

## **M. in Hell 281**

Chapter 281 - Fallen Angel's Nightmare (3)

"NOOOOOOOO!!!!" Uriel cried.

Oh Kang-Woo took a step back and smirked so that Uriel couldn't see him.

'Did it work?'

He turned to look at the stage he'd set.

Shalgiel was inside a cylinder filled with an unknown liquid.

Kang-Woo was honestly astonished.

'I said to make him hideous, but this is a bit...'

Shalgiel's organs were exposed and had been forcibly fused with the body of a demonic beast. It was hard to look at it.

He understood why Lilith and Vaal Zahak had confidently said to leave it to them.

'Still, it makes me feel a bit bad.'

Even if it was Kang-Woo, it was impossible for him to feel comfortable looking at such a thing. It was as if he'd dug up a corpse and disrespected the dead, so he couldn't help but feel a bit bad.

'But...'

He narrowed his eyes while looking at the screaming Uriel.

The first thought that came to Kang-Woo's mind was that it couldn't be helped, which was partially true. After all, for Uriel to believe the fact that Raphael had fallen, the trust that they had built over thousands of years needed to be broken, which required Uriel to behold a shocking sight.

'And most importantly...'

He had to kill Raphael, no matter what, if he wanted to turn things in his favor. Of course, Raphael didn't know that Seraph's soul was within Han Seol-Ah. Raphael hadn't given the order to forcefully bring her; that was something Shalgiel had done on his own.

'But...'

Even so, Raphael had to be killed—he had to become a fallen angel and receive the judgment of light.

'Raphael ordered Shalgiel to investigate Guardians in the first place.'

If Shalgiel suddenly died in such a situation, there was no need to think about who Raphael would suspect first. Even if Kang-Woo tried to make Rakiel the culprit, there was no way Raphael would believe it.

'I have no ill feelings regarding Raphael.'

It wasn't personal, but it just ended up that he couldn't let Raphael live.

"..."

Kang-Woo closed his eyes.

The world was a cruel place.

Just as most murders were due to monetary conflicts rather than emotional ones, people harmed each other based on cost and benefit. Of course, there were laws, morals, ideals, conscience, and many other complex mechanisms to stop those things, but—

'Fuck them.'

Kang-Woo shook his head.

'If I can avoid a war with the angels just by feeling a bit bad...'

He would gladly plunge his hands into the filth however many times it took—no, he would even roll around in it with a smile.

That was how he had lived, as well as how he had kept winning. He was neither a hero in anime with a blazing sense of justice nor a kind person like Kim Si-Hun.

He had struggled to survive in a place bustling with demonic beasts and demons for ten millennia; he would not be guilt-tripped over morals and personal conscience after what he had gone through.

"No... There's no way," Uriel mumbled in confusion.

Kang-Woo smiled while looking at the blue-haired boy.

'I guess I managed to get through the first hurdle.'

If Uriel had thought that this was a demon's trick and trusted Raphael to the very end, it would have been a problem, but he could not feel an ounce of trust for Raphael in Uriel, who was crying in front of the cylinder.

'Doubt is a poison.'

Once it poisoned a person, even if they tried to convince themselves otherwise, it would continue to eat away at them. For example, let's say that someone learned that their childhood friend is a serial killer...

How would they react?

'They would probably try to deny it at first.'

They would probably think there was no way that their friend would do something like that. But what if evidence of it came out one after another? No, what if they saw the scene of the crime with their own eyes?

"Why... why would Raphael..." Uriel knelt and mumbled in a sorrowful voice.

He was now past the stage of denial and was now wondering why Raphael had done such a thing. Kang-Woo smiled while looking down at Uriel.

'It worked.'

The firm trust that existed between Uriel and Raphael had been torn apart.

Kang-Woo pulled down the corners of his mouth with all his might. He might have burst into laughter if he wasn't in such a situation.

'Now, then.'

The first act couldn't have been any better. Now it was time to prepare the second act.

"Lord Uriel, what in the world is..."

"..."

"C-Could... Lord Raphael have—"

"Shut up!!" Uriel exclaimed. He sprang up and grabbed Kang-Woo's collar. "What the fuck do you know about Raphael to say shit like that?!"

"..."

Kang-Woo hadn't said anything, but Uriel had reacted so severely, which meant...

'You already know.'

Uriel was frantically trying to deny it, but Kang-Woo wouldn't let him off so easily.

"... You are right."

"Right about what?"

"I do not think that Lord Raphael had done this either."

"..."

Kang-Woo dangled a thread of hope in front of him.

Hope appeared in Uriel's eyes.

Even though all the evidence was in front of them, there was a human who defended Raphael in such a situation.

'He'll rely on that.'

No, he would console himself, thinking that he was right all along: it had been the fabrications of a demon and Raphael had been nothing but a scapegoat.

'If he wants to hold on to even a bit of hope... I'll give it to him.' Kang-Woo snickered in his mind.

He said, "There is no evidence that Lord Raphael committed this atrocity."

"Th-That's right! That's exactly my thought!" Uriel furiously nodded.

"Lord Uriel, could you tell us what was written in Lord Raphael's notes?"

"Huh...? Well..."

"It's okay. I can more or less guess what they were about."

"..."

Uriel anxiously bit his lips and closed his eyes. He then repeated what was written in the notes.

Cha Yeon-Joo, who was silently listening, screamed. "Fuck! Raphael didn't do this, my ass!! The notes clearly show that he went bonkers!"

"Watch it, Cha Yeon-Joo."

"Screw that! Are you high, Oh Kang-Woo? Or does Raphael kiss your ass or something?! Just look at this! How can you still say that Raphael didn't do this when he did this kind of shit to his subordinates?!" Yeon-Joo shouted in rage.

Uriel's expression crumpled aggressively.

"How dare you, human woman!"

"What do you want me to say? I'm sorry for interrupting your little angel circle-jerk session, but—"

"Cha Yeon-Joo!" Kang-Woo angrily shouted.

Yeon-Joo flinched.

He said, "I told you to watch it."

"U-Uhh..."

"The notes? Handwriting can be easily forged. The Chimeras? Has anyone here seen Lord Raphael make them with their own eyes?"

"..."

"Don't believe only in what you see. Rakiel's energy is all over the place for a reason. There's a chance that he might have orchestrated this whole situation."

"N-Ngh. Y-You don't have to get so angry..."

Yeon-Joo pouted due to Kang-Woo's attitude, which was different from usual. She found it a little unfair.

"..."

Uriel looked at Kang-Woo with a blank expression.

A human he had met for the first time had said what he wanted to say, which he had doubted people would believe.

He gulped.

"Y-Yeah. That's exactly what I wanted to say." Uriel furiously nodded again. "Since Rakiel is involved, there's a chance this whole situation was fabricated."

Kang-Woo said, "I agree, but..."

"B-But wh-what?"

Uriel looked at Kang-Woo with trembling eyes.

His eyes were filled with trust for the human named Oh Kang-Woo. It was only obvious, since a sturdy rope had appeared that he could grab on to when he had been desperately looking for even a sliver of something.

Uriel warily looked at Yeon-Joo but then took a step toward Kang-Woo.

Kang-Woo smirked.

'He doesn't seem to be as stiff as Raphael.'

Uriel was close to an immature child.

'How weird.'

Kang-Woo tilted his head. He would've understood if a demon had such a personality. After all, a demon's body amplified one's desires and thus forcibly halted mental maturity, which was necessary because demons didn't have the concept of lifespan.

If it weren't like that, Hell would be a place full of sages devoid of any desire who lived in peace. Or, Hell would be full of beings with no desire to live and who did nothing but lie still.

'Do angels also have some kind of restriction?'

They also didn't have a lifespan, so it would make sense.

'Well, regardless...'

That wasn't important at the moment. What mattered was that Uriel was an easier angel to trick than he'd thought.

"First off, the only thing we are sure about is that Lord Raphael is in a predicament."

"..."

"Considering that all of his subordinates have been killed, the fortress has become a den of the dead, and Lord Raphael is nowhere in sight. In the worst-case scenario... we will have to take into account the possibility that he has already been killed by Rakiel."

"That's... true."

Uriel nodded while making a depressed expression. He seemed to be somewhat resigned to the idea.

Kang-Woo glanced at Uriel.

"Let us look around the fortress a little more."

Uriel nodded, and the initiative was naturally passed to Kang-Woo.

Kang-Woo stepped out of Raphael's research room.

The location of the play's second act was already decided.

'It's going smoothly so far.'

Kang-Woo smiled.

In the end, what mattered were the emotions. Uriel had fallen into despair, but thanks to Kang-Woo, he'd started to regain hope. Based on his reaction, he seemed to be hoping that Raphael had died honorably in battle against Rakiel rather than for Raphael to have fallen.

'I guess that's just how angels are.'

That seemed to be the case for Raphael and Uriel.

Kang-Woo couldn't understand why they cared more about honor than their lives.

'Well, regardless...'

It was clear that Uriel cared a lot for the honor of his comrade-in-arms.

Kang-Woo licked his lips.

'Now that he's climbed back up with the rope of hope I've given him... it's time to push him back down.'

\* \* \*

Raphael slowly opened his eyes in a space filled with brilliant light.

'The treatment is more or less complete.'

He slowly raised his arms. In a place known as the Embrace of Light created through the compression of sacred power, he had fully treated the wounds he had received from Satan. He had originally planned to slowly treat his wounds over a long period of time since the Embrace of Light was isolated from all forms of contact, but the situation had changed.

'Rakiel.'

Raphael had no more leeway now that he had discovered that the being who had corrupted countless angels and gods in the era of myths was on Earth.

'But I am glad at least Uriel has come to help.'

He was confident that, with Uriel, he'd be able to defeat Rakiel.

'I should get out of here.'

He slowly raised his hands.

The space, which was filled with light, cracked. Like a bird breaking through the shell of its egg, he broke through it and got up. He saw the outside world for the first time in ten days.

"Hm?" A confused voice came out of Raphael's mouth. "What in the world?"

As soon as he emerged, he felt suffocatingly dense demonic energy. The problem was that he felt that the demonic energy was coming from him.

"What the..."

As he looked around his body, his eyes widened.

"M-My wings..."

His wings, which usually shone with pure-white light, had been dyed black. No, to be more precise...

'Demonic energy was... painted over them?'

Thick demonic energy was covering his entire body as if he had been coated with it.

Thud.

"A-Aaaahh."

"Uriel...?" He turned his head toward the sound.

"H-how could this have..."

"See?! What did I tell you?! I told you that he'd been tempted by that son of a bitch Rakiel!!!"

He saw the heroes who were protecting Earth and...

"R-Raphael..."

... Uriel in despair, as if all of his hopes had been shattered.

"RAPHAEEEEEL!!!" Uriel screamed in agony.

"...?"

Raphael looked around while making a confused expression.

'Wha...'

What in the world was going on?

Chapter 282 - Those Tainted By Darkness, Receive the Judgment of Light (1)

"This is..."

"Wh-What is that?"

Uriel, who had been wandering around the fortress with Kang-Woo in search of Raphael, found a grotesque object in a secret room. It was a sphere that looked like a cocoon a pupa would emerge from in its mature form.

Seeing the sphere radiating with suffocating demonic energy, Uriel's hope that he had been desperately holding on to was becoming drastically weaker. He wondered at first if it could be the Embrace of Light based on how it looked, but the sphere enveloped in green tentacles did not look like the Embrace of Light in the slightest.

Crack.

The sphere was starting to break.

"H-Huh?"

"Get back!" Kang-Woo shouted as he unsheathed Del Lain.

Kim Si-Hun also gripped his holy sword as he stepped back and lowered his stance.

Breathtaking anxiety hung in the air.

"Please, please..."

Uriel bit his lip and clenched his fists. His face was full of desperation as he stared at the sphere.

'Please... let Raphael not be in there.'

The uneasiness that he had felt when he had first come to be aware of the incident ran down his spine. He extended his hand in desperation. His fingers trembled as he thought of the future he did not want to imagine.

'N-No.'

Uriel held back his rising instinct.

An angel's instincts were completely different in nature from those of normal living beings. They were immortal, so they, of course, had constraints that allowed them to retain their sanity.

Just like how a demon's body amplified desires, an angel's body brought out obsessions. The obsessions were different between each angel; for example, Raphael was obsessed with eradicating demons. To be more precise, his entire army was. If it was for killing demons, they would sacrifice humanity and their own allies without a hint of remorse. They only thought about and acted on killing demons.

"Kuh..." Uriel grunted.

If Raphael was obsessed with eradicating demons, then Uriel was obsessed with affection.

Uriel was obsessed over relationships with others: between lovers, friends, subordinates, brothers, and others. His obsession with affection was why Uriel could live for eternity, and it was also the constraint that he could not escape from as an angel.

'It's dangerous.'

Not being able to control his instincts was extremely dangerous.

Just as a demon became a demonic beast if they were unable to control their desires, an angel's wings would turn black and the angel would end up falling from grace if their obsession turned into madness.

And once an angel fell from grace, it was irreversible.

'Raphael...'

Uriel looked at the sphere in desperation. He feared that the relationship he had built with Raphael as comrades-in-arms would crumble.

Uriel wouldn't despair so much if Raphael had been killed in honorable combat, but this was different. He would have to kill his traitorous comrade—his fallen friend—with his own hands. It completely went against his instincts. His fear and desperation went far beyond what a human could possibly imagine.

'Please.'

Crack.

As if crushing those hopes, what emerged from the black sphere was... a black-winged Raphael.

"RAPHAEEEEL!!!"

A desperate cry spread.

"Uriel?" Raphael tilted his head. "What is going on? What in the world is..."

"Th-That's what I want to know, Raphael!! Just why... why did you become like this?!"

"Huh? What do you—"

"You said you despised all demons! You said that everyone who had been tainted by the demonic had to be killed! So why... why have you of all people become a demoooooon?!"

"What in the world have you been talking about?"

Raphael looked down at himself.



