

## **New Eden 971**

### Chapter 971: The Unforeseen Issue

"In any case," David said, resuming his briefing.

"Once inside the caldera, we'll need a way to either ditch our escort, or make sure they can't follow us. Because as soon as the harpies spot us, there won't be time to tell them to run. Harpies tend to act as a flock, and by my estimations, there should already be no less than thirty.

"If we have to cover for two regular folks while we fight, this hunt goes from already dangerous to possibly deadly. We'll need all our focus on them."

"I'll take care of that," Liu Yan said with a mysterious grin.

"No killing," Alex interjected, unsure of what he had in mind.

Liu Yan put on an offended face, looking at Alexander with a faked disgruntlement.

"Of course, no killing! Who do you think I am?" he rebutted.

Alex shrugged, saying, "Eh. I barely know you. Maybe you're a closet psychopath. Better to specify than have to deal with bodies."

Liu Yan coughed at his response, only realizing after a moment that he was joking.

But David raised his hand, interrupting their banter.

"Can I keep going? Or will we waste our day here, chatting back and forth?"

Alex smiled at him, saying nothing more, and Liu Yan looked at David apologetically.

"Thank you," David replied to their silence.

"Where was I? Ah, yes. Once we ditched the escort, we'll have to make our way down into the caldera and attract the harpies' attention. Once we have their eyes on us, we should be able to take care of them swiftly, which would be ideal, since most of you don't have a mana lobe yet.

"Something that our guild leader could fix, if he wasn't always busy doing things on his own," David said, blame dripping from his words.

Alex looked away, acting like a spot on the ceiling had caught his attention, making David shake his head in annoyance.

"In any case, we will need to take care of this as swiftly as possible. I don't know if there are only regular harpies, as the satellite imagery only catches sight of the nest periodically, and none of the snaps show anything other than normal ones.

"I can't even find their hatching area, which is what worries me the most," he sighed, going through the snaps, all of which showed increasingly more harpies.

This was indeed worrying, as they had no solid idea of what they were stepping in.

"My most realistic bet here is that they have nested in one of the volcanic tubes that open up over the sea. But since the angle never shows us inside, I have no way to be sure. We'll have to be careful about this," David pointed out.

He swiped at the table again, a 3D rendering of the volcano appearing instead of the satellite imagery.

"With the Bellemares' help, we were able to map the island and the volcanic tubes that still pass under it, as well as inside it. Sadly, we couldn't get a satellite scan, so we only know the layout.

"With this information, we should be able to track down any stray nests if there are any, and take care of them to eliminate the problem. But this is where the issue could get more dangerous..." David said, pausing at his last word.

Alex looked at him, a worried expression flashing on his face.

"What haven't told us, David?" he asked.

David looked at him and pursed his lips in hesitation.

"We got recent reports of seismic activity of the volcano. All signs point to the volcano becoming active again," he said, hesitantly.

Alex and Kary both frowned.

"Isn't that a good thing? I doubt the monsters could resist getting submerged in lava," Alex pointed out, with a cocked eyebrow, thinking nature could fix their issue for them.

But David's sigh pushed his building relief away.

"It's not that simple, Alex. This volcano has been considered dormant for a long time now. Its last eruption was over six thousand years ago. If it's now showing signs of activity, after so long of dormancy, without a triggering factor like a massive earthquake, or shift in tectonic plates, then it means something else is at play."

Kary looked at the 3D rendering, and saw that the tunnels all connected in the center, about a hundred feet under sea level, into a large chamber, from where a much larger tunnel went toward the center of Jeju Island, where the main volcano was located.

"I read somewhere that Jeju volcano was also considered dormant. Are there signs of activity at that one as well? Or is it just this one?" she asked, looking concerned.

David shook his head no.

"Just this one. Which is what worries me. The last time, there were no signs of any activity around Jeju. This means that everything that is happening now is not a recurring event from my last life. I have no idea what to expect as an outcome.

"But I do know one thing," he said, pointing at the chamber she had been eyeing.

"Whatever is causing the activity, it's in that chamber. And if we let it linger too long, it could cause a catastrophic event to the entire island. So our hunt might turn into something bigger, depending on what we find..."

Kary and Alex weren't too happy about this. They were heavily unprepared for an expedition any longer than a single day.

Even if they could buy supplies directly here for a more extended trip, they lacked the manpower to rotate in the event of a multi-day hunt. This trip would get increasingly dangerous the longer it took.

"And why are you only telling us this now?" Alex asked, slightly peeved he had held this information from them.

"Because I wasn't sure until we landed. Katherine was still doing scans with her satellites and scouring the web for reports of seismic activity. It isn't easy, even for her, to hack into science institutes undetected, you know?"

Alex clicked his tongue, annoyed at this truth.

"And what would this mean in a more general term?" he asked.

"It means we might not be able to achieve complete success here. We might need to call in some reinforcements, or forsake complete victory altogether..."

## Chapter 972: Going Over The Plan

Alex gave David an annoyed glance.

"Is that why you kept looking worried every time we landed somewhere? Were you receiving the reports one by one?"

David simply nodded, his face already strained to stay composed.

"Why didn't you tell us anything sooner? I can understand not wanting to worry us, but we could have at least managed to get more people on board if we knew sooner. Why did you keep it for yourself?"

David sighed loudly, scratching his chin with a tired expression.

"And what then? If we had gotten more people on board, and all this was a false alarm. What then? Do you think we can sneak more people into the volcano's crater as it stands? Don't you think the more we are, the less easy it is to stay low profile?"

Jin-Sil interjected here, trying to ease the tension slowly building up.

"I doubt bringing more people would have been a good idea. This is a protected site we are going to. If the authorities see a bunch of youngsters pull up to it, they'll think we are trying to throw a party. I think David was right to keep this small."

