

Gourmet 921

Chapter 921

Ben was dying horrible deaths inside this unknown forest where the witch was hiding. After pondering why the witch was this furious, he realized she was being hunted and targeted by countless strong men to gain fame and fortune by killing her when she earned the name ‘Witch.’ Ironically, Ben had been one of those men. He had also been someone who inflicted pain like this on others so that he could make a name for himself.

Fwoooooosh—!

A thick branch stretched out from somewhere. It pierced Ben’s heart and pinned him to a wall.

Crack—!

Ben awakened from his thoughts. Although he was vomiting blood, his eyes were still filled with determination.

“...This subordinate of yours will be back soon.” Ben chuckled lightly. He could not even remember how many deaths he had experienced in this forest.

[Humans! All of you are ugly, dirty, and greedy! Suffer in pain! Experience pain like no other! Beg and scream for me to spare you!]

The witch could not understand why this man did not even scream once. Was he not scared of her? Anyway, she would not give him what he wanted for this ugly and dirty human being.

Fwoosh—

Fwoosh—

When Ben returned to life, hundreds of vines stretched out and wrapped all over his body. The vines tightened their hold on him as if they wanted to choke them to death.

“You see, someone is waiting for me to taste the coffee I want to make with the coffee beans you have in your hands.”

[Lies! You’re telling me that you’re willingly taking on the risk and the pain for the sake of someone else?!]

The witch’s voice rose, almost reaching a scream. However, a smile appeared on her face when she saw Ben’s face turn red as the veins continued to tighten around his body.

“I’m sorry.”

[...]

“I’m sorry. I was one of the greedy humans who called you a witch. I was also one of the dirty humans who declared that they would kill the witch to get a name for themselves.”

Ben tried to console the witch by telling her his story. “I- I was an orphan. I swung my spear to survive and continued on a reckless path so no one would ignore me.”

But at the end of his path, the only thing he could see was blood. He told her how he killed a lot of people so that he could make a name for himself and the tragedy that soon followed it. He also told her about the person that made him want to stand up and move forward once again. He, tied up by the vines, talked for a long time.

“Now, I live for him and him alone.” Ben, who sported a bitter expression, spoke to the witch warmly and gently: “Child, the one that should be punished is not you. It should be me.”

[...]

“Why? We were the ones that turned you into a real witch and hurt you, yet you were the one to run away and hide. You are not a witch. And we should be the ones to receive this kind of punishment.”

Ben felt genuinely sorry for her. The ones in the wrong were people like him, yet the one who suffered was her. Why did she have to hide in the dark and become an ugly and dreary witch? They should have paid for that crime.

Swoosh—

The vines that had a firm hold on him slowly began to unravel. Ben momentarily looked down at the loose vines hanging on him before stepping out of them and walking slowly. Then, the forest started to open up a path for him. At the end of the path stood the witch, who had a head full of tangled hair that covered her bloody face. The witch held a weird and strange staff as she looked at Ben.

The witch cried as she watched Ben slowly walk toward her. “It- It’s really not my fault...?”

A greedy human being was jealous of her powers and began calling her a witch. Because of that, many people came to kill her. At one point, she *indeed* became a witch.

‘I am a cruel and cunning witch. Often, I find myself resenting what I have become. Did everything that happened to me happen because I did something wrong?’

Ben continued to walk toward her.

“Those that hurt you,” Ben, who had killed a lot of people in the past, continued, “Those that made you sad.”

Ben had left many people in despair and sadness because of his greed. And the people who were just like him? They were the ones who turned the girl in front of him into a witch. Slowly approaching the crying girl, he bowed until his forehead hit the ground. Then, sobbing, he said, “The true witch is us.”

This image was something he had never shown to anyone. It was also a sort of apology to all the people who have fallen victim to him.

Ben could only cry when he heard the girl ask him if she was not a witch. Then, a small chuckle escaped his lips as he looked up at the girl and said, “Hey, where can you find such a pretty witch in the world, huh?”

A bright light burst out from the girl's body at that moment. The blood that stained her face and made her look hideous slowly disappeared while her tangled hair straightened itself out. The weird staff in her hands also turned to dust, returning to the earth beneath her feet. Her red clothes, which seemed to have been made from blood, turned into shabby yet ordinary garments.

When the light disappeared, a beautiful and pure girl appeared before Ben. When she flashed a bright smile at him, tens of thousands of red roses bloomed around her. At the same time, a black flower bloomed in front of Ben. Sitting atop this black flower was a 'coffee bean' as beautiful as a black gemstone.

Swooooooosh—

Fwooooooooooosh—

Everything that had turned this bright and innocent girl into a 'witch' over the hundreds of years that she was persecuted and left in this forest slowly disappeared. The rotten and broken trees became ashes scattered with the wind while the sharp and thorny vines retreated to who knew where. Only the ten thousand blooming red roses and the bright and beautiful girl were left after the dark and dreary forest disappeared.

Ben slowly reached out his hand as he harvested the coffee bean. He held the coffee bean dearly in his hands before slowly turning around. The girl was no longer a witch. Although he was happy that his words had meaning for this girl and allowed her to return to her true self, he knew there was nothing else he could do for her. That was why he was going to leave.

Grab—

Ben paused in his tracks. When he turned around, he saw the girl with her head lowered and her hands holding tightly on the hem of his shirt. Ben smiled faintly. He patted her head and said, "Alright. Come with this grandpa. I'm sure he will welcome you warmly."

Then, Ben finally took a step forward. Walking right next to him with her short and quick steps was the girl, whose name was Andrea.

Ben and Andrea shared many stories as they went on their merry way. Most of the questions Andrea asked the old man were about him and the man he served.

"He's the kind of guy that likes to stack his food like a mountain before eating everything in one go."

"That's impossible."

"Hoho. But you know, watching him eat like that always makes me smile."

Andrea listened to Ben, and she could hear his respect and affection for Minhyuk. Because of that, the girl grew ever more curious about the man. At the same time, she also felt terrified. What if she got called a witch again?

"You don't have to worry. No people like me are in the Beyond the Heavens Empire."

Ben, smiling as he walked with Andrea, suddenly stopped in his tracks.

“Andrea,” Ben said bitterly as he looked back at the girl. “This is happening because this grandpa did not pay the price of his crimes.”

Andrea hurriedly hid behind Ben as Farraden, the Pinnacle Strong Men, and their thousands of disciples appeared before them.

Farraden would never be able to forget that day. He had been cooking soup for Ben, who was left in grief after losing his son and had turned to alcohol. When he opened the door of the room where his friend was sleeping, he saw Ben holding a bloody spear in his hands and his daughter lying on the ground with only a breath left in her.

At that moment, rage devoured Farraden, and his head turned blank, and his vision turned white. He immediately pounced on Ben, who stood silently as if he was still drunk.

–Whyyyyyyy!!!

But Ben remained silent. He raised his spear and parried his attacks. Consumed by his fury, Farraden was able to land an attack on Ben. However, he suffered an injury, ending with a huge cut across his eye. Then, Ben ran away.

“Why did you run?”

“...”

Ben did not speak. Honestly, Ben’s memories of that time were hazy and vague. He only remembered Amoure coming to comfort himself, who was already drunk, and giving him a glass. When he opened his eyes, his hands were already stained with blood, and Farraden’s daughter was lying on the ground. After that, he lost his consciousness once again. When he woke up, he was already in front of the sea where his son, whom he missed so much, lived and died.

Should he be honest? Ben had thought he was just being punished for all his wrong actions. And that was not all. He was also scared. The fear made him immobile, so he could not find Farraden and explain himself.

Could he even tell his friend, *‘I killed your daughter,’ ‘Please forgive me,’* or *‘It was all because of Amoure.’* Ben had lost his son. That was why he knew better than anybody else how painful it was to lose someone they loved dearly.

So, Ben did not answer him. He just turned around and gave Andrea a return scroll that would bring her straight to the Beyond the Heavens Empire. This scroll could allow the user to get them directly to the empire, kingdom, or wherever it was set, even if they had never been there.

“Andrea. Go there and wait for me.”

“But...”

Ben just smiled kindly at her. Andrea wanted to use her powers, which helped her rule and command the forest, and fight alongside Ben.

“I’m sorry, Farraden.”

Everything happened in a blink of an eye. Three Pinnacle Strong Men were instantly subdued and left rolling around on the ground.

“...!”

“I- I promised not to die.”

Ben could not break the promise that he had made to his emperor.

Meanwhile, Andrea was very shocked by what she saw. Only at this point did she realize that she would only get in the old man’s way if she continued to stay here. So, she chose to leave.

And the moment Andrea disappeared? Ben darted through their midst as he fought against the Pinnacle Strong Men.

Slash- Slash, slash, slash, slash—!

The Pinnacle Strong Men had grown a lot stronger than before. Even their disciples had an average level of Level 550. However, they all fell like helpless children before Spear God Ben’s spear. But Ben did not kill them. He did not use his spear’s spearhead and only used its pole when dealing with them.

Farraden looked at the sight in shock. *‘Is the Spear God’s level this high?’*

They were also people who had made a name for themselves on the continent. However, from what Farraden could see, Ben was at a level where he could kill everyone present if he so decided. But the Luvien Empire and the Pinnacle Strong Men weren’t fools. Why did the Luvien Empire come to find the Pinnacle Strong Men? It was because they were aware of the ‘Pinnacle’s Stigma.’ The Pinnacle’s Stigma was a testament to a vow. And this vow was something that even gods could not resist. It was an absolute existence.

“A Pinnacle Strong Man cannot belong to any empire or kingdom.”

Of course, this was just a rule from their ancient days. However, Ben had been branded with the stigma and had to follow whatever rule was set for them. And the one that branded this stigma on all the Pinnacle Strong Men? It was none other than Farraden.

At that moment, the invisible stigma branded on Ben’s back shone with a bright red light. Ben felt the stigma grow hot from the power coursing through it.

Shwaaaaaaa—!

In just an instant, the powerful force that was inside Ben’s body began to dissipate. And as if he had been doused with poison, a burning pain began to spread throughout his body.

“Urk!” Ben vomited a mouthful of blood.

The irresistible force made even Ben, who had powerful mental prowess, collapse. But even though he was forced to his knees, Ben endured.

Farraden looked at him and said, “Two hours. You will die in two hours. And I will watch you die a horrible and tragic death.”

“Hoho,” Ben laughed bitterly. He felt like his blood was flowing backward. The once great and mighty Spear God was now helpless. Just one tiny move, and he would stagger and fall. Then, he looked up at Farraden and said, “Farraden, my dear friend.”

“...”

When Farraden’s eyes met with Ben, he felt like the old man had seen through him. Yes, Farraden knew that Ben had killed his daughter because of Amoure. But whenever a person was consumed by their anger, they would always find something to help them quell the burning rage coursing through their bodies. And for Farraden, that was Ben. Farraden had continued to live because he had vowed to kill Ben. But with just one glance, he felt like Ben had seen through his entire being.

“I’m sorry.”

In the end, it was his hands that were used to kill Farraden’s daughter. Farraden frowned. Why did he not make an excuse? Why did he not say that Amoure was behind everything?

Ben took something out. It was the bag containing a single coffee bean blooming among ‘ten thousand flowers’ and countless other rare coffee beans that Ben had previously obtained. He also pulled out a coffee bean grinder and began the long and tedious process of grinding and extracting coffee beans.

Then, Ben looked bitterly at Farraden before opening his mouth and saying something absurd. “Will you please deliver this coffee to His Majesty?”

Even until his very last moments, Ben only thought of one person and one person alone.

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Ben pursed his lips, his face turning whiter by the second. Despite his shaking and trembling body, he continued to kneel and grind the beans in his hand.

“...”

This was also one of the reasons why Farraden was extremely furious with Ben. It was because of the man that he served.

One day, he heard that Ghost Spear Ben had disappeared and had decided to serve the lord of a small territory. After that, he heard stories about how his lord became a king. Farraden even heard that he became the ‘Spear God’ just for that man’s sake. Why? Why would one of the Pinnacle Strong Men live for the sake of another like that? Shouldn’t he live like that for himself?

“Urk–!” Ben spat out another mouthful of blood, his breathing turning ragged. “Haa... Haa...”

Farraden watched Ben continue to grind the coffee beans and said, “I know that you’re crazy, but it seems like you have gone crazier in the time that we haven’t seen each other. You’ll still make a cup of coffee for that emperor even with your dying breath?”

Among the people Farraden met and known, Ben was the most self-respecting. He did not know how to bend to anyone’s will and did not know how to back down. But such a man was trying to

make a cup of coffee that he would serve to the man he served even though he was on the brink of death.

Ben smiled faintly at the question. Then, he began to tell his tale and explain why he chose to serve that man and that man alone.

“I...”

[You have submerged and soaked in the waters of the River of Growth for two days!]

[You have leveled up!]

[You have leveled up!]

[You have leveled up!]

[...leveled up...!]

When Minhyuk stepped out of the River of Growth and saw the six level-up notifications, a wide smile appeared on his face.

[You have experienced growth after submerging yourself in the waters of the River of Growth, a place mentioned in the legends of the Roarke Kingdom.]

[You will now be warped back to the place you were in before.]

When Minhyuk opened his eyes, he had already reappeared on top of the walls, at the same place where he had held the bloody key tightly before. As he stood on the walls and looked at the familiar scenery, Minhyuk remembered someone.

‘Is Grandpa Ben not back yet?’

On the day Ben left to harvest the coffee bean that bloomed among ten thousand flowers, Minhyuk stood in the same spot and looked where he had disappeared for a long time.

‘His journey must be challenging. I should treat him to a very delicious meal.’

Minhyuk chuckled when he thought of Ben. He wanted to repay the old man, who suffered for two days, with a delicious meal and company. However, Minhyuk heard something that made him stop in his tracks.

[The Forgotten Monarch’s Crown’s ‘Vassal’s Voice’ has been triggered!]

[Your vassal Ben is in danger!]

“...What?” Minhyuk blurted. He could not help but be flustered by the notification.

Spear God Ben was a strong powerhouse that no one in Athenae could deal with recklessly. Even the Luvien Empire would need at least three Sword of the Gods’ First Order members to deal with him. However, by the off chance that the Swords of the Gods brought Ben to the brink of death, it did not mean that they would leave unscathed. They would sustain severe injuries.

Because of that, Minhyuk was flustered and unable to understand the notifications he had heard. But he quickly calmed himself down. He could not be left in such an embarrassing state. He had to go and check Ben’s status through Vassal’s Voice.

The door swung open at that moment, and Haze appeared with an unknown little girl in tow.

“Your Majesty! Grandpa Ben is in danger!”

Unlike Minhyuk, Haze did not have the Vassal’s Voice, which meant that she knew about this through someone. He realized that the unknown girl who appeared in front of him was someone sent by Ben. But the girl did not have the time to introduce herself.

“It- it was Farraden! There was this guy named Farraden and so many other people!”

“Farraden...?” It did not take too long for Minhyuk to learn who Farraden was. “The Pinnacle Strong Men’s Farraden?”

