

## **M. in Hell 141**

Chapter 141 - Demon of Prophecy (1)

"That's..."

"Fufu... It must be too hard for you to believe at the moment."

"N-no," Kim Si-Hun said with a trembling voice.

Gaia turned to Grace McCubbin.

"Grace, please bring me that."

"Just a second."

Grace raised her hand, and blue energy gathered around it.

Click.

A wall shining with white light opened, and inside was a translucent blue sphere. The blue sphere, which could be seen through like a hologram, floated over to the table.

"What is this?" Si-Hun asked while looking at the blue sphere.

"It is the current state of Earth."

Gaia extended her hand and touched the blue sphere. As she did that, a white light surrounding the blue sphere rose up as if simulating the Earth's atmosphere.

Holes were in the protective barrier as if it were mold.

"Could this barrier of light be..."

"Yes, that's right. What you are looking at right now is the current state of the Gaia System."

"..."

There was a heavy silence. Oh Kang-Woo raised his head and looked at the blue sphere in detail.

'Damn it.'

It didn't look good. No, it was quite serious.

He wasn't sure how much it used to shine, but there were many holes in the barrier of light, and the light itself was also very dim in some areas.

"Is there a way to restore the Gaia System?"

To Kang-Woo, restoring the Gaia System, which he had broken, to its original state was as important as getting stronger.

Gaia made a weak smile.

"There isn't a way to restore the Gaia System at the moment."

Gaia had said it firmly, but Kang-Woo's eyes shone.

"You said 'at the moment.' Does that mean there might be a way to restore it later?"

"That's..." Gaia slurred her sentence. She sighed and said, "The Gaia System has a recovery function, but that function isn't taking effect at the moment. I hope it will recover someday."

"But you don't know when that's going to be?"

"... Yes." She slightly bit her lips. "To be honest with you... I'm not even sure if the recovery function is still intact. In the worst-case scenario, the Gaia System itself could disappear."

It was a hopeless situation.

Kang-Woo took a deep breath. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say there was no realistic way to restore it.

A heavy atmosphere filled the room.

"But there is still hope," Gaia quickly added.

"Hope?"

She clenched her fists and continued, "The Demon of Prophecy. I believe that if we eliminate that demon, the Gaia System will recover."

'That's not an option, young lady.'

Kang-Woo put his hand on his forehead as if his head hurt.

'I'm that fucking Demon of Prophecy.'

He couldn't commit suicide for world peace.

That wasn't an option for him since he wanted to protect the world for his own well-being and peace.

'I can't bite off more than I can chew.'

World peace was a secondary goal.

His primary goal was to live in peace with a beautiful girl like Han Seol-Ah as his bride.

Si-Hun, who had been silently listening, opened his mouth. "I'd like to ask you something."

"Go ahead," Gaia replied.

"Is the reason why you are injured... related to the Gaia System being damaged?"

"Ah..."

Gaia let out a short exclamation. She hesitated to answer for a bit.

So, instead of her, Grace answered.

"Yeah. Gaia became like this because the Gaia System's damage is worsening."

"G-Grace!"

"There's no need to hide it, is there?"

"But..." Gaia slurred her words.

Grace patted her shoulder and said, "It doesn't matter what the duty of Guardians is. I'm fighting to heal you."

A kind smile was drawn on Grace's face. There was worry and love mixed in her eyes.

Si-Hun remained silent. He lightly caressed the handle of the sword at his waist.

"Is there a way to heal Gaia right now?" he asked.

"There is."

"Grace. You don't need to give him unnecessary informa—"

"The reason doesn't matter, does it? Our ultimate goal is the same."

"Well..."

It was a vague conversation. Si-Hun stared at Grace.

"Will Gaia be healed if we kill the Demon of Prophecy?"

"Not exactly. There's no guarantee that the Gaia System will recover if we kill the Demon of Prophecy, but... it's the best shot we have."

"..."

Si-Hun clenched his fists. His eyes were trembling while looking at Gaia.

'Don't, Si-Hun.'

Kang-Woo grabbed his head while looking at Si-Hun, who was burning with a strong sense of justice.

'You can't kill the Demon of Prophecy.'

Just imagining Si-Hun, whom he had taken care of so much, pointing his sword at him made his head hurt.

'Fuck.'

Kang-Woo frowned. The situation was getting complex.

'It's not something that can be resolved by just keeping my mouth shut.'

There had been a revelation. Members of Guardians would be desperately searching for the Demon of Prophecy.

He still wasn't sure if they had a way to identify the Demon of Prophecy, but he couldn't remain on the sidelines doing nothing.

'What should I do?'

For a moment, he felt his head had become blank.

"Could you give me more details about the Demon of Prophecy?" Si-Hun asked while his eyes shone.

Gaia carefully opened her mouth.

"I do not have any exact information, but... I have a few guesses."

"Please tell me."

'Why are you doing this, Si-Hun?'

"I want to know more about the Demon of Prophecy."

'It's me, bro.'

Kang-Woo's inner ramblings didn't reach Si-Hun.

Si-Hun was so serious that the others wondered why he was so passionate about it.

Gaia was also bewildered by his attitude. She slightly flinched and continued.

"The Demon of Prophecy... is already on Earth."

"They're already on Earth?"

"Yes." Gaia nodded. "It was nine months ago. The exact date should be... May 22nd."

'Oh, fuck.'

"The Gaia System was overloaded and started breaking down on that day."

'She's even sure about the exact date?'

Kang-Woo's expression hardened.

If she knew the exact date, his chances of being discovered increased.

"Has the Demon of Prophecy made any moves ever since that day?"

"Yes. According to our guess, there's a chance that their original strength has been sealed due to the influence of the Gaia System."

"If their strength has been sealed..."

"We have every single member of Guardians investigating the changes that happened from that day onward. Information about anyone becoming illogically powerful, or matters involving the Demon Cult... They might even be among us, disguised as a human being."

'I'm fucked.'

If they investigated Kang-Woo, it wouldn't be hard to discover he'd Awakened as a Player around that date.

Taking into consideration how powerful Kang-Woo was while not being a Protector, he would have a hard time avoiding being suspected. After all, Kang-Woo's extremely fast growth rate couldn't be explained with a simple excuse such as talent.

'At this point, it's a miracle that I haven't been found out.'

He had to find a way to escape suspicion.

His head became messy.

'What should I—'

Slam!

'Huh?'

He heard a dull sound.

Si-Hun had slammed the table with his fists and stood up.

"I see. I get it now..." Si-Hun mumbled with a trembling voice. He was biting his lip so hard that it was bleeding.

'What's up with him?'

"What's wrong, Protector Kim Si-Hun?" Gaia asked.

"I've figured it out."

"Pardon me?"

Si-Hun's eyes shone intensely. He spat out, "I think I know who the Demon of Prophecy is."

'Huh?'

"Wh-What do you..."

Everyone was shocked. Si-Hun's low voice spread through the room.

"Satan. That man is the Demon of Prophecy."

'Oh, wait.'

"Satan, you say?"

"Yes. I've kept this a secret from everyone, but I had met him three months ago."

'Is this how it's gonna play out?'

Kang-Woo's mouth fell open. To be honest, he had never expected it to play out like this.

"Si-Hun, th—"

"I'm sorry for not telling you before, hyung-nim. I was worried you'd be killed if you got involved."

"Protector Kim Si-Hun, please give us more details."

"That day, I went to the hotel rooftop after being contacted by Mr. Osborne..."

Si-Hun's explanation continued. The more the story went on, the more Gaia's and Grace's expressions hardened.

"Th-Then... Protector Alec went missing because..."

"He wasn't killed by a Demon Cult assassin but by the Demon of Prophecy?"

The two women were astonished.

Si-Hun nodded.

"Yes."

'Si-Hun.'

"All this while, I had no idea why Satan had attacked Alec, but... I think I get it now."

'I love you, Si-Hun.'

"Satan was trying to get rid of a Guardians member because he was a threat to him."

'Yes! Fantastic work, my boy!'

"Satan is the Demon of the Prophecy."

"A-Aaahhh..."

A short exclamation came out of Gaia's mouth.

Slam!

"Hyung-nim?"

"Kang-Woo?"

After Si-Hun, Kang-Woo angrily stood up. He grabbed Si-Hun's shoulders while looking at him intensely as if actually furious.

"So what you're saying is that son of a bitch Satan tried to hurt you, right?"

"Oh, u-uhmm..."

"Tell me the truth. Did he try to kill you?"

"... Yes."

Si-Hun nodded with difficulty, as if he had found the incident of that day insulting.

Kang-Woo turned his head toward Gaia.

"Can Guardians only be joined if one is a Protector?"

"Pardon? Y-Yes, according to the rules..."

"This is no time to quibble over rules."

Kang-Woo let his energy burst out. Intense and suffocating energy pressured the surroundings.

"I will also join Guardians."

He had no other choice.

'Now that it's come to this, I'll go against Satan!'

Chapter 142 - Demon of Prophecy (2)

"P-Please wait."

Gaia seemed confused by everything that was said.

"Protector Kim Si-Hun, can you swear that what you've just said is true?"

"Yes."

Kim Si-Hun nodded without hesitation. Gaia took a deep breath at his answer.

"You said that Satan looked like a human, correct?"

"To be more precise, it was just the outline of his body. He was shrouded in darkness, so I couldn't see his exact features."

"I see."

Gaia nodded.

"First, I understand what you are saying. Taking into consideration that Protector Alec was being targeted by the Demon Cult, there is a high chance that Satan is a member of the Demon Cult."

"I guess our ultimate enemy is the Demon Cult, then," Oh Kang-Woo said.

The Demon Cult... They'd existed for more than a thousand years. They were evil beings who worshiped demons and accepted their power.

'They'd be more than capable of being involved with the Demon of Prophecy.'

He nodded. If one thought about it, it would be natural that Satan, the Demon of Prophecy and one who was trying to bring destruction to the world, would join forces with them.

Gaia's expression darkened.

"I guess so. Haaa. If he has already entered the Demon Cult, the situation has worsened."

"Even three months ago, Satan was able to overpower Alec easily. If that was his weakened state... I don't even want to imagine how strong he would be if he recovered his previous strength."

There was a grim atmosphere in the room.

Kang-Woo turned his head toward Gaia.

"Now, are you still going to stand your ground on the rule that only Protectors can join Guardians?"

"..."

Gaia remained silent. It didn't take long for her to make a decision. She turned her head toward Grace McCubbin.

"Grace, please bring that to me."

"Okay."

Grace brought out two rectangular boxes. As she opened the boxes, in each was a white mask and a crystal orb the size of a ping-pong ball.

Gaia fumbled around the table and raised up a mask in one of the boxes.

There was a blue shield engraved on the mask.

"There are many cases in which members of Guardians have to act secretly, so they must wear a mask while on missions. Hmm, to put it bluntly, you could say that this mask is the symbol of Guardians."

"Ah..."

"First, Protector Kim Si-Hun, may we ask for your help in protecting the world and eliminating the Demon of Prophecy?"

"Of course."

Si-Hun nodded as his eyes blazed with passion.

Gaia smiled. She gave the mask in her hands to Si-Hun.

"Welcome to Guardians."

"... Thank you very much."

Si-Hun accepted the mask while making a complex expression. He took the mask and placed it over his face. It seemed there was a special effect on the mask, causing a short exclamation to escape Si-Hun's mouth.

"Ah."

"Fufu. Did you think it was just a plain mask?"

After giving him the mask, she gave him the transparent crystal orb the size of a ping-pong ball.

"This is a communication device that's given to Guardians members. You can communicate with us even if you're inside a gate or on the other side of the world, and if you put it on the floor, you can open a gate that leads to here, the Hall of Protection."

"But what if it gets stolen from me...?"

One could open a gate that led to the base from anywhere...

It was an item that could cause a catastrophe if an enemy got their hands on it.

Gaia lightly laughed at Si-Hun upon hearing his worried voice.

"It is bound to its owner. Just a piece of Legendary-grade equipment, so there is no need to worry about that."

"Ah, I see."

Si-Hun nodded. On the other hand, Kang-Woo had a complex expression.

"They aren't even considering the possibility of betrayal?"

Even if the item was bound to its owner, the group would be stabbed in the back instantly if the person were to betray them.

From Kang-Woo's point of view, it was far too complacent of an item.

'Well, it doesn't really matter to me.'

They probably weren't giving out such an important item because they were dumb.

The mask and crystal orb were symbols of trust—that's how much Gaia trusted each Guardians member.

Considering that there were two boxes, Kang-Woo was certain that she was willing to accept him as a member of Guardians.

As her trust in him grew, Kang-Woo would be able to hide the fact that he was, in reality, the Demon of Prophecy even better.

