

M. in Hell 161

Chapter 161 - What's 1000 Minus 7?

[Phenex!]

[What the...]

Malphas and Halphas were lost for words as they watched Phenex's body twitch after his head exploded. They couldn't believe what they'd just seen.

[Phenex, are you messing with me right now because I almost lost to a human?!] Halphas asked in anger.

It had been because he'd let his guard down, but the fact he had almost lost against the retainer of Gaia didn't change. There was no worse humiliation for a loyal servant of their great master, Evil God Lucifer.

Saying that Halphas had almost lost because the enemy was one of Gaia's retainers had merely been an excuse. After all, the three demons were also retainers of the Evil God Lucifer in a sense.

Furthermore, Gaia was practically half-dead because she had not been able to properly manage the system that she was in charge of. It made no sense that they would lose against a retainer of a half-dead god.

[Phenex! Stop fucking around and get up! This isn't the time!] Malphas yelled.

He thought the same thing as Halphas.

Demons were far superior to humans from birth, so to them, this was as if a tiger had been killed by a single punch from a cat. There was no way they would be able to accept the reality of the situation.

[Phenex?]

However, there was no answer. Phenex wasn't moving at all after getting hit by the human who had appeared out of nowhere.

[Phenex! I told you to stop fucking around!] Malphas frowned and approached Phenex.

"Hey," the human, who had stepped on Phenex, said upon shifting his gaze to Malphas, "I told you to shut up."

Then Kang-Woo checked the state that Kim Si-Hun was in. Si-Hun hadn't healed completely, but he was no longer in critical condition. Considering Si-Hun's regenerative capabilities, he would probably fully recover on his own without further treatment.

"Hyung-nim..."

"Go to sleep. We'll talk later."

Kang-Woo laid Si-Hun down on the ground and exercised his right to forcibly command his Familiar. Si-Hun closed his eyes and fell asleep immediately.

When Kang-Woo heard Si-Hun breathing normally, he sighed in relief, "Haaa."

He felt much better now that Si-Hun was no longer in a critical state.

Kang-Woo took a deep breath.

Even though he was feeling relieved, he couldn't fully control his demonic energy, which was running wild. A potent impulse boiled from within him.

'Calm down,' he told himself.

He covered his face with his hands to block his vision. Then he slowly opened his eyes and once again saw the demons who had put Si-Hun in that critical state.

Kang-Woo's mind was ablaze with a cold fire. A cold fire was a paradox, but there was no other way to explain how he was feeling right now.

"Shit! Fuck!"

He couldn't help but curse.

Countless thoughts ran through his mind, and at the center of it all was Si-Hun.

"Motherfucker!!" Kang-Woo cursed again.

He gritted his teeth. It was the first time he had felt like this ever since he returned to Earth.

Kang-Woo hadn't felt so irritated since his battle with Prince Mammon in Hell—when over half of Balrog's body turned into ash and disappeared.

'Yeah.'

He wasn't angry; he was just irritated by what was going on. He was so irritated that he couldn't take it anymore.

'In that case...'

Kang-Woo looked at the demons that were approaching him. There was only one way to get rid of this irritation.

[Hm?]

Malphas, who was approaching Kang-Woo, frowned as he looked into Kang-Woo's eyes.

He couldn't see Kang-Woo's face because he was wearing a mask, but his eyes were visible.

'A demon...?' Malphas thought.

Black sclerae[1] with yellow irises—this was a characteristic that most demons had. There were some rare cases when a demon's white sclerae would turn black upon feeling extreme excitement or rage.

'Lord Lucifer said that was how Satan was.'

Malphas had heard from Lucifer that Satan, the Prince of Wrath, had white eyes that turned black in battle. He had also told them to run away without turning back if Satan's eyes were black when they managed to encounter him.

'Could this man be Satan?'

Malphas shook his head. There was no way that was true.

There were other demons besides Satan with that special characteristic. It was just that there were extremely few of them.

[Hm.]

In any case, it was hard to think of the person before him as a human. Leaving the yellow irises aside, Malphas had never seen a human with black sclerae.

[Are you really a human?] Malphas asked.

There was no answer.

Malphas clicked his tongue. Since the man refused to answer, Malphas would just force it out of him.

Malphas extended his right arm, and dozens of black spheres appeared.

"..."

Kang-Woo silently gazed at Malphas and slowly walked toward him.

Malphas shot dozens of black spheres at Kang-Woo.

Tap.

However, Kang-Woo merely flicked his finger, and a wave of demonic energy deflected the black spheres, driving them away from him. Malphas was astonished by that sight.

Kang-Woo took a step forward, and demonic energy surged within him. As demonic energy gathered around his heart, he formed a passage that led into the depths of the Ten Thousand Demon Core, the infinite sea of demonic energy.

He shivered as an enormous amount of demonic energy flowed out from the core and into his body.

[Wh-What the...]

Kang-Woo took a step forward. He suddenly disappeared as if he had disintegrated and then reappeared right in front of Malphas. Malphas quickly raised his arms, but Kang-Woo grabbed them and ripped them off.

Crunch!

[AARRGGHH!!]

Horrible pain spread throughout Malphas' body, and black blood sprayed out from the stumps of his severed arms.

Malphas clenched his teeth and stood up. A black sphere about the size of a fist appeared in front of his chest. He used the power that their master, Evil God Lucifer had bestowed on them, and the black sphere grew in size.

The word 'destruction' was perfect to describe the black sphere, which sucked in everything around it. The enormous pulling force of the black sphere tried to drag Kang-Woo into the sphere.

Kang-Woo did not resist its pulling force. Instead, he reached out and touched the black sphere.

Seeing that, Malphas smiled.

Tap.

[Huh?]

Nevertheless, nothing happened.

Kang-Woo was touching the black sphere, but his hand was not getting mangled, nor was he getting sucked into it.

CRACK!

[H-Huh? Wh-Wha—]

Rather, the black sphere was being devoured by the black smoke emerging from Kang-Woo's hand.

Malphas's face turned pale. The power that Lucifer had granted to him was quickly disappearing.

[What did you do?!] he shouted anxiously.

Malphas couldn't help but think that something was wrong. A subconscious fear—the fear that prey felt toward a predator—took hold of him.

[Th-This can't be happening!!] he shouted like a madman.

Malphas turned and retreated.

'I must gain some distance first.'

He, Halphas, and Phenex specialized in ranged attacks. Distancing themselves and using powerful demonic energy bullets was how they fought. Maintaining a distance was vital in giving them the advantage.

However...

[Huh?]

Malphas' eyes quivered and widened as if he'd seen something unbelievable.

He'd done his best to create distance and backed off hundreds of meters in just a second, but...

"I told you to stand still, didn't I?" the man said.

He was still right in front of Malphas. It was like Malphas was having a nightmare.

The man was so close that Malphas could even hear his breath.

[E-Eek!]

Malphas pivoted to try and get away, but Kang-Woo reached out and grabbed both of Malphas' legs.

Crunch!

[AARRGGHH!!!]

Kang-Woo crushed Malphas' legs with the weight and pressure of a gigantic press. Then he twisted his hands as if squeezing a mop head dry.

Malphas's skin tore and burst open, spraying black blood into the air. Black smoke leaked from Kang-Woo's hands, which were still holding onto Malphas's legs, and entered Malphas' wounds.

CRUNCH! CRUNCH! CRUNCH!

[Wh-What are you d—Argh! ARRGGHH!! S-Stop!!]

A tremendous amount of pain shot through Malphas' body. He fell to the ground and trembled. His eyes rolled back, and bubbles frothed from his mouth.

He'd lived many years as an immortal being but had never felt pain like this before. It was as if hundreds of thousands of insects were devouring his flesh from the inside out. He never thought he'd ever experience being devoured in such a vivid way.

[Bastard!!] Halphas yelled as he quickly ran over.

He grabbed what remained of his arm that Si-Hun had severed and launched a black sphere.

"Wait your turn," Kang-Woo said.

He flicked the black sphere back to Halphas with his finger.

[Arrgghh!]

Halphas was unable to dodge his own attack due to the wound he'd received while fighting Si-Hun. He collapsed right after being hit with the black sphere.

Kang-Woo's eyes then focused back on Malphas.

[S-Stop!! P-Please!!]

The black smoke that was devouring Malphas spread throughout his body through his blood vessels. He spasmed all over like he was being electrocuted. No, he wouldn't have felt this much pain if it were just from electrocution.

The immense pain made Malphas lose his composure. Even his loyalty toward Lucifer had no meaning at that moment.

[I-I'm sorry!! AARRGGHH!! S-STOP!!]

Tears dripped from his eyes. He didn't have the capacity to keep his pride anymore.

Then, the excruciating pain suddenly stopped. It was as if Malphas' desperate screams had reached the man.

"What's one thousand minus seven[2]?"

[What? Wh-What does that m—AARRGGHH!!]

"I won't ask you this many times." Kang-Woo looked at Malphas with deep, sunken eyes. "What's one thousand minus seven?"

[993!! It's 993!]

"Well done."

The tips of Kang-Woo's mouth went up. He cracked his index finger, and the Authority of Predation within Malphas took a bite of his flesh.

[Gaaaahhhh!!]

A horrible scream spread through the area.

It had only bitten off a fingernail's worth of flesh, but the Authority of Predation amplified the pain that Malphas felt. His body started to spasm again.

"Next."

[ARRGGHH! S-Stop!! Please!!]

"Keep going."

[986! Arrgghh!!]

"Next."

[979!]

The number gradually decreased. Every time Malphas said a number, the Authority of Predation took a bite of his flesh.

It was a method of torture Kang-Woo had seen in a manga before he'd fallen into Hell. The manga had claimed that making a person continuously subtract down from a large number would keep their brain running, amplifying their fear and pain.

"Next."

[419!]

This method turned out to be very effective.

Demons did not have processing capabilities that were particularly superior than that of humans. They were just overwhelmingly more powerful than humans.

[6...]

The counting finally ended. Saliva was leaking out of Malphas' mouth, and he was about to lose consciousness.

Kang-Woo grabbed Malphas' head and brought it close to his own.

"You've had enough practice, right?"

[What...?]

"Now this is where the fun begins."

A madness that Malphas had never seen or felt before weighed down on him.

Kang-Woo said slowly, "Function $P(x)=0$ has seven distinct roots, and function $Q(x)=0$ has nine distinct roots. Set $A = \{(x,y) \mid P(x)Q(y)=0; Q(x)P(y)=0; x,y \in \mathbb{R}\}$ is an infinite set, and B is a subset of A defined as $B = \{(x,y) \mid (x,y) \in A; x=y\}$. If $n(B)$ is the number of elements in set B , $n(B)$ varies depending on $P(x)$ and $Q(x)$. Find the maximum value of $n(B)$." [3]

[What?]

"Solve it."

[No, wait. What does that even—AARRGGHH!!] Malphas screamed in agony.

Kang-Woo smiled.

"Do you get it, Malphas?"

'This is just a brief taste of Korea's level of mathematics.'

Chapter 162 - Declare War

[Kurgh... Urghh,] Malphas cried out desperately.

His eyes had rolled back, and he had slumped to the ground trembling. Saliva dripped from his mouth, and black blood poured out of his body.

"Phew." Oh Kang-Woo stretched out his arms, seemingly refreshed. "I feel a bit better now."

The irritation occupying his mind had somewhat disappeared.

[Th-The maximum value of $n(B)$...]

"What, you still haven't solved it?" Kang-Woo sneered.

He wasn't expecting to get an answer anyway.

The demons had lived a long time, but that didn't mean they were more knowledgeable than humans. Demons weren't interested in anything besides fighting after all. There were a few exceptions, but demons on average were very dumb.

'Well, actually...'

Kang-Woo also didn't know the answer to that question either. He'd searched for a math problem on his smartphone and had said it without thinking too much about it. He was an orphan, so academia was something he never really had the time for.

"Ah, that was very productive."

Kang-Woo smiled in satisfaction.

Things could have gotten very dangerous due to the irritation in his mind.

'That was dangerous.'

The irritation that Kang-Woo had felt couldn't be compared to human levels of irritation as he was a demon. A demon's body amplified the demon's desires and emotions. Demons could get into a fight to the death just because their shoulders happened to bump while they were walking past each other.

'It was really bad during my battle with Mammon.'

Back when Balrog had been driven to the brink of death, the intensity of Kang-Woo's feelings of irritation had been really high.

'Back then...'

He recalled a scene from the past. The ground had been destroyed, and the sky itself had been burning black. There...

"Tsk."

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue.

That scene wasn't something he wanted to remember.

"Let's see..."

Kang-Woo took out his smartphone, changed to selfie mode, and looked at his eyes. Behind his mask, his eyes had returned to his usual white sclerae and dark brown irises.

'They went back to normal.'

The color of his eyes changed whenever he got overly excited or enraged, so he had to be careful. Otherwise, something similar to what happened back then during the battle with Mammon could happen once more.

'Now that I think about it, that son of a bitch Satan was the same as me.'

Kang-Woo realized that, unexpectedly, he and Satan had many things in common.

He frowned and muttered, "To think that I have similarities with the Demon of Prophecy."

It wasn't welcome news. Someone could think that he was the Demon of Prophecy instead of Satan. That was something he couldn't accept.

'That aside...'

Kang-Woo turned and looked at Malphas, who was endlessly mumbling something while trembling. It was as if he'd completely lost his mind.

"I think he's too far gone to interrogate," Kang-Woo said, belatedly regretting having gone too far.

He then turned from Malphas to Halphas. Halphas was lying on the floor, unconscious.

