

M. in Hell 201

Chapter 201 - Survivor of the Magic Tower (1)

Crack, split!

There were sounds of bones dislocating and breaking. Kim Si-Hun's muscles twitched as if they were dancing, and a black liquid filled with bodily waste flushed out of his sweat pores.

'Ah!' Si-Hun let out a gasp of relief in his mind.

He felt a weird sensation; it was as if he were being reborn.

Si-Hun did not feel any horrible pain like he'd often heard about regarding the process of Metamorphosis. Rather, it felt refreshing. It was as if someone was scratching itchy parts of his body.

After a while, he slowly opened his eyes and took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the air of the forest. His mind felt inexplicably clear, and his body felt as light as a feather.

Si-Hun extended his hand toward the sword penetrating Kang-Woo's stomach. Blue light enveloped the sword, and it came out smoothly on its own as if it were alive.

Kang-Woo collapsed.

"Hyung-nim," Si-Hun said.

He lightly extended his hands, and Kang-Woo was surrounded by blue energy as if an esper were using telekinesis on him. Then Si-Hun slowly laid Kang-Woo on the floor.

The blue energy covered Kang-Woo's wound. Surprisingly, not a single drop of blood was coming out from where the sword had come out.

'I have to end this as soon as possible,' Si-Hun thought.

He used the principles of Sword Control to stitch the wound together, but it was just a temporary measure. To fully heal Kang-Woo's wound, Si-Hun had to take him to the Hall of Protection, return to Korea, and then call for Han Seol-Ah.

[Wh-What in the—?!]

Upon seeing Yogg-Saron's surprised expression, Si-Hun turned and gripped his sword. His hands were no longer trembling.

"Yogg... Saron," he said the name with resentment.

The demon before him was the subordinate of Satan, the demon whom he despised the most and refused to be in the same world with. Yogg-Saron was a being who had put Gaia in danger and made him stab Kang-Woo.

'I'll kill him,' Si-Hun resolved.

There was no reason to keep Yogg-Saron alive.

Si-Hun surged with an intense bloodlust.

[Shit! H-How did you free yourself from the influence of the seed?!] Yogg-Saron looked confused.
[A human should not be able to resist the desires of a demon!]

"Enough nonsense, demon."

Si-Hun charged without hesitation while holding the sword.

Certainly, just like Yogg-Saron said, a demon's desires were strong. There probably wasn't a single drug that could be compared to it.

'But...'

It was possible to overcome it. Si-Hun was evidence of that. He'd hit rock bottom and barely managed to crawl back up, but it hadn't been impossible.

"I won't let you all do as you please."

Si-Hun took a step forward and thrust his sword. The sword left his hand and freely moved in the air as if it were alive.

'Heavenly Dragon Flash.'

There was a burst of light, and blue energy slashed through space and cut Yogg-Saron.

[How dare a mere human do this!!!]

The fierce battle continued. It was completely different from when Si-Hun had been overpowered pathetically.

Si-Hun moved incredibly fast while leaving afterimages.

Crash! Boom!

He felt free. He was able to do things that he hadn't been able to do before. The fact that he could use sword techniques without physically holding the sword made it possible for him to make incredible movements.

[Kuh!! Sh-Shit!]

As the fight continued, Yogg-Saron's wounds increased in number. His skin was torn, and the green tentacles were cut.

Yogg-Saron looked around anxiously. He grabbed a black sphere from his pocket.

[Bastard... This will not be the last time you see me.]

He glared at Si-Hun with intense bloodlust.

Crack.

Yogg-Saron shattered the black sphere in his hand. A black Rift appeared and devoured him.

"You're not going anywhere!!"

Si-Hun charged forward.

Yogg-Saron waved his hands, and a huge army of Undead charged toward Si-Hun.

"Kuh!"

Si-Hun could kill each Undead with one attack, but there were hundreds of them. He'd just powered up, but he couldn't eliminate such a huge amount of monsters in the blink of an eye.

'I'll ignore them...'

Just as he was about to chase after Yogg-Saron, who was disappearing into the Rift, the Undead ran toward Gaia and Kang-Woo, who were both unconscious.

"...Shit."

Si-Hun couldn't afford to chase the demon while sacrificing those two.

He bit his lip and glared at Yogg-Saron.

[Do not forget, human.]

Yogg-Saron and Si-Hun looked at each other.

[We will ultimately be the victors!] Yogg-Saron spread both hands out as he spoke in a maniacal tone. [Glory to Lord Satan!]

Then he disappeared into the Rift.

"..."

Si-Hun remained silent while glaring at the rift with a sharp gaze, but he ended up turning his head away soon after. He had no time to think about the demon who had escaped.

"Kuh."

"Hyung-nim! Kang-Woo hyung-nim!!"

"Si-Hun...?"

When Kang-Woo regained consciousness, Si-Hun cried while quickly running over to him.

Kang-Woo looked at Si-Hun with a faint smile and said, "I knew you'd be able to do it."

"D-Don't get up yet, hyung-nim! Your wound..."

"You're worried about me? I regenerated your arms with my blood, man. I'll be fine as long as I don't die instantly."

Kang-Woo smiled bitterly and healed his wound.

The wound was gone, but it seemed the physical damage was still left. He staggered when he tried to get up.

"Hyung-nim!"

"I'm fine. But more importantly, what happened? Why did you turn into a demon?"

"Well..." Si-Hun hesitated.

After thinking for a while, he told Kang-Woo what Yogg-Saron had said.

"A seed? Hmm," Kang-Woo muttered.

"...I'm sorry. Because of me..."

"It's okay." Kang-Woo shook his head. "But I think we should keep this a secret between us."

"...Okay."

"Don't be so worried."

Kang-Woo lightly patted his shoulder and held Si-Hun's hand, which was holding his sword.

"Whatever the case, you managed to overcome it with your willpower."

"..."

"If you've done it once, I'm sure you'll be able to do it again."

"It isn't that simple of an issue..."

"I believe in you, Si-Hun."

"Hyung..."

Tears appeared in Si-Hun's eyes.

He'd feared that he might kill someone important to him with his own hands. In the middle of such fear, Kang-Woo's words were like a welcome rain during a drought.

"Hyung!!!"

'Don't hug me.'

Kang-Woo pushed away Si-Hun, who had been moved to tears.

Si-Hun's expression resembled an abandoned dog's after being rejected.

'Don't look so hurt, dude.'

Why did Si-Hun keep aiming for the role of the female lead?

"I don't think I'm the one you should be hugging right now."

"Ah..."

"Mmm? S-Si-Hun?" Gaia, who had been unconscious, called out as she sat up carefully.

She looked around in confusion; she didn't seem to be acting.

"Gaia."

"Protector Kim Si-Hun! Uhhh... I mean... Wh-What happened to the demon?"

'Nice, sister-in-law!'

Thankfully, she spoke in a trembling voice as if she had recalled her role.

Si-Hun helped Gaia stand up.

Kang-Woo smiled while looking at them.

'With this...'

The hero had blossomed in the midst of despair. The evil demon had escaped, but the weak heroine had been rescued.

'This is what I call a novel! Huehuehuehue.'

* * *

A week had passed since that incident.

Kang-Woo was having a training session with Balrog to practice using the Authority of Blaze.

After it ended for the day, Balrog remarked, [I must say, that human certainly was impressive.]

Kang-Woo nodded.

It wasn't hard for him to guess who Balrog was talking about.

"I wouldn't have gone through all that if he wasn't impressive."

[I can only be amazed by your eye for people, my king. To be honest, I did not expect that human to become that much stronger in the middle of our plan.]

Balrog recalled his fierce battle with Si-Hun. He felt a thrill spread through his body.

Kang-Woo smirked. "You think he'll catch up to you?"

[Hehe. Even if the soul of a god dwells within him, I, Balrog, am not so weak that I would lose against a human brat,] Balrog answered without hesitation.

Kang-Woo nodded.

Balrog had not been at his best back then. He had fought without his whip, his main weapon, and had even had bothersome tentacles attached to him.

'But Si-Hun has honestly become strong enough to easily overpower most archdemons.'

Kang-Woo smiled.

Si-Hun should now be able to easily deal with small fry like Halphas, Malphas, and Phenex simultaneously.

'I'm proud of you, my boy.'

Kang-Woo's smile turned into a proud grin.

Si-Hun had powered up to the extent that he was strong enough to be among the top five in the army Kang-Woo had previously commanded as the demon king.

'Hard work never betrays you.'

Kang-Woo's painstaking, heartfelt performance had been worth it.

'But there's still a long way to go.'

He didn't have a complaint regarding Si-Hun's growth speed. However, he did have an issue with the average level of Earth's Players in general.

'I don't expect them to be as strong as Si-Hun, but it would be great if some stronger Players appear.'

The difference in power between demons and humans was so massive that it wasn't even funny. To say it bluntly, if Kang-Woo and other elite members of Guardians hadn't been here, a single prince of Hell would have easily been able to destroy Earth.

"Ngh."

Still, it was true that he was wishing for too much.

'It has only been six years since Players appeared.'

The fact that humanity had become strong enough to be able to defeat monsters in six years was already a miracle.

"...I guess I'll just have to gamble on the future."

He just had to hope Players would grow more through future battles.

"Balrog, break time is over."

For now, Kang-Woo needed to get used to using Mammon's Authority, and...

'I have to try merging it with other Authorities.'

Kang-Woo had never tried mixing a transcendental power like a prince's Authority with something else before. There was no precedent for it, nor would it ever happen with anyone else. Only an irregular being like Kang-Woo could even attempt it.

'It's not possible yet.'

He still couldn't control the Authority of Blaze properly, so merging it with another Authority was out of the question. Merging one Authority with another exponentially raised its difficulty level to control. It was something no one had managed to do before, so he had to be very careful about it.

'But one day...'

Kang-Woo raised his hand, and a small flame danced on top of his palm.

He still hadn't caught up to Mammon's ability to control fire. Nevertheless, he was certain he would be able to over time... just like he'd always done before.

[You were also like this back in Hell, but... you do not rest at all, my king.]

"There's no one who doesn't take a break."

There were simply people who couldn't afford to take breaks, and that was also the case for Kang-Woo. He actually really wanted to go on dates with Seol-Ah, watch TV with Echidna, and go to an Internet cafe with Cha Yeon-Joo again.

"Ah, I wanna take a break..."

Thinking about it made him crave it even more.

After learning Mammon's Authority, he'd been spending twenty hours a day trying to control it.

'No, even more than that.'

Kang-Woo had used the Authority of Focus, which reduced the perceived flow of time. So, according to his senses, he'd spent much more time than that on Mammon's Authority.

His goal in life was to become a wealthy bum, so it was hard to resist taking a break.

'Gimme a fucking break, for fuck's sake.'

Before returning to Earth, he thought he would enjoy a life of leisure once he got back. However, he ended up needing to fight for the sake of the world.

Kang-Woo was starting to get irritated.

'I really should dedicate a single day to re—'

"My, did you need a break, my king?"

He heard a voice behind him.

Kang-Woo turned and found Lilith looking at him with a smile.

"Nope," he answered without hesitation. He continued quietly, "We don't have time to rest."

"My, my. There you go again."

Kang-Woo's deflection was not very effective. Lilith slowly embraced him.

"Come to think of it, we haven't gotten to spend much time together since I arrived in this world," she expressed.

'I'm okay with that.'

"Hohoho. I understand your fatigue. You must have been missing our nights together that much."

'I'm sorry. I won't think about taking a break ever again. I'll work like a dog without taking a single day off.'

Kang-Woo looked at Lilith in despair.

Perhaps the desperation in his gaze might have gotten through to her...

Lilith sighed and said, "I would love nothing more than to spend an intense night with my king... but it seems that would be hard today."

'Oh, what?'

Kang-Woo's eyes shone at the unexpected answer.

"Did something happen?"

"There is something I must report to you."

Lilith continued calmly, "A survivor from the region where Lucifer's forces battled the Demon Cult has sought asylum in Guardians."

"A Demon Cultist...?"

"No. He mentioned that he was extorted by the Demon Cultists like a slave."

"Then what is he?" Kang-Woo asked curiously.

"He said that he's a mage... from the Magic Tower."

Chapter 202 - Survivor of the Magic Tower (2)

"Magic Tower?"

The Magic Tower...

Oh Kang-Woo had never heard of such an organization, yet it felt familiar for some reason. It seemed as if the organization had been shoehorned in for no reason because the author had thought that not having a Magic Tower in a fantasy was a waste.

"It's apparently known as the 'Tower of Truth,' to be more precise," said Lillith.

"Tower of Truth..." He scratched his chin, thinking that its name didn't matter. "Where is this guild from?"

"It is a fairly large-scale guild located in Europe. In particular... it seems they have quite a long history."

"A long history?" Kang-Woo asked while tilting his head.

It had only been six years since Players appeared on Earth. How long of a history could they have?

'Wait.'

He narrowed his eyes, recalling Tian Wuchen and Zhuge Xian.

