

M. in Hell 51

Chapter 51 - Your Honor, I'm Innocent (2)

"Hng... Kang-Woo?" the black-haired little girl called out Oh Kang-Woo's name as she woke up and rubbed her eyes.

"Echidna?" Oh Kang-Woo looked at her, feeling perplexed.

The naked little girl looked around.

"Hmm?" She looked down at her own body while tilting her head in confusion.

Echidna couldn't understand why she had turned into a human.

"Were you always able to take a human form?" Kang-Woo asked.

"No... It's the first time this has happened," Echidna answered while moving her hands, seemingly interested in her now human arms.

Kang-Woo didn't know where to look at the girl who was sitting on his torso, so he averted his gaze entirely.

Creak.

Right then, the door opened, and Han Seol-Ah, who had on an apron, entered the room.

She called out, "Kang-Woo~ Breakfast is r—"

"..."

There was a heavy silence.

Seol-Ah's expression hardened upon seeing a naked little girl sitting on Kang-Woo.

Seol-Ah said, "Kang-Woo..."

"It's a misunderstanding," Kang-Woo interjected.

"H-How could you... t-to such... a little girl..."

"I'm innocent," Kang-Woo said in frustration to Seol-Ah, who was trembling from the shock.

He felt that it was truly unfair. How could he have known that Echidna would transform into a human during the night?

'Your honor, I'm innocent.'

Kang-Woo had to spend quite some time explaining to Seol-Ah, who was panicking, about what happened.

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After the situation became less tense, Seol-Ah, Echidna, and Kang-Woo sat together in the living room. Echidna was wearing the clothes that Seol-Ah used to wear as a kid.

"Do you remember anything about what happened?" Kang-Woo asked.

Echidna placed both hands on her chest and tried to remember.

"Last night..." she began.

"Last night?"

"While sleeping with Kang-Woo, I felt something hot flowing into my body."

"..."

"Wh-What?" Seol-Ah stuttered as her eyes darted to Kang-Woo.

Kang-Woo's expression stiffened.

However, Echidna continued, "It was so hot... and strong."

'Echidna,' Kang-Woo thought.

"As it spread throughout my body... I felt like I became one with Kang-Woo."

'Why are you doing this to me?'

"At first, it hurt a little bit... but soon after, it started to feel good."

'What did I do to deserve this? Huh?'

The more Echidna recounted what happened, the angrier Seol-Ah became as she stared at Kang-Woo. It was as if she was looking down at a mangled bug in disgust.

She said, "Kang-Woo... you really—"

"I told you. Nothing happened," Kang-Woo interjected with a sigh. Then he asked Echidna, "You can still return to your dragon form, right?"

Kang-Woo still wasn't sure how strong Echidna was in her original form. Nevertheless, considering that her strength had gone down after becoming smaller, it would be detrimental if she couldn't return to her original form.

"Yeah, I think I can."

After saying that, Echidna transformed her left arm into a dragon's. The sight of a dragon's arm on a little girl's body looked weird, but the important thing was that she could return to her original form.

"That's a relief," Kang-Woo said.

It was great news that Echidna could transform at will. Even as a small dragon, she was still a dragon and bound to draw attention.

'But now that I think about it, isn't this form even more eye-catching?'

Kang-Woo looked at Echidna's unrealistically beautiful appearance as a human. She looked like a living doll. He thought that Echidna's human form was much more attention-grabbing than her dragon form.

'I'll leave the decision to her.'

Regardless, he was planning to respect Echidna's decision as to which form she wanted to stay in.

"Hmm..." Kang-Woo pondered about why Echidna was suddenly able to turn into a human.

The things that she had said crossed his mind.

'Is it because she became my summoned beast?'

Just like how a Familiar made with the Authority of Subordination could use a portion of their master's power, a portion of Kang-Woo's power might have flowed into Echidna.

'Anyway, I guess it doesn't matter as long as she can return to her dragon form.'

Kang-Woo leaned back on the couch. Then Echidna, who was next to him, casually moved over and sat on his lap.

"... What are you doing?" Kang-Woo asked.

"It's the most comfortable here," Echidna replied.

"..."

The soft sensation of her body on his lap stimulated Kang-Woo.

'Doing this with her human form is a bit of a problem.'

He didn't mind it when Echidna was in her dragon form, but when she was in her human form, he felt like he was committing a crime.

Kang-Woo lifted Echidna off of his lap and placed her down beside him.

Echidna looked at him with pleading eyes like those of an abandoned puppy.

"Kang-Woo, you don't like me in my human form?" she asked.

"No, that's not it."

If Kang-Woo were asked which of Echidna's forms he preferred, he would answer that he liked the human form more.

"Then why won't you let me sit on your lap?"

"Urgh. Umm..." Kang-Woo looked at her with a troubled expression.

He wasn't sure how to explain to her what he was feeling.

"L-Let's have breakfast first!" Seol-Ah interrupted them.

"That sounds great," Kang-Woo said in relief.

Seol-Ah proposed just in time that they should have breakfast, allowing Kang-Woo to dodge Echidna's question and head over to the dining table. Echidna pouted as she watched him walk away.

"Hmm... We should buy some clothes today," Seol-Ah said.

"Clothes?" Kang-Woo asked.

"Yes. The clothes I used to wear are all worn out, and they don't really fit Echidna."

"Oh, I see."

Kang-Woo looked at the clothes Echidna was wearing, and it was true that Seol-Ah's clothes didn't fit her.

'Especially around the chest area.'

Kang-Woo coughed and shifted his gaze to Seol-Ah. "Where are you gonna go?"

"There's a large department store not so far from here, so I was thinking of heading there. Would you like to come with us, Kang-Woo?"

"No. There are some things I have to take care of, so today won't work for me. I'll leave Echidna to you, Seol-Ah."

"You're not coming, Kang-Woo?" Echidna grabbed his clothes with a sad expression.

Kang-Woo patted her head gently. "Stay with Seol-Ah today. I'll be back by dinner."

"Okay..." Echidna nodded while biting her lips a bit.

'She'll need some ID to go around as a human,' Kang-Woo thought as he looked down at Echidna.

In the modern world, not having any form of identification was extremely bothersome. So, Kang-Woo was thinking of meeting with Cha Yeon-Joo and asking her to make a form of identification for Echidna.

'Great. I was already planning on going to see her anyway.'

Kang-woo had another reason for meeting Yeon-Joo...

'I'm going to ask for a regular S-rank Gate access permit.'

He couldn't use his temporary Gate access permit anymore, so he was planning to ask Yeon-Joo for a permit that would let him enter whenever he wanted.

'An S-rank Gate...'

Initially, Kang-Woo had no intentions of moving on to an S-rank Gate so soon. He had been planning to gain more experience points in B-rank and A-rank Gates and achieve his Sixth Awakening before challenging the S-rank Gate. However, his plans changed after getting Echidna as his summoned beast.

Kang-Woo looked at Echidna, who was eating with a sad expression.

'If I'm with Echidna, I'm sure I'll be able to hunt in an S-rank Gate.'

Echidna was a hatchling, but she was still a dragon. She would probably be more than able to handle one or two S-rank monsters.

Kang-Woo could hunt in an S-rank Gate alone, but the problem was what if something unexpected were to occur. He had no problems handling one or two S-rank monsters, but not even he would be able to handle more than that simultaneously. Echidna would be reliable support in unexpected situations like that.

"I could give you a ride to the department store though," Kang-Woo expressed.

"Thanks! That would be great, Kang-Woo," Seol-Ah replied.

After breakfast, Kang-Woo sent a message to Yeon-Joo and told her that he would be visiting her. Then he gave Echidna and Seol-Ah a ride to the department store.

"Muhhhh..." Echidna uttered.

"Don't make that face. We'll see each other again tonight," Kang-Woo said.

Echidna grabbed his clothes and trembled, not wanting to be separated from him.

After calming Echidna down, Kang-Woo drove to the Red Rose Guild building.

Beep. Kang-Woo entered the building with the pass that Yeon-Joo had given him and headed to her office.

Knock, knock.

"It's me," Kang-Woo said.

"Oh, come in," Yeon-Joo responded.

After opening the door, he found himself standing before a spacious office.

"So, what brings you here today?" Yeon-Joo asked.

"There are a few favors I want to ask of you," Kang-Woo answered.

Then he told her what had happened in the S-rank Gate.

"People from another world appeared...?"

"Yes. They were apparently from the Continent of Aernor."

"Sigh..." Yeon-Joo frowned.

She couldn't believe what she was hearing.

Kang-Woo asked Yeon-Joo, who had been rendered speechless, "Do you know anything about the Gaia System?"

"No. This is the first time I've heard of something like that."

"Hmm... I see."

"And this summoned beast of yours came from this Continent of Aernor?"

"Yeah."

"Can... I see her?"

"She didn't come with me today. I'll introduce you to her next time, but you shouldn't expect much information from her."

After Echidna's father disappeared, she'd spent all of her time alone in her lair. She probably didn't know much about Aernor's state of affairs.

"First, I'd like you to make an ID card for Echidna."

"Huh? You want me to make an ID card for your summoned beast?"

Yeon-Joo looked at Kang-Woo like he was saying nonsense. Then Kang-Woo gave her more details about Echidna to explain why a form of identification was necessary.

"Huu... Of course, you would summon a dragon... Just what the hell are you?" Yeon-Joo remarked.

"Isn't it a bit late to ask me that?"

"Ngh." Yeon-Joo looked at him, feeling displeased.

"You can make one for her, right?"

"Sigh... Fine, whatever. Send me her photo later."

"Thanks. And one more thing."

"What now?" Yeon-Joo looked at him exhaustedly because of how thoroughly Kang-Woo was using her.

"I want a regular S-Rank access p—"

Knock, knock.

Kang-Woo was interrupted by someone knocking. He and Yeon-Joo shifted their gazes to the door.

"I've come to discuss something with you," said the person at the door.

The door creaked open, and a tall woman with silver hair tied up into a ponytail entered Yeon-Joo's office.

"Baek Hwa-Yeon?" Kang-Woo mumbled the woman's name, which was ingrained in his memories.

Chapter 52 - S-rank Gate Hunt (1)

The 3rd Squadron of Hwarang...

Unlike the 1st and 2nd Squadrons, which were respectively guarding the S-Rank Gates in Suwon and Pohang, they were in charge of investigating crimes committed by Players.

'I believe she was the captain of the 3rd Squadron.'

Oh Kang-Woo stared at Baek Hwa-Yeon, who had bright silver hair.

It was weird for an Asian to have silver hair, but because of her beauty, it didn't feel weird.

'She's probably strong.'

He looked at her with his eyes narrowed.

At first glance, she looked really frail, but there was no way that was actually the case.

He could feel a sense of dignity from her expressions and how she acted.

She looked like one of those people who wouldn't break.

He wasn't sure exactly how strong she was, but he felt that she was probably among the strongest.

"Hmm, I see you already have a guest. I apologize for the interruption. Is he the person you're supporting?" Hwa-Yeon asked while looking at Kang-Woo.

"He is," said Cha Yeon-Joo.

"Is he part of the Red Rose Guild?"

"No. He isn't part of our guild. Hmm... It's more like an alliance."

"Oh? To think you'd give such huge support to a Player who isn't part of your guild. That's surprising."

"He's worth it."

Hwa-Yeon looked at Kang-Woo with interest and extended a hand toward him.

"Nice to meet you. I'm the captain of Hwarang's 3rd Squadron, Baek Hwa-Yeon."

"I'm Oh Kang-Woo."

"Oh Kang-Woo...?"

After hearing his name, Hwa-Yeon narrowed her eyes and searched through her memory.

"Oh! You're the young man I met at the C-rank Gate that time!"

It seemed she finally remembered having seen Kang-Woo previously. She grabbed his hands while her eyes shone.

Yeon-Joo tilted her head.

"Have you two met before?"

"Yes. He was a very polite and just young man. Haha. Cha Yeon-Joo, you have a good eye for people."

"... What?"

After hearing what Hwa-Yeon said, Yeon-Joo looked at Kang-Woo unpleasantly.

Kang-Woo, a polite and just young man? That was nonsense.

There weren't many people in the world whom those words couldn't be further from than him.

'What the hell did he do?'

Yeon-Joo looked at him with suspicious eyes.

Kang-Woo scratched the back of his head while making a silly smile.

"Haha. You flatter me. You having such a positive view of me really—"

"Blegh," Yeon-Joo interrupted.

"... What?"

"Nothing, I just felt a bit disgusted."

