

M. in Hell 41

Chapter 41 - That Just Leaves One (1)

The next day, Oh Kang-Woo put on the equipment he had received from the Red Rose Guild and went to Uijeongbu.

Clunk clunk.

'This is too uncomfortable. I should get a car.'

Kang-Woo frowned while taking the train to Uijeongbu.

He didn't need a billion-won car like Cha Yeon-Joo's, but he definitely needed one.

'Once this is done, I'll ask her to get me one.'

Kang-Woo got off the train while thinking that he should ask Yeon-Joo for an expensive car since it was free.

"Let's see..."

He looked up the list of monsters that appeared in Uijeongbu's B-rank Gate.

'There are many different kinds of monsters that appear there.'

A wide variety of monsters ranging from D-rank to B-rank elite monsters appeared in Uijeongbu's Gate.

'The top B-rank monster is a Minotaur, huh?'

A Minotaur wasn't as powerful as an Ogre, an A-rank elite monster, but it didn't fall behind in terms of physical strength. Minotaurs were comparable to boss monsters that appeared in C-rank Gates, so Players avoided hunting them without a party.

'Well, it's not my target this time around.'

Kang-Woo wasn't after the Minotaurs but the demonic beast that would give him even better rewards.

Mumble.

"Huh?"

As soon as he arrived at the B-rank Gate in Uijeongbu, Kang-Woo frowned. There was a commotion that made the Gate area seem like a noisy market.

"We're a party of five. Why aren't you letting us in?"

"Do you have any idea how long it took us to get here?"

The Players gathered in front of the Gate were complaining to the soldiers.

'What's going on?' Kang-Woo wondered.

In addition to the Players, there were people who looked like reporters holding cameras and mics in front of the Gate.

Kang-Woo walked toward the commotion.

"Access to the Gate is restricted due to the appearance of a variant monster. We appreciate your cooperation."

"So, this isn't about a boss monster? What the hell is a variant monster?"

"We have not been given details on the exact identity of the monster. However, ten Players have already lost their lives to this variant monster. For your own safety, please refrain from entering the Gate until we get the exact details."

The Players flinched after hearing the soldier's words.

'A variant monster, huh?'

Kang-Woo gasped in surprise. It wasn't hard for him to imagine what the variant monster was.

'It seems like the demonic beast is already running wild inside the Gate.'

If that wasn't the case, there wouldn't be a reason for Player access to be restricted.

'I wonder which one it is?'

There were more demonic beasts than demons throughout the Nine Hells, and some were even a threat to the seven princes of Hell. However, Kang-Woo hadn't fought against many demonic beasts since they didn't attack unless it was someone who had trespassed on their territory.

"T-Ten...?"

"Th-That many Players died?"

"Doesn't that mean it's a really dangerous monster?"

Another commotion arose among the Players after they heard that ten Players had died.

It wasn't uncommon for Players to die inside the Gates. However, Players who entered a B-rank Gate were above average, so it wasn't normal for ten Players of that level to die because of a monster.

"Please give us a bit more information about the variant monster!"

"The people are starting to get worried!"

The reporters rushed in with mics in hand as the Players withdrew in fear.

"We have not received details about its exact identity. We have only heard that it looked similar to a lion with five legs... It is a monster that has never been seen before," the soldier guarding the Gate entrance said.

He seemed troubled by the sheer amount of reporters surrounding him.

'A lion with five legs...' Kang-Woo's eyes lit up.

He knew of only one monster that matched that description...

'Buer.'

Buers were one of the strongest predators of the Second Hell.

'As expected, demonic beasts from the Second Hell have started to appear.'

With that, it was more or less confirmed that stronger demonic beasts appeared in higher-ranking Gates.

'A Buer, huh...?'

Kang-Woo then recalled the number of Players who had been killed.

'If ten Players have been killed, that means the Buer probably appeared two days ago.'

The Buer had a unique trait that made it different from other demonic beasts. It never hunted more than five prey per day. Regardless of whether the prey was large or small, it entered a state of Full Stomach after consuming five and didn't attack unless it was attacked first.

The fact that ten Players had died meant that the Buer had appeared in the Gate two days ago.

'If it's a Buer, it'll be easy.'

Kang-Woo was confident that he could win against the Buer with his current strength. However, there was an easier way to hunt this demonic monster. He just had to capture five monsters alive and throw them to the Buer, leading it to enter the Full Stomach state. Then Kang-Woo could hunt it at ease.

"Let's get going."

Kang-Woo slowly walked toward the soldier guarding the entrance. He wasn't planning to use the Authority of Blindness like before.

'I don't need to go through the trouble anymore.'

With a smile on his face, Kang-Woo took out his smartphone. He pressed a name on his contact list.

[What's up?]

Kang-Woo heard Yeon-Joo's familiar voice in his ear.

"I need you to do me a favor."

[A favor?]

"I want to enter a B-rank Gate, but the government is restricting entry."

[... Don't tell me you're in Uijeongbu?]

"I am."

[And you want me to pull strings so you can enter the Gate?]

"You can do it, can't you? After all, you have a good relationship with high government officials."

[Haaa.]

He could hear Yeon-Joo sigh.

[Do you have to go in there no matter what?]

"It's important."

There was a brief silence.

Then Yeon-Joo clicked her tongue. [This is gonna cost you a lot.]

"Don't worry. I always repay my debts."

[Yeah, yeah, I'm sure you do. You aren't going to die at the hands of that variant monster, are you?]

"You wouldn't be providing me with support like this if I was."

[...]

Kang-Woo felt like he could hear Yeon-Joo calling him a prick inside her mind.

[Gimme a second. There's a soldier guarding the entrance, right? Put him on.]

"Okay."

Kang-Woo approached the soldier and handed him the phone.

"Like I said, entry is currently restricted to all Players—"

"Cha Yeon-Joo of the Red Rose Guild would like to speak with you."

"... Pardon?" The soldier guarding the entrance took the call with an anxious expression.

The reporters looked at Kang-Woo with dumbfounded expressions.

"Cha Yeon-Joo...? No way, that Cha Yeon-Joo?"

"Who is he? Was there someone like him in the Red Rose Guild?"

Amid the noisy atmosphere, the call was carried out between the soldier and Yeon-Joo. After that, the flustered soldier guarding the entrance made some more calls and ultimately sighed.

"... You have been authorized to enter the Gate, Mr. Oh Kang-Woo. You will enter the Gate as a variant monster investigator and will be obligated to disclose information regarding the variant monster in the case of its subjugation. Do you agree to the terms?" the soldier asked.

After seeing that he was given authorization after just a few minutes, Kang-Woo smiled with satisfaction.

"I do. I will investigate the variant monster right away so that the people may rest easy." Kang-Woo spoke words he didn't mean.

"Wow!"

"Hey! Q-Quickly. Take a picture!"

The reporters who could smell the breaking news focused their cameras on Kang-Woo and took photographs.

"Since the Red Rose Guild received authorization, the same would naturally apply to us, correct?"

A group of six people suddenly appeared, splitting the sea of reporters. The party of five men and one woman walked toward the Gate while glaring at Kang-Woo.

"It's Kang Seong-Soo of the Mir Guild!"

"The rookie who has been given full support from the Mir Guild?"

"I've heard that it's only been three months since he became a Player. He's already hunting in a B-rank Gate?"

It seemed that one of the six members was famous, considering how much of a fuss the people around them were making.

Kang Seong-Soo, a young man with a ponytail, approached Kang-Woo. "Are you the one who's been getting support from the Red Rose Guild lately?"

He scanned Kang-Woo up and down. Kang-Woo's eyebrow twitched slightly when he saw Seong-Soo glare at him arrogantly.

"I guess it's true, judging from your Unique-grade equipment," Seong-Soo said with a smirk. Then he looked around. "What the hell? You don't even have a single party member? Is this all the support the Red Rose Guild can give you?"

Kang-Woo's mouth twisted slightly.

With a forced smile, he replied, "Haha. I prefer to hunt alone, so I haven't asked for party members."

"Hmph. From what I heard, you've been hunting in a C-rank Gate until recently... Aren't you taking B-rank Gates too lightly?"

"..."

Kang-Woo wasn't sure where Seong-Soo had heard about him, but Seong-Soo seemed to know quite a lot about him. It seemed like the news that Yeon-Joo was supporting him had spread quite fast.

At present, Seong-Soo was deliberately trying to pick a fight with Kang-Woo.

"Guys like you tend to die the quickest," Seong-Soo said.

Kang-Woo's smile was slowly disappearing. His patience was running thin as Seong-Soo continued to provoke him.

"It seems you're trying to get famous by killing the variant monster. Since when were Fourth Awakening Players so arrogant?" Seong-Soo asked.

'Seong-Soo,' Kang-Woo thought.

"Huh? How about you say something?"

'Don't do this, Seong-Soo.'

"Hahaha! What, did you become deaf?"

'Any more of this, and you'll die.'

It seemed that Kang-Woo's silence only made Seong-Soo more excited.

He put his arm around Kang-Woo's neck and continued, "How about you join our party and investigate together? Isn't it better than suffering a horrible death?"

There was a heavy silence.

A smile appeared on Kang-Woo's face, and he nodded.

"I'm not sure what to say to such generosity." Kang-Woo extended his hand toward Seong-Soo and requested a handshake. "Let us investigate the Gate together. To be honest with you, I was also a bit scared at the thought of going in alone."

He looked at Seong-Soo's party members with a kind smile.

Kang-woo needed five prey for Buer to enter the Full Stomach state.

'That just leaves one.'

The corners of Kang-Woo's mouth curved up.

Chapter 42 - That Just Leaves One (2)

"... Huh?"

Oh Kang-Woo accepted so easily that Kang Seong-Soo didn't know what to do.

'This isn't how it was supposed to go.' Seong-Soo seemed troubled by Kang-Woo's unexpected response.

The reason why he'd decided to pick a fight with Kang-Woo wasn't just because he didn't like him... It wasn't like he had anger management issues. There was no way he'd pick a fight with someone he had never met.

'I need to make him a complete laughingstock in front of the reporters,' Seong-Soo thought.

He recalled the orders he'd received from Kim Yeong-Hun, the one who was supporting him.

Back when Yeong-Hun received a report that the Player receiving the support of Cha Yeon-Joo had appeared at the B-rank Gate, he called Seong-Soo and ordered him to embarrass him publicly. The Mir Guild and the Red Rose Guild were rivals, so Yeong-Hun wanted Seong-Soo to provoke Kang-Woo and then make the reporters think that Seong-Soo was better than Kang-Woo.

It was not yet widely known that Kang-Woo was receiving the support of Yeon-Joo, but since she had personally recruited him, it wasn't a bad idea to take action ahead of time.

'One's image can't be easily changed once it's imprinted into the minds of the public.'

If they embarrassed Kang-Woo before he could fully grow, the negative image of being publicly humiliated would follow him into the future. Even if Kang-Woo became strong and famous later, most people would still think he was weaker than Seong-Soo. That's how things worked with public opinion.

'But if he acts like this, I'll only look like an asshole.'

Seong-Soo looked at the brightly-smiling Kang-Woo with a troubled expression on his face.

Flinch.

'Huh?'

Seeing Kang-Woo's smile made Seong-Soo flinch, and he felt a chill.

'What's happening?'

Seong-Soo ignored the sudden sense of uneasiness he was feeling and thought about how to deal with the current situation.

"Ngh..." he groaned.

He couldn't think of any good ideas.

The opponent had answered too politely. If Seong-Soo kept trying to pick a fight with him, the Mir Guild's public image would crumble.

It was only possible to clap when the palms of a pair of hands faced each other. If one of the two opposing parties made an effort to avoid conflict, there was no way to create a dispute.

'Damn bootlicker.' Seong-Soo frowned uncomfortably while looking at Kang-Woo.

There was no way Kang-Woo didn't know that Seong-Soo was trying to pick up a fight with him. Judging by Kang-Woo's reaction, he was probably scared.

'Well, if he's backing down just from this, he's no big deal at all,' Seong-Soo thought.

