Do you realize what you had asked me?"

Mino spoke in a voice tinged with deep sorrow and pain.

"...'why' did I come to 《Chaos》, nobody in their right minds would ever ask that question here."

With those words, Mino pulled out a dagger from her bosom and slightly pricked her pinky finger. A drop of blood swelled up at the tip of her finger before falling through

the air. The drop of blood disappeared into the air and scattered into white powder.

In this world, one's soul would scatter away as white particles. It wasn't anything very surprising. He had seen it happen hundreds of times during the Tutorial Game, and the same thing had happened when he had killed the Red Fox Clan here in Chaos. It wasn't something that Jae Hwan was surprised with, but it was something that he hadn't really thought about. Flesh was originally a miserable thing that would shed blood and spill guts.

But he himself had yet to shed any white dust. It was then that Jae Hwan realized the identity of this world.

“Then, the people here have already...”

Mino nodded as Jae Hwan looked over with sad eyes at the people on the summoning circle

"Welcome to the land of the dead. This is the world of 《Chaos》."

Chapter 17

Silver Imprisonment (2)

The so-called 'promised land' known as the 《Great Lands》 .

Any Adapter who has spent time in the Great Lands would know how deceptive that rhetoric is. There were no promises of opportunity in the Great Lands. There was only one thing that the 《Great Lands》 promised.

It was death.

“...so this place was originally a location you could only come to if you died.”

Jae Hwan started to understand why he had entered the 'root' of the Illusion Tree known as Chaos when he broke through the Nightmare Tower instead of entering the 《Great Lands》 .

If he had a body, he might have ended up in the 《Great Lands》 instead.

Jae Hwan had broken through the Nightmare Tower during the Tutorial Game and not from the Main Game, so only his soul must have exited the tower. As a result, there was a high probability that the 《Illusion Tree》 mistook Jae Hwan as a deceased and sent him to Chaos.

A place where the souls of the deceased from the battlefields within the 《Great Lands》 gathered.

《Chaos》 was that sort of place.

Jae Hwan looked at the figures of those who had been stripped of everything but their souls.

Those who left the 'roots' but eventually made their way back to the 'trunk'.

There were a lot of men, but there were also a lot of women.
All of them had dead eyes.

Who knows if they were even aware that they were dead.

“You could say that this is the last chance that the 《Great Lands》 has given us.”

Mino said as she looked at the summoned dead.

“If you die here, then it'll really be the end for you. Those who die here in the trunk will have their souls disperse and become nutrients for the Illusion Tree. There are no chances after that.”

Jae Hwan was reminded of the Red Fox Clan that had dispersed into white particles. They must have already become a part of this huge tree by now.

“Then do the people here still have a 'chance'.”

“You could say that.”

“Is there a way to recover one's body?”

“The chances are very slim, but if you're able to survive here...”

No matter what, those words sounded cruel. Even after they had died, they still had to 'survive'. It was an awful world. Mino's eyes became muddled as she stared at the people.

‘That's why I said your words make others envious.’

Mino must have arrived at Chaos by dying as well. She remembered the death she wanted to forget. Jae Hwan's question 'How did you come to Chaos' was no different from saying 'How did you die?'

The light from the summoning circle began to fade away.

A large number of guards from the fort's gate started to gather.

"Man, there's a ridiculous amount summoned this time as well. Alright, let's get to work!"

A bearded man gave a shout, prompting the other soldiers to lift up the deceased in an orderly manner.

"Oy, pay attention! It's because all of you are nothing but skin and bones that you got killed."

The dead allowed themselves to be shepherded by the guards across the drawbridge to a checkpoint. Processing the arrivals of the newly dead were some of the guards' responsibilities.

"There there, put this on and go stand in line over there."

When the dozens of dead were roughly gathered, they were lined up in front of the checkpoints. In front of the checkpoint was the bearded man standing by a podium.

The bearded man observed the group of people before opening his mouth to speak.

"Some of you should already know where you are right now. And although you may not accept it, that's too bad. Because regardless of what you want to believe, you are already 'dead'."

To those who had died once already, those words were like another death.

"On top of that, many of you probably died in your first battle since coming to the 《Great Lands》. Your guts have spilled and your head have been crushed. You have died worthless deaths like a bug."

Hearing his words, everyone's complexion changed. It was because the man's words were right. In fact, the majority of the people here had died almost as soon as they had entered the 《Great Lands》.

"Of the lot of you, is there anyone here who knew how they died?"

Nobody answered.

Even the bearded man stayed silent. Instead, the bearded man pulled out a cigarette and lighted it.

The smoke from his cigarette dispersed into the air.

It was time for everyone to think about how they had died.

In the end, everyone reached the same answer.

The women, wearing nothing but rags, were shivering in the cold. It wasn't long before the cigarette went out. The bearded man flicked the butt of the cigarette out of his hand and stomped it out. Right then, one of the deceased couldn't help but open his mouth after seeing what the bearded man did and speak in a trembling voice.

"That... it is because I'm weak?"

It was a voice that grew weaker and weaker the longer he talked. The bearded man began to laugh.

"Correct. But if I were to be more precise..."

His gaze rested on the people that had gathered before him.

"The reason why you died like bugs is because you didn't try hard enough."

Hearing that, the murmuring in the crowd began to grow.

Their eyes expressed their discontent at his words.

They couldn't accept it. Of those present, who here had not put in effort? Those who had not worked hard would not have been able to clear the Nightmare Tower. Some of them even stared at the bearded man with hostile eyes.

"Your eyes tell me that you don't agree. But put your hands to your chest and think. Have any of you ever trained so hard that you thought you would die? And I mean literally 'to death'."

It was the first time any of them had felt such pressure behind the words 'to death.'

“But now that you've died, you'll learn. If it's you who have spilled your guts by an enemy's blade, had your head cut off by them, was trampled underfoot, or had shamefully endured the slurs and insults of your enemies before death, then you will know. You will know what I mean when I say 'to death'.”

Moaning and weeping. Vivid memories of death. The deceased clenched their fists and tucked their heads, their shoulders were trembling. No one was able to look at the bearded man in the eye. It was because he was right.

It was something that they had realized only after they had already died.

None of them had ever once trained 'to death' before.

“You guys are in luck. All of you have another shot at 'effort' here in this place. But y'all are still just souls, for now.”

Chance. Some people began to lift their heads at this point.

“There is only one thing that you need to know here. If you die this time, then you will 'really' die.”

Die for real.

For those here that had already died once before, the word 'death' was terrifying.

“Therefore, there is only one thing all of you must do here. Survive. You must use any means necessary to survive until you are the last survivor.”

Last survivor.

“Live, live so that you may train and train. Grind the blade of your swords and raise your strength. And until the day an opportunity comes, you must wait and wait.”

Grow stronger and bide one's time.

“Then one day, a miracle might happen. I guarantee it. Those who work hard will find a way to leave the Illusion Tree. Therefore, train harder. For the sake of taking revenge

on those that killed you. Grow stronger so that you can rip them apart, step on them, and surpass them. That's all I can tell you."

The naked deceased listened to the man with vacant eyes.
Maybe their emotions were riled up, but some of them began to shake.

The man ended his speech. The surrounding soldiers listlessly clapped their hands. The guards on the left and right of the deceased led the waiting people towards the checkpoint.

"Men on this side, women on the other. Follow directions."

The guards approached the bearded man who had stepped down from his podium.

"Wonderful speech sir."

"As expected of Assistant Head-nim!"

The bearded man that had been called Assistant Head was drinking the water he had received from a guard before he muttered something under his breath.

"...what great speech."

The bearded man had a tired expression on his face.
It was a speech he had repeated more than a hundred times since he had been appointed to the northern checkpoint here.

To survive no matter what.

That their effort and their drive were lacking.
To grow stronger and take revenge.
They were definitely wise and guiding words. They were good words.

But the bearded man knew.
Those good words were a lie.

None of those gathered here will ever leave the 《Illusion Tree》 .

Most of them would die during their 'first hunt', similar to how they died in the 《Great Lands》 and the lucky survivors would spend the rest of their lives as a resident here.

They would become like him.

At that time, someone spoke up.

"James, who knew you could flap your lips so well? It was like you were trying to pick up a girl or something."

The bearded man, James, squinted his eyes. A man and a woman appeared at the checkpoint. The woman in particular was remarkable. She was a woman donning a black robe and a head full of scarlet hair. One would never be able to forget a beauty of her level...

"Did you already forget about me? 'Bromidic' James."

Something flashed through James' mind. The woman's appearance momentarily changed.

Her eyes shined like stars amidst her black hair. Her white cheeks looked like they had stolen the light from the break of dawn.

Joy spread across James' face.

"...look at who it is. Isn't this the [Black Forest Sect's] Mino?"

Hearing that, Mino changed her appearance again.

"Don't speak too loud. Dying?"

Jae Hwan alternated looks between Mino and the guard called James.

It seemed like the two were acquaintances.

"I heard that you've been promoted to Assistant Head?"

"So that's why you gave such a speech."

James' broke his long time streak of having a solemn expression and had a playful look in his eyes.

His eyes swept across Mino's body.

They had arrived at the start of the checkpoint.

Mino's expression hardened.

“Hmph. It was a good speech. I had wanted to enter as soon as possible, but I had to wait through the entirety of your 'noble speech' in order to enter the fort.”

James laughed while replying back.

“Somehow you've arrived back at the Northern Checkpoint. Don't you usually go to a different side?”

“No matter how you look at it, the road I took led me here.”

Mino's reply was short, as though she weren't willing to speak for too long.

“There's no need to prove my identity, right It's not like you don't know my face.”

Proof. Hearing that word, Jae Hwan looked at the side of Mino's face. Sensing his gaze, Mino sighed and laughed.

Tsk. There was a patient with amnesia here.

[Perhaps, do you not know what 'Proof' is?]

Jae Hwan nodded his head.

Jae Hwan heard Mino's Whisper again.

[All personnel entering and leaving the fort must be verified. Most people just open up their status info through the 《Interface System》 ... you should know how to do at least that much, right?]

He definitely did not know. He had never done so before.
Actually, there was a much bigger problem than that.

To begin with, Jae Hwan could not even use the 《Interface System》 .

Jae Hwan had reached the state of [Selflessness] by escaping the 《Nightmare Tower》 , but ever since then, he had become unable to utilize any of the functions of the 《Interface System》 , including things like the Inventory and Status windows. It was then that Assistant Head James opened his mouth.

"Mino."

"Hm?"

"I'm sorry, but the circumstances have changed."

"...Circumstances? What kind of nonsense is that?"

"Some of the rules have changed since a little while ago, those entering the fortress must have a 'certificate'."

"Certificate?"

A certificate? Mino gazed into the air.

"Do you mean that antiquated certificate that was used many years ago? The ones that [Big Brother] made and distributed?"

"That's right."

"Why? Didn't the usage of the certificate become obsolete ever since the Interface System was made available in the 《Illusion Tree》 ?"

"Some sort of strange interference is happening that the Interface System isn't operating properly."

Mino recalled the moment when her Skill 'Precise Appraisal' failed. She had thought that it was a simple skill failure, but it might just end up being related.

“Anyways, there have been many reports of people not being able to properly bring up the Info page using the Interface System.

So, at least for the time being, everyone going in and out of 《Chaos》 must prove their identity using a 'certificate'.”

“Now of all times...”

Things had become unnecessarily complicated. Mino sighed inwards and looked over at Jae Hwan.

[So do you have a Certificate?]

Jae Hwan had no answer.

[...you don't have one?]

Mino suddenly thought up a plan.

She had noticed that there were a lot of things wrong with this man. To make someone recall painful memories then not reciprocate...

.

Mino had a playful expression on her face.

"James."

"Hmm?"

“Sorry, but I've left my certificate at home. Wouldn't this work in its place? It's not like we've only known each other for a day or two, don't you think a certificate is too much?”

Mino laughed while handing James some money. It was an envelope containing white powder. James turned his eyes to carefully inspect the packet.

“This is some good medicine. How many horns did the beast have”

“Two.”

"It looks like your earnings have been pretty great these days Mino."

James slipped the packet into his pockets while laughing with a satisfied expression on his face.

He turned towards Jae Hwan and asked a question.

"Is he a part of your party?"

"Who knows."

Mino laughingly spoke up again as she step foot on the drawbridge.

"Hmm, you better say something. Didn't you say you had amnesia?"

Jae Hwan looked at James with no apparent changes to his expression while James looked at Jae Hwan with a firm expression on his face.

"Now then, shouldn't you ought to present a certificate?"

"Apologies, but I don't have such a thing."

"Huh, then you can't enter. You can't enter no matter what if you don't have a certificate!"

"It's no good if I don't have one?"

The other guards had an expectant expression on their faces.

"Absolutely not."

"Is it because you won't be able to confirm my identity?"

"That's right."

"If I'm able to prove myself, what else would I need?"

"Huhut, what's with this guy?"

It had been awhile since he had bothered to put a bit of a threat behind his words, and hearing his tone, the other guards began to loosen their shoulders like they were getting ready for a fight. Already having reached the other side of the drawbridge, Mino had a strange smile on her face.

[It's still not too late, why don't you ask me for help? A single 'help me', and one word from me will resolve this situation.]

No matter how strong he was, he was only one person who had to keep to the rules of «Chaos» .

There was a taboo in this world that could not be broken.