Kang-Woo walked toward him.

"Sir, you can't sleep here."

He nudged Halphas with the tip of his shoes, and Halphas slowly opened his eyes.

[Kuh! Urghh!]

Upon waking up, Halphas groaned in pain and grabbed his wound. He raised his head. His eyes were full of fear while looking at Kang-Woo.

[Y-You...]

Bash!

Kang-Woo stomped on Halphas' face, embedding his head in the ground.

Kang-Woo spoke quietly, "I'm sure you know you're in no position to ask questions, don't you?"

There was silence. Fortunately for Halphas, he wasn't dumb enough not to realize the situation he was in.

Kang-Woo looked down at Halphas.

"Who are you three?"

He had never seen them before. Their strength was comparable to the higher-ranked demons of the Ninth Hell. Yet, he'd never seen them during all the years that he'd waged wars in the Ninth Hell.

'Well, I guess it's possible that I just overlooked them.'

Just because he was the Lord of the Nine Hells didn't mean he knew every single demon there. The Nine Hells were massive, and an enormous number of demons lived there.

However, there was another problem...

'They used Lucifer's power.'

The black sphere with powerful absorptive capabilities was a technique that Lucifer had used in the past when he fought against Kang-Woo. The characteristics of the technique were too similar to call it a coincidence.

"Are you Lucifer's retainers?"

[Kuh.] Halphas frowned.

That short reaction was enough of an answer.

'I don't recall seeing these guys among Lucifer's retainers.'

Kang-Woo thought of Halphas', Malphas', and Phenex's faces. They looked identical.

They had such a unique appearance as a trio of identical demons, so there was no way Kang-Woo wouldn't be able to remember them if he'd seen them before. After all, the war against Lucifer had lasted for a very long time.

'Are they new retainers?'

There was a high chance that was the case. Kang-Woo stroked his chin and fell into thought. If they were newly made retainers, things would get troublesome.

'Has Lucifer recovered his old level of strength already?'

These three demons were not weak in the slightest. Kang-Woo had only been able to overwhelm them because he'd recently absorbed Tirion's power and obtained massive growth. If he wasn't able to use demonic energy from the deep end of the Demonic Sea, he wouldn't have been able to overwhelm them so easily.

'He probably didn't raise these retainers in the Ninth Hell.'

The place that Lucifer had fallen into was the continent of Aernor. Kang-Woo wasn't sure what kind of place Aernor was, but it probably wasn't brimming with demonic energy like the Nine Hells. So, if Lucifer had been able to create demons that were this strong despite that, it just showed how powerful he was.

'This isn't good.'

There was no way Lucifer would have only made three retainers. Kang-Woo wasn't sure how many more retainers Lucifer had made and how much stronger they would be compared to these three.

'I heard he battled angels.'

Then there was a chance Lucifer had made more retainers so that he could fight angels.

"Damn."

Kang-Woo frowned.

So many beings had crossed from the continent of Aernor to Earth. It showed that the dimensional wall separating the two worlds had become very weak.

He was already getting irritated while dealing with the Demon Cult. If Lucifer's forces started to cross to Earth more frequently, then it would be an absolute hassle.

'Just leave me the fuck alone, you sons of bitches.'

Kang-Woo just wanted to enjoy life after the ten millennia of suffering he'd gone through, so why was everyone trying to bother him?

'Fuck. What did I do to deserve this?'

He could confidently say that he'd lived an honest and good life. It just wasn't fair.

Kang-Woo sighed and asked, "So, why did you guys come here?"

[I-I cannot s—]

"Do you want to become like him too?"

Halphas looked at Malphas, who had gone insane from the extreme amount of pain he'd experienced.

The fact they were demons didn't mean they didn't feel anything after seeing something like that. No, demons would probably be even more fearful since they were obsessed with the desire to live as long as possible.

[W-We have come here to find Satan.]

"What?"

Kang-Woo looked at him in surprise.

'Satan is truly here?'

He felt as if he'd been hit in the back of the head.

"You came here to find Satan?"

[Yes. Recently, Tirion, the God of Heroes, was annihilated at the hands of Satan in this world. Lord Lucifer had commanded us to find him and request his cooperation.]

"Ohhh."

Kang-Woo nodded. He now understood what was going on.

'So, they were talking about me.'

For a moment, he thought that the real Satan had appeared on Earth.

'Wait, no.'

He shook his head.

'Satan is on Earth.'

It had been proven many times that Satan, the Demon of Prophecy, had come to Earth and was currently leading the Demon Cult. Kang-Woo had known for a while that Satan was indeed on Earth.

'Yes, of course. Satan is the one who killed Protector Alec and Tirion's apostle, Reynald.'

He'd almost forgotten about something very important.

'That aside...'

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes. 'Satan,' 'Lucifer,' and 'alliance'—those three words started to swirl around inside his mind.

"How much do you know about Satan?"

[Not much in detail. We just know he's been amassing power by creating retainers in this world and that he's currently battling the retainers of Gaia.]

'Oh?'

Kang-Woo's eyes brightened, and the tips of his mouth curved up.

'This...'

He could use this. The gears in his mind turned quickly.

Kang-Woo grabbed his stomach and roared with laughter, "HAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

[Kuh!! Wh-What the—!]

Kang-Woo sent his demonic energy bursting forward. He deliberately didn't use his Trait, the Ruler of Demonic Energy.

Halphas' face became pale after feeling the colossal amount of demonic energy from Kang-Woo.

"'Not much in detail,' you say? You know nothing at all!"

[...What are you talking about?]

Kang-Woo snickered and continued, "You say you came here to find Satan when he's in front of your very eyes. How funny is that?"

[Wh-What?!]

Halphas' eyes widened as he thought, 'This man is Satan?'

There was no way. The man standing before Halphas was wearing a mask, but he was clearly a human. Leaving his appearance aside, why would Satan be protecting a retainer of Gaia and attacking them?

"Seeing your reaction, it seems like your eyes are for decoration. I will take this opportunity to get rid of those useless eyes of yours."

[Wha—AARRGGHH!!]

Kang-Woo pierced one of Halphas' eyes with his finger, and a blood-curdling scream emerged from Halphas' mouth.

Halphas looked up at Kang-Woo while blood poured out of his eye. At that moment, he felt that the human in front of him was more like a demon than any other demon he'd seen before.

[A-Are you... t-truly Satan?]

"Can you still not see? Well... it seems like your other eye is useless, too."

[N-No!] Halphas quickly answered.

He bit his lip and nodded.

'This man is Satan.'

The man's chilling amount of demonic energy, his crazed actions, and...

'His eyes.'

The way his sclerae had turned black when he was enraged—it was a characteristic only very few demons had. If that couldn't prove he was Satan, nothing else could.

'What have I done?!'

They had been unable to recognize a prince of Hell and had antagonized him!

Halphas was so baffled that he couldn't even laugh.

[L-Lord Satan.]

"We finally seem to be on the same page. So, Lucifer requested my cooperation?"

[Th-That is correct.]

“Cooperation for what?”

[He said that you would understand if we told you that we should get hold of the Demonic Sea.]

"..."

It wasn't hard for Kang-Woo to deduce what Lucifer meant by getting hold of the Demonic Sea.

'Son of a bitch... He's after me?' Kang-Woo realized.

To be more precise, they were after the boundless sea of demonic energy, the Ten Thousand Demon Core, that he possessed.

Kang-Woo couldn't help but laugh. The dogs that had already lost once hadn't learned their lesson yet.

He laughed loudly again, "HAHAHAHAHAHA! How interesting!"

'You haven't gotten enough of a beating, Lucifer?'

The situation was different from the incidents involving Kim Jae-Hyun and Baek Kang-Hyun. Lucifer knew very well what kind of being Kang-Woo was. Yet, he was still planning to face Kang-Woo. That in itself was comedy.

'You already know who I am.'

Back when Kang-Woo had declared war on the seven princes of Hell, he had still been weak. He had faced dozens of losses, but he had ended up coming out victorious in the very end.

It hadn't simply been because he had become strong enough to defeat the princes of Hell. If all he had been was strong, then defeating them would have remained an unachievable feat.

"Tell Lucifer this," Kang-Woo said while grabbing Halphas's neck. "I have already acquired the Demonic Sea."

[Wh-What does that...?]

"Hahahaha! Lucifer, you idiot! You truly know nothing!!" Kang-Woo grinned. "Why do you think I created the Demon Cult? The Demonic Sea is already in my hands! It's only a matter of time before I absorb its power!"

[...]

He looked at Halphas with eyes full of madness.

"Lucifer is in Aernor... correct?"

[Y-Yes.]

"Good. I was starting to get bored of this world."

Kang-Woo threw Halphas to the ground.

"Tell Lucifer this too." Kang-Woo's lips twisted into a smirk. "I will go there myself with my retainers, the Demon Cult."

[L-Lord Satan! D-Don't tell me...!]

"Hahahaha! Listen carefully, retainer of Lucifer."

Speaking in a voice filled with madness, he spread demonic energy to his surroundings.

"I, Satan, declare war on Lucifer."

Kang-Woo burst into laughter.

'Fight among yourseeeeeeeves!'

Chapter 163 - In The Name of Light!

[...You will regret it.]

"You will be the ones to regret it."

Upon hearing that, Halphas bit his lip.

Oh Kang-Woo could see a complex mix of emotions in Halphas' expression—a sense of relief for having survived, despair for having failed in the plan, and fear of having to relay this truth to Lucifer.

[Lord Satan!]

"My will is firm. I will take my retainers, the Demon Cult, and annihilate Lucifer's forces."

[Wh-Why?! Why are you doing this all of a sudden?!] Halphas shouted in confusion.

It was an obvious reaction.

Halphas could understand Satan refusing to join forces, but why would he declare war out of the blue? It was as if Lucifer had sent an envoy to form an alliance with Satan, but Satan had suddenly decided to send an army to invade Lucifer's territory instead.

"Kehehe. You truly know nothing."

Kang-Woo hadn't declared war without thinking about it first. If Satan had obtained the Demonic Sea, that alone was reason enough to attack Lucifer.

"Tell Lucifer this. I will take your soul and Hell Armament this time for sure."

In the first place, the seven princes of Hell had never been allies. While Kang-Woo had been fighting against the princes, they had also fought against each other. In the end, they joined forces with each other to fight Kang-Woo. However, that alliance hadn't been built on trust; it had been built on desperation.

If one of the princes had obtained Kang-Woo's power, they would have had no reason to avoid waging war against the other princes. After all, they also desired to devour the other princes and acquire even greater power.

'This guy doesn't seem to know what the Ten Thousand Demon Core is, though.'

If Halphas knew about it, he wouldn't have needed to ask Kang-Woo why he was waging war on Lucifer. Nevertheless, even if Halphas didn't know, his master Lucifer definitely knew.

'He will most certainly attack Satan.'

Kang-Woo made all of the necessary preparations. If Halphas were to relay to Lucifer everything that had happened here, Lucifer would have no choice but to attack Satan.

"The Demonic Sea is already in my hands! It's only a matter of time before I absorb its power!"

Kang-Woo had said that without much detail, but the meaning behind those words was clear. He conveyed that Satan had obtained the Demonic Sea, but he hadn't been able to fully absorb it. Lucifer would easily realize the meaning behind those words and attack Satan.

Kang-Woo had blatantly thrown bait that was too hard to resist.

'He has no choice but to take the bait.'

He wasn't exactly sure about Lucifer's circumstances, nor the extent of the forces that Lucifer could send to this world.

'But it doesn't matter.'

If Lucifer wasn't able to send many forces due to the intact Gaia System, then that was fine in its own right. If he could send enough for it to be an actual threat, then that force would target the Demon Cult. Kang-Woo had to eliminate both the Demon Cult and Lucifer eventually, so there would be no better news than them wiping each other out.

'The Demon Cult and Lucifer.'

The best possible outcome was to let them fight each other while Kang-Woo watched from the sidelines and profited from it. It didn't matter which side won. Either way, Kang-Woo would benefit from it. This was the essence of divide and conquer.

"What are you waiting for? Must I rip off your other arm for you to go back?"

[Kuh.]

Halphas gulped at the chilling words. He glared at Kang-Woo before quickly throwing his body into a blue Rift.

[Satan and the Demon Cult... You will soon realize the gravity of the mistake you have made.]

'Not soon enooooough!' Kang-Woo thought.

He sent Halphas off into the blue Rift while laughing gleefully in his mind.

Halphas, who had no idea what Kang-Woo was thinking, glared at him while disappearing into the blue Rift.

Kang-Woo then took off his mask and tucked it into his clothes.

"Right, then."

Since he'd sent a message to Lucifer through Halphas, it was time to enjoy the newly obtained rewards. Kang-Woo turned to the corpses of Malphas and Phenex.

'It's too bad that I let one go.'

There was nothing he could do about it. After all, he couldn't go to Lucifer personally to send him a message.

'This is all an investment for the future.'

It would be better if he thought about it like that.

'Authority of Predation.'

Black smoke spread from his hand and shrouded Phenex and Malphas. They were devoured by the Authority of Predation. Not even Halphas' arm was left behind.

Riiing.

[Activating the Trait 'Reaper of Souls'.]

"I wonder how much more I have left to go?" Kang-Woo mumbled while looking at the message window in front of him.

Fwoom!

Just then, black demonic energy burst out from him.

'Huh?'

His eyes widened as a blue message window appeared in front of him.

[The first condition of Demonic Soul has been fulfilled.]

[The Demonic Energy stat cap has risen to 130.]

[The power of the system restricting your level is weakening due to the fulfillment of a condition of Demonic Soul.]