Minhyuk more or less knew about Ben’s past. He had once asked the old man about his story in the past. He could only hear his story because the two of them had reached a stage where they had opened their hearts to each other.

Back then, Ben had replied to him with a bitter smile.

–Hoho. Your Majesty, everything happened the way it was because your subordinate had committed many sins.

Minhyuk did not delve deeper into his answer. He only believed in the Ben he had met and known all this time. He knew that something like that would not happen because the old man wanted it to happen.

Then, Haze said, “Your Majesty, the Pinnacle Strong Men of the past have been branded with the ‘Pinnacle’s Stigma’ on their bodies. The person who branded the stigma on their bodies was Farraden. Because he was the one with the special power that allowed him to do so. All of the Pinnacle Strong Men branded with the stigma that Farraden had created had to follow the rules he had set.”

Minhyuk listened silently and intently.

“First, do not betray the Pinnacle Strong Men. Second, they cannot belong to any kingdom or empire. I have gathered that the Pinnacle’s Stigma would be triggered if they appeared within fifty meters of Farraden. Once triggered, the Pinnacle’s Stigma would slowly lead them to death. It is estimated that they would die in around an hour or so.”

“Then, I have to go right away.”

Minhyuk was in a hurry. Ben had only come out to fetch the coffee beans for him. But surprisingly enough, Haze stopped him.

“Your Majesty, you can see or hear what is happening to Grandpa with the Vassal’s Voice, right?”

This was a fact.

“Your Majesty, if you go there and threaten the Pinnacle Strong Men, or ‘Farraden’ to be exact, do you think they will willingly remove the stigma on Grandpa Ben?”

“...”

Bathump, bathump, bathump—

Minhyuk's pounding heart slowly returned to calm when he heard Haze's words. Although he did not know what exactly happened, he knew that Farraden had lost his 'daughter' because of Ben. Then, what would happen if Minhyuk threatened Farraden to remove the stigma from Ben? Well, the situation would probably take a turn for the worse.

So, Minhyuk decided to follow Haze's words. He checked the situation through Vassal's Voice. He was immediately met with it when he closed his eyes.

Thump—!

Minhyuk's heart trembled and shook when he saw a pale Ben, who was covered with blood, pouring the ground coffee beans onto the filter. Then, he heard the man, most likely Farraden, say.

[I know you're crazy, but it seems you have gone crazier when we haven't seen each other. Will you still make a cup of coffee for that emperor even with your dying breath?]

“...”

Minhyuk felt his heart constrict as a lump formed in his throat, and tears threatened his eyes. Yes. Ben was dying. But even though he was dying, he was still trying his hardest to make a cup of coffee using the beans he obtained for him.

At that moment, Ben looked up at Farraden bitterly before opening his mouth.

[I... wanted to die.]

Minhyuk's heart throbbed.

[I did not know the pain and sadness of losing someone until I lost my son.]

Ben poured the ground beans into the filter and gently lowered it to the coffee cup. Then, he slowly poured hot water on it.

[I have made so many people experience that pain and sadness. That's why I wanted to die. And it's also because I feel very sorry for you.]

The man named Farraden frowned. Then, Ben chuckled lightly.

[But I...]

He stared blankly in front of him for quite a while before speaking again.

[I wanted to live again.]

“...”

Minhyuk could see the faint happiness in Grandpa Ben's eyes.

[When I first met him, I wondered, 'What the hell is this bastard?' He could not help himself whenever he saw food. But strangely enough, his behavior and actions made me laugh.]

[He avenged my son for me. It felt quite bittersweet. My final motivation had disappeared. At that time, I thought, 'Ah, I can die now.' But...]

Ben smiled at the memory.

[The young man, who was only twenty years of age, smiled at me.]

[I'm glad. I'm thrilled for you, Grandpa. He told me those words so many times. I felt like I was possessed. I had wanted to die after avenging my son, but I stood up and followed him.]

[He would smile whenever he found something delicious to eat, and me? I would also smile.]

[Whenever he was sad, I would also feel sad.]

[And suddenly, I realized I had stayed by his side laughing and smiling for a long time.]

[It was quite a strange feeling. And later, I remained standing by the side of the man who became a king. I looked down at his people and looked at him again.]

[It was at that moment that I realized...]

A smile graced Ben's lips as he recalled that moment.

[Ah, I want to live.]

[I want to live and stand by his side for a long time.]

[I want to live and help him get whatever he wants.]

Then, Farraden shouted with his veins popping on the side of his neck.

[You have really gone crazy! He is a foreigner! He's nothing but a man who wants someone strong by his side! And you? You just wanted to find someone to lean on! In the end, you're nothing but a mere servant. And him? He's just the emperor that you serve!]

[I have never once viewed him as my 'lord,' my 'king,' or my 'emperor.']

[...!]

Warm coffee slowly started trickling down the filter Ben had poured hot water on. This coffee was the most precious in the world.

[Fwoooooosh!]

The trickling coffee slowly turned into drops that fell one after the other. A bright and happy smile flashed on Ben's face when the final drop fell.

[I have always thought of him as my son.]

“...”

Tears started to drip down Minhyuk's cheeks. He had never seen the relationship between him and Ben as the relationship between an emperor and his vassal. He had always treated Ben like his grandfather, while Ben treated him like his son. The two had always been there for each other because they treated each other like family. The thought of bringing harm to the other did not even cross their minds at all. The two acted as if this was only natural. And because of that, they always wanted to do something for the other. They always wanted to be by their side and protect each other.

“I have to go.”

“Did you find a way?”

However, Minhyuk did not answer Haze's question. He wanted to tell her that he was going to try the only thing he could, but he swallowed those words back into his stomach.

[...has been triggered!]

Minhyuk's eyes grew wide. Then, he was immediately teleported to where Ben was.

"Sir Farraden, why are we not killing that old man right away?" Rhoa asked. Rhoa was the second in the rankings of the Pinnacle Strong Men.

And just like Rhoa, all the other Pinnacle Strong Men present were in a hurry. They had to kill Spear God Ben and head to the Luvien Empire right away so they and their disciples could survive and live. So, why was Farraden waiting for him to die this slow death? And why was he looking at the old man with such a '*sad look*' when this very old man was the man who killed his daughter?

But unlike the other Pinnacle Strong Men, Farraden knew Ben. He was the one who knew him best. And he had already realized that Amoure orchestrated everything. But there was one thing that Farraden could not understand. Why was Ben so dedicated and loyal to his emperor?

From what he could tell, Ben, who had lived in guilt after he lost his son, had only stayed by the man's side because he wanted someone to rely on. Truth was, Farraden wished to return to how they were in the past. After all, he already knew the truth. But Ben only spoke and thought of his emperor now.

"Sir Farraden, if you're not going to do it, I will. We're still in danger. Don't you know that the Beyond the Heavens' emperor can appear any moment?" Rhoa said as he pulled his sharp dagger out. Slowly, he walked toward Ben, who was pouring the coffee he had made inside a vacuum-insulated bottle.

Farraden turned away. He did not want to see it happen.

"..."

Rhoa was forced to take a step back.

"The Beyond the Heavens' emperor?"

Farraden turned his head back when he heard his disciples' murmur. That was when he saw the emperor of Beyond the Heavens standing in front of Ben.

"Your Majesty..." Ben called out, his voice hoarse as he slowly neared his death.

Minhyuk looked back at Ben with a very sad look on his face. Then, Farraden said coldly, "You're too late. Even if you kill me here, the stigma on his body will not disappear."

The only one who could remove the stigma was Farraden, who believed that Minhyuk would only act this way.

'He will use his power.'

He was sure the man would overpower them until he released the stigma. But even if he killed Farraden here, he would never remove the stigma on Ben's body.

At that moment, the emperor, whom Ben cherished and loved so much, bowed his head without hesitation. "I'm begging you. Spare Grandpa Ben. The price of his crimes? Let me take it in his stead."

"...!"

"...!"

"...!"

A buzz rose among the Pinnacle Strong Men.

The emperor represented the empire and was often proud and arrogant. It was only natural. After all, they ruled over millions of people and even commanded and led millions of troops. For someone to become an emperor, they had to gather several kingdoms and create an empire.

Even if they could not kill Ben, the Luvien Empire would spare them if they could kill the Beyond the Heavens' emperor.

Rhoa said, "Then, go die in his stead."

It was both a mockery and a reproach for the pretentious emperor before him. They knew that people like him would often want their subordinates to do anything and everything for them but would never want to lose anything for their subordinates. Besides, the Beyond the Heavens' emperor was a foreigner. Even if he died here, he would still revive and survive.

But if he died at their hands, it would be recognized as a death caused by the Luvien Empire, and it would spell the fall of their emerging empire. Perhaps it was because he knew this fact that the Beyond the Heavens emperor remained standing there with his head bowed down.

'Ben. For someone like that...?' Farraden thought. He thought Ben's life was miserable and tragic because he served such a man.

That was when the Beyond the Heaven's emperor raised his head and stared straight at Farraden. Then, he said, "Even if I die a hundred or a thousand times. I will do it for his sake."

Chapter 923

[The God and Knight has been randomly triggered!]

[The God and Knight shows its power upon Minhyuk and Farraden!]

These notifications rang in Minhyuk's ears before he went to where Ben was, cementing his thoughts of wanting to do the only thing he could do.

Minhyuk did not want to threaten Farraden and the Pinnacle Strong Men. He knew better than anybody else that Ben would not want him to do this. So, the only thing he could do was beg on Ben's behalf. If all else failed, he would insist on taking the punishment in the old man's stead.

'I don't think it's something I should be ashamed of.'

Minhyuk would make the same choice for anyone in the Beyond the Heavens Empire. If he could keep and protect his precious people by just bowing once, he would do so repeatedly.

But one question was running through his head: ‘*Why did the God and Knight get triggered with Farraden...?*’

The God and Knight was a skill that would randomly trigger whenever he met someone who had the potential to become his *knight*. The fact that this skill got triggered meant that *Farraden* could become his vassal.

Right now, Farraden could be said to be the central pillar and the representative of the Pinnacle Strong Men. After Amoure and the Pinnacle Strong Men and the disciples that followed him, Farraden took control of most of the new Pinnacle Strong Men and led them to a different path.

Meanwhile, Minhyuk heard Rhoa’s voice when he arrived at where Ben was.

“Then, go die in his stead.”

Minhyuk, who bowed his head, was not afraid of dying, especially since he had increased his level by six. But even if his level did not increase, he would still not be afraid of dying.

As he bowed, Minhyuk thought, ‘*How can I show my sincerity to Farraden?*’

When it came to Ben, there was no question. Minhyuk could do anything for the old man. Only this question stumped him. As he pondered and agonized over the matter, he replied, “Even if I die a hundred or a thousand times. I will do it for his sake.”

When Minyuk raised his head, Farraden saw the sincerity on his face.

‘*Is it because he does not want to lose the Spear God?*’

Or perhaps this man cared for Ben just like Ben cared for him. Farraden was truly quite surprised by this turn of events. A ruler who ruled and commanded an empire bowed his head and declared that he was willing to die a hundred or a thousand times for the sake of his vassal.

Then, Rhoa, the second-ranked Pinnacle Strong Man, said, “Aren’t those words that anyone could say?”

Rhoa did not have a shred of trust in kingdoms and empires. Why? Because his family, which was completely devoted to the empire to the point that they swore their eternal allegiance to it, was accused of treason and murdered. The accusation was false, and it was made up by the imperial family that they devoted themselves to.

There were quite a lot of the Pinnacle Strong Men and their disciples who experienced the same thing. This was also the reason for a clause that said, “*You cannot belong to an empire or a kingdom.*” listed in the Pinnacle Strong Men’s rules.

Although the current Pinnacle Strong Men did not have the *Pinnacle’s Stigma* branded on their bodies now, most still chose not to belong to the kingdoms and empires for the same reason.

However, the situation with the Luvien Empire was different. The Luvien Empire, known as the strongest empire on all continents, threatened them with its lifeblood.

Farraden listened to Rhoa mock Minhyuk and took a dagger out. He possessed a very shocking and unusual power. Farraden was hailed as the King of Vows because if someone promised or accepted his offer, this promise would be fulfilled.

“You will die if this dagger enters your abdomen fully. That death will be equivalent to twenty deaths. Will that be okay? If you’re fine with that, I won’t kill Ben.”

Farraden was fully aware that death would cause huge damage to foreigners. This damage could be considered fatal for Minhyuk, an emperor and an existence who stood on top of everyone.

At the same time, the notifications rang in Minhyuk’s ears.

[If you get stabbed by the dagger in Farraden’s hands, you will be forced to log out twenty times in a row.]

[If you get stabbed by the dagger in Farraden’s hands, he would have to remove the Pinnacle’s Stigma that was branded on Ben’s body as the contractor!]

[However, these will only take effect once you agree!]

It was truly a surprising and special skill. However, there was just one thing: Farraden’s ability would only be triggered if the other party accepted his conditions. In other words, it was not very easy to trigger.

Farraden looked at Minhyuk. Twenty deaths was no small matter. Minhyuk would be pushed out of the top spot if he died twenty times. However, Minhyuk did not even hesitate to answer, “Alright.”

“...”

‘No way...’

Farraden approached Minhyuk the moment he heard the man’s agreement. He looked at Minhyuk as he slowly removed his Transcendental’s Armor before stabbing him with the dagger.

Stab—

The dagger slowly dug deep into Minhyuk’s abdomen. The dagger, constantly being pushed in, stopped at some point.

“...”

When Farraden looked up at Minhyuk, all he saw was Minhyuk staring straight at Ben. He could see the bitter smile on the man’s face. However, there was also relief on his face.

‘He’s truly sincere...?’

Drip— drip—

His warm blood dripped down the ground, but Minhyuk did not take his eyes off Ben.

Farraden was furious. He was furious at Ben, who sinned against him and his daughter and served someone else. Of course, he wouldn’t have gone to find Ben himself if the Luvien Empire had not sent them here. This was because he knew that everything was because of Amoure.

Even so, Farraden was still angry. He believed that Ben, who seemed to be only trying to find someone to lean on, became a madman obsessed with his emperor. However, he was the one who was mistaken.

“...”

Farraden slowly pulled out the dagger that he had stabbed halfway through Minhyuk's abdomen. Minhyuk looked back at Farraden in doubt. However, Farraden just turned around and walked away. When Farraden opened his hands, the *hanja* engraved on Ben's back surfaced. Then, they floated in the air and slowly disappeared into nothingness. At the same time, Ben, whose face had turned a pale white, slowly returned to normal. Even his ragged and weak breathing had already started to regain its vitality.

"Sir Farraden, why...?"

Farraden did not fully stab Minhyuk's abdomen with the dagger in his hands. And according to the vow, the effects would only take effect if the dagger was fully inserted into Minhyuk's abdomen.

A commotion broke out among the Pinnacle Strong Men and their disciples.

"What do you think you're doing...?"

"If you don't kill Ben or that emperor, then we will all die."

Farraden remained silent, opting to only stare at Minhyuk for a moment.