David smiled at her, glad someone was still looking at the situation as a whole. But Athena quickly snubbed him and looked back at Rì-Chu, ignoring his sympathetic glance.

He could tell from her attitude that she had not done this for him.

Regardless, she was right.

"As she said, we needed to be a smaller group to ease our access. At our current numbers, we can still pass as a group of young rich kids trying to sightsee the world on our parents' fat wallets. Any bigger and we'd raise all matters of red flags."

Alex was unconvinced by his excuse, but calmed down as Kary's hand lay on his forearm.

"Alright, let's all calm down. I agree with Alex that keeping this from us was ill-advised. But I understand your reasons. I would have preferred you bring this up sooner so we could plan contingencies.

"But we can make do with our current group. We simply have to find a solution to a possible battle of attrition. We can do that together, instead of arguing; what do you say?"

Alex nodded, swallowing his anger at being kept in the dark by his ally, while David pushed aside the matter altogether, focusing back on the first part of their briefing.

Time flew by quickly, and by the time they were done discussing every occurrence they could think of, it was already lunchtime.

"Alright!" Kary said, clapping her hands to get attention on her.

"What do you all say we eat something local before we make our way to the eastern part of the island?!" she asked, keeping her enthusiasm up in hopes of infecting others with it.

Instantly, lights lit up in Jonathan, Violette, Winston, and Cory's eyes.

Alex tried to hide his excitement, as did David, but they couldn't deny their want to try some local food. Who wouldn't want to experience the clash of cultures firsthand, after all?

Jin-Sil pulled her neurophone out of her ear and opened KakaoMap to find a restaurant not too far from the airport.

"There is something a few miles away along the beach that I think you could all enjoy. It's a KBBQ and hotpot restaurant that is famous around here. Care to try that out?" she asked, opening the menu's photos.

Alex instantly started nodding frantically, as the images of meat and the vivid colours of the hotpot titillated his taste buds. And he wasn't the only one.

As everyone seemed enraptured by the pictures, aside from Rì-Chu and Liu Yan, who could eat something similar in China, and weren't too fazed, Jin-Sil put the phone back to her ear to get the directions directly in her mind, and led the way.

Jin-Sil and Kary had already coordinated the rental of four mini-vans for the transport of their gear and themselves, and it didn't take long for the four vans to be loaded with the gear.

Now was only the separating of the people that remained, before leaving the hangar and airport, to head into Jeju.

David insisted he drive one van, since he didn't want to be dependent on anyone else, and looked around, only to see that no one was insisting on going with him. With a shrug, he headed to the van alone.

Jin-Sil took the second vehicle, Rì-Chū instantly stepping to her side, promptly followed by Liu Yan, who wasn't sure he wanted to ride with the others just yet.

The third van was driven by Killian, who insisted Winston come with him, since he wanted to talk to him about family stuff. Aapo tried following them, since he felt the least intimidated around them, but Killian glared at him, and that feeling quickly changed.

With that happening, Aapo reluctantly walked over to the first van, where David nodded at him, Aapo nodding back in silence.

The fourth and last van was filled by Alex, Kary, Violette, and Cory, with no fuss about it, aside from Jonathan and Cory playing rock-paper-scissors to determine who would ride with David, since the vehicles could only accommodate four people, given the amount of luggage they carried.

After three hands of humanity's most basic form of gambling, Jonathan had lost, and dragged his feet toward the first van, getting a chuckle out of David.

By the time this was done, the four vehicles had been fully loaded by the hangar team already, and they were cleared to leave.

It took them a little less than half an hour to leave the airport, which was a brief wait, all things considered, before they were on the roads of Jeju.

The cultural shock was almost immediate as they left the airport premises when all the shops and commerces were suddenly marked in bright and eye-catching colours, with the Korean Hangul spelling out the shop names.

Alex had to pay attention to where Jin-Sil was leading them, and this made his curiosity itch, as he couldn't stop to look at everything. But the same issue did not affect Kary, and her up- to-now stoic face changed to amazement, the joy of visiting a place she had always wanted to see becoming a reality.

Alex smiled warmly as he noticed her child-like amazement and sparkling eyes.

'At least her mind is off the impending danger that is upon us,' he mused, thinking about the volcano they were about to tread.

'The layout was all too familiar. That wasn't just a natural formation...'

#### Chapter 973: A Quick Lunch Break

Reaching the little restaurant didn't take too long, even though time felt like it had slowed to a crawl, with their attentions all enraptured by the local sights.

But, as they reached it and parked the four vans, the locals' attention also suddenly gravitated towards them. It wasn't every day they saw four vans roll up with so many foreigners walking out of them, after all.

As the group almost all felt the weight of the stares, Jin-Sil smiled at them and pushed them forward.

"Ignore them. They see white people often enough that they shouldn't be acting like this. It's probably just the size of the group that makes them curious. Once inside the restaurant, we'll be left in peace."

Pushing them inside, Jin-Sil pushed her way through them and to the reception counter.

"Annyeong. Yeon Jin-Sil-ilaneun ileum-eulo 12myeong yeyaghalyeogo iljjig jeonhwahaess- eoyo. Yeong-eo seobeoleul yocheonghal su issnayo? Uli geulub-eun geoui yeong-eoman sayonghabnida," she spoke, her words flowing rapidly.

The older woman at the counter bowed before gesturing to her right wordlessly.

In moments, the group was brought to a small private room, with enough room to sit sixteen people and then some, where the older woman motioned for them to enter, before bowing and leaving.

"That was almost awkwardly silent..." Alex commented, as he passed before Jin-Sil.

He paused a bit as he entered the room, uncertain what to do next.

Before him was a long rectangular table, but it was only a foot off the ground, with no chairs in sight. In their stead, lots of thick, comfy-looking cushions lay about around the table, and around the room.

