

## **M. in Hell 121**

Chapter 121 - Sword of Justice (4)

Oh Kang-Woo remained silent. Alec Osborne wasn't just playing dumb.

'He really doesn't know.'

He lightly laughed. He felt like all the questions filling his head had disappeared. There was no way someone sane would let an assassin who had tried to kill him live.

'So that means...'

Alec had been insane from the start.

Kang-Woo could finally be satisfied with Alec's absurd actions.

"Fuuu. I can't believe I let a Demon Cultist escape yet again... I'm truly ashamed."

"Let me ask you something."

"Yes?"

Kang-Woo looked at Alec with sunken eyes.

"You have no intention of giving up on Si-Hun, right?"

"Of course not. There aren't many Protectors. Si-Hun has the ideal personality and talent for a Protector," Alec answered without hesitation.

He continued, "He seems to be on the fence because it was such a sudden offer, but I am planning on continuing to persuade him. And... most importantly, Si-Hun himself seems to be interested in the idea."

"..."

"I know you think of Si-Hun as your little brother, so I understand you're worried, but this is for the greater good of humanity."

"Hah..."

Kang-Woo laughed.

The woman's corpse was still in the alleyway. A woman had died because Alec hadn't killed the assassin, but he was still as honest and upright as always.

Alec couldn't see anything beyond justice.

"I'll be on my way, then. Please try to convince Si-Hun for me as well, Kang-Woo."

Alec smiled and turned around.

Kang-Woo watched as Alec walked away.

There was no way to know how many deaths Alec had turned away from until now, but Kang-Woo was sure that this was probably not the first time.

There was no way it was the first time. People didn't go that insane so quickly and easily.

Alec had probably been broken for a very long time to the point of no return.

"For the greater good of humanity, huh...?" Kang-Woo mumbled.

It wasn't hard to see why Alec had broken. He had most likely tried to save every life in the past as well, regardless of whether they were good or evil, just like now.

'And he probably failed.'

It had nothing to do with his abilities or talent. Such an absurd ideal was bound to fail.

When faced with failure, people chose one of two options: either they accepted the result or turned away from it.

Alec had chosen the latter.

"Pathetic."

Kang-Woo spat on the floor.

It was hard to accept failure, and it wasn't easy to accept that what one had been doing was wrong. On the other hand, turning away from one's own failures was easy.

It was simple and comfortable.

Alec Osborne wasn't a strong-willed man who stayed true to his ideals. He was just a coward and loser who didn't know how to accept the results of his actions.

'He said he had no intention of giving up on Si-Hun.'

It didn't matter if he was a coward or a lunatic who couldn't accept reality. If it had been anyone but Alec, Kang-Woo wouldn't have even given them the time of day.

But this was different.

Alec was trying to make Si-Hun join him. He was trying to make Si-Hun exactly like him.

'I can't let that happen.'

If Alex wouldn't give up, Kang-Woo had no choice but to use force.

"Actually this might be a good opportunity."

He recalled Si-Hun looking at Alec in admiration.

Alec was an important individual to him, and Si-Hun trusted Alec so much that Kang-Woo had been forced to use the Authority of Subordination to make him refuse the offer.

Just like how children were greatly influenced by the heroes in films, Alec also seemed to have heavily influenced Si-Hun.

There was a huge chance that Si-Hun's heroic actions had also been influenced by Alec.

'I don't like that.'

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes. He had high hopes for Si-Hun and couldn't let him destroy himself like Alec due to unrealistic ideals.

"It's about time for me to give him a huge shock."

He had no intention of coddling Si-Hun like a baby forever.

Si-Hun had to learn how to make decisions and take action by himself. For that to happen, he had to make Si-Hun wake up from the fantasy of being a hero.

"Hmm."

He closed his eyes and began thinking at high speed. He thought of a good plan, then slowly opened his eyes. Since he had decided on a plan, he no longer had any reason to hesitate.

Kang-Woo turned his head.

'But before that...'

There was something he had to do before putting his plan into action.

Tap.

He lightly jumped and rose into the sky. He used the Authority of the Beholder over a wide area.

'So that's where he ran off to.'

Kang-Woo turned his head toward the area where he could feel demonic energy.

Unlike in Japan where it was like finding a tree in the middle of a forest due to the overabundance of demonic energy, searching for a Demon Cultist in Korea was more like finding a tree in the middle of a desert.

Kang-Woo flew toward where the Demon Cult assassin had escaped.

The assassin had headed toward an abandoned factory near Port of Incheon. The factory had been abandoned ever since it had been destroyed by the monster invasion on the Day of Calamity.

'He got pretty far.'

Considering he should've been tired after fighting Alec, he had been incredibly fast.

The traces of demonic energy stopped at the abandoned factory.

Kang-Woo landed on top of the factory and looked around.

'He doesn't seem to have any reinforcements.'

He couldn't sense any other sources of demonic energy near the factory.

High priests of the Demon Cult were able to conceal their demonic energy within their hearts, but he didn't even consider this possibility.

The assassin wouldn't have fought Alec alone if he had such powerful allies with him.

"Huff, huff!"

Kang-Woo heard heavy breathing.

The assassin seemed very exhausted from running at full speed right after his battle with Alec.

Kang-Woo clenched his fist and smashed it down on the abandoned factory's roof.

Boom!

"Kurgh!"

Dust scattered. The assassin took out his claws and glared at him.

"... Who are you?"

The man in the red demon mask wasn't able to hide the bewilderment in his eyes. He would naturally be surprised if a stranger suddenly appeared when he had thought Alec had caught up with him.

Kang-Woo laughed at the assassin's question.

"Who's asking?"

"..."

"You're not gonna tell me, right? Me neither."

The assassin lowered his body, and a sharp bloodlust leaked from him.

"You must be a member of Guardians."

It seemed he thought Kang-Woo was Alec's comrade.

Kang-Woo shrugged.

"Hmph. There's no point in acting dumb. I know you're a part of Guardians."

The assassin opened his hands. His claws, which had lengthened to over thirty meters, shone sharply. Demonic energy was concentrated at the ends of the claws.

"Sure, whatever you wanna think," Kang-Woo replied.

There was no need to tell him the truth. People saw and heard only what they wanted, after all.

"I have a lot of questions for you," said Kang-Woo.

"And you think I'll talk?"

"No, of course not."

Kang-Woo shook his head and raised his right hand. The Key of the Demonic Sea, which had been a ring, changed form.

"So..."

The ring wriggled and transformed into a gauntlet. It was infused with the Authority of Sealing, the Authority of the demon Amdusias.

"I'll have to make you want to talk."

Boom!

Kang-Woo leaped forward. He used the Authority of Haste and reduced the distance between him and the assassin in an instant. He could see the surprise behind the mask.

Bash!

"Kurgh!"

Kang-Woo struck the man in the solar plexus with the gauntlet.

The assassin's body folded and was blown back. Kang-Woo caught up to the assassin as he was flying back and kicked him.

Boom!

The wall of the abandoned factory was destroyed. Abandoned bars of steel poured on top of the assassin.

"Gurgh!"

The assassin swung his hands. The steel bars were slashed like ribbons, the metal clanging. The assassin lowered his body and leaped toward Kang-Woo.

His sharp claws swung up toward him from the bottom.

Tap.

"Gasp!"

Kang-Woo grabbed the assassin's claws and used the Authority of Titanic Might to rip the claws off of the man's hands.

Crack.

The claws fell to the ground along with drops of blood.

The assassin's movements became significantly slower due to the excruciating pain.

Kang-Woo grabbed the assassin's shoulder with the gauntlet infused with the Authority of Sealing. The gauntlet embedded itself into the assassin's shoulder as it destroyed his bones.

"AARRGGHH!"

The assassin screamed horrifyingly.

"H-Huh? Why is my strength..."

Once the Authority of Sealing had spread through the assassin's body, he fell to the ground.

Kang-Woo stuck his fingers into the assassin's mouth to stop him from committing suicide and then used the Authority of Subordination on him.

A huge amount of demonic energy entered the assassin's body.

Riiing.

[The soul of the target has resisted the Authority of Subordination.]

"Tsk."

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue in disapproval.

He thought that the Authority of Subordination might work if he sealed his power first with the Authority of Sealing, but it had failed.

'Well, that's too bad.'

He had no intention of giving up just because a mind control-type Authority had failed.

Kang-Woo thrust his finger into the shoulder the gauntlet was embedded into.

"Urrrhhh!!"

The assassin suppressed his scream.

Kang-Woo had no intention of stopping there.

'Authority of Hellfire.'

A life-burning fire began burning the assassin's body from the inside.

Being burned alive was one of the greatest pains that a human could feel. If such a burn happened from the inside, the outcome was obvious.

"Gaaaaahhhhhh!!!"

A horrible scream echoed throughout the abandoned factory.

Kang-Woo withdrew the Authority.

"Do you feel like talking now?"

"Huff! Huff!"

"How about we go for another round?"

"S-Stop! P-Please stop!"

The assassin desperately shouted as if he didn't want to suffer such pain again.

Kang-Woo smiled in satisfaction and nodded.

'What should I ask first?'

There were many things he wanted to ask, but he couldn't just voice his questions carelessly.

'Either by exploding or twisting, he'll die one way or another.'

From what he'd seen of the Demon Cult until now, a device was installed in every single member to ensure that classified information wouldn't be leaked.

The same was probably true for the assassin in front of him.

'I can't make the same mistake.'

He wasn't an idiot who didn't learn from his mistakes.

Kang-Woo first asked about information unrelated to the Demon Cult.

"Tell me what you know about Guardians."

"... Why? You'd know more about them than me if you're also a mem—AARRGGHH!"

"Don't ask. Just answer my question."

"Huff! Huff!"

Tears dripped from the assassin's eyes due to the excruciating pain.

"They are a group made up of people known as Protectors from all over the world. I don't know their exact number either. All I know is that there are fewer than ten and that their leader's name is Gaia."

"The leader's name is Gaia?"

"Y-Yes."

Kang-Woo's eyes narrowed.

'Gaia.'

He naturally thought of the Gaia System. He didn't think it was a coincidence.

Chapter 122 - Red Mask (1)

"And where is this Gaia?" Oh Kang-Woo asked.

"I-I don't know," the assassin replied.

"Hmm."

Kang-Woo nodded.

It would be weird if a Demon Cultist knew where the leader of Guardians was.

'I'll need to check it out.'

He had to get in contact with the Guardians and find out more about Gaia's identity.

"Is there anything else you know about Gaia?" Kang-Woo asked.

"I-I only know that it's a woman and that she has the ability to find other Protectors."

"I see."

Kang-Woo nodded.

'Then she must've been the one who found out about Si-Hun.'

That made this situation easier to deal with. Considering that there were so few Protectors, Gaia would most likely try to get in contact with Kim Si-Hun again, even if Alec Osborne were to disappear.

'She'll come to me as long as I keep waiting.'

There was no need for Kang-Woo to try to find her. As long as Si-Hun was around, an encounter with Gaia was inevitable.

"That was good info," Kang-Woo said, smiling in satisfaction.

He would've preferred it if the assassin had been given more specific information, but he was happy with what he had gotten at the moment.

"Then let me g—"

"All right, last question. I'll let you go if you answer it," Kang-Woo continued in a calm voice. "Tell me everything you know about the Demon Cult—their forces, locations, taboos, objectives, and anything else."

"..."

The assassin's expression hardened. There was a heavy silence, and his breathing became rougher.

Kang-Woo smiled. It was as he'd expected.

"I'm guessing you'll die if you talk."

In that case, there was no point in listening to the assassin anymore.

"Kurgh. I-I'll give you any other information you want! So..."

The assassin became anxious. He was desperately trying to hold onto his life. Kang-Woo placed his hand on the man's back as if he were trying to calm him down.

"A deal is only established when both sides have what the other wants. I can give you your life. What can you give me?"

The assassin talked desperately about the situation in Europe, how big the Guardians was getting, and all the information that he could think of. However, there wasn't any information about the Demon Cult that Kang-Woo wanted to hear.

"Thanks for the information," Kang-Woo said.

"W-Wait!"

