

M. in Hell 151

Chapter 151 - Determination for Kim Si-Hun (1)

"Demon King Vaal Zahak?" Gaia asked in a trembling voice.

They already had their hands full with the Demon of Prophecy, so it was understandable that her head hurt when hearing about another demon king.

She trembled while making an anxious expression.

Reynald nodded.

"Yes. Demon King Vaal Zahak. He is a powerful Lich who plagued Aernor with disease and created an army of undead."

"And you're saying that this demon king came to Earth?" Kim Si-Hun asked while making an anxious expression.

Reynald nodded.

"Correct. According to Lord Tirion, Demon King Vaal Zahak sold his soul to a demon of another world to cross between the two dimensions."

'Fucking hell.'

Oh Kang-Woo's expression became pale.

'I'm fucked.'

He hadn't kept Vaal Zahak's existence hidden from those close to him.

Han Seol-Ah had become quite a good friend with him, and even Cha Yeon-Joo and Si-Hun had also seen him before.

Not only that, even Seol-Ah's mother, Kim Mi-Jeong, had gotten used to Vaal Zahak, and they often chatted together.

'But Si-Hun and Yeon-Joo don't know his name.'

They just thought of Vaal Zahak as some low-ranking monster like a Skeleton.

It was understandable. The Vaal Zahak they'd seen was just a bag of bones wearing a pink apron who concentrated on doing housework.

It was impossible to associate him with a term like demon king.

'But...'

The situation wasn't good.

Things would be different if he'd kept Vaal Zahak hidden from the beginning, but that hadn't been the case.

'How could I have possibly known something like this would happen?'

It was unfair.

Who would've thought that Reynald would follow Vaal Zahak to another world?

No, in the first place, Kang-Woo had almost forgotten Reynald even existed.

'What's wrong with just having a nice life in your own world with that girl Reina, or whatever the fuck her name was? Why the fuck did you have to come all the way here to mess shit up?'

He glared at Reynald with resentment. Reynald was an absolute nuisance.

If peace had come to Aernor after Demon King Vaal Zahak disappeared, he should've just shut up and enjoyed the peace.

'You even received a love confession, man.'

Reynald had left his lover behind and come all the way to Earth by himself after playing out an entire soap opera in front of Kang-Woo before.

Kang-Woo wanted to tear his head apart and examine his brain.

While Kang-Woo was glaring at Reynald with resentment, the conversation continued.

"A demon of another world..."

"I was told that he is a supreme demon standing above all demons and that he is the holder of the Demonic Sea," Reynald answered.

There was a heavy atmosphere.

'Oh, fuck.'

His head began spinning. It seemed Reynald also knew a bit about him.

Of course, even if Reynald accused Kang-Woo of being a demon king, he wouldn't immediately be labeled as one. It was obvious that people would trust Kang-Woo more than someone who'd come from another world. Reynald, instead, would be the one put in a predicament.

'But...'

There was a huge difference between no one suspecting anything and a trigger that could plant doubt in people.

There was an insurmountable wall between nothing and something; Kang-Woo's efforts to obtain a perfect alibi through the Authority of Cloning would be for nothing.

"It must be Satan."

Kang-Woo quickly opened his mouth. He didn't have time to think of any other way.

'I'll go all in on Satan!'

Gaia and Si-Hun nodded.

"Yes. I believe so as well."

"There's no one besides him who could do something like that."

Their support was quite helpful.

"Is Satan the name of the demon that holds the Demonic Sea?" Reynald asked with shining eyes.

'Sure is.'

"Yes," Si-Hun said. "I'm not sure what this Demonic Sea is, but I'm sure Satan is the demon standing above all demons."

'That's it, Si-Hun!'

Kang-Woo clenched his fists after seeing how Si-Hun was backing him up. He was driving Satan to be the culprit with just the slightest nudge from Kang-Woo, so Si-Hun was practically doing all the work for him.

'Well done, my boy!'

It was normal that he'd cheer for Si-Hun.

"I see." Reynald nodded. After thinking for a while, he turned to Gaia. "In that case, it must not be simply a coincidence that I've met you here, Lady Gaia."

'What the hell are you talking about now?'

Kang-Woo's expression naturally distorted.

Reynald said in a serious tone, "I've been guided here to meet you through Lord Tirion's guidance and revelation."

'Bullshit.'

"You could say that it's destiny," Reynald said.

Gaia looked perplexed at his words.

It would've been weird if she was calm after hearing someone from another world talk about stuff like destiny.

He continued, "I cannot defeat the demon king alone."

'Then why the fuck did you come here, dumbass?'

"But if you and I join forces, we can defeat him. As an apostle of Tirion, the God of Heroes, I would like to help you, Lady Gaia."

Gaia remained silent after hearing Reynald. She was wondering if she could trust him or not.

Kang-Woo wanted to shout that they should behead that damn swindler, but it wasn't a situation where he could say something like that.

'Please refuse.'

At that point, he could only hope for Gaia herself to refuse Reynald's proposal.

Fwoom!!

"Ah...!"

At that moment, a golden light came out of Reynald. The golden light flowed into Gaia, and a short exclamation came out of her mouth.

"Ahh. I see," Gaia said.

'What the hell happened now?'

Gaia began nodding as if she'd realized something.

Si-Hun frowned at her sudden change in attitude.

"What happened?"

"I guess I should call it... a revelation. I received the will of Lord Tirion, whom Reynald had mentioned," Gaia said in a confused tone. It seemed this was her first time experiencing such a thing.

Kang-Woo looked at the golden light surrounding her in frustration.

'What a fucking convenient course of development.'

It was as if the author of the story was saying that anything was possible if light came out of someone.

Reynald's eyes shone.

"You received Lord Tirion's will?"

"Yes. He asked me to defeat the demons alongside you, Reynald."

"Wow, just as I'd thought."

"... I'm not sure if it's destiny, but it seems like we were lucky to have met you, Reynald."

Gaia nodded while making a faint smile.

A bright smile appeared on Reynald's face.

"No. This isn't luck but destiny."

"Hoho."

The two apostles laughed.

Si-Hun's expression stiffened slightly while looking at them.

Reynald didn't notice Si-Hun's mood change and looked toward Kang-Woo.

"That gentleman is..."

"Oh, he joined Guardians just recently. He isn't a protector chosen by God, but he is more righteous than anyone else."

"I see. It's nice to meet you. My name is Reynald."

Reynald extended his hand toward Kang-Woo.

Kang-Woo's expression distorted.

'Damn.'

It would surely raise suspicion if he didn't take his mask off.

Kang-Woo concentrated the demonic energy in his body while biting his lip.

'If it's just for a moment, I'll be able to do it.'

The Authority of Blindness, which showed an illusion to a target.

Its effect was so overpowered that it made the Authority very easy for a powerful opponent to resist.

However, they weren't in the middle of a battle; Reynald most likely had his guard down. Taking that into account, Kang-Woo felt that it would be worth trying out the Authority of Blindness for a very short moment.

'I have to succeed.'

The risk of what would happen if he failed was too big.

He used the Authority of Blindness as he took off his mask.

"Nice to meet you. I am Oh Kang-Woo."

"Haha. I was worried about what I should do when I first decided to chase after the Demon King Vaal Zahak, but seeing heroes like you all gives me peace of mind."

Reynald smiled.

After shaking hands, Kang-Woo put his mask back on. It seemed the Authority of Blindness had worked.

"Fuuu."

He had managed to overcome the crisis smoothly. He sighed in relief.

He had used almost half his demonic energy stores in that short instant due to having used the Authority of Blindness on someone who had received a blessing from a god.

Kang-Woo looked at Reynald in worry.

'What should I do with this guy?'

First, he was sure Reynald was an apostle chosen by a god.

Strictly speaking, he'd become an ally, so was it correct to get rid of him? He couldn't help but wonder about that.

'He's not insane like Alec.'

He couldn't deny that Reynald was a hero who fought against evil. Reynald had a good personality, and Kang-Woo was sure he'd saved numerous lives.

It was as if he were looking at the Si-Hun of another world.

The thought of getting rid of him made Kang-Woo feel as if he were trash who killed his allies for his own profit.

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes and fell into thought.

At that moment, Reynald approached Si-Hun and extended his hand.

"Nice to meet you, Si-Hun."

"Ah, yes."

Si-Hun nodded while smiling awkwardly.

Kang-Woo looked at Si-Hun.

'Huh?'

Si-Hun was acting a little weird.

"And Lady Gaia. I believe I've received yet another revelation from Lord Tirion."

"Pardon?"

After exchanging handshakes with the other Guardians members, he once again approached Gaia. He knelt on one knee in front of Gaia, looking like a knight pledging loyalty to his king.

"Lord Tirion has told me to protect you."

Smiling, Reynald grabbed her hand.

Si-Hun's expression stiffened even more.

"R-Reynald?" Gaia stammered.

"I knew it from the moment I first saw you. My reason for coming here was to protect you."

Reynald kissed the back of Gaia's hand.

Her face reddened.

'Would you look at this son of a bitch?'

Kang-Woo frowned as he watched Reynald court Gaia. He was pulling such shit with Gaia, whom he had met for the very first time a few moments ago, while having the female mage named Reina at home.

"Kuh..."

Si-Hun frowned.

Kang-Woo looked at Reynald, Gaia, and Si-Hun. It wasn't hard to see that there was a weird atmosphere around the three.

'How dare he try to pick up Si-Hun's girl?'

In reality, it was hard to call Gaia Si-Hun's woman. After all, Gaia was just Si-Hun's crush at the moment. Anyway, Kang-Woo couldn't deny that Reynald was trying to interfere with his little brother's first love.

'This won't do.'

If Kang-Woo remained still in this situation, he wouldn't have the right to call himself Si-Hun's hyung.

'This is most definitely not because there's a chance Reynald could discover my identity.'

It also wasn't because there was a chance that Guardians would target his summoned beast Vaal Zahak.

It was all for Si-Hun.

Yes.

'I have no choice but to do this for Si-Hun.'

Kang-Woo nodded.

'For Si-Hun's first love!'

He had no other option but to kill and get rid of the hero from another world. He had no other option but to do the trashy thing and stab his ally right in the back.

'Si-Hun! Leave it to me! If it's for you, I don't mind my hands getting dirty!'

Chapter 152 - Demon King Vaal Zahak (1)

"Since we have lots of empty rooms in the Hall of Protection, why don't you stay there, Reynald?" Gaia offered.

"Understood," Reynald replied. "There are many things I don't know about this world, so I should learn the basics at the very least."

"Hohoho. I will help you with that, so there is no need for you to worry."

"I am so glad to have you with me, Gaia."

The two apostles were talking as if they'd already become great friends. They seemed to be attracted to each other since they had both been chosen as apostles by the gods.

'There's a good chance of that being the case.'

It had been only a few hours since they'd met. In that short period of time, they had already become used to each other. That probably had something to do with Tirion's light entering Gaia's body.

It was obvious that Kim Si-Hun felt anxious looking at them. He looked as if he knew that he needed to do something, but was too anxious to do anything.

No, it seemed Si-Hun couldn't even understand what he was feeling at the moment.

'Don't worry, Si-Hun.'

He put his arm on Si-Hun's shoulder without a word.

Kang-Woo felt bad for the kind soul Kim Si-Hun, who had no idea what to do.

'Just leave it all to me, man.'

"Hyung-nim?"

"Oh, you just seemed a bit down."

"N-Not at all, hyung-nim. Hahaha. My thoughts are a bit of a mess at the moment," Si-Hun said while scratching his head.

"Is it because of Reynald?"

"N-No! It's nothing like that."

'Stop talking out of your ass, man. It's written all over your face.'

Kang-Woo smirked and patted his shoulder.

"Don't worry. I'm pretty sure Gaia is interested in you."

"I-It's nothing like that!"

"Hahaha! A grown man shouldn't become embarrassed over something like this."

"Hyung-nim!"

Kang-Woo felt that the way Si-Hun glared at him while blushing was cute. He thought that maybe having a real little brother would feel like this.

Kang-Woo laughed and followed Gaia and Reynald.

"Oh. Come to think of it, where do you live, Gaia?" Reynald asked.

"I usually stay in the Hall of Protection. I have difficulty with daily life if Grace isn't there to help me, so..."

"Huh? Does that mean I will be living with the two of you?"

"Hoho. It's okay. The Hall of Protection is very big. It also has all the facilities required for daily life."

"Mmm. Even so, living with the two of you in the same space is..."

"You don't have to worry about it."

Si-Hun bit his lip while listening to the conversation between Gaia and Reynald. It was obvious that he would react in such a way. After all, Gaia and Reynald had not only suddenly become close, but they were also going to live together.

'I'll have to deal with this quickly.'

Seeing Si-Hun like this made Kang-Woo's heart ache.

'I'll also look suspicious if I keep the mask on around him.'

He wasn't doing this for his own benefit, but it was true that leaving Reynald like this was dangerous. If he was going to deal with him, it was better to do it as soon as possible.

'Let's see...'

Kang-Woo began thinking while narrowing his eyes. He had to think of a way to deal with Reynald while avoiding suspicion.

'There's actually a very good way.'

The problem was that he couldn't think of a good way to build up to using that method.

"Hmm."

He fell into thought.

'I should...'

He narrowed his eyes. It was at that moment...

"In that case, let us begin the search for Vaal Zahak tomorrow. If Vaal Zahak had become Satan's underling, we may be able to find Satan through him."

Gaia seemed troubled by Reynald's proposal.

"I'm sorry. I understand your passion, but forget Vaal Zahak, we don't even have a way to track the Demon Cult that he and Satan are associated with."

They couldn't deny that reality.

At the moment, Guardians didn't have a way to track the Demon Cult.