"Um... I don't want to sound uncultured, but is this normal?" Alex asked.

Jin-Sil chuckled while Kary snickered at him, passing by him and sitting at the end of the table to the left.

"It's a traditional Soban table. They are low because you are supposed to sit on the ground. The cushions are comfortable enough for seating, and the floors are heated for maximum comfort," she explained, sitting diagonally to Kary.

Violette almost rushed to sit next to Kary, before David sat to Alex's right, his face a disinterested grimace.

"We should hurry up and eat so we can get to the hunt. Remember. The longer we push this back, the higher the risk of local authorities trying to handle it themselves, and all hell breaking loose," he grumbled.

"Hey, we all need food in our stomachs. Fighting on empty stomachs is also a risky factor, David," Alex argued, as he sat under the table.

He was a bit awkward as he did so, eliciting a few chuckles around the table from the others who were more versed in Korean sub-culture, but nothing enough to humiliate him.

Kary seemed the most dignified aside from Jin-Sil, and Alex could tell her eternal love for K-Dramas was paying off here, but he held from commenting on it.

Once everyone was seated, a light knock on the door echoed before a young male server entered, his appearance making the girls around the table raise an eyebrow while the guys shook their heads.

"Good morning, respectful guests," he said, in the most delicate voice Alex had ever heard in a man, as he bowed a little.

"My name is Choi Jun-Seo. I will be your server today. Since it is early lunchtime, is there anything I could get to you to fill the wait until our kitchen is ready to launch a big order? Some drinks? Appetizers maybe?" he asked, looking at them with a courteous smile.

Jin-Sil winked at Kary, whispering to her, "He lives up to his name, I'll say that much, hi hi." Kary became confused for a moment, since she didn't know what the young man's name meant, but, to Jin-Sil's right, Ri-Chū ground his teeth as he glared at the young man.

Jin-Sil saw this and blushed a bit, realizing he was acting jealous. She refrained from pouring oil over this fire, but couldn't help but throw some discreet glances at their server.

His tall but slim frame was almost effeminate by Western standards, but was all the rage in Asia. And with his pearly white smile and unblemished skin, Alex could only assume he was a wild hit with the young Korean ladies.

Alex was about to say that they were fine with waiting, but David cut him off.

"What's the legal age to drink in South Korea?" he asked, almost roughly.

The young man looked at him, his gaze almost piercing, regardless of his gentle smile, as he answered, "Nineteen, sir. Did you wish to start your meal with some local spirits or beers?" David looked around the table, making a quick count, and grinned.

"Yes. We'll have six local beers to start, and the young ones can grab whatever drink they want."

Jin-Sil clicked her tongue, grimacing at him.

'He could have lied about my age, bastard. I'm almost nineteen...' she thought.

The server scribbled down the beers on his notepad, before looking at the younger ones, starting at Violette, who was closest to the end of the table.

"I know we haven't brought menus yet, young lady, but could I recommend something for you? Would that be okay?" he asked, his smile becoming even gentler.

Violette felt the tip of her ears heat up as her heart skipped a beat. She nodded sheepishly, keeping her mouth shut, lest she bite her tongue and make a fool out of herself.

"Very well. I think you would like something sweet but floral. We have a cherry blossom and byeonggyul fruit cocktail, which I'm sure you'll like. It's lovely, a bit tangy, and has a soft floral aftertaste."

Violette nodded again, accepting his recommendation, before he passed to the next person over.

In barely a minute, he had made recommendations to all the younger ones for drinks, varying from fruit cocktails to local soft drinks, and no one questioned his assumptions.

Once he was done noting everything down, the young man bowed again, and left the room backwards, closing the door behind him.

Alex did a satisfied grimace.

"At least the service was peerless. Putting aside that they sent us Mr. Korea over here, making all the heads spin, I'd say we are off to a good start."

Chapter 975: Special Server

As promised, the food did not take longer than twenty minutes to get to their room, during which David was not shy to order a second round of drinks for everyone.

Everyone tried a bit of everything, from the mild to the fiery, before clear favourites were designated in the selection. As for the broths for the hotpot, it was made clear to all present that they didn't have the stomach for the hottest broth.

Even Jin-Sil, someone who was used to spicy foods, wasn't keen on eating from that one too much.

As the first serving quickly ran down, a fact that both impressed and confused the young server, Jun-Seo, they asked if it was possible to dilute it a little with another broth, to soften it up.

"Of course. I will bring some regular beef broth with your next order. Should I dilute the other spicy one as well?" he asked, a swift smirk passing his lips.

But he was quickly pushed back, as the men around the table, either from actual enjoyment or misplaced pride, told him that one was fine.

"Alright. I will bring your order to the kitchens right away. In the meantime, let me clear out a few of the empty plates for you," he said, his wide smile reappearing.

Jun-Seo pulled in a cart from the hallway, on which he proceeded to pile all the empty plates of meats and vegetables that the group had already eaten. He did so with a deftness and agility that did not fail to show his vast experience.

But Alex noted another kind of agility in his movements. Something that wouldn't come just from servicing tables for a few years.

With every slide of his foot, every pivot of his hips, and every extension of his arms, Jun-Seo had always kept his center of gravity anchored to the ground. Be it by lowering his stance, or shifting his weight around with some light extension of his legs, his core always remained stable.

It was uncanny, to say the least.

Looking to his right, he saw that David had also caught this, as his gaze was locked on the young man's movements.

'Maybe he practices martial arts? Being this stable on your feet is not just an innate thing,' Alex thought.

So, to test out his theory, he picked up a piece of pickled daikon.

As Jun-Seo lowered himself in between Aapo and Killian, at the other end of the table, Alex called out to Killian.

"Hey, Killian. Have you tried this Daikon? It's amazing!" he said, shooting the vegetable across the table at Killian.