[Your level cap has risen to 79.]

[You have achieved your Eighth Awakening.]

"All right!!"

Kang-Woo clenched his hands into fists.

It seemed he'd managed to fulfill the first condition because he'd absorbed the souls of demons that were as powerful as an upper demon, even within the Ninth Hell.

The message windows that followed also made him happy.

[The passage leading to the deep end of the Ten Thousand Demon Core has expanded.]

[Additional souls of demons absorbed with the 'Reaper of Souls' Trait will expand the passage even more.]

"Very nice," he said with a laugh.

The passage that led to the deep end of the Ten Thousand Demon Core had expanded, so the number of Authorities he could use had also increased.

There were a few Authorities that, unlike the Authority of Blades and the Authority of Haste, needed some preparations before he could use them. They were a sort of technique that could only be used with demonic energy from the deep end. If he could use those techniques, he would be on par with—no, he could surpass Balrog.

"Let's see... I wonder what I got for my Eighth Awakening Trait?"

He was overflowing with anticipation.

Kang-Woo opened his status window and checked the Trait.

[Eighth Awakening Trait: ??? (Rank: ???)]

[The Eighth Awakening Trait will fully unlock after reaching 130 Demonic Energy stat.]

"Oh."

Kang-Woo sighed disappointedly.

'They did the same thing with the Sixth Awakening Trait.'

He frowned at the question marks that appeared every time he was on the verge of forgetting about them. It was as if an author, who had obtained unexpected success with their novel, was doing their best to keep the readers interested.

'But unlike before, I know exactly what I have to do.'

His goal, reaching 130 stat points for the Demonic Energy stat, and the means to achieve it were clear. The method that was most likely to succeed was to continue expanding the passage to the deep end by absorbing the souls of demons using Reaper of Souls.

"And thank god the level cap was lifted."

It was already fantastic that he could break the level cap by fulfilling the conditions of Demonic Soul instead of having to kill Gaia's Protectors.

'Then I guess there are two ways.'

He could either kill Protectors to weaken the system that had sealed his power, or he could become strong enough for the system to be unable to seal his power.

"All right."

There was no need to even think about which of the two was the better option. He had no reason to do something as stupid as killing his allies to become stronger.

"First, getting 130 in my Demonic Energy stat takes priority."

Considering that the Awakening Trait was related to the condition to become a Demon God, he needed to unlock it as quickly as possible.

"It shouldn't be a problem."

The tips of his mouth curved up.

He just had to wait for Lucifer to take the bait that Halphas was bringing to him. Kang-Woo likely wouldn't need to wait very long.

'He's probably scared shitless.'

Satan had acquired the Demonic Sea that Lucifer desperately wanted. Demons always craved more power, so there was no way he'd be able to stand still and watch the situation unfold. Lucifer would surely make his move before Satan was able to fully absorb the Demonic Sea.

'If Lucifer takes action...'

There was no way the Demon Cult wouldn't take action either if that were the case. So, Kang-Woo would just wait to profit from it in the name of Guardians.

'But there's just one problem.'

He narrowed his eyes as he thought of the worst-case scenario.

'If Lucifer learns the truth...'

Nevertheless, Kang-Woo wasn't greatly worried about that possibility coming true.

'He thinks Tirion was annihilated because of Satan.'

Tirion had let others know of Satan's existence as a final form of struggle. At that moment, Tirion had thought that Satan was the holder of the Demonic Sea. There was absolutely no way Lucifer would be able to know that the Lord of the Nine Hells had annihilated Tirion while pretending to be Satan.

'Glory to fucking Tirion!'

As a loyal apostle of Tirion, the God of Heroes, Kang-Woo couldn't help but praise him. Thanks to Tirion's desperate dying words, Kang-Woo had gained the ultimate alibi that freed him from all doubts.

'As expected of Lord Tirion!'

Tirion had given Kang-Woo his power without hesitation while preparing himself for annihilation, all for Reynald to be avenged. He was a hero who had made known the existence of Satan, the Demon of Prophecy, even while he was being annihilated from excessive interference with the system!

"I will never forget... your sacrifice."

Thinking of Tirion's sacrifice made Kang-Woo tear up a bit. No one would dare call Tirion anything other than a hero. He had sacrificed his life to warn others of the existence of the Demon of Prophecy right until his dying breath.

'You are the real hero, Lord Tirion.'

Tirion had a heart that was as steadfast as a giant pillar and an indomitable will that never bent under any circumstances. He was a hero who truly mourned for his apostle Reynald and sacrificed everything for him.

"Aahh," Kang-Woo sighed.

'I realized your greatness far too late.'

He never imagined that the void Tirion left in his death would be so massive. Kang-Woo felt like his heart was being poked with a needle.

'I'm not feeling guilty.'

He had inherited Tirion's will and was trying to eliminate Satan, the Demon of Prophecy, so he had nothing to feel guilty about.

Kang-Woo stood up.

Since he had become Tirion's apostle, he couldn't just stand by as this world was laid to waste by the fierce battle between Lucifer and Satan.

'I will punish them both myself.'

He would do so in the name of light!

Chapter 164 - The Light Has Betrayed Me

"Kuh..." Kim Si-Hun groaned.

"You're awake," Oh Kang-Woo said as he sat beside Si-Hun.

Si-Hun slowly opened his eyes and looked at Kang-Woo.

"Hyung... nim?"

He looked up at Kang-Woo as if he'd seen a ghost.

Tsk. Kang-Woo clicked his tongue.

"Yeah. It's me, man."

"H-Hyung-nim! Kurgh!"

Si-Hun quickly stood up, but he collapsed again while grabbing his stomach. Kang-Woo grabbed Si-Hun and lowered him to the floor. Then Kang-Woo lightly hit Si-Hun's head with his hand.

"Stay still. Your wounds aren't fully healed yet."

Kang-Woo's Authority of Regeneration couldn't heal someone completely. It could heal superficial wounds, but it couldn't heal deep wounds and fatigue.

Si-Hun had received such severe damage that it wouldn't have been strange if he had died. There was no way he was going to be able to move right away.

"Why did you keep fighting like a dumbass? You should've run away when you had the chance and stalled for time. Seol-Ah said she would contact me, didn't she?"

"...I'm sorry."

"Haaa," Kang-Woo sighed.

'Well, I'm sure it would've been almost impossible to escape.'

After all, there were three enemies. There was a high chance that Si-Hun hadn't spotted an opportunity to run away. Despite knowing that, Kang-Woo couldn't help but get angry.

"M-More importantly, what about the demons?" Si-Hun asked.

"Two died, and one managed to escape."

Well, Kang-Woo had let him escape.

"Ah." Si-Hun's expression darkened, and he lowered his head. "Yet again, I—"

"I think I know what you're trying to say. It's cringy, so shut up."

"..."

"Don't put on a pity show by blaming yourself. It's pathetic."

"A-Ahem."

"You're so goddamn dramatic all by yourself. I would think you're the most miserable person in the world if I didn't know any better."

"H-Hyung-nim!"

Si-Hun's face flushed with embarrassment.

Kang-Woo laughed out loud.

"So, stop with the solo drama and keep lying down."

"Y-You kind of seem different from usual, hyung-nim," Si-Hun groaned at Kang-Woo's hard-hitting remarks.

Kang-Woo smirked. "Do I?"

It was true that he'd been harsher with Si-Hun than usual... but this was closer to his normal manner of speech.

"Kang-Woo!"

"Kang-Woo hyung-nim! Are you okay?!"

Han Seol-Ah, Kang Tae-Soo, and Echidna ran toward him.

"Hm?" Kang-Woo murmured.

He tilted his head in confusion when he saw a middle-aged blonde woman running alongside them while holding Gaia in her arms. She was Grace McCubbin.

"How did you..." Kang-Woo uttered in surprise.

"I called her," someone answered.

Kang-Woo turned his head toward the direction of the voice.

The one who had spoken was Tian Wuchen. He was with Cha Yeon-Joo, Baek Hwa-Yeon, and Tian Suyan—the monster subjugation group.

"Are you hurt?" Wuchen asked as he walked toward Si-Hun.

Si-Hun tried to stand up, but he fell back down again while groaning in pain.

Wuchen placed his hand on top of Si-Hun's body and remarked, "You have severe internal damage."

He closed his eyes and infused Qi into Si-Hun's body. Si-Hun's expression, which was distorted in pain, became more relaxed.

Kang-Woo turned his head from Wuchen, who was healing Si-Hun, to Yeon-Joo.

"You guys called Gaia and Grace?" he asked.

"Yeah. To be exact, Wuchen ahjussi[1] called them."

"Hm." Kang-Woo nodded.

Guardians was an organization that kept itself hidden, but most of the World Rankers and the chief executives of each country knew about their existence. Wuchen was a chief executive in China as well as a World Ranker, so it made sense that he had a way to contact Gaia.

"K-Kang-Woo, I heard that demons attacked Si-Hun. Is he okay?" Gaia asked in a worried voice.

She was blind, so she had no way of knowing what state Si-Hun was in.

Kang-Woo nodded and replied, "Fortunately, he's gotten a lot better now. I defeated the demons."

"Hmm, but where are the demon corpses?" Grace questioned.

"They turned to dust and scattered away after I killed them."

"Ah. Come to think of it, that happened with Oriax before," Yeon-Joo said, recalling what had happened in the past.

Grace tilted her head. "Really? That didn't happen when I killed a demon."

There was no doubt it hadn't. A demon didn't turn to dust and disappear after they died. Oriax had disappeared only because Kang-Woo had used the Authority of Predation.

'But...'

Kang-Woo calmly said, "It probably varies from demon to demon. After all, we still don't know much about them."

"That's true."

It had only been a few years since they began fighting demons and didn't know much about them. So, the others did not question it even when Kang-Woo made up an excuse.

'It's so easy to set things up.'

No matter what happened, he could just say whatever he wanted about demons, and it would be taken as fact.

"More importantly, Mr. Tian Wuchen, seeing how demons have attacked this village..." Gaia said.

"Yes. It seems like the traces we found today were of the Demon Cult," Wuchen answered while nodding.

Gaia sighed.

Kang-Woo's eyes lit up. "You found traces?"

"We did. Before I heard the news that Sword Dragon was attacked, I found traces that seemed to belong to the Demon Cult."

Gaia added, "I'm actually here because I heard from Mr. Tian Wuchen that he had found traces of the Demon Cult, and while we were on our way here..."

"We heard that Sword Dragon had been attacked."

"..."

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes.

'Then they didn't come here for Si-Hun.'

He had found it weird that they'd arrived so quickly, but it made sense if they had already been on their way before they heard the news.

'That aside...'

"What traces did you find?" Kang-Woo asked Wuchen.

"I found the summoning magic circle that the Demon Cult uses."

"There were those weird monsters that we had fought back in Manchuria too," Yeon-Joo said as she approached Kang-Woo. She handed him the item in her hand. "We found this in the center of the magic circle."

"This is..."

It was a black stake in the shape of an inverted cross.

Kang-Woo's expression hardened.

'A Rift Seed.'

The stake was a Rift Seed, the item that the Demon Cult had used to weaken the Gaia System.

'Judging from its condition, it hasn't been long since it had been sown.'

It was unnaturally clean. There was no way that Yeon-Joo would have gone out of her way to clean the stake, which meant that there were Demon Cultists around the area that had sown it not long before Yeon-Joo found it.

"This must be the reason for the rise in monster attacks lately," Yeon-Joo speculated.

"The monsters around here were far more aggressive than usual," Hwa-Yeon added while nodding.

Kang-Woo remained silent.

Si-Hun propped himself up and surmised, "In that case, the Demon Cult must have been behind the village attack as well."

"I think so too, Protector Kim Si-Hun," Gaia said.

'No.'

Kang-Woo shook his head. He thought of the three demons he'd just faced—Malphas, Phenex, and Halphas.

'They have nothing to do with the Demon Cult.'

They were Lucifer's pawns, who had ventured to Earth from the continent of Aernor. They had no relation whatsoever to the Demon Cult on Earth.

'But...'

The Rift Seeds, demonic beasts, and magic summoning circles—it was unlikely that Lucifer's pawns had been involved with those things.

Kang-Woo's eyes shone.

'If that's the case...'

On the pretext that these two incidents were completely unrelated, there was only one possible explanation.

'The Demon Cult has taken action.'

Lucifer's pawns had been nothing but uninvited guests whose arrival had coincided with the Demon Cult's activities. It was probably the Demon Cult that had turned monsters into demonic beasts and made them attack the indigenous people.

The tips of Kang-Woo's mouth curved up slightly.

'Holy shit! They've gone and done it!'

Kang-Woo had been waiting for Lucifer to take the bait. Meanwhile, the Demon Cult had gotten onto the fishing boat on their own and put things into motion, as if to make sure he didn't get bored while waiting.

"Seeing that there wasn't only one summoning magic circle... we should consider the possibility of another mass summoning."

'All hail the Demon Cuuuuult!'

Kang-Woo clenched his hands into fists and grinned.

He had been wondering how he could reach 130 points in his Demonic Energy stat, but the Demon Cult had given him the perfect solution. He felt like worshiping the Demon Cult.

'Where have you been all this time, good sirs?!'

It had been about time they made their move anyway, as they hadn't taken any action after sowing the Rift Seeds.

Thanks to their immaculate timing, Kang-Woo was so happy that he was desperately resisting the urge to dance on the spot. He was just one step away from opening his Eighth Awakening Trait, so he couldn't be happier upon learning that the Demon Cult was preparing for another mass summoning.

'I've been waiting for you.'

