

M. in Hell 411

Chapter 411 - Dragon of Caldesann [Bonus Image]

"A-Aaaahh," Oh Kang-Woo expressed as sparks traveled around his body.

"Wh-What do you think, Kang-Woo?" asked the flushed Han Seol-Ah.

She was wearing a white bikini that suited her very well. Two huge objects filled Kang-Woo's vision. He had seen her naked in bed many times, but seeing her in a swimsuit outside was amazing in its own right.

'Fuck. I'm so glad I'm alive.'

Kang-Woo gave Seol-Ah a thumbs-up while tears flowed down his cheeks.

"I-It's a little embarrassing if you react that way," she muttered while covering herself with her arms, but she smiled widely despite her embarrassment.

"So this is a swimsuit? Hmm. What a strange culture. Humans wear things that are no different from underwear in public?" Lilith said in fascination as she pulled on the string of her black bikini.

"That's the point," Kang-Woo remarked.

"Really?" Lilith tilted her head as if she was having a hard time understanding.

"Haaa, haaa. Good... Very, very good," Layla muttered as she rapidly pressed the shutter of a giant camera that she had pulled out of nowhere.

Her heavy panting made her look extremely shady.

'Gaia... Are you sure you want someone like her as your incarnation?'

Kang-Woo chuckled as he stared at Layla, who had also changed into a swimsuit.

"Please get out of the way, Kang-Woo. I need Seol-Ah to be in full view."

"Ah, yes, ma'am."

Kang-Woo took a step back.

"Ahem," Kim Si-Hun coughed as he peeked glances at Layla in her swimsuit.

Kang-Woo stared at Si-Hun pitifully.

'Si-Hun... Your future wife is a bit weird. I think there's a pervy old man inside her.'

However, there was no way Si-Hun, who was blinded by love, could see such a thing. Si-Hun walked over to Layla and chatted with her affectionately.

Then, Halcyon and Echidna approached Kang-Woo.

"M-Master Kang-Woo. I..."

"Why don't we have swimsuits?"

"Well, there are very important reasons." Kang-Woo calmly nodded. "First, Echidna."

"Yeah?"

"You can't wear a swimsuit."

'It'll affect the novel ranking.'

"You can wear one once you're older," Kang-Woo continued.

"Is there an age limit for swimsuits?" Echidna asked.

"Yup."

'Fifteen and up.'

"But I'm older than Seol-Ah."

"You still can't."

"It's unfair."

"Life is usually unfair, Echidna."

Kang-Woo patted Echidna's head with a warm smile. Echidna tilted her head, unable to understand the complicated truth of life.

"M-Master Kang-Woo. Wh-Why can't I wear a swimsuit?" Halcyon asked.

"You..."

Kang-Woo slightly looked down at Halcyon's lower body; more specifically, he imagined the magnum dong under Halcyon's clothes. Kang-Woo was swept over with dizziness.

"You just can't," Kang-Woo replied.

"I-I just can't? Wh-Why only me...?"

'If I say you can't, then you just fucking can't.'

"It's unfair!" Halcyon shouted.

'I feel the same way, man. I feel the same way.'

"Hmph, you made an entire lake just to see some swimsuits? You're fucking crazy." Cha Yeon-Joo walked over to Kang-Woo while shaking her head.

She was wearing a hoodie, but she was wearing a red bikini underneath.

"Mmm." Kang-Woo nodded as he stared at her.

"What?" Yeon-Joo glared at him.

"No, I just thought it suited you better than I expected."

Yeon-Joo was quite slim so she looked very good in a swimsuit.

"H-Hmm~ Really?" Yeon-Joo turned her head away while blushing and smiled. "I guess you have eyes, at the very least."

Kang-Woo smirked at the smug Yeon-Joo and said as he turned around, "Anyway, go have some fun in the lake. I'll be preparing the barbecue."

"Urgh."

"No fair, Kang-Woo."

Kang-Woo turned away from the complaining Halcyon and Echidna. As he was about to get the barbecue set that was packed in a bag...

"Ah..." he muttered.

"My king, is this the barbecue set?" Balrog asked.

"Huhu. I, Vernaak, have prepared the meat and vegetables already."

A red giant in massive swim trunks and a skeleton wearing a pink apron came into view.

"God..." Kang-Woo covered his eyes. They hurt as if they were rotting. "Fuck off... I'll take care of it myself."

"That is unacceptable! How could I dare call myself your subordinate if I let you do everything yourself?!"

"We will assist you!!"

"Please... Just fuck off..."

Kang-Woo's sobs echoed throughout Caldesann's peak.

Tsssss!

The meat on the grill sizzled mouth-wateringly. Kang-Woo distributed the meat to each of his party members.

