

Level 4 Human in a Ruined World #Chapter 281 - Read Level 4 Human in a Ruined World Chapter 281

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

Chapter 281: Karma (2)

‘Huh? The head of the Military Affairs...?’

Yeongwoo blinked his eyes wide open.

「Desirak, Head of Military Affairs, is completing the grading sheet.」

The head of Military Affairs, who was filling out the grading sheet, was undeniably the same ‘Desirak’ that Yeongwoo had encountered in the dungeon.

‘No way, he's still alive?’

From being the personal guard of the first prince to the head of Military Affairs at an intergalactic arms company.

“.....”

What kind of life had Desirak lived?

It also hinted at something significant—that a royal guard from the royal family was now employed at a company.

This could imply that the Vesedel royal family no longer existed.

‘Of course, it could just be that he followed the prince he served out into the secular world... But Desirak served the chairman, who was the first prince, right?’

That would mean he was the destined heir to the throne.

In other words, if nothing else had happened, the chairman would have become the king of Vesedel by now.

But at least as far as Yeongwoo knew...

‘Isn’t the chairman not the king? He’s known as the “King of Destruction,” but I don’t think he’s that king.’

His thoughts became more complicated.

One thing was certain, though: the company 'Dogo' was founded by the chairman, who was once the first prince of the Vesedel royal family, along with his followers.

They had established the company with none other than the royal family.

「The grading is complete.」

Finally, the four instructors had finished grading, and the grading sheet of Desirak, the head of Military Affairs, whom Yeongwoo knew, if only from a distant memory, was revealed first.

[Head of Military Affairs, Desirak]

"An overwhelming sense of déjà vu, as if witnessing the chairman's youth."

[Total score: 113/100]

"Oh, department head."

Head of Military Affairs Desirak gave a score of 113 out of 100, exceeding the maximum score.

His brief comment also seemed to be sentimental, as if recalling something from the past.

On the other hand, the evaluation from the head of development, which was revealed next, was:

[Head of Development, Talgia]

"The second step toward transcendence."

[Total score: 101/100]

‘101? That's a bit subtle...?’

He awarded 101 points, just one point over the maximum score.

It was a good performance, but perhaps he didn't want to be too generous with the points.

The brief comment also seemed to have a double meaning.

- The second step toward transcendence.

This referred to both the name of the second transcendence language Yeongwoo had learned, as well as implying that Yeongwoo, who was once insignificant, was gradually transcending his origins.

‘But if it’s the second step, shouldn’t it be 102 points? That’s pretty strict.’

Still, the score spoke for itself.

The head of development was quite satisfied too.

The fact that he intentionally gave a score over 100 was enough to show his approval.

‘Well, then.’

As Yeongwoo looked for the next evaluation, the grading sheet from the shareholders' alliance was revealed.

Flash!

[Dogo Shareholders' Alliance]

"Judged as a favorable sign for the stock market. However, non-killing is somewhat disappointing."

[Total score: 92/100]

‘Damn, what do these guys want me to do?’

92 points.

Although this was also a sufficiently high score, seeing it after the two prior scores that exceeded 100 made Yeongwoo feel frustrated.

Perhaps because the shareholders' alliance consisted of many members, they seemed to want Yeongwoo to follow the company’s existing policies as the company’s promotional model.

‘Still, the average score is over 100 so far.’

Currently, the total average score was 102 points.

Thus, the score from the final grader, the chairman, was extremely important.

If the chairman awarded a score that brought the average below 100, Yeongwoo might not be able to receive the hidden reward from the dungeon.

In other words, a minimum score of 98 was needed.

‘Aren’t we business partners in developing Earth now? Please keep that in mind.’

As Yeongwoo mumbled this to himself while waiting for the result, a brilliant light spread before his eyes.

Swaaa!

Then, the title ‘Chairman Dogo’ was engraved in the air as the grading sheet he left behind appeared.

[Chairman Dogo]

"Surpassing the limits of violent business."

[Total score: 120/100]

“Oh, oh...!”

A score of 120 points.

Yeongwoo, without realizing it, stretched his arms wide into the air and shouted.

“Chairmaaannn!”

And almost at the same moment.

Fwaaaa!

As the portal that had been holding Yeongwoo in place released its grip, his body was sent back to Earth.

Whoosh!

“Huh?”

Due to the sudden reactivation of the portal, Yeongwoo, who had his arms raised to the sky, stumbled forward and fell face-first to the ground.

Thud!

Immediately, Seoul's severe weather, with its intense cold and a massive snowstorm, engulfed him, but it didn't matter.

「A reward for completing the dungeon will soon be delivered. Please prepare.」

Because he had earned an extra reward from the crazy dungeon that Dogo had created.

‘A reward delivery? Is it going to fall from the sky again?’

Lying on the ground, Yeongwoo looked up through the blizzard and noticed the two slaves who had been waiting for him at the exit tilting their heads.

- Kiit?

- Bat...?

And soon, their pupils reflected something.

Shhh!

A massive steel box, trailing a long tail like a comet, was cutting through the snowstorm towards them.

“...Huh?”

Yeongwoo’s expression became puzzled as he saw the reward being delivered in a box.

“It’s not a Catalog?”

Until now, the extra rewards from dungeons had always been in the form of a Catalog, which was delivered instantly by the system instead of coming in a box.

In other words, if it wasn’t a Catalog, then what was it?

As Yeongwoo slowly stood up, the steel box accelerated and—

Boom!

With an ear-splitting roar, it landed right in front of Yeongwoo.

“...?”

The box was much larger than expected, almost the size of a container.

“Is there a monster inside or something?”

As Yeongwoo said this, the golden goblin dropped its ears to the sides and retreated.

Meanwhile, Pofu Tenta was already pulling out a trumpet from its belly, preparing to support him in battle.

This was the difference between a porter and a combat musician.

However, the situation didn't escalate to the point where Pofu Tenta needed to play its dreadful music.

Clank! Clank!

Soon, a loud unlocking sound came from inside the steel box, and then—

Boom!

The box's lid was blown off into the distance with a powerful explosion.

“...?”

Then, all four sides of the box unfolded simultaneously, revealing the true identity of the reward inside.

[Translator - Night]

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Bweee...!

Seeing what was inside the box, Negwig groaned and raised its front paw.

It was no wonder, as the extra reward delivered from the outer atmosphere was none other than a suit of armor, the same as the one worn by the chairman.

The armor, standing upright on a large wedge-shaped stand as if it were alive, was immaculately clean without a single scratch, as if it had been taken straight from the body of the first prince, Dogo.

「Legitimacy」 - Vesedel Royal Armor

【Vesedel Royal Family's Protection】

【Resilient Defense】

【Adapts to any planet.】

【Increases resistance to abnormal abilities by up to 5%.】

【--Empty Slot--】

【--Empty Slot--】

【--Empty Slot--】

◇ Dogo: Advertisement Space

‘What the... How many lines of options does this have?’

The armor had eight lines of options: two special options with separate tooltips, two regular options, three empty slots, and even a special Dogo option.

“...My God.”

As Yeongwoo approached the armor with his mouth agape, the tooltip for the special options finally appeared.

【Vesedel Royal Family’s Protection】

|This armor serves as a symbol of the royal family.

【Resilient Defense】

|30% of the damage taken is distributed over 3 seconds.

“Huh...?”

While the royal family's protection undoubtedly had some significant potential, what immediately caught Yeongwoo's attention was the "Resilient Defense."

Distributing 30% of the damage over 3 seconds essentially meant that only 70% of the initial impact would be applied.

‘The grade is just labeled as Vesedel. Is royal family equipment treated specially or something?’

「Legitimacy」 - Vesedel Royal Armor

The area where the grade of “Legitimacy” should have been listed simply read “Vesedel” without any other markings.

While equipment made directly by Dogo also had ◇ Dogo in the grade area, it usually came with additional indicators to show it was crafted gear.

However, "Vesedel" was being treated like an official grade, on par with unique, epic, or legendary designations.

It seemed to be a universally recognized grade, acknowledged across the entire universe.

'What exactly does a royal family represent in this universe? If it's recognized to this extent, there must be something truly special about it.'

With a suddenly tense expression, Yeongwoo approached the full-body armor, "Legitimacy."

The armor had been sized precisely to fit his height and was designed to cover his entire body, excluding his head.

The helmet was missing, likely to ensure that he wouldn't look exactly like the chairman.

"Oh?"

It was at this moment that Yeongwoo recalled something.

"The statue!"

Wasn't the statue his friends assembled in the returnee's room the same as this?

'Wait, how did Toma know about this? And in advance, too?'

Just as a chill was about to creep down his spine, Negwig snorted behind him.

Pshhh!

-Kwii!!

Was it urging him to try it on?

Come to think of it, the third option of this armor was identical, word for word, to Negwig's option.

「Negwig」 - Unknown Grade

【Adapts to any planet.】

While Yeongwoo didn't fully understand Negwig's background, it seemed likely that it had some connection to the Vesedel royal family.

"Alright, let's try it on."

Finally, as Yeongwoo placed his hand on the surface of "Legitimacy," the armor suddenly disassembled into hundreds of metal pieces that scattered in all directions before quickly enveloping him.

Chachachak!

"Ugh, argh!"

Pofu Tenta hastily blew its trumpet, but it had no effect on the armor.

"Why is it equipping like this...?!"

Stumbling in shock, Yeongwoo watched as "Legitimacy," now wrapped around his entire body, began to reform into a suit of armor.

Shrrk, clank!

This armor was designed to be worn in such an intimidating manner from the start.

Now fully encased in solid metal from head to toe, Yeongwoo's appearance was unmistakably similar to that of the chairman, Dogo.

Yet, despite the striking resemblance, his humble origins were still evident.

Fwaaash!

As soon as the armor finished equipping, a holographic wedge symbol of Dogo appeared above Yeongwoo's right upper arm.

"Huh, this is..."

The Dogo emblem was projected from the "Blank" advertisement tattoo hidden beneath the armor.

So the Dogo option attached to the bottom of the "Legitimacy" armor was actually a feature that projected ads even over the armor itself.

◇ Dogo: Advertisement Space

'Seriously? They're so obsessed with advertising that they modified royal armor to include it?'

But then again, 「Dogo」 was fundamentally a for-profit organization.

Based on the shareholder's assessment content, it seemed to be a cosmic mega-corporation listed somewhere.

‘Why are they working so hard for something like this?’

As Yeongwoo looked up at the sky in disbelief, he noticed a star twinkling at the tip of the tower lodged in Gangnam.

“...?”

Yeongwoo blinked and focused on the tower.

Then, a moment later...

Blink, blink!

The top of the tower flashed a couple more times.

The "brothers" were using the path that the vanguard had cleared to continue constructing the elevated road.

“No way, really?”

Yeongwoo quickly checked the time.

Swipe.*

Current time: 2:38 AM.

It was the dead of night, in the middle of a brutal cold snap, and yet the tower in Gangnam flashed once again.

Seeing this, Yeongwoo became certain.

“My God.”

While he had been struggling in the dungeon, the orcs... no, his "brothers," had been working through the night to build roads.

The thought of these "brothers," enduring the bizarre weather of various countries with nothing but the will to pave the way for vengeance, made Yeongwoo's steel heart burn with emotion.

“They really work without any rights since they're not human...”

Just then, another beam of light shot through the blizzard, heading toward China.

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

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Chapter 282: Karma (3)

3:16 AM.

When Yeongwoo returned to the room, Jeonggu, who had been sleeping in the living room, greeted him.

“What the... what time is it?”

Jeonggu groggily half-opened his eyes and looked around, while Yeongwoo brought the Golden Goblin and Pofu Tenta inside and closed the door.

Thud.

“It’s a little past three. Is the bedroom empty?”

“Yeah. Madam and the kids were watching TV but moved to a separate room.”

“Oh, I see.”

Yeongwoo nodded at Jeonggu’s words, then took off his cloak, ‘Cosmic Etiquette,’ and placed it on the living room table.

This revealed the new armor, ‘Legitimacy,’ that had been hidden underneath.

“Huh? What’s this now?”

Jeonggu’s eyes widened in surprise.

His son, who used to walk around without any clothes on, now appeared wrapped head to toe in armor, so it was only natural that Jeonggu was taken aback.

“What did you get yourself into this time?”

“...Dungeon reward.”

“A dungeon reward looks like this?”

Jeonggu asked with a tone suggesting he wanted more explanation, but Yeongwoo didn’t feel the need to elaborate.

How could he possibly explain everything—like how he learned the backstory of their main sponsor, 「Dogo」 and how this armor was closely related to that backstory—all from a dungeon he had explored during the night?

“I need to get some sleep. Tomorrow will probably be another crazy day.”

Yeongwoo ended the conversation and headed to the bedroom.

Clank, clank.

Because ‘Legitimacy’ covered him from head to toe, his every step sounded like the clanking of metal, almost like that of a creature in armor.

‘Anyone who sees me might mistake me for a monster. Good thing I don’t have a helmet.’

Finally reaching the bedside, Yeongwoo drew his sword and stood it next to the bed, then lay down on the sheets, still in his armor.

Sigh.

As the bed sank under his weight, Yeongwoo’s consciousness began to fade.

‘Tomorrow will be another busy day.’

The oath with the Red-footed Orcs, the high-speed transport routes spreading like spider webs across Earth, and the upcoming battle over Earth’s development rights...

As Yeongwoo recalled the previous day's events, his consciousness dimmed a little more with each thought.

Until finally.

As if a switch had been flipped, his consciousness completely turned off.

...

...

Ring... Ring!

...

Riiing!

...

An irritating sound broke through.

‘...Damn it.’

Yeongwoo cursed in his mind.

It was the morning call from the room, signaling that morning had already come.

By now, he was experienced enough with resets that this doomed world’s morning calls no longer felt strange to him.

But instead.

‘I seriously don’t remember getting any sleep?’

A sense of injustice washed over him.

It was like the feeling of waking up on a Monday morning.

Yeongwoo had no choice but to open his eyes.

Pop!

Instantly, updated notifications about his gear appeared in his vision.

「Strength has permanently increased by 100 due to the Furious Goblin.」

「The usage count of the Whistle has been recharged.」

Then, as the irritating morning call threatened to assault his eardrums again, Yeongwoo quickly picked up the receiver.

Click.

Normally, what followed would be a chilling voice announcing the time remaining until checkout, but this time.

Flash!

《Dogo informs you that you have 1 hour and 59 minutes remaining until checkout.》

“Huh?”

A voice Yeongwoo had never heard before echoed in his ears.

And it was a very clear voice at that.

“Dogo is informing me?”

As far as Yeongwoo knew, morning calls were within the realm of the reset system.

The morning call itself was part of the lodging system, and lodging in residences was one of the basic services introduced at the time of the reset.

