



도그의
하자마자
VIP

INTIME FUSION FANTASY STORY
토이카 퓨전 판타지 장편소설

A VIP AS SOON AS YOU LOG IN

- 로그인하자마자 VIP -

- VOLUME 4 -

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**Toika
Toy Car**

[Active Translations]

CHAPTER 155

CROSSING AND ACCELERATING (1)

It was luck. Kang Shin-hyuk's spiritual power had reached the rank of SSS, even if only temporarily, and his strong spirit was communicating with all things surrounding him to provide him situational information. That included the actions of all surrounding beings, the movement of their magical power, and going one step beyond that, even their consciousness of a superficial level...

Thanks to that, he was able to recognize and react to the attack faster than anyone else, perhaps even Oh Joo-young, who was attacking him.

"Huh...?!" Kang Shin-hyuk pulled both of his hands down, pulling at the layer of hundreds of threads around his body that he had prepared in advance. It was a precautionary measure he prepared, but he didn't think he would need to use it so soon. The strands of thread quickly wrapped around the sword like a spider wrapping its prey, slowing it down but not fully stopping it. His uniform was pierced as the sword tore past his skin and muscle to find the bone. Red blood flowed out from the sword embedded into him, stopping just before it could pierce his heart. The mighty magical power of the sword was invaded by the soul poison flowing through the thread. He had successfully stopped the surprise attack from the New Sword, Oh Joo-young.

"Tsu." The moment he recognized his failure, Oh Joo-young clicked his tongue and pulled back without his sword. The direction he withdrew to was not towards his guild members but towards the center of the gate where the monsters and Bomber Girl was. It felt like an eternity for Kang Shin-hyuk, but the entire encounter had only lasted about a second. Even the superhumans around them struggled to fully understand the situation as they watched Oh Joo-young join the monsters. Obviously, before Kang Shin-hyuk had been attacked, the armored monster had called Kang Shin-hyuk Anvil and father, but what happened after was so shocking that no one had time to care about it.

"Ugh..." Kang Shin-hyuk loosened the web and pulled the sword out, blood flowing freely from him. The medicinal effects of the potion he drank remained, quickly stopping

the blood flow and regenerating his wound. Considering that the person who attacked him was number one in the world, he had been exceptionally lucky. On the other hand, the sword he now held was exuding a strong sense of rejection against those it didn't recognize as its owner, but the spiritual power of Kang Shin-hyuk removed the soul poison from it, calming it down. Kang Shin-hyuk couldn't help but think that Oh Joo-young's traits were interesting. Part of it seemed similar to his own trait, and to a larger extent, it seemed to overlap with the abilities his former life had to deal with spiritual power. Maybe that was why it was easier to control the sword.

"...!" Kang Shin-hyuk was handling the sword, filling the people around him with amazement. His sword was a famous artifact that expressed his trait Excalibur, which meant that Kang Shin-hyuk had successfully restrained that trait.

"It was with perfect timing. He's much stronger than I've been told." Oh Joo-young, down a sword, complained to the man in dark armor.

-So I said it would be better to quit. Didn't you say that Anvil wasn't the one who could fight back this easily?

The armored friend responded with a sigh, acting like the two had been friends for years.

"Master...? You... Jormungand... Why...?"

"Huh? There are many things going on, but there's no reason to tell you about it. Damn it, if I knew you'd stop it, I would've cut down the Empress." Vanguard's submaster, Dane Brook, spoke up, but the answer that came back was ferocious. Suddenly, Bomber Girl was moving behind Oh Joo-young.

"You cooperated as best you could, but in the end, you couldn't kill a single person? Are you stupid?"

"You only killed one person yourself."

"Surely..." Dane muttered blankly at the sight.

"Has he been on that side from the beginning?"

"Then, making us fight at the center of the gate was to make it easier for Bomber Girl to kill civilians...?"

“How can this be? You were called the hope of mankind!” Dane’s mutterings triggered the anger of the other superhumans. It wasn’t just with words; they also turned their weapons toward Oh Joo-young. The other members of Vanguard were the angriest of all.

“Don’t be stupid. It’s not uncommon in this era for humans to betray each other.”

“You!”

“Quiet.” Finally, Shin Eunah opened her mouth.

“I don’t plan on watching a new wave drama. You’re my enemy, so I will kill you. Is that alright?” At that point, a whisper arrived from Shin Eunah saying that she would attack Oh Joo-young. Kang Shin-hyuk was quick to grasp her intent and silently nodded.

“No, but before that, why...”

-We are obviously enemies, but for now, be polite to Anvil, who can be called our father...

The armored monster was still speaking politely when something flew over his head. He instinctively activated his defensive skills, but it was in vain. The attack wasn’t aimed at him.

“Kh...?!” Oh Joo-young’s left arm and left leg were consumed by lightning and got burned. He tried to evade the second he recognized the attack, but he was unable to avoid it completely. As soon as he had noticed it, a spider web had wrapped around his body to restrain him. No, that wasn’t all. His physical abilities were clearly weaker...

“You, this...”

“Sorry, I was aiming for your heart.” Shin Eunah was calm as she created a new spear of lightning in her hand. Her extraordinary concentration and infinite magic were united by her terrifyingly precise control to create a miraculous weapon.

“Kh! Hey, help!”

“Sorry, but that can’t be restored! That little boy is using poison!”

“Fuck, interrupting me from start to finish...!” Kang Shin-hyuk frowned at that. From

start to finish? He didn't like either that armored monster of Oh Joo-young, who kept saying things he didn't understand. He wanted to sit down and figure it all out calmly, but he knew he couldn't afford to do that right now.

'So, I'll ask after...' Why did Oh Joo-young betray them? Why did he keep finding things that he sold to the Hero Universe possessed by monsters? Why did that monster have the armor that was given to Janus?

"Hahahaha!" Kang Shin-hyuk rushed at Joo-young, clapped his hands together to return his sword right back at him wrapped in thread. Oh Joo-young clicked his tongue and cut through the threads with a new sword pulled out from his subspace artifact. At that point, he was already convinced that some debuff was being applied to him. Of course, that was the Golden Dragon Kang Shin-hyuk had activated. Shin Eunah's had attacked him the precise moment he had activated that trait to prevent him from responding properly. Oh Joo-young's ability to protect him was incredible, but they had no intention of allowing him to continue.

-Bang!

The swords collided with the sound of a great explosion. Oh Joo-young could feel his right arm throbbing from the impact and raising his left arm reflexively. He felt something unidentifiable flow within his body from the attack, wracking him with pain. It wasn't the first time. The moment he attacked Kang Shin-hyuk, something began to invade his soul steadily. He ground his teeth and swallowed back the pain.

'Fuck, I should've killed him somehow...' The original plan was to reduce their power as much as possible by taking out the other top-rankers by surprise. However, when the Thunder Empress revealed her power, he changed that to killing her somehow. However, Anvil then appeared. He aimed for Anvil at the end because his instincts had screamed at him to do so, but this was the result. He couldn't finish him off, and now his own attacks were causing him to suffer.

"Go, attack!"

"Block them!" The other superhumans began to move upon seeing Kang Shin-hyuk and Shin Eunah confront the enemy. They were met by the SSS-class monsters. Only Bomber Girl and the armored monster remained motionless.

"How is this happening?"

-Anvil's abilities are better than originally expected. I have to step back.

"It's bad to run away after this far..."

-Then, we will die here.

"I'll go first!" Surprisingly, Bomber Girl ignored Oh Joo-young and the other monsters fighting to throw herself into the gate. The monster looked at her and shook his head.

-Humans are really disgusting. I can't find any fellowship...

"Help!"

-Gladly!

"...!" Oh Joo-young and Kang Shin-hyuk were locked in a fierce battle. However, when Shin Eunah threw a bolt of lightning to finish him off, the armored monster intervened. Even its armor couldn't completely prevent the attack, however, as it punched a hole in his shoulder.

-Even in my long life, a human has never hurt me like this before. It's amazing to think you've been hiding such strength all this time.

"There were people doing similar things to you guys... ugh?!" Kang Shin-hyuk focused on Oh Joo-young, ignoring the monster. His poisonous spider web, filled with spiritual power, had already spread out in every direction during the battle. The soul poison they emitted was weakening his foe.

"I'm going to get rid of the easy one!"

"I know!"

"Who is easy... huh?!" The breathing of Kang Shin-hyuk and Shin Eunah synchronized. She was using magic to keep Oh Joo-young's movements in check while also preventing the monster from assisting.

"A little boy! I've fought a lot more than you in the past!" Oh Joo-young, firmly pissed off, received the baptism of threads cutting his body. When the sword Kang Shin-hyuk held flew straight at his throat, Oh Joo-young's sword radiated a brilliant golden color.

“Excalibur!” It was the sword that broke through the realm of myth, blowing away the soul poison and spider webs around his body to strike Kang Shin-hyuk. It was the culmination of his unique SS+ trait. The next moment, it changed its direction dramatically and stabbed into Oh Joo-young’s neck.

“Ugh...” Oh Joo-young grunted. Kang Shin-hyuk neatly cut his head off with his own sword without being shaken, however. The moment he noticed the sword’s ego recognize him, he had thought of energizing it to use it himself. The trait the number one had was great, but he was unaware of spiritual power until the end.

-Sure enough, you already had complete control over the sword. Indeed, you deserve the title of the father of all swords.

The monster jumped up to catch Oh Joo-young’s head as he spoke with admiration.

-I apologize for thinking of you as only a blacksmith. Today, I admit my defeat and leave, father.

“I don’t know of a child like you.”

-It’s a joke; I don’t really like you either. Well then, until next time.

Shin Eunah threw another lightning lance backed by terrible magic, but the armored monster had vanished before it connected. Kang Shin-hyuk was well aware of the function included in the armor known as emergency departure.

“He’s completely gone.”

“...It’s annoying.” Shin Eunah was frustrated she couldn’t catch the monster with her own abilities, stomping at the ground. However, there was no time for resentment. Bomber Girl and the armored monster had disappeared, but there were still plenty of SSS-class monsters around. Kang Shin-hyuk retrieved the golden sword left by Oh Joo-young. He had taken two swords from him now.

“Once we finish them, we can figure it out.” He still had time left for the potion. At his words, Shin Eunah nodded and raised her magic again. The other rankers grew almost tired of the sight of her as she expelled out infinite magical power. Under her command and with Kang Shin-hyuk’s buff, they took out the remaining SSS-class monsters without letting a single one run away.

However, by the time they broke through the gate and were released outside, the French HQ for the association had ceased to exist in that spot.

CHAPTER 156

CROSSING AND ACCELERATING (2)

Paris was burning in a scene that seemed to be straight out of a movie. Eleanor and Lee Na-hee were down in the street, looking up blankly at the sky.

“Na-hee, are you okay?”

“Ah... huh.” Eleanor looked at her friend anxiously. Her face was subtly changed as if she was wearing a mask, and her eyes were dyed red. It was the same as when she had been fighting in the Korean countercurrent.

“I should also use it.” Lee Na-hee put on a mask herself as if everything was fine. Eleanor only grew more concerned for her friend. However, Lee Na-hee was trying to hide her face, which was heated by her bold actions against Kang Shin-hyuk. There was no room for any deeper conversation between the two, as waves of monsters overflowing the streets would soon reach them.

“Where are you heading?” Eleanor watched a monster jump over their friends from a nearby building and pierced it with her lance. At that, Lee Na-hee murmured.

“Can we head to my father’s shop?”

“Yes, then let’s go there.” In response to Lee Na-hee’s selfish remark, Eleanor nodded without hesitation. In front of them, Karen was shouting.

“It won’t be so bad on the Champs-Elysees! There will be a lot of superhumans there!”

“Oh, when did you...?” Lee Na-hee noticed Karen was also wearing a mask, disguised with red eyes and black hair. Lee Na-hee glanced over at Eleanor, who was sulking slightly.

“I thought I might be able to use this mask in the future, so I asked Shin-hyuk to give me one. I thought Karen could use it, since she’s with us.” Eleanor was proud of the gift she had received from Kang Shin-hyuk, which was clear by how she ran her fingers over it as she spoke. Lee Na-hee suddenly had an urge to boast about kissing Kang

Shin-hyuk to see her expression but suppressed it. It had just been a surprise attack she had done all on her own, after all. However, her face reddened as she remembered it, which made her glad she was wearing the mask now.

“Did that guy make it properly? Is enchanting not such a big deal to him... that idiot.”

“What are you talking about so suddenly, Na-hee?”

“Oh, nothing. Let’s go.” Outside of the HQ of the association, the monsters appeared to be only S-rank at the highest. Eleanor, who didn’t need to hide her power thanks to the mask, was able to deal with most of the enemies with a single lance strike.

“Karen, can you check what’s going on in the UK?”

“I checked, nothing seems to be wrong there. The same goes for Korea.”

“There must be a limit to the monsters’ ability to mobilize. Only France is dealing with this many gates at once.”

“...That monster, I’ll get it.” The three wandered the streets fighting monsters while making their way to Champs-Elysees. It seemed that the number of monsters was high around the HQ.

“Tsu!” Fortunately, the monsters around them had a lower rank overall. Lee Na-hee produced the short staff she placed in the garter ring around her left thigh. She wasn’t very confident in her magic except for enchanting, but in fact, she was fairly highly ranked among those in the Magic Department. In particular, she was perfect for dealing with miscellaneous mobs, but Lee Na-hee couldn’t help but note that she was more effective with Claire’s magic gun.

“By the way, Na-hee, do you keep that staff on your thigh?”

“Yes, it’s the perfect place to hide it secretly, right?”

“Only for that reason?”

“It’s cool to take it out like this too, right? Actually, I thought about putting it in my chest for that reason, but it was too big.” Eleanor watched her with excitement. It was fortunate that she hadn’t done that instead. If Kang Shin-hyuk were there, he would’ve known that Lee Na-hee wasn’t actually a pervert, just that she suffered from having

the taste of a middle schooler.

“We’ve arrived.”

“..Well?” The group arrived at the store they had found the day before after sorting out the weak monsters in the area, but they stopped short of entering it. Something felt off.

“What’s inside?”

“Ellie?”

“Be careful, Na-hee.” Karen blocked Lee Na-hee while Eleanor stepped inside. They could hear her laughter after a moment.

“Ellie?”

“Don’t come in.”

“No, I want to come in.” Eleanor spoke firmly and tried to push her away, but the smooth French caught her ear.

“I was waiting for you.”

“Wow...” Lee Na-hee leaned over to see the owner of the voice, stepping back in surprise.

“The stalker caught up to us here?”

“I was counting on you showing up here. Don’t you think we’re destined to be together?” The illusionary magic around the store disappeared, revealing the figure of Nathan Bodin standing among the ruins. Nathan’s trait was the S-class [Magic Interference]. Similar to Bomber girls [Magic Transformation], it was suitable for dissipating magic that hung around an area.

“Damn that fate, you just broke into someone’s house. I don’t think that stalker temperament of yours will get any better.”

“You’re saying some stuff you don’t mean. Oh, by the way, that mask is pretty cute. It’s a shame the expression doesn’t look right.” She had responded in genuine French, but Nathan ignored her words as if he couldn’t hear them and swept back his hair, saying

whatever he wanted. Though he was a handsome man, it was a disgusting sight to see.

“So, a cute girl in a mask. I’m not in school now, which means things have changed a lot, you know?”

“Of course I know. Before you were an annoying stalker, but now you’re a criminal!”

“Na-hee, I know you’re angry but now... he’s dangerous.” Karen raised her head to look around, speaking through clenched teeth. She could sense a large number of monsters coming. It was too late to avoid them. In the sky, she could already see wyverns flying in.

“You mad man, have you joined Jormungand?” Lee Na-hee stared at him with contempt, but he nodded without hesitation.”

“Only they are able to recognize my potential and develop it properly.”

“You became a real idiot.”

“..”

“If my junior saw it, would he laugh at this third-class villain act?” Nathan Bodin shuddered at her sharp words. The topic of Kang Shin-hyuk seemed to disgust him. However, he was maintaining his power, which was why Eleanor was unable to move easily. It wasn’t enough to immobilize her, but it made it difficult for her to move.

“That boy... admittedly, he’s just lucky because he was born with the means to beat me. That strange and mysterious power.” That was spiritual power.

“But soon I’ll be able to handle it. It’s a shame I can’t compete directly with him since he’s trapped in an SS-class gate.

“He’s no asshole like you, there’s no way he’ll die.” It might’ve been a bit hopeful, but Lee Na-hee maintained a strong stance to hide her doubts.

“Because he even kissed me. Once he clears the gate, the next step...” Nathan Bodin’s magic exploded out. Five small round shield-shaped artifacts that Lee Na-hee usually carried around (nicknamed Pot Lid, they were remote-controlled defensive tools created in mimicry of Claire’s drones) wrapped around her. Karen brandished her rapier to block the front, while Eleanor broke through the loosening magical interference to

stab Nathan Bodin.

-Kwaaaang!

Two sounds rang out. One was the sound of magical spears colliding against the shields Lee Na-hee controlled, and the other was the sound of the black mist that had formed to cover Eleanor's lance before it pierced Nathan's head.

"Shadow predator... did you sell your soul to the devil?" The mist scattered under her strong blow. Even though her attack had failed to connect, she remained calm. Her red-tinted eyes were filled with disgust.

"Eleanor R. Algiers... it was you." Meanwhile, Nathan's expression twisted. He could feel the transcendental power she had wielded in that strike. As she said, it was a shadow predator, an S-rank monster, that took the attack instead. He wasn't one who could be easily destroyed with his exceptional defense. Nathan Bodin stepped back slightly, still instilled with the fear of losing the Crown of Two Kings to her, and fired off magic bullets at her flashing lance.

"I didn't sell my soul. This is my escort. I'm being treated pretty well, Algiers. Unlike you, who was kicked out of your own country."

-Ahhhhhh!

-Kiiii!

The monsters around them had narrowed the distance and surrounded them at once. Lee Na-hee lifted her staff, which rang out a warning of the troll approaching from behind.

"You must've practiced a lot. If only you weren't a stalker, maybe we could've been friends."

"Friend? I don't need anything like that. Things have changed, I have no intention of accepting your complaining anymore."

"Complaining?"

"Listen to me. You should be mine." Two wyverns descended upon them, one aiming for Eleanor and the other for Karen. An ominous red line ran through their bodies,

marking them as no ordinary wyverns. At the same time, Lee Na-hee felt a trace of power she couldn't understand.

"I decided so!" Eleanor and Karen moved at once, intent on making Nathan regret his words. He activated his trait at maximum output to check the movements of the two. Eleanor was able to move against it despite that, but Karen was incapable of resisting it.

"Huh...!"

"Karen!" Lee Na-hee clenched her jaw and tried to manipulate the shields, but they were too badly damaged from before.

'If only my junior were here, this would be fine... ah, really!' Lee Na-hee, unable to witness her friend dying in front of her, protected her with her body. She decided that if Nathan Bodin's purpose here was her, she wouldn't try to kill them that way. But...

"Ah... all you have to do is leave her head. No, I want her heart too..."

"What?! You son of a bitch!" Her eyes opened wide at the unexpected remark. She didn't want to die to this kinky asshole. She had to live somehow.

'Move a little! Just a little! Enchant, enchant!' Lee Na-hee squeezed her chest, trying to force out her power even a bit. If she could revitalize her shields with her power, even just a little bit, it would be enough.

Just one shield. At least one!

-By satisfying the conditions, the existing trait [Enchant (A+)] will evolve.

It was at that moment an unexpected message appeared before Lee Na-hee.

CHAPTER 157

CROSSING AND ACCELERATING (3)

After the gate erosion was lifted, Kang Shin-hyuk began to fall towards the ruins of the HQ building of the French Superhuman Association. He immediately brought out the blue cow from his inventory, planning on riding it in search of Claire, but fortunately, Claire came to find him.

“...Eun-hyuk!”

“Noona!” Kang Shin-hyuk drooped with relief upon confirming Claire was safe. She hugged him tightly, her pleasant and alluring scent wafting over him.

“I’m glad you’re safe...!” Kang Shin-hyuk hugged her tightly as he felt her body tremble.

“As always, it was thanks to your potion. You’re the perfect match for me.”

“Even if you’re trying to score with those words, you’re already at a perfect score.” He burst out into laughter at her words, but a terrifying presence arrived to push Claire away. Of course, it was Shin Eunah.

“Foul!”

“Eunah, you did it last time, so this is a draw.”

“Well, that... I was so happy, I accidentally...”

“Isn’t it the same? I’m also relieved and happy.” Shin Eunah and Claire’s childish argument was a truly surreal scene, given the current situation. Those who were liberated from the gate saw them and realized that the report of the love triangle was true.

“Honey, I’m safe too. A hug...”

“I wish you died.” Juno valentine tried to step in but was soundly defeated. If he didn’t know of Kang Shin-hyuk’s skills, there might’ve been room for him to push in, but he

had also been overwhelmed by the sight of him inside the gate.

“The scandal of the century. A new ranker rising with the red-haired Alchemist, plus... the first place ranking...” All the high-rankers nodded and looked at Shin Eunah. They all had witnessed her abilities as she faced off against the monsters inside of the gate. They couldn’t dare measure up to her. Then there was Shin Eun-hyuk, who had suddenly shown up even though he wasn’t invited to the conference. And above all of that, ironically, the leader of Vanguard, the guild that put Korea at the center of superhuman society, had betrayed mankind.

“It’ll be difficult...”

“It’s okay. If we endure a bit of pain, Korea’s position may be solidified going forward.” If the power of the superhuman association was strong, then the whole country became strong. Both Shin Eunah and Shin Eun-hyuk belonged to the association, so even though Vanguard’s strength might have weakened, Korea would remain strong with the association supporting it.

“Ah...” It was then that Baek In-ha broke into it as Kang Shin-hyuk was struggling with the attention suddenly on him.

“Baek In-ha, are you awake?”

“Hey, I also endured a lot. You were fighting?”

“Yes, I broke the SSS-gate.”

“Damn...” Claire, Baek, and the other superhumans in a good enough condition had been trying to protect people as much as possible the moment the building collapses. He was still working to rescue those buried under the rubble.

“It’s tricky. These damn structures have anti-magic, so it’s hard to move them with magic.”

“What the hell is anti-magic for?”

“You’re telling me...” It was no normal task to remove the debris of a structure built to boast the world’s best durability.

“Everyone cooperate! The people under this rubble are more important than the whole

of Paris!”

“You say really cruel things so casually.” However, since those words weren’t untrue, all the superhumans mobilized to work hard at clearing the debris. Even in the midst of that, they were still dealing with the monsters flocking around.

“Is there any metal in it?”

“It’s at least fifty percent metal.”

“That’s great. Onyx, come out.” Kang Shin-hyuk quietly brought out Onyx while watching the people around him. He had been living in the garbage warehouse these days, but at his call, Onyx stuck his head out from the sub-space and let out a small cry.

“Today, it’s your job to eat the metal in this rubble.”

-Myu...

Onyx complained about being called only for these types of things. However, even as strong as he had grown from eating the alloy garbage, he would’ve needed to retire after three minutes of participating in the battle today.

“I have a sword for you today.”

-Myu?!

He was so eager to eat; it felt rather refreshing. Kang Shin-hyuk let the guy loose into the building rubble. Onyx immediately activated his stealth and went to work.

“How the hell...? Even I momentarily lost track of it...?” Claire, watching the scene up until then, opened her eyes in amazement.

“If the metal disappears, the work will be easier.”

“It’s better than nothing.” Baek, unaware of Onyx’s abilities, responded with an ambiguous expression.

“What about Na-hee and Eleanor?”

“When I woke up, they weren’t around.”

“What?” What had happened with Jormungand? Didn’t he rescue them? Did they evacuate to another place? Checking his phone, he found a message from Karen saying they would head toward Lee Na-hee’s store.

“No, why... hm...” He didn’t think it was a rational judgment, but he knew that people wouldn’t always act rationally. He summoned the blue cow and sat down on it.

“I’ll be back. Baek, please protect Onyx.”

“Uh, sure...”

“I’ll go too.” Claire sat behind him.

“I’m a magic-type anyway, so I won’t be helpful here.”

“Then, I too...”

“Eunah, you’re strong. Who’re you trying to trick?”

“Oh...” Eunah, well aware of the importance of the rescue operation, was unable to push her case. Claire grinned as she placed her arms around Kang Shin-hyuk.

“Oh, the Empress has lost.”

“I guess the Alchemist took it.”

“I thought the Alchemist was more attractive myself... hiii!” Shin Eunah’s gaze silenced the superhumans paying attention to them as Kang Shin-hyuk and Claire rode off.

“Are you really unhurt?” The bike ran through Paris’s night sky. When it was just the two of them, Claire carefully touched Kang Shin-hyuk’s chest, where the uniform was shredded. Every time her fingertips ran across his skin, an odd and strangely itchy sensation hit him. Kang Shin-hyuk pretended it wasn’t affecting him as he spread out his webs to catch nearby monsters.

“I was hurt, but your potion healed me completely. No scars at all.”

“It must’ve been painful...”

“It hurt, but...” Kang Shin-hyuk couldn’t help but enjoy the strange heat emanating out

from wherever she touched him.

“This is the reward.”

“You...”

“Now, now... huh?” Thanks to the blue cow’s ego, they were able to avoid colliding with any monsters. His gaze was focused forward as Claire continued to speak.

“I was happy too when you came to my side. Or was it because of Eunah?”

“No way. I was worried about my noona. All that other stuff... I was just worried about you...”

“Huh... is that how it is?” Claire sounded satisfied as she leaned against him.

“That’s right.” Kang Shin-hyuk was smiling back at her.

“I couldn’t help it because I was worried about you...” Claire hugged him from behind, finished what she had started before being disturbed by Shin Eunah. The two stayed still for a while.

“You know.”

“Yeah?”

“Let’s stop talking about her.” Kang Shin-hyuk barely suppressed his desire to ask what she meant.

“Okay.”

“Huh.” The urge to embrace her became more intense, but soon after, they reached Champs-Elysees.

“What?!” The scene there demolished their good mood.

“Na-hee... and the Magic Crown?!”

“Shin-hyuk?! Even Claire...!” In the ruins of the destroyed store, there was Na-hee and Karen, surrounded by four massive barriers, and Eleanor, who was confronting Nathan

Bodin with the lance Kang Shin-hyuk had made.

“What the hell is this?”

“Hey, junior!” Lee Na-hee waved excitedly from within the barriers.

“I evolved my trait! We’ll be even when it comes to splitting the profits now!”

CHAPTER 158

CROSSING AND ACCELERATING (4)

“How...” Nathan Bodin looked up at Kang Shin-hyuk and trembled in disbelief.

“How on earth did you get out of the SS-class gate...?”

“It’s something I’ve seen fifty thousand times in comic books... no, that’s true...” Kang Shin-hyuk sighed after confirming he was still wearing his mask properly.

“Isn’t this meaningless? He knew right away.”

“It’s because Na-hee said your name. It’s meaningless to hide visual information in that case.”

“Then, I’ll blame Na-hee.” Kang Shin-hyuk stopped the blue cow mid-air, letting Claire jump down into the barrier around Na-hee and Karen.

“What sort of thing is this?”

“It moves automatically to block everything, unnie.”

“You hear that, Shin-hyuk? Don’t worry about us and go all out.”

“Okay.” Kang Shin-hyuk procured two scythes from his inventory, gripping them as transparent strands of thread flowed through the air. Perhaps thanks to awakening the soul poison skill and increasing his proficiency with spiritual power, it was now possible to manipulate the threads with spiritual power and Wind Mastery at the same time, even while handling different weapons. He had tested it inside the SSS-class gate, but it was even possible after the potion’s effects had ended.

“I don’t know how you escaped the gate, but bluffing won’t work against me!” As Nathan shouted, the monsters approached him. Kang Shin-hyuk tightened his grip around his scythe as Nathan landed on the ground to unleash a powerful earth magic called Ground Wave. It made the earth sway like a stormy sea, and it was one of the more advanced area magics.

“Algiers!”

“Kh!” It was capable of temporarily incapacitating those standing on the ground, particularly the lancer who had been charging with the weight of a large lance. Eleanor could not maintain her balance and hit the ground as the sudden and violent waves rocked the earth.

“Die! Ground Spear!” Although his head was no good, Nathan Bodin was a person who thought things through. He calculated it would be better to deal with Eleanor, who was already exhausted from the battle, before dealing with the high-rankers who had broken through the SS-class gate. However, if there was something he couldn’t calculate, it was the fact that Kang Shin-hyuk could move faster than his magic.

“Hoo!”

“Kyah!” Kang Shin-hyuk fired off threads the moment the ground wave had been activated, tying them around Eleanor’s feet. She was yanked off the ground and up onto the bike hovering in the air.

“Now!” Once saddled, the bike soared into the air. Nathan Bodin readied his magic shield in preparation for the following offensive, but it wasn’t him who Kang Shin-hyuk aimed for. The ten strands of thread spread out in all directions to cut through the monsters around Nathan Bodin. It would be too much effort to kill them all at once, even with soul poison, so instead, he pulled them all together and wrapped them up. Backed with the power of S-rank Wind Mastery, it was easy to do so.

-Kuoooooh?!

-Let me go!

-Ooh, I can’t move...!

“Kh!” The sight of the monsters being pulled and bound to a single point in the air was a spectacle, and it only became more of one when Kang Shin-hyuk activated his trait to slay them with the scythes all at once.

“Shin-hyuk wanted to try that... how cool.” Claire laughed happily at the sight, filming it all the while. She deliberately ignored the complicated expression Karen had beside her.

“Hahahah!”

“What?!” Eleanor realized what was happening as Kang Shin-hyuk aimed next at Nathan Bodin, rushing him atop the blue cow. Her spear pointed upward in time to aim right at him as the bike sped up towards him.

“What...!” He tried to call out to the monsters for support, but most of them were already dead. He urgently activated his trait and poured all of his magic into his shield, but unfortunately, the blue cow was a bike that moved with spiritual power. Eleanor’s power was weakened slightly by him, but thanks to Lee Na-hee’s evolved trait, more than enough power remained at the tip of her lance.

“Huooooooooooh!” Eleanor raised her voice to hide her embarrassment at charging with a lance on the back of a bike, expressing her trait to its fullest extent. Her will sharpened so that it couldn’t be shaken by Nathan Bodin, filling the lance that Kang Shin-hyuk had made and that Lee Na-hee strengthened.

“Kahak!” The shield was broken through in an instant, pierced by the lance that reached Nathan’s heart.

“Shin-hyuk!” Eleanor called out his name, unjustly.

“I’m surprised to see you move!”

“No, I wanted to give the last hit to you. I believed you would be able to react to the blue cow’s movements.”

“You believed...?” Eleanor’s momentum as she tried to let out her anger shrank. It was cute the way her shoulders sagged.

“Well... thanks.”

“Our Majesty’s pronunciation is suddenly bad again.”

“Ellie needs to relearn Korean. Her ability to speak the language always declines when she is a little embarrassed.” Karen and Lee Na-hee, who was calmly judging the situation from inside the barrier, gave Eleanor a failing grade. On the other hand, Kang Shin-hyuk’s keen eyes were surveying their surroundings as he noticed something rising up from the ground. He threw the growing scythe with the power of his Golden Dragon and spiritual power. It roared through the air right past Eleanor to stick into

the ground.

“Uh, ah...?” Eleanor, dumbstruck, turned to the side and barely realized what had happened. A massive insect was rising from the ground with its mouth wide open to swallow up Nathan’s body, but it had been cut by the scythe and was now spewing blood.

“Senior, finish it.”

“Hm!” Eleanor stabbed the giant insect in its head with her massive lance that didn’t fit her small body.

-Kiiii!

“This tough guy...” Kang Shin-hyuk shot threads and daggers into the insect’s torso to stagger it as it tried to escape back underground. It writhed and tried to escape but suddenly collapsed with a terrible scream. Though it was bleeding immensely, something else had killed it.

“What is this, how...?”

“It’s a new skill.” Kang Shin-hyuk offered up that brief explanation as he landed on the ground by the insect, automatically recovering his weapons into his inventory. The insect had swallowed half of Nathan’s body, which was only placed in his inventory, unfortunately. He would need to figure out what that was about later.

“I’m glad you’re both safe.”

“Which two are you talking about, Shin-hyuk?”

“Oh yeah, all three of you.” Kang Shin-hyuk appeased Karen and looked around for any more monsters. Neither above nor under the ground, most were being dealt with by other superhumans. A few lurked in the skies, but they seemed content to stay back.

“Then, it’s over.”

“Yeah... alas, it goes like this.” Lee Na-hee lifted the barriers and changed them back to her original shield artifact, surveying the area with a bitter smile. Now that the illusionary magic had dissipated, leaving only the ruined cornerstone where a building had once remained.

“Nathan Bodin, you bastard.”

“Ah, um... I’m sorry, senior.” Lee Na-hee shook her head at his apology.

“Don’t worry, I know you did what you could.” She let out a bitter laugh.

“It’s not so bad to let it go and start anew. It’s not my mom and dad’s shop that was set up here anymore, but yours and mine.”

“...Isn’t that a little misleading?” Claire, who was still contemplating what was happening, stepped in.

“If you say it like that, it’s like you’re thinking about marriage, when in fact, you’re just a junior and senior in a club.”

“Yes? My unnie is also... it’s just me presenting the facts as they are. My junior and I decided to set up a store here, since rent is free on Champs-Elysees. Plus, my junior is profitable.” A smile returned to Lee Na-hee’s face as she looked back over at Kang Shin-hyuk.

“I’m glad you’re safe. Was it thanks to my enchantment?”

“...Do you hate me?”

“No. That enchantment can’t be placed on people who I don’t like. It’s the first time I tried it, so I wasn’t sure if it would work.” At the moment, everyone listening had a rough idea of what Lee Na-hee meant by enchantment. Karen pouted, and Eleanor had a rough look, but Claire only smiled.

“Shin-hyuk, please tell me the details of this *enchantment* when we’re alone.”

“Uh, yes... okay, sorry...” Lee Na-hee frowned as she noticed that Claire’s attitude towards Shin-hyuk, and his attitude towards her, changed.

“I’ll let you know, unnie.”

“No, I’ll listen directly from Shin-hyuk. I’m interested.”

“Na-hee, tell me. I’m curious how it relates to laws related to sexual harassment.”

No one was using their abilities, but a dangerous current seemed to be running through everyone. Kang Shin-hyuk had hope in his heart as he looked to his savior, the administrator, for help, but found no answer.

Rather, no messages had come from him ever since that monster had appeared.

CHAPTER 159

CROSSING AND ACCELERATING (5)

Jormungand's raid on Paris had killed Samuel Joiner, the representative of the UN Gate Countermeasures Organization, and countless French citizens. The fact that two of the top-rankers, including the world's number one Ju-young Oh, had betrayed humanity and joined Jormungand shocked the world. Due to their radical actions, mankind's awareness of Jormungand had increased. Now the battle was for the civilization humanity had barely been protecting. Each country stayed up all night to prepare for the future in hopes of preventing another tragedy like Paris. The people who participated in the conference, including Kang Shin-hyuk, remained in Paris for a few more days because it was announced that the Superhuman Association would hold the conference once more. The students cheered that they could skip more classes.

As a bonus, their free stay at a five-star hotel was extended.

"So..." The night after damage control was over and they returned to the hotel, Kang Shin-hyuk secretly escaped from his room and found his way to Shin Eunah's room, who was staying on the top floor of the hotel. Claire was also there. She hadn't been staying there from the beginning, but rather she realized that Shin Eunah was calling Shin-hyuk over and made her way there.

"Are they going to register me as the Death Puppeteer?"

"We had a fierce battle over Black Tarantula until the end, but trademarks..." Shin Eunah, who was drinking a can of coffee, smiled at Kang Shin-hyuk's voice as she read the summary of the association's countermeasures meeting she had gone to. She was remembered when they had first nicknamed her the Thunder Empress.

"You're fifth in the rankings, congratulations. I called you here because I wanted to tell you in person. In fact, the association wanted to contact you directly, but I stopped them. After dealing with Nathan Bodin, Kang Shin-hyuk returned with Eleanor, Lee Na-hee, and Karen to help rescue the victims of the incident. By then, they had all taken off their masks and returned to working as students of Shinyoung. No matter if they covered their faces, it would be easy to figure out who they are if they had all shown up wearing the same disguises. As a bonus, they could increase the evaluation of

Shinyoung in helping with the rescue efforts. Shin Eun-hyuk had vanished from the scene and couldn't be found as no one could read his magical power.

"Fifth place. You're a top-ranker, a top-ranker."

"I'm not happy about it... it was all thanks to that transcendence potion, anyway..." Kang Shin-hyuk honestly thought his results were fraudulent. Of course, he had grown strong enough to be confident as a high-ranking superhuman.

"It's already been revealed that it was the result of doping with a potion."

"Of course, but no potion could bring about such dramatic changes, even if it was one I made." Claire spoke up. She had been lying on the bed in her friend's room, rolling around and watching a video on her phone. Kang Shin-hyuk was trying his best to ignore what she was watching.

"But it was because of my spiritual power."

"You were compatible with my potion, so it resulted in a synergy effect, but people don't know that. That's why they assumed that your original skills are also worthy of the top-ranks. If it weren't for the potion, you wouldn't be ranked five, right? That's what you think?"

"Right..."

"I should've seen it myself. I'm glad there are still videos." Kang Shin-hyuk couldn't endure it anymore as Claire played the video once more with a happy smile.

"Is that from inside the SSS-class gate? How'd you film it?!"

"I hacked your phone and played with the recording function just slightly."

"You're not an alchemist. You're a super hacker..."

"I'll apologize, so don't call me a super hacker." Shin Eunah gazed at them as the two conversed as such. Claire looked over at her quizzically.

"Eunah?"

"No, just... the sense of distance..."

“Is it close? Is it really close?” In response to Claire’s light jab, Shin Eunah ground her teeth and pulled Kang Shin-hyuk. He was dragged away by her without any resistance.

“If you do something to my junior, I won’t leave it be.”

“I think you’re trying to do something... ah.” Claire had a slightly spiteful smile.

“Last night, I heard that a kid named Lee Na-hee kissed Shin-hyuk. For an enchantment.”

“...Okay, I’ll be back in a moment.”

“Wait a minute!” Kang Shin-hyuk desperately held onto Shin Eunah, whose body was filled with power as she tried to leave.

“I will never forget the name Lee Na-hee.”

“Ah...”

“My junior’s precious first kiss...” When Kang Shin-hyuk flinched at that part, Shin Eunah caught it immediately.”

“Not the first time...?”

“It’s not attractive to dig up someone’s past, Eunah.” At Claire’s words, Kang Shin-hyuk flinched again instead of Shin Eunah. He had also been worried about Claire’s ex-boyfriend, but now he felt like he had been blocked from that question. Of course, he knew it was rude to ask, but he couldn’t help but be concerned. He felt there was just too big of a gap in experience between them.

‘Most of my memories from Anvil are just about forging...’ Perhaps it was prioritizing Anvil’s memories that would help him improve his own ability. Of course, some memories of his previous life’s wife and family were also mixed in, but they were usually too sad to recall. Kang Shin-hyuk didn’t want to think of them, so he put a stopper on those ones.

‘I’m worrying about nothing.’ He calmed down quickly, not noticing Claire sigh and flicking Eunah’s forehead.

“Really, once you focus on something, you can’t control yourself... if you burden Shin-hyuk, I’ll punish you.”

“Ugh... alright, but Claire started it first.”

“Yes, yes, I was wrong.” Claire stood up from the bed and opened her inventory, producing various cups and cocktails.

“Let’s send off Shin-hyuk and have a drink. If Shin-hyuk stays around for too long, the teachers will notice.”

“Student of Shinyoung, alone in a room with the Alchemist and the Thunder Empress...”

“It’s okay if it’s revealed.”

“Ah, no, that would be bad. Goodbye then. Both of you sleep well.” Kang Shin-hyuk sighed and waved at the two as he left. Or rather, he tried to, but the door wouldn’t budge.

“What?”

“Hm?” Shin Eunah approached and grabbed the handle, but it wouldn’t open for her either. She tilted her head and prepared to use her abilities, but Claire quickly stopped her.

“If you do that, someone will really come. Let me try.”

“Really...” Shin Eunah grumbled and stepped back. Claire touched the front door, and it opened smoothly.

“Uh...?”

“Huh.” Claire opened the door with a big smile, letting him out. There was no fear of being caught, as the top floor was a single suite.

“Well then, see you next time.”

“Yeah. Oh, you got something there.”

“Huh?” When Kang Shin-hyuk looked back at Claire, she kissed him as if she had been waiting to strike. It was for only a moment, but it felt like an eternity.

“Uh, ah...”

“I’m new to this too. Anyway, sleep well!” The door closed, leaving Kang Shin-hyuk stuck in place. It sounded like she had whispered something to him when she was pulling away, but he couldn’t hear it properly due to his own excitement. It didn’t really matter, he figured. The important thing was that Claire kissed him.

‘Yes, I don’t have to worry about things like the past.’ The important thing was the present. Claire liked him, now where would they go from here? That was what mattered.

-Member.

“Hey, administrator?” As if he had been waiting for that timing, the administrator’s message appeared in front of him. Kang Shin-hyuk could only respond hazily.

-I apologize for being late to speak.

“What?”

-I returned after collecting dimensional information. It was about the disclosure of your information.

“Ah... yes, you haven’t been talking since the fight.”

-I’m truly sorry; that was an area outside of the reach of this power.

Kang Shin-hyuk felt something off.

“Administrator, you’ve been talking a bit weird today. Discussing things like power and information...”

-This is a monumental day...

The next message appeared in the blink of an eye.

-You met an executive of Jormungand at the SSS-level gate and defeated them. Moreover, as a VIP, the rate of your synchronization is increasing, so information regulations have been lifted to an extent. In fact, the rate has exceeded 40%.

“Really?” He checked the rate at that, confirming it was really up to 44.5%. It had been a nearly ten percent increase. Kang Shin-hyuk soon realized the cause. It was probably from controlling Joo-young Oh’s sword with his spiritual power, as well as gaining the

soul poison skill and increasing the rank of his powers...

-The third liberation at 50% draws near. I've just pushed certain information to come a bit faster.

"Yes, then what..."

-So, first of all, a 50,000HP bonus!

"Wasn't this urgent?" Was he going to skip over it? Plus, this was the biggest bonus yet!

-I will tell you later. It is related to the dimensional quest you will be given in the future.

"Yes, so..."

-To start with the conclusion, Janus went missing. The Hero Universe cannot reach him. The most likely outcome is that the information leak came from him.

Kang Shin-hyuk was surprisingly calm at the news that upturned his world. He tried to contact Janus, but no answer came.

He felt like crying.

CHAPTER 160

CROSSING AND ACCELERATING (6)

[Therefore, the Korean superhuman Shin Eunah is now recognized as number one in the international rankings, and the Korean superhuman Shin Eun-hyuk is now recognized as fifth in the global rankings. If you have any objections, please raise your hand and speak.]

Through the monitor, Charlotte Jad Macon, chairman of the World Superhuman Conference, was calmly speaking. Despite being poisoned to the point she was spewing blood days before, there were no signs of injury on her. No doubt, the conference had resumed in an attempt to show off the power of the superhumans, including her.

'Charlotte Jad Macon. She was quite active at the gate.' Kang Shin-hyuk and Shin Eunah were the ones who mainly dealt with the worst of the enemies, but most of the high rankers had been there to fight, including her.

[Shin Eun-hyuk, the Death Puppeteer.]

[You have to admit his power.]

[After seeing it, I wouldn't dare.]

[Fifth seems too low.]

[Two top rankers from Korea alone.]

Of course, all those attending the conference had been sucked into the SSS-class gate. Some had been rescued by him, and some had fought beside him. It would be absurd for them not to acknowledge his ability at that point. At least, that maintained that attitude on the surface. No one could interfere with Shin Eunah; she had already been proven to be a force far beyond Joo Young-oh.

[Then, this concludes the fifteenth World Superhuman Conference. With all these events in mind, each country will have to work closely together to protect humanity from the threat of Jormungand.]

Charlotte's dignified voice carried throughout the conference hall. Kang Shin-hyuk applauded with everyone else on the thirteenth floor. Lee Na-hee, standing beside him, suddenly tapped on the floor and muttered.

"It's great to restore a building like this in just a few days."

"Most of the materials were mostly intact. Even so, it's great." Kang Shin-hyuk looked around. They were once again in the HQ of the French Superhuman Association, the same one that had collapsed a few days ago in the raid. The association had restored it in that short amount of time.

"Though it cost an astronomical amount." Siara Bertrand added with a tired look.

"It was difficult. Every famous production superhuman they could find was brought into France... we got a lot of help from the Alchemist too."

"So..." In fact, he hadn't seen her face to face since that shocking kiss. Kang Shin-hyuk had too many other surprising things happen immediately after that, so he hadn't been able to follow up.

"I'm also a strong production superhuman."

"They don't know your trait evolved." Lee Na-hee's trait [Enchant (A+)] had evolved into a unique characteristic called [Sprout Rune (S+)]. The sight of Lee Na-hee bragging was both infuriating and cute. She burned with enthusiasm, saying that she would reach the SS or even SS+ rank by evolving her trait once more. She was completely different from the dispassionate senior he had first met. Kang Shin-hyuk, aware he had been the one who helped light that fire, wondered if he should be happy or embarrassed.

"Soon, everyone will know of my abilities, and the first glorious step will be with you."

"You are raising those flags by yourself."

"I like the sight of you two." As always, Siara Bertrand was misunderstanding what was happening. Eleanor was watching them with sharp eyes.

"The meeting must be over, so I'll head back now."

"What about the party?"

“I’ve already taken care of all those who needed it. Will you come play?”

“No, it’s no fun without you. Let’s eat together.”