He was exuding a thick demonic energy. It was as if there was a filter made of demonic energy covering him. The energy within him was no doubt sacred power, but the moment he drew it out, it felt like demonic energy.

'No way...'

Raphael's eyes widened. The gears in his head started to turn once again after having been halted by the confusing situation.

"N-No!!" Raphael quickly shook his hands. "There has been a misunderstanding!"

Wham!!

At that moment, the floor exploded.

The golden hero Oh Kang-Woo, the apostle of Tirion, God of Heroes, glared at him with a frown on his face.

"I... believed in you."

"What?"

"When we read the notes detailing your fall into madness, even when we saw your subordinates turned into Chimeras... I still believed in you."

"Notes? Chimeras? What are you talking about?"

"I...! I believed that you wouldn't have fallen!" Kang-Woo cried.

"Just wait a damn second."

Kang-Woo was the only one who defended Raphael when Cha Yeon-Joo was certain of his fall and when Uriel had no idea what to say, so everyone knew why he was acting this way.

"Ra... phael..."

Transparent tears flowed down Uriel's cheeks.

He'd spent thousands of years with Raphael.

Although they'd fought many times due to differences in their personalities, Uriel had always cherished his relationship with Raphael. No, he couldn't not care about it, considering his obsession was affection.

"..."

Uriel stood still while biting his lip. If Raphael had fallen, there was nothing he could do about it. It was his duty to send Raphael to eternal rest.

"Thanks... for everything," Uriel muttered.

"W-Wait, Uriel! You are being deceived! I have not fallen from grace!"

"... Okay." Uriel smiled lifelessly. "Thanks for saying that, at the very least."

Crackle!

Blue lightning gathered between his eight wings, and he weakly spread out his arms. He lightly bent over and then quickly leaned back. His eight wings, infused with blue lightning, spread out.

"Shit!!"

Raphael quickly moved back in dismay; bolts of lightning struck where he had been standing.

"Uriel!! You are being deceived!!"

"..."

Uriel clenched his eyes shut and slowly raised both of his lifelessly hanging hands.

"Argo • La • Fulmine."

A huge amount of sacred power rose from him. His specialty was divine magic based on sacred power.

Blue lightning gathered in his hands and launched toward the sky.

"F A L L !"

He imbued power into his voice, just like dragons using dragon tongue magic.

Once that happened...

Crackle!!

Raphael raised his hands and unleashed his sacred power to create a spear of light.

'What the f—!'

Raphael's eyes widened. His spear, Luperien, which contained far thicker sacred power than Holy Sword Ludwig, had been dyed black. It was also exuding suffocatingly thick demonic energy.

'What the hell is happening?!'

He couldn't understand why the energy coming out of him felt like demonic energy.

'There is no demonic energy within me.'

He looked through the energy within him, but as expected, he could not feel even a drop of demonic energy. In other words, the demonic energy covering him was being exuded by someone else.

'How?'

Before he could keep thinking, bolts of lightning poured down on him.

"Kurgggghhhh!!"

He spun his spear to block the bolts. The demonic energy pouring out of Luperien stormed to protect him like a shield.

Tsssss.

The searing heat from each bolt burned his hands.

'He is serious.'

Raphael bit his lip. He could tell from that attack that Uriel was truly trying to kill him.

'Since it has come to this...'

Raphael looked around. He saw that the protectors of Guardians were glaring at him with weapons in their hands.

'I will subdue Uriel first.'

He couldn't understand why he'd become a fallen angel after ten days of treating his wounds, but if Uriel, of all people, was attacking him, that meant it was already too late to convince him with words.

"Haap!"

Gripping his spear, he rushed toward Uriel, who was in the midst of casting.

Uriel used non-casting magic, causing lightning to spread out like a net and block Raphael's path, but Raphael swung Luperien and tore the net apart.

Clang!

Raphael struck the ground with the tip of his spear and used the force generated to launch himself into the air.

"Argo • La • Fulmine."

Uriel used that short time to finish his chant. He spread open his eight wings and crossed his arms to make an X.

"S U R G E !"

Crackle!

Thousands of lightning bolts rose from the floor as if a dragon were ascending into the sky.

As Raphael was about to raise his spear to block the attack...

"Yeon-Joo!"

"Got it!"

Slide.

Dozens of red chains surrounded Raphael and wrapped around him. He grimaced.

"Mere chains will not—"

"Si-Hun!"

"Okay, hyung-nim!"

"Kuh?!"

Following Yeon-Joo's red chains, the two heroes rushed forward.

Despite running on chains as thin as two fingers, neither Si-Hun nor Kang-Woo lost balance. Raphael quickly broke the chains wrapped around him, but Kang-Woo jumped, aiming to kick Raphael's head before he could fully free himself.

Thunk!

A barrier of demonic energy formed around Raphael, blocking Kang-Woo's kick. Si-Hun caught up to Kang-Woo in the meantime and swung his holy sword.

Clang!

"Kuh!"

Si-Hun's sword bounced off the thick demonic energy wrapped around Raphael.

"Hyung-nim! The demonic energy barrier is too thick!"

"Shit."

Kang-Woo bit his lip in anxiety.

Like Si-Hun had said, the demonic energy surrounding Raphael was too thick.

"What the..."

Raphael's mouth fell open in surprise. Although he hadn't done anything, the demonic energy around him had moved on its own to block their attacks. Raphael clenched his hair as if he were going insane.

'Now that it has come to this...'

He could only take a gamble.

"Uriel! You are being deceived by a demon! Think of all the battles we have fought together!"  
Raphael shouted.

"Ngh..."

"Do you really believe I have fallen from grace?! You know the power of obsession better than anyone!"

"Sh-Shut up! Shut up!"

"Get yourself together! I have no intention of attacking you!"

"..."

As if he were trying to prove that, Raphael raised both of his hands.

Clatter.

Luperien fell to the ground.

"Ngh..."

Uriel's eyes shook.

Hesitation, doubt, and hope intertwined.

He closed his eyes.

'No.'

It was a trick.

He looked at the black wings and the suffocatingly thick demonic energy emanating from Raphael. It was obvious that Raphael had fallen.

'No.'

He bit his lip. His overwhelming obsession and yearning swayed him. He had spent thousands of years with Raphael. They had fought on many battlefields and tasted countless victories and defeats.

Raphael was more his comrade-in-arms, whom he had gone through life and death with, than just another archangel.

'He isn't the Raphael I know anymore.'

The blue-haired young man shed tears, grabbed his hair, and shook his head.

'But...'

Deep inside his consciousness, Uriel still...

Pierce!!!

"... Huh?"

Red blood splattered.

Uriel slowly opened his eyes.

"Cough! Cough!"

A black spear had suddenly shot out of Raphael and pierced a young man trying to protect Uriel.

"Y-You..."

"Lord... Uriel..."

Kang-Woo, who had protected Uriel from danger, collapsed and leaned on Uriel, embracing him.

"Be... caref..."

"H-Hey! G-Get a hold of yourself, human!!"

Kang-Woo vomited red blood and lost consciousness.

"O-Oh Kang-Woo!"

"Hyung-nim!"

Yeon-Joo and Si-Hun screamed.

"Ra... phael."

Uriel turned his head in anger. He looked at Raphael, who had his mouth agape and his two eyes wide open.

"N-No! Th-That was not me!!"

Raphael quickly waved his hands and looked down at the black spear that had suddenly appeared out of thin air. He cast aside the spear and quickly flapped his wings, summoning the sacred power within him.

Rumble!!!

Pitch-black darkness burst out of him.

"No!"

Dozens of spears materialized from the darkness and shot out at random like cannons.

"I did not do this, goddammit!! I swear!!"

"..."

Uriel carefully placed Kang-Woo on the floor. His short blue hair spiked all over. Any sign of hesitation was gone from his beautiful face; all that was left was a deep resentment toward demons.

"Those tainted by darkness..."

Crackle!

An enormous amount of lightning wrapped around Uriel.

"Receive the judgment of light."

Chapter 283 - Those Tainted By Darkness, Receive the Judgment of Light (2)

'Urgh, fuuuuuck.'

Oh Kang-Woo grimaced as he collapsed.

'That hurt like a bitch.'

He'd pierced himself with a demonic energy spear, so there was no way it wouldn't hurt. On top of that, he'd used the Authority of Coloring to change the color of his blood while controlling demonic energy from a distance, so his head was also hurting.

'It's harder than I thought.'

Using demonic energy from a distance wasn't hard to do when he'd used it on that lizard last time, but since the target was an archangel, it was really hard.

'I have to use more demonic energy than the sacred power he's emitting.'

That was the main issue.

Kang-Woo was currently coating Raphael's sacred power with demonic energy.

'It would've been dangerous if I hadn't molted.'

Kang-Woo had overwhelmingly more demonic energy compared to the amount of sacred power that Raphael possessed; it was only obvious considering he possessed the Demonic Sea, an infinite pool of demonic energy. However, simply having more demonic energy wasn't enough to pull off something like this.

One could have a water tank as massive as the sea, but if the hose was only two centimeters wide, the water could not extinguish a huge fire. If he had not raised his demonic energy control through molting, he would not have been able to fully conceal Raphael's sacred power.

'But still...'

A smile crept onto Kang-Woo's face. He slightly opened one eye and looked around; Uriel and Raphael were fighting with everything they had.

'I did it.'

He could no longer see the affection for a comrade-in-arms in Uriel's eyes as Uriel showered Raphael with lightning bolts.

'In a one-on-one... Raphael is a bit stronger.'

That was not exactly true; it was just the fundamental difference between a mage and a warrior.

A mage could exert massive firepower under the premise that they were given enough distance and time, but they could not use their power to its full potential if the warrior closed the distance.

Whatever type of magic it was, higher-tier magic required casting, so it was unavoidable.

'That's also why Amon was undervalued despite his power.'

Black magic was the worst in one-on-one battles.

Of course, if at war, Amon could exercise power beyond that of an entire army. Individual power mattered the most in Hell, so mages were not rated highly.

'But...'

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes.

He knew a mage's advantage in large-scale battles very well because he had faced Amon back when Amon was still under Satan. He had also fought alongside Amon when they were at war with Bael's forces.

'If a mage was complemented by a wonderful vanguard who could buy them time to cast...'

They could exercise firepower unfathomable for a mere warrior.

Kang-Woo looked at his lovely little brother, who would fulfill the role of vanguard.

Si-Hun, who had been restlessly staring at Kang-Woo, clenched his sword and stepped forward.

"Shit! Yeon-Joo! We have to prioritize taking down the fallen angel instead of treating hyung-nim!"

"Wh-What?! Can't you see how serious his wound is?! We have to at least perform first aid—"

"Hyung-nim has strong regenerative abilities. Right now, our priority is to take down Raphael."

'Good.'

Kang-Woo nodded while making a satisfied expression.

'He's grown a lot.'

Si-Hun had come a long way from being nothing but a kind-hearted pushover.

"Kuh...!"

'You should kill that temper of yours a little, Yeon-Joo. A girl shouldn't have such a bullish personality...'

"... The hell? I suddenly feel unpleasant."

'You got this, Yeon-Joo noona!'

Tilting her head while frowning, Yeon-Joo also joined the fight. Tian Wuchen and Grace McCubbin soon joined them.

With Si-Hun and three World Rankers joining in, the flow of the battle changed little by little. Uriel gained more and more time to cast, and he poured powerful magic at Raphael.

"Shit! Shit!! Who is it?! Who the hell has done something like...!" Raphael shouted like a madman. No one was listening to him anymore.

'It's about to end soon.'

Kang-Woo smiled.

"URIEEEEL!!!" Raphael screamed. He continued to say that he was innocent and was being framed, but it was pointless because he was still exuding demonic energy from all over.

Uriel furiously poured attacks on Raphael as if he had decided not to listen to him, and...

"Cough, kurgh."

The majority of Raphael's body had turned into black ash as he had been struck by around three thousand bolts of lightning.

"Uri...el..."

He lonesomely extended his hand out and stammered as if he were trying to say something.

Kang-Woo stared at him.

'This should be enough.'

He moved the demonic energy that was surrounding Raphael and covered his body. Before Raphael could say any last words, Kang-Woo used the Authority of Predation.

Crunch.

'It's a bit scary to use in front of Uriel, but...'

Now that even his Authority of Predation could be used from a distance after his molting, he was confident that he could fool even Uriel's eyes.

"Raphael..."

Thankfully, due to Uriel's shock at having killed his friend with his own hands, he didn't seem to care about Raphael's body disappearing as darkness devoured it. It looked from the outside that he was turning into dust and scattering as if a certain bald man had snapped his finger in a certain superhero film, so there was no way Uriel would think that Raphael was being eaten by someone.

Riiing.

[You have eaten Archangel Raphael.]

[Explosively raising Sacred Power.]

[Sacred Power has risen to 112.]

'Dayum, that's an archangel for you.'

His Sacred Power stat, which had been at 73, had risen to 112 in a flash.

Considering how difficult it was to increase one's stat after it surpassed 100, it truly was an explosive boost.



[You have fulfilled the primary condition of 'Chaos,' the advanced quest of 'Road to Becoming a Demon God.']

[However, the power of 'Chaos' can only be used in its entirety after fulfilling every condition of 'Road to Becoming a Demon God.' A fatal penalty will be placed on the body if used before that.]

'Eh?'

Kang-Woo's eyes widened.

The advanced quest 'Road to Becoming a Demon God,' which had been just question marks until now, had finally been revealed.

'For God's sake, I don't even know the third condition of the final step.'

It was as if he had cleared Stage 4 before Stage 3. Not just that, he couldn't enjoy the rewards given by clearing Stage 4 because he hadn't cleared the one before that yet.

'Dammit, I don't need that shit, so just give me a hint for the third condition.'

He cursed at the system, but there was no way he could expect an answer. He didn't even know what the system was in the first place.

'It doesn't seem to be Gaia's power.'

There was no way Gaia was helping him grow stronger. It was possible that it was a being above her, a being without form that existed simply as a phenomenon of nature.

'I can't really picture what that could be, though.'

