

Seller 691

Chapter 691: The Assassination Attempt (need edit)

A while later,

In the ancestral temple of the Minamoto Clan, Azzy was alone, concentrated on creating the teleportation array.

Suddenly, footsteps were heard behind.

Azzy didn't immediately look up from the intricate arrangement of the portal array. His fingers moved deftly, weaving streams of energy into precise patterns.

Finally, he paused and straightened slightly and furrowed his brows, glancing at Aya without breaking focus.

"I believe I asked your clan lord not to disturb me unless it was urgent," he said, his tone calm but firm. "So... is there a problem?"

Aya tilted her head with the faint glimmer of curiosity in her silver-white eyes. "I was going to leave," she said, her voice soft but measured. "But before I go... there's a question that's bugging me. Sorry for the disturbance."

Azzy finally gave her his full attention, letting his hands fall to his sides. "State it then," he replied, his voice carrying the same quiet authority that had made her kneel earlier.

Aya took a small step closer, her gaze fixed on him. "I want to ask... why do you want me to join your Shadow Guards?" There was no hesitation in her voice, no attempt to mask her curiosity.

Azzy paused for a moment, letting the hum of the portal settle into silence. His eyes met hers steadily, unflinching. "Because," he said carefully, choosing his words with precision, "someone like you... Someone with raw talent, unshackled by attachments, capable of thinking freely... shouldn't be wasted. You have potential, Aya. And potential... is wasted when left without purpose. Shadow Guards will give you purpose, a place to grow, and opponents who can truly challenge you."

Aya's expression softened slightly, though her tail flicked with a restrained energy. "Purpose... you think a bored, expelled genius like me can find purpose in serving someone else?" she asked, her voice half-teasing, half-serious.

Azzy smiled faintly, a rare, subtle curve of lips that conveyed both confidence and understanding. "Purpose isn't about who you serve. It's about what you become in the process. You'll have freedom, you'll have challenges, and you'll have a goal to reach... not because I command it, but because you'll choose to pursue it. That... is what I'm offering."

Aya looked at him, her eyes narrowing slightly as she considered his words. For a long moment, silence filled the temple, broken only by the soft hum of the portal still under construction.

Finally, she tilted her head and muttered, almost to herself, "Interesting... but feels like it is not the complete truth."

Azzy's eyes narrowed slightly, a faint smile tugging at the corners of his lips. "Why are you even trying to question my motive?" he asked gently, tilting his head. "Do you think you don't deserve a position in the Shadow Guards or something? Or do you feel I'm trying to restrict your movements or something?"

Aya shook her head, her ears flicking slightly, a faint blush creeping up her cheeks. "No... It's not like that," she said softly. "You don't know me. You don't know what I've done here, what I am. And not only do you intend to put me in Shadow Guards, but you even gave me the goal of Shadow Commander. It's going to be the most elite force of the tri-state nation, independent of governance. Basically... it will be the most trustworthy army across all our clans."

Azzy chuckled quietly before stepping a fraction closer, his voice calm but firm. "When one becomes a demigod, they can sense things that normal humans can't see in others. Emotions, intentions, subtle energies... I don't know your circumstances, Aya, but I don't sense guilt. I don't sense malevolence, darkness, or any of the destructive tendencies your brother claims. I don't sense lies or deceit in your heart." He paused, letting the words settle. Then, with a faint tilt of his head, he added, "I also sense something... unusual. You are a virgin... which is... well, strange, given that your brother described you as someone who ruined marriages and enticed countless men and women."

Aya's face flushed red, her ears twitching a bit. She looked away, quietly murmuring, "It's... it's because of my unique constitution. Every month... during my periods, I secrete... high levels of pheromones. And as I've grown stronger, the level of attraction only increases. Those who are affected... even if they see me for a second, they become infatuated. They can't stop thinking about me all day."

Azzy raised an eyebrow, a small smirk on his face. "So that explains a lot," he said casually, though his tone carried an undercurrent of amusement. "No guilt, no malice, yet everyone thinks you're... dangerous because of a natural... biological effect."

Aya's ears twitched, and she looked down, fidgeting slightly. "Yes... exactly. It's uncontrollable. I've never wanted to... manipulate anyone. It just happens naturally."

Azzy nodded slowly, as if considering the information. "Then I understand," he said softly. "You don't need to hide who you are. our constitution, your abilities... all of it can be honed without harming innocents. That's what matters."

Aya looked up at him, her silver-white eyes meeting his golden gaze, a mixture of respect and curiosity in them.

Azzy blinked, tilting his head slightly as he regarded her. "But... I have a question that I couldn't find the answer to. You're more than five hundred years old," he said carefully, "so why do you still... have periods? Don't take offense—I'm just curious."

Aya's lips quirked into a small, wry smile. "I've lived long enough not to mind it," she said softly. Then, after a brief pause, she added, "But to answer your question honestly... even I don't know why."

Azzy's golden eyes softened, a hint of pity threading through his expression. "I see... I guess you've been carrying pain for centuries, haven't you?" he murmured quietly. "Over one hundred and thirty years' worth of it... accumulated into this one lifetime of yours."

Aya's silver-white eyes widened slightly, caught off guard by his insight. "You... you're quite perceptive, Lord Azrael," she admitted, a trace of awe in her voice. "Even though you haven't lived one-tenth of the life I've lived, you... see much more than I expected."

Azzy's lips curled into a gentle smile. "I've married, had a child... I've traveled through space, fought supreme realm experts, battled angels, Apostles, and even forgotten gods. I've carried the responsibility of leading the Death Clan. Experience like that... it teaches you a certain kind of wisdom. Perspective comes with surviving, with living through the impossible."

Aya fell silent, contemplating something in her head.

Azzy, noticing her quiet contemplation, leaned back slightly, still watching her with that calm, measured gaze. "You've seen much too, Aya," he said softly. "And I can tell... you're more than capable. You just... need purpose. That's what the Shadow Guards can give you."

Aya's lips parted, but no words came out immediately. Instead, her silver eyes glimmered with thought, a rare vulnerability hidden beneath her usual confident, untouchable exterior.

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The same day evening;

Finishing his work at the Minamoto Clan, Azzy went straight to the Elven village instead of returning home.

It was a familiar place to him. Years ago, he came here to challenge the current king, who was a prince back then, and then took away his sister as his assistant.

But because of the failed marriage proposal from the Elves, Azzy didn't want it to be awkward for the Elves. Hence, this time, he was more low-key as he visited them.

Upon reaching his quarters, he skipped dinner, which was mostly a variety of fruits, vegetables that elves usually eat, and shut himself in his room, meditating and absorbing the rich natural energy from the forests around in order to look for a way to upgrade his Decarune seal.

His meditation was disturbed by a soft knock on the door that immediately made Azzy sit up from the reclining chair in his room. "Come in," he said, his voice steady, clearly knowing who knocked on. He recognized their aura.

The door opened slowly, and a tall, lithe figure stepped inside, moving with the graceful, fluid motions that only royal elves possessed.

"Elowen..." he breathed in recognition.

Elowen Searvale took a slow step toward him, her silver hair glinting in the soft light of the room. "It's been a while," she said softly, her voice trembling just enough to betray the emotions she had held back. Her smile, though gentle, seemed almost fragile, and her eyes glistened as if tears were threatening to spill.

Azzy gave her an awkward smile, unsure how to respond at first. He hadn't expected such a personal moment, not here, not now.

Elowen seemed to sense his hesitation and shook her head slightly. "Don't worry," she said, her tone lightening. "You don't need to feel awkward with me. My brother already told me about... everything. Back then, I considered marrying you because we were friends, and I heard whispers that you might take multiple women in political marriages. But... that was back then. The situation now is different."

Chapter 692: The announcement (need edit)

As there was a brief silence from Claire, Azzy strained his voice a bit more and asked again. "Where is it, Claire?"

Claire couldn't help but sigh and answer. "It's found in the Banished Dimension... the place where the Protos race was imprisoned. Not even my father, Archangel Michael, would dare to enter that place."

Azzy exhaled slowly, his jaw tightening. "I'm willing to risk it to bring you back."

Her spirit answered immediately, firm but warm. "I already told you—it's not your fault, Azzy. And I've made peace with it. What I needed, I got it."

Her voice softened further, carrying a trace of worry. "Moreover, even if you don't fear your death to go on such a suicide mission, you have a family and a clan to look after. Think about your wife, your unborn child, and even if your clan has the successor in the form of your half-sister, if you were gone, everything would turn into chaos. If you want to attempt going there, try after fulfilling your duties to your family, try after securing your clan and your new country's future. There is no need to be in a hurry to leave. You can wait for a century or two... After attaining godhood... I'm not going anywhere..."

Azzy went completely quiet after Claire's words, the gentle hum of her voice fading into the recesses of his mind. The flicker of the candle beside him cast long shadows across the room, reflecting the conflict growing in his expression.

Then Claire's tone shifted — lighter, teasing, but laced with the weight of truth. "On a side note," she said, "there's another problem you're going to face soon."

Azzy's brows furrowed slightly. "Another?"

"Yes," she replied. "Once everyone learns that Leiza is pregnant, you'll become living proof that male demigods can sire children, too. And when that happens..." she sighed softly, "you won't be able to escape from the flood of marriage proposals that'll come your way. The hidden clans, your allies, as well as others that didn't try to establish any connection, all see you as a key to preserving or strengthening their bloodlines."

Azzy's expression darkened.

Claire continued, matter-of-factly. "They'll wrap it in righteousness — saying it's for the sake of the world, for the survival of humanity, for the protection of the future. But you know that in truth, they'll be asking for your bloodline. And when they find out about Zion's parentage... even if you reject marriage altogether, they'll still try to obtain your sperm through 'donations'. And who knows what methods they'll use then."

