

## **M. in Hell 81**

Chapter 81: El Cuero (3)

"Woooooohhh!!!"

Three Giant Ogres ran toward them while roaring ferociously. Just the bodies of these five-meter-tall giants were weapons in and of themselves.

"They're as noisy as always."

However, not a single one of the people present was scared of Giant Ogres.

Cha Yeon-Joo frowned and raised her hand. Chains with sharp thorns poured out from her wrist.

Crack!

"Gaaaaahhhh!"

The chains engulfed the Giant Ogres.

"You're in the way."

Echidna opened her mouth. She let go of Oh Kang-Woo's clothes and drew out the demonic energy from within her. Black energy gathered and turned into a blazing ball of fire.

Fwoosh!

Three fireballs were shot, each of them flying toward a Giant Ogre.

The chained Giant Ogres struggled.

Then, Baek Hwa-Yeon, Goo Hyun-Mo, and Kang-Woo hopped on top of the Giant Ogres. Just like characters in a famous series about killing titans, they quickly moved behind the Giant Ogres' necks and sliced them.

Slash! Thud!

Dark red blood spouted, and the corpses of the Giant Ogres fell to the ground.

Hyun-Mo lightly landed on the ground and whistled.

"His name is Kang-Woo, right? I hear he's a rookie from the Red Rose Guild, but he's no joke. Wait, is he even a rookie?"

Kang-Woo was so skilled that it was a bit embarrassing to call him a rookie.

Hyun-Mo scanned Kang-Woo, his eyes shining. He thought that Kang-Woo was participating in the plan simply because of his intelligence, but after seeing how Kang-Woo had hunted the Giant Ogre, he realized he was wrong.

Hwa-Yeon said, "Mm... I'll explain about that Player later. You just need to know that he's as strong as Yeon-Joo."

"Eh? A-As strong as Ms. Cha Yeon-Joo?"

"It's a bit of a long story."

Hyun-Mo looked at Yeon-Joo with a confused expression. Seeing how she didn't deny it, Hyun-Mo surmised that Hwa-Yeon was telling the truth.

"Wha—How...?"

According to the rumors, it hadn't even been three months since he had become a Player. But how could a Player like that be as strong as one of Korea's top Rankers, Cha Yeon-Joo?

Hyun-Mo looked at Kang-Woo, wondering if he'd heard wrong, but he saw no reaction from him; it was as if Hwa-Yeon had said something obvious.

"I can see the lake," said Hwa-Yeon.

"It's quiet," Kang-Woo mentioned.

"The area around the lake is El Cuero's territory."

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes.

It was so silent that one wouldn't believe one was in the heart of the Gate. However, even though the surroundings were silent, they could hear the low sounds of booming steps.

Kang-Woo turned his head toward the place where he could hear the sound. He had seen the place while investigating the Gate in the past three days.

"This way."

"... Is that really going to work?" Yeon-Joo asked.

"Do you have a better idea?"

"Mmm... No."

Yeon-Joo looked at the giant rock next to the lake with an expression that made it seem her head was hurting.

Golems covered in green moss were walking around very slowly near the giant rock. They were Mountain Giants, the third monster that appeared in Suwon's S-rank Gate.

Mountain Giants were rarer than the other monsters in the Gate, and they would never attack unless attacked first. They were closer to spirits than monsters, and their bodies were made of stone rather than flesh and bone.

Perhaps because they were made of stone, El Cuero didn't think of them as food, so they were the only monsters that could wander around the lake.

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

"Got it."

"You know, right? The core of this strategy is you."

Yeon-Joo nodded with a heavy expression on her face. Dozens of chains spewed out from her bracelets as they shone red. While Yeon-Joo was getting ready for her part of the strategy, the others also had things to do.

"Let's also get started."

Kang-Woo lifted a portion of the chains that Yeon-Joo had created. Unlike the thorny ones she usually created, these chains had a smooth surface.

"..."

Yeon-Joo and Hyun-Mo nodded, their expressions nervous.

"Fuu."

They each took a deep breath.

One could feel the anxiety in the air.

Kang-Woo looked at the lake.

It was such a beautiful lake that one wouldn't think such a terrifying predator was hidden within it.

"Okay, then..."

He raised his foot and concentrated demonic energy onto it. Then, he stomped the ground with all his might.

SLAM!!!

He activated the Authority of Sonority.

A sound loud enough to cause one to momentarily lose their sense of hearing spread throughout the surface and into the lake.

Rumble!

"Here it comes!"

El Cuero's reaction was fast. The lake's surface rippled, and something giant came out of the water.

A giant stingray about thirty meters large sped across the lake at a frightening speed.

Swoosh!

"Echidna!"

"Okay!"

As El Cuero twisted its giant body, hundreds of poisonous needles about the size of a palm were shot toward them.

Echidna walked to the front and extended both arms, creating a black barrier made of demonic energy.

Patter!!

The needles rammed the barrier while making sounds similar to a rainstorm hitting a window.

Echidna frowned, and her thin hands trembled a bit.

"Advance!" Kang-Woo stepped forward. After passing through the shield created by Echidna, he used the Authority of the Sky and levitated.

"Haap!"

"Aaaaahhhh! This is crazy!"

Hwa-Yeon and Hyun-Mo grabbed the chains that Kang-Woo was holding. As Kang-Woo flew up, both of them also flew up with him.

All three of them had risen dozens of meters up into the sky in an instant. Hyun-Mo screamed.

"We're going down!" Kang-Woo shouted.

"I'm afraid of heeeeeeeights!"

Even while screaming in fear, Hyun-Mo held on to the chains for dear life.

Kang-Woo got on El Cuero's back.

"We have to drag it out before it goes back into the water!"

"Got it!"

They spoke without honorifics, but no one cared.

El Cuero thrashed around violently, and Hyun-Mo lost his balance and fell.

"Its back is so damn slippery!"

Hyun-Mo took out one of his short swords and stabbed El Cuero's back.

"Uoooooong!"

"Huh? Why does a stingray cry like that?!"

Even while complaining, he properly performed his part of the strategy. He grabbed one of the chains Kang-Woo had brought and stuck it into El Cuero's skin where he'd cut with his short sword.

"Haap!"

Slash!

It was the same for Hwa-Yeon.

While showing an impressive sense of balance, she swung her longsword covered in wind.

El Cuero's skin was cut.

She inserted her hand into where she had cut with the chain in her hand.

Blood spewed out of El Cuero's wounds. Red chains had been embedded into its body.

"Uooooooooo!!!"

El Cuero thrashed about.

Hwa-Yeon and Hyun-Mo, who had been working hard to embed chains into El Cuero, slipped and were slightly pushed back.

Kang-Woo levitated and avoided its thrashes altogether.

El Cuero stopped thrashing about and hunched over.

'It's trying to dive back into the water.'

The giant lake was the natural fortress where El Cuero was absolutely safe.

Kang-Woo dived into the water faster than El Cuero. His field of vision was distorted, and powerful water resistance engulfed him. Once inside the water, he moved toward El Cuero's stomach, where its giant mouth and gills were.

KRRGG!

Kang-Woo twisted his body in the water, and powerful demonic energy started to gather around his fist.

'Skybreaker.'

A gurgling sound came out of his mouth as he chanted under the water.

Kang-Woo extended his fist concentrated with demonic energy.

Boom!!

A huge fountain spewed out of the water as if a bomb had exploded. Within the fountain, El Cuero's body rose to the sky.

Considering that it had received a strong attack, it didn't seem to have suffered much damage.

Because the attack had been done under the water, Kang-Woo had not been able to step into the punch. He could not even use ten percent of his full power.

'Now!'

Kang-Woo glared at El Cuero. He kicked under the water and shot up into the air along with a massive shockwave. Enormous water pressure weighed him down.

"Uooooong!"

El Cuero flapped its fins while roaring gruesomely.

An enormous number of sparks flew out of its fins.

"Get off its back!" Kang-Woo exclaimed.

Hwa-Yeon and Hyun-Mo hurriedly jumped into the air.

An electric shock engulfed Kang-Woo.

Crackle!!

"Kuuuuurrrgghh!!"

The voltage was high enough to make one's vision go white.

Kang-Woo's face contorted heavily.

"Kang-Woo!"

A barrier, which Echidna created from a distance, covered Kang-Woo, and the effect of the electricity weakened.

'Authority of Freezing.'

The surface of the water froze in an instant.

El Cuero landed on the surface of the ice, but the ice couldn't withstand the weight of a monster over thirty meters large and started to crack.

Kang-Woo was waiting for that moment. He grabbed the chains even tighter and ran. Kang-Woo, who was charging toward El Cuero while running on the ice, threw himself toward the gills on its stomach.

Crush!

Dark red blood leaked from the gills that were forcibly spread open. The blood entered Kang-Woo's mouth, but he didn't care. He grabbed the chain and ripped apart the skin covering its body. Thanks to the Authority of Titanic Might, he forcibly tore apart El Cuero's flesh with just raw strength.

He dug deeper...

Kang-Woo tore apart as much of El Cuero's skin as possible and dug even deeper into El Cuero's body.

The monster thrashed about crazily.

His vision was dyed black due to all the blood. He couldn't see a thing, but he ignored it.

Even if he couldn't see, he could still move.

Kang-Woo moved forward by tearing through El Cuero's flesh.

Crack!

Kang-Woo had penetrated its body and come out from its back.

He wrapped the chain that he was holding around his hands and then laid down on El Cuero and grabbed on to it.

"Pull!" Kang-Woo shouted.

"Hold on tight!"

He could hear Yeon-Joo's shout from a distance.

Rumble!

While making a sound similar to that of an earthquake, El Cuero was dragged toward land.

Holding on to El Cuero's back, Kang-Woo looked toward Yeon-Joo.

Dozens of Mountain Giants wrapped in chains were chasing her.

"Good."

Kang-Woo smiled, covered in blood.

Chapter 82: El Cuero (4)

Slash!!

The sound of slicing water could be heard.

The splashing water washed away the blood on Oh Kang-Woo's body.

"Kuuuuurrghhh."

His hands holding on to El Cuero and the chains that he wrapped around himself were under immense pressure.

The force would have probably torn him apart if he wasn't using the Authority of Invulnerability and Titanic Might.

'Just a little more.'

He could see the Mountain Giants that were chasing Cha Yeon-Joo. They were pulling El Cuero to the surface.

Boom! Boom!

"UUOONNGG!!"

As El Cuero twisted its body, one of the Mountain Giants covered in chains lost its balance and fell. Although dozens of Mountain Giants were pulling, they were losing in terms of strength.

'El Cuero's strong, I'll give it that.'

Its strength matched—no, it surpassed its size.

It was resisting with all its might.

The Mountain Giants chasing Yeon-Joo looked back at El Cuero.

"Where do you think you're looking, damn piles of rock?!"

Yeon-Joo used a chain like a whip and hit the Mountain Giants' heads.

Echidna also attacked the Mountain Giants.

The Mountain Giants looked away from El Cuero and at the two girls.

"Brat! You, go over there!" Yeon-Joo exclaimed.

"I'm not a brat."

While pouting, Echidna moved to the side that Yeon-Joo had indicated.

The group of Mountain Giants, which was split into two, began pulling El Cuero's body to the surface again.

Rip.

The chains penetrating El Cuero were now being pulled in two directions.

The blood coming from the monster dyed the lake red.

El Cuero began flapping its fin while screaming.

Countless poisonous needles engulfed the Mountain Giants.

Crack! Crack!

They were not poisoned since they were made of stone, but the physical damage from the needles raining down on them could not be ignored.

The bodies of the Mountain Giants were destroyed, and they collapsed on the ground.

"Damn."

El Cuero's resistance was far stronger than expected.

Kang-Woo looked back. Baek Hwa-Yeon and Goo Hyun-Mo, who had both jumped away from El Cuero to dodge its electrical attack, had fallen into the lake and were swimming toward him.

'I guess I can't expect reinforcements.'

Since they couldn't fly like him, they wouldn't be able to catch up to him and El Cuero by swimming. Therefore, he'd have to solve the issue himself.

Kang-Woo frowned under the immense pressure on his body.

'I'll have to use three.'

He couldn't dismiss either the Authority of Invulnerability or Titanic Might. He'd have to use three Authorities to stop El Cuero's movements.

There was a huge difference between using two and three different Authorities simultaneously.

The amount of demonic energy required to use more than one Authority rose by a power of two—using two Authorities simultaneously required four times the demonic energy of using one, and eight times for using three simultaneously.