The move was done with enough speed that any normal person wouldn't know what hit them until it was too late. And the trajectory was perfect, as well.

It was well aimed enough that Killian could catch it by simply lifting his hand, but happened to have Jun-Seo's face lowering in the way at the same time.

But before the piece of daikon could even reach the young man, he had already lifted one of the empty plates he was picking up and set it between his face and the veggie. And with an agile motion, he stopped the momentum of the projectile before sliding the plate with one daikon on it before Killian.

Everyone at the table stopped moving for a second, as a flash of malice crossed Jun-Seo's eyes, his head snapping toward Alexander.

But the malice quickly vanished, replaced by his best customer service smile once more.

"Sir. I would appreciate it if you didn't throw food inside our establishment. Had you asked me, I would have gladly brought the vegetable to him. We don't tolerate bad table manners in our restaurant," he said, straightening up and brushing his clothes off.

Alex looked at him, his gaze icy, before he put on a fake apologetic smile.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think this through. It won't happen again."

As he said his last word, Alex activated his mana vision and used his extremely sensitive senses to peer into the young man's body, trying to see if he was hiding traces of mana.



Lo-and-behold, inside his head, he found a lump of mana, too weak to be a mana lobe yet, but enough to be considered an awakened player.

Alex said nothing about it, and the young man didn't seem to notice the deep scan on his person, but there was no mistaking it.

Seeing the man apologize, even though he could tell it was fake, and that the throw had been done intentionally at him, Jun-Seo finished picking up the empty plates and left the room to go give their second order to the kitchens.

On his way there, he wondered what that oppressing feeling had been when he and the foreigner's eyes had locked, but brushed it off as adrenaline.

He had a moment of fear of being discovered, but these tourists didn't look like people who would know anything about awakened players.

If he had known how wrong he was, he probably wouldn't have kept serving them. Alas, news from outside Korea rarely made it inside, and he had no way of knowing that at least three of the people around the table were notorious people.

Back inside the room, Alex's gaze became stony again as he looked at Kary and David.

"I would ask why you threw something at him like that, but I can tell there was a reason. He's one of us, right?" Kary asked, her tone suddenly less cheerful.

Alex nodded, looking at David.

"Did his face or name ring a bell to you? Should we worry about finding an awakened so close to where we have to hunt monsters?"

David shook his head, closing his eyes for a second.

"His name doesn't ring a bell. Neither does his face. But I had a nagging feeling when I first saw him. I don't know if maybe I crossed paths with him before inside the game. In any case, I doubt he's a threat."

The three of them tried talking as low as possible, to not disturb the younger ones' enjoyment, but it was a wasted effort, as their senses were sharper than most.

"Should we ask for a different server?" Jin-Sil asked, worried this might devolve into something more serious.

"I like that idea," Rì-Chû said, grimacing.

"No," Alex interjected.

"It would only make him suspicious. Let's just keep acting like we have been until now. If his attitude shifts, I'll be the first to react. Until then, let us just enjoy this meal. We have a hard hunt to do after this. We might not have time to enjoy ourselves for a while..."

#### Chapter 976: Finishing Their Meal

The rest of their lunch proceeded in an awkward attempt to act normal, and Kary could only shake her head in a comical disappointment, as everyone in the room proved why they weren't actors, aside from her and Killian.

Their many hours in front of cameras, as pro players, had led them to have some modicum of acting skill. You couldn't always act how you felt when the eyes of millions were on you.

Jun-Seo continued serving them with his everlasting smile, as if nothing had happened, which was about the only thing they could hope for from this poor sketch of normalcy.

Once satiated, both in food and drinks, came the time for the group to pay.

"I'll take this one, if you don't mind. See it as a thank you for severing something that has been annoying me for a lifetime," Killian offered.

"No, let me," Liu Yan interjected.

"I'm imposing myself on your group. It is only courtesy that I at least cover your meal," he added.

Killian looked at the young man and frowned.

"Please. I insist," he said, his eyes cold.

"No. Let me do the honours," Liu Yan replied, unfazed by Killian's glare.

"Both of you knock it off," Alex cut them.

"Although I appreciate your efforts to blend into the group, the depth of your wallet will not be the measure I take for that. Plus, I don't think you have access to more cash than I do," he said, flipping out a black credit card.

Killian lightly scoffed.

"A black credit card isn't impressive, Alexander," he mocked.

Liu Yan nodded with a wide grin.

"Oh, the colour isn't what is supposed to be impressive here," Alex grinned.

This made Killian and Liu Yan raise an eyebrow.

Sliding the card across the table, now that it was clear of food and grills, Liu Yan caught it before it reached Killian.

He looked at the name on it and frowned.

"Are we supposed to recognize who that is?" he asked, confused.

But Killian knew better.

"Ok. Colour me impressed," he said, grabbing the card out of the Chinese's hands and sliding it back across the table.

David watched it go past him and whistled.

"You got big daddy Jack to fork out a black credit card? Damn. What did it cost? Did he bend you over?" David mocked.

Alex punched him on the shoulder, telling him to shut up.

"It cost me nothing. I just have to spread the name of our generous 'sponsor' when we save someone. Just like any sponsor would ask for. In exchange, we have access to his vast wealth.

"Wealth that, in this climate of incoming catastrophe, is bound to grow. Especially with our help

spreading his name," Alex said, taking the card and handing it to Jun-Seo, who was still waiting for it patiently.

"I will be right back with this, sir," Jun-Seo said, before bowing and leaving the room.

Liu Yan was still confused about the name on the card, which he had read as 'Levitus Group'. He had no idea who that was, since he rarely, if ever, kept himself apprised of the economics of other countries.

Killian, who could see the confusion still on his face, sighed deeply.

"Levitus Group is a company in Canada, based in Montreal, where Alexander is from, that deals in a multitude of enterprises. It's one of the largest companies in Canada, and its CEO, Jack Boudreau, is one of the richest men on Earth.