"Next..."

She turned to face Kang-Woo, holding a second mask in her hands.

"Kang-Woo."

"Yes."

She extended the mask to him.



"You're right. In times like this, we cannot afford to insist on the rule that only Protectors can join Guardians. However, I am accepting you as a member of Guardians not just because we do not have any leeway."

Her voice was passionate. Kang-Woo remained silent.

She said, "Your affection for Protector Kim Si-Hun and how angry you became when you realized that Satan had targeted him were the two decisive reasons."

"Si-Hun is a precious little brother to me. The Demon of Prophecy, or whatever his name is, cannot be forgiven for trying to kill Si-Hun."

Kang-Woo's eyes were burning with passion, and his voice was powerful.

It felt like a bit much considering they were only sworn brothers, but its effect was impressive.

"H-Hyung-nim."

"Fufu. You have a fantastic sworn brother. To be honest, when I first heard about you through Protector Kim Si-Hun, I was worried that his trust in you was excessive, but I guess I was worried for nothing."

Si-Hun was so moved that he was trembling. Gaia smiled in satisfaction.

Kang-Woo felt inwardly elated.

"Thanks, Satan!"

If Satan heard this, he would have shaken his head in dissatisfaction.

But from Kang-Woo's point of view, everything was flowing in a great direction.

"Kang-Woo, although you are not a Protector, I believe you are worthy of being called one based on your strong sense of justice."

'Yeah, of course I am.'

"Then, Kang-Woo, may we ask for your help in protecting the world and eliminating the Demon of Prophecy?"

"Of course."

He nodded without hesitation. He was overflowing with a strong sense of justice from being able to join Guardians.

'Yeah, there's no one more righteous and pure-hearted than me.'

Gaia nodded at Kang-Woo's choice.

"Welcome to Guardians."

He received the mask with a blue shield engraved on it.

He put it on.

Riiing.

[You have become a member of Guardians.]

[Activating the effect of 'Blessing of Gaia.' This blessing has a greater effect on Players chosen to be 'Protectors.']

[You are not a 'Protector.' Reducing the effect of the blessing.]

[Raising all stats by 1.]

Rumble!

"Huh?!"

"This is..."

The Hall of Protection shook.

The Blessing of Gaia was a strong buff for Protectors, but Kang-Woo had only managed to receive a fraction of its full effect because he was not a Protector.

But...

'It raised all my stats by one.'

A smile appeared on his face.

For other players, a single point to all stats was probably nothing...

But from Kang-Woo's point of view, it wasn't just a single point to every stat.

His Demonic Energy stat was so high that it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that it had surpassed the limit of what a Player could achieve.

So for him, the difference of a single stat point was huge.

'Hell yeah, I'm surging with demonic energy!'

As his stat increased, an explosive amount of demonic energy was created anew.

He would've probably been found out if he wasn't able to conceal his demonic energy with his Ruler of Demonic Energy Trait.

He would be able to fully use the energy once he melted the newly created demonic energy into his blood later through the Heavenly Dragon Cultivation Technique.

'I think I could be a match for Doomguard now.'

Doomguard, the protector of destruction. He was the commander of the 3rd Battalion of Kang-Woo's demon army and was also an archdemon among the demons of the Ninth Hell.

He wasn't as strong as Balrog or Lilith, who were both as powerful as the seven princes of Hell, but he was strong enough to massacre hundreds of demons of the Ninth Hell in seconds.

'This was an unexpected profit.'

He almost felt proud of becoming a member of Guardians.

"I hope we get along from now on."

After receiving the communication crystal, Kang-Woo shook Gaia's hand.

"Ah, yes. I hope so too."

Gaia was surprised by the explosive burst of energy, but only for a short while. She soon put on a bright smile.

"Please let me know as soon as you get information regarding the Demon Cult."

"Okay. As for missions, I will contact you through the communication orb at a later date. Oh, and feel free to visit the Hall of Protection any time you want. It gets lonely being here by myself."

Gaia waved her hand. Her arms were so thin that it seemed like they would break if one wasn't careful.

Si-Hun's eyes sank as he saw those arms.

"Okay. I will be waiting for your call."

He turned around and opened the door. After they left the gate, they were greeted by familiar scenery.

It was the rooftop of the apartment where Kang-Woo lived.

"... Thank you, hyung-nim."

"It was nothing."

'I should be the one thanking you.'

Kang-Woo smiled and patted Si-Hun's shoulder. Si-Hun's eyes teared up as if he were moved.

"Hyung-nim."

"Hmm?"

Si-Hun raised his head and looked up at the sky.

'This son of a bitch is too handsome.'

Just him looking up at the sky made it look like he was in the middle of a photoshoot.

"I kind of feel like... I've gained a new goal today."

"A new goal?"

"Yes."

Si-Hun nodded while making a serious expression.

"I've fallen in love with someone."

'What kind of bullshit is this now?'

Kang-Woo looked confused. Why was he suddenly talking about love?

"Don't tell me..."

"I became sure of it the moment I saw her. It is my destiny to protect her."

Kang-Woo went silent.

Si-Hun turned and leaned against the rooftop railing.

"I can't forget her frail body, which could break at the slightest touch."

Si-Hun clenched his fist.

"And..."

A strong energy and deep bloodlust rose from inside him.

"I will kill Satan, who made her that way, with my own hands."

"..."

"You've seen her too, hyung-nim. She couldn't even walk or see."

'Si-Hun.'

"It's all because Satan came to Earth. He ruined the Gaia System and killed a Protector."

'Wait a second, Si-Hun.'

"I'm so frustrated and angry. I think it's the first time I've felt this way in my entire life."

'What's wrong, man?'

"I want to protect her."

Kang-Woo could see Si-Hun's eyes burning with motivation. On the other hand, Kang-Woo was feeling more and more guilty.

"I want to protect her and make her smile."

'I get it, so stop, dude.'

"Hyung-nim."

'I didn't know things would turn out like this either.'

"Thank you for helping me."

'I couldn't just rot in Hell forever, you know? I stayed there for ten millennia. Isn't that long enough? How much longer was I supposed to stay there for?'

"I wouldn't be feeling so reassured if it hadn't been for you, hyung-nim."

'Do you know Lilith? Huh? Do you know her? A thousand years with her, and you wouldn't give a flying fuck if coming back to Earth would paralyze someone's legs and make them blind!'

Smiling awkwardly, Si-Hun scratched his head.

"Haha. It's kind of embarrassing to say something like that with my own mouth, but I became sure of it thanks to you staying by my side."

Kang-Woo lowered his head.

'I'm sorry, Si-Hun.'

Kang-Woo's hands and feet trembled from guilt.

Si-Hun extended his hand.

"Hyung-nim, let's kill the Demon of Prophecy and protect this world together."

There was silence. Kang-Woo's expression seemed troubled, but that was only for a brief moment.

Kang-Woo grabbed Si-Hun's hand.

"Let's do it."

'I don't give a fuck anymore.'

He gripped Si-Hun's hand tighter.

"Let's protect this world from Satan."

The Demon of Prophecy, Satan.

That filthy and wicked demon had not been satisfied with ruling the Nine Hells and had come to Earth. He had damaged the Gaia System that was protecting Earth and was trying to take it over.

'Unforgivable.'

Kang-Woo surged with anger. Satan had dared to reduce Si-Hun's first love to such a state.

To him, Si-Hun was someone with whom he shared a bond thicker than blood, and even their souls were linked. As his sworn brother, Kang-Woo couldn't stand for it.

'In the name of justice, I'll punish you. [1]

Chapter 143 - First Mission

After that day, Kim Si-Hun went to train with Tian Wuchen again.

In the first place, he had only returned from Shanghai because of Grace McCubbin's sudden visit.

Si-Hun, who had become stronger after receiving the Blessing of Gaia, returned immediately to Shanghai.

"I will come back stronger than Master," Si-Hun had said confidently.

Wuchen, who had been right next to him, frowned. His reaction was natural since a newbie was trying to surpass him after just a few months of training. However, he couldn't deny that Si-Hun was growing that fast.

"Damn, why did I pick up such a monster of a disciple in my retirement years..." Wuchen had said in disbelief at Si-Hun's incredible growth rate.

Even if Si-Hun possessed the Heavenly Martial Physique, he never imagined he'd grow so fast.

If Si-Hun were the protagonist of a martial arts novel, he still wouldn't have been able to grow so quickly. But Si-Hun was a Player. Stats rose as they leveled up. And stats provided power as if creating power out of nothing.

It had been one week since Si-Hun and Wuchen had left for Shanghai.

Oh Kang-Woo gathered information about the Demon Cult through regular meetings with Gaia and Grace.

And...

"I will give you your very first mission, Kang-Woo."

'Finally!'

Kang-Woo exclaimed in delight at Gaia's words.

He'd been desperately waiting for information on the Demon Cult, and something had finally been caught in Guardians' information network.

"What sort of mission?" Kang-Woo asked while making a serious expression.

One's expression and eyes were the most important things.

He couldn't look too happy to hear that the Demon Cult had made their move. He had to make an expression that showed a mixture of worry and anger.

'This kind of thing is my forte.'

He was very confident in controlling his emotions, which was far easier than controlling the impulsive desires that came with a demon's body.

"The Gaia System has been weakening lately," Gaia said.

"... Wasn't that already happening?" Kang-Woo asked.

Gaia shook her head.

"Yes, but not at this fast of a pace. We believe there is a different cause."

"Hmm. Have you been able to find out where it has been happening?"

"I am not sure, but we received information that traces of the Demon Cult have been found in Korea."

"Korea?"

That was unexpected. The Demon Cult in Korea had collapsed after Baek Kang-Hyun's death.

'Did an entirely new branch take their place?'

He had no idea. He also wasn't sure why foreign Demon Cultists would come all the way to Korea to execute their plan.

"Yes. Traces have apparently been found in a Gate near a city called Daegu."

"Daegu is..."

Just like in Sapporo, Japan, there were cities in Korea that had also fallen into ruin after the Day of Calamity. Daegu was one of the cities that had it the worst.

'The situation's a little different from Sapporo, though.'

In Sapporo's case, the city's restoration was delayed because the monsters inhabiting the ruined city were too strong, but in Daegu's case, there was another reason.

'They can't afford to reclaim it.'

It had been five years since the Day of Calamity. No, it was about to be six.

Running a country after the Day of Calamity was already a miracle, so neglecting the restoration of a city due to a lack of money could not even be considered a controversy.

"I understand," Kang-Woo replied.

"We will be leaving it in your good hands. If it's too much for you to do alone, you could ask Protector Kim Si-Hun to—"

"No, Si-Hun is focusing on his training right now. I can't get in his way."

"Then how about other Protectors? Grace is in the United States right now, but Protectors Zhuge Xian and Ito Shinji can provide you with assistance."

Zhuge Xian and Ito Shinji.

They were the names of the Chinese and Japanese Protectors he'd heard of after joining Guardians.

They weren't Players who were publicly known like Alec Osborne and Grace McCubbin. Forget World Rankers; they weren't even registered as Rankers.

'According to what I've heard, they seem like good people.'

But he wasn't sure if, by good people, they would be someone like Alec or Si-Hun.

It was obvious that Gaia didn't have an eye for people, taking into consideration how Alec Osborne was.

'Well, I guess that's not completely true.'

In the cases of Si-Hun and Grace, they both had great talent and qualities as Protectors.

'Considering she accepted me as a member of Guardians while breaking the established rule, you can't say she doesn't have an eye for people at all.'

There probably weren't many people who could contribute to world peace with such pure intentions.

"I will give the investigation a shot on my own first," said Kang-Woo."

He thought of dragging Zhuge Xian and Ito Shinji to investigate the Demon Cultists near Daegu as well but decided not to. Since they were both members of Guardians, they were likely both very busy.

The Demon Cult wasn't active only in Korea, so it would be more effective if each member investigated their own regions.

'They could also get in my way during interrogations.'

Kang-Woo was planning on doing as many interrogations as possible to find a lead on the seemingly inactive Demon Cult.

If they were people like Alec, there was a chance they wouldn't be able to tolerate Kang-Woo's own way of justice and might do something unexpected.

"Understood. If you say so, then I will trust you."

"I will begin right away."

Now that he had a clue, there was no need to dilly-dally.

Kang-Woo put on the mask given to him by Guardians and walked out of the Hall of Protection. He exited the gate at the same place he had entered it—the rooftop of the building where he lived.

"Echidna, Vaal Zahak," he called the two summoned beasts that had sworn allegiance to him.

He could exact justice in his own way in front of his summoned beasts, so he didn't need to think too deeply before doing anything.

"What is it, Kang-Woo?"

Echidna reached the rooftop first. She was holding a rice cake skewer covered with red sauce.

