

M. in Hell 31

Chapter 31 - Demonic Beast of the First Hell (2)

A Hellhound was a demonic beast that resembled a dog and was almost five meters tall. It was a powerful predator with explosive agility, which came from its massive build, and its skin was harder than steel. Hellhounds were one of the strongest predators even in the First Hell, where Oh Kang-Woo had fallen when he had first entered Hell.

'What is a demonic beast doing here?'

Monsters and demonic beasts looked similar, but there was a decisive difference between them. Both possessed demonic energy, but a monster's main energy source was the mana inside their mana stone. Demonic beasts on the other hand were a demon subspecies, and they moved solely with the power of demonic energy.

"Grrrrr," the Hellhound growled and glared at Kang-Woo.

Every time the Hellhound exhaled, black flames spewed out of its mouth.

"What the hell is going on?" Kang-Woo muttered.

'How did an entity that belonged to the First Hell get to Earth?'

Even Kang-Woo, the former lord of the Nine Hells, had barely been able to cross dimensions through painstaking efforts. So, there was no way that a demonic beast from the First Hell could have crossed the dimensional barrier on its own.

'Is this the Demon Cult's doing?'

He didn't have enough clues to speculate.

"Damn it."

Kang-Woo extended his right hand to the side and used the Authority of Dark Spears. A giant demonic energy spear two meters in length appeared in his hand.

'I don't have good memories with that damn fire mutt.'

Back when Kang-Woo was still in the First Hell, he'd been at the bottom of the food chain. Hellhounds had been apex predators that killed anything that moved, so Kang-Woo had almost died several times while hiding from them.

"But well, not anymore."

He had been at the bottom of the food chain in the past, but it was the complete opposite now. Kang-Woo had risen to the top of the food chain where he hunted the apex predators. Most of his strength was sealed, but there was no way he would lose against a demonic beast that belonged to the First Hell.

"Graaaaahhh!!"

Fwoosh!!

The Hellhound roared and launched black flames toward Kang-Woo.

Of course, the Hellhound's flames weren't the same as Andras's hellfire, which burned one's life force. However, since demonic energy was optimized for destruction, the power of the fire created with it was stronger than that of regular fire.

Boom!

Kang-Woo violently stomped on the ground to dodge the Hellhound's attack. Then he threw the demonic energy spear. It flew like an arrow and pierced the Hellhound's thick skin.

Crack!

"Graaaahhhh!!!"

The attack that had killed the Troll Chief in one blow didn't weaken the Hellhound's movements but rather amplified its ferocity. The Hellhound shot toward Kang-Woo like a bullet. The ground that the Hellhound had leaped off of exploded as the Hellhound approached Kang-Woo at a frightening speed. It targeted Kang-Woo with its mouth opened wide—so wide that it could easily devour a person.

"Hmph!" Kang-Woo scoffed.

He kicked off from the ground and thrust his foot accurately at one of the Hellhound's canine teeth. Kang-Woo's kick, amplified with demonic energy, crushed the Hellhound's canine teeth, and Kang-Woo used the recoil to move backward. He twirled in the air and landed on the ground into which he then shoved his right arm.

'Authority of Pitfalls.'

Kang-Woo's demonic energy traveled down from his hand into the ground. The ground started to tremor as if an earthquake was occurring, and a giant hole suddenly appeared on the ground right under the Hellhound.

"Whine!" the Hellhound cried like a dog as it fell into the hole.

Then, Kang-Woo charged toward it.

'Authority of Dark Spears.'

He jumped into the hole and created a demonic energy spear in midair. Gripping the spear with both hands, he stabbed it into the Hellhound's head.

Crush!

"Woof, woof, woof!"

"As tenacious as always."

Even with its head pierced, the Hellhound stood up and jumped into the air. Once it was out of the hole, the Hellhound staggered away from Kang-Woo.

It wasn't trying to escape though. Hellhounds were the apex predator of the First Hell. The Hellhound's pride wouldn't let it escape.

"Grrrrr."

The Hellhound lowered its body. The muscles of its hind legs swelled as if they were about to explode, and thick sinews protruded all over its body while its demonic energy grew even stronger. The flames that it exhaled covered its entire body.

Slam!

There was a loud boom as the flame-covered Hellhound charged toward Kang-Woo. The surrounding trees were crushed as if they'd been swept away by a tornado.

"...But also as stupid as always."

Kang-Woo smirked when he saw the Hellhound coming at him with its remaining life force despite having suffered a fatal injury. He clenched his right fist and pulled it back as if he was pulling a bowstring.

'Authority of Titanic Might.'

Kang-Woo surged with explosive strength. He was using the demon Baphomet's Authority, which was the best in terms of purely amplifying raw strength.

Then, he stepped forward with his left foot and used the force generated by twisting his waist to punch the Hellhound's chin.

Crack!

"Whine!"

Despite weighing well over a hundred times more than Kang-Woo, the Hellhound was sent flying away miserably like an empty can that got kicked. The Hellhound's jaw was destroyed, and black blood leaked from its mouth. It wriggled for a bit and then finally lost consciousness.

"Phew. The Authority of Titanic Might sure consumes a lot of demonic energy," Kang-Woo said.

He had used it only for a brief period, but it had consumed half of his demonic energy. Kang-Woo panted as he approached the Hellhound's corpse. He felt refreshed after overwhelming the demonic beast that had put him through the wringer when he had fallen to the First Hell.

'In terms of the trouble I'd gone through, I struggled as much as when I'd killed those goddamn princes of Hell.'

In terms of strength, the beings in the Second and Third Hells were much stronger. However, the Hellhounds had been a living nightmare for Kang-Woo, who had not even been able to use the Authority of Predation properly at the time.

Ring.

[You have successfully defeated a C-rank Rift Fragment.]

'Rift Fragment?'

Kang-Woo frowned when a message window popped up that was different from the ones he'd gotten when he defeated regular monsters.

'Come to think of it, it said something about a Rift Core when I crossed the dimensional barrier.'

He surmised that 'Rifts' likely referred to beings of Hell.

'How the hell did this thing cross over the barrier?'

Kang-Woo was met with more and more questions, but in the end, he couldn't come up with an answer. In the first place, he wasn't even sure if these 'Rifts' referred to beings of Hell, so there was no way for his questions to be resolved.

More message windows popped up and interrupted his thoughts.

[Increasing EXP.]

[Your level has risen by 5.]

'Five levels.'

Kang-Woo's eyes widened after reading the message.

The number of experience points that he had acquired from killing the Hellhound couldn't be compared to what he'd gained after killing the Troll Chief. The experience points required to level up increased exponentially from Level 30 onwards, so this meant that he had earned an astronomical number of experience points at once.

'I became Level 34 in one go.'

It was four levels higher than his original goal.

Kang-Woo waited for the next set of message windows with great interest.

[You have reached Level 30 and have achieved your Fourth Awakening.]

[Your Fourth Awakening Trait has been unlocked.]

'All right.'

Kang-Woo's goal today had been to get his Fourth Awakening. He had massacred many Trolls with no signs of a level-up. Nevertheless, after killing a Hellhound, he gained way more experience points than he had intended.

Before checking his Trait, Kang-Woo pulled out the demonic energy within his body.

"The seal breaks more with each Awakening."

It turned out that a larger portion of the Ten Thousand Demon Core's seal broke with each Awakening.

Kang-Woo smirked upon discovering that the amount of demonic energy he had access to had doubled.

'I won't have trouble using two Authorities simultaneously now.'

He smiled, satisfied to see that the results were better than he had hoped.

Kang-Woo pulled the demonic energy back into his body. At that moment, he felt something that he hadn't before.

'What's this?'

Kang-Woo tilted his head in confusion and pulled out his demonic energy again. The demonic energy flowed out of the Ten Thousand Demon Core and spread through his body far faster than before.

'The demonic energy is flowing faster than before.'

Furthermore, he was able to use the demonic energy more naturally.

"Don't tell me..."

Kang-Woo opened the status window and checked his new Trait.

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

[Effect: The Player can use demonic energy faster and more naturally, and can also completely conceal it from others.]

"So, it was because of the Trait."

As expected, the reason why he could use his demonic energy more effectively was the new Trait.

'A-rank, huh?'

Kang-Woo's eyes lit up.

His new Trait was different from the ones he had obtained before. If the Traits he had obtained before helped him gain more demonic energy, then the new one let him use it more effectively.

Now that he had learned that the government was starting to investigate demon worshipers, being able to completely hide his demonic energy was going to be incredibly helpful.

'I'll be able to avoid meaningless conflicts.'

Getting mistaken as a demon worshiper and being chased by the entire country would be troublesome, even for him. In consideration of that, the effect of the new Trait was better than the huge increase in his demonic energy reserves.

"I knew I made the right choice to level up."

The power of Traits was beyond what he had imagined. Kang-Woo initially thought that he could already use demonic energy better than any demon, but with the Trait's help, he could now surpass his previous capabilities. It was a power that he didn't have when he used to rule over the Nine Hells.

'Once the Ten Thousand Demon Core is fully unsealed, I'll probably be stronger than I had been in Hell!'

If the princes of Hell that he had devoured were to hear that, they would've panicked.

"And like I'd thought, it doesn't have a mana stone."

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue after using the Authority of Predation on the Hellhound's corpse. It did not move with the power of mana like monsters did, so it was natural that it wouldn't have a mana stone.

"I guess I'll go home."

After having gained far more than the goal that he had set, Kang-Woo headed to the Gate exit. He went through the Gate and was about to head home with lighter steps when...

"Long time no see," a voice said to him.

Kang-Woo turned to the source of the voice. There, he saw the red-haired girl he had met at the internet cafe. She was standing with her back against the wall.

Chapter 32 - Cha Yeon-Joo's Proposal (1)

"Well... we don't have a relationship in which we would say that to each other, do we?" Oh Kang-Woo replied apathetically.

Just like he'd said, they weren't even close enough to be acquaintances.

Kang-Woo looked at the girl with short red hair and continued, "So, what do you need from me? Uhhh..."

"Cha Yeon-Joo..." the girl with short red hair said as she turned to Kang-Woo and walked toward him. "My name is Cha Yeon-Joo."

"Cha Yeon-Joo?"

Kang-Woo thought that he had heard that name before and tried to remember where he'd heard it.

'Ah, she's one of the Players the people in the waiting room were talking about.'

He remembered hearing about Players who had gotten an S-rank Trait on their First Awakening.

'I believe she was the guild master of one of the five great guilds.'

The 'five great guilds' referred to the five biggest guilds of Korea—the Hanul, Red Rose, Onnuri[1], Mir, and Angel Wings Guilds. Kang-Woo remembered having read her name among the list of the guild masters of those five guilds.

"Red Rose...?"

"Yeah. I'm the guild master of the Red Rose Guild."

"..."

If Cha Yeon-Joo was the guild master of one of the five great guilds... that meant she was one of the top ten Players in Korea. The Player that Kang-Woo had met by chance in an internet cafe was far more of a bigshot than he had expected.

'No wonder she was so strong.'

Yeon-Joo was so strong that Kang-Woo's encounter with her had made him doubt his strength back then. It was natural that he doubted himself because he had been weaker than a woman he'd met randomly, despite having just gotten his Third Awakening and having reached a level of power two stages above his expectations through the Andras Guild's ritual.

'Is this how I'd feel if the fat old man from next door was, in reality, the CEO of a huge corporation?'

He wasn't sure if the comparison was appropriate, but it felt similar.

Kang-Woo looked at Yeon-Joo with slightly wary eyes. She was not dressed in the sloppy getup that she had been in that day. Instead, she was wearing a short pair of shorts and a tight T-shirt—clothes that were comfortable to move around in.

Even without dressing up, Yeon-Joo was very beautiful, so she looked even more attractive now that she was wearing clothes that revealed her figure.

'She dolled up.'

Yeon-Joo wasn't wearing fancy clothes. However, she had put on some makeup, so she had indeed dolled up somewhat. It suggested that she wasn't approaching him with ill intentions.

'She wouldn't have taken the time to put on makeup if she'd come here to pick a fight.'

After he finished analyzing Yeon-Joo's appearance, Kang-Woo asked calmly, "So, what does the guild master of the Red Rose Guild want with me?"

"To be honest, I've investigated you," Yeon-Joo said. Then she took out a piece of paper. "Your name is Oh Kang-Woo. Born in 1995, 28 years old. You grew up in Cheongseong Orphanage, but since no one adopted you, you were forced to leave and live alone. Correct?"

