

## **M. in Hell 271**

Chapter 271 - The Road The King Has Walked (1)

"Since Rakiel's existence has been confirmed, I will request reinforcements from the celestial realm. Uriel will be here soon."

"Are you saying that another archangel will be coming?"

"Yes." Raphael nodded. "Taking into consideration that Rakiel... and the other Constellations have been freed from their seals, I will be unable to stop them on my own."

"..."

It made sense. No, it was weird that he had only requested backup from one archangel.

'But still...'

Oh Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes.

'I'd be able to buy some time.'

Whether Uriel, Gabriel, Michael, or every single archangel came to Earth, it didn't matter.

'The seal hasn't been broken yet.'

No matter how hard they tried, they wouldn't be able to find Rakiel.

'And while they're wasting time...'

He would have plenty of time to prepare. Actually, he would also be able to turn the situation in his favor.

'It would be far too wasteful to abandon the Rakiel persona.'

The gears in Kang-Woo's head turned quickly. Being aware and unaware that one's plan could go awry was worlds different. Since he knew that Rakiel was real and that his seal hadn't been broken yet, he would be able to use that.

"I will give you a piece of advice, incarnation of Gaia."

"Yes, Lord Raphael."

"Be more wary of your allies than your enemies. Resolve yourself to doubt those you love."

"... Pardon?" Gaia's expression hardened.

"Rakiel is the Constellation of Corruption for a reason. His whispers are clever and sweet. Soon... no, even now, your comrades may be falling for his unending temptations."

"..."

"Even during the war against the Demon God, the number of angels corrupted by his whispers was unfathomable."

"I will keep that in mind, but..." Straightening her back, she said in a firm voice, "I believe in the protectors of Guardians. They..."

She fumbled for Kang-Woo's and Kim Si-Hun's hands and grabbed them. She then smiled lightly in relief and finished her sentence, "... Are not ones to fall for a demon's whispers."

"..."

Raphael sighed.

Hearing that, Gaia smiled. "I know what you are worried about. I will also be wary of the chance that it could happen. You do not need to worry."

"I only hope for your trust to stay true."

Gaia bowed, and Kang-Woo and Si-Hun followed suit.

There was nothing else that needed to be discussed with Raphael.

"In that case, we will excuse ourselves."

Kang-Woo turned around.

"..."

After Guardians left, Raphael looked over the silent fortress and shut his eyes.

"Haaa."

He couldn't help but sigh.

'Rakiel, of all people...'

Raphael bit his lip.

Although Gaia had told him not to worry, as someone who had witnessed firsthand the havoc the Constellation of Corruption had caused, he could not afford to.

"Shalgiel."

"Yes, my lord."

"Thoroughly monitor Guardians. At least until Uriel arrives."

"... Rather than shouldering the risks, how about we take this chance to sever ties with Guardians entirely?" Shalgiel said as his eyes shone sharply.

Rakiel was capable of corrupting even angels, so it was hard to believe that humans would be able to resist. Rather than keeping the risk factor exposed, it was also an option to sever ties with them before it happened.

Raphael shook his head.

"You are being too hasty. That is your biggest problem."

"... I apologize."

"Just focus on monitoring them for now."

"Yes, my lord."

Shalgiel bowed.

Raphael stared at Shalgiel with a slight uneasiness since he was well aware of his fiery personality. He shook his head and stood up.

"I will investigate materials on Rakiel until Uriel arrives."

"What materials in particular?" Shalgiel asked.

"Have you ever heard why Rakiel fell?"

Shalgiel shook his head. "... No. I just heard that he had fallen for the Demon God's temptations."

"I am thinking of investigating how exactly he was tempted."

To face the darkness, one had to understand it. Raphael sighed deeply.

'There are too many things I have to do.'

He had to investigate Rakiel and return to the Embrace of Light to heal his wounds.

Raphael once again sighed.

\* \* \*

Everything had a cause and effect. Although it might seem like a coincidence, if one took a closer look, there was almost always a reason.

After Kang-Woo separated from Gaia and Si-Hun, he ran at breakneck speed toward the cause of this effect... the starting point...

"Balrog, you motherfuckeeeeeeeeer!!!"

Slam!

Kang-Woo kicked down a custom-made ten-meter-tall door. He jumped up into the air and turned midair, using the Authority of the Sky.

Bash!!

[Kurghhh!!]

It was an impressive somersault kick.

Balrog, who reflexively protected his neck with his Overlord Armor, was blown into the air. He then crashed down onto the ground.

[M-My king?!]

"You son of a...! I asked you...! To suggest a name...! So why the fuck would you...!"

[Kurgh! Urgh! What is the matter, my king?!]

Balrog's shout echoed throughout the residence.

Kang-Woo took very deep breaths to calm down his overwhelming frustration.

"Haaa, haaa. Where did you... hear the name Rakiel?"

[... I beg your pardon?]

"I said, where did you hear the name Rakiel?"

[Mm. I cannot seem to remember...]

"Remember it."

Kang-Woo's eyes shone sharply. Balrog flinched and frantically nodded.

[I-I will remember it!]

It was not nice to see a five-meter-tall muscle giant trembling in fear, but now was not the time to think about that.

"Haaa."

Kang-Woo sat on the couch as if his head hurt.

Clack.

"Kang-Woo, what's wrong?"

"Master Kang-Woooooo! I missed you!"

A door opened, and Halcyon and Echidna appeared. Halcyon ran toward Kang-Woo as soon as he saw him.

"I was so lonely while you weren't h—"

Halcyon, who had been talking while grinning, stopped. After noticing that Kang-Woo was not in a good mood, he carefully let go of his arm and took a few steps back.

"U-Urghhh."

"... Is something wrong, Kang-Woo?" Echidna asked.

Lilith also entered the kitchen soon after Echidna and Halcyon and asked, "Is something the matter?"

"Ngh."

Kang-Woo grabbed his forehead while thinking about how to explain this complex situation.

"You see..."

He briefly explained to them his conversation with Raphael.

"Hah," Lilith also laughed in disbelief. She looked at Balrog with sharp eyes. "You don't know Rakiel?"

[Wh-What? You do?]

"I didn't know that he was a Constellation of Evil or whatever it was, but I've at least heard the name. Wait, didn't you hear it with me?"

[I-I don't remember...]

Balrog slurred while scratching his head.

Lilith grabbed her forehead as if it hurt. "You muscle pig..."

"Lilith, you know about Rakiel as well?"

"Yes. I have heard of the name before."

"From who?"

"Amon."

Amon...

Kang-Woo frowned when the name was mentioned.

Amon had formerly been Satan's subordinate. No other demon was more knowledgeable about black magic in Hell than he was. He was also the one who'd opened the Rift that led to Earth for Kang-Woo by using the Hell Armaments.

"Amon knew Rakiel?"

"Yes. I am certain that I have heard the name from Amon."

"What did he say?"

"It had not been anything in detail. He just... mentioned it in passing. He had asked if we knew about Rakiel."

"..."

She narrowed her eyes.

Kang-Woo felt something was off.

"Lilith, Balrog. Then, have you guys heard anything about Bauli?"

"Bauli?"

Lilith and Balrog looked at each other. The two demons shook their heads.

"No. I do not believe so."

"Then... what about Titans and beings of the Void?"

"Not that either..." Lilith slurred while looking troubled.

'Lilith doesn't know about myths either.'

Kang-Woo knew better than anyone how impressive Lilith's information network was, but even she didn't know about myths.

'Meaning, myths hadn't been passed down in Hell.'

That made it even weirder.

How could Amon know information not even Lilith was aware of?

"Balrog. Had Amon been acting strangely before you came to Earth?"

[I mean, I had not even been able to see him because he had shut himself in his laboratory ever since you had gone to Earth. If you would call that strange behavior, then... yes,] Balrog said while stroking his chin.

'He had shut himself in his laboratory, huh?'

Kang-Woo lacked information. There was no link between his seclusion and the Demon God.

"... Lilith."

"Yes, my king."

"Find a way to contact Hell. Doomguard, Marbas, anyone is fine. I need a way to contact someone at least at the level of commander."

"As you command."

Lilith bowed.

Kang-Woo leaned back on the couch. He needed to organize the situation.

'There's no need to bother with the complicated stuff for the moment.'

The myths, Titans, beings of the Void... Even if he thought about those things, he wouldn't be able to find an answer. What he needed to do now was determine what he needed to be wary of and what he needed to do.

'First of all, it would be best to limit using the Rakiel persona as much as possible.'

He would use it if he had no other choice, but he could not use it freely. Since he knew the seal was weakening, he had to consider the possibility that the real Rakiel would appear.

'And...'

Uriel would be coming to Earth; it wouldn't be weird if more archangels came after him. They would likely focus on finding Rakiel as soon as reinforcements arrived.

'But they won't be able to find him.'

They would most definitely investigate the people who had managed to come back from facing Rakiel, for example, the person who had miraculously been rescued after having been captured by Rakiel.

If they didn't get the result they wanted, they would obviously expand their search to the people around that person.

'Leaving Lilith, Echidna, and Halcyon aside...'

Even if Vaal Zahak and Balrog could hide their demonic energy, they could do nothing about their appearance.

"Vaal Zahak."

Clack.

The door of the laboratory opened, and a skeleton walked out.

"..."

He was wearing a pink hood while a pink apron covered his bare ribs. Even the duster was pink.

"Dude... you..."

[Kehehe. What is it, my king?]

"That's what I want to know. What is up with you?"

[There was too much dust in the laboratory, so I had been in the middle of cleaning. Huhuhu. My king... what will you have me do next? Shall I make the corpse of a saint into an Undead, or shall I turn those disgusting servants of light into puppets—]

"Don't say things like that while wearing those clothes. I can't focus."

[Kahahaha! What do you mean? Are they not great ceremonial attire?]

"No... Ah... Sorry. I'm... My mistake."

Kang-Woo turned away from him without being able to put words together.

"Haaa. There's something I need you to do."

[What is it?]

"You know how to use black magic, right?"

[Of course.]

"Can you create a suit that looks exactly like a human? Whatever you need to use to make it."

[Mm. Something like the tentacle decorations that Lady Lilith had made last time?]

"No. It has to be more detailed than that. Enough for one to be able to act exactly like a human after wearing it."

[... It may take some time, but it is possible. How many should I make?]

"Just for you and Balrog."

[Lord Balrog? Mm. Taking Lord Balrog's stature into account, he would never be considered a human...]

"I can shrink his body, so don't worry about that. But try to make one as big as you can within the confines of human parameters so that it doesn't look out of place."

[Understood.]

Kang-Woo looked at Balrog, who seemed confused at his words.

[M-My king. What do you mean by you will shrink me...?]

"I'm going to transform your body with an Authority. You won't be able to fight, but try to adapt to it to the extent that you can at least spend daily life in it."

[... Is there a need for me to act like a human to that extent?]

"Just in case so that angels don't catch on to you."

[I can easily slaughter those puny angels mys—]

"Balrog."

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes. Balrog flinched and slammed his forehead onto the ground.

[My apologies.]

"Good."

Kang-Woo turned his eyes from Balrog and swept up his hair.

'The biggest problem is the demon god.'

Kang-Woo recalled the myth that he had heard from Raphael. He knew the identity and objective of the Demon God lying within the Abyss of the Ten Thousand Demon Core.

Bauli was targeting his body.

'I can't eliminate him.'

Just keeping him from coming out was already hard enough.

"..."

He thought about it for a while, but there was only one conclusion he could reach.

'I have to improve my demonic energy control.'

To prevent the Demon God from crawling out, to absorb Belphegor's demonic energy and raise his Demonic Energy stat, and to prepare against possible variables...

'And to make sure...'

Kang-Woo's eyes deepened.

He recalled an endless mountain of corpses.

He recalled his despairing self.

'... I don't lose anyone else.'

He needed to improve his demonic energy control as quickly as possible.

"..."

Kang-Woo closed his eyes. There was one way to dramatically improve it.

'But that way is...'

He hesitated a bit, but that only lasted for a short while. He slowly opened his eyes.

"Balrog."

[Yes, my king.]

"I'm gonna molt."

Balrog's eyes widened.

Chapter 272 - The Road The King Has Walked (2)

BOOM!

Balrog got up and glared at Oh Kang-Woo.

[No,] he said in a firm voice he hadn't used until then.

Balrog bit his lip.

[Not... molting.]

"Balrog."



[You promised!]

BOOM!

Balrog stomped on the ground.

Crack.

The floor couldn't withstand the impact and cracked.

[You promised me that you would never do it again!!]

The atmosphere of the room suddenly became cold.

Echidna and Halcyon flinched.

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes.

"Are you refusing to obey my order?"

[...]

There was silence. Balrog clenched his fists and trembled.

[There has to be another way.]

"There isn't. That's why I'm doing it."

[The situation is not that urgent.]

"It's not, but we don't have all the time in the world either."

[You have already become far stronger than when you were in Hell.]

"And so have my enemies."

[...]

Balrog closed his eyes.

[... It is dangerous.]

"I know."

Kang-Woo smirked.

Balrog once again stomped on the ground.

[Then why?! Why are you trying to molt?!]

"Balrog."

Kang-Woo's eyes sank deep, and he opened his mouth. He spoke in a voice tinged with sadness. An emotion he'd been suppressing leaked out through his words.

"We've lost far too much."

[...]

"I refuse to lose anything else," he calmly said.

Balrog frowned and clenched his fists.

Lilith walked toward Balrog.

"Give up, Balrog. You know how stubborn our king is."

[... Are you fine with this?]

"Hohoho."

Lilith smiled widely; a chilling bloodlust leaked out of her.

"Of course... not," she said reluctantly.

[...]

Lilith's hands were trembling a bit, and it looked as if she were about to cry at any moment.

Balrog sighed.

[I understand. When are you planning to do it?]

"Right now."

Since he'd decided to use it, there was no reason to push it back any further.

[Where...?]

"Remember where we sparred before? Let's do it there."

[That place is too dangerous. How about... where that Guardians secret vault used to be?]

"The Grand Canyon?"

[Yes. Let us do it there.]

"Ngh. It's a bit of a hassle since we have to go through the Hall of Protection."

[Even so, that is the safest place.]

Kang-Woo nodded.

"Okay."

[In that case, I will make the preparations.]

