

M. in Hell 71

Chapter 71 - Sixth Trait

'Very good.'

Oh Kang-Woo heard a succession of distinct bell chimes, and the corners of his mouth curled up.

He felt that the seal on his Ten Thousand Demon Core had gotten even weaker after he achieved his Sixth Awakening. An explosive amount of demonic energy was now raging inside his body.

'I think I could win against Cha Yeon-Joo now.'

This thought was far too arrogant for a Level 54 Player who had only just gotten his Sixth Awakening to have. Cha Yeon-Joo had surpassed the wall of Level 59, which was considered the Limit of Effort, and had even managed to achieve her Ninth Awakening. She wasn't someone that a Sixth Awakening Player could face, especially considering that a Player got more bonus points the higher they advanced in level.

'But...'

Kang-Woo looked at Yeon-Joo.

He had never gone all out in a fight against her. However, after watching her fight against Kim Jae-Hyun and Oriax, Kang-Woo became sure of one thing—he was already stronger than her.

'Although I still wouldn't be able to completely destroy her.'

Nevertheless, Kang-Woo's growth speed was amazingly fast, especially considering that it hadn't been long since he had returned to Earth.

'The problem is going to be from now on.'

Kang-Woo frowned while looking at his level.

He had to pass the first gateway, which Players called the 'Limit of Effort,' at Level 59. At that level, most Players could only keep accumulating experience points, as it wasn't possible to level up simply by hunting monsters.

'I heard that the way to overcome it varies from person to person.'

Some Players had suddenly achieved enlightenment and unlocked the next level, just like what happened to practitioners in martial arts novels. Others had unlocked it after defeating a very powerful monster, and some others had managed to do it when they had been on the verge of death. Some Players had even managed to unlock it while they had been asleep.

'I heard that talented Players overcome it faster...'

If a Player had high-ranking Traits or was talented enough, it was easier for them to overcome the limitation. That was why people called it the 'Limit of Effort.'

'Well, I won't know until I reach that point.'

Talented Players had a high probability of overcoming the limit, but it did not mean that the process of overcoming it would be an easy one. Yeon-Joo was an example of that. Despite unlocking an S-

rank Trait with her First Awakening, she had been stuck on Level 59 for quite a long time before finally overcoming the Limit of Effort.

'I'll think about it later.'

Kang-Woo looked away.

He wanted to check the new Trait that he had unlocked, but there was something else he needed to do first.

'Authority of Predation.'

Kang-Woo moved back one of his hands. He made sure that no one could see it and then used the Authority of Predation. Black smoke emerged from his hand and covered Oriax's body.

"Huh?!"

"Wh-What the...!"

Goo Hyun-Mo and the other Hwarang Corps members exclaimed in surprise.

Kang-Woo had modified the Authority of Predation so it wouldn't make its signature devouring noise. Because of that, it looked as if the body of the demon was just disappearing into black smoke.

"Do the corpses of demons disappear after dying?" Hyun-Mo wondered while tilting his head.

There were hardly any records about demons, so there was no way for them to confirm the information.

Riiing.

[Demonic Energy has risen by 3.]

'Only 3?'

Kang-Woo frowned.

His stat had risen by far fewer points than he had hoped.

'Is it because my Demonic Energy stat is already way too high?'

His current Demonic Energy stat was at 83. It was a stat high enough to be comparable to the main stat of a Player who had reached Level 80 and achieved their Ninth Awakening.

Considering that a Player's stat became more difficult to increase the higher it got, maybe raising it by 3 points was already incredible.

'Still, as hard as it is to raise, the result is amazing.'

In terms of the absolute amount, the demonic energy he had access to had risen more with this stat increase than in the past when his Demonic Energy stat had risen by 20 points during the Andras Guild's ritual.

'There's nothing to be disappointed about.'

The important thing wasn't the number value by which the Demonic Energy stat had increased but the increase in the amount and quality of his available demonic energy. The Demonic Energy stat had only increased by 3 points, but he could feel a clear difference in power.

Kang-Woo smiled in satisfaction and turned his head to Yoo Tae-Shik, who was restrained by Yeon-Joo's chains.

"Kurgh!" Tae-Shik uttered.

"Hwa-Yeon, is this the man in the red demon mask?" Hyun-Mo asked while playfully poking Tae-Shik's cheeks.

"No, that's his subordinate," Baek Hwa-Yeon answered.

"Ngh. I guess he wouldn't show himself that easily. I just wish we could get rid of crazy guys like this as fast as we can," Hyun-Mo expressed, slapping Tae-Shik in disappointment.

Hyun-Mo might look extremely carefree. However, he was still the captain of Hwarang's 2nd Squadron, so he knew just how dangerous the Demon Cult was.

"First, let's take him to the investigation room and interrogate him. Oh! Our branch office outside of Seoul is less strict on procedures, so we'll be able to interrogate him properly there," Hyun-Mo said with a smile. He looked down at Tae-Shik while wiggling his fingers. "Look forward to it, you piece of crap. I'll show you the seventy-two interrogation techniques I've perfected through the—"

"Cough! Cough!"

"Eh? What's wrong with him? I haven't even started yet."

Tae-Shik suddenly started to vomit black blood.

Kang-Woo quickly approached Tae-Shik and suddenly sensed powerful demonic energy from him.

'This is...'

Kang-Woo's eyes narrowed. He had seen this phenomenon many times before. It was when demonic energy that had been sealed inside a person was released.

Then just like he thought...

"Guuurrgghhh! Cough! Urgh!"

Crack! Crack!

"Wh-What's happening?!"

"Get away from him right now, Captain!"

Hyun-Mo and Hwa-Yeon moved away.

Crunch!

Tae-Shik increased in size, two horns grew out of his forehead, and a set of wings sprouted from his back. However, it didn't seem like he was turning into a demon.

His skin melted down, and his face crumpled horrifyingly. The tattoos covering his face were nowhere to be seen. Each of his arms split in two, and now he had four arms in total. His teeth became sharp and extended all the way down to the base of his jaw.

In the end, Tae-Shik failed to restrain his desires and turned into trash that couldn't become a demon.

"Damn," Kang-Woo uttered with a frown.

Once a human changed into a demonic beast, there was no way to turn them back into a human.

'I guess we won't be able to find out the masked man's identity this time either.'

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue in annoyance.

Considering the personality of the man in the red demon mask, the possibility of Tae-Shik knowing his identity was low. Nevertheless, Kang-Woo was annoyed that they had lost the chance to get other useful information out of Tae-Shik.

"GRAARRGGHH!" Tae-Shik, who had turned into a demonic beast, growled and charged at them.

For Players who could even defeat a demon that belonged to the Seventh Hell, beating up Tae-Shik, who had turned into a demonic beast, was a simple task.

Yeon-Joo waved her hand aggressively, and chains enveloped Tae-Shik's body.

"Damn it! We won't be able to interrogate him!" Yeon-Joo shouted angrily and then pinned Tae-Shik to the wall.

Crack!

"GRAAAARRGGGHHH!"

"Calm down, Yeon-Joo. It isn't like we don't have any clues at all," Hwa-Yeon said.

"...Haaa." Yeon-Joo let out a sigh.

As if she was venting her anger, she slammed him down onto the ground several times.

Yeon-Joo put her hand on her forehead in frustration and concluded, "I guess all that's left is to investigate which guild among the Hanul, Onnuri, and Angel Wings Guilds are with the Demon Cult."

"We'll have to make some preparations too. After what happened today, they won't be able to make any reckless moves," Hwa-Yeon added.

"That's true."

Disappointed, Yeon-Joo looked down at Tae-Shik's corpse. She felt angry and frustrated that she hadn't been able to wipe out the Demon Cult yet.

Hwa-Yeon shifted her attention from Yeon-Joo to Kang-Woo and said, "Oh, right. Kang-Woo, the government will be rewarding you for your service."

"Hmm?" Kang-Woo uttered with bright eyes.

Hwa-Yeon laughed and explained, "You caught the Mir Guild in the act, neutralized Kim Jae-Hyun with no casualties, and aided in the interrogation. You even helped us to get to Pohang as fast as possible. I would lose face if you weren't rewarded for all of this."

Kang-Woo had a huge role in this incident. If it hadn't been for him, they probably wouldn't have even known that a demon had been summoned.

In any case, this was good news to Kang-Woo.

"I hope it's not some useless award certificate," he remarked.

If it were something like that, he would refuse it.

"Hahaha. I'm not that stupid. I will give you the details next time. Give me your number on our way back."

"If possible, I'd like to be rewarded without anyone mentioning me publicly."

"Hmm? Are you the kind of person to avoid fame?"

"I don't like drawing useless attention to myself."

"Hmm. I can reward you unofficially, but you'll have to make do with the inevitable spreading of rumors."

In other words, those with knowledge of this incident would eventually find out Kang-Woo's name. He was going to get more attention than before when he'd just been known as the rookie that the Red Rose Guild was supporting.

"I'll decide after hearing what the reward is," Kang-Woo replied.

There was no need for him to agree immediately. He would accept the reward if he concluded that it was worth drawing attention to himself.

'There's no need to refuse a reward just because I don't want to draw attention to myself.'

It was inevitable that more people would find out about him over time anyway. He was so out of the norm that he was bound to draw attention.

"Haha, you can look forward to it," Hwa-Yeon said confidently.

Kang-Woo's eyes shone. Hwa-Yeon wasn't someone who would exaggerate. If she said something like that, it meant the reward was something that he could truly look forward to.

"Yeon-Joo, your guild will also be rewarded. Thank you for your cooperation," Hwa-Yeon told Yeon-Joo.

"Well... I had a good reason to do it," Yeon-Joo said with a heavy voice. "Let's all go home now. I... want to rest."

They had fought against Jae-Hyun and then a demon right after. It was natural that they were exhausted.

Kang-Woo looked at Yeon-Joo, who had a bitter expression on her face.

'It doesn't seem to be just exhaustion,' he thought.

Yeon-Joo was probably thinking about her guild members who had died at the hands of the Demon Cult.

'She's probably blaming herself.'

They had ultimately failed to uncover the identity of the man in the red demon mask, who could be said to be the cause of everything that had happened. So, Yeon-Joo was probably feeling disappointed and regretful.

As Kang-Woo turned toward the cave's exit, he told her, "You're doing great."

"What..?"

"I'm talking about your revenge."

"..."

"I won't say that you've done enough, but you don't need to blame yourself. You don't need to feel impatient. There will be more chances in the future. All we need to do is to wipe them out when that time comes."

"..."

"Don't worry. I'll help you."

"Hng. You arrogant prick. Who are you to say you'll help me?" Yeon-Joo scoffed and turned away from Kang-Woo.

Despite her rebuke, she seemed more relaxed now. There was a slight smile on her face.

'It would be a problem if you made a mistake out of impatience,' Kang-Woo thought.

Impatience bred mistakes. It would be an issue for Kang-Woo if he were to lose Yeon-Joo because of some stupid error, and it wasn't just because he'd lose the support of the Red Rose Guild.

'I've grown attached to her to an extent.'

While thinking that, Kang-Woo opened his status window.

'Right then, let's check my Sixth Awakening Trait.'

He had been waiting for this. Most Players probably had the same feeling of anticipation when they unlocked a new Trait.

Like a child opening a gift, Kang-Woo carefully checked his status window. He wondered what Trait he'd gotten and how much stronger he would become.

"... What the hell?"

He frowned after checking out the details of his new Trait.

[Sixth Awakening Trait: ??? (Rank: ???)]

[The Trait will unlock fully after the Ultimate Demonic Body has been achieved.]

'More question marks?'

Question marks had first appeared with the Authority of Predation and then the Ultimate Demonic Body. Now, it was happening again with his Sixth Awakening Trait. He was starting to get tired of it.

'For fuck's sake. I don't even know the conditions to achieve the Ultimate Demonic Body. Isn't it unfair for the Trait to only be unlocked after I achieve it?'

Shouldn't they tell him the conditions so that he could actually put effort into fulfilling them?

Kang-Woo was starting to think that someone had created the Traits like this on purpose just to annoy him. No, he was hoping for that to be the case.

'So I can twist their head into a question mark if I ever meet them in the future.'

Kang-Woo frowned while staring at his status window, which was full of question marks.

Chapter 72 - Short Break (1)

A man inside a dark room was looking at a crystal orb. In a low voice, he said, "So it died."

The man, who was wearing a red demon mask, turned his head with an emotionless expression. He placed his eyes on a group of priests wearing black robes.

"Congratulations on the successful summoning."

"The Demon Cult has promised to provide us with additional support."

"We will be able to begin preparations to execute our true plan once we receive more support."

The priests celebrated the success of the demon summoning in unison.

The man in the red demon mask nodded.

"How are they planning to support us?"

"With demonic crystals created from concentrated demonic energy. They will be of help to our plan, and we were also given enough to increase your power, Your Eminence."

