

The Tower 173

Chapter 173

On December 15th, the World Auction, organized by the World Challenger Association (WCA), finally opened its doors. This time, the auction took place in Nanning, China, and thousands of challengers had already gathered there. The auction would run from the 15th to the 21st, spanning a whole week, and would feature tens of thousands of items, in particular, the key items selected by WCA on its last day.

The auction venue consisted of three halls which were organized based on the value of the items. Among them, the place where most of the general public and challengers gathered was the Third Auction Hall. This was where the first auction began.

"Wow... I can't believe the world changed so much while I was away these four years..." Baek Hyun had a bewildered expression as he looked around at the most modern and advanced facilities of WA.

"Hey, Oppa, take a look at this!" Park Hye-Won called Baek Hyun.

"Huh? What is it?" Baek Hyun turned to look at her.

Park Hye-Won stood next to Baek Hyun and held up her phone.

"Wind," Park Hye-Won said.

As she flicked her index and middle fingers, a gust of wind blew through, causing their hair to flutter.

"Oh! I took a picture at the right moment! We look quite nice here, actually!" Park Hye-Won seemed excited.

"What are you doing? Are you trying to post on Enstagram or something?" Baek Hyun laughed at her.

"Ugh! I'm getting lazy these days. But my fans are always waiting for me to upload something, so yeah..." Park Hye-Won muttered.

In the two weeks since her return to Earth, Park Hye-Won had skyrocketed to stardom, surpassing five million followers on her social media account.

"So why would you do such a thing in the first place?" Baek Hyun shook his head as if he could not understand her.

"Even so, my fans really love and support me, so I want to give back. It's not like I'm good at communicating, but even just by posting a single picture, they show so much love," Park Hye-Won explained.

She used Enstagram as a way to express her gratitude to her fans. Besides, it was the only thing she could do for them.

"Don't you also have a lot of fans?" Park Hye-Won asked Baek Hyun.

"Well... yeah that's true, but why do they like me anyway? There are so many people who are better looking than me," Baek Hyun replied.

"Ugh... Just be thankful, idiot," Park Hye-Won rolled her eyes at him.

"Hey, watch your mouth. Your fans might find out about your rough way of talking," Baek Hyun laughed at her.

"I'll watch out, LOL," Park Hye-Won replied.

At that moment, familiar-looking people approached the two of them.

"Hyung! Noona!" Shin Ha-Neul greeted them happily, waving his arms enthusiastically.

"Hey, isn't this place amazing?" Kang Ji-Hoon, who was standing next to Shin Ha-Neul, playfully poked Baek Hyun in the arm with an excited look.

"He is already getting too excited though we haven't even started going through the items yet," Shin Ha-Neul said. "Also, Noona, I saw your post on Enstagram! You just posted, right?"

"Huh? Did you see it already? I literally just posted it." Park Hye-Won smiled.

Shin Ha-Neul showed them his phone screen.

"I'm following you, remember?" Shin Ha-Neul said to Park Hye-Won.

"Oh, really?" Park Hye-Won replied.

"Yeah, so can you follow me back please..." Shin Ha-Neul shyly asked Park Hye-Won, and she agreed with a smile.

"Wow, thank you so much, Noona!" Shin Ha-Neul seemed excited.

"Haha, a thing to be grateful for," Park Hye-Won muttered.

To Shin Ha-Neul, whose follower count was only at 80,000, getting a follow back from Park Hye-Won felt like a drink in the desert. He had been wanting to increase his followers more than anyone else.

"Wait, what's your username again...?" As Park Hye-Won searched for Shin Ha-Neul's username to follow him, challengers from the United States spotted the Korean challengers and approached them.

"Heya!"

A muscular bald man in tight-fitting clothes named Ethan greeted them, along with other American challengers.

"Huh? Who's that? Is that Ethan?" Park Hye-Won looked at the man.

"Oh my, Hye-Won. You know I can't speak English."

"Same... I'm not good at it either..."

"What about you, Ha-Neul?"

"Hyung, you know me. Do you think I'll know how to speak English?"

"..."

Communication was natural in the Tower, but it was different on Earth. As Ethan approached them, everyone froze in an instant.

"I haven't seen you for a long time! Friends—

" Ethan greeted them.

"Um, h-hi! I... I am..."

"Ah! You guys can't speak English?" Ethan chuckled and spoke fluent Korean.

"Huh? Ethan, you know how to speak Korean too?"

"Hey, isn't it a must to know a second or third language these days? Besides, Korean is one of the popular ones," Ethan replied.

"Whoa... I almost had an anxiety attack because of the English."

"What funny kiddos," Ethan laughed.

"Where did you learn that way of speaking?"

"I learned it from a . How is it? Not that bad, right?" Ethan seemed proud of his Korean skills.

"Well... I guess the people I meet in the Tower speak like that too, so..." Park Hye-Won muttered.