Regardless, no matter how many times he had complained to the system, he had never gotten an answer. Casting aside the blue message window in front of him, he focused back on his performance.

"Cough! Cough!"

"Hyung-nim!!"

Kang-Woo vomited red blood, and Si-Hun quickly embraced him.

'Good, good.'

He felt like this was the perfect time for the play's finale.

Kang-Woo turned to look at Uriel, who was staring blankly at the empty space where Raphael had turned to dust and vanished.

'Mm.'

Kang-Woo felt both guilt for making Uriel kill his comrade-in-arms as well as joy that his plan had been a great success.

'In any case, I managed to avoid the worst-case scenario.'

He'd managed to clean up the mess he'd made. He couldn't stop the corners of his mouth from rising in relief. It was only natural since he had overcome the risk of going to war with the angels after only having recently wiped out the Demon Cult.

He would have stood up and started laughing if he could.

'Calm down.'

He couldn't ruin this perfect scenario. Kang-Woo closed his eyes and acted as pained as possible.

"H-Healer! Are there any healers here?!"

"... There aren't. Let's move hyung-nim to the Hall of Protection first."

Si-Hun picked up Kang-Woo.

'Oh my.'

Kang-Woo felt like he was about to puke, but he instead coughed while desperately maintaining his act.

'And now, I just have to go back, get treated, and receive ten days of care from Seol-Ah.'

Everything was perfect. Kang-Woo smiled while crying tears of happiness.

Then...

"... Wait, human."

'Hm?'

Uriel walked toward him, and Kang-Woo flinched.

'Fuck, he didn't catch on to anything, did he?'

"Cough! Cough!"

Kang-Woo vomited more blood on purpose.

"... Put that human down."

'Fucking why? You're not trying to stab us in the back after all that, are you?'

"Lord Uriel...?"

"Healing magic isn't my specialty... but there's something I can use."

'Oh.'

Thankfully, it seemed like his worries were unfounded.

Si-Hun nodded and put Kang-Woo down.

"Um • Babra • Ariande."

Uriel cast a spell.

'Well, I was fine after receiving Seol-Ah's healing, so I'm sure it'll be fine.'

Thanks to Han Seol-Ah, Kang-Woo had found out that even healing spells using sacred power were able to heal demons.

Kang-Woo closed his eyes in comfort.

'Right, let's see how an archangel's healing magic compares—'

Tap.

A strange sensation touched his lips.

"Gasp."

Si-Hun's eyes widened, and a confused voice came out of Yeon-Joo, "Wh-What?"

'The hell?'

Kang-Woo opened his eyes just to witness that Uriel was kissing him.

Blue hair that resembled the sky, skin as white as a pearl, and long eyelashes were in view.

'Huh?'

What the fuck?

"That should be enough for first aid. Now you won't die as long as you get some good rest."

Uriel stood up, his face reflecting his mixed feelings.

"Wh-What did you j-j-j-just do?" Kang-Woo stammered.

"I told you, first aid. But it only activates through mouth-to-mouth contact, so it can't be helped."

Uriel wiped his mouth while frowning.

"..."

Kang-Woo remained silent and clenched his fists so hard that blood flowed down them.

Anyone else would've been able to brush it off while laughing. It was just first aid, no different from CPR. So, there was no need to pay it any mind.

'Fuck.'

If it weren't for the fact that it was his first kiss with someone other than Lilith...

'Fuuuuck.'

If only he had actually been severely hurt and was actually in real danger...

'Why... fucking why?'

He hadn't even kissed Seol-Ah yet, since he had wanted to do it in the right mood after accumulating virgin power for ten whole millennia.

"Sniff... Urgh... Fuck... Fuck my life... Shit."

The curtains closed.

It had truly been a tragic play for the leads, supporting roles, and spectators alike.

\* \* \*

After recovering from his wounds thanks to Uriel's help, Kang-Woo refused Si-Hun's proposition to take him home and returned to his house at full speed.

"Darliiiiing!!"

Slam!

He opened the front door. Seol-Ah, who had been anxiously waiting on the living room couch because she hadn't been able to participate in his plan, sprang up.

"Wh-What's wrong, Kang-Woo?" she asked in bewilderment, seeing that Kang-Woo's eyes were wet.

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

"Huh? A-About what?"

"My first..."

"...?"

His shoulders were shaking as he hugged her.

Of course, he wasn't still sulking because Uriel had kissed him to heal his wounds. No matter how much of a numbskull he was when it came to relationships, he wouldn't despair over Uriel having kissed him for first-aid purposes.

Despite that, he was acting like this for two reasons.

First was because he was still overjoyed that the Raphael incident, which he had honestly believed had a low chance of success, had succeeded. Second was that he was hoping to use this to advance his relationship with Seol-Ah, which had been stagnant so far.

To put it simply, he wanted to make her jealous.

"What do you mean by... first?"

"My first kiss was..." Kang-Woo said while making a sad expression mixed slightly with a playful smile.

"... What did you say?"

'Hm?'

But...

"Which fucking bitch—Ah, I'm sorry. Who... did something like that to you?"

'Huh?'

Kang-Woo slightly looked up to see Seol-Ah's eyes devoid of life and shining with a dreary light.

'Why's she so scary?'

Chapter 284 - Nice Boat (1)

"Uhh... Mm. Well..."

Oh Kang-Woo slightly moved away from Han Seol-Ah's arms and made a troubled expression.

It was true that he wanted to see her become jealous, but he wanted to see her become jealous cutely, not while emitting an aura that seemed to belong to a horror film.

'What's going on?'

He tilted his head in confusion at how different Seol-Ah was from usual.

"Who... did that to you?" Seol-Ah asked again while smiling. Although she was smiling, there was still a chilling bloodlust in her eyes.

Kang-Woo smiled awkwardly and said it was a joke.

"What?"

"I was just in a good mood, so I just thought of playing a prank. The plan went really well, you see."

"Aaah, I-I see."

Seol-Ah's eyes returned to normal. She put her hands on her red cheeks while mumbling, "Oh, my."

Kang-Woo sighed softly when he saw she'd returned to her usual self.

"So, uhm... What about the plan?"

"Hmm? It worked. We won't have any trouble with the angels anymore."

"No, not that." Seol-Ah shook her head and then said, "You told me that you would tell me more about yourself, Kang-Woo. I want to hear more in detail about the plan that you talked about as well."

"..."

Kang-Woo remained tight-lipped. Come to think of it, he did indeed remember telling her that after showing her his true self.

"..."

There was a heavy silence, and hesitation appeared in Kang-Woo's eyes.

Only Lilith and Balrog knew the true self hidden behind his facade. Even for Kang-Woo, no, because he was Kang-Woo, it was difficult to reveal the truth. Although not as much as Kim Si-Hun, Seol-Ah also thought of Kang-Woo as a hero who did his best for the safety of this world.

'And...'

There were also a few things that she couldn't know, such as the fact that he had turned Si-Hun into his Familiar, that he had killed Alec Osborne and Reynald, and that he was actually the Demon of Prophecy.

'But then there's nothing for me to say.'

He grabbed his hair. After going through all that he had done after coming to Earth, they were nothing but things that he couldn't tell Seol-Ah.

'Oh, fuck.'

Regret belatedly swept over him for all the atrocities that he had committed.

"Uhh... you see..."

Kang-Woo averted Seol-Ah's gaze.

Her eyes narrowed, and she extended her hands and grabbed Kang-Woo's.

"You said... you would tell me everything."

She was emitting a weird aura that made it difficult to deny her.

"Ngh," Kang-Woo sighed.

"..."

To be honest, he was scared about how she would react when she came face to face with the true self behind his facade.

"I don't expect you to tell me everything at once, Kang-Woo. Even though I would like that... I can tell from your face how hard that is for you."

Smiling bitterly, Seol-Ah pulled Kang-Woo's hands. Kang-Woo walked to the couch as she pulled and sat down with her.

"So, explain to me this incident, at the very least. It's related to me, after all."

"..."

Kang-Woo closed his eyes.

'But this incident is no joke either.'

Raphael's screams still lingered in his ears. Leaving aside his excuse that there was nothing he could've done about it, what he had done this time had been cruel, even by his standards.

"Is that... also too hard?"

Seol-Ah teared up.

Kang-Woo felt that the light was starting to disappear from her face. He grabbed his forehead.

'Shit.'

There was no other choice. It was obvious that such a thing would happen from the moment he killed Shalgiel in front of her.

"No, it's okay. I'll explain it to you."

"Ah...!"

Seol-Ah's expression brightened.

"Okay... I explained to you before that Seraph's soul lies within you, right?"

"Yes."

"Because of that, I had no choice but to..."

Kang-Woo slowly began explaining that he had to kill Raphael by any means necessary and that the only way to kill him while avoiding a war with the angels was to make it seem like Raphael had fallen from grace. He couldn't tell her every single detail, but he told her the purpose of the plan, why it had been necessary, and as much of the process as he could possibly tell her.

"..."

Seol-Ah's mouth fell open in surprise, unable to say a word. Kang-Woo anxiously bit his lip.

'I'm sure it's hard to accept.'

To be honest, what he'd done to Raphael couldn't be excused.

Not only had Kang-Woo killed all of his subordinates and turned them into Chimeras, he'd also made it so that Uriel, the comrade-in-arms whom Raphael had spent thousands of years with, would kill him.

It was completely different from the case with Satan, who had tried to act like the victim to fool others. Raphael had truly done nothing wrong, and he had died an unjust death full of tears of blood.

'Maybe I should've toned it down a bit.'

He was swept with regret as soon as he told her the full story. He sighed after putting the facts out in the open for her to see.

Kang-Woo looked at Seol-Ah, who'd fallen into thought.

"I'm sure it's hard for you to take in, but—"

"So that angel did kiss you?"

'Hm?'

Seol-Ah's eyes narrowed, and he saw her clench her fists and tremble.

She said, "How dare that bitch..."

'He's a guy.'

Kang-Woo feigned laughter. "Uhh, are you fine with everything else besides that? It's a bit weird for me to say, but... I did a lot of scummy things."

"Ah..." Seol-Ah slurred.

What Kang-Woo had done could not be defended, no matter what she said. She honestly couldn't believe that such things had been done by the kind and gentle Kang-Woo that she knew.

"I'm... not sure." Seol-Ah opened her mouth after a while. "I don't intend to condone what you did. Even now, I think you went way too far, but I understand why you did it. It was... all to hide my existence, wasn't it?"

"Well... yeah."

"In that case, I can't speak for other people, but it's not my place to say anything to you," Seol-Ah said in a calm voice.

Kang-Woo looked at her in surprise.

'That's a bit... unexpected.'

He didn't think she was the type of person who would be okay with such a thing.

'Maybe... I don't know Seol-Ah that well.'

To be honest, he wasn't expecting her to react so calmly. He thought that she would be shocked and fall into dejection.

'I guess... she isn't just kind.'

Kang-Woo remained tight-lipped. He felt a sense of difference... that was hard to explain with words.

"Still... I'm really glad that you decided to tell me, Kang-Woo." Seol-Ah giggled. "I've been feeling sad because you never tell me anything."

"... I can't really share these kinds of things easily."

"Well... I understand."

Seol-Ah tilted her body.

"But..."

While holding Kang-Woo's hands, she gazed at him.

"From now on, I hope you won't hide anything from me and show me your true self."

She let out a hot breath and slowly reached out to grab Kang-Woo's arm. Then she touched his cheek.

"I'm ready to accept everything about you, Kang-Woo. Whatever you've done, whatever you will do in the future... I will always be on your side. Yes, always. Forever... Whatever happens, forever and ever."

"..."

Kang-Woo trembled a bit. He wasn't sure why, but for some reason, a chill ran down his back. He looked at Seol-Ah.

She was blushing and giving him a bit of a lustful look.

"Seol-Ah...? You're acting a bit w—Mmph."

Seol-Ah took him by surprise, pulling his neck in with both arms and kissing him. She ferociously slithered her tongue into his mouth and explored it. She moved without hesitation, like a starved predator that had found its prey. Not only that, but she put her hands into his clothes and touched his chest.

"Haaa."

"..."

Kang-Woo looked at Seol-Ah in surprise, his mouth agape.

She smiled at him.

"Fufu. Like I had thought... It feels good," she said, sounding high. She lustfully licked her lips.

At that moment, at least, Kang-Woo felt that Seol-Ah was sexier than Lilith, the Succubus Queen.

"Uhh... Mm."

Kang-Woo stammered as if he had been smacked in the back of the head with a hammer.

It was true that he mentioned the kiss with Uriel because he wanted his relationship with Seol-Ah to advance, but he had awakened something demonic in Seol-Ah instead.

"How was that, Kang-Woo?"



"H-Hm?"

"It was far better than... that Uriel angel, right?"

"It's not even worth a compari—"

"It was better... right?"

"Of course."

He nodded.

Seol-Ah smiled in satisfaction and rested his head on her two massive peaks.

An inexplicably soft sensation wrapped around Kang-Woo.

"You're tired, aren't you?" Seol-Ah asked.

"H-Huh?"

"Just a minute. I'll make you some kimchi stew."

Seol-Ah let him go and went to the kitchen.

Kang-Woo looked at her with a blank expression.

'I mean... I'm glad that she accepted me even after hearing that, but...'

Forget accepting, she was about to devour him.

Kang-Woo watched Seol-Ah with a blank expression.

'Lilith...?'

Yes, he felt as if he were looking at Lilith.

Kang-Woo shook his head.

'Nah, there's no way.'

He knew very well how kind and delicate a woman Seol-Ah was. She was also under the influence of the Goddess of Parental Love, Seraph, so there was no way that she would, like Lilith, show an obsession close to madness.

'She probably became confused after hearing something so shocking.'

Kang-Woo nodded and got up. Forgetting everything else, his priority was kimchi stew. If he ate Seol-Ah's kimchi stew, all of his confused emotions were bound to disappear.

Tap.

"I made a lot."

"Thanks."

