

M. in Hell 131

Chapter 131 - Apostle of Evil (2)

"RAAAHHH!"

Cha Yeon-Joo stomped on the ground.

Dozens of red chains whipped the ground and lifted her off the ground. Then she swung the chains down, smashing them into the head of the demonic beast leading the charge.

"KIIIEKK!"

After being hit with the chains, the demonic beast looked as if it had melted. It exploded soon after.

The mage-class Players then rained down their spells on the demonic beast army.

BOOM!!

The demonic beasts screamed, and the smell of their burnt flesh wafted over the battlefield.

A burst of hot air blew over the Players. They stepped on the corpses of the demonic beasts and leaped forward, with the Tank-class Players moving to the front.

The Chinese Players had moved into action too. They didn't have many mage-class Players, but they had many martial artist Players with Qi.

They swung their weapons with superhuman strength, swiftly increasing the number of demonic beast corpses.

"Raahh!! Come at me, you bastards!"

Kang Tae-Soo, who was wielding a giant shield, smashed some demonic beasts with its pointy edge. Due to his monstrous appearance and size, it looked as if a demonic beast were hunting other demonic beasts.

"We'll be joining the battle too, captain."

"Man~ I can't see an end to them! Hwa-Yeon, when this war is over, how about we go get some dinner togeth—"

"Captain Goo, I will leave the right side to you!"

"Ah..."

Baek Hwa-Yeon ran while covering herself with wind. Goo Hyun-Mo followed after her in disappointment.

"Graaaahhhh!"

The battle against the demonic beasts continued. The Players had the advantage because most of the demonic beasts had come from the First Hell. Of course, there were some strong demonic beasts among them like the Cerberus, but the same went for Players.

"Bring it on, you sons of bitches!"

Yeon-Joo extended her hands, and her red chains swept over the demonic beasts.

Hwa-Yeon ran toward her.

"Yeon-Joo! I've come to help you!"

"I'm okay! Besides that, how are the Chinese doing?"

"They're pushing through the demonic beasts with the Heavenly Sword Clan as their core."

"Ah, they're going too far up ahead," Yeon-Joo mumbled anxiously.

China had many melee-class Players, so Korea couldn't catch up with their charging speed.

"Hwa-Yeon! Tell that fox woman to slow down their charge!"

At this rate, the Korean and Chinese Players would become isolated from each other. If that were to happen, then there would be no point in fighting together in the first place.

Hwa-Yeon nodded and took out a crystal orb.

Nevertheless, she wasn't contacting Tian Suyan. Hwa-Yeon had no way of contacting her, and she probably wouldn't listen to her anyway.

"Kang-Woo, I have a request," Hwa-Yeon said.

[Go ahead.]

"Tell Tian Suyan to make the Chinese forces slow down their march. They're going too fast, and we can't catch up."

[Got it.]

The call ended.

Hwa-Yeon swung her sword with a hardened expression, splitting a demonic beast in two.

At the moment, the Players had the momentum. If things were to continue like this, then they would be able to win easily.

'The problem is the demons.'

It wasn't just demonic beasts that had appeared from the Rift. She'd seen demons in the video. To make things worse, there were about a hundred of them.

As more information about the Demon Cult became public, she came to understand the difference between demonic beasts and demons. In terms of pure physical prowess, demonic beasts were stronger. However, demons possessed intelligence; it was hard to predict how they would act.

'But he should be able to deal with it.'

Hwa-Yeon looked in the direction that Oh Kang-Woo had gone.

Kang-Woo hadn't entered the battlefield yet. He was in charge of getting rid of the demons that could become a wild card.

'I'll trust you.'

Hwa-Yeon stepped forward and swung her sword. Wind formed at the sword's edge and sliced through another demonic beast.

* * *

"Yeah. Slow down your charge."

[Okay, Kang-Woo.]

After receiving the call from Hwa-Yeon, Kang-Woo called Tian Suyan and told her to have the Chinese army slow down their charge like Hwa-Yeon had requested. Suyan accepted without hesitation.

Kang-Woo then turned around and looked at the Chinese Players. He saw them slowing down their march at Suyan's command.

'Tian Wuxian apparently couldn't participate because of shock.'

Kang-Woo laughed after recalling how Suyan had become the commander of the Heavenly Sword Clan.

Tian Wuxian had become ill from shock after being overwhelmed by an unknown Korean Player. He wasn't physically ill though; it was the effect of receiving a psychological shock.

'He's truly just an extra.'

Kang-Woo had a feeling that he wouldn't hear about Wuxian ever again.

Then Kang-Woo stood up and glanced at Han Seol-Ah, who was taking care of the wounded Players.

"Echidna," he called out.

"Yeah?"

"Stay here and protect Seol-Ah."

"What about you, Kang-Woo?"

Kang-Woo turned and looked at the Players who were fighting against demonic beasts. He got warmed up.

"I'm gonna join the battle."

"Didn't you say you were gonna wait until the demons appeared?"

"Well, they're not appearing at all."

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes.

There were many demonic beasts around, but there wasn't a demon in sight. He had used the Authority of the Sky and searched the battlefield from midair, but he hadn't seen a single one.

'The plan has gone awry.'

He hadn't expected that he wouldn't be able to see a single demon.

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue in disappointment.

'I miscalculated.'

He could surmise many things just from the fact that there wasn't a demon in sight.

'Their goal isn't war.'

If the Demon Cult's goal involved winning the war, then there was no reason that they wouldn't take part in the battle. No, if that had been their goal from the beginning, they wouldn't have used such a brute-force strategy.

'These demonic beasts are probably just fodder to them.'

It was as if they were just throwing the demonic beasts away. They wouldn't have wasted the demonic beasts like this if they thought that the demonic beasts were an important part of their forces.

'The purpose of the summoning was something else.'

They weren't trying to do something by summoning demonic beasts and demons. He couldn't help but think that the summoning itself was their goal from the beginning.

'And they're throwing the useless demonic beasts away.'

It was like they'd made miners charge into enemy territory after making them finish mining all the minerals. For the Demon Cult, those demonic beasts were just dregs they didn't want to deal with.

"Tsk."

Kang-Woo didn't like this. The Players were just disposing of the Demon Cult's leftovers.

It annoyed him to have to move as the Demon Cult wanted.

'The demons must be somewhere else entirely, then.'

Kang-Woo wasn't sure, but he couldn't see any demons among the demonic beasts. His appetite, which had grown because of how long he'd been waiting, lingered in his mouth in vain.

"Okay. I'll make sure no one hurts Seol-Ah. Hmph!" Echidna snorted.

Kang-Woo patted her head gently, and the snort became louder.

"Then I'll leave it to you."

"Okay."

He left Echidna behind and moved toward where the fight was happening.

The demonic beasts and Players were fighting intensely. Yet, Kang-Woo walked relaxedly toward the horrible battlefield as if he were on a walk.

"KIIEEKK!"

'Where could they be?'

The demonic beasts charged toward him. He lightly swung his hand, and the demonic beasts that were charging toward him exploded.

Kang-Woo kept walking. His steps were relaxed, but his speed was incredibly fast. He entered the enemy lines almost instantly. All of the demonic beasts that were waiting their turn to fight charged toward him.

"KRRRRR."

"Graaaahhhh!"

'They probably aren't far away.'

He flicked his finger, and the ring changed forms. The Key of the Demonic Sea transformed into a giant shield, which the demonic beasts ran into.

Crack!

"KIIKK!"

The demonic beasts' teeth were destroyed as they tried to bite the shield. Then when they scratched the shield, their claws were ripped out of their hands, and blood poured out.

Kang-Woo took a step forward.

'Even though the demonic beasts rushed in recklessly, they were still lumped together.'

"Graaahhh!"

'Seeing how they aren't eating each other, someone must be controlling them.'

"KIIEKK!"

'Where could they be hiding?'

"KWEEKK!"

The demonic beasts charged toward the prey that had penetrated deep into enemy lines. Long thorns appeared on the shield, and the Key of the Demonic Sea rotated fiercely.

Whirrr!

The demonic beasts were sliced apart as if they'd been put inside a blender. Flesh splattered in all directions.

The Cerberus, who was mixed among the demonic beasts, breathed flames at Kang-Woo. Nevertheless, he just raised his right hand and smacked the flames, causing them to burn the demonic beasts instead.

"GRRRR!"

The Cerberus opened its enormous mouth, which was big enough to easily devour a person whole, and targeted Kang-Woo.

Tap.

"Whine?!"

Kang-Woo grabbed one of the Cerberus' teeth, which was the size of a person's head, and pulled it out. The Cerberus cried in pain.

The Kang-Woo continued cutting and slashing through the crowd of demonic beasts. Nonetheless, it didn't matter how far into the horde he went. He still didn't see any demons.

Kang-Woo was starting to get annoyed. That wasn't what he'd hoped for.

'I guess I'll settle for eating these guys for now.'

He used the Authority of Predation. Black smoke spread out and covered the Cerberus.

Crunch!

Its bones were crushed, and its skin was torn apart. Its whole body was absorbed by the black smoke.

"I knew it wouldn't work on these guys."

The effect of the Trait 'Reaper of Souls' had not activated, and his demonic energy stat hadn't increased. These demonic beasts were far too low quality. It was like how a high-level Player couldn't gain experience points even if they massacred monsters in a low-ranking Gate.

'I need demons.'

Kang-Woo was getting thirsty. His lips were getting dry.

There was no way he would be satisfied with creatures like these. A hunger that he couldn't feel with his demonic body stimulated his desire to consume. He had come here expecting delicious food, so it angered him to find there was nothing delicious.

"GRRR."

The demonic beasts moved back. Kang-Woo could see the fear in their eyes.

He resumed walking, and the demonic beasts backed off even more.

Right then...

Swoop!

A black hand appeared out of nowhere and tried to attack him.

Kang-Woo frowned as he grabbed the black hand. None of the demonic beasts around him were capable of such an attack.

"Hmm?"

Kang-Woo realized the hand that had targeted him was holding a piece of paper.

He picked up the paper, which had a note written in Korean with terrible handwriting.

[I want to talk.]

Kang-Woo's eyes narrowed.

"What the hell is this?"

Was it a meal ticket?

Chapter 132 - Don't Act as if You Know Me (1)

"Hah."

Oh Kang-Woo couldn't help but smile.

It wasn't hard to imagine who had sent the message.

'The Demon Cult.'

He wondered why they were trying to contact him.

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes and thought deeply about it.

"I see."

He recalled what had happened in Japan. The sight of the Demon Cultists escaping with a heavily injured Akiyama resurfaced in his mind. Kang-Woo couldn't help but think that they had leaked information about him.

'I'm not sure why they're trying to contact me though.'

Kang-Woo had stopped their summoning. It would make more sense if they were to send a kill squad after him. There was no reason for them to contact him by using a method that was akin to the ancient way of sending a message with an arrow.

"I guess I'll know once I go."

It wasn't hard to imagine why... but to be sure, it would be better to go as they requested. Still, this was an extremely dangerous act like willingly walking into a blatant trap.

'Not bad.'

Kang-Woo smiled.

It didn't matter what kind of trap or how many they'd prepared. The important thing was that the demons were likely all there.

'There's also a chance they aren't fully prepared yet.'

The Demon Cultists probably wouldn't expect him to accept such a suspicious proposal.

'If they did, they would've at least mentioned where I should go.'

The purpose of the note they'd sent was to convey the minimum intention of wanting to meet him. The details about the time and location would probably be sent after the war was over.

'I have no reason to wait until then.'

Kang-Woo laughed.

He turned his face toward where the black hand had reached out from. Traces of demonic energy still lingered.

Kang-Woo ran, following the trail of demonic energy. The Authority of Haste surrounded his body, and he shot forward at an incredibly fast speed.

A cloud of dust appeared in Manchuria.

* * *

Earlier...

"He's quite strong."

Anton Sidorovich let out an exclamation in surprise upon seeing Kang-Woo through the eyes of the demonic beasts.

He wasn't sure why Kang-Woo had gone into the middle of the demonic beast army by himself, but he was practically massacring them.

A smile appeared on Anton's face.

"Right, then."

Anton took out a book made of black parchment—a strong weapon known as the Book of Nightmares. It had been given to him by the Aspects when they bestowed him the title of Apostle of Evil.

"Zazas, zazas, nasatanada zazas,"[1] Anton chanted.

The demonic energy of the Book of Nightmares resonated with his demonic energy. He sent a hand made of demonic energy through the insides of the Cerberus that he was using to see what was happening.

Anton watched Kang-Woo easily neutralize the attack and read the message.

"Done," Anton said, smiling with satisfaction.

One of the demons near him posed a question,

[So, what is it that we have to do? Who do we need to kill?]

"Kekeke. Don't be so hasty. We will meet him once the war is over."

Anton had a relaxed grin.

The demon frowned.