"Kraken's Rage."

His coat began shining with a dark blue light. The equipment's stat bonus doubled, and five extra Demonic Energy stat points were added.

Kang-Woo concentrated and activated a third Authority.

'Authority of Blades.'

As he held on to El Cuero, a black blade shot from one of his hands. The black blade penetrated the boss monster and enlarged inside it.

"UOOOO!!!"

El Cuero screamed in pain. Blood spewed from its wound and covered Kang-Woo along with the splashing lake water.

'Not enough.'

It wasn't enough with just that.

El Cuero was thrashing as violently as ever. He needed another attack to make sure that it wouldn't move.

Kang-Woo shouted to Yeon-Joo, "Make thorns!"

"What?"

"Make thorns over the chains!"

"A-Are you crazy?! If I do that, you'll...!"

"Hurry!"

"..."



Yeon-Joo's expression hardened. She gulped and nodded.

Thorns started appearing over the chains as her bracelet began to shine red.

"Petrification."

It was the special effect of the Gargoyle Armor that Kang-Woo had obtained from Mun Yeong-Ho. The effect doubled physical defense for ten seconds.

Although defense had doubled, Yeon-Joo's chains were Legendary grade, so the chains pierced the physical defense and penetrated Kang-Woo.

He could feel a strong pain spreading through his body.

Even under such pain, Kang-Woo simply frowned and maintained the three Authorities. He had become used to pain, so he wasn't going to scream from just that.

After being pierced by the thorns, El Cuero began to lose strength because of the Energy Drain effect on the chains.

Boom!

El Cuero's massive body was dragged up to the surface. Kang-Woo quickly cut the chains and got away from El Cuero.

"Kang-Woo, are you okay?" asked Echidna, who ran up to him while worried.

Kang-Woo nodded.

"We don't need the giants anymore. Echidna, clear out the remaining ones."

El Cuero had insane magical resistance.

It wouldn't be efficient for Echidna to fight it. Instead, it would be far more helpful for her to clear out the Mountain Giants.

"Okay."

Echidna shot magic at the Mountain Giants.

The Mountain Giants were already exhausted from pulling El Cuero all the way to shore.

They began to collapse from her magic.

"Yeon-Joo! Stop running away and join the fight!"

"I'm not running away because I want to!"

Yeon-Joo, who had been attracting the Mountain Giants' attention, had returned. Kang-Woo turned his head to El Cuero.

"I guess it won't die just from coming up to land."

"Obviously. Although it looks like a giant stingray, it isn't a real fish."

El Cuero was a monster. On top of that, it was a boss monster that appeared in an S-rank Gate. It wasn't going to die just because it wasn't in the water.

"Huff, huff! Swimming all the way here was no joke!"

"The strategy actually worked."

Hyun-Mo and Hwa-Yeon had also arrived.

Kang-Woo raised his right arm from which a black blade shot out.

"Then let's end this."

El Cuero was on the surface, so it was the perfect opportunity to hunt it.

Wind gathered around Hwa-Yeon's longsword.

Hyun-Mo gripped his two short swords in a reverse grip.

"I'll go first."

"It'll be different from when you were in the water, you radioactive stingray."

"UOONNGG!!"

"I can't concentrate because of its damn cry!"

It seemed that Hyun-Mo had a lot of things to say about El Cuero's cry, but he knew that it wasn't time to joke around. He lowered his stance and ran toward El Cuero.

Whish!

"Gasp!"

El Cuero swung its long tail like a whip. Although it moved like a whip, considering it was the tail of a thirty-meter-large monster, it was over two meters thick.

Hyun-Mo hurriedly ducked.

The tail brushed past his head.

"Get back!"

Hwa-Yeon raised her sword up high from a place El Cuero's tail couldn't reach.

Wind gathered around the white longsword's edge. She swung the sword down, and the wind was shot following the trajectory of the sword.

Slash!

"UOONNGG!!"

The wind cut off the tip of its tail, blood spewing out of it and splashing around the surroundings.

El Cuero's attention focused entirely on Hwa-Yeon.

Kang-Woo and Yeon-Joo took that opportunity to charge in.

Slash!!

"I'll block its tail for you! You just charge forward!" Yeon-Joo exclaimed.

"I'll trust you."

Kang-Woo nodded.

If he canceled the Authority of Invulnerability, he could dish out an even more powerful attack.

Kang-Woo didn't immediately charge in despite what he had said to Yeon-Joo. Instead, he scanned El Cuero with deeply sunken eyes.

'It's gotten weaker.'

Unlike fish, it didn't immediately suffocate after coming up to the surface, but because it was an aquatic monster, it was noticeably weaker on the surface compared to in the water.

Not only that, but it had also been severely wounded.

It wouldn't have been weird if El Cuero had died from its wounds while they were dragging it to the surface.

'In that case...'

Kang-Woo's eyes shone.

The only thing that was left was to finish it off.

He lightly closed his eyes. He could sense the mass of demonic energy gathered within his heart.

The Ten Thousand Demon Core...

The mass of demonic energy he'd gathered for the past ten millennia...

It was bigger and thicker than anything else.

'A sea...'

A sea made of demonic energy.

It was both endless and bottomless.

Not even Kang-Woo, who had created it, knew its exact limits.

He hadn't been able to determine what was inside the deep sea and what was going on inside, even when he had been able to use it to its full potential.

He raised his head and looked around. He saw three doors embracing the sea.

'I don't need that much.'

He turned his head from the doors.

He extended his hands toward the sea, cupped his hands, and scooped up a handful of demonic energy. It was a negligible amount compared to the sea of demonic energy, but for the moment, it was more than enough.

"Bident."

He used the Authority of Dark Spears and the Authority of Hellfire.

A spear covered in black flames appeared. Kang-Woo grabbed the spear, lowered his body, and aimed the spear at the monster.

He could feel powerful energy being transmitted to his hand, but he felt that it wasn't enough. It looked too small and weak compared to the vast sea.

He became greedy.

Once the fire of greed was lit, it set ablaze at terrifying speed.

'One more.'

Authority of Spallation. A destructive Authority that destroyed armor and tore apart skin was added to Bident.

The two prongs of the spear twisted around like snakes.

Heavy exhaustion and an enervation as though his soul had left his body flooded Kang-Woo. The price of simultaneously using three Authorities was by no means small. He felt as if he was about to pass out at any moment.

The tips of Kang-Woo's mouth went up.

"Gáe Bulg."

After his quiet chant, the dark red spear was completed.

Kang-Woo stomped on the ground while gripping the spear.

Ring.

[You have managed to perfectly merge three Authorities.]

[The second condition of Ultimate Demonic Body has been fulfilled.]

Message windows appeared, but Kang-Woo paid them no mind; he couldn't afford to.

He gripped the spear even tighter.

El Cuero's giant tail swung toward him, but it bounded off a shield made from red chains.

The dark red spear pierced El Cuero.

Chapter 83 - El Cuero (5)

Crack!!

The dark red spear pierced El Cuero.

The flames within the spear exploded, and the hellfire spread within El Cuero, greedily devouring the monster's life force.

'It's dead now.'

Oh Kang-Woo was sure of it. There was no way El Cuero would be able to survive that attack. He could feel the fingers of his hand that threw Gáe Bulg subtly trembling.

It felt good.

It was the first time he'd managed to create a technique from three different Authorities since returning to Earth. Although he used to do similar things in Hell as if they were nothing, being able to use it again felt good.

It felt hot and exciting.

His desire for power, which had been weathered over millennia, once again blazed within him.

'So this was the second condition for the Ultimate Demonic Body.'

Kang-Woo's eyes shone.

He wasn't sure what the Ultimate Demonic Body was and what changes it would bring, but one thing he knew for sure was that it was a completely new power that he never had in Hell.

It would be weird if he wasn't anxious to know what it was.

'I wonder what the last condition is?'

He couldn't think of anything, but since it was called Ultimate Demonic Body, it probably had something to do with demonic energy.

"Hmm."

Kang-Woo fell into thought.

"... Huh?"

While thinking, Kang-Woo felt a weird sense of danger.

He frowned. Something that should have appeared wasn't appearing.

'The message window didn't appear.'

The message window saying that they had defeated El Cuero had not appeared yet.

Kang-Woo hurriedly turned his head toward El Cuero.

"Grrrrrrr..."

"It's... not dead?"

El Cuero's eyes were still shining chaotically despite it having had half its body blown away. Even its unique cry had changed into that of a ferocious beast. In any case, the important thing was that El Cuero hadn't died yet.

'That's impossible.'

Kang-Woo felt the sensation in the tips of his fingers. The battle experience he had accumulated for ten millennia was telling him that El Cuero was dead.

Gáe Bulg was a technique powerful enough to kill a demon of the Seventh Hell. El Cuero had taken the attack straight on, so there was no way that it was still alive.

Confused, Goo Hyun-Mo exclaimed, "Wh-What was that attack just now?! Kang-Woo, just what in the world are—no, that's not important right now. Wh-What the hell is going on?"

"I-It's still alive after that?" Cha Yeon-Joo exclaimed in confusion.

The moment Hyun-Mo and Yeon-Joo saw the dark red spear pierce El Cuero, they'd felt goosebumps. Even though El Cuero was an S-rank boss monster, they had never imagined that it'd be able to survive such an attack.

"Graaaahhhh!!!"

"I-It's running away!"

The remaining half of El Cuero's body charged toward the lake.

"Dammit!"

Fwoosh!

Yeon-Joo extended her hand, covering El Cuero with red chains, but because her Strength stat wasn't very high, she was dragged by El Cuero.

Kang-Woo quickly moved. He grabbed the chain connecting Yeon-Joo and El Cuero.

"Kurgh!"

Kang-Woo's face contorted. His palms were being torn up. He wanted to use an Authority, but he had no more demonic energy remaining after he had used Gáe Bulg.

"Pull the chains!"

If El Cuero managed to escape to the lake, all their efforts would've been in vain.

Baek Hwa-Yeon and Hyun-Mo ran to them and grabbed the chains.

"Kurgh! Such power...!"

"I-Is it seriously on the verge of death?! How the hell can it still be this spry?!"

El Cuero quickly crawled toward the lake while dragging the four of them. The monster seemed stronger than when they had first faced it, and the strength it was exerting was abnormal for an aquatic monster on land.

'We're going to lose it.'

Kang-Woo felt anxious. The pain from his palms shot up his arms. Things could be different if he could use the Authority of Titanic Might, but he didn't have any other way to stop its charge.

"Hold on tight!" Yeon-Joo said.

The mana within her surged, and the chains surrounding El Cuero started to shine with a red light.

"Graaaahhhh!!!"

"Holy shit!"

El Cuero twisted.

Roars of madness echoed throughout the Gate. Black energy burst forth from within the remaining half of its body.

'Demonic energy.'

Kang-Woo frowned.

The energy bursting from El Cuero was without a doubt demonic energy.

'What's going on?'

He couldn't understand what was happening. He didn't have enough time to understand.

'Are we going to lose it?'

Kang-Woo bit his lips while looking at El Cuero, who had almost reached the lake. There was no way to stop it.

[Leave it to me, Kang-Woo.]

He heard Echidna's voice in his ears.

As blue light enveloped her, she turned back into a giant dragon. She then swung her tail like a whip and hit El Cuero, pushing the monster back.

[Stay still!]

Even if she was a hatchling, Echidna was still a dragon. Returning back to her original form was more than enough for her to stop El Cuero's escape.

Boom!

After being dragged back to the surface, El Cuero twisted violently. Massive amounts of blood poured out from its body, which had been torn in half.

[Hm! Hm!]

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Echidna smashed her giant tail down on El Cuero, and its body shook after being hit by the tail.

"Grrrrr."

Its aggressive screams gradually faded.

Its eyes, which had been filled with madness, turned blurry.

Ring.

[You have successfully defeated the S-rank boss monster El Cuero.]

[You have placed first in the level of contribution.]

[Additional rewards have been awarded for dealing the finishing blow.]

[Increasing EXP exponentially.]

[Your level is capped. The rewarded EXP will be accumulated.]

Blue message windows appeared in front of Kang-Woo; it was proof that El Cuero had truly died this time.

'I didn't break through the limit.'

While leaving disappointed feelings behind, Kang-Woo turned toward Yeon-Joo.

There was something more important than the level cap at the moment.

"What was that at the end?" Kang-Woo asked.

"... I'm not sure either."

