

## M. in Hell 251

Chapter 251 - After The War (3)

Click.

A giant, five-meter-tall door opened, and a muscular giant with red skin entered through it. No, he was far too massive to be called a giant; he was more like a monster.

[Hm?]

Balrog tilted his head. He had just returned from training in the training room specially built for him. There was an unexpected guest.

[What brings you here, Lilith?]

"I'm borrowing your kitchen. I live next door to the demon king, so there's a chance I'd be found out," Lilith calmly replied.

Balrog frowned at her words.

[To think you'd modify someone else's house as you please.]

The house Kang-Woo had built for Balrog naturally did not have a kitchen. Not only was there no way Balrog would prepare his own food, but a demon didn't need to eat in the first place.

Lilith had created a kitchen by modifying his house.

"Hohoho. This is also for our king."

[... What do you mean?]

Balrog's eyes shone as she mentioned Kang-Woo.

Lilith moved her knife while clicking her tongue.

Slice, slice.

A liquid as red as blood poured out.

"Have you already forgotten what our king has been telling us all this time?"

[Hmm?]

Lilith made a seductive expression and said, "He always used to say that he wanted to eat kimchi stew."

[K-Kimchi stew!]

Balrog's eyes widened.

One had to tear away the skin of a dead beast and rip out its internal organs. After cruelly slaughtering the animal with a knife, one only left behind the meat pieces that were the most comfortable to chew. Then, the meat was boiled in a liquid as red as blood. It was a dish truly worthy of a demon king.

Balrog had eaten it a couple of times after coming to Earth, but he couldn't understand its flavor, possibly because he had not yet become as ruthless as his king.

[Lilith, are you...]

Balrog stared at her while trembling.

Lilith licked the red liquid on the knife.

"Fufu. This time, I will make that dish known as kimchi stew and offer it to our king."

[...]

Balrog shuddered.

After swearing to protect his king, he had planned to monopolize the demon king's love and affection now that he had awakened the Overlord Armor, but he had never expected Lilith to make such a play.

[Kuh!]

Balrog clenched his fists in frustration.

[Was it not enough to seduce the king with your looks?!]

It was unfair.

Lilith was breathtakingly beautiful, worthy of being called the succubus queen. Even in Hell, she used her appearance to receive his love and affection.

'All she has going for her is her face!'

Even if he offered the head of a demon to receive the appreciation of the king, he couldn't compare to Lilith. Whenever the demon king saw Lilith, he trembled in excitement.

Lilith turned her head while making a bittersweet smile.

"I don't think... our king cares much for looks."

That was easy to see just by seeing how he'd accepted the feelings of that human girl Han Seol-Ah.

To the king, beauty had no meaning.

The physical shell was not what swayed his heart. To win his heart, she had to go further.

"I'm going to keep practicing cooking, so you just keep practicing that useless Overlord Armor technique or whatever it's called."

[Kuh...]

Balrog clenched his fists while biting his lip. He felt frustration and jealousy.

'If only I was also beautiful enough to dazzle my king like Lilith does.'

[Haaa.]

He sighed. Balrog turned around.

'I will do what I can.'

What the demon king wanted from him was probably different from Lilith. What he could do was grow strong enough to become the king's sword and shield.

[Next time...]

Balrog turned his head.

[Teach me how to make kimchi stew as well,] he said in a very low voice.

Lilith covered her mouth and burst into laughter.

"Fufu. Okay. Stop looking at me like an abandoned dog. But even if I do teach you... would our king like it more than the one I make for him, I wonder?"

[...]

Balrog remained silent at her question.

There was no need to think about it. If they both made the same kimchi stew, he would obviously prefer one that a beautiful woman like Lilith prepared.

[... Shit!]

Balrog cursed and went back into the training room. He picked up the communication device that the demon king had given him and called someone.

There was a limit to training by oneself.

- Hello?

He heard the voice of a human whom he had become rather familiar with through the communication device.

[Human, I have a proposition. I need you to meet with me.]

His red muscles, sensing an approaching battle, swelled as if they were about to burst.

\* \* \*

"Let's see..."

Kang-Woo leaned on the couch while reading the report he'd received from Gaia.

[Report of the Great Russian War.]

[Deceased Players - 3812.]

"... Tsk."

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue as he flipped through the document.

About ten thousand top Players from all around the world had joined Guardians. After one battle, almost half of them had died.

'I mean, it makes sense, considering the scale of it.'

He wasn't omnipotent, and there was no way he could stop everyone from dying in a large-scale battle. He had expected there to be casualties the moment he began preparing for the war.

'But still...'

It was sad to see that almost half of them had died.

It was true that the number of people wanting to join Guardians increased after the war, but selecting standouts from among them and making them grow would take time.

'But at the very least...'

There hadn't been major losses among the elite force of Guardians, the Sirius Corps, as well as the 1st Corps led by Grace McCubbin.

Most of the casualties came from the Players that had been swept away by the second landslide.

[Names and levels of Deceased Players.]

\*Player Name: Kwon Oh-Jin (Level: 78)

\*Player Name: Hikigaya Hachiman (Lv: 82)

\*Player Name: William Smith (Level: 76)

...

'Smith?'

A certain name in the list of deceased caught his attention.

"Smith, you son of a bitch."

He had passed away without being able to propose to Anna...

Kang-Woo sighed and prayed for Smith.

'You shouldn't have raised that death flag...'

One could say that it was karma.

Kang-Woo picked up his smartphone while making a bittersweet smile.

- Hello? How can I help you, Kang-Woo?

It was Park Hyun-Woo. He used to be the chief of Human Resource Management in the Red Rose guild, but he had been scouted by Guardians after its establishment when his capabilities had been acknowledged.

He had been placed in charge of sending reparations to the families of the deceased Players as well as managing the money that each country sent them.

"I'm calling about a Player named William Smith among the list of deceased Players."

- Just a moment, please. Ah, here he is. He is a British Player. Were you acquainted with him?

Hyun-Woo carefully asked.

"No, but I wanted to ask if you could send the reparations to his family sooner."

He'd died and left behind a woman with whom he'd pledged to get married to. Kang-Woo wouldn't have cared if he didn't know who Smith was, but he wanted to do as much as possible since he'd noticed him.

'Well, I'm not usually one to care about things like this.'

But people often did things they didn't frequently do when they were in a good mood. That was how he was feeling right now. The problems regarding Lilith and Satan had been resolved, so he wanted to do things he didn't usually do.

- Just a moment. Mm... The reparations have already been taken care of.

"Have they?"

- Yes. Oh, I thought I had heard the name somewhere. A woman named Anna came to the Guardians headquarters and received the money. Smith had written in his will that he would leave everything to her.

"I... see."

For some reason, he felt that something was wrong.

- Yes. To be more precise, she and her husband received the money.

"Pardon?"

Husband?

- It said that Anna and Smith were childhood friends... There wasn't anything else in particular written in the will. Is there a problem?

"No. Well... No, it's nothing."

Kang-Woo ended the call. He remembered Smith's face and how he told his subordinates he would propose to Anna once the war ended.

'Smiiiiiiiiith!!!'

It was the cruel taste of reality. No matter how Kang-Woo thought about it, he couldn't help but think that Smith had been deceived by Anna.

'I guess reality is cruel.'

Kang-Woo was even glad Smith had died without knowing the truth.

Kang-Woo put away the list of the deceased for a moment and prayed for him.

"Well..."

To be honest, he didn't care that much. The chaos in Smith's life meant absolutely nothing to him.

'All that matters is me.'

Kang-Woo has been looking back at his life a lot lately.

He wanted an ideal life where there was nothing for him to worry about—the life of a wealthy bum who could stay at home and do nothing, without anyone saying otherwise.

Working was fulfilling?

One was the happiest while working?

'Bullshit.'

The people who said that were probably the ones who, if they won the lottery, would yeet their resignation letters at their bosses at a moment's notice.

"Yawn."

Kang-Woo lay on the couch and stretched.

'Of course...'

It was not over yet.

The Demon Cultists had yet to be wiped out, and he needed to investigate the remaining princes of Hell. His relationship with the angels was also in a weird spot. Not only that, the Demon God lying within the Abyss was bothering him.

'There are also a ton of things I have to do right now.'

He needed to practice controlling Satan's Authority, the Authority of Extinction, as well as improve his demonic energy control.

There were many things he had to do.

"But..."

He needed some time to enjoy leisure every now and then. Kang-Woo lay on the couch and closed his eyes.

Ding, dong.

"... Are they back already?"

Echidna, Seol-Ah, and her mother had gone out to buy some clothes, so he had been left alone. He tilted his head and walked toward the front door. He then opened it.

Click.

"I missed you. My king, my lo—"

SLAM!!

He slammed the door shut.

"Huff, huff, huff."

His hand trembled as it hovered over the doorknob.

'Wh-What's up with her all of a sudden?'

The Lilith in front of him wasn't Kurosaki Yurie but the demon with green tentacles and eighteen red eyes.

'Why... why the fuck is she in that form again?'

Kang-Woo was sure Lilith had likely realized that he possessed a deep trauma of her true form. If she hadn't, there was no way that she would have been so docile lately.

'Hope...'

The end of the nightmare should have come.

Squelch.

"Hohoho. You are as shy as always, my king."

A green tentacle entered through the crack in the door.

Click.

She unlocked the door and entered the apartment.

"Wh-What brings you here?" Kang-Woo asked while taking a step backward.

Lilith held out the pot in her hands.

"Fufu. I made this myself."

She blushed and smiled brightly. Her smile was so hideous that it wouldn't even appear in one's worst nightmares.

"This is..."

A familiar scent came from the pot.

Kang-Woo took the pot from her with shining eyes.

"Kimchi stew," Kang-Woo said.

"Hohoho. You always used to say that you wanted to eat it while in Hell, did you not?"

"That's true, but..."

After returning to Earth, he'd been eating it at least once a day.

While twisting her body, Lilith shyly said, "I heard that Seol-Ah cooks well, but... I wanted to make it for you at least once, so I have been practicing."

"Ohh..."

A short exclamation came out of his mouth. He understood why she hadn't been contacting him recently. Kang-Woo saw some bandages on her green tentacle fingers.

'What's with that trope setup?'

He smirked. He didn't know where she'd picked up such a trope, but Kang-Woo knew there was no way kitchen knives could wound her.

"Thanks."

Kang-Woo smiled while taking the pot to the dining table.

Lilith trotted after him.

Seeing her looking at him with shining eyes made him feel bad.

'I'm feeling sorry again.'

He regretted slamming the door in her face as soon as he saw her.

"Alright, thanks for the food."

"Please feel free to let me know if you want more. I have more at home."

"Haha, okay."

Clack.

Kang-Woo brought a bowl of white rice from the kitchen and began eating the kimchi stew.

'Oh?'

Kang-Woo's eyes shone after having a taste of the kimchi stew.

'It's good.'

It was on par with the kimchi stew Seol-Ah made.

Kang-Woo looked at Lilith in surprise. For a demon who had almost no sense of taste, she had probably gone through a lot of trouble to make something so delicious.

'I'm proud of her.'

He couldn't help but smile.

Mush.

"Hm?"

At that moment, he felt something weird in his mouth. It was as if he were chewing seafood, such as an octopus, instead of meat.

"What did you put in the kimchi stew?"

"Oh, you see..."

Lilith smiled widely.

'Oh, wait a fucking minute...'

Kang-Woo's expression hardened. For some reason, he felt uneasy.

An ominous chill crept down his back.

"It is my secret recipe."

Wink.

Nine of her eighteen eyes winked.

The ominous chill worsened.

'No.'

Kang-Woo's hands trembled.

'There's... no way.'

He looked back at the bandages on Lilith's green tentacles.

There was no way a demon could get wounded by a kitchen knife, but... what if she cut them on purpose?

"N-NO!!!"

SLAM!

Kang-Woo sprang up and slammed his hands on the table.

No, that was impossible. Even for Lilith, there was no way.

Kang-Woo looked down into the pot.

Inside it, there were...

"Urpp."

He covered his mouth.

He naturally remembered a certain phrase.

'Reality... is a bitch.'

"Bleeeeeeeeeeeegh."

Chapter 252 - Ancient Demonic Beast (1)

"Fuuu..."

Oh Kang-Woo closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and concentrated.

'Authority of Blaze.'

FWOOSH!

A bright yellow karmic fire burned. He'd gotten used to Mammon's Authority. The flames burning from the tips of his fingers devoured the surroundings. The earth and the rocks melted, and a river of magma instantly formed.

'Authority of Blades.'

An Authority was added on top of the Authority of a prince of Hell.

He could normally merge up to six Authorities, up to seven if he pushed himself, but he had already reached his limit after merging two.

"Kuh."

His vision blurred, and his head heated up. The problem with merging Authorities with a prince's Authority wasn't the amount of demonic energy required—it was an issue of control.

'But...'

It was at least better than when he had done it for the first time. The first time, he had struggled to maintain Inferno for even three seconds, but he could now maintain it for over thirty seconds.

'As long as possible...'

He slowly opened his eyes and concentrated. He couldn't breathe properly, his legs were trembling, and he felt an intense pain in his chest as if his demonic energy was about to run amok at any moment.