Reynald smiled at her words.

"You don't have to worry about that. I can't track the Demon Cult, but thanks to Lord Tirion's blessing, I can find Vaal Zahak's general location."

"I-Is that true?!"

The Guardians members were all astonished by what Reynald said.

Kang-Woo was no exception.

'The fuck?'

Yet another unexpected development.

Kang-Woo's expression hardened.

'I seriously don't have time to be fooling around.'

It was a completely different story if Reynald could track Vaal Zahak's location.

Reynald looked at the astonished people and said, "Yes. Once a day, when the sky is dyed in gold, I can receive a revelation on where Vaal Zahak is and what he is doing."

"Wha..."

"What an ability..."

Everyone exclaimed in surprise.

Although it was only limited to Vaal Zahak, they could even figure out the locations of Satan and the Demon Cult's core members.

The eyes of the Guardians members began burning with passion.

It was a golden opportunity to find a lead on the Demon Cult, which was an expert in covering its tracks.

'Motherfucking scammer.'

Of course, Kang-Woo was frowning.

He wasn't sure what kind of god Tirion was, but compared to Gaia, there were too many things he could do. Being able to exercise that sort of ability while on Earth and not on the continent of Aernor was an absolute scam.

"We could definitely use this," Gaia remarked.

Si-Hun also nodded with shining eyes. "Yes. This is our chance to figure out the full extent of the Demon Cult's forces."

It seemed as if he thought that this wasn't the time to be jealous of Reynald. The other Guardians members became passionate.

"In that case, let's take some time to figure out Vaal Zahak's location and state."

"Yes. The time when the sky is dyed in gold must be referring to sunset."

"Right, there isn't much time left, so I will wait here."

'Shit.'

Only Kang-Woo placed his hand on top of his forehead as if he was having a headache.

'I need to make a move as soon as today.'

Once Reynald received the revelation even once, it would be over.

Evacuating Vaal Zahak to somewhere distant wouldn't solve anything.

He didn't know exactly how much information the daily revelations gave, so he couldn't create any unnecessary variables.

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes and fell into thought.

'I can't take action myself like I did before.'

Creating a dummy with the Authority of Cloning and taking action himself was too risky.

'I don't know what effects Tirion's blessing has.'

That was the biggest problem.

He wasn't sure how much influence the god Tirion could exercise, so taking action himself could be too risky.

'In that case...'

He just needed to have someone else take action instead.

The gears in Kang-Woo's head went into overdrive. He was thinking about what he should do in this situation.

'Wait.'

His eyes shone. He turned and looked at Reynald, who was making plans for the days ahead.

A handsome young man whose appearance was comparable to Si-Hun's...

Their personalities were also quite similar.

'To be more precise, it's closer to Alec's personality than Si-Hun's.'

Thanks to Kang-Woo's influence, Si-Hun hadn't become like Alec Osborne.

But Reynald was different.

Although his nature was similar to Si-Hun's, Kang-Woo hadn't been around to influence him, so he was more like Alec with Si-Hun's looks.

"If that's the case..." he mumbled in a low voice and licked his lip.

'I can use him.'

Kang-Woo thought of a way to use Reynald's divine revelation against him.

Kang-Woo separated from the rest of the Guardians members who were in the middle of a meeting and took out a communication orb.

It wasn't the one given to Guardians members but one he'd made to communicate with his summoned beasts.

'Being righteous is exhausting.'

Kang-Woo laughed.

* * *

"Gaia, there's something I'd like to talk to you about," Kang-Woo said.

"To me?"

"Yes. You come too, Si-Hun."

"But hyung-nim, it'll be sunset soon..."

"It's not like we're going to make our move as soon as we receive the revelation. Aren't we going to analyze the Demon Cult based on the information obtained through the revelations over the next few days?"

"I guess that's true."

Si-Hun and Gaia seemed surprised by Kang-Woo's sudden proposal, but they followed him anyway.

They went to the Hall of Protection's training room.

Kang-Woo turned around after reaching the huge white room.

"What are we doing here, hyung-nim?"

"I've watched the footage of when Satan invaded. Since there's a chance we might find Satan through Reynald, we might have to fight him."

"Ah, I see."

"So I wanted to test it," Kang-Woo said while caressing the ring on his right middle finger.

"Test what?" Si-Hun asked.

"If we're a match for Satan at the moment."

"..."

"I've come to realize after seeing Reynald how important it is to be chosen by a god."

"... Hyung-nim."

"Si-Hun, you don't need to feel intimidated. You have the soul of the Martial God inside you. If Reynald can do it, so can you."

Kang-Woo picked up his weapon.

"Come to think of it, this is the first time we've sparred," he remarked.

"Hahaha, you're right."

After realizing Kang-Woo's intentions, Si-Hun unsheathed the El Cuero Blade.

Kang-Woo turned to Gaia.

"Gaia, I would like for you to check if you can feel from Si-Hun something similar to what you received from Lord Tirion."

"So that's why you called me. I understand."

Gaia nodded and focused her attention on Si-Hun's energy.

Kang-Woo and Si-Hun's spar was about to begin.

'Although this isn't really why I called you.'

Kang-Woo made a faint smile.

The reason why he'd called both people was to separate them from Reynald.

He focused on his left eye. He linked his vision with that of his summoned beasts.

- Are you ready, Vaal Zahak?

- Of course, Master.

- Move according to plan.

- Yes, Master.

- Hm! Kang-Woo! I'll do my best too!

- Okay.

They exchanged a short conversation.

"Haap!"

Si-Hun charged toward Kang-Woo with the El Cuero Blade.

* * *

"Ah."

Reynald, who was sitting in his room in the Hall of Protection, let out a short exclamation. Energy was filling his body. The revelation was beginning.

- Kyaaaaah!

- Hahaha! What a fantastic sacrifice!

"Th-This is..."

A little girl's screams reached his ears.

He saw Vaal Zahak.

He saw a massive canyon and piles of rocks.

It was the place that had apparently been attacked by Satan a few days before Reynald had come to Earth.

He saw Vaal Zahak holding a frail little girl. Vaal Zahak opened his mouth, his eye sockets shining with a yellow light.

- Reynald. You thought that I, Demon King Vaal Zahak, wouldn't know you've come to this world?

"N-No way."

- Hehehe. You probably realized where I am right now through the revelation.

Vaal Zahak's creepy voice spread through his ear.

- KYAAH! S-Save me!! Please, help me!

- Reynald, if you want to save this girl, come here alone.

After saying that, Vaal Zahak violently grabbed the girl's neck.

- Cough! S-Save m...!

The girl wriggled her legs in pain.

"You bastard!! How dare you...!"

Reynald's eyes widened, and the anger blew his reason away.

"Vaal Zahak!" the hero roared.

Vaal Zahak's evil laugh spread through his ear.

- Hahaha!! Did you really believe you'd be able to face me if you had Tirion's blessing? Did you believe something would change if you met Gaia's lackeys?

Intense yellow light came out of the skeleton's empty eye sockets.

- Have you forgotten who I am, Reynald?

Vaal Zahak raised his arms, and a huge amount of demonic energy surged out of him.

The black robe fluttered.

- I am Demon King Vaal Zahak.

Flutter.

There was a pink apron visible under the hem of his robe.

Chapter 153 - Demon King Vaal Zahak (2)

'The hell is that?'

Oh Kang-Woo's face froze when he saw a pink apron beneath Vaal Zahak's black robe.

The image of an evil demon taking a frail girl hostage was destroyed by that pink apron.

'Why is he wearing that?'

His head hurt.

It was as if karma for having used Vaal Zahak as a housekeeper was coming back at him.

A great mood had been set up, but it had been shattered by just one apron.

He was worried about how Reynald would react.

'Authority of the Watcher.'

A translucent sphere appeared. Kang-Woo used the sphere, which could go through walls, to scout the room Reynald was in.

Reynald was frowning and trembling in anger. He didn't seem to care about the pink apron.

'Phew.'

Judging by Reynald's reaction, it seemed the situation he had feared didn't happen.

Reynald was pacing in the room while contemplating whether or not he should tell Gaia about the situation.

It wasn't hard to imagine what decision he'd make.

'If it's Reynald...'

He would face Vaal Zahak alone and would gladly jump into a trap if it were to save a little girl's life.

—Because he was a righteous man.

He was a hero who had to protect the weak and save the world.

—Because he was Reynald.

'Like I'd thought...'

Being righteous was exhausting.

Kang-Woo smiled. He raised his head, and Si-Hun's sword was being swung at him.

Clang!

He parried it with his own sword.

A heavy shock spread through his hand.

Si-Hun's physical specs had improved a lot from all of the training he'd done in the past few months.

The sword danced. As if a dragon was twisting its body, a barrage of enormous sword energies continuously struck Kang-Woo's sword.

Clang, clang, clang!!

'At this point, I think he's already stronger than Tian Wuchen.'

The disciple had surpassed the master.

Kang-Woo smiled while looking at Si-Hun swinging his sword. He had not been wrong about his certainty that Si-Hun would be the only person besides himself who would become strong enough to face the princes of Hell.

Si-Hun had become scarily strong and was still becoming stronger.

'Good.'

He changed his weapon to a spear.

He had started the spar to separate Gaia and Si-Hun from Reynald, but now he couldn't help but wonder about Si-Hun's limits.

'You're gonna have to try a bit harder, Si-Hun.'

The sword and spear clashed. The training room shook while a loud sound echoed out.

Materialized Qi wrapped around Si-Hun's sword. It was a technique called 'condensed Qi' in martial arts novels.

An intense heat storm swept away the surroundings.

Kang-Woo smiled in satisfaction and drew out more demonic energy.

'Because you'll have to do Reynald's share of the work as well.'

There was a lot of weight on Si-Hun's shoulders.

* * *

Boom!!

The surface exploded.

A golden light rushed along the giant canyon, which looked as if a god had split with a hammer.

Reynald...

The hero from another world was running with all his might to save the life of a little girl.

Rumble!

A thick smoke rose.

He was running at supersonic speed, creating a sonic boom. The surface split, and his breath became heavier.

But he couldn't stop.

The poor little girl who had been captured by the demon king...

He was so desperate to save the life of a little girl whose name he didn't even know.

'I hope I'm not too late!'

He couldn't help but be bothered by the fact he wasn't able to tell the Guardians members about what happened, but there was nothing he could do about it.

Demon King Vaal Zahak was an evil demon who didn't have tears or blood.

If Reynald had told the Guardians members, Vaal Zahak would most definitely have killed the little girl instantly.

He couldn't let that happen.

"Lord Tirion..."

'Please grant me the strength and wisdom to get through this trial.'

'Please save the life of the innocent girl.'

After a short prayer, he reached the place where he had seen Vaal Zahak.

"Vaal Zahak!"

Rumble!!

He stopped and roared ferociously.

A hazy billow of smoke soared into the sky.

He could see that Vaal Zahak was looking at him while grabbing the girl's neck.

[So you've come.]

Vaal Zahak laughed mockingly.

Reynald unsheathed his sword without hesitation. His magnificent golden sword, Del Lain, showed itself.

Golden light burst out from the sword that had received Tirion's grace.

But...

[Why are you standing still? Didn't you draw your sword to kill me?]

"Kuh."

Reynald couldn't swing his sword. He glared at Vaal Zahak while biting his lip, looking at the girl in Vaal Zahak's hand.

The little girl was as beautiful as a doll. She had white skin and black hair, and her eyes shone as if they were gems. She looked so frail that it seemed she would break if one wasn't careful enough.

Looking at the girl that Vaal Zahak was holding hostage made him grip his sword even tighter.

"Vaal Zahak, do I cry now?" the girl whispered.

[Yes.]

The little girl and Vaal Zahak were talking, but Reynald was too far away to hear them.

"KYAAHH!!!"

The girl, trapped by the evil demon king Vaal Zahak, screamed.

"P-Please save me, Mr. Hero!" the girl shouted to Reynald, tears dripping from her eyes.

After hearing the girl's shout, Reynald shouted in an urgent voice, "Get away from her, Vaal Zahak!"

Vaal Zahak laughed at him.

[Do you want to save this girl?]

"I told you to get away from her!"

[KAHAHAHAHA!! Pathetic! Why are you becoming so enraged over the life of a mere little girl?]

"YOU BASTAAAARD!!!"

Reynald's expression distorted. Golden energy burst out of him, shaking his surroundings.

While he was bursting with rage, the girl and Vaal Zahak continued to secretly talk to each other.

"... What do we do now?"

[Huhu. Now my pawns will kill him.]

As long as he had a little girl as a hostage, Reynald couldn't recklessly take action. Vaal Zahak just had to make Reynald realize how strong a mage with their safety guaranteed could be.

Vaal Zahak snapped his fingers.

[Arise, army of the dead.]

Demonic energy spread from his fingertips and seeped into the ground.

Space distorted, and a black Rift appeared.

What emerged from within were twelve Death Knights. The Death Knights were riding skeleton horses covered with blue flames. They drew their swords.

[Knights of death, tear his skin apart and drink his blood. Cut the body of this lowly mortal with your swords.]

His eye sockets shone with a yellow light.

[Kill my enemy.]

Rumble!

The Death Knights raised their swords and rushed along the canyon on their skeleton horses.

"HWOOOO!!"

It was the cry of the dead.

The ghastly howls that subconsciously instilled fear into the living spread through the canyon.

"You bastards..."

Even after hearing their howls, Reynald didn't tremble. The golden light protected his body and mind. He raised his sword.

"Unforgivable."

A cowardly demon king hiding behind a frail little girl held hostage... Reynald could neither forgive nor compromise with him.

Reynald swung the sword covered with golden light toward the Death Knights charging in his direction.