Si-Hun put down his plate and came up to him. "I'll take over, hyung-nim."

Kang-Woo shook his head. "Forget it and eat some more with Layla."

"But..."

"Hurry up and go talk her down."

Kang-Woo pointed at Layla, who was rapidly pressing the camera shutter without eating any meat.

"Daaaaayumt! *Huff, huff*. P-Please give me just one sexy pose, Lilith!"

Si-Hun smiled awkwardly. "H-Haha. Layla seems a bit excited."

"I doubt even her parents would be able to recognize her when she's like that."

'Though I don't know if they're alive.'

"A-Ahem," Si-Hun coughed as he walked over to Layla.

Kang-Woo chuckled.

'She's completely different from when I first met her.'

It might be a bit too severe of a change, but it was not a bad one. After all, it meant that she trusted him and the other party members.

"You have some too, Kang-Woo," Seol-Ah said as stuck next to Kang-Woo.

"I'm eating as I'm grilling."

"You haven't been eating at all since earlier, though." Seol-Ah pouted. She grabbed a piece of meat with her chopsticks and held it out in front of Kang-Woo. "Here, ahhh~"

Kang-Woo ate the meat. As expected of meat that he grilled himself, it melted in his mouth.

"What was this meat called again?" Kang-Woo asked.

"I'm not sure. I believe it came from an animal called... Triton. I've never seen them, though."

"I see." Kang-Woo's eyes shone.

Seeing that, Seol-Ah smiled faintly. "Shall I put some in your kimchi stew?"

"That's my darling."

'You know me so well.'

"Hohoho. Give me just a moment. I brought the ingredients just in case."

Seol-Ah walked to where the bags were while humming. Kang-Woo watched her walk away and then looked at the other party members. None of them would ever get tired from just a little fun in the water, and they were having fun chatting while eating the grilled meat.

'How nice.'

Kang-Woo smiled faintly. It was such a sweet feeling that he felt as if his brain would melt.

"Hm?"

Just then, Echidna entered Kang-Woo's field of vision.

"*Munch, munch.*"

She was eating with a dark expression as if she were deep in thought. Rather than enjoying the taste of the meat, it looked more like she was just chewing for the sake of it.

'What's up with her?'

Echidna had been acting weird since a while ago. As Kang-Woo was about to stop grilling the meat and go to her, Balrog beat him to it.

"What is wrong, young dragon?" Balrog asked as he sat next to Echidna.

Because he was in his demon form, he towered over her even while seated.

"Nothing." Echidna shook her head.

"It doesn't look like nothing. Your expression has been dark since earlier.

"If you have something on your mind, tell me. I, Balrog, will hear you out." Balrog laughed heartily.

Echidna's lips quivered with her head lowered. She then looked to see if anyone was around.

'I'll give them some space.'

Kang-Woo gathered the other party members somewhere else with the excuse that they needed to help make the kimchi stew. He wanted to hear what was on Echidna's mind, but it seemed like the better choice to step out.

'Echidna is overly dependent on me.'

That could partially be the reason why she was not able to talk to Kang-Woo about it.

Balrog chugged down an entire barrel of beer.

"Kaaahh." He wiped his mouth and said, "The only thing that is good for you to keep inside is loyalty, young dragon."

Echidna pouted and grumbled, "You talk like an old man, Balrog."

"Kahahaha! I'm far past the age where I can be called an old man, even by dragon standards."

"I've been here before."

"Oh?" Balrog's eyes widened.

Kang-Woo, who was also listening from a distance, widened his eyes in surprise.

"Are you saying this isn't your first time on... What was this mountain called? Oh, Caldesann?"

"Yeah. I came here with my dad when I was little," Echidna muttered.

She recalled the days with her father, who had suddenly disappeared one day and left her. Her expression darkened.

"Hmm. I see."

Balrog nodded as if he had understood why Echidna had been so down.

Crack!

He broke open yet another barrel of beer.

"Have a drink, young dragon. Hehe. This thing known as alcohol is great in times like this."

Balrog lightly patted Echidna's back. His hand was so big that it could cover her entire back.

"It's too big." Echidna softly giggled while pouting.

"In that case, please use this." Vernaak walked up to them and handed Echidna a transparent glass.

"Thanks, Vaal Z— I mean, Vernaak."

Just as Echidna was about to take the glass that Vernaak handed her...

Whaaaam—!!!

"Wh-What the—?!"

The mountain shook all of a sudden.

[Who dares disrupt the sacred Caldesann?!]

A thunderous voice shook the entire mountain. The ground split and from between it emerged a giant dragon with red scales. The enraged dragon covered in intense flames looked down at the intruders that had made a mess out of Caldesann.