Azzy's fists tightened unconsciously, the air around him growing heavy. His golden eyes glowed faintly as he stared ahead, silent. For the first time in a long while, he seemed... cornered.

He slowly unclenched his hands and asked in a low, weary tone, "What do you suggest, Claire?"

Claire's voice came gently but firmly. "If you ask me... I would say you have two choices."

Azzy listened, unmoving.

"One," she said, "Retire before her pregnancy becomes obvious and hand over everything to Fiona and the next generation. Don't get involved in either administration or politics. Let the clan and the nation run without your shadow looming over it."

Azzy's gaze lowered, the thought stirring quietly inside him. After doing so much, how could he leave it to Fiona and expect her to do it his way? He should first fulfill his vision for the clan and then hand over the reins to her

"Or two," Claire added softly, "talk to Leiza about the possibility of multiple marriages. You can't keep avoiding reality forever."

Azzy remained still for a long time, his eyes distant — neither rejecting nor agreeing, only thinking whether there is a third option.

The flicker of the candle beside him swayed in the faint breeze, mirroring the uncertainty that stirred within his heart.

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The next morning, Azzy completed the last calibration of the portal array deep within the Elven capital's sacred grove. The hum of runic light faded into stillness, the silvery glow sinking into the ground beneath the ancient roots.

"I bid you farewell, Lord Azrael." Nemeryn bowed, and Azzy returned the bow with a smile. "I'll be waiting for the auspicious day. Just prepare your clan to move when the time comes."

For a moment, Azzy's eyes wandered all over the place, looking at the elves who came to send him off. He didn't find Elowen anywhere.

With a brief scan, he found that she was still at the palace.

Not intending to worry about her anymore, he bid farewell to others and left for his home.

Meanwhile, somewhere in the Arcana world;

Deep beneath the Sea;

Down in the black, where no light dared linger, 16-year-old Azrael, the time variant, sat cross-legged on the seabed like he belonged there. His skin gave off a scarlet glow; black lightning stitched itself across his arms and chest in slow, lazy arcs. monsters that lived on the seabed kept their distance in fear.

He breathed in, and the sea leaned on him. He breathed out, and the sea answered.

"Focus," he told the dark, the word more breath than sound. It rippled through the water, and the lightning snapped harder, tasting the intense pressure at the bottom of the sea. The glow along his veins pulsed once,

twice. The old seal embedded at his brow — fine, etched runes that no one else had seen — quivered, like a moth caught in light.

Something inside him rearranged slowly...

Muscle knitted over bone. Skin flushed a deeper red. Horn buds pushed, hard and sharp, from his temples; wings, folded and raw, scrubbed against his back like a thing waking from winter. His mouth widened until his teeth were a savage cut of white against the red.

His voice came out wrong the first time he laughed — rough, layered with something ancient. "At last," he said to no one and to everything, and the sound cracked the water above like distant thunder.

When he rose, the ocean obeyed in a way that made the sea creatures scatter in frantic, blind frenzy. He burst through the surface in a streak of lightning, salt spray exploding off his shoulders, the air trembling around his body.

A seal impressed in black on his forehead hissed faintly, smoke curling from the grooves.

"I, Lucifer Morningstar," he said to the moon and the slick, and the name slipped like a blade. "The true king of the netherworld and the heavens is back. Hahahaha... Just you wait, brother... I will kill you properly this time and claim the heavens..."

Just as his announcement faded in the wind, A demigod rank krakken felt the prickle and rose like a mountain uncoiling. It shoved up, tentacles churning, and fixed him with a barnacle-sore eye that smelled of salt and empire.

The krakken's voice was a groan that had swallowed storms. "The demon..."

Azrael smiled without humor. He knelt, palms opening to the world's darkest energy: black lightning condensed into a spear of night. Demonic energy braided into it, shrieking with the sound of iron on bone.

He did not speak. He didn't need to. The spear screamed out and cleaved the water like a comet.

The krakken tried to coil and protect its heart, but the spear found a seam — a place where tendon met spirit — and the creature split with an ugly, soundless tearing.

Just like that, the ruler of the seas of the Arcana world died in one attack.

Azrael then walked through the steaming mist and laughed, low and bright. "Lucky you picked my doorstep," he said, looking up a spirit core, floating a hundred feet above the black water like a monstrous moon. It glowed like trapped thunder.

"That core," he breathed. "Enough to push my level to —"

He didn't finish. Or rather, he didn't get to...

Pain hit him like a hammer behind the eyes, all of a sudden. His hands laced into his hair as if to stop his skull from splitting. The red skin shrank back like wax in cold water. Horns retracted. Wings folded and vanished. The demonic mask tore away and left a normal, all-too-human face slick with seawater and sweat.

"Azrael." A voice, layered and thin, echoed in the surroundings, coming from his own mouth... "How dare you..."

"One day," the whisper hissed, like wind through a tomb, "I will take over your body."

The clawing pain faded as quickly as it came. Azrael rocked on his knees, breath ripped into ragged shreds. The spear in his hands had winked out. The spirit core bobbed above the sea, untouched and indifferent, while bubbles stitched a pale line to the world below.

He spat seawater and blood. His voice when it came was small, thin with the echo of the thing that had spoken. "That was close," he muttered to the empty waves. The red glow had gone; only dark bruises threaded his skin where the demonic energy had burned and withdrawn. "I managed to release the seal and tap into his power... but becoming a demigod at this stage seems to be even riskier."

His knuckles were white. He looked at the core again, hungry all over. The idea of that power — distilled, raw, orbiting the sky — set something in his chest keening.

"First," he said, standing and testing his legs like a man who'd almost died and found he could still walk, "I need to control this power."

His laugh this time was smaller. "Once I do... I'll visit the Death Clan. I will take my revenge. Only after that, let's think about the breakthrough."

He turned his face toward the horizon, clenching his fists.

Chapter 693: The Deal (Need edit)

By noon, they arrived at the Four Seasons Hotel for the Elle Global photoshoot.

The Presidential Suite had already been transformed into a bustling studio. Photographers, lighting technicians, stylists, and assistants moved around, setting up equipment. Amidst the commotion, a familiar face was waiting—Lee Hye-rin.

The moment she spotted Xueli, her eyes lit up. "Unnie!" she called cheerfully in the Goryeo affectionate term, walking up to her.

Xueli smirked. "Rin Rin, when did you get here?"

The younger actress grinned. "Just a while ago."

With that simple greeting, Hye-rin subtly made it clear to everyone in the room that she and Xueli weren't just industry colleagues but actual friends.

Then, her gaze shifted to Tianzhu. "Oh? Tianzhu-ssi?" She tilted her head. "Are you sick or something?"

Tianzhu, wearing his mask as usual, simply nodded in acknowledgment but said nothing.

Before Hye-rin could press further, Xueli redirected her attention with casual conversation. Meanwhile, Tianzhu got to work.

As a road manager, his job wasn't just about following Xueli around. He needed to ensure everything ran smoothly.

First, he met with the Elle Global staff, confirming the schedule.

Next, he checked if all required personnel had arrived, then met with the principal photographer to review the planned poses and backdrops. He flipped through the reference images on a tablet, making mental notes.

Then, he moved on to the outfits.

Inspected the garments to ensure they were clean and wrinkle-free.

Checked the accessories—jewelry, shoes, gloves—making sure they were all present.

Confirmed the emergency kit had essentials like pins, wipes, and extra shoes.

Once everything seemed in order, Tianzhu headed to the changing rooms—two separate bedrooms assigned to Xueli and Hye-rin.

He stepped inside Xueli's first, checking for any hidden cameras. After that, he moved to Hye-rin's changing room.

With everything clean, Tianzhu walked out of the room and headed back to Xueli.

Keeping his voice low, he gave her a brief rundown of everything he had done—the schedule confirmation, wardrobe inspection, and security sweep. Then, he gave her the green signal.

Xueli nodded in approval, while Tianzhu added, "I also called Yuna. She's on her way."

"Oh? You did it for me, too?" Hye-rin smiled warmly. "Thanks."

He gave a small nod in response.

Xueli grinned. "You're learning fast. It's only Day 2, and you're already acting like a pro."

Tianzhu shrugged. "Jingmin sent me a step-by-step checklist. I just followed instructions."

Xueli chuckled. "That guy really takes his work seriously." Then, her expression turned thoughtful. "I wonder what's going on with him... Even when his wife got into an accident, he only took two days off."

Tianzhu glanced at the schedule. "Do you want to visit his house after the shoot?"

Xueli tilted her head in thought, but before she could reply, Hye-rin checked her phone.

"It's already 12:08." She sighed. "We haven't even started makeup yet. The shoot will probably be delayed by at least an hour."

Xueli shrugged. "Then we'll just ditch meeting Stunt Master Ha. I'll ask for a rain check."

Tianzhu raised an eyebrow. "Is that okay?"

"Of course," Xueli replied smoothly. "I haven't even signed the contract yet. No need to rush when I have other commitments."

Tianzhu simply nodded in understanding.

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The photoshoot stretched on for three hours, a seamless blend of professionalism and artistry.

The first part consisted of solo shoots—Xueli and Hye-rin, each taking turns in front of the camera. The crew worked in meticulous detail, adjusting the lights, fixing stray hairs, and ensuring that the angles captured the essence of the luxury brand they were representing.

Xueli, with her undeniable presence, owned the set with a fierce yet effortless grace.

Dressed in a sleek black Saint Laurent power suit, she exuded a sense of authority and elegance, each pose reflecting her status as an A+ listed actress. Whether she stood against the backdrop of the hotel's marble-clad interior or casually draped herself over a plush velvet chaise, every shot screamed sophistication.

