

M. in Hell 291

Chapter 291 - Press It

"Shit, shit...!" The man with hair slicked back with gel and a well-groomed mustache cursed in a way that didn't match his appearance.

Samuel Hayden disheveled his slicked-back hair and clenched his communication crystal orb.

"Why did this..."

As soon as he had heard that Kim Si-Hun would be coming, he had dispatched his forces and kept away all the native people from the routes that Si-Hun would be traveling. He had decorated the limousine windows so that they wouldn't be able to see outside and had planned routes as far away from the slum and entertainment district.

The broadcasting station's employees and the bodyguards had all been bought off by him, and everything seemed to be going according to his plan.

However...

"Those crazy bitches!"

He'd never expected so many women to crowd together at the broadcasting station.

He had permitted their entry because he had simply thought they were just fans who had come to see a celebrity, but they had knocked down the bodyguards like some crazy group of cultists and had caused Si-Hun to run away.

It was still fine up until that point; he could brush it off as an unexpected variable. The problem began after Si-Hun and Oh Kang-Woo ran away.

"Why, just why...?"

Communication with them had been cut.

Normal people would have contacted him first to find a place to regroup. He'd already explained that the party would be held in the city hall, so they should've come to the city hall, even if they couldn't contact him.

... But they hadn't appeared at all, no matter how long Samuel waited for them around the city hall. It had been a completely unexpected variable.

One could ask him why he prepared for a situation like this in advance, but if one thought about it logically...

Who would imagine a VIP they'd invited to suddenly break from their schedule to run off somewhere else? It would be equivalent to a famous celebrity being invited to a foreign country, but they cancel all the plans scheduled and completely ghost the team. This wasn't some B-list romance film. Samuel had never expected Si-Hun, who was rumored to be kind and upright, to act this way.

'That crazy son of a bitch.'

The unexpected variable had not been Si-Hun but the actions of Kang-Woo, the man who was apparently the apostle of Tirion, or Tyrande, or whoever the hell he was.

Although Kang-Woo was apparently a god's apostle, his achievements in the battlefield couldn't be compared to Si-Hun's.

The man, whom Samuel had also invited because Si-Hun apparently treated him like his biological older brother, had completely ruined the plan.

'Don't tell me they went to the slum...'

He anxiously twisted his mustache.

Their going to the slum was the worst possible scenario. Not even he could control that place—no, he had given up on controlling it. If Si-Hun reached the place that exposed the true face of Valencia...

'It'd be over.'

Considering Si-Hun's personality, he would not stand for such injustice. He would slash apart the 'paradise' Samuel was trying to build in Valencia.

"Kuh..."

Samuel clenched his eyes shut. Just then, his communication crystal orb rang. He quickly opened his eyes and clenched the orb with two hands to the point that the orb could break.

[Yo~ What's the status?] A relaxed voice came from the crystal.

"I-It is terrible. Kim Si-Hun is not picking up, and we have no idea where he even is. Worst-case scenario, he might have seen the slum..."

[Hahaha. I guess it really did turn out like that.]

"... Pardon?"

Samuel's eyes widened as he heard the laughter from the crystal. The person was talking as if he had expected this to happen.

Boom.

"Wh-What do you mean?!" Samuel shouted while slamming his hands against the table.

[Don't get so angry. I just thought something like this might happen in the worst-case scenario~]

The voice from the crystal had a humorous tone.

[Yeah... Now that it's come to this... that should be good,] the person mumbled as if they had thought of something.

Samuel bit his lip in anxiety.

"Wh-What should we do now? At this rate, our plan will—"

[Aah, don't worry.]

The voice coming out of the crystal was still calm, which made Samuel feel more at ease. If they were so calm, then they most definitely had a plan in mind.

[There's a way to turn this around.]

'I knew it.'

Samuel's eyes shone.

[So...]

The person kept talking, and as they talked, Samuel's expression became more and more distorted. He clenched his fists from how ridiculous it was.

"Do you... really think that will work?"

[Heroes are simple people.]

"No, but still, this is...!"

[Isn't it good?]

The person laughed.

"Even if that works, the plan will—"

[The plan isn't important right now. Would you scramble to grab your wallet when your house is burning down?]

"..."

[Be honest with yourself. It's not the plan you're worried about, is it?]

The person snickered. Samuel remained tight-lipped. It was just as they had said. It would be a shame for his paradise plan to fail, but he would be able to try again anytime if they managed to get through this hurdle.

The problem was...

[It's okay. Haven't you heard of Korea's plastic surgery skills? Get through this mess, and you'll be able to change your face and start anew.]

"That's..."

[Hahaha. Trust me. I'll make sure not even your parents will be able to recognize you.]

"..."

Samuel remained silent and grabbed a small remote control with a red button on it from a safe.

"... I will trust you."

[Don't worry. You know what Kim Si-Hun is like. This plan is foolproof.]

Samuel nodded at that calm voice. Putting his uneasiness aside, he gripped the remote control tighter.

* * *

"Where in the world have you been?!" Samuel shouted.

The three young men who had completely ghosted him after running away from the broadcasting station were sitting in his office.

"Haa, leaving the party aside, please think about my position when you suddenly disappear like that. You could have at least contacted me."

"..."

Samuel scolded Si-Hun while sighing.

Si-Hun glared at Samuel in silence and then let out what was on his mind while clenching his fists.

"Samuel."

"Ah... yes? What is it?" Samuel asked while tilting his head.

"I saw the slum of Valencia tonight."

"..."

Samuel flinched, and he cursed unconsciously. He fretted while not knowing what to do.

He gulped and said, "Fuuu. I-I guess you ended up seeing it. I actually planned to discuss it with you."

"You were?"

"Yes, about the problem regarding the Players currently residing in Valencia. They have been causing many problems while lording over the natives because they had saved them through the South America restoration operation."

"..."

"I have been trying my best to control them, but... it hasn't been enough."

Samuel lowered his head.

"It had not been like this from the beginning. We are still not sure who has been inciting the Players to do such things, but... things have been like this ever since a radical racist discrimination group had been stirring up the Players lately."

"So what you're saying is... it was not like this in the beginning?"

Si-Hun's clenched fists were trembling. Not noticing that, Samuel nodded with his eyes shining.

"Yes, of course."

"And what have you done to deal with this situation, Samuel?" Si-Hun asked.

"I have set up a force of Guardians Players that can maintain security. But... there are not many instances of reports. They hide like rats whenever we go on patrol, so it is difficult to deal with them."

"..."

Filled with chilling bloodlust, Si-Hun shut his eyes tight before slowly opening them again. He bared his teeth like a ferocious beast.

"That's odd."

"... I beg your pardon?"

"We didn't get a single call from the security forces that you mentioned when we made the report."

"...!"

Samuel's eyes widened.

'H-He made a report?'

Samuel knew how strong Si-Hun was. He would be able to wipe out hundreds of Players from that area even if they attacked him all at once, so why would he bother making a report to the security forces?

'Sh-Shit.'

Samuel felt cold sweat dripping down his back.

"We even heard directly from them about when the atrocities against the natives had begun. Recently? Are you saying that what has been happening from the very beginning has only happened recently?"

"..."

Samuel shut his eyes tight. The worst-case scenario was happening right in front of his eyes.

'I have no other choice.'

Samuel gripped the remote control in his pocket.

"If you don't have any more excuses..."

White light gathered in the air.

Si-Hun stood up and extended his hand, summoning Holy Sword Ludwig, the pure-white sword exuding brilliant light.

"W-Wait!!" Samuel quickly held up his hand. "D-Don't move!"

"Hah. You finally show your true c—"

"I-I'll press this if you take another step!!"

"...?"

Si-Hun looked at Samuel as if he were asking what nonsense he was talking about.

Breathing heavily, Samuel shook the remote control in his hand.

"You see this, don't you? It's the detonator for every control apparatus installed in all the Gates across South America."

"Wh-What?"

Si-Hun's eyes widened.

A Gate control apparatus, simply put, was a device that placed a magical barrier on the entrance of the Gate so that monsters would be unable to come out. Although blocking them entirely was impossible, it was enough to buy enough time to prepare countermeasures before monsters came out of the Gate.

If such devices exploded simultaneously, all of the monsters they'd managed to push back into the Gates would just come back out.

"Crazy son of a bitch!" Si-Hun shouted. "Don't you know what will happen if you press that?!"

It hadn't been long since they had fully restored South America. Not only would their efforts to reclaim South America go down the drain, but the natives who had yet to fully move in would be slaughtered by the massive wave of monsters. Thousands would be sacrificed at most, and hundreds at the very least. The billions of dollars that had gone into the operation would go up in smoke.

Considering how much effort it would take to reclaim South America after that, it would be like severely regressing the progress that Guardians had allowed humanity to take.

"Hah."

A smile crept onto Samuel's face.

Although Si-Hun was shouting at him, he wasn't taking a single step.

'It worked!'

He hadn't been sure if a threat like this would work, but he had become sure of it when he saw Si-Hun's reaction.

"Ha... Hahaha." Samuel unconsciously laughed and bared his teeth as his eyes filled with madness.

"Heroes are simple people."

He remembered the voice he'd heard before. Just like they had said, Si-Hun had been a simple person.

'Despite the ones that would die only being worthless natives!'

He was overcome with delight. He was filled with hope that he would be able to turn this worst-case scenario around.

'I'll become an international criminal after this, but...'

He would just need to get plastic surgery like he had been promised and start anew.

"Now, what's your play, Mr. Sword Dragon? Hm? Will you cut me down and sacrifice the lives of those poor natives?"

"Kuh!"

Si-Hun bit his lip. The sword in his hands felt far heavier than usual. The moment he swung it, thousands of innocent people would die. His hands trembled from the lives of so many innocents weighing down on him.

"Pfft, bwahahahaha! I can't believe that fucking worked!! What an exhausting life you all live!!" Samuel's laughter spread through the room. "Huh? Why don't you do something instead of just standing there?"

Samuel slowly increased the distance between them to avoid accidentally dropping the remote control due to a surprise attack.

"I'm going to list my demands now. First, lower your weapon. And then, get me a helicopter. Oh, plus thirty million dollars in cash."

Samuel was so sure of his victory that he even demanded money that had not been in his plan.

'You'll have to pay for having dared to meddle in my plan.'

He could live without doing anything for the rest of his life with thirty million dollars.

"Y-You scumbag...!"

Si-Hun glared at Samuel while trembling. He was overflowing with rage, but...

"What are you doing? Huh? Drop your fucking weapon!!" Samuel said.

"... Shit."

Clatter.

Si-Hun closed his eyes and dropped Holy Sword Ludwig. Since thousands of lives were at stake, he had no other choice.

"... Hah." Kang-Woo feigned laughter as he was sitting down, watching the exchange between Si-Hun and Samuel.

'That's fun.'

Kang-Woo smirked as if he found them cute, and he looked at Samuel. No, to be more precise, he looked at Samuel's table.

'I knew it.'

He found the item he had been thinking of and laughed in disbelief.

'What a fucking shitshow.'

He clicked his tongue and turned his head.

- Balrog.

- Yes, my king.

He used an Authority to send a sound transmission directly into Balrog's mind. It had not been possible in the past because of Balrog's special characteristic, Demonic Armor, but his demonic energy control had gotten so much better than even his past self in Hell that he was able to get through Balrog's Demonic Armor with ease.

- Send a message to Lilith.

- I am listening.

- Tell her to...

Kang-Woo commanded, and Balrog subtly nodded.

'Right, then.'

He slowly got up. It was about time to end this stupid play.

"Hey, you! I told you not to m—"

"Press it."

"... What?"

Step, step.

Kang-Woo slowly approached him.

"I said, press it."

He raised one of the corners of his mouth.

"D-Don't you know what will happen if I press th—"

"All the Gates will explode and monsters will pour out, I bet. And the natives that are in relief from finally being free of the danger of monsters will be massacred."

"Th-That's right! If I press this, thousands of—"

"So what, man? What does that have to do with me?"

"Wh-What?"

Kang-Woo snickered. "Why should I care whether they die or not?"

"H-How could a hero say something like that...?!"

"Enough of this fucking bullshit."

He didn't care about meaningless humans with whom he had no relationship.

"Just kill them. I'm not the one killing them, am I? Why are you putting this crap on me when you're the one with the detonator? People would think I'm the culprit if they didn't know any better, don't you think?"

"..."

"What are you doing?"

Kang-Woo walked toward Samuel and grabbed his hand. He brought Samuel's finger right on top of the button and smiled fiercely.

"Press the fucking button."

Chapter 292 - Trap Card (1)

"C-Crazy son of a bitch!"

Samuel Hayden's expression paled.

He could tell from the fierce smile of the man, who was pushing down on his finger to make him press the button, that it was for real. The man would not care one bit if thousands of people were to actually die.

'This is the man that Sword Dragon treats as his older brother?'

Samuel couldn't understand it.

He had taken part in the South America restoration operation, so he knew very well that Kim Si-Hun was undoubtedly kind and just. He would never turn away from those in danger and would do everything he could to save them. He was the typical hero protagonist in literature and animation.

'So why does he hang around with this lunatic?'

"Why aren't you pressing it?" Oh Kang-Woo said in a low voice.

"Ugh..."

Samuel trembled. Kang-Woo's eyes, as deep as the abyss, were staring right at him. Inexplicable fear encroached upon him.

'If I press this...'

He would die in the most wretched and horrifying way possible, but that would also be the case if he didn't. Even if he surrendered, he wouldn't be able to avoid paying for the crimes he had already committed.

'It's over.'

He'd been pushed right up to the edge of a cliff.

The plan had failed, and it was far too late to go back.

He bit his lip.

'If I'm going to die either way...'

Spite filled his eyes as he shut them tight.

"N-No!!!"

Si-Hun quickly rushed forward and reached for Samuel's remote control.

'Yeah.'

Samuel smiled wickedly. He was at least happy that someone was moving according to his wishes. Nothing was more miserable than no one caring about what he had sacrificed his life to do.

'Fuck everyone.'

Samuel pressed the button without hesitation. As he thought about the imminent explosions and the disaster...