Kang-Woo concentrated the Authority of Waves in his hand that was on the assassin's back. He turned the assassin's insides into porridge.

The assassin coughed out some blood and collapsed onto the ground.

"Now then..."

Kang-Woo extended his hand, took off the red mask that was covering the assassin's face, and placed it on his own. The mask stuck onto his face even though it had no securing mechanism.

"Let's begin."

The eyes peering through the red demon mask were smiling.

Kang-Woo walked out of the abandoned factory while wearing the mask. It was time to enact his plan.

\* \* \*

"Urgh, I'm exhausted."

Alec, who had returned to his hotel room, flopped onto the bed.

He'd met Si-Hun right after a 10-hour flight and later even fought a Demon Cultist, so he had accumulated a lot of fatigue.

"I'll go see Si-Hun again tomorrow."

Protectors were very precious beings. He had no intention of giving up just because Si-Hun had refused once.

Alec recalled Si-Hun's eyes. They had looked at him intensely, full of envy and passion.

'I can convince him.'

Alec clenched his hands with an extremely confident expression. He was sure that Si-Hun would sympathize with his conviction.

"That aside..."

He thought of Oh Kang-Woo, the man who'd revealed himself as Si-Hun's sworn brother.

"What was that feeling?"



Alec's expression had hardened unconsciously when he'd first grabbed Kang-Woo's hand. An odd heaviness had weighed down on him.

"Hmm."

He kept thinking about it for a moment but ultimately shook his head.

"I'm sure it was nothing."

That odd feeling had only been a slight discomfort. It was wrong to judge someone based on something so trivial.

"Why didn't you kill the assassin?"

The question that Kang-Woo had asked him after his battle with the assassin popped up in his head.

"Haha. I guess it would be hard for him to understand," Alec remarked.

His ideal of saving all lives... Someone who wasn't a Protector wouldn't be able to understand such ideals that had awoken within him ever since he became one.

'But I'm sure Kang-Woo will also understand in the end.'

He was certain Kang-Woo would eventually understand how noble his conviction was and how many lives it could save.

"A-Aaah!! H-How, wh-why...?!" Alec's voice resounded in his mind as if from a memory.

"Urgh."

Alec had a headache. In his mind, he saw himself crying in despair over the corpse of a woman in an alleyway.

"Not this again."

Alec sighed and lay on the bed.

It had started a year ago. He sometimes suffered from an intense headache and saw images that seemed to come from nightmares.

"Erina..." Alec called out a certain woman's name in a voice filled with sorrow.

It was the name of the woman he'd promised to spend eternity with. She fully supported his beliefs that other people had a hard time understanding.

"I miss you."

Alec closed his eyes.

He thought of the lovely Erina. It had been a year since she'd suddenly disappeared. He had tried desperately to find her, but she was nowhere to be seen.

'I'll find you, no matter what.'

Alec believed she was alive somewhere. Finding her was one of his biggest goals.

"To do that, I'll have to drag Si-Hun into Guardians as soon as possible."

Alec had just begun to investigate the Demon Cult a year ago. He believed that her disappearance had a very high chance of being related to them. However, to investigate them thoroughly, the Guardians needed to expand their forces.

'But I'll rest for today.'

The headache wasn't going away, and Kang-Woo's disgusted gaze had been embedded into Alec's memories. Alec ultimately decided it would be better to sleep first and think later.

"Kyaaaaa!"

However, he suddenly heard a woman scream. It wasn't just a scream of surprise but the scream of a woman who feared for her life.

Alec quickly got up. He grabbed his sword and ran toward where the scream had come from.

'Up.'

It was the hotel's rooftop. The rooftop was quite far away, but Alec had been able to tell exactly where the scream had come from with his superhuman hearing.

'Hopefully, nothing has happened!'

Alec ran up to the rooftop frantically. He wasn't sure what had happened, but he couldn't hesitate if he wanted to save a life. His conviction was shining as brightly as ever.

\* \* \*

"You..."

Alec's expression hardened after reaching the rooftop.

A man in a red demon mask was sitting on a guardrail of the rooftop.

"You're finally here," the masked man said and waved his hand.

Alec sighed, "Haaa. You don't get sick of this, do you?"

He recognized the clothes that the man in the red mask was wearing. It was the assassin who had attacked him this morning.

"Where is the girl?" Alec asked with his eyes narrowed.

The masked man smirked as he replied, "Here."

He flicked his finger, and the scream of a woman sounded out of thin air.

Alec frowned.

"You tricked me."

"They say that the one who gets fooled is the true fool."

"..."

Alec looked at him cautiously. Unlike before, the masked man seemed very relaxed. There was no way he'd be so relaxed after suffering such a defeat if he didn't have a plan.

'I don't think there are any other Demon Cultists in the area,' Alec thought.

He expanded his senses to search his surroundings but couldn't feel anything.

"Didn't you learn your lesson after suffering such a defeat this morning? You are no match for me," Alec said.

"I don't know about that. We'll have to see."

The man in the red mask hopped down from the guardrail. His eyes peered through the mask and looked at Alec.

'Huh?' Alec thought confusedly.

His eyes widened, and he got goosebumps. Looking into the masked man's eyes made Alec feel like he was in a daze as if he was looking into an abyss.

"Kurgh," Alec grunted and shook his head.

His breaths became rough.

'What is this?'

This masked man was wearing the same clothes as the man who had chased him earlier that day. Alec could even see the section of clothes that he'd sliced away with his sword. The demonic energy that the man was emitting was also about the same amount.

Despite that... something was off.

'It's different.'

Alec gripped his sword, took a deep breath, and got into a fighting stance.

The masked man said, "There's something I want to ask you."

"...What is it?"

"I killed a woman while I was running away. The scream you just heard was from that woman."

"Wh-What?!"

Alec's mind went blank. He felt as if his head had been smacked with a sledgehammer from behind.

"You still won't kill me despite that?"

"..."

Alec's mind was now a mess. He bit his lips and raised his sword. A pure-white light similar to his pure convictions enveloped his sword.

Alec's eyes showed no doubts as he replied, "Yes. In exchange, I will make you atone for the life that you've taken for the rest of your days."

The masked man laughed, "Hahaha. Is not killing anyone really that important?"

"Saving everyone is my conviction."

"Conviction, my ass."

The masked man raised his hand, and a dark-red spear Alec hadn't seen before appeared in the man's hand.

The man said, "Stop talking crap and bring it on."

Chapter 123 - Red Mask (2)

[Transforming the Key of the Demonic Sea into 'Gáe Bulg'.]

[Exercising 34% of the skill's capacity.]

A blue message window popped up in front of Oh Kang-Woo.

He grabbed the Gáe Bulg, enveloped it with demonic energy, and activated the Authority of Titanic Might.

'Like I thought, this thing is overpowered.'

Although it only possessed 34% of the original version's power, it was more than adequate for him. He was able to maintain the Gáe Bulg without demonic energy and use other Authorities on top of that.

He checked the time while holding his weapon. The time on his smartphone showed 8:43 p.m.

'He should be here by 9 p.m.'

Kang-Woo smiled and lowered his stance.

There were 15 minutes left. It would be challenging to defeat a World Ranker in such a short time, but Kang-Woo was not worried.

'After all, I'm up against this guy,' Kang-Woo thought while looking at Alec Osborne.

Alec sighed and gripped his sword.

"You give me no choice," he said.

White light burst out of him as he stomped the ground. He shot forward, leaving behind a white afterimage. Alec swung his sword, which was infused with intense mana, toward Kang-Woo, aiming for his right shoulder.

Alec's swordsmanship was very orthodox. However, he had refined it to the highest limit, so his attack was simple yet very sharp.

"So what?" Kang-Woo sneered coldly.

He stuck his shoulder out and twisted his body—not to dodge the attack but to make sure it would be fatal.

"Ngh?!"

Alec realized that he was about to slash Kang-Woo's neck instead of his right shoulder. Surprised, he stopped his sword mid-swing.

Nevertheless, it wasn't easy to stop in the middle of an attack. Immense pressure weighed down on his hands. His entire body screamed in pain from the massive inertia generated, like a truck whose driver had suddenly slammed on the brake.

"See? I knew you'd do that," Kang-Woo commented.

He looked at Alec like he was pathetic and swung the Gáe Bulg. The dark-red spear shaft smashed into Alec's stomach. He was forced into a forward bend and sent flying.

Tap.

Kang-Woo swiftly caught up to Alec, who was still in midair. Then Kang-Woo slashed upward with his spear. Alec quickly twisted his body to block the attack, but he couldn't fully nullify the impact in midair with such an awkward movement.

Fwoosh!

"Kurgh!"

Black flames spewed from the Gáe Bulg's spearhead. Alec was singed by the fire and hurriedly rolled on the ground to put it out.

At that moment, Kang-Woo charged toward him. Alec then jumped back up and swung his sword. However, Kang-Woo didn't dodge; he pushed his head toward the sword's trajectory. Alec immediately changed the trajectory of his sword, letting it brush past Kang-Woo's cheeks instead.

The red mask was slightly cut, and black blood leaked out through it. Kang-Woo ignored it and clenched his hand into a fist. He took a step forward and smashed his foot onto the ground. Using the torque generated from that movement, he punched Alec.

Bash!

"Kargh!"

Blood spurted out of Alec's mouth, and he fell to the ground after receiving a direct hit from Kang-Woo, who had used Skybreaker.

"Kuh... H-How?" Alec uttered with quivering eyes.

The assassin's power was on a completely different level compared to that morning.

"Tsk," Kang-Woo clicked his tongue.

'I have to acknowledge his will at the very least.'

Seeing how Alec had avoided killing him even in the middle of such a situation, Kang-Woo had to acknowledge Alec's strong will to not kill anyone. No, at this point, it was closer to hypnosis or brainwashing.

'I had more fun against that assassin.'

Kang-Woo couldn't feel the thrill and tension that came with battle.

Alec's strategy was useful only when he was overwhelmingly more powerful than the opponent. For someone like Kang-Woo, whose strength went beyond that of World Rankers, fighting against Alec was boring and bothersome.

'Well, he's not the important one anyway.'

The fight with Alec was unimportant to Kang-Woo's plan.

Kang-Woo checked the time again.

"Haap!"

While Kang-Woo was distracted, Alec charged over and swung his sword. Once again, Kang-Woo pushed his vital point toward the sword's trajectory, causing the attack to stop.

Bash!

"Urgh!"

"Forget it. Let's just stop. This is so boring that I can't even be bothered to face you."

Kang-Woo, who'd spent so many years in Hell fighting battles that endangered his life, found this fight annoying.

'I wasn't hoping for a fight like this.'

He didn't like it at all.

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes. There was, however, one way to relieve his irritation.

"Who... are you?" Alec spoke in a low voice.

'He isn't the person I saw earlier today,' Alec realized.

Leaving the mask aside, the clothes and voice seemed the same as those of the assassin whom Alec had met earlier that day. Despite that, he thought they were different people. The skills of the assassin before him now were on a whole other level compared to those of the assassin from earlier that day.

"You call yourself a Protector, yet you can't even figure it out?" Kang-Woo mocked Alec. "There's only one reason why a Demon Cultist would become so strong so suddenly, isn't there?"

"Don't tell me..."

Alec's eyes widened. He bit his lips.

Just like the man had said, there was only one way a Demon Cultist could've gotten so strong so quickly.

"You're a demon!" Alec exclaimed angrily.

He used his sword as a cane and got up. He exuded an intense bloodlust that Kang-Woo hadn't witnessed from him before.

Kang-Woo nodded and smiled, satisfied.

"Yes, that's better."

He thought that he'd finally be able to experience a proper fight.

Alec raised his sword. The two superhumans once again clashed against each other on the hotel rooftop.

Boom!

The entire hotel shook as if there were an earthquake. They exchanged numerous attacks in a short frame of time, but Kang-Woo was not having fun.

'This guy's still like this.'

Even though Kang-Woo had said that he was a demon, Alec still wasn't attacking to kill. He was only trying to restrain Kang-Woo. Nevertheless, at least Alec wasn't saying bullshit like he would protect even a demon's life.

'Maybe it's because of how I look.'

Kang-Woo still had the appearance of a human. That was the most likely reason why Alec was hesitant to kill him.