Slam! Boom!

Although it was a clash between swords, the sound that resulted from it did not sound right.

The Death Knights, clad with demonic energy, clashed with Reynald.

While Reynald was fighting fiercely, Vaal Zahak cast magic.

[Kekeke. I never thought that my ill fate with that eyesore would continue in another world.]

"I hate him too."

The girl Reynald was risking his life to protect was frowning, and she was about to cast magic...

But Vaal Zahak stopped her.

[Don't rush. If he feels demonic energy from you, it would ruin our plan.]

"... Can you beat him by yourself, Vaal Zahak?"

[Hehehe. Who do you think I am? I dyed the continent of Aernor in fear, the strongest and most evil —]

"So, can you beat him or not?"

[...]

Vaal Zahak's yellow eyes flickered.

[Ngh. It wouldn't be easy with a frontal assault. That man is a hero who has received the blessing of Tirion.]

But...

A creepy laugh leaked out.

[I have also received power from Master. And right now, I can one-sidedly attack him, so there's no need for you to act,] he said confidently while pouring the magic he'd cast at Reynald.

Bone spears drilled out from the ground and targeted Reynald.

"Kurgh!!"

Reynald swung Del Lain and blocked Vaal Zahak's attacks, but he couldn't fight back.

One small mistake, and the little girl's life could be in danger.

"Dammit..."

The hero's expression darkened.

Vaal Zahak kept one-sidedly attacking him.

* * *

'Good.'

A smile appeared on Kang-Woo's face, who was watching the battle with his left eye.

Vaal Zahak's attacks were one-sidedly hitting Reynald.

As time went on, Reynald became noticeably more fatigued.

'Tsk, pathetic.'

Kang-Woo was expecting it, but he couldn't help but feel that Reynald was too pathetic. He was taking every single attack without fighting back at all due to Echidna, who was pretending to be a hostage.

How could he not call that pathetic?

'Although it's true that hostages are used for this very purpose.'

Armed police officers also couldn't easily neutralize kidnappers for that same reason. But even considering that, Kang-Woo couldn't help but sigh at how Reynald was dealing with the situation.

'Does he seriously think anything is going to change if he keeps taking the attacks?'

Kang-Woo was so frustrated that he wanted to step into his shoes, but that was not an option. Whether Reynald was righteous or stupid, what mattered was that everything was going as Kang-Woo had envisioned.

'Good. Just keep being attacked and die.'

Kang-Woo was cheering for Vaal Zahak. He was doing better than Kang-Woo had expected. Echidna's performance of asking Reynald to save her from time to time was also great.

Reynald vomited blood and collapsed onto the ground.

'It's almost over.'

Judging by Reynald's state, Kang-Woo was starting to see an end to this stupid play.

Kang-Woo looked in pity at Reynald, who was spewing blood while desperately trying to get up.

'Nothing's gonna change even if you do that.'

Kang-Woo smirked.

The hero who had raised his sword to protect a little girl... A powerful opponent... A hero who had been brought to the brink of death due to a cowardly tactic.

It was the perfect situation for a cliché powerup, but the world was not so generous.

'Life isn't easy, man.'

Injuries led to weakness, and rage led to simple-mindedness. Blood loss led to slowness, and desperation blunted movement.

Powering up in the worst possible scenario was something that only happened in manhwa and novels.

Reynald collapsed to the ground.

A smile appeared on Kang-Woo's face.

'It's over.'

He thought they'd cleanly gotten rid of Reynald.

It was at that moment...

Fwoosh!!

An enormous blinding ray of light burst out of Reynald's body.

"Huh?"

What the hell was this?

Kang-Woo looked at Reynald in confusion.

Reynald, who had collapsed on the ground, slowly got back up. An explosive amount of golden energy surrounded him like armor.

His body, which had been covered in wounds, instantly healed. All the Death Knights attacking him were swept away with just one attack.

'Wait just a fucking second.'

Kang-Woo couldn't understand what was going on, and he became uneasy.

'Did he seriously power up?'

It seemed that the cliché he'd brushed off and laughed at for being too unrealistic had happened.

Kang-Woo covered his face with both hands as if his head hurt.

It was as if the plan he had carefully constructed had been ripped to shreds.

"For fuck's sake..."

'What a comfortable life you have.'

Chapter 154 - Hero Reynald (1)

Fwoosh!!

There was an explosion of golden energy, and a brilliant light illuminated the entire area as if the sun had descended on the surface.

"A-Aaahhh."

With the golden energy covering his entire body, Reynald slowly tried to get up.

- Get up, Reynald.

"Lord Tirion..."

It wasn't hard to imagine what that energy was.

Reynald's expression darkened. The fact that he had been rendered helpless against an enemy's cowardly tactic weighed down on his shoulders.

- Raise your head, my child.

He could hear Tirion's magnificent and firm voice in his mind.

Reynald trembled while saying, "I'm sorry. I made a mistake..."

- You raised your sword to save a little girl. How could you call that righteous will a mistake?

"Aahhh." Reynald clenched Del Lain tighter. "Thank you, Lord Tirion."

- Huhu. I am proud of you, my child.

"I'm also honored to be able to serve you, Lord Tirion."

Strength returned to Reynald's weak legs. He staggered for a few steps, but he was ultimately able to stand back up. An explosive amount of strength spread through his body.

"It seems Vaal Zahak has acquired even greater power by becoming Satan's subordinate."

- Satan. Are they a being that's similar to the Evil God Lucifer?

Reynald nodded. "I have my suspicions of who Satan is."

- Who?

"There was a demon who was trying to make a demonic dragon his retainer when I first came to this world."

He retraced his memories. Vaal Zahak's cowardly tactic reminded him of how that demon had fought.

It wasn't just that...

The energy that Reynald felt from Vaal Zahak's attacks was similar to that demon's.

'I'm certain of it.'

He recalled the demon's face. The demon was a young man with sharp eyes. Although he looked like a human, his true identity was that of an evil demon.

- We cannot let him be, then.

"Yes. To protect this world, we have to eliminate Satan no matter what."

- Huhu. To do that, you cannot afford to fall here.

"Of course."

- I will lend you my power. Although the price I must pay is high... I am willing to pay it for you, my child.

"Thank you very much."

Reynald nodded and smiled.

Then he raised Del Lain. He could see that Vaal Zahak was still holding that little girl.

"Put your faith in the light!" Reynald shouted.

A golden light poured out of Del Lain.

Due to Vaal Zahak's cowardly tactic of holding a hostage, Reynald had let the fight be a one-sided beat down. However, the situation had changed now that he'd received Tirion's power.

The light that poured out of Del Lain protected the little girl.

Vaal Zahak's gaze wavered.

Boom!

Reynald stomped on the ground, producing an enormous impact that destroyed the rocks around the area. An insane amount of power filled his body, and he shot forward so fast that it looked like he had been stretched. Reynald reached Vaal Zahak in an instant and swung Del Lain at his head.

[Kuh!]

Vaal Zahak quickly used magic, and a barrier made of black demonic energy appeared in front of him.

Baaaam!

[Kurgh!]

Del Lain struck the barrier, destroying it with just one attack. Vaal Zahak was violently flung backward.

"Are you okay?"

Reynald held the girl that Vaal Zahak had taken hostage.

The girl's expression became distorted.

Reynald put his hand on her cheek while making a worried expression.

"Are you hurt anywhere?" he asked.

"N-No..."

The girl avoided looking at him. There was a sense of hesitation in her eyes.

- Do not take any action without Master's order.

- I know.

She heard Vaal Zahak tell her telepathically. Echidna nodded with a frown.

"I'm glad... Truly."

Reynald looked like he was about to cry from his accomplishment of having saved the little girl.

A handsome blonde young man covered with golden light was holding a beautiful little girl in his arms. Death Knights were scattered about on the ground, and a Lich had collapsed on the ground. It looked like a scene out of a film at a glance, but of course, the reality of it was different.

'Where do you think you're touching?' Echidna chided inwardly.

She twisted her body and freed herself from his embrace.

Echidna felt revolted that Reynald had touched her.

'Kang-Woo...'

What she wanted wasn't some moron with superficial beauty. She couldn't stand the touch of anyone besides the man who had saved her from the unbearable mire that was solitude.

Nevertheless, she hadn't forgotten her role.

"Thank you... for saving me," Echidna said and bowed with blushed cheeks.

Reynald stood up while making a proud expression.

He replied, "Please wait here. It'll all be over soon."

The power that Tirion had lent him only lasted for a short while. Once that time was up, both he and Tirion would have to pay the price.

'I have to eliminate Vaal Zahak before that.'

Reynald grabbed his sword. He stomped on the ground without hesitation and leaped toward Vaal Zahak.

Meanwhile, Echidna took the chance to contact Kang-Woo.

Her expression was stiff as she called out to him. "Kang-Woo, can you hear me?"

- Yeah.

"What should I do? Should I help Vaal Zahak?"

- No, stay as you are for now. Also, get away from there as far as possible and hide when I give you a signal.

"Okay."

Echidna did not object.

There was no need for her to doubt Kang-Woo's commands. She just had to follow them. That was her role.

Echidna cut the call with eyes full of trust.

* * *

"Goddammit," Kang-Woo cursed. Then he paused the spar with Kim Si-Hun. "Let's take a break."

"Huff! Huff! Understood, hyung-nim." Si-Hun nodded while panting heavily.

Although Si-Hun seemed tired, Kang-Woo hadn't even broken a sweat.

"I guess I'm still no match for you, hyung-nim."

Si-Hun averted his gaze while smiling bitterly in self-deprecation.

Kang-Woo lightly patted Si-Hun's shoulder and said, "Come on. What kind of hyung would I be if I let you catch up to me so quickly?"

"Hahaha. Just you wait. I'll catch up to you eventually."

"I'll be waiting," Kang-Woo replied with a smirk.

However, once he turned around, his expression darkened. He was still smiling on the outside, but that wasn't reflected at all on the inside.

'Fucking hell.'

Kang-Woo could see Vaal Zahak through his left eye.

The hostage plan had failed after Reynald powered up, and the situation had completely changed. The fight was still one-sided, but it was now Reynald who was overpowering Vaal Zahak. Vaal Zahak was holding on thanks to his magic, but it was clear that he would lose to Reynald soon.

'At this rate, I'll lose Vaal Zahak.'

Kang-Woo frowned. He couldn't let Reynald kill Vaal Zahak.

'I have no choice.'

As Kang-Woo raised his head, the gears of his mind turned quickly. His first plan had failed, but he had a backup plan.

'Although it's a bit dangerous.'

Considering the situation, he had no other choice.

Kang-Woo turned to Gaia and said, "Come to think of it, Reynald should've received his revelation by now."

"Ah, yes. Time flew by so quickly..."

"Let's have a listen to that revelation of his."

Kang-Woo went to Reynald's room with Gaia and Si-Hun, but of course, it was empty.

"Where did Reynald go?" Kang-Woo voiced while looking around.

"Have you heard anything from him?" Si-Hun asked Gaia after doing a quick search as well.

"No, I haven't," Gaia replied.

"Wait, hyung-nim."

Si-Hun pointed somewhere. The white floor had been hollowed. It wasn't hard to deduce what had made that dent in the ground.

"There are traces of him going somewhere in a hurry," Si-Hun inferred.

"Wait, if that's the case..."

Kang-Woo looked at the traces with a hardened expression and ran out while following the trail. The traces led them toward the room which contained the Gate that was connected with the Grand Canyon.

"Hyung-nim, this is..."

"Fuck!" Kang-Woo cursed.

"Wh-What happened?" Gaia asked with a trembling voice.

"The traces show that he went somewhere in a hurry after receiving the revelation."

"Then that means..."

Kang-Woo nodded. "Yes. Vaal Zahak... or maybe the Demon Cult, must have used some sort of trick to lure Reynald out."

"O-Oh, no..." Gaia uttered, trembling and turning pale.

Seeing that Reynald had run off by himself, the situation had to have been quite urgent. The thought that their new ally could disappear made Gaia anxious.

No, Reynald's value did not stop at that of simply an ally. As an apostle of a god, he possessed great power and even the blessing of the god he served. Most importantly, thanks to his revelations, he would have been able to provide them with information about the Demon Cult. That was why the thought of losing him was horrifying to Gaia.

"I'll go ahead first," Kang-Woo said.

There was no time to hesitate.

Kang-Woo turned and stomped on the ground.

"Hyung-nim!"

"Take Gaia and follow me!"

After saying that, Kang-Woo crossed the Gate. He ran along the canyon at breakneck speed with all his might and the Authority of Haste. While running on the steep surface as effortlessly as if it were flat ground, Kang-Woo put on his Guardians mask.

As he could see Reynald with his left eye, Kang-Woo ran straight to the place where there was an explosion of golden energy.

"Reynald!!" Kang-Woo called out to Reynald urgently.

"Kang-Woo?"

Reynald was surprised by Kang-Woo's sudden appearance.

"Why did you come here by yourself without a word?!"

"I'm sorry. I had my reasons for not telling you all."

"Just what—"

"Vaal Zahak took someone hostage and lured me here." Reynald angrily pointed toward Vaal Zahak, who was on the floor. "An innocent girl was put in danger because of this cowardly demon, but... she's okay now. Thanks to Lord Tirion's blessing, I was able to keep her safe."

Reynald smiled and was about to turn around.

"Ngh."

However, he suddenly staggered instead.

The golden blessing that had been wrapped around him disappeared. This meant that the power he had borrowed from Tirion had been used up. Reynald couldn't hear Tirion's voice anymore.

'It's okay,' Reynald thought.