"Good," the masked man replied, satisfied. From his voice, one could sense his desire for the power he would receive.

Leaving the result aside, the summoning had been successful. They had fulfilled the conditions given by the Demon Cult, so they would naturally be rewarded accordingly.

'Although I had never imagined for the demon to die just like that.'

The masked man recalled the footage he'd seen through the orb.

He frowned.

From the beginning, what mattered to him was making the summoning a success, but he'd never imagined that the demon would be defeated so easily.

'I was hoping he would at least deal considerable damage to the Hwarang Corps.'

The Hwarang Corps and the major guilds that weren't with the Demon Cult were beings that hindered their plan of taking over Korea. He was hoping that they would suffer considerable losses through this summoning ritual.

However, the result was the total opposite. The demon had suddenly acted strange and ended up dying.

'Why did the demon act that way?'

The man couldn't understand.

The demon had acted all high and mighty in the beginning but had then suddenly become a pathetic coward. It was completely different from the image of demons the man had in his head.

'Is it because of Cha Yeon-Joo?'

Cha Yeon-Joo, the master of the Red Rose Guild, was clearly the strongest Player among those who'd arrived at the cave.

The man shook his head while pondering the matter. He had met Yeon-Joo a couple times. She was indeed very strong, but she wasn't strong enough to make a demon tremble in fear. No, even if she was, demons were very prideful beings. It made no sense for the demon to tremble in fear before even fighting.

'There's something I'm missing.'

He narrowed his eyes. There had to be a reason he wasn't aware of. The problem was that it was impossible to guess the reason just by the footage he had seen through the orb.

'Is it because of the guy who had dealt the final blow with the scythe?'

He recalled the young man who had a sharp look on his face. The masked man had also heard about the young man named Oh Kang-Woo. There had been rumors about Kang-Woo being a very talented rookie whom the Red Rose Guild was supporting.

"Hmm..."

A short exclamation came out of the man's mouth.

Still, a rookie was a rookie. It had been only a month since the Red Rose Guild had begun supporting him, so there was a limit to how strong he could have become.

'I can't tell.'

He couldn't understand why the demon had acted in such a strange way.

'I'll have to check for myself.'

The man's eyes shone sharply.

"There is one other piece of news, Your Eminence."

"Speak."

"The World Rankers have shown signs of taking action."

The man strongly frowned after hearing World Rankers.

He didn't seem angry by the news that they'd started to act but by the words themselves.

"Hmm."

The anger, however, was momentaneous. He leaned back in the chair.

With the dimensional wall having become drastically weaker in the past month, the Demon Cult had become far more active than ever before. It was only natural that the World Rankers would take action against them.

"Has the Cult given any orders regarding them?"

"Nothing in particular."

"Nothing, huh...?"

The man's eyes shone with interest. The fact that the Demon Cult hadn't given any orders in this situation meant one thing.

"We will have to hurry. Stick to the original plan. We will start with El Cuero," the man said, mentioning the name of the boss monster of Suwon's S-rank Gate.

"Yes, Your Eminence!" loudly answered the priests, whose heads were bowed.

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After the demon-summoning incident was resolved, Kang-Woo climbed up on Echidna and flew home. Yeon-Joo and Baek Hwa-Yeon strongly refused to join them.

When he returned home, he saw Han Seol-Ah, who had taken Kim Si-Hun to the hospital. She wasn't alone—Choi Eun-Bi and Kang Tae-Soo were also there. They were sitting down with looks that showed they had many things they wanted to ask.

"I'll tell you all tomorrow when we go visit Si-Hun."

He couldn't hide things from them anymore since they'd also become involved.

The next day, he explained the whole situation in the hospital where Si-Hun was. He told them that he was a Player receiving support from the Red Rose Guild and that there was a mysterious group called the Demon Cult active in Korea. He also told them that Kim Jae-Hyun and Kim Yeong-Hun had been providing the cult with live sacrifices.

"Then... does that mean you've been staking out near me for a week straight after hearing the rumors?"

"Yes. The moment I heard the rumors, I knew it was about you."

"How did such a rumor..."

"Well, the world of Players is small, after all, and your party has many people with attention-grabbing looks. It would be weirder if rumors hadn't spread," Kang-Woo answered calmly.

Obviously, he didn't mention that he had used Si-Hun as bait by spreading those very rumors. He was just ad-libbing the explanation.

'I'm not saying anything wrong.'

The only reason why the rumors had even managed to spread was because Si-Hun's party had most definitely been different from the others. Every single party member was talented and eye-catching enough to warrant such rumors.

"Couldn't you have... told us about it?"

Seol-Ah looked at him with sad eyes. She knew that Kang-Woo was hiding many things about him from her.

'This probably isn't the only thing he's hiding.'

Even now, she was sure that Kang-Woo was still hiding even greater secrets. Even though he was right next to her and they even lived together, she felt that Kang-Woo was so far away from her that she wouldn't be able to reach him no matter how far she reached out her hands.

Bitter emotions filled her heart.

"I'm sorry for making you worry," said Kang-Woo.

"Ah..."

A short exclamation came out of Seol-Ah's mouth. After hearing him apologize without giving any excuses, she felt remorseful.

"N-No. Who am I to say such things to you...? I'm sure you had your reasons."

"But it doesn't change the fact that I made my family worry. I can't promise that things like this won't happen again, but... I'll try my best."

"T-Try?! Th-That's..."

Seol-Ah mumbled, and her face was red. Her heart beat faster, and she felt as though she would smile like an idiot if she didn't force the tips of her mouth down.

The word he'd said—family—filled her head.

"... Thank you very much."

There was a weirdly romantic atmosphere between the two.

"Kang-Woo, peel this for me."

Echidna jumped on top of his lap while pouting. She handed him an orange they'd bought before visiting Si-Hun.

Kang-Woo smirked and grabbed the orange.

"Hyung-nim. What happened to those Demon Cult members?"

"I guess you could say that it's settled for the time being. However, we haven't captured their leader yet."

"Wha... Do they really kidnap Players and sacrifice them?"

"You almost fell victim to them too, don't you remember?"

"Those abominable bastards!"

Tae-Soo stomped angrily. Tae-Soo already looked scary enough, and his frowning made him look like a wraith that popped out of nightmares.

'There's no way you're human,' Kang-Woo resisted saying aloud. "Anyway, take care while hunting from now on. You never know when they'll attack again."

"Understood."

"Also, each of you take one of these."

Kang-Woo gave each person an orb he'd received from Yeon-Joo.

"What's this, Kang-Woo oppa?"

"It's an orb that lets you communicate with others outside the Gates from within. Call me if anything dangerous happens."

"Thank you very much, Kang-Woo."

It seemed that Kang-Woo's thoughtful gesture had moved Si-Hun—he grabbed the orb tightly.

"Kang-Woo, I have a question."

"I will answer as long as it's something I know."

"What happened with Kim Yeong-Hun and Kim Jae-Hyun...?"

"They'll both spend the rest of their lives in prison."

"..."

"There is no need for you to worry. Even if the rich practically rule this country, they won't be able to solve this one with money."

They had kidnapped Players and sold them to a cult as sacrifices. Of course, they could try to destroy the evidence with money, but Kang-Woo wouldn't let them get away with it unscathed.

'If there's a lack of evidence, I can always fabricate it.'

Kang-Woo had the power to do it.

"Also, I heard about your circumstances, albeit unintentionally."

"Ah..."

"Kim Jae-Hyun seems to have forced an enormous amount of debt onto your family. I will make sure that you receive enough compensation. Also, since your mother seems to be unwell, I will take measures so that she can be treated in cutting-edge medical facilities."

"Kang-Woo..."

Si-Hun seemed to be lost for words. He began to tremble, and tears flowed down his cheeks.

"Th-Thank you. Thank you very much. Really... urgh, sniff. You are my benefactor, Kang-Woo."

'Don't say things like that. I'm starting to feel guilty.'

Kang-Woo smiled awkwardly while recalling that he had attacked Si-Hun and forcibly turned him into his Familiar.

"You truly are... a good person, Kang-Woo."

'Seriously, stop.'

"I was lucky to have met you."

'I'm sorry, I was wrong. Now that I think about it, I think turning you into a Familiar was a bit much.'

"Just like Tae-Soo, I would also like to serve you as my hyung-nim."

'Why are you doing this to me?'

Kang-Woo felt as if he was about to be set ablaze because of the guilt. No matter how calculative and brutal he was, he was not devoid of emotions.

'You're making me feel like complete garbage.'

Chapter 73 - Short Break (2)

While putting aside his remorse, Oh Kang-Woo nodded and smiled awkwardly.

"In that case, I'll start speaking to you casually."

"Thank you very much, hyung-nim."

Kim Si-Hun bowed while smiling.

'He's way too handsome.'

Even though they were both men, Si-Hun was handsome enough to make him tremble a bit.

"... Then, I'll also disclose to you all something that I'd kept hidden until now."

Si-Hun told them that he was the Martial God's successor and that he had an SSS-rank Trait.

"A-An SSS-rank Trait?"

"Th-there hasn't been anyone who got a Trait like that in their first Awakening, has there?"

"I knew Si-Hun was no joke either, but..."

Kang-Woo already knew the details, but he acted as if he were surprised.

"H-How did you awaken as the Martial God's successor?!" Tae-Soo asked.

"I'm not sure about the details, but when I awakened as a Player, I got... a different system message than other Players."

"A different system message?"

The other party members looked at Si-Hun. It was also Kang-Woo's first time hearing about the system message, so he looked at him with great interest.

"It said that I had been selected as a 'protector' to supplement the impaired Gaia System."

"Gaia System...?"

"I don't know what it is either, but when I first awakened as a Player, I definitely got a message like that."

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes.

'To think that I'd hear about the Gaia System here.'

Even Cha Yeon-Joo hadn't heard about it before, so he never expected to hear about it from Si-Hun.

"Si-Hun, when is the exact date that you awakened as a Player?"

"I believe it was... May 22nd."

"Oh, isn't that the day we met, Kang-Woo?" Han Seol-Ah mentioned.

"..."

May 22nd. It was the day Kang-Woo had returned to Earth.

'The day I returned to Earth, Si-Hun awakened as a Player.'

It wasn't hard to guess why based on the message that Si-Hun had claimed to have seen.

'Because of the impaired Gaia System.'

The defense mechanism called the Gaia System had been impaired because he had returned to Earth.

'And to supplement that impairment, a protector was chosen.'

It more or less made sense.

Kang-Woo's thoughts continued.

'Then, is Si-Hun the key to restoring the Gaia System?'

It was impossible to know at the moment if the word supplement in the system message meant that Si-Hun would be able to restore the impairment or if he had been chosen to take over the role because the impairment was irreversible.

'Looking at only the contents of the message, it sounds like it'd be the latter.'

Either way, what was sure was that Si-Hun could take over a portion of the system's role.

'I knew I was lucky to have met Si-Hun.'

Kang-Woo's eyes shone. It seemed that Si-Hun was far more important of an entity than Kang-Woo had initially thought.

'Our relationship is also good at this point.'

Thanks to the incident with the Demon Cult, Si-Hun's trust in him had increased. If he kept growing and was able to properly fulfill his role as protector, he would become a much stronger ally than Kang-Woo had initially thought.

'I feel a bit guilty though...'

But after hearing that Si-Hun was the protector chosen by the Gaia System, Kang-Woo thought that he had made the correct decision in making Si-Hun his Familiar.

Because the Gaia System kept weakening, one didn't know what would happen in the future. To stop it from deteriorating, Kang-Woo needed to investigate and prepare thoroughly.

"Th-Then are you some sort of hero that protects Earth?" Tae-Soo asked.

"Haha. It sounds a bit cringey to have someone say it straight to my face. To be honest, I'm not sure either. I did get a better Trait than others in the beginning, but that's also the same for Players like Cha Yeon-Joo or Baek Kang-Hyun."

"But SSS-rank?! I heard that even the First Lady started out with an S-rank Trait, so isn't that super amazing?"

"But I can't unleash the Trait's full power because I haven't been able to accept the entirety of the Martial God's power. I think right now, I'm... about the same as Players who have unlocked S-rank Traits on their First Awakening."

"That doesn't make it any less impressive!"

Tae-Soo patted Si-Hun's shoulders, laughing as if proud of him.

Si-Hun shook his head with a soft smile.

"Even with such talent, I almost lost to Kim Yeong-Hoon. The word impressive doesn't suit me."

"Hehe, true. You are indeed impressive, but Kang-Woo hyung-nim is even more so!" Tae-Soo shouted excitedly.

Kang-Woo smirked and stood up.

"I'll leave the party in your good hands. Call me if there's anything you need."

"I'll do my best to be useful to you, hyung-nim."

One could feel a strong will in Si-Hun's voice.

Kang-Woo nodded with a satisfied expression. Now that everything that had held him down in life had vanished, having gained a new goal of improving himself was a good thing.

"But take a break until your body fully recovers."

