

## **M. in Hell 321**

Chapter 321 - Goddess's Rage (2)

*'Holy shit, what?'*

Oh Kang-Woo, who had been scrunched up while clenching his chest, flinched. He was honestly a little confused.

*'What's with the overreaction?'*

He had only just been selected as a Protector; although Gaia had sworn on her Divinity that she would spare no support and love for him, it was a little out of nowhere.

*'Why does she love me so much...?'*

It was as if he had been adopted, and his adoptive mother was showing him a little too much love as soon as he entered the household. Although it was not a bad feeling, he was still confused nonetheless.

"Are you okay, my child?!" Gaia approached Kang-Woo, who had collapsed on the floor in pain.

She was looking down at him on the verge of tears; no, she was actually crying a little.

*'What the actual fuck?'*

Kang-Woo's eyes were filled with confusion, but continued his performance.

"Cough! Cough! I-I'm alright..."

"How can you say that when you're like this?!" Gaia embraced Kang-Woo while shouting, trembling while shedding tears. "Please... Please do not die... I cannot lose another child after Alec."

It had been a while since Kang-Woo had heard that name. Everything made sense as soon as he heard it.

*'I guess she's the type to love the humans that she has chosen as Protectors to death.'*

If that was not the case, there was no way that she would mention Alec Osborne, who had died by the hands of Satan years ago. The fear in her voice, her genuine concern for her incarnation, Layla, as well as her attitude toward Kim Si-Hun all showed that she treated the humans that she had selected as Protectors as her real children.

*'So that's why she even went as far as to swear on her Divinity.'*

Kang-Woo did not quite know how deep of a meaning that held, but he felt like they had not been empty words. A portion of her Divinity would likely be annihilated if she were to break the vow.

*'She really decided to treat me like her own son. No wonder, considering everything I did for her.'*

In Gaia's perspective, Kang-Woo was nothing short of her savior. She likely had great interest in him even before she had selected him as a Protector.

*'This is...'*

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes, lowering the ascending corners of his mouth with all his might.

*'... Amazing, isn't it?'*

Kang-Woo had seen her in a completely different light, other than simply being a troll. He was more than satisfied with becoming a retainer of a god, but she had even decided to treat him like her own child. It was honestly far better than what he had expected.

*'Kuh, who the fuck dared to call Lady Gaia a loser?!'*

He wanted to beat the shit out of the people who had dared to call Gaia useless. She was more perfect than his wildest dreams.

*'If that's the case...'*

Kang-Woo needed to stir Gaia up even more.

"Haaa, haaa," Kang-Woo panted heavily while clenching his chest. He took a deep breath in and slowly got up. "... I'm fine now."

Gaia stared at him with sunken eyes. "Why did you not say anything?"

Kang-Woo remained silent.

"Tell me, my child," she said, as if scolding him.

Kang-Woo smiled in a way that looked as if it would shatter into pieces at even the slightest touch.

"I was scared... of losing them." Kang-Woo averted Gaia's gaze and stared at Si-Hun, who was staring at him in shock. "I have gained too much."

Silence fell. With a grimace, Gaia shouted, "You... Idiot!"

Smack!

Gaia strongly flicked Kang-Woo's forehead. She then continued with a hardened face, "I will hold off on the mission of sending you to Aernor for now. I cannot leave such a dangerous mission in your hands in that state."

"No, you must." Kang-Woo shook his head. He grabbed Gaia's hands and stared at her with blazing eyes, speaking with certainty, "I have to go."

Gaia's eyes shook.

"It will take months just to open a Gate leading to Aernor. We cannot delay it," Kang-Woo stated.

"But you..."

"Lady Gaia." Kang-Woo tightened his grip on her hands and said again, "I have to go."

Gaia remained silent. She also knew very well that they had to go to Aernor to eliminate the Demon God's corpse and acquire Aernor's protection. If it had not been urgent, she would not have entrusted this mission to Si-Hun and Kang-Woo in the first place.

"My child..."

Gaia's eyes shook. She caressed Kang-Woo's cheek and lowered her head before she said, "I am truly sorry... For having you shoulder such a heavy burden."

She wanted to chase away the demonic energy within Kang-Woo this instant, but the fact that there were still traces of demonic energy within him despite having been chosen as a Protector meant that it had already spread to the point of it being nearly irreversible. If she forcibly tried to eliminate the demonic energy by using her Divinity, Kang-Woo's life would be put at risk. There was only one way to eliminate the demonic energy within him, and that was to kill Rakiel, the root source.

Gaia asked, her voice filled with bloodlust, "The Constellation of Corruption is currently on Earth, correct?"

Uriel answered, "Yes. He is plotting some sort of scheme here on Earth."

"I see." Gaia's eyes narrowed. Breathtaking energy flowed out from her and weighed down everything around her. "Wings of Seraph, can I entrust you with the mission of locating Rakiel while I prepare the Gate leading to Aernor?"

"Of course." Uriel nodded without hesitation.

He had been searching for Rakiel's traces whenever he had time, despite it not being his duty. He kneeled on one knee while spreading open his eight wings.

"In exchange, I have a request," Uriel mentioned.

"Speak," Gaia replied.

"I would also like to go on the mission that you have entrusted to Kang-Woo," he said while looking in Kang-Woo's direction.

"I will allow it," Gaia answered without hesitation.

There was no reason for her to refuse a powerful and reliable being like Uriel to join the mission.

"Constellation of Corruption..." Gaia mumbled while recalling Rakiel, who was hidden somewhere in this star.

Crackle—!

"I swear on my Divinity! I, Gaia, Goddess of the earth... will bestow upon you the most horrifying and agonizing death imaginable!"

Rumble.

Bloodlust blossomed from Gaia's eyes.

"The price you will pay for laying a hand on my child... will not be cheap."

The rage of the goddess with top-rank Divinity shook the earth.

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“Pfft, huehuehuehue!”

Kang-Woo unleashed the laughter that he had suppressed as soon as he came back home. He crouched while holding his stomach.

- The price you will pay for laying a hand on my child... will not be cheap.

*‘Shiiiet, I’m falling in love.’*

He couldn’t help but smile as he kept recalling Gaia’s words.

*‘It’s perfect.’*

The picture he had been hoping for had been fully painted.

*‘The hero being corrupted by demonic energy, and the goddess trying to save him...’*

It was now no longer weird that demonic energy could be felt from him; in other words, the chances of his true identity being found out had been lowered even further. His performance had even deepened her affection toward him.

*‘That aside...’*

Kang-Woo sighed from the moment that had freaked him out.

*‘That was dangerous.’*

He regretted having trusted in his Ruler of Demonic Energy too much.

*‘I can’t believe she detected my demonic energy.’*

Despite having been extra careful in hiding it, he had still not been able to conceal it in its entirety.

*‘I guess that’s a god of the top rank for you.’*

Kang-Woo entered his room while clicking his tongue. Han Seol-Ah, Echidna and Halcyon seemed to have gone out somewhere.

*‘Now, what to do?’*

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes. Although he had managed to blame it on Rakiel, the problem was what he would do from now on.

“I spammed this son of a bitch too much.”

He had used Rakiel’s name a bit too many times, to the point that it was difficult to resolve everything that he had made up.

“I think it’s about time I sell.”

The Rakiel Coin’s value had risen as high as it possibly could. He was no longer in any situation to go all in on the Rakiel Coin.

*'But it's a bit dangerous to sell since the real Rakiel is still alive.'*

Kang-Woo's head was in jumbles. Although wiping his hands clean off from the persona was not difficult, it was a difficult decision to make, in the case that the real Rakiel were to appear one day.

"For now... I'll see how things go."

He was not in a rush. Rather, he would be able to gain even more of Gaia's favor if he were to pretend to be even more dedicated to his duty without losing hope in such a situation.

*'Man, this is why you need good connections.'*

Kang-Woo couldn't feel any more reassured, now that he had the head god of Earth supporting him. He would no doubt have a bright future ahead of him as long as he used Gaia properly.

*'I'll trust you, Lady Gaia!'*

Kang-Woo clenched his fists and raised them up high into the sky.

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Whoosh.

Dust blew across a desolate land. Silence lingered between the distorted and split boulders. A being with ten black wings slowly got up.

"... Rakiel," someone said from behind the being.

The being known as Rakiel slowly turned his head. There, a hideous monster whose face was covered in rotten mold was glaring at him.

"Are you out of your mind?"

Rakiel looked up at the sky dyed in darkness without a word. "... No, I have been out of my mind until now."

"Hah!" the monster chuckled, and then shouted, "The Constellation of Corruption has gone mad after his seal had come undone! You bring shame to Lord Bauli!"

Rakiel stared at the monster with sunken eyes. "Constellation of Agony. No matter what you say, I will not change my mind."

He spread out his ten wings, and black lightning sparked between them. The monster known as the Constellation of Agony gritted his teeth.

"You dare betray us?!" he exclaimed in fury, but smirked moments later. "Kehehe. Rakiel, even if you do return to the light, do you seriously believe anyone will listen to what you say?"

"..."

"Who would possibly trust the words of a fallen angel? Hm?! Your sin of corrupting hundreds of thousands of beings just to get your hands on Seraph will never lighten!" the monster said mockingly.

Rakiel flew up with a heavy expression. "... I know."

He knew that he had committed an unforgivable sin.

"But..."

Exactly because of that...

"I will... atone for my sins."

Rakiel, who had flown up into the sky, disappeared into a blue Rift.

Chapter 322 - Turn Delicious, Moe Moe Kyun (1)

"... You don't know where the Demon God's corpse is?"

Oh Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes, tilting his head as he stared at the silver-haired young man tied to a chair.

"Ahh, urhh."

Lucis, who was wrapped in sticky green tentacles, nodded with his mouth open. Kang-Woo grimaced.

"You expect me to believe that? You said that you trained with Lucifer there. How does it make any sense that you don't know where it is?"

"Ahh... I-I don't... know," Lucis answered faintly.

Lilith, who had been standing behind Lucis, approached Kang-Woo.

"My king. It seems he really doesn't know."

"..."

Kang-Woo frowned as if his head hurt. He sat down on a chair while leaving the drooling Lucis be.

*'This changes things.'*

Kang-Woo had taken on the mission to go to Aernor so readily because he had expected Lucis to know where the Demon God's corpse was, but all that Lucis was saying was that he did not know. The difficulty of the mission that he had expected to be easy had skyrocketed.

*'Gaia said that she doesn't know either..'*

Kang-Woo leaned back on the chair and fell into thought. If no one knew where the Demon God's corpse was, then the duration of their trip could be indefinite. In the worst case scenario, they would have to waste several years just to find the corpse.

*'Would Bauli know?'*

The thought crossed Kang-Woo's mind, but he shook his head.

*'That'd be insane.'*

No matter how important it was to find the Demon God's corpse, letting out Bauli that he had imprisoned in the Abyss was crazy.

*'I'm sure he's waiting for the opportunity to take control of my body.'*

Not even Kang-Woo knew until when he would be able to suppress Bauli, so he could not afford to let him out of the Abyss.

"... Fuck." Kang-Woo sighed and clicked his tongue.

Since Lucis, whom Kang-Woo had believed to know where the corpse was, knew nothing, there was no way to know where it was.

"It seems we have no other choice but to look for it after we arrive in Aernor," Lilith mentioned as she slowly walked toward the chair that Kang-Woo was sitting on.

She seductively put one leg over the other and sat on the armrest.

"This trip might take longer than I'd expected," expressed Kang-Woo.

"Fufu, I do not mind wherever I go, as long as I am with you, my king."

"But I mind."

Kang-Woo grabbed his head. The thought filling his head weighed him down. The most critical issue regarding his mission in Aernor was...

*'Would Aernor have... kimchi stew?'*

There was no way that another world would have kimchi stew.

*'This is a serious issue.'*

The issue was on par with—no, far more important than restoring Earth's protection.

*'... I should make ample preparations.'*

Kang-Woo nodded while making a serious face.

"Is something on your mind?" Lilith asked.

"No, it's nothing," Kang-Woo replied while shaking his head.

"Hmm... That aside, Master Kang-Woo. Did you make some sort of promise with Echidna?"

"Hm?"

Kang-Woo tilted his head in confusion at the sudden question. Soon after, he recalled the events of what had happened right after coming out of the Rift.

"Echidna has been in a great mood since morning training."

"Ngh."

"Even when I asked her, she only smiled without answering... Has something happened?"

“I promised Echidna that I would go to Japan with her, just the two of us.”

“Oh my.” Lilith covered her mouth with her eyes wide open. “My king... Were you into little children?”

“Of course not.”

Kang-Woo firmly shook his head and frowned to hint at Lilith never to say something so unpleasant ever again. Although Echidna’s age had far surpassed that of a child, Kang-Woo did not see her as a woman in the slightest due to her outward appearance.

“Hohoho. I know, since you love my...”

*Squelch.* Lilith’s hair curled together to form tentacles. Yellow pus dripped from the suckers.

“Ahh, it’s a little embarrassing to say it myself.”

“Wha...”

What the fuck was she even thinking about?

“Tags: Tentacle.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Fufu. I said it in a roundabout way because I was embarrassed.”

Kang-Woo frowned.

“Lilith, you haven’t forgotten what we promised, have you?”

“... Ngh.”

Lilith flinched; her tentacles turned back to hair. She pouted and poked Kang-Woo’s chest with her finger.