The situation was over. Demon King Vaal Zahak had collapsed, and reinforcements had arrived. He'd even rescued the beautiful little girl who had been held hostage.

"Huh?"

The little girl he'd saved was nowhere to be seen.

Reynald urgently looked around for the little girl.

"Th-The girl that Vaal Zahak held hostage earlier was definitely here! K-Kang-Woo! Have you seen a little girl around h—"

Stab!

A dark-red spear pierced Reynald.

"You're a fucking pest to the very end," Kang-Woo sneered.

He twisted the spear, and blood poured out of Reynald like a waterfall.

"Go play hero in a different novel," Kang-Woo said, snickering. "Ah, but I don't think anyone would read a novel with you as the protagonist."

Reynald's novel: Dropped

Chapter 155 - The Light is Fading (1)

"Cough!" Reynald von Arnan coughed up some blood.

"K-Kang-Woo...?" he uttered, looking at Oh Kang-Woo in disbelief.

Reynald was overwhelmed with shock at the unexpected development of events. He dropped to one knee as he continued to bleed.

"Just... why?" he questioned.

Reynald couldn't understand why Kang-Woo had done this.

Kang-Woo was a member of Guardians and one of the individuals that Gaia trusted most. He wasn't a Protector who had been chosen by a god, but Reynald had not doubted that he was a righteous hero because of the unwavering trust that Gaia had in him. However, the price of such a belief had been high.

Reynald hadn't even had the time to defend himself. The dark-red spear had pierced his solar plexus in the blink of an eye. He received such severe damage that it wouldn't be strange if he had died immediately. It was a miracle that he was still conscious.

"A-Aaahhh."

His mouth fell open as the pain spread from his solar plexus to the rest of his body. He was losing consciousness.

Knowing he couldn't afford to die here, Reynald did his best to stay conscious.

"You—"

Reynald began to say something, but he stopped when he heard the little girl's voice.

"Kang-Woo, can I come out now?"

Reynald turned to the source of the voice, and his eyes widened in astonishment.

"What... the...?"

He saw the little girl he'd tried to protect while risking his life. The frail-looking, beautiful little girl who had thanked him with tears in her eyes was looking down at him with cold eyes devoid of emotion. He could even see a hint of disgust in them.

"Si-Hun will arrive soon with Gaia, so you have to leave before that. You too, Vaal Zahak," Kang-Woo told his summoned beasts.

[Yes, Master.]

"Okay. I'll do as you say, Kang-Woo."

Echidna and Vaal Zahak nodded.

Kang-Woo looked at Vaal Zahak and asked, "Are you hurt badly?"

[Hahaha. The injuries aren't light, but I have no problem moving.]

Vaal Zahak laughed as if he was trying to prove he was okay.

However, unlike what he said, his body seemed to be in really bad shape. There were cracks all over his bones, and his black robe was tattered. He had a few shattered ribs, and his skull had been crushed.

If he hadn't been a Lich, he definitely would've died. Nevertheless, such damage was huge even for a Lich. He was having a hard time keeping his balance.

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue. "Stop acting strong and get some rest. Echidna, take Vaal Zahak back."

[Master...]

Vaal Zahak trembled as if those words had moved him.

Echidna nodded and ran toward Kang-Woo, who patted her head.

"That guy touched me. It felt disgusting."

She glared at Reynald while tugging on Kang-Woo's clothes.

Reynald felt faint, as the little girl whom he had risked his life to save was glaring at him resentfully.

"What in the world... I-Is this a nightmare? Maybe I'm hallucinating..." Reynald muttered.

He rejected the unbelievable reality. To Reynald, the scene was more shocking than the dark-red spear that had pierced his body.

Still refusing to believe what was happening, Reynald extended his hand toward the girl.

He said, "I-It's dangerous. You're being deceived by an evil dem—"

Echidna snorted while kicking his hand away.

"Hmph. Don't insult Kang-Woo. He's a way better person than you," she replied.

'Sheesh, you're making me blush,' Kang-Woo thought with a smirk. 'I sure am a good person.'

He couldn't deny Echidna's words. No one had more pure intentions for protecting the world than Kang-Woo did. No one could dare to call him evil. After all, he was trying to protect Earth from the Demon of Prophecy, Satan.

"Wha..." Reynald slurred his speech in confusion.

Then his eyes suddenly widened; he finally understood what was going on.

"D-Don't tell me, you were all in on this together?!" he questioned.

"Took you long enough." Kang-Woo snickered.

Reynald should've realized that as soon as Kang-Woo stabbed him.

'He probably never imagined that a frail little girl would deceive someone,' Kang-Woo thought.

This was likely due to the "underdogma"—a belief that the underdog was always more morally correct than the more powerful. Reynald had not imagined that Echidna, who looked like a little girl, would stab him in the back. It was proof of how outdated Reynald's way of thinking was.

"D-Don't tell me... you..." Reynald uttered while trembling.

His fading consciousness cleared up as if he had gotten struck by lightning.

The only being who could control Vaal Zahak and make him use such a filthy tactic... There was only one being that Reynald knew who could do something like that.

"Sa...tan...!"

"The hell are you talking about?" Kang-Woo frowned in disgust.

'Me? Satan?'

Kang-Woo couldn't believe Reynald was comparing him to the evil and wicked Demon of Prophecy who was trying to destroy Earth. He wondered if there was an insult more unpleasant than that.

"How dare you compare me to Satan?" Kang-Woo said in anger.

He was okay with everything else, but he wasn't okay with someone calling him Satan.

"Don't try to act as if you aren't Satan, you evil demon!"

"You're quite spry despite having a hole in your stomach."

Kang-Woo clenched Gungnir's shaft and twisted it violently.

"Kurgh!"

The wound widened, and a huge amount of blood poured out. It was unlikely that Reynald could recover from such a critical injury, even with Tirion's power.

"L-Lord... Tirion..." Reynald reached out in desperation.

He prayed to Tirion once again, but a miracle couldn't happen twice. Tirion had run out of power. He had nothing left to send to Reynald after already sending him power once.

"Cough!" Reynald coughed up more blood.

In the end, he didn't receive an answer from Tirion.

"I guess miracles only happen once," Kang-Woo said, lightly patting Reynald's shoulder. "You're being punished because you're trying to live life on easy mode, man."

If Reynald hadn't been chosen by a god, he would never even have come all the way to another world.

Kang-Woo bent down and took off his mask for Reynald to see his face.

"Y-You're..." Reynald's eyes widened. "A-Aaahhh."

He remembered Kang-Woo's face. He couldn't ever forget it.

Tears flowed down Reynald's cheeks. He understood everything now. From the moment he came to Earth, he'd been dancing in the palm of Kang-Woo's hand.

Reynald fell into despair. The tears didn't stop.

"Well. Let me be frank. I'm sorry," Kang-Woo apologized and clicked his tongue.

If Reynald hadn't known anything about Kang-Woo, Kang-Woo wouldn't need to kill him. Reynald was old-fashioned and stupid, but he was a good person who fought for the weak without hesitation.

"But I had no other choice," Kang-Woo stated.

There was nothing Kang-Woo could've done about it. He didn't have any ill feelings toward Reynald, but the complex turn of events had forced him to make this choice.

Kang-Woo continued, "Of course, there might have been a better way. You might have understood my circumstances if I had taken a long time to persuade you."

It wasn't like Kang-Woo hadn't thought about that... but he couldn't take the risk of letting all the trust he'd built so far crumble.

"Y-You s-son of a..." Reynald stammered as he looked up at Kang-Woo in fury.

Kang-Woo wasn't surprised. He hadn't expected Reynald to be satisfied with his excuse anyway.

Kang-Woo smiled bitterly and placed his hand on Reynald's chest, concentrating the Authority of Waves in his hand.

"I'm sorry, Reynald."

CRACK!

The Authority of Waves launched from point-blank range destroyed Reynald's ribcage and exploded his heart. Reynald died instantly.

"I'll remember you," Kang-Woo said.

With that, Reynald stopped breathing.

There was a heavy silence.

Kang-Woo ordered Echidna and Vaal Zahak to leave. He'd successfully eliminated Reynald, but the situation wasn't over yet.

"Hyung-nim!!!" Kim Si-Hun called out.

He was running toward Kang-Woo with Gaia in his arms.

Kang-Woo saw Grace McCubbin and a few other members of Guardians whom he'd never seen before following behind Si-Hun.

"This is..."

Si-Hun's eyes widened upon seeing Kang-Woo kneeling beside Reynald's corpse.

Kang-Woo lowered his head.

"I'm... sorry," he said quietly.

He clenched his hand into a fist and punched the ground.

Crack. The hard rock cracked, and an imprint of Kang-Woo's fist was left in the rock.

"Hyung-nim..."

"I was a step too late." Kang-Woo's anguished tone conveyed how regretful he was.

"Wh-What happened, Kang-Woo?" Gaia asked in a shaky voice.

Unable to find the words to explain, Kang-Woo kept his head lowered.

"Aaahhh..." Gaia gasped.

Even without Kang-Woo saying anything, the tense mood told Gaia what had happened—that Reynald had already lost his life.

Gaia trembled in shock. "How could... something like this have..."

She had been able to feel some hope after meeting the hero who had been chosen by another god. Gaia had thought that Reynald would become the hero they needed to resolve the dismal situation they were in. Yet, that hope didn't last even a single day and ended up crumbling in the hands of an evil and wicked demon.

"I'm sorry. If only I hadn't suggested the spar..."

"No. Not at all. It isn't your fault, Kang-Woo," Gaia said, shaking her head.

It wasn't Kang-Woo's fault. He wasn't the one who had tricked Reynald and killed him, so no one could say it was his fault.

'Of course, it isn't!' Kang-Woo exclaimed delightedly in his mind.

He could tell that Gaia didn't suspect him in the slightest.

'YOLO!'

Kang-Woo wanted to dance because of how well he'd dealt with the situation. It was as if all the worries that he'd felt because of Reynald's appearance on Earth had vanished.

For a moment, Kang-Woo felt guilty about having killed Reynald. Nonetheless, the guilt melted away instantly after reaffirming to himself that he had had no other choice.

'All right. Now, it's time for the finishing touches.'

The finishing touches were the most important part of anything.

"We've lost another hero," Gaia stated sorrowfully.

"Yes," Kang-Woo said. He raised his head and saw that darkness was being cast over the golden sky. "The light... is fading."

A single tear ran down his cheek.

Chapter 156 - God of Heroes' Blessing (1)

"Hyung-nim..."

Kim Si-Hun had a complicated expression as he gazed at Oh Kang-Woo, who was tearing up.

While staring at Reynald's lifeless body, Kang-Woo grabbed at his chest. His head hung low with a solemn look in his eyes.

"Don't be sad, Kang-Woo," Gaia said, taking a step forward. She placed her hand on top of the shoulder of Kang-Woo, who was silently crying. "The light hasn't faded yet."

Gaia tilted her head upward, and so did Kang-Woo.

The sky had been engulfed in darkness.

No, it wasn't just the sky. After the Gaia System broke, Gaia lost her sight. Because of that, the world had always looked dark to her.

However...

"Look, Kang-Woo."

Gaia extended her hand toward the sky. She couldn't see, but she could tell that there were countless stars in the night sky.

"It isn't over yet, Kang-Woo. As long as the members of Guardians, the Protectors of the world, remain, the light will never fade."

"Gaia..."

'Damn, what a line,' Kang-Woo thought.

He found it a bit cringy, but it wasn't appropriate to make a face at that moment.

Kang-Woo stood up while nodding.

"Yes. You're right, Gaia."

He looked at the countless stars in the sky. His eyes were filled with melancholy, and the mood was calm.

'Now's the time. I should do that...'

"Ahem." Kang-Woo quietly cleared his throat.

He needed to convey to them that he was truly sad about Reynald's death, but he was trying to move forward.

"The light... hasn't faded yet. No, I won't let it fade!" Kang-Woo said with a heartfelt voice.

'Yes! This is it!'

It was the look of a hero standing up after overcoming pain, the epitome of a cliché.

Kang-Woo, who stood up under the starlight, looked as much like a hero as Reynald.

"Yes. I believe in you, Kang-Woo."

"Sniff. Hyung-nim..."

Gaia smiled, and Si-Hun teared up.

It seemed like the other members of Guardians were moved as well.

'Awright. This makes it worth all the effort.'

Kang-Woo's little act had been cringey, but it was worth it. He could feel that Gaia trusted him fully... No, it was more than that. Like Si-Hun, Gaia admired Kang-Woo.

A smile appeared on Kang-Woo's face.

The process hadn't been simple, but it had been a huge success. He was able to overcome a crisis in which his identity could have been revealed, and he instead managed to earn more of his allies' trust.

'This is all thanks to the good deeds I've done in my daily life!'

Kang-Woo didn't hesitate to get his hands dirty for his little brother's first love. It seemed obvious to him that such good actions would allow him to earn more trust from those around him.

Kang-Woo knelt on one leg and placed his hand on Reynald's corpse, whose eyes were still wide open.

"I hope you can rest in peace," Kang-Woo said. He gently shut Reynald's eyelids and wished for him to rest in peace. "I won't ever forget you, Reynald."

'Let's never see each other again, man.'

Kang-Woo was already having a headache dealing with the Demon Cult and Satan on Earth. If the continent of Aernor were to be added on top of that, the situation would become too troublesome.

"Let's go—"

Fwoooosh!!

Just as Kang-Woo was about to suggest that they leave, golden light poured out from Del Lain, Reynald's sword.

"What is it now?" Kang-Woo muttered with a crumpled expression.

He'd thought the situation had been resolved with Reynald's death, but things started to go awry once more.

[Tirion, God of Heroes, is enraged!]

- Who dares to kill my child?!!

