

## **M. in Hell 191**

Chapter 191 - Within the Abyss (1)

Oh Kang-Woo was sinking into an endless darkness. He was being sucked in deeper and deeper into a swamp that was the size of the sea.

'This is...'

Kang-Woo slowly opened his eyes. However, he couldn't see anything. He just felt something thick and sticky pulling him down.

He couldn't think clearly. A force he couldn't resist was continuously dragging him downward.

Lassitude, lethargy, and drowsiness... Extreme fatigue was pressing down on him.

'I'm sinking.'

The sensation of sinking was the only thing that he could feel.

'I have to get out of here.'

Through his faint consciousness, his inherent instincts were telling him that he shouldn't sink any deeper.

He kicked his feet and waved his hands.

Crunch!

Kang-Woo heard the sounds of flesh being chewed and bones being crushed.

Mouths appeared in the darkness and bit his legs.

'Ah.'

He couldn't feel any pain or sensations. All he felt was his ascending body being pulled back down a bit.

'I'm in danger.'

Kang-Woo's instincts were warning him that something wasn't right.

Having sensations of pain would have given the impression that he was in less danger. Yet, he felt absolutely nothing while his flesh was being devoured, which meant this was a dangerous situation.

His sensations were fading away. It began with his sight, followed by his hearing, and then his sense of smell. His five senses were slowly but surely being erased.

Crunch.

His flesh was still being devoured, and he was being pulled down quickly.

Kang-Woo couldn't feel pain, only terrible lassitude. He even thought that maybe letting himself sink might not be so bad.

'No.'

He shook his head, rejecting the thought that had crossed his mind.

'I am...'

Kang-Woo needed to remember; he needed to recall who he was, his past, and his experiences.

A person's ego was a culmination of their countless memories and experiences. If he were to lose all of his memories, his consciousness would melt into the endless sea of darkness and vanish.

Crunch.

The countless mouths continued to consume his body.

He kicked his feet and swam up, but it was nowhere near enough. He was still being dragged back down, deeper into the sea of darkness.

Kang-Woo reached out with his hands, but he couldn't touch anything. He kicked his feet, but he was not advancing.

He just kept getting pulled deeper and deeper into the endless darkness.

"Sh... it," Kang-Woo uttered.

He could feel it.

'I'm in the deep end.'

Kang-Woo was in the area that was beyond the shallow end of the Ten Thousand Demon Core. He was still unable to use the demonic energy here in its entirety.

This was the first time he had been dragged this far down since opening its doors. His instincts were warning him constantly.

'I'm in danger.'

His body had long since been eaten away by the countless mouths. The only thing left was the consciousness of the human Oh Kang-Woo.

'It's too late.'

He couldn't go back. He'd fallen too deep to be able to go back. In time, he would melt away into the boundless Demonic Sea.

'Maybe I should've used another way.'

Regret swept over him belatedly.

Even during the ten millennia that he had spent in Hell, the only time he'd opened the Second Door of the Ten Thousand Demon Core had been when he fought against Bael. He'd had a hard time returning to the outside world then as well, but it hadn't been as difficult as what he was going through now.

'Going up on my own is impossible.'

No matter how much he struggled, it was impossible to reach the surface of the Demonic Sea in his current state.

Kang-Woo turned around. He couldn't see anything. There was only darkness.

'At this rate...'

Everything would be over for him.

He thought about how he had lived an unhappy life when he had suddenly been dragged into Hell. He had spent ten millennia there, and after immense suffering, he had finally grasped on to a sliver of happiness. However, now that he had it, he was going to die in vain.

"Screw that."

Kang-Woo frowned.

He had held on for ten millennia. He'd survived through tens of thousands of battles. Yet, he was supposed to die here like this...? There was absolutely no way.

"Let's do this."

Kang-Woo turned around. He was gradually disintegrating. His body had already been absorbed by the demonic energy of the deep end.

'I don't need it.'

Even after their bodies had disappeared, the princes of Hell survived because their souls and consciousness had been intact.

This meant that the important thing wasn't the Ten Thousand Demon Core, Kang-Woo's 666 Authorities, or his unlimited demonic energy. They were all only a fragment of his entire being.

"If I can't go up..."

Kang-Woo looked down at the deepest area of the Ten Thousand Demon Core, the unknown region that not even his past self had been able to reach—the Abyss.

"...I'll just go down."

He gave up on trying to swim up.

His consciousness was suddenly pulled downward with an enormous force like an arrow being released from a bowstring after being pulled to its utmost limit.

Gurgle—!

The forces dragging him down were bewildered by his sudden change in action. They were now trying to pull him up.

Kang-Woo laughed.

"It's too late, man."

He ignored the force pushing him up and headed even deeper.

Deeper...

Deeper...

Deeper...

And...

Gurgle!

He passed through an invisible wall. An immense power shook his body.

This area was the same as before in the sense that it was just as dark, but he could tell instinctively there was a difference.

'So, this is the Abyss.'

This was the bottom that he'd never been able to reach—the root of the Ten Thousand Demon Core. Crack.

A giant Rift that was over a kilometer long appeared. It was bigger than any Rift he'd seen before. The giant Rift widened, and a yellow light poured out from it.

Kang-Woo's eyes widened.

'It's not a Rift.'

He trembled. He got chills the moment that he figured out what that giant Rift-like thing actually was.

Kang-Woo laughed in disbelief.

'This is...'

It was an eye.

The eye was so massive that there was no point trying to describe its size. It had a yellow iris, and its pupil stretched horizontally.

That eye, which was the size of a World Cup stadium, looked at Kang-Woo.

[Why... have you come here already?]

A question rang out in Kang-Woo's mind.

"...What?"

Kang-Woo frowned.

'What the hell is this?'

There was a being that he'd never seen or felt before at the bottom of the Ten Thousand Demon Core, and they were looking at him.

Kang-Woo got goosebumps. He felt like he'd encountered an undefiable being. If he were to make a comparison...

'A god.'

The being was incomparable to Tirion. Their massive presence made even breathing difficult.

'Fuck.'

Kang-Woo bit his lip.

Even if he were in his optimum state before being sealed by the Gaia System, he would be no match against the being before his eyes.

'Why is such a thing inside me?'

Kang-Woo couldn't understand what was going on. His mind was in jumbles.

Why was there a being with an ego, aside from Kang-Woo, inside the Abyss of the Ten Thousand Demon Core?

[It should not yet be the time of prophecy.]

"What is that supposed to mean?"

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes.

"Who are you? Why are you inside me?"

The being was unlikely to be something ridiculous like a second ego.

'There's no way I have a split personality.'

There was no way a reasonable man with unshakeable beliefs like himself would have a split personality.

In the first place, this being of the Abyss felt far too foreign to be his split personality.

[I am the origin and the root of all that is demonic. I am the father of all demons and the creator of the Nine Hells.]

"..."

[To put it simply, you may call me the Demon God.]

'Demon God...'

Kang-Woo laughed in disbelief and put his hand on his forehead as if it hurt.

"Wait. Putting all that stuff about the origin and root aside, why are you inside me?"

It was true that Kang-Woo was taking the steps to become a Demon God. Nevertheless, he was only on the second step, and he had only fulfilled half of its conditions. So, he couldn't understand why the Demon God was inside him.

[Do you not know?]

"How could I? I've devoured countless demons, but I don't remember ever eating a god."

[Hahahaha! Of course, you would not remember.]

The giant eye moved.

[After all, I have been inside you from the very beginning, even before you fell into Hell.]

"What the hell are you talking about? Before I fell into Hell, I was—"

[Normal? Nothing?]

Keke. Kang-Woo could hear laughter.

[How could a normal human possess the Authority of Predation? Could a human that is nothing remain sane after absorbing such an enormous amount of demonic energy? Do you believe you would have been able to rule the Nine Hells in just ten millennia if you were human?]

"..."

[The answer is simple. There has only ever been one answer.]

The horizontally stretched pupil spun.

[You have never been normal.]

"..."

There was silence.

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes. He didn't like that answer.

The self-proclaimed Demon God kept talking.

[Human, do you remember the face of your mother?]

"What?"

[Do you remember the being who birthed you?]

Kang-Woo shook his head.

He had been abandoned by his parents right after his birth. He'd never seen the face of his mother, nor had he tried to look at her.

The Demon God laughed.

[I will change the question. Do you truly believe you have a being known as a mother?]

"..."

[I am sure you understand how abnormal of a being you are now.]

There was no way Kang-Woo wouldn't have understood when it was being told to him so bluntly.

Kang-Woo trembled. He covered his face with his hand, and...

He laughed.

"Hahahaha! Fuck, man. That's some bullshit."

[Hm...?]

"How dare you insult my parents, you piece of shit?"

[What?]

"Why do you care if I have a mother or not?"

[That is not what I meant...]

"Aaahh. Well, I'm just kidding. I more or less get it."

Kang-Woo waved his hand as if he couldn't be bothered with any of this.

"Isn't this that thing?"

[What do you—]

"The mastermind foreshadowing—it's way too obvious, dude. You're trying to say shit like everything has been according to your plan and now trying to take over my body, right?"

[...]

"Right? I guess I was spot on since you're staying silent. I caught on from the moment you were telling me shit about the secrets of my birth."

[You...]

"What? Did you expect me to be shocked and bawl my eyes out at the fact that I didn't have parents? Should I do a retake and say something like 'I-I was a puppet all along?!' while tearing up?"

Kang-Woo snickered, "Kekeke."

He continued, "You're one twisted son of a bitch, you know that? Like fuck, man, why didn't you just do it yourself if you didn't like it? You're acting awfully high and mighty after staying put in your little hole all this time."

Kang-Woo sneered and raised his head, gazing at the god who was so massive that they didn't fully enter his field of vision.

He said to the Demon God, "Go fuck yourself."

The virginity he'd protected for ten thousand years... His body that had yet to be touched by human hands...

"How dare you covet my body?"

'I'll never give this undefiled body to you, dammit!!!'

Chapter 192 - Within the Abyss (2)

[You insolent...!]

There was a warp in the Abyss as the one-kilometer-long giant eye blinked.

'Woah.'

Oh Kang-Woo couldn't help but be surprised. He couldn't even imagine how massive the god was, considering the eye alone was a kilometer long.

'The eye doesn't seem to be their real body.'

Kang-Woo couldn't see the god's true form because the darkness of the Abyss was covering it. However, it was likely that the god was colossal—so much so that a giant mountain would just look like a toy in comparison. The size of the Demon God reminded Kang-Woo of Titans, the giant entities of mythology.

'It doesn't matter.'

Kang-Woo laughed.

It didn't matter to him how big or strong the opponent was because that wasn't important.

[You do not seem to know your place, human.]

"And are you saying that while knowing your place, Demon God?"

[What?]

Kang-Woo continued with a relaxed voice, "I don't really know your circumstances. I don't know what you're planning or how it's going, but..."

He approached the eye.

"What I do know is that your plan won't mean shit without me."

[...]

The god remained silent, but the eye trembled slightly.

[You know nothing...]

"I literally just said that I don't know about your circumstances. But... there is one thing I do know."

An enormous amount of energy was pressing down on Kang-Woo. Nevertheless, he wasn't fearful; there was no way he'd be afraid.

"You need me, don't you?"

[...]

"You said that you've been with me from the beginning, right? In that case, the reason why I fell into Hell and why I acquired the Authority of Predation must have something to do with you. There's no way you would have done things like that for no reason, right?"

Kang-Woo laughed.

"It isn't all that hard to figure out what your goal is either."

The reason why a god would be lying dormant in this endless abyss was obvious. There was no need to think about it too deeply. It was like taking an exam after memorizing the answer sheet.

"You want to get out of here, right? I'm not sure why you're stuck here, but you probably need me to get out."

[...]

There was a heavy silence.

The Demon God couldn't answer Kang-Woo.

The giant eye trembled aggressively as it exuded intense rage and colossal power that a mere mortal with no Divinity could hope to endure.

The Abyss warped as spears of demonic energy infused with an ungodly amount of power were formed. There seemed to be millions of them—a number that couldn't be easily counted. The demonic-energy spears shot toward Kang-Woo.

SLASH—!

His shoulders, arms, legs, waist—he was pierced all over.

Kang-Woo still felt immense pain even though this wasn't his real body but a fake one created by his mind. It hurt enough to make him think he'd die if a spear pierced one of his vital points.

Nevertheless...

"What? That's it?"



Kang-Woo smirked.

He stood still and looked beyond the Abyss. The spears had impaled him all over, but he paid it no mind.

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue while looking at the countless spears filling the Abyss.

"What a load of shit. Do you think anything will change with this many spears?"

He smiled mockingly.

It didn't matter how powerful the Demon God was or if hundreds, thousands, or even millions of spears had formed in the Abyss. What mattered were their positions—who was more anxious and desperate.

"Right. I guess that makes it clear."

Kang-Woo laughed.

He looked across at the being that he could never hope to defeat.

He was not afraid. Rather, he was more at ease than when he had faced Mammon.

"You can't kill me."

[You...]

A voice filled with rage flowed from the direction of the giant eye.