He understood the reason behind Alec's actions. After all, between a human that looked like a monster and a monster that looked like a human, it was very simple which one would be easier to kill.

'You don't have the right to be a Protector.'

Kang-Woo lowered his gaze.

He wasn't sure what exactly the purpose of a Protector was, but one thing for sure was that they had the duty of protecting Earth from outside invaders. That included the continent of Aernor where Reynald was from and the world of the gods where Susanoo resided. If Alec couldn't kill something just because it looked like a human, that meant he was useless as a Protector.

Crack!

"Kargh!"

Kang-Woo grabbed Alec's neck and lifted him off the ground. Alec struggled to free himself.

"Cough! Cough! L-Let me go!" Alec squeezed out.

"Seriously, what a fucking joke."

Kang-Woo gripped Alec's neck even more tightly.

He couldn't help but sigh and wonder, 'Are World Rankers ranked by how moronic they are?'

This experience with Alec made him realize just how nice of a person Tian Wuchen was.

Kang-Woo checked the time. The battle had ended faster than he'd thought. It was no surprise since he'd fought an idiot who couldn't kill people.

'There's still some time left.'

Thinking of venting his frustration with the remaining time, Kang-Woo said, "Of course, you probably have your reasons."

Humans didn't break so easily. Alec had probably been broken beyond repair due to sorrow that was far too great for a person to handle.

Kang-Woo continued, "I'm sure you have a story that would be a tearjerker if made into a film."

That was the only possible reason he could think of.

"But so what? Does the world disappear because you close your eyes? Do things that have already happened vanish because you avert your gaze from it?" he questioned.

"Kuh!"

"Be honest." Kang-Woo twisted his mouth. "You know, don't you?"

"What do you m—"

"The woman who died in the alleyway today. You saw her, didn't you?"

"..."

Alec remained silent. He couldn't understand what Kang-Woo was talking about.

Bzzt.

Alec's vision became blurry.

"A-Aaah!"

He saw himself agonizing over a woman's death. It was a scene he had never seen, a scene he didn't remember.

Nevertheless, his mouth opened without conscious thought and uttered, "Shut... the fuck up!"

"Haha, you finally feel like a human now that you're cursing." Kang-Woo laughed out loud. "Wake up, man. What you're doing is just masturbation, okay? You're just shaking your hand so that you can feel good."

As the mockery dug into Alec's ears, memories he had forgotten came back to him.

His eyes widened in shock.

'Erina.'

Alec saw the woman he'd promised to spend the rest of his life with. He saw himself crying in despair as someone killed her.

Alec screamed like a madman, "You know nothing about me!"

"What? Do you want others to understand your tragic past? Do you want them to grab your hand and sympathize with you?" Kang-Woo spat on the floor. "Whether you bawl your eyes out or become autistic with screws loose in your head, no one will give a flying fuck, so enough with the pity show."

Many people who fell into despair thought the world was depressing. Since they were sad, they believed that everyone else should be just as sad as them. But reality wasn't like that. It had never been like that.

"A-Aarrgghh!! K-Kurgh!" Alec screamed and squirmed.

Kang-Woo tightened his grip around Alec's neck, causing a desperate scream to emerge from Alec's mouth.

Then Kang-Woo smiled and said, "Shit, man. I feel so refreshed now."

He felt as refreshed as if he'd gulped down some cold cider to quench his thirst.

The reason why Kang-Woo had said all those things had nothing to do with wanting Alec to get better. He just wanted to give Alec a reality check since all of Alec's pretty little words had annoyed him to no end.



"That aside, what's taking him so long?" Kang-Woo muttered with a frown.

He'd talked for a long time, but the protagonist had yet to appear.

Right then...

Slam!

'Speak of the Devil.'

The door to the rooftop flew open and an unrealistically handsome young man appeared.

While panting heavily, he cried out, "Alec!!"

Kim Si-Hun's scream reverberated through the area.

Kang-Woo enveloped himself with demonic energy, shrouding himself in darkness.

'Oh, I should alter my voice.'

Acting all serious, he said, [It seems we have ourselves a small fry.]

Kim Si-Hun unsheathed his sword and shouted, "Who are you?!"

When he saw his role model, Alec, being grabbed by the neck, Si-Hun trembled, and his breath became heavier. He didn't want to believe what he was seeing. An intense rage surged within him.

[Who am I?]

Kang-Woo, who was covered by darkness, turned to face Si-Hun.

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

Only the red mask could be seen in the pitch-black darkness.

[I am Satan.]

Chapter 124 - Red Mask (3)

"Sa... Satan?" Kim Si-Hun uttered as his expression hardened.

Everyone in the world knew about the demon Satan. He had appeared in many different works of media as some sort of final boss. He was Wrath from the seven deadly sins.

"You're Satan?" Si-Hun questioned.

He glared at the red-masked man in disbelief. The man didn't look like how Si-Hun thought a demon would look. This supposed demon was shrouded in darkness, but his silhouette clearly belonged to a human.

[That is correct.]

"Kurgh!!"

The masked man who called himself Satan gripped Alec Osborne's neck even tighter. Alec swung his two legs desperately while making an expression filled with despair.

"Stop!" Si-Hun shouted.

He felt anxious. Alec looked like he was going to stop breathing at any moment.

[You look anxious,] the demon said.

"..."

[Is this man important to you?]

Si-Hun remained silent. He asked himself in his mind if Alec was important to him.

Ultimately, he replied, "I have no reason to tell you that."

Si-Hun raised his sword, the El Cuero Blade. It was the Legendary-grade weapon that Kang-Woo had given him.

'Kang-Woo hyung-nim.'

Si-Hun had called Kang-Woo after Alec contacted Si-Hun to say that a Demon Cultist had appeared, but Kang-Woo had not picked up. That meant Si-Hun couldn't expect to get anyone else's help.

'I have to defeat that demon.'

Si-Hun knew it was impossible. He knew it made no sense. There was no way that he had a chance against someone who had defeated the Sword of Justice, Alec Osborne.

Even so...

'Azure Dragon Rush.'

Si-Hun used the Azure Dragon Sword Technique he'd learned from Tian Wuchen. He lunged toward Satan with the swift and powerful sword attack.

Pound!

"Kurgh!"

[Weak,] Satan mumbled in disappointment.

He didn't even need to move. He flung Si-Hun backward with a simple flick of his hand.

Si-Hun, who had fallen to the floor, staggered to his feet with an intense determination in his gaze.

"I know I'm weak."

He activated his sword energy, and blue mana wrapped around his sword. Si-Hun stepped forward, raised his sword, and then swung it down. The blue sword energy flew from the sword and headed toward the demon.

Si-Hun had aimed the sword energy infused with his intense bloodlust at Satan's head. However, Satan flicked a finger and created a black wave that struck Si-Hun.

"Kuh!" Si-Hun groaned.

As he was pushed backward, he coughed up dark red blood. A simple flick of Satan's finger made Si-Hun feel like he'd been bashed by a sledgehammer.

[You seem desperate.]

"Cough! Cough!"

[Why are you so desperate? I don't believe you're related to Alec Osborne in any way whatsoever.]

"..."

Kim Si-Hun's eyes trembled as the demon's words echoed in his mind.

Satan was right. Strictly speaking, Si-Hun barely knew Alec. They weren't friends or comrades. Alec was just a hero whom he admired. Risking his life to save someone he'd only seen on television was dumb.

"Cough!" Si-Hun coughed up more blood.

'I know that.'

He knew he was doing something stupid, and other people would have a hard time understanding why he would choose to do it. If Kang-Woo were to see him like this, Kang-Woo would probably scold him.

'But...'

Si-Hun got up and firmly rooted his feet on the ground.

He turned to look at Alec again. Alec had turned pale. He was coughing up so much blood that it seemed like he was about to die.

'Hyung-nim probably wouldn't be able to understand,' Si-Hun thought, laughing at himself.

It was unlikely that Kang-Woo would understand what the Sword of Justice meant to him. After all, he had never told anyone.

Alec wasn't just someone he admired. He wasn't a boy who was blinded by a hero on a screen or a girl who had lost her mind over an idol. He wouldn't risk his life for something like that.

Si-Hun raised his sword and took a deep breath. In any case, he had no intention of explaining everything to that demon.

"Is it that weird to save someone who has nothing to do with you?"

[It's more idiotic than weird.]

"Idiotic, huh?" Si-Hun laughed. "You're right."

He didn't deny it. He wasn't expecting anyone to understand him. There was no way a demon would be able to understand something that even normal people couldn't.

"I'm sorry, Kang-Woo hyung," Si-Hun muttered under his breath.

He still hadn't been able to repay his debt to Kang-Woo. Kang-Woo had saved his life and given him even more help after that. Not being able to make up for all of that was Si-Hun's only regret.

"Fuuu."

He took in a deep breath and exhaled. The Qi inside his dantian spread throughout his body. The sword in his hand didn't feel like a weapon but an extension of his body.

Si-Hun was one with the sword. He let that sensation take over his body.

Boom!

He stomped on the ground and leaped forward.

The man in the red mask raised his hand, and a sword emitting demonic energy appeared in it. Si-Hun raised the El Cuero Blade, which was enveloped in sword energy, and swung it down.

The swords emitting blue and black light collided. They exchanged an enormous number of blows in just one second.

However, the difference in strength was clear. The recoil of sword energy transmitted through the sword ripped open Si-Hun's palms.

Whoosh!

Nevertheless, he ignored it. He stepped back and lowered his stance.

Si-Hun wouldn't be able to win in a direct confrontation. He dodged the incoming attack and once again swung forth with the El Cuero Blade. It moved fluidly like a dragon and stabbed the darkness shrouding the demon.

"Kargh!"

Si-Hun was flung back by a massive rebounding force and once again coughed up dark red blood. His expression hardened.

This was not a matter of martial arts; the difference in their raw strength was colossal. No matter how much Si-Hun charged at the demon, it was like trying to destroy a rock with an egg.

'But...'

Si-Hun wasn't going to give up. He couldn't give up.

He got up with his trembling legs and gripped his sword tighter, leaping toward the insurmountable wall before him without hesitation.

\* \* \*

They exchanged blows. Si-Hun was flung back once again.

'Well, isn't he amazing?'

Kang-Woo didn't mean it mockingly; he was purely impressed.

Now that he had achieved the Ultimate Demonic Body, there was an enormous difference in physical specs between him and Si-Hun. It wasn't at a level that could be overcome with just martial arts. No matter how outstanding the techniques of a three-year-old child were, they wouldn't be able to win against a pro wrestler. This was a gap that was impossible to overcome.

'Like I thought, Si-Hun is far better than Alec.'

Kang-Woo smiled in satisfaction.

Alec's swordsmanship was orthodox to a fault, but he'd refined it to its utmost limit. This meant that it was powerful but very easy to anticipate because it was so straight and simple.

However, Si-Hun's swordsmanship was different.

'I can't see it.'

It would be more precise to say that Kang-Woo couldn't anticipate it. Even Kang-Woo, who had experienced hundreds of thousands of battles in his life, was unable to figure out Si-Hun's swordsmanship.

His heart beat in ecstasy from seeing Si-Hun's unlimited potential.

Thwack!

"Kuh!" Si-Hun groaned, once again tumbling to the ground.

Of course, Si-Hun still wasn't as strong as a World Ranker at the moment. He would lose even if he was fighting against Alec.

'But that's purely due to the difference in their physical specs.'

Si-Hun was still growing. He hadn't even reached the level cap yet. In the first place, it was impossible for a Player who had only just broken through Level 60 to land an attack on Kang-Woo.

Yet, Si-Hun had managed to do it.

'Based purely on level, he's above me.'

Nevertheless, a Player's level wasn't that important. What truly mattered was the thing that gave a Player power—their stats. In that sense, Kang-Woo had stats comparable to a Level 100 player.

'I'll have to modify my plan a little.'

Kang-Woo licked his lips as he saw Si-Hun charge toward him with everything he had.

Originally, he'd planned to overwhelm Si-Hun with absolute power to stimulate his growth. However, Kang-Woo had changed his mind. Si-Hun was more desperate than Kang-Woo had anticipated.

