

M. in Hell 91

Chapter 91 - I'll Show You Who I Am Now (3)

Slam!

Oh Kang-Woo punched Baek Kang-Hyun's head with a fist full of demonic energy. The blow sent Kang-Hyun flying backward. He crashed into the concrete floor, destroying it as he slid across it.

[Kuh... You sure are full of surprises.]

Even after having acquired a powerful body through fusing with a demon, Kang-Hyun's head still rang from the force of Kang-Woo's punch. He couldn't figure out where someone as powerful as Kang-Woo had appeared from.

[I guess I'll just figure out your surprises until you have none left.]

Kang-Hyun laughed as explosive power surged from within him.

He didn't look like a human anymore, but he didn't care. Nor did he care that he had become immortal and no longer required the consumption of food and water. Kang-Hyun only cared about power—the boundless strength that having a demon's body had brought him.

"So damn sturdy," Kang-Woo remarked with a frown.

His hand was radiating in pain from the punch. It had been a clean punch, but he hadn't been able to deal much damage. That was how strong Kang-Hyun's demon body was.

'I'll have to finish this within a minute.'

His coat's special effect Kraken's Rage, which raised his demonic energy stat, only lasted for a minute. It was a bit too short for him to be able to neutralize Kang-Hyun.

"Hmmm," Kang-Woo groaned softly.

He wasn't cornered. He had a method of turning the situation to his overwhelming favor, but...

'Not yet.'

That method was far too risky, so he couldn't just use it willy-nilly.

'Anyway, I'll try to finish this within a minute for now.'

Kang-Woo lowered his posture.

If he wanted to neutralize Kang-Hyun in a minute, there was only one thing that he could do.

"Fuuuu."

Kang-Woo took a deep breath, gathered his focus, and drew out his demonic energy.

"Bident."

He merged the Authority of Dark Spears and the Authority of Hellfire and created a spear that burned in black flames.

Kang-Woo infused more demonic energy into it, and the two prongs of the spear twisted, creating a winding spear tip.

'Gáe Bulg,' he called the name of the spear in his mind.

He gripped the spear that he'd made with three different Authorities. The demonic energy inside him was depleting at an alarmingly fast rate.

Nevertheless, Kang-Woo poised himself to attack.

[You're truly something else.]

Kang-Hyun's nervousness was visible in his eyes. He could instinctively tell that a fearsome amount of energy was infused within Kang-Woo's spear.

[Not bad.]

Kang-Hyun smiled. Kang-Woo was indeed the perfect opponent for him to test out his overflowing power.

[You're just perfect!] Kang-Hyun screamed madly.

He spread his arms out, and demonic energy gathered around his fists, creating gauntlets.

Boom!

The two monsters, Kang-Hyun and Kang-Woo, charged at each other once again.

"Hup!"

Kang-Woo lowered his body and swung the Gáe Bulg as if he were swiping the floor. Kang-Hyun stomped onto the ground and jumped, but Kang-Woo changed the direction of the Gáe Bulg and thrust it upward at Kang-Hyun in the air.

[How persistent!]

Kang-Hyun put his two fists together and slammed them down toward Kang-Woo. The edge of the Gáe Bulg and the gauntlets clashed, producing an immense shockwave that pushed Kang-Woo backward.

"Kurgh," Kang-Woo groaned.

He convulsed, and his sight became blurry.

"Ptooy," Kang-Woo spat out some blood.

His sight quickly returned to normal.

'I'm no match for him in strength.'

Kang-Woo wouldn't be able to handle Kang-Hyun's sheer strength without the Authority of Titanic Might. However, if he used it, he wouldn't be able to maintain the Gáe Bulg. He would lose his only way of dealing a fatal blow to Kang-Hyun.

Crash! Boom!

The breathtaking exchange of blows continued. In every passing second, each of them dealt dozens of life-threatening blows that narrowly missed the other person.

At a glance, they seemed evenly matched, but Kang-Woo would be the one at a disadvantage as more time passed.

'Five seconds left.'

There wasn't much time left. Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes. It was time to make a decision.

He pulled the Gáe Bulg back, turned his body halfway, and lowered his stance. Kang-Woo took a powerful step forward and thrust the Gáe Bulg at Kang-Hyun.

[No, you don't!]

Kang-Hyun reached for Kang-Woo, but the latter extended his non-dominant arm toward Kang-Hyun's hand. Kang-Woo was hell-bent on landing this blow, even if he had to use his arm as a shield.

Kang-Hyun smiled. He grabbed Kang-Woo's arm with the demonic energy gauntlet and...

"Guh?!" Kang-Woo grunted in confusion.

His strength was leaving him at a drastic rate. The Gáe Bulg, which he had aimed at Kang-Hyun's neck, turned into black smoke and dissipated into thin air.

[Hahaha! You fell for it! I knew you would do that since you were in such a rush to attack me!]

"What... did you do?" Kang-Woo asked, frowning.

The moment that Kang-Hyun's gauntlet wrapped around Kang-Woo's arm, Kang-Woo suddenly lost control over his demonic energy. It was as if a mana restraint had been put on him. He was confused by the unexpected turn of events.

Kang-Hyun laughed in a relaxed manner.

[This is what's called a demon's Authority.]

"...Authority?"

[Yes. The power of an Authority.]

Kang-Hyun raised his gauntlet with a dazed look as if he were drunk.

[Anyone who is touched by this gauntlet that's infused with the Authority of Sealing cannot circulate their power.]

"That means..."

[Yes. You are unable to use your powers as a Player.]

Kang-Woo tried to move his demonic energy with a stiff expression, but it didn't budge. In addition to the powers he'd gained as Player, he had the power that he'd accumulated in Hell, but it seemed like that was sealed as well.

Kang-Woo was now no different from the ordinary human being he had been before falling into Hell.

Bash!

"Kurgh!"

A light kick from Kang-Hyun sent Kang-Woo tumbling pathetically to the ground. Blood spewed out from his mouth, and his sight became blurry.

[Hahahaha! Serves you right for being so arrogant as if the entire world was in your hands!]

Kang-Hyun laughed loudly and grinned as he looked down at Kang-Woo on the floor.

[Yes. Kissing the ground like that is a good look for you.]

Kang-Woo tried to force himself up, but the gauntlet wrapped around his left arm was extremely heavy. It felt as if a giant boulder was pressing down on his arm now that he couldn't use demonic energy.

'This is the worst.'

The situation was worse than when he'd first returned to Earth. At least he had been able to use demonic energy back then.

Kang-Woo turned his gaze to the gauntlet on his arm. He needed to find a way to free himself from it. He tried to pull it off with his right hand, but the gauntlet imprisoning his left arm did not budge in the slightest. Kang-Woo even used his legs, but the result was the same.

[Haha. Once on, there is no way to take it off.]

Kang-Hyun kicked Kang-Woo again while laughing. Kang-Woo rolled on the ground and coughed out more blood.

Then Kang-Hyun walked over to Kang-Woo and grabbed him by the collar and lifted him from the ground. Kang-Hyun was over three meters tall, so Kang-Woo's body was raised high into the air.

[I know arrogant pricks like you very well.]

"..."

[You morons believe the entire world is yours. You're arrogant, rude, and vulgar.]

Kang-Hyun's gaze, which was filled with anger and resentment, wasn't targeted at Kang-Woo.

[It's time for you to pay the price.]

Kang-Hyun trembled with excitement.

He recalled the name of the person who had made him experience the pathetic taste of defeat. Fujimoto Ryoma was the man who had thrown Kang-Hyun's life, which had been on a fast track to success until the World Ranker evaluation, straight into the gutter. The thought of stepping all over that man made Kang-Hyun want to dance in excitement.

Fwoosh!

Kang-Hyun threw Kang-Woo by the collar, sending him flying over to where the corpses of Players were sprawled.

[Where has that arrogant attitude of yours gone? Huh?] Kang-Hyun mocked Kang-Woo.

He felt refreshed seeing Kang-Woo roll on the ground pathetically.

[Let's end this. It was rather fun.]

"..."

Kang-Woo looked up at Kang-Hyun in silence, which just made the latter laugh.

"Kang-Woo!" Echidna called out urgently as she emerged from the smoke at that moment.

Upon seeing Kang-Woo on the floor and the demon who was looking down at him, Echidna quickly figured out what had happened.

"Get away from Kang-Woo!"

Echidna's eyes widened in anger. She tried to draw out her powers, but...

"Huh?"

Just like Kang-Woo, the demonic energy inside her did not budge. After all, the source of Echidna's power was Kang-Woo's demonic energy, so her power had been sealed along with his.

"K-Kang-Woo."

Echidna's face turned pale.

[You're the little girl who was sitting next to him.]

Kang-Hyun focused his gaze on Echidna and approached her while snickering.

"Kyaa!"

Kang-Hyun grabbed Echidna with his giant hand. She punched his hand with her little fists to no avail.

[What a cutie you are,] Kang-Hyun remarked.

He laughed at her attacks, which weren't strong enough to even tickle him. Then Kang-Hyun gradually tightened his grip around her.

[You seem to be fairly close to this girl... I wonder how you'll react from seeing her body explode in front of your very eyes.]

"Let me go! Only Kang-Woo... can touch—!"

Echidna desperately struggled against Kang-Hyun's grasp. Kang-Hyun laughed out loud once again.

Kang-Woo glared silently at Baek Kang-Hyun.

He grabbed a sword from one of the corpses sprawled on the ground.

[Hahahaha! Do you seriously think you'll be able to face me when you can't even use your powers?!] Kang-Hyun mocked Kang-Woo's struggle.

Nevertheless, Kang-Woo just ignored Kang-Hyun's words and grabbed the sword in a reverse grip.

"You asked me who I was earlier, didn't you?" Kang-Woo said.

He swung the sword, but he wasn't trying to attack Kang-Hyun. Instead, Kang-Woo swung the sword down his left arm, which was locked by the gauntlet.

However, Kang-Woo currently possessed the physical strength of an average male adult, so he wasn't able to cut his arm clean off with just one swing. Nonetheless, he didn't care.

He swung down the now broken sword as if it were an axe and cut into his left arm. Blood spewed out. The skin on his left arm was sliced open, and his red flesh was exposed. His muscles were cut, and his bones were broken.

Rather than cutting off his arm, Kang-Woo seemed to be hacking at it.

[What are you...]

Kang-Hyun's eyes widened in shock.

Kang-Woo didn't stop there.

Crack! Crack!

Glistening bits of bloody bone and flesh splattered across the ground. A horrible pain spread up Kang-Woo's arm, but he ignored it.

After being mangled, his arm was now very loose. Kang-Woo pierced through it with the broken blade and twisted his body as hard as he could. His muscles were ripped apart. Blood poured out from the mangled blood vessels, and the flesh that was still connected to the mangled region was forcibly ripped away.

Then Kang-Woo's left arm, still covered in the gauntlet, fell away from the rest of his body.

"I'll show you who I am now."

Kang-Woo smiled, baring his white teeth.

Chapter 92 - I'll Show You Who I Am Now (4)

[Ha... Hahaha! D-Do you think that changes anything?!] Baek Kang-Hyun shouted.

He was trying to look calm, but he couldn't hide his surprise behind laughs.

'Crazy son of a bitch,' Kang-Hyun thought.

It wasn't easy to cut off a person's arm. Bones were so hard that they needed to be broken, by slamming down on them with a hammer for example. Meanwhile, the muscles and the flesh needed to be crudely cut like a tough piece of meat.

A person had to be out of their mind to cut off their arm in that way. Yet, this guy had done exactly that... without even screaming.

'But still, nothing will change!'

It was true that Kang-Hyun was momentarily overwhelmed by the sight of Oh Kang-Woo mangling his own arm. However, when Kang-Hyun thought rationally about it, he realized he had no reason to fear.

The Authority of Sealing was no longer in effect now that the gauntlet was no longer on Kang-Woo, but he had lost an arm in exchange. Considering how fatal it was for a warrior to lose their limb in battle, Kang-Hyun still had an overwhelming advantage over Kang-Woo.

"Well, I guess we'll see soon enough," Kang-Woo said, clenching his severed left arm.

He could use demonic energy again, but just like Kang-Hyun said, nothing had changed. No, Kang-Woo was now far worse off compared to before. He'd used up the special effect Kraken's Rage, and he'd lost an arm. Moreover, he'd used three different Authorities simultaneously, so he didn't have much demonic energy left.

'I guess I have no choice,' Kang-Woo thought, letting out a deep sigh.

He had nothing else to rely on anymore. He did not want to use that method since it was far too risky, but he no longer had any other way out.

[Hmph, what can you do with a body like that?]

Kang-Hyun violently threw Echidna away from him. Echidna had regained her power now that Kang-Woo had recovered his demonic energy, so she landed on the ground lightly using magic.

"I'll protect you, Kang-Woo," Echidna said as she stood in front of Kang-Woo.

However, Kang-Woo grabbed her slender shoulders and said, "I'll do the rest from here."

"Kang-Woo...?"

"Stay still."

Kang-Woo gave Echidna a forced command, rendering her unable to move. A summoned beast was unable to defy their master's command.

Echidna looked up at Kang-Woo while biting her lip, looking like she was about to cry. Kang-Woo ignored her and kept walking forward.