Yeon-Joo shook her head.

They couldn't understand El Cuero's final desperate struggle.

It was the first time she'd seen a monster that could move after having half of its body blown away.

"Maybe it's a characteristic unique to El Cuero?" Yeon-Joo said while tilting her head. Some monsters possessed Traits that were hard to comprehend with logic. It was within the realm of possibility, considering no one had managed to kill El Cuero until now.

"No. That's probably not it." Kang-Woo shook his head without hesitation.

"Why not?"

"Because I received the additional reward for dealing the finishing blow."

If El Cuero hadn't died after being hit with Gáe Bulg, there was no way that he would have received the reward for the finishing blow. After all, El Cuero had died shortly after being smashed by Echidna's tail.

"In that case..."

"We'll have to check."

Kang-Woo looked at El Cuero's corpse.

After walking to its corpse, he searched the area from where he'd sensed demonic energy... It was where its brain was located.

"This is..."

He felt something with his hand. He grabbed it and pulled it out.

It was a black gem the size of two fingers. Inside it was demonic energy.

'What's this?'

He had never seen anything like it before. It was as if he was seeing the demonic energy equivalent of a mana stone. The main difference it had from a mana stone was that the gem looked somewhat artificially made.

'It's too refined.'

Unlike the rough surface of mana stones, the surface of the black gem was too smooth. It didn't seem like something made naturally.

'Could this be why El Cuero suddenly acted strangely?'

He felt that was probably the reason.

"What's that?" Yeon-Joo asked.

"I'm not sure."

Kang-Woo looked at the black gem while frowning.

He used the Authority of the Beholder on it but couldn't find any information on it besides that it was made of extremely dense demonic energy.

He looked at El Cuero's corpse closely once again. After checking where he'd found the black gem, Kang-Woo became sure of something.

'It wasn't there from the beginning.'

He saw traces of someone having planted it intentionally.

Kang-Woo's eyes shone. The gears in his head turned quickly.

He could guess who had planted the black gem inside El Cuero's head.



"I get it now."

"Get what?" Yeon-Joo asked.

"I'm not 100% sure, but it's highly likely that the Demon Cult did this."

"The Demon Cult?"

Yeon-Joo's eyes shone sharply. Suddenly, a ferocious bloodlust came from her body.

"... What does that mean?"

"Someone planted this black gem inside El Cuero's head. It contains demonic energy. The only one among humans who can create something containing this much demonic energy is the Demon Cult."

Unlike mana, one couldn't naturally obtain demonic energy.

There wasn't anyone on Earth who could create something like this gem besides Kang-Woo and the Demon Cult.

"Hmm..."

Kang-Woo looked at the black gem with great interest. He could feel the concentrated demonic energy through his fingertips. After staring at the gem for a long time, he used the Authority of Predation on it.

Ring.

[You have absorbed a demonic crystal.]

[Demonic Energy has risen by 3.]

He sensed that his demonic energy had grown as soon as he saw the message windows.

Kang-Woo's eyes widened.

'It rose by three?'

His Demonic Energy stat without the stat bonus of the Black Pearl Coat was 83.

He'd killed almost a hundred Giant Ogres over the past three days, yet it had not risen at all. That went to show how difficult it had become to raise his Demonic Energy stat, but it had just risen by three in an instant.

'This...'

A smile appeared on Kang-Woo's face.

The weathered desire for power that had once again bloomed within him after using Gáe Bulg... it was as if his burning throat had been quenched with cold water.

He didn't know why the Demon Cult had placed such a thing inside El Cuero, nor did he know what result placing a demonic crystal inside a monster could possibly bring.

However, there was one thing he was sure about...

'Sweet.'

The demonic energy inside the demonic crystal that the Demon Cult had created was thick enough to raise his stagnated Demonic Energy stat.

Since his level was capped at the moment, items that could increase his Demonic Energy stat were very valuable.

'I hope they don't have only one of these.'

Kang-Woo smacked his lips.

He suddenly felt that the Demon Cult—that group of lunatics—was like a restaurant that only served delicious food.

Chapter 84 - You Trust Me, Right? (1)

"Wh-What? Why did it suddenly disappear?!" Cha Yeon-Joo asked, confused.

The black gem that Oh Kang-Woo had found—the item that might be able to help them find out more about the Demon Cult—had suddenly disappeared.

"... It melted down the moment I grabbed it," Kang-Woo said.

He looked down at his hand while pretending to be shocked.

In reality, the black gem had disappeared because he'd used the Authority of Predation, but he couldn't say that.

He had to hide that he wasn't a human but a demon—the pinnacle of all demons, the demon king.

Yeon-Joo looked disappointed.

"... Is this a characteristic of demonic energy?" she asked.

"Now that I think about it, Oriax's corpse also turned to dust and disappeared," Goo Hyun-Mo commented.

'Good job,' Kang-Woo thought with bright eyes after he received the perfect assistance from Hyun-Mo.

Yeon-Joo nodded and muttered, "Hmm... I guess that's it, then."

"In any case, have your guild members investigate whether this item comes only from El Cuero or if other monsters have it too. And if they find a gem inside a monster's brain, have them bring it over right away," Kang-Woo said.

If the Demon Cult were the ones that had implanted the gem inside El Cuero, there was no way that it would be the only one with it. Other monsters had also probably been implanted with that gem.

'If I get more demonic crystals...'

Kang-Woo could get a massive profit and interfere with the Demon Cult's plans at the same time. It was truly killing two birds with one stone.

"But the black gem disappears once you touch it. Would we be able to bring them here even if we find them?" Yeon-Joo asked.

It was a perceptive question, but Kang-Woo did not get flustered by it.

He answered smoothly, "Since it only disappeared after I touched it, it'll probably be okay if they use something like a vacuum pack."

"Hmm. Okay. I'll have my guild members investigate it."

"I will also have the Hwarang Corps members investigate it. Did you find it inside the monster's head?" Hwa-Yeon asked.

"Yes. They'll see traces of it having been shoved in there," Kang-Woo replied.

"Understood."

If his hypothesis was correct, then he would be able to collect a large number of demonic crystals by using the manpower of the Red Rose Guild and Hwarang Corps.

Kang-Woo tried his best to refrain from smiling while he thought about that.

Echidna, who had returned to her human form, tilted her head while looking at Kang-Woo.

She commented, "Kang-Woo, you look like you're having fun."

"I'm not. How could I be having fun in the middle of a crisis like this?"

"...?"

Echidna was confused. Their souls were connected, so she could more or less tell what he was feeling. She was sure that Kang-Woo was full of anticipation and joy.

Seeing Echidna's confused expression, Kang-Woo quickly said, "More importantly, you were of great help earlier."

"Really? Was I of help to you, Kang-Woo?"

"Yup. That's my Echidna. I'll reward you as much as you want once we get back home."

"Hm! Hm!" Echidna snorted triumphantly.

Her mind was full of thoughts about what reward she should ask for from Kang-Woo.

Kang-Woo smiled and patted Echidna's head.

'I should look around too,' he thought.

Absorbing one demonic crystal was far more effective in raising his demonic energy than killing hundreds of Giant Ogres. His level was capped at the moment, so gaining experience points was meaningless. Instead of hunting, looking for demonic crystals was a far more effective use of his time.

'Thanks to them, I'll be able to sleep soundly at night.'

Kang-Woo's leveling up had been capped, and he didn't know what the last condition was for achieving the Ultimate Demonic Body. Additionally, his Demonic Energy stat was not going up even though he used the Authority of Predation. He had reached a plateau in his growth.

Then the Demon Cult appeared. The timing was so perfect that he almost felt grateful to them.

Kang-Woo felt full just from thinking of all the demonic crystals he would take from the Demon Cult.

"Buuuurp."

He let out a foul burp.

\* \* \*

"El Cuero... has been killed."

"What?"

Inside a dark room, the man in the red demon mask asked quietly, "... What happened?"

"W-We are not sure either. We went to check the demonic crystal's degree of erosion, but all we found were traces of battle and blood stains that we assume belong to El Cuero."

Slam! Crack!

The red-masked man slammed his fist onto the table. The solid wooden table was smashed to smithereens.

"What about the other monsters?"

"We are checking them right now, but... it seemed like the hunters had been completely unaware of our plan when they hunted."

"Shit."

El Cuero was a monster that hadn't been killed even once since the Gate appeared five years ago. Yet, right after they implanted a demonic crystal in it in accordance with their plan, El Cuero was hunted and killed.

The red-masked man was so furious that he had no energy to rage and just felt sad instead.

"How's the plan progressing?" he asked.

"It... has been greatly delayed due to this setback."

"..."

The red-masked man's eyes narrowed, taking on a chilling gaze.

"What if we use the other method?" he questioned.

"Y-Your Eminence, that's—!"

"I am not saying that we should use it immediately. I just want to check its viability."

"If... we use that method, we could execute our plan immediately."

"Hmm."

"B-But Your Eminence, we won't be able to handle the repercussions if we do that. Now that the World Rankers have started to take action, it is far too risky."

"I know," the red-masked man answered. "What of the demonic crystals?"

"We still have some left."

"Plant them in other monsters. Proceed with the plan as quickly as possible. If it gets delayed any further..." the red-masked man said, looking angrily at the priest. "None of you will be safe either."

The priests bowed their heads and replied fearfully, "Y-Yes, Your Eminence!"

"That aside... who was it that killed El Cuero?"

"We are not certain, but we believe it was the Red Rose Guild."

"The Red Rose Guild?"

"Yes. We discovered traces of the red chains that Cha Yeon-Joo uses at the scene."

"So, she has interfered once again," the red-masked man commented.

He exuded a ferocious bloodlust, causing the priests to tremble in fear and have goosebumps.

"Prepare the shadows," the red-masked man ordered.

"... Are you planning to eliminate Cha Yeon-Joo?"

"Yes. She must pay for interfering with our plans."

"Cha Yeon-Joo is strong."

Cha Yeon-Joo was one of Korea's top Rankers. Furthermore, she was the master of the powerful Red Rose Guild. It would be almost impossible to assassinate her.

The man in the red mask smirked and said, "There's a rookie whom Cha Yeon-Joo cares about. He is an impertinent man named Oh Kang-Woo. We will take him hostage."

"I see..."

"He is but a child who knows nothing of worldly affairs. It will not be difficult."

"As you command."

"You must capture him alive no matter what. Oh, and there is a child who follows him around. Capture her alive as well."

"A child... you say?"

The masked man nodded and replied, "I sensed demonic energy from the child. I must examine her in greater detail."

"Yes, Your Eminence!"

The priests left the room.

The masked man took in a deep breath and exhaled, "Fuu."

Then he placed his hand on his face and took off the red demon mask.

"They sure are getting on my nerves."

The man in the red demon mask, Baek Kang-Hyun, put the mask on the table and frowned.

\* \* \*

Hwa-Yeon called Kang-Woo and Yeon-Joo over to the Hwarang Corps headquarters and handed each of them a passbook[1].

"Here's the money left after deducting the repair cost," Hwa-Yeon told them.

"Ten billion was left after selling the mana stone and the corpse. They gave us a lot of money for them because it's the first time that the El Cuero was successfully hunted."

"Hmm. So, you're going to give us five billion each?" Yeon-Joo asked.

"Yes."

"What about you, Hwa-Yeon?"

"I don't need it. Also, you and Kang-Woo were the ones who did most of the work."

"... You're a born soldier," Yeon-Joo remarked with a laugh and accepted the passbook.

Hwa-Yeon said, "I have more good news."

"Good news?"

"Is it about the demonic crystal?" Kang-Woo asked.

Hwa-Yeon shook her head and answered, "No. The Hwarang Corps members are investigating it, but they haven't been able to find any yet. It's about something else."

"What is it?"

"Material suitable for Legendary-grade equipment was found in the El Cuero's corpse. Apparently, it's possible to forge a sword out of the needle in its tail."

"Whoa."

"Wow, we actually got Legendary-grade material?" Yeon-Joo remarked.

The eyes of both Yeon-Joo and Kang-Woo lit up. Legendary-grade equipment was priceless for high-level players.

Kang-Woo, who had experienced the stat bonus effect of the Black Pearl Coat for himself, showed even greater interest than Yeon-Joo.

'I don't use swords, though.'

He didn't use a particular weapon. He just created weapons with his Authorities depending on the situation. Nevertheless, he could receive the stat bonus benefits just by equipping the sword, so it didn't matter.