Kang-Woo gulped while looking at the kimchi stew in a pot as large as a wash basin.

Slide.

Instead of sitting across from him, Seol-Ah sat next to him.

"Hm?"

Kang-Woo tilted his head.

"I just wanted to take a closer look. Seeing you eat makes me feel happy, Kang-Woo."

"Really?"

Kang-Woo paid it no mind and gulped down the kimchi stew.

It might have been because he had not taken any rest after the incident with Shalgiel, but the kimchi stew that he was having after a long time was extremely delicious.

"Good boy."

Seol-Ah patted Kang-Woo while he was eating the entire pot of kimchi stew and gave him a beautiful smile.

That night, with the excuse that she was worried about his chest wound, she asked to sleep next to him. She kindly patted his hair and back while holding his head.

Although his body didn't need to sleep, he started to feel sleepy for some reason.

Swoosh.

As he closed his eyes, he saw a beautiful sunset in the sky and heard waves in the distance. He saw Seol-Ah, who was lying in a white boat, hugging his head.

[Finally... it's just the two of us, Kang-Woo.]

Her voice echoed throughout his mind like an illusion.

'What in the world?'

Kang-Woo tilted his head.

It was surely a beautiful dream, and he should be smiling with joy, but...

For some reason...

He felt chills run down his spine.

Chapter 285 - Nice Boat (2)

"Yawn."

Oh Kang-Woo opened his eyes from the ray of sunlight seeping in through the window.

"What was that?"

He thought about the previous night's dream.

He had dreamed about being on a boat in the ocean over the sunset, and he was being embraced by none other than Han Seol-Ah. It was a very happy dream, but his clothes were drenched in sweat as if it had been a nightmare.

'Was I that nervous?'

Although he wasn't showing it, he honestly felt very bad about what he had done this time. If their relationship with the angels collapsed, it wouldn't just be his problem; Guardians, Players, and the entirety of humanity would be dragged into the mess he made if it escalated to war.

"Ngh."

Kang-Woo lifted his blanket.

"...?"

His clothes were in disarray. His pants were halfway down, and his shirt was unbuttoned.

'What's this?'

He touched a red mark on his chest; there were several of them. They looked similar to when the suckers of Lilith's tentacles attached to him.

"... Had Lilith stopped by?"

Kang-Woo tilted his head and got up. He tidied up his clothes and was about to leave the room when...

"Hmm, something like that happened...?"

He heard Lilith's voice from outside.

Kang-Woo nodded. Like he had thought, Lilith had stopped by. He was just about to open the door when he stopped to eavesdrop on the conversation.

"Yes. I heard... he kissed Kang-Woo."

"Hah. That fucking pigeon... Oh my, hoho. My apologies. I got a little worked up."

"No, I was thinking the same thing."

"My, my. I guess we were thinking the same thing, Seol-Ah."

"Yes. I would like to tear the wings off that damn angel Uriel, or whatever his name is, and shove them down his thr—Oh, I-I'm sorry. I ended up saying something weird."

"No need to worry~ I did the same thing."

They were speaking very calmly to one another, but it was unsettling for some reason.

Kang-Woo's mouth fell open.

'Seol-Ah and Lilith?'

Based on the atmosphere of their conversation as well as its content, they seemed to have become very close to each other.

"So... what will you do, Seol-Ah?"

"Hoho. It had been for no other purpose than first aid, so I won't be doing anything."

"Oh, but your eyes tell me otherwise."

"Ah."

What was she planning on doing exactly?

"I guess you caught me," Seol-Ah remarked.

"Fufu. Didn't you know that I was the chief of staff in the demon king army? I have a good eye for that kind of thing."

"Actually, I've been thinking of asking for your help regarding th—"

Clack!

Kang-Woo swung open the door.

"Top of the mornin' to ya!"

"Oh, good morning, Kang-Woo."

"Hohoho. You seem to be chipper first thing in the morning, my king."

Lilith and Seol-Ah waved to Kang-Woo. Lilith got up and bowed her head.

"Congratulations on the plan's success. After you left, I checked on Uriel... and it seems he has been completely deceived."

"Uhh, mm."

Kang-Woo nodded in puzzlement. As he turned his head, he saw Echidna and Halcyon on the living room couch, hugging each other while trembling in fear.

'Why the hell...'

Echidna quickly walked toward Kang-Woo.

"Kang-Woo, Kang-Woo. Seol-Ah is acting wei—"

"My, what are you talking about?" Seol-Ah asked.

As Echidna was desperately trying to tell Kang-Woo something, Seol-Ah grabbed her hand. She then hugged Echidna and smiled.

"S-Seol-Ah."

"Come with me for a second."

Seol-Ah dragged Echidna into her room.

Echidna sent S.O.S. signals to Kang-Woo with her teared-up eyes.

"K-Kang-Woo..."

Clack.

The door closed. Nothing could be heard inside.

"..."

Kang-Woo remained silent as he stood in place. His head was in a jumble. As he staggered toward the couch and sat down, Halcyon scooted over to him.

Lilith, in the form of Kurosaki Yurie, approached Kang-Woo with elegant steps and stood across from him.

"I have come in hopes of hearing about how we will be settling this affair."

"Mm."

Kang-Woo nodded and organized his jumbled thoughts. The plan itself had been very important, but settling the chaos afterward was just as important.

'The angels will probably be in an uproar.'

One of the four archangels had died. Not only did the angels not know who the Demon of Prophecy was, they were also being completely made for fools by one of the Four Heavenly Kings following the Demon of Prophecy.

'I have to make good use of this situation.'

If he took this opportunity to consolidate their relationship with the angels, he would be able to make his moves far more easily. In the first place, if Raphael had fully trusted Guardians, he wouldn't have ordered Shalgiel to investigate them, and then Shalgiel wouldn't have learned of Seol-Ah's existence.

"What's Uriel doing?"

"He is currently gathering the corpses of Shalgiel and the other angels. He is also clearing out the rest of the Undead loose within the fortress by himself."

"I see."

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes. He tapped on his thigh with his finger. Halcyon stared at Kang-Woo's finger with his mouth open.

"What do you personally think about the state Uriel is in?"

"Mm..."

Lilith fell into silence as if she were organizing her thoughts.

"I believe he is in severely critical condition."

"Critical?"

"Yes, he seems to have suffered considerable psychological shock. His face was as white as a sheet. Moreover, his process of clearing out the Undead is extremely temperamental."

"Are angels usually that emotional? Raphael and Shalgiel only looked like demon-killing machines."

"I am not sure either, but just as demons have desires, angels may also have some constraints that allow them to sustain their eternal life."

"Could be. They'd all be devoid of emotions if that weren't the case."

Kang-Woo nodded. The bodies of demons amplified desire for a reason; like all living things, they had evolved to survive. To prevent their emotions from being worn down with the passage of time, they had no choice but to place the constraint of amplifying their desire on their bodies.

"Well... I guess it isn't bad news."

Kang-Woo smiled. The bigger the shock, the thinner one's psychological defenses became. For example, he had been able to easily make Halcyon their ally because he/she possessed deep trauma.

'If I make good use of it...'

His relationship with Uriel would surpass members of an alliance and become allies in the truest sense.

'It's more likely than with Raphael.'

Kang-Woo had kept his distance from Raphael because of Raphael's obsession with eradicating demons, but Kang-Woo did not see that same obsession in Uriel.

"I should make some time to go see him."

"What will you have us do...?"

"Making fake bodies for Vaal Zahak and Balrog takes immediate priority. Their movements will be highly restricted in their demon bodies."

"I understand."

"Also, try to figure out if there's a way to hide Seol-Ah's power."

If angels could see Seraph in Seol-Ah just by looking at her, it would be a problem to recklessly ally with the angels. A person could only be hidden for so long.

Lilith bowed.

"Haaa."

Kang-Woo leaned back on the couch. With the whole ordeal involving Shalgriel done and over with, he was finally able to take a breather, and there wasn't anything he had to do in a hurry at the moment.

'If I manage to drag Uriel to my side...'

Life on Earth would become very peaceful.

"Right, I should go."

"Are you going to Uriel?" Lilith asked.

"Yup."

Kang-Woo nodded.

Emotions were bound to be eroded by the flow of time. Just as one forgot painful memories over time, it was best to approach Uriel while his despair was at its peak.

"Keep up the good work." Kang-Woo looked at Lilith apologetically.

She was without a doubt his busiest subordinate. She was investigating how to make contact with Hell, was tasked with setting his 'stages,' had to figure out how to hide Seol-Ah from the angels, and had many other tasks.

Not only that, but she was also in charge of gathering and distributing various pieces of information.

She was doing practically everything. Although she was technically not doing everything on her own since she had her puppets that she had seduced with her charms...

'I'm sure she barely has time to rest.'

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue and slowly extended his hand to stroke Lilith's hair.

"Thanks for everything."

"Oh my."

Lilith blushed as Kang-Woo acted differently from usual. She asked teasingly while smiling seductively, "Are you thinking of praising me with only words?"

"..."

Lilith giggled. She took a step closer to Kang-Woo and whispered, "I heard from Seol-Ah, that... an insolent angel stole your lips."

"That was purely for healing."

"Then may I ask for healing of my mind, exhausted from overwork?"

"..."

It was completely devoid of logic, but he didn't know how to refuse. Lilith had indeed been working a lot.

"..."

She wrapped her arms around Kang-Woo while looking at him gently. She got on her tiptoes and puckered her lips. Her lips, shining faintly red, stimulated him.

Kang-Woo gulped. He wasn't dumb enough to not realize what she wanted as a reward.

"Oh, right. I should return to my original f—Mmph."

Kang-Woo pulled Lilith in without hesitation. His eyes shone in desperation.

'Before she goes back to normal...!'

He had to calm Lilith down.

Kang-Woo hugged Lilith like a warrior whose life depended on it. Although he felt guilty about Seol-Ah, he had no other choice if he wanted to live.

"Haaa. Haaa."

He panted heavily and snuck a glance at Lilith.

"Aah..."

Her mouth was wide open in surprise. It seemed she hadn't imagined that Kang-Woo would act first.

She trembled in excitement.

"Fu... fufufufufu."

'Wh-Why are you laughing like that?'

"It seems Seol-Ah has... melted down your heart enough. Hohoho. Good, very good."

Lilith's eyes were shining with lust. Her black hair floated up in the air and twisted around. Sticky liquid flowed out of the ends of her hair.

Kang-Woo flinched and turned around.

"There's no time to waste."

"Yes, my king."

Lilith smiled.

Kang-Woo opened a gate to the Hall of Protection. Before stepping into it, he turned his head.

"Oh, come to think of it..." He tilted his head and asked, "Why did you take off my clothes at night?"

He recalled the events of this morning.

"I beg your pardon?" Lilith's eyes widened as if she had no idea what he was talking about.

"I... only talked with Seol-Ah as soon as I arrived."

"... What?"

Kang-Woo's eyes widened, and he shifted his gaze to the door of the room Seol-Ah had dragged Echidna into.

The door was still closed.

\* \* \*

"... What in the world?"

Kang-Woo walked while scratching his head. His head was in a jumble.

'I should ask Seol-Ah later.'

There was no time to focus on that. He passed through the gate leading to Africa in the Hall of Protection.

"Right, then..."

He had two objectives for coming to the fortress.

First, he needed to develop a closer relationship with Uriel.

'Second...'

Chapter 286 - Homo Shit What the Gay Is Happening?

The fortress that used to shine with pure white light had been engulfed in unknown darkness.

"Grrk! Grrrk!"

Growls could be heard coming from within the darkness.

Splat, splat.

Dozens of Undead were limping, leaving behind bloody footprints. Their skin was rotten, their eyes dull, their lips pale.

"..."

A boy with hair as blue as the clear sky stood in the hallway in front of the Undead, his lips pursed.

"Grrrk!!"

Seeing a living being, the Undead growled and bared their teeth. Saliva ran down between their yellow teeth.

Rush!



As if they hadn't just been limping, the horde sprinted across the hallway at immense speed. The boy grimaced and stepped forward. Although dozens of Undead were rushing toward him, there was no fear on his face.

"Argo • La • Fulmine," he cast in a low voice.

Crackle.

Blue lightning gathered in the palm of his hand.

"S W E E P !" he spit out.

Crackle!!

Blue lightning filled the hallway like a wave, the walls of the fortress burning black.

"Grrrk?!"

In the blink of an eye, the blue electricity engulfed the Undead. Thousands of lightning bolts turned the Undead into black ash, scattering them into dust.

"..."

The young man remained tight-lipped after defeating dozens of Undead with just one attack. Despite displaying power fitting for a god, he still wore an expression that couldn't be more sorrowful.

"Raphael..." Uriel, the blue-haired boy, mumbled in a sad voice. He collapsed in the darkness-filled hallway and looked down at his hands.

'I killed my comrade with my own hands.'

A friend with whom he had gone through countless battles...

"Shit, shit..."

Weeping echoed through the hallway. His obsession with affection and yearning for relationships ate away at him.

'...'

He did not even feel danger from his obsession; he simply wanted to let his instincts and yearning take him away.

"Kuh."

Uriel bit his lip and lowered his head.

Would he have still been in this state if his loyal subordinates were present?

There was no way to know.

"... It's a pointless thought."

Sant'Angelo had ended up using a lot of resources because he had rushed his crossing into Earth. Hundreds of upper angels had collapsed because of how much sacred power they'd used to form the Gate to send just him, so it would probably take at least a month for his entire army to arrive.

"You must be Uriel, the one who was newly given the seat of archangel."

"Who the hell are you?"

"Tsk, considering your stature resembles that of a human... you must have some human blood mixed within you."

"So what? Isn't that the same for that crazy bitch Gabriel?"

"There is no need to be so irritated. I did not say that to discriminate against you. No, there is no need for discrimination between those who eradicate evil together."

"..."

"My name is Raphael, child."

"You son of a bitch!"

It was hard to say their first meeting was a good one, but...

"Fuuu. I am quite tired. Are you okay, child?"

"Shut up."