"... I understand."

"Since I'll feel bad for disturbing your rest, I'll get going."

Kang-Woo turned around, and Si-Hun looked a bit disappointed.

"Are you... leaving already?"

"Huh? Yeah. I have things to do," Kang-Woo expressed in bewilderment.

It was as if Si-Hun didn't want him to leave.

'What's up with him?'

He felt that their relationship had gone beyond the level of just good.

'Don't tell me...'

Kang-Woo shook his head. He didn't even want to think about it.

Familiars often gained affection for their masters because their souls were bound together—they were instinctively attracted to their masters.

'Please...'

Despair could be seen in Kang-Woo's eyes.

He didn't want to think that was the case with Si-Hun.

Kang-Woo walked out of the room without looking back.

* * *

After paying a visit to the hospital, Kang-Woo became really busy.

Not only did he have to plan measures for the days ahead with Yeon-Joo and Baek Hwa-Yeon, but he also had to check if what he had promised Si-Hun was progressing well.

He then went to see Kim Jae-Hyun in a prison specially made for Players and reconfirmed the information that Jae-Hyun had told them about the Demon Cult.

Kang-Woo made sure Jae-Hyun knew that funny business would not be tolerated since they had Kim Yeong-Hun as a hostage.

Kang-Woo also checked how much his demonic energy stores had increased after achieving his Sixth Awakening and how easily he could use the Authorities available to him.

'This is exhausting.'

Kang-Woo sighed after thinking of the past few days. He almost began hating that he had only one body.

'Too bad I can't use the Authority of Cloning yet.'

The Authority of Cloning was an Authority that let him create another version of himself that shared his consciousness. It required so much demonic energy that he couldn't use it yet despite having achieved his Sixth Awakening.

'I'll still have a mountain of things to do even with another me.'

Kang-Woo sighed and opened his status window.

He had to reach Level 59 to check if he would also have a leveling restriction like other Players, and he also had to find out what the other two conditions to achieving the Ultimate Demonic Body were.

However, he couldn't even attempt these tasks because his schedule was packed beyond belief.

'But it's finally over.'

Because he'd kept himself busy for the past few days, he'd been able to finish most of the urgent matters. Once he finished what he needed to do today, he'd have time to relax.

"Kang-Woo, we've finished packing up for the move."

"What about your mother?"

"She said she still had some stuff to organize, so she told us to go ahead first. She'll be taking a taxi later in the day."

"Hmm."

Kang-Woo nodded.

He looked around the empty sixty-six-square-meter apartment. It was the house he'd lived in with Seol-Ah after returning to Earth.

'She probably needs some time to organize her thoughts.'

He'd barely lived here for two months, but Seol-Ah's mother, Kim Mi-Jeong, had lived there for almost twenty years. It likely wasn't just items alone that she needed to organize

"Then let's go first," Kang-Woo said as he got in the car.

Seol-Ah sat in the passenger seat, and Echidna sat on top of his lap.

"..."

"What's wrong, Kang-Woo?"

Kang-Woo lifted Echidna up without a word and put her in the back seat.

"Kang-Woo has become colder with me."

Echidna lowered her head in sorrow.

Kang-Woo smirked and drove toward Seoul Station.

"... Is this really okay?"

"What is?"

"Y-You're the one who purchased the house. Taking me and my mother to live there with you is..."

"I told you not to worry about it. I don't want to live alone in such a big house."

"B-but still..."

"And it's not like I bought it with my own money. Red Rose prepared it for me."

"Ms. Cha Yeon-Joo?"

"Yup. It was included in my contract conditions."

"Nghh..."

Seol-Ah clenched her fists in frustration.

The house was 165 square meters wide. Not just that, the prices of land near Seoul Station had skyrocketed ever since the Player Management Office and the guild houses of the five great guilds were built there. Hence, this house easily surpassed two billion won.

She felt envious that Yeon-Joo could provide Kang-Woo with such an expensive house as if it were nothing.

'The two of them seem really close...'

Seol-Ah bit her lips anxiously.

'And the house we're moving to is also close to hers.'

Thinking of Kang-Woo being with Yeon-Joo turned her head into jumbles.

Seol-Ah let out a sigh.

The huge gap between her and Yeon-Joo made her shoulders drop.

A heavy silence befell the car.

Echidna opened her mouth and broke the silence.

"Kang-Woo, what are you doing tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow? I'm not sure..."

Unlike the past few days, he really didn't have any plans for tomorrow.

"... Are you super busy tomorrow too?" Echidna asked cautiously.

She seemed to want to play with Kang-Woo but didn't want to burden him. She looked like a kid asking her father, who was swamped with work, if he had any days off.

Kang-Woo smirked, finding Echidna's cautious attitude awfully cute.

'I guess there's no harm in taking a break for one day.'

After he'd returned to Earth, the days he had taken a break were so few that it was embarrassing. Considering that he would probably get even busier soon, it was probably a good idea to take some time off.

"I don't have any work tomorrow."

"Ah! Th-Then..."

"You said last time that you wanted to go somewhere together to play, right? Let's go tomorrow."

"Hm! Hm! I'm okay with anywhere as long as it's with you, Kang-Woo!" Echidna said while snorting. Her eyes shone expectantly. The thought of going out with Kang-Woo made her excited.

"Ah..."

A short exclamation came out of Seol-Ah's mouth. Seol-Ah felt as if she was falling behind as a love rival against not only Yeon-Joo but also Echidna, who had joined late in the game.

'I met him first.'

Seol-Ah felt left behind, which made her anxious.

"Th-then I'm coming too!"

"Hmm? Didn't you say that you would spend the whole day unpacking?"

"I can always unpack later! I-I would also like to go!" Seol-Ah quickly replied.

"Okay, Seol-Ah. You can come too."

Kang-Woo gladly nodded.

"Ngh..."

Echidna glared at the uninvited guest while pouting, disapproving of Seol-Ah's wet-blanket attitude.

"H-Haha."

Seol-Ah laughed awkwardly after feeling Echidna glaring at her. She understood Echidna's feelings of wanting to be alone with Kang-Woo, but there was nothing Seol-Ah could do about it.

'A-All's fair in love and war.'

Seol-Ah was willing to be a wet blanket if it meant that she could make Kang-Woo hers.

Chapter 74 - Short Break (3)

"Kang-Woo, wake up."

The next morning...

Echidna shook Oh Kang-Woo awake. After having a simple breakfast, Kang-Woo went outside with Echidna and Han Seol-Ah. He took the two girls to a giant department store in Mok-dong, Yeongdeungpo.

At first, the girls seemed to be wary of each other, but soon, with shining eyes, they began to choose clothes.

'They're getting along better than I'd expected.'

Kang-Woo had thought that Echidna would be wary of Seol-Ah since Echidna was very introverted. Even yesterday, she'd pouted and glared at Seol-Ah while they were unpacking. Now, they were both looking around the department store while chatting as if they were sisters.

'This must be the power of women.'

Kang-Woo couldn't understand what was so fun about picking clothes. To him, they all looked the same.

"My, look at this. This would look great on you, Echidna."

"... Would Kang-Woo like it?"

"Hehe. Of course he would."

"Then, I'll try it on."

Seol-Ah wandered around picking out clothes for Echidna as if she were her little sister.

It seemed Echidna had also taken an interest in clothes, so she followed Seol-Ah around with her eyes shining.

'I guess it's fine as long as they're both enjoying themselves.'

It wasn't a bad idea for Echidna to make other friends and not depend on him too much.

Excessive dependence would only cloud her judgment.

"Come here for a second, Kang-Woo."

"Kang-Woo, does it suit me?"

As he turned his head, he saw Echidna looking at him nervously. She was wearing a beige jacket and a checkered skirt that reached her knees—she looked astonishingly cute.

'It's like she's wearing a school uniform.'

Leaving aside her real age, because she looked so young, it seemed like she was wearing a school uniform.

"Yeah, it suits you."

"Hm! Hm!" Echidna snorted while blushing.

She looked up at Seol-Ah with sparkling eyes.

"I want this."

"Fufu. Okay. I'll buy it for you."

"Thanks. So you were a good person, Seol-Ah."

Echidna had been won over all too easily with just a single outfit.

She smiled radiantly while grabbing onto Seol-Ah's clothes.

"Haaaah! You're too cute!"

"... Seol-Ah, I can't breathe."

Seol-Ah hugged Echidna and rubbed Echidna's cheeks against her face.

Kang-Woo smiled at the two of them, satisfied.

'I'm glad I took a break.'

Seeing both of them having fun made him smile.

After paying for the clothes, the girls each clung to one of Kang-Woo's arms and pulled him along.

He truly had flowers in each hand.

He could feel people glaring at him with jealousy, and Kang-Woo followed the girls while smiling like a victor.

'This is the life.'

He thought of the days he'd endured among demons who were nothing but muscle-headed battle junkies and the nights he'd spent in fear that tentacled monsters would appear in his dreams.

Kang-Woo was so happy that he thought maybe all the suffering he had gone through had all been for this moment.

An hour passed.

"How about this one, Echidna?"

"It suits you, Seol-Ah."

'Mhm. Very nice. They've gotten even closer.'

Two hours passed.

"Hoho. Please try this on, Kang-Woo!"

"You look cool, Kang-Woo."

'Hmm.'

Three hours passed.

"Kang-Woo, Kang-Woo. Let's go back down to the second floor. I think it was better there."

"Oh, I'd also like to go back to where we were an hour ago."

'What's this?'

Four hours passed.

"Ah, like I thought, we should go back to where we were in the beginning."

"Yeah, yeah. I liked that place better."

'Why isn't it ending?'

Even after four hours, they were still shopping.

Kang-Woo looked at them with a dumbstruck expression.

The problem wasn't that they were going to every single store but that they went back to stores that they had already been to whenever they changed their minds.

'We've been to this store four times already.'

Kang-Woo had a pale expression on his face.

Unlike Kang-Woo, who was slowly becoming lifeless, both girls looked at the clothes without taking a break. It was as if they were using the Authority of Invigoration.

He felt like he'd been locked up in an endless möbius strip.

'Is this life?'

It wasn't that he was physically tired after only a few hours of walking, but repeating an action that seemed meaningless made him mentally tired.

'Am I really on a break?'

He'd gone to the department store to take a breather before things got busier, but rather than taking a breather, he felt as if he was becoming even more tired shopping than when he was in battle.

His mind was about to reach its limit when suddenly...

"Now that we've looked around enough, should we take a break?"

"You've... looked around enough?"

"Fufu. We're going to take a look around for things besides clothes in the afternoon."

He felt as if he had been struck by lightning under blue skies.

Kang-Woo's face turned even paler.

"Kang-Woo, I'm hungry."

"Oh my. It's already past lunchtime. Should we just have a light meal at the food court?"

"Food court?"

Kang-Woo tilted his head in confusion, which rather shocked Seol-Ah.

"Do you perhaps not know what a food court is?"

"Yeah. I've never heard about it."

When Kang-Woo had lived on Earth in the past, forget food courts, he had never even been to a department store.

Seol-Ah seemed troubled.

"Hmm... It's where multiple good vendors are located in one place. There's a wide variety of menus to choose from, and it's all reasonably priced."

"Whoa."

Kang-Woo's eyes shone. Eating was one of the things he'd been enjoying the most since returning to Earth.

"Let's go."

Kang-Woo's exhausted expression recovered its vigor. He headed to the food court with eyes full of expectation.

What he saw next shocked him.

"W-We can order anything from here...?"

"Yes. You say the number corresponding to what you want to eat, and then you get a meal ticket."

"Whaa..."

As he looked at the menu with more than a hundred different options, Kang-Woo couldn't help but feel a thrill.

'Is this Heaven?'

There were three different types of kimchi stew: one with tuna, one with ham, and finally, one with meat.

If this wasn't Heaven, Kang-Woo didn't know what was.

"I can't believe a place like this exists...."

Kang-Woo regretted having missed out on places like this while having been in a craze of hunting and leveling up.

'I've been forgetting about the most important thing.'

Why had he returned to Earth in the first place?

Wasn't it to eat and play as much as he wanted?

He could feel his desire boiling. They weren't normal desires but desires amplified due to having the body of a demon.

He could feel his desires devouring his sense of reason.

"Kang-Woo, what should we eat?"

"Everything."

"Everything?"

Kang-Woo walked up to the counter and stated in all seriousness, "Please give me everything from number 1 to 168. Oh, and ten each of numbers 67, 68, and 69."

The dishes that he had ordered ten each of were obviously kimchi stews.

"K-Kang-Woo! Please calm down!"

Seol-Ah came running to Kang-Woo, who had lost all sense of reason.

"Why?"

"There's no way we can eat all that."

"We can just take any leftovers home."

"They'll go bad before we manage to eat it all."

"Don't worry. I can make it so they don't go bad."

As long as Kang-Woo flipped the effect of the Authority of Decay, he could store all the food without having to worry about it going bad.