[Are you telling us to wait even longer? We are demons. We live for blood and slaughter! We cannot postpone battle for any lo—]

"Did you not understand me when I said we shouldn't be hasty?"

Anton narrowed his eyes. He exuded a wave of strong demonic energy that overwhelmed the demons.

[Kurgh...]

The demons paled, and their expressions hardened.

Anton's demonic energy was comparable to a demon of the Ninth Hell. Most of the demons here were of the Fifth and Sixth Hells, so it was too powerful for them to withstand.

The demons remained silent.

"Good."

Anton nodded while smiling. Now he just had to think of a way to make Kang-Woo come to them on his own.

'I wonder how I should do it?'

The easiest way was to take a hostage.

'It appears that he lives with a woman.'

His face took on a greedy and sly smirk. The woman he'd seen in the photos was quite beautiful. If they took her hostage, it shouldn't be hard to convince Kang-Woo to meet them.

"Oh, my. I shouldn't be thinking of doing things like that."

Anton laughed while drawing a cross on his chest with his fingers.

The goal was to recruit Kang-Woo to the Demon Cult. A rash provocation like that could stop them from achieving their goal.

'But...'

Anton's eyes shone. If Kang-Woo were to refuse his proposal, Anton would be free to deal with the hostage as he wanted.

Slurp.

He licked his lips. His ugly nature, distorted by greed hidden under a benevolent appearance, had shown itself.

"All right. That's enough for t—"

Just as Anton was about to call it a day, he felt something was off.

"Hmm?"

Anton turned his head to look. He sensed someone was getting closer to him at an incredible speed.

"Don't tell me... He's coming this way?"

Anton's face was filled with surprise.

It was true that Anton had called Kang-Woo over, but he never imagined that Kang-Woo would come after receiving just a piece of paper.

'No, more importantly, how did he locate me?'

Anton couldn't figure it out.

He used the Book of Nightmares and ordered the demons around him to leave.

"Keke. Well, I guess it doesn't matter."

Anton would try and recruit Kang-Woo. If Kang-Woo refused, then Anton would just kill him. Since the two options were already decided, there was no need to hesitate.

Anton walked toward the approaching energy.

* * *

Boom!

A heavy impact shook the ground. Kang-Woo dismissed the Authority of Haste and looked at the old man in front of him.

The old man had wrinkles on his face and wore clerical clothing. He wasn't hiding his demonic energy.

Kang-Woo used the Authority of Language and said, "You wanted to talk?"

Anton's eyes lit up as he replied, "You can speak Russian?"

"Let's just say that I can. First off..."

Kang-Woo looked around.

Although they were a fair distance away, he noticed that he was surrounded by the demons that he'd been trying to find.

The tips of his mouth curved upward.

'They're kinda low-ranking though,' he commented inwardly.

Most of the demons belonged to the Fifth Hell or lower, the Sixth Hell at most.

Upon seeing Kang-Woo, the demons showed no reaction. Rather, they were emitting strong bloodlust at him.

'None of them seem to know me.'

That was understandable. Kang-Woo had only started to gain notoriety when he'd reached the Ninth Hell. The demons might have heard rumors about him, but they probably didn't know what he looked like. In particular, this would be the case for those that were in the middle levels like the Fifth and Sixth Hells.

'It's better this way.'

Kang-Woo looked at Anton with a relaxed demeanor and asked, "So, what did you want to talk about?"

"Keke. I'm glad we're on the same wavelength. I wanted to make you a proposition."

"Proposition?"

"Yes," Anton replied with a smile. "Have you ever heard about demons?"

"Is there anyone who hasn't after all the mess you guys have made?" Kang-Woo remarked, feigning laughter.

Anton shook his head and said, "No. What I'm asking is if you are aware of the privileges possessed by demons."

"Privileges?"

"Yes. The privileges of demons that only the Demon Cult can offer you!" Anton exclaimed loudly.

"Humans eventually die. It doesn't matter how wealthy you are or how many women you sleep with. Even if you have so much influence that no one would dare cross you, we all eventually die." Anton looked at Kang-Woo with intense eyes. "However, demons do not die. Their lifespan is not finite, and they do not require sustenance."

Anton was talking calmly, but his voice was strong, and his gaze intense.

'This guy would be a great spokesperson for a pyramid scheme,' Kang-Woo thought with a smirk.

"So?"

"We have the power to turn humans into demons. We can give you, a mere mortal, immortality."

"..."

"Think about it. Does it make any sense that someone like you, who was blessed with such strength, should rot among humans? That sort of life does not suit you. You are more fit to be a king who rules over the mortals."

Anton didn't get overly excited. He continued talking to Kang-Woo very calmly but powerfully. He praised Kang-Woo moderately and tried to persuade him by telling him that such a life did not suit him.

"How about it? Join us. We can promise you supremacy, power, and immortality," Anton offered with a smile. "I know you very well. I can see the desire for power in your eyes. You are the same as me. Where you are right now does not suit you."

"Here," Anton said, bowing slightly and extending his hand toward Kang-Woo. "Why don't you join us? You can also become a demon—an immortal being who has escaped from the cycle of life."

Anton knew very well how to awaken the desire in people. He spoke so smoothly that it was obvious he had made this speech more than just a few times. He talked calmly and appealed to Kang-Woo's desire. People like Fujimoto Ryoma or Baek Kang-Hyun would have accepted it without hesitation.

However... the man standing in front of Anton was none other than Kang-Woo.

"You'll make me a demon?" Kang-Woo asked. "Ha... HAHAHAAAAH!!!"

He laughed so loudly that his stomach hurt. He found the situation extremely funny.

"You..." Kang-Woo uttered while trying to control his laughter. "You said you know me, right?"

"That is correct. Although this is the first time we've met, seeing your eyes, which are filled with desire, is enough for m—"

"HAHAHA! You're one funny guy." Kang-Woo ended up roaring with laughter again. "Do you have a scouter[2] on your eye or something? What could you possibly know just from my eyes? Not even your mom would know what the hell you are just from looking at you, man."

"...."

There was a heavy silence.

Kang-Woo continued, "Don't act as if you know me."

He raised his hand, and an intense torrent of demonic energy concentrated in it.

Crack.

Unable to withstand the force of the demonic energy, the ground split. The atmosphere went rampant as if a storm were raging.

Then he turned his hand... and the world turned upside down.

"You don't know who I am."

Chapter 133 - Don't Act as if You Know Me (2)

Rumble!!

The ground shook like there was an earthquake, and a huge crack ran through the terrain.

Crack.

A chilling sound echoed from the warped terrain. The split ground rose to about thirty meters.

Hundreds of pillars appeared. They were so immensely tall that one had to look straight up to see where they ended.

"What the..."

Anton Sidorovich looked around while making a confused expression.

This place had undoubtedly been a plain—one so flat that the horizon was visible from it. Yet, that plain had suddenly turned into a mountainous terrain with unique rock formations.

'He changed the terrain?'

It was utterly absurd. People often said that the terrain would change in a battle between those of World Ranker-level powers. However, that was a figure of speech. In reality, no one could change a plain into a mountainous terrain... no one except for the monster in front of him.

'Just what kind of Trait does he have...?'

Antoon looked at Oh Kang-Woo cautiously.

Seeing how the terrain itself had suddenly changed, there was a high chance that Kang-Woo's Trait was related to controlling the forces of nature.

'And among them, earth.'

As Anton opened his book, he looked at the demons with sharp eyes.

"What are you doing? It's time for the battle that you've been desiring so much. Kill that man!" Anton screamed like a madman.

The demons, who had also been distracted by how the terrain had suddenly changed, raised their weapons.

Anton cast magic and glared at Kang-Woo.

'The only thing that has changed is the terrain.'

There was no big difference. It was incredible that Kang-Woo could warp the terrain, but it wouldn't do much to change the outcome.

'It does nothing but make for a decent little show.'

There was no need to feel overwhelmed or intimidated. Kang-Woo couldn't win the battle just by changing the terrain. The only difference was that the stage where Kang-Woo would die had changed.

"Zazas, zazas, nasatanada zazas."

Anton focused on his chant as if to erase his heavy feelings of uneasiness.

* * *

[Hahahah! It's finally time for slaughter!]

[Die, human!]

As the demons charged toward him, Kang-Woo slowly raised his head. They stepped on the unique rock formations all over the terrain, using the steep mountainous terrain to their advantage.

"Haha," Kang-Woo let out a short laugh. Then he raised his hand and uttered, "Well, well."

Hundreds of demons were charging toward him, and Anton was casting a spell. Based on Anton's command, Kang-Woo could guess what Anton was thinking. Anton probably thought that Kang-Woo had done nothing but change the terrain, which was just a meaningless demonstration of his powers that wouldn't affect the battle in any way.

"However, there's no way that's all it is," Kang-Woo said.

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

It was impossible that his actions could be meaningless. After all, he wouldn't have changed the terrain if it was pointless. Moreover, changing the terrain hadn't been his main intention.

"Ignite."

Fwoosh!

A pillar of black flames burst out from the cracks on the ground. It devoured the two demons that were charging toward Kang-Woo.

Then he raised his right hand and swung it from right to left.

Rumble!

A tall rock split and then crumbled, releasing flames as viscous as lava.

[Gaaaaahhhhh!!!] a half-disintegrated demon screamed as he squirmed in pain.

[Move, weaklings!] a demon with four arms yelled.

He pushed aside the squirming demon and jumped. His one eye, which was the size of a basketball, focused on Kang-Woo.

[Hahaha! I, Rakum of the Sixth Hell, can use four weapons masterfully with my four arms—]

Slash.

There was a flash of black light as Kang-Woo wielded the Key of the Demonic Sea in sword form.

Another two demons walked past the one that had just been split in two.

[I am the almighty—]

[I am Scarta, the overlord of the Sixth He—]

Crack!

Kang-Woo flicked his finger. The Authority of Waves spread out and shattered the two demons' bodies into smithereens.

"KIIEEKK!"

"KRRRR!"

Even demonic beasts had emerged out of nowhere to assist in the battle. They weren't low-ranking demonic beasts from the First Hell; these were the ones that resided in the Third Hell and above.

It seemed Anton had previously set aside these demonic beasts that were too valuable to expend through war.

"Fuuuu." Kang-Woo took a deep breath.

He held the hilt of the Key of the Demonic Sea, currently in sword form, in reverse and drew out all of the demonic energy flowing in his blood.

Kang-Woo took another deep breath and merged four Authorities.

The core Authority was the Authority of Blades. It was the Authority of the demon Sabnak and was considered the most useless of the Authorities. Nevertheless, even that useless Authority could become more powerful than any other Authority when Kang-Woo used it.

Crack!

He stabbed the ground with the sword, forming a Rift on the collapsed ground. Kang-Woo poured his explosive demonic energy into the Rift.

Crack—!

[Gaaahhh!]

[Wh-What the—?!]

A shadow spread out from the Rift. It looked as if the night sky was being reflected on the ground. Sharp blades rose from within the shadow and ripped the demons apart. Hundreds of thousands of blades adorned the shadow like stars in the night sky.

As the ground became covered in blades, many demons flew up to avoid them. Upon seeing that, Kang-Woo pulled his sword out from the ground. The Rift disappeared, and the sharp blades turned into black smoke and dissipated.

He turned around.

'There are about half of them left.'

About half of the demons had not been able to fly and were skewered by the blades. The other half had dodged the attacks and were flying away.

Kang-Woo pointed the sword upward at those demons. Demonic energy flowed out of his body like a falling tide, and he felt dizzy for a moment.

'It's okay.'

He was not experiencing demonic energy exhaustion, nor had the Ten Thousand Demon Core gone out of control. His brain had simply been overloaded for a moment due to it having exceeded its processing capacity. Kang-Woo was used to this. He had experienced it so many times that it bored him.

[Run!]

[Wh-What the— What the hell is that monsteeer?!]

[W-Wait...]

A demon that was trying to escape suddenly turned pale. He turned around while making an expression that showed he'd realized something.

[N-No way...]

The demon had heard of the battles between a human and the seven princes of Hell. In particular, he recalled the tale of the demon king who had annihilated Prince Belphegor's forces in an instant. A tall mountain, a shadow that covered the earth, and thousands of blades—everything here matched the tale that he had heard of through rumors.

[Th-That's impossible.]

The demon tried to deny it. It was something that couldn't possibly be happening. There was no way that the demon king, the almighty symbol of Hell, would be here.

Kang-Woo slowly swung the sword, which he'd pointed at the sky, downward.

Simultaneously, rocks that were over thirty meters tall shook, and an overwhelming wave of demonic energy filled the entire area.

"Sunset," Kang-Woo muttered, his voice reverberating like thunder.

The rocks exploded, and black lava erupted from them, shooting into the sky.

[A-Aaahhh!] the demon gasped.

He looked around, but he couldn't see the sun anymore.