While looking at Jae Hwan with an expressionless face, she thought to herself.

'I think I frightened him too much, should I go save him?'

Even if she didn't have a certificate or anything of the sort, she still would've been able to make it in by coaxing one or two guards.

But then something unexpected happened.

Jae Hwan's poise took a strange turn as he calmly watched the guards. His left foot stepped back ever so slightly, and the height of his shoulder changed. It was a change that only someone like Mino whose nerves were high strung could notice. If he were to lay hands on the hilt of his sword...

'Maybe?'

Mino quickly used Whisper.

[Wait, stop! Wouldn't it be better not to resort to such actions?]

Her voice was urgent.

[I know that you're very strong, but if you end up killing the guards, 'Bromidic James' included, then you'll become a wanted man.]

His expression clearly showed that he did not care. Mino bit down on her lips.

[No matter how strong you are, it's impossible to fight against the whole fortress! Do you know what that means?]

Jae Hwan's stance remained unchanged. The ignorant guards hadn't realized anything yet, but the intensity of Jae Hwan's subtle movements did not escape Mino's eyes. All of a sudden, Mino recalled the demonic scene where Jae Hwan slew the Red Fox clan without batting an eye and then walked away as though nothing had happened.

She recalled the thrust that had wantonly set alight an entire forest and reducing it to nothing but burnt embers.

Mino had realized that she had made a huge mistake.

Not only was this man incredibly strong, but he was also unfettered by the laws of the world. Nobody had told her anything, but Mino could feel it with her entire body.

The fact that there was no need for him to even pull out the sword.

If necessary, he was willing to cut down not only just the guards here, but the entirety of the fort as well. The question of whether or not he could do it wasn't very important to him.

He had always lived his life like this and he would continue to live this way until the day he died.

Mino's complexion paled.

Chapter 18

Silver Imprisonment (3)

Suddenly slaughtering dozens of guards? It was something that a higher order Adapter in 《Chaos》 could do.

The issue lay in what happened afterwards.

The first problem was with opposing a 'fort' on one's own.

Opposing a fort held a completely different meaning from opposing a single person or a clan. Forts here in Chaos served an intermediary role between the 《Interface System》 and the Adapters of the Illusion Tree by gathering and organizing the information of the various Adapters.

One fort was like its own world.

None of the 'High Order Adapters', the leaders of the ten sects included, antagonized any of the forts. There was nothing to gain for doing so.

But at this moment, Mino had begun to think that Jae Hwan didn't care about any of that.

"H-hey hey hey hey hey hey, James, wait a minute! He's actually my party member, alright?"

"...didn't you say he wasn't just a few moments ago?"

"It was just a one time joke."

Mino said with a wry smile on her face.

"A joke?"

"Yeah, look at my face and let it go."

James had a disgruntled look on his face.

He looked at the man with a tired expression on his face. He looked like a young man who had come to Chaos as a joke, but he was a stubborn man who he couldn't take lightly.

"If I say no?"

'No my ass. You say no and you're all dead.'

But she could only endure and couldn't say that out loud. Even more so in front of a power hungry man like James. If she were to speak the truth like that, the situation would only get worse. What she had intended to be a light joke ended up being blown way out of proportion by the young man who lived diligently according to his own code.

"Just let it go this one time and I'll buy you a drink later. How about it?"

"Still no."

Mino bit her lips.

"Why are you like this today? If you need a bribe I'll give you more. Do you want more horns?"

Seeing Mino's excessively polite actions, James squinted his eyes.

"It's even more suspicious when you put it that way. That guy, I'm going to have to take him to the Chief Inspector."

Mino's face wrinkled when she heard the words 'Chief Inspector'.

Gorgon Fortress had an entrance facing each of the cardinal direction-- north, east,

south, west-- and each entrance had a checkpoint and a Chief Inspector.

Normally speaking, a Chief Inspector was someone strong enough to easily handle 1st and 2nd Stage Adapters. In particular, the Chief Inspector stationed at the north gate was the most famous of them all. All of the inhabitants of the Gorgon Fortress called him this:

Obstinate Carlton!

Mino had run into some troublesome work on multiple occasions because of Carlton. Literally 'troublesome'. Carlton was the Inspector that the Adapters of the 《Illusion Tree》 hated the most. But it wasn't like he had a garbage personality, resorted to violence, or charged a high toll to pass through.

It was actually the exact opposite.

None of the Chief Inspectors in the 《Illusion Tree》 were as clean and proper as the man named Carlton. Carlton was the most honest checkpoint inspector because he was a mixed race descendant of the Heavenly Angel race. It wouldn't be entirely wrong to say that he was born to be a checkpoint inspector.

In fact, that was the problem.

Those inspectors who were excessively strict wouldn't receive much love from the people. For example, some inspectors are moderately flexible with their rules, others accept bribes, while some are just plain crooks.

That way, the inspectors would be well received and wouldn't have to deal with too much trouble, while also promoting the fort's underground economy. If the underground economy grows, then the fort's coffers would grow at an increased rate as well.

But Carlton was an unrelenting one.

As a matter of fact, with the Obstinate Carlton at the north gate, the number of wanted

persons detained reached three or four times more than the other checkpoints, so much so that those people opted to just go to a different fort altogether. It was a place where decent people would get delayed because of minor infractions, resulting in the maxim 'avoid the north gate by any means necessary' when entering Gorgon Fortress.

Things had slightly improved since James became the vice head inspector, but...

Mino took a glimpse in Jae Hwan's direction.

'If Carlton and this guy were to meet, it would be all over... '

One was a human who lived in complete disregard for the law, while the other was of the Angel race who could never allow such a human run free. It was too much to even imagine what would happen if they met. She didn't think that making one joke would result in the current outcome. Mino felt a cold sweat run down her back.

Today might be the day where the north checkpoint unintentionally gets destroyed.

"James, there seems to be some sort of misunderstanding, but this guy isn't a bad guy, you see? Well, I mean he could be a bad guy, but he's not!"

Her mind was in a mess, so she spoke out whatever came to her mind in a fluster. Not even Mino could quite understand what she was saying.

"This person, this person saved my life. You know the Red Fox, right? Did you know this guy annihilated the Red Fox by himself?"

"Red Fox? By himself?"

"That's what I'm saying. He's not a suspicious person at all!"

He swept through a clan all by himself?

James took another glance at Jae Hwan.

The sword looked good, but the user in question looked like a beggar.

"Even still, he's quite suspicious?"

"No, because of that... y-you, say something!"

Hearing that, Jae Hwan's gaze turned a little strange. Although his eyes didn't seem to be laughing, they definitely seemed to be enjoying the situation. Mino used Whisper and sent Jae Hwan a message with an uneasy voice.

[Ah, for real, don't you think you went too far? It was just a little prank...]

Mino's Whisper was met with silence.

"What she said is correct."

Mino's pretty face crumpled.

"Be more sincere and describe it so it's more believable! Talk about when and where you killed them!"

Jae Hwan did not say anything.

Acting like he knew this was what was going to happen, James let out a snort.

An urgent Whisper found its way to Jae Hwan.

[You, do you think it's the time to be joking around? I'm sorry! Since I made a mistake...]

But at that moment, Mino realized that Jae Hwan was staring at a person approaching from afar. A powerful and stubborn man was approaching.

It was someone who would completely undo Mino's desperate efforts.

He was tall and handsome with unblemished skin. He was an alien who was human-like in appearance with the exception of his beautiful, silver wings.

'Gorgon Fortress' most stubborn person.

Mino's expression stiffened while James' face bloomed.

"...Hello everyone, what's going on here?"

Gorgon Fortress's very own.

It was the Chief Inspector of the northern checkpoint, Obstinate Carlton.



After listening to what had happened, Carlton began to rub his chiseled jaw. It was a habit that Carlton had picked up during times of frustration.

Obstinate Carlton was famous not only for his personality, but also for his beauty. Of course, it was for no other reason than him being of angelic descent.

The appearance of Carlton stroking his chin with his blonde hair tied behind his back was so graceful that casting artists throughout Gorgon Fortress would make busts of his figure and sell them to women.

The most popular piece of art, 『Carlton Distressed』 .

But to someone like Mino who didn't care about what Carlton looked like or what he did, he was nothing but an annoying dandy who happened to be the chief inspector of Gorgon Fortress.

"So because of what happened Chief, the Red Fox..."

"Somehow, the Red Fox ended up getting cleaned up."

Mino shut her mouth.

The situation was going to take a turn for the worse. Carlton looked towards Jae Hwan and asked a question.

"So that's why you wish to enter the fort?"

"That's right."

“But you don't have a certificate.”

"That's right."

"I cannot allow that."

"Why?"

Carlton closed his mouth for a moment.

Why would he be curious about such a 'natural' thing?

It was something he couldn't understand. It was the first time someone had asked such a thing in the 55 years that Carlton had been working as the northern checkpoint inspector in Gorgon Fortress. It won't be allowed because it's not allowed. There was no need for a reason. But despite that, this guy was asking why.

Carlton's face took on a strange, joyful expression.

Mino grasped her forehead.

She couldn't help but think that 'that' was finally going to come out.

Carlton opened his mouth.

“If you can't prove your identity by use of the certificate, then by the authority of the Checkpoint Chief Inspector, I have the right to deny any travelers entry. It is stated so in Article 27 paragraph 4 of the Gorgon Fortress rules of entry. In addition, once more referring to the Gorgon Fortress rules of entry Article 34 Paragraph 2...”

The surrounding guards began to get excited.

“I-it came out! The Chief Inspector's 『Obstinate Law Encyclopedia』 !”

"Oooh, it's been awhile?"

“How is it possible for anyone to memorize such a thing, every time I see it, I can't help but think how impressive it is.”

“I sometimes want to just say that's it's all a lie. Isn't it different every time?”

In the meantime, the guards at the northern checkpoint were bustling with excitement. They had their reasons. They believed in their Checkpoint Commander. The adapters had a saying.

'The strongest inspector of the four Gorgon Fortress checkpoints is Carlton.'

Although his position was only that of a checkpoint inspector, there had never been a breach of the northern checkpoint in the 55 years that Carlton had been working there. Nobody was actually aware of how Carlton's skills were.

"...in addition, according to Article 2, Section 7 of the Gorgon Confinement act, which is based on a similar precedent, a person who approaches the fort without a certificate can be forcibly detained..."

At that moment, Jae Hwan spoke up.

"Stop, I get it."

Hearing that, the guards' faces paled.

"So in other words, you're here to arrest me, right?"

Sighs erupted from here and there.

Nobody had ever dared to speak to Carlton like that in ten years. There was no change on Carlton's face, but the guards knew.

Carlton was angry.

"Well, if you don't have a 'certificate', then yes, I have the right to do so right now."

"Why do I need something like that to prove who I am?"

"You just need it. Everyone else here uses it to verify their own identity."

"What is even written on the certificate?"

"Your real name, affiliation, your job and related skills, some information on your

status, criminal history and spirit contamination values, and..."

"Then there's even more reason for me not to need a certificate."

Carlton raised his eyebrow as he heard what Jae Hwan said.

Every resident of 《Chaos》 had certificates and used those certificates to prove their identity.

A certificate is one of the few ways with reliability that an Adapter could use to prove their identity in Chaos. However, the man in front of Carlton was denying the need for a certificate.

"I don't quite understand what you mean. Then what are you going to use to prove that you are you?"

"I'm not going to prove my identity."

Carlton was taken aback by Jae Hwan's self-assured statement. Such a case where an Adapter would speak like that was so rare that Carlton had not ever met someone like this in the 55 years he was working here.

It was because most Adapters had been unable to resist the binding power of Carlton's recitation of the [Law] . Carlton wasn't simply reciting the Law for no reason.

A spoken command skill , [Law] .

A high level ability that only a very few people in the fort could resist. It was an ability that Carlton had received from Gorgon Fortress after having his abilities as an inspector acknowledged. In fact, he was the only to have received a skill. Not even 3rd Order Adapters could resist Carlton's recitation of the [Law] and would be left kneeling on the ground.

Even moreso, instead of Jae Hwan getting affected by the skill that Carlton had casted, it was Carlton's side that seemed to have taken a hit.

A soul that not even the Law could infiltrate.

From a certain standpoint, Carlton was impressed.

'This guy feels like he's trying to prove himself without proving himself.'

Could such a thing actually exist?

"If this is how it is, then I, Carlton, will arrest you pursuant to Article 2, Section 7 of the Gorgon Confinement Act."

A silver aura burst forth from Carlton's hands.

The aura wrapped around Jae Hwan's entire body like a net. The surrounding guards started to cheer. It was because it was a rare sight to behold.

"Ohhh, that's!"

If 『Carlton Distressed』 was a top selling item for female collectors, then the thing that the richest person of Chaos owned was the Carlton Collection. A hidden collection of Carlton covered in a silver aura.

Its name was 『Carlton's Prison of Silver』 .

That was because the model for that piece was right in front of them. Another nickname for Carlton was Silver Imprisonment.

The Angel race's inherent skill, [Silver Imprisonment] .

It was one of Carlton's top skills. A silver chain that made it impossible for those who've been bound to escape.

But after a few moments, Carlton was once more startled.

The silver aura that wrapped around Jae Hwan disappeared like smoke as soon as it touched him.

"...how?"