"Well, I knew that I'd have to use it one day," he said.

Kang-Woo placed his right hand over his chest.

He often used Authorities like Blades, Haste, Dark Spears, and many others that were simple and effective, but those weren't the Authorities that best suited him. There was one Authority that suited him more than any other.

"Authority of Predation."

Kang-Woo closed his eyes and focused. The blurry image in his mind turned clear.

'Ten Thousand Demon Core.'

A giant sea of demonic energy spread before his eyes. In that sea, there were three doors. Kang-Woo approached the smallest of the three. He grabbed the doorknob. His hands were shaking a bit.

The giant sea behind him formed a massive wave that could devour him whole. He only hesitated for a moment. Then he gripped the doorknob even tighter.

Kang-Woo opened the door, and a sea of demonic energy rushed out through it.

Ten Thousand Demon Core...

First Door, open.

The blood pouring out of his severed arm turned black. As the sticky black blood dripped down to the ground, his skin melted. His whole body melted; his chest, neck, shoulders, arms, and legs, were all replaced by black liquid.

[What the...]

Kang-Hyun's expression hardened as he watched the grotesque scene. He felt an ominous chill run down the back of his neck. Kang-Hyun couldn't help but think that something had gone wrong.

'What is that?' he thought.

Kang-Woo had turned into a giant blob of black mucus. He looked more horrifying than Kang-Hyun, who had turned into a demon.

'I don't know what's going on, but...'

There was only one thing Kang-Hyun should be doing now. He clenched his fists, took a deep breath, and concentrated demonic energy on his fists. New gauntlets quickly formed around his fists.

Now fully prepared to fight, he stomped on the ground. The giant three-meter-tall demon shot toward Kang-Woo at a frightening speed.

[Haap!]

Kang-Hyun punched Kang-Woo's mucous body. The punch made a giant hole in Kang-Woo, and parts of his slimy body splattered all over.

Kang-Hyun laughed, [Hahahaha! I was wondering what you were doing, but you just turned into slime?! Your body exploded!]

That one attack had blown away half of Kang-Woo's body. Kang-Woo was now far easier to fight than when he had that dark-red spear with him.

[Hey! Fight back, at the very least!] Kang-Hyun exclaimed as if washing away the uneasiness in his mind.

Seeing half of Kang-Woo's body explode, Echidna turned pale and tried to approach him.

She called out, "K-Kang-Woo!"

However, she couldn't move because of his order.

Echidna anxiously bit her lips, but her anxiety only lasted for a moment.

[Huh...?]

Grrrrrk.

Something happened. Kang-Woo's body, which had been blown in half, gained back its form.

Some of the sticky black mucus crawled up Kang-Hyun's fist, and something appeared from within it.

[A mouth...?]

It was a mouth baring sharp teeth. Furthermore, there was more than just one mouth. Hundreds of mouths appeared simultaneously from the mucus stuck on Kang-Hyun's arm.

[What the hell is th—]

Crunch!

[AARRGGHH!!]

A painful scream emerged from Kang-Hyun's mouth.

The mouths created from the mucus bit off his flesh, each one taking off about two fingers worth of flesh. Considering Kang-Hyun's huge body, that amount was nothing, but it was a completely different story if there were hundreds of mouths doing the same thing.

Crunch! Crunch! Crunch!

Kang-Hyun's skin was ripped apart, and mouthfuls of flesh fell from his body. The sharp teeth dug even deeper, piercing into his muscles. Kang-Hyun quickly used his other arm to shake off the mucus, but they did not budge.

Then Kang-Hyun focused demonic energy into his other fist and struck Kang-Woo's mucous body.

Splat!

The mucus burst from just one punch. However, a blob of the mucus splattered onto Kang-Hyun's eye.

[N-No w—]

Crunch!

[Aaarrggghhh!]

A mouth had formed inside the blob of mucus and devoured his right eye. Mind-numbing pain spread throughout Kang-Hyun's whole body.

[Wh-What the hell are these?!]

Kang-Hyun had never heard about something like this, nor had he ever imagined it. Was it a monster? A demon? He had no idea how to classify it. The fear of the unknown dominated his mind.

He stomped on the ground while struggling desperately.

[I-I will not be defeated by a mere slime!]

Kang-Hyun thrashed about violently and swung his fists, but it was useless. He tried to brush the mucus off, but it only made the mucus spread even more across his body. He ripped apart parts of his flesh that the mouths were devouring, but they instead stuck to the hand that he had used to rip off the flesh.

Kang-Hyun focused his mind and gathered all of his demonic energy into one place.

[Haaaaap!]

He clenched his hands into tight fists and let the compressed demonic energy burst.

It was as if a huge explosion had occurred; shards of rock scattered, and a nearby car bounced away as if it were a stone skipping on water.

However...

[A-Aaaahhhh...]

Kang-Hyun still couldn't free himself from the black mucus. Rather, the black mucus grew bigger from having greedily devoured the demonic energy that he had released.

The black mucus soon covered Kang-Hyun's whole body. His face turned pale.

[N-No, d—]

Crunch! Crunch!

Thousands of mouths appeared from within the mucus and used their sharp teeth to devour him. There was nothing Kang-Hyun could do. He kept trying to rid himself of the mucus, but it was like trying to shake off water while fully submerged in it.

He was completely covered in the mucus and felt like he'd been thrown into a lake full of piranhas.

- What is happening? a low-pitched voice said inside Kang-Hyun's head.

It was the voice of the demon he'd summoned into his body.

[H-Help me.]

- Help you...? What is going o—

Kang-Hyun synchronized his consciousness with the demon's. There was a risk that the demon could take over Kang-Hyun's body if they synchronized consciousness too early, but Kang-Hyun had no other choice.

Regardless, the result was the same.

- Gaaaaahhhhh!!

The painful screams of the demon who had synchronized his consciousness with Kang-Hyun echoed throughout his mind.

After realizing what the situation was through Kang-Hyun's eyes, the demon shouted in despair, - Wh-Why?! Why did you fight this monster?!!

[Monster?]

- Argh, you idiot! You fool! You'd have been better off fighting one of the princes! Bael, Satan, anyone!

It was a desperate cry from the demon.

Kang-Hyun was taken aback by the demon trembling in fear.

[Wh-What are you talking about? Are you saying he's as strong as the seven princes of Hell?]

- The seven princes? The seven princes, you say?! Wake up, human! the demon's desperate cry continued. - The seven princes are no more! They were all devoured by that monster!!

[What are you talking ab—]

- That is the demon of demons, the predator of predators! Why don't you know that, you stupid human?!

Kang-Hyun felt the demon's fear through the synchronized consciousness.

- That monster is the demon king!

It was a cry that came from the demon's soul.

[...]

Kang-Hyun was confused by what the demon was saying. Why would the demon king, the most powerful demon who ruled the Nine Hells, be here?

'There's no way,' he thought.

It was impossible. It simply couldn't be true.

Kang-Hyun's sensations gradually disappeared from his body as it was getting devoured by the countless mouths. He could no longer feel pain. His fading consciousness and the little that remained of his body were all he had left.

The black mucus scattered away and then gathered in front of him again. Something appeared from within the mucus. It was a giant mouth big enough to devour the three-meter-tall Kang-Hyun whole.

The mouth opened up wide, and its sharp teeth chewed up what was left of Kang-Hyun.

Crunch.

With a chilling sound, Kang-Hyun vanished into the giant mouth.

Chapter 93 - The Way to Achieve the Ultimate Demonic Body (1)

Oh Kang-Woo opened his eyes.

He couldn't see anything. It was as if the entire world had been encroached upon by darkness.

He moved his hand, twisted his body, and struggled.

He felt something sticky pulling him as if he'd fallen into a swamp.

'Where...'

His memories were blurry as if he were high on drugs. He turned his head and saw something being absorbed into the darkness.

'Baek Kang-Hyun.'

A faint memory came to mind.

He remembered seeing a giant mouth devour Kang-Hyun whole. Kang-Hyun had been eaten pathetically after struggling and resisting like a madman.

While seeing Kang-Hyun sinking deep into the sea, Kang-Woo realized what he needed to do right now.

'I have to get out of here.'

He raised his head. He still couldn't see anything around him.

He kicked his feet violently.

Up, up.

He felt his body going up little by little.

Crunch!

'Kurgh.'

Something bit his ankle.

He looked down.

A giant mouth bit his ankle and pulled him down. He sank back down.

Kang-Woo twisted his body and pulled on his ankle with all his might. It was cut off by the giant mouth.

'Now.'

He flapped both arms, twisted his body, and kicked with his remaining foot to escape the darkness.

Mouths—those of predators with sharp teeth—appeared all around him.

His entire body was bitten, his arms were cut, and half his face was bitten off.

Kang-Woo, however, still didn't stop.

He knew better than anyone that if he stopped here, he would never be able to go back.

He raised his head. There was a wide-open door within the nothingness.

He turned toward the door.

The giant mouth had devoured his lower body.

He desperately struggled while screaming, but the mouths devouring him did not easily let him go. His consciousness started to fade, and his sight became blurry.

'Ah...'

He couldn't remember where he was or who he was. His name, age, and past were all a blur. He thought that it would be comfortable if he were to just sink deeper into the sea.

"Kang... Woo!"

He heard a voice. It was the voice of a girl.

His fading consciousness regained form.

'Focus.'

He bit his lip. He had to remember his name. He had to think about who he was, why he was here, and how to get out.

'I am...'

He extended his hand and grabbed the doorknob of the wide-open door. He pulled with all his might.

The door closed.

* * *

"Huff! Huff! Huff!!"

"K-Kang-Woo! Are you okay?"

He regained consciousness. As he opened his eyes and panted heavily, he saw Echidna grabbing his face.

"Where..."

He looked around. It was the place where he'd fought Kang-Hyun.

"What happened to the Rift?"

"... It disappeared when the demon died."

"Fuu. Then I guess we've put out the biggest fire."

Kang-Woo felt relieved, and he collapsed to the floor.

Echidna looked down at him while trembling. Transparent tears dripped down her cheeks.

"Kang-Woo... you almost disappeared."

"..."

"I could tell since I'm your summoned beast. Kang-Woo, you almost died."

"Risking your life in situations like this is the cool thing to do."

"Don't joke...!" Echidna angrily glared at him. "You said that you wouldn't let me be all alone anymore...!"

He extended his hands and caressed her cheeks wet with tears.

"I'm sorry."

"Sniff. Waaaaahhhh!"

Echidna hugged him.

Kang-Woo gently patted her head and fell into thought.

'I knew opening the door now was too risky.'

The act of opening the door was a way to force the Ten Thousand Demon Core, which could be considered a sea of demonic energy, out of control.

Even while in Hell, he always saved it as the very last resort.

It wasn't hard to see why.

'It could devour me.'

The Ten Thousand Demon Core was colossal, and even Kang-Woo didn't know everything about it. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to call it, with the demonic energies of hundreds of thousands of demons intermingling, another world.

Forcing something so colossal to run out of control came with equally colossal risks.

'But I never had a problem with just the First Door.'

After the Gaia System had sealed his power, the Ten Thousand Demon Core seemed to have become harder to control.

'I shouldn't use it unless absolutely necessary.'

The risk had been bigger than he had expected. If it hadn't been for Echidna's faint voice, it wouldn't have been weird for him to have been devoured by the sea of demonic energy.

He would have to refrain from using it until he recovered his original power and could better control the Ten Thousand Demon Core.

'I can't die after all I've gone through.'

Kang-Woo looked down at Echidna, who was hugging him.

Although it hadn't been long since he had returned to Earth, many things had happened. He'd been able to experience the joys of eating and taking a break. He'd also gotten important people and those he had to protect.

He had ended up getting reasons to not die.

Ring.

[You have successfully defeated Amdusias, a demon of the Eighth Hell.]

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

[Demonic Energy has risen by 5.]

[You have acquired the Authority of Sealing.]

"Wow."

Five Demonic Energy stat points!

It was a lot considering that his Demonic Energy stat was now similar to the main stat of a Player whose level was in the mid-nineties. It was as if he could permanently use Kraken's Rage, which he could only use for one minute.

'It finally surpassed 100.'

Kang-Woo checked his Status Window.

His Demonic Energy stat was at 103!

He'd only been able to reach three digits after using Kraken's Rage, but now it was his baseline stat value.

'I heard the minimum requirement to be a World Ranker was to have a three-digit stat.'

The minimum requisite for taking the World Ranker evaluation was to reach Level 85 and have a three-digit stat.

At just Level 59, Kang-Woo had achieved a three-digit stat, which was only barely possible even after reaching Level 89, the final point of one's Ninth Awakening.

In the end, what gave Players power wasn't their level but their stats.

Kang-Woo was currently as strong as a World Ranker. No, considering how many Authorities he could use, it wouldn't be weird if he were stronger than them.

And in only three months, no less.

'I also got an OP new Authority.'

The Authority of Sealing. It had been powerful enough to seal Kang-Woo's power. The only flaw was that the Authority had to be in contact with the target's body, but its effect more than made up for its flaw.

'I'll make very good use of this.'

Kang-Woo smiled, satisfied.

The things he'd obtained were so great that it almost made him forget that he didn't manage to break through the level cap.

"Kang-Woo!"

