

M. in Hell 21

Chapter 21 - Andras Guild (3)

The Andras Guild was one of the biggest mid-sized guilds, and many shady rumors were circulating about it. In particular, the guildmaster, Jo Deok-Hyun, was being closely watched by the Hwarang Corps.

Due to the Andras Guild's situation, their guild's base was in a secret and secluded location.

The man guarding the door at the end of a maze-like alleyway said in a deep voice, "Stop."

He glared at the figure that had suddenly appeared but soon lowered his guard upon recognizing the figure.

"Kang Cheol-Ho?" the guard called out.

"Y-Yeah," Kang Cheol-Ho answered.

"Didn't you go hunting for sacrifices with Seo Tae-Ho today? What took you so long?"

"Th-Things happened," Cheol-Ho said, glancing down at the large suitcase he had with him.

The guard tilted his head when he noticed that Cheol-Ho seemed a bit different from usual.

He went on to ask, "Things? What things? More importantly, where's Tae-Ho?"

"...Tae-Ho's dead," Cheol-Ho replied.

"What? Dead?" The guard looked at Cheol-Ho in disbelief.

"Didn't you go to a D-rank Gate? You're telling me that Seo Tae-Ho died at the hands of people who have only achieved their Second Awakening at most?"

"There was a high-level Player mixed in with the group. I barely managed to kill him and was able to bring the remaining Player to use as a sacrifice."

"Huuu..."

"I'll give a more detailed report later. But first, take the sacrifice."

Cheol-Ho pushed the suitcase to the guard, who looked suspiciously at him.

"You're acting strange today," the guard remarked.

"...It's because of Tae-Ho's death."

"Hmm. Well... I guess it makes sense since you two were close. The ritual is about to start, so I'll hear about what happened later."

"O-Okay. Then I'll—"

Cheol-Ho turned around as if he didn't want to be there, but the man guarding the door grabbed his shoulder.

"Come in and join the ritual."

"I... It's fine."

"Huh? What are you talking about? You were the one who brought the sacrifice, so you should be the one to be baptized. Haha, I'm jealous. If you receive some more demonic energy today, you might even be able to use a bit of the Authority."

"I-I don't need it!"

"...?"

The guard frowned as if he couldn't understand Cheol-Ho, who was just shaking his head.

The ritual was the most important event for them. It allowed the members of the Andras Guild to receive something called demonic energy—an energy far more powerful than mana.

Having the power of demonic energy was similar to getting high on illicit drugs. Demonic energy gave a person the feeling that they were more powerful, and it strengthened their desire to live. These were feelings that couldn't be replaced with anything else.

"Something else happened, right?" The guard looked at Cheol-Ho suspiciously.

After all, Cheol-Ho should have no reason to refuse the ritual. The guard knew Cheol-Ho wasn't a good enough person to refuse to acquire all that power just because his friend had died.

Cheol-Ho dripped with cold sweat as he turned around and said, "N-Nothing happened, so do whatever you want with the sacrifice."

"Hmm..."

The guard watched Cheol-Ho quickly walk away. Then he opened the suitcase Cheol-Ho had left behind. Inside the suitcase, the guard found the body of a young man with sharp looks. The young man was covered in blood and unconscious.

"The sacrifice looks fine," the guard commented.

After checking that the young man was still breathing, the guard took the suitcase with him and entered the guild house. A scrawny man wearing a robe then walked toward him.

The guard saluted him with a nervous expression. "Guildmaster! The sacrifice has arrived!"

"It's a little late today."

"They were interrupted in the middle by a high-level Player."

"Hmm. So...?"

"Seo Tae-Ho died while fighting him."

"I see."

Jo Deok-Hyun didn't seem to care that a member of his guild had died. He just turned around with an apathetic expression.

"Bring in the sacrifice. The ritual is about to begin," he said.

"Yes, sir!" the guard replied with a loud shout.

After that, he brought the suitcase to the room where the ritual was going to take place. The door creaked open to reveal eight members of the Andras Guild. They were dressed in vestments,

kneeling in the room. These eight were among the small number of guild members who knew about the true nature of the Andras Guild.

"Ohhhh!"

"Oh, almighty Andras!"

Upon seeing Deok-Hyun enter the room, the members of the Andras guild bowed down toward him. Mad gazes flashed across their eyes as they looked at Deok-Hyun. Rather than a guild of Players, they seemed more like a cult.

Deok-Hyun smiled furtively while gazing at the members who had gathered in the room.

'Everything is progressing smoothly.'

It had been one year since he'd been 'evangelized,' and his followers were increasing slowly but steadily in number.

"Hehehe," Deok-Hyun laughed as his eyes gleamed with madness.

It wasn't hard to make Players fall for the power of demonic energy. Most Players wished to have more strength, and demonic energy had the power to fulfill those desires.

'With a little more effort, I'll be able to turn everyone here into a Demonoid.'

The more demonic energy a human took in, the closer that person would get to becoming a demon. In Deok-Hyun's case, twenty percent of his body had already been converted to that of a demon, so he had stepped into the realm of Demonoids. His goal was to create a powerful army of Demonoids.

'The power of my Authority is getting stronger.'

Deok-Hyun grinned excitedly while thinking about the person who had told him about the ritual. That person hadn't been wrong. Deok-Hyun had received more demonic energy as he conducted more rituals and offered up more sacrifices. Thus, he had become consistently stronger.

The power that a demon's Authority gave a person made a Player's Trait look insignificant.

'I'll become a full demon.'

Demons had eternal youth and absolute power. Becoming a demon was the only way to escape a mortal's finite life.

"Then, let's begin the ritual," Deok-Hyun said and hit the ground with a dark brown cane.

Boom.

"Ohhhh."

"Ahhh! Demon King!"

After hearing the command to begin the ritual, the eight Andras Guild members screamed and hit the ground with their heads.

"Prepare the mana stones," Deok-Hyun ordered.

"Yes, sir!"

The guard placed the young man who would be used as today's sacrifice on the altar. Then he opened the safe, which was under the altar. There were thousands of mana stones inside the safe.

They had purchased the mana stones using all of the Andras Guild's available funds and were going to use them to create a Rift.

'With these mana stones, we should be able to do at least thirty more rituals.'

Deok-Hyun smiled while looking at all the mana stones he had under the altar.

"Whose turn is it to be baptized?" he asked.

"It should be Kang Cheol-Ho... but he said that he wouldn't participate in today's ritual."

"Is that so?" Deok-Hyun nodded with a frown. "Then no one will be baptized today."

"Ah..."

The guild members seemed disappointed by those words. Their gazes filled with desire, and their murmurs grew in volume.

"Silence!" Deok-Hyun commanded.

Slam!

"..."

"If you want to be baptized, bring me sacrifices and mana stones. Those who don't act don't deserve to be baptized."

"Yes, sir!"

Deok-Hyun smiled. 'I'll be able to hoard the strength all to myself today.'

He became excited at the thought of taking the demonic energy from one sacrifice all for himself.

"Let's begin."

Whir.

Deok-Hyun moved the mana inside the mana stones by following the magic circle, just like he'd learned on the day he'd received the 'revelation.' A few of the thousands of mana stones lost their light. The magic circle under the altar began to shine, and a small distortion appeared in the air.

Swoosh!!

Black energy began to flow out from that small distortion.

Demonic energy was more destructive than mana, and it was an energy that could turn humans into demons.

'Good.'

Deok-Hyun smiled, feeling satisfied to see the demonic energy flow out.

The ritual began by creating a Rift that led to Hell. Once demonic energy flowed out of the Rift, it needed to be directed toward the sacrifice. The reason for that was that if a person tried to absorb the demonic energy directly without using a sacrifice, it would contort their body and kill them.

Once they directed the demonic energy to the sacrifice, the ritual would end. Then it would just be a matter of time before the sacrifice was killed by the demonic energy contorting their body. A person could then safely absorb demonic energy by drinking the blood of the sacrifice's corpse, which would be filled with demonic energy.

'Today, I'll be able to drink all the blood.'

Deok-Hyun would be able to monopolize the demonic energy from today's ritual since he didn't need to share the sacrifice's blood with his underling who had brought the sacrifice.

'Hehehe! Die already!'

At the thought of absorbing the demonic energy all by himself, Deok-Hyun directed the demonic energy out of the Rift more aggressively, allowing it to be absorbed by the sacrifice at a faster speed.

'He's holding on quite well.'

Deok-Hyun was surprised by how the sacrifice had barely moved despite all the demonic energy entering him.

The amount of demonic energy a person could absorb differed from case to case. Some people had only held out for merely a second.

'Does he have an A-rank Trait or something?'

Usually, people with higher-ranking Traits could resist being eroded by demonic energy for longer.

'If he can resist for that long...'

Naturally, the demonic energy inside the sacrifice's blood would be thicker the longer the sacrifice was able to hold on. Deok-Hyun smiled excitedly as he watched the sacrifice continue to absorb demonic energy.

The mana stones they were using to maintain the Rift quickly lost their light, but they could still go on for longer.

'Hehe. Luck is on my side!'

Deok-Hyun had never seen a sacrifice last this long against demonic energy.

To think that on the very day when he could monopolize the blood, the offered sacrifice would be someone capable of absorbing lots of demonic energy... It seemed like an opportunity that had been gifted to him by the heavens.

'I'll be able to absorb ten times... No! Fifteen times the normal amount of demonic energy at once!'

Deok-Hyun was thrilled.

'Hahaha! Come on, open your eyes and scream in pain!' he mistakenly spoke out loud what he was thinking.

He wanted to drink the blood of the sacrifice right then.

'Hahahaha!'

The demonic energy emerging from the Rift kept flowing into the body of the sacrifice.

"Good! Very good!"

Deok-Hyun laughed while waiting for the young man to scream in pain.

"Huh...?"

However, no matter how long he waited, the young man didn't open his eyes.

"What's happening?"

Yet, the demonic energy flowing from the Rift kept entering the young man's body.

"Why isn't it stopping?"

It kept doing so...

"W-Wait."

Endlessly...

"S-Stop!"

Without stopping...

"I said stop!"

The demonic energy flowed incessantly into the young man on the altar. All the mana stones Deok-Hyun had bought with the Andras Guild's entire fortune had lost their light. Once all of the mana stones lost their light, the Rift vanished.

"Huh...?" Deok-Hyun muttered in confusion as he watched the huge amount of magic stones, which was enough to perform over thirty rituals, disappear all at once.

The young man on the altar got up slowly. He smiled brightly as he looked at his surroundings with great interest.

"Woah. Thanks to this, my stat has gone up by 20," he said.

The young man burst into laughter as if he'd just won the lottery.

Deok-Hyun's jaws were agape, shocked by how the young man was totally fine.

"Can you do this ritual one more time?" the young man asked.

"..."

A heavy silence fell over the room.

Chapter 22 - Demon Worshipers (1)

Rewinding a little...

Oh Kang-Woo had disguised himself as a sacrifice and infiltrated the Andras Guild.

'What a group of freaks.'

With narrowly opened eyes, Kang-Woo watched the Andras Guild members gathered around the altar. When Jo Deok-Hyun entered the room, the guild members started to praise him. There was no doubt that they seemed like a cult of religious fanatics.

'And...'

Kang-Woo could sense the state of their bodies.

A human body became more like that of a demon the more demonic energy one took in. Except for his mind, Kang-Woo's body was already more like a demon's than a human's.

'Although there's a difference in the percentage, it seems like they're all in the process of becoming Demonoids.'

Kang-Woo finally understood why they were acting so crazy. The body of a demon was constantly craving to fulfill its desires, similar to an animal constantly in heat. It had been long since Kang-Woo had become part demon, so he could control his desires, but that wasn't the case for these people. There probably wasn't anyone among them who was sane.

'How did they manage to accept demonic energy?'

Kang-Woo could safely absorb demonic energy thanks to his Authority of Predation. However, demonic energy was normally lethal for humans. If a human accepted demonic energy recklessly, it could invade their soul and body and break them down completely.