Yeon-Joo shrugged and turned her head to Hwa-Yeon. "Well, I can't agree with him being polite or just, but he's definitely skilled."

"Hmm, I see."

Hwa-Yeon sat down while nodding.

Yeon-Joo turned her head to Kang-Woo and asked, "So, where were we?"

"Hmm..."

Kang-Woo glanced at Hwa-Yeon.

Yeon-Joo noticed what he was worried about and said, "You don't need to worry about Hwa-Yeon. She has a deep relationship with us."

"Hmm. Well, if you say so. I want a regular S-rank Gate access permit this time."

"... What?"

Yeon-Joo was surprised by the unexpected request. She looked at Kang-Woo with narrowed eyes.

"Don't tell me you're actually planning to hunt in an S-rank Gate?"

"Yeah. Didn't I tell you that I got a summoned beast? It would be dangerous if I were alone, but I'm okay now that I have a summoned beast."

"Wha..."

Yeon-Joo looked at him in disbelief.

He didn't seem to be exaggerating. The Kang-Woo she knew wasn't someone who would recklessly challenge the impossible.

If he said he could hunt, it was because he could do it.

"... You know what monsters appear in Suwon's S-rank Gate, right?"

"Giant Ogres, Mountain Giants, Wyverns, and..."

"El Cuero."

Yeon-Joo mentioned the boss monster of the S-rank Gate.

"Even if you hunt there, don't go near the lake. Understood?"

"I know."

Kang-Woo nodded.

The giant lake that covered half of the S-rank Gate... Surprisingly, there were barely any monsters living inside the giant lake. The reason for that was the monster named El Cuero that Yeon-Joo had just mentioned.

El Cuero was a monster that looked like a stingray, and its size reached thirty meters. Its wide fins were covered in thousands of poisonous needles, and its body radiated high-voltage currents.

Because El Cuero had eaten most of the monsters within the lake, those that couldn't walk out of the water hadn't survived. The only monsters left in the lake were the small fish that El Cuero didn't consider food.

The lake of Suwon's S-rank Gate looked beautiful from the outside, but in reality, it was a place where one single predator had devoured most of the monsters that'd lived within it.

"Huu. Okay, then I'll ask them to convert your temporary access permit into a regular one. You'll be able to enter it as soon as tomorrow."

"Thanks."

Kang-Woo's eyes shone when he heard that he'd be able to enter the Gate the next day.

"W-Wait!" Hwa-Yeon, who had been listening to the conversation between the two, shouted in surprise. "S-rank Gate? What are you talking about? He was in a C-rank Gate up until a few weeks ago..."

"Oh... You see..."

Yeon-Joo sighed.

Just like Hwa-Yeon had said, until a few weeks before, Kang-Woo was a Player who'd hunted in a C-rank Gate.

But now...

'He's a monster who can even enter S-rank Gates.'

Yeon-Joo looked at Kang-Woo in disbelief.

She knew he was talented, and she thought that maybe he would be able to surpass Baek Kang-Hyun, Korea's strongest Player. However, he had more potential than she'd thought.

His growth rate was unprecedented.

'The only one I can think of is First Lady...'

First Lady, Grace McCubbin.

She was the first person to awaken as a Player and was ranked first in the world.

'No, he's growing even faster than Grace.'

It had been only a month since Kang-Woo had awakened as a Player, yet he had already become as strong as a national ranker.

Even though First Lady had grown fast, she hadn't grown as fast as Kang-Woo.

'How much of a monster will he become in the future?'

Yeon-Joo looked at him, half excited and half worried.

"Well, things happened, but you can believe me when I say you can trust this guy's skills."

"Hmm. Even so, an S-rank Gate is..."

Hwa-Yeon looked at Kang-Woo in disbelief.

An S-rank Gate was a place where even national rankers were wary about hunting in alone.

Of course, El Cuero was the biggest reason why people avoided going to Suwan's S-rank Gate, but the normal monsters that appeared in it were also quite strong.

'Did he awaken an S-rank Trait on his Third Awakening or something?'

Hwa-Yeon stared at Kang-Woo with her head tilted in confusion.

'No, even if he has an S-rank Trait, it's impossible to go from hunting in a C-rank Gate to an S-rank one in just a few weeks.'

That meant that he may have awakened a Trait with a higher rank than that.

"... It seems you've found an amazing Player," said Hwa-Yeon.

Yeon-Joo smiled bitterly and shrugged. She looked at Hwa-Yeon and said, "Well... I'm not sure if I found him or he found me, but oh well."

"Then I'll be going," Kang-Woo said as he stood up, now that he had finished what he had come here to do.

He had already talked to her about Echidna's ID and an S-rank Gate access permit.

Since he had already solved both things, there was no reason for him to stay any longer.

"They seem to want that too."

Kang-Woo turned around while peeking a glance at Hwa-Yeon.

"Be careful. S-rank Gates are very dangerous places. I went a couple times and almost died once because I had pulled attention from too many monsters."

"I'll keep that in mind," said Kang-Woo. He then walked out of the office.

Clack.

As Kang-Woo walked out of the office, a heavy silence fell.

Yeon-Joo looked at Hwa-Yeon, who sat down where Kang-Woo had been.

"So, why are you here?"

"It's about the Demon Cult."

After hearing the words Demon Cult, Yeon-Joo frowned angrily. Unconcealable bloodlust seeped out of her.

"Have you found them?"

"No, not yet."

"... Fuuu."

Yeon-Joo sighed in disappointment after hearing Hwa-Yeon's answer.

Hwa-Yeon said, "But this time, we can have our hopes up."

"We can?"

"You've heard that one of our agents had successfully infiltrated the Demon Cult, right?"

"Oh, yeah. I've heard."

"Last night, Agent Kang Dong-Hun secretly sent me a message saying that he had managed to secure key video footage, so he would set up a rendezvous point and hand me the footage."

Yeon-Joo's eyes shone when she heard Hwa-Yeon's words.

"Key video footage?"

"Yes."

"Then can't he just send it as a data file? There's no need to meet him and put both parties in danger, is there?"

"Communication devices are highly restricted, so he can't. You also can't send or receive messages from inside the Demon Cult."

"... They're terribly thorough."

"They have to be, considering what they do."

Hwa-Yeon frowned, as if just thinking about it angered her.

The crazy people who kidnapped Players and used them as live sacrifices... Even that was only one of the many things they did.

Hwa-Yeon didn't even know what other secrets they had in store.

Yeon-Joo asked, "Did the agent infiltrate their headquarters?"

"No, just a branch. We don't know where their headquarters is. We aren't even sure if it's in Korea."

"... Are you saying the Demon Cult might be spread throughout the world?"

"Judging by their size, there's a good chance that's the case."

"Wha..."

Yeon-Joo sighed.

"Just what the hell is the Demon Cult...?"

To think that a cult full of lunatics who used living Players as sacrifices was a global organization... She couldn't believe something like that was happening in the twenty-first century.

Hwa-Yeon said, "Nothing is known for sure yet. This is just my guess, so don't be too hasty."

"So, where's the rendezvous point?"

"Suwon."

"Suwon?"

"I'm meeting up with him tomorrow near Hwaseo Station."

There wasn't anyone in Korea who didn't know about Hwaseo Station in Suwon. After all, it was the location of one of Korea's two S-rank Gates.

Hwa-Yeon said, "I'd like to ask for your guild's cooperation. I want to meet him as discreetly as possible, but... just in case something goes wrong, I'd like your guild's help."

"Okay."

Yeon-Joo nodded without hesitation. Things related to the Demon Cult were her current priority.

"I'm coming too."

"... Is it because of that girl?"

"..."

Yeon-Joo frowned at Hwa-Yeon's question.

"Don't talk about Ha-Eun."

"... My apologies. Understood. It will be very reassuring to have you with us."

Hwa-Yeon softly patted Yeon-Joo's shoulder while smiling bitterly.

"That aside, Hwaseo Station, huh...?"

Yeon-Joo thought of Kang-Woo, who had said he would go hunt in an S-rank Gate.

'I'm sure I won't meet him there, right?'

All they had to do was receive the video file from the agent.

There was no way for him to somehow get involved.

Chapter 53 - S-rank Gate Hunt (2)

The next day...

Oh Kang-Woo got up early, ate breakfast, and prepared to go out.

Next to him was Echidna, who was wearing a white one-piece dress with frills.

Kang-Woo asked, "Is this the dress you bought yesterday with Seol-Ah?"

Echidna grabbed the dress's hem and spun. It was a movement Kang-Woo would normally see in manhwa, and looking at Echidna, who resembled a doll, he felt as if he was inside one.

"Does it look good on me, Kang-Woo?" Echidna looked up at him expectantly.

Kang-Woo smiled and patted her head. "Yeah. You look amazing."

"Hehe."

It seemed Echidna was happy to hear Kang-Woo's praise. She lightly clenched her fists and skipped.

She pranced toward Han Seol-Ah and bowed her head.

"Thanks. Kang-Woo liked it, just like you said."

"Fufu. You would've looked amazing in anything since you're so pretty, Echidna." Seol-Ah patted Echidna's head while making a kind smile.

Kang-Woo turned toward the entrance door. "Then I'll go hunt with Echidna."

"Okay, Kang-Woo."

Seol-Ah seemed to be envious when she heard that he was going to hunt with Echidna, but she smiled bitterly and nodded.

She knew that she was still far too weak to hunt with him.

"Have a safe trip, Kang-Woo."

"You're going hunting today too, right, Seol-Ah?"

"Yes. I'm going again with Si-Hun, Tae-Soo, and Eun-Bi."

"If you see a monster you've never seen before, don't fight it. Just run away."

"I understand."

"I'll go with you to check up on you guys sometime soon."

"You will?"

"Yup."

Seol-Ah seemed surprised.

Kang-Woo slowly nodded.

'I think it's about time I help them power level.'

They had probably gained a lot of battle experience, so it was necessary to help them level up to speed up their growth.

"Hehe. Then I'll be waiting for that day," said Seol-Ah. She seemed happy just to hear that Kang-Woo would be joining them soon.

Leaving behind the happy Seol-Ah, Kang-Woo drove to the S-rank Gate.

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"Right, then, let's begin," Kang-Woo said.

After driving to the S-rank Gate, Kang-Woo easily entered the Gate by using the access permit Cha Yeon-Joo had given him.

'Fewer Hwarang Corps members were at the Gate than last time. I wonder if something happened?'

Normally, the entrance would be completely surrounded by members of the 1st Squadron, but there seemed to be fewer of them today.

'Well, I guess it doesn't matter.'

It wasn't important whether or not something happened to the Hwarang Corps.

Kang-Woo glanced at the faraway lake and said, "Don't go near that lake. A very dangerous monster lives inside it."

"Got it. I'll stay with you, Kang-Woo," Echidna said.

"Okay then, I'll lure the monsters here and you support me with magic. Don't transform into your original form."

Echidna would obviously be far more powerful in her original form, but that form was just too big. There was a high chance that they would attract the attention of too many monsters.

"Okay."

Echidna nodded, her eyes full of enthusiasm.

Kang-Woo used the Authority of the Beholder to search for monsters around them.

'A Giant Ogre, huh?'

He sensed a giant five meters tall roaming around.

The Giant Ogre was the most common monster that appeared in the Suwon S-rank Gate. Because it gave a lot of experience, it was a popular monster to hunt.

'Let's try hunting one at a time first.'

Kang-Woo used the Authority of Temptation to lure one Giant Ogre to them.

Stomp! Stomp! Stomp!

"Echidna, get ready."

"Okay."

The floor rumbled as if there was an earthquake.

Kang-Woo lowered his body after seeing the Giant Ogre approach.

"Graaaahhhhh!!" the Giant Ogre roared.

Kang-Woo was momentarily overwhelmed when he saw a five-meter-tall giant roaring and running toward him.

'Authority of Titanic Might.'

Kang-Woo concluded that, without using an Authority, he wouldn't be able to beat a Giant Ogre, so he used the Authority of Titanic Might and clashed against it.

Boom!

As Kang-Woo and the Giant Ogre collided, the surrounding terrain was upturned, and a loud sound rang out.

"Urghhhh." A short exclamation escaped Kang-Woo's mouth.

'As expected from an S-rank monster.'

Even with the Authority of Titanic Might, the monster's strength was hard to bear.

'But...'

Kang-Woo's eyes shone.

While maintaining the Authority of Titanic Might, Kang-Woo quickly ran up the Giant Ogre's arm and reached its shoulder.

'... It's nothing I can't defeat.'

Crack!!