It wasn't that there had never been any Adapters to resist the [Law] . There were sometimes Adapters who were born with a strong spiritual power. But not even Adapters as strong as them could avoid Carlton's inherent ability [Silver

Imprisonment] .

It was because every Adapter who had successfully resisted the Gorgon Fortress's Law was 'evil' and therefore, by nature, could not escape from Silver Imprisonment.

However, Carlton's [Silver Imprisonment] was showing that the man who was in front of him was not an evildoer.

Why was this happening?

Mino took advantage of that opening to intervene.

“Chief Inspector-nim! This person has a certificate, but he forgot it and doesn't have it with him right now. If you just let him go this time, I'll make sure that he carries it with him!

How about it? I'll be sure to make sure he never forgets!”

Small, trembling shoulders. Small hands gripped so tight they had become white.

Jae Hwan took a calm look at Mino whose teeth were clenched tight. Seeing such a proud woman acting the way she was, he couldn't help but feel that the reputation and dignity of this fort was incredibly high.

'Law. He said it was the law.'

At that moment, Jae Hwan changed his attitude and extinguished his fighting spirit.

Mino's expression instantly lit up.

'Ahh, finally, this man is listening to what I'm saying.'

There was no reason for things to have been blown so far out of proportion in the first place. It would have been annoying, but it would have been simple to just follow the inspector's directions, provide information by using the Interface System, listing everything down, and then receiving a new certificate.

"I see. Let's do things according to your 'laws'."

Feeling as though things were proceeding along much too calmly, Mino began to have an ominous feeling. Carlton nodded his head.

"That's good. Then from now on, you'll be restrained..."

Hearing that, Jae Hwan made an odd expression.

"No, there's no need to arrest me."

"What kind of..."

"I can just do what that woman did earlier, right?"

Mino came to a stop.

Like what I did? What did I...

Mino's face completely blanched.

"W-wait, hold on!"

But it was too late, Jae Hwan had already rummaged through his dimensional bag before throwing 'something' towards Carlton. Teuk, with that sound, Carlton caught that 'something' that Jae Hwan had tossed out.

"Take that and let me go. That'll be enough, right? From what I saw, this is how things work, right?"

Everyone's jaws dropped.

James's face as he made eye contact with Jae Hwan was especially good.

'T-that idiot?!

Carlton looked at the 'something' in his hands with an expression that looked like his soul had left his body.

"What's going on? You said to do things according to the [Law] , isn't this how everyone does things? From what I saw earlier, this was how things were done."

Law.

Something that everyone knew but rarely acted in accordance with.

Jae Hwan spoke up again.

"Ah, perhaps, it's not enough? Then take this as well."

Another 'something' went flying in Carlton's direction.

Mino couldn't stand it any longer, and her screaming voice appeared in Jae Hwan's mind.

[Y-y-you, are you serious?!]

The surrounding air began to freeze.

In particular, the faces of the guards that had taken bribes, James included, had become especially cold.

'This guy needs to die right now!'

They knew that if these illegal bribes were to be made known to Carlton, the cleanest inspector in all of Chaos, then he would definitely not let them go.

Thinking that he would no longer have any opportunities after this, James took up his weapon and ventured forward.

"How dare you shamelessly try to bribe the Chief Inspector you fool!"

"Chief! This degenerate should be executed on the spot!"

With other people it may not be so certain, but it was something to avoid doing in front of Obstinate Carlton. So far, there were 154 poor sops trapped in a prison somewhere in Gorgon Fortress for attempting to sway Carlton's mind with bribes.

The 155th person was right about to be born before their very eyes.

James was expectant.

He wanted to see the scene where Gorgon Fortress' cleanest inspector cleans up the filth before his eyes.

Despite that, Carlton's expression was pale.

"...did you say your name was Jae Hwan?"

[TLN: Carlton's tone went from neutral-ish to very respectful]

After looking at the blue gem in his hands for some time, Carlton looked up then back down at the game then up again before changing his attitude to one of respect and sincerity.

And then, something way out of left field happened.

"You really like to joke a lot. I've been waiting for you. Nokmyeong's envoy."

Chapter 19

Silver Imprisonment (4)

[TLN: Nokmyeong is actually Nokmyeongga. Not a huge difference, but I thought I should make this clear]

“...wait, what the heck just happened?”

“Chief Inspector-nim, even though he doesn't have a certificate...”

“Is it because Chief Inspector-nim received the 'something'?”

“Ttek! Don't you dare say that no matter where you go!”

It was a situation created by an unintended misunderstanding.

A number of Adapters disappeared into the fort after being passed through the checkpoint and crossing the drawbridge.

Some took a glance at Jae Hwan's sword while others simply disregarded him as they did not care. The surrounding guards were whispering to each others.

The guards around James were blatantly pointing their hostility towards Jae Hwan. Their burning gazes could be felt on Jae Hwan's skin.

'... just what the hell is that guy's affiliation?'

After a few moments, two people from inside the checkpoint walked out. They were Mino and Carlton. Mino, however, looked like her soul had fled her body. The reason for that was the binding power of the [Law] that Mino was subjected to.

Carlton opened his mouth to speak up.

“Mino-ssi, please make sure to carry your certificate with you at all times. Also don't forget, bribes are never allowed. If I were to act according to the Gorgon Fortress books of laws Article 7 Section 34 as I had originally intended, you would be detained, but since it's something that Jae Hwan-ssi had requested of me, I'll turn a blind eye to it this time.”

Mino looked towards Jae Hwan's direction with lifeless eyes before Carlton began to talk again.

"Jae Hwan-ssi has already proved his identity."

The object that Jae Hwan had tossed towards Carlton.

It was an expensive treasure called the Neglected Soul Stone created by the Nokmyeongga family of the five great families in the 《Great Lands》 .

*[TLN: **Nokmyeongga** = Green Beetle Family]*

Although the Neglected Soul Stone was an item that members of the Nokmyeongga family used to prove their identities, the stone itself was famous for other reason.

It was a treasure that forcibly raised an Adapter's Spirit Power.

For example, the blue Neglected Soul Stone that Jae Hwan had tossed towards Carlton was something that could instantly turn a [Non-Adapter] into a [1st Order Adapter] .

Because the item was so valuable, it was easy for Jae Hwan to prove his identity.

"Since I've already confirmed these soul stones, I'll return them back to you."

"Looks like you don't need them."

“The Neglected Soul Stone isn't something that can be given away so easily. Nokemyongga's envoy should do well to treasure it more.”

Carlton placed the two stones directly into Jae Hwan's hands.

As Carlton led Mino and Jae Hwan further into the gate, Carlton fished something out from his bosom and finalize the inspection. It was a device that looked like a small thermometer.

"It's a Contamination Meter. As you may be aware, all travelers entering and leaving the fort must unconditionally go through this test. It's so that we may prepare for whatever may happen."

Contamination? Jae Hwan took a glance at Mino. It was usually during times like this when Mino would explain to Jae Hwan what he didn't know. But the person in person still had an expression like her soul had fled the premises.

Carlton opened his mouth to speak up.

"Because she was stuck in the Law, she may remain like that for a little while."

Jae Hwan nodded like he was convinced by what Carlton said.

"Then let's begin with Mino-ssi."

Bbig- bbig, a small screen appeared in the air as the device made some beeping noises.

[Measurement Results : Safety warning! Soul Contamination level has exceeded 15%. It is recommended that the user take medication as soon as possible.]

Carlton's expression stiffened again.

"Mino-ssi, according to Gorgon Fortress' Laws regarding entry, Article 8 Section 14..."

Mino took out medicine from her bosom and began to drink it.

Next was Jae Hwan's turn. As soon as the device began to blink, Jae Hwan felt as though something had penetrated through his body. The light began to blink rapidly.

Carlton's eyes widened like saucers, this was the first time he had ever seen something like this.

'Could he be a contaminated soul?'

The results came out in the next moment.

[Measurement Results : Soul Contamination cannot be measured]

Carlton looked like he had just seen a ghost and he looked towards Jae Hwan for an explanation.

"Please forgive me, but we're going to have to try again."

[Measurement Results : Soul Contamination cannot be measured]

Carlton went silent. The meter had never failed before. From the moment he had started working here, no, from the moment this device was built, it had never been 'faulty'. There was only one case where the tool could not measure someone's Soul Contamination.

It was when someone's Soul Contamination was at 0%.

0% Soul Contamination. It wasn't a number that could be achieved simply by eating lots of good medicine. Even Carlton who had been taking measurements for 55 years had never seen a result like this. None of the higher order Adapters within the fort had such clean souls.

Somehow, Carlton was convinced.

"Indeed, that explains why my [Silver Imprisonment] didn't work at all. I have never

seen a soul as clear as your's."

Carlton recalled when his [Law] skill failed to work on Jae Hwan and when his inherent skill [Silver Imprisonment] failed to work as well. A person who does not comply with the system has a clean soul? It was a contradiction.

It was a contradiction, but it was also something impossible for Carlton to confirm or deny.

"Well we're all done here, so you guys are free to go."

But unexpectedly, Jae Hwan did not leave.

Having been silent up to that point, Jae Hwan finally opened his mouth to speak.



"Chief Inspector-nim, is it really ok to just let them leave like that?"

The Vice Chief Inspector, James, asked as he watched the backs of Jae Hwan and Mino get smaller and smaller.

It was something that James really couldn't understand.

"James, were you also unaware that people from Nokmyeongga had come to Chaos?"

"I know that..."

He had to know. Whenever someone from the five great families visited Chaos, they would send a message to every fort.

It was none other than the five great families.

They were the only ones who could make deals with the dream manipulating [Nightmares] to visit 《Chaos》 without actually having to experience 'death'.

James knew for certain.

“But no matter how I look at him, he doesn't look like a Nokmyeongga.”

Green skin and two antennae.

The Nokmyeongga had very specific characteristics that anybody would be able to recognize at first glance.

Carlton nodded his head.

“I agree. He looked nothing like a Nokmyeongga.”

“...why did Inspector-nim treat him like he was definitely a Nokmyeongga?”

Carlton laughed and then suddenly asked a question.

“James, do you perhaps know what kind of treasure a Neglected Soul Stone is?”

“Isn't it an object that can make an Adapter's spirit power grow?”

“Correct.”

Is there anyone who doesn't know what a Neglected Soul Stone is?

If you were an Adapter, then it was an item that you desired.

“Have you perhaps heard of the various characteristics of the Neglected Soul Stone?”

Characteristics? James was briefly taken aback.

Carlton silently removed the white gloves he was wearing.

After a moment, Carlton showed his hand to James.

As though his hands were burned, his palm and his veins were black.

However, his hands definitely were not burned. James was well aware of what that

was.

“Soul Contamination!...”

How did something like this happen?

James could not believe his eyes.

Soul Contamination was like karma to the people in 《Chaos》. Everyone in Chaos would slowly become contaminated by the various things native to Chaos. Little by little it would accumulate. Once someone's soul contamination reaches a hundred percent, they would suffer from a fate worse than death.

Fortunately, there was a way to slow down or even stop the rate of contamination. It was precisely eating the horns of the beasts in Chaos.

Those who can consistently consume the 'medicine' created from the horns of the beasts here could survive a long time while avoiding contamination. And as far as James knew, Carlton had one of the purest souls in all of Gorgon Fortress.

But Carlton's soul was now polluted.

And it was only his palm at that.

James hurriedly took some medicine out of his pocket and sprinkled it over Carlton's hand. It was the medicine that he had received from Mino awhile ago.

“...perhaps, did this happen because of the soul stone?”

Carlton nodded his head.

"James, have you ever seen someone who was not a Nokmyeongga be in possession of a Neglected Soul Stone?"

James carefully thought about it.

There were none.

"Don't you think it's strange? For a treasure like the Neglected Soul Stone, it would make sense for there to be many people to attack the Nokmyeongga to get their hands on such a treasure."

That was the conclusion he had come to after thinking for a bit. There are even those from Nokmyeongga who travel alone. If every Nokmyeongga was in possession of a stone, then there should have been many instances where people would have attacked travelling groups of Nokmyeongga.

However, James had never seen or heard of anything like that happen.

"...so it was because of soul contamination."

Carlton nodded again.

"Someone who is not a Nokmyeongga could never handle a Neglected Soul Stone. The only ones who can hold onto a soul stone without suffering from the effects of the contamination are the Nokmyeongga."

If that were the case, then it wouldn't be strange for Carlton to treat Jae Hwan like he were actually from Nokmyeongga. But it was hard for James to understand.

"I've never seen a Nokmyeongga without antennae."

Hearing that, a wry smile sprouted on Carlton's face as he turned off the silver aura that was fading from his body.

"James, what do I look like right now?"

"...huh?"

But James understood what Carlton was trying to say in the next moment.

Carlton Zevier.

A man born between the angel race and the human race.

He carried the blood of humans and did not inherit the pointed ears and the jewel in the middle of his forehead that were known characteristics of the angel race. The only thing he inherited from the angel race was their silver aura.

He looked no different from a human without it.

'I see. If that man is like Chief Inspector-nim... '

But James stopped thinking up until that point.

'But did Chief Inspector-nim let him pass for such a personal reason?'

James took a look at the side of Carlton's face.

Carlton's exterior gave off a good impression, but there was no way to tell what he was like on the inside.

"It seems like you still have a few questions you want to ask, James."

"...my apologies."

"Don't worry about it, your doubts are good."