“That aside, my king. Have you not been neglecting me too much lately? Neglect play is fine every once in a while, but... it gets a little lonely,” she said as if complaining.

Kang-Woo smirked. It was true that he had not been giving Lilith any attention.

*‘I guess I should also give Lilith some of my time later.’*

If he did not allow her to satiate her desire every now and then, an incident similar to what had happened with Lucis might occur again.

*‘But first...’*

Kang-Woo got up and headed to the demonic dragon that was likely waiting for him excitedly.

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“Wow! Wooow!”

Echidna, who had arrived at Akihabara, the sanctuary of otakus, jumped around like a little kid.



“Kang-Woo! Kang-Woo! Look at that! It’s Love Live!”

*Hm! Hm!* She pulled on Kang-Woo’s sleeve while snorting. Kang-Woo smirked while looking at her.

*‘Well, considering all the anime she watched at home...’*

It seemed like she had been completely engrossed in otaku culture.

*‘I should’ve taken her here sooner.’*

Seeing how excited she was, he regretted not coming to play with her here sooner.

Kang-Woo asked while patting Echidna’s head, “Do you like it?”

“Hm! Hm! Yeah! It’s the best!” Echidna nodded in excitement. “Over here, Kang-Woo!”

Echidna took Kang-Woo’s hand and dragged him deeper into the district.

*‘It sure is amazing.’*

It was different from other cities and towns just from the air it gave off, to the point that he felt like this would be how another world would be like. Giant anime posters were everywhere, and loud music filled the streets.

*‘I can’t believe it’s still like this after the Day of Calamity.’*

Humanity itself had been swept into a giant war with monsters after the Day of Calamity, wiping out many businesses related to art such as anime, manga and s. After all, there was no one crazy enough to read fantasy s when monsters were outside their homes. However, this district was one of the few that had managed to go back to its former state after the Demon Cult had been completely eradicated.

“Is there somewhere you want to go?” Kang-Woo asked as he matched his walking pace with Echidna, who was dragging him along.

Echidna thought as she put her finger on her lips, looking around.

“I wanna do that... and I wanna try going there too.”

“Haha, we can do it all. We have plenty of time today.”

“Hm! Hm!” Echidna snorted while thoroughly taking a look around.

And then, she suddenly pointed to a store.

“There!”

In front of the store was a woman wearing an extremely frilly maid outfit that looked as if no one should be wearing.

*‘What the hell is that?’*

Kang-Woo was bewildered. He knew very well what maid outfits were, and what they symbolized. Why was a woman wearing an outfit symbolizing slavery touting in the streets?

“Master~ Come visit our cafe~”

*‘M-Master?’*

Kang-Woo’s eyes widened in shock. He trembled.

*‘N-No way...’*

An electric current traveled down his spine and along his limbs.

*‘I-It must be a place where you do those kinds of things!’*

Kang-Woo felt as if he had been struck by lightning. There was no place other than *that* kind of place where someone would be touting for business while calling people Master, wearing clothes symbolizing slavery.

*‘She wants to go in there with me?’*

Had Echidna gone mad? Had her stormy adolescent brain finally overloaded and lost its function?

“W-Wait. You want to... go in there?”

“Yeah! I’ve always wanted to come here!”

“You have?”

“There are places where I can wear the maid outfit and roleplay!”

“Roleplay?!”

No!! Over my dead body!

“I don’t remember raising you that way, Echidna!!”

“... Huh?” Echidna tilted her head as if she couldn’t understand, but pulled Kang-Woo along with her. “You’re acting weird, Kang-Woo. Just give it a try.”

“N-No...”

Kang-Woo was dragged by Echidna while trembling.

*‘What the hell?’*

Was he just behind the times? Had he gotten way too old? Had human culture become so open toward such things?

*‘Then why have I...’*

For ten millennia...

Kang-Woo unwittingly shed tears. An unbearable sense of shame filled him. He was dragged into the maid cafe by Echidna while being lost for words.

“N-No matter how I think about it, this is insane,” Kang-Woo muttered while trembling before opening the doors to the maid cafe.

No matter how open things had become, this was not okay. Roleplaying as slave and master with a girl who was five hundred years old but looked like a high school girl?

*'Th-This world has come to an end! It's gone to the dogs!'*

Kang-Woo shook his head with a pale face, but Echidna showed no signs of stopping.

*'Now that it's come to this...'*

Kang-Woo clenched his fists. He had no choice but to wipe out this immoral and vulgar establishment himself.

*'No matter how chaotic the world has become, how dare they...!'*

*Clack.* He swung open the door, and what he saw was...

"Welcome, Master~"

"...?"

Despite being an atrociously vulgar business, the interior was decorated in quite an adorable way. It was so open to the point that there were not even dividers. Kang-Woo was shocked once again.

*'E-Even public play?!'*

Humanity was truly heading toward its end. Kang-Woo was trembling in shock.

"Kang-Woo, over here."

"Welcome, Master~ my lady~ My, you're so cute!!"

"Hm! I wanna wear a maid outfit too."

"Sure, just a second!"

The maid approached Kang-Woo and Echidna with a smile and took Echidna somewhere. Soon after, Echidna came back while wearing a maid outfit, puffing out her nonexistent chest proudly.

"Hm! Kang-Woo, what do you think?"

"Oh, uhm. Well..."

"Oh right. I shouldn't be calling you Kang-Woo here." Echidna pulled on Kang-Woo's arm and said in embarrassment, "Master.. Does it suit me?"

What? Has the play already begun, without leaving him any time to stop it?

Kang-Woo stood still with his face completely frozen. He had no idea what to do.

"Master, my lady~ Your drinks are here~!"

Just then, a maid appeared to put their drinks on their table.

She then said with a smile, "Now, let's all do it together~"

*'What?'*

They were all gonna do it together?!

“Th-This abomination of—!”

Kang-Woo drew out his demonic energy, unable to endure it any longer.

“Let’s chant the magic spell~!”

“What?”

What spell?

“Repeat after me~”

What the fuck was this maid talking about?

“Turn delicious~ Moe moe kyun!”

The fuck you say?

“Turn delicious~ Moe moe kyun!” Echidna happily followed after the maid and chanted the spell while making a heart with her hands.

Kang-Woo blankly stared at Echidna.

“You do it too, Kang-Woo!”

“... What?”

She wanted him to do it too? Kang-Woo chanted the spell while making a heart with his hands like the maid instructed, with a face completely frozen.

“Turn delicious. Moe moe kyun,” he chanted as if weeping like a spirit of the dead heading to the River Styx. “Ahh...”

He just... wanted to die. He stared at Echidna, who was taking a video of him with her smartphone while giggling.

*‘Where...’*

From where had it all gone wrong?

Chapter 323 - Atonement (1)

“That was so much fun, Kang-Woo,” Echidna said as she held Oh Kang-Woo’s hand while smiling.

Time flew by when having fun; It had become dark before they had realized it, and stores were closing one after another. Their time in Akihabara had come to an end.

Kang-Woo smirked while nodding. Although he had been a little bewildered by the maid cafe they had visited in the beginning, he had a much better time afterward.

“Let’s come again next time,” he said as he gently stroked Echidna’s hair.

“Okay!” Echidna answered brightly.

Seeing her radiant smile eased Kang-Woo's mind.

"Shall we go home?" he expressed.

Although he had mentioned passports last time, they had not flown here; after all, they could literally go anywhere in the world through the Hall of Protection via Gates that had been installed all over the world. Kang-Woo went to an area with no people to open a Gate leading to the Hall of Protection. Just then, Echidna hugged his arm as if dangling on it.

"... Thank you," she said softly while smiling, "If it weren't for you... I would've never known happiness like this, Kang-Woo."

Kang-Woo turned his head to look down at her. Her smile momentarily felt extremely beautiful to him.

"..."

Kang-Woo scratched his cheek. He was not used to feeling such emotions.

"... Let's go home."

"Okay!"

Echidna held his hand even tighter. Although Kang-Woo was not used to such a feeling, it did not feel bad at all.

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The day after his trip with Echidna, Kang-Woo arrived at the Hall of Protection after getting a call from Kim Si-Hun. Si-Hun, who had just come out of the training room, looked haggard.

"What's up with your face?" Kang-Woo asked while frowning.

If a superhuman like Si-Hun was in such terrible condition, it meant that it was about something serious.

"... Hyung-nim," Si-Hun called with a trembling voice. He bit his lip while on the verge of tears. "I called you because... I would like to ask you something."

"... What is it?"

"Lady Gaia probably doesn't know this, but... You used to be a demon, right?"

"Yeah, I used to be."

Kang-Woo actually was still a demon, although Si-Hun thought that Kang-Woo had returned to being a human after becoming the apostle of the God of Heroes.

"Is it dangerous even for a former demon... to be encroached by demonic energy?"

Si-Hun stared at Kang-Woo with desperation, hoping for him to answer *no*.

'Aha.'

Kang-Woo finally understood why Si-Hun was so haggard.

*'Cute little bastard.'*

Si-Hun had been worried about him. Kang-Woo fell into thought while suppressing the corners of his mouth from curling up.

*'How should I handle this?'*

He thought whether or not he should specially tell Si-Hun, who had become a complete mess, but lightly shook his head.

*'Si-Hun is too close to Layla.'*

After Grace McCubbin had become the public leader of Guardians, Si-Hun had been staying in the Hall of Protection and assisting Layla in her place. Although Layla no longer needed protection now that Gaia had regained her power, Si-Hun still assisted her for various things in the Hall of Protection.

*'I feel sorry for Si-Hun, but...'*

He could not afford to shoulder the risk of the truth being exposed in this situation.

"... Yeah. My body has practically become that of a human," Kang-Woo answered.

"Th-Then, if the encroachment of demonic energy continues, will you become a demon... like before?"

"No." Kang-Woo shook his head in sorrow.

Si-Hun's face paled. There were only two outcomes for a human that had been encroached by demonic energy. If they did not become a demon...

"A-Are you saying... You'll become a demonic beast?"

Si-Hun now knew the difference between demons and demonic beasts very well. Demons possessed intelligence, but demonic beasts...

"I'm not sure either, but considering the symptoms... It's likely," Kang-Woo replied while smiling bitterly.

"Th-That can't be!"

Si-Hun quickly approached Kang-Woo and grabbed his shoulders. His head was in jumbles.

*'Wh-Why...?'*

Why did Kang-Woo of all people have to endure such suffering? Si-Hun knew how difficult to endure the encroachment of demonic energy was, since he also had the seed of Satan within him once.

*'After all that hyung had sacrificed...'*

Kang-Woo had sacrificed more than anyone else to protect Earth, so why...? Si-Hun grit his teeth. The shame of being powerless, sympathy toward Kang-Woo, and his rage toward Rakiel for causing

all of this intermingled and heated his mind. Among the countless emotions swirling in his heart, there was just one emotion that stood out among the others.

‘Why... didn’t you tell me?’ Si-Hun asked.

“...”

“That angel knew! He even said that you two searched for Rakiel together! So... So why...?”

It could have been jealousy, or a sense of inferiority; the thought of him being worth less to Kang-Woo than an arrogant angel caused him to have strange thoughts.

*‘Did he... trust that angel more than me?’*

If that hadn’t been the case, there was no way that only Uriel would have known about Kang-Woo’s condition. Si-Hun bit his lip while trembling. He knew that the emotion he was feeling was childish, but...

“Why... Why didn’t you tell me?”

It was difficult to suppress his overflowing emotions.

“I...! I can also...!”

Si-Hun could also protect Kang-Woo; he had worked extremely hard to grow stronger to be able to protect his hyung. No matter how difficult the training was or how life-threatening the danger he was in, he had endured it all with the pure thought of wanting to repay Kang-Woo.

“... Si-Hun.” Kang-Woo looked at Si-Hun in sorrow. He carefully grabbed Si-Hun’s hands that were on his shoulders. “I want you to be happy. I want you to smile without a care in the world.”

“Hyung...”

“Although we’re not related by blood, I still consider you to be my little brother.” Kang-Woo smiled while patting Si-Hun’s shoulder. “Big brothers don’t rely on their little brothers.”

Kang-Woo turned away from Si-Hun, who was staring at him blankly.

“You don’t look too well. Training is done best in moderation. Overtraining will only hurt you.”

Kang-Woo walked away while waving. *Clack*. He closed the door.

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“Urpp!”

Kang-Woo crouched while covering his mouth at home after coming out of the Hall of Protection.

*‘Aaarrggghhh.’*

He was cringing so hard that he felt like he was about to be shriveled up into oblivion.

“Bleeeeeegghh,” Kang-Woo retched while having his hand on a wall. “Haaa, haaa.”

Those lines had been disgusting, even for him.

*‘It wasn’t like I could tell him that I’d done it to corrupt Uriel.’*

He had absolutely no logical explanation for his actions, having left him no choice but to rely on emotions instead.

“But well...”

Kang-Woo had taken a peek at Si-Hun’s expression right when the door was about to fully close; it seemed like the emotional operation had been a success.

*‘He looked like some maiden in love.’*

That was how moved Si-hun had been.

“Urgh, I won’t be able to look Si-Hun in the eyes for a while.”

Those cringey lines would pop up in Kang-Woo’s head every time he saw Si-Hun, so there was no way that he would be able to endure the cringe.

Vrrrr.

Just then, Kang-Woo’s smartphone vibrated. Speaking of the Devil, it was Si-Hun.

“What the hell is it now?”

Si-Hun had not had enough of the cringe lines and called him again. Kang-Woo frowned.