The gears in Seol-Ah's head started to turn quickly to come up with a way to calm Kang-Woo down.

"The food court has a diverse menu, but the food isn't that good. Instead, I'll make whatever you'd like to eat on this menu at home. You should just eat until you're full here."

"Hmm. If it isn't good, then..."

After hearing the food wasn't that good, his desire quickly died down.

Disappointed, Kang-Woo just ordered the three types of kimchi stew, pizza, fried chicken, and tangsuyuk[1]. It was still quite a lot, but it was nothing compared to what he'd originally planned to order.

"I want what Kang-Woo's having."

Echidna ordered the same dishes as Kang-Woo with shining eyes.

Seol-Ah tried to stop her but gave up after seeing her sparkling eyes.

"... I'll just have udon."

The bell for their food rang not long after they had ordered their food with the meal ticket.

Kang-Woo and Echidna had ordered so much food that even a table of four wasn't enough to put everything on the table. They had to stick another table on the side.

"Right then, let's eat."

Kang-Woo had a spoonful of the pork kimchi stew.

"Hmm."

Just like Seol-Ah said, it was a bit lackluster compared to the one she made.

'But...'

Kang-Woo's eyes shone. What it lacked in taste, it made up for in variety.

This was a very precious opportunity to make his dream of combining a variety of foods, which he could have never imagined while in Hell, into a reality.

Kang-Woo turned his head to the pizza and placed it above the kimchi stew.

"... Kang-Woo?"

A dumbstruck voice came out of Seol-Ah's mouth.

Kang-Woo ate a slice of pizza with kimchi stew simultaneously.

It wasn't just the pizza; he also mixed the tangsuyuk and fried chicken with the kimchi stew.

"Slurp! Whoa, this tastes better than I'd thought it would."

"Are you supposed to mix it all in there like that?" Echidna asked Seol-Ah while tilting her head in wonder, staring at Kang-Woo eating kimchi stew with pizza, tangsuyuk, and fried chicken.

"... No."

"But Kang-Woo is doing it."

"That's because Kang-Woo is..."

'... A weirdo.'

She barely managed to stop herself from saying that as she stared at Kang-Woo diligently eating his kimchi stew.

It was at that moment...

Slide!

A man suddenly approached them and sat across from Kang-Woo without asking for permission. Snickering, the man said in a countryside dialect, "Wow! Ya rilly know yer stuff! Yeah! Stew is meant fer mixin' all kinds uh stuff into it!"

Kang-Woo stopped eating and glared at the man in front of him.

The man was wearing an out-of-fashion aloha shirt and a gold chain necklace. He was covered in muscles and had bright tanned skin. Looking at him was like looking at a smaller version of Kang Tae-Soo.

"... Who are you?" Kang-Woo said in an annoyed tone.

The man smiled.

"Mah name is Baek Kang-Hyun from the Hanul Guild. Have ya heard uh me?"

"..."

Kang-Woo's expression hardened.

There probably wasn't anyone in Korea who hadn't heard the name Baek Kang-Hyun.

"Yer the rookie of the Red Rose Guild, right?" Kang-Hyun snickered and kept talking. "A'hv an offer fer ya."

"An offer?"

"I'll give ya fifty billion won and match ya with Unique-grade equipment. I'll git ya uh car and house that can't even compare to whut ya have right now. Join our guild. I'll save ya an executive position."

Seol-Ah's mouth fell open after she heard the ridiculous amount of money and conditions offered.

Kang-Woo's expression, however, didn't change in the slightest. He smirked and leaned back in the chair.

He opened his mouth in a relaxed manner.

"That's it?"

Chapter 75 - Legendary-grade Equipment (1)

"Oh?" Baek Kang-Hyun uttered with bright eyes.

He looked at Oh Kang-Woo, who had a relaxed expression.

Kang-Woo wasn't bluffing. It seemed like he truly thought that the conditions weren't good enough.

As if he found that situation funny, Kang-Hyun laughed, "Hehehe. Yer an interestin' lad."

"If you have nothing more to say, why don't you leave?" Kang-Woo said arrogantly.

This wasn't an attitude a Player should have in front of Kang-Hyun, who was renowned as the strongest Ranker in Korea.

"Hahahaha!" Kang-Hyun laughed loudly.

He wasn't sure how long it had been since someone had spoken to him in such an arrogant way.

"Ah've taken a likin' to ya. In that case, whut's yer definition of satisfactory conditions?" Kang-Hyun asked.

"Hmm," Kang-Woo murmured while narrowing his eyes and gazing at Kang-Hyun.

Although Kang-Woo seemed relaxed, the gears in his head were turning incredibly fast.

'Baek Kang-Hyun, huh?'

It was a name he had gotten tired of hearing about. Kang-Hyun hadn't been able to become a world ranker, but he was known as an unmatched monster in Korea. He was even stronger than Cha Yeon-Joo.

'I wasn't expecting him to be like this.'

Kang-Woo had thought that Kang-Hyun would be like a solitary martial artist, but he ended up being the complete opposite. The image that Kang-Woo had of the number one Player was completely destroyed.

'If he's here now, does that mean he has heard the rumors?'

The incident involving the Demon Cult... Kang-Woo had contributed too much to it for him to go unnoticed. Just like Baek Hwa-Yeon had warned him, Kang-Woo would have to put up with the fact that rumors were inevitably going to spread.

'But I wasn't expecting for him to come himself.'

Kang-Woo was surprised.

'I guess both he and Yeon-Joo like to do things themselves.'

He looked at Kang-Hyun and said, "Sorry, but it doesn't matter what conditions you offer me. I have no interest in joining a guild."

Kang-Woo didn't even have to think about it. He was happy with his current alliance with the Red Rose Guild and the Hwarang Corps. What he liked the most was that he didn't have to follow their orders; they were on equal standing. However, if he joined a guild, things would change. He would inevitably have someone above him.

'I can't let that happen.'

Even if they guaranteed his freedom, he didn't like to be under someone else.

'And there's no need for it either.'

The situation had changed from when he had accepted Yeon-Joo's offer. Kang-Woo had become strong enough that he didn't need someone else's support.

"Hmm. Ya sure there's nuthin' Ah can offer ya?"

"I'm satisfied with the money, car, and house that I have now. I'm not after things like that."

"Hehe. Then whut's it that ya want?"

"Not sure. Why don't you figure that out yourself?"

"Hahaha! Nice! It's been a while since Ah've met sumone that treats me this way!" Kang-Hyun laughed while nodding. "Then whut bout this? If ya join us, Ah'll give ya one Legendary-grade equipment fer free."

"..."

Hesitation filled Kang-Woo's eyes for a short moment. Kang-Hyun noticed that, and he smiled.

"That seems to have gotten yer attention."

"Hmm... I won't deny that."

Legendary-grade equipment were things that couldn't be bought easily even with all the money in the world. First and foremost, there weren't many of them. Player equipment were created by Players with crafting-related Traits working in tandem with scientists who researched modern weaponry.

The materials used for those equipment were, of course, monster corpses and mana stones. Making Legendary-grade equipment was almost impossible because it required materials that could only be collected from boss monsters of S-rank Gates.

'Moreover, those materials don't always appear.'

Most importantly, there was an imprinting issue. Equipment of the Legendary grade and above had an imprinting function, which meant the equipment imprinted itself on its very first wearer. In other words, no one else would be able to use it after that.

Moreover, there were typically numerous conditions that needed to be met for the imprinting process. So, it was common for Players to be unable to use their equipment despite having worked painstakingly hard to obtain it.

'This one's a bit attractive.'

Unique items were already quite good, but Kang-Hyun was offering something even better...

'I believe Yeon-Joo's chains were also Legendary-grade.'

It was true that Yeon-Joo was strong, but she was even stronger with her chains. The chains were quite powerful, especially with their Energy Drain passive.

The most important point, however, was that equipment of the Legendary grade and above usually raised a Player's stats by an absolute value.

'Although I'm sure there won't be any that raises demonic energy.'

Kang-Woo was indeed interested.

Nevertheless, Kang-Woo shook his head after much thought.

He said, "I'll pass."

It was a sweet proposal, but it didn't matter how sweet it was. He wasn't the type of person that was willing to be under someone else's command.

"Hehe. Ah knew ya would," Kang-Hyun replied with a smile and stood up. "This is mah number. Gimme a call if ya ever change yer mind."

"Okay."

"Sorry fer disruptin' yer meal. Oh, and if yer gonna mix, ya gotta mix this too."

Kang-Hyun grabbed the plate of diced radish kimchi next to the udon and poured them into the kimchi stew.

"Now this is true flavor!" Kang-Hyun exclaimed.

"...Putting kimchi in kimchi stew?"

"C'mon, yer missin' out. They're different textures!"

"Well, I'll give it a try."

Kang-Woo smirked and ate the kimchi stew with the diced radish kimchi.

That abomination was no longer kimchi stew; it was closer to organic waste. Unable to even bear looking at the kimchi stew, Han Seol-Ah turned away.

"Is it good, Kang-Woo?" Echidna asked.

"Of course."

Slurp!

After finishing the kimchi stew, Kang-Woo stood up.

"Shall we get going?"

"Was it really okay to refuse his offer, Kang-Woo?" Seol-Ah said.

"Why? Do you think it's a waste not to accept fifty billion won?"

"N-No! Nothing like that. It isn't my money in the first place. He didn't seem like the kind of person to retaliate, but I'm just worried that he might do it."

"If he does..." Kang-Woo said while smiling, "I'll just have to make him thoroughly regret it."

* * *

After walking around the department store one more time, Kang-Woo headed to the parking lot.

"Haaaah~ I had so much fun today!"

"Yes. I had fun buying tons of clothes that I tried on and got compliments from Kang-Woo."

The two girls smiled with satisfaction.

"That's a relief," Kang-Woo said with a slightly tired expression.

He was extremely exhausted mentally from walking around the department store all day.

Nevertheless, he wasn't in a bad mood at all. He thought that it was good that Echidna and Seol-Ah had gotten closer.

"I'll drive the car over, so wait here," Kang-Woo told the two girls.

"Okay, Kang-Woo."

After grabbing the shopping bags from Echidna and Seol-Ah, Kang-Woo went to bring the car around. This time, Echidna sat in the passenger seat. Kang-Woo drove out of the department store with driving skills that had improved a lot compared to when he had first earned his license.

"But still, it's too bad," Seol-Ah mentioned.

"Hmm? What is?" Kang-Woo asked.

"The Legendary-grade equipment. You were interested in it, weren't you?"

"Oh, yeah. I guess it's a bit of a shame."

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue. He couldn't help thinking about the Legendary-grade equipment.

"Fufu. But I'm glad you refused the offer."

"You're glad?"

"Yes. I got this... unsettling feeling from him."

"Hmm."

Kang-Woo thought about Kang-Hyun, who had smiled a lot and spoken in a rural dialect. Kang-Hyun couldn't be further from unsettling.

'I guess it's what they call women's intuition.'

Kang-Woo thought that he should ask Yeon-Joo about Kang-Hyun later on.

"I don't like the idea of being under someone anyway," Kang-Woo replied.

"Fufu. That's true. I can't imagine you following someone's orders."

"Don't follow someone else's orders, Kang-Woo," Echidna said, grabbing his clothes with an anxious expression.

To her, Kang-Woo was a sacred being. She didn't even want to imagine him following someone else's orders.

"Don't worry. That won't ever happen," Kang-Woo responded.

As he turned the car's steering wheel, a hush settled over the vehicle. It seemed like Echidna and Seol-Ah were tired because of how much they'd wandered around the department store.

'Legendary-grade equipment, huh...?'

In the silence, Kang-Woo naturally thought of the Legendary-grade equipment again.

'I'm feeling even more regretful since it was practically right within my reach.'

For a moment, he thought that he should maybe ask Yeon-Joo for a piece of Legendary-grade equipment, but he knew how valuable they were. Even Yeon-Joo wouldn't be able to get him one that easily.

Vrrr. Vrrr.

"Hmm?"

His smartphone was suddenly vibrating in his pocket. Kang-Woo placed his smartphone on the car mount and put on earphones.

"Hello?"

[It's Baek Hwa-Yeon. Are you free to talk now?]

"I'm driving, but... It's fine. What is it?"

[I was wondering if you could come to the Hwarang Corps headquarters right now.]

"Now?"

The Hwarang Corps headquarters was in Suwon, where the S-rank Gate was. It wasn't that far from Seoul Station, but it wasn't that close to Kang-Woo's current location.

[Yes. I assure you it will be worth it.]

Kang-Woo could hear a bit of excitement in Hwa-Yeon's voice.

He tilted his head and asked, "What has gotten you so excited?"

[The government has decided on your reward. You can come get it in our headquarters, so I would like you to stop by.]

"Whoa."

Come to think of it, Hwa-Yeon had said that he would be rewarded by the government.

"What is it?"