"I no longer harbor any resentment against him." Then, he opened his mouth and told Minhyuk what he wanted to say to Ben: "Once he wakes up, please tell him that he no longer has to feel sorry for me."

The two of them were once the best of friends in the world. Although Farraden knew everything happened because of Amoure, he was still angry at Ben. Why? Because he believed that Ben was serving the wrong man. However, he fully understood why Ben stood by this man's side.

"And please tell him not to miss me."

Seeing Farraden acting like this, the Pinnacle Strong Men immediately shouted, the veins on their necks popping with the volume of their shouting.

"No!"

"This dogmatic choice of yours will bring us all to our deaths...!"

"In the first place, we do not have the right to kill Beyond the Heavens' Ben and his emperor."

"...!"

"...!"

"...!"

"And the Luvien Empire does not have any intention of sparing us. If Ben truly dies, do you think that man over there, who cares deeply about his subjects, would truly let us go and keep us alive?"

That was the truth. If Ben died, then Minhyuk would kill everyone here.

The current Pinnacle Strong Men were different from the Pinnacle Strong Men of the past. They only came to kill Ben because they branded him as *Farraden's enemy*. However, as Farraden had implied, the Pinnacle Strong Men no longer had a place in this world. This truth would not change no matter what choice they made.

But Farraden still found the results of his capricious choice to be very heartbreaking, especially since they would harm his comrades.

"I'm sorry. I will pay the price for this crime. Let's go back now."

The Pinnacle Strong Men and their disciples looked at Farraden blankly. Rhoa broke the silence. He said, "I will follow whatever you say, Sir Farraden."

Rhoa loathed the kingdoms and empires but respected and followed Farraden's orders. It was proof of how good a leader Farraden was. No one spoke against him. After all, it was not Farraden's fault. It was the Luvien Empire's fault for forcing them into a situation where they would kill them if they did not choose to kill who they wanted them to kill.

Just when they were about to turn around and leave, a voice rang out.

"If you go just like that, Ben will feel sad and miss you more for the rest of his life," the Beyond the Heavens' Emperor said as he helped Ben lie on his legs.

"..."

At that moment, the notifications for the God and Knight rang in Minhyuk's ears.

[Origin Authority God and Knight has the power to help you obtain the loyalty of the God's Knight of your choice through various methods.]

[If you can show Farraden, the Pinnacle Strong Man that had lost the place he could lean on, what kind of emperor you are, you might win his heart!]

However, this was not the reason Minhyuk was determined to lose his life twenty times in a row. Even without these notifications, he would still trade his life for Ben's life, even if he had to die twenty or a hundred times over. But his actions made the Pinnacle Strong Men, who harbored distrust toward empires and kingdoms, realize something.

'He's not someone who abandons his subjects.'

'He's someone that puts his vassals before himself.'

The Pinnacle Strong Men have never seen an emperor like this.

"Come to the Beyond the Heavens Empire."

"...!"

"...!"

"...!"

Everyone's eyes grew wide when they heard his words. This was the only way for them to live now. At this moment, Rhoa felt a cold sweat break on his forehead.

‘Was he able to read the flow in just this short moment?’

Did he figure it out just by hearing their short conversation? Or perhaps it was another way? In any case, it would be a surprise. Maybe he led them toward this path and forced them to choose.

Then, Farraden asked, “I- I was going to kill your vassal.”

“I understand that.”

“...”

“I might have done the same thing.”

“...”

Farraden clenched his fists. However, this was not something that Minhyuk and Farraden had to discuss and agree on.

Ben, who had already recovered from the effects of the damage caused by the stigma, said, “I’m sorry.”

“...”

Farraden turned to look at Ben silently. As someone who knew Ben well, Farraden could tell that the apology was his apology for killing his daughter and an apology for asking him to come with them.

Farraden looked up at the sky for a moment. Then, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He did not blame Ben for what happened with his daughter. He knew that Ben cared for his daughter as his own, and he also knew that his daughter would not want him to resent Ben for what happened, either.

“I’ll go with you.”

[The God and Knight has succeeded!]

[God’s Knight Farraden has the power to make any vow made before him take effect!]

[God’s Knight Farraden will not hesitate to risk his life for God!]

Farraden agreed to go with them. Meanwhile, the sudden turn of events left the Pinnacle Strong Men looking confused. At this moment, Minhyuk’s high CHA showed its strength once again.

“I will destroy the Luvien Empire.”

“...”

“...”

“...”

These were words that no one could say carelessly like this.

“Then, I will join you.”

“We will also join you.”

They all knelt and swore their allegiance to Minhyuk.

At the same time in Joy Co. Ltd.

A sigh rang loudly inside the conference room. With a sad and bitter voice, Team Leader Park said, "Love and care for each other. This is the bond between Minhyuk and Ben. I thought it would be enough for Player Minhyuk to receive the rewards and release the ad today. But it seems like it's a bit lacking now."

Carron boasted that the effects of the advertisement video about Ben would be beyond their imaginations. Everyone was waiting in anticipation for it to be triggered. However, there was a slight difference that made it unable to be triggered right now.

And on the monitor they were watching, they saw Ben and Minhyuk walking toward the sunset.

Minhyuk had heard through the Vassal's Voice that Ben saw him as his *son*. He also saw how the old man did his best to grind the coffee beans and make coffee for him even though he was already on the brink of death.

As they walked toward the sunset, Ben carefully handed the thermos with the coffee he had made to Minhyuk and said, "Your Majesty, actually..." Ben smiled kindly. "The stigma won't be able to kill me. Aren't I a god? The power that a god possesses can restrain Farraden's power of vows."

Minhyuk just listened silently to Ben's ramblings. He knew the old man was just saying it so he would not be worried or sad. At that moment, the words that Ben said when he was dying flashed in his head.

–I... I wanted to die.

"Hoho. It seems like this old man's acting is quite good, huh? Hoho. I was even able to deceive you, Your Majesty." Ben smiled in satisfaction.

As Minhyuk listened to Ben's laughter, the old man's words flashed again in his head.

–But I wanted to live again.

Minhyuk sported a surprised look on his face as he continued to walk with Ben. Then, he said, "Grandpa, you're telling me all that was just acting? My god. You got me there! I was completely fooled!"

All Minhyuk could do now was let Ben feel at ease. Then, Ben's words once again flashed in his head.

–I have never once viewed him as my 'lord,' my 'king,' or my 'emperor.'

–I have always thought of him as my son.

The two showed their care and love for each other in their ways. Minhyuk pretended he was deceived by the rambling Ben, who did not want him to feel sorry or sad. And Ben? He acted as if he was not going to be killed a few moments prior. Ultimately, everything they did was because of their love for each other.

Then, at that moment...

[The bond between you and Ben has reached its peak!]

[You can now view the advertisement video “Old Man and Young Man.”]

[Would you like to watch it?]

Chapter 924

Joy Co. Ltd. executives gathered when they learned that Spear God Ben’s advertisement video had been completed. Their reason was simple: They wanted to discuss the final line appearing on the video.

These were the things that Joy Co. Ltd. had heard from their consumers every single time:

–The ad’s budget was ten million won, but it feels like it’s just worth five million won.

–Joy Co. Ltd. might have produced Athenae and cannot be rivaled when it comes to the capsule and the game, but... their ads and commercials are trash.

–God is fair. They did not give everything to Joy Co. Ltd.

Joy Co. Ltd. was a global company that continued to grow by the day. However, every time they released an advertisement or a commercial, they received everyone’s criticism. The culprit? It was none other than President Kang Taehoon, who was going “Fufufu” inside the conference room right now. Just like someone said, God was fair. In other words, God was not biased and did not give everything to Kang Taehoon.

The faint chuckle that escaped President Kang Taehoon’s mouth engulfed everyone inside the conference room with anxiety.

‘What kind of line did he prepare this time again?’

‘The viewers will definitely say that we have ruined the advertisement with this line.’

That was right. Right now, the executives were all busy making eye contact. Even though Kang Taehoon had always listened to his executives’ opinions, he had always ignored them when it came to this. This was because he was extremely proud of his *lines*.

Even Manager Kim Dae-Il, who often opposed and rebuked him, was entirely on board. He said, “President Kang Taehoon’s line in our last advertisement was truly outstanding. Everyone who saw it got goosebumps all over their bodies. *Fufu*.”

“...”

“...”

Indeed. Many comments on the community sites said they got goosebumps from the ads they made. The goosebumps were not the good kind, but those that one would get when they were very, very embarrassed.

“That line has been in my head for a month.”

“As expected of the president.”

After all, it was very rare for people to ruin an excellent advertisement with just a single line. But President Kang? He just smiled in satisfaction and delight.

“Of course, I prepared a line for the ads this time, too.” Amidst everyone’s anxiety, Taehoon cleared his throat and continued, “Hopes, dreams, friendship, and love. Come to Athenae, where happiness is aplenty!”

“...”

“...”

“...”

All of the executives were frozen on the spot. No! Why did it sound like he was trying to lure them into an amusement park?! It also felt like a line from a manhwa for children of all ages.

“Kghhk... You’re really amazing, president.”

“Fu- Fufufu.” President Kang Taehoon shrugged his shoulders.

Then, at that moment, their savior appeared.

“This line is the worst line I have ever heard. I’ve worked hard to edit this video, and you’re just going to slap on such an old-fashioned line like that?”

“...”

“...”

The savior was none other than Jackson.

“From what I heard, the influx of customers does not change much even after an advertisement is released in Korea. So, this is the case. Children nowadays would not even like to hear such lines, you know?”

“I don’t understand.”

“I really don’t understand.”

Both President Kang and Manager Kim could not understand why Jackson said so.

Jackson could not stand the work he worked hard to edit being turned to waste. Besides, he did not need to worry about President Kang Taehoon and Manager Kim Dae-Il’s opinions since he was hired externally.

“I understand why the executives have approved this line for the advertisement. However, this ad features Beyond the Heavens’ Minhyuk and Ben. I believe Player Minhyuk’s opinion is the most important in determining which line to use.”

President Kang was embarrassed when he heard Jackson's words. However, he still believed in the line he had thought of. There was no way that Minhyuk would hate such a shocking and amazing line, right? So, he pulled out his phone and called Minhyuk, putting it on speaker.

[Yes, President?]

Not long after, Taehoon enthusiastically relayed the situation about the line he had thought of.

[...Who in the world picked that nasty line? That line sounds like you want robots to join together and fight.]

"..."

[I think even Beanie can come up with a better line than that.]

"*Ahem, ahem.* Is- is that so?"

Only then did President Kang and Manager Kim realize the situation. The two could only cough to hide their embarrassment. However, President Kang did not want to give up just yet.

"Then, do you think your lines will have a bigger impact than this line?"

"Of course. I will put the line I have prepared and submitted to the president and the executives previously."

"It's too provocative," President Kang Taehoon said as he glanced at his executives.

"Let's vote then. Those who think that my line should be included in our advertisement video, please raise your hand."

Only Kim Dae-Il raised his hand. The rest? Well, none of them raised their hands.

"It's decided, then." Jackson chuckled.

This time, Joy Co. Ltd. selected a very good advertisement video. Of course, Jackson's ability to edit videos also played a huge role, so the executives had high expectations.

'Jackson's line is truly the best!'

'A lot of viewers will surely be thrilled by that line.'

To put things into perspective, this was the line that President Kang Taehoon had thought of before:

–Come, let's all venture into an unknown world filled with love, hope, and dreams!

Just thinking about it could give the executives goosebumps.

The same notifications rang in the ears of the players in Athenae worldwide.

[You can now view the advertisement video "Old Man and Young Man."]

[Would you like to watch it?]

[If you choose to watch the advertisement video, your character will be protected during the entire video!]

Some agreed, while others disregarded it. And for those who decided to watch the advertisement video in Athenae, a line appeared before them.

[I didn't even have a shred of hope left.]

At the same time, an old man's gloomy and dark voice rang in their ears.

[I went around the world and killed many people. But when news of my son's death reached me? I was left in despair.]

Amidst the darkness, they could see an old man crouching down and holding his head in pain. This old man was the man who they call *Spear God Ben* now.

Then, at that moment, the scene in front of them changed. They saw the dazzling blue sea as the old man tried to board his ship while a young man stood before him. The young man smiled brightly at the old man and enthusiastically greeted him, "Hello!"

[That was the first time I met him.]

The young man had a wide and bright smile, and the old man stood still in front of him. A faint smile appeared as the old man looked at the young man.

[It's fun staying by his side.]

[Thanks to him, I was able to find the will to live once again.]

[I am not afraid of anything as long as I stay by his side.]

[I made a vow to myself.]

The scene changed again, showing an episode from a long time ago. It was the episode in the Continental Cloud. Black Dragon Vormon appeared and moved to kill the young man.

[I will protect him.]

[I will risk everything and put everything on the line to protect him.]

Shwaaaaaaaaaaaaa—!

The old man slashes Black Dragon Vormon's neck. As he landed, he stabbed his spear on the ground and stretched his hand toward the young man.

"Please don't give up, my King."

Then, the old man slowly turned into ashes that disappeared with the wind, changing the scene. In this scene, they saw the old man facing a woman. The name *Spear God Aerdes* was floating above this woman's head.

Aerdes asked the old man, "Once your soul falls into hell, you will be forced to walk into a mountain of knives and feel the everlasting pain of being stabbed by their blades. You will also feel the pain of being cooked in a hot pot, the pain of being stuck in a cold block of ice, the pain of your tongue being pulled out, the pain of vipers wrapping around your body and biting you with their poisonous fangs, the pain of your bones being cut with a jagged saw, the pain of facing the biting wind with your bare body, the pain of being stuck in the dark and feeling despair and solitude with nothing on your body. You will remain in this void and continue to do so for thousands of years. You will even lose your shot at reincarnation. Will that be alright?"

[He was worried about me when I chose to become the Spear God after knowing that it would be hard and painful and that I also face the risk of my soul being destroyed.]

.]

“I have never learned how to back down,” the old man replied, a small smile on his face.

The scene changed once again. White snow fell upon the bleeding and dying old man while tears streamed down his face.

[I did not retreat. I endured the pain as I died over and over again.]

[Although I was in pain, I felt glad that it was me who was hurt and not him. I felt glad that I was doing this for him.]

Ben smiled, the tears dripping down his cheeks as he looked up at the snow falling from the skies above him.

[He is my light.]

Thousands of screenshots appeared in front of everyone watching. One picture showed the first meeting between the old man and the young man, during which they ate some flower crab ramyeon on a small boat.

[Sometimes, he is my companion.]

There was a picture of the old man peering under a cat's tail to harvest some coffee that he would use to make a cup for the young man.

[Sometimes, he is my lord.]

There was a picture of the two of them standing atop the walls as they looked at the millions of troops gathered before the Beyond the Heavens Empire.

[And sometimes...]

Various screenshots of the young man smiling brightly as the old man passed by him flashed in front of everyone.