So the fact that ‘Dogo’ could now intervene in such morning calls...

‘What is this? Does it have something to do with the planetary development rights?’

Of course, it could be that this new feature applied only to him, their direct model.

But regardless of who it applied to, the fact that Dogo could now alter morning calls in a world undergoing a reset hinted at something significant.

‘So planetary development isn’t just about laying down roads and such, huh?’

Yeongwoo placed the receiver back down and then tried to check his wristwatch.

Swish.

But instead of the wristwatch that had definitely been there yesterday, holographic numbers floated above his armor.

[08:02]

The current time was 8:02 AM.

Soon, a tooltip for the equipment also appeared.

「Gauge」 - Relic Tool

【Displays the time on the planet where you are currently located.】

◇ Dogo: Interacts with head office products

◇ Dogo: Multi-display

《Congratulations on surviving the 7th day.》

So, this was...

“A watch?”

To be exact, it was a special watch that worked even outside of space and had been specially modified by the company.

Since he didn't have such equipment before going to sleep, it was clear that it had been provided along with the morning call.

And judging by the additional note at the bottom of the tooltip:

《Congratulations on surviving the 7th day.》

'So, it's a commemorative watch for surviving seven days of reset.'

Given the use of honorific language, it felt less like a gift from the chairman and more like something from the company staff.

'Is surviving for seven days really something worth celebrating...? Ah, I guess so.'

Yeongwoo tilted his head in confusion for a moment but soon understood.

He also realized something new:

Even Dogo didn't know how long their contracted models would survive.

They might not have thought much of the contract in the early stages, but at some point, the company must have watched Earth's reset progress with growing anxiety.

《Congratulations on surviving the 7th day.》

Otherwise, they wouldn't have left a congratulatory note celebrating survival.

'Well, anyway, I need to finish today's tasks.'

After inspecting the watch for a while, Yeongwoo stood up abruptly and grabbed his sword.

He then headed to the still-quiet living room.

“.....”

It seemed like Seok and the kids in the separate room were still lost in dreamland, and Jeonggu had slipped off the living room sofa and was lying on the floor.

Yeongwoo slowly walked over to the sofa and nudged his father with his foot.

“Father, wake up.”

Jeonggu, who had been sleeping like the dead, slowly opened his eyes.

“...What did you say?”

“I said, wake up.”

“Oh.”

Seeing the sunlight streaming in through the curtains, Jeonggu frowned.

He, too, had barely slept, just like Yeongwoo.

“What time is it?”

“It’s a little past 8.”

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

“Then I can sleep a bit more. Checkout isn’t until 10.”

Jeonggu muttered this as he tried to go back to sleep on the living room floor, but Yeongwoo nudged his thigh again with his foot.

“Hey, how dare you kick your own father?”

“Someone might come later. Since I’ll likely be out of Seoul then, you’ll have to greet them.”

“What?”

At the mention that a guest of Yeongwoo, the Absolute Demon, might come to Seoul, Jeonggu shot up from the floor.

“Is this guest even human?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, really?”

Hearing that a human would be visiting, Jeonggu’s expression relaxed a bit, and Yeongwoo, standing at the door, added some final words.

“One of my former colleagues will be bringing money from Busan. It should be about 8.6 million.”

“A colleague? You have human colleagues?”

“.....”

As Jeonggu kept pestering him with questions, Yeongwoo squeezed Bastard in annoyance.

Squeak.

Seeing this, Jeonggu waved his hands, signaling he'd stop.

“Okay, I get it. So, what should I do with the money?”

“Just keep it somewhere safe. You'll need to hand it to me when I get back. Also, don't forget to pick up money from Incheon this evening.”

Yeongwoo meticulously laid out his father's tasks for the day, prompting Jeonggu to ask one last crucial question.

“What's this guest's name?”

“Kang Yechan.”

“Kang Yechan?”

“Yes. He's pretty strong, so stay close to him if anything happens.”

* * *

8:11 AM.

After leaving the hotel, Yeongwoo headed straight for the 'Tower' that had been erected in Gangnam the night before.

'I need to hurry.'

As Jeonggu had mentioned, he could safely rest in the room until the checkout time of 10 AM.

However, there was only one reason why Yeongwoo was rushing to start his day.

'By now, the Standing Committee members from Beijing would have visited all the nearby cities.'

Therefore, for Yeongwoo, whose business model involved offering "less tribute than usual," now was the time to start his operations.

To borrow the chairman's words, it was time to launch a massive campaign of "violence beyond limits."

"Today, I'm going to need you to work hard. We need to head to China via the overpass and return here before 1 o'clock."

As Yeongwoo spoke encouragingly to Negwig, it lifted its head slightly and responded with a brief sound.

-Squeeeeak!

Was it just his imagination, or did Negwig seem unusually excited?

Crash, crash!

Soon, the "Tower" built by the Red-footed Orcs filled Yeongwoo and Negwig's field of vision.

Already, a crowd of nearby residents had gathered around it, chattering excitedly.

A few brave souls were even touching the surface of the tower.

'Everywhere the roads have been laid will probably look like this.'

Yeongwoo didn't know how far his brothers had extended the road construction, but whether it was China, Russia, or Mongolia, there was no way people would just stand by and watch the sudden appearance of the tower.

Most likely, crowds were gathering to observe it everywhere, just like here, or they were already attempting to demolish it.

"Don't worry! This is ours!"

As Yeongwoo shouted this and headed straight for the tower, its surface began to glow brightly, forming an arched entrance just for him.

Sssss!

"Huh?"

"What... what's going on?"

"A door just appeared...?"

The residents, still fearful of the mysterious tower, watched with their mouths agape as Yeongwoo entered it.

Day 7 of the reset.

No matter how adaptable humans were, it wasn't easy to accept alien structures as their own in just a week.

On the other hand, as Yeongwoo stepped into the tower—

Piiii!

His entire field of vision was suddenly filled with light, and he felt his body being lifted hundreds of meters into the air.

“.....”

His brothers, who had personally built the tower and the overpass, must have also risen into the sky like this.

Swoosh!

Soon, Yeongwoo completed his ascent and arrived in a circular space with a diameter of 20 meters.

'This is only my second visit, but every time I come here, it stirs something in my heart.'

This was the very top of the tower.

The user could use the round table device in the center of this space to check the status of the high-speed transit routes or decide whether to expand the roads.

It was a choice between following the already built roads or becoming the road himself.

"Let's see how much work my brothers have done."

As Yeongwoo placed his hand on the round table, a holographic globe of Earth appeared.

Flash!

He marked the current location, Seoul, with a wedge-shaped icon.

This indicated that the user was currently here.

Then—

Whooosh!

From Seoul, silver lines representing the high-speed transit routes began to spread out in all directions.

".....?"

The merciless employer, Jeong Yeongwoo⁰⁷, widened his eyes in amazement.

"Wha... did they do all this in just one night?"

What Yeongwoo had originally ordered were roads leading to various parts of China.

The very reason he had assigned this construction to his brothers was to pave the way for revenge against 'Mara.'

Even Yeongwoo's only basis for this was his strong suspicion that Mara might be hiding behind China.

Perhaps that was why his brothers seemed to have anticipated the possibility that Mara might not be behind China after all.

The roads were already being built across Japan, Australia, and even toward the Philippines.

'Do they really plan to cover the entire world with roads?'

While Yeongwoo did intend to make them build more roads somehow, he hadn't expected his brothers to take the initiative and expand this crazily on their own.

This was nothing short of...

'...madness.'

Well, how deep must the desire for revenge be against the one who killed countless kin and stole their homeland?

Yeongwoo gazed at the routes already covering Eastern China with a newfound sense of reverence.

He then pointed to the city of 'Tongliao,' a place he couldn't visit yesterday due to the physical distance.

Even riding Negwig at full speed would have taken half a day to reach that city, but now he could invade it within a matter of minutes.

After Yeongwoo pounded his fist on the round table, the interior lit up momentarily, and one of the walls opened up, revealing a high-speed road resembling the Milky Way.

A path of light, built by migrant workers from beyond our galaxy.

Now, by setting foot on it, he could travel to the next tower at near-light speed.

Swoosh.

Yeongwoo mounted Negwig again, then pointed his sword into the vast void beyond and shouted:

"Let's go! My brothers have lit the way!"

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

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Chapter 283: Karma (4)

Tongliao.

A city in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, and the next destination recommended by Dalian Swordmaster, Tian Zhulin, the guardian of Dalian City, to Yeongwoo.

The reason she advised him to visit Tongliao was simple—it was an extremely dangerous area.

Tongliao, where 50% of the population was Mongolian, was a place where anti-government protests demanding independence from China occurred even right up to the Reset.

This meant that the atmosphere was already tense before the Reset.

Then, with the advent of the Reset and countless swords falling from the sky, one can only imagine what kind of chaos unfolded in Tongliao.

At the very least, the Han Chinese didn't even attempt to approach Tongliao, and as a result, only eerie rumors circulated about the place.

Some said the Mongolians occupying Tongliao were preparing to march on Beijing, while others claimed that even the beggars lying by the roadside in Tongliao were at the level of elite swordsmen from other cities.

"....."

Of course, Yeongwoo knew nothing of this background, and merely thought that Tongliao would be stronger than other cities.

After all, from Dalian City's perspective, they would have picked a city capable of adequately dealing with a troublesome guy from the Korean Peninsula.

'How strong could a place like Tongliao be? If it's such a troublesome city that Dalian City knows about it, Im Dupyeong must have considered it a potential threat as well.'

If that was the case, wouldn't Im Dupyeong have sent an even stronger collection team to Tongliao?

So far, Yeongwoo had dealt with two collection teams: one led by Zhang Jinshan, the 6th Standing Committee member, and another by Baek Gangryang, the 4th Standing Committee member.

Assuming the Standing Committee was still composed of six members like before the Reset, four members, including Im Dupyeong, the 1st Standing Committee member, remained.

'Well, if you look at it positively, I've already dealt with a third of the Standing Committee, who were only six in number.'

This would have severely disrupted Im Dupyeong's collection operations.

As Yeongwoo had felt yesterday, China was too vast a land.

Now, Im Dupyeong had only three collection teams left.

Perhaps Im Dupyeong himself was directly involved in the collection operations.

'Where is he spending all that money? Whether he invests it in equipment or abilities, he's surely become an enormous monster by now.'

While Yeongwoo pondered various things, Negwig carrying him was speeding down a path of light.

On the ground, Yeongwoo and the creature would have appeared as a rapidly moving shooting star.

However, Yeongwoo wasn't even aware that he was moving at such a high speed.

He was calmly investing in his abilities in preparation for a battle with Im Dupyeong.

* Available Karma: 85,212,500

* Available Defense Funds: 78,967,105

‘Hmm. My balance is more than enough.’

The top number represented his personal assets, while the bottom one was akin to a national treasury.

Using national funds required keeping a separate ledger and disclosing the usage to the public.

In contrast, personal assets could be freely used as before.

So Yeongwoo decided to increase his abilities using his personal funds first.

‘Anyway, when the mutants appear this afternoon, I’ll need to visit the shop, so I’ll spend a clean 60 million.’

[Strength] 7,700 (19+7,681)

[Endurance] 6,348 (21+6,327)

[Durability] 7,498 (13+7,485)

[Sensitivity] 3,500 (24+3,476)

There were a total of four basic abilities.

Yeongwoo evenly invested 10 million in each ability and hesitated momentarily before adding an extra 20 million to Sensitivity.

This was to ensure the effect of the ring "Agility."

「Agility」 - Mutant Ring

【When Sensitivity is the highest ability, gain 10% damage reduction.】

Currently, Yeongwoo's ability boosting mechanism consisted of two main components.

The first was the "Masochism" effect from the epic jewel attached to the Fearful Cat.

【When bleeding, Strength increases by 25%.】

The second was the Sensitivity stealing from the Golden Flash.

However, with Strength now so high, the Agility effect was hard to trigger unless it was a one-against-many fight.

‘Damage reduction is a rare and valuable effect. It’s best to trigger all of them if possible.’

This was a kind of big data Yeongwoo had gathered from handling far more equipment than others. As a result, his final abilities were:

[Strength] 8,700 (19+8,681)

[Endurance] 7,348 (21+7,327)

[Durability] 8,498 (13+8,485)

[Sensitivity] 6,500 (24+6,476)

‘Even with this setup, I need a Sensitivity steal of about 4,400 for Agility to trigger. Not easy at all.’

Of course, he was already a sufficient monster with a total ability score of 31,000.

But would it be enough to face Im Dupyeong, who had been on an extraordinary path since the first day of the Reset?

Shhhhhooo!

Meanwhile, Negwig continued to carry Yeongwoo at incredible speed, and soon an alarm appeared in Yeongwoo’s vision, indicating that they were about to reach their destination, Tongliao.

Paht!

The alarm showed Yeongwoo his exact position on the route in real-time.

‘What the heck? Did these guys build a tower right in the middle of Tongliao?’

Yeongwoo’s mouth fell open when he saw that the next tower, or stop, on the route was located right in the middle of Tongliao on the map.

It seemed that the overly zealous brothers had built stations in every major city in China.

This, of course, meant that.

‘The tower must already be surrounded.’

As soon as Yeongwoo came to this conclusion, Negwig's movement across the sky ceased.

Swaat!

This indicated that they had finally arrived at the station unlawfully set up in Tongliao.

However, they were still 800 meters above ground in a booth, so neither Yeongwoo nor the citizens of Tongliao could see each other yet.

'Have the experts in Tongliao already come out early?'

Since China had different title systems in each city, it was hard to predict the next opponent's title.

Some cities had Swordmasters, others had Five Heroes, and some had Twin Evils...

'Is it because the land is so vast?'

Clang!

Yeongwoo jumped down from the creature's back and stood in front of the round table in the center of the room.

Then, an interface appeared, asking whether he wanted to resume his journey or descend. Without hesitation, Yeongwoo chose to descend.

'This is the first time I'm using the path for its original purpose.'

Of course, this "original purpose" was something Yeongwoo had decided on his own.

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

But since it was Dogo who provided the design plans for this road, Yeongwoo figured that anyone in that crazy company would have used it just like he was about to.

Thump!

Shortly after, the entire room Yeongwoo was in briefly vibrated, and bright light filled the walls and floor.

Swaaaah!

Then...

Paht!

In an instant, Yeongwoo's body blurred, and in the blink of an eye, he was transported down to the ground floor.

'...This is incredible. But does this mean they'll soon use this technology to remodel the entire Earth...?'

However, what Yeongwoo needed to focus on right now wasn't the astonishing technology of Dogo.

Clank!

The tower's walls on the ground level suddenly opened, creating an entrance.

Beyond it, just as expected, a throng of Tongliao's residents had gathered, blackening the area with their sheer numbers.

"...Huh?"