"I don't know why you investigated me, but yeah."

"You registered as a Player on May 23rd. That means... it's been two weeks."

"..." Kang-Woo waited for Yeon-Joo's next words with his mouth closed.

"According to the test results from the Player Management Office, you got an F-rank Trait with your First Awakening. Well, this is surely an incorrect assessment. If you truly had awakened an F-rank Trait, you wouldn't be hunting in a C-rank Gate after only two weeks."

"Hmm." Kang-Woo nodded as if asking her to continue.

"To be honest, at first I thought you were a criminal who had bought the identity of Oh Kang-Woo from a broker," Yeon-Joo said calmly. "But your face, fingerprints, and everything else match your previous records."

"How did you get my fingerprints?"

"You got your fingerprints scanned when you first registered for your license, didn't you?"

"...I guess big guilds have more power than I thought."

Private information that was protected by the government had entered the hands of the Red Rose Guild all too easily.

"Well, it did cost us a lot of money. Those boomer congresspersons were awfully condescending," Yeon-Joo explained while shrugging. Then she continued, "First, I've affirmed that you haven't taken another person's identity. Which means..."

She looked at Kang-Woo intensely and stated, "You're a Player with incredible talent. Maybe even more than Baek Kang-Hyun or me."

"I'm flattered," Kang-Woo replied with a smirk. Then he asked nonchalantly, "So, what are you trying to say?"

'Well, I have a rough idea...'

There was no need for Kang-Woo to think too deeply about the reason why someone as important as Yeon-Joo had come to see him personally. He knew what his value was. Strength and talent were incredibly valuable on Earth at present, so his value was overwhelmingly high. Kang-Woo had no intention of hiding his value or avoiding using it to his advantage.

'I was just thinking about trying to make a connection with a large guild, so this is perfect.'

He had no intentions of joining a guild, but he wanted to have an amicable relationship with one.

"As the guild master of the Red Rose Guild, I want to sponsor you."

"...What?" Kang-Woo hugged his body and looked at her warily. "Were you after my body this whole time?"

"..."

There was a heavy silence between the two. Yeon-Joo looked at Kang-Woo like she was looking at a piece of garbage.

'You shouldn't look at people with that kind of gaze.' Kang-Woo couldn't believe he was receiving such a scornful gaze for making a joke.

"That's unexpected," he expressed.

"What did you think I was going to say?"

"I thought you were going to ask me to join the Red Rose Guild."

"Hmph," Yeon-Joo snorted at Kang-Woo's answer. "There's no way someone hiding his Trait rank would want to join a guild. If you were thinking of joining one, you wouldn't have hidden your strength from the beginning."

"Hmm..." Kang-Woo uttered awkwardly.

'It's not like I hid it on purpose.'

He had gotten an F-rank Trait assessment because the testing device had been unable to assess the power of his Authority of Predation correctly.

'Well, it's better for me if that's how she interprets it.'

Kang-Woo did not intend to join a guild, so he did not need to clarify the misunderstanding.

"So, how are you going to sponsor me?" Kang-Woo asked.

"To put it simply, we'll support you so that you can grow faster than you're growing now."

"What are you going to ask in return? Maybe to help you with that video game from before?"

"You son of a b—! Ah. Fuuu, fuuu." Yeon-Joo put her hand on her chest and took deep breaths to try and quell her rage.

"Hahaha, I'm just kidding. I had never played games before, so I didn't really know what to do."

"Sigh. I failed to get promoted to silver because of you. Just thinking about it makes me..."

"Hmm? Does that mean you're bronze? Hmm. That sounds like the lowest tier for some rea—"

"N-No! My skills are beyond bronze! It's just that I have bad team-matching luck!"

Kang-Woo laughed at Yeon-Joo's reaction.

She was one of the top ten Players in Korea and the guild master of one of the largest guilds in the country. However, seeing her get angry because of a game made her seem a bit more approachable.

"Well, jokes aside... Why do you want to support me?" Kang-Woo asked.

"Because you're going to become stronger."

"You probably know this since you've investigated me, but I'm just a newbie who became a Player just two weeks ago."

"And in those two weeks, you became strong enough to solo hunt in a C-rank Gate. You're going to become stronger, much stronger than you are now. I'm sure of it."

"..." Kang-Woo looked at Yeon-Joo with great interest.

'She isn't the master of a major guild for nothing.'

He didn't think lowly of himself.

But she probably didn't know that he was the demon king who had returned to Earth after ten millennia, or that he had an abnormal power called Authority of Predation.

For her to say that without not knowing these details probably meant she was sure about his talent.

"How will you be supporting me exactly?" Kang-Woo asked.

"First, you'll be able to access any Gate up to A-rank freely, regardless of your level. If you need a party, we'll provide you Players with classes of your liking from our guild. Also, if you sell mana stones through us, we can reduce the tax deducted from the money you receive."

"Oh?"

"We'll even let you rent equipment. Although you'll need to pay a security deposit for equipment of grades Unique and above, you can freely rent anything lower than that. If you need it, we'll also buy you a house and a car."

'Why are they treating me so well?'

The conditions were so good that one would think he was officially joining the Red Rose Guild. No, it was unlikely these kinds of conditions were available even for guild members.

"...What's the meaning of this?"

"It's an investment for the future."

"Even if it is, I think this is a bit excessive."

It wasn't as if Kang-Woo was joining the Red Rose Guild. The guild wouldn't be able to do or say anything if Kang-Woo were to just pretend that the deal had never taken place once he had gotten everything he could out of it.

'Not just that...'

From the point of view of the guild, it was probably humiliating for their guild master to approach him and make this proposal herself. It wasn't just a matter of pride; this could harm the guild's reputation.

'She must have a reason for it.'

Kang-Woo thought the conditions that Yeon-Joo offered were excessive, regardless of how talented he was. Of course, it would be understandable if she knew his true strength. Then she'd probably do everything possible to maintain a good relationship with him, but right now, that wasn't the case.

"The guild is... going to give you a request in the future. We would appreciate it if you could accept it when the time comes," Yeon-Joo said.

It seemed like the royal treatment was for this request.

"What request?" Kang-Woo asked.

Yeon-Joo smiled bitterly at Kang-Woo's question.

It was such a sad smile that it was hard to believe she was the same person who had just gotten angry just because of a game.

Kang-Woo remained silent. He felt like he was seeing Yeon-Joo's true self for the first time.

Yeon-Joo erased that sad expression from her face and replied, "I can't tell you right now."

"Hmm." Kang-Woo nodded slowly.

He still hadn't accepted her offer. Nevertheless, if that request was so important to her, it was understandable that she couldn't tell him about it yet.

'If it's something absurd, I can always refuse it later.'

It wasn't like Kang-Woo would be signing a contract in which he would promise to fulfill that request. In the future, he would listen to the details of the request and fulfill it if it was within his power to do so. If it wasn't, he would just sever his ties with the Red Rose Guild.

Kang-Woo didn't need to consider the proposal for long. It was the perfect opportunity to establish a connection with a large guild and receive a wide range of support.

He wasn't stupid enough to let such an opportunity go.

"I accept."

Chapter 33 - I Told You, I'm Stronger Than You Think (1)

"I accept," Oh Kang-Woo said.

Cha Yeon-Joo's face brightened after she heard his answer. She crossed her arms and snorted. It was as if she wanted to say "I knew it."

"Good choice," Yeon-Joo replied.

"So, when are you going to tell me about that request?" Kang-Woo asked with a smirk after seeing Yeon-Joo's complacent expression.

"When the time comes. It's not like you'll be of any use with your current level of strength anyway."

"Hmm." Kang-Woo looked at her silently.

'What could it be?'

He was sure that Yeon-Joo's request wasn't impossible for him to fulfill in his current state. She didn't know everything about him and thus was unaware of his current level of power. All Yeon-Joo knew was that Kang-Woo was a talented Player who had achieved his Third Awakening in just two weeks.

"You're probably way off," Kang-Woo said.

"Huh?"

"I'm saying that I'm probably stronger than you think."

Yeon-Joo silently looked at him as if he was being ridiculous.

A newbie who had only been a Player for two weeks had said something like that very confidently, so it was expected that Yeon-Joo would laugh at his words.

"Yeah, okay. Sure. But I still can't tell you the details. It isn't only because you're weak," Yeon-Joo replied.

"Then, why?"

"We don't have enough evidence. It isn't something I can say until we've gathered surefire evidence."

"...?"

Kang-Woo was having a hard time understanding why Yeon-Joo was avoiding answering him directly. Then he just shrugged.

'I don't feel the need to keep insisting.'

She probably had a reason to avoid answering. Either way, if it ended up being something absurd, he could always refuse it. Kang-Woo didn't have to worry about the request yet.

"Here's my number, so save it," Yeon-Joo said.

"The number of a beautiful lady is always welcome."

"Isn't it a bit too late for flattery?" Yeon-Joo frowned at Kang-Woo's playful answer.

She thought Kang-Woo had said that to make fun of her.

'I'm just stating the truth,' Kang-Woo thought as he saved her number on his phone with a smirk.

He felt good getting the number of a beautiful woman like Yeon-Joo, though it didn't feel as good as when he'd gotten Han Seol-Ah's number. Yeon-Joo was a bit whiny at times, but that didn't matter.

'The most important thing is that she doesn't have tentacles.'

All women on Earth looked like angels compared to Lilith, who'd tried to sneak into his bed every night.

"More importantly, when can I get the equipment?"

What interested Kang-Woo the most was the part about being able to rent equipment of grades Epic and below for free.

'I was wondering how helpful having equipment was.'

Kang-Woo had 666 different Authorities, so he could attack, defend, dodge, and search for enemies, all with demonic energy. He had no need at all for equipment with special effects. Furthermore, most equipment with a grade lower than Epic wouldn't be as good as an Authority, so it was fairly pointless for him to use such equipment.

'But I still want equipment since they can help me save demonic energy.'

If he could use a piece of equipment instead of demonic energy for defense, he would be able to save more demonic energy. Kang-Woo didn't have access to unlimited demonic energy like when he was in Hell, so he needed to save up as much as possible.

'Using an Authority consumes a lot of demonic energy.'

His demonic energy had increased after reaching Level 30 and getting his Fourth Awakening, but he still couldn't use it recklessly because utilizing his Authorities required a lot of it.

"If you want, we can go right now," Yeon-Joo said.

"Sounds great."

"Then follow me. Let's go to our guild's base first."

"Where is your guild's base?"

"Seoul Station."

It was where the Player Management Office was.

Kang-Woo nodded and followed Yeon-Joo.

Soon after, he saw a foreign vehicle parked on the side of the road that was completely different from the rest.

"Whoa, look at that."

"Isn't that a Porsche 918 Spyder?"

"Holy shit..."

Even the people who were passing by looked at it with surprise.

Yeon-Joo walked toward it and took out a car key from her pocket.

Click.

"Get in," she said.

"Wow!" Kang-Woo exclaimed in surprise as Yeon-Joo casually opened the door of the Porsche.

'Is this really the person who was gaming in a tracksuit and a baseball cap?'

Yeon-Joo looked so cool right now that he was wondering if she was truly the same person as the one he'd met that day at the Internet cafe.

'So, this is why everyone is obsessed with foreign cars.'

Yeon-Joo seemed like a different person now, even though all she'd done was open the car door and get into the car.

In the past, Kang-Woo struggled even to pay for public transport, so seeing that Yeon-Joo owned such an expensive car shook him more than realizing that she was one of the top ten Players in Korea.

"What are you doing? Hurry up and get in." Yeon-Joo turned and looked at Kang-Woo, who was standing still.

Kang-Woo nodded and got into the passenger seat.

'Nice.'

The seat was so comfortable that he felt like he was about to melt.

"How much did you pay for this?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. I didn't look at the price when I bought it. It probably cost me around a billion won."

Kang-Woo was speechless. A billion won was a huge sum of money, which meant the car was more expensive than the average apartment.

Yeon-Joo stepped on the accelerator, and the Porsche moved like it was gliding across the road.

"That's an expensive car for you. It moves so smoothly," Kang-Woo remarked.

"Why? Want me to get you one too?" Yeon-Joo asked as if she were offering to get him a cup of coffee.

It was obvious that Kang-Woo's eyes would light up at such words.

"Are you for real?"

"It was in the conditions, wasn't it? That I would buy you a car if you needed one."

"Noona..."

"What?"