“Yes, then me too.” Lee Na-hee grabbed Kang Shin-hyuk’s arm with her bold declaration. Eleanor grabbed onto his other arm as if it was only natural. Meanwhile, Karen stepped back with an unpleasant face as she snorted at them. Several people’s eyes were on them now.

“...What?”

“Sir, please die. Die!” Kang Shin-hyuk sighed at the curses naturally flowing out from the observers and removed the two from him.

“I want to be alone.”

“Are you going to see Claire?”

“No.” Kang Shin-hyuk’s immediate response surprised Lee Na-hee as she withdrew.

“If so, then what?... No, I’m sorry.”

“There’s no need to apologize.” Kang Shin-hyuk bitterly smiled at her words. She always knew the right timing to retreat from a subject. Perhaps she could intuitively examine the nature of a person, just like he could with spiritual power.

“Huh...? Shin-hyuk, what happened?”

“Nothing much. Then, I’ll be off.” Kang Shin-hyuk waved at them and walked out of the hall. Most of the people were excited for the party to start after the meeting, but Kang Shin-hyuk had no intention of matching that atmosphere. He returned to the hotel and checked the time. He had about fifteen hours before check out.

“That is... twenty-two and a half hours in Mirotoz.”

-Would you like to go to Mirotoz?

“Yeah, I need to meet Halo in person.” First, he went to his My Room and then to Mirotoz from there. When he arrived, Halo’s voice greeted him from the leaf that lay by the side of his bed.

[Anvil, you're here.]

"I wanted to talk to you, Halo."

[It's difficult to say, but I was of the same mind.]

-Master Halo...

[It's a joke, administrator.]

Kang Shin-hyuk took the leaf and left the room. The elves were out in the field created by Kang Shin-hyuk, working hard. They had already completed one harvest, and now a second one awaited them.

"Master Anvil!"

"Anvil is here!"

"You look better." The elves noticed that Kang Shin-hyuk had grown stronger and awakened a new skill. Although it was possible that they might just be saying that to curry favor with him.

"Did you come to make the shackles?"

"Yes, there is that too. I'll get to it after chatting with Halo for a minute." After greeting the elves, he took out the blue cow and headed straight for Halo. It would be enough to talk to him through the leaves, but he felt like facing him in person. If he wanted to converse, the Hero Universe's whisper system would've been enough.

"I'll sit down here."

[Okay.]

Kang Shin-hyuk put the blue cow back in his inventory and sat down on a branch protruding from the middle of the tall tree.

"You know about Janus."

[Can't you get in touch with him? I thought he would have left a word for Anvil...]

Although he had been expecting it, Halo also seemed unable to contact Janus. Kang Shin-hyuk heaved a sigh.

“Instead, a guy wearing the armor that Janus had made for him arrived on Earth.”

[Huh? Is that so?]

Halo didn't seem all that surprised by the fact.

[To tell you this, maybe Janus is too healthy. He won't die.]

“Is Janus a traitor?”

[You shouldn't judge the situation too quickly, Anvil. Trust in the Janus you know.]

“The only thing I believe in is myself.”

[I see.]

“By the way...” There was something he couldn't even ask the administrator about, but perhaps he could ask Halo.

“That guy in armor called me his father. To be precise. He called Anvil his father.”

[From before your lifetime... the countless weapons you have made in that past life, and the seeds of their potential, have had a significant influence on not only those in the Hero Universe but also our enemy, Jormungand.]

“You mean that's enough to call me father?”

[Hmm, right... Anvil... do you know of the conditions under which monsters are born?]

Kang Shin-hyuk's heart began to pound just with those words.

“The conditions...”

-Master Halo.

[Administrator, in my opinion, Anvil has already made his decision. He is finally taking the Hero Universe seriously and is trying to move forward. That is why you came to

find me, isn't that right?]

He was right. The relationship Kang Shin-hyuk had maintained with the Hero universe so far was too passive. He had only completed a few dimensional quests, and most of them were related to Shin Eunah and Claire. It was partly because he had yet to recover the skills of his previous life to make the armaments the other members were used to. But now, it was a little different. Although he couldn't dare compare himself to a tremendous presence like Halo, Kang Shin-hyuk had directly obtained the minimum qualifications by acquiring Soul Poison. Now was the time for him to learn about the Hero Universe actively. It was necessary to learn about what was going on on Earth right now.

[Sure, so... but that is wrong.]

“Well?”

[Isn't metallurgy what brought you into the Hero Universe?]

“That's...”

[Your combat power is still... I apologize for saying, but it's nothing much to see. But that's not true of metallurgy. So, if you want to be deeply connected with this... you have to use your metallurgy.]

Halo was able to ruthlessly say that Kang Shin-hyuk's combat abilities, which had reached the SSS-rank, were only that much. But he was right; he was still inferior to the members of the Hero Universe in that regard. He had just thought he was barely qualified to step in.

[You don't seem to understand how great the armaments you made are.]

Halo laughed bitterly.

[First, let me tell you the correct answer. Monsters are mirrors that reflect our existence.]

“Well?”

[A mirror, us and monsters, Hero Universe and Jormungand.]

[You have created weapons that have changed both histories and worlds, causing

countless monsters to be born. In that sense, you can be said to be the father of many monsters, perhaps more than anyone else.]

Kang Shin-hyuk was learning something he had not been prepared for, of a scale much more extensive than he anticipated.

CHAPTER 161

THIRD LIBERATION (1)

Shinyoung's students, who had experienced the historical events in Paris, were able to safely return to Korea without any injuries. It felt a bit odd given the past few days' circumstances, but Kang Shin-hyuk went to school like everything was normal the next day.

"Did you fight an SS-class monster? Really?"

"Hey, how about seeing the Alchemist? Was she prettier than on TV?"

"Kang Shin-hyuk, were you good friends with Lee Na-hee?" Students in the same class buried them with questions about what happened in Paris, harassing them as soon as they arrived. Especially Kang Shin-hyuk...

"I saw a picture of Algiers and Na-hee crossed their arms with him."

"What is that? Is it a joke? Say it's a joke."

"I heard Baek In-ha was fighting in the city too."

"What's your relationship with the Alchemist?"

"Forget Baek In-ha..." No, these guys were paying more attention to the thought of a love triangle than Jormungand's raid on Paris! Kang Shin-hyuk let out a sigh.

"I have someone I like who's not at this school, so please don't spread pointless rumors."

"Oh, he just cut them off. But what do you think?"

"I just said not to spread them!" Despite the events taking place in Paris, the students didn't seem too shaken. Perhaps it was because a countercurrent had just taken place in Seoul just a short while ago.

"It's the morning check-up time, everyone quiet down." Siara Bertrand entered the

classroom and knocked on her desk. Her magic caused the sound to reverberate throughout, silencing the students. But she only looked quietly down upon the adolescent students who were hungry for some gossip.

“Ah, please tell us about Paris!”

“Is it true Kang Shin-hyuk and Lee Na-hee are dating?”

“Did an SSS-class gate really appear?”

“Shin Eunah’s number one in the world now?”

“You don’t even know that? Did you hear about Joo-young Oh’s death?” Siara Bertrand knocked on the table once more to silence the students. This time the vibration was a bit stronger as she let out a sigh.

“Everything that has been reported is true. Try to figure out the rest for yourself. Oh, and... I don’t know if Kang Shin-hyuk and Lee Na-hee went on a date, but I can confirm that Lee Na-hee kissed Kang Shin-hyuk.”

“...” The classroom was deathly silent. Kang Shin-hyuk couldn’t believe it himself. His teacher was blatantly betraying him! No, when he thought about it, her goal from the start was to push them together. But to use such childish means! It didn’t take long for the students to realize the words were true and exploded.

“She was my first love!”

“Get him.”

“Kill him!” It was the first time Kang Shin-hyuk realized how popular Lee Na-hee actually was in Shinyoung. She was the beautiful girl who won the popularity vote last year, so it was natural if you thought about it calmly.

“Come on, fight me in practice. In practice.”

“Today’s practice is group tactics.”

“Ganging up on him is legal? Great, let’s do it.”

“That should be included in tactics!”

Previously, there had been a time where Kang Shin-hyuk felt it was challenging to follow along with Shinyoung's classes. He had been unable to keep up with the other students because of his inability to handle mana, and he had immersed himself in perfecting his writing to fill in for the lacking in his practical lessons. Then school classes had been just a stepping stone for him to acquire his superhuman's license.

-Member, it seems you're feeling a little better.

But now he felt a little different about it. Probably from the time the athletic meet was concluded, Shinyoung had become a reasonably pleasant place for him. Janus's disappearance and the truth Halo had illuminated him weighed heavily on his heart, but they became a little lighter at school with his classmates.

"Yes, really. I didn't think I could ever be friends with them."

-You don't need to understand each other to be called friends deeply.

"That's right. Thank you, administrator.

-You understand this administrator well. Receiving a thank you from a member like this, I have no choice but to give you a bonus. 30,000HP bonus!

"I can't help but think that the bonuses seem too big these days..."

-40,000HP bonus!"

"Don't just give me a bonus for no reason." Kang Shin-hyuk's eyes narrowed. He wondered about the administrator's ability to contact people and his own ability to extend out his spiritual power. Could the two be combined somehow?

"Well, now?" Before long, the school had ended for the day. During the group tactics class that afternoon, he had been able to rejuvenate himself by knocking down his angry classmates who struggled to kill him. There were so many rumors going around school about him that it was hard to know where to begin, but Kang Shin-hyuk walked unaware of it all.

-Are you heading to the club room?

“Yeah.” The conversation with Halo had been profound and enlightening, but there was only one conclusion. If he wanted to train his actual ability, he needed to forge. It wasn’t that Kang Shin-hyuk didn’t like it; there were just a few opportunities to do so, given all that had happened recently. But now that things had calmed slightly, and he had gathered a minimal amount of strength to protect himself and challenge dimensional quests, it would be fine to focus on metallurgy for a while. He had no reason to not do so.

-Tsukuyo’s whisper: Anvil, have you made a new weapon yet? Are you sick?

Yes, rather than because of Halo, Tsukuyo’s insisting had begun a few days ago.

-I’m going to make one today.

-Tsukuyo’s whisper: Oh my, it’s like our hearts were connected!

It might’ve been useful to communicate with her sooner, but he had hesitated.

-Tsukuyo?

-Tsukuyo’s whisper: If you call me like that, I can’t help but be thrilled... Anvil, why are you calling?

Kang Shin-hyuk couldn’t respond for a while. In fact, he had some doubts about Tsukuyo. She was as powerful as Halo and Janus, yet some ominous energy lingered about her. It was fascinating to behold but made him alert. The Anvil from his previous life had considered Tsukuyo to be an unusual sort and was wary of her. There were many times when he realized that not all members of the Hero Universe were good.

‘But is she linked to Jormungand?’ So far, she just seemed like a pervert who liked the weapons Anvil made that emanated ominous energy. It was a rude judgment, but not inaccurate.

-That... did, you know that Janus is missing?

-Tsukuyo’s whisper: Anvil called me by my name, but then the topic turned to that boring person. I’m disappointed.

-Sorry, but... I wanted to ask if you knew anything about it.

-Tsukuyo's whisper: It can't be helped. Anvil has been paying attention to Janus since the old times. He competes with me the most for Anvil's items... Now that means I can monopolize them!

No way... he knew what awaited him the second he put more items on the trading board.

-Tsukuyo's whisper: Actually, I wasn't paying much attention to him. From the start, we made a promise not to interfere with each other... also, he was always a person who moved on his own.

-Tsukuyo's whisper: But a request from Anvil is a different matter. I will find Janus, even if it frays my precious hair.

-Uh... really?

Kang Shin-hyuk was surprised by the meaning of her words. It seemed that Tsukuyo really had no clue where he was, which meant that either she had no close relationship with Jormungand, or Jormungand had nothing to do with it. Secondly, he was taken aback that she would cooperate in finding Janus for him.

-Tsukuyo's whisper: My love for Anvil is true, but you still don't know my feelings.

-Uh, no... I know, I know enough, but I still thought it was a separate matter.

-Tsukuyo's whisper: It can't be, right? How can I stay still when you are in distress?

-Tsukuyo's whisper: I will use all I can to find him, so please wait with confidence. There is no way that Janus will die if he is only stuck in a dimension beyond the reach of the Hero Universe.

-Tsukuyo's whisper:... Oh, are you receiving my messages, Anvil?

-Yeah.

There was no answer for a while, but then Tsukuyo sent a message dripping with ecstasy.

-Tsukuyo's whisper: Oh, I never would have been able to send such a message before!

-Tsukuyo's whisper: Joy, joy... the day we can be together is soon...

The messages that began pouring in were suddenly blocked.

-By this point, your business must be concluded.

“ ... ”

-This is a waste of time for that fox. However, you can rest assured she is searching for Janus. So you don't need to worry anymore.

“Is that so...? A dimension beyond the reach of the Hero Universe, and her abilities...”
In other words, Tsukuyo's ability reached into Jormungand's realm. Kang Shin-hyuk still could not understand everything about Tsukuyo.

-It's okay, member. For now, all you have to do is focus on what Halo said to do.

-Soon, you will be able to solve all of these problems with your own hands.

“I hope so.” Kang Shin-hyuk let out a short sigh and headed to the club room.

Soon, autumn would arrive.

CHAPTER 162

THIRD LIBERATION (2)

[When a new world is born, mana sprouts out, and humans adapt to it...]

[In them, mutations begin to appear. Yes, the beings commonly referred to as superhumans in your world are such a thing.]

[If so, a new life is born from the sea of mana that responds to the unique waves they emit. A new life called a monster.]

[There is no way to know exactly why. It is only the clear truth of the matter.]

[Yes, it's an unfavorable fight.]

[If it weren't for you, everything would already be over. So don't bother, Anvil. No matter how many monsters you have created, countless more have been slain by the weapons you made.]

[I'm not kidding. Since the birth of this universe, you have been one of the most effective forces in controlling the balance between humans and monsters.]

[Now, do you realize what you need to do?]

[I believe you now realize that Tsukuyo is not the only one watching the trading board.]

On top of the anvil was a piece of metal glowing an angry red. The loot that had been left by the dwarves at the SS-class gate was their nails. It was more or less their only means of attack, and by investigating them with spiritual power, it seemed possible to craft them into various tools. Dig, chop, pierce, or craft... it was no exaggeration to say that it was a soul weapon in which all the dwarves' abilities had been concentrated.

"Wow, it's one of the best materials I've ever seen..." Being able to use it in so many ways meant it had a variety of abilities. Lee Na-hee muttered in excitement as she examined it while Kang Shin-hyuk smiled.

“If that surprises you, wait until you see what the SSS-class monsters dropped.”

“Show me!”

“It’s something we can’t handle yet with our own abilities.” With that declaration that he would keep it, Lee Na-hee pouted. However, Kang Shin-hyuk quietly turned his gaze away. Lee Na-hee noticed it with a glint in her eyes.

“What was that just now?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Hmm?” Lee Na-hee provoked him further, puffing her thick lips out further. Kang Shin-hyuk resisted the urge to grab onto them with the clamps and shake her.

“Let’s work.”

“Sheesh.” Although her trait had evolved, his collaboration with Lee Na-hee hadn’t changed much from before. First of all, Kang Shin-hyuk still melted and beat the metal into a basic frame for her to place her mana into. And, while Kang Shin-hyuk hammered and hardened the metal, she would observe his work and create a magical character, a rune, from her mana to plant into it. It seemed easier, but in fact, the labor of processing mana was much more intensive than before.

“But, basically, it’s similar to the enchant trait.”

“But my demands have increased. For the best effect, you have to analyze your opponents that much.”

“Does this mean it’s different from the enchantments given by selecting the desired attribute?” Kang Shin-hyuk could feel her mana flowing into the red metal as he shaped it. It felt similar to spiritual power, as it was exploring the essence of the object. However, if there was one difference, it would be that Kang Shin-hyuk’s spiritual power reinforced the essence of what it understood, while Lee Na-hee was attempting to add something new to it.

‘Certainly, it’s a useful ability.’ Lee Na-hee’s ability had been a shock to him. Even with enchantment, he wasn’t sure if it would be in perfect harmony with his own abilities. In some of the works, the addition of her abilities had even felt a bit burdensome. But not now. The rune grew together and bloomed with his spiritual power to create a

valuable piece of work. Instead of addition, it was now more like they were working with multiplication.

“It’s great, Na-hee.”

“It’s subtle, but I’m happy. It’s trickier to use, though, and it’s hard to use with objects I don’t understand well.” Lee Na-hee seemed pleased with Kang Shin-hyuk’s honest admiration as she subtly smiled.

“Also...” Kang Shin-hyuk paused in his hammering. The metal on top of the anvil was taking the form of a red glove. It was similar to the thread gloves he wore as Shin Eun-hyuk. He wanted to create a metal glove that could move naturally even when worn on the hand by making a thin plate of this red metal. They would look like ordinary silk gloves on the outside, but to the touch, one could feel the hard and cold texture they possessed. Now that his metallurgy had reached the A+ rank, he could craft such a thing with little difficulty.

“What is it? Just this for today?” It was already evening. However, Lee Na-hee knew that once he started, there would normally be no way to stop him until he was done.

-Member?

‘It would be better to check.’ Kang Shin-hyuk removed his work gloves and reached a hand out to Lee Na-hee.

“Senior, your hand.”

“Oh, hand?! Didn’t I wash them?”

“It’s okay, so give it to me.” He snatched Lee Na-hee’s hand, who was blustering. While struggling with her embarrassment, Lee Na-hee still showed no intention of pulling her hand away as he began to let his spiritual power flow.

“How do you feel?”

“How do I feel? Uh... I don’t think it’s bad to come out so strong.”

-Did you have to choose that method, member?

As Kang Shin-hyuk began to feel pathetic, Lee Na-hee was quick to comfort him.

“Big and warm? That feeling?”

“...” Kang Shin-hyuk quietly let go of her hand.

“Let’s keep working.”

“Uh?! Oh, what is it? What is it now?!”

“I’m sorry.”

“So, what is it?!” Did he make a mistake? He had felt like her trait was definitely related to spiritual power. Maybe, as she had boasted, it might appear if she evolved once more. He had already promised to help, so he could observe her trait in the future and intervene if there was anything hinting at spiritual power.

“Hey, wasn’t that a bit too sudden?”

“Some people kiss like that, but is that how it is?”

“That’s! That’s just an enchantment...”

“Have you tried that enchantment a few times?”

“Ha, once.” Kang Shin-hyuk stared at her blankly.

“It’s really only once. Do I look like the sort to casually kiss anyone?”

“A kiss? I thought it was an enchantment?”

“Ah...” Lee Na-hee quietly sank as Kang Shin-hyuk resumed working. She hovered nearby, her spirit in tatters.

“Forget all about this.”

“Huh?”

“Forget it!”

“Ah, sure.” The two started working again in silence. Kang Shin-hyuk struck with his hammer, and Lee Na-hee released her magic. He was able to focus once more on his

work, but Lee Na-hee kept passing glances at him.

-Shall I kill her?

'Why are you so aggressive? She's a person who might join the Hero Universe sooner or later.' Kang Shin-hyuk saw a path of possibilities that Lee Na-hee had. If she could deal with spiritual power, she would prove her qualification to join the Hero universe. If she were a bit luckier, it might be possible within a few years.

-That's why I have to kill her now before the contacts with you increase.

'Calm down.' Kang Shin-hyuk had a bloody chat with the administrator as his hands were constantly moving. Carefully grinding the surface of the gloves, he then added a dwarf's gemstone powder to it. The final process was to make five small holes, one in each fingertip, and trim them neatly.

'This part will spray the thread...' Even though it was designed to shoot threads, no threads were used in making it.

'The metal thread is limited, and the spider thread is too weak. Then what would be best?' That, of course, was his spiritual power. It wouldn't have been something he dared to do without the soul poison skill, but now it was possible. All that remained was to create a way to utilize spiritual power as a specific means of attack. In other words, these gloves were a way of adding physical power to one's spiritual power. So even if someone else wore these gloves, they wouldn't be able to grasp their utility.

"Na-hee, do you still follow?"

"Huh. I can't understand the material, but somehow I've figured out the rest."

"If you had realized it earlier, your work would've been much easier."

"What?"

"No, that's it, I suppose."

"Huh?!" What Lee Na-hee was adding to the gloves was speed. Just wearing them would make him faster and allow him to spray threads quicker. It was possible for her to do after she had seen him fight before. When the work was almost finished, Kang Shin-hyuk suddenly put it down on the workbench. Lee Na-hee raised her head in

amazement; her concentration broken.

“Did you screw it up? It was going so well.”

“No, we have to make the other one. I’m thinking of making a matching pair this time.”

“That’s why...”

“I will do the rest of the work tomorrow. Is that okay?”

“Yes.” Lee Na-hee still had an awkward look on her face. Kang Shin-hyuk stood up and began to stretch with a laugh.

“Then I’ll go. Are the weekends okay with you?”

“Ah, that’s completely okay.”

“Then, I’ll work on the weekend.”

“...” Lee Na-hee stiffened as Kang Shin-hyuk left, leaving her to remain in the club room for some time after that, swaying alone.

She was filled with a complete sense of defeat.

CHAPTER 163

THIRD LIBERATION (3)

“The school festival scheduled to be held this October has been cancelled.”

“Ah, Jesus!”

“Teacher, please!”

“We endured this dog-like training because we were looking forward to that!”

Tuesday, the end of the class. Siara Bertrand’s sudden announcement left the students in despair. Shinyoung, who held the most magnificent festival among all superhuman training schools, had officially canceled this year’s festival.

“...Instead, you will be entering a battle training period. In the future, there will also be more gate practice.”

“Gate practice?”

“We’ll be entering real gates, instead of using virtual gates in the gym?” There would always be a risk if the gate were real. Naturally, it required a lot of preparation to allow students to enter a gate compared to superhumans or mercenaries to ensure their safety.

“Is that saying that the lower-level gates will be left to the students, since there are too many for the mercenaries?” New gates had been forming at an alarming rate since the Paris incident. It was as if the monsters had begun an all-out war to reduce the realm of humanity to ashes. All armed groups, including the Superhuman Association, were responding with full force. In particular, Vanguard (now the number three guild worldwide after the incident with Oh Joo-young) was running around particularly vigorously under Dane Brook’s leadership to regain their authority.

“Oh, come to think of it...”

“These days, the gates have increased so much that the market is oversaturated with

monster parts, according to my dad.”

“The association and the guilds are pressuring schools to take care of the lower-grade gates so they can reduce the damage...”

“Everyone, the school doesn’t like students who are quick to notice but useless in a fight.” However, it wasn’t really bad news for the students who were sick of the rotation between virtual gate practice, physical fitness and skill training, and the competition between students.

“Then, would we ever go in without a teacher?”

“It is difficult for only teachers to accommodate each group of students, so like before, we will be receiving support from the guilds. They will supply supervisors for the class.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to just have them clear the gates?”

“Not in the long term... you will be dealing with several gates.” Thus declared the world’s best superhuman training institution.

“The details will be delivered tomorrow. For the time being, concentrate on your writing and practical classes. Three days a week, you will be conducting gate practice, and for the other two, you will continue as you are.”

“Will we receive compensation?”

“The basic rewards for the gate will be distributed according to your contribution.” Siara Bertrand had a twinkle in her eyes as she answered.

“You will be treated like official superhumans.”

“Oooh!” It may have been a sudden measure based on an emergency, but it was undeniable that gate practice would lead to rapid growth. Added to that was the opportunity to earn money like a proper superhuman, making this opportunity to participate in gate practice a welcome sight.

“It’s an opportunity to make your name known to the world. There’s no doubt that the third years are envious of you for this. With that in mind, take advantage of this chance to learn everything you can.”

“It would be nice if we could skip the practical and writing classes and only devote ourselves to the gates...”

“That won’t be possible. We are sending you out to the gates despite your lack of preparation. The teachers are planning on putting their all into the two days of classes you will have.”

“That’s great news...” The students’ enthusiasm was shot down.

* * *

Kang Shin-hyuk headed to his club room after listening to Siara Bertrand’s shocking declaration. He had already been attacking gates with the status of Shin Eun-hyuk and had long since stopped feeling the burden of classes, so he wasn’t particularly moved by the announcement. Rather, today was the day he planned to complete the pair of gloves.

“Senior... what are you doing?” Opening the door to the club room, Lee Na-hee stood in the center of the room, muttering strange words with her eyes half open and her arms outstretched. Nearby, Lee Manwoo was reading a newspaper while ignoring her, making the entire scene feel surreal.

“Practicing with my trait.”

“You’re getting bored working every day?”

“Combat, not production.” Lee Na-hee responded seriously. Indeed, it wasn’t just the first years who would be challenging the gates. She must’ve heard the same announcement earlier.

“So, what the hell is this practice?”

“I’m practicing to instantly manifest my trait. I think it would be better to reinforce artifacts rather than myself directly. For that, what matters is the time it takes for my trait to manifest.” Admittedly, for production, the time it would take didn’t really matter. But in a combat situation, even a delay of a tenth of a second could result in your death. She seemed to be fully engaged in training to get rid of that delay.

“So, is it going well?”

“It was going well, but then everything was ruined because of you.”

“Why me?”

“I can’t concentrate since you suddenly showed up.” Lee Na-hee’s temper flared slightly as she sat down. Only then did Lee Manwoo fold up his newspaper and look over at Kang Shin-hyuk.

“If you’re going to make something with Na-hee, will you let me know why you were doing it secretly?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Hmm, I know roughly...” Kang Shin-hyuk felt his heart sink.

“Hey, I’m the one who saw you the first time you picked up a hammer. My eyes aren’t so bad that I can’t recognize your craftsmanship... honestly, even the name Shin Eun-hyuk is a bit too easy.” Yes, he had been caught.

“I’ve no intention of blabbering about it, so rest assured. There are so many things I want to ask though... haah...”

“Haha.” Considering that he was ranked fifth internationally under that name, Lee Manwoo’s reaction was pretty tame. Kang Shin-hyuk could only laugh in amazement at Lee Manwoo, who cleared his throat awkwardly before he continued.

“Also... thank you for protecting Na-hee in Paris. It would’ve been dangerous if it weren’t for you.”

“She was holding on just fine without me.”

“This as well...” Lee Manwoo took out the business cards given to Na-hee and spread them out on the table.

“I’ve properly applied my stamp to them. It’ll be easy to talk about it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, if you want to, you’re ready to trade your armaments with them.”

“Seriously?” Six of the business cards were for guilds in the world’s top ten, yet Lee Manwoo was saying that they could make a deal with such people. Kang Shin-hyuk was taken aback.

“I used my name. It seems like it is still worth something.”

“No hesitation...”

“The important thing is that you won’t have to go through the hassle of selling your work. It’s an annoying process, so I’m just helping you skip that part.” Kang Shin-hyuk was familiar with struggling hard to prove himself as qualified for Shinyoung, so he could understand what Lee Manwoo meant. He nodded silently.

“If you had abandoned metallurgy to devote yourself to combat, I wouldn’t have bothered. But I made up my mind after seeing all of this. Just make whatever you like, I will choose the right connection for you.” Then the work could be sold at the proper value. Lee Manwoo recovered the business cards and stowed them away. It sounded so natural at first, but in fact, things in this world weren’t so easy. His reputation carried a heavy weight to it, whereas Kang Shin-hyuk was still considered a rookie. Adults were more likely to disparage his work and belittle him to lower the price. Lee Manwoo had set himself as a shield, however, to protect them from such an eventuality. Using his name to lead Kang Shin-hyuk to his own fame and authority in a short amount of time had been what Lee Manwoo was planning from the start.

‘Not bad... rather, I owe him one.’ Kang Shin-hyuk began to recall the conversation he had with Halo as he listened to his teacher. What had he said? That the armaments created by Shin-hyuk changed the world. They gave birth to many monsters, but at the same time destroyed many more. That was why he had to make them. He sympathized with Anvil, who was determined to devote himself to metallurgy as a way to protect humanity and change the world. However, if the armaments he created were sold only to the Hero Universe, it would be difficult to change the Earth.

‘It’s the world I live in. If I’m going to protect anything, I need to start with Earth first.’ It was so natural that it felt odd he had taken so long to reach that conclusion. Perhaps it was because the Hero Universe was the only way for him to understand the truth, so he had become obsessed with it. But from the start, his products could be sold in another place. From now on, he would trade the weapons he created on Earth as well as in the Hero Universe.

“Teacher, thank you for your care.”

“What do you think?”

“It must have been a lot of trouble, so thank you.”

“Alright, make sure to work hard.”

“I will. Then, I will leave the selling to you.”

“Leave it to me.” Lee Manwoo stood up.

“The gloves you’re making are for you, right? Are you going to start with the next one?”

“Yes? Oh, no.” Kang Shin-hyuk shook his head.

“I made mine, so next is Na-hee’s.”

“Huh?!” Lee Na-hee, who had been listening from the side, suddenly jerked her head up.

“This is the first I’m hearing about it!”

“You have the ability to reinforce artifacts, but you didn’t think about creating a new one?”

“Uh, that... well...” Lee Na-hee blushed and hesitated, then finally bowed her head.

“Hahah.”

“Grandpa, shut up.”

“Then, I’m counting on you.” Lee Manwoo left, leaving the two in the workshop. They got to work as if nothing had happened, except for a slight smile on Lee Na-hee’s lips.

An hour later, the new thread gloves had been completed.

CHAPTER 164

THIRD LIBERATION (4)

[Soul Connector]

[SS Rank]

[Special ability: Shadow Silk, Lord, Spiritualization, Dwarf's Hand]

*Shadow Silk: It emits spiritual power into a thread with physical force. It never ceases unless spiritual power is lost. Allows for movement through the shadows.

*Lord: You are the master of the soul. When wearing this armament, spiritual power is amplified by one step, and the ability to interfere with other spiritual powers is increased.

*Spiritualization: Envelops the thread with spiritual power to further strengthen it. It also applies to the wielder, boosting strength, agility, and stamina by one step.

* Dwarf's Hand: 30% increase is applied to all hand-related movements and skills.

[Mutations that occurred in areas where Gaia's eyes could not reach, scratching the dark wall with nails to pierce the dimensional barrier. The blacksmith of the soul made those nails into a stable armament that cannot be handled without spiritual power.]

-You have succeeded in creating [Soul Connector (SS)] by handling materials above your current level! Metallurgy has grown to the S-rank. Emotion has increased to A+.

-Synchronization has greatly accelerated- current rate of 48.5%.

"Wow..." Lee Na-hee was staring at the pair of red gloves atop the workbench. As it was generally believed that the SS rank was the highest limit of a superhuman, so too was it for an artifact. An SS-rank artifact was something most couldn't even imagine a human creating, and obtaining one from a gate was unlikely, to say the least.

"I heard that there are less than a hundred in the world... and now we just made one

here.”

“Ah, I see.”

“Don’t you understand?!” Earth seemed to be a world inferior to the ones the other members of the Hero Universe resided in. Yet, Anvil had created several works that didn’t reach that rank that had been highly praised. Kang Shin-hyuk felt a bit of incongruity in that, but the administrator quickly explained as if he had read his mind.

-The items you create are exceptional regardless of rank, especially in the field of spiritual power, where no one was able to come close. Therefore, even if something you made was only A-rank, it was viewed as being more valuable than an SS-rank artifact without spiritual power.

I see... ‘ It was the same with this artifact. Weapons that dealt with spiritual power were in a different league. The gloves even said that those without spiritual power couldn’t handle them. He gave it to Lee Na-hee as a test, and sure enough, she could only fumble them in the air.

“Uh, huh? I also helped make them, so why?”

“It means that you’re still lacking. If you realize what it is, you’ll be able to grow quicker in the future.”

“Ah, it’s a little bit higher...” Kang Shin-hyuk smiled as he put the gloves on. They were made of metal yet were quite comfortable to wear. Perhaps it was thanks to the last skill they had, Dwarf’s Hands, that they felt like he wasn’t even wearing gloves.

“I’ll have to keep wearing them.”

“They’re stylish, but aren’t they a little noticeable? If you wear them as Shin Eun-hyuk...”

“Voila.” He filled the gloves with his spiritual power, finely manipulating them as if they were a part of his own body.

“I can’t see them!”

“Here, try touching them.”

“...” Despite the fact he must’ve been wearing gloves, Lee Na-hee could only see his bare hands. She gently held his hand with both of hers, the result being roughly what she had predicted. She couldn’t feel the glove at all; it was just Kang Shin-hyuk’s hand she was holding.

“You can hide them like this...”

“How long will you hold onto me?”

“I was just trying to find the gloves.” Perhaps it wasn’t a lie, as soon he felt the energy of his gloves increase as her trait activated.

“It wouldn’t have been possible if I didn’t help make it. It’s really an SS-rank artifact.”

“There’s still room to experiment with them, but this is good enough for now.” Even without testing them in combat, the artifact’s excellence was obvious just by looking at the stat amplification. Of course, it couldn’t be worn without spiritual power, but that hardly mattered.

-It’s an object that could compete with the masterpieces of your previous life. If you put this on the trading board, everyone would be in an uproar.

‘I’ll have to work on making stuff like this consistently in the future.’

-It was as I expected. Even though you haven’t recovered everything from your previous life, you are already regaining the state of your previous life. By the time you regain all of your memories, you’ll be capable of results that no one could imagine.

His metallurgy was S-rank still, and his synchronization rate was still less than fifty percent. Despite that, however, he had created an SS-rank artifact. Of course, the ingredients were good, but they were like the Great Heavenly Spirit of the Shinfeng orb, merely by-products of an ordinary monster. It was an achievement incomparable to renovating the blue cow. Of course, he wasn’t content with just that, but it was a start to surpassing his previous life’s skills.

‘Na-hee’s help was also great... ’

-Cheh.

Kang Shin-hyuk laughed at the administrator’s short message. He had felt it clearly

while working. Lee Na-hee's trait matched his metallurgy well. It was clear that just by looking at the results that his judgment was correct.

"Then, let's create an artifact for you. I have a lot of work to do after that."

"You really pamper people."

"Aren't we partners?"

"Yes, partners. Our business. If it weren't for that, I wouldn't let you take up my entire weekend, so remember that." Lee Na-hee responded happily. No doubt, she was also proud of her own growth.

"What do you want to make?"

"Yes, I was thinking about it while watching Claire..." He immediately accepted her request, and they got back to work. Kang Shin-hyuk wondered if Claire would be envious when she saw what they were crafting.

In the end, he decided to make something for Claire as well.

* * *

Kang Shin-hyuk returned to his room around 1 AM. For some reason, Onyx was waiting for him in the middle of the room instead of being in the garbage warehouse.

-Myu!"

"Oh, you decided to show up?"

-Myuuuuuuuu!

Kang Shin-hyuk had omitted saying, 'since you normally are just eating or sleeping.' However, Onyx seemed to notice the omitted part and violently charged at Kang Shin-hyuk with his thorns protruding. He jabbed them into Kang Shin-hyuk's foot.

"What are you doing?!"

-Myuuuuuu!

Onyx climbed up Kang Shin-hyuk's leg, jabbing him with his thorns all the while.

-Myu!

"Ow, ow!" Only then did Kang Shin-hyuk realize that he hadn't kept his promise from France.

"I was supposed to give you a sword in exchange for taking care of the building..."

-Myuuuu...

Onyx shook his head at Kang Shin-hyuk. Thanks to him, rescuing the survivors under the rubble had been a walk in the park. But so much had happened since then that Kang Shin-hyuk had completely forgotten. Onyx had been waiting patiently all that time for his reward.

"Ah, my bad... I'll give it to you, Onyx. Come on."

-Myu!

As soon as he said that, Onyx's thorns receded as he jumped onto Kang Shin-hyuk's shoulder.

"Let's see, it's in the inventory... here." Kang Shin-hyuk produced the two swords he had taken from Oh Joo-young, the traitor of mankind. The man praised as the new blade had some unique weapons.

"As a result of repeatedly manifesting his trait, the nature of the sword changed..." His trait was Excalibur (SS+). It was a trait that gave him powerful light magic and cutting power, a trait named after the legendary sword. The swords he used had been shaped by that trait over time. Kang Shin-hyuk recalled seeing an auction for one of the blades Ju-young Oh had just touched on TV before.

'Now, I have two of them.' One of them had been the one he normally used, while the other seemed to be a secret weapon of sorts that exceeded the former overwhelmingly.

'But if it didn't contain the power of Excalibur, it would be weaker.' Maybe he always kept his energy in this sword, or perhaps it just contained his trait as he died. Kang Shin-hyuk began to wonder what would happen to the power of a trait when a human died while manifesting it in a weapon. Did it remain in the object? Perhaps this sword

had the answer.

-Myuuuuuu!

“Yeah, wait a moment. You can’t have this one.”

-Myuuu...

Onyx nodded sadly at Kang Shin-hyuk’s resolute voice and accepted the weaker first sword.

-Myuuuuu?!

However, as soon as he took a bite, he began to devour it ferociously. Kang Shin-hyuk wondered if Onyx would change after eating it.

“Godslayer, you’ll get to eat one too.”

The second sword that contained all of Ju-young Oh’s power was given to the Godslayer sword.

CHAPTER 165

THIRD LIBERATION (5)

The sword was not made by humans, a fictitious blade used by the heroes in myth and legend. The wishes and will of countless people dwelled within it, causing it to be reborn as a sword for humans. The blade did not exist but could be materialized using human magic. The one who became the owner of the sword regarded himself as the chosen one, the incarnation of a legendary hero and the savior of mankind. The strongest sword. The strongest human. The strongest being. Had he been able to stay in that illusion, he would've surely remained an ally of mankind to the end.

-The best? How funny...

If only that woman hadn't made him realize the truth.

-The sword you create is just a believable fake.

-Fake...?

-All traits are just fakes that were elaborately crafted somewhere. Ah, yes, it's the same with monsters.

-Ha, what bullshit.

-Is it? You and I, facing each other like this... it's like someone intended it to be this way.

The owner of Excalibur wanted to cut down his enemies but was unable to. He couldn't overcome the enemy with his sword. He had encountered a desperate wall far beyond the power of superhumans on earth.

-It's a piece created by the hand of the greatest craftsman who existed in this universe before, added to the myth of your little earth.

Of course, even that was just a copy. After forcing the master of light to kneel, his will broken, the woman laughed.

-So, no matter how much you increase your magic, you can never become the strongest. There's no way a fake can beat the real thing.

-You monster...!

-The only difference between you and a monster is the position. Everything else is the same.

-... Do you think those words will shake me? I will cut all of you down and protect humanity. It's all I have to do.

The woman shrugged and let out a sigh.

-It doesn't have to be you. Among the swords, what you have is the best, but Chang has another candidate. I could make do with him.

-Huh!

He was once more caught up in the words of this woman who treated him as a substitute. However, the woman casually beat him down once more. The owner of the shaking light knelt in front of her once more, his curiosity finally raised.

-What... do you mean?

-An experiment to surpass the real thing.

-Didn't you say you can't surpass the real thing with a fake?

-Yeah, that's how it has been so far. I want to stop doing this now, destroy the damn Hero Universe, and open up a world of chaos where there is no distinction between real and fake.

To do that, they needed proof that a fake could surpass what was real. Then...

-So I chose the best among the fakes, you.

-Hero Universe... what is it?

-If you come to us, I will tell you. There will be a lot that will surprise you. You, who thought you were the best, will find out about the standard of what is real.

The man was conflicted. He had already realized that he was nearing the limit of his growth, and he was shaken by the woman's words that there was a way to go further. Everyone in the world knew him as a good and righteous man, but he wasn't. He just wanted to be recognized as the strongest.

-Going beyond the real thing.

-Yes, of course.

The woman smiled cheerfully and nodded.

-You'll leap over Anvil.

The person who had created the original that the sword in his hand copied. The man felt an instinctive hatred for its existence.

-Yes, let's do it together.

In the end, the man nodded.

-In return, you must help me kill.

-Anvil?

-Yes.

The woman laughed at the words.

-A man loved by the whole universe?

-Yes.

-Yes!

The woman was joyous.

-If you can, try it. I'll open the way, so let's run wild.

-I'll be a traitor to mankind from now on.

The man smiled and lifted his sword, which radiated a dazzling light, shining upon his distorted face.

-That's not a bad deal to be the strongest.

* * *

-The Godslayer has completely devoured 'Excalibur – Demon's Fang' to regain some strength. However, it will take time for it to digest the strong armament fully.

Upon feeding Joo-young Oh's sword to the Godslayer, blurry memories had gone through Kang Shin-hyuk's head. He had been able to get a rough sense of why the strongest had betrayed humanity. What concerned him, however, was...

"I can guess what that monster meant from what I heard from Halo... but what does it mean to be a fake?" Wasn't the order all wrong? Wasn't it because humans first awakened their traits that such outstanding replicas and monsters were born?

"Administrator, what is a trait? They seemed to think that the traits were only a copy of the real thing."

-That's interesting, but...

The administrator's words cut off.

-That is a foolish illusion of those monsters, starting with the distinction between what is real and what isn't.

"Is that so?"

-There are only a few in this universe who can create something entirely new. Of course, you are one of them.

"..."

-But does that mean all others are fakes? That's ridiculous. It's all real, just like the monsters that appear are all real.

Perhaps the administrator wasn't wrong, but Kang Shin-hyuk felt another secret hidden in the trait Excalibur. It seemed to be closely related to Jormungand's motives,

as well as Anvil himself.

“Will you know a little once you’re done digesting the sword?”

-Vwoooooom

The Godslayer sword let out a quiet cry in response, complaining as well. Kang Shin-hyuk smiled and sat down with a whetstone. He wanted to clear his mind, which had been bogged down by the strange memories he had acquired by absorbing Oh’s sword.

-Myu?

“It will take time for you to digest. Go to sleep.”

-Myu!

Onyx, despite having swept through the garbage warehouse, seemed to be done eating, at least for now.

-Myu...

He climbed up onto Kang Shin-hyuk, who was starting to hone the Godslayer sword and fell asleep. Kang Shin-hyuk grumbled a little bit but soon devoted all of his attention to the sword. He felt like lately he was being bothered less by the things around him.

‘It’s a bit sad as it feels like I’m gradually becoming an old man...’ But Claire seemed to like mature people, so he felt like it was okay. Kang Shin-hyuk thought that with a smile on his lips.

* * *

“Hello, I’m Ahn Hyeongju from Vanguard’s fifth team. It is an honor to be in charge of training you today.” The next day, Kang Shin-hyuk and Baek In-ha were face to face with the young man who would be in charge of supervising their gate practice.

“What?” As soon as he learned that Ahn Hyeongju was in charge of them, Baek began to criticize Kang Shin-hyuk.

“With this timing, shouldn’t Claire show up?!”

“Why are you talking about Claire and not Shin Eunah?”

“Shin Eunah became the number one in the rankings, so I thought she wouldn’t be able to!”

“Then why Claire?”

“That makes sense with this flow!” Kang Shin-hyuk pushed Baek away as he mumbled something he couldn’t understand. Ahn Hyeongju was watching them with disbelief.

“I knew you were receiving support from the association, but... are you acquainted with the Alchemist as well?”

“Oh, though you’re our supervisor, you can talk plainly. Yes, I work with metallurgy, so I’m receiving support in that regard.”

“Support from the Alchemist...” Ahn Hyeongju was so shocked that he was sticking with polite speech. No wonder Kang Shin-hyuk was a student scouted by Shin Eunah, and now he was learning that he also has a connection with the Alchemist.

“...What? A young man with a relationship with those two... Death Puppeteer?” Right, it was about time for people to guess the relationship between them. Kang Shin-hyuk only smiled and pointed at himself.

“Me?”

“No, it couldn’t be, of course.” Ahn Hyeongju shook his head at Shin-hyuk’s words. There was no way a rookie, no matter how skilled, from Shinyoung, could survive an SSS-class gate and reach fifth place in the international rankings at the age of seventeen.

“I said some pointless things. However, I am not looking down on you. Rather, I think you’re great. If you progress the way you are now, then I believe one day you can reach the level of the Death Puppeteer.”

“Haha, thank you for the compliment.”

“So why is he in charge of us?” Ahn Hyeongju appeared to be in his twenties with thick bangs.

“Well, that... you’re too strong to practice with the other freshmen, but it was hard to

find a supervisor.”

“Hmm?”

“You are sponsored by the association, and you by the Baekyang Guild, and I’m from Vanguard. I was chosen as I don’t need to recruit you or anything like that.”

“So, where are we heading? Are we starting right away?”

“Indeed. Proficiency test... well, I’ll skip it.” Despite being young, their supervisor had enough experience to know how to skip the useless procedures.

“We’ll go to the S-class gate right away.”

“...Huh?” Kang Shin-hyuk doubted his ears, but their supervisor’s words hadn’t changed.

Shinyoung’s customized education was a bit overdeveloped.

CHAPTER 166

THIRD LIBERATION (6)

“An S-class gate? Shouldn’t that be left to the other guilds?”

“You will be taking on an S-class gate, given the current situation.” Ahn Hyeongju responded to Kang Shin-hyuk with a big smile.

“An S-class gate is of a level that a guild must manage it. As reasonable rewards can be expected, they are popular enough to auction admission tickets... but what if there were multiple gates occurring at the same time as they are now, and one guild had to handle them all?”

“It means that the guild can’t afford to concentrate manpower on them.”

“Exactly. However, if you go in poorly prepared, you will lose power. So...”

“So it’s been passed on to the students? What nonsense.” Kang Shin-hyuk punched Baek in the shoulder for his words, but Hyeongju was silent.

“Isn’t he saying that the school evaluates us that highly? Or maybe they want to test us.”

“It is less risky to enter with an elite of a certain skill level.” Ahn Hyeongju rallied his strength in response to Kang Shin-hyuk’s words.

“Well, why did they choose us and not people from the reserves?”