... After they had gone through countless battles and went against the rise of the Evil God they had become like brothers.

"..."

Uriel closed his eyes. An irresistible storm of emotions raged within him. He slowly raised his trembling hands... the very hands that had killed his friend...

Tap.

"What are you doing here?"

"...!"

Uriel quickly got up.

Crackle!

Blue lightning rose, and he turned his head toward the voice.

"Ah..."

It was the young man with sharp eyes, the one who had thrown himself in harm's way to save him after Uriel had almost been deceived by the fallen Raphael.

"... How is your injury?"

"It has become much better thanks to you, Lord Uriel."

Oh Kang-Woo smiled.

Uriel felt relieved, but that was only for a short while.

"Why are you here? I believe I clearly said that I would be the one to purify the fortress and collect the corpses of the angels," Uriel said in a sharp voice.

"..."

"If you came here to express your sympathy, then screw off. I might look like this, but I've lived more than a hundred times longer than you."

"If I may, how old are you?" Kang-Woo asked.

"In human years, I should be around three thousand years old. I'm not exactly sure since I've never kept track."

Kang-Woo shrugged and smirked. He ignored Uriel's words and slowly walked toward him and sat next to him.

Uriel narrowed his eyes.

"What are you doing?"

"Is age that important?"

"... What?"

"Did you know that most of a human's mental development is done during their teenage years? Basically, if you're a moron during those years, you'll stay one for the rest of your life."

"... What are you trying to say?"

"I am saying that age and mental maturity are not related."

"Hah, big words from a human that can barely live a hundred years. I've lived for three thou—"

"Even if"—Kang-Woo interjected, causing Uriel to flinch—"you've lived for ten millennia, things that hurt still hurt. You still have a hard time, and you suffer. Even if you can put a plug in so that the flow doesn't leak, you cannot stop the flow itself."

"..."

"Do you think it is cool to pretend everything is ok? Do you find it amazing when one is able to suppress their emotions even when their parents or friends have died?"

"That's..."

"It's okay to cry when you want to."

"..."

There was a heavy silence.

There wasn't any conversation; time just flowed.

An hour passed, and Uriel slowly opened his mouth.

"To be honest, we didn't really get along that well."

Kang-Woo listened without a word.

Uriel said, "The body of an angel subconsciously brings about obsessions. It forcibly makes angels obsess over something so that their minds don't break down over the passage of time."

"..."

"Raphael's obsession was to kill all those tainted by evil."

"Interesting. I thought all angels were like that."

"Only Raphael's retainers are like that. Although demons are our mortal enemies, there aren't many angels who are that desperate to kill all demons."

Anyway, Uriel kept talking.

"We fought practically every single day... I even had to save him a few times because he jumped straight into enemy lines, unable to control his instincts... He was a real son of a bitch."

Uriel lowered his head, transparent tears gathered around his eyes, and his shoulders trembled. He clenched his fists and spoke in a shaky voice: "But still... he shouldn't have died like that. He didn't fight for thousands of years to suffer such a death..."

"..."

Kang-Woo didn't say anything and just kept listening to Uriel.

'Fuck.'

He didn't outwardly show it, but his thoughts were in quite a state of disarray at that moment.

'Maybe I shouldn't have come.'

To think he was there to console someone who'd killed his comrade because of a plan he'd executed. Even if he didn't mind feeling guilty, this was a bit too big of a hurdle to jump over.

Being unable to bear seeing Uriel cry in silence, Kang-Woo stood up. "Wait here for a moment."

"... What?"

Without replying, Kang-Woo turned away, went back to the Hall of Protection, and then to his house. He called over Han Seol-Ah, who had been chatting with Echidna, and...

"... What's this?" Uriel asked.

"It's a food from Earth called kimchi stew."

Uriel laughed in disbelief as he looked at the steaming pot. "Sorry, but angels don't need to eat to—"

"I know."

Kang-Woo put down the kimchi stew in front of Uriel and then took out a bowl of rice he'd brought along with it.

"But you can still eat, right?"

"..."

"Eating always makes you feel better when you're depressed."

Uriel looked at Kang-Woo in disbelief and then laughed—he couldn't help but laugh at the nonsensical situation. He poorly grabbed the chopsticks Kang-Woo gave him and tried the kimchi stew.

"..."

He couldn't taste much flavor; all he could feel was that it was hot.

Kang-Woo, who was eating next to him, said, "I know that angels don't have very developed taste buds."

"Then why did you prepare this?"

"Isn't it at least better than curling up and crying?"

"... You said it's okay to cry when you want to."

"That's different. After all, you're not suppressing it."

Kang-Woo laughed lightly and started to eat the kimchi stew.

Uriel looked at him and smirked.

"Yeah..."

To be honest, it wasn't a bad feeling.

Angels didn't have any opportunities to gather and eat.

'If I focus, I can taste it.'

Their taste buds weren't developed because they barely used them, but it wasn't as if they lacked the sense of taste.

As he concentrated on the food inside his mouth, he could taste its sour and savory flavor.

'It's... good.'

Uriel's eyes widened at the taste he'd never experienced before.

"It's better than I thou—Hm?"

Munch, munch.

While he was focusing on the taste, the kimchi stew was already almost gone.

"What the f..."

"What's the matter?"

"Why did you eat it all?!"

"First come, first serve."

"I thought you wanted to eat together to cheer me up!"

"I mean, you can barely even taste it, so what's the point?"

"You son of a bitch!!"

Uriel got angry and quickly moved his hands to put what little remained of the kimchi stew on top of the rice.

'...'

Before he noticed, a smile had been drawn on Uriel's face. He looked at Kang-Woo, who was voraciously eating the kimchi stew.

Uriel ate a spoonful of rice covered with kimchi stew, and a warm sensation that he had never experienced before spread through him.

\* \* \*

"So this is where you gathered the bodies."

Kang-Woo looked at the corpses neatly placed outside the fortress.

Shalgiel and the angels who had been turned into Chimeras by the fallen Raphael had been saved thanks to Kang-Woo and Uriel.

Kang-Woo turned to Uriel and asked, "What are you going to do with the bodies?"

"After the fortress is purified, I'm going to cremate them."

"Cremate?"

"Yeah. We cremate angels when they die so that they can return to the light."

Kang-Woo nodded. He felt like the right time had come.

'Right, then...'

It was time for him to fulfill his second objective.

"How about you leave that to me?"

"To you?"

"I learned how to honor the death of great heroes from Lord Tirion. It's similar to the process of cremation. We use mana to burn the bodies."

"..."

Uriel remained silent and stared at Kang-Woo. Kang-Woo was the apostle of Tirion, God of Heroes, and one of Earth's protectors. His consideration moved Uriel.

"R-Really? Then I'll leave it to you."

If he had learned it from Tirion, then it was worth trusting. Although Tyrion was a lower god, his conviction and sense of justice were worthy of praise.

"Thank you."

Kang-Woo smiled.

'Yes!!'

Although he didn't show it, he wanted to dance from joy. There was only one reason why he wanted to send off Shalgiel and the other angels.

'I cannot let their sacred power go to waste.'

He smiled and used the Authority of Predation. Of course, he had converted the demonic energy to 'mana.'

Crunch, crunch.

Golden energy poured from his hand and covered the angels' corpses.

Riiing.

[Sacred Power has risen to 113.]

The body turned to dust and scattered with the joyous message chimes.

Of course, it only looked that way, and their bodies were actually being eaten.

'But what does the truth matter?'

A smile crept onto his face.

That was right, the truth had never been important.

'It's fine as long as it looks like the truth.'

Kang-Woo used the Authority of Predation on over a hundred corpses.

[Sacred Power has risen to 118.]

'Like I thought, it gets harder to raise the higher it gets.'

Either way, it did go up.

Kang-Woo nodded while making a satisfied expression.

'Right, then, I should bid the kid farewell.'

He had now fulfilled both of his objectives, so it was time to go back.

'Darliiiiiiiing! Here I come!'

Since that was over with, his life would become far more relaxing.

Kang-Woo turned to Uriel, a smile on his face.

"And that's that."

"Th-Thanks."

"Not at all. Although it was only for a short time, they were also my comrades."

"Ah..."

At the word comrades, Uriel's expression brightened.

Kang-Woo continued while smiling, "In that case, I will be excusing mys—"

"Wh-What?"

'Hm?'

Uriel became extremely bewildered as soon as Kang-Woo mentioned that he would be leaving.

"Is something wrong?" Kang-Woo asked.

'What's up with this kid? What's the matter now?'

"N-No, well..."

Uriel shifted uneasily while averting Kang-Woo's gaze. He pouted and said in a low voice, "Y-You're going back already...?"

"..."

'Wha?'

"S-Stay a bit longer! Ah! That's it! Help me purify the fortress!!"

'You said you were gonna do that by yourself.'

Uriel trotted to Kang-Woo and pulled his arm.

He could feel Uriel's will to not let him go. No, rather than will... it felt more like 'obsession.'

'What the fuck?'

Kang-Woo's mouth fell open.

'What the hell is happening?'

Something had gone wrong.

Chapter 287 - Festering Wound (1)

"In that case, I will help out for an hour or two. I also have some things I have to take care of today."

Actually, Oh Kang-Woo had absolutely nothing to do today. He just wanted to go back home as soon as possible and get all lovey-dovey with Han Seol-Ah.

"R-Really? That's a relief. There are too many Undead for me to wipe out on my own," said Uriel.

'I've seen you wipe out dozens of them with just a wave of your hand.'

"Ahem. It will probably take a couple of months for my army to arrive... You can help me locate Rakiel in the meantime, right?"

'I'm gonna play with my darling, damn pigeon.'

Kang-Woo tried his best to suppress the words from coming out of his mouth. He had been planning on having tons of dates with Seol-Ah after this was over, so this felt like a hammer to the back of the head.

Kang-Woo anxiously bit his lip and said, "Guardians can handle the Rakiel investiga—"

"You said we're allies. I can't just stand around doing nothing."

He was right. Kang-Woo couldn't think of any way to refute him.

"In that case, I will have Kim Si-Hun pair up with y—"

"No, I'm gonna go around with you."

'But fucking why though?'

Kang-Woo looked at Uriel in frustration. Why... why did it have to be him?

'I mean, it's not a bad thing.'

He would be able to gain a lot from helping Uriel purify the base and investigate Rakiel's traces.



First, he could make the angels indebted to him, which would obviously be quite useful for their relationship in the future. He'd be able to make the angels move as he wished at least once. However...

'Fuuuuuck.'

Kang-Woo clenched his hair. He knew it would be useful and that it was necessary, but...

'I wanna plaaaaaaaay!'

If everyone was able to do things because it was useful and necessary, no one would ever fail in dieting. There were countless things that people didn't want to do despite knowing that they had to.

It would be one thing if the real Rakiel had done it, but Kang-Woo did not want to waste time tracking down a Rakiel that didn't actually exist.

'But it doesn't feel right to just reject it.'

Kang-Woo sighed and opened his mouth.

"I also have a lot to do, so I would only be able to help out about two to three days a week... Is that alright with you?"

"Well, if you're busy, then I guess it can't be helped."

Thankfully, Uriel seemed to have common sense.

"In that case, let's just have a light purification session today. I will come tomorrow or the day after to help out with investigating Rakiel's traces."

"Okay!" Uriel energetically nodded, a smile on his face.

"..."

Kang-Woo covered his eyes.

'Fuck...' he inwardly cursed.

\* \* \*

A month passed, and the days had been busy for Kang-Woo. He went on dates with Seol-Ah and also stayed at home, playing with Echidna and Halcyon.

Not only that, but he also went on a trip with Lilith, who had been swamped with work. Lilith had screamed in joy, and Kang-Woo had screamed for other reasons.

Of course, he didn't just play around.

He occasionally took some time to improve his demonic energy control and chased Rakiel's traces with Uriel.

'Though it's completely pointless...'

There was no Rakiel in the first place, so chasing after his traces was pointless. He'd suggested to Uriel that they give up since they hadn't been able to find anything, but Uriel had flatly refused for some reason.

In any case, they began cultivating a friendship from all their time together, and Kang-Woo had more or less achieved his objective.

"Hup."

Kang-Woo got up from bed.

"There's that mark again."

For some reason, whenever he slept with Seol-Ah, he woke up with red marks all over his body. There were also some wet areas.

He had asked a few times, but she never gave him an answer. He also became extremely sleepy whenever he was in Seol-Ah's embrace for some reason, so he couldn't even stay up to check what was happening.

'That's that, but...'

Kang-Woo circulated his demonic energy through his body.

'I knew it.'

When he slept with Seol-Ah, there were times when his demonic energy control improved. He didn't know the exact reason, but when he slept with her, his demonic energy control improved far more than when he trained.

'Could it be Seraph's influence?'

He wasn't sure yet. Whatever the reason, after he had realized it would improve his control, Kang-Woo slept with Seol-Ah more often. As if his life were a fantasy, he got stronger just by sleeping, so there was no reason for him not to.

'But it kinda feels like my stamina gets reduced each time.'

It hadn't been like that at first, but he'd recently started to feel that his body was stiff when he woke up. It was as if someone had squeezed him dry.

'I wonder if it has something to do with my improved demonic energy control?'

It was a possible explanation. It was nowhere near molting, but training to improve demonic energy control consumed massive amounts of his stamina. If he subconsciously trained while sleeping, it was obvious that his stamina would decrease.

'I'm not sure why it only happens when I sleep with Seol-Ah, though.'

Kang-Woo had become used to it happening, so he soon paid it no mind and turned on his smartphone.

'I'll just read some news.'

He clicked on the news tab.

[The arrival of an era of peace. South America restoration complete.]

[Completion of the construction of the first South American city in Venezuela since the Day of Calamity. Guardians promote living in the city by promising great benefits to its residents.]

[International organization, Guardians. Despite having achieved greatness, concerns over their excessive authority rise...]

[The world enters an economic boom after the collapse of the Demon Cult. Economic growth dwarfs the Industrial Revolution and...]