'I should wait for them to do the ritual first.'

Kang-Woo pretended he had lost consciousness and lay still on the altar as he watched the ritual take place.

"Prepare the mana stones."

"Yes, sir!"

At Deok-Hyun's command, a man opened the safe under the altar. There were thousands of mana stones inside the safe.

'What are they trying to do?'

Kang-Woo became more curious when the ritual started. Deok-Hyun hit the floor with a dark brown cane and began casting a spell. The mana inside the mana stones flew out, and a small Rift appeared in the air.

"...!" Kang-Woo trembled upon seeing the Rift.

Dense demonic energy started to flow out from it.

'What the hell?'

He was very used to the demonic energy flowing out of the Rift.

'How are they calling demonic energy from the Nine Hells?'

There was no way to know how they had opened a Rift with only the few clues he had.

Deok-Hyun directed the demonic energy coming from the Rift into Kang-Woo's body.

'Huh?'

As the demonic energy entered Kang-Woo, he naturally used the Authority of Predation and absorbed all of the demonic energy flowing into him.

Riiing.

[Demonic Energy has risen by 1.]

'Well, well.'

He hadn't expected such a jackpot. Kang-Woo kept absorbing the demonic energy coming to him from the Rift.

'Sweet.'

From the moment the Andras Guild members directed the demonic energy to flow into the sacrifice's body, Kang-Woo understood what they were trying to do. They were using the sacrifice to take the damage—the breakdown of the human soul and body that occurred when a human accepted demonic energy in its pure form.

'I'm not sure how they plan to absorb the demonic energy after that.'

Anyway, that wasn't important to him. Because to him, that demonic energy was like honey rather than poison.

Riiing.

Riiing.

Riiing.

As the ritual continued, Kang-Woo heard the clear sound of a bell repeatedly ringing in his ear.

'It just keeps rising!'

The amount of demonic energy that entered his body surpassed what he had absorbed after using Predation on a hundred Lizardmen.

With the demonic energy flowing into his body like an endless stream of water, the corners of Kang-Woo's mouth curled up.

"What's happening?"

Kang-Woo heard the confused voice of Deok-Hyun, who had finally realized that something was off.

"Why isn't it stopping?"

'Don't you dare stop,' Kang-Woo thought.

"W-Wait."

'A little bit more.'

"S-Stop!!!"

'Don't stop!'

"I said stop!"

'Just one more stat point!'

Deok-Hyun's urgent scream and Kang-Woo's internal scream intertwined.

Nevertheless, all good things come to an end. The mana stones maintaining the Rift lost all their mana, and the Rift naturally disappeared.

Putting aside his disappointment, Kang-Woo slowly stood up. He more or less understood what the ritual was, and now it was time to hear the details from Deok-Hyun.

"What? You can't do it again?" Kang-Woo asked.

"A-Aaahhh." Deok-Hyun trembled.

He was confused about why that young man was perfectly fine after taking in so much demonic energy. The only thing that Deok-Hyun was sure of was that, because of that young man, all of the mana stones he'd bought with the Andras Guild's entire fortune had gone down the drain. He hadn't been able to get anything in return even after using up so many mana stones.

"N-No," Deok-Hyun uttered.

All those mana stones he'd gathered by using the full force of the Andras Guild had been valuable resources that were supposed to let him break free from the cycle of life and grant him eternal life.

The Hwarang Corps had been on the lookout for the Andras Guild lately, so he wasn't sure how many more years it would take him to gather that many mana stones again.

"NOOOO!" Deok-Hyun's scream spread through the room.

He directed his angry gaze toward Kang-Woo. "YOOUU!!!"

Deok-Hyun pointed his cane at Kang-Woo, and a bullet made of demonic energy shot out from it. However, Kang-Woo easily dodged the demonic energy bullet.

Boom!

The demonic energy bullet hit the wall and exploded with a loud noise.

After seeing that, Kang-Woo looked at Deok-Hyun with great interest.

'Not bad.'

Was it because of the demonic energy or because of Deok-Hyun's power as a Player? Somehow, he kept shooting bullets made of demonic energy without rest.

Then, the demonic energy bullets that were shot toward Kang-Woo's front suddenly changed trajectory mid-flight and targeted his back instead.

'Authority of Invulnerability.'

Demonic energy poured out of Kang-Woo's body and enveloped him as if it were armor. With the demonic energy armor, Deok-Hyun's bullets simply ricocheted off Kang-Woo.

'It's definitely more comfortable now that I have more demonic energy.'

After getting his Third Awakening, he'd gained access to a huge amount of demonic energy. It was a huge achievement considering that it hadn't even been a week since he'd returned to Earth.

Kang-Woo circulated the demonic energy around his body in satisfaction.

"Y-You can use demonic energy?" Deok-Hyun asked in shock.

He was surprised to see the person that they'd brought in to use as a sacrifice control demonic energy so naturally.

That couldn't be happening. No, that definitely wasn't supposed to happen.

"Arghh!" Deok-Hyun uttered.

He waved his cane nervously and fired a large amount of demonic energy toward Kang-Woo.

Deok-Hyun turned and shouted to the other guild members, "What are you all doing?! Attack him!"

After hearing Deok-Hyun's command, each of the eight guild members took out their weapons and charged toward Kang-Woo.

Nevertheless, Kang-Woo smirked when he saw the Andras Guild members charging toward him.

'What can a bunch of guys who can't even use demonic energy do?'

There was no way they would be able to beat him.

Slam! Stomp!

"Argh!"

"Kurgh!"

Kang-Woo began to massacre the members of Andras Guild like a wolf who'd run into a flock of sheep. They tried to stab Kang-Woo with their weapons but failed because they couldn't pierce his demonic energy armor.

Kang-Woo's defense was impregnable, so he just had to concentrate on offense. He used the Authority of Invulnerability and the Authority of Blades simultaneously.

'This is taking a lot of demonic energy to maintain.'

Using two Authorities simultaneously was still a bit too much for him, even after the explosive rise in his demonic energy.

'I should try to end this as quickly as possible.'

While thinking that, Kang-Woo began moving. He had no issue fighting against multiple opponents simultaneously.

In the Nine Hells, he'd spent most of the time fighting alone before he met Balrog. So, he was more used to fighting against multiple opponents simultaneously than fighting one on one.

Smash! Slash!

"Argh! M-My arm!!!"

"M-My leg!!!"

Killing the opponent wasn't the most important thing when fighting against multiple opponents. It was better to deal enough damage to incapacitate them completely.

The agonized members of the Andras Guild lying on the floor would interfere with the movements of their allies, and that would give Kang-Woo the leeway to fight more comfortably.

Stab! Crush!

"ARRRGH!"

One of the members of the Andras Guild had targeted Kang-Woo's back. Kang-Woo stabbed him in the shoulder and twisted the blade. As he did that, the blade shattered the man's shoulder blade, and a horrible scream came out of his mouth.

'Four.'

Kang-Woo was able to beat half of the enemies before even three minutes had passed by. If things went on like that, all eight members of the Andras guild would soon be defeated.

At that moment, Deok-Hyun raised his voice and said, "Move! Useless idiots!"

The other four members moved back and looked at Deok-Hyun with hopeful eyes.

"He's finally going to use that."

"If it's the power of the guildmaster..."

Deok-Hyun walked to the front. "Take a look! This is the flame that burns life itself, the Authority of Hellfire!"

Full of confidence, Deok-Hyun extended one arm, and a black flame that was the size of his palm appeared in his hand.

"Hah..." Kang-Woo let out a smirk. "You call that the Authority of Hellfire?"

'Nonsense...'

That wasn't hellfire that was created with an Authority. Hellfire that was created with an Authority felt more like a starving demon than just a hot flame. The hellfire that Deok-Hyun had produced looked similar to the real thing, but it was actually just a crude imitation.

"Hahaha. I'm not sure how you can use demonic energy, but you won't stand a chance against this Auth—"

Fwoosh!!

Before Deok-Hyun could finish his sentence, black flames appeared in Kang-Woo's hand. The writhing hellfire, which was bigger than a person's entire torso, emitted strong demonic energy. Comparatively, Deok-Hyun's flame, which was the size of his palm, looked pathetic.

"...Huh?" Deok-Hyun looked dumbfounded upon seeing the hellfire burning from Kang-Woo's hand.

'This can't be happening,' Deok-Hyun thought.

It was then that he realized that something had gone wrong.

Chapter 23 - Demon Worshipers (2)

"H-How? Wh-What..." Jo Deok-Hyun was lost for words.

The young man that Deok-Hyun had thought was a sacrifice had produced in his hand hellfire that was just like Deok-Hyun's.

'No.' Deok-Hyun realized it wasn't the same hellfire.

Just a glimpse was enough to know that the young man's hellfire was on a totally different level compared to his.

'I can't win.'

Deok-Hyun's eyes flitted around in despair. His last hope, the Authority that he possessed, had been completely crushed. He couldn't think of a way to beat Oh Kang-Woo.

"..."

His face became pale, and he started to tremble. He stared at Kang-Woo with an agitated gaze.

'What should I do?'

It was clear that Deok-Hyun wouldn't be able to win. He could tell just by looking at the hellfire in his hand.

Cold sweat dripped down Deok-Hyun's forehead like rainfall. His internal conflict was displayed on his face.

Kang-Woo looked at Deok-Hyun with great interest. 'I wonder what he'll do?'

He was curious as to how Deok-Hyun was going to respond, considering he had just shown Deok-Hyun that it was impossible for him to win.

Kang-Woo's question was soon answered.

After thinking for a while, Deok-Hyun knelt and raised both arms. "Ohhhh!! Incarnation of the almighty Andras!!"

"Huh?"

"I've been yearning for your descent into this world for a long time!!"

"..."

Upon hearing Deok-Hyun's passionate words, Kang-Woo let out a brief laugh. Then, he sighed.

"You are our king, our god, our messiah! The rightful tyrant to rule this world!"

Deok-Hyun kept putting on his passionate performance even as Kang-Woo burst into laughter.

'This guy's pretty quick-witted,' Kang-Woo remarked inwardly.

He couldn't believe how quickly Deok-Hyun had changed his attitude as his situation worsened. Kang-Woo had expected Deok-Hyun to do something, but he never thought the guy would kneel and worship him.

"Oh, almighty Andras! I knew it was you from the moment I laid eyes on you!"

'No, you didn't,' Kang-Woo thought.

"You have no idea how long I've been waiting for this day to come!!"

'But you weren't.'

"Sniff! I, Jo Deok-Hyun, am so moved that my heart feels like it will burst at any moment!"

'Bullshit.'

Kang-Woo was astonished by Deok-Hyun's passionate performance.

"What are you doing?! All of you, kneel! He is the one who will break the cycle of life and lead us to eternal life!"

"Oh... I see."

"Now!"

Deok-Hyun was shouting at the other guild members, who were just standing there motionlessly. The other guild members looked at each other with confused looks and then kneeled hesitantly.

"...!" Kang-Woo was surprised to see Deok-Hyun kneel on the floor like that.

'Quite impressive.'

It was hard for a human to abandon his pride and kneel in such a way. Kang-Woo felt a kind of respect toward Deok-Hyun after seeing how willing he was to lower himself into such a pathetic position.

'Not bad.' Kang-Woo smiled while looking at Deok-Hyun.

He didn't hate pathetic people. The people he hated were the ones who even stayed pointlessly prideful even though it was obvious that they would lose. Kang-Woo preferred people who could adapt quickly based on the situation and were willing to throw away their pride for a chance of survival.

'Since he's willing to place himself in such a pathetic position, I should reply in kind.'

While feeling a weird sense of rivalry, Kang-Woo took a step forward.

Stomp!

"Hahaha! You've recognized me at last! I am Andras! The king of ten thousand demons, the Lord of Inferno, and the master of hellfire!!" Kang-Woo exclaimed while emitting demonic energy from his body.