"KRAARR!!"

A spear made of demonic energy pierced the Giant Ogre's neck.

Kang-Woo actually wanted to use the Authority of Blades on top of the Authority of Dark Spears to tear apart the Giant Ogre from the inside out.

'But that'll be a bit too difficult.'

If he simultaneously used three different Authorities in his current condition, that would be pushing it.

'I can't go against this thing's raw strength without the Authority of Titanic Might.'

Kang-Woo clenched his spear even harder to prevent the Giant Ogre from shaking him off.

The Giant Ogre was so strong that blood came out of Kang-Woo's hand from clenching the spear too hard.

As Kang-Woo and the Giant Ogre clashed with each other, Echidna aided Kang-Woo with her magic.

"Dark Scythe."

Twelve black scythes appeared in the air and flew toward the Giant Ogre.

Slash! Slash!

"Gaaaaaahhh!!"

The Giant Ogre, which had been trying to shake off Kang-Woo, was stabbed by the twelve scythes. Its eyes turned red, and it flailed even more violently.

"GRRRRR!!"

The Giant Ogre frantically charged toward Echidna, who was attacking it from afar.

"I can't let you do that," Kang-Woo said. He then dismissed the Authority of Dark Spears and concentrated the Authority of Titanic Might onto his right hand.

Crack!

His right hand, powered with the Authority of Titanic Might, penetrated the monster's skull, and Kang-Woo felt something squishy.

'Authority of Electricity.'

Bzzt!!

"Guuuuurrr..."

The Giant Ogre, with its mouth agape, staggered after having its brain directly fried with electricity. A black scythe flew toward the sluggish Giant Ogre's neck.

Boom!

The five-meter-tall Giant Ogre fell to the ground.

Ring.

[You have successfully defeated the S-rank common monster Giant Ogre.]

[Increasing EXP.]

[Your level has risen by 1.]

'I leveled up from just killing one monster.'

Kang-Woo's eyes shone after he read the message window.

Usually, it would require a party of Players at least Level 65 to hunt in an S-rank Gate. Therefore, because Kang-Woo was at Level 40, he'd gained a massive amount of EXP at once.

'Very nice.'

He thought that choosing to go to an S-rank Gate was the correct decision. In an A-rank Gate, he wouldn't have been able to level up after killing a single monster.

"Kang-Woo, are you okay?"

Echidna approached Kang-Woo, who was covered in the Giant Ogre's blood. She looked at him with worried eyes.

He gently patted her head and said, "I'm fine. It's just a scratch."

Kang-Woo had gripped the spear tight so as to not be thrown off the Giant Ogre, so his palm had been slightly cut. Since it was only a tiny scratch from the spear shaft, it wasn't even worth using the Authority of Regeneration.

"I'll treat you." Echidna didn't seem to like that he had been injured even a little, so she began licking the wound.

"..."

A ticklish sensation spread from his hand.

While smiling awkwardly, Kang-Woo looked at Echidna, who was licking his hand.

'That hand has been inside the Giant Ogre's brain.'

Kang-Woo thought it would be better not to tell her that at this moment.

"I'm fine now," Kang-Woo said, pulling his hand out of Echidna's grasp.

Echidna looked at him, a bit disappointed. Looking at his hand, she carefully asked, "Kang-Woo, was I of help?"

"Yeah, you were."

He did not even have to hesitate. She really had been of great help in hunting the Giant Ogre.

Echidna smiled brightly after hearing his answer.

Kang-Woo fell into thought while looking at her.

'For her to be this strong without being in her original form...'

He thought that if she fought using her original body, they would be able to horde-hunt even inside an S-rank Gate.

"I feel like I've become way stronger after connecting with you, Kang-Woo."

Echidna looked at her own body in surprise. She felt that, after spending a night with Kang-Woo, she had become stronger than before.

"Hmm..." Kang-Woo, who still appeared troubled by Echidna's choice of words, gulped. "Let's hunt another one."

"Okay."

After devouring the Giant Ogre with the Authority of Predation, Kang-Woo moved on to find the next target.

"Kiiiekk!!"

"That's..."

At that moment, he noticed a group of Wyverns flying toward them.

Wyverns weren't S-rank monsters, but it was known that one had to be even more careful with them than with Giant Ogres because Wyverns traveled in flights.

'There are more than thirty Wyverns.'

Kang-Woo's expression stiffened when he looked at the group of Wyverns flying toward them.

A group of over thirty Wyverns was powerful enough to take down a Giant Ogre easily.

"Kiiieekk!!!"

The group of Wyverns descended toward Kang-Woo and Echidna at near-supersonic speed.

Kang-Woo dodged the Wyverns' attacks while hugging Echidna.

Scratch.

"Ah..." Echidna screamed.

While they were dodging the attacks, the claws of a Wyvern had caught on Echidna's dress and ripped it.

Echidna's face turned pale.

"A-Aaahhh..."

"Let's run away," Kang-Woo said while looking at the group of Wyverns, but Echidna wasn't in a state where she could hear his words.

She said, "K-Kang-Woo..."

"Hmm?"

"Kang-Woo praised me for this dress..."

Her body trembled while she gripped the torn dress. Then, a terrifying energy erupted from her body as if an explosion had happened.

"Kang-Woo praised me for this dress!"

A blue light covered Echidna, and then a giant dragon that made the Wyverns look like a flock of sparrows appeared.

"Krrr?!"

The Wyverns, which had flown toward them as if pursuing the scent of a delicious treat, stared in surprise at Echidna, who had transformed into a dragon.

[GRRRAAAAHHHH!!]

Echidna's roar rang out.

After hearing the roar of a dragon, the Wyverns tried to turn around and escape.

Crack! Crush!

Echidna massacred the group of Wyverns trying to escape.

The group of Wyverns, which could hunt a Giant Ogre as if the Giant Ogre were a child, died powerlessly under Echidna's claws.

"Wha..."

Kang-Woo laughed in disbelief.

'Isn't she stronger than me?'

Echidna was stronger than he had initially thought.

Chapter 54 - S-rank Gate Hunt (3)

[Graaaahhhh!!!]

Echidna's angry roar spread throughout the S-rank Gate.

Riiing.

[Your summoned beast has defeated the A-rank common monster Wyvern.]

[Your level has risen.]

"Kiiieekk!!"

The screams of Wyverns filled the air as the black scythes, fire, and thorns that Echidna created rained down on them.

Riiing.

[Your summoned beast has defeated the A-rank common monster Wyvern.]

[Your level has risen.]

'Nice job!'

Kang-Woo clenched his fists upon seeing Echidna's great performance.

More Wyvern reinforcements arrived after having sensed their kin in danger, but they were powerless against Echidna, who was currently enraged.

'Yes! Kill them all!'

Kang-Woo smiled as he watched Echidna kill the Wyverns with a strength that exceeded his expectations. Every time she killed a Wyvern, a blue message appeared in front of him, notifying him that his level had risen. Kang-Woo was leveling up at an incredible speed.

"Yeah! This is what a summoned beast is all about!"

Kang-Woo felt like a trophy husband who lived without doing anything.

What about the Buer and the Cerberus? They didn't matter. Echidna was incomparably stronger than those two demonic beasts that he had thought of summoning.

'Although, she does consume a lot of demonic energy.'

Kang-Woo was a bit disappointed as he felt his demonic energy was depleting.

At first, he was surprised to see Echidna annihilate a group of Wyverns. She was so strong that Kang-Woo couldn't believe she had lost against Reynald's party. However, that doubt was quickly explained by the enormous amount of demonic energy that was sucked out of him every time Echidna moved.

'So, she became stronger after receiving my power.'

Kang-Woo finally understood what Echidna had been referring to about having made a connection with him. Just like how a Familiar was connected to its master, his and Echidna's souls were also connected.

'It's a bit different from Kim Si-Hun's case.'

Kim Si-Hun's main source of strength wasn't demonic energy but his unique stat Qi, whereas Echidna's main source of strength was demonic energy. Even though they were both connected to Kang-Woo's soul, he could give more to Echidna than to Kim Si-Hun.

[Grraaaahhhh!!!!]

Crack! Crunch!

'Whatever the case, it isn't a bad thing.'

Kang-Woo's eyes lit up when he saw that Echidna had eliminated most of the Wyverns.

If he had summoned a Buer or a Cerberus, it was likely that neither of them would have become as strong as Echidna even if they had taken in his demonic energy.

'There's a huge gap in their potential, after all.'

It didn't matter how strong an ant became; it was still an ant. Every species had a hard cap on how much strength they could obtain. Of course, it could be said that that law didn't apply in the world of Players, but there was no way it didn't have any influence at all.

'In that sense, Echidna is amazing.'

Echidna displayed so much power that Kang-Woo wondered if she was stronger than him. Based on what he had seen so far, she seemed to possess greater power than he had expected.

'And...'

The fact that Echidna could use his power to become so strong meant that his growth affected Echidna.

'The stronger I get, the stronger Echidna will get too.'

Kang-Woo was getting stronger at a very fast rate, so being able to affect Echidna's growth was a huge plus. It was like wearing clothes that grew with you as you grew.

Riiing.

[Your summoned beast has defeated the A-rank common monster Wyvern.]

[Your level has risen.]

Kang-Woo heard the clear chime of a bell. Then silence fell on his surroundings.

[Huff, huff...]

The destruction was finally over. After massacring the Wyverns, Echidna was panting. She returned to her small size after being covered with a blue light again.

"Sniff..." Echidna teared up while looking at her dress, which had been ripped by a Wyvern's claws.

Kang-Woo patted her head. "It's okay. We can always buy more clothes."

"But..."

"Don't worry. I'm sure anything would look good on you."

Echidna finally stopped crying after Kang-Woo consoled her.

Kang-Woo then continued with a slightly reproachful tone, "But I'd appreciate it if you didn't do something like this again."

"Ngh..."

"I don't like people who can't control their anger and just lose their minds."

Despite what Kang-Woo said, it wasn't simply a matter of whether he liked people who behaved irrationally. The issue was that becoming irrational out of rage was a fatal error that could lead to death.

"I-I'm sorry..." Echidna lowered her head with a sad expression.

Kang-Woo felt bad about scolding her, but this was something that he couldn't just gloss over with laughter.

'If I don't make it clear, she might do it again.'

It was good news that Echidna was strong. Kang-Woo had cheered for her earlier when she returned to her original form and wiped out the group of Wyverns. However, it would be a problem if she thought that what she did was okay because of that. Just because the result was fine didn't mean there wasn't any issue with the process.

"Just don't do it again. Okay?" Kang-Woo said.

"Okay. I won't get angry again." Echidna anxiously nodded because she didn't want Kang-Woo to hate her because of what had just happened.

She desperately lacked affection from others, so Kang-Woo had become an irreplaceable person to her.

Kang-Woo patted her head and replied, "Okay. I'll trust you."

"Yeah. I'll work even harder and become more helpful to you, Kang-Woo."

Echidna clenched her fists and began walking energetically in search of the next target.

At that moment, she stumbled as she stepped forward. "Ah!"

"Are you okay?" Kang-Woo asked hurriedly.

Fortunately, he caught Echidna before she fell to the ground. He noticed that Echidna was breathing heavily, and beads of sweat were streaming down her forehead.

'She overdid herself.'

Echidna was paying the price for using Kang-Woo's power and exerting more power than she originally had.

"I-I'm okay. I still can move a b—"

"That's enough for today. Stay here and rest for a bit."

"But..."

"Stay here and rest," Kang-Woo said firmly.

Echidna flinched a bit, but she then nodded in agreement.

Kang-Woo laid her down on top of a nearby rock and stood up.

"Just lie here," he told Echidna.

"What about you, Kang-Woo?"

"I have to take care of a few things."

After saying that, Kang-Woo walked toward the forest.

"Fuu," Kang-Woo let out a sigh.

He could hear loud steps coming from inside the forest.

"There are around five, I assume," he remarked.

There was no way that the other monsters in the Gate hadn't noticed a twenty-meter-long dragon wreaking havoc.

Kang-Woo began warming up after sensing five Giant Ogres coming his way.

'It isn't going to be easy.'

Kang-Woo felt a bit burdened at the thought of fighting five Giant Ogres without Echidna's help.

"Well, I guess I could push myself a little once in a while."

Leeching from the experience points that his summoned beast gained from hunting was good and all, but Kang-Woo also needed to do things himself from time to time. Just like how a knife needed to be sharpened for it to cut properly, a person needed to keep fighting to maintain their battle sense.

Fwoosh!