The Demon God's black eye dilated with fury.

[Why do you not fear?] they asked, unable to understand.

Up until then, every single human who had stood before them had trembled in fear. No, it wasn't just humans. There wasn't any being who hadn't trembled before the Demon God. Even the gods of the divine realm held their breaths before the Demon God.

[Do you have any idea who I—]

"How many times do I have to tell you that I don't, you numbskull?" Kang-Woo said with a frown.

"I don't know who you are, nor do I care, so stop acting all important. I have absolutely no interest in the likes of you."

[...]

"Stop beating around the bush and choose."

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes.

"You either send me back..." he continued without hesitation, "...Or we die here together."

[...]

There was silence. The giant eye trembled.

Kang-Woo laughed.

It was easy to tell what choice the Demon God would make.

'You shouldn't have tried to use me,' Kang-Woo thought.

Countless demons had tried to use him before, but no one had succeeded. It wasn't because he was strong; he would have died before even reaching the Ninth Hell if all he had been was strong.

'Everyone that has tried to use me has died...'

Kang-Woo turned his head. He could see the Demon God was hesitating.

He licked his lips.

Kang-Woo didn't like being unsure of things, but this time, he was absolutely certain of this.

'...And so will you.'

He laughed at the anonymous god.

\* \* \*

Kang-Woo opened his eyes.

"...I don't remember a ceiling like this."

A ceiling he'd never seen before was in front of his eyes.

He tried to get up.

"Kuh!!"

Immense pain swept through Kang-Woo. He collapsed without being able to raise himself from the bed.

"You've finally woken up, my lord demon king."

"...I told you not to call me that."

"Hoho, my apologies," Lilith said, smiling brightly.

Kang-Woo looked around and asked, "Where are we?"

"The Guardians' Chinese branch. The human Tian Wuchen prepared a private room for you."

"How many days has it been?"

"Mm... It has been a week since the war ended."

Kang-Woo frowned.

One week... He'd been asleep for quite some time.

"And the extent of the losses?" Kang-Woo asked.

"769 members of Guardians have died."

"Lower than I had expected."

Kang-Woo had thought that at least a thousand people would die.

"It was mainly because the Demon Cult had directed their forces to the branch interior midway."

"What about the outcome of the battle?"

"Very good. The... I believe it was called... level? The average level of the Players has dramatically increased. Another two World Ranker-level Players have emerged."

Kang-Woo nodded in understanding.

Demons provided massive amounts of experience points after all.

'I need them to grow even more.'

A satisfactory smile appeared on his face.

"What about you guys?"

"Balrog is severely injured. He suppressed the rampaging demonic energy with his bare body."

"Ngh. Well, it's Balrog, so he should be fine."

Balrog's innate regenerative capabilities were almost as impressive as the Authority of Regeneration. There was no need to worry as long as he wasn't dead.

"The human Kim Si-Hun still hasn't regained consciousness. Among your acquaintances, his injuries are the most severe."

"..."

Kang-Woo frowned. He forcibly tried to get up, but immense pain pushed him back down again.

'This is why I didn't want to open a Door.'

Forcing the Ten Thousand Demon Core to run wild greatly boosted his power, but the recoil was far too great.

'I saw a weird son of a bitch this time too.'

The anonymous god who was within the Abyss... If negotiations with them hadn't gone well, Kang-Woo might have never been able to wake up.

'Well, anyway...'

He lay down on the bed.

Then he slowly raised his hand. The fact that he had managed to come back was finally starting to feel real.

He had a lot to think about and a pile of things that he needed to do, but the important thing was that he had managed to return.

Additionally...

'I devoured Mammon.'

Kang-Woo was suffering from the recoil of opening a Door, so he couldn't check how much power he'd obtained after devouring Mammon.

'I should at least check my status window.'

He'd devoured a prince of Hell, so there was no way his Demonic Energy stat hadn't risen. It was only natural that he would have high hopes for a large boost since the stat had been stagnant at 130 for a very long time.

Kang-Woo was also highly interested in Mammon's Authority, which he hadn't been able to use until now.

"I have something to report, Master Kang-Woo," Lilith said.

"Hm."

Kang-Woo's hands stopped right before he could open his status window. He considered telling her to wait for a bit, but he didn't think that for long.

Ultimately, he refrained from opening his status window and turned his head to face Lilith.

'There's no point even if I check it now.'

Kang-Woo was struggling even to lift a finger because of the recoil from opening a Door. Trying to check how strong he'd become in such a state was comedy itself.

"Go ahead."

"Lucifer's forces have attacked the Demon Cult."

"Oh?"

Kang-Woo's eyes lit up.

'So, he finally took the bait.'

He had been yearning to hear this news for a while.

"How did you find out?"

"When Balrog attacked the Tibet branch, that bitch Julia had contacted another Demon Cult branch. I traced back that communication record."

"...Then Lucifer's forces attacked a different branch at the same time that we attacked the Tibet branch?"

"That is correct."

"Hah," Kang-Woo forced a laugh.

'Should I say we were lucky?'

It had not been intended, but the timing ended up being incredible.

"You traced back the communication, right?"

"Yes."

"Did you only find out the contents of the call?"

"Fufu, no."

A wide smile appeared on Lilith's face. She walked toward Kang-Woo's bed and sat down on it.

"I investigated the command center and found the location of five branches. One of them seems to be a huge branch with thousands of members, just like the Tibet branch," Lilith said.

"I see."

Kang-Woo smiled.

'She sure is capable.'

Lilith had concluded that assisting Balrog in attacking the interior of the Demon Cult branch would be inefficient and then immediately went to find clues about other Demon Cult branches. She had done her job perfectly.

Kang-Woo couldn't help but feel proud of her.

"Well done," he praised, reaching out and caressing Lilith's cheek.

Lilith let out a soft moan and clung to him.

"What should we do? Should we use the Guardians forces and attack the other branches?"

"No," Kang-Woo answered, shaking his head.

Lucifer's forces had gotten involved, so there was no need to make Guardians take action. Rather, it was the opposite.

"Make contact with Lucifer's forces," Kang-Woo ordered.

"Ah..."

"Tell them the locations of the Demon Cult branches you've discovered."

"Fufufu. Understood," Lilith replied with a broad smile. Then she placed her cheek on Kang-Woo's chest. "I was worried because you weren't waking up, my king."

"...It didn't really look like it."

"I was so very worried. I made the soldiers protecting you unconscious just so I could infiltrate your room and be by your side to protect you."

"Why the hell would you do that?"

"My king..."

Lilith put her hands on his chest.

Green tentacles started to emerge from her body.

"W-Wai—urpp!"

One of the tentacles entered Kang-Woo's mouth.

He couldn't even lift a finger at the moment, so there was no way he'd be able to break free from Lilith's advances.

"This loneliness, this sorrow, this heartbreak..."

"Mmmph! Mmph!!"

Eighteen eyes appeared on Lilith's face.

"I would like them to be healed as I share this bed with you."

"Mmmmmmmph!!!"

Squelch, squelch.

Tentacles wrapped around Kang-Woo. He struggled desperately.

Night fell.

A flower petal descended to the ground.

"Mmmph!! Mm—hng!"

'Th-The tentaclesss!'

Chapter 193 - The Cliche Of Getting Stronger By Losing

"Urgh."

The next morning, Oh Kang-Woo slowly got up after being freed from the nightmarish tentacles. He wasn't completely recovered, but he could at least move his body a little bit.

'Status window.'

Riiing.

[You have unread message windows.]

[Would you like to read them?]

A blue message window appeared in front of him.

He nodded without hesitation.

[You have consumed the Prince of Greed, Mammon.]

[Activating the Trait 'Reaper of Souls'.]

[Activating the Trait 'Prince Slayer'.]

[You can now use the Authority of Blaze possessed by Prince Mammon.]

A broad smile appeared on Kang-Woo's face while he looked at the message windows.

'A prince's Authority.'

Authority of Blaze was the most powerful and destructive Authority that not even Kang-Woo had been able to use back when he used to rule the Nine Hells. The ridiculous firepower Mammon had shown in the battle made it clear that the Authority of Blaze was worth the trouble Kang-Woo had gone through to get it.

Kang-Woo turned his head.

'There's still some left.'

The system notifications hadn't ended. He checked the rest of the message windows.

[The second condition of Demonic Soul has been partially fulfilled.]

[All the conditions of Demonic Soul will be fulfilled through the absorption of another prince's soul.]

[The upper limit of the Demonic Energy stat has risen due to the partial fulfillment of Demonic Soul's condition.]

[Demonic Energy has risen by 5.]

[Demonic Energy has reached 135.]

[The passage connected to the deep end of the Ten Thousand Demon Core is 82.3% complete.]

'This is...'

Kang-Woo's eyes widened.

His Demonic Energy stat had reached 135. The passage to the deep end of the Ten Thousand Demon Core would soon be complete.

The tips of his mouth went up.

'I think I've almost fully restored it.'

The power that the Gaia System had sealed... He felt like he would soon be able to regain his full power.

Kang-Woo had been able to use a hundred percent of the demonic energy from the deep end when he had been in Hell. He had managed to become the Demon King with just that.

'But now I'm different from back then.'

Before awakening as a Player, he hadn't had the Ultimate Demonic Body, nor had he been able to use the Authority of a prince of Hell. Kang-Woo didn't know what effect Demonic Soul had, but that was also a power he hadn't had while in Hell.

If he could use demonic energy from the deep end, he could probably reach a plane higher than what he'd reached before.

'Very nice.'

Kang-Woo felt that he could face an average prince of Hell alone.

'I'm not sure about Bael, but I could definitely face Lucifer or Satan.'

That was assuming they were still only as powerful as before. In any case, he thought he wouldn't need to rely on opening a Door to defeat them.

'My body's itching for a fight.'

He couldn't help but feel it'd be great if Mammon appeared in front of him again so that he could test how much stronger he'd become, but Mammon had already died. As for Lucifer, it would be hard to make contact with him for the moment.

There was still the option of Balrog, but he was wounded at the moment.

"Tsk."

It was too bad, but there was nothing Kang-Woo could do about it.

He lay back on the bed again since he still couldn't move properly.

"Oh, right."

He remembered something.

Kang-Woo got up and grabbed his smartphone. He called Kurosaki Yurie—to be more precise, Lilith, who was inside her body.

- Did you sleep well, Master Kang-Woo?

"...No."

Remembering the previous night gave Kang-Woo chills. He shook them off.

"Lilith, where did you store Greed?"

Greed was Mammon's Hell Armament, and just like his Key of the Demonic Sea, it was a Transcendent-grade armament.

- Pardon? By Greed... Do you mean Mammon's Hell Armament?

"Yeah."

- Mm. I'm sorry, but I didn't find the Hell Armament at the place where you fought Mammon.

"What?"

Kang-Woo frowned.

'Greed vanished?'

He tried to remember what had happened.

'Did I consume it along with Mammon?'

The first thing he thought of was when he had forced the Ten Thousand Demon Core to run wild by opening a Door. The vast darkness had devoured Mammon and the other demons whole.

'That can't be the case.'

Kang-Woo shook his head.

Even if his Authority of Predation was powerful, it couldn't consume a Hell Armament. Even if it could, he should have gained power corresponding to that.

No matter how much he searched through his status window or checked the system messages, he couldn't see any traces of him having consumed the Hell Armament.

'Was it destroyed?'

He rejected the idea, shaking his head again.

That was even more impossible. He had cracked the Hell Armament to break out of it, but that was completely different from destroying it entirely. Only a god would be able to destroy a Hell Armament.

'No.'

If it were a god at the level of Tirion, they would be devoured by the Hell Armament instead.

"Where the hell did it go?"

Kang-Woo frowned.

He'd devoured the soul of a prince of Hell, so the Hell Armament was an important resource he could now use, and he definitely wanted to use it. After all, that transcendental weapon contained so much power that it could not even be fathomed by Kang-Woo.

Whooom.

"Hm?"



At that moment, the ring on his right middle finger shook. His Transcendent-grade weapon, the Key of the Demonic Sea, shook as if it were alive.

'Wait.'

He checked the information window of the Key of the Demonic Sea with bright eyes.

[Equipment Information]

[Equipment Name: Key of the Demonic Sea

Grade: Transcendent (Imprinted)

Type: Growth \*The equipment will grow stronger whenever certain conditions are fulfilled.

Basic Effect: Unique Stat +3, Indomitability, Transformation, ??? \*It has not been unlocked.

Special Effect: ???, ??? \*It has not been unlocked.]

[Effect Description]

[Indomitability: The equipment cannot be destroyed by any physical, magical, or spiritual attacks.

Transformation: The equipment can transform into any weapon registered as a skill. It will exert 34% capacity of weapons made using Authorities.]

[Equipment Status]

[\*Digestion Stand-by: Currently preparing to digest the Hell Armament 'Greed'.

\*Inadequate Demonic Energy: The wielder's demonic energy quality is inadequate. Digestion will commence once Demonic Soul is achieved.]

"...The hell is this?"

Kang-Woo laughed in disbelief.