Most of what he said was a lie. Andras wasn't strong enough to call himself king of anything. Furthermore, it was Mammon, one of the seven princes of Hell, who had been known as the Lord of Inferno. Most of all, Kang-Woo wasn't Andras. The only thing that was true among the things he'd said was that Andras was the master of hellfire.

"Long live Andras! The king of ten thousand demons! The Lord of Inferno!!"

However, there was no way Deok-Hyun knew about these things. He just bashed his head on the ground while praising Kang-Woo loudly. If someone else were to see this scene, they'd probably think that Deok-Hyun truly respected and admired Kang-Woo.

'But there's no way that's the case.'

He believed Deok-Hyun was only acting like this because he knew he couldn't win against Kang-Woo.

Kang-Woo smirked and sat on the altar.

'That's not important though.'

The important thing was that Deok-Hyun had surrendered, and he had a lot of information Kang-Woo was interested in.

"There are things I need to discuss with you, so command your subordinates to leave."

"Yes, my lord!" Deok-Hyun replied.

He kept his head pressed against the floor as he shot a glance at his subordinates. They then left the hall, dragging the injured out with them.

Now left alone with Deok-Hyun, Kang-Woo said, "There are a few things I want to ask you."

"Ask me anything, oh Almighty Andr—"

"Enough of that. You know that I'm not Andras."

"..." Deok-Hyun shut his mouth and looked at Kang-Woo with a sharp gaze. Then, he asked, "Who... are you?"

"I'm the one asking the questions."

"Ugh..."

"First, tell me the details about the ritual. How are you doing it? Where did you learn to create a Rift by using the mana inside mana stones?"

The thing Kang-Woo was most curious about was how Deok-Hyun had created a Rift. It was too strange to consider the creation of Rifts as the power of a Trait.

Deok-Hyun looked around before answering cautiously, "I-I learned how to create a Rift when I experienced the e-evangelization."

"Evangelization?"

"Yes."

"What the hell is that?"

"One day, a man wearing a demon mask suddenly appeared before me and said that he'd grant us immortality if we converted to the Demon Cult."

"And you accepted that?" Kang-Woo looked at Deok-Hyun, astonished.

Who in their right mind would accept such a suspicious offer?

"U-Umm... H-He was far too strong."

"Too strong?"

"Yes. He was able to overwhelm our entire guild almost instantly. Then he told us to choose to either do as he said or die. We had no other choice!"

"So, where's that demon-mask guy now?"

"I-I don't know. I haven't seen him since that day."

"Not even once?"

"Y-Yes."

"You don't even know how to contact him?"

"I don't. Sometimes, he sends us orders via letter."

"Hmm. Despite that, you followed his orders so enthusiastically?"

"Ugh! W-Well..." Deok-Hyun trembled as he avoided Kang-Woo's gaze.

Kang-Woo glared at him.

'At some point, he probably became more motivated to do the rituals without any external pressure,' Kang-Woo thought.

Deok-Hyun might have been forced to do it at first, but a man like him probably couldn't resist the sweet temptation of the power that demonic energy gave him.

'Who could it be?'

Demon Cult... It was an extremely cringy name that only fanatics would come up with, but the demon-mask guy's influence and power didn't seem to be a joke. There was no way that someone who knew how to create a Rift that led to Hell could be a weakling.

Kang-Woo turned toward Deok-Hyun. "Where are those letters?"

"Here it is."

"... What the hell? Just one?"

"Y-Yes." Deok-Hyun nodded, trying to portray himself as a victim.

"Hmm. I see." Kang-Woo's eyes narrowed as he stroked his chin. "Are you the only one who was evangelized by the Demon Cult?"

Deok-Hyun shook his head while saying in a trembling voice, "I-I'm not sure. I've never met anyone else."

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue.

'There's no way he's the only one.'

It seemed that Kang-Woo had no way of finding out who was behind the Demon Cult and why they had approached Deok-Hyun. However, unless they were an idiot, they would never execute their plan just by trusting in Deok-Hyun alone.

Deok-Hyun didn't look like someone useless, but he also didn't seem capable. There was no way that someone strong enough to disrupt dimensions would leave everything to someone like this.

'I'm sure there are others.'

Kang-Woo was sure that other people the Demon Cult had influenced were hidden somewhere—demon worshipers that served an unknown evil god.

"Tsk," Kang-Woo clicked his tongue while thinking about the situation. "So, what order did that evil god give you? To accumulate demonic energy inside yourself through the ritual and become stronger?"

"N-No."

"Then what?"

"To increase the influence of the guild and turn as many people as possible into Demonoids. According to him, once that happens, he'd be able to create Hell on Earth..."

Kang-Woo's gaze sharpened.

'Using demonic energy to turn Players into demons, huh?'

He wasn't sure what those people were ultimately trying to achieve or what was the point of turning Players into demons... but there was something he was sure about...

'These fuckers dare...' Kang-Woo thought with a frown, '...create Hell on Earth?'

He couldn't let them do as they pleased.

Chapter 24 - Demon Worshipers (3)

"Then, like I said, search for more info about the Demon Cult," Oh Kang-Woo commanded.

"U-Understood." Jo Deok-Hyun bowed with an expression filled with fear.

However, it wasn't simply fear; he had completely submitted to the man named Oh Kang-Woo. It was proof that he had been successfully dominated by Kang-Woo's Authority of Fear.

"Don't perform any more rituals. Understood?"

"Yes, sir!" Deok-Hyun quickly nodded.

Kang-Woo smiled, satisfied by Deok-Hyun's answer.

'This much pressure should be enough.'

He couldn't let the Andras Guild kidnap any more Players to use as sacrifices. Of course, his moral obligation was the main reason, but there was another reason. The government's elite force was keeping the Andras Guild under close watch. So, if the Andras Guild kept going around as they'd been doing, it wouldn't be long before they were caught.

'They'd be on the verge of being caught even if they stayed hidden.'

The Andras Guild had done so many bad deeds that there was no way that the government would let their actions slide. They would be punished for sure, especially considering the number of Players they had sacrificed.

'Once that happens, I can just abandon them.'

In the meantime, the members of the Andras Guild would be useful in helping him find out more information about the Demon Cult. They knew and had demonic energy, so it would be easier for them to find the Demon Cult than regular Players, who didn't even know about demonic energy. That's why Kang-Woo was going to use them until they got caught by the government.

'I've also used the Authority of Fear on him, so he won't leak information.'

Kang-Woo had a tired expression as he turned and left. Was it because he'd used the Authority of Fear, which consumed a lot of demonic energy? His whole body felt like it was weighed down by fatigue.

'I want to rest.'

After hunting and taking care of the Andras Guild issue, Kang-Woo felt a strong desire to rest.

'There's nothing better for recovery than that.'

Kang-Woo's eyes lit up. There was one surefire way he knew would help him recover.

The corners of Kang-Woo's mouth curled up into a grin, and his steps became lighter. He hummed while heading toward Han Seol-Ah's home.

"Let's go eat kimchi stew!!"

The thought of eating a pot of piping hot kimchi stew with meat blew away his fatigue. Kang-Woo used his remaining demonic energy to activate the Authority of the Sky and flew across the sky.

* * *

Click.

"K-Kang-Woo!"

When Kang-Woo entered through the front door, an anxious Seol-Ah approached him.

Kang-Woo looked at her while tilting his head. "Did something happen?"

"That's what I should be asking you! I didn't get any word from you even though so much time has passed since you entered the Gate... and you haven't answered any of my calls."

"Oh."

After leaving the Gate, he'd gone directly to the Andras Guild, so it was true that he returned home later than usual.

"I apologize. Something came up," Kang-woo said.

"Phew. I was worried something bad might have happened to you." Seol-Ah sighed in relief.

Kang-Woo gazed at her with a smile. "Thank you for worrying about me. Next time, I'll contact you in advance."

"O-Okay." Seol-Ah avoided looking at Kang-Woo as a slight blush crept up her cheeks because of Kang-Woo's honest reply. "Since you're here, I'll make you dinner. Is there anything you'd like to eat?"

"Kimchi stew," Kang-Woo replied immediately.

"Oh... Well, I was expecting you to say that." Seol-Ah laughed at that answer.

"And with as much—"

"Yes, I bought some good meat."

"Whoa!"

"Fufu. This is all thanks to you, Kang-Woo."

The money Kang-Woo had given Seol-Ah was like rain during a drought. Of course, it wasn't like Kang-Woo had given her all the money he had earned. However, Players earned so much money that even giving her a considerable portion of it didn't affect his daily life in the slightest.

"Haha. You cook me delicious food every day, so that much is nothing. If you need more money, feel free to ask me."

"N-No! I also got my Second Awakening, so it's time for me to earn money and pay you back."

"I see." Kang-Woo looked at her with great interest. "When did you get your Second Awakening?"

"I leveled up today while hunting Goblins," Seol-Ah said.

She even puffed out her chest slightly as she spoke, seemingly proud of having achieved her Second Awakening.

When her voluptuous chest entered Kang-Woo's sight...

'Mahayabanyabaramildabodhisattvabodhisattva.'

Kang-Woo turned his gaze away from her to exorcize the worldly desire that had entered him through his eyes.

After calming down, he turned back to Seol-Ah again.

"What rank is your Second Awakening Trait?" he asked.

"Fufufu. Listen carefully, Kang-Woo," Seol-Ah said with an excited voice, her eyes shining. "B-rank! After getting my Second Awakening, I got a B-rank Trait called Blessing of Light!"

"Whoa!" Kang-Woo exclaimed.

It was already considered rare that she was a healer-type Player, but on top of that, she'd gotten a high-ranking Trait.

'If she parties with Tae-Soo, it will be no joke.'

A tank and healer with high-ranking Traits... Their combined strength would be on par with carry parties.

After what had happened with the Andras Guild, Kang-Woo had been thinking of creating a team of his own, so this was good news.

'After all, I'm not sure how strong the members of the Demon Cult are.'

It wasn't a bad idea to build up a force of his own so that he could confront them more comfortably.

"Seol-Ah, did you receive any invitations from guilds?"

"Far too many to count," Seol-Ah said with a trembling voice, seemingly still in disbelief that she had unlocked a B-rank Trait.

To be honest, it wasn't very rare for a Player to acquire a B-rank Trait. However, Seol-Ah was a healer, so her value was far higher than other Players in the same range of levels.

"Which guild are you thinking of entering?"

"Umm..."

At Kang-Woo's question, Seol-Ah blushed and fidgeted hesitantly. "To be honest, I don't want to enter a guild. I just want to be of help to you, Kang-Woo."

"Mm..." Kang-Woo fell silent for a little while.

After thinking about it, he said, "It's true that you've gotten a high-ranking Trait, but I don't think it's a good idea for you to form a party with me yet."

"Oh..." Seol-Ah let out a disappointed sigh at Kang-Woo's firm words.

"To put it bluntly, I don't think you can be of help to me yet."

"I see." Seol-Ah was disheartened and lowered her head.

Her reaction almost made Kang-Woo change his mind, but he shook his head in the end.

'Not yet.'

Seol-Ah couldn't be of help to him yet. In fact, there was a higher chance of her hindering him. Nevertheless, it wasn't because she was weak. After all, she was far more talented than most Players.

'The problem is that she'll be around me.'

Thanks to his Third Awakening and the ritual, Kang-Woo's demonic energy had increased significantly. He had attained a level of power that no one would believe belonged to a Level 20 Player.

He was overwhelmingly strong, so forming a party was unnecessary because it would only cut the number of experience points he gained.

'Maybe later on, things will be different.'

From what he'd heard, the experience points lost from hunting elite monsters that appeared in B-rank Gates and above as a party was negligible. Once he could do that, he wouldn't mind hunting with Seol-Ah, Kang Tae-Soo, and a couple more people. Nonetheless, it wasn't the time yet. Tae-Soo and Seol-Ah didn't have much combat experience, so they had to gain more of it first.

'You cannot get that type of experience by being carried.'

A Player didn't need to put their life in danger to gain such experience, but they most certainly couldn't get it by standing still and doing nothing.