A stormy voice resounded in their minds.

"Kuh!"

"Kyaa!"

Their eyes quivered at the presence of such colossal energy.

- I asked who killed my child?!!

It was a voice filled with rage. A huge amount of golden energy stormed around Del Lain.

'Tirion, God of Heroes.'

Kang-Woo's expression hardened. He now understood why Tirion had the title of a god. Tirion's strength was overwhelming even though he was pouring out his strength through a sword rather than in person.

"Please calm down, Lord Tirion."

- Daughter of Gaia, do you know who killed my child?

Fwoom.

The golden light around Del Lain flickered.

Kang-Woo's eyes narrowed while listening to Tirion's words.

'Wait...'

Tirion was desperately asking who killed Reynald.

'Does he not know the details of what happened?'

There was a high chance that was the case. If Tirion had seen everything that happened with Reynald, he should've known that Kang-Woo had used his spear to stab Reynald.

'All right, I managed to dodge the worst possible outcome.'

The worst possible outcome was, of course, Tirion pointing him out as the culprit. If that were to happen, even Kang-Woo would be in deep trouble.

'If he doesn't know what happened here...'

So, Kang-Woo couldn't simply do nothing.

"The one who killed Reynald was Demon King Vaal Zahak," he said.

- No, it was not him. If it were Vaal Zahak, I would have been able to feel it.

Tirion rejected Kang-Woo's explanation.

'I guess Vaal Zahak isn't an option.'

Still, there was no need to fret. After all, there was a true demon on Earth that was using Vaal Zahak as his subordinate—the Demon of Prophecy, Satan.

"Then I'm sure it was Satan."

Kang-Woo didn't even need to say it himself; Gaia had said it instead.

- Satan.

Whirrr. Del Lain was vibrating.

- I see. So, it was Satan. That evil demon took away my child's life!

"Kurgh!"

There was an explosion of golden light, and the members of Guardians grunted due to Tirion's overwhelming power.

[Tirion's rage is directed toward Satan!]

'Nice!'

Kang-Woo clenched his hands into fists in celebration.

'You're the best, Satan!'

By this point, Satan was pretty much an all-purpose cheat code. Satan, the Demon of Prophecy, had even enraged a god from another world.

- Subjects of Gaia, are you also fighting against that evil demon?

"Of course. Killing Satan, the Demon of Prophecy, is our duty," Kang-Woo replied.

There was determination in his eyes and no hesitation in his voice.

The sword resonated with Kang-Woo's burst of justice-filled words.

- I will lend you all of my power! Even if it means I'll vanish from existence!

[Warning. Excessive interference of Tirion, God of Heroes, has been detected. Further interference deemed impossible.]

A message window appeared in front of them.

- Kuuurrghh!

They could feel the pain in Tirion's voice.

Kang-Woo's eyes shone sharply.

The System had turned normal people into Players, and thanks to the ability known as stats, it could give them power, seemingly out of thin air.

'Now that I think about it, Gaia said that she could interfere with the system, although at a limited capacity.'

If those who received a god's power could interfere with the system, it wasn't weird that the god who gave them that power in the first place could as well.

'It seems not even gods can interfere with the system without consequences.'

He was able to roughly figure that out from hearing Tirion's pained voice.

Kang-Woo wasn't sure what the system was or how it worked... He wasn't even sure if the Gaia System that had created the players was the same one as the one that had been damaged because of Satan, the Demon of Prophecy.

Nevertheless, it wasn't hard for Kang-Woo to understand the current situation. Tirion wanted to give a portion of his power to the members of Guardians... even if it could lead to his annihilation.

"Lord Tirion! A hero like you mustn't disappear!" Kang-Woo shouted hurriedly.

Of course, his inner thoughts were different.

'Just cough up your power and disappear.'

Kang-Woo couldn't care less if Tirion were annihilated. Rather, it would be better if Tirion disappeared as soon as possible since he was the one who had thrown Reynald to Kang-Woo.

"A god mustn't sacrifice himself for mere mortals like us."

- No! My will is firm!

"Lord Tirion!"

'Yeah. I knew you were more likely to do it if I said you shouldn't.'

The more a person tried to stop a hero, the more passionate they became about doing something.

The corners of Kang-Woo's lips lifted subtly.

Then he stood up while wiping his tears.

"If that is the will of a god, then we will follow it," Kang-Woo said with a firm voice and intense eyes. "I swear it in the name of Gaia. We will make sure Reynald's sacrifice wasn't in vain. We will kill Satan, the Demon of Prophecy, and his subordinate Vaal Zahak and save the world!"

Tirion reacted to Kang-Woo's intense voice.

- What is your name?

The golden light that flowed out from Del Lain wrapped around Kang-Woo's body.

Kang-Woo knelt on one knee as if he were a knight pledging allegiance to a king.

"My name is Oh Kang-Woo."

- Hmm. I can feel an inexplicable power from you.

Kang-Woo flinched.

'Don't tell me he feels the Ten Thousand Demon Core.'

If Tirion could sense Kang-Woo's Ten Thousand Demon Core, then Kang-Woo would have to scrap a large part of his plan.

"Kang-Woo hyung-nim wasn't chosen as a Protector, but he became powerful through his own painstaking efforts. I'm sure that what you're feeling is his indestructible will," Si-Hun stated.

Gaia agreed, "He's right. Kang-Woo is more righteous and heroic than anyone I've ever met. He was the first to take action after Reynald disappeared and the one who was the saddest about his death."

A Protector and Gaia's apostle spoke up in Kang-Woo's favor.

'I love you guys!' Kang-Woo thought.

It was the support of the couple that he'd helped unite by working as cupid.

Kang-Woo unconsciously tightened his fists.

- I see. So, you were the first to take action in response to my child's sorrow and the one who was saddened the most by his death.

They were able to convince Tirion—who was prepared to die to avenge the death of his child, Reynald. The decisive factor was Gaia's words since she was also an apostle of a god just like Reynald.

After Tirion heard Gaia's words, Del Lain's golden light fluttered intensely.

Just as Gaia trusted Reynald because they were both the apostles of a god, Tirion seemed to trust Gaia quite a lot too.

- Very well. I choose you to inherit the hero's dying wishes.

'YOLO!'

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

Golden light poured out of Del Lain.

- Please, use my power for justice.

Tirion, who was prepared to be annihilated, requested earnestly.

"I will put my faith in the light!" Kang-Woo shouted in a firm voice.

An intense light poured into Kang-Woo.

Riiing.

[You have received the God of Heroes' Blessing.]

[Divinity of Tirion, God of Heroes, will be annihilated due to his excessive interference in the System.]

The intensely bright light made it hard for Kang-Woo and the others to keep their eyes open.

An explosive amount of energy entered Kang-Woo, and he immediately became connected with Tirion.

- W-Wait...

Before being annihilated, what was left of Tirion's consciousness expressed his shock. However, since he was connected with Kang-Woo, the only one who could hear him was Kang-Woo.

- Th-This is...! The D-Demonic Sea! You are the master of the Demonic Sea!! Tirion's voice rang out in Kang-Woo's mind.

He'd finally realized Kang-Woo's true identity.

'It's too late,' Kang-Woo thought.

Tirion's voice was getting weaker. That meant he was about to be annihilated.

- You bastard!! Y-You...!! It was you who killed my child!! Aah, wh-what have I done?!

Kang-Woo smiled.

'Don't be so sad. Just like you've asked, I'll kill Satan with my own hands.'

- Nonsense! If you are not Satan, then who is?!

'It's a long story, man. Anyway, you can leave the rest to me and disappear. I'll keep this world safe.'

- YOOOOUUUUUU!!

Tirion's desperate scream filled Kang-Woo's mind.

'What? I didn't ask you to choose me.'

Kang-Woo couldn't hold back his laughter anymore.

'You're the idiot for being deceived. Kahahaha.'

Chapter 157 - God of Heroes' Blessing (2)

- YOU BASTAAARRD!! Tirion's shout reverberated through Oh Kang-Woo's mind.

His voice was filled with rage, but his volume was quite low because he had weakened and was about to be annihilated.

'Time for you to rest.'

Kang-Woo smiled wickedly.

- Kurgh! I-I must inform Lord Michael!

'Who the hell is Michael?'

Kang-Woo frowned.

He'd heard that name before since it was quite famous in mythology. Michael was the name of one of the four great archangels, alongside Gabriel, Raphael, and Uriel.

'Is Tirion related to the celestial realm somehow?'

On top of that, he had addressed Michael as if the archangel were ranked above him.

'An archangel is above a god?'

Kang-Woo couldn't understand what was going on, seeing as common sense said that angels were the henchmen of gods. He frowned at the unexpected development of events.

'I can't let him contact anyone,' Kang-Woo thought to himself.

He had known from the start that Tirion would figure out his identity once he accepted Tirion's blessing. Nevertheless, he had accepted it anyway because Tirion had resolved himself to be annihilated.

Kang-Woo couldn't let Tirion tell others about his identity.

Whirrr!

He used the Authority of Predation on the power he'd obtained from Tirion. The darkness started devouring the golden energy.

- A-Aaahhh.

Kang-Woo's use of the Authority of Predation accelerated Tirion's annihilation.

'Stop being a nuisance and just disappear.'

He was getting annoyed at Tirion.

Kang-Woo had thought that Tirion would be annihilated as soon as he accepted Tirion's power, but he was wrong.

- Kuh! N-No! I will not give my power to an evil demon! Tirion shouted, making a final effort to put up a fight.

The golden energy within Kang-Woo started to run wild.

"Kurgh!"

Kang-Woo's face crumpled in agony as the pain spread throughout his body.

'Motherfucker!'

He bit his lip. He did his best to not lose his mind to the pain.

- Th-This must be as far as I go.

Tirion's voice was so soft that it was hard for Kang-Woo to hear him.

Then Kang-Woo's connection with Tirion was cut. It seemed like he'd been fully annihilated.

However...

"Kuurrgghh!"

Fwoooooom!

Golden energy pierced through Kang-Woo's skin and burst out.

It was Tirion's final retaliation. His efforts to make his power run rampant and destroy Kang-Woo were much harder to deal with than Kang-Woo had initially expected.

'Damn.'

It was a mind-boggling pain.

Tirion's energy ran wild in Kang-Woo's body. He felt as if he was being torn apart from the inside—like he'd drunk a cup of water full of razor blades.

'Fuck, I shouldn't have scammed him.'

If Kang-Woo had known that he would feel such pain, he would've let Kim Si-Hun have the power instead. Kang-Woo was now paying the price for having scammed the God of Heroes.

'You said he would be annihilated, dammit.'

He felt resentment toward the system's message window.

"Wow!"

"Hyung-nim..."

Si-Hun and the other members of Guardians exclaimed in surprise and admiration.

From the outside, it looked like Kang-Woo was powering up after receiving the power of a god.

"As expected of Kang-Woo hyung-nim. To think you'd be able to accept the power of the God of Heroes so easily..."

'No, Si-Hun.'

"I admire you, hyung-nim."

'I'm about to die from pain.'

"Compared to you, I'm... far too lacking."

'Help me.'

Kang-Woo asked Si-Hun for help in his mind, but Si-Hun couldn't hear him.

In this situation where he couldn't either laugh or cry, Kang-Woo was about to pass out.

'It hurts so fucking much.'

He was used to enduring pain; he could even stay smiling while one of his limbs was amputated. Despite that, he was having a hard time withstanding the pain he was suffering right now. A normal person would've already died from shock after feeling such terrible pain, which was as if their entire body was being ripped into pieces.

'Dammit.'

Nevertheless, Kang-Woo couldn't just wallow in regret. He closed his eyes and tried to control Tirion's power... but that didn't last long.

'I can't control it.'

Tirion's energy was too different from what Kang-Woo had been using up to this point. It was as if he'd poured electricity into a car that ran on gasoline. The golden energy was fundamentally too different from demonic energy, so controlling it was impossible.

'In that case...'

Kang-Woo bit his lip and clenched his hands into fists. If he couldn't control it, he had no choice but to devour it all. The demonic energy within his blood boiled.

Kang-Woo strenuously raised his head.

Even though Tirion had been annihilated, Del Lain was still wrapped in a golden light.

'Authority of Predation.'

Black energy surrounded Del Lain. The golden light strongly resisted the Authority of Predation. Nonetheless, Kang-Woo ignored those efforts. Like a predator overwhelming and devouring its struggling prey, he engulfed the energy with the Authority of Predation.

Riiing.

[Applying the Trait 'Mana-Hungry Demon.']

[Warning. There is a different form of energy mixed with the corresponding mana. Full conversion to demonic energy deemed impossible.]

[Would you still like to proceed?]

'That's not important right now.'

Kang-Woo didn't care about whether he could fully absorb the power. His body was about to explode any second. He did not have the leeway to worry about such trivial things right now.

Kang-Woo focused on using the Authority of Predation to its utmost limit.

Fwoooooom!

"Kurgh."

Tirion's energy continued to run rampant in resistance, tearing apart Kang-Woo's skin. Black blood leaked from his wounds.

Upon seeing that, one of the Guardians members shouted, "Th-This is a Metamorphosis!!"

'It's not, bro,' Kang-Woo thought.

"Wow!"

'I said it's not, you sons of bitches. I'm seriously about to die over here, so don't just stand there, and come cast some healing magic on me.'

"Seeing that black blood is coming out, it looks like the body is expelling its internal waste."

'My blood is black.'

Si-Hun nodded. "It's definitely a Metamorphosis. Everyone, please watch over the surroundings. Hyung-nim could suffer irreversible damage if he were to receive even the smallest impact."

'Si-Hun, please help me.'

"Sh-Shouldn't we do something?"