'Now that I think about it, this is a growth-type weapon.'

The basic capabilities of the Key of the Demonic Sea were so great, but he had forgotten about them.

'I can't believe it devoured a Hell Armament.'

It was as if the weapon was taking after its wielder. He never thought that it would have an ability like this.

"Well, I'm glad I won't have to worry about where it is."

He was disappointed he couldn't immediately use the power of the Hell Armament. Nonetheless, it hadn't disappeared, so he felt relieved.

Kang-Woo looked down at the wriggling Key of the Demonic Sea in ring form.

'A Transcendent-grade weapon that has absorbed a Hell Armament, huh?'

Kang-Woo would be lying if he said he didn't have his expectations up now. His heart beat faster at the expectation that an unprecedented armament would be born.

"If it devoured Greed..."

That meant it could also devour the other Hell Armaments.

'I can't wait.'

His heart raced excitedly just like that of a child who had received his Christmas gift.

- Master Kang-Woo? What's wrong? Should I check again if the Hell Armament was there?

"No, it's fine. There's no need."

Kang-Woo stood up.

"Besides that. Where are Si-Hun and Balrog?"

He had finished checking the rewards that he had gotten from consuming Mammon. It was time to check on his subordinates.

Kang-Woo got the locations of Kim Si-Hun and Balrog from Lilith. Then he stood up.

"First..."

Kang-Woo hesitated between the Balrog and Si-Hun but ended up choosing Si-Hun.

'Balrog is tough.'

It wasn't a matter of who was more important. In the case of Balrog, his regenerative capabilities were so high that he would regenerate completely as long as he was still alive.

'He pretty much regenerated in a flash even when half of his body had turned to ash.'

However, that was not the case for Si-Hun. He didn't have abnormal regenerative capabilities like Balrog.

'Well, I'm sure he'll be fine.'

After all, Si-Hun was a hero who had been chosen by a god. He was the person closest to being a protagonist than anyone else Kang-Woo had seen until this point. Si-Hun had risen above every single moment of crisis, so Kang-Woo was not worried at all.

Kang-Woo opened the door with light steps.

"K-Kang-Woo!" Han Seol-Ah walked toward him with an anxious expression. "Y-You're finally up! Are you hurting anywh—n-no, more importantly, you shouldn't be moving around as soon as you wake up!!"

It seemed like she'd been very worried while Kang-Woo had been unconscious. She was on the verge of tears.

From the dark circles under her eyes, it looked as if she hadn't slept for a few days. It seemed like Lilith hadn't told Seol-Ah that Kang-Woo had woken up last night.

Kang-Woo sniffled. He felt moved, especially upon recalling the nightmarish experience from last night.

'I'll offer you my life, my dear!' he thought.

Kang-Woo's heart beat rapidly as Seol-Ah held him cautiously, worried that he might lose consciousness again.

"Kang-Woo, are you okay...?" Echidna, who had come along with Seol-Ah, pulled on Kang-Woo's clothes with an anxious expression.

Kang-Woo nodded with a smile.

"How's Si-Hun doing?" he asked.

"He still hasn't woken up."

"Hm."

Kang-Woo nodded.

The injuries that Mammon had inflicted on Si-Hun were probably quite severe.

"I'm gonna go see Si-Hun," Kang-Woo said.

He left Seol-Ah and Echidna outside and entered the room that Si-Hun was in.

Kang-Woo found Si-Hun asleep on the bed.

"..."

He bit his thumb, and black blood flowed from it. Then he opened Si-Hun's mouth and dripped the blood inside.

'Authority of Regeneration.'

Kang-Woo used the Authority of Regeneration with his Demonic Energy stat, which was currently at 135 points. That was enough to regenerate Si-Hun's burned arms. His pale face regained its color as well.

Si-Hun's body was being restored. It was as if time was rewinding or a miracle was occurring.

"Urrmm..." Si-Hun murmured as he opened his eyes.

He looked around and made a bewildered expression upon seeing Kang-Woo.

"H-Hyung-nim? A-Are you okay?!" Si-Hun asked.

"That's my line. Are you okay?" Kang-Woo replied.

"Ah..." Si-Hun sighed in relief when he saw that Kang-Woo seemed well.

"I'm fine. I... don't feel any pain," Si-Hun said with a faint smile. Then he suddenly raised his voice in a panic, "But more importantly, wh-what happened with Mammon?"

It seemed like his memories of the battle were in fragments.

"Mammon is dead."

"Ah."

"It's all thanks to you, Si-Hun."

Kang-Woo patted his shoulder.

Those were not empty words. If Si-Hun hadn't bought Kang-Woo enough time, Kang-Woo would not have been able to avoid the worst-case scenario.

'I'm proud of you.'

He felt satisfied with the result of his investment in Si-Hun.

Kang-Woo looked at Si-Hun with a proud and satisfied smile.

'Now, it would be great if he became a bit stronger...'

Si-Hun had far too great a potential for him to be used just for buying time. He had the potential to become strong enough to face a prince of Hell. No, maybe even more than that.

'It won't be easy though.'

Si-Hun's life had been at risk numerous times in this war, yet he hadn't been able to experience a power-up.

'I guess not even Si-Hun would be able to power up that easily—'

"Huh...?"

Kang-Woo's thoughts were cut short by Si-Hun's trembling voice.

"H-Hyung-nim." Si-Hun turned his head urgently and looked down at his two hands in despair. "I-I can't... I feel my hands."

"...What?"

Kang-Woo looked at Si-Hun in disbelief.

'Is this a power-up flag?'

The hero who had lost his power...

The cliché of a hero losing his power and then becoming stronger after successfully overcoming the trial was a story development Kang-Woo had seen many times before.

"Hah..."

Kang-Woo grabbed his forehead while making a confused expression, unsure if he should be happy or sad.

'I bet my entire net worth and my left hand that Si-Hun is powering up.'

You won't do it, no balls.

Chapter 194 - A God From Another World

"Kuh."

Clatter.

Kim Si-Hun's trembling hand dropped the sword. His body was soaked with cold sweat, and he was breathing heavily.

"Shit."

Si-Hun reached down to grab the practice sword he'd dropped. Just doing that was so exhausting that cold sweat drenched his body like rain.

"Haaa, haaa."

It felt like he was trying to force his way through a blocked passage.

Si-Hun bit his lip tensely and raised the sword.

Clatter.

The sword fell from his hand again, and the clear sound of steel hitting the floor echoed through the room.

"Shit, shit...!"

He slumped onto the floor. He felt like he was going to cry.

Si-Hun looked at his trembling hands. They were his hands, but they did not feel like it at all.

"I'm sorry for giving..." a voice rang out in his mind.

It was something his mother had said, but it didn't sound like her voice anymore. Rather...

"Become stronger, and..."

Si-Hun recalled the red demon mask and that mocking voice full of contempt and ridicule. The voice that rang in his mind was closer to that of Satan than his mother.

"Shut... up."

Si-Hun frowned and stood up. He reached down for the sword again. He clenched his teeth so hard that blood poured out of his mouth.

Then he raised his sword.

Clatter.

The sword fell to the ground again.

\* \* \*

"Protector Kim Si-Hun..."

Gaia anxiously watched over Si-Hun in the Hall of Protection's training room as he trained to hold a sword. She couldn't see him, but she could sense how desperate he was.

"I-Is it really okay for us to do nothing?" Gaia asked Kang-Woo with a trembling voice.

"We have to wait," Kang-Woo replied.

"But..."

"If we don't trust Si-Hun, who will?"

"We could at least console—"

"No." Kang-Woo shook his head. "Meaningless sympathy will only make Si-Hun suffer."

"..."

"We have to trust Si-Hun and wait."

"...Okay," Gaia said in a weak voice.

Si-Hun had lost both arms after being injured by Mammon, a prince of Hell.

"Protector Kim Si-Hun..." Gaia murmured while biting her lip.

In reality, losing both arms wasn't a problem. Through the birth of Players, injuries that were untreatable through current medical technology had become treatable.

Si-Hun had regained his two arms thanks to Kang-Woo, but the problem was that his brain still thought that he had lost his arms. His brain still remembered the pain from when Mammon's flames had burned off both of his arms.

He'd lost so much sensation in his hands that he even struggled to hold a spoon.

"Urgh, sniff."

Gaia burst into tears as she was unable to handle the overwhelming sorrow she felt regarding Si-Hun's situation.

Si-Hun had stuck himself in the training room for days without sleep. Even though he had a superhuman body, it wasn't hard to imagine how hard it was to train continuously without any breaks.

"It's okay." Kang-Woo held Gaia's shoulder while she cried. "Si-Hun will definitely get through this."

Kang-Woo turned his head and looked at the training room. Si-Hun was drenched in sweat as he desperately tried to pick up the sword.

A smile appeared on Kang-Woo's face.

'Of course, he'll get through it. Who do you think Si-Hun is?'

It wasn't just because Si-Hun looked like a protagonist or a hero, or because he had been chosen by a god.

'That guy doesn't know when to give up.'

Kang-Woo remembered Si-Hun's battles against Halphas and Mammon. They had been enemies that Si-Hun had had no chance of winning against. His life had been at risk, but he hadn't run away.

It wasn't that he didn't know fear.

'It's because his willpower far surpasses his fear.'

Kang-Woo could instinctively tell that Si-Hun was going to overcome this adversity.

'And...'

He would become stronger as a result.

Kang-Woo looked at Si-Hun with an expectant gaze.

The beginning of their relationship hadn't been good. At first, he complained about the guy looking like a protagonist and obtaining strength without making much effort. However, after spending time with Si-Hun, Kang-Woo's opinion of Si-Hun changed.

'To think that I would think of him as a little brother...'

Kang-Woo had ended up getting attached to the person he had only thought of as a tool; it was like he was in some 80's spy film.

He smiled bitterly.

"Ah," Gaia uttered right then.

Kang-Woo turned toward her and asked, "What's wrong?"

"A-A revelation... No, I'm not sure if I should call this a revelation, but... I heard the voice of... a god who is not Lady Gaia."

"Another god?"

"I'm not sure who it is either, but they seem to be... very close to Lady Gaia."

"What did they say?"

Gaia said carefully, "A god from another world... is coming here."

\* \* \*

There was a slender woman with long, brown hair lying on a large altar in a temple, which was atop the clouds and covered in an intense light.

A man with rough hair like a lion's mane approached the woman, who was breathing faintly.

"How is Lady Gaia?" he asked.

"Oh, Lord Uranus."

Standing near the altar was a woman wearing white clerical clothing. She bowed in greeting while making a dark expression.

The white-robed woman smiled bitterly and softly caressed the unconscious woman's cheek. The unconscious woman on the altar was Gaia.

"She still hasn't regained consciousness. She opens her eyes from time to time but ends up falling asleep soon after..."

"Hm," Uranus expressed. He mumbled in a bittersweet tone, "I see she has still not regained consciousness even after a prince of Hell who had rooted himself on Earth has died."

Guardians, the heroes whom Gaia had chosen, had managed to kill a prince of Hell on Earth, but Gaia was still in the same condition as before.

"Her complexion has gotten a tiny bit better, but..."

"The situation will likely not be resolved unless the fundamental cause is eliminated."

Gaia had used all of her power to seal the Demon of Prophecy. Due to her excessive interference with the system, her Divinity was at risk of being annihilated.

"Haaa." Uranus couldn't help but sigh.

The world Gaia was protecting... was a beautiful blue star.

The woman who was taking care of Gaia grabbed Gaia's hand.

"Lord Uranus, if only you could directly intervene—"

"Not possible," Uranus said, shaking his head.

The woman couldn't understand why that was the case.

"I don't understand. Why is the system blocking interventions from the divine realm even in such a situation?!" the woman shouted angrily.

Uranus shook his head. "I do not know. We have no choice but to follow the providence of the universe."

"But..."

"But we still have some cards we can play," Uranus said quietly. "I have asked for the help of a god from another world this time."

"But if they're a god, they shouldn't be able to interfere in the human realm..."

"Not entirely. Gods from other worlds can bypass the restrictions to an extent."

Tirion, God of Heroes, was a lower god, but the fact that he had been able to lend his power to a human was proof of what Uranus said.

However, the system restrictions were so tight that a god would be annihilated just for trying to communicate with a person in the human realm, let alone lending power to them. Only upper gods like Gaia were able to interfere with the system.

Tirion had been annihilated. Nevertheless, he had managed to give great power to a human, who was neither an incarnation nor a successor. It was proof that gods from other worlds weren't held to the same harsh restrictions.

The woman's eyes shone after hearing Uranus's words.

"Then, which god from the continent of Aernor have you—"

"No, I have asked for the help of a god from an even further dimension. She was acquainted with Lady Gaia before Lady Gaia became like this."

"Who is—"

"She will be here soon."

Uranus turned around.

A white Rift opened, and a woman walked out. Blinding light radiated from the goddess with glorious blonde hair.

"So, this is the world Gaia's in charge of," she said.

The blonde woman looked around, and Uranus walked toward her.

"Thank you for coming," he expressed.