He'd been worried that maybe the Demon Cult had gone under after failing in their Rift Seed plan, but it turned out that they hadn't given up.

Kang-Woo knew that they wouldn't give up. He believed that they would rise once again after overcoming all kinds of hardships and make sure this world was engulfed in darkness.

'I knew you could do it, my good sirs of the Demon Cult!!'

He didn't know which or how many demons they would summon. Nevertheless, aside from the princes of Hell, there was no demon who could be a match for Kang-Woo now.

'And the chance of it being a prince is almost nonexistent.'

The magic circle that Yeon-Joo and the others had found was similar to the one the Demon Cult had used to summon Oriax. The seven princes of Hell were no longer in the Nine Hells, so there was no way they would be able to call upon a prince through a summoning.

There was a chance that Lucifer, who had fallen into the continent of Aernor, or princes in other dimensions could be summoned. However, every demon and demonic beast that the Demon Cult had summoned so far had been from the Nine Hells, so that was highly unlikely.

That meant the only thing he had to do was freely enjoy the meal that the Demon Cult chefs had prepared for him.

'I won't ever forget the taste of this delicious lunch box that the Demon Cult has prepared for me...'

The grace of the Demon Cult had completely melted away any sense of reverence he had felt for Tirion a few moments ago.

'Fucking cheapskate.'

The excruciating amount of pain he had felt when he absorbed Tirion's power stood out even among the ten millennia's worth of painful experiences.

After all that bullcrap Tirion had said about devoting oneself to the light, he hadn't even been able to recognize a true hero that was doing his absolute best to save the world. Why couldn't the light give him as many things as the Demon Cult did?

Kang-Woo felt like crying. He thought that his past self was pathetic for having lamented over Tirion's death.

'The one I should be worshiping isn't the light.'

It was not the time to be praising trash like Reynald.

Kang-Woo tightened his fists and stretched his hands up to the sky. Darkness was slowly filling the sky as the sun set.

'From now on, I will be worshiping the Demon Cult!'

Chapter 165 - The Road to Becoming a Hero (1)

"The Demon Cult..."

Gaia mumbled that name with a worried expression. She began to tremble slightly.

"What do you want to do? Should we head straight to where the magic summoning circle was found?" Grace McCubbin asked Gaia.

"B-But Protector Kim Si-Hun is..."

"I'm fine."

Kim Si-Hun stood up. One couldn't say he was fully healed, but he couldn't stay lying down in such a dire situation. He grabbed his sword while putting more strength into his staggering legs.

"..."

Gaia remained silent and grabbed her dress's skirt.

"It's... too dangerous."

She hesitated as Si-Hun displayed his fighting spirit.

From her perspective, it was normal to hesitate.

The Demon of Prophecy, Satan, had attacked their secret vault and taken the Rift Seeds they'd collected with much effort. Protector Alec Osborne and Reynald, a god's apostle, had died. Not only that, if it hadn't been for Kang-Woo, Si-Hun would've died.

It would be weird if she didn't hesitate in such a situation.

She cautiously said, "It would be better if we took more time to analyze the size of their forces and subjugate them after receiving help from each country..."

It made sense.

South America had turned into monster territory, so even if a mass summoning were to occur, there wouldn't be many civilian casualties. Just like the war in Manchuria, it would be better if they took time to organize an army and then face the enemies.

"Gaia."

Kang-Woo took a step forward. He understood why she was hesitant, but they couldn't continue to mope around.

'They might take the demons out of their forces like last time.'

In Manchuria, Kang-Woo had only been able to track them down because Anton Sidorovich had sent him a meal ticket out of the blue. But there was no guarantee they would do that again.

No, considering the losses that they had suffered before, there was no way they'd try to use the same strategy.

If he missed the exact time when the Demon Cult began the summoning ritual, there was a chance that the demons would be moved somewhere else.

'I can't let that happen.'

"If we give them time, we don't know how much more damage they could cause. We have to attack as quickly as possible."

"I know that, but..."

"I know what you're worried about. You're afraid we will die at the hands of demons, like Reynald and Alec."

Gaia remained silent. Kang-Woo guessed correctly.

Kang-Woo drew out his demonic energy from within his body but added a bit of Tirion's energy that he had devoured before, which now resided in the Ten Thousand Demon Core.

Slightly dark golden energy, unlike his usual black energy, flowed out of him.

The only thing that changed was the color; it was still demonic energy, but it worked wonders visually.

"Ah..."

Those around them let out short exclamations.

The sight of Kang-Woo covered in a faint golden light was just like that of a hero of light. It was a scene that was very cliché. It appeared in numerous manhwas and novels, but there was a reason for it being that way...

'Great reactions.'

He suppressed his laugh and opened his mouth.

"We won't be able to protect anyone if we're afraid of death."

"..."

"Of course, I'm not being stupidly prideful, nor am I trying to leap to my death, blinded by justice. It's a conclusion I reached after facing those demons not long ago."

He transformed the Key of the Demonic Sea into Reynald's golden sword, Del Lain. He gripped the sword and stuck it into the ground.

"Demons are most certainly powerful enemies, but we are a match for them."

'Shieet, what a scene!'

Gaia said, "But still, it would be better if we took some time to—"

"The more time passes, the bigger the damage. People live here as well, albeit few." His eyes were burning intensely, and an unbreakable will poured out of him. "Although there aren't many, we must protect them."

'Fuck, man. I'm getting goosebumps even though I'm the one saying it!'

"Numbers... aren't important when talking about people's lives."

'Oh, shit! What if Gaia falls in love with me?! Aren't I being way too cool right now?'

He felt proud about the dialogue he'd just improvised.

Gaia opened her mouth slowly as if she'd been hit in the back of the head.

'Please...'

Kang-Woo stared at her in earnest.

'Please don't call me cringe.'

He would probably die of shame if she laughed at him for his ridiculous lines. He was not joking. He'd done his best to look as good as possible, but if she laughed at him, he would be beyond repair.

She said, "I see. I guess I was... nothing but a coward."

'Fuck, I dodged a huge bullet there.'

She continued, "You're right, Kang-Woo. We are Guardians, those who protect this world. We won't be able to protect anyone if we're afraid of death."

'Thank you very much for not laughing at me, Madam Gaia!'

Kang-Woo was moved by the fact that she had been persuaded without much difficulty. His jittery heart calmed down.

"Let's go to where the magic summoning circle was found. Mr. Tian Wuchen, please lead the way."

"Got it."

Tian Wuchen turned around and started to run. The Guardians members and the others followed after him.

"... Hey." Cha Yeon-Joo placed her hand on Kang-Woo's shoulder. She frowned as if she couldn't resist anymore. "I'm gonna hurl."

"..."

"Tsk."

The hard-hitting fact smashed into his solar plexus.

After saying that, Yeon-Joo left Kang-Woo alone and followed Wuchen.

There was a heavy silence.

Kang-Woo covered his face with his hands. The shame belatedly swept over him.

'I'm gonna hurl too...'

The road to becoming a hero was long and hard.

* * *

They followed Wuchen to where the magic summoning circle had been found. It was within the Amazon, the place that could be considered Earth's lungs.

They raced across the vast jungle, which ordinary people would have trouble walking in.

It was much harder to move around here than in a rocky region like the Grand Canyon, but still, everyone present was a monster at the Ranker level at the least.

Moving around in unfavorable conditions merely at this level was an easy task for them.

"Kiiiekk!"

Slash!

Wuchen split a demonic beast charging toward them in half.

Instead of participating in the battle, Kang-Woo used the Authority of the Beholder to search their surroundings.

'It really is the Demon Cult.'

He'd become familiar with the traces of the Demon Cult. He followed their traces.

'They aren't far.'

The more the group followed the traces, the more frequently the demonic beasts appeared and the stronger they were.

Thick demonic energy surrounded the area in a wide range, as if confirming that the Demon Cult was once again preparing a mass summoning like back in Vladivostok.

'But...'

Since Kang-Woo could now use demonic energy from the deep end of the Demonic Sea, it wasn't difficult for him to find the source of the demonic energy that was spread out over this wide area.

Kang-Woo pointed somewhere.

"This way."

"Did you find another trace?"

"No."

He'd already prepared an excuse for how he was able to find their location.

"Lord Tirion's power is pointing me there."

It was the second cheat code he'd obtained after Satan.

As long as he used the name of Tirion, God of Heroes, he could bypass any possible conflict.

"Let us hurry."

"We don't know what could happen the more we delay."

Si-Hun and Gaia agreed with his words.

Grace, who was holding Gaia, nodded and rushed in the direction Kang-Woo had pointed.

"Who's there?!"

"Kuh! How did they find—"

'Bingo!'

As they went through the thick vines, they arrived at an open space created by cutting down the trees. There, they saw Demon Cultists wearing black robes.

'Long time no see, guys!'

Kang-Woo's cheeks naturally rose as soon as he discovered the Demon Cultists. He quickly looked around. He wasn't really after the Demon Cultists or the monsters corrupted by demonic energy.

[Who are they?]

[They must be the members of Guardians that we were told about.]

Demons appeared from behind the Demon Cultists.

Kang-Woo's eyes shone.

'Fuck yeah!'

These demons were on another level compared to the demons that had been summoned in Vladivostok. The majority of them were from the Seventh Hell, and even a few were from the Eighth Hell.

'There aren't that many, though.'

He licked his lips. He checked how many Demon Cultists there were and where the summoning ritual was taking place.

'This probably isn't the only place where the summoning ritual is taking place.'

Considering how widespread the demonic energy was, there were probably many summoning rituals happening simultaneously. In other words, there was a chance that more demons were summoned besides the ones in front of him.

'You've done it, guys!'

He couldn't help but exclaim in surprise at the Demon Cult's efforts.

'You lovely bastards!'

Although the Gaia System had been weakened through the Rift Seeds, it wasn't hard to imagine how much effort they had put in to pull off a mass summoning of demons from the Seventh Hell and lower.

[Hah! They are still humans! What could a bunch of struggling bugs possibly achieve.]

A demon with four horns and six eyes took a step forward while laughing loudly.

[Lord Jaraxxus, we will dispose of these hum—]

[No, it has been a while since I have tasted blood! I will face them myself.]

Jaraxxus, a demon of the Eighth Hell...

He walked forward while igniting hellfire in both of his hands.

The demons that seemed to be his subordinates expressed hesitation.

Jaraxxus's adjutant, Ebony Mow, spoke to the other demons while shaking his head.

[Let him have his fun.]

[Ah... As you command!]

The demons bowed.

Jaraxxus stomped on the ground.

[I, Jaraxxus, the Eighth Hell's Ruler of Hellfire Blaze, will face you!]

He opened both arms, and hot air blew around him.

After the Guardians members saw the surrounding vegetation dry up instantly, their faces stiffened.

Jaraxus's mouth went up after seeing that.

[Come! You pathetic mortals!]

Kang-Woo took a step forward. A golden sword appeared in his hand.

A Demon Cultist started to laugh after seeing Kang-Woo step up by himself.

"Hahaha! I'm not sure how you found out about this place, but it's too late now!" The Demon Cultist looked at Jaraxus's dashing back in awe. "It'll be different from Manchuria! Now, we have the Ruler of Hellfire Blaze, Lord Jaraxus, with us!!"

CRACK!

[Kurgh! Urgh! H-How...]

The sword, covered with golden light, cut Jaraxus from his shoulder to his groin. Without being able to block a single attack, he was split in two.

"Eh?"

The Demon Cultist's eyes widened.

Jaraxus was split in two, and his corpse became black smoke and dissipated.

"Wh-What? The Ruler of Hellfire Blaze, Lord Jaraxus, was... Wh-What the hell happened?!"

He was here, and now he wasn't.

Chapter 166 - The Road to Becoming a Hero (2)

[Lord Jaraxus?]

[What just...?]

It wasn't just the Demon Cultists; there was a huge commotion among the demons as well.

Rather than being horrified, they were confused.

If he'd lost after fighting intensely, they could have made a reaction such as 'How could Lord Jaraxus have lost against a mere human!' but that wasn't the case.

To think that he would die by being split in two without being able to defend against a single attack. Not even a piece of flesh was left of Jaraxus, the self-proclaimed Ruler of Hellfire Blaze.

[Was this what Lord Jaraxus intended?]

[But why would he...?]

They were thinking that Jaraxus was maybe playing a trick on them.

That's how shocking it was that Jaraxus had died from a human's single blow.

"K-Kang-Woo...?"

"Hah, are you really human?"

Han Seol-Ah and the others opened their mouths in surprise.

Tian Wuchen couldn't believe how supernaturally powerful Kang-Woo had become compared to when they'd sparred.

The only ones who weren't that surprised were Gaia and Kim Si-Hun, who already knew the extent of Kang-Woo's strength.

"Hyung-nim has recently received the blessing of Lord Tirion, the God of Heroes, and become his apostle."

"... Then is that the power of a god?"

"Yes."

Everyone nodded at Si-Hun's words.

Tirion, God of Heroes... They didn't know who he was, but they thought such power was as expected from a 'god.'

Cha Yeon-Joo laughed and shook her head in disbelief.

The red bracelets on both her wrists started to shine.

"I'll get the details later. This isn't the time to be wondering about how that guy became so strong."

"You're right."

Wuchen raised his sword.

The demons soon realized their situation. They finally accepted Jaraxxus's death and started to panic.

It was obvious that it was a great opportunity to attack.

Sighing, Yeon-Joo charged toward the demons.

"Damn. Now I'm not even surprised when gods or demons appear."

She could feel how much the world had changed in just a few years.