"Based on the rough estimate... it will probably be legendary-grade equipment that raises strength or dexterity," Hwa-Yeon informed them.

"Oh..."

"It'll be useless on me, then."

Both Kang-Woo and Yeon-Joo clicked their tongues in disappointment.

Kang-Woo mainly used the Demonic Energy stat and Yeon-Joo's main stat was the Mana stat, so neither of them needed Legendary-grade equipment that raised their strength or dexterity.

"Can't you use it, Hwa-Yeon?" Yeon-Joo asked.

"Haha. Unfortunately, the imprint condition is a bit particular. I can't use it," Hwa-Yeon answered.

There were some instances when certain conditions needed to be met for the imprinting. It was not decided through the production process but by the material itself, so the conditions could not be bent to the forger's will.

"What is the condition?"

"You apparently need a unique stat called Qi."

"Qi? The thing that appears in martial arts novels?"

"Yes. Those among the warrior classes rarely possess this stat, but the Players who do are mostly in China... There are extremely few Players in Korea who have it."

"Hmm... Then it's basically a fool's gold. How about we sell it to China?"

"I wanted to hear your opinions first. After all, you were the ones who made the greatest contributions in killing El Cuero."

Kang-Woo and Yeon-Joo nodded.

The person who played the biggest role was Kang-Woo, followed by Yeon-Joo. The others also contributed a lot, but it couldn't be compared to those two.

"There isn't anyone who has the Qi stat in my guild. You can sell it as long as they pay a high price for it," Yeon-Joo said.

"In that case, I'll buy it," Kang-Woo declared.

"... You?"

Kang-Woo nodded.

The unique stat Qi... He knew one person who had that.

'Kim Si-Hun.'

It was the kind-hearted young man who, along with Kang Tae-Soo, often followed Kang-Woo around. Kim Si-Hun was very handsome, but his talent was even more incredible than his looks.

'Although we aren't blood-related, you're my little brother.'

Kang-Woo's and Si-Hun's souls were bound together after all.

'As your hyung, I will get you this sword as a gift!'

Kang-Woo clenched his fists.

Chapter 85 - You Trust Me, Right? (2)

Two weeks after they hunted the El Cuero...

Oh Kang-Woo received a call from Baek Hwa-Yeon in the morning and quickly went to Suwon.

"It was just finished," Hwa-Yeon said.

She placed a sword with an impressive blue edge down on the table.

"Are Legendary-grade equipment always crafted so fast?" Kang-Woo asked while touching the sword.

It had only been two weeks since they'd hunted the El Cuero down. The sword had been crafted so quickly that Kang-Woo was a bit worried about its quality.

"What's hard is getting the materials that only drop from S-rank boss monsters. Once you have the materials, crafting the equipment isn't that hard."

"Hmm... But I heard that it still costs a lot of money. Hwa-Yeon, you didn't push yourself, did you?" Cha Yeon-Joo asked.

"So what if I did? Both of you are doing more for our country's safety than the Hwarang Corps. It would be embarrassing if we skimmed out on the compensation," Hwa-Yeon said with a firm voice.

The Demon Cult was, at that moment, more dangerous than monsters. For the moment, only Players were falling victim to their crimes, but it was impossible to know when civilians would start being affected as well.

"... I'm not really doing it for public safety, though," Yeon-Joo muttered, avoiding Hwa-Yeon's eyes.

"I'm hunting down the Demon Cult for world peace," Kang-Woo stated.

"... I never thought you'd say that for real. Don't lie. I knew from the moment we met that you're not that kind of person," Yeon-Joo replied.

"Wow, you don't believe me?"

Kang-Woo shrugged.

He'd said it half-jokingly, but he was telling the truth. For him, the Earth itself was something that had to be protected.

'Although I recently acquired other objectives too.'

The Demon Cult used demonic energy differently from the beings in Hell. Kang-Woo had profited more than he'd initially expected while hunting them down. Rather than selflessly protecting the world, he was doing it purely for his own benefit.

"Leaving your reasons aside, it's an undeniable fact that both of you are helping us catch the Demon Cult. The end doesn't always justify the means, but in this case, I think we can look at it positively," Hwa-Yeon said with a smile.

Kang-Woo was impressed by her smooth words that flowed like water.

'No wonder Goo Hyun-Mo fell for her.'

Leaving her position aside, Hwa-Yeon was quite a charming woman. She seemed a bit old-fashioned, but she was compromising and had a clear concept of reward and punishment. Hwa-Yeon was a superior Kang-Woo would like to have if he were to ever enlist in the army, although that's something that would never happen.

"... Don't fall for her," Yeon-Joo warned.

"What?" Kang-Woo uttered.

"Don't start harboring weird feelings for Hwa-Yeon! She would be wasted on an asshole like you!"

"A-Ahem. What are you talking about all of a sudden, Yeon-Joo?" Hwa-Yeon asked.



"I could see it in his eyes! Hwa-Yeon, be careful. Your life will be ruined if you get involved with an asshole like him!"

"Calm down, Yeon-Joo. You're too worked up."

"Because it's something to be worked up about!" Yeon-Joo shouted angrily.

Kang-Woo looked at her in disbelief.

"Neither of us even have a notion of doing anything like that, so why are you overreacting?" Kang-Woo said.

"J-Just in case!" Yeon-Joo shouted with a red face.

"It's like you're jealous," Hwa-Yeon said while smirking.

"Whaaat?"

"Hahaha. I was just joking."

"Hmph! Why would I be jealous over someone like him?!"

"Where did you learn such a generic quote..." Kang-Woo said while shaking his head.

He turned away from Yeon-Joo and extended his hand toward the sword.

[Equipment Information]

[Equipment Name: El Cuero Blade

Grade: Legendary (Unimprinted) \*Imprinting Condition: Unique Stat (Qi) Holder.

Basic Effect: Lightning-Attribute Attack +700, Strength +2, Dexterity +2

Special Effect: Allows the wielder to walk freely on water.

Equipment Description: A sword made with a needle from El Cuero's tail. It is highly lethal and enables the wielder to use attacks imbued with the power of lightning.]

'There's a total boost of four points.'

The thing that Kang-Woo checked first was the stat bonus, the most important aspect of a piece of Legendary equipment. The blade raised two stat numbers by two, making it a total boost of four stat points. That was on the higher end of stat bonuses for Legendary-grade equipment.

"Do you like it?" Hwa-Yeon asked.

"It's so good that I would use it if I could," Kang-Woo answered.

"Hahaha. I agree. To be honest, I also wanted it, but... this is better than letting a good item that I can't even use rot away."

"You've made a good investment. Kim Si-Hun will become a very powerful Player. I guarantee that he will soon be helping us in our fight against the Demon Cult."

"Did you say he's your brother?"

"Yes, but we aren't blood-related."

"Hahaha. Since you speak of him so highly, I will be looking forward to his accomplishments."

"He won't disappoint you," Kang-Woo affirmed confidently.

Discovering Kim Si-Hun had been akin to Kang-Woo having won the lottery.

'He's the Martial God's successor after all.'

If it weren't for an unprecedented being like Kang-Woo, Si-Hun would have rewritten the history of Players. Kang-Woo was curious and expectant to see how Si-Hun would grow.

"Oh, there is one more thing I wanted to say," Hwa-Yeon said.

"Go ahead."

"Isn't it about time you speak to me casually?" Hwa-Yeon expressed while leaning on her chair. "I speak casually to people that aren't my superiors, but... are we not allies on equal footing? I believe it's unfair for only you to speak formally."

"In that case... sure. I'll speak casually."

"Mm."

Kang-Woo didn't think that speaking formally was unfair. Nevertheless, considering his relationship with Hwa-Yeon and Yeon-Joo, it would be more comfortable to speak casually.

"Have you guys found anything about demonic crystals yet?" Kang-Woo asked.

"The corps members are diligently searching for them, but nothing yet," Hwa-Yeon answered.

"It's the same with my guild members. These past two weeks, we've killed almost five times the usual amount of monsters, yet we haven't found a single demonic crystal," Yeon-Joo said.

"Was my deduction wrong?" Kang-Woo wondered.

He had also been searching multiple Gates for the past two weeks, but he hadn't been able to find anything as well. It was as if he'd been wrong in his deduction that it was likely that the Demon Cult had implanted demonic crystals in other monsters aside from El Cuero.

"We can't be sure yet, so please keep investigating," Kang-Woo pleaded.

"Got it."

"Then I'll be going," Kang-Woo said.

He stood up, and Yeon-Joo followed him out.

"... Do you have nothing to do? Why do you come along every time I come to Suwon?" Kang-Woo asked.

"You didn't defeat El Cuero by yourself. I yielded on the Legendary-grade weapon, but I'm gonna make sure I get my share of the reward. I want to see how valuable the weapon was so I can ask for a fair price," Yeon-Joo replied.

"Ngh."

There was nothing Kang-Woo could say to that. He took a deep breath and nodded.

Yeon-Joo followed behind him while humming in a good mood.

\* \* \*

"Ah, hyung-nim!" Kim Si-Hun greeted.

"Ohhhhh! Kang-Woo hyung-nim, long time no see!" Kang Tae-Soo exclaimed.

Si-Hun's party, which had just come out of a gate, greeted Kang-Woo.

Aside from Han Seol-Ah, it had been a few days since Kang-Woo had seen the members of Si-Hun's party. After chatting for a bit, he brought them to his home. It was so that he could give the Legendary-grade weapon to Si-Hun as discreetly as possible.

Tae-Soo exclaimed in surprise, "Whoa! So, this is the new house you moved to, hyung-nim?"

Echidna, who was at home, pranced out to greet Kang-Woo, "Welcome back, Kang-Woo!"

Eun-Bi's eyes lit up.

"Wh-Who's this cute girl, oppa?" she asked.

"I'm Kang-Woo's summoned beast," Echidna answered.

"Summoned beast...?"

"Yup."

Eun-Bi trembled in disbelief and questioned, "Kang-Woo oppa... don't tell me you've been enjoying doing this kind of roleplay with a girl this young?"

"What are you talking about?" Kang-Woo replied.

"Aren't you afraid of the police?! This is a crime!"

"... Even though she looks like that, she's probably ten times older than you."

"Sh-She's not even legal...!"

Eun-Bi gazed at Echidna, who possessed too many virtuous factors, with a scared expression.

Kang-Woo hit Eun-Bi's head softly and then walked toward the living room.

"I called you here because there's something I wanted to give you," he said to Si-Hun.

"To me?" Si-Hun responded.

"Yeah."

Kang-Woo handed him the El Cuero Blade that he'd received from Hwa-Yeon.

"... What is this?"

"Check, and you'll find out."

Si-Hun checked the weapon's information, and his eyes widened in shock.

"A L-Legendary weapon! I-Isn't this a Legendary-grade weapon, hyung-nim?!"

"Yup."

"Y-You're giving this to me?"

Kang-Woo nodded.

Si-Hun looked down at the El Cuero Blade with a dumbfounded expression.

He stammered, "H-How could I accept something this valuable...?"

"Because you're worthy of it."

"Hyung-nim," Si-Hun said as his eyes reddened. He touched the El Cuero Blade with trembling hands. "I'm... not worthy of this weapon."

"That's something for me to decide."

"..."

"What level are you right now?"

"Level 38."

Si-Hun was close to his Fifth Awakening. He was leveling up at a slower pace than Kang-Woo, but his speed was probably still head and shoulders above everyone else.

"You know you're getting stronger at a far faster pace compared to other Players, right?"

"But that isn't because I'm exceptional—"

"No, you are exceptional. Of course, Tae-Soo, Seol-Ah, and Eun-Bi were probably of great help, but the definitive reason is that you're exceptional."

"..."

"You're going to get stronger. It won't be too late to prove your worth later down the road."

"Hyung-nim..."

"You trust me, right?"

"Yes! I trust you! I will do my best to prove my worth!" Si-Hun said with eyes full of determination.

Kang-Woo nodded while making a satisfied expression.

The only thing left was for the weapon to be imprinted on Si-Hun.

Si-Hun then extended his hand as if he were responding to Kang-Woo's thoughts.

"Hmm?"

...However, he didn't his hand didn't reach for the El Cuero Blade. His hand moved past the El Cuero Blade and grasped Kang-Woo's hand.

'What's up with him all of a sudden?' Kang-Woo thought.

"To be honest, the first time I met you... I felt a weird sensation of discomfort. It was as if my entire body was rejecting you," Si-Hun expressed.