"The Levitus Group no doubt deals in some legit businesses, but it's also well known to deal in the dark, as well, which is why a lot of its money is laundered through its legitimate businesses.

"A company that size has an income that no singular person could match. Having that card on him basically means he's a walking bag of money. He isn't about to run out anytime soon. I don't think we'll get to pay for anything as long as we are with him anywhere," Killian said, chuckling at the last words.

Liu Yan frowned, wondering how Alexander had gotten a backer with that kind of cash.

"Are they related or something?" he asked Killian.

"Dear god, he wishes," Killian mocked.

"No. But from the intel my organization has gathered, they have been working together for a while. We think Alex has told Jack about the things happening in the dark, and in exchange for this chance to prepare against it, they entered a mutual benefit agreement."

Alex was listening to them talk, as he bantered with David, who was still mocking him for having 'Daddy Jack' as a backer, as he called him derisively.

'His network is pretty good. He's not entirely right, but that's pretty damned close to the truth,' Alex thought, mildly impressed.

Everyone enjoyed their last bit of talk together before their server came back with the card and the receipt.

"Thank you for dining at Banchan BBQ, esteemed guests. We hope to get your patronage again soon," Jun-Seo said, giving them a bow.

Everyone started getting up, ready to leave the establishment, and they all gave a small bow or curtsy to the server, in sign of respect, before heading outside.

Alex stopped for a second next to the young man, many thoughts flitting through his head. But he discarded most of them, since garnering unwanted attention was not wise at the moment.

Instead, he handed him a business card with his name on it, something Jack had insisted he get, since he would be representing the Levitus Group abroad.

"When shit hits the fan, call this number," Alex simply said, before walking away.

Jun-Seo looked at the card, confused, before calling out to Alexander.

"What does that even mean?"

Alex didn't turn around, waving his hand as he replied, "You'll know. Trust me. Call when that time comes."

And before the young man could ask anything more, Alex was already climbing into the van, getting ready to leave.

Jun-Seo couldn't chase after him, as this would reflect poorly on the restaurant, so he just stood there, confused, for a moment, before putting the card in his pocket.

'What in god's name is he talking about?'

Chapter 977: Gear For Everyone

The group left the restaurant shortly after, driving away in their four rented grey vans, and headed straight for the destination.

Having already driven about ten minutes out of the airport in the right direction to go to the restaurant, their trip only lasted for another forty-five. And once they parked the vans, an issue they hadn't considered popped up.

As the group all exited their vehicles, Alex looked at the extensive building that cordoned off the last stretch to the foot of the volcano and frowned.

"How are we supposed to bring our gear up there if we can't even drive to the base without needing an escort?" he asked, annoyed.

"Can't we just say we are role-players and wear everything up there?" David said, as if it was so simple.

Alex looked at him with a look that clearly said, 'Are you stupid?'

But it was Jin-Sil that shot his idea down.

"Even if we could pass the armour out as roleplay material, I doubt they would let us carry weapons up there. I know some of you are mages, and don't really need a weapon, but that is not the case for everyone here.

"And I doubt they would willingly let us bring weapons up there, especially real ones. As a matter of fact, simply having them in our possession could have us locked away..." she said, remembering some of them wielded swords and guns.

As they wracked their brains for a solution, it was Violette who offered them one.

"I have an idea, but I don't know if it will work," she said, a bit shy about talking before the entire group.

And it only got worse when all eleven of them turned to look at her. Her face went beet red as she tried hiding behind her bangs, lowering her head almost to a ninety-degree angle.

Kary chuckled as she lowered herself to Violette's eye line.

"Go ahead. Tell us your idea. No one here would dare laugh at it," she said, a warm smile on her lips.

"Right guys?" she then asked, turning to look at the others, a deathly glare in her gaze.

A chill ran down everyone's spine as her murderous intent brushed past them.

Seeing as no one was replying, Kary repeated herself, her tone now venomous. "Right, guys?"

Alex was the first one to chime in, "Right!" and it was quickly followed by the others, realizing she was expecting an answer.

This put Violette at ease a little, even though she knew it was a forced reaction from Kary's threats.

"I could wrap the gear up in a bubble of water, and with the help of wind magic, I could camouflage it as a cloud above the volcano, at least until we are rid of the escort's watchful eyes..." she muttered.

Jonathan was the first to react, his eyes brightening up.

"That's a great idea! I can help!" he chirped, unaffected by the groups' gazes landing on him.

Liu Yan then raised his hand smiling at the group.

"I can help as well. It'll lessen the load on everyone's mana expenditure if we work together on this."

Alex nodded his head, glad the young man was finally understanding that helping out was the way to gain their trust and respect.

"Alright then. It's settled. Let's get everything out of the vans and out of their crates to make the gear load smaller, and then we can get to it. It's already a bit past noon, and we will be running out of daylight shortly," Alexander said, clapping his hands.

Unpacking was done swiftly, with everyone working together, and they also used this moment to distribute the gear to the ones that were planned from the start.

Contrary to the last hunt they did, the gear this time was a bit more refined, as the crafters under Jack's employ had managed to refine their technique. Instead of simple leather armours for everyone, the gear was more varied.

Casters were assigned sets of cloth robes, all of which had been embroidered with a myriad of runes, which David had graciously taught them, making the robes as hard to slash through as kevlar armour, while staying extremely light.

The leather armours, for the heavier-armoured people, were also inscribed with runes, although to a lesser degree, and scribbled inside the armour, making them less apparent. As for their two more heavy-wearing members, Cory, who usually wore chain-mail, and Winston, who wore full plate armour in the game, they were delighted to see their equipment. A full piece of chain-mail had been crafted for Cory, with a piece of linen fabric lining the interior, on which the runes had been embroidered. And, although the chain-mail looked heavy at a glance, Cory was able to lift it with one hand, as it weighed next to nothing.