'They've apparently been using martial arts before Players appeared.'

In the case of Wuchen, although most of the knowledge had been lost over time, he even knew the martial arts of the Martial God Tian Taihuang.

'In that case...'

That meant the Tower of Truth had existed before the Day of Calamity.

Just like Wuchen had used martial arts before that day, there was a chance that the people from the Tower of Truth had also possessed supernatural powers that couldn't be explained with science.

'It's not impossible.'

The Demon Cult was an organization with thousands of years of history, after all.

Magic, sorcery, martial arts...

The powers that had become widespread after the appearance of Players had existed since before the Day of Calamity.

"So, where is he right now?" Kang-Woo asked.

"We imprisoned him in the Hall of Protection with Gaia's permission. Si-Hun is monitoring him."

Kang-Woo nodded.

It didn't matter what organization he was from—they couldn't immediately believe his words that he wasn't a Demon Cultist. After all, a Demon Cultist wouldn't blatantly reveal the fact that he was one when seeking asylum in Guardians.

He stood up.

Lillith asked, "Will you be going right away?"

"There's no better way than talking to him myself."

"Fufu, I will lead the way."

"It's fine. I've been to the Hall of Protection too many times to count."

Kang-Woo smirked and opened the gate that led there.

'Come to think of it, this is so convenient.'

He could go to the Hall of Protection from anywhere and at any time he liked. Not only that, but he could also go to any Guardians branch worldwide through the Hall of Protection, so in terms of convenience, it was top-notch.

As he walked through the gate, he saw a familiar, white passageway.

"Hyung-nim."

Kim Si-Hun, who was guarding the entrance, greeted him.

Kang-Woo nodded and entered the room. Inside, he saw an old man bound by mana restraints. He had messy white hair and a gray beard. He looked like a generic old mage that would appear in a certain film about a ring.

Kang-Woo brought a chair over and sat in front of him.

"Nice to meet you."

"You are..."

"I am Oh Kang-Woo, a member of Guardians. I have come here to ask you a few questions."

"Ngh."

The old man twisted around as if the mana restraints were uncomfortable.

Smiling, Kang-Woo opened his mouth to say, "I hope you can understand, even if the restraints are a bit uncomfortable."

"... Ah, yes! O-of course." The old man flinched in surprise and bowed his head. He carefully opened his mouth. "My name is Khadgar. I am a mage of the Tower of Truth."

"I have never heard of it."

"The existence of the Magic Tower is not publicly known," he said with pride.

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes and said, "I heard you had been enslaved by the Demon Cult... Could you tell me the specifics?"

"It is exactly as it sounds. Those filthy demons treated us like slaves...! Sniff."

It seemed he was overflowing with emotions as he spoke. The old man frowned and bit his lip.

Kang-Woo could feel the old man's desperate emotions. His eyes shone.

'He doesn't seem to be lying.'

Neither the voice full of sincerity nor the tears of a victim could be considered proof, but it did not seem to be an act, at the very least.

"Fuuu, fuuu." Khadgar calmed down and said, "We mages of the Magic Tower have been researching magic for a very long time in pursuit of the truth."

"I heard you have been using magic since before Players appeared..."

"Yes, that is correct," he said confidently. "I guess you could say that it is a small reward for pursuing the truth of the world. We are able to perform miracles, to an extent."

"I see."

"While we were researching, we were ambushed by the Demon Cult. They enslaved us and extorted our magic."

"When exactly did this happen?"

"It was... about a year ago."

Khadgar's eyes became teary as if he was remembering a terrible nightmare.

'A year ago, huh?'

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes after hearing that.

"Do you mages of the Magic Tower not have any magic to use for combat?"

"No, we do. We possess powerful magic that has been passed down for generations. However..."
Khadgar lowered his eyes. "We were no match for the demons."

'Well, I guess that makes sense.'

Demons and humans... There was a clear difference in strength between the two races.

Of course, there were exceptions who were able to slay most demons before they could muster any form of resistance, such as Si-Hun, but demons were fundamentally far more powerful than humans.

"You mentioned that they extorted your magic... What did they do exactly?"

"We were forced to create the magic items they required. They were black gems the size of fingernails... We were also forced to create very weird-looking stakes."

"Oh?"

Kang-Woo's eyes shone.

Demonic crystals and Rift Seeds.

He had figured out how they were able to mass-produce such things.

"We were also forced to enchant numerous armaments and pieces of equipment. We were no more than slaves in a sweatshop."

The old man clenched his fists in anger.

"Those damn demons! Magic is not meant to be used like some insignificant tool!!!"

"Please calm down... How did you manage to get free?"

"Some unknown demons attacked the factory we were in. They might have had some sort of internal conflict... I took that opportunity and barely managed to escape."

He'd taken advantage of the chaos that had formed due to the battle between the Demon Cult and Lucifer's retainers and had luckily managed to escape.

Khadgar bowed deeply to Kang-Woo.

"I beg of you! Many of my comrades are still being held by the Demon Cult! Even now, they are being extorted by those evil demons. Please... please, save them!"

"Of course we will," Kang-Woo answered without hesitation and smiled.

'The Magic Tower, huh?'

The Magic Tower, an organization of mages who had been in pursuit of the truth of the world for a very long time.

'Well, they don't seem to be quite worthy of pity.'

He had almost felt pity after hearing the circumstances they were forced into, but when he thought about it, there didn't seem to be a need.

'If they were attacked a year ago...'

That meant that, before that, the Magic Tower had remained peaceful.

'And the fact that no one knew about their existence means... pretty much that.'

They had done nothing when humanity had been on the brink of ruin on the Day of Calamity. They had the power to fight monsters since before Players had appeared, yet they had simply watched. They hadn't protected or saved anyone.

The only thing that mattered to them was 'pursuing the truth.'

'I mean, it's not like you're obligated to save people just because you have power.'

But it at least wasn't what Khadgar was making it out to be: as if good Samaritans who had done absolutely nothing wrong were being wrongfully exploited.

Those who had done absolutely nothing while other people in need of help were pretty much begging for help all this while. It was truly laughable to see people, who had no desire to help others, begging for help themselves.

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

Kang-Woo couldn't care less whether they were good Samaritans or not. What mattered was their value—whether they were useful or not.

'They can also enchant equipment, huh?'

Not only could they strengthen all sorts of equipment, they would also be able to create all sorts of magic weapons and scrolls if milked thoroughly.

'Not bad at all.'

He had been feeling disappointed by the average level of Players lately. If they could raise the strength of Players by boosting equipment specs, it would be worth the effort.

'I can make use of them.'

A smile appeared on his face.

* * *

'Alright!'

Khadgar exclaimed in excitement in his head. He felt as if he had finally grasped a sliver of hope within despair.

'I knew I made the right choice coming here.'

Guardians, an organization made up of pushovers who dedicated themselves for humanity. He'd heard about them through rumors, but he'd never imagined it to go this well so easily.

'I can't believe there are actually people like this on Earth.'

He did his best to suppress his laugh of disbelief. He couldn't care less about trivial matters of the human realm, such as monsters attacking through Gates, the war against the Demon Cult, and things that had absolutely nothing to do with the pursuit of truth, so he couldn't understand it at all.

'Tsk tsk, pathetic idiots.'

They had no idea what was truly important; they could not understand the true meaning behind the Day of Calamity...

The human race currently living on the star known as Earth was incapable of reaching the core of the truth, nor was it even trying to reach it. These humans weren't trying to understand the meaning behind the appearance of Gates and Players.

'I'm sure they'll never come to understand why Earth is so special.'

Earth was different from other stars.

This world...

"Do you know where your comrades are being held?"

"... Ah! O-Of course!" Khadgar quickly answered.

He knew where his comrades were being held. No, to be more precise, he knew where the Tower of Truth's research materials were stored.

'Comrades, huh?'

Such a word was completely foreign to a mage. Khadgar suppressed his laughter. He couldn't care less about his comrades. They could stay enslaved by the Demon Cult or die for all he cared.

'The Tower's research materials.'

That was all he needed.

'This had to happen when I was about to attain the knowledge of Lady Hecate...'

Hecate was the goddess of magic as well as one of the Titans that appeared in ancient mythology.

Just as he had grasped onto the hopes that he would be able to attain even a portion of that knowledge, the Demon Cult had invaded the Tower of Truth.

'Fuuu. Just thinking about what I went through because of them makes me...'

He remembered the days he'd spent as a slave.

'Magic is not supposed to be used for something so trivial!'

Magic was a sacred knowledge that should only be used in search of the truth. It wasn't supposed to be used for trivial enchantments or for making magic tools.

'But that all comes to an end now.'

Khadgar's eyes shone.

He'd heard rumors about Guardians. The organization was strong enough to have come out victorious against a massive Demon Cult branch in Tibet. They could be considered the last bastion of humanity.

'I will finally... be free from the demons!!'

He clenched both fists.

Chapter 203 - Welcome to the Palace of Joseon, Strangers (1)

"Is that the place?" Oh Kang-Woo asked.

"Yes," Khadgar said.

They were at an S-rank Gate located in Western Europe. Unlike the Gates in Korea, this Gate wasn't being managed, so there were monsters all around it.

"The factory is inside that Gate."

"Inside the Gate?"

Khadgar nodded.

Kang-Woo looked at the S-rank Gate with great interest. It was the first time he'd seen a Demon Cult branch located inside a Gate.

"Si-Hun, let's kill the monsters around here before entering the Gate."

"Yes, hyung-nim."

The Sirius Corps, a corps under Si-Hun's direct command, had been added to the operation. It contained about three hundred members and was made up of powerful Players from Guardians. Han Seol-Ah, Kang Tae-Soo, Cha Yeon-Joo, Baek Hwa-Yeon, and most of the people Kang-Woo knew were in this corps.

The Sirius Corps was also the only special force that had acted like a proper corps within the disordered Guardians during its establishment.

'I don't get why it's called the Sirius Corps, though.'

It was as if an author had been too lazy to come up with a decent name and just slapped on a random word that they had just thought of. Si-Hun had been the one to choose this name, which did not seem to have any meaning behind it.

"D-Doesn't it sound cool?"

Kang-Woo recalled seeing Si-Hun with a proud expression while wearing the epaulet with the corps emblem.

'He has a childlike side to him.'

Kang-Woo smirked.

Si-Hun's personality was like a shonen manga protagonist's, and he also seemed to like childish names. Although he was in his mid-twenties, he sometimes acted like a teenager who had just entered puberty.

'Although I don't hate it.'

If Reynald or Alec Osborne had acted in such a way, Kang-Woo would've felt disgusted, but since it was Si-Hun, it was kind of cute. This could be considered a double standard. Kang-Woo himself was aware of his own duality, but he paid it no mind.

'There's no one who isn't like that.'

Barely anyone in the world followed a single conviction or had unchanging beliefs. They would be considered to have no soul—or be considered inflexible.

'I guess a child always looks cute in the eyes of a parent.'

He watched Si-Hun command the Sirius Corps with a bit of awkwardness in his voice.

Khadgar walked toward Kang-Woo, who was smiling like a proud father.

"Excuse me..."

"Ah, yes?"

"Like I had mentioned before, please collect the research materials stored in the branch as well."

He looked at Kang-Woo with an uneasy expression on his face, seeming really worried about those research materials.

No, Kang-Woo could tell that he placed more importance on those research materials than on rescuing his comrades.

Kang-Woo made a good-natured smile.

"Of course, I will let the corps know to secure them."

"H-Haha. Thank you very much." Khadgar bowed.

"What are those research materials about for you to care so much about them?"

"Pardon? Ah. Haha, i-it's nothing special! You could say that they're materials to help us on our quest for the truth."

"Oh?"

"W-We still haven't made much progress. After all, the truth is more complex and abstract than anything."

He smiled awkwardly while avoiding Kang-Woo's gaze.

Kang-Woo looked at Khadgar while laughing in disbelief.

'He's a terrible actor.'

Possibly because Khadgar had spent all his life locked away researching magic, forget acting, Khadgar couldn't even hold a proper conversation. He was so bad that Kang-Woo wondered if it would be more dangerous if he pretended to have been deceived.

'Materials for their quest for the truth, huh?'

He certainly was curious, but nothing more.

'It's not like I'll be able to understand it.'

It would be comparable to someone who was bad at math reading a book full of complex mathematical formulas.

Kang-Woo had little magic knowledge, so there was no way he would be able to understand the research materials by just looking at them.

'I wonder if Amon would be able to?'

There was no one who could match Amon's knowledge of magic in the Demon King army.

He thought about it for a while but shook his head.

'I don't need it.'

Kang-Woo already knew the truth, and Khadgar was wrong. The truth was never complex or abstract. The simplest explanation was usually the correct one.

[Master Kang-Woo, shall we proceed with the plan?]

He heard Lilith's voice. He didn't answer but nodded, which was more than enough of a response.

[May your will be done, my king.]