"Haaa."

Sighing once again, she clenched her fists and looked sharply at the Demon Cultists.

'Whether it be demons, angels, or gods...'

She only had one goal...

She saw the Demon Cultists, hiding behind the demons, shout something. Because the situation had turned awry, they were using a communication orb to shout something and were trying to escape.

"Where do you think you're running off to?"

She clenched her fists, and the red chains rose to the sky and surrounded her.

Wuchen, Baek Hwa-Yeon, Tian Suyan, and Goo Hyun-Mo also took out their weapons. Kang Tae-Soo lifted his shield, and Seol-Ah applied her strong buffs to the Players.

Human vs. demons...

The battle between the two forces began.

* * *

Kang-Woo thrust his sword emitting golden light.

It looked like Del Lain, the sword of Tirion, God of Heroes. But in reality, it was a replica created with the Key of the Demonic Sea. Although it was a replica, its base was the Key of the Demonic Sea—a Transcendent-grade weapon.

The energy emitted from the sword was more intense than Reynald's Del Lain.

Crack!

[Kurgh!]

The sword pierced a demon through the demonic energy barrier they had created.

Kang-Woo didn't even need to use an Authority. There was an overwhelming difference in their physical specs. Even when he was running wild with pure physical strength, the demons couldn't do anything.

'I sure have gotten stronger.'

He could feel how much stronger he'd become in the past few months, and his strength couldn't be compared to when Oriax was first summoned.

'But...'

He used the Authority of Predation.

Before their corpses could fall to the ground, the demons were devoured by the smoke that had stealthily come out of Kang-Woo.

From what others could see, it looked as if the demon corpses were turning into black smoke and dissipating.

Riiing.

[Activating the Trait 'Reaper of Souls.']

The demons' demonic energy and souls flowed into his body.

He felt the passage to the deep end of the Ten Thousand Demon Core expand as the Reaper of Souls Trait activated.

'It isn't enough yet.'

A thirst was burning his throat. He could feel that he still needed a lot more for his Demonic Energy stat to reach the 130 points he was trying to achieve.

He stomped on the ground and swung the sword.

More. More.

He desperately desired and thirsted for more power. It was a primal desire that couldn't be replaced with anything else.

[S-Stay away!]

[ARRGGHH!]

Crunch! Crunch!

He tore their flesh apart, and their gore sprayed over the area. A fishy smell stimulated his nose. He couldn't get enough of it.

"Haaa."

He breathed in. Black blood splashed on his white mask.

Rather than the appearance of an apostle of the God of Heroes, the sight of him drunk on their blood was more akin to the image of a demon.

He was annihilating the demons with overwhelming power to the point that they couldn't even think of resisting.

It didn't take him long to fully devour all twelve summoned demons.

"Kuh!"

"B-Backup! Request backup!" the Demon Cultists anxiously shouted. They picked up the crystal orb and contacted someone.

Yeon-Joo was about to rush toward them and attack.

"Wait." Kang-Woo stopped Yeon-Joo in her tracks.

"... Why?"

"Wait a little bit."

Yeon-Joo narrowed her eyes and looked at the Demon Cultists making calls. "Are you going to use them as bait?"

"Yeah." He nodded. If they were going to call for backup, Kang-Woo and the others had no need to go out of their way to search for the other Demon Cultists.

'Delivery, please~!'

He almost considered the Demon Cult members asking for backup lovely.

Kang-Woo panted heavily as if he were exhausted and bent over while grabbing his chest.

The Demon Cultists' eyes shone at Kang-Woo's methodical acting.

"Th-The enemy is tired! Send backup now!"

'Awright!'

A smile appeared on his face behind the mask.

He could sense that a group possessing demonic energy was heading his way from nearby after having received the request for backup.

A smile appeared on his face, and he shrugged.

'Yes, call them all here.'

He had already predicted that multiple summoning rituals were happening in this area. He wasn't sure how many demons would be coming, but he was sure that the number wouldn't be small.

'The demonic energy was spread pretty far.'

He had found traces of demonic energy in most of the areas he'd observed with the Authority of the Beholder, meaning many powerful demons had been summoned.

'Very good.'

He liked how the situation was playing out.

Although it was very little at a time, the passage to the deep end of the Ten Thousand Demon Core was expanding, and his allies were thinking of him as the apostle of Tirion, God of Heroes.

'It isn't that hard being a hero as long as you endure the cringe.'

He just had to emit a bit of light and say some cringey stuff. On top of that, he was the apostle of Tirion, so it would be weird if they didn't consider him a hero.

Even Yeon-Joo, who said she was going to hurl after hearing his lines, was looking at him in a different light, so there was no doubt it had been very effective.

'Now, as long as I wipe out these Demon Cultists...'

It would help him become stronger and consolidate his position as a hero.

The trust that Gaia and the other Guardians members had in him would rise, and he would probably gain as much influence as Gaia. No, his goal was to surpass her in influence.

'I'll take over Guardians.'

The tips of his mouth went up.

The true hero, Tirion, had already placed the tracks. He just had to follow them.

'Satan! Tirion! Thank you both so much!'

Becoming the apostle of Tirion and being free from the accusation of being the Demon of the Prophecy...

He wouldn't have been able to be in such a sweet position if it weren't for the sacrifice of Satan and Tirion.

It was obvious he would be thankful to them.

It was at that moment...

"I would like to ask you all something." Gaia took a step forward with Grace's help. She clenched her fists and opened her mouth. "Why are you all following the commands of an evil demon like Satan?"

The Demon Cultists who were requesting backup through the crystal orb looked at her.

Gaia trembled.

"Why... Just why are you... trying to destroy this beautiful world?" She bit her lip and shouted as if she were letting out all of her anguish. "You killed Reynald and Alec... What are you all trying to achieve by sacrificing the lives of countless people?!"

Tears dripped from her eyes.

The people she trusted had died.

The partners who promised her they'd save the world together had been murdered.

Although she was a god's apostle, she was just a frail girl at the core. She'd tried her best to stay strong after such unfortunate incidents, but it was hard to make the sadness and anger go away.

Her anger had exploded after seeing the Demon Cult.

"Gaia, calm down."

Grace grabbed Gaia, looking at her sadly.

Gaia's thin shoulders shook, and the tears didn't seem to stop.

"Gaia..." Si-Hun clenched his chest as he witnessed Gaia's sorrow.

"... What?" The Demon Cultists tilted their heads while looking at each other. "Follow the commands of Satan? What is she talking about?"

They looked at Gaia as if she were talking nonsense. It was true that the Demon Cult served demons... but Satan wasn't the one giving them commands.

Since Satan could be considered a symbol of demons, they could understand if the name was used in a figurative sense, but what she had said after was even harder to understand.

"Reynald? Alec? Who is she talking about?"

They looked at each other in confusion as if asking one another if they knew.

"...?"

The atmosphere was becoming weird.

'Oh, shit.'

Kang-Woo's expression hardened.

Gaia and Si-Hun were also frowning and were trying to figure out what was going on after seeing the Demon Cultists' genuine confusion.

'No!'

The atmosphere suddenly became tense.

'In that case...'

Kang-Woo's eyes shone. There was only one way to solve the problem.

He grabbed the Key of the Demonic Sea, which was still in its Del Lain form, and held it high. Golden light burst out of it.

"How dare you try to deceive me!"

"What?"

"Did you think I wouldn't know you killed my child Reynald?!"

"No, seriously, who is this Reyn—"

"Shut up!!" Kang-Woo stomped on the ground. A huge amount of energy exploded outward, and the surface shook. "How could you?! How could you be so shameless while still wearing the skin of humans?!"

The golden light intensified.

The apostle of Tirion clenched the sword shining gold with both hands.

"Ah..."

"That's...!"

An exclamation left Gaia's and Si-Hun's mouths.

The golden light couldn't be compared to the ones before.

... And Kang-Woo was talking in a way different from how he usually spoke.

"Deific Manifestation."

They couldn't help but think that Tirion had borrowed Kang-Woo's body to manifest due to the Demon Cult's shameless attitude.

Gaia gulped after seeing the enraged god.

A Demon Cultist said, "But for real, who the hell are those peop—"

"Scumbags like you are not even worth talking to!"

Tirion, God of Heroes, who had descended by borrowing Kang-Woo's body, charged toward the Demon Cultists and swung his sword.

"Take the judgment of light!"

The Demon Cultists' heads were blown away with the flat of Del Lain's blade.

Chapter 167 - It's Not Murder If There Are No Witnesses

Bash!

Del Lain shone. The flat of its blade blew away the Demon Cultists' heads.

It was a horrifying scene. An enraged god was standing there, covered in blood.

"How dare you... How dare..."

It was a voice filled with sadness.

The radiant light that had burst out gradually died down.

Tirion, God of Heroes, had manifested by borrowing Oh Kang-Woo's body.

He was breathing heavily and feeling an uncontrollable rage.

"Lord Tirion..."

"Daughter of Gaia," Tirion mumbled. He continued in sorrow, "Do not give them any attention. Do not try to get an answer from these evil demons."

"I-I'm sorry."

"Demons are dishonest in nature. They will always try to deceive you with sweet words and treacherous lies."

"I will keep that in mind."

Gaia bowed after hearing Tirion's sincere advice, but there was still an unanswered question, which Kim Si-Hun asked instead of Gaia.

"Hadn't you been annihilated after the previous incident, Lord Tirion?"

The blue message that had appeared in front of them back then... No, even if it weren't because of the message window, Tirion had specifically said that he would pass his power onto them while resolving himself to be annihilated.

The god they thought had died after giving his power to Kang-Woo was talking through him as if nothing had happened, so it was understandable that he would have doubts.

"..."

Flinch. Tirion, who had manifested by borrowing Kang-Woo's body, was trembling so subtly that it was impossible to see with the naked eye.

But he hesitated only for a short while. As if he'd expected the question, he explained, "You are right. To be more precise, it was my Divinity that had been annihilated. Right now, I am just a shell of my former self."

"Ah..."

"I probably will not be able to manifest in this body many more times, but I wanted to tell you this before things got out of hand."

He spoke with an intense look in his eyes.

"Do not be fooled by demons, dear heroes. Evil will corrupt your minds the moment you listen to a demon's whispers."

It was a desperate voice. The golden light around them was starting to get weaker.

"When you stare into the abyss, the abyss stares back at y—"

The light extinguished.

"Huff! Huff!"

Kang-Woo panted heavily while grasping his chest. He turned his head and looked at his surroundings.

"What just..."

"Lord Tirion manifested through your body, hyung-nim."

"What?"

Kang-Woo's face was dyed with bewilderment. He looked at his hands as if he couldn't believe what Si-Hun was saying.

"You don't remember?"

"... No. But wasn't Lord Tirion annihilated back then?"

"He said that his Divinity had been annihilated, but he was still alive within you."

"Oh..."

A short exclamation left Kang-Woo's mouth. He looked at his body as if moved.

"I see. He is still within me..."

"We realized how much Lord Tirion cares for us." Gaia continued in sorrow, "Without knowing how he felt, I..."

"No. I understand why you said something like that."

Kang-Woo shook his head.

"To be honest, I am also curious about why they are trying to drive this world to ruin."

"Lord Tirion said that we shouldn't listen to them."

"... I see."

He nodded.

Since Tirion had manifested personally to tell them that, it needed to not be taken lightly.

Kang-Woo's expression hardened as if he'd understood the meaning behind Tirion's words.

'Fuck, shit almost went south.'

His heart beat faster.

'I didn't expect her to question the Demon Cultists then and there.'

He could understand Gaia's actions.

They had lost so much to Satan's hands, so it would be weird if she didn't feel frustrated at all.

It was amazing she had been able to keep her emotions bottled up for such a long time.

'But Lord Tirion managed to patch things up.'

The Demon Cultists' wicked whispers had almost ruined everything.

'Nasty sons of bitches.'

He recalled them acting confused as if they didn't serve Satan or hadn't killed Reynald or Alec Osborne.

Instead of denying the claims, they had made a detailed performance by tilting their heads in confusion as if they had no clue what Gaia was talking about.

Their acting was so shameless that they even almost deceived Kang-Woo.

'I'd really think the Demon Cult had nothing to do with it if I didn't know any better.'

Even he, the loyal apostle of Tirion, the successor of the hero Reynald and savior of this world, had almost been fooled, so it wasn't hard to estimate how good their acting skills were.

Shaking his head, Kang-Woo opened his mouth to say, "This isn't the time to think about why they committed such evil."

He turned around.

He could sense that demons were racing through the massive jungle and approaching them.

Tirion was right. This was not the time to be wondering why the Demon Cultists were doing this and why they had killed the innocent Reynald and Alec.

Boom! Boom!

"Here they come."

After saying those short words, Kang-Woo and the other Guardians members raised their weapons.

[Hahaha! Jaraxxus, you idiot! You asked for help because you couldn't get rid of a puny human?!]

[Let us engrave the fear of demons into the minds of these weak humans!]

Ding, dong. Kang-Woo heard the sound of a doorbell in his head.

'It's here.'

The food delivery he'd been waiting so long for had finally arrived. He gulped and raised Del Lain.

'It's here!!!'

He stomped on the ground and quickly rushed toward the demons emanating demonic energy.

Crack!

[Kurgh!]

A demon's head was smashed by Del Lain; black blood poured in all directions.

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

'I'll pay with credit!!'

The massacre had begun.

* * *

[Kurgh! Wh-What the—?!]

[What the fuck?!]

Desperate screams were heard.

It was overwhelming, and there was no other way to explain it. Someone the demons wouldn't believe was a human was wiping them out all too easily.