"I'm going to call you Yeon-Joo noona from now on."

In the real world, a person who earned more money was treated as either a hyung or a noona.

After hearing the word 'noona,' Yeon-Joo looked at Kang-Woo as if she'd eaten a bug by mistake.

'You shouldn't look at people like that.'

While thinking the same thing as he had previously, he said, "A car like this is obviously welcomed."

Kang-Woo still didn't have a driving license, but he had no reason to refuse an expensive foreign car like this.

"But if you refuse the request, I'll immediately take it from you."

"You're so stingy for a Ranker."

"Well, the livelihoods of many people depend on me."

Kang-Woo smiled at Yeon-Joo's cheeky answer.

Brake.

"This is our guild base," Yeon-Joo announced.

"...Impressive."

The place they'd arrived at was an enormous and seemingly brand-new building over twenty stories high, with the logo of the Red Rose Guild featured on its exterior.

'So, this is the power of a large guild.'

It seemed similar to a building of a conglomerate company. As Kang-Woo followed Yeon-Joo into the building, he thought that he'd made a good choice to build a relationship with a large guild.

When the pair entered the building, a gentle-looking young man wearing round glasses and a man with a scar that looked like a slash on his left eye approached them.

The man in glasses looked at Kang-Woo and extended his hand. "You must be the one that our guild master mentioned before. Nice to meet you. I'm Park Hyun-Woo, the chief of the Red Rose Guild's Human Resources Management division. And this is the battle operations commander of the Red Rose Guild, Mun Yeong-Ho."

"I'm Oh Kang-Woo."

Unlike the affable Park Hyun-Woo, Mun Yeong-Ho scanned Kang-Woo up and down while glaring at him.

"Since you're here, it must mean your conversation with our guild master went well," Hyun-Woo said.

"With such good conditions, I would have accepted even if you guys were planning on poisoning me," Kang-Woo replied.

"Hahaha, we're not that kind of guild." Hyun-Woo laughed and then turned to face Yeon-Joo.

"Should I take him to the equipment vault?"

"I'll take him. You still have a lot of work to do, don't you?" Yeon-Joo said.

"Yes. Thank you very much."

"In that case, I will come with you," Yeong-Ho chimed in with a deep tone while glaring at Kang-Woo.

"Yeong-Ho? You want to come...? Why?" Yeon-Joo asked.

"...I'd like to see what sort of person he is with my own eyes."

"Hmm... Okay, sure. You'll be seeing each other often, so it wouldn't hurt for you to get to know him. Come with us then, Yeong-Ho."

Then Yeon-Joo walked over to the elevator and called out to Kang-Woo, "Over here."

Kang-Woo nodded and followed her.

The elevator brought Yeon-Joo, Kang-Woo, and Yeong-Ho up to the fifteenth floor.

[Commencing mana recognition. Please infuse a small amount of mana.]

Clack.

"This is our guild's equipment vault," Yeon-Joo stated.

There were many pieces of equipment stored inside glass cases.

"Wow," Kang-Woo uttered in awe.

"I can let you rent equipment up to those of the Epic grade. You can rent the Unique-grade ones over there if you put in a security deposit," Yeon-Joo said while pointing at an area with approximately ten pieces of equipment.

Just at first glance, it was obvious that the Unique-grade equipment was on another level compared to the Epic-grade ones.

'If I remember correctly, equipment grades were categorized into Normal, Rare, Epic, Unique, Legendary, and Mythic.'

Kang-Woo asked while looking around, "Are there no Legendary or Mythic equipment in the vault?"

"If we had equipment like that, we would be using them instead of having them rot away inside the vault."

"I guess that's true. Then, do you use equipment of the Legendary grade or above?"

"I have one that's Legendary."

"Hmm." Kang-Woo looked at the Unique-grade equipment. "How much of a security deposit do I need to put in?"

"Five billion won. And that's with a considerable discount."

"..."

Kang-Woo had heard that Player equipment was expensive, but the prices exceeded his imagination.

'That's impossible with my current funds.'

He was converting most of the mana stones that he earned from hunts into demonic energy and absorbing it, so he didn't have that kind of money.

'It would be hard to come up with that much even if I had sold all of them.'

The price of Unique-grade equipment was abhorrent.

'What a shame.'

Even at a glance, the difference in quality between Epic and Unique was massive. Kang-Woo completely gave up on the Unique-grade equipment and turned away from them.

"Then I guess I'll check out the Epic-grade equipment first—"

Slam!

A loud slam resounded through the vault.

Kang-Woo turned to find Yeong-Ho glaring at him with a frown.

"Don't talk to her so casually," Yeong-Ho said.

"Huh?" Kang-Woo uttered.

"Don't talk to the guild master so disrespectfully," Yeong-Ho said again while releasing powerful bloodlust.

Kang-Woo smirked at him. "And if I do...?"

Chapter 34 - I Told You, I'm Stronger Than You Think (2)

"And if I do...?" Oh Kang-Woo said mockingly.

Mun Yeong-Ho reached for the sword on his waist in anger.

"Yeong-Ho!" Cha Yeon-Joo shouted to Yeong-Ho upon seeing him grab his sword. She glared at him intensely and questioned, "What do you think you're doing?"

Yeong-Ho stayed silent.

"Answer me."

"This newbie dared to be disrespectful to you, Guildmas—"

"So what? Why are you making a big deal out of something that I don't care about?"

"..."

"How he talks to me is my business, so stay out of it, Yeong-Ho."

Yeong-Ho bowed his head while trembling slightly in frustration.

Yeon-Joo sighed and turned to Kang-Woo. "Kang-Woo, don't you provoke Yeong-Ho either. You could be crippled if you face him right now."

"I'll take your word for it." Kang-Woo nodded and looked at Yeong-Ho, who was trembling in rage.

It was understandable why a member of the Red Rose Guild would be angry with Kang-Woo. Just the fact that Yeon-Joo had personally gone and brought Kang-Woo here was probably infuriating enough for Yeong-Ho, but to make matters worse, Kang-Woo talked to Yeon-Joo as if she were his friend.

'Things like this are difficult to make a rational decision on.'

It would be weirder for her guild members to react as calmly as Park Hyun-Woo had done.

'In any case, I guess this isn't a poorly managed guild.'

If they didn't have loyalty toward their guild master, an incident like what had just occurred would not have happened. Kang-Woo's trust in the Red Rose Guild increased after he saw Yeong-Ho's reaction.

"Then let's go take a look at the equipment."

After glancing at Yeong-Ho and seeing that he had his fists clenched and was immersed in his thoughts, Kang-Woo checked out the Epic-grade equipment.

[Equipment Information]

[Equipment Name: Shadow Armor

Grade: Epic

Basic Effect: Physical Defense +40, Magical Defense -10, Movement Speed +10, Health -2.

Special Effect: Allows the wearer to use 'Afterimage,' which momentarily raises their movement speed by 50%. Can only be used once every 24 hours.]

"Hmm."

It was kind of ambiguous as to whether the effects of the armor were good. The increase in physical defense wasn't bad, but the large number of penalties bothered him, especially the decrease in the health stat.

'The special effect is also useless.'

Afterimage could momentarily increase the wearer's speed, but since Kang-Woo had the Authority of Haste, it was kind of useless to him.

'I would prefer it not to have a special effect and for it to have better basic effects instead.'

While looking through more equipment, Kang-woo turned to Yeon-Joo and asked, "Are there any that raises your stats?"

"There isn't any Unique-grade equipment that raises your stats. You can only find those among Legendary-grade equipment, and even then, they're rare."

"Are stat boosts really that good of an effect?" Kang-Woo asked while tilting his head.

He couldn't believe that equipment effects that increased a Player's stats could only be found on equipment of Legendary grade and higher.

'How much does a piece of Legendary equipment cost?'

If getting Unique-grade equipment for cheap would cost him five billion won, then he couldn't even imagine how much it would cost him to get a Legendary-grade one.

"Of course, they are. You already know that the higher your stats become, the harder it becomes to raise them, don't you? That's why no equipment below the Legendary grade raises stats by an absolute value."

"Oh, I guess that makes sense." Kang-Woo nodded.

He too was currently struggling to raise his Demonic Energy stat after getting it to 50. It could also be because his stats were a lot higher than those of Players of a similar level. However, it was a fact that the higher a stat became, the harder it was to raise it.

'Which means this armor that reduces a stat number is complete garbage.'

Kang-Woo took his eyes off the Shadow Armor.

He asked, "Then what about one with good basic effects and no special effects?"

"Just a sec. I remember seeing a few of those around here..." Yeon-Joo walked around the vault while recommending some equipment. Then she added, "Oh, right. You can only rent three, so choose wisely."

"Okay."

Kang-Woo chose a wrist guard, a necklace, and a black coat that Yeon-Joo had recommended to him. They were all pieces of equipment with good basic effects and no special effects.

[Equipment Information]

[Equipment Name: Blackstone Wrist Guard

Grade: Epic

Basic Effect: Physical Defense +50, Magical Defense +30]

[Equipment Information]

[Equipment Name: Necklace of Mana Protection

Grade: Epic

Basic Effect: Magical Defense +60]

[Equipment Information]

[Equipment Name: Ogre Leather Coat

Grade: Epic

Basic Effect: Physical Defense +80]

After checking out the equipment, Kang-Woo equipped them for a quick test.

'I'm not feeling much of a difference.'

His physical defense had gone up by 130, and his magical defense by 90, but he couldn't feel a huge difference.

'I don't know how much physical and magical defense I have in the first place.'

The two values weren't displayed in his status window, so he couldn't see how big of a difference the equipment had made.

"How much is 130 physical defense?" Kang-Woo asked.

"Oh, it's hard to know that in the beginning." Yeon-Joo nodded as if she had also gone through a similar experience. "130 is about the same as being covered by a 5mm steel plate. If you stab your skin with a paring knife, the knife will crumple."

"I see." Kang-Woo nodded with great interest. "Is the defense applied only where the equipment is worn?"

Normally, it was obvious that the defense would be applied only to the body part that the equipment covered. After all, a person's head wouldn't be protected if they wore a bulletproof vest.

"No, thanks to the mana within the equipment, the effect is applied to your entire body. But in exchange, the equipment effect is reduced by half for wherever the equipment doesn't cover."

"So, if my physical defense gets to 1,000, will a bullet get deflected if I get shot in the eye?"

"I've never tried, but theoretically, yes."

"...No wonder firearms are obsolete now."

A missile would probably be needed to face a Player with purely physical defense equipment.

'The power of equipment is greater than I thought.'

Kang-Woo looked down at his body with surprise after hearing Yeon-Joo's explanation. With such defense, he could conserve more demonic energy than he initially thought.

'This makes me want Unique-grade equipment even more.'

Kang-Woo looked greedily at where the Unique-grade equipment were displayed. Just having a few pieces of Epic-grade equipment gave him such great effects. Unique-grade equipment could only be even more effective for defense.

"Yeon-Joo noona..."

"...What is it now?"

"I don't need the foreign car that we talked about before, so how about you let me rent a piece of Unique-grade equipment instead?"

"..."

"If you trust me, I'll make a return of 1.5 times its price," Kang-Woo said as if he were asking for a loan in a gambling house.

Yeon-Joo sighed deeply like she had gotten a headache.

"I can't give you an answer right this second. I'll have to discuss it with—"

Slam!!!

The same loud slam from before resounded throughout the room again.

Kang-Woo and Yeon-Joo turned their heads toward the source of the sound and found a pale-faced Yeong-Ho trembling in anger.

"D-Did you just call... noona?" Yeong-Ho questioned.

"Yeong-Ho?" Yeon-Joo called out.

"H-How... How dare you!!!" Yeong-Ho raged.

He angrily drew his sword and charged at Kang-Woo.

Boom!!

"Mun Yeong-Ho, what did I just tell you?" Yeon-Joo said to Yeong-Ho in a low voice as she blocked him with her bare hands.

"..."

She was exuding overpowering bloodlust and suffocatingly thick mana.

"Sheathe your sword and fuck off. If you pull this shit one more time, you'll be punished."

"I-I'm sorry," Yeong-Ho apologized.

With a stiff expression, he sheathed his sword and bit his lip in frustration.

"Sigh... I'm sorry for the trouble. I'll give him a proper warning later," Yeon-Joo said to Kang-Woo.

"No, it's okay," Kang-Woo replied.

"That aside, what kind of Unique-grade equipment do you need? I'll bring it up during the next guild meeting."