"... Hm?"

Samuel's eyes widened.

"Wh-What the hell?"

Nothing had happened.

There were numerous Gates near Valencia that Players used to level up and collect mana stones. Although they weren't high-ranking Gates, there should have at least been some flashy explosions. However, absolutely nothing had happened.

Crackle!!!

"Gaaaaahh!"

No, something did happen, but it wasn't at all what Samuel had expected.

An intense electric current spread through his body as soon as he pressed the red button, and smoke rose from him. His limbs shook like crazy, and he collapsed on the spot.

"... Huh?"

Si-Hun suddenly froze as he ran toward Samuel. He still had his arm outstretched, unable to understand what had just happened.

"Wh-What just..."

Si-Hun walked toward Samuel with a dumbfounded expression on his face and pressed his index and middle finger against Samuel's neck.

'There's... no pulse.'

The powerful electric current from Samuel's remote control had killed him immediately.

Regardless of what kind of person he was, Samuel Hayden was strong enough to become the mayor of a city like Valencia. If the current was capable of killing him, it meant that...

'The detonator had been made under the assumption that Samuel would press it.'

Si-Hun's head was in a jumble.

'What...?'

He couldn't understand what was going on.

Si-Hun turned to Kang-Woo, who was smiling bitterly as he looked down at Samuel's corpse.

"... So this is how they're gonna play it."

Dead men told no tales, so it was the ideal measure to take.

"Tsk."

Kang-Woo turned around and headed to the couch in Samuel's office. Balrog was sitting on it while concentrating with his eyes closed, his lips moving slightly.

"Haaah."

Kang-Woo sat on the couch.

Si-Hun walked toward him, completely dumbfounded.

"H-Hyung-nim, what just..."

"Do you know who made the Gate control apparatus being used for all South American Gates?"

"N-No." Si-Hun shook his head.

"A mage named Khadgar, contracted with Guardians. What he lacks in brains he makes up with skill."

"Oh, yes. I've heard of him."

"Do you think we would've made absolutely no countermeasures for a terror attack?"

"Ah..." Si-Hun's expression brightened. "I-I see! I would expect nothing less from you, hyung-nim!"

Si-Hun nodded while making a bright smile.

"I see you were so firm for a reason! Haha! I completely misunderstood you without even knowing that."

Si-Hun nodded in succession while smiling. He was tearing up a little from relief. The fact that they were able to stop Samuel's terror attack likely had a part in his feeling of relief, but he likely felt

even more relieved that Kang-Woo wasn't cruel enough to sacrifice thousands of people without remorse.

"I'm... so glad."

Si-Hun continued to tear up.

"..."

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue when he saw Si-Hun's reaction.

'Actually...'

He had made no such countermeasures. He had simply said whatever came out of his mouth. Not even he had expected the control apparatuses to not explode when Samuel pressed the button. Moreover, Samuel's death had been completely outside his expectations. If he knew, Kang-Woo would've used the Authority of Regeneration and stopped him from dying instantly.

'I'm not sure whether it's a good or bad thing.'

It was good in the sense that Kang-Woo was able to come up with an excuse to satisfy Si-Hun, since he was not yet ready to accept Kang-Woo's true self. But...

'I honestly hoped for the explosion.'

He stared at Si-Hun crying in relief.

Si-Hun was a good person; he was righteous and kind-hearted. Although Kang-Woo had molded him through countless battles into someone who would cut down his enemies without hesitation...

'He still exerts himself too much to protect as many powerless people as possible.'

It was not a good thing by Kang-Woo's standards. It was hard enough even for Kang-Woo to protect the things around him despite having become more powerful than himself back in the Ninth Hell, so there was nothing more demented than Si-Hun struggling to protect people that he had absolutely nothing to do with.

Kang-Woo had honestly hoped for Si-Hun to be stimulated by this incident to abandon the things that he did not need without hesitation.

'Well, even so...'

This was just how Si-Hun was. It was his nature. Kang-Woo had no intention of denying that or forcing him to change.

Si-Hun was good-natured. Taking into consideration his wretched life before Kang-Woo had come across him, the fact that he was still this good-natured was worthy of respect and admiration rather than ridicule.

'Stay that way.'

Kang-Woo would take measures so that it would be okay for Si-Hun to be like that.

"That aside, I can't understand. What was he so confident in for him to..."

"He probably thought it would work. I purposefully hid the fact that the control apparatuses have measures in place against terror explosions."

"Ah, if he had known that..."

"He would have found a way to bypass it."

It was a lie. There had never been any such measures from the very beginning.

"I see," Si-Hun nodded as if he understood. "Then... did Samuel die also because of..."

"I killed him. Because I hated his guts."

That was also a lie. What had killed Samuel was the trap hidden within the detonator.

"Hahaha. You really have no mercy, hyung-nim."

"I can't let a scumbag who tried to kill thousands of people live."

Yet another lie. As long as they were people he had absolutely no relation with, Kang-Woo couldn't care less about those thousands of lives.

"Fuuu, but I'm glad things were resolved smoothly," Si-Hun remarked.

"Yeah."

"I will go and report everything about Valencia to Grace. I will make it so that the bastards who had harassed the natives receive their due punishment," Si-Hun said in a chilling tone.

Kang-Woo smirked after feeling the intense bloodlust in Si-Hun's voice.

"Okay. I'll stay in Samuel's office to investigate if there are any others involved in this incident, so you go ahead to the Hall of Protection first and report what happened."

"Okay, hyung-nim."

Si-Hun nodded. There was a firm determination in his eyes.

'I guess they're gonna be going through hell.'

Seeing Si-Hun's expression, it seemed like the Guardians members in Valencia would soon be in trouble.

Kang-Woo turned his head.

"What about you, Balrog?"

"I will regroup with Lilith. She is almost here."

"Okay, then go."

Balrog and Si-Hun left.

Finally, only Samuel's scorched body and Kang-Woo were left in the room.

"Right, before I begin..."

Kang-Woo looked at the shelf in Samuel's office—it was filled with luxurious liquor.

'Good, time to set a badass mood.'

He had a cheap-ass palate from only drinking beer and soju, but hard liquor was best for moods like this.

Kang-Woo picked one at random and poured a glass.

Maybe it was because it was expensive liquor, but an intense aroma filled the air.

"Nice."

He sat down with one leg over the other and sipped the glass of alcohol while trying to look as cool as possible.

"Fuck, that's bitter!"

Pfft.

He spat out the hard liquor.

* * *

"Pfft, bwahahahaha!!"

A man sitting on a luxurious chair in a dark room burst into laughter. He snickered while leaning back on the chair.

"Man, I didn't think it'd work so well."

The man watched the footage that had been recorded by the communication crystal orb. This footage was the true objective of this plan as well as the precious result.

"Press the fucking button."

"Holy crap! What a fucking line!"

The man laughed while clapping. Everything had gone as he'd planned. No, even better.

"I never expected him to react that way."

The man had honestly fretted that the two men would stupidly let Samuel escape.

'Well, that would have also been usable in its own way.'

After all, the main objective of this plan had been to prove Guardians' incompetence.

'This won't necessarily prove that, but...'

Considering he had clearly said that he did not care if thousands of people died, it was actually even more impactful than incompetence.

'If this footage spreads...'

Guardians would be completely tossed aside by the public. They wouldn't be able to keep their disgusting title of being the protectors of humanity.

"Bwahahahahaha!!"

The man grabbed his stomach and burst into laughter. Thanks to Oh Kang-Woo's idiotic intervention, things had turned out much better than planned.

"All that's left is to let the Americans know that I succeeded."

He continued laughing and transferred the video to a USB.

Just then...

- Fuck, that's bitter!

"Hm?"

He saw Kang-Woo spitting out liquor.

"Tsk tsk, he has no idea how expensive that is."

The man clicked his tongue.

"I mean, what would I expect from a man who grew up in an orphanage?"

He shrugged as he recalled the records from when he had investigated Oh Kang-Woo.

"Well, this should also be useful. I'm sure the people would absolutely love to see this son of a bitch drinking liquor from a dead terrorist."

He focused on the footage again.

- Fuuu.

Kang-Woo in the footage sighed, and...

- Fucking hell, what a fucking embarrassment after trying to act cool.

... He turned his head to look right at the camera secretly installed in the table.

"... Huh?"

- Can we cut that out? Lemme try again. I'll make it look really good this time, I swear.

"Wh-What?"

There clearly wasn't anyone else in the room.

"Wh-Who is he talking to?"

The man got goosebumps. Kang-Woo, who was looking his way, smiled. An inexplicably chilling sensation ran down the man's spine and throughout his body.

'What the hell?'

Something was going wrong.

- Hey, are you listening? Maybe there's a communication crystal somewhere here. Ah, here it is.

Whoom.

The communication crystal orb on the man's table vibrated.

"H-Huh?"

The man placed his hand on the crystal orb before he had even realized it.

[What's wrong? Did you think everything was going as you planned?]

Kang-Woo's voice came out of it, and the man's expression hardened.

[This kind of shit is my specialty, you dumb fuck. Did you seriously think I'd fall for it?]

"Wh-What the fuck?"

The man trembled.

Then...

Squelch.

He heard a viscous liquid dripping from behind him.

Chapter 293 - Trap Card (2)

"Wh-What in the..."

The man got goosebumps from hearing something mucus moving. He didn't know what it was, but he knew that something was there.

"Wh-Who's there?!"

He quickly searched for his weapon. He grabbed the cane atop the table. The cane shone with a blue light, and white frost gathered.

"Hmm."

The flirtatious voice of a woman flowed across the dark room. The man gulped as his groin reacted to the irresistible sexual urge.

The woman's voice sounded. "Jason Hemet. You're that American World Ranker who challenged Si-Hun to a duel and lost miserably."

"Kuh!"

Jason Hemet's expression crumpled. After he lost that duel against Sword Dragon Kim Si-Hun, which had been streamed to the entire world, he had become a laughingstock.

Everyone knew how unbelievably strong Sword Dragon was now, but back then, not many people knew about him. And so, after experiencing inexplicable humiliation, he joined Guardians with the desire for revenge, and he finally got his chance, but...

"H-How..."

How had he realized his plan? No, he hadn't just realized it; Jason had dug the trap and had concealed his presence like a predator, waiting until his prey let their guard down and fell into his trap.

[It's simple.]

Oh Kang-Woo's voice came out of the crystal orb.

[Valencia was made with the USA's full support.]

He kept talking with a calm voice.

[So isn't it weird that the city's security has become this bad?]

From the USA's point of view, Valencia was an important territory that would act as a foothold for them to occupy free land, such as Mexico, Columbia, and other countries that had been ruined since the Day of Calamity. There was no way that they would just leave the country to rot after building it.

[It isn't that security wasn't good.]

It had just been neglected so that it would get bad, for another purpose.

[For example, it could've been done to keep in check Guardians, which had gotten too powerful. Well, I'm sure there are a lot of reasons. Even if Grace McCubbin is American, she couldn't be controlled, so I'm sure people higher up wanted to prevent Guardians from getting too big.]

They had been waiting after digging a trap. They had built a place where people could set free their wildest desires and had let loose prey, the natives, into the city so that the Players could do whatever they wanted to the natives without fearing any consequences. They had likely even bribed some Players to get in on the act to instigate the other Players to do the same.

"Th-That's complete nonsense..."

[Things that are hard to understand usually get much simpler to understand once you think about who gets the most out of it.]

The detonator Samuel Hayden had was fake, which meant that someone had deceived him. Why would that person have wanted Samuel to pressure Kang-Woo and Si-Hun with a fake detonator?

'If their goal had never been a terror attack...'

Rather, if the goal had always been to fabricate proof that there had been a terror attack, it made sense.

From there, he had to think about the organization that would benefit the most from such a thing. Considering who had invested the most in the city, the answer was simple.

[Well, I'm not saying Guardians isn't at fault.]

They probably hadn't forcibly corrupted the Guardians members, but humans were corrupted all too easily from just a simple incitement. A person could reach their lows far easier than one thought as long as they were given the chance to do things that they hadn't been able to do, without any consequences.

[It's my mistake. I should've trained my hounds properly.]

Tsk.

Jason heard Kang-Woo click his tongue.

"..."

Jason remained silent and anxiously bit his lip.

"I-I already have the footage I need. If I leak this..." he anxiously said with much difficulty.

Squelch.

But before he could finish talking, the sound he'd forgotten about grew louder. Jason's expression paled, and he quickly turned around.

"Frozen Nova!"

An intense frost storm raged from Jason's cane. A sharp ice crystal formed from the blue gem at the tip of the cane.

"Hohoho."

A woman's seductive giggle echoed through the room.

Squelch.

The sound of the sticky mucus grew louder.

"Wh-What the..."

Jason paled. Based on the voice, he had expected a knockout beauty to appear, but what appeared from the other side of the dark room were horrifying green tentacles.

"Urpp!"

Jason covered his nose and mouth to block the horrible stench. He'd faced countless monsters before, but the green tentacles before his eyes felt more hideous than anything else he had seen before.

The squirming tentacles gathered together.

"Although I am lacking in combat prowess..."

Eighteen red eyes stared at Jason, and the creature licked her lips with a tongue as long as a snake's.

"Surely you don't think I can't face a single mere World Ranker?"

The green tentacles extending from Lilith wriggled fiercely.

"A mere World Ranker, you say?" Jason bit his lip. He recalled all of the criticisms he'd heard after he lost to Si-Hun. "Damn monster bitch...!"

FWOOSH!

A frigid frost storm raged, and an ice spear several meters long shot at Lilith.

Crack!

A green tentacle wrapped around the ice spear in midair.

"Urgh!"

Jason burst out with as much mana as he could. Ice spikes rose from the floor, the walls, and the ceiling and shot toward the tentacle monster.

"Monster bitch? What a rude human."

The eighteen eyes narrowed. For Lilith, who had always been praised as beautiful, being called a monster was a first.

She raised her hand in intense rage. Her hair shot out and turned into green tentacles.

Spurt!

Yellow pus poured out of the tentacles and spread out like a tent.