"Haap!"

[Kuh!]

The problem wasn't just the one person at the forefront... Those behind him weren't at all the weak and worthless humans they were accustomed to.

All of them were as powerful as the demons of the Seventh Hell. No, among them, a few were even stronger than that.

[R-Request more backup, human!]

"Y-Yes, my lord!"

The Demon Cultists who had arrived with them raised their crystal orbs.

'Four who are World Ranker-level?'

The old man with a sword, the red-haired girl with chains, the blonde woman with a rapier, and the young man wielding a sword emitting a blue light...

They seemed to be World Ranker-level Players at just a glance.

'And...'

Crack!

[Gaaaahhhh!]

[Stop that monster!!]

The human wearing a white mask and wielding a sword that emitted golden light...

'What in the...'

He had an overwhelming strength that couldn't be compared to that of a World Ranker.

The Demon Cultists were so surprised that they couldn't close their mouths after seeing the man one-sidedly massacre the demons of Hell. It was so one-sided that they felt bad for the demons.

'This is bad.'

If things continued, the summoning ritual at the core of their plan could be interrupted.

'I cannot let that happen!'

The amount of money the Demon Cult had invested in this summoning ritual was huge. The Apostles of Evil... no, even the 'Aspects' had high expectations for this plan.

Failure wasn't an option.

"Please hold on for just a little longer!!" the Demon Cultist desperately shouted. Just a little longer, and the core summoning ritual would be complete.

If that demon was successfully summoned, they would be able to easily eliminate that monstrous human.

Boom!

"Just a little longer, you say?"

"Gasp!"

The monster who had been massacring the demons approached him in an instant.

Kang-Woo grabbed the Demon Cultist by the collar and said quietly, "You must have a card up your sleeve that you can use if you wait just a bit more."

"E-Eek!"

A terrifying energy burst forth.

A fear that the Demon Cultist had never felt while encountering numerous demons up until this point invaded his mind.

"A-Aaahhh."

His mouth fell open as the fear, which he couldn't refuse, invaded his consciousness.

The eyes he could see behind the mask... They were too thick with madness to say the man was a hero fighting demons.

The Demon Cultist's mind went blank after he saw Kang-Woo's eyes.

"Alright, tell me what you're waiting for," Kang-Woo asked.

"I-I can't..."

"You joined the Demon Cult to attain eternal life, didn't you? You wanted to become immortal, so what's the point of that if you die here?"

"..."

"Loyalty to demons? Admiration? What's the point of all that?" His words were like sweet whispers. "Don't you want to live?"

A temptation the Demon Cultist couldn't refuse was dangled in front of him. His powerful desire to live stimulated him.

Kang-Woo said, "You can be honest. No one will criticize you. After all, there's nothing else you could possibly do in this situation."

"Nothing else I could do..."

"Yeah. Anyone else would do the same," Kang-Woo said in a low whisper.

The Demon Cultist was nodding before he had realized it.

'Yes... there is nothing else I could do.'

This man was a monster who'd massacred those powerful demons.

How could he resist such a monster?

'There is... nothing else I could do.'

The Demon Cultist nodded.

He looked at the demons and his comrades who had been killed. He was scared. He did not want to die. He felt as if he should listen to this monster if he wanted to escape from the fear that was about to drive him insane.

Kang-Woo said, "I promise you. If you tell me the truth, I will guarantee your life. I swear in the name of Tirion, God of Heroes."

"Tirion...?"

It was the first time he'd heard such a name.

"It's the name of the god I serve."

"..."

The Demon Cultist remained silent. His thoughts started to race.

'I guess he's a hero.'

The cliché of a hero who had been chosen by a god...

But thanks to that, he was able to calm down a bit.

'Come to think of it, Guardians is made up of the retainers of a god, isn't it?'

The retainers of gods interfering with their plans...

It seemed as if the monster in front of him was one of those retainers.

'In that case...'

The fear inside him disappeared. A smile appeared on his face.

'I can live.'

A servant of a god had made a promise in the name of the god he served. The Demon Cultist didn't think that someone who called himself a hero wouldn't fulfill a promise made in the name of their god.

'As long as I survive...'

As long as he survived, he could grasp the opportunity to make a comeback. He would be able to obtain the eternal life he so desperately wanted.

The hesitation lasted only for a short moment. He opened his mouth and spoke with a trembling voice.

"The summoning ritual..."

* * *

"Summoning a demon from the Ninth Hell, you say?"

A smile appeared on Kang-Woo's face after he heard the explanation from the Demon Cultist.

The Ninth Hell...

It was the deepest layer of Hell—a place where only the strongest demons gathered.

'Yeah, I had a feeling they could be summoned.'

Devouring demons from the Seventh and Eighth Hells was great and all, but a demon from the Ninth Hell was on another level.

That could be seen just by the fact that he hadn't been able to fulfill the condition for the Demonic Soul even after absorbing over a hundred demon souls, but the condition had been fulfilled after he absorbed the souls of Malphas and Phenex.

'I'm almost there.'

He'd killed dozens of demons, but his Demonic Energy stat hadn't reached 130 yet. However, he could instinctively tell there wasn't much left before he reached it.

If he killed a demon from the Ninth Hell and absorbed their soul, the stat would easily reach 130.

'Alright.'

His throat burned with thirst.

Kang-Woo laughed. He would soon be able to get rid of this thirst.

"Thanks for the information."

He raised his sword and thrust it into the trembling Demon Cultist without hesitation.

Stab.

"Kurgh?!"

The Demon Cult member looked up at him in confusion.

"Wh-why?"

The promise that Kang-Woo had made in the name of a god that he would let him live if he told the truth had been broken all too easily.

"Y-You told me you would... let me live."

The Demon Cultist extended his hand, drenched with blood, toward him. He widened his eyes and shouted, "You swore in the name of the god that you serve!!"

Cough. He vomited blood.

He couldn't understand it.

The heroes that he knew—the retainers of gods—weren't like this.

At least they were beings who would fulfill a promise made in the name of the god they served.

'But what's with him?'

The man hadn't even hesitated. It was as if a promise made to a god had absolutely no meaning to him.

Kang-Woo opened his mouth after seeing his confused look.

"Man, I was really going to, okay? But I thought about it carefully, you see?" He sounded serious.

"No one will know if you die, right?"

"Wh-What do you..."

"If you die, no one will know I didn't fulfill a promise made in the name of a god."

"... W-Wait."

"Shieet, why hadn't I thought of such a good way until now?"

"What nonsense are you..."

Kang-Woo laughed at him. He twisted the sword stabbed into the Demon Cultist.

"It's not murder if there are no witnesses!"[1]

It was as if he had been enlightened.

Kang-Woo trembled in excitement after realizing a new truth.

'EUUUUUUREKA!!'

Chapter 168 - I Don't Know What He's Talking About

The battle was over.

All the demons' corpses turned into black smoke and dissipated. Not only that, but the Demon Cultists had also paid the price for their crimes.

There was a short silence.

Oh Kang-Woo's companions were breathing heavily after fighting against the demons.

"Wave of Light."

Han Seol-Ah opened both arms and cast magic. The symbol of angel wings on her back started to emit light, and it spread to other people.

The panting people looked at her in surprise.

"This is..."

"Amazing."

It wasn't magic that just healed wounds. They felt that the fatigue and mental stress they'd accumulated while fighting was being healed.

"Since when could you use magic like this?" Kim Si-Hun asked in surprise.

There were many healers who could heal wounds, but the number of healers who could heal accumulated fatigue was extremely low. Add mental stress to that equation, and it was no longer in the realm of healing.

"It's thanks to the Trait I obtained on my Eighth Awakening."

"That's incredible."

It was honestly a surprise. That's how special Seol-Ah's healing magic was.

'Come to think of it, the buff effect was incredible as well,' Si-Hun thought.

The reason why Si-Hun had been able to face Halphas, one of the three demons he had faced before, was thanks to the buff she'd applied to him. He had never heard about a buff that boosted one's stats by an absolute value.

"N-Not at all."

Seol-Ah blushed in shyness because of the attention. But there was a smile on her face. Not many people disliked being recognized and praised, after all.

Seol-Ah looked at Kang-Woo. She clenched her fists in excitement.

"Kang-Woo, you must be more tired than the rest, so I'll cast my magic on you one more time."

Seol-Ah trotted toward him, grabbed his hand, and used magic again.

To be honest, two out of the three demons had been defeated by Kang-Woo, so, in reality, she hadn't said anything wrong.

"Thanks," Kang-Woo said while smiling.

A smile appeared on Seol-Ah's mouth.

Kang-Woo looked down at the light flowing out of her and entering him.

'The effect is certainly incredible.'

It was as if the fatigue that had accumulated after fighting the demons disappeared.

After Kang-Woo had surpassed 120 in the Demonic Energy stat, Seol-Ah's buffs had stopped boosting his stats, just like how the Black Pearl Coat's stat boost effect no longer applied to him.

That was why he thought it would be hard for him to get help from Seol-Ah while fighting, but it seemed he'd underestimated her.

'Mm.'

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes.

It wasn't like she'd received the soul of the Martial God like Si-Hun; she also hadn't been chosen by the Gaia System like the other Guardians members. But still, he could feel an unknown energy coming from her.

'What could it be?'

He couldn't tell.

Kang-Woo shook his head while thinking about it. There was nothing more stupid than trying to get an answer to a question he couldn't even begin to solve.

'I'll just have to keep my eye on her.'

That was all he could do for the moment. Rather than getting an answer, solving the situation at present was more important.

"That aside, is it over now?" Cha Yeon-Joo asked.

Kang-Woo nodded.

"I can't feel anything around here. It seems like it's more or less over," he calmly answered.

Actually, the Demon Cult's plan wasn't over yet. The Demon Cult was probably working fervently to summon a being from the Ninth Hell at this very second.

'I shouldn't throw a wrench in their admirable works.'

It would be ideal to attack them right after they summoned the demon of the Ninth Hell.

'I guess we could stay here for a bit and then give some sort of excuse to take action.'

He'd already been told where the summoning ritual was taking place. He thought it would be okay if they moved out once he felt a huge amount of demonic energy.

'Very good.'

Kang-Woo smiled, as everything was going according to his plans.

It was at that moment...

"Ah..."

A short exclamation left Gaia's mouth. She fumbled her hands in the air.

"What's wrong?" Si-Hun said with a worried expression.

Expression stiff, Gaia opened her mouth and said, "Lady Gaia herself has... given me a quest."

"What?"

"Just a second, please. I will share it with you all."

She waved her hand in the air, and a blue message window appeared in front of them.

Riiing.

[Commencing the S-rank unique quest.]

[Quest Details: Stop the summoning of a demon of the Ninth Hell.

Reward: None.

P.S: I'm so...rry... my chil...dren. This is the only... thing I can do... right... now.]

'What the hell is this?'

Kang-Woo frowned after reading the quest window that appeared in front of him. But he soon realized what Gaia had done.

'That fucking troll!'

He frowned.

She'd let them know through a quest that the Demon Cult's summoning plan was not over yet and that they were trying to summon a demon of the Ninth Hell.

'Motherfucker...!'

He could understand why she'd done that.

She probably couldn't stay idle while looking at her children relaxing while thinking they had defeated their enemies. The intentions were good. If he hadn't known they were trying to summon a demon of the Ninth Hell, it would have been of great help.

'But why now of all times?'

Even if her intentions had been good, if the result was an absolute cesspool, it meant nothing.

Gaia's quest was about to ruin his perfectly crafted plan.

'At least give us a reward.'

Seeing that there was no reward, it seemed as if her power to interfere with the system was also diminishing. It hurt his head watching a god waste her power over things like this.

'Think.'

The gears in his head went into overdrive.

Now that the rest had discovered that the demon summoning ritual hadn't ended, he had no choice but to find another way.

"This is..."

"It seems the summoning ritual isn't over yet." Gaia kept talking as her expression hardened. "We must stop a demon from the Ninth Hell from being summoned."

Yeon-Joo approached and asked, "I mean, do we even need to stop them, considering how strong Kang-Woo is now?"

She'd seen how he had overwhelmingly massacred dozens of demons. She'd almost felt sorry for the demons, so it was true that she didn't feel the need to stop them.

"Yes, we do," Gaia expressed.

Although they had been able to defeat the demons easily thanks to Kang-Woo's help, the situation would change if the key demon of this summoning ritual were to be summoned.

Although Kang-Woo was a hero who had earned the power of a god, they weren't sure if he'd be able to fight a demon from the deepest layer of Hell.

"Gaia is right. We must stop them as soon as possible." Kang-Woo took a step forward. He continued in a loud voice, "It's not like I'm lacking the confidence to face a demon of the Ninth Hell, but it's much more simple and surefire to prevent them from being summoned altogether."

"Kang-Woo is right," Gaia agreed with him. "In that case, we should first figure out where the summoning ritual is taking place..."

"I might have an idea of where that could be."

"You do?"

"Yes." Kang-Woo nodded. "Right after receiving the quest, I've been feeling an unpleasant energy through Lord Tirion's power."

He once again used Tirion as an excuse. It was a cheat code on the same level as Satan.

People reacted after he said he'd felt something unpleasant.

"Where?"

"Follow me."

Kang-Woo turned and began running. He took them in the opposite direction of where the summoning was taking place.

'I need to stall for time!'

That was the best option he had at the moment. He had to stall until the Demon Cult could successfully finish the summoning ritual.

'Dammit, you Demon Cultists! You'd better not fail after I'm going this far for you!'

It was a desperate mental shout.