'That's because you're a protector of this world, and I'm the reason why the Gaia System is broken.'

Si-Hun continued, "But when I met you again, that feeling disappeared."

'That's because I turned you into my Familiar.'

"Now... Haha, this could sound a bit weird, but... it's as if my soul is connected to yours."

'It actually is.'

"Hyung-nim..."

'Don't look at me like that, man.'

Kang-Woo brushed away Si-Hun's hands while smiling awkwardly at him. Si-Hun looked a bit disappointed.

Kang-Woo felt chills and wondered, 'Did I overdo it?'

He was gifting the sword to Si-Hun to build more trust between them and light a fire of motivation in him, but things had taken a bit of a weird turn. Kang-Woo felt that he had to draw a line before things got too out of hand.

"Si-Hun, why don't you—"

"Oh, hyung-nim. Come to think of it, there's something I have to tell you."

Si-Hun took something out of his pocket, and Kang-Woo's eyes widened upon seeing what it was.

"Recently, while hunting, I noticed some monsters were acting weird. So, I examined their corpses, and I found these," Si-Hun said.

Si-Hun had taken out two small black gems. Kang-Woo quickly raised them closer to his eyes.

The gems were the demonic crystals he'd been searching for the last two weeks. To make things even better, there were two of them!

Kang-Woo raised the corners of his mouth into a massive grin.

'Let's be together forever, Si-Hun!'

Chapter 86 - Be Careful (1)

"How did you get this?"

Oh Kang-Woo touched the two demonic crystals that Kim Si-Hun handed him.

They were small compared to the one inside El Cuero's head, and there was also far less demonic energy inside them.

However, that wasn't important.

Kang-Woo, the Red Rose Guild, and the Hwarang Corps had been searching for them for two weeks, and they hadn't been able to find a single one, but Si-Hun had found not one but two!

"I first got this yesterday. I was hunting with the party members when I felt a chill down my back. How could I describe this... Oh, I told you that I felt a sense of discomfort when I first met you, right?"

"You did."

"It was similar to that."

"Ohhh."

"So I followed that sensation and then saw a weird monster."

"A weird monster?"

"Yes. We were mainly hunting Minotaurs, but its outer appearance was a bit weird. It was as if it had been dyed black. It also seemed a bit crazed."

"And you found this after you hunted it?"

"Yes." Si-Hun nodded.

"You found two inside the same monster?"

"No. Today, while hunting, I felt the same sense of discomfort. I followed it and found another weird monster, and this one came from it."

Si-Hun pointed to one of the two gems.

Kang-Woo's eyes sank, and the gears in his head quickly turned.

'He felt the same discomfort when he first saw me.'

The first thing Kang-Woo thought Si-Hun had felt was demonic energy. There was a high chance that Si-Hun instinctively felt discomfort when he was around someone who had demonic energy.

"Si-Hun, did you feel the same discomfort when you first met Echidna?"

Kang-Woo pointed to Echidna, who was sitting and sticking right next to him.

As the topic changed to her, she looked at Kang-Woo while tilting her head.

"Am I discomforting, Kang-Woo?"

"No, of course not."

"No. Although I met Ms. Echidna for the first time today... I didn't feel that kind of discomfort at all."

"I see."

It wasn't demonic energy.

Echidna was different from demons, but she still had demonic energy.

'Then...'

Leaving demonic energy aside, what did he have in common with monsters?

Nothing immediately came to mind.

He kept thinking.

At that moment, he remembered that Si-Hun said the Minotaur had been "dyed black."

'Was it being eroded by demonic energy and gradually turning into a demonic beast?'

If demonic energy turned humans into demons, it wouldn't be weird if it turned monsters into demonic beasts.

He naturally recalled when he had killed the Hellhound and Buer as soon as he thought about demonic beasts.

"Ah."

He let out a short exclamation. It was as if he'd managed to complete a puzzle.

'Rift Fragments.'

When he had killed demonic beasts, he had received messages saying he'd defeated Rift Fragments. Additionally, when he'd crossed the dimensional barrier to Earth, he had heard a voice mention that a Rift Core had been detected.

Rift Core and Fragment...

There was no way these two words weren't related.

'Si-Hun subconsciously feels discomfort at the presence of beings known as Rifts.'

It made sense.

Si-Hun had been chosen by the Gaia System, a transcendental being that was able to seal Kang-Woo's power.

Si-Hun's role was to be a protector, a being that could supplement the Gaia System, which had been impaired after the Rift Core had crossed the barrier into Earth.

'If the Gaia System was what had been blocking the Rift Fragments...'

It wouldn't be weird for Si-Hun to instinctively feel a sense of discomfort.

'Then does that mean the Demon Cult is intentionally creating Rift Fragments?'

He was starting to understand why they were planting the demonic crystals inside monsters.

A smile appeared on his face.

'Si-Hun can find them.'

He wasn't sure why the Demon Cult was trying to create Rift Fragments, but he was sure that Si-Hun could find them.

Rather than blindly trying to find a needle in the middle of a desert, it was far more effective to use a metal detector.

If it were Si-Hun, he would be able to find monsters with demonic crystals planted inside them from a distance.

"Si-Hun."

Kang-Woo grabbed Si-Hun's hands. Kang-Woo had never felt as proud of Si-Hun as he did at this very moment. It was the first time Kang-Woo thought that it had been worth how much he'd invested in him.

"Hyung-nim?"

"You're gonna have to help me for a bit."

"I'll help you with whatever as long as it's within my capability, but... what exactly do you want help with?"

"You just need to follow me without doing a thing."

"Pardon me?"

"You'll be more than enough help just staying by my side."

Si-Hun was just like a human GPS. Just guiding Kang-Woo in the direction he felt discomfort would be enough. Of course, in the near future, he would be able to do more than serve as a GPS, but this was more than enough for now.

"K-Kang-Woo?" Han Seol-Ah asked in shock.

"Kyaaaaaa! I knew it! They have been acting weird ever since the hospital! Yessss!" Choi Eun-Bi exclaimed.

"Huh?"

The two girls reacted before Si-Hun could. Seol-Ah was trembling, her face completely pale, and Eun-Bi was getting super worked up while bleeding from the nose.

Kang-Woo replayed the words he'd used in his head.

'Damn.'

Kang-Woo quickly let go of Si-Hun's hands.

"I-If you say so, hyung-nim..."

'Don't blush.'

"I'll do my best. After all, I've already made my resolution to follow you."

'I told you not to blush, man.'

Kang-Woo covered his face with his two hands and regretted what he had just said, but it was already too late.

'How am I supposed to explain this?'

Kang-Woo couldn't get Seol-Ah's pale-stricken face out of his head.

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"In that case, I will see you tomorrow morning," Si-Hun remarked.

"Okay, take care on your way back."

"Hyung-nim! Are you sure I can't come with you too?!" Kang Tae-Soo asked.

"I told you. We might be going into Gates A-rank and above. The more people I have to protect, the more dangerous it will be."

"Urgh..."

"Or are you confident that you won't be a hindrance when we're against monsters in A-rank Gates?"

"N-No."

"Then you know what you have to do, right?"

"Ugh... Okay, Kang-Woo hyung-nim. I, Kang Tae-Soo, will withdraw this time, but I will not give up!"

"Sure. I'll be waiting for you."

Kang-Woo laughed.



After clarifying the situation to resolve the misunderstanding, he saw Si-Hun, Tae-Soo, and Eun-Bi out.

He honestly wanted to go search the Gates right this very second if he could, but there were things he had to do before that.

'I'll have to plan an efficient route.'

Mindlessly searching only nearby Gates would be very inefficient.

It would be better to explain things to Cha Yeon-Joo and Baek Hwa-Yeon and then determine the most efficient route.

'I'll have to visit the Red Rose Guild.'

It did not take long to reach the Red Rose guild house even on foot.

Kang-Woo turned his head toward Seol-Ah and Echidna, who were next to him.

"I'm gonna go visit Red Rose. I might be long."

"Is there anything I can help with?" Seol-Ah asked.

"Not at the moment."

Too many cooks spoiled the broth; not many people were needed to set an efficient route.

Seol-Ah and Echidna looked disappointed, but they nodded.

"In that case, we'll be heading back inside. Have a safe trip."

"Thanks."

After waving at them, Kang-Woo turned around.

Echidna and Seol-Ah waited at the apartment entrance and stared at Kang-Woo walking away until he couldn't be seen anymore.

"Seol-Ah, you look sad."

"Fufu. It's nothing."

Seol-ah patted Echidna's head.

Echidna grabbed Seol-Ah's clothes.

"It's okay. Kang-Woo feels super thankful to you. I know it since I'm linked to Kang-Woo."

"Ngh... R-Really?"

Seol-ah smiled while blushing.

She grabbed Echidna's hand.

"Let's head inside first. I'll let you choose our menu for dinner tonight, Echidna."

"Hm! Hm! I want beef!" Echidna said while snorting.

"Fufu. Okay. Then let's stop by the supermarke—"

Seol-ah suddenly stopped speaking. Her expression hardened.

"Who are you?"

Ten men wearing red masks and dark robes, which seemed to melt into the darkness, surrounded them.

"Who are we?"

"There is no need for you to know."

They kept talking.

"We only want one thing."

"Your lives."

"What you must do right now is..."

"... Call him."

They each took turns speaking. It was as if all ten were connected as one.

"To call... who?" Seol-ah asked.

"Oh Kang-Woo."

"Call the man you follow."

"And then your role will end."

Seol-ah bit her lips. "I won't call him. I don't know who you people are, but I won't just do as you s—"

"Do I just have to call Kang-Woo?" asked Echidna.

"E-Echidna?!"

"Just a second, I'll call him right now."

Echidna closed her eyes as if she couldn't understand the situation they were in. She called Kang-Woo through the link that a summoned beast had with their master.

"Kang-Woo will be here soon."

"I'm glad you're quick on the uptake."

The men wearing red masks laughed.

Kang-Woo, who had been on his way to the Red Rose Guild, soon appeared.

"Who are you?" Kang-Woo asked in a low voice while looking at the men surrounding Seol-Ah and Echidna.

"You don't need to know who we are."

"Just follow our orders."

"If you want a painless death."

Kang-Woo looked at the men wearing red masks with great interest.

"Are you from the Demon Cult?" Kang-Woo asked.

"We are not obligated to answer that," one of them answered

"You are the one who must answer," another added.

"What an idiotic way of speaking," Kang-Woo said as he laughed in disbelief.

Echidna and Seol-Ah were surrounded by the men, but he wasn't worried at all.

The red-masked men remained silent after seeing his relaxed attitude.

"You are impertinent, just like he said."

"A child who knows nothing of worldly affairs."

"You must think you have everything since you're under Cha Yeon-Joo..."

"But we will make you understand how big the world truly is."

The men moved behind Echidna and Seol-ah and grabbed them from behind. They pointed kris blades at their necks.

"Be careful," Kang-Woo said.

The men laughed.

"It's already too late. Nothing will change even if they are careful."

"No, not them..." A smile appeared on Kang-Woo's face. "You guys."

"...?"

Crack!!

Echidna, who transformed one of her arms into a dragon's, violently struck the one that had grabbed her from behind.

The man was blown backward, and the sound of his bones breaking sounded out.

"Don't touch me." Echidna glared at them coldly. "Only Kang-Woo can touch my body."

Chapter 87 - Be Careful (2)

"Kurgh! Wh-What the—?!"

"What happened?"

"Your little act is crumbling." Oh Kang-Woo laughed as the men completely lost their cool.

Echidna transformed her giant hand into a human's again and cast magic.

A black vortex swirled around her hand.

"You're bothering us," Echidna said in annoyance.

The black vortex gathered around her hand began expanding.

"Get back!"

The masked men scattered to avoid the vortex.

"Kyaaa!" Han Seol-Ah screamed as the men violently pulled her.

Tap!

Kang-Woo stomped on the ground and leaped at the man holding Seol-Ah. He pulled back his arm and punched the man, blowing the man away with a gruesome sound.

"Kuh! Surround him and attack!"

The masked men took out their weapons. Their weapons were weird and consisted of iron hooks connected by chains.

Nine iron hooks were swung at Kang-Woo.

"Hmm."

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes.

The hooks were emitting enough energy for Kang-Woo to know that taking them head-on would be dangerous. He grabbed Seol-Ah and soared into the air using the Authority of the Sky.

"Kyaaa! K-Kang-Woo?!"