The ice spikes all over the room evaporated as soon as they were touched by the yellow pus.

"Urpp!"

Jason blocked his mouth as a horrible stench filled the room.

"Bleeeeeeghh!!"

He threw up, unable to take the stench any longer. Lilith's eyes widened, and she tilted her head.

"Oh, was my perfume too strong for you?"

The aroma caused the lust of a demon to run out of control just by smelling it, but it seemed like it had a different effect on humans.

"Regardless..."

If the mage had given up on casting and was vomiting, there was no need to think about how things would end.

With a thick smile on her face, Lilith walked toward Jason.

"Kuh!"

Jason took out another communication crystal from his pocket, quickly imbued mana into it, and shouted, "Ambush, ambush! Get the hell over to my study right now!!"

The building that he was in had Players standing by twenty-four seven to be able to immediately respond to attacks. Jason wasn't sure how she'd infiltrated his room without them noticing, but they would be able to buy him enough time to escape.

Tzzzzz.

As if betraying his expectations, the crystal only returned static that would play from a broken radio. He could hear terrified screams within the static.

- Arrgghh!!

- Wh-What the hell is that monster?!

- H-Help m—

Crack.

He heard bones being broken, and the chilling sound of flesh and muscle being torn apart reached him through the crystal.

- Lilith.

A low voice he hadn't heard before came through the communication crystal. The voice contained a fierce, beast-like energy.

- I'm done here.

"Hoho, okay."

The tentacled monster known as Lilith nodded, and a smile formed on her face. He couldn't help but feel chills when he saw her smile stretch across her face, ear to ear.

"I'm... almost done here as well."

An intense red light shone from Lilith's eyes. She activated her specialty, mind-control magic.

"U-Urrhh."

Jason's eyes widened as he was met with that red light head-on. He grabbed his neck as if he was having trouble breathing. An instinctive fear took over him.

"A-Aaaaaaaahh!!"

Clatter.

He dropped his cane and wet his pants.

"S-Stay away!!"

"Hohoho."

The tentacled monster slowly walked toward him.

Squelch, squelch.

Transparent mucus stained the ground.

Lilith reached out, and her green tentacles began wrapping around Jason's body.

"E-Eek!"

"Don't worry. I won't kill you." Lilith licked her lips with her long tongue. "After all, I have a lot of things I want to ask you."

Jason's limbs trembled as if he were having a seizure. His eyes rolled back, and he lost consciousness.

"Haaa. Being so beautiful is a sin."

Lilith sighed and shook her head.

This was why she didn't like reverting to her true form; people were so shocked by her beauty that they immediately lost consciousness, so she could not even interrogate them.

[...]

In the study's video feed, she saw Kang-Woo looking this way with a worried expression. Lilith smiled, easily figuring out what he was concerned about.

"There is no need to worry. No matter what happens, you will always be the only one in my heart, my king."

[No... That's not what I...]

"Fufu, so there is no need to be jealous."

Lilith caressed the crystal orb in delight.

[Fuck!]

She saw Kang-Woo in agony as he clenched his hair.

"I will interrogate this man to confirm the people who were involved in this incident."

[... Please.]

The footage was cut.

Lilith placed her hands on her cheeks while rolling her foot.

"Haaa, he is as cute as always."

She couldn't resist how lovely the jealous Kang-Woo looked. She wanted to devour him, and she would if it were up to her.

"I mean... I had my fill on our trip last time, so...."

She would be able to resist for the time being.

"Well, then..."

She made a bright smile and slapped Jason, who was unconscious, to wake him up.

"Now, now. Wake up, sleepyhead."

She woke him with a voice as gentle as that of a mother waking up her child.

"Ummm."

Jason slowly opened his eyes, and...

"Gyaaaaaaaaaahh!!!"

The nightmare began.

* * *

A blue Rift appeared on the roof of Seoul's 63 Building, which used to be the tallest building but had long since lost that title.

Crack!

The Rift grew as if the air itself were splitting.

"Haaa, haaa."

The breath of the being that had come out of the Rift was filled with desire. They hurriedly looked around and smiled while flaring their nostrils.

"A-Aaaahh! Finally! Finally!"

The being let out an exclamation as they twisted their body. They shot up into the sky as they flapped their wings. Black feathers fell from the ceiling of the 63 Building.

Chapter 294 - Lost Octopus (1)

Whoom.

Black light flickered around Oh Kang-Woo's middle finger. He looked down at his black ring, which was vibrating subtly.

'It's been like this for a while now.'

After fulfilling one of the conditions for Chaos, the advanced quest of Road to Becoming a Demon God, the Key of the Demonic Sea had begun to change.

He didn't know if the digestion of the Hell Armament was about to be complete or if there was another reason, but the Key of the Demonic Sea, which had remained dormant for a while, had started to show some changes.

'Well, I guess it's a good thing.'

Although he didn't need a weapon, being unable to use Transcendent-grade equipment that could ease the burden of using numerous Authorities simultaneously was unfortunate.

'I'm also curious... about what this thing is.'

Kang-Woo looked down at the Key of the Demonic Sea. It was a convenient weapon that could change into any shape. Although it had some limits, it could replicate the power of weapons made through merging Authorities.

Not only that...

'It's a weapon... that eats Hell Armaments.'

Hell Armaments represented the power of the princes of Hell. If all seven of those transcendental weapons gathered, they could easily tear open a Rift between dimensions and bend space and time.

"... I wonder what it'll become."

The secret behind why the Key of the Demonic Sea could devour Hell Armaments could possibly be more important than the Road to Becoming a Demon God quest. After all, the demonic energy within the Hell Armaments could not even be eaten by the Authority of Predation.

"Well, whatever the case..."

There was nothing he could do at the moment but wait for results.

Kang-Woo stopped giving the Key of the Demonic Sea any more attention and grabbed a cup of coffee.

Just then...

Knock, knock.

"Darling?"

When he turned his head toward the opening door, he saw Lilith smiling in the doorway.

She bowed and entered the room.

"What's up?"

"I have come to report what I had learned by interrogating Jason."

Lilith handed Kang-Woo several documents. It was a list of names of politicians and billionaires from all over the world who had been involved in the Valencia incident. Most were Americans, but there were also influential figures from other countries.

"That's a lot."

"It seems there have been many people dissatisfied with Guardians' quick rise in power."

"I bet. It's a bit too much power for one organization to have."

It was only obvious, considering a group made up of Players possessed enough power surpassing some countries, to be able to influence the entire world.

"But," Kang-Woo continued as he handed the documents back to her. "We need this much power, at the very least, to prepare for what's ahead."

No, they needed even more power to defend against the imminent invasion of the outer worlds.

"Hoho." Lilith smiled. She bowed and said, "There is no need to worry. I will make it so that this world bows down to you, my king."

"I don't want or need anything like that."

Kang-Woo shook his head in disapproval. He hated hassles; the one that the world should be bowing down to needed to be Guardians, or more specifically, Kim Si-Hun. Although Kang-Woo had appointed Si-Hun to be the figurehead, he couldn't just play around behind the shadows either.

'I feel like I'm moving further away from my dream.'

To illustrate that point, he was stuck looking over documents as soon as he had woken up. He sighed as he felt himself getting further away from his dream of becoming a wealthy bum. If it were up to him, he'd just spend the entire day flirting with his darling.

"What's the status in Valencia?" Kang-Woo asked.

"Si-Hun is cleaning up the entire city with the Sirius Corps. He captured a bulk of Guardians Players that had laid their hands on the natives, and they will be undergoing trial in a month's time."

"It'd be difficult to secure evidence, though."

There weren't many crime prevention measures, such as CCTV cameras, in place yet in Valencia. If the issue went to court, many Players would get away scot-free due to lack of evidence. Whatever they were charged with, it was easy to claim one's innocence if there was no evidence for their crimes to be backed up with.

"Hoho. The victims' tears are evidence enough."

Lilith smiled widely. Even if she had to fabricate evidence, she was planning on winning the case.

Kang-Woo smiled bitterly and nodded.

"Then give this list to Si-Hun too."

The public leaders of Guardians were Grace McCubbin and Si-Hun. There was a need for Si-Hun himself to punish the culprits for his influence and for public awareness of him to rise even higher.

'As well as molding the press so that the public would be fine with the culprits receiving harsher sentences.'

He had to make them fear Si-Hun so they wouldn't dare to do something like that again.

'I guess I'll be busy for a while again.'

Kang-Woo had to do some things of his own while Si-Hun cracked down on the influential figures that had been involved in the Valencia incident.

'I'll have to make rules.'

He had to do the things that he'd been putting off.

If it were up to him, he'd make cruel and unbending rules like those he'd established in Hell, but he wasn't in Hell anymore, so he couldn't implement such rules.

'I should get other people to help me.'

Gaia had said that she would make the rules herself, blaming herself for her indolence after Si-Hun had told her about the incident. However, there was no way that a girl who could just barely lead a group of ten individuals would be proficient in making rules for such a massive organization.

As for Kang-Woo, he had gotten used to the rules of Hell, so he was having a hard time drawing a line. He was in desperate need of help from others.

'I should ask Wuchen and Yeon-Joo.'

Although the groups led by Tian Wuchen and Cha Yeon-Joo weren't as large as Guardians, they had the know-how after having led large groups for so long.

"And... there is one more thing I have to report."

"Hm? Besides this?" Kang-Woo asked as he tilted his head.

"Yes. I have found... traces of demonic energy in the downtown area of Seoul."

"... What?"

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes.

"Although the traces themselves are very faint... judging by how widespread they are, it seems that whatever is leaving behind the demonic energy is going around the entire city."

"Mm."

Kang-Woo crossed his arms.

Traces of demonic energy had been found in downtown Seoul. Now that the Demon Cult had completely broken apart, there weren't many things that could leave such traces.

"I guess a demonic beast must've escaped from a Gate."

"Yes, I believe so as well."

Beings of the Nine Hells have occasionally crossed into the Gates ever since the Gaia System's defensive mechanisms have been broken.

Demonic beasts like the Hellhound had been categorized as variant monsters that didn't have mana stones among Players. It was highly likely that one of such demonic beasts had managed to come out of a Gate.

'Demonic beasts coming out of Gates have pretty much become a common occurrence.'

He'd received similar reports quite a few times. If it had just been about the traces of demonic energy, Lilith wouldn't have bothered to report it to Kang-Woo.

'Meaning, the locations of said traces must be the problem.'

If a demonic beast wandered around downtown Seoul, there would be a high risk of there being many civilian casualties.

Seoul was where Si-Hun lived. The Hall of Protection was located in Washington DC, so Seoul was the city that Guardians paid most attention to after it. Kang-Woo honestly couldn't care less if people he didn't know died out, but a commotion in Seoul at a time like this would be bad.

"I guess we should deal with it," Kang-Woo mentioned.

"Fufu. In that case, I will personally take care of it."

"Please."

Si-Hun was in Valencia, and Kang-Woo had to discuss appropriate rules to place with Gaia, Yeon-Joo, and others. Having Lilith take care of it personally was the best course of action. She was exceptional in terms of searching, so she would be able to hunt down and kill the demonic beast in a flash.

"Understood, please leave it to me," Lilith replied with a smile.

She clenched her fists while snorting as if she were Echidna.

Kang-Woo smiled bitterly.

'This is why I can't come to hate her.'

To be honest, he still wanted to keep his distance from her because of her hideous appearance, which he would never be able to get used to, but he couldn't do that because of things like this.

"Fufu. Will you go on a trip with me again if I manage to resolve this issue without a hitch?"

"...!"

Kang-Woo's expression hardened. He recalled how he'd rewarded her thanks to all the work she'd been doing and what he had gone through in the famous Japanese onsen.

"Urpp."

He covered his mouth, and his face paled.

"Are you okay, Master Kang-Woo?"

Lilith stroked his back in worry. Although she looked like Kurosaki Yurie at the moment, her hand touching his back felt sticky for some reason.

"I-I'm fine. Let's set aside the travel plans for a bit. There are still a ton of things we have to do, and I also have plans with Seol-Ah."

"... I see."

Lilith nodded while making a sad expression. Her expression had noticeably darkened when Han-Seol-Ah was mentioned.

Creak.

"Umm..."

Seol-Ah opened the door and peeked into the room, holding a tray full of delicious fruits.

"You were in the middle of a meeting, right? Have some fruit."

"Thanks, darling."

Kang-Woo grabbed the tray from Seol-Ah with a bright smile, as if he had found a ray of light within the endless darkness.

"..."

Lilith frowned when she saw this side of Kang-Woo. She placed her hand on her chest. It started to hurt.

'He has...'

Tears slightly formed around her eyes.

'... Never smiled like that to me.'

A feeling that she had never felt before burned her heart.

Lilith shook her head.

'What am I thinking?'

In the end, she was the legal wife. The vows of love that they had pledged were still vivid in her memories.

'Maybe...'

Worries that Kang-Woo might have forgotten about the vows they had made surged.

'There's no way.'

Her masterful tentacle techniques always caused him to scream in such a lovely way, even during their last trip. There was no way the king didn't love her.

'But still...'

Lilith pouted. She would prefer if he gave her a bit more attention.

"In that case, I will be excusing myself."

"Why?" Kang-Woo asked. "Stay for a bit longer and have some fruit."

"Hohoho. The faster I resolve this, the earlier I will be rewarded by you, Master Kang-Woo."

Lilith lightly waved and walked out of the room.

Clack.

The door closed.

"Haaa."

Lilith softly sighed. Her mind was in a mess.

'Now isn't the time.'

She hadn't hurried just to receive Kang-Woo's love.

The traces of demonic energy around Seoul had spread at tremendous speed over just a few days. At this rate, a massive incident would break out at any second.

'It's as if... it's searching for something.'

Lilith narrowed her eyes and set off. And...

* * *

"... What?" Kang-Woo asked while aggressively frowning.

Balrog, who was on his knees in front of him, flapped his lips in hesitation but then bit his lip and lowered his head.

"Lilith has... disappeared."

Chapter 295 - Lost Octopus (2)

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Oh Kang-Woo murmured in a low voice.