"There's a tank I got to know recently who has an A-rank Trait. I think that you should form a party with him and gain some combat experience first."

"...I see."

"Once you level up enough and gain enough combat experience, let's form a party together and enter a high-ranking Gate."

"Ah!" Seol-Ah uttered in surprise.

She had been disappointed by the fact that she wouldn't be able to form a party with him, but that wasn't quite the case. Seol-Ah would be able to do it if she kept growing stronger. This was very exciting for Seol-Ah, who was not only grateful to him but also romantically interested in him.

"I understand. I'll form a party with that tank," Seol-Ah said.

"Both of you have high-ranking Traits, so you'll probably level up quickly."

"Yes, I want to level up quickly and form a party with you."

"It probably won't take long since I'm going to give you all the support you need."

After Tae-Soo and Seol-ah gained some battle experience, Kang-Woo was thinking of helping them level up. His level of strength was incomparable to that of an average high-level Player, so he was sure that they'd be able to level up far faster than other Players with his help.

'This is all an investment.'

Kang-Woo had realized something after taking in Balrog as his underling in the Ninth Hell. Tasks could always be accomplished faster and more easily with two or three people, even for tasks that could be done alone. It was such an obvious thing that Kang-Woo was ashamed to say that he had made this realization. However, the realization had truly shocked him because he'd done everything by himself for such a long time.

'Up until then, I always thought that having an underling would only hinder me.'

Before meeting Balrog, Kang-Woo hadn't known that having a capable underling would be so helpful.

"Fufu, thank you, Kang-Woo. Oh, time flew while we were talking. Wait for a little bit, please."

"Okay."

While waiting in the living room, Kang-Woo thought about when he should help Tae-Soo and Seol-Ah level up. He didn't get to think about it for long though, as Seol-Ah soon walked toward him with a fragrant pot of kimchi stew.

"Whoa," Kang-Woo uttered.

Upon seeing the kimchi stew, Kang-Woo quickly approached her. His nostrils flared up with excitement.

Was it because Seol-Ah had used an expensive cut of pork? The kimchi stew looked as if it were emitting a brilliant light.

"Thank you for the food!"

"Oh, just a moment, Kang-Woo..."

Seol-Ah stopped Kang-Woo, who was about to start eating as if he were a starved animal. Kang-Woo looked up at her anxiously in response.

Finding his reaction cute, Seol-Ah laughed before saying, "Try putting this in today."

When Kang-Woo saw what she was giving him, he trembled.

"Th-This is..." Kang-Woo mumbled, seemingly unable to believe what he was seeing.

Shock similar to a strike of lightning spread through his entire body.

"Instant noodles!" he exclaimed.

Kang-Woo looked at the kimchi stew with trembling excitement.

'I don't know who you are, but....'

He thought about the Demon Cult that was planning something sinister.

'I'll protect Earth!'

Kang-Woo had made that resolution while slurping on the instant noodles that had yet to be fully cooked.

Chapter 25 - Unexpected Encounter (1)

"We will send the C-rank Player license to the address that you've written down tomorrow."

"Hmm... You can't give it to me right now?"

"Correct. For licenses ranked C and above, there is a special identification device created with mana stones embedded into it, so it's impossible to issue it immediately."

"Understood."

The morning after the incident with the Andras Guild, Oh Kang-Woo went to the Player Management Office and requested a C-rank Gate access permit. After all, he had long since surpassed the required amount of mana stones to exchange to be promoted.

Kang-Woo went to the level assessment device, received confirmation that he had achieved his Third Awakening, and then walked over to the entrance to receive his license. However, the answer he received there differed from what he'd expected. They said that they would send it to him the next day.

'I wanted to go to the C-rank Gate immediately.'

His original plan had been to take a few days off after achieving his Third Awakening. Nonetheless, that plan changed after meeting the demon worshipers, who had been evangelized by a member of an organization called the Demon Cult. Kang-Woo wanted to become as strong as possible before finding out in detail what that organization was, what they were aiming to do, and how strong their forces were.

"Hmm." Kang-Woo wondered if he should use the Authority of Blindness to bypass the Gate security.

His demonic energy had increased a lot recently, so he was sure that he would be able to pass through stricter security measures than what was used at the Gate at least once.

'I shouldn't do that.'

Kang-Woo ultimately shook his head after thinking about it for a while.

It wasn't like the Demon Cult was highly active at the moment, and finding information about them was going to take time anyway. He couldn't just do nothing, but there was no need to move as if he were being chased.

'I guess I'll just do what I planned on doing and take a break.'

Kang-Woo had some unexpected free time, so he thought taking a day off and enjoying life on Earth wouldn't be a bad idea.

'I haven't taken a day off since returning to Earth.'

There were many things he wanted to do, but he hadn't taken a proper break ever since his return.

Kang-Woo began feeling excited at the unexpected day off.

"But..."

Kang-Woo was standing alone in front of the Player Management Office, which was in the middle of a city where hundreds—no, thousands—of people walked hurriedly and with purpose.

He stood still in silence.

"What should I do?"

Kang-Woo scratched his forehead in confusion, as he was unfamiliar with recreational activities. He'd lived in poverty in the past, so his only forms of entertainment had been eating out and reading manhwa or novels on his smartphone at night. Even then, he would read only the free chapters. Things became even worse later when he went to Hell.

He had dreamed about returning to Earth, but he hadn't thought about what he wanted to do in detail. After all, he couldn't miss doing things he had never done.

"Hmm..."

Kang-Woo sat down on a nearby bench and immersed himself in his thoughts.

'Now that I think about it, I lived a boring life while on Earth.'

He tried to think about what he used to like doing, but since he never really had any hobbies, nothing came to mind.

"Hmm... Should I just go get some fried chicken?"

Kang-Woo thought about the fried chicken and beer he had eaten recently. He hadn't been eating anything else because Han Seol-Ah's food was too delicious.

'But it's too early.'

He'd gone to the Player Management Office early in the morning, so it wasn't even lunchtime yet. It was unlikely that there was a place selling chicken and beer so early in the day.

"Oh!"

Kang-Woo suddenly thought of somewhere he could go. He had never been to a place like that before, but he'd really wanted to when he was a kid.

"Yes, I should go there."

Kang-Woo stood up excitedly and looked around. If he remembered correctly, he should be able to find what he was looking for easily.

'Found one.'

Kang-Woo's eyes lit up when he spotted a certain sign. He quickly walked toward it.

[Yaience Internet Cafe ~Death is like the wind - always by my side~][1]

"I'm finally getting to enter an internet cafe!" Kang-Woo said loudly while looking up at the sign.

Back when he was a kid, he'd always felt envious of the kids who got to spend time in internet cafes. Then, when he became an adult, he never had enough time to go due to being too busy working.

'I should experience these things one by one.'

During the last ten millennia, Kang-Woo endured a lot of pain and almost died more than a thousand times. Seeing as he had finally returned to Earth, he should reward himself for everything he had gone through. Kang-Woo was planning to experience and enjoy everything he hadn't had the chance to.

"Let's go," Kang-Woo said in a voice resembling a warrior about to go to war.

A bell chimed as he pushed the door open.

"Let's see... Do I just register and add money into my account like this?"

Despite this being his first time in an Internet cafe, he finished the registration process smoothly. However, he couldn't help but gasp in excitement while looking around, just like someone from the countryside visiting Seoul for the first time.

Kang-Woo looked at the monitor and clicked on a button at the top that said 'Order Food.'

"Whoa... I can also order food?"

The neatly-organized menu reminded him of a restaurant.

He thought about it for a while and selected 'Set A.'

'I heard you had to try the instant noodles when in internet cafes.'

Kang-Woo had often heard that the instant noodles served in internet cafes were delicious.

"Then..."

After that, he looked for a game to play. However, he'd never played games before, so he didn't know which game to choose.

'How can I choose if I don't know anything?'

Kang-Woo pondered for a while and ultimately just chose a game from the 'Popular Games' folder. He clicked on a game with a logo consisting of the capital letter 'L' and created a new account.

"Hmm?"

After he completed the registration, an advertisement window popped up.

[Startup Package - 5 Rune Pages, 100K IP, rise to Level 30!]

"Whoa."

It advertised the benefits of the game's startup package and how much money it cost.

'If I'm going to start playing, I guess it's better to start at Level 30.'

He didn't understand what levels meant in this game, but he thought he had nothing to lose by starting at a higher one.

Kang-Woo bought the startup package and began playing the game. He clicked on a button that said 'Ranked Solo.'

"Support... There are different kinds of classes?"

While tilting his head, Kang-Woo chose a character—a wind mage.

'Am I supposed to go there now?'

Kang-Woo's wind mage walked along the bottom lane while following behind a hot blond male character.

One minute and thirty seconds after the game began, monsters started to pour out from both camps, and a 2v2 match began.

"Ah. So, if I kill these monsters, I'll get money."

Kang-Woo understood how to play the game after playing for a short while. Upon realizing that he would get money if he hit the monsters, Kang-Woo began moving the mouse and hunting the monsters down.

Then he received a chat message from the user playing as the hot blond male character.

[Izreal: y u killing em]

Kang-Woo tilted his head and sent back a chat message.

[Channa: u get money if u kill em]

[Izreal: ur not supposed to kill the minions u dumb f***]

[Channa: u hurry up n kill em too. free money]

[Izreal: eat a f***** d*** u m***** f*****]

He didn't understand why, but the other person seemed angry.[2]

"Here is your Set A. That'll be 4,000 won."

"Oh, thank you very much."

When Kang-Woo was served the instant noodles meal set that he'd ordered, he paid the employee and then stared at his instant noodles with bright eyes.

'It smells amazing.'

instant noodles had been the food that he'd eaten the most back when he was poor. He'd eaten so much of it that he had become sick of it, but smelling it in the internet cafe made him drool.

Kang-Woo grabbed the chopsticks and began eating the instant noodles.

"Slurp!"

The sweet and spicy aroma and the unique flavor of the instant noodles spread through his mouth.

'Delicious!'

With the instant noodles before him, the game became his second priority. He just placed his character next to a turret and focused on eating.

"I never would've imagined that pickled radish went so well with instant noodles!" Kang-Woo exclaimed in surprise after tasting the included side dish of pickled radish.

It couldn't be compared to kimchi, but pickled radish was also good in its own way. Following the pickled radish, Kang-Woo smiled and happily ate the kimbap that was included in the meal set.

[Izreal: hey do something!! please!! this is my promotion matchhhhhh!!]

His partner sent him a desperate message, but Kang-Woo didn't notice it since he was too busy eating.

"Internet cafes don't really meet the hype."

Was it because he had never played video games? He didn't understand what made internet cafes so popular.

"Like I'd thought, eating is better."

Rather than playing video games, he better enjoyed eating the instant noodles that the internet cafe served. He even thought that it would be worth going to an internet cafe again just for the food.

After finishing the instant noodles, he emptied his canned beverage. The taste of the carbonated drink lingered in his mouth as the liquid slid down his throat.

Then...

Slam!

"CHANNA, YOU FUCKING BITCH!!! AARRRGGGHHH!!!"

Kang-Woo heard someone shout angrily behind him.

He turned around and saw a woman with short red hair, who was wearing a baseball cap, get up angrily. She had thick eyebrows, full lips, a sharp nose, and fair skin. The red-haired woman was wearing a tracksuit, but that wasn't enough to hide her beauty.

Her eyes met Kang-Woo's, and she glared at him.

"What are you looking at? Got a problem? I'm not in the mood to deal with you right now, so—" the red-haired woman said angrily until she noticed Kang-Woo's game screen. "...Huh?"

She looked back and forth between Kang-Woo's screen and hers.

Then the corners of her mouth curled up in a sneer. "Wow. Coincidences like this really do happen, huh?"

Strong energy poured out from her body as she said, "You'd better step outside while I'm still asking nicely, you son of a bitch."