He wasn't sure why the Red Rose Guild had decided to support Kang-Woo, but since Kang-Woo was a coward, he probably wouldn't be a danger to the Mir Guild in the future.

Seong-Soo turned away from Kang-Woo and spoke to his party members, "...Haaa. Let's go."

They all looked at Kang-Woo disappointedly and followed Seong-Soo inside the gate.

"Wow! Red Rose and Mir have joined forces!"

"Alright. 'Two of the great guilds join forces to defeat the variant monster.' Let's go with this title!"

Regardless of what the real situation was, the mass media reporters considered it an entertaining scoop that Kang-Woo and Seong-Soo had formed a party and entered the gate together. They expectantly looked at the party entering the gate.

* * *

The B-rank Gate where Minotaurs mainly appeared looked like a labyrinth, and the walls were made of rocks. Because the rock wall reached the ceiling, it felt more like a dungeon than a Gate.

After entering the gate, Kang-Woo turned to Seong-Soo's party and said in a bright tone, "Right, then. Should we join forces and hunt the variant monster together?"

Seong-Soo scowled at the sight of Kang-Woo's carefree attitude. He spat on the ground and said, "Do you have no pride?"

"I beg your pardon?" Kang-Woo asked.

"Hmph, I'm not sure if you're acting dumb or you just have shit for brains..."

"Seong-Soo oppa, just ignore him. I was a bit scared since he was apparently scouted by Cha Yeon-Joo personally, but he's just a moron." The woman wearing a blue robe sighed.

"I guess Cha Yeon-Joo has lost her mind. I can't believe she would promise someone like this her full support... Vice Guildmaster Kim Yeong-Hun really is the best."

"Yeah. Not only is he a second-generation chaebol, but he's also handsome and extremely capable."

"Like father, like son. Our guild master is also a Ranker."

"Haha. After all, the Mir Guild is the only guild that was built by a father and son who awakened together."

The party praised the Mir Guild while completely ignoring Kang-Woo.

Before awakening as a Player, the Mir Guild's guild master, Kim Jae-Hyun, had been the CEO of Mir Electronics—one of Korea's leading conglomerates. When Gates first appeared five years ago, he awakened as a Player with his son, Kim Yeong-Hun. They then used the massive amount of wealth that Jae-Hyun acquired through Mir Electronics and became strong very quickly. That was how the Mir Guild was born.

'A guild made by a conglomerate, huh?' Kang-Woo's eyes shone with great interest as he silently followed behind the party. 'They must have a disgusting amount of money.'

A large guild earned a lot of money. If the earnings obtained by a big electronics company were to be added to that, the amount of money they had was likely astronomical.

'Should I lead the two guilds into an all-out war against each other?'

Kang-Woo would be able to profit a little in the process.

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

'I'd feel bad doing that to Cha Yeon-Joo.'

He had already received so much support from her, so it would breach his morals if he instigated an all-out war between the two guilds.

'I'm sure the Red Rose Guild will be of use to me in the future.'

Nevertheless, this was the bigger reason than the breach of morals. Pushing the Red Rose Guild into a war against the Mir Guild for immediate profit would be like cutting open a goose that laid golden eggs.

"That aside, where's the variant monster?" Seong-Soo questioned angrily.

He was looking around at the surrounding labyrinthine passageways.

"First, let's just walk around," Kang-Woo said while walking carefreely from the back.

"Hmph, isn't that obvious? You're dumber than I thought."

"Hahaha, my apologies." Kang-Woo smiled like a moron and looked at Seong-Soo's party from behind.

'Seong-Soo.'

However, Kang-Woo's inner thoughts were completely different from his smiling face.

'Are you sure you can handle this, Seong-Soo?'

He used the Authority of the Beholder to search for the Buer and felt its presence nearby.

'It's not in its Full Stomach state.'

The Buer was wandering around violently, searching for prey.

'Authority of Temptation.'

Kang-Woo used an Authority to spread the scent of delicious prey.

"Hmm? Do you guys smell something?"

"Yes. A mouth-watering smell..."

Seong-Soo and the rest of the party looked around for the source of the scent as it permeated the passageway.

'Here it comes,' Kang-Woo thought.

He sensed the Buer was approaching. It was smashing the stone walls to get to them.

Kang-Woo took a few steps away from the party and waited for the Buer to appear.

Rumble!!!

"Huh? Wh-What's happening?"

"Something's approaching us!"

"Prepare for battle!" Seong-Soo ordered the other party members after sensing the variant monster approach. Then he said to Kang-Woo, "You'd better stay the hell out of our way. Don't even dare try to say that you helped us hunt it later."

"..."

Kang-Woo laughed. Even in that situation, Seong-Soo didn't forget to insult him.

'You're the master of death flags, man.'

Kang-Woo didn't think that Seong-Soo's party could win against the Buer. A starved Buer was so strong that the average demonic beast of the Third Hell would be no match against it. Even Mun Yeong-Ho, a Seventh Awakening Player, would probably struggle against it.

As for Seong-Soo, it had only been three months since he became a Player. There was no way he would be able to win against it.

Boom!!

"ROOAARR!!"

"Here it comes!"

Seong-Soo took his spear out and prepared for battle.

'A variant monster is nothing,' he thought.

On his First Awakening, Seong-Soo had gotten an A-rank attribute. Furthermore, he had managed to achieve his Fifth Awakening only three months after becoming a Player. The only Players who had managed to grow faster than him were monsters like Baek Kang-Hyun and Cha Yeon-Joo. That's how sure Seong-Soo was about his abilities.

"Guys like you tend to die the quickest."

Those were the words Seong-Soo had said to provoke Kang-Woo. The problem was that those words hadn't come out of Seong-Soo's mouth this time.

"What did you say?" Seong-Soo turned his head around to Kang-Woo in annoyance.

It was clear those words had emerged from the mouth of Kang-Woo, who had remained silent like a coward until then.

Kang-Woo had his arms crossed, and there was a deep smile on his face. It wasn't the dumb smile he had displayed until recently but a very chilling one filled with bloodlust.

"Are you fucking insa—"

"Seong-Soo," Kang-Woo interjected.

"... What?"

"Stop with the death flags, man. Are you a flag dealer? You keep adding new ones by the second. What are you gonna do next? Are you gonna take out a picture of your lover and say that you're gonna propose to her when this is over?"

"What the hell are you talking ab—"

Crush!

"AARRGG!!!"

While Seong-Soo was distracted by Kang-Woo, the Buer destroyed the wall and attacked one of his party members. The tank Player's shield was destroyed in one blow, and he was sent flying.

"What the...?!" Seong-Soo became wide-eyed in shock after seeing the Buer's strength, which was far beyond what he had imagined.

The Buer moved its five legs toward the tank Player, who had been pushed back, and devoured him with its giant mouth.

Crunch!

Dark red blood gushed out of the tank's body. He was devoured with his armor still on him.

"Kuh!"

Seong-Soo didn't have time to care about Kang-Woo anymore. He grabbed his spear and leaped toward the Buer.

"Haaaap!"

Mana gathered on the tip of his spear and shone with a blue light. Seong-Soo stepped forward and aggressively thrust his spear toward the Buer. There was a flash of light as the spear turned into a light ray shooting toward the Buer's head. However, the Buer just waved its arm and brushed off Seong-Soo's attack.

Crack! Seong-Soo's spear was broken into two all too easily.

Pushed back by the Buer's enormous power, Seong-Soo went tumbling to the ground.

"Huh...?" Seong-Soo looked confusedly at the Buer after he was smacked aside with just one blow.

The unsettling feeling that something was going horribly wrong surged within him.

Chapter 43 - That Just Leaves One (3)

"Graaaahhhh!!!" The Buer's roar shook the entire passageway.

The demonic beast with a lion's head and five legs swallowed its saliva while looking hungrily at its prey. A delicious scent that it had never smelled before was wafting through the air from its prey.

The Buer opened its mouth and leaped toward them.

"Wh-What is this monster?!"

"B-Block!"

With fearful expressions, the party members took out their weapons. However, the Buer was so strong that it had taken out the party's tank with just one attack. There was no way that the remaining party members could block the Buer's attacks.

Crunch!!

"AARGG!! S-Save me!!"

The Buer bit the sword-wielding Player's lower body. The sword-wielder frantically stabbed the Buer with his sword to make it release him, but he couldn't get away from the sheer power of the Buer's jaws.

The Buer's bite split the sword-wielder into two, causing his organs to spill out.

"A-Ahhhh..."

Kang Seong-Soo's party members looked at the Buer with desperate expressions. It was a monster... a predator that devoured humans.

Normally, when Players faced monsters for the first time, they instinctively saw the creature as predators and were afraid of them. However, as Players hunted and leveled up, that fear became weaker.

Seong-Soo's party had grown fast without experiencing dangerous situations, so they'd quickly forgotten about that fear. For them, monsters had been nothing more than beings who gave them experience points and money.

Yet, they were now filled with a fear they'd forgotten.

"Wh-What are you doing?! Attack!" Seong-Soo, who had lost his weapon, shouted at his party members.

Nevertheless, they struggled to take action. Their fear was devouring their rationality.

When the Buer saw that its prey were scared, it roared, "Graaaahhhh!"

Then the Buer aimed its foot, which had especially sharp claws, at the Player who was wielding a greatsword.

"Urgh!"

The Player raised his greatsword reflexively to defend himself, but the Buer's claws cleaved the greatsword in half and impaled the Player's skull.

"AARRGGHH!!!"

Crack. Crunch.

Then the Buer pulled its claws downward, ripping all the way through the Player's skull and into his ribs. A fountain of blood sprayed out as the Player's ribs broke and cracked open with a horrifying sound.

The Buer devoured the screaming Player whole.

"S-Seok-Hyun!" a Player wielding a rapier shouted.

He thrust the rapier at the Buer, but the rapier wasn't properly imbued with mana, so it failed to pierce the Buer's thick skin and broke. The Buer's long tongue instantly enveloped the rapier-wielding Player like a snake, constricting him until he exploded.

Upon seeing the horrible sight, the woman in the blue robe stopped casting magic.

Instead, she let out a shriek, "E-Eek!"

With a pale face, she turned around and began to run. "S-Save me!!"

She ran past Seong-Soo, heading toward the passageway's exit. The Buer turned its head and saw that its prey was running away.

"GRRRRR," the Buer growled.

Its incomparably sharp claws elongated swiftly, doing so until they pierced through the robed woman from the back.

"Cough!"

The woman looked down at the monster's claws in disbelief, seemingly unable to believe that they had pierced through her. Red blood poured out of her mouth.

Crunch, crunch.

The fifth prey disappeared into the Buer's mouth.

"Wh-Wha... What in the world..." Seong-Soo crumbled onto the ground after watching his party members get devoured.

His pants became wet, and he looked at the Buer fearfully. Seong-Soo thought that he too would also be devoured soon.

"Huh...?"

Yet, unlike what he was expecting to happen, the Buer didn't attack him.

Instead of charging at him, the Buer yawned and curled up into a ball as if it had finished hunting for the day.

"It's full," Oh Kang-Woo stated.

"What are you..." Seong-Soo looked confusedly at Kang-Woo, who was calmly walking toward the monster.

Kang-Woo smirked and extended his right hand toward the Buer.

He explained, "Once a Buer is full, it won't attack you unless you attack it first."

It was quite easy to deal with a Buer that was full. The Buer just needed to be killed with the very first attack that it permitted before it would attack again.

Demonic energy began gathering in Kang-Woo's hand.

"Bident," he said.

The technique Bident had been named after the two-pronged spear of a certain ruler of the underworld in Greek mythology. The Authority of Dark Spears and the Authority of Hellfire had to be combined to use Bident, so it was a technique that only Kang-Woo could use.

An intense hellfire began burning at one end of the two-pronged spear. It was a technique that required quite a bit of time to prepare because he had to combine two different Authorities, but that didn't matter in the current situation.

Riiing.

[You have learned the skill Bident (Rank: S).]

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

When a message window popped up saying that he had learned a new skill, the demonic spear in his hand was enveloped in hellfire. A terrifying amount of demonic energy spewed out of it.