"What?"

It was something that he wasn't unwilling to hear.

"It's because I wouldn't have allowed him to pass for that reason if he were a normal person."

James suddenly came to a realization.

“Was there a Command of Allowance?”

“It seemed pretty urgent. I've gotten in touch with the other party, so it shouldn't be long before they seek them out. Whether or not he's from Nokmyeongga and whether or not he can use the Neglected Soul Stone won't matter.”

Neglected Soul Stone.

An item that boosts an Adapter's Spirit Power.

While rapidly polluting the soul of anyone who used it that wasn't from Nokmyeongga.

A person who could use an item while avoiding soul contamination was in high demand.

A thought suddenly went through James' head.

“...perhaps, is it related to castellan's illness?”

"I don't know all of the details. But..."

The only certainty was that something big was about to happen in Gorgon Fortress. Carlton recalled the last conversation he had with Jae Hwan.

“I don't know what ulterior motives they might have.”

"..."

“But whether I'm a Nokmyeong or not doesn't matter. Because they should already know, right?”

"Of course they already know.”

“Is it ok to just send me off like this? Isn't this against your sense of justice?”

Justice. Hearing that, Carlton smiled.

“One day, there'll come a time when our justice meets again.”

Carlton recalled Jae Hwan's terrifying spirit.

If it weren't for that spirit, Carlton wouldn't have been in such a hurry to let him pass. He didn't know why, but he got the feeling that Jae Hwan wanted to fight him.

'No, rather, it wasn't me he wanted to face... '

Carlton silently looked at Gorgon Fortress while thinking to himself.

He couldn't help but wonder what would have happened if he had pulled out his sword or if he had never chosen to reveal the Neglected Soul Stone. Even for Carlton who was proud of his skills, he wasn't confident in being able to face against Jae Hwan.

“Oh right James.”

“Yes?”

“According to what Jae Hwan-ssi said, it seems like you were the one taking bribes.”

“Th-that...”

“According to the Gorgon Fortress' Penal Code, Article 34 section 7,...”

James' face grew increasingly wretched.

Chapter 20

The World's 1% (1)

[No matter how hard you work, there are some things in this world that cannot be overcome.]

— <Twilight's Shadow> Vice Head Meikal Garnard's message to his workers.

The Adapters who came to 《Chaos》 created major strongholds that allowed them moments of relaxation. Among them, the leader was the third of the four cities.

In particular, there were four cities located in relatively accessible areas and freely allowed Adapters to settle, so the flow of Adapters in and out of those cities was rather active.

Gorgon Fortress was one of the four palaces.

'I should have hit him at least once.'

Jae Hwan recalled Carlton whose silver aura exuded from his shoulders. A man with the face of a swindler who blabbered on and on about some laws.

Jae Hwan dared not believe those who spoke of the law.

To be frank, there were many lawyers who made up the walkers who were in the same Nightmare Tower that he was in. It was because there were hundreds of thousands of people living in the Nightmare Tower.

—All humans are equal within the tower.

At first, lawyers created laws to help the weak. A world completely cut off from the outside. As such, it seemed like a good place to enact laws for humans. They ended up

creating many laws, with some laws seemingly protecting the weak.

But it was a mistake.

By the time that everyone had come to, they had realized that all of the laws were such that 'only they knew'. People stumbled and were caught by the law whose names they did not even know. When people came back from hunting, they were forced to pay excessively high taxes and were only allowed to hunt in specific areas in the name of protection. Those with low growth potential could only ever come into possession of weak skills and low level equipment.

The principle where 'all humans in the Tower are equal' was based on a human's skill and status. But that principle of equality was destroyed by items and levels.

The law catered to the strong, suppressed the weak, and was impossible to fix. By the time the tower's atmosphere had degenerated by the system that the lawmakers had created, the lawmakers themselves disappeared into the past, leaving the law alone. With nobody there to uphold the law, the law broke down.

Above the 85th floor, Jae Hwan only had one rule.

All humans 'live' for today.

It was the only law that Jae Hwan followed and kept until now.

'The roads here are complicated'

Jae Hwan frowned at the crowded streets.

In addition, he was holding onto luggage.

Mino's eyes were still dim and drooping.

It was good that she was able to follow along, although she was wobbling side to side as she walked.

His mood wasn't too great.

It had somehow turned into a bother to bring her along considering the trouble he

had to deal with ever since he met her, but she was still the first 'human' he had met since he came here, and he felt guilty about leaving her behind. Jae Hwan decided to wander on the streets until Mino returned to normal. She had accompanied him this far, it was only right to stay with her.

The streets were filled with vendors selling a wide variety of medicinal herbs, equipment boasting, remarkable craftsmanship, and a large selection of food.

Jae Hwan walked along the streets with the teetering Mino.

"It's become really difficult to see the castellan's face nowadays."

"From what I've heard, he's lying sick in bed..."

"Hmm."

The sound of merchants talking and laughing drifted over... workers from an inn nearby advertised for their establishment from the moment the sun had come up.

How much longer did he have to wander around?

After some time, Jae Hwan realized that he had gotten completely lost. When he started paying attention again, he had realized that he had ended up in some back alley of the market street where he had been wandering about. In the back alley was a group of troublemakers sitting on the floor together, using their noses to snort what looked like the 'medicine' that Mino had consumed awhile back.

'Ah damn it, where the heck am I?'

With no clue as to what to do, Jae Hwan eventually decided to use [Doubt] and [Comprehension] . The overlapping voices in his surroundings turned into streams of information that entered Jae Hwan's mind.

But then a problem occurred.

Jae Hwan ignored the fact that this was the first time he had ever arrived at such a

congested and untidy area. In the meantime, Jae Hwan started to suffer from a serious headache as a result of his mind being overloaded with too much information.

Suddenly, Jae Hwan's senses caught onto an important bit of information.

"Hey, can you recover already?"

Hearing that, Mino's eyes slowly started to turn back to normal.

"...I, what? Why am I here?"

"There's no time for that, you have to lead me out of here first. My head is absolutely excruciating."

Mino took a quick look around and led Jae Hwan to the main road after recognizing where she was.

"Just leave through here for now."

After leaving the back alleys, Jae Hwan ended up on a relatively quiet, but large road. The flow of information slowed down and Jae Hwan's headache began to disappear.

"That's good, alright you can go now."

"...don't you think you're overstepping some boundaries? Just throwing me out like that."

Her memories slowly started to come back. She began to recall what had happened. Then she realized why she was here. Mino's face took on a slight shade of red. Jae Hwan spoke in a flat voice.

"You'll just get in the way".

Hearing that, Mino flew into a rage.

"Just because of a little prank, are you serious?"

Noticing that Jae Hwan didn't consider it to be a simple prank, Mino bit on her fingernail before apologizing.

"...I'm sorry."

The scale was too big to be considered just a little prank. Because of her, the person who had saved her life ended up becoming the target of the guards' violence. Regardless, despite who did what and who said what, the entire situation would have been avoided if Mino had not tried making things difficult for Jae Hwan in the first place. If you looked at it from another perspective, it was like Mino was throwing away her opportunity to repay Jae Hwan's favor.

"...I mean it."

Mino said while looking at Jae Hwan.
There was still no reply from Jae Hwan.

She waited for an answer.
Yet, there was still no answer.

Considering what had happened, it wasn't strange.
Thinking about it, Jae Hwan rarely had an answer.

No matter what questions were asked of him, he did not answer.
Even still, she did not know what his identity was.

Well, there was one thing that she knew about him.

He was human.

Instead of answering questions, Jae Hwan was a human who liked being the one to ask questions. He had asked her if she would go to the past if she had the chance, and he had asked her about the certificates that were needed to prove one's identity. He was someone who concerned himself with questions that she had never even thought of.

A person who questioned the world.
That was the Jae Hwan that Mino knew.

Mino carefully put forth a question.

"Where do you plan to go now?"

"It does not matter to you."

"...still, please tell me."

Mino spoke up again, but this time the hurt in her voice was palpable.

"There is something I must find."

"What is it? I might be of help to you."

Jae Hwan sat still for a moment before opening his mouth to reply back.

"Nightmare."

Nightmare. Hearing a name that she hadn't heard in a long time, Mino momentarily paused. A name that every [Product] would remember. Nightmares. They were beings called [Producers] in the Great Lands. The starting point for all 'Nightmares'.

"What do you plan to do by seeking out the Nightmares?"

Jae Hwan did not answer.

"Perhaps, are you seeking revenge?"

Mino couldn't help but think that if it was Jae Hwan, then it could be possible. Jae Hwan replied back.

"Even if I told you, you wouldn't understand."

Hearing that she wouldn't understand, Mino momentarily opened her mouth before just closing it again. The first reason why she continued to ask was because Jae Hwan seemed to have a bad impression of Mino, and the second reason was because she just couldn't understand what Jae Hwan intended to do. Mino eventually changed what she was saying.

"...The Nightmare is a very rare species throughout all of the Great lands. In addition, they don't stay in one place either"

"Then are they not present here?"

"Well if you were to search through all of Chaos then you'd probably find one. The Nightmares are one of the few peoples that can enter the 《Illusion Tree》 without having to experience 'death'."

It was an unexpected information.

Well, it was something that he considered before.

The Nightmare Towers themselves were a part of the Illusion Tree. And on the 100th floor of the tower he was in was a demon. As such, it would make sense for Cultivators or Producers to know of a way to enter the Illusion Tree through a soul passage or some other method.

"I... can't be completely certain."

After worrying about something for some time, Mino opened her mouth to say something.

"I think I know where you can find a Nightmare."

"Where would that be?"

"There's a smithy, a smithy created by a Nightmare."

A smithy. Jae Hwan looked at the Frost Dragon Sword hanging off his waist while listening to her speak. Thinking about it, he did need to go visit a blacksmith.

"Ah."

Mino nodded her head in understanding.

Such a sword without a sheath blatantly hanging off his waist would draw a lot of unneeded attention. In fact, the eyes directed towards Jae Hwan from awhile back was uncomfortable.

"Do you want me to show you the way there?"

Jae Hwan took hold of the hilt of his sword as he nodded.

"After the pests who've been following us since a while ago are taken care of."

Jae Hwan turned around and laid eyes on the good-for-nothings that he had first seen snorting 'medicine' in the back alleys. It was a narrow path where nobody from the surroundings could come to help. The man at the head of the group who seemed to be the boss stepped forward to say something.

"It's them, boss!"

"Hahat, found them! You, that sword.....!"

The thugs pulled out their swords, prompting Jae Hwan to draw his sword as well.

The boss' head suddenly burst into white particles.



After a little bit of time, the dozen or so people turned into white particles and disappeared into the Illusion Tree.

'There was someone else who wasn't one of these thugs.'

There was someone hiding atop a roof observing him. Jae Hwan was only able to detect him with [Doubt] because he had activated it at a good time. He was trying really hard to hide, but because he was hiding so 'diligently' Jae Hwan couldn't help but notice

him.

When Jae Hwan pulled out his sword, the mystery man was also taken by surprise. The reason why Jae Hwan didn't go after him was because he simply was not a threat.

Mino spoke in an admiring voice.

"Every time I see you in action, I can't help but think you're amazing. How are you able to end everything with just a thrust?"

"I know nothing but the thrust."

"...are you joking?"

"I'm serious."

"But, surely you would have variations and different derivative techniques, right?"

"Well I guess there are Light thrust, Plain thrust, Strong thrust, it's like that."

"...then what did you use just now?"

"Light Thrust."

Those thugs were fairly strong for thugs. Most of them were non-adapters, but there was a good number of 1st Order Adapters involved as well. But despite that, he used a 'light' thrust to take care of them?

Mino was reminded of the time when Jae Hwan wiped out the Red Fox clan. The incredibly powerful 'thrust' that obliterated an entire forest. Mino put forward a question.

"Is it that you've only been using 'light thrust' up until now?"

"No. I've used a 'plain thrust' once."

Mino thought that the 'plain thrust' that Jae Hwan used was probably the finale attack he used against the Red Fox clan.

Of course, the truth was slightly different.

'Back then when I fought against the five-horned wolf I had to use 'plain thrust'.'

He recalled the horns of the wolf that were sitting in his bag.

The Five-horned Wolf was the strongest enemy that Jae Hwan had faced since he had arrived in 《Chaos》. It had withstood multiple 'light thrusts' but still didn't die. Even though after it was hit with a 'plain thrust' it died right away.

Even though Mino looked at Jae Hwan with a look of disbelief for some time, her countenance swiftly turned to one of understanding.

"...well it's not like it's impossible, I know another Adapter who only knows how to use just one skill like you."

"Like me?"

"Yes. Except instead of thrust, he uses 'slash'."

An Adapter who only uses Slash?

The topic caught Jae Hwan's interest, but when he was about to ask more about it, he began to hear a daeng—daeng— from somewhere in the distance.

It was a nostalgic sound.

It had been a long time since he had heard that sound, and it struck some chords in his memory, making him recalling his friend Jay who had stayed with him until the end.

Jay's <Jay's Workshop>.

Upon returning from another harrowing battle at the frontlines of the Nightmare Tower, Jae Hwan would always listen to the rhythmic pounding of Jay's hammer coming from <Jay's Workshop> while soaking his body in the holy water within the temple. The sound was harsh and rustic, but it resonated with Jae Hwan.