"... What's that?"

"Vaal Zahak made it for me."

She opened her mouth to eat the rice cake skewer, her mouth was so wide that one wouldn't believe her mouth belonged to a little girl. She ate the entire rice cake skewer at once.

Nom, nom.

"It's good."

Silence fell. The silence was finally broken by Kang-Woo's shaking shadow.

A white skeleton appeared from the shadow, which wriggled as if it were alive.

[I have answered your summons, Master.]

Vaal Zahak, a powerful Lich who was once known as the demon king, was wearing a pink apron with a cute bunny on it instead of wearing his somber robe.

"Vaal Zahak, you..."

Kang-Woo's mouth gaped open in shock at Vaal Zahak's appearance.

Vaal Zahak raised his head and looked up at the radiantly shining sun.

[Wow. What great weather we're having. Hehehe...] Thick demonic energy rose from him. The ruler of death said in a low tone, [Weather like this is perfect for washing the blankets. If you would bestow me with some time...]

"No, we can leave that for later. We have more important things to take care of."

Kang-Woo glared at Vaal Zahak while making a serious expression. It wasn't the time to care about trivial things like washing blankets.

"Don't tell me there isn't a rice cake skewer for me?" he asked in a serious voice.

[Hahaha! Master! What do you take the mighty Vaal Zahak for?]

Vaal Zahak snapped his finger. The shadow shook again, and a perfectly fried rice cake skewer appeared.

[Huhu. I've been learning cooking from Madam Seol-Ah lately, and I've come to realize how profound the world of cooking truly is.]

"Let's give it a try."

He took a bite of the rice cake skewer. A spicy but sweet taste spread through his mouth.

"It's very well-made."

[I will keep doing my best. More importantly, for what reason have you called us?]

"Oh, right."

Kang-Woo turned his head to Echidna, who was licking the sauce off of her hands.



"A mission. It's about time we let loose after a while."

Echidna's and Vaal Zahak's eyes shone.

\* \* \*

Kang-Woo flew to Daegu on Echidna.

Daegu was ruined just like Vladivostok. He didn't see traces of anyone in the vicinity.

'Authority of the Beholder.'

He expanded his demonic energy. Investigating an area where demonic energy was clearly visible was easier.

'There's nothing around here.'

He couldn't find traces of demonic energy in the area.

'Was the information wrong?' he thought briefly, but then he shook his head. He couldn't be so sure yet.

"Let's enter the Gate."

There were three A-rank Gates in Daegu. Players could perfectly deal with them nowadays, but that hadn't been the case during the Day of Calamity.

Kang-Woo entered one of the three Gates.

'Bingo.'

As soon as he entered, he felt demonic energy. He walked toward the source.

"This is..."

Once he reached the place where the demonic energy was concentrated, he saw a black stake in the shape of an inverted cross about a meter tall stuck in the ground.

There was a Rift around the stake as if space itself had been broken, and the size of the Rift was getting bigger.

'What the hell is this?'

He had never seen such an object while fighting the Demon Cult until now.

He was about to approach the black stake when...

Grrrr.

There was a low cry, and he turned his head toward the source of the sound.

"Of course they wouldn't have just left it unattended."

He saw an Ogre and some Elite Trolls that often appeared inside A-rank Gates.

'No.'

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes. He used the Authority of the Beholder and looked at the monsters.

Monsters moved by using the energy within mana stones, but instead of mana, he could feel demonic energy from them.

'Are they being contaminated?'

Just like when he'd found a demonic crystal inside El Cuero's head, the monsters were slowly turning into demonic beasts.

"Prepare for battle."

"Okay!"

[As you command.]

The two summoned beasts drew out their energies when...

"Who the hell are you guys?"

A scrawny young man almost two meters tall appeared while making a cheeky smile.

"Hmm. You don't look like you're from the Hwarang Corps..."

He didn't seem surprised by how Vaal Zahak looked.

"Well, whatever. I can just kill trespassers."

His smile widened, and he snapped his fingers.

Kiieekk!

The land that the man was standing on was upturned, and a monster with a long tail appeared.

The monster wasn't that big. It was only three meters tall, but its body was covered with black scales as if it wore armor. There was a green acidic solution coming out of its body.

The monster looked like a certain alien from a science fiction film.

Kang-Woo's eyes shone after looking at the monster.

'A Chrysalis?'

A Chrysalis did not look that powerful from a glance, but it was a demonic beast that resided in the Eighth Hell. It was strong enough to instantly massacre a huge group of Cerberuses.

'They can even control a demonic beast of the Eighth Hell now?'

He couldn't help but exclaim in admiration at the Demon Cult's knowledge.

A Chrysalis was a very violent demonic beast that not even demons of the Eighth Hell picked a fight with. It wasn't as intelligent as an ancient demonic beast like Halcyon, but still, it was quite clever compared to other demonic beasts.

If the Demon Cult could control such a demonic beast, that meant their knowledge was on another level.

"The Eighth Hell, huh?"

The demonic energy from the demonic beasts of the Third Hell he'd devoured before wasn't much help, but it was a completely different story if it was from the Eighth Hell.

Kang-Woo smacked his lips.

"I'll face that thing."

For the first time in a while, food worthy of eating had appeared. It didn't look tasty, but that didn't matter.

'I've been with Lilith for a millennium.'

He almost found an alien cute.

Kang-Woo made a bright smile and took a step forward.

Chapter 144 - Whoops!

"Hahaha! You guys are out of your minds."

The young man, seemingly a Demon Cultist, laughed while releasing demonic energy.

Oh Kang-Woo frowned after sensing the demonic energy flowing out of him.

'He's pretty weak.'

It was hard to believe he was controlling a demonic beast of the Eighth Hell like a Chrysalis.

It was as if a fox were using a tiger as a servant.

Kang-Woo used the Authority of the Beholder and looked at the young man. The man was so weak that he couldn't resist the Authority's power.

[Player Name: Park Yong-Chan]

[Level: 63]

He was a Seventh Awakening Player. Taking into consideration that he had demonic energy, he was probably a bit stronger than that.

'But it's still underwhelming.'

Even though he'd broken past the Limit of Effort, any Player with even a minimal amount of talent could do that.

He was still too weak to be able to control a Chrysalis.

'It's actually better this way.'

Kang-Woo's eyes shone.

To be honest, a Demon Cultist as strong as Anton Sidorovich being able to control demonic beasts and demons wasn't that surprising. Hell took survival of the fittest to its utmost limit; strength was everything to them.

Kang-Woo was actually more curious about this aspect of the Demon Cult.

'How could someone this weak control a demonic beast as if it were his servant?'

Demonic beasts weren't like wild animals that could be domesticated if they were raised from when they were still infants. They would kill their owner if they thought that their owner was weaker than them.

'Especially if it's a Chrysalis.'

Even among demonic beasts, a Chrysalis was famous for its violence and intelligence. It was a being that couldn't be tamed through regular means.

"Alright, tear them apart!" Park Yong-Chan shouted.

The Chrysalis lowered its body and raised its head.

"Kiiieekk!!"

A horrible scream rang out through the area. Acid seeped out of the monster and melted the ground.

At its shout, the monsters surrounding them started to move.

'He's controlling the monsters in the area through the Chrysalis.'

That was something Kang-Woo could understand. The Chrysalis was an intelligent demonic beast, so it often created packs by controlling demonic beasts weaker than it.

"Gwoooo!"

"Grrrrr!"

A group of Ogres that had almost completely turned into demonic beasts charged at Kang-Woo and his summoned beasts, shaking the ground with each step.

Their ferocity was unlike that of regular A-rank monsters, most likely due to having accepted demonic energy.

"Kang-Woo."

[Master, I am yours to command.]

The two summoned beasts took a step forward. He nodded as he smirked.

"Kill them. Oh, except that one that looks like a cockroach."

[As you command.]

"Hm! Leave it to me!"

Echidna opened both arms. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

[FUS RO DAH!]

Dragon tongue magic. It was the dragon race's unique magic, and it was among the most powerful magics.

Usually, a hatchling wouldn't be able to use it. It was so difficult that not even adult dragons could use it without being careful.

However, thanks to Kang-Woo becoming stronger, Echidna could obtain power far beyond a hatchling's capabilities, so she was able to use dragon tongue magic.

Crackle!

A wave of demonic energy rushed out, with Echidna at its epicenter.

A black wave that resembled a Breath, the most powerful attack that a dragon could use, shot forth as it tore the ground apart.

The Ogres were swept away by the wave and were scattered in all directions.

[No, no, no. That won't do.]

Vaal Zahak shook his head while his eye sockets shone yellow. He looked at the Ogre corpses that appeared to have been torn apart by a blender.

[You should treat precious corpses with more care.]

Tap. He snapped his finger, and his black robe fluttered.

"What the hell?"

Yong-Chan's mouth fell open.

It was weird enough that the skeleton in a black robe was wearing a cute apron that didn't suit him at all, but that wasn't what surprised him.

"GRRR."

The Ogre corpses that had been torn apart got back up.

Despite that their blood had splattered all over the place and that their internal organs were spewing out of their bodies, the Ogres were still moving.

No, they weren't just moving...

The Ogres were forcibly connecting and restoring each other's dismembered bodies.

After some time, Flesh Golems that had an appearance more horrifying than any other demonic beast were created.

[Go forth, my children.]

Vaal Zahak extended his hand, and the Flesh Golems slowly began to move. A thick laugh left his mouth, and an explosive burst of demonic energy surrounded him.

[Kill those lowly beasts yearning for life.]

Once again, his pink apron fluttered. Demonic energy flowed out of his hand and entered the Flesh Golems.

"GRRRAARR!!"

They went berserk.

The Flesh Golems ran toward the other Ogres, their movements so violent that one wouldn't believe that the monsters created by haphazardly sticking corpse pieces together could move in such a way.

"Wh-What the..."

Yong-Chan's expression became pale.

Kang-Woo leisurely checked out his expression.

Yong-Chan was biting his lip violently. He put his left palm on top of the back of his right hand.

"Chrysalis!! What are you doing?! Kill those sons of bitches!"

'Oh?'

Kang-Woo's eyes shone. A complex magic circle was drawn on the back of Yong-Chan's right hand. He was screaming like a madman.

'Is that how he's controlling it?'

He still wasn't sure. Kang-Woo slowly analyzed the situation.

"Kiiieekk!"

'It's charging at me.'

The Chrysalis stomped on the ground, lowered its body, and rushed at an impressive speed.

He could easily tell what the Chrysalis was trying to do.

'I knew it.'

Kang-Woo smirked. The Chrysalis had a uniquely small body compared to other demonic beasts.

'Kiiieekk!"

He pulled his right foot back and kicked as if kicking a football. The Chrysalis dodged the attack with its incredible reflexes.

He used his left foot as an axis to pivot, swinging his right leg down toward the Chrysalis's shelled back.

"Kishaaaaahh!!!"

This time, the Chrysalis didn't dodge the attack because it trusted the immensely hard shell on its back.

Kang-Woo lightly laughed while looking down at it.

"Damn insect."

Crack!

"Kiiieekk!"

His right foot smashed the Chrysalis's back. Although a Chrysalis's shell was hard enough to crush the teeth of gigantic demonic beasts, it was nothing in front of Kang-Woo.

As he swung down his right foot, which was infused with the Authority of Pulverization, the Chrysalis's back was destroyed. Acid spewed everywhere.

The Chrysalis stopped attacking and quickly backed off.

"Kiiieekk."

Kang-Woo could feel that it was extremely cautious of him.

"What are you doing?! Attack!!!" Yong-Chan shouted. His right hand shone with a dark light. The same light came out of the Chrysalis's forehead.

"KIIEEKK!!!"

Kang-Woo's eyes shone sharply.

'He's definitely controlling it through that magic circle.'

He still needed to investigate how it worked exactly, but his immediate doubt was answered.

'Now...'

He had to check the limits of the magic circle.

'I'm sure it isn't absolute.'

He knew that just by seeing how the Chrysalis twisted its body after receiving Yong-Chan's orders.

Kang-Woo charged toward the Chrysalis while keeping track of the time as he had been doing from the moment the battle had begun.

Bash! Crack!

"Kishaaaahhhh!"

The battle continued.

Although the Chrysalis was a predator that operated in the Eighth Hell, Kang-Woo was already as strong as an archdemon of the Ninth Hell.

The demonic beast was no match for him.

It was a one-sided battle.

"F-Fuck."

Yong-Chan's expression became pale. He anxiously looked at the back of his right hand. The light flowing out of the magic circle was dimming.

"N-No."

Yong-Chan turned around and started to frantically run away.

He heard Kang-Woo's low voice.

"Five minutes." Kang-Woo smiled. "It seems you can forcibly command it for five minutes at most."