"Hmm... Armor that's comfortable to move around in. One with good basic effects if possible."

"Armor, huh?" Yeon-Joo pondered about it.

Having heard their conversation, Yeong-Ho turned to face Kang-Woo and asked, "Did you say that you need armor?"

"Yeah," Kang-Woo answered.

"Then how about we do this? If you beat me in a duel, I'll give you my armor. It's a Unique-grade one with great basic effects."

"Mun Yeong-Ho, I believe I told you to fuck off."

Upon seeing that Yeong-Ho was still trying to pick a fight with Kang-Woo, Yeon-Joo stepped in between them. It seemed like she was really angry; her bloodlust was now much thicker than before.

"No, wait," Kang-Woo interjected.

"...What?" Yeon-Joo uttered.

"I think it's a decent offer."

Yeon-Joo went silent.

Kang-Woo looked at Yeong-Ho's armor with great interest. He was willing to duel Yeong-Ho at any time if it meant that he could get a hold of his Unique-grade armor.

"Are you insane?" Yeon-Joo looked at Kang-Woo with a sharp gaze.

She knew that Kang-Woo was extremely talented. Neither she nor Baek Kang-Hyun had been able to enter a C-rank Gate in just two weeks, yet Kang-Woo had been able to do it, and he was even solo-hunting there. This meant that not only had he awakened an S-rank Trait, but he had also been born with incredible combat talent. Yeon-Joo had seen it for herself at the Internet cafe.

'He'll become as strong as me... No, stronger.'

She was sure that Kang-Woo would become so strong that he could write a new chapter in the history of Korean Players. That's why she wanted to build a good relationship with him, even if it meant her guild suffering a loss financially.

'But it's still too early.'

Nevertheless, this wasn't a matter of whether Kang-Woo had talent. Yeong-Ho was strong and was currently Level 67. He had been able to surpass Level 59, which was referred to as 'the Limit of Effort,' and achieve his Seventh Awakening. Just like how a tiger cub couldn't win against a fully mature hound, someone that had only been a Player for two weeks couldn't possibly win against Yeong-Ho.

'This is crazy,' Yeon-Joo thought.

She had to stop Kang-Woo. He was someone who could become a great asset for her guild in the future. If their relationship went awry due to this incident, her investment in him would completely lose its meaning.

"Don't be stupid, and just go, Yeong-Ho. You too, Kang-Woo. Don't—"

"It's okay," Kang-Woo interrupted Yeon-Joo with a smirk.

Yeon-Joo trembled unconsciously after seeing Kang-Woo's chilling smile.

"This is gonna be fun," Kang-Woo added.

He looked at Yeong-Ho's Unique-grade armor and smacked his lips in anticipation.

'If he's giving it to me, I have no reason to refuse,' Kang-Woo thought.

Chapter 35 - I Told You, I'm Stronger Than You Think (3)

"Good choice." Mun Yeong-Ho smirked upon seeing that Oh Kang-Woo had accepted his proposal.

He was excited at the thought of teaching that cheeky newbie a lesson.

'I'll make sure he can't ever disrespect the guild master again,' Yeong-Ho thought.

He touched his left eye and could feel the slash-like scar throbbing.

Yeong-Ho had been ambushed by a Chaos Player when he was just a newbie Player, and Cha Yeon-Joo had saved him. Yeon-Joo wasn't simply Yeong-Ho's guild master. She was his savior and his master, to whom he had sworn his loyalty. Additionally... she was the woman he loved.

'How dare someone like you...' Yeong-Ho glared at Kang-Woo.

The moment that he heard Kang-Woo call Yeon-Joo noona, Yeong-Ho felt sick. He felt as if Kang-Woo was making fun of the feelings of affection he had toward Yeon-Joo that he'd been lovingly accumulating over the years.

'I...' Yeong-Ho gazed at Yeon-Joo.

Yeon-Joo was currently glaring at him, but she looked beautiful even though she was angry.

The fact that Kang-Woo had gotten close with Yeon-Joo, an elusive beauty, so easily enraged Yeong-Ho even more.

'I'll let you realize the huge gap between us.'

He had to teach a lesson to the newbie, who acted all high and mighty just because he had talent. Yeong-Ho had concluded that if he didn't take Kang-Woo down a few pegs now, there was a chance of him betraying them in the future.

While justifying his actions to himself, Yeong-Ho took Kang-Woo to the sparring room on the fifth floor. Kang-Woo followed him into the room in a very relaxed manner, but it just enraged Yeong-Ho even more to see Kang-Woo behaving so calmly as if he were on a field trip.

Click.

"This is the sparring room," Yeong-Ho said.

"Whoa. Pretty sick facility!" Kang-Woo exclaimed in surprise while looking around the huge sparring room, which occupied an entire floor.

"Let's see how long you can keep that relaxed attitude up for."

"Okay. Take a good look." Kang-Woo shrugged and went to stand on one side of the sparring room.

Yeon-Joo approached him and said, "This is just insane. Stop it."

"Hahaha. I told you, it'll be fine," Kang-Woo replied casually.

"You'll regret it," Yeon-Joo warned seriously.

Upon hearing that, Kang-Woo turned toward her and smiled.

He understood why Yeon-Joo was so worried. Normally, it would be impossible for a newbie Player to defeat an executive of a large guild.

'But...'

Yeon-Joo didn't know much about Kang-Woo. She understood absolutely nothing about his true self.

"Let's begin," Yeong-Ho said. He stood still with his arms by his side without even unsheathing his sword. "I'll give you three freebies. Attack me."

"Wow, you've been reading too many martial arts novels," Kang-Woo remarked.

"..."

"Stop putting on airs and take out your sword, man," Kang-Woo advised.

He didn't want to hear Yeong-Ho say silly excuses like he would've won if he hadn't given Kang-Woo those three free attacks.

'If we're gonna do this, we should do it properly,' Kang-Woo thought.

If there was a need to hide his strength, he would without a shadow of a doubt. However, if he had to show it, he would give it everything he had. Right now, it was time to show it. That way, his value would rise, and he would be able to get even better rewards.

"What are you doing? I told you to take out your sword," Kang-Woo said.

"I don't intend to go all out against a newbie," Yeong-Ho replied.

"Oh, really?" A smile appeared on Kang-Woo's face.

He found Yeong-Ho's arrogant nature far too ridiculous and pathetic.

"Well, suit yourself," Kang-Woo said in the end.

He squatted down with his arms drooping straight down. His stance looked like a bowstring being drawn. Kang-Woo concentrated demonic energy on his feet and activated the Authority of Haste.

Bang!!!

His body shot forward.

Yeong-Ho's eyes widened in shock as he had been waiting motionlessly for Kang-Woo to attack.

"Wh—?!" Yeong-Ho uttered.

Kang-Woo used the Authority of the Sky to change his trajectory in the air. Ignoring the law of inertia, he changed directions at a speed that was physically impossible. Then Kang-Woo struck Yeong-Ho in the stomach as hard as he could with a roundhouse kick.

Smack!

"Kurgggghhhh!!!"

Yeong-Ho was pushed back as if he were a ball, and he bounced off the ground like a skipping stone thrown into a lake. He went smashing into a wall, which caused smoke to pour out of it.

"Bleeeggghhhh!!!" Yeong-Ho dropped to his knees and vomited on the floor on his knees because of the pain ripping through his guts.

The word unsightly was not enough to fully describe how pathetic he looked.

"Cough! Cough! H-How...?" Yeong-Ho uttered.

He staggered while getting up and looked at Kang-Woo in shock.

"Wh-What the hell? What just happened?" Yeon-Joo was also stunned and lost for words after witnessing Kang-Woo's demonstration.

She looked back and forth between Kang-Woo and the vomiting Yeong-Ho.

Someone who had been a Player for only two weeks had won against a Player who had achieved their Seventh Awakening. Furthermore, Yeong-Ho was strong enough to be the battle operation commander of the Red Rose Guild. So, seeing him get blown away with one strike made Yeon-Joo wonder if she was currently dreaming.

"Two more, right?" Kang-Woo said.

He extended his hands toward Yeong-Ho, who was barely able to stand. Then a black spear manifested out of thin air and flew toward Yeong-Ho.

"Hup!" Yeong-Ho dodged the spear with a shout and quickly took out his sword.

His face was pale as he pointed his sword at Kang-Woo.

"Hmm? I thought you were gonna give me three freebies," Kang-Woo commented while walking toward Yeong-Ho.

Yeong-Ho didn't answer his question.

No, he couldn't do so. He focused on the fight and grabbed his sword tightly. Cold sweat flowed down his back.

'That was dangerous,' Yeong-Ho thought.

He probably would've lost consciousness from that one blow if it hadn't been for the power of his Unique-grade equipment, Gargoyle Armor.

Yeong-Ho looked at Kang-Woo with a wavering gaze. 'He's only been a Player for two weeks?'

It didn't make sense.

Not even Cha Yeon-Joo nor Baek Kang-Hyun had been that strong in just two weeks. This was a situation where it was as if a three-year-old baby had thrown a fully mature adult. Not even the word genius could explain what was going on.

"What kind of trick did you pull?" Yeong-Ho questioned.

"I didn't pull any tricks. I'm just stronger than you," Kang-Woo answered.

"Bullshit! How could a two-week-old Player possibly be—"

"Oh, so you're aware that you had proposed something so absurd that it could be called bullshit, huh?"

"..."

"And now that things aren't going as you'd planned, you're crying and complaining."

"Th-That's not..."

Upon seeing that Yeong-Ho was lost for words, Kang-Woo laughed for a while.

Then, he turned serious and spoke in a cold voice, "Stop fucking around, you pathetic piece of shit."

"Urgh." Yeong-Ho frowned.

He was trembling, and his face turned red.

'I guess I've hit a nerve.' Kang-Woo smirked when he saw Yeong-Ho's reaction.

"Y-You bastard!!" Yeong-Ho yelled.

The sneer on Kang-Woo's face drove Yeong-Ho mad, and he clenched his sword angrily.

'I can't let it end like this,' Yeong-Ho thought.

He and Kang-Woo weren't the only ones here. Yeon-Joo, the woman he loved, was watching over their duel. He couldn't let her see such a pathetic side of himself.

Yeong-Ho raised his sword and shouted, "Divine Execution Sword!"

A pale bluish aura shot upward from the sword. His sword grew in length, reaching over ten meters long. It was emitting a powerful energy.

"Can you only use that technique by shouting such a cringey name?"

"..."

"No, right? You only did that to look cool, huh?"

"Sh-Shut up!"

"You just threw up while trying to put on airs. Isn't it a little bit late to try to look cool?"

"Y-You son of a—!"

"You should've just taken out your sword when I told you to. You trying to look cool after all that only makes you look more pathetic."

"Aaaarrggghh!!!"

The harsh criticism made Yeong-Ho even angrier than before. He charged at Kang-Woo in a blind rage.

Kang-Woo, on the other hand, calmly analyzed Yeong-Ho's movements. 'He's strong, I'll give him that.'

The power of Yeong-Ho's sword, which was emitting a blue aura, was formidable. It was an attack so strong that Kang-Woo would probably struggle to block it even with the Authority of Invulnerability.

'He would've been a hard opponent to fight under normal circumstances.'

If Yeong-Ho had fought with everything he had from the beginning, it would've probably been a hard fight.

'But...'

Kang-Woo looked at Yeong-Ho charging straight at him in a fit of rage. There was no way Kang-Woo would lose against someone who had completely lost his rationality, no matter how strong he was.

'Authority of Shadows.'

Kang-Woo's shadow lengthened as it traveled across the floor.

"Die!!" Yeong-Ho yelled.

Normally, Yeong-Ho would've been able to notice the shadow approaching him on the floor. However, because he had lost all sense of reason due to Kang-Woo's provocation, Yeong-Ho was totally unaware of the shadow attaching to his own.

'Eclipse.'

After checking that the shadows were connected, Kang-Woo smiled and activated the special power of the Authority of Shadows.

Yeong-Ho slashed his sword straight down at Kang-Woo's head.

"W-Wait, Yeong-Ho!" Yeon-Joo called out.

She ran toward them after seeing that Yeong-Ho was clearly trying to kill Kang-Woo in the duel.

Yeong-Ho was usually so calm to the point that he was emotionless. Even Yeon-Joo, who had known him for many years, had never seen him be so enraged that he had lost his rationality.

However, before Yeon-Joo could block Yeong-Ho's sword, Kang-Woo turned into a black blob and melted into the ground.