"Kang-Woo hyung-nim!"

"Hey! Are you okay?!"

Han Seol-Ah, Kim Si-Hun, and Cha Yeon-Joo ran to him. Behind them, he could also see Kang Tae-Soo, Baek Hwa-Yeon, and Choi Eun-Bi.

"Yeah." Kang-Woo nodded and tried to stand up. "Huh?"

However, Kang-Woo staggered and fell to the ground.

"Kang-Woo!!"

Yeon-Joo extended her hands. The chains that emerged from her bracelet wrapped around his body.

"Just stay down if you're tired! Don't make people worry!" she said while glaring at him. "And who told you to go in there by yourself?! You were the one who told us to be careful of the Demon Cult! Why did you fight by yourself?"

Kang-Woo smirked after hearing her angry voice. The sincere concern hidden behind anger made him feel good.

"I mean, 'all's well that ends well,' right?"

"That's not the important thing here! Do you have any idea how—"

"Thank you for worrying about me."

Kang-Woo placed his hand on top of Yeon-Joo's head.

She moved back in surprise.

"I-I wasn't worried!" Yeon-Joo shouted, her face as red as her hair.

Kang-Woo didn't answer, and he lay down on the floor. He was swept with fatigue that weighed down on his body.

Seol-Ah got close to Kang-Woo and placed her hand on top of his chest.

"Healing Light."

"Whoa..."

Although the fatigue hadn't completely vanished, his body didn't hurt as much as before.

"The effect is incredible."

"It's because I got my Fifth Awakening."

"What? You've already reached Level 40?"

He had no right saying this, but their leveling speed was abnormally fast.

"Si-Hun received a unique quest, and our levels shot up after completing it," Seol-Ah explained.

"A unique quest?"

"I will tell you later, hyung-nim. I think it would be better for you to get some rest for the time being."

"Hmm..."

Kang-Woo nodded.

'I feel like I'm about to pass out anyway.'

Although he felt better after receiving the Healing Light, he still felt tired.

"Are you still having trouble moving?"

"A little."

Kang-Woo nodded.

While smiling kindly, Seol-Ah picked him up. Although she looked like a frail girl, she was still a Player. Her basic stats were far beyond a normal human's. Lifting an average man was nothing for her.

"I will carry you home."

"This is a bit...'

Kang-Woo smiled awkwardly.

Leaving her strength aside, it felt extremely weird for an adult man to be carried by a delicate woman.

'I'll ask her to put me down.'

Although he had trouble moving, he could at least walk.

"Thanks, but I think—"

Squish.

At that moment, he felt something soft against his stomach—a sensation that couldn't be described with words.

It was her chest, which Eun-Bi had nicknamed Cerberus.

Kang-Woo widened his eyes.

"Do you think you can walk?"

"U-Uhhh..."

His instincts were about to overtake his reason. It did not take long for him to think.

While coughing, Kang-Woo answered while groaning, "I don't think so. Man, it sure can't be helped. It's a bit of a weird sight to see, but since I can't move an inch—"

"In that case, I will carry you, hyung-nim!" said Tae-Soo.

"Huh?"

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

"Hahaha! I'm sure you'll be more comfortable in my arms than my sister-in-law's!"

'Stay away from me.'

"As the little brother, I can't stay still when my sworn brother can barely walk!"

'No, please just stay still, man.'

"Hyung-nim! Come jump into my arms!"

'Go away.'

Tae-Soo picked up Kang-Woo.

Kang-Woo was met with the thick stench of sweat and the sensation of muscles that were as hard as stone.

"Hyung-nim! We should take you back home first and foremost! No need to worry! I will take full responsibility for taking you there!"

"No... Tae-Soo, your house is in the complete opposite direction, so..."

"Hahahaha! That doesn't matter to me as long as it is for you, hyung-nim!!"

"Put me down for a second. Now that I think about it, I think I can walk."

"You shouldn't overwork yourself! Stay still!"

Tae-Soo held Kang-Woo even tighter.

Kang-Woo was soaked with Tae-Soo's sweat.

'This ain't it.'

Kang-Woo's face turned pale. He reached out toward Seol-Ah, but she was too far away.

'This really ain't it...'

Chapter 94 - The Way to Achieve the Ultimate Demonic Body (2)

It had been three days since the Rift had appeared in the middle of Seoul.

It was obvious, but the country was turned upside down after the Isu Station incident. No, it wasn't just within the country but the entire world.

The Demon Cult...

It was the incident that made their existence known.

The world leaders weren't that surprised. They had already known about their existence and how dangerous they could be.

Most countries ordered the elimination of the Demon Cult, but it wasn't that effective.

The Demon Cult was strong and secretive.

Now that massive armies had been switched to small forces of Players in war, it was difficult to hold a large-scale investigation.

Rather than being more secretive, the Demon Cult no longer found the need to stay hidden and became even more active, causing chaos throughout the world.

Compared to other countries, Korea, the starting point of this global chaos which was similar to the chaos during the Day of Calamity five years ago, was rather peaceful. This was because Oh Kang-Woo had pretty much severed the root of the Demon Cult in Korea.

While the world's attention was focused on Korea, big forces were starting to move.

* * *

"I can finally move around comfortably."

A house located in Seoul station...

Kang-Woo, able to get out of bed after three days, stretched. He found it hard to recover from the side effects of using the Ten Thousand Demon Core, so he'd spent the last three days sleeping.

Kang-Woo, however, had finally fully recovered.

Click.

"Kang-Woo, why are you up?" asked Echidna.

"Because I'm feeling better. I think I can move around again."

"Don't push yourself too hard, Kang-Woo. It's okay if you rest a bit more. I'll take care of you."

Echidna grabbed Kang-Woo and tried to make him go to bed again.

Kang-Woo smiled bitterly and shook his head.

"No, I'm okay. I actually feel better than before after getting tons of rest."

"..."

Echidna looked a bit disappointed by how full of energy Kang-Woo was. She thought that the times of her being stuck next to him while taking care of him for the past three days had ended.

"Kang-Woo, don't push yourself anymore."

"Okay."

"That's what you always say, but you do it anyway," Echidna complained adorably and grabbed Kang-Woo's clothes. "What are we doing today, Kang-Woo?"

"Hmm. First, I want to get a grasp of the current situation."

He had more or less heard things, but not much on the details.

Kang-Woo opened the door and went to the living room.

"Hm?"

He saw Cha Yeon-Joo drinking tea with Han Seol-Ah.

"Huh? Why are you up already?" Yeon-Joo asked.

"Because I'm feeling better. More importantly, what are you doing here?"

"Hmph. What's wrong with taking a break in a house that I bought with my own money? Got a problem?"

Seol-Ah lightly giggled at Yeon-Joo's words.

"Yeon-Joo stops by every day because she's worried about you."

"Th-that's not true! Don't say weird things!" Yeon-Joo shouted, flustered.

Kang-Woo smirked.

"I was about to call you anyway. Perfect timing."

"You were?"

"Yeah. I wanted to know what's going on around the world."

"Hmph. Why don't you go back to bed like a good patient?"

"I told you that I'm all good now."

Yeon-Joo sighed and took a sip of tea. "First, Hanul Guild has been officially disbanded."

"And the remnants of the Demon Cult?"

"We arrested them, but... they all turned into monsters before we could interrogate them."

"Hmm."

Kang-Woo gulped. It seemed as if someone had made sure that information wouldn't leak.

"What about the cult itself?"

"We've been getting reports from all around the world, but... none of the cult's branches in other countries have blatantly shown themselves as they did in Korea. The chaos in Korea still hasn't died down yet."

Thousands of lives had been sacrificed. There was no way that the chaos would be resolved so quickly.

Kang-Woo nodded and began reading the news on his smartphone.

[Demon Cult, the global pseudo-religious organization, who are they and what is their goal...?]

[A hero has appeared! Attention to the Sword Dragon, Kim Si-Hun!]

[People continue to testify about the Sword Dragon Kim Si-Hun... A "supernova" has risen.]

[Creation of the Kim Si-Hun fan club. Sword Dragon Kim Si-Hun receives massive global attention.]

"I only see news about Si-Hun."

"Well, he was the first one to arrive and kill the demonic beasts to rescue civilians during the Isu Station incident."

Si-Hun was more handsome than the average celebrity and had saved ordinary civilians from demonic beasts like a hero. He was also strong enough for it to be unbelievable for him to have not been known all this while.

It would be weird if he didn't get attention.

"Why? Are you disappointed that he stole your thunder?" Yeon-Joo asked.

"No way."

Kang-Woo shrugged. He hated receiving unnecessary attention, and he even pitied Si-Hun, who had become a celebrity after the incident.

"Oh, and a force of one of the World Rankers has come to Korea."

"A World Ranker?"

"Yeah, and this World Ranker's force is called the Heavenly Sword Clan... a Chinese guild."

"Are they here for Si-Hun?"

"I'm not sure. They haven't done anything in particular yet, so we aren't sure about their intentions."

"Hmm."

Kang-Woo nodded. He thought it probably had nothing to do with him.

"Anyway. The Demon Cult's forces in Korea have been more or less wiped out... or so I'd like to think," Kang-Woo remarked.

"Yeah, although the ones in Korea were probably nothing but the tip of the iceberg."

Yeon-Joo's eyes shone sharply.

Kang-Woo looked at her. "You aren't planning to end your revenge here, right?"

"Of course not. I'm not stopping until I completely wipe them off the map."

"That's a good mindset."

After the Isu Station incident, it became obvious that the Demon Cult was too dangerous for Kang-Woo and the entire world.

Because the Gaia System was weakening, he couldn't even imagine what absurd methods they would use to increase their forces.

'I had never even imagined that it was possible to summon a demon within one's own body.'

He'd never thought humans could fuse with demons in such a way.

"So no Demon Cult members have been exposed in other countries?"

"Right. Although we've been receiving some reports, there hasn't been any detailed information."

"I see."

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes.

It would be impossible for him to search for the Demon Cult branches hidden all around the world.

'That would be beyond stupid.'

Finding the branch hidden in Korea was already hard enough, so searching for the branches that he had no idea where they could possibly be was far too inefficient.

'Right now, I have to get stronger.'

If it wasn't possible to attack, he just had to build a fortress to defend, a fortress they wouldn't dare to attack.

'First, I'll have to break through the level cap and figure out how to acquire the Ultimate Demonic Body.'

Since his level was capped, he wouldn't be able to grow stronger if he couldn't figure out the final condition for obtaining the Ultimate Demonic Body.

However, the problem was that he wasn't sure how to solve these two problems. If he had some sort of clue, he would be able to make a guess, but that wasn't the case.

'In that case...'

He couldn't waste any more time. He had to find something that he could do right away.

'Something that I can do right now and will be of help to me...'

The first thing that came to mind was raising his Demonic Energy stat through hunting. However, this would be as much of a waste of time as thinking about the other two problems because his Demonic Energy stat had surpassed 100.

Raising it through hunting wasn't very effective.

Kang-Woo closed his eyes and fell into thought.

"Oh."

At that moment, he thought of a possibility that he could do and that could be helpful to him.

"I'll have to call Si-Hun."

Kang-Woo took out his smartphone while smiling.

* * *

"Hyung-nim! Are you feeling okay now?"

After he called him, Kim Si-Hun appeared in less than 20 minutes.

Kang-Woo nodded. "More importantly, how are you doing? I've been seeing nothing but you on the news lately."

"Haha, please don't even get me started. People swarm me as soon as I even leave my house, so I can't even go hunting." Si-Hun took off his hat and mask in exasperation. "I'm considering buying a full face mask."

"Well, I don't really see the point of that after all this time, but... in any case, you must have it hard."

"I actually have a lot of complaints."

"Complaints?"

"Yes. Speaking frankly, I wasn't the one who resolved the Isu Station incident. That was you, Kang-Woo hyung-nim. It's you who should be praised as a hero," Si-Hun said in disappointment. He felt that he'd stolen Kang-Woo's achievement.

"I would hate that."

"You don't mind people not recognizing you for what you've done?"

"Receiving attention when I have nothing to gain just makes things bothersome. You literally just talked about how exhausting it is."

"That's true, but..." Si-Hun felt a bit disappointed that people weren't recognizing Kang-Woo for his achievement.

"I hate bothersome things."

"Hmm... If you say so, I guess there's nothing I can do. That aside, what did you call me for?"

"I have a favor I want to ask you."

"As long as it's something I can do, I'll do it," Si-Hun said with eyes burning with loyalty.

Kang-Woo laughed after watching him act as if he was willing to even give Kang-Woo his own liver.

"I want to learn martial arts."

"... Martial arts?"

Si-Hun tilted his head.

"Yup. You told me that you reached a new height some time ago, didn't you? What was it again...? One With the Sword, right?"

"Yes, but..."

"Not to that point, though. I just want to learn how to use weapons properly."

"Mmm..."

Si-Hun suppressed his groan. He wasn't hesitant because he didn't want to teach Kang-Woo martial arts but because of another reason.

He replied cautiously, "I'm not good enough to teach you, hyung-nim."

Kang-Woo was already far stronger than him.

Si-Hun teaching Kang-Woo was like a student teaching a teacher how to study.

Kang-Woo shook his head.

"No. I may be stronger than you in terms of power, but not if it's purely in terms of weapon technique."