"Kuh!"

Yong-Chan frowned. His reaction made it clear that Kang-Woo was right.

The light of the magic circle on the back of Yong-Chan's right hand disappeared.

"Kishaaahhh!!!"

The Chrysalis, which had become a mess, turned toward Yong-Chan.

It would have been dead from its severe injuries if it had been a regular life form, but a Chrysalis far surpassed the limits of a regular life form.

"Shaaahhh!"

It lowered its severely broken body and roared aggressively.

A stronger bloodlust than when it had faced Kang-Woo flowed from the Chrysalis.

'I guess it's understandable.'

It had been forced to fight an opponent it didn't want to fight in the first place and had almost died because of it. If the Chrysalis had free will, it most definitely would've escaped after the first clash.

However, it was forced to bare its teeth against a predator it couldn't win against, so it was understandable how angry it was.

'I got some good information.'

Kang-Woo nodded while looking at the Chrysalis emitting powerful bloodlust toward Yong-Chan.

'Once time runs out, it might attack the master.'

It was useful information. It meant that if the situation was too much to handle, he could just stall for time.

'I'll watch and see how it goes for now.'

Kang-Woo crossed his arms and began walking leisurely.

"G-Goddammit! L-Listen to me, Chrysalis!!" Yong-Chan desperately shouted.

"Oh, right. Do you know what the special characteristic of a Chrysalis is?" Kang-Woo asked him.

"Wh-What? What the fuck are you talking about?!"

"I guess you don't."

Kang-Woo snickered. Chrysalises were small, so they had a particular hunting characteristic that they used to incapacitate their prey.

"Shaaahhh!"

"Eek! G-Go away!!"

Yong-Chan swung both of his arms. He used a skill to create a fireball the size of a person's head and shot it toward the Chrysalis.

But there was no way such a desperate attack would work against it.

The Chrysalis ran toward Park Yong-Chan at a dazzling speed. Its sharp teeth targeted the space between his legs.

"G-Go awa—"

Crunch!

"AAAGGGHHH!"

"Oh, fuck."

Kang-Woo closed his legs subconsciously. It was hard to watch.

'Chrysalis, you cruel bastard.'

The hunting characteristic of the Chrysalis was that... they attacked their prey's reproductive organs first.

"Aaarrggghhh! Gaaaahhhh!!"

Yong-Chan screamed in pain while trying to cover the blood fountain. His scream was so horrible it reached his soul.

"KIIIIK!"



"Alright, that's enough."

The Chrysalis jumped toward Yong-Chan to kill him, but Kang-Woo violently smacked the back of the Chrysalis's head. Crack. Its head exploded with a chilling sound.

"Let's see. Park Yong-Chan, was it?"

"Kurrghh! Aaarrghh!!"

"Oh."

Kang-Woo clapped his hands together as if he'd just realized something.

"Sorry, my mistake."

Kang-Woo squatted in front of Park Yong-Chan and snickered.

"I guess I should be calling you No Dick-Chan."

Chapter 145 - I Won't Ever Forget Your Name

"Urghh. Hurgh!"

Tears flowed down from No Dick-Chan's eyes. An unbearable pain spread through him. He couldn't return to his senses. Foam frothed at his mouth, and he couldn't stop trembling.

"Hey, get yourself together, man," Oh Kang-Woo said and slapped No Dick-Chan's cheeks a couple of times.

However, no matter how much time passed by, it didn't seem like No Dick-Chan was going to return to his senses.

'This isn't good.'

Kang-Woo put his hands on top of No Dick-Chan's head. Black demonic energy flickered in his hand.

He used Authority of Focus. It reduced pain and raised one's focus, kind of like a stimulant. Unlike the Authority of Rage, it was a buff-type Authority that only benefited the target, but in this situation, there was nothing else he could do about it.

After all, Kang-Woo couldn't interrogate No Dick-Chan if he was in that painful state.

"Huff, huff!"

No Dick-Chan came back to his senses thanks to the Authority of Focus.

He looked at Kang-Woo with fearful eyes and asked, "Wh-Who are you?! How did you defeat the Chrysalis...?"

"Hmm."

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes.

'I guess he has no idea who I am.'

The Demon Cultist couldn't tell who Kang-Woo was or even that he was a member of Guardians, despite his iconic Guardians' white mask.

'The Demon Cultists know about Guardians.'

Nonetheless, it was significant that the Demon Cultist couldn't identify Kang-Woo as a member of Guardians.

'He's not that high in rank.'

In other words, the Demon Cult did not treat this Demon Cultist as that important.

"Since when did the Demon Cult become active again in Korea?"

"Th-That's..." No Dick-Chan mumbled with quivering eyes.

"Ah, wait. Don't say it," Kang-Woo interjected.

Judging by No Dick-Chan's reaction, it seemed like he would be killed if he tried to say important information about the Demon Cult.

'In that case...'

Kang-Woo placed his hand on No Dick-Chan's forehead.

'Authority of Subordination.'

The Authority of Subordination had failed against strong individuals like Anton Sidorovich and Baek Kang-Hyun, but there was a chance it would succeed with No Dick-Chan.

Riiing.

[You have successfully made Player No Dick-Chan your Familiar.]

Kang-Woo looked at the system message with tired eyes.

"I shouldn't use this rashly," he remarked.

Even if No Dick-Chan was weak, he was still a Player who had broken past the Limit of Effort. Consequently, it hadn't been an easy task for Kang-Woo to make No Dick-Chan his Familiar.

Kang-Woo stretched as fatigue weighed down on his shoulders. It was all because the Authority of Subordination had many restrictions.

'But still...'

He could feel his soul being linked to No Dick-Chan's.

Then Kang-Woo concentrated and analyzed No Dick-Chan's body. He could sense some sort of foreign murky energy within No Dick-Chan's body... to be more precise, in his soul.

'Is this the restriction?'

Kang-Woo used his energy to wipe away the murky energy in No Dick-Chan's soul.

"Cough! Huff! Huff!"

No Dick-Chan suddenly became teary-eyed. He was trembling so hard that his tendons were visible.

After a while, he gradually became calmer, and his breath normalized.

'Does this have an effect similar to the Authority of Subordination?'

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes as he looked down at No Dick-Chan. He thought about it for a while but ultimately shook his head.

'It isn't as powerful as the Authority of Subordination.'

It seemed like the source of the murky energy couldn't control everything that the target did like the Authority of Subordination could. Nevertheless, just seeing that the Demon Cult could cast a restriction that influenced the soul was proof of how advanced their knowledge was.

'They're impressive.'

Kang-Woo still couldn't understand how they had managed to possess knowledge that even he didn't have despite having ruled over the Nine Hells.

"Now, tell me everything you know," Kang-Woo said.

"Ah, urgh."

After squirming for a while, No Dick-Chan unloaded all of the information he possessed.

"After Cardinal Baek Kang-Hyun died, the Demon Cult branch in Korea became vacant. The Demon Cult is paying great attention to Korea, so they have sent an Apostle of Evil to create the branch anew."

"They're paying great interest to Korea?"

That was unexpected. There wasn't an SS-rank Gate in Korea. Moreover, the country hadn't been ruined on the Day of Calamity, so the S-rank Gates were being properly maintained.

A country like Russia should be more worthy of the Demon Cult's attention. The country was practically paralyzed, and there was an SS-rank Gate located there, so it would be a far better place to be active in.

'Or maybe the Middle East or South America.'

The Middle East and South America also fit the bill. There were SS-rank Gates located in those regions, and the countries there had more or less been wiped out. There was no reason for the Demon Cult to go out of their way to act in Korea.

"I'm also not sure of the reason, but the Cult thinks of Korea as a very important country," No Dick-Chan said.

"I see. Then is that related to sticking this black stake inside a Gate?"

"No. Sowing 'Rift Seeds' has nothing to do with Korea."

Kang-Woo remained silent.

'Nothing to do with it, huh?'

The gears in his head turned quickly.

The Demon Cult thought of Korea as an important place, but that wasn't the reason why they were sowing these Rift Seeds inside the Gates. Additionally, the Gaia System had been weakening drastically recently.

'I see.'

There was only one conclusion he could reach from those two things—the Demon Cult's plan wasn't specific to Korea.

If that was the case, Kang-Woo could understand why someone as weak as No Dick-Chan had been put on his task by himself.

'There's a chance this is happening worldwide.'

The Demon Cult was sowing Rift Seeds throughout all of the gates. It didn't matter if they failed; they would just have to sow even more. As long as they made their weakest members sow the Rift Seeds with demonic beasts as protection, the depletion in their forces would be insignificant even if those members failed.

'This is the worst.'

This kind of situation was what Kang-Woo had been worried about. It wasn't an issue that Kang-Woo could resolve by himself. After all, even if a person could block the rain with their umbrella, they wouldn't be able to stop the ground from getting wet.

"Well, this is a complication."

Tsk. Kang-Woo clicked his tongue.

'I need the help of Players.'

He needed the entire world to move.

Kang-Woo could tell the difference between what he could and couldn't do alone... and he knew he didn't have enough power to move the entire world.

"At least, I don't."

Kang-Woo smiled.

He grabbed his communication orb.

'But what about Guardians?'

Guardians was a secretive organization that didn't make itself public, but it had immense power and influence. Leaving everything else aside, Guardians had First Lady Grace McCubbin, the first and strongest Player. She was someone who could make the United States, the strongest country in the world, take action.

If the USA took action, other countries would naturally follow suit. Even after the Day of Calamity, that hadn't changed. The USA was the world's hub of finance and commerce as well as the pinnacle of power.

'Also, Guardians isn't my only resource.'

Kang-Woo knew many people who could move entire countries, like Tian Wuchen, Jang Hyun-Jae, and Kurosaki Yurie.

"Where are the Rift Seeds being sown exactly?"

"I-I don't know."

"Who is the one behind the plan?"

"I don't know..."

No Dick-Chan shook his head.

Kang-Woo nodded. There was no way someone at the bottom of the ladder would know a piece of information like that.

"Then do you know who made the Rift Seeds?"

"I-I'm sorry."

"Tsk."

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue and picked up the black stake.

Since he couldn't get information from him, he had no choice but to investigate.

'Authority of Insight.'

Kang-Woo closed his eyes and focused his mind. He'd failed to decipher the summoning magic circle last time, but there was no guarantee it would fail this time as well.

Riiing.

[Authority of Insight has partially succeeded. You have learned how to use the Rift Seed.]

"This is..."

Kang-Woo's eyes widened as information about the Rift Seed entered his mind.

He didn't know what the theory behind it was or how it had been made, but he had managed to learn how to use the Rift Seed.

'This seems useless.'

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue again. He had to get rid of the Rift Seeds, so learning how to use them was useless to him.

"Huh? Wait."

At that moment, he thought of an idea. Kang-Woo applied the Rift Seed's effect of weakening the system on his body.

The stake that looked like an inverse cross turned into black smoke and disappeared. It was a very slight feeling, but he could sense that the Ten Thousand Demon Core's seal was weakening, and there was demonic energy flowing out of it.

"Yes!!"

Kang-Woo clenched his hands into fists. The Rift Seed's effect was weak, but the seal had certainly gotten weaker, just like when he had activated his Trait 'Reaper of Souls.'

'Demon Cult, my bro...'

Kang-Woo had not expected that the Demon Cult's vast knowledge of controlling Rifts would become so useful to him.

'Thank you for giving me this day my daily bread.'

He couldn't even fathom how much he had benefited while hunting down the Demon Cult. At this point, he couldn't help but think that they were purposefully laying the groundwork for his growth.

'Long live the Demon Cult!'

Kang-Woo couldn't help but feel in awe of them.

He patted No Dick-Chan's shoulder.

"Okay. Thanks for the information."

"Th-Then will you be letting me l-live?"

"Of course, man."

Kang-Woo wasn't shameless enough to ignore someone's kindness. He couldn't kill someone who'd been so helpful to him.

"All right, see ya," Kang-Woo said.

"H-Haha. Oka— AAAGGGHHH!!!"

The moment Kang-Woo dismissed the Authority of Focus, a horrifying scream emerged from No Dick-Chan's mouth. He once again grabbed the area between his legs, and foam frothed at his mouth.

"Oh, my..."

Kang-Woo looked down at No Dick-Chan in worry. The latter's scream sounded desperate. Kang-Woo appeared sad while looking down at No Dick-Chan squirming and screaming in pain.

"There's nothing I can do about this."

He couldn't let his benefactor who'd given him important information suffer from such pain.

Kang-Woo bit his lip and created Gáe Bulg.

"Kurgh, cough!"

He slowly thrust Gáe Bulg, piercing No Dick-Chan's heart. No Dick-Chan died immediately.