"Wh-What the—?!" Yeong-Ho shouted in surprise.

He looked around in search of Kang-Woo, who had suddenly disappeared.

Tap.

"All right, here comes the third," Kang-Woo said.

He suddenly appeared from Yeong-Ho's shadow and placed his hand on Yeong-Ho's back. The Authority of Waves spread throughout Yeong-Ho's body.

"Cough!" He vomited blood.

Then, he lost consciousness and collapsed onto the ground.

Yeon-Joo, who had run in to stop the battle, looked at Kang-Woo with a blank expression.

Kang-Woo calmly turned around to face her and said, "See? I told you, I'm stronger than you think."

Chapter 36 - The Chosen One (1)

"I'm really sorry for what happened today. I'm going to kick Yeong-Ho from the guild, and I'll make sure no one else does something like this," Cha Yeon-Joo said to Oh Kang-Woo with her head bowed.

A member of her guild had been rude to a Player they'd promised to offer their full support, so even someone of her status had to lower her head in apology.

"It's fine since I've received this." Kang-Woo lightly slapped the Gargoyle Armor he had received from Mun Yeong-Ho.

He looked at the armor and opened its information window.

[Equipment Information]

[Equipment Name: Gargoyle Armor

Grade: Unique

Basic Effect: Physical Defense +200, Magical Defense +80

Special Effect: Allows the wearer to use 'Petrification', which doubles their physical defense. Can only be used once every 24 hours.]

'As expected from a piece of Unique-grade equipment.'

With just one Unique-grade item, Kang-Woo's physical defense had increased by a number that was even greater than the total additions to his physical defense that his three rented Epic-grade items had provided.

'The special effect is good too.'

Moreover, the Gargoyle Armor's special effect was far more useful than the one that the Shadow Armor had. While thinking this, Kang-Woo looked at the Gargoyle Armor in satisfaction.

Then he turned toward Yeon-Joo and said, "However, if something like this happens again, I'll have to rethink my relationship with the Red Rose Guild."

Kang-Woo had to draw a clear line even though he had received a piece of Unique equipment because of the incident. After all, the incident with Yeong-Ho had occurred because Yeon-Joo had failed to control her subordinate. Kang-Woo had chosen to accept Yeong-Ho's proposal, but the proposal should never have been made in the first place.

'Although I can more or less understand the reason behind his actions.'

Kang-Woo's body was closer to that of a demon than a human, so he was highly sensitive to the desires of others. He instinctively knew what the others wanted and how much they craved it.

'I guess he was blinded by love.'

That expression was an apt description of Yeong-Ho's situation.

"...I'm sorry. I have no excuse." Yeon-Joo sighed and asked for forgiveness once again.

However, Yeong-Ho wasn't the only reason why Yeon-Joo was acting in such a way. It was also because of the strength that Kang-Woo had shown. The fact that he'd only been a Player for two weeks and had been able to defeat someone who had achieved their Seventh Awakening was enough to change her attitude.

Kang-Woo had gone from being a Player with whom it would be worth maintaining a good relationship to someone she needed to have a good relationship with no matter what. The power dynamic had changed completely. Now, even Yeon-Joo, who possessed a fierce personality, couldn't just walk all over Kang-Woo.

"Then let's stay in touch." Kang-Woo waved goodbye to Yeon-Joo and turned around.

Yeon-Joo watched him walk away in silence.

"Haaa," she sighed deeply.

'Is he truly human?' Yeon-Joo wondered inwardly.

It was no longer a matter of whether Kang-Woo was talented. He possessed great power that defied common sense.

'I think I could beat him at present, but...'

With Kang-Woo's growth speed, it wouldn't surprise Yeon-Joo if he soon surpassed her. His growth speed was so scary that she thought it might be better to do something about him before he became too strong.

"At this rate, a World Ranker may appear in Korea."

The World Rankers were the eight strongest known Players in the entire world, and there wasn't a Korean among them currently. Korea's top Ranker, Baek Kang-Hyun, once had a chance of becoming a World Ranker, but he had ultimately failed to do so.

'But maybe if it's Kang-Woo...'

Kang-Woo was a monster who was growing at an unprecedented speed, so Yeon-Joo thought that becoming a World Ranker might not be hard for someone like him.

While Yeon-Joo was immersed in her thoughts, Park Hyun-Woo walked toward her.

"Guildmaster, did Kang-Woo go back?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah. He just left," Yeon-Joo replied.

"I heard that something happened between him and Yeong-Ho..."

"Yes, I plan to hold a disciplinary meeting and kick Yeong-Ho out of the Guild."

"..."

"Don't make that face. This is all Yeong-Ho's fault."

"Understood," Hyun-Woo replied and nodded with a bitter smile. Then he said, "I have something I need to tell you."

"What is it?"

"The government has managed to implant a spy in the Demon Cult."

"..."

"If we're lucky, we'll finally be able to get some evidence of their deeds."

Yeon-Joo's eyes lit up. "Give me the details."

* * *

"Let's see..."

On his way home, Kang-Woo opened his status window.

[Status Window]

[Player Name: Oh Kang-Woo

Level: 34 (Fourth Awakening)

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

Second Awakening Trait: Insatiable Hunger (Rank: C)

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

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

Strength: 23

Dexterity: 21

Health: 20

Mana: 0

Demonic Energy (Unique Stat): 53

Intelligence: 11

Wisdom: 13

*Current Equipment Effects

Physical Defense: 330

Magical Defense: 170]

If someone else had seen Kang-Woo's freakish status window, they probably wouldn't have been able to hide their shock. Normally, Fourth Awakening Players could barely reach 30 for a stat even if they were lucky, but Kang-Woo's Demonic Energy stat had already surpassed 50.

'The other stats are rising consistently too.'

His most important stat was Demonic Energy, but it wasn't like the Strength, Dexterity, and Health stats were useless. Kang-Woo could fortify his body with demonic energy, but it would reduce his reserves of demonic energy. So, if he could fortify his body with the other stats instead, he would avoid wasting demonic energy.

'But Intelligence and Wisdom are useless.'

Kang-Woo didn't have mana, so those two stats that raised the effectiveness and power of mana were useless to him.

'Too bad I can't choose which stats to raise.'

One stat was randomly selected to be raised with each level up, and the amount of increase was also random. Then, from the Second Awakening onwards, the stat related to the Trait that a Player used the most was usually supposed to be the one that rose the most. However, in Kang-Woo's case, all of his other stats had gone up instead of the Demonic Energy stat.

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

It was indeed possible that it was because the number for that stat was already too high and impossible for a Level 34 Player to have. Considering that a Player's stat became harder to raise the higher it got, it made sense that Kang-Woo's Demonic Energy stat wasn't going up as he leveled.

'In other words, leveling up in the Level 30s won't raise my Demonic Energy stat.'

That probably explained why his other stats were going up instead.

"That's too bad."

Kang-Woo wanted to put all the stats in Demonic Energy with each level up, but that was impossible.

"But thanks to the Hellhound, I far surpassed my original goal."

He had been planning on leveling up to Level 30, but his level had shot up to Level 34 after hunting a Hellhound.

'If I keep up this pace, I'll get my Fifth Awakening soon.'

Thanks to the Red Rose Guild, Kang-Woo could freely access higher-ranking Gates. He could skip B-rank Gates and immediately go to A-rank ones, so leveling up was probably going to get much faster.

"That aside, I finally have some leeway."

Kang-Woo was now in a completely different position compared to back when he could barely use an Authority with his meager amount of demonic energy. During his fight against Yeong-Ho earlier, Kang-Woo realized that he was in the upper ranks of Players. He had enough strength to defend himself against strong Players.

"I should take this opportunity to help Seol-Ah and Tae-Soo grow."

After seeing how much Yeon-Joo was willing to support him, he realized something.

'It's better to invest early in Players with great potential.'

Investing early in talented Players could generate a huge return. That was why Yeon-Joo, one of the top ten Players in Korea, was investing so heavily in Kang-Woo. The value of his talent and growth potential was higher than what she was investing.

'Tae-Soo and Seol-Ah are also worth investing in.'

Tae-Soo and Seol-Ah weren't that impressive compared to Kang-Woo, but that was only in comparison to him. Compared to the average Player, a tank that had awakened an A-rank Trait with his Second Awakening and a healer with a B-rank Trait were very talented.

'And...'

The most important thing was that they thought very highly of him, so the chance that they would betray him was low.

'I'll look over their hunt and give them advice tomorrow.'

Kang-Woo wasn't planning on carrying them; that would only hinder their growth. Tae-Soo and Seol-Ah needed to gain more combat experience and receive proper guidance. They would probably be able to grow at an explosive rate once they were placed on the right path.

"I guess I'll go home."

Kang-Woo headed home while feeling the pleasant weight of the pieces of equipment he'd gotten.

Chapter 37 - The Chosen One (2)

The next day, Oh Kang-Woo went to where he had promised to meet up with Han Seol-Ah and Kang Tae-Soo.

"Kang-Woo hyung-nim!! Over here!!" Tae-Soo, who had already arrived near Dongincheon Station, shouted and waved his hand upon spotting Kang-Woo.

"Keep it down, man. You're embarrassing me." Kang-Woo frowned when he saw that everyone around them was looking at Tae-Soo.

"Hehehe. Did the thing you had to do last night go well, hyung-nim?"

"Yeah, it did."

"I'm glad to hear that! Ah! Hyung-nim, these two are the Players that I said I'd introduce you to!" Tae-Soo pointed at a girl with brown hair and a young man who had a sword on his waist.

'Oh, my God.' Kang-Woo's eyes widened at the sight of the young man.

The young man was so good-looking that the expression "as handsome as a Greek statue" seemed ridiculously fitting. He was so stunning that even his surroundings seemed to shine when Kang-Woo looked at his face.

"This handsome gentleman is Kim Si-Hun, and this little kid is Choi Eun-Bi," Tae-Soo introduced the pair.

"Who are you calling a kid?!" Choi Eun-Bi exclaimed.

"Haha. If you aren't a kid, then what are you?"

"Hmph. Says the guy who looks like he's forty..."

"Wh-What?"

Eun-Bi ignored Tae-Soo and turned around to face Kang-Woo. With bright eyes, she approached him and extended her hand for a handshake.

She said, "You're the oppa that Tae-Soo oppa has talked so much about, right? I've heard a lot about you! Oh, also, you can speak casually to me, Kang-Woo oppa!"

'Is she another Tae-Soo?' Kang-Woo laughed while gazing at Eun-Bi.

It was impressive how friendly she was.

Kang-Woo began, "All right. First, why don't you guys tell me your Trait type and rank—"

Eun-Bi suddenly squealed excitedly, "Kyaa! Are you the healer unnie?! Woah, you're so pretty!! And your breasts... Damn, it's like you have three heads. You're like Cerberus!!!"

"H-Huh? Th-Thank you...?"

"Unnie, let's take a selfie!! I'm gonna brag to my friends!"

Kang-Woo, who hadn't been able to finish his sentence, watched dumbfoundedly as Eun-Bi dragged Seol-Ah somewhere. Seol-Ah extended her hands toward Kang-Woo as if she were a deer being dragged away by a lion.

At that moment, the man with the sword on his waist approached Kang-Woo and extended his hand.

"Nice to meet you. I've heard a lot about you from Tae-Soo. I'm Kim Si-Hun."

"Oh, yes, hello."

"I'm currently Level 12, and I've unlocked an A-Rank Trait on my Second Awakening. As you can see, I'm a warrior."

Kim Si-Hun spoke very respectfully. Furthermore, he just told Kang-Woo the information that he was most interested in.

'He's like a manhwa protagonist,' Kang-Woo remarked inwardly.

Kang-Woo shook Si-Hun's hand.

He was certainly a little jealous that Si-Hun was so good-looking and well-mannered yet talented as well, but he thought Si-Hun would be very helpful as an ally.

'They're thankfully nothing like those Andras Guild members.'

Kang-Woo could sense the desires flowing out of Si-Hun and Eun-Bi. With his highly-sensitive demonic body, Kang-Woo was able to decipher what kind of desires people possessed, and he couldn't sense any impure or unsettling desires in Si-Hun and Eun-Bi.

He wasn't sure why they hadn't joined a big guild, but it seemed like Tae-Soo wasn't lying when he said that they were trustworthy people.

"And Eun-Bi is a mage with a B-Rank Trait," Si-Hun added.