Balrog turned away. He took Lilith with her to go around the house and collect things.

"Kang-Woo." Echidna trotted over to him and pulled on his clothes. "What's molting?"

"I-I would also like to kn-know." Halcyon furiously nodded next to her.

Kang-Woo answered with a troubled expression, "It's... a form of training."

"Training?"

"Yup. It's the fastest way to improve my demonic energy control."

Echidna's anxious eyes calmed down after hearing the word training.

"Can I come watch you train too, Kang-Woo?" she asked, her eyes shining.

"No." Kang-Woo firmly shook his head.

Echidna flinched.

He patted her head and continued, "Seol-Ah is alone in the house. Echidna and Halcyon, go home today and stay with her."

"... Okay." Echidna couldn't insist any further, and she nodded.

Just then...

[How about you take them with you since it has become like this?]

"... Balrog."

Kang-Woo's eyes shone sharply.

Balrog continued calmly, [The little dragon and Halcyon are now your retainers. They have the right to know.]

"The right to know, my ass? You think I don't know what you're trying to do?"

[Of course, I still wish for you to change your mind, but you know it is not good to hide this from your retainers.]

"What isn't good? Having them join us is completely meaningl—"

[It is not meaningless.] Balrog shook his head. [The little dragon is strong enough to use dragon tongue magic, and Halcyon is stronger than me.]

"Hah, trying to use logic, are you?"

[You know that it is the right decision to prepare for possible variables.]

"..."

Kang-Woo was at a loss for words.

"... Fuck."

He didn't want to admit it, but Balrog was right.

Kang-Woo became significantly weaker right after molting. To cover all bases, taking Echidna and Halcyon with him was the correct choice.

[Not just that, taking only me would bring about discord among the retainers.]

That was also right.

One of the most important things when managing subordinates was to never favor any in particular. If he only took Balrog, then Echidna and Halcyon would obviously feel a sense of alienation. Perhaps discord was a bit excessive, but it would at least sow the seeds for it.

[Do you want to see the king train?]

"Yeah, I wanna see!"

"I-I would like to s-see it as well."

[You heard them.]

Echidna and Halcyon nodded.

Kang-Woo shook his head.

"... Do as you please."

He gave up and just turned around.

Balrog smirked and spoke to them.

[In that case, you guys help us prepare as well.]

"What should we prepare?"

[Changes of clothes, lots of water, and towels to dry off the body.]

"...?"

Echidna couldn't understand why they needed things like that to train, but she nodded.

As Halcyon, Echidna, and Balrog moved together, they quickly finished their preparations.

"Then, let's go."

Kang-Woo activated the gate that led to the Hall of Protection, intending to use the gate within the Hall of Protection to travel to the Grand Canyon.

"I feel like I've been coming here pretty often," Kang-Woo mumbled while looking at the canyon.

There weren't many people in the area, so he often used it for training.

As he slowly began to walk, Echidna followed him.

"Kang-Woo, I've been training a lot. I can use five dragon tongue magics now. That's more than what an adult dragon can do," she said, like a child who wanted to be praised.

Kang-Woo smirked and patted her head.

"Good job. Oh, it looks like you've gotten taller too."

"Hm! I'm gonna be as fat as Seol-Ah soon too."

"Uhh... Mm."

"I asked Seol-Ah how she managed to get so fat, but she got angry at me..."

"Don't say things like that from now on."

His kimchi stew was on the line.

After begging Echidna, Kang-Woo started to walk.

Halcyon grabbed Kang-Woo's other arm.

"What do you want?"

"M-Master Kang-Woo. I-I've also been training!"

'Don't lie.'

Demonic beasts didn't train. No, to be more precise, there was really no point in them training. Their physical specs were so incredible that they were already at their peak, so there was no point in them doing physical training.

As Kang-Woo looked at him in disbelief, he began to flap his wings.

"B-bridal training! I've been doing bridal training!"

'You aren't a bride.'

"M-Marriage! That's the only thing left!"

'There's still that thing between your legs.'

Kang-Woo's eyes shook uneasily.

[Enough chit-chat.]

Balrog grabbed Halcyon and Echidna by their napes and dragged them back.

"... Wh-what are you doing?"

Halcyon's eyes shone sharply. He exuded intense bloodlust.

"I-I had just m-managed to talk to Master Kang-Woo a-after so long..."

He ground his teeth and flapped his wings in annoyance.

"D-Don't bother m-me, or I-I'll blow your h-head off."

It seemed as if Halcyon wasn't joking. He had even taken out his claws.

[You are a being a bother to the king,] Balrog calmly said.

"..."

As Kang-Woo was mentioned, Halcyon remained silent.

"N-not fair..."

He bit his lip in frustration.

Kang-Woo looked around.

"This place should be okay."

[... We should go a little deeper.]

"What, you wanna burrow into the rock or something? This is enough."

Nobody else was nearby, after all.

They could not feel the presence of even the smallest organism around them within this narrow canyon. Kang-Woo went into a small cave within the rock and took a deep breath.

"I'll be counting on you."

[Yes, my king.]

Balrog stood in front of the cave and readied a bucket of water, clean clothes, and towels.

"Wh-what are you doing?"

[... You will see,] Balrog firmly said. [Our job is to make sure no one touches the king until the molting is over.]

"Then are we gonna be protecting Kang-Woo?"

Echidna's eyes shone. He was always protecting her, so she seemed quite interested in protecting him.

Balrog slowly nodded.

[You can begin.]

"... Okay."

Kang-Woo was about to say something to Echidna and Halcyon, but he sighed and nodded.

He suddenly recalled his conversation with Han Seol-Ah.

"Why not? I-I also want to know more about you, Kang-Woo."

"Because you'll pity me."

"What?"

"If I tell you, you'll pity me."

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue.

"Fuck."

He cursed and began taking off his clothes.

"Hm! Hm!"

"G-Gasp! P-Picture! I must take a picture!"

The audience was noisy.

Kang-Woo threw all of his clothes besides his boxers to the side.

'Is this some sort of humiliation play?'

He saw the two girls looking at him with intense eyes and smirked.

'Right, then...'

He closed his eyes and summoned forth his demonic energy... and more... and even more. Then...

"Cough!"

His body bent like a bow, his head hurt, and his sight became blurry. The demonic energy he had drawn out to his utmost limit began to run amok. A giant, endless black sea appeared before him. Three doors were stopping that giant sea. It was the Ten Thousand Demon Core.

He walked toward one of the Doors and slightly opened it.

Rumble!!

"Kang-Woo...?"

The canyon shook.

Kang-Woo bit his lip so hard that his teeth tore his skin.

The demonic energy that had been like a calm river stream had become like rapids and was tearing him apart. And...

"BLEEEEEEEEEEGHH!!"

He vomited black blood as an unfathomable agony dominated his mind.

Crack! Crunch!

His bones twisted and broke, visibly piercing his skin. His blood vessels tangled as his muscles exploded.

A huge amount of blood poured out of him.

"A-Arrgghh."

He trembled and extended his arm as if trying to grab the air. His fingers bent backwards. His skin was turned inside out as if he were molting.

"A-Aaaaaaaaaahh!!"

An ungodly amount of pain spread through him, and he twisted and screamed.

'I have to... control it.'

The demonic energy was tearing apart his entire body.

He'd slightly opened a Door of the Ten Thousand Demon Core intentionally to forcibly create a situation that made him break past his limits.

If he couldn't go beyond this limit... if he couldn't control this rampant demonic energy...

He would die.

"Kargh, argh, kurgh!"

His body shook as if he were about to have a seizure, and his tongue hung from his mouth. He soiled himself in his pain and wet the ground. He vomited and spat out all his teeth.

This was probably how a person would turn out if they were put in a microwave.

Blood poured everywhere as his body was torn apart.

"Fu...ck."

It hurt.

It hurt. It hurt. It hurt.

He couldn't think of anything else besides that it hurt. It was as if only pain existed in the world—it was all he could feel. To free himself from that pain, he crawled on the floor disgustingly.

"A-Argghh."

A tear dripped from his eyes. His consciousness was fading, his vision distorting.

Balrog's, Echidna's, and Halcyon's faces were swirling together as if various paint colors were getting mixed.

Only pain existed in his world.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahh!!"

He screamed and tensed his body.

While his consciousness became governed by pain, a certain thought crossed his mind.

To survive, he instinctively controlled his demonic energy.

He entered a state of non-self. He suppressed his demonic energy little by little, as if disentangling a horribly tangled ball of yarn.

As if smoothing a tangled thread, he slowly began to regain control of the demonic energy.

One step at a time...

Forward...

And forward...

\* \* \*

"K-Kang-Woo!!!"

"Master Kang-Woo!!!"

The two tried to approach Kang-Woo, their faces pale.

[Stop.]

Balrog stood in their way.

"Y-you...! H-How could you say that when he's in that state?!"

Halcyon bared his claws and teeth.

Echidna collapsed to the floor while trembling.

[If you touch the king right now, he will die.]

Halcyon stopped moving at Balrog's words.

"Wh-What's h-happening?"

It was nothing like training. Even self-harming didn't look this horrid.

"Th-This is... molting?"

Balrog calmly nodded.

[Molting is the act of forcibly bringing about a state of non-self by intentionally making one's demonic energy run rampant.]

"Isn't that dangerous...?"

[It is like turning your body inside out, so of course it is. In the worst-case scenario, he could die. Even if he survives, he has to endure the worst amount of pain that an organism can possibly experience.]

"Wh-Why would he go so far...?"

[The king said it himself.]

Balrog made a bitter smile.

[To never lose anything ever again.]



"..."

Balrog turned and saw Kang-Woo crawling on the floor and screaming. Kang-Woo soon lost consciousness.

[Come to think of it, the two of you do not know the road the king had walked in Hell, do you?]

"..."

[It was neither one of dominance nor one of glory.]

Balrog approached the collapsed Kang-Woo and picked him up. A long trace of black blood and excrement had been made behind him.

[That road...]

Balrog grabbed a water bucket and poured it on Kang-Woo.

The blood and excrement were washed from his body, flowing down the path Kang-Woo had crawled.

[That foul and wretched road filled with filth is...]

The place the water flowed over looked like a road.

[... The road the King has walked.]

There was a breathtakingly heavy silence.

"Bal...rog..."

At that moment, Kang-Woo, who had been unconscious in Balrog's arms, opened his eyes with difficulty.

[Please rest, my king.]

"A-Arrgghh."

Kang-Woo grabbed Balrog's shoulders with shaking hands. As if gathering the last remaining strength he had, he opened his mouth. He wanted to tell him this at the very least: "That's... cringe... cough!"

[M-my king! Are you saying that you are hurting so much to the point that you are cringing?!]

"No, I'm saying you're crin..."

[I know what you are trying to say, my king. My heart is hurting... just as much as you.]

"Son of a... that's not... saying... Fuck... cringe... what the fuck... is a road filled with filth..."

Kang-Woo's body trembled.

"BLEEEEEEEEEEEGHHH!!"

[Urrrrggghhh.]

He vomited in Balrog's face and passed out.

Chapter 273 - The Road The King Has Walked (3)

"Argh, fuck."

Kaaagh, ptooy.

Oh Kang-Woo spat out the vomit that had gathered in his mouth. Although he'd healed his wounds with the Authority of Regeneration, he could still feel the pain.

"It hurts so fucking much."

He was used to pain, but it was still hard to withstand. It was worse than being shredded by a giant blender.

Kang-Woo shook his head.

'This is exactly why I didn't want to do this.'

One of the reasons was that it was dangerous, but decisively, it hurt too much.

He was still trembling in pain.

[Good job.]

Balrog walked toward him and gave him a bottle of water.

Kang-Woo reached out to grab it, but his hands were trembling so much that he couldn't.

Balrog held the back of Kang-Woo's head with his muscular hand. He smiled with his hideous face.

[I will help you.]

"Fuck off."

[Hahaha. There is no need to be embarrassed.]

"No, f—"

[Alright! Come into my arms and—]

"Arghh! S-Son of a bitch! You smell like... Urpp."

[Oh, come to think of it, your vomit did not seem to have fully washed off.]

"What? You f... W-Wash it off right now!"

Kang-Woo struggled, and Balrog smiled at him.

[I am fine.]

"So what?"

[It is a reward in our line of work.]

"The fuck are you talking about?"

He twisted his body and was barely able to free himself from Balrog. He couldn't walk properly, so he rolled on the ground. His head ended up hitting something—Echidna's leg.

"..."

"Oh, Echidna? Please help me. Get me away from the muscle pig," Kang-Woo said while making a tired expression.

Then... something transparent fell on his cheeks. With his mouth closed, Kang-Woo looked up at Echidna.

Transparent tears were flowing down her cheeks.

"..."

"Sniff, sniff... sniff."

Echidna's shoulders were trembling.

Kang-Woo sighed.

'I mean...'

He had expected this to happen. He'd tried to remain as calm as possible and even joked a bit, but there was no way she wasn't shocked after seeing the molting process.

"Kang-Woo, Kang-Woo, Kang-Woo..."

Echidna hugged Kang-Woo and rubbed her head against his chest.

He smiled bitterly and patted Echidna's head.

"M-Master Kang-Woo. Wh-What was..."

Even Halcyon was trembling.

"Th-That was... m-molting?"

"Yeah."

He nodded.

Molting was a sub-technique of opening the Doors that involved intentionally letting the Ten Thousand Demon Core run wild and attain great power.

'I guess it's a bit weird to call it a technique.'

Molting was like a failed version of opening the Doors. There was absolutely no merit in molting, a technique close to self-harm.

While trying to use it effectively, he discovered a new effect...

While struggling on the borderline of life and death, he had awakened a state of non-self. In martial arts terms, it would be similar to intentionally creating the conditions for reaching enlightenment.

'The only problem is that there's a chance I could die.'

He didn't know if he was just lucky or if he was just tenacious, but he had survived up to this point despite having used it multiple times.

'Although it hurts like hell.'

No matter how much he used it, he couldn't get used to the pain.

Kang-Woo shook his head.

"This is... training?" Echidna asked while bawling her eyes out.

Kang-Woo smiled bitterly. It was definitely hard to see it as training.

'But still, there's nothing I can do about it.'

Normal training was meaningless for him.

Of course, he could slowly improve his demonic energy control by using the Authorities of the princes of Hell or by merging it with other Authorities.