"May you rest in peace..." Kang-Woo mumbled in a pained voice. "I won't ever forget your name, No Dick-Chan."

His eyes were tearing up.

Chapter 146 - Gathering Rift Seeds

[Demonic Energy has risen by 0.12]

"What's this now?" Oh Kang-Woo said in bewilderment after reading the system window.

He got that system message as he absorbed the Chrysalis and the demonic energy that flowed out of the Ten Thousand Demon Core.

'A decimal point?'

It was a stat increment that he'd never seen before.

'Is it because the demonic energy from the Chrysalis is kind of ambiguous?'

He hadn't been expecting his stat to go up by one from hunting a Chrysalis anyway. His Demonic Energy stat had risen to 122 thanks to the Blessing of Gaia, so he knew it wouldn't go up from absorbing the Chrysalis.

'Well, I guess it's better than not rising at all.'

A decimal point was better than nothing.

Since he'd found a new jackpot called a Rift Seed, he didn't feel the need to rush.

'As for the Trait, Reaper of Souls...'

Riiing.

[The target is not a demon.]

"Like I thought, it won't activate."

A Chrysalis wasn't a demon but a demonic beast, so it made sense that a Trait that let him absorb souls of demons wouldn't activate.

"I guess I have no choice but to keep hunting demons."

He had to keep absorbing demon souls to fulfill one of the conditions for Demonic Soul.

"First—"

Kang-Woo cut that thought. His growth was not a priority at the moment.

He took out a transparent orb from his pocket.

"Ah, aah, can you hear me?"

[Yes, go ahead,] Gaia's voice rang out from the orb. [Were you able to complete the mission?]

"Yes. I've resolved matters in Daegu."

[Were you hurt in any way during the mission? If you were, you can come to the Hall of Protection to be treated—]

"No."

Gaia seemed worried about Kang-Woo, but he cut Gaia's words short. He hadn't gotten hurt, and he certainly didn't have time to relax while being treated.

"I have acquired important information."

[What kind...?]

Kang-Woo told her about the Rift Seed and how the Demon Cult was sowing Rift Seeds all around the world. Guardians had to mobilize all of their forces to bring the Demon Cult's plan to a halt.

[...] Gaia was silent for a moment.

Then she said solemnly, [I understand. I will contact every single member of Guardians and have them focus on destroying the Rift Seeds.]

"No. We shouldn't destroy them."

That would be a huge loss for Kang-Woo.

Kang-Woo explained in a serious tone, "We should collect them and put them in one place."

[Collect?]

"Yes."

[But if we do that, the Rift Seeds would remain—]

"You don't need to worry about that. The Rift Seeds don't activate as long as they're pulled out of the ground."

[Oh, I see.]

Gaia seemed like she still couldn't fully understand what Kang-Woo was saying.

[But is there a reason we should be collecting them instead of destroying them? Wouldn't it be better to destroy them just in case?]

"That would be true if we just wanted to stop their plan."

Nevertheless, Kang-Woo didn't falter. Making situations flow in the direction he wanted was his forte.

[Then why...?]

"You need to think more long term. We won't be able to solve the lingering issue by only acting after the Demon Cult makes their moves."

[Ah.]

"Have you ever tried to research the Demon Cult's knowledge?"

[Of course, but it's such esoteric knowledge that we weren't able to get results.]

"In such cases, the better it is to have more research materials. The Demon Cult can cause incidents like that so unilaterally because of all of the knowledge they've obtained through the years. Without researching that, we'll always be a step behind them."

[Ahhh.]

She voiced apologetically, [I had no idea you had thought that far... I apologize. I didn't know you thought so seriously about the Demon Cult.]

"Haha. I'm just being selfish. As a resident of Earth, I'm just doing my best to save myself."

[No, that can't be called being selfish,] Gaia stated firmly. [If you just wanted to save yourself, you could've stayed down and remained hidden. But you stepped up to protect those precious to you. You're fighting while putting your life at risk. You couldn't call such determination selfish.]

Kang-Woo laughed lightly, "Haha. That's embarrassing. You don't need to praise me so much."

[Hoho, you don't need to be so humble. As you've suggested, we will try to collect as many Rift Seeds as possible without destroying them.]

"Thank you."

[No, I should be the one thanking you. I will take measures so that we can collect as many of them as possible.]

"I will also collect as many as I can."

The call was cut. A smile appeared on Kang-Woo's face.



"Of course, we should collect them instead of destroying them."

Collecting the Rift Seeds for research to put a stop to the plan permanently...? That was nonsense. Even with the Authority of Insight, Kang-Woo couldn't completely decipher the Demon Cult's knowledge.

If it was knowledge not even the demon king who used to rule over the Nine Hells could understand, there was no way Guardians would be able to figure something out through research.

"And putting a permanent stop to it is out of the question."

He couldn't let the Demon Cult roam around freely, but that didn't mean he wanted to stop their plan. To Kang-Woo, the Demon Cult were chefs who prepared delicious food for him.

'I'll squeeze as much as I can out of them before throwing them away.'

He walked out of the Gate with a thought that would make the Demon Cult members go insane if they were to hear it.

Echidna and Vaal Zahak followed him out after clearing out all the demonic beasts around them.

"Echidna, Vaal Zahak. There are two more gates near this area. See if there's the stake that we saw earlier in either of them. If there is, don't destroy it and bring it to me."

"Okay, Kang-Woo."

[As you command.]

The two summoned beasts moved according to his command.

Kang-Woo took out his smartphone after exiting the gate.

'I already contacted Gaia.'

It was time to make the other people that he knew take action. Kang-Woo contacted Tian Suyan, Cha Yeon-Joo, and Jang Hyun-Jae.

After explaining the situation to the three people, he asked them to collect the Rift Seeds.

"This should be enough for China and Korea."

There was only Japan left.

Kang-Woo took out the card with the contact information he'd received before. It was Kurosaki Yurie's number.

'I'm not sure why she cares so much for me, but...'

She was too good a contact to not use in this situation.

Brrr—

[Kurosaki Yurie speaking, Master Kang-Woo.]

'She picked up so damn quickly.'

Yurie had answered before the call even finished ringing once.

"Hello, Ms. Kurosaki. I believe this is the first time we're speaking over the phone."

[Yes, I believe so.]

Yurie sounded a bit cold, seemingly displeased that Kang-Woo had not called her even once.

"I apologize for not contacting you earlier. I've been very busy lately."

[Not at all. I'm sure you had your reasons.]

It seemed like her mood improved.

"The reason why I've contacted you is..."

He began explaining the Rift Seeds.

[I see...I understand. We will also conduct thorough investigations.]

"Thank you."

[Oh, may I ask you something?]

"Of course."

[This group that's known as the Demon Cult... do you happen to know which demon they serve? I've tried conducting my own investigations, but I haven't been able to find anything.]

"Mmm."

It was a sudden question, but there was no reason for Kang-Woo to hesitate with a reply.

"They serve the demon Satan."

It wouldn't be good if only Guardians knew about the existence of the Demon of Prophecy, Satan.

'It'd be better if as many people as possible know about it.'

Kang-Woo had already told the people closest to him, like Suyan and Yeon-Joo, about Satan. The more people knew about Satan's existence, the fewer people would suspect Kang-Woo.

[Hmm. Satan, you say?]

Yurie seemed dissatisfied with the answer.

Kang-Woo tilted his head puzzledly at her reaction.

Nevertheless, he answered confidently, "Yes, the demon they serve is Satan."

[I see. I understand.]

"Then I will be looking forward to your call once you've collected the Rift Seeds."

[Very well. I will do as you ask, Master Kang-Woo.]

"Thank you very much."

Kang-Woo was about to cut the call when...

[Oh, right. There was something else I wanted to ask you. Is that okay?]

"Yes, of course."

[It's a personal question completely unrelated to this incident, but... do you happen to know the myth of Cthulhu?]

"Myth of Cthulhu?"

The question was so out of left field that it caught Kang-Woo off guard.

'I believe it's a myth containing tons of tentacles.'

Kang-Woo had heard about it because it had been overused in many forms of media.

"Yes, I do, but why..."

[I have the power to call upon the power of gods, so I have been investigating many different myths. I wanted to ask your opinion on a few that caught my attention.]

"Oh, I see."

Kang-Woo recalled her ability—the power to borrow the power of gods in Japanese mythology.

'To be more precise, it's the ability to summon the power of otherworldly beings.'

It was an ability he thought would be worth researching in detail one day.

'I'm certain there's a dimension where gods of mythology reside.'

There was a chance that Gaia's true body existed in that dimension.

'The myth of Cthulhu, huh?'

If it hadn't come out of someone's imagination and was about an existing world...

'It should be good to investigate their powers beforehand.'

After sorting out his thoughts, Kang-Woo said, "It does seem interesting. Are you able to draw out the powers of beings from outside of Japanese mythology?"

[No, that's not the case. I can only borrow the power of gods in Japanese mythology.]

"Hmm. I see."

Kang-Woo wasn't sure if he was happy or disappointed.

'I guess it's a good thing.'

He didn't want to see a god covered in tentacles.

[Fufu. I see, you're interested. Thank you very much. I will call you again next time,] Yurie murmured while giggling unnervingly and ended the call.

"Ah, understood."

Kang-Woo looked at his smartphone with confused eyes.

'What an enigmatic woman.'

Yurie had sent an octopus as a gift. Then she'd asked something completely unexpected out of the blue. Kang-Woo couldn't help but think that she was a bit crazy.

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

As long as Yurie didn't get in his way, it didn't matter if she was a bit nuts.

For the moment, Kang-Woo's focus wasn't on Yurie but on the Rift Seeds that were being sown throughout the world.

'The net has been cast.'

A broad grin appeared on his face.

It was time for him to patiently wait for the harvest.

'Now I just have to wait.'

Chapter 147 - I Am Satan (1)

The entire world took action. It might sound a bit exaggerated, but there wasn't a better way to describe it.

The first country that took action was the USA, followed by China, and then Korea. Each country focused on collecting the Rift Seeds to the point that they offered expensive rewards for them.

It was inevitable because without providing proper incentives to the Players, the country could be destroyed if the Demon Cult were left to act freely. Even if they didn't want to offer rewards, the people protested that the governments should.

That's why even countries that weren't in the best financial situation were forced to offer rewards. After all, money moved people. Since monetary rewards were being offered, even normal players moved in search of Rift Seeds.

Commenter (Nature will rise against you!): damn they really gonna suck the Demon Cult dry this time LMAO

└ Players are finally doing their jobs!

Commenter (The light shall burn you!): But why are these guys planting thingies that look like wards[1] inside Gates?

└ Prob to get more vision[2]

└ Bat Editor: are they trying to summon something else?

└ Butterfly Valley: Ah, I hope I could tell you what I know ;;;

└ JerryM: I got to Level 100 on LoL today!!

Commenter (Astounding!): But I'm so glad we aren't just letting them do as they want

└ I heard they already found a hundred of those ward thingies all over the world??

LMAO serves those Demon Cult SOBs right!

There were huge reactions on the internet. People were celebrating that the Demon Cult's plan was being ruined. That showed how much people feared the Demon Cult.

"Very nice."

Oh Kang-Woo smiled while he was reading the internet news.

It had been ten days since the world had started collecting Rift Seeds. Players who were blind for money searched day and night for them.

"Money sure comes in handy."

There was nothing like money to make people move.

Due to the massive number of players participating and how fast Guardians dealt with the situation, they had already collected many Rift Seeds.

'Although I'm sure it's not 100%.'

Even if they were blind for money, Players didn't go to areas completely taken over by monsters like the Middle East or South America. There was a chance that the Rift Seeds planted in those areas hadn't been found.

'This is good enough.'

Kang-Woo wasn't sure what the Demon Cult was planning. However, he would welcome it if the Demon Cult were still able to partially succeed in whatever they were planning even after the whole world had interfered with their plan. He would like it even more if they could summon a massive number of demons like before.

"I should get going."

Kang-Woo walked out of the apartment and went up to the rooftop. He placed the crystal orb that he'd received from Guardians on the floor.

A little bit later, a small gate appeared. It led to the Hall of Protection.

'Its real location is somewhere in the USA, apparently.'

It was a device, which was beyond the reach of science, that allowed one to cross the Pacific Ocean in an instant. The power of magic allowed such miracles to become reality.

Kang-Woo took a step forward. His field of vision became distorted, and a weird sensation shook his body.

Nevertheless, it only lasted for a short while. The white passageway he was now familiar with appeared in front of him.

"Oh, good to see you, hyung-nim!"

As Kang-Woo entered the passageway, he was greeted by Kim Si-Hun.

Si-Hun was in charge of collecting the Rift Seeds in the Middle East, an area that the average player couldn't even think of stepping foot into.