Kang-Woo took them in a completely different direction.

'Come on!'

Ten minutes passed...

"How much further, hyung-nim?"

"We're almost there."

Twenty minutes...

"Hyung-nim, At this rate, the summoning ritual will—"

"This way! Just five more minutes!"

Thirty minutes...

"Kang-Woo, are you sure we're going the right w—"

"We're really almost there! It's literally right in front of us!"

'FUUUUUUUUCK!'

He couldn't help but curse.

'What's taking them so fucking long?'

It was understandable that he'd be annoyed. The more they went in the direction he was guiding them, the weaker the demonic energy became, and the demonic beasts were nowhere in sight. Their trust in him was naturally plummeting.

'Please, just get it done already!'

He couldn't misguide them forever.

He was about to burst into a fit of rage from how goddamn slow the Demon Cult was.

'Please.'

BOOM!!

As if his desperate prayers had reached the heavens, a giant pillar of demonic energy soared into the sky with an explosive boom.

'Finally!'

Kang-Woo's eyes shone.

'They finally did it!!'

"O-over there!"

"Everyone, quick!"

They ran toward the massive black pillar. Kang-Woo gulped while looking at it.

'It's at least an archdemon.'

Archdemons were among the strongest in the Ninth Hell. He felt a weight lift off his shoulders and his steps became lighter; he was almost proud for being able to deceive his allies for 30 minutes.

Kang-Woo arrived at the summoning ritual with shining eyes.

"I-Intruders!"

"Kuh! So you've come this far!"

As expected from a ritual to summon an archdemon from the Ninth Hell. Unlike the other summoning ritual areas where there were five to six people at most, there were at least fifty people here.

'Nice!'

He raised his weapon while smiling.

"Your evil scheme ends here!" he shouted.

'You did it, you sons of bitches!'

Although they had been slow as hell, they'd managed to do it.

Kang-Woo's smile was hidden behind his mask.

'Now, let's see who you summoned, shall w—'

He looked at the black Rift.

And...

"Hahaha! You're too late, damn retainers of gods!!!"

"Now that he has come, you will not be able to escape death!"

Step, step.

A giant, five-meter-tall demon emerged from the black Rift.

He had a muscular body with red skin, goat horns on his forehead, bat wings, and a long tail.

Just feeling his destructive energy was enough to suffocate them.

The Demon Cultists knelt.

"Bow! Bow in worship! Behold an archdemon of the Ninth Hell!"

"The Lord of Destruction, Balrog!!!"

"..."

There was silence.

The demon that had walked out of the Rift opened his mouth.

[So this is Earth?]

"It is, my lord!!!"

[Who are you all?]

"We are loyal servants of demons! Mortals that yearn for immortality!"

[Hmm.]

The giant demon turned his head as if he wasn't interested.

Just then, the eyes of Kang-Woo and the demon met.

[Huh?]

"..."

Kang-Woo was wearing a mask. In other words, his disguise was only a thin piece of material covering his face. But Balrog had spent thousands of years with him, so the fact that he was wearing a mask meant nothing.

[M-My lord Demon King!]

Balrog knelt.

[Finally, I've gotten to meet you again at last! You have no idea how much I have longed to see you again after hearing the news from Doomguard!!]

Boom!

He slammed his forehead into the floor.

[My king!! I, Balrog, have come to you once again to pledge my loyalty to you!!]

"..."

There was a heavy silence.

No one said anything.

There was no way they could say anything.

Sensing everyone's eyes on him, Kang-Woo turned his head and slowly opened his mouth.

"I don't know what he's talking about."

[Aahh! My lord Demon King!]

"I really have no idea."

[Sniff! I have missed you so much!]

"I don't know who that demon is."

[My kiiiiiiiiing!!!]

"..."

Silence fell once again.

He felt that everyone was staring at him. A curse left his mouth.

"Fuck."

He was fucked.

Chapter 169 - Oh Kang-Woo: Warrior of Light (1)

Oh Kang-Woo was fucked.

There was no better way to describe the situation. Balrog had slammed his head onto the ground and cried out that he had missed the demon king so much.

The Demon Cultists had invested a lot into summoning Balrog. Meanwhile, the members of the Guardians had received a quest from Gaia and then made their way here to stop the Demon Cultists.

As for Kang-Woo...

'Oh, fuck.'

All sorts of insults were lingering around his mouth. He could feel everyone's gazes boring into him. They were looking at him with a mixture of confusion, denial, trust, and doubt.

Of course, most of them were trying to deny the reality of the situation. They thought that the demon from the Ninth Hell was pulling a nasty scheme.

However...

[My kiiiiiiiing!!]

"..."

Balrog was calling out to Kang-Woo even more desperately now.

From his cry, they could tell that he was genuinely elated to see Kang-Woo. It sounded so desperate that it was hard to think of it as a scheme. Balrog cried so earnestly that even Kim Si-Hun and Han Seol-Ah, who trusted Kang-Woo very deeply, were tilting their heads in confusion.

'Why now, of all times?' Kang-Woo thought.

He wouldn't have been in such trouble if he were alone like when Doomguard had been summoned.

The problem was that the people he could call his comrades were all present. The members of the Guardians, his roommate, his sworn brother, the guild master sponsoring him, captains of the Korean government's special forces, and even someone who could influence the Chinese government—all of the people who were important to him were gathered there.

'Why now, of all times?!'

Kang-Woo grabbed his head. His mind blanked out at the unexpected development of events.

The trust he'd built through all of his acts and his title of hero... he was in a situation where he could lose everything.

'It's my mistake.'

Kang-Woo had to admit it. He should have guessed that something like this could happen when he had heard that they were going to summon a demon from the Ninth Hell. He should've expected and prepared for it, but greed had blinded him. Instead, he'd pushed a bit too far because of his desire to reach 130 in a stat.

This was something he could've avoided or prepared for. It was the fault of no other but him.

'No, but still...'

He still thought it was unfair.

There were many demons in the Ninth Hell. The number of demons had decreased after the seven princes' forces crumbled, but it was still over a hundred thousand. So, why, out of all those demons, was it Balrog who had been summoned?

'Fuck my life.'

Kang-Woo raised his head and looked around at the reactions of his allies. He had to do something before the situation worsened.

'First off...'

He thought about a way to overcome his current situation.

'The best way...'

Ultimately, the best method was for Kang-Woo to tell Balrog about the situation he was in.

'The fastest way is obviously to let him know myself.'

Moreover, Kang-Woo had to do it without letting anyone know.

It shouldn't be difficult to do considering what he had done when he dealt with Oriax. He could just send a message to his brain that only Balrog could hear.

'The problem is...'

Kang-Woo bit his lip.

He imbued his will into demonic energy and shot it at Balrog.

Swoop.

The demonic energy that reached the area around Balrog's head disappeared without leaving a trace.

It was just as Kang-Woo had expected.

'AARRGGHH.'

He ruffled his hair in desperation.

'That goddamn muscle pig.'

The way Kang-Woo sent his will through demonic energy was similar to how voice transmission worked in martial arts novels.

However, there was a problem due to Balrog's characteristics. There was a powerful demonic energy barrier on top of his skin at all times. Other demons had it too, but in Balrog's case, it was a little special. His barrier was akin to the Defensive Vajra Qi[1] in martial arts novels.

This was practically a passive ability for him; he was always surrounded by an extremely thick barrier of demonic energy. It was so thick that most demons had a hard time making one like that even if they used their full power.

In other words, Balrog was instinctively blocking out everyone else's demonic energy. It wasn't impossible to bypass his defensive barrier to send him a transmission, but Kang-Woo currently did not have enough demonic energy to do that.

'Of all the demons, why is it yooouuu?!'

Balrog's ever-present demonic energy barrier, which he didn't even need to consciously maintain, was a powerful characteristic that was known among demons as Demonic Armor. This was because it seemed like Balrog was wearing armor made of demonic energy at all times. Aside from Balrog, Kang-Woo had never seen any demon who had that characteristic.

If the summoned demon had been Doomguard, the situation wouldn't have become this complicated. Kang-Woo could've successfully sent his will through demonic energy to Doomguard and asked him to cooperate, but he couldn't do that with Balrog.

'Should I approach him and whisper?'

Kang-Woo shook his head, rejecting his sudden thought.

Everyone present had a physical capability that surpassed that of a normal human—even Seol-Ah, who was a healer. So, there was no way Kang-Woo would be able to send Balrog a message without powerful martial artists like Si-Hun and Tian Wuchen figuring it out.

'Should I let him know by mouthing it?'

However, Kang-Woo wasn't confident that he could explain his circumstances just by mouthing it. Besides, he was wearing a mask, so that made it impossible.

'I mustn't take off the mask.'

He wanted to leave his options open, such as making excuses like there was no way that demon would be able to recognize him since he was wearing a mask. Hence, he couldn't afford to take off this mask.

Kang-Woo bit his lip uneasily.

'Should I send him a written message?'

He didn't have time to do that. Moreover, Balrog didn't know how to read Korean.

'Damn.'

Kang-Woo was feeling anxious. He knew that the more Balrog talked about him, the more the others would doubt him.

'Now that it's come this far...'

He had to feign ignorance for now.

"Everyone, this is all part of that treacherous demon's scheme. Leaving aside the question about whether I'm the demon king, I'm wearing a mask. So, how could that demon have recognized me?"

"Oh, now that you mention it..."

"Yes, you're wearing a mask," Si-Hun said while nodding. "I knew something was off the moment that demon called you the demon king and praised you. It must be a wicked scheme."

"Yeah. I'm just as bewildered as you all are."

Kang-Woo was indeed bewildered.

"Well, I guess it's obvious you'd be bewildered if a demon you've never met before suddenly knelt and called you the demon king."

"I don't know what that demon, the Lord of Destruction, is trying to do, but I'm innocent."

"Hahaha. Of course, hyung-nim. That demon probably doesn't even know your name. If we ask, he'll most definitely get flustered and—"

"N-No, ahem. Just a second. Let's watch and see why he's putting on a show like that first."

"Ah, understood."

Kang-Woo's heart dropped when he heard Si-Hun suggest asking Balrog if he knew what Kang-Woo's name was.

Nevertheless, Kang-Woo had managed to extinguish the doubts the others were having by using the mask as an excuse.

'Now I just have to let Balrog know of my circumstances.'

That was the biggest issue. The problem had gone full circle.

Kang-Woo started to think desperately.

Right then...

"L-Lord Balrog! Why are you calling that retainer of a god the demon king?"

"You are mistaken! They are members of Guardians, Gaia's retainers!"

The Demon Cultists who had summoned Balrog surrounded him.

They felt confused after seeing the demon they'd summoned call a human the Demon King. Moreover, that human was a member of the Guardians, their enemy. The situation was so strange that it wasn't even funny to them; it was just tragic.

'Whoa, good going, guys!'

Upon receiving the Demon Cult's assistance, Kang-Woo's eyes lit up, and he clenched his hands into fists triumphantly. Thanks to the Demon Cultists shouting that Balrog was mistaken, Kang-Woo was able to free himself from suspicion somewhat.

"Lord Balrog! Lord of Destruction! Please, raise your head!"

"That individual isn't the Demon King! They are the greatest hindrance to our ultimate goal!"

"Please, defeat bring judgment to those hypocritical retainers of god!"

'Nice!'

Kang-Woo cheered the Demon Cultists on.

'Please, take a hint.'

He desperately wished for Balrog to notice his situation and cooperate with him.

'You've known me for a long time.'

Kang-Woo had spent more than a thousand years with Balrog. They could figure out everything about each other with just their eyes... Well, not exactly.

'Actually, I know that you're dim-witted as all hell, but please, just this one time!!'

It didn't matter how positively he thought of Balrog. He was too optimistic in thinking they knew what each other wanted without even talking.

If they truly knew each other that well, there was no way that Balrog would've offered Kang-Woo the head of a Focalor when he'd said that there was nothing to eat in Hell.

'Please, Balrog!!' Kang-Woo screamed desperately in his mind.

However, Balrog stood up and stepped on Kang-Woo's hopes. He waved his muscular red arms.

Bash!

Balrog's light swing slammed into the head of a Demon Cultist, causing it to explode.

Balrog glared down at the Demon Cultists surrounding him and roared, [How dare you make a fool out of me?!]

'Hey, Balrog,' Kang-Woo thought.

[A mistake, you say? That man is not the demon king but a retainer of a god, you say?]

'Stop.'

[Hah! I had high hopes for you humans since you worship demons, but to think you'd be this dumb!]

'Please just say you were mistaken.'

Rumble!!!

Balrog violently stomped on the ground. A huge vortex of demonic energy stormed around him. Seeing that, the Demon Cultists gasped, and their faces turned pale.

Then Balrog raised his hands, and a whip surrounded by black flames appeared. He ferociously swung the whip.

FWOOSH!!

"ARRGGHH!!"

That one simple attack turned half of the Demon Cultists into ash.

Everyone present was astonished by the power of the Lord of Destruction, Balrog. The Demon Cultists looked at him with eyes full of fear.

[Listen carefully, humans!]

'Hey...'

[The one before your eyes is the Lord of the Nine Hells! The true emperor!]

'Stop, dude.'

[The demon who emerged victorious against the seven princes of Hell and rose to become the pinnacle of all demons!]

'Please stop.'

Rumble—!!!

The earth shook.

Balrog's violent scream reached everyone's ears.

[He is Demon King Oh Kang-Woo!!]

'YOU CRAZY MOTHERFUCKERRR!!!!'

Chapter 170 - Oh Kang-Woo: Warrior of Light (2)

'YOU CRAZY MOTHERFUCKERRR!!!!'