[Fufu. I hope you realize how much effort I've put into giving you an appropriate reward that reflects your accomplishments.]

The way that Hwa-Yeon was speaking was unlike her usual self. Kang-Woo wondered what kind of reward could make her so excited.

"I will decide if it's appropriate or not after hearing what it is."

[Hahaha! I'm positive you'll be satisfied with it. You will be given the Legendary-grade equipment that has been in the Mir Guild's hands.]

"..."

Kang-Woo's eyes shone.

He had just been grieving about the Legendary-grade equipment. Yet, before he could get over it, he'd received unexpected good news. It was as if someone had scratched a part of his body that he couldn't reach with his hands.

The corners of his mouth curled up.

'This is why you have to live like a good samaritan.'

Kang-Woo felt as if his good actions had been rewarded.

Chapter 76 - Legendary-grade Equipment (2)

"Have a safe trip, Kang-Woo," Han Seol-Ah said.

"You'll be back soon, right, Kang-Woo?" Echidna asked.

"I'm just gonna be dropping by to grab something, so it won't take long."

Kang-Woo drove Seol-Ah and Echidna to the new apartment. He was planning to drive to Suwon Station immediately after dropping them off.

Right then...

"Oh, you're finally back. I heard from Hwa-Yeon. You're going to Hwarang Corps headquarters, right? I have business there too, so let's go together," Cha Yeon-Joo, who had been sitting in front of the apartment entrance, said.

She walked over and casually opened the passenger seat door of Kang-Woo's car.

"Y-You're..." Seol-Ah stuttered in surprise.

"Oh, you're the girl we met the other day. If I remember correctly... you live with Kang-Woo, right?" Yeon-Joo asked.

"Y-Yes. Kang-Woo and I live together."

Yeon-Joo narrowed her eyes. She looked back and forth between Kang-Woo and Seol-Ah.

Then Yeon-Joo said softly to Seol-Ah, "Isn't it difficult living with a weirdo like this? If you want, I'll buy you a house in the area, and I'll make sure it's in your name."

"It's okay. I like living with Kang-Woo."

"... Is that so?"

Yeon-Joo seemed a bit disappointed and turned away. She scoffed while getting into the passenger seat.

"What does she see in a guy like you?" Yeon-Joo asked.

"Then how about getting out of the car of a guy like me and leaving in your own car?" Kang-Woo replied.

"Shut up. I don't feel like driving today," Yeon-Joo said, placing one of her smooth legs over the other. "Drive."

"Am I your chauffeur...?"

"If you don't like it, give the car back to me."

"Wherever you'd like to go, ma'am."

Kang-Woo surrendered to capitalism and waved goodbye to Seol-Ah and Echidna. The two girls sent Kang-Woo off while staring at Yeon-Joo anxiously.

Then Kang-Woo slowly stepped on the accelerator.

"I actually had something I wanted to ask you, so perfect timing," he said.

"You did?"

"Yeah," Kang-Woo replied while thinking about the energetic man he'd met earlier. "I met Baek Kang-Hyun today."

"Wh-What? Where?"

"In Times Square mall[1]. It wasn't a coincidence. He came looking for me."

"... What did he say?" Yeon-Joo asked as her eyes became narrowed and her voice trembled slightly in anxiety.

Kang-Woo glanced at her and smirked.

He asked, "What do you think he said?"

"Stop joking around," she said, looking at Kang-Woo angrily.

"He invited me to join the Hanul Guild," he replied with a shrug.

"Wh-What conditions did he offer?"

"Fifty billion won, an expensive house and car, an executive position in Hanul, and... a piece of Legendary-grade equipment."

"... Fucking hell," Yeon-Joo cursed as her eyes widened in shock.

The conditions were so great that it seemed like Baek Kang-Hyun was out of his mind. Yeon-Joo thought that she'd offered Kang-Woo astronomical conditions, but they were nothing compared to Hanul Guild's offer.

"Ngh..." Yeon-Joo uttered while biting her lips.

She thought that there was no way Kang-Woo would've refused such an offer.

"S-So, when are you joining Hanul Guild?" Yeon-Joo asked hesitantly.

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"... Don't tell me you refused?"

"I have no reason to go out of my way to be under someone else."

"Hah."

Yeon-Joo was speechless.

From the first time that she met Kang-Woo, she'd felt he was the type of person who wouldn't take orders from anyone. Despite that, she never thought that he'd refuse such great conditions.

"... You really are a weirdo," Yeon-Joo remarked.

She turned her head away from him and looked out the window. There was a very faint smile on her face.

"So, is there anything you know about Baek Kang-Hyun?" Kang-Woo asked.

"I've met him a couple of times."

"What kind of person is he?"

"I probably felt the same thing as you. He completely shattered my image of him. I couldn't believe that he was Korea's number one Player."

"Hmm. Yeah, you can tell that at first glance. But besides that, are there any rumors about him?"

"Rumors...?" Yeon-Joo muttered as she sifted through her memories. "I heard that he got extremely angry one time."

"He got angry?"

"Yeah. It was probably when he failed the World Ranker evaluation. Back then, many people were talking about a World Ranker appearing in Korea for the very first time."

"Hmm..."

"Well, I don't blame him. He probably wasn't expecting to fail in such a way."

"How did he fail?"

"Among the World Rankers, there's a Japanese person named Fujimoto Ryoma. Kang-Hyun lost to him. Quite miserably, at that."

Fujimoto Ryoma was a Japanese World Ranker who was also famous for having a Mythic-grade weapon.

"Korea and Japan already have a bad relationship. So, after losing in such a way... Kang-Hyun was berated by the public. People said things like he wasn't worthy of being called a Ranker, that he lost on purpose to make Korea look bad, that he betrayed his country, and all kinds of other things."

"I'm surprised he only got angry."

It would've been stranger if he hadn't gotten angry in that situation.

"If it had been you..." Kang-Woo let his words trail off.

"I would have found every single hate commenter and broken their wrists," Yeon-Joo stated.

"..."

Kang-Woo believed that Yeon-Joo was perfectly capable of doing that.

Then he asked, "So, there aren't any ominous rumors about him?"

"Why? What did he say?"

"Nothing. I was just wondering if he would try to get revenge on me for refusing his offer."

Yeon-Joo smirked and said, "He's not that kind of person. He probably liked your attitude and laughed about it."

She was on point.

Kang-Woo nodded and stepped on the accelerator.

* * *

"You're here. I've been waiting for you," Baek Hwa-Yeon said.

She had been waiting for them in front of the Hwarang Corps headquarters.

After greeting her, Kang-Woo approached her and replied, "You could have waited for us inside."

"Fufu. I was feeling anxious waiting inside," Hwa-Yeon explained while turning toward the headquarters entrance. "Come in. I'll show you your reward."

"I heard that it's Legendary-grade equipment," Yeon-Joo said.

"Yes. There was a piece of Legendary-grade equipment that hadn't been imprinted on a Player yet, so I immediately thought that this had to be Kang-Woo's reward."

"You must've gone through hell to get approval."

"Don't get me started. They were so against it that I almost exploded from rage."

Hwa-Yeon shook her head to forget the horrible memories.

"Well, that's how congresspersons are," Yeon-Joo remarked.

"Hmph. There really is no getting through to them," Hwa-Yeon said with a frown.

She took them to the room where the piece of Legendary-grade equipment was being stored. Upon passing a thick door, they saw a long black coat. Its design was so plain that one would never guess that it was of the Legendary grade.

"Is this the Legendary-grade equipment?" Yeon-Joo asked.

She gazed at the long coat with bright eyes.

Kang-Woo also got closer to the long coat to check its details.

[Equipment Information]

[Equipment Name: Black Pearl Coat]

Grade: Legendary [Unimprinted]

Basic Effect: Physical Defense +660, Magical Defense +480, Unique Stat +5

Special Effect: Allows the wearer to use 'Kraken's Rage,' which doubles the stat boost for one minute. Can only be used once every 24 hours.

Equipment Description: A coat made from the coagulated blood within the Kraken's heart.]

After reading the equipment information, Yeon-Joo clicked her tongue and commented, "Hmm... It isn't that good a piece of Legendary-grade equipment."

She could understand why the Mir Guild had kept it unimprinted.

"Although the stat boost is absurdly high..." Yeon-Joo muttered.

There weren't many pieces of equipment that boosted a stat by an absolute value of five, even among Legendary-grade ones. Most of them boosted stats by one or two usually, up to three or four at most.

As a Player's stat number rose, their corresponding aspect improved. However, the stat became exponentially more difficult to raise the more it rose. For example, it was fairly simple to raise the Strength stat by one or two points through exercise. Nonetheless, once it rose above 40, it wouldn't

rise no matter how hard the Player worked out. In other words, after reaching a certain stat number, most Players had to be content with a rise of just one to three stat points when they leveled up.

The problem was that there wasn't a guarantee that one's main stat would rise. That was why a stat boost of five was almost equivalent to leveling up four or five times. This was an incredible effect, considering it would keep getting harder to level up over time.

"But Players with unique stats are extremely rare," Yeon-Joo stated.

That was the issue. Not many Players had a unique stat in the first place. So, if a Player didn't have a unique stat, the Black Pearl Coat's most incredible effect was practically useless.

"But still, the basic physical and magical defense values are pretty high," Hwa-Yeon replied.

"That's true, but still... It's too bad."

Yeon-Joo turned around to say something to Kang-Woo, whom she thought would be disappointed.

"Hmm...?" she murmured puzzledly.

Rather than being disappointed, Kang-Woo was smiling. Yeon-Joo tilted her head.

Suddenly, a thought crossed her mind.

"Do you perhaps... have a unique stat, Kang-Woo?" Yeon-Joo asked.

"Yup."

Yeon-Joo couldn't believe what she was hearing. It was unbelievable that Kang-Woo had a unique stat—something that an extremely small number of Players possessed.

'Now that I think about it, it makes sense,' she thought.

Kang-Woo's growth rate was unreasonably fast. Nevertheless, if he had a unique stat, then that explained his speed.

"In that case, that changes things. This is... one of the best pieces of Legendary-grade equipment you could ever have."

"Nice," Kang-Woo said with a nod while making a satisfied expression.

His unique stat was Demonic Energy.

'To think that it would boost my Demonic Energy stat by five whole points...'

Moreover, if he used the equipment's skill, it would double the stat boost. In other words, his Demonic Energy stat would rise by ten whole points, although only briefly.

'Even devouring Oriax only gave me three points.'

That was a higher amount than what he'd gotten by devouring a demon from the Seventh Hell.

Kang-Woo turned around and extended his hand to Hwa-Yeon.

He said, "Thank you for the great item. Since we have the same goal of wiping out the Demon Cult, I will cooperate the best I can."

"Hahaha. I never imagined that you would have a unique stat. It seems like this equipment was destined to meet you. We will be counting on you in the future as well," Hwa-Yeon replied and laughed while shaking his hand.

Slam!

An old man wearing a suit suddenly entered the special storage room with four bodyguards.

He yelled, "Keep your hands off of that item!"

"Congressman Hong...?" Hwa-Yeon uttered.

"Hmph! A petition submitted by the congresspersons of my party has just been passed. That item will return to the national treasury," the old man wearing a suit, Hong Jun-Tae, stated with a smirk.

Chapter 77 - Legendary-grade Equipment (3)

Hong Jun-Tae was the leader of the We Are One Party and possessed great power in the country.

Baek Hwa-Yeon frowned at his sudden appearance.

"...A petition? What are you talking about?" she asked.

"My party members submitted a petition, and it was just passed. We cannot let you have that Legendary-grade equipment," Jun-Tae answered.

"This equipment was acquired by the Hwarang Corps during a mission. Captain Jang Hyun-Jae is the one who has the right of transfer, and he has recognized Player Oh Kang-Woo's accomplishments."

"He awakened as a Player only a few months ago! What could he have possibly accomplished to deserve Legendary-grade equipment? Baek Hwa-Yeon... I can only see this as you trying to take the Legendary-grade equipment for yourself!" Jun-Tae accused while staring at Hwa-Yeon with suspicion.

Hwa-Yeon's expression hardened.

"What are you talking about?!" she questioned.

"Hmph. You greedy young'uns always shout like that. How dare you take us as fools just because you're the captain of Hwarang's 3rd Squadron? Do you have any idea how much that Legendary-grade equipment is worth?!"

"How many times must I say that he has done enough to earn it?!"

"You rude little brat! How dare you yell at your elders?!" Jun-Tae shouted angrily. "In any case, the petition has been passed. The president has personally put me in charge of investigating potential corruption in the reward selection process."

"Kuh."

The Hwarang Corps was part of the government, but they were technically an independent organization. Even so, they couldn't go against the president's orders.

Jun-Tae acted as if he were just looking around before finally shifting his gaze to the Black Pearl Coat. Legendary-grade equipment like the coat were priceless, and Jun-Tae's eyes showed clearly that he was greedy for it.

He eventually pulled his gaze away from the coat.