"Sorry for calling you during your training."

"Not at all. I can't keep training during a crisis like this. Also, the mission area was quite helpful in terms of training."

"How is the Middle East?"

"...Quite serious. It makes Shanghai seem like paradise," Si-Hun said with a hardened expression.

Kang-Woo nodded.

Areas like Shanghai and Sapporo were being somewhat maintained because China and Japan hadn't collapsed. However, regions like the Middle East and South America had fallen into ruin on the Day of Calamity and completely become monster habitats. It was obvious that the situation would be much worse in those areas.

"Good work," Kang-Woo said.

"It was nothing. Oh, I heard it was you who realized this situation first and came up with the necessary countermeasures."

Si-Hun looked at Kang-Woo with eyes full of admiration.

Kang-Woo smirked and replied, "I just did what I had to do. After all, I'm also a member of Guardians now."

"Haha. I'm sure you would've done the same thing even if you weren't part of Guardians, hyung-nim."

"Flattery won't get you anything, man. Let's go."

"Yes, hyung-nim."

Si-Hun laughed and followed behind Kang-Woo.

As they opened the door and entered, they were greeted by Gaia and Grace McCubbin.

"Hello, Kang-Woo," Gaia greeted.

"Hello. How is the situation?"

Gaia smiled softly. She moved her thin arms toward the table.

"It's as you can see," she said.

The translucent globe that they had seen before appeared. The barrier of light surrounding the Earth had gotten noticeably weaker than before.

Gaia continued, "The situation has worsened compared to before the seeds were planted, but if we hadn't done anything, the situation would be much worse."

"Is it still worsening?" Kang-Woo asked.

Gaia shook her head. "No. The damage to the system has been stable since three days ago."

"That's good to hear."

That was likely due to more than just the removal of the Rift Seeds. After all, it was unlikely all of the seeds that had been sown worldwide had been collected.

'The Demon Cult must have more or less achieved what they had been aiming for.'

The Demon Cult hadn't made any other moves, so there was a high chance they had managed to fulfill their plan.

Whatever the reason was, the situation with the Rift Seeds had been resolved.

"We can't let our guards down just yet... but we were able to minimize the damage thanks to your quick judgment. Thank you very much, Kang-Woo," Gaia expressed and bowed.

"Not at all. More importantly, where are the Rift Seeds being stored?"

That was Kang-Woo's primary reason for coming here. He wanted to check where the Rift Seeds were being stored.

"This way."

Grace pushed Gaia's wheelchair, and they moved to another gate. As they walked through the gate, they were greeted by intense sunlight.

Kang-Woo saw a vast land that had cracks running through it, as if God had used a mace to split it.

"This is..."

Kang-Woo's eyes shone.

He had never traveled here before, but he was familiar with it since he had seen photos.

"It's the Grand Canyon," Grace remarked.

"...It's enormous."

It seemed like it was also Si-Hun's first time seeing the Grand Canyon. He looked around with his mouth agape.

The might of nature that could be felt from the Grand Canyon was truly imposing.

"Guardians has a secret vault at the foot of the canyon. We have stored the Rift Seeds there."

"Isn't it too famous a place to call it a secret vault?"

The Grand Canyon was a very famous tourist destination. Even though tourism had plummeted after the Day of Calamity, it was a place that didn't go well with the word 'secret.'

Gaia softly giggled and explained, "The Grand Canyon is extremely vast. The area tourists can visit is just a very tiny part. This is a place that tourists can't reach."

"Aha."

Kang-Woo nodded and followed her.

They walked between the giant canyons until Gaia stopped in front of a solid rock wall.

"Protector Zhuge Xian. It's Gaia."

[You're back,] a voice rang out from behind the rock wall.

"What the...?" Si-Hun uttered.

He looked around confusedly for the source of the voice. Then something unbelievable happened.

Whoosh.

A gust of wind blew, and the giant rock wall disappeared. A silver door appeared in place of the rock wall.

"This is...'

Kang-Woo's eyes widened in shock, as even he hadn't been able to sense it.

Grace said, "This is Zhuge Xian's illusion. There's nobody as good as him when it comes to this."

"So, this is an illusion..."

"Impressive, right?"

Grace smirked and opened the door. Then a long-haired man in a suit walked out.

"So, you're the two new members, Mr. Oh Kang-Woo and Mr. Kim Si-Hun. Nice to meet you. I'm Zhuge Xian."

Kang-Woo and Si-Hun shook hands with Zhuge Xian.

As they entered the vault, Zhuge Xian explained, "This vault is being protected with various illusions that I've cast. You may be attacked if you wander around, so please be careful."

"Zhuge Xian is in charge of researching the Rift Seeds."

"Haha. I don't really have much to show for it, though," Zhuge Xian voiced, smiling bitterly.

He opened the door of a vault with '04' written on it.

"This is where we're storing the Rift Seeds that we've collected."

"Wow," Kang-Woo uttered with bright eyes.

There were over a hundred stakes neatly gathered in the vault. He salivated uncontrollably at the sight. He wanted to use the Rift Seeds right then and there to weaken the seal of his Ten Thousand Demon Core.

'I must resist.'

Now wasn't the time.

Kang-Woo drooped his right arm down while casually looking around the vault. The black ring on his right middle finger liquefied and seeped into the floor of the vault. Kang-Woo's figure very briefly became blurred.

"Is there a chance that the Demon Cult could attack this place?" Si-Hun asked while looking around.

Zhuce Xian answered while laughing, "Of course, there is. They might be able to trace the Rift Seeds."

"Then wouldn't it be dangerous...?"

"It's okay," Zhuge Xian affirmed in a confident voice. "My sorcery isn't so weak. This place will be safe unless the Demon of Prophecy invades it. No, not even the Demon of Prophecy would be able to invade this place."

It seemed like he was quite confident in his sorcery.

Grace continued the explanation, "It might sound pretentious, but you can believe him. Although Zhuge Xian's combat capabilities leave much to be desired, his sorcery is incredible."

"Haha. That's from your standards Grace. My sorcery isn't bad in combat either."

With some light chit-chat, they finished exploring the vault.

"Let's go back."



"Yes. I feel reassured after seeing that the Rift Seeds are being well kept."

Kang-Woo laughed lightly and returned to the Hall of Protection.

"Oh, right. How about we all have dinner together at my place?" he proposed.

"Pardon?"

"A-At your house, hyung-nim?"

Gaia and Si-Hun were surprised by the sudden proposition.

Kang-Woo smirked. "Ah. This isn't something for me to brag about, but the food at my house is to die for."

"But..."

"I understand your circumstances, Gaia. But aren't things like this good from time to time? It's just dinner, after all."

"..."

Gaia's expression exposed her hesitance. She was the leader of a secret organization, so she couldn't freely move. It was hard for her to participate in dinner.

"Haha. That sounds like a great proposal," Si-Hun voiced to support Kang-Woo.

He too wanted to stay with Gaia for a bit longer.

"Wh-What should we do, Grace?" Gaia asked in an anxious voice.

Grace laughed lightly and patted her shoulder.

"These kinds of things are fine from time to time, aren't they?"

"Ngh... but..."

"It's not like we're having dinner at a stranger's place. It's a fellow member of Guardians, so what does it matter? As the leader, isn't it important for you to know in what conditions the members live in?"

"That's unfair of you."

Gaia pouted. Grace's laugh became louder.

"Then it's decided," Kang-Woo said.

He smiled and turned around.

'I believe Seol-Ah is in charge of dinner tonight.'

Kang-Woo gulped eagerly and made his way home with Gaia, Grace, and Si-Hun following him.

\* \* \*

"Urgh. I have no idea."

Zhuge Xian sighed.

The long-haired young man was a Player who specialized in sorcery and a Protector who had been chosen by the Gaia System.

He looked down at the black stake on the table in irritation.

"Just how in the world did they make something like this?"

Zhuge Xian was in awe of the Demon Cult's knowledge.

"I'll take a short break."

He grabbed a cup of tea and leaned back on his chair.

"Kim Si-Hun, huh?"

Zhuge Xian recalled the face of the Protector whom he had met earlier. They were both men, but he couldn't help but admire how handsome Si-Hun was.

"He was impressive."

He could sense Si-Hun's immense talent just by looking at him.

"The one next to him was Oh Kang-Woo, I believe?"

Kang-Woo had become a member of Guardians despite not having been chosen as a Protector.

"Hmm..."

Zhuge Xian frowned in dissatisfaction. He didn't like that someone who wasn't a Protector had joined Guardians.

"Having mad connections is a scary thing."

If Si-Hun wasn't sworn brothers with Kang-Woo, it was unlikely that Kang-Woo would have been able to enter Guardians.

"Let's get back to it."

Zhuge Xian put down the cup of tea.

He had tons of research samples, so he could conduct as many experiments as he liked.

"Well, seeing that he proposed something like this, he doesn't seem to be an idiot."

He'd heard that Kang-Woo was the one who had suggested collecting the Rift Seeds instead of destroying them.

Zhuge Xian pulled up his chair and placed his hand on top of the black stake.

Right then...

Boom!!!

A huge impact shook the vault.

"Wh-What the—?!"

Zhuge Xian got up. He raised his hand, and a complex magic circle appeared on top of it. The outside came into view.

"Th-This is..."

He saw a person who was shrouded in darkness and wearing a red demon mask. The mask tilted, and the man's eyes stopped right where the spell was located.

Zhuge Xian's eyes met the man's gaze through the video. A shudder ran down his skin.

"D-Don't tell me..."

He trembled. Zhuge Xian remembered hearing it from Gaia—no, even if he hadn't heard of it from anyone... After feeling the immense energy from the man, there was only one being that Zhuge Xian could think of.

"S-Satan."

The one attacking the vault was the strongest and most evil demon king—the Demon of Prophecy, Satan.

Chapter 148 - I Am Satan (2)

Boom!

"Kurgh!"

A huge impact shook the vault once again.

Zhuge Xian tried to maintain his balance in the middle of the shaking vault. Then he bit his lip and went to the room where he controlled his sorcery.

'Damn.'

He frowned.

Had he jinxed it? He'd never imagined that the Demon of Prophecy would actually invade the vault.

'Don't tell me...'

Zhuge Xian frowned.

The faces of the two new members whom he'd seen earlier today crossed his mind. The timing was too perfect to call it a simple coincidence.

"This isn't the time for that."

Zhuge Xian shook his head. He had other things to focus on.

"Fuuu."

He took a deep breath and quickly regained composure after trembling for only a short while.

Zhuge Xian entered the control room where he controlled every single spell cast within the vault. He sat down in a large chair and reached for the control device.

"The Demon of Prophecy, huh?"

Zhuge Xian gulped and moved his fingers in excitement.

'Even if you're a monster...'

He wasn't planning to let the Demon of Prophecy do as he wished.

Grace hadn't been exaggerating when she'd said that even the Demon of Prophecy wouldn't dare to do as he liked in the vault. The entire vault was under the control of Zhuge Xian's sorcery. He'd cast dozens of different spells to protect it. In the context of war, it was as if the enemy forces were rushing toward a fortress that had a massive wall riddled with cannons.

According to Zhuge Xian's calculations, not even the Demon of Prophecy would be able to do as he wished here.

"First off..."

Before starting, there was something he had to do. Zhuge Xian grabbed a transparent orb while putting on his mask.

[Requesting immediate backup.]

Leaving his confidence behind, the most important thing was telling Gaia about the situation. He could stall for time with his sorcery while waiting for support.

'No...'

A smile appeared on his face.

'If everything goes well, I could even defeat the Demon of Prophecy.'

Zhuce Xian searched the surrounding area with sorcery, but it didn't seem like the Demon of Prophecy had brought any reinforcements with him. This meant that Satan had decided to attack the vault alone.

Seeing as the Demon of Prophecy had jumped into the enemy's territory alone, it might just be a golden opportunity for Zhuge Xian.

Riiing.

[An unknown energy is surrounding the vault. The backup request has been hindered.]

"Damn."

All of Zhuge Xian's excitement disappeared, and he anxiously bit his lip. He slowly reread the message window that had appeared in front of his eyes.

'The message isn't being blocked.'

It was being hindered.

That meant that if he made the Demon of Prophecy exhaust his power, he might be able to weaken the energy surrounding the vault.

'I guess I have no choice but to fight.'

Zhuce Xian put on the headgear that he used to control his sorcery from the control room. The situation outside entered his field of vision; it was as if he were playing a VR game.

The combination of sorcery and headgear didn't seem like it would work well together, but the synergy between them was better than imagined.

'Those narrow-minded geezers would never understand.'