Kang-Woo threw the spear at the Buer, who was still curled up.

Rumble!

The spear emitted such great power that it shook its surroundings, making it seem like there was an earthquake.

"ROOAARR!!"

Because the Buer was in the Full Stomach state, it had received the attack head-on without taking a defensive stance. The two-pronged spear pierced the Buer's thick skin, and the hellfire within it exploded from the inside. Even the strongest monster of the Second Hell wouldn't be able to handle such a powerful attack while completely defenseless.

Riiing.

[You have successfully eliminated the B-rank Rift Fragment.]

[Your level has risen by 6.]

[You have reached Level 40 and have unlocked your Fifth Awakening Trait.]

[The upper limit of bonus stat rewards for leveling up has risen. Demonic Energy has risen by 7.]

[Demonic Energy stat has reached 60. One of the conditions required to achieve the Ultimate Demonic Body has been fulfilled (1/3).]

As the Buer fell, Kang-Woo heard the chime of a bell, and blue message windows appeared in front of him.

'What the hell is this Ultimate Demonic Body?'

Kang-Woo tilted his head at the unexpected message.

'Sounds like something out of a martial arts novel.'

After reading that weird-sounding name, Kang-Woo opened his status window to check for more details about it.

[Information]

[Ultimate Demonic Body: The first step to becoming a Demon God.

*Condition 1: Demonic Energy stat reaches 60.

*Condition 2: ???

*Condition 3: ???]

'What's up with this uninformative description?'

Kang-Woo frowned.

The information window didn't say anything about what the Ultimate Demonic Body was and what effects it had. Nor did it mention what the other two conditions were.

'It says that it's the first step to becoming a Demon God, so I don't think it's a bad thing.'

Nevertheless, Kang-Woo already had some idea about the massive amount of power that he would probably be able to obtain by achieving the Ultimate Demonic Body.

'I've never seen anything like this even in Hell.'

He had never gotten anything like an Ultimate Demonic Body before, even when he became the lord of the Nine Hells.

Kang-Woo looked at the information window with great interest.

'I guess this more or less confirms my previous hypothesis.'

He was now sure that his suspicions were true; he could get even stronger than when he had been in Hell as long as he kept leveling up as a Player.

'I'll be able to become a god.'

He wasn't sure what kind of power he would obtain as an existence that surpassed a demon king... but the thought of it made his heart race excitedly.

"I thought that I no longer had the desire to become stronger, but I guess I was wrong."

Having the body of a demon strengthened one's desire for power. Kang-Woo had already become as strong as he could be in Hell, so he'd thought that he no longer had such desires. Nonetheless, after getting a hint about how to reach new heights, he was once again filled with an intense desire to become more powerful.

'First, I should devour the Buer's corpse.'

Kang-Woo needed the demonic energy inside the Buer to cool down his desire for power a bit. He technically had to conserve the corpse since he had entered the Gate as a variant monster investigator, but he had no reason to give up an immediate profit for the government.

'Leaving the head should be enough.'

Kang-Woo could just say that the rest of the body had been destroyed during the battle.

He walked toward the Buer's corpse and activated the Authority of Predation. Black smoke emerged from Kang-Woo and covered the corpse.

Chomp. Crunch.

As the flesh of the corpse was torn apart, the demonic energy of the Buer started to enter Kang-Woo's body.

[Demonic Energy has risen by 4.]

'As expected, demonic beasts give a lot more demonic energy.'

The fact that Kang-Woo's demonic energy stat had increased by four after reaching 60 meant that the Buer had possessed a massive amount of demonic energy.

'Oh. Come to think of it, I haven't checked my new Trait yet.'

He'd been so distracted with the Ultimate Demonic Body that he had forgotten to check the new Trait that he'd acquired with his Fifth Awakening.

Just as Kang-Woo was about to open his status window and check the Trait, he heard Seong-Soo's fearful voice.

"Wh-What the hell are you?" Seong-Soo trembled as he looked at Kang-Woo as if he were a monster.

Kang-Woo had eliminated the monster that had killed each of Seong-Soo's party members with just one attack, so it was unsurprising that Seong-Soo would react like that.

"Oh, right. There was still one left," Kang-Woo remarked.

He walked toward Seong-Soo with a grin.

"E-Eek! S-Stay away!"

Seong-Soo pathetically crawled backward, but Kang-Woo continued to walk toward him slowly.

"How unexpected. I was sure you would be the first one to die."

"D-Don't come any closer!"

"You're hurting my feelings. Aren't we party members?" Kang-Woo said.

He crouched down next to Seong-Soo and placed his hand on Seong-Soo's shoulder.

"A-Are you going to kill me?" Seong-Soo asked with a voice filled with fear.

Kang-Woo's eyes widened in shock as if he wasn't sure why Seong-Soo was asking something like that.

"What are you talking about? There's no way I would kill a party member," Kang-Woo replied.

"..."

"You seem to be misunderstanding something. I'm not that horrible of a person, Seong-Soo." Kang-Woo smiled and placed his hand on top of Seong-Soo's head. "There's still something you have to do, so you can't die yet."

Chapter 44 - Kang-Woo's Tears (1)

"S-Something I have to do?" Kang Seong-Soo looked at Oh Kang-Woo fearfully.

Kang-Woo lightly patted his back and let out a laugh. "Now, now, you don't need to be so scared. First, there are some things I want to ask you."

"U-Urghhh..."

"Who ordered you to pick a fight with me?"

Kang-Woo didn't think that Seong-Soo had made those provocations of his own volition. Seong-Soo had no real reason to do that to Kang-Woo.

Seong-Soo lowered his head with his mouth closed.

Then, Kang-Woo kicked Seong-Soo's head as if it were a football.

Smash!

"Kurgh!!" Seong-Soo groaned in pain.

His front teeth broke from the impact of the blow, and blood dripped from his mouth. Then, Kang-Woo placed his hand on the shoulder of Seong-Soo, who had fallen and was now trembling on the ground.

"Now, let's try this again. Who gave you the order?" Kang-Woo asked.

"K-Kim Yeong-Hun..."

"Kim Yeong-Hun?"

That was the name of the Mir Guild's vice guild master. Seong-Soo's party had mentioned him before.

"The handsome and capable second-generation chaebol?"

Kang-Woo didn't understand why someone like that would try to pick a fight with him.

"Y-Yeong-Hun was once coldly turned down by Cha Yeon-Joo. He has resented the Red Rose Guild ever since that day."

"So, he made you pick a fight with me because I've been getting support from the Red Rose Guild?"

"T-That's not all. He said that... we need to make sure people think that the Mir Guild is superior to the Red Rose Guild."

"Hah, he's more pathetic than I thought."

Kang-Woo stood up while laughing.

He had been wondering what kind of person Kim Yeong-Hun was since the woman in the blue robe had spoken so highly of him, but he turned out to be nothing impressive.

"Do you have a picture of him?" Kang-Woo asked.

"I-I do."

Seong-Soo took out his smartphone and showed Kang-Woo a photo of a handsome young man.

'Huh?' Kang-Woo tilted his head.

Even though it was the first time seeing Yeong-Hun, he reminded Kang-Woo of someone.

'Kim Si-Hun?'

The person in the photo reminded Kang-Woo of Kim Si-Hun.

'Is it because they're both good-looking?'

Based purely on looks, Si-Hun was the more attractive one.

Kang-Woo didn't think about it too deeply and returned the smartphone to Seong-Soo.

"So, what you're saying is that I just happened to be dragged into the middle of this pathetic guy's revenge plot?" Kang-Woo questioned.

Seong-Soo bowed down and said desperately, "I-I'm sorry! I-I had no choice either since I was ordered to!"

Kang-Woo burst into laughter while looking at him. "Even if I take that into consideration, you seemed like you were really into it."

"Th-That's..."

"Oh, it's all good. Life is all about helping others, right? I don't mind, as long as you do exactly as I ask you to."

"I-I will do anything you ask!"

"Hahaha. Don't worry. It's not too difficult. Rather, it might actually be good for you."

"...?" Seong-Soo gazed at Kang-Woo confusedly.

Kang-Woo, on the other hand, had a big smile as he looked down at Seong-Soo.

* * *

Mumble.

"Everyone, quiet! Quiet down, please!"

Many reporters had caught the emergence of some breaking news and gathered in front of the Gate where the variant monster had appeared. The soldiers shouted at them and asked for silence several times, but the commotion didn't subside.

There was a new existence, a variant monster that hadn't been seen before... and to catch it, the Red Rose and Mir guilds had joined forces!

The reporters were thirsty for more details about this breaking news, so they were waiting and staring intensely at the Gate.

"Huh?"

"Th-They're coming out!!"

The reporters suddenly saw two people walk out of the Gate. To be precise, Kang-Woo walked while supporting and carrying Seong-Soo out.

"That's..."

"Kang Seong-Soo and the person named Oh Kang-Woo!"

"What about the other party members?"

"Did they defeat the variant monster?"

A murmur arose among the crowd as they saw the pair exit the Gate.

"Wh-What happened in there?" the reporters asked Kang-Woo, shoving mics into his face.

Kang-Woo just ignored them and shouted hurriedly, "C-Call an ambulance, please!"

He then laid Seong-Soo down.

"Gasp!"

Some people screamed in horror after seeing the horrible state that Seong-Soo was in. His face was covered in so much blood that it was hard to recognize him, and his body was full of wounds as if a group of people had beaten him up.

"Ah, gah, h-help me..." Seong-Soo groaned in agony.

He reached out with a trembling hand, asking for someone to save him.

"H-How did this happen?" someone asked.

The people who saw Seong-Soo were stunned by his terrible state. The only way to describe it was that it was horrifying.

Everyone looked at Kang-Woo for answers.

He clenched his fists in frustration and explained, "He was hurt while... fighting the variant monster."

"Th-Then, are the rest of the party members..."

"That's right. Only Seong-Soo and I survived... Everyone else... is dead," Kang-Woo said while biting his lips with a stiff expression.

The crowd talked among themselves after hearing that everyone except Kang-Woo and Seong-Soo had died.

"D-Don't tell me... the subjugation failed even after the rookies of Red Rose and Mir joined forces?"

"Just how strong is the variant monster?"

"W-We have to quickly call the Hwarang Corps and have them dispatch their elite force!"

Some people began panicking after finding out that two rookies who were being supported by large guilds hadn't been able to defeat the variant monster. It was obvious what sort of atrocity would occur if the variant monster were left alive and allowed to emerge from the Gate.

Kang-Woo answered softly, "You don't have to worry about that. We've defeated the variant monster. It's just that... many people had to be sacrificed in the process."

"Wow!"

"Were you the one to defeat it?!"

Everyone around Kang-Woo exclaimed excitedly upon hearing the news that the variant monster had been defeated.

"No, I'm not the one who killed the variant monster," Kang-Woo stated, shaking his head.

"Then..."

"The hero who killed the variant monster and saved my life was Mr. Kang Seong-Soo."

"Ah!" the crowd gasped.

Kang-Woo placed his hands on top of Seong-Soo, who was breathing with great difficulty.

"After watching his entire party get wiped out in the fight against the variant monster, he shouted at me to escape while he stayed behind to fight," Kang-Woo continued with a heavy voice. "I couldn't bring myself to escape and witnessed his battle to the very end. He ultimately defeated the variant monster. It was truly a heroic and desperate battle."

"..."

"After killing the variant monster, Seong-Soo kept mumbling the names of his deceased party members until he lost consciousness."

The crowd looked at Seong-Soo with tearful expressions while Kang-Woo told the story of the Player who had risked his life to fight off the variant monster. Hearing that Seong-Soo had mumbled the names of his party members before he lost consciousness was enough to move the crowd to tears.

The reporters who loved heroic tales had bright eyes.

"Could you give us a bit more detail?"

They pushed their mics even closer to Kang-Woo. Their attention was no longer on Seong-Soo, who was panting painfully on the ground. For them, it didn't matter if Seong-Soo was about to die. All that mattered to them was the news; they wanted a story that was capable of moving people.