As if wanting others to hear him, Jun-Tae rambled loudly, "Tsk. What a mindless bunch. They even dared to frame someone as great as Chairman Kim Jae-Hyun..."

"... He is a criminal who offered living people as sacrifices to the Demon Cult," Hwa-Yeon stated.

"Hmph! How can we be sure of that? Maybe you fabricated the evidence."

"Congressman Hong!"

Jun-Tae moved his hands, not wanting to listen to what Hwa-Yeon had to say.

"Anyway, I have been put in charge of the investigation, so don't even think about going anywhere," he said, seemingly sure that there had been the presence of corruption.

Kang-Woo smirked as he listened to the conversation between the two people.

'I guess he used to be bribed by Kim Jae-Hyun,' he thought.

It was easy to see why Jun-Tae was acting in that way. He reeked of insatiable greed.

Jun-Tae, who had been walking around the room, approached Kang-Woo.

"So, you're that rookie of the Red Rose Guild? Don't hurt yourself by being greedy, and just stay out of the way like a good rookie. Understood?" Jun-Tae said, raising his hand and tapping Kang-Woo's cheek.

"...Hah." Kang-Woo let out a forced laugh.

Jun-Tae had crossed the line. Kang-Woo wasn't the kind of person to take such treatment lying down.

'Answer to evil with even greater evil.'

That was how he had survived for over ten millennia.

Kang-Woo spoke in a low voice, "Stop your yapping, boy."

"What...?"

"How old are you? How dare a snot-nosed brat like you touch an adult's cheek without permission?"

"..."

Jun-Tae was speechless.

Kang-Woo was clearly in his twenties. So, why was he suddenly talking as if he were the older one?

"Have you lost your mind, punk?" Jun-Tae said.

"Punk? Did you just call me a punk? Hah, what a rude little brat you are. What are your parents doing? Why have they not taught you proper manners?"

"Arrgghhh!"

Kang-Woo pinched Jun-Tae's cheek. He had tried to pinch lightly, but the definition of 'light' was very different for superhuman Players.

Kang-Woo let Jun-Tae go, and the latter fell to the ground.

"Y-You crazy son of a bitch!" Jun-Tae yelled.

His face had turned red in anger, and he grabbed the back of his neck as if it was in pain.

Jun-Tae shouted to his bodyguards, "What are you doing?! Kill him!"

Kang-Woo had inflicted violence on a congressperson. Even if the bodyguards killed him, they could just claim that it had been to prevent an assassination.

The four bodyguards behind Jun-Tae started to move.

Schwing.

They each took out their weapons.

'All four of them must be warriors,' Kang-Woo thought.

Kang-Woo could tell that they were considerably skilled, as expected from a congressperson's security detail.

'They're all at least on their Sixth Awakening.'

Even so, the bodyguards weren't a match for someone like Kang-Woo, who possessed power on par with or surpassing a Ranker.

"Haap!"

The bodyguard at the very front charged toward Kang-Woo. His weapon was a pair of gauntlets covered in spikes, and he swung one of them at Kang-Woo's head.

Tap.

"Huh?" the bodyguard uttered confusedly.

Kang-Woo had lightly caught the bodyguard's fist as if he were catching a baseball.

The bodyguard frowned and put more strength into his fist.

"Wh-What the—?"

However, his fist wouldn't move. It was as if it was stuck between two giant pieces of rebar. Kang-Woo pulled the bodyguard toward him and then drilled his knee into him.

Bash!!

"Kurrghhh!!!"

The bodyguard bent over, and blood spurted out of his mouth. He lost consciousness and collapsed.

"Wh-What the...?" Jun-Tae stammered, his face turning pale.

His bodyguards were high-level Players who had achieved their Seventh Awakening. There was no way someone who had become a Player only two months ago could win against them.

"Want some help?" Cha Yeon-Joo asked.

"Nah. I might as well warm up since it's been a while since I've let loose," Kang-Woo replied.

Unlike Jun-Tae, Yeon-Joo was calm. It was as if she knew that things would turn out like this.

"Wh-What are you doing?! Isn't he a member of the Red Rose Guild? Hurry up and stop him! If you don't, I will make sure to report that Red Rose was also involved in the corruption!"

Yeon-Joo raised her hands in a seemingly helpless manner.

She smirked and said, "Oh, I'm sorry. Kang-Woo isn't a member of my guild, so I can't order him around."

"Wh-What are you—"

Smash! Slam! Boom!

"Kurghhh!"

Before Jun-Tae could come to his senses, the battle was almost over. Kang-Woo used the Authority of Titanic Might to throw the bodyguards across the room. They screamed in agony as they smashed against the reinforced wall of the special storage room. Then they passed out.

"That was barely a warm-up," Kang-Woo said, clicking his tongue in disappointment.

He then walked toward Jun-Tae in a relaxed manner.

"Eek! S-Stay away from me!"

"Haha. This is exactly why young'uns shouldn't be greedy," Kang-Woo stated. He crouched in front of Jun-Tae and looked him in the eyes. "When I was your age, working diligently was the only answer. Diligence was the only thing that you could count on!"

Jun-Tae frowned in silence.

"But when I see kids these days... God! My heart aches. It aches so much!"

"Y-You bastard! Are you mocking me right now?!"

"Mocking? Do you think I'm playing around? For God's sake, kids these days... You're not even listening when this adult is giving you precious life advice."

"Y-You motherf—!"

Jun-Tae trembled with anger. Kang-Woo was treating him like a child, and it was driving him insane.

"I turn sixty this year, you damn brat! Sixty!!" Jun-Tae said.

"Sixty?" Kang-Woo replied with a smirk. "I thought you were a snot-nosed brat, but I guess you haven't even left your mother's belly yet."

"Y-You...!!!"

Jun-Tae swung his fist toward Kang-Woo in a rage. Leaving age aside, he wasn't even a Player, so there was no way he could deal any damage to Kang-Woo.

Bash!!

"Gaaaahhhh!"

Jun-Tae was the one who punched Kang-Woo, but he was also the one screaming in pain. It seemed like the bones of his fingers had broken. He was crying while holding his hand.

"Does it hurt?" Kang-Woo asked.

"Waaaahhhh."

"You're still young. That's why it hurts. The pain you're feeling now is a fertilizer that will make you grow."

Jun-Tae, who didn't know if he should get angry or scream in pain, turned away from Kang-Woo.

"Sigh. So what are you gonna do about this?" Yeon-Joo asked as she walked toward Kang-Woo.

"You know the weight of what you just did, don't you?"

Kang-Woo had attacked a congressperson, and to make matters worse, Jun-Tae was the leader of a party. In a sense, it could end up being more serious than having crossed Kim Jae-Hyun.

"It's okay. I have ways to solve it."

"... Are you going to wipe his memories like you did with Kim Yeong-Hun?"

"That's an option, but that wouldn't fix the core issue, which is the petition."

"Then what do you have in mind?"

Kang-Woo smiled widely and answered, "I'll do my utmost to make Korea a clean and dignified country."

"What... exactly are you gonna do?"

"You'll see."

Kang-Woo placed his hand on top of Jun-Tae's head. He pulled demonic energy from his Ten Thousand Demon Core and gathered it in his hand. His expression turned serious, showing that he was using a highly advanced Authority.

Jun-Tae uttered in a panic, "Cough! Cough! Wh-What are you d—"

Soon after, Kang-Woo was done using the Authority. Jun-Tae looked around while grabbing his head.

"Nothing changed," Yeon-Joo said while looking down at Jun-Tae with a confused expression.

"How much money have you received from Kim Jae-Hyun in bribes until now?" Kang-Woo questioned Jun-Tae.

"Starting from six years ago, I received two billion won in bribes annu— Huh?! Wh-What am I saying?!"

Jun-Tae's eyes widened, and he quickly covered his mouth with his hand. However, that didn't stop him from talking.

"On top of that, I received 1.3 billion won a few days ago to help conglomerates evade taxes, and..."

He kept going on and on. Just revealing one of those things to the media would be enough to destroy his life as a politician.

"This is..." Yeon-Joo muttered.

"I made it so that he will be able to live as an honest man from now on," Kang-Woo said.

He looked down at Jun-Tae, who kept talking about his malpractices. His true self that was revealed after his mask of lies had vanished was truly pathetic.

"N-No! This can't be happening!" Jun-Tae cried out.

He ran out of the storage room with a pale face.

Yeon-Joo watched in disbelief as Jun-Tae fled.

"... But wouldn't he be fine if he just keeps his mouth shut?" she asked.

"Of course not. Do you seriously think I didn't take that into consideration? I made it so he can't resist talking about himself," Kang-Woo replied.

"Why go that far?"

Yeon-Joo looked at him puzzledly. She knew that Kang-Woo probably had countless ways to get that petition removed without doing something like this.

"What do you think would happen if a party leader became a whistleblower? All sorts of corruption cases involving conglomerates and major guilds would come to light. That way, we can stop others from trying any funny business beforehand."

It wouldn't be merely a truth bomb; it would be more like a catastrophe befalling the political world.

"..."

"What?" Kang-Woo asked.

"U-Uhm... K-Kang-Woo. You said that all sorts of corruption cases would come to light, right?"

"I'm sure they would," Kang-Woo replied with a nod.

Yeon-Joo avoided his eyes anxiously as she said, "U-Um. To be honest... I'd also be in a l-lot of trouble if that were to happen."

"What?"

"You know... I did a background check on you... I issued an S-rank Gate access permit to a Player who hadn't even gotten their Seventh Awakening... and... your summoned beast—I believe her name was Echidna? I even forged her ID..."

Kang-Woo remained silent. He felt like he'd received a message in his mind that said, 'You have just killed your teammate.'

Then Kang-Woo turned toward the door that Jun-Tae had run out of.

What was that about making Korea clean and dignified...?

Kang-Woo realized he had made a huge mistake.

"Catch that son of a bitch!"

A clean and dignified Korea didn't suit him well.

Chapter 78 - Legendary-grade Equipment (4)

They caught Hong Jun-Tae and stopped him from being the whistleblower who would make Korea a clean country. Instead, Oh Kang-Woo turned him into a tool that could be used for any necessary malpractices and political schemes.

Kang-Woo sighed in relief and returned to the special storage room.

Cha Yeon-Joo approached him and asked, "How did it go?"

"I told him to report that he hadn't been able to discover any instances of corruption. And of course, I stopped him from becoming a whistleblower," Kang-Woo answered.

"Phew. That's good to hear."

"Yeah. All the corruption in Korea's government almost came to light."

The fact that Korea's political scene was still corrupt made them sigh in relief.

Baek Hwa-Yeon stared at them silently.

"What?" Yeon-Joo asked.

"No... It's nothing," Hwa-Yeon replied, grabbing her forehead in confusion.

She didn't know if she should be happy or not because of that situation.

'The world is a complex place,' Hwa-Yeon thought.

She had difficulty getting used to things like this because she'd lived her whole life like a soldier.

"Now that the bothersome problem has been resolved, let's try it on," Kang-Woo said.

He put on the Black Pearl Coat in anticipation.

Riiing.

[You have put on Legendary-grade equipment.]

[Commencing imprinting of Black Pearl Coat.]

A pleasant chime of a bell rang inside his mind.

Fwoooooom!

After that, a complex blue magic circle appeared on the Black Pearl Coat and then flowed into Kang-Woo.

Riiing.

[Imprinting successful.]

[Black Pearl Coat has accepted Player Oh Kang-Woo as its owner.]

[Demonic Energy has risen by 5.]

After a few blue message windows popped up, Kang-Woo felt changes occur within his body, as his Demonic Energy stat had suddenly risen from 83 to 88. Additional demonic energy flowed into Kang-Woo seemingly from thin air. This was due to the power of the system that Kang-Woo had yet to fully understand.

'Amazing,' Kang-Woo thought, looking down at the coat in surprise.

Ever since his Demonic Energy stat surpassed 80, just a single stat point increased his demonic energy stores drastically.

'If I use the skill on top of this massive effect...'

His demonic energy stat could reach 93 immediately, although it would only last for one minute.

Kang-Woo smiled, feeling satisfied.

'I honestly didn't have much hope that it would raise my Demonic Energy stat just because it's a piece of Legendary-grade equipment.'

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that it was fate.

Kang-Woo checked his status window with his equipment on.

[Status Window]

[Player Name: Oh Kang-Woo

Level: 54 (Sixth Awakening)

First Awakening Trait: Authority of Predation (Rank: ???) *The majority of the Trait's power is currently sealed.

Second Awakening Trait: Insatiable Hunger (Rank: C)

Third Awakening Trait: Mana-Hungry Demon (Rank: A)

Fourth Awakening Trait: Ruler of Demonic Energy (Rank: A)

Fifth Awakening Trait: Demonic Beast Summoning (Rank: S)

Sixth Awakening Trait: ??? (Rank: ???) *The Trait will fully unlock after achieving the Ultimate Demonic Body.