"You must be Uranus. I heard about you from Gaia long ago." The blonde goddess sighed deeply after looking at Gaia. "How did she end up like this?"

"She sacrificed herself to seal the power of the Demon of Prophecy."

"Demon of Prophecy...?" The goddess tilted her head.

"We do not know their exact identity because the information that we can acquire is very limited, but..." Uranus explained with a heavy voice. He clenched his hand into a fist. "A demon named Satan is the most likely the Demon of Prophecy."



"Satan? There's a Satan in this world too?"

"He is likely different from the Satan in your world."

"Mm..." The goddess fell into deep thought. "Gaia might die at this rate. Then this world will..."

"I will not let that happen, even if I were to be annihilated in exchange," Uranus declared with an intense gaze.

The goddess nodded with a heavy expression.

She asked, "So, what are you requesting me to do? By the way, I can't interfere too much either."

"I am aware. This is what I request of you."

Uranus snapped his finger.

An image of a human with a sharp gaze appeared.

"His name is Oh Kang-Woo. He is the human that the incarnation of Lady Gaia trusts the most. I wish for you to give him as much of your power as possible."

"Mm... What kind of human is he?"

"To be honest with you, I do not know either."

"You don't?"

Uranus nodded. "After Lady Gaia collapsed, it became more difficult for the gods of this world to interfere with the system. We have only managed to find out about the human Oh Kang-Woo through Lady Gaia's incarnation, but... I can guarantee that he is an extremely exceptional human."

A human had killed a prince of Hell.

Uranus did not know how the battle had played out, but he'd heard from Gaia's incarnation that the one who had killed the prince of Hell was a human named Oh Kang-Woo.

"I would like to raise this man as the hope of our world," Uranus stated firmly.

The blonde goddess narrowed her eyes.

"Hmm..." she said, "I want to see that human with my own eyes first to see if he's worthy of becoming the hope of this world."

"...You are quite cautious."

The goddess shook her head while making an expression that suggested she'd remembered something unpleasant.

"I've gone through a horrible experience because of a certain human garbage," she explained.

"Hm. What kind of human was he?"

"A peerless piece of trash named Lee Ki-Young[1]—fuuu, you don't need to pay him any mind. He has nothing to do with this world."

The woman shook her head again as if she was erasing a nightmare from her mind.

She continued, "Anyway, I will go see that human Oh Kang-Woo and see if he's trustworthy. I'm indebted to Gaia, so I also want to help as much as I can."

"I will entrust this matter to you, Goddess Benigoa."

Uranus bowed to Benigoa, who had come from a world far away.

Chapter 195 - I Think I Can Trust You

"A god from another world...?"

Oh Kang-Woo frowned.

He had experienced receiving the will from above through Gaia and had also received assistance in the form of quests. However, this was the first time he couldn't understand their intentions.

'Why a god from another world out of the blue?'

He narrowed his eyes.

While trying to listen to the words that resounded in her head, Gaia continued, "I'm not sure either, but they're saying this is the best that they can do..."

Kang-Woo took a deep breath.

'Why?'

Questions filled his mind. From the information he had, he couldn't think of a reason for them to drag a god over from another world.

Whooom.

Before his questions were answered, a white gate appeared inside the Hall of Protection.

A blonde woman walked out of the gate, glowing with a blinding light.

"You must be Gaia's incarnation, and... you must be Oh Kang-Woo," she said.

The woman was merely standing there talking, but her immense power was raising the hairs on their skin.

'She's in a completely different league from Tirion.'

Kang-Woo's expression hardened.

Boom!

"Hyung-nim! What was that light...?"

"What's going on, Kang-Woo?!"

"Is something wrong, Kang-Woo?"

"Wh-What was that?! What happened?"

"Hyung-nim!! What happened?!"

Kim Si-Hun, who had been in the training room, swiftly emerged. Han Seol-Ah, Echidna, Cha Yeon-Joo, and Kang Tae-Soo, who had also been training in different training rooms, all rushed out too. Their attention was placed on the woman who was radiating blinding light.

"I'm Benigoa. I've come to help you at the request of Uranus."

There was a heavy silence.

A god from another world had suddenly appeared. No one knew how to react.

Kang-Woo took a step forward, staring at her warily.

"If you're a god from another world... Are you from the continent of Aernor?" he asked.

The most likely answer was Aernor since he had come across many beings from that world.

Benigoa shook her head and answered, "No."

'No?'

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes. He was even more confused now.

"What brings you here? What do you mean exactly... when you said that you've come to help us?" he questioned.

"You don't need to be so wary of me. I haven't come to harm any of you."

Benigoa sighed softly and explained what was going on. The more she explained, the stiffer Kang-Woo's expression became.

'Gods from other worlds receive fewer restrictions...?'

That wasn't good news at all. No, it was the worst possible news.

Uranus had asked for help from a god of another world to protect the world that Gaia was in charge of. That wasn't something that could be done lightly. It was similar to when a country went bankrupt and asked for help from the IMF.

This meant that Gaia and her aides had been driven so far into a corner that they could no longer provide proper assistance to Kang-Woo and Guardians.

'Oh, fuck.'

If, like Benigoa, gods from other worlds were to come to Earth for the sole purpose of helping out, then that was great news.

'But there's absolutely no way that's the case.'

However, there was no way that every single outer god—gods from other dimensions who received fewer restrictions from the system—would come to Earth purely to help this world. This wasn't some children's book where everyone held hands and got along.

'Oh, fuck. Then that means if a god from another world were to invade Earth right now, we would only be able to watch while sucking our thumbs.'

Of course, they wouldn't be invading anytime soon. Gaia was still alive, and the Gaia System protecting Earth had yet to disappear completely. Unless they had come to Earth with Gaia's permission like Benigoa had, an outer god would not be able to invade Earth so easily.

'But if the Gaia System completely collapses...'

Then, there was no way to know who would invade Earth.

'Useless pieces of shit.'

Kang-Woo's head hurt. He couldn't help but feel angry at Gaia and the other gods protecting Earth.

If he had to make a comparison...

'It's like when a nation's economy completely collapses, and they can only watch as foreign enterprises take over...'

No matter what the foreign powers did, the nation would be completely powerless to stop them. In the end, it would be the people who would suffer the consequences.

'Fucking hell. What the hell were they doing that it got this bad?'

He couldn't help but curse at the thought of the idiotic Gaia and her close aides.

Of course, Kang-Woo was the main culprit, but it wasn't the time to argue over such trivial details.

'The Gaia System needs to be restored as soon as possible.'

Kang-Woo bit his lip in impatience.

While his mind was swirling with all kinds of thoughts, he sighed and turned to Benigoa. She had come here to offer power to the Warrior of Light, the one who could be considered the ace of Guardians.

'Well, she's offering, so I might as well accept it.'

Kang-Woo still felt angry when he thought about the worthless gods who had let this world get to the verge of collapse, but that wasn't a reason to refuse their gift. It was pretty much a last resort, but he needed to get whatever he could.

"Mm. So, you're the Warrior of Light, huh?" Benigoa said.

She looked at Kang-Woo with a sharp gaze, evaluating him. She seemed to be wondering if she should trust him.

"...His face kind of reminds me of Lee Ki-Young," Benigoa remarked.

She felt an uncanny sense of displeasure when she looked at Kang-Woo. He seemed similar to the man who had traumatized her.

'The hell? She's not gonna give me her power after coming this far...?'

Kang-Woo frowned.

He didn't know who Lee Ki-Young was, but he could tell that Benigoa didn't trust him.

Kang-Woo felt extremely disappointed now, especially after having wondered expectantly about what sort of power she would be giving him.

"Goddess Benigoa," Si-Hun said, taking a step forward. "Please help hyung-nim protect this world."

He knelt on one knee without hesitation.

Si-Hun spoke passionately about how Kang-Woo had saved him from his wretched past and the swamp he had thought he would never be able to swim out of.

"Hyung-nim is... the person I respect and trust the most," Si-Hun declared.

'Well done, my boy!! You know that I love you, right?!' Kang-Woo thought.

"Hmm," Benigoa murmured, her eyes lighting up at Si-Hun's sincere words.

She looked back and forth between Si-Hun's and Kang-Woo's faces.

"I-I feel the same way!" Seol-Ah stepped up next. "If... Kang-Woo hadn't been there for me, I would never have been able to attain such happiness."

She softly embraced Kang-Woo's arm while blushing. "Kang-Woo is... v-very precious to me."

'Shieet, darliiiiing!!!'

Kang-Woo clenched his fists while making an expression as if he were about to cry.

"Si-Hun and Sister-in-Law are right! I, Kang Tae-Soo, know Kang-Woo hyung-nim better than anyone else!"

'Tae-Soo... I had honestly forgotten about you after your importance in the story fell, but you sure are helpful in times like this.'

Support from Tae-Soo, whom Kang-Woo thought had vanished into thin air, had arrived.

Benigoa laughed upon hearing Tae-Soo's strong voice.

"Is that you, Deok-Gu?" she asked.

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"Oh, sorry. There happens to be someone just like you in the world I'm in charge of."

Benigoa turned away.

After Si-Hun, Seol-Ah, and Tae-Soo, Echidna stepped up this time.

"Kang-Woo is a very good person," she stated.

Echidna grabbed Benigoa's sleeve and looked up at her with innocent eyes.

"Gasp." Benigoa took a deep breath.

She was a goddess, but her sense of beauty was similar to a human's. The way Echidna was looking up at her cautiously was so cute that Benigoa wanted to hug her right that second.

'Echidna, where did you learn such cunning techniques?'

It was obvious to Kang-Woo that Echidna was trying to look cute on purpose. He trembled upon seeing how much she'd grown.

As even Echidna had stepped up, everyone's attention shifted to Yeon-Joo.

"...What? I have to say something too?"

Yeon-Joo felt everyone's gaze on her as she stood there with her arms crossed. Based on the flow of things, it seemed like she had to say something as well.

She looked at Kang-Woo with annoyed eyes.

"To be honest, he's not that great. I have no idea why you all love such a self-centered guy who always acts on his own and doesn't seem to care about how others feel," Yeon-Joo lashed out.

"But, well..." She snorted. "He's still trustworthy."

Yeon-Joo turned her head away.

Kang-Woo could see that her cheeks were turning red.

'Which anime are you from?'

He couldn't help but chuckle at Yeon-Joo's line that seemed as if it had been ripped straight from an anime.

"Hahahaha!" Benigoa laughed while holding her stomach.

Her laughter was so hearty that one wouldn't expect it to have come out from a goddess's mouth.

She nodded and said, "If the people around you trust you this much, I guess I can trust you."

Benigoa walked toward Kang-Woo and declared, "I will give you my power."

'Fuck yeaaaaaaahhhhhh!!'

Kang-Woo clenched his hands into fists.

He had not intended it, but she had been easily convinced thanks to the people around him.

'This is all thanks to my good karma! Yup! Karma! Of course!!!'

Kang-Woo was so happy that he could dance right here, but he suppressed his rising cheeks as much as possible.

'I should put on the face of a hero desperately struggling to protect the world.'

He shouldn't act happy at the thought of receiving a gift from a god. He had to control his emotions and show the goddess his will to protect this world with the power that she was about to give him.

"Oh, but it's not like I'm completely free from the system's restrictions. I say it's the power of a god, but it's probably not as grand as what you're thinking of," Benigoa added.

'I won't look a gift horse in the mouth!'

No matter how little the amount of power might be, Kang-Woo would still be getting something. It was as if the real Santa Claus had appeared on Christmas and had given him a gift, so there was no reason to refuse.

"It does not matter what power you give me," Kang-Woo said.

He took a step forward, grabbed Benigoa's hand, and pulled her toward him slightly.

"Ah..."

"What matters is the fact that you are looking out and caring for us, Lady Benigoa," he expressed with a serious gaze and an honest voice. "As you know, our world is not at all in a good situation. To be honest, it's a wonder why it hasn't fallen to ruin yet."

The goddess in charge of this world had almost died while trying to stop the invasion of Satan, the Demon of Prophecy. To make matters worse, Gaia's close aides were not able to help the human realm.

Kang-Woo continued, "I am sure you are also in charge of a world, Lady Benigoa. There must be things that you have to protect as well. You said it in passing, but you mentioned that you've

suffered because you were deceived by a human in the past. So, I understand how hard it must be for you to lend your power to another world."

"Well..."

"I will never forget it."

Kang-Woo gripped Benigoa's hand firmly. The warmth of their hands met.

He bit his lips and put himself on the verge of tears. His voice cracked slightly, but he looked into her eyes with an unwavering gaze.

"We will never forget your kindness," he stated.

A strong sense of justice was exploding from the Warrior of Light, Oh Kang-Woo.

Benigoa trembled a little.

"...Like I thought," she voiced with a smile, "You're different."

She lightly placed her hand on Kang-Woo's shoulder.

Riiing.

[You have received Benigoa's Blessing.]

[Raising all stats excluding Demonic Energy by 10.]

[The absolute rise in Demonic Energy has been reduced due to its quality being too high.]

[Demonic Energy has risen by 3.]

'YOLO!!'

