

The Tower 42

Chapter 42: The Recapture of Merteng

The black fog lifted from the green landscape. The people, tired of the neverending fight, sighed and sat down.

"The community is down for real."

"How on earth did they do that?"

"What happened to all the existing Korean challengers? Are they really all dead?" Ji Eun-Ju asked.

Everyone became more serious after hearing Ji Eun-Ju's words.

"No way... Would they really do that to each other? We're not some kind of monsters; we are all humans," Kang Ji-Hoon muttered.

"Oppa, it has been more than 70 years since World War II ended. It's time for that terrible tragedy to happen again."

"Yes, Ji-Hoon. Can't you understand after being attacked like this? We're enemies to them now. Look at that," Park Joo-Hyuk explained.

Park Joo-Hyuk's sword pointed to the dead body that lay on the ground.

"To them, we are just a species that disturbs the ecosystem. They probably believe they must kill and exterminate us," Park Joo-Hyuk muttered.

"First of all, we should quickly set up a base where we can all rest. We don't know when the enemy will invade again, and soon, the challengers will come up from the lower floors," Hwang Kang-Woong explained.

"Yeah, that's right. Plus, we are the advance party, aren't we? So, we need to revive Merteng before then."

Among the challengers at Undermost, these seven people were the fastest to climb the tower. They could choose to wait for other challengers and climb up together, but the safety of the Korean challengers who were already active in Isocia was a problem.

This was why Lee Shin had allowed them to go up first. These seven people had clinched the top ranks of Korea all the way to the 20th floor. They were more than capable to recapture Merteng if they could just break through the enemies who were not expecting them this quickly and had let their guard down. If they could reclaim Merteng, they would buy enough time for the other challengers from Undermost to come up.

"Let's go guys. We're almost there at Merteng."

Merteng was like a second home for the Korean Challengers. In the far distance, they could see a city that was shrouded by darkness.

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Swoosh— Thud!

When Kim Kang-Chun struck with his sword, the head of a medium-sized beast fell to the ground.

"No way... Does this even make sense? How can a medium-sized beast appear already?" Kang Ji-Hoon grumbled looking at the dead body of the beast as if it was ridiculous.

"Did they do something to make it harder for us?"

"Well, the collapse of Merteng did not make any sense in the first place. All the problems started with that. I wouldn't find it strange even if they had put some tricks and traps in front of us."

"We need to think straight and be clear about this. Otherwise, there might be a setback in our plan," Hwang Kang-Woong explained.

"That's right, maybe those challengers have found a way to manipulate the demons," Kim Kang-Chun argued.

Kim Kang-Chun was right. This place was the starting point for challengers on the 21st floor, who have yet to get any [pattern], reside. It was the place where the first stage of restoration of the country took place. The emergence of a medium-sized beast could not have appeared without the intervention of other challengers.

"First of all, we have to break through the castle wall. Fortunately, there aren't that many soldiers out there, but only a few demonic beasts and demonized humans. Use CEO Hwang's [Structure Identification] to identify the weakened parts of the wall and Kang-Chun can then make a hole accordingly. After that, we will advance quickly as planned," Park Joo-Hyuk commanded.

The five challengers nodded in response to Park Joo-Hyuk's instructions and ran toward the wall.

"Khaaak!" The beasts, who were wandering around the wall, rushed towards them.

[Ground Digging]

As soon as Hwang Kang-Woong's shovel hit the ground, the ground on which the beast was running turned over, causing it to stumble.

"Ha!" Kang Ji-Hoon shouted.

Kang Ji-Hoon struck with his sword right after, cutting off the beast's leg, weakening its mobility. Park Joo-Hyuk then followed through with a stab into its neck.

Swoosh! Splat!

They easily defeated the beast with their teamwork. The challengers eventually eliminated the beasts and closed in on the castle wall.

Hwang Kang-Woong's skill [Structure Identification] gave him the ability to find out the overall structure at once just by looking at a building. Hwang Kang-Woong moved quickly, touching and checking the walls. And he stopped right away when he noticed something.

"Hit over here!" Hwang Kang-Woong shouted.

At Hwang Kang-Woong's order, Kim Kang-Chun hit the area that Kang-Woong was pointing at without hesitation.

Bam!

One side of the wall was easily demolished by a blow from Kim Kang-Chun, who had the highest Strength stat here. A hole was created, barely allowing an adult to enter.

"All right, let's go in," Kim Kang-Chun muttered.

When the challengers entered through the wall, they were shocked to see the state of the place that was enveloped in the demon realm. They had expected some hardship ahead of them, but they started to think that it would be a lot harder to reach their destination.

Fortunately, they had already obtained a map on Merteng's structure in advance. Despite the current environment, they would still be able to find their way there, thanks to the unique structures built all around.

"It is here. Our goal is to get to the Throne Room. The Nucleus is here."