Kang-Woo's techniques had been polished through countless battles—he'd never properly learned martial arts.

'Although they say that true martial arts are formless...'

But that could only be said by someone who had learned the forms.

Kang-Woo's techniques were purely practical techniques that had reached their ultimate form.

'I thought that was more than good enough, but...'

It would be a complete waste to leave Si-Hun, the Martial God's successor, to rot in a corner.

"Understood." Kim Si-Hun nodded. "I will teach you martial arts."

Chapter 95 - The Way to Achieve the Ultimate Demonic Body (3)

The next day, Oh Kang-Woo went to a training room in the Red Rose guild house with Kim Si-Hun.

"Kyaaaaa!"

"Isn't that the Sword Dragon?!"

"That's the Sword Dragon, isn't it?"

Si-Hun's popularity could also be felt in the Red Rose Guild.

The people working at the counter rushed to them while screaming.

"Wh-What brings you to the Red Rose Guild?!"

"A-A-A-A-A-Are you perhaps joining the Red Rose Guild?"

"Uhhh..." Si-Hun shook his head while smiling awkwardly. "No. It's true that I am receiving a lot of help from Red Rose, but I have already pledged my loyalty to someone else."

"L-Loyalty?"

"Would you mind telling us who?"

"I'm sorry, but that's a bit..."

The members of the Red Rose Guild looked a bit disappointed.

"Th-Then could I at least have an autograph?"

"Mmm, that's..."

Si-Hun scratched his cheek as he was having difficulty refusing.

Kang-Woo opened his mouth and said, "Let's stop wasting time and get going."

"Ah, yes! Understood, hyung-nim!"

"..."

The guild members glared at Kang-Woo.

"What's up with that squid?"

'Isn't squid a bit too harsh?'

Kang-Woo frowned after hearing what they were mumbling behind him.

Objectively speaking, Kang-Woo also had fairly decent looks. No, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that he was good-looking, but next to Si-Hun, most average-looking people were like squids.

Si-Hun said, "I'm going to give them a piece of my mind. How dare they call you a squid...?"

"Don't make this any more miserable for me than it has to be. Just follow me."

Si-Hun stepping up to protect Kang-Woo's honor in this situation would make Kang-Woo look even more pathetic.

They took the elevator and went to the training room.

"Ah, you're here. The guildmaster has given me the details." Park Hyun-Woo welcomed them at the training room entrance. After opening the door, he carefully said, "Come to think of it, I've heard about your spar with our guildmaster in the training room at Hwarang Corps headquarters."

"Oh..."

"The repair fees were up in the billions, I've heard. Hahahaha"—Hyun-Woo grabbed Kang-Woo's hand while laughing dryly—"I would appreciate it if the same did not happen here."

"... Yes, of course."

"Hahaha! I will hold you to that."

Kang-Woo could feel the fatigue in Hyun-Woo's laugh.

'I believe he's the one mainly in charge of managing the guild.'

Hyun-Woo had likely been swamped with work due to the multitude of incidents as of late.

Kang-Woo looked in pity at Hyun-Woo's thin shoulders as he walked away and then entered the training room.

"Let us begin right away," Si-Hun remarked.

"Sounds good."

Si-Hun glanced at the practice weapons that were inside the training room. "First off, which weapon do you mainly use, hyung-nim?"

"Hmm... I don't have one in particular."

He used different weapons based on the situation.

Si-Hun nodded.

"Even still, it would be best for you to choose a weapon that you will mainly use to learn martial arts. Hmm... Let's start with a sword first, since I specialize in sword martial arts."

"A sword, huh?"

To be honest, the weapon he was the most accustomed to was the spear.

He also used the Authority of Blades quite often, but its shape slightly differed from a conventional sword. It emerged from the back of his hands for him to swing, so it was more akin to an assassin's hidden blade than a sword.

'I guess if I'm learning martial arts from the Sword Dragon, it's better to use a sword.'

He grabbed a practice sword.

"First, I will teach you the basic movements of the Sleeping Dragon Sword Technique. I'm sure you'll be able to learn them all in just a day."

Si-Hun displayed all of the movements.

The Sleeping Dragon Sword Technique had eight different movements.

The sword moved as fluidly as water. After showing him the movements, Si-Hun turned around.

"Now you try them."

"... What?"

"Just do exactly what I showed you."

"How could I possibly do that when I only saw it once?"

"Pardon? But you're just following my form."

Si-Hun looked at Kang-Woo in confusion.

Kang-Woo looked at him in disbelief and just swung the sword around at random.

"Would you be able to follow this if I told you to?" Kang-Woo asked.

"Of course."

Si-Hun perfectly copied what Kang-Woo had just done.

'The fuck?'

Kang-Woo felt something was weirdly out of place.

"Don't be like that and give it a try, hyung-nim."

"I literally can't, man."

"Hmm... Then I'll guide you through each movement, one by one."

Si-Hun tilted his head and performed the first movement of the Sleeping Dragon Sword Style.

It involved swinging the sword down from up high to waist level and then back up as if bouncing off the air.

Kang-Woo tried to copy Si-Hun's movements.

"No. That's not how you do it, hyung-nim."

"Huh? It was perfect, wasn't it?"

"You put too much strength into your downswing. If you do that, the rebound when you swing back up will be too strong."

Si-Hun repeated the first movement, which Kang-Woo also tried again.

"That's not it, hyung-nim. You didn't swing hard enough this time,"

'What do I have to do, then?'

While thinking it was harder than he initially thought, Kang-Woo put a bit more strength into the downswing.

Whoosh!

"Oh, a little bit weaker there."

Whoosh!

"No. Your swing was too weak."

Whoosh!

"You have to swing a bit harder."

Three hours passed.

Kang-Woo's expression carried a hint of irritation after performing the same movement for three hours straight.

"Did you also struggle with controlling your strength at first, Si-Hun?"

"Y-Yes," Si-Hun said while trying to avoid his gaze.

Kang-Woo realized that he was lying.

"You can be honest."

"... I was able to perfectly control my strength in about two to three tries," Si-Hun said carefully.

Kang-Woo laughed in disbelief.

'He learned how to do this in just two to three tries?'

Controlling the first movement's strength was equivalent to filling a cup with water to its very top while blindfolded.

It was a totally different kind of sense from the battle sense that Kang-Woo had polished through countless battles, so he couldn't get a good grasp of it.

"Fuu. Let's leave strength control for later and just stick to learning the movements' proper form."

"Mmm... Understood."

Si-Hun looked at Kang-Woo as if he couldn't understand what the problem was and then nodded.

The Sleeping Dragon Sword Technique had eight movements in total.

Kang-Woo followed Si-Hun along each movement and performed them so that they all linked with each other.

'The transitions between the forms feel a bit clunky.'

It felt weird as he tried to link each movement. It was as if he was forcing a mismatched gear to turn.

"I can't seem to link the fourth and fifth movements smoothly. What should I do?"

Kang-Woo turned to face Si-Hun. The sole purpose of a master was to give their disciples guidance.

Si-Hun answered while making his characteristic smile, "You should just swing your sword naturally without being conscious of linking them."

"What?"

"It's not working because you're being too conscious of it. Just let your senses take over your body."

"Mmm..."

Kang-Woo swung the sword while tilting his head. Just like Si-Hun suggested, he let his senses swing the sword for him.

It obviously didn't work.

'What the hell?'

Kang-Woo finally figured out why he was getting this out-of-place feeling for a while.

Si-Hun was a genius before he was an outstanding swordsman—a genius with talent far above ordinary people, at that.

'That's literally the same thing as saying to just last-hit the minions when they're low.'[1]

Something similar had occurred during an interview with a certain genius pro gamer. He spoke as if things were natural, but as he was a genius, things that were natural to him were not natural to others. It seemed as if Si-Hun wasn't aware of this.

Because he could do it so naturally, he couldn't understand what others were struggling with.

"Hmm."

Although only a single day had passed, Kang-Woo became sure of something.

'Si-Hun doesn't have talent in being someone's master.'

Because he was too talented, he couldn't explain how to do things to others. It was impossible to learn anything from Si-Hun unless one was as talented as him.

"Tsk... I'll have to give up learning martial arts from you."

"Wh-What do you mean, hyung-nim? I guess I really was too weak to help you..."

"No, that's not it. It's actually the complete opposite."

"The opposite?"

"You're too talented."

"..."

Si-Hun remained silent.

Kang-Woo sighed and turned around.

"Let's stop here. I'm sure we'll have other opportunities in the future."

"Ah..."

Si-Hun groaned lightly. He seemed disappointed because the opportunity for him to repay Kang-Woo even a little had gone down the drain.

"H-Hyung-nim. How about you try learning a cultivation technique?"

"Cultivation technique?"

"Yes. The backbone of martial arts isn't sword or foot techniques, but cultivation techniques. I'm sure I'll be able to teach you that properly at the very least."

"Hmm."

While thinking about it for a little while, Kang-Woo nodded.

It was worth a shot.

"Okay. First of all, why don't you check how I circulate my energy within my body?"

"Okay."

Kang-Woo used the Authority of the Beholder and checked how the energy flowed inside Si-Hun's body. He could see the movements of Qi with the dantian at its center.

'I think I could pull this off.'

If it was just controlling the energy inside himself rather than controlling his body, he felt that he could do it.

Kang-Woo sat and recalled how the Qi flowed inside Si-Hun's body.

Ring.

[Activating the effect of the Trait "Ruler of Demonic Energy." Raising your control over demonic energy.]

[You have learned the Qi cultivation technique "Heavenly Dragon Cultivation Technique."]

'Oh.'

He had succeeded in just one try.

As he used the Heavenly Dragon Cultivation Technique, his demonic energy circulated throughout his entire body with the dantian at the focus.

'Huh?'

As he used the cultivation technique, he could feel his demonic energy concentrating in the area under his belly button. This area was known as the dantian.

However, the demonic energy didn't just concentrate there. It also formed a round crystal.

'This is...'

It was a familiar sensation.

The image of a black gem popped up in his mind.

Ring.

[You have successfully formed a demonic crystal.]

[You have obtained a clue for the final condition of Ultimate Demonic Body.]

'Si-Hun...'

Excitement ran through his body.

He had found a clue for the final condition of the Ultimate Demonic Body where he had least expected it.

'I love you, man!'

Chapter 96 - The Way to Achieve the Ultimate Demonic Body (4)

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

*Condition 1: Demonic Energy stat reaches 60.

*Condition 2: Perfectly merge three or more Authorities.

*Condition 3: Form a demonic crystal above a certain size (unfulfilled).]

'To think that the last condition was to create a demonic crystal inside my body.'

Oh Kang-Woo would've never figured it out if he hadn't learned the cultivation technique from Kim Si-Hun. After all, he didn't know that the demonic crystal used by the Demon Cult could be formed through cultivation.

'But is this the same demonic crystal used by the Demon Cult?'

Kang-Woo concentrated on the demonic crystal that was within his dantian. Both were concentrated demonic energy. In that aspect, they were similar, but in terms of the density of demonic energy, they were completely different.

'They may be the same kind of item, but the amount of energy concentrated inside them is completely different.'

It was like comparing an americano to an espresso.

The Demon Cult's demonic crystals felt as if the demonic energy had been watered down, while the demonic crystal in Kang-Woo's dantian was thick with pure undiluted demonic energy.

Because the concentration levels were different, the amount of power that he could extract from it was also on a whole other level.

Kang-Woo concentrated the demonic energy of the demonic crystal within his dantian into his fist. Although he hadn't used an Authority, a destructive amount of demonic energy gathered in his fist.

To test its power, Kang-Woo lightly struck the steel doll in the training room.

Wham!

The steel turned to dust from a single blow.

"A-Amazing, hyung-nim!" Si-Hun shouted in surprise. He could also cleanly cut steel, but Kang-Woo had turned it to dust. That was something he couldn't even fathom doing.

Si-Hun asked, "Did you have success with the cultivation technique?"

"Yeah, thanks to you. You were of great help."

He had only used the cultivation technique once, so there wasn't much demonic energy inside the demonic crystal yet. The demonic crystal was reduced to a third of its original size from just concentrating energy into his fist once.

'Well, I only just learned the cultivation technique.'

There was no need to rush.

Now that he'd learned the cultivation technique, he just had to use it and increase the size of his demonic crystal.

Kang-Woo used to control the boundless energy contained within the Ten Thousand Demon Core, so using a cultivation technique that controlled the energy within him was a simple task.

Kang-Woo once again sat down on the floor cross-legged and used the Heavenly Dragon Cultivation Technique.

He opened his eyes after focusing on the cultivation technique for a while.

'I don't really feel the need to sit like this.'

Kang-Woo uncrossed his legs and stood up.

He felt like he would be able to keep cultivating during everyday life but not during pressing situations such as while in battle.

"Th-That's dangerous, hyung-nim!"

"Hm? What is?"

"If you stand up while using the cultivation technique—"

Si-Hun was about to warn Kang-Woo that he could suffer from Qi deviation but became wide-eyed from astonishment.

Not only had Kang-Woo not suffered from Qi deviation, but he was perfectly fine.

"Did you... halt the Heavenly Dragon Cultivation Technique?"

"No, I'm still using it."