'A little bit more...'

He was already used to controlling demonic energy that was about to run rampant.

'I can do more.'

He was dripping in cold sweat. His skin swelled from the demonic energy running rampant under it, and an intense pain shot through his entire body.

He felt as if he would faint the moment he even relaxed a little bit, but despite that...

'More.'

He didn't stop.

He had never stopped once in his life.

He never compromised. He never yielded. He never hesitated.

He would climb much, much higher and keep pushing forward.

FWOOSH!!!

TSSS.

A sword emitting yellow flames took perfect form. The unstable flames had formed a solid blade.

[Proficiency of the skill 'Inferno' has risen!]

[The power of the skill 'Inferno' has increased. Reducing the necessary level of demonic energy control to maintain the skill.]

"Fuuu."

He relaxed after reading the message window that had appeared in front of him. The flaming sword melted and disappeared into the air.

Riiing.

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

"Again?" Kang-Woo mumbled while making a bored expression.

It'd been a month since he started training his demonic energy control after a short break. He was finally starting to attain some results, and he had been continuing to get these clues every now and then.

'At least remove a question mark each time I get the clue or something.'

He cast the message window aside in irritation.

"Alright, then..."

Since training with Mammon's Authority was over, it was time for Satan's Authority.

Kang-Woo used the Authority of Extinction.

"Kuh..."

His head began to hurt again. He'd only used one Authority, but his proficiency in Satan's Authority was still very low. He needed much more time to get used to it.

"A bit more..."

"Master Kang-Woo."

"Gasp!"

Kang-Woo's expression paled when he heard a voice behind him. He turned around, trembling. He saw a beautiful, elegant girl with black hair standing behind him.

"Wh-What's up?" he asked while calming himself down.

Lilith bowed and said, "I have come to give a report."

"Is it about that Kalgia guy?"

The last remaining Aspect of Evil, Kalgia.

Guardians and Lilith had been looking for him for the past month, yet they hadn't been able to find him.

Lilith shook her head.

"No. I... do not believe it is Kalgia."

"Really?"

Kang-Woo felt that the conversation would become long, so he stepped on the ground lightly. The earth split, and a rock rose from the ground. After he took a seat on the rock, Lilith offered him a beverage.

The drink was the blue beverage they sold in the market.

"..."

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes and looked at Lilith.

"You didn't put anything weird in here, did you?"

"Hohoho, no." Lilith shook her head while covering her mouth. "After all the scolding you gave me, I will never do that again."

"... Well, as long as you understand."

Kang-Woo trembled as he recalled what happened last time. Just thinking about it made his insides churn.

"So, what is it?"

"There have been phenomena of demonic beasts appearing within Gates, have there not?" Lilith mentioned.

"... Yeah."

Kang-Woo nodded while making a heavy expression.

The Demon of Prophecy, Satan...

After he forcibly crossed dimensions to Earth, the Gaia System, the barrier that defended Earth, had been impaired and the dimensional wall had been severely weakened.

Thanks to that, aside from those summoned by Demon Cultists, demonic beasts and demons have been appearing within Gates from time to time.

'That scumbag.'

Just thinking about it made Kang-Woo clench his fists in anger. Satan's twisted desire to take over Earth had caused countless people to shed blood and tears.

Even now, when he'd gone into hiding, the Gaia System had not been restored. No, it was actually weakening even more. Just like how a knife wound did not disappear just because the knife broke, the broken Gaia System was also the same.

Although the Demon Cult, the perpetrators behind the wound's aggravation, had been dismantled, the wound was not healing.

"Did a strong demonic beast appear this time?"

If Lilith was reporting it to him, that was likely the case.

"I do not have the exact details yet, but... it seems an ancient demonic beast has appeared within the Gate located in the US state of Florida."

"... An ancient demonic beast?"

Kang-Woo frowned.

Although most demonic beasts didn't have any intelligence, ancient demonic beasts were the extremely few that did. Although they possessed intelligence, that did not mean their demonic beast characteristics had completely disappeared. This was the reason why they formed their own territories and did not leave them.

'I've only heard about ancient demonic beasts.'

He had never seen one.

There were two main reasons: first, there was no need for him to go out of his way to fight them, and second, it was far too risky to fight them.

The physical prowess of a demonic beast was higher than a demon's. It was just like how a human's physical capabilities were lower than both a lion's and a tiger's. Ancient demonic beasts were so strong that they could fight against a prince of Hell one on one.

'Come to think of it, I heard that the ancient demonic beasts were acting strangely.'

He remembered what Doomguard and Balrog had told him, but still, he never imagined that an ancient demonic beast would appear in a Gate.

He was again reminded of how weak the Gaia System had become.

"Do you know which one?" Kang-Woo asked.

"It seems to be... Halcyon, most likely."

"Halcyon, huh?"

He had heard of it before; he had even tried to summon it with his Demonic Beast Summoning Trait.

'Oh, speaking of which...'

He'd completely forgotten about his Demonic Beast Summoning Trait.

"Mm..."

He fell into thought.

'I wonder what would appear if I tried to summon one now.'

He currently had more demonic energy than when he used to rule over the Nine Hells.

"..."

He remained silent.

He couldn't even imagine what would be summoned. He recalled what Goddess Benigoa had told him.

"Outer Gods receive fewer restrictions from the system."

Outer Gods were beings that did not belong to worlds within their proximity, like Aernor and Huan, but ones far, far away.

'Fucking hell, what if I actually summon one?'

He couldn't completely brush off the possibility.

Not only had Goddess Benigoa warned them about it herself, but the Gaia System had also become so weak that even an ancient demonic beast could cross over to Earth.

'If I summon a god...'

It was the end, without a doubt.

It would bring about the same result even if he managed to defeat that god. The Gaia System, which was barely holding shape even now, would be completely destroyed, exposing the world to irreversible calamities.

'I'll put it off for now.'

It would probably be fine if he held back on the amount of demonic energy used for the summoning, but there was no need to take that risk on purpose. Besides, he did not need someone or something summoned while holding back his power.

"Any casualties?" he asked.

"At the moment, none but the six-member party that discovered it. One party member had been severely wounded but had miraculously survived."

"First, restrict access to the Gate."

"Fufu. It has already been done. I also restricted the press to minimize the spread of news."

As expected of Lilith, she had dealt with things swiftly.

Kang-Woo nodded.

'An ancient demonic beast, huh?'

To be honest, he had nothing to gain by hunting an ancient demonic beast at the moment. The amount of demonic energy he could control was nearing its peak, so he couldn't afford to use the Authority of Predation.

'I'll consider it an investment for the future, I guess.'

He couldn't devour the ancient demonic beast, but he could compress it like Belphegor to devour later on.

'And...'

Even if he had nothing to gain, he couldn't let the ancient demonic beast run amok inside a Gate. If it managed to get out, it would obviously cause a massive catastrophe.

"Let's go as soon as tomorrow."

"And the members of the subjugation party?"

"Just Balrog and I are enough."

If the ancient demonic beast was as strong as a prince of Hell, having many people would only be a hindrance.

He'd considered Kim Si-Hun, but Balrog was more suited for it.

'Hiding how I turn the corpse into a gem would be a bother.'

Si-Hun didn't know that Kang-Woo could grow stronger by eating demons. Usually, Kang-Woo could use the Authority of Predation secretly to make the corpse scatter into dust, but he couldn't do so at the moment.

"Understood. I will prepare a Gate in the Hall of Protection that will lead straight to the location."

"Oh, do you know anything about Halcyon?"

It was the first time he would be fighting against an ancient demonic beast, so it would be better to get as much information as he could.

"Mm."

Lilith put her finger on her lips and fell into thought.

"I have also never seen it in person, but... I have heard that it is extremely hideous."

"Hideous?"

"Yes. I have heard that it is the most hideous being in Hell."

"Hah."

He laughed in disbelief.

'How fucking ugly could it possibly be?'

How did a demon have to look to be called the most hideous in Hell?

'I can't really put my finger on demon beauty standards.'

For example, Lilith was considered the most beautiful in Hell.

'It would be a huge twist if Halcyon actually looked human.'

"Lilith, do you find humans disgusting?" Kang-Woo asked Lilith, just in case.

"I'm sorry? No, of course not." Lilith shook her head. "I cannot discern who is beautiful or ugly, but they do not look disgusting to me."

"Mm."

He nodded.

'It's like the way a person looks at an animal.'

One couldn't tell which lion was beautiful or ugly, but lions did not look disgusting.

"Well, it doesn't really matter how it looks."

He smirked.

"Are you sure? I have heard stories of demons losing their minds the moment they see Halcyon..."

"Don't worry," Kang-Woo said while holding Lilith's shoulders.

It didn't matter how repulsive and hideous Halcyon looked.

"I've had pretty thorough training in that area," he said confidently.

Chapter 253 - Ancient Demonic Beast (2)

Oh Kang-Woo saw a pitch-black darkness that didn't reflect any light.

'I'm sinking.'

He could suddenly feel himself sinking into the bottomless darkness.

'This is...'

He narrowed his eyes.

The first thought that crossed his mind was that he was in the deepest layer of the Ten Thousand Demon Core—the world that was full of demonic energy from the Abyss.

"..."

He remained silent and shook his head.

'No.'

It wasn't a grandiose world like that—it was a simple dream, a fleeting illusion.

'Could it be... a lucid dream?'

He wasn't sure. He often had short dreams when he slept, but for some reason, this dream felt quite real.

'Ah...'

Something became visible amidst the darkness—a memory of the past. The memories of what he'd gone through in Hell went past his eyes like a panorama.

Squelch.

He heard the wriggling of something dripping in mucus.

'What was that?'

He turned his head. Something sloppy stretched out from the darkness and wrapped around his body.

'Kuh.'

He twisted around and drew out his demonic energy to use an Authority, but...

'Kurgh!'

It wasn't the real world. It was simply a dream. He had no demonic energy or Authority, and the place was really just a pure dream.

Squish.

Something viscous bound his body.

'This is...'

It was a familiar texture—the source of his deep trauma.

'Why... is this...'

He couldn't think straight. The tentacles slithered into every single one of his orifices as if they were trying to cut off his consciousness.

It was a horrible nightmare—a fragment of the past he didn't want to remember.

The darkness split, and eighteen red eyes appeared.

A woman's laugh filled the entire space.

'A-Aaaahh.'

He struggled and frantically swung his arms and legs. He screamed like a madman, but no sound left his mouth. The light was exterminated from the darkness.

Crush.

Something broke.

Deeper and deeper he went.

"Aaaaaaaaahhh!!!"

He threw aside the blanket and stood up. His entire body was covered in cold sweat. His clothes were unpleasantly stuck to his skin.

"Huff, huff."

He panted heavily, raised his head, and looked around. He saw a familiar room.

"Wh-What the hell?" Kang-Woo mumbled while wiping off the sweat trickling down to his chin.

It was a crazily realistic dream.

He had been forced to recall the memories of Hell that he had been forgetting after returning to his life on Earth.

'Shit.'

He closed his eyes and tried to erase the unsettling memory from his head.

"Haaa..."

He couldn't help but sigh. For some reason, he really wanted to see Han Seol-Ah.

'If only there had been a woman like Seol-Ah in Hell.'

No, if Lilith had looked like how people imagined a succubus...

'It would have been a bit better.'

Appearance was important, and it wasn't a matter of being beautiful or not. At least, one shouldn't have eighteen eyes and a body covered by tentacles that oozed pus.

Both humans and demons primarily relied on sight to sense the world around them.

'If there had been at least one beautiful woman, maybe life in Hell wouldn't have been so bad.'

He laughed in disbelief at the thought that crossed his mind.

To be honest, it was an unsightly and vulgar thought, even for him.

But what could he do?

Although it was a vulgar thought, he had needed something that could act as a way to give him peace of mind.

'Only people who don't watch porn can throw stones at me.'

Desiring someone of the opposite sex was a natural human instinct. He wasn't trying to deny that.

"Well... Hell is just that kind of place."

He had no reason to blame Lilith. All demons in Hell looked like that, so there was nothing she could've done about it.

'Besides, it's all in the past.'

Still, remembering his life in Hell made him tremble as if he were about to have a seizure.

Kang-Woo shook his head and raised his blanket.

"Fufufu."

As soon as he raised his blanket, there was...

"You will be going to hunt Halcyon today, correct? I sneaked into your room at night to give you strength, my king."

Hehe.

Lilith cutely stuck out her tongue while smiling brightly. Nine of her eighteen eyes winked at him. The green tentacles that he had seen in his dream were wrapped around him.

"A-Aaaahh."

Kang-Woo lowered his head while covering his face with his two hands.

A desperate cry leaked from his mouth.

The nightmare... wasn't over yet.

\* \* \*

[You seem tired, my king.]

"... Be quiet," Kang-Woo replied to Balrog wearily.

He did not have the mental capacity to give a proper answer due to the horrible act that he had suffered early in the morning.

"That aside, are you ready?" Kang-Woo said while shaking his head as if trying to brush off the nightmare.

Balrog smiled.

[There is nothing to get ready for in particular.]