'I don't think he's going this far because of plain admiration.'

If it were that, Si-Hun wouldn't be trying so hard. Kang-Woo thought about the reason for a little while but ultimately shook his head. Just because Si-Hun was his Familiar didn't mean that he would know everything about Si-Hun.

'Whatever the case, this is better.'

The more important Alec was to Si-Hun, the stronger the stimulation would be.

Kang-Woo faced Si-Hun with one hand while grabbing Alec's neck with the other. Si-Hun thrust his sword sharply. It suddenly changed trajectory right when it was about to collide with Kang-Woo's sword. His swordsmanship was truly unpredictable like a slithering snake.

Clang!

'Yes, good.'

Si-Hun's sword was deflected by the shroud of darkness. Then he used the recoil to spin in the opposite direction from his initial trajectory, swinging his sword toward Kang-Woo's head. It was a phenomenal acrobatic movement.

'Yeah, that's it,' Kang-Woo remarked inwardly and used less power on purpose.

Si-Hun's sword pushed him more aggressively. Si-Hun destroyed a little bit of the mask that wasn't protected by the darkness.

'You're doing so well, Si-Hun!!'

Si-Hun's swordsmanship wasn't like Alec's, which was purely for suppressing the opponent. All of Si-Hun's attacks targeted the vitals, and each attack was filled with a powerful bloodlust. It was the perfect lethal swordsmanship that had no other intention but to kill the opponent.

'This is what I call a battle!'

If Si-Hun's stats were higher, it would've been a more thrilling battle.

Kang-Woo felt a bit disappointed but shook his head.

'Si-Hun will get stronger.'

Si-Hun already had the Heavenly Martial Physique, which was an aptitude bestowed onto him by the heavens, the soul of the Martial God, and a great master known as Sword Emperor Tian Wuchen.

'And now I'm filling in the missing pieces.'

Kang-Woo's eyes shone sharply. It was about time that he overpowered Si-Hun.

He drew out more of his power.

Right then...

Fwoom!!

"Huff! Huff!"

Si-Hun was surrounded by an explosive blue light.

Riiing.

[Familiar Kim Si-Hun has accepted the power of the Martial God.]

[Familiar Kim Si-Hun has learned the essence of the Azure Dragon Sword Technique.]

'The hell?' Kang-Woo thought when a blue system window appeared in front of him. 'He powered up again?'

He laughed in disbelief. This had not been in his calculations.

'He's powering up like it's nobody's business... Are you Naruto or something?'

Chapter 125 - Red Mask (4)

Fwoom!

Kim Si-Hun shone with a vivid blue light, which spread over his surroundings. The strength of his Qi now couldn't be compared to before.

'Talk about a power-up machine,' Kang-Woo remarked inwardly.

Normal people struggled to experience a power-up even once, but Si-Hun had already done it twice. At that point, it wasn't enough to call him talented.

'But still...'

Oh Kang-Woo laughed.

It was widely known that one could not surpass talent purely with effort. In a sense, it was true. The wall of talent was too high and thick for it to be overcome with effort.

'For a human, that is.'

People had a short life span. It didn't matter how much effort they put in, there was a limit to the time that they could invest in that effort. However, Kang-Woo was different. He was a demon, an immortal. He'd struggled to survive for ten millennia.

Even if Si-Hun had accepted the soul of the Martial God and had been granted great talent by the heavens, it was still not enough to surpass the results of the effort that Kang-Woo had accumulated in that ungodly amount of time.

'Should I even be calling it "effort"?''

Kang-Woo had been far too desperate for it to be encapsulated by such a simple word. It had been a yearning for life—the natural desire of not wanting to die—that had made him what he was. That desire wasn't weak enough to lose against something like talent granted by the heavens.

"Haap!"

Si-Hun, who was covered by blue light, charged toward Kang-Woo.

Kang-Woo let his sword go. He lightly flicked his finger that he'd concentrated the Authority of Waves on.

Whaaaaam!

Waves of black light spread in all directions with Kang-Woo as the epicenter. There was nowhere for Si-Hun to escape. He had no other choice but to block it.

Si-Hun quickly raised his sword as a black wave engulfed his body.

"Kurgh!"

He was forced to bend at the knee. His strength left him as if his power-up had never occurred in the first place.

'This is the power of Satan,' Si-Hun thought with a pale face.

It was like looking at a mountain with no peak. He felt like he was looking down at a bottomless abyss. Si-Hun knew he wouldn't be able to win.

He became even more sure of something he had already known from the beginning. He wouldn't be able to surpass that demon with his current level of power.

[Not a bad struggle.]

"Kurgh."

[But a small fry will be just that, no matter how hard it tries.]

"Damn..."

Clatter. The El Cuero Blade fell to the ground as Si-Hun lost strength in his hand.

Satan approached him and asked, [Are you frustrated?]

"..."

[Do you feel like you're about to lose all reason from wrath? Do you feel like your mind is about to turn blank?]

"Shut up," Si-Hun barked at Satan, who was mocking him.

Satan snickered. [Good. I like your eyes. They're full of wrath and resentment. That desire is what leads life itself.]

"Enough bullshit and put an end to this alr—"

[I won't.]

"...What?"

[Why would I end something so fun?] Satan said cheerfully.

"What do you..."

[I've taken a liking to you. Your wrath and resentment made me tremble. It excited and thrilled me.]

Satan moved his hand that still held Alec's neck, who continued to flinch in pain.

If Alec were a normal person, he would've died already. Nevertheless, Alec was a superhuman with superb physical capabilities, so he would be able to survive even if he were to stop breathing for an hour.

"What are you trying to do?" Si-Hun asked anxiously.

Satan grabbed Alec's face and brought it closer to his own.

[Do you want to save this man?]

"...Yes," Si-Hun replied with a nod.

Madness filled Satan's gaze.

[You were quite desperate. Your determination and fighting spirit have impressed me.]

"..."

[Hence...]

Crack.

A horrifying sound rang out as Satan crushed Alec's head. His skull burst, and his brain was turned to mush. Dark red blood and white brain matter dripped down.

"H-Huh...?"

Si-Hun's mouth fell open, and his eyes widened. He couldn't understand what he'd just seen.

Alec had died. The Sword of Justice, the person he'd admired and meant so much to him, had died in front of him just like that.

"A-Aaaah."



Si-Hun couldn't say anything; he struggled to form words. He trembled, and his mind went blank. The wrath that Satan had mentioned dominated Si-Hun's body.

"YOU SON OF A BIIIIITCH!!"

Si-Hun picked up his sword and stabbed Satan with all his might.

Nonetheless, he no longer had any strength left in him. He was struggling even to hold his sword.

Ting. His sword fell away, deflected by Satan's darkness.

Si-Hun tumbled to the ground yet again. He tried to get up, but he was too weak. He fell to the ground trembling. Yet, he still tried to crawl over to Satan.

[Yes, those are the eyes,] Satan said with satisfaction and nodded.

He laughed at how desperate Si-Hun looked. Satan approached Si-Hun relaxedly and lifted him off the ground.

While looking into Si-Hun's resentful eyes, Satan slowly said, [The wrath and resentment you feel right now will nourish your growth.]

"..."

[Struggle desperately. Struggle while thinking of me.]

Satan's face closed in on Si-Hun's.

[I am death, I am the end. I am wrath and resentment.]

The red mask tilted.

[I am Satan.]

"..."

Unable to speak, Si-Hun shut his mouth while the red mask was ingrained deep into his memories.

[Become stronger, human. Use the wrath and resentment as nourishment for your growth. And...]

The demon laughed next to his ear.

[Kill me.]

Thwack.

Satan struck Si-Hun's stomach with his fist. Si-Hun had been barely holding on, and with this, he finally lost consciousness.

After Si-Hun lost consciousness, Kang-Woo took off the red mask.

"Fuuu. What a shitty manner of speech."

He couldn't help but cringe at what he had said to Si-Hun.

"How did that son of a bitch Satan talk like this?"

Kang-Woo imitated Satan's usual manner of speech to speak to Si-Hun.

'Well, it wasn't just the manner of speech that was the same.'

The situation was similar as well. When Kang-Woo first fought Satan, he suffered an overwhelming defeat.

After that, Satan said something similar, "Become stronger, human. Use the wrath and resentment as nourishment for your growth. And... kill me."

'And then I actually killed him.'

Satan's end was rather funny. Satan, who had been expressing all sorts of vanity, had not expected that Kang-Woo would grow strong enough to kill him. Once death was right around the corner, Satan became a pathetic being.

He'd said, "H-How could a human... have gotten their hands on the Demonic Sea?!"

"That's why you should always kill people when you have the chance instead of trying to act all cool," Kang-Woo stated.

He tapped his chest, where the Ten Thousand Demon Core resided.

Satan had been devoured by the endless sea of demonic energy in the core. Kang-Woo had not been able to devour the prince's soul, the most important part, because it had escaped into the Hell Armament. Nevertheless, he had managed to devour Satan's Authority and his immense amount of demonic energy.

'I can't use it though.'

Kang-Woo hadn't been able to use the princes' Authorities even before his Ten Thousand Demon Core got sealed. Using a prince's Authority was impossible even for Kang-Woo, who had reached an incredible height in terms of controlling demonic energy.

"That aside..."

Kang-Woo glanced at Si-Hun, who had lost consciousness. He wondered if he'd overdone it but shook his head in the end.

'Si-Hun needed some stimulation.'

Si-Hun had everything—talent bestowed by the heavens, a marvelous master known as the Sword Emperor, and even benefits from the system. However, there was one thing he was lacking.

'Desperation.'

Kim Yeong-Hun and Kim Jae-Hyun were in prison. All the weight that Si-Hun had been shouldering had disappeared. His only motivation now was his admiration for Kang-Woo and the desire to become as strong as him.

'That's not enough.'

This was not child's play. To get stronger, a person needed to be desperate. That was the only way they could overcome the indolence that could strike at any time and grow instead.

'Please understand, Si-Hun.'

Kang-Woo had no choice but to use a radical method. Even if he had ordered Si-Hun to "be desperate", it was completely different from actually being in desperation.

'Your sword needs to get dirtier.'

Si-Hun needed to turn his sword into one that reeked of blood, a sword that wouldn't hesitate to cut an enemy down in crucial moments. If he couldn't do that, he'd die.

'Just like Alec.'

Kang-Woo smiled bitterly and approached Alec's corpse. He extended his hand, and black flames burned Alec's corpse.

"I guess that puts an end to this."

He'd eliminated Alec and given Si-Hun strong stimulation. Si-Hun's power-up had been a bonus. Now Kang-Woo just had to wait for Gaia to approach Si-Hun.

"I'll have to break my level cap somehow while I wait."

Leaving the Traits aside, weakening the seal of the Ten Thousand Demon Core was important too. Thinking about the level cap made him sigh.

'At least give me some sort of hin—'

His thoughts were suddenly cut short. He heard the distinct chime of a bell, and blue message windows appeared before him.

Riiing.

[You have defeated a Protector.]

[The energy of the system blocking your level has weakened.]

[Your level cap has risen to 69.]

[Applying accumulated EXP.]

[Your level has risen by 10.]

[You have achieved your Seventh Awakening!]

[Your stats have risen: Strength +11, Dexterity +9, Health +8, Wisdom +4]

'Huh?'

Kang-Woo's eyes widened. His level cap had lifted. What he'd craved so much had happened when he least expected it to.

'Killing a Protector was the way to break my level cap?'

Kang-Woo laughed in disbelief.

He would've continued on cluelessly if he hadn't killed Alec.

Then Kang-Woo carefully looked at the system messages.

'I thought the next cap after Level 59 was at Level 89.'

After the first cap, there were no other ones besides Level 89, the end of the Ninth Awakening—also known as the Limit of Talent.

'But I'm capped at Level 69.'

There was no need to think about it anymore. The system had been suppressing his growth on purpose.

'And the way to lift that cap is to kill a Protector, huh?'

Kang-Woo looked at Si-Hun, who was unconscious.

For a short moment... For a really short moment, Kang-Woo drooled a bit, tempted to turn Si-Hun into his prey.

"No."