'But that would take too much time.'

If he did that, it would take him several years until he was able to absorb Belphegor's demonic energy.

If the only price to pay for getting stronger was pain... he was willing to withstand as much pain as he needed.

"Well, it hurts a lot, but it gets easier to handle over t—"

"Don't lie!" Echidna said, tears flowing down her cheeks.

"..."

She recalled how Kang-Woo had been twisting in pain as if having a seizure and how he was shedding tears while screaming.

Just pain?

Pain was everything.

Humans cried even if a knife slightly cut their skin, so there was no imagining the level of determination one needed to have to use molting despite knowing all the pain he would have to endure.

Echidna cried while hugging Kang-Woo.

- Hm! I've been training a lot too.

She felt ashamed of how confidently she'd said that.

"Kang-Woo..."

Echidna touched Kang-Woo's cheeks. She couldn't even imagine how much it must have hurt.

She recalled Balrog's words: "This is the road the King has walked."

Echidna at least knew more about Kang-Woo's past than Han Seol-Ah.

She knew how he'd gone from the First to the Ninth Hell despite having been born with a human body and how he'd declared war against the seven princes of Hell, rewriting the history of the Nine Hells and turning it upside down.

"I-I... didn't know."

Tears dripped from Echidna's eyes. She just knew the usual Kang-Woo and how strong, confident, and clever he was.

That's why, obviously...

"I never imagined you... to have lived... like this..."

She thought that Kang-Woo would have easily defeated any demon of the Ninth Hell or a prince of Hell with a smile on his face. She had thought that he had won without any sort of danger or pain, but...

"Sniff, waaaaaaahh!"

His road had been neither one of dominance nor of glory. He hadn't fought enemies in a cool way like an anime protagonist. It was miserable and shameful.

He had pitifully struggled to survive while trying his absolute best to survive and to protect whatever he had in his hands.

That's how he'd lived.

"I'm sorry... I'm... sorry."

She wasn't sure what she was sorry for, but for some reason, guilt weighed down on her. She felt as if she'd acted childish without knowing his hard past and how much he'd struggled in pain.

"Haaa."

Kang-Woo sighed and glared at Balrog.

'This is why I didn't want her to come.'

It was true that he'd lived a wretched life, but he did not want to emphasize it or have people pity him for it.

'The road the king has walked? Bullshit.'

He was annoyed at Balrog for inflating his past for no reason. It just made Kang-Woo look like some boomer who was lecturing the young about everything he had gone through in life.

"You should've just listened when I told you not to come..."

Kang-Woo patted Echidna's back and smiled. To be honest, it didn't feel bad. There was no way that it would feel bad to have someone worry about you.

"I can move a bit now."

Kang-Woo got up and rotated his waist around.

The lingering pain had disappeared.

'Right then...'

He closed his eyes and checked his body. He lightly drew out his demonic energy. His expression brightened.

'Its effect is as great as always.'

High risk, high return.

Since he'd put his life as a guarantee, the reward wasn't bad. He could feel that the demonic energy flowing through his body had become much more docile than before.

'But...'

Tsk.

He clicked his tongue.

'It's not good enough.'

He couldn't absorb Belphegor's demonic energy yet.

'A few more times and I should be good.'

His demonic energy control had improved more than expected, likely because of how much it had already somehow improved from lying in bed for ten days straight at home.

'Man, I wish it could just get boosted from a good night's sleep like back then.'

If he did, he wouldn't need to perform such a shitshow.

"Balrog, let's go again."

[... Are you still not satisfied?]

"I have to do it a few more times."

He needed to raise his control to the point that he could effortlessly open the Doors.

'There's no better technique than that in worst-case scenarios.'

Opening the Doors gave one an enormous amount of benefits in exchange for putting one's life as collateral. He could wipe out most enemies easily just by opening the First Door.

"N-No!" Halcyon quickly approached him and shook his head. "Y-You're going to do that again?!"

"Once isn't enough."

Kang-Woo probably had to do it two to five times.

'Urgh, just thinking about it makes me feel like shit.'

He didn't even want to imagine doing that shitshow of crying and pissing five whole times.

No, honestly...

'I'm scared as fuck.'

He trembled. He tried to act as if he was fine, but there was no way he was. Just thinking about enduring that insane agony and searing pain was enough for him to hurl.

Not only that, molting was not a safe training method. Although he might be able to handle the pain, if he was unlucky, there was a chance he could die.

"N-No! I-I'll do better! S-So..."

Halcyon bawled his eyes out, and so did Echidna. Kang-Woo put his hand on his forehead, seeing the sight that he had expected.

Halcyon extended his nails.

"I-If you're really going to do it, th-then I will also feel your pain!"

'The hell are you talking about?'

"U-Urghh!"

"Holy fuck!"

Kang-Woo quickly stopped Halcyon from harming himself. Halcyon had deeply stabbed his leg with his sharp nails.

'Jesus Christ.'

There was no need to do something so insane.

Kang-Woo looked at Halcyon in disbelief.

"Urgh! P-Please... don't h-hurt yourself."

"Haaa."

Kang-Woo didn't know what to do.

As Kang-Woo sighed, Balrog walked toward him.

[How about you do it a few days later, my king?]

"... A few days?"

[Yes. I will not try to stop you, but I believe there is no need to be in such a rush when we are not in any immediate danger.]

"Hmm, but still..."

[If you do it right away, you may lose focus.]

Kang-Woo remained tight-lipped.

It made sense.

'Well, rather than hurrying things and dying, I guess playing it safe is better.'

Bauli was not showing signs of crawling out of the Abyss of the Ten Thousand Demon Core.

Since he'd decided to train while putting his life in danger, it would be better to ensure his body was in perfect condition, at the very least.

"Okay. Then let's do it once every three days."

He could practice Satan's Authority, which he hadn't gotten to do yet, while he rested.

[Fuuu.]

Balrog sighed in relief and looked at Kang-Woo.

"We've lost far too much." Kang-Woo's words echoed in Balrog's head, and a bitter taste went through his mouth.

'One day, once everything is over... I hope you achieve happiness.'

Balrog made a bitter smile as he felt tears coming to his eyes.

\* \* \*

"Fuuu, fuuu."

He had completed his fifth molting. Due to some delays, he had managed to molt five times in twenty days.

"Done."

Kang-Woo smiled. He could feel that his demonic energy had risen beyond recognition. He picked up the gem containing Belphegor's demonic energy.

Crunch.

He ate it.

Riiing.

[You have eaten the Prince of Sloth, Belphegor.]

[Activating the Trait 'Reaper of Souls.']

[Activating the Trait 'Prince Slayer.']

[You can now use Prince Belphegor's 'Authority of Stillness.']

'Nice.'

A smile appeared on Kang-Woo's face.

[Demonic Energy has risen to 154.]

His Demonic Energy stat, which had been stagnant for a while, had also risen.

'It only went up by four even when I ate a prince of Hell.'

Still, it had risen. And the biggest gain was...

[Raising the rank of Trait 'Ruler of Demonic Energy' to SSS in accordance with the improved demonic energy control.]

[Demonic energy can now be converted to sacred power on top of mana.]

[Demonic energy can now be used from a distance. However, its effectiveness decreases dramatically the further the distance.]

'Shiiiet.'

He clenched his fists.

It was an unexpected gain. He could now exude as much golden sacred power as he wanted, just like how an apostle of Tirion, God of Heroes, should.

And he was able to use demonic energy from a distance.

'That's the best thing.'

To put it simply, he could now use Authorities that could only be used from the body, such as the Authority of Blades, from a distance.

'Meaning, I'll also be able to use Inferno from a distance.'

He could even use a powerful technique he'd made by combining the Authority of a prince of Hell and the Authority of Blades from a distance.



'And...'

Kang-Woo extended his hand toward a lizard on a rock twenty meters away.

As he emitted demonic energy and centered it around the lizard, a huge amount of demonic energy started to come out of the lizard. The lizard looked almost like a demonic dragon that had lived for thousands of years.

Kang-Woo converted his own demonic energy into sacred power, and he started to exude golden light. From the outside, it looked as if a warrior of light was fighting an evil demonic dragon.

"I can use this."

Kang-Woo made a thick smile.

There was no need to even think about where to use it.

He wasn't a swindler. As always, he was walking the path of justice and light. He could confidently look into the sky and say he wasn't ashamed of anything he had done, but...

"Man, I shouldn't be acting like this."

Laughs kept leaking out.

"It's so fucking nice."

For some reason, his heart was beating faster.

"Huehuehuehuehue."

Chapter 274 - Overturned (1)

Oh Kang-Woo had finally returned to his normal daily routine. He had attained more than expected after five molting sessions, so he decided to give himself a gift.

"Ah..."

He relaxed on the bed and sunk into the soft mattress. It was as if he'd become one with the bed, unmoving and unbreathing. He was so stuck to the bed that he might as well have used the Authority of Immobility.

He pulled the blanket right up to his neck, relaxing in the warmth of the custom-made duck-feather blanket he'd specially ordered for this very day.

"Aaah," he let out a short exclamation. "This must be what they call happiness."

A slow smile crept onto his face while he mumbled nonsense. It wasn't that he was falling asleep, but he felt happy beyond belief while lying in bed doing nothing.

'Yeah, this is the life of a wealthy bum.'

The seat of a demon king who ruled over the Nine Hells and the seat of an overlord who ruled the entire world were both meaningless.

While they got up early to have meetings and a bunch of other shit, he could stay in bed and roll around while scratching his balls. Being a king was nothing compared to being a bum.

'I'm so fucking happy. This is what you call the good life.'

He squirmed around his sheets while shivering in excitement.

Slam!

"Kang-Woo."

At that moment, someone interrupted his rest. It was a black-haired little girl—no, she was on the verge of becoming a fine lady. She trotted toward the bed and shook him.

"You're gonna have the whole day off, right?"

"..."

He didn't answer.

"You've been having it hard all this time, right, Kang-Woo? I'll play with you for the whole day."

Hm! Hm!

She shook his body while snorting.

Kang-Woo closed his eyes as if he were deeply asleep. He'd just managed to get a free day, so he refused to get out of bed. He kept his eyes closed, just like a father trying to hide from his daughter who wanted to ask him to play with her on a Sunday.

"Kang-Woo. I know you're not sleeping."

Echidna pulled his arm, raised the blanket, and tickled his side. That was not working, so she even jumped on top of him and bit his earlobe.

"Urrrrgggghhhh." He could not endure her biting his earlobe, so he rose from the bed while sounding like a zombie.

"Hehe."

Echidna made a victory smile.

Kang-Woo's eyes widened.

"Why are you bothering me so much?! I'm not stepping one foot off this bed today!" he desperately cried.

Echidna turned her head to the side and spoke in a sad voice.

"But..." She trembled as if she were a heartbroken heroine. "If I don't go this far... you won't ever be interested in me!"

"..."

Kang-Woo wondered what in the world Echidna was talking about. As he was looking up at her in disbelief, she smiled and made a V-sign with both her hands.

"It's from a popular meme[1]."

"What's a meme?"

"A buzzword. You don't know about memes when you've been on Earth for so long?"

"There's a bit of a generational gap."

A gap of about ten millennia.

Kang-Woo quickly reached out to Echidna, who was on his chest. He hugged her and tickled her sides.

"Ahn! Wh-What are you doing, Kang-Woo?!"

It was rare to see Echidna flustered. Kang-Woo smiled and tickled her armpits. "You dared to interrupt the king's rest, so you must be prepared to face the consequences."

Although it was so cringe that he would vomit despite having said it himself, the words casually left his mouth so that he could play along with the situation.

Echidna narrowed her eyes.

"Kang-Woo, that's cringe."

"..."

"I didn't know you were that kind of person."

"Come on, shouldn't you be playing along...?"

"I'm disappointed."

Echidna snorted.

Kang-Woo's eyes trembled as if he were a protagonist who had just been betrayed.

Then... both Echidna and Kang-Woo burst into laughter.

"Urgh."

Kang-Woo got up from bed.

"Kang-Woo, are you... feeling okay?" Echidna carefully asked while pulling on his clothes.

She had been trying her best to be fine, but her expression was soon dyed with sorrow and worry. She probably wondered if he had died or something.

Kang-Woo smirked.

"I'm completely fine. I gained a lot too."

"Kang-Woo, promise m—"

"Okay. I won't use it again unless it's absolutely necessary."

Kang-Woo patted her head. Echidna nodded while crying a bit.

Molting was definitely a high-risk, high-return gamble; it was as insane as going all in consecutively in a casino. He would definitely die if he kept spamming it.

"Promise?"

"Yeah, promise."

Kang-Woo went out to the living room with Echidna.

Halcyon came running when he saw Kang-Woo.

"Master Kang-Woo! You're up!"

Halcyon embraced Kang-Woo, his eyes shining like a beast.

"You're already up?" Han Seol-Ah asked, worried. "You could have rested a bit longer..."

"Because of this little troublemaker." Kang-Woo pinched Echidna's cheek.

Seol-Ah glared at her.

Echidna flinched and hid behind Kang-Woo.

"Well, I can't stay in bed all day." Kang-Woo smiled and sat on the couch. Even a bum had a daily schedule. Since the sun was up in the sky, he had to fill his stomach with warm stew. It was more than worth giving up on becoming one with the bed.

"Darling." Kang-Woo looked at Seol-Ah with shining eyes.

Seol-Ah laughed. She already knew what he wanted without him saying another word.

"Just a few minutes. I'll have it ready in a flash."

"Oh, I'll help."

"It's okay. You can stay resting." Seol-Ah shook her head. "I heard you underwent some harsh training for the past twenty days, so you can leave everything to me for today."

She hadn't heard the details of the training, but it had been so brutal that Echidna had bawled her eyes out in Seol-Ah's arms. She wanted to let Kang-Woo get some good rest for today.

"Well... if you insist."

Kang-Woo smiled awkwardly and nodded. Being taken care of by someone else still felt awkward.

"Then Kang-Woo, let's watch anime while we wait." Echidna pulled his arm.

"N-No. Master Kang-Woo is g-going to stay with m-me."

As if he didn't intend to lose, Halcyon pulled the other arm.

"..."

Although he had flowers in both arms, one had yet to bloom, and the other had both a pistil and a stamen.

'What is this?'