1. Yaience (야이언스) is a term coined by Korean League of Legends players that combine Yasuo and science. It basically means that people play Yasuo mainly because they want to be the main character, but get tilted when they aren't the ones carrying the game and just let themselves be killed. He is a difficult character to play, so they would rather just lose the game than be carried. Hence, it has basically become a science that you are 100% going to lose the game if you have a Yasuo player on your team. ☹️

2. This is far too complicated to explain to people who don't play LoL through a reference note, so maybe someone in the comments who's knowledgeable in the game can explain for people that don't understand. Plus, the summoner names are altered, but I'm sure ppl who play the game can figure it out. Long story short: Channa is a support hero and Izreal is the ADC. The support hero should let the ADC take the last hit to get more money. 🙄

Chapter 26 - Unexpected Encounter (2)

"You'd better step outside while I'm still asking nicely, you son of a bitch," the woman with red hair said menacingly.

Her ferocious attitude resembled that of a wild animal.

"Huh? What?" Oh Kang-Woo uttered while tilting his head in confusion.

Seeing Kang-Woo's attitude made the woman even angrier.

"You know what, you fucking troll!" the woman shouted aggressively.

She extended her hand toward Kang-Woo, wanting to smack him on the head.

Kang-Woo dodged her attack with a frown. "Huh?"

When the woman's attack hit nothing but air, she let out a confused gasp and glared at Kang-Woo.

"You!" she exclaimed angrily.

Whish! Whoosh!

Kang-Woo dodged all of the incoming attacks. He looked like an acrobat with the way he evaded the attacks just by moving the upper half of his body agilely.

"What the..." the woman uttered.

She couldn't believe that Kang-Woo was dodging all of her attacks.

Kang-Woo was also looking at her in surprise.

'She's fast.'

His expression stiffened as he watched her hand swing toward him.

The woman was fast—no, she was more than that. Her attacks curved swiftly in unpredictable ways like a snake. Just in terms of technique, she was on an impressive level.

'She's strong.'

Kang-Woo got out of the chair and looked at the woman calmly. She was the strongest person he had met since returning to Earth. Compared to her, Players like Jo Deok-Hyun seemed pathetic.

'She might be...'

Kang-Woo thought that she might be even stronger than his current self. It wasn't like they'd fought with all their might, but judging by how the mana that she emitted intimidated him, it was quite possible that she truly was stronger than him.

"Who are you?" the red-haired woman asked.

She was wary of Kang-Woo too.

After seeing how casually Kang-Woo dodged her attacks by simply moving his upper body, the red-haired woman questioned in a low voice, "Which guild sent you? Are you from the Mir Guild?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"How dare you bullshit me?" the woman said while glaring at him. "There's no way someone like you isn't part of any guild."

The red-haired woman recalled how he had dodged all of her attacks. She hadn't attacked him with the intent of killing him since the reason behind the brawl was a video game. However, even if she hadn't attacked seriously, her attacks weren't at a level that some random guy who didn't belong to any guild could have dodged.

"Is there a rule that I have to join a guild?"

"..."

"Rather, I'm even more curious than you are. Who are you? Why did you pick a fight with me out of the blue?"

"What? Are you kidding me right n—"

"From what I can gather, you're the person who insulted me in the chat earlier."

"Obviously! Who wouldn't insult you in such a situation?" the woman shouted angrily.

Even a saint that had managed to transcend the mundane world would be furious enough to throw their keyboard if they were in her shoes.

Kang-Woo shrugged at her reaction.

'Is it because I stayed still in the middle of the battle?'

Upon recalling that he had stopped playing to eat ramen, Kang-Woo nodded slightly and said, "I'm sorry that I stopped playing abruptly. It's just that the noodles I'd ordered got served."

"No! I'm talking about what happened before that!"

"Huh? Did you perhaps not know that you get money if you kill those monsters?"

"No! That's not what I mean!" The woman glared at him in frustration.

Kang-Woo seemed confused as to why she was angry.

After seeing his reaction, she spoke while frowning, "Don't tell me... Was that your first time playing the game?"

"Yeah, that was my very first match."

"Oh... Sigh."

The red-haired woman rubbed her forehead as if she had a headache. Kang-Woo didn't seem to be lying.

'That goddamn startup package.'

The woman had been negatively affected by the startup package, which was designed to attract new players.

"So... you didn't know how to play the game?"

"Right."

"Urgh..."

It didn't make sense for the woman to stay angry at Kang-Woo since he didn't know how to play the game.

The red-haired woman asked, "But seriously, who are you? I've never received any reports about a Player ranked A or above who looks like you."

"Well, that's because I'm not an A-rank Player."

"You aren't A-rank?"

The red-haired woman looked at Kang-Woo in disbelief.

'That's impossible.'

She hadn't fought at full power, but Kang-Woo's movements made it hard for her to believe that he wasn't at least an A-rank.

The woman said, "Don't lie to me. There's no way you aren't A-rank—"

"Here." Kang-Woo showed her his Player license.

He hadn't received his C-rank license yet, so it stated that he was still a D-rank Player.

"D-rank...?"

The red-haired woman checked Kang-Woo's Player license and frowned as if she'd heard a bad joke.

"How can a D-rank possibly move like that?" she questioned while looking at him puzzledly.

The only thing she had seen from him was his movements, so her assessment that Kang-Woo was an A-rank Player was just based on his technique.

'If he's a D-rank, that means he's a newbie Player.'

She was having a hard time accepting the situation because this person who moved like a veteran warrior was just a D-rank Player.

"Okay. We're done, right?" Kang-Woo said.

"Ah..."

Kang-Woo turned his back on the woman.

It was the first day off that he had gotten ever since returning to Earth, and he had no intention of wasting it on a meaningless brawl.

"Wait a sec—" the red-haired woman, who was still in shock, called out and extended her hand toward Kang-Woo.

However, Kang-Woo ignored her and walked out of the Internet cafe.

"..." The red-haired woman stared blankly at the door of the Internet cafe.

She recalled seeing the name 'Oh Kang-Woo' on the Player license of the Player who had displayed movements that couldn't have possibly belonged to a D-rank Player.

'Is he hiding his strength?'

There was a chance that Kang-Woo had wiped his identity clean due to having committed some heinous crime.

'But that's weird too.'

There was no chance that a criminal who had changed his identity would be in an internet cafe near the Player Management Office in broad daylight.

"If that's not the case, then..."

She looked at the spot that Kang-Woo had stood on. It was clean with no traces of a fight, so much so that it was hard to believe that he had dodged all of her attacks from there. That meant that he had truly only used the upper half of his body to dodge all of her attacks.

'Maybe he's a genius with incredible talent.'

Fighting instinct varied from person to person. A true genius could develop excellent movements from just a few battles. The red-haired woman was one of those cases. She had been able to join the ranks of the powerful almost instantly thanks to her incredible talent.

'Who is he?'

Her desire to learn more about the person named Oh Kang-Woo skyrocketed. She wanted to check if he was indeed a Player gifted enough to be worthy of being called a genius.

'If that's the case...'

Her gaze turned sharp.

Maybe Kang-Woo could become a trump card that could help resolve the painful situation that she was in currently.

'I'll have to check.'

She took out her smartphone and called someone.

Click.

[This is Park Hyun-Woo, the Red Rose Guild's chief of human resources management.]

"Hyun-Woo. It's me, Yeon-Joo."

[Oh, what can I help you with, Guildmaster?]

"There's a Player I want you to investigate."

[Hmm... Are they one of the demon worshipers you told me about before?]

"No, it's not about that."

[I'll start investigating as soon as you tell me their name.]

"I'll head to the guild office right now."

After ending the call, she turned around while still thinking about Oh Kang-Woo. Then she saw the word 'Defeat' on her game screen.

"Ah..."

Her anger came flowing back. She frowned and pressed the 'Confirm' button.

Riiing.

[You have failed to be promoted to Silver.]

"AAARRGGGHHH! I'll beat the crap out of him next time!"

The red-haired girl, Cha Yeon-Joo, screamed in agony as she stared at her Bronze rank in the game.

* * *

"Fuuu," Kang-Woo sighed in relief after leaving the Internet cafe.

He recalled the red-haired woman he had just met.

'She was strong.'

All he'd done was dodge a few of her attacks, but that was enough for him to have an idea of how strong she was.

Kang-Woo wasn't sure if he would be able to defeat her if he fought with all of the power that he had at present.

'I would probably lose.'

His expression stiffened when he remembered the dense mana that the woman had emitted. After getting his Third Awakening and an unexpected bonus at the Andras Guild, he had been so sure that he wouldn't lose against any run-of-the-mill Players, and yet...

'There's still a long way to go.'

Excessive confidence could make a person lower their guard, and that could become the knife that stabs them in the back.

"I'll have to do my best again from tomorrow onward."

With that in mind, Kang-Woo walked toward the subway station. He had been planning to take a break and experience numerous things, but his encounter with the red-haired woman changed his mind.

'It's better this way.'

He took the subway and returned home thinking that he was glad he had met the red-haired woman before becoming overly confident.

* * *

The next day...

After receiving his C-rank Player license, Kang-Woo went to find the C-rank Gate in Mok-dong. He saw an empty lot that was in the middle of an apartment complex.

"Let's see... The Mok-dong C-rank Gate."

Kang-Woo took his phone out and checked what monsters appeared in the Mok-dong Gate.

"A mix of Orcs and Trolls, huh?"

Orcs were D-rank monsters just like Lizardmen, but it seemed they appeared in some higher-ranking Gates as well.

After reading the information about the monsters, Kang-Woo walked toward the entrance.

A soldier stopped him at the entrance and said, "I can't allow you to enter this Gate today unless you're in a party consisting of five C-rank Players."

"...May I ask why?"

"A Troll Chief has appeared. Solo hunting is prohibited while a boss monster is active."

"..."

Troll Chiefs were boss monsters that periodically appeared in C-rank Gates. They were stronger than even elite monsters that appeared in B-rank Gates.

"Hmm." Kang-Woo looked at the Gate while stroking his chin.

'I guess it's time to push myself.'

The rewards he could get from killing a boss monster were incomparable to what he could get from killing a normal C-rank monster.

Kang-Woo couldn't miss that opportunity.

Chapter 27 - I'm Way Stronger Than I Thought (1)

"Ugh! Today's the day when the boss monster spawns?"

"What should we do? Should we try to hunt it?"

"Are you crazy? How could we possibly kill the Troll Chief?"

The Players in front of the Gate muttered among themselves when the soldiers stopped them and told them a boss monster had appeared. They were discussing whether they should still enter the Gate.

'The standard of Players is totally different at the C-rank Gate.'

Oh Kang-Woo nodded while looking around at the people gathered at the Gate.

At first glance, the biggest difference between the Players here and the ones at the D-rank and E-rank Gates was their equipment.

'Should I also get some equipment?'

Kang-Woo hadn't faced a monster strong enough to warrant it, but it was inefficient to hunt solo without any gear.

"Hmm... I'll have to think about it."

Kang-Woo looked around and thought that if he were to buy some equipment, he should also buy some for Kang Tae-Soo and Han Seol-Ah too.

"Let's go!!!"

"Let's hunt the Troll Chief!!!"

"Let's get some extra rewards!!!"

One party entered the Gate while shouting excitedly.

Kang-Woo looked at the party entering the gate.

'The security here is definitely tighter.'

It seemed that it wasn't a lie that inspection was done more thoroughly at C-rank Gates and above. Each soldier was checking each Player's licenses closely and even checked for the mana stone in the license card with a strange machine.

'It shot up from ID checks at a bar to a full-on examination at airport security.'

Kang-Woo now understood why the Andras Guild members searched for Players in D-rank Gates to use as sacrifices for their ritual. Security was tighter at C-rank Gates and above, so the Andras Guild couldn't hunt for prey comfortably in those Gates.

"Let's see..."

Kang-Woo pulled away from the crowd in front of the Gate and looked at the soldiers inspecting the Player licenses.

Was it because a boss monster had appeared? They were checking every Player's license thoroughly.