"Alright, let's go. It's going to be a tough game to move inside the castle. Be prepared guys, especially you Eun-Ju," Park Joo-Hyuk said while looking at Ji Eun-Ju.

Ji Eun-Ju was already filled with worry. If she continued to behave this way, there was a good chance that she would only hinder the rest, instead of helping them.

In the previous fight, Kang Ji-Hoon was seriously injured because Ji Eun-Ju hesitated to deal with the enemies at a critical moment.

She was performing fine when fighting the demonic beasts, but she still had not gotten used to attacking humans, even if they were enemies. From now on, they could be in real mortal danger; if they took Ji Eun-Ju who was always hesitant and worried along with them, someone might be sacrificed.

"Listen, Ji Eun-Ju. If you hesitate again, like you did before, there's a high chance that we'll get hurt, okay? If you don't kill the enemies, we will die," Park Joo-Hyuk spoke firmly and held Ji Eun-Ju's shoulders.

They could not baby her anymore.

"Y-yeah Eun-Ju, you can do it. Don't cry..." Hye-Won tried to comfort Eun-Ju because she was sniffing.

Ji Eun-Ju cried not because of Joo-Hyuk's scolding, but because she was frustrated with herself.

"Oh shit, the beasts have noticed our presence," Kim Kang-Chun said urgently as he looked at the beasts approaching from far away.

"Ji Eun-Ju, we're not going to say this again. If you don't want to harm us like this, just don't join the attack in the first place. Just assist us from behind. And when Merteng gets reclaimed, stay there quietly until we clear the way," Joo-Hyuk told Eun-Ju.

After he finished speaking, Joo-Hyuk did not pay any more attention to Eun-Ju who was still crying. He brandished his sword and ran toward the beast.

"It's alright Eun-Ju. Don't be so hard on yourself. Joo-Hyuk is just saying this because he's worried..." Hye-Won tried to comfort her.

"No... I don't want to be a burden anymore," Ji Eun-Ju replied.

Eun-Ju took a deep breath and stared at the approaching beasts and witches.

"I'll kill those witches, leave them to me," Ji Eun-Ju said in a determined voice.

They were not simply humans; these were creatures that were similar with and familiar to humans. Witches were human beings, just charged with demon power. Their appearance was not much different from that of regular humans. Therefore, their presence was enough to make Ji Eun-Ju hesitate. It was not as hard as killing a regular human, but it required Eun-Ju to muster her determination to kill them by herself.

"Ha..." Ji Eun-Ju barely calmed her thumping heart with a deep breath and held up her wand.

Two witches, whose bodies were black, approached her. The two leapt and clawed at Ji Eun-Ju with their sharp fingernails.

[Stone Wall]

A stone wall jutted out and pushed the witches up in the air.

[Stone Edge]

Then a sharp stone pike protruding from the ground penetrated the stomachs of the witches falling from the air.

"Khhaaak!" The witches cried in pain.

The witches' black blood splattered out from their body and splashed onto Ji Eun-Ju's face.

Just as she flinched and tried to close her eyes, Park Joo-Hyuk shouted, "Just look! Don't take your eyes off them!"

Park Joo-Hyuk had finished dealing with the beast nearby and was watching Eun-Ju's fight. Eun-Ju kept her eyes wide open and looked at them, while trying her best to keep her head fixated and not look away. Due to her mana, blood was pouring out from the witches' guts, as if they were skewered. Except for their dark skin and long nails on both their hands and feet, they looked just like human beings. Ji Eun-Ju tried to confront them head-on, summoning all the determination she had tried to muster.

"This is the world you have to live in from now on. You need to get used to it. Try harder to get used to it. Why did you come into the tower if you couldn't even manage this? Think carefully! Why did you enter the tower in the first place?" Joo-Hyuk explained.

Eun-Ju held her trembling right hand with her left hand and did not take her eyes off until the end. Joo-Hyuk was right.

"The reason I came into the tower..." Ji Eun-Ju muttered.

Ji Eun-Ju had entered the tower just to escape from reality. She had done it on impulse. She thought that she would never run away again, because there was no place to run away to in the tower. Ji Eun-Ju's quickened breathing gradually began to stabilize.

"I'm sorry for making you worry," Ji Eun-Ju said quietly.

When Park Joo-Hyuk saw how hard she tried to overcome her fear, he smiled slightly and turned around.

"Let's get going. It's late," said Park Joo-Hyuk.

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The gates to the castle had been broken, and the bodies of the demonic beasts were scattered all over the place. The fishy smell of beast blood stunk up the place.

"Ha... ha... ha..."

"This is crazy. We've just entered, and I can't believe we're already so exhausted."

"Ha... How many days did it take us?"

"Mr. Hwang, can you please give me a potion? I'm about to run out of mana power."

"Here you go. Try to save your mana power from now on. We don't have much potion left," Hwang Kang-Woong muttered.