"They're walking out?"

"What is that?"

Not a single one of them was without a weapon, and about 30% of the visible residents were heavily armed.

There were a significant number of people wearing grade equipment, not just standard-issue gear.

"Oh dear, it's nice to meet you all."

As Yeongwoo slowly led his mount, Negwig, out of the tower, the citizens who had surrounded the strange structure took a few steps back.

Even so, they didn't forget to shout threats, pointing their weapons at him bravely.

"St-stop!"

"Don't move!"

But it seemed they couldn't quite believe that the person emerging from the alien-looking 'tower' was one of their own, a fellow human from Earth.

"It really does look like a person."

“Is that a person?”

“It... looks similar to a person?”

Although some in the crowd were uttering words like ‘human’ and ‘person,’ they were always accompanied by qualifiers like ‘almost’ or ‘similar.’

And in the meantime—

Clang, bang!

From the opposite side of where Yeongwoo was facing off against the citizens, sounds of people striking the tower with their weapons could be heard.

‘Good thing I tested it yesterday.’

Hearing those sounds, Yeongwoo nodded in satisfaction.

Then, thinking he should stir things up a bit more, he deliberately took a big step forward.

Thump!

The hundred or so citizens who had been watching him screamed as if they had just encountered a wild beast.

“D-don’t move!”

“Are you crazy? Move again, and we’ll consider it an invasion!”

Despite their threatening words, their swords wavered weakly.

“.....”

Knowing that he could handle everyone present without so much as a scratch, Yeongwoo silently waited for the next move.

Finally—

“H-hurry, get to City Hall!”

“Quickly!”

The words Yeongwoo had been waiting for reached his ears.

At last, they were calling upon the real strongmen of this city.

But the truth was, those strongmen were already—

Whoosh!

Swoosh!

—rapidly approaching the tower from different directions, each emanating a distinct aura.

‘Two... no, three?’

The ominous presences closing in from three sides made Yeongwoo realize that these people were different from those in other cities.

Because—

Screeeech!

—their first response to this strange and suspicious visitor was none other than a preemptive strike.

This could be seen as reckless, but on the other hand, it could also mean they were strong enough to be so reckless.

And in most cases, their strength was indeed the latter.

「Your sense stat has temporarily increased from 6,500 to 8,134.」

「Your sense stat has temporarily increased from 8,134 to 10,511.」

「Your sense stat has temporarily increased from 10,511 to 12,008.」

‘What? Who are these guys?’

Indeed, the abilities of the three swordsmen were overwhelming, and Yeongwoo, startled, quickly assumed a defensive stance.

He directed the golden trail that had been waiting behind him to the left to handle one of them, while he himself drew a dagger from his coat.

Then, he blocked the incoming blade from the front with his dagger.

Ping!

He had taken this action to avoid accidentally killing his opponent if he had used his full power.

Only then did the opponent's face and the title attached to it come into view.

『Tongliao's Three Swords』

‘Ah, this is the Three Swords system.’

It was probably something like First Sword, Second Sword, and so on.

And the opponent currently crossing blades with Yeongwoo—

“The First Sword...?”

『First Sword』

The title simply read ‘First Sword,’ and the opponent's eyes were filled with unease.

But wasn't there supposed to be one more swordsman?

Counting the man currently locked in a power struggle with the golden trail and the woman who had just crossed blades with Yeongwoo, that made two.

‘So, the one coming from behind now must be...’

Sensing the reappearance of the aura that had disappeared earlier, Yeongwoo deliberately turned his body slightly.

Just like in Shandong, he planned to let the third swordsman pierce his heart and leave a lasting impression on them.

However—

Ping!

The blade of the surprise attacker from behind didn't even reach Yeongwoo's skin, let alone his heart.

The armor he wore, ‘Legitimacy,’ effortlessly deflected the blade that should have pierced his heart.

“Damn it. I was supposed to put on a heart-stopping show.”

As his planned scenario fell apart from the start, Yeongwoo glanced around, slightly flustered.

What he saw were the frightened faces of the citizens of Tongliao.

And no wonder—they had just witnessed someone emerge from an alien structure and simultaneously take on all three of Tongliao's Three Swords.

So, Yeongwoo quickly changed his approach.

Whoosh!

He grabbed the arm of the female swordsman who had first crossed blades with him and swiftly brought his dagger to her neck.

Whoosh!

"Wha...?"

Yeongwoo's movement was so fast that it was unbelievable, leaving the opponent—Tongliao's Second Sword, Huang Shengli—too shocked even to think of attempting anything.

"W-who the hell are you?"

As Huang Shengli asked in a disbelieving voice, Yeongwoo pressed the dagger closer to her neck and spoke to the surrounding citizens.

"Bring me money right now. Or I'll kill all of Tongliao's Three Swords."

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

Chapter 284: Karma (5)

"If the citizens don't come up with the money, I'll kill all of Tongliao's Three Swords..."

The ones most shocked by this rather outrageous threat were the Three Swordsmen themselves, who only now realized they were being held hostage.

"W-What? Are you a robber?"

When the second sword of Tongliao, Huang Shengli, asked in a bewildered tone, Yeongwoo instinctively flinched for a moment.

"....."

Until now, he had never thought of himself as a robber, but hearing it now, he realized that what he just did was essentially robbery.

He had abruptly taken them hostage and demanded money from the citizens.

On Earth, someone like this would definitely be called a 'robber.'

'Damn it, things have gotten really messy.'

Moreover, Huang Shengli, who was now a hostage, was looking at the "Tower" that Yeongwoo had come on.

She was in shock that this mysterious structure, which seemed almost awe-inspiring, was just a means for a robbery.

But was Yeongwoo just a mere robber?

No.

Jeong Yeongwoo⁰⁷ was a powerful robber who could take the Three Swordsmen of Tongliao hostage instead of the citizens.

And he was an angry robber who believed that trying to solve this situation with nice words was out of the question.

"You attacked me first."

"...What?"

"You three attacked one person, and now what? Asking if I'm a robber? Demanding compensation for assault is robbery?"

"Well, that's because..."

"Just get the money ready, you bastards!"

When Yeongwoo rolled his eyes and threatened the citizens of Tongliao, a loud voice came from behind him.

"You thief! Let's settle this once and for all!"

This was from Zheng Chosan, the first sword of Tongliao, who had failed in his previous attempt to stab Yeongwoo in the back.

Shiiing!

This time, a sharp attack aimed precisely at the back of Yeongwoo's neck came flying in, forcing him to display a bit of his skill.

'I didn't want to cause permanent damage if I could help it.'

He swung Bastard like lightning and sliced Zheng Chosan's blade in two.

Swish!

The unique-grade sword of Zheng Chosan was now broken, and Huang Shengli, who witnessed this up close, widened her eyes in shock.

".....!"

She realized that this robber who appeared with the Tower was not just unusual in personality but also in martial prowess.

'Who the hell is this guy?'

A monstrous stranger who arrived like a bolt out of the blue.

"You bastard!"

Next, the third sword, Guo Wangbo, who had finished his struggle with the Golden Trail, came charging in.

Tat-tat-tat!

Before he could even take three steps, the robber's form shot forward like a bullet.

"S-Stop!"

At that moment, Huang Shengli, who was still held by Yeongwoo, screamed, and almost simultaneously, there was a heavy thudding sound.

Thud!

"Ugh?"

It was the groan of Guo Wangbo, who had tried to swing his sword at the robber.

He looked down at his stomach, which was now in excruciating pain.

"....."

There, between his navel and solar plexus, was the hilt of a red sword. Jeong Yeongwoo had struck Guo Wangbo with the hilt of Bastard.

Of course, he had controlled his strength, so Guo Wangbo didn't sustain any external injuries.

But instead...

"Urgh!"

The effect of the Golden Punishment began gnawing at his senses.

As his entire body felt like it was burning, Guo Wangbo rolled on the ground in agony.

Seeing this, the citizens finally began to move.

"L-Let's gather some money."

"How much does everyone have right now?"

"This is all I have..."

Fearing that all of Tongliao's Three Swords would actually be killed, they decided to try and collect the money the robber demanded.

Seeing this, Huang Shengli gritted her teeth.

Grinding them together, she barely managed to form a sentence in respectful language.

"What are you? Do you go around extorting money like this?"

"....."

Confronted with such an accurate statement, Yeongwoo paused for a moment in thought.

Then, unable to find another answer, he nodded.

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"I do go around extorting money."

A straightforward answer.

With that, Yeongwoo released the arm of Huang Shengli, whom he had been holding until now.

It seemed she wasn't the type to abandon the citizens and flee.

Then, Huang Shengli looked Yeongwoo up and down.

"What will you do with the little money you get from us? You seem like someone who already has more than enough."

"Isn't it the case that many drops make a flood?"

".....?"

"Even specks of dust, when gathered, can form a mountain. I intend to collect every bit of small change in China to help buy this planet."

"W-What do you mean... buy what...?"

From specks of dust to purchasing a planet—Huang Shengli's mind seemed to freeze for a moment at this cosmic leap in conversation.

The uninvited guest in front of her was not just a simple robber but an utterly insane one.

However, Yeongwoo remained serious.

"Please contribute some money so I can buy Earth. I'm asking you nicely."

Then, he looked toward the southwest, where Beijing—Peking—was likely located.

"In return, I'll conquer Beijing and erase Im Dupyeong for you."

Beijing, and Im Dupyeong.

The moment Yeongwoo uttered these two words, the previously noisy hall, bustling with people collecting money, fell silent.

".....?"

Surprised by this unexpected reaction, Yeongwoo widened his eyes.

Then, Zheng Chosan, the first sword of Tongliao, who was still standing with his broken sword, pointed his half-blade at Yeongwoo.

"Conquer Beijing? That's our long-cherished goal. Who do you think you are to interfere?"

"You, who can't even take me down, have your sights set on conquering Beijing?"

"You...!"

There was nothing wrong with what Yeongwoo said, so Zheng Chosan couldn't find anything to refute.

This conversation was openly happening in front of the citizens of Tongliao.

There was no greater humiliation than this.

Some random robber had shown up out of nowhere, spouting nonsense, and they lacked the power to shut him up.

It was enough to drive Zheng Chosan mad.

"You crazy bastard!"

"I've heard that too many times; it doesn't affect me anymore. Just hand over the money. Then I won't bother you any further."

Yeongwoo spoke with a face that showed he was genuinely unaffected, and finally, Huang Shengli brought up the matter of 'price.'

"...How much do you need?"

So Yeongwoo had to ask in return.

"How much are you paying Im Dupyeong right now?"

"Huh...?"

"Huh?"

"What are you talking about?"

Huang Shengli looked completely bewildered.

In response, Yeongwoo quickly turned to gauge the expressions of the other two swordsmen, Zheng Chosan and Guo Wangbo.

"...Good grief."

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

As expected, they also had no idea.

They were completely unaware of the existence of the "collection teams" of the Standing Committee members who traveled through various Chinese cities daily, collecting tens of millions of karma.

"You've never met them? Im Dupyeong's collection teams."

"Collection teams?"

"Im Dupyeong is collecting money?"

Seeing the Three Swordsmen of Tongliao immediately become enraged confirmed it.

The shadow of Beijing had not yet reached this city.

'Damn, is this because of me? Well, I did kill the East region officer.'

It was unmistakable.

One of the two Standing Committee members he had killed in China must have been in charge of collecting from Tongliao.

"Oh, I'm sorry. It seems I might have killed the person in charge of Tongliao. Otherwise, your blood would have already been sucked dry starting yesterday."

Yeongwoo scratched his chin with the tip of Bastard.

"So, how should I make you feel this grim reality...?"

"W-What are you talking about now?"

"You may not know this, but all other cities in China are paying Im Dupyeong 50 million karma every day."

"Fifty million...?"

Fifty million karma every day.

This figure sounded completely unrealistic to the citizens of Tongliao, who had not yet encountered a Standing Committee member.

"Is that even possible?"

"Not monthly, but daily? They're paying 50 million every day?"

"Why are they even paying that?"

As the crowd began to buzz again, Zheng Chosan questioned the uninvited guest as if challenging him.

"Don't talk nonsense! You're saying every city is giving that much money to Beijing? Why? That doesn't make any sense."

Yeongwoo immediately released a golden aura from his eyes, projecting the "Majesty of the Strongest Sword."

Whoosh!

This was the first proper display of intimidation since he arrived in Tongliao.

"Gasp!"

"Ugh...!"

"It hurts!"

Although Yeongwoo directed his aura only at the Three Swordsmen of Tongliao, even the citizens surrounding them could sense how immense his internal energy was.

"Why do they pay? Because if they don't, they'll die. What's so hard to understand? Did I explain it too nicely?"

Yeongwoo casually lifted his sword in front of the frozen Zheng Chosan.

"I don't want to be a villain. But if you keep wasting my precious time, I can't help but lose patience."

".....?"

"What... what is he saying?"

Despite being the strongest in Tongliao, the Swordsmen, who felt their hearts being crushed under his aura, couldn't just ignore what Yeongwoo was saying.

"So, you're saying you want to collect the money before Im Dupyeong does?"

Huang Shengli asked in a voice filled with indignation.

"Yes! But you forgot something important!"

"What? And what's that?"

"I charge ten million less than Im Dupyeong!"

"You crazy bastard!"

It was Huang Shengli's patience, not Yeongwoo's, that cracked first.

Just in time, the "Strongest Sword's" aura that had been restraining the three masters began to fade.

Swoosh...

The aura's duration had ended.

Swish!

As soon as the hold on the Three Swordsmen of Tongliao was released, they all rushed toward Yeongwoo simultaneously, as if they had planned it.

"Haaa!"

"Die!"

"You shouldn't be allowed to live!"

This was a critical battle, where the fate of losing or keeping millions of karma daily hung in the balance.

Of course, Yeongwoo had expected such a reaction and swiftly retreated, shouting to the golden goblin, "Black Sword!"

He was ordering the goblin to pull out and toss him the Dullahan's sword.

However, the goblin merely tilted its head without even opening its subspace pouch.

-Kee?

Yeongwoo realised, 'That's right, I put it in the Catalog.'

In a hurry, Yeongwoo grabbed the "Golden Trail" floating behind him with both hands.

Thunk!

He then swung the sword toward the three masters of Tongliao, who were already closing in on him.

"Listen to me! Paying me is the safest and easiest way! Don't make me turn into a real villain!"

Whoosh!

The sword drew a wide golden arc, and though the Three Swordsmen of Tongliao flinched at the sight, they didn't suppress their fighting spirit.

"We've never even met the collection teams, and we won't lose to them either!"

"Aren't you one of those collectors? Aren't you Im Dupyeong's dog?"

"It seems killing you is the true justice!"

As the Three Swordsmen, each filled with righteous indignation, charged at him, anyone watching would see Yeongwoo as the villain.