"Oh, thank you."

"She's a bit too energetic... I apologize."

"It's okay."

While Kang-woo was talking to Si-Hun, Tae-Soo approached them and proudly puffed out his chest.

"What do you think, hyung-nim? They both seem trustworthy, right?" Tae-Soo asked.

"Yeah," Kang-Woo replied.

"Hehehe, see? I told you I have a good eye for people!"

"Then how did you almost get killed by your party members last time?"

"Th-That's..." Tae-Soo didn't know what to say in response to that sharp remark and avoided Kang-Woo's gaze. "That was a divine revelation from the heavens telling me to meet you, hyung-nim! Yep, that's it!"

"..." Kang-Woo looked at Tae-Soo bemusedly, thinking he was being absurd.

Tae-Soo coughed and changed the subject, "Ahem. More importantly, what do you think about this party?"

"Well, first, the composition is perfect."

The party had one tank, two damage dealers, and a healer that could both heal and buff. Kang-Woo had nothing to say about it in terms of team composition.

'Furthermore, they have both melee and ranged damage dealers.'

It wasn't just the composition that was good. Two of the party members each had an A-rank Trait, while the other two had each gotten a B-rank Trait with their Second Awakening. Their Traits were so highly ranked that they could even be considered a carrying party.

'Not bad.' Kang-Woo looked at the four of them with bright eyes.

Even at first glance, it was obvious that the party consisting of these four people had great potential. They were talented people that even Kang-Woo, who used to have strong demons like Balrog as subordinates, wished to have around.

'Although I still have to watch them a little bit more.'

However, having a good team composition and great talent did not necessarily mean they would make a good party. Many other things needed to be taken into consideration, like their basic battle sense and ability to make quick decisions.

'But they're still worth raising.'

If they could keep growing steadily, they would probably be of great help to Kang-Woo in the future.

"I'll be going with you on today's hunt," Kang-Woo said.

"Huh? You're coming too, hyung-nim?" Tae-Soo asked.

"Yeah. I'll watch and give you some feedback on anything that needs fixing."

"Oh! Your feedback is more than welcome!! Thank you so much, hyung-nim!!" Tae-Soo said excitedly.

'This is an investment,' Kang-Woo thought passionately while looking at the four.

He was sure that investing in the four of them would give him a huge return, so he was very motivated.

"Then let's head right into the Gate. Oh, I'll only be stepping in if I judge that you guys are in real danger, so don't let your guards down," Kang-Woo warned.

"Hehe. Understood, hyung-nim!"

Tae-Soo picked up his giant shield and energetically walked toward the Gate near Dongincheon Station. As the party of five headed over to the Gate, everyone's attention centered on them.

"Wow, look at him. He's so handsome!"

"Is he a celebrity?"

"The woman next to him is no joke either!"

Everyone's attention was mostly focused on Si-Hun and Seol-Ah. However, there was someone else who was also drawing attention—the person in their party who had the most eye-catching appearance.

"Waaaaahhh! M-Monster!" a little girl nearby cried when Tae-Soo, who was over two meters tall, walked past her.

"E-Eh? I-I'm not a monster, l-little girl," Tae-Soo stuttered.

"Waaaahhhh!! Mommyyyyyy!!!"

Tae-Soo didn't know what to do to comfort the girl, so he approached her, but that only made her cry even louder. Stumped about what to do, Tae-Soo turned back to look at Kang-Woo.

'Why are you looking at me?' Kang-Woo thought.

He didn't have an ability that could make a little girl stop crying. Nevertheless, there were too many people around looking at them, so he couldn't just ignore her.

Kang-Woo sighed and was about to walk toward the crying little girl... but Si-Hun approached her first. He kneeled on one knee and patted her head gently.

"It's okay," Si-Hun said.

"Sniff."

"He may look like that, but he isn't scary."

"R-Really...?"

"Yup, so don't cry."

"Hehehe. Okay, handsome oppa!" the little girl said with a smile on her face.

Si-Hun left the kid to her mother, who had come running due to her cries, and stood up with a smile on his face. Even though this was an ordinary situation, it looked like a scene straight out of a film just because Si-Hun was the one in the middle of it. If it were Kang-Woo who had done that, it wouldn't have looked as cool.

'This guy...' Kang-Woo looked at Si-Hun gloomily. 'He's too much of a protagonist.'

* * *

"Chiik! Chiiiiik!"

The Orcs, who had green skin, swung their clubs.

The average size of an orc was one hundred and sixty centimeters. The orcs were smaller in stature than the average adult human male, but because they had muscular bodies, they couldn't be taken lightly.

Nevertheless...

"Hmph!"

Slam!

"Chiiik!!!"

Tae-Soo used his shield to push back the three orcs that were charging toward them simultaneously. Having been pushed by someone who had a height of two meters and a body that was more muscular than theirs, the orcs fell to the ground.

"Hahaha! How about that?!" Tae-Soo burst into laughter after feeling a rush of adrenaline from having successfully pushed away three orcs at once with a bull charge.

The orcs got back on their feet but staggered as if they were people who had just been hit by a car.

"Lightning Shock!"

Bzzt!!

At Eun-Bi's shout, the mana stone at the end of her wand glowed. Blue lightning shot out from the mana stone and struck the orcs.

"GRAAAARR!!!"

"Tae-Soo oppa! There are five more behind us!"

"Roger!" Tae-Soo clenched his shield even more tightly and stomped. "Over here, you sons of bitches!"

After Tae-Soo shouted, his shield radiated light. The orcs were attracted by the light and charged over to him.

"Aura of Light!"

"Oh! Thank you, sister-in-law!"

Seol-Ah shot a ball of light into Tae-Soo's body, buffing him. After that, she shot arrows of light at the orcs.

"Haaaap!"

"Graaaahh!"

After receiving the buff, Tae-Soo became as strong as an average C-rank monster.

Meanwhile, Si-Hun charged toward the orcs that had been pushed away.

Slash! Stab!

Si-Hun's sword drew a perfect line as he slashed the orcs. Even without taking his handsome looks into account, Si-Hun's sword skills were so beautiful that this scene looked like something out of a painting.

Si-Hun swiftly took the lives of the five orcs.

"Woah! Kang-Woo hyung-nim is great, but you're not so bad yourself, Si-Hun! Did you practice kendo before becoming a Player?" Tae-Soo asked.

"Oh, yes. A little bit as a hobby," Si-Hun answered.

"That's not on the level of a hobby," Tae-Soo remarked, impressed by Si-Hun's picture-perfect sword technique. Then, he turned to Kang-Woo. "What did you think, Kang-Woo hyung-nim? Aren't we all fantastic?"

Kang-Woo nodded at Tae-Soo's words.

Just like Tae-Soo said, everyone was so good that it was hard to believe that they had only achieved their Second Awakening.

"Hehehe. What did I tell you? I have an impeccable eye for—"

Kang-Woo cut short Tae-Soo's words and spoke with a calm voice, "First, I'm going to give you some feedback."

The party's potential was quite high because they all had high-ranking Traits. However, that did not mean there was nothing they needed to fix.

'Rather, there are too many to count.'

Kang-Woo's gaze was sharp as he continued talking.

Chapter 38 - The Chosen One (3)

"First, Tae-Soo, you've got keen eyesight, and you know how to draw the monsters' attention. However, you rely too much on your strength. You charge at them to knock them down even when you don't need to. It wastes your stamina and leaves you with far too many openings. Don't think about knocking the monsters down. You're doing more than enough just enduring and deflecting their attacks."

"Ugh... U-Understood." Kang Tae-Soo, who had been super excited after their first successful hunt, flinched and lowered his head sadly after hearing Oh Kang-Woo's critical feedback.

Kang-Woo then turned to face Choi Eun-Bi. "Eun-Bi, you don't need to use powerful magic to finish off monsters that have been knocked down. Don't forget that Si-Hun is the main damage dealer. You are a sub damage dealer, so you should be supporting him. Yet, you were so focused on attacking the three monsters on the ground that you weren't able to do anything against the five approaching from behind, right?"

"Y-Yes. You're right, oppa."

"Even weak lightning attacks can paralyze enemies, so limit using up your reserves."

"Yes, oppa!"

"And Seol-Ah..."

"Y-Yes, Kang-Woo!" Seol-Ah answered nervously after seeing the previous two receive criticism from Kang-Woo.

Kang-Woo said calmly, "The timing of your buff was great, but attacking the monsters with light arrows was dangerous. Healers already draw too much attention. If you attack on top of that, Tae-Soo won't be able to keep the attention of the enemies on him. You're not hunting alone, so even if you want to help, you need to be more careful."

"Oh... I-I'm so sorry."

"Don't worry. You'll improve with time. As for Si-Hun..."

"Yes?" Kim Si-Hun, the last party member, calmly awaited Kang-Woo's words.

"There was nothing for me to criticize. You carried out your role perfectly," Kang-Woo stated.

"Oh... Thank you very much," Si-Hun said with a nod.

He didn't seem too surprised. It was as if he knew he hadn't made any mistakes.

Kang-Woo looked at Si-Hun and thought, 'Amazing.'

Even from the perspective of someone with ten millennia's worth of battle experience, Si-Hun's battle sense was impressive. His technique was a bit rough around the edges due to the lack of experience, but it was impressive nonetheless.

'So, this is what a real genius looks like, huh?'

Even though Si-Hun didn't have much battle experience, he was getting used to combat at a frightening speed. Kang-Woo, on the other hand, had taken approximately ten years to learn how to use a weapon properly, so he felt dejected.

'I guess this is how Cha Yeon-Joo feels when she looks at me.'

It was the same for most occupations, but talent was especially important for Players. Cha Yeon-Joo didn't know about Kang-Woo's past, so she probably saw him as someone with impressive talent. Despite that, Kang-Woo wasn't really that talented. It was only because of the experience he had gained through shedding blood, sweat, and tears for the last ten millennia that he had become so strong.

However, Si-Hun was different.

'He's the real deal.'

Si-Hun possessed a frightening level of talent, so much so that his movements improved even while fighting the orcs. He was a diamond in the rough.

"Let's head a bit deeper inside," Kang-Woo said.

He was now interested in how much Si-Hun could grow.

"Okay."

"Hehe! I'll do better this time, hyung-nim!" Tae-Soo responded excitedly while lifting his shield.

The party members hunted more orcs as they went deeper into the forest.

Crack!

"Haap!"

Si-Hun was abnormally talented, but the rest of the party members were also quite talented compared to the average Player. Furthermore, after taking Kang-Woo's suggestions to heart, they were now improving very quickly.

'At this rate, they'll be able to enter a C-rank Gate within a month.'

It took the average Player over two months to enter a C-rank Gate, so it would be considerably fast if this party could do it within a month. Of course, it had only taken Kang-Woo five days, but it didn't make sense to compare them with him.

"Huh? Hyung-nim, what's that monster over there? It isn't an orc," Tae-Soo pointed out.

"Hm?" Kang-Woo, who was watching them hunt from a distance, stepped forward.

"Grrrr!!"

There was a black wolf with two giant horns on its forehead, and it was glaring at Tae-Soo with murderous intent in its eyes.

'A Demon Wolf.' Kang-Woo's expression hardened.

A Demon Wolf wasn't as strong as a Hellhound, but it was still a demonic beast from the First Hell.

"GRRRAARRR!!!"

"H-Huh?"

Seeing the Demon Wolf leap toward him at a terrifying speed, Tae-Soo raised his shield, but it was obvious that he wouldn't be able to block the attack. That was how overwhelmingly powerful the Demon Wolf's charge was.

"Tsk." Kang-Woo frowned and extended his hand toward the demonic beast.

He hadn't been planning on doing anything unless a complication arose, but this was far more serious than a simple complication. Tae-Soo was a talented tank, but the opponent was on a whole other level. The party members were still too weak to fight a demonic beast from Hell.

'Why is there another demonic beast here?'

Kang-Woo scowled at the Demon Wolf. After his previous encounter with a Hellhound, this Demon Wolf was the second demonic beast from Hell that he had encountered on Earth.

Powerful demonic energy surged from his body as he prepared to fight.

However, before Kang-Woo could do anything, Si-Hun charged toward the Demon Wolf.

Slash!!

"GRRRAARR!"

"S-Si-Hun!" Tae-Soo exclaimed.

"Please get back!" Si-Hun said.

A blue aura rose from his sword. Si-Hun swung his sword at a speed that couldn't be compared to before, slashing open the demonic beast's back with the blue aura.