"Stay still," Kang-Woo said to Seol-Ah, who was struggling. He landed on the ground after moving a safe distance away from the masked men. "Wait for me here."

"I-I can help too!"

Seol-Ah extended both her hands, and white light started to gather around them.

"Grace of Light!"

After she made a short chant, the light flowed into Kang-Woo.

Ring.

[You have received the Grace of Light.]

[Boosting Strength by 3, Dexterity by 3, and Demonic Energy by 2.]

'Wow.'

Kang-Woo looked at the white light around his body with great interest. Leaving Strength and Dexterity aside, the effect of his Demonic Energy stat going up was considerable.

The demonic energy within him expanded.

'Although it's a bit weird that demonic energy rises after receiving the Grace of Light...'

The important thing was that her buff skill was more useful than he'd initially thought.

He was expectant of its effects after she leveled up some more.

'But before that...'

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes. He could see the nine masked men looking at him nervously.

'I'll have to take care of them first.'

He raised his right arm, and a black blade shot out from the back of his hand. He lowered his body. After using the Authority of Haste, he shot forward as if he were an arrow.

Rattle!

The men shot the iron hooks at Kang-Woo.

Although nine iron hooks were thrown simultaneously, none of them were tangled with the others, which went to show how well the men had been trained as assassins.

Kang-Woo swung his blade and struck aside two of the iron hooks. He lowered his head to dodge one that had aimed for his head.

He stomped on the ground with both feet and shot upward. The two iron hooks that had been aimed at both of his legs intersected with each other.

The men's eyes shone sharply as if they had expected Kang-Woo to jump up into the air, and three of the iron hooks changed trajectories.

Kang-Woo canceled the Authority of Haste and used the Authority of the Sky. He defied inertia and changed direction at a right angle.

Slash!

The three iron hook chains brushed past the Black Pearl Coat, their sharp hooks lightly grazing the coat. Kang-Woo stomped his feet as if jumping in the air, and his floating body shot toward them at high speed.

'Authority of Dark Spears.'

Numerous spear ends the size of his fingers poured down like rain. The men urgently dodged the spear ends.

Stab, stab, stab!

"Kurgh!"

One of the men couldn't dodge the spear ends in time and was penetrated by dozens of them. He collapsed in a pool of his own blood.

The men quickly prepared to counterattack.

The chains that were scattered about pressed against Kang-Woo.

'Not a bad attack, but...'

Kang-Woo smiled after looking at the chains pressing him from all sides. They reminded him of another attack.

'They're nothing compared to Cha Yeon-Joo's chains.'

He raised his right foot and stomped with all his might. The Authority of Waves spread out with him as the epicenter, and all of the chains pressing into him powerlessly bounced off him.

He could see that the strangers were perplexed.

"R-Retreat."

The information had been wrong.

Player Oh Kang-Woo was not an insolent rookie who acted high and mighty just because he was under Cha Yeon-Joo.

'We must inform His Eminence.'

Kang-Woo's existence was an unexpected variable in their plan. If they did not inform the cardinal, their plan would most definitely fail.

The men turned around.

"Where do you think you're running to?"

Kang-Woo spread his arms out.

A suffocating chill engulfed the men, and their movements noticeably slowed down.

"Echidna."

"Leave it to me, Kang-Woo."

Echidna stretched her hand out.

A black barrier surrounded the area. It wasn't a magic cast for defense, but one cast to stop prey from escaping.

The masked men desperately swung their weapons at the barrier.

"It's too late."

Kang-Woo took a deep breath.

The powerful demonic energy throughout his body surged. He then placed both of his hands on the ground.

'Field of Blades.'

The ground was split, and black blades shot up from the cracks. It wasn't one or two. Hundreds of black blades swept the men.

Stab, pierce!

"Gaaahhhh!"

"Fuck!"

The blades dug deep into their flesh.

The masked men tried to escape, but there was nowhere to run. In front of them was the black barrier, and behind them was a field of blades. Four of the masked men lost their lives instantly, and the other four were heavily wounded.

One could see the despair in their eyes.

Boom!

Kang-Woo leaped toward the surviving men.

'I can't let them go again.'

He had to restrain them before they committed suicide or turned into demons.

Kang-Woo grabbed the head of the one that had ordered the others to retreat. The Authority of Fear flowed down from his hand and onto the man's head.

"Kurgh! A-Arrgghh!"

The man trembled, foaming at the mouth.

Kang-Woo frowned.

'I failed.'

Kang-Woo felt a huge amount of demonic energy leave him, but he did not see the hazy eyes that would show that the Authority's power had been successfully applied.

The effectiveness of control-type Authorities like the Authority of Fear was drastically reduced even if the target grew even a little stronger. Since the men who had attacked him weren't weak, it was natural that it would fail.

'The Authority of Fear isn't the only way.'

Kang-Woo took off the man's mask, revealing a man who seemed to be in his mid-thirties. Kang-Woo punched the man hard on his cheek.

"Who gave you the order?"

"Cough! Cough! Kill me."

Crack!

Kang-Woo twisted the man's hand without hesitation.

The man screamed gruesomely.

"You won't have many chances. Now, talk. Who gave you the order?"

"Kill m—Aaarrggghh!!!"

Kang-Woo twisted his other hand, crushed his foot, and ripped his ear off.

The man peed himself from the mind-numbing pain.

"Who gave you the order?"

Kang-Woo's voice was as calm as it could be.

The man's eyes were full of fear.

"I-I don't kn—"

"There's no way you don't know. Just tell me, and you will be at peace."

"..."

"Dying is nothing. You know that very well, don't you?" Kang-Woo said softly.

The man gulped. He did indeed know that death was nothing. In the face of true suffering, death was a blessing.

Fear powerful enough to devour his sense of reason dominated the man's mind. He slowly opened his mouth.

"B-Bae..."

"Bae?"

Just as the man was about to reveal the mastermind, one of the men who had collapsed on the ground swung an iron hook. He did not aim for Kang-Woo but the man who was about to talk.

The iron hook pierced the man's neck.

Stab!!

"Glory to the Demon Cult!!!"

The man's body began to inflate.

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue.

"Petrification."

He doubled his physical defense with the Gargoyle Armor's special effect. He also used the Authority of Invulnerability on top of that to protect himself.

Boom!!

The body of the inflated man exploded, killing all of the other men as well.

Kang-Woo walked out of the explosion completely fine and grabbed one of the red masks lying on the ground.

It was a mask with the face of a demon.

"What a waste of time."

He had failed to find out the cardinal's identity yet again.

He surged with irritation.

Kang-Woo took a deep breath and calmed himself down.

'So you won't come out, huh?'

Kang-Woo's eyes shone.

"Then I'll drag you out."

There was no need to hurry. He wasn't the one who was running out of time.

He crushed the mask in his hand into smithereens.

\* \* \*

"W-We've failed."

"What?"

"We've just confirmed that all the shadows have died."

"... Was it Cha Yeon-Joo?"

"We cannot be sure, but most likely."

"It must be. There aren't many players besides Cha Yeon-Joo who could face ten shadows."

Baek Kang-Hyun frowned. He hadn't expected the shadows to be annihilated so fruitlessly. Other Red Rose members seemed to have assisted Yeon-Joo.



"What a waste."

He'd only ended up losing precious forces while trying to eliminate Yeon-Joo.

His irritation rose from the continuous failures.

"How many Rift Fragments have we collected?"

"About thirty percent."

"Passable rate of collection."

Kang-Hyun nodded and then took a deep breath and calmed down. There was no need to rush. He was not the one who needed to rush.

'They have no way of finding the demonic crystals.'

Time was on his side.

Unless the Red Rose Guild had a demonic crystal detector, they wouldn't be able to find the crystals planted within the monsters.

Kang-Hyun stroked his red demon mask with a smile on his face.

Chapter 88 - A Cornered Rat

Slam!!

The wall was destroyed.

Baek Kang-Hyun's eyes were full of anger.

"What... the hell is going on?!"

It had been ten days since the shadows had failed to kill Cha Yeon-Joo. Something that shouldn't—and couldn't—happen was happening.

The number of demonic crystals secretly implanted in monsters was decreasing at an alarming rate.

It was as if the Red Rose Guild had a demonic crystal detector.

"Y-Your Eminence."

Boooooom!

A wall collapsed, and a loud sound as if a bomb had exploded went off.

The priests in front of him trembled every time there was an explosion. They couldn't hide their fear.

"Haa, haa... How many Fragments have we collected?"

"W-We could only collect fifty percent. The demonic crystals that we planted are being discovered before the monsters are fully eroded by the demonic energy."

"Damn it!!!"

Another loud sound rang throughout the room.

The eyes of the man wearing the red demon mask shook.

The plan had gone awry.

He couldn't comprehend it. Save for the members of the Demon Cult, there wasn't anyone who could control demonic energy.

But who was finding the demonic crystals so precisely?

'Is there a traitor?'

He naturally began to doubt the members of the cult, but then he shook his head. He'd carefully selected the members that had participated in the plan to avoid such a thing.

The chances of a traitor being among them were low.

"... Call off the plan."

"Sir?"

"We will use the other method."

"Y-Your Eminence!"

The faces of the priests paled.

There was indeed one more method besides collecting the demonic crystals that they had implanted in the monsters...

'But that method is insane.'

Kidnapping and sacrificing live Players paled in comparison. This other method was literally like jumping to their own destruction. Even if it worked, it would turn the entire world against them.

The Demon Cult's forces in Korea weren't that big and couldn't be compared to the ones in Japan and China.

This other method was like declaring war on the entire world. They couldn't do something so crazy.

"I-It's too dangerous. We should be asking for more support from the cult and making a new plan—  
Kurgh!"

Kang-Hyun clenched the priest's neck.

"A new plan? Do you seriously expect that to solve anything? Huh?"

"Kurgh! Kurghhh!"

"Even now, the Japanese are becoming stronger and more influential. And you want me to make a new plan in this situation?"

The moment he mentioned Japan, his eyes became full of anger and impatience. His pathetic defeat, the endless ridicule, and the looks of disdain filled his mind.

Crack!

The sound of the priest's neck breaking rang throughout the room.

With eyes full of madness, he looked at the remaining priests.

"Make the preparations. I will not repeat myself."

"Y-Yes, Your Eminence!"

The priests started to move quickly.

\* \* \*

"So far, so good."

Oh Kang-Woo was satisfied.

He looked down at the three demonic crystals in his hand. He had gotten three in just a day.

The moment Kim Si-Hun participated in the search for demonic crystals, things had completely changed.

Kang-Woo had just been charging in completely blind in search of the demonic crystals, but things had become much more efficient thanks to Si-Hun.

Thanks to his help, Kang-Woo had found fourteen demonic crystals in the last ten days.

Considering that Kang-Woo hadn't been able to find a single one for two weeks before, it was a considerable achievement.

"Kang-Woo hyung-nim, is that all for today?"

"Yeah. We've looked around all the Gates around here, so let's look through the rest tomorrow."

"But what are these demonic crystals? How can something like this influence monsters in such a way...?"

"I don't know either."

Kang-Woo wasn't sure how demonic energy turned humans into demons or monsters into demonic beasts.

'That's not important.'

The important thing was that they were interfering with the Demon Cult's plans involving the use of demonic crystals and that the demonic crystals were of great help to his growth.

'They're probably shitting themselves.'

Because they didn't know about Si-Hun's identity, the Demon Cult likely had no idea what to do as their demonic crystals were being found so easily.

It was as if a treasure someone had thought that they'd hidden in a place unknown to the rest of the world had been discovered.

It would be weird if the Demon Cult wasn't panicking.

"Anyway, I'm glad I can be of help to you, hyung-nim."

Si-Hun smiled—it was a smile so innocent that it was hard to look at.

"Let's go home."

Kang-Woo averted his gaze and got into the driver's seat. While driving home, he began thinking.

'It should be about time for them to react in some way.'

He wasn't sure about how many demonic crystals the Demon Cult had, but the demonic crystals had so much demonic energy that they could even increase Kang-Woo's Demonic Energy stat, which was almost 90.

He didn't think they would have hundreds or even thousands of them.

'If that were the case, they would've planted even more.'

With the help of Si-Hun, Kang-Woo had found fourteen demonic crystals. Since he had only found that many after searching through all the Gates scattered around Korea, they likely did not have that many demonic crystals.

'What will their next move be?'

Kang-Woo didn't think that they would just take this lying down. They would definitely do something, whether that be sending an enormous number of assassins or just forcing the plan.

'If only I had more information.'