"Right from the moment we entered the Gate, we felt a suffocatingly powerful bloodlust."

"Meaning...?"

"Yes, the variant monster was roaming around near the entrance."

The reporters gulped.

"A chill ran down all of our spines the moment we saw that monster. It was so strong that it was hard to believe it had appeared in a B-rank Gate."

"What did it look like?"

"Just like the government described it. It was a monster with a lion's head and five legs. One of Seong-Soo's party members was killed with just one blow."

"What... O-One blow?"

"How could that be?"

The other party members might not have been as strong as Seong-Soo, but they had still been fairly strong Players. After all, they had been a party of talented people whom the Mir Guild had gathered and supported.

"As soon as we realized that we were no match for it, we wanted to flee. But if we escaped through the Gate, there was a chance that the monster would follow us out and wreak havoc out here, hurting hundreds of innocent people."

"...Gulp."

Kang-Woo had spoken at a low volume, and the tense and desperate tone he'd used made the reporters so nervous that they gulped. They gripped their microphones tighter and listened to Kang-Woo's story even more carefully.

"Seong-Soo stepped up and shouted that innocent people could be hurt if we didn't stop the monster here."

"Ah..."

"Then Seong-Soo and I fought against the monster with everything we had, but... the losses were too great. After that, everything went as I previously mentioned. In the end, Seong-Soo risked his life to deal the finishing blow to the variant monster."

"Ohhh..."

The reporters were in awe at the heroic attitude of Seong-Soo.

However, one reporter asked Kang-Woo a question, "But Mr. Kang Seong-Soo was quite aggressive toward you in the beginning. What do you think about that?"

That question completely killed the awe-inspiring mood.

Nevertheless, Kang-Woo easily answered, "Seong-Soo explained to me the reason for that after we entered the Gate. After hearing that it had not been long since I'd begun receiving support from the Red Rose Guild, he was worried that I was entering a B-rank Gate too soon. What was even more worrying than that was that I had to fight against a variant monster. So, he had acted like that on purpose to discourage me from going."

"Oh! I see."

"I had no idea about the deep meaning behind his actions..." Tears dripped from Kang-Woo's eyes. "He is my savior, as well as the true hero of this era."

* * *

[A hero defeats the variant monster!]

[A dramatic battle, and the reason why he fought until the end...]

[Mir Guild's rookie Kang Seong-Soo was immediately taken to the hospital but still has not regained consciousness. People have donated over 30 million won for...]

[The hero fails to wake. In a vegetative state due to internal hemorrhaging... The Mir Guild announces that they will pay for Kang Seong-Soo's medical bills.]

[Yet another star loses its light.]

Chapter 45 - Echidna (1)

"What a reaction..."

Cha Yeon-Joo looked at all the headlines about Kang Seong-Soo.

Oh Kang-Woo, who was sitting in front of her, shrugged as if it was no big deal.

"It's because I threw them good bait," he said.

Since the beginning of human history, people have always liked heroic tales. The public was fascinated by them, and Seong-Soo's story seemed just like one.

"You... faked those tears during the interview, didn't you?"

"Yup."

"Why go that far?"

"Because it's more moving that way," Kang-Woo replied and took a sip of coffee. "Kang Seong-Soo had to get their attention so I could stay off the radar for a bit longer."

If Kang-Woo got famous, things could get quite bothersome for him. He would have revealed to the public that he was the one who had killed the variant monster if there were something he could gain by becoming famous. However, there was absolutely nothing in it for him to become famous at this time.

'It'll do more harm than good.'

If the public's attention were centered on him, he would have to be careful with his actions. That was especially bothersome for someone like Kang-Woo, who didn't care about doing anything illegal as long as it benefited him. Kang-Woo didn't want to suffer because of unexpected circumstances.

'I'm sure I won't be able to hide forever, though.'

If he were to continue getting stronger, it was inevitable that others would notice him.

'I can think about that later on.'

If there were nothing he could do about it, he would probably try to find ways to profit from that newly obtained fame.

Kang-Woo put down the cup of coffee and looked at Yeon-Joo.

Yeon-Joo sighed and asked, "So, what actually happened inside the Gate?"

Right from the start, she hadn't thought that Kang-Woo would lose against the variant monster. After all, he was someone that had easily won a fight against a high-ranking player of the Red Rose Guild. Even if the variant monster was strong, it probably wouldn't be able to win against Kang-Woo.

"Nothing much. Kang Seong-Soo's party fought the monster first. Then I defeated it."

"But was Kang Seong-Soo really beaten up by the variant monster?"

"Yeah."

"The marks on his face were clearly done by a person."

"There's no way that could have happened. I'm sure you're mistaken," Kang-Woo answered calmly.

Yeon-Joo looked at him with a troubled expression. She couldn't help but feel anxious whenever she talked to him. He was someone who had talent far beyond her expectations. The problem was that he was capable of ignoring societal moral standards without hesitation for his own benefit.

'Am I raising a tiger cub?' she thought worriedly.

Yeon-Joo ultimately shook her head and continued the conversation. "Hmm. First, tell me more about that variant monster."

This was why she had called Kang-Woo over. She wanted more information on the variant monster.

Kang-Woo nodded and proceeded to tell her more about the Buer. Of course, he didn't tell her about its Full Stomach characteristic.

"For a monster like that to appear in a B-rank Gate..." Yeon-Joo held her head with a complicated expression.

According to Kang-Woo, the Buer was a strong monster—so much so that it was hard to believe it had appeared in a B-rank Gate.

'It's at least an A-rank monster,' Yeon-Joo remarked inwardly.

The Buer was likely to be an elite A-rank monster. There was a massive gap in strength between monsters of even a single rank difference, so the difference in power between the Buer and the monsters in the B-rank Gate couldn't be taken lightly.

'Too many weird things have been happening lately.'

The demon cult had suddenly become more active, and even a variant monster had appeared. The world had been slowly but surely achieving a state of normalization throughout the five years after the Day of Calamity, but now things were once again becoming chaotic.

'Come to think of it, the timeframe in which weird things started to happen and the time when Kang-Woo awakened as a Player are similar.'

It was hard to believe, but it had only been a month since Kang-Woo had awakened as a Player. It had been within this period that the demon cult suddenly became more active, and strong monsters that didn't match the ranks of their Gates started to appear.

'I'm sure it's just a coincidence.' Yeon-Joo shook her head after looking at Kang-Woo for a little while.

It was true that Kang-Woo was growing at an unprecedented pace, but that didn't mean it had something to do with the demon cult or the sudden appearance of variant monsters. She couldn't blame him for something without evidence.

'Moreover...'

Yeon-Joo watched Kang-Woo silently drink a cup of coffee.

Even though she did not see Kang-Woo as a kind and generous person, she didn't think he was a psychopath like the members of the Demon Cult, who used people as offerings.

'He isn't that level of human garbage.'

At least, that was what Yeon-Joo wanted to believe.

'Either way, we're in the same boat now.'

After the incident with Seong-Soo, it was publicly known that the Red Rose Guild was supporting the rookie Oh Kang-Woo. Of course, the news about that had been buried by the heroic tales of Seong-Soo, but anyone could probably find out about it easily if they wanted to. This meant that everyone knew that there was an alliance between them.

Yeon-Joo didn't want her guild's relationship with Kang-Woo to crumble just because she was suspicious of him.

"What are you thinking about for so long?"

"Oh... Nothing much."

"There's something I wanted to ask you."

"What is it about?" Yeon-Joo tilted her head and looked at Kang-Woo.

"Have you heard of a Rift Fragment?" Kang-Woo asked.

His question was about the words that had appeared in the message window that had appeared after he killed the demonic beast. He wanted to know if Yeon-Joo knew anything about it.

"No. It's my first time hearing about something like that."

"Hmm... I see."

"What is it?"

"After I killed the variant monster, I got a message saying that I had defeated a B-rank Rift Fragment."

"Hmm." Yeon-Joo nodded with a bright and curious gaze. "Okay. I'll try looking into those Rift Fragments."

Kang-Woo nodded and continued, "One more thing."

"Shoot."

"When are you going to give me details about your request?"

"Ugh..." Yeon-Joo's expression darkened the moment Yeon-Joo heard the word request.

Kang-Woo said calmly, "I'm sure you're aware of it, but we've entered a definitive alliance. However, there's an issue that hasn't been resolved between us."

"..."

"Wouldn't it be troublesome for you if I rejected the request after you've invested so heavily in me?"

"Yeah...."

"Don't worry. I won't reject it unless it's something completely outrageous. I want to maintain our current relationship too," Kang-Woo said, leaning back in his chair. "So, isn't it about time you tell me?"

Yeon-Joo sighed.

After thinking about it for a while, she yielded with an expression that seemed to say there was nothing she could do about it.

She began, "There's an organization called the Demon Cult."

"..."

"We are still unsure about this organization's size and how long they've been operating, but they suddenly became more active recently."

"And...?"

"They're lunatics who perform weird rituals with live humans as sacrifices. Our guild is collaborating with the government to catch them."

"So, that request..."

"I was planning to ask you to help us eliminate the Demon Cult once we find their location. We don't have solid evidence yet... but they're too powerful for us to brush them off as simply a cult made up of crazy people."

"..."

There was a heavy silence between them.

Kang-Woo finally understood why Yeon-Joo was trying to gather as many strong people as possible, even if she had to make those proposals personally in spite of her high status as the guild master of a major guild.

'So, she's planning to wage an all-out war against the Demon Cult,' Kang-Woo realized.

It was no surprise that the Red Rose Guild, one of the largest guilds in Korea, knew about the Demon Cult's existence, considering that the government was already investigating the Demon Cult.

'Not bad.'

No, this situation was much better than not bad. Kang-Woo was already trying to hunt down the Demon Cult, so being able to do it with the help of a large guild and the government was the ideal situation. Moreover, Kang-Woo would definitely need their help if the Demon Cult was strong enough for even Yeon-Joo to be wary of them.

'The only thing I don't understand is...'

Kang-Woo frowned slightly and asked, "But why are you trying to get rid of the Demon Cult? Is it just because of a moral sense of responsibility?"

Yeon-Joo remained silent after hearing the sharp question.

Kang-Woo could understand why the government was trying to hunt down the demon cult, seeing as it had the duty of protecting its country and its people.

However, Yeon-Joo was different. She wasn't some hero of justice. She had no reason to put so much effort into getting rid of the Demon Cult.

Of course, any ordinary person wouldn't approve of the Demon Cult's lunacy. Nevertheless, Yeon-Joo was in charge of a guild; she couldn't just mobilize an entire guild because of her sense of justice.

'And it's not like she can benefit from them the way I can.'

In Kang-Woo's case, he would be able to obtain lots of demonic energy through the Demon Cult's ritual. However, that wasn't the case for Yeon-Joo, so she had even less of a reason to face them.

"It's not like I'm doing it for charity. The government promised us a huge reward for eliminating the Demon Cult."

"Ah, so that's your objec—"

"And there's one more reason," Yeon-Joo said quietly, interrupting Kang-Woo.

She emitted a strong wave of bloodlust. It was suffocating and seemed to fill the room in the form of a thick invisible liquid.

'She's stupidly strong.'

Kang-Woo was impressed by Yeon-Joo's strong bloodlust. It was the first time he'd felt her power from such a short distance.

'So, this is a Ranker.'

Now that he had gotten even stronger after achieving his Fifth Awakening, Kang-Woo had a great desire to fight Yeon-Joo. It took him some effort, but he managed to suppress that desire.

"One of the people they sacrificed was a member of our guild," Yeon-Joo said.

"..."

"I can't forgive them, no matter what," she stated while still emitting her terrifying bloodlust.

'It must've been someone dear to her,' Kang-Woo thought.

It wasn't hard to guess that based on her reaction.

Kang-Woo nodded and spoke in a serious tone, "Okay, I'll accept the request."

"Thanks."

"I told you. I always repay my debts."

After saying that, Kang-Woo changed topics. "Putting that aside, what about the favor that I asked of you last time?"