'This is a good opportunity.'

Kang-Woo looked at the parties of Players that were gathered around the entrance. His attention centered on a Player who was shouting about the extra reward that could be acquired from hunting the boss.

'I believe he said that the mana stone of the boss monster could be sold for 100 million won.'

Moreover, many other by-products could be sold for a very high price. A few hundred million won could be gained just by killing one Troll Chief.

"Ah... Should we give it a shot?"

"But I'm honestly not confident..."

The other Players looked at each other in doubt.

Hunting a Troll Chief was harder than hunting a Hobgoblin, which was the boss monster of the E-rank Gate and a C-rank boss monster. The difference in strength between the C and B ranks was greater than the difference between the E and C ranks.

'Good.'

Kang-Woo's eyes lit up upon seeing that doubt was spreading among the Players.

He walked up to them and yelled, "Let's take this chance to hunt the boss monster together! It won't be a match for our combined strength!"

Hearing that, the Player who had insisted on hunting the boss monster from the beginning got excited and shouted, "Yeah! If we're just gonna stay trembling in fear outside the Gate like this, let's all just join forces instead!"

His shout stirred up the greed of the Players, but there was one decisive problem.

"Urgh, but wouldn't the shared reward be too little?"

"True."

The more Players there were, the fewer rewards each one would get. Even though a few hundred million won could be acquired from hunting the boss monster, each person would get only a tiny amount of money if they divided it among that many party members.

Kang-Woo shouted again, "Even so, think about the EXP that killing a boss monster would give us! Even if we hunt as a big party, there isn't a big difference in the EXP gained!"

The eyes of the Players lit up after hearing Kang-Woo's words.

Money wasn't the only thing they could obtain by killing the boss monster... They could also gain a massive amount of EXP. This was a very tempting proposal for Players who were desperate to level up.

'Everyone probably knows that even if you kill a boss monster as a group, the EXP you gain isn't that different from doing it alone.'

It was the same for elite monsters. Of course, when there were more members in a party, each member would get fewer experience points, but the loss in experience points was negligible because the number of experience points gained from hunting a boss monster was incomparable to that of a normal monster.

"All right!"

"Let's use this opportunity to take a look at the boss monster!"

Once the fire was lit, there was no way to stop it. The crowd bonded with each other and burned their desire even further.

'Now I only have to wait.'

Kang-Woo, who had ignited the fire, pulled away from the crowd and looked at the Players from a distance. He had no intentions of hunting the boss with them as a party.

'It'll reduce the rewards that I'll receive.'

Leaving the experience points aside, the main issue was the distribution of the corpse and mana stone. Corpses and mana stones were important elements for his growth since he could use his Authority of Predation. So, he had no intention of sharing his resources for growth with the other Players.

'The rewards are all mine.'

Moreover, they weren't Players whom Kang-Woo was planning to help grow like Tae-Soo or Seol-Ah. He had no reason at all to share the rewards with them.

"If we also kill the chief's guards that are always beside him, we'll be able to sell a pair of them for about ten million won!" the Player that proposed fighting the boss monster together added.

That Player gathered some Players, and they ended up with a party of twenty. There were so many people that it looked as if a guild had come to the Gate to hunt together.

"Let's go!"

"Let's level up to get our Fourth Awakening!"

A huge party was formed to hunt the boss monster.

After confirming each of their positions, the large party of Players approached the Gate inspection zone.

'Now.'

Kang-Woo slowly made his move as the party reached the Gate's entrance. Each Player had to be inspected individually, so all the soldiers guarding the entrance came to help check the Player licenses of the party's members.

"Everyone, please get in a line!"

"Just a moment, please!"

While the soldiers tried to keep the Players in check by making them line up in a single file, Kang-Woo used the Authority of the Sky and crossed the fence surrounding the gate.

'Authority of Blindness.'

Kang-Woo used the Authority of Blindness on the few soldiers who hadn't gotten swept into the chaos and then quickly moved to the entrance of the C-rank Gate.

Whoom.

"Alright."

After entering the Gate, Kang-Woo smiled with satisfaction and looked around.

'It looks similar to the Gate with the Goblins.'

This Gate reminded him of the dense forest that he'd seen when he first returned to Earth.

Kang-Woo pushed through the thickets and walked deep into the forest.

'Now, where would the boss be?'

The forest was too dense to search through from the sky. Then Kang-Woo remembered there was a certain Authority that he could use.

'Wouldn't I be able to use it now?'

It was the Authority of the demon Astaroth, the Authority of the Beholder. He couldn't use it before because it consumed a lot of demonic energy, but he thought that he could give it a shot now.

"Let's see..."

Kang-Woo checked his Demonic Energy stat. Thanks to Jo Deok-Hyun's ritual, Kang-Woo's Demonic Energy stat had surpassed 50.

'Although, in reality, it's higher than 50.'

The demonic energy that flowed out from the weakening seal of the Ten Thousand Demon Core wasn't added to the Demonic Energy stat, so his actual Demonic Energy stat was probably a lot higher than 50.

"I think that I can pull it off."

Kang-Woo nodded and walked deeper into the forest. He placed his hand on the ground and used the Authority of the Beholder.

Fwoom!

Demonic energy came out of his hand and spread out through the ground like spider webs.

"Kurgh."

Kang-Woo grimaced because of the wave of information he was receiving.

The Authority of the Beholder had one flaw...

'It's way too high-performance.'

It was that it absorbed all the information from its surroundings and consequently sent too much information for Kang-Woo's brain to process. In Hell, he'd used an Authority that accelerated his mental processing speed, but he still didn't have enough demonic energy to use two Authorities simultaneously.

"Argh, urgh."

He had a headache. Every single piece of information entering his head stabbed his brain.

Kang-Woo felt nauseous and started to think he wouldn't be able to keep using the Authority of the Beholder. However, the information of a very strong entity suddenly entered his mind.

'I've found you.'

Kang-Woo's eyes lit up.

The energy of the strong entity was completely different from that of the other monsters surrounding it.

'Is it because it's the chief? Why are there so many monsters?'

There were dozens of Trolls and Orcs surrounding the Troll Chief, and unlike the Hobgoblin, the Troll Chief didn't seem to have the intention of going somewhere by itself.

"Hmm." Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes while thinking about this.

Then he heard the murmur of Players from afar. It was the big party that had formed because of him.

'I should use those guys.'

Thinking that those Players should be able to deal with the small fry, Kang-Woo approached the Troll Chief.

'First, I should troll the chief to get his attention.'

He would then hide, and the party would naturally end up fighting the other monsters. He just had to slip out when they were fighting and go eliminate the boss monster by himself.

"Then, should I try to grab his attention?"

Kang-Woo raised his hand as he stared at the Troll Chief, who was holding a massive cane and being protected by the Trolls.

'Authority of Dark Spears.'

It was the Authority of the demon Raum.

A spear of demonic energy that was around two meters long manifested in Kang-Woo's hand. With one hand, he threw the spear at the Troll Chief.

Stab!

"GRAAAAHHHH!!!"

The demonic energy spear pierced the Troll Chief's chest.

'Good. Now, I'll drag the attention of the Orcs and Trolls toward the other Players...'

Kang-Woo turned toward where the other Players were.

Riiing.

[You have successfully defeated the B-rank boss monster Troll Chief!]

[Additional EXP has been awarded due to the boss monster's defeat.]

[You have placed first in the level of contribution to defeat the boss monster. Additional EXP has risen threefold.]

[Your Level has risen by 4.]

"Eh?" Kang-Woo turned confusedly to where the Troll Chief was.

The Troll Chief was convulsing on the ground with the demonic energy spear pierced into his chest.

"The hell? It died in just one blow?"

Chapter 28 - I'm Way Stronger Than I Thought (2)

"The hell? It died in just one blow?" Oh Kang-Woo laughed.

He had no intention of killing the Troll Chief with that attack. Instead, he'd been trying to catch its attention and then lure the monsters to the other Players.

Kang-Woo had thought that he still wasn't strong enough to deal with the Troll Chief and the dozens of Trolls and Orcs simultaneously. Yet, he ended up killing the Troll Chief with the demonic energy spear he'd used for the purpose of grabbing its attention.

'Was that really the boss monster?'

Kang-Woo still couldn't believe that he had killed the boss monster, so he checked the message windows again.

'Are B-rank monsters weaker than I thought?'

Kang-Woo tilted his head and thought about the energy he had felt from the Troll Chief and the monsters around it.

'No.'

The Troll Chief had emitted power that was incomparable to the Trolls around it.

That meant there was only one possible explanation.

'I've become stronger than I thought.'

Ever since his encounter with the red-haired woman, Kang-Woo had believed that he wasn't that strong. That was natural since he had encountered a Player who was stronger than him in an internet cafe instead of a high-ranking Gate, where strong Players were expected.

'But that wasn't the case.'

Kang-Woo had without a doubt gained immense power after achieving his Third Awakening and going through the Andras Guild's ritual. It was just that it had not been enough to reach the level of the red-haired woman whom he had met by coincidence.

'Just who was she?'

While thinking about the red-haired woman, Kang-Woo walked out of his hiding place.

"GRRRR!"

"GRAAAHH!"

After losing their chief, the monsters angrily roared at Kang-Woo.

He used the Authority of Blades and approached them slowly.

"Change of plan."

Killing the boss monster in one hit helped Kang-Woo realize how strong he had become. A tiger did not need to shrink back when facing cats. So, he scrapped his plan to attract the monsters' attention and make them fight the other Players.

"I'll wipe you all out," Kang-Woo stated.

It wasn't his style to fight recklessly against multiple opponents. Others might find his style of fighting cowardly, but he prioritized his safety above all else when he was in battle. However, that was unnecessary when there was such an enormous gap in power between him and his opponents.

"KAAAARRRGHH!"

Kang-Woo stabbed the Troll that swung its club at him in the stomach with a blade made of demonic energy. Then, he filled the Troll with the demonic energy in the blade.

Slash! Crack!

The demonic energy turned into blades that sprouted from inside the Troll's body like thorns, tearing it apart from the inside.

This was one of the ways the Authority of Blades could be used. Now that Kang-Woo had accumulated a lot of demonic energy, he could use this method without much issue.

'Nice.'

Kang-Woo smiled after feeling how light his movements had become compared to when he had faced the Lizardmen.

He felt good to know that he was recovering his old level of power. It felt like he was removing the heavy burdens that had been weighing down his body one by one.

Kang-Woo jumped right into the fray of enraged monsters and began to run wild.

"Kiiiekk!"

"Krrr!"

The screams of monsters spread throughout the forest. They were predators that devoured humans, yet they were now in a state of panic because of the appearance of a new predator.

After almost half of them had been massacred, the Trolls and Orcs began to run away from Kang-Woo.

'I see they have enough intelligence to know when to run away.'

Perhaps, it didn't have to do with their intelligence but rather their survival instinct. The monsters had probably concluded that they wouldn't be able to defeat Kang-Woo and decided to flee in fear.

Kang-Woo extended his hands toward the monsters trying to escape.

'This is a good chance.'

It was the perfect chance to see what he could do now and to what extent.

Kang-Woo focused on his demonic energy and gathered the maximum amount that he could use. Then he cut the palm of his hand, and a drop of blood fell to the ground.

"Field of Blades."

Slash! Slash! Slash!

Black blades rose from the ground starting from the point where his blood landed. A wave of black blades engulfed the monsters, who looked too pathetic and miserable to be called monsters. The few that barely managed to escape the blades just kept running without looking back.

Ting.

[You have successfully defeated a group of C-rank monster Trolls.]

[You have successfully defeated a group of D-rank monster Orcs.]

[Your level has risen by 2.]

"Pant, pant."

After using Field of Blades, Kang-Woo was panting, and his entire body was covered in sweat.

"I actually managed to use Field of Blades"

He looked around while wiping the sweat off his forehead. The ground, which was covered in black blades, was painted with thick monster blood.