He heard a mischievous giggle. He ignored it and turned his head to face Khadgar.

"We will infiltrate the branch as soon as we finish cleaning out the area of monsters. We will be counting on you to stick with the main force and guide them to where the mages are being held, Khadgar."

"Oh, g-guide them? The path is not that complic—"

"We require your cooperation for a swift execution of the operation."

"..."

Khadgar bit his lip and nodded. It was obvious he didn't want to do it, but it didn't matter.

'He has no justification for a refusal.'

While making a deal, the most important thing was who was more desperate. Kang-Woo was the one who held all the power, so there was no need to be forceful. Just a simple nudge was enough for Khadgar to be unable to refuse.

"Let us begin."

Kang-Woo sent a short signal, and the operation commenced.

The three hundred Sirius Corps members cleared out the monsters around the Gate. Then, with Si-Hun leading the way, they followed Khadgar and entered the Gate.

Kang-Woo heard screams and the sound of swords clashing against each other. He also felt demonic energy and smelled a faint trace of blood. He used the Authority of the Beholder to look inside. He didn't take action because he didn't need to.

'I nurtured forces for a reason.'

It was so that he wouldn't need to go out of his way to take action in every single trivial battle.

'Rather, I'd just be a nuisance if I joined the fight.'

EXP was a very important growth factor for Players. Therefore, if he joined them, the amount of EXP they would gain would be reduced. No, they wouldn't be able to gain any.

"Right then..."

Kang-Woo looked around. He didn't intend to stay still just because he wouldn't join the battle. He had other things to do.

Kang-Woo slowly walked elsewhere.

* * *

The short battle between the Sirius Corps and the Demon Cult ended, and the Sirius Corps won by a landslide.

There had been a considerable amount of resistance, possibly because this factory was a very important facility for the Demon Cult. However, the Demon Cult had not been a match for the Sirius Corps—a unit made up of only the elites of Guardians.

The performance of Si-Hun, the commander of the Sirius Corps, stood out especially. He easily wiped out the demons that had been guarding the branch. Although the members of the Sirius Corps knew about Si-Hun's abilities, they couldn't help but open their mouths in surprise.

The demons of the Seventh and Eighth Hells had been killed so easily that one couldn't help but feel bad for them.

It wasn't just Si-Hun. Yeon-Joo, who was in charge of the center, took advantage of their solid vanguard and poured an outrageous amount of attacks on the enemies, and Seol-Ah at the rear supported the vanguard with powerful healing magic and buffs.

Thanks to their support, Si-Hun had been able to be more active on the battlefield and had grasped victory in a flash.

"Khadgar!!"

"You were safe?!"

The mages of the Magic Tower had been forced to make magic tools as if they were machines. The faces of about thirty of them brightened after they saw Khadgar. Their malnourished bodies were haggard, and their legs were chained by extremely large chains.

"Sniff! I-I knew this day would come!"

"We're finally free from those damn demons...!"

The mages, who had been saved with the help of the Sirius Corps, hugged each other and cried. That only lasted for a short while. Everyone's attention soon focused on Khadgar.

"We're glad you rescued us, but..."

"You haven't forgotten about that, right?"

"Hahaha," Khadgar laughed.

They were mages through and through; it was obvious what they were referring to.

He said, "Of course."

To mages, research materials were more important than their own lives.

A clue to the truth that they had discovered after searching for almost a thousand years... those research materials stolen by the Demon Cult contained that very clue.

"All of you, follow me," said Khadgar.

As the Sirius Corps freed the mages, they followed Khadgar.

Khadgar activated the tracking magic he had cast on the research materials.

"Huh...?"

The tracking magic was not activating. Khadgar looked around, flustered.

Kang-Woo walked toward him.

"Is something wrong, Khadgar?"

"Ah! K-Kang-Woo! Do you happen to know where the research materials that I had mentioned are...?"

"Ah..."

Kang-Woo sighed and took them somewhere. He led them to a room whose contents had been turned into a pile of ashes.

"Th-This is...!"

"Everything had already been burned by the time I got here."

"The research materials... were burned...?"

That was impossible. The Book of Hecate, a book with compiled knowledge regarding the truth, was protected by powerful magic. Forget fire, the book could even survive being submerged in lava. Burning the Book of Hecate was impossible unless they had the Authority of a demon.

Khadgar ran toward the pile of ashes and rummaged through it. There, he found the Book of Hecate, with more than half of it turned into ash.

"A-Aaahh."

He cried in despair. He flipped through the Book of Hecate with fumbling hands.

It was definitely the original. If it were a replica, he would've noticed. No, the Book of Hecate was not simply a record of words. It had been made with ever-changing cryptic codes and patterns to make it impossible to replicate. If it had been stolen, they could have found where it was through tracking magic, but that was now meaningless.

The Book of Hecate had been burned to ashes.

"Shit! Shit! What the fuck were you doing until this happened?!!" Khadgar angrily grabbed Kang-Woo's collar and shouted, his saliva spurring in all directions. "You useless sons of bitches! Do you have any idea how important the truth contained in this book was?!"

"Please calm down, Khadgar."

Kang-Woo grabbed Khadgar, who was deranged, by the shoulders. He bowed his head and said in a regretful voice, "I apologize for being unable to protect your important materials."

"Urgh..."

"I am ashamed to offer this as an alternative, but... how about I promise that Korea will support your research so that you can restore the materials?"

"Support our research?"

"Yes. Even if it is research material, isn't the most important thing the knowledge within your head? With enough support, replicating the book should be possible."

"... I guess that's true."

Khadgar's eyes shone.

As if he hadn't been cursing Kang-Woo just a moment ago, he started to use formal speech again.

"But the research costs an enormous amount of money..."

"You don't have to worry about that." Kang-Woo smiled. "As long as you provide us with some of your help, we will offer you all more than enough support."

"What kind of help?"

"Please supply us with magic items like the ones you had been making."

"Mmm."

"There is no need to worry. It will be completely different from what you went through here. The working hours will be on par with any corporation in Korea."

He could see the doubt on the mages' faces, but they did not need to think for long. The Magic Tower had been destroyed because of the Demon Cult, and the Book of Hecate had been burned to a crisp.

To be honest, Khadgar couldn't even demand compensation for damages since Guardians had rescued them, and in their current situation, it was hard for the mages to refuse their support.

"... I understand."

The thirty mages nodded.

Kang-Woo smiled.

"Then, let us go to Korea right away. Oh... but I guess the initial funding would be a problem."

"What do you mean...?"

"It would be hard for me to fund your research out of my own pocket. I will have to write up an official proposal once I check the value of the magic items that you make."

"Ahem! We don't only do enchantment magic. We can also produce useful magic scrolls and—"

"I am aware, but it will still take a long time for the head office to approve the funding. It would take half a year at the earliest and a year at the latest..."

"Th-That is too late!"

They had gone through painstaking effort to reach Hecate's knowledge; they couldn't waste any more time after they had finally been freed from the clutches of the demons.

"Mmm..." Kang-Woo expressed difficulty. "Oh! There is one way to get the initial funding."

"Ohhh?"

"What...?"

"A credit loan," Kang-Woo said with a smile.

Chapter 204 - Welcome to the Palace of Joseon, Strangers (2)

"A credit loan?"

Khadgar tilted his head and looked at the other mages. It seemed no one knew what that meant.

Most of the mages' knowledge was passed down from one generation to the next, so most of them had lived locked in the tower since they were kids and had spent their time studying and dedicating their lives to research.

Hence, there was no way they would know about things like credit loans.

The mages looked at each other, confused.

"What's that?"

"It's my first time hearing of it. What about you?"

"It's also my first time..."

There were thirty mages, but no one knew what a loan was.

Kang-Woo's eyes shone, and he smiled.

"A credit loan is lending you money based on your credibility."

"Credibility?"

"Lending money?"

"Yes," Kang-Woo said. "The details are quite complex... but that's the easiest possible explanation. They lend you money, and in exchange, they receive interest."

"Oh! Like a bank."

"Exactly." Kang-Woo nodded while smiling.

A mage said in a worried voice, "But would we be able to borrow money? Our credibility is..."

He trailed off at the last part of the sentence.

It was obvious that they didn't have a single penny to their name, nor did they have a house to return to or a job. There was no way someone in a situation similar to that of a homeless person would have the credibility to borrow money.

"Kuh."

"Damn Demon Cultists...!"

The mages clenched their fists in frustration. The Magic Tower had been selling magic items to members of high society since before the Day of Calamity.

After Players had appeared, magic had become quite common, but that hadn't always been the case. They had used to earn quite a lot of money just by selling simple artifacts with protection magic against bullets.

Thanks to that, they had earned quite a lot of money throughout the years and had become free from financial struggle. However, the Demon Cult had destroyed the Magic Tower, and all of the money they had amassed had been taken away.

"There is no need to worry."

Kang-Woo handed them documents as if he had been prepared for such a situation. It had even been translated into their language so that they could read it.

Third-party Finance, Garrosh & Cash was written at the top.

"Garrosh & Cash?"

"What does third-party finance mean?"

The mages tilted their heads in confusion.

Kang-Woo explained to them in a very kindly manner, "Third-party financing is similar to a circle in terms of magic. You can borrow more money with third-party financing compared to first-party and second-party."

"Ohhh."

"A third circle isn't that high..."

"Ah, I'm not saying it's completely the same as magic. In financing, the third party is the highest stage," Kang-Woo said.

"Oh, I see."

The mages nodded and then looked at each other. Although Guardians had freed them from slavery, they realized that they hadn't even properly thanked them. They bowed their heads in embarrassment.

Khadgar stepped forward.

"Thank you for... introducing us to a third-party financing group," Khadgar said as if he had been truly moved.

He had initially thought only of using Guardians to gain freedom and to continue to focus on studying the truth through the Book of Hecate. Not only that, but when he had discovered that the Book of Hecate had been burned, he had acted very rudely. Even if he was a mage who wasn't used to society, he knew that grabbing the person who had saved him by the collar was rude.

'And even after all that...'

He started to tear up.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that they were bankrupt, yet seeing Kang-Woo do his best to help them had moved him. Kang-Woo was helping them so they could resume their research and had helped them acquire the necessary funds to do it.

Khadgar was ashamed of having thought of Guardians as a group of pushovers.

"Thank you... so very much," Khadgar said while extending his hand.

"Not at all."

Kang-Woo shook Khadgar's hand with a smile.

It was a warm exchange between people.

A smile appeared on Khadgar's face.

Kang-Woo sighed and said, "I should be the one to apologize. If I had more authority, I would have been able to get you the money that you needed right away..."

"No, it's okay. I'm just glad that we can borrow the money."

"Do you know how interest works?"

"Mmm... We have to give back more money than the amount we borrowed, right?"

"That is correct. It's easiest to think of it as the payment for having borrowed money." Kang-Woo sighed. "Third-party Finance Garrosh & Cash allows you to borrow more money compared to the credibility you possess, but there is a problem."

"Problem?"

"Yes. The interest rate is high."

"Ah..."

There was a short silence.

Khadgar looked at the other mages and then opened his mouth.

"But we will get the research funds from Guardians later on, will we not?"

"Yes, as soon as the funding is approved."

"Then there shouldn't be a problem."

"But if you do not pay the interest back quickly, issues regarding your credibility will arise... Oh, how about we do this?" Kang-Woo smiled. "You just have to increase your magic item production hours a little. In Korea, we call this overtime."

"Mmm."

"I will take measures so that you will be able to make money from the magic items that you produce and sell before your research funding is approved."

"Wow."

"You would go so far for us..." they exclaimed in surprise.

The mages nodded in succession.

The magic items they made were expensive. Of course, the money they would make couldn't be compared to the money they had earned before Players appeared, but magic items were still valuable.

The mages were also confident in terms of their quality.

Some Players could create magic items, but they couldn't be compared to the ones made by the Magic Tower's mages, who have been studying magic since the day they were born.

"How much is that interest rate?"

"The monthly interest rate is 24%. Each month that passes, the interest is compounded."

"Compounded? What does that mean?" they asked in confusion.

Kang-Woo laughed and said, "It's not that important. You can just think of it as a type of interest."

"Hmm."

There was a short silence.

"Can you give us some time to think?"

"Of course."

Khadgar turned around. The thirty mages gathered for a group meeting.

"Over twenty percent each month... Isn't that too expensive?"

"But it's the best option we have, considering our current situation."

"Won't we be able to pay it back easily once we begin selling magic items?"

"I guess..."

They nodded.

Khadgar opened his mouth.

"How about we do this, then? We'll do that overtime thing to create magic items until the funding is approved."

"Ohh. I see..."

"But if we do that, we wouldn't have much time to recreate the Book of Hecate, would we?"

"That's true."

"Recreating the Book of Hecate takes priority above all else..."

The mages fell into thought.

One of them clapped.

"Oh! Come to think of it, that Oh Kang-Woo man said he would respect the normal working hours of Korean corporations, didn't he?"