It didn't feel right. He should be happy to be put in such a situation, but he was not for some reason.

Kang-Woo's arms were being pulled around.

"Kang-Woo's mine."

"Y-Yours? Th-There you go again with your n-nonsense. D-Don't lie. I-I don't like liars."

"..."

Seol-Ah remained silent while looking at Halcyon and Echidna. She narrowed her eyes. Suddenly, her eyes gleamed.

"Kang-Woo."

"Yeah?"

Seol-Ah spread out her arms. Although she was wearing a baggy sweater, a certain area was heavily emphasized.

Kang-Woo's eyes widened. It was not hard to imagine what she wanted from him.

"W-We're in front of the children..."

Kang-Woo had remained a virgin, at least with humans, for ten millennia. He averted his eyes from her gaze, thinking that this was a bit too much.

Seol-Ah's eyes narrowed.

"Kang-Woo?"

"M-Mhmm."

He looked around. Echidna and Halcyon had stopped pulling his arms and were tilting their heads.

"You're not... going to come?" Seol-Ah asked in a low voice. For some reason, her voice was scary.

He felt chills running through his skin. Kang-Woo couldn't resist anymore and approached Seol-Ah. As he lowered his head and adjusted his height, Seol-Ah hugged his head.

"Good boy."

"..."

It felt very weird for his head to be caressed. After she had nursed him in the past, her attitude had changed a bit. He could feel some sort of big sister energy coming from her. Such a feeling should be weird since he was almost four hundred times her age, but it did not feel that way for some reason.

It was as if Seol-Ah was older than him.

'In terms of age, Echidna is way older than Seol-Ah.'

Purely in terms of age, Halcyon was actually the oldest one here. Ancient demonic beasts have been alive for a very long time.

"Mm."

"Fufu. Do you feel good?"

Seol-Ah patted his back.

There was no need to even ask. Kang-Woo enjoyed the soft sensation spreading through his cheeks.

Seol-Ah raised her head and looked at the other two girls, whose facial expressions had hardened.

"Heh."

"Urgh!"

She was making a smug smile.

Halcyon's face went red. He flapped his wings in a fit and bit his lip.

"H-How dare y-you... t-treat Master Kang-Woo like a child..."

He clacked his teeth while glaring at Seol-Ah.

"H-How e-envi—I-I mean, the insolence..."

He ground his teeth, and extended his nails to scratch the wall in a fit, cutting the walls as if it were tofu.

"Urghh."

Still, he couldn't attack Seol-Ah because he knew that Seol-Ah was important to Kang-Woo. Halcyon stomped on the ground in frustration and groaned.

Seol-Ah smiled and clapped her hands together. "Oh, right. Why don't we go to the supermarket together, Kang-Woo?"

"The supermarket?"

"We're out of pork, so we need to go buy some."

"Hmm? I checked yesterday, and there were still a ton left—"

"We're out."

Seol-Ah smiled.

Kang-Woo gulped and nodded.

"Right. Let's go, Kang-Woo. In the meantime, you two can look over the house," she said firmly to Echidna and Halcyon.

Seol-Ah slightly pulled Kang-Woo's clothes and walked toward the door, humming.

"..."

"Urghhh."

The two left behind glared at them as Seol-Ah and Kang-Woo left.

\* \* \*

"... Wouldn't it have been better if we had brought them as well?"

"It's been a while since we've been alone together." Seol-Ah smiled while slightly sticking her tongue out.

Kang-Woo smirked at her attitude, which wasn't like her usual self.

'It's probably because...'

It seemed he'd made her worry.

It was no wonder. Although she had not been told the details of the molting process, she likely had an idea of how serious it was from seeing Echidna and Halcyon.

"Alright. Since we're here, let's take our time looking ar—"

As he grabbed Seol-Ah's hand and was about to go, he stopped in his tracks. His eyes narrowed.

"It has been a while." The silver-haired angel, Shalgiel, was blocking his path. He stared at Seol-Ah with an intense gaze and said, "There is something I must tell you."

## Chapter 275 - Overturned (2)

Oh Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes and asked, "What could it be about for you to bring this many soldiers?"

There were ten angels in front of him, and easily dozens more were hiding along the alleyways. Practically the entirety of Raphael's forces was here. The energy coming from the angels wasn't normal, either, which meant that they'd brought only the elites among Raphael's forces.

Kang-Woo frowned due to the air they were giving off; it was as if the angels had come ready for war.

"..."

Shalgiel silently looked at Han Seol-Ah.

Seol-Ah hid behind Kang-Woo, flinching. She'd only seen angels from a distance in the war against the Demon Cult back in Russia.

"I knew it... but why...?" Shalgiel opened his mouth in disbelief and grabbed his forehead while feigning laughter.

"Shalgiel."

"Ah, my apologies." Shalgiel shook his head at Kang-Woo's call.

"What is it that you must tell me?"

"... Before that, may I first ask what the nature of your relationship with this woman is?" he asked while pointing to Seol-Ah.

"She's my lover," Kang-Woo calmly said.

"Hah." Shalgiel laughed in disbelief and glared at Kang-Woo in obvious rage. "A human lover... I can see that you know absolutely nothing, Kang-Woo."

"..."

Kang-Woo was becoming irritated with Shalgiel for evading his question and having such an attitude.

'Calm down.'

He quelled his irritation. It was very important to maintain a good relationship with angels. He couldn't let emotional outbursts influence his actions.

'Especially now.'

Uriel would soon arrive on Earth.

Kang-Woo forced a smile and calmly said, "Could you explain what it is that I don't know?"

"Have angel wing symbols appeared on this human's—I mean, this lady's back?"

"...!"

Kang-Woo's eyes widened. It was the same for Seol-Ah, who had been listening next to him. She looked at Kang-Woo as if she were asking if he'd told anyone about it.

"How did you know that?" Kang-Woo asked in a sharp voice.

It was true that he'd considered asking the angels about it, but it had been nothing but a consideration; he had not told them yet.

Shalgiel calmly explained, "While investigating Guardians, I coincidentally learned about her."

"..."

Kang-Woo didn't intend to ask him why he'd been investigating them. It was understandable that they'd try to see if the organization they'd allied with was trustworthy.

"So, what do the angel wings mean?" Kang-Woo asked.

"..."

Shalgiel closed his eyes. There was a bit of hesitation in his expression.

He sighed.

"It is... a soul."

"... A soul?"

"The soul of Lady Seraph lies within her."

"The fuck you say?"

Kang-Woo unconsciously ended up cursing from Shalgiel's absurd words. He looked at Shalgiel with his mouth agape.

'Is he crazy?'

There was a limit to how random someone could be.

Kang-Woo glared at Shalgiel as if Shalgiel were talking out of his ass, but he didn't seem to be lying. There was no way someone would joke in a situation like this.

'By Seraph, he means...'

He'd heard that name before.

Celestial Goddess Seraph—the angel who had defeated Bauli alongside Gaia and the Heavenly Dragon. The Constellations of Evil were all sealed away because she had sacrificed her own Divinity.

'But...'

Kang-Woo looked at Seol-Ah.

She didn't seem to know how to react to what Shalgiel had just said.

'Seraph's soul is inside Seol-Ah?'

There had actually been clues about what it could have been.

'Back then...'



Kang-Woo recalled the brilliant light that had come out of her back in the dungeon—the light that had burned him. The power had been far stronger than the maximum power output that he, who had become stronger than his past self in Hell, could release.

'If Seraph's soul is behind that power...

It was enough of an answer to satisfy him, but that was all there was to it. He was not satisfied with the underlying cause.

"Why is Seraph's soul inside Seol-Ah?"

"... Do not speak her name disrespectfully. It is not one that you can use however you want."

"Is that important right now?" Kang-Woo frowned.

Shalgiel groaned. "As for why her soul is inside a human woman—and in a human from another dimension, no less—I do not know either. Oh... But I have a theory as to why the soul is in a different dimension."

"... What is it?"

"We have confirmed that Lady Gaia's power had also weakened significantly when Lady Seraph's seal had significantly weakened. It likely has to do with the Demon of Prophecy."

"Then..."

"Yes. I believe Lady Seraph's soul had fallen through the giant hole made between the dimensions."

"..."

Kang-Woo remained silent.

It was simple. To make a comparison, Huan, Aernor, and Earth were like three layers of breakwater that protected against the forces of the outer world. If one layer collapsed, it would naturally affect the other two layers as well.

"So, what is it that you want to say?" Kang-Woo asked.

It was honestly hard to believe, but there was no way an angel would say something so absurd as Seol-Ah possessing Seraph's soul without any proof. They had likely brought it up after investigating very thoroughly.

Now, it was time to hear why he was talking about this.

Shalgiel said, "We need her help."

"... Help with what?"

"Lady Seraph's power is weakening each second. Before that power completely disappears... we have to return the soul to its rightful place."

"That means..."

"Yes. We need the soul that she possesses. If everything goes as planned... there is a chance that Lady Seraph will be revived within her."

"..."

There was silence.

Seol-Ah looked back and forth between Kang-Woo and Shalgiel, not having fully understood what had just been said.

Kang-Woo slowly opened his mouth.

"What will happen to Seol-Ah if Seraph is revived?"

"Well..." Shalgiel slurred. After organizing his thoughts, he calmly spoke again. "She will share her consciousness with Lady Seraph. You could think of it as coexisting—"

"We refuse," he said firmly.

Kang-Woo glared at Shalgiel.

'Coexisting, my ass.'

There was no way the soul of the Celestial Goddess could coexist with a mere human.

Even thinking about Lilith, who had entered the body of Kurosaki Yurie, Kurosaki Yurie had fallen into an indefinite slumber after her soul had been pushed aside by Lilith's.

'But coexist, you say? You think I'm sharing my consciousness with Bauli without a care in the world?'

Bauli had not been able to take control of Kang-Woo's body due to Kang-Woo's exceptional demonic energy control. If he had been nothing but a puppet like Bauli had hoped, his soul would have been devoured already.

"Uhm... Kang-Woo. What is going on...?"

"You don't have to pay it any mind." Kang-Woo pulled Seol-Ah close to him. He said to Shalgiel, "If you have nothing else to say, we will be on our way."

"..."

Shalgiel stared at Kang-Woo.

"As expected of a human," he mumbled and clicked his tongue. "Surround them."

The angels hiding around them appeared and surrounded Kang-Woo and Seol-Ah.

"... What is the meaning of this?"

Kang-Woo's eyes narrowed.

Shalgiel spoke in a heavy voice. "It was my mistake for having the tiniest expectations for a human."

"..."

"We will be taking that woman," he said firmly as if he would not compromise for anything else.

Kang-Woo grimaced.

'Endure it.'

He clenched his fists. His hands were shaking. He took a deep breath and quelled his overflowing rage.

'If I let my emotions run wild, it's over.'

He had done his best to maintain a collaborative relationship with the angels, even going as far as to do that shitshow with Ludwig. It had all been to ensure Guardians and the angels would work together.

'We need the angels.'

To be more precise, he couldn't afford to antagonize them. They had been growing in power while the Ninth Hell had been at war for a thousand years. Raphael, Uriel, Gabriel, and their leader Michael possessed great power. Not only that, but their goal was the same as Kang-Woo's—to eliminate all demonic beings from the world and bring forth peace.

'I can't do that alone.'

He wasn't a god—he couldn't be everywhere all at once.

Earth was in an extreme crisis; the Demon of Prophecy and the Four Heavenly Kings were not the biggest issue.

'Earth is being invaded by the Nine Hells itself.'

It was clear to see with demonic beasts and even Halcyon, an ancient demonic beast, appearing within the Gates. Even if the Demon Cult and the summoning rituals did not exist, Earth was becoming more and more exposed to the outer world.

It wasn't just the Nine Hells. Earth currently had no defenses to block invasions from any other world. If they antagonized the angels in such a situation...

'It would be the end.'

Kang-Woo might be able to survive, but Earth wouldn't be able to withstand a full-fledged war.

'And most importantly...'

Angels were connected to gods—they'd come to Earth after receiving a request from Uranus. Fighting them also meant that they would be crossing the gods backing the angels.

"Fuuu." Kang-Woo took a deep breath and calmly said, "I want to talk to Lord Raphael."

"Lord Raphael is currently recovering in the Embrace of Light. Besides, nothing would change even if you talk to him."

"... Are you forcing Seol-Ah to sacrifice herself?"

"If it is necessary."

Shalgiel raised his hand. A few angels approached and grabbed Seol-Ah.

"Kyaaa!"

Kang-Woo raised his brows. He pushed away the angels grabbing Seol-Ah. Although he'd pushed them slightly, the angels were blown away.

"Are you going to resist to the very end?" Shalgiel said in irritation. "I am sure you are aware of your current situation."

"..."

"Or would you like to take this chance to check if Lord Uranus also feels the same way?"

Shalgiel knew about the relationship between Guardians and the angels very well—they weren't on equal terms.

The angels had simply come to help because they had been asked to. Although their objective to eradicate demons was the same, there was no need to even discuss the power dynamic between the two sides.

"..."

Kang-Woo stopped in his tracks.

Shalgiel smirked.

The angels walked toward Kang-Woo and grabbed his shoulders, pushing him down.

Kang-Woo didn't resist and kneeled.

"K-Kang-Woo..."

Seol-Ah's voice trembled. She looked at the angels with uneasy eyes and gulped.

"I still don't understand entirely what is going on, but... you're saying that you need my help, right?"

"Yes. If Lady Seraph is revived, humans will not have to fear demons any longer."

"Ah..." Seol-Ah let out a short exclamation, then she nodded and smiled. "If so, then I can do it... as long as it ensures Kang-Woo's safety."

There was a short silence.

"..."

Kang-Woo closed his eyes.

The situation was simple. Their relationship with the angels couldn't get ruined, and Seraph's seal was getting weaker. If Seraph was revived and consolidated the seal, a deity would join them as their ally.

Not just that, since Seraph was of the same rank as Gaia, she could possibly restore a portion of the protective barrier surrounding Earth. At the very least, she would be able to prevent beings of the outer world from invading Earth.

If Seol-Ah, just one person, sacrificed herself, Kang-Woo could obtain the peaceful life he'd yearned for for ten millennia.

So... it was an easy choice to make.

"Haaa." Kang-Woo sighed deeply. "You fucking pigeons have gone too far."