The Authority of Hellfire set ablaze both of Kang-Woo's hands. A smile appeared on his face, and strong bloodlust flowed out of him. After being completely covered in demonic energy, Kang-Woo no longer seemed like a human.

Rumble!!!

The predator of predators bared his sharp teeth.

* * *

"I've leveled up quite a lot."

Once he was done hunting, Kang-Woo opened his status window and checked his achievements for the day. His current level was 49. This meant he was about to reach Level 50 and achieve his Sixth Awakening.

Thanks to hunting in an S-rank Gate, his level had risen from 41 to 49 in a single day. His leveling-up speed was completely unprecedented. It was so fast that if he were to tell someone, that person would probably think that he had gone crazy.

'In the first place, there probably isn't any Player who can hunt in an S-rank Gate with a level that's in the forties range.'

It was all thanks to Kang-Woo's absurd stats and abilities that didn't match his level.

'My demonic energy also rose.'

Kang-Woo smiled when he noticed that his demonic energy had increased significantly compared to before. The monsters in this Gate didn't give as much demonic energy as demonic beasts, but Kang-Woo had still managed to accumulate quite a lot because of the monsters' high rank.

"I guess I can call it a day."

Kang-Woo wanted to achieve his Sixth Awakening since it was just around the corner, but he was starting to feel the effects of having pushed himself a bit too hard.

'There's always tomorrow.'

After all, the speed at which he had leveled up today was inconceivable for other Players.

"Echidna, are you feeling okay?"

"I'm still a bit tired, but I'm fine after resting a bit."

After taking a break on the rock, Echidna rejoined Kang-Woo and helped him to hunt, but she seemed far more exhausted than she had let on.

Kang-Woo gently patted her head and said, "Let's call it a day."

"I'm still good to go."

"I'm tired too, so let's end it here."

"Okay... Then let's go home."

Echidna's expression showed that she was relieved. She didn't say it out loud, but it seemed like she had been overexerting herself.

After stroking Echidna's head a bit more, Kang-Woo turned toward the Gate's exit.

"Right. Let's buy you some new clothes on the way home," he said.

Echidna was currently wearing Kang-Woo's outerwear instead of the ripped dress.

She nodded with bright eyes. "I'm okay with anything that you choose for me, Kang-Woo."

"Okay."

Echidna walked beside Kang-Woo while gripping his clothes. As they exited the Gate, they were greeted by the chilly night air.

Kang-Woo searched for clothing stores around the area. However, they were standing by a Gate, so there were no clothing stores nearby.

Kang-Woo walked toward the closest clothing store by using the shortest path that was displayed on the map on his phone. The pair then found themselves in front of a deserted alleyway.

'If we go through here and walk about three hundred meters...'

Kang-Woo looked down at the map while continuing to walk.

"Kang-Woo."

At that moment, Echidna, who was following behind Kang-Woo, pulled on his clothes. He tilted his head as he turned to face her.

Echidna said with a stiff expression, "I smell blood."

Chapter 55 - Confidential Video (1)

"Hurrh! Huff!"

Kang Dong-Hun was breathing heavily. He felt his bloodstained T-shirt stick to his skin as he walked.

'I need to contact the captain...'

Dong-Hun held the memory card tight with a desperate expression. He thought of his captain, who was probably looking for him.

Dong-Hun was thinking of Baek Hwa-Yeon, the beautiful woman with shining silver hair... and the person in charge of the 3rd Squadron of the Hwarang Corps.

"Cough! Cough!" Red blood spewed from Dong-Hu's mouth.

Nevertheless, he wiped off the blood dripping from his mouth with his sleeve and kept moving.

'I need to lose those bastards somehow.'

Dong-Hun bit his lip while fighting against the pain that was turning his mind into a haze. The thoughts about his pursuers made his body feel even heavier.

"Damn it..."

He was gradually losing consciousness and struggled to keep going.

Dong-Hun didn't mind dying, but he couldn't die without giving the video he was holding to Hwa-Yeon. That's how shocking the contents of the video were.

"..."

Dong-Hun stared at the micro SD memory card that was the size of a fingernail. Everything that he had experienced before acquiring this video flashed before his eyes.

'Crazy sons of bitches.'

Dong-Hun frowned as he recalled what he'd seen while infiltrating the Demon Cult. He'd witnessed the cult's members use living people as sacrifices without batting an eye. However, the problem was that the cult didn't consist of one or two lunatics like that. The Demon Cult, which had been believed to be simply a pseudo-religious cult, was far bigger than he had imagined.

After infiltrating the Demon Cult, Dong-Hun acted as if he were crazy too to get more information. In doing so, he managed to record footage of shocking information.

'Everything had gone well until then.'

The Demon Cult strictly restricted communication devices to prevent information from leaking out. Even if someone managed to sneak a device in, they wouldn't be able to use it due to a jamming device installed inside the cult's base. So, for the Hwarang Corps to get the footage that Dong-Hun had recorded, he had to bring the memory card to their headquarters in person.

"Cough! Cough!" Dong-Hun coughed up more blood and fell to the ground.

To get the video outside the cult's base, he had put a fake video on top of the original video, which could only be viewed by using a decoding device that the Hwarang Corps possessed. The fake

video was something that wasn't unusual for an adult male to have, so he had managed to walk out of the base of the Demon Cult with ease and then headed toward the rendezvous point.

'Of all times for the camera to be found...'

However, one of the Demon Cult members had found Dong-Hun's camera, wasting his efforts to make a cover-up. The fake video was pointless since the Demon Cult ended up finding out that he'd made recordings of the events inside their base.

After realizing his plan had failed, Dong-Hun took the memory card and fled. Members of the Demon Cult pursued him, and an intense fight took place. Dong-Hun eventually barely managed to escape and contacted headquarters for assistance, but he could barely run due to having received a fatal injury.

"Haa, haa..."

Presently, Dong-Hun felt his conscience was getting blurry because of his continuous loss of blood. He could instinctively tell that he was getting close to his limit. If he lost consciousness now, the evidence he possessed would be destroyed by his pursuers.

"Captain..."

With what was left of his strength, Dong-Hun crawled along a deserted alleyway.

"I smell blood."

At that moment, he heard the clear voice of a little girl. Dong-Hun's eyes lit up, and he crawled in the direction that the voice came from.

* * *

"Huff! Huff!"

Oh Kang-Woo heard the sound of someone panting come from inside the alleyway. He frowned after realizing the scent of blood was wafting over from that direction.

'What the hell?'

Kang-Woo was very far away from the Gate. There was no reason for there to be such an intense scent of blood around here.

He walked closer to the source of the heavy breathing.

"Ahh, urghh..."

There, Kang-Woo saw a young man in his mid-twenties. He was covered in blood and trembling in pain.

Upon seeing Kang-Woo, the young man crawled over to him.

"Th-This... Please..."

With trembling hands, the young man gave Kang-Woo a memory card. It was a micro SD card that was often used in smartphones.

"Hwar—"

Thud.

The man lost consciousness without being able to finish his sentence.

Kang-Woo was confused by what happened.

"What the hell is this?"

The young man covered in blood had collapsed before Kang-Woo could do anything.

Kang-Woo looked around and walked toward the young man.

'He's dead.'

It seemed like the young man had already been fatally wounded before Kang-Woo got there. The young man ended up losing his life almost immediately after he saw Kang-Woo.

Kang-Woo went through the young man's clothes to try to find out his identity.

"Hmm..."

However, he couldn't find anything on the young man—not a wallet or even a smartphone. There was nothing that he could use to check the young man's identity.

'I wonder if I can check who he is with the Authority of the Beholder.'

Kang-woo used the Authority of the Beholder on the young man. After all, Kang-Woo had been able to see Kim Si-Hun's status window thanks to it, so he thought this should work.

Demonic energy emerged from Kang-Woo and entered the corpse.

[Status Window]

[Player Name: Kang Dong-Hun

Level: 52 (Sixth Awakening)]

'Sixth Awakening?'

The young man, Kang Dong-Hun, was a considerably high-level Player. Furthermore, the highest-ranking Trait he had was ranked A, which wasn't low at all.

'It's clear he didn't come out of the Gate.'

To access an S-rank Gate, a Player had to be at least Level 60 and have achieved their Seventh Awakening.

'I didn't see him inside the Gate either.'

Kang-Woo looked down at the micro SD card that Dong-Hun had left behind.

"I guess this is the only clue I have."

Kang-Woo put the micro SD card inside his phone. There was only one video file stored in it. He pressed play and watched it.

"Th-This is—!"

Kang-Woo's eyes widened upon seeing the contents of the video. There were sounds of wet plapping and a woman moaning, along with scenes of exposed skin filling the screen...

The micro SD card that Kang-Woo had received from the young man, who had been on the verge of dying, contained a video that was for adults only.

'This is porn...'

Kang-Woo was dumbstruck by the situation that had far transcended his imagination. To think that the thing that the young man had given him in his last breath was porn.

'What the hell is going on?'

Kang-Woo grabbed his forehead in confusion. He couldn't even laugh at how bizarre the situation was.

'Why would he give me something like this right before dying?'

It was far too obscene to consider it a memento.

'Maybe I saw it wrong?'

Kang-Woo once again watched the video from start to finish, but there was nothing in the five-minute video except for interacting bodies.

"..."

He looked down at his smartphone screen with his mouth closed. His eyes lit up as he decided he had to see into the truth of the video, and he watched it again from start to finish.

"Hmm..."

Again...

"Hmm."

And again...

"Dayum..."

Kang-Woo watched it non-stop.

"This is..."

The corners of his mouth curled up. He looked at the woman in the video with a smile.

"...Nice."

Ten millennia... It had been ten millennia since Kang-Woo had watched porn.

"Very nice."

Nothing mattered to him at that very moment, not even his dignity. Kang-Woo was so engrossed with the video that he might be pulled into it.

'Amazing.'

Kang-Woo had bright eyes as he watched the video. He could feel himself getting aroused just by watching it.

Echidna tilted her head in wonder and asked while pulling on Kang-Woo's clothes, "What's that, Kang-Woo?"

"A video containing something very important," Kang-Woo said in the most serious tone he had ever used.

"Something very important?"

"Yeah. The mysteries of the human body... or the miracle of life..."

Kang-Woo was describing porn in a glorifying way when suddenly...

Step, step.

"Hey."

A group of black-robed men with a crazed look in their eyes surrounded Kang-Woo and Echidna.

"..."

Kang-Woo put his smartphone into his pocket while staring at the black-robed men. He could sense a thick bloodlust coming from them.

'Who are these guys?'

Kang-Woo frowned.

At that moment, one guy who had half of his face covered in burn scars approached Kang-Woo and Echidna. He looked back and forth between Dong-Hun, who was now a corpse, and Kang-Woo.

The man then said in a low tone, "You've seen the video."

"What?" Kang-Woo looked at him in confusion.

The man in black burst out into laughter. "It's pointless to act dumb. I know you've seen it."

"I mean, I did see it, but..."

"As long as you've seen that video, we cannot let you live."

"What are you talking about?" Kang-Woo looked at him in disbelief.

The man with the burned face snorted. "Hmph. Are you trying to act dumb after seeing all that?"

'The hell?' Kang-Woo thought.

"You have a lot of nerve. Or maybe you're just dumb," the man continued.

'What's with them?'

"In any case, as long as you've seen that video, we cannot let you live," the man said.

'Why are they so obsessed with porn?'

Kang-Woo looked around puzzledly, unable to understand the current situation. The black-robed men took out their weapons and released a chilling bloodlust.

Kang-Woo couldn't understand why these people were so obsessed with the video. Nevertheless, the one thing he knew for sure was that they were trying to take this video away from him.

His gaze turned sharp, and he softly grabbed his phone, which he had put in his pocket.

"I'm sorry, but I can't let you have this," Kang-Woo said.

"Hmph, you've finally revealed your true colors."

The men brandished their weapons at Kang-Woo as if they had known this would happen.

Kang-Woo glared at them with a blazing spirit. 'No matter what happens, I will protect this video. Even if it costs me my life!'

Chapter 56 - Confidential Video (2)

"Kill him!"

The men surrounding Oh Kang-Woo charged toward him simultaneously.

Kang-Woo lowered his body, quickly checked his surroundings, and counted the number of opponents.

'Twelve.'

The black-robed man at the forefront swung down his sword while shouting, "Haap!"

Clang!

"Huh?!" he uttered.

He was pushed back the moment his sword collided with Kang-Woo's blade. The black-robed man looked back and forth between his sword and Kang-Woo's blade in disbelief.