“Well... there weren’t any.” Hyeongju became silent once more. No doubt, this was a complicated situation for him to explain.

“I’ll ensure your safety, so please don’t worry. I am from Vanguard, after all.”

“Hmm.” Kang Shin-hyuk knew what Baek was trying to say, but he swallowed the words. He thought the same thing.

'I'm stronger than this person.' It was a surprising decision that the school gave them an S-class gate for practice, but, to put it plainly, Kang Shin-hyuk thought that the S-class gate wouldn't be enough to draw out his or Baek's power.

'I can hardly talk, but Baek's movements at the last gate were astounding.' Despite being weakened by the poisonous energy which several high-rankers had succumbed to, Baek had been able to fight back against SS-class monsters effectively. Although his specialty was agility, he wasn't lacking when it came to power. He wasn't particularly confident in his defense, but he was an excellent offensive ally to have by your side.

"There will be no problem." These were two who had fought against that irregular SS-class gate. They couldn't think of any trouble at an S-class gate they couldn't handle.

"The gate hasn't been explored in advance."

"Why?!"

"The gates have been pouring out monsters, even research is undermanned."

"Has the curtain of the great gate era risen?"

"Don't start with such a pointlessly heart-pounding announcement..." It was gate practice, no different than just official superhumans attacking a gate. Shin-hyuk was worried about the others going out to practice, however. Would a crisis occur while Shinyoung's students were out? At least it would be a valuable experience for those who've successfully completed their training.

"Here it is."

"Good thing it's not an emissive gate." The gate was in Hongdae, so plenty of people were observing them. Perhaps Shinyoung had planned this from the start.

"By this evening, there will be headlines about two students entering an S-class gate."

"Would you like some melon bread and ice cream?"

"Ah, normal Shinyuk." Kang Shin-hyuk paid no mind to the eyes around him as he bought some food. Ahn Hyeongju was speaking with the soldiers in charge of the gate while the two boys enjoyed some tasty snacks. The maximum number of people allowed in was uncertain, but the gate was definitely a small dungeon based on its

mana emission.

“This sort of talk is pretty helpful.”

“The original gate practice was done in a place where all the measurements had already been done, after all.”

“You two! Now you have to get ready to go.” Kang Shin-hyuk quickly devoured his bread and grabbed onto the handle of the Godslayer sword around his waist.

“Let’s head right in.”

-Entering the S-class gate ‘The Dark Creeper.’

“This...” Upon entering, Ahn Hyeongju frowned at the notification from the Gaia system that had appeared before them. Kang Shin-hyuk, who had only been going to irregular gates lately, was a bit taken in by the normal-looking message he had seen for the first time in a long while. All that stood before them in the gate was a large wall that blocked their vision.

“Is there a problem? It’s the correct rank, and it’s not an irregular gate.”

“Well, there is a problem... where we are now... I was hoping for a straight-forward gate.” Hyeongju let out a sigh.

“You are aware that certain gates require special actions to clear? This gate is like that. The higher the grade, the more difficult it is to clear...” Whereas some gates, like the one he was hoping for, just required those entering to move forward and destroy the monsters that appeared.

“Ah, I see.” Kang Shin-hyuk had experienced it before, in Belatos. Shin Eunah and he had to obtain the records and fight the blue cow. To put it simply, they were tricky dungeons to clear, but they offered quite a bit of compensation.

“The problem is that gates like this can be an issue without prior investigation. They aren’t kind places for humans...”

“Definitely not. Let’s go.” Baek In-ha spoke up briefly before disappearing from his spot. Shortly after, he appeared in front of the wall that had appeared, letting his leg fall down.

-Kyaaaah!

With a short burst, something exploded at the end of the trajectory he drew with his food. He had found and killed a monster too fast for Ahn Hyeongju to recognize. His expression was dumb-founded as Kang Shin-hyuk admired Baek's speed.

"Huh? What..."

"Shinyuk, does this work for you?" Baek threw a mass of indefinite black solids at Kang Shin-hyuk.

[Shadow Predator's Shadow Fragment]

[S-class]

[Part of the body of a shadow predator. It is a daunting task to fabricate, but if you succeed, there may be no one capable of physically harming you.]

"A shadow predator?"

"By the way..."

"Even without knowing what it is, there's a lot of them!" Kang Shin-hyuk was unaware, but shadow predators were one of the most difficult to deal with among the S-class monsters. They moved in the shadows and had an unmatched speed in the dark. They were vicious guys who would move into their opponent's shadow and give them all kinds of debuffs as they devoured their magic. It was the monster that had shown up to escort Nathan Bodin before. But now, those very same shadow predators were all over the wall that stood before them in this gate.

-Kyaaaah!

"What an intuitive gate name...!"

-Member, if that wall is broken, the gate will change into an eroded irregular gate. Blocking them from that wall is the gate's defense condition.

The administrator's message came in quickly.

"Then what is the clear condition?"

-The general condition is to hold on until morning. If so, the gate will be deactivated but not destroyed. The requirement for destroying the gate is to destroy the source of the shadow predators.

Looking up, Kang Shin-hyuk couldn't get a sense of any energy beyond the wall. It was the same with the monsters. They were able to thoroughly hide their energy, specialized in hiding from the start. If so...

"Shall I let Onyx debut here?"

"Onyx?!"

"Onyx?" Ahn Hyeongju was considering whether or not he should intervene, curious about who or what Onyx was. Baek, who had already met Onyx before, raised an eyebrow. He was mistaken in just thinking of Onyx as a gluttonous hedgehog that ate metal. Well, actually, he wasn't, but Onyx could do other things.

"Onyx, I choose you! Go!"

-Myuuuu!

As soon as he opened the door to the garbage warehouse, Onyx ran out fiercely. Upon seeing the shadow predators crawling along the wall, he urgently made a U-turn and returned to Kang Shin-hyuk's arms.

-Kyahahaahaha!

-Myu?!

"Look, it doesn't mean anything by its laugh."

"Hedgehog? No, a monster? Where did it..."

"I already reported it to the school." Kang Shin-hyuk replied briefly before turning to Onyx.

"Onyx, that wall."

-Myu...

The small hedgehog seemed disheartened but had no intention of disobeying the order. He went to the middle of the wall and activated his new skill.

[Synchronization (SS): B

-Assimilate with the target and add their own status, characteristics, and skills to it. Low rank, only available for inanimate targets.]

That was the skill Onyx had acquired after eating the sword. Surprisingly, Oh Joo-young had been learning unity, a state in which a sword and a person harmonized to become one. Onyx had succeeded in taking a copy of that skill when he devoured the blade. Onyx's status had grown to A+ through his constant eating, but that by itself wasn't enough. He also had the skill of [Implementation (SS)], which let him reproduce what he ate. He was able to use that to express his new talent further.

What happened as a result...

-Kyahak!

-Kiiii!

"Thorns have sprouted all over the wall?!"

"The predators are stuck in the thorns...?"

"What... they're being revealed." He was able to fully express the abilities of the prey he had eaten so far through the inanimate objects he synchronized too. Now that enormous wall was like a huge version of Onyx, as long as his magic sustained it.

-Myu! Myu!

"Yes, I'll feed you." It had the disadvantage of requiring a tremendous amount of magical power. If it weren't for the enormous amount of food piled up in the warehouse, it wouldn't have been possible.

"Then, let's go."

"Where?!" In an instant, the risk of the gate had hit rock bottom. Ahn Hyeongju was relieved but responded angrily at Kang Shin-hyuk, who was making no sense.

“We have to clear the gate. There’s a lot of energy around there.” He hadn’t felt the root of that energy yet, but they were sure to find it if they looked for it.

“You’re heading down the wall on purpose?”

“Hey, Shinyuk, you’ll regret it if you take all the fun for yourself.”

“One of you has to stay here, I can’t just leave it to Onyx.”

“Just leave it to Hyeongju.”

“I’m the supervisor!”

“Then rock paper scissors.” Kang Shin-hyuk had no intention of backing down himself. The materials from these monsters looked pretty good, so he wanted to see how great the drops from the source would be.

“Okay, one game.”

“Come on.” Baek was confident he would win with his agility. Kang Shin-hyuk made sure his gloves were on properly and activated his spiritual power to strengthen himself further.

“Are you both ready?... Why am I here supervising this game?”

“Give me a quick signal.”

“If you don’t like it, next time we’ll go to a gate where you can’t afford to engage in this nonsense.”

“Rock... Paper... Scissors!”

The result was obvious.

Kang Shin-hyuk boldly strode forward with Godslayer in hand, leaving behind the sorrowful Baek In-ha.

CHAPTER 167

THIRD LIBERATION (7)

-Shaaa!

-Shaahaaak!

Thousands of shadow predators flocked toward Kang Shin-hyuk, who landed on the ground after jumping over the wall.

'Should I use threads? No...' Apart from the fact that using it could reveal his hidden identity, relying too much on one weapon went against his trait and skills, which let him master all weapons. Besides, he had left the Godslayer alone for too long and just fed it Excalibur, so it would be a good chance to have it work off that meal. The scene that had played in his mind yesterday ran through his thoughts, that image of Oh Joo-young skillfully handling his sword against that woman. The idea of that woman still bothered him. Something about her presence, or maybe the blade she wielded, remained in his mind. Somewhere...

"If I do it myself, I'll see it." With his Golden Dragon, he realized and reflected the essence of the movements he had seen. Now with the artifacts backing his physical status into the realm of SS-rank, it would be possible actually to translate it into movement. He could do it now; he was confident of that fact. As the shadow predators began to stick to his body and eat his spiritual power, Kang Shin-hyuk brandished the Godslayer with his left hand and breathed lightly. A golden glow ran through his veins as spiritual power flowed through him and ignited the tip of his sword. His eyes had an eerie golden scratch running through them.

"Break!" He swung his sword, cutting down the enemies in front of him.

-What?!

-It's poisonous...

Kang Shin-hyuk's spiritual power flowed through the sword, turning into soul poison. Shadow predators were poorly matched against it, being creatures made out of spirit.

If the blade even grazed them, they would fall away with a terrible scream.

“Kh...!” Having removed the ones sticking to him, Kang Shin-hyuk focused on drawing the same movements with his sword that he had seen the other day. Those concise movements that blocked Oh Joo-young’s sword, followed by a neat horizontal cut that would stop all movements. The moment it was put into action with the Godslayer sword, the shadow predators flocking around him were cut down at once. The pieces left behind by them were automatically recovered into his inventory.

-Kii, kiiii...

-A sword that touches our existence. This swordsman is dangerous.

-Our father is in danger...

The shadow predators realized that Kang Shin-hyuk was an enemy they couldn’t dare touch and began to retreat. Having made all his enemies retreat with those simple cuts, he felt half-way successful in reaching the essence of her movements.

“Okay, I can feel it a little.” With that satisfied mumbling, an unexpected message appeared before him.

-By increasing your understanding of Excalibur, the digestion of the Godslayer has sped up.

-Synchronization has slightly accelerated- current rate of 48.7%.

“Huh?” It made sense that touching the source of Excalibur had sped up the digestion speed, but his synchronization has increased too? Was it because he was analyzing the sword?

‘Let’s aim to complete the digestion here.’ It would be nice to achieve 50% synchronization too, but that might be too much to ask for. Kang Shin-hyuk smiled ferociously as he watched the shadow predators flee from him.

-Run away!

-It’s a human that will melt our souls!

“Where can you run away?!”

-A 15,000 HP bonus for beastlike members!

-By increasing your understanding of Excalibur, the digestion of the Godslayer has sped up.

-Synchronization has slightly accelerated- current rate of 48.8%.

With the administrator's message lingering in the background, Kang Shin-hyuk started massacring the shadow predators. Of course, his real purpose was to provoke them into revealing where the source was. Going beyond the wall, what awaited him was a forest full of conifers which hid the shadow predators.

-By increasing your understanding of Excalibur, the digestion of the Godslayer has sped up.

-Synchronization has slightly accelerated- current rate of 49.1%.

"They move quickly... it can't be helped." Now he needed a skill to maximize his sword's range rather than its power. Kang Shin-hyuk had no such talent, but he did have a treasure that was suitable. That was the Shinfeng Orb.

-Due to fusing with the [Shinfeng Orb], some of the original power of the Godslayer sword has been temporarily restored. The blade has become SS-rank. The sword's strength and special abilities will be amplified.

-You can now use the special abilities [Restoration] and [Regeneration] of the Shinfeng Orb.

-The special ability [Wind Blade] has been temporarily unlocked.

The power of the orb was still recovering. It wasn't capable of the dramatic change the Great Heavenly Spirit caused yet, but it was enough for now.

"Wind blade!" The sword's blade, glowing golden with the orb inside of it, suddenly stretched out to ten meters long. The metal itself had not grown, but now a blade of wind sprouted up out of it.

'It really is an SS-class artifact.' Kang Shin-hyuk drew the blade horizontally in front of him, splitting through all of the shadow predators within range. The heavy conifers that blocked his view were also swept away, clearing his line of sight.

-By increasing your understanding of Excalibur, the digestion of the Godslayer has sped up.

-Synchronization has slightly accelerated- current rate of 49.3%.

Kang Shin-hyuk let out a laugh as he ran forward.

“I like this one more than the Heavenly Spirit.”

-10,000HP bonus!

Apparently, the administrator agreed.

-Our father is in danger.

-For us to survive...

-Run!

The shadow predators hid in the shadows in their attempt to escape, but in front of Kang Shin-hyuk, it was a pointless resistance. He put the sword into the shadows and let the wind explode out, imbuing it with soul poison as it swept through the shadow predators.

-Synchronization has slightly accelerated- current rate of 49.4%.

“My body’s so light. I fear nothing now!”

-What does that mean, member?

“The boss is being summoned, but I can’t see it yet.” Kang Shin-hyuk went deeper into the dark forest as he continued hacking down monsters and trees alike with the wind blade. In the meantime, he was finally getting a sense of it.

‘Is this it?’ The shadow predators were adept at hiding their energy, so it took a while for him to get used to it. However, by fighting them and hitting them with his own spiritual power, their habits, movements, and even some of their memories gradually began to come to him. Repeating that over and over again, a map of the forest started to form in his mind.

'Shall we go? We've secured enough by-products, and the synchronization rate is now 49.6%. By the time I clear this place, I can expect that not only Excalibur will be fully digested, but I'll also reach the third liberation.' Kang Shin-hyuk recovered the Shinfeng orb from the sword. For dealing with the mass of dark energy, it would be better to absorb it rather than use the Shinfeng orb.

-Hmm? The energy coming from the forest is a little different...

"How so?"

-The source of the shadow data and its performance is different than what I know. It isn't an irregular gate... perhaps, depending on the situation, the goal of the gate will change. That is, a partial change may occur.

"That is good news." He had been growing bored with only the shadow predators. He wanted the gate to become S+ grade, maybe even SS- with a bit of luck. Kang Shin-hyuk covered his whole body with Golden Dragon and bought intermediate status potions in preparation. However, the max they could raise his rank to was SS, so their effects were limited.

'I can still raise it by using the soul connector. I should be glad I can achieve that effect without borrowing Claire's potion.' After thorough preparation, Kang Shin-hyuk continued forward to the source of the gate as he lightly stabbed at the shadow predators in his vicinity. Cutting down more trees, he could feel a dark mass growing in front of him. It was so dark that he thought his eyes were closed for a moment.

-Father!

-Protect him!

It was what the shadow predators called their father. They swarmed to bite at him in an instant. Even a high-ranker would struggle against such a group; however, Kang Shin-hyuk didn't resist them. He only covered his body in a strong flow of spiritual power. Against them, that was enough.

-Kyaaak!

-Poisonous!

-Gueeee!

The shadow predators fell away from him and died like flies.

-Proficiency of [Soul Poison (SSS)] has increased.

A brief message appeared, indicating the skill level had increased slightly but had not risen. He figured it would be difficult to raise the second he confirmed it was an SSS-rank skill.

'I was fortunate to receive S+ as its initial rank.' Kang Shin-hyuk strode forward and ignored the shadow eaters around him. The huge source of darkness before him was still creating more of them.

-Get ready, member. Things are changing right now.

Kang Shin-hyuk took a stance with his sword aimed forward. He didn't know how it would change but assumed he would need to meet it with his sword.

The next moment, the source of darkness began to shift, and Kang Shin-hyuk lowered his sword.

CHAPTER 168

THIRD LIBERATION (8)

The shadow source has recognized the existence of the ideal energy and is attempting to evolve.

-The source of the shadow is absorbing the shadow predators!

It would've been nice if the story had been simple, and it had just made a shadow golem with the source as its core. Instead, it had created a force field to protect itself and block Kang Shin-hyuk from approaching while it began to absorb the shadow predators it had created. Then... it began to shrink gradually.

"It doesn't seem hostile..."

-It's a great opportunity, so allow me to explain.

The fact that the administrator entered explanation mode meant that the situation really wasn't dangerous. The source of the shadows was taking its time to evolve right in front of its enemy.

-All monsters are hostile to humans, but some of them suppress their instincts to place survival as their top priority.

"Survival..."

-That's right. This is especially the case for non-living monsters born under the influence of humans or legends and myths rather than creature-type monsters born with instincts.

It was a bit difficult for him to understand. A monster that prioritized survival but was also non-living?

-Non-living monsters are inorganic monsters that cannot be defined in the form of an animal or plant. Living Armor is one example.

“I see.”

-These monsters don't have a living body, so they aren't swept away by their instincts. However, they have a strong desire to survive as they weren't originally alive.

It sounded a bit ironic to him, but Kang Shin-hyuk thought he could understand the feeling. Something that had come to life, as if by a miracle, no doubt would have an obsession with the life they had been granted.

“How does that relate to the current situation? So this source is a non-living monster with a strong desire for life...?”

-Since it has no way to defeat you, that means it has decided to change into a form that cannot harm you. It's an option a creature-type monster couldn't think of.

“Uh...?” Was that because he used soul poison to overwhelm the shadow predators?

-That is correct. Your soul poison is a dangerous attack for these creatures, so the source of the shadows is adapting accordingly.

Monsters being killed by superhumans was a scene playing out at countless gates at this moment; however, no matter how large the gap between opponents, there was usually a slight chance to surpass it. The problem was that the soul poison, at least from the view of the source of the shadows, was an impenetrable wall. It was a case of a bad match-up.

“Is this also a mirror like what I've been hearing?”

-The member Halo may not have considered this sort of unusual situation.

Well, that was fair. Kang Shin-hyuk shook his head as he observed the black sphere before him. Now it was small enough that he could hug it with both of his hands as it continued to compress itself smaller and smaller. The sight felt similar to when Kang Shin-hyuk had united the benadelite particles in Gromas before.

“I guess this is because I showed up with the Shinfeng orb and the Great Heavenly Spirit in the first place.”

-This is a case that this administrator never expected. You can do whatever you want.

Kang Shin-hyuk nodded and sheathed Godslayer as he stepped towards the source of the shadows.

-...

It seemed to pulse in time with his steps, revealing its intention to Kang Shin-hyuk. It frightened him.

“Isn’t this bad?”

-If we’re talking only about this dungeon, the scariest thing is you.

The administrator responded honestly, revealing why he had given him all those bonuses.

-At least from the enemy’s perspective. 10,000HP bonus!

Now the bonus just felt pointless. Kang Shin-hyuk let out a laugh as he reached out to the source. It didn’t resist him; it had already surrendered. His spiritual power covered it.

‘Are you ready?’ The situation now was much better than when he had made the Great Heavenly Spirit. His metallurgy and spiritual power had increased, and now he had the power of the Golden Dragon. Kang Shin-hyuk raised his hand, imagining the hammer in his hand that radiated a golden brilliance as spiritual power gently covered it. He used it to strike the source.

-Klang!

The source was nervous at first, fearing that Kang Shin-hyuk was attempting to destroy it, but it soon calmed after the hammer blow rang out. It began to realize that Shin-hyuk was helping its evolution as they connected through his spiritual power.

-Klang! Klang! Klang!

He was doing metallurgy even though he had arrived for battle. It was fortunate no one else had followed him into the forest.

-Klang! Klang! Klang!

The source wasn't that different from the Great Heavenly Spirit, as both were collections of enormous energy (although the similarities ended there). Just like when he had done it in Gromas, however, the work was still difficult. Shin-hyuk's mind was focused as he continued to shape the source.

"I'll need a finishing material." That would be, of course, the by-products from the shadow predators that had been killed earlier. He produced them and processed them with spiritual power into the source that was now about the same size as the Shinfeng orb. He imbued it with the spiritual thread of his soul connector.

-What great workmanship. 15,000HP bonus!

"...It's looking good." He didn't know what sort of properties the orb would have, but it had a smooth luster to it that resembled the Shinfeng orb and the Great Heavenly Spirit.

-Klang! Klang! Klang!

The work wasn't over yet. He kept tapping at the orb, injecting his spiritual power and Golden Dragon to stabilize and strengthen it. It began to show its traits as he honed it. Perhaps, once he reached the ultimate form of what he was doing now, it could be called All-craft.

-Klang! Klang! Klang!

The work felt like it took an eternity, but in reality, it had taken less than five minutes. When Kang Shin-hyuk stayed his hand, an orb that glowed black in response to his spiritual power floated before him. It was an artifact with an ego, a gem born from Kang Shin-hyuk's skill.

-After performing a miraculous work by overwhelming the material, a treasure [Dark Spirit Pearl (SS)] that contains the power of shadows was born.

-Metallurgy skill proficiency has increased significantly by forging a living object!

-Synchronization has accelerated- current rate of 51.4%.

Some results had been expected, and some had been unexpected.

-The third liberation of VIP is in progress. 2 billion HP has been unlocked!

-You have awakened one of your previous life's skills. You have learned the skill [Repair]. Under the influence of synchronization rate and metallurgy, your repair skill proficiency will grow to A+.

Kang Shin-hyuk's eyes bulged out of his head. The fact that he had unlocked a new skill was a surprise, but a most welcome one. It was a skill that went hand-in-hand with metallurgy. Rather, he had already been using metallurgy to do something similar when he made the Great Heavenly Spirit and the Dark Spirit Pearl.

'Maybe it's not just repairing, but it will affect my overall metallurgy.' He could tell in a second that he had acquired a great skill, and for it to be A+ was something that couldn't be ignored.

-Congratulations on your third liberation with a 150,000HP bonus! Now you can purchase advanced status amplification potions that increase each status by three levels for an hour at the price of 1,000,000HP each! In addition, more products have been added to the store, including spirit adhesives!

"The price suddenly rose again." It was pricy, but he had just unlocked 2 billion HP, so even that price looked a bit cheap.

-That's because it's an advanced level. Of course, you can receive an additional VIP discount for purchasing one for 700,000HP!

Kang Shin-hyuk was beginning to doubt the structure of the Hero Universe store, handing out such discounts after the fact, but he knew there was nothing good awaiting him if he asked the administrator, so he kept quiet.

-Also, keep in mind that the limit of the advanced potions is the SSS-rank.

"Could I beat Halo with SSS-rank?"

-You cannot win.

Kang Shin-hyuk nodded, needing no further explanation.

"It feels like I've grown considerably in a short time, but I still can't see the end."

-You are growing at an alarming rate. It may seem like a long way, but in reality, the distance is rapidly narrowing, so don't worry about it.

“Thank you, administrator.”

-150,000HP bonus!

Kang Shin-hyuk hoped that the administrator wouldn't keep sending in these types of bonuses; his heart wouldn't be able to take it. Besides, at this rate, it might start causing inflation.

-The login bonus has also been improved due to the third liberation. An enhanced roulette that can be turned with 20 roulette coins has appeared!

“Ah.”

-The Enhanced Roulette includes equipment slots and many hidden systems of the Hero Universe, so don't miss it!

“I already pulled out the equipment slot.”

-That's proof of your luck! In addition, the maximum available time per day of My Room has been increased to ten hours, and the time ratio with Earth has been adjusted to three times, so please use it appropriately!

Wasn't that the best news? It was better to stay in his My Room to go off on a quest.

-The number of dimensional quests that can be taken has also increased significantly. Returning to a world where you have previously completed a quest will now require half the amount of HP!

“Oh, is it time to fill my days with quests?” It was time to set aside Mirotoz and explore the other dimensional quests!

-We've gotten too excited, so I had forgotten.

“What is it?”

-The gate has not been cleared even though you secured the source of the shadows, which was the clearing condition.

“Ah...?” Come to think of it, he was still in the gate.

-Another irregular phenomenon is occurring!

“Oh, really...” He wouldn’t be given that much time to enjoy his spoils.

Kang Shin-hyuk hit the ground running with the Dark Spirit Pearl in hand.

CHAPTER 169

PULLING THE ACCELERATOR (1)

-Member, be alert. Erosion is occurring.

“If erosion happens on the streets of Hongdae right now...” In Korea, it would be an emergency equivalent to the countercurrent. It was for that reason gates in high-population density areas were under strict management. Considering that it was a dangerous challenge, Shinyoung had presented Kang Shin-hyuk and Baek In-ha.

-No, member. I am not saying that this gate is eroding Earth.

“Then what?” Kang Shin-hyuk sprinted through the forest as he spoke with the administrator. It hadn’t taken much time to reach this point from the wall, but now it felt so far away. Wasn’t it a little weird?

-This gate is being eroded by the enemy. It is reacting to the abnormal mutation of the source of shadows.

“Is that possible?!”

-Generally, no. But it is proof that the gate has already transformed into an irregular one. Not only that, it means that they are watching you if erosion is occurring immediately.

“They?”

-Those you have already met. The gate is gradually expanding from the erosion. Dear member, if you wish to rejoin your party, it is better to take out your bike.

“Right...!” The blue cow bike had been shown in the media several times already as the ride of Shin Eun-hyuk in Paris. It was a bike immediately recognizable as Shin Eun-hyuk’s. So using it now meant that Ahn Hyeongju might catch him, but...

“Human life is more important than that.” His agony lasted less than a second as he pulled out the bike and immediately placed the Shinfeng orb in it.

“Full speed!”

-Wow!

Reading his mind, the blue cow soared into the sky. Still in his hand, Kang Shin-hyuk could feel the Dark Spirit Pearl growing embarrassed as it met an object that resembled itself.

“That, what...?” Now that he was soaring above the trees, he could recognize the situation of the gate at a glance.

“The sky... the gate’s being invaded.”

-Cuoo...

Darkness spread over the sky. The environment of the gate was nighttime before, but this was a sort of darkness that shattered light and hung heavily above everything under it.

-It is them.

“Let’s hurry.” Kang Shin-hyuk accelerated even faster as he could feel the gaze of something similar to the shadow predators from that darkness. The blue cow powered by the Shinfeng orb rushed through the air like a thunderbolt, leaving an afterimage behind it.

-50,000HP bonus to this member’s awesome racing skills!

“Fortunately, it’s not a 100,000HP bonus this time. It’s really too much.”

-Oh, you’re going faster. 50,000HP bonus!

“So you gave it out twice...” The Shinfeng orb had recovered a lot, but Kang Shin-hyuk’s ability to drive had also grown. Golden Dragon Fighter strengthened the bike’s internal engine even further as they soared above the forest.

“Shin-hyuk!” It didn’t matter how much the gate was expanding as it eroded; he could reach the wall at the rate he was going. Ahn Hyeongju only barely recognized him after the bike landed.

“Where did you... oh, that bike...?”

“Let’s talk about it later.”

-Myu!

Kang Shin-hyuk stowed away the blue cow as Onyx let go of his magic and ran to Kang Shin-hyuk. He jumped up onto Shin-hyuk, frightened. Gently patting him, Shin-hyuk looked up at the darkness around them.

“What happened?”

“That’s what I want to ask. It seemed like something was happening in the forest, but then the sky became weird right after. It’s nice the shadow predators are gone, but now something else...”

-Shaaah

Something began to fall from the sky toward them. It fell down like a dark rain, moving in a vaguely human-like way as it did.

-Due to the change in the gate’s environment, the gate has transformed into The Model Garden (SS)!

-It is a Shadow Elemental, a monster with a purer attribute than the Shadow Predator. It is SS-ranked, so they might not be as easily killed as before!

In response to the Gaia system, the administrator warned Kang Shin-hyuk. Baek In-ha and Ahn Hyeongju had seen the same message as they both prepared for battle. Hyeongju had a large shield in hand, and Baek was now brandishing two daggers in addition to his normal boots.

-Shaaaaah!

More of that dark rain began to fall as the closest poured down towards Kang Shin-hyuk. He instinctively filled his sword with spiritual power and cut it, but the feeling was lacking. The enemy had no clear shape, so he wasn’t sure how he could cut down a vital spot.

‘But my soul poison... ’

-Shaaah!

The enemy screamed out the next second, expanding in place like a piece of popcorn popping. Even if it couldn't be cut down in a single blow, the soul poison certainly worked. If so, there was no reason to hesitate. He placed the sword on the floor and spread out his hands. His power flowed through the soul connector to spread out as ten strands in all directions.

"You are Shin Eun-hyuk!"

"Please be quiet, please!" The threads were backed by his S-rank wind mastery, dancing along the wind to confront the shadow rain.

-Shaaah!

-Kiiii!

Kang Shin-hyuk's attack opened up like a large umbrella to greet the rain. Ten strands as pillars and the spreading wind formed an umbrella-like membrane to resist the rain. The shadow elementals fell through to the ground, hit by the poison.

"What are you doing? Kill it!"

"Yes, right!"

"Here we go!" Baek and Hyeongju, who had been stunned by the sight of Kang Shin-hyuk, regained their senses at his sharp remark and began to attack the weakened elementals. Hyeongju charged in with his shield to kill them one by one, while Baek kicked off the floor and fired crystals of blue mana from his feet, kicking them into the nearest ones.

"It's too fast...!"

"Is he slow?" Now that the enemies were weakened by his soul power, a magical attack was enough to finish them off.

"What is happening to them?"

"Focus on cutting them down." The thread that came out of the soul connector was both a thread of soul and a thread of shadow, making it the perfect weapon to cut down

these shadowy guys. Those who tried to climb into the shadows were cut down by the thread that followed them.

-Shaaaaaah!

-Shaah!

Kang Shin-hyuk swung his hands in a dazzling display to cut down the hundreds of shadow elements falling down upon them.

“It’s a hard counter, in many ways.” But would that keep up in the future? What if all of the light disappeared here?

-There are a number of worlds made up of only shadow, as there are many made of light.

“The scale is a bit too big for me.”

-But your way of thinking is a good start. It’s clear that light is a weakness for them. Of course, they know that too, so they rush to swallow up the light.

‘Hmm.’

-It would be good for you to have some means to attack with light. Light has a divine nature that makes it effective against undead and demons, so it is one of the top priority attributes to purchase.

“Then... Baek!”

“Huh?!” Kang Shin-hyuk kept managing his ten threads as he called out to Baek. Baek was moving fast around the area created by Kang Shin-hyuk to finish off the shadow elementals.

“Do you have any means to attack with light?”

“I’m only as fast as light.”

“Then it can’t be helped.” He didn’t like where the administrator was heading with it, but there seemed to be no choice.

'What you're saying is, something like Light Mastery?'

-That's right!

The administrator's voice was suspiciously bright in responding.

-You have a very high affinity with fire, but also with light, which shares some attributes of fire. In addition, by interpreting Excalibur that was absorbed into the Godslayer, your understanding of light has also improved. So, the conditions to learn Light Mastery are rather good.

'Oh, then I'd rather take Fire Mastery.'

-You can learn that later. Light Mastery will increase the type of weapons you can craft and handle in the future!

'...Like?'

-That is beam weapons.

'I'll buy the best I can.' The second he heard the word beam, Kang Shin-hyuk was sold on the idea.

-Purchasing Light Mastery (SS) skill stone for 3.5 billion HP. Your VIP special discount has brought the price down to 2.145 billion HP. Purchase successful!

In returning for failing to curb his middle schooler sense of taste, all of his property had been robbed. He understood that attribute skills were expensive, and SS was rare, and even the VIP bonus was good...

But if it was that expensive, why didn't he confirm the purchase beforehand?!

-It is a dangerous moment. SS-grade skills often don't remain for long, especially since that person who signed up a while ago... Excuse me, a member put it up for sale at a price lower than the normal selling price. If I hadn't bought it right away, another member would've claimed it.

'Isn't that wrong in various ways as an administrator?'

Well, it had already been bought. Kang Shin-hyuk pulled out the skill stone and used

it right away.

CHAPTER 170

PULLING THE ACCELERATOR (2)

-You learned Light Mastery (SS). Under the influence of the skills and traits you have learned, your proficiency will grow to B-rank. Golden Dragon Fighter has grown to SS-rank!

A dazzling light burst out from Kang Shin-hyuk. It was not pure white, but rather, it had a golden hue to it as it mingled with his Golden Dragon. He focused on himself and began to analyze the new skill he had just learned.

-Wind Mastery is a power exerted based on magic power or wind power. However, you are exercising it in harmony with your spiritual power. Light Mastery is a similar skill, but you can deal with it through your Golden Dragon Fighter.

“Huh... well, as long as I can create light, I suppose...” It was a new source of power at the very least; it didn’t really matter how it worked so long as it did.

-Few people deal with Light Mastery. Not everyone who uses the power of light has Light Mastery. Joo-young Oh, for example.

‘I see.’

-Light Mastery is an extremely rare skill. It turns out that it had been posted on the trading board belatedly, and now the freeboard is burning. The member Loki is dancing in a frenzy.

‘Oh, yeah?’

-Ascaldin, another member who already has Light Mastery, was teasing the member Loki, but when he heard that it was of SS-rank rarity...

‘You don’t need to relay that.’ In the process of adapting to the new skill, Kang Shin-hyuk’s body was continuously radiating bright light. The shadow elementals burned in the light he made, causing them to attack more viciously than before as they let out terrible screams.

-Because they hate the light, they are rushing to swallow yours.

“It’s funny for beings born in light.” The shadow elements swarmed around him despite being burned by the light he emitted. He thought it wouldn’t be very effective as it was only B-rank, but perhaps its synergy with Golden Dragon was boosting it. Kang Shin-hyuk mixed his trait within the light to further boost it.

-Shaaaaah!

-Kiiiiiii!

The golden threads stretched out to pierce the burning elements, the soul poison harmonizing with the light to wound the elementals fatally.

‘But the consumption from Golden Dragon has increased... I need to adjust it accordingly.’ Golden Dragon was the very life force of Kang Shin-hyuk. He could recover it to an extent by drinking potions, but it was inefficient and took a while to recover that way, so it wasn’t very reliable. The boss of this gate had yet to appear, so wasting energy would be dangerous. He lowered the energy density to a more appropriate level and moved his hand to clean up those that remained. His automatic routing function was still active, but his party members didn’t seem to notice due to the dark surroundings. Instead, they were focused on the bright light he was emitting.

“Shinyuk, what is that?!”

“It looks like an awakening.” It would be weirder if they weren’t suspicious of the sudden change, but they couldn’t have known about the Hero Universe, so Kang Shin-hyuk didn’t bother hiding it.

“A huge number is coming!” The sky was torn asunder as the rain pouring in became stronger. All the raindrops that hit the ground flooded toward them in the shadows. It was as if the entire world had become their enemy. If it weren’t for the Soul Connection and the Light Mastery he had just learned, the shadows would have consumed them all by now.

“I’m really dying here!”

“Fix your shield! It’s because of the light I created.”

“It’s easy for you to say! Once we get past this, be prepared! I have a lot to ask!”

"I'll have you pay for your life, so be prepared for that too!" Hyeongju shut his mouth and lifted his shield again.

-The boss is appearing. Be careful, as it is SS+ rank.

"I'm glad you're here." Kang Shin-hyuk thought about the set of intermediate status potions he had already prepared. He could only drink one set a day, and now he had the option of advanced ones...

'Can I give this to another?'

-No. Status potions are items that cannot be traded even between members.

'There's no way?'

-Feeding through oral contact may work; however, it may be less effective.

'It's okay, never mind.'

-Cheh.

'What?!' Kang Shin-hyuk gave up on the idea of feeding the potions to Baek In-ha and thought of what he could do instead.

-The enemy you are dealing with has a spiritual body. Spiritual strength and Golden Dragon are more important than boosting basic stats. Thus, an intermediate potion will be enough.

That was true. Kang Shin-hyuk downed the three potions without worrying about it anymore, boosting all of his stats to the rank of SS+ with the added benefit of his soul connector. At this level, he was at the pinnacle of humanity.

-From the cracks of the torn world, the Sediment of Chaos (SS+) has appeared! Be careful; the enemy won't die unless you break its core!

His battle preparations over, something massive gradually emerged beyond the pouring rain of shadows. It was a bizarre and disgusting sphere that seemed to extinguish all light in the world, possessing an infinite sense of darkness.

-Ooooh...!

“The Sediment of Chaos...”

“Huh?! Whoa!” Hyeongju Ah let out a groan and kneeled before the boss had even launched a proper attack. Blood was leaking out of his ears. Was it possible that this monster was so fast that it could move without Kang Shin-hyuk’s reinforced senses to catch?

-That’s a type of demon. It emits dirty mana that will hurt those without enough mana or those who don’t know how to protect themselves with magic.

Therefore, Hyeongju Ahn had been brought to this state just by being near this boss. Shin-hyuk felt bad to say it, but he hadn’t been of any help since entering the gate.

“I have a bad feeling, but I don’t see a way to fight it.”

“I’m back to carrying around this extra luggage.” Should he shoot the thread? No, the Gaia system said he had to break its core to damage it. Was it buried deep inside that massive body? It was unlikely he could cut through it, given it was hundreds of meters long. He tried firing off a thread to test it, but it was cut off as soon as it was buried into its body.

-Guooohohoh...!

It seemed Soul Poison had a bit of an effect, however, as it turned towards Shin-hyuk with an angry voice. At the same time, a dark gas began to seep out from its body.

-Member...!

“Kh!” Kang Shin-hyuk crossed the threads into a grid pattern in front of him to build a shield. He empowered it with spiritual power and his Golden Dragon trait, creating a sparkling golden square shield.

-Chiiik, chiiik

The gas hit the shield and made a creepy hissing sound. Kang Shin-hyuk’s eyes narrowed as he poured more energy into the shield.

‘Like the administrator said, the nature of its magic is filthy...’ But what did that exactly mean? It meant that it was an attack that held no meaning to Kang Shin-hyuk.

“Baek In-ha, take Hyeongju Ahn to safety. Can you manage that much?”

“These damn shadows... okay! I think I can do at least that much!” Baek, who had been naturally excluded from the boss fight, was shouting energetically. The shadow elementals had been gradually increasing ever since the Sediment of Chaos appeared, but Baek was mindful of keeping Hyeongju safe.

“Please lend me the bike!”

“Seriously? Alright, take it!”

“Yes, thank you!” Once out of his inventory, the blue cow immediately understood what was to be done and went straight to Baek. Kang Shin-hyuk asked Onyx to go with him.

“If the situation arises, keep Baek safe.”

-Myu... myu!

Onyx seemed concerned but soon nodded that he could do that much before heading for Baek as well. He jumped high into the air, showing off a strange new ability that Shin-hyuk took note of.

“Okay then.” Kang Shin-hyuk released the shield of threads once the party had moved behind the rubble of the crumbling wall. The Sediment of Chaos poured out even more energy to end him, assuming the shield had faltered because of his attack. He felt like the attack was similar to the breath a dragon emitted, but he wasn’t entirely sure as he had never fought a dragon before.

-Guo...?!

“It’s okay.” The dark sticky breath roiled over Kang Shin-hyuk’s body. The gas had no effect on him at all. That was partially thanks to Kang Shin-hyuk’s strong resistance to all kinds of poison from his skill, Soul Poison. Secondly, however, it was because he had no mana that could be polluted.

“If that is all, it would be fastest to dig into its body and break the core.”

-Of course, digging into a spirit body is quite simple, but it becomes a confrontation between souls in the end. It would be a pain to endure the pressure of that thing.

“As is, it won’t work, so it’s better to bring it to an end soon.” Kang Shin-hyuk bought and drank a high-grade potion on the spot before jumping off the ground. With the power of Wind Mastery to compress and burst the air, he soared over tens of meters in the air instantly.

“Hahaha!”

-Ooooooh!

“I should’ve kept the Shinfeng orb!”

-It’s coming!

The next moment, his field of view was colored black.

“Huh?!” It wasn’t the gas. Something happened to the Sediment of Chaos’s body as it swallowed Kang Shin-hyuk whole. Kang Shin-hyuk briefly wondered if its body had been scattered all over the gate from the start. If so, that meant Baek In-ha and the others were in more danger than he was in right now. The problem was that he had no time to worry about them.

‘Get off...!’ Golden Dragon flowed through his body to push away the unpleasant energy that tried to worm its way into him. Spiritual power formed a thick armor over him and spilled out poison, making the boss realize he had swallowed up something unhealthy. It wasn’t enough by itself, however. Even if the path to the core was a straight line, he couldn’t tell exactly where he was.

‘First, the Great Heavenly Spirit...!’ The space around him was crushing down on him as their souls clashed. Wouldn’t it be possible to reverse the situation if he absorbed the enemy’s energy into the sword? Yet, as if possessed, he pulled out the Dark Spirit Pearl instead and put it inside of the Godslayer sword. The sword was dyed in shadow as a brief message appeared.

-The Godslayer has completely digested Excalibur: Demon’s Fang.

CHAPTER 171

PULLING THE ACCELERATOR (3)

-Light and shadow exist together. You realized that where there is light, so too must there be a shadow.

The digestion of Excalibur by the Godslayer sword had been completed by inserting the Dark Spirit Pearl. The sword flashed out, having successfully received the light after being enhanced by the darkness of the Dark Spirit Pearl.

-The Godslayer has regained some of its original traits and has evolved to the SS-rank.

The handle was slightly longer now, and the guard had a new ornament. The blade itself was sharper and considerably longer as well. Now it was large enough to be a bastard sword.

-A new special ability, Sacred Sword, has been unlocked.

The sword looked brilliant and noble as it shone with an unbreakable light that fascinated Kang Shin-hyuk. The sword had clearly regained some of the original divine power that it once touted. The changes didn't end there, however, as it was changing from the core as well as its evolution.

-Due to the fusion with the [Dark Spirit Pearl], possibilities that the Godslayer originally didn't possess have temporarily bloomed. It has become an SS+ rank. Its strength has been amplified, and all special abilities are maximized.

-You can now use the special ability [Dark Spirit].

-You can now temporarily use the special ability [Spirit Sword].

-[Sacred Sword] and [Spirit Sword] have fused to unlock the special ability [Sword of Chaos]. [Sword of Chaos], [Flesh Control], and [Guardian] have fused to unlock the special ability [Dawn].

A list of unrecognizable names passed in front of his eyes, making Shin-hyuk's mind

go blank. A new special ability had been obtained by digesting Excalibur, as well as one from fusing it with the Dark Spirit. Combined, those abilities had become a whole new special ability. He didn't know what it was, but he was convinced it would be powerful. Kang Shin-hyuk was quick to confirm the information about the special abilities.

[Dawn: Burns through the darkness to bring light. When expressed, all stats, special abilities, and skills are used to create a dawning strike that cuts through everything.]

“Okay...”

-The special ability cannot be expressed due to a lack of ability. Forced manifestation could lead to death.

Then why did he obtain it?! Kang Shin-hyuk hurriedly stopped trying to express the special ability. The Godslayer was silent.

‘I have to put in the Great Heavenly Spirit.’ He was still struggling inside the body of the Sediment of Chaos; this was no time to be leisurely exploring special abilities. He wasn't sure if he could absorb the power of this enemy, but it was better than the Dark Spirit Pearl, whose abilities he couldn't handle.

-Vwoom

However, the Dark Spirit Pearl let out a strange cry and began to express its own special ability in response to Shin-hyuk trying to remove it. Not [Dawn], but the [Dark Spirit] ability it possessed.

‘Ah, there was this.’ The fusion messages had been so intense he had forgotten. The compressed source of shadow, which had been the boss of the gate, was no joke.

-Guooooaaaaaaa!

The Sediment of Chaos let out an annoying and discomfoting sound that reverberated throughout its body. All of the darkness around Kang Shin-hyuk was being sucked into the Dark Spirit Pearl stuck in the center of Godslayer's guard.

‘This...’ It was almost like the power of the Great Heavenly Spirit, yet even that couldn't absorb the entire body of the monster around him.

[Dark Spirit: Become the master of shadows. Increases stealth in darkness, as well as movement and attack speed. Reduces the damage of all dark attacks by half. It can absorb all darkness and store it in the shadow, permanently increasing the ability depending on the amount.]

The Great Heavenly Spirit interfered with energy and absorbed it, but the Dark Spirit Pearl could exert absolute power over only the dark.

“That’s why you wanted to come out like that.”

-Vwooom!

Then why did it remain quiet when dealing with the elementals? Maybe it had a limit to how much darkness it could soak up like this, so it had been saving up for the decisive moment. Or maybe he just wanted to test the power of his master. If that were the case, they would need to have a talk later.

“I’ll figure it out then.” Kang Shin-hyuk raised his head, his confidence rising to wash away his anxiety. He could no longer feel his foe’s energy pressing down on him from all sides anymore. Rather, now it felt like it was trying to expel Kang Shin-hyuk from its body.

“Break!” But there was no need for Kang Shin-hyuk to withdraw. He compressed air beneath his feet to burst forward through the Sediment of Chaos like a cannonball. The Godslayer he held in hand devoured the darkness coming in from all sides to pave the way forward.

-Guooooooh!

Perhaps if Kang Shin-hyuk weren’t inside the Sediment of Chaos’s body, it would be able to fight back with magic or some special ability.

-Guooooooooooh!

However, such skills weren’t usable against foes already trapped inside its body. It was so massive that it couldn’t attack itself. It could restore itself to an extent from its core, but it was being drained faster than it could keep up. Kang Shin-hyuk didn’t have time to relax, however, as he knew that the Dark Spirit Pearl couldn’t last forever.