"... What did you say?" Shalgiel's eyes shone sharply. He was not fully used to the human language, but he could easily tell that Kang-Woo had insulted them.

"Don't try to act like you didn't hear me, dumbass. Are you the lead of a love comedy or something?"

"You insolent...!"

Flames poured out of Shalgiel's eyes. As he was about to unsheathe his sword, he bit his lip and opened his mouth instead.

"... I understand your anger. I am sure you are even more disconcerted since this human woman is your lover."

He held in his rage.

"This sacrifice is for the greater good. This world and all of its people could be protected from the hands of demons with the sacrifice of one mere human."

"..."

Kang-Woo remained silent.

He got up.

"Huh? HUUUH?"

A flustered murmur came out of the angel that was holding him down.

Kang-Woo reached out and grabbed the angel's head.

"Hey, you."

He stared right at Shalgiel.

"I was solo for ten fucking millennia, okay? It's been so excruciatingly painful having no one by my side to embrace me. There wasn't even porn for me to watch, man. Do you know what I had at the very least? Huh? Do you?"

He had pus-spewing green tentacles.

"The world is in danger? The seal is about to break?"

He didn't give a fuck.

Crush.

The head of the angel he was holding exploded.

White blood and brain matter wet his hand.

"I can't live without my darling, you bastards."

The alliance with the angels that he'd built through so much effort... was overturned.

Chapter 276 - My Way (1)

"Wh-What the—!!"

Shalgiel's eyes widened as he saw his subordinate's head explode.

His vision slowed down, and everything unfolded in slow motion; he clearly saw the skull shatter, the brain burst, and the white blood pour. He quickly extended his hand, but it had been too late.

He glared at Oh Kang-Woo. Biting his lip, he shouted, "H-how dare you...!! Are you out of your mind, human?!"

Kang-Woo had done more than just kill a single angel. He'd broken the relationship between two organizations and had pushed a star to ruin.

It was as if a diplomat from a superpower had come to a weak nation after receiving a request for assistance and died there. It could even lead to a war between the angels and humans.

"What do you expect me to do?"

Despite having done something absolutely insane, Kang-Woo was calm.

No. It was as if he hadn't even hesitated.

Kang-Woo extended his hand, and the heads of the angels holding Seol-Ah also exploded.

"K-Kang-Woo?!" Seol-Ah exclaimed.

Kang-Woo pulled Seol-Ah toward him after she was freed from the angels, embracing her with one hand.

"You son of a..." Shalgiel ground his teeth at the unexpected development of events. "I see, so this is your answer."

There was no mistaking Kang-Woo's intentions—he was going to choose war for the sake of a single human. He had been blinded by emotions and had sacrificed the greater good.

It was a choice so stupid and ignorant that Shalgiel should have expected such from a human.

"I feel ashamed for the bit of hope I held for humanity."

Without hesitation, Shalgiel unsheathed his sword.

Raphael had high hopes for humans, but that wasn't the case for Shalgiel.

He remembered his time in Aernor before coming to Earth. Forget focusing on eradicating demons, they were too busy fighting for their own interests and ambitions, despite Evil God Lucifer being alive.

Earth was no different. Even if the world and cultures were different, in the end, they were humans.

"Hope, my ass," Kang-Woo said. "Big words from a guy who brought all these people."

Just the fact that Shalgiel had brought nearly a hundred subordinates proved that he had never intended to solve this peacefully.

Kang-Woo couldn't help but laugh in disbelief at Shalgiel's words. He provoked Shalgiel with a beckoning wave.

"Try to take her if you can."

A smile crept onto his face. Since he'd decided to flip the table, there was no need to put on a performance. He didn't need any complicated calculations or schemes—he could just run as wild as he wanted.

Rumble!

The buildings around them shook, and a breathtakingly dense demonic energy surged from Kang-Woo.

"What...?"

Shalgiel's eyes widened. The human was enveloped in black demonic energy.

'No.'

His body trembled—he'd never felt demonic energy this thick before.

Even Satan wasn't at this level.

"Wh-What in the world...?"

Shalgiel grabbed his head in chaos.

Kang-Woo was one of the core members of Guardians; he was the apostle who'd inherited the power of Tirion, God of Heroes. Despite that, he was able to emit such powerful demonic energy?

"N-No way."

He recalled that evil ritual and how it had summoned Kang-Woo.

"Y-You are..."

The thought that they had been deceived crossed his mind, and his mouth fell open in shock.

"Youuuuuu!!!"

Shalgiel gripped his sword tighter as an intense white light poured from his weapon.

'We had all been deceived.'

He, Raphael, Guardians... everyone had been dancing in that demon's hands.

'Then...'

Shalgiel looked at Seol-Ah. To be more precise, he was looking at Seraph's slumbering soul within her.

"Sh-Shit. So that was it!!" Shalgiel exclaimed.

Kang-Woo must have already known everything. He had known that Seraph's soul was inside the human woman, so he had seduced her.

Just like...

Rakiel.

"Kill that demon!!" Shalgiel cried out.

The delicate woman that the demon was holding...

He felt like he could see Seraph crying in the Demon King's grasp.

"We must save Lady Seraph from that demon at all costs!!" he desperately shouted.

Kang-Woo chuckled.

"Man, now that I think about it, this paints a funny picture."

He started to laugh out loud.

From an outside point of view, it definitely looked like an angel was being held hostage by a demon.

'How fun.'

He smiled and felt that he could use it.

"Darling. I'm sure you're confused, but just give me a few minutes."

"H-Huh? K-Kang-Woo?"

Seol-Ah was trembling as if she couldn't understand what was happening. She knew that Kang-Woo was a demon, but she never thought that he'd kill an angel so easily. After all, he had always been the one to emphasize the importance of their alliance with the angels.

'A-All for me...'

There was no need to think too deeply about why Kang-Woo was doing something so absurd.

Seol-Ah bit her lip. She would be lying if she said that she wasn't happy, but she was more worried about Kang-Woo.

'Kang-Woo.'

She started to tear up.

She couldn't understand anything about Seraph or the seal, but she could understand that Kang-Woo was trying to protect her even if that meant he had to give up on many of the things he'd worked hard for.

He didn't mind causing a war if that meant he'd be able to save her.

"Do you know why the king had declared war on the princes of Hell?"

"It was because of that massive ball of muscles over there."

She finally understood what Lilith had said in the past.

Ba-dump, ba-dump.

Her heart started to beat faster, and she started to feel thirsty, her chest feeling hot. She momentarily thought that she shouldn't be feeling this way, but...

"Haaa."

She let out a breath full of yearning and looked at Kang-Woo with hazy eyes. She couldn't see it, but the wing symbols on her back flickered black for a very short moment.

Without noticing that change, Kang-Woo shouted toward the angels, "You can say goodbye to Seraph if you take one more step!"

"Kuh!"

The angels stopped moving.

Kang-Woo burst into laughter.

"Shiiiet, this actually works?"

"You wicked demon...!"



"Yes, I am a demon~"

Kekeke.

Kang-Woo burst into laughter.

Crack!!

He swung his hand horizontally. The Ruler of Demonic Energy Trait, which had risen to SSS rank, activated. A storm of black blades appeared in the air and engulfed the angels.

"Kurgh!"

"Gaaah!"

Screams echoed, and Kang-Woo hummed.

"L-Lord Shalgiel!"

"Kuh! Sh-Shit!!"

Shalgiel trembled in bewilderment. The human with Seraph's soul was being held hostage, so there was nothing they could do.

"Huehuehuehuehue!"

The demon king continued to laugh and move his hands. Black blades appeared wherever he gestured, and attacked the angels.

Not only would they have lost when fighting the demon king head on, he even had a hostage, hindering their actions. There was no need to wonder who would win.

"Shit! All forces, attack at once!!"

Shalgiel stomped on the ground and leaped forward. They wouldn't stand a chance just standing around as they were all killed. They had to end things quickly so that the demon king couldn't think about using the hostage.

"Haap!"

He held up his sword, which was shining with brilliant sacred power, and rose up into the air by flapping his six wings. He meant to split the demon's head in two, but...

"Are you sure you wanna do that?"

Kang-Woo grabbed Seol-Ah's neck. Of course, he had no intention of hurting her.

'But...'

"Kuh!"

Shalgiel's sword stopped, and Kang-Woo burst into laughter.

"Pfft! Kahahahah!"

It was truly ironic; the one that Kang-Woo was protecting while bearing the risk of war was being used to make his enemies powerless.

Shalgiel's face turned red.

"Y-you son of a bitch...!"

"Yeah, yeah~ I'm a son of a bitch, I'm a scumbag, I'm a filthy demon, I disgust you, blah blah blah. Say whatever you want~"

Those were all things he'd heard during the thousand-year war.

Kang-Woo slowly walked toward Shalgiel. Even while walking, he waved his hands and massacred the angels. Slowly approaching, he lightly slapped Shalgiel's cheek.

"Are you angry? Huh?"

"Y-you...!"

"If you're angry... you know what to do, right?"

Kakakaka.

Once again, he burst into laughter.

Any sign of logical thought disappeared from Shalgiel's eyes. Without even infusing sacred power into his sword, Shalgiel charged at Kang-Woo.

"Aaarrggghh!!!"

"Shiiiet, it worked like a charm."

Kang-Woo smirked and narrowed his eyes as he dodged.

'Authority of the Beholder.'

His senses expanded, and he saw everything around him in a bird's-eye view. He counted the remaining angels.

'Twenty-three.'

He'd really killed a lot.

Kang-Woo leisurely waved his hand again.

It wasn't enough.

He kept killing the angels who were standing still and unsure of what to do.

'It's so damn easy.'

It was so easy to the point of being boring. No wonder hostage situations were so difficult to resolve, especially since there was no way they'd be able to give up on the hostage.

"Kuh!"

He even saw a couple of angels trying to escape—they flapped their wings and rose into the air.

Kang-Woo flicked his fingers toward them.

A black spear appeared in the air and pierced through them.

Crack!

"Kurgh!"

'I can't let even a single one escape.'

Kang-Woo's eyes sank.

'Now that I've made a complete mess...'

He had to fix it however he could. His head was already hurting from how he could possibly fix this, so he couldn't leave things like this.

'We have to avoid war at all costs.'

He couldn't let the already-small Guardians forces be reduced due to this.

Kang-Woo's eyes shone sharply as he looked at Shalgiel, who was charging at him in madness.

'If I want to find a way...'

He needed more information.

"Arrgghh!! Y-You son of a biiiiititch!!"

"Right, now that I've taken care of the rest..."

Kang-Woo let go of Seol-Ah and jumped into the air. He grabbed Shalgiel's head and rammed it into the ground.

"Kurgh!"

Shalgiel screamed.

"Y-You..."

Shalgiel looked up at Kang-Woo from the ground with eyes full of rage, resentment, and malice. His face was so distorted that it was hard to believe he was an angel.

"Alright, there are a lot of things that I want to ask you," Kang-Woo said.

"Kuh! Do you seriously believe I will answer a demon's questions?"

"I do."

Kang-Woo nodded without hesitation. He lowered his head and whispered in Shalgiel's ears, "Because, you see, if you don't answer my questions... Seraph's soul will be annihilated right here and now."

The demon smiled brightly.

Chapter 277 - My Way (2)

"Y-You bastard..."

Shalgiel's eyes were trembling. He could see from Han Seol-Ah's reaction that she was truly in love with him. Although he himself had pressured her, she had also been willing to sacrifice herself for the human Oh Kang-Woo.

'But...'

To think that someone who claimed to be her lover would take her hostage as soon as he showed his true colors. The bloodlust coming out of Kang-Woo was telling Shalgiel that he was not lying.

He was really trying to kill that woman.

Shalgiel trembled.

'How evil...!'

He clacked his teeth. Although demons were known to be like that, he'd never seen trash like him before.

'Not even Demon God Lucifer had ever harmed the woman he loved!'

There was no line that the demon Oh Kang-Woo wouldn't cross. Kang-Woo was crazy and out of his mind. He was even more of a demon than a demon. He was a cold person who controlled the world as he pleased.

"Kuh..."

"What? Do you think I'm lying?" Kang-Woo smiled wickedly. He yanked Seol-Ah, who was standing in a daze, and embraced her.

"Play along for a bit," he whispered.

"Wh-What are you trying to do to her?!" Shalgiel quickly shouted.

Kang-Woo licked Seol-Ah's cheek.

"Now that I think about it, annihilation might not be enough. How about we try something different?"

"Wh-What?"

"Think about it. Aren't you intrigued?" He roughly grabbed Seol-Ah's well-endowed chest and smiled as filthily as he could. "What do you think would happen if Celestial Goddess Seraph conceived a demon's child?"

"Wh-Wha...!"

Shalgiel's eyes widened. Just thinking about it made him want to vomit.

Although she had not awakened yet, Seraph's soul was certainly lying dormant within that woman's body. In other words, if that woman conceived a child...

"A-Aaaahh."

Shalgiel was in so much despair that he could not even form words.

Kang-Woo smiled and took a glance at Seol-Ah.

"Ah..."

Seol-Ah's cheeks reddened, and she shyly shook her head.

"O-Oh, Kang-Woo..."

'Hm?'

"Wh-What are you saying in a place like this?"

'Uhm, excuse me? Darling?'

She jumped in embarrassment with her hands on her cheeks.

Kang-Woo felt anxious.

'What the fuck?'

Seol-Ah wasn't helping at all. Kang-Woo understood how confusing this had to all be for her, but she was not dense enough to not understand what was going on.

But despite that...

"... I-I'm fine with it."

'You're fine with what?'

It seemed she wasn't planning on playing along. He took his hand off her chest and covered her mouth. Her breaths, which were very heated for some reason, tickled his fingers.

'Fuck, I hope he hasn't realized.'

He shot Shalgiel an anxious look. Thankfully, Shalgiel still seemed to be in shock.

Kang-Woo sighed in relief.

"So... what will you do?" Kang-Woo asked subtly.

Shalgiel looked down.

"Promise... me," he said reluctantly, "that you will not lay a finger on Lady Seraph."

"Hmm~ I'm not sure if I can. She's far too beautiful for me not to do anything, you see."

"You bastard!!"

"Hahahaha! Alright. Don't get so angry. I promise. Oh, you might not be able to believe me, but I am a man of my word," he said in a half-laughing tone.