"He did."

"But we don't know how long that is..."

"Huhuhu. I have heard about the working hours of corporations before."

"You have?"

They looked at the mage, surprised.

The mage who mentioned it crossed his arms and nodded.

"Although it was Germany and not Korea... they usually work six hours per day. If you add overtime, it will probably be about eight hours in total."

"Mmm... It's not quite enough time for our research."

"But we will have weekends."

"Ah, you're right. I hadn't thought of that."

The mages nodded.

It was worth doing it if they were given a work shift between six and eight hours per day and if their weekends were guaranteed.

"It'll at least be better than what we went through here."

"Haha, there's no way it will be comparable to being enslaved by demons."

The mages reached an agreement.

Khadgar stepped forward as their representative.

"We accept the proposal."

"You have made the right decision," Kang-Woo said. "Please sign these documents. I will borrow three hundred billion won in your name for the initial research funds as soon as we get to Korea."

"..."

Before signing, Khadgar extended his hand out toward Kang-Woo.

"Thank you. I will never forget about you."

"Hahaha." Kang-Woo laughed. "Let us do our best for world peace."

Kang-Woo shook his hand once again.

* * *

Time passed.

A factory in Korea dedicated to making magic items was set up, and the magic items made by the mages of the Magic Tower were swiftly supplied to Guardians.

The mages made everything from defensive artifacts to tons of armaments that had all sorts of enchantments. The Players had even been supplied with scrolls and potions to use for emergencies.

The high-quality magic items the mages created raised the overall strength of Guardians.

Thunk.

Khadgar collapsed in the middle of making a magic item.

"K-Khadgar!!"

"Are you okay?!"

The other mages quickly went to him. They were more haggard than when they were enslaved by demons.

Khadgar, who had collapsed from overwork, extended his trembling hand.

"I-I must make more... I-If not, the interest..."

"Khadgar!!!"

"Get a hold of yourself!!"

Cries were heard.

Click.

The door opened.

Kang-Woo walked in while illuminating the dark factory.

"How is everyone doing?"

"Y-You...!"

"You scumbag!!!"

They looked at Kang-Woo with anger and resentment.

Kang-Woo smiled brightly.

"What's wrong? You're the ones who signed the documents. I never forced you to do it."

"This is fraud!!"

"It's not fraud. I explained everything to you beforehand." He laughed out loud.

"Y-YOU BASTAAAAAARD!!!!"

Stomp. Khadgar, who was on the ground, sprang up and ran toward Kang-Woo like a madman.

Tap.

"Kurgh!"

He'd rushed forward without using magic, so the result was obvious. His neck was grabbed in a flash, causing him to groan in pain.

"Please relax, Khadgar. Have you still not had enough since your last attempt?"

"U-Urghh."

Fear appeared on Khadgar's face.

"The restoration of the Book of Hecate... the truth..." he mumbled in a weak voice. He felt like the truth was slipping away.

"You don't need to struggle so much to find the truth, Khadgar. The truth is always simpler than you think."

"..."

Kang-Woo turned to the mages inside the factory.

The inside of the factory resembled a dumping ground, and there was a pungent smell of rotten food.

"Everyone, a person must eat. Unless you're a demon, you need sustenance."

Kang-Woo grabbed a pack of instant ramen on the floor.

"To buy food, you need money."

The tips of his mouth went up.

"To earn money, you must work."

He patted Khadgar's shoulder.

"Hahaha. What do you think, Khadgar? The truth is always simpler than you think, don't you agree?"

"Y-You son of a..."

"If you want to eat at least one meal a day, please work." Kang-Woo kept talking as if he were having fun. "There is no food for those who don't work."

"You scammer...!"

"How could you force us to work for the entire day, do overtime, and even work on weekends?!"

"You said our working hours would be the same as any corporation!!"

Kang-Woo heard people cursing him.

"I didn't lie." He extended his arms. "Did I not promise you working hours on par with any corporation in Korea?"

"Yes! You definitely—"

"This is how much they work. Ah, of course, you have been working a little more than them since you have so much debt to pay, but it can't be helped, can it? After all, this is the path you have chosen."

There was silence.

"Oh, right. I forgot to tell you all something. Haha, it's funny that I'm saying this now after you've been in Korea for months now, but..."

He bowed and smiled.

"Welcome to Korea."

'Strangers, I welcome you to the palace of Korea.'

Chapter 205 - Lucifer's Child (1)

Oh Kang-Woo took a deep breath. His lungs filled with air, and demonic energy spread through his body. He slowly closed his eyes and concentrated.

'Authority of Blaze.'

He activated the Authority and awakened Mammon's soul, which he had eaten deep within the Ten Thousand Demon Core. A blazing energy began to spread through the demonic energy that had been melted into his blood.

"..."

He felt pain as if lava, not blood, was circulating through him. Powerful flames wrapped around him, and a yellow light surrounded him. He slowly raised his right hand.

He focused his mind on the Key of the Demonic Sea, the ring on his right middle finger. The black ring burned yellow.

Sizzle!

The scent of burning skin, along with faint smoke, tickled his nose.

He ignored it.

Black blood poured from where his skin was melting.

He ignored it.

'Focus.'

He closed his eyes and gathered his mind.

The Authority of Blaze was running amok in his body. Kang-Woo tried to suppress, trample, and control the uncontrollable flames. Mammon's soul thrashed around as if it were screaming, seemingly feeling pain.

Kang-Woo paid the soul no mind; he had no leeway to heed it.

He ignored the vengeful soul's screams, and another stream of demonic energy flowed out of the Ten Thousand Demon Core.

'Authority of Blades.'

TSSSSS!!

Rumble!!

The ground he was standing on melted. It turned swamp-like, and he slowly sank into the earth.

Sweat dripped down his forehead. An immeasurable pain spread through his body. He wanted to throw up, and his consciousness was starting to blur. He wanted to let it go. He felt a chill from the fear that his body could melt down entirely, but...

Tap.

He took a step forward and stretched out his right hand in front of him. The yellow flames surrounding him began to pour down his arm and gather in his palms. He stuffed the heat into his ring.

"Kurgh."

He grunted in pain. He couldn't feel his arm. No, the only thing he could feel was pain.

The drops of sweat evaporated.

Haaa, haaa.

He panted heavily and knelt down on one knee. His heart was searing hot. He couldn't think of anything; his consciousness was hazy.

He moved his right hand, which he had extended forward. From the index finger to the middle finger and to the ring finger, little by little, he focused on moving them. Even just a millimeter was fine.

He clenched the flame that had gathered in his hand.

TSSSS!!!

The floor split, and lava rose. A valley of death that made Hell seem cute spread from under his feet.

He merged the flame made with a prince's Authority with the Authority of Blades. Combining a prince's Authority with a different regular Authority... it had not been done by any demon, prince of Hell, or even god.

A miracle took shape.

He held a sword burning with yellow flames.

There was one last thing to do...

He had to give a name to the materialized miracle.

He opened his mouth, having already thought of a name.

"Inferno."

Riiing.

[You have learned the skill 'Inferno.']

[Techniques registered as skills can be used more easily and precisely.]

[You have made a great achievement that no one has ever achieved!]

[You have obtained a clue regarding the advanced quest of 'Road to Becoming a Demon God,' ???.]

'The hell is this?'

A message window appeared in front of him. He frowned while reading it.

'Road to Becoming a Demon God... has an advanced quest...?'

Road to Becoming a Demon God was likely referring to the stages like the Ultimate Demonic Body and the Demonic Soul.

'I haven't even completed them yet.'

He still hadn't achieved the Demonic Soul.

No, he wasn't even sure if 'Demonic Soul' was the final step to becoming a Demon God, but he had gotten an advanced quest for it out of nowhere.

'Is this Bleach?'

Why was there so much foreshadowing?

"Haaa."

He sighed.

He tried to click on the advanced quest that had '???' written.

"If it's as I expect..."

Riiing.

[You are not authorized to view the quest '???.']

"I fucking knew it."

He couldn't help but frown as he recalled a vow he'd made long before.

"I'm gonna twist the head of whoever made this damn thing into a question mark."

Even a crossword puzzle gave hints, but this had no hints at all.

'Maybe the son of a bitch who made this doesn't know yet either.'

Kang-Woo couldn't help but think that the message window had just been thrown at him without much thought from whoever was managing it.

"Tsk."

He clicked his tongue and turned away from the massively unfriendly message window. The advanced quest full of question marks, which looked like some failed puzzle book, was not important right now.

"Let's see..."

He raised Inferno. Although he'd moved it a little, Inferno's blade was not able to maintain proper form. It was mushy, and portions of it were evaporating.

'It's not perfect yet.'

Although it had been registered as a skill, he'd fused a skill he couldn't control well yet, so the level of perfection was disastrous.

"But still."

He jumped while clenching Inferno. He swung the sword toward the sky.

* * *

[This is the 8 o'clock news. Outbursts of lava similar to a volcanic eruption have been detected along with a sudden earthquake in the Grand Canyon of Arizona, USA. Scientists say that this is by no means a natural phenomenon, and they claim that it had to have been influenced by magic. Guardians members have been sent to investigate the incident, and an evacuation order has fallen on the entire state of Arizona. We will now get in touch with the reporter Lee Han-Seok present on the scene. Reporter Lee Han-Seok?]

[Yes! I am currently in the Grand Canyon, the scene of the incident. There is lava flowing through the canyon, and the entire area is filled with immense heat!]

[What is the scope of the abnormality?]

[The lava has currently spread out over a three hundred-meter perimeter! The heat is immense! I will check for myself how severe the heat is!]

The reporter on the screen began walking toward the lava flowing through the canyon.

[AAARRRGGGHHH!]

A heartrending scream was heard.

Beep.

The TV was turned off.

There was silence.

"Hm. The situation has blown up quite a lot, Master Kang-Woo."

"..."

Lilith walked toward Kang-Woo, who was lying on the bed with his limbs sprawled out.

"Are you able to move?"

"... No."

He shook his head.

After using Inferno, Kang-Woo had entered a state of exhaustion similar to when he'd opened a Door of the Ten Thousand Demon Core, and he had not been able to get out of bed.

Lilith sat on the bed.

"I guess you shouldn't be using that Authority recklessly."

"Ngh. I honestly didn't expect this much."

He didn't think its destructive power would be that huge and that he'd suffer such massive aftereffects. He felt like a huge piece of iron was weighing him down.

"Is everything okay in Guardians?"

"Yes. Magic items are being consistently provided, and the average level of Players has been increasing, too."

He nodded.

The magic items were being made by the mages of the Magic Tower after he'd made a fair contract with them. To get used to the powers that came with the new items, the Guardians members had been retaking South America from monsters while leveling up.

Thanks to the equipment provided and practical experience gained through monster hunting, Guardians was getting stronger each day.

"I guess I won't need to worry about that aspect, then."

Kang-Woo lay back down as if relieved.

"How's the battle between Lucifer's forces and the Demon Cult going?"

The conflict between them was more important than the growth of Guardians. He needed them to damage each other as much as possible so he could play both ends against the middle.

"They have not engaged in an all-out war yet."

"Hm."

He nodded.

'I wonder which side has the advantage.'

The Demon Cult and Lucifer's forces...

Honestly, he had no idea who would have the advantage.

'Lucifer's forces should have the overwhelming advantage at the moment.'

Leaving everything aside, Lucifer's forces had Lucifer, the third-strongest prince of Hell. Just his presence should be enough to tip the scales in his favor.

'But I can't be sure since there really isn't much I know about the Demon Cult.'

He didn't think that Mammon was their leader. There was, for sure, someone stronger than him leading the Demon Cult.

'I wonder who it is.'

There was no way for him to know. Kang-Woo shook his head after some time because recklessly guessing things that he knew nothing about would only bring about danger.

He interrupted his imagination and restricted his thoughts. The moment that he thought in favor of something, all other possibilities would be eliminated from his thoughts.

A guess turned into a prediction, and a prediction soon became a certainty.

"Has Lucifer come to Earth?" Kang-Woo asked.

That was the most important thing. He had to devour another prince of Hell to fulfill the remaining condition for the Demonic Soul. The conflict between Lucifer's forces and the Demon Cult was good and all, but it had absolutely no meaning if Lucifer himself didn't appear.

'There's not much point in devouring anything else now.'

He had grown to the point where he could no longer gain EXP from mobs. Anything other than a prince of Hell was meaningless.

"No," Lilith replied. "We have not found any trace of him, so he likely has not come yet."

"Ngh."

He frowned.

'He still hasn't shown himself even after all this?'

Kang-Woo wondered if he had not managed to goad Lucifer enough. Lucifer's forces had only made small moves for the past few months, so it was clear that they hadn't displayed all of their strength.

'He's not one to stand for such humiliation, though.'

Lucifer, Satan, and Bael... he'd fought against them for the longest.

Lucifer was most definitely not one to stand still in such situations.

'In that case...'

It probably meant that he had no leeway to take action himself.