The world had been devoured by darkness.

* * *

Bubble.

The land was covered in boiling hot black lava. The vegetation that grew on the plain had all burnt into ashes. The ground was further distorted by the scorching lava.

The Ninth Hell was the deepest hell where the strongest demons gathered, and now, the Manchurian Plain looked just like it.

"H-Huff, huff!"

An old man, Anton, ran through that distorted landscape.

He couldn't understand what was going on. It seemed like he was having a terrible nightmare.

Anton tossed the Book of Nightmares, half of which had been turned to ashes. Half of his right arm had also been burned off, and there was a gash in his side. Even so, he ran to get away from the predator walking toward him.

Thump.

Anton did not get far until he slumped to the ground. Dark red blood flowed out from his wounds. He turned his head with trembling eyes and saw a demon standing beside him.

"A-Aaahhh..." Anton shrieked.

"I told you not to act as if you know me," the demon said.

He reached out to Anton and grabbed the back of his head.

Then the demon looked at Anton with eyes full of madness and asked, "So, do you still think you know who I am?"

"Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Who are..."

Anton couldn't speak properly. Immense pressure weighed down on him like he'd come face to face with an absolute being. It felt as if a deep, bottomless Abyss was surrounding him.

He had felt this sense of awe before when he met the Aspects in person.

'No.'

Anton shook his head. He recalled that time and compared the energy that he felt from the demon in front of him to what he'd felt that day.

His face turned pale. He had not experienced fear like this, which was as vast as an endless sea, even when he met the Aspects.

"Who... are you?" Anton asked.

"What's it to you?"

Black smoke flowed out from the demon's hand that was holding the back of Anton's head and shrouded him. However, it didn't stop there; the smoke spread throughout the scorched and distorted landscape as well.

"Will knowing who I am change anything? Do you think you can die without regrets if I tell you? This isn't the time to be saying stuff like that, buddy."

"..."

Anton remained silent. He couldn't deny those words.

There was only one thing he should be saying...

"S-Spare... me," Anton pleaded while trembling.

He was filled with a desire to live and the desperation to survive. He had painstakingly obtained immortality after sacrificing countless people. Anton didn't want to die in vain in a desolate plain.

"Yes, that's it. That's what you should be saying." The demon nodded in satisfaction. "But haven't you also heard those very words quite a lot? You've probably killed a ton of people to get so much demonic energy."

"..."

Anton couldn't say anything. He recalled the memories of people begging him for mercy... He had indeed often heard such desperate words. Anton even had quite a lot of fun hearing the screams of the sacrifices begging for mercy before he killed them.

The demon laughed while looking down at him.

On the demon's face was a smile similar to Anton's those times when he had gazed cruelly at the sacrifices.

"What did you do back then? Oh, I'm just asking this as a courtesy. I already know what you did," the demon said.

Anton looked at him with a pale expression.

"Have you spared anyone even once?" the demon asked.

"..."

No, there was no way that had been the case. To Anton, the sacrifices had merely been food that he'd used to gain more demonic energy. It was much like how a lion wouldn't hesitate to kill a crying deer.

"A-Aaahhh..." Anton cried, pleading and reaching out his hands in desperation for mercy.

The demon smiled and grabbed Anton's hand.

"Haha. I can't believe I'd resonate with you over something like this. Right, you said earlier that you and I are the same, right? I'll have to somewhat agree with you on that."

Anton heard a bit of shyness in the demon's voice.

The demon scratched his head sheepishly and stated, "Because I've never spared anyone either."

Crunch!

The black smoke crushed and swallowed Anton.

Chapter 134 - Thank You for the Meal

Crunch. Crunch.

The chilling sound of skin being torn apart and bones being crunched spread through the devastated plain.

The demons' bodies, souls, and demonic energy flowed into Oh Kang-Woo through the black smoke hanging over the field.

Riiing.

[Activating the Trait 'Reaper of Souls!']

[Absorbing demon souls in their entirety.]

An astral energy that could not be seen flowed into him.

He had never been able to feel such a thing while using the Authority of Predation before because it had always mangled and ripped apart the souls that it had devoured.

'Ah.'

It was a mysterious feeling.

The demons he'd devoured only lived in the middle levels of Hell, so the energy wasn't that big. But even the light from a firefly could shine brightly if hundreds gathered. Even though they were small portions of energy, he felt a fullness spread through his body because he had absorbed hundreds of portions.

'It kind of feels weird.'

It was a sensation similar to lying in a hot tub with hundreds of small bubbles enveloping one's body. It felt indistinct yet heavy. It felt as if bubbles were tickling his body.

After a while, the bubbles tickling him seeped into his body, and a familiar message window appeared in front of him.

[The Trait 'Reaper of Souls' has been successfully activated.]

[You have absorbed souls and raised the quality of your own soul.]

[You have obtained a clue for the first condition of Demonic Soul.]

'Nice.'

Kang-Woo's eyes shone as he read the message windows that had appeared in front of him. The tips of his mouth went up. He opened his status window and checked the contents of 'Demonic Soul.'

[Information]

[Demonic Soul: The second step to becoming a 'Demon God.'

*Condition 1: Raise the quality of your soul (Unfulfilled)

*Condition 2: ???]

'I knew it was connected to my Seventh Awakening Trait.'

He had expected it.

He was now certain that the steps to becoming a Demon God and the Awakening Traits were connected.

Kang-Woo nodded in satisfaction.

'It's a condition I can fulfill.'

Kang-Woo decided not to think about the second condition hidden behind question marks. He decided to focus on the first condition, which he could actually fulfill.

He wasn't sure how many demon souls he had to absorb, but the way to fulfill the condition was very straightforward.

Riiing.

[Demonic Energy has risen by 4.]

"Woah, it even raised my stat."

Kang-Woo's eyes shone.

Raising his stat wasn't an effect of Reaper of Souls but the effect of having absorbed the demonic energies of hundreds of demons.

Four points. A smile appeared on Kang-Woo's face. He opened his status window and checked the stat.

"... Goddammit."

The stat was still at 120.

Kang-Woo recalled something he'd forgotten.

"This has become complete trash."

Kang-Woo looked at the Black Pearl Coat he was wearing.

The Black Pearl Coat boosted his demonic energy stat by five. However, its effect had become obsolete after the stat had surpassed 120. Hence, even if he took off the Black Pearl Coat, his demonic energy stat would stay at 120.

The stat boost effect of the Black Pearl Coat had completely disappeared.

"Tsk."

He wasn't sure if he should be happy by the fact that further increases in his Demonic Energy stat would be the base value or if he should be annoyed by the fact that the Black Pearl Coat had become useless.

'Well, let's think about it optimistically.'

It was something he'd expected after discovering that the stat boost from Legendary-grade and lower-grade equipment wouldn't apply after 120 stat points.

It had been bound to happen, so he just considered the issue as resolved.

Kang-Woo left the bittersweet feeling behind and stood up.

"That aside..."

He thought about the message that said the quality of his soul had risen. He still wasn't sure what effect it had.

'I should check.'

He closed his eyes and meditated, checking the changes in his body.

'Nothing has changed physically.'

There had been no physical changes like what he had experienced with the Ultimate Demonic Body, nor had anything new formed within his body such as with the demonic crystal.

'There has to be a change.'

He wasn't sure what kind of effect fulfilling the conditions for the Demonic Soul would give, but considering what had happened with the Ultimate Demonic Body, he was sure that it would give him great power.

Although he was still in the middle of fulfilling the conditions, it was weird that he hadn't felt a single change.

'Hmm?'

He felt something different about his body, something he hadn't felt before using Reaper of Souls. It didn't take him long to realize what it was.

'The seal on the Ten Thousand Demon Core has weakened.'

Kang-Woo's eyes shone.

The seal hadn't weakened as much as when he awakened every ten levels, but it had definitely become weaker.

"This..."

A deep smile appeared on his face.

"The effect is greater than I imagined!"

The Ten Thousand Demon Core was the foundation of his power.

It'd been half a year since he'd returned to Earth. Although he'd obtained new powers he didn't have while in Hell, they still couldn't be compared to his original power.

The Ten Thousand Demon Core was a sea of demonic energy that not even he knew the full extent of; it was a complete enigma to him.

"Yeah, this is what I'm talking about, especially when I'm being blocked from leveling up."

A deep smile was drawn on his face. He almost wanted to start dancing out of happiness.

To him, there were two huge benefits to leveling up. The first was the Awakening Trait, and the second was the weakening of the seal on the Ten Thousand Demon Core.

He had been unable to weaken the seal any other way, so this was absolutely huge.

"Very nice."

He sat down while smiling in satisfaction.

If the seal on the Ten Thousand Demon Core had weakened, there was something he had to do immediately.

'I have to convert the released demonic energy into a stat.'

He had also done so when he'd achieved his Seventh Awakening.

'I can't depend on the Black Pearl Coat's stat boost anymore.'

From now on, any rise in his Demonic Energy stat would directly translate to his own power.

Kang-Woo closed his eyes and used the Heavenly Dragon Cultivation Technique.

He felt the demonic energy that had flowed out from the weakened seal on the Ten Thousand Demon Core. It wasn't an explosive amount compared to when he awakened, but it was still the demonic energy from the Ten Thousand Demon Core.

He was enveloped in an abundant amount of demonic energy.

The demonic energy of the Ten Thousand Demon Core started to melt into his blood.

Riiing.

[Demonic Energy has risen by 1.]

The ringing sound made him feel good.

"Wow."

He let out an exclamation. Although it had gone up by just one point, the change was impressive.

The demonic energy raged within him.

'The higher the stat becomes, the harder it is to raise, but the effect becomes even greater.'

He smiled while thinking about the most basic information about stats.

He'd used quite a lot of demonic energy during the battle because he'd used two big techniques consecutively, but it felt as if his demonic energy stores had already been replenished.

"I should head back."

The war against the demonic beasts should be over by now.

Kang-Woo stood up and looked at the destroyed plain that had become similar to Hell.

'It wasn't a bad harvest.'

The harvest was as he had expected, no, even better.

Kang-Woo lightly clenched his fist.

Getting stronger while stopping the Demon Cult's plan... it was like killing two birds with one stone.

He turned around, put his hands together, and bowed.

"Thank you for the meal."

Burp.

* * *

He returned to where the Korean and Chinese Players had been warring with the demonic monsters.

'It seems like it's over.'

As he had expected, the war had already ended. People were transporting the injured.

It was obvious the fight ended with an overwhelming victory for China and Korea.

Humans weren't weak enough to lose against a group of demonic beasts from the First Hell.

'There doesn't seem to be many casualties either.'

Most of the people walking around had bright expressions on their faces, meaning there hadn't been many casualties.

'I wonder what would happen if a war between the forces of the Ninth Hell and Earth's Players broke out.'

He didn't need to think too much.

No matter how powerful the Players were, they were no match against the forces of the Ninth Hell. It would be a one-sided massacre similar to what had happened five years ago on the Day of Calamity.

'But...'

Kang-Woo looked at the players busily moving about. They didn't seem happy just because they'd won the war.

"Finally! I got my Seventh Awakening!"

"Alright! Me too!! I'm finally free from this damn level cap!"

"Holy crap, my level went up by eight!"

Kang-Woo could hear their happy shouts.

The players had leveled up a lot from the battle; it had ended up being a huge EXP event, just like Cha Yeon-Joo had said.

'Players can grow.'

It wasn't just those who had participated in the war. Players all around the world were gradually becoming stronger.

Although they still had a long way to go before they could face beings from the Ninth Hell, Kang-Woo brought to focus the fact that they were getting stronger.

'And among them, there are special individuals like Si-Hun.'

For players, talent was very important. No matter how much time they invested, talentless players couldn't get stronger. Inversely, if one just had talent, one could get a lot stronger in a short period of time.

"Kang-Woo!" Yeon-Joo ran toward him. "Where were you? What about the demons?"

"I eliminated them."

"... By yourself?"

He nodded.

Yeon-Joo laughed in disbelief. "It's not like there were just a couple of them. There should've been at least a hundr—"

"To be exact, 237."

"How did you... Fuuu. Forget it. I don't want to ask." Yeon-Joo shook her head. She cleared her throat and looked at Kang-Woo. "That aside, you're not hurt, are you?"

"Of course not."

"I guess you really are okay, considering you're as arrogant as ever. Hmph, people like you need to break some bones to be brought down a peg or two."

She turned her head away while snorting. Unlike her cold words, the tips of her mouth were curled up.

Kang-Woo smirked and walked past her. After Yeon-Joo, Echidna came running toward him.

"Kang-Woo, I protected Seol-Ah just like you told me to."

Hm!

She snorted.

"Good job. Not much happened, right?" Kang-Woo asked.

"Yeah. Some flying demonic beasts attacked, but I got rid of them all."

She looked at him with shining eyes, just like a child waiting to be praised.

Kang-Woo gently patted her head.