Balrog flexed his arm as if he were bragging about his bulging muscles. Kang-Woo smirked.

'It's being restricted.'

Thanks to Lilith's speedy measures, not a single person was in sight near the Gate located in Florida, USA.

[Halcyon...]

Balrog's expression hardened while he thought about what was beyond the Gate. He was exuding a sense of anxiety.

"What? Are you nervous about fighting an ancient demonic beast?"

Kang-Woo tilted his head while looking at Balrog, who was not acting like himself. Although they'd never fought against an ancient demonic beast, seeing Balrog so nervous was rare.

[Haaa.]

Balrog sighed.

[It is because of Halcyon's hideous looks... I am not afraid of fighting it, but I would rather not see that disgusting appearance again.]

"..."

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes at what Balrog had said.

"You've seen Halcyon before?"

If that weren't the case, Balrog saying he would rather not see it again would make no sense.

[... Yes.]

Balrog nodded while making a heavy expression.

[It was... about nine hundred years ago. We happened across Halcyon's territory while I was surveying the area with my subordinates. I was able to see it back then.]

"Wait, nine hundred years ago?"

If it was nine hundred years ago, it was after Kang-Woo had met Balrog and begun working together. He flipped through his memories but didn't recall Balrog ever reporting that he had encountered Halcyon.

"Why didn't you report it?"

[Ah...] he mumbled in a low voice.

Reporting to your superior was one of the musts of a subordinate; purposefully omitting something in a report on purpose was serious enough to call for execution.

[M-My apologies, my king!]

Balrog noticed he'd made a mistake. He quickly lowered his head.

Kang-Woo scratched his head while looking at Balrog, who seemed like he was about to disembowel himself at any second.

"No, I'm not trying to blame you or anything. I was just curious."

Although omitting to report was a grave crime, it was nine hundred years ago.

There was no need to punish him at that point.

'But why did he do it?'

There was no way Balrog would omit to report for no reason. Considering his personality, there was a chance it was for a very important reason.

[Well...] Balrog sighed. [It was because of how hideous it was.]

"..."

[You had been swamped with work back then, so I did not want to bother you with such a hideous being...]

Kang-Woo frowned.

It was too weak of an excuse.

'Well, I guess it makes sense considering the situation back then.'

If it occurred nine hundred years ago, it was when the conflict with the princes of Hell was gradually rising. Ancient demonic beasts didn't leave their territory, so Kang-Woo didn't have the leeway to bother with them at the time.

'It's making me even more curious now.'

Just how hideous was Halcyon for Balrog to react this way?

Kang-Woo looked at the gate with great interest.

"Let's go."

[I-I will pay for this crime with my li—]

"Enough of that."

He gave Balrog's leg a light kick and began walking. As he crossed the Gate, an immense jungle appeared before him.

"..."

The thick scent of blood wafted into his nose.

"It sure has been going on a rampage."

He saw the mangled corpses of monsters throughout the dense forest.

'Looks about right.'

It was an ancient demonic beast. Since a monster that could face a prince of Hell had appeared in a Gate, it would be nothing short of a disaster for the Gate's monsters.

One of the characteristics of a demonic beast was building a territory, so it had likely killed every single monster that it could see in the area.

[My king.]

"I know."

Kang-Woo drew out his demonic energy, preparing himself so that he could use an Authority at any moment.

Balrog also raised his fists and drew out his demonic energy.

Clack.

Black armor formed around his fists. It looked as if a western knight was wearing gauntlets.

This was the Overlord Armor that Balrog had newly acquired.

"... Come to think of it, are you not using your whip?"

[It does not suit the Overlord Armor very well, so I have mostly been using my fists recently.]

"Hmm."

Kang-Woo nodded.

It was true that Balrog's main weapon was the whip, but that didn't mean he wasn't good at bare-handed combat.

'I'm sure he'll take care of it on his own.'

Just like he couldn't give martial arts advice to Kim Si-Hun, the same applied to Balrog.

Balrog was already a perfect warrior. If he had made a decision as important as abandoning his main weapon, it was likely the correct decision.

Sniff... Sniff.

At that moment, Kang-Woo heard the sound of someone crying in the forest. He created a sword with the Authority of Blades.

"Over there."

He felt powerful demonic energy in the direction of the crying. He slowly walked toward the voice.

'Halcyon.'

The demon that looked so hideous that it made even demons convulse in shock...

Kang-Woo hacked away at the thickets while thinking about what it could look like.

'It doesn't matter.'

It didn't matter how disgusting it looked. There were no hopes or dreams in Hell. He'd already seen the worst of the worst in Hell in terms of hideous beings.

Even if it looked like it had been made by attaching many different corpses, he was sure he could eat it with the Authority of Predation while smiling.

'Now, then... show yourself.'

Kang-Woo extended the blade and slashed apart the vines obstructing his vision.

There, he saw...

"..."

[Kuh! As hideous as always!]

Balrog clenched his fists while grimacing. Kang-Woo stared at Halcyon with his mouth agape.

"Sniff, sniff."

A white-haired woman was crying. There were bat wings on her back, two horns on her forehead, and a long wiggling tail coming out of the area near her buttocks.

And she was blindingly... chillingly... beautiful.

"Balrog..."

Kang-Woo trembled.

Halcyon was so beautiful that she sent chills through Kang-Woo's body. Honestly, Han Seol-Ah and Echidna were no match for her.

If he had to make a comparison... she looked exactly how people would often imagine a succubus.

"Motherfucker."

All those years he'd spent in Hell passed through his mind like a panorama. Forget a woman, he couldn't even see a real person. The wife he got was Lilith. He cried every night while tentacles harassed him. The place was so barren and empty with absolutely no form of entertainment.

He had endured through all that, but... but...

"A-Aaaahh."

He grabbed his head.

"You've seen Halcyon before?"

"Yes."

"A-Arrgghh."

"Why didn't you report it?"

"You..."

"It was because of how hideous it was."

"Motherfuckeeeeeeeeer!!!!!"

Tears poured down Kang-Woo's cheeks.

"Why didn't you report it, motherfuckeeeeeeeeer?!!!!!!"

Chapter 254 - Halcyon (1)

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahh!" Oh Kang-Woo screamed in despair.

It was unfair. He couldn't handle the emotions he was feeling at the moment.

'Why...'

Why had Balrog, who thoroughly reported every little thing, not report to him that one time?

"Why... why...?"

He felt a mix of resentment, rage, and confusion regarding Balrog.

"You think that appearance is hideous?"

[Of course. There is no demonic beast more hideous than that,] Balrog answered without hesitation.

Kang-Woo fell into chaos.

He activated the Authority of Resistance and Authority of Insight simultaneously in case he was under an illusion, but no matter how closely he looked at Halcyon, she was eye-poppingly beautiful.

'Fucking hell.'

He remembered what Lilith had said. She'd said she couldn't understand human beauty standards, but she didn't find them disgusting.

'But...'

He looked at Halcyon. She had the perfect balance of human and demon. It was the seductive appearance of a succubus that often appeared in anime.

'Though she's as flat as a wall.'

That did not matter.

Even Echidna was as flat as a wasteland stretched out over the horizon.

"Have you... found humans disgusting all this time?"

If Balrog found Halcyon disgusting, he would also find Kang-Woo and every other human disgusting as well.

[No, not at all. I cannot differentiate beauty among humans, but I do not find them disgusting.]

"That makes no sense." Kang-Woo became even more confused. "Then why do you think Halcyon is—"

[Because that hideous lifeform is 'mixed.']

"..."

The lightbulb in Kang-Woo's mind finally lit up.

"Oh."

He finally understood.

'If how a demon looks at human beings is like how we look at fish...'

From a demon's point of view, Halcyon was as if a demon had merged with a fish.

Imagine if there was a creature with the head of a fish and the body of a human.

It was obvious that from a human's point of view, whatever part of the human's body was replaced with that of a fish, it wouldn't be as hideous as a demon. However, demons were not human; their values and notions were different to the very core.

'No.'

Kang-Woo more or less understood why.

He could understand that from a demon's point of view, that mixed lifeform might be more hideous than tentacles spewing yellow pus.

But... even still... even if he understood...

"For fuck's sake..."

His frustration did not vanish. It was like getting out of prison after serving a thirty-year sentence and then being told out of the blue that he had been innocent all along.

The only difference was that, instead of thirty years, he'd spent ten millennia in prison.

'Fine. I can let go of my first nine thousand years.'

If only Balrog had made the proper report, he could've spent at least 900 years with a knockout beauty like Halcyon.

"Urgh, sniff."

He couldn't help but cry in sorrow. It was unfair. It was miserable.

He recalled all the nightmarish nights he'd struggled with Lilith.

'If only I knew there were demonic beasts as beautiful as this...'

Of course, he wouldn't have forced himself on her. Ancient demonic beasts were far too strong for him to force himself onto in the first place, and he wouldn't do something as vulgar as use his powers to satiate his lust.

But... even still...

'I could've at least tried to make her an ally.'

He honestly would've been perfectly fine with it at the time, even if she refused. Just seeing her from a distance would've been enough to make him shed tears of happiness.

[You seem to also be having a difficult time enduring its hideous appearance as well, my king.]

"No..."

[I will...! Kuh! F-For the demon king...!]

"I said no, you motherfucker..."

[Urpp, bleeeeeegh!!]

Balrog puked while clenching the ground. Since he did not need sustenance, he puked a sticky fluid instead of stomach acid.

"Ah..."

Kang-Woo grabbed his hair.

"Fuck my life."

It was already in the past. Even if he found it unfair, he couldn't turn back time or change the past.

"Sniff... Sniff."

He turned to look at Halcyon, who was crouched down and crying.

It wasn't the time to think about whether Halcyon was beautiful or not.

'Why is she crying?'

He couldn't understand it.

Kang-Woo slowly walked toward her. He heard her mumbling something.

"Sniff... Wh-Who..." She looked at Kang-Woo. "Wh-Who are you?"

"..."

She shrank in fear. There were tears in her eyes, and her body was trembling.

'The hell?'

She was completely different from his image of an ancient demonic beast.

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes. He wasn't sure of how to react.

"Ah, I-I see. Y-You're also h-here to h-harass me, a-aren't you?" Halcyon stuttered. She slowly got up, exuding dark-red demonic energy.

'What's up with her?'

He frowned. He couldn't understand why Halcyon was reacting this way.

"Sniff, sniff. Wh-Why are you trying to h-harass me? Y-You're scaring me."

'You're the one scaring me, for fuck's sake.'

"I-I don't know wh-where I am, and e-everyone is trying to h-harass me. Y-You're all so mean."

'Does she really have intelligence?'

He heard that ancient demonic beasts had intelligence, but it was hard to say that of Halcyon.

'I should at least see if I can talk to her.'

Kang-Woo opened his mouth and said in a low voice, "Are you Halcyon?"

"... Huh? Y-You know me?"

"I've heard a lot about you."

It seemed he could talk with her.

"Y-You're here to harass me, j-just like them, aren't you? E-Everyone hates me, s-so I'm sure of it. I-I'm sure you're here to harass me."

'I can't seem to get through to her.'

Kang-Woo feigned laughter and looked at Halcyon.

She was acting as if she were a mental patient with a victim mentality. Her reaction made him think that the fact that ancient demonic beasts possessing intelligence was a lie.

"Sniff. E-Everyone's so mean to m-me. I-I've done nothing wrong." She shed tears. Crouching, she stuttered, "I-I didn't w-want to l-look like this e-either."

The whites of her eyes turned red, and her irises turned white. Hideous tendons sprouted out from the areas around her eyes.

Her white hair messily soared in the air, and...

Slam!!

The ground was distorted just from a single stomp of her foot.

Halcyon shot toward Kang-Woo in the blink of an eye.

"Why does everyone...!!!"

She raised her arm. Extremely sharp dark-red fingernails extended out, and she aimed for Kang-Woo's neck.

"Tsk."

Bash!

He raised his leg and kicked Halcyon in the stomach.

Rumble!!

She rolled a hundred meters and then stood back up. She swung her claw upward, shooting a wave of dark-red demonic energy at Kang-Woo.

'Authority of Invulnerability.'

He raised a wall of demonic energy to block the attack, but her dark-red demonic energy tore the wall down. He crouched and dodged the attack.

"... H-Hate me so much?!!"

Smash!!

Halcyon flew a hundred meters in less than a second and kicked Kang-Woo.

He rolled on the ground while being blown away. He felt as if he'd been struck by a wrecking ball weighing dozens of tons.

"..."

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes as black blood spurted from his mouth.

'I guess even if she looks like this...'

She was still an ancient demonic beast, and even the physical capabilities of a prince of Hell couldn't compare to her physical prowess.

"Nice."

The tips of his mouth went up. It would've been a killjoy if Halcyon had been a frail girl like her appearance implied.

'She finally feels like a monster.'

Kang-Woo lowered his body.

Halcyon charged toward him and swung her claws downward.

"Skybreaker."

Kang-Woo pulled his right arm back, took a step forward with his left leg, and swung his fist.

Enormous amounts of demonic energy clashed.

A huge, 30-meter crater formed as dirt and stone went flying.