Kang-Woo shook his head and pushed aside his desire.

"Even if I can, I won't."

Si-Hun was his subordinate who had pledged his loyalty to him, as well as a comrade whose soul was bonded to him.

"Si-Hun..."

'You trust me, right?'

Chapter 126 - That Took a While

"Ahem."

Kang-Woo coughed lightly. He shook his head at the sudden thought that had crossed his mind. Although it had been for a short while, it had been a disgusting thought, even for him.

'There's no way I'm that kind of trash.'

He was fighting against the Demon Cult for world peace. He had done nothing to be ashamed of; there was no way he'd even think of something like that.

"That aside..."

He naturally sank back into thought.

Even though he had discovered the condition for breaking his level cap, he couldn't be satisfied.

'I have to kill a Protector.'

He knew what to do, but he couldn't just hunt down the members of Guardians and kill them just because of that.

'That would be the stupidest choice I could make.'

First, the Protectors were allies who protected Earth from otherworldly invaders, such as demons.

In the case of Alec, he'd killed him because his ideals could have negatively influenced Kim Si-Hun, but there was no guarantee that the other Protectors were like him.

'To be honest, if it weren't for Si-Hun, I would've left him alone.'

The flood of otherworldly beings could put the world into a state of crisis.

Becoming stronger while killing the Protectors of this world would not be wise.

'I can't kill my teammates who help to defend kimchi stew.'

Growing strong enough to be able to fend off any otherworldly being by killing the Protectors was also an option, but still, it wasn't a good idea.

'In the end, I'd be alone.'

There was a limit to how many things he could do by himself. It didn't matter how strong he became; he couldn't face a worldwide crisis alone.

Saving only Korea would also be stupid of him.

The modern world was connected. There was a reason why Korean stocks would plummet if US interest rates rose—Korea was not a self-sustainable country. If the rest of the world was ruined, Korea would ultimately end up following suit.

'I can't let that happen.'

Even if he wasn't patriotic, he didn't want to see the country of his birth destroyed. No, leaving everything else aside, Korea had kimchi stew.

Korea mustn't be destroyed.

'I'll protect it no matter what.'

He became motivated and clenched his fists.

"And most importantly..."

There was no way the system would be able to block his growth.

There wasn't only one way to get stronger.

"First off..."

Kang-Woo lightly jumped and flew up using the Authority of the Sky. After leaving the hotel rooftop, Kang-Woo reached a nearby hill.

"Let's check it out."

His eyes were full of expectation. It had been unexpected, but his level cap had been lifted, and his level had gone up.

He was finally free from the Sixth Awakening and had achieved the Seventh Awakening. That being the case, there was something he had to check first.

'I wonder what I got for my Seventh Awakening Trait?'

He opened his status window as if he were ripping open a gift.

[Seventh Awakening Trait: Reaper of Souls (Rank: SS)]

[Effect: This is a Trait linked to 'Authority of Predation.' The Player can fully absorb the souls of demons and raise the 'quality' of their soul. The stronger the demon whose soul you absorb, the larger the effect.]

"This is..."

Kang-Woo's eyes shone. First, it was an SS-rank Trait. It was the same rank as the Trait that had allowed him to create the Key of the Demonic Sea.

'Although I'm not sure what raising the quality of my soul means.'

He wasn't yet sure what raising the quality of his soul would do. It probably wouldn't have a negative effect, but he didn't exactly know what positive effect it would have.

He thought about it but soon decided to stop.

He wouldn't know what it did until he tested it out.

'Linked to the Authority of Predation, huh?'

He had an idea of what it meant.

The Authority of Predation devoured everything from the target, their life, demonic energy, and even their Authority. Their soul was no exception.

'Although the way to eat a soul is a bit gruesome.'

The Authority of Predation completely ripped the soul apart.

In the first place, the Authority did not absorb the soul but tore it apart. The devoured soul disappeared forever. Fully absorbing the target's soul was a new addition to the Authority of Predation.

"Also..."

There was something more important about the Reaper of Souls Trait.

Kang-Woo looked at his status window again.

'Demonic Soul.'

It was the second step to becoming a Demon God. He didn't know what its two conditions were, but he was sure that the Reaper of Souls Trait was related to the conditions for the Demonic Soul.

'Come to think of it, my Sixth Awakening Trait was related to the Ultimate Demonic Body.'

The first time he'd seen the Demonic Art of Creation, he wasn't sure what relation it had with the Ultimate Demonic Body. However, he had found out after creating the Key of the Demonic Sea.

'The Awakening Traits and the steps to becoming a Demon God are related.'

He wasn't 100% sure, but it was a hypothesis worth considering.

"Anyway, I'll have to hunt demons to figure this Trait out."

There was no need to hurry. As long as the Demon Cult existed, a demon was bound to appear. They would most definitely cross over from Hell in whatever shape or form.

'And as for those that do cross over...'

He would devour them as he'd done for the last ten millennia.

"I'll have to make Cha Yeon-Joo work harder."

His current main source of information was the Red Rose Guild. Since it had ended up this way, it would be better to receive news of demon sightings as quickly as possible and take action first.

"Now that I've checked the Trait..."

Kang-Woo sat down. He closed his eyes and concentrated.

'Ten Thousand Demon Core.'

He could feel that its seal had become weaker after achieving his Seventh Awakening. He could see a bigger sea of demonic energy.

'I'll refine the demonic energy in the Ten Thousand Demon Core into a stat.'

The demonic energy of the Ten Thousand Demon Core existed separately from his Demonic Energy stat, but he couldn't use it in its current state.

'It's too low-quality.'

The demonic energy of the Ten Thousand Demon Core was like a sea; it was boundless and endless.

He couldn't use demonic energy from the deeper part of the sea because the seal hadn't been fully lifted. The demonic energy that had flowed out as the seal weakened was only from the sea's surface.

'I would've just used it without complaints in the past, but...'

Now that he had mastered the demonic crystal, which could compress demonic energy to high concentrations, he no longer needed to put up with it.

"Huuup."

He took a deep breath, then used the Heavenly Dragon Cultivation Technique he'd learned from Si-Hun.

The demonic energy that came out of the Ten Thousand Demon Core melted into his blood. He didn't bother focusing it into his dantian since his whole body had become like a dantian after achieving the Ultimate Demonic Body.

'But if I keep doing this...'

He felt that the Ten Thousand Demon Core residing in his heart would spread to the rest of his body.

'No, rather than spreading...'

His whole body would become the Ten Thousand Demon Core itself.

"..."

His heart started to beat faster. If his body turned into the Ten Thousand Demon Core, he felt that he would be able to use the demonic energy from the deepest part of the sea, the abyss.

His desire soared. He wanted to grasp the limit of the Ten Thousand Demon Core. He felt that if he forced the demonic energy from the Ten Thousand Demon Core to run free, he would be able to drag out more demonic energy.

'But not yet.'

He cut off that desire. An incredible thirst and severe pain spread through his body.

The thirst was like an iron hook scratching his throat.

'Endure it.'

He cut off the desire once more. It was different from when he'd crafted the Key of the Demonic Sea. His instincts were saying that it was dangerous.

"Fuuu."

He took a deep breath.

A demon's body naturally craved to fulfill desires. Enduring it was comparable to not drinking water in the middle of a desert. Even so, Kang-Woo endured it and ignored the severe pain and the thirst drying up his soul.

'I'm used to it.'

He was used to enduring his desires. He'd done so for the last ten millennia, and he simply had to endure one more time.

Riiing!

[Converting the demonic energy from the Ten Thousand Demon Core into a stat.]

[Demonic Energy (Unique Stat) has risen by 8.]

Kang-Woo's eyes widened after reading the message window.

'It rose by eight?'

It was a ridiculous boost. He could feel that the demonic energy within his blood had risen explosively.

It went to show how massive the amount of demonic energy that had been freed after his Seventh Awakening was.

"Okay, now..."

Kang-Woo checked his status window. He saw that his Demonic Energy stat had reached 120.

"What?"

His Demonic Energy stat had been 113. Since it had risen by eight, it should've become 121.

"So why is it only at 120?"

He tilted his head in confusion. Message windows popped up as if to answer his question.

[A stat has reached 120. Explosively raising the 'quality' and 'effect' of the stat.]

[The stat has failed to be raised due to the low-quality stat boost of equipment Legendary-grade and below.]

"What's this?"

He more or less understood what it was saying.

He had become so powerful as his main stat rose that the equipment effect that raised a stat by an absolute value had been blocked. In other words, the Black Pearl Coat's stat boost effect wouldn't have any meaning beyond a Demonic Energy stat of 120.

"Kraken's Rage."

He quickly used the buff.



[The stat has failed to be raised due to the low-quality stat boost of the equipment.]

As expected, the effect was not applied.

"..."

His expression was distorted.

With that, the Black Pearl Coat had become a trash Legendary that didn't raise his stats.

"Tsk. But my demonic energy has gone up a lot, so I guess I should be satisfied with that."

The huge amount of demonic energy within his body made him understand why the absolute value boost didn't apply to him anymore.

He wasn't at the level of Balrog or Lilith yet, but he could easily defeat an average demon of the Ninth Hell.

'But why is such important information not widely known?'

To think that the stat boost effect of a piece of Legendary-grade equipment would no longer be applied after the stat reached 120...

He hadn't heard of anything like that happening before.

"..."

It didn't take long for him to come to a realization.

"I see how it is."

Kang-Woo burst into laughter.

The reason for it not being known was simple.

'There's nobody else.'

Nobody had reached 120 in a stat yet, which was why it wasn't widely known.

"I guess I'll go home."

Kang-Woo stood up.

The effect of his Seventh Awakening had been above his expectations, and the explosive amount of demonic energy stacked inside his body made him feel thrilled.

'It's been about half a year.'

It had already been half a year since he'd returned to Earth. That was the time it took Kang-Woo to reach a height no other player had been able to reach within the past five years.

"It took longer than I thought."

Tsk.

Chapter 127 - Just As Planned

The meeting between Sword Dragon and Sword of Justice, which had been heavily anticipated by the public, had fallen through due to Alec Osborne's disappearance.

Alec had last been seen hurriedly running away from the hotel.

There were many hypotheses regarding his disappearance, but the most convincing theory was that the person behind his disappearance was an assassin sent by the Demon Cult.

After what happened a month prior, it had been made quite public that assassins from the Demon Cult were after Alec.

People were horrified.

Shortly after World Ranker Fujimoto Ryoma was revealed to be an evil demon worshiper, Alec Osborne had died. That meant the Demon Cult was strong enough to kill or corrupt World Rankers.

There was also panic in Korea, which had been at peace after having managed to wipe out the Demon Cult from within its borders.

People began buying emergency food as if war were happening.

It wasn't that the chaos had paralyzed the economy but that the number of people walking on the streets had decreased significantly.

The fear of the Demon Cult had returned to Korea.

Commenter (Carrot Carrot): What should I do? I'm too scared to go to work.

↳ Commenter (Shake): 3 ppl in my company called in sick;; we're fked

↳ Commenter (Lemme Out): I've read Russian Demon Cultists have been killing people. Is that gonna happen in our country too?

↳ Commenter (I Wanna Go Home): What about Sword Dragon? What is he doing?

↳ Commenter (ππ): Dunno, he hasn't been seen either. Also, what good is Sword Dragon when even Alec was killed?

People's attention naturally focused on Korea's supernova, Sword Dragon, but most people thought that there was nothing he could do when even a World Ranker had been no match for the enemy.

The fear of the Demon Cult was gradually growing in Korea.

\* \* \*

Whish! Whish!

A sword covered in blue light was swung, making a chilling sound.

With a hardened expression, Tian Wuchen blocked Kim Si-Hun's ferocious sword swings.

Boom!

A loud sound exploded out, and the extremely expensive training room shook.

The spar continued.

"Huff, huff!"

Si-Hun breathed heavily.

Wuchen lowered his sword.

"Let's stop here for today."

"I can... keep going."

"... In that state?"

Wuchen laughed in disbelief.

Si-Hun's body was covered in sweat, and he was trembling as if he was about to collapse.

'But...' Wuchen thought.

Si-Hun's eyes were full of motivation, and the blood of a martial artist was boiling inside him.