There was a picture of the young man smiling widely as the old man handed over the coffee he had brewed and extracted. A picture of the young man showing an embarrassed smile when the old man caught him stealing some of his food. A picture of the young man waving excitedly on the walls as he called out to the old man. A scene of the two of them walking together on days when the night was cool and refreshing. There was also a picture showing the old man watching over the young man worriedly when he was hurt and sick.

Finally, the old man spoke once again.

[He is my son.]

The screenshots disappeared as darkness stained everything in front of the viewers. In this darkness, the sound of weapons clashing resonated.

“Everyone! Do not back down!” The young man shouted.

He had now become an emperor and was watching over the enemy troops pouring out of the huge castle gates. On one side of the wall, the name *Luvien Empire* was floating. There were only 200,000 troops left under the young man's command. Even the young man was bloodied and bruised.

In that short moment, all the viewers saw the battlefield through the eyes of the young man. They watched as their comrades died while fighting frantically against the enemies. Then, the young man's view, the same view that the viewers saw, suddenly grew erratic as he fell off his horse.

“Haa... Haa...”

The young man's ragged breathing echoed in everyone's ears. The viewers watched as everything turned into slow motion.

[I will always protect him.]

“Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

A roar resounded as 300,000 cavalry charged forward. And leading them was none other than the old man. The old man rode atop a black horse, his glare piercing the enemies sharply through the gaps of his loose hair.

[I will always come to save him.]

The appearance of the old man and his cavalry swept away the soldiers of the *Luvien Empire*. Spear God Ben slowly stood on top of his horse and leaped forward.

Vwoooooooooooooong—

The power of God wrapped around Ben's spear, seemingly able to wreck everything. It flew from his spear and shot toward the gigantic walls before them.

[I will always fight alongside him.]

Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeep—

Everything turned white just before the force the old man sent collided with the walls. All of the viewers watching the advertisement were left curious. What would they see next? The scene slowly changed once again. It was the scene they saw at the start of the advertisement. It showed them the old man and the young man meeting at sea, where the young man enthusiastically greeted the old man. Then, the scene that was cut off at the beginning resumed.

“Boy, who are you?”

Everyone felt that the magnificent and booming voice that decorated the video's climax was about to recite his final line.

[On that day...]

“My name is Minhyuk. What’s your name, grandpa?”

The old man smiled as he replied, “Ben.”

[...a legend has begun.]

Chapter 925

Various community sites were paralyzed after Joy Co. Ltd. released their new advertisement video. The Old Man and the Young Man ranked first, followed by Ben, Minhyuk, and the Beyond the Heavens Empire, ranked fourth on countless portal sites worldwide. It was a hot issue that everyone was talking about.

[I felt like I watched a short music video.]

[This is wild. I spaced out after the video ended, so I ended up dying from the mob that I was fighting.]

[I remembered something President Kang Taehoon said when they first released Athenae. He wanted to create a world where players and NPCs lived together. After watching this video, we can tell he had already made such a world.]

[That’s right. At least one player in Athenae is very close to an NPC.]

[Spear God Ben is one of the founding fathers of the Beyond the Heavens Empire. He’s also the NPC that everyone is most curious about. After all, he is the first NPC to become a god after the release of Athenae.]

[He’s a vassal, but he’s also a god. Everyone must be thinking the same thing, right?]

Everyone turned their attention to one of the comments. What were they thinking?

[How on earth did Ben become the Spear God?]

That was right. Everyone was curious: What blessing was Minhyuk born with, for him to be surrounded by so many strong and unique people?

[This video shows that Player Minhyuk has played a considerable role. They have only gathered and edited Ben and Minhyuk’s highlights to turn them into advertisements. Ah. Of course, the scene where they were at war with the Luvien Empire and the line, “On that day, a legend has begun,” appeared was staged and produced separately.]

When one of the players pointed out that most of the scenes that Joy Co. Ltd. used for the video truly happened in real life, the effect of the advertisement grew. The real-time search terms even welcomed two fast-emerging topics.

#1. Athenae capsule’s price.

#2. How to start in Beyond the Heavens Empire.

Immediately after the playing players watched the video, Joy Co. Ltd. published the advertisement video on ZTube and several broadcasting networks. Of course, the video was cut short and only showed the highlights of the advertisement for TV consumption. But surprisingly enough, those

who watched the ad on TV quickly boarded the internet and added views to the video uploaded to ZTube. These were what the players felt when they saw the advertisement video:

[I also want to create a legend and form a strong bond with an NPC in Athenae.]

[My dad also wants to try Athenae now. So, he asked me how to do it.]

[Yep, yep. My mom and dad also want to go on a date in Athenae. When we saw the ad, they asked me, 'Is that really how it looks?'. And when I told them it's the same, they immediately bought capsules!]

On the same day, Minhyuk received a call from President Kang Taehoon.

"Our Athenae capsule sales have increased fortyfold. You must also feel the effect of the advertisement video, right?"

Hearing that question, Minhyuk answered, "Yes, very much so."

The moment Minhyuk accessed Athenae, these notifications rang in his ears.

[Today, 43,311 new players have created their characters and chose to start in Beyond the Heavens Empire.]

[They will all become precious talents of the Beyond the Heavens Empire!]

Whenever new players created their characters for the first time, they would be asked to choose the empire or kingdom where they wanted to start. Considering the future, these new players would become very important and precious talents to their chosen nation.

These players would often choose to remain in their chosen nation. In this case, they would stay with the Beyond the Heavens Empire. Why? The reason was simple. This was because these players would have built bonds and ties to the Beyond the Heavens' NPCs, whom they benefited from through various quests and tasks.

With the newly created characters, the number of players who chose to join the Beyond the Heavens Empire increased by around 87 times. And that was not all.

[Today, the Beyond the Heavens Empire has welcomed more than three million visitors!]

[You can expect to receive abundant taxes from the inns, restaurants, and various attractions visitors frequent!]

If the player belonged to a nation not at war with the Beyond the Heavens Empire, they could visit their empire after quickly checking their identities. The Beyond the Heavens Empire's streets were bustling and lively.

'As long as we continue to release the ads, we will experience the same effects, if not more.'

Although Joy Co. Ltd. had yet to reveal its plans, Minhyuk knew this advertisement gig was a large-scale plan. Both Jackson and Joy Co. Ltd. would review and follow a step-by-step process before releasing the videos of their NPCs with tremendous stories. Based on what Minhyuk had heard, the final advertisement video would focus on him and the entire Beyond the Heavens Empire.

Minhyuk stood atop the walls and looked out of the castle. A small smile appeared when he looked down at the insulated vacuum bottle he was holding. Then, he checked the title he had received: The One with His Friend.

Unique Title

- When fighting within one kilometer of Ben, your stats, attack, and defensive power will increase by 5%.*
- When fighting within one kilometer of Ben, your HP will recover by 15% if either of your HPs drops to 10%.*
- Your CHA increases by 10%.*
- Passive Skill: Friend*

Minhyuk could tell it was an excellent title with just one look. Of course, he also checked the detailed information of the passive skill named Friend.

Passive Skill

“???”

Minhyuk was left stunned. He usually summoned Ben and his other vassals using the Almond of Subordinates, but with this skill, he could now summon Ben without using the almonds. The only question was why the skill would only be triggered if he said the word *Friend*.

‘I think Ali will really like this...?’

Perhaps Ali would be envious of him once he knew that Minhyuk had a skill like this. Although Minhyuk was not aware, this title was personally and specially created by President Kang Taehoon himself. He, who had always been the main reason why Joy Co. Ltd.’s ads always had bad lines, felt a new hope and dream bloom in his chest when he saw Ali crying, “*Frieeeeeeeeend!!!*”.

That was why he made it like this.

After checking the title, Minhyuk opened the insulated vacuum bottle and poured its contents into a clear glass filled with ice.

‘The best coffee is iced americano!’

Even if he froze to death, Minhyuk was the type of person who would insist on drinking iced Americano. After making an iced Americano with the coffee Ben had made for him, Minhyuk gently put the glass on the table to take out the delicious snack that could be considered its perfect combi!

This snack was none other than chocolate-flavored Diguets[1]. Diguets were round biscuits with a thick coat of chocolate on the other side. It had a sweet flavor and a crispy texture that would spread in one’s mouth and bring delight.

‘From what I recall, this is called the calorie snack from hell.’

But it was fine. If it was delicious, then it was worth zero calories. Minhyuk even deliberately made himself grow exhausted before he drank Ben’s coffee.

‘Coffee tastes best when you’re extremely stressed and craving caffeine!’

The ice of the iced Americano clinked loudly as Minhyuk took a sip with his straw.

Gulp, gulp—

The cold and bitter iced Americano gently flowed down Minhyuk’s throat on this hot and exhausting day. A sigh of admiration would often follow when drinking a genuinely refreshing and delicious coffee.

“Haa...” Minhyuk sighed as he picked up a Diguets and took a bite.

Crunch, crunch—

The thick Diguets biscuit's texture was to die for. Minhyuk wondered if he would first feel the texture of the biscuit, but the sweetness of the chocolate was the first thing that filled his mouth. It was sweet—so sweet that Minhyuk felt like his mouth was sticky with sugar. However, Minhyuk’s mouth did not stop. He continued to chew through the whole pack of Diguets just like that.

Didn’t they say that eating sweets would make one happy? That was the case right now. Minhyuk’s smile grew deeper with every bite of the Diguets. And whenever he felt like the sweetness was too much, he would take a sip of the cold iced Americano and cleanse his palate for a bit.

Sluuuurp—

“Kgghhk!” Minhyuk exclaimed as he finished the Diguets and drank the last sip of his coffee. “Thank you, grandpa!”

The moment his word of thanks to Ben, who was far away and could not hear them, fell, a notification rang in his ears.

[You have drunk the Coffee made from the Coffee Bean that Bloomed Among Ten Thousand Flowers.]

[The one that extracted and brewed the coffee has the love, effort, and passion toward you.]

[It exerts more power than any other ordinary coffee beans.]

[You have gained 200 Will.]

[The exhaustion and fatigue you experience will decrease by 20%.]

The special stat *Will* could only be increased after continuous and repetitive labor. The fact that he could gain 200 just by drinking a glass of coffee was a truly remarkable and shocking reward.

Minhyuk looked down at the Beyond the Heavens Empire with a satisfied smile.

[You have received the invitation to the Gods’ Succession Ceremony!]

“Huh...?” Minhyuk mumbled as he looked at the notification in confusion.

Special Players Management Team.

Team Leader Park Minggyu and Lee Minhwa, who recently returned from her vacation, were sitting side by side and looking at the monitor in front of them.

“It has finally begun.”

This was an episode that Joy Co. Ltd. had prepared for a very long time. The players who have personally met and interacted with the gods could be counted on one hand; to be exact, just three fingers would be needed. Considering at least 1,000 God-class players, that number was far too small.

But even now, God-class players still carried the same name, *XX's Descendant*. If their names still carried the word *descendant*, then the god had not yet allowed them to succeed their position. In other words, the god was still alive or had not given up their position.

“It’s a different case for the Food God.”

“That’s right.”

The Food God was a Continental God and a unique case among gods. Since he was considered a Continental God, his influence and impact were significantly smaller than the other gods. However, being the Food God also had its perks. Unlike the others, he could receive the full power of the Food God through level-ups, quests, or just plain receiving it. But for the ones carrying the name *descendant*? It was different.

“Unless they have fully inherited the position, they will only be considered half-baked gods.”

There were quite a few God-class players at Level 600. However, for the successors to show the true power of their God class, they must be at least Level 650.

“That is assuming that they could receive the recognition of the gods during the succession ceremony.”

The succession ceremony was a banquet where the gods invited and interacted with their successors. The successors, who could only hear their voices during their stay in Athenae, were happy to meet and interact with those gods. However, that was only because they did not know the real meaning of the succession ceremony.

“The succession ceremony would determine whether their path would end here or they would continue to move forward.”

Team Leader Park and Minhwa looked at each other. But then, someone watching from behind them said, “Is Player Minhyuk coming too?”

This man was none other than Jackson. Even executives would be required to give explicit approval before they could enter the Special Players Management Team, and this should be the case for Jackson, a contractual employee, too. However, Jackson’s contract included the clause, “*You cannot disclose anything that you have seen or heard inside Joy Co. Ltd. It will be considered a breach of contract if you disclose even the tiniest detail that you have witnessed inside.*” So, it was not a problem for him to stay here.

As someone who personally met Minhyuk and watched his videos when playing during the editing process, Jackson became a huge fan. That was also the reason why he was here.

“Maybe? I think he’ll come,” Team Leader Park said.

Lee Minhwa also added, “Yeah. There’s a lot of delicious food served during the succession ceremony.”

With interest flashing on his face, Jackson asked, “Player Minhyuk had attended the ‘Banquet of the Gods’ and recently cleared the ‘Argalis Dungeon.’ He’s also very familiar with many gods. He’ll probably come, no? Ah. Since the successors will attend, does that mean Nerva will also attend?”

Nerva might be an NPC, but he was still the Battle God’s Sword. His position was somewhat similar to a successor’s, and he would have received an invitation, too.

Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap—

Jackson’s finger tapped the desk in front of him rhythmically. He was expecting a lot of exciting things to happen.

“There are the high-rankers who are excited to meet the gods for the first time. On the other hand, there’s a player who has already met with the gods and received their recognition.”

Closing his eyes, he drew a scene in his head. A grin appeared on Jackson’s face as he imagined what would happen.

“There’s also the Battle God’s Sword and the emperor of the strongest empire, who was not chosen as the successor and was set aside for someone else.”

Jackson continued with his eyes still closed, “The genre of this succession ceremony is... face slapping.”

Chapter 926

Minhyuk had received a notification about the arrival of an invitation to the Gods’ Succession Ceremony. And when he checked his inventory, he saw an invitation tied with a bright red ribbon sitting silently inside. When he clicked on its information, this was what appeared:

1. Ten platinum.
2. Ingredients for Chobok[1] Samgyetang.
3. Succession Ceremony’s Congratulatory Ring.
4. Fantastic Potion

‘The qualified descendants can become real gods?’ Minhyuk pondered over the matter.

Joy Co. Ltd. was a company that could maintain and adjust the balance of the game very well. The only exceptions were monsters like Minhyuk, who were so strong that they could not do anything except let him be.

Even though many players reached Level 600, none of them could be said to be able to compete with Minhyuk. However, there was a high chance that this succession ceremony could become a turning point for them.

‘Ali and Death are both excellent people. However, they aren’t showing much change from before.’

The only growth they experienced was due to an increase in level. But if they could successfully inherit god’s position during the Gods’ Succession Ceremony, then they might be able to gain new skills or obtain high stats with effects that could help increase their power.

Of course, Minhyuk was the exception to this.

‘The Food God is already dead.’

Minhyuk was not a successor. He was the current *Food God*, who possessed the subclass Battle God’s Descendant. Although he was not explicitly invited, he thought he could still get something if he attended in the name of the Battle God.

‘Ingredients for Chobok Samgyetang...?’

The temperature was getting increasingly hot. Anyone subjected to this hot weather would grow unknowingly exhausted and sticky with sweat. Minhyuk imagined going home and eating some samgyetang with ginseng, jujube, and garlic. Just one sip would definitely energize him.