He had been with Cha Yeon-Joo, Gaia, and Tian Wuchen for the past few days, making rules for Guardians, but he couldn't help but curse when he heard out of nowhere that Lilith had disappeared after he came back home.

Kneeling, Balrog lowered his head.

"After she had gone to hunt down the traces of demonic energy after you had commanded her to find the traces and eliminate the source... contact with her had been severed."

"... Wait just a second."

Kang-Woo called Lilith's communication crystal orb.

Just like Balrog said, Lilith was not picking up.

He narrowed his eyes and focused his mind.

Lilith was his retainer; although they were not linked through the Authority of Subordination like him and Kim Si-Hun, they were still connected by the soul.

He closed his eyes in search of traces of her soul. He even used the Authority of the Beholder, but he wasn't able to feel anything.

"..."

He anxiously bit his lip.

'Lilith lost to a demonic beast?'

Based on the circumstances, there was a chance that the demonic beast had been an ancient demonic beast like Halcyon, and Lilith could have been defeated by them.

"Is Lilith"—Balrog slurred, his eyes trembling in chaos—"dead?"

"No." Kang-Woo firmly shook his head. "If she had died, a portion of my soul that had mixed with hers would have returned to me."

He couldn't tell where she was, but their soul link had not been severed.

"She's alive," Kang-Woo said while clenching his fist.

Balrog sighed in relief.

Lilith was alive, but Kang-Woo still couldn't contact her or figure out where she was.

'In other words...'

Kang-Woo's eyes narrowed. Now that it had come to this, there were only two possibilities.

'Either Lilith intentionally severed communication on purpose...'

He shook his head. The chances of her having done that were very low—no, he was sure that it was nonexistent.

'Or...'

He didn't want to believe it, but considering the situation, it was the most likely explanation.

Kang-Woo said in a low voice, "I think... Lilith has been kidnapped."

"..."

Heavy silence fell, and Balrog's expression aggressively crumpled.

He knew Lilith very well.

Although she wasn't as strong as him, she was highly specialized in infiltration and escape through a diverse array of bewitching magic. She was careful enough to have been able to avoid the courtships of Asmodeus, the Prince of Lust, so it was hard to believe that she had been kidnapped without being able to send even a single S.O.S. signal.

"How could this have..."

Balrog grabbed his forehead while making a confused expression.

Kang-Woo shut his eyes tight. His tightly clenched fists trembled. Veins popped out on his forehead and the back of his hands.

Rumble.

The entire building shook as if an earthquake were happening.

Balrog, who had been in confusion, came back to his senses and placed his hand over Kang-Woo's shoulders.

"My king!"

The shaking didn't stop.

Shatter!

The cup of coffee on the table fell to the ground, and the coffee spilled over the floor with glass fragments.

"Kang-Woo?"

"What's wrong, Kang-Woo?"

Creak.

After hearing the glass break, Han Seol-Ah and Echidna opened the door and entered. Halcyon also peeked over from behind them.

"Gasp."

"M-Master Kang-Woo?"

Suffocatingly dense demonic energy surrounded him. Both Seol-Ah and Echidna paled from the colossal amount of power exerting pressure on their whole bodies.

Halcyon stepped forward and extended his hands, his white hair fluttering from the pressure of the powerful wave of demonic energy. He frantically blocked the demonic energy exuding from Kang-Woo.

Balrog placed his hands on Kang-Woo's shoulders and shook him.

"My king, please return to your senses!!"

"Ah."

Kang-Woo returned to his senses as Balrog desperately shouted at him. He looked around the room, which had become a mess, and said in a low voice, "If they were able to kidnap Lilith, they'd be at least prince-level."

Under the assumption that Lilith hadn't been kidnapped on purpose, it would be impossible to kidnap her unless they were at least as powerful as a prince of Hell.

"The possibility of it being an ancient demonic beast is also low."

If Lilith was not dead, there was only one reason why she couldn't be tracked.

'Someone is disrupting the tracking with magic.'

Ancient demonic beasts fought purely with overpowering physical prowess. Although they possessed intelligence, they were not intelligent enough to be able to use magic. Like Halcyon, most of them overpowered their enemies with their overwhelming raw strength.

"In that case, a prince of Hell might have..."

"Yeah. It's possible."

Not every prince of Hell had shown themselves; only four had appeared so far, and three of them had been killed. Including the ones that they had yet to see, four were still alive.

"Leviathan can be excluded. He can't use magic," Kang-Woo said.

"What about the Constellations of Evil that Raphael had mentioned?"

"Not likely. Even if their seal broke and they came to Earth, they have no reason to kidnap Lilith."

"In that case, we would have to begin our investigations under the assumption that it was a prince of Hell," Balrog expressed while nodding.

"Call Kim Si-Hun."

"Kim Si-Hun is currently in the USA—"

"Call him," Kang-Woo said in a firm voice.

Balrog groaned and nodded. He had seen this side of Kang-Woo several times back in Hell.

'Once he becomes like this...'

He couldn't be reasoned with—nothing could stop the king. He had also been like this when he had caused the thousand-year war, which he had almost no chance of winning at the time.

"Right, then." Kang-Woo stood up. He mumbled, "Let's move."

He turned away. He could feel the gazes of Halcyon, Echidna, and Seol-Ah, but he paid them no mind. He couldn't afford to.

'How dare they...'

He was not mad. Even if Lilith was kidnapped or put in a situation where she could die at any second, he would not become furious. The emotion he was feeling was closer to irritation than rage.

'... Take what's mine?'

Lilith was his—she was his loyal and capable subordinate. Not even he could match Lilith's information-gathering capabilities. Purely in terms of capability, she surpassed Si-Hun.

'But...'

His possession—his subordinate who should be dedicating her life to working for him had been taken from him. The problem wasn't simply that she had been kidnapped. This was a provocation and a declaration of war directed right at him.

"Shit," Kang-Woo cursed aggressively.

Once again, he did not mind that Lilith had been kidnapped. She was just another convenient pawn to use without any worry of betrayal, just like Si-Hun.

"Fuck."

He ground his teeth. For some reason, he could not erase the sight of Lilith's smile from his head.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!!"

The appearance that had caused him trauma, the stench from her oozing pus, and her face covered in hideous tentacles... For some reason, he felt an unbearable desire to see her.

"Kang-Woo, what's wrong?"

Echidna, who hadn't heard what had happened, approached Kang-Woo. She was about to pull on his clothes when she flinched.

"Kang-Woo...?"

She stared into his eyes, which were staring into nothingness while he was in deep thought. The whites of his eyes were dyed black, his irises yellow, his pupils torn horizontally. He was emitting such overpowering bloodlust that she wondered if he really was the Kang-Woo she knew.

"U-Urghh..."

Echidna trembled. Seol-Ah grabbed her by the shoulders and stepped back while lightly hugging her. She realized instinctively that Kang-Woo shouldn't be touched for the time being.

Clack.

Kang-Woo opened the room door and left, which lifted the air of the room.

"Haaa." Halcyon finally let out his held breath.

Seol-Ah approached Balrog. "Umm... Balrog, what happened? I think I overheard that... Lilith was kidnapped."

"It's just as you've heard. Communication with Lilith was severed while she was chasing after the traces of demonic energy in Seoul. We don't yet know who kidnapped her or why."

"O-Oh no..."

Seol-Ah turned pale.

If a beautiful woman like Lilith was kidnapped... one couldn't help but imagine things beyond her just being physically restrained.

"I am also worried about that." As if he'd read her mind, Balrog said in a serious tone, "The king didn't bother mentioning it, but... Lilith is excessively beautiful. Honestly, we would have to take into account what you are imagining."

"...!"

Seol-Ah shut her eyes tight to shoo away the horrifying thought.

"I will also help look for Lilith!"

She didn't know how to find traces of demonic energy or where to even begin searching, but she wanted to be of at least a little help to Lilith.

'Lilith...'

Seol-Ah had been able to become an item with Kang-Woo thanks to Lilith's help. Lilith had given her the courage to confess to him. They'd also become quite close after chatting about things she didn't know about Kang-Woo, such as what he liked and disliked, and many other things. She couldn't let Lilith go through something so insufferable.

"Thank you."

Balrog nodded while making a bitter smile. He knew she wouldn't be of much help, but they needed as much help as they could get.

Just then...

"Ah," Seol-Ah exclaimed as if she'd remembered something.

"What is it?" Balrog asked.

"C-Come to think of it. There was a box placed in front of our door without any address or sender written on it this morning."

"What?"

"I thought it had just been sent to us by accident, so I left it at the security office... W-Wait just a moment!"

Seol-Ah quickly walked out of the room. She ran into Kang-Woo and told him to stay right here before returning with a box in her hands not long afterward.

"This is..."

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes as he stared at the box.

It was an unknown box that had arrived shortly after communication with Lilith had been severed. It was hard to see it as a simple coincidence.

Rip!

Kang-Woo quickly tore open the box. In it was a black crystal orb.

"A communication crystal orb..."

Crystal orbs made by processing mana stones did not require electricity, so they were used very often in daily life.

Kang-Woo raised the crystal orb.

"Fuuu," he nervously sighed. "All of you... stay outside."

He couldn't predict what state she would be in. If she happened to be in the worst possible scenario in his imagination, then he should be the only one to see it.

"..."

Seol-Ah was about to say something but then nodded and dragged Echidna and Halcyon into the room. With a heavy expression, Balrog also nodded and followed behind them.

'Lilith.'

Her appearance was not leaving Kang-Woo's head.

Kang-Woo activated the crystal orb, and a video appeared in midair as if it were a hologram. Within the video, he could see Lilith restrained within darkness.

"Lilith...!" Kang-Woo called out. As he had expected, Lilith had been kidnapped by someone.

- My... king...

He could hear Lilith's heartrending voice. Hearing that, he felt like his heart was being ripped apart, but at the same time, he felt relieved when he saw that she wasn't hurt.

- Aaah! My king!!!

It seemed this was a live feed; after seeing Kang-Woo's face, Lilith urgently called out to him.

- I apologize. I... apologize, my king.

She sobbed. She was so sad that yellow pus, instead of tears, was flowing out of her eyes.

"..."

- It is okay! I have not gone through anything that you are fearing!

Wriggle, wriggle.

Countless tentacles shot out of her body.

'No.'

The atmosphere that had been so grim—the cliché scene of the protagonist raging after seeing the kidnapped heroine—was taking a weird turn.

- Aaah, my king!

Yellow pus poured down from her eighteen red eyes, which were locked on Kang-Woo.

'Fucking wait.'

Kang-Woo clenched his fists. He bit his lip, trying his best to suppress a certain thought in his head while desperately trying to maintain the grim mood.

- There is no need to worry.

Lilith's voice was filled with sadness.

- No matter what happens to me...

'No.'

The tentacles twisted hideously.

- Even if my body... is violated...!!

'Stop.'

Like mold, red holes formed all over her purple skin.

'Please...'

- I...! At least my heart...!

Lilith screamed in a desperate voice.

- Will never submit!!

Poof!

The ends of her tentacles exploded, and yellow pus poured out of them as if her tentacles were fountains. The yellow pus splashed onto the crystal orb, making the feed blurry.

"Aah." Kang-Woo covered his face with his hands. "Please, please... fucking stop... Why are you doing this?"

Kang-Woo clenched his hair and lowered his head.

'You're making me not want to save you.'

Tears flowed down his cheeks.

Chapter 296 - Lost Octopus (3)

"Fuuu."

Oh Kang-Woo sighed and shook his head.

Although his will to save Lilith had decreased by half, he couldn't ignore a loyal subordinate who had accompanied him for hundreds of years.

'Who could have...'

He narrowed his eyes.

The first question that had popped up in his mind when he had first heard of Lilith's kidnapping was who the culprit could be.

'The likeliest culprit is...'

The Prince of Lust, Asmodeus.

He was the prince of Hell who had frantically tried to get his hands on Lilith ever since they were in Hell.

If Asmodeus had also managed to go back into the past and be revived like the other princes of Hell, that was reason enough for him to kidnap Lilith.

'But...'

There was something he couldn't understand. The feed on the crystal orb was live. If Asmodeus really had kidnapped Lilith, there was no way he would send Kang-Woo a crystal like this. It made more sense to think that someone else had sent the crystal for some other purpose.

"Lilith."

- Sniff. M-My king.

Lilith looked at Kang-Woo, pus leaking from her tentacles.

Doing his best not to vomit, he asked in a low voice, "Who kidnapped y—"

Tap.

Just then, someone walked out of the darkness that was holding Lilith captive.

'Rakiel...?'

The first thing he saw were black wings and a stature slightly larger than a human's. It was only obvious that Kang-Woo would first think of the Constellation of Corruption, Rakiel.

'Rakiel kidnapped Lilith?'

It was even more unbelievable than Asmodeus sending the crystal orb. Rakiel was currently sealed by Seraph's power. No, even if the seal had broken and he had crossed into Earth, there was no reason for him to kidnap Lilith out of nowhere.

'What's going on?'

As Kang-Woo's confusion was reaching its peak...

- Are you watching?

The black-winged being completely revealed himself.

"Ah..." A short exclamation left Kang-Woo's mouth.

It was a face he'd seen before, and just the fact that he recognized the face meant that it obviously wasn't Rakiel.

"Fuck... Come to think of it, you had black wings too."

Kang-Woo feigned laughter and glared at the half-human, half-demon.

"Lucis."

He was the son of Lucifer, the Prince of Pride, as well as the half-breed between Lucifer and a human woman.

- I'm relieved you still remember me.

Lucis smiled wickedly.

There was no way Kang-Woo would have forgotten. He had said some bullshit about having fallen for Lilith's true form at first sight, and he was a depraved boy who had stabbed his loving father in the stomach.

'There's no way I'd forget a bastard like that.'

Although he had been slightly instigated, Lucis had ultimately made the conscious decision to stab Lucifer. There was no way that Oh Kang-Woo, the icon of light and justice, would do something so depraved as making a son stab his father.

"Son of a bitch. I'm surprised you had the gall to come back to Earth after doing something as depraved as stabbing your father."