Then came Hye-rin's turn.

She stepped onto the set in a soft ivory Dior silk gown, the delicate fabric cascading around her as she settled by the floor-to-ceiling window while her silhouette framed against the panoramic city skyline.

The photographer directed her to tilt her chin slightly, letting the natural sunlight bathe her face. The contrast between the golden glow of the afternoon and the cool tones of the gown created an almost dreamlike quality. Well, atleast for Tianzhu.

From his position in the corner, he observed silently with his mask still in place. For some reason, he couldn't take his eyes off Hye-rin.

Each pose she struck, whether a graceful turn of her wrist or the subtle way she let the gown flow around her, felt effortless yet intentional.

For a brief moment, her gaze flickered towards him, and their eyes met.

A small, knowing smile played on her lips before she turned back to the camera, continuing her work.

Tianzhu exhaled sharply, turning his attention back to his phone, pretending to check the schedule. "Okay, I need to stop staring at her. Man, she is beautiful though."

The next phase of the shoot began with twin shots featuring both actresses together.

Xueli and Hye-rin stood side by side, a stunning contrast—Xueli's sharp, bold confidence against Hye-rin's soft, understated elegance. They wore matching diamond earrings with their dresses flowing together.

The photographer had them interact naturally as they casually laughed while he continuously clicked on the shutter.

By the time the final flash went off and the director called "Cut! That's a wrap!", everyone was relieved.

Xueli stretched her arms, rubbing them a little bit. "One hour non-stop shooting... God, my back is stiff."

Hye-rin looked at her in worry. "You alright, Unnie?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. It's just been a while since I have done photoshoots for magazines. Forgot how rigorous they will be." Xueli chuckled, waved off casually.

After a while, the location shifted to the grand staircase. The concept for this set was "glamour in motion", capturing a modern femme fatale—elegant, confident, and effortlessly commanding attention.

Hye-rin stepped forward, now dressed in a tailored black Alexander McQueen blazer dress, cinched at the waist. The dress was short yet structured, its sharp lines balanced by the bold statement of her thigh-high leather boots.

The stylist adjusted her cuffs, ensuring every detail was impeccable, while the lighting team positioned reflectors to catch just the right amount of sheen on the polished steps.

The photographer called out, his voice filled with energy: "Alright, Miss Hye-rin, this is your moment! Think bold. Think unstoppable. You're walking away from something or someone—but with complete control. Give us that last glance over the shoulder, like you own the world."

Hye-rin smirked, her expression effortlessly shifting into character.

She started her descent.

One step. Her heels clicked against the marble, her pace measured, exuding dominance. Another step. The long sleeves of the blazer dress moved subtly with her, adding a sense of controlled fluidity. Then—mid-stride, she turned her head ever so slightly, casting a gaze over her shoulder.

The cameraman gasped quietly, immediately pressing the shutter.

Click. Click. Click.

From his position by the monitoring screen, Tianzhu watched the images appear in real time. Each frame was near perfection, but one particular shot stood out—

Hye-rin's smoky eyes locked directly on the lens, her lips parted slightly as if about to say something, as the golden hotel lights glistened against her sharp jawline.

Tianzhu blinked. "That was... something else." He mumbled involuntarily. Upon realizing, he cleared his throat, looking away. He wasn't supposed to be this focused on her.

But something about her presence on that staircase, the way she carried herself with such effortless power, made it difficult not to watch. He couldn't help but remember their first encounter, how dismissive he was, treating her as someone he casually passed in the streets. But now, there was this subtle attraction that made his gaze difficult to pull away from her.

However, the shoot still has a segment left.

As the next setup was being prepared, the production team moved to the rooftop infinity pool of the Four Seasons Hotel. By this time, the sun was already lower in the sky, casting a soft golden glow over the glass-like water, seamlessly merging with the skyline of Hangzhou in the background.

This time, the photoshoot's concept was "Serenity and Strength".

Hye-rin emerged from the dressing area in a sleek Bottega Veneta slip dress with the fabric hugging her frame in all the right places, flowing like liquid silk with every step she took.

The dress was minimalist yet luxurious, its muted champagne hue complementing her flawless skin. She was barefoot, each step against the warm tiles exuding a natural, unforced grace.

The set design was simple but effective—the infinity pool stretching out behind her, the city lights beginning to flicker in the distance, and a crystal glass in her hand, filled with a refreshingly cool, citrus-infused drink.

The photographer adjusted his camera, looking pleased.

"Alright, Miss Hye-rin, this time, you're not just looking at the view or came here to rest... You're a woman at the top of the world, enjoying the moment, owning it. The water, the city, the sky—it's all yours. Keep a soft but an intense gaze."

Chapter 694: The Deal Part-2 (need edit)

Inside, the cell was dimly lit by a single bulb overhead. The space was narrow — two bunks, a sink, a small steel toilet in the corner.

And sitting on the lower bunk was a man.

He was huge — muscles thick like cords under his tanned skin, his arms covered in scars and faint tattoo lines that vanished under his sleeves. His eyes lifted slowly, and for a second, Sungjun thought he was looking at a bear.

The guard chuckled, giving Sungjun a shove from behind.

"Lucky you," he said, voice dripping with sarcasm. "You just got assigned to the worst cell in the block."

Sungjun stumbled forward a step, catching himself against the frame of the bunk. He looked up — the big man hadn't moved, still staring at him, unblinking.

The guard leaned on the door, smirking.

"Poor bastard. You really do have the worst luck, getting this guy as your cellmate."

Then he slammed the door shut with a metallic clang.

The echo rolled down the corridor, and the footsteps faded away.

Sungjun straightened, rubbing his wrists where the cuffs had chafed. He didn't speak. The cell smelled faintly of sweat and damp metal. For a long moment, the two men just stared at each other.

Finally, the big man spoke, voice rough like gravel.

"You snore, kid?"

Sungjun blinked. "...What?"

The man leaned back, cracking his neck. "You snore. Because if you do, I'll make sure you stop by morning."

Sungjun let out a slow breath, a humorless smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"Guess I'll try not to sleep then."

The big man grunted, half amused, half unimpressed. "Suit yourself."

He leaned back on the bunk again, closing his eyes like nothing more needed to be said.

Sungjun sat down on the opposite bunk, his expression unreadable.

When he finally spoke, it was to himself — barely above a whisper.

"So this is what you meant by 'somewhere safe,' huh... Alex?"

The bulb flickered once, then steadied. The silence that followed wasn't peace — it was confinement.

Excellent continuation — this scene really establishes Sungjun's dominance and his shift in tone from the composed strategist to a cold, commanding presence. I'll rewrite your points into a smooth, show-don't-tell, cinematic style scene with casual dialogue and tight pacing — keeping the intensity and weight of Sungjun's personality intact.

Scene: The Cellmate (Part 2)

The heavy door clanged shut behind him, sealing the cell with a metallic echo.

The big man on the bunk shifted his leg to the side, stretching lazily. Then he turned his head, giving Sungjun a curious glance, half a grin tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"A Zhonggou guy?" he said, his voice deep, mocking, yet oddly casual. "Huh. Don't see many of your kind down here. What'd you do to end up in Level 2? Smuggling?"

Sungjun didn't answer.

He just started walking forward, slow and steady, eyes locked on the man like a predator measuring distance. The air between them thickened, the bulb above flickering once as if even the light hesitated to stay on.

The man frowned. "What—"

Before he could finish, Sungjun stopped right in front of him. He had to tilt his chin up slightly — the guy was enormous, at least seven feet tall, muscles coiled like ropes beneath his orange shirt.

Sungjun looked straight into his eyes and said flatly,

"I don't like your eye level."

The man blinked, confused. "What?"

"Kneel," Sungjun said.

The silence that followed lasted barely a second before the big man's face twisted into anger.

"The hell did you just say, you little—!"

He swung a punch the size of a frying pan, but Sungjun shifted slightly, letting the fist cut through empty air. His expression didn't even flicker. In the same motion, he drew in a quiet breath, pushing mana deep into his bones — the faint hum of power resonating through his limbs.

Then he struck back.

A short, brutal punch. No theatrics. Just precision.

The hit landed square in the man's ribs. The sound was wet and sharp — like someone snapping a thick branch. The big man's eyes went wide as saliva and air burst from his mouth. His massive body flew backward, crashing against the steel bed rail before sliding to the floor with a grunt.

He wheezed, clutching his side, trying to get air back into his lungs.

Sungjun walked up to him slowly, his face calm, his gaze cold enough to freeze the air.

He stopped above him and said quietly,

"This is how our eyes should meet."

The man looked up, panting, a mix of pain and disbelief spreading across his features. Sungjun crouched slightly, voice low but clear.

"If you still don't understand the difference between us... I'll take my time teaching you."

He raised his right hand, flexing his fingers once — the same hand that had dropped him.

"I was arrested for smuggling drugs," Sungjun said evenly. "But this hand... has killed dozens. Every one of them a gangster who thought power came from shouting louder."

He tilted his head slightly, eyes narrowing.

"So if you understand," he said, "stay down. Kneel—and answer me."

His voice hardened, every word deliberate.

"Who are you?"

The man's breathing slowed. His jaw clenched. But his eyes — they no longer carried defiance. Slowly, he shifted onto one knee, head bowed.

"My name..." he rasped, voice low, "is Ivan. Ivan Petrov."

Sungjun's gaze didn't waver.

"Good," he said softly. "Now we can talk."

Would you like the next continuation — where Sungjun begins interrogating Ivan and we start to hint that this man may know something about Seongha's father (or even be connected to the underworld dealings Pavel once touched)?