He knew they were targeting Rift Fragments, but he wasn't sure what they were trying to do by gathering them. Even if he wanted to guess, he couldn't because of the severe lack of information.

'The members of the Demon Cult know more about this than me.'

At the very least, the Demon Cult knew more about Rifts than Kang-Woo did. It was obvious, considering how the Andras Guild had created a Rift by using mana stones and how the Cult had summoned a demon from the Seventh Hell.

'I guess I'll find the answer eventually if I keep waiting.'

Trying to guess at that point could be dangerous.

"H-Hyung-nim."

Just as they had passed Suwon and were heading to Seoul, Si-Hun spoke with a heavy expression.

"What is it all of a sudden?"

"... A system window popped up."

"Huh?"

Kang-Woo looked at Si-Hun in utter confusion.

It wasn't like they were hunting monsters, so there was no way he would've gotten a system message.

"What does it say?"

"U-Umm..."

Before Si-Hun could continue, Kang-Woo's smartphone rang—it was Cha Yeon-Joo.

"Just a second."

Kang-Woo answered the call.

[Wh-Where are you right now?]

"Why? What's up?"

[Answer me! Where are you right now?!] An urgent shout. Kang-Woo's expression hardened after hearing the tone of her voice. It was as if she had lost her mind.

"I just passed Suwon and am heading to Seoul now. What's going on?"

[Go to Isu Station right now! Hurry]

"Cha Yeon-Joo," Kang-Woo said in a low voice. "Calm down."

[This isn't the time!]

"Calm down. Take a deep breath and concentrate. Control yourself. Nothing will come of rushing."

[...]

There was silence. He could hear her taking a deep breath.

Kang-Woo nodded.

"Now, explain the situation. What happened?"

[... A Gate appeared in the middle of Isu Station.]

"A Gate?"

[No. I'm honestly not sure if it's a Gate or not. Rather than a Gate... it's closer to a Rift. It looks similar to the black breach that Oriax had come out from.]

"..."

A Rift. Kang-Woo was starting to get a bad feeling.

"Did a demon appear?"

[No. That's not it.]

"Then what?"

[...]

There was a short silence. Yeon-Joo spoke with a trembling voice.

[Black energy flowed out from it and... engulfed people. Then... and then... the people...]

Cha Yeon-Joo couldn't bear to finish her sentence.

He could guess why she was lost for words.

'Demonic energy came out of the Rift.'

And that demonic energy had engulfed people.

There weren't many possible outcomes that could result from such a thing.

[The people... turned into monsters.]

They weren't exactly monsters. Because they were exposed to demonic energy while completely defenseless, they'd probably turned into demonic beasts rather than intelligent demons.

Or...

'They died.'

There weren't many humans who could resist demonic energy when exposed to it. Even Players with superhuman physiques couldn't resist more than a certain amount, so there was no way regular civilians could.

It was as if someone had dropped a biological weapon in the middle of the city.

No, it was worse than a biological weapon—people who had turned into demonic beasts were most certainly attacking other people.

[H-Hurry. Hwa-Yeon and I are already heading there as fast as we can.]

"I'm on my way."

He ended the call.

Kang-Woo turned to Si-Hun in the passenger seat.

"What did the system window say?"

"That the Rift Fragment is getting bigger... and that I have to stop it."

Kang-Woo's eyes narrowed. The gears in his head quickly turned.

A Rift had suddenly appeared in the heart of a populous area. People had turned into demonic beasts after being exposed to demonic energy. The Rift Fragment was getting bigger.

There were three pieces of the puzzle.

"So they're pushing ahead with quantity, huh?"

Kang-Woo frowned.

The Demon Cult had originally planned to secure Rift Fragments by turning monsters into demonic beasts, but that plan had failed due to him and Si-Hun.

After having been cornered, they had decided to go for quantity rather than quality. The problem was that the sacrifices they had used to make up the quantity had not been monsters but powerless civilians.

"Those crazy sons of bitches..."

Kang-Woo didn't consider himself a good human being.

He felt neither sorrow nor sympathy for someone else's suffering. He always eliminated beings before they would get in his way, and thoroughly made use of anything that he could possibly use.

He was cruel and cold.

He'd lived for too long in a place where he wouldn't have been able to survive if he wasn't like that, but even he had lines that he didn't cross.

Even if they could be of use to him, he would never step over the weak who couldn't resist.

That was the final fortress that protected what remained of his humanity, no matter how small.

The Demon Cult, however, had crossed that line.

Vroom!!

He stepped on the gas pedal.

The car accelerated.

The struggle of a cornered rat...

That struggle hurt more than he'd initially thought.

Chapter 89 - I'll Show You Who I Am Now (1)

"Kyaaaaa!"

Screams rang throughout the area as buildings burned, and dense clouds of smoke hung in the air.

"M-Mom..."

"C-Come here!"

A middle-aged woman ran while holding the hand of her young son, who was still in elementary school.

"Huff! Huff! M-Mom. I'm... t-tired."

Her son was out of breath.

Upon hearing her son's labored breathing, the woman stopped and turned to look at her son, tightening her grip on his hand.

"Kiiiekk!"

Crack! Boom!

"ARRGGHH!!"

Demonic beasts with black skin, sharp teeth, and long claws were charging at people. One of them pounced like a hungry wild animal onto a man who had fallen to the ground, biting off chunks of his neck. A fountain of blood sprayed out from the man's wound as he screamed his last.

The middle-aged woman's face turned deathly pale.

"D-Don't look," she told her son.

"Mom?"

The woman turned her son's head away from the gruesome scene. Then they were running again.

A scorched smell wafted into her nose, and her heart beat so fast that she felt like it was about to explode. However, she couldn't stop running. The moment she stopped, they would become food for the monsters.

'Why is something like this happening again...?'

The memory of a dire moment from her past resurfaced—a scene of people being killed by monsters. It wasn't the first time she had experienced something like this. Five years ago on the Day of Calamity, a Gate suddenly appeared, and waves of monsters emerged from it.

It had been just as hellish back then as it was now. No, it felt much more horrifying now.

The woman muttered, "H-How could something like this..."

Black energy had flown into the area, and those who came into contact with it suddenly contorted and turned into monsters. Even the monster that she had just watched kill a man, had been a young man shopping in a supermarket before all this.

"Huff. Huff. M-Mom, I-I'm too tired. I can't run anymore."

The boy's lips were starting to turn blue. The middle-aged woman bit her lip and carried her son in her arms.

"I'm s-scared," the boy said.

"Huff, huff. Just a bit further. It's okay. Mom will protect you."

The woman kept running for her life. Running by herself was hard enough, but it was impossible to flee from those monsters while carrying her son. It did not take long before a monster had moved right behind her.

Tears dripped from the woman's eyes as she said to her son, "Y-You can run now, right? Go on ahead."

"Mom...?"

"Hurry!"

The middle-aged woman picked up a few rocks from the ground. She knew that she wouldn't be able to fight against monsters with things like these, but if she did nothing, she wouldn't be able to earn enough time for her son to escape.

'Dear God...'

The woman prayed for someone to help her. She hoped for a savior who could rescue them from this hell. She didn't need to be saved; it was enough if her son could be rescued.

"Waaaahhh! Moooom!!"

"Please, run!" the woman shouted.

She threw the rocks at the monster.

Bash!

"Grrrrrk!"

The monster's movements became slowed slightly after being hit with a rock, but that only lasted for a few moments.

Soon after, the monster screeched and leaped. Seeing the monster coming toward her, the woman screamed while raising her arms to protect her body.

Slash!

"Kiieekk!"

Right then, the monster was cleaved in two. A handsome young man wielding a blue sword had killed it.

The woman uttered, "Wh-Who..."



"Evacuate from this place quickly," the young man said softly.

The woman gulped and grabbed her son.

Kim Si-Hun—the young man who had saved the woman—stared at the streets of Isu Station, which had become like hell. It was absolute chaos; people had turned into demonic beasts and were attacking those who were still human.

Si-Hun's hands trembled.

Those demonic beasts had been humans until just a few moments ago. He wasn't sure if he should be killing them.

In his hesitation, Si-Hun recalled what Oh Kang-Woo had told him.

"Listen carefully. People who have turned into demonic beasts can never go back to normal ever again. You can just think of it as they died the moment they were exposed to demonic energy, and that energy is controlling their corpses. They're pretty much undead monsters like zombies and skeletons."

Si-Hun clenched his fists. He bit his lips so hard that blood leaked out.

"Don't hesitate. The damage will spread further each time you hesitate. Use the time you have for hesitating to keep moving. Use the time you have for being sad to swing your sword. Don't get needlessly emotional. Use that time to do as much as you possibly can."

"Okay, hyung-nim," Si-Hun replied to his memory of Kang-Woo, who wasn't with him, and continued making his way through the area.

Riiing.

[Commencing the protector's unique quest.]

[Quest Information: Kill the demonic beasts to eliminate the Rift Fragments (1 / 2789).

Reward: Extreme boost in EXP. Will be distributed among party members in the case that the quest is commenced alongside them.

P.S.: I beg of you, protector. Please put a stop to this so that an even bigger disaster does not occur.]

'This is...'

Si-Hun frowned after reading the message window.

The first thing that he noticed was the huge number of demonic beasts— 2789. It meant that the number of civilians who had turned into demonic beasts had reached four digits.

Given that Isu Station was situated in one of the most populous places in the country, that count was relatively low. However, when considering the value of each civilian's life, that was not a number that could not be taken lightly.

'P.S.?'

Kim Si-Hun tilted his head when he read the last line in the message window. It seemed as if the system had a will of its own. He had never seen anything like this in a system window before, nor had he heard about it before from other players.

'This isn't time for that.'

Regardless, he didn't have time to think about this now. Si-Hun gripped his sword tightly. The damage was increasing while he wasted time.

'Cloud Dragon Steps.'

He concentrated the Qi from his dantian at his feet. A faint haze flowed out of Si-Hun, and he shot forward, parting the haze.

Slash!

"Kiiiekk!"

Si-Hun swung his sword and split a monster in two with a single slash.

The demonic beasts weren't strong. They were only as strong as D-rank Orcs. However, that was just from Si-Hun's point of view. For ordinary people, every single demonic beast present was disaster incarnate.

'There are too many of them,' Si-Hun thought. 'I have to be faster!'

He raced through the streets and killed one demonic beast after another. Nevertheless, killing them with just one slash wasn't swift enough for him.

'Faster!'

Si-Hun's body screamed in protest at his excessive strenuous movements, but he ignored the pain and continued spilling the blood of demonic beasts. He could feel that his meridians, which were being overloaded from his Qi circulating at speeds far past the limit, were becoming distorted. Nevertheless, Si-Hun paid no mind to it.

Slash! Slaaaash!

"Kiiiekk!!"

He just kept killing more and more. He couldn't even hear what the people he'd saved said.

Si-Hun only concentrated on killing as many demonic beasts as he could. It was as if his sword and his enemies were all that existed in this world.

Riiing.

[You have reached a trance.]

[You have acquired the unique Trait 'One With the Sword!']

[You have fulfilled one of the conditions of Metamorphosis!]

The chime of bells rang noisily in his ears.

"Huff, huff," Si-Hun panted heavily.

He finally stopped for a moment and turned to look around him.

"Wh-Whoaaaa!"

"A-A hero!!"

"Thank you! Thank you very much!"

Before Si-Hun even realized it, the people he had saved had gathered behind him. They knew instinctually that the safest place was near Si-Hun.

"... Damn it," Si-Hun cursed under his breath.

It seemed like they had no intention of staying away from him even if he told them to.

Si-Hun looked over at the burning buildings. He could still hear people screaming.

'I knew it. I can't do this by myself...'

He couldn't face thousands of demonic beasts by himself.

"Si-Hun oppa!"

"Si-Hun! It's you, right, Si-Hun?"

"Tae-Soo...? Eun-Bi?"

"I'm here too."

"You too, Seol-Ah? How did you get here so fast...?" Si-Hun wondered.

Then a little girl suddenly approached him.

It was Echidna. At first glance, she looked like a cute little girl, but in reality, she was a dragon like those in myths and legends.

Si-Hun quickly realized how Kang Tae-Soo, Han Seol-Ah, and Choi Eun-Bi had been able to get here so quickly. It wasn't just the three of them though. Cha Yeon-Joo and Baek Hwa-Yeon appeared through the smoke.

"Where's Kang-Woo?" Yeon-Joo asked in a sharp voice.