However, he wasn't the only one who got a surprise.

"Haap!"

Someone else swung an ax at Kang-Woo from behind, but he dodged it easily. He used the Authority of Haste and moved at an incredible speed.

'Authority of Invulnerability.'

Kang-Woo dismissed the Authority of Blades and instead concentrated the Authority of Invulnerability on both of his hands. Black energy covered his fists in a form that resembled gauntlets.

With the combination of the Authority of Haste and Invulnerability, Kang-Woo's punches were faster than the speed of light and more powerful than a cannonball. Kang-Woo sent his opponents flying.

Bash!

"Kurgh!"

One of the men who received a punch was flung backward like a pebble.

Crack!

"Argh!"

It was useless if they tried to block the punches with their weapons. Thanks to the Authority of Haste, Kang-Woo could easily twist his body a bit and hit parts of his opponent that they couldn't block.

The black-robed men tumbled to the ground, accompanied by the sound of their bones breaking.

"What the..."

"Where did someone like him come from?"

Three people fell instantly, and none of the black-robed men could hide their surprise.

They were by no means weak. All of them had achieved their Fifth Awakening, and their leader had achieved his Sixth Awakening. It was difficult for Players to raise their levels easily without a high-ranking Attribute, so this meant that these black-robed men were all among the strong.

Moreover, there were twelve of them. Even if their opponent had surpassed the wall of Level 59, which was considered a Player's 'Limit of Effort', there was no way that he should be able to overwhelm them like this.

"D-Don't tell me... He's on his Eighth Awakening?"

"Th-There's no way."

The men couldn't believe what had just happened, so they grabbed their weapons again and charged toward Kang-Woo. Nevertheless, the result was the same as before. No, it was worse.

Crack! Slash!

"AARRGGHH!!"

The men who lost their arms and legs screamed while spewing out blood. They looked as pathetic as moths flying into flames.

Kang-Woo did not need to use refined techniques or complicated mind games against them. He beat them with just overwhelming speed and strength.

The number of people with all of their limbs intact was reduced to half.

"M-Monster..."

Expressions of fear were present on the faces of the black-robed men.

Kang-Woo was overwhelmingly more powerful than them. The beatdown made them lose all morale.

The black-robed man who seemed like the group's leader said with a frown, "All of you, unleash your power."

"B-But sir..."

"We'll all die at this rate anyway!" the group's leader bellowed.

Hearing that, the expressions of the remaining men stiffened.

'What are they trying to do?' Kang-Woo thought while frowning.

His question was answered soon after.

The men chanted in an unknown language, and demonic energy surged from them.

'Demonic energy.'

Kang-Woo's eyes narrowed.

The fact that the men were using demonic energy could only mean one thing.

'They're members of the Demon Cult?'

Now Kang-Woo was even more confused about why they were trying so frantically to get back the pornographic video.

'Was there something I missed?'

Kang-Woo thought about it deeply, replaying the five-minute video in his mind. However, no matter how much he thought about it, there hadn't been anything in the video except for the miracle of life.

"Guuuurrghhh!"

The faces of the men crumpled as they used demonic energy. Their blood vessels protruded excessively, appearing hideous. The eyes of the men turned red, and their skin black. Their muscles bulged so much that it looked like they were going to burst.

"Whoa," Kang-Woo uttered while looking at them with great interest.

'Their bodies are turning into that of demons.'

Up until recently, they had been still been mostly human, so Kang-Woo hadn't noticed anything off about them. However, they were now changing and becoming more like demons.

'But...'

Kang-Woo's eyes narrowed.

'It's subpar at best.'

There was no better word to describe the transformation than 'subpar.'

The moment a human accepted demonic energy, they were bound to change and become mostly a demon. Once that happened, there were two possible outcomes: the first was that the human would turn into a demon while maintaining their original appearance like in Kang-Woo's case, and the other one was that they would turn into a grotesque demon.

Demons constantly craved to fulfill their desires. It might not sound that bad, but it was by no means a simple feat for a human to suppress such desires. Once their desires completely devoured their sense of reason and they got drunk on their overflowing power...

'They turn into a demonic beast rather than a demon.'

Kang-Woo looked coldly at the men who could no longer be called humans. Their rationality had been lost to their desires; they had been completely devoured by demonic energy.

In the context of a martial arts novel, the men would be practitioners who had let the demonic arts completely devour their sense of reason, while Kang-Woo was a master that had perfect control over the demonic arts.

"Tsk. I won't be able to ask them why they're so obsessed with this video anymore," Kang-Woo said, clicking his tongue as he looked at the men.

Even with the Authority of Fear, Kang-Woo wouldn't be able to get any information out of the men because their human minds had been completely devoured.

"GRRRR!"

After the men transformed into giants with black skin and red eyes, they threw their weapons aside and charged toward Kang-Woo.

Echidna stood in their way and declared, "I won't let you lay a hand on Kang-Woo."

Unlike before, she could feel dangerous energy coming from them. Echidna immediately stepped in front of Kang-Woo to protect him.

The demonic beasts flinched a bit upon sensing the overwhelming force that Echidna was emitting.

"Echidna."

"Kang-Woo?"

Echidna looked worryingly at Kang-Woo, who placed his hand on her shoulder and pushed her behind him.

"Kang-Woo, it's dangerous. You could get hurt. I'll take—"

"There are a few things you still don't know about me," Kang-Woo said. He raised one of the corners of his mouth while stepping forward. "There isn't anyone who's a better match against them than me."

To become the lord of all demons, he had battled and devoured countless demons and demonic beasts throughout ten millennia. There probably wasn't anyone in the world who knew how to fight against demonic beasts better than Kang-Woo.

Clack.

Kang-Woo calmly observed their actions as he pulled out a blade of demonic energy from the back of his hand.

The men who had turned into demonic beasts charged toward Kang-Woo. Due to their increased physical strength, the hard concrete floor sank with every single step they took.

"GRRRR!"

Kang-Woo easily dodged their attacks and stabbed one of the demonic beasts. The thirty-centimeter-long demonic energy blade penetrated the demonic beast's chest. If the blade had pierced the chest of a human, they would've died instantly.

'But not if they're a demonic beast.'

Demonic beasts had a regenerative ability that couldn't be compared to that of humans.

Kang-Woo infused more demonic energy into his blade.

Crack!!

The blade stuck in the demonic beast's chest grew and tore the demonic beast apart from the inside out. Dark red blood spewed out like a fountain.

'You need to do at least this much to kill them.'

Kang-Woo looked apathetically at the pieces of flesh on the ground and kept moving.

Slash! Crack!

"GRAARR!!"

Every time Kang-Woo moved, the demonic beasts screamed in agony.

Earlier, they resolved to unleash their trump card, but even after doing so, the flow of the battle didn't change in the slightest. Rather, Kang-Woo's movements became even more aggressive after he concluded that he wouldn't be able to get any information out of them.

"Guh... Aghh..."

The demonic beasts, who had lost all sense of reason, were stricken with fear. Their instincts as demonic beasts were screaming that their opponent was not prey. He wasn't someone that insignificant beings like them could face; he was an absolute being that ruled over them from up high.

"GRAARR!" the demonic beasts screamed as they fled.

Kang-Woo smiled when he saw them scatter to try and escape.

"It's far too late for that," he said.

Then Kang-Woo slowly extended his right hand. Powerful demonic energy surged from him. The demonic energy blade that had come out of the back of his hand burrowed into the ground on its own as if it were a living being.

'Field of Blades.'

Crumble!

Thousands of blades burst up from the ground, breaking through the concrete. They engulfed the fleeing demonic beasts like a massive wave. The demonic beasts were ripped apart, and pieces of their bodies splattered all over the ground.

"Fuu."

After wiping out all the demonic beasts, Kang-Woo caught his breath and took out his smartphone.

"Why did they go so far for something like this?"

He took out his smartphone and replayed the video yet again, but just like before, he could only hear the sound of pounding bodies and the moans of a woman.

"Hmm."

Kang-Woo frowned.

'No matter how you look at it, it's just porn.'

As he was staring at the screen in confusion...

Slam!

"Are you sure this is the place?!"

"Yes! The signal clearly came from here..."

Kang-Woo saw Cha Yeon-Joo and Baek Hwa-Yeon approach him at a frightening speed.

'Cha Yeon-Joo?'

Kang-Woo was surprised by Yeon-Joo's sudden appearance.

"Kang-Woo...?" Yeon-Joo said. Her eyes widened in disbelief when she noticed him. "Wh-Why are you here?"

"That's my line. What are you doing here?" Kang-Woo replied.

"Ah!" Yeon-Joo uttered and quickly shook her head, seeming to have remembered why she had come there. She then asked, "Kang-Woo, have you seen a memory card with a video on it somewhere around here?"

"Are you talking about this?"

Kang-Woo showed her a memory card for a smartphone, and Cha Yeon-Joo's eyes lit up.

"Yes, that's it!"

"But why are you looking for something like this...?"

"It has a very important video stored in it."

"... What?" Kang-Woo said, looking at her with a stunned expression.

Yeon-Joo answered him seriously, "It's something I absolutely need."

"This...?"

Kang-Woo looked at her with a stiff expression, but Yeon-Joo just nodded without hesitation.

"I need to use it right now, so give it here."

"..."

Kang-Woo trembled while looking down at the memory card. He recalled the video that was on it.

'You need to use it right now? To do what... exactly?'

Chapter 57 - Confidential Video (3)

"... Okay," Oh Kang-Woo said.

He had a puzzled expression as he gave Cha Yeon-Joo the memory card.

'It seems like there's definitely something hidden in the video.'

No matter how much he thought about it, Yeon-Joo wouldn't be saying all this over a porn video.

After receiving the memory card, she seemed to think of something.

She said slowly, "Now that it's come to this, we should watch it together. You'll have to know about it sooner or later anyway."

'No, I already know about that kind of stuff,' Kang-Woo thought.

He became sure that there was something hidden in the video, but he couldn't help but feel weird about it.

"Hwa-Yeon, how is your agent?" Yeon-Joo asked.

"He's dead," Baek Hwa-Yeon answered with a grim expression after searching through the corpses.

She approached Kang-Woo and spoke in a low voice, "Could I... ask you what happened here?"

"I'm not sure what's going on either," Kang-Woo said.

He sighed and told her what had happened starting from the moment he met the young man who had given him the memory card.

"They attacked you the moment you received the memory card?"

"Yes."

"... I guess you really were just caught up in it by coincidence."

Hwa-Yeon swept her disheveled silver hair up as if she had a headache.

"That aside, I'd also like to know. What is going on?" Kang-Woo asked.

"I'll explain everything after we watch the video," Hwa-Yeon remarked.

"Oh, right. About that vi—"

Before Kang-Woo could finish the sentence, a moan rang throughout the alley. Yeon-Joo had placed the memory card in her phone and pressed play just a moment ago.

"Wh-What the...?" Yeon-Joo said with her face looking as red as her hair.

Hwa-Yeon approached her and carefully examined the video.

"It's a fake video. We cannot look at the real content in the video without the video decryption device that we have at headquarters," Hwa-Yeon said.

"But why use a video like this as a fake?!" Yeon-Joo shouted.

Hwa-Yeon calmly answered, "Isn't it a good fake because it's this kind of video? We recommend our agents use adult videos. Agent Kang Dong-Hun just did as he had learned."

"N-No, wait. That means..." Yeon-Joo said, turning her head toward Kang-Woo. "Y-You saw this video earlier, didn't you?"

"Yeah," Kang-Woo replied.

"Then why didn't you tell me?!"

"You said you needed to use it right now..."

"Use for what?!" Yeon-Joo let out another shout while blushing even more.

After realizing the truth about the video, Kang-Woo smirked and remarked, "I happened to be curious about that myself."

"Y-You damn..."

Yeon-Joo trembled in humiliation. However, she couldn't say anything because she was the one who had taken the memory card from him as fast as she could.

"So, what's going on? What's so important about that video?"

"Sigh..."

Yeon-Joo was about to say something else, but she sighed and explained the situation to Kang-Woo, clearing up his confusion.

"So, you had arranged to meet up with an agent who had infiltrated the Demon Cult, but it went wrong?"

"Yeah. After we received his SOS signal, we looked all over for him, but we couldn't find him. This was the place of the last signal."

"Hmm. That means there's information about the Demon Cult in that memory card."

Kang-Woo finally understood why those men had suddenly tried to kill him and why Yeon-Joo had said that there was important information in that video.

'So, that's why there weren't many members of the Hwarang Corps guarding the Gate today.'