- What...?

Lucis looked at Kang-Woo with a blank expression for a moment before his face crumpled.

- What the hell are you talking about?! It's all your fault that I stabbed my father, Satan!!

"Hah," Kang-Woo laughed in disbelief as he raised his hand to swipe up his hair. He stared Lucis down. "And now you're even trying to pin me as Satan?"

- Do you really think I wouldn't recognize you after you hide in a human body?!

Lucis screamed in anger.

- After that incident, I talked a lot with my father and learned that Lady Lilith used to be a loyal subordinate of the demon king. But back then, she was clearly following Satan's orders.

"..."

Kang-Woo looked back on the past.

'Oh, right...'

This was still back when he was impersonating Satan while wearing the red demon mask. He'd made Lilith and Balrog call him Satan, so it was understandable that Lucis would make such a mistake.

- And after making some deductions, I was finally able to realize the truth.

Lucis glared at Kang-Woo.

Kang-Woo could more or less guess what Lucis had concluded.

'If Lilith, who used to serve the demon king, is suddenly serving Satan, and if Satan was in the form of a human instead of his former demon form...'

The first thing that one would think would be that the demon king had made his subordinate pretend that he was Satan. At least, that was the most logical conclusion.

'But...'

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes. There were still some variables. The first was that Lucifer fully believed that Kang-Woo was Satan.

'At the very least, there is no way Lucifer thinks that I impersonated Satan.'

Every action had an impetus. Lucifer didn't know Kang-Woo's circumstances, so in his mind, there was no way the demon king would pretend to be Satan in the first place.

The demon king that Lucifer knew was the crazed predator who had driven the entire Ninth Hell into war. From Lucifer's perspective, just like how there was no reason for a billionaire to shoplift from a small convenience store, there was no reason for the demon king to pretend to be Satan. There was no way for Lucifer to possibly imagine that the demon king was trying to save Earth for kimchi stew.

'I built things up immaculately, too.'

Not only had Kang-Woo told Lucifer's subordinate, who had come in search of the demon king's Demonic Sea, that Satan already possessed the Demonic Sea, he had also proven to Lucifer directly that he was Satan by showing him Satan's Hell Armament.

'In other words, rather than thinking that the demon king is impersonating Satan...'

It was more likely that he would think Satan had acquired the demon king's body.

"..."

Kang-Woo looked elsewhere in silence.

The second variable was how Lucis looked in the video feed. His eyes were blazing with pure, innocent love for Lilith. He was truly in love with Lilith; the effects of the brainwashing still lingered, and his love had evolved into madness.

If that was the case... If Lucis's love had evolved into madness...

'All humans—no, all living beings—see what they want to see and believe what they want to believe.'

That was the nature of all living beings. Add madness, and there was no more need to even question it.

- Satan, I know that you've taken the body of the demon king and are controlling Lady Lilith.

'I knew it.' Kang-Woo's eyes shone.

It was a simple line of thought.

Everyone in Hell knew that Lilith was deeply in love with the demon king. If she was being controlled by Satan and the man that she loved was already dead, then it was only obvious that Lucis would also hope for his love to bear fruit.

'In other words, Lucifer and that brat still think I'm Satan.'

It was all coming together, and he was finally starting to understand why Lucis had kidnapped Lilith.

"So what if I have?"

- I will free Lady Lilith from your evil grasp!

"..."

Kang-Woo grabbed his forehead as if it hurt from the obvious answer. The Lilith inside Lucis's head was a poor and weak woman who had been brainwashed by Satan and was being forced to serve him.

'Fuck.'

He had never expected that the seed he had sown would bite him in the ass like this.

"Where's Lucifer?"

- Hmph. Father has nothing to do with this matter.

"What?" Kang-Woo frowned.

'This wasn't orchestrated by Lucifer?'

If that wasn't the case, then that meant Lucis had kidnapped Lilith on his own.

'How did that brat possibly manage to do that?'

Lilith had even managed to escape from Asmodeus's grasp. Although Lucis was Lucifer's son, he was still far lacking compared to a prince of Hell.

'Hm?'

Just then, Kang-Woo noticed the black wings on Lucis's back.

'Eight...?'

When he last saw Lucis, Lucis only had six wings—exactly the same amount as Shalgiel.

He wasn't sure if, like angels, a demon's power was indicated by the number of wings they had, but considering how Lucifer had ten wings on his back, it was likely.

'If Lucis has eight wings, he's on the same level as Raphael and Uriel.'

Considering the overwhelming difference in power between Shalgiel and Raphael, he couldn't understand why Lucis had eight wings.

- Huhu. Don't think that I'm the same powerless self as before, Satan.

Lucis smiled wickedly.

- You have no idea how many trials I've overcome to gain her love.

"..."

Kang-Woo wasn't sure what trials Lucis was talking about.

'But one thing's for sure...'

Lucis had become incomparably stronger than before. In other words, just like what Lucifer had declared when Kang-Woo saw him last, he was making very ample preparations to take his revenge. He was not just becoming stronger but also helping his son grow.

'Well, that answers all of my questions for now.'

There was only one thing left to take care of.

- If you don't free her—

"You can shut up now. I have nothing else I need to hear from you," Kang-Woo interjected. "Let's speak more in person."

- What?

Lucis frowned.

Kang-Woo put his hand on the communication crystal orb, closed his eyes, and focused. The overwhelming level of demonic energy control that he had displayed when he forced the Demon God back into the Abyss was once again showing itself.

'Authority of the Beholder.'

He reverse-tracked the very thin connection of demonic energy between the crystal orbs. He was able to clearly see where Lucis was holding Lilith.

"Stay right there, you fucking brat."

Kang-Woo waved his hand.

Split!

A crack formed in the air, creating a black Rift. Without even thinking about calling Balrog, Kang-Woo threw himself into the black Rift.

Riiing.

[You have entered the 'Dimensional Crack' connected to the continent of Aernor.]

A blue message appeared in front of him. He ignored it and moved forward.

"Ah...!"

He saw Lilith, still restrained by the darkness.

"M-My king!!"

"Kuh! How many times must I tell you?! You are being brainwashed by Satan! The demon king is already dead!!"

He heard Lucis's boisterous voice. As he was shouting at Lilith, his eyes widened once he saw Kang-Woo coming out of the black Rift.

"H-How did you..."

"Haaa, fucking hell." Kang-Woo sighed deeply.

He couldn't help but get angry after finding out that the matter that he had been so anxious over had been nothing more than a childish game.

"Move."

"Kuh!"

Lucis bit his lip at the overwhelming amount of demonic energy coming out of Kang-Woo. He created a spear of darkness and pointed it at Kang-Woo.

Crackle!

Black lightning danced at the tip of the spear.

"Aaah, my king!!"

Lilith shed tears when she saw Kang-Woo. Yellow pus splattered everywhere, exuding a horrendous stench. Her tentacles wiggled and grew longer.

"..."

Flinch.

Kang-Woo stopped in his tracks. He couldn't help but grimace at the tremendous stench filling the entire space.

"Ah... I don't wanna save her..." He unwittingly said his honest thoughts while clenching his hair and lowering his head.

"You scumbag..." Lucis clenched his jaw and glared at him.

He couldn't help but be heartbroken as he saw the yellow pus flowing from Lilith's eyes. Not only had Satan brainwashed her, but he was also trying to abandon her.

"Are you blind?! Can't you see her tears—her sorrowful tentacles?!"

"I can. I can see them all too fucking well."

"Then how... how could you say something like that?!"

"That's what I want to ask. How the fuck can you say something like that?"

"Satan..." Lucis bit his lip and surged with rage. "I know exactly why you took the demon king's body and brainwashed this poor woman! I know it all, Satan!!"

"I don't think you do."

"Didn't you do it to obtain her love?!"

"The fuck d'you say?"

Black lightning crackled in all directions.

"That's how desperate you were for her love!! Because Lilith is...! She's more beautiful than anything else in the world!"

"Stop..."

"But...!"

"I said stop..."

Boom!

Lucis stomped on the ground.

"Your love is twisted, Satan!! There is no point in false love!!"

"Please... don't say cringe lines like that."

"I will take this opportunity to reveal the whole truth to her!!"

Lucis waved his hands, and the darkness that was restraining Lilith moved forward.

He then said solemnly, "Satan, this is your last chance. If you truly love her..."

"..."

"Reveal the whole truth here."

Kang-Woo turned his head to look at Lilith, who was restrained by the darkness. Yellow pus was spewing out of her as if she were a fountain, and her green tentacles were wriggling grotesquely.

"Lilith..." He anxiously called out her name. He kneeled and lowered his head. "I'm sorry. I'm actually Satan. The demon king was torn apart by the dimensional wall as he crossed over to Earth and died. I've been... deceiving you all this time."

Kang-Woo revealed the truth in a voice filled with sorrow. Lucis poked Lilith as if telling her that it was exactly like he had said.

"Ah..." Lilith shortly exclaimed.

She wiped the pus coming out of her eyes with her tentacles and smiled.

"It is okay. I... believe in you, my king. I do not know why you are lying, but... I..." Lilith said with a firm voice, "I love you."

"..."

There was a heavy silence.

Kang-Woo's shoulders trembled a bit.

"Sniff... Sniff, urghhh."

Tears dripped down his cheeks.

"I'm Satan..."

"No, my king."

"I'm telling you, I'm Satan..."

"You are not Satan."

"Urgh... Waaaahh." He wept while grabbing his head. "I'm fucking Satan..."

Please just believe me.

Chapter 297 - Lost Octopus (4)

"See, Lady Lilith?! He admitted himself that he's Satan!" Lucis shouted energetically.

The demon king had died, so in his perspective, it was as if the lover of his crush had died. Lucis would obviously think of it as a chance of his lifetime. Consoling Lilith, who was in a sense of loss due to the demon king's death and Satan's deception, would drastically raise his chances that love would bloom between them.

"Shut up! The demon king is Satan? That is complete nonsense!!" Lilith screamed.

She glared at Lucis, and her green tentacles explosively expanded. She was instantly freed from the darkness restraining her, and the tears flowing down her cheeks had disappeared as if they had never been there in the first place.

Kang-Woo lowered his head and narrowed his eyes. The tears flowing down his cheeks had also completely disappeared.

'I knew it.'

Kang-Woo sighed and got up. With that, everything had become clear.

"Haaa," Kang-Woo sighed and slowly walked forward.

"Kuh!"

Lucis blocked his path.

Crackle!

Black lightning poured out from the end of his spear.

"Stop right th—"

Kang-Woo launched forward before Lucis could even finish his sentence. He was so fast that it looked as if his body had extended in a long line.

Wham!!

"Kurgghhh!!"

Kang-Woo punched Lucis right in the face, sending him flying without even giving him a chance to use the spear covered in dancing black lightning.

"Cough! Cough!"

Lucis helplessly rolled across the ground before quickly standing again.

"Shit!"

He extended both arms forward, and a black sphere crackling with lightning gathered in both of his hands.

"I will protect..."

His eight wings spread wide open.

Rumble.

The entire space filled with darkness shook.

"... Lady Lilith!!" Lucis said in a tone filled with powerful will.

From the way he was speaking, it almost seemed as if he were a protagonist trying to save the captured heroine.

What should be coming out of Kang-Woo's mouth was coming from Lucis instead.

"Bullshit." Kang-Woo clicked his tongue and slowly raised his hand.

He exerted perfect control over the Ten Thousand Demon Core's demonic energy after molting five times while risking his life and sleeping with Han Seol-Ah.

"Inferno," he said.

The Authority of Blaze of the Prince of Greed, Mammon, merged with the Authority of Blades.

FWOOSH!!

A sword burning with yellow flames appeared in Kang-Woo's hand.

"Wh-What the—" Lucis's expression hardened.

He could feel an immense heat emanating from the yellow sword. The heat was so intense that it seemed to be distorting the space around it.

"That's..."

His eyes widened. Lucifer had told him about the different Authorities possessed by the princes of Hell to the point that Lucis was sick of it. Among them was the Prince of Greed, Mammon. Lucis had heard that, in terms of firepower, Mammon could overpower even the high-ranking princes of Hell.

"Why... why would you have Mammon's..."

He couldn't understand it. A prince's Authority was their own unique power, and not even the almighty demon king could control them, but...

"Wh-What? How..."

Lucis was looking at the yellow sword burning in Kang-Woo's hand. He couldn't breathe. Although he was dozens of meters away, his skin was burning.

"Satan, h-how are you able to use the Authority of Blaze?!" Lucis cried out.

Kang-Woo smirked and gripped Inferno tighter.

"It isn't just the Authority of Blaze."

"... What?" Lucis asked back while narrowing his eyes at the absurdity.

"I wouldn't be able to keep such a neat shape with just the Authority of Blaze. It's absolute trash in terms of the amount of demonic energy it guzzles."

Kang-Woo looked at Inferno in satisfaction.

Thanks to his improved control over demonic energy, he was able to perfectly merge the Authorities of the princes with other regular Authorities.

It was something he couldn't have even imagined when he was still in the Nine Hells. He recalled molting several times to be able to use the Authorities of the princes of Hell.

'I guess I really have gotten stronger.'

He had not felt it since it had been a while since he had fought at full power, but facing Lucis allowed him to feel the overwhelming difference between them.

'I'm not sure how he managed to get stronger, though.'

Lucis's eight wings were not for decoration. Kang-Woo wasn't sure what sorts of trials he'd gone through, but he'd most certainly become stronger. But of course, Lucis was still several levels weaker than Raphael and Uriel. He was only about as strong as Belphegor, one of the weaker princes of Hell.

Still, considering how long Belphegor had ruled in the Ninth Hell, Lucis's growth was impressive.

Kang-Woo slowly walked toward Lucis with Inferno in his hand.

Lucis desperately shot black spheres at Kang-Woo. If they were not in a dimensional crack right now, the barrage of attacks would have leveled the entire area in a radius several hundred meters wide.

'I can't believe it feels so trivial.'

Kang-Woo had still been able to face Belphegor on his own during his days in the Ninth Hell, but it had been nowhere near as simple.