It wasn't nice like music, but it was a comforting sound, something that Jae Hwan could just silently listen to while relaxing. He had weathered through many rainy seasons, but every time he came back with a broken sword and a shattered armor, the sound of the hammer was always there, waiting for him.

Even after Jay disappeared, the sound did not disappear with him. Instead, it continued to live on inside Jae Hwan's eardrums and at his fingertips.

Maybe it was the sound that Jay had passed onto Jae Hwan that drove him to break through the 100th floor. In the end, the sound of the hammer pounding away accompanied him to the end. Arriving at the place where the sound was resonating from, Mino opened her mouth to talk.

"This is Gorgon Fortress's largest smithy."

<Twilight's Shadow>

It was the name of the smithy.



Many busybodies in the «Great Lands» have discussed something similar to the following.

“Who is the greatest craftsman in all of the Great Lands?”

To answer that question, those busybodies first had to realize that the term 'craftsman' was not correct. That was because the greatest 'craftsmen' in all of the Great Lands were not humans.

Nightmare.

If the strongest in the Great Lands were the sovereigns, then the best craftsmen, no

craftsdemons, were the Nightmares.

Of the five hundred [Famous Artisans] Nightmares and the thirteen [Master Artisans] Nightmares, those who could be called the greatest [Producers] in the 《Great Lands》 could be counted on one's fingers.

Located in Gorgon Fortress, <Twilight's Shadow> was one of the best weapons workshops in all of 《Chaos》 and was established by one of the greatest of the [Famous Artisans], 'Twilight's Deep Ignell'.

Jae Hwan looked around and nodded his head in satisfaction. This workshop was far better than even the best workshop in Atopos.

The interior was spacious and the tools were of a high quality. There were tens of blacksmiths taking requests or working on other commissions amidst the burning heat of the furnace at the middle that threatened to melt the whole workshop down to the ground.

Jae Hwan opened his mouth.

“A Nightmare established this place?”

“That's right”

“Then there could be a Nightmare here.”

“Could be.”

At that time, a worker who had taken it upon himself to guide others appeared from somewhere and greeted them. He was a robust and healthy looking young man who appeared to be an apprentice craftsman.

“Welcome—!”

“Are you a Nightmare?”

Looking at Jae Hwan who asked such a question the moment he walked in, the apprentice's countenance wrinkled. That was because anyone who asked to see a 'nightmare' was looking for only one thing. Mino hastily stepped forward and spoke

up.

"I'm sorry. The person next to me isn't the brightest when it comes to the affairs of the world, please understand a little."

"Ah, is that so?"

Looking at Mino's sincere smile, the apprentice's expression relaxed.

[...no matter how you look at him, he's also a person.]

Jae Hwan didn't say a word.

"So what are you looking for?"

"I came to meet a Nightmare."

"...you must mean the boss."

The apprentice had a difficult expression on his face.

"The boss isn't in right now, so it would be a little tough."

"Where did he go?"

"That, the boss has a severe case of wanderlust so... do you have a commission you would like to give directly to the boss?"

Jae Hwan fell into thought for a moment.

"That would be pretty good as well."

"What is it you want commissioned..."

"A sword sheathe."

"A sword sheathe..."

The apprentice took a cursory glance at the naked sword before shaking his head from side to side.

"A request like that, even if the boss was in, he wouldn't accept such a commission."

"Why is that?"

The apprentice clicked his tongue on the inside.

'It's like he was born yesterday, he has absolutely no common sense.'

The apprentice spoke.

"Well first of all, the boss' specialty isn't weapons. I'll explain since you look like you're randomly wandering about while blindfolded. Nightmares usually don't make weapons."

About to ask what he meant, Jae Hwan stopped himself as he realized that he already knew the answer. Jae Hwan had spent the last thirty years of his life living a life of torture, loneliness, and cruelty within the 'specialty' of the Nightmares— the Nightmare Tower.

Chapter 21

The World's 1% (2)

Jae Hwan reined in the somber memories bubbling up to the surface of his mind. There was something he needed to ask a Nightmare, but things had unfortunately turned out differently. Jae Hwan opened his mouth again.

“Then who is the best craftsmen among those here.”

“That would be vice head Meikal-nim...”

The apprentice looked up and down Jae Hwan's body. Jae Hwan also took a look at himself. He had forgotten that he was currently dressed like a beggar.

“The cost for employing Meikal-nim is extremely high. On top of that, he would need the materials...”

“I've brought the necessary materials.”

The term 'material' when used in the smithy usually referred to a gaksu's horns. Metals such as steel and silver would be refined as well, but typically speaking, of the raw materials that could be found in the 《Illusion Tree》, none were as good as the horns of a gaksu. It was because none of the metals were as light and durable as the horns.

“...are you saying that you've brought horns with you?”

The apprentice asked with a skeptical voice.

The minimum requirement for the products crafted in <Twilight's Shadow> was the horn from a Two-Horned Gaksu.

Weapons forged from the horn of a One-Horned Gaksu were designated as entry level weapons used by Non-Adapters and 1st Order Adapters, so naturally speaking, they belonged to a beginner's lineup and were not used to forge items from personal requests. Thinking about it, <Twilight's Shadow> was a high-end workshop that catered to the richer and stronger residents of Gorgon Fortress.

"We won't work on any project that doesn't use a Two-Horned Gaksu's horn or higher as the material. Why don't you look through the entry level sheaths and choose one from there? Since they were made by our <Twilight's Shadow>, their quality will absolutely not disappoint even if they are at entry level..."

Jae Hwan shook his head. The apprentice's face turned bright red, but as he opened his mouth to say something, Jae Hwan spoke up first.

"When you say a Two-Horned Gaksu, you're referring to a monster with two horns, right?"

"...yes, that's correct."

Jae Hwan calmly fished out the horns that were in his dimensional bag. They were the horns he had obtained after fighting and killing a large wolf some time ago.

The apprentice received the horns, but after staring at them for a moment, his arms began to uncontrollably shake.

'T-this, what the hell kind of gaksu did these horns come from?!

Although he was an apprentice, he was still a full fledged craftsman that had been working at <Twilight's Shadow> for quite a long time, but he had never seen such horns before. The horn's black luster, hardness, and thickness were all characteristics that fascinated the eye.

"S-such a large and incredible thing..."

The young craftsman suddenly realized something. This wasn't something that could be decided on his own.

He needed to find the vice head immediately.

The craftsman's head that was frantically looking around suddenly stopped.

There were around a dozen or so craftsmen gathered around the center furnace.

"Ah, the vice head is finishing something over there...!"

Before the craftsman could continue any further, Jae Hwan began heading towards the center. Mino let out a sigh, and along with the apprentice, hastily followed after Jae Hwan.



<Twilight's Shadow> 's vice head 'Artisan of Dawn' Meikal.

There were very few people in Gorgon Fortress that didn't know of Meikal. It was because he was the only human to have received the [Apprentice] class. It was something that only Nightmare craftsdemons had received until now.

Although it was the lowest title of [Apprentice] in the artisan class, it was a huge event that proved that those of other races could be recognized as Producers.

"Huhu, looks like I've gotten old."

However, it had already been a few decades since that had happened. Meikal had recently started to see his own limitations.

He recalled a story that he had heard from a Nightmare the first time he had received the title of apprentice.

—Blame the race you were born into. It's impossible to rise above [Apprentice] with a human's body.

Earlier on, he had refused to believe those words. The young Meikal had thought that all he needed was time. He was enthusiastic. Although he was born into a disadvantaged race, he could overcome it through sheer effort.

He practiced when the Nightmares slept if it meant he could practice tempering and tanning just one more time, and when the other Nightmares relaxed and messed around, he intently studied more metallurgy.

It was all with the belief that he could someday become a [Renowned] or a [Master] .

Meikal's efforts did not go unnoticed, and he was given the nickname 'Artisan of Dawn'. It was a nickname given to him by those who admired his hardworking figure while everyone was still sleeping well past dawn.

However, the Artisan of Dawn entered his twilight years and he began to realize the truth of the world.

No matter how hard you work, there are some things in this world that cannot be overcome.

"Looks like I'm unable to do something like this now."

Meikal muttered to himself as he stared at the horn before his eyes. It was the horn of a Four-Horned Gaksu entrusted to Meikal by the vice head of the [Limitless Sect] of the ten sects in 《Chaos》 . It was a request to craft a sword, and the process had reached the final stages. The problem was the most recent workmanship.

'Make a gem holder in the middle of the hilt.'

It was not an easy task to create a holder out of a tough material like the horn of a Four-Horned Gaksu. No, rather, the horn was something that was difficult to even break.

Though difficult, he could make a blade by shaving down the horn with a certain knowhow, but to make a gem holder...

Nightmare's exclusive skill, [Process] .

It was a skill the Nightmares had given him when he reached the maximum rank available to him after immeasurable effort, [Apprentice] . It wouldn't be easy to fashion a holder out of the horn even after using that skill.

It may have been possible if he were younger.

Meikal removed his hand from the horn. If he wanted to continue working, he needed

to get as much rest as he could. The surrounding craftsmen all rushed to him.

“Master, can I try it once?”

“Can I also...”

Meikal laughed.

It was good to be young.

“You punks, with your skills you don't stand a chance!”

Meikal already knew that none of the other craftsmen here would ever surpass himself. It was something that was simply impossible in this world. Humans would never surpass the Nightmares in the field of crafting.

The hearts of the youths here, however, warmed Meikal's old heart. The young must expend all they have while they're still young. All he could do was encourage the flames in their hearts.

“Good, if there's anyone here who can dig a hole into the horn, then whoever it may be will be vice head of <Twilight's Shadow> for the day!”

He was maintaining the illusion that they could do anything as long as they tried hard enough. Looking at them, Meikal was reminded of his old self.

“OOOH! Are you serious?!”

“If it's like that, then let me have a go at it!”

All of the young craftsmen jumped from their seats.

Of course, nobody could succeed. Even the artisans who knew how to control their spirit power couldn't scratch the surface of the Four-Horned Gaksu's horn. The Four-Horned Gaksu's horn was just that kind of material.

At that moment, someone spoke up.

"Let me give it a go."

Who is this? It was the face of a newcomer.

Meikal who was fanning his face with his hand to dispel the heat coming from the central furnace built a displeased expression on his face.

"Customer-nim, you shouldn't do such a thing there!"

Holding something in his arms, a good looking young man trotted behind him came into sight. It was the same young craftsman that had received Jae Hwan at the entrance a short while ago. Meikal asked him a question.

"Neiven, who is this person? Also, what are you cradling in your arm?"

"T-this is..."

The young man named Neiven didn't know how to explain. He alternated his gaze between the horn in his arms and Jae Hwan, but Neiven's face grew increasingly more complicated. Jae Hwan spoke up.

"All I need to do is poke a hole through this horn, right?"

Interest sparked in Meikal's eyes. He was dressed like a beggar, but his spirit was like that of a first class craftsman.

'Looks like it's a young craftsman journeying across Chaos.'

Meikal waved away the threatening atmosphere created by the surrounding craftsmen and spoke up.

"Give it a go."

He didn't know where this young man had rolled in from, but his bearing was

impressive. More than anything, this young man's reckless courage in the midst of all the other novice craftsmen of <Twilight's Shadow> was praiseworthy.

But, recklessness was only recklessness.

One's prestige and authority wasn't something acquired overnight. It was something that would never die, that was prestige. It was the same for <Twilight's Shadow>, it was a symbol of authority. Meikal was considering whether or not he should display the prestige of <Twilight's Shadow>.

But then Meikal's expression took a drastic turn.

"...how?"

The man had no anvil or hammer and only used his finger tip to drill a hole into the hilt made from the Four-Horned Gaksu.

An act of insanity. It would have taken hundreds of fingers to break through it. He had heard that there were high ranking Nightmares that were capable of altering a gaksu's horn without any tools, but he had never heard of a human being able to do so.

'He was able to do it so easily, what about all I've done until now... '

With a loud, thunderous noise, it exploded into dust. It was like all of <Twilight's Shadow> had collapsed. The sound was loud enough to shake the floor that the workshop was built on.

Meikal's mind had gone blank.

That sound, it was like every effort he had made throughout his entire life had been shattered.

After some time, the dust that had filled the air slowly began to settle.

There was a hole that extended even into the anvil that was under the horn, the diameter of the whole being the width of a finger. It was so deep that the end couldn't be seen.

"T-t-t-that...!"

Everyone in the workshop couldn't believe their eyes.

"If it's like this it's fine right?"

The man in question was calmly standing at his spot. His finger was pointed at the sky, the hilt rotating around his finger as the man calmly stood there.

Watching the sword swing round and round, Meikal's world also spun round and round until he came back to his senses. Although dizzy, Meikal successfully asked Jae Hwan a question.

"...who the hell are you?"

Getting tired of hearing that question, Jae Hwan replied back.

"Vice head."

Hearing that, Meikal's expression slightly improved. For someone of such skill, it was highly likely that his master was a famous and renowned person.

"Vice head? What workshop are you from?"

Jae Hwan answered in an indifferent voice.

"<Twilight's Shadow>."

Hearing that, some of the surrounding craftsmen glared at him.

"This punk he...? Are you fucking around!"

Jae Hwan spoke up without flinching.

"You promised earlier, didn't you?"

Promise? Everyone in the studio was confused.

Then all of a sudden, the same scene appeared in everyone's heads.