'What happened?'

Si-Hun's attitude had changed after Alec Osborne's disappearance. He had become desperate and begun to train three times more than before.

'And his martial arts are improving at frightening speed because of it.'

With effort on top of his Heavenly Martial Physique, Si-Hun was growing at shocking speed.

'I'm worried.'

What had made Si-Hun so desperate?

Wuchen had asked him many times, but Si-Hun never answered.

Wuchen gulped and raised a hand.

"Then let's start again after a ten-minute break."

"Haaa, haaa. Understood."

Si-Hun lay down on the ground as if collapsing.

Wuchen walked out of the room after looking down at him. He saw a familiar young man—Oh Kang-Woo.

"How is Si-Hun doing?" Kang-Woo asked.

"He's spending the whole day training. Although... I don't know if I should call this passion or madness."

"It isn't madness. Si-Hun isn't that weak."

"Hmm. Well, I have to agree with that, but I can't help but worry. Do you know why Sword Dragon suddenly started acting this way?"

"No, he's not telling me either."

"Hmm. I feel like it's related to Alec Osborne, but since he's not talking, there's no way to be sure," Wuchen said, worried.

Kang-Woo made a light smile. "Well, coveting power is human nature."

"Oh. Speaking of that, I have a proposition to make."

"A proposition?" Kang-Woo tilted his head.

With a heavy expression on his face, Wuchen said, "I'm thinking about going monster hunting with Sword Dragon."

"Oh?"

"Simple training is now pointless for Sword Dragon. It'll be better for him to accumulate levels and battle experience while fighting monsters."

It was a valid opinion.

"Then, are you planning to go to Suwon's S-rank Gate?"

Wuchen shook his head.

"I'm thinking of Shanghai."

"By Shanghai, do you mean..."

There was an SS-rank Gate there just like in Hokkaido.

"Isn't it too early?"

"Don't worry. I'll be right by his side," Wuchen said in a confident voice.

Kang-Woo fell into thought.

'Sending Si-Hun to China, huh...?'

It was something that went against the conditions they'd first agreed upon with Wuchen, but Kang-Woo had come to know him quite a bit and accumulated a certain level of trust, so he thought that there shouldn't be any problems.

"I understand. If that's what's best for Si-Hun, let's do it."

"Hehe. Sword Dragon will become immensely powerful."

"I know."

Kang-Woo smirked. If that weren't the case, there was no point in all the effort he'd made.

Wuchen said, "Oh, and I won't be taking a communication device."

"Are you planning on training in seclusion?"

Wuchen nodded. "Well, something like that."

Kang-Woo fell into thought.

'There shouldn't be a problem.'

There wasn't anything that Kang-Woo needed Si-Hun for at the moment, and that would be the case even if a demon were to suddenly appear.

What mattered the most was for Si-Hun to get stronger, and Wuchen's proposal was the most effective method.

'It isn't like that way of training is famous for nothing.'

Gate hunting and secluded training were different, but at the core, they were similar.

Growing was like a flow.

Just like how even the sound of breathing bothered one while studying in a public library, even a slight disturbance could make one's concentration difficult and break the flow of growth.

'I can always call him with the Authority of Subordination if I really need him.'

There probably wouldn't be many problems.

"I understand," Kang-Woo remarked.

"Haha. We'll be heading out as soon as tomorrow, just to let you know. Once the secluded training is over, maybe Sword Dragon will follow me more than you."

"Hahaha." Kang-Woo laughed and walked past Wuchen toward Si-Hun. "That will never happen."

Even if Wuchen had pretty much become Si-Hun's master, there was no way Si-Hun would follow Wuchen more than him.

'Because I made sure that would never happen.'

Kang-Woo smirked and sat next to the lying Si-Hun.

Si-Hun sprang up.

"Ah, Kang-Woo hyung-nim!"

"You can stay lying down."

"It's fine, break time is almost over anyway."

Si-Hun stood up but then staggered.

"Urgh..."

"Si-Hun."

"Ah, I'm okay, hyung-nim."

Si-Hun quickly waved his hand. Kang-Woo also stood up and opened his mouth.

"I don't know what happened to you that day."

"..."

Si-Hun remained silent.

"Nor do I know why you suddenly started to train so desperately."

"That's..."

Si-Hun bit his lip and placed his hand on top of the handle of his sword. His expression darkened.

Kang-Woo shook his head and continued, "I'm worried, but I won't stop you. I won't ask you about it again either, but in exchange..."

He placed his hand on Si-Hun's shoulder. Si-Hun's eyes widened as Si-Hun and Kang-Woo exchanged warmth through the touch.

"Get stronger, Si-Hun."

"Hyung-nim..."

There were some tears in his eyes.

It seemed like Kang-Woo's words moved Si-Hun. Si-Hun trembled a bit, and the veins in his hands could be seen as he gripped his sword's handle.

"I understand, hyung-nim."

He looked at Kang-Woo with eyes full of motivation.

Kang-Woo turned around. The tips of his mouth went up.

'Just as planned.'

He tried his best to hold his laughter.

\* \* \*

Si-Hun and Wuchen left for Shanghai.

After solving the issue with Si-Hun, Kang-Woo began focusing on the movements of the Demon Cult. He'd heard that they had become more active in Russia recently.

"I should try going there myself."

There were many incidents in Russia recently, so he had to take a closer look.

Kang-Woo gathered information about the regions where incidents related to the Demon Cult had occurred in Russia.

"Haaa..."

He couldn't help but sigh.

Kang-Woo was looking at a map of Russia given to him by Cha Yeon-Joo.

"How stupidly big."

Russia was incomparably larger than Korea. Although he was looking at a map of Russia, he felt he was looking at a world map.

The thought of finding the Demon Cult in such a big country was honestly disheartening.

'Will I even be able to find them?'

He wasn't confident, and he honestly wanted to just let them blatantly run wild.

'But I still have to go.'

He sighed again.

Ring.

Someone called him.

It was Yeon-Joo.

"What's up?"

- Where are you right now, Kang-Woo?

"Home."

- Turn on the TV.

Yeon-Joo said in a serious voice. Her tone of voice somewhat resembled the time when the Isu Station incident had happened. Kang-Woo turned on the TV as Yeon-Joo had told him.

"This is..."

It showed a destroyed city, similar to what one would expect from a post-apocalyptic story.

There was a huge black Rift amidst the ruined buildings.

[Breaking News! An enormous number of monsters have appeared in Vladivostok!]

Vladivostok...

It was one of the SS-rank Gate sites, and just like Sapporo and Shanghai, it was an area that had become a ruin after the Day of Calamity.

[Th-Their numbers are so enormous that we still cannot provide an estimate. The monsters that have come out of the Gate are annihilating the SS-rank monsters that used to inhabit the ruined city, and they are now marching toward Manchuria! Fortunately, there have been barely any civilian casualties, but swift measures must be taken due to the short distance from Korea—]

He could hear the panicked voice of the anchor. The camera recorded a group of monsters walking out of the city ruins. They looked so ugly that just seeing their appearance made one want to vomit.

"Ha, haha."

He began laughing.

The anchor had said that a huge group of monsters had appeared, but Kang-Woo could tell what they really were.

'It's the Demon Cult.'

The monsters walking out of the city were demonic beasts. He could also see a few demons among them.

The tips of his mouth went up, and he clenched his fists.

'Yolo!'

Chapter 128 - What Are You Doing?

After hearing the news, Oh Kang-Woo went to the Red Rose Guild with Echidna and Han Seol-Ah.

"Come on, hurry the hell up!"

"Call China and check the location of the Demon Cult!"

"Where is the meeting taking place? Plane—get a plane first!"

The Red Rose Guild was upside down. People were running in the lobby and offices, trying to figure out the current situation.

As Kang-Woo opened the office door, he saw Cha Yeon-Joo buried under a pile of documents.

"Hey." Yeon-Joo lifted her head. Unlike her usual self, she had a stiff expression.

Kang-Woo got close to her and asked, "I saw the news, but what's the exact situation?"

"A massive summoning took place in Vladivostok."

"A massive summoning? Then..."

She nodded with a heavy expression on her face. "We aren't sure about the exact number. But it seems like they've summoned three digits' worth of demons. A huge number of demonic beasts were also summoned."

"Three digits...."

The tip of his mouth was about to go up when he heard that number. But he managed to control himself.

'Well done!'

He was wondering how he was going to investigate a big country like Russia. But in that desperate situation, they'd solved the issue for him. He wanted to hug them for having pulled off the large-scale summoning.

Satisfied, Kang-Woo sat in the chair.

"Any casualties?"

"Not much. Not many people live around Vladivostok in the first place. But the problem is..."

"The demonic beasts are moving."

Yeon-Joo nodded, her expression serious. "At a quick pace too. They're also so strong that they swept away all of the SS-rank monsters around the Gate."

The second point was what worried Kang-Woo the most.

An SS-rank Gate.

Even though five years had passed since the Day of Calamity, the areas around the Gate had yet to recover because monsters who couldn't compare to those from other Gates had made it their territory.

Thankfully, they hadn't expanded to other areas. However, the area around the Gate was restricted to the public.

However, the demonic beasts had wiped out these SS-rank monsters. It was easy to see how strong the demons and demonic beasts that the Demon Cult had summoned were.

'But...'

Kang-Woo gulped and licked his lips. He felt hungry. To him, the army of demons just looked like a nutritious lunch box.

'I don't really need the demonic beasts, though.'

The effect of Reaper of Souls only applied to the souls of demons.

Demonic beasts, having lost their ego after being unable to control their desires, weren't worth absorbing.

'Maybe if it's a demonic beast like Halcyon.'



Halcyon—one of the few demonic beasts possessing intelligence.

Demonic beasts with intelligence were so strong that they could defeat the average demon. Some even possessed Authorities. These were worth devouring using the Authority of Predation.

But that was only if there were demonic beasts like Halcyon.

'Most of the demonic beasts shown in the video belong to the First to Third Hells.'

Among them, there probably weren't any variants with intelligence.

Variant demonic beasts mostly lived in the Eighth and Ninth Hells.

'Then I should prioritize targeting the demons.'

He didn't intend to let a single one live.

To check the effect of his new Trait, Reaper of Souls, he had to devour as many demons as possible.

"Where are the demonic beasts headed?"

"Toward the Manchurian Plain. They might stay on course to China, but they could also change their direction to Korea."

Vladivostok was close to North Korea and China.

Five years ago, during the Day of Calamity, North Korea had fallen. That's why a large-scale war would occur if they changed their direction to Korea.

"Hmm."

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes.

A large-scale war could happen either in China or Korea, depending on the direction the demonic beasts moved.

In this situation, there was only one reasonable solution.

"How did China respond?"

"They requested an alliance with Korea. They're thinking of solving this issue in the Manchurian Plain before the number of civilian casualties increases."

"As expected."

Kang-Woo nodded.

Between China and Korea, they didn't know which direction the demons would move. If one side was attacked, there was a chance they could face damage that could be hard to handle. Therefore, joining forces and erasing the demons at once was the best possible decision.

'Although it will be unbalanced.'

China was the strongest country in East Asia. Since they had a large population, the number of Players was also high. There were also many Players who had the unique stat Qi, possibly due to the country's characteristics. So, their forces were quite strong.

Even if Korea and Japan joined forces, they wouldn't be able to face China.

'Well, it should be different if I'm there.'

Kang-Woo smirked.

It was ridiculous to think that a single person could make a difference in the strength of a country. But he wasn't being delusional. With Kang-Woo's presence, Korea would be able to compete with the USA in terms of strength.

"So, what's gonna happen?"

"A strategy meeting is going to take place in Harbin, and they asked us to participate. We're going to get a plane and head to Harbin with the Hwarang Corps and another major guild."

"I see."

"You're coming too, right, Kang-Woo?"

There was no need to ask. Kang-Woo nodded without hesitating.

"Of course."

A deep smile appeared on his face.

Feast time was drawing near.

\* \* \*

Soon, Tian Suyan joined them. Kang-Woo and the rest boarded a plane that the Red Rose Guild had prepared and took off to Harbin.