‘Alright! Since the weather is hot, let’s have a bowl of samgyetang!’

At this moment, Minhyuk’s next destination was finally settled.

The entire world was turned upside down by the sudden appearance of the succession ceremony’s invitation, with people clamoring that the players could now finally meet and interact with the gods.

Divine and spiritual beings! Gods were absolute beings who ruled and governed their respective fields. But the players carrying the name “*descendant*” were not stupid. They were aware that this succession ceremony was not simply that.

The succession ceremony’s atmosphere was fancy. It was held in a fancy dining hall with a beautiful chandelier hanging above the players’ heads. One look and a person would feel transported to a noble’s dining hall. The gods were all gathered together and talking harmoniously amongst themselves as the players warped in the dining hall one after another.

Among these players stood Reporter Go Eun-Ah. Go Eun-Ah was not a God-class player, but she was allowed to attend this succession ceremony because she was a broadcasting station official. She was the only reporter present in this succession ceremony.

Joy Co. Ltd. knew that the scene where the players met with the gods would attract many of the players’ curiosity and interest. And that was not all. Most of the players would be delighted to witness such a historic moment, which was why Go Eun-Ah was here.

[Wow. I never expected that I would be able to see the gods’ faces.]

[Look at how luxurious and classy that is...]

[The players that can meet with the gods are only a few and far between. Me? I'm very jealous~]

The viewers watching the broadcast were all excited. Then, one of the players appeared at that moment and attracted all the viewers' attention. This player was affiliated with the Luvien Empire, a member of the Swords of the Gods' Second Knight Order, and a high ranker who received the admiration of many.

[God of Shields Valentino!]

[Kghhk~ The real thing is here!]

[Wow! It's really Valentino! Did Valentino come here to meet the God of Shields?]

The viewers, who watched the players appear one after another, expected them to approach the gods and shake their hands. However, the scene that unfolded in front of their eyes was completely different. They could see that Valentino was suffering from heavy and enormous pressure.

[You have encountered the gods!]

[Kneel and worship them!]

Cold sweat dripped down Valentino's forehead when he appeared near the gods. Just when he was about to stagger and collapse, a man approached him.

Valentino was the idol of all tanker players, and because of that, he often wore gorgeous and stylish armor on his body. However, the armor that adorned the body of the man walking toward him took far more attention than the armor on Valentino's body. The fact that the armor also had a remarkable effect called *Fantasy* added to its charm and made those looking at the man more interested in him. The man, the God of Shields, walked silently. The man just looked at Valentino with that deep, arrogant, calm look as if he was nothing but a lowly being.

The gods' descendants were the people that these gods had chosen. They wouldn't spare them, give them their love, or treat them dearly. Of course, there were quite a few exceptions. If someone achieved something that satisfied the gods, they would be an exception.

Valentino was staggering on his feet, and cold sweat covered his face. Forced to kneel on one knee, he said, "Valentino has seen the God of Shields."

With his hands behind his back, the God of Shields remained silent and stared calmly and arrogantly at Valentino. After a while, he slowly, ever so slowly, nodded.

"Haa...! Haa...!"

Only at that moment did the pressure weighing down on Valentino disappear, allowing him to breathe more easily.

"Get up. Stand beside me."

"Y- yes!"

Valentino was well known for his arrogant personality. However, no one criticized him because he stood in such a high position. But this very same Valentino was now lowering his pride and standing meekly beside the God of Shields.

[That's a real god...]

[Wow. So freaking cool!]

[Valentino looks like he doesn't know what to do...]

In the first place, gods ruled, created, and dominated their fields. Their arrogance knew no bounds.

'This is no joke.'

Meanwhile, Reporter Go Eun-Ah received a special buff as a broadcasting station official, allowing her to resist everything from the gods. Looking around her, she realized that almost everyone reacted like Valentino did. The players all knelt on one knee, some even kissing the back of their god's hands, in worship. But even if that was the case, no one felt a sense of incongruity in this situation. They even felt like this should be the case. After all, the gods were beings that encompassed all of Athenae.

Most of the gods did not really care about their successors and just let them be, opting to talk among themselves. At this point, even the players started to think that they were just the extras of this succession ceremony with how they were acting. Some even found the gods annoying. But all of the players gathered in a united front.

"I didn't expect something like this to happen."

The players had also imagined the scene where they proudly showed up and shook the hands of the gods, but the reality in front of them was completely different.

"But there's nothing that we can do. Besides, we will become stronger if we get recognized in this succession ceremony."

The players talked and comforted themselves. Then, a man appeared. The noisy dining hall suddenly turned quiet.

Go Eun-Ah, who watched the scene, was left in awe. *'Just by appearing...?'*

Nerva was not a god yet. However, he was still the Battle God's Sword and the emperor of the strongest empire on earth. And, to be honest, ordinary gods could not threaten Nerva.

The man, Nerva Sephiroth, took one step after another and did not avoid the gazes of the gods, who looked at him with their mouths closed. He walked proudly and took a seat on his own. Then, the gods looked at Nerva.

'What was that just now? Did they just fight a war on nerves?' Go Eun-Ah felt the undercurrents of a war on nerves between Nerva and the gods.

The Battle God once favored Nerva. But right now, he was in a situation where he was no longer in the sight of these gods.

Meanwhile, some of the knights of the Swords of the Gods' Second Knight Order rushed up to Nerva and showed their courtesy. Nerva waved his hand and signaled them to retreat as he looked at the gods.

*'These f*cking god bastards.'*

In the past, these gods clamored to please him. But now? They were trying their hardest not to be conscious of his presence.

As the succession ceremony heated up and the players began to gather one after another, minor commotions started to appear in some places.

Some of the members of the Swords of the Gods' Second Knight Order, including Valentino and Bastien, were successors of the gods. They gathered together and found two men in this succession ceremony. These two men belonged to none other than the Beyond the Heavens Empire and were busy talking with each other.

Since the Luvien Empire and the Beyond the Heavens Empire were at war, it was only natural that their players would compete for pride. And with Valentino, Bastien, and the rest of the Second Knight Order's petty and lowly characters, they would not miss this opportunity. Valentino and Bastien sidled up to the two men.

"Hiik! Oh, what a blunder! Sorry, sorry!" Valentino pretended it was a mistake as he poured wine on one of the man's clothes.

The man was none other than Golden Mage Ali, who said, "I don't think it's a mistake, though?"

"You should have avoided it, then. Didn't I say that I'm sorry? Why are you getting so worked up?" Valentino shrugged.

Worked up? Ali did not even react that much to his provocations. All he did was sigh.

'Let's avoid any unnecessary conflicts.'

And standing right next to Ali was Death. The two knew nothing good would come out if they clashed with these childish and immature people. Did people avoid shit because they were scared of it? No. They avoided it because it was dirty. So, they moved away and distanced themselves from Valentino and his group.

But Bastien did not want to stop. He spoke loudly as if he wanted them to listen to his words. He said, "Hey, did you hear? I heard that one of those bastards has a disability with social phobia. He acts high and mighty here but can't even make eye contact with someone in real life. Kyaa~! Athenae truly changes people's lives."

"Haha! And that's not all, you know? Didn't they say that birds of the same feather flock together? Do you see that other guy? He's an otaku. But do you know?"

Valentino put his mouth near Bastien's ears as if he was whispering as he spoke loudly, "One of those bastards has a brother who can't even use his legs properly. Don't you think his brother should come and play Athenae? He'll probably laugh since he will be able to run around happily. Hahahaha!"

"H- Hey. That's going a bit overboard."

"Why? Did I make things up?" Valentino arrogantly declared. After all, His Majesty Nerva was present in this succession ceremony.

Didn't everyone see? Nerva had proudly made eye contact with all of the gods here! No, he overwhelmed them with his gaze alone. Besides, even if Minhyuk came to this succession

ceremony, he was still a player through and through. Would he be any different from them? He would bow his head to the greatest Absolute God, the Battle God, and probably even kiss the god's foot.

Death, who couldn't stand their words, moved to try to grab Valentino's collar. But Ali stopped him. Ali believed that they should not cause any commotion here. If they did, they would probably harm Minhyuk. Ali was holding back. He loved all of the people that he called "Frieeeeeeend!" and he did not want to harm his favorite friend, Minhyuk.

When a commotion broke out amongst them, the God of Shields approached them and gave them a scolding, "You're noisy."

"We- We're sorry!" Valentino answered politely as he hurriedly bowed his head.

"What are you all being noisy about, huh?"

"We were just talking about how pitiful some successors are."

The God of Shields was no fool. Whether they were humans or gods, there would always be a war of nerves and a contention of pride everywhere.

"Whose successors are they?"

Valentino listened to the God of Shields and politely answered, "The descendant of the God of Magic, Ali, and the descendant of the God of Death, Death."

"Is that so?"

The God of Magic and the God of Death were among the high-ranking gods. However, the God of Shields did not care that much because they were just their successors. But then, something flashed in his head. The God of Shields, who was about to leave, turned back again and asked, "By any chance, are they *Minhyuk's* friends?"

"Eh? Ah. Yes, that's right," Valentino answered in confusion. He wondered why the God of Shields asked him such a question.

Thud—

But then, Valentino saw the God of Shields raise his hands and grab him by the shoulders.

"You crazy bastard?! What have you done?! How dare you..."

"Eh?"

Then, the final player entered the succession ceremony. And at that moment, something very shocking and amazing happened.

"..."

"..."

"..."

A silence far deeper and greater than the silence Nerva had evoked in his entrance swept the entire dining hall where the succession ceremony was being held.

The player who entered was 185 cm tall and wore a white cape bearing the symbol of a fork and knife crossed together. His handsome face looked like it had been carved in stone, and he did not look inferior to the gods present at all.

All of the gods and players present turned to look at him. And Reporter Go Eun-Ah? She was shocked.

‘What? Why...’

Why was the man not affected? Why was he not bowing under the pressure of the gods? Then, she saw the gazes of the gods looking at him. They were looking at him softly with smiles lingering on their faces.

‘Why... are they smiling?’

At the same time, Valentino, being grabbed by the God of Shields, saw the god before him, quickly let go, and rushed out with a chuckle. The God of Shields, with a delighted smile on his face, spread his arms wide and approached the man, Minhyuk.

“I, the God of Shields, feel very delighted today!” The God of Shields stood in front of Minhyuk and looked at the other gods before saying, “It is a delight that the man, who would lead us and command us in battle on behalf of the Battle God, has shone his light and graced us with his presence during this succession ceremony!”

The God of Shields enthusiastically shook Minhyuk’s hands. At that moment, the other gods rushed out and flocked around Minhyuk. Meanwhile, the players were gobsmacked. They watched with wide eyes.

“Wh- what is happening...?”

Even though they witnessed it with their own eyes, Valentino and the other players could not bring themselves to believe it. Were the gods trying to curry the players' favor?

But then, at that moment, Minhyuk said, “God of Shields.”

“Please speak, haha!” The God of Shields laughed loudly. He wanted to maintain a close and friendly relationship with Minhyuk.

Then, Minhyuk said, “I heard that your successor had committed a great offense against my dear friend?”

Yes, that was right. Minhyuk received a whisper from Death just when he arrived at the succession ceremony and was made aware of the mocking and over-the-line words that Valentino said.

At that moment, the expression of the God of Shields immediately turned dark. He had also just learned about what his successor had said to Minhyuk’s friends and how he mocked someone with a disability who could not walk with their legs. Even the God of Shields would be angry if something like this happened to someone under his wing. On top of that, he wanted to maintain a friendly relationship with Minhyuk. So, he did not say anything against Minhyuk.

Minhyuk strode toward where Valentino was.

“...”

Valentino gulped, his mouth suddenly turning dry.

‘W- what the hell? How did the situation turn out like this...’

He could not understand it. Well, it was only natural. The information that Minhyuk challenged and cleared Argalis Dungeon and received the gods' recognition was not spread to ordinary players or anyone not from the Beyond the Heavens Empire.

Minhyuk hollered, “He is my close friend, but he is also my vassal. As an emperor, protecting my vassals and subordinates is only natural!”

He clenched his fists and turned to look at the God of Shields. Then, he looked at another person, Nerva Sephiroth, and said, “Can I punch this guy in the face?!”

Chapter 927

The Battle God watched the succession ceremony in interest. The war of nerves between Minhyuk and Nerva was fierce.

Latte, the Battle God's aide, rubbed his chin and said, “It will start in an hour.”

The Battle God nodded slowly. “Nerva or Minhyuk. This will determine who will gain the power of the Battle God.”

He had chosen Nerva as his successor in the past, which was why he had given the man the position of the Battle God's Sword, a position on par with that of a descendant. However, in the end, Minhyuk became his descendant. But during this succession ceremony, they could finally determine who would obtain the *Battle God's Authority*.

The Battle God was fair and impartial. He did not give Nerva the position of his descendant because he saw more potential in Minhyuk then.

Ultimately, Minhyuk was in a similar situation to the other descendants. If Minhyuk could not prove his qualifications and show them that he had the ability to be the Battle God's descendant, then he would be deprived of this position. On the other hand, if Nerva could show him satisfactory performance, then Nerva might be able to receive the Battle God's Authority and become the Battle God's Descendant.

Latte immediately understood what the Battle God meant after seeing that he did not respond to him.

‘It seems like even the Battle God cannot determine the outcome, too.’

An emerging emperor and the emperor of the strongest empire, only one among the two would be able to receive the *Power of Development*.

Minhyuk went out to finish his workout before the succession ceremony. Before he started his workout, he specifically reached out to both Ali and Death and told them:

–If, by any chance, something happens there, you should contact me right away.

Ali and Death just chuckled at him.

–We're not children, you know?

–You don't have to be so worried over us.

–Why? Do you think it's too annoying and burdensome for a friend to care about his friends?

The two immediately turned to look at Minhyuk when they heard the word “*friend*.” They thought simultaneously, ‘*Ah, it's so nice to be friends with him.*’

And Minhyuk? He grew furious when the thing he worried about became a reality. He wondered if there indeed was someone so petty and immature at their age. But lo and behold, there truly was one. The worst part? They made fun of Ali's older brother's legs and disability.

Minhyuk looked at everyone before turning to Nerva and saying, “Can I punch this guy in the face?!”

Nerva frowned. He immediately grasped the situation, especially because the gods had spoken up and confirmed the situation.

“It's completely understandable. And knowing that you're an emperor who cares about your subject, I feel very ashamed.”

“You deserve to be angry.”

The whispers of the gods grew louder. And Valentino? He could feel Nerva's cold and piercing glare.

‘I'm- I'm in trouble...’

Minhyuk had been superficial when he asked Nerva if he could seek justice for his friends and sought Valentino's insult. Valentino knew Nerva would unleash his anger upon him once they returned to the empire. He could see a future that was far more terrifying than dying right away.

As for Nerva, he could tell that the crowd was starting to blame him. But as the emperor of the most substantial empire, he remained calm. He stood up and looked at Minhyuk and Valentino.