Shalgiel clenched his eyes shut and asked in a trembling voice, "What... do you want to ask?"

'Great.'

A smile appeared on Kang-Woo's face.

Shalgiel had declared his loss. All that Kang-Woo needed now was to collect evidence needed for a twist.

"First, how much does Raphael know about this incident?"

"... H-He already knows everything. He also has a notion of your true identity," Shalgiel answered while averting his gaze.

Kang-Woo smirked.

Shalgiel's voice was uneasy, his hands were trembling, and his teeth were clacking.

'Come on.'

He wouldn't be able to fool anyone like that.

Crack!!

"Aaarrggghh!!"

Kang-Woo grabbed one of Shalgiel's wings. He rammed Shalgiel's head into the ground with his foot and pulled on the wing, ripping it out with the sound of crushing bone. White feathers fell like snow.

"Shalgiel."

Kang-Woo grabbed his silver hair and brought his face closer to Shalgiel's.

"I said that I would keep my word, didn't I? But you're not keeping yours? Hm? What should I do with you?"

"Kurgh, urgh."

Shalgiel's body trembled, and his lips paled from the pain surging through his body.

He closed his eyes and opened his mouth.

"Lord Raphael is... currently recovering from his wounds within the Embrace of Light. Today's events are purely of my own accord."

"Good, that's better. That aside, what is the Embrace of Light?"

"It is a capsule filled with sacred power. Anyone who enters will be able to heal their wounds quickly, but..."

"It must be isolated from all contact with the outside world."

"... Correct."

Shalgiel nodded.

Kang-Woo licked his lips with great interest.

"Then, are you saying that he has been treating his wounds since our meeting?"

"... Yes."

"Shalgiel, what did I just say?"

"Kuh...!"

Shalgiel flinched.

He bit his lip and said, "He has been... researching."

"Researching?"

"He has been looking through materials on why Rakiel fell, how Demon God Bauli was able to tempt him... and how Rakiel managed to make other angels fall, among other things."

"Research, huh...?"

Kang-Woo's eyes shone. An outline of a plan was taking form in his head.

"When is Uriel coming to Earth?"

"I-I do not know that either."

Shalgiel shook his head. He didn't seem to be lying.

Kang-Woo asked him a few more questions about the angels, but not even Raphael's right arm, Shalgiel, knew much about their internal affairs.

"Well, I've heard more than enough."

Kang-Woo smiled widely. He wasn't exactly sure what he needed to do, and he didn't have a fully thought-out plan, but he had grasped on to a sliver of hope.

Considering that he'd overturned everything while being prepared to really go to war, it was an incredible achievement.

"... And what about your promise?" Shalgiel looked at Seol-Ah with trembling eyes.

Kang-Woo grabbed his shoulders. "Don't worry, man. We'll have three kids and live happily ever after."

"Th-That is not what you promised!!"

Shalgiel's eyes widened. He twisted around as if he were having a seizure.

"You bastard!! How dare you try to defile Lady Seraph with your filthy member?!"

"You motherf... It isn't dirty. I clean it every single day, just in case."

'Though nothing has happened yet.'

Kang-Woo frowned. He didn't say that last part.

"Th-That's right! It's not dirty! I've seen it before!" Seol-Ah shouted.

"Huh...?"

Suddenly, the atmosphere became chilly.

"A-Ah! U-Uhmm... I-It's not what you think. U-Uhh...!" Seol-Ah quickly began shaking her hand as if she'd only just realized what she had just said.

"When did you..."

"I-I misspoke. Please forget I said anything."

"No, wait..."

"I-It's your fault for falling so deeply asleep, r-right? You think so too, right, Kang-Woo?"

"I don't."

"Th-Things like this are bound to happen if we live together. Th-that's right. It was an accident! An accident!"

"Lifting my clothes while I was sleeping was an accident?"

"Of c-c-c-c-course! It was beyond my control!"

Seol-Ah furiously nodded.

"..."

There was a heavy silence.

Shalgiel looked at both of them in confusion at what the hell was going on, his mouth agape.

"Uhh... Mm."

Kang-Woo was also troubled—he felt that all his acting had been blown away at once.

'I won't ask Seol-Ah to act ever again.'

She was like a ticking time bomb.

He missed the Oscar-winning Gaia.

"Sorry, man," he said to Shalgiel apologetically. "I at least wanted to give you a cool send-off."

Kang-Woo wanted him to die while saying something cool like "Mark my words, you will receive the judgment of light one day!" or something along those lines, but things had gone awry.

Kang-Woo patted Shalgiel's shoulder as if truly sorry.

"Goodbye, man. I won't forget you."

"Wait... What in the world is—"

Stab.

He pierced Shalgiel's chest with his hand, grabbed his heart, and squeezed it so hard that it exploded.

Kang-Woo took a deep breath and activated his communication crystal orb.

- What can I do for you, Master?

"Vaal Zahak. Bring over your Undead and collect all the angel corpses here."

After giving a short command, he cut the communication.

"..."

His eyes met Seol-Ah's.

She looked around and bit her lip.

"Kang-Woo..."

It was as if she wasn't sure what to do and was surprised that Kang-Woo had acted so differently from the Kang-Woo she knew.

Kang-Woo grabbed her hands and calmly said, "Stay here for now and go back with Vaal Zahak once he arrives, okay?"

"Wh-What about you?!"

"I have something I have to do first, so I'll be heading off to do that."

"..."

"I know you don't understand what just happened. I'm sure you must be confused out of your mind."

She'd seen Kang-Woo's true face for the first time, so there was no way she wouldn't be surprised.

He said, "You said before that you wanted to know more about me, right?"

"Ah, yes! I-I do."



"Once this is over, I'll tell you. So for now, stay here and go back with Vaal Zahak."

"..."

Seol-Ah nodded.

Leaving her behind, Kang-Woo immediately opened a gate leading to the Hall of Protection.

'It's a race against time.'

He needed to move quicker than anyone else to clean up the mess he had made.

\* \* \*

"I guess he really had brought as many forces as he possibly could."

Kang-Woo laughed in disbelief as he looked over the empty angel fortress. There were neither gatekeepers guarding the entrance nor any patrol guards within the fortress.

"Tsk."

He clicked his tongue and used the Authority of Stealth. He jumped and infiltrated the fortress. Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes as he looked around and activated the Authority of the Beholder.

'I want to find Raphael, who's apparently in the Embrace of Light, but...'

There was something that he had to find before that—he went to Raphael's study. There were countless books piled up.

"Are these all related to Rakiel?"

He had expected Raphael to not have been able to research much since not much time had passed, but there were far more materials than he had thought.

He looked at Raphael's notes lying on the table. The research progress of Rakiel's fall was neatly recorded by date.

"..."

He narrowed his eyes.

'This is...'

A slow smile crept onto his face, and he felt shivers of excitement.

Just then...

Whoom.

The white crystal orb on the table shone.

[Hey! Raphael!! It's Uriel. What the hell's taking you so long to answer?]

Kang-Woo heard the clear and sonorous voice of a little boy.

[Hihi, I heard you got floored by Satan, but you actually got hurt for real? I'm curious. Turn on the feed already!]

"..."

Kang-Woo silently listened to Uriel clamoring all by himself.

[Anyway, things here are pretty much over, so I'll be heading to Earth once the portal to Earth forms in about a week. Everything's okay over there, right?]

Kang-Woo licked his lips when he heard the cheerful voice. His eyes shone.

'Come to think of it, I guess there was no need to even think about it.'

Kekeke.

A vulgar laugh left Kang-Woo's mouth.

'It would've been so simple if I'd done this from the start.'

Kang-Woo slowly extended his hand. Just like he'd said, there was no need to think or hesitate. He just had to do things his way. He would do what he did best and had always done masterfully.

Clack.

[Oh, you finally answered the call. Hey! Raphael!! What have you been doing?!]

Kang-Woo slowly opened his mouth.

"Lord... Uriel..."

[Huh? Shalgiel? Why are you picking up instead of Raphael?]

Shalgiel's voice was coming out of Kang-Woo's mouth.

"My apol... It is... already too late... for Lord Raph..."

[What? What do you mean?]

"Rakiel... has corrupted Lord Raph—Kurgh."

[Hey! Wh-What? What are you talking about?!]

"Sh-Shit! This place is already... Cough! Lord... Uriel... stay aw—"

Beep.

The communication was cut. The tips of Kang-Woo's mouth curled up.

"Now, let's set the stage."

## Chapter 278 - Setting The Stage

In the northern reaches of Aernor, a giant island over 20 km in diameter floated in the sky. Pure-white palaces were built all over the island, and hundreds of angels flew around in the sky.

It was the island of angels, Sant'Angelo. The island was directly connected to the celestial realm and acted as the base of all angels.

BOOM!

A loud explosion was heard within a breathtakingly beautiful castle.

"Shit! Form the goddamn Gate already!!!"

"L-Lord Uriel..."

A boy with short blue hair was yelling at angels far taller than him. He was only as tall as an average human, his height unlike an angel's average height of three meters. If one didn't know any better, it would look like a little boy was scolding grown adults, but that was not the case.

"W-We apologize."

The angels lowered their heads without even daring to go against the boy.

The blue-haired boy, Uriel, flapped his eight wings.

Crackle!

Blue lightning spread in all directions with the sound of thunder.

Biting his lip, Uriel said, "Is apologizing all you can do? Huh? We can't even check Raphael's condition. What have you upper angels been doing until things turned out like this?"

He looked like a young boy throwing a tantrum, but the upper angels just lowered their heads and gulped. The six wings behind their backs were trembling.

Upper angels possessed the highest authority after the archangels. Their role was to constantly keep tabs on the schedules and status of the archangels, who were scattered across the world to do their own missions. To make a comparison, the upper angels were like the secretaries of CEOs. It was their duty to know what each archangel was doing at all times.

"Sh-Shalgiel has not been reporting lately because he has been executing the mission given to him by Lord Raphael, so..."

"So you're blaming Shalgiel?"

Uriel glared at him.

The upper angels remained silent in frustration. It was true that Shalgiel had not contacted them after he had begun his investigation of Guardians. On top of that, Raphael had been too busy researching and recovering to contact them, so there was no way for them to know what was happening on Earth.

"... We apologize."

The upper angels could not make any excuses due to Uriel's turbulent mood. Uriel kicked the ground in irritation. The floor of Sant'Angelo, which was protected by all sorts of magic circles, caved in.

"Open the Gate right now. I'm going to Earth."

"About that..."

The upper angels made troubled expressions.

Forming a Gate leading to Earth had become fairly easy now that Gaia's protection had been severely damaged, but they needed more time to create a Gate for an archangel like Uriel to pass through. This was due to the protection's characteristic to reject otherworldly beings possessing great power. Even if they had the permission of the gods of Earth, they needed time if they wanted to get Uriel through safely.

"We need more time."

"... How much more time?"

"It will take a week at the very least."

"You can't do it any faster?"

"If we rush, there is a high chance that your powers will be limited due to Lady Gaia's protection."

"Shit! I'm in a goddamn hurry!" Uriel anxiously shouted.

Even so, crossing to Earth while risking having limiters placed on his powers was too dangerous.

He thought about sending his subordinates, but he shook his head.

'They'll just die in vain.'

Rakiel wasn't stupid—he would have most definitely made the necessary preparations for scouts. Not just that, forming a Gate for his subordinates to go through would only delay his chance to cross over to Earth.

Even if the protection on Earth was currently a mess, creating a Gate to another world wasn't that simple.

'Rakiel.'

Uriel started to feel uneasy. Rakiel was the Constellation of Corruption and had corrupted countless angels and gods during the era of myths. Uriel wasn't sure when exactly Rakiel had broken out of Seraph's seal and crossed to Earth, but facing him while having limiters on his power was completely illogical.

"Has Lord Raphael... been corrupted by Rakiel?" an upper angel carefully asked.

Uriel grimaced.

"Nonsense," he said firmly while shaking his head. "Even if he's the Constellation of Corruption, he can't make Raphael fall so quickly."

It made no sense.

Even if the legends about Rakiel in the era of myths were incredible, Raphael was one of the archangels, who were more powerful than the average god.

'For Raphael to have fallen despite not even a month having passed since he last contacted us...'

Uriel snorted.

The voice he had heard through the communication crystal had been no doubt Shalgiel's, but there were countless magics that could imitate one's voice.

'I smell a ploy....'

He narrowed his eyes, and a ferocious energy flowed out of him. It was only obvious what sort of trick the Constellation of Corruption was playing after having crossed to Earth.

"Tsk."

Uriel clicked his tongue. Whether it was a trick or not, he couldn't help but worry. He couldn't sit idly by after knowing that the communication crystal that Raphael should have had had fallen into Rakiel's hands.

"Raphael..."

He anxiously bit his lip and shook his foot in irritation.

'Be safe.'

Although Raphael was old-fashioned and sometimes drove Uriel mad, they were comrades-in-arms who had fought together in battle.

They often fought due to the differences in their personalities, but among the archangels, they were the closest friends. It was only obvious since Michael was practically unapproachable and, in the case of Gabriel, she was far too wacko for anyone to get along with.

"Fuuuu."

In any case, Uriel did not believe that Raphael had fallen, but he was still worried for him. He wanted to go to Earth immediately to find out the truth, but he only became more frustrated because he couldn't.

"Five days," Uriel said.

"Pardon...?"

"Open the gates within five days, whatever you have to do," he said while baring his teeth.

The expressions of the upper angels hardened.

Creating a Gate that connected dimensions already required enormous amounts of effort. On top of that, if they wanted to let a being as powerful as Uriel pass through without any limiters on his power, they needed to spend day and night converting enormous amounts of sacred power into complicated formulas. The number of collapsed angels from overwork could easily surpass a hundred.

Faces pale, the angels quickly mentioned, "No matter how quickly we work—"

"If it's not ready in five days..." Uriel firmly said as if he would not accept any objections, "I'll rip off two wings from every single one of you myself."

"..."

Ripping off two of their six wings meant that they would be demoted from upper to intermediate angels. The angels nodded frantically as if there were a motor attached to their heads.

Even if they were fighting to eradicate evil, they were living beings—they also had emotions and ambitions.

"Y-Yes, my lord!"

Uriel turned away after he heard their answer.

"..."

After he turned around, Uriel's expression darkened.