Sungjun eased down onto the lower bunk as if the metal frame were a throne. The cell felt smaller with him seated—closer, more dangerous. The big man wiped a smear of blood from his lip with the back of his hand and sat up, rubbing his side. He stared at Sungjun for a long beat, then gave a tight, crooked grin.

"Name's Steve Smith," he said, voice gravelly but steady. "Used to be with the Iron Brotherhood. We weren't quiet about who we were—until the cops made sure there wasn't much left of us." He shrugged, like listing the weather. "After that I shifted to weapons. Smuggling, moving gear for people who could pay. Caught doing it — twelve years was the package. Been five in this place."

He flexed his fingers, the movement oddly calm. "I don't like subordinates," he added casually. "Trust is thin down here. But I got a few who still listen. You sit with me, nobody's gonna bother you. I can make that happen."

Sungjun studied him—no surprise, no reaction beyond a slow blink. Then he stood, the cell creaking under the movement, and walked to the single barred window. Moonlight sliced through the bars in a pale line across the floor.

"Stand," he said after a moment, without looking back.

Steve rose without hesitation, like he'd been rehearsing the motion for years. He planted his feet squarely, waiting.

Sungjun turned, the light catching the corner of his jaw. "I need you to tell me everything about this place," he said plainly. "Gangs, troublemakers, the ones we can use, the ones we avoid. Which guards look the other way and which will beat you for spitting. Names, habits, routines. Every scrap of useful noise."

Steve nodded once, slow and sure. "I got you. Start with what you want to know first or you want the whole laydown from top to bottom?"

Sungjun's smile was thin. "Top to bottom. No wasted words."

The bulb hummed above them as Steve pulled a small breath and began, voice low—an industrial whisper against concrete.

Scene: The Cafeteria Fight

The cafeteria was a blur of noise — steel trays clattering, the buzz of cheap fluorescent lights, and the dull murmur of inmates trading gossip.

Sungjun stood in line with his tray, eyes forward, calm as a man waiting for a bus. Behind him, Steve towered like a quiet shadow.

At one of the tables, a group of inmates sat watching. One of them — broad-shouldered, with a mohawk and a tattoo crawling up his neck — leaned forward, a grin twisting on his face.

"Well, look at that," one said, nudging his buddy. "Steve Smith's out of his hole."

"Yeah, but who's the pretty boy in front of him?" another snorted.

"New cellmate, maybe," a third guessed. "Looks too clean to last long here."

The leader with the mohawk chuckled, setting his tray aside. "Then let's go give him a warm welcome."

The four of them stood and swaggered toward the line. The crowd nearby quieted — not out of fear, but out of curiosity. Something worth watching was about to happen.

They stopped in front of Steve.

Steve's jaw tightened. "What?"

The man spread his hands, smile never leaving his face. "Relax, big guy. Just wanted to check out your new roommate."

He turned his attention to Sungjun, eyes sliding over him like measuring a mark. "You're new, huh? Pretty face. You might wanna be careful around here, beauty."

Chapter 695: The Deal part-3 (need edit)

Azzy rolled his shoulders, eyes gleaming faintly gold. "Then let's not waste time." Cracking his knuckles, he unleashed one of the soul skills, "Rise of the Undead."

At once, a pulse of black light erupted from his feet before ten forms burst from the darkness, and twenty undead beasts emerged. While they were only normal beasts and didn't possess any skills, each of them was still of Rank-9, the same as their targets.

Azzy didn't move. Not a single step.

He merely raised a finger and spoke. "Go."

The undead surged forward at his order.

"Guys, kill them..." Evelyn roared, charging forward alongside her Arcana Spirit. The others also followed suit.

Twelve minutes later;

Three of them—Fiona, Malgrim, and Emiya—lay or knelt on the ground, panting hard, their clothes torn and aura flickering weakly. The sweat on their foreheads shimmered under the glow of the barrier dome.

Only Avia and Evelyn were still standing, their focus locked on the final undead— a feline Rank-9 beast, massive and sleek, with its hollow eyes burning with blue fire.

It growled, letting out a sound that rattled through the air.

The sabertooth lunged at them both, its claws tearing up the floor as it missed them. Avia dashed to the left; Evelyn to the right, evading its attack.

"Now!" Evelyn shouted. "Soul skill: Rapid Punch Knockout."

Her Steel Kangaroo leapt forward. Its iron fists flashed like bullets. One, two, ten... twenty-three punches landed in rapid succession, each one ringing like a hammer strike, not giving any time for the beast to evade or counterattack.

The final blow sent the beast skidding across the arena with many of its bones destroyed.

Evelyn didn't wait for its resurrection. She surged forward, leaping high, covering her body with the layer of soul energy. Every shred of power she had left poured into her right leg.

She came down like a meteor—

CRACK!

Her heel smashed into the beast's skull, splitting it open with a flash of light. The sabertooth howled once—then staggered.

"Finish it!" she called out.

Avia's blades then glowed emerald. She spun into a blur as she unleashed her strongest soul skill: Hundred-Cut Slash!

In a storm of flashing arcs, she carved through the beast, shredding it into nothing but dust and fragments of fading energy.

As the echo of the final impact faded into stillness, Avia exhaled, lowering her daggers. Meanwhile, Evelyn steadied herself, one hand pressed against her knee. Their eyes met—and both smiled tiredly.

Tap

They raised their hands and slapped a triumphant high five in satisfaction.

At the far end, Azzy nodded once in approval. "Okay," he said at last, voice even. "That's it for today."

He turned, dismissing them with a wave.

The undead mist dissolved, vanishing like smoke in sunlight and returning to his mindscape.

One by one, the representatives began to leave the field—tired, battered, but proud.

However, right then, Azzy called out, "Aunt Evelyn..."

This made them pause their steps and turn around in surprise, as Azzy is the clan lord after all and is qualified to even address his parents directly with their names. Evelyn looked at him, raising her eyebrow, "Yes?"

Azzy replied. "Wait for me..."

"Hmm?" Evelyn tilted her head.

After a while;

The corridor shimmered faintly with blue light crystals embedded along the walls, casting a soft glow through the Starlight Clan compound. The scent of blooming moon orchids drifted through the air as Azzy and Evelyn walked side by side, nodding to the clan members they passed.

They reached the main residence—a modest yet elegant home made of pale stone and silverwood. Inside, laughter echoed faintly.

In the center of the living room sat Kylan Crescent, Azzy's granduncle, his white hair tied neatly and his sharp eyes softened by amusement as he played on the floor with a small child—a baby boy no more than three months old, crawling with astonishing speed after a silver ball that glowed faintly every time it rolled.

"Granduncle," Azzy greeted with a slight bow.

Kylan looked up, his face lighting up. "Ah, Azzy, Eve... You're just in time. This little troublemaker is trying to break the crawling speed record."

Evelyn furrowed her brows as she stepped forward. "Father..."

The old clan patriarch understood the meaning behind her displeased expression and said, "C'mon, Azzy addressed me with relation, and not the name. Meaning he is here as my grandnephew... What's wrong with calling him that way..."

"But he is still the clan lord. You should not use such short names..." Evelyn criticized her father a bit, but Azzy waved his hand. "Aunt Evelyn, I don't mind it. In fact, I prefer to be called this way. And it is not like this is the first time anyway..."

Evelyn blinked in surprise, "Then, how come you never told me that... I..."

This time, her words were interrupted by the cooing of a baby, who paused mid-chase, turned his head, and, upon seeing Azzy and Evelyn, his eyes lit up. He squealed in delight and began crawling straight toward them.

"Oh, my baby... you missed your..." Evelyn opened her arms entirely to pick up her son, but she froze as he entirely bypassed her and crawled toward Azzy. "Eh?"

Azzy blinked in surprise before kneeling down and scooping the baby into his arms. The child giggled, tiny fingers clutching Azzy's collar.

Evelyn crossed her arms, mock irritation in her tone. "Honestly. If someone saw this, they'd think he's your son, not mine."

Azzy chuckled softly, bouncing the baby slightly. "What can I say? My little cousin and I are bonded by death energy."

The baby cooed as if understanding him, a spark of faint black light flashing briefly in his bright eyes.

"See?" Azzy said with a grin. "He agrees."

Kylan laughed quietly, shaking his head. "You two and your strange energy affinities..."

Azzy looked back at Evelyn, still cradling the child. "Seriously, Aunt, you really have no idea his father was a descendant of our clan?"

Evelyn sighed, rubbing her temples. "I told you already." Her tone held a tired edge, the kind that hinted at long-avoided conversations. "It was a moment of weakness and it just happened during the ovulation period. I don't even remember his face anymore."

Her gaze softened as she looked at the baby—now giggling in Azzy's arms, trying to grab a strand of his hair. "Regardless of his bloodline, it doesn't matter. Whether he has death energy or not... he's still mine."

Azzy exhaled, the ghost of a sigh slipping through his lips. "Right..."

He looked down at the little boy, who was smiling up at him with bright eyes.

The evening air was cool when Azzy returned to his residence. The corridors of the Death Clan's central citadel were calm—too calm, almost deceptive in their stillness. As he crossed through the main hall, a guard hurried to him and knelt.

"Your Majesty, one of the scouts requests an immediate audience. He claims to have urgent information."

Azzy gave a slight nod. "Bring him to my study."

Moments later, the faint crackle of soul lamps lit up the vast study chamber. Scrolls and documents were neatly stacked across the long ebony table—reports on finances, training schedules, and the latest mission evaluations. A faint scent of old parchment and ink lingered in the air.

The door opened. A young scout stepped inside, his dark uniform dusted from travel, boots still damp with dirt. He dropped to one knee. "Your Majesty."

Azzy looked up from a document he was signing. "What is it?" His tone was calm, but the subtle shift in his aura made the room feel colder.