Wait, surely?

'Good, if there's anyone here who can dig a hole into the horn, then whoever it may be will be vice head of <Twilight's Shadow> for the day!'

Vice head Meikal's expression stiffened.

Jae Hwan talked again.

"I am the vice head of <Twilight's Shadow> for the rest of the day."

But in the next second. The Four-Horned Gaksu's horn that was spinning around Jae Hwan's finger suddenly made a light snapping noise as its body became riddled in cracks.

What in the world?

Meikal's expression paled.

"N-nooooo...!"

The horn of the Four-Horned Gaksu entrusted to Meikal by the vice head of the [Limitless Sect] scattered into the air. Jae Hwan frowned and couldn't help but mumble to himself.

"Ah shit, it was just a light thrust as well."

Chapter 22

The World's 1% (3)

Meikal's mind went blank, completely forgetting the prestige of <Twilight's Shadow>. He didn't know what kind of joke he was playing, but the Four-Horned Gaksu's horn was broken. An object with a sky high price incomparable to most things in all of Chaos, the horn of the Four-Horned Gaksu.

What would he say to the vice head of the Limitless Sect now?

"Ah, I didn't do it on purpose, sorry."

"Sorry? Did you just say that you're sorry?"

Meikal said as his mustache trembled. The only thoughts rushing through his head were whether or not he should beat the man in front of him to death with a hammer or burn him to death in the fire.

Jae Hwan opened his mouth.

"I'll compensate you with a better horn."

"...with a better horn?"

Hearing that, the surrounding craftsmen sneered. Compensate, and a Four-Horned Gaksu at that. Did he not know what kind of monster a Four-Horned Gaksu was like? Not only were they rare beasts, but there was no guarantee that the heads or vice heads from the ten sect would even be able to successfully hunt such a monster. He was going to compensate for the horn of a monster like that?

"Rather than that, your side should keep your promise as well."

"Promise?"

Meikal recalled what he had said a few moments ago. When he had said that anyone who could dig out a gem holder in the Four-Horned Gaksu would be the vice head of the workshop for the day. Meikal's face had a blank expression. Is that something someone would say given the current situation?

"If you can compensate for the Four-Horned Gaksu, then vice head or not, you can do whatever the hell you want for the day. But if you can't compensate for the horn, then don't think about leaving here alive."

Jae Hwan nodded and pointed towards Neiven.

"Put it down here."

Following Jae Hwan's gesture, Neiven put down the horn he was cradling onto the floor by the furnace. It was a large, black horn that had once belonged to an unknown monster. Everyone stared at it while wondering what it was.

But then everyone simultaneously took in a deep breath and just stared. An unknown amount of time passed.

Then someone sighed and muttered something.

"Oh my God, a Garnak's horn..."

Monsters in 《Chaos》 possessing five or more horns were categorized into their own Phylogenetic Trees. Creatures at that level were just that powerful, and dangerous. It was a wolf-type monster that multiple heads and vice heads from Chaos' ten sects had to come forth in order to subdue.

A Five-Horned Gaksu, Garnak.

Silence filled the workshop. Meikal spoke up with a heavy voice.

"Close the door. We're not taking anymore customers for today."

The worker closest to the door hurriedly rushed to close it. Accompanying a loud, screeching noise, a large iron gate sealed the entrance. Even for Meikal, this was only the third time that he had seen the raw horn of a garnak in such pristine condition. He had seen one being worked on in a different yet famous workshop when he had first

arrived at 《Chaos》 and had seen another one when he watched over his predecessor vice head's shoulders as he worked.

“Sure is amazing.”

Whether or not it was a young garnak, the horn was smooth without any grooves. Everyone in the workshop concentrated on the horn with a glowing expression on their faces. If they could just work with such a large and beautiful material like that for just one night...

“This should be enough for compensation, right?”

“...of course. It would compensate many times over.”

The horn from a Five-Horned Gaksu was more than ten times as valuable as that of a Four-Horned Gaksu. They didn't even need the whole horn, just cutting off a wedge would be more than enough to pay them back for the damages. But this guy was offering the whole horn! It was enough to pay for the damages and still count as a long term transaction. After thinking about it for a bit, Meikal spoke up.

“This <Twilight's Shadow> will be yours for the rest of today.”

The surrounding began to buzz as people muttered about.

Meikal promptly silenced the surroundings.

“All of you, silence.”

The mumbling stopped. Meikal opened his mouth again.

“By the way, just where the hell did you get this horn?”

“I fought it.”

He directly fought a garnak?

Then just who the hell was this man? Not willing to drag this on any longer, Jae Hwan spoke up.

"I'm going to immediately start work, so get ready."

"By work, do you mean...?"

"I'll make it myself."

Neiven rushed his way to Meikal and whispered something into his ear. Meikal nodded his head.

"So that's how it is. You plan to make a sheath."

"That's right."

"What about the material?"

"It's this."

Jae Hwan pulled out another horn from his dimensional bag. It's quality and condition was even better than the first one. Since it was named a Five-Horned Gaksu, then obviously it would have five horns. As the garnak's killer, Jae Hwan would have five horns in his possession as well.

Of course, Meikal didn't misunderstand.

"Are you saying that you're going to make just a sheath with the horn of a garnak?"

It was the horn of a garnak, not of a Four-Horned Gaksu or a Three-Horned Gaksu, but a garnak. It was a material that would be transformed into a masterpiece even if it was treated like mud. But he was going to use a top class material like that to make a plain sheath? Meikal couldn't help but think that the young man in front of him absolutely did not know the value of a Garnak's horn.

"Can I take a look at the lucky sword that will be paired with the sheath?"

Jae Hwan handed him the sword that was hanging from his waist. Looking at the sword's information, Meikal let out a small sigh.

"Huh, Frost Dragon's Sword."

"You already knew?"

"It's a sword made from the horn of a Frost Dragon King's horn. Well, at least that's what it says if I follow the description."

If it was the Frost Dragon King, then of the 12 zones within the 《Great Lands》, it was a renowned beast that resided in the most dangerous of the 12 zones, the 'Forgotten Zone'. A sword created from the horn of a legendary dragon. There was no way it wouldn't be a renowned sword. The unfortunate thing was that this sword was most likely a 'replica'.

Regardless, it was still a fascinating origin. Although Meikal didn't often hear about news from the 《Great Lands》, something on the scale of the King Frost Dragon being hunted would quickly reach his ears, but as far as he knew, such a thing hadn't happened.

It was possible that it was a sword created by some Nightmare using the King Frost Dragon's horn as a theme. In other words, this sword was not actually created from the King Frost Dragon's horn.

"It's definitely one of the few swords made by a Nightmare, but making a sheath for it out of a garnak's horn seems like a waste. Rather, using the horn to make a new sword..."

It was then that the sword began to tremble as it cried out with a 'oong oong' sound. Taking Meikal by surprise, he accidentally let go of the sword and let it fall towards the garnak's horn. The sword began to tremble more, its blade opening up like a mouth.

Wajajak wajajak.

The horn of the Five-Horned Gaksu began to disappear right in front of everyone's eyes. Meikal's face held the most surprised expression of all.

"No way, a Soul Weapon..."

Having consumed the horn, the Frost Dragon's Sword began to give off a bright light. It was the first time that Meikal had seen such a thing.

"It seems like today is just full of surprising sights. Your sword is evolving."

The blade grew sharper while its body grew increasingly denser and heavier. Its strength was in no way inferior to a sword made from the horn of a garnak. On another note, the black aura spilling out of the sword didn't seem like it could be concealed merely by wrapping it up in a cloth. It was certainly a sword that required a sheathe. If Jae Hwan were to walk around in public, its spirit power would attract unnecessary flies.

'The soul of that sword is definitely top class, just... '

The sword kept crying out as it unceasingly let out its black aura. Confirming the sword's state, Meikal spoke up.

"Looks like a major evolution. It will take a bit longer, but after it completes its evolution, its name will probably change."

"Name?"

"When a soul weapon undergoes a major evolution, its original name disappears."

The sword that had lost its name cried out in a lonely voice. Watching the sword's figure, Meikal hesitantly expressed his thoughts.

"But the material is gone now..."

The sword had consumed the material that Jae Hwan was going to use to make his sheath. Now what was he going to use to make his sheath?

"It's alright. I have another."

It's been stated before, but the Five-Horned Gaksu has five horns.

Seeing another horn come out of Jae Hwan's dimensional bag, Meikal threw his hands into the air with a defeated look on his face.



Meikal stood in front of the garnak's horn for some time. A horn that gleamed with a black luster. It was the first time he was going to work with a garnak's horn. A long time ago, Meikal had the fortune of observing the castellan's weapon being crafted from a garnak's horn, but...

'Hoho, can I do this?'

Even though he had been appointed as vice head and had even received the title of [Apprentice] , Meikal wasn't sure if he could even work on the horn of a Four-Horned Gaksu.

'What kind of [Apprentice] wouldn't have created their own tower by now... '

There was a huge gap even between those who carried the same title as [Apprentice] . Even if two beings held the title of apprentice, the imaginative power between humans and nightmares was vastly different. While humans were focusing on creating a sword, the nightmares were already creating a tower that could be a whole world on its own.

Meikal looked down at the garnak's horn.

It was a material that rarely made an appearance. It was something that overwhelmed people even if all they did was calmly observe.

"I'm sorry, but I don't think I'm capable of doing this..."

Jae Hwan was putting on some articles of clothing one piece at a time.

"You... I mean, temp vice head, what are you currently doing?"

Jae Hwan had suddenly started putting on a blacksmith's garb, and as he rolled up his sleeve, he spoke.

"I don't get what you're trying to say."

Meikal made a puzzled look on his face.

"I'm making the sheath."

"...huh?"

"You just help me from the side."

It was unexpected, but still, it was something he wanted to hear. He knew that the man in front of him named Jae Hwan possessed great strength. He didn't know what methods Jae Hwan had used, but it didn't change the fact that he had the ability to break the horn. But being able to break a horn and being able to process and craft the horn were two completely different tasks.

"Even if it's you..."

"You're right. I don't know if I could do it on my own."

Jae Hwan nodded his head. Jae Hwan possessed the destructive power to make changes to the horn, but not the skill and finesse to make the changes he wanted. Something like the garnak's horn wasn't something that could be processed by sheer force.

"That's why I need you."

Jae Hwan said while looking at the remnants of white aura on the end of Meikal's hammer that the Nightmares' skill [Process] had left behind.



Meanwhile, deep within the depths of Gorgon Castle.

A middle-aged man wearing a ceremonial uniform sat inside an inner room suddenly coughed as he sipped on a cup of tea.

"You lost him? What the hell does that mean?"

"...I'm sorry."

In front of the middle-aged man lay a man wearing a dark blue magician's clothing in a prostrate position with an ashamed expression on his face.

"How did you lose him?"

"That, I don't know either. By the time I was able to gather my wits... I was just lying down on a roof."

He had failed, but he didn't know why or how.

It made no sense.

The middle-aged man asked the man garbed in blue many questions.

"You, what order adapter are you now?"

"I'm a third order adapter."

"What is the grade and level of your stealth skill."

"Third grade, master level."

"Then how the hell were you discovered?"

"...I- I don't know."

"You're driving me crazy."

Even a higher order adapter would find it difficult, if not impossible, to discover a third order adapter hiding under the influence of a third grade mastered stealth skill. But despite that, not only did the other party detected his subordinate, he even sent out a formless and undetectable skill that knocked him out.

'Carlton said he couldn't have reached the fifth order.'

But based on what had happened, it was unknown whether or not he was a fifth order adapter. Preparations were needed to be made in case the other party happened to be a higher order adapter.

"He needs to be found. Even if you have to search through every nook and cranny, you need to find him out."

Suddenly, a loud 'koong' resounded from the depths of the underground dungeon. The dungeon shook, but although it shook only slightly, it was enough for the middle-aged man who had already become a higher order adapter to feel it. He could even faintly hear the long, drawn out screams resonating from within the dungeon depths. A distant scream wracked with pain.

The middle-aged man's expression took on a tint of sadness.

“...castellan, please hold on for just a little longer.”

Chapter 23

The World's 1% (4)

A day passed in <Twilight's Shadow>, the light of the next morning finding its way into the workshop. The day that had been given to Jae Hwan had passed, yet neither Meikal nor the other craftsmen had unwilling expressions on their faces. Maybe it was the fact that witnessing a precious material like the garnak's horn being processed was a rare occasion.

Witnessing this was a story that none of the craftsmen present would ever forget.

Mino silently exited <Twilight's Shadow>.



A pub with a rowdy atmosphere. The loud voices of various middle-aged men could be heard from every corner of the pub. There was a loud hologram device hoisted up in the center of the pub currently blaring out a broadcast.

The broadcast's host was a pink-haired Nightmare with a small horn on her head.

[This week's highlights Hot Ten with Siluen! Unfortunately, it's time for the program to end now. Before we end, here's a video that all of you would most likely be familiar with by now. There haven't been any videos that was as widespread and well known as this one from 《Little Brother》 in recent days. Precisely the [99th Floor Solo Clear] Video!]

On the screen was a gigantic Frost Dragon soon followed by the appearance of a man. The figure of a man who only used thrust in order to overcome his obstacles. The man's face was covered with a mosaic in order to blur it. It was a security measure to prevent the leakage of the product's information.