'Damn, these guys really...'

Clang, clang, clang!

In an instant, they exchanged a dozen blows.

This exchange only lasted because Yeongwoo was holding back against the three swordsmen.

If he wanted, he could have beheaded all three within ten seconds.

But as he had said earlier, Yeongwoo's patience, like his time, was wearing thin.

"You bastards, I'll show you why the other cities are paying me from now on."

So, as Yeongwoo reached for the Bastard once more...

Boom!

A strange explosion-like sound came from the rear of the battlefield, where the four had been fighting.

"What."

"What the...?"

Yeongwoo and the Three Swordsmen of Tongliao all turned to look in the direction of the sound.

What they saw was an elderly man approaching, his voice amplified with a strange, demonic resonance.

—The Chairman Im Dupyeong demands tribute! Tongliao, heed the command...!

The old man, announcing his approach with an eerie tone filled with malice.

—I am Hong Jingbai, the 2nd Standing Committee member of the Central Politburo!

"...!"

The 2nd Standing Committee member, second only to Im Dupyeong himself in Beijing, had arrived.

He had been dispatched to investigate the situation in the Eastern region, where Standing Committee members kept disappearing.

Yeongwoo quickly extricated himself from the battlefield and pointed to the Three Swordsmen of Tongliao, who were conveniently gathered together.

"Master Hong! Over here! These men are plotting a rebellion!"

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

Chapter 285: The Student Surpasses the Master (1)

"What?"

"...Huh?"

"Did you just say 'Master Hong'...?"

The Tongliao's Three Swords were left speechless at Yeongwoo's accusation of treason.

After all, wasn't he the one who had been shouting about the fall of Beijing?

"Is he completely out of his mind?"

The first sword of Tongliao, Zheng Chosan, erupted in anger but didn't have the luxury to argue.

By that time, the second member of the Standing Committee, Hong Jingbai, had already approached them.

"Kneel before the Party! From now on, anyone who stands on their feet will be beheaded!"

With a terrifying voice, Hong Jingbai demanded submission, and Yeongwoo was the first to kneel.

Thud!

Then, the second sword of Tongliao, Huang Seongli, gritted her teeth and glared at Yeongwoo.

"What are you doing right now?"

"If you don't kneel, you'll be beheaded."

"But aren't you supposed to be Im Dupyeong's adversary? Shouldn't you...?"

"Oh, that was when I was getting paid. You're not planning on paying me yet, are you?"

"...What?"

Huang Seongli's eyes widened as he finally realized that this guy was staging a protest to demand his payment.

"If you don't want to kneel with me, you'll have no choice but to fight Master Hong. Let's see if you really have the strength to defend this city."

Already on his knees, Yeongwoo scratched his chin with a calm expression.

Meanwhile, the third sword of Tongliao, Guo Wangbo, shouted at the citizens.

"Don't kneel! Are you crazy?"

That was because half of the citizens gathered in the area were hesitating and beginning to kneel.

They had concluded that Tongliao's Three Swords might not be able to defeat Hong Jingbai.

The other half of the crowd was also confused, unsure of what to do.

They wanted to trust the Tongliao's Three Swords but instinctively felt that kneeling might be the safer option, given that Hong Jingbai's martial arts seemed formidable.

"Ha, is there truly anyone here dreaming of rebellion?"

Finally, Hong Jingbai laughed savagely, looking at the Tongliao's Three Swords.

Central Political Bureau's second member of the Standing Committee, Hong Jingbai.

Age: 68, Height: 2 meters.

Estimated to be the second most powerful person in Beijing at this moment.

Unlike the fourth member, Baek Gangryang, whom he had met earlier, Hong Jingbai's body wasn't grotesquely deformed.

Instead, his overall appearance was tall and thin, making him look the most normal among the strange figures they had encountered so far.

However...

'Huh? He doesn't have a weapon?'

Aside from the purple demonic energy covering his entire body, he wasn't carrying any weapon.

And for someone who is the second most powerful person in Beijing to walk around without a weapon...

'Does that mean he has something that makes a weapon unnecessary?'

As Yeongwoo thought this, Zheng Chosan, the first sword of Tongliao, was the first to charge at Hong Jingbai.

"You've come to find your own grave!"

He decided he had to turn the situation around before all the citizens kneeled.

Following him, the third sword, Guo Wangbo, also rushed in, and finally, the second sword, Huang Seongli, reluctantly moved as well.

Thud! Thud!

"Everyone, be careful! Judging by what he's doing, there's definitely something going on!"

The 'he' Huang Seongli referred to was obviously the brazen intruder kneeling over there.

And at last...

"Die!"

Zheng Chosan, who was leading the charge, tried to stab Hong Jingbai with his broken sword—the one Yeongwoo had cut in half in an instant.

When Hong Jingbai saw the sword, he furrowed his brow.

"Who did this to your sword?"

As expected from the second most powerful person in Beijing, he sensed something ominous from the severed edge of the sword.

In this world, equipment, especially weapons, were generally made to be almost indestructible.

However, Zheng Chosan didn't have time to answer Hong Jingbai's question.

He had already used all his courage in launching the attack with his broken sword.

"Graaaah!"

Unaware of what he was being asked, he recklessly thrust his sword forward.

Screeech!

"Ha, you're still a novice. I admire your courage, though."

Meanwhile, Hong Jingbai laughed fiercely as he grabbed the sword blade with his bare hand.

Crunch!

"What!"

Zheng Chosan finally came to his senses, eyes widening, while the third sword, Guo Wangbo, swung his broad sword and intervened between them.

"Step back! I'll handle this!"

Although he was the third sword, Guo Wangbo was the oldest in terms of age.

He was a carpenter from Kailu County, Tongliao.

He wielded his massive sword with his well-developed forearms as if it were a piece of paper.

"You Hong clan scum! I'll chop off your head and display it in the streets!"

As Guo Wangbo charged in with a menacing line, the smile vanished from Hong Jingbai's face.

"Indeed, you're the kind that doesn't understand words."

As he said this, both his left hand, which was holding Zheng Chosan's blade, and his still free right hand turned an intense, chilling shade of deep purple.

Fsssssst!

"Everyone, fall back!"

Sensing something ominous, Huang Seongli urgently threw her sword at Hong Jingbai, hoping to bind his arms for even a moment to buy her comrades time to retreat.

And her judgment was...

Ping!

...spot on.

"Huh?"

"What?"

"My... my sword...?"

As Huang Seongli's sword flew toward him, Hong Jingbai's right hand transformed into a massive blade.

Swoosh, thunk!

Huang Seongli's sword was deflected by Hong Jingbai's blade and embedded itself far away in the ground, leaving her unarmed.

"Damn it."

Seeing that two of the Tongliao Swordsmen were already disarmed, Guo Wangbo grimaced as he foresaw the grim outcome.

But they weren't the only ones whose expressions darkened.

"It's over."

"They can't beat him even with all three of them?"

"If that's the case, then what hope do we have...?"

The remaining half of the citizens, who were still standing, quickly began kneeling.

Seeing this, Hong Jingbai burst into laughter.

"How amusing. What an entertaining world."

Then, pointing his monstrous blade-covered arm at the Tongliao's Three Swords, he declared:

"To punish you for defying the Party, I will demand even more tribute."

"...!"

"From now on, the person in charge of Tongliao must deliver 40 million karma to Beijing every day!"

"What?"

"What?"

At Hong Jingbai's threat, the Tongliao's Three Swords instinctively turned their heads—toward the uninvited 'Strongest Sword' who had descended from the sky, no less.

If the increased tribute due to the crime of rebellion was 40 million, then how much had it originally been?

It certainly wasn't 50 million.

'Wait a second. Something's off here.'

'Huh? The tribute was increased by 40 million due to rebellion?'

'Didn't that guy just say earlier that all cities were paying 50 million?'

As the entire Tongliao's Three Swords began to approach a chilling realization, Yeongwoo finally stood up.

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

Sshh.

"Hah, this is interesting. Master Hong, you have a surprisingly delicate side. Is 40 million really the price for raising a sword against the Party?"

"...?"

With an outsider standing up alone, Hong Jingbai's attention naturally shifted to him.

"...Who are you?"

"Sigh..."

Yeongwoo swept his bangs back with his left hand as if he were pitying him and then spoke in a low voice.

"I am a representative of the Korean Peninsula."

"...?"

"And Im Dupyeong's greatest concern, Jeong Yeongwoo07!"

"What?"

Hong Jingbai realized many things in that instant when an outsider dared to mention Im Dupyeong's name so casually.

The mystery of the Standing Committee members who had disappeared one after another while collecting tribute in the East.

And the absurd severed edge of the sword he had seen earlier.

"You... you can't be..."

As Hong Jingbai's expression suggested he had figured something out, Yeongwoo, who had been hiding his title all this time, finally revealed it again.

Swoosh!

『Strongest Sword』

"The Strongest Sword...!"

Hong Jingbai's eyes widened as he saw the brilliant title of the Korean Peninsula.

The First Standing Committee Member, Chairman Im Dupyeong, had once mentioned a likely suspect.

Someone notorious for bearing the brand of Chinese colonialism and surviving unusually long in the East.

And it seemed that this person was...

"Hong Jingbai! Come to me and serve the national interest!"

The elected official of the Korean Peninsula, 'Strongest Sword' Jeong Yeongwoo, flashed his greedy eyes.

At the same time, he hurled his sword, already wrapped in fierce red energy.

Swoosh!

However, Hong Jingbai, being the second most powerful person in Beijing, maintained his composure.

"Ugh...!"

Even in this situation, he twisted his upper body to dodge Yeongwoo's sword.

The blade, like Huang Seongli's earlier, merely pierced the distant ground.

Thud!

"So you're nothing special either. Such a shallow trick with even shallower skills to match."

Hong Jingbai confirmed the sword embedded in the ground and laughed sinisterly.

The ominous feeling he had sensed earlier vanished when he saw that his opponent's hand wasn't as strong as expected.

However, Yeongwoo, on the other hand, seemed to be brimming with joy, a smile spread across his face.

"Young Master Hong!"

"...?"

"Do you recognize this sword?"

With these words, Yeongwoo reached out into the air, summoning a mutated crescent blade called "Dark Slash" from his weapon inventory.

This weapon had once belonged to none other than Baek Gangryang, the 4th Standing Committee member.

"You...!"

As expected, Hong Jingbai ground his teeth in fury.

"I'll tear your limbs apart with that sword!"

Enraged by Yeongwoo's taunting of the dead, Hong momentarily lost his composure and began to storm forward, ready to unleash his power.

At that moment, Yeongwoo flicked his right hand, recalling the "Bastard" that had been embedded in the distance.

「Gnoll's Iron Belt」 - Mutant Belt

【Remotely retrieve weapons.】

This technique was Yeongwoo's signature move, a counterfeit swordsmanship technique.

But with the automatic combat greatsword "Golden Trail" rushing in simultaneously, no one suspected that this so-called "Strongest Sword" was a fraud, at least not in terms of martial prowess.

Swoosh!

Woooooom...

Bastard shot towards its master like an arrow, while the golden greatsword danced in front of him as if alive.

The spectators could only gape in awe.

"Amazing..."

"Is that really the Legendary Sword Control technique?"

Even Huang Seongli, who still had her sword stuck in the distant ground, couldn't help but gasp in admiration.

She knew that he was a fraud, but witnessing his martial arts firsthand made it clear that his skills were no lie.

"Damn you...!"

Despite facing attacks from three directions, Hong Jingbai displayed remarkable martial prowess.

He blocked the Dark Slash that Yeongwoo had swung at him with the blade on his right arm and pinned the Golden Trail to the ground with his foot, immobilizing it.

"Hmph, you bastard!"

Of course, he had never fought at full power like this before, so...

Swoosh!

...he failed to block the last sword aimed at his shoulder.

Crash!

"Ugh!"

As Yeongwoo's Bastard Sword tore through Hong Jingbai's left shoulder, the citizens of Tongliao, who had been kneeling, stood up in unison.

They realized that the madman's insane claim of toppling Beijing and eliminating Im Duyeong might actually be possible.

Snap!

After retrieving the Bastard Sword, Yeongwoo surveyed the now-standing citizens.

Then, he stepped back, returning all his other weapons to his inventory, leaving only the Bastard.

Even the Dark Slash and the Golden Trail, which had been lying on the ground, were put away.

Pop!

As all the weapons that had dazzled their eyes vanished at once, the citizens of Tongliao looked around in bewilderment.

"W-what? All of a sudden?"

"Where did they all go?"

Yeongwoo sheathed the Bastard at his waist and said in a businesslike tone,

"The next part is paid. If you want me to kill Young Master Hong here and now, you'll have to pay."

The citizens, noticing that Hong Jingbai's shoulder was slowly regenerating, asked in shock,

"What do you mean?"

"H-how much do you need to finish the fight?"

As the awaited question came, Yeongwoo spread his right hand wide open.

"Five?"

"Five...?"

"Fifty million. Collect the money right now. Installments are also accepted."

"...!"

Finally, Yeongwoo's tribute demand had surpassed even Beijing's.

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

Chapter 286: The Student Surpasses the Master (2)

"Oh... fifty million?"

"How are we supposed to come up with that money now...?"

"They said installments are possible. Let's just try to gather some money first."

The citizens frantically searched their pockets with bewildered expressions.

After all, they had stopped kneeling, assuming that Hong Jingbai was about to die soon.

However, as Hong Jingbai began to stand up, nearly recovered, the atmosphere in the hall became tense.

"Hurry, take out your money!"

"If we don't, we're really all going to die!"

The citizens of Tongliao started urgently collecting money, their voices almost screaming in fear.

Huang Seongli, the second sword of the Tongliao's Three Swords, glared at Yeongwoo.

"Isn't Fifty million too much? Earlier, it seemed like the money collected by Beijing wasn't even close to that..."

She was implying that it wasn't even forty million, let alone Fifty million, which was true.

Yeongwoo quickly raised his finger to cut off Huang Seongli's words.

"That's right. I lied."

"What did you say?"

"But wasn't it too much for three of you to attack one person? Let's call it even."

"What... What kind of nonsense is that...?"

"If my martial arts weren't advanced, I would have already been killed by your swords before I even had the chance to lie."

"..."

"And isn't it possible that I got angry and raised the price because you attacked me without any warning?"

"But that's not true, is it? You were planning to extort a huge sum from the start."

"Hah."

Yeongwoo chuckled wickedly at Huang Seongli's rebuttal.

"That's something you'll never know. But what is certain is that the price might have been different if you had tried talking first."

"..."

In any case, the fact remained that he had intended to extort millions from the beginning.

But the powerless three swords of Tongliao couldn't argue any further.

Meanwhile, Hong Jingbai, now fully recovered, shook his neck from side to side, his expression filled with anger.