[The danger is yet to be over. Eras of peace are when one must be most vigilant.]

After the Demon Cult collapsed, the world economy started to improve at an explosive rate with Guardians and the USA at the center.

Of course, there were still dangers like Rakiel, the Four Heavenly Kings, and the Demon of Prophecy. Guardians purposefully did not hide their existence. No, they could not hide it because too many eyewitnesses had seen the Demon of Prophecy appear in the appearance of Oh Kang-Woo.

The entire world had been up in a buzz after the appearance of a great evil that dwarfed the Demon Cult, but as time passed and civilian casualties became nonexistent, public interest slowly faded.

A few people had even claimed that Guardians had spread fake news so they could keep taking money from countries around the world.

'There's nothing that can be done about this.'

That was just how the masses were, after all.

Even if news of a certain country developing nuclear weapons became public, if there was no immediate danger, people's interest in those topics faded, and this was exactly what was happening now.

There had been much fear in the air when the Demon Cult was active since there had been many civilian and Player casualties, but there was no longer any visible threat.

"I might as well leave it like that for the moment."

The enormous authority that Guardians possessed was not yet at risk of being stripped away. If the public wanted to forget, letting them forget was also an option.

Clack.

Echidna opened the door and entered the room.

"Kang-Woo, Seol-Ah says that food is ready."

Kang-Woo nodded and stood up.

"Kang-Woo..." Echidna pulled on his clothes and looked at him in worry. "Are you okay?"

"Hm? About what?"

"... Nothing."

Echidna shook her head and dragged Kang-Woo by his clothes to the living room.

"Ah, good morning, Kang-Woo," said Seol-Ah.

"Morning. But you always wake up earlier than me, Seol-Ah. I don't sleep for very long... Are you okay?"

Kang-Woo usually slept four hours on average. It was quite a long time considering that he did not need sleep, but that was not the case for Seol-Ah. Although Seraph's soul was inside her, she still had a human body, so she needed more sleep.

"Fufu. I'm okay," Seol-Ah said while smiling. Her skin and hair did not look dry at all. Rather, they were shining as if she were taking some good tonic.

'Well, I'm sure it's fine.'

At least it didn't seem like she was lying.

He pulled a chair back and sat down.

The breakfast menu was obviously kimchi stew.

"Hm?"

However, the contents were different.

"Eel and garlic?"

"It's been nothing but pork, so I thought of changing things up a little since you might get sick of it."

"Come on, there's no way I'd get tired of kimchi stew."

"Still, isn't it nice to change things up from time to time?"

"Well, I guess everything goes well with kimchi stew."

Kang-Woo picked up his chopsticks.

While they were in the middle of eating, the front door opened, and Halcyon entered.

Kang-Woo had used an Authority to hide his horn and bat wings, so he looked like a knockout female beauty.

'Although that is still attached.'

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue.

"M-Master Kang-Woo."

"Where have you been?"

"L-Lilith told me to c-call you. Uhhh... Th-The bodies are complete."

Kang-Woo's eyes shone. He recalled the order he'd given to Vaal Zahak.

"Okay, I'll be right there."

Kang-Woo quickly finished his kimchi stew and got up.

"Seol-Ah, Echidna, do you wanna come too?"

He needed the opinions of many people to see if the disguise made for Vaal Zahak and Balrog could fool others.

"Yes, of course."

"I wanna go too. I'm curious."

The two of them nodded.

Kang-Woo got up from his chair.

\* \* \*

The first thing he saw when he arrived at Balrog's house was a black-haired young man. The young man with thick, dark circles under his eyes looked a little sickly and temperamental.

"... Who are you?"

"Huhuhu. What do you think, Master?"

The black-haired young man, Vaal Zahak, bowed as if he were a waiter in a luxurious restaurant. The chain attached to his monocle shook slightly.

"Is it not perfect?" he asked.

"It would be, if it weren't for that goddamn pink apron."

"Huhu. That is not possible."

Vaal Zahak proudly flapped his pink apron.

Kang-Woo frowned.

"I-Is that really Vaal Zahak?" Seol-Ah asked in surprise.

"Yeah. What do you think? It's not weird, is it?" Kang-Woo asked.

"... I would've never guessed it was him based on his appearance."

"Hm! He looks like a butler from an anime!" Echidna also looked at the changed Vaal Zahak with shining eyes.

Vaal Zahak's slick tuxedo under the pink apron and his expensive-looking monocle made him look like a butler from Japanese anime and manga.

'He stands out for a different reason now.'

Kang-Woo feigned laughter but nodded in satisfaction. If he used his Ruler of Demonic Energy on top of this to completely conceal his retainers' demonic energy, no one would be able to tell that Vaal Zahak was a demon.

"A-Are you really Vaal Zahak?" Seol-Ah asked.

"Of course, madam."

Vaal Zahak touched the pendant on his neck. A black light momentarily covered his body, and he returned to his usual skeleton self.

"Whoa, that's pretty convenient!" Kang-Woo said.

"It took us quite a while to develop this magic tool."

Vaal Zahak puffed his chest out with great pride.

Kang-Woo looked around.

"Where's Balrog?"

Clack.

Speak of the devil, a door opened. There, Kang-Woo saw a brown-haired young man walking with Lilith's help.

"..."

"B-Balrog...?" Seol-Ah stuttered.

The man was over 190 cm tall, with toned muscles and a face bursting with masculine beauty. The muscle pig Balrog had turned into a large young man as if he had gone through a metamorphosis.

"B-Balrog?" Kang-Woo looked at him in disbelief.

To be honest, he thought that a human Balrog would look like a professional wrestler, but he had been completely off the mark. Balrog looked like a supermodel who could easily take the front cover of any fashion magazine.

"My king!"

After seeing Kang-Woo, Balrog walked toward him with a smile, but...

Tumble!

"Urgh!"

He tripped. Unlike Vaal Zahak, Balrog was originally five meters tall, so he had a hard time getting used to his shortened legs.

"Are you okay?" Kang-Woo asked.

"Kuh... To think I would have to show such disgrace to my king..."

"I mean, your limbs are shorter now, so of course that would happen."

Kang-Woo helped Balrog up.

Although Balrog had become smaller, he was still quite massive due to his height and wide shoulders.

"My king..."

Kang-Woo looked up at Balrog, who was blushing from being embarrassed that he had shown such a disgraceful side.

Due to the size difference, it looked as if Balrog were on top of him.

"..."

Kang-Woo suddenly felt a chill, so he threw Balrog, whom he had been supporting.

"Kurgh!" Balrog yelped.

'Fuck.'

He even thought that Balrog's usual muscle-pig self looked better.

Kang-Woo organized his thoughts and opened his mouth.

"There doesn't seem to be anything awkward about your disguises. To be honest, you've exceeded my expectations. Good work, Vaal Zahak."

"You flatter me," Vaal Zahak said as he clacked his teeth. "I was able to make it a much better quality thanks to Lady Lilith's help."

"Really?"

Kang-Woo turned his head toward Lilith.

Lilith waved her hands and smiled. She slowly walked toward him.

"I was not able to fulfill your other orders yet, but... I have made some progress on how we can conceal Seol-Ah's energy."

"If you're tired, you can take a short break. I can keep Uriel in check. Seol-Ah won't be in danger of being found out as long as we're careful."

"Fufu. I will do my absolute best in anything as long as you command me to do it."

Lilith made a bright smile.

For some reason, Seol-Ah nodded and even took notes for some reason. It was as if she were a student at a lecture.

Lilith said, "Oh, right. I visited the Hall of Protection for a short moment, and I have a message for you from Gaia."

"A message?"

"Yes." Lilith licked her lips. "She would like you to go to Venezuela with Si-Hun."

Chapter 288 - Festering Wound (2)

"Ah, hyung-nim!!"

As soon as Oh Kang-Woo arrived at the Hall of Protection, Kim Si-Hun, who seemed to have just finished training, waved at him.

'Oh dayum.'

Kang-Woo was surprised when he saw Si-Hun's shirtless body.

The male body couldn't get any more perfect than that. Kang-Woo felt more like he was looking at a work of art that an artisan crafted with their heart and soul than at a human body.

'Why can't I get like that?'

Kang-Woo's body was also perfect without any flab, but he still couldn't compare to Si-Hun.

'Is it because of that Heavenly Martial Physique or whatever it is?'

Kang-Woo felt like it was unfair for some reason.

"... Is something wrong, hyung-nim?"

"No, I'm just kind of annoyed for some reason," Kang-Woo replied, frowning.

Si-Hun fretted while not knowing what to do.

Kang-Woo asked, "More importantly, are you ready?"

"Yes. I just have to take a shower and change clothes. Please wait a moment," Si-Hun said, a smile on his face.

Just then...

"Kuh... T-To think you would m-make the king wait. Y-You've become arrogant, human." A brown-haired giant staggered toward them.

"...?"

Si-Hun's eyes widened.

"Who... might you be?"

"Balrog," Kang-Woo answered.

"Pardon? That gentleman is Balrog?"

"Yup."

Kang-Woo nodded and gave Si-Hun a quick explanation.

"It's absolutely seamless. I would've never guessed him to be Balrog just by looking at him," Si-Hun exclaimed. "I mean, the person himself seems to be struggling a lot, though."

It wasn't easy to get used to a significantly different stride length.

Balrog frowned and kept walking around.

"I-I am fine. I will acclimate soon enough."

"You could've just stayed home. There's no need for you to come with us."

"I cannot do that!" Balrog shouted and gave Si-Hun a sharp look. "I do not believe that this human will aid you properly."

"What did you say?"

Si-Hun's eyebrow went up. Sparks flew in the air as the two of them glared at each other. A thick bloodlust lingered in the air.

'What's wrong with you guys?'

Kang-Woo looked at Si-Hun and Balrog in disbelief. He couldn't help but sigh.

"It's nothing but a show. It honestly doesn't matter whether you come with us or not," Kang-Woo said while clicking his tongue.

A show. That was the best way to describe what they had to do in Venezuela.

'We're apparently recruiting immigrants.'

Most of South America had been fully restored. Leaving aside massive jungles like the Amazon, Guardians had managed to eliminate most of the monsters that had been living in the old human cities. This was all thanks to the Players' average level having increased after the Players had battled the Demon Cult.

'Demons give a lot of EXP.'



Not just that, but with World Rankers like Si-Hun, Jason, Grace McCubbin, and others taking the lead in wiping out the monsters, the Players had managed to restore most of South America.

'The problem is...'

No one wanted to live in South America. They'd managed to rescue the natives who had been silently living all over the South American regions, but that was nowhere near enough people.

Although they'd managed to drive the monsters back into the Gates, danger still lingered. The plan erected to counter such worries was to build a city with guaranteed safety. The first city of this kind had been built in Venezuela, and Si-Hun and Kang-Woo had been invited as special guests to promote and affirm the safety of the city.

"I understand Si-Hun, but why did they invite me?"

"Because you became famous during the last battle."

"But still, I didn't participate in the restoration of South America."

"Hahaha. I praised you a bunch during the operation, and they said that they wanted to meet you..."

'So it was because of you.'

Kang-Woo frowned in irritation but soon shrugged it off while sighing.

"Well, it's important," he said.

Although it was nothing but a show—no, it was important exactly because it was a show. Keeping up appearances was important for an international organization that received money from all around the world like Guardians.

"Then let's get going."

Kang-Woo began walking.

If it was something that had to be done, the best course of action was to deal with it as quickly as possible.

\* \* \*

"Whoa... It's better built than I'd expected!" A short exclamation came out of Kang-Woo's mouth.

Although the Venezuelan city wasn't that big, the European-style buildings and clean roads made it very beautiful.

'It also has a bit of a fantasy atmosphere.'

Although it was a modern city, it was a city that looked like it belonged to a fantasy .

"This is the first step... of Guardians," Si-Hun said in a proud voice.

Guardians' ultimate goal was to protect Earth from the otherworldly beings that threatened humanity and to create spaces where humanity would be able to live in peace as they had before the Day of Calamity.

The city that would become the first step toward that was Valencia, built in Venezuela.

"Haha. I wanted to show this city to you at least once, hyung-nim," Si-Hun said while bursting into laughter.

This city was the result of the South America Restoration Operation he had been involved in, so it was understandable that he'd be proud.

Kang-Woo tilted his head while looking around Valencia. "But did Guardians have enough money to build an entire city?"

It was true that Guardians had grown into a massive organization after receiving funding from countries all over the world, but still, building a city like this was a whole other story.

'Guardians is closer to a fighting group.'

It was only obvious since their main objective had been to eradicate the Demon Cult.

Si-Hun nodded as if he understood what Kang-Woo wanted to say.

"The USA apparently provided the money and infrastructure necessary to build the city."

"Ah, as expected."

If that were the case, he could understand it.

The USA, with its colossal Department of Defense budget, had stayed the strongest country in the world even after the Day of Calamity. If the USA had been involved in the construction, building a city of this level would have been a piece of cake.

Kang-Woo could easily guess why they would go so far as to build an entire city.

'They must be trying to use this opportunity to raise their influence in South America.'

It was a possible explanation.

Most South American countries had been ruined, which left vast amounts of land that did not belong to anyone. From the USA's perspective, there was no way they would miss the chance to expand their territory.

'Well, leaving their intentions aside...'

It was only obvious that a country would take action for its own benefit.

Kang-Woo looked around. "I see a lot of people wearing the Guardians uniform."

All over the place were Players wearing black uniforms with white shields drawn on them.

"Guardians maintain this city's security. The mayor of Valencia is also from Guardians."

"Wha..."

Kang-Woo laughed in disbelief.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the city was owned by Guardians.

'Why?'

Kang-Woo could not think of why Guardians had practically been given ownership of the city despite the USA having funded its development.

"Oh, could it be that..."

"Yes, that's right. This city is being managed by the American Players of Guardians."

"As I thought." Kang-Woo nodded.

Guardians was an organization composed of players from all around the world. If the American Players belonging to Guardians managed the place, both entities could benefit.