"Y-you can use it while moving?"

Si-Hun looked at him in disbelief.

There were some cultivation techniques that you could use without sitting in a lotus position, but the Heavenly Dragon Cultivation Technique wasn't one of them.

In exchange for the incredible amount of Qi one could accumulate and control with the technique, one could only fully take advantage of the effects through cultivating in the proper position.

However, Kang-Woo had completely broken the cultivation technique's characteristics.

"How..."

Kim Si-Hun looked at Kang-Woo, confused.

Using the Heavenly Dragon Cultivation Technique in daily life was something that not even the Martial God Tian Taihuang, who had transferred his knowledge of martial arts to Si-Hun, had been able to achieve.

"It isn't that hard. It circulates throughout your meridians, right? You just have to control it so that the flowing energy doesn't clash."

"... But your meridians also move when you move."

The reason why it was difficult to use cultivation techniques while moving was simple—the position of one's meridians changes along with one's movements.

Just like how it was difficult to get through a tunnel shaking from side to side, it was difficult to circulate one's Qi while the meridians moved. No, it was next to impossible.

"You just have to take your own movements into account."

"..."

Si-Hun remained silent after hearing the words Kang-Woo had said so calmly. Although Kang-Woo had said it as if it was nothing, Si-Hun knew how incredible the feat was.

It was like running full throttle along an extremely narrow road where one misstep could cause one to fall down a cliff.

"Just as I thought... I can't compare to you, hyung-nim."

Si-Hun shook his head.

Kang-Woo smirked.

Controlling demonic energy along with his movements was easy compared to controlling the boundless amount of demonic energy within the Ten Thousand Demon Core.

'I guess you could consider this a talent, but...'

Kang-Woo didn't consider it a talent. It was a product of what he had learned desperately for ten millennia so that he wouldn't be devoured by his own demonic energy.

It couldn't be explained with the word talent.

"How about you try giving qinggong a shot this time?" Si-Hun suggested.

"No. Let's leave that for another day. This is enough for now."

He'd obtained a new possibility for growth in the form of the demonic crystal, so he wanted to focus on researching the cultivation technique and making his demonic crystal bigger.

'And once I do...'

Kang-Woo recalled the final condition of the Ultimate Demonic Body.

He still didn't know what exactly it was or its effects, but he was sure it wouldn't be something that would harm his growth.

'Rather it's highly likely that it'll augment my growth.'

Also, he could only use the Trait he had acquired on his Sixth Awakening after achieving the Ultimate Demonic Body.

Now that he had a goal and knew what he had to do, he had no reason to focus on anything else.

'I'll focus on the cultivation technique first.'

Kang-Woo casually used the Heavenly Dragon Cultivation Technique.

Feeling the demonic energy spread throughout his body gathering around his new power, the demonic crystal within his dantian, made him feel good.

'Once the demonic crystal gets a bit bigger, I'll have to put it to the test.'

Kang-Woo smiled in satisfaction and turned to Si-Hun.

"Let's go home."

"Are you sure you're fine with not learning any other techniques?"

"Yup. Oh, this Heavenly Dragon Cultivation Technique of yours is the greatest one you have among the other cultivation techniques you know, right?"

"Yes. If I accept more of the Martial God's power, I will probably be able to learn a better one, but... right now, the Heavenly Dragon Cultivation Technique is the best one."

"I see."

That meant that if Si-Hun became stronger and learned better cultivation techniques, it would also help Kang-Woo.

'Keep on growing, Si-Hun!'

Kang-Woo looked at Si-Hun like a farmer praying for fruit to bear. Of course, he wasn't thinking of leaving him to grow all on his own.

"In that case, let's go to an S-rank Gate next time, Si-Hun."

"A-An S-rank Gate?"

"Yeah."

"I'm glad that you trust me, but our party isn't strong enough to hunt in an S-rank Gate yet."

"Don't worry. The one doing the carrying is none other than me."

"... Pardon?"

"All you have to do is sit back and relax."

Kang-Woo would be carrying Si-Hun for his explosive growth.

"I'll show you my incredible carrying skills."

Kang-Woo smiled while patting Si-Hun's shoulders.

* * *

"Are you done for today?" Park Hyun-Woo asked as they walked out of the training room.

"Yes. Thank you for letting us borrow your training room."

"You're not stopping by to see the guildmaster before you go?"

"I told her that I would be busy today, but I plan on meeting her next time."

"Haha. I'm sure she's disappointed."

Hyun-Woo nodded while laughing softly.

"Please feel free to come visit the Red Rose Guild any time you'd like."

"Thank you for always being so helpful."

Kang-Woo and Si-Hun shook hands with Hyun-Woo.

"Oh, right. Come to think of it, have you heard that people from the Heavenly Sword Clan have come to Korea?" Hyun-Woo said.

"Yes, I have."

The Heavenly Sword Clan was a Chinese guild led by Sword Emperor Tian Wuchen, one of the eight World Rankers. It was a guild made up of Players with the Qi unique stat like Si-Hun. It was more like a clan in martial arts novels than a regular Player guild.

"I've heard that the Heavenly Sword Clan have started to make their move," Hyun-Woo mentioned.

"Hmm... What is their goal?"

"We still have yet to figure that out."

Kang-Woo nodded.

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Please be careful. You might fall into danger if you associate yourself with them."

The Heavenly Sword Clan was far more powerful than any Korean guild.

First, they had almost ten thousand Player members. The Red Rose Guild had a little over a thousand, so the Heavenly Sword Clan was pretty much ten times bigger.

"Hahaha, you don't have to worry about that," Kang-Woo expressed.

"Well... I'm sure you would keep your distance from them."

"No. I won't need to keep my distance from them."

"...?"

"After all, I won't be the one in danger if they associate with me."

Kang-Woo laughed.

There was a heavy silence.

"Then we'll get going," said Kang-Woo.

Just because the Heavenly Sword Clan had made their move, there was no need for him to hide.

He only had one simple rule of survival: answer to evil with greater evil, and return bloodlust with even greater bloodlust.

The moment one yields one, one's enemy will take away two. If one bows one's head, it will get trampled on.

Of course, if it were an enemy Kang-Woo was no match against, hiding would be the right decision.

In that case, lowering one's body, crawling on the floor, and waiting for one's opportunity was the wisest decision.

'But not anymore.'

Kang-Woo knew how strong he was. It wasn't like he'd recovered all of his former power in Hell, but he wasn't weak enough to go around Earth while avoiding people.

"Let's go, Si-Hun."

"Yes, hyung-nim!"

After seeing Kang-Woo walking away, Si-Hun quickly followed him.

Kang-Woo got into his car after exiting the Red Rose Guild.

"I'll drive you home."

"It's okay, hyung-nim. It doesn't take long on the subway."

"I can't let you do that when you've taken the time to teach me martial arts. Oh, and I'll buy you a car soon."

"N-No, that's okay, hyung-nim. I'm already grateful to you for helping me find the right care for my mother, so a car would be..."

"It's because it's inconvenient for me. I'll get you one so that you can come to me as soon as possible whenever I call you."

"Hyung-nim..."

Si-Hun teared up a bit.

Kang-Woo smirked.

'I wonder what would've become of him if it weren't for me.'

Si-Hun had taught him martial arts. Taking that into consideration, buying him a car was nothing. But for Si-Hun to react like that... he was so gullible that he would fall for scams all too easily.

'Although I'm here to make sure that doesn't happen.'

While thinking that, Kang-Woo took Kim Si-Hun to his house.

"Hmm?"

There, he saw a group of people wearing martial arts robes.

Click.

"Who are you?" Si-Hun asked them after getting out of the car.

The men looked at Si-Hun.

One man with a slash scar on one eye approached Si-Hun and spoke in awkward Korean.

"I am the captain of the Heavenly Sword Clan's 3rd Squadron, Nangong Chen. The Sword Emperor wants to meet Korea's Sword Dragon. Follow."

"I'm sorry? Sword Emperor...? A-Are you talking about the Sword Emperor Tian Wuchen?"

Si-Hun flinched after hearing the name of one of the strongest people in the world.

Nangong Chen's eyes shone sharply.

"Do not dare speak his great name. Follow obediently. Plane is ready."

"Uhhh..."

Si-Hun hesitated.

Kang-Woo grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back.

Nangong Chen's eyes locked onto Kang-Woo.

"You've learned Korean all wrong, you son of a bitch," Kang-Woo stated.

"... What?"

"Why are you talking down to us, man?"

Chapter 97 - Sword Emperor Tian Wuchen (1)

"Who are you?" Nangong Chen questioned with a sharp gaze.

"I'm Si-Hun's hyung," Oh Kang-Woo answered calmly.

"Kim Si-Hun's older brother...? Are you Kim Yeong-Hun? But I heard that he is in prison."

"In this world, there are bonds that are thicker than blood."

"...?" Chen looked at Kang-Woo in confusion.

"Have you heard of sworn brothers?" Kang-Woo asked.

"Oh, that was what you meant," Nangong Chen said, snorting while nodding. "We have no interest in you. The Sword Emperor only wants the Sword Dragon. Move."

"I'm not interested in who he is either."

"...Do not run your mouth," Nangong Chen chided. Then he turned to face Kim Si-Hun. "Follow obediently if you do not want to see this man get hurt, Sword Dragon."

"I should be the one telling you not to run your mouth at hyung-nim," Si-Hun replied.

Si-Hun, who had been intimidated by the mention of the Sword Emperor, stepped forward at this moment. He exuded a strong bloodlust as he placed his hand on his sword's handle.

Of course, he was still afraid of Sword Emperor Tian Wuchen. Wuchen was the strongest Player in China and the boss of China's largest force. Even China's president was careful not to cross him, so Si-Hun thought it was understandable for Nangong Chen, an executive of the Heavenly Sword Clan, to talk down to him.

Nevertheless, Si-Hun wouldn't let Nangong Chen disrespect Kang-Woo like that. After all, Kang-Woo had saved Si-Hun from his hellish life. Si-Hun wasn't a coward who would remain silent while seeing his benefactor get insulted.

"Oh? You dare unsheathe your sword?" Nangong Chen remarked with narrowed eyes. "You seem to be on a high horse after people praised you as the Sword Dragon."

Nangong Chen thought that he should use a more aggressive strategy.

'The Sword Emperor told me to bring him as politely as possible, but...'

What was the point of being courteous to this brat? Rather, Nangong Chen thought it would be better to teach Si-Hun a lesson before he even had the chance to disrespect the Sword Emperor.

Nangong Chen reached for the handle of the sword on his waist, but someone put his hand on it before him.

"Don't unsheathe it," Kang-Woo said.

"Wh-What the..." Nangong Chen uttered in surprise.

"You die if you unsheathe that, man."

Kang-Woo had placed his hand on Nangong Chen's sword without him realizing it.

Nangong Chen was horrified. He was a warrior-type player with the Qi unique stat. This meant his senses were far sharper than other warrior players. Yet, Nangong Chen had no idea that Kang-Woo had placed his hand on his sword until Kang-Woo spoke.

"Kuh!" Nangong Chen groaned and stepped backward. He looked at Kang-Woo in bewilderment and caution. "How...?"

The thought that he might have been careless crossed Nangong Chen's mind.

"Oh, just so you know, it wasn't because you let your guard down or weren't focused enough. It's just because you're weak," Kang-Woo remarked.

"..."

"So, don't say anything stupid like you were careless."

A thick vein protruded on Nangong Chen's forehead. He unsheathed his sword without hesitation.

"How dare an uncivilized Korean—!"

Crack!

"AARRGGHH!" Nangong Chen screamed.

Kang-Woo had approached Nangong Chen and twisted his hand before he could finish his sentence. The sword that Nangong Chen was holding dropped onto the ground.

"Enough of that damn nationalism. Don't you get sick of it?" Kang-Woo asked, looking at Nangong Chen pitifully. "Is the country you're from so important? Then pay more taxes, dude. People like you who don't have shit always become patriotic while in another country."

"Y-You son of a—"

"And logically speaking, do you seriously think calling someone 'uncivilized' in their own country helps your country's image in any way? Huh? If you really love your country so much, you shouldn't do that, man."

"Raaaahhhh!"

Nangong Chen charged at Kang-Woo. Nevertheless, Kang-Woo pivoted slightly and raised his knee, driving it into Nangong Chen's stomach. Nangong Chen grabbed his stomach and fell to the ground in pain.

He groaned, "Kurgh! Cough! How dare you!"

Schwing!

The men behind Nangong Chen unsheathed their swords.

Kang-Woo said quietly, "I told you not to unsheath them."

He burst out with a powerful bloodlust, and the men's faces turned pale.

"Urgh..." they uttered anxiously.

Kang-Woo's bloodlust was abnormal. The men felt like they would be devoured rather than killed. Specifically, they felt like frogs in front of a massive predator.

"None of you are dumb, so you know that you're no match for me, right?" Kang-Woo said.

"Kuh..." the men groaned.

They were well aware that they would be no match for Kang-Woo, who had defeated Nangong Chen, the captain of the third squadron without even giving him the chance to use his weapon.

Nangong Chen, who was on the ground, coughed, still acting superior.