"You lunatics are just spewing nonsense."

Hong Jingbai's words were full of rage.

Yeongwoo pointed at him and spoke.

"You're the second executive, which means you're the second in martial ranking, right? So how weak are the rest?"

As Yeongwoo no longer used honorifics, Hong Jingbai's face twisted in a menacing way.

"This little pup thinks he can do whatever he wants just because he's gained some power."

Of course, Hong Jingbai was 68 years old.

He was a veteran who had lived twice as long as the 'Strongest Sword' in front of him.

To be exact, he was a veteran of the previous world.

So Yeongwoo made this clear.

"Whether then or now, you're just a dog doing Im Dupyeong's bidding. And don't forget, the world has been reset."

Swish.

As Yeongwoo said this and took up a fighting stance again, Hong Jingbai unsheathed his sword, his eyes gleaming.

A second round between the second-ranked warrior of Beijing and the representative of the Korean Peninsula.

Most of the people in the hall already had a good idea of how it would end.

After all, they had all seen Hong Jingbai's shoulder get shattered by Yeongwoo's strike.

"Is the money ready? How much have you gathered?"

Still locking eyes with Hong Jingbai, Yeongwoo only opened his mouth to ask the question.

The citizens of Tongliao, despite looking overwhelmed, dutifully responded.

"Around ten million."

"Hmm, ten million."

Yeongwoo mulled over the amount.

It was far short of the fifty million karma he initially demanded, but given the number of people present, it was clear they had put in a considerable effort.

It meant each person had contributed at least ten thousand karma.

"Very well. I'll collect the remaining forty million tomorrow."

As Yeongwoo nodded, the citizens finally breathed a sigh of relief.

They had managed to move this killing machine with just ten million, when it should have required fifty million.

At this point, it was unclear whether it was better to continue paying fifty million daily to the Korean national treasury or to hand over forty million daily to Im Dupyeong in Beijing.

'Hah, but since we've already stopped kneeling, Hong Jingbai won't let us live.'

'There's no other choice. Hong Jingbai has to die for now.'

As the citizens alternated between looking at Yeongwoo and Hong Jingbai with conflicted eyes, Hong Jingbai, who had somehow read their thoughts, widened his eyes.

"Independence for Tongliao!"

"...?"

"What?"

"What did he just say...?"

The words were so surreal that they wondered if they had misheard.

Hong Jingbai, as if to confirm, repeated himself.

"Beijing will guarantee Tongliao's independence!"

Then, he pointed at Yeongwoo with the heavy sword that had grown from his forearm.

Whoosh!

"But to do that, the three swords of Tongliao must cooperate with me to kill this man from the Korean Peninsula right here! Shouldn't we handle our own affairs?"

Hong Jingbai cleverly avoided using the words "our country" or "China."

It was proof that he was indeed a veteran of nearly seventy years.

Realizing that he was unlikely to win a solo battle against the 'Strongest Sword,' he chose the lesser of two evils.

But the representative of the Korean Peninsula, Jeong Yeongwoo, was a far more unpredictable character than Hong Jingbai had anticipated.

"What nonsense. Just die now."

Like a villain who doesn't wait for the hero to finish transforming, Yeongwoo charged at Hong Jingbai before he could finalize his deal with Tongliao.

Tat tat!

In an instant, Yeongwoo's form reached right in front of Hong Jingbai, causing some of the Tongliao swordsmen to flinch.

Almost without realizing it, they had been about to strike Yeongwoo from behind, following Hong Jingbai's proposal.

But then, Yeongwoo stopped them with a firm voice.

"Don't do something you'll regret! If I die here, Im Dupyeong's monopoly will begin! There will be no more competition for Beijing!"

"...!"

This argument was logically sound, and it shocked the Tongliao swordsmen deeply.

The current "tribute market" in China was dominated by Jeong Yeongwoo from the Korean Peninsula and Im Dupyeong in Beijing.

It was already a vile situation, but at least there was a minimal amount of competition, preventing it from becoming the worst-case scenario.

But if Jeong Yeongwoo were to die here, Im Dupyeong's only competitor would disappear, leaving China entirely in the hands of a dictator.

But what if Yeongwoo survived this encounter?

'We would still have to pay a fortune as planned.'

But instead of Im Dupyeong, it would be Hong Jingbai who died here, leaving the market in its current duopoly—still bad, but the lesser of two evils.

"And will Beijing really keep its promise? Both sides are extorting money, but Im Dupyeong was a dictator even before!"

Yeongwoo's words were a clear self-assertion.

Im Dupyeong was an enemy of Tongliao even before the Reset, but Jeong Yeongwoo, who was said to have come from the Korean Peninsula, was an unknown entity.

At least, he had no history of oppressing Tongliao before the Reset.

Swoosh!

As Yeongwoo's blade flashed like lightning, Hong Jingbai screamed and swung his sword.

"Die!"

A violet streak erupted from the tip of Hong Jingbai's forearm.

Whoosh!

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

In contrast, Yeongwoo's blade, tracing a red arc,

Bang!

struck Hong Jingbai's blade diagonally and ruthlessly split it.

"Huh?"

Crack!

Hong Jingbai's blade shattered in mid-air like a crumbling biscuit.

The sight of an otherwise indestructible weapon being mercilessly destroyed was so unfamiliar to everyone that Hong Jingbai and everyone present was taken aback once more.

And over the tremendous impact, Jeong Yeongwoo's voice fell.

"You don't need to demand Tongliao's independence from me. I've never placed Tongliao under my control, even once."

"...!"

"Just pay the agreed money. That's all I need. If that money needs a name, it could be called 'independence assistance fee.' After all, I'm going to kill Im Dupyeong."

With these words, Yeongwoo kicked down with his left foot on Hong Jingbai's knee.

Bang!

As a result, Hong Jingbai's lower body tilted, causing him to half-kneel, and soon Yeongwoo was about to strike down with his sword again.

Whoosh!

But the opponent was still the second-in-command of Beijing.

At the last moment, Hong Jingbai figured out how to counter this Korean swordsman.

He mustered all his strength and grabbed Yeongwoo's forearm with his left arm.

Thud!

He would have to control the arm holding the sword if he couldn't block the sword.

"What... What kind of weapon is that?"

Hong Jingbai, holding onto Yeongwoo's arm, asked, trembling.

He was using all his strength to withstand Yeongwoo's force.

In response, Yeongwoo looked down at Hong Jingbai with a calm expression and said,

"A match detector."

"...What?"

"If you can't block this sword, it means you're not my match."

With these words, Yeongwoo added more strength to the arm holding the sword, causing Hong Jingbai's eyes to widen.

"Stop it!"

This was because Hong Jingbai's arm was being forcefully bent.

It was a simple power struggle, but he was losing completely.

Crack.

As the tip of the sword neared Hong Jingbai's forehead, he spoke a problematic line.

"You're not just a human, are you...?"

"Not 'just'? Then who else isn't just a human?"

Yeongwoo asked, and soon realized.

This referred to Im Dupyeong, who had given power to the Standing Committee members.

"Im Dupyeong? What about Im Dupyeong? Who's behind him?"

Yeongwoo asked, twisting the sword threateningly, but Hong Jingbai did not easily open his mouth.

He knew that the battle was over and that his death was certain.

"Hah... The world is being toyed with by demons."

Hong Jingbai suddenly pretended to be indifferent.

But Yeongwoo didn't listen to any more unnecessary words.

"If you have nothing to say, just die. I'll find out who Im Dupyeong's sponsor is myself."

"...!"

As Yeongwoo exerted all his strength, the sword, which had been barely hovering in the air, immediately pierced Hong Jingbai's forehead.

Crunch.

The sound of the blade piercing a watermelon was heard, and soon, the blood-red blade protruded from the lower back of Hong Jingbai's head.

"Ugh..."

Seeing this, Tongliao's Three Swords realized anew.

That strength is always relative.

Who would have imagined that Hong Jingbai, who was so mighty, would be so helplessly defeated?

"Ugh."

Hong Jingbai, with his head pierced by the sword, let out a brief groan and then his pupils stopped moving.

"..."

He was dead.

"He's already gone."

Whether this departed soul would be absorbed into the void or go to Lemu's Lustful Garden was still unknown.

As Yeongwoo watched, he pulled the sword out, causing Hong Jingbai's emaciated body to fall sideways.

Thud!

Then, a violet aura from his body began to rise into the sky.

Swoosh!

Beijing was probably reclaiming the power given to him.

"..."

Seeing this, Yeongwoo thought it might be a good time to deal with Im Dupyeong.

The Standing Committee members, who had received power directly from him, were much weaker than expected.

‘Im Dupyeong might not be that strong either.’

Despising the weak.

Yeongwoo looked in the direction of Beijing with the same cunning eyes as always, when suddenly, he sensed something above his head.

Swoosh...!

Something was falling at high speed.

The presence was threatening enough that Yeongwoo instinctively swung his sword and cut the object in question.

Slash!

The object that had been falling toward Yeongwoo's crown split in half, and soon a piece of paper inside floated down as if dancing in the air.

Flutter.

"Huh? What's this?"

As Yeongwoo frowned and grabbed the paper with his hand, he saw ink-written characters come into view.

『I wish to meet the Master of the Skyscraper, Mr. Jeong.』

"...Suddenly wants to see me?"

Many thoughts crossed his mind, but Yeongwoo first checked the seal at the bottom of the paper.

And then, the name Yeongwoo most wanted to see appeared clearly.

『Northern Beijing Evil』 Im Dupyeong.

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

Chapter 287: The Student Surpasses the Master (3)

"Hoo, Mr. Jeong,"

Yeongwoo muttered, rereading the letter sent by Im Dupyeong with an intrigued expression. Although there wasn't much content in it, the term "Skyscraper" caught his eye.

'If it's Skyscraper... could it mean the path that the brothers have paved to the sky?'

As Yeongwoo looked up at the sky while holding the letter, Huang Seongli approached and asked,

"What's that? What did you just read?"

"Im Dupyeong wants to meet."

"...What?"

Huang Seongli, in disbelief, took the letter and soon opened her mouth.

"Is this guy really shameless?"

She was referring to the fact that Im Dupyeong had used honorifics in the letter.

"It's not that he's shameless; he might just be very good at reading the trends of the times."

Yeongwoo was as taken aback as Huang Seongli but was also somewhat impressed.

After all, for a former head of state, a person who came from an ordinary background, and a foreigner at that, to request a meeting was no easy task.

Whether it was a trap or not, it was clear that Im Dupyeong was no ordinary man.

"You're not seriously going to befriend that guy, right?"

Huang Seongli, who had already grasped the temperament of the "Strongest Sword," glared at Yeongwoo, who scratched his nose with his index finger.

"Well, I'm not sure. Im Dupyeong also needs China's money, so I don't know if coexistence is possible. We might be forced to cooperate, but..."

"You said you could definitely beat Im Dupyeong, right? Then there's no reason for an alliance."

"Yes, that's true, but..."

But was there really anything absolute in this world?

The world was unpredictable, especially in this post-reset world.

"Anyway, Im Dupyeong will most likely die, and no matter what happens, Tongliao will never fall under the control of the Chinese government again,"

Yeongwoo left his promise at that and sent the Golden Goblin to retrieve the ten million karma prepared by the citizens.

"Now, you all need to prepare the remaining forty million and the fifty million you're supposed to give me daily, making it ninety million karma by tomorrow."

"Ninety million...?"

Upon hearing the amount directly, Tongliao's First and Third Swords rushed over in a panic.

"Hey! No, Master!"

"Ninety million? Isn't that too harsh?"

Preparing ninety million karma by tomorrow. Of course, if Tongliao's Three Swords actively rained down gold coins, it wasn't an unattainable amount.

"Think of it as the price of success..."

Just as Yeongwoo was about to explain that it was the retribution for Tongliao's Three Swords's karma, the citizens surrounding them suddenly fell to their knees and looked up at Yeongwoo.

"Master!"

"Master! Please have mercy..."

"This is too harsh!"

Yeongwoo looked at the citizens in surprise.

'Ah, I see. You don't have to move people's hearts to be called Master.'

As long as you move them somehow, they will call you that.

"Ah... everyone."

Yeongwoo put on an expression as if he was deeply moved.

Then, facing the tearful citizens who were overwhelmed by the harshness, he spread his hands.

"Well, it can't be helped. The owner of the country is the people, after all. Although China isn't my country, I can't take your wishes lightly."

Then, he held up four fingers and continued,

"From tomorrow, Tongliao's daily tribute will be forty million. However, you must still pay today's original amount, so prepare eighty million by tomorrow."

"T-that's..."

First Sword Zheng Chosan tried to protest, but Huang Seongli grabbed him, stopping him. She had a hunch that provoking this demon any further might lead to paying a hundred million instead of eighty million.

"Alright, we'll figure out how to raise forty million,"

Huang Seongli nodded, and Yeongwoo pointed upwards with his finger.

"If a mutant appears, lure it to the most Populated area and choose the thirty thousand karma supply after dealing with it. That should help with raising the tribute."

With that said, Yeongwoo called forth Negwig.

Now that everything in Tongliao was settled, it was time to meet the person who had sent the letter, Im Dupyeong.

-Screeech!

Confirming Yeongwoo's signal, Negwig pressed its iron hooves into the ground of Tongliao, and Huang Seongli hurriedly approached Yeongwoo to plead.

"Im Dupyeong shouldn't be left alive. He will become a huge problem for us in the future."

"It depends on what kind of person Im Dupyeong is and his situation. For now, I can only say that I'll try to kill him."

Yeongwoo did not give a definite answer until the end.

Everything seemed uncertain.

Although the Standing Committee members were falling like straw, was that the only reason Im Dupyeong had requested a meeting first?

'Of course, there's a good chance it's not a conversation he wants. The letter didn't say anything about chatting, after all.'

He wouldn't know whatever it was until he met the man in person.

Although the meeting was earlier than expected, it wasn't a bad situation for Yeongwoo.

After all, there were other big events expected to happen today.

In Seoul alone, there was a high possibility that another dragon might fall today.

And among those possibilities was his mother, who would one day return as a dragon.

'It's always something new.'

In this world filled with mutants born from the karma of earthlings and bizarre events due to the planet being opened up by the reset, it was only natural that those who stood out were mostly akin to demons.

'Now, let's take a look around Beijing.'

Finally, Yeongwoo mounted Negwig, and the citizens of Tongliao, still on their knees, rose in unison.

They were genuinely thrilled to see the departure of this demon-like man.

"Master Jeong!"

"Take care on your journey..."

"Goodbye!"

Just as Yeongwoo had bid farewell to the Chairman of Dogo, the citizens of Tongliao waved their hands in the air, bidding farewell to the greatest sword of the Korean Peninsula.