Field of Blades was a technique that Kang-Woo had developed using Sabnak's Authority.

'Demons lack imagination.'

They used the Authority that they possessed in one-dimensional ways. Of course, there were a few exceptions, but Sabnak wasn't one of them.

Riiing.

[You have learned the skill Field of Blades (Rank: A).]

[Techniques registered as skills can be used more easily and precisely.]

'Huh?'

Kang-Woo tilted his head at the message window that popped up.

'Oh, so these are what they call skills.'

Players obtained skills by creating techniques to utilize their Traits.

Usually, Players had to try numerous times before they could register a technique as a skill, but since Kang-Woo was already proficient in the technique, he could register it immediately.

"Hmm... So, Authorities and Traits have many things in common after all."

Authorities and Traits were similar in that there was a wide range of Authorities and Traits and that they could be applied in many different ways. Kang-Woo thought that it would be worth investigating this idea a bit more.

While thinking that, he walked toward the corpse of the Troll Chief.

"Now, it's time to enjoy the rewards."

Kang-Woo smiled and used the Authority of Predation. The Authority of Predation spread out and devoured all the corpses of the monsters around him.

Crunch! Crack!

Was it because his demonic energy had increased? The Authority of Predation devoured the monster faster than before.

As the amount of demonic energy inside him rose, Kang-Woo got immersed in his thoughts.

'Should I also consume all the mana stones?'

Ever since achieving his Third Awakening and acquiring the Trait 'Mana-Hungry Demon,' he could convert the mana inside mana stones into demonic energy. This left Kang-Woo wondering whether he should choose power or money.

'Power comes first.'

After thinking about it for a while, Kang-Woo decided to leave ten C-rank mana stones and devour the rest. He wasn't desperate for money at the moment, and he would be able to earn a lot more once he became stronger.

'Devour everything,' Kang-Woo inwardly commanded the black smoke that had emerged from his hands.

Horrifying sounds rang out as the Authority of Predation devoured every monster Kang-Woo had just massacred.

Riiing.

[Demonic Energy has risen by 2.]

"Only two?"

Kang-Woo frowned after reading the message window.

He had devoured the boss monster and all the trolls around him, but his Demonic Energy stat had only increased by two. Was it because his Demonic Energy stat had already reached 50?

"So, this is what they meant when they said that the higher your stats become, the harder it is to raise them."

Kang-Woo turned around while clicking his tongue. He had just gained another reason for why he should go to a higher-ranking Gate.

'But the leveling up speed is still okay.'

He had simply become too strong for his level, so the speed at which he leveled up was extremely fast. His Level had risen by four just by him killing a boss monster, and after he cleared up the rest of the monsters, it had risen by two more levels. Kang-Woo only had four levels left until his Fourth Awakening.

"Should I hunt a bit more before going back?"

He had to wait for the big party to exit the Gate so that he could use the disorder to leave without anyone noticing.

While continuing to hunt alone, Kang-Woo checked the party's location with his Authority. They were searching for the boss monster everywhere in the Gate.

"Where the hell is the boss monster?!"

"Did the government get the date wrong?"

"Damn it!"

The players shouted angrily after wandering around for a few hours without being able to find anything.

Ranger-type Players had spread out to search so that they could find the boss and hunt it as quickly as possible, but they couldn't find the boss monster anywhere.

"We only saw Trolls scatter and run away for some weird reason..."

"You didn't see the Troll Chief's body, did you?"

"No. There were traces of a battle, but there was no body."

One could see the disappointment in their expressions.

"Sigh, let's just go back."

"Ah! L-Let's stay just a little bit longer..."

"Let's go. Damn, we just wasted an entire day."

The excitement cooled down as quickly as it had heated up. When a few party members mentioned that they should leave the Gate, everyone began walking toward the exit.

Kang-Woo followed them stealthily.

'I'll just use the commotion that they'll cause to leave unnoticed.'

Kang-Woo, who had obtained good rewards from hunting, smiled with satisfaction and stealthily followed the party out of the Gate.

"There wasn't any boss monster!"

"Do you have any idea how much time we just wasted?!"

The Players who exited the Gate before him complained to the soldiers and caused a commotion.

'Nice.'

Kang-Woo seized the opportunity to go unnoticed and once again flew over the fence. He landed on the ground and was about to head home when...

"Silence!"

A group of people in uniforms colored in a mix of red and black approached the Gate entrance.

"The H-Hwarang Corps?"

"Hey, isn't that Baek Hwa-Yeon, the captain of the Hwarang Corps' 3rd Squadron?"

"Woah, you're right."

The person at the forefront was Baek Hwa-Yeon, a beautiful woman with a very dignified appearance and silver hair tied in a ponytail.

While overwhelming everyone with her charismatic eyes, Hwa-Yeon said, "We've recently received reports of Chaos Players appearing in D-rank Gates, so we're carrying out a surprise inspection of Players who have achieved their Third Awakening and above. We appreciate your cooperation."

After she finished talking, the Players who had just left the Gate were surrounded by a squadron of uniformed Players.

Kang-Woo's expression stiffened.

'Don't tell me...'

He bit his lips a little bit and looked around.

'Have I been found out?'

Chapter 29 - You Even Added Instant Noodles (1)

Oh Kang-Woo stared warily at the uniformed Players encircling him and the party.

It was obvious, even at first glance, that Baek Hwa-Yeon wasn't a normal Player. Perhaps, she'd even seen Kang-Woo cross the fence while using the Authority of Blindness.

"It is just a simple inspection, so there is no need to fret. We will leave as soon as we're done checking if any of the Players here are on the wanted list," Hwa-Yeon said.

Then, she glanced at the members of her squadron. They nodded in understanding and approached the Players.

'Thankfully, it seems like she didn't see me.' Kang-Woo sighed in relief.

It appeared that Hwa-Yeon hadn't seen him cross the fence.

'But Chaos Players, huh...?'

Kang-Woo thought of the incident with the Andras Guild and its members, the crazy demon worshipers who had used Players as sacrifices.

'Are they making their move?'

He wasn't sure yet, but the demon worshipers would have no choice but to expose their presence if they continued to perform rituals.

"Please show us your Player licenses."

Hwa-Yeon and her subordinates began inspecting the Player licenses.

When Hwa-Yeon got to Kang-Woo, she extended her hand with a handsome smile.

'She's pretty masculine.'

After giving her his Player license, Kang-Woo asked, "Do you handle inspections personally?"

"You cannot be a captain if you leave everything to your squadron members," Hwa-Yeon replied.

"That's a great mindset to have."

After that light exchange of words, Kang-Woo smoothly kept the conversation going.

"Have there been a lot of Chaos Players lately?" he queried.

"Yes. That is why we carry out surprise inspections like this."

"Hmm. Players earn more than enough money to live off by just hunting monsters, but they're stooping to murder to earn more...? How scary."

"...It is," Hwa-Yeon said, flinching slightly.

Kang-Woo did not miss that flinch.

'She's lying.'

Hwa-Yeon's flinch hadn't been in response to Kang-Woo mentioning that the number of Chaos Players had increased; it had been in response to what he'd said about Chaos Players killing people for money.

'She knows that their goal isn't money.'

Kang-Woo thought that the Hwarang Corps might be aware of the rituals that the demon worshipers were conducting.

"Could you tell me which Chaos Player you're looking for? As a Player, I want to do my part. If I ever see him, I'll report him."

"Thank you for your offer, but it is unfortunately classified. I ask for your cooperation once it becomes public."

"Oh, I see."

"Righteous young men like you are rare these days. I like that." Hwa-Yeon looked at Kang-Woo's Player license with a smile on her face. "It seems like you've just become a C-rank Player. I understand your desire to hunt at C-rank Gates, but I suggest you stay at a D-rank Gate for a bit

longer. It will be safer for you to come here after leveling up a bit more. There will be an EXP penalty, but you can still level up to 25 in a D-rank Gate."

"Thank you very much."

"Oh Kang-Woo... I hope there are more Players like you."

Hwa-Yeon returned Kang-Woo his Player license and gave him a light pat of encouragement on the shoulder.

Kang-Woo smiled at her words. 'It'd be a problem if there were more people like me.'

From a moral standpoint, Kang-Woo was closer to being evil than a saint.

After his conversation with Hwa-Yeon was over, Kang-Woo glanced at Hwa-Yeon, who had gone to inspect other Players.

'Classified, huh...?'

He wanted to know if their target was Jo Deok-Hyun or some other demon worshiper.

Kang-Woo could tell with just a glance that Hwa-Yeon was a very strong Player, so there was no way he would be able to use a mind-control type of Authority like the Authority of Fear on her.

'I guess I'll have to be satisfied for the moment just by knowing that the government has begun investigating the demon worshipers.'

Moreover, Deok-Hyun was currently mobilizing his guild members to gather information on the other demon worshipers day in and day out. It seemed wiser for Kang-Woo to take a step back instead of rushing things.

"I should head back."

Kang-Woo walked away from the Hwarang Corps and went home.

A few days had passed by since he had hunted the boss monster. Kang-Woo continued hunting in the C-rank Gate and increasing his strength. When he heard that Han Seol-Ah had completed basic training and was ready to start hunting, he called Kang Tae-Soo.

As soon as Tae-Soo received Kang-Woo's call, he rushed to the cafe near Seol-Ah's house. He extended his hands toward Seol-Ah with his characteristically affable attitude.

"Oh, man~ It's nice to meet you. So, you're the healer that hyung-nim had mentioned!" Tae-Soo greeted.

"Oh, yes. Nice to meet you too," Seol-Ah replied.

"Wow~ You're so beautiful. My eyes almost popped out of their sockets when I saw you from a distance!"

"Th-Thank you very much."

Seol-Ah felt uncomfortable that a giant nearly two meters tall had approached her with sparkling eyes. She smiled awkwardly and turned toward Kang-Woo.

Tae-Soo looked at both of them and smiled.

"Hehehe. The air around you two is abnormal... What is your relationship with hyung-nim?" he asked Seol-Ah.

"Ah, u-um..."

"Don't say stupid things," Kang-Woo said calmly after taking a sip of the coffee he had ordered. "First, Tae-Soo, I want you to take Seol-Ah to hunt in a D-rank Gate."

Tae-Soo replied, "Of course. I should be the one making the request since she's a healer with a B-rank Trait. Sister-in-law, is your Trait only centered around healing?"

"S-Sister-in-law...?" Seol-Ah blushed.

Tae-Soo laughed loudly upon seeing her reaction. "Hahaha. It's already written on your face, so why are you getting so embarrassed? But more importantly, could you tell me more about your Trait?"

"Ngh... It's a Trait called 'Blessing of Light.' It can heal, but it can also be used to buff either strength, health, or dexterity."

"Whoa! So you can buff and heal simultaneously?"

"Yes, and I can use a few attack skills, too."

"That's amazing!" Tae-Soo exclaimed in surprise.

It was very impressive for a Player to be able to heal and buff at the same time. Most parties would consider whether they should incorporate a buffing class into their party, but that wouldn't be necessary if Seol-Ah were in their party because she could do both roles alone.

"If you can also buff, there's nothing more to say. A guild like Hanul Guild would welcome you with open arms almost immediately," Tae-Soo said.

"Haha, thank you, but I have no intentions of entering a guild for the moment."

"Haha. I'm the same. I'm thinking of making history in the world of Players along with hyung-nim!" Tae-Soo smiled naively and guzzled down the hot coffee. "Kaaah!! For coffee, you can't go wrong with an americano! Right, hyung-nim?"

'That's not beer.' Kang-Woo laughed upon seeing Tae-Soo overreact.

"So, is there anyone you have in mind regarding damage dealing?" Kang-Woo asked.

A party could not be formed with just a healer and a tank. So, a few days ago, Kang-Woo had asked Tae-Soo to find a good damage dealer.

"Of course! I found two incredible people!" Tae-Soo answered.

"Really?"

"Hehehe. I'm confident in my eye for people! They're so talented to the point that it's weird they haven't joined any guild yet."