‘I have to find the core.’ He repeatedly fired off the compressed air to drive himself

deeper into the chaos sediment as the Godslayer erased away chunks of the darkness.

'Where is it? It must be hiding in the deepest part.' His enemies up until now hadn't been good at dealing with the soul, so it was easy to read their weaknesses. But this was different. Its entire body was a huge mass of spiritual power, so it wasn't easy to scan it with spiritual power. Now that it was weakened by the Godslayer, using spiritual power to read it was now possible. Cracks were forming in the Sediment of Chaos's defenses.

'It's my first time doing this... but its good practice.' Kang Shin-hyuk's spiritual power flowed through the body of his foe. It noticed belatedly, trying desperately to stop it, but it could not concentrate on its defenses properly, given the damage it was sustaining.

'Found you.' The moment his spirit found his destination, the Wind Mastery naturally reacted to push his body forward. His sword was held straight ahead, cutting right through the darkness before him.

'Faster.' The compressed wind exploded out, shooting him further forward. It wrapped around his body with spiritual power, granting him the ability to fly through his own strength.

'Stronger!' That alone wouldn't be enough as the Dark Spirit Pearl was beginning to overload.

'Light Mastery.' A weak light began to flow out from his body, providing just enough of a boost to the Dark Spirit Pearl. The pearl began to emit a stronger power in rebellion of the light as Kang Shin-hyuk gained a bit of understanding of how he could harmonize the attributes of light and darkness.

-Member!

The administrator's message brought his attention back to the world and the massive black sphere before him. It was smaller than the true body of the source of shadows he had previously encountered, but its power was incomparable.

"This guy won't try to change like the Dark Spirit Pearl."

-Rather, it might try to absorb the pearl.

“That’s probably why it swallowed me up.” However, that pearl had now brought him here, to deal the final blow. Kang Shin-hyuk let out a laugh and lifted his sword high.

“Then, it’s the final battle of the day!” The core of the Sediment of Chaos swelled greatly in a final attempt. He could feel that the energy inside of it was going to explode, but...

Without any hesitation, Kang Shin-hyuk struck it with the Godslayer, the energy within the sword pouring out.

The Dark Spirit Pearl radiated a gloomy light as it engorged itself on the most powerful darkness it had ever eaten.

CHAPTER 172

PULLING THE ACCELERATOR (4)

Baek In-ha was born far apart from the norm. He was blessed with an overwhelming talent and amount of mana from the start that none in his generation could match.

“What an excellent child.”

“If I was like that, I wonder if I could become the master of Baekyang.”

“Haha, stop joking. That child was born too late. Humans get old with the passage of time, but a strong superhuman will only grow stronger as time passes.”

“Well, aren’t there one or two who are aiming for the position of Baekyang’s master? The master said that if you don’t meet the standard, you won’t be given a seat even if you’re a relative.”

“Yes, the competition is already fierce. Even for this child...” If he had been born ten years later, that child would’ve become the master of Baekyang. Baek In-ha, who had exercised his dazzling talents without hiding them, grew up listening to that from a very young age. It was thrown around by those who recognized his shining talent and expressed regret, but it only sounded like ridicule to his ears.

‘It’s not my fault I wasn’t born earlier. My fault is that I’m too weak to overcome the limits of time, and that is all.’ Baek In-ha realized that at a young age. Words like ‘because I was born too late’ or ‘I didn’t have good enough artifacts’ only served to frustrate him. Such things didn’t motivate people, but only encouraged them to stop moving.

He didn’t like it. People around him making excuses for him were unbearably annoying. It was around that time he stopped caring about his reputation. Natural talent, time, effort, all of that felt ridiculous. He just started doing his best at what he could. He wanted to surpass the guys who cut themselves down. Perhaps it was then that his tone of speech became more casual, and his behavior became awkward, a symbol of a spiteful adolescent boy. He wanted to make a big counterattack after ridiculing those who only judged the outward appearances.

As a result, Baek In-ha became comfortable. Those who talked nonsense about his talent disappeared, and his ability began to advance at a phenomenal pace. Without any intervention, he grew freely. He stopped revealing himself so much on the outside, so it became difficult to know exactly how strong he was, but he was satisfied with his strength. He didn't compare himself to others but focused solely on strengthening himself. As he grew older, however, he slowly remembered his history and realized that what he knew was not everything in the world.

"In the future, behave more properly." That was why his grandfather... that was why the master of Baekyang, Baekjuin, directly called out to him.

"Think about what the guy who will be the master of Baekyang will look like to others."

"Yeah? Who?"

"You."

"The owner of Baekyang?"

"Yes, the guild master." Baekjuin declared so firmly.

"I've placed it in front of you. So do your best."

"No, why?" Baekjuin let out a laugh.

"I wonder if you're just pretending to be the prodigal son."

"Hey... ugh!"

"You will be Baekyang's face in the future. Fight and defeat all those who attack. If you don't have that kind of spirit, you can't sit here."

"No, Grandpa, so why..."

"You are the strongest among your relatives. Isn't that clear?" Baekjuin's eyes shone brightly.

"It's a lie to make them loyal when it is said it doesn't matter if they are outsiders."

"Thank you for being so mischievous... ah!"

“But they won’t notice. So, in fact, you must prove you have the abilities to be worthy of Baekyang’s master, starting now. Okay?”

“...So...”

“First, start with Shinyoung. Student Council President, you can do that much.”

“No, no...”

So, Baek In-ha formally became Baekyang’s successor. That was when he realized that no matter how much he hid it, there would be those who would recognize him. But, he didn’t think the way of life he chose was wrong. He thought it had gone well, as he had been able to meet a boy his age who couldn’t handle mana.

* * *

‘This...’ How many times had he become a bystander to Kang Shin-hyuk during a crisis? Baek In-ha was on the lookout for shadow elementals crawling around him in the surroundings filled with darkness.

‘He had even produced this bike...’ The reason he had borrowed the blue cow from Kang Shin-hyuk was that his magical power had been gradually falling. However, he could save his mana by using the blue cow to move around and then use his magic into attacking. With that, it would be possible to endure the situation. It was a great artifact; even now, it seemed as if it had its own ego that actively assisted him.

‘No doubt, it’s lending me the power of the wind to my attacks.’ He felt surprised by Kang Shin-hyuk’s development over half a year and couldn’t help but wonder how he had accumulated such extraordinary strength in that short amount of time. A bitter smile played on his lips at the thought.

‘When did I start comparing myself with the friend I made without a thought of it before...?’ Kang Shin-hyuk was a man without mana, yet he had entered Shinyoung confidently and had devoted himself to what he could do, despite what anyone around him said. Baek had felt a sense of unity in that, feeling that the two were essentially very similar. However, Kang Shin-hyuk couldn’t help but pay attention to others’ opinions and make an effort to improve without giving in, while Baek had stopped caring. With that, Shin-hyuk had taken a leap into an entirely new category of strength.

‘I could’ve taken it for granted until he became the Rookie King. Then... Shin Eun-hyuk...’

'It would've been a lie if he said he was just happy to see his friend grow faster than him. But what were those emotions, and where did they come from? It wasn't easy to admit, but in the end, Baek accepted he was no different from the others he laughed at. He was jealous of his friend, comparing himself to him. However, he had no intention of giving up and sitting down. The attitude Baek had throughout his life wouldn't change. He didn't care if Kang Shin-hyuk made a bike, shot threads, or even had a relationship with a red-haired beauty! Baek could proceed the only way he could.

'No, but how the hell did he end up with Claire...?'

-Myu!

"What are you saying, hedgehog?"

-Myu?!

He wouldn't accept those who imposed limits on themselves, not even if he did it. He clenched the handle of the bike he borrowed from his friend, his knuckles turning white.

"Do you think I'll be satisfied with only this much?"

-Myu!

He pulled down on the accelerator with one hand and held a dagger in the other, raising his mana up to the limit. If he could match the speed of this bike, he could prevent the elementals from approaching.

-Shaaaaa

-Kiiiiiii!

The sounds of the elementals rang out, but he remained vigilant. He knew their cries meant little; what he needed to focus on was their magic—negative mana, poisonous magic that would eat away at one's mana.

-Cuo...

The bike vibrated in response. He had no clue where it came from, but this artifact was

blowing out a magical wind to protect him. It pushed away the magic of the shadow elementals as it boosted Baek's power.

-Shaaaah!

Baek accelerated on the bike towards the shadow elements rising up from the floor. They let out a scream as the bike flattened them.

"Go away!"

-Kiaaaaak!

His magic power was concentrated at a single point at the tip of the dagger as it cut through even the shadow elementals far away from him.

'What...' The results that came out were much more impressive than the power he had used. Was it just an illusion? No, he confirmed it wasn't as he kept swinging the dagger.

'Is it this bike?!' He had heard of artifacts like this that enhanced their master's abilities, but he never imagined the change would be so dramatic. It was all thanks to the Shinfeng orb that powered it, but Baek In-ha had no idea. The traits of the blue cow matched very well with him, making them incredibly fast. It instantly recognized what was happening around them and created an efficient path to follow. They moved around an area with Hyeongju Ahn at the center, removing the shadow elements that encroached on them as they moved like lightning.

'No, it's actually sparking. Is it using wind and lightning?' The blue cow responded by releasing the magical power of the wind to amplify Baek. He immediately fell in love with the bike.

'If I ask Shinyuk to sell me one, would he?' Maybe it would be too hard to make something like this again. If so, he would have to engrave what this felt like in his mind—the flow of the wind and his own mana.

At some point, green mana began to rise up from his entire body. Hyeongju Ahn was unconscious, so he couldn't see it, but Onyx watched it with amazement.

* * *

-You have subdued one that is harmful to the order of things! Bonus based on membership level! You received 27,000,000HP! As a VIP bonus, you had received an additional amount of HP equivalent to 50% of the reward, for a total of 40,500,000HP!

It had been a satisfying meal. The amount of HP had been slightly higher than when he had killed the Poison Mist (SS+), as well. That probably meant this opponent was particularly tricky, but Kang Shin-hyuk had an ability that served as a hard counter to his foe.

-The Dark Spirit Pearl has absorbed darkness beyond its intake limit. It has been sealed until it is finished digesting.

“I believe in you, Dark Spirit Pearl.” Kang Shin-hyuk placed the pearl in his inventory as the gate erosion was lifted, and the natural night sky returned.

-The Irregular Gate has been cleared. The gate has been destroyed. Everything inside the gate will be discharged outside.

Soon, everyone would be bounced out. Kang Shin-hyuk used the air bubbles to land gently on the ground. He had grown comfortable using them during the fight. Ahead of him was Baek, his eyes closed as he rode atop the blue cow.

“What, did you burn through everything, Baek?” Hyeongju Ahn, as a bonus, was still knocked unconscious.

-Myu! Myu!

“Yes, you seem fine too. Good job, Onyx.” He grabbed onto Onyx, who had rushed him with some intent.

“Huh? What’s wrong?”

-Myuuu!

Onyx pushed against Shin-hyuk’s cheek to make him look at Baek.

“Baek In-ha? What’s going on?”

“Shinyuk...” Baek finally spoke up, gently opening his eyes that were now stained with emerald color.

“Lend me this bike.”

“No.”

“I’ll do anything, so lend it to me. Please, lend it to me!”

“I hate the idea of it...”

“Sir?”

In order to build a bright and compliant society full of dreams and hopes, Kang Shin-hyuk had decided to prepare a contract.

CHAPTER 173

PULLING THE ACCELERATOR (5)

The gate opened, revealing two boys and an unconscious man. Barricades had been erected around the gate (though they meant little if monsters started pouring out), and police monitored them.

“What happened? Emergency at the gate?!”

“We cleared the gate?” Baek In-ha raised his head and pointed back at the gate, which was gradually scattering behind them. The police became embarrassed as they looked at the man they were supporting.

“Yes?! Then, did Hyeongju Ahn do that...” Somehow, in their eyes, an emergency had occurred in the gate, and Hyeongju Ahn had been injured while saving his two trainees. Kang Shin-hyuk shrugged after exchanging a glance with Baek.

“I guess we didn’t do a proper job.”

“Somehow...” That evening, Kang Shin-hyuk and Baek In-ha made the headlines of the news. It was the first time since the artifact contest that he had appeared in his form of Kang Shin-hyuk instead of Shin Eun-hyuk. He was sitting on the sofa in the hospital, gazing up at the TV screen as he listened to the administrator’s explanation.

-There is an item called a soul contract. It is a terrifying artifact that can inflict serious penalties or even death if you try to break it. It is a product exclusively handled by the Hero Universe.

“It sounds more like black magic than anything else... I’ll buy one.”

-They are 30 million HP each.

“...” If it weren’t for killing the Sediment of Chaos, he wouldn’t have been able to afford it. Kang Shin-hyuk purchased it with his trembling hand. Fortunately, his VIP discount brought it to 22.5 million HP, but he still didn’t have enough money to buy another.

“Well... huh?” Hyeongju Ahn, who was lying in the patient’s bed, groaned and opened his eyes. He was quick to grasp where he was, his eyes bulging.

“You’re alive?! But... that terrible monster!”

“Mister, be quiet. If you talk too loudly, the Vanguard members outside will come in.” Hyeongju Ahn had returned from the gate in a battered state with traces of that filthy mana in his body, so not only Vanguard but also the entire Korean branch of the association had mobilized to investigate. Kang Shin-hyuk hadn’t known, but the demon that had caused it was known among superhumans. Rather, apparently, all of the main members of Jormungand were demons. Hague, the armored man who appeared in Paris, had mana similar to the Sediment of Chaos.

“Kang Shin-hyuk... you look fine.”

“Of course I am. The hospital isn’t sure, though.” Kang Shin-hyuk and Baek were trapped in the hospital out of a fear they might’ve been influenced by the mana. Baek had called Baekyang to give them a more comfortable ward, but Kang Shin-hyuk had stayed behind to wait for Hyeongju Ahn to wake up. Of course, that was to cover up what he had seen.

“Oh... oh! Right, Hongdae!” Hyeongju Ahn groaned and grabbed his head, recalling what had happened before he passed out.

“The gate was cleared.”

“What...?”

“Baek and I solved it.” Kang Shin-hyuk pointed to the TV. The news was about the S-class gate being cleared, which in itself wasn’t particularly newsworthy. The fact that a demon had been detected at the gate and one of Vanguard’s elite fighters had been incapacitated despite two students walking out fine had garnered attention. Hyeongju Ahn stiffened as he watched the screen, no doubt feeling humiliated. Kang Shin-hyuk patted his shoulder and handed him the contract.

“Anyway, so I don’t need to worry about you, sign here.”

“A contract? What... ah.” Hyeongju Ahn stopped himself from moving instinctively, sensing the enormous magic of the soul contract.

“Don’t reveal your identity... what is this about artifacts?”

“I’ll sell armaments to Vanguard through you. That way, you will also accumulate some standing.”

“Armaments, what do you... ah, I see.” Hyeongju Ahn belatedly recalled that Kang Shin-hyuk had won the artifact contest.

“...Did you make all the weapons you used today?”

“Would you like to check them out?” Kang Shin-hyuk took off one of the gloves he was wearing and showed it to Hyeongju Ahn. He didn’t have the emotion skill, so he couldn’t check the details himself, only the information Kang Shin-hyuk deliberately released... that was to confirm that he was indeed the craftsman.

“Nonsense. How old are you?!”

“I made it with my senior. With these kinds of trading conditions, it should be sufficient for not revealing my identity.”

“I didn’t intend on it from the beginning. The Thunder Empress has been in charge of your information for the association...” The associations didn’t know his true identity, but Shin Eunah, the one who managed his information, wouldn’t forgive someone who spreads it. Kang Shin-hyuk smiled at the thought and handed him the contract once more.

“So let’s prevent such a situation. Now, sign. Quickly.”

“It looks like a pretty good artifact... is there a reason you’re hiding your identity?”

“If I get caught, I won’t be able to move freely as Shin Eun-hyuk. I plan on revealing it after I graduate.”

“You seem to be after only the good parts of being a high-ranker. Well... alright.” Hyeongju Ahn signed the contract with a slight frown as he could feel its power bind him.

“I originally planned for this to be a temporary job, but now I feel like we’ll be seeing each other in the future.” Kang Shin-hyuk had intended this from the start, through trading with Vanguard. Wouldn’t it be convenient if he had someone on Vanguard’s side to support him?

“In the future, my skills will improve.”

“Aren’t you two already good enough?! I can’t figure out how the hell you were fine against that demon!” Hyeongju Ahn quickly shook off his depression, raising his voice energetically.

“How can I... can it be possible to be so strong?”

“It’s partially luck, but also a lot of effort.”

“I see.”

“There’s no way to become strong just by studying or reviewing preparations.” Kang Shin-hyuk was confident he wouldn’t lose to anyone when it came to effort, but he acknowledged it wasn’t solely through his effort he had grown so fast.

“Luck and talent aren’t something you can force, so try your best.”

“Hmm...”

“I can also make you a weapon one day.”

“Really?!” Hyeongju Ahn was convinced that if he had an artifact half as good as Soul Connection, his ability would increase significantly.

“It won’t be free, but I’ll sell it for cheap. Wear it and show it off to the Vanguard people.” If he wanted to sell his armaments for a good price, he would need to prove they were worth it. Of course, he had Lee Manwoo to back him up in that regard, but he had already been considering establishing his own connections as well.

“Cheap... how much is it?”

“First, let’s see what you can pay, because I’ll decide what to make based on the budget.” Having finished what he came to do, Kang Shin-hyuk pressed the call button and stood up. Opening the door and stepping out into the hallway, he saw a nurse walking fast towards the room. She was followed by Vanguard’s members, one of whom was a girl who seemed a little younger than him. She wore Vanguard’s coat and had a creepily neat appearance.

-Member?

'Why do you get worried every time I see a woman these days?'

-70,000HP bonus!

'Look at that...' Of course, he thought she was pretty, but that wasn't what had caught his attention. Her hair and eyes were bluish indigo. Her skin was white, and she looked Korean. Claire's own eyes and hair had been dyed red when she awakened, so this must've been a similar case.

-She's a talented fox...

'She hasn't said a thing yet, but she's already a fox?'

"Kang Shin-hyuk." Shin-hyuk was planning on pretending to ignore them, but the man at the head grabbed him. It was Lim Hoon. Considering he was in his thirties, it was an unconventional greeting, but Lim Hoon was one of Vanguard's strongest members.

"Long time no see."

"Hello."

"I see Shinyoung had made a good bet with you."

"It's thanks to Mr. Hyeongju Ahn, who protected us." Kang Shin-hyuk had no reason not to push Hyeongju up now that he was his contact with Vanguard. Lim Hoon continued to look at him seriously as if he were considering something.

"When we met before, I mentioned the contract would have to be revised next we met... I thought that would happen in about two more years."

"Oh, did you bring a contract?"

"I'm ready, but I don't think you'll take it."

"Yes. So, when I graduate, let's talk once more."

"Haha, so there's still a chance." Lim Hoon had a nervous smile on his face, but then he pulled the girl who stood behind him up suddenly.

"This is the next prospect of our guild, Hye-na."

"I'll go in first." The girl looked at Kang Shin-hyuk with an unpleasant expression before passing him to enter the hospital room.

-A woman has appeared with a high probability of falling in love with this member. It would be better to handle her now.

'Where do you get your information from? We need to talk about your hobbies one of these days.' The sight of Kang Shin-hyuk speaking to the administrator was a bit of a shock for the others to see, but Lim Hoon was quick to take action.

"I apologize. She is still young..."

"It's alright, I don't mind."

"Hye-na is a swordsman, like yourself." Kang Shin-hyuk handled all weapons well, but since he used swords the most on the official stage, there were rumors his trait had to do with swordsmanship.

"She does have a sword on her back." A blue greatsword hung behind her black coat.

"She is the daughter of the guild master. She learned kendo directly from her father."

"..." Kang Shin-hyuk, who had killed Vanguard's former guild master in his Shin Eun-hyuk form, went quiet.

"That... take good care of her. That child will enroll in the knight department of Shinyoung next year."

"Yeah, I'll make sure to keep an eye out for her."

"Thank you." Lim Hoon smiled before leading the other guild members into the hospital room.

-It's obvious that later she will rush to kill the person who killed her father. Kill her now.

"Well, it's fine for now." Kang Shin-hyuk headed off to the private room where Baek In-ha was waiting.

CHAPTER 174

PULLING THE ACCELERATOR (6)

Klang! Klang! Klang!

As usual, the sound of a hammer rang out in the narrow workshop.

Klang! Klang! Klang!

The blacksmith forgot the time passing by as he hammered the metal.

Klang! Klang! Klang!

No, had he forgotten?

-Janus's whisper: Grandpa, can we talk a little seriously?

-You? It's already funny.

However, on that day, his new friend threw a small stone into that regular routine.

-Janus's whisper: If you armed yourself with the armaments you made, would you have been able to fight as much as you like in that world?

Klaaang!

A little too much power was put into the hammer. The blacksmith looked down at his ruined work with regret, letting out a sigh as he tossed it into the furnace.

-You ruined an object because of your talking.

Even if it was ruined, it was still already a complete artifact. The blacksmith supposed he could melt it down to create another artifact that could properly utilize its ability.

-Janus's whisper: Do you think I believe grandpa could ruin anything? I could go out and recover a whole city with whatever it is.

-A city?

-Janus's whisper: Next up would be the world.

-The world? Nothing is left.

The blacksmith turned his attention to creating a new alloy by adding various materials to the melted artifact. They mixed in harmony according to his will.

-Janus's whisper: Not at all. You're a member of the Hero Universe.

-What is left, then?

-Janus's whisper: What's left? The whole world remains.

-Not intact.

-Janus's whisper: Huh?

-But what's left intact?

The metals mixed together into one, forming an alloy that gave off a brilliant light. The blacksmith pulled it out and cooled it into an ingot with a gloomy expression.

-Why don't I leave it to you to save the world?

-Janus's whisper: Yes...

-Janus's whisper: Yes. Please leave it to me, grandpa.

The blacksmith got back to work with his hammer.

Klang! Klang! Klang!

In that narrow workshop, there was only the sound of a hammer ringing out.

-Janus's whisper: Even if you don't like it, I'll save you all.

-I'll look forward to it.

But in the end, that dear friend couldn't save the blacksmith.

* * *

-You received 2 roulette coins as today's log in bonus!

The morning after the third liberation, the usual phrase welcomed Kang Shin-hyuk as he lay in a hospital bed. However, this time was a bit different. Now there were two roulette coins. Now he couldn't help but look forward to what rewards awaited him after he completely regained VIP privileges.

'I had five from before... so seven in total now.' Of course, now that he heard of the improved roulette that could be played with twenty coins, he had no intention of running the ordinary roulette. The administrator had made it clear it could unlock new functions of the Hero Universe.

'Whoo... I've gotten a bit used to the feeling of recovering memories.' He was beginning to pull out the deeper memories that his previous life had hidden away as a result of the third liberation. He was naturally accepting those dark memories. It felt like he was being forced to become an adult. Kang Shin-hyuk began to change his clothes and think instead about what sort of beam weapon he should make when someone knocked on the door. Quickly putting on his pants and shirt before opening the door, he was greeted by the form of Shin Eunah.

-Cheh.

"Senior Eunah?"

"Good morning."

"What happened...?"

"I came to get you out. It seems there is still a bit of an upset from yesterday." That was all due to yesterday's report. One Vanguard guild member and two students had gone into a gate together, yet the two students had returned fine despite the Vanguard member being injured. Kang Shin-hyuk and Baek In-ha had been confined to the hospital out of a concern that they were influenced by that contaminated mana, but it was also to help them avoid excessive media exposure. Shin Eunah, who had become aware of the situation the following day, had arrived to rescue Kang Shin-hyuk on behalf of the association.

“Yes, let’s go. Come on, I’m going to use movement magic.”

“What about Baek?”

“Baekyang will take care of their own.” Kang Shin-hyuk quickly gave up on bringing Baek along and instead sent him a brief text message of [I went ahead of you.] and put away his phone. His phone began to vibrate immediately after, but he ignored it and looked back at Shin Eunah.

“I can go to school then, right?”

“It’s not a school day.”

“Oh, I see.” Since the era of the great gate had come, Shinyoung was forced to change its education policy for the time being. Two days of the week were focused on theory classes, and the remaining three were dedicated to gate practice. It was like they were forcing the students to act as real superhumans, but it was an undeniably great opportunity to grow both in skill and financially (as they were offered compensation in return for going into the gates).

“Then the other students will be practicing now.”

“Yes, but your team is now inactive.” It was too difficult for them to move now, given that Hyeongju Ahn had been incapacitated. No doubt, it would be the same for the rest of the week.

“I see.”

“So, go on a date with me.” He wanted to respond, but she smiled and motioned with her hand. At the next moment, they were in Claire’s bar.

“Ah, you came sooner than I thought you would.”

“Claire?”

“Hi, Shin-hyuk.” Claire was wearing a long coat over her normal clothes, very clearly a combat artifact of some sort.

“Where are you going to fight...?”

“I’m a high-ranker, there’re a lot of things I have to manage in Korea.”

“It’s the same as it was in the United States. I had a schedule today.”

“Today?!”

“What’s so surprising?” Shin Eunah hadn’t just used her magic to bring them to the bar from the hospital; it sounded like she had been moving all around the world.

“It used to be impossible, but now it’s easy enough to make a few round trips.”

“You’ve completely become a moving piece of artillery...”

“She is number one in the international ranking.” Kang Shin-hyuk could feel the difference between them just by being near her.

“I brought Claire because she wanted to see her junior before leaving. Even though I never saw you since we got back.”

“Yes, I missed you.”

“I’m the same, I missed you too.” The part where Shin Eunah tried to turn it to herself was ignored. She was busy making her own appeal, so she didn’t notice the subtle atmosphere between Shin-hyuk and Claire.

“If we couldn’t meet today, we wouldn’t be able to for a week, so I pushed myself a little.”

“I’m glad I didn’t miss it.” The two were talking as usual but subtly avoiding each other’s gaze. They seemed to be overly unconscious of each other, though neither realized it.

‘I kissed him impulsively, but he’s still a minor. The limiter shouldn’t be released... no, I feel like I want to kiss him again when I see his face.’ It would be dangerous to do that with Kang Shin-hyuk. Claire truly believed that. On the other hand, Kang Shin-hyuk felt embarrassed when he saw her, but he was regaining his composure.

“I’ll prepare a present for you.”

“A present?”

“You’ll be surprised.” Kang Shin-hyuk let out a laugh, and Claire began to feel a bit more comfortable. Yes, if the limiter was released, that was fine. It wouldn’t be a crime.

“I’ll look forward to it.”

“Please do.” Fortunately, Shin-hyuk and Shin Eunah didn’t notice her thoughts.

“A gift?”

“Of course, I’ll prepare one for senior Eunah as well.” Kang Shin-hyuk responded naturally to Shin Eunah but made sure to wink at Claire.

“Gift... a gift from my junior...!”

“Yes. Then, let’s go quickly.” Claire laughed and began to urge Shin Eunah. She turned back as if she remembered something suddenly, however.

“Oh, right. I’ll leave the store to you today.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Isn’t it a bother to head back to school anyway? You can just crash here or even do business if you’re bored.”

“Leaving the bar to a minor...”

“Minor? Isn’t Shin Eun-hyuk an adult?” Claire laughed and began pushing Shin Eunah again.

“I’ll be back.”

“Be safe.” Shin-hyuk said farewell and made sure to give Shin Eunah a hug before they left. Shin Eunah ascended to heaven, but eventually, Claire pulled her back down to earth. With a flick of her finger, the two vanished.

“...Did they really go to America?” Kang Shin-hyuk, now alone, let out a deep sigh as he glanced around the bar where he would stay alone. Claire had always been here before, and Shin Eunah would also stop by.

-Member.

The administrator spoke up as he changed into his uniform.

“Yeah?”

-It felt like a man who was cheating in front of his wife.

“...” Kang Shin-hyuk remained silent as the administrator accused him.

-I need to be honest.

“Eunah... Eunah is a child who needs mental care. Even though she is an adult on the outside, mentally, she’s still a child. It seems to be getting better these days, but...”

-You are unexpectedly calm in judging her.

“Because I’ve been watching her for a long time.” It felt like Anvil was in his words.

“Claire and I are the ones closest to Eunah. However, if we start a relationship in the current situation, Eunah will feel alienated.”

-It won’t just be a feeling of alienation.

“You know too?!”

-Still, it would be better not to give her too much.

The administrator responded coldly.

-That fox is already dreaming of a beautiful house with a garden on a hill, raising three children, and a dog with you.

“...” That was too heavy. He wanted to deny it, but it was too believable with Shin Eunah’s actions lately.

-There is a special band provided by the Hero Universe. Would you like to purchase it?

“No... please put it in the shopping cart first.”

-You remembered the shopping cart function! 30,000HP bonus!

“Thank you for these tears.”

The bar’s sales that day were a huge success, thanks to his new fame after claiming the fifth ranking internationally.

Unfortunately, plenty of rumors had also spread about the supposed relationship between Claire and Shin Eun-hyuk.

CHAPTER 175

NEW DIMENSION QUEST (1)

-You received a speed buff as today's log in bonus! All movements will be 30% faster for the next 24 hours!

On Friday morning, Kang Shin-hyuk washed up and ate as soon as he got up about 30% faster. He decided to eat his breakfast alone in his room to avoid what would happen if he went out in public.

'In Paris, I was caught in an SS-class gate, but they don't know I was active then.' Even Baek, who hadn't been disguised, was just counted among the countless other superhumans who had fought back. Now that they had conquered an S-class gate, however, attention would undoubtedly be on them, especially after one of Vanguard's elite superhumans had been defeated.

'Then what to do? I could continue working.' He tried to text Lee Na-hee, but the answer she sent in return was [Save me], so he closed the screen. Of course, when she learned that her text had been read, she quickly sent more.

[Senior Na-hee: I asked you to save me!]

[Thank you for your efforts in practice.]

[Senior Na-hee: Should I say the same to you?]

[Ah...]

Kang Shin-hyuk stowed the vibrating phone away. Anyway, working with Na-hee wasn't an option for now. That hadn't been a problem since he had been thinking of working on a gift for Claire and Shin Eunah.

"I just need to work a little more." He had gone into his My Room for the rest of the evening after closing down the bar to work on forging. It was the best way to calm his mind.

'Let's make it a series. The numbering of the series... I need to be careful.' The gift for the two was the same thing, but he was trying to make Shin Eunah's gift after Claire's. Rather, they were similar to what he had made with Na-hee before, so they were two and three in the series rather than one and two.

'Let's make something for Eleanor while I'm at it.' Since they would be acting together in the future, it wouldn't be a bad thing for them to have. Perhaps it could be a mark of being a part of the team Masked Bacchus. Perhaps he should make one for Baek while he was at it.

"Then, let's get started!" He entered his My Room. Thanks to the adjustment of the time ratio to 1 to 3, it was possible to benefit from working here rather than performing dimensional quests. The scene inside the room hadn't changed much, however, as he hadn't completed many dimensional quests. An anvil and furnace had been set up, though, so it was enough.

"Light it up." His heart calmed down as soon as he saw the blazing fire. It felt more familiar than it had before, now that he had learned Light Mastery. He also wanted to get Fire Mastery. Kang Shin-hyuk got to work in earnest with such useless thoughts.

-You are an artisan in the field of precision parts manufacturing. There are many delicate parts, but you're skilled at making them.

"Since I made all those modifications to the blue cow, I'm more comfortable making things like this now." Retrieving the memories of his previous life meant retrieving the memories of that hardworking craftsman who had done little else other than blacksmith work other than eating and sleeping. Kang Shin-hyuk felt no fatigue despite making delicate mechanical parts that allowed for no deviation or error.

'But it's not just simple labor. Each will be given different traits.' The base material for it all was the same dwarf nails. Blue alloy leftover from the blue cow was used, as well as the thorns and wasp stings left behind after making the previous alloy. He thought of Claire as he made hers, adding special features to his work just for her to use. For Shin Eunah's, he focused on making it sincerely. He added to it fragments of the shadow elemental and bits of the blue alloy.

"It will need mana to complete, so it's fine to stop at this stage. Na-hee can enchant it."

-You're working very fast.

“I had already made most of the molds... how much time do I have left? About five hours.” It had been a tremendous amount of work, but the 30% speed buff had helped him get through it quickly. He would need Lee Na-hee to enchant it, so he decided to do some work on his own.

‘Okay, enough materials... no, is it too much? I don’t know...’ He added fragments of the shadow elements and the core left behind by the Sediment of Chaos to the first item. He was worried he might’ve used a gemstone of too high a rank, but it couldn’t be helped.

“Okay, I think it’ll be fine.”

-You are now a superhuman of SS-rank based on the Gaia system.

“I can’t believe it, but it’s true.” Strictly speaking, his abilities were still lacking. His strength had reached SS-rank, but his agility and stamina were still only at S+ rank. However, his spiritual power and Golden Dragon went a long way to raise his status. He had also learned skills of high rarity like Soul Poison and Light Mastery.

-The SS-rank will be another stepping stone for you.

“Haha, maybe.” Anyway, now he was convinced he could handle what he had just made and immediately started work on the second piece. Here, he used the blue metal that remained and the wing bracelet from the wasp queen, which he hadn’t been using these days. He decided it would be better as a material rather than as it was.

-You’re going to make something using an artifact that’s already considered a finished product?

“Yeah. I think it’s possible now.” According to the memories of Anvil from the day before, it was possible at his current level. The administrator remained silent for a long moment before responding.

-10HP bonus.

“Thank you.” For some reason, that 10HP bonus felt more impressive than the huge ones Shin-hyuk had been receiving lately. He felt like he knew why and smiled bitterly. He didn’t respond, however, and devoted himself to his work. The ingredients and queen wasp’s wing bracelet were melted down into an alloy, mixed together with his Golden Dragon. He didn’t know how long he spent there, but, fortunately, he finished

his work before he was kicked out of his My Room.

-Using a high-quality artifact as a material, you have created an alloy with a special purpose! This metal, which vibrates under the influence of the wind, has great potential.

-However, because it is a special metal, it may be counterproductive if you fail to make it into a proper object. Metallurgy skill proficiency has greatly increased.

It was an odd bluish metal. If Kang Shin-hyuk gave it a name, it could become a very famous alloy. Of course, he intended to use it up, so there was no need for that.

-Member, what is the purpose of this alloy?

“You didn’t notice? After you recommended it to me like that.”

-I did? What the hell... oh, maybe.

The administrator tried to guess what it was. Yes, it was what he had recommended. Kang Shin-hyuk was going to create a beam weapon.

‘From the moment I got Light Mastery...’ A theory had formed in his head about the destructive power of magical light. However, his skill proficiency and the materials he used had obvious limitations. So, while thinking, he had thought about what might happen if he used an already completed artifact.

“This alloy was born from that.”

-Amazing...

The alloy was a magical metal that allowed you to control vibrations with the force of the wind. Whether light was a particle or a wave had been studied intensively by countless people for ages, but in the end, it was concluded it had properties of both. However, it was clear that the aggressive light created by his skill had a wave-like nature that could be reinforced and compressed by external vibrations.

-I thought you would create an artifact that had the power of wind and lightning...

“That’s too simple. It’s not like the artifact I’ll make for Baek.”

-You don't even mind denying your own work in order to reach your goals. 50,000HP bonus!

In addition to confining the power of the light, the vibration added would increase its control and power. If he was successful, the results would be incredible.

"Hmm, then..." He had limited materials, so there could be no mistakes. He went to work very carefully.

Functionally 29 hours later (given the time ratio with Earth), Kang Shin-hyuk let out a sigh of relief after finishing his work for the day. His spiritual power and Golden Dragon had almost hit bottom, showing how much energy he had put into his work.

"How is it?"

-Completing all of these will increase the rank of your metallurgy.

"I think so too." It had been an improvised idea, but the result was pretty good.

"Then, I have to head back and practice martial arts."

-Member, I'm sorry, but a dimensional quest request has arrived.

"A request?"

Kang Shin-hyuk was about to end the day with physical training, but the administrator's message stopped him in his tracks.

-It is a dimensional quest in Kieron.

A familiar name then popped up.

CHAPTER 176

NEW DIMENSION QUEST (2)

Kieron. That was the world where Kang Shin-hyuk had conducted his first-dimensional quest.

“A new one occurred? But the Heroic Shield was collected...”

-Because it is a world where records of your actions remain, you have been given the first chance to interfere with the problems occurring.

“Problem...?”

-What you think is right. It is Jormungand. If help is requested from the Hero Universe, there is a 100% chance they are involved.

Kang Shin-hyuk wondered if it might be related to the Ouroboros unit of Jormungand. While he was considering some silly things, the administrator continued.

-Of course, there are no traces of you left in that world anymore. If you wish to decline, there is no problem with it.

“What do you think, administrator?”

-A bonus of 70,000HP to members who respect the administrator’s opinion!

The administrator could hardly let a day pass by without giving out some HP bonus.

-Kieron belongs to a lower level than earth. Even when you first received the dimensional quest, virtually nothing was dangerous to you.

The huge monster at the end had been the exception, but he could’ve avoided it if he had wanted to. In fact, it had felt more like a bonus problem he faced after completing the main task. Thanks to that, though, his traits had evolved.

-It is the same now. Although there have been many changes in Kieron, they are very

weak compared to the changes you have undergone.

“So I’m not in danger there.” Another world where he could play in comfort. It was cruel to the people of that world, but it was a world of a lower standard of force than earth. Even the strongest person in the world there wasn’t much better than Kang Shin-hyuk had been when he just awakened. So what about him now? He would have to restrain himself in order not to hurt people.

-That’s right. If you exert excessive power that doesn’t match that dimension, Jormungand may send a suitable enemy to face you, so you need to be careful in wielding your force.

It was the first time that such a restriction was given, but Kang Shin-hyuk was interested.

-On the other hand, what you can get is similar to before. That is time. The time ratio has soared once more to 1:15 now with the earth.

“What the hell is it about that ratio?”

-It is from the monster that had appeared. If it were a natural mutation, it wouldn’t cause a cataclysmic change, but this isn’t natural.

Yes, he had expected that such a guy would appear.

-What will you do? It is a dimensional quest that indirectly helps to defeat danger while defending humanity as it survives and rebuilds. There will be no real battle, but your metallurgy will be important.

“Sure, that’s good enough. Let’s go.” Shin-hyuk had little hesitation. Right now, it was around six o’clock on a Friday evening, and Claire and Shin Eunah would be gone the whole weekend on their business trip. With the time ratio, he could be there for a month and a half before he needed to head back. Time had always been one of the resources he needed more of. He also wanted to check out his new skills and make items to sell on the trading board.

“If only I heard this yesterday or even this morning.”

-Dimensional quests don’t occur every time, after all.

“It can’t be helped. I’ll go right away. Oh, wait.” Didn’t he decide to work with Lee Na-hee this weekend? He sent her a quick text that something came up over the weekend.

[Senior Nahee: Ah.]

[Senior Nahee: Oh, seriously?]

[I’m sorry.]

[Senior Nahee: My weapon was to be completed.]

[If it’s okay, we could do it Monday?]

[Senior Nahee: I won’t sleep until it’s finished.]

[Okay.]

[Senior Nahee: If it’s okay, then look at me.]

[Senior Nahee: (Emoji where a cat makes a heart with its tail)]

-Kill.

“It’s just an emoticon!” For a teenager, being sent a heart emoji from a girl your age was enough to set off all sorts of delusions. Most likely, it didn’t mean anything; it was just a way to end the conversation. Although, there were cases where they might complain later about the missed signals. It was like Schrodinger’s heart emoji, as it possessed two contradictory results that wouldn’t be known until directly confirmed...

-Go to Kieron.

Kang Shin-hyuk finally moved to Kieron after a long time of worrying about the administrator and Lee Na-hee. As his eyes opened, he could see a rather large number of humans. It was the race of humans in Kieron.

“Block them! If they get past, Her Majesty will be in danger!”

“Prepare your javelins! Fire!”

“Eat javelin, you monster!” Dozens of javelins flew over the wall the humans were on,

filling Kang Shin-hyuk with a strange sense of longing. He realized it was because they were weapons he made.

-Kyaaaah!

-Keeehok!

As Kang Shin-hyuk quickly moved to avoid the spears, the weapons lodged into the ground and caused screams to ring out. There didn't appear to be anything there, but Kang Shin-hyuk remembered the monster that had been here before.

-Quoooh!

'It's coming up.' Several monsters, exactly like the one he faced before, began to reveal their true appearance. They had been disguised as rocks and debris, even piles of dirt, but now they had javelins sticking out of them.

"Fire the arrows!"

"We have to kill them and retrieve the javelins!"

"The swordsman unit is moving forward! Stab them through the barrier!" The scene was very hectic, which is why none of them seemed to notice Kang Shin-hyuk appeared right in the midst of it. But was that really enough for them not to notice him?

-Myu?

"Was it because of you?" Since Onyx had been given free rein of the garbage warehouse, he had become more active. He had activated hiding as a habit, using [Synchronization] to hide Kang Shin-hyuk as well.

"Good job, Onyx."

-Myuuuuu!

"Did you feel the dimensional shift in the garbage warehouse?"

-Myu!

Rarely, Kang Shin-hyuk would be able to interpret Onyx's intentions successfully.

“Then, this situation... uh, what should I do...?” Thanks to Onyx, Shin-hyuk was able to take a step back and judge the situation calmly.

-It is a mutation. Originally, these are creatures that wait for their prey and hide. However, they have become impatient as humans followed the excellent fox’s guidance to regain their safe dwellings and a stable food supply with those javelins you left behind.

“Did you just say fox so naturally?”

-And when the world began to stabilize, and the possibilities of new life began to sprout, Jormungand noticed it. They were unable to intervene for the same reasons as you actively, but they had another possibility.

“That’s mutating this monster.”

-A 30,000HP bonus for members whose intelligence overflows!

Maybe the administrator shouldn’t be in charge of quiz questions.

-Thus, the entire race of them mutated. Complete stealth was possible, even disguising themselves as objects, and they even became faster.”

“I see.” The battle in front of them was fierce. Although they were smaller versions of that giant one they had fought before, their attack was threatening as they quickly moved their sharp front paws.

‘No direct intervention but... at this rate, they’ll be pushed back.’ He felt guilty standing by and doing nothing. If he did that, then there was no point in coming here. If so, how far could he interfere...

-If you don’t use your own weapon to kill enemies, it’s okay.

The administrator replied as if he had read his mind. He laughed with relief, now aware of what kind of help he could give. With Onyx’s assistance, he approached the barrier stealthily and laid his hands on it. Then, he activated his trait with all his power.

“What?!”

“The barrier is shining golden!” He gave the barrier the power of a dragon. The change

wasn't all that dramatic, however.

'The barrier itself isn't very strong. My trait is stronger than the target, so the amplification is limited...' Despite that, it was enough. The barrier that had seemed like it might buckle at any moment was still standing strong against the monsters' rampage.

"It's a blessing!"

"God has blessed us!"

"God is looking down upon us. We can beat them!" Why did they quickly rely on faith? Kang Shin-hyuk let out a sigh, recalling something similar that had happened before. However, he answered them by activating his trait again to strengthen each human and weapon within his reach.

"Is this really alright? There's no problem?"

-Of course. Your trait of remotely interfering with other people's origins is perfect for dimensional quests.

The administrator admired Kang Shin-hyuk anew. The war situation had been completely reversed just by him activating his trait twice.

"God has heard our prayers and gave us strength!"

"Now, let's kill them! Javelin troops!"

"Fire!" Their bodies dyed with a subtle golden hue; the soldiers threw their javelins with all their might. The golden-stained spears rained down upon the monsters.

-Kyaaaaah!

-Kiiiek!

-Kiiii!

The symphony of monster screams rang out as the swordsman troops tore through their hard shells with weapons stained golden.

"My whole body is full of strength!"

“Ooooh!” The soldiers rallied to wipe out the monsters, a completely different image than before. The battle, which would’ve lasted a few hours, was cleaned up in just five minutes.

“Oh, huh...”

“My strength...” After the battle was over, Kang Shin-hyuk let his power flow out of them. It would be too much to think it had been a permanent blessing.

“We won.”

“Is it all over? Really?”

“Yeah, at least this battle.” The soldiers collapsed on the ground, not even thinking of recovering their weapons.

“Whoo...”

“Well?” Kang Shin-hyuk let out a sigh of relief upon seeing the situation ended without any sacrifices. But, at that moment, one soldier turned his head towards him.

“Hey!”

“Huh?” His eyes clearly met Shin-hyuk’s beyond the barrier. He had been one of the soldiers he met before.

“Ooh!”

“God’s Apostle!”

“No way, the apostle is back!”

“Eh?” Stealth shouldn’t have canceled out just because he sighed; how was he caught? Kang Shin-hyuk turned to look at Onyx on his shoulder but noticed he was no longer there.

-Myuuuu!

The guy was on the ground, gnawing at the legs of the dead monsters. Kang Shin-hyuk felt a sigh forming in his very soul.

“How could it be?!”

“We thought that God had abandoned us...”

“He came again!”

-Myuuuuu!

Onyx was, undoubtedly, a gluttonous pig.

CHAPTER 177

NEW DIMENSION QUEST (3)

“It’s been a while, Anvil.” One of the soldiers recognized Kang Shin-hyuk, so the process was expedited. He was guided directly to the queen without the need to explain his existence.

“Who are you?”

“It’s Milia.” Kang Shin-hyuk faced a woman who called him by his Hero Universe ID and made a confused expression. She replied with a sigh as if she found his response ridiculous.

“No way, are you really Milia...?”