He became gleeful and was tempted to throw it on right now, just to get used to it. But Alex's serious gaze made him think twice as he laid it down in the pile with the rest.

As for Winston, a set of full plate armour had been forged, with engravings on the inside of it to make it as magical as the rest of their equipment. He was the first to notice something on his, which stood out like a sore thumb.

Looking at the other pieces of armour, he also noticed the ones that weren't outright made with monster leathers had the same oddity on them, and he frowned.

"Are these runes powered by monster cores? Don't the crafters know that we can all use mana?" he asked, pointing to small orbs of varying colours on the armours.

David chirped in before Alex started asking stupid questions.

"It was my idea. I know most of us don't have a mana core developed yet, so I asked that they incorporate monster cores into the equipment. It'll lessen our mana expenditure, and help us focus on fighting, instead of splitting it to keep our armour active at all times."

Winston could feel a bit of mana in the core, but it felt inadequate in comparison to what he could eke out.

"Will they be enough?"

David chuckled.

"If you look closely at them, you'll see they also have etching on them. The cores were modified to recharge off our normal expenditure of mana, in case they run out.

"Plus, the runes on everyone's equipment are made to drain the least amount of mana possible, while staying relevant to our hunt. We should be fine," David pointed out.

It barely reassured them, but at least they trusted him enough to believe his words.

For now.

## Chapter 978: Hidden In The Sky

When it came down to weapons, a few of them didn't need any, given they were casters, and only took the weapons they brought as catalysts. Since mana was now a limited resource, for anyone who lacked a mana lobe, it was better to use whatever tool to help them, right?

David offered Kary a wand, carved out of the horn of one of the Raiju. It was the only horn they managed to salvage after Alexander's mutated self had ravaged the corpses.

But Kary looked at it and frowned.

"This isn't as attuned to the fire element as the one you made for me when we hunted the goblins in Nebraska..." she complained.

"Yeah. It's lightning attuned, which is fire and wind-based magic. It should work just as well. Unless you want the old wand I made a while back. Luckily for you, it comes without strings attached this time. Well, mostly," David grinned as he produced the wand from his personal bag.

Kary grimaced at the 'Mostly' but still took it.

"I feel like every bit counts right now. Give the other wand to Liu Yan, at least for now. I'm sure he'll be happy," she said flatly.

David shrugged before turning to the young man, who was looking at all of them getting equipment with a slightly jealous expression.

"Rejoice, uncalculated ally. The guild leader has decided to relinquish to you, at least for now, this wand. Hold it for a little while, before we send it into the sky. You'll need to get used to it. Circulate some mana inside it, so you know you can use it properly," he mocked, before handing him the wand.

Liu Yan looked at it with a glimmer of happiness, as he took it with reverence.

"Thank you. I don't know-" he started saying, before realizing David had already walked away.

Jonathan, who happened to be next to him at that moment, chuckled.

"Don't worry about his attitude. He may be a dick, but he's a trustworthy one," the child said, smiling at Liu Yan.

Liu Yan looked at the kid, who looked entirely too young to be part of a hunting expedition, and sighed. Then he realized something.

"Where is your wand?" he asked the kid.

He was seeing everyone get a weapon, yet this kid had nothing passed down to him.

Jonathan smiled at him again, pulling out a necklace from inside his shirt.

The necklace had a bright blue stone ornament, or at least what could be mistaken as a stone, hanging in its center.

The engravings on it resembled the ones on the armours and weapons, with a slight difference. They were engraved infinitely smaller.

The wand in his hand pulsed as Jonathan stepped closer to show him the necklace.

"I don't need anything encumbering my hands. This is plenty, and, judging by your wand's reaction just now, it knows what this is more than anything," Jonathan said with a snide grin.

All he was seeing here astonished Liu Yan. He knew there had been monster sightings around the world, and had even heard about some near his town in China. But he hadn't heard of anyone hunting them down and assumed the government had dealt with it.

Yet, here he stood, with a group of strangers from across the world, as they carried around so much magical gear, made with monster cores and monster materials, almost like they were still inside New Eden...

It was mind-boggling to him.

"Where did you get all this?" he asked the young boy.

Jonathan looked at him, making a grimace, before looking at Alexander and Kary a few meters away from them.

"I don't know if I can tell..." Jonathan replied hesitantly.

"Then forget I asked," Liu Yan said, shaking his hands sideways as he heard this.

But Jonathan, being only seven, had never been very good at keeping secrets.

He scooted closer to Liu Yan, putting his hand near his mouth, and whispered.

"We've already been on a few hunts. Plus, a lot of the gear comes from a horde of rats that David, Alex, and Kary defeated in the subway tunnels in Montreal. But don't tell them that I told you!"

Liu Yan looked at him with wide eyes.

"All of you have already hunted monsters? How long has this been going on?" he whispered back.

Jonathan shrugged, unsure how long it had been going on. He had only been told about the rats after it happened.

The oldest incident he was part of was the incident with the teenager demonizing in his gramps' underground compound. Which, the thought alone, made him shiver, an itch passing through his arm where it had been severed.

Seeing the child's face suddenly turn pale, Liu Yan understood he had pried enough, and he walked a bit away from him.

'What kind of crazy things have happened around the world?' he wondered, as he looked at the wand in his hands.

Once everyone had been assigned armour and weapons, aside from Liu Yan, who had been an uncalculated addition, they all set them into a pile, and Violette stood before it, soon followed by Jonathan's whose face had gone back to normal.

That's when Liu Yan understood it was time to send the gear up.

He put the wand down into the pile, now used to the feeling of it in his hand, and put himself across from Jonathan and Violette.

He could do magic without the wand, that much he was confident in. But he wondered.

'What kind of difference in power do we have?'