Yeongwoo raised his hand in response, then leaped into the tower of the brothers with Negwig.

Whoosh!

As before, a bright light enveloped the tower inside, and soon it launched Yeongwoo towards the place where the path of light was.

* * *

Beijing.

The capital of China and the problematic city where Im Dupyeong had made his base after the Reset.

Before the Reset, the population was around 21.4 million, making it the most Populous "capital" on Earth.

This highlighted the sheer size of China's Population, which in turn indicated the enormous potential economic power of this land.

Even without daily quests, the income generated per person per day could easily exceed 30,000 Karma.

‘But that requires each city to have at least one strong person capable of dealing with mutants.’

This was why Yeongwoo tried not to kill the city's warriors whenever possible.

‘But that's not enough.’

From the top of the tower, Yeongwoo pondered as he displayed the routes of the high-speed transit paths.

‘Is there no way I can legally monopolize the money of this land?’

For example, like the defense tax he was collecting under the elected authority of the Korean Peninsula.

The defense tax had no delivery issues and no risk of late payments.

So if he could also extract defense taxes from China...

"Hmm."

Yeongwoo gazed at Beijing, prominently marked on the western part of the route.

The city was about 640 kilometers away from his current location in Tongliao.

In the past, he wouldn't have dared to visit Beijing at this point in time.

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

If he had gone, he would have had to leave Seoul unguarded for an entire day, as no mutants had appeared in Seoul yet.

But now, things were different.

'Once the roads are all laid out, there will be no place on this planet I can't reach.'

One of the reasons the Mongol cavalry was so notorious in the past was their mobility.

During the early 1200s, under the reign of Genghis Khan, the Mongol cavalry swept through areas from the Jin dynasty to Eastern Europe.

Their greatest weapons were their speed and supply lines.

Their advance was faster than the enemy could mobilize forces, and they sustained themselves through looting, making it impossible for their targets to defend against them.

Moreover, the Mongol army's combat skills were honed to perfection through the Mongol unification wars, making the Mongol army itself a great calamity for humanity at that time.

Much like the meticulously prepared and unpredictable actions of Jeong Yeongwoo, the demonic human of the Korean Peninsula.

"Let's go! To Beijing!"

As Yeongwoo forcefully tapped on Beijing on the route map, the outer wall at the top of the tower opened, revealing the sky hundreds of meters above, and a shining path through that sky.

- Screeeeech!

Recognizing the significance of the path, Negwig raised its front paws high and let out a long howl.

Gripping the reins of his iron steed, Yeongwoo shouted towards the sky.

"We'll have lunch in Beijing today...!"

And then he leaped into the sky along with Negwig.

Taaah!

The high-speed transit path swiftly absorbed Yeongwoo, Negwig, the Golden Goblin, and even Pofu Tenta, and sent them hurtling toward the next station.

Fwooooosh!

Then, another high-speed leap to the next destination.

It was a truly revolutionary form of mobility.

‘Already near Beijing? This is unreal.’

As they neared their destination, an alert appeared to even Yeongwoo, who was in a state of high-density energy.

The route reappeared, emphasizing Yeongwoo's current location and the final destination, Beijing.

And soon after...

Fwooooosh!

The surroundings, which had appeared as a continuous blur, gradually began to regain their original shape.

‘Almost there.’

As they approached the destination, Yeongwoo's speed gradually decreased.

As a result, the entire area of Beijing was clearly visible below.

Whoooosh...

Looking down from about 800 meters in the air, Beijing resembled a massive electronic circuit board.

"Uh... now where do I go?"

Yeongwoo expanded his field of vision with clairvoyance and scanned the cityscape of Beijing, turning his head in various directions.

The first thing that caught his eye was a crowd gathered at the base of a tower over there.

"...?"

Upon closer inspection, he saw workers striking the tower's surface with all sorts of metal tools.

Despite the difficulty, they were persistently attempting to dismantle the tower.

‘Actually, that's a good thing. It means there's no myths in Beijing yet.’

So, where would Im Dupyeong, the self-proclaimed ruler of Beijing, be?

Due to the territorial mark stuck in this area, the man must have known that a dangerous guest had already arrived in Beijing's airspace.

"I guess I'll just have to go down and find out."

As Yeongwoo sighed and was about to enter the station built in Beijing...

Bzzzz!

A strange sound came from somewhere below.

Whoosh!

With a chilling noise, a laser beam struck the overpass.

To be precise, it hit Yeongwoo, who was halfway merged with the road during transit.

Boom!

"Huh?"

Caught off guard by the unexpected attack, Yeongwoo's eyes widened in surprise, but that wasn't the real problem.

The real issue was that the impact had knocked him off the road.

- Babat!

- Keeek?

From up above, where the road had already moved on, Yeongwoo heard the surprised cries of Pofu Tenta and the Golden Goblin.

Then that sound rang out again.

Bzzzz!

"Im Dupyeong!"

This time, Yeongwoo accurately pinpointed the origin of the sound and, even as he was falling, turned his head to look at the problem area.

And then...

Whooooosh!

A red laser beam was shooting out from somewhere within the Forbidden City.

‘Uh?’

More precisely, it was coming from a structure that had been reinforced with some kind of metal.

"...A metal Forbidden City?"

As soon as Yeongwoo uttered those nonsensical words, the red laser engulfed him.

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

Chapter 288: Metal Forbidden City (1)

Boom!

A laser shot straight from the Forbidden City hit its mark.

The attack came so quickly that Yeongwoo had no time to defend himself with his Bastard, causing him to be blasted backward once again.

"Are you crazy, Im Dupyeong...!"

Despite his exasperation, he quickly tried to anchor his sword into the surface of the tower.

Whizz!

However, the distance from the tower had already grown too far, and his attempt to halt his momentum ended in vain.

"Damn it!"

Yeongwoo began to fall rapidly, pulled by gravity.

While his Vesedel armor was incredibly durable, leaving him without external or internal injuries, there was no guarantee that he would survive crashing into the ground from hundreds of meters high.

His golden flying sword, which usually stayed by his side, would also plummet under these circumstances.

"Damn it...!"

Thus, Yeongwoo had two choices at this point.

The first was to read the coordinates of the Forbidden City in his sight. Doing so would allow him to retaliate and exact some revenge by returning the laser barrage.

However, there was no guarantee that Im Dupyeong was still inside.

‘In that case...’

The second option was to call for help from a friend.

「Amber Whistle」 - Legendary Necklace

【Call a friend.】

[Yeongtae, Taejoon, Younghyeom, Geumhwa]

Among his four friends, Geumhwa was a flying mutant.

If he summoned her quickly enough, he could request her rescue.

And now was that "quick enough" moment.

Tch!

Yeongwoo immediately gripped the whistle and blew into it with all his might.

Peeeeeeep!

The clear sound echoed through the skies over Beijing, and the colors in the area seemed to fade.

Flash!

Sensing that something was happening on the Forbidden City's side, another laser beam was fired.

Zap!

"What the hell, how many times can these bastards fire those lasers?!"

As Yeongwoo muttered this, another red laser shot toward him.

This time, however, he wasn't just going to take it.

Slash!

Despite his unstable position, Yeongwoo accurately swung Bastard and split the laser in two.

"Huh? How did that work?"

Yeongwoo widened his eyes in disbelief as he realised his sword could cut through lasers.

This defied Earth's laws of physics.

And then, suddenly.

「Yaaaaaah!」

A cheer rang out, starting with his first friend, Hong Yeongtae, followed by Taejoon, Younghyeom, and Geumhwa, who appeared one after another.

Since the summoner was hundreds of meters up in the air, they materialized at an even higher altitude than usual.

「Huh? What the...?」

「Why are we so high up?」

Representative Kim Taejoon and General Kim Younghyeom gaped in shock as they realized they had been summoned much higher than normal.

Meanwhile, Geumhwa, who had regained her harpy form, was more concerned with Yeongwoo's situation below.

"Geumhwa! Over here! Hurry!"

At Yeongwoo's urgent request, she immediately dove toward him in a high-speed descent.

「What... what is all this? Are you okay?」

Despite her terrifying appearance, Geumhwa's voice was surprisingly gentle.

"No, I'm not okay. I was ambushed."

「Ambushed? You, Yeongwoo, got ambushed?」

Geumhwa had seen Yeongwoo's past rampages on television, so she couldn't easily believe it.

The idea that someone had managed to ambush one of the most feared beings on Earth successfully was hard to swallow.

"Yes. If I had been just a bit more underhanded, I could have anticipated this ambush."

「...?」

Geumhwa tilted her head in confusion at his oddly twisted logic.

She began to wonder if saving this man was the right decision.

However, there was no time for deep contemplation, as they were already quite close to the ground.

So, in the end.

Tap!

Like a parachute, Geumhwa caught hold of Yeongwoo's billowing cloak with both feet.

「Where should I drop you off?」

She asked while gliding, and Yeongwoo's sword pointed forward.

He indicated the place from which the earlier laser beam had been fired—the Metal Forbidden City.

"Let's take care of that first."

「That thing...?」

Following the direction of Yeongwoo's sword, Geumhwa shuddered as she finally noticed the Metal Forbidden City for the first time.

Although she had occasionally watched Yeongwoo's battles on the television in the returnee's room, she had been too busy assembling statues that morning to catch any broadcasts.

"What? You didn't know?"

「How would anyone know about that thing?」

As the two conversed, the three friends who had been free-falling finally landed—or rather, crashed—into Beijing below.

Boom!

With a tremendous crash, dust clouds billowed around the area, but fortunately, it seemed the friends' bodies had not been crushed.

Soon, large silhouettes began to rise from within the dust cloud.

‘Oh, so friends are invincible right after being summoned?’

It made sense.

Since they were always summoned in mid-air, it would be problematic if they broke their legs upon landing.

"Drop me off in front of that."

Yeongwoo pointed to a massive gate in the distance.

It was Tiananmen, the southern gate of the Forbidden City.

「You want me to drop you there? But there's already someone there....」

Geumhwa double-checked as she spotted a group of black statues resembling soldiers gathered in the square before Tiananmen.

Their large stature was apparent from tens of meters up in the air, and it was clear these weren't ordinary statues.

"The person who turned the old men into demons is behind this. He probably has other tricks up his sleeve too."

As Yeongwoo spoke, the statues guarding the Tiananmen Square began to turn their heads toward him individually.

As expected, this was an army prepared by Im Dupyeong.

'Moving Terracotta Warriors, huh?'

It might be said that this is typical of China.

In any case, on the surface, the 'Metal Forbidden City' and those iron Terracotta Warriors seemed to be made of the same material, so Yeongwoo speculated that this too was a power provided by Im Dupyeong's sponsor.

"Who on earth is behind Im Dupyeong? It's too crude to be Lemu, and it's not Mara either..."

Yeongwoo was someone who had indirectly encountered both factions.

However, in this bizarre city of Beijing, he could not sense the presence of any particular faction.

A fortress reinforced with steel and living Terracotta Warriors.

On top of that, firepower support using laser cannons.

What kind of power was sponsoring something like this...?

‘...Huh?’

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

At the moment when Yeongwoo's eyes widened as he finally realized something, a distinctive energy-emission sound came from the Metal Forbidden City, which had been quiet for a while. Then—

「Whoa!」

A laser beam was fired toward the person holding Yeongwoo, Geumhwa.

Yeongwoo blocked the laser with Bastard, just as he had done earlier, but he couldn't prevent Geumhwa from being shocked, as she lacked combat experience.

「Gasp!」

Startled, she inadvertently let go of Yeongwoo, and seeing this, the Terracotta Warriors began to rush toward the spot where they anticipated Yeongwoo would land.

Boom!

The ground shook as if an earthquake had struck.

The height of the Terracotta Warriors ranged from at least 7 meters to as much as 10 meters.

Im Dupyeong had literally prepared giant soldiers.

‘Was he planning to conquer all of China? When did he build these...?’

As Yeongwoo was thrown to the ground, he saw a large shadow approaching him and gripped Bastard.

Of course, to someone like Yeongwoo, who had been in and out of dungeons on alien planets, Terracotta Warriors made of metal were not much of a threat.

However, what gave him an ominous feeling was—

‘If the sponsor behind Im Dupyeong isn’t Lemu or Mara, isn’t that an even bigger problem?’

This would mean that, even if it wasn’t a formal development company, they could still significantly influence Earth’s civil war.

While they might not be able to reshape planets like with road construction, they could alter the power dynamics by sponsoring specific factions.

‘Damn cockroach-like bastards, when am I going to kill them all?’

There was so much to do to take over this planet.

Swoosh!

Yeongwoo rose, extending Bastard to a length of 6.6 meters, but the approaching Terracotta Warriors showed no hesitation as they swung their massive weapons at him.

Whoosh!

With the sound of air being compressed, a dark trail cut through the air as if someone had swung an ink brush, and at the same time, Yeongwoo's Bastard sliced through the air twice in rapid succession.

Slash, crash!

The first strike severed the weapons of the Terracotta Warriors, and the second strike cleaved the bodies of the Terracotta Warriors in half.

Thud!

"Is this how you greet guests? Im Dupyeong! Come face me directly!"

As Yeongwoo swiftly dealt with a whole squad of Terracotta Warriors and charged fiercely toward the tightly closed Tiananmen, to his surprise, his name was pronounced from within the gate.

—Master Jeong.

"What...?"

An alien-sounding voice, characteristic of a machine.

However, Yeongwoo immediately recognized it.

The owner of this voice was none other than Im Dupyeong, President of China and First Standing Committee Member, the great evil of Beijing.

—It seems you've achieved quite an accomplishment. I underestimated you.

Then, the lock on the tightly closed Tiananmen gate was released, and the thick iron doors began to open sideways.

Clang!

Im Dupyeong was opening the path to the Forbidden City.

"What are you trying to do?"

Not knowing where to look while speaking, Yeongwoo directed his question toward the roof of Tiananmen.

The strange voice responded from within the now-open Tiananmen.

—My body is somewhat incapacitated, so I apologize for not being able to greet you in person.

"Incapacitated...?"

As Yeongwoo frowned, he saw another gate in the distance inside Tiananmen slowly opening.

It was none other than the main gate of the Forbidden City, the Meridian Gate.

Im Dupyeong was indeed opening the way into the Forbidden City.

"..."

Was this another trap, or was Im Dupyeong truly too incapacitated to come out and greet him?

Yeongwoo scanned the suspicious exterior of the "Metal Forbidden City" and then asked Im Dupyeong again.

"Is your sponsor Mara?"

If Mara built this fortress, he needed to call his brothers immediately.

He could not break their promise.

But—

—No, it is not.

"...Not Mara?"

According to Im Dupyeong, the power behind Beijing was not Mara.

"....."

Because of this, Yeongwoo felt the blood vessels in his neck swell.

If the power behind China was not Mara, where should his brothers go?