"I could've given you a ride," said Echidna, sitting next to Kang-Woo while pulling on his clothes.

Kang-Woo patted her.

"It isn't a situation where we can do anything by arriving first, anyway."

The other major guild had also sent reinforcements to Harbin, and the strategy meeting would probably take place after all the forces had arrived.

"Haaa. To think something like this would happen when Father wasn't here..." Suyan sighed. One could see the worry in her expression.

"Why? Is there a problem?"

"Since Father isn't here, my uncle will probably lead the meeting... but he doesn't like Korea very much."

"Uncle?"

"Yes. Have you heard of Sword Wraith Tian Wuxian?"

"Nope."

Kang-Woo shook his head.

"He hasn't become that famous because of my father. But still, he's one of China's strongest martial artists. He's also the vice leader of the Heavenly Sword Clan."

"Hmm. Then is his influence in the Heavenly Sword Clan bigger than yours?"

"I'm ashamed... But yes."

Suyan bit her lips. The absence of Tian Wuchen felt too big.

"I'm sure it'll work out one way or another."

Kang-Woo leaned back on the chair. He wasn't worried. If things didn't work out, he would just make them work. It was as simple as that.

\* \* \*

The flight to Harbin didn't take long.

After disembarking the plane, Kang-Woo and the rest got in the car provided by the Chinese and went toward the Chinese Player Management Office.

'This place is enormous too.'

Kang-Woo exclaimed in surprise.

As expected from East Asia's strongest country. The Player Management Office was quite massive. It reminded him of the Forbidden City located in Beijing. Furthermore, the office was so massive it made one wonder if one were in the middle of a Chinese martial arts novel.

Kang-Woo walked inside the Player Management Office while looking around.

"Hmm?"

"What's everyone doing over there?"

They were walking toward the meeting room when they saw a group of people gathered in front of a giant door.

Yeon-Joo quickly looked at their faces.

"They're from the Onnuri Guild and Angel Wings Guild."

After the disbandment of Hanul and Mir, Red Rose and the other two guilds had become Korea's three great guilds.

Yeon-Joo approached a middle-aged woman angrily pacing in front of the entrance.

"What's going on, Hyun-Joo ajumma[1]?"

"Who the hell are you calling ajum—Oh, it's you, Yeon-Joo."

Jeong Hyun-Joo was the guildmaster of Angel Wings, a guild made of high-quality healers.

The generous-looking woman said while frowning, "These guys are out of their minds. What the hell are they thinking after calling us all the way out here?"

"What is it?"

"They aren't letting us join the meeting after we came all the way here and are telling us to do as they say later."

"What?"

Yeon-Joo laughed in disbelief.

Not allowed to participate in the meeting and just to do as they were ordered?

To put it bluntly, they were saying that even if Koreans were placed on the front line, they should follow their orders.

"They're goddamn insane."

The Chinese weren't their superiors. Yet, they were saying they should follow their orders. What kind of nonsense was this?

Yeon-Joo walked toward the meeting room while emitting strong bloodlust.

Two Chinese Players blocked Yeon-Joo.

"Move."

"Master Tian Wuxian is in the middle of a meeting. You cannot enter. You will be informed of the meeting results later," the Chinese Player said in awkward Korean.

"Did you not hear me telling you to move?"

"Master Tian Wuxian had mentioned that he would need to reconsider the alliance between China and Korea if the Koreans do not follow the instructions."

"Sons of bitches..."

Intense mana flew out of Yeon-Joo's body. An immense tension weighed down on their surroundings.

"... Dammit."

Yeon-Joo cursed. In the end, she withdrew her power.

China was not the strongest country in East Asia for nothing. They were not ones to be crossed recklessly.

Instead of Yeon-Joo, Suyan walked to the front.

"What is the meaning of this? These people came all the way here to help us stop the Demon Cult's invasion. Step aside now."

"I apologize. Master Tian Wuxian had specifically mentioned that, no matter what, they were not to be let in until the meeting was over."

"Hah, you must be joking. If my father hears about this—"

"Master Tian Wuxian's orders take priority when Master Tian Wuchen is absent."

"..."

Suyan remained silent. What she had been worried about had become reality. She turned around and said to Kang-Woo, "I'm sorry. I will use the emergency communication network to call my father imm—"

"Oh, there's no need."

Kang-Woo leisurely stopped her.

Yeon-Joo and Suyan looked at him in surprise.

"Are you planning on just staying out here, then?"

"No way."

"What? Then how are you going to..."

He smirked and walked forward.

There was only one thing he could do in a situation of no compromise.

As Kang-Woo neared the door, the Chinese Players blocking the entrance took out their weapons.

"If you come any clos—"

Kang-Woo moved his hands. After grabbing their heads, he threw the two toward the meeting room door.

Crash!

The door was destroyed, and the meeting room became visible.

There were many major Chinese guilds gathered around the Heavenly Sword Clan representative.

"What the..."

The people inside the meeting room frowned.

Near the entrance, a muscular giant of a man stood up.

"Who dares to interrupt this sacred meeting?!"

While letting out a strong bloodlust, he walked toward Kang-Woo. The man swung a fist, which was about the size of a normal person's head, at Kang-Woo.

The fist was covered in materialized mana, the sign of a Ranker.

Tap.

Kang-Woo lightly grabbed his fist.

"Huh?"

A confused voice escaped the giant's mouth.

Kang-Woo pulled back the fist he was holding, causing the giant to lean forward as if falling. Kang-Woo tried to grab the man's head, but his hands slipped because the man was bald.

'Bald people sure have high survivability.'

They gained power in exchange for their hair.

Kang-Woo grabbed his neck instead.

Slam!

He slammed the man's head into the table.

With a loud explosion sound, the table made of hardwood was destroyed.

Kang-Woo sat in the place where the man had just stood up from.

"..."

A heavy silence fell in the meeting room.

They looked at Kang-Woo with their mouths wide open.

"What are you doing?"

Kang-Woo put one leg over the other while sitting in the chair.

"Continue the meeting."

Chapter 129 - I'm Full Just From Looking

"Who are you?" asked the person sitting in the meeting room's high seat. The man had a slash scar over one eye.

He was Sword Wraith Tian Wuxian—the Heavenly Sword Clan's second-in-command and Tian Wuchen's younger brother.

Kang-Woo leaned back in his chair.

"That's what I want to ask. You were the ones who asked for reinforcements, so what do you think you're doing?"

"Too many cooks spoil the broth."

"Don't try to sound wise with stupid idioms like that. I'm sure your heads aren't full of shit, so you should all know what's going on."

"..."

There was a heavy silence.

Their heads weren't just for decoration, after all.

They were the ones who'd asked for cooperation, so they knew how rude it was for them not to let the guests participate in the meeting while asking them to just follow their orders.

But...

Everyone in the room looked at Wuxian.

"What a rude man you are." Wuxian let out bloodlust and grabbed the handle of his sword.

"Ahhh..." Kang-Woo sighed and placed his hand on his forehead. "I'm seriously sick and tired of people like you."

"..."

"Alright, I will explain to you what kind of person Tian Wuxian is," Kang-Woo remarked.

"... What are you talking about?"

Wuxian's eyes shone sharply.

What was Kang-Woo trying to explain about him to Wuxian himself?

Kang-Woo explained, "Once upon a time, there was an incredibly talented big brother and a decently talented little brother."

"..."

"The little brother lived all his life in the shadow of his big brother. He was always jealous of him but couldn't do anything because he couldn't surpass his big brother."

Wuxian's expression hardened.

"But a perfect opportunity came. The big brother wasn't available, and an army of monsters was invading."

Kang-Woo continued in a low voice, "He wanted to make a huge achievement. He probably wanted to show everyone he could do it too, which was why he placed the reinforcements at the back to ensure that they wouldn't be able to make any achievements whatsoever in the battle."

There was a whiteboard in the meeting room with the formation for the battle drawn on it. Everyone looked toward it.

The Korean Players were placed near the rear end, around the supply unit.

In comparison, the Heavenly Sword Clan was in the vanguard; not at the very front where they would be human shields, but right where they would be able to play an active role.

"An idiot struggling within the shadow of his big brother. That is who Tian Wuxian is."

"..."

Wuxian remained silent.

Someone he'd seen for the first time—to make it worse, someone whom he'd known for barely five minutes—was talking about him as if he knew everything about his life.

The problem was... most of what he said was true.

"You know nothing." Wuxian's expression distorted.

"I think I've pretty much figured out everything about you as a person just from your first line, man. Seriously..." Kang-Woo clicked his tongue as if bored. "You have no individuality, you're boring, and you don't even leave an impression. You're common to the very core, and exhaustingly plain."

"..."

"You're like a character that an author took three seconds to think up because their deadline was approaching. I'm seriously so sick and tired of meeting guys like you."

"Kurgh."

Wuxian bit his lips. Kang-Woo's words were more unpleasant than any of the humiliating comments that he had ever suffered.

He trembled in anger. Veins popped up from the hand gripping his sword handle. The Qi inside his dantian spread through his body.

"Haaa."

Kang-Woo sighed. He could already see where this was heading.

"Alright, I guess it's time for you to charge at me in an uncontrollable rage."

There was no need to even think about it.

Expressionless, Kang-Woo raised his hands and made a beckoning gesture.

"Bring it already. Don't waste precious story content."

\* \* \*

"H-How could this be?!"

"How could he defeat the Sword Wraith so easily..."

Everyone in the meeting room was shocked.

Five seconds...

That was all it took for the unknown Korean Player to overwhelm Sword Wraith Tian Wuxian.

After losing his temper, Wuxian had unsheathed his sword, charged toward Kang-Woo, and lost.

The martial artists looked at Wuxian, who had been smashed into the wall unconscious, in disbelief. Even Sword Emperor Tian Wuchen wouldn't have been able to overwhelm Wuxian so easily.

"Alright, let's do it like this," Kang-Woo said to the rest, who were looking at him in disbelief for having overwhelmed Wuxian instantly.

"There's no way we'd be able to cooperate like this. We can fight together, but let's just act separately."

He was talking about dividing command. In reality, doing something like that in war was dangerous, but there was nothing they could do about it in their situation.

'This will be better than fighting because we couldn't get along.'

It would be a frontal assault in a non-complicated terrain, anyway. There wasn't much strategy needed in the first place. In that case, it would be better if each side fought on their own.

"Then, let's all go our separate ways, okay?"

Kang-Woo stood up and turned around.

Cha Yeon-Joo called out to him dumbfoundedly, "K-Kang-Woo, you—"

Kang-Woo placed his hand on her shoulder. "In that sense, do your best."

"... On what?"

What did he mean?

Kang-Woo smiled.

"Yeon-Joo, I want you to be in charge of commanding the Korean forces."

"Wha—Why me...?"

"Or ask Mr. Jang Hyun-Jae. I can't do it."

"But you're the one who caused this mess."

"There's always someone who creates work and another one who cleans up after them."

"..."



Yeon-Joo felt as if someone had hit her from behind.

Commanding an army... It was something not even she, who commanded a major guild, had experienced before. Leaving experience aside, it didn't match her personality.

"Y-You piece of shit."

Yeon-Joo sighed and grabbed her forehead. She had felt refreshed after seeing him teach the Chinese a lesson, but in exchange, he'd put a huge burden on her.

She asked, "Why can't you do it? I'm sure you'd be a great commander."

Commanding in war was a difficult task and wasn't as simple as shouting something like 'Kill them all!' She had to know the characteristics of each squadron and mobilize the right one at the right time.

'But if it's Kang-Woo...'

From what he'd shown until now, he could command the forces easily.

Kang-Woo shook his head.

"I have other things to do."

"... What else is there to do in war except for fighting?"

"Haha, that's a secret."

He avoided answering.

Kang-Woo smiled bitterly.

'I can't tell her I'm going to eat demons.'

The Demon Cult army consisted of thousands of demonic beasts and hundreds of demons. What Kang-Woo needed the most were demons.

'I'm going to take advantage of the chaos and hunt only the demons.'

He had to go deep into enemy lines, but that would be no problem at all with his current strength.

Kang-Woo turned his head and looked at the frantic Chinese Players.

'They just have to make enough chaos so that the Demon Cult becomes restless.'