'How troublesome.'

He needed to goad Lucifer more and make him so mad that he charged at Satan like a madman without caring about the forces of the celestial realm.

'The problem is how.'

Kang-Woo couldn't come up with any ideas.

"Shit."

It had been half a year since both sides had started feeling each other out. He felt frustrated as he watched them skirt around each other.

"Oh right, Master Kang-Woo."

"Hm?"

"Lucifer hasn't come, but a demon claiming to be Lucifer's son has."

"Son... you say?"

"Yes. I had checked the footage of the Demon Cult branch that had crumbled, and there was a demon claiming to be Lucifer's son fighting against them."

"..."

Kang-Woo's eyes shone.

'Lucifer's son?'

It was something he couldn't have imagined.

'A prince of Hell made a child?'

It was completely unprecedented. Although the princes of Hell had existed in the Nine Hells for hundreds of thousands of years, something like that had never happened before.

'I mean, Leviathan had parents.'

Leviathan was the son of the king of demonic beasts, Behemoth.

Still, Kang-Woo had never heard of a prince of Hell having a child.

"..."

There was a short silence. The tips of Kang-Woo's mouth started to go up.

"... Master Kang-Woo?"

"Lilith." He turned his head. "Would demons also care for their children?"

Kang-Woo's eyes started to shine with madness. He licked his lips as if he'd thought of something fun. There was strong bloodlust emanating from him, and viscous demonic energy was spreading slowly across the floor like tar.

Madness, bloodlust, and malice intermingled.

"... I'm sorry?" Lilith slightly flinched. She looked at Kang-Woo and trembled as she slightly opened her mouth and said, "Y-you want to have a child with me?"

"What?"

"H-Hohoho. I-I'm a bit flustered. To think you would be so assertive..."

"No, what the hell are you talking about?"

"I-I have also been thinking about it, but... i-it's a bit sudden, so I'm a bit embarrassed."

"Uhm, excuse me?"

Lilith shook her head, her palms covering her cheeks. Her face had become red, and her black hair was turning into green tentacles.

Slap, slap.

The tentacles shyly hit Kang-Woo.

'No.'

He lowered his head while looking at Lilith, who had become immersed in her fantasies. He covered his face with both hands.

'I was trying to say something cool while setting a nice mood...'

What he had said was a sick-ass line with a hint of sinister energy, a chilling line an anti-hero would say...

'Why are you doing this to me? Please, just let me be a protagonist.'

Chapter 206 - Lucifer's Child (2)

"Haaa."

Oh Kang-Woo sighed.

"That's not what I'm talking about, so calm down."

"Ah..."

Lilith expressed disappointment. She lowered her head while sulking.

Kang-Woo groaned and gave her a light hug.

"You know this isn't the time to think about things like that," he said in a gentle voice.

It wasn't because he was trying to console her.

'Not having Lilith would be troubling.'

Back in the demon king army and now in Guardians, she was a very important member.

Her talent in information gathering and forging was so high that Kang-Woo honestly wondered if she had been blessed by a godly being in that aspect. The fact that she had been able to distribute the Book of Hell in just a month of being in the Demon Cult was proof of her abilities.

'If I didn't have Lilith...'

He wouldn't have known how the battle between the Demon Cult and Lucifer's forces was going or the fact that Lucifer's son had come to Earth. Without her, it would be as if he'd lost his eyes and ears.

'I cannot let her be depressed.'

Whatever happened, Lilith would move for his sake. He wasn't worried about her betraying him, but it was a matter of efficiency. The difference in one's efficiency between when there was and wasn't a reward was massive.

Seeing how lazy reserve soldiers pretty much turned into special forces when early discharge was on the line was proof that rewards worked to improve motivation.

"My king..."

"Let's take time to think about it seriously once this is all over."

"Aahh, my king..."

Lilith's body trembled as her eyes teared up. Tears flowed down her cheeks.

Kang-Woo couldn't help but feel guilty after seeing her tremble.

'I didn't expect her to cry.'

As the one who'd thrown the bait, he couldn't help but feel guilty because she reacted so strongly.

Lilith wiped her tears and smiled brightly. She clenched her fists.

"Fufu. Okay. If that is what you wish, then I will do my best to resist, Master Kang-Woo."

He heard her excited voice, and his guilt grew even more.

Avoiding her gaze, Kang-Woo asked, "So, what do you think?"

"About whether demons also care for their children?"

"Yeah."

Did demons also have maternal and paternal instincts?

It was a hard topic.

'After all, demons don't need to reproduce.'

They could do it, but they didn't need to. The cases of demons giving birth to children through sexual intercourse were extremely rare. Demons weren't in the category of ordinary biological creatures.

They were born in the darkness of the Nine Hells, from a Rift that no one knew the nature of. Demons were just born randomly out of thin air along with a black wave in space.

No one knew what the nature of the darkness was. It could be demonic energy, a manifestation of a deity, or just something created by the Nine Hells itself. Not even the princes of Hell had any idea.

There were only three known facts about the Rift: One, the demons born from the Rift were born as adults. Two, a great minority of the demons born from it possessed a special power called an Authority, but that didn't mean that all demons with an Authority were strong.

'Just take Sabnak for example.'

Although Sabnak had the Authority of Blades, he was mere small fry in the First Hell.

'And third...'

The strength of the demons born from the Rift was decided from the moment they were born. There were some exceptions, but the strength and limits of most demons were decided from the moment they were born. That meant that there were almost no cases of a demon from the First Hell becoming strong enough to enter the Ninth Hell.

It was similar to children being born wealthy.

Even the princes of Hell had been born to become 'princes of Hell.' Among the seven princes of Hell, there was only one who hadn't been one since the beginning.

'Bael.'

Kang-Woo and Bael had many things in common.

Through numerous years, Bael had reached the Ninth Hell from the First Hell and had managed to kill Beelzebub, one of the original princes of Hell, and had taken his place.

Except for him, all the other princes of Hell had been born with the destiny of becoming one.

'Leviathan makes it a bit iffy.'

Leviathan hadn't been born from a Rift. Considering that his father was Behemoth, the king of demonic beasts, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that he was also born with that destiny.

'Alright, enough with the boring exposition.'

Back to the main topic.

"Hmm, I am not too sure about that either, but I do know for a fact that if we were to have a child, I would love them with my entire being." Lilith gave a warm smile while touching her stomach.

Kang-Woo's eyes narrowed.

'I guess they at least have a concept of love for one's flesh and blood.'

The question was whether Lucifer was also the same.

Maternal or paternal instincts weren't absolute, even for humans. There were parents willing to risk their lives for their children, but on the other hand, there were some who killed their children with their own hands.

Love for one's own flesh and blood was relative.

'It's worth testing out.'

The tips of his mouth went up.

"Lilith, investigate the location of the demon claiming to be Lucifer's son."

"My king, are you..."

"You said you would love our child with your entire being, right?"

He laughed out loud. He was ecstatic, like some child who couldn't sleep because he was too excited for their trip the following day.

"Let's see if that's also the case for Lucifer."

"..."

* * *

Boom!

Crack!

"Aaarrggghhh!"

"S-Stop him!"

Screams rang out.

The passageway became full of explosions and the smell of blood.

A demon was walking through the passage.

"... How boring."

He narrowed his eyes while looking around as if he didn't like what he saw. He covered his mouth and yawned.

The name of the demon who'd destroyed everything around him was Lucis. He had six black wings, dark skin, and silver hair that reached his waist. Based on his face alone, he did not look that different from a human. Unlike other demons, he wasn't that big. His skin wasn't grotesque, nor was his body covered in muscles. He didn't even have tentacles.

One would think at first glance that he was someone in a very high-quality cosplay costume.

"Aaaahhh!"

"R-Run!"

The Demon Cultists turned pale as if they'd seen a monster. They were more fearful of Lucis than the other monster-like demons, and it wasn't hard to see why.

"Hmph, small fry."

Lucis raised his hand, and darkness gathered around it. It was the power of his father, Lucifer, the Prince of Pride. Lucis had inherited a portion of his father's power.

Crack!!

He spread his hands, shooting a black sphere forward. Like a black hole, the sphere absorbed everything in its surroundings, and the darkness sucked in the cultists trying to escape.

Tsk.

He clicked his tongue as he watched them die without offering much resistance.

"Rakkisgard, have you found Satan's location?" he asked while turning his head.

The giant demon kneeling in front of him shook his head and hurriedly answered, [My apologies. I captured and interrogated the human who was the branch manager, but... I had not been able to get Satan's location.]

"Again?"

Frowning aggressively, Lucis stepped on Rakkisgard's head, which was against the floor.

BOOM!

"Useless piece of shit. How many more chances must I give you?"

Lucis struck Rakkisgard aggressively in succession. Although Rakkisgard was bleeding, he didn't dodge Lucis's attacks.

"Shit."

Lucis cursed in displeasure after his kicking spree.

Rakkisgard slowly opened his mouth.

[We are taking too much time, Lord Lucis.]

"..."

[If Lord Lucifer were to find out that you are here...]

"Shut up." Lucis glared sharply. "I'm not going back until I have Satan's head."

Lucis clenched his fists, recalling his father, Lucifer.

'If I take Satan's head...'

He would be able to get his father's acknowledgement.

"How is the current situation in Aernor?"

[... Not good. Raphael's forces are continuing to apply pressure to Lord Lucifer.]

"..."

There was silence.

Lucis turned around.

"Onto the next location."

[Lord Lucis...]

"Rakkisgard." Lucis turned his head, his waist-long silver hair shining mysteriously. "Do not make me repeat myself."

[... Yes, my lord.]

Rakkisgard got up.

As he stood up, his five-meter-tall body made the ceiling crumble.

"Satan..."

A strong bloodlust appeared in Lucis's eyes.

'Arrogant prick.'

From what he had heard, Satan used to rank higher than Lucifer as a prince of Hell in the demon realm. Satan's crazed actions were likely due to that past memory.

'To think he'd dare to declare war on us.'

Lucis couldn't remain still at such provocation. Lucifer had also been furious after hearing the news. The only reason why he hadn't taken action despite that was because of Raphael's forces.

'If Father can't make a move...'

Lucis would protect his father's honor for him. He had heard that Satan had gotten hold of a power known as the Demonic Sea, but he wasn't worried.

'I'm the son of Evil God Lucifer.'

They were not in the demon realm like in the past.

Lucis walked with unwavering eyes.

Crack!

"Gaaaahhhh!"

"Arrgghh! S-Spare m—!"

As they walked down the passageway, he watched his subordinates exterminate the cultists.

"Hmph," he snorted.

Lucis could tell from the sorry state of the Demon Cultists that he didn't need to worry about Satan.

'With his subordinates being so weak, there's no need to even think about the power of their leader.'

He didn't know about what had happened in the demon realm.

He'd been born after Lucifer had gone to the continent of Aernor. He was born when Lucifer, one of the princes of the Nine Hells, had made love to a human woman.

Hence, he had no idea who Satan was or how strong he was. He thought he didn't need to know.

'No matter how strong he is...'

He wouldn't be able to defeat his father.

Lucis looked at his hands, which were closer to a human's than a demon's.

'I have to prove it.'

He had to prove his strength and his value. If not, he wouldn't be acknowledged as a demon.

Lucis began walking again.

Just then...

[I had high hopes after hearing that you were Lucifer's son, but all I see is a snot-nosed brat.]

"Kuh!"

Lucis quickly turned around. Darkness had appeared where there definitely hadn't been anything before. He saw a red demon mask floating in a shroud of darkness.

"Who are y—"

[I heard you have been looking for me.]

Snicker.

A chilling laugh leaked out from behind the mask.

"Y-You're..."

[Correct.]

The shroud of darkness expanded.

[I am Satan.]

In other words, a cheat code.

Chapter 207 - Kang-Woo, Whose Body Was Honest Despite Saying No

"Sa... tan...?"

Lucis's eyes widened in shock.

He had been searching for Satan ever since he came to Earth in secret, and that very prince of the demonic realm was now right in front of him.

"H-Haha."

The tips of Lucis's mouth went up.

Satan had finally come out of his cave after having been completely missing since his declaration of war.

Lucis couldn't help but laugh in disbelief while exuding an intense bloodlust. He raised his hand, and a pitch-black darkness gathered around it.

"So, you finally crawled out of wherever you were hiding."

[Oh?]

The eyes peering from behind the red mask gleamed. The mask tilted as if to show Satan was entertained.

[You don't seem to be afraid.]

"Is there a reason to be?"

[What a funny question.]

Satan's chilling laughter flowed out from behind the mask.

A reason to be afraid...? Satan was a prince of Hell, one of the strongest in the vast Nine Hells. There wasn't a reason not to fear him.

The value of his title as a prince of Hell was no longer as prestigious as before the princes had been defeated by the demon king, but the princes of Hell still couldn't be compared to the average demon.

[Do you not know who I am, brat?]

"I do. I know that you used to be a prince of the demon realm and that you now lead the group known as the Demon Cult in this world."