“Fuck...”

He shut his eyes tight. He wanted nothing more than to ghost on everyone and vanish along with Han Seol-Ah, but he couldn’t afford to ignore the call.

*‘Why me...?’*

Kang-Woo answered the call with a trembling hand.

“Yeah, Si-Hun?”

[H-Hyung-nim!]

“...?”

Si-Hun was acting in a way completely different from his expectations. Kang-Woo would have yeeted his smartphone if Si-Hun had called him to say something cheesy like he could rely on him, but that did not seem to be the case. He seemed to be shocked by something.

“What’s wrong?”

[H-He appeared... in the H-Hall of Protection.]

“He?” Kang-Woo frowned.



[R-Rakiel! Rakiel has come to the Hall of Protection all by himself!]

“...!”

Kang-Woo’s eyes widened.

*‘What?’*

Why would Rakiel be there? Kang-Woo cut the call and quickly called Lilith.

“Lilith!”

- My, what’s wrong, my king?

“Where... Where’s Lucis?!”

- He’s right next to me.

“... What?”

Kang-Woo’s voice trembled.

*‘What the hell?’*

If it was neither Lucis or Kang-Woo...

“Could it be... The real Rakiel?”

Kang-Woo clenched his hair in complete chaos.

*‘Why would he just barge in out of nowhere?’*

There was only one reason why the Constellation of Corruption would appear in the Hall of Protection, where Gaia’s incarnation was.

*‘Holy fuck.’*

Leaving aside how Rakiel had managed to find the Hall of Protection, he had just barged in through the front door without giving them any time to prepare. Kang-Woo had known that the seal on Rakiel was weakening and that he would be coming to Earth in the near future, but he had never expected him to act so rashly.

*‘I should...’*

As Kang-Woo was about to head to the Hall of Protection right away, he stopped in his tracks.

“Wait.”

His eyes narrowed. The gears in his head turned rapidly.

*‘Something doesn’t add up.’*

No matter how much he thought about it, he couldn't make much sense of Rakiel’s actions. If he had known to come to the Hall of Protection, he would have also known that it was Guardians headquarters. Despite that, he had walked in all by himself with no subordinates to assist him. Worst of all, Gaia’s incarnation was in that Hall of Protection.

*'Wait a fucking minute.'*

Unsettling thoughts swirled around his head. He bit his lip in anxiety.

“Kang-Woo? What’s wrong?” Seol-Ah asked while opening his room door and coming in.

Kang-Woo grabbed Seol-Ah’s hand and said, “Darling, I don’t have time to explain, but I need you to follow me for a second.”

This was not the time to take one’s time to explain matters. Seol-Ah expressed confusion, but nodded in silence. The two of them headed to the Hall of Protection.

There was Gaia, who was exuding immense energy as if she had already manifested within Layla, Si-Hun, who was already assuming a fighting stance with Ludwig in hand, and...

“O Goddess of the earth.” There was a black-winged angel kneeling in front of Gaia. “I have come to atone for my sins.”

Rakiel placed his head on the floor. Kang-Woo grabbed his head in panic. The worst-case scenario he had pictured in his mind was happening before his very eyes.

*'Fucking son of a bitch.'*

This was not good at all.

*'Shit.'*

Kang-Woo grimaced from the unexpected turn of events. He glared at Rakiel with sunken eyes.

*'You want to atone for your sins?'*

The corners of his mouth curled up, and he licked his lips.

*'Over my dead body.'*

Chapter 324 - Atonement (2)

“Let me ask you something,” the hideous monster with pus flowing from his face said while staring at Rakiel.

It was the Constellation of Agony, a comrade who had stood with Demon God Bauli alongside Rakiel in the battle against the gods of the Triad.

*'No.'*

Rakiel shook his head. The term *comrade* was not appropriate among Constellations of Evil. They had absolutely no sense of camaraderie for one another; they had simply fought together because they had been on the same side.

“Why have you turned toward the light all of a sudden?” the Constellation of Agony asked.

Rakiel remained silent. He then asked back with empty eyes, “Why did you serve the Demon God?”

“... What?”

“I wanted Seraph. I wished to... have her in my hands.” Rakiel’s eyes gleamed sharply. “The Demon God used that obsession of mine. He turned my obsession into madness, and made me accept his demonic energy.”

It was a past that he could never revert. He was an angel that had fallen for the temptations of a demon.

“I stained my hands with an immeasurable amount of the blood of my comrades at his command. My sins can never be washed away.”

Rakiel bit his lip.

“Only after the Demon God had died and the woman that I had desired sacrificed herself to seal the darkness was I finally able to understand.”

He had been controlled by the Demon God, and he had committed an irreversible sin after being tricked by the Demon God’s whispers and drunk on the infinite power and desires that his demonic energy gave him.

“I will atone for my sins.”

Rakiel clenched his fists.

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“You want... to atone?” Gaia asked as she looked down at Rakiel, who was bowing while lowering his head.

Her pupils were shaking as if she was suppressing her surging emotions with all her might.

“Yes,” Rakiel answered shortly.

*Hah.* Gaia laughed in absurdity. It was a very cynical response for a goddess that was considered the goddess of parental love, just like Seraph. Rakiel flinched, but closed his eyes and lowered his head.

*‘... It is only natural.’*

He would have reacted the same way if he was in her shoes. After all, he was none other than the Constellation of Corruption.

“Do you have any idea what you are saying right now?” Gaia asked in exasperation.

“Yes, I do.”

“In that case, you must have gone mad. You would never have dared to even talk about atoning for your sins if you were in your right mind.”

Rakiel could not refute her in any way; he could only lower his head in silence. Gaia narrowed her eyes.

“Tell me the truth. Why have you so confidently appeared before me? Have you taken the humans of this star hostage?”

“My desire to atone is not a lie. I swear it on my Divinity.”

“... What?”

Gaia wavered for the first time. She knew very well how great of a meaning that a vow with one's Divinity on the line held. However...

“Even so, do you truly believe you will be forgiven for your countless sins?”

*Grit.* Gaia glared at Rakiel while exuding immense energy. Rakiel slowly raised his head.

“I do not,” he said calmly.

Rakiel knew that he would never be forgiven for the sins that he had committed and that the blood on his hands would never be washed away.

*‘But...’*

He clenched his fists. Although he knew better than anyone else that he would not be forgiven...

*‘At the very least...’*

He wanted to apologize from the bottom of his heart; he at least wanted to be understood why he had committed such grave sins.

*‘And if possible...’*

He wanted to atone for them, although it might be too late. He wanted to clean up even a little of the mess that he had made.

“Then why have you come to see me?” Gaia asked, her tone still as cold as before.

“At the time, I was... being controlled by the Demon God. He dominated my mind and made it so that I would corrupt my precious comrades.”

“Hah, so you are saying that you have done nothing wrong?”

Rakiel shook his head. “No. That is not what I am trying to say. Although my mind had been taken over by the Demon God, I still remember all the sins that I had committed. And I know that... such sins cannot be forgiven from just saying that I had been controlled.”

He continued while biting his lip, “But... I thought that I should at least apologize from the bottom of my heart for every sin, for the countless comrades that had died because of me.”

Rakiel was speaking in a low voice, his eyes shaking plaintively. Gaia kept her silence from seeing Rakiel's appearance. She knew he was telling the truth.

Fwoom!

“Enough of your lies!” Kim Si-Hun shouted while infusing his holy sword with Qi.

His deeply instilled rage filled the room.

*'That human...'*

Rakiel momentarily expressed surprise from seeing the human that he had never met before. He could feel the blazing rage in the human's eyes.

"..."

Rakiel's thoughts were jumbled.

*'I see my sins have been this large.'*

An immeasurable amount of time had passed since the war between the Demon God and the gods of the Triad. Not even the father of that man's father would have experienced the war, so Rakiel's heart grew even heavier from witnessing the intense rage from the human.

"Wait, my child," Gaia interrupted while raising her hand to stop Si-Hun.

As Si-Hun turned his head toward Gaia to say something, he was left speechless from seeing Gaia's eyes, which were as chilling as frost.

"You just said that you remembered all of your sins, did you not?" she asked.

Rakiel nodded. "I did."

Although the memories were from when he had been controlled by the Demon God, he vividly remembered what he had done.

"Confess your sins to me," the goddess commanded.

Rakiel hesitated for a short moment. It was as if a murderer had been told to recite his exact crimes. He hesitated not because he did not remember, but rather because he remembered it all too well; he regretted the fact that he had said that he remembered his sins.

*'No.'*

Rakiel shook his head. Although his self-remorse was eating him away, that was all the more reason to say it himself.

"I... was not able to overcome my obsession toward Lady Seraph. I lost to the Demon God's temptations and accepted his demonic energy," he confessed. "I corrupted my comrades at his command, and burned countless angels to death. No... Not just angels."

Tears flowed down Rakiel's cheeks. The tears of a fallen angel was just as transparent as that of a human.

"I have corrupted humans... fairies... all with my own hands. I tempted them, and trampled over them."

Rakiel's shoulders trembled. His confession sounded more like he was weeping.

"I am truly... truly sorry for all the sins I have committed."

Rakiel felt as if his heart was being put on fire. The memories from back then, laughing as he stared at the beings that had failed to overcome their desires and killing his own kind from being controlled by the Demon God, were vividly replaying in his head. The fragments of such memories were slicing up his brain.

“If I had been able to escape from the Demon God’s influence... I would have never had such thoughts.”

Rakiel knew very well that making an excuse like he had been controlled was cowardly, but there was no other excuse to make; he had actually been controlled. If it had not been for the Demon God, he would have never fallen from grace in the first place.

*‘Bauli...’*

He recalled the Titan enveloped in the chasms of darkness. His rage blazed as greatly as the self-remorse weighing down on his shoulders.

“I am sorry.”

*Boom.* Rakiel slammed his head on the floor.

“I am sorry.”

*Boom.* The floor of the Hall of Protection cracked.

“I am sorry.”

*Boom.* Black blood flowed down from Rakiel’s forehead; he seemed to be purposefully suppressing the demonic energy that naturally flowed out from him.

“I will gladly accept any punishment. If you will have my head, I will cut it off myself,” he said while crying, overcome by regret and rage.

He saw a hazy illusion of a past memory. In the illusion, he saw Seraph and himself, who was kneeling on one knee, laughing together.

“I am truly...”

Rakiel unconsciously stretched his hand forward, but the illusion dissipated as soon as he stretched his hand out. Tears flowed from his eyes.

“... Sorry,” he said faintly.

“... Is that all you have to say?” Gaia asked.

Rakiel slowly raised his head. “Yes, that is everything.” N♡vєlB;n: Unleashing Imagination, One Read at a Time.

Deathly silence fell.

“Have you truly confessed every single one of your sins?”

“Yes, I have,” Rakiel answered while nodding, his heart slightly lighter than before.

“You have, you say...?” The goddess surged with rage. “How shameless can you be?!”

*Slam!* She stomped on the floor while her eyes blazed in fury. The ground shook.

“What about you having dared to kidnap my child and torture him?”

“... Pardon?”

Rakiel’s eyes widened in confusion.

“No, not only did you kidnap my retainer, you even tried to turn him into a demonic beast by sowing your demonic energy into him!”

“I am not sure I follow...”

“Hah! I never had any expectations from the beginning, but how can one be so shameless?!”

The goddess’s rage burst out.

“P-Please wait, Lady Gaia.” Rakiel stared at Gaia as if he had no idea what she was talking about. “I have never kidnapped your retainer, nor have I tried to turn him into a demonic beast.”

No matter how many times he searched through his memories, he had no memory of having done such a thing. Just like Seraph, Gaia was known for treasuring the retainers that she had chosen like they were her own children. Even if Rakiel had been controlled by the Demon God, he had never done something as insane as kidnapping a retainer of a top-ranking god and torturing them.

“Hah... Hahaha!” Gaia laughed in exasperation. “You are truly something else! You dare lie to me so blatantly when the one that you had kidnapped is right before your eyes?!”

“... What are you t—”

“Kurgh! Cough! Cough!”

Before Rakiel even had a chance to ask what Gaia was talking about, a young man with sharp eyes, who had been standing next to Gaia, collapsed. Gaia approached the man in astonishment.

“M-My child!”

“Cough! Cough!”

Oh Kang-Woo vomited black blood; hideous green tentacles grew from the ends of his fingers as if he was a character in a certain parasite manga.

“Lady Gaia...” Kang-Woo said faintly. “Please... forgive Rakiel.”

“Wh-What?” Gaia’s eyes widened.

“Although he had made me this way... C-Cough! H-He had not been in control.”

“...”

“A-And...” Kang-Woo grabbed Gaia’s hand. “He is... p-powerful. Even if you have r-regained— *Cough!* Your power... I-It is dangerous... Kurgh! *Cough!*”

“My child...”

Tears flowed down Gaia’s cheeks. Even while he was being encroached by demonic energy and was turning into a demonic beast, he was worried for her.

“Do not worry, my child,” Gaia stated as she got up. “I will save you... no matter what.”

Rumble.

Immense energy flowed out from her, aimed straight at Rakiel.

“... Huh?”

Rakiel blankly stared at Gaia and the human man in her arms.

*‘What? What was going on?’*

Chapter 325 - Atonement (3)

*‘What?’*

What in the world was happening? Rakiel’s face was dyed with confusion. He could instinctively tell that something was going wrong. No, anyone would be able to tell just from seeing the enraged goddess before their eyes.