'Regardless, it means that this city is owned by Guardians in name.'

Even if the city was a gathering of American Players, since the two of them also belonged to Guardians, they had a say in what happened in the city.

"Shiiiet."

The secret organization that used to only have a few members had grown to become a massive international organization that even owned a city.

Although it was Kang-Woo who had set the foundation, the ones who managed it and made it grow so big were Gaia, Grace, and Si-Hun.

'No wonder the news was saying that some people are worried that we're gaining too much power.'

It certainly wasn't an authority that a normal organization could gain.

'That aside...'

Kang-Woo looked at the streets of Valencia. There were people who had immigrated from all around the world. Most were American, but there were also a few Asian people.

'Something's...'

He felt a strange sense of uneasiness.

Just then...

"Thank you for coming such a long way." A middle-aged man with a fancy mustache walked toward them. The man, wearing a slick suit, bowed toward them. "I am Samuel Hayden, mayor of Valencia."

He extended his hand and smiled at them. His hair was slicked back with gel, and his mustache was groomed beyond perfection.

"Nice to meet you. I am Kim Si-Hun."

"I am Oh Kang-Woo."

"Haha. I've heard a lot about both of you. Although you aren't related by blood, you have a deep comradery that goes beyond that... Even among Guardians, you're very well known."

"Haha, I'm flattered..." Si-Hun laughed awkwardly while scratching his head.

"And who is this fine gentleman next to you?" the man asked while looking at Balrog.

"He's my secretary," Kang-Woo answered.

"Ah, I see." Samuel turned away as if he wasn't interested in Balrog. "Let us go to the city hall. We have a very busy schedule ahead of us."

He guided them to a luxurious limousine.

As Si-Hun and Kang-Woo headed to the limousine, people exclaimed in surprise after recognizing them.

"Wooooow!"

"I-It's Sword Dragon!"

"A-And the Golden Hero...!"

Si-Hun's popularity in particular didn't seem to have a limit.

"..."

Kang-Woo remained quiet. Once again, he felt an uneasiness and narrowed his eyes.

Clack.

"Please, get in."

Samuel opened the limo's door, and they saw the inside was adorned with luxurious curtains and decorations. It was as if they'd entered a hotel room. There were so many things decorating the interior that it was hard to see out the window.

"..."

Once again, Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes.

"Let us depart." At Samuel's words, the limousine started to move.

\* \* \*

That afternoon passed by chaotically.

The word show was the best way to describe their experience. Dozens of reporters took Kang-Woo's and Si-Hun's photos.

Kang-Woo and Si-Hun were shown around Valencia and were told how safe and beautiful the city was. At the same time, the pair also appeared in a talk show where they talked about Guardians' goals and future plans.

'It feels as if I'm an idol in a variety show.'

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue while looking at the girls screaming around the broadcasting station. Although some were interested in Kang-Woo, their main interest was Si-Hun.

"KYAAAAAA!!!"

"I-It's really him! It's Sword Dragon!"

"Please give me an autograph!"

Si-Hun made a troubled expression because he was surrounded by women as soon as he left the building.

"Mm."

Kang-Woo groaned.

He already knew it would happen. He had been the cause of Si-Hun's massive popularity, but being shown the massive difference between them at point blank was...

"It's kind of... Yeah, this is..."

It took a while for him to find the right word.

"Yeah, that's it."

A lightbulb turned on in his head, and he clapped his hands together.

"Like... shit."

Although he had a beautiful darling like Han Seol-Ah, there was no way he'd feel good when he saw women from all over the world rushing to someone other than himself.

"Hey, Si-Hun, enough of that, and come h—"

He extended his hand to Si-Hun, who was making a troubled expression. As soon as he grabbed Si-Hun's hand...

Snap, snap, snap!!!

"KYAAAAAAAAA!!!"

"Yes! This is it!! This is the perfect angle!"

"Who's the top, and who's the bottom?!"

"Sword Dragon is obviously the bottom!"

"No, the older one being the bottom is..."

"Who's that brown-haired man over there? A rival? A love triangle?"

The women screamed like mad after seeing Kang-Woo and Si-Hun hold hands. It was as if the temperature in the area had gone up by ten degrees.

"..."

Kang-Woo's mouth fell open; their dense desires overwhelmed him. Their desires were so strong that they could even make Mammon, the Prince of Greed, kneel.

'What the fuck?'

Were they in Hell?

"Si-Hun, let's go somewhere quieter."

He couldn't think of anything other than that they needed to get away from this place as soon as possible.

"Ah, h-hyung-nim!"

Kang-Woo pulled Si-Hun along and ran in the opposite direction as if they were eloping lovers.

The screams intensified.

"W-Wait!"

Samuel and his bodyguards hurriedly ran after them, but they were chasing after Si-Hun and Kang-Woo—one was humanity's strongest Player and the other was the demon king who had dominated the Nine Hells.

The two disappeared in the blink of an eye.

"Sh-Shit!"

Samuel cursed aggressively and quickly grabbed his communication crystal orb to make a call.

Chapter 289 - Festering Wound (3)

"Phew, this should be far enough."

Oh Kang-Woo sighed and looked back. There wasn't anyone following them, and they couldn't hear the crazed screams anymore.

"H-Hyung-nim."

Kim Si-Hun, who had been dragged along by the hand, averted his gaze while blushing.

'What? Why the fuck are you blushing?'

Si-Hun gripped Kang-Woo's hand tighter while slurring, "This is a bit too sudden..."

'Don't grab me harder, dude.'

Kang-Woo frowned and pulled his hand away. He could see the disappointment on Si-Hun's face.

"Why did you do that?" Si-Hun asked.

"I just didn't want to be there," Kang-Woo said in a tired voice.

"Hahaha, so did I, but... we should still go back. We still have things on our agenda."

"The only thing left is the party at the city hall."

All the hard stuff was done; the only thing left was the social gathering where one drank alcohol while building political connections.

'And once we go there...'

Kang-Woo frowned.

What would happen in a social party was clear. Influential figures from all around the world would stick to Si-Hun like flies to get whatever they could out of him, and the majority of them would be women to take advantage of the male instinct.

'I refuse to witness something like that.'

Kang-Woo did not even want to imagine the sight of Si-Hun being surrounded by dozens of knockout beauties because he was far too envious.

'Si-Hun is mine. Back the fuck off.'

Kang-Woo placed his hands on Si-Hun's shoulders and said, "Aren't you sick of meeting people, too?"

"I-I am, but..."

"Right then. Ditch the evening schedule and hang out with me instead."

"Ah..."

Si-Hun's eyes widened, hesitation evident in his eyes. His smartphone and communication crystal orb were being bombarded by Samuel's calls.

"..."

The hesitation was short-lived.

Si-Hun slowly nodded. "O-Okay!"

His eyes were shining as if he thought that opportunities like that weren't common.

Kang-Woo smiled and called Balrog, who had fallen behind because he was still getting used to his human body. "Yeah, Balrog. We're at..."

Panting heavily, Balrog soon arrived at the alley. "Haaa, haaa. So this is where you were."

"How was it over there?"

"There was a huge uproar. Samuel, I believe his name was? He was yelling to gather forces to find you two immediately."

"No wonder..."

Si-Hun was a VVIP from Samuel's point of view. It would be weird if he were okay after such a person disappeared on his own.

"Well, let's not mind the small stuff." Kang-Woo clicked his tongue and shook his head. "Let's have a drink, just the three of us."

"W-Will that really be okay, hyung-nim?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

In terms of power dynamic, they were definitely on top; Samuel could not force them to do anything.

"Let's go." Kang-Woo turned around and narrowed his eyes while walking through the deserted alley.

'And...'

To be honest, he hadn't been planning on going this far. However...

'... Something's bothering me.'

He wanted to figure out the cause of the uneasiness he had been feeling all this time.

The three of them went deeper and deeper into Valencia while walking down the alleyways. After twenty minutes of walking...

"..."

"This is..."

"A slum...?"

A horrible stench attacked their noses. The eyes of the people walking through the streets were lifeless. It was completely different from the Valencia they'd first laid eyes upon.

'They must've been trying to hide this.'

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes. Looking at it from Samuel's position, it was certainly not something he would like to show.

'I mean... it's unavoidable.'

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue. There was no city without a slum. The state of the slum in Valencia was a bit severe, but considering the city had only been made recently, it could not be helped.

"Kuh..."

Si-Hun's expression crumpled, likely because he had recalled promoting Valencia as a safe and beautiful city.

Kang-Woo patted his shoulder.

"You didn't know, so it couldn't have been helped. Also, issues regarding slums can be resolved over time."

Kang-Woo walked along while thinking that he should bring up this matter to Gaia later.

"... Master Kang-Woo."

At that moment, Balrog called out to him in a low voice.

"I know."

Kang-Woo nodded. It wasn't hard to guess what Balrog was about to say. He slowly looked around.

'Hostility.'

The eyes of the lifeless slum inhabitants wearing rags for clothes were filled with hostility.

"... Let's go somewhere else."

Kang-Woo moved along, feeling that nothing good would come out of staying in the slum. As they walked out, a few bars came into view.

"Before we go in..."

Kang-Woo snapped his finger, and darkness lightly covered Si-Hun's and Kang-Woo's faces.

'Authority of Blindness.'

He and Si-Hun had become too widely known for them to enter a bar without caution. After hiding their faces with the Authority, Kang-Woo entered a bar with a huge beer drawing on the outside of it.

"Wahahahaha!"

"Fuck! So you see...!"

As expected from a bar, it was extremely noisy inside.

Taking a seat in a corner, they ordered three cups of draft beer. The beers came out in just a minute, and they chugged them down.

"Kaaah!" The carbonation of the beer made Kang-Woo tremble. "That hits the spot."

Kang-Woo couldn't help but feel happy drinking some beer after freeing himself from that stifling and boring schedule.



Balrog also heartily drank the beer. "Kaaah, this is nice. Maybe it's because this is a human body, but I feel like the alcohol is having a bigger effect."

"... Don't drink too much," Kang-Woo warned as he narrowed his eyes, recalling what happened when Balrog got drunk last time.

They burst into laughter.

'Yeah, this is far better.'

Not going to the social party that they weren't made for had been the right decision.

"Come to think of it, I think this is the first time I've drunk alcohol with you, hyung-nim."

Si-Hun also drank, having taken a liking to the atmosphere as well. His expression changed, and it seemed he'd decided not to care about Samuel anymore.

"Right, let's drink to our hearts' content!" Kang-Woo burst into laughter and raised his beer mug.

Drinking with Han Seol-Ah was nice, but drinking with the boys had its own charm.

'In a sausage party...'

Romance talk could not be left out.

"So, how is it going with Gaia?" Kang-Woo asked while smiling.

"C-Cough! Wh-What are you talking about, hyung-nim?"

Coughing, Si-Hun averted Kang-Woo's gaze.

"Come on. You're the one who proudly said that it was love at first sight. So, how is it going?"

"Ahem..."

"Tsk, you're devoid of guts. How will you ever win a woman's heart like that?" Balrog added.

"What? You son of a..."

They chit-chatted loudly. Kang-Woo smiled faintly as he watched Balrog and Si-Hun argue with each other.

'Nice.'

The atmosphere was so good that the uneasiness he had felt here in Valencia was fading. Kang-Woo raised the new beer mug that they had ordered.

Just then...

"Kyaaaaaa!"

"Hahaha! Why are you playing so hard to get?"

Shatter.

A woman's scream echoed throughout the bar as a beer mug shattered.

Kang-Woo shifted his eyes to the source of the sound.

A group of men sitting at a table were grabbing a female employee. She was a very beautiful Hispanic woman with bronze skin.

"Hm? Stop playing hard to get with me and just sit the hell down!"

"I-I don't want t—"

"Fucking bitch!"

Slap!

The woman's head turned violently along with the loud sound.

A scream rang through the bar.

Si-Hun's eyes widened as Kang-Woo's narrowed.

"What the..."

"..."

The first thing Kang-Woo noticed wasn't the man's giant stature or the woman who had just been slapped. It was the uniform the man was wearing. Kang-Woo could clearly see the black uniform with the pure-white shield drawn on it.

"If it weren't for us, you'd still be running from the monsters, bitch. How dare you play games with me?"

"Sniff, sniff..."

"Am I right or wrong? Huh? We saved you, did we not?"

"Y-You did..."

"You're goddamn right! So you'd better fucking do what we say!"

Slap!

The loud sound echoed once again.

The sounds of weeping and laughing were heard at once.

Rattle.

Si-Hun stood up from his chair. He muttered, "Those bastards..."

"Sit down."

"... Pardon?"

"I said, sit down," Kang-Woo said calmly.

"Wh-What do you mean, hyung-nim?! Can't you see that—"

"Balrog."

"Yes, Master Kang-Woo."

Balrog stood up and grabbed Si-Hun's shoulders.

Kang-Woo put one leg over the other and looked around.

'Ohhh.'

After he took a look around, he understood everything.

'I see how it is.'

He finally understood the source of his uneasiness after arriving in Valencia.

Whistle~!

"Hey! Baon! I fucking called dibs on that bitch!"

"Today's my turn, so fucking back off!"

"Fuck! Why is that bitch the only decent one in this damn bar?!"

"What about the men? There's not a single hot one!"

"Owner! Get out here! Why don't you do a better job at hiring people?!"

"Kahahaha!"

The men let out crazed laughter.

Not only did it seem as if they were used to doing such a thing, but it seemed they were enjoying it. The bar was full of women, and the male Players were clapping and talking dirty to them without any filter.

"Hello?" Kang-Woo took out his smartphone and called someone while staring at the Guardians uniforms that the male Players were wearing. He waited for a reply.

"Hey! Baon! My eyes are getting bored, so rip her clothes off or something!"

"Kekeke. Just a second, dammit."

The large man known as Baon tore off the Hispanic woman's clothes.

Rip.

The woman screamed as her bronze skin was laid bare. The men were leering at her bare cleavage.