"Echidna, you go help the injured too."

"Okay!"

The treatment of the injured and the restoration of damages took priority for now.

'And then...'

He fell into thought. He'd solved the Russia incident and stopped the invasion of demonic beasts and demons.

'I have nothing to do.'

Unless the Demon Cult ran wild again or exposed their tracks, Kang-Woo couldn't think of anything to do.

"Hmm."

Kang-Woo looked at Echidna, who was running to where the injured people were. Suddenly, a certain thought crossed his mind.

"Aha."

He took out his smartphone and checked the date.

'I think it's been about three months.'

Chapter 135 - Second Summoning (1)

The war in Manchuria ended with the overwhelming victory of the Players. It was the first large-scale war since the Day of Calamity, so it was understandable that it received attention worldwide.

Thanks to this incident, China's and Korea's national status improved around the world.

The Demon Cult had been making the world tremble in fear. So now that their first large-scale attack was stopped, it wasn't weird that everyone was so excited about the overwhelming victory.

'Although that's actually not the case.'

Oh Kang-Woo lightly clicked his tongue.

Unlike what people thought, they weren't able to perfectly block the Demon Cult's attack. All they had done was win the fight against the demonic beasts, which were practically leftovers from the Demon Cult's plan.

'They'll take action again soon.'

... And the scale was probably going to be much bigger.

Eyes deep and sunken, Kang-Woo reached over the table. On it was a Chinese crayfish dish called mala longxia. It was obviously his first time eating it.

He put on plastic gloves and grabbed a crayfish.

'It's better for me if they take action first.'

He chewed the crayfish, which was covered in a red sauce.

Crunch.

Its shell cracked, and he could taste the soft meat. He smiled as the sweet and sour flavors filled his taste buds.

'I'll keep the gold teeth and chew up everything else.'[1]

The bigger the move the Demon Cult made, the more he'd be able to gain from them. Considering that he was protecting the world, the situation was kind of ironic.

'My top priority is to get stronger.'

Kang-Woo wasn't sure what would happen if the Gaia System kept weakening.

To stop unexpected variables, he needed to possess enough power to crush those very variables.

"How is the food?" Tian Suyan asked as she entered the room.

Kang-Woo nodded.

"It's delicious."

"... You think it's delicious when you're eating it with the shell?" Cha Yeon-Joo looked at him in disbelief.

Kang Tae-Soo, who was also eating the crayfish without peeling off the shell, tilted his head. "Huh? Shouldn't you obviously be eating this shell and all?"

Crunch.

Tae-Soo grabbed a fistful of crayfish and chewed on them whole.

"What's up with this monster?" Yeon-Joo remarked.

"Fufu. His name is Tae-Soo, and he's one of my party members," Han Seol-Ah answered with a smile.

Yeon-Joo shook her head while looking at Tae-Soo, who looked like a monster. She turned her eyes toward Kang-Woo.

"Anyway, the post-war process is almost over, so we should be getting ready to go back."

"Oh, yeah. About that..." Kang-Woo put down the crayfish. "I have a place I have to visit first, so go ahead without me."

"You do? Where?"

"Vladivostok."

There was a bit of commotion.

Vladivostok...

It was where the SS-rank Gate was located and where the conflict with the Demon Cult had started.

Yeon-Joo narrowed her eyes. If Kang-Woo was planning to visit Vladivostok in this situation, there was only one possible reason...

"Are you planning to investigate the traces of the Demon Cult? If so, I'll go with you."

"No. That's one of the reasons, but there's something else too. It's not a huge deal, so just Echidna and I will be fine."

Yeon-Joo tilted her head.

"What do you have to do?"

"I'm planning to get another summoned beast."

"A summoned beast...?"

Everyone placed their attention on Echidna.

Echidna, who was eating the crayfish, stood up in shock.

"K-Kang-Woo. You don't need me anymore?"

She anxiously pulled at Kang-Woo's sleeves. She seemed to be worried that her place as his summoned beast would disappear.

Kang-Woo smirked and patted her head.

"It's nothing like that, so don't worry."

"Urgh..."

Echidna anxiously bit her lip.

Seol-Ah softly hugged her from behind.

"Don't worry. You know very well what kind of person Kang-Woo is."

"Yeah, okay."

Echidna reluctantly nodded as Seol-Ah came in for assistance.

Kang-Woo said, "Then let's go right now. Yeon-Joo, once you get back to Korea, check if the Demon Cult has taken action in other countries besides Russia."

"Would they take action again so soon?"

"Hmm." Kang-Woo shook his head after thinking about it. "I'm not sure, but there's nothing wrong with being careful."

After all, he had to kill demons before anyone else could. He stopped himself from blurting that out and turned around.

"Let's go, Echidna."

"Okay."

Echidna nodded and followed him.

* * *

Kang-Woo headed to Vladivostok on Echidna after coming out of the barracks. He had been able to tell from the demonic beasts' marching speed that the Manchurian Plain and Vladivostok were not that far apart.

Tap.

"This place is an absolute mess too."

The ruined city looked straight out of a post-apocalyptic film. He couldn't feel any human presence, and after the summoning incident, all of the monsters that had been residing in the city had been killed.

The only thing left in Vladivostok was silence.

"Is this the place, Kang-Woo?" Echidna asked.

"Yeah."

He turned his head and saw the SS-rank Gate in the heart of the city.

Echidna pointed to it.

"Should I go through there?"

"Wait. We should look around before that."

The place where the demon summoning had happened... Maybe he'd be able to obtain some information.

Kang-Woo began following the traces of demonic energy. It wasn't hard to find where the large-scale summoning had taken place.

"I don't see anything like an altar."

A complex magic circle was drawn on the floor, but he couldn't see anything else. He knelt down to observe the magic circle.

'Authority of Insight.'

Kang-Woo observed the magic circle and analyzed how the Demon Cult was able to summon beings from Hell.

"... Hah."

He laughed in disbelief, and his expression distorted slightly.

'I have no idea.'

He couldn't tell. Even though he'd obtained the Ultimate Demonic Body and his control over the Ten Thousand Demon Core had increased, he couldn't decipher the magic circle drawn on the floor.

'How did they develop a technique like this?'

According to what he'd heard, the Demon Cult had been present almost a thousand years before the Day of Calamity. They had likely developed their summoning technique over that long period of time, so it was only natural that it would be at such a high level.

'But even considering that...'

Was it possible for a human to create a technique that was at a level he couldn't decipher?

He couldn't help but have doubts.

"Tsk."

He couldn't understand it, but he had to acknowledge it.

'The Demon Cult far surpasses me in terms of summoning knowledge.'

Their knowledge was in unknown territory for him.

Kang-Woo stood up. There were no clues to be found. The only information he could gather was that there wasn't a way to decipher the Demon Cult's summoning and seal it completely.

"Well, I guess it's better this way."

The tips of his mouth went up. He wasn't planning to stop them from summoning demons in the first place.

'If the only other world besides Earth was Hell, I would've used any means necessary to seal it, but...'

Since he knew there were other worlds besides the Nine Hells, blocking the demon summoning was like halting, of his own accord, his path to grow.

'I can't have that.'

The Demon Cult was, to him, a jar full of honey. He was going to eat from it for as long as he could.

"Let's enter the Gate."

"Did you find any clues?"

"No, but it wasn't completely fruitless."

He entered the SS-rank Gate with Echidna.

A monster charged toward them as soon as they entered, but Echidna got rid of it without Kang-Woo lifting a finger.

"Don't touch Kang-Woo."

Echidna trampled on the corpse of a giant, eight-meter-tall spider.

Kang-Woo smirked while looking at her.

'Echidna's also become quite strong.'

He was the source of her power. The more he grew, the stronger she also became.

'With this, I guess it won't matter whichever demonic beast gets summoned.'

Even if he was unlucky and summoned a weak demonic beast, it would become very powerful as long as it linked with him.

'I just hope it's obedient.'

He didn't hope for it to be as loyal as Echidna... He would be satisfied just from it being a dog that didn't bite its owner.

'But still, I'd prefer for it to be strong. Halcyon, please let it be Halcyon!'

Halcyon was one of the demonic beasts of the Ninth Hell possessing intelligence.

They rarely left their habitat so Kang-Woo had never seen them, but he had heard many rumors about them.

'They are one of the top five demonic beasts.'

Summoning Halcyon would be like winning the lottery.

"Right then, let's go for it."

He focused his demonic energy and activated the Demonic Beast Summoning Trait.

Riiing.

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

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

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

[A dimensional gate leading to the continent of Aernor has been opened.]

'What the fuck?'

He was sure that this time he would finally succeed in summoning a demonic beast from the Ninth Hell, but things flowed in a weird direction again.

'Where the hell is my Halcyon?'

He was frustrated. He had been expecting an outrageously powerful demonic beast to appear.

A blue gate appeared just as it had during his first summoning. A being crossed through it.

"You're..."

It was a skeleton wearing a black robe. Kang-Woo could feel strong demonic energy flowing from its body.

Light came out from the skull's eye sockets, and it looked at Kang-Woo.

[Where am I?]

"Hmm. It's a bit hard to explain. First, introduce yourself."

[I am the one who brings nightmares to Aernor. I am the king of the dead and the overlord of magic.]

'This dude's way of speaking kinda resembles Satan.'

Enormous demonic energy burst forth. The skull lightly struck his staff downward on the ground.

[I am the Demon King Vaal Zahak.]

"..."

There was a heavy silence.

Kang-Woo couldn't close his mouth.

"... You're a demon king?"

Strange.

'So am I.'

Chapter 136 - Second Summoning (2)

"V-Vaal Zahak," Echidna said in a trembling voice.

Oh Kang-Woo turned his head toward her.

"You know him?"

"Yeah. He's a powerful Lich living in the Land of Death, the northern end of the continent of Aernor. The people of the continent call him... the demon king."

Echidna looked at Vaal Zahak warily.

"Hmm."

His eyes shone. He turned his head to the skeleton wearing a black robe.

'Demon king, huh?'

To be honest, it wasn't important whether Vaal Zahak was a demon king or not. The important thing was if he would be helpful as a summoned beast.

'But is he really a demon king?'

Kang-Woo could feel powerful demonic energy from him. He was definitely stronger than Echidna. But if one asked him if the demonic energy was strong enough for Vaal Zahak to be called a demon king, he couldn't help but tilt his head.

'He doesn't seem that much stronger than that Anton guy.'

He wasn't sure exactly how strong he was, but he seemed similar to or a bit stronger than Anton Sidorovich.

[I will ask you again. Where am I?] Vaal Zahak said in a dreadful voice, demonic energy swirling around his body.

Kang-Woo smirked.

"I summoned you."

[You summoned me?]

"Yeah, because I needed more summoned beasts."

[...]

There was silence.

Yellow light flickered from Vaal Zahak's eye sockets.

[A summoned beast...? Do you mean to use me, Demon King Vaal Zahak, as your Familiar?]

"Yeah, more or less."

Kang-Woo nodded.

[Hah.]

Vaal Zahak laughed in disbelief.

[HAHAHAHAHAHA! Interesting! How very interesting!]

Clack. Clack.

The clacking of bones as the skeleton's jaw moved could be heard. A strong bloodlust came out from Vaal Zahak, and his eye sockets shone with a ferocious yellow light while looking at Kang-Woo.

[A mere human dares to use me as a Familiar?]

"Well, I'm not technically human... Man, this is kinda hard to explain." Kang-Woo scratched the back of his head. "Anyway, it's true that I'm trying to use you as my Familiar. In exchange, I can promise you that as long as you pledge loyalty to me, I swear I will live up to it."

It was a principle he had kept ever since he was in Hell. He'd sometimes felt annoyed by Balrog's extreme loyalty, and he'd also screamed quite a few times after seeing Lilith infiltrating his chambers. But still, he answered their loyalty with appropriate rewards and trust.

'That's the role of a lord.'

A lord who didn't care for his subordinates was just an insane tyrant. The way to rule over a group was to repay loyalty with trust and rebellion with severe punishment.

[HAHAHA! You're quite fearless for a human!]

Vaal Zahak laughed and slowly raised his hand.

[Humans lacking fear just need to be beaten to be cured.]

He moved his finger. It seemed like he was casting a spell.

Kang-Woo sighed after feeling the thick bloodlust Vaal Zahak was exuding.

'I guess it won't be as easy as it was with Echidna.'

Riiing.

[The summoned beast is expressing hostility toward its master! The effect of the contract is weakening!]

[You are unable to give forced commands due to your weak bond with the summoned beast!]

Blue message windows appeared as if they were answering his question.

The demonic energy coming out of Vaal Zahak's hands seeped into the ground around him.

Clack. Clack.

Hundreds of skeletons dug themselves out of the ground. They weren't regular skeletons—they were wearing armor that resembled what knights used to wear in the Middle Ages.