*‘I kidnapped that human and tortured him?’*

No matter how thoroughly he rummaged through his memories, he did not recall anything of the sort; it could not have even happened in the first place. He had prepared to cross over to Earth as soon as his seal had been broken, and had been frantically searching for Gaia’s location as soon as he had arrived on Earth. He could swear by the gods that he had never laid a hand on any human on Earth.

*‘What is happening?’*

Rakiel stared at Oh Kang-Woo. The sharp-eyed man was twisting in pain while clenching his chest, the symptoms commonly seen in a human that had been forcibly injected demonic energy.

*‘Who are you?’*

Who in the world could that human possibly be for him to lie about having been kidnapped by Rakiel? Rakiel’s head was in a mess; waves of chaos crashed into his mind.

“P-Please wait a moment! I-I have never kidnapped that hum—”

Slam!

A wall was smashed while Rakiel was frantically shaking his head, and a blue-haired boy with eight wings came through it.

*‘An angel?’*



Rakiel had never seen him before. Eight wings would mean that he was an archangel, so he could surmise that the angel was one that had risen to the rank of archangel after he had been sealed. The blue-haired boy stared daggers at Rakiel.

“Hah, you even changed your face a little,” the boy said while snorting.

Rakiel could not understand what he was talking about.

The boy said while instilling bloodlust into his voice, “What? You want to atone after all that you’ve done? You’ve never kidnapped a human?” Uriel gritted his teeth. “You can’t even remember what you did just a few months ago?”

“What are you t—”

“And right after Lady Gaia’s power was restored, no less.”

Uriel glared at Rakiel with disgust. Although one could not be certain that the restoration of Gaia’s power and Rakiel’s sudden change in attitude were related, the timing fit just right; it looked as if Rakiel had assumed a submissive attitude as soon as the power of the head god of Earth had been restored.

“You scumbag...!”

Rakiel’s cunning attitude made Uriel’s teeth clack. Uriel was sure that Rakiel was trying to take advantage of Gaia’s benevolent nature.

“You should’ve behaved yourself if you were gonna pull something like this.”

Spark, crackle!

Blue lightning danced around Uriel’s wings.

“Did you seriously expect to be forgiven... After you corrupted Raphael and tried to turn Kang-Woo into a demonic beast?!”

“Raphael? Who is th—”

“Shut up!!” Uriel shouted, unable to endure Rakiel’s shameless attitude any longer.

Conversation no longer held any meaning. Since Uriel had witnessed Rakiel’s evil deeds with his own eyes, he could not be given any chance for atonement.

*‘Raphael.’*

Uriel recalled his old friend, looking down at the hands that had killed him. The specter of Raphael occasionally haunted him, asking why he had killed him, and if he thought nothing of their friendship. Uriel recalled the bloodied Raphael. His rage blazed as strongly as the self-remorse weighing down on his shoulders.

*‘I will avenge you.’*

Crackle—!

Uriel raised his hand, blue lightning gathering around it. He imbued power into his words and materialized magic.

“P O U R !”

A blue lightning cloud formed on the ceiling of the Hall of Protection. Lightning struck along with a blinding flash. At the same time, Kim Si-Hun charged forward.

“Heavenly Dragon Flash!”

Light poured from his sword along with his shout. His eyes boiled with rage.

Si-Hun exclaimed in fury, “I will not let you of all people off with a painless death!”

His gentle face crumpled like that of a Yaksha. A goddess, archangel and hero poured the fallen angel with attacks to eradicate him.

*‘Wha...’*

Rakiel stared at the attacks with his mouth agape.

“What in the...”

Things about corrupting Raphael, kidnapping and torturing Gaia’s retainer...

“Why must I endure such...”

Rakiel was frustrated. He would have understood if they were enraged by the sins he had committed; even if he had been controlled by the Demon God, it did not change the fact that he had committed sins that he could never be forgiven for. He would have accepted their rage and let them take his life with the solace, albeit shallow, that he had apologized from the bottom of his heart.

*‘But this is...’*

He was being made to atone for sins that he had never committed. He could endure anything else, but not this.

*‘I have to resolve the misunderstanding.’*

Rakiel no longer had any attachments to life after he had been unsealed; he had no intentions to live on shamelessly after committing such heinous sins. However, he could not stand for this. He refused to die while being framed for something he did not do.

“Kuh!”

Rakiel raised his two hands. Black lightning shot up to block the blue lightning struck down from the sky. He formed a long spear made from black lightning and swung it up diagonally, clashing with Si-Hun’s sword.

*Boom!* An explosive sound echoed.

“... Kurgh.” Si-Hun was blown back while grimacing, his hands numb from the impact.

“Hah! You’ve finally shown your true colors!” Uriel shouted as if he had known this would happen.

Rakiel answered in frustration, “Listen to me! I have not done anyth—”

“I told you to shut up!”

Blue lightning struck down again, which Rakiel reflexively deflected.

*‘Shit.’*

This would not go anywhere at this rate.

*‘I have no choice.’*

If he did not subdue them, he would not even be able to hold a proper conversation with them.

“Fuuu,” Rakiel took a deep breath.

Black lightning crackled between his ten wings, and his immense demonic energy stirred. The energy that had once been sacred power but changed after his obsession became madness surged. Divinity, the power that only those that had reached godhood could use, flowed from him.

“... I am sorry,” Rakiel said to Si-Hun, who was charging at him, while clenching his spear.

He had no other choice if he wanted to resolve the misunderstanding. He twisted his body around and swung down his spear; the spear edge infused with Divinity clashed with Si-Hun’s sword, and...

“Wh-What?”

Si-Hun jumped back in surprise. The condensed sword energy that had been wrapped around the holy sword was annihilated. He aggressively frowned.

“That’s...”

It was the power of Divinity.

*‘Shit.’*

His Qi scattered as soon as the Divinity touched it; it could not be any more overpowered. Si-Hun was bewildered after witnessing the power of Divinity for the very first time.

“But...”

It was only for a moment. Si-Hun’s eyes gleamed sharply.

*‘There’s a way around it.’*

He would be fine as long as he avoided the spear edge infused with the mysterious power. Si-Hun lowered his stance.

*‘I don’t stand a chance head on.’*

If his Qi was scattered just from being touched, he had no way of facing Rakiel head on.

*‘Formless Sword.’*

Si-Hun focused his mind and created invisible swords in the air, and increased his distance from Rakiel while moving the swords with Sword Control. Although there was no chance that such a strategy would work one-on-one...

“IGNITE!”

Crackle—!

Blue lightning struck Rakiel.

“Kurgh!” Rakiel grimaced.

*‘It will not be easy to subdue them.’*

He gripped his spear tighter. Although they were not a threat to him, he could not go easy on them either.

*‘But...’*

Rakiel was sure that he would have no problem subduing the two of them.

“You fool.”

The goddess stepped up as if to trample on his certainty.

“Kurgh!”

Gaia, who had come around to Rakiel’s back while he had been focused on Si-Hun and Uriel, extended her hand toward him. An immense but intangible power weighed him down.

“Did you seriously believe you had a chance against me when you only possess Lower Intermediate-rank Divinity?” Gaia said.

“...”

Rakiel bit his lip in anxiety. Gaia was right. She was a goddess of the top rank; a being in charge of a star. Although she was nowhere near her true power at the moment, that did not change the rank of her Divinity. She was in a whole other league from a mere fallen angel.

*‘But...’*

Rakiel kept his mouth shut and clenched his fists. He had a way to turn the situation around.

*‘The power of the Demon God.’*

It was the power that Bauli had sown into him, as well as the power that had dominated his body. If he used the power of the Demon God, who possessed Divinity of transcendent rank surpassing the top rank, he would be able to break through this crisis, albeit only momentarily.

“... Shit.”

However, Rakiel would have to give up on resolving the misunderstanding with Gaia if he did that. He shut his eyes tight.

Wham! Bash!

“Kuh! Kurgh!”

He was barraged with attacks from Gaia, Si-Hun and Uriel even while he was hesitating.

“Cough! Urgh...”

He no longer had any more time to hesitate. He was on a forked road.

‘*N-No...*’

Rakiel could not afford to die while falsely accused of a crime he did not commit.

‘*Shit, shit, shit!*’

Rakiel stepped back in anxiety.

‘Ah.’

Just then, a human that was looking his way came into view. It was the human that had claimed to have been kidnapped and tortured by him, as well as apparently turning into a demonic beast after having been injected with demonic energy.

“You...” Rakiel frowned.

He had not been able to think properly at the time due to the sudden flow of events, but the man known as Oh Kang-Woo was highly suspicious.

‘*In that case...*’

Rakiel came to a decision. He placed his right hand on top of his heart.

Ba-dump.

His heart beat strongly. The demonic energy that the Demon God had sown within him spread across his body aggressively.

Rumble—!

Pitch-black demonic energy swept the surroundings.

\*\*\*

“Hm?”

The eyes of Kang-Woo, who had collapsed on the ground, twisting while grabbing his right arm as if suppressing the Dragon of the Darkness Flame, sparkled. A chilling sensation traveled down his spine. The space around them was distorting as soon as pitch-black demonic energy had burst forth from Rakiel.

‘*The hell is this?*’

A powerful force pulled him in as space was being torn.

“K-Kang-Woo!”

Han Seol-Ah quickly embraced him. The torn space was approaching them as if to swallow them whole with its giant entrance.

‘*Hmm.*’

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes. Rakiel was looking his way, and space had been torn apart as soon as he had unleashed his power.

*'I see how it is.'*

Kang-Woo smiled, having easily figured out Rakiel's intentions.

*'He wants to take me.'*

Kang-Woo also wanted nothing more. He smiled and grabbed Seol-Ah's arm as she was embracing him.

"It's okay, so don't worry and follow me, darling."

"K-Kang-Woo...?"

Kang-Woo jumped into the torn space while staring into Seol-Ah's wide eyes.

\*\*\*

The space was completely black and endless in a single direction, as if it was a giant tunnel. Kang-Woo was rather familiar with such a space.

Riiing.

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

It was the same place where Lucis had held Lilith hostage.

"Haaa, haaa," Rakiel, who had dragged Kang-Woo into the dimensional crack, panted heavily.

He glared at Kang-Woo; the human that had been twisting on the floor while clenching his right arm earlier, was leisurely smiling.

"Who... are you?"

Rakiel was able to figure out from the human's complete change in attitude that all this had been orchestrated by him.

"Who are you, and why have you framed me for crimes I have never committed?!"

Rakiel screamed like a madman.

"Me?" Kang-Woo pointed at himself while snickering.

He had been asked who he was countless times to the point he was sick of it. He used to hesitate to answer, but he no longer had the need to.

"I am..."

The demon of demons, the Hell of Hells, the predator of predators... or not.

"... The Protector of Light."

Immense demonic energy exuded from Kang-Woo.

"Oh, fuck. Hold on."

He made a mistake: he did a re-do.

“... The Protector of Light.”

Brilliant golden energy exuded from Kang-Woo and illuminated the dark space.

“...”

Rakiel’s mouth fell open. Deathly silence fell.

“What?” Kang-Woo asked shamelessly.

“...”

“What? Got a problem?”

“...”

Fucking bitch.

Chapter 326 - Atonement (4)

“Y-You...!”

Rakiel trembled. The human was blatantly making fun of him. There was no way that a self-proclaimed Protector of Light would exude demonic energy by mistake.

“Who the hell... are you?”

Rakiel stared daggers at Oh Kang-Woo. He had felt a familiar feeling as well as chilling fear when Kang-Woo exuded demonic energy. That was how enormous the demonic energy that he had released had been, but...

*‘It’s gone.’*

The demonic energy had vanished without a trace when Kang-Woo had exuded golden energy. No, it had been completely replaced with sacred power, an energy of the complete opposite nature to demonic energy.

*‘That’s impossible.’*

Rakiel placed his hand on his forehead. The being that had released enough demonic energy to give him chills had also instantly released sacred power of the same amount. Since it was impossible for the body to contain both sacred power and demonic energy, there was only one possibility.

“... I see. That ability must be how you managed to fool Lady Gaia.”

Rakiel’s eyes set ablaze. An ability to mask demonic energy as sacred power... If even Gaia had been unable to see through such an ability, it was not weird for her to have been deceived. However, that did not answer all of Rakiel’s questions.

“Why... was it me?” Rakiel asked while biting his lip.

Why had the human framed the crimes on him of all people?

*‘Is it related... to my sins of the past?’*

Rakiel clenched his fists. The weight of his heinous crimes was crushing his shoulders. That was the most likely reason, since the human had likely not done such a thing for no reason. It was likely because the human held some sort of personal grudge against him. Rakiel stared at Kang-Woo while steeling his resolve.

“Oh, the thing is...” Kang-Woo grabbed his forehead as if his head hurt and sighed. “It just happened to overlap.”

“... What?”

“I mean, I never intended to do this from the beginning, you know?” Kang-Woo was not that much of a scumbag. “But...”

Kang-Woo explained the entire circumstance to Rakiel; how he had needed a name for his fallen angel persona, and the name that his subordinate had recommended him happened to be Rakiel.

“Man, small world, huh? Who would’ve thought that name was already taken?” Kang-Woo expressed frustration. “So, if you want to blame someone, blame it on Balrog, not me. It’s all his fault, okay?”

“Y-You...”

Rakiel’s face crumpled aggressively. He momentarily grabbed the back of his head from the overflowing rage, but focused his gaze back onto Kang-Woo.