Or, what should he tell them?

He could almost see Bantubangtong's disappointed face.

"Then who remodeled the Forbidden City like this?"

As Yeongwoo said this, he turned around.

He saw the desolate Tiananmen Square.

Geumhwa and the other three friends had already returned, as their summon time had expired.

"It can't be Lemu, right? They're not into this kind of style."

At this moment, Yeongwoo was already pulling up the coordinates of the Forbidden City.

Based on his deductions, the one backing Im Dupyeong was likely—

"Earth, 084! 360! 6251! 061! Fire now!"

As Yeongwoo quickly recited the coordinates of the spot directly above the main gate of the Forbidden City, 'Meridian Gate,' Im Dupyeong's mechanical voice seemed startled.

—What are you doing...?

And simultaneously—

Boom!

A massive laser beam pierced through the clouds and descended.

Then, as soon as it touched the roof of the 'Meridian Gate,'—

Zap!

The large beam disappeared without a trace.

"Damn bastards, I knew it!"

Only after this did a system message appear before Yeongwoo's eyes.

「Physical conflict between our products is not permitted.」

The intergalactic arms dealer Toma.

The master of firepower, who had turned his attention to China after losing the main sponsor spot to Dogo, Yeongwoo's primary sponsor.

‘Seriously, is there so much to gain on this planet? Why is everyone making a fuss?’

As Yeongwoo lowered Bastard to the ground, intending to deal with them personally, a new advertisement request from Dogo arrived just in time.

[Dogo] "Heavenly Capital"

[Mission] Secure the remodeling core of the Forbidden City and establish the new capital of Earth.

[Special] In this mission, you must disclose the support from Dogo.

[Reward] 30 million Karma

‘Huh? What is this? A new capital? Deciding Earth's capital?’

As Yeongwoo read the mission details with a bewildered expression, he soon realized something.

"Um... is it possible? A Metal Seoul...?"

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

Chapter 289: Metal Forbidden City (2)

Metal Seoul.

Dogo didn't provide an official response to Yeongwoo's absurd suggestion.

However, the quest's objectives remained unchanged, which essentially meant:

“You tacitly agreed, didn't you? If I were to choose the capital of Earth, what other place would there be besides Seoul? All my comrades are there.”

Even as he said this, Yeongwoo was already imagining what a metalized Seoul would look like.

Giant guardian statues protecting the four gates of Seoul, and a metal Gyeongbokgung Palace, for example.

And more importantly...

‘Could we equip Seoul with laser cannons like the ones on the Forbidden City?’

The reason Yeongwoo was focused on this particular idea was none other than because of the Mutants.

If they could establish a perfect capital defense system through city modifications, wouldn't that naturally solve the Mutant problem as well?

'That would greatly expand my range of operations.'

Today alone, he had to return to Seoul before 1 PM to deal with the Mutants.

But what if those restrictions were lifted?

If that happened, even managing Earth on a global scale wouldn't be impossible.

This would allow him to realize the goal he declared during the Strongest Sword election: "Enrich the nation and strengthen its military to unify the world."

And to achieve that, the key was the modification core of the Forbidden City.

'I'm sorry, but the Forbidden City has to go down.'

[Mission] Secure the modification core of the Forbidden City and choose a new capital for Earth.

It was clear as day that if Yeongwoo were to secure—or rather, steal—that core, the Metal Forbidden City would inevitably collapse.

Click!

As Yeongwoo stepped inside Tiananmen, the voice of Im Dupyeong once again echoed from within the palace.

—Master Jeong.

"Oh, seriously, you talk too much. After striking first, why do you keep calling me 'Master'?"

Of course, he didn't mind being called 'Master' by someone who was once the President of China.

After all, it was a unique experience.

However, if this was meant as a strategic courtesy to gain favor, he was not interested.

—I sense killing intent. I'm not mistaken, am I?

"No, so you really opened the gate thinking we'd have a conversation? After exchanging laser beams, don't we have to see this through to the end?"

While saying this, Yeongwoo carefully surveyed his surroundings.

You never know when or where a laser beam might come shooting out.

Clank, clank.

After taking a few more steps forward, he was soon greeted by the majestic sight of the Meridian Gate, which had approached surprisingly close.

This was the official main gate of the Forbidden City, and the only structure immune to the laser cannons fired from the Returnees' Room.

'They say it's a product of their own, so it can't be attacked... Does that make any sense? And yet, the Forbidden City's laser cannons attacked me.'

Swish.

As Yeongwoo adjusted his grip on his sword and stepped through the Meridian Gate, Im Dupyeong spoke again.

—We share the same benefactor.

“...So?”

—As you have seen, shouldn't we be cooperating rather than pointing swords at each other?

He was referring to the fact that Yeongwoo's bombardment didn't touch the Meridian Gate.

Since they were both using the power of Toma, Im Dupyeong suggested that instead of fighting, they should find another way.

“.....”

But strictly speaking, Im Dupyeong and Yeongwoo didn't share the same benefactor.

For Im Dupyeong, his only reliance was Toma, but Yeongwoo's main sponsor was Dogo, who had instructed him to extract the Forbidden City's core.

Moreover, the two companies had different statuses on Earth.

Dogo was a construction company that legally obtained the right to develop Earth, while Toma was merely an affiliate of the Earth Reset Project.

And in the first place...

[Mission] Secure the modification core of the Forbidden City and choose a new capital for Earth.

‘Our company is on a different level. They even say we can choose the capital of Earth?’

In other words, the city Yeongwoo chose would eventually become the new capital of Earth.

Dogo’s ambition to place Yeongwoo in control of Earth was becoming clear.

“Cooperation only works if our interests align. You and I are on different scales.”

—What?

Im Dupyeong was finally starting to get angry.

After all, even he had his limits when it came to swallowing his pride.

By this time, Yeongwoo had already passed through the open Meridian Gate and was heading toward the Taihe Gate.

The Taihe Gate was the main entrance to the Hall of Supreme Harmony, the most important structure in the Forbidden City.

Passing through here would allow access to the core of the Forbidden City.

The Hall of Supreme Harmony was also the location where emperors were crowned.

‘What? It’s closed?’

Seeing that the Taihe Gate was locked, Yeongwoo instinctively knew that Im Dupyeong must be hiding behind it.

And more importantly...

“.....”

“You’ve arrived.”

In front of the firmly closed Taihe Gate stood two elderly men.

Politburo Standing Committee Member No. 5, Hyun Buwon, and Standing Committee Member No. 3, Sung Bangho.

Both members were quite tall, around 2 meters, but despite their imposing physiques, their eyes trembled intensely.

They knew very well that the person who had just arrived at the Taihe Gate was the one who had killed the other three Standing Committee members, except for Chairman Im.

Among those three was Hong Jingbai, Beijing's second most powerful man.

Swoosh.

Hyun Buwon, the 5th Standing Committee member, stepped away from the Taihe Gate and gestured for Yeongwoo to stop.

“Stop right there.”

Yeongwoo took three or four more steps before finally stopping at the Committee member's command.

Clank!

“Your voice is trembling, Committee Member.”

Yeongwoo spoke with a smile, causing the 3rd Standing Committee member, Sung Bangho, who had his arms crossed, to twitch his eyebrows.

“Normally, outsiders are not allowed to enter the Hall of Supreme Harmony, but the Chairman has granted special permission. However, you must leave all your weapons behind.”

As Sung Bangho spoke, his gaze fell upon Yeongwoo's sword, Bastard.

Even a layman could see that this sword was no ordinary weapon.

“What if I don't?”

“...What?”

“What if I refuse to disarm? Are you going to fight me?”

“You...!”

It was a provocation that greatly wounded their pride, but Sung Bangho did not immediately rush at him.

While he was aware of Yeongwoo's formidable skills, Im Dupyeong was just behind him.

“I’ve heard you’re very arrogant. If you weren’t the Chairman’s guest, I would have personally ripped your heart out.”

“My heart is invincible to swords, old man.”

With these words, Yeongwoo lifted his sword, causing both Standing Committee members to flinch reflexively.

But what Yeongwoo did next was...

Thud!

He planted the sword firmly into the ground in front of the Taihe Gate.

“Since I’m at the Forbidden City, I suppose I should follow its rules.”

With that, he slightly spread his arms to show that he had no other weapons.

“Now open the door. I’m a busy man.”

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

At Yeongwoo’s command, the castle guard reluctantly nodded, and soon, one of the five elders of the Hyun family placed his hand on the Taihe Gate.

Thump.

The tightly locked latch automatically released, and the thick iron door began to open.

Thududududuk!

The Taihe Gate opened.

Behind the massive entrance was the Taihe Hall square, where ancient Chinese officials used to bow and pay respects.

And across this spacious square—

Rooooaar...!

Stood the Taihe Hall, exuding an eerie aura, like a towering Mount Tai.

Originally, the Taihe Hall was built on a stone staircase rising from the square, but now the entire staircase had been replaced with metal.

Even the wooden structure of the Taihe Hall was completely covered in metal, making it look less like a fortress and more like a battleship.

‘Impressive. So if I take that Core, I can turn Seoul into something like this?’

As Yeongwoo strolled around the Taihe Hall square like a visitor at a model house, the gate behind him closed shut.

Kuuung!

They had trapped the unarmed Yeongwoo in front of the Taihe Hall.

And then—

Shiiiiing!

The central decorative path of the staircase leading to the Taihe Hall began to glow brightly.

This path, known as the “Dragon Path,” was the route reserved for the emperor’s palanquin and was characterized by carvings of dragons flying through clouds.

Therefore, what Yeongwoo was seeing now was—

“These Chinese guys really have a thing for dragons...”

As Yeongwoo, staring at the brightly glowing dragon on the path, was about to step onto the staircase leading to the Taihe Hall—

Grrrr!

The “Fearful Cat” that Yeongwoo had tucked into his pocket let out a sharp cry.

‘Im Dupyeong?’

As Yeongwoo widened his eyes, he soon sensed a massive presence rising from within the Taihe Hall, just beyond the high staircase.

It was as if a huge tidal wave was approaching silently.

‘Oh, come to think of it.’

Yeongwoo realized that the sky above the Taihe Hall square had grown ominously dark, and he quickly summoned a Golden Trail, Dullahan’s sword, and the White Fire from his weapon arsenal.

Pa-pa-pat! Pa-pat!

Then, from beyond the staircase, the voice of Im Dupyeong, which he had been hearing all along, flowed out.

—You have quite a few tricks up your sleeve.

But his tone was much different from before.

He no longer spoke respectfully, and his tone had become much more ferocious.

“Earlier, you wanted to talk, but now you’ve changed your mind?”

As Yeongwoo spoke, glancing alternately at the blackened sky and the tightly closed Taihe Gate, Im Dupyeong let out a low chuckle.

—Your sword outside the gate was showing an unusually strong energy reaction.

It was referring to the Scapegoat.

—But I no longer sense any ‘danger’ from you.

“Really? Then show yourself already.”

As Yeongwoo finished speaking and was about to step onto the sacred Dragon Path, a tremendous wave of energy erupted from the Taihe Hall.

—How dare you!

Rumble!

A thunderous sound echoed, and a massive object rose from the front of the Taihe Hall, darkening the already black sky even further.

“.....!”

It was none other than a dragon.

The first oriental dragon Yeongwoo had seen since his reset.

“No way... what the hell did you do?”

However, it wasn’t just an ordinary dragon; the creature was a type of steel dragon, its entire body made of pitch-black metal, much like this metal Forbidden City.

It was similar to Yeongwoo’s eldest uncle, Song Taeho.

But hadn't Im Dupyeong said he narrowly avoided the annihilation vote and blocked all the attacks directed at him?

"What the... weren't you human?"

As Yeongwoo, for the first time in a while, looked surprised at the sight of Im Dupyeong's head soaring high in the air, he noticed a title above his crown.

『The Great Villain of Beijing』

"Uh."

That format clearly signified the Strongest Sword, or rather, the strongest in each nation.

In other words, Im Dupyeong was still considered human.

'Did this crazy guy abandon his body to gain power?'

If that were the case, then Im Dupyeong was the epitome of a new human species optimized for the reset.

And finally—

—Hah, human? I've long stopped being such a weak creature.

"What?"

—I will become a god.

With these words, Im Dupyeong descended the Dragon Path of the Taihe Hall, filling the front of the square where Yeongwoo stood.

The sheer size of his body was overwhelming, twisting multiple times in midair, yet still blocking not only the Taihe Hall behind him but also the sky.

"Hm, you do look strong."

Though Yeongwoo wore a reluctant expression, he didn't miss the small number glowing under Im Dupyeong's chin.

From earlier, something had been shining under the guy's chin, so he zoomed in with his "Clairvoyance" and saw a series of numbers.

484,237,551 / 500,000,000

‘Ten hundred... billions? So that’s 480 million`?’

Then the number on the right must be 500 million.

In other words, out of 500 million, 480 million.

Yeongwoo blinked, his mind quickly racing.

It didn’t take long for him to reach a conclusion.

‘This bastard isn’t a dragon yet, but a mere Imoogi.’

Yeongwoo immediately lifted his head to gaze at the sky.

Sure enough, the dark sky hadn’t actually changed due to the weather; it was merely a large canopy draped over the Forbidden City.

In other words, the reason Im Dupyeong had deliberately invited Yeongwoo inside the Forbidden City was that fighting here gave him an advantage.

And the reason for that was—

“Aha... you need 16 million more. That’s the condition of your contract with Toma, isn’t it? To use your power outside this fortress.”

In terms of cosmic contracts, Yeongwoo’s experience far surpassed anyone else’s.

As Yeongwoo made this plausible deduction, Im Dupyeong, who was blocking the sky, gritted his steel brows and furrowed his forehead.

—How presumptuous! But you are already in my grasp. You are the last offering on my path to becoming a god.

With that, he twisted part of his upper body and pulled out an arm holding a glowing Yeouiju.

“.....!”

At that exact moment, Yeongwoo’s pupils also dilated widely.

‘The Core!’

He instinctively knew.

That was the very Yeouiju that would turn the Imoogi Im Dupyeong into a god... no, into a dragon, and would eventually become the heart of Metal Seoul.

‘All that’s left now is to crush him.’

Having gathered all the information he needed, Yeongwoo licked his lips and reached his right hand backward.

Paht!

—.....?

At that moment, Im Dupyeong’s steel brow furrowed as his eyes squinted tightly.

Crash!

One side of the Taihe Gate behind them shattered as the mythical cursed sword, Bastard, shot like a bullet into its master’s hand.

“You’re about to become a cripple.”

Mocking Im Dupyeong’s aspirations, Yeongwoo tightened his grip on Bastard, while the aspiring god, Chairman Im, raised the Yeouiju high and shouted.

—Forbidden City! Activate extermination mode!

“What?”