'It feels like... I'm fighting a little kid.'

He had never imagined a day would come when he would be able to overpower an absolute being like a prince of Hell.

His heart beat faster, and his blood was boiling.

The primal instinct of all animals to get stronger brought him intense pleasure. Kang-Woo smirked. The feeling of omnipotence... the unending thrill of having the entire world under his foot fired him up.

"Twilight."

Just like Uriel, he spoke and materialized an image in his head. It was of a giant blaze engulfing the world whole. In the past, it would've just been imagination, but he could tell that he had now earned the 'freedom' to make that imagination a reality.

Whoosh.

He lightly swung Inferno. He had not used any martial art techniques like Kim Si-Hun. It had simply just been a haphazard slash.

FWOOSH!!!

The compressed flames tore apart space itself along the trajectory of the swing. A yellow crack was formed in the air as if space itself had been injured, and an enormous amount of flames spewed out of it.

The flames devoured the hundreds of black spheres being shot at Kang-Woo, and they began to burn the dimensional crack itself.

As if the sun were setting over the horizon, the world was dyed in twilight.

"Gaaaaahh!!" Lucis screamed.

The flames filled the space with an unbearable heat that made it feel as if the entire world were burning.

Riiing.

[You have learned 'Twilight,' a derivative skill of 'Inferno.']

[Your proficiency in 'Inferno' has reached its maximum limit.]

[Raising the rank of 'Inferno' from SS to SS+.]

'Oh, what's this now?'

It was an unexpected harvest. His irritation from having been trolled by a brat died down a little.

"Kuh! Kurgh!"

Lucis was rolling on the ground as his skin was burning.

'He'll die at this rate.'

Kang-Woo dismissed Inferno. It didn't matter to him if Lucis died or not, but he still had things he wanted to ask him. He walked toward Lucis, who was huddled up on the ground. Almost half of him had turned into ash after being directly hit by Inferno.

"Tsk."

Kang-Woo used the Authority of Blades to cut his finger and make himself bleed. He then let the blood flow into Lucis's mouth to treat Lucis's destroyed body with the Authority of Regeneration.

The singed areas bubbled up and his body was restored.

"My king!"

Lilith ran toward him while shedding tears. She wrapped Kang-Woo in her tentacles and smiled brightly.

"I knew you would come to save m—"

"Lilith," he said in a low voice.

Lilith, sensing his rage, flinched.

"Yes? Wh-What is the matter, my king?"

He glared at her, his mouth shut tight.

Lilith gradually averted her eyes from his gaze.

"Why did you do that?" he asked while biting his lip.

"I am not quite sure what you m—"

"Why... did you do that?" Kang-Woo reached out and grabbed her shoulders. His hands were trembling.

"..."

"That brat has certainly become incomparably stronger than before. I'm sure you wouldn't have stood a chance against him in a head-on battle since he's become almost as strong as a prince of Hell."

Lilith's combat prowess was nothing special. Saying it bluntly, she was weak. If she were up against Shalgiel, she would just barely come out victorious after a fierce battle. It was impossible for her to beat Lucis, who had become as powerful as a prince of Hell.

"But"—Kang-Woo glared at her fiercely—"you could've escaped."

"..."

She was capable of running from even Asmodeus, so there was no way she couldn't have been able to run from an immature brat drunk on his own power.

"..."

"..."

There was a moment of heavy silence. Lilith, her head lowered, shed tears.

"But..." She slowly raised her head as she wept. "You... have never smiled like that at me."

"... What?"

"For the hundreds of years that I've been devoted only to you... after everything that I have done only while thinking of you...!" Lilith shouted. "Not once... not even once... have you smiled at me like the way you do at Seol-Ah."

"..."

Kang-Woo's mouth fell open.

'What kind of shitty melodrama is this?'

He felt as if he'd become the protagonist of a morning TV drama. He was surging with rage from the thought that she had willingly been captured by the enemy for a reason like that.

Lilith was lucky that it had been Lucis. If it had been someone like Asmodeus, she would never have been able to come back to Kang-Woo. It had been far too reckless of her. No, leaving everything aside, her actions had crossed the line.

"What the f—"

"Sniff... Sniff."

His aggressive curse was cut off. He could tell from Lilith's trembling shoulders how afraid she was right now.

"..."

Lilith was not an idiot. She knew how dangerous her actions had been and that she had crossed the line, but the reason she had willingly surrendered to Lucis to get Kang-Woo's love and attention had to have been because she had been that desperate.

"You... have never smiled like that to me," Lilith's voice echoed in his mind.

Kang-Woo closed his eyes.

It was fine even if it was a cheap melodrama or a morning TV drama. He still tried his best to understand Lilith's childish and cringey line.

The man whom she had loved for hundreds of years and pledged vows of love with, albeit for political reasons, had suddenly accepted someone else as his lover. Despite that, she understood and loved him. She had even given the woman who had taken her place as his lover advice on what would make him happy.

She had also taken on an ungodly amount of work to be of help to him and taken on all the annoying and difficult work that he didn't want to do. Despite all that, he still did not give her even an ounce of interest and only paid attention to his new lover. Not only had he been having an affair right in front of her, but he was even rubbing salt into her wounds.

'Oh, fuck.' Kang-Woo's eyes widened. 'I'm a fucking scumbag.'

Forget the kidnapping scheme; he would have literally nothing to say even if she were to stab him in the stomach multiple times with a kitchen knife.

Of course, Lilith was also to blame for not believing him when he had clearly said hundreds of times that her human form was more beautiful, but it was understandable when he considered her position. No one would believe it when someone told them that they looked hideous and the form that they considered to be worse than a cockroach was way more beautiful.

Even a person who had been told they were beautiful for merely decades would say that was nonsense, but Lilith had been around demons who told her that she was beautiful for hundreds of thousands of years. It would obviously be hard to believe even if the man she loved said it.

"I didn't hope for much." Lilith made a sad smile and grabbed Kang-Woo's hands, which were placed on her shoulders.

"..."

"Just once... even for a moment..." Her tears poured down her cheeks and dropped on the back of Kang-Woo's hands. "I want you to smile at me like you do at Seol-Ah."

"..."

Kang-Woo kept his mouth shut. He had wanted to question her about this incident, but he couldn't bring himself to after thinking about her circumstances. Rather, he felt as if he was to blame.

'But still...'

He felt that he should say this, at the very least.

"Just"—he embraced Lilith—"don't ever..."

His hands were trembling. He recalled the unbearable feelings that he had felt when he first heard that she had disappeared.

"Do anything like this again."

"Ah..." A short exclamation left Lilith's mouth.

She could feel from his trembling hands how much he had been worried about her.

"I-I apologize. I just..." Lilith squirmed.

Only now had it dawned on her what she had done. She had basically betrayed the king whom she loved more than anything.

"I know," Kang-Woo said.

He stroked Lilith's head. His hands were covered in sticky mucus, but at this moment, he couldn't care less about the hideous tentacles and the pus. Thinking about everything he had done to her so far, it was not even worth considering.

Kang-Woo grabbed Lilith's cheeks and lifted her head. He made a bright smile.

"A-Aaaahh." Lilith trembled.

The smile she had yearned for so much was being directed at her. Shivers spread through her entire body.

"My king... My king... Sniff."

Her surging passion caused her to put more strength into the tentacles embracing Kang-Woo.

Kang-Woo watched her cry in silence.

He was overwhelmed by the guilt of not giving her something so simple as a smile, which had driven her to such desperation. Her hideous appearance was nothing but an excuse. In terms of appearance, Kang-Woo looked like a fish to her, but she had loved him devotedly for hundreds of years despite it.

'I just... never tried to understand her even once.'

He had never cared about how she felt when she looked at him and how much she loved him. He had never once looked at the woman named Lilith beneath the hideous appearance.

"Lilith."

Kang-Woo took a deep breath. To be honest, he still found the stench disgusting, and the tentacles covering her body were as hideous as ever. But... that was not all there was to her.

"Ah..."

He grabbed Lilith's chin. Her eighteen eyes widened, and she trembled. Kang-Woo slowly tilted his head. For the first time in hundreds of years, without being forced in any way, he kissed her first.

Chapter 298 - Kimi No Na Wa (Your Name)

"Ah..."

A short exclamation left Lilith's mouth. Her purple skin reddened.

"Ah, ah, aah!"

Lilith closed her eyes and jumped in place as she clenched her fists and wiggled her tentacles. She didn't know how to react.

Pus poured out in all directions from the ends of her tentacles.

'...'

Oh Kang-Woo closed his eyes. Even if he tried to ignore it and desperately endure it...

'Fuck...'

He wasn't sure if he'd made the right decision.

'Did I dig my own grave?'

He was swept with regret, wondering that maybe he had made the wrong decision while he was drunk on his own emotions. No matter how precious her feelings were to him, he could not bring himself to ever get used to those tentacles.

"Sniff. Sniff... I love you... I love you so much, my king." Lilith smiled brightly. "Hehe. This is the first time... you kissed me first, my king."

Kang-Woo remained silent with a complicated emotion as he stared at Lilith, who couldn't be any happier.

'I'm thankful, but...'

No matter how much he tried to ignore her outer appearance and look at the person within...

'It's too much.'

Kang-Woo closed his eyes to the stench stimulating his nose.

If she'd looked like Kurosaki Yurie, he couldn't have been any happier, but what he was going through was so hard to withstand that his emotions cooled down pretty quickly.

'Wait.'

A certain thought crossed his mind, and Kang-Woo's eyes shone sharply.

'What if I...'

Although he had treated her far too harshly until now, he had ample justification to do this at this moment in time.

"But still, I can't let this go unpunished."

"Ah..."

"Lilith, what you've done is akin to having betrayed me."

"Th-That..." Lilith's eyes trembled.

Regardless of her reason, it did not change the fact that she had planned this to deceive him. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that she had committed treason. Even execution would be an appropriate punishment.

"... I apologize."

Lilith lowered her head without even thinking about making excuses. Her shoulders trembled, and she anxiously shifted her feet.

"I will accept any punishment," she said while gulping.

Kang-Woo could feel she was even willing to take her own life if commanded.

'Good.'

Kang-Woo opened his mouth slowly while making a nervous expression.

"From now on, I forbid you from being in your demon form in front of me."

"... Pardon?"

"Stay in the form of Kurosaki Yurie whenever you are with me."

"N-Not that!!" Lilith quickly shouted.

The demon king had finally made a move on her, but staying in that ugly and unsightly form might completely extinguish any sparks of love that had been formed at this moment.

"Please, my king! A-Anything but that...!"

She was scared she might be abandoned if she stayed in her human form.

'It took me hundreds of years to win his heart despite looking this beautiful...!'

It had taken hundreds of years to win the demon king's heart in her demon form, which was praised by all demons and would even make lower demons go mad with lust when they saw her. If she returned to her human form, his feelings would surely die down over time.

"You said you'd accept any punishment, did you not?" Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes and glared at her.

Flinch.

Lilith trembled.

"I... understand," she nodded while making a heavy expression. Her tentacles disappeared, and she returned to the form of Kurosaki Yurie.

Kang-Woo clenched his fists while maintaining a solemn expression.

'YOLOOOOOOOO!!!' he exclaimed in silence.

He would have danced right here and now if he could.

'Fuck yes! It worked!!!'

Tears dripped down his cheeks. To be honest, Kang-Woo wanted to tell Lilith the truth; he wanted to tell her that he hated tentacles and her pus even more.

'But she didn't believe me the hundreds of times I said that her human form was far more beautiful.'

He had told her to the point that he had become absolutely sick of it, but even after that, she simply laughed it off. She had even shaken her head and giggled when he had taken a day to tell her seriously.

'At this point, I honestly don't think she's acting like this because she doesn't know.'

Lilith wasn't an idiot, so she probably knew that he wasn't joking after having been told so many times. In other words, it was more accurate to say that she was denying it despite knowing that Kang-Woo was telling the truth.

'Well...'

It wasn't like he couldn't understand Lilith. One might think she was crazy by human standards, but that was not the case—she'd lived for more than ten millennia. He wasn't sure how old she was exactly, but rumors of Lilith had already spread throughout the Nine Hells when Kang-Woo had first fallen into Hell.

After only being told she was beautiful for all that time, her appearance had been denied by the one she loved most. It would be weirder if she had accepted it easily.

'But it's all over now.'

A smile appeared on Kang-Woo's face.

"M-Must I really stay by your side in such an ugly appearance?" Lilith asked in a sad voice.

"Yeah. You must always be in this form whenever you're with me."

"Even during... n-nightly service?"

"Absolutely. Always. No matter what," he emphasized three times.

Tears flowed from Lilith's eyes.

"Wh-Why such a pointless punishment...?! How could you do this when you went absolutely crazy over my tentacle techniques?!!"

Kang-Woo barely managed to stop himself from cursing.

"Regardless, this is my punishment for you. Unless it isn't for unleashing your power during combat, you must always be in human form."

"Urgh..."

"You aren't thinking of glossing over such a serious crime, are you?"

Her lips moved slightly as if she were trying to say something, but she lowered her head.

"I... understand."

Wham!

Just then, a huge noise sounded out. Kang-Woo and Lilith looked toward the source of the sound.

"Wh-What are you talking about?!" Lucis, who had been healed by the Authority of Regeneration, glared at Kang-Woo with an expression full of despair. "How could you do something... so horrible to Lady Lilith?!!"

Lucis shook his head as if he couldn't stand to look at her.

"..."

Kang-Woo looked at him in disbelief. He considered burning him into a crisp again with the Authority of Blaze, but then he smiled as if he'd thought of something better.

"Do you hate Lilith's human form that much?"

"Obviously! This is an insult to Lady Lilith's beautiful tentacles!"

"Then I guess you ultimately only love Lilith for her looks."

"Wh-What?"

"Tsk, tsk, after all your talk about true love... Pathetic."

"Kuh!" Lucis's face aggressively crumpled. "N-No!! I'm truly in love with—"

"Then why did you react so sensitively? The only thing different about her is merely her appearance."

"Well..."

"It just means that you care more about her outer appearance than what's within."