He was confident that he was already way stronger than a normal human being, and could summon forth some pretty decent magic. But these people kept pulling out secrets from their bags like it was nothing.

Could their level of magic far surpass his?

Violette started the ball, raising her hand at the pile of items, as a puddle of water formed under the pile, before rising off the ground.

Liu Yan was rather impressed by her control, as she did this effortlessly, but this was far from powerful magic, in his opinion.

But that quickly changed when Violette started enveloping the entire pile in an enormous bubble of water, seemingly effortlessly, and even separated the items by owner inside the bubble.

The bubble was ten feet in diameter, and nothing inside was touching. But what was most impressive was how the clothes and armour within it almost seemed like they were still dry. 'Is she keeping the water from actually touching the items? How much fine control does she have on her



magic?!" he mused, before realizing it was his and Jonathan's turn. Shaking his thoughts away, Liu Yan started focusing on the ball of water, trying to imagine it turning into a cloud, which he knew he could do. But his focus was quickly shaken when Jonathan suddenly shoved the ball upward with a powerful gust of wind.

In a matter of seconds, the ball of water had already shrunk down to the size of a bead in the sky, before he could even change its outer appearance.

Liu Yan had to force himself to concentrate, changing the appearance last second, before the orb of water reached out of his mana senses, and heavy beads of sweat had already formed on his forehead.

'What in God's name are these people?!' he thought, realizing Violette and Jonathan seemed unfazed by the magic they just performed, whereas he was already feeling tired.

Chapter 979: Greasing The Wheels Of Bureaucracy

Liu Yan realized Alex and Kary were looking at him, little smirks on their lips, and immediately thought they were mocking him.

But, internally, both of them were thinking, 'See how powerful even the children in our group are?'

It was pride that dominated their minds, far from them the thoughts of mocking Liu Yan's pitiful display of power.

Liu Yan vowed to himself to prove to them he was powerful once they started fighting, to compensate for his lacklustre performance just now.

'Don't worry, Yan. You excel in combat magic. This was just not your specialty,' he told himself, clenching his fists.

"Alright. Seems like we are set. Jin-Sil. Lead the way, please," Alex said with a smile.

Even though they were heading into a dangerous hunt, Alex tried to show only confidence and strength. He wanted everyone to look at him, and think, 'Everything will be fine. If he's this confident, there is no way things could go wrong.'

Of course, there was still some nervousness amongst them, mostly coming from the ones who hadn't hunted monsters yet. But seeing their guild leader and ally display such confidence helped alleviate the tension in their bodies.

Jin-Sil took the lead, as they walked into the building that separated the parking lot from the historic site, displaying a confident smile as well. She needed to look like a guide to this happy troop of young people, so they could talk their way into the volcano without hiccup.

Normally, the site would be open to tourists until dusk. But in light of the recent disappearances, and missing people at the foot of the volcano's waterside, it had been closed for investigation.

Of course, since most of the disappearances occurred during non-visiting hours, or on the ocean below, where the circulation was technically illegal, the authorities were taking their time with starting the investigation.

The paltry sum they charged visitors was far from affecting the economy if it was suddenly closed for a week or two. Jeju Island's most famous touristic volcano wasn't this one, after all.

As the group entered the building, which was still open so the security could shoo away tourists, Jin-Sil confidently walked up to the counter.

Immediately as the security guard saw her, he frowned and tried shooing her away.

responded with a pleading look.

The man looked at her with an annoyed look, waving her away without responding.

Alex looked at him, his smile fading away a bit. He stepped forward, ready to speak up, but Kary acted faster than him, producing a thick wad of cash.

She slammed it on the counter, grinning at the two men.

"I know at least one of you speaks English, so let me make this simple. In this pile of cash, there are around twenty-five thousand US dollars. That should be around sixty million won if my math is correct. This can be yours if you let us through.

"We promise to be mindful of the environment, and leave nothing behind that wasn't there before, but we need to pass. The offer is of a limited duration, so make your mind fast," she said, not taking her hand off the wad of cash.

The eyes of the other security guard went wide as he understood what she said.

"San-e oleumyeon 1indang 3000man wonssig jugessdaneun yeoja! Hyeongjenim, ulineun I jean-eul tong-gwasikil su eobs-seubnida." he exclaimed, looking at his colleague.

The man in front of Kary and Jin-Sil suddenly looked at her with wide eyes, extending his hand to the money. But Kary withdrew it faster than he could reach it.

"Ah ah. I need assurance we can go up before I pay. Do you think me a fool?" she asked, giving them a mocking eyebrow raise.

The man to the left stepped forward, bringing his hands together with a wide smile.

"Of course, Ma'am. You and your friends can go up the mountain, not a problem. We won't keep you here. But we will act like you were never here. If something happens up there, you will take full responsibility. Is that alright with you?" he asked, eyeing the money greedily. Kary grinned.

"Even better," she said, tossing the money at the man.

"Let's go, people," she said, turning to the others, who were looking at her with wide eyes. "What?" she asked, giggling a little.

"Did you think I wouldn't have a contingency plan lined up? It's not that I don't trust Jin-Sil, but money is always the best transactional lubricant. Now, hop to it. We need to climb up there," she said, passing the gate that the security guard had unlocked with a wide grin.

He wasn't even looking at the esoteric group, as he was already imagining all the things he could do with this money. Thirty million won was a year's worth of salary, for bottom-level workers like them.

No sane person would have spat on that offer. Even the most righteous of people would do a double-take at that sum.

As the group passed the opened gate, ignored entirely by the two glee-filled guards, Alex leaned in close to Kary.

"When did you have time to stop and pull out that much cash?" he asked, curious.

"I've had it in my bags since we left Montreal. I figured a bit of cash would go a long way if we ever needed it. So, I had it pulled a few days before leaving," she said, winking at him.