Park Hye-Won greeted the Americans who came along with Ethan.

"Hye-Won! I'm... your fan!"

"Me too!"

"Can you give me your autograph?"

"Yeah! I want one too!"

Park Hye-Won had an unusually large number of male fans, and some of Ethan's colleagues were among them.

"Tsk tsk. These guys, they only like pretty girls," Baek Hyun shook his head in frustration.

"Well, Park Hye-Won is indeed very pretty," Ethan said, as he looked at Park Hye-Won, who was diligently signing autographs for her fans.

"Huh? Did you just say Hye-Won Noona is pretty?" Shin Ha-Neul said with a smirk, looking at Ethan.

"Huh...? I mean..." Ethan seemed to panic.

"Oh, I see... So you just said another girl was pretty when you have Tashi..." Kang Ji-Hoon took out a notepad and started scribbling something as if noting down a hit. "Ethan... said Hye-Won was... very pretty..."

"Hey! Stop it! Stop it already! W-what nonsense!" Ethan, flustered, tried to snatch Kang Ji-Hoon's notepad but failed.

"Hehe, I should tell Tashi Noona about this," Shin Ha-Neul joked.

"Ethan was... looking at Hye-Won drooling..." Kang Ji-Hoon's notepad was filled with increasingly exaggerated facts.

"Well, what is it that you want?" Ethan's neatly organized hair became damp with sweat.

"I feel like I'm a little thirsty..." Shin Ha-Neul muttered.

"A single coffee here costs over 10,000 won. Don't you think it's too expensive here, Ha-Neul?" Kang Ji-Hoon added.

"That's right! It's too expensive for me to buy..." Shin Ha-Neul muttered, looking at Ethan.

"I'll buy it for you guys. Come on, let's go right now," said Ethan.

"What about your colleagues over there?" When Shin Ha-Neul looked to the side, Park Hye-Won seemed busy taking pictures with the male fans surrounding her.

"Just leave them. They'll come on their own!" Ethan said and put his arms around both of them and led them away.

"Oh! Wait a second, I didn't get a chance to give her my username for her to follow me back on Enstagram yet!" Shin Ha-Neul shouted, but it was too late.

Ethan, Shin Ha-Neul, and Kang Ji-Hoon went inside first, and Park Hye-Won seemed occupied with her fans. Baek Hyun, who was left behind, looked flustered and hurriedly followed Ethan.

"Hey! Wait up!" Baek Hyun shouted to get their attention.

As a huge crowd gathered at the headquarters of the Defense Force in Island 1, Genia's official announcement continued.

"Hello, this is your new leader of the Defense Force, Genia," Genia introduced herself in front of many others with a new title.

It was Genia, not Versia, who became the leader of the Defense Force. Challengers began to buzz with excitement when they heard her announcement.

"We have purged the corrupt elements within the Defense Force. Versia, who committed corruption, has been imprisoned in an underground cell, and the Defense Force will undergo a reorganization," said Genia.

It was a shocking story for everyone. While many people had wished ill upon Versia and hoped that Genia would rise, when it actually happened, it was still surprising to them. In the video, Versia had gone to the extent of almost killing Lee Shin. While Lee Shin had been rendered powerless, Versia's sword aura was about to tear him apart. Yet, the question remained as to how Genia managed to turn the situation around.

"Lee Shin is alive. Besides, he made significant contributions in removing the corrupt elements within the Defense Force. From now on, Lee Shin will work as an ally of the Defense Force, and the Defense Force will form an alliance with him," Genia continued on.

It was pretty frequent for top-rankers to form an alliance with the Defense Force. Of course, since challengers led such independent lives, most of them were unavailable when they were actually needed. However, even retaining a nominal association was a great benefit for the Defense Force.

Therefore, the challengers simply accepted the news about the alliance between Lee Shin and the Defense Force without much commotion.

Afterward, Genia explained the direction the Defense Force would take in the near future and the events that had occurred so far. The Defense Force planned to designate new defense zones from Island 31 to Island 43, cover the Fourth District, and deploy additional defense mechanisms accordingly.

These too were Lee Shin's proposals. The reason Versia did not expand the defense zones further previously was primarily due to a lack of manpower. However, Lee Shin was planning on covering that with Vian's abilities, more specifically, using AI Titan.

Lee Shin handed over the method of its production to Vian. With that, he would be able to create proper machines.

Moreover, Lee Shin also planned to plant the Seed of Ardelgia in the four Districts according to the defense strategy, inevitably expanding the scope of the Elves' activities.

"...And lastly," Genia's announcement was not very long.

She seemed slightly nervous to bring up the final point.

"Lee Shin and I are not in a romantic relationship. Romantic feelings are not important to the leader of the Defense Force. So, please don't misunderstand. That's all. Thanks." Genia finished her speech and stepped down from the platform.