The rendezvous point was near Hwaseo Station where the 1st Squadron had been stationed, there was a high chance that they had been dispatched as reinforcements.

"Yeah. S-So, it wasn't about porn! Understood?!" Yeon-Joo shouted while grabbing Kang-Woo's collar.

It seemed like she was still embarrassed.

"Okay, I get it. Calm down," Kang-Woo replied.

Echidna approached Yeon-Joo and pulled her away from Kang-Woo.

"Don't treat Kang-Woo like that," Echidna said.

She looked warily at Yeon-Joo while hugging Kang-Woo's waist.

Yeon-Joo asked, "This kid is...?"

"She's the summoned beast I told you about before," Kang-Woo answered.

"Oh, she's the dragon?"

Yeon-Joo scanned Echidna with great interest. She only looked like a little girl who was as pretty as a doll rather than a dragon.

"Are you sure she's your summoned beast? You didn't do anything weird to her, did you?" Yeon-Joo questioned.

"What kind of human garbage do you think I am?"

"Ah... Well, I guess you wouldn't go that far," Yeon-Joo commented with a nod. "You're a different kind of human garbage, after all."

"... Is that a compliment or an insult?" Kang-Woo while looking at her in disbelief.

Echidna glared at Yeon-Joo and demanded, "Take that back."

"Guh..."

"Kang-Woo isn't garbage. He's very important to me."

"U-Uhhh..."

"If you don't take that back, I won't stand for it," Echidna said while letting out demonic energy.

After hearing the words that the doll-like girl said, Yeon-Joo seemed troubled and scratched the back of her head.

She yielded and replied, "Fine. I'll take it back."

"Good."

Echidna stopped exuding demonic energy and buried her head into Kang-Woo. Kang-Woo patted Echidna, who was rubbing her cheeks against him.

Yeon-Joo stared at the absurd scene and forced a laugh.

"What sort of trick did you pull?" she asked.

"Something called popularity and thoughtfulness," Kang-Woo answered.

"Bullshit," Yeon-Joo said, feeling fed up.

Then Hwa-Yeon, who had been cleaning up the surroundings, approached Yeon-Joo and Kang-Woo.

She said, "Let's go to the headquarters right away. It's the only place we can decrypt this video."

"Okay. Kang-Woo, you're coming too, right?" Yeon-Joo asked.

"Well, since things have turned out like this, it would be weird for me not to," Kang-Woo replied.

He shrugged and followed Hwa-Yeon and Yeon-Joo.

* * *

The Hwarang Corps' headquarters wasn't that far from that alleyway where they had been just before. The building that Hwa-Yeon led Yeon-Joo and Kang-Woo to looked rather plain, unlike the imposing Player Management Office.

"Captain Baek Hwa-Yeon!"

As Hwa-Yeon entered the building, members of the Hwarang Corps came running to greet her.

She nodded with a grim expression on her face and said, "Agent Kang Dong-Hun is dead. I'll contact his family, so prepare their compensation."

"Ah..."

"He's a national hero. Take care of his family with respect."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Hwa-Yeon looked around and asked, "Where is Captain Jang Hyun-Jae?"

"He's been dispatched to Japan for the SS-rank Gate investigation."

"Hmm..."

Jang Hyun-Jae was Hwa-Yeon's superior, the captain of the 1st Squadron as well as the highest authority in the Hwarang Corps. There was no Player stronger than him in Korea aside from Baek Kang-Hyun.

'If only the captain were here...'

Hwa-Yeon sighed. She thought that if Hyun-Jae had been here, Agent Kang Dong-Hun might not have died on duty.

"I'm going to the investigation room. Bring in the video decryption device," she said.

"Yes, ma'am!"

Hwa-Yeon went to the investigation room with Kang-Woo and Yeon-Joo.

After they put the video on the memory card through the decryption device, they played the original video. It displayed a room with a dark background. The first person they saw was an unidentifiable person wearing a red demon mask.

'A red demon mask.'

Kang-Woo's eyes lit up. He remembered what Jo Deok-Hyun had told him.

'He may be the one evangelizing people into the Demon Cult.'

Kang-Woo kept watching the video attentively.

[Your Eminence.]

[Speak.]

A man had entered the dark room and kneeled before the first man who, from the way he was addressed, seemed to be a cardinal.

The kneeling man had a geometrical tattoo on his face. He respectfully bowed his head at the feet of the mask-wearing cardinal.

Then he said with a trembling voice, [The preparations for the summoning are almost ready.]

[How long will it take?]

[Four weeks... Three if we're lucky.]

[Three weeks...] the red-masked man muttered and then nodded, seemingly with satisfaction.

[Faster than I'd expected. Did you receive support?]

[Yes. As expected from a major guild, the sacrifices that they offered us were Players with B-rank Traits or higher.]

[Good.]

[Hehehe. Soon, our dreams will come true.]

[We have only taken the first step. We still have long before we achieve our true goal.]

[But if we manage to succeed, the cult may provide us with greater supp—]

[Enough,] the red-masked man said, interrupting the other man.

A terrifying gaze peered through the red mask at the kneeling man.

The red-masked man continued, [Spare your words until the summoning preparations are complete.]

[Yes, your Eminence!] replied the man with his head on the floor.

The video ended there.

"..."

There was a heavy silence in the room. Hwa-Yeon and Yeon-Joo stared stiffly at the projection screen where the video had been playing.

"Hmm," Kang-Woo murmured with a frown.

He organized the information he'd gathered from the video in his mind.

'Cardinal, summoning, and a major guild.'

There were three key pieces of information in the video. The first was that since the man in the red mask was a cardinal, there had to be people ranked above him in the cult. The second was that they were making preparations to summon something to Earth. The third was that a major guild was supporting the cult.

"The only move we can take at the moment is to investigate this major guild, I guess," Kang-Woo concluded.

"Huh?" Hwa-Yeon uttered while looking at Kang-Woo in surprise. She asked, "What makes you say that?"

"Now that they've learned of the existence of a spy in their cult, they'll probably do their best to hide as much information about the summoning as possible. We currently have no way to find more information about the cult, so all we can do is to investigate which major guild is supporting them."

"What!" Hwa-Yeon exclaimed in surprise. She was in disbelief that he had made this deduction in such a short time. "Did you work in a field related to this in the past?"

Besides people who worked as a strategist or an analyst, there weren't many capable of making such an analysis so quickly.

"No, he's just... this kind of guy," Yeon-Joo remarked.

She looked at him like she was sick of being shocked. After all, Kang-Woo was someone who had realized her intentions from the first moment she'd approached him.

Acknowledging Kang-Woo's capability, Yeon-Joo asked him, "So, what do you think we should do?"

"Well, there's only one thing we can do now," Kang-Woo said in a low voice. "The Hanul, Red Rose, Onnuri, Mir, and Angel Wings Guilds... Except for your guild, Red Rose, one of the other four guilds is likely connected to the Demon Cult."

"I know that too, but there's no way we can find out which one it is."

The five great guilds were so powerful that not even the government could recklessly lay a finger on them. Investigating them wouldn't be easy.

"There is one way."

"What way...?"

"We need to..."

A smile appeared on Kang-Woo's face.

Chapter 58 - They Took the Bait (1)

"Use bait," Oh Kang-Woo said.

"Bait?"

Cha Yeon-Joo tilted her head.

"What are you talking about?"

"You know that the Demon Cult is looking for Players with high-ranking Traits to sacrifice, don't you?"

The man with the tattoo on his face had clearly said in the video: As expected from a major guild, the sacrifices they had offered us were Players with B-rank Traits or higher.

That meant they were looking for Players with high-ranking Traits to sacrifice.

If this weren't the case, the man wouldn't have praised the fact that the major guild had offered them Players with B-rank traits or higher.

"Yeah, I do."

Yeon-Joo nodded with a heavy expression.

She knew better than anyone that they were looking for Players with high-ranking Traits.

"They're probably targeting low-level Players."

"Low-level Players?"

"To be more precise, low-level Players with high-ranking Traits."

"Ah...!" Yeon-Joo exclaimed while nodding.

Players normally had higher chances of unlocking a high-ranking Trait the higher their level was. However, high-level Players were often in a party or had connections to guilds.

For the Demon Cultists who needed to be discreet, it was far too risky to aim to sacrifice high-level Players.

"I agree. Recently, both the number of Chaos Players around low-ranking Gates and the number of kidnapping incidents have skyrocketed," Baek Hwa-Yeon said with a heavy expression while nodding.

The first time she'd met Kang-Woo was when she was investigating such incidents in low-ranking Gates.

"That's why we're going to spread a rumor that there is an incredibly talented Player hunting in low-ranking Gates," Kang-Woo calmly said. "If we say that their Trait is at least S-rank or higher... the Demon Cult will probably take the bait."

"Hmm..."

Hwa-Yeon gulped after hearing Kang-Woo's words. She said in a worried voice, "But wouldn't the Demon Cultists give up on the Player if the rumor spreads too far and the Player garners too much attention?"

"No. That won't happen."

"... What makes you so sure?" Hwa-Yeon asked while making a confused expression.

"Because the heat is on."

"The heat is on?"

"They've realized that there was a spy among them, meaning they think there's a chance that information about the summoning has been leaked."

"Then wouldn't they be even more discreet?"

Kang-Woo shook his head at her question.

"They'll probably go for a home run."

"... Go for a home run?"

"Hwa-Yeon, what countermeasures would you place to stop them from hunting for sacrifices?"

"Hmm... If it were me, I'd order all members of the corps to monitor Players with B-rank Traits or higher."

"Yes, that would be the most logical way."

Since they were targeting low-level Players with high-ranking Traits, that was the most logical way to respond to the situation.

"Then, from their point of view, they would need to be very careful before hunting a Player with B-rank Traits or higher since they wouldn't know who's watching from where."

"That's true."

"That's why I'm sure they will aim for prey with an S-rank Trait rather than those with meager B-rank traits."

"..."

His explanation shut Hwa-Yeon's mouth.

Just like he said, if they knew that there was a chance that someone was monitoring the B-rank Players, rather than aiming for someone with a meager B-rank Trait, they would most definitely aim for a Player with an S-rank Trait to get a much bigger prize at once.

But...

"Isn't there a chance that they'll delay their plan and safely hunt Players with low-ranking Traits?" Hwa-Yeon asked him with a serious expression.

Kang-Woo smirked at her question.

"No. Maybe they'll hasten it even more, but they most definitely won't delay it."

"... What makes you say that?"

"Because they're human."

"...?"

Hwa-Yeon looked at Kang-Woo while making a confused expression.

Kang-Woo continued in a calm voice, "They said that they would receive more support from the Demon Cult if they succeed in this summoning plan. That's why they won't delay it."

"Isn't that a misjudgment? Would they take such a huge risk for a reward in front of them?"

"Yes."

"What makes you s—"

"Because that's human nature."

"..."

His firm answer made Hwa-Yeon close her mouth.

Kang-Woo smiled after seeing her reaction.

"Have you heard of the marshmallow experiment?"

"... I have."

Hwa-Yeon nodded while making a heavy expression.

The marshmallow experiment taught the simple lesson that one could earn even bigger rewards through self discipline and resisting immediate gratification.

"Do you know why the experiment is so famous?"

"Isn't it because it teaches the most basic principle for success?"

"No. It's only famous because that's not how most people are like."

"..."

Resisting the temptation for immediate gratification sounded simple.

From a third-person point of view, those who failed because they couldn't resist temptation looked stupid and pathetic. Most people, however, would also make that same stupid mistake if faced with such a situation by chance.

They knew that the temptation in front of them was dangerous... They also knew that, by resisting, an even bigger reward awaited them. But even so, humans couldn't resist the sweet marshmallow in front of them.

It wasn't because they were irrational or stupid... It was because the mechanism that controlled one's desires was not designed to look at the bigger picture.

'Of course, it's not like people who can control such desires don't exist.'

Kang-Woo's eyes shone sharply.

Just like Kang-Woo had said, it wasn't that there was no one who could resist such immediate gratification. However, the man in the red mask and the rest of the Demon Cultists at least couldn't.

'Because they've taken in demonic energy.'

A human who took in demonic energy would slowly gain the body of a demon, and those with a demon's body would always crave to fulfill their desires.

It was hard for even Kang-Woo, the lord of the Nine Hells, to control his desires sometimes even after having spent ten millennia as a demon, so he was positive that there was no way that the Demon Cultists could.

"Then, who do you have in mind to use as bait?" Yeon-Joo asked.