'Something's wrong...'

He knew that there was no way that Raphael would've fallen. No matter how amazing Rakiel was, Raphael's conviction and will were not so weak for him to be corrupted so easily.

'But...'

Uriel bit his lip and clenched his fists. A faint sense of uneasiness spread throughout his body.

\* \* \*

"First off..." Oh Kang-Woo looked around and organized the plan in his head. "I should call Lilith and Vaal Zahak."

His plan would be hard for him to carry out alone. Among his retainers, Vaal Zahak and Lilith could be called pros in setting stages.

'They did a great job making the stage for the incident with the Four Heavenly Kings last time.'

However, they would go for a different theme this time; he couldn't reuse the same stage.

'Uriel will apparently come to Earth in a week, but...'

Kang-Woo's eyes narrowed. Considering that he had blown the situation to a much greater degree, he had to consider the chance that Uriel would arrive sooner.

'At least he can't cross over right away.'

He'd asked Shalgiel how angels were able to cross from Aernor, the world they were based in, to Earth.

Creating a Gate that connected dimensions required many hands, and for an archangel to cross it, hundreds of angels had to work on it.

'So that was why Lucifer was so weak despite having Divinity.'

There was a way to cross quicker, which was to accept the limiter placed by Gaia's protection.

Lucifer had likely been weak because he had crossed dimensions as quickly as possible to save his son.

'But it's still not enough time.'

They had to finish all the preparations before Uriel arrived on Earth. The good thing was that they wouldn't need to prepare a large-scale stage like the one they had used before.

"Three days should be enough."

If Uriel arrived on Earth quicker than that while accepting the limiter, then the plan would fail.

'Though the chances of that happening are low.'

Kang-Woo hoped Uriel wasn't that stupid.

Click.

Soon, Vaal Zahak and Lilith arrived.

[I have answered your summons, Master.]

"I escorted Seol-Ah to Balrog's residence just now. What is going on, my king?"

The fortress was empty, so Vaal Zahak and Lilith were able to come to Raphael's research room faster than expected.

"We don't have a lot of time, so I'll be quick."

Kang-Woo explained everything to them as quickly as possible.

[Wha... T-To think she would possess Seraph's soul...] Vaal Zahak exclaimed in surprise, his eye sockets shining.

"It is... hard to believe."

Lilith touched her lips while narrowing her eyes. It felt very seductive. Kang-Woo shook his head to eliminate such useless thoughts.

"We have to complete the stage before Uriel arrives."

"Are you thinking of creating a dungeon like last time?"

"Yeah."

Kang-Woo nodded.

"..."

Lilith narrowed her eyes.

"It may be safer to just go to war with the angels instead," she calmly said.

It was the first time she had objected to Kang-Woo's plan, showing how reckless it was, as well as its high chance of failure.

"You understand that this is completely different from before, do you not, my king?"

They were not the lead roles who would be on the stage. No matter how much they could try to convince Uriel that Raphael had fallen, everything would fall apart the moment Uriel decided to trust Raphael.

"Uriel will believe Raphael," Lilith said.

It was only obvious. They had traversed through many battlefields side by side for thousands of years. There was no way that Uriel would believe that Raphael had fallen so easily.

"I know." Kang-Woo nodded. He also knew that making this plan succeed would be difficult. "In the worst-case scenario... I'm considering war."

"... I see you have no intention of giving up Seol-Ah."

"You know very well how I've lived until now."

Kang-Woo smirked.

Making a bittersweet smile, Lilith nodded and looked down at the floor.

"My king," Lilith said carefully.

"Hm?"

"What would you do... if I were put in the same situation?"

"What are you talking about now?"

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue. What he would do if Lilith was in the current situation instead of Seol-Ah was so obvious that it was a waste of time to even think about it.

"If it were you... using you as a hostage wouldn't work, so that's out of the question. Corrupting you also wouldn't fit that well either... Mmm. I would either try to make some sort of conflict among the angels or create a third member of the Four Heavenly Kings. If that all fails, I guess we'd have to go to war."

"..."

The possibility of giving up on her wasn't even in his head.

"Ah..."

Lilith trembled. She clenched her fists and jumped in excitement.

Yes. The demon king that she loved was this kind of person.

"Fufu. I see. Fufufu."

Lilith covered her mouth and twisted around as if it was difficult to hold back her giggles. Her long black hair swayed as if it were dancing.

"So, what is the plan?" she asked.

"Well..."

Kang-Woo explained the stage he had in mind.

The more he explained, the more Lilith's and Vaal Zahak's eyes shone.

"Hah..." After listening to it all, Lilith exclaimed in surprise. "Mm. I guess it is very like you to think of a plan like this, my king... No, maybe it is a bit too cruel, even for you..."

She couldn't help but feel sorry for Raphael.

Lilith smiled brightly.

"But it is worth a try."

Kang-Woo nodded.

If Lilith, who was basically the chief of staff, agreed to it, it meant that the plan was more than possible enough to try.

"In that case, let's get ready. Vaal Zahak, you collected all the angels' corpses, right?"

[Of course.]

Kang-Woo got up.

It was about time to set the stage his way.

\* \* \*

Three days later, Kang-Woo sighed while putting down an old book on the table.



"Fuuuu."

The stage had been fully set.

"Now, then..."

His eyes gleamed with anxiety. He looked at the stage he had created in the research room for this plan.

A blue message window appeared in front of him.

Riiing.

[The dungeon has been formed.]

[Please set the name of the dungeon.]

'Finally.'

The time had come.

Kang-Woo took a deep breath and opened his mouth. He had never been more nervous for anything in his entire life.

"Fallen Angel's Nightmare."

[Setting the dungeon name to 'Fallen Angel's Nightmare.']

'Alright!'

Humans were learning creatures.

Kang-Woo clenched his mouth shut; he did not even let out a single breath.

Badump, badump.

His heart was beating fast.

Just then...

Click.

"My king~ have a cup of coffee."

Riiing.

[Changing the dungeon name to 'Fallen Angel's Nightmare My King Have a Cup of Coffee.']

"Motherfucker!!"

Riiing.

[Changing the dungeon name to 'Fallen Angel's Nightmare My King Have a Cup of Coffee Motherfucker.']

"This stupid ass system!! Why does the dungeon name have to be set verbally?!"

Riiing.

[Changing the dungeon name to 'Fallen Angel's Nightmare My King Have a Cup of Coffee Motherfucker This Stupid Ass System Why Does the Dungeon Name Have To Be Set Verbally.']

"You fucking son of a bitch! Hey!"

Riiing.

[Changing the dungeon name to 'Fallen Angel's Nightmare My King Have a Cup of Coffee Motherfucker This Stupid Ass System Why Does the Dungeon Name Have To Be Set Verbally You Fucking Son of a Bitch Hey.']

"Nooooooooo!!!"

Riiing.

[Changing the dungeon name to 'Fallen Angel's Nightmare My King Have a Cup of Coffee Motherfucker This Stupid Ass System Why Does the Dungeon Name Have To Be Set Verbally You Fucking Son of a Bitch Hey Nooooooooo.']

"Aaah... Fuck... Stop... Fucking stop..."

Kang-Woo covered his face with his hands.

Riiing.

[Changing the dungeon name to 'Fallen Angel's Nightmare My King Have a Cup of Coffee Motherfucker This Stupid Ass System Why Does the Dungeon Name Have To Be Set Verbally You Fucking Son of a Bitch Hey Nooooooooo Aaah... Fuck... Stop... Fucking Stop....']

Chapter 279 - Fallen Angel's Nightmare (1)

"There hasn't been any news of Uriel's arrival, right?" Oh Kang-Woo asked while holding the communication crystal orb.

[Not yet, it seems,] Lilith's voice came out of the orb.

Kang-Woo nodded.

"When he arrives, he'll most likely appear in Africa."

Both Ludwig and Raphael had first appeared there.

He wasn't sure if they could open a gate anywhere they wanted, but the chance that the Gate would open in the same place was very high.

'Even if he doesn't end up there...'

If he wanted to figure out the truth about the call, he'd have to come to Raphael's fortress in Africa.

"Gather more forces and keep watch twenty-four seven. You can even use Guardians members. We have to find him as soon as he arrives."

[Understood.]

After saying that, Lilith cut the call.

Kang-Woo sighed and got up. He'd also sent Halcyon and Echidna to help Lilith, so the house was awkwardly silent.

Knock, knock.

He heard a careful knock on the door. Since Halcyon and Echidna weren't home, there was only one person it could be.

"Come in."

"... Are you done with your call?"

Han Seol-Ah opened the door and carefully peeked in.

When Kang-Woo nodded, she walked over and sat on the bed.

"..."

There was an awkward silence.

Kang-Woo stared vacantly at Seol-Ah while sitting on a chair.

He had given her a general explanation of the situation after he had finished making the stage and was standing by at home. He had told her that the soul of Celestial Goddess Seraph was within her, that the angels were trying to use that to revive Seraph, and that her own soul may fall into a deep slumber like Kurosaki Yurie.

"... Kang-Woo."

"If you're gonna say what you said last time, don't even think about it."

When Seol-Ah had first heard the explanation, she had asked Kang-Woo to let her be sacrificed and revive Seraph, since that was the best way for Kang-Woo to live in peace.

"And besides, you're basing your decision on the wrong premise. If Seraph is revived, forget my peace, they'll try to kill me."

After all, he was the Demon of Prophecy. No, even if he could hide that he was the Demon of Prophecy, it would be of no use since he was still a demon. He needed to prevent the outcome of antagonizing a god—a god powerful enough to govern an entire world, at that.

'Of course...'

Reviving Seraph for the sake of the star known as Earth was the right choice. Her power would surely help protect Earth, but...

'Fuck that.'

There was no point if the god who would protect Earth took action to eliminate him.

'What's the point of a safe and peaceful world if I can't live in it?'

Kang-Woo had no intention of sacrificing himself for world peace. If he had ideals like that, he would've killed himself a very long time ago.

'After everything I went through to survive.'

He had to stop this world from ending, but sacrificing himself to achieve that was out of the question. The same went for if he was lucky enough to be acknowledged by Seraph; the happiness he would attain would be half-baked without Seol-Ah.

"Everything I've ever done has been for me to stay happy."

He had struggled through ten whole millennia just to be happy—all for a joyous, fun, and occasionally sad and depressing life that was, ultimately, full of laughs.

"If you die, I won't be happy."

"..."

Seol-Ah kept her mouth shut in a daze, and then she giggled.

"Okay. I won't ever say it again."

Seol-Ah nodded as if truly happy.

Kang-Woo finally felt relieved.

"Seraph, huh...? Oh, maybe that's why."

"Why what?"

"Back when... you were kidnapped. After we managed to get you back, I've been having these dreams."

"Dreams?"

"Yes. Dreams of... being enveloped in cozy light. And..." Seol-Ah groaned. "I'm not sure if I should be saying this, but after I started having those dreams, I started to feel as if you were younger than me. N-No, not younger, but... more like I want to look after you. I've only ever seen you as cool and amazing, but I've been seeing you as cute lately..."

"..."

"A-Anyway, I've been feeling this way."

Kang-Woo crossed his arms and nodded.

"That does seem like Seraph's influence."

After she awakened Seraph's power, the power seemed to have also somewhat influenced her personality. According to Shalgiel, Seraph was the Goddess of Parental Love, so it was understandable why Seol-Ah had lately begun to see Kang-Woo as younger than her.

"Then how about I call you Seol-Ah noona from now on?"

"Gasp."

Seol-Ah's eyes widened, and she started to tremble.

"N-No!" She strongly refused. Blushing, she shouted, "I might die!"

Kang-Woo laughed out loud.

"Oh... Right! I almost forgot!" Seol-Ah clapped her hands together and said with sparkling eyes, "C-Come to think of it, when I-I... ahem, lifted your clothes to look at your... I think that was Seraph's influence as well."

She looked at him with intense eyes and clenched her fists.

"..."

Kang-Woo remained silent, thinking back to that time.

'That's low, Seol-Ah.'

He averted his gaze from Seol-Ah while thinking that he would never make her put on a performance.

"Y-you don't believe me?" Having noticed that, Seol-Ah puffed her cheeks and softly hit him.

Kang-Woo burst into laughter.

Just then...

Whoom.

The communication crystal orb rang.

Kang-Woo got up and grabbed it.

[My king.] It was Lilith. [Uriel has arrived.]

"..."

Kang-Woo's eyes shone, and a smile crept up. The time had finally come.

"Keep me updated on his live location."

After saying that, he cut the call.

Seol-Ah looked at him with a hardened expression.

"... Are you going?"

"Yeah."

He had caused this trouble, so it was also his responsibility to patch it up.

"Let me also—"

"No." He firmly shook his head. "Seraph's existence can't be revealed to the angels."

If that happened, even if the plan succeeded, what had happened with Shalgriel would happen again.

"..."

Seol-Ah nodded while making a bitter expression. She also knew why she couldn't allow other angels to see her.

"... Please be careful."

Seol-Ah grabbed Kang-Woo's hands.

Kang-Woo smiled and nodded. Then he turned around and opened a gate that led to the Hall of Protection. At the same time, he sent a message to Gaia, Kim Si-Hun, Cha Yeon-Joo, Grace McCubbin, and Tian Wuchen, among others.

'I have to bring the others as well.'

He would not be the lead character on this stage. He would be but a spectator, and the more spectators there were to watch a show, the better.

'And...'

His eyes narrowed, his expression hardening. There was something else that he needed to do no matter what besides being a spectator.

\* \* \*

"... Fuuu."

The boy with short blue hair sighed and slowly opened his eyes. He saw a blue sky and an open expanse.

'So this is...'

Earth.

"It's not much different from Aernor," he mumbled in a low voice.

After looking up at the sky for a while, he shook his head. This was not the time. He took out a piece of paper on which the location of Raphael's temporary base was written.

'Raphael...'

Uriel anxiously spread his wings. He wanted to bring his army as well, but there had not been enough time.

'I'm coming now.'

Uriel quickly flew into the air in search of his comrade-in-arms, whom he wasn't exactly sure what had happened to, but Uriel was sure that something had happened nonetheless.

"Hm?"

At that moment, he saw a group of humans wandering around the fortress. His eyes widened, and he landed where they were like a bolt of lightning.