It was as if the Titans of mythology were fighting; just the clash of their powers was enough to level the surroundings.

Wham!

The dense forest was nowhere to be seen anymore. All that was left was a distorted, desolate land, as if an earthquake had occurred.

"Haaa, haaa, haaa!"

Halcyon flew up while panting heavily.

Kang-Woo chased after her and reached out to grab her leg as she was trying to fly away. He smashed her into the ground.

"Kurgh!" Halcyon exclaimed as the enormous thud rang out.

Step, step.

Kang-Woo walked toward her.

"H-How?"

Halcyon's face was dyed with fear.

Kang-Woo walked toward her expressionlessly.

The physical capabilities of an ancient demonic beast were clearly superior to those of a prince of Hell, but... it was a completely different story if she were compared to Kang-Woo.

She was likely above him in terms of raw physical strength, but he had an incredible number of Authorities and overwhelmingly more demonic energy than her.

"Well, you weren't all that bad."

Kang-Woo looked down at the wound he'd received from Halcyon. This wound from her claws was not regenerating.

'Is it poison?'

There was no way to know.

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue while looking at the wound bleeding out black blood.

'What a pain.'

Tear.

He ripped out the portion of flesh wounded by Halcyon's claws. Black blood poured out like a fountain, but only for a moment. As if rewinding a video, his injury regenerated.

"Wh-Who are y-you?" Halcyon asked in a fearful voice. Tears were trickling down her cheeks.

"Who knows?"

He had no reason to tell her. Kang-Woo slowly raised his hand.

'Authority of Blaze.'

Karmic fire, burning as if it would devour the entire world, enveloped his hand.

"Eek! S-Sniff. I-I'm sorry. I-I'm so sorry. P-Please don't hurt me. I'm sorry. I'm sorry..."

"..."

He had no intention of killing her—there were many things he wanted to ask her.

'Seeing her current state...'

He wasn't sure if it would be worth asking her anything.

"Tsk, though you've got a pretty face..."

Kang-Woo had never expected Halcyon to be this insane.

'But at least it's better this way.'

He was able to console himself, at least a little, that he had dodged a bullet from not meeting Halcyon in the past.

"... Pardon?" Halcyon raised her head. "D-Did you just say that I'm p-pretty?"

Tears poured out of her eyes.

"A-A-Aaaahh."

Halcyon trembled while touching her face.

"H-He said I'm pretty."

She stared at Kang-Woo with eyes filled with madness.

"I-I've finally heard that I'm prettyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!!!"

Her white hair soared into the air.

"Kyahahahahahaha!!!"

The tips of her mouth went up to their absolute limit, and a burst of mad laughter came out of her mouth.

'What the fuck?'

Kang-Woo looked at her in absurdity.

'What's up with this bitch?'

An unsettling feeling crept down his spine.

Chapter 255 - Halcyon (2)

The first emotion Halcyon felt after being born was fear.

"Eek!"

"Wh-what the hell is that monster?"

When she opened her eyes for the very first time, she saw demons looking down at her in disgust. They grimaced as they looked at her as if she were hideous.

"Shit! Urpp!"

"Bleeegh!"

They vomited while looking at her.

Unlike them, she didn't have numerous eyes, skin covered in wriggling tentacles, or moldy skin covered in holes.

"I-Is this a demonic beast?"

They called her a demonic beast, not a demon. A beast with no intelligence or sense of reason. A being that moved and survived only through instinct.

"I-I have never seen such a hideous demonic beast..."

They were looking at her in disgust, and their voices were filled with enmity.

'I...'

She crouched down and prayed.

She frantically prayed, begging them not to harass her, not to hurt her.

'I've done nothing wrong.'

"Kill it!"

"Kill that disgusting thing! Hurry!"

Attacks poured toward her from every direction.

She couldn't understand why they resented her and why they were disgusted with her so much, but there was one thing she was sure about: being hit by their attacks hurt a lot.

She ran away. Because she was born a monster, she was very fast.

She desperately ran away with all her might.

"Follow it!"

"We cannot let that thing grow!"

They chased after her, trampled on her, and tore at her flesh.

It hurt. It hurt so much that she could barely endure it.

"Please... don't... hurt... me," she begged in desperation.

"What's wrong with this demonic beast?"

According to what she had heard from them, demonic beasts, just like their name suggested, were beasts with no intelligence. They didn't feel despair or fear. They were monsters that wouldn't hesitate to attack if they thought someone was their enemy.

That was the demonic beast they referred to.

"Sniff, sniff."

So what?

She wasn't like that. She possessed neither the madness nor the brutal desire to tear apart her enemies. She was just terrified by their words and looks of disgust.

No matter where she ran, they always chased after her. It was the same with those she met for the first time. All demons she met showered her with attacks as they vomited.

Life was fear and pain. Everyone in the world cursed her. It was a never-ending nightmare. In the end...

"Y-You're also trying to harass me, aren't you?"

She lost her mind. There was no way she would be able to endure it while staying sane. Surrounded by fear and madness, she killed everyone who approached her.

She realized that, if she didn't kill, she was the one who would get killed.

"Sniff, sniff."

She made a territory. She then realized that if she stayed inside the robust borders she'd built, other demons wouldn't come after her.

But...

"Waaaaaahh!!!"

The wound didn't close. The way they had pointed at her and their disgusted gazes did not disappear from her head.

She wanted someone who wouldn't look at her in fear or disgust, but however long she waited—a century, a millennia, even ten millennia—no such being appeared. She would always be a target of fear and disgust. It was an unending nightmare.

"Sniff, sniff."

She remained shrunk within the robust borders she had built while bawling her eyes out. Even if she cried, nothing would change. Just like that... too many years passed.

\* \* \*

"Kyahahahahahaha!!!"

Hysterical laughter echoed throughout the surroundings.

Halcyon crawled on the ground and grabbed Oh Kang-Woo's pants.

"R-Really? A-Am I really pretty?" she asked desperately. She was looking up at him with sincerity, like a devotee seeking salvation.

"Uhh, I mean, yeah."

Kang-Woo looked down at her with a confused expression. He answered reflexively. He had not expected such an assertive response; no, it was borderline lunacy.

"A-Aaaahh."

Halcyon cried while touching her face. She looked like she was high on drugs. She once again burst out into laughter filled with pleasure, thrill, and madness.

'Don't tell me...'

Kang-Woo thought of a certain possibility. He looked at Balrog lying on the floor, still vomiting.

A scenario of a possible explanation came to mind.

'This must be the first time she has ever heard that she's pretty.'

Taking into consideration that Halcyon looked more hideous than anything from a demon's perspective, she had likely never heard that she was pretty in Hell.

'I'm sure it's not just that.'

She wouldn't react like this just because she had simply never been called pretty.

'Trauma.'

There was a chance that her appearance being so hideous to other demons had left a deep trauma on her. No, if that hadn't traumatized her, there was no way she would be reacting like this.

She had likely been ostracized and had become all demons' target of resentment and disgust.

"Well..."

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes. The ends of his mouth went up.

'I can use this.'

It wasn't hard to guess what Halcyon had gone through.

'It's obvious.'

He could guess and imagine it. In that case, using her experience to his advantage was not hard at all.

'The important thing is...'

How valuable Halcyon would be to him. As for that, there was no need to even think about it.

'Even right now, it'll be nothing but a plus for me.'

There were many things he wanted to ask Halcyon: the reason why she, an ancient demonic beast, had arrived on Earth, and the information on the abnormal movements of the other ancient demonic beasts and Behemoth, the king of demonic beasts...

'Not just that.'

After reaching 150 in his Demonic Energy stat, he temporarily couldn't use the Authority of Predation to absorb demonic energy. Of course, he could always compress Halcyon's corpse, just like he did with Belphegor.

'But...'

It wasn't like his control over demonic energy would skyrocket anytime soon. It needed to be slowly improved through repetitive training. Continuing to turn the corpses of demons and demonic beasts into gems was far too inefficient. He wasn't even sure when he would be able to absorb Belphegor.

'I mean, it would be a different story if I managed to awaken some sort of power or something.'

He wasn't Kim Si-Hun, so relying on powering up was not good.

"Sniff, sniff. I-I'm glad. I'm so happy..."

Halcyon was moved to tears.

Kang-Woo looked at her expressionlessly.

'In other words...'

It was far more beneficial to make her into an ally than to kill her and make her into a gem to absorb in the future. Although she didn't possess an Authority, she would be able to overpower a prince of Hell in terms of physical ability.

'Alright.'

Kang-Woo smirked. He'd decided on a goal and knew how to achieve it, so there was no reason to hesitate.

"Y-You're telling the truth, right? Y-You're not lying, right?"

Halcyon looked up at him anxiously while placing her hands together.

Kang-Woo reached out toward her while making a kind smile. He put his hand on her cheek.

"Mm..."

Kang-Woo hesitated for a moment.

Halcyon's expression paled as she trembled.

"Now that I take a closer look, maybe not that pretty."

"Ah..."

A short exclamation came out of Halcyon's mouth—it was one mixed with disappointment and relief.

Kang-Woo smirked. It had been just as he had expected.

'Calling her pretty here would be more of a detriment.'

It was a simple issue.

Imagine there was someone who had only heard they were ugly all their life. Would they be able to fully trust the words of someone who came up to them and praised them for being way too beautiful?

'Of course not.'

Whether they were human, demon, or demonic beast, all lifeforms possessed self-preservation instincts. They would naturally be wary of people who told them 'absurd lies.'

"I-I thought as much. Th-There would be no way that I'm... pretty."

Tears flowed down Halcyon's cheeks.

"I'm... unsightly, disgusting, and..."

Her voice became progressively weaker as if she were struggling to find the words.

Kang-Woo's eyes shone.

'Now.'

He grasped the chance once she was put to her lowest point.

"No, I wouldn't say that," he said firmly.

"Pardon...?"

"I'm saying that you're not unsightly or disgusting. Well, I'm not sure what you've heard until now, but at least, for me, that's not the case at all."

"Ah..."

"Even when looking at you again, you're not bad at all. You're not unsightly or disgusting."

Kang-Woo smirked and wiped her tears.

There was no need to exaggerate. No, exaggerating would only make things worse.

What Halcyon really wanted wasn't for someone to tell her she was beautiful.

'What she really wants is...'

Someone who didn't find her disgusting.

"A-Aaaahh.."

That was all. Just that one tiny little thing was nothing short of salvation for her.

"Sniff, sniff."

Tears flowed down her cheeks. She was trembling with excitement.

"Thank... you. Thank you so... so much."

She cried even more while clutching his clothes.

Kang-Woo slowly looked elsewhere while looking down at her.

'It's not enough yet.'

The puzzle was 99% complete. The final piece needed to be added.

He took out his communication device and whispered.

- Stand up, Balrog.

Balrog, who had still been vomiting while collapsed on the ground, staggered into a standing position.

[Kuh! Watch out, my king!!]

After seeing Halcyon stuck to Kang-Woo, he quickly stomped on the ground. The Overlord Armor made of black demonic energy wrapped around his arms.

"Urgh...!"

Halcyon clenched her eyes shut, pitifully trembling. After having been put on the verge of exhaustion after battling with Kang-Woo, she would not be able to block Balrog's fist covered in the Overlord Armor.

Kang-Woo slowly raised his hand.

Whaam!!

Kang-Woo stopped Balrog's fist right next to Halcyon's head. If he had been even a millisecond late, her head would have been blown off.

[M-My king?]

"I'm not in any danger, so stay still."

Halcyon looked up at Kang-Woo in surprise.

"Ah..."

Her clutch on his clothes became even stronger.

[Are you... not affected at all while seeing that monster, my king?] Balrog asked while having trouble keeping his eyes on Halcyon.

'That's it.'

It was the question he had been hoping for. The final piece of the puzzle had been formed, so he calmly said, "I guess not."

"..."

Halcyon looked up at him anxiously.

"Unlike what I've heard from you, I don't really find Halcyon unsightly." He placed down the final piece of the puzzle. "Are my eyes weird? I even find it a bit pretty."

[Wha...]

"I guess only I think that way."

Kang-Woo shrugged and then looked at Halcyon. He could see a change in her eyes.

'That's it.'

The only one who didn't find her disgusting...

If that person's eyes were a bit special, and only that person did not find her to be disgusting...

"Tsk. That's enough for the subjugation. Let's go back, Balrog."

"E-Excuse me!"

Halcyon raised her head.

He could sense desperation in her voice.

If there was only one person in the world who could take her out of the endless nightmare...

'She would desperately cling to them, whatever it took.'

Halcyon desperately exclaimed, "P-Please take me with you! I-I'll do anything. I-I won't cry, s-so... p-please don't abandon me. I'm sorry for a-attacking you earlier. I won't ever do it again. I-I'll do anything you ask, s-so please..."

He could see a mad sense of desperation in her eyes.

Kang-Woo slowly turned his head.

'That's it.'

A satisfied smile appeared on his face.

Of course, what he did likely wasn't morally correct. Leaving a demon's point of view aside, she was actually beautiful, and him being the only one who wasn't disgusted by her looks was a lie.

'But...'