“Yes.” Her face was slightly wrinkled, but it was impossible for him not to recognize her. She had been wearing a helmet during the quest previously, but she had removed the helmet at the head to reveal she was a woman. But what about now? She was still wearing a similar set of armor, but she had become a bit taller, and the mood around her had matured much like the rest of her. Brilliant blonde hair cascaded down over her shoulders, and two deep blue eyes stared at him. He had thought she was pretty before, but now an aristocratic atmosphere had added itself to her, making her presence even more overwhelming.

“You definitely look like Milia...”

“Seven years have passed.” Queen Milia casually tossed that out. She was staring at him with her chin atop her hand. She looked almost like a painting.

“After you sowed the seeds of hope in us and disappeared, that was the time it took for us to barely sprout. Isn’t it unreasonable to think we won’t change?”

“There seems to be some room for misunderstanding with that expression!” At the same time, it sounded like she was expressing gratitude; it also sounded like she was blaming him. There also was some room in there for some strange interpretations! The soldiers who had guided him in were staring at him too. She finally broke her

stony expression and smiled at Kang Shin-hyuk's displeasure.

"It's a joke. I just wanted to be a little grumpy with you, who showed up as we were suffering."

"You've improved your speaking skills after becoming a queen."

"Seven years have passed. That's enough time for an unassuming girl to become a shameless queen." It had only been a little over half a year for him, but the time ratio was 1:15. The soldiers he had met before did seem a little older, so it didn't take long for Shin-hyuk to be convinced seven years had passed. They had aged well, all things considered.

"How long has passed in your world?"

"About half a year."

"Half a year? I thought it would be more than that." Milia laughed and beckoned for the soldiers to retire. When only the two of them were left, she seemed a bit more comfortable.

"Did you know the situation? Are you here to help us once more? There shouldn't be any more items for you here."

"I didn't come for anything. It's true I'm here to help you, though, so ask me for anything you can. I can't directly join the battle, however."

"I see... but still." Milia stood up from the throne and descended the steps to be on the same level as Kang Shin-hyuk.

"I heard you were a great help to my soldiers."

"I just temporarily strengthened them." Of course, it was only a temporary buff. If they wanted to survive in this land, they shouldn't be satisfied with such passive help.

"The battle is getting fierce. Had the soldiers collapsed there, they might have abandoned the palace."

"This castle is part of the Ord kingdom..." He had felt it the moment he entered. It wasn't something that could be built within a few years. Besides, had it been new, it

wouldn't be collapsing in places.

"Is there any reason to insist on this place? The wall seems to have been collapsing."

"The power of the water orb is stronger here in Ord." Ah, there was such a thing. Kang Shin-hyuk nodded, recalling why Milia had led the soldiers under the name of Milan against the survival alliance half a year ago.

"...I'll show you." Milia seemed hesitant but quickly made up her mind and began to lead him. She opened the door behind the room into a long corridor. Surprisingly, Kang Shin-hyuk was able to detect dark magic running through it.

"Only the royal family can enter. Or their companions."

"What a great barrier." Kang Shin-hyuk felt that he could interpret and neutralize the core of this barrier with his spiritual power, but he was smart enough not to say so out loud. Milia was proudly spreading her shoulders as she spoke.

"The first barriers were established by my ancestors, and descendants have strengthened them over the generations. Thanks to that, this corridor was able to survive."

"It would've been better if it was over the planet."

"If it was, the kingdom would've fallen before the world was destroyed." Milia laughed and proceeded down the hall. They walked for about three minutes when the space around them suddenly expanded. They were in a room with a clean magic circle drawn on the floor, and not a single exit could be found.

"Fountain?"

"Yes." A small fountain was prepared above the magic circle. Clean water sprung up and fell back down from it as the fountain maintained the same amount of water, but it wasn't just circulating it. A clear blue marble floated in the center of the fountain, water springing from it. There was probably a water pipe under the fountain that the generated water was flowing through.

"Is the water produced here supplied to the entire kingdom?"

"The entire kingdom would be a bit of an exaggeration. Survivors have been gathering

here for seven years, but we are only about 50,000 in number. The amount of water that can be produced by the orb is far more limited.”

“It’s still ridiculous, isn’t it?”

“Right.” Milia looked at the orb of water with faint pride.

“When the first kingdom collapsed, I didn’t even dare think of enduring in this royal city. We ran with the forces he had. The amount of water that can be produced with the help of the magic circle is only enough for about 3,000 people. When we ran away, we had less than 2,000, so I thought that would be enough...”

“But, it’s not?”

“Yes, Anvil.” Milia responded firmly and turned to look straight at Kang Shin-hyuk.

“I need your help. We can’t withdraw from the castle now. You must defend this place. I’ll do anything to help, and give you whatever I can.” Kang Shin-hyuk was interested in the water orb, but there was no meaning in protecting the castle if he took it. Besides, his purpose wasn’t to steal rewards from them, so in the end, he just nodded. However, Milia bit her lip, seeing his expression.

“If you want, even my body...”

“No, that’s fine.”

“That immediate answer bothers me! Thank you for the answer itself, but I really don’t like the speed of that reaction!” Kang Shin-hyuk could feel the irrationality of the world as Milia stared at him.

“I’m not going to make up any nonsense about telling you to cherish your body, but before taking the last resort, think about whether there is a suggestion more tailored to the needs of the customer.”

“I am not a woman who would show off to anyone. What if I need your help so much, but there are no treasures left in this kingdom?” It seemed like she just said her own body was a treasure. Of course, a beauty like her couldn’t be argued with.

“It doesn’t matter if it’s not a treasure, so think about it. Do you have something like Brenite?” Brenite was the magic metal produced in Kieron. Magical metals were

precious resources, no matter how simple their properties. It often had a high price point, even on the Hero Universe.

'Moreover, it's at least a middle-ranked metal too. My skills were poor last time, but now...' At that time, he had made a javelin with the Brenite he had obtained from them with his low metallurgy. It was a valuable experience, but now he would be able to produce even better results.

"Brenite?" Milia responded blankly, then clapped her hands after remaining in silence for several long seconds.

"Yes, that was it!"

"It looks like you really just remembered. Didn't you say it was a specialty of the kingdom?"

"Of course it was. However, it has been too long since it has been possible to mine."

"Why?"

"It became impossible to distinguish between ore and monster. Everyone who went to mine was slaughtered." That had put a damper on things.

"There are enough minerals left to be mined. Would you like to go in?" Kang Shin-hyuk paused briefly to ask the administrator.

'What would happen in that case?'

-You would be caught. It would be better to get help from the soldiers rather than fight in person.

In this situation where you didn't know when the next battle would be, taking out the troops to the mines was an idea only a demon could use.

"Okay, we'll get the Brenite later. First of all, I have to start fixing this place."

"Fix it? I wish you could make our soldiers armor."

"I'll do that too, but before that..." Kang Shin-hyuk smiled bitterly, recalling the barrier that was too weak to stop the monsters' attack.

“I’m thinking of building a wall first.”

“The walls of the giant shield?”

“No.” Kang Shin-hyuk shook his head firmly. The Heroic Shield was already gone. What he would build was a huge steel wall.

He was going to turn it into an artifact.

CHAPTER 178

NEW DIMENSION QUEST (4)

The administrator explained that Kieron was a weaker world than Earth. The size of the world was much smaller than the Earth, so it was inevitably lower. However, it shouldn't be misunderstood that all things that made up this world were small because of the interfering power that could be called the will of the world. Just as Kang Shin-hyuk, a person from another world, decreased in size when he entered Kieron, objects and people in this world were released from Kieron's oppression when they went to another world. That was how the Brenite javelin, made in this world, could be used normally even after going back to Earth.

'What the hell does a small world mean?' It wasn't pointless. For an object or being to overcome the oppression of the world and maintain its original size, it would need a high level of innate spiritual power. That was how the Heroic Shield had retained its size and had been seen as a huge wall to the people of Kieron.

"If so, how about thinking in reverse? First of all, how about making a miniature of the wall, then turning it into a massive wall to protect the whole city?!"

"That sounds very stupid." To Milia, it sounded ridiculous.

"Of course, there are cases like the shield wall, and there are records of how you made the sword enormous that one time, so it cannot be said to be impossible, but it's not realistic. A wall-shaped artifact?"

"It's more realistic to build a wall than completely protecting the castle and the people within a month and a half."

"Yes, so make me a weapon, not a wall. If we had only a hundred more like the old javelins, it would be easier to stop them."

"Well, I'll do that too, but the wall comes first." Milia sighed at Kang Shin-hyuk's strong will. But, before long, she shook her head with a bloody smile.

"Previously, I didn't know you were such a maniac. Is it a little strange for me to be

happy to learn of your new side at a time like this?”

“Yes. That’s because I’m not a maniac.”

“You were like that.” Milia turned around with a laugh.

“Then, let’s go back. I’ll guide you to your room.”

“Alright.”

-Fox.

Kang Shin-hyuk followed Milia while ignoring the administrator’s message that appeared in the corner of his eye for a brief moment. But before leaving, he turned to look once more at the water orb in the fountain. There he had an idea while looking at it, but it passed by so quickly he couldn’t remember it now.

‘If it’s important, I’ll think of it later.’ Kang Shin-hyuk was brought back to the throne room and then guided by the soldiers to his room. It was time for him to focus on making a blueprint.

“First, we need to figure out the difference in size between this world and Earth.

-If you enlarge the sword, you can figure it out.

It was a good idea. Kang Shin-hyuk told the soldier who brought him dinner about the plan and that everyone didn’t need to be surprised or run away when it happened. The soldier, frightened, went out to spread the news in a hurry while Shin-hyuk ate. It was stew with plenty of bird meat, probably from this world’s aerial monster. It wasn’t all that different tasting than chicken.

“But it’s not very filling.” Kang Shin-hyuk required a lot of food to fuel himself, so this kind of meal wasn’t enough.

-The food crisis will be serious, especially if they only hunt.

“I didn’t see any fields while I was entering. The ground is dry.” There was clearly a lack of rain in this country, and drinking water had been scarce before they secured the water orb.

“But providing them food now won’t solve the fundamental problem.”

-That’s right.

Still, for those with uncertain futures, just being happy today was enough. Kang Shin-hyuk invested a considerable amount of his remaining HP in purchasing the regular food sold on the trading board in tons. He focused on buying a lot of fresh fruits, vegetables, and grains that would restore spiritual power.

-Smart.

When he finished the purchase, someone knocked on the door.

“Can I come in, Anvil? I don’t know if you remember me...”

“Come in, Zeke.” The door opened, and a middle-aged man in armor entered. It was easy enough for Kang Shin-hyuk to guess his identity, as he was the man Shin-hyuk had seen the most during his stay before.

“You quit pretending to be a soldier?”

“I stopped that a while ago. It’s been a while, Anvil.”

“You look old.”

“You’re a friend who only picks out words that people won’t like.” Zeke frowned while muttering similar things to Milia; then, he immediately looked at him with sharp eyes.

“You said you were going to summon God’s sword.”

“God’s sword? Ah.” To Zeke and the other soldiers, that giant sword that had appeared to end the monster that threatened humanity was the sword of God.

“Yeah, I want to check something out. However, this time it is impossible to destroy all the monsters with it, so be aware of that.”

“I have already heard it from Her Majesty. She said you were going to build a wall, so it’s undoubtedly related to that. Is it really possible?”

“Sure.”

“...Hey, Anvil.” Zeke closed the door and approached Kang Shin-hyuk. It felt a bit odd to make intense eye contact with a middle-aged man standing so close, but he wasn’t going to back down.

“You must’ve heard how hard it has been the last seven years, even with the city.”

“Yes, that’s why I don’t mean to offer any half-assed help.”

“But nonetheless, without you today, it might already be over. It was that precarious of a situation, and it still is.” He thought it was an everyday battle, but it seemed that each battle was an important step. That was why the dimensional quest had appeared. Kang Shin-hyuk nodded, but Zeke drew closer as if he was worried somebody would hear him.

“We have reached our limit. No matter how great your abilities are, it would be unreasonable to provide us a way to stably survive in this situation. Her Majesty is also dependent on you, though it feels like picking at grass.”

-What is this bug talking about? It doesn’t make sense to question your abilities.

The administrator spoke up for Kang Shin-hyuk’s feelings, but he wanted to believe it wasn’t his fault that the administrator’s speech had become so harsh lately.

“So at the time you decide it is impossible... please don’t hesitate to take Her Majesty into your world. She has suffered enough. No one can blame her for leaving behind a world that will be destroyed anyway to find happiness as an individual.”

-Even trying to push that fox on you! It’s impossible now; I can’t stand it anymore! Should I kill him?

Kang Shin-hyuk ignored the administrator.

“There’s no need to worry about that.”

“You will listen to my request? Thank you.” It seemed that Zeke had a misunderstanding, but Kang Shin-hyuk had no intention to correct those thoughts. In a few days, everyone would know anyway. The fact stood that Kang Shin-hyuk had changed much more in half a year than they had over seven.

“Anyway, has word about the sword spread?”

“Yes, I’ve been talking about it.”

“Okay, then...” Kang Shin-hyuk opened the window and threw the Godslayer sword out. He poured his spiritual power in it and used Wind Mastery to raise it into the sky.

“Ha, didn’t you throw it with a javelin before?”

“That’s outdated. Fully automatic is the trend these days.” It wasn’t fully automatic, but Zeke wouldn’t understand anyway. Previously, he had to squeeze out spiritual power enough to kill himself to do it, but now it was different. The Godslayer sword had regained its strength to the SS-rank. Even if Kang Shin-hyuk didn’t instill it with spiritual power, it would be possible for it to regain its form on its own. And so, a giant sword appeared in the sky above Kieron.

“Woooooahh!”

“It’s the sword of God!”

“God’s apostle has proven himself!” Everyone became noisy as the sword appeared above them. Perhaps they had been waiting to confirm the stories. Their faces were filled with joy and determination like they were watching the International Fireworks Festival.

‘I should go to the fireworks festival this year with Claire.’

“Just like before.” As Kang Shin-hyuk was lost in his delusions about a date with Claire, the voice next to him sighed. Looking over, Zeke had a polite expression in contrast to those cheering outside.

“That display was the spark of hope for us humans. Even though I know that despair awaits us in the end, I have the courage to struggle again.”

“You’ve become so pessimistic since last I saw you.”

“Anyone who lives in this world will, perhaps Her Majesty too.” He patted Kang Shin-hyuk on the shoulder, asking him not to forget what they discussed, and left. Kang Shin-hyuk couldn’t tell him that he had prepared food as he left in such a cool manner.

“Well, should I do it after I make the wall?”

-Did you figure out everything you need to know?

“Yeah.” Kang Shin-hyuk nodded.

“I think I can make it roughly the size of a waistband. It can be resizable, so it’ll be perfect for if they want to expand the city later.”

-A 110,000HP bonus from this administrator who can’t help but marvel at your genius!

In that way, Kang Shin-hyuk’s production began. He was using the magic metal Kenyon and the nails from the SS-class dwarves.

* * *

[Is it Kieron?]

[What a cute guy.]

CHAPTER 179

NEW DIMENSION QUEST (5)

Klang! Klang! Klang!

The sound of metal being beat resonated through the temporary workshop built in the castle. A red metal block made of melted dwarves' nails was being molded by the steady hammer fall.

-Bartender's whisper: So you went to another world?

-Yes. I'll be back by the time you come back.

-Bartender's whisper: If you're late, I'll scold you.

-Please do, Madam.

Klang! Klang! Klang!

He was using a tremendous amount of physical strength and spiritual power to work, but messages were flying in from Claire at distant intervals to rejuvenate him.

-Bartender's whisper: Is there a pretty girl there?

-No one is prettier than Claire.

-Bartender's whisper: So smooth. Prove it.

-How can I do that?

-Bartender's whisper: I don't know.

-You don't?

-Bartender's whisper: Yes.

Klang! Klang! Klang!

He wondered what sort of relationship they had in the first place. Things had felt more comfortable than before, but he was more cautious because of it. He tried not to let it bother him, but the age difference was a problem. As he considered it, another message came in.

-Bartender's whisper: Because of somebody these days, I can't see you.

-Bartender's whisper: I miss you.

Klang! Klang! Klang!

Kang Shin-hyuk beat on the metal for a while to calm himself down before he responded.

-I also miss you.

He felt weakened as he recognized the trouble in his mind. The conversation had ended with that, but it had been enough to charge his energy. Shin Eunah would send him a message that she wanted to see him every three hours, but why was Claire's destructive power so different? Of course, he knew the reason well.

"Good."

Klang! Klang! Klang!

In order to meet her quickly, he had to focus on what was in front of him. Kang Shin-hyuk put his spirit into the metal as he beat it. The hammer conveyed his clear will into the materials with sincerity and affection, filling the metal with a heart that would not be shaken. If anyone stepped into that space now, they would be able to recognize his heart. In that atmosphere, he didn't realize his spiritual power changing colors as he worked.

Klang! Klang! Klang!

How much more must he swing the hammer in that trance? When he woke up, the metal was a little lighter compared to the original red color it had been. A metallic belt that had a pinkish color was now before him.

-You have created an artifact with intense emotion. As a result, you have successfully created the artifact [Guardian Will(SS)] with special latent power!

-Metallurgy skill proficiency has increased to S-rank. Stamina has grown to SS-rank.

-Your affinity has greatly increased, and the rarity of the [Resist Fire(S)] has grown to become [Resist Fire (SS+)]. Skill proficiency has grown to S-rank.

-Synchronization has greatly accelerated- current rate of 53.5%.

“...” Without the help of Lee Na-hee, he had created an SS-rank artifact using only SS-rank materials. However, the message that had appeared the moment the artifact was completed made him hesitate from enjoying his success.

“...Did I make a mistake?”

-I would laugh if I knew.

“It’s an absolute secret.” The image of Claire bursting with laughter came into his mind, but fortunately, he was leaving it here. Kang Shin-hyuk sighed and checked the artifact’s information.

[Guardian Will]

[SS Rank]

[Special Abilities: Guardian, Regenerate, Aurora]

*Guardian: When the owner is in a dangerous situation, it creates a shield of spiritual power to protect them.

*Regeneration: steadily restores the owner and itself to their original state.

*Aurora: Accumulates energy from light. This energy is consumed to manifest the other special abilities, and the surplus energy is randomly beneficial.

It was embarrassing, but Kang Shin-hyuk thought the power of love was amazing.

“I want to use it.”

-The effect of learning Light Mastery is showing itself properly. 80,000HP bonus from a relieved administrator!

No doubt that meant the artifact's third special ability, Aurora. Honestly, it felt like a waste to leave such an item here.

"Uh... well, I suppose I can create something like this again."

-Of course. You also have the Guardian ability already with the Godslayer sword.

The administrator was right; he was feeling a bit greedy. He knew it would be a great help to this country.

'Well, I would rather give it to Claire than wear it myself.' He was too embarrassed to tell the administrator this, though. He already had been working on a separate gift for her, and he could give her better armor once he had increased his skill. Kang Shin-hyuk shook those thoughts away and hefted the belt in his hands.

'Then, let's do this.' First, he activated Light Mastery, then used Golden Dragon to imbue the light with his energy and put it into the belt.

-Light Mastery (SS) proficiency has increased.

As a skill with high rarity, it wouldn't grow easily, but that was one of his goals while he was here.

'Now...' Kang Shin-hyuk left the workshop with the belt, causing one of the soldiers waiting outside to step back.

"Is this a gift for Her Majesty?"

"Call Zeke."

"For Sir Zeke?!" There seemed to be some misunderstanding. The soldier ran away before he could correct it, however. Soon enough, Zeke arrived, and Kang Shin-hyuk asked him to pull back the soldiers on the barriers around the city.

"If I do that, the monsters will infiltrate the city."

"It'll just take a short moment, don't worry." Zeke was still skeptical. Finally, he let out

a sigh after Shin-hyuk brought up Milia.

“Damn, threatening Her Majesty. Yes, I see. It is the kingdom you saved, so do whatever you want.” Kang Shin-hyuk threw the belt into the air while he gave instructions to the soldiers retreating back from the barriers. The belt, which was thrown with the force of an SS-rank (from wearing the soul connector), quickly soared to an invisible height. It didn’t fall, however, as Kang Shin-hyuk held it up with Wind Mastery.

“Get into a good position...” Kang Shin-hyuk remote-controlled its position before stimulating it with spiritual power. For an SS-rank artifact, it should be easy enough for it to reveal itself beyond the laws of this world.

“Ugh!”

“Look, a huge circular wall...!” Kang Shin-hyuk laughed happily as the belt became huge and cast a distorted shadow over the entire kingdom. It was of a higher rank than the Heroic Shield, which was known as an impenetrable wall. He may not have fully exhibited Anvil’s abilities from his heyday, but it was a mighty display of the skill he had.

“Anvil, is that...?!”

“Are the soldiers back? Here goes!” The circular wall began to fall slowly. Kang Shin-hyuk ignored the various reactions around him as he fine-tuned the position of the wall as it steadily lowered. He had to make sure it was positioned perfectly as he had calculated it, almost like Tetris.

“Anvil, if you do that, all the barriers will fall!”

“That’s fine, as this will be the new wall that will protect this country.”

“Hah, but it could disappear at any moment...”

“It won’t.” Perhaps Zeke recalled the sight of Kang Shin-hyuk collecting the Heroic Shield. This was something he willingly created for the inhabitants of this kingdom, however. As long as his will in the belt wasn’t disturbed, it wouldn’t happen again. Kang Shin-hyuk filled the belt with spiritual power after confirming the humans had fully withdrawn. The belt then landed firmly on the ground.

-Kwaaaaaaahhhh!

A heavy vibration ran through the kingdom as it landed.

-It's a success.

The belt wrapped around the city perfectly.

"It really worked." He smiled as he could feel particles of mana and spiritual power in the air around him. Little by little, life was returning to the dry ground. Perhaps that was thanks to the regeneration effect of the Guardian Will; it's ability to restore its owner steadily. That was now extending to the entire area within it.

-If Master Halo finds out, he will be envious.

"In that world, it would be fortunate if the artifacts I created didn't need to get bigger." The reason why it was possible here was the difference this world had with the earth. Kang Shin-hyuk turned to Zeke, who was watching him fearfully.

"Next is the fieldwork. I would like to select a suitable area for a field to grow crops in." He brandished the two large scythes from his inventory.

Not knowing what they were, Zeke had no choice but to nod.

CHAPTER 180

TOUCHING BEHIND (1)

The two scythes were excellent for taking care of large quantities of monsters, but their true value lay in farming.

'No, it's not my job.'

-50,000HP bonus for this farmer-like member!

'It just became like this because I was looking for more comfortable clothes.' The Twilight Harvester, Kang Shin-hyuk, wore a loose t-shirt and a straw hat. In his hands were two scythes.

[Falling Scythe]

[SS-rank]

[Special ability: Harvesting, Fall Harvest, Earth Communication]

* Harvesting: The chance of a critical hit is extremely high when harvesting a target. With each repetition, the weapon's performance and effectiveness are permanently amplified.

* Fall Harvest: Movement speed and attack speed are increased by 30% when holding this weapon—the effect doubles in autumn.

* Earth Communication: It is possible to share energy with the earth. This effect strengthens when you are stepping on the ground.

[Growing Scythe]

[SS+Rank]

[Special Abilities: Growth, Amplification, Capture, Split]

*Growth: Speeds up the growth of crops. All abilities increase by 30%.

*Amplification: Increases the yield of crops. All abilities increase by 30%.

*Capture: Never misses the target it has set.

*Split: Can divide into several pieces to increase work efficiency.

Those were the scythes that would help grow and harvest the crops, and as a bonus, they could help revitalize the land.

“Anvil, you’re a man who really doesn’t know how to relax.” Kang Shin-hyuk infused them with his spiritual power and Golden Dragon as he plowed the vast field Zeke had shown him to. No doubt, he would be admired by farmers around the world. It would’ve been better if he had a farming tool better suited for plowing, but he lacked the confidence to create new artifacts like these scythes.

“It’s not enough to create a steel wall around the whole city in just a day, now you’re cultivating a field that can feed 100,000 people all by yourself?” It wasn’t the original use of the scythe, but it could be done anyway. First, the Falling Scythe filled the energy with spiritual power. Since the walls were helping imbue life into the land, it was much easier than it was in Mirotoz. Then, crop seeds collected by the city’s residents were divided and planted by type. Again, instead of a hoe, the ground was dug using the growing scythe’s hundreds of blades, and then the seeds were sown with Wind Mastery. Aided by the Growing Scythes abilities, the crops would yield a large amount of food in the future. At the end of that exhausting work, Kang Shin-hyuk heaved a sigh.

“Woah, this was a lot of practice.” His spiritual power was exhausted. He was currently taking a break, munching on an energy bar sold by the Hero Universe (it was unlocked with the third liberation, and it tasted like chocolate).

“Wizard...? Has Anvil become such a powerful spellcaster in seven years?”

“Sir Zeke is talking about silly things once more. Didn’t I say only half a year has passed?”

“You were a tenacious sort.” People were making noise from behind them, but a glance from Zeke and Milia quieted them down.

“Aren’t you both busy?”

“Is there anything more important than building a strong wall and creating a massive field that can feed all of us?” Milia responded with the dignity of a ruler, but Kang Shin-hyuk just shook his head.

“It would be great if those in power watched quietly.”

“Right. However, if a subordinate does something wrong, it is the person in power who is responsible.” Milia swept her curled hair to the side, but Kang Shin-hyuk just stared in response.

“I mean that I have to be aware of everything going on in this country. So, I would like you to explain the walls of the city slowly...”

“Do I need to explain everything? Let it be. I already told you about expanding them and making entrances.”

“Can anyone stay quiet after they find out such a wall was completed in just one day, and that it will last forever?”

“You don’t need to believe it.” In fact, Kang Shin-hyuk would’ve been anxious if Milia had understood the structure of the spiritual power from the start. But, as time passed, she would naturally understand. For now, however, she pursued him with an unconvinced expression.

“I can rest assured once I know the basic principles. Is this really the power of God?”

“Hmm... it’s nothing that difficult or grand.” It wasn’t special knowledge. Kang Shin-hyuk briefly described the laws governing this world and how objects could retain their original form. Milia, having no talent for spiritual power, struggled to understand the concept of a world outside of this world, but she was trying hard.

“In other words, when it gets smaller again, I can call you!”

“You don’t understand.”

“So the kingdom is protected by artifacts. That sounds ridiculous. Do you mean that, because of that artifact, vitality is returning to this country?”

“If this world had no promise, it wouldn’t be possible.” The administrator had said that this world had been revived thanks to Milia. Was it related to her or the water orb? He

didn't know, but it seemed likely that this world's life force would be restored in the future.

"You resolved all this country's ailments just by showing up."

"Well, you still have the fight against those monsters."

"Do we need to worry about being pushed back with such a reassuring wall? Don't look down on our soldiers that have endured thus far with our barriers, Anvil." The sight of Milia crossing her arms confidently was pretty cute.

"Come to think of it..."

"Well? What is it?"

"Why did you stop pretending?" It was so natural that he had forgotten, but Milia had been pretending to be her dead brother, Milan, last they met. She smiled bitterly at him.

"I knew from the beginning it would be unreasonable to hide it forever, but it was discovered faster than I thought. Some of the survivors tried to push a woman into my bedroom, saying some absurd stuff..."

"Oh. So?"

"So?!" Milia kicked him in anger as he didn't seem that surprised. Of course, she had to grab her own leg after kicking someone with SS-rank stamina.

"Now, drink the potion here..."

"Khh, Anvil..."

"I wanted to ask if they tried to push a man in after they discovered it."

"That's rude! And letting a woman into a man's room is very different than the other way around, Anvil."

"But the only one who can handle the water orb is the one who inherits the blood of the royal family."

“Most of the young aristocrats didn’t make it when the country fell, and none of the survivors match with Your Majesty.” Zeke chimed in next to Milia. Kang Shin-hyuk compared the two for a moment before nodding. Now Zeke and Milia looked upset.

“You are like the apostle of a damned god.”

“You really have learned how to upset people!” Kang Shin-hyuk, having finished his break, stood up and waved them off. He didn’t see the expression that briefly passed on Milia’s face.

“That... are you going to continue working here?” Milia spoke up again once she saw Kang Shin-hyuk heft the scythe up with both hands. He shrugged.

“I have to finish the basic work. After that, I’ll leave it to the people here.”

“All those who have survived until now are great warriors... but, thanks to the wall, it is possible to reduce the number of troops at the border to handle the fields.”

“Good, send some of them to the field. Also, prepare some for me.”

“Why?”

“Brenite.” Milia left out a brief exclamation as she remembered once more.

“Now we can afford to mine it. If I can get enough, I’ll make new siege weapons with what’s left.”

“Siege weapons!” That must’ve been an attractive offer. Milia seemed relieved as Kang Shin-hyuk got back to work sowing seeds.

-You’re gradually becoming a bad guy.

‘Each time you say fox.’

-Of course, that fox is right, but I didn’t expect this. I want to ask if there are any problems with the needs you have of your administrator.

‘I won’t let my eyes stray to another woman when there’s Claire.’

-I hope you will continue to be strong.

'Don't be sinister.' Kang Shin-hyuk finished his work only after once more, depleting his energy. The hellish group of monsters continued to attack them, but now they were overwhelmed by the walls as javelins rained down upon them.

Kang Shin-hyuk handed over the tons of food he had bought the day before to hold a feast. Thanks to that, he received dozens of volunteers the next day to head into the mines.

CHAPTER 181

TOUCHING BEHIND (2)

The mine was about two hours on foot away from the city. The soldiers who had engorged themselves on the food provided by Kang Shin-hyuk after he constructed the walls and cleared the field were the first to volunteer as his guides to the mine. Despite their worries, they were not attacked on their way because the monsters in the area had already been sorted out to some extent, and the active ones were flocking towards the city with terrifying momentum.

“They were originally like that?”

“They instinctively move to where there are a lot of people. It wasn’t that bad before, but since the mutants appeared...”

“They’ve become more aggressive.”

“That’s right. So even in the mine, you have to be careful...” The mine, as far as the soldiers were concerned, was hell itself. They wouldn’t dare go there if Kang Shin-hyuk wasn’t with them. However, they seemed to misunderstand that Kang Shin-hyuk would fight, yet the truth was that he had no intention of doing so.

“This is the mine. There will be a ton of monsters hiding in there...!”

“Yes.” Upon entering the mine, the soldiers glanced at Kang Shin-hyuk and clearly wanted to fall back. However, he pointed to one side of the wall.

“Attack there.”

“Yeah?”

“Speak quietly so they don’t notice.” Giving little attention to the soldiers, Kang Shin-hyuk looked over the walls. Now that the quantity and quality of his spiritual power had grown greatly, he was able to grasp the location of living beings easily. So, no matter how many of them hid, they could be seen clearly with his eyes.

“Attack over there. I can’t fight, so I’ll tell you their locations.” It was natural for Kang Shin-hyuk, but it was incomprehensible to those who had been driven to the brink of destruction. However, in their eyes, he was an apostle of God. The soldiers looked nervous as they stepped toward the part of the wall he was pointing at quietly. At that instant, a golden scratch crossed his eyes, and their bodies began to overflow with power.

“Unbelievable...?!”

“Now, attack!” They had experienced the same yesterday, so they were quick to move. They stabbed into the wall.

-Kyaaaak!

Then, the monster popped out screaming, but it had already lost a lot of strength because of the surprise damage it had sustained. They quickly finished it off.

“Amazing, Anvil!”

“You could tell where it was...” Hearing their cheers, Kang Shin-hyuk nodded in satisfaction.

“I’ll lead you this way, so don’t be scared and follow along. We will clean up the mines today.”

“...Yes?”

“I’ll continue to buff you, but I won’t fight myself. That is very important to take note of.”

“Ah... okay.” It might sound like nonsense, but the soldiers already believed he was an apostle. No doubt, they assumed some disaster would come for them if he violated a taboo. The reality wasn’t too dissimilar to that. Kang Shin-hyuk led them further in after retrieving the usable monster parts.

-Kiiii!

-Kyaahahaaaa!

-Kyaaak!

-Kooaaahk!

There were many monsters in the mine, too many. It was like they had all gathered here from across the world.

“Huk... huk...”

“This is impossible, we’ll die here...!”

“No, you can do it.” Kang Shin-hyuk gave them recovery potions (unfortunately, status potions weren’t allowed) and cheered them up. With his trait, their exhausted bodies were restored.

-It’s almost like a blessing to them.

‘Has my existence come to the point where I can be called a spirit?’ He was backing them up simply because he couldn’t use his own strength. The soldiers continued to battle, half-enchanted, but he knew they would be grateful when they realized that they would grow from the constant fighting against strong enemies.

“Well, this seems to be roughly organized.” As promised, by the end, they had dealt with all the monsters in the mine. The soldiers were exhausted, but Kang Shin-hyuk let out a satisfied laugh as he looked at the blue veins running throughout the walls. Right after, however, his expression soured.

“I should’ve made a pickaxe...”

-A 130,000HP bonus for the cute appearance of members who regret their own mistakes!

“Thank you, but I’m a little angry right now.”

-50,000HP bonus!

Kang Shin-hyuk trembled at the administrator’s teasing. Even when plowing the field, he had just resorted to using a sickle to decrease his workload, but would that work for mining?

“Well, I can try it.” Thus, he brandished his scythe. The sight was silly enough to cause the soldiers to laugh, had they not seen him plow the entire field with those very same

scythes.

“...Ha!” Kang Shin-hyuk began to swing the scythes crazily into the wall. Stone powder rained down on him as impure ore sprang out and rolled onto the ground. He was using his Wind Mastery to collect and process the stone dust as he swung the scythes, sorting the ore at the same time. It looked very silly from the outside, but in reality, he was using ridiculously high-level techniques.

“This one is done, so shall we move on to the next?”

-If you finish mining the next vein in five minutes with your scythe, you will receive a special administrator bonus!

“You’ve learned some bad things from Earth.” Rather than crushing the administrator’s hopes, however, Kang Shin-hyuk willingly accepted the request and received a large amount of HP as a bonus. It took nearly ten hours to get to the mine and clear it out, but it took less than two hours to dig up tons of ore.

“Well, I need to purchase additional inventory slots.”

-It is 5 million HP per slot.

“Good thing I got that bonus.” Inventory was becoming more expensive now, but he was able to secure five additional slots, for a total of twenty.

‘Okay, this much...’ The amount of cargo that could be stored per compartment was approximately 200 kilograms. Shin-hyuk put everything he could away and left the rest to the soldiers. Some of it would be used for the Ord kingdom, so that was fair.

“How did you dig up this much?”

“I didn’t think this mine had this much Brenite.” The soldiers had been relaxing while Shin-hyuk mined and were astonished to see the result. Among them were the soldiers of Ord who had been around before the end of the world; they were particularly impressed by the sight of the brilliant blue Brenite.

“Okay, then let’s go.” He bought a sturdy bag from the Hero Universe to hold the remaining ore, and then he led the party out. A strange sight awaited them, however.

“...Do you see what was in the sky?”

“I see it.”

“A black hole...” Kang Shin-hyuk stood still and looked up at the endless sunset sky and the huge black hole in the middle of it.

“Administrator.” His voice trembled.

“Didn’t you say I wouldn’t be caught if I didn’t fight in person?”

-I was aware of it being that way, but they seem to have been watching this world since the start.

A similar thing had happened in the dungeon he entered with Baek In-ha and Hyeongju Ahn.

“What the hell?”

-You are the one who holds the entire universe’s attention.

The administrator sounded almost proud in response, but now wasn’t the best time.

“If it’s too late, there’s nothing to worry about, damn it!” Kang Shin-hyuk threw the bag he was holding down and pulled out the blue cow from his inventory. Then, he called Onyx out and passed him off to the soldiers.

-Myu?!

“Onyx, lead these soldiers back to the city. Guys, listen carefully. This little guy is stronger than you.”

“Master Anvil?!”

“Go!” The blue cow charged violently, running so fast that it left behind an afterimage.

It’s huge, shit. The closer he got to his target, the more he could see. The creature coming out from the hole in the sky was bigger than any other monster he had encountered so far.

-In this small world, it is retaining its original size.

The administrator explained briefly, clearing Shin-hyuk's confusion. Just like the belt he made had grown into the size of a city wall, or his sword that had become massive, this monster was maintaining its shape. Even taking that into account, it must've originally been large. Even his large sword would look like a chopstick compared to it.

-Quoooh?

The monster that appeared had a green crystal embedded in its head. Its cry filled the world, causing the inhabitants of the Ord kingdom to tremble. They could never cope with it on their own. Kang Shin-hyuk increased his speed and threw out his Godslayer sword. It became enormous as he wrapped it up with a spiritual wind, flying straight towards the monster's eyes.

-Quoooh!

It bounced off harmlessly.

-You cannot break its shield by throwing it. You have to swing it yourself!

"That's crazy." Kang Shin-hyuk was aware of what that meant. He had to grow in size like that monster.

"Ultraman is so outdated..." No, it was being rebooted, so perhaps he could ride on its popularity. Kang Shin-hyuk grabbed the sword that bounced off and made up his mind.

-No need to worry too much, member.

An unexpected message appeared.

-As long as they intervene first, it is possible to work properly with the Hero Universe. There is nothing more to hide.

"...Huh?"

-You have entered a request for support. Mirang has accepted the request.

Support? Accept? As Kang Shin-hyuk's eyes widened, the administrator continued confidently.

-Three minutes, member. Hold on for three minutes.

“...How?” Kang Shin-hyuk muttered lifelessly as he looked up at the ultra-giant beast before him.

“It’ll be down to the wire.”

CHAPTER 182

TOUCHING BEHIND (3)

Kang Shin-hyuk couldn't afford to joke around. He hadn't drawn enough attention by throwing his sword, as now the monster was opening its mouth towards the kingdom.

"Ah, shit!" It was a scene he thought was familiar. The crystal on the monster's head began to sparkle as an overwhelming amount of energy began to well up in its throat.

"It's a breath attack." He had seen the wyverns breathe fire, but nothing that reached this scale. And definitely not from a monster that looked like a large chicken! It was high-density energy incomparable to the wyverns.

'Isn't it a light property? It's condensing light energy down, just watching it is helpful to my light mastery training... no, now's not the time!' Kang Shin-hyuk's mind was spinning. He was still trying to make himself huge, but it was impossible right now. There was only one other thing that came to his mind. Kang Shin-hyuk put an orb into the sword.

-After fusing with the [Great Heavenly Spirit], some of the original traits of the Godslayer have been temporarily restored. The Godslayer has become SS+ rank. The sword's strength and power have been amplified, and the power of all special abilities is maximized.

-You can now handle the special abilities [Absorption] and [Generate] of the Great Heavenly Spirit.

-Special ability [Release] has been surprisingly temporarily unlocked. He threw the sword at the monster's throat again and made it grow. He hoped it would be enough to stop that breath attack.

-Quooooaaaa!

The sword struck the monster in its open mouth as light spilled out.

'Absorb it and release it!' The Great Heavenly Spirit radiated purple as it pulled in the

light flowing out of the monster's mouth. The energy wasn't something that could be handled even with an SS+ rank treasure, but thanks to its special ability after eating Excalibur, it had a strong resistance to light.

-Quoooo!

The giant monster continued to let out the energy even in the midst of its anguish as it scratched at the large thorn in its neck. The purple stained sword absorbed most of the energy and released it immediately after, exploding the rest of the energy in its throat.

-A 15,000HP bonus from this administrator who admires your courage!

"Thank you, but...!" Kang Shin-hyuk remembered that the sword had been deflected before. He wasn't able yet to grasp this foe as the crystal in its head continued to shine.

-Cuaaaaaah!

The scene that followed astonished him. The Godslayer sword shrunk and fell out of the monster's neck. Kang Shin-hyuk returned it to his hands and tried to fire it off again, but the sword stiffened in the air and wouldn't budge. It was some new ability that this chicken monster was using. Its eyes were slit like a snake's, and they flashed Shin-hyuk's entire body yellow.

"Huh...?!" He was wracked by indescribable pain. It felt like everything that made up his body was forcibly stopped and hardened into stone. It was even affecting his spiritual power; only his Golden Dragon escaped from its influence to fight against it.

"Oh..."

-I understand now! A chicken head, snake's tail... a basilisk! What a terrible hybrid of light-handling basilisks!

Kang Shin-hyuk gasped for breath, only able to breathe at all thanks to his trait Golden Dragon. The world beyond the gate was beyond the reach of the Hero Universe, given the administrator's lateness in providing that information.

-Cuooooo...!

It was staring at him, recognizing his existence, but the breath attack continued to

shoot straight towards the kingdom. Had it been a day before, the whole kingdom would've been swept away in an instant. However, just before it could touch the top of the castle, a shield wrapped around the city. It was the special ability Guardian that had been imparted into the walls.

'But that won't last long.' When the belt's spiritual power ran out, the kingdom would be wiped out. No, if the power of the one who made the belt died, it would be over before it ran out.

'I have to stop it.' He clenched his jaw and forced the energy of the Golden Dragon to circulate throughout his entire body. The fact that it even slowed him was a power related to the soul. However, his Golden Dragon was fine because it was a power based on his trait.

'In other words, if it's my trait...' Guardian Golden Dragon, the power that puts the power of a dragon in one to turn the tides of any fight. It could strengthen his allies and weaken the enemies. Kang Shin-hyuk's eyes flashed golden as the flow of energy intensified in his body.

'I can overcome its ability...!' It was at the moment. The Godslayer sword, which was frozen in the air, began to twitch. It re-enlarged itself, emitting the brilliant light it had absorbed from the basilisk's breath. Kang Shin-hyuk immediately fired it.

-Quaaaaah!

At the same time, the [Absorption] ability was maximized as he activated the special ability Guardian.

"Break...!" The breath attack that was pouring out onto the city was blocked by the shield formed by the Godslayer as it poured out the light. Originally, no matter its spiritual power, it would've been impossible, but with the absorption ability, he managed to recycle the light energy and the melting to create it again.

-Ahhhh!

The beast focused on the sword once more, but it didn't shrink. Instead, since his gaze fell away from Kang Shin-hyuk, he was able to move freely once more.

'Now.' His repressed spiritual power began to spread out through his body once more. He recalled the moment the Godslayer sword became huge, that will that drove it.

“Whoa...!” He would not be suppressed by the laws of this world. He proved it by making the city walls. If he tried calmly, he would certainly be able to find his original form.

“...!” At that moment, his spiritual power and Golden Dragon began to mix together to extend outside his body, forming a frame around him.

-Success member. 3,000HP bonus!

“Ah!” Kang Shin-hyuk realized it the next moment; the sight before him was different. The bike followed a second later, matching his size.

“Oh...” His head was dizzy as pressure bore down on him from everywhere. It was like the world was suppressing him. He was breaking the law of Kieron, so a strong backlash was to be expected. But, he could keep himself intact. Kang Shin-hyuk had finally acquired the unique strength of a member of the Hero Universe.

“How much time do I have left?”

-About 1 minute and 30 seconds.”

“Then, I have no choice but to try.” At first, it felt ridiculous to fight the monster directly, but that chicken head, which seemed to fill the world, now seemed like a surmountable foe.

“Quo...?”

Seeing Kang Shin-hyuk had become massive, it turned its breath on him. The basilisk’s gaze overlapped with the pressure from the world to place a terrible burden on his body, but Kang Shin-hyuk recalled the Godslayer sword to his hand. As long as he could resist with Golden Dragon Fighter, that ability wouldn’t hit him again.

“It’s my turn, chicken-head.” Moreover, Kang Shin-hyuk was able to exert his influence on the enemy, strengthening himself as he weakened it. Standing on the same level as the basilisk, he could now affect him.

-Quo?!

It screamed and twisted as it felt something wrong with its body. Its size began to decrease. Perhaps due to it being weakened, it was now being affected by the laws of

Kieron. It was a great opportunity, now that it was weakened, and it wouldn't come again.

-Quoooo?! Kuoohohooo!

It twisted its body and let out a powerful shriek as the crystal on his head began to spew out a dazzling light. Kang Shin-hyuk activated his light mastery as it moved out in all directions. At the same time, he activated the absorption ability of the Godslayer to converge the light into his sword.

—Light Mastery (SS) skill proficiency has increased!

—Light Mastery (SS) skill proficiency has increased!

“Dirty...!” It was impossible to completely absorb the aggressive light as it spread over his body to burn his skin. However, despite that, it did very little damage thanks to the sword's light resistance.

*Sacred Sword: Empowers those who hold this weapon and allows them to handle the power of light. It also has a strong resistance to light.

With the power of the Great Heavenly Spirit added to it, the attack could be endured. But it went beyond enduring it, as most of the light was being turned into energy stored in the sword.

“It would be a walk in the park if I could handle the Dark Spirit Pearl properly.” But it meant nothing since he couldn't. Kang Shin-hyuk poured the energy overflowing from the orb into the blue cow, concentrating the rest into the sword. Light wouldn't work well against those who dealt with it, so it was turned into pure energy and converted into spiritual power.

“Let's go.”

-Vwooom

The Godslayer sword and the blue cow resonated with one mind as Kang Shin-hyuk positioned himself to attack.

-Quoooh!

The body of a giant snake wrapped around the chicken head, forming a sphere around it. It was a strange shield meant to protect it from the Godslayer.

-It must be a defensive skill that makes use of petrification magic. It will stop the movement of any object within a certain range.

“Is it possible to stop something it doesn’t see?”

-It seems only to affect a short range around its body.

What a fraudulent ability. Kang Shin-hyuk clicked his tongue but didn’t give in to despair. Unlike before, he now held the sword in his hands. He could apply the power of flesh control now that he was grasping it. Added to the trait of the holy sword it absorbed, it could break through this shield to cut off its head.

-Hurry.