Yeon-Joo had called Kang-Woo here to get information about the variant monster, but he had come here because he needed to get something from her.

"I got it," Yeon-Joo replied.

She took out a card from the drawer and handed it to him. The card had his picture and the words S-rank Gate Temporary Access Permit printed on it.

"I'm going to ask again, just in case. You're not planning to hunt there, right? If you are, I can't give you this," Yeon-Joo said.

"I already told you many times that I don't plan to do so," Kang-Woo replied.

"Then why in the world do you want to enter an S-rank Gate?"

"There's something I have to do there," Kang-Woo said with a smile.

He grabbed the S-rank Gate access permit, placed it in his pocket, and walked out of the Red Rose Guild building.

While walking to the parking lot, he opened his status window.

'I can finally use this.'

His status window showed him the new Trait that he had obtained with his Fifth Awakening.

Chapter 46 - Echidna (2)

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

[Effect: The Player can summon demonic beasts from another dimension. The power of the summoned demonic beast will depend on the amount of demonic energy used for the summoning.

*The summoned demonic beast will recognize you as its master.

*You can summon one demonic beast every three months.]

'I can finally use this.'

Oh Kang-Woo looked at the description of his newly obtained Trait with great anticipation. It was a Trait that allowed him to summon a demonic beast. However, the true value of the Trait depended on the summoned demonic beast.

'Summoning a Buer would be more than good enough...'

A Buer was almost as strong as an average Seventh Awakening Player.

'But it would be a bit lackluster.'

Kang-Woo's eyes were full of desire. He could summon only one demonic beast every three months. Given the current situation, he needed to try summoning the strongest demonic beast that could be summoned.

"That's why I got this."

Kang-Woo touched the S-rank Gate access permit in his pocket.

There was only one reason why he hadn't immediately summoned a demonic beast and had instead waited for the S-rank Gate access permit.

'The Rift Fragments appear inside Gates.'

It wasn't just the Rift Fragments; Kang-Woo had also returned to Earth indirectly through a Gate.

'Maybe Gates are some sort of bridge that connects Earth to other dimensions.'

That was the only possible way to explain why demonic beasts appeared inside Gates and not on Earth itself.

'And the higher the Gate's rank, the stronger the demonic beast.'

That was something Kang-Woo had confirmed after killing the Buer. Of course, that didn't explain why he, the strongest being in Hell, had appeared in an E-rank Gate.

'No, maybe it does make sense.'

Kang-Woo remembered how his strength had been sealed when he crossed over to Earth. His Ten Thousand Demon Core's seal had weakened because he had leveled up and absorbed demonic energy from monsters, but he'd been extremely weak when he first returned to Earth. So, considering his level of power back then, it made sense that he had appeared in an E-rank Gate.

'In any case, it's a fact that stronger demonic beasts appear in higher-ranked Gates.'

Hence, to summon a strong demonic beast, Kang-Woo had to enter a high-ranking Gate.

"S-rank..."

Kang-Woo remembered Cha Yeon-Joo's worried face.

The S-rank Gate was the highest-ranking Gate in Korea at the moment. There were only two in Korea—one in Suwon and another one in Pohang.

'I heard there are SS-rank and above Gates in other countries.'

He wanted to enter a Gate with a ranking that was higher than SS, but that was impossible. The SS-Rank and above Gates were in other countries, and the monsters that appeared in them were so strong that even approaching the area near the Gate was highly restricted.

There was one in Hokkaido, Japan, and another one in Shanghai, China. Monsters had completely invaded those two areas, so public access was not allowed anywhere near those areas, and the government of each country was busy preventing monsters from breaking through the perimeter of the affected area and into the rest of the city.

'Realistically, the highest-ranking Gate I can access at the moment is an S-rank one in Korea.'

Nevertheless, Kang-Woo thought that he should also visit those areas in the future.

He headed to the parking lot while thinking deeply about this.

Click.

"Having a car is definitely more comfortable."

After killing the Buer, Kang-Woo asked Yeon-Joo for a car. Of course, it wasn't the super expensive foreign car that she used.

'But it's still worth a few hundred million won.'

He'd heard the explanation about which model of Mercedes Benz it was when he'd received it, but they all looked the same to him since he wasn't interested in cars.

Kang-Woo opened the car door and grabbed the steering wheel. He had learned how to drive and obtained a driver's license while waiting for the S-rank Gate access permit.

Riiing.

[Starting navigation to Suwon Hwaseo Station.]

Kang-Woo turned on the GPS and drove to the location of the S-rank Gate.

'As expected from an S-rank Gate.'

Unlike the C-rank and B-rank Gates, there weren't any Players in the area where the S-rank Gate was located. Instead of Players, many soldiers were guarding the area around the Gate.

'It appears that the 1st Squadron of the Hwarang Corps is stationed here.'

The Hwarang Corps was a group of Players owned by the government. Their 1st and 2nd Squadrons monitored the S-rank Gate, ensuring no monsters had escaped from it.

Kang-Woo showed the access permit to a member of the Hwarang Corps guarding the Gate.

"Access confirmed," the Hwarang Corps member said.

After entering the Gate, Kang-Woo exclaimed in surprise, "Wow!"

Inside the Gate, there was a huge lake and a bunch of tall rocks surrounding it. The place was so beautiful that it could be used as a vacation spot. However, that was only if S-rank monsters didn't appear in it.

"This place is huge."

The inside of the Gate was so vast that you couldn't see where it ended. Kang-Woo couldn't tell how big the area was, but it was way bigger than the spaces inside the other Gates he had been to.

'I believe she said it's as big as Seoul.'

Kang-Woo thought about the information he had heard from Yeon-Joo and used the Authority of the Beholder. He went to a place that was hidden between stone walls to avoid being seen by monsters and prepared for the summoning.

'A demonic beast...'

Kang-Woo thought of the Buer he had recently hunted.

The physical characteristics of demonic beasts were often of a higher level than those of the demons that lived in the same level of Hell. Despite their strength, demonic beasts were still inferior to demons, as they lacked the intellect that demons possessed. Similarly on Earth, humans were physically weaker than lions and tigers, but they were still the ruling species.

'In consideration of that, being able to control demonic beasts is a huge merit.'

If a demonic beast obeyed Kang-Woo's will, their fatal flaw of not having intellect would no longer be an issue.

'My goal is to get a Cerberus.'

The Cerberus was the strongest demonic beast that lived in the Third Hell. Even demons of the Fourth or Fifth Hells didn't dare to fight against it.

"Let's begin."

Kang-Woo closed his eyes and concentrated.

Whirl!!!

Powerful demonic energy began leaking out from his body. Kang-Woo pulled out all the demonic energy he could use at the moment.

"Huu, huu."

He breathed deeply as cold sweat dripped from his forehead. There was a strong wind current around him because of the demonic energy he was emitting.

Crack!!

Unable to handle the demonic energy, the ground began to crack like dry ground in a drought. A split ran right underneath Kang-Woo.

'Now!'

The moment that his demonic energy peaked, Kang-Woo used all of it to activate his Trait.

Riiing.

[Activating the Fifth Awakening Trait: Demonic Beast Summoning (Rank: S).]

[Creating a Rift for the summoning.]

As the blue message windows appeared, a Rift formed in the air, fracturing the space like glass being broken. The Rift grew in size, and finally, a blue Gate that was about twenty meters tall appeared.

"Blue...?" Kang-Woo was surprised.

Gates were usually colored white, gray, or black. He had never heard of nor seen a blue Gate before.

'Did it fail?'

Kang-Woo looked at the Gate with a frown.

However, the Gate was still absorbing his demonic energy, and he hadn't gotten a message window saying that the summoning had failed.

Riiing.

[You have successfully created a Rift necessary for summoning.]

[A deeper Rift has been created due to the influence of the Demonic Energy within the Ten Thousand Demon Core (Rank: ???).]

[A connection to another world could not be obstructed due to the impairment of the Gaia System's functions.]

[A dimensional Gate leading to the Continent of Aernor has been opened.]

"What...?"

Kang-Woo frowned.

'Where's this Continent of Aernor?'

His expression hardened after reading words he couldn't comprehend.

[Summoning a demonic beast.]

A blinding light shot out of the huge blue Gate, filling the entire area. The light gradually faded, and Kang-Woo saw the demonic beast that he'd summoned.

"What the...?" he muttered.

The demonic beast had black scales, two wings on its back, and scarlet reptilian eyes.

"A dragon?"

It was a giant dragon that was over twenty meters tall.

Riiing.

[You have successfully summoned a demonic beast!]

[The daughter of Demonic Dragon Kargath, dragon hatchling Echidna (Rank: S) has been registered as your summoned beast.]

[The summoned beast has recognized the Player Oh Kang-Woo as its master, but the summoned beast may retaliate against its master if its fidelity drops.]

"..." Kang-Woo looked at the message window with his mouth closed.

Then, he looked at the summoned beast, Echidna, and frowned. However, he wasn't frowning because a dragon hatchling had become his summoned beast but because of the dragon hatchling's current state.

[Huff, huff...]

It seemed like the hatchling was about to stop breathing at any moment. There were gaps across its scales as if they had been slashed open by a sharp blade, and in those gaps, Kang-Woo saw red flesh. Echidna, who had injuries all over its body, was bleeding profusely.

'What happened to it?'

The demonic beast that Kang-Woo had summoned was about to die.

He walked toward Echidna.

Tap, tap, tap.

At that moment, other people walked out of the Gate that Echidna had been summoned from.

"Huh...?" Kang-Woo was confused to see people appear from the Gate that he'd made.

There were five of them in total, and they were covered in dust as if they'd been fighting just moments before.

!" The blond man leading the group waved his hands at Kang-Woo.

'What is he saying?' Kang-Woo frowned after hearing the people scream in a language that he didn't understand.

He used the Authority of Language and now understood the language that had seemed alien to him at first.

"It's dangerous! Stay away from that evil demonic dragon!"

After hearing the blond young man's scream, Kang-Woo became even more confused.

'Who are these guys?'

Chapter 47 - Echidna (3)

'Who are these guys?'

Oh Kang-Woo stared at the guy waving his hands at him.

'Are they foreign Players?'

The guy waving at Kang-Woo had blond hair that reached his waist. He looked like a typical handsome Caucasian man with golden armor and a sword that was too luxurious to even look at. It was unlikely that these were ordinary people.

'No, wait.'

Kang-Woo's expression stiffened after looking at the other party members behind the blond man. They were each carrying a hammer, bow, shield, and staff. There wasn't anything off about the man with a shield or the brown-haired woman with a staff, but there was a problem with the short person wielding a hammer and the blonde woman wielding a bow.

'A dwarf and an elf?'

Even if it was possible for the dwarf to be a little person with a round body that made it look like he would roll over if he were hit, the blond woman with long pointed ears had an appearance that only an elf could have.

'They look like a party straight out of a fantasy novel.'

Kang-Woo looked at them with a troubled expression.

The young blond man in the lead walked toward Kang-Woo and shouted, "Kurgh! H-Hurry!"

"Calm down, Reynald!" The elf archer stopped the young blond man.

"Look at that demonic dragon. It's already about to die."

"Ah..."

"It won't be able to hurt anyone else."

"Fuu, that's a relief." The blond young man sighed in relief after regaining his rationality.

"Who are you?" Kang-Woo asked them using the Authority of Language.

"I am the third prince of the Arnan Empire, Reynald von Arnan," the young blond man answered kindly.

"Arnan Empire?"

"Yes. And you are...?"

Kang-Woo looked at them in confusion, unable to understand what was happening.

Thoughts of the message stating a Gate had connected with the Continent of Aernor and Reynald's mention of the Arnan Empire swirled around in Kang-Woo's mind.

'Are they really people from another world?'

There weren't many other possible conclusions he could come to based on those two pieces of information. A Gate that led to the Continent of Aernor had opened, and his summoned beast had

appeared from it along with a few other people. Furthermore, a dwarf and an elf were among them. Kang-Woo was starting to believe that they were indeed people from another world.

[Hurgh. Urghhh.]

While Kang-Woo was confused, Echidna was moaning in pain.