“I understand. But he is also my subordinate. Do you think it's proper for the emperor of an empire at war with us to punish my subordinate in front of me like that?”

“...”

“...”

The commotion among the gods suddenly died down. They could not overlook the fact that the two nations were at war, and because of that, the gods understood that they could not come forward.

“Does the Beyond the Heavens' Emperor wish to obtain an apology from me by using this as a pretext? If that's the case, then you're being petty.” Nerva thought of a way to turn the situation in his favor. “However, this emperor also understands your love

for your subordinate. I believe it would be better for them to solve the matter between them amongst themselves.”

Perhaps this was the best solution. As for Minhyuk? He was very delighted with this turn of events.

‘This is much better.’

Minhyuk nodded and said, “Then, one shot. Allow us to send one attack.”

Nerva looked at Valentino and Ali before nodding in agreement. He thought it would be better for him to concede this much rather than continue to avoid it by saying they were two nations at war. Unfortunately, this was Nerva's biggest mistake.

Ali and Minhyuk shared a smile. The only reason why Ali endured the humiliation was because he was afraid that it would harm Minhyuk since all of the gods were here. But they have now fully convinced the gods.

The gods slowly moved and opened a small space inside the dining hall. The God of Shields even provided a thick and solid barrier that surrounded Ali and Valentino.

“With this barrier in place, your powers will not be able to affect us,” the God of Shields said as he turned to Ali. He was compensating him because he felt extremely sorry that his successor had created this mess.

Valentino looked at the God of Shields, the man whose position he would inherit, and Nerva, the emperor of the empire he served. There was only one thing that he could do.

“Can I block it?”

Nerva turned to look at Minhyuk when the question was raised. Minhyuk nodded.

‘I need to defend myself from the magic of the God of Magic so I can receive their recognition.’

Indeed. This might be an opportunity for him, too. Valentino immediately removed an armor set specialized in magical defense from his inventory.

“This is the God of Shield’s ‘Dragon Armor.’”

The thick and scaly armor could increase one’s magical defensive power by at least 200%.

“I can’t believe it. He has already obtained the Dragon Armor.”

The God of Shields just shrugged his shoulders. The gods often guided their successors on the right path and even bestowed upon them items they owned once they reached the right path. And this Dragon Armor that the God of Shields had bestowed was powerful enough to stop a dragon’s Breath.

Baaaaaaang—!

Golden light instantly shot out and covered Valentino’s body when he slammed his square shield on the ground.

[God of Shields’ Magic Blessing.]

[Your magical defensive power will increase by 150%.]

[Your magical attack power will increase by 20%.]

[Your total HP will increase by 10%.]

“Oh...”

“Ho.”

“The God of Shields is truly reliable.”

The gods marveled at the scene quietly. The shield that could defend against almost any magical attack was like an iron castle in front of them.

Valentino, who had equipped the magic-resistant armor and hid behind his shield, laughed at Ali. Meanwhile, Ali was on edge with so many gods surrounding them, and the God of Magic was watching him. However, Valentino mocked his brother. He could not fold here.

“Frieeeeeeeeend!!!”

“Frieeeeeeeeend!!!”

Minhyuk smiled as he nodded slightly at Ali. For a moment, Ali felt like Minhyuk was telling him it would be alright even if he did not meet the expectations of the people around him.

Ali chuckled. Then he asked, “Sir Valentino has received the buff effects of a magic-resistant armor set. However, I am only allowed to use one magical attack. May I borrow the power of several other spells for this attack?”

Nerva nodded when he heard the question. With explicit permission, Ali grabbed the staff he summoned with both hands and slammed it on the ground.

Flaaaaaash—

A golden and blinding light flashed, the wind brought forth by the light making his hair flutter.

“Friend,” Ali responded to Minhyuk and Death’s calls. Then, he raised his left arm high. Like the two, the X symbolized their friendship. Then, he said, “Meteor.”

Rumbleeeeeee—!

“Ho...”

“The human summoned a Meteor.”

“Hoho.”

The sky was torn apart as meteors began to fall. However, the gods were not impressed by the size or number of meteors that appeared. They were only impressed that a human cast the spell. After all, only five meteors were falling from the sky.

“Magic Duplication.”

Rumbleeeee—!

The meteors that were falling from the sky doubled. The gods, watching the scene, gawked when they saw the five meteors turn into ten as they continued to fall toward Valentino. But the surprise did not end there.

“Magic Compression.”

[Meteor is being gathered and compressed!]

“...!”

“...!”

“...!”

Gather was a magic that Ali had been using since he was a low-tier mage. Gather, a magic that gathered everyone or everything in one place, was not used by most of the mages. Why? Because they could not utilize it properly. But Ali continued to use it, applying it in many ways. And just like that, Ali mastered Gather magic and succeeded in developing and creating a new magic called *Magic Compression*. This was a power that not even the God of Magic had.

[Meteor has been compressed!]

The meteor located at the center of the formation of meteors sucked in one of the meteors falling beside it.

[The current falling Meteor’s power can deal an additional 6,000% magical attack power and devour an area with a radius of 70 meters!]

[Meteor has been compressed! The current Meteor has received a 30% increase in power!]

[An additional 2,000% magical attack power will be applied, and the radius of effect will also increase by 21 meters!]

If Meteor was gathered, then it should have weakened in power.

However, there was one crucial factor to consider here. Meteor was the strongest AOE magic attack skill, and if appropriately used, it could slaughter almost 100,000 enemies. Now, the strongest AOE magic attack skill had been turned into a single magic attack skill.

Then, another meteor was sucked in by the central meteor.

[An additional 2,000% magical attack power will be applied, and the radius of effect will also increase by 21 meters!]

Just like that, the meteors were sucked in by the central meteor one after another. And the central meteor? It slowly grew bigger and bigger.

[...magical attack power...!]

[...magical attack power...!]

[...magical attack power...!]

Now, the central meteor had turned into a gigantic meteor twice the size of the meteor that the God of Magic could summon.

The God of Magic gasped. *‘This is stronger than my own Meteor.’*

The other gods were also shocked and overwhelmed by the gigantic meteor falling from the sky above them. They watched in trepidation as Ali raised his fair and slender finger and pointed it at Valentino.

‘This- this- shit...’

Valentino hurriedly lifted his square shield above him. Then, the attack collided with his shield.

Baaaaaaaaaaaang—!

The ground on which Valentino was standing cracked, forcing his feet to go deeper and deeper under the ground.

“A- aaaaaaaaaaack!”

But the gigantic meteor continued to crush him with its overwhelmingly heavy and colossal force. High magical defensive power? The highest total HP among the tankers? Those counted for nothing. They were all useless in front of Ali’s Meteor. The damage that Ali’s magic dealt him was beyond imagination. To put a rough estimate, the Meteor Ali cast had over 20,000% additional magical attack power. It was something that he could not deal with what he had.

“Keuhaaaaaaaaaack!”

Baaaaaaaaaaaang—!

In the end, Valentino was crushed by the meteor. He was almost ground to dust by the attack, and he heard an extremely ridiculous set of notifications in his ears.

[Your HP has reached 0!]

[The God of Shields’ Will has been triggered!]

[Your HP has recovered to 10%. Your defensive power will increase by 100% for ten seconds.]

The gods turned mute when they saw the aftermath left behind by the meteor after it devoured the ground in front of them. They watched as Valentino, who managed to recover to some extent, stumbled and struggled to stand up.

“...”

Nerva clenched his fists tightly when he saw Minhyuk standing across from him. He could see the mirth in the man’s eyes and the smile teasing the corners of his lips.

Meanwhile, Valentino made eye contact with Ali after he finally stood on his shaking feet. He saw Ali mouthing something at him. It seemed like he was saying, *‘F*ck you.’*

Valentino, the global number one in the tanker rankings, was an icon and an idol for all tankers worldwide. Why? In Athenae, the tanker class had never been in the spotlight. But the tankers' status seemed to rise whenever Valentino appeared on the screen. And this very same Valentino was now left facing a tall and high wall he could not reach.

*'F*ck you,'* Ali mouthed to Valentino.

'Damn it...!'

Despite suffering such great humiliation, Valentino could not attack or show anger at him. His eyes shifted as he realized Minhyuk had created this situation before the gods for Ali's sake. Although embarrassing, he even shouted, "Frieeeeend!!!" to show his trust in his subordinate. His gaze landed on his emperor. However, Nerva acted entirely differently from Minhyuk.

"This emperor is very ashamed to have you as a subordinate."

"..."

"You dare to criticize others, yet you act like a wet rat in front of the one you criticize? It seems like you need to share the conversation that you had earlier. If I find you guilty, then I believe you deserve such treatment, no?"

Nerva judged that it was better for his image to scold his subordinate, who had been trampled on, rather than protect and show care for him. He had decided that Valentino deserved criticism and blame in this place.

When Nerva said, *"I will talk to him and advise him well,"* Valentino thought he would not receive any more punishment. But the reality was completely different.

[You have tarnished the reputation of the Great Luvien Empire!]

[Emperor Nerva Sephiroth removes your qualifications and dismisses you as a member of the Swords of the Gods' Second Knight Order!]

[Emperor Nerva Sephiroth has deprived you of your title in his empire. You are no longer a Count of the Luvien Empire!]

[Once you go back to the Luvien Empire, you will be executed as punishment for your crimes!]

Valentino's head turned blank. He could see Nerva's contempt. It was as if he were looking at a bug despite his kind, gracious, gentle words.

'N- No...'

He was the idol of all tankers. When he joined the Swords of the Gods, tankers from all over the world cheered. Some of his fans were so happy that they even held parties amongst themselves.

Valentino was a greedy man who loved attention. Because of that, he had already thought and planned his future, which was also why his head had turned completely blank. He wanted to scream. However, he could only clamp his mouth shut in front of Nerva. He might fall even further if he said the wrong thing here.

Meanwhile, Ali raised his left arm and showed off the symbol on his arm as he walked toward Minhyuk. And Minhyuk? He greeted Ali with a wide and bright smile on his face.

‘Damn it! Shit! Shit! Shit!’

Everything had a price; this was how Valentino paid the price for his actions.

Reporter Go Eun-Ah turned her head after looking at Valentino, who finally got up after stumbling on his feet.

‘The succession ceremony,’ she thought, her mind turning as she tried to figure out its meaning.

Succession was a process where one gave up their position and allowed someone to take over for them. However, she had one question.

‘Will everyone present here inherit and sit on the gods’ thrones?’

Of course, everyone who had received the invitation to the Gods’ Succession Ceremony had something in common. First, they were all players who had achieved Level 600. Second, there were no production-class players; Minhyuk was the exception since he was unique. And third, all of them were God-class players.

‘Will those who have met these conditions but weren’t invited this time be able to inherit the position in the next succession ceremony successfully?’

But would the gods truly hand over their positions so easily? Go Eun-Ah understood that the God-class players would grow stronger once they inherited their respective gods’ positions. However, she wanted to know if the gods were willing to give their positions easily.

Crackle—

Crackleeeee—

Crackle, crackle—

Suddenly, blazing flames shot up and lit the entire hall where the succession ceremony was being held.

Rumbleeeee—

Then, the entire hall began to shake.

“Wh- what?”

“What the hell?”

“What is happening so suddenly?”

The players were highly flustered as the hall slowly floated to the sky. At that moment, a familiar man wearing gorgeous silver armor and overflowing with charisma appeared standing in front of the podium. The gods immediately gathered around him as they all looked at the players.

“The succession ceremony will now commence.”

This man was none other than the Battle God.

“Kihyeeeeeeeeeeck!”

“Kyahaaaaaaaack!”

“Graaaaaaaaaa!”

Roars resonated from a distance. When they turned to look in the direction where the sound came from, they saw thousands of bone dragons and tens of thousands of wyverns charging toward them. And from the looks of it, death knights and liches were riding atop them. Then, a bright light flashed, and the space by the side of the gods cracked open. Through this crack, hundreds of pegasi, followed by thousands of white horses carrying the knights of the Divine Army, ran out. But that was not the end of it all.

“Kihyeeeeeeeeeeck!”

“Kyahaaaaaaaaaack!”

Thump, thump, thump—

The God of Summoners stepped forward and raised his arms to the sky.

Flap—! Flap—! Flap—!

Millions of flying monsters poured out from the sky.

“What- what the hell...”

The players, who could not understand the situation, were all moving like headless flies. At that moment, the Battle God and the gods gathered around him disappeared in a flash of light. Where did the gods go? They appeared standing or riding atop some of the bone dragons and the pegasi.

Finally, the notifications rang in the ears of the flustered players.

[The Succession Ceremony has started!]

[Those who fail to prove their qualifications during this Succession Ceremony will be stripped of their classes!]

[If you ever get stripped of your class, the stats and skills that you have obtained will be retained.]

[But the effects of the skills that you have obtained with this class will be reduced by 50%. You will no longer be able to level up the skills!]

[The effects of all the titles you have obtained with this class will be reduced by 50%.]

“...!”

“...!”

“...!”

Everyone was left speechless when they saw that the penalty was too big. Notifications also rang for each individual, and these were the notifications that rang in Valentino’s ears.

[If you die during the Succession Ceremony, you will lose your qualifications and be stripped of your title as the God of Shields!]

[You are the descendant of the God of Shields. Protect your allies from the enemies to prove your qualifications as the God of Shields!]

[Various factors will affect your Credibility Rating as the God of Shields. Do not lose your pride as a god!]

[Your current Credibility Rating is 0%!]

[If your Credibility Rating reaches 50%, your qualifications will be recognized. If you can achieve a higher rating, you will receive outstanding rewards from the gods!]

[All damage you received before the Succession Ceremony will be recovered!]

Most of them heard similar notifications. And, of course, the same was true for Minhyuk.

[If you die during the Succession Ceremony, you will lose your qualifications and be stripped of your title as the Battle God's Descendant!]

[You are the descendant of the Battle God. Command your allies and lead them to the right path. Your qualifications will be questioned whenever an ally dies!]

[Various factors will affect your Credibility Rating as a god. You are the successor of the Battle God; you have to prove that you are better than the others!]

[Your current Credibility Rating is 0%!]

[If your Credibility Rating is 50%...]

Minhyuk was also left flustered when he saw that his skills' effects would be reduced by half if he died or failed to prove his qualifications in this Succession Ceremony. However, the most significant damage he could receive here was that he would be unable to develop and grow further as the Battle God's Descendant.

“We have to survive against the onslaught of the gods' attacks...?”

“Stop the gods? This is wild. How can we...?!”

The players were plunged into even deeper confusion. They were just players. That was not all. They were also forced to kneel and worship the gods the moment they arrived here and subjected to the gods' momentum and presence.

Baaaaaaaang—!

Immediately after that, a huge explosion erupted and devoured the players.

“Keheok! *Explosion* is this strong?!”

“Shit...”

“A- aaaaaaaack!”

The players quickly saw the hundreds of magic the God of Magic sent hurtling down at them. But was that all? Of course not. The soldiers and knights of the Divine Army also shot thousands of arrows.

Crackle—!