Oh Kang-Woo gasped.

Demon King Oh Kang-Woo...

The moment Balrog said Kang-Woo's name, Kang-Woo's stopgap was thrown out the window. His mind blanked out like he'd been hit in the back of the head with a hammer.

There was an astronomical difference between calling him the Demon King and associating his exact name with the title.

"How does that demon know hyung-nim's name...?"

"K-Kang-Woo? What is going on?"

Kim Si-Hun and Gaia were the first to question him.

'Damn it all,' Kang-Woo thought.

The hero Oh Kang-Woo—who had been chosen by Tirion, God of Heroes—and the archdemon of the Ninth Hell Balrog were meeting for the very first time.

It didn't matter what the truth was. As far as the others knew, this was the first time Kang-Woo was meeting Balrog. Yet, Balrog knew Kang-Woo's name and was even professing his loyalty to Kang-Woo.

It shouldn't have been possible for Balrog to know Kang-Woo's name. This huge contradiction was hard to cover with trust.

"What is the meaning of this?"

Tian Wuchen, Tian Suyan, and Cha Yeon-Joo looked back and forth between Balrog and Kang-Woo in confusion.

At first, they'd thought it was a cheap trick that the Demon Cult was playing. However, judging from the way the Demon Cultists had reacted and how Balrog had killed them in the blink of an eye, that didn't seem to be the case.

"...Kang-Woo?"

Even Han Seol-Ah looked at him with quivering eyes.

This situation made Kang-Woo's head hurt. He turned his head and saw Balrog looking at him with glimmering eyes. Kang-Woo fell deeper into turmoil.

Right then...

"Kuh! Since things have become like this!"

The Demon Cultists who had survived Balrog's attack decided to take action.

They chanted, "Oh, Aspects of Evil! Grant us the power to control all that is demonic!"

[Hmm?] Balrog murmured with a frown.

Before he could make a move, black light poured out of the magic circle that he was standing on.

[Kuh! Wh-What do you think you're doing?!]

The black light restrained Balrog, and a geometric pattern formed on his body. It was as if he was being branded with a branding iron.

'That's...'

Kang-Woo's eyes widened. He recognized the magic circle that had formed on Balrog. This one had a different form and size, but Kang-Woo had previously seen a magic circle with the same pattern.

'I thought that it could only control demonic beasts.'

The black magic circle that had controlled the Chrysalis covered more of Balrog and emitted an ominous light.

Kang-Woo frowned.

'Are they gonna try to control Balrog?'

That had a completely different meaning from being able to control a Chrysalis. Balrog was a demon that no one could forcibly control, not even Kang-Woo when he had been at his peak in Hell.

'Just how...?'

Moreover, Kang-Woo had no idea who or what the Aspects of Evil that led the Demon Cult were.

[Do you seriously believe... you will be able to control me?!]

"ARRGGHH!"

"S-Save me!"

"Damn! H-Hurry! Keep chanting!"

Balrog struggled against the control of the magic circle. His thrashing limbs smashed the Demon Cultists around him to bits. Even so, those who survived continued to desperately try to gain control over Balrog.

The magic circle that glowed with a black light encompassed Balrog completely.

[Graaaahhhh!!!] Balrog roared.

He furiously swung the whip, which was covered with black flames. All of the remaining Demon Cultists were reduced to ashes and dispersed into the air.

[Fuuu, fuuu.]

However, Kang-Woo had a grim expression as he cursed inwardly, 'Shit.'

Balrog, who had gotten rid of the rest of the Demon Cultists, was glaring at Kang-Woo with animosity. It seemed like Balrog couldn't completely free himself from the control of the magic circle.

[M-My king, p-please... forgive...]

An irresistible impulse engulfed his mind, and he aggressively swung his whip at Kang-Woo.

"Hyung-nim!"

"Stay back!!"

Kang-Woo took a step forward despite hearing words of caution from the others. They might have a chance against other demons, but he was the only one who could face Balrog at that moment.

He stomped on the ground violently, raised Del Lain, and blocked Balrog's flame whip.

Clang—!

"Kuh!"

The impact of the collision was colossal, and it traveled up Kang-Woo's arms. Then Balrog, who had closed the distance between them in the blink of an eye, slammed into Kang-Woo with his shoulder.

"Kurgh!"

Kang-Woo bent over at the waist, unable to withstand the force of Balrog's slam. Like a pebble caught up in the force of an explosion, the slam sent him flying and then rolling on the ground.

'Fucking crazy pig!'

The Lord of Destruction, Balrog—his power was indeed worthy of that title.

Kang-Woo's expression hardened.

[Graaahhh! Who... Who dares to control me?!] Balrog cried desperately.

He squirmed, struggling to free himself from the influence of the magic circle that had covered his body. His red skin split open in the process, and black blood flowed out from Balrog's eyes, nose, and ears.

"Goddammit," Kang-Woo cursed.

At this rate, Balrog would die while trying to resist the power of the magic circle.

'Just stay still, you dumbass!!'

Kang-Woo ran anxiously toward Balrog. He concentrated the Authority of Titanic Might on his fist and threw a punch, but Balrog raised his knee and countered the fist.

Rumble!!

The ground shook. Two huge powers clashed, and the trees around them were blown away.

"Cough!"

The massive shock caused blood to spurt out from Kang-Woo's mouth. Black blood splattered onto the floor.

[A-Aaaahhh. Wh-What have I done to my king...?!]

Balrog paled. He was trembling, seemingly unable to accept that he'd attacked Kang-Woo. The amount of blood pouring out of his eyes, nose, and ears increased.

[Kuh! If I am forced to hurt my king, I would rather...!]

Balrog raised his hand, which was shaking intensely as he resisted the influence of the magic circle.

'That son of a bitch...'

Kang-Woo's gaze darkened. He could easily guess what Balrog was trying to do.

Balrog put his hand near his head.

'Stop, you crazy bastard.'

Balrog was thinking that he would rather die than be forced by an unknown power to attack his king. For a person with just an average level of loyalty toward their king, it was an unthinkable task. However, this was Balrog, and he would most definitely do it without hesitation.

'Fuck!'

Kang-Woo turned his head and glanced at the others. They were watching him with confused gazes; they didn't understand what was happening.

Balrog was trying to commit suicide. The situation was worsening. Nevertheless, there was one way for Kang-Woo to resolve everything.

'...I could give up on Balrog.'

If Balrog were to commit suicide, Kang-Woo would be able to make excuses that it had all been the Demon Cult's filthy scheme all along.

However...

"Shit, shit! Fuck!"

Kang-Woo cursed.

Balrog... had been the first demon that Kang-Woo had fought, and he had been Kang-Woo's loyal aide for over a millennia. They'd fought many wars and experienced countless victories together.

"You fucking idiot! You're absolutely no help at all!" Kang-Woo chided him.

Balrog was an idiot who had stayed by Kang-Woo's side even after he'd declared war on the seven princes of Hell and become the common enemy of the entire Ninth Hell. As long as it was for Kang-Woo's sake, this stupid demon would fight against any opponent without taking into consideration how strong they were. He was a duncehead who would obey any order Kang-Woo gave him; he would fight if he were told to, and he would die if he were told to.

"ARRGGHH!!"

Kang-Woo's irritation surged. Even at that moment, Balrog was moving his hand toward his head with the intention to explode it.

There would be no way for Kang-Woo to sort out this mess if he were to save Balrog. Kang-Woo would be blatantly confirming that he truly was connected to Balrog in some way and that this wasn't just some scheme the Demon Cult had plotted.

'Yeah, just die.'

It was no surprise that Kang-Woo would have such thoughts.

'As long as Balrog dies...'

If the source of this entire conflict were to die, Kang-Woo would be able to sort this huge mess out.

'But... But... But...'

"Shit! Shit! Shit!"

He stomped on the ground.

"BALROOOOOG!!!" Kang-Woo shouted.

He leaped at Balrog and kicked away his hand, which was about to make his head explode.

"You dumbass!! How many times do I have to say that you have to stop trying to commit suicide every time something bad happens?! Huh?"

[Kuh. M-My king.]

"That's going to disappear in just a few minutes, so enough of your shit, and just stay still!"

[But...]

Kang-Woo scowled and said sharply, "Since when did you start questioning my orders?"

[My apologies!] Balrog quickly answered.

The close battle continued.

Balrog was a powerful demon, but it wasn't to the extent that Kang-Woo couldn't hold out against him for a few minutes. Furthermore, if Kang-Woo used a technique that utilized demonic energy from the deep end, he would be able to defeat Balrog. Regardless, there was no need to do that.

[Kurgh!]

"Argh!"

Balrog wasn't giving the battle his all. He was fighting Kang-Woo while resisting the magic circle as much as he could.

It was the same for Kang-Woo. The fight would be over once the magic circle's power ran out, so there was no need for him to go all out.

Fwoosh.

Five minutes passed by, and the magic circle that was covering Balrog's body turned into black smoke and disappeared. The battle came to an end.

Bam!

[My king!]

Balrog knelt and slammed his forehead onto the ground, forming a dip in the earth.

[I beg of you, behead this traitor who dared to attack you!] Balrog shouted while shedding tears.

"Haaa," Kang-Woo sighed.

"H-Hyung-nim."

"Kang-Woo, what is..."

Si-Hun and Gaia were looking at him in confusion.

The others were doing the same.

'Fuck.'

Kang-Woo couldn't make any excuses anymore. The situation had gotten far too messy.

'Think.'

The gears in his mind turned quickly, trying to figure out a way to overcome this situation.

'There is one way.'

However, it wasn't perfect, nor had it been thoroughly planned out. It was closer to a gamble. It was an extremely lackadaisical plan that relied solely on the trust that he had built up so far with everyone present.

'But...'

There was no other way. The situation had gotten too complex for Kang-Woo to pretend that it had all been part of a demon's scheme.

'Shit.'

He wasn't fond of strategies like this. If someone else were to hear what he was thinking of saying, they would yell at him that it was so absurd, and he wouldn't be able to refute them in any way.

'I believe in you guys.'

Kang-Woo turned and looked at each of his comrades.

Still, even if they had great trust in him, there was a high probability that his plan would fail.

'But if it works...'

Then he would be able to act much more freely in the future.

'All right. Let's roll the dice.'

Nothing would be resolved if he remained silent. Since he'd decided on a plan, the only thing left was to put it into action.

"...I guess I can't hide it any longer," Kang-Woo told his comrades while slowly taking off his mask. He looked at them with sad eyes and confessed, "I am the demon king of the Nine Hells."

He gulped, took a deep breath, and kept talking.

"Or at least I used to be," Kang-Woo said with a bitter smile. "That is, until the rebellion that Satan led."

* * *

There was a saying that a true lie contained 99% truth with just 1% lie woven in between. It meant that a lie that cleverly distorted the truth was far more effective than a 100% lie.

Kang-Woo knew this very well, but he had not cleverly distorted the truth in any way during his time on Earth.

'To be more precise, there had been no need to.'

Gaia, the Guardians, and all the other people he'd built a relationship with... they didn't know much about Hell. Since they didn't know anything, there hadn't been a need for him to distort the truth. That was also why Kang-Woo had told 100% lies until this moment.

'But...'

However, the situation had changed due to Balrog. It had become difficult for Kang-Woo to keep up the lie that he had been telling the others.

'Just thinking about it makes me angry.'

Kang-Woo looked at Balrog, who was keeping his head on the ground, and sighed.

'You moron.'

Of course, Kang-Woo wasn't actually angry at Balrog. He knew that Balrog had reacted in such a way because he was really happy to see his lord, whom he hadn't seen in such a long time. There was no way Balrog would've known that his actions would harm Kang-Woo's position.

Kang-Woo wished for Balrog to pick up on the truth behind the current situation, but Balrog was too dim-witted for Kang-Woo to expect him to be able to do that. Balrog was simply a subordinate who was loyal to the point of stupidity.

'There weren't that many hints for him to take either.'

There was no way Balrog would've known that after returning to Earth, Kang-Woo had hidden his identity and pretended to be a hero.

'But I really have to fix his habit of trying to take his own life whenever things go awry.'

Kang-Woo was angry with Balrog because he was too loyal to him. If Balrog made even the slightest mistake, he always said things like he'd made a fatal mistake and would pay for it with his life. His excessive loyalty gave Kang-Woo a lot of stress.

If anyone else had said that, Kang-Woo would have been able to ignore it, but in Balrog's case, he couldn't do that.

"K-Kang-Woo? What do you mean?"

"Y-You were the demon king, hyung-nim?"

Gaia and Si-Hun couldn't recover from the shock at the bomb-like revelation.

'I get it.'

They hadn't known each other for a long time, but they had both come to trust him a lot thanks to all of the efforts he'd made. Hence, it made sense that they would react like that after Kang-Woo suddenly confessed that he was the demon king.

"Yes. I used to be the demon king who ruled the Nine Hells."

Kang-Woo raised his hand. He drew out pure demonic energy onto his hand without using the Ruler of Demonic Energy.

Gaia gasped. She trembled in shock and took a step backward.

"Y-You've been deceiving us all this time?" Grace McCubbin questioned.

She took out her weapon and glared at Kang-Woo with a sharp gaze.

Si-Hun and Seol-Ah were fidgeting indecisively with faces full of disbelief.

'I expected these reactions.'

Kang-Woo had known they would react that way. Actually, he'd thought their reactions would be much worse.

'Not bad.'

He saw a possibility of his plan succeeding.

'Commencing Project Oh Kang-Woo: Warrior of Light!'

He clenched his hands into fists.