Kang-Woo turned around and saw that Echidna, who was looking at him, was struggling to breathe.

"Damn."

Kang-Woo frowned after realizing that the demonic beast he had waited for a week to summon might die.

'I have to treat it.'

If he lost his summoned beast, then he would have to wait another three months before he could summon another one.

'I can't let that happen.'

Three months wasn't a long time, and Kang-Woo could do without a summoned beast. However, he refused to lose his summoned beast in such a stupid way.

Kang-Woo walked toward Echidna and placed his hands on its giant body.

"W-Wait!" Reynald shouted as he approached Kang-Woo. "What are you doing?!"

Kang-Woo turned his head around to him and said, "This is my summoned beast. I'm not sure why you're trying to kill it, but I can't let it die."

"Kuh! You bastard!"

"So, you're this demonic dragon's master!"

Reynald and his party members drew their weapons and aimed them at Kang-Woo.

Nonetheless, Kang-Woo ignored them and placed his hand on one of Echidna's wounds.

'It's bleeding too much.'

A lot of blood was flowing out of the parted scales.

Kang-Woo used the Authority of Blades and created a small blade. Then he cut the palm of his hands.

'Authority of Regeneration.'

Blood ran down the palm of his hand. The drops of blood that were imbued with the Authority of Regeneration seeped into Echidna's wound.

[Huff... Huff... Wh-Who are you?]

Echidna's wounds quickly started to close. The dragon that had collapsed on the ground looked at Kang-Woo.

She realized something and said in a relieved voice, [Ah... You must be my master.]

Tears dropped from the dragon hatchling's eyes, which were as large as an adult human.

[I'm sorry... for appearing in such a state.]

"..."

Kang-Woo could hear Echidna's voice inside his head, and he gazed at her with a stiff expression.

'I'm not sure what's going on, but...'

Just like what was mentioned in the message window, it seemed like Echidna thought of him as her master.

'And this current situation...'

Kang-Woo looked at Reynald's party, who were staring at him warily with their weapons brandished. It wasn't hard to guess who had hurt Echidna.

"Reveal your identity, you bastard!"

"I'm gonna ask you something," Kang-Woo said.

After discovering that Reynald's party had almost killed his summoned beast, Kang-Woo stopped talking to them politely. He couldn't waste three months waiting to summon another demonic beast, so he couldn't let Echidna die.

It was clear that the bloodlust that Reynald's party emitted was directed at Echidna. This meant that Kang-Woo's goal was opposite to theirs, and the two parties would end up fighting for sure. So, Kang-Woo had no reason to be polite to an enemy.

"Why are you trying to kill Echidna?"

"It's an evil demonic dragon!"

"What did she do exactly?"

Kang-Woo tried to converse with Reynald's party. To be precise, he was trying to buy much-needed time to heal Echidna completely.

'I also want to understand the current situation better.'

All he had wanted to do was summon a high-ranking demonic beast from Hell, but things had suddenly turned complicated with the appearance of a demonic dragon and people from another world.

"It caused a terrible drought and plague! Because of that demonic dragon's magic, many innocent people have lost their lives! Was it perhaps you who commanded it to do that?" Reynald looked at Kang-Woo with eyes full of resentment.

'Drought and plague...?' Kang-Woo pondered.

It was a somewhat vague explanation.

[I told you that... it wasn't me...]

"Shut up! You evil demonic dragon! Who else could it be but you?!" Reynald shouted angrily after hearing Echidna's words.

Kang-Woo looked at Reynald in disbelief.

'It was probably just a natural disaster, you moron.'

He thought of the witch hunts that had taken place in the Middle Ages—that horrible period in history when innocent women had been thought to be the causes of plagues and droughts and therefore put to death.

'Well, I don't know who's telling the truth.'

It wasn't impossible that someone might have caused plagues and droughts on purpose, just as Reynald had said. The world that Reynald lived in was one where magic existed, so Kang-Woo couldn't say for sure that those events were just natural disasters.

'But...'

Kang-Woo looked at Echidna, who was breathing heavily.

Regardless, he was sure that it wasn't Echidna who had caused them. He didn't think that because of his trust in Echidna, whom he had met only a few minutes ago.

'How could she have possibly caused a drought?'

It may have been possible for her to cause a plague. However, for a being to cause drought, it needed to be powerful enough to bend the atmosphere to its will. If there were a being who could do that, that meant that they could interfere in the destiny of a world. In other words, it meant they would have the power to destroy an entire world. There was no way that Echidna could do something that only those who possessed power on par with the seven princes of Hell could pull off.

"Did you try to kill Echidna because of such a simple thing?"

"Simple?! Do you have any idea how many innocent people are suffering and have died because of the drought?!"

"How would I know something like that?"

"I must kill the demonic dragon to save them!" Reynald shouted with a voice filled with a sense of justice.

Kang-Woo looked at Reynald with narrowed eyes.

'I don't like this dumbass.'

Reynald was the type of person that Kang-Woo hated the most. He was a stubborn piece of shit who charged forward blindly in the name of justice—in other words, a dumbass who couldn't be reasoned with.

[Huff, huff.]

Echidna's breathing was starting to stabilize thanks to the Authority of Regeneration. The wound from where blood had been spewing out was closing swiftly.

'It seems like I've bought enough time,' Kang-Woo thought.

It would take some more time to fully heal since the wound was so deep, but it seemed like her life wasn't in danger anymore.

'A summoned beast, huh?'

Kang-Woo looked down at Echidna, whose body was over twenty meters long. He had begun the summoning hoping to get a Cerberus, but things had gone in an extremely weird direction. Still, the result wasn't bad.

'She's a dragon, after all.'

Echidna was only a dragon hatchling, but it was still amazing that Kang-Woo would be able to use a dragon as a summoned beast. She might be a bit weaker than a Cerberus at present, but the growth potential of a dragon couldn't be compared to that of a Cerberus.

"I'm sorry, but I can't let you kill Echidna. She's my summoned beast," Kang-Woo stated.

He took his hand off Echidna and turned toward Reynald.

Of course, Kang-Woo wasn't completely certain as to whether Echidna had caused the plague and drought. Even if it was impossible for her to cause the drought, she might have caused the plague somehow. So, Reynald could actually be a hero, and Echidna could really be an evil being that had massacred innocent people.

'But that doesn't matter.'

What mattered to Kang-Woo was that Echidna was worth having as a summoned beast. He would use everyone that could benefit him and eliminate everything that could harm him. It didn't matter to him whether Echidna was evil, as she was valuable to him. Kang-Woo wasn't stupid enough to throw away a winning lottery ticket.

Reynald pointed his sword toward Kang-Woo and yelled in a voice filled with a strong sense of justice, "Vile demon!"

Kang-Woo smirked. "I actually am a demon, man."

Chapter 48 - Echidna (4)

"I knew it! So, you really are a demon!" Reynald exclaimed. He glared at Oh Kang-Woo and clenched his sword even tighter after hearing Kang-Woo refer to himself as a demon. "For the suffering citizens of the Arnan Empire! For the crying children! I, Reynald von Arnan, will punish you!"

Golden mana spurted out of his body. His fluttering golden hair made it seem like a scene from a film.

The middle-aged man with a shield and the dwarf with a hammer stepped forward.

"Haha! All right, Reynald! What's a demon when we've defeated a demonic dragon?"

"Kekeke, you'll have to treat me to barrels of black beer after this, kid."

The dwarf and the middle-aged man said their piece while looking at Reynald, who was burning with a desire for justice. Meanwhile, the brown-haired woman gazed at Reynald with blushed cheeks.

The elf beside Reynald sighed and said, "Sigh, you seriously are a piece of work. We're going against a demon. Are you sure you can do this, Reynald?"

"It isn't a matter of whether I can do it or not! I have to do it!" Reynald declared and raised his sword toward the sky.

'Damn, man. Nice fucking lines,' Kang-Woo thought.

He looked in disbelief at Reynald, who was burning with passion. Kang-Woo felt embarrassed just by looking at him.

'Why are they acting like this? Are they high on something?'

Kang-Woo couldn't understand the reason for their fervor.

"Haap!" Reynald took a powerful step forward and swung his sword, aiming for Kang-Woo.

A stream of golden sword energy shot toward Kang-Woo at an incredible speed, and Kang-Woo swung his black blade at it.

Boom!!

The golden sword energy was cut in half and exploded in mid-air, causing the ground around it to be upturned as if a bomb had gone off.

'This isn't an attack that I can just block.'

Kang-Woo frowned. He had gotten caught in the explosion. He hadn't been expecting the sword energy to explode when he cut it in half.

"Having equipment sure is nice."

Normally, he would've been hurt a bit by such an explosion. Nevertheless, Kang-Woo didn't receive any damage thanks to the Epic-grade equipment that he'd rented and the expensive Gargoyle Armor he had obtained from Mun Yeong-Ho. Kang-Woo thought with satisfaction that he had made the right decision to acquire the equipment.

Then he turned his gaze toward Reynald's party.

Kang-Woo said, "Okay, since they attacked first..."

It was his turn to strike back.

Whiir.

'Authority of Explosion.'

Black smoke gathered in Kang-Woo's hand, forming a sphere of demonic energy that caused explosions. Then he clenched it lightly.

'Scorching Rain.'

This was a technique that he had invented by modifying the Authority of Explosion, which only made explosive spheres.

The sphere, which was as big as a basketball, was split into smaller spheres the size of billiard balls. Kang-Woo lightly swung his hand and threw the small spheres at Reynald's party.

"I'll block them!" the middle-aged man shouted. He ran to the front and raised his shield. "Iron Wall!"

A blue barrier appeared in front of his shield.

Despite that, Kang-Woo just smirked and said, "Fall."

Boom!!

"Kurgh!!"

The dozens of balls flying toward the middle-aged man changed their trajectory and fell straight to the ground instead. The bombs exploded, and the shockwave sent the middle-aged man flying backward.

"Hans!" Reynald shouted the name of the middle-aged man. Then he glared at Kang-Woo. "How dare you!"

'You were the one who attacked me first, dumbass,' Kang-Woo thought.

If someone were to see this situation, they would probably think that Reynald's party had been ambushed. Kang-Woo couldn't believe how enraged Reynald was.

"I won't forgive you!" Reynald yelled.

"I won't forgive you either, man," Kang-woo replied.

It seemed like Reynald had forgotten that he had attacked first, and Kang-Woo didn't like Reynald's attitude at all.

Kang-Woo stomped the ground and dashed toward Reynald.

"Arnan Imperial Sword Technique, First Movement! Blade Storm!" Reynald shouted.

'Why does everyone shout the names of their techniques?' Kang-Woo remarked inwardly.

Judging by the name of Reynald's technique, it seemed like a wide-area attack.

'Then I'll get through it with the minimum amount of defense.'

With a sharp gaze, Kang-Woo used the Authority of Invulnerability.

Crash!

Just as its name indicated, Reynald's technique was a wide-area attack that created a storm of blades. Kang-Woo lowered his stance to charge through the attack and then used the momentum to kick Reynald's stomach.

Smash!!

"Kurgh!!"

"Reynald!"

"You bastard!!"

Upon seeing Reynald get pushed back by the kick, the dwarf and elf attacked Kang-Woo. Nonetheless, Kang-Woo casually leaned back and dodged the three arrows flying in his direction. Then he extended his hand toward the dwarf.

'Authority of Shattering Air.'

Boom!

"Kurggghhh!"

The dwarf was hit with a compressed demonic energy bullet, and the blast flung him backward with blood spurting out from his mouth. Kang-Woo walked toward the dwarf to finish him off.

"Fire Blast!"

At that moment, flames were shot toward Kang-Woo. The brown-haired woman with a staff had launched a magic attack at him. The attack was a bit too powerful for Kang-Woo to bear with just his equipment, so he gave up on attacking the dwarf and fell back.

"Arrggghhh!!" Reynald, who had been flung backward after being kicked in the stomach, stood up and once again charged toward Kang-Woo.

He exuded a surge of golden energy, and his surroundings shook like there was an earthquake.