He had no intention of telling her the whole truth. He had not gone through this hassle to give her salvation, nor was it to take her out of her painful nightmare.

'What I need is someone who listens, follows, thinks of, serves, and dies for only me.'

That was all he needed.

"Well, okay." Kang-Woo smiled. "I'll take you."

"Ah..."

Halcyon's eyes filled with delight.

Chapter 256 - There Really Are No Hopes and Dreams in Hell

"Oh... Kang-Woo..."

"Yeah, that's my name."

"C-Can I call you M-Master Kang-Woo from now on?"

Halcyon looked up at him with shining eyes as if she were an abandoned dog that had just been adopted.

Kang-Woo smirked and nodded.

Halcyon's expression brightened. She clenched her two fists and trembled, unable to hide her joy.

'Ah, I'm feeling guilty...'

Kang-Woo was still a person, so he couldn't help but feel guilty after seeing her so happy. The guilt was weighing down on his shoulders.

'That aside...'

There was something he had to do.

"In exchange, I have a condition."

"A c-condition?"

Her eyes trembled with uneasiness.

Kang-Woo calmly said, "Become my retainer. A Familiar, to be more precise."

No matter how much demonic energy he had, he would not be able to subordinate a demonic beast on the level of Halcyon with the Authority of Subordination.

'But...'

It would be a different story if Halcyon herself submitted to him of her own accord. If that were the case, the chances of the Authority of Subordination succeeding would increase greatly.

'This is why I took the time to do all of that.'

If he took her out in her current state, she'd immediately realize that it wasn't just Kang-Woo who didn't find her disgusting.

From her point of view, the number of saviors would greatly increase, and then her desperate feeling to stick to Kang-Woo would most definitely decrease.

'I need to tie the knot before that.'

He needed to place the leash that was the Authority of Subordination, which would make her unable to defy him.

"A... Familiar?"

Halcyon's eyes widened. She nodded without hesitation.

"O-Okay! I-I'll do it! I-I'll become your Familiar!"

"..."

Kang-Woo wondered if she was saying that while knowing what being a Familiar entailed.

In the cases of Balrog and Lilith, it was different—they weren't chained by the Authority of Subordination. The only ones chained by his Authority of Subordination were Kim Si-Hun and Echidna.

'Those two can't go against my commands.'

He couldn't give them any commands that went against their survival instincts like committing suicide, but besides that, they couldn't go against him.

He had even controlled Si-Hun numerous times with it.

'Well, I guess it doesn't matter.'

It didn't matter to him if she knew what a Familiar was or not.

A swindler didn't need to think about what would happen to the person signing the contract.

'... Although I'm not a swindler.'

Kang-Woo had not lied to Halcyon, at the very least.

It was true that he found her beautiful, and he had not hidden the fact that he would take her with him on the condition that she became his Familiar. No one could dare call him a swindler after all that.

"Good."

Kang-Woo put his hand on Halcyon's shoulder. Demonic energy rose from within him.

'Authority of Subordination.'

Whoom!

An immense amount of demonic energy flowed out of him. The demonic energy was so thick that it felt viscous. It flowed into Halcyon's body.

Halcyon closed her eyes and accepted the demonic energy without offering any resistance.

Powerful shackles restrained her soul.

Riiing.

[The subject is accepting the 'Authority of Subordination' without resistance.]

[Drastically raising the Authority of Subordination's chance of success.]

[The soul has been successfully subordinated. Registering 'Halcyon' as your Familiar.]

'Alright.'

He could feel that his soul was linked to hers, and a smile appeared on his face. After Balrog and Si-Hun, he had obtained yet another powerful ally who could face the princes of Hell.

"A-Aaaahh."

Halcyon let out an exclamation while holding her chest.

Kang-Woo silently looked down at her as she trembled.

'That aside, she's actually extremely flat.'

Even Echidna's chest was bigger than hers.

He shrugged and turned around.

'That's none of my concern.'

He did not like them flat. Like most men, he was an advocate of voluptuous women. However, the fact that Halcyon was flat had absolutely nothing to do with him.

'I already have my darling.'

He couldn't help but smile when he thought of Han Seol-Ah. He already had a perfect woman like her, so he did not need anyone else.

"Thank... you. Th-Thank you so much. Sniff."

Halcyon shed tears.

Kang-Woo made a complex expression. It felt weird to be thanked for turning her into a slave who could not defy him.

"Well... let's leave the detailed introductions for a bit later."

There were other important matters to resolve first.

Kang-Woo said, "I want to ask you something."

"What... is it?"

Halcyon tilted her head.

"How did you get here?"

"Ah..." Halcyon looked around the area and cautiously said, "I-I'm not sure either. My memories prior to coming here are... fuzzy."

"Your memories are fuzzy?"

"Y-Yes!"

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes.

She couldn't lie because of the Authority of Subordination.

"Since when have your memories been fuzzy?"

"Umm... I-It hasn't been that long. A-Around a year? I-I'm not exactly sure. I-I'm sorry."

She lowered her head as if she'd committed a capital crime.

'A year, huh?'

It wasn't a short time, but that was not the case for immortal demons and demonic beasts.

Kang-Woo tried his best to recall the past.

If her fuzzy memory started a year ago, then it would be around the time the Demon Cult had summoned Balrog to Earth.

'If her memories had been fuzzy since then...'

There was one thing that he could think of.

"Is there nothing you can remember?"

"N-No, I can still remember fragments."

"Tell me everything you can remember."

"Mm... I don't remember well, but... I-I was heading somewhere."

"You were heading somewhere?"

"Yes. I just thought that I had to go there... as if I had been hypnotized. I-I think that's why I had headed there."

"And then you were here when you came back to your senses?"

"Y-yes! Th-that's right! When I came back to my senses, I was already here!"

"..."

Kang-Woo remained silent. He turned his head toward Balrog, who was resisting the urge to vomit.

"Balrog, when did the ancient demonic beasts start acting strangely?"

[About... a year ago. Since then, the ancient demonic beasts have been leaving their territories.]

"Which ancient demonic beasts exactly?"

[Bul-Kathos, Ouroboros, and Lacrasha. Oh, and Halcyon over there. Also...]

Balrog hesitated for a moment.

[We had confirmed that Behemoth had moved as well.]

"..."

Behemoth...

The king of demonic beasts and the father of Leviathan, a prince of Hell.

Not even Kang-Woo had heard much about him.

'It would be bad if Behemoth crossed over to Earth.'

Leaving other ancient demonic beasts aside, not even Kang-Woo could take Behemoth lightly.

'Her consciousness became fuzzy, and she was heading somewhere...'

And when she came back to her senses, she was already within this Gate.

He began organizing the information he'd heard from Halcyon.

"..."

Kang-Woo frowned.

'I have no idea.'

He lacked information.

"Do you remember why your memories became fuzzy?"

"I-I'm not sure. I-It just happened one day..."

"What about any information on the other ancient demonic beasts, such as Behemoth?"

"I-I don't know. I've never met them. I-I'm sorry for being u-useless!"

Halcyon was crying, and she begged Kang-Woo not to abandon her.

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

'Something is happening.'

He wasn't sure whether it was intentional or just a natural phenomenon, but one thing for sure was that something was happening in Hell after the princes of Hell had disappeared and he had left.

"Shit."

A short curse left his mouth.

He thought he would be able to relax a little after taking care of Satan, but he had received unsettling news.

'I mean, I've already known it since a while back.'

He already knew that ancient demonic beasts and Behemoth had begun moving strangely, but he hadn't thought that much about it because it was something that was happening in Hell.

'But...'

The situation had changed.

He wouldn't care if it was something that was happening in Hell, but if it involved Earth, that was a whole other story.

"... What a bother."

The biggest problem was that there wasn't anything he could do. He had no way to go back to Hell, so there was no way to find the culprit or stop whatever was happening in advance.

"Balrog, is there a way to contact Hell?"

The demon king army was still in Hell. Kang-Woo wasn't sure what had happened to the army now that both Balrog and Lilith were MIA, but it would not have been broken up so easily. However...

[There isn't one.]

Balrog shook his head.

Kang-Woo sighed deeply.

'I guess the only thing I can do is wait.'

However, he didn't feel like this issue was one that could be solved simply by waiting.

"... Let's go back for now."

Kang-Woo turned his body after thinking about it for a while. He couldn't find a solution at the moment.

'The only solution at the moment is to keep finding the ancient demonic beasts in Gates and killing them.'

'I'm sure it won't be as easy as with Halcyon.'

She had been an exception among exceptions. The other ancient demonic beasts would probably fight to their deaths.

"Tsk."

He clicked his tongue.

'It can't be helped.'

He could only find and kill them as they appeared on Earth.

'I gotta improve my control over demonic energy quicker.'

Now that things had come to this, the best course of action was to grow stronger by devouring the ancient demonic beasts. To do that, he needed to raise his level of demonic energy control, currently capped at handling a Demonic Energy stat of 150.

"A-Are you sure I can go with you?"

"Yeah."

As he nodded, Halcyon brightly smiled and trotted after him. She smiled happily while carefully grabbing the ends of his clothes.

'... I'll have to explain to Seol-Ah first thing when I get home.'

Kang-Woo headed home while smiling bitterly.

\* \* \*

"Your new Familiar...?" Seol-Ah asked.

"Yeah."

"Is it... a similar case to Echidna?"

"You could say that."

Although it wasn't exactly the same, it didn't change the fact that they were both his Familiars. There was no big difference.

Seol-Ah looked at Halcyon with great interest.

"Eek!"

Halcyon hid behind Kang-Woo in fear. It was similar to how Echidna had first reacted.

"..."

Echidna, who had followed behind Seol-Ah, glared at Halcyon in disapproval. She pulled Kang-Woo's arm while on full alert against Halcyon.

"Kang-Woo is mine. Don't try anything funny, newbie."

"Why are you acting like some territorial sunbae?"

Kang-Woo patted Echidna's head while feigning laughter. He said, "Halcyon will be sleeping in my room tonight."

"In your room, Kang-Woo?"

"Yeah. I mean, just look..."

Halcyon was trembling severely while grabbing Kang-Woo's clothes, her face as white as a sheet.

'Her personality has a part in it, but...'

It was also because of a particular characteristic of demonic beasts. Most demonic beasts, like feline creatures, had the characteristic of building their own territory and rarely leaving it. Since this was her first time coming here, it was also the period of time when her anxiety and wariness were at their peak.

"Oh, I see," Echidna said. "What should we do for dinner, then?"

"We don't need food."

"Mm... Then I'll bring out a blanket and a pillow."

"Thanks." Kang-Woo turned to Halcyon. "Let's go."

"Ah... O-Okay!"

As soon as he entered his room, Halcyon followed him. She relaxed a little now that there were just the two of them.

"I'm sure you're exhausted. Let's sleep," Kang-Woo said.

After the battle with Halcyon and all the mind-boggling things they had talked about, he was tired. Kang-Woo laid the blanket on the floor so she could sleep.

Halcyon nervously looked up at him.

"C-Could we... sleep together?"

"Hm?"

It was an unexpected proposal.

Halcyon quickly lowered her head.

"N-Nothing! H-How dare I s-say such a thing?! I-I'm so sorry!"

"..."

Kang-Woo looked silently at Halcyon, who was crying as if she'd committed a heinous crime. He sighed.

'I honestly wouldn't mind.'

If he were asked whether he liked or disliked the idea, he, of course, liked it. Who would hate the idea of sharing the bed with a beauty like Halcyon?

'But I feel bad for Seol-Ah.'

His mind was in a jumble since it felt as if he would be unintentionally having an affair. After thinking about it for a while, Kang-Woo said in a low voice, "... Only for today."

He'd made her his Familiar through the Authority of Subordination, so sleeping with her for just one night was nothing.

'We'll only be sleeping, after all.'

He wasn't at risk of not being able to handle his desires. If he couldn't resist such a temptation, he wouldn't have been able to handle the desires that a demon's body brought.

"Th-thank you very much!"

Halcyon clenched her fists while making a bright expression.

He smirked at how innocent she looked.

Click.

He turned off the light and lay on the bed with Halcyon.

"Hehehe..."

Halcyon smiled while lying next to him.

While lying on the bed, Kang-Woo began thinking about everything that had happened today.

'It's even more frustrating now that we're like this.'

If Balrog had reported to Kang-Woo nine hundred years ago and Kang-Woo had gone to see Halcyon, Kang-Woo could have at least had a better time in Hell.

'You were right, Akiyama.'

He remembered the crazy Japanese Demon Cultist who had summoned Lilith.

'There were indeed hopes and dreams in Hell.'

It was just that he hadn't been able to find it.

Even in Hell, there had been a hidden gem.

"Hehe... Master Kang-Woo." Halcyon stuck closer to Kang-Woo.

"Hey, you're sticking too cl—"

Just then...

"Huh?"

He felt a strange sensation against his thigh, touching something that shouldn't be there.

'What the fuck?'

Kang-Woo raised the blanket. He looked down and saw the hard thing pressing against his thigh.

"Wait a minute."

His face paled.

"You were..."

"What's wrong?" Halcyon asked.

Mouth open in shock, Kang-Woo finished his sentence, "... a man?"

Dangle.