"News from the surface, sire," the scout said quickly.

Azzy leaned back slightly in his chair, steepling his fingers. "Go on."

The scout swallowed, glancing once at the flickering shadow behind Azzy before speaking. "It's... about the reemergence of the Werewolf Lord."

Azzy's eyes lifted sharply, the crimson in his pupils glinting faintly. "The Werewolf Lord?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," the scout continued. "Word has spread that WAMO—the World Adventurers and Mercenary Organization—is assembling elite experts from various guilds across the continent. Their goal is to form a strike team to hunt down the werewolves and recover a certain artifact."

Azzy's brows furrowed slightly. "Artifact?"

The scout nodded. "They called it the Cursed Music Box of Semele."

For a brief moment, Azzy said nothing. The only sound was the faint ticking of the chronometer on his desk.

He finally leaned forward, resting his elbows on the polished black surface. "Cursed Music Box of Semele..." he murmured under his breath, as though turning the name over in his mind. "Never heard of it."

The scout hesitated. "The guild leaders believe it to be of divine origin, perhaps linked to the gods of old. The legends say it carries the power to twist fate itself... bringing ruin wherever it plays."

Azzy's expression didn't change, but his silence spoke volumes.

At last, he said quietly, "Understood. Leave the full report on my desk."

"Yes, Your Majesty." The scout bowed deeply and withdrew.

When the door shut, the room was silent again. Azzy sat still for a long moment, eyes on the parchment the scout had left.

Chapter 696: The Deal part-4 (Need edit)

By the time Lin Fang and Vivian arrived at the Mariotte Grand Hall, it was already 11:30 p.m.

As the valet hurried to open the car door, Vivian stepped out in a scarlet gown. Her hair was styled neatly, and her lips painted the same bold shade as her dress — elegant, poised, and in layman's terms, rich...

Lin Fang walked beside her, dressed in a plain black suit, the kind of standard formalwear used by personal guards.

But his face was strangely hidden behind a sleek wolf mask, which was popular these days due to the rise of cosplay events in Northern Yan.

Vivian glanced sideways, raising an eyebrow. She murmured, just enough for him to hear, "Was this really necessary?"

Lin Fang adjusted his tie slightly. "The people inside are basically rich folks like you. And if a case arises where I have to protect you, I might need to offend some of them. You'll leave this city in three days— but I'll still have to live here. I'd rather not invite unnecessary trouble later on." He said quietly, staring ahead.

She stared at him for a few seconds, then exhaled and nodded slowly. "Fair enough."

Together, they walked through the carpeted hall as the faint sound of classical music echoed all around. The banquet area was supposed to be lively — but as they entered the private hall, Vivian's steps faltered.

Only three people were inside. The remaining were all a part of the orchestra band or the hotel staff.

One of them was familiar to Lin Fang, too. It's Mark, who stood in the center in a crisp black suit. The latter's expression softened as he noticed her but that disappeared in the next instant when he spotted the masked bodyguard. Of course, he didn't need to ask Lin Fang to learn of his identity. He could easily guess it. Meanwhile, beside him, a man and a woman turned curiously at the newcomers.

Mark was the first to break the silence. As his eyes flicked over Lin Fang's mask, surprise flashed for a moment before he brushed it aside with a practiced smile. "Vivian," he greeted warmly, stepping forward and pulling her into a hug.

While his arm was around her waist, he leaned close to whisper against her ear, "Please... try to get along with them tonight. We can sort our issues later, but now, smile. They're important for your father's business. Don't make things complicated."

Vivian forced a smile, putting up the perfect social mask, and pulled back, turning toward the couple.

"Good evening," she said smoothly as if she was genuinely happy to see them, "And happy birthday." She said to the man.

"Thank you..."

As the man said, Mark introduced them, "This is Zhang Yifu, the City Mayor's brother, and this is his wife, Shen Ruyi."

Vivian put on her polite smile and looked at them. "Vivian Moreau," she replied gracefully, shaking his hand. "It's a pleasure. This is my bodyguard."

At the mention of his name, Lin Fang gave a courteous nod from behind her, his wolf mask glinting faintly under the chandelier light.

The woman, Shen Ruyi, wrinkled her nose slightly at that introduction. "Bodyguard?" she repeated, her tone lined with disdain. "Why would a mere bodyguard be here? Surely you don't need one inside such a secure place."

Vivian hesitated. "He's just..."

"You should send him outside, Miss Moreau," Shen Ruyi cut her off, her smile sharp and patronizing as she added. "I don't know how it was in Novus Mundus, but in Zhonggou, a private banquet isn't really a place for those who aren't in the same social circle. I apologize for the blunt tone."

Vivian's smile stiffened as she glanced toward Lin Fang, who stood silently but with a faint furrow beneath the mask. Before she could respond, Zhang Yifu chimed in with an assuring grin.

"You can trust us, Miss Moreau," he said, gesturing around the room. "There are cameras everywhere — see those little black domes? Our own security personnel are watching every angle. And a few of my friends will be joining shortly. They might feel uncomfortable having someone... outside the circle."

Vivian's fingers twitched against her gown. She could feel Mark's presence beside her, his hand resting lightly on her back as he leaned close to whisper.

"Don't be stubborn," he murmured. "You'll only offend them over something so small."

Her lips pressed together. She turned toward Lin Fang, uncertain. "If you don't mind—"

Before she could finish, Zhang Yifu interrupted smoothly, "There's a security control room upstairs, Mr. Lin. You can stay there if you wish. It overlooks this entire floor."

Lin Fang paused, reading the unspoken message in their eyes. Then, without a word, he gave a small nod. "Understood."

As his footsteps faded toward the exit, Mark's lips curved into a calm, satisfied smile. He raised his glass from the nearby table, the red liquid swirling slowly within.

"Well then," he said, voice light, "let's have some wine, shall we?"

Vivian forced an awkward smile in return, the unease in her stomach growing heavier by the minute.

Would you like me to continue right from here — with Lin Fang upstairs noticing something off through the security feed (the early hint of a setup or ambush)? That would naturally lead to the upcoming confrontation scene.

Here's your scene rewritten in novel-quality prose with pacing, tension, and cinematic flow, consistent with your ongoing tone and narrative style:

The hotel staff led Lin Fang toward the elevator at the end of the hall. The man smiled politely, pressing the button for him.

"Please wait on the top floor, sir. Another staff member will assist you there," he said, bowing lightly.

Lin Fang gave a simple nod, stepping inside. The doors slid shut with a soft chime.

As the elevator began to rise, a faint hum echoed through the small, dimly lit space. Lin Fang leaned against the railing casually — until Alpha's voice resounded sharply in his mind.

"Something's wrong."

"What?" Lin Fang frowned.

"The elevator... It isn't stopping at the fourth floor."

His eyes darted toward the display — it had already passed the 4th and was climbing rapidly. "Great," he muttered under his breath.

And then—

"Protect yourself with mana. Now!"

Instinct overrode thought. Lin Fang instantly wrapped his body with a layer of dense, shimmering mana.

A split second later, a hiss filled the elevator. From the vents above, a thick purple gas poured down like smoke from a furnace.

His system chimed rapidly in his mind:

[Warning: Foreign toxin detected.]

[Mana barrier neutralizing effect...]

[Mana reduced: -1500 MP/sec.]

The gas coiled around him like living mist, trying to seep through every gap. His eyes narrowed, the pressure from his mana field flickering faintly.

"Poison?" he muttered coldly. "How original."

Seconds dragged on. The elevator kept climbing.

By the time it dinged open again, his mana reserves had already dropped by twenty-seven percent.

He stepped out silently — into a wide, moonlit terrace. The night air carried the faint scent of salt and gun oil.

Six men stood waiting, each clad in sleek black suits and wearing half-masks. Every one of them held a katana drawn and ready.

For a brief moment, surprise flickered through their eyes. One of them — apparently the leader — clicked his tongue.

"Tch. As expected of the intel we received... the gas didn't work."

He raised a hand, his expression hardening.

"Doesn't matter. We'll cut him down the old-fashioned way."

The sound of six blades slicing through air filled the rooftop.

"Boys—get him."

Lin Fang rolled his shoulders once, mana pulsing faintly around him like an aura of blue fire.

"Perfect," he said quietly. "I needed some warm-up anyway."

Would you like me to continue with the fight choreography next (showcasing Lin Fang's combat finesse and partial use of Alpha's buffs), or do you want it to take a stealthier tone — where he tests his upgraded sword and newfound reflexes?

Here's the continuation written in proper cinematic style — crisp, impactful, and visually vivid, while keeping your tone consistent:

66)

Lin Fang's eyes hardened behind the wolf mask. The six men spread out, circling him with deadly precision, their blades gleaming beneath the terrace lights.

"Alpha."

[Understood. Activating skill — Divine Blessing.]

A surge of golden light pulsed from his hands, coating his arms up to the elbow like molten fire. The air rippled around him as the system's notification echoed in his head:

[All physical stats increased by 500%. Duration: 60 seconds.]

The leader barked an order—"Cut him down!"

But Lin Fang was already gone.

In the blink of an eye, a blur of motion cut through their formation. His fist met the first guard's chest with a thunderous crack, sending the man flying backward like a ragdoll. Before the others could react, Lin Fang pivoted—his palm slammed into the second's face, shattering his mask and sending him sprawling unconscious into the wall.

The third swung his katana desperately, but Lin Fang caught his wrist mid-swing, twisted it with casual force, and drove his knee into the man's gut. The air left his lungs in one wheezing gasp before he crumpled.

Chapter 697: The Deal Part-5 (need edit)

As the bear's size towered over him with its eyes burning with killing intent, Alpha's voice echoed in Lin Fang's mind. "Lin Fang, proceed as if you were facing a Lord Tier Beast."