Sorcery had been passed down in the Zhuge Family before the Day of Calamity. As the heir, Zhuge Xian had learned sorcery ever since he was a child. He possessed a talent for sorcery like no other, so he did not stop at simply learning the sorcery passed down between generations and instead tried combining sorcery and modern science. The sorcerers in his family criticized his decision to combine sorcery and modern science, but that didn't stop him.

"Let's begin."

Zhuge Xian placed his hands on the keyboard while wearing the headgear.

He had created this sorcery device using modern science after much research. The power of the device far surpassed that of regular sorcery.

[System Activated. Defense level set to 2.]

"Not enough. Raise it to four."

[Correction. Adjusting defense level to 4.]

Zhuge Xian quickly moved his hands in tandem with the robotic voice. Typing sounds filled the control room.

'Here he comes.'

The demon in the red mask began to move.

Tap. Tap. The demon moved slowly and relaxed as if he were taking a stroll in a park.

Zhuge Xian frowned.

"So, you're going to act all relaxed, huh?"

He didn't like it. His hands moved swiftly.

"Let's see how long you can maintain that attitude."

[Commencing intruder banishment.]

Two magic circles appeared around the demon. They rose upward and poured down a stream of fire on him. However, the flames bounced away from the shroud of darkness and spewed all over the floor.

The demon continued advancing.

Then an ice spear emerged from a third magic circle and flew toward the demon.

Smash!

The demon lightly waved his hand and shattered the ice spear.

The floor split, and rocks were flung up from the ground. The demon stomped on the ground, destroying the floor along with the soaring rocks.

The demon didn't stop there.

Then thirty-seven magic circles lit up. Rays of light poured down on the demon like a rainstorm. The demon lightly flicked his finger, and all of the rays of light were vaporized.

Sixty-four magic circles appeared and caused a huge explosion. An ear-splitting noise and pieces of debris spread out in all directions. However, the demon walked out of the cloud of dust, unfazed, and the darkness surrounding him remained undisturbed.

The demon just kept going.

"Adjust defense level to five."

Beads of cold sweat dripped from Zhuge Xian's forehead. His typing speed increased.

[Adjusting defense level to 5.]

Rumble!

A partition wall next to the vault opened. Golems emitting a blue light flooded out and charged toward the demon.

The demon lowered his posture, drooping down his arms to his sides. He then stretched them outward like unfurling wings.

Crack!

Black blades rose from the ground and pierced the golems. All of the golems were destroyed in a single attack.

"Adjust defense level to six."

[Adjusting defense level to 6.]

172 magic circles appeared and surrounded the demon, shining at him simultaneously. A black wave surged out from the demon, and the wedges of light exploded.

"Fuuu, fuuu."

Zhuge Xian's breath became heavier. He was typing as if he was about to destroy the keyboard.

The wedges of light that poured in all directions hit each other and merged, creating a glorious sight. They formed a spear of light over thirty meters long.

'And then...'

He added illusions on top of that. Dozens more light spears appeared. Only one was real, but those who weren't specialized in sorcery wouldn't be able to tell which one it was.

Spears of light flew at the demon.

'You won't be able to block these.'

Zhuge Xian was sure of it.

BOOM!!

A huge explosion shook the Grand Canyon. The rock wall crumbled, forming a dust cloud.

"What the..."

Zhuge Xian saw the demon grabbing the real light spear. The demon had been able to pick out the real one from among the dozens of illusions.

Snap!

The giant light spear cracked, shattering into pieces.

Zhuge Xian couldn't see the demon's expression due to the mask, but he was sure that the demon was smiling.

"Huff! Huff!"

He breathed heavily from his overuse of sorcery. Warm blood dripped out of his nose, ran down his lips, and into his mouth.

"A-Adjust defense level to seven."

[Adjusting defense level to maximum. Activating 'Sword of Protec—']

Crush!

Before the system message could finish, the partition wall of the control room was torn down. The demon in the red mask emerged through the broken wall.

Zhuge Xian shuddered, uttering, "M-Monster."

He trembled. 'Monster' was the only word he could think of.

[How dare you compare me to a mere monster?] the demon in the red mask said quietly. [Did you really believe you could stop me with that toy?]

The demon extended his hand. A huge pulling force dragged Zhuge Xian toward him.

"Kurgh!"

[Remember this, human.]

The demon fixed his aggressive gaze on Zhuge Xian.

[I am death, I am the end. I am the father of all wrath, and I am wrath itself.]

The mask twisted.

[I am Satan.]

After the demon finished saying that, Zhuge Xian lost consciousness.

\* \* \*

"...What?" Gaia uttered with a trembling voice.

The tableware she held in her hand fell to the ground, and her other hand, which was holding the communication orb, shook.

"What's wrong?" Kim Si-Hun asked while making a worried expression.

Gaia had been having a good time eating dinner in Kang-Woo's home. However, her expression darkened after she answered a call through the orb.

Oh Kang-Woo's, Grace McCubbin's, and Han Seol-Ah's expressions hardened upon seeing Gaia's sudden change in demeanor.

"Th-The vault... was attacked."

"Attacked? Was it the Demon Cult?" Kang-Woo asked in a hurried voice.

Gaia answered with a pale face, "The one who attacked the vault was... Satan."

"...What?"

Everyone was astonished.

Kang-Woo's, Si-Hun's, and Grace's mouths fell open at the unexpected development of events. It was shocking that Satan had attacked the vault. Despite how ridiculous it might sound, they had never imagined that Satan would actually take action himself.

"S-Satan?!" Si-Hun exclaimed in shock and grabbed Gaia's shoulders.

Gaia bit her lip and nodded. "...Yes. He invaded the vault an hour ago and took all of the seeds that we had collected."

"Kuh!" Si-Hun hurriedly got up. Then he turned to Kang-Woo. "Hyung-nim!"

"Let's go," Kang-Woo said with a nod, getting up as well.

Si-Hun opened a gate that led toward the Hall of Protection, with Grace and Gaia following him.

Kang-Woo walked behind them.

'Good.'

The Authority of Cloning had done its job well.

Of course, the Satan that had invaded the vault wasn't his clone. There was no way that a clone he'd created with an Authority would be powerful enough to destroy Guardians' vault. A clone could only do simple tasks like eating and talking.

"Haha," Kang-Woo laughed lightly.

Yes... his clone could only do simple tasks like eating or talking.

'With this...'

He'd obtained the Rift Seeds that had been collected from all over the world and gained the perfect alibi proving that he wasn't Satan.

Kang-Woo's clone followed Si-Hun, Gaia, and Grace through the Gate and disappeared.

Chapter 149 - Demonic Energy From the Deep End

"What the..."

Kim Si-Hun's body trembled. A terrible sight was in front of him.

A collapsed rock wall, a massive pile of rubble, and a torn partition wall.

The amazing work of nature that he had seen this morning had become a horrible sight of destruction. It was as if a natural disaster had happened.

Si-Hun and the other Guardian members had their mouths agape in shock.

"G-Grace, what exactly happened?" Gaia, who was blind, pulled Grace McCubbin's sleeve.

Grace couldn't bring herself to answer; she had her mouth closed.

"Huff! Hurgh! Cough!"

Zhuge Xian walked out of the debris. He had fallen into mana exhaustion, but at a glance, it seemed he hadn't suffered any major injuries.

"Protector Zhuge Xian!" Gaia shouted in an anxious voice.



Xian bowed while making a hard expression.

"... I'm sorry, Madam Gaia."

"A-Are you okay?"

"Yes. I wasn't injured, but..."

Zhuge Xian turned his head. The canyon had collapsed as if an earthquake had occurred.

He bit his lip.

"I wasn't able to protect... the Rift Seeds."

"Haaa, but I'm glad to hear that you're not hurt."

Gaia sighed in relief. Si-Hun walked toward Zhuge Xian.

"What in the world happened?"

"..."

Zhuge Xian didn't answer. He glared at Si-Hun and Oh Kang-Woo.

"Where have you two been?"

"Us?"

"If you're suspecting these two, there's no need," Grace said while sighing. "I understand what you're thinking, considering the timing, but they've been with us the whole time."

"Ah..."

Zhuge Xian let out a short exclamation. He lowered his head while making a dark expression.

"I'm sorry. It's just that the timing in which Satan invaded the vault coincided with when you two visited the vault, so I couldn't help but be suspicious of you."

Si-Hun and Kang-Woo nodded.

Just like he said, it was understandable that he'd be suspicious, considering the timing of the attack.

"They wouldn't do something like that," Gaia said in a firm voice.

Once again, Zhuge Xian lowered his head.

"I understand, Madam Gaia. I will keep that in mind. I apologize to the two of you."

"No, your suspicion is valid," Kang-Woo replied. "Haaa. If we knew Satan was going to invade, we would've stayed in the vault a bit longer."

"It isn't your fault, Kang-Woo. No one could have expected anything like this to happen," Gaia replied to Kang-Woo.

Kang-Woo sighed as if he regretted not having been able to do anything.

He had a heavy expression.

'Yolo!'

But unlike his expression, he was celebrating on the inside.

'It went more smoothly than I'd expected.'

To be honest, he was worried that he'd taken action too fast, but Gaia and Grace dealt with the situation better than he had expected. Rather, he felt like their trust in him had gone up dramatically after the incident.

'No, it definitely did.'

After this incident, the possibility of Kang-Woo being Satan had likely completely disappeared from Gaia's mind. She had probably never thought that in the first place, but now, it was a bit different. From now on, even if he did something suspicious, she would never imagine Kang-Woo and Satan to be one and the same.

That meant he could act a bit more freely from now on.

'Although I'm most certainly not Satan.'

Kang-Woo nodded repeatedly. He was definitely unrelated to Satan, a wicked being who only committed evil.

If Satan was evil, then Kang-Woo was the justice that judged evil.

It was only natural that they wouldn't be able to find a connection between him and someone like the Demon of Prophecy, who wanted to destroy the world.

'What a piece of trash.'

The entire world had taken action to collect the Rift Seeds.

There had been many Players who'd died during the process, and there were also many Players who'd died while fighting Demon Cultists.

To think that Satan would take away all the Rift Seeds that had been collected through all that sacrifice... Satan's evil deeds made Kang-Woo grind his teeth in anger.

"We shouldn't forget."

"Kang-Woo...?"

"We should never forget... that carelessness is a greater weapon than any other and that Satan will use that weapon against us at the slightest of opportunities."

After hearing what he said, every Guardians member remained silent. Everyone clenched their fists in frustration.

Carelessness.

He wasn't wrong. They had already known there was a chance that the Demon Cult would track the Rift Seeds and attack, but they hadn't put any other security measures in place besides Zhuge Xian's sorcery.

Gaia said, "I'm sorry. This is all because of my lack of—"

"It isn't only your responsibility, Gaia. We have all made mistakes."

"Ah."

"Everyone can make mistakes. What matters is that we learn from it. It's a very common phrase, but it's hard to put into practice." Kang-Woo turned around. He patted the pile of debris. "Satan is strong. We can't relax just because he became weaker after crossing dimensions."

"... You're right."

Gaia nodded.

Kang-Woo turned around. There was one thing members of Guardians had to do in this situation.

"We have to get stronger."

Everyone nodded at Kang-Woo's words. Their determination and will to fight could be felt.

'Yup, we sure gotta get stronger.'

They'd definitely realized how powerful Satan was after this incident.

They couldn't remain still.

'We sure gotta.'

Whatever it took.

Kang-Woo smiled.

\* \* \*

A few days after the Satan incident, Zhuge Xian and Grace focused on restoring the destroyed vault.

Since Satan had discovered its location, they couldn't keep the vault at the Grand Canyon, but they were restoring it anyway to retrieve the Sword of Protection, the vault's defense mechanism.

It had been damaged after Satan's attack, but it wasn't damaged to the point that they couldn't repair it. They couldn't afford to leave behind one of their most valuable defense mechanisms.

Kang-Woo and Si-Hun didn't take part in the retrieval for training reasons.

Si-Hun went to the Middle East again with Tian Wuchen.

As for Kang-Woo...

"Let's begin."

There were more than a hundred black stakes in front of him. He smiled in satisfaction while looking down at the Rift Seeds in front of him.

He had not been able to gain much after just using one, but he had over a hundred of them at the moment. It was normal for him to be excited.

"I'm not expecting that much. Let's just get to 123."

One stat point.

His Demonic Energy stat had surpassed 120, so even one stat point made a huge difference.

"Alright."

The preparations were done. It was about time to begin.

Kang-Woo extended his hand toward the Rift Seeds. He absorbed the seeds into his body just as he'd learned using the Authority of Insight.

Whir!

Black energy flew out of the Rift Seeds. Although the amount was small individually, the energy became significantly thicker after over a hundred of them were gathered together.

'Just one stat point!'