"Low-ranking Players with an S-rank Trait or higher are either already receiving tons of attention or have entered a major guild. Don't tell me you're trying to use yourself as bait?"

"No. I'm already known as the rookie receiving the support of the Red Rose Guild, so that won't work."

"Then, are you planning on lying?"

"That would pretty much scream that it's bait, so that'd be impossible."

"..."

Kang-Woo's answer shut Yeon-Joo's mouth. Frowning, she finally opened her mouth.

"Then who?"

"I have someone in mind," Kang-Woo answered while smiling.

A low-level Player whose Trait was higher than S rank... Someone who wasn't part of any major guild... Not only that, but someone who wasn't very well known at the moment.

Kang-Woo knew someone like that.

'Kim Si-Hun.'

Kim Si-Hun had such overwhelming talent that Kang-Woo had made him his Familiar as quickly as possible. Si-Hun was also so talented that he had unlocked not an S but an SSS-rank Trait on his First Awakening.

'They won't be able to resist taking the bait.'

Kang-Woo's eyes shone sharply as he thought about the man in the red mask.

* * *

A week after the spy incident...

After accepting Kang-Woo's proposal, Yeon-Joo and Hwa-Yeon discreetly spread rumors about Si-Hun.

They didn't put him on the news or spread his name through the press; they simply made his name spread like gossip among low-level Players.

'Very impressive,' Kang-Woo thought while checking social media with shining eyes.

There was a post so inaccurate that it could pretty much be considered a myth—it mentioned that there was an incredible Player who was hiding their Trait rank and hunting in low-ranking Gates.

The post didn't grab too much attention but was fun enough to have other people comment on it.

He wasn't sure if it was Yeon-Joo's or Hwa-Yeon's doing, but the dissemination of the rumor was faster than Kang-Woo thought possible.

'Neither of them seemed talented for things like this.'

Hwa-Yeon, who gave off the feel of a by-the-book general, and Yeon-Joo, who had a fiery personality, didn't look talented in manipulating information.

'The one that would be good at things like this is...'

He thought of someone he'd frequently seen in the Red Rose Guild.

A gentle-looking young man—the Red Rose Guild's Chief of Human Resources Management, Park Hyun-Woo.

'Well, I guess it doesn't matter who did it as long as the result is good.'

Kang-Woo put his smartphone back in his pocket.

He lightly stretched and then turned to the window of a semi-basement flat across the road.

Through the window, he saw Si-Hun, who was taking care of a middle-aged woman.

"His household circumstances are worse than Seol-Ah's," Kang-Woo mumbled in a low voice while looking at Si-Hun.

It had been a week since the bait operation had begun.

Kang-Woo had been watching Si-Hun all day every day without ever going back home because he had no idea when the Demon Cult would attack Si-Hun.

'I can't afford to lose Kim Si-Hun.'

He had decided to use him as bait, but he had no intentions of putting him in real danger.

Si-Hun didn't know it, but he was a Familiar whose soul had been bound to Kang-Woo's soul.

Kang-Woo had no intention of sacrificing someone as talented as Si-Hun as bait.

'Since I've turned him into my Familiar, I need to take responsibility for him.'

If Si-Hun discovered the truth, he would most likely call Kang-Woo a hypocrite. In the first place, Kang-Woo wasn't thinking about taking responsibility out of guilt.

'You're going to be great in the future.'

Kang-Woo looked at Si-Hun, who was taking care of a middle-aged woman with a sad expression on his face.

Si-Hun was going to become stronger and greater in the future, and he would become Kang-Woo's solid supporter. In that sense, spreading rumors about him was just accelerating what would eventually happen down the line.

Click.

"I'm off, Mother."

Si-Hun, who had been taking care of his mother, walked out the door to the semi-basement flat.

He had left to hunt with Seol-ah and Tae-Soo in a Gate as usual.

"Haa."

Si-Hun sighed while making a grim expression.

He seemed lost in thought for a while. His eyes were red, but as if trying to improve his mood, he shouted to himself.

"Stay strong! Just a bit more and the debt will be fully paid off!" Si-Hun said while touching the sword at his waist.

Kang-Woo laughed in disbelief.

'He was even born in a poor household.'

It was a common setup in fantasy novels—one who was born into an extremely poor household and became a Player to support his family.

'Is he really the protagonist?' Kang-Woo thought to himself while following Si-Hun from behind.

Chapter 59 - They Took the Bait (2)

After leaving his house, Kim Si-Hun took the subway to Mok-dong.

Mok-dong was the location of the C-rank Gate that Kang-Woo had hunted inside in the past.

'Although it hasn't been long enough to call it the past,' Kang-Woo thought.

It hadn't been a month since Kang-Woo had leveled up while hunting Trolls.

'Come to think of it, I've grown at an explosive rate after encountering the hellhound that day.'

The demonic beast he'd met at the C-rank Gate... After eliminating it, he had begun to receive the support of the Red Rose Guild. Thanks to that, he had grown at an explosive rate.

'But the fact that they came to a C-rank Gate means...'

With great interest, Kang-Woo looked at Si-Hun, who was leaving the Mok-dong station.

Coming to the C-rank Gate meant that Kang Tae-Soo, Han Seol-Ah, and everyone else in the party had reached Level 20 and gotten their Third Awakening.

'They're pretty fast.'

It couldn't be compared to Kang-Woo's speed, but Si-Hun's party was leveling up at an incredible pace.

Kang-Woo smiled in satisfaction. After hiding his presence by using an Authority, he followed Si-Hun.

"Good morning."

"Hey, Si-Hun oppa~!"

"Good to see ya, Si-Hun!"

After leaving the station, Si-Hun was greeted by the other party members.

Unlike the awkward greeting they had exchanged when they had first met each other, they seemed to have become closer.

"... What's wrong with Seol-Ah?" Si-Hun asked Tae-Soo as he approached him. He gazed at Seol-Ah while tilting his head in confusion.

Seol-Ah had her head down with a gloomy air about her, and she was scraping the floor with the ends of her shoe.

Tae-Soo grabbed Si-Hun's shoulder and pulled him away from Seol-Ah, whispering, "I heard that Kang-Woo hyung-nim hadn't come back home for the past week because he was busy."

"Oh..."

A short exclamation came out of Si-Hun's mouth. He nodded as if he'd understood what was going on.

'Seol-Ah likes Kang-Woo, after all.'

It was obvious from her actions unless one was stupid beyond saving.

While taking a break from hunting, she often talked about Kang-Woo and blushed, seemingly having fun talking about him.

'So Kang-Woo hasn't been home for a week...'

He was a high-level Player, so there were many reasons for him to not be at home for a week.

"He hasn't been contacting her?"

"That's not it. They text every day and call from time to time, but he's apparently in a situation he can't get away from."

"Hmm... Then I guess he isn't in a Gate."

It was obvious, but cell signals did not travel through Gates. For making calls through Gates, you needed a special magic tool that used mana stones.

"Nghh... He doesn't tell her where he is even if she asks, apparently," Tae-Soo remarked.

"Haha... No wonder she's so depressed."

Si-Hun looked at Seol-Ah while making an awkward smile.

"Seol-Ah unnie~ don't be so sad. I'm sure Kang-Woo oppa has his reasons."

"Haa. I'm sure he does..."

Seol-Ah sighed with her head down. She mumbled while scraping the floor with the ends of her shoe.

"Has he gotten sick of my food...? Or maybe he's with another woman..."

She wanted to think positively, but as time went on, she became more anxious.

It hadn't been long since she met him, but in that short period of time, her daily life had changed so much that she could no longer think of the time when Kang-Woo was not in her life.

It wasn't just her who was depressed.

Echidna, who had been left alone at home, was in a worse state than her.

"You and Kang-Woo oppa live together, right?" asked Choi Eun-Bi.

"Y-Yeah."

"Hehe. Then maybe he's staying out because he can't hold it back anymore?"

"Hold what back?"

"Kang-Woo oppa is a healthy young man, you know? Living under the same roof with a woman as pretty as you... hehehe. Oppa's Neo Armstrong Cyclone Jet Armstr[1]—"

"Enough."

Si-Hun slightly hit Eun-Bi, who was having fun teasing Seol-Ah, on the head.

While smiling brightly, he turned to Seol-Ah.

"Don't take Eun-Bi's words to heart. Kang-Woo probably has his own reasons. Unlike us, he's a high-level Player."

"Ah, yes. I'm sure he does..."

"The only way we can be together with Kang-Woo is to keep hunting and leveling up."

"Ah..."

Seol-Ah's expression changed. One could see the determination in her eyes. She agreed with Si-Hun's words while nodding.

"Alright then, let's head inside," said Si-Hun. He then entered the C-rank Gate, and Tae-Soo, Seol-Ah, and Eun-Bi followed him.

"Nghh."

Kang-Woo seemed troubled.

'I'm feeling guilty.'

It was an inevitable situation, but seeing Seol-Ah like that made him feel guilty.

'Echidna is probably worse off.'

Seol-Ah aside, Echidna was far too dependent on him.

Because he knew that, he tried to contact her frequently, but the effects of it seemed to be getting weaker as time passed.

'I also want this to be over as soon as possible.'

Kang-Woo sighed while trudging toward the Gate.

It had been a week since he had been able to eat kimchi stew and sleep in a comfortable bed.

Losing something that one used to have was more painful than not having it at all in the first place.

Suppressing his desire to return to the daily life that he had only just barely been able to experience after ten millennia of life in Hell was not easy.

'But I can't just leave the fishing rod unattended after laying the bait.'

Carelessness was a poison with no antidote.

Losing Si-Hun because he had gone to relax would be the stupidest thing he could ever do.

"... Let's go."

Kang-Woo entered the Gate after passing the inspection.

* * *

Stomp!

"GRRRRR!!!"

"Kurgh! They're stupidly strong!" Tae-Soo exclaimed after blocking a Troll's club swing.

"Haap!"

Smash!

As Tae-Soo smashed down his shield, which was the size of his torso, the ground around the Troll's feet caved in.

The Troll that had been fiercely attacking Tae-Soo lost its balance and staggered.

"Seol-Ah!"

"Yes!"

After making sure that the Troll had lost its balance, Si-Hun leaped forward.

At his signal, Seol-Ah used the magic she'd prepared.

"Boost!"

A white light came out of Seol-Ah and entered Si-Hun.

His movements became significantly faster.

Si-Hun crouched down and aggressively stepped forward. His footprint was engraved on the ground with a heavy sound.

Schwing!

'Sleeping Dragon Sword Technique, Second Movement, Flying Dragon Flash.'

The force generated from his step spread from his feet to the rest of his body. Si-Hun used that force to twist his waist and pulled out the Qi from within his body.

Flying Dragon Flash.

Like a dragon crouching inside a lake suddenly soaring to the sky, he cut the Troll with an upward slash.

The sword technique that Si-Hun had received from the soul of the Martial God Tian Taihuang had manifested in the current era.

Slash!

"Gaaaahhh!!!"

From the calf to the armpit... The Troll, whose body had been cut almost in half, fell to the ground while making a grotesque scream. Because of its monstrous life force, even though it had been cut in half, it was floundering so violently that they couldn't get close.

"Lightning Spear!"

No matter how much the Troll floundered, it couldn't do anything against ranged attacks.

Eun-Bi's spear of lightning penetrated the Troll's chest.

"Guuurrrggghhh."

The Troll finally lost consciousness, and black smoke came out of its mouth.

"Fuuu. As expected, C-rank monsters are strong."

"We could comfortably hunt up to five Lizardmen, but I think that more than three Trolls will be dangerous," Tae-Soo said.

His hand seemed to have become numb after blocking the Troll's attacks—he repeatedly opened and closed his fists.

"But it's still amazing that we've leveled up enough to hunt a Troll in less than a month," Si-Hun expressed.

"Hahaha! This is all thanks to you, Si-Hun. Wow... I had a good feeling from the moment we created the party, but I had never thought we'd reach a C-rank Gate in less than a month," Tae-Soo shouted excitedly as if he couldn't believe they had just defeated a Troll.

"If it weren't for everyone, I also wouldn't have been able to reach a C-rank Gate so quickly," Si-Hun said with a smile as he nodded.

"Let's collect the mana stone and keep moving."

"Ah, I heard that the stagnant blood near a Troll's heart can be sold for a high price since it's often used for potions, so let's collect that as well."

After taking the stagnant blood and the mana stone from the Troll's corpse, they moved on in search of the next target.

"Wow."

Kang-Woo's eyes shone after looking at them.

"They've definitely grown.'