“You bastaaaaaaard!!”

Rumble—!!

The dimensional crack shook. Black lightning sparked between Rakiel’s wings as he drew out all of his demonic energy.

“Come on, bro. A man can make mistakes. You’re so heartless,” Kang-Woo said.

One needed to just take it as a life lesson and move on. *Tsk, tsk.* Kang-Woo clicked his tongue and shook his head. Seeing that only amplified Rakiel’s rage, and he screamed like a madman. Black lightning struck all around them.

“K-Kang-Woo.”

“Support me from behind, darling.”

Kang-Woo stepped in front of Han Seol-Ah, who was staring at Kang-Woo in worry. He narrowed his eyes and looked at Rakiel, who was enveloped in black lightning.

*‘I guess he’s not one of the Demon God’s chief officers for nothing.’*

Rakiel was strong; no, to be more exact, he had gotten stronger. Kang-Woo had thought that he would be more than a match for Rakiel from back when he saw him facing Kim Si-Hun and Uriel. However, after he had placed his hand on his chest like when Kang-Woo opened the Doors of the Ten Thousand Demon Core, he had gotten far stronger than before.

*‘A head-on battle is out of the question.’*



Kang-Woo would be no match for Rakiel, who had unleashed the Demon God's powers, without opening the Doors. From what he could feel, Rakiel was on the same level as Behemoth.

*'But I can't afford to open the Doors.'*

Kang-Woo's eyes gleamed sharply. Rationally speaking, opening the Doors was the right call. The only technique that would be effective against a being that had reached godhood was the Chaos techniques. Both choices required him to shoulder a massive risk.

*'But of course...'*

That only applied when he was fighting one-on-one.

*'I didn't bring darling along for no reason.'*

Kang-Woo glanced back. Seol-Ah was concentrating while clasping her hands together. Seol-Ah's buffs and healing-related divine magic had become beyond impressive after awakening the soul of Seraph. Kang-Woo had already confirmed their effects through Si-Hun. Although he would be no match for Rakiel one-on-one, it was a different story if he was being supported by Seol-Ah. Furthermore...

"Kurgh, cough! Cough!"

*'He doesn't seem to have long.'*

Rakiel looked to be in terrible condition.

*'In that case...'*

Kang-Woo turned around, and... ran away without hesitation.

"Kuh!! You son of a biiiiitch!!"

"Huehuehuehuehue!! Catch me if you can!" Kang-Woo laughed vulgarly on purpose to taunt Rakiel.

The more enraged Rakiel got, the better; there was nothing easier than facing a beast without reason.

Crackle! Spark! Crackle—!

*'Holy fuck.'*

Bolts of black lightning shot toward the running Kang-Woo. Chills ran down the back of his head from the blinding speed of Rakiel's attacks.

*'That's way too fast.'*

Although Kang-Woo was running at supersonic speed, Rakiel was accurately shooting lightning bolts at him. Kang-Woo just barely managed to dodge the bolts by tumbling on the ground.

Rumble—!

The black lightning infused with Divinity struck the ground, making a hole that was hundreds of meters deep.

“Damn rat!” Rakiel exclaimed while gripping his spear.

He twirled the spear like a windmill and thrust it in the direction of the running Kang-Woo.

“Black Lightning - Thunderbolt.”

Split—!

The black lightning shot from the end of the spear toward Kang-Woo while tearing up the space in its path. Kang-Woo flinched.

*‘Shit.’*

The attack was far too fast for him to avoid. He raised his hands in a hurry.

*‘Authority of Invulnerability.’*

Kang-Woo gathered demonic energy into the form of a shield that was more the size of a wall.

“Aegis.”

He grabbed Aegis with two hands, lowered his stance, and poured the demonic energy of the Ten Thousand Demon Core into Aegis. However, it was nowhere near enough to block an attack infused with Divinity head on.

“Blessing of the Celestial Goddess!”

Just then, Kang-Woo heard Seol-Ah’s sonorous voice. The giant shield made of demonic energy was enveloped by brilliant light, and the black lightning struck the shield moments later.

Rumble—!!

“Gurghh...!”

The enormous impact shook Kang-Woo. Unable to handle the immense pressure, he was pushed back despite his legs digging into the ground. *Sizzle!* The ungodly heat of the black lightning burned his hands as he was holding Aegis. His flesh melted in an instant, and he could see his bones.

*‘Fuck, I can’t even use the Authority of Regeneration right now.’*

Kang-Woo grimaced. He did not have the leeway to treat his wounds. Attacks imbued with Divinity annihilated all forms of energy. The only way for Kang-Woo, who was still not able to use Divinity, to block an attack imbued with Divinity was to pour even more demonic energy than what the Divinity was annihilating.

“What in the...” Rakiel expressed shock.

He could not believe that Kang-Woo was blocking an attack imbued with Divinity by pouring stupid amounts of demonic energy. It was theoretically impossible to block an attack imbued with Divinity without Divinity of one’s own. It was as insane as deflecting a giant water cannon with the swing of a single blade.

“Kurgh!”

Although Kang-Woo was blocking Rakiel's attack in an unreal way, it was only a matter of time until Kang-Woo reached his limit. Rakiel drew out even more power while staring at Kang-Woo's melting flesh.

"Healing Ray!"

As soon as Seol-Ah cast another skill, Kang-Woo's melting hands began to revert to normal as if time was being rewound. Kang-Woo smiled brightly.

*'Darliiiiiing!'*

He knew that it had been the right call to take Seol-Ah with him.

"... Huh?" Rakiel expressed confusion. He stared at Seol-Ah in disbelief. "Why... How?"

He trembled.

"Lady Seraph... No, it can't be."

Rakiel had gone pale. Kang-Woo's eyes shone.

*'Oh, come to think of it...'*

Rakiel had mentioned that he had fallen for the Demon God's temptations to make Seraph his. Kang-Woo smiled wickedly.

*'What an interesting turn of events.'*

It was an unexpected profit.

Kang-Woo asked slyly, "What? Is there a problem?"

"Wh-Why... Why is Lady Seraph here?!"

"Hm? We're together obviously because we're lovers."

"What?" Rakiel's eyes widened. He stared at Seol-Ah blankly, even ceasing his attack at Kang-Woo. "Lovers... you say?"

"Yup."

Kang-Woo walked up to Seol-Ah and embraced her with one arm as if showing off. Seol-Ah was slightly bewildered, but accepted his embrace with reddened cheeks.

"A-Aaaahh."

Rakiel trembled. The world reflected in his eyes was falling apart. He lost strength in his legs and fell to his knees.

"L-Lady Seraph... was a-alive?"

"Revived, to be more exact, by borrowing the body of a human."

Rakiel gritted his teeth, and chilling bloodlust filled his eyes.

"She is not someone... you may dare lay your hands upon."

That noble and beautiful angel...

“Don’t you dare... lay your filthy hands on her!!” Rakiel bellowed while crying.

The woman that he had wanted to the point that he was willing to let his wings darken and sacrifice countless comrades... The target of his obsession, who was more high, noble and beautiful than anyone else... He felt like he was going insane from the fact that she had fallen into the hands of an irrelevant and vulgar demon.

“... What did you say?”

The one to reply to Rakiel had not been Kang-Woo. Seol-Ah’s expression turned cold, glaring at Rakiel while frowning aggressively.

“Ah...” Rakiel froze from seeing her bloodthirsty glare.

“Why do you believe that Kang-Woo can’t lay a hand on me?” Seol-Ah brought Kang-Woo’s hand to her chest as if telling Rakiel not to talk nonsense, and then raised her left hand for Rakiel to see. “We are already engaged to each other. We’ve promised to never be apart from one another.”

Seol-Ah then slightly turned and hugged Kang-Woo. “So, don’t you dare say such nonsense again.” She got on tiptoes and kissed Kang-Woo as if to show Rakiel. Rakiel turned pale.

“A-Aaaahh.”

His heart felt as if it was burning to ashes. His vision was getting blurry, and his head was getting hot. The events playing out before his eyes felt so unrealistic that he felt like he was dreaming.

“No.”

This couldn’t be happening.

“No...”

His world was shattering into pieces. The essence of his being that he had kept precious was being destroyed by something.

“N—”

“No, my ass,” Kang-Woo said while snickering. “Just acknowledge it already. Everything you’ve done until now has all been for naught.”

Rakiel froze.

Kang-Woo continued his mockery, “What was it you said? That I can’t lay my filthy hands on her? I would think that you had lived an incorruptibly pure life if I hadn’t known any better.”

“Y-You...”

“You want to atone for your sins? You were being controlled by the Demon God? Enough of your bullshit.” Kang-Woo chuckled from the absurdity. “Why did you fall for his temptations in the first place? Wasn’t it because you wanted to fuck Seraph? Huh?”

But after all this time, you say that you were being controlled? That it wasn't your will at all?"

"..."

"Enough with the pity show, dickhead. You seem to be trying to sugarcoat it as best you can, but you're just trying to kill yourself after lightening the load of your self-remorse since every single one of your advances on Seraph failed, aren't you? Aren't you?"

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue and shook his head in disappointment. "There's a limit to how unsightly you can be."

Rakiel trembled. Kang-Woo's razor-like words were slicing away at him. And then, something inside him... snapped.

"A-Aaaahh! Raaaaaaahh!!!" Rakiel's sense of reason blew away, and madness took its place. "Y-You fucking bastaaaaaaard!!!"

His fury surpassed its critical point. Rakiel charged at Kang-Woo while exuding bloodlust— no, he tried to charge at him.

Crack!

"My child!"

"Hyung-nim!"

"Kang-Woo!"

The dimensional crack opened, and Gaia, Si-Hun and Uriel appeared. Rakiel paid them no mind; he was only looking at Kang-Woo.

"... Huh?" Rakiel expressed confusion once again.

"Cough! Kurgh!"

The demon that had been mocking him to no end was on the floor while twisting around.

"N-No..." Kang-Woo muttered while shedding tears, and got on his knees toward Rakiel. "P-Please, not Seol-Ah... Please..."

"..."

"Kurgh! Y-You can kill me! But... Please, not Seol-Ah...!"

Rakiel, as if the fury that had been filling his mind had blown away, looked down at the begging Kang-Woo blankly.

"My child!" Gaia rushed toward Kang-Woo and hugged him while giving Rakiel a deathly glare. "You bastaaaaard!!!"

Rakiel remained silent while listening to the goddess's rage-filled shout. "H-Haha."

*Clatter.* The spear in his hand dropped to the ground. He laughed crazily, like a person who had blown off all of his life savings on gambling. Transparent tears flowed down his cheeks.

“Hurgh, *sniff*, urghh.”

The fallen angel’s sobs echoed throughout the tunnel.

Chapter 327 - Atonement (5)

“Do not dream of a painless death, Constellation of Corruption,” Gaia said as she glared at Rakiel in fury. White energy burst out from her, causing her light brown hair to surge into the air. “I will have you pay the price... for laying a hand on my child.”

Gaia unleashed her Divine Essence. The power of the goddess of the earth descended onto the mundane realm through her incarnation. Gaia had not wanted to unleash her Divine Essence because it would place a burden on Layla’s body, but now was not the time when she was up against Rakiel.

“H-Haha.”

All Rakiel could do as he stared at the goddess who had unleashed her power was laugh blankly. He cried from his eyes that had lost their light.

“It’s... over,” he mumbled.

Rakiel had lost everything; the woman that he had desired, the atonement that he had wished for, and even his last remaining honor had all been defiled by the words of a demon.

“A-Aaaahh.”

Rakiel lowered his head and groaned while grabbing his head. The demonic energy within him rampaged. He did not suppress it; no, he no longer had enough reason to suppress it.

Crack! Crunch!

Rakiel was becoming closer to a demonic beast from being unable to control his demonic energy. His ten black wings contorted, turning into arms. His skin distorted, and his blood vessels and muscles bulged out.

“Grrrrrrrr!!” Rakiel growled like a beast.

He had fallen from an angel to a demon, and now he had even fallen as far down as a demonic beast. Gaia frowned from seeing Rakiel, who had fallen as far as he possibly could.

“... How unsightly you have become.”

Rakiel was Corruption, one of the four Constellations of Evil, as well as the being who had massacred countless angels and humans in the war between the gods and the Demon God. The final form of the Constellation of Corruption that had spread enough despair to be recorded in myths could not be any more unsightly.

“Tch, he’s completely become a monster.” Uriel grimaced.

Kim Si-Hun said coldly while gripping the holy sword, "Whether he be a fallen angel or a demonic beast, our duty does not change."

*'Hyung-nim...'*

He turned his head to look back at Kang-Woo, who was wincing in pain while in Han Seol-Ah's arms. The demonic energy's influence seemed to be growing stronger within him.

*'To save hyung-nim...'*

They needed to kill Rakiel and eliminate the demonic energy that he had sown into Kang-Woo.

"... Hyung." Si-Hun clenched the holy sword so hard that it could break, and steeled his resolve. "I will save you."

Si-Hun charged forward.

"... What are you acting all cool by yourself for?" Uriel chased behind Si-Hun while pouting in dissatisfaction, sparks of blue lightning making the ends of his blue hair stand up.

"Kuh... It's dangerous..." Kang-Woo muttered as he reached out in desperation.

Gaia approached him and grabbed his hand.

"My child." She smiled warmly like a mother to her child. "Worry not."

"Ah..."

"You have protected me all this time." She stood up as she smiled, then continued, "This time... I will protect you."