Vaal Zahak spread his arms out and shouted, [Look! Feel! Tremble in fear! They are the pawns of the mighty Demon King Vaal Zaha—]

Tap.

Kang-Woo lightly flicked his finger.

Crack.

The Authority of Waves expanded and swept away the skeletons. The armor they were wearing was distorted, and the skeletons shattered and dispersed.

[Huh?]

A confused voice came out of Vaal Zahak. He looked around at his annihilated skeletons in disbelief.

[You're quite strong for a human!]

He began shouting as his eyes shone. He put both hands in front of his chest, and a ball of demonic energy formed between his palms.

[But will you be able to win against Death Knights?]

The ball between his hands started to grow, becoming three meters wide. Just like how demons emerged from the Rifts, skeleton knights appeared from the sphere.

"Wow."

Kang-Woo's eyes shone. Certainly, he could feel a pressure he wasn't able to feel from the skeletons.

'There are about twelve of them.'

Vaal Zahak commanded the Death Knights, [Go, Knights of the Round Table! Kill the human who has dared to mock me, Vaal Zahak!]

The Phantom Horses that the Death Knights were riding snorted.

"Kang-Woo!"

Echidna stood between the Death Knights and Kang-Woo.

Kang-Woo, who was about to create a weapon with the Key of the Demonic Sea, stopped.

"Hmm..."

He stroked his chin and thought for a moment.

"Well, this is a good opportunity, so maybe I should leave things to Echidna."

He thought it would be good to leave things to her once in a while.

'Getting real battle experience will be good for her.'

Kang-Woo crossed his arms and took a step back.

"Echidna, you try taking them on."

"Okay! I'll take them on!"

Echidna clenched both fists. It was her time to shine.

'I'm gonna be praised by Kang-Woo!'

Intense conviction burned in her eyes. Her body was surrounded by blue light.

Graaaaahhhhh!

Echidna instantly turned into a giant dragon over twenty meters tall.

Vaal Zahak's eye sockets shone yellow after seeing her.

[A demonic dragon, huh? I guess he wasn't just an idiot who didn't know his place.]

A human who controlled a demonic dragon? He'd never heard about such a being, even in the continent of Aernor.

[How interesting.]

Vaal Zahak let out a creepy laugh and turned his head toward Kang-Woo.

[He might be better than Reynald.]

Reynald was the prince of the Arnan Empire, the hero who had awakened as a Protector after being chosen by the gods.

Vaal Zahak had targeted Reynald and tried to turn him into the strongest Death Knight quite a few times. He had failed every single time due to interruptions from various gods, but he couldn't feel the energy of the gods from the human in front of him.

He would be a good alternative to use instead of Reynald.

Vaal Zahak realized that Echidna was just a hatchling after seeing her full size, so he shouted, [It's nothing but a hatchling! Kill it!]

The twelve Death Knights raised their weapons and charged toward Echidna.

[Now, then...]

Vaal Zahak turned around. There was one thing he had to do while the Death Knights fought the demonic dragon.

[Huhuhu. How pitiable, human. To make me, Vaal Zahak, take action... Despair from your own weakn—]

"Right. Let's fix that manner of speech first."

Kang-Woo clapped his hands together, thinking of the first thing he had to do.

[... What are you talking about?]

"Saying your own name is just so goddamn stupid."

He shook his head while making a tired expression.

"Satan really annoyed me because of that. I can't let my summoned beast be like that."

[Who are you calling your summoned beast?!] Vaal Zahak angrily shouted.

Strong demonic energy gathered in his hands.

[It seems I won't be getting through to you with words.]

"I agree."

Kang-Woo created Gáe Bulg with the Key of the Demonic Sea.

If they couldn't solve the situation by talking, then there was no other way than to overwhelm the other with strength.

'But the demon king of Aernor, huh?'

Kang-Woo remembered that Vaal Zahak had called himself the demon king. To be honest, he knew almost nothing about the continent of Aernor. He had heard some information from Echidna, but he only considered it a place resembling a fantasy novel.

'But if this guy is the strongest being in Aernor...'

If Vaal Zahak was indeed the 'Demon King' as he had claimed...

'... Then I won't have to worry about Aernor.'

Slam!

He stomped on the ground. He used the Authority of Haste, and his body shot forward like light. He thrust Gáe Bulg at Vaal Zahak.

[Huup!]

A barrier of demonic energy was created.

Kang-Woo didn't stop and thrust the spear, destroying the barrier.

Vaal Zahak quickly twisted his body and waved his hand, creating a black blade that targeted Kang-Woo.

Clang!

Kang-Woo deflected the blade with Gáe Bulg.

[Kuh!]

Vaal Zahak was a mage who fought at a distance while having summoned beasts protect him. He was a textbook necromancer commonly seen in video games.

Whish! Whoosh!

Kang-Woo thrust Gáe Bulg at an incredible speed and didn't give Vaal Zahak time to cast a spell. It was an attacking style specialized in countering.

The yellow light in Vaal Zahak's eye sockets trembled.

[H-how could a human be so...]

He couldn't understand Kang-Woo's strength. Even if a caster was weak in close-range combat, it was the first time he'd been pushed so much.

[I guess I have no other choice.]

At this rate, he would surely lose.

Vaal Zahak ripped off the bracelet he had on his arm, and the bracelet's black gem fell to the ground.

Since things had turned out like this, he had no choice but to use his trump card.

'I never imagined I'd have to use this here.'

The Blood of the Evil God.

It had the ability to temporarily summon a being from the demon realm that appeared in ancient mythology.

It was an item he had kept in case he encountered a situation he couldn't handle.

Rumble!

The surface shook, and a huge storm of demonic energy raged.

Demonic energy more powerful than Vaal Zahak's dyed the surroundings.

'Hmm?'

Kang-Woo's eyes shone.

It was the first technique of Vaal Zahak's that he found menacing.

He could feel a thrill in his skin. His body trembled in excitement at the thought of battle. No, it was energy so strong that it even made him feel slight fear.

'It's dangerous.'

He became nervous. The energy was on another level compared to Vaal Zahak.

[Come forth! Oh, one that lives in the deepest part of the Abyss, longing for eternity!]

Crack!

A giant Rift appeared.

The air cracked as if a window were shattering, and...

[Who dares to call me?]

It had goat horns, purple skin, and a giant body over five meters tall.

The demon that appeared from the Rift stomped on the ground.

[I am Doomguard, a demon of the Ninth Hell and the protector of destruction.]

"..."

Kang-Woo's mouth fell open. It wasn't because Vaal Zahak had summoned a demon from the Ninth Hell.

[Aahh, great being from Hell. Please listen to the request of the lowly mortal that has summoned you.]

[You may speak,] Doomguard replied in a low tone.

Vaal Zahak pointed at Kang-Woo.

[Please bring death to my enemy!]

[Hmm. A battle, is it?]

Doomguard turned his head. His eyes meet Kang-Woo's.

[Huh?]

Doomguard's eyes widened.

[Why, if it isn't my lord Demon King?!!] He shouted flippantly while waving his giant arms. The overwhelming presence he'd just displayed crumbled almost instantly.

"... Long time no see."

Kang-Woo sighed as if he couldn't believe what was happening.

Doomguard, the protector of destruction...

That was the name of the demon in charge of the 3rd Battalion of Kang-Woo's demon army.

[... Eh?]

Vaal Zahak was surprised at the meeting of the two demons.

[What's going on?]

Demon King Vaal Zahak, the one who had terrorized the continent of Aernor, looked around in confusion.

Chapter 137 - Second Summoning (3)

[Man~ It's been so long, my king!]

Doomguard walked toward Oh Kang-Woo with a cheerful smile on his face.

Kang-Woo frowned.

'Move your face away, man.'

Doomguard was muscular and over five meters tall. On top of that, he had a face that really fit the name demon. Seeing Doomguard smile like that was like looking at a scene from a horror film.

"Yeah... How has it been for you guys?"

[Haha! Hell's always the same. Hmm, if I had to say, I'd say that the demonic beasts have been wandering around a bit more than before.]

"Demonic beasts?"

[Yes. Ancient demonic beasts like Halcyon are expanding their territories.]

Ancient demonic beasts referred to demonic beasts that had gained intelligence, such as Halcyon, Bul-Kathos, and Ouroboros.

They had demarcated their own territories in the Ninth Hell and almost never left them.

"The ancient demonic beasts have started to take action?"

[Yes. Lord Balrog is investigating the exact cause.]

"Hmm."

Kang-Woo nodded as if he wasn't that interested.

'Are they after my vacancy?'

He thought about it for a while but soon shook his head. Either way, it was a matter of the Nine Hells. He was already busy enough thinking about matters on Earth.

Vaal Zahak stepped forward and shouted, [Wh-What are you doing, Lord Doomguard?! Please bring death to that weak and lowly hum—]

Doomguard's expression crumpled.

Fwoosh!

Crack!

[Kurgh?!]

Vaal Zahak fell to the ground after being punched.

[Weak and lowly human? Watch your mouth, bones. This person is my master and the Lord of Hell.]

[L-Lord of Hell?]

Vaal Zahak looked at Kang-Woo, his mouth wide open. His teeth clacked together as if he couldn't believe it.

[Hmm?]

At that moment, Doomguard's expression hardened. His body started to become hazy.

"What's wrong?"

[It seems the summoning duration is up.]

Doomguard turned around while making a disappointed expression.

[I will be off then, my king! I will let Lord Balrog know that you're doing well~!]

Doomguard waved his hand while laughing.

Although Doomguard was a charismatic leader in front of his subordinates, he was known for acting cute like a well-behaved dog in front of Kang-Woo, his master. He was so flippant and did not have an ounce of dignity that Balrog had criticized him a few times.

"Tell him never to come find me," Kang-Woo said in a serious tone.

Doomguard bowed and disappeared through the Rift from which he had appeared.

"..."

There was a heavy silence.

Vaal Zahak moved his yellow lights for eyes in all directions while trying to understand what was going on. He frantically thought about the relationship between the human in front of him and the being from Hell he'd summoned through the Blood of the Evil God.

No, there was no need to think about it too deeply. After all, that being from Hell had called the human the demon king.

Then he had only one choice left...

Vaal Zahak slowly walked toward Kang-Woo. Considering how the situation was playing out, he wasn't stupid enough to not know what he had to do.

[Ooohhh!! Almighty Demon King!]

'What the hell's up with him?'

Vaal Zahak's attitude had visibly changed.

Vaal Zahak knelt down and pounded his head against the ground.

[I knew from the moment I laid eyes upon you that you were the master of the demon realm!]

'But you didn't.'

[How could I, such a lowly creature, not recognize the energy of the absolute being that rules over all demons?]

'But you didn't.'

[How could I dare to brandish a weapon against the master of the demon realm? Please look. I am so bare-handed that my hands don't even have skin.]

'You don't even use a weapon in the first place. You think you can pull the wool over my eyes?'

Vaal Zahak's attitude reminded him of what had happened with Jo Deok-Hyun back in the Andras Guild.

Kang-Woo couldn't help but laugh after seeing how Vaal Zahak's attitude had changed after realizing he was the Lord of the Nine Hells.

[To think you'd accept me as your Familiar!! I, Vaal Zahak, am so moved that I am about to shed tears!]

'Stop shitting yourself.'

He obviously couldn't shed tears because he was a skeleton.

Riiing.

[The fidelity of your summoned beast has increased.]

[You can now use forced commands. However, extreme commands such as suicide are impossible.]

Message windows popped up.

Leaving the process aside, it seemed that Vaal Zahak had completely submitted to him.

"Well... Sure, I guess."

Kang-Woo held his forehead.

"Huff. Huff. What happened, Kang-Woo?"

Echidna, who had been fighting the Death Knights, turned her head in confusion.

The twelve Death Knights Vaal Zahak had summoned were kneeling on one knee toward Kang-Woo.

"... I took care of the problem," he said while making an uncomfortable expression.

Just taking into consideration that Vaal Zahak had completely submitted to him, the problem had indeed been resolved.

'But more importantly...'

There was something more important than Vaal Zahak at the moment.

"How did you summon a being from the Nine Hells?"

"Nine Hells? Oh... Are you talking about the demon realm?"

It seemed that, on the continent of Aernor, they referred to the Nine Hells as the demon realm.

'So that means...'

Kang-Woo stroked his chin.

It didn't matter what name they used.

'The Nine Hells is not only connected to Earth but also to the continent of Aernor.'

There was a chance it was also connected to numerous other worlds.

In the first place, if every world was completely segregated from one another, there wouldn't be an entity like the Gaia System that prevented otherworldly invasions.

Kang-Woo nodded and said, "So, you can summon beings from the demon realm?"

If that was the case, he didn't need to wait for the Demon Cult to summon demons. The problem would be solved just by having Vaal Zahak summon them.

[Oh... No, I cannot.]

Vaal Zahak shook his head.