The party's movements had significantly improved, and each member clearly knew and fulfilled their role correctly.

'It would've been a bit unbalanced if Seol-Ah only knew how to heal, but that's not the case.'

If a party was too strong, the healer's place would be a bit ambiguous since the members wouldn't receive many injuries due to their strength.

However, Seol-Ah was an all-around support who could both heal and buff. Her place in the party wasn't ambiguous, even if she was in a party strong enough not to be injured.

'I don't think there's even a need for me to carry them.'

Kang-Woo followed the party with a smile on his face.

'That aside....'

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue.

"It should be about time for the Demon Cult to take the bait..."

It had already been a week, and there wasn't much time left until they performed the summoning they had planned. More than enough time had passed for them to no longer hold themselves back and pounce on their prey.

Kang-Woo used the Authority of the Beholder and searched the surroundings of Si-Hun's party.

'Hm?'

Kang-Woo felt the presence of two people approaching Si-Hun's party.

The Mok-dong C-rank Gate was a popular hunting place, so it wouldn't be weird for them to meet another party.

But...

'The two people are approaching them after killing a Troll with just one blow.'

The two people had each killed a Troll in one blow while approaching Si-Hun's party without even collecting the mana stones.

"Well..."

Kang-Woo's eyes shone.

The reward he'd been waiting for over a week was finally getting closer.

"They took the bait."

While licking his lips, Kang-Woo ran to Si-Hun's party, which had just confronted the two people who had been approaching them.

Chapter 60 - They Took the Bait (3)

"Wow~ What a coincidence. I never thought I'd see you here, Si-Hun!"

"Kim Yeong-Hun...?"

Kim Si-Hun's expression stiffened when he saw who had appeared in front of them.

Kim Yeong-Hun... He was the vice guildmaster of one of Korea's five great guilds, the Mir Guild. Not only that, he was also the son of Kim Jae-Hyun, the CEO of Mir Electronics.

In other words, Yeong-Hun was born wealthy.

He had practically been fed with a golden spoon coated in diamonds as a baby. However, the heavens had not given him everything.

Unlike Jae-Hyun, who was among Korea's two most talented Players, Yeong-Hun was only slightly above average.

That weakness, however, was covered by Jae-Hyun's money and influence. The father-son pair had a massive amount of money that could overcome Yeong-Hun's lack of talent.

"Do you know him?"

"Isn't that person the vice guildmaster of the Mir Guild?"

Han Seol-Ah and Kang Tae-Soo each asked a question as they looked back and forth between Si-Hun and Yeong-Hun.

Yeong-Hun bowed slightly and opened his mouth.

"Nice to meet you. My name is Kim Yeong-Hun. Wow, you have such a beautiful lady in your party, Si-Hun."

Yeong-Hun smiled after looking at Seol-Ah.

"... Why are you here?"

Si-Hun glared at Yeong-Hun. He was emitting bloodlust so powerful that one wouldn't believe it was coming from someone as calm-hearted as him.

"Huh? Why else would I be here other than to hunt?"

"Then hunt somewhere else and get out of my sight."

"Hahaha! You shouldn't talk like this to your hyung."

"How dare you?!"

The moment Si-Hun heard Yeong-Hun call him hyung, he started to tremble. He glared at Yeong-Hun and said, "How dare you call yourself my hyung?!"

"Hahaha! True, I guess we aren't normal brothers."

Yeong-Hun laughed as if he found the situation funny.

"After all, unlike me, you have the blood of a commoner running through your veins."

"You son of a bitch!!"

Si-Hun unsheathed his sword while frowning angrily.

The blood of a commoner...

The words he had heard countless times sent a piercing pain through his heart.

"Why? You'd dare rebel against me?"

Yeong-Hun unsheathed a blue sword from his waist. Just a glance was enough to know that it was an excellent sword.

Si-Hun trembled a bit after looking at him. Yeong-Hun was strong. No, to be more precise, all the expensive equipment Yeong-Hun was wearing had made him strong.

"..."

"Haha. Okay, okay. Hmph. There have been some rumors going around about you."

"Rumors?"

Si-Hun looked at him while scowling.

"You've got an incredible Trait, haven't you? I heard that it's at least S-rank."

"...!"

Si-Hun's eyes widened.

"Man, I never thought that you'd awaken as a Player with such a high-ranking Trait at the perfect time."

"... What are you talking about?"

"We just happened to be in need of a sacrifice like you," Kim Yeong-Hun said with a smile as he licked his lips.

"Sacrifice...?"

Si-Hun frowned after hearing that ominous word.

Yeong-Hun looked with great interest at the other party members as well.

"Mm, your other party members seem fairly talented, too. Damn, we've hit the jackpot!"

"..."

"Oh, I won't be using that beautiful lady over there as a sacrifice, though. I can think of much better uses for her."

Yeong-Hun looked at Seol-Ah with lustful eyes.

Seol-Ah felt as if a snake was crawling up her body. She scowled in disgust.

"... What the hell are you planning?" Si-Hun asked.

"Haha. If you follow me like a good little boy, you'll find out even if you don't want to."

"Who would follow a guy like you...?!"

"Well, if you don't want to, feel free. I can always just force you."

Yeong-Hun raised his sword and said to the man next to him, "You, stay put. Si-Hun is my prey."

"Understood," the person standing like a statue next to Yeong-Hun replied shortly while bowing.

"Kuh..."

Si-Hun trembled with anger. He recalled the humiliation that he had suffered at Yeong-Hun's hands.

They were half-brothers, but the lives they'd lived were completely different. Si-Hun was born as the result of an affair, so he'd been bullied by Yeong-Hun since they were little.

One day, Jae-Hyun had become bored of Si-Hun's mother, so he kicked both of them from the house even though his mother was sick at the time.

No one had helped them.

Si-Hun had struggled to survive until now while locking away the boiling rage deep inside him.

'If only I was stronger...'

It was a thought he had harbored more than a thousand times.

After wishing to be stronger for such a long time, he finally got a chance—the soul of the Martial God Tian Taihuang and an SSS-rank Trait.

He could become stronger at a pace that couldn't be compared to other Players.

'But...'

There was despair in Si-Hun's eyes.

Just facing Yeong-Hun was enough to see the overwhelming difference between them. Yeong-Hun had achieved his Sixth Awakening, so there was too much of a difference between their levels. Even Si-Hun's incredible Trait was not enough to overcome the massive difference.

'If only I had more time.'

Maybe if he was at his Fifth Awakening, or even his Fourth at the very least, he would've had a chance.

But it was pointless to think about that now... He was currently just a low-level Player in his Third Awakening.

"Right, then, I guess it's time to teach my conceited little brother a lesson on proper manners!"

Yeong-Hun raised his sword and leaped forward.

He approached Si-Hun at incredible speed and swung his sword with great vigor.

Clang!

"Kurgh!"

It was Tae-Soo who blocked Yeong-Hun's attack.

Tae-Soo bit his lips as the shock traveled through the shield. He opened his mouth to say, "I'm not sure what relationship you have with Si-Hun, but as long as I'm here, you won't be able to lay a hand on him!"

"What's up with this muscle pig?"

Yeong-Hun seemed bothered by the fact that Tae-Soo had blocked his attack, so he glared at him.

"Haap!"

After blocking Yeong-Hun's attack, Tae-Soo used his shield to charge at him. Then, the two-meter-tall Tae-Soo slammed into Yeong-Hun.

Ting!

"Huh...?"

Tae-Soo let out an exclamation in disbelief. As soon as his shield had touched Yeong-Hun's black leather armor, his shield had been pushed away by a powerful repulsive force.

"How dare you butt into our fight?"

Yeong-Hun swung his sword at Tae-Soo, who had interrupted the fight.

"Watch out, Tae-Soo!"

Slam!

"Kurgh!"

With an explosive sound that was hard to believe came from the swing of a sword, Tae-Soo was blown backward.

His shield had been smashed into smithereens and had fallen to the ground.

"Fuck!"

Si-Hun cursed and leaped toward Yeong-Hun.

'Sleeping Dragon Sword Style, Fifth Movement, Storm Dragon Emergence!'

There were more than thirty levels between them, and Si-Hun didn't stand a chance if he didn't use his strongest attack from the beginning. When he was thinking this, Seol-Ah's buff suddenly flowed into his body.

"Boost!"

His body surged with power momentarily.

'With this, I might...!'

With a cold glint in his eyes, Si-Hun swung his sword enveloped in wind at Yeong-Hun.

"Kuh!"

Clang!

Yeong-Hun quickly blocked Si-Hun's attack with his sword.

Because there was too much of a difference between their stats, Yeong-Hun overpowered Si-Hun in every way. Despite that, he couldn't block all Si-Hun's attacks that were enveloped in wind.

Clang, clang, clang!!

"Damn prick..."

Yeong-Hun flushed red in anger while looking at Si-Hun's sword, which bounced off his leather armor.

The fact that he'd been hit despite the difference in their stats was humiliating for him.

"Yeah, that's how you've always been."

Yeong-Hun glared at Si-Hun in displeasure.

Since they were little kids, Si-Hun had been better than him at everything. Whether it was studies or sports, Yeong-Hun had never been able to win against him.

And now, even talent as a Player.

'But...!'

The corners of Yeong-Hun's mouth curled up.

Talent didn't matter. Thanks to his money and influence, he'd obtained the ability to overcome talent.

Yeong-Hun pushed Si-Hun's sword away and kicked him in the chest. His boots burst in a flash of light, flinging Si-Hun helplessly back.

"Kurgh!"

"Hahaha! Yes! This is your limit! This is the difference between you and me!"

"Kuh..."

"No matter how much you struggle or how hard you work, there is a wall that you can't overcome."

Yeong-Hun approached Si-Hun's sprawled figure on the ground and kicked him in the face.

Bash!

"Kurgh!"

Bash! Smash!

"Hahaha! Well, do you feel like coming with me now?!"

Si-Hun's face was covered in blood.

"Lightning Spear!"

"Holy Strike!"

Seol-Ah and Eun-Bi fired magic at Yeong-Hun to protect Si-Hun.

"Raaaahhhh!!"

Even Tae-Soo, who had lost his shield, charged at Yeong-Hun with bare hands.

"Hah, they've all lost their minds..."

Yeong-Hun slightly moved back in annoyance to dodge Seol-Ah and Eun-Bi's magic.

While Yeong-Hun dodged the attacks, Tae-Soo grabbed Si-Hun and fell back, creating some distance between them and Yeong-Hun.

"Ugh... Argh."

"S-Si-Hun!"

Si-Hun used his sword to prop himself back up.

Seol-Ah ran toward him and treated him with healing magic.

"All of you, run away," Si-Hun stated.

"We can't do that!"

"I have to... take care of this on my own."

Si-Hun staggered toward Yeong-Hun.

"Kurgh."

He was enraged by the fact that he had to suffer so much because of Yeong-Hun. He couldn't endure the reality that he didn't have the power to defeat him, and he could no longer stand his own weakness.

At that moment, he heard someone's deep voice.

- Do you need power?

* * *

'So the Mir Guild was the one with connections with the Demon Cult.'

Kang-Woo's eyes shone while he observed Yeong-Hun and Si-Hun's battle.

Yeong-Hun even mentioned a sacrifice, so it was practically guaranteed that the Mir Guild had connections with the Demon Cult.

'But to think Si-Hun was the bastard son of a chaebol household...'

Kang-Woo had thought that the two had looked fairly similar when he had seen a photo of Yeong-Hun, but he had never expected them to be related.

"I guess I should step in soon."

He had made the necessary calls to carry out his plan.

Kang-Woo slowly stood up and was about to step in when...

"Huh?"

A powerful energy began to rage from within the staggering Si-Hun.

'What's happening?'

Si-Hun, who was covered in powerful energy, raised his sword, which he had been using as a cane.

'Don't tell me he powered up because he's in danger.'

Kang-Woo looked at him in disbelief.

While surrounded by the powerful energy, Si-Hun pointed his sword at Yeong-Hun.

"Yes! I need power!"

'What a time to power up.'

"I need the power to kill my enemies and to protect those precious to me!"

'Wow, how can he say lines like that out loud without cringing?'

The powerful energy surged from him like an explosion.

A blue sword energy incomparably more vivid than before gathered on his sword.

Ring.

[Familiar Kim Si-Hun has accepted the power of the Martial God.]

[Familiar Kim Si-Hun has learned new martial arts: Cloud Dragon Sword Technique and Cloud Dragon Steps.]

'Screw it. You just be the protagonist, man.'