Her energy was as overwhelming as an insuperable mountain. Gaia followed behind Si-Hun and Uriel toward the fallen demonic beast.

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"Kieek, grrk, grrrrk."

Rakiel, who had turned into a demonic beast, collapsed. He was pitifully shaking on the ground while covered in gruesome wounds.

"Haaa, haaa. What a fucking persistent son of a bitch."

"Fuuu. We finally defeated him."

Of course, neither Uriel nor Si-Hun felt any sense of sympathy for him. It was only obvious since Rakiel had not only corrupted Raphael, Uriel's friend, but had also kidnapped and tortured Kang-Woo.

"Hyung-nim..." Si-Hun quickly turned toward Kang-Woo after defeating Rakiel. "Ah..."

Kang-Woo, who had been in pain from the encroachment of demonic energy, was looking down at himself wide-eyed.

“H-Hyung-nim! Are you okay?!”

“... Yeah.” Kang-Woo nodded while smiling faintly. “Thanks, Si-Hun. The demonic energy has completely disappeared.” Nøv€l-B1n was the first platform to present this chapter.

“Ah...” Si-Hun trembled in delight, and hugged Kang-Woo as he sobbed. “Hyung...! I’m glad. I’m... so glad.”

Kang-Woo smirked and patted Si-Hun’s shoulder.

“My... child.”

“... Lady Gaia.”

“How are... you... feeling?”

Kang-Woo’s expression hardened. Gaia seemed to be in serious condition.

“A-Are you alright?” he asked.

“Kuh... Do not worry about me. I am simply paying... the price for using too much Divinity,” Gaia said while grimacing.

It was a limiter applied to all gods; the more they interfered with the mundane world, the faster their Divinity would be consumed.

“But still... I am relieved.” Gaia, who had been wincing in agony, smiled while looking at Kang-Woo and caressed his cheek.

“Lady Gaia...”

“Fufu. As long as you are safe... I cannot ask for nothing more.” Gaia’s breaths became even more labored. “Haaa, haaa. It seems I will be unable to manifest through Layla for a while.”

“...”

“While I recover my Divinity in the divine realm... Can I leave Earth in your hands?” she asked faintly as if she would disappear any second.

“Yes, of course.” Kang-Woo nodded without hesitation and grabbed Gaia’s hands. “This time, I will protect you.”

“Ah...” Gaia’s face brightened. She slowly closed her eyes while giggling. “My child. I am truly glad... to have met you.”

With that, Gaia lost consciousness. Kang-Wo lifted up Gaia— no, Layla. She was burning up while sweating profusely as if she had caught the flu, likely the side effects of Deific Manifestation.



“Si-Hun,” Kang-Woo said as he handed Layla to Si-Hun. “I’m sure Layla will be having a hard time with the side effects of the manifestation. Look after her.”

“Okay, hyung-nim.”

“I’ll take care of the rest. You can go on ahead.”

“But...”

Si-Hun hesitated for a moment, but nodded soon after.

Kang-Woo looked toward Uriel as well, calmly saying, “You can leave as well, Lord Uriel.”

“No. You’ve only just recovered, so I’ll also— Urgh.” Uriel winced.

He was hurt all over from the desperate battle against Rakiel.

“I’m fine now. There is no need for you to worry,” Kang-Woo remarked.

“... Really?”

“Yes,” he answered with a smile.

Uriel, who was staring at Kang-Woo in dissatisfaction, nodded and left through the Rift that he, Gaia and Si-Hun had created.

“Kang-Woo,” Seol-Ah called as she approached him.

She lowered her head in mixed feelings while looking down at Rakiel, who had turned into a demonic beast.

Kang-Woo carefully asked, “... Were you disappointed?”

This had been the first time that he had shown this side of himself to Seol-Ah. She thankfully said nothing when Gaia and Si-Hun had been here, but she had likely been shocked.

“... No,” Seol-Ah replied as she shook her head. She continued while grabbing his hands, “I decided to be with you despite knowing this is your true self. Was I... of help to you this time?”

“Yeah. I would have had a much harder time if it hadn’t been for you, darling.”

They were not empty words; Kang-Woo would not have been able to face Rakiel one-on-one if it hadn’t been for Seol-Ah’s buffs and healing magic.

“Fufu. That’s more than enough for me.” Seol-Ah embraced Kang-Woo while smiling brightly.

Kang-Woo said while patting her head gently, “I still have some stuff to do, so you can go home first. I won’t be long.”

“Okay. I’ll be waiting for you.” Seol-Ah nodded, expressing slight disappointment.

After she turned around and left through the Rift, only Kang-Woo and Rakiel remained in the silent darkness.

“Grrr, grrrr.”

Rakiel looked up at Kang-Woo with eyes filled with spite. Kang-Woo slowly walked toward him and trampled on his head without hesitation.

Smash!

“Gaaaaaahh!!”

“I didn’t expect you to turn into a demonic beast.”

However, the situation had been resolved much more easily thanks to that.

“O-Ohhh... Kang... Woo.”

“Hm? You still retained your intelligence despite having become a demonic beast?” Kang-Woo looked down at Rakiel with great interest.

“I-I will... curse... you.”

“Countless sons of bitches already have.” Kang-Woo crouched down while snickering. He locked eyes with Rakiel and continued, “Though they’re all dead now.”

Rakiel glared at Kang-Woo in silence.

“Do you... feel... no shame?” Rakiel asked

“Hm?”

“Deceiving a goddess and your own comrades... living on through wretched lies... Do you truly... feel... no shame?”

“There you go again with your bullshit.”

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue. It was an interesting question.

*‘He has a point.’*

Considering all that he had done to deceive Gaia, it was not strange at all for Rakiel to think this way. He had pretended to be encroached by demonic energy and rolled on the ground quite pathetically. However...

“Who cares?”

“... What?”

“Who cares if it’s pathetic and shameful?”

Kang-Woo didn’t care even if he was unsightly and dishonorable.

“If I can get what I want just by doing that...”

He would become pathetic and shameful as many times as he needed to. Kang-Woo had even once become Bael’s subordinate to lower the latter’s guard. He had gotten on his knees and oinked like a

pig to prove his loyalty. He had licked Bael's feet, and smashed his own head on the ground. He had survived and endured that way, and in the end... He had won.

"Does the concept of honor... not exist... for you?!" Rakiel exclaimed.

Kang-Woo snickered. "Fuck, man. I never thought I'd hear that from a dude who fell from grace because he was too horny."

"Nothing of... the sort! My love was... pure...!"

"Pure, huh? Is that why you fell for the Demon God's temptations?" Kang-Woo retorted while clicking his tongue. "Don't try to force a tear jerking scene. This isn't some Korean film."

Kang-Woo grabbed Rakiel's head and brought it closer to his.

"You were nothing but a horndog."

"G-Ghhh!!"

Rakiel's eyes set ablaze. He could not refute Kang-Woo; there was no way that he could, since it was a fact that he had fallen for the Demon God's temptations.

Rakiel lashed out in a fit of rage, "Kuh! How long... do you think your lies... will last?!"

All that he could do was criticize Kang-Woo. However, Kang-Woo only tilted his head in confusion.

"Satan said the same thing. Why do you think they're lies?"

"Wh...at?"

"You did it all, didn't you? You corrupted Raphael, kidnapped the Protector of Light and sowed demonic energy into him. It was you who did all that, so where are the lies that you're talking about?"

Rakiel's face paled. "You... crazy... bastard."

"Think about it." The corners of Kang-Woo's mouth curled up. "Only you and I know the whole truth."

*Gurgle.*

Black mucus flowed down Kang-Woo's hand and covered Rakiel.

"But if you die..."

Countless mouths with sharp teeth formed within the black mucus.

"... And I forget..."

*Crunch.*

Chilling sounds of crunching bones echoed. The mouths within the black mucus devoured Rakiel like a pack of piranhas. Kang-Woo smiled crazily.

“... No one will know, will they?”

The cackles of a demon filled the tunnel.

Chapter 328 - Ninth Awakening (1)

Crunch, crunch.

Black blood poured as bones were chewed and flesh was torn. The Authority of Predation devoured Rakiel without leaving a single mound of flesh.

Riiing.

[You have successfully devoured the Constellation of Corruption!]

[Devouring the Constellation of Corruption’s Divine Essence.]

[A fragment of Transcendent-rank Divine Essence has been detected. Would you like to devour it?]

"Transcendent-rank Divine Essence?"

Oh Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes. He recalled how Rakiel had suddenly gotten stronger during his battle against Gaia.

*‘So that was thanks to this.’*

It was not difficult to guess who the fragment of Transcendent-rank Divine Essence came from.

*‘Demon God Bauli.’*

The power was likely one that he had sown into Rakiel.

“Mm...”

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes again. He could more or less understand the situation.

*‘Rakiel’s Divine Essence is around Lower Intermediate-rank without the Demon God’s help, and he possessed a portion of the Demon God’s Divine Essence.’*

If that was the case, he needed to make a decision.

*‘Should I eat only Rakiel’s Divine Essence, or eat the Demon God’s Divine Essence along with it?’*

He did not have to think for very long, since he had thought something similar back when he had received the mission to go to Aernor from Gaia.

“I don’t have to go out of my way to risk danger.”

The Divine Essence of the Demon God was more valuable than anything else in the world, even if it was merely a fragment.

*‘But I don’t see a need to eat it while risking my body being taken over.’*

It was a completely different case from improving his demonic energy control through molting. Although molting was a high-risk high-return training method, he had already gone through it dozens of times in Hell, and even in the worst-case scenario, it would only end with him dying.

*'But this doesn't end with just me dying.'*

Although Kang-Woo had no idea what Bauli had in store, it was an undeniable fact that everything around Kang-Woo would get caught up in it as soon as his body was taken over.

*'I don't need a ticking time bomb in my hands.'*

There was absolutely no merit to having power if it was uncontrollable. Kang-Woo absorbed the Divine Essence of only Rakiel, excluding that of the Demon God.

[You have devoured the Divine Essence of the Constellation of Corruption.]

[The Divine Essence absorbed through the Authority of Predation is interfering with the limits of the system.]

[Raising level cap from 79 to 86!]

"What?" Kang-Woo became wide-eyed from seeing the message that had popped up in front of him. "Oh... I completely forgot that I was a Player."

It had been so long since he had been stuck on his level cap that he had even forgotten he was a Player. In terms, it had been roughly 165 chapters since his level cap has been broken.

*'I had pretty much half given up since it didn't break even after becoming a Protector.'*

Kang-Woo had thought at first that the Gaia System was what had been preventing him from leveling; after all, his cap had broken after killing Alec Osborne. However, he had realized from the unchanged level cap even after becoming a Protector that the Gaia System was not the only problem.

*'The Gaia System is but a tiny portion of a colossal system.'*

It was highly likely that the power that the gods called *providence* was putting a cap on his level.

*'Come to think of it, the other gods aside from Gaia also had limiters placed on them by the system.'*

Although they were not limited in the form of a level cap like Kang-Woo, they were also unable to use their powers recklessly in the mundane realm.

*'Although it's different from god to god, it doesn't change the fact that they have limits placed on them.'*

The only beings that were free from the system's restrictions were the *outer gods* that the goddess Benigoa had mentioned.

*'So why...'*

Why had his level cap been broken from absorbing Rakiel's Divine Essence? Kang-Woo fell into thought while narrowing his eyes.

"Oh, I get it," he said as he snapped his finger.

It had not been difficult to figure out the reason.

*‘Divinity has the power to interfere with the system.’*

If that was the case, it also made sense that Divine Essence also alleviated the restrictions of the system somewhat. Divine Essence could be considered a classification of rank that only those that wielded Divinity could earn. In terms of magic, Divinity was like mana, and Divine Essence was like the mana circles.

*‘Lower Intermediate-rank is about 3rd-Circle.’*

He was not sure if it was accurate, but it was likely something along those lines.

*‘If Lower Intermediate Divine Essence gives me this much...’*

Kang-Woo’s desires surged. He wondered how far his level cap would break if he absorbed Transcendent-rank Divine Essence. No, he might be able to gain far more than just that.

“Tsk,” Kang-Woo clicked his tongue.

He created a dagger with the Authority of Blades and stabbed it into his left collarbone without hesitation. *Crack, crack.* He forcibly twisted the dagger; his flesh ripped apart, and black blood poured out.

“Haaa,” Kang-Woo sighed.

The searing pain of his collarbone suppressed his surging desire.

*‘I can’t believe I’m still not used to it yet.’*

Controlling his desire was still hard to do despite ten millennia having passed. Kang-Woo did his best to think about other things. Thankfully, message windows popped up just in time.

[Your level has risen to 86 due to the accumulated EXP.]

[You have reached Level 80 and have achieved your Ninth Awakening.]

[You have acquired a new Trait.]

“Whoa.”

The news was so great that it quelled his surging desire almost instantly.

*‘Traits are absolutely amazing.’*

It was no exaggeration to say that he had surpassed his former self in Hell thanks to the power of Traits. Even his Key of the Demonic Sea had been crafted with the power of one of his Traits. The only SSS-rank Trait Kang-Woo had at the moment was ‘Ruler of Demonic Energy’. Considering how useful the Trait had been, he couldn’t help but hope for another of the same rank.

“Right, let’s get another SSS!” Kang-Woo exclaimed energetically while opening his status window to check his Ninth Awakening Trait.

[Ninth Awakening Trait - ‘Chaos Control (Rank: ???)’]