"Y-You're wr—"

"Prove it if I'm wrong."

Lucis remained silent, and his face paled.

Kang-Woo smiled in satisfaction and looked down at him.

"You don't have the right to love her, you brat."

"U-Urgh." Lucis lowered his head, and tears dripped down his cheeks.

Kang-Woo snickered as he looked at Lucis, who was crying in dejection like a loser.

'That's enough joking around.'

It was about time to get to the main point.

"Right, brat. There are a few things that I want to ask you."

"D-Do you seriously think I'll—"

"Lilith," Kang-Woo quietly called out.

The quick-witted Lilith nodded, converted a few of her hair strands into tentacles, and wrapped Lucis's body.

"Gasp!"

Lucis's eyes widened. His eyes turned hazy as he twisted to get free.

Kang-Woo smiled wickedly.

'I've already confirmed that he's still under the brainwashing effect.'

If the effect had disappeared, there was no way he'd have come to Earth in secret to save Lilith without telling his father.

"Argh, urghh." Lucis drooled.

"First off, where's Lucifer?"

"Father is... in the middle... of a trial."

"A trial?"

Kang-Woo recalled Lucis saying through the communication orb that he had become stronger after overcoming a trial.

"And what is this trial?"

"The trial... is a space... made by the... Demon God's heart. It involves... growing one's... power there."

The Demon God's heart.

Kang-Woo's eyes narrowed.

"What kind of space is it exactly?"

"A place... where the flow of time... is different. A space... free from the... laws of physics."

Lucis's answers were choppy due to the brainwashing effect, but Kang-Woo could more or less understand what he was saying.

'Is it the same kind of space as that nightmare of the Primordial Darkness?'

He recalled the black space that he had followed Satan into. Lucis had said that the flow of time was different there, so it was understandable that Lucis had become so strong in such a short period of time.

'If Lucis became this strong...'

He couldn't even guess how much stronger Lucifer had become.

'The son of a bitch had Divinity when he first came to Earth...'

Kang-Woo's expression turned anxious.

Although he himself had become overwhelmingly stronger than his past self, so had Lucifer. Kang-Woo couldn't fathom how serious of a wild card Lucifer would become while Lucifer was preparing for his revenge in the trial, the space made from the Demon God's heart.

'I'll have to keep this guy for now, then.'

Kang-Woo looked down at Lucis. As long as he had Lucis, Lucifer wouldn't be able to act freely. For now, he had acquired some solid insurance.

'There's no need to be in a rush.'

He narrowed his eyes. It was dangerous to be indolent, but there was no need to be in a rush either.

'If I play my cards right, I could use Lucifer as well.'

The gears in his head started to quickly turn.

He did not have a detailed plan yet, but he surmised that he would be able to use Lucifer in the future if he used Lucis correctly. Kang-Woo couldn't help but smile.

'This is what you get for not raising your son right.'

Lucis's trolling was enough to make Kang-Woo shudder. He got goosebumps from imagining having a son like Lucis.

"Lilith, brainwash him even more thoroughly than before. Ensure he's willing to stab his father or cut open his throat if you order him to."

"Yes, my king." Lilith bowed.

The brainwashing she'd already applied to him was still in effect, so it wouldn't be hard to intensify it.

Kang-Woo turned away while making a satisfied expression.

Just then...

"Hm...?"

Kang-Woo saw the eight wings on Lucis's back and the black lightning crackling between them. A thought crossed his mind like a bolt of lightning.

'Wait just a minute.' Kang-Woo's eyes widened.

"Fuck yeah. I can use this."

He laughed in disbelief from not having thought of it sooner.

'He can be used for more than just keeping Lucifer in check.'

"Pfft, huehuehuehue."

A vulgar laugh unwittingly flowed out of his mouth.

"My king...?"

"Step aside for a second."

Kang-Woo walked toward Lucis and tightly gripped his shoulders.

"Listen carefully, Lucis."

"U-Urrh...?"

"Your name is no longer Lucis."

"Na...me?"

"From now on, your name is..."

Kang-Woo smirked.

"Rakiel."

Chapter 299 - That Was Barely Anything

With the self-made kidnapping plot right after the Valencia incident wrapped up, Oh Kang-Woo was finally able to take a break.

"Haaa," Kang-Woo sighed in exhaustion while sprawled out on the couch. He'd been so busy that he hadn't had time to properly sleep in nearly a week.

'I'm missing out.'

He frowned as he remembered how his demonic energy control improved just from sleeping with Han Seol-Ah.

Although it did not rise unconditionally, it still rose far more than when he trained for a whole day to raise it, so it was beneficial for him to sleep with Seol-Ah every day.

"I mean..."

Kang-Woo smiled. Annoying things had happened one after another, but he had gained a lot out of them.

'First, I was able to filter out the stagnant water within Guardians.'

To him, Guardians was like a hound. Although it might not be able to kill the enemy, it could at least bite their leg to buy enough time for him. Considering that the success rate of hunting a boar lowered to below half if you hunted without a hound, managing Guardians well was important.

'And...'

Kang-Woo's eyes shone. He thought about the demon with black wings, Lucis.

'This is really big.'

He still wasn't sure why Lucis—or, to be more precise, his father Lucifer—had black wings. Lucifer had been ruling as a prince of Hell since before Kang-Woo had even arrived in Hell. Regardless, what mattered was that Lucis's wings were exactly the same as the ones that fallen angels had. It was also a huge plus that Lucis, who was a half-breed between demon and human, was indistinguishable from angels.

'There might be angels who recognize his face, so I should modify it a little.'

He'd heard from Raphael that only Michael had ever seen Rakiel's face, meaning that even if he made Lucis act as Rakiel, no one would be able to tell.

'Rakiel Coin to the moon!'

Kang-Woo couldn't help but smile.

The bad thing about the Satan Coin was the fact that Kang-Woo and Satan existed simultaneously in the same place, which made it very restricting.

Although he could create a fake body with the Authority of Cloning, it could only do extremely simple tasks, to the point that one would immediately be able to tell that it was a fake once someone picked a fight with it.

'But if I brainwash Lucis into being Rakiel...'

That meant both Kang-Woo and Rakiel could be in the same place. Not only that, it would not affect Kang-Woo in the slightest even if Lucis was found out to not be Rakiel.

'It's an immortal coin.'

It was a perfect coin that couldn't fail. Even if it did fail, it wouldn't affect him at all, so there was no reason for him not to cheer.

'But of course, this brat is a bit too weak to play the role of Rakiel properly.'

Kang-Woo could somewhat compensate for that by controlling demonic energy from a distance, just like he'd done during the incident with Raphael. Since Lucis was at least as strong as a low-ranking prince of Hell, Lucis would be able to fight far better than Kang-Woo's clone.

'And most importantly...'

Kang-Woo looked toward the kitchen.

"I'm so glad nothing bad happened, Lilith," Seol-Ah said.

"Hoho. Thank you for worrying about me."

"Not at all. I wanted to help save you as well, but Kang-Woo left without saying a word..."

"I'm happy enough knowing that the king treasures me so deeply."

"Oh, come to think of it, when you were kidnapped, Kang-Woo was..."

He saw Lilith, in the form of Kurosaki Yurie, chatting with Seol-Ah. Although it was just a normal kitchen, the two women sitting and chatting radiated such a gorgeous aura that the scene felt as if it were straight from the front cover of a magazine.

He couldn't help but clench his fists in delight. He felt as if he were about to cry.

'Fuck yeah... This is it. This is the life.'

The best thing he had received from the past few incidents was undoubtedly that he'd been freed from the tentacles that had traumatized him for such a long time. Just that alone was incredible enough.

"Kang-Woo, are you crying?" Echidna, who'd been watching TV while sitting on his lap, tilted her head.

Kang-Woo silently patted Echidna's head as he smiled. He was filled with an inexplicable sense of joy.

"It's getting late, so I will get going. Oh, right. I placed the report regarding Lucis in your room earlier."

"Okay, thanks." Kang-Woo smiled brightly and waved.

Lilith smiled back at him and bowed.

"Fufu. Your room was also a little messy, so I tidied it up."

"Mm. Was it that messy?"

"Just a little." Lilith turned to Seol-Ah and winked.

Kang-Woo tilted his head but paid it no mind.

'They seem to be on the same wavelength about something.'

They had been getting very close recently, so it wouldn't be weird if they shared things he wasn't aware of.

"I will see you tomorrow." Lilith opened the front door and walked out.

Kang-Woo checked the time—it was 11:00 p.m. It was still too early to fall asleep, but he really wanted to relieve all the fatigue that he had accumulated in the past week.

'There's also the demonic energy control issue.'

He wasn't sure how strong Lucifer would become through the trial, so he had to become as strong as possible. Besides molting, sleeping with Seol-Ah was the fastest way to improve his demonic energy control.

"Seol-Ah."

"Yes, Kang-Woo?" Seol-Ah walked toward him while making a kind smile as if she knew exactly what he wanted. "Shall we sleep together tonight?"

"Yeah."

"Fufu. Just a moment. I'll go wash up." Seol-Ah went to take a shower while humming.

Kang-Woo gulped and went into his room first.

The report Lilith had mentioned was on his desk, and the room had been tidied up like a hotel room.

"... Right, then."

Kang-Woo poured a little bit of demonic energy into a black crystal orb at the corner of his desk—it was the communication crystal orb that Lucis had sent him. It had originally been for two-way communication, but he had modified it to be able to record videos.

'It's been bothering me for a while.'

Kang-Woo wanted to check what happened whenever he slept with Seol-Ah.

Things that he couldn't understand always happened. For example, his clothes were always partly taken off, and there were marks on his chest and thighs, among other weird things.

'It's also weird that I don't remember anything whenever I sleep with Seol-Ah.'

He would usually be very sensitive to anything that happened even when he was asleep, but he had absolutely no memory of anything during the time that he was asleep with Seol-Ah for some reason.

'I also have to figure out why my demonic energy control improves.'

As long as he figured that out, he'd be able to apply it to his usual training routine. Kang-Woo put the crystal orb on 'record' mode and placed it on the table.

Clack.

"I'm back, Kang-Woo."

The door opened, and Seol-Ah entered in her pajamas. She'd just taken a shower, so her slightly wet hair and red cheeks gave off an alluring air.

"Ahem," Kang-Woo coughed.

"I heard that you've been very busy recently... Are you feeling okay?" Seol-Ah asked in a worried voice while putting her hand on top of his.

"Well, nothing's wrong in particular. My body actually doesn't require sleep."

"But aren't you still tired?"

"That's inevitable."

Although he was physically fine, he couldn't do anything about psychological fatigue. He was keeping the Ten Thousand Demon Core in check at all times, so psychological fatigue would only keep piling up.

Although sleep wasn't mandatory, he needed it to some extent.

"... I'm worried." Seol-Ah laid her head on his shoulder and gripped his hand tighter.

Kang-Woo felt a warm and comfortable sensation spread from his hand to his entire body.

'Darliiiiiiiiiing!'

Kang-Woo held back his desire to scream. He wanted to hug her and jump, but the air was too serious for him to do something like that.

'Still, darling is the best.'

It was difficult to feel the same comfort and warmth from anyone else but her. Kang-Woo frantically forced down the ascending corners of his mouth and embraced her with one hand.

"Don't worry. I'm not working hard enough to the point that I'd break down."

"Still..." Seol-Ah pinched Kang-Woo's thighs while slightly pouting. "You've barely been home lately. Do you have any idea how lonely Echidna has been?"

"Only Echidna?"

"Ngh... W-Well..." Seol-Ah blushed.

Kang-Woo laughed and then gave her a light kiss on the lips. The air around them was so sweet that he felt as if he were receiving death threats from men all over the world.

"Let's go to bed."

"Okay." Seol-Ah's eyes shone. She snorted in excitement and then spread her arms out wide.

"Alright, come here."

"Ahem. It's a bit embarrassing every time, so why don't we just—"

"Now," she said in a firm voice as if she wouldn't take no for an answer.

Kang-Woo ended up lying in bed in her arms.

'Ah.'

An inexplicably soft and warm sensation spread through his body. Though he couldn't even remember his childhood, it was as if a deeply imprinted loneliness was being healed.

'I'm getting sleepy again.'

Kang-Woo felt his eyelids become heavier as if he had taken sleeping pills. Before he fell asleep, he looked toward the crystal orb lying on the table.

'Tomorrow...'

He would come to know everything.

* * *

"Urghhh..."

After he woke up the next morning, Kang-Woo checked his body first.

'Like I thought.'

His clothes were loosened, and there were red marks around his chest.

'My demonic energy control has also gone up.'

As he closed his eyes and focused, he could feel that his control had improved.

"Good."

Kang-Woo grabbed the crystal on the table and activated it by pouring a small amount of demonic energy into it.

- Fufu. You're already asleep.

He could see himself sleeping in Seol-Ah's arms.

- How cute.

Seol-Ah softly giggled as she patted his head.

"Ahem."

Kang-Woo focused on the video while blushing.

'Right then, let's see what happens...'

Right as he was getting nervous...

- Yawn.

'Hm?'

Seol-Ah yawned, and then she closed her eyes. All that could be heard were the sounds of breathing.

'What?'

That was it?

Kang-Woo watched the video with a strange sense of disappointment.

Thirty minutes later...

Whoom.

Twelve faint wings appeared on Seol-Ah's back. At the same time, demonic energy leaked out of Kang-Woo's body.

The demonic energy and the light from her back intertwined in the air.

'I guess it really was because of Seraph's energy.'

Kang-Woo's eyes shone as he watched the demonic energy and the white light intertwine.

"Hmm. Seraph's energy is the more active one."

The demonic energy did not move an inch as if it were asleep, whereas the white light moved busily as if it were coveting the black demonic energy.

Pop, pop.

The ripples from the energy disheveled his clothes, and red marks appeared around his body.

"So this is why the red marks appeared."

His clothes seemed to loosen when his energy entangled with Seraph's.