[The reason I was able to summon the being from the demon realm was thanks to the artifact known as the Blood of the Evil God. I cannot dare to summon a being from the demon realm without the artifact's help.]

"Tsk."

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue in disappointment.

He thought that, instead of roaming around searching for prey to hunt, he'd be able to live a stable and comfortable life farming demons, but things in life never went as he wished.

"Who's this Evil God?"

[Evil God Lucifer. He is the root of all evil in the continent of Aernor.]

"... Lucifer?"

Lucifer of Pride.

It was the name of one of the seven princes of Hell, who had lost against Kang-Woo.

'Could it be a coincidence?'

A short thought crossed his mind. He shook his head. There was no way it was a coincidence.

'How was he revived?'

Numerous possibilities crossed his mind.

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes.

'It's not like it's impossible.'

Kang-Woo had not completely killed the princes. Their souls had fled into the Hell Armaments. If their souls were intact and the Hell Armaments still existed, it wouldn't be impossible for them to be revived.

Kang-Woo had used the seven Hell Armaments to return to Earth.

If one of the Hell Armaments had found its way into the continent of Aernor in the same way he'd returned to Earth...

'There's a chance that Lucifer was revived in Aernor and came to be known as the Evil God.'

Just like Earth, Aernor's forces were weak compared to the Nine Hells.

Kang-Woo could tell just from the fact that Vaal Zahak was called a demon king and how much he worshiped the demon realm.

If Lucifer had been revived in a world like that, Kang-Woo had no doubt he would be considered a godlike being.

'But...'

There was still an unanswered question.

"You said that Lucifer was the root of all evil, right?"

[That is correct.]

"Since when has he been in the continent of Aernor?"

[I do not know either, except that it was a very long time ago...]

"Hmm."

Kang-Woo frowned.

'The timeline is weird.'

It had been only half a year since Kang-Woo had returned to Earth.

Even if a Hell Armament had found its way into Aernor, the timeline didn't match.

"..."

He kept thinking, although not for too long. The result was already there. He was, at the moment, just trying to understand the process that led to this result.

'The timeline got tangled.'

He wasn't sure if it was an issue on Aernor's end or if the Hell Armament itself had gone back in time much further than the point Kang-Woo had traveled to.

The only thing he was sure of was that the timelines between the dimensions were not synchronized.

'The Nine Hells is also connected to the current world, a world ten millennia behind the Nine Hells' point in time.'

The demons from the Ninth Hell knew of Kang-Woo's existence, meaning that Earth had been connected to the Nine Hells ten millennia in the future when Kang-Woo was active.

From that alone, it was obvious that the timeline had gotten entangled.

"Damn."

His mind was in jumbles. Kang-Woo leaned his back against a tree and organized the information inside his head.

'The timeline entanglement isn't important right now.'

The important thing was that Lucifer had been revived, and he also needed to consider the possibility that the other princes had also been revived.

"... Wait."

Kang-Woo was thinking about it with a troubled expression when his eyes suddenly shone.

'Wouldn't I be able to absorb the souls of the princes now?'

With his new Trait Reaper of Souls, he could possibly get his hands on the souls of the seven princes of Hell, which he had been unable to devour with the Authority of Predation.

'I'll have to gather more information first.'

He still didn't know if all the princes had been revived or if it was just Lucifer. Besides, Lucifer did not exist on Earth.

He couldn't stay indolent, but it wasn't like he had no time to waste.

"Then, where in Aernor is Lucifer right now?" he asked the bowing Vaal Zahak.

Vaal Zahak raised his head. [I do not know either.]

"I see."

Kang-Woo nodded. Even if Vaal Zahak knew where Lucifer was, since Kang-Woo had no way to cross into Aernor, there was nothing he could do.

'Also, if Lucifer has recovered his old strength...'

With Kang-Woo's current strength, he would be no match for Lucifer.

'I'll have to take the worst possible outcome into account.'

He had to consider the possibility of battling the princes.

'My agenda remains unchanged.'

He just had to keep doing what he'd been doing until now. He had to keep devouring and getting stronger. He had to recover his old strength from when he used to rule over the Nine Hells.

'No.'

Kang-Woo clenched his fists.

After awakening as a player, a new desire ignited in him.

A domain he hadn't been able to reach even in the past...

The desire to reach that domain burned his throat.

'Slow down.'

He quelled his burning desire. He had to refrain from rushing. Rushing only bred mistakes.

Kang-Woo slowly opened his mouth. He had another question before going back.

"But why was Lucifer unable to rule over Aernor?"

The princes of Hell were strong. Taking into consideration the average strength of the people that lived there, there probably wasn't anyone capable of stopping him.

He should have ruled or perished, one or the other.

"Kang-Woo, that's because of the archangels from the celestial realm," Echidna said. Because Kang-Woo kept only asking Vaal Zahak questions, Echidna sulked and pulled on Kang-Woo's clothes.

Kang-Woo tilted his head.

"Archangels?"

"Yeah. This is from ancient mythology, but I read that archangels descended from the celestial realm to prevent the rise of the Evil God."

"The celestial realm, huh...?"

Since the Nine Hells existed, it was understandable that a world opposite to it existed.

"Do angels still exist in the continent of Aernor?"

Echidna shook her head.

"No. After the war against the Evil God, they all disappeared. After that, the Evil God also vanished into thin air."

"I see."

It seemed that Kang-Woo wouldn't need to take angels into account. Since Lucifer was in hiding, Kang-Woo had some time.

'I more or less understand.'

It would be better if he heard the rest of the information while going back to Korea.

"Let's go back. Oh, Vaal Zahak, do you have any magic that lets you conceal yourself?"

Vaal Zahak looked like a white skeleton.

[Of course! I, Vaal Zahak, can melt down into the shadows and rule over the darkne—]

Crack.

[Gyaaaa!! M-My skull!!!]

Vaal Zahak screamed. It seemed he could still feel pain.

"Vaal Zahak, I told you not to talk like that earlier."

[I-I understand.]

Kang-Woo turned around. Suddenly, he clapped his hands together as if he'd remembered something. After discovering that Vaal Zahak could feel pain, he had begun to wonder about something.

"Oh, right. Can you eat?"

[Eat... you say?]

"Yeah. It doesn't look like you can, though."

[Oh. I don't need sustenance, but I can eat. If food enters this area here, I can break it down from within.]

Vaal Zahak pointed to a black space in his throat.

Kang-Woo's eyes shone.

"Oh, then do you also have a sense of taste?"

[My sense of taste is poorer than that of a human, but... I can still taste. Why are you suddenly asking me this?]

Vaal Zahak tilted his head in confusion.

Kang-Woo smirked and put his arm on his shoulder.

"Let's go."

[Go where...?]

"To get some kimchi stew."

[What is kimchi stew?] Vaal Zahak asked, his eye sockets shining with a yellow light.

Kang-Woo patted his shoulder.

"You'll find out soon enough, man."

Chapter 138 - Kim Si-Hun's Return (1)

Winter arrived, snow piled up, and icy winds blew. Three months had passed since the war at the Manchurian Plain.

The Demon Cult had ceased all activities and hid themselves as if they'd come to some sort of agreement among themselves. Rumors spread that the Demon Cult had run away with their tail between their legs.

The world leaders and the top Rankers knew that was nothing but wishful thinking, even though China and Korea had beaten the Demon Cult. They all thought that there was no way that was the extent of the Demon Cult's forces.

Time flew by like the calm before the storm.

* * *

"Yawn."

As rays of sunshine shone into the room through the window, Oh Kang-Woo stretched out and got up from bed. He'd slept for only an hour, but that much sleep was enough to reinvigorate him. That was possible because a demon's body didn't need sleep in the first place.

"Hmm."

He leaned his back on the pillow and picked up his smartphone. He'd received a few texts from Cha Yeon-Joo and Tian Suyan.

Kang-Woo thought of what he'd done for the past three months.

He'd focused on two things since returning to Korea—Demon Cult activities all over the world and Mythic-grade equipment. Kang-Woo had been searching for signs of the Demon Cult's activities so that he could devour demons, and he looked for Mythic-grade equipment so he could replace the now-useless Black Pearl Coat.

'I haven't made much progress with either, though.'

Tsk. He clicked his tongue.

Demons had been summoned, but those who summoned them had been insignificant members of side branches that had formed as a result of the Demon Cult rapidly expanding their forces. Those members hadn't even been true members of the Demon Cult.

As for the summoned demons, they had been low-ranking demons that resided in the upper Hells—the First, Second, and Third Hells. They weren't even worth devouring.

'But at least I'd made some progress on that.'

On the other hand, Kang-Woo's search for Mythic-grade equipment had been hopeless. He'd thought at first that he could just acquire materials for Mythic-grade equipment by killing boss monsters in SS-rank Gates, but he changed his mind after entering the Gates in Sapporo and Vladivostok.

The problem wasn't how strong the boss monsters were. It was that it was really difficult to find the boss monsters inside the Gates, and even when he managed to find and kill them, they didn't always drop Mythic-grade materials. Additionally, unlike video games, they did not respawn in fixed time frames, so it was impossible to hunt them frequently.

"Ngh."

Consequently, Kang-Woo had spent the last three months without any significant progress. Of course, he'd gotten better at using the Key of the Demonic Sea and created new combinations of Authorities and made them into skills... However, he had not been able to raise his stats or level up.

'Others have improved much more than I have.'

Yeon-Joo, Kang Tae-Soo, Han Seol-Ah, and the others had gotten stronger after traveling the world with Kang-Woo.

Yeon-Joo had managed to break through the Limit of Talent—the end of the Ninth Awakening—and achieved her Tenth Awakening. She was now strong enough to be on par with a World Ranker.

Baek Hwa-Yeon and Goo Hyun-Mo had also achieved their Ninth Awakening.

There was no need to even mention Tae-Soo and Seol-Ah, who had been very talented right from the beginning. They had both broken past the Limit of Effort and achieved their Seventh Awakening. A few days ago, they even managed to reach their Eighth Awakening.

Choi Eun-Bi, who was a mage-class player, fell slightly behind in terms of growth, but she'd also managed to break past the Limit of Effort without difficulty.

'They've all grown so much.'

It was as if an author who had failed to balance the characters had forcibly made them stronger. They were getting stronger at a pace that couldn't be compared to that of normal players... Such miraculous growth had only been possible thanks to Kang-Woo carrying them.

"Well, it needed to be done sooner or later."

There was a limit on how many things he could do alone. If his allies didn't become strong enough to defend themselves, things could become quite bothersome.

'I wonder how things are going with Si-Hun.'

It had been three months since Kim Si-Hun left for Shanghai with Tian Wuchen. Kang-Woo was linked to Si-Hun through the Authority of Subordination, so he knew Si-Hun was alive. Nevertheless, he wasn't sure how strong he'd become.

'I'm looking forward to it.'

Kang-Woo had high hopes since it was Si-Hun, who had always been exceptional.

Knock, knock.

"Are you awake, Kang-Woo?" Seol-Ah asked after knocking on the door.

Kang-Woo stopped thinking and got up.

"Yeah, just a second."

He got up and opened the door. Seol-Ah was standing in front of his room with a worried expression.

"What's wrong?" Kang-Woo asked.

"Uhhh..." Seol-Ah dragged out the end of the sentence. She looked around to make sure that there wasn't anyone around. Then she said cautiously, "I got my Eighth Awakening a few days ago, right?"

"You did."

"A-After that, something strange appeared."

"Something strange appeared?"

Kang-Woo looked at her while tilting his head.

Seol-Ah swallowed nervously.

"A weird symbol appeared... on my back."

She turned her back toward him and carefully pulled down the hem of her shirt, showing him her fair skin.

'Hallelujah,' Kang-Woo thought.

There was no symbol in his field of vision; he only stared at her bare back with intense eyes.

"...Kang-Woo?"

"Oh, sorry. My sight's still a bit blurry."

He had only slept for an hour, so his vision would naturally be blurry.

'Yeah, there's nothing I can do about it.'

He was a human being. How could he possibly be okay after sleeping only for an hour?

Kang-Woo gulped. He pretended to rub his eyes and narrowly opened his eyes.

He once again took a look at Seol-Ah's back and saw that there was a symbol that resembled angel wings on it.

"This is..."

"It appeared a few days ago," Seol-Ah said.

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes.

"What Trait did you get with your Eighth Awakening?"

"It's called Wings of Light."

"Hmm."

Kang-Woo gulped. He wasn't sure if the symbol had appeared because of the Trait's influence or if there was another reason.

"Have there been any other changes besides the symbol?"

"No, nothing yet."

Kang-Woo took a closer look at the symbol.

He was having a hard time brushing the symbol off as just being because of Seol-Ah's Trait. Perhaps it was because Echidna had told him about the beings of the celestial realm.

'But still, it's not like there's anything I can do about it.'