"Those bastards!" Si-Hun stood up, unable to suppress his rage any longer, but Balrog pressed down on his shoulders.

"I told you to stay still, human."

"How can you still say that when—"

"It is the king's order," Balrog said in a calm voice.

Si-Hun flinched. He anxiously bit his lip, looked at Kang-Woo, and opened his mouth.

"Hyung-nim, what are you—"

"Stay still," Kang-Woo said as he continued to hold his smartphone.

Si-Hun's expression crumpled. "Hyung-nim!"

"Kim Si-Hun." Kang-Woo glared at Si-Hun with deep, sunken eyes. In a chillingly cold voice, he said, "I told you to stay still."

Si-Hun flinched.

"S-stop!"

"What are you crying so goddamn much for, bitch?! Don't you already know what you were in for the moment you decided to work here?"

The men snickered. Their filthy desires and madness filled the bar.

"..."

Kang-Woo waited with his mouth shut and his smartphone in his hand.

Time passed... Five minutes... Ten minutes...

The woman stopped resisting and poured alcohol for the men with her clothes half-torn. Her face was bruised from being struck by the man known as Baon.

"... Haaa," Kang-Woo sighed.

He put his smartphone back in his pocket.

'I had my doubts, but...'

It had ended up being the worst-case scenario that he had imagined.

Kang-Woo slowly stood up.

"Kahaha! So I...!"

He walked toward Baon, who had the woman in one arm and was roughly fondling her breasts.

"Excuse me," Kang-Woo said in a careful voice, "I would like to ask you something."

"And who are you?" Baon glared at Kang-Woo while frowning.

"What? You wanna join? She's mine for the night, so go somewhere else. If you're really desperate, go find a girl in the slum."

He shooed Kang-Woo away as if he didn't want to be bothered anymore.

Kang-Woo shook his head.

"No, not about that..."

Baon glared at him in irritation.

"Fucking hell, this city is busting with native women, so what's your fucking deal? Oh... Could it be...?"

His lips curled upward.

"Are you trying to play hero or something?"

"..."

Kang-Woo remained silent.

"Pfft! Hey, this fucker is for real!"

"Bwahahaha! Man, how long has it been?"

"Hohoho! Wow, there are still people like this left in Valencia? Looking at you now, you're quite a cutie. Why don't you go for a round with this older sister here?"

The men and women looking over in excitement burst into laughter.

"Hey, mister."

Rattle.

Baon stood up from his chair.

"You seem to be here as a tourist... If you have no idea what's going on here, then just kindly fuck off, why don't you?"

"What's wrong with it here? Didn't you see Sword Dragon taking that fucking commercial today?"

"Bwahahaha! That bullshit about this being a safe and beautiful city? I mean, I guess this place is paradise for people in Guardians!"

Crazed laughter filled the bar.

Kang-Woo looked around in silence.

"Right, do you get what sort of place this is now, Mr. Hero?" Baon raised his hand and lightly slapped Kang-Woo's cheek. "I don't know where an otaku like you came from, but at least choose your battles wisely, okay?"

"Haaa..." Kang-Woo sighed.

It was just like the man said.

'I get what kind of place this is now.'

He also got that people like these could not be reasoned with.

Kang-Woo frowned.

Baon smiled wickedly. "What? Are you mad? This is the problem with fucking otak—"

Kang-Woo extended his hand, grabbed Baon by the head, and...

Slam!!!

He smashed Baon's face into the table.

"Kyaaaaaa!"

"Wh-What the fuck?!"

Baon's nose was crushed, and his front teeth were ripped out.

Once again, Kang-Woo asked carefully, "Excuse me."

Boom.

He smashed Baon's face onto the table again.

"I would like..."

Boom.

He then smashed Baon's face into a beer mug. It shattered, the sharp fragments piercing Baon's cheeks.

"To ask you..."

Boom.

Blood spattered in all directions; Baon was not screaming anymore.

"... Something."

Crack!

The thick table made of hardwood split in half, and Kang-Woo threw Baon aside as if he were trash. He then took a seat in his place.

"Would you care to answer, motherfuckers?"

Chapter 290 - Festering Wound (4)

"Wh-What?"

The man who had been drinking with Baon stared at Oh Kang-Woo dumbfoundedly.

"Crazy son of a bitch!"

He grabbed a bottle of alcohol off the floor and raised his arm high. The bottle shone with faint blue light after being infused with mana. The man swung it down at Kang-Woo's head.

Tap.

"Huh?"

Kang-Woo easily caught the man's hand and twisted his arm. The bottle fell to the ground. Then he pulled his arm back and threw the man across the bar.

"Kurgh!!"

Thud!

The man was bashed into a wall.

"Fuck!"

"Who the fuck is this guy?!"

Two men sitting at the adjacent table raised their weapons: a mace with sharp spikes and a metal ball linked with a chain. Before they could even swing their weapons in rage, Kang-Woo grabbed the bottles of alcohol rolling on the floor and threw one at each of them.

Crack!

"Arrgghh!!"

The knee of the man wielding the mace was destroyed.

"You son of a bitch!"

A metal ball the size of a human head flew toward Kang-Woo's head. Kang-Woo caught the chain and pulled.

"Huh? Huuuh?"

The extremely muscular giant of a man was pulled toward Kang-Woo with extreme force. Kang-Woo grabbed the back of the man's head and smashed it into the glass shards strewn all over the floor.

"Wh-What the fuck? H-Hey, th-that crazy fucker isn't going to...!"

Screams echoed out, ringing Kang-Woo's ears.

"..."

A smile crept onto Kang-Woo's face. It was a familiar sensation; it was welcoming. He hadn't felt this much delight ever since he had left Hell. His heart was beating faster, and his blood was boiling.

"A-Aaaaaahh!" the man whose head had been smashed into the floor cried out in pain. He trembled in fear as he stared at the glass shards right in front of him.

"I-I'll talk!! I'll tell you anything!!" he desperately screamed.

"It's okay." Kang-Woo snickered. "There are a bunch of others I can ask."

"Ah..."

Crush—!

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!!!"

He dragged the man's head across the glass shards all over the floor. The shards pierced his cheeks, eyes, nose, and mouth.

"A-Aaaahh."

Kang-Woo approached the last man who had been drinking alcohol with Baon. He was the one who, while snickering, had called this place a paradise for people in Guardians.

A strange stench tickled Kang-Woo's nose. He looked down and noticed the man had wet himself.

"K-Kyaaaa!"

"Wh-What the fuck?!"

The Guardians Players who had been ridiculing and jeering at Kang-Woo quickly shot up from their seats and tried to run out of the bar.

"Balrog, Kim Si-Hun." Kang-Woo called out.

Bam!

Balrog aggressively shut the door to the bar and looked at the Players with apathetic eyes.

"You cannot leave without the king's permission."

"What? Who the fuck do you think you—"

The woman who had ogled Kang-Woo earlier grimaced. She took a small knife from her belt and swung it, but before the knife could even reach Balrog...

Clatter!

"Kyaa!"

A pained scream left the woman's mouth. A hand had suddenly appeared from the side and twisted the arm she had been holding the knife with.

"Who the fuck—"

She was cursing when her face suddenly stiffened, and it wasn't because of how good-looking the young man twisting her arm was.

"H-Huh?" A fearful exclamation left her mouth. "S-Sword Dragon?"

Sword Dragon Kim Si-Hun.

He was the second-in-command after Grace McCubbin, but he was by far the most famous Player in the world. He was glaring at her while frowning aggressively.

"Th-There seems to have been a misundersta—"

Bash.

As the woman was talking with an awkward smile, Si-Hun punched her in the stomach hard. She blew back and vomited in midair.

"Take a seat, please," Si-Hun coldly addressed everyone in the bar.

The Players who had been trying to escape flinched.

Every Player who had been present in the war against the Demon Cult, or had participated in the South America restoration operation, knew of Si-Hun's immense power.

The bar, which had been as chaotic as a warzone, had frozen in an instant due to Sword Dragon's appearance.

"Now, then."

Kang-Woo walked toward the trembling man who had pissed himself. He had more or less understood the situation, and it was time to hear why it had happened in the first place.

'I have more or less of an idea.'

Regardless, it would be better to hear it directly from them.

"I'd like to ask you a few questions..."

"A-Anything!"

The man who had been snickering and ridiculing Kang-Woo had made a complete 180.

Kang-Woo shrugged and asked, "Are you all really part of Guardians?"

"..."

"If you don't want to talk, I'm fine with—"

"Y-Yes! We're all part of Guardians!" the man quickly replied.

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue.

"How long have you been doing this?"

"... Pardon?"



"How long have you been doing this kind of shit to the natives?"

"W-Well..."

The man averted his gaze. Seeing that he couldn't even make an excuse, the answer was obvious.

'From the very beginning.'

It had likely been like this ever since Valencia had been built during the operation to restore South America.

'So this is what happens when there isn't an enemy like the Demon Cult to fear.'

It had been many months since the war against the Demon Cult's main force had ended.

Humanity was enjoying a time of peace it hadn't been able to experience since the Day of Calamity. There were no strong opponents, and the average level had explosively increased.

Guardians had gained too much power.

'And...'

Stagnant water is bound to go bad.[1] The people in this bar were not especially evil or atrocious. Great power usually led to a liberation of desires; it gave them the chance to do things that they thought about or had dreamed of.

It was also the reason why politicians became corrupt so easily. Claiming that they had been scumbags from birth was a lame excuse. They were neither evil nor had they been corrupted. They had simply become able to do what they had not been able to.

"Tsk." Kang-Woo clicked his tongue.

'I should've expected it.'

He had not believed for even a moment that every single member of Guardians had joined the organization purely for the sake of world peace and the safety of humanity. Human desires were not driven that way. Altruistic people were praised because most people were not like that.

Hence, all Players in Guardians were given a hefty salary, authority, and various types of hazard pay for risking their lives.

'I should've done something about this earlier.'

It was his mistake. He should've made stricter rules to stop them from abusing their authority, but he hadn't. Not having the time was just an excuse. He had just been putting it off for later because it had been such a hassle.

"I-I'm sorry!" The trembling man lowered his head. "Baon was my superior, so despite knowing it was wrong, I wasn't able to do anyth—"

"No, I honestly don't really care about what you guys did."

"... Pardon?"

The man looked up at him in confusion.

Kang-Woo kept talking, his eyes calm.

"I said, I don't really care about what you did."

Kang-Woo wasn't a hero or an apostle of justice. He had absolutely no desire to go around saying bullshit about saving all the weak.

"Whether you harass, beat, or knock down a powerless woman..."

He couldn't care less. No matter how much someone whom he had no relation to suffered, it was none of his business. He was not the least bit interested.

"The problem is"—Kang-Woo's eyes sank, and he slowly extended his hand and grabbed the man by the neck—"that you're all part of Guardians."

Guardians was an organization Kang-Woo had cultivated in preparation for the imminent invasion of outer worlds. If he were to make a comparison, they were like hounds that bit the legs of enemies, buying him enough time to shoot his bow.

However, the hound had gotten sick. The festering wound was slowly eating away at the hound from the inside.

Although it was his mistake for not holding the leash tighter...

"I can't just let it slide."

He had to cut out the rotten pus before it was too late.

The man stuttered, "Wh-What do you..."

"Balrog."

Kang-Woo stood up.

Balrog, who was guarding the door, bowed.

"I await your command."

"Kill them all."

"Yes, my king," Balrog answered without hesitation. He reached for his pendant, and black light flickered. And then...

"Wh-What the hell is that?!"

"A d-demon?!"

... A huge demon appeared.

"Fuuu."

The Lord of Destruction took a deep breath, and armor appeared on both of his arms.

Kang-Woo snapped his finger and activated the Authority of Silence to ensure that no sound leaked from the bar.

"Graaaaaaaaaahh!!!"

Demon Roar. The savage bellow ruptured the Players' eardrums.

Balrog moved, and soon after...

"Arrgghh!"

"H-Help!"

Hell descended onto Earth.

Every time Balrog swung his fist, the head of a Player wearing a Guardians uniform exploded.

"A-Aaaahh."

The Hispanic woman trembled while holding up her torn clothes and watched with wide eyes.

Kang-Woo approached her and put his jacket around her.

"You'll forget all of this when you wake up."

He placed his hands on the woman's forehead. Her eyes went blurry, and she fell into a deep slumber.

"H-Hyung-nim."

Si-Hun walked toward him, trembling as if he had never expected Kang-Woo to order their deaths.

"I think this is a bit too—"

"Si-Hun," Kang-Woo calmly said. "A festering wound will only grow bigger if it isn't completely cut out."

"..."

Si-Hun remained silent and bit his lip as if there were many things that he wanted to say.

Kang-Woo sighed softly. "You know, when we first arrived in Valencia..."

"... What about it?"

"I felt something was off."

"... You did?"

Kang-Woo nodded. "There were tons of people on the streets."

There were many black, white, and even Asian people.

"But I couldn't see a single South American native that you guys rescued."

"..."

"That's not all." Kang-Woo took out his smartphone. "I called the branch of Guardians in charge of the security here to tell them there's been a disturbance in this bar, and I asked them to mobilize the troops."

"Then you stayed absolutely still back then because..."

"No one called me back for ten whole minutes."

"..."

Si-Hun's eyes widened.

The Guardians members who should've been in charge of this region's security hadn't taken any action. Meaning...

"Could every single Guardians member in Valencia be..."

"Maybe it isn't just Valencia."

Kang-Woo slowly began walking.

"W-Wait! Then does that mean Samuel, even despite knowing this, he..." Si-Hun's expression paled, and the worst possible scenario passed through his mind.

"I told you"—Kang-Woo made a bitter smile—"a festering wound only gets bigger."

"..."

It hadn't only gotten bigger; the rotten pus had spread all across Valencia.

"Let's go."

Kang-Woo opened the door and walked out of the bar. The scent of blood mixed with the chilly night air and stimulated his nose. He saw a soaring building across the shining red-light district.

It was Valencia's city hall, as well as where they would find Samuel Hayden.