[So, you don't.]

"What?"

[If you truly knew about the princes of Hell, you would not be acting this way before me. Has Lucifer not educated you?]

"Hah, how dare a coward who hid like a little rat after declaring war mention my father's name?!"

[A little rat... Does that not also apply to Lucifer?]

The eyes behind the mask narrowed. An intense bloodlust surged from Satan.

[Why has a brat like you come instead of him?]

"My father isn't needed to kill the likes of you."

[What a bold brat you are.]

The mask tilted.

[No, maybe you are just stupid.]

"...Let's see how long you can keep that leisurely attitude for."

Lucis lowered his body. The darkness wrapping his hand warped, and powerful demonic energy poured out of it.

He looked at Satan calmly.

'He's no big deal,' Lucis thought.

He could only feel a shallow presence and pressure from Satan. It was completely different from when he was with his father. Lucis felt like his guess of Satan being all talk and no bite had been right.

'I can do this.'

Such a thought crossed his mind.

Lucis gulped. Then he lowered his posture and raised his hand. He tensed his muscles, focusing on his legs in preparation to shoot forward.

At that moment...

[Now that I look at you, you do not look like a demon.]

"..."

Flinch. Lucis trembled.

Comments about how he didn't seem like a demon, that he was different from a demon, and that they couldn't believe he was Lucifer's son... Lucis had heard them so many times that he was utterly sick of hearing them.

"Shut up," Lucis growled while glaring at Satan.

Lucis looked more like a human than a demon. It was the result of being half human and half demon.

"That's not a demon."

"He's nothing but a half-blood."

"Why did Lord Lucifer even have a child with a human?"

"Just look at him. Why does he look so ugly and weak?"

He was half demon and half human, but he'd been raised along with demons since the day he was born. He'd learned their values, beliefs, thoughts... and what he looked like to them. By human standards, it was as if a human had a baby with an insect; it was absolutely disgusting.

Lucis cursed himself, his mother, and everyone who disrespected and scorned him. He needed to prove to them that he was the son of the Evil God—that he had Lucifer's blood running through his veins.

He'd come here to prove that.

'I will kill Satan.'

Lucis would kill the prince of Hell, who was the object of fear for all demons, with his own hands. There was no better way to prove himself than that.

[...I see. A half-breed of demon and human,] Satan remarked in genuine surprise.

Lucis frowned aggressively. "You say that, but you lost against a human, did you not?"

[...]

"I heard it from Father. The demon king, who defeated all seven princes of the demon realm, used to be a human."

Satan remained silent.

Lucis continued coldly, "In the end, all the princes are nothing but losers who lost to a mere human. Are they not?"

[You sure love talking shit about your dad. Lucifer would cry blood if he heard that, bro.]

"What?"

[Ah, ahem,] Satan coughed awkwardly. Then he returned to his normal manner of speech and continued quietly, [Your father lost against the demon king too.]

"That's all in the past. He won't lose now," Lucis stated confidently.

[What a fucking hypocrite. You shameless piece of—ah. Fuuu. Fuuu.]

"..." Lucis frowned. "You're insane."

[No prince is sane,] Satan said while laughing confidently.

Lucis's gaze sharpened. There was no point in talking anymore.

"Enough talk. You talk too much for a prince."

[Oh?]

"If you're really a prince..."

Rumble.

A huge amount of demonic energy gathered around Lucis's hand. Dozens of black spheres rose around him.

"Prove it with your strength."

[Ha... Hahahahahahaha!!!] Satan laughed loudly. [Very well. If you desire it so badly, then I will show you...]

Demonic energy spread out like a black curtain, and the red demon mask tilted.

[...Who I am.]

BOOM!

The ground shook.

Satan opened his arms wide.

[Come. Prove your worth. Prove that you deserve to exist.]

Lucis frowned. "I'm not the one that has to prove anything."

[You talk too much. Bring it.]

"You will be the one who needs to prove yourself, Satan."

[I get it, so bring it.]

Lucis raised his arms, and the black spheres began rotating.

"Rakkisgard! Open your eyes and take a good look!"

[Dude, stop talking and—]

"Right here and now, I, Lucis, will show you!!!"

[Hello?]

"I will show you whether the one you serve is nothing but a worthless half-blood or the demon who will succeed Evil God Lucifer!"

[Can you hear me?]

"See it! Feel it! Realize it!"

[Stop. I can't keep this act up much longer.]

BOOM!

Lucis stomped on the ground.

Crack. The ground was split.

His waist-long silver hair fluttered as intense energy poured out of him.

Lucis said coldly, "Through this battle, I will prove—"

[Fuck, man. Just come at me already. You're making me fucking cringe. It's hard for me to set the mood, you know? Why are you making me work so hard, dipshit?]

"..."

[Do you have any idea how much I cringe every time I do this? Do you? Huh? I'm so ashamed that I kick the bed whenever I think of it while sleeping.]

"What do you—"

[This is that thing, isn't it? You were discriminated against because you were born a half-blood, right? Are you in fucking puberty? What the fuck do you keep trying to prove? Why are you doing this to me? You gotta tone it down so that I have something to work with to set the mood, man.]

Satan was twisting his body as if he were in pain.

Lucis frowned after seeing Satan with a totally different attitude. It was like he had a split personality.

"I guess I won't be getting through to you with words."

[Yeah, so let's just please fight...]

"No need to worry."

Lucis exuded bloodlust.

"Even if you beg for your life, nothing will change."

He stomped on the ground and extended his hand. The black spheres spun fiercely while flying toward Satan.

Satan's eyes lit up.

[Fucking finally,] he said in a moved voice.

Satan spread the shroud of darkness covering his body and blocked the black spheres.

"Haap!"

Lucis spread out both arms, and six black wings fluttered. Hundreds of feathers shot out, and the demonic energy feathers poured down like rain.

Crack.

"Wha—?!"

Satan vanished as if he had gone up in smoke. Then, he reappeared right in front of Lucis in the blink of an eye. He grabbed Lucis's face and threw him like a baseball.

Tumble—!!

Dust rose from the ground as Lucis was sent flying.

"Cough!"

He quickly got back up.

"Huh?"

Lucis's eyes filled with confusion, as when he got up, Satan was already in front of him.

Bash!

Satan dropkicked Lucis's face, and black blood spurted from his nose.

"W-Wait," Lucis said, raising his hand to pause the fight.

He didn't understand what was going on.

He was fighting against a prince of Hell, but he was still Lucifer's son. Despite that, why was there such an overwhelming difference in power between him and Satan?

[Fucking hell, that hits the spot,] Satan said, feeling refreshed.

"God... dammit!!"

Lucis's expression crumpled in anger. His silver hair fluttered, and he squeezed out all the demonic energy he could muster.

"Raaaahhhhh!!" Lucis roared.

Giant spheres that were around ten meters in diameter appeared on his hands. The giant balls of demonic energy sucked in everything around them.

"Die!!" he shouted and launched his attack at Satan.

However...

Slash.

A black light cut the spheres, splitting them in two all too easily.

The red mask appeared from behind the dispersing demonic energy. Satan pressed Lucis's head down.

"Kurgh!"

Lucis collapsed with his head stuck to the ground. Satan then stepped on his neck.

[Lord Lucis!!]

The demon Rakkisgard came running.

Nevertheless, before he could charge toward Satan, a giant demon appeared next to him and pushed him down.

[Kurgh!]

[How dare you interfere in a sacred battle?] Balrog, the demon who had pushed Rakkisgard down, questioned with a frown.

A black-haired beauty walked out from behind him and rummaged through Rakkisgard's pockets.

"Ah, Master Ka—Lord Satan, here is what you've been looking for," she said.

She handed Satan a black crystal orb.

Kang-Woo—no, Satan frowned aggressively while looking at the crystal orb.

[Fuck's sake...]

He sighed and raised the crystal orb the black-haired beauty had given him.

[Fuuu,] he took a deep breath to pull himself together.

[I don't want to do this anymore...] he mumbled in a tearful voice but ultimately shook his head.

He had no other choice.

'Haaa, fuck.'

His head hurt.

His 20/20 hindsight was burning his eyes. It was as if a hairy old man succumbed to money and advertised a game while putting a -nyan at the end of each sentence.

The shame was destroying him.

'Life is so damn hard.'

How long did he need to live like that?

Whoom.

Light flowed out of the black crystal orb. He saw the face of a demon through the round mirror-like orb.

The eyes of the demon looking at him through the crystal orb widened.

[You...]

"Ahem," he cleared his throat.

'First, get into character.'

Satan spoke in a chilling voice.

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

'Alright. Not bad at all.'

Only the red mask was visible amid the shroud of darkness.

[I am Satan.]

'Shiiiiieet! This is it! This is a prince of Hell! This is Satan!'

His mouth moved naturally despite the shame he was feeling.

Chapter 208 - The Reason Satan Does Not Stop

- What in the...

Lucifer appeared visibly bewildered in the crystal orb. He could see Satan, who wore a red demon mask, stepping on Lucis.

- What did you do, Satan? Why is Lucis there?

Lucifer spoke in a voice filled with bloodlust while narrowing his eyes.

Satan stepped on Lucis even harder.

"Kurgh!" Lucis grunted pitifully.

He flapped like a fish out of water.

[Who knows? How about you ask your son yourself?] Satan said calmly.

Lucifer's expression hardened.

He knew Satan had not crossed over to the continent of Aernor and kidnapped Lucis. If something like that had happened, there was no way Lucifer wouldn't have noticed it.

In that case, there was only one other possibility.

- Rakkisgard.

[I-I apologize, Lord Lucifer!] Rakkisgard, who had been subdued by Balrog, answered apologetically and lowered his head.

It was easy for Lucifer to guess what had happened just from his short reaction.

Lucis had gone to Earth on his own, fought Satan, and lost. His defeat had already been decided the moment that he confronted Satan.

Lucis did not know, but Lucifer knew the league that the princes of Hell were in. He knew that there was no way his son would be a match for them.

Lucifer frowned.

- Pathetic boy.

"F-Father..."

Lucis trembled in shock and bit his lip.

He felt a complex mixture of fear, regret, and rage.

[Right, then,] Satan continued talking in a leisurely manner. His eyes behind the mask were shining with a mad look. [I am sure you are aware of why I left this brat alive, are you not?]

He had captured the enemy commander's son. There probably wasn't anyone dumb enough to not understand why.

- Kill him, Lucifer replied in a cold voice.

[Oh...?]

- I have no intention of taking care of a son who acted without knowing his place. Kill him.

There wasn't a hint of compassion in Lucifer's dry voice.

His cold eyes focused on Lucis.

- This must be the limit of a half-blood.

"Kuh..."

Lucis bit his lip, and tears flowed down his eyes. He trembled. He couldn't breathe properly.

The term 'half-blood' stimulated him like a curse eating away at his life.

Throughout his life, countless demons had called him that behind his back and even right to his face. The word had been stuck to him his entire life, but this was the first time his own father had called him that.

'It hurts,' Lucis thought.

His chest was hurting as if his heart was being cut out. His vision was becoming hazy.

Right then, he heard a spooky laugh.

[Lucifer.]

- ...

[Is he not your son regardless?]

- That means nothing.

Lucifer's eyes were cold as he continued dryly, - Since when has flesh and blood been important to demons?

[Hm.]

- Enough of this silly farce, Satan. Do you truly expect affection for flesh and blood from demons who have no need for reproduction?

It was an obvious question. Demons didn't need to reproduce, so it would be ironic if they felt affection toward their flesh and blood.

[Then...] Satan looked at Lucifer. [Why did you have a child?]

- ...

Lucifer remained silent.

His words were contradictory. If his son wasn't important to him and was truly meaningless, he wouldn't have had Lucis.

If it had simply been an accident, he would have been more than capable of erasing the child several times over during the pregnancy. It would be too hopeful to think that a prince of Hell would feel remorseful about killing a fetus.

- ...It was an accident.

[An accident, was it?]

Satan laughed.

[Lucifer.]

Lucifer didn't answer.

While laughing, Satan raised his hand and swung down a black blade at Lucis's head. He stared at Lucifer's face through the orb as he did it.

- Sto—!

Lucifer frowned, unable to maintain his composure. He urgently called for Satan to stop, but he cut himself off midway and bit his lip when he realized what he'd done.

Satan held his stomach and burst into laughter.

[Hahahahahaha!!!]

Did demons feel affection toward their flesh and blood? The result of his low-probability gamble had already been decided the moment the call with Lucifer had been connected.

If Lucifer truly thought of Lucis as worthless, he would've cut the call. No, he wouldn't have accepted the call in the first place, since he'd had no need to do so.

From the moment Lucifer accepted the call and started to give excuses, the result had already been decided.

[You have become rather cute. This must be what they call paternal affection.]

- ...

"F-Father..." Lucis said in a tearful voice and lowered his head. "I'm... sorry."

- Be quiet, Lucifer replied coldly.