Lin Fang's jaw tightened. "A Lord tier, huh? Maybe I shouldn't have deactivated the skill earlier."

With a flick of his wrist, twin daggers of Xuanwu materialized in his hands, and he exhaled once, lowering his stance. "Alright then," he muttered. "Let's end this quickly."

The bear lunged forward, swiping the claws like cleavers through the air. Lin Fang dodged sideways, evading the attack by a hair's breadth, and then he countered with a downward slash. The dagger cut deep across the creature's forearm, spilling blood to the floor.

Graaa

The beast roared and swung again, this time faster. Lin Fang met the blow head-on once again, crossing both daggers to parry. The impact sent a shockwave that shattered nearby glass panels, blasting Lin Fang to the back.

Lin Fang, who held his footing, slid across the floor for a moment before he spun in the air and landed on the floor.

Narrowing his eyes, he murmured. "System, Activate, Combat Merge. Select Cloud"

In the next second, the system's chime echoed in his head.

*Ding!

[Active Skill: Combat Merge is now active.]

As the Blazing Smilodon went into hibernation, Lin Fang received its stats.

Tightening his grip, he charged forward. Turning into a blur, he unleashed the daggers' skill at the same time.

*Ding!

[Twin Fang Slash is now active]

With both daggers shaped in a cross, he swung them down upon narrowing the distance in that second.

Before the Bear gets to respond to the heavy instincts of moving away, the attack landed on its chest, from shoulder to the lower abdomen on either side, a huge cross-shaped cut was on its body, and the blood started gushing out of its body as he bear howled in pain, staggering.

He vanished from sight again. A blink later, he appeared behind the beast with one of his daggers poised against its neck.

The bear froze, panting heavily. Blood dripped down from its wounds, staining the terrace floor red.

Alpha's voice then cut in. "It's perfect. Now proceed to execute to eliminate the threat."

Perhaps Lin Fang himself was about to kill the bear, but Alpha's words suddenly made him hesitate. His grip tightened on the dagger and then stopped. Instead, gave a powerful kick to his back.

As it fell to the floor, he exhaled sharply, forcing his muscles to relax. The daggers were dismissed into the inventory.

"Why?" Alpha questioned him right away.

"I have no qualms killing monsters that threaten my life," Lin Fang replied quietly with his eyes still locked on the downed creature. "But he's not a monster. He is a human."

Alpha's heavy voice turned a bit serious as it replied. "You have to change those naive thoughts, Lin Fang. You were almost killed twice by the very humans. Now, this is the third time. I'm afraid that if you don't put away these stupid thoughts, it will come back and bite you."

"I know, but I don't want to be a murderer," replied Lin Fang, firm on his ideology. He turned his back as the bear's massive body reverted slowly to its human form. The man was unconscious and bleeding but alive.

Meanwhile, down on the 3rd floor, the soft jazz music of the banquet hall played faintly in the background. Vivian sat at the table, but her hand was trembling as she raised a glass of wine. The edges of her vision blurred.

Her pulse quickened unnaturally. "What... what's going on...?"

She pressed a hand against her chest, heat coursing through her body while her breathing became unsteady. The room seemed to spin.

"Babe?" Mark's voice came softly, almost too soft. He reached out, putting on a mask of concern. "Hey, are you okay?"

Vivian's words slurred, "I... I don't know. Something's wrong. Tell Lin Fang... tell him to come down..." At the same time, her hand was already hurriedly moved to her smartphone. 1 number was pressed on hold and dialed an emergency call.

Meanwhile, Mark nodded quickly, voice filled with false reassurance. "Yeah, of course. Just... come on, you need to rest."

He wrapped an arm around her and half-carried her out of the banquet room. No one stopped them.

Moments later, he pushed open the door to a suite room he had already arranged on the same floor. Once he had laid her down on the bed, his face suddenly twisted from fake worry to a smirk.

Meanwhile, a semi-unconscious Vivian's mind swam in confusion and heat. "It's... so hot... what... did you..." her hands automatically reached out to her own bosom... "You... what's in that drink..."

Mark's smirk widened further, "Nothing, Babe. Just a simple drug... Forget about it." Slowly, removing his shirt buttons, he said. "Embrace your feeling and give in to me..."

At the same time, his other hand shot into his pocket and took out his smartphone, the camera switching on in the next movement, recording her who was spasming left and right as the effects of the drug got stronger.

She clenched her fists tightly as he threw the shirt away and was about to reach for her, her face turning deep red in anger but helplessness, too. The mana in her system is trying its best to nullify the foreign agent that has already been digested...

However, right then, the door exploded open with a crash. A gust of wind swept in as the splintered remains of the lock hit the wall.

Standing at the doorway was Lin Fang, who was sweating like hell and taking heavy breaths. "Phew. Thank goodness, I came in time..."

Mark froze mid-motion, his smile dying instantly. His phone slipped from his hand. "Wha—what are you doing here?" he stammered in a cracking voice.

Lin Fang didn't reply. Letting out another deep breath, in a blink, he was in front of him and shot his hand forward. His hand gripped Mark's throat tightly before slamming him into the wall so hard the plaster cracked.

Mark choked, with his legs dangling as his body was raised above. Lin Fang said in a cold voice. "You're lucky I got here before something irreversible happened. Or else, I wouldn't have hesitated to crush that throat..."

He threw Mark across the room. The man crashed into a table like a rag doll and fell to the floor, gasping.

Lin Fang then turned, pulled the sheet over Vivian to cover her properly, and faced him again.

The icy dagger shimmered into his hand again, this time just one. Pointing it at him, he said. "You hired those men upstairs, didn't you? They're all unconscious now, and one will die if you don't save him now. Now, take them and leave before I change my mind."

Mark's face turned white. He staggered to his feet, clutching his neck.

"Y-you... You will pay for this..." He spat in a trembling voice, but his eyes betrayed his fear.

Lin Fang took one step forward. The air grew heavy with killing intent as he poured mana into it. "Don't take my kindness and your influence for granted."

Mark flinched back. Without another word, he grabbed his shirt and bolted for the door.

Lin Fang's gaze then dropped to the smartphone on the floor. The screen is showing nothing but dark, but he saw that the recording was on. His expression hardened, and he crushed it beneath his boot as Mark was rushing away.

Just then, a faint pulse of mana stirred behind him. Lin Fang turned toward Vivian, who slowly raised.

Before Mark could reach the exit, the mana lashed out from her palm, forming something like a serpent, which then wrapped around him like a rope. He was yanked off his feet, suspended midair once again.

Lin Fang looked at her in surprise.

Vivian's eyes were glowing faintly as Mark's scream cut the room in half.

She slowly sat up with her cheeks flushed from the earlier fever, but her stare was hard as steel even as her breath appeared ragged. "I'm giving you one week, Mark," she said in a low voice, almost a growl. "Break the engagement. Convince your father to pull out of my company. If on the eighth day you haven't—then I don't care about jail, bankruptcy, or dragging my own parents into the street. I will have you and your whole family removed. Understand? Now get out."

Mark didn't need a second warning. He stammered, nodded over and over, eyes wide with panic, then bolted from the suite as if the floor had caught fire beneath him. The door slammed shut and the echo bounced off the walls like the last sound of a storm.

Vivian let out a long, shaking breath and buried her face in her hands for a second. When she looked up, there was something softer in her expression — gratitude mingled with exhaustion. She turned to Lin Fang, the wolf mask still shadowing his face. "Thank you," she said, voice quiet. "If you hadn't come... I don't know what would've happened."

Chapter 698: The Deal Part-6 (Need Edit)

Lin Fang was taken aback, not by her plea but by what he was witnessing.

She wasn't just experiencing the effects of the drug that was giving her a high sex drive. Her entire body started transforming.

Then, her pupils flared crimson. Lin Fang froze as he saw her skin grow pale, her veins darkening faintly beneath it, and her nails extended into faint, sharp crescents. He took a step back in alarm.

"Alpha," he muttered under his breath, "what the hell is happening to her?"

Alpha's calm voice echoed in his mind. "She's not just human. You're looking at a dhampir — half vampire, half human. That drug must've triggered her blood instincts. Be careful. Dhampirs are quite sexually aggressive during the night. And that drug only increases her sex drive even more..."

Lin Fang clenched his jaw, realizing the full weight of the situation. Vivian's breath came in ragged, trembling waves, her body trembling as she fought for control. "Get out," she groaned, clutching her temples. "I can't—I'll lose it."

He knelt beside her, his voice low and steady. "You're not going to lose it. Focus on me. Breathe."

Her gaze locked on his — glowing red, intense enough to make his skin prickle. "Why the hell do you come near... Damn it... I don't think I can control it anymore..."

Vivian's hands found his coat with frightening strength, and she pulled him down. Then her lips slammed into his in a desperate, urgent kiss.

Lin Fang froze — shock and instinct clashing inside him. Desire flickered for a heartbeat, but Li Liu's face flashed through his mind, and the line he drew for himself snapped tight. He shoved away hard, creating distance. The wolf mask hid the flicker of something unreadable on his face.

"Vivian—no." His voice was flat, steel under silk.

She lunged again, more frantic this time. Lin Fang didn't wait. He moved with cold efficiency, not to satisfy urge but to stop it. He stepped inside her reach, caught her wrist, and with one practiced motion applied a precise, nonlethal choke hold for a second to cut her struggle without hurting her — enough to drop her to the bed, breath slowing, muscles going lax. He then laid her gently on her back, turning her head to one side, checking her airway.

Alpha's voice was in his head like an icicle. "You did well to restrain rather than escalate."

Lin Fang knelt, palms hovering near her temple, and poured a careful thread of mana into her, trying to nullify the drug effects.