Chapter 257 - Revelation (1)

"... A-A man?" Oh Kang-Woo said, his mouth open in shock.

Halcyon tilted his head. At that moment, as if he understood something, he quickly said, "Oh...! I-I'm, uhm, a-androgynous."

"Androgynous?"

What a load of bullshit.

"Yes. I-I can choose which g-gender I want to be."

'What an awfully convenient setting.'

Just like humans, demons and demonic beasts had genders. Although very rare, demons and demonic beasts also produced offspring. However, Kang-Woo had never heard of androgynous demons or demonic beasts before.

'In any case...'

His shock died down a little after hearing that Halcyon could change genders.

"W-Would you prefer me... to be female, Master Kang-Woo?" he asked.

"Of course."

He didn't hesitate to answer. He didn't even want to imagine that someone so beautiful was a man.

"I-In that case, please just wait a little bit. I-It won't take very long!"

"Okay, then get started right awa—"

"I-It'll take about a hundred years."

"I beg your pardon? A hundred years?"

"Yes!"

Halcyon smiled brightly.

Certainly, for immortal beings, a hundred years was not a very long time. However, that meant...

'He'll have a dick for a hundred years.'

Kang-Woo's expression paled.

'No.'

Kang-Woo grabbed his head.

Halcyon, who was laying on the bed, looked at his face. He carefully asked, "I-Is there a problem?"

Kang-Woo remained silent.

A problem? There were nothing but problems.

The sensation of that thing he had felt against his thigh was still very vivid.

Kang-Woo did not even think to check that area while they were fighting, but now that he saw it, he could see it clearly under Halcyon's clothes, which seemed to be made from beast skin.

'No, just... why...?'

He was beyond frustrated; he was just enraged now.

'Why does he have one with that appearance?'

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me..."

The difficulty of sleeping together with Halcyon had skyrocketed. Although he had never planned to do anything besides sleeping, that was not the problem.

'Shit.'

Kang-Woo grabbed his head in confusion. He'd already been put into similar situations a few times. For example, Kim Si-Hun sometimes gave off a weird feeling.

'No.'

Kang-Woo shook his head.

It was different. There was a clear difference between Si-Hun and Halcyon. He could always brush off Si-Hun's actions as if it were a joke, but not Halcyon's.

'At this rate...'

Kang-Woo's expression paled. Within the deepest parts of his consciousness, as deep as the Abyss, the thought that it might actually be okay popped up.

"Absolutely not!!"

"Kyaa!"

Kang-Woo sprang up, sweating and panting heavily.

"Ah..."

Halcyon looked up at Kang-Woo panting heavily and exclaimed as if he had realized something.

"I-I understand."

'Understand what?'

Halcyon nodded while blushing.

"I-I'm fine with it."

'I'm not.'

"I-If Master Kang-Woo wants to do it that badly..."

'No, I don't want to do it.'

"I..."

'No.'

Halcyon lowered his head while blushing.

The sensation against Kang-Woo's thigh grew stronger.

"Ah."

Kang-Woo covered his face with his hands.

"Fuck my life..."

Why was this happening to him?

'Just please let me be happy too.'

He was crying before he realized it.

\* \* \*

"... Did something happen, Kang-Woo?" Han Seol-Ah asked while looking at him the next morning, worried because of the dark circles beneath his eyes.

"..."

With his mouth closed, Kang-Woo looked at Seol-Ah. He grabbed her hands.

"K-Kang-Woo?"

"Darling."

"Y-Yes...?"

"You know you're the only one for me, don't you?"

"..."

Seol-Ah tilted her head at his sudden change in attitude.

Kang-Woo dragged her in and hugged her tightly.

"K-kyaa!"

Seol-Ah's face reddened. She quickly looked around. Thankfully, there wasn't anyone nearby.

"Oh, you..."

The ends of her mouth went up. She wasn't sure why he was acting this way, but she didn't hate it. She put her forehead on Kang-Woo's shoulder.

She felt as if he would be able to hear her heart beating faster.

"Fuuu. I feel much better now," Kang-Woo said.

"Ah..." As Kang-Woo let her go, Seol-Ah gave a short exclamation as if disappointed. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing much."

"Don't say that. You look exhausted."

"..."

Kang-Woo remained silent.

It was too complex to explain what had happened last night.

'What should I say, exactly?'

How could he tell the woman he was dating that he had despaired over the fact that Halcyon had something he shouldn't have?

Kang-Woo forced a smile and avoided answering.

"Mm... You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

Seol-Ah smiled after seeing him troubled.

"Oh, more importantly, you had plans today, didn't you? I got a call from Gaia earlier."

"Oh, right."

He'd completely forgotten about it due to the Halcyon incident. It was the day he would go see Raphael with Gaia and Si-Hun.

'He hasn't fully recovered yet, apparently.'

Raphael was still recovering after being critically wounded in the fight against Satan. Seeing how he'd requested a meeting, it seemed he'd gotten better.

'I really don't want to see him.'

Kang-Woo wanted to avoid meeting angels as much as possible, but it couldn't be helped. After all, they were allies in their hunt for Satan, the Demon of Prophecy.

"You were going to meet that angel named... Raphael, right? I'm a bit curious. What do angels look like?"

"They don't look that different from humans."

Although their stature was incomparable to that of a human.

"I guess you could say they're like... giants with white wings?"

That was probably the best comparison.

"How fascinating," Seol-Ah remarked.

"Mm..."

Kang-Woo recalled that Seol-Ah had symbols of angel wings on her back.

'Should I ask an angel about it?'

Although it didn't seem like there was anything wrong with Seol-Ah's body, he was still worried about it nonetheless. The symbols were similar to angel wings, so the angels might know something about it.

'...'

He thought about it for a while, but he ended up shaking his head.

'I'll keep it under wraps for now.'

Angels were not yet trustworthy allies. It wouldn't be too late to ask them after they built more trust. Besides, nothing had happened to Seol-Ah in the past year she had the symbols.

'Is it just an influence of her Trait?'

He narrowed his eyes. Players sometimes experienced changes to their bodies after awakening a Trait.

"Excuse me for a sec, Seol-Ah."

"Pardon? Ah... Kyaa!"

Kang-Woo turned her around and lifted her shirt. He saw the angel wing symbols shining faintly. Her back would likely shine dimly in the dark.

'The light is getting brighter.'

"K-Kang-Woo? I-I'm fine with it, but... d-doing it so early in the morning is..." Seol-Ah lowered her head while blushing. "W-We should at least go to my r—"

"Have you noticed any changes after these symbols appeared?"

"... Pardon me?"

Seol-Ah turned her head, her eyes as wide as saucers. She finally understood why Kang-Woo was staring at her back. Her face became so red that one might think white steam would rise from her head.

"N-Nothing in particular!"

"Really?"

In that case, it seemed fine to leave them alone for the time being.

"I'll be going to the Hall of Protection. Halcyon is still asleep, so try talking to him once he wakes up."

Kang-Woo put her shirt back down.

She couldn't see any lustful intentions in his eyes.

"..."

Seol-Ah glanced at Kang-Woo with narrow eyes.

For some reason... she was displeased.

"... No kimchi stew for you for the next week."

"Huh? Wh-Why? Why would you do such a horrible—"

"I've already made my decision."

Seol-Ah turned away coldly.

"At least tell me why!!" Kang-Woo shouted as if the situation wasn't fair.

His voice echoed through the house in vain.

\* \* \*

"Welcome, Kang-Woo."

"We've been waiting for you, hyung-nim."

As he entered the Hall of Protection, he saw Gaia and Si-Hun.

Kang-Woo nodded.

"Is something the matter, hyung-nim?"

"It's nothing," Kang-Woo said lifelessly. He turned to Gaia. "That aside, where did we decide to meet Lord Raphael?"

"In their fortress in Africa, like last time."

"And how is he doing...?"

"I've heard he's gotten much better."

Kang-Woo nodded while smiling. "What a relief."

Kang-Woo honestly wished for Raphael to stay bedridden for a bit longer, but he couldn't let his thoughts show.

"Let's get going."

It was close to the time of the meeting.

Kang-Woo turned to the gate that led to Africa.

Si-Hun followed him while pushing Gaia's wheelchair from behind.

"Long time no see," Raphael said.

Once they arrived at the fortress of the angels being built in the wilderness, the five-meter-tall giant waved at them while sitting in a chair as giant as himself.

Kang-Woo asked, "How are you feeling now?"

"Much better. What about you?"

"I have pretty much fully healed," Kang-Woo said while lightly swinging his arm. "More importantly, what have you called us here for today?"

"I was not the one who called you."

"Pardon?"

What was all that about?

Raphael continued, "A god of Earth contacted me. They said there was something they needed to tell all of us."

"... A god of Earth?"

"I am sure you all know better than me who it could be."

Raphael's eyes rested on Gaia.

Kang-Woo's and Si-Hun's eyes widened.

"No way..."

Whoom!!!

At that moment, intense light poured out of Gaia.

"A-Aaaahh."

She let out an exclamation, her mouth wide open. Gaia trembled severely.

"Gaia!" Si-Hun exclaimed.

"This is..."

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes. He'd seen it a few times.

'A revelation.'

It was how the gods of Earth contacted the protectors through their incarnations.

"My... children..."

A weak voice that sounded as if it would extinguish at any moment came out of Gaia's mouth.

Kang-Woo's expression hardened.

'It's different from before.'

The god was talking to them directly.

Considering whose incarnation Gaia was, it wasn't hard to guess the voice's owner.

'Gaia.'

It was not the voice of Gaia the incarnation but of the true Gaia.

"Haaa, haaa. There is... something that... I must... tell all... of... you," the stammering voice said.

Raphael, Kang-Woo, and Si-Hun looked at her.

'What's she about to say?'

Kang-Woo glared at Gaia in disapproval. There was no way he'd have a positive opinion of Gaia.

She had been the one who had caused him to go through all that suffering during his early days after he returned to Earth. She was also the goddess who had not been properly protecting Earth from the hands of Satan, the Demon of Prophecy.

She was so useless that she had to beg for the help of angels and gods from other worlds.

"Satan... is not... the Demon... of Prophecy."

"... Wh-What?!"

"What do you mean by that?!" Si-Hun and Raphael shouted simultaneously. Their expressions paled.

'Motherfucker.'

Kang-Woo's face also paled.

'What the actual fuck is this goddess going on about?'

He had worked his ass off to buy the entirety of the Satan Coin.

'Is this coin gonna plummet now?'

Chapter 258 - Revelation (2)

"That is impossible!"

Raphael got up.

'Yeah! Well done, Raphael!'

Oh Kang-Woo nodded.

"Lord Raphael is right. Satan himself has admitted that he is the Demon of Prophecy."

Kang-Woo recalled how Satan had admitted that he had indeed done everything that had happened. At the time, Satan had been laughing like a madman, his eyes gleaming with lunacy.

Who would try to doubt that Satan was the Demon of Prophecy after seeing something like that?

"N-N... No. Satan... is not... the Demon of... Prophecy," Gaia said with difficulty.

Kim Si-Hun grabbed her shoulders and shouted, "Y-You must be mistaken! Th-There is no way that monster isn't the Demon of Prophecy...!"

In the great war that had occurred in Russia, Raphael had suffered a critical wound, and even Kang-Woo had almost lost his life. Even after that, they hadn't been able to kill Satan. They hadn't been able to beat him.

That demon, full of wrath and madness, was surely hiding somewhere even now as he planned the world's destruction.

'But...'

After all that, Satan wasn't the Demon of Prophecy?

"There is no way..."

Si-Hun lowered his head. A huge sense of powerlessness weighed on him.

Gaia arduously reached out to Si-Hun and embraced him.

"I-I am sorry, my... child. I have made you shoulder too big of a burden," Gaia said in a sorrowful voice. She then continued in fear, "B-But Satan is... not the Demon... of Prophecy. He was not the... Demon of Prophecy that S-Seraph and... I... saw."

Raphael calmed himself down and asked, "If Satan is not the Demon of Prophecy, then who is?!"

"I-I do not... know."

Gaia shook her head.

Raphael frowned, and so did Kang-Woo and Si-Hun.

"Did you not just say that you once saw the Demon of Prophecy?" Si-Hun asked her as if he were trying to refute her.

"I-It is hard... to explain in detail. H-His darkness was too big... f-for us to fully confirm his identity."

"Then there is a chance Satan could be the Demon of—"

"N-No." Gaia firmly shook her head. She continued while panting heavily, "I did not... see the darkness of the Abyss... from... h-him."

"Are you saying that the black gem that he had taken out at the end was not the darkness of the Abyss?"

"Th-The power possessed by the Demon of Prophecy is much greater... I-It cannot even begin to compare to that."

"..."

There was a heavy silence.

Their minds went blank from the unfathomable scale of events.

Gaia trembled.

"M-My children. B-Be careful of the Demon... of Prophecy. The monster... of the Abyss will..."

The light surrounding Gaia started to fade. Then, Gaia, who was sitting in the wheelchair, collapsed to the side.

"Gaia!"

Si-Hun quickly ran toward her and grabbed her before she could fall to the ground.