He looked at Lucis with a troubled expression. He was likely feeling the same way a father would feel after his son had caused trouble and had become a death row prisoner.

- What do you want?

In the end, they were back to square one. Lucifer acknowledged the fact that Satan had the advantage.

Satan continued leisurely, [You already know what I want, do you not?]

- ...War.

[Yes, Lucifer. Let us have a war full of blood, flesh, destruction, and madness—a war that can fill our stomachs with the flesh of our enemies.]

- You must have become even crazier after going to Earth, Lucifer commented exasperatedly.

The Satan in Lucifer's memories was not this crazy. He could at least be reasoned with and was capable of making reasonable judgments.

- Do you know what situation we demons are currently in? Lucifer questioned angrily. - Aernor, Huan, and even the world you are living on, Earth...

Satan hadn't heard of one of the three worlds that were mentioned.

- The forces of the celestial realm are trying to eradicate demons from every single world connected to the Nine Hells, Lucifer continued. - The Nine Hells will be completely isolated from all other worlds. I am sure you understand what that means, do you not?

He looked at Satan with sharp eyes.

- We will never be able to return to the Nine Hells.

[...]

Satan remained silent at Lucifer's words.

He trembled as if he couldn't hold back the laughter. He grabbed his stomach and let the laughter out.

[What does that matter?]

- What?

[What does it matter if we cannot return to the Nine Hells?]

- Are you out of your mind?

[That is what I want to ask you.] The red demon mask tilted. [When have we ever not been out of our minds?]

- ...

Crack.

"Arrgghh!!"

Satan trampled on Lucis's arm. The arm twisted at a weird angle, and black blood poured out.

Lucifer's expression hardened when he heard the screams. He was trying to act as if it didn't affect him, but his expression gave him away.

- Satan, Lucifer said with blazing eyes and a voice filled with thick bloodlust, - Stop.

[You know what you must do for me to stop, do you not?]

Satan opened both arms.

The darkness devoured the light around him. It was as if it had suddenly become night.

[Come here and kill me. If you do not...]

Crunch.

Satan rotated his foot, further deforming Lucis's twisted arm.

Lucis's blood-curdling scream rang out once again.

- I told you to stop, Lucifer growled.

Satan could sense the chilling rage from the other side of the crystal orb.

Nevertheless, he burst into laughter and continued leisurely, [Your son... will die here.]

- ...

Lucifer remained silent and gave Satan a disgusted look.

- You make me sick.

[Hm?]

- Are you not ashamed of using a cheap tactic like taking a hostage?

It was a childish provocation.

[Since when have we cared about such things?] Satan asked with deep, sunken eyes full of madness. [Were you expecting compassion in a battle between demons? Were you expecting morality? A fair and beautiful fight? Were you expecting a fair fight with rules in place so that neither party could complain?]

That was nonsense.

[Wake up, Lucifer. We were never like that. We have never fought like that. Do you remember our battle against the demon king? What did we do back then? Did we simply have a contest of strength to have a fair battle?]

They had not.

Kidnapping had pretty much been an elementary tactic for them. They had used nasty plots, pitted allies against each other, and created all sorts of misunderstandings and misinterpretations.

They'd subdued a subordinate of the demon king and forced them to hug a bomb and charge toward the demon king army. They'd spread plagues and curses to kill the demons that served the demon king.

That wasn't all. They had even cut apart subordinates that the demon king favored and sent them to him piece by piece.

[Are you trying to become a good samaritan after all we have done? Are you begging for mercy and compromise? You are the one who makes me sick. What has made you so pathetic?]

- ...

[Do you want to condemn me? Do you want to curse me for using a vulgar tactic like threatening you with your son as my hostage?]

Satan lowered his head toward the crystal orb. The eyes behind the mask were shining with a yellow light.

[In that case, come here, Lucifer. Go mad with anger, become blind with resentment. Fight me, and...] Satan let out a chilling laugh. [Kill me.]

Slam—!!!

Lucifer destroyed the giant throne he was sitting in.

- I will... make you this proposal for the last time, Satan, Lucifer said in a restrained voice.

Satan could tell that Lucifer was trying his best to suppress his rage.

- If I give up on everything and go there, you will become the next target of the angels, Lucifer continued quietly. - Do not expect the angels to target Huan before you. You will become their next target, Satan. I will make it so.

He was threatening Satan.

The crystal orb couldn't withstand Lucifer's demonic energy and started to crack. It was clear how much rage he was feeling at the moment.

- There is no winner in this battle. Regardless of who wins, we will both lose everything. Will you still fight me despite that?

[...]

Satan didn't answer. He slowly raised his foot and stepped on Lucis's other arm.

Crunch!

Lucis's pained scream was enough of an answer.

[Who do you think I am? I am death, the end, and wrath itself. I am Satan. Whether it be angels or gods, it matters not. Tell them all to come here. Tell them to come here and fight me. Whatever you say to me, I will not stop.]

'Why, you ask? Because it's not my probleeeeeeeemmmmm!!'

RIP Satan!!

Chapter 209 - Beauty Trap

[This is the eight o'clock news. A massive gate has been sighted in Africa. Unlike a normal Gate with colors that range from the lowest-ranked white to the highest-ranked black, this Gate was a dark blue. The Gate disappeared soon after it appeared, and all of the monsters, animals, and vegetation around that area have died.]

[Guardians is currently investigating a possible connection between this and the Grand Canyon volcanic eruption incident, but they have not been able to find any such connections.]

[Since the appearance of the blue Gate, sounds and sightings of explosions have been detected all over the world. Although there have not been civilian casualties since most of the incidents have been occurring in areas inhabited by monsters, it seems necessary to place particular attention on this matter.]

"I guess things are going smoothly."

The tips of Oh Kang-Woo's mouth went up while he watched the television.

Using Lucis as a provocation had been a success. Lucifer had crossed over to Earth and was engaging in an all-out war with the Demon Cult while exuding hostility toward Satan. The battle was an overwhelming victory for Lucifer's forces.

Kang-Woo wasn't sure how Lucifer's forces were finding the Demon Cult's branches, but they were very good at it.

The entire world had a hard time finding the locations of the Demon Cult branches, yet Lucifer's forces were finding them easily and even smashing them with overwhelming power. It was as if the lukewarm actions of Lucifer's forces until this point had been to build the foundations for this.

From what he was hearing from Lilith, the Demon Cult was being pummeled so one-sidedly that Kang-Woo honestly felt sorry for them.

'I was hoping for the Demon Cult to put up a bit more resistance.'

He did not think that this was all the Demon Cult had.

They might not be able to reverse the situation, but he wished they would reduce at least Lucifer's forces at least a little.

'I guess not everything goes as intended.'

Unlike Kang-Woo's expectations, the Demon Cult was being slaughtered. Nevertheless, he did not feel as anxious as he had been in the past.

Kang-Woo looked down at his hands.

He'd already grown strong enough to fight against the princes of Hell. He no longer needed to try to exhaust Lucifer like he had originally planned.

'I'm also preparing a trump card.'

Kang-Woo leisurely laid back on the couch.

Whatever the case, the only thing he had to do was watch the fight between Lucifer and the Demon Cult from a distance.

"Kang-Woo, I wanna watch anime. Konosuba airs today," Echidna said as she walked toward him.

She sat on her exclusive seat, Kang-Woo's thighs, and spread open her small hands.

Kang-Woo smiled and gave her the remote.

"Hm! Hm!"

Echidna changed the channels while snorting, but her expression soon filled with disappointment.

"It was canceled again..." she muttered, lowering her head with a pout.

Most shows had been canceled because of the Gate that Lucifer had used to cross to Earth.

"It'll calm down soon."

"Okay."

Echidna turned and pulled on Kang-Woo's clothes.

"Kang-Woo, I learned another dragon tongue magic today. I can use three of them now."

"Woah, you learned another one?"

Kang-Woo patted Echidna's head to show that he was proud of her.

Hatchlings couldn't use dragon tongue magic, the exclusive magic of dragons. Only adult dragons could.

Echidna was connected with Kang-Woo through the soul and could receive his power, but making the innately impossible possible required an astronomical amount of effort.

"Maybe you'll be able to use Breath soon, huh?" Kang-Woo asked playfully.

"Hm! Hm! I'll do my best!" Echidna answered while snorting.

"Well... I don't think it's something you can do with just effort, though."

Kang-Woo laughed softly.

Based on what he had heard from her, only a select few dragons, even among ancient dragons, were able to use Breath. Maybe Echidna would be able to do it in the future, but she was just a hatchling at the moment. Furthermore, it was an extremely difficult technique to use.

"Kang-Woo, Kang-Woo. Are you still busy these days?" Echidna asked carefully.

Kang-Woo had been very busy trying to master Mammon's Authority over the past few months, so it wasn't an unexpected question.

Kang-Woo patted her head while making a bitter smile. "Yeah, but I think things will calm down soon."

Once he devoured Lucifer, he would be able to fulfill his immediate objective.

Of course, he would have to train to master both the Authorities of Lucifer and Mammon, but he wouldn't need to hurry like he was doing right now.

"...I see."

Echidna lowered her head while making a sad expression.

Kang-Woo patted her head and asked, "How about we go on a picnic once this is over?"

"A picnic?"

"Yeah, with Seol-Ah."

"Hm! Hm! Yeah! Okay!"

Echidna nodded in excitement.

Kang-Woo smiled.

'This is what I call healing.'

He thought that if he ended up having a child with Han Seol-Ah one day like he hoped, this was what it would probably feel like.

Kang-Woo smiled while imagining it.

"Let's take Lilith and Balrog along," Echidna suggested.

"...Why them?"

"They aren't that close to Seol-Ah. Lilith and Balrog are super nice. I want everyone to get along."

"..."

Kang-Woo thought about it.

The companions he'd made on Earth did not really interact with his companions from Hell, Balrog and Lilith. It was mainly because Balrog and Lilith knew him too well. They knew what kind of person he was and what he had done in Hell.

'That's a bit...'

He'd warned them about what not to say, but he still found it troublesome.

Still, it wouldn't be good if Lilith, Balrog, Kim Si-Hun, Seol-Ah, and the others weren't well-acquainted with each other.

'I'll have to think about it later.'

It was important for his allies to have a good relationship with each other if he wanted a cohesive force.

There might be a day when Balrog and Si-Hun had to fight alongside one another or when Seol-Ah had to heal Lilith.

"Well, I have things to do, so I'll get going. Where's Seol-Ah?" Kang-Woo asked.

"She went out with the redhead."

"With Cha Yeon-Joo?"

"Yeah. They've been hanging out a lot lately."

"Hmm."

Kang-Woo nodded and got up.

Cha Yeon-Joo and Seol-Ah... At first glance, they were like oil and water.

'Well, maybe that's why they became friends.'

He walked off while thinking that.

* * *

Tap.

A man walked through a dark, humid cave and sloshed through the water pooled on the floor.

The metallic scent of blood filled the tunnel.

"Cough... Cough."

He heard someone coughing weakly.

Kang-Woo took out his red demon mask and put it on.

"You are a tough one," he remarked.

"..."

Lucis had been tied up and neutralized by the Authority of Sealing. There were wounds all around his body. He was in a dreadful state.

He glared at Kang-Woo and said, "Kill me."

"I will not."

"KILL ME!!"

"Hahaha. There is no way I would kill you."

Kang-Woo smirked, reached out, and grabbed a handful of Lucis's silver hair.

"Do not plead for death. It is my choice whether you live or die," Kang-Woo stated.

"..."

Lucis frowned.

Kang-Woo turned his head and saw Vaal Zahak, who had on a black robe with blood splattered all over it. He wasn't wearing the cute apron that he liked to wear.

"Are you having trouble making him submit?"

[I apologize, Lord Satan.] Vaal Zahak bowed. [I have tried all the black magic that I know, but... he refuses to break.]

"Hm."

Kang-Woo thought, 'How unexpected.'

He wasn't expecting Lucis to be this tenacious.

'That's not good.'

Kang-Woo frowned.

If Lucis didn't submit, it would throw a wrench in the works of his plan.

"Kek." Lucis cackled like a madman. "Kill me. I will never submit to you."

"Mmm..."

Kang-Woo had initially thought that Lucis was just a character with a severe case of chuunibyou, but this had honestly been unexpected. His unbending will truly surprised Kang-Woo.

'What else could I do?'

Even though he had weakened Lucis's power with the Authority of Sealing, none of the mind-control Authorities like Subordination or Fear worked on him. Lucis seemed to be proving that he really had the blood of a prince of Hell.

'What should I do?' Kang-Woo sighed. 'Maybe a change of plan is in order.'

He could make a compromise, but he didn't like the idea of it. It felt as if he had lost to a character who was all bark and no bite. It was a highly unpleasant feeling.

Splash.

"I knew you would be here, Lord Satan," Lilith said as she entered the cave. She glanced at Lucis and frowned. "Has that brat still not submitted?"