Energy invigorated his body.

"Thank you... very much," Kang-Woo said emotionally while bowing.

Benigoa smiled as she looked down at him.

The human's honest eyes, cracked voice, and tears dripping from his eyes were proof that his soul was more pure and beautiful than anyone else's.

"I think I can trust you," Benigoa concluded.

Blinding light spread far and wide.

'Of course, there isn't anyone as trustworthy as me! Huehuehue.''

Chapter 196 - A Hero Is Born From Despair (1)

"I'll get going then. I don't think... I'll be able to stay in this world much longer," Benigoa said with a faint smile on her face. Her body was starting to become transparent, signifying that her time was almost up.

Shortly before she vanished, she looked at Oh Kang-Woo and said, "Be careful."

Before Kang-Woo could ask what she was telling him to be careful of, she said, "If Gaia's condition continues to worsen, outer gods will descend on this world."

"..."

"I helped you because I owed a debt to Gaia, but you'd better not expect that from them."

Kang-Woo already suspected as much.

He nodded. "I will keep that in mind."

Honestly, nothing would change even if he knew that outer gods would descend if Gaia worsened. After all, there was no way to resolve the issue at its core. No, there was a way to solve it all, but he couldn't do it because he was the Demon of Prophecy, the origin of the problem.

'I can't offer my life to save the world.'

There were all sorts of people in the world, and some heroes would probably be willing to risk their lives to save everyone.

'But...'

At the very least, he was not one of them.

Even when he had fallen into Hell, he had fought relentlessly, desperately, and miserably, all for the sake of survival. Was he supposed to sacrifice himself to save the world after everything he'd gone through?

'Not a chance.'

He was going to try to survive, no matter what.

It was a simple issue. If the problem was that beings from other worlds were crossing dimensions because of him, he would just need to kill them all.

"In that case... I'll leave this world in your hands. I'm not sure if we will ever meet again, but I will pray for you."

Benigoa turned fully transparent and disappeared.

Kang-Woo smirked. It seemed a little ironic for a god to pray.

'I guess real gods are different from the concept that we have of gods.'

One true almighty god had not established the providence of the universe. Rather, there were numerous gods categorized by rank, and conflicts existed between them. Each god had their own individual characteristics.

'They aren't perfect.'

In that case, they can be fought and killed.

No...

'They can be eaten.'

Kang-Woo smiled and looked down at his hands. He closed his eyes and felt the power the goddess from another world had given him.

'Not bad.'

To be honest, it did not meet his expectations of what he thought a god's gift would be. His Demonic Energy stat hadn't gone up much either because it was so high, but a gift was a gift.



It hadn't required effort on his part, so he couldn't complain.

'I mean, it's actually a pretty sick gift.'

After hunting Mammon, his Demonic Energy stat had only increased by five points.

Considering that the higher one's stat became, the harder it was to raise it, he wasn't sure if his Demonic Energy would rise by five if he ate another prince of Hell.

'It's not like the other stats are useless either.'

An absolute rise of ten points was no different than equipping a bunch of Legendary-grade equipment.

Kang-Woo turned around with a smile. He could feel everyone staring at him as he was bathed in light.

"Thanks, guys."

He had received Benigoa's gift thanks to Kim Si-Hun and his other comrades.

'It sure is important to be on the straight and narrow.'

No one had lied to Benigoa. It did not seem that every god could detect lies, but Benigoa most surely would have noticed if anyone had told her a poor lie. She hadn't suspected him because she had felt how much everyone present trusted Kang-Woo.

'To be honest, I'm a bit moved.'

It wasn't enough to make him shed tears, but he felt a warmth in his heart.

It had only been a little over a year since he had returned to Earth, but the relationships he'd built in that short period of time couldn't compare to the ones he'd made in Hell.

In Hell, he had many subordinates with unconditional trust in him, but there was a limit to their emotional bonding.

Each of his comrades said something.

"No. Even if we hadn't done anything, I'm sure she would have figured out your true nature, hyung-nim."

'She shouldn't.'

"The goddess surely realized how much of a warm person you are, Kang-Woo."

'I don't think she did.'

"It would have been great if she could have helped us defeat the Demon of Prophecy..."

'Darling, if she'd done that, I would've been done for.'

"Haha! This is all thanks to your good deeds, hyung-nim!"

'Of course, I worked my fucking ass off.'

The scene was so moving it could have been straight out of a movie, but Kang-Woo couldn't help but feel a bit guilty.

'Shouldn't the ending credits appear at this point?'

If so, things would've been just right. He sighed and turned around.

"I'll be back in a bit."

"Where are you going, Kang-Woo?" Echidna asked.

"I want to test out the power that I just received."

"I wanna go too," Echidna said while grabbing his sleeve.

Kang-Woo nodded and held her hand.

"..."

He could feel Si-Hun staring at his back.

Si-Hun looked down at his hands with a dark expression.

'Oh boy, Si-Hun.'

It was easy to guess why he was making such an expression.

'You must be going through a severe inner struggle.'

A swordsman who couldn't hold a sword...

It was hard to imagine the disabling feeling Si-Hun was experiencing. And while he was struggling, the hyung-nim he respected so much had received the power of a god.

'He's probably thinking that I'm getting further and further from him.'

It was an undeniable truth. Kang-Woo was becoming stronger at a faster pace than he had expected, and he would soon be able to surpass his old self.

No matter how talented Si-Hun was, it was ultimately in a relative sense. His sense of deprivation had likely reached a severe level.

'I need to do something about it.'

Kang-Woo couldn't stay still and do nothing. He didn't think it would make Si-Hun crumble, but he still had to give him a slight push forward.

"Let's go."

He turned with Echidna. He couldn't push Si-Hun immediately.

'Once a bit more time passes...'

Once Si-Hun became more desperate and got to the point of complete despair...

'I'll take advantage of that moment.'

\* \* \*

[Huff, huff.]

Clenching his chest, Balrog breathed heavily. The ground around him and Kang-Woo had melted down, and an intense wave of heat had wiped out everything around them along with the smoke. Balrog collapsed to the ground, trembling in excitement.

[H-Hehehe.]

He could see yellow flames surrounding Kang-Woo.

[As expected of the Demon King.]

"Mm..."

Despite Balrog's praise, Kang-Woo expressed dissatisfaction. He looked at the yellow flames burning in the palms of his hands.

'It's a bit of a letdown.'

He was not thinking that the Authority of Blaze was a letdown; he was disappointed in himself.

'To think it would be so hard to control.'

He had never used a prince's Authority before, and he wasn't a genius—he didn't have the capability to memorize things just by looking at them once like Si-Hun. Although Kang-Woo could theoretically use 666 Authorities, there was a reason why he only used the ones he was familiar with.

[Hmm? Is there something bothering you?]

"I didn't like it. I never thought Mammon's Authority would be so difficult to control."

[But from our battle just now—]

"You didn't go all out, did you?"

[...]

He hit the nail in the coffin.

Balrog sighed and nodded.

"Be honest. How was it?"

[I felt that you were weaker than your usual self. Of course, the demonic energy itself was as thick as what you had back in Hell, but...]

"It was clumsy, is what you're trying to say?"

[Yes.] Balrog continued, [My wounds have not been fully healed, so I cannot give you an exact answer, but I can say that it was weaker than Mammon.]

"I see."

Kang-Woo nodded.

There was no reason to be disappointed. Mammon had used the Authority of Blaze for tens of thousands of years, so there was no way Kang-Woo would be able to use the Authority better than him.

"I'm gonna have you practice with me for a while."

Until now, there was no point in Kang-Woo training since he had far surpassed the realm of getting better through practice. However, the situation had changed.

He might never get to Mammon's level, but he needed to be able to control the Authority of Blaze well enough to use it in combat.

[As you command, my king.] Balrog smiled.

"That aside, how are your injuries?"

[They have gotten much better. I will be fully healed in a few days.]

Kang-Woo bit his thumb. His flesh split, and black blood dripped.

"Drink."

[... There is no need for you to use the Authority of Regeneration. I will heal naturally over ti—]

"Bullshit. It was obvious you were hurting when you were making intense movements."

[...]

Balrog remained silent. He sniffled and then, looking as if he was about to cry, hugged Kang-Woo tightly.

[MY KIINNGG!!!]

"Kurgh! G-Get off me, man!!"

A five-meter-tall giant was hugging him tightly. Kang-Woo could handle Balrog's strength since he was just as strong, but he couldn't stop the smell from penetrating his nose. It was a horrible smell that poured out of Balrog's muscles, covering him.

[Hahahahaha!! It is truly my life's honor to be serving you, my king!]

"No fair, Balrog. Me too." Echidna, who had been silently watching, also hugged Kang-Woo.

'So this must be Heaven and Hell.'

Kang-Woo closed his eyes while feeling the difference in texture on both sides.

Time passed.

\* \* \*

Clatter!

"Pant! Pant!"

Si-Hun's sword fell out of his hand. He collapsed. Tears dripped down from his eyes.

"I'm sorry for..."

The voice. He could hear that sickening voice. He clasped his mouth as nausea surged. The red demon mask was laughing at him mockingly.

"U-Urgghh," he groaned.

It had been three months since he had been absorbed in his training to wield a sword again. He had barely slept. Nothing had changed, and he hadn't improved at all. He still couldn't properly hold a sword.

"Aaarrggghhh!!!!"

He cried in despair. He slammed his head down on the floor along with his fists.

Kang-Woo's back, which he could vaguely see, was getting even farther. He could no longer see his back; all he saw was darkness.

"Aaaaaahhhhh!!!"

BOOM. BOOM.

He shouted while clenching his head. He grabbed his sword as he bit his lip so hard that it bled.

Clatter.

The sword dropped onto the floor again.

\* \* \*

"It's about time."

Kang-Woo's eyes shone as he looked through the training room wall and watched Si-Hun cry.

'It's time to power up.'

If a hero was born from despair...

"I'll just have to make that despair."

Kang-Woo smiled.

Chapter 197 - A Hero Is Born from Despair (2)

'How should I go about it?'

Oh Kang-Woo was leisurely sitting on a chair while watching Kim Si-Hun cry through the training room walls.

It had been three months. Nearly a hundred days had passed.

'It hasn't been that long.'

It couldn't be said to have been short, but it wasn't that long either.

Lucifer's forces and the Demon Cult had been fighting for the past three months, but there hadn't been much progress. Although they'd been fighting, it seemed they were feeling each other out; neither side had truly gone on the offensive.

'But...'

For Si-Hun, the past hundred days had likely felt like forever.

Kang-Woo looked at Si-Hun with sunken eyes. Si-Hun was crying while desperately trying to hold his sword. It had gone past being sad, and it now looked wretched.

'I'm sure he has never experienced such a serious block before.'

It was the first time Si-Hun had fallen this far since becoming a Player. Thanks to his talent and knowledge, Si-Hun had grown at a faster pace than anyone else. He also had the Heavenly Martial Physique.

Kang-Woo didn't know much about martial arts, but according to Tian Wuchen, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that Si-Hun's talent had been bestowed by the heavens.

Si-Hun had truly grown at an unbelievable pace, by human standards. He also did not have to go through the Limit of Effort like all other Players.

He thought he was nothing special because he was comparing himself to none other than Kang-Woo, but he had never experienced a block in his growth.

No, the problem wasn't that his growth was blocked.

'He hit rock bottom.'

A swordsman who can't hold a sword... The foundation of Si-Hun's identity was crumbling. To make a comparison, he was currently no better than trash.

"FUUUUCK!!" Si-Hun cursed.

Kang-Woo's expression hardened. He was expecting this to happen, but it was hard to see Si-Hun at rock bottom.

Kang-Woo stood up and turned around.

'I should get things ready.'

Kang-Woo couldn't do it alone. No, to be more precise, he wouldn't be involved in the plan. He first went to see Balrog. There was also Vaal Zahak, who was doing the laundry, as well as Lilith.

[Kekeke, what can I, the ruler of death, Vaal Zahak, do for you?]

"... I told you to take off that damn apron." Kang-Woo sighed while looking at the pink apron beneath Vaal Zahak's robe. "I called you all here because..."

Kang-Woo explained his plan to his three subordinates. The more he went on, the more intensely the yellow eyes in Vaal Zahak's eye sockets shone. Lilith smiled in excitement.

Balrog, however, frowned in displeasure.

[Is that human worth going so far for?]

He couldn't understand it.

Kang-Woo nodded without hesitation.

"He's more than worth it."

Si-Hun could grow to become stronger than Balrog. This wasn't a groundless assumption—just looking at Si-Hun's status window made it clear.

'An SSS-rank Trait.'

The rank of the first Trait Si-Hun had awakened...

Kang-Woo hadn't managed to acquire a Trait of that rank during his eight Awakenings.

'Even Prince Slayer is only an SS-rank Trait.'

Even an overpowered Trait that allowed him to use the powers of the princes of Hell was SS rank.

If Si-Hun could use the full power of his SSS-rank Trait, there was a chance he might surpass Balrog and become as strong as a prince of Hell.

'No, maybe even stronger.'