‘Whoo...’ Even with the administrator’s urging, Kang Shin-hyuk was in no hurry as he calmed his mind. He was one with the sword in his hand through his breathing. The holy sword trait activated to reinforce the power in his body, further sharpened by the flesh control ability.

“...Hah!” The blue cow rushed in with a burst of speed. Blue sparks lashed out, adding lightning and wind power to his sword. A golden airflow stretched out from behind it as Kang Shin-hyuk flashed forward like a comet atop his bike.

“Let’s go!”

-Quek?!

The moment Shin-hyuk’s eyes opened, the bike collided with the basilisk’s body, drawing a blue line through the sky.

CHAPTER 183

TOUCHING BEHIND (4)

-Kuaaaaaah!

The basilisk's scream filled the sky. Kang Shin-hyuk and the blue cow, who had cleaved through its curled torso, were covered in a shower of green blood.

-A terrible poison has entered your body, but Soul Poison (SSS) has completely resisted it. Soul Poison (SSS) skill proficiency has increased.

"It even has poison."

-A 170,000HP bonus from one impressed by your wonderful performance!

Despite the bonus, Kang Shin-hyuk pulled away from his sword with a resentful sigh. He felt like he had only been able to win because of the Godslayer.

-You have subdued one that was harmful to the order of things! Bonus based on membership level! You received 550,000,000HP! As a VIP bonus, you received an additional amount equivalent to 50% of the reward, for a total of 825,000,000HP!

A shocking message appeared before him. 800 million?! No matter how strong it was, there was only one of them. The previous Light Mastery (SS) skill stone was 3.5 billion HP, and the administrator said it was cheap, but now he finally understood.

-Loot has been collected.

But that wasn't all that was surprising. As the dead basilisk shattered in the air and loot items were automatically stored in his inventory, more messages appeared.

—You have acquired the Light Basilisk's Crest of Light (SSS).

—You have acquired the bones and leather of the Light Basilisk.

—You have acquired the meat of Light Basilisk.

—You have acquired the poison blood of Light Basilisk.

“It was an SSS-class monster...”

It was also a boss-class monster. Ironically, it was in a world that weakened everything, so it was defeated.

Although Kang Shin-hyuk had also been weakened by Kieron, he overcame that limit and weakened the enemy with his Guardian Golden Dragon. It was no exaggeration to say it had won him the battle. Of course, it was also beneficial that the enemy fit his abilities.

“Would it have been easier with a status potion... no, probably not by much.” This time, the entire fight had been virtually done with his spiritual power and Golden Dragon Fighter. As his body became stronger, so did his Golden Dragon Fighter, but it would’ve been a small margin in that fierce fight.

‘Moreover, it only covers up to the SSS-rank.’ Now he was viewing the SSS-rank as only up to. It was natural given the administrator had revealed that Halo and the other members in the Hero Universe were generally above that rank. If so, it meant that status potions served to help members that were still lacking, or so Kang Shin-hyuk viewed it as such.

-A 120,000HP bonus from a thrilled administrator!

“There are too many bonuses.” He hesitated, noticing a shadow falling beyond the hole that was cut through the basilisk.

“Uh...” It was several of them, actually.

“I didn’t think it would end with one, but to be so many...”

-Are you okay, member?

If it were one more basilisk, it might have been doable, but more than two was impossible. Now, the only feasible option was to run, but that would leave the humans trembling in the kingdom below.

‘What do we do? I spent most of the power in the Great Heavenly Spirit...’ A new hole opened in the sky near Kang Shin-hyuk as he nervously watched the shadow monsters

appear through the first one.

-Fortunately, I'm not late.

A giant, massive wolf, big enough to devour even the sun, suddenly appeared.

"...!" It had long, beautiful silver fur, and its eyes shone like green jade. Magical power illuminated its entire body, enough to blind anyone who could pierce magic.

-Anvil, it's great to see you in person like this. Mirang, it's Mirang. Can you recognize me?

Kang Shin-hyuk was relieved to find out the wolf was an ally. If it were a foe, he might as well lay down.

'I guess he's in a huge state right now?' The wolf, Mirang, was so large that even the giant Kang Shin-hyuk couldn't see its entire body. Probably, this wolf had power similar to Halo.

-I can roughly see the limitations of this world. It's a tricky restriction, despite being a low-level world.

Mirang looked around and spoke while Kang Shin-hyuk remained frozen. He could easily overcome the pressure of Kieron.

-Oh, they're coming out now. I'll take care of it. In the meantime, Anvil, calm those beautiful things.

"What...?" Kang Shin-hyuk was overwhelmed by the power emanating from Mirang. The wolf nodded and stretched a paw to point at the ground. Indeed, below them, the tiny humans were making a ruckus.

-Hero Universe.

-I wanted to do this quickly.

-It's fortunate to see his face.

At that point, a sinister voice came out from the hole across from them. Kang Shin-hyuk realized that he couldn't dare face them alone.

“Can I ask you to take care of it?”

-Sure, I came to do just that. Please do me a favor later. I require your craftsmanship.

“If that’s enough, then I’ll do what I can.”

-Very good. Let’s start right away!

The wolf laughed and burst through the air. Kang Shin-hyuk had to hold onto his bike to not be swept away by the current of magical power. In the process, his body shrunk back. Looking up, he saw the giant monsters in the shape of snakes being cut apart by the wolf’s claws and an ax protruding from its tail. He snapped out of it and drove down to the ground as the snakes’ blood rained down.

“Anvil!” Milia was shouting at him from atop the castle.

“If that poisonous blood breaks through the shield, it’s all over!” Milia cried out and grabbed him as soon as he landed. Looking up, he could see the snakes and Mirang fighting. The issue was that the blood dripping from the snakes was becoming a heavy rain that spilled out onto the ground. The shield of spiritual power was blocking it, but the sight of it bouncing off the shield to dissolve the area around them was terrifying.

“Is this the aftermath of fighting directly...?”

“What are those monsters? Are they the agents of God who came to execute us who couldn’t accept destruction?”

“Why is that your thought? They’re just a group that doesn’t like human prosperity. For now, let’s focus on stopping them.”

“Anvil, you...”

“I’m sorry, but we have a little more work to do! Go!” He enlarged the Godslayer again, activating Guardian to help deflect the poisonous blood raining down on them. It would buy them a little more time. Kang Shin-hyuk began to go through his artifacts and wondered what could be done.

“By enlarging the spiritual thread of the soul connector, I could make a shield... no, Guardian would be more efficient. I need to make a shield right away.”

-Sorry, member. Even in the Hero Universe, the only artifacts that can be maintained here are the ones you create.

That was right; he had been told that blacksmiths who handle spiritual power properly were rare. So rare that it was really just Anvil. Kang Shin-hyuk wracked his brain as he watched the battle happening above them.

'Oh, what about Onyx?' In this situation, it would be a disaster for those outside the city, but Onyx dutifully led the people from the mines back to the city. He had made a wise judgment as now the land around the city had become a true hell.

'How to solve it...' His mind kept going back to the problem. His spiritual power couldn't infinitely block the poisonous blood. In the end, the only way remaining was something he really didn't want. Kang Shin-hyuk would have to enlarge himself again to directly block the poisonous blood with the power of his Guardian Golden Dragon. Now that he had confirmed the blood wouldn't affect him, suppressing it would be easy.

"Okay, then let's go directly..."

"Anvil." It was then, as Kang Shin-hyuk was squeezing his head for thoughts, Milia spoke up with a serious expression.

"Is it really only possible for the items you brought to become bigger?"

"Uh? No, it's not. As long as the quality of the item is high enough, anything else can be..."

"That's it." Milia ran straight into the castle, and Kang Shin-hyuk guessed what she was thinking. However, he decided to abandon her expectations.

"Then, I should stop it." Kang Shin-hyuk rode the bike back into the air. He had already grown once, so he remembered the trick. It consumed no small amount of spiritual power and his Golden Dragon energy, but it would be easier to maintain than the Guardian shield.

"After all, heroes shine more when they defend than when they fight."

-150,000HP bonus!

“Oh, did I say it out loud?” He was suddenly aware of how much his self-talk had increased since entering the Hero Universe, but now those embarrassing thoughts were coming out. He blew away those thoughts as he enlarged himself. Green rain rained down upon him.

“Ah.”

-It's a good day to practice soul poison.

“Right?” He responded darkly as he spread a shield out with the Godslayer in his hand. A thread of spiritual power moved towards the raindrops.

-... Member.

“Yes?”

-I really don't think you need to come forward. First of all, even collecting the poisonous blood personally...

The administrator's attitude had changed completely.

“Yes? But the consumption of spiritual power...”

-It will be resolved before that, so don't worry.

Kang Shin-hyuk thought the answer was strange as he gently stretched the thread out to gather the raindrops. Under the laws of this world, the size of the poisonous blood automatically decreased as he gathered it. Soon enough, he had collected two liters of it in a container he threw into his inventory before producing a new one. It was about the time when he considered finding a way to recharge his spiritual power when the blood stopped.

“Huh...?” Looking up, there was an enormous image of Milia. In her arms was an enormous orb of water.

“Uh...”

-I am the new member of the Hero Universe, ‘Water Fox.’

“The administrator forced that nickname on you.”

-How'd you know?!

While the administrator was astonished, Milia busied herself with manipulating the falling blood with the water orb. It formed a stream that moved according to her wishes.

The water orb wasn't an artifact that created water; it was a treasure that manipulated all liquids.

CHAPTER 184

GRACE OF ANVIL (1)

The battle continued for another dozen minutes. Each time the wolf cried out, the sky vibrated, and a silver flash shot out every time it sprinted through the sky. If Kang Shin-hyuk didn't know, it would be easy to mistake as thunder and lightning.

-It's over!

Then, the wolf opened its mouth and spewed out flames greater than the light the basilisk had breathed.

-Hwaaaaaah!

It was like the sun was pouring out of the wolf's mouth. Red flames covered the sky, blindingly bright. It consumed all the snakes in an instant and even destroyed the energy lurking beyond them.

-Ahh.

-Unfortunately.

Perhaps that was the core of the gate. Immediately after, a horrifying unknown voice permeated every corner of the world. The black hole torn in the sky disappeared neatly, leaving a bloody sunset in its wake.

"..." Kang Shin-hyuk, who was watching the scene from a safe place, trembled. He could hardly believe that an independent entity could use such tremendous energy alone.

-It was fortunate you could collect the reward on a basilisk by yourself.

"Exactly. Had Mirang arrived sooner, I wouldn't have been able to swing my sword once." The process had been a struggle, but he gained a lot from that battle.

"Anvil, were you watching?" The voice of a young man suddenly appeared in his ear. Looking up, the giant wolf had vanished. Looking back, a person was calmly standing

behind him.

“Mirang?”

“Yes.” Now he was in the form of a young human man like Kang Shin-hyuk, but with beautiful silver hair and eyes that shimmered like emeralds. He had a handsome face without any wrinkles, with particularly alluring eyes. Kang Shin-hyuk was able to naturally accept him as he could tell he was the same from his spiritual power.

“I saw you well, you were tremendously strong.”

“Because of the limitations of this world, I couldn’t reveal all my power. It was enough to defeat Jormungand’s spearmen, though.” Mirang grabbed Kang Shin-hyuk’s hand, shaking it, and Shin-hyuk repressed his instinct to step back. He realized that an overly beautiful face was scary. Of course, Claire was an exception.

“It’s an honor to meet you in person, Anvil. The fact you chose to die as soon as you became a VIP was disappointing for me, as well as for many other members who wished to meet you. However, there was a chance to complete that great karma and meet in a new way. I should express my gratitude for Gaia’s harmony.”

“Thank you for saying so.”

“It’s embarrassing, but I haven’t been able to acquire any of the new things you’ve put on the trading board. I responded to this application so I could meet you in person and ask for a product.” Shin-hyuk wanted to ask why Mirang hadn’t whispered about it, but then he remembered he had declared himself he wouldn’t accept personal requests for the time being. That was why Mirang ran to him so quickly.

“Thank you. Of course, I still have a long way to go to reach my previous life, but I think I can make some good stuff.”

“Oh, really!” Honestly, seeing Mirang spewing out flames made him wonder what would be useful to such a person. In the meantime, he made sure Mirang would stay here to protect them.

“But can you wait for a moment? I have to talk to them.”

“Ah, yes, I will wait. But it’s really fun to find a new member of the Hero Universe in a world that was about to perish.” Mirang laughed at the sight of Milia holding the water

orb. Kang Shin-hyuk didn't understand why he laughed; perhaps it was something for those who had a wider view of the universe.

"Milia." Kang Shin-hyuk left Mirang and approached Milia, who was still intently controlling the water orb. To be more precise, she was gathering all of the poison blood scattered around the world, evaporating the pure water to leave only the poison essence.

"Good morning, Anvil." Milia blinked as she looked down on Kang Shin-hyuk. Her voice caused the air to vibrate.

"I need help with holding this. Could you?"

-With the control of venom blood now possible, all you need is an alchemy flask sold on the trading board. It can't be bought by this Water Fox who just signed up.

"How much is it?"

-It is a special solution flask that costs 10,000HP per 750ml flash. It is 6,500HP at the VIP special discount price!

Certainly, it was too much for Milia to pay since she just joined, but it was practically worth pennies to him. He went ahead and bought twenty right away. Now that the water part was removed, the poison blood had reduced to a more manageable size.

"Hand it over."

"Uh, um." Milia blushed a little at Kang Shin-hyuk but pushed the venom sphere towards him. It looked rather threatening, actually.

-It is only pure poison. Even the most brilliant alchemist would struggle to achieve this degree of purity.

'But Milia did it.'

-The Water Fox has awakened a very powerful trait of dealing with water using water magic. Since each member's personal information is confidential, we cannot provide detailed information, but it's honestly annoying to me as well...

He couldn't tell her personal information, but he wouldn't hide his emotions at all. The

administrator continued as Kang Shin-hyuk wrapped the poison sphere with wind and suppressed it with his spiritual power.

-The water orb is a precious object created by the Water Fox's ancestors. Only the royal family can properly handle it. But in a world where hope was lost, that bloodline weakened and left the world to end...

“...”

-That was when you appeared as a prince on a white horse.

'I kept quiet because I didn't want to hear about that.' After Kang Shin-hyuk succeeded in shrinking it, he transformed it with the wind into the flask.

-The Water Fox had the potential to succeed in the world but didn't have the quality to do it herself. However, your ability to interfere with the source made her grow. The Water Fox, exposed to you, eventually brought out her latent power and reformed herself.

'Thanks to that, she joined the Hero Universe.'

-She is of a level that surpassed her ancestors.

He had never felt this way in other worlds, but now he felt that his actions had really influenced this world's existence. A savior who would take charge of the world was born under his influence, causing his head to hurt whenever he thought of the aftermath.

'Milia's possibilities awakened, though I just came to do a dimensional quest.'

-To summarize, that is it.

As he slowly descended to the ground after clearing up the poison, the residents of the city went to worship Kang Shin-hyuk.

“Thank you!”

“Apostle, you have granted strength to our queen, so we will offer up our prayers!”

“Not just that, but the help of another god...”

“Thanks to the wolf god!” Kang Shin-hyuk was greeted by the trembling people. It was at a level he couldn’t deny with a simple no. He was the one who defeated the basilisk, and then Mirang had also shown up. Added to it, the queen Milia became huge...

“Anvil, I guess you didn’t do a lot of dimensional quests.”

“Mirang.” Mirang appeared in front of Kang Shin-hyuk, perhaps having noticed his embarrassment.

“It’s no wonder humans serve us like gods. Rather, it’s often better for them, so it’s good to get used to it quickly.”

“Is it better for them?”

“Sure. Because mortals name everything they cannot understand. Those who don’t try to understand it are usually broken. So this is the shield they unconsciously use to protect themselves.” Mirang said to Kang Shin-hyuk, then waved his hand at the humans looking up. The humans raised their voices in praise to express their gratitude for him, who was pretending to be a classy nobleman despite fighting so violently moments before.

“Then...” Kang Shin-hyuk raised his head and pointed to Milia, who was still enormous. After Kang Shin-hyuk had stored the venom, she was carrying out other tasks with the water orb- creating lakes and rivers within the cities and further across the world.

“What about her?”

“She will be treated as someone who has risen above the ranks of humanity. Anvil, do you think one who showed such a display today could come down to the position of human again?”

-From today on, there will be clear rain in this world again. That Water Fox will become a creature of wonder to the humans of this world, a goddess of water.

Mirang spoke in a lightly teasing tone, and the administrator added a further explanation.

“That’s...” Kang Shin-hyuk eventually quieted. Wouldn’t that type of existence be too lonely?

“Well, then, can I ask about what I want?”

“Yes. The work will continue.” Kang Shin-hyuk looked up at the image of the goddess who was engaged in the work of creating waterways in the world before smiling bitterly before guiding Mirang into his workshop.

It was deep into the night when Milia finished her work. As a bonus, Onyx had returned safely with all the soldiers.

CHAPTER 185

GRACE OF ANVIL (2)

“Aren’t you used to fire? Could you make a sword suitable for containing the power of fire?”

“A sword.” They were in the temporary workshop built in the castle. Kang Shin-hyuk was still casually facing the handsome young man, Mirang. He was tracing his fingernails over the table, using the energy of fire to burn a picture into it—an image of a greatsword with a long, sturdy blade.

“Okay. My natural energy is strong, hmm... of course, it is incomparable to those with true strength, but it’s enough that most weapons can’t handle it.”

“Well, that’s right.” Mirang had said he was a wolf the moment he was born. It was relatively recently that he had been able to take on a human form. After taking on a human form, he started becoming interested in handling weapons... The problem was, as he said, there was no weapon able to withstand his energy.

“The human body is delicate... and the distance between each other is narrow.” He must’ve been talking about the modernized form of human society; no other animals willingly lived in confined areas as humans did.

“So if you can’t control it, you’ll inadvertently hurt people. Correct?” Why did Mirang want a human form in the first place? Such a fundamental question was raised. Kang Shin-hyuk thought he couldn’t make what he wanted without knowing that.

“What I want is one extremely sharp tooth. It has to be small enough that it won’t hit targets other than the ones I want, but it’s fatally sharp and can inflict damage to them.”

“...I know what you want. Let’s try it.”

“I thought Anvil would say so!”

“But...” Kang Shin-hyuk held out his hand to him. Mirang reached out and grabbed it

without thinking, just as Kang Shin-hyuk wanted.

“Okay, wait a minute like this. I’ll be going over some basics with my spiritual power, but don’t resist.”

“It’s an honor, rather.” Mirang nodded happily. Kang Shin-hyuk felt a bit relieved. Mirang wasn’t a person who treated spiritual power as casually as Kang Shin-hyuk did, but he recognized that he had spiritual power and instinctively used it. If so, he had to understand how dangerous it was to leave yourself vulnerable to another who used spiritual power, but he had done so without hesitation for Kang Shin-hyuk.

-Because you’re like an idol in the Hero Universe. Most members would probably buy a hundred million CDs if they could shake your hand.

‘I hate that analogy.’

-To get an artifact from you, maybe even five hundred million CDs...

‘I won’t become a singer.’

-Keh.

After thoroughly crushing the administrator’s idea, Kang Shin-hyuk began to let his spiritual power flow into Mirang bit by bit.

“It’s very delicate.” Mirang let out a voice of admiration.

“To manipulate the essence of the soul by dividing it so easily... mine is a lump. It’s strong as it is, and if I try to force it, I lose it.”

“It’s natural because everyone has different spiritual powers.”

“Is that so? Is this the spirit of a craftsman... no, it’s also a warrior’s spiritual power. How fun.” Mirang closed his eyes with a smile. Kang Shin-hyuk struggled to accept the information flowing in from Mirang.

‘It’s not normal, but... ’ As long as he could fully analyze his opponent with spiritual power, he would no longer be afraid. Kang Shin-hyuk had always thought that way since he had learned how to use it properly. However, he didn’t think he would be in trouble because of the depth and breadth of the source.

A being with a different origin than mine. It's difficult to understand... ' The fact the source was different meant that the way of viewing the world was different. For Kang Shin-hyuk, flame emitted heat and light, and thus, had a warm image in his mind. At the same time, it also symbolized creation to him as a blacksmith. However, for Mirang, who had been with flames since he was born, the flame was his body, breath, weapon, and shield.

"Ah... ' It was completely different. How could he accept it, understand it, and apply it to the object he planned to make? Kang Shin-hyuk now realized that understanding was a completely different matter.

Still.' It wasn't his first experience. The first object he had communicated with was the Godslayer sword, which wasn't alive. However, he never had to worry about understanding the origin of the metal. He first found what he could sympathize within the sword, then pulled out what he could work with. Understanding began with finding common ground with the other person. If he searched for that, he would be able to realize even the parts he couldn't understand little by little.

"Thank you." Kang Shin-hyuk murmured quietly as he closed his eyes.

"This production will be a very special experience for me."

"It's the same for me." Mirang also quietly nodded.

"Your spiritual power is very warm. I don't think it was wrong to come visit you."

Although it was in his previous life that he had become friends with Mirang, Kang Shin-hyuk thought that he and Mirang could communicate as friends for the first time. He began to understand the source of Mirang.

-... Should I have been vigilant of other men as well?

He ignored the useless things the administrator was saying.

* * *

Of course, understanding Mirang wouldn't end in a day. After five hours of holding Mirang's hand (Zeke, who had seen the scene through the door of the open workshop, had left silently without them noticing), Kang Shin-hyuk decided to stop for the day.

“We’ll do this again tomorrow, then I’ll start work the following day.”

“This world is slower, so it’s no issue if I need to stay longer.” It was Kang Shin-hyuk’s perception that was faster, as it was passing by at fifteen times as much, but Mirang’s standard was different. It wasn’t wrong to say that time was passing slower here, he supposed.

“That’s the standard for those who live very long.”

“Hmmm?”

“No, it’s nothing.” It’s those who lived short lives who felt the passage of time the most. Humans, at most, had a hundred years. So, as they faced the passage of time head-on, they had the perception of it being fast. However, Mirang lived a very long time. Eventually, for him, the impression that this world moved slowly remained.

“...Mirang.” Kang Shin-hyuk came to think of the future this world would face as he considered Mirang’s perspective.

“I want you to ask you something.”

“Anything.”

“What will happen to this world in the future? Will they keep sending those monsters?”

“No way. Jormungand can’t waste that sort of thing. If they kept sending monsters to this weakened world, the Hero Universe could capitalize on it to reduce their power.” That, too, couldn’t come from a human’s point of view. No, in the future, Kang Shin-hyuk might have to think that way.

“So how come they did this time... ah.”

“It’s because of you, Anvil. You are what everyone wants.”

-Did I not say you were like an idol to everyone?

“No, you said I’m just an idol of the Hero Universe.”

-I was being humble... 130,000HP bonus for shy members!

Kang Shin-hyuk frowned at the administrator. He had roughly expected something along those lines, but was that really the case? He arrived to save this ruined world, but in the end, he had brought those monsters? If he left, would Jormungand stop looking at it?

-It is surprising that they recognized your existence and opened a passage right away. However, if you leave this world, they wouldn't dare send excessive power here.

"They'll continue to invade in a form tailored to this world. That's why it's currently out of balance."

"Balance."

"Balance is something we all value. Because either side can't collapse." Kang Shin-hyuk wanted to inquire more about that part, but a knock on the door stopped him. No, it wasn't from the door. It was coming from the window.

"Hmm?" Mirang's expression stiffened. On the other hand, the administrator was quick to complain.

- No way! She infiltrated us using the support request!

"What is it?" Mirang was still sitting, so it probably wasn't an enemy. Kang Shin-hyuk stood up from his seat despite his confusion and approached the window. Like a will o' wisp, a pale silver-blue flame turned around in the air outside the window. Inside of it, he could feel an endless affection radiating out towards him through his spiritual power.

"Well, I think it'll be okay."

-Cheh...!

"There's no way to stop her, so open it up, Anvil." Mirang smiled bitterly, having received the administrator's message as well. Kang Shin-hyuk had a rough idea of what was happening now. Opening the window, the light flew in and stopped before him. Shortly after, Tsukuyo, a woman wearing a black silk garment embroidered with gold, appeared in its place.

"Anvil!" Tsukuyo held him in her arms, exuding an unbearably alluring scent.

“I came to meet you!”

-...!

Kang Shin-hyuk accepted her hug while flinching, remembering how he had suffered before. He was wary of her, but she only laughed. It was the laugh of a lion aiming for its prey.

“You’re still cute.”

“You have bad taste, Tsukuyo, to arrive when the work is over.” Mirang spoke up for Kang Shin-hyuk, who was frozen in place.

“I just slowed my steps a little to see Anvil looking cool.” Tsukuyo pulled away, revealing a small porcelain bottle in hand.

“Are you hungry, Anvil? I brought food and alcohol, so let’s share a cup to celebrate our reunion.”

“Alcohol? Good.”

“...It’s not for you.” Tsukuyo responded calmly to Mirang, who was quick to open a drink in the workshop. Kang Shin-hyuk remained stuck in place as he watched the two move around, barely able to open his mouth after a long pause.

“I can’t drink because I’m a minor.”

CHAPTER 186

GRACE OF ANVIL (3)

The appearance of Tsukuyo had a huge impact on the city. Mirang had overwhelmed many with his presence, but Tsukuyo's presence was a bit different.

"She's really beautiful."

"Just looking at her gives me strength."

"It feels like my body is getting a little hot..."

"A goddess."

"She's a goddess." The city was filled with weird energy. Still, they had been given hope due to Milia's awakening, and Tsukuyo's presence poured oil on that fire. Although... it felt a bit annoying.

"Let's work!"

"Is she watching us?"

"I saw her while on patrol, and she waved at us."

"Oooh!"

"As a soldier who had been protecting Ord, I am most proud of this moment!" That's right; now, the soldiers were doing what they could to make themselves more visible to her. Kang Shin-hyuk appraised Tsukuyo, who had captivated the city's residents with her charm, critically.

"I'm grateful you invigorated the soldiers, but this is why they're having pointless thoughts."

"Oh my, Anvil. I didn't do anything special to them. Foolish men always accept a woman's laughter as they wish and hope in vain. Ah, of course, I'm not talking about

you.”

-Shall I kill her?

Kang Shin-hyuk ignored the administrator as per usual.

“I know. I’m not saying you’re wrong, but shouldn’t we be careful to avoid these people who behave as such?”

“You care about me.” Tsukuyo laughed. It was a beautiful sound that held no pretense.

“But it’s okay, Anvil. No one can bother me.”

“Is that so?”

“I’m just happy to be able to meet you like this. It’s why I’m smiling like this.” Thank you for your words, but it’s overwhelming! Kang Shin-hyuk had no choice but to retreat endlessly as she pushed forward.

“Why did the goddess arrive in this world?”

“Is she with the apostle?”

“Perhaps she’s the apostle’s...?”

“Or maybe she’s also an apostle.” The people weren’t blind, however. They were able to roughly guess their relationship when they saw her cling to Kang Shin-hyuk. Because of that, some unfortunate misunderstandings were happening.

“Still, what about Her Majesty?”

“Her Majesty became a god. Maybe...”

“I see!” What was it? Kang Shin-hyuk had a sinking feeling as the soldiers standing guard in the inner city murmured. Next to him, Tsukuyo was thinking seriously.

“She’s a new member. Are you interested in her?”

“No!” Tsukuyo’s eyes slightly widened as Kang Shin-hyuk shook his head in fear. Even if Milia forgave such a misunderstanding, the administrator would not.

“No? Still, you did give her such a pretty belt...” Tsukuyo glanced at the wall that guarded the city’s outskirts. She seemed to have read Kang Shin-hyuk’s heart contained in the will of Guardian at once. Kang Shin-hyuk excused himself while blushing.

“I made it while thinking of someone else. Anyway, it wasn’t made as a gift for Milia.”

“Someone else... ah, Eunah?”

“No.”

“Someone other than Eunah? I see...” Tsukuyo looked a bit depressed but soon regained her energy.

“I can take second place now. I will be the first one day.” He vowed not to tell her about Claire out of fear she might be assassinated. Kang Shin-hyuk tried to carefully switch topics.

“Do you want anything? I’ve decided to make Mirang something, so if you’d like to ask for anything...”

“Ah! You know my heart so well.” Kang Shin-hyuk tried hard not to look at her as he received her request.

“A ring would be nice. No, that is... sorry. A necklace... are you still not confident with accessories? Then a fan would be good.”

“A fan?”

“Yes.” Tsukuyo, who was concerned that he might refuse if she asked for the wrong thing, made a compromise.”

“It’s because fans make fire. I would be very happy if you made a wonderful fan full of your passion for me.” The type of object was different, but the properties were the same as what Mirang wanted. No, didn’t a fan fit more with the wind than fire? For Kang Shin-hyuk, with an SS-rank wind mastery skill, it was easier than making a sword of fire. However, he had never made a fan before, but it thought it would be a nice challenge.

“Now, Anvil.” Tsukuyo reached out to him as she held the image of what she wanted in

mind.

“You did this after receiving Mirang’s request, right?” Her small hand reached out toward him. Kang Shin-hyuk shed a bleak smile at her blinking eyes.

“Did you see it?”

“I was late, but my eyes were wide open.”

-Fox.

Kang Shin-hyuk thought it wouldn’t be necessary to do a personal analysis this time, but Tsukuyo had no intention of pulling her hand back. Eventually, Kang Shin-hyuk gave in. Her hand was cool and slender, filling him with conflicted and warm emotions as soon as he held it.

“Yes.” Tsukuyo was smiling as she held his hand. He caught her gaze and tried to interpret her source as quickly as possible. Her heart and actions were troubling, but this was a great chance to understand her a little better.

“Ah...?!” The first impression he received was being thrown into a heavy sea with a weight around his ankles. It was a far deeper and vaster source than that of Mirang that threatened to swallow him.

‘It can’t even compare to Mirang. What the hell is she...?!’ Kang Shin-hyuk vividly remembered Mirang in his wolf form, but Tsukuyo was incomparable even to that. He had been convinced from before that she dealt with spiritual power, but this... was more than Anvil, no, more than Halo?

‘I can’t breathe...!’ It was arrogance to try and understand her at all. Kang Shin-hyuk somehow breached the surface, and that alone was enough to bring about an incredible increase in his power.

– You have gained valuable experience in appraising the unknown through spiritual power. Emotion skill proficiency has increased to S-rank.

-Resist Fire (SS+) proficiency has increased to St rank.

– Golden Dragon Fighter (SS+) has increased.

- You have interpreted parts of the abyss. The size of the soul has increased with a small realization of spiritual power.

Kang Shin-hyuk had grown his skills just by interpreting a small part of her vast spiritual power. Were it not for the strong mental fortitude his previous life had passed onto him, he might've forgotten his purpose.

"Shall we end this for today?"

"Yes? But now it's starting...?!" Suddenly, Tsukuyo pulled away from him. Looking around, he was surprised to find out that more time had passed than he had thought. It was morning when he grabbed onto her hand, but now the day was in full swing.

"Oh, how cute. How can you be such a lovely person?" Tsukuyo smiled happily as she watched him rub his hand in amazement.

-A year to live.

The administrator cursed her as Kang Shin-hyuk blinked a few times before falling a step away from her in a cold sweat.

"I'm sorry, I'm still not good enough."

"No, you are perfect. Otherwise, you wouldn't have been able to face me for so long." Tsukuyo said something he couldn't understand before quickly closing the distance between them to stare into his eyes.

"You are the same from the beginning. I've missed your pure soul." If he faced her endless inky black eyes, he felt like he would pass out.

"I'll make Mirang's item, then I'll make your fan."

"Yes. Until then, I'll have to keep telling you about me. Keep going." Tsukuyo was following Kang Shin-hyuk around with a happy expression. He wanted to send her back to her own world as soon as possible, but he had to admit that she was very attractive.

-Gaia, please, bring the wrath of the gods to burn this fox...

The administrator was quick to rely on Gaia. Was the Hero Universe related to the Gaia

system? Kang Shin-hyuk continued to think of questions that had no answers.

“Ah, yes, I forgot to say tell you.”

“Huh?”

“Janus.” Kang Shin-hyuk’s head raised in a flash at Tsukuyo’s nonchalant response. He instinctively squeezed the handle of the Godslayer sword hanging from his waist.

“I found a little of his information. I’ll tell you later.”

“Thank you.”

“Is it not something I promised?” Tsukuyo covered her mouth and laughed, then spoke in a slightly quieter voice.

“I don’t think it’s something you really care about.”

* * *

That evening, Kang Shin-hyuk continued his research by holding Mirang’s hand (which was going easier after his encounter with Tsukuyo). Towards the end of it, he was summoned by Milia. Tsukuyo seemed keen to follow him but withdrew when he firmly rejected her.

“Anvil, I thought we were pretty close.” Milia sat on the throne with her cheeks puffed up slightly. Kang Shin-hyuk shrugged.

“Are we not?”

“Then why don’t you explain her to me.”

“Tsukuyo?”

“I’m hearing her name for the first time. What a funny name.”

– The Water Fox and the administrator’s hearts agree.

Milia was frowning, causing the soldiers around them to tremble and step away slightly. Did the deification cause something like this?

“You guys, go back.”

“Yes, yes!”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” Milia also noticed it, frowning at the soldiers now. After they all disappeared, Kang Shin-hyuk glanced behind her throne. Normally Zeke was always by her side, but now he wasn't visible.

“What about Zeke?”

“Zeke... he resigned from my escort post.”

“Why?!”

“Because the one he must keep is stronger than him.” Despite her calm tone, there was a deep bitterness in her voice.

“I hope he doesn't give up.”

“Well...” Looking back on his previous conversation with Zeke; a positive outcome seemed unlikely. Instead of saying it, however, Kang Shin-hyuk switched topics.

“You know now, right? Tsukuyo is a member of the Hero Universe. She and Mirang came to help me.”

“To help? So what did she do?” She was sticking to him, creating a disturbance, and making him upset for nothing.

“Isn't her existence of no help?!”

“What, I didn't say anything.”

“The administrator told me!” Those two were conspiring now. Kang Shin-hyuk shrugged, resolving himself.

“The attack that happened yesterday happened because of me.”

“...” Milia bit her lip gently and bowed her head.

“I was told it would be okay if I left. So, until then, it would be good to have those two

here. As long as they are here, this city will be safe.”

“I can’t blame you when you make such excuses...”

“Don’t look at me like that. I’ll leave a bunch of weapons for the soldiers to use. Haven’t you seen how much Brenite we mined?”

“I saw. Yes, I’m looking forward to it. I’ll forgive you for bringing such a strange woman into the castle.” Milia sighed, saying so unconvincingly. Obviously, there was nothing wrong with it, but Kang Shin-hyuk turned away while feeling oddly sorry.

“Anvil, I am now a member of the Hero Universe.” Milia called out to him once more.

“Yes, I know. Congratulations.”

“I was delighted that I was qualified to lead the kingdom myself, but now my people feel farther away.”

“But when I thought about it, there was still one person who I felt closer with.” Milia’s voice quieted.

“Can I continue to think that way?”

-Fox!

Kang Shin-hyuk let out a sigh and looked back at her.

“...I’ll tell you about the Hero Universe’s add friend feature.”

CHAPTER 187

GRACE OF ANVIL (4)

Klang! Klang! Klang!

The sound of metal being hammered resonated in the workshop. Now, Kang Shin-hyuk was making the sword for Mirang. It wasn't possible to find out everything about Mirang in just two days, but his understanding of the flame Mirang had been born with had improved enough to try.

-Resist Fire (SS+) skill proficiency has increased.

The flame that slept at the core of the giant wolf was at the top of a mysterious road. As his understanding of it increased, so too did his resist fire skill. Considering that his skill proficiency grew as much as they had from diving into Tsukuyo's power just a day ago, he was growing at a very fast pace.

-Eunah's whisper: I'm at an SS+ level gate now. It's an erosion type.

-Erosion type... they're increasing. Is it a full-fledged war now?

As he worked, he used the whisper system to converse with his friends. Today's conversation partner was Eunah. No, rather, half the time, it was Eunah.

-Eunah's whisper: I was sure it would be like this one day.

-Yeah, but this timing is too complicated.

It took a while for answers to come back as the flow of time was different between their worlds, but given he was working, that was just

fine.

-Eunah's whisper: Yes... I'm glad my junior grew up before things got harder.

-Eunah's whisper: Even if you were weak, I would always stay by your side to protect

you!

He was suddenly glad he had grown as fast as he did.

-Eunah's whisper: Like my junior, I have to become stronger as fast as possible.

-Eunah's whisper: At least strong enough to roast her with electricity...

Huh?

Goosebumps formed on his arms. The time it took for her next response felt like an eternity.

-Eunah's whisper: It may be hard for you to suffer from strange women, but be patient. I will save my junior.

-No, wait a minute. What strange woman?

-Eunah's whisper: That woman, Tsukuyo.

Kang Shin-hyuk's rhythmic hammering stopped halfway in fear. It was only a message, but he could practically hear the cold voice of Eunah, the Ice Princess, whisper in his ear like a blizzard.

-Eunah's whisper: She's talking very proudly on the free bulletin board. Even with wolf uncle...

That probably meant Mirang. He wasn't aware she was so close to Mirang.

-Eunah's whisper: And that new one named Water Fox. Isn't she a member of the world you've been to? She's also suspicious.

He wanted to erase the message and pretend he hadn't seen any of them, but they kept appearing.

-Eunah's whisper: My junior is still underage. If I become stronger and protect my junior...

-Well... you can rest assured. I can protect myself.

-Eunah's whisper: No, it seems that my grandpa and my junior doesn't know these people well. They put their feelings first and push you around.

Well, he did have that experience of having his first kiss stolen by Tsukuyo, so she wasn't entirely wrong. Of course, he couldn't tell Eunah that, lest she challenged Tsukuyo.

-Eunah's whisper: So, we have to protect you. Until then, I'll practice hard.

-Cheer up.

-Eunah's whisper: I feel refreshed. I won't tire out for the next 100 years.

-I'll be okay.

-Eunah's whisper: I will protect you. No one will touch you.

So scary! But he couldn't tackle it right now. When dealing with Shin Eunah, he needed to be cautious and careful, like crafting glass.

-Shall I handle it?

"No, that's fine. Rather, I would like to check the freeboard right now."

-I think it would be better not to.

At that, it seemed he really had to check it. He accessed the free bulletin board, immediately finding the post that Tsukuyo had posted. The title?

[Tsukuyo – Please pay attention to those who haven't met Anvil yet.]

"This woman is very good at aggravating people..." The text contained proud statements about Anvil, Kang Shin-hyuk, exaggerated descriptions, and false records. Halo had commented that Anvil was on a long-term quest in his world, and Mirang had chimed in with a few comments showing off that he was also with Anvil. There were some members who were complimenting his work, complaining that Tsukuyo was with him, or complaining that he wasn't accepting requests. There were some new members there, as well.

[Water Fox – I am a new member that awakened thanks to Anvil. I want to say hello to

my seniors.]

And then there was a misguided new recruit.

[Loki – You awakened thanks to Anvil? What are you talking about? Are you a blacksmith too? Rather, where’s Janus?]

[Storm Confucius – I haven’t seen him these days. Was he beaten?]

[Rocky – He’s 100 times stronger than you, no way.]

[Miyang – Hey, newcomer, is Anvil next to you? Please tell him. I’m the only one who doesn’t have an Anvil-made weapon.]

[Super Ultra Galaxy Fist – Anvil is doing a dimensional quest now? When will he make me some gloves?]

[Ascaldin – No, now Anvil made a new member of the Hero Universe?]

[Water Fox – I can’t explain in detail... but thanks to his ability, I was able to strengthen my resolve.]

Fortunately, Milia made no further mistakes. However, Tsukuyo continued to message.

[Tsukuyo – That’s not new. However, I hope there will be no misunderstandings. He is just so kind and generous that he gives equally to everyone; it is by no means love.]

[Miyang – Isn’t it the same for you?]

Tsukuyo didn’t reply to that comment. Instead, other members continued to reply as if praying for blessings, and Milia continued to comment herself.

[Water Fox – Anvil is a good person. He is the benefactor of our world; there will be nothing to bother him.]

[Tsukuyo – I hope so because he already has a lot to deal with. There is no need for him to carry a new load.]

[Eunah – The heaviest one is there.]

[Halo – Haha, Anvil’s favorite is Eunah.]

[Bartender – So he’s there with you...]

Kang Shin-hyuk froze at the most recent comment. It should be okay. He thought about sending Claire a message but eventually gave up. Wouldn’t she only become more anxious if he did? She now knew that Tsukuyo had come to him, so it would be better to talk to her in person.

“Hah, what pointless troubles.”

-But now it is better than before, member.

“Is that so?” Kang Shin-hyuk laughed at the administrator’s message.

-Didn’t you receive a guarantee that Janus is safe?

“I did.”

-There has always been antagonism between members. Moreover, Janus is one of the elder members who has been in the Hero Universe for a long time. So you don’t need to worry too much.

“...That’s the way it is.” He had received a report from Tsukuyo about Janus’s current situation earlier. Specifically, Tsukuyo said she had fought with him in the world she visited.

– Maybe the fox attacked him because he was unlucky. The fox...

The administrator was seriously discussing why Tsukuyo had to die. Thanks to it, however, Kang Shin-hyuk’s mood had lightened. He didn’t want to fight Janus; he just wanted to know if he was alive. He believed that one day he would be able to whisper with him again.

“Then, let’s finish the sword for Mirang.”

-I’m looking forward to it.

The metal he was working on right now was a silver metal that sparkled more brilliantly than snow hit by the sun. It was Mirang’s claws. Even with Kang Shin-hyuk’s

developed emotional skill, it was impossible to measure the quality of it. After observing and understanding the origin of the claws' owner, Mirang, it became possible for him to process it. With a little help, it could be processed.

"I wish I could take that magical flame back with me." Kang Shin-hyuk admired the wolf's flame burning like a ruby inside the furnace. He had gained a deeper understanding of fire by exploring the origin of Mirang and Tsukuyo, so he could tell the flame was half-alive. It burned at the perfect temperature, and the powerful magical and spiritual power emanating from it aided in the forging process.

- Please ask.

"It's really scary because I think he might agree."

Klang! Klang! Klang!

Thanks to it, the process was easier than he had been worried about. Of course, if his spiritual power were even slightly insufficient, it wouldn't have been possible.

'Tsukuyo's iron fan is next.' After that, it would be producing weapons for the soldiers of Ord. Kang Shin-yuk suddenly remembered Tsukuyo's comment that he had seen on the bulletin board. She had commented about the burdens he was carrying and how more weight wouldn't be possible. Maybe Milia would notice it herself.

'If she refuses, I'll still make it.' Right, how about making a special weapon for Milia? Knowing that Kang Shin-hyuk had been commissioned by Mirang and Tsukuyo, she had been hiding her envy.

"Okay, let's make it.' Kang Shin-hyuk completely pushed aside his worries about Janus and instead agonized over what he would make for Milia.

He was still too naïve.

CHAPTER 188

GRACE OF ANVIL (5)

-You finished a special experience of shaping the origins of others into the form of a single weapon. It is not something that can be attempted without a deep understanding of spiritual power and extreme skill in metallurgy.

- You have succeeded in creating a custom weapon for only one existence. Its performance is astounding, but it will not allow any other user.

-Your proficiency with Metallurgy has greatly increased. Your Spiritual Power has grown from the experience of embracing other's origins.

[Mirang Salt Tank]

[Cannot be measured]

[Special Ability: Sunseed, Blooded]

*Sunseed: Contains the purifying power of fire. It strengthens itself by absorbing the user's flame. The details of the effect are unknown.

*Blooded: A blade trained with fire and blood. The more injured the user is, the harder and sharper it becomes when coming into contact with a strong flame.

Atop the anvil was a red two-handed sword. The blade was made entirely through processing Mirang's claws, and the length of the blade was two meters long. The handle was about 70cm, including the pommel and cross-guard, which used part of the snake he had caught. The red blade was radiating heat as if it was burning. If someone without flame resistance touched it, it wouldn't just be a minor burn.

-Vwoooooom

...' Kang Shin-hyuk could hear the first cries of the sword as he injected his spiritual power into it. He realized that, for the first time, he had created a masterpiece worthy of the name of Anvil, and at the same time, he recognized it was an object he could

never make with his strength alone.

“Complete... is it done?” Throughout his work, Mirang, who had kept the fire, saw that Kang Shin-hyuk’s hand had stopped and thus began to ask nervously. Shin-hyuk quietly nodded and handed the sword over to Mirang, who easily accepted it with one hand.

“Amazing... Anvil, you made such a nice sword. You were saying you were inferior, but you’re not at all.”

“It’s thanks to you, Mirang. It’s a weapon that hides its potential, so it’s a little different than your source.”

“At the least, it’s the weapon you made.” Mirang swung the sword several times before narrowing his eyes and smiling in satisfaction.

“I think this sword will work well. I’ll have to get used to it... I’ll stay here for a while and take care of you.”

“Thank you, Mirang.” If it were Mirang, it wouldn’t be difficult to deal with a sword that contained his source. He was embarrassed to say that he would protect Kang Shin-hyuk from Jormungand, though.

“Then, call me if something happens, Anvil.”

“I know. Don’t go too far.”

“Yes.” Kang Shin-hyuk was grateful that he would be around. Being safe from Jormungand was one of the reasons, but he also served as a check against Tsukuyo, who had been sticking to him every day. Without Mirang, Shin-hyuk would be in quite a bit of danger. Whenever she looked at him, or their eyes suddenly met, he felt as if he were naked in front of her. If Shin Eunah revealed herself to Kang Shin-hyuk and leaned on him, Tsukuyo was a woman who understood everything about him and affirmed him unconditionally. Both were a burden, but Tsukuyo made him uneasy.

“Is it finally my turn, Anvil?”

“You’re here.” As soon as Mirang left, Tsukuyo appeared. It was like she was able to grasp where he was no matter the time.