"Si... Hun...?" Gaia asked, her face paling. She was trembling as if she were about to pass out at any moment.

"Wh-What happened...?"

"Rest for now. I will explain it to you later," Si-Hun said in a low voice, holding her in his arms.

Gaia closed her eyes.

"..."

Silence fell once again.

Raphael grabbed his forehead as if his head hurt.

"Just what in the world..."

He seemed to have fallen into a state of chaos.

"Lord Raphael, are there any other demons that you can think of who could be the Demon of Prophecy?" Kang-Woo asked.

"..."

Raphael remained silent and dodged Kang-Woo's gaze. After Kang-Woo saw that Raphael was avoiding looking at him on purpose, Kang-Woo's eyes shone.

"You do have one in mind."

"... I cannot say," Raphael said in a firm voice. "It is something that Lord Michael presides over. Forget about it, human."

"..."

Kang-Woo was about to say something but didn't. He narrowed his eyes.

"Haaa... What to do now?" Raphael mumbled and sighed.

"What we have to do has not changed," Kang-Woo answered in a firm voice.

It didn't matter who the Demon of Prophecy was. In the end, there was only one thing they could and needed to do.

"We must find Satan," Kang-Woo said with certainty.

'We won't get anywhere if we don't find Satan.'

He recalled Satan, who had been wrapped in the horrifying demonic energy known as the Abyss.

"Even if he is not the Demon of Prophecy, seeing how he can control demonic energy from the Abyss, I am sure he has some connection to the Demon of Prophecy."

"... You have a point."

Raphael nodded.

Although the number of mountains that they needed to climb over had increased, what they had to do was clear: they had to scale the mountains one by one and eliminate the evil in front of them.

'To do that...'

Raphael narrowed his eyes. He looked at Si-Hun, Kang-Woo, and his subordinates working busily in the fortress.

To eradicate evil...

For light to win...

'It does not matter what we have to sacrifice.'

"... We will support you all as much as we can."

"Thank you very much."

Kang-Woo bowed. Receiving the angels' assistance was crucial to opposing a powerful demon like Satan.

He asked, "Have you found any clues regarding Satan?"

"I have been recuperating due to my injuries while building our fortress, so we have not been able to find anything yet. We will have to start now."

"Come to think of it, Ludwig had mentioned that he had been tracking Lucifer. What happened with that?"

"Well..." Raphael sighed. "Lucifer has not been any different. He has abandoned his forces and completely hidden himself."

"Is there a chance"—Kang-Woo gulped—"that Lucifer is the Demon of Prophecy?"

"..."

Raphael remained silent. He seemed troubled, but after a while, he ended up shaking his head.

"Lucifer does indeed possess Divinity, but... it is not him. I have fought against him before, so I can tell. He does not have the Demonic Sea."

"..."

He seemed certain of it. There was nothing to be said because, after all, Raphael was the one who'd fought the most against Lucifer.

Kang-Woo said, "We will go back for now. We will contact you as soon as we get any information regarding Satan."

"Please."

Raphael nodded.

Si-Hun held Gaia.

"... Let's go." Kang-Woo turned away. His steps were heavy.

\* \* \*

Wham!

"Fuuuuuck!!!"

Kang-Woo smashed the wall. Even though he hadn't used demonic energy, a hole was formed in the sturdy wall.

"Shit, shit, shit!!!"

Aggressive curses flowed from his mouth. He frowned.

'That fucking troll!!'

Just thinking about Gaia put him in a fit of rage. She had thrown a wrench in his perfectly crafted work.

"Haaa..." he sighed deeply. He recalled all the bullshit she had spouted while stammering.

'That useless bitch.'

He had been wondering how she would resolve the crisis that she had put Earth in after being unable to protect Earth, but she had obstructed him in a completely unexpected way.

'After everything I've done.'

He had put so much effort into exposing Satan's identity and his unjust actions for the whole world to see.

'But...'

It had all turned into smoke.

Thanks to the revelation of god or whatever, the stable tower he'd built had collapsed in the blink of an eye.

"The Demon of Prophecy..."

The demon destined to destroy the world... the being that all gods say had to be stopped.

Kang-Woo clenched his hair.

'If it's not Satan, then who could it be?'

One thing was for sure, it was not him. There was no way it could possibly be him. It was only logical—he was the Warrior of Light whom the God of Heroes had chosen. He wasn't in some B-list that would aim for that kind of shitty cliché.

'Yeah, there's no way.'

It didn't matter how much Kang-Woo thought about it—he wasn't the Demon of Prophecy. It was not even a question, considering everything he'd done up until this point. He had always been at the forefront of killing demons.

Why had he massacred them as if he were a starving beast?

'To protect the world, obviously.'

It had been to exact the judgment of light on those tainted by evil.

Who was the one who had exposed all of the evildoings of Satan and dismantled the Demon Cult?

It was him, Kang-Woo. The possibility of him being the Demon of Prophecy was...

'Nonexistent.'

There was surely someone else—a demon who had been cleverly ridiculing the gods while having the entire world at the palm of his hand.

"If it isn't even Lucifer, then who...?"

Who was the Demon of Prophecy?

A sense of loss weighed down on him. He couldn't help but sigh.

Just then...

Clack.

The door opened, and a woman with long black hair entered.

"Is something wrong, Master Kang-Woo?" Lilith asked in a worried voice.

Kang-Woo shook his head and sat on a giant couch. After separating from Si-Hun and Gaia, he had gone to Balrog's house. He'd bought and reformed an entire building to ensure Balrog could live comfortably in it.

"... It's nothing. More importantly, where's Balrog?"

"I asked him to investigate something in the Middle East for me."

"The Middle East?" Kang-Woo asked while tilting his head.

Lilith nodded.

"Yes. It is for the investigation regarding Kalgia, which you had asked me to do last time."

"Ah."

He remembered.

Kalgia... the Demon Cult's last remaining Aspect of Evil—the black mage who hadn't appeared in the war.

"Have you found him?"

"There is a place that seems likely, so I asked Balrog to investigate. This is only my assumption, but... I am almost sure Kalgia is there."

Kang-Woo's eyes shone.

There was no way to solve the bad news from Gaia, but this wasn't bad news.

'I'll feel more relieved if I wipe out the Demon Cult first.'

He could think about the Demon of Prophecy and Satan later.

"Should I tell Balrog to bring Kalgia's head?" Lilith asked.

"Mm... wait." Kang-Woo fell into thought. "Have him pull out once he confirms the location."

"Are you thinking of killing him yourself?"

"No."

He shook his head. There was something he'd come up with regarding Kalgia.

"Si-Hun will kill Kalgia."

It was about time he gave something to do to the protagonist, who had barely appeared in the story lately.

Chapter 259 - The Whole World Will Be Destroyed (1)

An old man so thin that he looked like a skeleton was walking through the endless stretch of sand in a desolate desert, supporting himself with a cane. A violent sandstorm engulfed the old man.

Tap.

He swung his cane down at the ground. Black demonic energy flowed out of it and made contact with the sandstorm.

Poof!

The sandstorm exploded and scattered.

The old man, who'd just stopped a natural disaster with one simple motion, turned away while completely expressionless.

He started to walk again... nonstop.

Soon, a collapsed ruin appeared in front of him.

The old man looked around with sharp eyes, and...

"Aah..."

A short exclamation came out of him. He trembled in excitement, crouched, and dug through the sand. A book with a black cover appeared from beneath the sand.

"Ke... Keke..."

He burst into chilling laughter, his eyes filled with madness.

"Finally, finally...!"

He trembled while holding the book in his hands.

"I've found the truth!"

He smiled like Archimedes shouting 'Eureka!', and he cheered while shivering in excitement. Mad energy permeated from the old man.

"Ke... keke."

He turned toward the desert.

Earth... a star where countless humans lived and a star filled with malice and madness. To him, this star—and all the people that breathed and lived on it—were targets of resentment.

"Now..."

The ends of the old man's mouth went up.

"The end is near."

\* \* \*

"Hmm. You care more about that human than I had expected," Lilith said in surprise.

After all the time that they had spent together, she knew how much Oh Kang-Woo cared for his subordinates, yet she had never seen him give so much care to one particular subordinate.

"I am getting a bit jealous," Lilith said playfully while hugging Kang-Woo's arm.

Kang-Woo smirked.

"I'd say it's more of a matter of efficiency than care."

Even if Kang-Woo killed Kalgia himself, there wasn't much he could gain from it. Taking into consideration their current forces, there were only three who could fight against an Aspect of Evil on their own...

'Halcyon, Balrog, and Kim Si-Hun.'

The strongest one at the moment was Halcyon, then Balrog. Si-Hun was at the bottom.

'The one who can get the most out of killing Kalgia is...'

There was no need to think too deeply. There was one big difference between demons and demonic beasts, such as Balrog and Halcyon, and the human Kim Si-Hun.

'Si-Hun is a Player.'

He was blessed by the system. In other words, he could gain EXP and level up by killing Kalgia, which wasn't the case for Balrog and Halcyon because levels and EXP didn't apply to them.

It was inevitable that their growth expectancies would be different.

'Well, considering Balrog's recent doings, maybe that's not the case.'

One of the most surprising pieces of news for Kang-Woo as of late was when Balrog had awakened a new power known as the Overlord Armor, which should have been logically impossible.

'The limit of a demon is decided the moment they're born.'

A prince of Hell was born to be one. Demons of the Eighth or Ninth Hell were born in their respective Hell layer.

Surpassing that wall with their own strength was almost impossible.

'But...'

Somehow, Balrog had surpassed that wall and had overcome his limits and killed Belphegor. This wasn't only because Balrog had become stronger thanks to Kang-Woo's Demonic Energy stat rising. After all, one couldn't kill a prince of Hell just because their available demonic energy had increased.

'I'm sure he'll grow even more from now on.'

One who had surpassed their limits once could aim even higher. Just like Kang-Woo, Balrog would likely be able to reach even higher. That was why Balrog had been immersed in training lately.

"Anyway, can you make the preparations?" asked Kang-Woo.

"Yes. I will take measures so that we can go as soon as we confirm the location."

"We can't send Si-Hun by himself, so... make it so that an army can go with him."

There was no way Kalgia would be by himself. There was a high chance that the remaining forces of the Demon Cult were gathered around him.

'After all, he's the last remaining Aspect of Evil.'

From the Demon Cult's point of view, he was their last hope. In that case, sending an army was a must for Si-Hun to be able to face Kalgia one-on-one.

"May your will be done, my king."

Lilith slightly lifted the hem of her skirt and bowed.

"..."

Kang-Woo silently stared at her. He recalled the recent incident with Halcyon.

"There's something I wanted to ask."

"Anything you would like."

"You said you can't tell human beauty, right?"

"Ah, yes."

"You actually find them a bit disgusting, don't you?"

"..."

Lilith remained silent.

Even if they looked at humans as beings that were like fish, if demons had to choose whether humans were beautiful or not, they would most likely veer in the direction of humans not being beautiful.

'Some fish honestly look a bit hideous.'

Although it depended on the species, the ones that lived in the abyssal zone looked no different from demons.

"Mm. I do not find them beautiful or pretty, at the very least," Lilith answered while making a troubled expression.

Considering how she was answering in such a roundabout way, it seemed she actually found humans disgusting.

"Then does that mean I also look that way to you?"

"Fufu," Lilith giggled softly.

She extended her hand and touched Kang-Woo's cheek.

"That is not important. No matter what you look like, even if you look like the hideous Halcyon... I would still love you."

"..."

"Do you remember when you saved me from the hands of Asmodeus? Countless demons sought my love. They used to tell me that they would offer their lives to me like it was nothing. But..."

Lilith carefully caressed Kang-Woo's cheek as if she were touching a precious treasure.

"You were the only one who had stood between me and the prince of Hell."

"That was..."

"I know. You wanted the forces that followed me."

Lilith smiled.

"But still, I was happy. It made me think that, even if the whole world were to be destroyed, I would be happy if you were as well."

"..."

"Hohoho. I will get going, then. I will come again once the investigation is complete."

Lilith turned away.

"Thanks," Kang-Woo said quietly while looking at her walk away.

Lilith turned and smiled softly; then she closed the door.

Tap. Once the door closed, there was only silence left.

"Fuck..."

He clenched his hair. His mind had become unnecessarily jumbled.

'Well, first...'

He took a deep breath and shook his head. He couldn't focus on Lilith at the moment.

"Let's go raise my demonic energy control."

Kang-Woo got up. He was not trying to let Si-Hun grow by giving him Kalgia for Si-Hun's sake.

'I have to make my forces as strong as possible.'

The future became uncertain after the Satan Coin crashed into oblivion.

'There's only one thing I have to do.'

Just like when he had fallen into Hell, when he entered the Ninth Hell, when he declared war on all seven princes of Hell, and at any other time...

'I have to go higher.'

Keep moving forward while devouring everything in the world.

\* \* \*

"Let us depart."

Si-Hun, who was standing in the front, turned. The Sirius Corps, the force under his direct command, stood in front of the gate in the Hall of Protection that led to the Middle East.

"Like last time, we will be acting on our own." A silver-haired angel approached Si-Hun. It was Shalgiel—Raphael's second-in-command and the angel sent to both help and keep an eye on Guardians.