He had come here for that reason.

Even for him, going through tens of thousands of demonic beasts and then facing hundreds of demons was too much.

It was necessary to drag the demonic beasts away and disperse the demons' forces.

'I'm sure they'd be able to do that much.'

Although their strongest Player had just lost terribly to him, Chinese Players couldn't be underestimated. If he got rid of the demons, they should be able to deal with the demonic beasts by themselves. And if Yeon-Joo and the Korean Players were added on top of that, there was absolutely no question about them dealing with the demonic beasts.

'Hurry on over.'

Kang-Woo clenched his fists expectantly. Although he was unable to feel hunger due to his body being that of a demon, he couldn't help but feel a tickling sensation in his stomach.

\* \* \*

Three days passed.

The preparations for war were done very quickly.

Yeon-Joo had spent day and night studying formations and strategies to fulfill the role of commander.

And finally...

"Th-The've appeared!" shouted a Player specialized in reconnaissance.

There was a heavy nervousness going around. Everyone looked in the direction the Player pointed.

A cloud of dust was rising over the horizon.

"Urgh."

"H-how many are there?"

"It feels like we've gone back in time to five years ago..."

The Players trembled in fear. It was their first time seeing such a huge invasion since the Day of Calamity.

"Everyone, calm down and make sure you've prepared everything for battle! We still have some time!" shouted Yeon-Joo, who was holding a megaphone. Her voice rang out through the area.

Just as she'd said, there was some time before the demonic beasts reached them.

It wasn't as if demonic beasts moved at supersonic speed, so they wouldn't be able to arrive in a flash just because they could be seen on the horizon.

"They're here."

Kang-Woo's eyes shone, and he stood up. Unlike others, he was excited.

'They're finally here!'

He used the Authority of the Beholder and looked beyond the dust above the horizon. He saw the demonic beasts he'd seen in the news.

'But I don't see any demons yet.'

Kang-Woo clenched his fist while licking his lips. Delicious meals were walking toward him on their own. He wanted to thank the Demon Cult.

"Good."

He nodded and smiled in satisfaction. The demonic beasts might look like horrifying monsters to others, but to him, they just looked like nutritious lunch boxes that were fervently running toward him.

"Kang-Woo," Han Seol-Ah said as she walked toward Kang-Woo. She had a rice ball in her hand. "I made you something to eat."

It was an attractive proposal. The combat rations that the Chinese provided were so horrible that he wanted to eat it even more.

But Kang-Woo shook his head.

"No, I'm okay. Give it to Echidna."

"Have you eaten already?"

"Nope." Kang-Woo smiled and looked at the demonic beasts. "I'm full just from looking."

He stroked his stomach.

'Hurry up, guys.'

Thinking about the feast he was about to have made him full already.

Kang-Woo let out the gas that was bubbling up from his stomach.

Burp.

Chapter 130 - Apostle of Evil (1)

The large army started to move. It was different from a normal army. Its members weren't soldiers carrying guns but demonic beasts summoned from Hell. Walking relaxedly in the center of this army of demonic beasts was a wrinkly old man.

Surrounded by demonic beasts, the old man seemed out of place. However, that wouldn't be the case at all if he were observed based purely on the energy that he exuded. Much like the demonic beasts around him, he was filled with demonic energy.

If anything was out of place, it was that the demonic energy flowing out of the old man's body was overwhelmingly thicker than the demonic energy around him.

"Good."

Anton Sidorovich, the white-haired old man, smiled, deepening the wrinkles on his face. He nodded while looking at the demonic beasts crowding the Manchurian Plain.

'With this, we've proven it.'

This was the Demon Cult's first large-scale summoning. Before this, they'd gained experience by doing small-scale summonings, but they were finally putting their plan into action now.

The large-scale summoning was the first step of that plan. They wanted to test a hypothesis before they set their plan into motion.

Anton laughed. The test was a huge success.

'The Gaia System is getting weaker.'

The Gaia System was the Earth's defense mechanism that the Demon Cult had been trying to destroy for a long time. It had been stopping the Demon Cult's long-cherished goal, but it was gradually weakening. The entity that had been blocking their plan's progression was finally starting to disappear.

'With this, they will also become stronger.'

Anton's heart beat faster.

The Aspects of Evil who stood at the pinnacle of the Demon Cult would be able to make their move soon enough.

[Human.]

"Hmm?"

A being walking beside Anton spoke to him. It was an ugly creature with bat wings, goat horns, and red skin. Unlike the demonic beasts that were closer to animals, this being had an intelligence similar to a human's. It was one of the beings of Hell who always sought to fulfill their desires.

"Kekeke. What is it?" Anton replied.

[Are we headed toward the human army right now?]

"Yes, that's correct."

[Hehehe. I see.]

Uttar, the demon from the Fifth hell, let out dark demonic energy.

To him, humans were lowly, insignificant, and weak creatures. They were mortals suitable as livestock who should only crawl on the floor. Yet, Hell's opinion of humans had been greatly overturned due to one man, and Uttar didn't like that.

[I, Uttar, will prove that humans are, in the end, just that... Humans!] Uttar said in a spirited voice.

"Ah, I think you'll have to leave that for later."

[What?]

"We have something else to do first."

Anton took something out of his pocket. It was a photo of a young man with a sharp look—the person who had meddled with their plan in Sapporo.

'I heard that he's participating in this war.'

Anton heard that this person had also gotten into a conflict with the Chinese.

"Hmm."

He looked at the photo with great interest.

'I'll have to talk to him.'

Anton had to know how someone who could easily overwhelm a cardinal wasn't that well-known and why he had gotten in the way of the last summoning.

'He isn't like Alec Osborne.'

After seeing the man through Akiyama, Anton was sure of it. He hadn't felt a blazing sense of justice or hostility toward the Demon Cult from the man.

'Those eyes...'

He was used to seeing eyes like the man's. They were mad eyes full of desire for power, shining with madness and bloodlust. Anton knew a lot about humans like that.

'He's like me.'

Considering that, it wasn't hard to imagine what the man desired.

'I'm going to drag him into the cult.'

Anton didn't think it would be hard to get the man to join them. After all, the Demon Cult could offer what no one else could—immortality and power. For a normal human, it was very hard to resist either of them.

If someone capable of easily overwhelming Akiyama joined them, he would be helpful to their future plans.

If he refused...

'I'll make him pay for having meddled in our plan.'

Anton displayed a chilling smile.

If the man could be a bother to their plan, then taking him out in advance was the correct decision.

[And what do we have to do?]

"We have to go meet someone. I would like you to be there for support just in case."

Seeing how that young man Oh Kang-Woo had been able to overwhelm Akiyama so easily, his strength had to be at least at the level of a World Ranker. It was better to have as much backup as possible while facing a powerful person whom they didn't have much information about.

[Hah!] Uttar let out a laugh. He glared at Anton with a burning gaze. [I listened to what you had to say as thanks for having summoned me, but you are crossing the line. I am a demon, human. Do not order me around.]

"Hmm."

[I want to eat humans. I will pretend I did not hear your request for my support.]

Uttar turned away.

While making a troubled expression, Anton called out to him, "Lord Uttar, I apologize, but I hope you will refrain from acting rashly."

[Hmph. Is waging war against humans acting rashly? Who do you think I am? I am Uttar of the Fifth H—]

"No, that is not what I am talking about. I am just saying that you should refrain from doing things that are against the will of the Demon Cult," Anton said in a warning tone.

[What?]

Uttar laughed in disbelief.

He stared at Anton, who was asking him to be obedient. He thought his insides would turn upside down while looking at Anton's arrogant look.

[You must be out of your mind—!]

Uttar raised his giant hand.

However, before he could swing a ridiculously big fist, Anton took out a book made out of black parchment.

At that moment...

Crack—!

[Kurgh! Wh-What the—?!]

Dozens of black hands emerged from the floor and grabbed Uttar. An enormous force weighed him down.

[Kargh!]

His skin was torn apart, his bones were crushed, and he was forced to kneel. Uttar's eyes were full of astonishment.

"I trust that you will listen to me."

Anton laughed. Powerful demonic energy swirled around him.

After all, he was Anton Sidorovich, an Apostle of Evil. He was recognized by the Aspects of the Cult and was even stronger than an average demon from Hell.

[D-Damn human!] Uttar roared.

"What a shame."

Tap. Anton closed the book.

The countless hands that had emerged from the floor tore Uttar apart.

A heavy silence fell over them.

\* \* \*

"All forces, prepare for battle!" Cha Yeon-Joo's shout spread through the plain.

The nervousness of the Players in formation was openly displayed on their faces. From their point of view, all they saw were horrible creatures running toward them.

"D-Damn," one of the Red Rose Guild members uttered while clenched his trembling hands.

Everyone else was in a similar state. The demonic energy flowing out of the approaching army of demonic beasts pressured the Players greatly.

"Stay sharp! This is different from the Day of Calamity! We now have the power to fight against monsters!" Yeon-Joo yelled.

Hearing that, everyone gulped.

They recalled the Day of Calamity—a day when countless people had died and many countries had collapsed.

"Y-Yeah!"

"We can do this!"

The Korean Players cheered each other up so they wouldn't feel so anxious.

Yeon-Joo turned her head and saw the Chinese Players in a formation of their own.

'There are so goddamn many of them.'

China had so many Players that one couldn't help but be impressed.

'I guess they're also in a similar situation.'

She couldn't understand what they were saying since they were speaking in Mandarin, but it seemed like they were cheering each other up too.

'I get it.'

There weren't just ten to twenty thousand demonic beasts; there were at least fifty thousand of them. It would be weird if the Players weren't scared.

'But still...'

Yeon-Joo clenched her hands and recalled the Day of Calamity. The sight of people being slaughtered by an endless swarm of monsters resurfaced in her mind.

The current situation was different from back then. She and the rest of the people here had enough strength to fight against the monsters.

"GRRRAARR!!"

"KIIEEKK!"

The roars of the monsters got closer. The Players readied their weapons.

Yeon-Joo hurriedly took out a piece of paper from her pocket. Written on it was the strategy she'd spent the past three days thinking up.

"Mage classes, prepare to cast!"

The basics for most battles was to start with ranged attacks.

"And then, uhh... So, tanks should block the charge of the demonic beasts and then back off! Then make a V-shaped formation and lure the demonic beasts into the formation! And..." Yeon-Joo kept reading from the paper.

"Yeon-Joo, if you keep talking like that, no one will understand you."

"Ngh..."

The commander of the Hwarang Corps, Jang Hyun-Jae, walked toward her while sighing.

Many Korean Players from different guilds had gathered here as one. They didn't have much time to train together, so there was no way they'd be able to pull off such a complex formation.

"Uhhh... S-So..." Yeon-Joo uttered.

She'd crammed the art of war over the past three days. However, once it was time to put it into practice, she couldn't remember what commands to give.

Yeon-Joo frowned and thought, 'This isn't for me.'

Commanding didn't suit her. She was more suited to fighting.

"Hyun-Jae ahjussi[1], I think you should do it," Yeon-Joo voiced.

She gave the megaphone to Hyun-Jae, who was next to her, and smiled. Red chains emerged from her wrists while emitting a red light.

"Oh, yeah. I forgot to say something," Yeon-Joo said. She took the megaphone back from Hyun-Jae and shouted through the megaphone, "Don't make this more complicated than it needs to be! Think of it as a massive EXP event! Let's take this opportunity to get tons of EXP!"

Some people laughed, and the tense mood became more relaxed. There were also some Players whose eyes lit up after hearing the mention of experience points.

"Hah," Hyun-Jae laughed in disbelief.

He never imagined that Yeon-Joo would motivate the Players in such a way.

"Let's go, guys!! Oh, right. Some of you aren't part of my guild. Well, anyway! Do your best, everyone! Don't die and don't get hurt!"

Yeon-Joo's ridiculous commands didn't include a strategy or formation, but they had an extraordinary effect. The Players laughed, and no one seemed scared anymore. Rather, they were getting excited.

Boom. Yeon-Joo stomped on the ground, and a heavy vibration radiated outward.

"DEMACIA!!!"[2] she shouted, her voice spreading through the battlefield.

The battle began.