Si-Hun was practically blessed by everything that could possibly bless him in this world.

Kang-Woo had a feeling that he could reach some place even higher.

[... If you say so, my king, I will do as you say.]

Balrog bowed his head while making an unpleasant expression.

Kang-Woo smiled and patted his shoulder.

"You'll come to find out for yourself if you spend some more time with Si-Hun."

[Ngh. I still do not like the fact that I have to take action for the benefit of someone other than you, my king.]

"It is for me," he firmly said.

It wasn't because he sympathized with Si-Hun or because of the bond they had built after all this time.

'I need him.'

Kang-Woo couldn't do everything by himself. He wasn't a god—he wasn't almighty. No, not even the gods were almighty. He'd learned that through Gaia.

If Balrog, Lilith, and Echidna hadn't been with him during the war in Tibet, he would not have been able to stop the volcano from erupting.

It wasn't hard to imagine what would've happened if the volcano erupted. Guardians would've been massacred, and the world that had been painstakingly gathered as one would've been torn apart once again.

"Even if I didn't consider Si-Hun my brother, I would've still done this the same way."

It was better to have as many powerful cards to play as possible, and Si-Hun was one of the most powerful ones.

"You can do it, right?" he asked them.

Balrog, Lilith, and Vaal Zahak knelt before him and bowed their heads.

[May your will be done, my king.]

Kang-Woo nodded and turned around. Getting these three to participate in the plan had not been hard in the slightest. Since Lilith would be in charge of coordinating the plan, there was no need to worry about its quality.

'The problem is...'

He narrowed his eyes. It wasn't enough with just these three. He had the protagonist and the antagonist, but there wasn't a heroine. He lacked the decisive spice that would set Si-Hun's heart ablaze and push him even further down the depths of wretched despair.

Kang-Woo couldn't do it because he was too strong to need help, so using himself wouldn't stimulate Si-Hun.

'In that case...'

There was only one possible person.

Kang-Woo threw the transparent crystal orb, and the gate that led to the Hall of Protection opened.

\* \* \*

"I'm sorry...?"

The woman—with light brown hair, pale skin, and a body so frail that it stirred the desire to protect her in everyone around her and looked as if it would break from the slightest touch—trembled.

"What do you mean?"

"It's for Si-Hun."

"B-But still!"

Gaia sprang up from the wheelchair. She lost her balance and collapsed.

Kang-Woo caught her before she could fall down and carefully sat her back in the wheelchair.

"How could I do that to Protector Kim Si-Hun...?" Gaia lowered her head.

"I'm sure you know the state Si-Hun is in right now," he said in a low voice.

"..."

"Are you planning on just watching as Si-Hun crumbles under the weight of his own despair?"

"N-No! There's no way I'd do that!" she quickly shouted. She continued as if she couldn't understand, "But even still, doing something like that is..."

"Si-Hun's current problem isn't physical. The nerves in his hands had healed long ago."

"..."

"You know as well, don't you? The reason he can't hold a sword is purely a psychological problem."

Gaia nodded with difficulty, knowing it as well. Kang-Woo had a healing ability that could be considered almost miraculous, yet Si-Hun still couldn't hold a sword.

"Si-Hun has to overcome it on his own. We're just creating a situation that can help him with that."

"But what if Protector Kim Si-Hun breaks down completely because of—"

"He won't," he said firmly.

If this were a novel, Si-Hun would be the protagonist. He never gave up or backed down. Overcoming one's fear of death with sheer willpower was easier said than done; not many people were able to do such a thing.

"He won't break down over something like this."

"..."

Gaia fell silent.

"Will I really be able to do this?" she asked in a trembling voice.

"You'll be fine. You just need to scream a few times."



To be honest, Kang-Woo did not have high hopes for her acting. He'd dragged Gaia into his plan because she was the woman that the hero Kim Si-Hun had fallen in love with at first sight and had sworn to protect.

Gaia was obviously a bad liar, so he did not expect her to make a theatrical performance.

"I... understand." Gaia nodded with a heavy expression. "I will do the best I can."

Kang-Woo smiled.

'And with this...'

The actors were cast. Next was to set the scene.

'This is pretty fun.'

It felt as if he were looking at things from an omniscient viewpoint. A weird sensation of excitement ran through him.

'I should do this a few more times in the future.'

Kang-Woo smiled.

\* \* \*

"Why did you suggest a walk out of the blue...? Is something on your mind?"

A man and a woman were walking beside a stream in a quiet and peaceful forest harboring chirping birds. It was Si-Hun and Gaia.

"N-No. It's just that you seem to be having a tough time lately, Protector Kim Si-Hun."

"..."

Si-Hun remained silent. He looked down at his hands as he pushed Gaia's wheelchair. The tips of his fingers were trembling, and he wasn't holding the wheelchair's handles. He just had his hands above them and was pushing.

To be more precise, that was the only thing he could do with these hands.

He felt a burning pain in his chest.

"I'm... fine," he said in a weak voice.

"..."

Anyone would be able to tell that he wasn't fine.

Gaia extended her hand and grabbed Si-Hun's hand.

"I... also broke down when I lost my eyesight and my legs stopped working."

"..."

"It felt as if I had become worthless trash."

"That's—"

"That's why I understand the despair that you're going through. But..." Gaia smiled and stroked his hands softly. "Please, don't resent yourself."

"Gaia..."

"Fufu. It's funny for me to say this when I'm the one always relying on others, but... I wish for you to not suffer anymore."

There was a heavy silence. A dreamy atmosphere was blossoming between Si-Hun and Gaia.

"Gaia, are you—"

As Si-Hun was about to say something—BOOM!!!—there was a huge explosion.

"Wh-What the—?!"

Black demonic energy stormed all around them, and a giant being walked out through the thickets.

[Kekekeke! I have finally found you!]

The being was easily over five meters tall and was covered in horrifying green tentacles. The enormous amount of demonic energy the demon was emitting was suffocating.

"Kieeeeeek!"

"Grrk, grrk."

Undead monsters poured out from behind the tentacle monster.

"Y-You're..." Si-Hun stared at the monster as his voice trembled.

The massive demon covered in tentacles shouted, [I am the loyal subordinate of Lord Satan, Yogg-Saron!!!]

BOOM!

The demon stomped on the ground, tentacles spreading in all directions.

[Bow down before the God of Death, human!!!]

\* \* \*

'Dayum.'

Kang-Woo was using the Authority of the Beholder from atop a tree about a hundred meters from Si-Hun and Gaia. He smiled.

'Nice production.'

The appearance Lilith herself had made for Balrog was so hideous that it made him want to vomit. Additionally, the Undead that Vaal Zahak had made were a nice addition.

'Shieet! This is great!'

Kang-Woo looked at them with shining eyes as if he were a film director.

"Kyaaaaah!!!"

Balrog reached out and grabbed Gaia.

'Alright!'

The weak heroine being snatched away by a demon...

It was just like what he had imagined.

'Now if we just shut Gaia's mouth...'

They would be able to prevent Si-Hun from figuring out their plan from her bad acting.

But just then...

"S-Si-Hun!!! S-Save me!! Si-Huuuuuun!!!"

'Eh?'

"L-Let me go, you filthy demon!!!"

'The hell?'

She let out a desperate scream with all her heart. It was so desperate that just hearing it was enough to break one's heart.

'What's with her?'

Gaia's desperate cry continued, "Wh-What are you planning to do with me?! Y-You horrible demons!!!"

'What's happening?'

"Th-Those eyes filled with filthy lust...! Don't tell me you're planning to..."

'Why is she so good at acting?'

"You depraved servant of evil! Y-You intend to violate me with those tentacles, aren't you? Just like in an ero-manga!!!"

'Excuse me, ma'am.'

"Just like in an ero-manga!!!"

'Don't say it twice.'

He covered his face with his hands as if he couldn't watch any more. He felt as if he had been hit in the back of the head with Mjolnir after witnessing a completely unexpected side of Gaia.

'Sister-in-law, why are you doing this to me...?'

This novel is supposed to be for all ages.

Chapter 198 - A Hero Is Born from Despair (3)

"G-Gaia!!!" Kim Si-Hun yelled.

A demon had ambushed them out of nowhere, and his horrifying tentacles were holding Gaia. She was letting out a desperate cry.

Si-Hun quickly reached for the sword at his waist. The sword was a Unique-grade weapon he'd received from Guardians after the El Cuero Blade had melted.

The sword slipped from his hand.

Clatter.

"Ah," he exclaimed with a frown. Even now, at such an important moment... his hand couldn't hold a sword.

[A-Ahem!] Yogg-Saron, the demon covered in hideous green tentacles, coughed. He looked at Gaia in confusion as if he hadn't expected Si-Hun to drop his weapon.

Squelch.

"Aaaaaahhhhh!! S-Si-Hun!"

"J-Just a second, Gaia!!!"

Si-Hun heard Gaia's screams. Those fear-filled screams were super effective. Si-Hun grabbed his sword so tightly that blood trickled from his hand.

It was just a little bit, but he managed to raise the sword.

[Kekekeke! What a pointless struggle!]

Yogg-Saron let out ferocious bloodlust, and the breathtakingly intense demonic energy weighed down on Si-Hun.

[Kill that foolish human!]

"Kiieekk!"

"Grrrrrk!"

The demon extended his hand. At his command, a group of Undead charged toward Si-Hun.

Si-Hun swung his sword.

Tap.

"Kuh!"

As soon as it touched the Undead, the sword fell to the ground. He was barely able to hold the sword, so there was no way he'd be able to swing it. Using foot techniques, Si-Hun moved as if he were sliding on the ground, leaving behind afterimages.

"KIIEEKK!"

Si-Hun kicked. His body slightly rose, and the spinning kick struck the Undead's head.

Bash.

The Undead's head exploded from the Qi-infused kick.

Si-Hun couldn't use his hands to hold a sword, but he could still use his legs. After all, he possessed exceptional foot techniques to augment the martial God's sword techniques, and that was more than enough to easily wipe out the Undead. However...

[Hm? Why aren't you using your sword? Is it only for decoration?]

"Kuh."

Si-Hun was ultimately a swordsman. Maybe things could have been different if he had used weapons other than a sword, but he could not even exhibit a quarter of his power when his hands were unusable.

'Shit.'

He quickly rolled and reached for the sword on the ground, but it didn't matter how much he concentrated. There was no way he could hold a sword during battle when he couldn't even properly grab it when focusing his entire being on it.

The Undead next to him pushed him back with a kick.

"Kurgh!"

He rolled on the ground. He extended his hands outward to regain his balance; they just flung around in vain since he wasn't able to add any strength to them.

[You are different from what I had expected.]

The demon's voice echoed in his ears.

[Are you hiding your strength, human?]

"..."

Si-Hun remained silent. His body trembled, and his head got hot.

Hiding his strength?

There was no way that was true. He turned his head and saw Gaia, who seemed tired after screaming so much. Her body was weak, and she was so thin that she seemed as if she would break if squeezed too hard.

She was right in front of him, but there was nothing he could do.

[You are different from what Lord Satan had told me. He had mentioned that you would one day be on par with the princes of Hell...]

"Satan... sent you?"

[That is right.]

"Why... now?" Si-Hun asked while looking down at his trembling hands. Why did he have to appear now, of all times?

[He had mentioned that you lacked despair.]

"..."

[Lord Satan has high expectations for you.]

"Wh-Why me? Why the hell would he have expectations for me?"

[That is what I want to know,] Yogg-Saron said mockingly as if finding Si-Hun pathetic.

[Why in the world would Lord Satan put so much interest in you?]

"..."

[Grab your sword, human. Prove yourself to me.]

"Shut... up."

[Kekeke.]

The green tentacles wriggled.

[If you cannot prove yourself, die. There is no reason for my lord to have expectations for a cripple who cannot even hold a sword.]

Swoosh!

The tentacles shot forward at supersonic speed.

Si-Hun stomped on the ground and frantically dodged the tentacles. The tentacles brushed past his body. His flesh was cut, and blood poured in all directions. The tentacles bent and targeted his shoulders.

He reflexively raised his sword, but all he had in his hands was air.

Bash.

"Kurghh!!"

His shoulder was pierced. Intense pain spread through his body. He rolled on the ground miserably and pathetically. He rolled to avoid the attacks, and his sword happened to be where he had ended up.

—The sword he couldn't even hold.

[Grab your sword, human,] the demon said.

Si-Hun felt like crying. He wanted to grab his weapon more desperately than anyone else. He reached for it.

Clatter.

The sword fell from his hands.

[Tsk, you truly are trash.]

"S-Si-Hun..."

Gaia called out to him in a sad voice, but there was nothing he could do.

Squelch.

"Urgh!"

[Will you be able to raise your sword if your woman dies before your eyes?]

The tentacles wrapped around Gaia's neck. Gaia frantically struggled as if her breath was about to be cut short at any moment.

"You motherfucker!!"

He stomped on the ground and desperately leaped forward. He didn't even have time to use a foot technique. He charged toward Yogg-Saron while drawing out all the Qi he had as if he were wringing his soul dry.