"Kang-Woo hyung-nim..." Si-Hun began.

He looked at the giant Rift that had appeared in the air. The area around the Rift was covered in black energy, so they couldn't see a thing inside.

Si-Hun concluded, "He headed toward the Rift."

\* \* \*

Kang-Woo stomped on the ground and shot forward, destroying the concrete floor under him in the process. He quickly passed by scenes that were full of demonic energy. The area around the Rift was being eaten away by demonic energy. Seeing that made Kang-Woo feel like he was back in Hell, which he had spent ten painstaking millennia in.

"Ehh? If it ain't Kang-Woo? How didja get here?"

Kang-Woo saw a familiar face right by the Rift.

'Baek Kang-Hyun.'

It was Baek Kang-Hyun, Korea's unprotested number-one ranker. Not even Yeon-Joo nor Jang Hyun-Jae, the captain of Hwarang's first squadron, were a match for him.

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes as he looked around at what seemed to be the corpses of Players.

"Ya must've run all thuh way here after seein' this weird-ass Rift too. It's dangerous here, so git tuh safety. Ah'll close this Rift."

Kang-Hyun approached the Rift while laughing in his usual good-natured way.

Despite hearing what Kang-Hyun said, Kang-Woo raised his right arm without stopping his charge.

'Authority of Iron Axes.'

Demonic energy gathered in his right hand and formed a black axe. He merged the Authority of Iron Axes with the Authority of Freezing, and a suffocating chill emitted from the axe.

"Leviathan," Kang-Woo said to activate a skill.

Then he swung the axe toward Kang-Hyun.

Boom!!

There was a thunderous sound as the impact from Kang-Woo's attack sent Kang-Hyun flying backward. The latter's good-natured smile could no longer be seen behind his two arms, which he had used to blow the attack.

"... How did you know?" Kang-Hyun said ferociously.

Kang-Woo raised his axe and replied, "Because there aren't any corpses of demonic beasts in the area."

"..."

"There are corpses of Players, but not the corpses of those that killed them. There's no way a single demonic beast killed this many Players, so it was probably you."

"Wow," Kang-Hyun uttered, his eyes gleaming with great interest.

Kang-Woo rested the axe on his shoulder and said, "Stop the bullshit and put on the mask, bitch."

Chapter 90 - I'll Show You Who I Am Now (2)

"Ha... Hahahaha!" Baek Kang-Hyun burst out laughing. He nodded and conceded, "All right. Since it looks like you know everything, I guess there's no need to hide it anymore."

Kang-Hyun took out the red demon mask and put it on. There was a crazed look in his eyes as he clenched his hands into fists.

Seeing that, Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes and gripped his axe even tighter.

"Let's begin," Kang-Hyun said.

"Now we're talking," Kang-Woo replied.

There was no need to beat around the bush. Talking was pointless now that they'd confirmed that they were enemies.

Kang-Woo pulled back his arm that was holding the axe. He then stomped onto the ground with one foot and swung his arm at lightning speed.

Whish!

He threw the axe, which was covered in frigid energy. It spun incredibly fast. The moisture in the air froze along the trajectory of the axe, leaving a trail of frost in its wake.

Kang-Hyun lowered his body and tightened his fist. Demonic energy then gathered around his fist and formed a gauntlet.

The gauntlet wasn't simply demonic energy; it was materialized demonic energy. This proved that Kang-Hyun was not a madman whose mind had been eroded by demonic energy. Rather, he had perfect control over the power.

Slam!

Kang-Hyun struck the axe with an uppercut, smashing it away from him. However, doing that caused his gauntlet of demonic energy to be frozen by the frigid energy infused into the axe.

"Hmm," Kang-Hyun murmured.

There had been more power behind Kang-Woo's axe attack than Kang-Hyun had thought.

Kang-Hyun glared at the axe warily, but Kang-Woo completely disregarded Kang-Hyun's wariness. He swung his left arm at Kang-Hyun without even giving the axe any attention. As the axe disappeared, a black blade appeared on Kang-Woo's left arm, and he swung it like it was a whip.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Loud clangs rang throughout the area as Kang-Hyun's gauntlet collided against Kang-Woo's blade constantly. Huge shockwaves swept through their surroundings whenever their weapons collided. The ground cracked as if it were glass, and cars bounced like stones skipping on water. It was no exaggeration to call this a battle between two massive monsters rather than humans.

Boom!

Kang-Hyun threw a nearby truck, which weighed several tonnes, toward Kang-Woo, but the latter swiftly lengthened his blade and split the truck in two. Then Kang-Hyun used the small opening when Kang-Woo was distracted by the truck to close the distance between them. Kang-Hyun lowered his body, pulled his right fist back, and charged forward forcefully with enormous power gathered around his fist.

Nevertheless, Kang-Woo didn't dodge.

'Skybreaker.'

He merged the Authority of Titanic Might and the Authority of Shattering Air. Just like the skill's name Skybreaker suggested, Kang-Woo was gathering power strong enough to break the sky in his fist.

Kang-Hyun and Kang-Woo's punches smashed against each other.

Rumble—!

The ground underneath them crumbled, forming a giant pit; it was as if a sinkhole had occurred.

Despite that, Kang-Hyun and Kang-Woo simply jumped out of the pit and continued their battle, which consisted of movements so swift that they were difficult to follow with the naked eye.

Slide!

Then Kang-Hyun was pushed back, destroying the concrete in the path that his feet had skidded.

"..."

Kang-Hyun looked down at his trembling hands. He recalled the moment when his fist had collided with Kang-Woo's. The impact of the collision had made him feel like his entire body was shattering.

"I get it now," Kang-Hyun said, nodding in understanding. "It wasn't Cha Yeon-Joo. It was you."

"Me?" Kang-Woo asked.

"The one who has been meddling in our plans... It's not Cha Yeon-Joo. It's you."

Cha Yeon-Joo was strong—strong enough to be one of the top Players in Korea.

'But that's all,' Kang-Hyun thought.

He had never fought against Yeon-Joo, but he knew roughly how strong she was. Yeon-Joo alone wouldn't have been able to disrupt their plans.

"Who are you really?" Kang-Hyun questioned.

He looked at Kang-Woo bewilderedly.

Kang-Hyun's first thought was that the rumor that Kang-Woo had only become a Player three months ago was a lie. It was impossible for a rookie who had only awakened three months ago to possess the power that Kang-Woo had shown him.

Based on that, there weren't many conclusions that Kang-Hyun could make. Kang-Woo had to be either a Player who had been hiding his identity for a very long time or a foreign Player who had illegally acquired a local identity as Oh Kang-Woo.

Among his conjectures, Kang-Hyun thought that the one with the highest possibility of being true was of Kang-Woo being a foreign spy.

'He doesn't seem to be a World Ranker.'

The eight Players whom the world considered to be the strongest... He didn't think any of them would do something like this.

Kang-Hyun narrowed his eyes.

'But World Rankers aren't the only powerful Players out there.'

The World Rankers were just the most famous Players. There were others who were on the same level or even stronger than the World Rankers. For example, some of the cardinals in the Demon Cult were stronger than the World Rankers.

"Who knows?" Kang-Woo replied.

"Hmph. I wasn't really expecting an honest answer anyway."

Kang-Hyun snorted and got back into a fighting stance. His muscles bulged like they were about to explode.

"In that case, I will force it out of you," Kang-Hyun said.

"Try it if you can," Kang-Woo responded calmly.

Kang-Hyun frowned.

Crash!!

The two monsters clashed once again, and a huge shockwave shook the surroundings like an earthquake.

The duration of the battle was extended. The equally balanced battle of power gradually tilted in favor of one of them.

Smash!

"Kurgh!" Kang-Hyun groaned as he was pushed back.

A crack appeared in his red demon mask, and he threw it aside.

"You're strong," he remarked.

Kang-Hyun had no choice but to admit that the abnormal Player Oh Kang-Woo was stronger than him.

He laughed while thinking, 'Not again.'

Kang-Hyun recalled the memory of his loss against Fujimoto Ryoma, which had plummeted him into the depths of despair. He had once again come face-to-face with the massive wall of his limits that seemed impossible to overcome.

"How fun," Kang-Hyun remarked with a wide smile.

He then turned his eyes to the Rift. Kang-Hyun felt rather lucky to have come face-to-face with the same wall during such a crucial moment. After all, he'd sacrificed so many people for the sole purpose of surpassing that wall.

"Hehehehehehe," Kang-Hyun laughed creepily. He gazed at Kang-Woo with eyes full of madness and said, "You'll be the perfect opponent for me to fight against and test out how much power I'm able to obtain."

"...?"

Kang-Woo appeared puzzled. He couldn't understand what Kang-Hyun was saying.

"Now, come! There are enough Rift Fragments!" Kang-Hyun exclaimed with his arms wide open.

The demonic crystal that was maintaining the Rift shattered, releasing a colossal amount of demonic energy. Simultaneously, black energy flowed out of the people who had turned into demonic beasts and then into the Rift. The amount of demonic energy in each person had been very small, but its cumulative amount was nothing to scoff at since there were thousands of demonic beasts.

Kang-Woo's expression hardened.

Kang-Hyun laughed, "Hahahaha! Now, come to me!"

The result of his plan that had sacrificed thousands of lives was about to appear in front of him.

Rumble—!!

Powerful demonic energy flowed out from the Rift and entered Kang-Hyun. His crazed laughter grew louder.

Crunch!!

Kang-Hyun's bones and muscles contorted noisily as giant bat wings broke through his skin and spread open from his back. His muscles expanded unnaturally, and his skin turned red. He grew sharp teeth and a long tail.

Lastly...

Crack!

Two horns emerged from his forehead.

"Grrrrrrr," Kang-Hyun growled.

His now yellow eyes, which resembled a reptile's, were focused on Kang-Woo.

[Excellent,] Kang-Hyun said.

He trembled, thrilled by the feeling of his boundless power. It was a formidable power that went beyond the wall—power that he could never have even dared to imagine until now.

[Kehe... Kahahahahahaha!]

Kang-Hyun laughed like a maniac once again.

He did not feel an ounce of remorse even though he had sacrificed thousands of lives to fulfill his plan. Rather, he thought that sacrificing those worthless lives had been more than worth it to obtain such limitless power.

After all, life was a survival of the fittest; the strong preyed upon the weak. This was the providence of nature and the principle of the world.

Thousands of lives were meaningless before Kang-Hyun's obsession with power.

- Where is... this place? a quiet voice rang out in Kang-Hyun's mind.

[It seems you've come to.]

- Who are you?

[My name is Baek Kang-Hyun. I am your host and the one that will become you.]

- What does that mean?

A smile appeared on Kang-Hyun's face.

[You will find out in due time.]

He turned to face Kang-Woo.

Kang-Woo stared in disbelief at Kang-Hyun, who had turned into a demon.

"How...? Is something like this even possible?" Kang-Woo questioned.

He knew unconsciously what Kang-Hyun had done, but he never had imagined it to be possible. Kang-Woo felt as if he'd been bashed on the head multiple times.



'He summoned a demon into him,' Kang-Woo thought.

He wasn't sure if Kang-Hyun had summoned a demon's soul or just its body. He also wasn't sure if doing either one would have the same effect as fusing with a demon.

The one thing that Kang-Woo was sure of was that Kang-Hyun had attempted something absolutely insane... and it worked.

[Now, why don't we continue where we left off?!.]

Kang-Hyun stomped on the ground and broke into a run. Powerful demonic energy surged from him. It was so dense that it made Kang-Woo tremble for a moment.

It seemed like the demon Kang-Hyun had summoned into him was quite a powerful one.

'Or maybe fusing your body with a demon makes you stronger,' Kang-Woo thought.

This was Kang-Woo's first time seeing something like that. He had never even imagined that something like that was possible, so he wasn't sure what effect it had.

'That's not important.'

Nevertheless, it wasn't important how that was possible or what effect it had...

Kang-Woo glared at Kang-Hyun, who roared while charging toward him. Then Kang-Woo stretched both of his arms out to his side and spread demonic energy throughout his body. He took a very deep breath and focused on spreading his demonic energy.

[Die!]

Kang-Hyun threw a punch at Kang-Woo. After having transformed into a demon that was almost three meters tall, Kang-Hyun's fist alone was a powerful weapon.

Kang-Woo rolled on the ground to dodge the punch and stood back up.

"Kraken's Rage."

Smash!

He punched Kang-Hyun's head with a fist full of demonic energy.