[This Trait raises the control and destructive power of the Player’s Chaos techniques.]

“This is...”

Kang-Woo’s eyes widened. Although its description and effect was simple, its contents were not simple in the slightest.

*‘... Jackpot.’*

He had wished for an SSS-rank, but had gotten something even better.

*‘I absolutely need this.’*

Kang-Woo clenched his fists. He needed to raise his proficiency in Chaos techniques to acquire the fifth key of the Demonic Sea. No, even if it wasn’t a quest, he needed to learn the insanely powerful Chaos techniques.

*‘A Bottom-rank skill was able to destroy Behemoth’s horn.’*

Although it came with its risks, it was not as risky as opening the Doors of the Ten Thousand Demon Core. It was more than good enough to have in hand as a trump card during combat.

*‘This must be what it’s like to have pigeon meat!’*

Kang-Woo couldn’t help but smile after gaining profits that far exceeded his expectations, to the point that he was considering forgiving Rakiel for kidnapping and torturing him.

“Now, then...”

It was time to test out what he had earned. Kang-Woo focused, drawing out both demonic energy and sacred power at the same time. His left hand was wrapped in white light, while black light enveloped his right.

*‘Chaos - Burst.’*

Kang-Woo slowly clasped his hands together. The two energies clashed against each other along with enormous repulsive force.

[Activating the effect of Trait ‘Chaos Control’.]

The repulsion of the two energies lessened along with the activation of the Trait. Kang-Woo stretched out his arms forward with his hands clasped together.

—————!

A giant explosion that engulfed even its own sound shook the dimensional crack, vaporizing the ground as if a nuclear bomb had blown up. Its destructive power was truly outstanding.

“Kurgh!” Kang-Woo grimaced.

His two hands had disappeared without a trace down from the elbow.

*‘It’s still like this even after using the Chaos Control Trait?’*

The effect of the Trait was certainly exceptional, but the side effects of Chaos Techniques were far too big.

*‘Even so...’*

Kang-Woo felt like he had come to an understanding of the basic principles of Chaos techniques. Kang-Woo healed his two arms with the Authority of Regeneration, which took much longer than usual, likely due to the Chaos technique's side effects.

*'What if I lessen the power a little...?'*

Kang-Woo more or less understood its principles. This time, he infused sacred power and demonic energy respectively, on the index and middle finger of the right hand. He stretched his arm out and flicked his finger.

[You have learned the Bottom-rank Chaos technique, 'Chaos - Bullet'.]

Although the degree of explosion had been nowhere near Chaos - Burst, it was much better in terms of practicality.

"Alright." Kang-Woo smiled.

His heart raced from the fact that a whole new realm was before his very eyes. He would train in seclusion if he could.

"Mm..."

Kang-Woo thought about Han Seol-Ah.

"I'll just go home."

He had spent far more time than expected while practicing the Chaos techniques. If he stuck around here any longer, Kim Si-Hun and Uriel would come running, wondering what had happened to him.

*'Darling must be worried about me too.'*

There was still plenty of time until he set out for Aernor, so he also had plenty of time to train.

"Oh... Come to think of it..."

Kang-Woo clapped his hands together as if he had thought of something. He remembered what he had to do before going to Aernor.

*'Shit, I almost forgot.'*

He had been so excited that he had completely forgotten.

Kang-Woo turned around and walked out of the Rift, the light in his eyes slowly fading.

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"E-Eek!"

"S-Stay away!"

Screams echoed as soon as Kang-Woo entered through the door of the giant workshop and walked past the mages leisurely.

"Wh-What do you want?! Wh-Why are you here?!" Khadgar, the head of the mages affiliated with Guardians, exclaimed in desperation.



His face was haggard as if he had stayed up several nights, and his eyes no longer held any light.

“We’re... at our limit! W-We really will die if we work any more!”

They were working like Egyptian slaves to provide Guardians with high-quality magic items.

Kang-Woo replied in all seriousness while staring at Khadgar, “I have a final request.”

“Final... Request?”

“Yeah. If you do what I ask, I’ll free you all.”

Khadgar’s eyes widened. He then asked while stuttering, “Wh-What is the r-request?”

Kang-Woo slowly answered, “Well...”

Chapter 329 - Preparations to Leave (1)

After Rakiel, the Constellation of Corruption, died, preparations to go to Aernor began at full throttle. Layla, after having recovered from the aftereffects of Deific Manifestation, worked to form a Gate that the team could pass through without any restrictions while keeping contact with Gaia. In the meantime, Oh Kang-Woo and Kim Si-Hun selected party members to go to Aernor with them.

“I’m coming with you, no matter what,” Han Seol-Ah remarked firmly while grabbing Kang-Woo’s hand as if she would not accept no for an answer.

She was exuding chilling energy as if chaos would ensue if Kang-Woo did not ask her to come with him.

“I was gonna take you with me anyway,” Kang-Woo replied while smirking.

Going to Aernor while leaving Seol-Ah behind had not even been an option for him.

*‘I can’t leave behind someone with Top-rank Deific Essence.’*

Although she was not able to fully wield Serah’s power, Seol-Ah’s abilities were still beyond impressive. She was not very useful in terms of combat prowess, but she possessed buffs and healing magic so exceptional that it didn’t matter in the slightest.

*‘And...’*

Just sleeping with Seol-Ah improved his demonic energy control severalfold compared to simple training. She was like an EXP potion that allowed one to level up automatically in terms of RPGs, so there was no way that Kang-Woo would leave her behind.

*‘I mean, I don’t plan to be apart from darling even if that wasn’t the case.’*

Seol-Ah had already become the most important portion of his life; he would not be apart from her, even if the world would end due to it.

“Phew,” Seol-Ah sighed in relief.

She had been slightly worried since Kang-Woo was one to frequently act on his own.

“What would you have done if I said no?” Kang-Woo asked teasingly.

“If you did...” The light in Seol-Ah’s eyes disappeared momentarily, exuding thick, chilling bloodlust. “I’m... not sure.”

“Right? I’m not sure how it would feel to be apart from you either,” Kang-Woo replied while laughing.

“No.” Seol-Ah shook her head. She continued in a low tone, “I’m not sure... What I would do.”

*‘Huh? What’s happening? You’re scaring me, darling.’*

“Kang-Woo,” Seol-Ah called out.

“Uhh... Yeah?”

Seol-Ah reached out to slowly caress Kang-Woo’s shoulders, neck, and thigh in order.

“Do you think limbs are necessary?”

*‘I beg your pardon?’*

“Just think about it. If you don’t need to use them... There’s no need to have them, is there?”

*‘What are you talking about?’*

“Oh my, we’ve gone off topic. If you said that you weren’t going to take me with you... I would’ve been sad. Yes, very sad.”

“I-I see.” Kang-Woo nodded in puzzlement.

He wasn’t sure what he was feeling, but one thing was for sure.

*‘I can’t leave darling behind.’*

He felt as if something irreversible would happen if he did. Kang-Woo nodded and slowly turned his gaze toward Echidna and Halcyon, who were staring at him with sparkling eyes, fists clenched and eager to say something.

“Of course, you guys will be coming too,” said Kang-Woo.

“Hehehe, I-I knew y-you would say that!”

“Hm! Hm! I’ve been waiting for you to say that!”

Halcyon and Echidna smiled brightly.

“Echidna, you said you didn’t know much about Aernor, right?” Kang-Woo asked.

“Yeah. I’d been cooped up in my lair, so I don’t know that much.” Echidna lowered her head while flinching. “... Sorry.”

“No, it's okay.” Kang-Woo had several other people to ask about Aernor. “But are you sure?”

“Hm? About what?” Echidna asked.

“If you come to Aernor with me, you won't be able to watch any of the anime you love so much.”

“Hm! Being with you is way better!” Echidna answered without hesitation while snorting.

Kang-Woo smiled at her commendable answer. As he was patting Echidna's head, Halcyon carefully approached him with a red face.

*‘Screw off. Come back in a hundred years.’*

“M-Master Kang-Woo.”

Halcyon hugged Kang-Woo's arm tightly with trembling hands. Something large touched the back of Kang-Woo's hand.

*‘Jesus.’*

The sensation of Halcyon's Neo Armstrong Cyclone Jet Armstrong Cannon was shooting up his arm. Kang-Woo quickly pulled his arm away and coughed, then stared at Lilith, who was looking at him while giggling, and Balrog, who had his arms crossed with a stiff face.

“You're not thinking of leaving us behind, are you?” Lilith asked with her eyes narrowed.

“I will not let you go by yourself this time,” Balrog stated firmly.

He was referring to when Kang-Woo had crossed from Hell to Earth by himself. Kang-Woo sighed while staring at his two subordinates.

“Of course not... Where would I go without you two?”

He had already become practically inseparable with Lilith and Balrog. Even if he tried to rip himself away from them, they would find a way to follow him somehow, like they had done already.

Kang-Woo remarked while clicking his tongue, “Balrog. Train Halcyon and Echidna like you had done last time. Take Vaal Zahak with you too.”

“Will Vaal Zahak be coming as well?”

“He's from Aernor, after all. He was also known as the demon king there, so I'm sure he knows a lot about Aernor.”

“Understood.”

“And...” Kang-Woo turned to Lilith. “Lilith, amplify the effects of Seol-Ah's pendant before we leave for Aernor.”

Rakiel had mistaken Seol-Ah for Seraph as soon as Seol-Ah used her power. In other words, she was fine in daily life, but she would be found out as soon as she used buffs or healing magic. Considering what they would have to do in Aernor, Seol-Ah's identity had to be hidden even when she was using her power.

*'Uriel will be coming with us, after all.'*

To be honest, Uriel coming with them to Aernor was not welcome news. Si-Hun and Layla knew that Kang-Woo had been a demon in the past, and that he had demon subordinates like Balrog and Lilith. However, Uriel considered Kang-Woo to be purely human, so he couldn't make any rash decisions with him there.

*'It's a hassle in many ways.'*

Even so, it was difficult to do something to Uriel when he had an army of angels behind him.

*'There's no need to cause unnecessary battles.'*

It could not be helped if there was no other way, but waging an all-out war against angels just because of a hassle was idiotic.

"Mm... In that case, you will have to help me out a little, my king. I made the item by applying how you hide your demonic energy, but to amplify its effects, I need to have a good grasp of the extent of both you and Seol-Ah's powers."

"How can I help?" Kang-Woo asked.

"Oh, it's nothing special," Lilith said while smiling with her mouth covered. "You said that the demonic energy and sacred power from you two intermingle as you sleep, did you not? I will just be taking part in that process."

"Ah..." Seol-Ah reddened, her toes squirming with her head lowered. She stammered, "U-Umm... Th-That's..."

Kang-Woo asked while tilting his head, "Are you saying you'll watch as Seol-Ah and I sleep?"

"Yes."

"Mm."

Kang-Woo nodded as if he understood why Seol-Ah was embarrassed.

*'I mean, we don't do anything in particular other than sleeping, but I'm sure she's embarrassed to show others of us sleeping together.'*

However, he felt that she was being excessively embarrassed when all they did was sleep while holding hands.

*'But considering Seol-Ah's personality...'*

It was not weird for her to be that embarrassed.

"That's fine, but... don't change into your demon form, okay?"

“Ngh.” Lilith flinched. She sighed in disappointment and nodded. “Yes, I understand.”

Seol-Ah remained silent.

“Fufu. There’s no need to worry, Seol-Ah,” Lilith said as she approached Seol-Ah, who had her head lowered.

Lilith met eyes with her and whispered something in her ear. Seol-Ah’s face reddened like a tomato.

“You’re so cute. I’ll teach you all kinds of things.” Lilith smiled as she lightly embraced Seol-Ah.

“... I-I’ll be in your care,” Seol-Ah replied in a very small voice.

Kang-Woo tilted his head in confusion, unable to follow what the two women were talking about.

*‘Well, I’m sure it’s nothing.’*

Although Seol-Ah’s obsession and possessive nature had gotten extreme due to the strengthening of Seraph’s influence, she did not show that side to Lilith. It was as if Seol-Ah was fine with it as long as it was Lilith, like a junior yielding to their superior. Whatever the case, there was no need to worry at all about Lilith.

“Right then, let’s all make preparations from today onward,” Kang-Woo stated as he turned around.

He took out his smartphone and called Si-Hun.

[Oh, hyung-nim?]

“Yeah. I have everyone we need.”

Kang-Woo named every single member that would be coming with them. Of course, since Si-Hun and Layla both thought that Vaal Zahak was a servant of Satan, Kang-Woo altered his name a little.

[Vernaak?]

Si-Hun tilted his head in confusion from hearing a name that he had never heard of.

“Yeah. He used to be one of my subordinates back in Hell, and he apparently knows a lot about Aernor. He’s very capable too.”

[He wasn’t at the picnic last time, though.]

“He couldn’t come back then due to circumstances.”

[He lived at Balrog’s house...? I never knew despite having gone there pretty frequently to train with Balrog.]

“He’s a bit of a hikikomori[1], so he doesn’t like to go outside.”

In actuality, Kang-Woo had ordered Vaal Zahak to stay out of Si-Hun’s sight, but Si-Hun had no way of knowing that.

“I’ll introduce him to you next time.”

[I understand.]

“Have you recruited anyone?”

[Mm. Master said that he would stay here, and the same goes for Grace. As for Tae-Soo... I don't think it would be a good idea.]

“I guess that's true.”