Then, the four red watchtowers, each guarding the corners of the Forbidden City, rose simultaneously.

Kugugugugu!

In response, Yeongwoo, impressed, lunged at Im Dupyeong.

“Leave that behind too! Im Dupyeong...!”

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

Chapter 290: Metal Forbidden City (3)

—Your arrogance knows no bounds!

Central Politburo First Standing Committee Member, Im Dupyeong, roared as his body grew larger.

Crack!

His body was already so enormous that it obscured the sky.

Any ordinary Strongest Sword wouldn't have dared to take a step forward.

Just standing alone in this space, under the dark canopy that covered the sky, facing this enormous dragon would have caused most to lose their fighting spirit.

But.

Ta-at!

South Korea's elected Strongest Sword Jeong Yeongwoo⁰⁷, was different.

"Im Dupyeong! Hand over the core first!"

When everyone else retreated in front of the exchange office, his story began by moving forward instead.

From the moment he first grasped the Early Bird, Yeongwoo understood that everything frightening and unfamiliar in this world wasn't something to avoid but something to overcome.

He had learned that overcoming something always brought some kind of reward in this world.

Of course, at the beginning of his journey, he overcame obstacles solely for his own safety.

But now, the driving force behind his challenges was something different.

"Contribute to the construction of Metal Seoul...!"

As Yeongwoo, holding Bastard, charged like lightning, Im Dupyeong opened his jaws wide.

Kwa-at!

From deep inside Im Dupyeong's throat came a sound that was all too familiar to Yeongwoo.

Zing!

“This bastard?”

The red laser beam that had been targeting Yeongwoo all this time was actually a breath weapon fired from Im Dupyeong's mouth.

“No doubt about it, he’s a robot dragon.”

But the laser cannon, probably installed by a military contractor, posed little threat to Yeongwoo, who already held Bastard.

Kwa-aak!

Yeongwoo easily sliced through Im Dupyeong's laser breath and leaped into the air.

Ta-at!

His target was the orb in Im Dupyeong's right arm, the core of this Metal Forbidden City.

Then.

Pew-pew-pew-pew!

“...?”

Following Im Dupyeong's ‘Annihilation Mode’ command, four turrets that had risen earlier simultaneously fired lasers at Yeongwoo.

Unlike Im Dupyeong's breath, these lasers were much thinner, but they were much faster and more physically powerful.

It was as if.

‘It's like blades are flying at me?’

Sizzle!

The actual destructive power of the lasers was impressive, as white sparks flew from where the lasers intersected in mid-air when Yeongwoo swiftly dodged them.

Yet, the ground of the Forbidden City remained unscathed.

This was because the directive from the Toma Corporation, stating that their products wouldn’t harm themselves, also applied to these turrets.

“No... this is pretty amazing.”

Lasers could be fired within the city without leaving a single scratch on the buildings.

In other words, as long as the residents were evacuated, battles could take place inside the city.

“Is that part of the Metal package too?”

As Yeongwoo pointed at the turrets and asked Im Dupyeong a question.

Crash!

The turrets, which had failed to snipe Yeongwoo, rose even higher than before.

“Huh?”

Yeongwoo’s gaze naturally followed them upward, and he soon realized something.

—.....

—.....

The four turrets guarding the corners of the Metal Forbidden City were, in fact, the heads of giants who had been hiding inside the city walls.

“...Oh my god.”

Yeongwoo momentarily forgot about his fight with Im Dupyeong and stared at the giant guardians walking inward from the four corners of the Forbidden City.

—.....

They didn’t seem to have any lines, but instead greeted Yeongwoo with laser beams.

Pew! Pew-pew!

Once again, the crimson laser beams cut through the black sky of the Forbidden City.

As Yeongwoo watched this dazzling laser show, he understood why Im Dupyeong had been so confident.

In this Forbidden City, there were very few who could defeat him.

The only problem was that one of those few was standing right here, right now.

Swoosh!

Yeongwoo deflected the turrets' attacks with Bastard and immediately turned his gaze back to Im Dupyeong.

"Truly impressive."

At that moment, Im Dupyeong, who had been diving towards Yeongwoo from the sky, twitched his fiery eyebrows.

—What do you mean?

"I mean this fortress and those giant guardians. You too, Im Dupyeong. It's all very impressive. You might have met me later if you had only collected taxes in the West. It's a shame for you."

—What?

Realizing that the conversation had been a setup to mock him, Im Dupyeong swung his left front paw.

Swa-aack!

A dark trail slashed through the air as Im Dupyeong's claws cut viciously. Yeongwoo narrowly dodged the attack.

Whoosh!

Then, as if waiting for the moment.

Swaa-aack!

Yeongwoo swung Bastard from top to bottom, severing one of Im Dupyeong's front paws.

Slice!

As expected, Im Dupyeong's dragon body was cut through like tofu the moment it touched Bastard.

Even though Toma Corporation could create planet-level bombardment weapons, they couldn't create equipment that could withstand 'mythical' attacks.

—Ah...!

Im Dupyeong, realizing a lot as he saw his limb severed so easily, hastily tried to soar into the sky.

But by then, Yeongwoo had already driven Bastard into his body and mounted him.

As a result, Im Dupyeong had no choice but to ascend into the sky above Taihe Hall with this mysterious outsider riding him.

“Chairman Im! This is the end!”

As Yeongwoo began climbing up Im Dupyeong’s arm, gripping the orb, Im Dupyeong cried out in anger, now emitting black smoke from his nostrils.

—Who are you really? How could someone like you be more...!

There was a tone of resentment in his voice so that Yeongwoo couldn’t help but ask.

“And you? Why are you going to such lengths? Was there something that made you give up being human? You weren’t really trying to regain power for the sake of the people, were you?”

From Yeongwoo’s perspective, he couldn’t understand Im Dupyeong’s motivations at all.

Yeongwoo couldn't possibly understand Im Dupyeong's motives. Despite successfully remaining human in the reset world, he had chosen a body barely distinguishable from a mutant. Why would he make such a choice?

Then Im Dupyeong turned the question on Yeongwoo.

—How can you even question that? You, too, are someone who has forsaken being human, aren't you?

"...!"

—I can sense energy coursing through your body.

He was referring to the equipment that had replaced parts of Yeongwoo's body.

In truth, the difference was only a matter of degree—Yeongwoo, too, had forsaken parts of his humanity to gain power.

"That's..."

For the first time since coming to the Forbidden City, Yeongwoo was at a loss for words, unable to find his next line.

Im Dupyeong spun his body fiercely and shouted,

—When all of this started, the people gave me 300 million arrows! I saw them flying straight at my heart!

This meant that on the first day of the reset, 300 million people had directly shot arrows at Im Dupyeong.

"..."

Yeongwoo fell silent.

Im Bonghee.

He had once seen the final moments of his former roommate, who had trembled in fear at even a single arrow.

And as he had predicted, Im Bonghee's expression when struck by the arrow was one of sheer terror.

So, what would it feel like to learn that a staggering 300 million arrows had been fired at you, not by anyone else, but by your own people?

There was no need to ask—Yeongwoo knew Im Dupyeong must have felt overwhelming fear.

Kwaaaang!

As Im Dupyeong spun rapidly to shake Yeongwoo off, his body heated up until it burned red-hot.

The intense heat pierced Yeongwoo's palm and reached up to his elbow.

"Ugh!"

Yeongwoo was holding onto Im Dupyeong's body purely by willpower, as the talisman of the berserker wasn't blocking the pain.

"So, you plan to grow power so immense that it can never be opposed?"

Yeongwoo asked, barely holding on.

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]

Im Dupyeong, with his eyes glowing red, looked back at him and said,

—Exactly. The kind of fearsome power that no one can oppose. That's what I and China need.

"...Not you and China, but just you. You just don't want to be beaten down ever again."

—Shut up!

Enraged, Im Dupyeong fired a breath attack at his own body, where Yeongwoo was hanging on, but Yeongwoo was already gone.

Flash!

Yeongwoo had quickly leapt up and clung to Im Dupyeong's back.

"I, too, somehow ended up dreaming of ruling the Earth, so I've got a lot on my mind."

—What?

"How the hell do you make 300 million people shoot arrows? Even using up the points they'd need for self-defense. Have you ever thought about that?"

—You...!

For a moment, Im Dupyeong was at a loss for words, and at the same time, Yeongwoo drove his sword deeper into Im Dupyeong's back.

Slash!

"Now, step down in accordance with the people's will! I'll help you with that!"

As Yeongwoo pulled the sword down further, Im Dupyeong's iron skin split open, revealing a path to the afterlife.

Seeing this, the colossal soldiers of the Forbidden City rushed over, but it was too late.

Thud!

Yeongwoo was already descending toward the Yeouiju, riding the now tattered right shoulder of Im Dupyeong.

Shaaak!

The mysterious device, the core, which had been gifted to Im Dupyeong by Toma through some contract, was now on the verge of falling into the hands of a bandit from the Korean Peninsula.

Crash!

Yeongwoo, slicing through Im Dupyeong's arm with his sword, kicked the large core beneath him.

Thud!

As soon as the core was dislodged from Im Dupyeong's weakening right hand, at that exact moment—

—Argh...!

With Im Dupyeong's final cry, the dragon's body lost power.

"Huh?"

With Yeongwoo's surprised exclamation, Im Dupyeong's massive body plummeted to the ground of the Taihe Plaza.

Whoooosh, Boom!

A tremendous roar and shockwave assaulted Yeongwoo's ears, and the colossal soldiers who were rushing to the plaza all came to a halt simultaneously.

It was as if someone had unplugged the power cord; everything in the metallic Forbidden City had stopped functioning.

"No way... The core was more important than I thought."

Yeongwoo pushed Im Dupyeong's body aside and stood up, his foot stepping on the steps leading to the Taihe Hall.

Im Dupyeong's massive size had covered the entire area from the steps leading to the Taihe Hall to the central part of the plaza.

"Ah, the core. Where did the core go?"

As Yeongwoo turned his head to look for the core he had kicked away earlier, he spotted the 4-meter-wide core vibrating at a low frequency in front of the Taihe Hall.

And just in time—

Creak, creak, creak.

The doors of the Taihe Hall, which had been firmly shut, began to open.

It seemed that the core being dislodged from the dragon's hand had also unlocked the door's mechanism.

Similarly, the gate on the opposite side, the Taihe Gate, had reopened, where Yeongwoo saw the two members of the Standing Committee he had seen earlier, collapsed in front of it.

With Im Dupyeong's death, they too had lost their lives.

"What the hell were those guys? Did they make a pact to die on the same day and hour?"

Chilled for some reason, Yeongwoo carefully touched his own neck as he walked toward the Taihe Hall.

As he approached, he could see the six dragon-carved golden pillars that supported the center of the Taihe Hall, and at the very center—

"Huh."

There was something that anyone would recognize as a throne.

Moreover, someone was already sitting on it.

"Im Dupyeong...?"

Sensing that the person on the throne was Chairman Im, Yeongwoo gripped his sword tightly and rushed into the Taihe Hall.

Thud, thud, thud!

But after just a few steps, he came to a sudden stop.

"Crazy..."

He had belatedly realized that steel hoses connected various parts of the Taihe Hall to the body of the person sitting on the throne.

He had thought that Im had abandoned his human form and been reborn as a dragon made of steel, but his true body had been confined within the Taihe Hall all along.

"What kind of madness is this?"

This was a line directed at both the late Im Dupyeong and his sponsor, Toma.

But naturally, there was no answer.

"No, seriously, this guy is insane."

Yeongwoo covered his mouth as he took in the desolate scene of the Taihe Hall, where Im Dupyeong must have spent the entire reset period.

"What on earth are you... How could you be more...?"

Im Dupyeong's earlier words, spoken in disbelief as the dragon's body was effortlessly split open, now took on a slightly different meaning.

What he meant by "even more than me" was not the dragon he had become, but rather himself, who had craved power while binding his true form to this throne.

"Indeed, there's no such thing as power without a price."

Yeongwoo shuddered once again at the cruelty of the cosmic forces.

After all, from their perspective, both Im Dupyeong and Jeong Yeongwoo were nothing more than small beings from a remote planet.

The only difference, if any, was that Im Dupyeong desperately needed great power immediately, while Jeong Yeongwoo had at least followed the proper contractual process in line with minimal order.

"That's why there are standard contracts. He delved too deep into the dark arts."

Clicking his tongue, Yeongwoo left Taihua Hall.

Then, he saw the 'Core,' the final thing he had to deal with in the Forbidden City today, waiting for him.

"Now... Let's see what exactly I can do with this."

Just as Yeongwoo reached out for the Core, his heart pounding,

Crackle!

The sky, which had returned to its original state after Im Dupyeong's death, rippled unnaturally.

"...?"

And then,

Boom!

A shockwave that had traveled from afar swept over the skies above the Forbidden City.

"Wait, this is..."

A sense of déjà vu hit him.

He had seen this phenomenon before, when 'Dogo' was selected as the last developer of Earth.

'Those bastards!'

The other two companies that had decided to develop Earth had finally started to take action.

But that wasn't the end.

[Developer 1 'Lemu' has declared war on 'Dogo.']

[Developer 2 'Mara' has declared war on 'Dogo.']

As if they knew that Yeongwoo was in the process of taking over China, the two companies consecutively declared war on 'Dogo.'

"What? Those bastards."

As the enraged Yeongwoo glared at the sky while gripping Bastard, a new system message appeared in his view.

「A declaration of war has been made! To officially record the development rights dispute, please set the office address within 8 hours.」

"Office address?"

This meant he had to enter the developer 'Dogo' office address on Earth.

And given that he was the one responsible for this setting, it seemed...

'I'm the agent of Dogo, huh?'

If so, where should he designate as the center of the upcoming Earth development war?

Since it would be officially recorded, he couldn't take this lightly.

'...Then it has to be Metal Seoul.'

Yeongwoo's gaze shifted back to the Core.

The system then displayed a follow-up message.

「In 8 hours, all companies' office addresses will be disclosed. Non-involved parties should evacuate immediately.」

"Ah."

Only then did Yeongwoo realize that these announcements were being made to the entire Earth.

This meant that the Korean Peninsula would have already been thrown into chaos by now.

After all, due to the Supreme Sword vote, the entire Korean population knew that Jeong Yeongwoo was backed by Dogo.

"This is bad."

Yeongwoo scratched his chin with the end of Bastard.

Then, he took out the unique ring, 'Wave,' and brought it to his mouth.

《Ah, can you hear me? In one hour, we will hold a business briefing at COEX in Gangnam. The topic is the reconfiguration of Seoul's infrastructure.》

After saying this, Yeongwoo paused for a moment before adding a final word.

《And also, the matter of consenting to the war. Please be sure to attend.》

[Translator - Night]

[Proofreader - Gun]