'Healing magic...'

"No. Those are wounds formed through the reconstruction of his body. There is no need to use healing magic."

'Just let me have some healing magic, you son of a bitch.'

As his injuries increased, Kang-Woo wanted to be healed, but he knew he couldn't expect any help due to Si-Hun's firm beliefs.

At that moment, he resented Si-Hun.

'AARRGGHH.'

Since Kang-Woo wouldn't be receiving the aid of healing magic, he would have to absorb Tirion's energy as quickly as possible.

Riiing.

[You have successfully absorbed a portion of the energy of Tirion, God of Heroes.]

[Expelling the energy that failed to be converted.]

Rumble!!

The ground shook, and a blinding light swept over Kang-Woo's surroundings.

"Woah!" the Guardians members exclaimed in surprise after feeling the divine energy.

[Demonic Energy has risen by 4.]

[A portion of the passage leading to the deep end of the Ten Thousand Demon Core has been activated as the quality of the stat has risen.]

[All conditions of Demonic Soul must be fulfilled for complete activation.]

[You have reached the maximum stat number that can be currently reached. The stat will rise once the first condition of Demonic Soul is fulfilled or the level cap is broken.]

Kang-Woo had absorbed only a portion of the energy, but it had been the energy of a god, so even just a portion of it was incredibly powerful. His Demonic Energy stat had reached 129, and he felt immense power flowing through his body.

Tirion's sword, Del Lain, turned into dust and scattered away. The golden dust that covered their surroundings made for a spectacular view.

A brilliant light soared into the sky, dispelling the darkness.

"Huff, huff!" Kang-Woo panted heavily while bending over.

"Hyung-nim!"

"Kang-Woo!"

Gaia, Si-Hun, and the other members of Guardians went running toward him.

'Fuck.'

The pain had finally stopped. In addition to that, Kang-Woo had obtained massive rewards for having absorbed the power of a god.

'I thought I was gonna die.'

He was used to pain, but he'd struggled so much that he'd almost passed out. The shock of having experienced such pain would not dissipate so easily.

On top of that...

'You've hurt my feelings, Si-Hun.'

Kang-Woo knew why Si-Hun had said they shouldn't use healing magic on him. If Kang-Woo had been in someone else's shoes, he would've also thought that he had been going through a Metamorphosis.

He knew that, but he couldn't help but feel disappointed anyway. Human emotions were quite complex, after all.

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

Kang-Woo remained silent.

"Hyung-nim? Is something the matter?" Si-Hun asked, worried after seeing Kang-Woo's stiff expression.

Kang-Woo turned away and answered, "Nothing at all, man."

'How could you do this to me?' he thought.

"Wh-What's wrong, hyung-nim?"

"Nothing."

'After all I've done for you... you still don't understand how I feel?'

"Your expression says otherwise..."

Kang-Woo walked past Si-Hun without replying.

"H-Hyung-nim!"

Si-Hun hurriedly followed him.

Kang-Woo snorted. 'I'm upset with you.'

* * *

After the members of Guardians left, a small Rift formed in the Grand Canyon and exuded a gloomy aura.

Crack.

A black arm emerged from the Rift, which was black and blue.

CRACK—!!

The Rift widened, and a black figure pushed himself out.

He had two horns, bat wings, a long tail, a muscular body, and eyes that had yellow irises with vertical pupils. The figure was exuding a suffocatingly thick demonic energy.

"This must be the place called Earth that Lord Lucifer mentioned."

"Malphas, can you see anything around the area?"

"No, I don't see anything around here."

"Hmm. Father said that there are many humans in this world."

Three identical demons appeared from the Rift and looked around the canyon.

"Well. I'm sure we will find some if we look around some more."

"Lord Lucifer would not lie."

The names of the three demons were Phenex, Malphas, and Halphas.

They turned around and bowed toward the Rift.

"Glory to Lucifer."

The three demons were bowing to their master, the Evil God Lucifer.

Then Halphas took a step forward and grabbed some sand with his hands.

"I can feel Tirion's energy," he said.

"So, it's true that Tirion was annihilated."

"Tsk. Who cares about a lower god's annihilation?"

"Yes. What matters is the being that annihilated him."

Halphas raised his head.

He recalled the command that their master Lucifer had given them, "Find him."

"Let's move," Halphas told the other two demons.

"Where should we start?"

"I heard that the retainers of Gaia reside in this world. They should have some information."

"Can we kill them?"

"She's a god of that faction. I'm sure it won't matter if we kill them."

"Isn't Gaia an upper god?"

"Hmph. Are you scared of killing the retainers of a half-dead god?"

"Of course not."

The three demons exchanged glances with one another.

"Then let's go."

They spread their wings simultaneously and soared into the darkness.

They had traveled to this faraway world on Lucifer's command for one reason...

"Tirion was a lower god... but it's still surprising that he managed to annihilate him. Impressive."

"There would be no reason for us to find him if he wasn't impressive."

"That's true."

"I am sure he will be of great help to Lord Lucifer's plan."

The three demons let out grim laughs.

"Satan."

"Let us find him."

They had come to Earth to find the Demon of Prophecy, Satan.

Chapter 158 - Hero Kim Si-Hun (1)

A week passed after Reynald died at the hands of Satan, the Demon of Prophecy.

The Guardians members left the sadness behind, and everyone returned to their routines of investigating the Demon Cult and completing all sorts of missions.

Guardians mainly handled missions related to investigating the Demon Cult and eliminating the monsters that walked out of the gates, and they did all sorts of rescue missions around the world.

Oh Kang-Woo asked, "You want me to go to South America?"

"Yes," Gaia said.

Kang-Woo fell into thought.

She explained, "A group of indigenous people who have remained in those lands has been attacked recently by monsters. They asked for help from the USA, but there are many refugees, and they're spread out, so they're lacking personnel. I want you and Si-Hun to guide the indigenous people to the US soldiers."

Although most countries in South America and the Middle East had collapsed and become deserted, it wasn't that no one lived there anymore.

Countries like Argentina and Brazil had pretty much been reduced to countries in name only, but many people were still living in these countries and trying to rebuild their nations.

Many people had refused to leave when a nuclear power plant had exploded in Japan due to a huge earthquake, so it wasn't weird that some people still lived in a territory that had become infested by monsters.

'I don't really want to.'

He couldn't care less about the people; they had been the ones who had decided to live in a dangerous region.

No, even if they had no other choice, Kang-Woo had no reason to save them.

'I don't want to play hero.'

He just wanted to protect Earth from demons and beings of other dimensions he didn't know about.

Kang-Woo was doing it because of his own personal desires.

If the problem wasn't as serious as an entire civilization being on the verge of collapse, he didn't feel the need to go around the world playing hero.

'On top of that, they're citizens of a country that has already collapsed.'

Even if they died, the situation in the world wouldn't change.

Although incidents around the world had increased, people had accepted it as something inevitable.

It was a cruel thought in a humanitarian sense, but Kang-Woo couldn't give less of a shit about being a humanitarian.

'Well, maybe it would be different if they were dying right in front of me.'

How humanitarian someone could be was often influenced by whether they could see it or not.

Watching someone die of hunger was more shocking than hearing on the news that hundreds of thousands of people on the other side of the world had died from starvation.

He would save them if he could, but he didn't feel the need to make an effort to save people.

—That was how much morality Kang-Woo had left.

'It's not like I have something to gain, either.'

He'd been able to grow exponentially after absorbing Tirion's power, and the biggest change was that he could use a bit of the demonic energy in the deep end of the Demonic Sea.

'The best part is that the number of Authorities I can use has increased.'

There were many Authorities he couldn't use unless he used demonic energy from the deep end. No, in reality, most of the Authorities that belonged to archdemons could only be used with demonic energy from the deep end.

Kang-Woo, however, couldn't be content with just that. He still had a long way to go before he could face the princes of Hell, so he needed to focus just as much on getting stronger.

'This Michael, or whatever, is also a bit of a problem.'

In other words, he didn't have time to go around saving people.

"Of course, I know this is a dangerous task," Gaia said, seemingly noticing that Kang-Woo didn't like the idea too much. "But Si-Hun will be with you, and if you need it, we will provide you with more sup—"

"Oh, it isn't because of the danger," he answered firmly.

He wasn't lying.

Saving people who lived in areas infested by monsters...

Leaving the tasks related to the Demon Cult aside, it was one of the most dangerous missions. No, the average task related to the Demon Cult wasn't as dangerous.

Still, he wasn't too worried.

After his Demonic Energy stat reached 129, Kang-Woo had acquired power surpassing an archdemon, so to him, it wasn't a hard task.

"Hmm."

He crossed his arms and fell into thought. It was true that he didn't want to do it, but it wasn't like he had anything else to do.

'The Demon Cult still hasn't taken action.'

Since his stat growth had been blocked, absorbing the souls of demons and fulfilling the first condition of 'Demonic Soul' was his priority. But the problem was that there weren't any demons.

Unlike other players, he didn't need to train, so he had even fewer things to do.

'I guess I could play hero for a bit.'

Gaia, Kim Si-Hun, and the other Guardians thought of Kang-Woo as Hero Reynald's successor after he inherited the power of the God of Heroes. It didn't matter if it was true or not. Kang-Woo had to show himself doing some heroic things from time to time.

'There's also a chance the recent increase in attacks is because of the Demon Cult.'

He thought it wasn't a bad idea to investigate their movements while drilling into people's minds that he was the God of Heroes' successor by rescuing civilians.

Kang-Woo nodded.

"Okay, I will take the mission."

"Ah! Thank you very much, Kang-Woo."

Gaia smiled brightly. Although she looked very frail, her bright smile had something that could stimulate the hearts of all men.

'Si-Hun, you should be thankful to me.'

He felt guilty for having gotten rid of the innocent Reynald for the sake of Si-Hun's love, but after seeing things develop like this, he was kind of proud.

'Come to think of it, where has that guy been lately?'

He had heard that Si-Hun had gone somewhere else in order to train, but he hadn't heard where. They'd met in the Hall of Protection a few times, but they'd only exchanged simple greetings.

He felt as if Si-Hun was avoiding him.

'Don't tell me it's because of that?'

When Tirion's power was tearing his body apart, Kang-Woo had treated him coldly because Si-Hun hadn't realized the pain he was going through.

"In that case, I will have a flight to South America ready for you two. Can I ask you to relay the mission details to Protector Kim Si-Hun?"

"Ah. Yes, of course."

"Protector Kim Si-Hun has been looking down lately... Please also ask him what's wrong," Gaia said in a worried voice.

Kang-Woo nodded. He was planning to do that anyway.

'Si-Hun, it isn't actually because of that, right?'

He began walking faster in search of Si-Hun.

* * *

Si-Hun was in a training room inside the Hall of Protection.

As Kang-Woo walked toward it, he heard an explosion.

Click.

Boom! Slam! Crash!

"Huff! Huff! Huff!"

Si-Hun was swinging his sword at a practice scarecrow.

The scarecrow, which had been made using a special magic device, was tattered like a mop.

"Si-Hun."

"H-Hyung-nim?"

As Kang-Woo entered the room, Si-Hun's expression hardened. Si-Hun averted his gaze and asked, "What are you doing here?"

"I have something to tell you."

Si-Hun remained silent.

Kang-Woo looked at him quietly and then opened his mouth.

"Let's go somewhere more comfortable."

"Hyung-nim?"

He dragged Si-Hun to the rooftop of his apartment. The view from the rooftop was beautiful, as expected from an expensive apartment.

Kang-Woo leaned on the railing and asked, "Has something been on your mind lately?"

"..."

"If it's because of how I acted before, I'm s—"

"No, it wasn't because of you." Si-Hun stood next to Kang-Woo while smiling bitterly. His voice had a sense of loneliness. "This is my own problem."

"What kind of problem?"

There was a short silence.

After thinking about it for a while, Si-Hun opened his mouth.

"Do you remember when Reynald died?"

"Yes."

"Back then..."

He bit his lip and clenched his fists, gripping the railing. His grip indented the metal railing. Si-Hun said in a trembling voice, "To be honest, I was a bit relieved."

'Oh, so that's what this is about.'

Kang-Woo smirked.

Si-Hun had felt disgusted at himself after feeling relieved that his rival had disappeared.

It was a Si-Hun-like worry.

Kang-Woo said, "Don't worry. It's normal for humans to feel like that."

"... But you were different, hyung-nim."

"Not really. If I were in your shoes, I would've danced with joy right then and there."

"Hahaha."

Si-Hun laughed. He probably thought Kang-Woo was joking.

'No joke.'

If it were Kang-Woo, he actually would've danced with joy.

He looked at Si-Hun and said, "Let me ask you something."

"What is it...?"

"Why are you so strict with yourself?"

Kang-Woo had been wondering about this for quite some time. To be more precise, he'd been wondering ever since he saw Si-Hun stand up for Alec and put his life on the line.

'It's too unnatural to call it a personality trait.'

During the Isu Station incident, although Kang-Woo had told him to do so, Si-Hun had been able to cut down ordinary people who had been turned into demonic beasts without hesitation.

Alec and Reynald wouldn't have been able to do such a thing.

Si-Hun wasn't like them; he was merely trying to become like them.

There was a heavy silence.

Si-Hun narrowed his eyes and fell into thought for longer than before under the silence.

"Haha. I guess I can't hide anything from you, hyung-nim."

Si-Hun laughed lightly.

"When I was a kid... my mother told me something."

Si-Hun looked up at the sky with sad eyes.

"She told me, 'I'm sorry for giving birth to you.' "

Si-Hun clenched his fists, his veins popped out.

"I despised those words. I hated them so much that I couldn't stand hearing them.

"But...