"Yeah."

"Hmph. He dares to inconvenience Lord Satan..."

Lilith frowned in displeasure.

She walked toward Kang-Woo and touched sensually.

"You're quite tired because of that brat, are you not?" she asked.

"Not really..."

"I should be comforting you at times like this, my k—Lord Satan." A wide smile appeared on Lilith's face. "Come to think of it, it has been a while since I have spent the night with you. How about you forget all of your worries and let me comfort you tonight?"

"Save me."

Lilith's sudden proposal... was probably because she had been suppressing all her desires while gathering information from all over the world regarding the battles between Lucifer and the Demon Cult. Now, her pent-up desires had reached their limit.

"Fufufu."

Squelch, squelch.

Lilith's beautiful, brown hair started to turn into green tentacles. Her face split, and eighteen eyes appeared.

Kang-Woo subconsciously took a step back.

Then...

"G-Gasp!!"

'Hm?' Kang-Woo wondered.

He noticed Lucis, who had kept his cool for the entire time of his capture, gasp and widen his eyes.

'What's with him?'

Lucis looked as if he'd just seen a ghost. He was even trembling.

There was no way a demon would be scared after seeing a ghost, so Kang-Woo wasn't sure why Lucis was reacting like that.

'Is he also shocked by Lilith's appearance?'

Kang-Woo was starting to feel a bit empathetic toward Lucis when...

"By the gods... such a beauty..." Lucis voiced.

"What?"

"Wh-Why is... such a beautiful woman following a scumbag like him?"

"The fuck d'you say?"

Kang-Woo felt as if he had been struck on the back of the head.

Lilith snorted while looking at Lucis. "Hmph, I guess even a brat like you knows beauty when you see it."

'No.'

"Go drink more of your mother's milk."

'The hell is happening?'

Kang-Woo was confused. What he saw didn't match what Lucis was saying.

Lucis bit his lip and shouted, "You are being deceived!"

"What do you mean?"

"A woman as beautiful as you... is not meant for trash like him!"

"...I will tear that mouth off if you dare to call my king trash again."

"Kuh!"

Tears dripped from Lucis's eyes.

"Please, come to your senses. I-I have fallen in love with you at first sight. I would like to protect you," he said in a trembling voice.

"What? Fallen in... What?"

"Hohohoho! How cute."

'Holy fuck... This is how it ends up?'

Kang-Woo was so surprised that he found it difficult to close his mouth. He grabbed his head in confusion.

At that moment, Lilith put her lips over Kang-Woo's ears.

"My king, you mentioned that you've been having trouble making that brat submit, right?"

"Y-Yeah."

"Fufu. I guess I have no choice. I, Lilith, will take care of this."

Lilith walked toward Lucis elegantly and said, "You fell in love with me at first sight, you say?"

"Y-Yes," Lucis answered.

"Fufufu. Now that I take a closer look, you are rather cute. Why don't you... show me how you feel?"

Squelch, squelch.

Tentacles spread from Lilith's body and surrounded Lucis.

"A-Aahh! H-How beautiful... Y-You..."

"Call me Lilith."

"L-Lady Lilith... A-Aaahhh!"

"Hohoho!!!"

"Nnn... Nngh!"

"..."

Thud.

Kang-Woo fell to the floor.

Something he couldn't believe—something he didn't want to believe—was happening in front of him.

A man in a demon cosplay was moaning while being violated by tentacles.

"Urpp." Kang-Woo covered his mouth and lowered his head. "Bleeeeeegggghhh."

Chapter 210 - What the Hell Does That Mean?

Oh Kang-Woo left the cave and tried to calm down so that he could hold on to his sanity.

While he was doing that, Lilith emerged from the cave and sighed.

"Fuuu. It sure is tiring, dealing with a brat," she said.

Kang-Woo turned his head toward her with exhausted eyes.

"...Did it work?" he asked.

"Of course." Lilith smiled. "It is a bit too soon right now, but... as time goes on, he will become a puppet that follows my every order."

"Well done."

Kang-Woo nodded.

Turning Lucis into a puppet was an important part of his plan.

Kang-Woo had half given up on the plan since neither his mind-control Authority nor Vaal Zahak's magic was effective. However, Lilith was able to keep the plan alive, so that was fantastic.

'Although the process was a bit...'

Lilith's method had been horrifying to witness.

'Well, at least it was effective.'

Kang-Woo kept his mouth closed while making a resentful expression.

Lilith walked toward him and said sadly, "Please do not get the wrong idea, my king."

"...About what?"

"I cut off all the tentacles I used, and I didn't use my main body, s-so..." she mumbled with a worried expression. "I-It wasn't an affair!"

"..."

That thought had never crossed Kang-Woo's mind. Rather, he was surprised that Lilith could even think such a thing.

"Urgh... I did not want to do something like that to a man who isn't you, but..."

"Oh, yeah. Thanks."

Kang-Woo nodded while making an awkward expression.

From Lilith's point of view, it was as if she had seduced a random brat in front of the man she loved, so it made sense she would think that way.

"It's okay. I trust you."

That was not a lie. Kang-Woo had spent a very long time with Balrog and Lilith. So, of course, he trusted and valued them.

He was cruel to his enemies, but he couldn't do the same to his allies. That would be in contradiction to his position as king. It was something that only a lunatic would do.

"Aah," Lilith uttered, hugging Kang-Woo with bright eyes.

He did not feel repulsed in any way since she was in her human form, so he let her do it.

"Right, this is not the time for this." Lilith backed off while shaking her head. "I have something to report."

There was a reason why she had looked for Kang-Woo.

"There has been a complication," Lilith said.

"What happened?"

"There was a large Demon Cult branch that I've been keeping an eye on... It's the one I mentioned previously—the branch with thousands of members like the one in Tibet."

"What about it?"

"I have been leaking information to guide Lucifer's forces there to incite a full assault, but... the plan went awry."

"...Keep going."

Kang-Woo's gaze sharpened.

"The Demon Cult branch is trying to avoid an all-out assault."

"Hmm."

"I was hoping for them to bring out some sort of trump card like what had happened with Mammon in Tibet, but... At this rate, the Demon Cult may abandon the branch entirely and run away."

"..."

Kang-Woo remained silent. He narrowed his eyes and thought about what he'd just heard.

'I don't like this.'

He had planned to make bad blood between Lucifer and the Demon Cult to wear their forces down and reap the profits. However, it seemed that the plan was going awry.

'What's going on?'

Kang-Woo even thought that he might have overestimated the Demon Cult.

'No.'

He shook his head.

After returning to Earth, he'd continuously observed and fought against the Demon Cult. His intuition was so good that his conjectures were close to being facts.

'They're hiding something.'

Rather, they likely had multiple cards up their sleeve. He didn't even need more evidence to confirm that.

The Demon Cult had awakened Mammon, but it didn't seem like he was their leader. Kang-Woo had eaten him, but the Demon Cult continued running as usual. This wouldn't be the case if Mammon were their leader. In other words, there was someone else.

'What if it's the real Satan who's leading the Demon Cult?'

Nevertheless, Kang-Woo thought that was too much of a stretch and erased the possibility from his mind.

"In any case... I guess I have no other choice."

He couldn't stand still. He stood up.

"What will you do?" Lilith asked.

"They serve a being called the Aspect of Evil, but most of the cultists don't know who it is."

One of the freakish things about the Demon Cult was that they served the Aspect of Evil, but no one knew exactly who it was. They didn't even know if it was a demon or a human.

The Aspect of Evil had likely made it that way so they could stay under the radar. However, that was truly freakish even for a group that was closer to a fanatical cult than a religious organization.

'It's like they're serving a king they can't see.'

Kang-Woo had no idea why that being had concealed their identity to such an extent, but he could make use of it.

"That is true," Lilith remarked.

"In that case..." Kang-Woo raised the red demon mask, which he'd gotten more used to using than the Guardians' white mask. "I'll just have to become their king."

His wide smile was covered by the mask.

* * *

"W-We can't win."

"Why is a prince of Hell... A-Are there no instructions from above?"

In a certain region in Africa, there were dozens of people gathered in a giant base built under the desert. They were all wearing black robes despite the desert's sweltering heat.

The members present had the rank of cardinal and above. They were essentially the executive members of the Demon Cult.

Slam!

"H-How could there be no instructions even at a time like this?! What the hell do they expect us to do?!"

"Wh-What about Madam Julia?"

"We can't get in touch with Madam Julia either."

There was a heavy silence, with their sighs being the only exception.

"What is the Aspect of Evil doing during a crisis like this...?" someone mumbled.

Everyone flinched.

The Aspect of Evil... the being they served and worshiped—the king they served was hidden under a veil. The king hadn't appeared in front of his soldiers even in such a crisis, so it was obvious that their morale had plummeted.

"We have no choice but to retreat."

"Yes. I think that would be b—"

Crack!

At that moment, a black Rift suddenly appeared in the air.

"Wh-What the—?!"

"What in the..."

The cultists looked at the Rift that had suddenly appeared.

Step, step.

A being who wore a red demon mask and was shrouded in darkness slowly walked toward them while applying immense pressure to the air.

"E-EEK!"

"L-Lucifer?!"

They were feeling a huge amount of demonic energy that they'd never felt before, so they naturally thought of Lucifer.

The Demon Cultists trembled in fear.

The red demon mask turned toward them.

The being behind it questioned, [Are you not even able to recognize your own master?]

"...Pardon?"

[Tsk, pathetic.]

The unidentified being standing in front of the table lightly waved his hand.

BOOM!

"KURGH!"

The cardinal sitting at the head of the table was blown backward.

Then, an overwhelming amount of demonic energy pressed them down.

The being pulled out a chair back and sat down.

"You are..."

"N-No way..."

[You asked what the Aspect of Evil is doing, did you not?] the being said quietly, as if to clear the doubts of the Demon Cultists. [He is right before you.]

"A-Aahh!"

The red demon mask tilted.

[I am your father, the creator of the dark, the ruler of darkness.]

A viscous demonic energy surrounded the Demon Cultists.

[I am Satan,] he stated in a sharp tone.

"A-Aaaaahhhh!!!"

"Oh, Aspect of Evil!!!"

"Oh, Lord Satan!!!"

The Demon Cultists dropped to their knees. They were thrilled.

Satan... Everyone on Earth had heard of that name.

The Demon Cultists trembled after discovering the identity of the Aspect of Evil whom they'd been serving.

[You are trying to run away?]

"U-Uhmm..."

The faces of the Demon Cultists turned pale.

Satan spread open his hand, and the head of a Demon Cultist was pulled toward it.

Crunch.

He lightly squeezed, and the Demon Cultist's head exploded. An intense scent of blood filled the entire room.

[Demons do not retreat.]

"U-Urghh."

"W-We apologize!"

The Demon Cultists lowered their heads.

[Why do you worship demons?]

Satan got up.

[There is only one reason why humans serve, worship, and admire demons. It has been decided since the beginning of time,] he said in a voice full of desire, yearning, and madness. [Eternal life? What is the point of living an eternal life as a slave? Desire? A desire that cannot be fulfilled is nothing more than a curse. You do not serve demons for a reason like that.]

Stomp.

[Power! The power to step over others and rise to the top! Was that not what all of you have been after?!] Satan shouted.

The Demon Cultists trembled, feeling chills run down their back.

[You want to run? You want to compromise? There are no such things for a demon! Crave! Fight! Take! Kill the enemy, and eat their flesh! Drink their blood! That is what we live for!!]

"A-Aahh."

It hadn't been a minute since Satan had appeared, yet he was able to overwhelm the crowd with his charisma. The Demon Cultists left their mouths agape at Satan's overwhelming presence.

Then, Satan reached into his shroud of darkness and threw some things out onto the table.

Clink.

Dozens of black gems scattered across the table.

"Th-These are..."

"Demonic crystals...?"

[Eat,] Satan said. [I will give you my power. Fight. Kill the false prince of Hell who dares to condemn the Demon Cult.]

The eyes behind the red mask burned with a fiery gaze.

[Die for me.]

"Aaaaahhhh!!!"

"Oh, Lord Satan!!!"

"Oh, Aspect of Evil!!!!!"

The Demon Cultists went nuts.

Behind the mask, Satan grinned.

* * *

Step, step!

A figure ran through a giant ice cave with hurried steps. The robe she wore left her face uncovered—a face horrifyingly disfigured by severe burns.

She ran while panting heavily.

Before long, a black sphere appeared in front of her. It was pulsating as if it were a giant's heart.

The woman, Julia Vilkova, shouted, "L-Lord Satan!!!"

Rumble!!

A loud sound shook the surroundings. Frost fell to the ground, and the black sphere wriggled.

[What is it?] Satan asked.

"Umm, y-you see..." Julia stammered.

Satan writhed within the darkness.

[Speak. If you have awoken me for an inappropriate reason, I will—]

"Lord Satan." Julia gulped. "Satan has appeared."

[...]

There was a heavy silence.

[...What?]