"Cough! Cough! H-How dare a K-Korean—"

"Man, this moron still hasn't learned his lesson," Kang-Woo remarked. He grabbed Nangong Chen by the back of his neck and lifted him up. "The standards of a nation are decided by its people. You're the only one who loses out from getting so red-hot with anger."

"..."

"Oh, maybe that was too hard for you to understand. Well, whatever. I guess I'll take this chance to show you what you should be doing for your country."

"Wh-What are you trying to do?!"

"Just come with me and you'll see."

Kang-Woo dragged Nangong Chen somewhere, and Si-Hun followed him.

"Where are you going, hyung-nim?" Si-Hun asked.

"Si-Hun, is there a restaurant around here that serves good kimchi stew?" Kang-Woo answered with a question.

"...Pardon?"

Si-Hun's eyes widened in confusion. Why was Kang-Woo suddenly looking for a restaurant that served good kimchi stew?

Regardless, Si-Hun replied, "There's one around the corner of that alleyway..."

"Good."

Kang-Woo smiled in satisfaction and dragged Nangong Chen there.

He turned around and called out to the other men who were standing in place dumbfoundedly, "Hey! You guys come too!"

"..."

The men looked at each other and then followed Kang-Woo.

Upon entering the restaurant, Kang-Woo said, "Aunty, seven portions of kimchi stew with extra meat, please."

"Sigh~ You got it, young man. But... is that gentleman hurt?" the middle-aged lady in the restaurant asked.

"No, he's just making a fuss over nothing. Right?"

Kang-Woo patted Nangong Chen's back. Nangong Chen flinched.

"It'll be ready soon~" the warm-hearted lady said.

She went into the kitchen and came back out soon after with piping hot kimchi stew.

"Wh-What is this?" Nangong Chen asked.

"Kimchi stew. Try it. It'll blow your mind," Kang-Woo replied.

He patted Nangong Chen's trembling back.

Nangong Chen frowned and questioned, "Making us eat hodgepodge like this is what we should be doing for our country?"

"Hodge... podge...?"

Kang-Woo's eyes widened in anger, and a strong bloodlust came out of him.

Kang-Woo grabbed Nangong Chen's shoulder and used the Authority of Fear. Nangong Chen felt like his shoulder was getting squashed by a hydraulic press.

"G-Gaahh!"

"It's not hodgepodge; it's kimchi stew. Now, the meat is ready. Try it."

"Kurgh..."

After glancing at Si-Hun, Nangong Chen began eating the kimchi stew.

'Hmm...?' he murmured inwardly in surprise.

Nangong Chen found the stew delicious. The kimchi he'd tried before had a strong, sour taste that made him frown, but now that he was eating it in a stew, that sourness had been replaced by a sweet taste.

He ripped apart the kimchi, placed it on top of a spoonful of rice and a slice of meat, and ate the spoonful of food. A sweet, spicy, and savory taste spread inside his mouth.

'To think that there was food like this in Korea...?'

Nangong Chen was an executive of the Heavenly Sword Clan. Everything he ate was normally prepared by top-class chefs. Compared to his usual meals, this kimchi stew tasted like cheap instant food.

'But my hands aren't stopping.'

He quickly devoured an entire bowl of rice.

It wasn't just him; his four subordinates were also eating the kimchi stew.

"Aunty~ Three more portions, please! And a bowl of rice for each!" Kang-Woo called out.

"You got it, young man~ Sigh, you're all eating so well!"

Kang-Woo smiled in satisfaction and looked at Nangong Chen.

He asked, "What do you think? It's delicious, right?"

"...Ahem," Nangong Chen uttered awkwardly.

"Hehe. I guess it is. Feel free to eat as much as you want," Kang-Woo said. He also had a spoonful of kimchi stew while humming happily. "To be honest with you, I'm not a very patriotic guy. But you have to admit the kimchi stew is great, right?"

"I-It isn't that great."

"What are you talking about? You already finished two bowls. Anyway, you understand now, right? What you should be doing for your country is teaching others about its fantastic cultures, not calling them uncivilized or inferior."

"..."

Kang-Woo then focused on eating his kimchi stew.

After eating an amount that shocked the other customers, Kang-Woo stood up.

"Let's go, Si-Hun," he said.

"O-Okay..." Si-Hun replied.

"Pay for the meal and go back to China. Tell that Sword Emperor or whatever his name is to come himself if he wants to meet Si-Hun," Kang-Woo told Nangong Chen.

After that, Kang-Woo and Si-Hun walked out of the restaurant, leaving Nangong Chen and his men behind.

Nangong Chen was dumbfounded.

'You want me to pay for everything you ate?'

He experienced the warmth of Koreans.

* * *

"So... you came back after happily eating that kimchi stew or whatever?"

In a giant room, a scrawny man was sitting in a chair that felt more majestic than luxurious. He was so thin that it seemed like he would break if struck, but he exuded an energy so great that it overwhelmed those around him. This was the Sword Emperor Tian Wuchen, the Player who could be said to be the ruler of China.

"I-I apologize, sir!" Nangong Chen replied.

Kneeling before Wuchen, Nangong Chen trembled with an expression full of fear. A suffocating air of anxiety stormed inside the room.

"Ha... haha." Laughter emerged from Wuchen's mouth. "Hahahahahahaha!!!"

Rumble!

Wuchen's laugh shook the entire room.

"Good! Interesting! I like him!" Wuchen exclaimed while laughing. "But..."

The atmosphere suddenly changed.

Wuchen glared at Nangong Chen with sharp eyes and said, "I believe I told you to be courteous and polite."

"U-Uhmm..."

"What? Did you want to go on that power trip of yours again? Were you trying to run the name of Heavenly Sword Clan through the mud?"

"A-Absolutely not!"

"Lies."

Wuchen used his Qi to pull Nangong Chen over to him.

He grabbed Nangong Chen's neck aggressively and said quietly, "I sent you because you know a bit of Korean, but it seems you acted all high and mighty without realizing how big the world is."

"Cough! I-I apolog—"

"You're banished. Those who do not have the qualities of a martial artist are unneeded in the Heavenly Sword Clan."

"N-No!"

Wuchen lightly waved his hands, and Nangong Chen was sent flying toward a wall.

"Hehehe. So, he wants me to go in person...?"

Wuchen stood up.

This was the first time something like that had happened since he became a World Ranker.

"Since he wants me to go, I'll have to go."

"You're going to Korea, Father?" a voice as beautiful as rolling jade beads rang out.

Wuchen turned toward the source of the voice.

A young woman whose hair was tied up in the Chinese hairstyle often called twin buns approached him. With a slender figure, thick eyebrows, a sharp nose, and red lips, she was a very attractive woman. She was Tian Suyan, Sword Emperor Tian Wuchen's daughter and one of the strongest martial artists in the Heavenly Sword Clan.

"Why? Do you want to see how handsome the Sword Dragon is?"

"Hohoho. What are you talking about, Father?" Suyan asked. She sat down on the armrest of the chair and crossed her smooth legs. "I'm not interested in anyone who isn't stronger than you."

"Ngh," Wuchen groaned, seemingly troubled by that.

Chapter 98 - Sword Emperor Tian Wuchen (2)

A week had passed by since Oh Kang-Woo and Kim Si-Hun encountered Nangong Chen. During that time, Kang-Woo focused on increasing the size of the demonic crystal inside him. He used the Heavenly Dragon Cultivation Technique even while eating, drinking, and sleeping.

His ability to control the demonic energy inside him was already at a level that no one could ever hope to catch up to. The shocking result was a result of Kang-Woo spending every second of the day cultivating. The demonic crystal grew in size every day, and he got used to using the energy inside it.

'But when will I achieve the Ultimate Demonic Body?'

The demonic crystal had become the size of his fist, but he still hadn't fulfilled the final condition.

'Well, I guess I'll fulfill it eventually.'

Even if he became anxious, nothing would change. The only thing he could do was place all his focus on it.

Kang-Woo checked his status window while using the Heavenly Dragon Cultivation Technique. His Demonic Energy stat was still at 103. He did not gain any demonic energy from cultivating.

'I guess it's obvious since there isn't any demonic energy.'

Unlike mana, it was impossible to obtain demonic energy through natural sources. Maybe it would be different if he were in Hell, where demonic energy filled the air, but it was impossible on Earth.

The demonic crystal was growing in size because Kang-Woo was pulling the demonic energy that was spread throughout his body into his dantian.

'There's probably a limit to this too.'

Once all the demonic energy that he possessed was added to the demonic crystal, he wouldn't be able to make the crystal any bigger. The seal on the Ten Thousand Demon Core was still active, so he couldn't extract demonic energy from it for the demonic crystal.

Furthermore, ever since his Demonic Energy stat surpassed 100, it had stopped increasing no matter how many monsters he devoured.

'I guess the only way to get more is to break through the level cap.'

The higher his level became, the weaker the seal got, which in turn increased the amount of demonic energy he could use. He also was looking forward to the rising of his other stats through leveling up, although it would be at random.

'But I have no idea how to break it.'

Kang-Woo had at least obtained a hint about how he could achieve the Ultimate Demonic Body, but he had absolutely nothing on how to break the cap on his level. He had tried all the different ways that had worked for other Players, but they hadn't worked for him.

Cha Yeon-Joo had laughed at Kang-Woo, wondering if he had been cursed by the system.

"A curse, huh...?" Kang-Woo muttered.

Yeon-Joo had said it as a joke, but it was a real possibility. Si-Hun had said that the system window had spoken to him during the Isu Station incident as if it had its own will.

'If Players and the Gaia System are somehow connected...'

Kang-Woo could understand why his level cap wasn't breaking if that were the case. It was because he was the culprit who had damaged the Gaia System.

'I guess I have no choice but to focus on increasing the size of the demonic crystal.'

In any case, not all of the demonic energy inside his body had been concentrated into the demonic crystal yet. He just had to focus on what he could do since he didn't have a way to resolve those worries at the moment.

"Hyung-nim, break time is over," Si-Hun called out to Kang-Woo, who was immersed in his thoughts.

Upon hearing Si-Hun's call, Kang-Woo nodded and stood up.

They were currently in the S-rank Gate in Suwon. Just like Kang-Woo had promised before, he had gone there to carry Si-Hun's party.

"Are you all ready?" Kang-Woo asked.

"Hehe! Of course!"

"Yes, we've rested enough."

"Urgh~ I wanted to rest a bit more..."

Kang Tae-Soo, Han Seol-Ah, and Choi Eun-Bi replied to him while getting up.

Echidna, who had been sitting right next to Kang-Woo, tugged on his clothes and asked, "Kang-Woo, is something on your mind?"

"No, it's nothing," Kang-Woo answered.

He did have things on his mind, but they couldn't be resolved by talking about them to someone else. So, there was no need for him to talk about such worries.

"Let me know anytime if it's something I can help with."

Kang-Woo smirked and nodded.

Then he said, "More importantly, let's get back to it."

He warmed up and then looked around. They had to find a monster that had gotten distanced from the rest of its group.

'Over there.'

Kang-Woo saw a lone Giant Ogre, the most common monster in the Suwon S-rank Gate. He approached it and used the Authority of Silence to cover a wide area around the lone Giant Ogre. Things could get bothersome if they caught the attention of other Giant Ogres.

"Echidna," Kang-Woo said.

"Got it."

Echidna took a step forward and extended her hand toward the lone Giant Ogre. Black demonic energy rose from her hand, forming into eight scythes.

Fwoosh! Fwoosh!

"Grrr!"

The scythes moved erratically as they attacked the Giant Ogre. It dodged the scythe attacks with agile movements that didn't fit its size.

However, that only lasted for a moment. The scythes curved unpredictably in the air and gradually inflicted the Giant Ogre with more and more injuries. As blood poured out from its wounds, the Giant Ogre's movements slowed.

"Get ready, guys," Kang-Woo said.

"Yes, hyung-nim."

Si-Hun unsheathed the El Cuero Blade nervously. Even Tae-Soo, who was excessively spirited, and Eun-Bi, who was complaining, turned serious at Kang-Woo's words.

"GRRRAAAHHH!" the Giant Ogre roared.

'A little bit more,' Kang-Woo thought.

He wanted to wait until the ogre lost a bit more of its health before letting the others attack. It was important to weaken the Giant Ogre enough so that Si-Hun's party could win against it in a battle.

'It would be pointless for them to just gain experience by doing nothing.'

The reason why he'd brought Si-Hun's party to the S-rank Gate wasn't only to help them grow quickly through the huge gains in experience points. It was also to polish their battle sense while fighting an S-rank monster, an opponent they wouldn't normally be able to face.

'Now this is how you truly carry someone.'

There was a limit on how strong a Player could get just by leveling up. Just like how there was a difference between two martial artists who wielded the same sword, there was also a difference between Players with similar stats.

Real battles weren't decided purely by numbers. This was something that was well known among Players. Simply having a higher level and stats did not guarantee a Player's victory in a battle. Stats were just like building muscles through physical training. Just like how a bodybuilder could not beat an MMA fighter, it was pointless to just focus on getting bigger.

Kang-Woo focused only on increasing his stats because he already had so much practical experience that it was pointless to gain more. However, it was different for Si-Hun's party. They needed to increase their levels and gain battle experience at the same time.

"Grrr," the Giant Ogre groaned as it staggered.

Kang-Woo said, "Begin."

"Okay!"