The community was flooded with discussions about her final remark.

* So Lee Shin and Genia are not dating?

* I feel like Lee Shin was dumped by Genia.

* Wow... and he still decided to help the Defense Force after getting dumped? He's truly amazing.

Numerous posts and comments poured in. Among them, there seemed to be a lot of sympathy for Lee Shin. Rumors abound as female challengers began to fall for this unexpected side of his character—the “pure-hearted guy”.

Lee Shin, who had been briefly observing the reactions of the challengers in the community, became frustrated with the strange comments flooding in and signed out.

"Tsk..." Lee Shin clicked his tongue.

There were many important things that had been said in the announcement, but he was annoyed by the attention being drawn to strange things. At that moment, Genia, who had finished her speech, approached him.

"Let's get going," said Genia.

"Okay," Lee Shin replied.

The two descended into the underground of the Defense Force. It was where the Seed of Ardelgia was stored.

"You cannot enter this place without the permission of the Defense Force leader," said Genia.

Genia had the emblem that she had taken from Versia. Only those the emblem acknowledged could become the Defense Force leader. That emblem had acknowledged Genia, and the next moment, the mark of the Defense Force was engraved on her arm.

"So, is this the Seed?" Lee Shin muttered.

There were four seeds inside a bean sac that looked like a kidney bean.

"We are going to plant these Seeds in the four defense zones," said Genia.

"I hope we can plant one on Island 43 as well," Lee Shin suggested.

"Of course," Genia replied.

The giant tree, Ardelgia, was rooted in Island 1. Even if these Seeds of Ardelgia sprouted, they would not grow into a massive tree like the Ardelgia. However, it would grow into a tree just larger than an ordinary tree and expand the scope of defense by linking with the Ardelgia and its blessing.

The reason why the White Elves on Lardel Archipelago could use their power was due to the Ardelgia blessing. Therefore, planting these Seeds in the four zones and expanding the scope of the blessing would enable them to defend more islands.

"And as the power of that blessing grows stronger, more White Elves will be born. Their power will also increase," Genia explained to Lee Shin.

"But it will be quite challenging during the transition period," Lee Shin replied.

"Yes, I'm aware. And I am prepared for that," Genia said.

Lee Shin smiled at her confidence. In the future, Genia might change like Versia, but if that happened, wouldn't another tide push her out? Lee Shin did not need to worry about it at the moment. Since the Defense Force had been restructured smoothly, that was enough for Lee Shin for now.

"We should go and plant them right away," Lee Shin said with determination.

"Don't you think we are rushing a bit?" Genia asked.

Genia still did not know what Lee Shin was planning. She did not know that Lee Shin wanted to connect the Dimension Gate using the power of the Ardelgia. In theory, connecting the Dimension Gate would not have a significant impact on the Seed's germination, but there was always an unknown risk. If that happened, how would Genia react? Perhaps she might turn her back on Lee Shin.

"Sorry, I don't have much time," Lee Shin replied.

"...Then let's go together," Genia suggested.

"But things aren't settled here yet, so that's not possible. Please don't leave this place for a while," Lee Shin said.

After seeing Lee Shin's firm attitude, Genia bit her lips and nodded.

"Alright, I get it. But promise me you will come back to the Defense Force," said Genia.

"I will," Lee Shin said.

The next moment, Genia took out a Seed and handed it to Lee Shin.

"Do you trust me? I could run away with this." Lee Shin said, looking at Genia.

"Then it would be my misjudgment. I already know that you have plans on Island 43. I suppose you need this Seed for something, right?" Genia asked.

As those unexpected words came out of her mouth, Lee Shin looked at her with surprise.

"...Yes, that's correct," Lee Shin replied.

"This entire matter would have been impossible without you, Mr. Lee Shin. I don't think you would do that, but even if you were to run away with it, I won't resent you," said Genia.

Then, the next moment, she smiled sweetly and extended her hand to Lee Shin.

"You won't run away, right?" Genia asked.

"I won't run away." Lee Shin replied and shook her hand with a smile.

Sevrino, who received the Seed of Ardelgia, observed it with a face full of curiosity. Vian, too, looked closely at the Seed with fascination and seemed amazed when he sensed the power emanating from the Seed.

"This is truly amazing. Is this the Seed that came from the tree on Island 1?" Sevrino muttered.

"If we want to investigate it in detail, even a few years would not be enough. We should probably plant it quickly and make it sprout," Vian muttered.

In response to Sevrino's words, Lee Shin started planting the Seed. Those around them watched the process anxiously.

"Hey! What are you all staring at? Go back to your work. There are things to do...!"

"As soon as the tree grows, we need to prepare to connect the Dimension Gate!"

"Get ready, everyone!"

Lee Shin watched as they busied themselves, trying to calm his excited heart. The time to return to Earth had finally come.