"...How did you get to know them?" Kang-Woo asked warily.

The most important thing was if they were trustworthy; their capability came after. There were demon worshipers targeting low-level Players, so anything could happen.

Tae-Soo seemed to notice Kang-Woo's worry and said confidently, "I met them back when I was still hunting Goblins. Both of them have just gotten their Second Awakening. They're both trustworthy."

"Hmm..." Kang-Woo looked at him in complete distrust.

'I can't trust his judgment.'

After all, Tae-Soo had previously accepted two members of the Andras Guild as party members.

'I'll have to see them for myself.'

Kang-Woo cared for Tae-Soo, but Seol-Ah was especially important to him. He couldn't let her get involved in unnecessary trouble.

"Can I meet the two of them?" Kang-Woo asked.

"Of course. I'll introduce them to you tomorrow before we go hunting."

"Okay." Kang-Woo nodded and turned his head around to Seol-Ah. "Are you okay with that, Seol-Ah?"

"Of course. I trust him since you introduced him to me. Fufu. I'll try my best to level up as fast as possible so that I can party with you," Seol-Ah replied.

"You can take your time. The most important thing is your safety."

Kang-Woo's and Seol-Ah's eyes met, and an affectionate atmosphere bloomed between them.

"Hehehehehe." Tae-Soo giggled after looking at both of them. "Hyaaa, I can see the love in the air, hyung-nim."

"Urgh..." Seol-Ah's face reddened at Tae-Soo's words.

Tae-Soo found Seol-Ah's reaction funny and said with a smile, "But seriously, what is the nature of your relationship? Are you two dating?"

"N-No!" Seol-Ah denied it firmly.

The attention of the people inside the cafe centered on her because she had spoken so loudly. Noticing that everyone was looking at her, Seol-Ah blushed even harder.

Then she mumbled very quietly, "W-We aren't dating."

After that, Seol-Ah gazed at Kang-Woo, who was beside her.

"What... did you say?" Kang-Woo asked in shock.

He had an expression that looked as if he'd been hit with a hammer.

Kang-Woo trembled as he turned to face her. "Weren't we dating?"

"...Pardon?" Seol-Ah looked at him confusedly, wondering what he was talking about.

They certainly weren't dating, and the talk of dating had never even been brought up.

"You told me you would make delicious kimchi stew for me every day!" Kang-Woo exclaimed in frustration.

"No, I never said that."

"How could you do this to me after you even added instant noodles into it?!"

"I don't understand what you're saying at all, Kang-Woo," Seol-Ah replied unexpectedly calmly.

Kang-Woo's expression resembled that of a tragic female protagonist that had been betrayed by the man that she loved.

"Ah... Hm, so..." Tae-Soo bore witness to their skit with a puzzled expression. "So... are you two dating?"

Chapter 30 - Demonic Beast of the First Hell (1)

'So, it was just me who thought we were dating.'

Oh Kang-Woo staggered slightly with a shocked expression upon exiting the cafe. He had thought they were in a relationship because Han Seol-Ah had let him live in her house and cooked delicious kimchi stew for him every day.

'Did I get ahead of myself?' Kang-Woo shrugged sadly.

Seol-Ah approached him cautiously. "Uhhh, Kang-Woo."

"Yes...?"

"Did you... really think we were dating?"

"I'm ashamed of that, but I did."

"I-I see," Seol-Ah said and took a few steps back.

Her face was red, but she seemed strangely happy. She just stood there, fidgeting and staring off into space.

"What's wrong?" Kang-Woo asked her.

"N-Nothing!" Seol-Ah, who was surprised by his question, shouted in surprise.

Kang-Woo tilted his head, confused by Seol-Ah's suspicious behavior.

Meanwhile, Seol-Ah turned around and once again stared blankly into space.

"Hehehe," she giggled while imagining something.

She even clenched her fists and whispered to herself, "All right!"

Seeing that Seol-Ah's weird behavior continued, Kang-Woo was about to approach her. Nevertheless, before he could, Seol-Ah turned back to face him with a determined look.

"K-Kang-Woo!" she called out.

"Uh... Yes?"

"Wh-Why don't w-we ju..." Seol-Ah stuttered as she tried to propose something.

However, the more she talked, the more embarrassed she felt. She blushed even harder, and her voice became quieter.

"Seol-Ah?"

"U-Urghhh."

Seol-Ah was trembling while biting her lower lip. She suddenly opened her mouth as if to resume speaking, but she continued to fidget without being able to finish her sentence.

Then she took a deep breath and finally managed to talk.

"S-Spea..."

"I'm sorry?"

"Y-You can speak to me casually. Yes. L-Let's start with that." [1]

Kang-Woo smiled at Seol-Ah's words. "Sure. I'll do that."

"Th-Thank you very much, Kang-Woo."

"You can speak to me casually too."

"N-No! This is more comfortable for me!" Seol-Ah exclaimed while shaking her head.

Kang-Woo shrugged at her firm answer and replied, "Okay."

"Hehehe, I'm loving this, hyung-nim," Kang Tae-Soo said as he watched them with a smile. He patted Kang-Woo on the shoulders with his giant hands and continued, "I'll see you at Incheon tomorrow then, hyung-nim. I'll send you the exact location later."

"Huh? Why Incheon instead of the D-rank Gate that's closer?"

"Well, we had an incident at that Gate, didn't we? That's why I decided to change our target from Lizardmen to Orcs."

"Oh."

"They're stronger than Lizardmen, but we won't be in a swamp and won't need to be silent. So, it's a more comfortable place to hunt."

"Good idea." Kang-Woo looked at Tae-Soo in surprise.

'He clearly isn't dumb.'

Tae-Soo was thoughtful and knew how to take action. On top of that, he was loyal to Kang-Woo.

'As an underling, he's perfect.'

Kang-Woo gazed at Tae-Soo with satisfaction. He thought he had made the right call in saving Tae-Soo from the Andras Guild members.

"Okay, then. I'll meet you there tomorrow," Kang-Woo said.

"Understood, hyung-nim. Do you have any plans tonight? Why don't we go out and have a drink?" Tae-Soo asked while making the motion of drinking a glass of soju.

"No. I have stuff to do today."

"Aw, man. What stuff?"

"I need to level up," Kang-Woo said while thinking about his level.

He was currently Level 29 and about to get his Fourth Awakening.

'I should level up as much as possible while I still can.'

He wanted to become as strong as possible before focusing more of his attention on gathering information on the demon worshipers. For him, achieving more Awakenings was the equivalent of weakening the seal on his Ten Thousand Demon Core.

Unlike normal Players, who had to worry about whether they would get a high-ranking Trait, Kang-Woo was guaranteed to become stronger with each Awakening.

'I also want to know what I'll get as my fourth Trait.'

Traits were a new power that he didn't have back when he used to rule over Hell. He couldn't help but wonder what kind of new Traits he would unlock down the road.

'They say that the higher your level becomes, the higher your chances of unlocking a higher-ranking Trait will be...'

Kang-Woo thought that he might be able to get an even better one this time.

He then said to Tae-Soo and Seol-Ah, "I'll get going, then."

"Hunt safe, hyung-nim!"

"Okay. I'll see you tonight, Kang-Woo."

After saying goodbye to both of them, Kang-Woo walked to the C-rank Gate.

* * *

"Now, then..."

After the inspection was completed, Kang-Woo entered the Gate and took a deep breath.

'Let's begin.'

Kang-Woo didn't need to formulate a strategy to fight against mere Trolls or Orcs. He only needed to think about how he should move to kill more of them faster.

'I guess leveling up really does get progressively harder.'

Even though he'd killed so many monsters, he still hadn't leveled up. He wanted to advance to a B-rank Gate, but that wasn't an option yet. The promotion requirements for becoming a B-rank Player were similar to the C-rank promotion requirements. He needed to provide mana stone exchange receipts and a certificate that stated he had reached Level 30.

'So, this is why personal connections are important.'

Players who belonged to big guilds could enter high-ranking Gates freely and bypass the rank restriction. However, Kang-Woo could not hope to reap such privileges, as the only guild that he knew was the Andras Guild, whose members were on the watchlist of the Hwarang Corps.

"I should try to make some connections."

He had no intentions of entering a big guild, but maybe making connections with one wouldn't be a bad idea.

'And I don't think it will be that hard.'

Kang-Woo possessed great power that far surpassed what other Players of his level possessed. He hadn't closely compared himself with other Players, but he was sure that no one could dismiss him casually.

After the major struggle against the monsters that occurred in the past, power and talent had become valuable commodities in the world of Players. So, it was likely that someone like Kang-Woo was a gem that everyone would desire.

With those thoughts in mind, Kang-Woo used the Authority of the Beholder. Black demonic energy spread out from his body, shoving every single piece of information about his surroundings into his brain.

'First up, there are eight over there.'

After finding a group of Trolls, Kang-Woo sprinted toward the group. He ran incredibly fast through the forest thanks to his Authority of Haste.

Slash!

"Kiiieekk?"

Kang-Woo charged into the group of Trolls without hesitation and used the blade made from his Authority of Blades to split the head of one of the Trolls in two. The troll screamed in confusion and died before even realizing it had been ambushed.

"GRRRRR!!"

It was only then that the other Trolls realized that they were being ambushed, and they charged toward Kang-Woo. For anyone else, seeing Trolls that were almost three meters tall charging toward them was the definition of fear, but Kang-Woo didn't feel anything. Compared to what he had experienced in Hell, the Trolls' charge was nothing more than a cutesy prance.

Clash! Crack!

"Kiiieekk."

All eight Trolls were massacred in less than a minute. If someone else were to have seen that fight, they would probably have felt bad for the Trolls.

After catching his breath, Kang-Woo quickly searched for his next target.

'I can devour their corpses later.'

At that moment, reaching Level 30 and getting his Fourth Awakening was more important to him than taking the spoils of battle using the Authority of Predation. Kang-Woo left the corpses of the monsters behind and began moving at a frightening speed in search of his next target.

"Huh?"

Kang-Woo caught a faint scent of blood right then. It was obvious that he would smell blood since he was running around killing monsters, but this blood that he was smelling was different from monster blood.

'It's the scent of human blood.'

Furthermore, the strong scent of blood didn't seem to be coming from light wounds but from rather critical ones.

Kang-Woo's gaze sank. He slowly moved toward the source of the scent of blood.

'Did they die while hunting?'

That was the most likely answer. It was quite common for Players to die while hunting.

'Authority of Silence.'

However, there was also a chance that they had been attacked by a Chaos Player or a demon worshiper. So, Kang-Woo stealthily walked toward the source with his Authority of Silence activated.

It did not take him long to find the source of the scent. He brushed through the thickets to see the corpses of five Players on the ground.

"This is..." Kang-Woo mumbled.

He looked at the corpses of the Players. They were so badly torn apart that it was even hard to tell their genders.

"...A monster's doing," Kang-Woo concluded while looking at the marks on the corpses.

"Hmm..."

While checking out the corpses, Kang-Woo noticed something strange and frowned.

'There's no monster blood.'

Other monsters could have dragged away the corpses of any monsters that died during the battle, but it was weird that there wasn't even a single drop of monster blood on the ground. There was no way that a party of five Players who could enter a C-rank Gate had died at the hands of Trolls without injuring them at all.

'That's impossible.'

There was simply no way that could happen unless they had been fighting a boss monster. No, it would be impossible even for a boss monster to decimate a party of five without shedding a drop of blood.

'Just what exactly happened here?'

Kang-Woo continued to search the mangled corpses with a frown.

Suddenly...

Rustle.

"Grrrrr," a low cry rang out.

It was a cry that seemed to seep into the soul of those who heard it.

Kang-Woo's eyes widened. "No way..."

The thing that emerged from the bushes was a giant beast covered in black and red fur. It was almost five meters tall, and... it was a monster that Kang-Woo knew a lot about.

"Why is a Hellhound here?"

The monster that had emerged from the bushes was a demonic beast that inhabited the First Hell.