It was a frustrating situation.

Seol-Ah, who realized Kang-Woo was worrying about it, said with a smile, "It's just a symbol. Nothing else happened, so you don't have to be so worried."

"I can't do that."

After all, Seol-Ah was very special to him.

Kang-Woo extended his hand and touched the symbol.

"Eek!" Seol-Ah shrieked.

She flinched, and her face became as red as a tomato.

Kang-Woo ignored her reaction and used an Authority.

'Authority of Protection.'

The Authority of Protection checked the changes in the target's body in real-time and created a powerful barrier depending on the situation. It continuously consumed demonic energy, so he avoided using it if he could. However, he had to use it now.

While looking at her back with a serious expression, Kang-Woo told Seol-Ah, "Make sure to let me know if you notice any other changes. Even small things like a nightmare or feeling a little sick. Okay?"

"O... O-Okay, Kang-Woo."

Seol-Ah was surprised because Kang-Woo reacted more seriously than she'd expected.

She bowed her head to hide a smile that she couldn't hold back.

'I'm happy.'

Seol-Ah wriggled around due to the feelings rising within her. An inexplicable feeling swept through her from seeing that Kang-Woo cared so much about her.

"Kang-Woo..." she murmured with a wet voice.

Seol-Ah was having a hard time controlling her feelings.

She was about to turn toward Kang-Woo and say something when...

"Kang-Woo, Seol-Ah, what are you doing here?" Echidna called out.

This scene of Seol-Ah with the back of her shirt pulled down and Kang-Woo staring fixedly at her exposed back was a breeding ground for misunderstandings.

"N-Nothing!" Seol-Ah quickly shouted.

Echidna tilted her head and then tugged on Seol-Ah's clothes.

"Seol-Ah, I'm hungry."

Growl. A cute sound rang out.

Seol-Ah smiled awkwardly and pulled her shirt back.

"Just a second. I'll get breakfast ready in a flash."

She quickly ran toward the kitchen.

A few moments later, a delicious smell spread through the house. It was the fragrance of kimchi stew. Kang-Woo had insisted on it, so kimchi stew was always served for breakfast.

[Oh, is it time to eat?]

Vaal Zahak opened the door of his room.

When they were outside, he always hid in Kang-Woo's shadow, but otherwise, he just roamed around in his normal form.

"Good morning, Vaal Zahak," Seol-Ah, who was cooking, greeted him.

At first, she and her mother Kim Mi-Jeong were scared by the sight of the skeleton walking around. Nonetheless, after some time passed, they both got used to him. They had now reached a point where they were no longer shocked to see Vaal Zahak even in the middle of the night.

Tap.

"Breakfast is ready."

Everyone quickly gathered around the dining table. Breakfast began with a rowdy atmosphere.

Vaal Zahak grabbed a piece of meat with the chopsticks, which he'd gotten used to using.

Munch, munch.

[Hehe. A satisfying feast of blood as always,] Vaal Zahak exclaimed while taking a sip of kimchi stew.

The sight of a skeleton eating kimchi stew was extremely bizarre, but the others did not seem to mind.

[Haha! I can feel the taste deep inside my bones!]

"..."

Kang-Woo let out a laugh.

After seeing a skeleton say something like that, he couldn't help but laugh.

'What terrific reactions.'

None of the characters that had been created to react to the food in cooking manhwas would be able to fulfill the role as perfectly as Vaal Zahak was doing right now.

[Huhu. It was a delicious feast, human girl,] Vaal Zahak said proudly.

Kang-Woo's hands shot at the speed of light.

Bash!

[Gyaaaaa! M-My skull!] Vaal Zahak screamed.

"I told you not to talk to Seol-Ah like that."

[Kurgh. I-I'm sorry, Master,] Vaal Zahak replied while grabbing the back of his skull.

"Then I'll leave the dishwashing to you."

Kang-Woo patted Vaal Zahak's shoulder and stood up.

The yellow lights in Vaal Zahak's eye sockets shook.

[Kuh. Why must I, Vaal Zahak, have to...]

Washing dishes... Doing such a thing was unimaginable for him during his days on the continent of Aernor. However, he couldn't go against his master's commands.

Vaal Zahak quickly collected the tableware and put on rubber gloves. He grabbed a sponge and put dish soap on it.

Clack, clack.

He'd become accustomed to washing dishes in the past three months. Vaal Zahak washed the dishes perfectly to the point that they shone.

He had to finish cleaning up the dishes quickly.

'I have to fold the laundry too.'

If he didn't do that, he wouldn't have enough time to clean the house in the morning.

After being forced to do the housework for the past three months, Vaal Zahak had a schedule of what to do in his head.

'Why do I, a demon king, have to...'

Demon King Vaal Zahak—the ruler of death, who had made Aernor tremble in fear—had been reduced to a slave.

Once he was done with the dishes, he moved on to folding the laundry.

He trembled while doing that.

'I can't keep living like this.'

Vaal Zahak's eyes shone.

He put the laundry down and stood up angrily.

[Master!]

"Yeah?"

[I have tried to endure it all this time, but I cannot take it anymore!]

It was a voice with deep anger.

[I must tell you off today!]

"What? You don't want to work?"

[No! That's not the problem!]

Boom. Vaal Zahak stomped on the ground.

[Master!]

He exuded intense demonic energy as he extended his hand and showed Kang-Woo what was in his hands.

[How many times must I tell you not to put your socks in the washing machine inside out?!]

"Oh."

[You probably have no idea how important this is when folding laundry, Master!]

"Uhh, yeah. Sorry."

[Hmph. Please be more careful next time.]

Vaal Zahak turned around and walked toward the drying rack where he had hung the laundry. He collected the laundry that had dried in the sunlight. The smell of the fabric softener tickled his nose.

[Good.]

Vaal Zahak let out a smile.

[They've dried nicely.]

Chapter 139 - Kim Si-Hun's Return (2)

'Come to think of it, my Demonic Beast Summoning Trait is no longer on cooldown.'

Oh Kang-Woo smirked while watching Vaal Zahak fold the laundry.

He'd already performed the demonic beast summoning it twice, but he couldn't help but think about doing a third one.

'Why do they keep coming from the continent of Aernor?'

At first, he wanted a Cerberus and then a Halcyon. However, the result was that he kept summoning beings from Aernor, which was located in another world. It wasn't at all what he'd expected.

'Since my second summoned beast also came from Aernor, the probability of the third one coming from there too is high.'

In that case, he had to think carefully before summoning another demonic beast. Leaving everything aside, if he ended up summoning Lucifer, everything would be over.

'I can't beat that guy at the moment.'

The princes of Hell were strong—so strong that he couldn't think of any other word to describe them. That was clear from how Lucifer was considered a godly being in the continent of Aernor.

'The probability should be astronomically low though.'

Lucifer wasn't a demonic beast but a demon, so the probability of summoning a demon was likely extremely low.

'But it's also weird to refer to Echidna and Vaal Zahak as demonic beasts.'

Even if the probability was close to zero, he couldn't risk it as long as there was a chance that Lucifer could be summoned. Everything he'd worked so hard for could crumble instantly with one mistake.

'I can't let that happen.'

Kang-Woo shook his head. Even if he needed to do so because of a desperate situation, summoning a demonic beast now would be too risky.

'In that case, I'll just have to wait for the Demon Cult to—'

Ding, dong.

His doorbell's chime rang through his home, cutting his thoughts short.

"I'll go," Han Seol-Ah said.

"No, it's okay."

Kang-Woo stood up to answer the door, as he was closer to it.

'Is it Cha Yeon-Joo?'

The only person who would visit him at such an hour was probably Cha Yeon-Joo since she lived close by.

Kang-Woo opened the front door, and his eyes widened in surprise.

"Huh?"

An extremely handsome young man was standing in front of him.

Among the people Kang-Woo knew, only one person had such an appearance.

"You're back," Kang-Woo uttered.

"Long time no see, hyung-nim."

Kang-Woo smiled.

For the past three months, he'd strangely felt lonely, but Kim Si-Hun, his soul-bound comrade, had returned.

'It's nice to see him after such a long time.'

"I've missed you," Si-Hun expressed as he hugged Kang-Woo.

'Well, I didn't miss you this much,' Kang-Woo thought, his expression hardening.

He smiled awkwardly and gently pushed Si-Hun.

"Hahaha. Why don't you calm down first, Si-Hun?"

"I heard there was a war while I was absent."

'Get off me,' Kang-Woo protested inwardly.

"I'm... so glad you're safe, hyung-nim."

'Seriously, dude. Get off.'

Kang-Woo used considerably more strength to push Si-Hun off him, but Si-Hun wasn't budging in the slightest.

'Did he eat a bull or something?'

Si-Hun had become incredibly strong. Kang-Woo looked at Si-Hun in surprise.

Right then...

"Huh?" Si-Hun uttered in shock as his eyes darted toward the living room.

Upon noticing something, his eyes widened, and an intense Qi burst forth from within him. Si-Hun unsheathed his sword at lightning speed and shot forward.

"Watch out!"

[Huh?]

Si-Hun reacted to the presence of the skeleton, Vaal Zahak, peacefully folding the laundry in the living room.

[How dare a human interrupt the mighty Vaal Zahak folding laundry?!]

Vaal Zahak was also very powerful. He focused demonic energy on his hands and prepared to fight.

"Stop!" Kang-Woo shouted.

He extended his hand toward Si-Hun, who was running forward, and Vaal Zahak, who was facing him.

'Fuck, my apartment!'

The first comfortable home he'd obtained after ten millennia... was about to be destroyed.

* * *

"Fuuu," Kang-Woo sighed in relief.

Before the two clashed... Si-Hun had managed to stop at the very last minute, and Vaal Zahak had automatically stopped because of the forced command given to him as a summoned beast.

"I-I'm sorry, hyung-nim. I didn't imagine he would be your summoned beast..." Si-Hun apologized.

"No, I get it," Kang-Woo replied.

Considering that Vaal Zahak looked like an undead monster, it would have been weirder if Si-Hun hadn't misunderstood.

"That aside, are you done with your training?" Kang-Woo asked while looking at Si-Hun.

He couldn't tell exactly how much Si-Hun had changed, but there was one thing he was sure about...

'He's gotten stronger,' Kang-Woo thought with a smile.

The Qi circulating within Si-Hun couldn't be compared to before. He had already been incredible; he had always been extremely gifted in terms of his techniques and the knowledge he possessed. What he had been lacking was the physique to back up his techniques.

Kang-Woo wasn't sure how much Si-Hun had leveled up over the past three months, but his physical specs improved vastly.

'Nice.'

Kang-Woo nodded while making a satisfied expression.

Si-Hun's growth had a greater significance than that of others. No matter how much other people grew, Kang-Woo only saw them as strong enough to take care of themselves. However, Kang-Woo believed there was a chance Si-Hun could become stronger than Echidna or Vaal Zahak, who were truly powerful beings. Now, after seeing how much stronger Si-Hun had become in just three months, Kang-Woo knew that possibility was real.

"No. I wasn't able to reach the stage I had been aiming for," Si-Hun answered.

'Greedy son of a bitch,' Kang-Woo remarked inwardly.

He'd been the one who had made Si-Hun like that. Nevertheless, he felt proud of Si-Hun.

Kang-Woo drank the coffee that Echidna had brought him and said, "Then why did you come back?"

It probably wasn't because he missed Kang-Woo.

"..."

There was a short silence.

Kang-Woo tilted his head in confusion as he stared at Si-Hun's stiff expression.

"Someone came to see me while I was in the middle of my training," Si-Hun finally replied.

"To see you?"

"Yes. It was a person wearing a white mask."

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes. There was one possibility he could think of.

"Were they a member of Guardians?"

"Haha." Si-Hun nodded while laughing. "As expected of you, hyung-nim."

"I can't think of anyone else who would come to see you."

Si-Hun was a Protector, and there were fewer than ten others like him around the world. There was no way they would leave someone as important as him on his own.

"Yes, a member of Guardians came to see me."

"Hmm."

"I'm sure you know them as well, hyung-nim."

"Hmm? Didn't you say they were wearing a mask?"

"After I said I had no intentions of talking to someone who doesn't show their face, they took off their mask," Si-Hun explained and smiled bitterly.

Kang-Woo nodded while his eyes lit up with pride. That was a surprising response considering how much of a pushover Si-Hun was.

"Good. So, who was it?"

"Grace McCubbin. You've heard of her, right, hyung-nim?"

"Oh."

There was no way that Kang-Woo hadn't heard about her—First Lady, Grace McCubbin. There probably wasn't a single Player who didn't know of her.

Grace McCubbin was the first ever Player to emerge as well as the strongest. She had made the United States the most powerful country in the world. Listing all of her achievements would probably require quite a few sheets of A4-sized paper.

'So, she's a Protector.'