Kang-Woo shouted from within and guided the energy toward his heart. He could feel the black energy attacking the system sealing the Ten Thousand Demon Core.

Rumble!

The ground shook.

An explosive amount of black demonic energy soared toward the sky.

Crack. The ground he was standing on couldn't resist the massive energy, and split.

An ecstatic power spread throughout his body.

Riiing.

[The seal of the Ten Thousand Demon Core has weakened.]

[Demonic Energy has risen by 3.]

"Three...?"

His mouth fell open. He would've been happy with an increase of one, but to think that it would rise by three... Although he was happy, he couldn't understand it either.

"What happened?"

Kang-Woo lightly closed his eyes. He analyzed the demonic energy inside his body and very quickly found the reason.

'Demonic energy from the deep end had been released.'

The demonic energy of the Ten Thousand Demon Core was separated into three layers. The shallow end, the deep end, and...

'The Abyss.'

The deepest area of the Ten Thousand Demon Core.

He hadn't been able to control the demonic energy from the Abyss, even when he'd been in Hell.

"Demonic energy from the deep end is finally also being released."

Until recently, only demonic energy from the shallow end had flowed out, but a tiny bit of demonic energy from the deep end had been released as well.

Of course, it wasn't purely from the deep end; it only made up a portion of the demonic energy released.

'But...'

The fact that it had been released was what mattered.

"Just a little more, and I should be able to face Balrog."

He smiled in satisfaction. He had made enough progress, and it would have taken months if only demonic energy from the shallow end had been released.

Forget archdemons; he felt like he would soon be on the same level as Balrog and Lilith.

"It's still not enough."

Kang-Woo's eyes shone. If it were when he first arrived on Earth, he would've thought that this much strength was more than enough.

To be honest, barely anyone on Earth would be a match for him as long as he was as powerful as an archdemon.

But the situation had changed.

'The princes of Hell.'

There was a chance he would have to fight them. If even one of the princes of Hell appeared, Earth would be no match for them with their current level of strength.

Numbers were meaningless before a prince of Hell. The only one who could face a prince was another prince.

Although Players overall were getting stronger, if someone asked him if he thought that they would grow enough to be able to face a prince of Hell, he would naturally shake his head.

'Maybe Si-Hun could.'

Among the Players Kang-Woo had met, there wasn't any Player besides Si-Hun who had the potential to face a prince of Hell one day.

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue.

"It's too unbalanced."

The gap in the average power level of Earth and Hell was far too big.

Anyway, what Kang-Woo had to do was already decided.

'I have to get strong enough to be able to face a prince of Hell.'

Although he also had to take into account the divine realm where gods like Susanoo and Gaia resided and the celestial realm that he had only heard about, the battle against the princes of Hell was top priority.

"After all, Satan has already been revived."

The Demon of Prophecy, Satan.

In that situation, he was the opponent he had to be the wariest about.

Just taking into consideration that he'd invaded the vault of Guardians, it was obvious that he was already a member of the Demon Cult.

No, rather than just being a member, there was a chance he was the one controlling it from the shadows.

"Satan."

He recalled the powerful demon he'd faced in the Ninth Hell in the past.

He naturally clenched his fists.

"I'll protect this world."

He overflowed with a sense of justice.

Chapter 150 - A Hero from Another World

A week had passed since Satan's attack.

While the members of Guardians were focusing on personal training, Oh Kang-Woo focused on the Demon Cult's movements.

"They haven't taken any action whatsoever?"

"No. I've investigated thoroughly, but they haven't moved in the slightest."

"Hmm."

Kang-Woo gulped. He'd asked Cha Yeon-Joo to investigate Asia and Gaia to investigate Europe and the USA. But after such a massive operation as sowing Rift Seeds worldwide, the Demon Cult hadn't made a move again.

'What's going on?'

Their plan to sow Rift Seeds all around the world hadn't failed. Although the damage was minimized, it was true that the Gaia System had weakened. If their goal was to weaken the Gaia System, they should've taken action afterward.

'I thought they'd do another mass summoning.'

He had planned to devour all of the demons brought to Earth by the summoning, but the Demon Cult hadn't made any moves.

"That's concerning."

"... Right?"

Yeon-Joo nodded.

The normal thing would be for them to make a move, but seeing that they were hiding at such a time made them feel anxious.

"Well, I'll keep investigating for the time being," said Yeon-Joo.

"Please do."

"Oh, right. There was something I wanted to ask you."

Yeon-Joo sat next to him. Kang-Woo tilted his head, and she pointed to the living room.

"Your summoned beast over there... Can you really treat it like that?"

She was pointing at Vaal Zahak, who was focused on cleaning the living room.

The sight of a skeleton wearing a pink apron and a mask was comedy itself.

"It's okay."

[Hahaha! Weaklings! You've all perished without leaving even a speck of dust behind!]

Vaal Zahak even looked happy while cleaning.

Yeon-Joo shook her head in disbelief.

"Of all the summoned beasts, why would you... It's extremely rare even among undead monsters."

"I didn't choose it because I wanted to."

To be honest, he wanted an ancient demonic beast like Halcyon.

Yeon-Joo sighed and said, "Well, leaving that aside, about the Demon of Prophecy that you mentioned..."

"Satan?"

"Yeah, Satan. There was something about him I wanted to ask."

"Go ahead." Kang-Woo nodded.

"That Satan guy... you said he took human form, right?"

"There's a high chance he did."

"Is there anyone you can think of? Since the Demon Cult has been quiet recently, I was thinking that maybe I could investigate who he has transformed into."

It was like a bolt from the blue. Kang-Woo remained silent.

He opened his mouth and confidently said, "I don't think it would matter. Whoever he has turned into, he would be hiding within the Demon Cult as long as he has sided himself with them."

"Hmm, I see."

"So, please investigate the Demon Cult first. Once we get them, we'll be able to get Satan."

"Got it."

Yeon-Joo sighed and nodded.

She playfully poked at his side.

"Maybe you're the Demon of Prophecy? To be honest, it's a bit suspicious how you've become strong so quickly."

'Fuck, how did you know?'

He felt like he'd been hit on the head by a stone someone had thrown as a joke.

However, he wasn't stupid enough to overreact in this situation.

"Why? What would you do if I were the Demon of Prophecy?" he asked back playfully.

Yeon-Joo snickered.

"I'd send you back to Hell as soon as possible."

'Please don't say something as horrifying as that.'

"I'd rather not go somewhere like that."

"Tsk. Well, that's enough joking around. I'm going to work, so see you later."

Yeon-Joo got up and walked out of the house.

Slam. The door closed. Kang-Woo placed his hand on top of his forehead.

"Fuuu."

'That was close.'

He acted calmly, but it was true that he'd flinched at her sharp remark.

When he was calming himself back down...

Vrrr.

"Hmm?"

Something in his pocket began vibrating when he got up. It was the crystal orb used for communication given to Guardians members.

"Hello?"

[We have a mission for you. Abnormalities in the Gaia System have been detected in Suwon's S-rank Gate. Grace, Si-Hun, and I are heading there as we speak, so please come as soon as possible, Kang-Woo.]

"Understood."

Kang-Woo nodded.

Seeing how they hadn't entrusted the mission to just him, it seemed they had tightened their guard in regards to Satan after the last incident.

'Did I make them too cautious?'

It was true that, in terms of the Demon Cult, he was more comfortable moving on his own.

He regretted making them excessively wary of Satan.

'No.'

After recalling what Yeon-Joo had just said as a joke, what happened the other day was necessary.

'Thanks to that, I'm completely free from suspicion.'

While Satan was invading the vault, he was eating dinner with them.

There wasn't a better alibi than that.

The fact that they were too cautious made him feel a bit stifled, but he thought it was also necessary.

'It's better than staying still and being overwhelmed later.'

Taking into consideration numerous factors, it was better this way.



"Let's go."

Kang-Woo put on his white mask and turned to Echidna and Vaal Zahak.

'I guess there's no need for all of us to go.'

If he were alone, it would've been another story, but Grace McCubbin, Gaia, and Kim Si-Hun would be there.

There was no need for him to take both of his summoned beasts.

Tap.

Kang-Woo opened the balcony window. As he used the Authority of the Sky, his body soared up into the sky.

\* \* \*

"Hello, hyung-nim."

The Suwon S-rank Gate at Hwaseok Station. As Kang-Woo entered the Gate he'd visited the most, he was greeted by Si-Hun.

Si-Hun, Grace, and even Gaia in a wheelchair were all wearing white masks.

"Where did the abnormality appear?"

"I'll guide you."

Gaia pointed to the lake in the middle of the Gate with her finger. It was where Kang-Woo had hunted El Cuero months ago.

"That's..."

"What... is that?"

They saw a blue Gate two fingers wide as they approached where she had pointed.

"Could demons be trying to cross into this world?"

"No, I don't think that's the case." Si-Hun shook his head. "The Rift from which demons appear is black, but this—"

"Is blue." Grace also looked at the Gate with great interest as if she had also never seen a Gate of this color before.

Everyone was showing great interest, but of course, not Kang-Woo.

'Wait, this...'

His expression hardened. A blue Gate.

It was definitely the one he'd seen while summoning Echidna and Vaal Zahak.

'Could this Gate be connected to the continent of Aernor?'

He couldn't make such a conclusion since he'd only experienced it two times, but it was true that there was a chance that it was the case.

Kang-Woo couldn't help but feel anxious.

'Fuck, don't tell me...'

Fwoom!!

Before he could finish his thoughts, a blue light spewed out from the Gate.

The Gate, which had only been two fingers wide, widened enough for a person to pass through.

Schwing!

"Watch out!"

The one who reacted first was Si-Hun. Si-Hun unsheathed the El Cuero Blade and shouted.

Grace also took out her rapier.

There was a tense atmosphere.

Step, step.

"#@\$%@#..."

A young, blond, handsome man walked out of the blue Gate.

He was wearing shining silver armor and had a golden sword at his waist. The young man opened his mouth.

An unknown language came out of his mouth.

"What the..."

Si-Hun made a confused expression while grabbing his sword.

The blond young man expressed slight surprise, then waved his hands a few times in the air.

"Ah, ahh. Can you understand me now?"

"Who are you?" Si-Hun asked in a sharp voice.

The blond young man stared at Si-Hun for a while but soon bowed.

"My name is Reynald, the emperor of Arnan."

"... What?"

It was obvious that they would be surprised by what Reynald said.

The atmosphere became cold.

'Oh, fuck.'

The only one who understood what was going on was Kang-Woo.

'Why is this son of a bitch here?'

His head hurt.

Reynald, the hero from another world who had crawled out of the Gate when Kang-Woo had summoned Echidna. It was the person who'd played out a whole soap opera scene in front of him.

"Arnan? Where's that?"

"It is an empire in the continent of Aernor."

"And where is this continent of Aernor...?"

Gaia slurred in confusion.

Reynald looked at Gaia in the white mask. After staring at her for a while, he trembled.

"Ahhh, it must be you! Yes, I'm sure of it. You must be the incarnation of the otherworldly goddess Gaia that Lord Tirion spoke of."

'What's up with this dude now?'

Kang-Woo wasn't sure who this Tirion person was, but it seemed that the man knew about Gaia.

Since Gaia was wearing a mask, it seemed he'd sensed some sort of energy within her.

"... I don't quite understand. Who are you? And where is this continent of Aernor?" Gaia asked in a confused voice.

Reynald opened his mouth.

"The continent of Aernor is..."

The longer his explanation went on for, the more surprised people became.

Another world besides Hell, where demons resided.

Gaia, Si-Hun, and Grace listened carefully to the tales that sounded like something out of a fantasy film.

'I'm fucked.'

In this situation, the only one who wasn't listening to what Reynald was saying was Kang-Woo.

A drop of cold sweat dripped down his forehead.

Judging by the atmosphere, it seemed they weren't going to fight. Rather, it seemed that the heroes of different worlds would get along very well with one another, to the point that Gaia, Grace, and Si-Hun took off their masks midway. However, Kang-Woo didn't dare to take it off.

'He probably remembers my face.'

It wasn't hard to imagine how Reynald would react if he took off his mask.

'Why did he come back here?'

He wasn't sure why he'd crossed dimensions and come to Earth.

The friendlier the Guardians members and Reynald became, the more anxious Kang-Woo became.

"But why did you cross dimensions to Earth, Reynald?" Gaia asked what Kang-Woo was wondering about the most.

"The reason why I came here is"—Reynald gripped the handle of his sword while making a heavy expression—"to eliminate Demon King Vaal Zahak, who had escaped to another world."

There was a heavy silence.

Kang-Woo grabbed his head with both hands.

The situation had worsened.

'Motherfucking hell.'

Things never worked out as intended.