The morning light crept thin through the curtains. Vivian woke with a groan, a dry taste in her mouth, and the slow fog of yesterday sliding away like mist.

She blinked, and the room snapped into sharper focus: the neat crease of the sheet, the distant hum of the city, and a dark shape in a chair nearby.

Lin Fang slept in a rigid, almost awkward pose, jacket folded over his knees. He looked like he'd fought all night and finally given in to a tired slump. For a second, Vivian allowed herself the absurd comfort of realizing she was wearing a shirt that wasn't hers — his shirt. The cotton smelled faintly of him and something like rain.

Then memory hit like a cold hand. Her face drained of color. She sat bolt upright, clutching the shirt at her chest.

Lin Fang stirred and opened his eyes. He blinked, then saw her, and the tired line on his face softened. "Hey," he said, low. "It's okay. Nothing happened last night."

Vivian's breath came out ragged. She tried to form a smile, swallowed, then let out a long, shaky apology. "I'm— I'm sorry. I'm sorry you had to deal with that."

He waved a hand, half-annoyed, half-gentle. "Don't be. You weren't in the right condition. You didn't choose that. Nothing happened afterward, and that's what matters."

She let out a small, shaky laugh of relief. After the pause, she pushed her hair away and asked, "So... what now? I threatened him last night, but even if I want him gone, I can't just have him killed. I don't have solid proof. If I drag my parents into this, they'll demand paperwork, stakes, proof. His father has eight percent in our company — that's over a billion credits. My parents won't move on words alone."

Lin Fang sat forward, elbows on his knees, thinking. He watched her closely, the sunlight carving his jaw into shadows. "What about the hotel CCTV?" she asked, hopeful and suspicious at once.

Vivian shook her head. "I doubt it. They wouldn't leave behind an obvious evidence in the banquet hall."

Lin Fang's mouth tightened. He tapped his fingers once. "When I got to the room," he said, voice flat, "Mark had a smartphone recording. He intended to have something to blackmail you with. That phone—he could have used it as leverage. People like him plan for revenge. They do it meticulously."

He met her eyes as he continued. "I think he meant to use the footage later. If the recording exists intact, that's gold for him. With me ending up dead in the hands of his goons, he was confident that no one would be able to save you."

Vivian rubbed at her temple, "Then I guess we'll have to force the truth out of the people who helped him."

Lin Fang stood and reached for his jacket. "I'll go now. I'll look at the hotel feed and see if any staff logs or blind feeds exist."

She watched him for a second, gratitude and something fiercer flickering across her face. "Be careful," she said, almost softly.

As he left, Vivian got up and walked into the restroom.

She stared at her reflection, water dripping down her cheeks, a faint flush lingering from last night's chaos. Her eyes lingered on the curve of her jaw, the sweep of her lashes, but her thoughts were elsewhere.

Lin Fang... she murmured under her breath, voice barely audible. A gentleman.

The memory of the previous night replayed vividly, and how he had responded. Even when she had tried to tempt him under the control of a drug, he had pushed her away and maintained a gentlemanly manner.

And during the outing, his patience had never wavered. Her teasing, her mood swings, the awkward moments of embarrassment — he bore them all quietly, calmly.

A small, genuine smile tugged at her lips. "He's trustworthy... at the very least. Someone I could count on. Someone I could..." She shook her head slightly, feeling the heat of the thought, "friendship, yes... friendship first."

She took a deep breath, splashing her face again to clear the last traces of thought.

With a determined nod to her reflection, she whispered, "Alright... let's try our best, Lin Fang."

Elsewhere...

The alley smelled of old beer and rust. Mark stumbled out into the narrow corridor, the city's neon bleeding against the wet stone. He clutched the envelope tight, the picture of Vivian folded inside like a promise he thought he could buy.

A shadow moved in the corner of his vision. Before he could turn, something struck the back of his neck. The world tilted; his legs gave way. He hit the ground hard, his head ringing. A thin, glassy dart stuck out from the small of his back, slick with a dark stain.

A hooded man stepped from the deeper shadow, lowering the silenced pistol in one gloved hand. He crouched beside Mark and drew a phone. His voice was calm, businesslike as he put the call through.

"Target down," he said into the line. "The buyer took the advance. He's out cold in the alley — tractable. The dealer's identification confirms it was a commission to Scorpion."

A crisp woman's voice answered on the other end, cool and deliberately distant. "Good. Scorpion's been a nuisance. Can your crew take care of them?" Her tone had the casual cruelty of someone used to ordering violence.

The man's eyes flicked to the street entrance. "Kill or capture?"

"Kill them all if possible," the woman said. "But the one who met Mark — capture him. Alive. I want him talking." There was a beat. "If you need more resources, name your price."

The man hesitated for a fraction, then spoke. "Three million to take out eight men, capture one A-rank. High risk."

A slow click on the line. "Five. Five million if you bring me that one alive. Do not fail." The voice hardened into command. "And one more thing about Mark — don't kill him. I want him intact. I want him exposed."

"Exposed how?" the man asked, wary.

"You'll get the instruction later. But do not destroy him." Her voice was flat and final. "Make him lose everything that matters to him. Reputation, influence — everything. If he stands in my way after tonight, he will be finished in the court of public opinion. And if he resists?" A small, cold laugh. "Then make sure he regrets it."

The man's jaw set. "Understood. Five million. Take out Scorpion tonight. Capture the contact who met Mark. Mark will be used as leverage."

Chapter 699: The Sect Head Trials (Part-5)

Mark didn't even blink. "Yes," he said immediately. "I accept that completely."

His answer made the red tribunal twitch faintly, while the black tribunal let out a low rumble that might have been a laugh.

Mark continued casually. "I love wealth. I won't lie. I love it a lot. I love money, materials, rare ores, and expensive things. That's just who I am."

He shrugged before adding in clarity. "But I've never tried to steal someone else's wealth. And I don't desire the riches that belong to others. I only want what I earn, what I create, or what I conquer fairly. So yes, I'm greedy. And no, I'm not ashamed of it."

The white tribunal watched him quietly for a few long seconds. Then she lifted her hand and snapped her fingers. The mirror shattered into golden sparks.

She turned toward him. "Then... the fourth and final test."

The painted world dimmed around them as though holding its breath.

The floating cloth-shaped tribunals shimmered faintly, their faceless forms turning toward Mark. He steadied his breathing, preparing himself for whatever came next.

The white tribunal, however, took a step forward, her voice soft but piercingly clear, echoing through the strange dimension. "This is the last question of your character test. Prepare yourself."

Mark nodded once, trying to maintain composure. "Tell me," she began, "who do you trust the most, aside from yourself?"

Mark blinked at the question.

He waited for a face to appear in his mind... Any face. Song Yue. Shen Ling. The Snow Wolf King. Ryder. Lan Xia. His sisters. His companions. Even Chang'e.

But there was nothing. Only blankness.

He stood there frozen, his brows knitting tightly as realization dawned painfully slow.

"No one," he finally said. His voice was flat and honest. "I don't trust anyone. Not fully."

The white tribunal tilted her head slightly, while the other two remained silent.

"Why?" she asked.

Mark's tone turned colder, but quieter as he remembered how he was betrayed by his comrades in his past life, how he was abandoned by his birth mother, how he was betrayed by Lin Xue, and the system...

"I was betrayed more than once. By people I fully trusted with my heart. That's why." He exhaled slowly. "I had love and care for my loved ones, but trust... I don't have complete trust in them."

The three tribunals exchanged glances before the white tribunal spoke again, this time shifting the nature of the question. "Then answer this instead. If you had to leave your loved ones behind... to whom would you entrust their lives?"

She paused, then added gently, "Or think of someone you love deeply. The person closest to your heart. It doesn't have to be about trust alone."

This time, Mark closed his eyes.

A memory flickered.

Song Yue, her soft smile, her warm presence, her steady heart.

And another memory surfaced, and Alina was seen. She was always beside him, always calm, always efficient, always loyal, with her cold exterior and gentle interior.

Mark opened his eyes again. "When it comes to love, it's Song Yue. She is the one I love most."

The white tribunal nodded, waiting.

"And when it comes to trust, if I have to rank all others," he continued, "it's Alina. But she's not human. In your terms... she's a battle puppet. A machine with thoughts and feelings of her own."

The white tribunal raised its palm. "Then listen carefully. I give you two scenarios."

The space trembled.

Her voice deepened ever so slightly.

"Scenario one: Alina kills your Song Yue under some influence."

Mark froze.

"Scenario two," she continued, "Someone else tries to kill Song Yue, and Alina... runs away to save her own life. Song Yue dies."

Mark's blood turned to ice.

"These are illusions," the tribunal warned, "but you must face them."

Instantly, two images exploded into existence before Mark's eyes.

In the first, Alina, with blank eyes and a twisted smile, plunged her arm through Song Yue's chest. Mark's hands trembled instinctively. He knows that it is an illusion, but for some reason, his breath hitched painfully, and a shiver tore through his entire spine as he saw Song Yue collapse with widening, disbelieving eyes.

In the second, Song Yue cried for help while an unknown enemy's blade descended toward her, and Alina turned and fled. Her movement was fast, emotionless, and selfish. Song Yue's scream ended abruptly as the blade pierced her heart, and darkness swallowed the scene.

Mark staggered a step back.

His heartbeat pounded in his ears.

His fists clenched so tightly his knuckles popped.

He forced himself to breathe, but each breath was sharp, like knives carving into his lungs.

The white tribunal's voice came again, calm but firm. "Answer me. What punishment will you give to Alina?"

Mark shook his head slowly. "I... don't want to answer this."

"You must," the tribunal insisted. "There is no avoiding it."