Si-Hun and Tae-Soo leaped forward. Seol-Ah buffed them while Eun-Bi cast magic.

"Graaahhhh!"

Boom!

"Kurgh!"

Despite the Giant Ogre being on the verge of death, it was still a fierce battle. In the first place, the Giant Ogre wasn't an enemy that Si-Hun's party, whose levels averaged in the forties, could fight against. The fact that they could put up a fight against a Giant Ogre at all showed that everyone in the party was very talented.

Boom!

"Huff! Huff!"

"Giant Ogres sure are strong."

The battle was over.

Tae-Soo was panting heavily, but Si-Hun didn't seem to be that tired.

'Si-Hun also has power incomparable to his level,' Kang-Woo remarked inwardly.

If Si-Hun were to fight with everything he had, he would probably be able to win against a tired Giant Ogre by himself. However, because this was supposed to be training for real battles, Si-Hun had held back so that his other party members could participate.

'I'll have to create a special course for Si-Hun later on.'

It was evident that there was a clear difference between Si-Hun and the other party members. At this point in his development, Si-Hun needed something else to truly grow.

"Regroup and prepare for the next hunt," Kang-Woo told the party.

"Fuu! Understood!" Tae-Soo replied.

"Please come this way, Tae-Soo," Seol-Ah said.

She then cast healing magic on Tae-Soo.

"Grrr!"

At that moment, Kang-Woo saw a group of Giant Ogres approaching them.

'They must've smelled the blood.'

He'd blocked sound from getting out, but it seemed like it hadn't been enough.

Kang-Woo drew out some of the energy from his demonic crystal when he saw that three Giant Ogres were approaching them. Si-Hun's party would not be able to handle them.

"Wait here," Kang-Woo said to the others.

Then he turned back toward the incoming Giant Ogres, who were roaring ferociously. Kang-Woo activated the Authority of Dark Spears and created a black spear. The energy from the demonic crystal flowed into the spear and enveloped it as if he were using sword energy.

Clang!

"Grrrr?"

"Huh?"

There was a distinct clanging of metal accompanied by a flash of light. The Giant Ogres, who were approaching Kang-Woo, stopped in their tracks. A thin line appeared across their bodies, and blood

spewed out like a fountain as the line widened. The three Giant Ogres lost their lives in a single attack.

Kang-Woo turned to the side. He saw a scrawny man with two people following behind him. One was a glamorous woman, and the other person was a terrified young man.

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes while thinking, 'Eliminating three Giant Ogres in a single strike...'

Not even Yeon-Joo would be able to do such a thing. This meant the person who killed the Giant Ogres possessed power greater than that of a Ranker. There was only one person that powerful who would come meet Kang-Woo's group in person—Sword Emperor Tian Wuchen, China's strongest Player and one of the eight World Rankers.

"You actually came. I thought you would send a group of assassins to kill me for my arrogance," Kang-Woo said.

"So, you're the Sword Dragon's sworn brother. I sincerely apologize for what happened before. Oh... I guess you wouldn't understand Mandarin," Tian Wuchen replied.

Wuchen glanced at the young man beside him.

The young man nervously translated, "M-Master Tian Wuchen apologizes for what happened before."

"Mandarin is fine," Kang-Woo interrupted.

"Hmm? You can speak Mandarin?" Wuchen asked after Kang-Woo spoke using the Authority of Language.

Kang-Woo nodded.

Wuchen seemed relieved and continued, "That makes things much simpler. I apologize for what happened before. I heard that my subordinate was disrespectful to you."

"Apologies are meaningless if it's just lip service."

"Hahaha! You have a point."

Wuchen bowed to Kang-Woo, shocking the people around them.

"..."

Even Kang-Woo hadn't been expecting Wuchen to ask for forgiveness in such a polite manner.

Sword Emperor Tian Wuchen... the most powerful person in China had just bowed to a person. Bowing to someone was not a simple matter for him. Considering his status as a person of great power and influence, it wasn't something that he should even be doing.

"I banished the member who had been disrespectful toward you from the clan. It was my mistake for mishandling my subordinate," Wuchen apologized.

"Well... if you're going this far, then I accept your apology."

After all, Kang-Woo hadn't been harmed by Nangong Chen. Since the instigator had been properly punished, there was no need to make the conflict any bigger.

"So, what brings you here?" Kang-Woo asked.

"I am here to meet the Sword Dragon."

"I know that, but why do you want to see Si-Hun so badly?"

"Because I saw the video."

"...?"

"I saw the video of the Sword Dragon fighting in... I believe the place was called Isu Station."

"So?"

"I want to confirm something," Wuchen said while smiling. "About how the Sword Dragon managed to learn the martial art techniques of the Martial God."

Chapter 99: Sword Emperor Tian Wuchen (3)

"..."

There was a heavy silence.

Kim Si-Hun and the other party members couldn't understand Mandarin, so they remained silent. Kang-Woo, who understood what the Sword Emperor had said, also remained silent, but it was to figure out the situation.

Echidna tugged on Kang-Woo's clothes and asked, "Kang-Woo, what's a Martial God?"

"Hmm? Echidna, you understand Mandarin?"

Kang-Woo looked surprised, but he quickly realized that he had forgotten something very basic...

'Now that I think about it... How is it that Echidna's able to speak Korean?'

He had never thought about it. Echidna had spoken Korean so fluently when they first met that it never occurred to him that it was strange. He thought she'd naturally learned to speak his language after becoming his summoned beast.

"No, I don't know Mandarin. I can use magic and make it so we can understand each other," Echidna explained.

"Wow."

It seemed like the magic that Echidna was using had a similar effect to Kang-Woo's Authority of Language.

"Can you cast that magic on other people too?" Kang-Woo asked.

"Yup."

"Then cast that magic on Si-Hun and the others as well."

"Okay."

Echidna raised her hand and chanted a short spell. A wave of magic left her hand and enveloped Si-Hun and the others.

"This is..." Si-Hun uttered.

"Oh, the Sword Dragon speaks Mandarin as well?" Tian Wuchen asked.

"N-No. What happ—"

"It's magic," Echidna answered Si-Hun.

Si-Hun looked at her in surprise. He had never heard about a Player being able to harness magic for full language interpretation.

"Hm! It's not that difficult. This magic is very common in the continent of Aernor," Echidna explained.

She snorted triumphantly at the thought that she'd been helpful to Kang-Woo.

"I guess there was no need to bring an interpreter," Wuchen said and laughed.

The young man next to him flinched.

"Don't worry. I will still pay you what I promised," Wuchen told the young man.

"Th-Thank you very much!" the young man stammered in response.

"More importantly, I'm happy since this will make things much quicker. Sword Dragon, where did you learn the martial arts of the Martial God?" Wuchen asked.

Si-Hun's eyes widened.

He uttered, "H-How did you..."

Kang-Woo said, "I'm curious about something too. How did you know Si-Hun was using the Martial God's techniques?"

"Hehe. That is because our clan descended from the Martial God himself."

"Oh?"

Kang-Woo's eyes lit up.

If what Wuchen said was true, then that meant Martial God Tian Taihuang had existed on Earth a long time ago, and Wuchen was his descendant.

"Then does that mean you practiced martial arts before you awakened as a Player?" Kang-Woo asked.

"That's right. Although... I will admit that I was nowhere near the stage I am in now before I awakened."

Kang-Woo nodded as if he understood what Wuchen meant.

'Well, the Demon Cult also existed long before Players came to be.'

It had become clear to Kang-Woo that there had been people on Earth who could use martial arts, magic, and other fantastical abilities long before people had even started transitioning into Players on Earth.

Si-Hun said, "I learned the Martial God's martial arts when I awak—"

"Stop," Kang-Woo interjected. He grabbed Si-Hun's shoulder and stopped him from talking. "What are you going to do once you find out where he learned it? Are you going to kill him to protect your arcane arts?"

"Hahaha! It seems you've read too many martial arts novels."

'I don't want to hear that from someone who would appear in a martial arts novel,'?Kang-Woo thought.

After Wuchen was done laughing, he expressed, "I want to make a deal."

"A deal?"

"Yes. Our clan's arcane martial art techniques have lost their true forms after being passed down from generation to generation. However, the Sword Dragon's Cloud Dragon Sword Technique that I saw in the video was exactly the same as what's in our clan's records of the Martial God's martial arts."

"So, you want help in restoring your clan's arcane martial arts?"

"Correct."

Kang-Woo's eyes shone.

Now that he knew the other party's intention, the discussion would progress faster.

A wide smile appeared on his face as he said, "We should obviously expect something in return since it's a deal. Right?"

"Before that, I would like an answer to my earlier question. Where did he learn the martial arts of the martial god?"

"Well, you should hear it from the man himself."

Kang-Woo patted Si-Hun's back as if saying he could talk now.

With a confused expression, Si-Hun explained why he used the martial arts of Martial God Tian Taihuang.

The longer the explanation went on, the wider Wuchen's mouth fell open.

"What... The Martial God's soul dwells within you...?" Wuchen asked.

"I can't converse with him or anything like that. The knowledge of his martial arts just flows into my head."

"I see. So, you managed to unfold the Cloud Dragon Sword Technique to such perfection without anyone teaching you?"

"Oh, umm..."

"That's just because Si-Hun's talent is monstrous," Kang-Woo stated.

"How interesting," Wuchen remarked.

He scanned Si-Hun's body with great interest. As he took a closer look, he became awestruck.

'He has the Heavenly Martial Physique,'?Wuchen realized.

The Heavenly Martial Physique was a physique that was granted by the heavens. Those with this physique were able to realize the mysteries of a martial art just by seeing it once as well as master

the essence of any cultivation technique. Wuchen had never thought that he would see someone with this physique in person.

He laughed, "Hahaha!! The word 'monstrous' truly doesn't even begin to explain it."

"Anyway, now that we've answered your question, let's get back to the deal," Kang-Woo said calmly.

He was acting so dignified that no one would think he was talking to someone as powerful as the Sword Emperor.

Wuchen then looked at Kang-Woo. Although the Sword Dragon's talent was impressive, Wuchen was also deeply impressed by the Player Oh Kang-Woo.

'Has anyone ever been this prideful before me?' Wuchen thought.

He had never experienced something like this ever since becoming a World Ranker—no, even before that. Wuchen had been born as the successor of an enormous force known as the Heavenly Sword Clan. Everyone had bowed to him ever since he had been a child.

"Hahaha. I have heard a few things about you, but... I'm surprised. Are you being so prideful while knowing who I am?" Wuchen asked.

"Why? Should I be kneeling and licking your feet instead?"

"Hahahaha! No, not at all. As for the deal... Oh, how about this? If the Sword Dragon helps us restore our arcane martial arts, I will personally teach him martial arts."

"You'll teach him martial arts...?"

"The Sword Dragon seems to have learned the Sleeping Dragon Sword Technique and Cloud Dragon Sword Technique. The Heavenly Sword Clan possesses the superior versions of those martial arts, the Azure Dragon Sword Technique and Heavenly Dragon Sword Technique."

"Didn't you say that they've lost their true forms?"

"Even so, they still possess power that's the Cloud Dragon Sword Technique can't compare to."

"..."

Kang-Woo got immersed in his thoughts.

If one of the World Rankers, Sword Emperor, were to teach Si-Hun martial arts personally...

'It would be of great help to Si-Hun.'

Si-Hun might be able to master the Azure Dragon Sword Technique with Wuchen's help. It wasn't a bad deal at all in many ways. No, it was too good of a deal.

'But...'

Kang-Woo turned to look at Si-Hun.

The deal wasn't Kang-Woo's to accept. The one who would be restoring the clan's martial arts and receiving the Sword Emperor's teachings was Si-Hun.

"Hyung-nim..."

"It's your choice. What do you want to do?"

"..."

Si-Hun considered the question. It did not take him long to give his answer.

"I would like to learn," he said.

After all, the one offering to teach Si-Hun was the Sword Emperor. It would be more difficult to find a martial artist who wouldn't accept the deal.

'But most importantly...' Si-Hun thought while looking at Kang-Woo.

Si-Hun wasn't intimidated at all by the Sword Emperor. He wanted to become like Kang-Woo. Si-Hun didn't want to keep receiving help from him one-sidedly.

He placed his hand on the handle of his sword and thought resolutely, *'I want to become stronger.'*

Si-Hun replayed the Isu Station incident in his mind. People had been crying everywhere, and smoke and wreckages had filled the streets. If he had been stronger, he would've been able to save more people.

Kang-Woo nodded.

"Then I guess we have a deal. Oh, I have one condition," he mentioned.

"Condition?" Wuchen asked.

"Restoration of the martial arts and your teachings—all of it will have to be done in Korea."

Kang-Woo couldn't send Si-Hun somewhere far away. If they were far apart, Kang-Woo wouldn't be able to look after Si-Hun if worst-case scenarios were to occur.

'I can't fully trust Tian Wuchen.'

Wuchen seemed trustworthy, but Kang-Woo couldn't completely trust someone just based on his gut feeling.

"Hmm. Korea, huh...? What do you think, Suyan?" Wuchen asked his daughter.

"I'm fine with it. I've always wanted to visit Korea," Tian Suyan answered with a bright smile.

Her smile brought about an odd mood. She turned to Kang-Woo and stared at him with sparkling eyes.