'He's strong. I'll give him that,' Kang-Woo thought while watching Reynald charge over.

Reynald was stronger than Mun Yeong-Ho. He would probably be able to defeat a Buer all by himself.

"Haap!"

Clang! Clang!

Kang-Woo and Reynald clashed. Their black and golden energies entangled with each other in midair and dealt a huge amount of destruction to their surroundings.

"Haaaap!"

Boom!

The golden sword energy exploded once again, pushing Kang-Woo backward.

"Fuuu! Did you see that, vile demon?!"

"..." Kang-Woo scowled.

It appeared that he didn't like the fact that he had been pushed back.

'This would've been a bit dangerous if I hadn't already achieved my Fifth Awakening.'

Reynald was more skillful than Kang-Woo had initially thought. Just based on pure power, he might even be stronger than Kang-Woo currently.

'It's no wonder he was able to defeat a dragon hatchling.'

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue while thinking of Echidna, whom Reynald had driven to the brink of death.

'But...'

Kang-Woo had a sharp gaze.

Reynald was certainly strong.

'But that's all.'

Kang-Woo charged toward Reynald and shouted, "Blade Slash!"

"Kuh!"

After hearing Kang-Woo's shout, Reynald raised his sword and took a defensive stance. However, unlike his shout, Kang-Woo lowered his body and dealt a low kick to Reynald's thigh.

Smash!

"Gaaaaahhhh!!" Reynald screamed in pain while grabbing his right leg at the spot where he'd been kicked.

"Y-You vile demon! Y-You clearly said 'Blade Slash'..." Reynald looked at Kang-Woo in disbelief.

'No, you're just stupid.'

Only an idiot would tell an opponent what attack they were about to use. The only exception was if it were an attack that required an incantation to use. Otherwise, it was best to hide as much information from the opponent about the attack as possible.

"R-Reynald!"

"Ugh... A-All of you, run! He's too strong!"

"We can't do that! How could we just leave you behind?!"

"Just go!" Reynald shouted with tears flowing from his eyes.

"Stop being so damn overdramatic," Kang-Woo said.

After seeing Reynald's party act as if they were in the middle of a movie, Kang-Woo laughed and walked toward them.

"You..." Reynald glared at him intensely.

Kang-Woo continued approaching Reynald while calmly taking in his anger.

'Well, the fight is already over.'

For a warrior, their legs were their lifeline. It was still possible to fight even if they lost an arm or had fractured ribs, but an injured leg was a whole other story. A warrior who couldn't move from his spot was nothing but an idiot carrying a weapon.

"Kurgh. H-Hurry up and run!!" Reynald yelled again.

He wasn't stupid enough to be unaware of the issue with his current condition, so he kept begging his party members to run away. Reynald knew better than anyone else how powerless a warrior that couldn't move from his spot was.

'Let's finish this.'

Kang-Woo raised his blade, which was created with the Authority of Blades, and stared at Reynald with his eyes sunken.

There wasn't any compassion or anger in Kang-Woo's eyes. To him, a battle had always been nothing more than a means to survive. Adding emotions to such an act was a luxury he could not afford.

"P-Please wait!"

"Reina...?"

At that moment, the brown-haired woman came running and embraced Reynald.

She shouted at Kang-Woo while crying, "I-I beg of you! Please let Reynald live! If he dies, the citizens of Arnan will lose all hope!"

"..."

"And... he's the person that I love."

"Reina..." Reynald murmured.

Reina caressed Reynald's cheek with tears in her eyes. "I'm sorry for confessing in such a way, Reynald. B-But... I thought I wouldn't get another chance to say it."

She turned her head toward Kang-Woo and said, "I'll give you my life. I-I'll do anything you ask! So, please! Let Reynald live!"

Kang-Woo had kept his mouth shut while listening to Reina's plea. Then he burst into laughter. "Enough of this shitshow."

Kang-Woo walked toward Reina and Reynald.

"What? If he dies, the citizens of Arnan will lose all hope...? Do you expect me to give a shit? What does that have to do with me? First of all, you guys are the ones who attacked me first. Would you let me live if our roles were reversed? Huh?" Kang-Woo said calmly. "No, right? There's no way you would. All of you brandished your weapons. If you were prepared to kill, you should have also been prepared to die."

Kang-Woo extended his hands toward Reynald and Reina, who were in an embrace. Then he activated the Authority of Explosion. Strong demonic energy began gathering around the palm of his hand.

While watching the pair tremble in fear, Kang-Woo said, "Save the pity show for TV, dickheads."

Chapter 49 - Echidna (5)

"N-No..." Reina muttered.

"You wicked filth!" Reynald exclaimed in frustration.

'But why?' Oh Kang-Woo wondered.

He had won fair and square. It was true that he'd shouted a fake technique name to confuse the opponent, but that had only worked because Reynald was stupid.

'So, what's wicked and filthy about me?'

The five of them were the ones who were truly wicked considering they had ganged up on Kang-Woo.

'Is this how demon kings in comics feel after losing to the hero's party?'

Kang-Woo now understood the frustration of a demon king losing to the hero's party. He thought there wasn't anything more to consider and was about to use the Authority of Explosions on Reynald's party.

Then he said, "Oh, right."

“What are you...”

"C-Could it be...?"

Kang-Woo was about to finish them off, but he suddenly stopped. The demonic energy sphere disappeared from his hand, instilling hope into Reina and Reynald.

"It would be a shame if your equipment was damaged," Kang-Woo remarked.

Even at a glance, it was obvious that Reynald's equipment was worth quite a lot of money. Kang-Woo didn't want to use any of the equipment because they were too extravagant, but he thought he'd be able to sell them to Cha Yeon-Joo for a considerable sum of money.

'Especially that golden sword.'

There was a chance that Reynald's sword, which was capable of shooting sword energy that exploded like a bomb, was Legendary-grade.

'How much money could I get for something like that?'

Kang-Woo gulped while looking at Reynald's items.

"Kuh! Y-You evil—!" Reynald trembled in anger upon finding out that Kang-Woo was willing to rip equipment off his corpse.

Of course, Kang-Woo didn't care about how Reynald felt about that, so he went ahead and created a long spear using the Authority of Dark Spears.

'It should be enough to use this to pierce his neck.'

Kang-Woo was approaching Reynald while thinking that when suddenly...

Riiing.

[Other beings besides the summoned beast have crossed the Gate.]

[Casting out the otherworldly beings through the Gaia System.]

"Huh?!" Kang-Woo uttered in shock.

Reynald and his party members turned opaque just as those messages appeared before Kang-Woo. He quickly tried to pierce Reynald with the spear, but it just passed through Reynald's opaque head and pierced the ground.

"Fuck!" Kang-Woo cursed.

He frowned while looking at the blue message window.

'Why now?!'

It had initially said that the connection to another world couldn't be obstructed due to the impairment of the Gaia System. Yet, the system was suddenly casting Reynald's party out now.

Kang-Woo smashed the ground in anger, but in the end, he could only watch helplessly as Reynald's party disappeared.

Riiing.

[The Gaia System has successfully cast out the otherworldly beings.]

"Haaa..." Kang-Woo sighed.

'Wait.'

Kang-Woo anxiously turned to where Echidna was. He realized that she might have been cast out as well because she was also an otherworldly entity.

"Phew." Kang-Woo let out a sigh of relief after seeing that Echidna was still on the ground staring at him.

Thankfully, Echidna hadn't returned to her original world.

'Just what in the world is the Gaia System?'

Kang-Woo thought of the words Gaia System, which he'd first seen when he initially appeared on Earth.

'Is it some sort of protective barrier... that defends against otherworldly invasions?'

Perhaps the Gaia System was something like the Earth's atmosphere, which prevents asteroids from falling on Earth. That was his best conclusion with the information he had currently.

'It said that the Gaia System was impaired.'

When the Gate that led to the continent of Aernor opened earlier, it said that a connection to another world had failed to be obstructed due to the impairment of the Gaia System's functions.

'Does it have something to do with why demonic beasts have been appearing?'

Demonic beasts—or variant monsters, which was what the people of Earth called them—had begun to appear only recently. In terms of the time frame...

"Hm?"

At that moment, a thought crossed Kang-Woo's mind.

'The time when the demonic beasts started to appear is similar to when I returned to Earth.'

It was highly likely that the demonic beasts began appearing due to the impairment of the Gaia System.

"That means..." Kang-Woo laughed in disbelief. "Am I the one who damaged the Gaia System?"

It made sense, considering the timeline of when the demonic beasts started to appear.

"Hah..." Kang-Woo put his hand on his head with a conflicted expression.

He felt troubled once he realized that he was the reason why demonic beasts of Hell had begun appearing on Earth.

'Is there a way to restore the Gaia System?'

The best thing he could do in this situation was to restore the impaired Gaia System. However, he didn't know exactly what and where the Gaia System was, much less how to find a way to restore it.

'The only thing I can do at this moment is hunt as many demonic beasts as possible.'

It was like pouring water into a bottomless jar, but there was nothing else he could do about it at present. He concluded this train of thought thinking that he should ask Yeon-Joo about the Gaia System.

Then he walked over to Echidna.

"Stay down for a bit. I'll finish treating you," Kang-Woo said.

What he had done previously was just first aid. For Echidna to be able to move again freely, he needed to treat her for a bit longer.

Kang-Woo cut the palm of his hand again and let his blood drip into Echidna's largest wound.

Echidna struggled to turn her head toward Kang-Woo.

[I didn't do anything,] she said. [I didn't cause droughts or spread plagues.]

"I see."

Tears flowed down Echidna's gigantic eyes.

[I told them it wasn't me. I told them I didn't do it, but... no one believed me.]

"..."

[Do you believe me?] Echidna's voice trembled anxiously.

She had the eyes of a child who had been abandoned by her parents and was just asking to be loved.

Kang-Woo knew those eyes.

'I was also like that.'

He had been abandoned by his parents when he was a kid. From the moment he was able to form thoughts, he'd already been living in an orphanage, and that's where he grew up.

Kang-Woo had never thought that he would like to meet his birth parents or be embraced by them. However, he did want to receive someone's love. He wanted to be protected and acknowledged for his existence.

Seeing Echidna reminded him of his past self.

""Save the pity show for TV, dickheads," my ass.'

Kang-Woo smiled bitterly with a tingling heart. The harsh words that he had said to Reynald had returned to stab him. He couldn't be more of a hypocrite.

'Well, my answer is already set in stone.'

Echidna was Kang-Woo's important summoned beast, and they would be together from now on. No, even if it wasn't because of that, his answer had already been decided from the start.

"I believe you."

[...]

"Even if the rest of the world condemns you, I will believe in you."

Just like how one had to be resolved to die when entering a battle, being a master also had its corresponding responsibilities. Kang-Woo had no intention of dodging or ignoring those responsibilities. He wasn't planning on using his summoned beast as a disposable tool.

[You...] Echidna looked at Kang-Woo with a wavering gaze.

A heavy silence fell between them.

In the meantime, Kang-Woo kept treating Echidna. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead.

'Maybe I overdid it a bit today.'

He had summoned a demonic beast and been in a battle, and now he was even treating someone. Kang-Woo had obtained quite a lot of demonic energy after getting his Fifth Awakening, but he had performed several taxing tasks in succession.

'I want to go home and rest.'

It was the first time he'd wanted to rest so badly.

"That aside..."

Kang-Woo looked at Echidna, who was over twenty meters long.

'How am I supposed to take her out of here?'

If he took her out in this state, it would cause mass panic. In the worst-case scenario, the Hwarang Corps could attack her.

'It doesn't seem like something that could be resolved with an explanation either.'

If Echidna were only as big as a person, Kang-Woo would be able to walk out with her just by saying she was his summoned beast.

'I've heard of Players that use summoned beasts.'

Even still, Echidna was far too big. There was no way the Hwarang Corps would let her be unless they were insane.

"Echidna, can you modify your body size?"

[Modify?]

"Yeah, as small as possible."

Dragons in fantasy stories usually had a polymorph ability. Kang-Woo looked at her expectantly.