There were some men sitting off to the side that discussed the man on the screen.

"I wonder what happened to him, he probably got scared at a sovereign's lovecall."

"Hey, don't you know? That Tower's cultivation suddenly came to a stop."

"Suddenly stopped? Why?"

"Who knows. I bet he got caught while fabricating a video. There are rumors saying that he ran away."

"What, are you saying that that video is a fake?"

"Of course you idiot. How could a single person complete a 1st Generation tower by himself."

The men's discussion slowly started to veer away. They spoke of this and that, but now they were talking about a story relevant to a world far from them. This was Chaos. The world of the dead.

"Where do you think a [Fruit] would fall? I want to be alive again."

"Keul keul, do you think a [Fruit] is something that'll just fall on your house?"

"Miss. Another One-Horned Gaksu wine here—"

At that time, a woman walked into the pub with a loud bang. It was Mino. Mino just walked up to the bar, cleared away the men's drinks, and sat down on a stool. The men's eyes focused on Mino. Slim waist and a white skinned, slender face.

"Hey missus, you come here alone?"

"Fuck off."

"Yep."

The men who were violently rebuffed by Mino quickly got out of their seats and left the pub. Watching those men, Mino laughed.

'Comparing myself to them, I'd be a strong opponent.'

Jae Hwan's face appeared in her head again.
She became disheartened.

The pub's owner appeared soon after.

"Look at this little chick driving away all of my business."

"...old lady Claire."

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"That's why oldy..... listen to me."

Mino was drunkenly speaking with a twisted tongue.

"I've heard enough, dumb girl."

The middle-aged woman, Claire, frowned. Claire was a colleague from Mino's homeworld of 'Arkal'.

"That's why what you said, it's like this."

"...Huh?"

"You almost died after trying to take advantage of a guy whose identity you don't know, but then in the end he saved your life."

"..."

"But despite that, you failed to recognize his grace and foolishly tried to make things

difficult for him."

"..."

"...so why are you still mindlessly chasing his back without coming to your senses?"

The wrinkles on Claire's forehead deepened.

She was very familiar with Mino. Mino was like this ever since the Nightmare Tower. The nature of her personality was somewhat foolish, and she was likely to play mischievous pranks and be a nuisance to those around her.

She wasn't a bad child.

But unfortunately, the child's surroundings were always beset by some dizzying events.

"If you think he was going to die because of you, then you're the delusional one, little chick."

Mino didn't say anything and simply drank more alcohol.

"...am I that much of an inconvenience?"

"Listening to you, he sounds like a dangerous guy, it'd be good if you quickly leave him. It's not like he's lacking anything."

"...ehehehe."

"Why are you chasing after him and bothering him?"

Mino's eyes shook as she heard that.

Mino silently thought about something for some time before finally speaking up.

"...it's just, looking at him, you know."

Claire had heard lines like that a countless amount of times since she had started operating this pub. Needless to say, she held herself back from exclaiming that it's happening again. But,

"It's infuriating."

An unexpected line came out of Mino's mouth.

"He's so cocky. He has no manners, his speech is crude... but for some reason, nobody is able to block his path. He just does whatever he wants, but nobody can be his opponent. Red Fox, Obstinate Carlton, and even the Twilight's Shadow's old man... Claire, do you know what I thought while seeing all of that?"

She spoke while surveying the interior of the pub.

"It felt like the life I've been living until now was for nothing."

"....."

"It's not like I died because I wanted to die. Even you Claire, you lived so diligently until now."

Something unexpected flashed through Mino's eyes.

"But he suddenly appeared out of nowhere, then as if everything we had kept until now was wrong, he broke all of it, he killed people, he ignored..."

Her cup was empty.

Mino poured herself another glass of gaksu wine.

The bitter fragrance of the horns mixed with the scent of the alcohol.

"Regardless, I want to see it. I can't do it, but I want to see someone punish him. That's why..."

Hearing Mino's story, Claire faintly felt something somewhere in the corner of her mind. It was at that moment that Claire realized something.

This child met someone she should have never met, and she had felt something that she should have never felt.

Claire knew what Mino was feeling. It was something Claire had also felt in the past. At the time, Claire turned away from it and ran away. Then she aged.

Claire opened her mouth and spoke in a stubborn tone.

"Mino, let me give you some advice."

"Huh?"

"Don't involve yourself with him any longer, don't even meet him."

"...Why?"

"If you stay with him any longer, then you'll 'really' die."

Mino was taken aback.

This was the first time she had seen Claire make such a serious face since she had accidentally caused the two of them to die.

As Mino was about to open her mouth to say something, something made from spirit power flew in through the window. Mino confirmed the identity of the sender.

[Northern Checkpoint Chief Inspector Carlton Zevier]

'... what is this stubborn ass sending me?'

As soon as she tried to open the message, Mino felt a pressuring power. It didn't feel like there was malicious intents, but the energy felt strange.

Moreover, there wasn't just one.

From the energies in the message, she could tell that there was more than one individual that Mino wasn't confident in being able to defeat in a face to face confrontation.

The door to the pub opened in the next moment and a number of unidentified people entered. Even though she was intoxicated, Mino had enough control over her faculties to realize the tension in the air, prompting her to pull out the dagger in her bosom.

One of the people stepped forward and asked her a question.

"Are you the Witch of Slaughter?"

"...if I am?"

The door to the pub closed as she answered.

An unknown man spoke up with a wide grin on his face.

"There's something you must do."



The smelting process began first by supplying power to the central furnace. Since the material this time was the garnak's horn, it was necessary to supply a much larger amount of spirit power than usual in order to produce a flame hot enough to process it.

While flames grew stronger, Jae Hwan just looked at the cleaned garnak's horn.

"First, show me the method you use to process it."

The very first step when processing a horn in <Twilight's Shadow> was to grasp the basic framework.

In fact, Meikal was already in the process of drafting up a design on the surface of the garnak's horn with a quill pen dipped in white ink.

The more specific and detailed the sketch was, the better. Once the shape of the horn was machined, it couldn't be turned back. Once the draft was completed, the craftsmen called out to Meikal.

Inside the central furnace was a fire burning bright white.

Meikal put the horn in a premade mold and placed it in the furnace in order to make it more malleable. After some time had passed, a strange bubble-like thing formed on the surface of the horn.

Meikal and the other craftsmen quickly removed the mold and swiftly brought the horn to a cutter in order to shape the horn.

The cutter moved along the lines of the white ink.

Even though it had become more malleable, the horn was so strong that it became necessary to go through a dozen cutters. As soon as they had just barely succeeded in the cutting, Meikal let out a sigh and spoke.

“It'll be a battle of skill from here.”

[Apprentice] class inherent skill, [Process] .

A skill that every skilled craftsman knew.

It was hard to believe that the brilliant white light coming off of Meikal's hammer and chisel was the result of a mere craftsman. But Jae Hwan's expression remained unchanged. It was because he had seen a similar sight in the past before.

—Jae Hwan-gun, what I'm doing is not smelting. It's a game of chance.

Jay had said something like that one day.

Atopos' prime blacksmith, Jay.

—I've been working very hard while watching you Jae Hwan-gun. I've already mastered all of the skills relevant to a blacksmith. I can be confident in myself. I have a 99% chance of repairing any weapon coming from the 《Nightmare Tower》 .

The weapons from the 《Nightmare Tower》 were just common weapons in the 《Great Lands》 . All of the weapons in the tower were just replicas of the original.

Nevertheless, a 99% chance was still incredibly high. Only Jay had such a tremendous

chance of repairing a weapon in all of the 《Nightmare Tower》. He had almost never seen Jay ever fail to repair something.

— But ever since I've reached this level, I've had some strange thoughts in recent days. I want to think that I'm missing something crucial. That's the sort of thing I've been thinking.

Jae Hwan had asked him what he meant at the time.

Jay responded as such.

— I have devoted all of my time to raise my skill proficiency so that I could reach a probability of 99%. But despite that, I can't help but think sometimes. Was I striving towards the 99%, or was I desperately running away from the prospect of the 1%, or something like that...

Jae Hwan first experienced the powers of [Doubt] not long after he heard Jay say that.

A strength different from a skill.

It was incomplete and difficult to work with, but it was a free power.

"I get the gist of it now, why don't you stop for a moment."

Having sweat so much that his back was soaked, Meikal stopped.

Although it took an absurd amount of time, the garnak's horn did not have a single blemish.

Only the chisel and hammer were broken.

"...Smelting is a time consuming process. On top of that, the garnak's horn is something that must have at least a month's worth of time invested into it."

"I am aware."

"...You already know? Huhuh."

Regardless, Meikal had a difficult expression on his face.

"Don't tease an old man like this."

" ... "

"Can't you tell if I'm lying or not?"

Jae Hwan did not answer. He simply touched the surface of the horn without speaking. Even if it were hammered a countless number of times, it wouldn't leave a single blemish behind. Although it had been awhile since Jae Hwan had become unable to use the 《Interface System》, he was still able to figure out what was going on by reading into the messages that Meikal was getting.

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[Skill has failed.]

[Skill has failed.]

[Skill has failed.]

[Skill has failed.]

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"I'm too old to process a garnak's horn. If only you had come to me earlier."

Sitting on a chair by the furnace, Meikal lit a cigarette.

"Well, now that the promised day has passed, can I speak more freely? Afterall, you're not the vice head anymore."

Jae Hwan silently nodded his head.

With the authority of the vice head back in his hands, Meikal's expression had loosened up.

"Do you smoke?"

Jae Hwan shook his head.

Meikal let out a stream of smoke and watched as it lingered in the air.

The faces of the nearby craftsmen became dark.

By nature, Meikal wasn't someone who did any unnecessary actions when working on a commission. But Meikal had put down his hammer and was instead smoking a cigarette.

"If it doesn't work a hundred times, and then doesn't work a thousand times, then, well, there are some things in this world that are just impossible. Of course, youngsters like Neiven over there would think otherwise."

Hearing that, Neiven's face grew bright red. It was the craftsman that had led Mino and Jae Hwan when they first arrived.

"Th-that's not true vice head-nim!"

"What do you mean not true? Did you already forget what you said to me last time?"

Meikal turned towards Jae Hwan again and spoke.

"That youngster over there is a very hard working guy. When I recruited him he was talking to me at the entrance of the workshop, but he does have a promising future. Maybe the next 'Artisan of Dawn' will be him. If he's lucky, he might receive the [Apprentice] designation. But..."

Meikal took the cigarette out of his mouth and smothered it on the anvil's surface.

"Even he will never be able to surpass the limitations of his birth. Humans can never reach the level of top craftsman. Just like how I can't process this garnak's horn."

While listening to Meikal's self scorn and lamentations, Jae Hwan realized that Meikal had failed to start a work on the horn. The horn was a gauge. It showed that from the depths of Meikal's being, he had already failed.

Jae Hwan opened his mouth to speak.

"You won't know for sure unless you continue."

"I've already done the best that I can. A hundred time, a thousand times."

"Then you have to do it ten thousand times."

"And what do I do if it fails even after ten thousand times?"

"Then you do it ten billion times."

"Ten billion? Euhuhut! You, you're young."

Meikal let out an uproarious laugh while bending his back.

"So you think that I haven't put in enough hard work and dedication, is that it?"

"..."

"I have. I don't know if you'll believe me. You're right, I probably haven't reached ten billion like you've said, but I know that I've got to be pretty damn close. Train, train, and train some more. That's why I've been able to come this far."

The years brushed by in Meikal's eyes. Many, many years had passed since he had come to this workshop by means of the 《Illusion Tree》 .

"How many years have you lived?"

Jae Hwan counted to himself. He had lived for twenty years before entering the tower but had lived thirty years in the tower.

Then taking that into consideration, it wouldn't be wrong to say that he had lived fifty years.

"Fifty years."

"Is that right? Looks like you died much earlier than expected."

Afterall, Jae Hwan's outward appearance was that of a twenty year old man. It would be impossible unless he had died when he was younger.

Meikal spoke.

"I've lived a hundred and fifty years."

He spoke in a strangely arrogant tone. After learning about how old Jae Hwan was, Meikal became more relaxed. He fell into deep thought. No matter how amazing this man was, he was still too young and too immature to understand vicissitudes of time.

"No matter how I say it, you won't understand. Afterall, you have yet to live as many years as I have."

It was impossible to understand the 'time' of others. It was a truth. Jae Hwan opened his mouth to speak.

"No, I know."

Hearing something stupid, Meikal raised an eyebrow.

Then a smile sprouted on his face.

It was precisely that sort of mindset that a youngster would have.

He was exactly the same when he was young as well. He had wanted to say that he 'knew' of the difficulties that age brought. But now he knew that there were some things that one could never know unless they were old.

Meikal opened his mouth to Jae Hwan for a word of advice, but was a step too slow and was cut off by Jae Hwan.

"You are someone who has invested far more effort than anyone else."

"..."

“Surely you've worked hard and trained hard in order to get to where you are now.”

Listening to Jae Hwan's calm voice, Meikal became speechless. They were simple words that stated simple facts. They were words that lacked finesse, and words that could not be praised.

But in the presence of those words, Meikal shook.

Perhaps it was because nobody had ever talked to him so plainly and so straightforwardly. He was praised and put on a pedestal when he was young, and honored and framed as a great man when he was old. Yet, he had never felt as though he were truly being recognized.