Yogg-Saron swung his hand in annoyance.

Smack!

"Kurgh!"

Si-Hun's body bent as he flew away. The rough ground grated his skin and tore his clothes apart. The demon was right; a swordsman who couldn't hold a sword was just a piece of trash.

"Urgh...! S-Si-Hun!!"

Gaia, who was being strangled, desperately shouted, "R-Run away, Si-Hun!!"

"Gaia..."

She was speaking very clearly despite the demon strangling her, but Si-Hun didn't have time to think about that. He looked at Yogg-Saron with shaking eyes. A rage intense enough to make his head go blank surged through him. He reached for the sword on the ground yet again.

'Please.'

Just this once...

Just this moment...

That was all he wanted.

He was okay with never being able to use a sword again after this.

'So please.'

He needed the power to protect her right now.

"A-Arrgghh."

He grabbed the sword and put his focus on each trembling finger. He was sweating as if it were raining outside. His body, as if whispering that he no longer had the power to hold a sword, refused to grasp it.

He ignored the whisper.

"Please..."

His nose bled. The blood passed his lips and gathered on his chin. He tried to do what his head forcibly rejected. He raised his sword, held it tight, and...

Clatter.

The sword fell to the ground.

"A-Aaahhhh."

"Si-Hun..."

He heard Gaia's voice and raised his head.

She was looking at him with a faint smile.

"I'm okay. Si-Hun. Don't worry about m—Ugh!"

[This girl talks too much.]

Yogg-Saron frowned. The tentacles tightened around Gaia's neck, causing her to pass out.

[Wha—] Yogg-Saron exclaimed in surprise. He wasn't expecting her to actually pass out, but he quickly regained his composure. He slowly raised his head and looked at Si-Hun with scornful eyes.

[So, you weren't able to raise your sword.]

"..."

[There is no need to despair, human.]

He kept talking as if it didn't matter.

[It only means that is all you amount to as a human.]

"..."

In the end this is all you amount to.

You cannot do anything.

You cannot achieve anything.

That is simply your limit as a human.

"Shut... up."

Si-Hun trembled. He heard a voice.

"I'm sorry for giving birth to you."

A nightmarish voice... the voice that devoured his life. The trauma... the stigma engraved in his mind... the voice that told him that this was all he amounted to.

He had lived denying those words, but...

"Shut up, you motherfuckeeeeeeerrrrrr!!"

He screamed. He roared. He raised his sword by holding it between his two wrists.

He stomped on the floor and charged toward the demon. However, there was no way that a sword swung with his wrists would have any power behind it.

The sword bounced away, and Si-Hun collapsed. He saw Gaia, the woman he'd sworn to protect and make her smile, being held hostage by the demon.

"Move..."

He said words that wouldn't work.

"Please, move..."

The sensations in his hands were faint. No matter how much strength he put into them, his hands just trembled.

He couldn't hold the sword.

A swordsman who couldn't hold a sword... couldn't do anything.

"A-Aaahhh..."

A desperate cry left his mouth, and tears dripped from his eyes. He felt a thirst as desire spread through his body.



'I don't need anything else.'

He was okay with anyone, or anything.

He was even willing to sell his soul to a demon.

He needed power.

Power to protect her.

"A-Aaaaaaahhhhhhhh!!!"

A fire ignited in his mind. His vision flickered. Something within him, a giant ball of power, spread to every corner of his body.

\* \* \*

"..."

Oh Kang-Woo frowned as he listened to Si-Hun cry desperately. Si-Hun had truly hit rock bottom.

"It's hard to watch."

Kang-Woo had planned to give Si-Hun a push and had put his thoughts into action, but even so, seeing Si-Hun struggling at rock bottom was difficult.

'Maybe I should've just waited.'

He shook his head at the sudden thought that crossed his mind. He couldn't have waited—Si-Hun needed a push. He needed a desperate situation that would let him overcome the despair and grow.

Humans were cunning creatures. It didn't matter if they tried their best or how desperate they were. They wouldn't sincerely be moved unless they had to face the situation upfront.

It was like an enlistee whose enlistment in the army didn't feel real until they entered the training center.

Something like despair was hard to understand until faced with it.

'... Even if that despair is fabricated.'

Someone needed to put a gun to Si-Hun's head. It had been absolutely necessary.

"A-Aaaaaaahhhhhhhh!!!"

He heard Si-Hun's cry. It was the desperate cry of someone who had hit rock bottom. The tips of Kang-Woo's mouth went up.

"It's done."

He heard the desperation erupt like a volcano. If it were the Si-Hun he knew, there was no way he wouldn't power up in such a situation.

'Stand up, Si-Hun!'

He looked at him with expectant eyes.

Rumble!!

As if Si-Hun were answering Kang-Woo's expectations, an enormous lump of power spewed out of him.

'Good, now accept the power of the Martial G—'

"I don't need anything else!!" Si-Hun cried.

A huge amount of demonic energy poured out of him.

"Eh?" Kang-Woo uttered.

"It doesn't matter what it is! I don't care if this is the end!!"

'Hey, hey, wait. The hell? Why are you exuding demonic energy?'

"I need power!!"

'Oh, fuck. Hey, Si-Hun, what are you doing?'

The soul of the Martial God dwelled within Si-Hun's body, but also... his soul was connected to Kang-Woo's.

"If I can save her, I'm willing to do anything!!"

Horns appeared from Si-Hun's forehead.

"No," Kang-Woo exclaimed.

Bat wings appeared from Si-Hun's back.

"Fucking wait."

Si-Hun's eyes turned black. His irises turned yellow, and his pupils stretched horizontally.

"Si-Hun..."

Kang-Woo clutched his head.

The more Si-Hun's body changed, the more demonic energy flowed out of him.

"Why did you fall, you dumbass...?"

Chapter 199 - A Hero Is Born from Despair (4)

"A-Aaaaaahhhhh!!"

Kim Si-Hun grabbed his head and twisted his body as he slowly turned into a demon. He was brimming with powerful urges, and an intense thirst governed his mind.

A yearning for power... the burning desire devoured his body.

'What's going on?'

Si-Hun couldn't understand it. A power he had never felt before enveloped him—a destructive and ferocious energy.

He instinctively knew it was different from Qi.

"Haaa."

He took a deep breath, and his head cleared. An intense amount of energy invigorated his body as if he had taken a stimulant. He looked down at his hands and saw that they were no longer trembling.

He couldn't understand why he had changed into this form or what had caused the change.

But...

Clack.

He grabbed his sword. A thrilling sensation spread from his hand. He knew that his current state was weird and that he had diverted from the correct path.

"It doesn't matter."

All that mattered was that he could grab his sword and save the woman he loved from the hands of the demon. He even thought that it would be fine if he could no longer hold a sword after saving her. He could even laugh off turning into a demon.

He grabbed his sword and prepared to fight.

[Huh?]

A flustered voice left Yogg-Saron's mouth. He dumbfoundedly stared at Si-Hun, who was slowly turning into a demon.

Boom!

Si-Hun stomped on the ground. He shot forward with an intense aura of demonic energy around him. Black condensed sword energy flowed from the sword in his hands. He twisted his body and swung down his sword.

Slam!

[Kuh!]

Yogg-Saron was pushed back. He was surprised. After hesitating for a bit, he put Gaia down carefully.

[I am not sure what is going on, but...]

It would become dangerous at this rate. The human in front of him was emitting enough threatening energy that Yogg-Saron considered him dangerous.

He clenched his fists, planted his feet, and extended his hands. The green tentacles spread out.

Slash!

Five tentacles were cut with a single slash.

Si-Hun twisted his body and dodged the remaining tentacles, which slammed into the ground. He jumped onto the tentacles and ran along them.

A black light cut Yogg-Saron.

[Kuh!]

Yogg-Saron quickly leaned back. His collarbone was slashed, black blood pouring out of it.

Yogg-Saron frowned. An intense fighting spirit flared up within him. He ripped off the tentacles stuck to his body as if they were a nuisance, and his eyes shone like a veteran martial artist's.

Slam! Boom! Crash!

The sword and the fist clashed.

A huge impact that resembled an exploding bomb shook their surroundings.

Trees snapped, the ground exploded, and dirt scattered.

The tips of Yogg-Saron's mouth went up. He was getting fired up.

'Not bad.'

For him, fighting was his entire life and his reason for existence. The sword being swung at him fired him up. He covered both fists with demonic energy as if he were wearing gauntlets. He pulled his foot back, lowered his body, and swung his fists upward.

Si-Hun's sword blocked the attack, but the overwhelming difference in strength pushed back Si-Hun. Si-Hun twisted his body and spread out his wings. Extending his legs as if stepping on air, he shot toward Yogg-Saron.

Si-Hun acrobatically spun around and focused his entire weight on his sword, swinging it down with the goal of splitting the demon's head in two.

Crack!

The demon raised his arm and blocked the attack. The sword crushed his demonic energy gauntlet, and black blood poured out of his half-split wrist.

Yogg-Saron jumped back, and his wrist regenerated almost instantly.

[Hah.]

He laughed.

He could feel a thrill traveling down his spine and spreading throughout his body. His beastly senses stimulated him, as he had come across a powerful opponent. Ferocious fighting spirit enveloped his entire body.

A wave of demonic energy pervaded their surroundings.

He extended his hands and tried to tear off the tentacles.

- Stop.

He heard a voice in his ear. His hands halted, and his boiling fighting spirit died down.

- Don't act on your own, Balrog.

He heard his king's voice through the communication device in his ear.

\* \* \*

"Shit."

Oh Kang-Woo bit his fingernails in panic.

Si-Hun had taken the form of a demon.

His head hurt from the unexpected development.

'Why did it end up like this?'

It actually wasn't hard to figure out why, but he just wanted to deny reality.

'Did I push him too hard?'

Based on Si-Hun's power-up patterns, he had thought that Si-Hun would power up again when put in an extreme situation, but maybe he'd gone too far. Instead of the Martial God's power, Si-Hun had accepted his demonic energy.

'This is the worst possible outcome.'

It was an unexpected development of events.

He knew there was a chance that Si-Hun could be influenced by his demonic energy since their souls were linked through the Authority of Subordination, but Si-Hun was different from Echidna and Vaal Zahak.

The main source of Si-Hun's power wasn't demonic energy but a power called Qi.

The power Kang-Woo used was completely different. Being able to draw it out should have been impossible.

'Dammit. Now that it's come to this....'

Si-Hun didn't know that he'd been made a Familiar through the Authority of Subordination, nor was it something that should ever be revealed. However, at this rate, he would begin to have suspicions since he'd learned that there was demonic energy inside his body, something he would no way have.

'... I will trample on his seed of doubt first.'

Everything would be over if the fact that Kang-Woo had used the Authority of Subordination on Si-Hun was exposed, and the relationship with Si-Hun he'd painstakingly built would be completely ruined.

Kang-Woo picked up the communication device.

"Balrog, repeat exactly what I say. Don't sound stiff. Sound as naturally wicked as possible."

He saw Balrog lightly nod after having received his command through the communication device.

'The best way to eliminate the seed of doubt is...'

He'd just thought of a plan on the spot, but it wasn't bad at all.

"Kekekeke, just as planned."

Kang-Woo recited a line for Balrog to say. The battle had come to a lull after Si-Hun had taken Gaia to a safe place.

Balrog laughed out loud and said the line.

'Good.'

Kang-Woo could see Si-Hun looking at Balrog. He already knew what should be said next.

'Time to use the cheat code again.'

Kang-Woo gulped and continued, "The seed sown by Lord Satan seems to have sprouted."

"Take the wheel, Lord Sataaaaaaaaaan!! Please resolve this fucked-up situation!!!"

\* \* \*

[The seed sown by Lord Satan seems to have sprouted,] Yogg-Saron said while making a malicious smile.

"... What?"

His words had been enough to shock the enraged Si-Hun.

"Seed, you say?"

Si-Hun, who had come back to his senses a little, looked down at his own body. His skin was dyed black, and he had wings on his back, a long tail like that of a reptile, and goat horns that had sprouted on his forehead.

He clearly looked like a demon.

"Don't tell me, was all of this..."

[Correct. It had all been part of his plan.]

Yogg-Saron smiled widely.

[Why do you think Lord Satan was interested in a mere human? It was all because he was aware of the soul of the Martial God lying dormant within you.]

"..."

[My lord sowed the Seed of Corruption within you, so that you would be able to abandon the body of a human and become a demon.]

"But... why?"

Si-Hun couldn't understand it.

The Demon of Prophecy, Satan...

Why was he trying to corrupt him and turn him into a demon?

"Ah."

A short exclamation left his mouth as if he'd completed a puzzle.

Si-Hun trembled. He recalled what had happened a few months prior in South America, about how Kang-Woo's subordinate, Balrog, had been controlled by an unknown magic circle of the Demon Cult.

'The Demon Cult... has a way to control demons.'

Then, there was only one reason why they would want to turn him into a demon.

"He was... planning on controlling me?"

[Kahahaha! Thankfully, you are not dumb enough to be unable to get through.]