Grace had grown at an incredible speed that completely outpaced everyone else except Kang-Woo and Si-Hun. It made sense if the reason behind that insane growth rate was her aptitude as a Protector.

'She might be even stronger than the rumors say.'

There was quite a lot of detailed information regarding Grace's powers because there were many records of her fighting against monsters. Despite that, there had never been any mention of her being a Protector. That meant that she'd hidden information about Guardians and her role as a Protector on purpose. So, there was a chance that she was even more powerful than rumored.

'How interesting.'

Kang-Woo's eyes shone with interest.

After he had surpassed 120 in his Demonic Energy stat, he thought he had surpassed every single Player in the world. However, he thought otherwise after finding out that Grace McCubbin was a Protector.

'That's good news.'

The Protectors and Kang-Woo had the same main goal. As long as Guardians weren't lunatics like Alec, Kang-Woo could continue being allies with them. It was good news that his allies were stronger than he had expected.

"So, what happened after you met Grace McCubbin?"

"I received an offer to join Guardians again."

Kang-Woo had expected it.

"I said I'd think about it since I wanted to hear your opinion, hyung-nim."

"Well done."

Kang-Woo smiled. Si-Hun had dealt with the matter as Kang-Woo had hoped he would.

"Then, is Grace McCubbin in Korea at the moment?"

"I'm not sure about that. But I told her about you, and she asked you to come with me since she wanted to meet you as well."

"Okay. Did you get her number?"

"Instead of a number, she told me about how I could meet up with her."

"What?" Kang-Woo uttered, tilting his head.

Si-Hun stood up and told him, "Follow me. I'll guide you there."

* * *

Kang-Woo told Seol-Ah, Echidna, and Vaal Zahak to stay at home. Then he followed Si-Hun to the rooftop of the apartment building where Kang-Woo lived.

Si-Hun glanced around and then said, "This place should be good."

"What are you planning to do?"

"Just a second, please."

Si-Hun took out a device that was the size of a fist. It was a mechanical device that shone blue.

He threw the device on the floor.

Clink. Whirr.

"Woah."

The device opened, and a white Gate that a person could cross through appeared.

'It feels like I'm in a science fiction film,' Kang-Woo thought, smirking.

He walked through the white Gate with Si-Hun.

"This is..." Kang-Woo uttered.

He had entered a white space. The ceiling, walls, and even the floor—they were all shining white with no blemishes.

The pair walked along a passageway until they reached the door at the end.

Click.

Si-Hun opened the door to reveal a white room with a giant circular table in it, where two people were seated.

'One is Grace McCubbin,' Kang-Woo thought, shifting his gaze to the two people.

Grace was a blonde woman who seemed to be in her mid-forties. She looked the same in person as in the photos that he had seen of her.

'The other person is...'

The other person present was a woman sitting in a wheelchair, and she had light-brown hair that reached her waist. She was so thin that she might break if someone were not careful around her. Her skin was sickly pale, and the white dress she was wearing made her appear even more poorly.

The woman, who seemed to be in her early twenties, had her eyes closed.

"Nice to meet you," she greeted without opening her eyes. "My name is Gaia."

Chapter 140 - Gaia

"My name is Gaia."

Oh Kang-Woo's eyes widened in surprise.

The woman in the wheelchair was Gaia... the leader of Guardians and the being whom Kang-Woo thought was related to the system that was sealing his Ten Thousand Demon Core.

'I can't believe I've met her at a time like this.'

He'd guessed that he would meet her eventually if he stayed with Kim Si-Hun... but he hadn't expected that it would be this soon.

'I never imagined she would make a move herself.'

Gaia was the leader of Guardians, so he thought he would only meet her after he got a bit closer to the Protectors.

'Is Si-Hun that important?'

In Kang-Woo's opinion, Si-Hun's talent was far superior to that of Alec Osborne. This meant that Si-Hun could be special even among Guardians.

'Or...'

Kang-Woo lowered his gaze.

'They're that desperate.'

The Gaia System was getting weaker, and the Demon Cult was like a ticking time bomb. Guardians weren't in a situation where they could stay still.

'But...'

Kang-Woo looked at Gaia.

Despite Gaia's position as the leader of Guardians, Kang-Woo couldn't feel any sort of power from her.

'Maybe she isn't related to the system?'

Their names could just happen to be the same. That was the worst possible outcome from all of the options he could think of.

'The name Gaia is quite rare.'

Kang-Woo had to hear her explanation first before jumping to conclusions.

He focused on Gaia's words as Gaia continued speaking.

"So, you're the person that Protector Kim Si-Hun spoke of," Gaia said, turning her head to Kang-Woo.

Her eyes were still closed. However, Gaia's expression hardened for a moment. Then it relaxed.

"Nice to meet you. I've heard about you from Grace. You're Protector Kim Si-Hun's sworn brother, right?" Gaia asked.

'I guess she can't recognize it,' Kang-Woo thought.

There was no need for him to think deeply about why her expression had hardened for a moment. The answer was that Protectors subconsciously felt a bit of repulsion toward beings from the Rift.

'But that feeling isn't that strong.'

Si-Hun and Alec had also felt a sense of repulsion toward Kang-Woo, but they hadn't acted upon it. That meant that the feeling of repulsion was very vague.

Kang-Woo had been worried that Gaia would be able to figure out his identity immediately, but that didn't seem to be the case.

'What a relief.'

If Gaia had discovered that he was the Rift Core, things would've become problematic.

Kang-Woo nodded and replied, "Yes. I'm Si-Hun's sworn brother."

"Hoho. A sworn brother in this day and age... That's a kind of relationship you don't see often."

"Hyung-nim is someone more important than family to me. I respect and admire him more than my biological brother," Si-Hun expressed in a firm voice.

Respect shouldn't even be mentioned. Si-Hun despised his biological brother, so he wasn't exaggerating.

'You're embarrassing me, man,' Kang-Woo thought.

Why was Si-Hun saying that so passionately? It almost sounded like a love confession.

Gaia turned her head to Si-Hun.

"Fufu. You're a very passionate person, Protector Kim Si-Hun."

"Pardon? No, I wouldn't go that far..."

Si-Hun shook his head while flustered.

Gaia smiled and said, "I can tell how clean and beautiful your soul is... and what it is that you're trying to obtain to the point of setting that soul ablaze."

"..."

Upon hearing those words, Si-Hun remained silent.

Gaia slowly reached out toward him, but she couldn't find the right direction, and her hands wandered around.

Grace McCubbin, who had been standing behind her, took a step forward.

"This way, Gaia."

"Ah. Thank you, Grace."

Gaia followed Grace's guidance and extended her hand toward Si-Hun.

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes.

'She really must be blind.'

Well, there was no point in having her eyes closed all the time if she wasn't blind.

Gaia touched Si-Hun and expressed, "I know what conflict you're going through... your hardships and anguish, but I'm on your side. I want to be by your side and support your wishes."

"Gaia..."

Si-Hun's eyes widened. He trembled as if he'd been struck by lightning.

Gaia laughed and said, "Even though my body is as hideous and ruined as this, I want to help you. Would that be too much?"

"H-Hideous? That's not true!" Si-Hun quickly shouted.

Kang-Woo laughed while looking at them.

'My, aren't you two having fun?'

Anyway, he'd obtained some information.

'A ruined body.'

Kang-Woo looked at Gaia, who was sitting in a wheelchair. He could somewhat understand what she meant.

'She's injured.'

After taking a closer look, he could tell that Gaia's ruined body wasn't due to a physical defect she'd been born with. She'd probably suffered a huge injury and could not move about unless she was in a wheelchair. It was likely due to a similar reason that she was unable to see.

'I guess it isn't just the name that's the same.'

After finding out that Gaia was injured, Kang-Woo thought of the Gaia System—the world's defense system, which was getting weaker. It made sense that she was severely injured if she was somehow related to the system.

"More importantly, let's get to the main issue at hand," Kang-Woo interrupted, lightly pulling Si-Hun back.

There was something that Kang-Woo had to check.

"If you want to have Si-Hun join Guardians, please give us the exact details about the goal and situation of Guardians," he said dryly.

Kang-Woo couldn't let Si-Hun join a group whose goal he didn't even know about. To build a good relationship with them, he first needed to know what their ultimate goal was.

"I understand. I will explain to you step by step. Please take a seat," Gaia replied.

After Kang-Woo and Si-Hun sat down, Gaia continued speaking.

"Have you heard of the Gaia System?"

"..."

There was silence.

Kang-Woo's gaze wavered as he thought, 'She's getting straight to the point.'

The worst-case scenario he'd imagined about only Gaia merely having the same name as the Gaia System did not actualize.

'I'm not sure what kind of relationship they have, but...'

There was a clear connection between Gaia and the Gaia System.

"Ah," Si-Hun uttered and nodded. "Yes. I've heard of it. When I awakened as a Protector, I got a message saying that I was chosen to supplement the Gaia System."

"Yes. Every person who awakened as a Protector received that message."

"Could it be... Did you send that message, Gaia?" Si-Hun asked while gulping.

The names Gaia and Gaia System... Si-Hun also thought the two were related.

'Well done, Si-Hun!'

Kang-Woo clenched his fists. Si-Hun had asked what Kang-Woo wanted to know the most.

"No." Gaia shook her head. "I wasn't the one who sent it."

"Then..."

"First, I think I should give more details about what the Gaia System is," Gaia said with a smile.

"Si-Hun, Kang-Woo, do you two believe in otherworldly beings?"

"By otherworldly... do you mean like other worlds that appear in manhwa and anime?"

"Yes, the beings of Hell that the Demon Cult is summoning are beings that have crossed over from a different dimension."

"Ah."

"It isn't just Hell. Numerous dimensions are interconnected. The Gates you are used to are passageways that connect those dimensions."

"I... see."

Si-Hun nodded in confusion after hearing a story of such an absurd scale that it was hard to understand.

Gaia calmly continued, "You can think of the Gaia System as a barrier that protects Earth from otherworldly invasions."

"In that case, Gaia, you are..."

"I am the Gaia System's... Fufu, what would be a good word? Incarnation? Agent? Fragment?"

It seemed like Gaia herself couldn't exactly define what she was either.

"Ah, I've heard that there is a profession called 'miko' in Japan, referring to women who serve gods. Translated, I guess it would be a female shaman. It's not a perfect term for what I am, but it's close enough."

"You're an incarnation...?"

"It's not as grand as it sounds. I can influence the system a tiny bit, but it consumes an astronomical amount of my power, and there are many restrictions on what I can do."

"..."

"Hmm. It might be a bit hard to understand. Ah, when the Demon Cult incident happened in Korea, I interfered with the system and sent a message to you, Si-Hun."

"Oh, back then..."

Si-Hun's eyes widened. He recalled the sudden quest window that had seemed to be written by someone, unlike the regular system windows sent by the Gaia System.

Gaia made a self-deprecating smile and stated, "That's the extent of the things I can do."

'I see,' Kang-Woo thought with a bright gaze.

He now knew what kind of relationship Gaia had with the Gaia System.

'The incarnation of the Gaia System.'

However, her role and authority were incredibly limited. From his point of view, it was a bit disappointing.

'If she had more authority, she might be able to lift the seal.'

The most disappointing thing was the seal of his Ten Thousand Demon Core. Just unsealing it would have changed everything.

'I guess it won't be that easy.'

Kang-Woo frowned. He didn't like the situation, but there was nothing he could do about it.

'It's okay.'

It wasn't like relying on the Gaia System was the only way to weaken the Ten Thousand Demon Core's seal.

Leaving the disappointment behind, Kang-Woo focused his gaze on Gaia.

"Then, is the goal of Guardians to take over the Gaia System's role and defeat those otherworldly beings?" Si-Hun asked.

"Yes."

'As expected.'

Kang-Woo nodded. It matched perfectly with what he had expected their goal to be.

"But Guardians has another goal."

'Huh?'

"What is it?"

"Fuuu."

Gaia took a deep breath before saying, "The ultimate goal of Guardians is... to kill the Demon of Prophecy."

'What the hell is that?'

"The Demon of Prophecy?"

"Yes. Five years ago... on the Day of Calamity, I received a revelation." Gaia clenched her hands into fists and recited the revelation that the Gaia System had sent her that day. "The advent of the Demon of Prophecy will plague the land in the near future."

'The Demon of Prophecy, huh?'

"For that demon will be the lord of Hell."

'Huh? Wait.'

"The lord of Hell will destroy this world and drown it in darkness."

'Don't tell me...'

"Gather the Protectors and kill the Demon of Prophecy to protect this world."

'Is the Demon of Prophecy me?'

Gaia trembled as she said the last part of the revelation, "The Demon of Prophecy is the master of the Demonic Sea with 666 different Authorities. Face him with the full force of the Protectors... That was the revelation I had received."

"..."

There was a heavy silence.

Kang-Woo covered his face with his hands.

'It really is me. Fuck me.'