Each of the six exhausted men sat down on the ground and rested against the dead bodies of the beasts. These six challengers were the ones who had swept the top ranks up to the 20th floor. That was why they could survive until this point. If it were others, they would have already died at the starting point.

Wooong—

"Heads!" Park Joo-Hyuk shouted.

Sheeek— Bam! Boom!?

Balls of fire started to fall on them as they were resting. Thanks to Park Joo-Hyuk, all six of them immediately jumped into their defensive stances. Fortunately, none of them were hurt as they had quick reflexes. However, the entrance caught fire due to the corpses strewn all around. The temperature on the battlefield increased rapidly and the challengers' stamina took an additional toll.

"You all look quite exhausted." A man in a robe walked up to them.

"Were you waiting for us to get tired?"

"Yeah, of course. I was too scared of your fighting spirit," the man replied.

However, contrary to what he had been saying, the man in the robe looked relaxed.

"Why on earth are you doing this to us!" Park Hye-Won shouted and expressed her frustration.

"Why are you asking? Is it because you really don't know? I think the Koreans should know better than the foreigners. Aren't you the ones who are forced to compete the most?" the man asked again.

"But this is too much! Killing fellow humans by such reasoning is...!" Ji Eun-Ju shouted in a tearful voice.

These situations were painful for Ji Eun-Jun who was kind and tender-hearted. Even though it had been almost two years since she had entered the tower, she still found it hard to get used to the fact that challengers would kill their opponent out of jealousy.

"You're still young," said the man.

"You wouldn't have come alone." Kim Kang-Chun made a sudden attack.

In a blink of an eye, Kim Kang-Chun stood in front of the man in the robe, and slashed vertically with his greatsword.

Chang—!

A pair of daggers suddenly appeared in the air and blocked the path of the greatsword. However, Kang-Chun had gently stepped back as if he had anticipated it. The next moment, Kang-Chun saw a masked man who appeared in front of him.

"Now they are showing up. Why don't you all come out?" Kang-Chun shouted.

"Haha. Stop pretending to be calm," the man replied.

Suddenly, numerous masked men in dark clothes appeared and surrounded them. These people were hiding themselves as if they merged with the black fog around them.

"I don't think they're challengers."

Their vibes were very different from other challengers. All of them who were surrounding Kang-Chun and his group were emitting the same wave of mana, except for the one guy who stopped Kang-Chun's attack a while ago.

"You're quick to read the room! I heard that you learned from Lee Shin. You must be very skilled in sensing mana in your environment," the man said.

"You're making a mistake right now. Do you think this shit will work if our master comes up here?" Kang-Chun replied.

"I admit it. Lee Shin is out of our league. But you know what? You guys are not." The man laughed at them.

A moment ago, as the greatsword and two daggers clashed, a gust of wind arose. As a result, the robe fluttered and the face of the man in the robe was revealed. He was a sharp-looking man with black bangs that covered his eyes. He sneered at the Korean challengers.

"Maybe I will just cut off your hands and feet before Lee Shin comes, so that he cannot do anything about it even if he comes," the man said.

Flame burned fiercely at the tip of his wand.

"And he will soon be just like you guys." Inyuu Kogo looked down at Korean challengers with an arrogant expression.

"Wait, is he Inyuu Kogo?"

"What? That's Inyuu Kogo?"

Among all the Asian challengers, Inyuu Kogo was the only flame wizard with slanted eyes and intense flame mana. And his slanted eyes were visible through his long drooping bangs.

"I saw him on the video."

"Oh, I see. This is him," Hwang Kang-Woong replied.

Hwang Kang-Woong had also seen him in a video that was posted on the community. Now, all of the videos were down, so it was hard to find, but they could watch the video not long after they went up to the second floor.

Inyuu Kogo was a ranker of the lower floors in Japan. He was a challenger who was famous for his powerful fire spells.

"Don't worry, he is just..." Kim Kang-Chun looked surprised.

"Well, take a look at this," said Inyuu Kogo.

Kim Kang-Chun turned serious all of the sudden when he saw the blue pattern appear on Inyuu Kogo's face. The pattern was a system that ran through the entire Isocia here. One could upgrade the pattern they bore in the order of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, navy, purple, black, and finally white by accumulating merit points. As the challenger's pattern upgrades, their stats increases as well, and their scope of activity in Isocia widens at the same time.

"You guys don't even have the [Qualification]... No matter how good you are, it will be hard to catch up, because of the gap between our colors." Inyuu Kogo laughed at them.

In Isocia, an individual with a pattern was called a 'Qualified Person.'

"I can't believe that he has the blue pattern..."

"Damn it, why did he come all the way here with the blue pattern...!"

"It's time for you guys to die," Inyuu Kogo muttered.

Inyuu Kogo's mana power began to burn with flame. At the same time, the blue pattern shone, adding power to the flame.

"Get out of this place right now!"