The Battle God also sent flames flying toward them along with the bone dragons' Breath.

Shwaaaaaaaaaaa—!

Crack, crack, crack, crack—!

Rumbleeee—!

The succession ceremony's hall, which floated to the sky, shook fiercely. In just an instant, the narrow space was turned upside down. Some unlucky players were even sprawled on the ground and forced to log out.

“N- no...”

The players' faces twisted when they saw the expression on their faces before they completely turned into ashes and disappeared. And what expression did they see? They looked desperate. It was as if their worlds fell apart, and they lost everything. Anger flared up within them. Perhaps it was only natural. After all, their pride as one of the God-class players was trampled upon.

“F*ck this! Is this the reason why there aren't any production class players among us?!”

Only then did the players realize that among all the God-class players, there weren't any players with a production class. This was because they wouldn't be able to survive this hell. But what if they were here? What would happen then? Although the production-class players might face enormous risks, they would still greatly help the other players. After all, they could help reinforce and strengthen the other players so that they could reach the gods and be on the same ground.

[After 30 seconds, the Second Wave will begin!]

[After 20 seconds, the Second Wave will begin!]

Tension ran high among the players as the notifications rang in their ears. Many of them even lost their will to fight. Even Minhyuk frowned when he heard the same notifications.

[One of your allies has died!]

[Your Credibility Rating has decreased by -2%!]

Minhyuk suddenly felt a sense of urgency when he realized that his qualifications would still be questioned even if the ones that suffered damage were others and not him. Be that as it may, he had already accepted this situation. However, the problem was that most players lost their will to fight.

[Your allies' morale has decreased sharply!]

[All of your stats have decreased by 12%!]

[Your physical defensive power has decreased by 20%!]

At that moment, the gods began to prepare for the second wave of attacks. Meanwhile, Minhyuk, who was located on the opposite side of where the gods were, heard another series of notifications.

[After 5 seconds, the Second Wave will begin!]

[The Second Wave will be far more menacing than the First Wave!]

“U- Uwaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Run!!!”

“Damn it!!!”

The players hurriedly ran in the opposite direction, trying to get as far away from the gods as possible. It was quite a funny sight. These people were the envy of many. However, now that they were facing great danger and were at risk of losing their God class, they all tried to run away.

Valentino stood blankly amidst the panicking crowd. Then, someone shouted at him, “Activate your shield and protect this emperor!”

This someone was none other than Nerva. Nerva did not look flustered at all. He stood there calmly and gave orders to Valentino. And Valentino? He looked at the crowds of players running away in the opposite direction.

“...”

Valentino continued to look at them blankly. At that moment, Minhyuk, who was about to pass by him, said, “Valentino, activate Bentino’s Wall in front. I am in desperate need of your help. If we have your walls, then we will be able to defend against this attack.”

“...What?”

You crazy bastard! Valentino almost blurted out these words. Could one player indeed defend against the onslaught of attack from the gods? No more than that, did he just say that he desperately needed Valentino’s help? Then, at that moment...

“Come here in front of me and protect me right away!!!”

Nerva’s grating shouts rang in his ears. This was the very same person who had said that he would execute him and remove him as a member of his knight order. The worst part? He looked at Valentino with contempt as he shouted louder at him.

Nerva shouted because he did not want his subjects to heed the orders of the Beyond the Heavens’ Emperor.

“If you don’t come before me right now, I will make it so you cannot set foot on Earth!!!”

Valentino was left speechless as he looked at Nerva, who kept on threatening him.

I am not a good person. I am very greedy and love to get the attention of everyone. If I find someone better than me, I will be jealous of them, bite them, and curse at them.

Yes, he was that kind of guy.

[Sir Valentino is the pride of all the tankers in the world!]

[Kghhk~ Godlentino! He’s our pride!!!]

[He’s the one with the greatest qualifications as a god! He’s the one who will show the world what we tankers are like!]

He was also the subject of people’s admiration.

‘I have already lost everything. I lost my qualifications as a member of the Swords of the Gods and even my position as a count. Do I still have anything more to lose?’

The notifications that rang in his ears earlier said:

[Do not lose your pride as a god!]

That was right. There was still something he had not lost. Valentino was the pride of all the tankers in the world.

I am the God of Shields. I can summon the biggest, sturdiest, and greatest shield in existence!

Valentino turned his gaze away from Nerva and ran in the opposite direction, toward where Minhyuk, Ali, and Death were running.

“Make way!”

[The Second Wave has started!!!]

Valentino beat them to the chase. Then, he slammed his square shield on the ground with all his might just as the thousands of magic sent by the God of Magic and the tens of thousands of arrows shot by the Divine Army flew toward them along with thousands of Breaths.

The moment the Succession Ceremony truly started, all the damage they had received had recovered. This was also the case for their skill cooldown, which meant Valentino had something to rely on.

“Bentino’s Wall!!!”

A colossal shield that looked like a wall comparable to Mount Tai’s appeared in front of the running players.

The entire world held its breath as it watched Bentino’s Walls unfold as the attack of the gods fell upon the God-class players.

Chapter 929

[Bentino’s Wall.]

[Bentino’s Wall, the size of a castle’s wall, will protect you and your allies!]

[You have an additional 8,000% defense!]

[Bentino’s Wall has a duration of three minutes.]

[Using the skill will destroy 1 point from your STM.]

Bentino’s Wall was a skill that Valentino acquired when he reached Level 600. It was named after Bentino, the greatest God of Shields. The power of this skill depended on the skill user since it gave an additional 8,000% defensive power to one’s defensive power.

For players, there was a vast difference between the defensive power that ten players could express and the defensive power that a hundred players could express. Of course, this included all of the things that boosted one’s defensive power, like armor, skills, accessories, and stats.

And Valentino? He had a total defensive power 1.7 times higher than the total defensive power of the player standing second in the tanker rankings.

Bentino's Wall stretched out, creating a shield akin to a long stretch of walls. However, even though Valentino was able to display such a vast and wide stretch of wall, he still doubted if he could stop the thousands of magic attacks that the God of Magic unleashed along with the tens of thousands of arrows shot by the Divine Army and the Breaths of the bone dragons.

But, of course, Valentino was not alone. There were still those who supported him from behind.

Golden Mage Ali was one. He stepped forward and unfolded his fair and slim fingers. Then, he pointed his fingers, now covered with a bright golden light, toward the magic about to rain down on them.

"Dispel."

Flash—

It was as if a wave had appeared and swept the magic away. In an instant, a third of the magic sent by the God of Magic disappeared into nothingness.

At the same time, tens of thousands of skeletons appeared in the air as Death, the God of Death, slammed his staff on the ground. The summoned skeletons immediately gathered together until they formed another huge wall.

Booooooooooom—!

The remaining magic slammed on the bone wall and pounded it until it destroyed the skeletons of the bone wall, turning them into ashes.

Baaaaaaaang—

The attacks continued until they slammed into Bentino's Wall, which everyone believed in.

Booooooooooom—!

The first to make contact with Bentino's Wall was the magic attacks. The bombardment of magic slammed into the walls constantly and was immediately followed by a shower of arrows and Breaths.

Valentino, who held on and endured the attack with sweat dripping down and covering his entire body, roared, "Uwoooooooooooooh!!!"

Even though Bentino's Wall was about to collapse, it continued to hold on and stop the gods' attacks.

"This is crazy..."

"Valentino! You're so cool!"

"You're the best, Valentino!!!"

The players burst into cheers.

When the vibrations crawling up his arms disappeared, Valentino realized that his Bentino's Wall could defend against the gods' attack.

[You did not lose your pride as a god and could defend your allies successfully!]

[You have proven your qualifications as the God of Shields!]

[Your Credibility Rating has increased by 42%.]

His credibility rating soared.

Valentino felt his heart thump like crazy. For the first time, he had done something against that man, Nerva. Despite that, the rewards that he received were sweet. There was also an unfamiliar sense of excitement thrumming in his veins from when he walked in the opposite direction from those fleeing. He was in awe of himself that he'd been able to stop the attack from the gods.

He looked back at Minhyuk. Valentino knew that he would not only be removed from the Swords of the Gods and stripped of his status as the Count but also executed once he returned to the Luvien Empire. But if he joined Minhyuk and the Beyond the Heavens Empire that he had created, then perhaps his situation would be different. Perhaps his second life would finally begin!

So, Valentino looked at Minhyuk and said, "Please allow me to join the Beyond the Heavens—"

"Are you done talking bullshit?"

"..."

Valentino secretly glanced back at Nerva.

*'Ah, I'm f*cked...'*

"Are you done talking bullshit?" Minhyuk growled, confused by Valentino's unexpected words.

Minhyuk wouldn't accept someone who had spoken ill of Ali just a few moments prior. Weren't they supposed to accept the strong? No. The Beyond the Heavens Empire chose people based on their personality and attitude, especially if the person in question was someone like Valentino, who stood at the top.

Seeing Valentino's ugly expression, Minhyuk said, "Things have already reached this point. I think it would be better if you helped me out here. After all, you have already fallen out with Nerva, no?"

That was right. Valentino could already tell his fate by the notifications alone.

[You have defied an imperial decree!]

[The penalty of one execution will be equivalent to the penalty of three forced logouts!]

Valentino agreed with Minhyuk's words. Things had already developed to this point.

'If I stayed by Nerva's side, my credibility rating would likely plunge into the negative.'

Valentino was a tanker. And what is a tanker's main task? It was to protect and guard his allies. If, during this trial where his qualifications were being tested, he chose to stay by Nerva's side and protect him as his subordinate and not as a god, Valentino would not be able to avoid a negative rating.

Anyway, Valentino was already doomed to die once he returned. So, why did he have to suck up to Nerva? He thought it would be better for him to keep his pride and become the true God of Shields.

Valentino quickly looked back.

“Valentino! You’re amazing!!!”

“It’s all thanks to you!”

The other players were giving him a thumbs up.

Nerva, who saw the scene, took this as an opportunity and said, “Did you see that? You can also face the gods. And do not forget, I am with you.”

The morale of the allied players slowly rose once again. Because of that, abnormal status and stat decrease also disappeared. Then, Nerva quickly used this moment to trigger the ability that he possessed as an emperor.

[You have been bestowed with the Greatest Emperor’s Blessings!]

[All of your stats have increased by 22%!]

[You have obtained the courage not to back down!]

[Your resistance to abnormal statuses has increased by 50%.]

[Your magical and physical defensive power have increased by 20%.]

“If we join forces, we can stop the gods.”

Nerva was also working under the same conditions as Minhyuk. As the Battle God’s Sword, he would only receive the Battle God’s recognition if he could properly lead his allies. He could also use this opportunity to deprive Minhyuk of his position as the Battle God’s Descendant and take the seat for himself.

That was right. After all, it wasn’t necessary for both Nerva and Minhyuk to survive; just one was enough.

“Crazy...”

“We can receive such buff effects just by fighting with him?”

“We can do it. We can stop them!”

Hope bloomed on the faces of the players.

Shiiiiiiing—

Nerva drew his sword.

No one here did not know who Nerva was. He was the emperor of the strongest and greatest empire, the Luvien Empire, which was his advantage. Also, Nerva had the highest level among the NPCs known to all players.

“Please give us your orders!!!”

“Your Majesty! Please allow me to be a part of your empire’s Sword of the Gods!”

As expected of the players. They were all greedy beings. And, of course, Nerva, who was smiling kindly at them, knew this. He chose to use his smarts and exploit the greed that was almost overflowing from these players.

“Of course. This emperor has already considered creating the Swords of the Gods’ Third Knight Order. Those who can stop the gods’ attacks better than anybody else, those who move without fear, and those who can establish themselves as gods in this place will all be qualified to be members of the knight order.”

Those words boosted the morale of the players.

“Your Majesty! I will risk my life to protect you!”

They began to talk nonsense as they gathered around Nerva, treating him as their main axis and center of command. Valentino turned around after watching them and looked at Minhyuk. He had already taken his path. He could no longer go back to Nerva’s side.

Meanwhile, Minhyuk received a notification that only he could see.

[Your Credibility Rating is -4%!]

Nerva had boosted the morale of the other players and given them a buff, which was why Minhyuk’s credibility rating had dropped significantly.

At that moment, some of the players approached Minhyuk.

“We wish to fight by your side, Minhyuk.”

“We don’t want to become the Luvien Empire’s dogs.”

Only three players approached Minhyuk. Of course, the most important thing for them was their survival. The players would always choose the path where their survival was guaranteed and where they could obtain a power that would allow them to exert a stronger power as gods.

Minhyuk looked at the three players and asked, “What are your classes?”

“I’m Bedman, the God of Fetters. I can restrict and bind everyone. Fufu.”

Minhyuk turned silent when he saw the man lick his lips. He hurriedly turned to look at the next person. “You?”

“I’m the God of Animals. I can transform into any animal. My character name is Bahalt.”

Minhyuk nodded as he turned to the last person with a hammer hanging on his waist. The man reminded him of Hyemin’sDaddy.

“My name is Alvarr. I am the God of Siege Weapons. I can summon any siege weapons and use them to strike my enemies.”

Minhyuk nodded as he looked at the three. That was when he realized, “You three are friends.”

“That’s right.”

The three conveniently left out how they became friends.

“The empire that we used to play in the past lost to the Luvien Empire.”

Minhyuk nodded.

Meanwhile, Valentino, who saw them like that, thought, *‘All of them are people I haven’t heard of...’*

Even though they were God-class players, none had heard about these three. Of course, they were here because they had met the requirements and had the qualifications to stand here. Even so, there was a high chance that they were gods without influence.

[After 30 minutes, the Third Wave will begin!]

[The Third Wave will last for 40 minutes. The Succession Ceremony will end if you can defend against the third wave of attacks!]

“Is there a way?” Valentino asked.

He knew he and Nerva had already turned their backs against each other. Since that was the case, Valentino wanted to become the God of Shields and make the emperor eat shit. However, looking at their current manpower, it seemed like this would be very difficult.

Of course, their side had Death, Ali, and Minhyuk. And Valentino was also confident that he could continue to maintain his shield to defend them. As for the other three? Well, Valentino did not know.

Valentino thought, *‘One of them can turn into any animal. Another is a pervert who likes rope-binding. And the last one is the God of Siege Weapons, who is useless unless he’s on a battlefield.’*

On the other hand, the other side has powerful and skilled players.

‘The bullets sent by the God of Shooting are comparable to the arrows sent by the God of Archery Miao. On their side, there’s also the God of Disasters, known for being the best regarding AOE attacks.’

Valentino sighed. *‘The God of Lightning can stop the enemies by sending fifty lightning bolts in one go. The God of Ice can control the enemies’ movements by freezing an area of 200 meters. If Nerva joins the other gods, then...’*

Of course, as the God of Shields, Valentino could steadily increase his credibility rating by protecting his allies. However, he didn’t want Nerva to obtain anything good from this situation.

Then, Minhyuk said, “There is.”

“What is it?”

“Since that side chose to defend, we’ll just attack.”

“...?”

Valentino doubted his ears for a moment. He felt like he had just misheard what Minhyuk said.