"Yes. I'm sure she doesn't think that anymore. No, she probably doesn't even remember saying that to me."

He continued, saying in a pent-up voice, "But that wasn't something I had achieved myself with my own hands. I was simply saved by you, hyung-nim."

His voice became more and more intense.

"I wanted to be like you, hyung-nim. I wanted to be a savior to those who had suffered just like my past self so that I could... proudly say that what my mother had told me when I was a child was wrong."

"..."

"That's why I can't stand my narrow-minded and selfish self."

Si-Hun finished talking.

Kang-Woo sighed.

'A savior, huh?'

Kang-Woo felt as if he finally had an idea of what kind of person the man named Kim Si-Hun was.

Si-Hun didn't want to become a hero. He didn't want to receive people's admiration or cry out about justice. He just wanted to extend a hand to those in need... so that he could be proud of himself.

'Dumbass.'

Kang-Woo frowned.

In a sense, Si-Hun was dumber than Alec.

It was a frustrating, annoying, and childish thought.

Trying to help others to overcome a childhood trauma was something only morons with chuunibyou[1] would think of.

It was a way of thinking Kang-Woo could neither understand nor sympathize with.

But...

Tap.

He placed his hand on Si-Hun's head.

"Hyung-nim?"

Then, Kang-Woo ruffled his hair.

"Argh! Wh-What are you doing, hyung-nim?!"

"Haaa."

Kang-Woo couldn't help but sigh. He smirked as Si-Hun looked up at him in confusion.

"Fuck. I've grown so soft."

Although for a short moment, he had cheered Si-Hun on.

Kang-Woo did not understand him or calculate what he could get out of it by doing so; he had cheered Si-Hun on in the purest sense.

It didn't suit Kang-Woo at all.

'I feel like I'm gonna hurl.'

He was cringing so hard, but it wasn't an unbearably bad feeling.

"Hyung-nim...?"

"Let's go."

"Wh-Where?"

Smiling, he lightly patted Si-Hun's head.

"To save people."

Chapter 159 - Hero Kim Si-Hun (2)

"We're going to separate into three groups."

Oh Kang-Woo, Kim Si-Hun, Han Seol-Ah, Echidna, Cha Yeon-Joo, Kang Tae-Soo, Baek Hwa-Yeon, Goo Hyun-Mo, Tian Suyan, and Tian Wuchen.

Kang-Woo thought he might as well go all the way with playing hero, and he called as many people as he could.

They landed in the country at the top of the continent, Venezuela.

Most of the South American countries had collapsed after the Day of Calamity, but Venezuela had been the exception. It wasn't because Venezuela was a strong country or had outstanding Players...

It was thanks to the USA.

The USA was using Venezuela as a base to eliminate the monsters in South America, since it was the closest to them; and they were also planning to recover the rest of the Earth.

'Of course, they aren't doing it out of good intentions.'

It was obvious, but the reason why the USA was working so hard to take back the countries that monsters had invaded wasn't because they were selfless.

On the outside, they said it was for world peace and the advancement of humanity, but everyone knew that, in reality, it was to publicize that they were the strongest country in the world.

'Well, whatever their reason is, it's true that they're helping out.'

It was a fact that the world restoration project would not have even taken off if it hadn't been for the USA.

It had become a good influence for East Asian countries, such as China and Korea, to begin restoring the Middle East.

"We only have ten people. Isn't it a bit too little to divide into three groups?" Yeon-Joo asked.

Kang-Woo shook his head.

"The main force is the US military, and the indigenous people are too widely scattered, so moving together would be too inefficient."

Most of the indigenous people remaining in South American countries lived like nomads; they built villages to live in, abandoned them when monsters attacked, and then built new villages after relocating.

Hence, none of them stayed in one place as a large group, so rescuing them wasn't easy.

"Then how are you going to divide the groups?" Wuchen asked.

"Judging from the situation, we should divide into groups focused on hunting monsters and groups focused on guiding the refugees to the US military," answered Suyan, who was reading through the documents.

Wuchen and Suyan had been collaborating with Korea and Japan to recover the Middle East, but they were participating in this operation at Kang-Woo's request since it would act as a good reference for the Middle East restoration project.

Kang-Woo nodded. "Then, with Mr. Tian Wuchen as the focus, Suyan, Mr. Goo Hyun-Mo, Hwa-Yeon, and Yeon-Joo will be in the monster subjugation group. Si-Hun, you take Seol-Ah and Tae-Soo to rescue the indigenous people and guide them to the US troops."

"What about you, hyung-nim?"

"Echidna and I will be going around with the monster subjugation group to eliminate monsters, but we'll also focus on finding traces of the Demon Cult."

"Oh."

"Do you think this incident has something to do with the Demon Cult?" Seol-Ah asked.

Kang-Woo shrugged.

"I'm not sure, but since there have been multiple simultaneous monster attacks, it's worth investigating."

"W-Wouldn't it be dangerous?"

Seol-Ah grabbed his arm while making a worried expression.

Kang-Woo was about to beam with joy, but he coughed to stop himself.

"Ahem. Well, I'm sure nothing dangerous will happen, so don't worry."

Judging from the number of people in the group, Kang-Woo and Echidna might look like they were the ones most exposed to danger, but that wasn't necessarily the case.

It had been quite some time since Kang-Woo's strength had reached a point that couldn't be compared to the strength of other humans on Earth.

The only way he'd be in trouble was if a prince of Hell appeared on Earth.

"I'd say Mr. Tian Wuchen's group would be exposed to the most danger. Make sure to contact me if anything happens. Oh, right. Everyone has the necklaces Echidna gave you, right? They have interpretation and tracking magic cast on them, so make sure you don't lose them."

"We'll be just fine without you worrying about us," Yeon-Joo snorted and turned around.

Hwa-Yeon smiled bitterly and whispered, "I hope you understand she's just acting like that because she wasn't put in the same group as y—"

"Hwa-Yeon!!"

"Oops. Hahaha. Then we'll get going."

Wuchen's group was the first to take off.

Kang-Woo approached Seol-Ah and said, "They were attacked by monsters, so there are probably many injured."

"I think so too."

"Don't try to heal every single injured person. Focus only on those in critical condition and lead them to where the US troops are. Take a break when you use half your mana and then focus on replenishing it."

"Fufu. You're telling me to save up mana just in case, right? You don't need to tell me such things anymore."

Seol-Ah nodded while smiling brightly.

Kang-Woo said, "Si-Hun and Tae-Soo, if there's conflict among the people or a monster attack, stop them as soon as possible. I'm counting on you guys to keep Seol-Ah safe."

"Hehe! You can trust me, hyung-nim! I'll make sure no one lays a hand on my sister-in-law!"

"We'll save as many people as quickly as possible."

"Okay," Kang-Woo said. He turned around and rose to the sky with Echidna.

Si-Hun looked at Kang-Woo's back.

"Let's go."

"Okay, Si-Hun."

"It's been a while since we've all teamed up like this, Si-Hun!"

"Haha, I guess you're right. Although, Eun-Bi isn't here."

"Tsk. We can't bring a kid who isn't even twenty years old to such a dangerous place."

"That's true."

Si-Hun softly laughed while looking at his party members. He hadn't seen them for a while.

* * *

"Thank you! Thank you very much!"

"Mommy!"

A child who looked about five years old hugged his mother. He was still limping since he hadn't been fully healed yet, but it was still much better than before, considering he'd been on the verge of death.

Seol-Ah waved at the child while smiling brightly.

The child's mother bowed several times.

It was at that moment...

Waaaahhhh!

Seol-Ah heard the cheers outside the barracks. Tae-Soo, who was guarding Seol-Ah, laughed out loud.

"Si-Hun seems to have arrived!"

"Yes, that seems to be the case.

When they went outside, they saw Si-Hun and the men of the village.

The men all shouted.

"Everyone! The US troops will be arriving today!"

"This gentleman defeated all the monsters in the area!"

Everyone looked at Si-Hun.

Si-Hun scratched his head, smiling awkwardly.

The leader of the village approached him and grabbed his hand. Tears could be seen in his wrinkled eyes.

"Thank you. Thank you... so very much. If it weren't for you, we would've all died."

"N-Not at all."

Si-Hun didn't know what to say in response to the man's sudden words.

"You are our hero."

After seeing his bright smile, a weird sensation spread through Si-Hun's body.

"I'm sorry for..."

He could hear a voice filled with sorrow.

Si-Hun shook his head.

"N-No. I'm..."

'... Not a hero.'

He suppressed those last words and smiled awkwardly. It was hard for him to express his emotions.

Si-Hun turned around and walked toward Seol-Ah and Tae-Soo.

"Hehe, if it isn't our hero Si-Hun?"

"Ngh. I told you not to call me that."

"Hoho. You've saved hundreds of lives these past few days. Who else could we call a hero?"

"... I didn't do it by myself," Si-Hun said while looking at them with a bitter smile.

Seol-Ah and Tae-Soo had also been busying about for the indigenous people who had been attacked by monsters.

"Were you able to make contact with Kang-Woo hyung-nim and Mas—"

BOOOOM!

"KYAAHH!!"

A deafening sound cut Si-Hun's words short and rang through the area.

A huge impact shook the barracks, and the building crumbled.

"S-Si-Hun!"

"What's going on?!"

Seol-Ah and Tae-Soo stood up, but before they could even stand up completely, Si-Hun had already run in the direction of the explosion.

"What the..."

Si-Hun's eyes widened.

In the village outskirts, there were holes in the ground as if someone had poked through a piece of paper.

The villagers screamed from all over the village.

"S-Si-Hun!! Save u—Kurgh!"

"Ah."

A round hole appeared in the stomach of the village leader, who had just called him a hero. The hole had been cut out so cleanly that it was as if someone had used a precise machine.

Blood poured out; the village leader collapsed.

Si-Hun wasn't looking at the village leader who had collapsed—he was looking at the village entrance.

"Demons..."

He saw two horns, black wings, black skin, and yellow eyes that resembled a reptile's.

Three demons so identical that they looked like clones were standing at the village entrance.

[Is it that human?]

[It seems so. I can feel the energy of a god.]

[A retainer of Gaia.]

The three demons talked to each other.

Si-Hun's body trembled.

'They're strong.'

He could tell just by looking at them. He felt a chill run through his body.

[Let's take him alive and ask him where Gaia's incarnation is.]

[Will you do it, Halphas?]

[Yes. I want to know how strong a retainer of Gaia is.]

The demon in the middle took a step forward.

"Si-Hun!"

"Si-Hun!"

Seol-Ah and Tae-Soo arrived.

"They're..."

"Demons," Si-Hun said, biting his lip anxiously. His head became blank; he wasn't sure what to do.

[Right, let's begin.]

The demon didn't give him time to think. Halphas extended his hand, and a sphere of black demonic energy flew toward Si-Hun.

"Si-Hun!"

Slam!!

"Kurgh!!"

Tae-Soo blocked the sphere with his shield. It was just one attack, but after being hit with the black sphere, Tae-Soo was flung back as if he were a piece of paper.

"Tae-Soo!" Seol-Ah quickly shouted his name and used healing magic on him.

White light covered Tae-Soo.

[Huh?]

Halphas's eyes shone. With great interest, he looked at the light covering Tae-Soo.

[That's...]

"Haap!!"

Si-Hun stomped on the ground and leaped forward.

Blue sword energy extended from the El Cuero Blade.

[Hmm.]

Halphas twisted his body and waved his hand. He created several black spheres in an instant and launched them toward Si-Hun.

"Shit!"

Boom, boom, boom!!

Si-Hun quickly rolled on the ground. The black spheres hit the place where he'd been standing, and exploded.

Si-Hun dodged Halphas's attack and swung his sword.

The battle continued.

BOOOOM!

"Kurgh!"

Si-Hun was being overwhelmed. He couldn't land even a single blow and had to keep dodging Halphas's attacks.

Malphas and Phenex clicked their tongues in disappointment, their conversation reaching Si-Hun's ears.

[Is this the extent of a retainer of Gaia?]

[How disappointing.]

'Dammit.'

Si-Hun frowned and clenched his fists harder.

During that short time, attacks poured down on him once again. A black sphere brushed past his leg. His clothes ripped, and the wound widened.

"Si-Hun!"

Seol-Ah urgently used healing magic and buffs on him.

The wound closed, and he recovered his vitality, but he knew better than anyone that he was still no match against the demons.

"... Run away with Tae-Soo."

"What?"

"Take the villagers and get out of here now!"

"B-But..."

"Hurry!"

Si-Hun didn't hesitate. Nothing would change even if he fought alongside his two party members. He wasn't even sure if he'd be able to beat the demon named Halphas, so winning against three demons simultaneously was impossible.

Si-Hun took out a piece of paper from his pocket.

"This is the place where the US troops said they'd be. Get there as fast as you can. I will buy you as much time as possible."

Seol-Ah looked at Si-Hun with hesitation.

Si-Hun shouted aggressively, "Hurry! Even if the three of us fight together, it'd just be two more dead bodies!"

Closing her eyes, Seol-Ah took the paper. Tae-Soo was about to say something, but she pulled his hand and said, "I will call Kang-Woo right away."

Seol-Ah dragged Tae-Soo by force and started to run away.

Si-Hun watched them get further away and sighed in relief.

[I will go.]

Malphas turned toward the escaping Seol-Ah and Tae-Soo.

"Where do you think you're going?!" Si-Hun stomped on the ground.

Azure Dragon Foot Technique.

Slithering snake marks were left on the ground as Si-Hun shot forward. Qi burst forth from his dantian, traveled down his arms, and enveloped the El Cuero Blade. The condensed sword energy surged and targeted Malphas's head.

[Ngh.]