“Anvil, what are you doing?”

He wondered why a great person like Tsukuyo was stuck to him, but when he asked the reason, he thought something annoying would happen again.

“I thought you were pretty.

“Ah!” The effect was great.

“Why, Anvil directly praised me...!” Tsukuyo was trembling; her usually pale cheeks were burning red, and tears were forming in her eyes to show that she was genuinely moved. Kang Shin-hyuk felt a sigh in his heart.

“Then, let’s make your item now.” He reached a reluctant hand out to her as if he were a groom in an arranged marriage he did not want

“I’ll ask you, Anvil.” Tsukuyo, on the other hand, grabbed it like a woman marrying the love of her life. It took him an entire week to make the iron fan Tsukuyo wanted.

* * *

To fulfill Tsukuyo’s request, he had to scavenge her source, which served to change his own. What that meant was, like with Mirang, all the stats that composed him were influenced by her to grow.

-You’ve been in contact with the source of the one you cannot dare reach for a long time, and your fundamental understanding of spiritual power has increased.

-You’ve learned from others how to deal with the energy that illuminates the body. Your understanding of Golden Dragon Fighter has increased.

– Golden Dragon Fighter (SS+) skill proficiency has increased to S-rank! Your body has gradually changed into one suitable for all martial arts. Positive adjustments have been made to all body statuses. Agility has grown to SS-rank!

-Resist Fire (SS+) skill proficiency has increased to SS-rank! Your fundamental understanding of fire has increased.

At that point, he wondered if his spiritual power would increase to SS-rank before he was done. Mirang’s sword was a recognizable object with two special abilities, but the

finished iron fan was an unknown object he couldn't analyze. However, Tsukuyo accepted it with sincere surprise and delight.

"Ah, now I have to leave you again."

"With every meeting, there will be separation." Tsukuyo had stayed by his side even to receive the fan, but eventually had to leave as a being of her caliber regretfully couldn't leave her world empty for too long.

"The balance of this world is a curse. Ah, my Anvil. Yet, I have no choice but to listen."

"Why are there so many guardians of the balance in the Hero Universe?"

"I hope one day we meet again, and that we'll be closer when we do."

"..." Tsukuyo left Kang Shin-hyuk uneasy until the end. After she completely disappeared, the administrator vowed to check the support system so that it would never happen again, but Kang Shin-hyuk felt he would face her frequently in the future.

-I will definitely create a quest to pursue and kill that fox.

"Uh... good luck, administrator." Even after making the iron fan, Kang Shin-hyuk continued to work hard. The wall had been completed more or less immediately, but in order to keep it, the soldiers needed to become stronger. Kang Shin-hyuk produced a wide variety of weapons and armor for the soldiers and, finally, siege weapons. It meant that Kang Shin-hyuk had to give up on forging and focusing on casting instead to meet the production demands.

"Well, this is better than I thought?"

-Because the skill of a blacksmith who has mastered metallurgy doesn't just end with pouring molten metal into a mold. 100,000HP bonus!

"Administrator, if you thought I was going to ask why you gave a bonus, you've made a mistake."

- 150,000HP bonus!

-200,000HP bonus!

“Three consecutive ones...?!” If an item were made by casting, it would inevitably be less complete than forging it. However, metallurgy had a tremendous effect on casting as well as forging to help create a special item. Moreover, Kang Shin-hyuk’s metallurgy was based on spiritual power. The liquid metal was poured, cooled, hardened, and refined with spiritual power imbuing it in each step so that the quality couldn’t be bad. And, decisively, his trait would reinforce everything he made.

-Metallurgy skill proficiency has increased to S+ rank! All metallurgy-related actions have an additional 30% speed bonus!

After a tremendous amount of work, his metallurgy grew once more. Now that he received the S+ rank, his mass production work sped up immensely. After that, he returned to forging work and made items to sell on the Hero Universe, as well as some items he wanted to make personally. He had time to consider his other skills, especially Light Mastery. As a bonus, he had some time to study into a matter he wanted to investigate.

“Okay, apparently, this is the best...”

“Anvil, if the time is okay, I have a request for daily necessities... Wait, is that alcohol?”

“Finally. Welcome, Zeke. Drink it and tell me your impressions.”

“?!”

“Did you say alcohol, Anvil?”

“?!” So, a month and a half passed. Mirang remained for the month and a half as promised and left about thirty minutes before Kang Shin-hyuk did.

“Anvil, I look forward to seeing you again. I will not forget the gift you gave me.”

“I really got a great one.”

“It’s embarrassing to accept that sort of thing.” Kang Shin-hyuk had made a sword in return for Mirang’s support, but he still tried to pay him. Kang Shin-hyuk refused, and Mirang eventually gave up and instead handed him an item before running away. It was one of his fangs.

“It’ll be impossible for me to use this for the time being...”

-It seems stronger than the claws. No matter how much you've analyzed Mirang, you'll need to understand fire better to work with this.

"Thanks to Tsukuyo, my understanding of fire improved but... it's still impossible."

-That's right. You have to deal with fire yourself, not just resisting it.

"Fire mastery, too."

-But that's on hold for the time being.

"Why?!" Kang Shin-hyuk sighed and stowed the fang away. After organizing the workshop, he headed off to where he would spend his last thirty minutes in this world. It was the spire on top of the castle. Milia was waiting for him there.

"In this land... other monsters began to appear." Milia, wearing a dress now, said so as she observed the land beyond the wall. Kang Shin-hyuk shrugged.

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault." She shook her head firmly.

"It's because I've been looking for water in this world again." She was correct. The day she had awakened her power, she filled the world with water using the water orb. The water from her power was filled with vitality and permeated the world, becoming rivers and seas. The earth had received that vitality-filled water and gained a new life. It had even started to rain again.

"The territory of those monsters naturally decreased as the land did... other monsters filled that empty spot. But it's not just that. Land beasts will prosper again, so I don't regret it. I did what I had to."

"That's right."

"I just wanted to say thank you." Milia finally said it out loud.

"I was able to start a new world with the remnants of humanity because of you."

"You give me too much credit."

“I haven’t given you enough.” She looked back at him with tears in her eyes, causing him to flinch away.

“I’m really grateful to you, Anvil. Even if you say you don’t know.”

“Yes, you don’t. How I feel every night...” She stopped herself and bit her lip before changing the topic.

“Since the world has changed again, the time ratio with your world will soon readjust. I heard it from the administrator.”

“Yeah.”

“It means that there will be no seven years passing here while you spend only half a year.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“You!” Milia tossed something at him. He caught it reactively before it could hit him, his eyes going wide as he realized what it was.

“The water orb...?”

“This world will never run out, so take it. We don’t need it.”

“You have the trait to deal with water, no.” Milia frowned and began to shout at his refusal.

“If I have the water orb, I will only be a target for Jormungand, so you must take it.”

“It’s a national treasure...”

“Take it!”

“Yes.” He had refused enough. Shin-hyuk quietly took it in his arms, causing Milia to smile.

“I’ve strengthened it with my trait, so it’s a good reward for this quest.”

“You’re proud of it.”

“Now go. I’ve taken everything I can and gave everything I could, so there’s no reason to stick around. I can’t afford it.”

“No kiss this time?”

“Hmm... you’re asking yourself? Perhaps this time it won’t end with a kiss.” Milia swept her blonde hair to the side, her eyes narrowing.

“Will you?”

“No, sorry. I’ll head back.”

“Okay.” Milia laughed.

“I’ll ‘whisper’ to you once in a while.”

“Okay, when I’m not busy.”

“Yes.” Milia’s satisfied smile was rather cute despite her age.

“Oh, yes. Before that... here’s a gift.”

“Well?” Kang Shin-hyuk took out what he had made for her and handed it over. It was a trident made out of Brenite. It was light and sharp but also ridiculously sturdy. It was created with the materials of all sorts of underwater monsters he had purchased from the Hero Universe. It wasn’t quite as good as the ones he made for Mirang and Tsukuyo, but it was SS-grade.

“This...”

“I originally thought it would go well with the water orb, but it should be strong by itself.”

“This, this is really... more than I thought.”

“Hm?”

“Ah.” Milia realized she had made a mistake in her speech. It had only been Mirang and Zeke around him lately...

“Didn’t Zeke quit your escort?”

“Uh...” Milia avoided his gaze, but she couldn’t stand him staring at her.

“He quit as an escort, but as a royal advisor...”

“Tell me more.”

“He gave me some advice about connecting me with you...”

“...” Now it seemed that Zeke was playing matchmaker! He kept coming to his workshop, but Shin-hyuk thought it was because he was bored after quitting his job. No, he was spying!

“Milia, you...”

“Well, what do you mean? You’re already saying goodbye, you cruel man!” Milia’s face reddened in anger, but he laughed.

“Zeke is okay, so don’t worry.”

“...Why are you more worried about him than me?”

“You don’t need to worry anymore. You’re a member of the Hero Universe.”

“Ugh...”

“So, I’ll go now.” This time, with no regrets, Kang Shin-hyuk turned around.

“This really doesn’t make sense.”

“Bye.” Milia was complaining, but she didn’t chase after him. Kang Shin-hyuk waved her goodbye as the dimensional quest came to an end. The next moment, he was back in his My Room.

“It’s over.”

-We were fortunate there was no further conflict with Jormungand.

“I’m sure it’ll be busy from now on.” With this quest, Kang Shin-hyuk had a rough

feeling about the relationship between the Hero Universe and Jormungand. As a member of the Hero Universe, he realized that it was unavoidable for Earth to collide with Jormungand.

“I’ve no choice but to struggle or be killed.”

-Yes.

Kang Shin-hyuk smiled at the administrator. Soon, a whisper appeared.

-Water Fox’s whisper: I guess I haven’t told you about the way we propose yet.

-Water Fox’s whisper: A woman first proposes to a man by giving them a gift, often an heirloom.

-Water Fox’s whisper: If they refuse the gift, they refuse to marry you, but if they receive it, it means they will go to the woman’s house as a son-in-law.

-Water Fox’s whisper: But when a man who received a woman’s gift gives a gift to her, it means he will bring her to live with him.

-Water Fox’s whisper: How difficult. You’re a difficult man.

Kang Shin-hyuk smiled bitterly at the whispers arriving. From the time Zeke acted as a spy, he knew there must be some hidden meaning. But wasn’t this approach cute compared to Tsukuyo? Kang Shin-hyuk thought that way as he laughed and told her he would see her next time.

-I have to kill her.

And he had to go through a lot of effort to stop the administrator.

CHAPTER 189

ROOKIE OF THE YEAR 2ND SEMESTER (1)

-The total number of HP you currently have is 1,065,478,950 HP.

It had been a productive weekend. Kang Shin-hyuk became proud upon seeing the administrator's message.

-If you hadn't robbed the bulletin board of supplies, you would've had five times this.

"The total isn't important. No, of course it is." What was more important was whether he could make something he could understand and make things that suited his users. That was the belief the Anvil of his previous life also held. During the last month and a half of working in Kieron, his synchronization rate had reached 60%, and now Kang Shin-hyuk was showing off his stubbornness.

"Because I took materials from Tsukuyo and Mirang to make things, I should offer something that is at least comparable to that."

- As a result, your popularity has risen even further. Well done.

"So you say..." However, the administrator wasn't wrong. Up until now, it couldn't be denied that he had produced somewhat disappointing results when compared to the name of Anvil in the Hero Universe. No matter how much spiritual power his work contained, the armaments themselves couldn't be viewed as excellent. So far, Tsukuyo and Eunah had been engaged in a bidding war to take up all of his works. Now, however, he had begun to produce achievements worthy of the brand of Anvil, so other figures who knew the deceased Anvil began to open up their wallets in earnest.

[Loki- This halberd... ah...]

[Miyang - Ah, ah...]

[Loki - You haven't bought anything from Anvil yet?]

[Miyang - Mmmm! Loki, you had something from him already, so why'd you buy it this

time?! I haven't gotten one yet!]

[Loki – Ah, I didn't know, hahaha. Cry a little harder, hahahaha.]

[Super Ultra Galaxy Fist – Oh, what great performance! Grandpa, make me something!]

The armaments he made were quick to leave the trading board, and he even caught the eye of new members who didn't know of Anvil. As a blacksmith, he had succeeded in being recognized by the Hero Universe.

[Horus – No, the real story is about the rank. SSS-grade, but the performance is weirdly good. The power goes beyond its rank!]

[Halo – That's the trait of Anvil's armaments.]

[Garnet – Huh, a force I don't recognize resides in this armament. I was lucky to get it for this price... Anvil, you said? Amazing.]

[Eunah – Loki, Garnet... check.]

[Loki – ? What check?]

In fact, considering the response from the Hero Universe, the fact that he made 1.6 billion HP wasn't all that much. It was the result of all the work he had done in Kieron and all the materials he had to buy as a result. Shin-hyuk felt like he had begun to catch up with his past self, so he felt a little proud, but he knew he still had a way to go. However, now was the time to focus on other subjects.

“Do I still have time before school?”

– You can spare about twenty minutes.

“I won't have time for a proper breakfast then.” Kang Shin-hyuk munched on an energy bar as he looked over the item Milia had handed to him before he left.

[Water Orb]

[SS+Rank]

[Special Abilities: Water God, Ocean, Ice Flower]

* Water God: Grants the power of a god of water. You can create and manipulate water and amplify its effect. For water not made by the orb, the effect is reduced by 50%.

*Ocean: Grants excellent resistance to water and half the resistance to ice and water vapor. It grants the ability to move freely in the water.

*Ice Flower: Can turn water into ice. The strength of ice is amplified.

[The object that the water god handed over to the descendants. They awakened the power of their blood through this orb. The orb's ability has also declined, but thanks to the strong descendant who has recently awakened, it has begun to regain its strength.]

"..." Kang Shin-hyuk became quiet as he opened a new energy bar. It was amazing. It seemed to him that this whole damaged orb thing was becoming a tradition at this rate. But even after losing its strength, its ability was still this great? It could even manipulate ice, which he hadn't seen in Kieron.

"Hmm... it seems that if the descendant doesn't use it, it'll lose its strength... doesn't that mean I need to contact Milia regularly...?"

-It seems that the water fox is pretty clever.

Kang Shin-hyuk kept tearing into energy bars as he read the administrator's message.

-But, like a water fox, she's low in intelligence, so she doesn't know much about spiritual power.

"Well..." Although those who inherited the blood of the water god had the power to strengthen the orb, Kang Shin-hyuk could use spiritual power to bolster it himself. It could be seen in the growth of the Shinfeng Orb, so it would presumably work here as well. Anyway, it was obvious why Milia had granted it to him.

"Is the way I reject her wrong?"

-As far as I've judged it, you didn't reject her. Rather, you left too much hope.

Kang Shin-hyuk sighed.

"I wish she could meet a good man soon."

-There is none better than you.

“Don’t affirm weird things.” Kang Shin-hyuk shook his head and devoured his last energy bar before washing up. It was time to head off to school, but right before he could, a text flew in that improved his mood.

[Claire: Got back today, come to the bar after school.1

[I will.]

Kang Shin-hyuk struggled to calm his mind as he headed off.

* * *

The school that day was very noisy. The cause was, of course, that Kang Shin-hyuk and Baek In-ha who cleared an S-class gate. For Kang Shin-hyuk, it felt like the distant past, but on Earth, it had just happened last week.

“Hey, can’t we just have Baek In-ha fight?”

“What about Algiers? She can break an S-rank gate alone.”

“Is it true that the third years are falling apart?”

“Is Kang Shin-hyuk stronger than Baek In-ha now?”

“I don’t think so. But did you see Hyeongju Ahn?”

“It’s because he protected those two that they’re safe.”

“Take it up with Kang Shin-hyuk. When he beats you, I’ll be proven right.” It was ridiculous that the school gave two first-years the task to clear an S-rank gate, but it was more absurd they had safely cleared it. It had proved that the teachers’ judgment of the two had been correct.

-They’re making a fuss with just an S-class gate. This is a great proof of how far you’ve gone in the Hero Universe.

“It wasn’t really anything new...”

“Why do you look like you don’t care?”

“It wasn’t anything special.” Kang Shin-hyuk threw something at Baek, who greeted him. It wasn’t the sort of thing that could be avoided or caught unless you were someone with a unique speed-related trait-like Baek. Baek successfully plucked it out of the air and cheered as soon as he recognized it.

“Shinyuk!”

“Not that again.”

“Shinyuk...!” Baek was ecstatic, as what he had caught as the Shinfeng orb. They had made a promise to lend him the Shinfeng orb when Shin-hyuk didn’t need it.

“Senior Shinyuk... no, you’re better than a senior.”

“I’ll let you borrow it for the week.” Kang Shin-hyuk opened his textbook for the first class.

“What?”

“No, you’re growing fast, but it doesn’t feel so strange anymore.” Baek In-ha was staring at him with his head tilted.

“Oddly enough, sometimes after the weekend, it feels like the atmosphere has changed a lot.”

“It’s because I’ve had a dynamic weekend.”

“Ha...” Baek seemed at a loss for words. Kang Shin-hyuk raised an eyebrow as his friend drew closer.

“Did you see Claire’s breasts? Is that it?”

That afternoon, Kang Shin-hyuk finished his work with Lee Na-hee after class, then headed straight to the frontline bar on his bike.

CHAPTER 190

ROOKIE OF THE YEAR 2ND SEMESTER (2)

Kang Shin-hyuk entered the frontline bar, the doorbell ringing pleasantly behind him as he did so. He could see Claire in front of the counter, but no one else was around.

“No Eunah?”

“No, no.” Claire giggled and shook her head. Her red hair was tied into a ponytail that moved from side to side as her head shook. Kang Shin-hyuk wasn’t quite relieved, however.

“Why not?”

“She’s number one in the rankings, wouldn’t it be strange if she could afford to come to the bar every day after work?”

“You’re also a high-ranker.”

“I could say the same to you, Mr. Rank Five.”

“True.” Claire had gone to the United States this time, but she was a superhuman who didn’t fight on the frontlines. She did, however, regularly supply potions and items to each country’s superhumans. It was different from Shin Eun-hyuk, who didn’t engage in official activities despite being certified as rank five internationally.

“Thanks to that, it seems Eunah has been very busy.”

“...What, after so long, you’re looking for Eunah? Have you been contacting her?” Claire reacted sensitively to his thoughtless questions. Kang Shinhyuk smiled at her pouting.

“No way. I missed you. It was a long time for me.”

“Ah, good... uh, you’re like a mastermind.” Claire, who had inadvertently laughed at his honest confession, suddenly became shy.

“I missed you a lot too.” It became awkward, but it didn’t feel bad. The two faced each other and enjoyed the unfamiliar feeling a little more.

“I have a present for you.”

“That’s right, a gift. I’ve been excited for it.” He had proclaimed it before she went to America. He grinned and pulled out his gift, a pistol. It was rather large for a regular-sized pistol, but it had intricate enchantments and decorative gemstones engraved on the surface to grant it an almost antique look. Beyond just being aesthetically pleasing, the pistol was imbued with condensed spiritual power that granted it terrifying power. On the side, Claire’s full name had been written on it in neat handwriting one of Lee Na-hee’s enchantments. Instead of being reinforced when held by its owner, it prevented others from handling it.

“Ah.” Claire’s gaze wasn’t one of amazement. Kang Shin-hyuk pretended not to notice as he vigorously explained it.

“It’s a handgun I made for you. Your main armament is a firearm, right? It has a function to change into a rifle, and it even has a cover mode that allows it to float in the air and automatically fire at enemies with spiritual power.”

“I’m a little curious about that.” Her ears pricked up at the idea of it transforming, but her heart still felt cold at the realization that the gift she received wasn’t romantic at all.

“Actually, this is part of a series. I thought it would be nice to have a common weapon for when we all work together with those masks later on.”

“Huh, are you a genius?” She had to admit it was cool to imagine a squad that all used the same type of weapon.

“Still...” Claire liked the pistol, but she couldn’t help but feel a little disappointed. Kang Shin-hyuk decided to present her with a second gift just this time.

“Let me change into my bartender outfit really quick.”

“Huh? I wasn’t going to open up the bar today.”

“Wait a second, you’ll see.” Claire was still fiddling with her pistol with an odd look as he came back from changing clothes. Her eyes went wide as he walked over to the bar

counter.

“Then, please look forward to this bartender’s signature cocktail. It is only for a certain guest.”

“Signature...? Is it your original cocktail?” He only smiled as he started making the cocktail.

“Aren’t all these materials from different dimensions?”

“Yes, so I can’t sell it as a product.” It used liquors and fruits from other dimensions. The final ingredient was an egg. He added it as an afterthought, separating the yolk and putting just the whites into a shaker.

“A pink lady?”

“That was the inspiration.” A pink lady cocktail contained cream and egg white; however, the egg that Kang Shin-hyuk added was from the birds of Kieron. It tasted similar to an egg yet had a distinct flavor. When added to alcohol, it went quite well. He recalled the reaction of Zeke and Mirang when he had made it for them the first time. He poured it into a chilled cocktail glass, the liquid a vibrant red color, much like Claire’s hair and eyes.

“Even though whites are mixed in, the color is very vivid.”

“But the taste is smooth.” He almost added, ‘Like you’ but refrained from doing so. Claire’s face turned slightly red as if she had read his mind, however.

“What do you call it?”

“Claire.”

“What’s with that? It’s too obvious.” Claire said as much but couldn’t hide her smile. Receiving a cocktail named after her was a special experience for her as a bartender

“Did you try it yourself?”

“I had a friend taste test it. Mirang.”

“Oh, he was saying he came by to help.”

“I didn’t let Tsukuyo try it.”

“I would be very upset if she did.” Unlike the pistol, he seemed to have received a passing score this time. She lifted the glass with a satisfied laugh and sipped at it, savoring the bright red liquor. Then, looking a bit surprised, she finished it all in one go.

“You don’t need to drink it all at once.”

“This is delicious...! I didn’t even care if it tasted good!”

“Hey! I studied hard.” Claire laughed at his blunt response and leaned over the bar to hug him.

“Thank you, I was impressed.”

“Thank you for liking me.”

“How’d you think of a gift like this?” He just thought that Claire would like this the most. He became embarrassed admitting it, but she only hugged him tighter.

“I want to kiss you.” Claire made the mistake of letting the words flow out of her mouth. Kang Shin-hyuk nodded quietly.

“Oh, but I can’t because I don’t know when Eunah’s coming.” In fact, that was just an excuse to curb the emotions growing beyond her control. Having had a glimpse at the heart that wanted to make her a cocktail, she couldn’t stay still.

“Wouldn’t it be okay to do it once?”

“Yes... then just once.” In the end, her hesitation came about because he was younger than her. She still felt a bit guilty when she dealt with him, but if Kang Shin-hyuk forgave her, then she would be able to.

“Ah...” The two fell away from each other after a too-short moment. A sigh of regret left their mouths.

“Once it’s over, it’s over.”

“Then, one more time.”

“Yes.” In the end, they didn’t end with just one kiss. Fortunately, something in Claire’s pocket vibrated before the fire spread out of control.

“Eunah’s coming.”

“Huh?”

“I had a magic power detection artifact installed in the store. She’ll be here soon.” At least one of them would die if she walked in on them kissing, and that person would most likely be Claire. The two quickly moved away and made sure no traces of the other were left on them.

“No lipstick on me.”

“It’s not a cartoon.” The doorbell rang as they prepared themselves. Usually, Shin Eunah would teleport or barge in.

“I’m here.”

“Come in, Eunah.”

“Junior...!” Shin Eunah, who had arrived with a tired expression, quickly regained her bright smile as soon as she saw Kang Shin-hyuk.

“Did Claire call you?”

“I did. We should have a return party.”

“It’s been so noisy. I’ll be working tomorrow anyway.” Eunah sat down in front of the bar with a smile.

“Junior, my present.”

“Ah, right.” As if he had been waiting, Kang Shin-hyuk produced a pistol with Shin Eunah’s name engraved on it. She accepted it with her eyes twinkling like a child receiving a present from Santa.

“It’s a gift from grandpa...”

“You called me grandpa again.”

“Ah, I’m so happy that I reverted to that habit.” Shin Eunah had a bright smile as she held the pistol. Kang Shin-hyuk thought about explaining it in detail but decided to remain quiet. Shin Eunah suddenly noticed that he was dressed up as a bartender after taking her time to enjoy the gift.

“I want to drink a cocktail from my junior.”

“What would you like?”

“Are there no originals?”

“It’s still difficult to make.”

“Then, I want something sweet.”

“Okay, wait a moment.” Kang Shin-hyuk started to make a cocktail as Shin Eunah watched him.

“Junior, have you ever drank?”

“Huh?”

“It was just a little, but I thought it smelled like alcohol.” Fortunately, she didn’t notice Claire flinch next to her.

“It must be an illusion, I’m a minor.”

“Is it?” Shin Eunah nodded and laughed. Kang Shin-hyuk felt a pang of guilt as he continued to shake the cocktail.

-I’m enjoying this morning drama. 200,000HP for your poker face!

‘Don’t give me such a strange bonus!

-300,000HP bonus!

In the end, Kang Shin-hyuk received over 1 million HP as a bonus from the administrator that evening.

CHAPTER 191

ROOKIE OF THE YEAR 2ND SEMESTER (3)

[Thyrus No.4: Zephyrus]

[SS+ Rank]

[Special Abilities: Supply Ammunition, Windshot, Acceleration, Protection]

*Supply Ammunition: As long as you have the ammunition, the ammo is automatically loaded into the magazine. Increases the destructive power of bullets by 30%.

*Windshot: Fires a bullet of the wind. The power and speed of the bullet are reinforced with the power of the wind, and a strong shock wave is generated around the impact by the power of vibration.

*Acceleration: Accelerates the user with the power of the wind. Bullet speed is also accelerated.

*Protection: The blessing of strong winds protects the user and strengthens their ability to handle the wind.

[The fourth in a series of pistols, it is an artifact containing the power of strong winds and vibration, and it cannot be used by anyone else other than the owner. Its power increases when it is held by the owner.]

"..." After school on Tuesday, Baek In-ha stood blankly holding the pistol he had received from Kang Shin-hyuk.

"What is this?"

"Thyrus is the pine cone staff that lord Bacchus carries. Zephyr is the god of the west wind, so it is an artifact that faithfully embodies the power of the wind."

"No! Why am I holding a treasure that only a high-ranker would have?!"

“That’s a good question. Welcome to Masked Bacchus.” Along with that, Kang Shin-hyuk handed him a half-face mask that he had purchased from the Hero Universe. It was the same artifact he used when he worked, which cost a whopping 12 million HP (bought at 7.5 million HP at the special VIP price).

“What, what do I have to do to receive this? What is Masked Bacchus? Are there any beauties?”

“We’re a group that aims for mankind’s peace and Claire’s self-satisfaction, transcending the interests of each country. We mainly engage in dressing up and dealing with illegal gates.”

“Are you trying to match your girlfriend?”

“This kid is smart...?” However, while Baek grumbled, he accepted the two items offered. Kang Shin-hyuk’s proposal wasn’t so bad. The fashion sense was off, but if he could build a close relationship with them, he wouldn’t lose out. Besides, it meant getting some very useful artifacts.

“More importantly, Algiers and Na-hee are pretty. I can’t help but accept it!”

“You really said it out loud.” Kang Shin-hyuk shook his head, but Baek was shameless.

“Aren’t you with Claire? Why do you care?”

“Apart from what they think of you... do you really have any intention of getting involved in the first place?” The idea that this guy was quite sleazy couldn’t be erased. Baek looked at him seriously, stopping his thoughts.

“Look at my eyes burning with passion for my noona.”

“Yes, go away.” He gave him what he wanted to, so he didn’t need to hang out with Baek anymore. Kang Shin-hyuk sent a text to Claire, letting her know he secured a new member, then headed off to the training center in Blackwood. He had delivered Lee Na-hee her pistol directly when they worked together yesterday, so that only left Eleanor.

“Oh, Shin-hyuk’s here!”

“Catch him!”

“Uh, huh? What?!” The members who had been training outside threw their weapons down and rushed him. While he was caught off guard in embarrassment, they picked him up and carried him. He made sure to remember the face of one who touched his ass amid the confusion.

“We should celebrate you clearing the S-class gate!”

“Why didn’t you come sooner? We’ve been preparing since yesterday!”

“Our Rookie King has completely turned Shinyoung upside down!” They brought him to the same yard they had the barbecue party before. Do Woojin was stoking the flames waiting for them.

“Our Woojin cooks pretty well.”

“He’s a good boy.”

“Let’s have a barbecue!” Shin-hyuk’s seniors in the Wyvern Knights were quick to find reasons to celebrate and party. His resistance was meaningless, however, as the seniors sat him down next to Eleanor and withdrew.

“Why am I here...?”

“You are the vice-captain.”

“Oh, right. That did happen...” Eleanor smiled at him.

“Even if everyone is tired these days, you appearing on the news has made the Wyvern Knights lively.”

“That... they certainly are.” Just half a year ago, Shinyoung’s students had only focused on studying and training. But after the occurrence of the fourth countercurrent in Korea and Jormungand’s raid on Paris, as well as the gate incidence rate increasing, the students had been recruited to the field. Just one week had passed, but the students’ stress was no joke. But Kang Shin-hyuk and Baek In-ha’s performance at the gate seemed to have alleviated their moods just a bit.

“It’s become so bothersome lately.”

“Does it suit your taste better to hide and move around?” Kang Shin-hyuk shrugged at

Eleanor's mischievous expression.

"The high-rankers are being dragged around and given a hard time too."

"I'm used to it now. I'll be at the center of the world someday." Eleanor could say such a thing with confidence. Karen intervened before he could respond, however, pushing cooked meat in front of him.

"Now, eat a lot! You can't leave until you eat all of it!"

"Wow?!"

"Look at you, taking care of Shin-hyuk."

"Huh, what?"

"It's not like that!" Karen shouted at her seniors as Kang Shin-hyuk quietly munched on the food given to him.

"Karen also wore a mask before... no, let's not make her one.' Kang Shin-hyuk secretly delivered Eleanor her pistol after the seniors calmed down and left them be.

"What is this?"

"It's a weapon for when we work as Masked Bacchus. I made sure it can use your trait."

"My trait with a gun...?" Eleanor tilted her head, but her eyes widened when she read the artifact's information. It was an SS+ rank artifact, just like each one of the Thyrsus series. All of them had different abilities, but none were lacking. The only exception was Kang Shin-hyuk's.

"I can't accept this."

"What if you agree to give me the monster parts obtained when you work as, and with Masked Bacchus in the future?"

"Even then, it's still too much."

"Take it, everyone's got one."

“...Na-hee too?” When Kang Shin-hyuk nodded, she quieted down and picked it up.

“I will reward you by killing a lot of strong enemies with this. I’ll kill a lot of them.” For some reason, her attitude appeared to change instantly.

“There’ll probably be a call for the team members sooner or later.”

“Ah...” Shin Eun-hyuk was officially recognized as fifth place in the international rankings. If he continued to do nothing, it wouldn’t look good. So, yesterday after the party, Claire, Shin Eunah, and he accepted a request from the association under the name of Masked Bacchus to proceed with work. The identities of Claire and Shin Eunah would be known to the association even if they wore masks, so it would prove they were working hard at the same time.

“In that case, you’ll be able to play more freely. You’re too strong to be trapped in the framework of the school.”

“Yes...” Eleanor had hidden too much until now. She needed to be free of the burden of the royal family. In that sense, she needed the mask the most.

“Thanks. Well... can you help me practice with the gun?”

“If it’s at a basic level, sure.” She was a training enthusiast second to none, so she could learn how to use it in no time. Eleanor nodded with a shy smile.

“Let’s go see the wyvern after we eat.”

“Yeah.”

“A mask for the wyvern too...”

“No, that’s impossible.” The other members had no idea what sort of conversation they were having.

“Karen’s pretty too, but after all...”

“Eleanor wins out.” The seniors were bluntly discussing their own matters while Karen stuffed her face with food.

“The captain is skilled.”

“Will there be a public wedding with the former wyvern knights, you think?”

“Stop it, former captain Douglas Payne will come after you.” Thus, the seniors chatted as they ate, some of whom were once in the previous captain’s faction exchanged uneasy glances.

“I heard Lee Na-hee said she was going for Shin-hyuk.”

“Eh, the number one in last year’s popularity vote?”

“This year, the students had to secretly vote since the festival was canceled, but Lee Na-hee will probably win it again.”

“No, I believe our captain will do well this year.”

Kang Shin-hyuk decided to ignore the rumors circulating around him.

And so, the second semester began in earnest.

CHAPTER 192

ROOKIE OF THE YEAR 2ND SEMESTER (4)

On Wednesday, Hyeongju Ahn showed up in a much better state. As soon as he saw Kang Shin-hyuk, he waved him over with papers in hand.

“This is a list of assets that can be handed over now.”

“I wish you’d just text.”

“It’s clearer like this.” A quick glance showed the resources that Vanguard would offer in exchange for the artifacts he created for them.

“Can you offer me this?”

“Of course. If I tell everyone I sold it to you, they’d understand.”

“Man, you guys need to learn from Baekyang about making deals.”

“Well, I’m in no rush.”

“Huh...!” Losing their guild master had been a heavy blow, but Baekyang had been taking advantage of the weakness they had been showing. Kang Shinhyuk examined the charts Hyeongju handed over and engraved them into his mind. He could calculate the value of everything on them if he took some time, but he knew someone who could do it more accurately.

-It is clear they’re begging you for help. This level of assets is barely in the A+ class.

That was the administrator.

“The A+ level is no joke. Why are you looking at me funny?” Kang Shin-hyuk sighed and pressed Hyeongju Ahn, who responded with surprise.

“It’s not that you can create SS-class artifacts every time. This already means we’re investing in your future heavily...”

“Hey, Baek. Show him.”

“Ha.” Baek In-ha, trembling slightly, pulled out the pistol Shin-hyuk had made for him. Artifacts with owners could be set, so only certain information was viewable, and right now, it was set so that only the name and rank could be read.

“SS+?!” Hyeongju Ahn was stunned upon examining it. He wasn’t entirely wrong about making SS-grade items each time, as the soul connector and the zephyr were made of special materials, but that didn’t need to be said out loud.

“There will be far greater things than what you imagine, depending on what you invest.”

“Hey, I’ll pull out all stops, so wait!”

“No, today, I’ve got to go to practice first.” After Kang Shin-hyuk and Baek In-ha had cleared the S-class gate and proved themselves, they were being assigned A-class or higher gates. In fact, they were already treated fully as official superhumans in the top 5%, not as students. However, they were able to break through the A-class gate they went to in no time, so now Hyeongju Ahn was taking care of business.

“I want to face a release type next time.”

“Ha, it’s surprisingly difficult to shoot this.” Kang Shin-hyuk was wondering what sort of gate they’d go to next as Baek practiced shooting the pistol next to him.

“Did you not learn how to shoot?”

“Shinyuk, please teach me.”

“I’ll only teach you the posture.” The gun he built used special.550 magnum bullets filled with mana stone powder from Mystic, a weapon brand for superhumans. Kang Shin-hyuk had already analyzed the bullets’ structure and thought of making his own sooner or later. Baek’s posture was corrected by Shin-hyuk, and he managed to hit a target for the first time. A shock wave rippled out from the bullet after it connected, shattering the target.

“This really is killer...”

“Make sure to practice.”

“When the next gate breaks out, I’ll face it with only this pistol.”

“Are you playing games?” Fortunately, incidents like the S-class gate and Jormungand’s attack couldn’t happen all the time, so they were able to clear all their assigned gates in the second week without incident. Shinyoung carefully checked and posted the success of the gates assigned to the students to ignite their competitive spirits. They had beaten out the second years and ranked first.

“They’re trying to turn the students’ complaints into competitive spirit.”

-The effect seems to be working. Maybe this type of environment is better for skilled people.

“You’re acting laid back, administrator.”

-A 110,000HP bonus for members who accurately grasp my heart!

The school was functionally telling the students to participate in national and global emergencies, but it was a good experience for them so that Kang Shinhyuk wouldn’t complain. In addition to that, even members of the Hero Universe seemed to be busy dealing with similar issues caused by Jormungand.

* * *

“Okay, are you all ready?”

“Yes, but what’s with this cloak? Was it made with the pieces from the shadow predators you collected before?”

“Wow, don’t...”

“Somehow, it feels good.” Meanwhile, Masked Bacchus’s activities had begun. After recruiting Baek In-ha as a new member, they all put on their masks and capes made of shards of shadow predators and wandered the streets of Seoul at night with their pistols, sweeping through the irregular gates that formed. Claire and Lee Na-hee worked as magic agents, whereas Kang Shin-hyuk and Eleanor served in the front as melee users. Baek In-ha was in charge of assisting both teams with his unique mobility. Shin Eunah, their non-regular member, would only appear when she was available. Her pistol was designed to manage her enormous magical power, so each time she showed it things ended pretty quickly after only a couple of bullets.

The fame of the elite group called Masked Bacchus, led by the Alchemist and the Death Puppeteer (though most people were calling him Shin Eun-hyuk), began to spread. The power of those two was quite high, but all of them were of a high-level that people couldn't help but pay attention to. There were suspicions that Shin Eunah was a member, but they managed to keep her presence under wraps for the most part. Besides, most people assumed the number one in the world wouldn't have time to gallivant around in a mask.

"Now there are posts asking us to come abroad. We'll be busier in the future." In that way, Masked Bacchus was gathering attention around the world and not just in Korea. The members were gathered today in Kang Shin-hyuk's room in the Royal Class dorm to celebrate. Claire was scrolling through her phone, humming while Kang Shin-hyuk smiled at her.

"It's good to be busy, but will there be a payoff?"

"Hey, did you know? Whenever you work, the association receives compensation?"

"?!" Claire laughed and put her lips next to his ear at his shocked expression.

"How about I reward you with a date?" Baek In-ha, who was sitting on the other side of Shin-hyuk, understood immediately what was happening and raised his hand.

"Oh, the boss is embezzling! Please date me too!"

"Baek, you don't receive a share."

"Ah." Kang Shin-hyuk coldly silenced Baek.

"Unnie..."

"Hmph." As the eyes of the rest of the female members sharpened, Claire smiled.

"I'm joking, I'm joking. We're working in secret, right? I can't just hand out the money proudly, but I've been holding onto it."

"Unnie, you're really thorough."

"Ah..." Lee Na-hee let out an excited sigh as Eleanor pouted. Watching them, Kang Shin-hyuk realized that Claire had just claimed him as her own to them.

'No, that's kind of scary.' He decided to eat quietly and avoid getting in-between the three. But, just then, a whisper arrived.

- Halo's whisper: Anvil, will you be arriving soon?

-Yes, I'll be there this weekend.

-Halo's whisper: Wonderful. It will be over in the next few decades or so.

-It won't take that long.

He still had quests left to resolve. Kang Shin-hyuk bitterly smiled, then suddenly thought of Janus. Where was the one who kept asking him for a new sword?

...We'll meet someday.' As his synchronization rate increased, his feelings toward those he had known in the past did as well. If he hadn't met Claire, he might've ended up a lot more like the Anvil of his previous life.

"Shin-hyuk?" Noticing his complicated thoughts, Claire called out his name, anxiously.

"Yes?"

"Ah, no, it's nothing."

"Aha." The two shared a look, and Claire smiled in relief, but the others were only more dissatisfied.

"Ah, I want to go."

"I'm not going to leave these two as they are."

"You go alone."

"Yep."

October passed without any festivals, and soon November arrived.

Shin Eun-hyuk's world ranking rose to fourth place.

CHAPTER 193

ROOKIE OF THE YEAR 2ND SEMESTER (5)

The rankings were renewed every three years, but there were cases where it would happen faster due to changes in the international situation. There would also be cases of renewal before then as well as when the majority of the top-rankers consented to the change. It would also happen when an existing ranker died, and the rankers below them were raised as a result. Shin Eun-hyuk had risen to the fourth rank because Emil Markov, who was the last number four, had died.

“Is everyone gathered?”

“The new faces have increased so much in just a few years.”

“A few years, everything has changed in just two months.” Although an unprecedented incident in which two top rankers had betrayed humanity and even one of them had died, the members of the seven top rankers that represented earth’s superhumans armed forces didn’t change very easily. When the top ranks shook, the world would shake with it, and if a top ranker died, then the world stock markets fluctuated. They were beings that maintained the world’s stability just by existing. However, the top rankers couldn’t skip their meetings just because two members had turned out to be traitors.

“Thank you for attending this meeting.” It was the number one, Shin Eunah, who served as the chairman. She bowed her head and spoke calmly. Kang Shinhyuk, who attended in his mask, clapped moderately as he looked around the surroundings. The meeting place was in a small conference room in the Lubron Hotel in Seoul. The reason why the meeting was being held there was that Korea was ranked first. Since the previous number one had also been Korean, everyone was used to it.

“It’s been a while since we’ve met here. Joo-young Oh was sitting there shamelessly last time too.”

“That psycho.”

“I mean, the two who betrayed us were Asian, right? How can we trust this new guy?”

Kang Shin-hyuk turned his head and looked at the person who just spoke up.

‘Mid-forties, but they looked like they’re in their thirties... I’ll need to watch out for this one.’ It was Ulrich Hinchel, who was number seven. He had risen to sixth place after Bomber Girl betrayed them, but then his ranking had been fixed after Kang Shin-hyuk took fifth place. Now he had risen again after the fourth ranker had died.

“What are you looking at?” Ulrich spoke German, but Kang Shin-hyuk was now able to handle all languages after joining the Hero Universe. He responded to him in perfect German.

“Either leave or shut up.”

“Ha.” He tried to stand up with an excited smirk, but he didn’t expect Kang Shin-hyuk to react so quickly. He was blocked by the five threads projected by the soul connector that fastened him and his chair to the floor.

“Weren’t you going to go? No? Then you’ll be quiet?”

“Ugh...!” When his body didn’t budge, he raised his magical power to activate his trait. In response to him, however, the spiritual threads tightened around him and constrained even the movement of his magic. Kang Shin-hyuk’s cold eyes told him there would be no further warning.

“...Damn.” He knew it was his defeat the moment Kang Shin-hyuk fired the threads without his noticing. It was as good as saying he’d be dead if Shin-hyuk wanted him to be. Only after acknowledging his death in his heart did Ulrich relax. Kang Shin-hyuk let the thread go with a laugh.

“The antagonism between top rankers isn’t helpful. Also, keep in mind that the criterion for becoming a top ranker has nothing to do with nationality but rather with power.”

“Sure.”

“I can vouch for his abilities myself.” Shin Eunah firmly and fairly declared so as the chairman. All the others around the table nodded in agreement. Now, no one was dissatisfied with his ranking, as Shin-hyuk and Eunah intended.

-Eunah’s whisper: Good job.

-I should've joined a drama club.

-Eunah's whisper: Shinyoung has no such club.

Of course, the skit that had just played out was planned between the two. No one could complain against Shin Eunah, who had more than proven her abilities during the world conference, but Shin Eun-hyuk was a relatively easy target despite his contributions. This served to solidify his position.

'Those ranked below me would be especially unhappy.' The possibility of a dispute was high, given the re-arrangements happening in the top ranks if they hadn't taken action.

"So, today, let's discuss the recruitment of a new top ranker and future Jormungand countermeasures."

"Countermeasures." The older active duty top ranker and number three, a Chinese man named the Dark Curtain Jang Jinmyeong, let out a sigh.

"It seems almost certain that Jormungand can gather information on the people entering through the gates... you have to be careful on your own, right? It's nothing ridiculous about us sticking together, right?"

"Surely. I just came to the conclusion that we should have at least one means of countering it." Shin Eunah responded calmly and suddenly picked up her phone to send a text. Shortly after, the door of the meeting room opened to reveal a beauty with red hair. Her red hair was tied back in a ponytail, and she wore an attractive white blouse.

"Hello, everyone!"

"The Alchemist?" Everyone seemed surprised except for Kang Shin-hyuk and Eunah. There were many idol-like beings among the superhumans, but she was one of the most attractive even among them. Shin Eunah didn't lack in appearance either, but she was so strong she couldn't be considered.

"Why are you here?" Number two, Stone Ground Nick Harland, seemed happy to see her. He was American as well, so perhaps he was just happy to see a fellow countryman.

“Wait a minute, is she the new top ranker? Didn’t you say that top rankers are chosen by power?” Shin Eunah shook her head with a bloody smile when the man ranked five grunted.

“The candidates for the new top ranks will be decided among those close to the top seven. She has been called to counter Jormungand.”

“A measure against Jormungand? Will we all dope like the Puppeteer?”

“What a ridiculous thought. Our Puppeteer here is the only one who can grow stronger with my potion.” Claire came in and sat right beside Kang Shin-hyuk with a loud laugh. Some gazes were thrown their way, mostly from Shin Eunah, but Shin-hyuk ignored them.

“Why is it limited to the Puppeteer?” Meanwhile, Nick Harland turned to her, regretting that he couldn’t use her potions. She shrugged.

“Our compatibility is right. That part has already been officially revealed. I have a clear reason for not going at the request of the US government.”

“No... but why Korea?” Claire shook her hand for him to give up.

“Rather than that, let’s talk about communicators. That’s why I’m attending this event.”

“Communicator?”

“Yes.” Claire exchanged a glance with Shin Eunah before taking out several small wireless earphones.

“...Air pods?”

“No, you fool. It’s a communicator that can work inside a gate.” The people went silent as they mulled over her words, but soon Jang Jinmyeong stood up and began to shout.

“How is that possible?!”

“Several countries have been developing them in secret, but none have succeeded so far!”

“But voila! I have!”

“Unbeknownst to the US government?!”

“Because I didn’t get their support.” Nick shook his head.

“Are you going to defect to Korea?”