"In that case, we will spend about a month here for now," Wuchen stated.

"Sounds good," Kang-Woo replied, nodding in satisfaction.

He had been thinking of creating a special training regimen just for Si-Hun, but the need for it had just vanished.

"First, let's get out of this Gate. Oh, I heard you live near Seoul station. Is that correct?" Wuchen asked.

"Yeah."

"Then I guess I will have to buy a building near the area."

"Buy... a building?"

"We will need a training room to teach the Sword Dragon in and somewhere to stay for a month."

"..."

Kang-Woo couldn't believe Wuchen had said he would buy a building as if it were nothing.

Wuchen approached Si-Hun and said, "Let us talk for a bit as we head out. There are many things I would like to ask you."

"Ah, yes, sir! I-It's an honor!" Si-Hun replied.

Wuchen and Si-Hun took the lead, with Kang-Woo following from behind.

At that moment, the seductive woman who had been beside Wuchen approached him.

"Hello," she greeted.

"You're..."

"My name is Tian Suyan," Suyan continued with a smile on her face. "Kang-Woo, right? Fufu. I've never seen someone being so prideful in front of my father."

She looked at Kang-Woo with great interest.

Suyan had watched Wuchen ever since she was a little kid, but she'd never seen a man behave so pridefully in front of him.

'What kind of person is he?' she wondered.

Her interest in Kang-Woo surged. Suyan couldn't imagine just how strong and self-confident he was, considering he had been so bold in front of the Sword Emperor.

'I heard that he neutralized the captain of the 3rd Squadron in just a single movement.'

Suyan's expectations soared. Her ideal man wasn't just a strong man but a man stronger than her father, Tian Wuchen!

She was instinctively attracted to strong men, but she had never met any man stronger than Wuchen. Hence, her interest was piqued by Kang-Woo, who had not been intimidated by her father in the slightest.

"I have no reason to be intimidated," Kang-Woo remarked.

"Hmm. Does that mean you're confident about beating the Sword Emperor?"

"Not sure," Kang-Woo said with a laugh.

Suyan felt the strong confidence hidden behind his short laugh. Her eyes shone like those of a wild beast stalking its prey.

'I don't think he fully understands how powerful Father is, but...'

She couldn't deny that those words piqued her interest even further.

Suyan licked her red lips while staring at Kang-Woo. She scanned him from head to toe excitedly.

'Hm?'

At that moment, Suyan felt something pulling on her clothes. She turned around and found a little girl, who was as pretty as a doll, looking up at her.

"Kang-Woo is mine. Back off," the little girl whispered so that only Suyan could hear her.

Chapter 100: I've Gotten Greedy

After they left the Gate, Oh Kang-Woo walked toward the parking slot with Han Seol-Ah and Echidna following behind him.

"I will contact you myself tomorrow, Sword Dragon. Hehehe. You will be having a hard time starting tomorrow," Tian Wuchen said.

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Kim Si-Hun replied.

"I can't believe I am teaching martial arts to someone with the Heavenly Martial Physique."

Wuchen looked expectantly at Si-Hun.

Having the Heavenly Martial Physique meant Si-Hun had the ideal aptitude for being a martial artist. This was an opportunity for Wuchen to train a genius of this caliber with his own hands!

'If I train him right, I may be able to get Suyan a good spouse,' Wuchen thought.

Tian Suyan had always said she wasn't interested in anyone weaker than her father. To prove that she had not been joking, she had never dated anyone. In fact, Wuchen had never even seen her having a conversation with a man before.

Suyan had also rejected every single man who had tried to woo her. Among them, there had been one man with a very bright future, but all his efforts had been for naught.

'I want to see her get married before I die.'

Wuchen had initially thought highly of her upon seeing her reject men who looked like bums. However, he was now feeling anxious as Suyan had recently turned 27 years old. It truly seemed like she wasn't interested in anyone weaker than her father.

'If there isn't anyone who can fit that criteria, I'll have to raise someone to fit it.'

Wuchen clenched his hands into fists, and his eyes lit up with determination. He was sure that the Sword Dragon, who had the Heavenly Martial Physique and even the soul of the Martial God, would be able to surpass him one day.

"Then, I'll be going on ahead. Oh, I'll be coming to watch you teach Si-Hun tomorrow, so let me know where you'll be doing that," Kang-Woo told Wuchen.

"Sure," Wuchen replied and watched Kang-Woo leave.

'That aside, just what in the world is this guy?'

After hearing about how Kang-Woo had instantly neutralized Nangong Chen and his men, Wuchen investigated Kang-Woo before coming to Korea. The only information he had been able to find was that Kang-Woo was a rookie that the Red Rose Guild was sponsoring and that he had only been a Player for three months.

'There is no way that's true.'

There was no need for Wuchen to think too deeply about the information he'd found. It simply made no sense that a Player who had awakened three months ago could have been able to defeat Nangong

Chen. It would have been impossible for them to instantly neutralize Nangong Chen unless they were at least a Ranker.

"Interesting," Wuchen remarked with a deep smile.

Kang-Woo was a Player with mysteries that not even the Heavenly Sword Clan's information network could uncover. Furthermore, he was so confident in his abilities that he wasn't even intimidated by Wuchen...

Wuchen's desire to have a battle with Kang-Woo surged. Of course, he didn't think that Kang-Woo truly was at his level. After all, he was Sword Emperor Tian Wuchen, one of the eight World Rankers. He was one of the strongest Players in the world; he wasn't so weak as to lose against a Player from some unknown place.

At that moment, Suyan walked up right next to Wuchen and said softly, "Father, what do you think about that guy, Oh Kang-Woo?"

She looked very excited.

"I'm not sure, although he seems like an interesting fellow," Wuchen commented.

"Fufu. Right? I've never seen someone act that way in front of you, Father."

Wuchen laughed, "Hahaha. It must be because he doesn't know much about me."

He believed that Kang-Woo didn't know who he was and what he was capable of. There was no way Kang-Woo would have behaved the way he had if he had known.

"Hmm. I don't know about that," Suyan replied while alluringly licking her red lips.

Wuchen's eyebrows twitched slightly.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"We had a short conversation, and... he said he was confident he could beat you."

"Oh?"

Wuchen's eyes lit up with interest.

"How about it? Wouldn't you like to know where all of his confidence is coming from?" Suyan asked him while cutely grabbing his arm.

"Hmm... It seems like you're interested in that young man."

Wuchen had never seen his daughter interested in a man before.

'This will mess with my plan...'

He felt that his plan of training the Sword Dragon to make him Suyan's spouse was slightly going awry.

After thinking for a while, Wuchen shook his head.

'I guess it doesn't matter.'

He knew Suyan's personality very well. She was interested in Kang-Woo now, but she would lose interest as soon as Kang-Woo lost against him.

'I'm sorry, bold young man. But the Sword Dragon is a better partner for Suyan.'

Wuchen had astronomically different opinions of Si-Hun and Kang-Woo. Si-Hun possessed the Heavenly Martial Physique, the ideal aptitude for being a martial artist, and even the soul of the Martial God. Kang-Woo might be stronger than Si-Hun at the moment, but the Sword Dragon would most definitely overtake him in the near future. Between the two, Si-Hun was a far better choice for the role of the Heavenly Sword Clan's future heir.

'He's also very handsome.'

The Sword Dragon's insanely good looks, which made him look like a Greek sculpture, also played a part in Wuchen's decision. It didn't matter how many times he thought about it. He was certain that the Sword Dragon was a better match for Suyan.

"Fufu. I can't deny that I'm a little interested. After all, there aren't many people who can behave that way to you," Suyan said.

"Well, that's true."

"What do you think, Father? Wouldn't you like to test him?"

"Hmm..." Wuchen groaned.

It seemed like he would have to loosen his self-restraint to make Suyan lose interest in Kang-Woo.

'I've taken quite a liking to him, though.'

Wuchen believed that Kang-Woo wouldn't be able to keep up his current attitude once he found out how powerful Wuchen truly was. It was truly a shame, but for the sake of the Heavenly Sword Clan's future, it couldn't be helped.

"Okay, let's do that," Wuchen said.

"Fufu. I love you, Father."

Suyan hugged Wuchen's muscular arm. Her eyes shone with anticipation.

'Father is sure to win, but...'

She was hoping for Kang-Woo to be strong enough to be able to satisfy her expectations even a little bit. Then she thought about the little girl who had pulled on her clothes. It was clear to whom the girl's feelings were directed.

The smile on Suyan's face widened.

'This is gonna be fun.'

She licked and smacked her lips.

There was nothing more tempting than something that belonged to someone else.

* * *

After returning home, Kang-Woo had dinner and then went to his room.

"Sword Emperor, huh...?"

The face of the scrawny man crossed his mind.

Wuchen had an appearance that didn't suit the title of Sword Emperor. Nevertheless, the enormous amount of energy that he had emitted proved that he was one of the eight World Rankers.

'I wonder if I'd be a match for him?'

Kang-Woo couldn't tell for sure from just a glance. He was confident that he wouldn't lose, but his victory wasn't guaranteed.

'I'm curious.'

Kang-Woo raised his hand, and the demonic energy concentrated within the demonic crystal enveloped it.

He had yet to find a chance to properly test his new power, the demonic crystal. Even before he formed the demonic crystal, no one in Korea had been a match for him. He had tested its power by himself, but it still couldn't compare to testing it in a fight.

'I wish I could put it to the test at least once.'

It was as if he had painstakingly created new gear in a game but had done absolutely nothing to test it out. Kang-Woo hadn't had anything like the demonic crystal when he had ruled over the Nine Hells. Just like the Traits that he'd unlocked by leveling up, the demonic crystal was a completely new power for him, so it was natural that he was curious about the demonic crystal's power.

Kang-Woo focused on the energy of the demonic crystal enveloping his hand. He did this for a while, and at some point, he felt something flow out.

"Hmm?"

A black gem the size of a nail appeared on the palm of his hand.

'I guess I can extract something like this too.'

Kang-Woo devoured the gem with the Authority of Predation. He was severely lacking in information regarding demonic crystals.

"...I'll think about it tomorrow."

It was already late at night. Kang-Woo lay down on his bed.

Creak.

At that moment, Echidna opened the door and entered Kang-Woo's room. She was hugging a pillow.

"What's wrong?"

"I want to sleep with Kang-Woo tonight."

"Mmm..."

It was a troublesome proposal.

Nevertheless, before he could say anything, Echidna entered his bed in a flash. Kang-Woo was confused by the sight of her suddenly behaving like a spoiled child.

"Did something happen?" Kang-Woo asked.

"...Nothing."

Echidna used Kang-Woo's arm like a pillow and curled herself like a shrimp. Just like always, she held onto Kang-Woo's clothes, but something seemed off this time.

"It's okay. You can tell me."

"You won't get angry?"

"Of course not."

"At first, I was more than happy just being by Kang-Woo's side," Echidna said carefully.

"..."

"I was no longer alone in a big nest. I was happy enough not being lonely anymore," Echidna continued, tightening her grip on his clothes. "A weird woman took interest in you today."

"...Are you talking about Tian Suyan?"

"Yeah. That person smacked her lips while staring at you."

"..."

.

Kang-Woo hadn't been paying attention to Suyan, so he had not noticed how she behaved.

"When I saw that, I felt something pressing on my chest. I've been happy with just staying by your side, but... it's not enough anymore," Echidna stated, getting closer to Kang-Woo. "I've gotten greedy."

Her small hands pulled on Kang-Woo's clothes some more. Echidna's breathing got heavier. She leaned her head forward while licking her lips, inching them closer to Kang-Woo's.

Knock knock.

"Kang-Woo, have you seen Echidna?"

After knocking, Seol-Ah opened the door and saw Kang-Woo and Echidna in a suggestive position.

"Huh?!" Seol-Ah uttered.

She was stunned speechless.

Echidna, who had been stuck to Kang-Woo, got up. She looked at Seol-Ah and got immersed in her thoughts.

For a moment, there was a heavy silence. Only the sound of breathing could be heard.

Then Echidna raised her head. She walked toward Seol-Ah and grabbed her clothes.

"I'm okay with Seol-Ah," Echidna said.

"Pardon? Wh-What is okay?" Seol-Ah asked.

"You can join us, Seol-Ah."

"J-J-J-Join you in what, exactly?"

Seol-Ah couldn't properly talk; it was as if she were a broken machine.

Echidna tilted her head and answered, "Well, mati—"

"KYAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Seol-Ah's scream rang throughout the house as she quickly covered Echidna's mouth. She glared at Kang-Woo while blushing and breathing heavily.

"E-Echidna! Come here for a moment!"

"Mmmpp."

Seol-Ah dragged Echidna out of the room and closed the door behind them.

"..."

Kang-Woo felt as if a storm had swept through the room.

He remembered the first time he'd met Echidna. The dragon hatchling had been trembling pitifully like an abandoned kitten. She had been a young girl seeking to fill her emotional void, which had been caused by her father, with warmth and affection.

Since then, Kang-Woo had been a fatherly figure to Echidna. However, that had changed. To be more precise, Echidna had changed.

'Our baby girl has changed.'

Kang-Woo, who had been left alone in the room, was so shocked that he couldn't even close his mouth.