Although Kang Tae-Soo was leveling hard after having entered Guardians, he had only just entered the ranks of Ranker.

[There's no one in particular besides me and Layla.]

“Got it.”

Since their travels to Aernor would be filled with all sorts of dangers, they couldn't just take anyone with them. Finding sufficiently strong Players that they could trust deeply was not easy.

In the end, the members of the Aernor exploration team had ended up being mostly Kang-Woo's subordinates; it was only natural, considering the massive difference between regular Players and Kang-Woo's subordinates. Even Echidna, the weakest of them, was now able to use dragon tongue magic of fully mature dragons.

“Let's finalize the roster, then,” Kang-Woo said as he sent the finalized list of members to Si-Hun. “Send this to Layla.”

[Okay, hyung-nim.]

Kang-Woo hung up.

*‘I guess it's time for me to get some work done too.’*

Bam! Bam!

As he turned around while thinking, someone banged on the door to the point that it would break. Kang-Woo opened the door to see a red-haired woman glaring at him while panting heavily.

“Take me with you too.”

It was Cha Yeon-Joo.

Chapter 330 - Preparations to Leave (2)

“You want to come with us?” Oh Kang-Woo asked, taken off guard by Cha Yeon-Joo's statement.

It was not that he hadn't thought about her when he was thinking about members for the Aernor exploration team; Yeon-Joo was very capable as well as trustworthy, but there was just one reason why he had not asked her.

“What about your guild?” he asked.

Yeon-Joo had a guild to manage. Not just that, Red Rose had become big enough to be the largest guild in Korea. It would be a different story if it was just a short mission, but he felt bad to take her on a mission that he had no idea how long it would take.

“I quit,” Yeon-Joo said.

“... What?”

“I quit my guild master position.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Kang-Woo became wide-eyed by her sudden response. She had quit her position as guild master? It was completely absurd, considering Red Rose possessed enough authority as Guardians, albeit restricted to Korea.

Yeon-Joo crossed her arms and snorted. “Well, to be exact, I didn’t quit... I put Hyun-Woo in charge temporarily.”

Kang-Woo stared at her dumbfoundedly. Although she had said that she had temporarily left it to Park Hyun-Woo, she did not sound like she had any intention of returning to the position.

“Are you sure you can quit just like that?” he asked.

“What does it matter? I was pretty much a figurehead anyway.” Yeon-Joo shook her hand as if she wasn’t interested. “I was never the right person for the job. This just happened to be the perfect opportunity for me to quit.”

“...”

“So take me with you to that Aernor place or whatever it was called,” she said while leaning toward Kang-Woo.

Kang-Woo smirked. “You didn’t quit so you could come with me, did you?”

“Wh-What?”

Yeon-Joo reddened. She stammered for a bit, but then grimaced like a Yaksha.

“D-Don’t screw with me, you son of a bitch! Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Why would I quit my position for the likes of you?! I just quit because I was sick and tired of it!” she shouted while panting heavily.

Kang-Woo snickered, being able to read her like a book.

“You...!”

Yeon-Jo raised her hand. *Thrash!* Chains poured out of her bracelet and shot toward Kang-Woo, which he easily caught.

He muttered, “Are you sure?”

“... About what?”

“No one knows when we’ll be able to come back from this mission. No, being able to come back alive isn’t even a guarantee.”

Not even Kang-Woo knew what would happen during their mission to eliminate the Demon God’s corpse. Although he was confident in his strength, the world was far too big.

“Will you still come with us despite that?” he asked, his eyes sunken deeply.

Yeon-Joo stared at him in silence, but she did not take long to answer.

“Yeah.”

Kang-Woo smiled as he heard the firm will in her answer. He stretched his hand toward her. “I’ll be in your care.”

“A-Ahem. Likewise...”

“Right, aren’t you forgetting something?”

“What?”

Kang-Woo said while pointing at the chains that Yeon-Joo had released, “Shouldn’t you be calling me *oppa*?”

“N-Ngh!”

Yeon-Joo reddened again. She fumed like a steam engine and swung her fist at Kang-Woo.

“You fucking pervert!”

The furious lioness made a mess of the house. Kang-Woo avoided her attacks while snickering.

*‘Well, I’m glad.’*

He had been hoping for Yeon-Joo to come with him; after all, unlike Han Seol-Ah and Lilith, Yeon-Joo felt more like a female friend. No, leaving aside gender, she was the only person that Kang-Woo could speak to like a true friend.

Seol-Ah stared at Kang-Woo, who was running around while snickering, in silence.

Something in her squirmed as she saw his mischievous side, something that he had never shown her. Her eyes lost their light.

“... Yeon-Joo.”

“Huh? What? I have to teach that pervert a lesson, so let’s talk later,” Yeon-Joo answered while frowning.

Seol-Ah extended her arm toward Yeon-Joo.

Fwoom!

“Huh? Huuuh? Wh-What the hell is this?”

Chains of light flowed out from Seol-Ah and restrained Yeon-Joo. They were the Demon-Binding Light that had bound Kang-Woo back when she had fallen from grace.



*Step, step.* Seol-Ah slowly walked toward Yeon-Joo.

“Wh-What’s wrong...?”

“Let’s talk for a bit.”

Seol-Ah smiled, and dragged the restrained Yeon-Joo to her room by the shoulder.

“H-Hey! W-Wait! Oh Kang-Woo! She’s acting weird! Help me!”

“No, it’s nothing weird. I just want to talk, so don’t worry and let’s take our time.”

Seol-Ah dragged Yeon-Joo along as she let out a lifeless giggle.

Having instinctively felt danger, Yeon-Joo shouted, “K-Kang-Woo! Oh Kang-Woo, you son of a bitch! Stop just staring blankly!! H-Hurry up and stop Seol— Argh! K-Kang-Woo! No, o-oppa!!”

*Clack.* Seol-Ah closed the door to her room after having dragged Yeon-Joo in it. *Click.* The sound of the door locking was heard.

Awkward silence fell. Kang-Woo, who had been running from Yeon-Joo, stared at the door blankly.

“Uhh... Mm.” He scratched his head awkwardly. He then turned his head and said energetically, “Right, let’s get ready to go.”

Yeon-Joo’s solitary screams flowed out through the seams of the door.

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After that, Kang-Woo’s life became chaotically busy. The main thing that he focused on was to practice the Chaos skills through his Ninth Awakening Trait, Chaos Control. The training was extremely difficult due to the techniques’ insane level of power and highly complex level of control required.

His arms and legs were blown off countless times due to the repulsion between demonic energy and sacred power, and his life had also been at risk a few times. Because the difficulty of the training was as high as that of molting, Kang-Woo trained in very remote places.

He had gotten significantly more used to using the Chaos skills thanks to Chaos Control compared to when he had first learned them. However, he had not been able to learn any Low-rank skills to complete the fifth quest of the Key of the Demonic Sea because training Chaos skills was so dangerous that he could not do it often.

*‘I shouldn’t rush.’*

Although there were times when he was extremely annoyed by the fact that he had not been able to get past the Bottom-rank, he did not push himself to train the Chaos skills. After all, there was nothing more pathetic than dying from training too hard due to impatience.

Due to this, Kang-Woo had not put all his eggs into one basket that was Chaos skill training. He improved his demonic energy control by sleeping with Seol-Ah, and practiced the Authorities of the princes of Hell from time to time. He also did not forget to tighten Earth’s security as well as preparing all the items needed for his trip to Aernor.

“Fuuu.”

“You’ve gotten much better, hyung-nim.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

Kang-Woo had also been learning swordsmanship from Kim Si-Hun while helping him train. Of course, since he had never learned any systematic martial arts and possessed only average-level talent, he had not been able to gain much from the training. Although Kang-Woo’s demonic energy control was amazing enough to even shock gods, he did not know how to do much else aside from his highly unpolished combat skills.

*‘Fucking hell, s say swordsmanship polished through experience is better than martial arts.’*

It was complete bullshit; although his skills gained through combat experience would not lose to regular martial arts...

*‘Kim Si-Hun, this son of a bitch...’*

Si-Hun did not possess regular martial arts. Kang-Woo had gotten absolutely floored back when he had faced Si-Hun purely through technique without relying on his Authorities.

*‘Motherfucking genius.’*

Kang-Woo once again realized through learning martial arts from Si-Hun that Si-Hun truly possessed an astonishing level of talent.

*‘Why are his skills improving more when he’s the one teaching me martial arts?’*

Si-Hun was improving more than Kang-Woo despite Si-Hun being the one to teach Kang-Woo. He had said something about having attained enlightenment after explaining in words what he had done all this time just by feeling.

“Screw it. Fuck this!” Kang-Woo exclaimed while throwing the sword temperamentally.

Si-Hun approached while surprised. “H-Hyung-nim. Don’t be like that and let’s try it for a bit longer. I’m telling you, your learning speed is by no means slow.”

Si-Hun was talking like a food delivery man telling the customer that they were almost there despite being miles away. Kang-Woo sighed and picked up the sword again.

“Haaa, this is driving me insane. Don’t people with lots of combat experience usually pick up on this stuff super quickly?”

“That combat experience is actually what’s holding you back. Bad habits have been so ingrained into your muscles that your swordsmanship has become highly deformed.”

Practice made permanent, not perfect.

“You will reach far higher heights once you fix those habits,” Si-Hun remarked.

“Easier said than done.”

Kang-Woo's habits had been ingrained into him for ten whole millennia; he would not be having this much trouble if he could just fix them.

"Haha, I have faith that you can do it, hyung-nim."

"Urgh." Kang-Woo frowned in frustration. "That's enough swordsmanship training. Let's move on to your cultivation technique training."

"Oh, okay, hyung-nim."

Kang-Woo was not one-sidedly getting trained by Si-Hun; he was using his astounding knowledge of energy control to teach Si-Hun how to circulate his Qi more efficiently.

"I told you, that's not how you do it," Kang-Woo expressed.

"U-Uhh..."

"Stop trying to rely on your instincts, and move your Qi through extremely thorough calculations."

"Ngh..."

Their roles reversed once it came time for cultivation technique training. Si-Hun frowned, seemingly unable to understand what Kang-Woo was saying. Kang-Woo smirked as if telling Si-Hun that this was how he had felt during their swordsmanship training.

"You have hundreds of thousands of meridians. Based on how you circulate your Qi, the effect generated is completely different for the same amount of power."

"Understood."

Of course, Kang-Woo was not doing this out of childish revenge. There was no one more skilled at controlling energy within oneself than Kang-Woo.

Whoooooom!

Si-Hun closed his eyes and focused; translucent swords formed in the air. Formless Sword, the technique that Si-Hun had acquired after his assimilation with the Martial God surpassed 60%, had become far more precise than before.

"Let's wrap it up here." Kang-Woo stood up after having supervised Si-Hun's training. "We should finish getting ready. We leave tomorrow."

"... It's already tomorrow. Time flew by so fast," Si-Hun replied.

"Well, we've been busy."

Gaia had taken four months to form a Gate that led to Aernor. The number of people also contributed to the long wait; it had taken much more time due to the strength of each member. But now, that all had come to an end; Gaia had successfully formed a Gate that wouldn't put limiters on anyone.

"Let's go."

“Ah... Hyung-nim.”

“Yeah?”

“I would like to ask you for a favor.”

“What kind of favor?” Kang-Woo asked while tilting his head in confusion.

“My mother wants to meet you at least once.”

“Your mother?”

Si-Hun’s mother had suffered through all kinds of discrimination and disdain as Kim Jae-Hyun’s mistress.

*‘And...’*

She had also sown the seed of trauma within Si-Hun.

“Why so out of the blue?” Kang-Woo asked.

“She said that she wanted to express her gratitude for everything that you’ve done for us.”

Si-Hun’s mother, after having been abandoned by Jae-Hyun, had collapsed from health complications, but had been treated in a hospital accommodated by Kang-Woo (or Red Rose, to be more exact), and had become far better.

*‘It had been to earn Si-Hun’s trust, but...’*

Whatever the case, debt was best repaid.

“Sure.” Kang-Woo nodded happily.

He felt like he had a need to meet Si-Hun’s mother, for the trauma that was still haunting Si-Hun to this day.

*‘Though it also feels like it’s about time.’*

Kang-Woo and Si-Hun had first met four years ago. To be honest, this meeting should have happened ages ago.

*‘Even so...’*

It was better to sort everything out before they left for Aernor.

“Thank you very much, hyung-nim.”

Si-Hun took Kang-Woo to a home somewhere in Seoul. Although the two-story home did not scream wealth, it soothed one’s soul.

“This is my home,” Si-Hun remarked.

“Come to think of it, this is my first time coming to your home.”

“Hahaha. I mostly stay in the Hall of Protection.”

Si-Hun opened the door while smiling. Kang-Woo could not feel any traces of life in the home.

“Oh, my mother is saying that she stepped out for a bit to buy ingredients, and will be back soon.”

“I guess we can wait, then.”

Kang-Woo, who had been thinking about going on a house tour, saw a pot of something in the kitchen. After having seen the black substance in a giant pot, he frowned while pinching his nose due to the stench.

“What the hell is this culinary crime?”

“It’s my mother’s kimchi stew.”

“What the hell is this criminally delicious-looking kimchi stew?”

It looked extremely delicious.

“Oh, that’s what you meant,” Si-Hun said.

“I can already feel my mouth watering, man.”

*Hahaha.* Kang-Woo laughed while patting Si-Hun’s shoulders.