The white light that had been swirling around the demonic energy focused on a specific part of it, as if it were attacking a weak point. The black demonic energy started to get sucked into the white light. As if it were resisting the white light's attack, the black demonic energy huddled up and then drooped lifelessly. It then retreated back into Kang-Woo's body.

'What the hell happened?'

Regardless of how many times he watched it, he couldn't understand why the two energies clashed.

'At the very least, it's clear that my demonic energy control rose due to my power intermingling with Seraph's.'

The power within Seol-Ah was that of the Celestial Goddess. He still wasn't sure why Seraph's soul had entered her, but Kang-Woo couldn't deny that the god possessed power beyond his imagination. It was possible that his control had forcibly risen so that it wouldn't be devoured by that power.

'It's similar to how molting instinctively raises my demonic energy control to keep me alive.'

It could be considered 'casual' molting.

"In any case, it's a huge plus."

There could possibly be side effects, but he had not felt any so far, and it did not risk his life like molting did.

'I don't think I'd be able to use this for training, though.'

But if his demonic energy control could improve just by sleeping with Seol-Ah, there was no reason not to do it. Demonic energy control was absolutely necessary for him since he possessed a ticking time bomb, the Ten Thousand Demon Core.

"Well, that was barely anything."

To be honest...

'I was hoping that maybe something a bit dirty was going on...'

He had been ignoring it since he wasn't sure if the kind and gentle Seol-Ah would do such a thing, but since he was a man, he had been having dirty thoughts.

"Tsk."

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue in a strange sense of disappointment.

* * *

"Oh, Lilith?" While Kang-Woo was watching the recording in his bedroom, Seol-Ah called Lilith.

"Yes, I did as you said. I wouldn't have known if you hadn't told me."

- We aren't strangers anymore, so we should help each other out. It caught my attention while I was cleaning the room.

Lilith's voice came out through the smartphone.

Seol-Ah asked in worry, "But what if he finds ou—"

- No need to worry.

Lilith giggled and continued.

- Doctoring footage is my specialty.

Chapter 300 - Key of the Demonic Sea

"Let's leave it here for today," Oh Kang-Woo said as he slowly looked around the humid jungle with the stench of monster corpses lingering in the air.

"A-Already?" Uriel, the blue-haired boy, turned his head in surprise.

'What do you mean, "already"?'

They had scoured the Amazon jungle for traces of Rakiel for over eight hours today.

'What an absolute waste of time.'

Rakiel wasn't on Earth.

Kang-Woo was the one who'd been using his name, so he knew it better than anyone else.

They were going all around the world in search of nonexistent clues, so there was no better way to waste his time.

"Ahem. L-Let's search a bit more. Ah, how about we take a break before resuming our search? Oh, let's eat that kimchi stew thing. You brought it with you, didn't you?"

"Ngh."

Kang-Woo groaned while staring at Uriel, who was searching for a good place to eat. Since he was stuttering, Uriel also seemed to know that searching for Rakiel here for any longer was pointless.

'Why's he acting like this despite knowing it's pointless?'

Uriel had been contacting him more frequently as of late.

No, to be more precise, ever since Kang-Woo had bought him a smartphone after suggesting they take a day off while touring Seoul, Uriel had not stopped contacting him.

'Why is an angel so goddamn good at using a smartphone?'

Kang-Woo took his smartphone out and looked over all of the messages Uriel had sent him through KakaoTalk this morning.

Yuriel ❤️: [What are you doing today?]

Yuriel ❤️: [You finished all the Guardians work a few days ago, right?]

Yuriel ❤️: [Then search for traces of Rakiel with me today.]

Yuriel ❤️: [Shouldn't you be up by now? Why aren't you reading my messages?]

Yuriel ❤️: [That aside, this smartphone thing is fascinating.]

Yuriel ❤️: [Things you want to say can be sent immediately like a letter. It's way better than a communication orb!]

Yuriel ❤️: [Things like language can be easily learned through magic.]

Yuriel ❤️: [Maybe I should supply this to everyone in Sant'Angelo.]

Yuriel ❤️: [But I guess it'd be difficult since there wouldn't be any... wifi, I think it was called? It's better than communication orbs in every way except this.]

Yuriel ❤️: [Why is wifi so slow in Africa? I'm trying to watch videos on this MyuTube thing, but it keeps buffering.]

"..."

There were over a hundred messages like this.

'He's acting like some kid begging for attention.'

He'd thought Uriel just looked like a kid, but he also seemed to be one mentally as well.

'The characteristic of angels is "obsession," or so I've been told.'

Rather than obsession, it felt more like he was sending messages simply because he was so fascinated by a smartphone, but...

'It gets annoying when he sends them without rest.'

Uriel kept sending messages as if he were desperate for attention.

If Kang-Woo had known that something like this would happen, he wouldn't have done something as insane as giving him a smartphone.

"... I never thought he'd be able to use it so well," Kang-Woo mumbled so that Uriel wouldn't be able to hear him.

He had never expected an angel who lived in a world without even any electronic devices, let alone a smartphone, would be able to adapt to a smartphone so quickly.

'What the hell is with that ID, though?'

The addition of 'Y' could be glossed over since he could have just made a typo when typing his name, but Kang-Woo could not understand why he had added a heart mark. He had asked Uriel, but apparently that was a typo as well. He'd even taken a profile picture. Though he wasn't quite on Halcyon's level, he looked like a girl due to his androgynous looks.

'I feel like I'm texting a girl working at a shady establishment or something.'

An establishment where employees wearing angel costumes jailbaited people.

'I don't even have a profile picture.'

He laughed in disbelief. He didn't find out until later, but it seemed that the level of civilization in Aernor wasn't as low as he had expected.

Although they didn't have something like a smartphone, they had magic tools that could replace most electronic devices used on Earth. Since angels were mainly active in Aernor, angels also frequently used such magic tools.

'I mean, at least I'm getting closer to him.'

It was absolutely necessary to build good relationships with the angels. Unlike the immovable Raphael, Uriel was much easier to control. As long as he kept growing their relationship...

'He'll definitely be more helpful than Guardians.'

If Guardians was like a hound, Uriel and the other angels were like a trained tiger; taming it was extremely difficult, but once trained to the point that it could be controlled, the beast was strong enough to kill the prey all on its own.

"Haaa."

It was only obvious that training such a fierce beast would be tiresome.

Compared to Raphael, who seemed impossible to tame, the situation with Uriel was far better.

'I can at least get through to him.'

Raphael, from his manner of speech to his thought process, was way too much of a boomer, which had resulted in Kang-Woo not being able to get through to him.

"Alright, all done!" Uriel exclaimed in a bright voice.

He'd used magic to cut giant trees all around the jungle to make a table and chairs.

Kang-Woo smiled bitterly.

"You didn't have to make something this extravagant."

"Hehe. It's better to eat in comfort if possible. Besides, it wasn't that hard to make." Uriel grinned and took a seat.

Kang-Woo sat across from him and opened his magic bag, taking out a container of kimchi stew Han Seol-Ah had made. He took out a pot and poured the contents of the container into it.

"When will the other angels be coming?"

"Mm. I pushed them a bit too hard to send me here, so it'll probably take more time than I thought."

Kang-Woo frowned a bit at Uriel's answer.

'I guess I'll be doing this for a while, then.'

Uriel didn't want to be with anyone other than Kang-Woo for some reason. Kang-Woo had sent Kim Si-Hun to him once because it was a waste of time, but after Uriel had harshly rejected Si-Hun, Kang-Woo had to step up again.

'He's not some baby bird asking for his mommy.'

Not only did he have wings on his back, but he also behaved like a pigeon.

Kang-Woo put his hands on his forehead as if it hurt.

Seeing that, Uriel's eyes widened.

"Wh-What's wrong? Are you hurt?"

"N-No. It's nothing."

"I noticed you've been doing that a lot lately... Are you sure you aren't hurt?"

"Haha. I assure you, I'm fine."

Kang-Woo smiled and shook his head as he looked into Uriel's worried eyes.

'It's because of you, dammit.'

There was no way Kang-Woo wouldn't be stressed from going all around the world in search of nonexistent traces of Rakiel. If not for this, he would be currently tasting paradise in his darling's arms.

'Ah, my blood pressure...'

The back of his head hurt again. Knowing the fact that it was necessary only made him more angry, just like how a person did not want to wake up on a Monday morning despite knowing that they needed to go to work.

"A-Are you sure you're okay?" Uriel gave him a worried look.

Kang-Woo had been frequently grabbing the back of his head while groaning lately, so Uriel wondered if something was wrong with him.

"I told you, I'm fine." Making a forced smile, Kang-Woo finished emptying the container of kimchi stew into the pot.

The container, infused with insulation magic, had kept the kimchi stew steaming hot. Kang-Woo salivated as he looked at the steaming kimchi stew.

"I've noticed a lot of this being in the stew lately. It didn't used to be there," Uriel said as he grabbed something that looked like a chestnut from the kimchi stew with his chopsticks. "It's called garlic, right? Is this a staple ingredient in kimchi stew?"

"No, I wouldn't say it's common."

Seol-Ah had recently started putting garlic in the kimchi stew.

Kang-Woo put garlic and kimchi above a bed of rice.

"But it's okay, since it's still delicious. Garlic is also good for restoring stamina."

"Really? It must be for nutrition purposes, then. But someone of your level doesn't really need their stamina replenished, do they?" Uriel asked while tilting his head.

The Kang-Woo he knew was stronger than Shalgiel but weaker than Raphael—about as powerful as Belphegor. Even someone far below him, Tian Wuchen, rarely expended stamina during daily life. That was also why the stronger the individual, the less sleep they needed.

"I've been experiencing a lot of energy expenditure lately."

"... Doing what?"

"Nothing worth mentioning."

It was difficult for Kang-Woo to explain to Uriel that he was expending stamina because he was going through 'casual molting' as the energy of the Demonic Sea intermingled with Seraph's energy while he was asleep.

'Because I'm not sure why it's happening either.'

He didn't know why it was happening, but he wasn't stopping it since it was of great benefit to him. Also, sleeping in Seol-Ah's embrace felt good.

"..."

Uriel bit his lip anxiously and fell into thought as he stared at Kang-Woo.

Not noticing his expression, Kang-Woo ate the kimchi stew.

"Slurp, munch."

It was as delicious as always.

* * *

"I will get going, then."

"Ah, okay."

Uriel waved his hand, a lonely expression on his face. It seemed like he wanted to stay with Kang-Woo a bit longer, but he really had to let him go now.

'I hope his subordinates arrive soon,' Kang-Woo thought.

Only then would Uriel stop chasing him around like an abandoned dog.

"Let's try investigating from Russia again in three days' time."

"Ah...! O-Okay!" Uriel nodded while making a bright expression.

Kang-Woo smiled bitterly from how blatantly excited Uriel looked. Dealing with Uriel was certainly far easier than dealing with Raphael.

'Is this what they call a blessing in disguise?'

He had gotten headaches in the past from the possibility of having to go to war against the angels, but now their relationship had become even stronger than before. Although it wasn't an alliance relationship between two organizations like it had been before, making an ally out of Uriel, who was far stronger than an army, was extremely meaningful.

"I'll text you when I get home." Uriel waved his hand.

Kang-Woo nodded and headed home to where his darling was waiting for him.

* * *

Clack.

"I'm back~"

Kang-Woo opened the front door and saw the home he'd been so dearly missing. Seol-Ah was sitting on the living room couch all by herself, staring blankly at the air. Chills went down Kang-Woo's spine due to her sitting completely still in the living room without even having the TV on.

"Ah."

Life returned to Seol-Ah's eyes when she noticed Kang-Woo. The chilling sensation quickly disappeared and was replaced by warm, comforting energy.

She approached him with a bright smile on her face. She placed her forehead on his collarbone and gently embraced him as if he were a precious treasure.

"You're late today. I was waiting for you."

"Where are Halcyon and Echidna?"

"They went to Balrog's house to train."

"They've been training hard lately."

"Fufu. I think the shock from seeing your training last time sparked their desire to train." She was probably referring to the molting. "What kind of harsh training was it exactly for them to be acting like this?"

"Oh..." Kang-Woo slurred.

Molting was actually far too brutal to call training. Echidna and Halcyon had bawled their eyes out when they saw it, so it was only obvious how Seol-Ah would react.

"It's nothing worth mentioning."

He averted his gaze while smiling awkwardly, just like he had done with Uriel.

"..."

Seol-Ah hugged him tighter in silence. Her eyes were shaking.

"I'll go take a shower."

"... Okay."

Seol-Ah sounded gloomy, likely having been hurt by the fact that Kang-Woo was hiding things from her.

'I'm sorry, darling.'

But even so, he could not tell her about molting. There was no way that he could package the process that involved his body turning inside out while pissing and shitting as harsh training.

She would obviously cry as much as Echidna had, so he just couldn't tell her.

'I might have to use it again, after all.'

Staying silent was the correct decision.

Kang-Woo entered the bathroom and turned on the hot water, filling the room with steam.

Whoom!

Just then, black light poured out of the Key of the Demonic Sea on his right middle finger.

Riiing.

[The Key of the Demonic Sea has successfully digested three Hell Armaments!]

[You have successfully acquired the first key, 'Predation'!]

Creak, creak.

The sound of gears turning was heard from the Key of the Demonic Sea. Five geometric symbols appeared on the ring's surface, and one of them shone dimly with white light.

Kang-Woo's eyes shone.

'Finally!'

The Key of the Demonic Sea had returned.

Before he even had a chance to check the new power that he had gained, another system window popped up.

[You must complete a prerequisite quest to acquire the second key of the Key of the Demonic Sea, 'Skyfall.']

'A prerequisite quest?'

['Key of the Demonic Sea' prerequisite quest - 'Beginning of Chaos.']

[Sow the 'Seed of Corruption' within a being of at least an archangel or above.]

"What the fuck is this?" Kang-Woo frowned as he looked at the message window.

He had received an absurd quest out of nowhere.

"How the fuck am I supposed to—"

Riiiiing.

[The prerequisite quest has been successfully achieved.]

"What?"

[You have acquired the second key of the Key of the Demonic Sea, 'Skyfall.']

"The fuck?"

It was already achieved?