[I can.]

'Nice!'

Kang-Woo smiled, satisfied at her answer.

"Then become as small as possible right now."

[Okay.]

Echidna was almost fully healed, so she nodded in agreement and chanted in a language that Kang-Woo couldn't understand.

Whish!

A bright light covered Echidna, and she shrank.

"Whoa."

Kang-Woo's eyes shone while looking at Echidna, who was now only thirty centimeters long.

'Cute.'

The dragon hatchling appeared cute now that its giant dragon body had shrunk to about 30 centimeters. Rather than a summoned beast, Echidna seemed like a pet.

'I wonder if she can transform into a human?'

Kang-Woo, who had actually hoped for her to transform into a human, felt slightly disappointed. Nevertheless, he lifted her and held her in his arms.

[It's okay. I can fly.]

"Stay still. Your wounds still haven't fully healed."

After saying that, Kang-Woo turned to the Gate's exit while carrying Echidna.

[...] Echidna stared at Kang-Woo silently for a moment. Then she said cautiously, [You.]

"Hmm?"

[Name. Tell me your name.]

"Oh, right. I haven't told you my name yet."

It was then that Kang-Woo realized that he hadn't introduced himself yet.

"Oh Kang-Woo. My name is Oh Kang-Woo."

[Oh Kang-Woo...] Echidna, who was in Kang-Woo's arms, kept mumbling his name. [I'll remember it.]

"Hmm?"

[Your name. I swear I'll never forget it,] Echidna stated in a determined voice.

Kang-Woo nodded with a smile.

Chapter 50 - Your Honor, I'm Innocent (1)

Vroom.

"So, what kind of world is the Continent of Aernor?" Oh Kang-Woo asked Echidna while driving back to his place.

Echidna was sitting on his lap. Kang-Woo had initially offered her the passenger's seat, but she didn't budge from his lap.

'Well, it's not like she's bothering me.'

Because Echidna had become so small, she was more cute than a bother.

[I'm not sure what you mean.] Echidna seemed troubled by Kang-Woo's question.

Her reaction was understandable. It was probably similar to asking someone from Earth what Earth was like.

"Hmm... What kind of nations there are, what kind of people live there, how they live—stuff like that."

[Okay. First, the largest nation is the Arnan Empire. Then...]

Echidna's explanation continued for quite a while.

The Continent of Aernor that she was describing was a place similar to a world in medieval fantasy stories, where people used swords and magic. It was a world in which fairies, monsters, and dragons existed.

'In that case, do the monsters in Gates come from Aernor?'

Monsters like Goblins and Trolls, which appeared in the Gates, did not exist in Hell. They were monsters that used the power of mana stones to move, rather than demonic energy.

At first, Kang-Woo thought the monsters in the Gates were weak compared to demonic beasts like the Hellhound or Buer, but that wasn't necessarily true.

'A demonic beast like the Buer shouldn't be appearing in a B-rank Gate in the first place.'

If the Buer had appeared in an A-rank Gate, the situation wouldn't have been as chaotic.

'Monsters aren't weak. The monsters in S-rank Gates are proof of that.'

Kang-Woo couldn't ignore them just because they weren't demonic beasts.

"Tell me about yourself too, Echidna," Kang-Woo requested while turning the steering wheel.

[Me...?]

"Yeah. Stuff like how your life was like, and how you got involved with Reynald."

[I... used to live with my dad. But one day, he left me and disappeared.]

"He disappeared?"

[Yeah. After that, I spent all day reading in my lair until someone suddenly entered it...]

"And that was Reynald?"

Echidna nodded.

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue and said, "You must have been lonely."

[Yeah... I was so lonely,] Echidna replied in a depressed voice.

Kang-Woo didn't really understand how she felt because he didn't know what loneliness felt like.

'There hasn't been a time when I wasn't lonely.'

He had lived alone since he was born, so his sense of what loneliness meant to others had dulled considerably because being alone was normal for him.

"Then, how did you get summoned here?"

[While I was fighting Reynald, I felt like someone was calling me. Then a Gate suddenly appeared.]

"Hmm."

Kang-Woo still wasn't sure what the mechanism for the summoning was, but it seemed like the reason wasn't that she'd wished for it.

"We're here."

They eventually reached the shabby apartment complex where Kang-Woo lived with Han Seol-Ah.

[So, this is Kang-Woo's nest...]

"No. The word nest is a bit... To be honest, the apartment isn't even mine."

Kang-Woo smiled awkwardly and parked the car.

His car stood out quite a bit among the other more reasonably-priced domestic cars in the parking lot.

'Maybe I should just buy a place.'

He didn't intend to live apart from Seol-Ah and her mother, Kim Mi-Jeong. However, it couldn't be denied that their apartment was shabby and small. Seeing as Kang-Woo was now earning a lot, it seemed like a bad idea to move to a bigger place.

'Hopefully somewhere near the Red Rose Guild.'

Kang-Woo and Cha Yeon-Joo had become true allies. He was quite satisfied with their relationship and wanted to maintain it, so he thought moving closer to the Red Rose Guild's base would make it easier for him to do that.

'We could also go to the internet cafe together.'

Kang-Woo laughed as he recalled that time when Yeon-Joo flipped out.

"Let's go."

[Okay.]

Kang-Woo lifted Echidna and walked toward the apartment.

* * *

"Kyaaaaa!!" a scream rang out in the living room.

"So cuuute!!" Seol-Ah took Echidna from Kang-Woo and hugged her aggressively.

Echidna flapped her wings as she felt two big balls of flesh pressing against her.

[S-Save me, Kang-Woo!] Echidna called for Kang-Woo desperately.

Meanwhile, Kang-Woo gulped. 'I envy you.'

In Kang-Woo's eyes, Echidna was screaming out of pleasure.

[K-Kang-Woo...]

Of course, in reality, she was suffering.

"You said her name's Echidna, right? Haa... How can she be so cute~?" Seol-Ah shrieked elatedly.

"I didn't think that you'd have zero aversions to it," Kang-Woo said.

"Why would I be averse to such a cute summoned beast?" Seol-Ah looked at him confusedly.

Kang-Woo laughed. "She's still a monster."

"But she's cute! Cute things are justice!" Seol-Ah hugged Echidna even tighter.

Kang-Woo laughed upon seeing a side of Seol-Ah that he hadn't seen before.

[S-Save me...]

"Echidna is struggling, so why don't you let her go first?" Kang-Woo said.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I was too caught up in the moment," Seol-Ah replied.

Seol-Ah finally let Echidna go. As soon as Echidna was free, she flew toward Kang-Woo, hid behind him, and glared at Seol-Ah warily.

'I guess her strength also reduced along with her size,' Kang-Woo realized.

If Echidna had her original strength, there was no way Seol-Ah would've been able to keep hugging Echidna if she wanted to break free.

[Kang-Woo, that person is scary.]

"Well, she didn't have ill intentions, so don't be so wary of her."

Echidna was hiding behind Kang-Woo like a scared child. He found that cute and patted her head softly. Echidna closed her eyes and rubbed her head against his hand.

'She's cute.' Kang-Woo smiled and kept patting her.

He felt like his emotions, which had dried up after spending so many years in Hell, were finally returning to him.

"How have you been doing, Seol-Ah? Are your hunts going well?"

"Oh! Yes, of course. We're leveling up super quickly, so we'll be getting our Third Awakening soon. Then we'll be able to move on to C-rank Gates."

"That's good to hear," Kang-Woo said while nodding.

He wasn't surprised by Seol-Ah's abnormally fast leveling speed.

'After all, Kim Si-Hun is with her.'

Kim Si-Hun, the Player who had the overpowered SSS-rank Trait, was leading the party, so it was only natural that the rest of the party would also level up fast.

'Moreover, Tae-Soo and Seol-Ah are talented.'

Choi Eun-Bi, who was a ranged damage dealer, was also quite talented compared to an average Player. So, it would be strange if they took a long time to level up despite their great talent and Si-Hun helping them.

"To think that we'd level up so quickly... I was surprised. Fufu. This is all thanks to you, Kang-Woo."

"I didn't really do anything, though."

"What do you mean? You have no idea how much your feedback during our first hunt has helped us. And... if it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have even dreamed of living like this." Seol-Ah smiled, blushing slightly.

Seeing that smile made Kang-Woo happy.

'Wanting to be loved, huh...?'

He thought of his very distant past, which he had recalled when he met Echidna. The memories were from back when he was a child who craved love and affection.

'It's not a bad feeling.'

It felt nice to have someone give him such a blatant show of affection. Kang-Woo sat on the couch with an unfamiliar but warm feeling in his chest.

"Ah! Let's have a party to celebrate Echidna's addition to our family. Fufu, it's all on me today," Seol-Ah said.

"Are you sure?"

"I've been making lots of money in my hunts with Si-Hun, Tae-Soo, and Eun-Bi, so this much is nothing to me now," Seol-Ah replied while smiling brightly.

It seemed like the poverty that had continuously harassed her had disappeared somewhat.

'It also has to do with the fact that she doesn't have to associate with Han Tae-Hyun anymore, I guess.'

In any case, it was an irrefutable fact that Seol-Ah was now able to smile in a way that she had never been able to before.

After hearing that Seol-Ah was going to host a celebration party, Kang-Woo nodded and said, "Okay, then let's get us some kimchi st—"

"No kimchi stew."

"Wh-Why?" Kang-Woo looked at her with his feelings hurt.

Seol-Ah sighed and answered, "You've been having kimchi stew every single day lately."

"That's true."

"... Don't you get sick of it?"

"How could I ever?"

Would he ever get sick of kimchi stew? There's no way something like that would happen.

After seeing Kang-Woo's determined gaze, Seol-Ah put her hand on her forehead as if she was having a headache.

"Anyway, let's eat something a bit more extravagant today," she said.

"Extravagant?"

"Fufu. Ta-dah! Please take a look at this, Kang-Woo!" Seol-Ah excitedly showed him a pack with a golden tag on top of it. "It's Hanwoo[1] beef! It was on sale today, so I bought some!"

"Hanwoo..."

"Let's have some delicious grilled beef sirloin today~."

Seol-Ah took the pack of meat to the kitchen with a smile on her face.

Kang-Woo said disappointedly, "How about we add that into kimchi st—"

"That would be an insult to the beef. Understood, Kang-Woo?"

"... Yes." Kang-Woo lowered his head in sorrow.

* * *

"I should go to bed soon."

After enjoying the beef party, Kang-Woo lay on his bed with a tired expression. Echidna flew over to the bed.

"Was it delicious?"

[... It was pure bliss.]

Echidna trembled elatedly while thinking about the beef she had just eaten. Kang-Woo smiled, lifted her, and placed her on his chest.

"It's been a long day, so let's sleep."

[Okay.] Echidna nodded and curled up on Kang-Woo's chest.

She quickly fell asleep. It seemed like she was tired because she wasn't fully recovered yet.

'Now that I think about it... If Echidna had turned into a human, we wouldn't have been able to sleep together like this.'

Kang-Woo didn't care about that now, since she was like a large lizard. Nevertheless, Echidna was female, so it would have been a huge problem if she had turned into a human.

'Well, I guess this isn't so bad.'

After patting the sleeping Echidna for a bit, Kang-Woo closed his eyes. His accumulated fatigue soon guided him into slumber.

* * *

The next day, Kang-Woo woke up and opened his eyes because of the bright rays of sunlight shining into his room through the window.

"Hmm?"

Just then, he realized there was something heavy pressing down on his body.

'Is it Echidna?'

However, it was too heavy for it to be Echidna. After all, it felt like it weighed at least thirty kilograms.

Kang-Woo looked down and found a naked little girl, who had long jet-black hair, asleep with her head on his chest.

"The hell?" Kang-Woo stared at the little girl bewilderedly.

"Zzz... Zzz..." The little girl was deep in dreamland, but she was firmly gripping Kang-Woo's clothes.

'What's going on here?'

Kang-Woo's expression became stiff at the sight of the little girl, whom he'd never seen before, sleeping on his chest.

'Is this a dream?'