"GRRRAARR!!" the injured Demon Wolf roared and lunged toward Si-Hun with its front legs.

Si-Hun blocked the attack with his sword.

Wham!

"Kurgh!"

Nevertheless, there was no way a Player who had only just achieved his Second Awakening would be able to block a Demon Wolf's attack. The impact of the Demon Wolf's attack sent Si-Hun flying backward and then rolling on the ground.

"Kurgh, cough!"

Despite having taken the Demon Wolf's attack head-on, Si-Hun staggered to his feet, but the Demon Wolf charged toward him once again.

Crack!!

"Whiiiiine."

Kang-Woo climbed onto the Demon Wolf's back. He amplified his strength with the Authority of Titanic Might and used his fist to smash the head of the Demon Wolf, destroying it with just one attack.

Riiing.

[You have successfully defeated a D-rank Rift Fragment.]

[Your level has risen by 1.]

A blue message window appeared in front of Kang-Woo, but he ignored the message window and turned to look at Si-Hun.

"Cough! Haaa, haaa. Th-Thank you very much, Kang-Woo." Si-Hun bowed his head toward Kang-Woo while panting heavily.

Tae-Soo came to them and shouted, "Wow!! As expected of hyung-nim!! You defeated that monster with just one blow!! Damn!! You're the best!!"

"..."

"Also, Si-Hun, that was sword energy, right? Right?!"

"Ah... Umm..."

"Are you really only on your Second Awakening? Your sword was flashing so brightly!"

"I really am only on my Second Awakening," Si-Hun replied to Tae-Soo with a troubled expression.

Kang-Woo gazed at Si-Hun intently while thinking deeply.

'He's strong.'

What Si-Hun had just shown defied logic. It couldn't simply be because of his extraordinary battle sense. Even after taking into consideration that he had unlocked an A-rank Trait with his Second Awakening, he was still too strong for a Player of his level.

'I'm thinking the same thing as Mun Yeong-Ho.'

Mun Yeong-Ho had probably felt the same way when he looked at Kang-Woo.

'Is he really only on his Second Awakening?'

There was a reason why Kang-Woo was overwhelmingly stronger than other Players, but Si-Hun was different. He couldn't have also spent ten millennia in Hell.

Kang-Woo looked at Si-Hun suspiciously and used the Authority of the Beholder on him. Demonic energy flowed out of Kang-Woo and went toward Si-Hun.

Riiing.

[Erasing traces of Demonic Energy with the effect of Ruler of Demonic Energy (Rank: A).]

The distinct chime of a bell rang out, and the unpleasant and disgusting sensation of the demonic energy disappeared. With its traces now concealed, the demonic energy could approach Si-Hun without being noticed.

[Status Window]

[Player Name: Kim Si-Hun]

"Hm?"

Kang-Woo tilted his head in wonder after a blue status window suddenly appeared in front of him. The name on the status window clearly said 'Kim Si-Hun.'

'You can do things like this with the Authority of the Beholder...?'

He had only intended to check whether Si-Hun was hiding some sort of power, but he realized an unexpected truth. It seemed that he could check the status windows of other Players.

To confirm if that was truly the case, Kang-Woo used a little bit more demonic energy on Si-Hun.

[Level: 14 (Second Awakening)]

'I can see his status window.'

Kang-Woo's eyes lit up at the unexpected turn of events.

'He truly is only on his Second Awakening.'

From what Kang-Woo could see, Si-Hun was Level 14. Si-Hun had said before the hunt that he was Level 12, so he had leveled up twice today.

'In that case, how is he so strong?'

This meant that Si-Hun had indeed only achieved his Second Awakening despite being that strong.

Kang-Woo tilted his head and used a bit more of the Authority.

[First Awakening Trait: Martial God's Successor (Rank: SSS) *The power of the Martial God has not yet been fully absorbed, so the Trait cannot display its full potential.

Second Awakening Trait: Sword Energy Manifestation (Rank: A)]

"What?"

Kang-Woo couldn't hide his surprise after checking out Si-Hun's Traits.

[Unique Class: The Chosen One - The soul of the Martial God Tian Taihuang dwells within you. You are a hero destined to become the protector of this world.

Strength: 15

Dexterity: 16

Health: 13

Qi (Unique Stat): 25

Intelligence: 8

Wisdom: 9]

'What?' Kang-Woo's mouth fell open in shock. 'The hell's with this guy?'

Si-Hun had an SSS-rank Trait and was a human with the soul of the Martial God dwelling within him, a hero destined to become the protector of this world...

'Is he actually the protagonist?'

Kang-Woo stared at Si-Hun bewilderedly.

Chapter 39 - The Chosen One (4)

When Oh Kang-Woo fell into Hell, he had honestly been quite happy because that situation had made him feel like the protagonist of a novel. The thought that his life of poverty and misery could change into an awesome and one-of-a-kind life excited him.

Of course, those thoughts eventually disappeared as he experienced many near-death situations. When he first fell into Hell, he wasn't the protagonist; he was a being at the bottom of the food chain, even lower than plankton.

'But...' Kang-Woo looked at Kim Si-Hun, dumbfounded.

Si-Hun's dazzlingly good looks, kind personality, and well-mannered attitude...

'He's the definition of a protagonist.'

Kang-Woo couldn't help but find Si-Hun's status window absurd.

"Hmm."

He began thinking deeply about Si-Hun's status window.

'Destined to become the protector of this world, huh?'

Considering Si-Hun's Trait, the description that stated he was to become the world's protector did not seem overblown. Kang-Woo wasn't sure who the Martial God Tian Taihuang was, but he was likely extremely strong considering the 'Martial God' title. Moreover, Si-Hun had obtained an SSS-rank Trait just for being the Martial God's successor, so there was no doubt about the Martial God's power.

'Is that why his swordplay is so good?'

Si-Hun's movements were too good for it to be simply because he's talented. He was strong and growing at a frightening speed.

"..."

Kang-Woo looked at him with a deep and subdued gaze as he became lost in his thoughts again, particularly about what he should do about Si-Hun.

'I could give him my full support and build an amicable relationship with him.'

That was what Cha Yeon-Joo had decided to do with Kang-Woo. A simple and effective way to produce a good investment return was to recognize someone's talent, provide them support to grow even faster, and, while doing so, build an amicable relationship with them.

'But that has a lot of flaws.'

The biggest flaw was that the sponsor could not make the person that they were supporting do their bidding if the only relationship between them was an amicable one. In the worst-case scenario, the sponsor could be betrayed by the person to whom they had given their full support.

'Kim Si-Hun doesn't look like someone who would do something like that.'

Si-Hun was so kind to the point that he could be called a pushover, so the chances of that happening were low.

'But...'

Kang-Woo looked at Si-Hun, who was being healed by Han Seol-Ah.

'No one can know that for sure.'

Si-Hun was a kind person. He might not betray Kang-Woo of his own volition, but there was no guarantee that he wouldn't do that because of someone else's influence.

If Si-Hun thought of Kang-Woo in a very good light like Seol-Ah or Kang Tae-Soo did, then Kang-Woo wouldn't think this way. However, that wasn't the case.

'How about I eliminate him now and nip the bud?'

Si-Hun wasn't the same as Seol-Ah and Tae-Soo. Seol-Ah and Tae-Soo were talented Players, so they could aim to become Rankers in the future, but that was all. No matter how strong they became, there was an extremely low chance that they could become a threat to Kang-Woo.

However, Si-Hun was different. If he were one day able to use his SSS-rank Trait to its fullest, or if he unlocked even stronger ones as he leveled up... he could grow into a threat to Kang-Woo. It wasn't a bad option to eliminate Si-Hun as a safeguard.

'...No.' Kang-Woo shook his head. 'That would be too much of a waste.'

Eliminating someone as talented as Si-Hun just because he could become a threat was stupid. He was like a lottery ticket that was guaranteed to win. If there was a way for Kang-Woo to make Si-Hun an ally, he could gain a subordinate that was even stronger than Balrog.

'I want to make him an ally, but I don't feel comfortable doing nothing as he keeps growing stronger.'

Kang-Woo crossed his arms and stroked his chin with one hand.

'In that case...'

Kang-Woo's eyes lit up. He'd thought of a good idea that could help Si-Hun grow while making him a guaranteed ally.

'And it's something I can only do now.'

The corners of Kang-Woo's mouth curved upward. He was extremely lucky to have discovered Si-Hun early.

"Kang-Woo? Is something wrong?" Seol-Ah asked.

She had finished healing Si-Hun and was now walking toward Kang-Woo.

Kang-Woo wiped the smile from his face and calmly answered, "Oh, I was just thinking about something."

"Sigh. What was that monster? I've never seen anything like it before... We would've been in real trouble if you weren't here."

"I'm not sure either... I also want to know why a monster like that appeared in a D-rank Gate," Kang-Woo said while analyzing the corpse of the Demon Wolf.

He was still unsure about what Rift Fragments were and why demonic beasts were appearing in Gates.

"That aside, how is Si-Hun doing?" Kang-Woo asked.

"Oh, he's much better now. He can't move excessively yet, but walking should be okay."

"Hmm." Kang-Woo nodded and walked to Si-Hun. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm feeling a lot better thanks to Seol-Ah."

"That's good to hear."

"I would've been hurt even worse if it weren't for you, Kang-Woo. Thank you so much. You're as strong as Tae-Soo said," Si-Hun said as he stood up and smiled affably.

The surroundings seemed to brighten just from his smile.

"Of course! I've never seen a Player as strong as Kang-Woo hyung-nim!" Tae-Soo bragged about Kang-Woo while pounding his chest. "He isn't just strong! Kang-Woo hyung-nim is someone with a strong sense of justice. He once taught the members of the Andras Guild a lesson all by himself!"

"Wow."

"Hehehe! He is the man whom I have dedicated my undying loyalty to!"

"You have a good hyung-nim." Si-Hun nodded and turned his head to look at Kang-Woo.

It seemed like he was also starting to trust Kang-Woo.

"Oh, but you were amazing too, Si-Hun. I've never seen someone like you among Second Awakening Players," Tae-Soo said.

"I'm flattered."

"Hehehe. But why didn't you join a large guild? You could probably join any guild you want. The Mir Guild has been seeking out new members. Are you interested in joining them?"

"I'm not planning to enter a guild, especially the Mir Guild." Si-Hun's expression turned cold at the mention of the Mir Guild.

Upon noticing that, Tae-Soo scratched his head and said, "Hmm. I see. Do you have some bad blood with the Mir guild?"

"Nothing worth mentioning," Si-Hun replied in an uncharacteristically cold and firm tone.

Tae-Soo surmised that he had mentioned something he shouldn't have.

So, he lowered his head apologetically as he spoke, "Well, it doesn't seem to be anything good. I'm sorry for asking something I shouldn't have."

"No, don't be. It's just that it's a bit complicated... I should be the one to apologize for reacting in such a way."

It seemed as if Si-Hun managed to control his emotions, and he once again looked at the party with a smile.

Si-Hun said, "I feel better now, so let's continue hunti—"

"Oh, I think it would be better if we stopped for the day. After all, you're not in your best condition right now."

"I'm fine."

"You don't need to push yourself so hard. There's always tomorrow."

"Hmm... Understood," Si-Hun replied with a nod.

Kang-Woo walked toward the Gate exit with the rest of the party.

"Hyung-nim! Are you going to come tomorrow, too?"

"No. Try hunting with just the four of you. And don't forget what I taught you today."

"Oh..."

"I can't be looking after you guys forever."

"Ngh. Well, okay. I, Kang Tae-Soo, will level up more so that I can party with you, hyung-nim!"

"Okay, I'll be waiting." Kang-Woo laughed and walked out of the Gate.

"Then, I'll be going this way," Si-Hun remarked.

"Okay, I'll see you tomorrow, everyone!" Choi Eun-Bi exclaimed.

Everyone went on their way after the hunt was over, but Kang-Woo walked to the station with Seol-Ah since they lived together.

"Seol-Ah."

"Yes, Kang-Woo?"

"There's something I have to do, so go on ahead of me."

"Oh... Is it urgent?"

"Yeah."

"I understand. What about dinner?"

"You can eat first. I might be a bit late."

Seol-Ah looked at Kang-Woo sadly, disappointed that she wouldn't be able to go home with him. Nevertheless, she turned around and walked into the station alone.

"Right, then..." Kang-Woo uttered.