Strength: 38

Dexterity: 35

Health: 32

Mana: 0

Demonic Energy (Unique Stat): 88 (+5)

Intelligence: 25

Wisdom: 23

*Current Equipment Effects

Physical Defense: 990

Magical Defense: 650]

"Good."

He had only put on one piece of Legendary-grade equipment, yet there were significant changes in his status window. The Demonic Energy stat wasn't the only one that had increased; his Physical and Magical Defense stats had also increased by a lot too.

'Is it okay for equipment effects to be this good?'

Kang-Woo thought he'd be on par with World Rankers if he just relied on the power of dozens of pieces of Legendary-grade equipment.

'Although that won't happen.'

Just one piece of Legendary-grade equipment had caused such a huge uproar. It wasn't something anyone could buy just because they had lots of money. However, that didn't mean it was impossible to possess Legendary-grade equipment. Legendary-grade equipment could be made as long as one had the right materials and people.

Kang-Woo mentioned what he was thinking about to Yeon-Joo.

She smirked and said, "That's impossible. Leaving the equipment grades aside, you can only wear five pieces of equipment."

"Only five?"

"Yeah. Didn't I tell you before that the mana flowing out of equipment envelopes your entire body? The effects cease to apply when more than five of those mana waves overlap."

'What an annoyingly convenient setting...'

Kang-Woo nodded disappointedly.

He had been thinking about getting as many pieces of Legendary-grade equipment as possible in the future. However, it seemed like he would need to give up on that.

'Well, at least I can wear up to five pieces.'

Nevertheless, Kang-Woo would get a great boost if he could get more Legendary-grade equipment that increased his unique stat.

"Why? Do you like the Legendary gear's specs that much?"

"I like them immensely," Kang-Woo answered, nodding without hesitation. "To the point that I would like to check how much stronger I've gotten."

"Hmm..." Yeon-Joo murmured. After thinking for a bit, she said, "Then how about a light spar with me?"

"Spar?"

"Yeah. There's a sparring room in the Hwarang Corps headquarters. Oh, Hwa-Yeon, can we borrow the sparring room?"

"Of course," Hwa-Yeon answered.

"Okay, thanks," Yeon-Joo said. Then she turned to Kang-Woo. "So? Wanna have a go?"

"I have no reason to refuse," Kang-Woo replied.

Yeon-Joo was one of the top ten Rankers in Korea. She was a good opponent for Kang-Woo to check how strong he had become after achieving his Sixth Awakening and equipping a piece of Legendary-grade equipment.

'I also want to see how strong Yeon-Joo is.'

They were allies, so it was important to know how strong she was and to what extent of the role that she could fulfill.

Kang-Woo wasn't the only one who was thinking that. Yeon-Joo was also scanning Kang-Woo with keen eyes.

'I wonder how strong Kang-Woo has become?' she thought.

Yeon-Joo had been sure from the first time she saw Kang-Woo that he'd become stronger than her one day. Nevertheless, she hadn't expected him to become so strong in such an unreasonably short amount of time. His growth rate was so fast that it mocked every single record that Players had placed since the Day of Calamity.

Even Grace McCubbin, whom people considered to be the world's savior, hadn't grown nearly as quickly as Kang-Woo had.

'It isn't just a matter of speed.'

Yeon-Joo had heard that Kang-Woo had passed Level 50 and achieved his Sixth Awakening after the Oriax incident. Achieving the Sixth Awakening in just two months was amazing on its own, but that wasn't the issue.

'Kang-Woo defeated Mun Yeong-Ho when he was only at his Third Awakening.'

Kang-Woo was impressive not just because his leveling-up speed was fast but because he was unbelievably strong compared to his level. During his fight with Mun Yeong-Ho, Kang-Woo had been at his Third Awakening, while Yeong-Ho had been at his Seventh. Just in terms of stats, there had been such a huge difference between them that it was like comparing an adult to a primary schooler. It was impossible to overcome a gap like that even if there was a large difference in the ranking of their Traits.

'But Kang-Woo overwhelmed Yeong-Ho.'

It was true that Yeong-Ho had let his guard down, but an adult couldn't lose in a physical fight against a primary schooler just because of that. Yeon-Joo was sure that Kang-Woo had some other power besides his level and stats.

'I'll use this opportunity to find out what it is.'

There were still too many things about Kang-Woo that Yeon-Joo didn't know. Considering what they would be doing together in the future, she needed to understand his power.

"Shall we begin?" Yeon-Joo asked.

"Sure," Kang-Woo replied positively.

Yeon-Joo tightened her fists slightly while walking toward the sparring room.

'I'm not planning on losing.'

She knew that Kang-Woo was already as strong as a Ranker, but she didn't think that she would lose to him in her current state. After all, she was one of the strongest rankers in Korea.

However... it wouldn't be long before she realized she was wrong.

* * *

Slide!!

Dozens of chains scratched the floor. The floor of the sparring room had been built with special alloys, but it was no match for chains infused with mana.

The chains were scattered all over, slithering around like snakes. It was an unavoidable net of death that had been spread across the room.

Crack!

Nevertheless, Kang-Woo ran through the death net. He used the Authority of Haste and moved at supersonic speed, causing a sonic boom.

The chains quickly chased after him. Then he used the Authority of the Sky to completely ignore inertia and changed direction at a right angle. The chains on his trail lost him momentarily.

Boom!

Kang-Woo sent the chains scattering away with the Authority of Explosion and leaped through them without hesitation. The thorns on the chains dug into his skin, but he paid them no mind. He charged through the net of chains at a frightening speed.

"Kuh!" Yeon-Joo uttered.

She crossed her arms in an X-shape, and the scattered chains instantly gathered in front of her.

Kang-Woo opened his arms wide and clapped, making a deafening sound with his hands.

Boom!

"Kyaa!"

Fweee—

Yeon-Joo's hearing was momentarily disabled. She grabbed her ears and crouched down. Her consciousness began to fade away, and her chain shield lost its form.

'Authority of Shattering Air, Authority of Titanic Might.'

Kang-Woo raised his right fist, and black energy gathered around it. The black energy grew increasingly dense until it materialized. It seemed as if his fist had grown massively in size.

He lowered his hips, moved his right arm and leg back, and then rotated his torso. Kang-Woo used the force generated from the rotation to throw a punch forward.

"Skybreaker," he said.

It was a skill that required verbal activation.

A power that was a combination of the Authority of Shattering Air and the Authority of Titanic Might pushed out from his right fist.

BOOOOOOOM!!

The materialized energy brushed past Yeon-Joo and smashed against the wall of the sparring room. The one-meter-thick wall was torn apart like a piece of paper, and the sparring room crumbled.

"Ah... Ngh..." Yeon-Joo groaned.

She lost strength in her legs and fell to the floor. Yeon-Joo looked up at Kang-Woo in fear.

All those thoughts she had previously... about how she wasn't planning on losing and that she didn't think she would lose to him in her current state...? They were all nonsense.

"You monster..." Yeon-Joo mumbled quietly.

Chapter 79 - El Cuero (1)

Ring.

["Kraken's Rage" has ended.]

[You may use it again in 24 hours.]

'Amazing.'

Oh Kang-Woo looked down at the Black Pearl Coat with his eyes shining.

As expected, the coat's special effect Kraken's Rage was incredible. Although it only lasted one minute, it had pushed his Demonic Energy stat to 93, and thanks to that, he'd been able to overwhelm Cha Yeon-Joo.

'The higher the stat becomes, the better its effect will be.'

If his stats increased, the effect of increasing his stats by an absolute value would become even better.

Now he understood why people went crazy for Legendary-grade equipment.

Raising a stat by an absolute value was an irreplaceable buff for high-level Players.

'That aside, Yeon-Joo is pretty amazing.'

If they had fought before he obtained the Black Pearl Coat, he wouldn't have been able to overpower her this easily. After fighting against her, he more or less grasped how strong she was.

'She also seemed to be hiding something.'

He wasn't certain, but when he'd used Skybreaker, she had tried to do something but then decided not to. It was probably because she'd noticed that he'd used his technique in a way that would miss her.

Kang-Woo extended his hand to the collapsed Yeon-Joo.

She grabbed his hand and stood up.

"... You monster," Yeon-Joo said. At this point, she was sick of being in disbelief.

Kang-Woo shrugged.

"It was thanks to the Legendary-grade equipment."

"I also have Legendary-grade equipment." Yeon-Joo showed him her bracelet. "Are you... seriously human?"

"Why? Did you not imagine I'd overtake you in just two months?"

"Isn't that obvious? Sigh. My head hurts..." Yeon-Joo grabbed her forehead.

"But it isn't bad news, is it? I'm not your enemy, at the very least."

"... Nor can I call you a trustworthy comrade."

Yeon-Joo sighed and turned around.

Kang-Woo also turned around.

Their eyes landed on Baek Hwa-Yeon, whose face had paled. She was trembling, seemingly shocked by something else besides just their battle.

Hwa-Yeon was looking at the giant hole in the wall of the sparring room.

"D-Do..."

"Hmm?"

"Do you have any idea how expensive this sparring room is?! It cost us billions of won! How could you destroy it like this?!"

Kang-Woo looked at the wall, which had taken a direct hit from his Skybreaker. It was destroyed to the point that it was embarrassing to even call it a wall anymore.

He looked around the destroyed sparring room.

"Uhh... Mm. So..."

Kang-Woo was lost for words. To be honest, he didn't need to use Skybreaker against the wall.

Because Yeon-Joo was a high-level player, she probably could've guessed how powerful his fist had been. Therefore, the reason he'd used it anyway was out of his greed for wanting to see the power of his new Legendary gear.

Because of that lapse in judgment, he'd destroyed a sparring room that cost billions of won. He naturally felt guilty about it.

"I didn't do anything." Yeon-Joo was the first to turn a blind eye. She insisted on her innocence in all seriousness.

"What are you talking about? You damaged the sparring room too," said Kang-Woo.

"... Are you talking about the scratches on the floor that I made with my chains?"

"That's also technically damage."

"Hmph, fine. I'll also pitch in on the repair fees," Yeon-Joo said while nodding nonchalantly.

"We're both responsible, so let's each pay half," Kang-Woo remarked.

"Do you even have a conscience, you son of a bitch?"

It was harsh criticism.

Kang-Woo flinched after hearing the heavy facts, but he wasn't planning on backing off.

"I only used such a powerful attack because you were so strong."

"Okay, but still..."

"If you were someone I could win against with a couple of light attacks, I wouldn't have used an attack like that."

Fallacy disguised as logic.

"Are you trying to say that it's my fault you destroyed the wall?"

Kang-Woo nodded without hesitation.

"Your attacks were so fierce that you forced me to use such a big attack."

"Come on, let's be honest. You didn't need to use that last att—"

Yeon-Joo was right. Kang-Woo had absolutely no need to use that last attack.

"Nonsense. You know better than anyone how much refined control is required to instantly put away the energy that you'd been gathering," Kang-Woo retorted in a firm voice.

"..."

Kang-Woo looked so confident that one wouldn't think he was lying.

"As you know, it's been only two months since I became a Player. I gained great power through luck and talent, but I can't fully control my strength yet."

He was lying.

He used to control the boundless energy of the Ten Thousand Demon Core, so there was no way he wouldn't be able to control that meager amount of energy.

"Urgh!"

Yeon-Joo trembled. She suspected that Kang-Woo was lying, but she couldn't refute his words at all. After all, it was obvious that a Player who had awakened two months ago wouldn't be able to fully control their abilities.

"Son of a bitch...!"

Kang-Woo smiled.

"Alright. Let's do our best to pay the cost of repairs since we're both responsible."

"... I've never seen a person as shameless as you."

Yeon-Joo glared at Kang-Woo and let out a sigh.

The fees for repairing a sparring room made from a special alloy would easily surpass ten billion won. She could easily pay it if she used her guild's funds, but there was no way she could do that.

'I can't use my guild's funds for something like this.'

Even if she was the master of one of the five great guilds, she couldn't take tens of billions of won from the guild for personal reasons.

Kang-Woo opened his mouth and said, "I have a good idea."

While sparring, he'd thought of something good. Of course, he hadn't expected them to get into this mess when he had had this thought.

"A good idea?" Yeon-Joo asked.

"How about we hunt it together?"

"Hunt what?" Yeon-Joo tilted her head.

Kang-Woo continued, "El Cuero."

"..."

El Cuero...

It was the boss monster that appeared in Suwon's S-rank Gate that looked like a giant stingray.

El Cuero was infamous among players.

When Suwon's S-rank Gate had opened for the first time, it'd annihilated the investigation team.

After that, an unspoken rule had formed that Players should never approach the lake if they wanted to hunt in Suwon's S-rank Gate.

"... Are you saying that while knowing what kind of monster El Cuero is?"

El Cuero was strong—but that wasn't the only reason why players struggled with it.