Mark's jaw tightened. He swallowed hard.

"What do you do to Alina," she pressed, "in each scenario?"

Mark closed his eyes.

Silence stretched... long and heavy.

"I don't know," he whispered at first. "I don't know what I would do." His voice cracked faintly. "If Alina killed Song Yue... regardless of whether there is fault in her or not, I would be devastated. Broken. I don't know what line I would cross. I might kill her out of rage, even if she were innocent. Or I might forgive her because she is innocent and try to look for a way to revive my Song Yue. I can't say."

He opened his eyes and looked serious.

"But if she ran away and let Song Yue die," he said slowly, "I would hunt her. Not out of betrayal, but because abandoning her duty is unforgivable. She was supposed to protect my family. And if she abandons that role... then I won't forgive her."

His voice deepened.

"As for the one who killed Song Yue..." He inhaled sharply, and his eyes became cold as death. "I will destroy that person. I don't care if that person is a god, a demon, or someone beyond creation. I will annihilate them completely."

The white tribunal watched him in silence.

Mark sighed softly. "I don't know if that's the kind of answer you expect. But this is how I feel."

For a long moment, the painted world was silent.

Then the white tribunal gave a slow nod.

"There is no correct answer. There is no incorrect answer. The test of character is meant to know your true heart, not judge it."

She raised her hand toward him, and the atmosphere shifted.

"Very well, Lan Zhen. Your character is understood."

She turned to the red tribunal.

"He may proceed to the second trial."

*

The painted dimension shifted once more as the white tribunal stepped back, folding her formless, cloth-like arms behind her. The black tribunal's deep voice rose, reverberating across the warped sky like rolling thunder. "The second trial is the trial of wisdom."

Mark straightened his posture instinctively. The weight of the previous trial still lingered in his chest, but he pushed it aside.

The black tribunal's outline shimmered with faint shadows as he continued, "Character decides who you are. Strength grants respect. But wisdom... wisdom sustains power. Wisdom is what leads a sect through calamities and prosperity. It teaches humility when to retreat and courage when to advance. Without wisdom, even the strongest leader collapses." His faceless head inclined slightly. "Thus, your trial begins."

Before Mark could respond, the world warped violently beneath his feet.

Colors inverted and the space folded.

And in the next instant, he was no longer standing before the tribunals.

He stood instead in a vast hall, stretching endlessly in both directions like some ancient palace forged by giants. Marble pillars climbed into the sky. The entire corridor was lit with a soft golden glow that seemed to have no source.

Before him were twelve enormous doors, each carved with different symbols. Six stood to his left, six to his right. All were closed.

The black tribunal's voice echoed from nowhere and everywhere at once. "Choose one door."

Mark frowned slightly. He stepped toward the nearest door on his right. The carvings shifted under his gaze, forming the shape of a blade. Curious, he pushed it open.

Inside was a small circular chamber, empty except for a sword embedded in a stone altar.

A voice echoed inside the chamber, seductive and earnest at the same time. "Master... come. Free me. I will grant you power."

Chapter 700: The Sect Head Trials (Part-6)

Mark closed the door immediately as soon as he saw the sword and heard those words. He wasn't tempted in the least.

"Not happening," he muttered.

He walked to the next door. This chamber held three disciples who bowed deeply, calling out, "Patriarch Lan! Please guide us. We need your wisdom!" Their eager faces held expectation and reverence.

Mark shut the door again.

A third door opened to reveal piles of glittering treasures, gold, elerium ingots, sparkling artifacts, wealth enough to buy a planet. By this time, he already understood the gist of this test. He didn't even step inside. The door was closed right away.

The fourth showed beautiful women sitting on silk cushions, smiling invitingly. They beckoned him softly, the scent of incense wafting out.

Mark closed that door too, faster than the others.

Fifth door. His former patriarch, Lan Yujin, was sitting on a throne, tapping his finger with annoyance. "Kneel," the illusion commanded. "Pay your respects properly."

Mark scoffed and shut it with a slap.

He continued opening door after door. Some contained disciples shouting insults. Others contained treasure. Some showed catastrophes waiting to be solved, begging him to intervene. At least two more held swords,

demanding release. All were nothing but distractions, each crafted to ignite desire, fear, pride, greed, or responsibility.

By the time he opened the final door, he had seen every trick the trial threw at him.

The twelfth room held something different.

It was a swirling, stable portal that hovered silently in the center. No voices called. No illusions tempted. It simply... existed.

Mark stared at it for a moment, but still closed the door in the end and then walked back to the first one. He reopened it. This time, he stayed a few seconds and then closed it. He went on another round of door opening and closing, but this time, he spent time staying outside and watching each scenario behind the door for at least 10-20 seconds before shutting them. Only when he was absolutely certain that every other option was a trap did he finally step cleanly into the portal.

The world rippled.

The colorful dimension returned as usual.

And the black, white, and red tribunals stood before him once more.

The black tribunal's voice was deep and steady as he said. "You chose correctly. But answer us this, why?"

His form leaned slightly forward, questioning. "If you knew the portal was the answer from the moment you saw it... Why did you close it? Why examine everything else first?"

Mark crossed his arms and gave a small, confident smile. "Because a leader can't make decisions blindly." He tilted his head toward the floating tribunal. "A leader must choose only after knowing all possibilities."

The tribunals remained silent, listening.

He gestured at the empty air around them. "Once I saw everything, the answer became clear. Only the portal had no trick. Only the portal offered no distraction. Only the portal was the path forward."

He finished plainly, "A leader must understand all options before choosing the correct one. That's why."

The black tribunal's towering cloth-like frame rippled faintly, as though a silent wind passed through it.

"Bravo," he said, his deep voice resonating like a distant drum as he praised. "A wise leader does not leap toward the first option nor cling blindly to expectations. Patience is the first step of wisdom." His shadowed form leaned forward slightly again, and his tone shifted from praise to inquiry. "Before I ask the next riddle, I must confirm something. Do you know what a river is? What is an ocean?"

Mark nodded. "Of course I do."

Mark didn't need to ask him why this tribunal asked him such a basic question. After all, this world is filled with snow and ice. Lakes exist, yes, but they lie frozen for ages and only melt during the summer. That's when most of the citizens and clans collect the water to store for the rest of the year. Of course, sects and high-ranking clans have no problem. They have the means to create water.

So, anyway, the reason why the tribunal asked him about rivers and oceans is that there are no such things on this current planet. And the tribunal wasn't aware whether Mark got out of the planet to other regions in the dominion.

Mark understood that and didn't point it out. he simply waited for the question.

The black tribunal then lifted an invisible hand, and the entire painted dimension darkened around them in the next second.

A landscape formed behind him with towering mountains, flowing rivers, and an endless sea in the distance. His voice then filled the space. "A river begins at the mountains, nourished by their springs. Eventually, it

reaches the ocean and surrenders all its waters." His faceless head tilted slightly. "So tell us, Lan Zhen... who has the greater right over the river? The mountain that gave it birth? Or the ocean that claims it at its end?"

Mark remained silent.

Inside his mind, Ark spoke immediately.

[Master, the answer is the ocean. The mountains do not create the river. The water originates from the sea, which goes through evaporation, condensation, and formation of clouds and then rainfall on the mountains, thus the cycle begins with the ocean and returns to it.]

Mark almost chuckled inwardly.

He ignored the AI completely as he knew that it was the right statement but not the right answer.

He raised his gaze to the tribunal and let out a soft exhale. "None of them," he said loudly.

The black tribunal's shadowed head turned slightly. "None? Explain."

Mark took a step forward. "The mountain may be where the river begins. The ocean may be where the river ends. But neither owns the river. They only mark its starting point and its final destination. They were the River's Birth and death."

The tribunals remained eerily still, listening.

Mark continued, "What matters... is everything between those two points. The river chooses its own path. It twists, turns, breaks, crashes, flows, or dries depending on what it encounters: Like stones, valleys, sunlight, storms, forests, and even human hands. It is shaped by its journey, not its beginning or end. Just like people."

The air quivered faintly.

Mark raised his hand and gestured toward the illusion of landscape hovering behind them. "And beyond that... water sitting still in a mountain is not a river. It's a lake, the same as an unborn child in a mother's womb. Water in an ocean is not a river either, because it becomes part of the ocean, just like how our spirits become a part of the spirit realm. And then the sun evaporates the ocean waters with its intense heat, just like how our spirits go through the afterlife, through the judgement, through hell or heaven. And then those waters turn into clouds, before falling onto mountains to become the river, just like how our spirits, after passing through the trials in the afterlife, return to the world."

"A river is only a river while it is moving... only between the mountain and the ocean. That moving span... that changing journey... that is life. That is what belongs to no one but itself."

He finished quietly, "So my answer is simple. Neither the mountain nor the ocean has any right over it. Only the river's journey matters."

For a long moment, none of the tribunals spoke. The painted world around them flickered, colors drifting like ink underwater.

Finally, the black tribunal's voice rumbled, softer this time. "A rare perspective indeed. Few challengers have ever answered thus."

Mark, however, smirked in his mind, thinking, "Haah... such stupid philosophical riddles were filled all over the internet, back in my past life..."

Meanwhile, the white tribunal seemed to nod with an almost wistful sigh. The red tribunal, usually harsh and sharp, remained silent, as though weighing Mark's words that equated a river to a mortal's life.

The black tribunal's towering form leaned slightly forward. "Good. Very good. It has been a long time since a challenger with such clarity of self stood here. Most stumble. Many lie. You, at the very least, know who you are... and who you are not." There was a quiet pause before he said. "Now, the third test. Brace yourself."

The world shifted.

For a moment, Mark found himself standing between two silhouettes, one bathed in gentle blue light, and the other flaring with bright gold.