Yogg-Saron laughed out loud while holding his belly. His green tentacles wriggled.

[Correct. This has all been to turn you into a puppet and force you to pledge your allegiance to Lord Satan.]

"..."

[A human with the soul of the Martial God... Kekeke. You could not be any weaker at the moment, but it is certainly interesting.]

Yogg-Saron's eyes shone.

[I wonder how much Gaia will despair once she sees that you have been corrupted into a demon? Hm?]

Tap.

Si-Hun took a step backward and grabbed his head as if he didn't want to believe what was happening.

"No."

That wasn't what he had wanted. He had not intended to become a demon, nor had he intended to become Satan's puppet. He looked down at Gaia with shaking eyes. He had simply wanted to protect this frail woman who could break from the slightest touch.

[Kahahahaha!! Good! Once you become my lord's puppet, I will make you kill that woman with your own hands!!!]

"A-Aaahhh."

Just thinking about it horrified Si-Hun. Fear spread through his body, and he imagined himself killing Gaia. Just the thought made him want to vomit.

'I-I have to go back to normal.'

It wasn't too late yet. He could still push the demonic energy out of his body. He did not hesitate; he focused on pushing out the darkness that had corrupted him.

'Wait.'

Just then, he looked at his hands, which were still gripping his sword.

'If I give up this power now...'

He might return to not being able to hold a sword again.

Hesitation and yearning intermingled in his mind.

'No.'

He did not think for very long.

He couldn't become Satan's puppet. Even if it were for those important to him, he had to give up this power.

"Kurgh! Kuh!"

A horrible thirst shook his body. His demon body amplified his desires. His longing for power dominated his mind.

"N-No..."

He felt his consciousness start to fade. It felt as if he would be devoured by his own desires and lose his sense of reason.

"A-Aaahhh."

Tears dripped from his eyes. He couldn't resist the desires of a demon's body. His vision blurred, and the thought that becoming a demon wouldn't be so bad filled his mind.

"Si... Hun?"

At that moment, he heard a familiar voice. It was as if lightning had struck him. Si-Hun turned around as he trembled.

"Kang-Woo hyung...?"

The person he trusted the most in the world was behind him.

Chapter 200 - A Hero Is Born from Despair (5)

"Si-Hun? A-Are you really Si-Hun?"

Oh Kang-Woo's eyes shook, and it looked as if he were having a bad nightmare.

"N-No. There's no way that's Si-Hun..."

His body trembled, and he grabbed his hair and shook his head. He tried to deny reality. There was no way the demon in front of him was Kim Si-Hun.

"H-Hyung-nim."

"Shut up! How dare you try to impersonate Si-Hun in front of me!" he shouted aggressively. He extended his right hand and brought out Del Lain, the sword that emitted a golden light. Powerful bloodlust rose from him.

He glared at Si-Hun and Yogg-Saron with resentment.

"Where is he?"

Boom!

He stomped on the ground, and the golden light spread in all directions.

"Where is Si-Hun, you motherfuckers?!!!" he desperately shouted as if he wanted to erase the worst possible scenario in front of him and deny the reality before him.

[Kahahahahahaha!!!]

Yogg-Saron grabbed his stomach and began laughing out loud. The tips of his mouth went up as if he couldn't find the situation any more entertaining. He opened his mouth while looking at Kang-Woo.

[You cannot recognize your brother despite him being right in front of you?]

"What... did you say?"

[Your brother is right there, human.]

Yogg-Saron raised his hand and pointed to Si-Hun.



"That demon is Si-Hun? Bullshit!" Kang-Woo shouted. However, he already knew by intuition that it was Si-Hun. He knew from the air that the demon was giving off and the way that the demon was looking at him.

"Hyung... nim."

"... No."

Kang-Woo denied it and shook his head, his expression pale. He didn't want to believe the nightmare.

"Wh-Why... How..."

"I'm... sorry."

Si-Hun lowered his head. He had been reduced to a demon. He had fallen to rock bottom after falling for Satan's scheme. He felt as if his heart were burning, showing Kang-Woo this form.

Si-Hun looked down at his own body.

'Even now...'

It still wasn't too late. He could go back. He could still make it right. Even Kang-Woo had the body of a demon before becoming the apostle of Tirion, God of Heroes.

Just like Kang-Woo, Si-Hun just had to give up the demonic energy corrupting him.

"A-Arrgghh."

A burning thirst spread through him. He felt as if his throat was being scratched with sharp metal, and his body trembled as if it were drying up.

'I have to... give it up.'

He had to let it go. He had to drive away the darkness filling him.

It wasn't difficult.

All he had to do was to give it up like letting go of a rope.

It was simple and easy, but...

"A-Aaaaaahhhhh!"

He struggled in pain. The intense urge to fulfill desires and the horrible thirst that a demon body caused, which he'd never felt before, took control of him.

His struggle to give up the demonic energy was like a drug addict's attempt to spit out a drug already on the tongue. The pain it brought was similar to watching a glass of water being poured out while one was about to die of dehydration under the sweltering sun.

No, it was worse than that.

There was a reason why most people who accepted demonic energy inside their bodies lost their minds and were reduced to demonic beasts.

Furthermore, the demonic energy Si-Hun had accepted belonged to the demon king. The desire caused by having a demon body was eating away at him like a curse.

"S-Si-Hun!"

Kang-Woo anxiously reached out to him.

Si-Hun started to convulse.

"A-Aaahhh!"

He scratched his cheeks with his claws, tearing out flesh. Black blood poured down his cheeks. His body twisted, and he grabbed his hair.

Crack.

His fingers pierced his head. His scalp was torn away, and he screamed.

Crunch!

He raised his sword and smashed it down on his arm, desperately swinging his sword to free himself from his desires. Blood splashed everywhere, and his bones became visible. But that only lasted for a moment.

As if time were being rewound, the injury regenerated in almost an instant.

Only pain remained.

"Get out of me!!!"

It didn't stop.

Tears dripped from his eyes.

At this rate, he would become Satan's puppet. He would end up killing the woman he loved and twisting the neck of the hyung he admired.

No, Kang-Woo was overwhelmingly stronger than him, so it would be the opposite. Either way, it didn't matter. Whether Kang-Woo killed him or he killed Kang-Woo, both results would be catastrophic. There would be nothing but despair.

'I have to free myself.'

He had to be free from Satan's scheme and his own horrifying desire.

He put more strength in his downswings, hoping that the pain would wash away this mind-blowing thirst.

"Si-Hun!" Kang-Woo went to him. He grabbed the sword and shouted, "Stop it, you crazy son of a bitch!!!"

"Hyung-nim, I..."

"You can tell me what happened later. First, you have to calm d—"

"I... can't."

Si-Hun shook his head. He could feel that the demonic energy was changing his body even more. It would be the end if he gave up and failed to drive out the power. He would fully become a demon and turn into Satan's puppet.

"I have... to do it... right now."

"D-Do what right now?!"

"I can... still go back. It... still isn't too late," he said in a desperate voice.

It wasn't too late. Not yet.

He grabbed the sword and mindlessly swung down at his arm again. The sharp blade cut his muscles and bones.

A horrible pain spread through his body, and it chased the thirst away.

He began to push out the demonic energy.

Crack, crunch.

The goat horns on his forehead were sucked back into his body, and the bat wings were getting smaller.

"Kuh... Argh..."

The more he pushed the demonic energy out, the more intense the thirst became.

His consciousness was fading. It felt as if the demonic energy that had devoured his body was talking to him.

- Are you really going to give me up?

The demon's sweet whisper...

He could see a red demon mask staring at him and laughing.

"Shut... up."

He knew it was an illusion. The Satan he could see and hear was fake. It was just a nightmare created by that crazy thirst, but even if he knew it was fake, it was hard to resist the temptation.

Crack.

The horns on his forehead slowly returned. His vision was distorted and covered by darkness.

"..."

Kang-Woo looked down at Si-Hun. It wasn't hard to guess what Si-Hun was experiencing.

'Not good.'

He knew how strong the desires of a demon were. When he had fallen into the Nine Hells, he had struggled a lot while trying to resist those urges.

'I guess it wasn't enough for me to appear.'

He was hoping Si-Hun could push those temptations away from the shock of seeing Kang-Woo, but it seemed the stimulation hadn't been big enough.

'If Si-Hun keeps living as a demon...'

He already used the Satan cheat code, so he had washed away the suspicions about the Authority of Subordination.

Si-Hun staying as a demon might actually be more helpful in terms of power.

Kang-Woo hesitated for a bit and then shook his head.

'No.'

Si-Hun's source of power wasn't demonic energy.

That was like putting gasoline in a diesel car. There was no telling the side effects that could arise from such a thing.

'In the worst-case scenario...'

Si-Hun would die.

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes. He couldn't let that happen.

'In that case...'

It was time to use his trump card.

The tips of his mouth went up.

'This is gonna work.'

He was sure of it.

He looked at Si-Hun, who was trembling in desperation.

"Ahem."

'Gotta clear my throat.'

He closed his eyes for a moment to get into the mood.

His little brother had turned into a demon... His ally had been corrupted after being deceived by a demon... The friendship and love that blossomed in the middle of a desperate situation...

The setup was very important.

Kang-Woo slowly opened his mouth, extended his hands, and grabbed Si-Hun's shoulders.

"Si-Hun! Get it together, Si-Hun!!" he said in a desperate voice that surprised even him.

'The mood is on point.'

Riiing.

[Activating the Authority of Subordination.]

He heard the notification message at the same time he had spoken.

Black energy flowed from Kang-Woo's hands into Si-Hun's body.

"Hyung... nim."

"Get it together, dammit!!"

"I'm... sorry... hyung-nim. I..."

Si-Hun's body trembled.

"Ah."

At that moment, Si-Hun's eyes widened, and he felt an unknown urge rising inside him. He quickly turned his head.

[Hehehe. Can you feel it? That is the power of the seed Lord Satan had sown within you,] Yogg-Saron opened his mouth to say as he watched everything unfold with arms crossed.

Si-Hun's expression darkened in despair.

"N-No."

The desire to destroy, the resentment, the lunacy.

Si-Hun's hands were moving on their own.

"N-No!!"

He held back his arm with all his might, but it wasn't enough. The seed that Satan had sown sprouted inside him. A horrifying urge to kill was aimed toward Kang-Woo.

"What's wrong?!"

"H-Hyung-nim! W-Watch ou—"

Stab.

"Ah."

The sword in his hands pierced Kang-Woo's stomach.

Si-Hun's eyes widened, and his mouth fell open. He could feel that his hands were stained with blood—it was the chilling sensation of killing in cold blood.

Cough.

Blood spurted from Kang-Woo's mouth. Kang-Woo looked down at the sword piercing his stomach in disbelief.

"H-Hyung-nim. I'm sorry... I'm... sorry."

Tears dripped from Si-Hun's eyes. He was hoping that everything that was unfolding in front of him was just a nightmare, but the hot blood flowing over his hands was telling him it was real.

"Wh-what have I..."

He felt that he was about to go crazy. No, he might have already gone mad.

Kang-Woo fiercely embraced him when he was about to lose his mind.

"Hyung... nim...?"

"Haaa. Cough! Get it together, you idiot." His voice was so weak that it sounded like he would die at any moment. "I don't know what happened for you to have become like this."

"H-Hyung-nim. D-Don't talk anymore. Th-The blood...!" Si-Hun shouted while crying.

"But..." Kang-Woo ignored him and didn't let him go. "You can do it."

"..."

"You can overcome it."

Kang-Woo smiled at him.

"Si-Hun..." He placed his hands on his cheek. "Thanks for staying as my little brother."

"Ah."

Si-Hun's body trembled.

Trauma. The trauma that had been carved into his soul...

"I'm sorry for giving birth to you."

The words that had been weighing him down his whole life. He wanted to deny them, these words which were a nightmare and a curse. He had lived only to deny them.

Tears dripped from his eyes.

All this time, he had desperately wanted to hear words of acknowledgement and gratitude that he was there for someone.

"A-Aaaahhh."

He could do it. The seed that Satan had sown within him and the demonic energy filling his body... he could throw it all away.

Thirst engulfed him, but he ignored it.

A longing for power invaded his mind, but he ignored it.

'I am...'

His sight became pitch-black. He tore down the darkness through which he couldn't see anything.

The darkness disappeared and became filled with a blue light.

Si-Hun's body was surrounded by intense blue light.

Riiing.

[Assimilation with Martial God Tian Taihuang has reached 51.2%.]

[All conditions for Metamorphosis have been fulfilled.]

[Commencing body reconstruction.]

[You have learned the unique skill 'Sword Control.']

Rumble!!!

The ground shook.

As the blue light surrounded Si-Hun, Kang-Woo fell to the ground.

Kang-Woo opened his eyes slightly and looked at Si-Hun, the tips of his mouth curving up a bit.

'Shiiiet! Fuck yeah! This is it!'

He recalled his last phrase.

"Thanks for staying as my little brother."

'Dayum.'

Kang-Woo trembled in excitement at that line. He felt chills just thinking about it.

'I'm so fucking cool.'

That was why everyone loved him.