Behind Shalgiel were angels that one could say were the elites among Raphael's forces and the Watchers of Light who were their servants.

"Yes, I would appreciate it," Si-Hun said while making a relieved expression.

Although he was in command of this operation, he still felt awkward around the angels. Commanding in such a situation would be uncomfortable, so having them act on their own made it easier.

"Understood." Shalgiel turned around.

"Alright, then..."

Si-Hun took a deep breath. A heavy sense of anxiety was weighing down on his shoulders, unlike usual.

"Come to think of it, where's Kang-Woo?" Cha Yeon-Joo asked while looking around. She was also a member of the Sirius Corps, but she seemed more like a party member than a corps member due to her personality.

"Hyung-nim said he couldn't come because he's busy with something."

"Busy?" Yeon-Joo frowned. "What could that guy possibly be busy with?"

She seemed highly dissatisfied that he was not taking part in this operation.

Si-Hun shook his head while making a bitter smile.

"I'm not sure, but..."

He remembered how sorry Kang-Woo looked because he couldn't join them—his expression had been dark and extremely serious.

"I'm almost certain it is a serious matter."

For someone who despised evil as much as Kang-Woo to not participate in the operation to defeat the final Aspect of Evil, he likely had something very important to do that Si-Hun was not aware of.

'Hyung-nim...'

Si-Hun thought of Kang-Woo, who was likely working busily elsewhere. He always thought of others, made sacrifices, and was more righteous than anyone else.

Si-Hun respected him more than he did anyone else in the world. If such a person was doing something without telling him, it was most certainly something too difficult to even express in words.

Light particles gathered around his hand, forming a pure-white sword.

Clack.

He grabbed Ludwig and swore an oath.

"I will finish off the Demon Cult in your place, hyung-nim."

\* \* \*

Click.

"Whoa, it worked."

Kang-Woo's eyes shone while looking at the item he'd cleverly created using the Authority of Projection and the Authority of Subordination. He had created it for this very moment.

Si-Hun's field of view was put up in front of him like a TV screen.

"Ngh, I'm a little tired," Kang-Woo said with drowsy eyes.

He had become dead-tired from all the extreme practicing to surpass the limit of his demonic energy control. For the past few days, he had practiced without any sleep.

'This isn't something that can be recovered with the Authority of Regeneration.'

Even a demon king would become mentally exhausted after staying between the border of life and death every second of the day.

'To be honest, I'm extremely sleepy, but...'

He couldn't afford to miss such an opportunity.

Kang-Woo reached for the object he'd prepared for this moment. He cracked open a can of beer and munched on some of the popcorn he'd prepared beforehand.

"Go, Si-Hun!"

He waved his light sticks.

"You got this, my little bro!!"

Chapter 260 - The Whole World Will Be Destroyed (2)

"KIIEEKK!!"

A horrible scream rang out.

"Haa."

Kim Si-Hun took a deep breath and held Ludwig tighter, leaping forward and swinging the sword upward. Pure-white sword energy shot along the trajectory of his attack.

The demonic beasts rushing toward him were cut in half.

Slash!

Black blood splattered in all directions.

He lightly turned to dodge the blood splatter and then ran forward.

"Arrgghh!!"

"Kill them!!"

Screams were heard from all directions. Hundreds of demonic beasts were charging toward the collapsed Sirius Corps members.

Crackle!

At that moment, red chains spread out and cut through the demonic beasts.

A woman with short red hair kicked a demonic beast and rushed forward.

"Where is that son of a bitch Kalgia?!" Cha Yeon-Joo yelled.

Si-Hun raised his hand and pointed to the remnants of a building that had turned into a ruin. Yeon-Joo and Si-Hun could see a passage leading underground. Although it had been destroyed in the past due to a certain someone, a Demon Cult branch used to be there.

"In there, apparently," Si-Hun said.

"Ngh, it's pretty far."

It actually wasn't that far in terms of distance.

"Kiiieekk!"

"Sons of bitches!" Yeon-Joo crossed her hands. The chains spread out in a net and wrapped around the demonic beasts.

Tsss.

With the smell of burning flesh, smoke rose.

"Why are there so many demonic beasts...?" she mumbled in irritation.

The thousands of demonic beasts pouring out from around the ruin made the way to the passage seem much longer than it actually was.

"This must be the entirety of the Demon Cult's remaining forces."

"But there isn't a single Demon Cultist in sight for that to be the case..."

Yeon-Joo narrowed her eyes and looked around. Just like she said, there were only hideous demonic beasts around them. Neither the Demon Cultists who controlled the demonic beasts nor the Demon Cult's cardinals could be seen anywhere.

Si-Hun remained silent.

'It's certainly weird.'

It was weird that, despite there being so many demonic beasts, not one Demon Cultist was visible.

There were two possibilities he could think of.

'They either used the demonic beasts as bait to escape...'

Si-Hun stared at the passageway where Kalgia apparently was.

'... Or they gathered the cultists to prepare for something.'

He felt an ominous feeling traveling down his back. He had a feeling that Kalgia had not run away.

'They have something up their sleeve.'

It was not a deduction based on logic, but an unreliable guess based on a hunch. However, the ominous energy coming from the underground passage strengthened his hunch.

He gripped his holy sword tighter.

"Yeon-Joo," Si-Hun called out.

"Yeah?"

"It will take too much time to advance after clearing out every single demonic beast. I will charge straight through them."

"What?"

Yeon-Joo looked at Si-Hun as if he were saying nonsense. They were about three hundred meters away from the entrance to the underground passage. There were easily over a thousand demonic beasts blocking their way.

'He's gonna charge through all that?'

It was completely absurd.

Whoom!

"Hey, wait! You're not actually—"

BOOM!

Si-Hun stomped on the ground. Blinding light spread through the surroundings.

"C-Crazy son of a bitch...!"

One step...

He swung his sword low. The leg of a demonic beast more than three meters tall was severed, and the demonic beast collapsed.

Two steps...

He stepped on its head and rose into the sky, holding his sword in a reverse grip as he smashed it down. Pure-white sword energy burst out in the shape of a fan as if the compressed power was exploding. It slaughtered the demonic beasts.

Three steps...

He squeezed through the gap that he had created and, in the blink of an eye, infiltrated the area where the demonic beasts were gathered.

"Fuuu."

He gripped the sword with both hands and raised it up high. White light rose like a pillar.

"Heavenly Dragon..."

He opened his mouth and drew out Qi from inside his dantian. An explosive amount of light filled their field of vision.

"... Flash."

Rumble—!!

The sword energy that grew up to thirty meters in length wiped out the demonic beasts. About a hundred demonic beasts exposed to that powerful energy were vaporized.

It was as if a giant from mythology had swung down their sword.

"Wha..."

"Wh-When did he gain such power...?"

Tian Wuchen laughed in disbelief.

Yeon-Joo could only stare at Si-Hun with her mouth agape.

Si-Hun had run into an area where thousands of demonic beasts had gathered, and created a path.

It was a power that was hard to imagine came from a human. It was such an unbelievable sight that it was more accurate to call him a monster.

"There is no time to waste! Now is our chance!" he quickly shouted toward the corps members looking at him in disbelief.

The Sirius Corps members, who had finally returned to their senses, rushed toward the path Si-Hun had opened up.

"Yeaaaaaaah!"

"Charge!!"

They assumed a wedge formation with Si-Hun at the forefront, cutting through the sea of demonic beasts.

"KIIEEKK!!"

"Kuh!"

Si-Hun grimaced.

Countless demonic beasts appeared out of nowhere to block their path.

'Not enough.'

He would be able to charge through if he were alone, but it would be difficult to take the entire Sirius Corps with him.

"Yeon-Joo! Master! Gather around me with only the corps's most elite members!"

"Kuh! But if we do that..."

Wuchen looked around while making a troubled expression.

If only they charged past the demonic beasts, the other members that were left behind would get surrounded.

"It's okay," Si-Hun said while looking somewhere.

There were angels with white wings attacking the demonic beasts where he was looking.

"Those tainted by darkness!"

"Receive the judgment of light!"

The angels were sweeping away the demonic beasts. Among them, Shalgiel and a few angels flew toward Si-Hun.

"Where is the enemy commander?"

"This way!"

Si-Hun pointed to the underground passageway.

Yeon-Joo, Wuchen, and Shalgiel turned toward the passageway, and the elites of the Sirius Corps and the high-ranking angels worked together to clear a path.

Boom! Crash!

The underground passageway crumbled, revealing a large cave behind its crumbled walls.

"Zazas, zazas, nasatanada za—"

"I-Intruders!"

Hundreds of priests in black robes were performing some sort of ritual.

Without hesitation, Si-Hun rushed forward.

Slash! Slash!

"Kurgh!"

"Arrgghh!"

The priests were cut down at an incredible speed.

Si-Hun grew even more anxious.

'Something's wrong.'

He had no idea what ritual the hundreds of Demon Cultists were performing or what it would bring, but one thing was for certain:

'I can't let them succeed.'

He was sure of it. His steps became quicker, and he cut through all the priests blocking his way.

"Filthy demon worshipers!"

It was the same for Shalgiel. After he sensed the chilling demonic energy coming from the complex magic circle, he spread his six wings and flew up.

"Die!"

Shalgiel flew toward the scrawny old man who seemed to be leading the ritual.

Kalgia raised his head.

"Kehehehe."

A chilling laugh came out. He slammed his cane down on the ground.

BOOM!

"Kurgh!"

Demonic energy spread radially and blew Shalgiel away. Shalgiel smashed into a wall as if he'd been struck by a giant hammer.

"Kekeke. Angels and the retainers of Gaia, huh...? What an interesting audience we have gathered here."

Kalgia burst into laughter and turned around. The huge amount of demonic energy coming out of him weighed down on the entire cave.

"Kuh! Wh-what's up with that bastard...?"

Yeon-Joo frowned at the huge pressure weighing her down. She was trying to control the red chains and attack Kalgia, but her body wasn't listening to her.

"Kuh!"

"M-My body..."

It was the same for the rest.

Players and angels alike fell to the ground because they couldn't withstand the immense pressure weighing down on the entire cave.

Slash!

Among them, the only one that could still move was Si-Hun. He cut through hundreds of the Demon Cultists and advanced.

"Stop him!"

"Do not let him interfere with the ritual!"

The Demon Cultists blasted thousands of black magic spells at Si-Hun.

"Flash."

He slashed the countless black magic spells and advanced. Every time he took a step forward, dozens of Demon Cultists fell.

Wham!

"Haaa, haaa."

But no matter how strong Si-Hun was, there was no way he'd be okay after being attacked by so much black magic. He was becoming more wounded, and blood poured out from everywhere.

'Shit.'

He bit his lip and glared at Kalgia, who was laughing in madness as if having the time of his life.

Just then...

BOOM!

"P-Protector Kim Si-Hun!!!"

"Gaia...?"

The wall collapsed, and Gaia appeared along with the middle-aged blonde woman Grace McCubbin, who was carrying Gaia on her back.

Si-Hun's expression hardened at Gaia's sudden appearance.

"It's dangerous h—"

"W-We must stop the ritual!!!" Gaia shouted while making a pale expression. "I-I received a revelation! Th-That man is trying to...!"

"Kehe... Kehehehe!!!" Kalgia burst into laughter. "It seems you've finally realized it, incarnation of Gaia!"

He rummaged through his robe.

"But you are already too late! You cannot stop the ritual!"

He took out a black book from his robe.

"I have finally realized! We have been deceived all this time! We had been fooled all this time by Satan!"

He opened the book, and he released an immense amount of demonic energy.

"Wh-Whooooaaaaa!!!"

"The truth!!!"

"At last, our true ruler...!"

The priests kneeled while cheering as if they had lost their minds.

"What in the world..."

Si-Hun frowned at their sudden change in attitude.

Kalgia kept shouting. "This book contains the entire truth! This book is a sacred text that has come directly from Hell! This book is truth itself!"

On the cover of the book was written Book of Hell.

Kalgia exclaimed in madness, "Satan was a false king! He was not the Demon of Prophecy that made even the gods tremble in fear! The true demon... the lord of Hell has always been someone else!!!"

Slam!

He smashed his cane down on the ground.

"Now, come! Manifest yourself, O Great One!!!"

The air cracked, forming a black Rift.

"O Lord of Hell! O King of Demons Who Rules the Nine Hells!!!!!"

Crackle!

The black Rift grew bigger.

"Kahahahaha!! You are all too late! The ritual cannot be reversed anymore!"

Kalgia opened both arms and burst into laughter.

"Look with your own eyes at the moment of the world's destruction!"

Crackle!!

"O Demon of Prophecy! Please bring destruction upon this world as per the prophecy!!!!"

Booom!!!

The entire cave shook with a massive explosion. Smoke rose into the sky and sank. And in the middle of the magic circle...

"... Huh?"

... Was Kang-Woo, spread out over a couch with a can of beer in one hand and popcorn in the other.

He said with drowsy eyes as if he had just woken up, "The hell?"

He looked around. His half-open eyes widened.

"What the fuck is going on?"