It seemed as if Malphas wouldn't be able to take the condensed sword energy head on. The demon moved back while frowning.

The El Cuero Blade brushed past his shoulder and chest, a wound appeared on his body, and black blood poured out.

Malphas extended his hand, instantly creating a black sphere and launching it toward Si-Hun.

Slaaaam!!

"Kurgh!"

Si-Hun rolled on the ground along with an explosion.

"Cough!"

He vomited blood. He had only been hit by one of the black spheres, but a mind-numbing shock and intense pain were spreading through his body.

He clenched his teeth, used the sword as a cane, and stood up.

[Oh? I guess he isn't a retainer of Gaia for nothing.]

[Back off, Malphas.]

[What about the ones that escaped?]

[They aren't important. The only one that matters is the retainer of Gaia.]

Halphas stepped forward once again.

Si-Hun looked at the three demons in silence.

'I can't win.'

He couldn't even properly face one of them. If they attacked him simultaneously, his chance of winning was close to zero.

"Haaa. Haaa."

His body trembled in fear; his two legs shook. The only thing on his mind was his desire to follow after Seol-Ah and Tae-Soo in escaping.

[He's shaking.]

Halphas laughed at him mockingly. He could see Si-Hun's legs trembling in fear.

Si-Hun took a step backward.

Tap. Something hit his foot. He looked down.

It was the corpse of the village leader who had called him a hero.

'Yet again...'

He wasn't able to save someone.

"I'm sorry for giving birth to you."

He heard that voice once again—it was something he was used to. He had never been able to get away from that voice.

"A hero? Bullshit."

He gripped the sword tighter. He added more strength to his trembling legs.

He raised his head and glared at Halphas.

'I...'

He wasn't thinking of becoming a hero, nor did he want to become one.

'I...'

This excruciating voice had been engraved into his brain.

'I...'

He wanted to be freed from the voice. If someone were to say the same thing to him in the future, he wanted to be able to proudly raise his head and tell them that they were wrong.

'I...'

It was childish and stupid.

A child who admired a hero he saw through the TV screen was probably better than him.

He was just a pathetic loser suffering from trauma. He was an idiot who couldn't act his age. He was a moron unable to walk away from his unfortunate past.

'I...'

He knew that.

It wasn't that he didn't know.

He knew how stupid his thoughts were.

But...

Despite that...

[Oh?]

He raised his sword and took a step forward with trembling legs.

'I won't run.'

Si-Hun stomped on the ground.

Chapter 160 - Hero Kim Si-Hun (3)

Kim Si-Hun stomped on the ground and focused on his sword. He felt as if he had become one with his sword. His Qi reached his sword, and a mysterious high spread through him.

"Fuuu."

He took a deep breath. The Qi within his dantian moved in synchronization with his breaths, to his arms, legs, and sword.

Crack.

Footsteps were engraved on the ground, and he shot forward while using the foot technique as if he were sliding.

[Interesting.]

Halphas smiled. Black spheres shot in all directions.

Si-Hun's eyes shone sharply. There were dozens of black spheres being launched toward him.

Being hit with even one would be fatal.

'I can't block them.'

He might be able to deflect a few, but there were dozens. Blocking all of them was impossible.

'Should I jump into the air?'

He shook his head. Some attacks had been launched up in the air, as if Halphas had read his possible dodge trajectories. Unless he could fly, jumping into the air to dodge the black spheres would be impossible.

'In that case...'

He lowered his body to the point that his chest almost touched the ground. He launched himself forward.

Boom!

He flew with his body low. Gravity caused him to slump to the ground while drawing a parabola.

It was at that moment...

'Azure Dragon Ascension.'

He twisted his body and swung his sword at the ground. He instantly shot up perpendicularly from the ground into the air as if inertia had disappeared.

He looked down and saw Halphas clearly astonished.

'Azure Dragon Flash.'

He swung the sword. Blue condensed sword energy surged from the blade and targeted Halphas's head.

[Good!]

The tips of Halphas's mouth went up. The fight he thought was boring had suddenly turned interesting.

He extended his left hand and created a barrier of demonic energy.

Baaaam!

A loud sound spread through the place. The shockwave raised a cloud of dust.

Halphas was pushed back a bit. He spread out both of his arms.

[Struggle some more, retainer of Gaia!]

A black sphere the size of a fist formed between his extended arms.

[Hahahaha!]

Halphas laughed out loud. An explosive amount of demonic energy burst out of his body.

The black sphere got even bigger.

From thirty centimeters to fifty, and then to a meter.

[Alright, try to block this as well!]

[Calm down, Halphas.]

[What are you going to do if the retainer dies?]

The other two demons tried to stop him, but Halphas didn't hear them.

The spark had already been lit.

The battle-crazed body of a demon had made him lose his mind.

The black sphere grew to over two meters in size.

Si-Hun felt chills. He could feel impressive destructive energy from the black sphere.

Crackle!

The black sphere shot forward, devouring everything in its path.

"Kurgh!"

Its pulling force was enormous.

A powerful gust, resembling a typhoon, pushed him from behind.

He would be absorbed by the black sphere the moment he eased up.

Si-Hun's face turned pale. He couldn't stand still and endure it either. The black sphere was approaching him quickly.

"Shit!"

He bit his lip. He subconsciously knew he wouldn't be able to dodge it.

Si-Hun clenched his sword tighter; the blue condensed sword energy surged more intensely.

"Fuuu. Fuuu."

He felt cold sweat drip down his back. He gulped. Once again, fear of death dominated his body.

'Focus.'

He infused his trembling legs with Qi and clenched his fists.

'If I can't dodge...'

Smash!

He swung his Qi-infused fists down on his knees as if he were striking nails with a hammer. His two legs were planted into the ground down to his knees.

He gripped his sword with both hands.

'I'll block it.'

He raised the sword above his head. Shimmering darkness opened its mouth toward him.

He exploded the Qi within his body. Condensed sword energy shot up.

"Fuuu."

He took a deep breath and then held it.

He relaxed his body and stared at the sphere.

He'd only have one chance; he wasn't sure if it was even possible to do it.

'That doesn't matter.'

A smile appeared on his face. Instead of feeling pressured, he felt as if the weight on his shoulders had been lifted now that he had been put in such desperate danger.

He could see someone's back.

The person who had appeared when he was about to die at Kim Yeong-Hun's hands...

'Kang-Woo hyung.'

They were not related by blood.

He didn't know who Kang-Woo was or what kind of person he used to be in the past...

But there was something he was sure about...

At that moment, Kang-Woo had saved him.

Kang-Woo had saved him from the muddy life he'd thought he'd be stuck with forever.

Crackle!!

The black sphere closed in. Si-Hun swung the sword down from above his head. It was not a fast swing; it was slow and leisurely.

Riiing.

[You have learned the Unique Skill 'Heavenly Dragon Flash.']

A message window appeared in front of Si-Hun, but he paid it no mind. The sword swung down on the black sphere.

[Huh?]

Halphas's face crumpled.

He had created that black sphere using the power bestowed on them by their master, Evil God Lucifer.

Even if Si-Hun was a retainer of Gaia, Halphas's technique wasn't something a human should've been able to counter.

But...

[Halphas!!]

[Dodge!]

He heard the other two demons scream at him.

The black sphere was split in two, and the blue energy that had split the sphere shot toward him.

Halphas instinctively twisted his body.

Slash!

[Kurgh!]

The blue energy severed his left arm. Pain spread from his arm to the rest of his body. Halphas's expression stiffened.

'That was dangerous.'

If he hadn't twisted his body at that moment, he might have been split in half. No, if he hadn't dodged, he would have died.

[A mere human!!]

He was set ablaze with fury, and his face turned red from humiliation.

To think he'd suffer such humiliation in front of his brothers!

Bam!

Si-Hun, who had split the black sphere, pulled his legs out of the ground. He leaped toward Halphas without hesitation.

Halphas frowned and raised his right arm. He'd received an attack because he'd let his guard down for a moment, but he wouldn't let such a thing happen twice.

Slash!

[Kurgh!]

Si-Hun's sword turned into a ray of light and shot out. The sword brushed along Halphas's right arm and cut his shoulder.

Halphas anxiously swung his right arm.

'I'm faster.'

Halphas was not only faster but also overwhelmingly stronger than Si-Hun. He could clearly see the trajectory of the human's slow sword; it was also so weak he could easily deflect it.

But...

Slash!

[How?!]

He wasn't able to block Si-Hun's attacks.

Even if he summoned and shot black spheres, created demonic energy barriers to block his attack, and even tried to counter, he couldn't fully dodge the human's attacks.

Halphas was gradually covered with wounds.

And...

Whoosh!

[Kuh!]

The blade wrapped in blue light targeted his neck. Halphas quickly moved back, but it was useless. The sword drew a trajectory that he couldn't understand, sticking to him.

The fear of death spread through him.

'Am I going to die at the hands of a mere human?'

That was impossible. It should be impossible. He was a demon who served Evil God Lucifer. Losing against a human was not an option.

[You dumbass!] Phenex stepped up and kicked Si-Hun, who was targeting Halphas.

Bash!

"Kurgh!"

After being kicked by Phenex, Si-Hun was blown back, and he rolled on the ground.

[What do you think you're doing against a mere human, Halphas?!]

[...]

Halphas lowered his head. He remained silent while covering the severed area of his left arm with his right hand.

Phenex walked toward Si-Hun while clicking his tongue.

[I guess he is still the retainer of an upper god, albeit a half-dead one.]

Phenex stomped Si-Hun's arm.

Crunch!

"AAARRGGHH!"

Si-Hun screamed in pain.

Phenex snapped his finger. Black spheres about the size of a fingernail poured down on Si-Hun.

Stab! Stab! Stab!

His skin was pierced. Holes about the size of a fingernail appeared on his shoulders, chest, stomach, and thighs. Blood poured out of him.

"Cough! Cough!"

Si-Hun vomited blood, and a portion of his intestines spilled out from his torn-open stomach.

A horrible pain engulfed him.

[Tsk. He'll die if I go any further. Halphas, take responsibility and figure out where Gaia's incarnation is.]

[Kuh. Okay.]

Halphas nodded while biting his lip.

"Haaa. Haaa."

Si-Hun's consciousness was blurring. A tear dropped from his eyes.

He was scared. He tried to overcome it by force, but since things had taken a turn for the worst, his body started to shake.

He could feel his consciousness blurring. He remembered the faces of his mother and party members—even Kim Yeong-Hun and Kim Jae-Hyun.

"Hyu...ng."

He desperately hoped to be saved.

He had resolved not to run away, but it had ended up like this. Now that he was on the brink of death, the growing fear was making his head go blank.

A laugh came out of Si-Hun's mouth. He looked so pathetic that even his tears stopped.

'I...'

Yet again.

Yet again.

Yet again.

'I wasn't able to do anyth—'

BOOOOM!!!

A loud sound cut his thoughts short.

Si-Hun looked in the direction of the sound.

"Ah..."

A young man in a white mask walked out of the dust cloud.

* * *

Oh Kang-Woo looked around.

The first thing he saw was Si-Hun, who had collapsed onto the ground. Si-Hun's right arm was bent in an unnatural direction, and blood was pouring out from all over him.

The wound on his stomach was so bad that his intestines could be seen.

The fact that he was a Protector aside, Si-Hun was still a human; his wounds were so bad that it was impressive he was still alive.

Step, step.

He walked toward Si-Hun and grabbed him by his collar.

"Kim Si-Hun."

He wasn't sad or furious. He couldn't feel anything while looking at Si-Hun, whose wounds were so bad it was almost weird he hadn't died yet.

"Who told you that you could fight, dammit?"

That was the extent of Si-Hun's worth to Kang-Woo.

Kang-Woo had turned him into his Familiar so he could make use of him with ease. He was pretty much nothing more than a chess piece to Kang-Woo. He wasn't worth more than that.

"You told them to run away while you bought them time on your own?"

Kang-Woo wasn't soft enough to get angry just from losing a single chess piece. He rated Si-Hun's potential very highly, but Si-Hun wasn't so important that his death would critically impact his plan.

"Did you want to look cool? Huh?"

The tendons in the hand grabbing Si-Hun's collar became visible.

Demonic energy uncontrollably surged out of him.

"What? Did you get a big head after everyone around you praised you as a hero?"

Of course, Kang-Woo wasn't angry. There was no way he'd get angry because of something like this.

"Hyung... nim..."

"If you judged that you couldn't win, then you should've just run away, you fucking idiot!!!" he screamed.

Kang-Woo's breath became heavier, and his eyes turned bloodshot, his body trembling slightly.

He lifted his mask and put his thumb in his mouth. Crunch. He bit off the tip of his thumb along with the fingernail, the wound bleeding profusely. He stuffed his bleeding thumb into Si-Hun's mouth and activated the Authority of Regeneration at full throttle.

The wounds closed at a fast pace.

"You said you wanted to save people, didn't you? Huh? You told me you were going to overcome your childhood trauma. Is this how you were planning to do it? Huh? Who's gonna know whether you did or not if you just end up dy—"

[Human.] Phenex frowned and walked toward Kang-Woo. [Do not interf—]

Tap.

[Huh?]

Kang-Woo's hand, which had just been grabbing Si-Hun's collar, grabbed the back of Phenex's head. He smashed Phenex's head into the ground before Phenex could even react.

Split!

[Kurgh!]

Phenex's head got stuck in the ground. Kang-Woo raised his foot and trampled his head.

CRACK!

Phenex's head exploded.

"Can't you see that I'm talking?"

Kang-Woo turned his head. The whites of his eyes blackened, and his irises started to turn yellow.

His black eyes were sparkling with madness.

"Shut up and stay still, you motherfuckers."