‘Did he just tell us to attack the gods?!’

Was that even possible? The gods had given them the task of defending against the gods’ attacks. But Minhyuk was telling them that they were going to attack the gods?

Minhyuk said, “Anyway, it wouldn’t matter. This is the Succession Ceremony. So, even if the Divine Army or anyone else dies, they would just be revived and will be able to survive. I plan to

have you protect us, and once the other side moves to defend, we will do our best to deal damage to the gods.”

“Do we even have a chance to fight back?”

Were the gods just simple gods? Besides, would the damage they could dish out even put a chip on the gods?

“Don’t forget that I’m the only production-class player here.”

“...!”

Valentino’s eyes grew wide. Indeed, Minhyuk was the only production-class player present in this place. And from what he heard, the effects of the buff that Minhyuk could give to others were far superior to any other buff effects. It was only natural. After all, the effects of a buff created by combining skills, ingredients, and abilities would be vastly different from a mere ordinary buff.

“That’s why you have to give me all of the ingredients in your hands. Ah, it has to be at least epic grade.”

‘You’re suddenly extorting ingredients from us?’

Valentino blinked blankly at Minhyuk, who had already stretched his hand. Valentino was a bit reluctant but knew that what they needed the most right now was Minhyuk’s cooking. So, he handed over all of the God-grade ingredients that he had saved and the legendary-grade and epic-grade ingredients that he had on hand.

Minhyuk remarked, “I don’t think I would need this now, and this one, too. This God-grade ingredient is the only one that looks best.”

Even though Minhyuk said these things, he did not return the ingredients he had obtained.

‘I- I think I’m being extorted...?’ Valentino thought.

Nevertheless, he was not the only one being treated that way. The others also had some rare and mysterious ingredients on hand. And Minhyuk? He just smiled widely and accepted them.

‘No—what...?’

“Now that everything has been decided, we should do the most important thing,” Minhyuk said.

Then, a man grabbed Valentino’s wrist. The man was none other than Ali.

Valentino began, “About earlier—”

Ali cut him off. “Shut it, or I’ll rip you a new one. I’m not giving you this token because I like you. I’m giving this to you only because we’re fighting together in this place.”

Ali did not want to be tagged as narrow-minded and petty. He also did not want to isolate Valentino by not drawing the token on his wrist because of what happened earlier, so he also drew it on Valentino's wrist.

Inside the succession ceremony's hall that floated high up to the sky, Ali raised his left arm and shouted, "Frieeeeeeeeeeend!!!"

Minhyuk also raised his left arm and shouted, "Frieeeeeeeeeeend!!!"

"O-ooh. We always wanted to try this too. Frieeeeeeeeeeend!!!"

"Frieeeeeeeeeeend!!!"

"Frieeeeeeeeeeend!!!"

Valentino could feel his face heating up as he muttered, "F-f-f-fr-fr-fr—"

Ali, Minhyuk, and the rest of the gods glared at him.

"Frieeeeeeeeeeend!!!"

With seven arms raised to the sky, one word resonated loudly throughout the area. "Frieeeeeeeeeeend!!!"

At this moment, Valentino felt like he wanted to go home.

Chapter 930

Seven men raised their left arms to the sky while shouting as loud as they could.

"Frieeeeeeeeeeend!!!"

"Frieeeeeeeeeeend!!!"

"Frieeeeeeeeeeend!!!"

"Frieeeeeeeeeeend!!!"

"..."

"..."

Nerva, who was watching the scene from a distance, was speechless. Even the other players looked at them blankly.

Then, one of the players murmured, "It's so f*cking cringy, but it also looks so cool..."

The mumbling player's expression was awkward and embarrassed when all the people, including Nerva, turned to look at him.

"We don't have to worry too much about that side."

"That's right."

"What is there to be afraid of when we have His Majesty Nerva on our side?"

Of course, Minhyuk was the envy of all of the players. But if they were asked to choose between Minhyuk and Nerva, they would not hesitate to choose Nerva. The players were all aware of Minhyuk's situation.

'Maybe Death and Ali are also feeling the same thing.'

'But they can no longer separate from Minhyuk, so there's nothing else that they can do.'

'Even the gods, who chose Minhyuk's side, are all trivial and insignificant gods.'

'Although I feel sorry for him, I will do my best to overcome this trial.'

They all turned to Nerva and soon refocused on their tasks.

"Did you say that you're the God of Shooting? Your task is to keep the God of Magic, the God of Archery, or any god capable of long-range attacks in check."

Nerva calmly began to give his orders: "Use your bullets and shoot at their powers before they can fully unleash them. As for the God of Lightning, release your lightning bolts to counter the attacks that are about to fall on us. Lightning strikes faster than any other attack, so it is more effective to use it to prevent those attacks from coming at us."

Of course, these were common tactics that anyone could think of. However, it was different since Nerva gave the command. And because Nerva, who gave them an extremely ridiculous buff, was here, the proud and arrogant players could unite.

'With this, I will not be afraid of anything.'

The players were all intoxicated by the power that coursed through their veins.

Just like that, they followed Nerva's orders and used the remaining twenty minutes before the next wave of attacks to start preparing. That was when they heard a loud thud, and something heavy fell on the ground. When they turned to look at the direction of the sound, they saw Minhyuk opening the lid of a huge cauldron.

After removing the cauldron lid, Minhyuk again checked the ingredients he had ripped off of Valentino.

- All of your attack power will increase.*
- Your skill level will increase.*
- Your probability of ignoring your enemies' defenses will increase by 30%.*

If you can cook this chicken until it is soft and tender, you will taste a very light, savory, and delicious chicken. The buff effects that you will receive will be much better than ordinary. But the buff effects will be reduced if you fail to cook this well.

The God's Chicken that Grew Up Watching the God of Herculean Strength was quite a special ingredient. Most God-grade ingredients would subject the person cooking them to various torments the moment they started to process and cook them. However, this chicken was different. It did not have any of that.

The problem was that if the one cooking failed to cook the chicken until it was soft and tender, it would remain tough because of its muscle mass. There was also the fact that the buff effect that one would receive upon failure in cooking the chicken well would be worse than the buff effect of an epic-grade dish.

And from what Minhyuk could see, this chicken seemed to focus on increasing one's attack power. Perhaps it was because its name included the words "Herculean Strength."

Minhyuk briefly considered how he would cook this embarrassingly tough chicken. It did not take too long for a dish to pop into his mind.

'Ah... If it's like this, then...'

The dish that came to Minhyuk's mind was spicy braised chicken. But it wasn't a simple spicy braised chicken. It would be made with exceptional equipment. The dish was none other than *Cauldron Lid Spicy Braised Chicken*.

This spicy braised chicken was not cooked on a gas range but on a wood fire. It was soft enough that the flesh would fall off the chicken leg the moment it touched one's mouth. That was how delicious it was. And with wood fire, the better and stronger the fire, the deeper the flavor, and the softer the meat would seep inside.

Minhyuk quickly placed a lot of firewood under the cauldron lid.

'We don't have much time.'

He had to move as fast as he could to boil the meat well.

"Ali, Valentino. I will give you two a critical mission."

Valentino wanted to go home already. However, since he was already here, he decided to do his best and give it his all. As for the three other God-class players, they were watching everything with shining eyes.

'Oh my god. What will be his first command to the world's greatest mage and tanker?!'

This was Athenae's Supreme! What would his command be?

Then, Minhyuk said, "Use some fire magic here. Valentino, use your shield to fan the fire so we can maintain its intensity and help it grow stronger."

"Fire!" Ali immediately cast his spell. He did not even hesitate, as if he was very familiar with this scenario.

Fire shot toward the firewood, causing it to burst into flames.

“...”

Valentino was the idol of all tankers in the world. How dare someone ask him to fan the flames with his shield? However, Valentino only hesitated for a moment. In the end, he squatted down and began using his square shield as a fan to blow wind to the flames.

Meanwhile, Minhyuk, who had quickly finished chopping and preparing the ingredients, began to cook. He added the God's Chicken, potatoes, gochujang, and the ingredients on the cauldron lid. Then, he pulled out another pot lid and covered the cauldron lid to allow the ingredients to boil.

Fwiiiiiiish—!

After ten minutes, steam began to escape from the seams of the pot. When Minhyuk lifted the lid, the boiling red sauce that covered the chicken appeared.

“Valentino, go faster. The fire is going out.”

“Huh? Ah, y- yeah...!”

“But you're good at fanning, huh?”

“Ha- Haha. I'm quite good, huh?” Valentino smiled as his hands moved faster to fan harder. This was the prime example of the carrot and the whip! And the sauce that had filled the entire cauldron lid had decreased significantly in no time. It was boiling down really, *really* well.

Just like that, the thirty-minute countdown ended.

[The Third Wave has started!]

[The Third Wave lasts forty minutes and will be immediately followed by an all-out attack from the gods!]

At that moment, dozens of meteors began to fall from the sky. They were the God of Magic's Meteor.

“We have to hold on until I finish cooking this meal. Ali!”

Ali created a huge golden barrier that covered him and his allies in a split second. Minhyuk turned his head to look at the situation.

‘Shit, that's crazy.’

The Divine Army sent tens of thousands of sword lights while the death knights and bone dragons summoned by the God of Death charged at them from a distance.

Crack, crack, crack—!

Then, at that moment, diamond-like ice began to form through the gap in the bone dragons' formation. The ice, cracking finely like a spider web, froze an entire area at a very high speed. The players cheered when they saw a whole area of 350 meters turn frozen.

“Sir Nerva’s power is truly amazing,” the God of Ice sighed in admiration. The effects of Nerva’s buff had made him 1.3x stronger than usual. And thanks to that, the God of Ice could slow down the charge of the bone dragons and the other enemies.

Meanwhile, the meteors falling at the succession ceremony hall were suddenly struck by hundreds of lightning bolts.

Crackle, crackle, crackle—!

Crack— crack, crack—!

At the same time, a man flew up toward these meteors. This man was Nerva. As Nerva flew up with his sword, powerful sword lights rivaling the meteors' number also appeared.

Baaaaaaaaaaaaang—!

The moment these sword lights made contact with the meteors, the meteors shattered into pieces. Just like that, Nerva continued to destroy the meteors. The players, encouraged by this scene, stepped on the debris of the meteors that Nerva destroyed and moved to help him. A faint smile appeared on Nerva’s face when he saw this scene. Perhaps his credibility rating had already experienced a significant increase.

[Unlike the Battle God’s Sword, you have not moved to prove your qualifications as the Battle God’s Descendant!]

[Your Credibility Rating is -18%!]

“...?”

Minhyuk, who was busy cooking, experienced a sharp decrease in his credibility rating. And that was not all. The others have also heard a similar set of notifications.

[Even though you used your strongest defensive magic, you still failed to protect your allies from your enemies!]

[Your Credibility Rating is -22%!]

[As the master of the undead and the ruler of the kingdom of the dead, you failed to stop your enemies from advancing!]

[Your Credibility Rating is -19%!]

[As the owner of the greatest and strongest shield, you failed...]

[Your Credibility Rating is -1%!]

The credibility ratings of those who chose to side with Minhyuk also fell. Why? Because they decided to hide behind the barrier while the others were fighting fiercely to defend against the attack.

Immediately after that, the gods began to attack more fiercely, forcing many players to log out and causing a sharp decrease in Valentino’s credibility rating.

[Your Credibility Rating is -12%!]

[Your Credibility Rating is -16%!]

Still squatting down and fanning the flames, Valentino turned to look at Minhyuk.

“Until when...”

At that moment, Valentino saw the bright and happy smile that flashed on Minhyuk’s face.

“It’s done.”

[Everyone’s Happiness.]

[One dish turns to ten.]

Immediately after those words left Minhyuk’s mouth, a dish wrapped in a bright golden light appeared in front of Valentino. He couldn’t help but smile at the dish. But then, he suddenly fell in doubt, thinking, *‘From what I recall, the Food God’s Everyone’s Happiness can create ten dishes out of one single dish.’*

But the only ones on their side were Minhyuk, Ali, Death, Valentino, and the three other God-class players. This meant that there were three bowls of this meal left. Who was going to eat these three bowls?

The answer came not long after. Valentino saw the three other dishes appear in an absurd place.

‘This- this crazy bastard.’ Valentino was both shocked and amazed by Minhyuk’s guts. *‘He’s not doing an item or a mob steal, but a talent steal?’*

The three dishes appeared before the God of Shooting, the God of Ice, and the God of Lightning, all fighting alongside Nerva.

Claaaaang—!

Clack!

God of Shooting Rudolph aimed and fired at the God of Magic, who was busy casting his magic upon them. He was delighted when he saw the God of Magic stop casting his spell and choose to erect a shield in front of him.

‘I’m stopping the gods and holding them back!’

Rudolph was intoxicated with the power coursing through his veins. The Greatest Emperor’s Blessing was such an impressive buff. He had never received such an amazing buff in his life. For a player who suddenly received an amazing buff, the reinforcement of their abilities and the power that came along to help them hunt or catch a mob that they could not usually deal with was enough to make them drunk on power.

‘All of my stats increased by 22% while my magical and physical defensive power increased by 20%.’

Since all of Rudolph’s stats had increased, his magical and physical attack power would also increase relative to his stats. The buff was enough to increase his attack power by 20%. But it wasn’t the only thing that increased along with his stats. Even his *Hit Rate* increased.

However, no matter how good a buff effect is, there would still be something that they would find disappointing.

‘The fact that all of my stats have increased was already good. But if my attack power were increased by leaps and bounds, then I would probably be able to shoot through the gods.’

If that was the case, then he might have passed out from delight and ecstasy. Of course, the current buff that he received was already the greatest buff that he had ever seen in his life. So, he felt like it was already more than enough.

‘Once this Succession Ceremony ends and I inherit the position of the God of Shooting, shall I join the Luvien Empire?’

Just when the thought flashed, a dish appeared before him. Rudolph could see that the dish seemed not only in front of him but also in front of the God of Ice and the God of Lightning. He knew who sent this to them right away—it was none other than the Food God.

Rudolph glanced at the Food God and saw that he was smiling faintly at him.

‘Unbelievable.’

Rudolph had already raised his score by siding with Nerva to the maximum. Even if this dish had buff effects that were far superior to Nerva’s buff, would someone be crazy enough to eat it? However, Rudolph could not resist the curiosity that started to eat at him.

“Hmm...”

Rudolph thought, *‘It’s okay to check it, right?’* as he quickly checked the information of the braised chicken dish that appeared in front of him. But when he saw the information, he could only blink blankly.

‘Huh? I think there’s something weird here?’

Rudolph, who had already turned off the dish information window, quickly opened it again to check the details.

‘There’s a 16% increase in all stats, a 28% increase in magical and physical attack power, a +2 increase in all skills’ levels, and a +4 increase in a chosen skill’s level.’

Rudolph’s eyes brightened considerably as he pondered over the effects of the dish.

‘If I eat this dish, my attack power will be 1.4x stronger!?’ Rudolph thought as he reached for the dish without delay.

Talent steal? Success!