Crackle!!

Blue electricity swept their surroundings.

"Who are you?" he said in a voice full of bloodlust. He quickly scanned the group.

'Humans.'

There were six of them.

The one at the front was a young man with sharp eyes. Behind him was an impressively handsome young man. In the middle, a brown-haired woman was seated in a wheelchair, and a middle-aged blonde woman was pushing it. Behind them was a woman with short red hair and an old man with a sword at his waist.

The sharp-looking young man took a step forward.

"We are Guardians."

"Guardians?"

Uriel had heard of them. They were the protectors of Earth who had allied with Raphael.

Uriel first doubted whether their identity was true or not, but he nodded after taking a closer look at the woman in the wheelchair.

"You have the incarnation of Gaia with you."

"Greetings, O Great Angel."

Gaia politely bowed her head.

Uriel asked while keeping his guard up, "Why are you all here?"

"Before that... who are you? I don't believe I have ever seen an angel like you among Lord Raphael's subordinates."

The sharp-looking man was also looking at Uriel warily.

Uriel groaned and opened his mouth.

"I'm Uriel."

"Ah...!"

The sharp-looking guy let out an exclamation and lowered his head.

"My apologies. I had known that you were an angel from your wings, but... I was a little cautious due to recent strange events."

"... Strange events?"

"We have not been able to contact Lord Raphael or Shalgiel. They had not even shown up to our usual meeting, so... we came here because we were worried."

"Oh."

Uriel's expression hardened. He understood why the Guardians members were roaming around the fortress and anxiously bit his lip.

"Since when has contact with them been cut off?"

"About five days ago."

"... Shit."

Uriel frowned.

The sharp-looking young man said in a worried tone, "Has something happened to Lord Raphael?"

"... No, nothing at all."

"Your expression says otherwise."

"I said it's nothing!" Uriel shouted in irritation, but he soon grabbed his forehead.

'If it's Guardians...'

Their strength had been detailed in Raphael's report. Most of them were only as strong as intermediate angels and below, but a few of them apparently surpassed upper angels.

From what he had heard, one of them had inherited the Holy Sword Ludwig and another was the apostle of Tirion, God of Heroes.

"Are the humans Oh Kang-Woo and Kim Si-Hun among you?"

"... I am Oh Kang-Woo."

"I am Kim Si-Hun."

"... I see." Uriel nodded.

The situation had changed. If they were stronger than an upper angel, it was a different story.

"Can you help me?"

Uriel had been in such a hurry that he hadn't been able to bring along his subordinates. He was in desperate need of these humans' help.

"Is it about Lord Raphael?"

"... Yeah."

"We planned to investigate regardless, so there is no problem at all," the human Oh Kang-Woo said in a calm voice.

And so, Uriel and Guardians began moving to the angel fortress in Africa.

"What in the..."

"I-Is this really the same fortress?"

The beautiful fortress that had exuded serene light was nowhere to be seen. Instead, dark energy enveloped it. The destroyed sections of the fortress and all the corpses scattered around made the atmosphere of the fortress even darker.

"Kang-Woo hyung-nim."

"... It seems something really did happen."

"Kang-Woo, this is..." Gaia slurred.

"Gaia, have you received any revelations from the gods?"

"No... Nothing."

Kang-Woo and the other Guardians members seemed shocked at the fortress's changed atmosphere.

Uriel bit his lip, his anxiety growing.

"Let's enter. Follow me."

Uriel took a step forward, and the fortress gates slowly opened.

Then...

Riiing.

[You have entered the SS+ rank dungeon 'Fallen Angel's Nightmare My King—]

"Kurgh!! Kuh... Gaaaaaahh!!!"

As the blue message window appeared, the human who revealed himself to be Oh Kang-Woo screamed in pain as his body bent like a bow. His eyes rolled back as if he were having a seizure.

"H-Hyung-nim!!!"

Si-Hun quickly ran toward Kang-Woo.



Uriel also turned to look at the human who had suddenly collapsed on the ground and was having a seizure.

The blue message window in the air disappeared.

Chapter 280 - Fallen Angel's Nightmare (2)

"Kurgh, cough!!"

Oh Kang-Woo bent like a bow and trembled.

"... What the hell? What's wrong with him?"

"H-Hyung-nim!!"

Kim Si-Hun quickly ran over to Kang-Woo and shook him.

Kang-Woo, who suddenly had a seizure, stood up while grimacing.

"Haaa, haaa."

"Wh-What was that, hyung-nim?"

Si-Hun grabbed Kang-Woo's arm and supported him with a worried expression on his face.

"I-I'm not sure either, but the moment I entered this place... memories of that day came back to me and..." Kang-Woo answered while making a confused expression.

"Memories of that day?"

"When I was tortured by Rakiel," Kang-Woo answered in a dark tone.

"Ah..."

Si-Hun's expression hardened.

Kang-Woo had been tortured so horribly that it had been hard to even look at him, so it wouldn't be weird for him to have developed PTSD.

"This place is... full of Rakiel's demonic energy," Kang-Woo mumbled while breathing heavily.

"... This is Rakiel's demonic energy?" Uriel asked while biting his lip.

Kang-Woo nodded.

"Shit."

Uriel made an anxious expression. There was a thick demonic energy emanating from the entire fortress. If it was Rakiel's demonic energy, then that meant a disaster had occurred.

'There's no way.'

Uriel shook his head.

It had only been a month. There was no way that Raphael had fallen in such a short period of time.

'I have to check.'

Uriel carefully strode forward.

Kang-Woo hurriedly extended his hand. "Please wait! We should figure out what happened before —"

"There's no time," Uriel immediately denied his suggestion.

They didn't know what had happened to Raphael, so they had no time to sit around while thinking of a plan.

'Raphael.'

Uriel quickened his pace.

Then...

"Grrk, grrk."

They heard staggering footsteps and growling. Something was walking toward them from the fortress's dark hallway.

"That's..."

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

Cha Yeon-Joo squinted to take a better look. A trembling voice came out of her.

"A Ghoul?"

A monster with a horrible stench, rotten skin, and viscous pus flowing out of it was roaming and staggering through the hallway.

"W-Wait, those clothes... Isn't that the uniform of the Watchers of Light?"

Although the clothes had been discolored due to the rotten flesh, they were definitely the white ceremonial robes worn by Raphael's apostles.

Yeon-Joo extended the chains from her bracelet and whispered, "What the... Why have Raphael's apostles become Undead?"

"I don't know." Kang-Woo shook his head.

Uriel's expression hardened. He recalled what Shargiel had said.

"My apol... It is... already too late... for Lord Raph..."

"Shit... Shit..." Uriel's wings shook anxiously. He walked toward the Ghouls. "Where's Raphael?"

Although there was no way that the dead could answer, he asked anyway. As he raised his right hand, the hand crackled with fearsome lightning.

"Where the hell is Raphael?!"

"KIIIEKK!!"

Crackle!!

The blue lightning burned the Ghouls wearing ceremonial robes to the ground in the blink of an eye, leaving only black ash.

"Wha..."

The lightning's power was frightening. Raphael was impressive, but Uriel seemed to be beyond him.

'I guess there are classes even among archangels.'

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes. He had not seen Uriel's full power yet, but he could feel far thicker and stronger energy from Uriel than Raphael.

"Shit..." Uriel cursed while wiping out the Ghouls in the hallway.

Forget Raphael, not even a single angel was in sight.

'Where the hell are they?'

They looked all over the place, but they only came across Undead.

Kang-Woo, who was silently walking behind Uriel, opened his mouth.

"Come to think of it, I heard that Lord Raphael had been doing research on Rakiel."

"Research?"

"Yes. He had said that only by learning how Rakiel fell and how he had been tempted by Demon God Bauli would we be able to face Rakiel."

"..."

Uriel silently nodded. Considering Raphael's personality, it was perfectly possible he'd been investigating stuff like that.

'Oh, in that case...'

Uriel's eyes shone.

"Let's look for Raphael's research room first."

"Will we be able to find Lord Raphael there?"

"I'm not sure about that either, but Raphael always writes down his research records."

Uriel had seen it many times during their thousands of years together.

Uriel had a fiery personality and hated frustrating things, so he couldn't even think of writing down the plethora of research he had done on demons by hand, but Raphael always left records behind without question.

"If we find those notes, we'll be able to find out what happened in the past month."

"Okay."

Kang-Woo nodded.

Uriel and Kang-Woo looked all over the base to find Raphael's research room.

Uriel said, "If it were him..."

Raphael would most definitely have made his research room close to his office.

After reaching Raphael's office, Uriel looked around.

'I knew it.'

There was a door next to the office.

"We're going in."

Creak.

Uriel nervously opened the door.

"... This is a lot," Kang-Woo exclaimed in surprise.

The room was so full of books that it looked like a library.

"Is this all material regarding the era of myths?" Kang-Woo asked

"Probably. Rakiel was active during the war against the demon god."

"... There are a lot more books than I had expected."

"That's how the war had been. But the records themselves aren't exactly accurate. Much of it is guesswork," Uriel said while clicking his tongue.

Rather than records, they were closer to s.

Kang-Woo nodded. He felt as if he could understand why Raphael had gathered so many materials about the era of myths.

"He must have been trying to compare all the materials to find the true record."

"Raphael is the best at that kind of stuff." After giving a short reply, Uriel started looking around the room.

Not only were there far too many records, but the books were also scattered all over the place as if a battle had taken place. Therefore, it was hard to find Raphael's notes.

Then...

"... Huh?"

Kang-Woo picked up a book lying in the corner of the room. White liquid had been splattered on its cover and had dried.

"Lord Uriel, this..."

"..."

Uriel remained silent.

The white liquid was...

'Angel blood.'

He closed his eyes, then opened the book with trembling hands.

As expected, it contained notes in Raphael's handwriting.

- Day 1 of researching Rakiel

The Constellation of Corruption has been spotted on Earth. I have decided to investigate the reason behind why Rakiel fell before I face him. I did not gain much on this first day. I focused on requesting Sant'Angelo to send me materials regarding the era of myths.

- Day 2 of researching Rakiel

I have begun researching. The only one of us who has actually witnessed the war firsthand is Lord Michael. It was truly an unfathomably large war. How could Demon God Bauli have expanded his forces?

- Day 5 of researching Rakiel

I do not understand. The Demon God desired the end of every creation designed by the Titans. In other words, he had been trying to erase all life, so why would Rakiel possibly have betrayed the angels to join the Demon God?

- Day 7 of researching Rakiel

No matter how many records I go through, I cannot figure out the reason. The past Rakiel was one of Lady Seraph's most trusted subordinates, along with Lord Michael. He was capable, powerful, and honorable. Lady Seraph herself had mentioned that Rakiel would take her place if she were to die in the war.

He had all the glory he could possibly want, so... why did he betray us?

The notes clearly showed Raphael's confusion.

Uriel frowned. He couldn't get much information from the first week of notes.

'What the hell happened, Raphael?'

He anxiously bit his lip and flipped the page. And then... his eyes widened.

- Day 10 of researching Rakiel

I found a clue. Maybe... Rakiel had betrayed us because...

"The hell?"

The page that should have contained information had been ripped out.

Uriel frowned. He quickly turned to the next page and saw that the records continued.

- Day 13 of researching Rakiel

I have figured out the reason. Just... how could this possibly... I am so shocked that my head is in a daze. What of everything that I have learned my whole life? We... we might have been believing in a false myth this whole time.

"... What?"

Uriel's hands were trembling, and his uneasy feelings were intensifying.

- Day 17 of researching Rakiel

Rakiel came to see me. I asked him if everything that I had found out was the truth. He had... already known everything from the start, and...

Once again, the page was torn.

- Day 18 of researching Rakiel

Something... has to be wrong. There is no way... This is impossible.

Aaaahh. W-We have all been deceived.

We were made for fools this entire time!!

- Day 19 of researching Rakiel

I've noticed today that my wings are turning black.

Am I losing my mind? Or am I falling like Rakiel? I do not know.

But... but...

Aaaahh, where... where did it all go wrong?

The final page...

- Day 20 of researching Rakiel

Rakiel came to see me again. No, maybe it was not him who had come to see me. I do not remember. My wings have been dyed completely black. Have I fallen? I do not know. If this is what falling feels like, I would not mind falling more and more.

My notes end here. I will now do what I have to do. What only I can do...

"..."

Uriel's hands were trembling as he gripped the book. His lips paled.

The event that he did not even want to imagine—something that could not have possibly happened—had occurred.

"No."

He quickly shook his head.

"It can't fucking be!!!"

He'd read all the notes, but he still had no idea why Raphael had fallen. The section of the notes that would have detailed why had been torn out, but there was something he was sure about...

Raphael had lost his mind.

"Lord Uriel? What was written in—"

"Don't touch it!!!"

Uriel knocked the book out of Kang-Woo's hands.

The pages scattered as the book fell to the ground. Uriel noticed a phrase on the final page of the notes that seemed to have been written down in a hurry.

Gaze not into the abyss, for if you do...

The abyss also gazes into you.

Kang-Woo said, "This is..."

"Shit! Shit! Something must be wrong! It... can't be true..."

Uriel grabbed his hair, closed his eyes, and thought of Raphael.

He and Raphael had been comrades-in-arms for thousands of years. Raphael was old-fashioned, but he resented demons more than anyone else. There was no way someone like him would have fallen in such a nonsensical way.

"We have to find Raphael..."

"Uhm, Lord Uriel. There seems to be a gap here," said Si-Hun, who had been searching through the research room while Uriel had been reading the notes.

As Uriel turned his head, he saw a small gap between two bookshelves.

"Move."

Uriel quickly walked toward it and pulled the bookshelves apart from each other.

Creak.

Just like a secret door that often appeared in films, the bookshelves swung backward and revealed a new space. And within it was...

"A-Aaaahh."

"Urpp!"

"Wh-What the fuck is that?!"

Uriel's exclamation and Yeon-Joo's curse were heard.

Si-Hun covered his mouth as if about to hurl.

Kang-Woo looked at it with a hardened expression.

Inside the secret space of the research room was...

"NOOOOOOOO!!!!!"

Uriel's desperate scream spread.

There were cylinders full of an unknown liquid.

Within those hundreds of cylinders...

Raphael's subordinates floated, fused with the bodies of demonic beasts. They had been turned into Chimeras.