Alex chuckled to himself.

'If she wasn't on my side, that amount of foresight would terrify me,' he mused, looking at her backside as she accelerated her gait to take the lead.

His thoughts wandered off a bit as he looked at her hips swaying from left to right, and only came back to normal when David's shoulder bumped into his.

"Earth to Wolfy. Get your thoughts out of the gutter there, perv. I know that's a fine ass, but you should be thinking about the battle to come. Not your next fling," David mocked, as he walked past him.

Alex grunted, pushing the stray thoughts away.

'He's right. The trouble hasn't even begun yet. I need to stay focused,' he told himself, his gaze steeling itself once more.

'I hope everything can keep going this smooth...'

#### Chapter 980: Reaching The Cauldron

After exiting the back of the building, the group found themselves on the vast empty plain that led toward the volcano, and little sighs of awe escaped from their lips.

It was an inspiring sight, even when interlaced with the winding path of cobblestone and wooden rails that led toward the forest. On the backslash of this decor, they could see that same wooden railing snake up the side of the mountain, climbing the side of the volcano.

The forest, although not too long and a few hundred meters ahead of them, was filled with distinct Korean Pine trees, all of which had been trimmed at the base, to both keep people from climbing them, but also to allow a nice breathable path through.

Walking the distance between the building and the forest proceeded smoothly, and the group only fell on high alert once the trees covered the sky overhead. From this point on, their visibility was reduced enough for it to be a risk.

At least, it would have been for normal people.

Immediately as they lost visual of the sky, mana sense waves blasted out, covering an array of distances, and with it, the area was completely under their purview again. But they didn't relax just yet.

"Starting here, I think it would be best we rearm ourselves," Alex pointed out.

They had all thought it would have to wait for them to be at the top of the volcano, since they thought they would get escorted. But since they were left to their own devices, thanks to Kary's quick thinking and heavy greasing of paws, they could do so freely right now, where people couldn't see them.

With but a thought from Violette and Jonathan, the orb that contained their gear was brought back down from the sky, the cloud appearance on it quickly fading away as they brought it down blazingly fast.

A bit of frost had started forming on the orb, given the height at which they had kept it hovering, but it was no issue for Violette, who melted it without a second glance before dispelling the water and laying their gear down.

Everyone quickly put the armour over their clothes, Kary quickly jumping in to help Winston with his, since the plating armour required a bit of finesse and some extra hands to strap correctly.

Over the course of the next five minutes, everyone prepared themselves as much as they could, both physically and mentally, and Liu Yan watched them hype each other up like a sports team getting ready to head into the field.

It was a reassuring sight, given their lives would soon be in danger, to see them treat this as a normal occurrence.

Even the ones that had yet to hunt with the group felt at ease with each other.

Once everyone was equipped, armed, and mentally ready, Alex took point, with Winston at his side, and David and Jonathan right behind them, putting the mages in the middle of their group, Jin-Sil and Aapo following closely behind, and Cory closing the march with Killian.

The path was narrow, only allowing two people to march side by side if they left enough room for them to wield their weapons, so they formed two lines of six, walking at a slower pace than before.

The trek through the relatively short forest felt like an eternity, since they kept their senses on high alert, and walked at a crawling pace, but once at the foot of the volcano, the actual danger started.

From here on out, the path became narrower, only allowing one person at a time if they wanted enough room to wield weapons, so they had to stretch out into a longer single file. But that was only the start of the risks involved.

Since they were on a staircase that was maintained, yes, but still relatively old, any abrupt change in weight, or slamming force into the staircase, would put them at risk of it collapsing.

And since they were dealing with flying enemies, the possibility of being ambushed on this mountain flank was incredibly high. If a harpy slammed into the path, trying to catch them, would it give in under their combined weight?

Already, nervousness started to rise in the ranks, regardless of Alex trying his best to exude confidence.

Even he was starting to feel the mounting pressure. And it would only get worse from here. Slowly trudging their way up, keeping their eyes above, under, and around them, everyone's head on a swivel, the party took an hour just to reach the top, which was double the time it would normally take.

The sight that greeted them, once they all arrived at the top, was breath-taking.

On one side, the island and its many colourful roofs and walls, and on the other, the enormous volcanic plateau, forming an almost perfect bowl, with green grass and the occasional bamboo tree.

It was an amazing sight, especially when compared to the eternal blue backdrop of the ocean beyond it.

Now that they were outside the forest, and over the looming mountainside, the sounds of lapping waves started reaching their ears from the proximity of the ocean.

The chants of seagulls, although weak, given their low numbers, interlaced with the wind that was now rushing past their face, bringing in the salty smell of the sea.

"Man... This would have been an amazing moment, had we not been in danger..." Alex said, looking over the horizon.

"I mean, we could take a break and enjoy the scenery for a moment. No?" Killian asked, looking at the scene with nostalgia.

This sight wasn't too uncommon to him, who lived on the hilly sea sides of England.

But Alex shook his head.

"I'm afraid we won't get that leisure. The harpies started getting agitated over the southeast lip. I think they felt our presence," Alex declared, pointing his sword over to the other side of the volcano.

Already, piercing screeches started echoing in the wind, sending the very few seagulls flying away in panic.

They couldn't see the enemies yet, but those with mana senses reaching further started feeling their presence.

"We better get off this ledge as fast as we can, lest we get thrown off mid fight. The way down won't be forgiving for anyone falling down," Alex said, starting to jog and slide his way down the rocky ridge after jumping the small barrier in place.

They needed to have solid ground around them if they wanted to reduce that kind of possibility. Harpies were well known for taking their prey high and dropping them off cliffs, after all.

"Come on! What are you waiting for!" he shouted, as he slid down a steeper slope.

Already, dark spots appeared over the opposite side of the volcano cauldron.

Battle was imminent.