After parting ways with Seol-Ah, Kang-Woo turned toward where Si-Hun had gone.

"Let's begin."

He had a big smile on his face as he kicked off from the ground and soared into the air.

* * *

"Sigh... the Mir Guild, huh?"

Si-Hun thought of the name that had popped up during his conversation with Tae-Soo. His heart filled with dread the moment he recalled a certain man who was a member of that guild.

He shook his head to clear his mind and kept walking.

"Kang-Woo?" Si-Hun called out in surprise.

Kang-Woo had suddenly appeared in front of Si-Hun while he was walking to the bus station to return home. Si-Hun tilted his head puzzledly and looked around to try and figure out what was going on.

Kang-Woo slowly walked toward him and said, "There's something I need to talk to you about."

"Oh, I see. What is it?"

"Hmm... It's something important, so let's go somewhere private."

"I understand." Si-Hun nodded.

He walked into a secluded alleyway and then turned around to face Kang-Woo.

"What did you want to ta—"

Smash!!

"Kurgh!!"

Kang-Woo punched Si-Hun right in the solar plexus. Caught completely off guard, Si-Hun fell to the ground with a hand on his stomach.

"Cough! Cough! Wh-What are you—"

"Oh. This is just insurance," Kang-Woo stated.

"Cough! I-Insurance?" Si-Hun asked.

Kang-Woo got on top of Si-Hun, who was lying on the floor.

Then he continued calmly, "You are going to become stronger, Si-Hun. Overwhelmingly stronger than other Players. So, I want to build a good relationship with you."

"G-Good relationship...?"

"To put it simply, I want us to become allies."

"Kurgh! How can you say that after doing something like this?!"

Si-Hun tried to shake Kang-Woo off of him, but Kang-Woo looked down at him with a smile.

"And this is insurance for that."

"What is that supposed to m— Kargh!"

Kang-Woo focused demonic energy on his hand and stabbed it into Si-Hun's chest, reaching his heart. Then, Kang-Woo gathered as much demonic energy as possible and used an Authority.

'Authority of Subordination.'

It was an Authority that forcibly made the target's soul a subordinate of the Authority's user. To put it simply, it made the target into a demon's Familiar. The Authority of Subordination was a level higher than the Authority of Fear, so it had more to offer.

"Kurgh! Cough! S-Stop!"

"Don't worry. You'll forget everything that happened here," Kang-Woo said calmly while looking at Si-Hun. "When you open your eyes again later, you'll continue living your life just as you've been doing until now. You just have to hunt and keep getting stronger like you did today. I'm sure you and the others will be able to become a party that's stronger than any other, as long as you keep growing with Tae-Soo and Seol-Ah."

"Kurgh! Cough!"

"Oh, and if you become my Familiar, you'll be able to use a portion of my power. I'm sure it will be very helpful for your growth."

Kang-Woo used the power of the Authority of Subordination to check if Si-Hun's soul was under his possession. Once he confirmed that it was, he took his hand off of Si-Hun's heart.

Surprisingly, there was no wound on Si-Hun's chest. Even his clothes were perfectly fine.

"A-Aaaahhh..." Si-Hun waved his hand in the air as if he were trying to grab something.

"You don't need to worry about anything," Kang-Woo said softly. He grabbed Si-Hun's hand and continued, "We'll become very good allies."

Chapter 40 - The Chosen One (5)

"Hmm?"

When Kim Si-Hun regained consciousness and opened his eyes, he felt the hard sensation of the stone floor beneath him.

'What happened?' he wondered inwardly while looking around.

After parting ways with the rest of the party, Si-Hun had been walking to the bus station to go back home.

"Eh?"

However, that was all he could remember. He didn't remember anything that had happened after he left the Gate and headed for the bus station.

Si-Hun took out his smartphone from his pocket and checked the time.

"It's been an hour."

An hour had passed since the last time he'd checked the time.

"Guh!"

He tried to force himself to remember, but it gave him a headache. Si-Hun grabbed his forehead and stood up.

"Did I pass out?"

The unknown monster they'd met in the Gate... Si-Hun had taken a direct blow from it during the fight.

'That was dangerous.'

Thinking about that situation still gave him chills. That was how overwhelmingly powerful that monster had been.

'But I thought I was all better.'

Si-Hun thought he had fully recovered after being healed by Han Seol-Ah, but it seemed that the injury was more severe than he'd thought.

'But to think that I would even pass out...'

Si-Hun frowned while looking down at his body.

'I still have a long way to go.'

The soul of the Martial God Tian Taihuang had entered his body when he awakened as a Player two weeks ago. However, he only knew about the Martial God's existence through the status window and hadn't been able to interact with the Martial God's soul in any way.

'It's because I'm still too weak.'

Si-Hun bit his lip anxiously.

Despite having obtained the great power that came with the soul of a Martial God, Si-Hun was still considerably weaker than he could be because he hadn't been able to fully accept the power within the soul.

'I have to get stronger.'

Si-Hun's eyes shone determinedly as he clenched his fists.

He had to get stronger because there was something he had to do, and it could only be done when he had enough power.

'Kim Yeong-Hun.'

Si-Hun thought of the person that had put him into his current crisis. It was the vice guild master of the Mir Guild, one of the five great guilds of Korea.

'That human garbage.'

Si-Hun couldn't help boiling with rage when he thought of that person.

"Huu." Si-Hun took some deep breaths to quell the rage boiling within him.

'I must wait.'

He was still far too weak to face Kim Yeong-Hun.

"I wonder if it would be possible if I were as strong as Kang-Woo?"

With a bitter smile on his face, he remembered the Player that he had met today—Oh Kang-Woo. Si-Hun didn't know what level Kang-Woo was, but it was probably very high, considering that Kang-Woo had used just one blow to defeat the monster that Si-Hun had struggled to fight against.

'He was strong.'

Kang-Woo's level wasn't the only thing that seemed strong. Si-Hun thought that Kang-Woo likely had high-ranking Traits as well. Of course, Kang-Woo's Traits probably couldn't be compared to Si-Hun's SSS-rank Trait. However, Si-Hun still did not have full control over his Trait's power, so there was currently an overwhelming difference in power between him and Kang-Woo.

"And it didn't seem like he was just strong."

Si-Hun understood why Tae-Soo had spoken so highly of Kang-Woo, who led others with his peculiar charisma. Judging by how he had gone to a low-ranking Gate to help out low-level Players like Si-Hun and the others, Kang-Woo also seemed to have a good personality.

"He seems like a good person."

Si-Hun smiled at the thought of Kang-Woo. They'd just met, but Kang-Woo had left a very good impression on Si-Hun.

'I can trust Kang-Woo.'

While thinking that he would be able to build a good relationship with Kang-Woo, Si-Hun continued walking toward the bus station.

* * *

"Yeah, I'm a good person." Kang-Woo smiled.

He was watching Si-Hun while hiding in the alleyway.

"I did it."

He wasn't completely certain that the subordination process would be successful due to the variable, the Martial God's soul. Nonetheless, Kang-Woo ultimately managed to turn Si-Hun's soul into his subordinate.

'If I had discovered Si-Hun a little bit later, there would have been a high chance of failing.'

The Authority of Subordination allowed its user to exercise complete control over another person's soul, so it wasn't an easy Authority to use. A lot of demonic energy was required to turn someone into a Familiar, and there were also many restrictions.

Had he found out about Si-Hun even a week later, Kang-Woo would've probably failed to make him into a subordinate.

Riiing.

[You have managed to subordinate a soul. Registering 'Kim Si-Hun' as your Familiar.]

[Would you like to give your Familiar an order?]

"Not yet."

[The order has been deferred. You may give your Familiar an order anytime and anywhere.]

Kang-Woo grinned after reading the message window.

'Of course, it has to be possible anytime and anywhere.'

If it wasn't like that, it wouldn't have been worth it to turn Si-Hun into his Familiar.

"Now that I have my insurance... I just have to wait for him to grow."

Kang-Woo wasn't planning on forcibly giving Si-Hun an order at present—no, even in the future. He didn't want to forcibly make Si-Hun do anything unless it was absolutely necessary.

'I turned him into a Familiar only as insurance.'

Si-Hun hadn't treated Kang-Woo in a hostile manner, nor did he even think badly of him. Rather, Kang-Woo had left a very good impression on Si-Hun. It was clear from how Si-Hun had mumbled to himself that Kang-Woo was a good person.

'A dog that doesn't bite its owner doesn't need a collar.'

Nevertheless, in the worst-case scenario, Kang-Woo could still force Si-Hun to obey him.

"I'll be supporting you as best I can, so keep on growing, Si-Hun."

Kang-Woo's smile deepened as he watched Si-Hun walk further away.

If Si-Hun grew the way that Kang-Woo hoped, he would probably become as strong as Balrog. There was a chance that Kang-Woo would have to fight the demon cult members before he could fully unseal his Ten Thousand Demon Core, so Si-Hun was very important to him. Kang-Woo also liked that Si-Hun would be hunting with Seol-Ah and Tae-Soo, helping them level up, and protecting them from unforeseen events.

'Additionally, Si-Hun will probably grow even faster thanks to what happened today.'

A Familiar could use a portion of their master's power. This meant that Si-Hun had both the Martial God's soul and a portion of the demon king's power inside him. Si-Hun was going to grow even faster from now on.

"It sure is invaluable to have comrades that help each other out."

Kang-Woo nodded while smiling in satisfaction.

He didn't feel bad in the slightest for having forcibly turned Si-Hun into his Familiar. Kang-Woo had spent too much time in Hell to feel bad about something so insignificant.

'I'm going to make sure that only I can get my hands on this growing sprout.'

Kang-Woo smacked his lips and laughed softly.

He would use everything that could benefit him and eliminate anything that could harm him. That was the way of survival he had learned in Hell.

"I should head back."

Feeling satisfied, Kang-Woo turned around and headed home. He felt a bit sluggish because the Authority of Subordination consumed a lot of demonic energy.

'I wonder if Seol-Ah has eaten yet.'

Kang-Woo reached for his smartphone and considered buying something on the way home to celebrate having made Si-Hun his ally.

Vrrrr.

"Hm?"

Just as he grabbed his phone, he received a call. Kang-Woo checked the caller ID. The name that appeared on the screen was Jo Deok-Hyun, the master of the Andras Guild. Kang-woo had ordered him to find clues regarding the Demon Cult.

"What is it?"

[I-I've called to give you some information.]

"Information?"

[Yes. Th-That's right.]

"Is it related to the demon cult?"

[I-I can't say for sure.]

"Tell me."

Kang-Woo listened to Deok-Hyun's words with bright eyes.

[We've found traces of demonic energy.]

"Traces of demonic energy?"

[Yes, but... it doesn't seem to be man-made.]

"It's not man-made?"

[Yes. Rather than man-made... the traces seem to have been left by something like a monster.]

"..."

Kang-Woo stroked his chin.

Traces that had been left by a monster had bits of demonic energy... It wasn't hard for Kang-Woo to conclude what the monster was from that.

'A demonic beast.'

The monster was a demonic beast, also referred to as a Rift Fragment. It seemed that another demonic beast like the Hellhound and Demon Wolf had appeared.

"Where were the traces found?"

[The B-rank Gate in Uijeongbu.]

"A B-rank Gate, huh?"

The corners of Kang-Woo's mouth curved up.

'Then it's highly likely that a demonic beast stronger than a Hellhound has appeared.'

A C-rank Rift Fragment had appeared in a C-rank Gate, and a D-rank Rift Fragment had appeared in a D-rank Gate. Hence, there was a high chance that a stronger demonic beast had appeared in the B-rank Gate.

'If it's stronger than a Hellhound... it might be a demonic beast from the Second Hell.'

Kang-Woo licked his lips like a hunter who had just found its prey.

'I leveled up five times from killing a Hellhound.'

Killing the Rift Fragments had given him more experience points than killing a boss monster. He had gotten several times more experience points from killing the Hellhound than from killing the Troll Chief, a B-rank boss monster. So, killing a demonic beast from the Second Hell would probably get him way more experience points.

"This is..."

Kang-Woo opened his status window and checked his level.

After killing the Demon Wolf, he had leveled up once and was now Level 35. An average Player would probably take between one to two months to level up five times to get to Level 40, but that would not be the same for Kang-Woo.

"I guess I'll be getting my Fifth Awakening sooner than I thought."

A deep smile appeared on Kang-Woo's face as he thought of the massive amount of experience points that he would get from killing a demonic beast.