“Don’t make me sound like a traitor. I meant getting involved with the government makes it difficult, and mass production is impossible. Oh, and that depends on how my love affairs are resolved.”

“Affair...!” Shin Eunah blatantly began to wriggle at that last bit. The two shared another glance as Kang Shin-hyuk picked up a communicator as if it had nothing to do with him.

“As she said, it can’t be mass-produced. Moreover, the production cost is astronomical. They also need to be tested.”

“Why do you know that...?”

“I’m her collaborator. This is a product made by the two of us.” So far, communicating with someone outside of the gate was only possible through the Hero Universe. Claire had been researching ways to enable communication through that barrier and found a possibility when she met Kang Shin-hyuk and learned spiritual power. Kang Shin-hyuk was worried the Hero Universe might not allow it, but the administrator never brought it up. Rather, Halo and Mirang assured him that high-level worlds already had such a way to communicate beyond gates. So, for nearly a month, they had studied ways to do so.

“The trials will be conducted by ourselves.”

“It’s not stable yet, so it drains the user’s magic considerably. For a top ranker, that should pose no problem.”

“So, we can send rescue requests if we fall into Jormungand’s traps?”

“Well, not that it means you can run straight into the gate just because you get a request.” At that point, Claire held her index finger up.

“That’s why I added a teleport function.”

“That was my part.” Shin Eunah spoke up calmly and turned the communication device on. Nick Harland and the others laughed in disbelief.

“How could this be made without us knowing...”

“Think of it as an honor, as you are the first to receive one.”

“In the future, top rankers should be careful not to die in vain to Jormungand. With this, we can cooperate closely in the future.” Shin Eunah declared so solemnly as she held her own communicator.

“For the time being, I would like to talk to you about these communicators. Analyzing it doesn’t mean you can create it. If you take it apart or break it, I will ensure your country will never have one in the future.”

“Hey, Alchemist...”

“Sorry.” Claire stuck her tongue out at Nick, who looked anxious.

“Now’s the time to think about the world rather than just your own country.”

“What...”

“Then, let’s get to the main point of the day.” Shin Eunah cleared the air with her loud declaration.

“That is, choosing a new top ranker. The talents currently ranked seventh to tenth are the most powerful practically...”

The meeting ended successfully. The three Hero Universe members on Earth had begun to change their world in earnest.

CHAPTER 194

THE PATH OF THE GIANT (1)

The day after the meeting ended and a new top ranker was announced, Lee Manwoo appeared in the club room after school with several papers in hand.

“A request came from Amatsuki. They say they want ten B-rank combat artifacts. Here are the details.”

“B-rank.” Kang Shin-hyuk nodded calmly as he looked over the list. Amatsuki was the best fighting guild in Japan and famous enough that it was well known in Korea. It was also, for reference, the guild where Bomber Girl once belonged to.

“But, it’s only B-rank.”

“Right. I already know your abilities well.” Now that he was familiar with the standards of the Hero Universe, for Kang Shin-hyuk, B-rank artifacts were something on the level of Kieron’s knights, not for Earth’s superhumans. No, there was a time he thought that B-rank artifacts could only be used by advanced superhumans.

“It’s difficult to deliberately make it low rank.”

“B+ or A- would be fine, so long as it doesn’t significantly affect material costs.”

“Then, let’s do seven B-ranks, two B+, and one A-rank?” Lee Na-hee helped Kang Shin-hyuk figure it out, and Lee Manwoo arranged it.

“It seems like it would be good to focus on versatile abilities.”

“Then let’s do that.”

“I’ll be busy again for a while. I’ll have to let Claire know.” Lee Na-hee smiled at the thought of being busy with work again. Kang Shin-hyuk tilted his head but eventually shook it off and let Claire know.

“You brought us a lot this time.”

“Yeah? I am a teacher who brings you such good requests every time.”

“Thank you, as always.” As Lee Manwoo had planned, Kang Shin-hyuk’s name as an artifact artisan was gradually gaining notoriety. He had been able to win orders from various famous companies and guilds for him and Lee Na-hee the past months.

“Though I’m still less well known than Shin Eun-hyuk.”

“You’re quite famous too, though, as a member of Masked Bacchus.”

“Ah, right. I’m so cool, huh? Hey, didn’t you meet Red Shoes?”

“Yeah, we saw her in Paris too.” Red shoes, that referred to the new seventh ranker named Bridget Poulsen. Like Eunah, she had gained fame at a young age because of her excellent abilities, but she prioritized her main job more than fighting at gates. However, it was no exaggeration to say that the general society’s image of superhumans relied on her for being a famous supermodel and actress.

“It’s odd to manage that stuff on the side despite being a top ranker. But she is pretty.”

“Claire is much prettier.”

“...” Lee Na-hee froze for a moment, then suddenly loosened a couple of the top buttons of her shirt for no reason. She then moved closer to Kang Shin-hyuk and fluttered her eyelashes at him.

“Is she prettier than me?”

“You’re prettier than Bridget, of course.”

“Really?”

“Why don’t you become a model too?” If he left it be, it felt like it might become something more serious, so he answered as she wanted. Lee Na-hee moved away with a smile of satisfaction.

“Well done.”

“Sometimes, it’s best to give up.”

“Yes. You have to get what you want sometimes.”

“Let’s get to work.” Kang Shin-hyuk shook his head and put his work apron on. Lee Manwoo tried to take a seat to watch them work, but Lee Na-hee kicked him out.

“If your business is done, go ahead and leave grandpa.”

“What else are you planning to do without me?”

“Hah, don’t say anything that might be misunderstood.” Lee Na-hee steadfastly kicked him out, although he was right that she had been thinking of doing something other than working. Kang Shin-hyuk felt a bit sorry for him, but he wasn’t fooled.

“Well, there’s no reason to be sorry since he was the one who was working with Siara before.”

“Keh, that child has loose lips.”

“Grandpa, leave quickly.” There was no one he could trust, apparently. Kang Shin-hyuk started working in earnest once he shuffled off.

-Klang! Klang! Klang!

“Hmm, you’ve gotten even better.” While he worked, Lee Na-hee planted the seeds of runes and instilled magic power into the raw materials.

“I’ve been practicing.”

“I’ve been curious from the start, but where on earth?”

“I’ll tell you someday.” If her traits continued to evolve, she might also handle spiritual power and reach the Hero Universe. He couldn’t tell her about that beforehand.

“What, you’re just working on that?”

“I did accept the order.”

“I’m kidding.” Lee Na-hee’s shirt was still open, and Shin-hyuk made a point of avoiding looking at her.

“What are those traits? Are you manifesting something?”

“It shouldn’t be difficult to organize it. All you need to do is concentrate.” Kang Shin-hyuk nodded and continued to focus. It was Lee Na-hee, who was watching him and not paying attention to her work, but that was often the case.

-Klang! Klang! Klang!

They were working together, but it almost felt like they were alone. Lee Na-hee continued to look at his face while she engraved her runes into the metal. His gaze was fixed on a single point on the metal without any deviation. His eyes sparkled a soft golden as his trait was expressed. She couldn’t help but think he was really beautiful as a craftsman. If she had to imagine her ideal type, he would be such a person.

‘But he really has developed immensely... how the hell?’ Lee Na-hee wanted to ask as there were times she felt he had grown up by himself. His abilities kept growing by leaps and bounds as he had gone to another world unbound by time. Even Lee Na-hee, who was confident in her own abilities, felt desperate.

‘Is it because of Claire?’ Did he feel like an adult because he was with her? No, but that was a different problem. While thinking about that, she suddenly realized the artifact was almost complete.

‘Oh, I have to enchant it. One such change was that work that took at least a few hours ended even quicker these days. Despite that, the quality of the work hadn’t degraded at all. Kang Shin-hyuk was pouring out great works that could be compared to other artifact artisans.

‘Whoo...! It was true her own ability was growing rapidly when she worked with him, but she wanted to walk with him in harmony, so she couldn’t help but be frustrated.

‘Complete.’ She always did her best when it came to crafting. Her enchantment was completed, so now Kang Shin-hyuk just needed to finish the work. But... his hand was still.

“...Junior?” Lee Na-hee tilted her head and called out his name, but he didn’t budge. He seemed to be staring blankly in the air, not at the artifact or at her.

“Junior...?” His face somehow looked very mature and sorrowful, unlike the usual Shin-hyuk she knew.

“Junior, are you okay?” She approached him and asked once more, but he couldn’t hear her.

“You...” She felt fear rising inside her. What if he had gone somewhere and never came back? It was a childish thought, but it felt plausible.

“Hey, if you keep playing like that, I’ll kiss you. No, I mean, it’s an enchantment.” Speaking urgently, she brought her face close to his. His eyes, shining bright and golden, caught her gaze and didn’t let her go. Her lips felt dry all of a sudden.

“Junior...? Kang Shin-hyuk?”

“Ah.” With only a centimeter left between them, the focus returned to his eyes. They went cold as he realized Lee Na-hee was right before him.

“Senior, no matter what...”

“What? I was worried.” As he seemed to have regained his sanity, she exhaled a sigh of relief and then kissed him hurriedly. He jumped back and shouted.

“Do you usually do that?!”

“No, it’s because you made me worry. It’s a bonus, so don’t feel bad.”

“Oh, really.”

“I don’t like it.”

“There wasn’t a problem.”

“You can’t get upset.”

“Should I say thank you, then?”

“Hey.” Kang Shin-hyuk, who was getting upset, Lee Na-hee suddenly pointed at Kang Shin-hyuk, who was getting upset.

“I like you.”

“Huh?”

“Ah. Of course, I know who you like, but just know that.” Lee Na-hee caught his gaze.

“So, don’t go anywhere weird again.”

He smiled bitterly and nodded.

CHAPTER 195

THE PATH OF THE GIANT (2)

-With limited materials, you have created a wonderful object that pushes the source to the limit. Spiritual strength has slightly increased.

-Synchronization has slightly accelerated – current rate of 65.8%.

Kang Shin-hyuk had also realized that he had been acting strange these days. He couldn't help it, though. As the synchronization rate increased, those memories that were tightly sealed started flowing into his mind. Sometimes they were of happy moments, sometimes of frustration, and some were of infinitely painful moments. He couldn't deny them as they were all his, so he had to accept them all. It was fortunate that it didn't happen every day, but it was quite severe whenever it did occur, especially when he was holding the hammer.

'Don't go somewhere weird. Ha.' The words Lee Na-hee said left him feeling a bit conflicted, but at the same time, he mentally thanked her. She helped him get rid of his confusion and find his center. No, though, she had kissed him too while she was at him.

"Shin-hyuk, are you okay?"

"You're saying it properly." Kang Shin-hyuk hurriedly arranged his thoughts and looked up to see Eleanor with a spear in hand, proudly tapping her chest.

"I've been practicing hard."

"It was a bit messy at the end."

"Ugh." Kang Shin-hyuk laughed and picked up his sword. They had just finished sparring as they often did since he had become the vice-captain.

"Today, I think there was something..."

"Sorry. Something like that did happen."

“Shall I punish Na-hee?” Shin-hyuk narrowed his eyes.

“How’d you know?”

“We’re closer than you think.”

“No, you can’t convince me just by saying that.”

“It was after she boasted that she became Miss Shinyoung this year.”

“Ah, the popularity vote?”

“Uh-huh.” The school festival, which Kang Shin-hyuk had yet to experience, was canceled because of the damned gate situation. Still, there were several events for the students who wouldn’t completely give up on the chance to enjoy some festivities. The selection of Miss & Mr. Shinyoung was one such event.

“I heard you received a lot of votes too.”

“There are more students in the Knight Department than the Magic Department...” Eleanor looked away in embarrassment.

“I heard you came pretty close.”

“No, it’s only because mine are so small...” Kang Shin-hyuk thought Eleanor’s charm didn’t lose out to Lee Na-hee, but there were certain differences in the proportions between the two that couldn’t be overcome.

“But I voted for you.”

“Really?” Her expression brightened immediately at that. He laughed and nodded.

“Yes, but don’t tell anyone. It’ll be annoying if Na-hee knows.”

“Okay!” Eleanor responded vigorously and hummed to herself as she cleaned up the equipment. He didn’t tell her this, but the biggest reason he voted for her was that she reminded him of a cute little squirrel.

“Has there been no problems with your practice?”

“Uh-huh. We were assigned a low-difficulty gate.”

“That’s because you’ve been hiding your skill.”

“We’ve been active at night instead.” It seemed that Eleanor was still embarrassed to be a part of Masked Bacchus.

“You’re getting better little by little now. Once you’ve gotten the posture down, we’ll be done practicing.” Kang Shin-hyuk nodded. While the frequency of gate occurrences had increased compared to before, no explosive increases had occurred like they did a few months ago. Now, the students’ usage of the ranges and training facilities had been reduced to the minimum as they constantly assaulted gates.

‘Although the overall amount of gates is steadily increasing.’ No doubt, the association, and the world governments were both aware of that. It was becoming difficult for low-level superhumans to work, and even the higher level ones were being burdened. According to the other members of the Hero Universe, Jormungand was more likely to invade worlds that were stronger and more developed.

“You’ll have more opportunities to work with Masked Bacchus.”

“I’m prepared.” Eleanor clenched her fist, her eyes full of determination. He decided to ask her what had been on his mind for a while now.

“What will you do after you graduate?”

“...” Eleanor was stunned by the sudden shift in topics, but soon she recovered with a serious expression.

“I will head back once.”

“Once.”

“Yes.” Eleanor hesitated but then resolved herself again.

“Will you go with me then?”

“To England?”

“Yes.” Certainly, she would be reluctant to go back to her own family that hated her

(well, Karen would be with her, but neither were thinking of her at this moment). Asking him to go to such a place meant she relied on him, rather than that she wanted to burden him. Since he had asked her to join Masked Bacchus, he could hardly refuse.

“Let’s go together... if Claire allows it.”

“Yes.” She looked relieved as she clasped her hands together. Then, she blushed very slightly.

“Then... maybe we can keep going?”

“Are you saying to live with you in England?”

“I’m not Na-hee.”

“What a relief, but isn’t that a little rude to Na-hee?”

[You have such anxieties, Anvil.]

Halos’ voice was, as always, calm and peaceful. Kang Shin-hyuk shrugged as he hefted the hammer.

“It must seem funny to you.”

[Not at all. I’ve never experienced reincarnation. It’s like you’re balancing both of your lives.]

“That’s a good way to put it.” His conversations with Halo served to soothe his mind.

“Is this going well?”

[It’s going better than that. You can tell just by looking.]

“You can tell that easily?”

[Sure. Isn’t it something that was a part of me?]

The shackles made out of tree roots were now 70% completed. The giant continued to shake the ground every two days, but that was no problem for the elves since Kang Shin-hyuk secured a field for them. The continued vibrations were never pleasant,

however.

[You know where you need to focus right now. It will be painful sometimes, but once you get over everything, you'll never look back with regrets.]

"...Is that so?"

[At least I like you very much.]

"Haha, thank you so much." Halo had lived a long enough life that Kang Shin-hyuk couldn't even dare compare to it even after recovering his previous life's memories. Maybe that was why conversing with him made him relax.

"Thank you."

[Thank you as well, Anvil.]

-... Master Halo, please pay close attention.

It was then the administrator interrupted the conversation between them. The sound of the giant stepping down once again caused Mirotoz to shake.

"...?" Kang Shin-hyuk looked up. The giant's steps were two days apart, but now...

"Isn't it too early?"

"Come. Maybe we should take a look.]

Halo sounded tense as he stretched his consciousness to the highest point of the tree. Kang Shin-hyuk frowned as he gazed out through the fog toward the huge feet that were dimly visible. Then, once more, the giant's foot landed on the ground.

[That seems to be a problem I've never considered.]

Halo returned to Kang Shin-hyuk's side as he remained tense.

[The giant has sped up. I guess he learned how to move faster. Jormungand must've been closely monitoring us, but when did they contact the giant?]

"If it's moving faster... haste?"

[Oh, that makes it easier if you already know of the magic. Yes, that's right.]

The sound of the giant's footsteps echoed out once more.

"Ahhhhh!"

"The giant is running!"

"This world will finally be destroyed!"

"Ah, if we die anyway, attack Anvil for the last time...!" The elves had no choice but to panic as the shaking that occurred once every two days had increased so rapidly.

"Anvil!"

"Please accept my last!"

"..." Kang Shin-hyuk turned to Halo after hearing the shouts from the residential area.

"It won't last long if it is magic."

[Perhaps. I guess we can tell soon if that's the case... oh, it's slow again.]

The problem was that it was likely not to end as a temporary phenomenon. Kang Shin-hyuk looked down at the shackles.

"At first, you said 100 years, right? How many now?"

[Well... three months?]

"It's become quite urgent."

[I'm sorry, Anvil. I had no intention of rushing you with this quest.]

"It's okay." Kang Shin-hyuk crossed his arms.

"I'll have to do the work in My Room." The time ratio there was 1 to 3, so it would be more efficient. The issue was taking this huge work there.

[What are you trying to do?]

“Hm... that means we have to do a prefab design.”

Kang Shin-hyuk stood up and began to buy large quantities of spiritual adhesives from the trading board.

CHAPTER 196

THE PATH OF THE GIANT (3)

Spiritual glue was the first product he had obtained as a login bonus from the Hero Universe, and it had played an active role in holding the monsters down after he had fallen into the mantis den. It activated based on one's spiritual power and connected objects together with a transcendent level of adhesion. However, the effect was depleted after a few minutes, and the adhesive strength would vanish.

I've already crossed that limit.' It was a product that varied depending on the user's capabilities. Even when restoring the Shinfeng orb, it was possible to completely restore it by using his spiritual power after fitting it together with the spiritual glue. Moreover, his spiritual power was SS-rank now.

"...These pieces are sized differently." With the help of Halo, Kang Shin-hyuk had taken the shackles made of the tree roots and crushed them into dozens of pieces. Halo seemed very curious about the whole process.

[Huh, first split the roots and then attach them again? Can what was once broken go back to normal?]

"I already have experience with this sort of thing, so leave it to me. Oh, instead, use some of your mana here." Kang Shin-hyuk produced the Great Heavenly Spirit and placed it on Halo's branches.

[Is this a treasure you made? This seems like something in the realm of alchemy...]

"Is it necessary to possess alchemy to make something like this?"

[Hmm. Well, regardless, it's quite the novelty. It will be effective against Jormungand.]

He avoided explaining how he had made it, as he would have to explain everything had happened in Gromas.

[It's only SS-rank? What nonsense.]

“Only SS-rank...” Whenever he talked to other members of the Hero Universe, earth’s standards seemed so low. However, now, when Kang Shin-hyuk was determined to make something, it was easy enough to achieve the SS-rank so that he couldn’t blame them for that view. In fact, he planned on looking beyond that. He was still holding onto the SSS-grade materials he obtained from the light basilisk, after all.

[Now, I’ve put in as much as I can.]

Halo handed it back to him now that his vitality filled the Great Heavenly Spirit. Halo’s trait was strong, so it would be perfect to use with the shackles made from his tree.

‘Well, the true power of the Great Heavenly Spirit is to convert energy and amplify it. I wish it were possible to use it in boosting the vitality of this world or convert it into a destructive attack.’ There was a high likelihood Jormungand would cause more problems, after all.

[It’s a really great thing, but its capacity is lacking. Why don’t you try upgrading it by adding what is lacking?]

“Upgrade?”

[Right... if you make the shackles well this time, I shall give you the best branches from this tree. As you know, they are good mediums for storing and transforming energy.]

He knew it well. A tree absorbed and stored water and sunlight, circulating energy as a part of its life span. It was also a symbol for life, as the phrase world tree wasn’t just for show. Of course, just telling him to upgrade the orb with the tree’s branches didn’t mean he fully understood how to do it yet.

“Is Halo a world tree?”

[My body isn’t a tree.]

“Really?!”

[Sometimes your jokes are difficult.]

– Please don’t be fooled, member.

[Stop it, administrator.]

The administrator was trying to say something but was blocked by Halo. It was clear that Halo was a special member that even the administrator had to be careful around.

“Alright, good. I cut everything anyway.”

[Are you going to work with these now?]

“Yeah. Time is running out, so it can’t be helped.” Kang Shin-hyuk didn’t have the time to have a leisurely conversation now.

[Those Jormungand guys are resentful.]

“You can get rid of them quickly, then I can just come over to play.”

-Member. Rather than going to My Room, why don’t I introduce you to a new dimensional quest?

“Ah?”

-It is a world with minimal Jormungand intervention, as it has already been ruined. Its time ratio with the earth is 1 to 20. In a world with virtually no potential for rebirth, Jormungand has already left after absorbing most of its energy.

“What sort of quest is there?”

– It is one to recover an object you previously made.

Those were the two types of quests available to him. There were ones he got from accepting requests from other members like he did now, and the others were quests to recover artifacts Anvil had previously created. He thought the second-dimensional quest in Kieron had been given to him to protect the potential Hero Universe candidate Milia, but the administrator wouldn’t admit this.

-It isn’t urgent so that you can prioritize the shackles there.

“The recovery quest will be left unattended and I can use the slower time.”

-This is the privilege of being a VIP member. It should be used when possible.

Kang Shin-hyuk had no complaints about accepting the administrator’s favor in this

case.

“Then, let’s go. Thank you. Oh, is it a dangerous place?”

-It would be nice if you had at least one person assisting you.

Kang Shin-hyuk had only one idea of who to ask.

[If so, I will send my alter ego!]

-Halo is busy enough. We will take care of this here.

[No, it’s okay. This world’s work will be okay without me for a little while.]

-Fine...

For some reason, the two started bickering. Kang Shin-hyuk left the two of them be and began to store the shackle parts after marking them.

“Okay, it’s ready. Then, I’ll head over. In the meantime, it would be nice to find out what’s happening with the giant.”

[Anvil...]

-Halo has the ability to make rational judgments. You know who the wise choice is.

[...Administrator. If he has chosen someone else, leave it be.]

-Hm? What could you mean?

Kang Shin-hyuk went to greet the elves before he left. They seemed impressed that he was going on an adventure to protect Mirotoz; however, the emotions they were displaying were somewhat regrettable.

“There’s nothing we can do for someone on such a dangerous path... even so, can’t I try with my body?”

“Please stop taking off your clothes so boldly.” These damn exhibitionist elves had ruined his excitement over naked bodies.

“We can’t just let master Anvil go off on such a dangerous path!”

“No, before you go...”

“Aren’t you all just letting out your desires?!” He ran away from the elves and returned to earth. It was Tuesday evening when he got back, so he had practice tomorrow, but...

[Can I leave for a while?]

[Hyeongju Ahn: You proudly ask for me to fake official documents? Your practice for school...]

[How about the gloves you received before? Maybe some matching boots would be nice.]

[Hyeongju Ahn:... Will you be gone the entire week?]

Convincing Hyeongju Ahn went over easily.

[Just this week.]

[Hyeongju Ahn: Well, Baek can handle it alone...]

[Then, thank you.]

It was a little risky to skip training, but if Hyeongju Ahn and Baek In-ha vouched for him, they wouldn’t be caught. He texted Baek too, but since he could hold the Shinfeng orb hostage, he had no worries about the result.

[Baek In-ha: Are you going to Africa or something?]

[Hahahahaha.]

Africa one of the most dangerous places to go since it had been consumed by gates. Fortunately, such a thing had been prevented in Paris when the erosion gates appeared there.

[Baek In-ha: I’m really curious, where are you going and what are you doing?]

[Lodging trip with Claire.]

[Baek In-ha: Ah, you said it?!]

He left Baek alone and contacted Claire next.

[Eunah, can you do a dimensional quest alone with me?]

[Claire: I'll do it, I'll do it!]

-I can't stand this atmosphere. 250,000HP bonus from an impressed administrator!

Thus, it was confirmed who would go with him.

CHAPTER 197

THE PATH OF THE GIANT (4)

Kang Shin-hyuk accepted the temporary quest so that he could gain enough time to prepare the shackles needed to save Mirotoz from the giant. The world's name was Cy Xenon. The time ratio with the earth was a whopping 1 to 20, as it was nearly impossible to save it from perishing. If the world were completely destroyed, he wouldn't be able to contact the Hero Universe, however, so he wouldn't be able to waste too much time here.

-By the way... after entering, the situation here is worse than I expected. In fact, you may have to abandon the dimensional quest here.

"Right after arriving, you're getting excited... it really kills the street atmosphere."

"It's a bit like Seoul." If modern Seoul were abandoned for about fifty years, and then a new civilization had been built on the collapsed ruins with mana, then it would be like that. A night street full of neon signs with people's faces illuminated by a screen located on a tall building wall, with vehicles driving on a road of light above the city. However, the light was flickering unsteadily in several places on the road, and nearly a third of the buildings were collapsed. Mechanical parts and garbage were littered on the road, and the screen hanging from the building flickered periodically. Kang Shin-hyuk thought it was the very image of cyberpunk.

"Oh, what's that?"

"...What is it? A robot?"

"Wow." The place where Kang Shin-hyuk and Claire had been deposited was a side alley in the city, brightly illuminated by a neon sign hanging above head.

[Found two illegal entities.]

However, while they had been half-drunk on the atmosphere of the night streets, three humanoid robots made of a gray, dull metal had found them and moved to block the alley's exit.

[Confirmed to be minorities of the 'human' race not registered in the database. Will commence arrest.]

[Do not resist arrest, or you will be fired upon.]

Kang Shin-hyuk and Claire exchanged a glance with each other. They were probably thinking the same thing-things were going to be very fun.

[Forcibly viewing the status of the target... cannot be viewed. Confirmed that the Gaia system has a means of resistance.]

[Raise the border.]

“The Gaia system... how can these guys view it? Their ability doesn't seem to be that good.” Claire had never dealt with a robotic monster before, so she was looking at them with curiosity as she brandished her pistol. Kang Shin-hyuk wasn't in a hurry himself. If the situation were urgent, they could've taken them out by now, but as a result of examining them with his spiritual power, he was able to tell they were about A-rank.

But the issue is if a hundred of them crawl out... ' Kang Shin-hyuk called out Onyx, who was eating in the garbage warehouse as usual.

-Myu?

[Checking monster occurrence.]

[Requesting permission to release.]

Onyx was confused, but then he noticed the robots aiming a muzzle at him (there was a hole in the robot's finger), and he instinctively hid. Then, even Kang Shin-hyuk and Claire vanished as he extended his stealth to them through his [Synchronization].

[Investigating the disappearance of the subjects.]

[Detecting mana. Explore the whole area.]

[Searching... no reaction.]

[Mission failed. Withdraw.]

The robots soon left after scanning the area. Claire let out a shout as soon as they couldn't be seen anymore.

“What is this, stealth?! You covered us completely, right?”

“It's a great stealth skill. Is it S-rank now? At that level, we can't get caught.” As a bonus, synchronization had been steadily upgraded, too, so he was now able to extend it to two people at the same time. This little hedgehog was gaining some terrifying abilities.

-Myu!

“Now, eat this.”

-Myu.

Onyx was angry at being called to hide them, but he quickly quieted down after receiving the failed glove Shin-hyuk had made the day before.

-Myuuuu.

“This guy is so cute.

-Myu...

Claire laughed as Onyx's thorns laid down so he could eat. She gently petted him, and he let out a satisfied cry. Kang Shin-hyuk shook his thoughts away as he watched the pair, now wasn't the time to relax. They needed to confirm the current situation!

“Can you elaborate a little more about this world?”

-Alright

The administrator was silent for a moment more before he continued.

– In this world, the Gaia system has been contaminated with viruses. The system cut off this world before it could spread out, and since then, it had taken on an independent dimensional structure. Jormungand has withdrawn after reaping the energy they could.

“It's really like the prologue of a cyberpunk game ... no, wait.”

-This world is maintained by a diseased system and a devastated energy source. I said it before we arrived, but there is no hope left.

Kang Shin-hyuk felt something was off as he read the message.

“The Gaia system was cut off, but how did we get here?” Until now, Kang Shin-hyuk had thought the Hero Universe was closely related to the Gaia system, but now that didn’t seem to be the case.

-Did I not explain that the Hero Universe is a system located above the Gaia system? Of course, a world equipped with the Gaia system has greater authority, but it doesn’t mean one without it cannot be accessed.

“Oh, I didn’t think it would be possible to break into a world not managed by the Gaia system. Then... wouldn’t it be possible to invade the world’s ruled by Jormungand?”

-Such a course wouldn’t be safe for members of the Hero Universe.

Claire nodded, convinced by the administrator’s explanation. However, the messages that had appeared when he signed up were ones his previous life had seen, so that he couldn’t remember them clearly.

“Is that virus okay, then? I don’t know the structure of the Gaia system, but if it is dangerous enough to need to disconnect from it, then the Hero Universe also...”

-The Hero Universe is not weak enough to allow contact with viruses.

At some point, he had cursed Tsukuyo while crying out for Gaia’s name, but now it was impossible to understand what he meant. However, the fact that the Gaia system could be contaminated was an interesting bit of information. Claire seemed especially intrigued by it.

“I didn’t know it was possible for it to be contaminated like it was a piece of computer software. It looks the administrator doesn’t want to tell me that.

-As the member invited you, I cannot help it.

“Really, this is blatant favoritism. Not like I’m different, but...” Claire’s face was shining brightly. Humans were blessed by the Gaia system to become superhumans, but there was much they didn’t know about it. It was no wonder she was excited to learn all this

new information.

“Before we left, you said it would be to a world that wasn’t all that special, but this is one of the most special I’ve been to.

-There’s nothing special about it. It’s just one of countless worlds that have already lost the potential to develop.

The administrator paused to think for a moment.

-However, the information about this world hasn’t been updated since the Gaia system was shut down, so even I didn’t think it would be like this.

“Hey!” No wonder he was clearly confused upon arrival. But the fact he pushed Kang Shin-hyuk into coming despite that lack of new information meant that he thought it was safe. Even if it were a little dangerous, the extra time was worth it. Halo was his precious friend that he wanted to help, after all.

-You did a great job. They belonged to a network centered around the corrupted Gaia system, so if they were destroyed, you might’ve been tracked by all the robots in this city.

“At that level, it shouldn’t be hard to deal with them... was your information updated? Can you tell me what the level of the strongest robot in this world is?”

-Accurate measurement is difficult, but it seems to be around the SSS+ level.

At that level, it would be possible for Kang Shin-hyuk and Claire to deal with it so long as they acted carefully. He was able to fully understand why the administrator hadn’t sent him to such a good environment until now.

“How long can you keep this hiding up?”

“If you don’t use too much magic, for as long as we need.”

“really?” Claire poked Kang Shin-hyuk’s cheek as a test. She was wondering if attacking another would affect it, but Onyx’s stealth recognized it, and the hiding continued. Claire’s cheeks turned a little red as she tried to explain it.

“The act of touching... no, wait, that sounds a bit filthy.”

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Look.” Claire motioned for him to look into her eyes. He complied, and her face grew closer. Soon, their lips were touching. They remained there for a while before she pulled back with a giggle.

“It seems like that didn’t work either.”

“No?”

“I don’t know, can I try one more time?”

“Kiss maniac.” Rather than refusing, he opened up his arms and hugged her. Onyx, who had finished eating the metal gloves, looked at them with a criticizing expression.

It was only five minutes later when they finally began to search for a safe place.

CHAPTER 198

THE PATH OF THE GIANT (5)

The name of the city was Neorust – if the rusty iron sign that had been torn apart and was now laying on the floor could be trusted.

“Can I take this?”

“If it’s not contaminated.” Kang Shin-hyuk examined the source of the iron signboard with his spiritual power, soon nodding after he confirmed that there were no people or robots nearby. Thanks to the improved stealth ability of Onyx, their stealth wouldn’t be canceled out with small actions, but it couldn’t completely block out loud noises, so they had to be careful.

“Wow, this will go great with the bar.”

“Well, I hope nobody comes to ask what Neorust is. Especially not Eunah. We’ll have to tell her we found it at the market.”

“Well, it should be fine.” Claire laughed and stored the rusty iron sign in her inventory while Shin-hyuk looked around. The streets really were similar to downtown Seoul except for the piles of scrap metal and the fact there were no human pedestrians walking around. Also the light road above them, he supposed.

“There’s a human-like robot, oh, and a human with cat ears... that guy has octopus tentacles.” On the side-walk ahead of them, odd-looking people and robots were seen walking around.

“There are some with half-machine bodies. Wow...”

“...Didn’t you say you wanted to plant machines in your body?”

“Did I?” The robots that they had encountered earlier could be seen patrolling the road regularly. Some people seemed grateful to see them, while others snuck away. Others didn’t care either way, and some grabbed them to ask questions.

“Do they have a way of identifying people?”

“It’s early to say, but probably. It’s dangerous to keep walking outside, though.”

“Yeah. Let’s find an abandoned building for now.” So Claire said, but she had a point. They had come here to finish Halo’s shackles. The world itself was very interesting to Shin-hyuk, but he didn’t know how much time he would be able to waste investigating it.

-The reconnaissance is trying to figure out the city patrol route. Move to an area where there is no danger.

Kang Shin-hyuk and Claire moved along with the administrator’s navigation. The road was too dangerous because of the robots, so they moved across the building rooftops.

“That screen has magical power.” Claire spoke up as she landed on top of a half-ruined building. Her eyes were focused on the recurring video on the monitor that was hung on the tallest building they could see in the city.

“It’s a very ominous mana. Demon?”

“Ah.” He had learned of it just a while ago. Although it didn’t have much of an effect on Kang Shin-hyuk, who didn’t have mana and used spiritual power, it was a terrifying and evil force that polluted the body and mind.

“The guys you’ve been dealing with were so weak that they couldn’t affect you.”

“Ah, maybe.” Kang Shin-hyuk nodded and thought of the armored monster in Paris. He hadn’t fought Kang Shin-hyuk but had he; it might’ve been truly dangerous.

“Of course, it’s impossible without spiritual power.”

“I guess I was able to do something before because of it.”

“Perhaps... I’m glad.”

“Relieved?”

“Yes, that...” Kang Shin-hyuk tilted his head. Claire hesitated, then punched his shoulder and turned away.

“Come on, let’s hurry up.”

“What were you trying to say?”

“I’m not saying anything.” Claire was acting oddly shy and hurried ahead. Kang Shin-hyuk shrugged and pursued after her.

-It really is a demon. Didn’t you feel it in the robot before?

‘I didn’t have time to fully explore it... administrator?’

-Administrators can’t afford to focus on insignificant objects as the information processing is too high.

Oh, do it.

-However, we are actively intervening with those concerned that will affect our members. The mana has been detected in the video on that monitor. That means that the other robots are connected to the network that dominates this city and world.

‘Does that mean Jormungand didn’t actually withdraw from this world?’

-What are you saying, member? That is not the exclusive property of Jormungand.

‘Eh?’

-Jormungand is the organization that stands against the Hero Universe. It is also one that stands on the other side of the mirror... but it didn’t always exist. Someone had to create it and gather its members.

‘Isn’t it the same thing? Just like all citizens of the Republic of Korea are obligated to receive basic education.’

-If you expand your perspective to the whole world, you’ll see that not everyone is born with such luxuries.

It was a sad fact.

-To give a more accurate explanation, Jormungand was created by a flute-blowing man who can control the rats called monsters born across all dimensions. But not all rats

are under his control.

There were also some who had joined of their own volition because their goals aligned.

“Then what is the flute playing man?”

-300,000HP bonus!

‘Don’t boldly pretend not to know again.’ Not that it was easy to tell if the administrator actually knew or not. He decided to give up and focus on something else. The traces of demons that remained in this world might not be controlled by Jormungand. Kang Shin-hyuk let out a hefty sigh.

“It won’t be easy if we don’t know where the item to be retrieved is.”

-No, I think I know where it is.

“Huh?”

“Oh, look.” Claire reached out and pointed as Kang Shin-hyuk tilted his head at the administrator’s words. Suddenly, the paved road had been cut off, and all the garbage that were piled up had increased. The road had been chaotically destroyed in the aftermath of some explosion. The buildings were relatively larger and closer together than they had been in that downtown area, but they had an older feel to them. Neon signs were strung up here as well, and Shinhyuk could sense the vitality of many people around them.

“It’s a place full of life.”

“Yes.” Claire looked satisfied as she looked around; there were no robots patrolling this street. Perhaps that downtown area had been a limited area.

“I can find a suitable building here.”

“Yes, I want to start work soon.”

“When I think about it, I’m monopolizing you while you work. Wow, Lee Na-hee’s been lucky.” All of these people seemed to be communicating very actively without his knowledge. It seemed rather scary.

“What are you all talking about?”

“I’m going to check it out now.” Claire pretended to grapple with Shin-hyuk. He smiled and pulled her down, but she grabbed him and blew in his ear.

“There, your ears are clean.”

“Stop...” The two, trembling, fell as the building’s roof collapsed under them.

“Kh!”

“Ah!” Kang Shin-hyuk somehow held onto Claire as he landed, but dust spilled out over them. Onyx, who had been watching the scene from the start, cried out as if he were laughing.

“Kahak.” “Wait.” Kang Shin-hyuk produced the water and Shinfeng orb from his inventory. First, he used the wind to remove the dust from them, sending it high into the sky.

“Wow, someone might think you were a wizard.”

“And now this.” Then, he washed his face thoroughly with the water. It felt a little unpleasant to be soaking wet, but it was better.

“So, where are we?”

“Let’s ask the owner of this building when they last did maintenance.” However, they couldn’t find anyone even after searching for several minutes.

“Wow, there’s a bar in here.” Claire looked around the first floor with a sparkle in her eyes. She was right. Most of the cases were empty, but it was obviously a bar with tables, cases, and seating.

“It’s fate.”

“As long as the owner doesn’t show up, it should be fine.” Although, given the weakened ceiling, they would need to be careful.

“Hey! Heirech, are you alive?” The door on the fire floor opened with exquisite timing, and a person entered. They had three legs, arms covered in bizarre iron armor, and a

wolf's face.

“What, it's not Heirech. Who are you guys?”

“Are you the owner of this house?” Kang Shin-hyuk calmly asked so and produced his pistol.

“Would you like to talk for a while?”

“Where did you get such an elite weapon... no, don't close the door!”

“I won't let you go.”

Somehow, he thought the weapon would fit well here, and it did.

CHAPTER 199

THE PATH OF THE GIANT (6)

Kang Shin-hyuk aimed his pistol as Claire moved to block the exit. The wolfman, trapped and unable to escape, quietly raised his hands in surrender, and the two moved in to dig out information from him in earnest. They explained to him that they were outsiders who had just entered the city.

“Outsiders? I was lucky.” The wolfman, Mokoud, sat down with his third leg as a chair to support his body.

“I mean, this is where you came in. Had I fallen through the roof of another building, I would’ve become a beehive.”

“I think it’s best for us not to commit pointless killings. By the way, is that a dick?” Kang Shin-hyuk observed Mokoud carefully, but Claire seemed to be focusing on something else.

“No! This is the tail passed down from my ancient ancestors!”

“A tail! Sure enough, animals often use their tails for balance.”

“Claire, that couldn’t be a dick. If so, women of that race...”

“I see. Wow...”

“Oh...”

“No!” Mokoud grew angry at the two, knowing of their misunderstanding. It seemed that they weren’t the only ones who had seen his third leg and didn’t realize it was a tail.

“Cheh, I thought Heirech was back when I heard the noise. I wouldn’t have come in otherwise.” But it was already late, and Mokoud was a valuable guide to them.

“If he’s the owner of this place, what did you come here for?”

“Cocktail ingredients. His specialty is making cocktails with ingredients that protect the body from brainwashing. I needed one, so I don’t die.”

“Brainwashing?”

“Hah, are you guys serious?” Mokoud was taken aback by their lack of knowledge. However, Claire shrugged and chimed in.

“We call it something else. Are you talking about that video?”

“You must’ve been living in a cave if you don’t know about them. Yes, the brainwashing that the video uses. If you get hit by it, you’ll become the robots’ people.” The first thing that came to mind were the people walking in that downtown area. Now Shin-hyuk understood.

“That’s what we call the brainwashing.”

“We call it a demon.”

“That’s also quite the proper expression! Ha.” Mokoud and Kang Shin-hyuk nodded. Indeed, it made sense that the purpose of that video was to shoot out filthy mana to pollute human minds constantly. But a cocktail that could protect from it... Shin-hyuk glanced over at Claire, who nodded. Mokoud glanced between the two.

“Hey, so when can I be released?”

“We still have a lot of things we want to hear, my friend. Please give us an appropriate example.”

“Ah? Dried rattail is fine. There are plenty here.”

“I know how to make those cocktails myself.”

“What?” Mokoud’s eyes were wide open at Claire’s proud declaration.

“Hey, we’ve been moving so far and haven’t been polluted. You know what I mean?”

“Well, is this fate?” In other words, humans who had come from the outside and knew how to make cocktails had fallen into this bar. Of course, Mokoud wasn’t so naïve as he had survived this far, but he also knew that these humans had no reason to lie.

“We will use this house for a while, and we’ll help you.”

“Will you give me a cocktail?”

“Yes, first of all...” Claire produced a cocktail potion from her inventory and handed it to Mokoud. He accepted it with a dubious expression but soon closed his eyes and took a sip. Soon, a smile bloomed on his face.

“It works a lot better than what Heirech makes!”

“That’s, of course.” Claire squared his shoulders with pride. Kang Shin-hyuk knew that she had just handed him a status buff cocktail that had no additional benefits. In other words, her cocktails had the basic effect of defending against that mana because she dealt with spiritual power.

“Tell me whatever you need; I’ll help you with anything I can!”

“Well, then let’s hear more about this world.” Claire glanced over at Kang Shin-hyuk, who nodded in agreement, and they pulled out two dusty chairs. When the pistol was put away, Mokoud began to tell his story with a more relieved expression.

It was a familiar story from a perished world.

* * *

After sending off Mokoud, the first thing Kang Shin-hyuk did was to do some house cleaning. Using the water orb and the Shinfeng orb as delicately as possible, he swept through the three-story building. The trash was removed, and any useful items were cleaned and piled together. There was no dust left after a good solid cleaning with the two orbs.

“Oh, this hole... should I patch it up now?” The sky above the perforated ceiling was covered with soot clouds. There was no value in a night sky without any stars, so he decided to block it up. Kang Shin-hyuk tinkered with the broken wooden boards he had on hand, and in less than twenty minutes, he had repaired it. Claire applauded him once he was done.

“Wow, you did it so neatly.”

“I was the MacGyver at the Starlight Orphanage.” Because of his good agility, he was

adept at all sorts of crafts. However, he had never actually seen MacGyver. Claire laughed at his words, then suddenly had a thought.

“The orphanage... can I go with you later?”

“You can if you like.”

“But going together is a bit different.”

“It’s completely okay for me.”

“...Okay? Yes, then let’s go together.” She tapped his shoulder with a satisfied laugh.

“Now, I want to take a bath.”

“Ah, of course.” He let out a sigh that soon turned into laughter. There was a bathroom in the building, but no bathtub. He went ahead and made a bathtub in the empty room next to the bathroom. As a bonus, he made a shower as well. This time, Claire went fish-eyed as Kang Shin-hyuk built all of that, including proper drainage and new tiling, in less than an hour.

“...Are you really not MacGyver?”

“This is a plumber’s job.”

“Okay, then, Mario. Well, the water temperature is good.” Claire threw off her clothes and was soon only in her underwear.

“What, Claire, wait a second.”

“Hurray.” As Kang Shin-hyuk turned away in fear, she hugged him from behind. His sense of reasoning was being threatened by the scent and texture that warmly enveloped him. Claire put her hands around his abdomen and whispered in his ear.

“My Mario, would you like to bathe together?”

“Eh, ugh.”

“Fufu.” Claire laughed again when she noticed he was thinking very seriously about it. She put her head on his shoulder and pecked him on the cheek.

“It’s okay; I can stand it. Because I’m an adult.”

“That...”

“But if you can’t stand still, you’re always welcome.”

“Why are you saying things that test my patience?”

“That’s... heh!” The next moment, the two fell into the bathtub full of hot water. Kang Shin-hyuk, who noticed Claire had thrown off her underwear after entering the bath, didn’t look back and jumped off.

“Ahahahahaha!” Claire burst into laughter as she watched Kang Shin-hyuk run away. He pledged to take revenge later after he became an adult!

-Your patience is superhuman. Actually, it didn’t seem like you had to endure it, perhaps.

“I’ll tell you that it’s not because of Eunah.”

-If so, is it because of the wife your previous life had?

“Surely... no, maybe a little.” The Anvil of his previous life was someone who valued others very much. He gave a lot of meaning to each and everyone, so he was very distressed when he lost them. Kang Shin-hyuk, who was recovering his memories day by day, clearly contained such a heart. So, simply put, he was very conservative in his relationships. Whatever Claire herself thought, she was a very important person to him, so he wanted more precious moments where they were confident in each other. He couldn’t say that in front of her, though, so he had to make excuses.

-So, the administrator is worried you will proceed with another woman first.

“If you’re concerned about it, try stopping Tsukuyo.” Kang Shin-hyuk grumbled for nothing and headed to another room on the third floor. It was a space created to fulfill his purpose in coming here. That was a studio.

“Then, let’s start.”

-I think she intends to run a bar.

“I think it’s good. If we’re staying here in the future, it’s good to build a relationship with the residents.” Maybe the next time he came here to do a dimensional quest, it would help. Kang Shin-hyuk hummed and pulled out Halo’s roots.

-Eunah’s whisper: Where are you? I miss you.

He felt his heart falling.

-I’m on a dimensional quest.

-Eunah’s whisper: I wish I could’ve helped.

-I’ll ask you next time.

-Eunah’s whisper: Yes, I’ll do whatever I can for my junior.

Kang Shin-hyuk trembled slightly.

-You said it wasn’t because of the fox, right?

He struggled to ignore the administrator’s message and started working. However, with his hands trembling, it took him a while to start properly.



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