'Looks like I'm starting to go senile as well.'

Meikal thought to himself with a bitter expression on his face.

"Thank you. I've finally reached the day after living my life where a young man would comfort me."

Jae Hwan didn't give an answer.

His interaction with the blunt man in front of him sparked some curiosity in Meikal's self. How would the younger and arrogant Meikal evaluate the life of the old Meikal?

As the saying goes, if you could ask your past self something, what would you ask?

Meikal took out another cigarette and asked Jae Hwan a question.

“What would you say that I'm lacking?”

"..."

"Talent? Birth? Or would you say luck?"

Looking at Meikal, Jae Hwan's pupils deepened.

No, to say his gaze deepened was false. It wasn't like his gaze had become an bottomless hole or a window into an abyss. Inside his eyes was something discomfoting that Meikal couldn't quite describe with words.

In the midst of his discomfort, Jae Hwan spoke.

"You are not lacking in anything."

"...I lack nothing?"

"Instead of saying you lack something, it's more like..."

"More like?"

"You could say that you have too much."

"I have too much? What do you mean?"

He had asked if he was lacking anything but was given the answer that he had too much. Meikal looked at Jae Hwan with a questioning expression on his face. Jae Hwan reworded his answer,

"You've lived too long."

Chapter 24

The World's 1% (5)

Live too long?

Hearing what Jae Hwan said, it wasn't Meikal who was angry, but the surrounding craftsmen.

"How dare you say that!"

On the other hand, Meikal's state of mind had changed, and he seemed to be seriously worrying about something.

"...what exactly does that mean?"

Jae Hwan did not respond immediately.

"Try using your skill again."

After hesitating for a moment, Meikal got up from his seat and followed according to Jae Hwan's instructions.

Grabbing his hammer and chisel, he began to knock away at the horn.

Once, twice, thrice.

Seeing Meikal knock away at the horn like a machine, Jae Hwan promptly stopped him.

"What did you just see?"

"...what?"

"What did you see when using your skill?"

Seeing the confusion in Meikal's eyes, Jae Hwan shook his head.

"Do it again and pay attention."

Meikal used his skill again. The message 'Skill has failed' repeatedly rang in his ears. Instead of succumbing to the message in despair, Meikal focused on what had caused the skill to fail.

What can you see there?

He didn't quite see anything.

No, if he were to be specific, he could see his hammer and chisel.

"I see. Those would be the things I can see."

"...are you messing with me?"

Meikal was on the verge of throwing his hammer at Jae Hwan.

Jae Hwan opened his mouth.

"Your hammer and chisel, do you know what principles to follow in order to work on the horn?"

Meikal hesitated before giving his answer.

"Well, with the strength of the [Process] skill..."

Jae Hwan spoke while shaking his head.

"I should have worded my question differently from the beginning. I'll ask again."

Jae Hwan stared into Meikal's eyes, and composed a question consisting of selected

words.

"Do you know the principles and mechanics behind how the [Process] skill works?"

Meikal's expression stiffened.

"You, do you understand the weight behind what you're saying?"

Meikal said, his tone half angry and half incredulous.

"What kind of principle the [Process] skill uses?"

All skills stem from a predecessor skill.

Those skills were the origin of skills.

The Nightmare's [Process] was one of those skills.

Using those skills to work on a material was the same as directly modifying the particles that the material consisted of. They were not created by anyone, but were instead birthed from the beginning. It was like water or fire when hitting the elements. Something that had existed from the beginning. Those from the 《Great Lands》 would deem those skills to be the first skills.

How could humans explain the origin of the world?

Then what the hell does he mean by asking for the principles behind the skill?

Jae Hwan nodded his head while speaking.

"That's right. You don't even know what exactly it is that you're using, but despite that you've been using it all this time."

Those words poked at Meikal's pride.

Meikal eventually opened his tightly closed teeth.

"...to concentrate spirit power into the hammer and chisel, and by using that strength to delicately chip away at the horn. That's probably the underlying principle behind the skill."

“Is that right? If the [Process] skill was so simple, then how come others cannot use it?”

“That...”

Only those who had learned the [Process] skill could use it, otherwise, why was it that those who hadn't learned it did not apply such a simple principle themselves despite not having learned the skill?

Meikal closed his mouth. Slightly thinking about it, Meikal realized how ridiculous his explanation sounded. What Jae Hwan said made sense. If the principle was so simple, then wouldn't people be able to use the [Process] skill without actually learning it?

“You don't know what that skill truly is. Despite that, you continue to use that skill.”

At that moment, Meikal couldn't help but hate the man in front of him.

Nobody knew the principle behind [Process] in the first place.

But why did this man insult him and look down on him for not knowing such a thing?

“You speak as though you know what the principle is.”

“That's because I do know. To be specific, I figured it out a few moments ago.”

“What?”

Jae Hwan silently traced the grooves on the horn. As though responding to Jae Hwan's finger, the surface of the horn began to sway. Meikal's eyes widened. It was a magical scene.

“H-how did [Process] ...!”

The horn slowly split along the line traced by Jae Hwan's finger tip. Calmly and slowly. As it followed the white light emitting from Jae Hwan's finger, it eventually just split completely in half. Meikal's head was dizzy.

Without realizing, Meikal's legs lost all strength. His innards were in turmoil as he

suffered from both jealousy and hopelessness.

"...who the hell are you? Just what kind of blessing did you receive to be able to possess so much talent?"

"It's not talent."

It was a firm voice.

"Observe closely once more. Then tell me what you see."

Meikal once more took a look at Jae Hwan's fingertips. The particles that came into contact with Jae Hwan's fingertip disintegrated into fine powder. It looked like it was being eaten by something.

"...are the particles decomposing?"

Jae Hwan nodded his head.

Meikal's mind focused again.

"It won't be easy for you. Because of the tremendous amount of training and hard work you've done in your long life, the 'world' that you know and see would have already solidified into a higher degree."

He listened closely to Jae Hwan's words.

Even after seeing the proof at Jae Hwan's fingertips, Meikal still couldn't completely believe what he saw. The expectation that Jae Hwan was using some sort of trick was clouding Meikal's eyes and thoughts.

It was his distrust of youth.

The egotism of someone who had accumulated many years of life.

Tens of millions of tannings, quenches, and hammerings, these were not the results of his work, but of his undying pride.

"All of your hard work was not for nothing."

“Then...”

“You've practiced so hard that you grew sick, shouldn't you have realized it by now?”

With a tap, the garnak horn under Jae Hwan's fingertip shattered.

"If despite all of your work you couldn't succeed, then it is not you who is in the wrong, but the world."

"Th-that..."

Meikal found it impossible to understand what Jae Hwan was trying to say. How could the world itself be at fault?

Meikal recalled the moment he first learned [Process] . He recalled his younger days when his eyes were set upon the backs of the Nightmares that walked in the same path that he did.

The young Meikal was anxious.

He kept thinking that there would be a day when he would become like those Nightmares, but there was still a strange doubt in his mind. Could he overcome and stand over them if he trained the way they did?

But just because he would listen to doubts didn't mean that the young Meikal would take it to heart.

In the end, all Meikal could do was put in more effort.

Meikal used the skill over and over again until his body could no longer bear the burden.

He trained and trained until his mind went blank.

By devoting himself to his extraordinary efforts, Meikal eventually forgot his original doubts.

He forgot all of it. As his skill level went up, his abilities increased and the chance of

success went up as well. An honest world that would reward those who worked hard. In that kind of world, Meikal could not doubt his own path.

Eventually, he ended up in his current place.

A place where all of his efforts failed to shed any more light on this path that he tread on.

Meikal finally understood.

Only when he was young could he blame the world.

"...you said that the world is wrong?"

Meikal spoke with a heavy voice.

"Then what do you want me to do?"

An overwhelming voice laced with Meikal's 150 years of blood, sweat, and tears.

A voice completely dyed by the experiences of his years.

"Do you want me to fight the world?"

Jae Hwan calmly stared at Meikal.

He stared at him with the eyes of a veteran who did not forsake his world when his world forsook him.

He stayed there like that for a while.

"You may have progressed in years, but you still have power to fight the world."

Hearing that, Meika's eyes shook.

"Look carefully once more. Rely on nothing but purely on your own eyes."

Meikal who had been blank faced suddenly had a late realization what Jae Hwan meant. Jae Hwan was telling Meikal... Let go of the years you have accumulated. Forget everything.

Deny the life that you have lived thus far.

It was an extremely painful thing.

However, Meikal had an inkling of excitement as he wondered about what kind of world he would see through this denial. That curiosity was perhaps the last remnant of Meikal's youth.

It was the first time Meikal forgot a skill since the time of his birth.

He struggled to free himself from the shackles that had become one with his soul throughout the years of his life. Although he was struggling, he refused to close his eyes. He widened his eyes and focused on Jae Hwan's fingertip.

It was so that he could lay eyes on something that he had missed despite the life he had lived.

Jae Hwan grasped a hammer and chisel.

The light from [Process] embodied the tools in Jae Hwan's hands.

Tang.

Once more, tang.

And yet again.

Tang.

Every time he heard that sound, Meikal felt that something in his soul was slowly becoming undone. The numerous facts that he had deemed to be common sense were slowly unraveling.

An unknown amount of time passed.

Suddenly, a loud crack resounded throughout the workshop.

As though a giant glass was cracking from its edges.

A certain truth had enraptured his head.

Meikal's face was suddenly overcome by fear. Is this possible? Am I witnessing something that I should have never set eyes on? Without even knowing, Meikal tightly shut his eyes. Silence found its way into the world. Something slowly made its way

through the overwhelming silence. A terrible loneliness came to attack him. He knew now.

The world he have been living in all this time, it had been destroyed.

Although terrified, Meikal was also curious, curious about the new world that he had stepped into. Utilizing all of his strength, Meikal forced his eyes open.

The garnak's horn was watching him.
Yet, it was no longer a horn.

Its body was huge, tall enough to reach the battlements of Gorgon Fortress, and its body was inlaid with thorns and teeth that threatened to consume its surroundings. A monster comprised of hideous masses of hate.

Meikal faced the monster with trembling hands and trembling lips.

Is this what I had been facing up against this entire time?
Have I been using my petty abilities against something like that?

Looking around at his surroundings, where there should have been his fellow craftsmen were now changed with corpses. Originating from those emaciated corpses was a terrible stench. Maggots crawled out of the eye sockets.

Meikal was on the verge of losing his mind.

Then there was Jae Hwan.
Holding onto a hammer and chisel.

A man, possessing no skills, facing up against a monster.

When the monster attacked Jae Hwan, Jae Hwan struck back and put it in its place. The monster let out a loud and hideous scream. Blood splashed out of the monster's body, its bodily fluids freely flowing out of its wounds. Nevertheless, the monster did not seem to suffer a heavy blow. Rather, it seemed pleased. Like it was pleased that it was fighting such an opponent after a long time.

The surrounding corpses heaved as they screamed.
Whether they were cheering for Jae Hwan or supporting the monster was unknown.

At the center of the confusion and insanity was Meikal who had been shaken in both body and mind.

'Alas, has this man always been living in this sort of world?'

An Awakened who lived in a world devoid of skills, systems, and level ups. A truly honest world where nothing can deceive you. A world wholly made of truth. Although he was so nauseous that he was on the verge of throwing up, he still experienced the exquisite taste of the smithing process.

This was the world after the fall.

How could a world like this exist?

How could the man in front of him live in this world without losing his mind?

Meikal made eye contact with Jae Hwan for a brief second.

In this world, Jae Hwan looked like a normal person. He was neither a hero nor a savior sent to save the world. He was an average young man. If anything, the only outstanding feature he possessed was his courage not to forsake this world.

Meikal understood Jae Hwan's insanity for the first time. He could feel and understand the loneliness and sorrow that Jae Hwan experienced. After having understood all this, he came to a realization that nobody would ever be able to understand this man.

The garnak's horn stared at Jae Hwan with calm eyes.

It is impossible for you to come here.

A fear that had not received the permission of the world.

Meikal's legs were trembling.

There was no room for retreat now.

The monster was approaching with an outstretched hole.

The hole was full of corpses.

In the next moment, Meikal found himself staring into the large pupil of the monster.

'How, how in this world...'

That was Meikal's last thought before the monster consumed him.
Well, before the monster almost consumed him.

Tuk.

Meikal caught a glimpse of Jae Hwan as Jae Hwan pulled him out of the monster's grasps.

While wiping the sweat off his brow, Jae Hwan spoke up.

"Are you not going to keep it together?"

"Heo-heok..."

"Did you forget that you're in the midst of crafting? Properly help me."

Feeling Jae Hwan pinching him awake, Meikal once again faced the monster in a dizzy state.

He felt Jae Hwan's hand grasping his shoulder. The old Meikal grasped for courage. Courage to overcome this world that lacked skills. Courage to forge a path that none had tread before. Courage to forge a path that he could have departed on years ago but had refused to do so.

All of a sudden, skin began to grow from Meikal's hands. Blood vessels began to form within his body, and blood began to pulse. He felt a heart begin to throb in his chest, and his vision grew clearer. Meikal felt power flow all throughout his body. Like the day he first held a hammer in the prime of his youth.

Meikal ran at the monster.

As the garnak's horn grew even closer, Meikal raised his hammer.



Two days passed.

Jae Hwan's sheath was finally finished.



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