Firstly, El Cuero was a monster that lived inside the water. It came up to the land sometimes, but it mostly attacked from inside the lake by shooting poisonous needles.

Melee warrior Players couldn't even get close enough to attack it.

Just the fact that it was an aquatic monster made it hard to hunt, but it also had a very high magical resistance, so it could block most ranged attacks.

It had been five years since Suwon's S-rank Gate had opened, but no one had managed to defeat El Cuero since then.

Of course, El Cuero wasn't an undefeatable monster. If someone gathered a huge party of high-level Players, they'd probably be able to defeat it. But in the case of El Cuero, no one had ever assembled a subjugation party. To be more precise, there wasn't a need to assemble one.

Usually, large subjugation parties were formed when monsters came out of Gates to attack civilians. Because El Cuero was an aquatic monster, there was no chance it would leave the Gate and attack civilians.

These two facts—that it was hard to defeat and that there was no need to defeat it—had made El Cuero a monster that had not been killed for five whole years.

"I know that it's hard to kill."

"It isn't just hard... If you're after the money, is there a need to hunt El Cuero?"

Although tens of billions of won was an astronomical amount of money, it wasn't that absurdly high for Players like Yeon-Joo and Kang-Woo.

They could earn that much simply by diligently hunting Giant Ogres and selling their mana stones.

"It isn't only because of money."

"Then what?"

"You said that an S-rank boss monster could drop the materials required for Legendary-grade equipment although the chances are low, right?"

"That's true, but they're not easy to make even with the necessary materials... Is this all just for Legendary gear?"

"That's one of the reasons, but I thought it could be the key to breaking the level cap."

"Oh, right. You're still at your Sixth Awakening."

Yeon-Joo looked at him in disbelief. She had completely forgotten that Kang-Woo still had yet to reach the first wall for a Player, the Limit of Effort.

He was too strong compared to his level, so she'd forgotten that his level was around the fifties.

"Then does that mean I lost against a Player around Level 50?"

Thinking about it made her realize how terrible of a loss she had suffered. Yeon-Joo sighed while making a sad expression.

"But the way to break that cap varies between Players, you know?"

"I heard that killing a boss monster is the most common way to break the cap."

"Oh, that's true."

The most common ways to overcome the Level-59 wall were to kill a boss monster, experience enlightenment, or encounter life-threatening danger. Of course, there were other ways to overcome it, but most people had overcome it through one of these three ways.

The one with the highest chance of success and the one that most people tried was, of course, killing a boss monster.

Not many people were willing to put themselves in a near-death situation or train endlessly to reach an enlightenment that might never come.

"I can overcome the level cap, and we can cover the repair fees at the same time. What do you think?"

"Wouldn't you be the only one to profit from this?"

"Of course not. Isn't it all to make our alliance stronger?"

"I guess I can't argue with that."

Yeon-Joo smirked.

Killing El Cuero would also be good for her since she herself was facing the second wall that Players faced, the Limit of Talent.

"Okay. Let's hunt El Cuero."

Yeon-Joo nodded while looking at Kang-Woo. Her eyes carried hints of fear and expectation.

'If Kang-Woo overcomes the Limit of Effort and levels up even higher...'

Her desire to see with her own eyes how much stronger this monster could become boiled within her.

Chapter 80 - El Cuero (2)

Baek Hwa-Yeon asked, "In that case, could I join the party as well?"

"Huh? You too, Hwa-Yeon?" Cha Yeon-Joo asked.

Hwa-Yeon nodded. "Well... I was the one who let outsiders use the sparring room, so I also have a bit of responsibility. If possible, I want to shoulder the repair fees with you two."

"Hwa-Yeon..." Moved, Yeon-Joo grabbed Hwa-Yeon's hands. "I knew you were different from that scumbag!"

"I can hear you, you know," Oh Kang-Woo remarked.

"You're kind, understanding, responsible... Yeah, this is how a human should be."

"Excuse me?" Kang-Woo asked.

"Thanks. I think we really have a shot now that we have you with us."

Kang-Woo remained silent. He thought that the situation was unfair.

'I thought we had a mutual understanding.'

If Yeon-Joo heard his thoughts, she would have a fit of rage.

Kang-Woo turned and looked at Hwa-Yeon, who had a sword that was almost two meters long.

'A melee class, huh...?'

It was the Player class known to be the most useless for hunting El Cuero. It was a natural assessment unless the Player had the ability to move freely underwater.

'But...'

Kang-Woo's eyes shone. To use the strategy he was thinking of, they needed a powerful melee class Player.

Hwa-Yeon would be of great help.

'I guess this is what people call a blessing in disguise.'

He had unintentionally destroyed the sparring room that would cost billions to repair, but thanks to that, he convinced Yeon-Joo and Hwa-Yeon to accompany him to hunt El Cuero.

He didn't care about money in the first place. What he needed were things that money couldn't buy.

Even if one had billions to spend, one wouldn't be able to buy Legendary-grade equipment or higher. None were for sale, so there was no way the equipment could be bought.

The same went for the leveling cap.

One couldn't break the cap with money.

'You can't buy power with money.'

It wasn't like a mobile game where one could pay to win—there was a limit in terms of what one could do with money.

He needed other things besides money to recover his old strength and become even stronger than before.

"Including Hwa-Yeon, that's four," Kang-Woo said.

"Four? Who's the other one?"

"Echidna. You've seen her before."

"Oh, right. You have a summoned beast," Yeon-Joo said as if she was sick of being surprised.

Kang-Woo nodded. He was sure that Echidna would be able to play a crucial role in the El Cuero hunt.

Yeon-Joo asked, "Then is it just gonna be us four?"

"Hmm..."

Kang-Woo thought about it for a while.

He wanted to let Kim Si-Hun's party participate, but the risk was too big.

'It's far too early for them.'

It was true that they were talented players... especially Si-Hun. If Kang-Woo hadn't existed, he likely would have become a heroic Player who broke all sorts of existing records. But for the moment, their party's average level was too low.

Kang-Woo couldn't bring them to hunt an S-rank boss monster.

'If there are too many people, it could hinder us rather than help.'

According to the plan he was thinking of, having too many people would only make things more difficult. While hunting a boss monster, it was important to keep its attention focused, and having many people only made things inefficient.

"Two—no, we could bring one more person."

"What class? A ranged damage dealer? Or a healer?"

"A melee class, if possible."

"A melee class? To hunt El Cuero? Why?"

Yeon-Joo looked at him, confused.

It was common knowledge that melee classes were the most useless Players against El Cuero.

If they were forced to choose, a tank who could protect ranged damage dealers as they attacked was most useful.

"I have a plan. It'll only work if we have multiple melee class Players."

Yeon-Joo fell into thought.

The Red Rose Guild members were all exceptional, and among them, a few were close to becoming Rankers. But the opponent wasn't an average monster...

It was El Cuero.

Yeon-Joo couldn't think of any guild member who would be of help in killing an S-rank boss monster.

"How about Captain Goo Hyun-Mo?"

"Oh, the captain of Hwarang's 2nd Squadron?"

Goo Hyun-Mo had short blond hair and always wore sunglasses. Although he looked like a third-rate gangster, he definitely had the skill.

"Mmm."

Kang-Woo nodded at Hwa-Yeon's suggestion.

Considering Hyun-Mo's performance in the battle against Oriax, he wouldn't be bad at all.

'Although it's too bad that his main stat isn't strength.'

Hyun-Mo was a dexterity-specialized warrior who dual-wielded short swords.

He had different specs than what Kang-Woo wanted, but since he was a melee class and was strong enough to be the captain of Hwarang's 2nd Squadron, his strength stat would be nothing to scoff at either.

"I am fairly acquainted with him, so I don't think there will be issues in recruiting him," Hwa-Yeon stated.

"It would be great if you could."

"Okay. Just a second."

Hwa-Yeon took out her smartphone and made a call.

[Ahem. H-How can I help you, Hwa-Yeon?]

One could hear Hyun-Mo's flustered voice through the phone. It seemed he wasn't expecting Hwa-Yeon to call him.

"There is a favor that I would like to request of you."

[Hahaha! As long as it's a favor from you, I'll do anything!!!]

'It doesn't seem to be just that.'

Hyun-Mo's voice was trembling a bit in excitement. Kang-Woo smirked at his obvious reaction.

[Captain! You did it!!]

[Will you finally escape from being forever single?!]

[Shut up!]

The voices of Hyun-Mo and his squadron members could be heard over the phone. It was hard to believe that their conversation was transpiring between a captain and his squadron members.

Hyun-Mo coughed and then continued to talk to Hwa-Yeon.

[S-So, wh-what is the favor? If it's for dinner, I know an incredible—]

"No, it's not for dinner."

[Oh... Yes, of course it isn't.]

He sounded disappointed.

Hwa-Yeon explained the situation and told him that she wanted his help in hunting El Cuero.

[El Cuero, huh...?]

"If you feel it's too much, I can ask someone el—"

[N-No! Since it's a favor for you, I'll help you in any way I can. Hahaha! I've wanted to hunt El Cuero at least once!]

"That's good to hear."

[I'll take a helicopter and make my way there right now!]

"No. There's no need for—"

[Hahaha! Maybe we can have dinner while looking around Seoul if I arrive too early!]

"I have to draw up a report regarding the destroyed sparring room, so I don't think I will have the time."

[Oh... Yes. I see. O-Of course. You must be busy...]

"I would appreciate it if you could give me a call when you set out. A member of the 3rd Squadron will come pick you up."

[...Okay. I will make sure to call.]

The call ended.

"Hmm... Captain Goo's spirits suddenly dampened. I wonder what happened?"

Hwa-Yeon tilted her head in confusion, unable to understand Hyun-Mo's reaction.

Kang-Woo and Yeon-Joo looked at her silently. It was as if they were asking if she seriously didn't know why.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Uhhh..."

"Hmm. That aside, I wasn't expecting him to be so excited about hunting El Cuero. I'm glad I didn't cause trouble for him."

"She's for real."

"Yeah, she really doesn't know."

"Hmm? What's wrong?" Hwa-Yeon asked while looking at both of them, who were looking back at her in disbelief.

Kang-Woo and Yeon-Joo exchanged glances with each other.

"Let's just leave it be."

"Yeah. I don't want to go through the trouble."

An alliance of silence was formed.

"What are you two talking about?"

"Nothing at all," Kang-Woo replied.

"More importantly, when are we going?" Yeon-Joo changed the topic.

"As soon as possible."

"I need to let my guild members know, and I have some stuff to organize, so... it will probably take about three days.

Hwa-Yeon said, "It will also take me a few days to write and submit the report. Regarding the destruction of the sparring room, I will come up with a different reason that doesn't negatively affect you two."

"Then let's go in three days. I will send you the details of the strategy after I conduct some more research."

After nodding, Kang-Woo turned around. He had three days, and he also had something to do besides planning a strategy.

'First, I'll reach Level 59.'

He was currently at Level 54 and hadn't reached the Limit of Effort. To know if hunting El Cuero would let him break through the limit or not, he had to reach Level 59 first.

"In that case, let's meet at 2 PM in three days in front of the gate," Hwa-Yeon said.

Kang-Woo and Yeon-Joo nodded at Hwa-Yeon's words.

* * *

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

[Your level has risen.]

[You have reached Level 59. Your level has been restricted. All experience gained from now on will be accumulated and applied all at once after the restriction is lifted.]

"Hmm. I guess the restriction also applies to me."

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue while reading the blue message window.

Talented players had a higher chance of overcoming the restriction. In that sense, Kang-Woo's talent was beyond other people's, so he thought that maybe his level wouldn't be restricted.

However, not everything went as one wanted in life.

Kang-Woo closed the message window and turned around.

"Kang-Woo, it's time."

"Perfect timing. Let's go back out into the entrance."

"Are we going to kill the monster you talked about today?"

"Yeah."

"I'll do my best to be of help to you."

Echidna, who had been helping him hunt for the past three days, clenched her fists.

Kang-Woo smirked and patted her head.

Echidna grabbed his hand and rubbed her cheek against it.

"I trust you," Kang-Woo said.

"Can you give me a reward this time too if I do well?"

Echidna looked up at him expectantly.

Kang-Woo nodded.

"Of course."

"Hm! Hm! I'll do my best," Echidna said while snorting.

Accompanied by the energetic Echidna, Kang-Woo walked out of the Gate.

Yeon-Joo, Hwa-Yeon, and Hyun-Mo were already waiting in front of the Gate.

"Huh? You were already inside?" Yeon-Joo asked.

"Yeah. I've been hunting a bit," Kang-Woo replied.

"... You didn't needlessly waste energy before facing the boss monster, did you?"

"Don't worry. I hunted in moderation."

After greeting Yeon-Joo, Kang-Woo greeted Hyun-Mo and Hwa-Yeon.

He then said, "Alright, I will explain the strategy."

While hunting for the past three days, Kang-Woo had refined his strategy for hunting El Cuero.

"The core of this strategy is..."