"Huh?" Echidna's eyes widened. She muttered with her mouth agape in disbelief, "Dad...?"

Chapter 412 - I'll Be Taking Your Daughter

[Echidna...?]

The red dragon looked down at Echidna with shaking eyes. Silence fell.

"Hah," Oh Kang-Woo feigned laughter.

This dragon seemed to be Echidna's father who had left Echidna by herself in the past.

'Demonic Dragon Kargath, was it?'

He recalled the message window that he had seen a long time ago.

'I never thought I'd meet him in this way.'

"Hmm." Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes.

He did not have a positive impression of Kargath. How could he, when Kargath was the reason why Echidna had gone through such misfortune?

'But still...'

That was not reason enough to beat him to a pulp in front of Echidna. Kang-Woo decided to try to converse with Kargath first.

"You must be Karg—"

[You bastaaaaaaards!! What are you trying to do to Echidna?!]

Caldesann shook from Kargath's enraged roar before Kang-Woo could even finish his sentence. Kang-Woo frowned.

'What's up with this son of a bitch? What are we trying to do to Echidna, he said?'

Kang-Woo could not understand why Kargath was so enraged. He turned to Echidna.

'Why is he so—'

Next to Echidna was a red giant who had his hand on Echidna's back, and in front of her was a skeleton wearing a pink apron.

"Huh?"

'Oh, mmm. I can see why he's angry.'

Any parent would be enraged if they saw their daughter next to a demon and an Undead with no prior information.

'But... Was he not a demonic dragon?'

If that was the case, there was no way Kargath would be acting so sensitively from seeing Echidna with a demon and an Undead. Kang-Woo tilted his head in confusion and scanned Kargath with the Authority of Insight.

'He... doesn't have demonic energy?'

Kang-Woo wondered if Kargath's demonic energy had disappeared like himself after he had become the God of Splendor, but he could not feel Deific Essence from Kargath either. He was confused by the incomprehensible situation.

[Step away from Echidna this instant!]

Kargath stomped his feet while roaring. He drew out a massive wave of mana and shot it at Balrog.

"D-Dad, no!" Echidna shouted hurriedly.

She stood up and stepped in front of Balrog. The mana blast quickly changed direction.

Crash!

The mana blast collided with the lake and created a massive pillar of water.

[No...? Wh-What do you mean, Echidna?]

Echidna clenched her fists and continued, "They're my friends. Don't hurt them."

She glared at Kargath, whose face turned as white as a sheet.

[Friends...? H-Have you been brainwashed by that demon?] he asked desperately as if he found it hard to believe.

"No." Echidna shook her head. She looked up at Kargath while biting her lip. She said in a low voice as if pulling out the emotions that she had suppressed all this time, "Dad... Where have you been... all this time?"

Her shoulders were trembling and her eyes were filled with rage and sorrow. Kang-Woo couldn't imagine how much of her emotions she had suppressed to stop herself from saying that until now.

Kargath remained silent for a long time. [I'm... sorry.]

He lowered his head.

"Why... Why did you disappear without a word? Why... did you... abandon me?"

[I did not abandon you!!] Kargath quickly shouted. [I did not.]

"Then...!!" Tears flowed down Echidna's cheeks as she bit her lip aggressively. "Why... Why..."

Echidna fell to her knees as she wept, the tears pooling at the tip of her chin. Balrog wiped her tears with his hand.

[How dare a filthy demon touch my daughter?!]

"Do you truly believe you have the right to say that?" Balrog slowly stood up and sneered at him.

"Kargath... Yes, I remember hearing about you from Amon. A dragon cursed by the Dragon God for breaking a taboo due to his greed for Deific Essence."

Balrog glared at Kargath and continued, "Foolish dragon, do you know the demon named Lucifer?]

[Are you a subordinate of the Evil God?]

"No. That is not what I'm trying to say." Balrog slowly shook his head. He lightly patted Echidna's shoulder and continued fiercely, "I'm trying to ask if you knew that not even the Evil God abandoned his child."

Kargath flinched. He took a deep breath, flames lingering around his mouth, and then said, [I had... no choice. It was the only choice I could make... to lift the curse that the Dragon God placed on our family.]

Kang-Woo thought about what Kargath meant by a curse but was easily able to figure it out.

"In other words, you were cursed by the Dragon God because you fucked up, so you left your daughter to ask the Dragon God for forgiveness and get the curse lifted, right?"

He might not have necessarily asked for forgiveness; he might have made a deal with the Dragon God or even made threats. However he did it, it did not change the fact that he had left Echidna to lift that curse.

"Well, it seems like you managed to get the curse lifted since I don't feel any demonic energy from you, but..."

Echidna had suffered from isolation while Kargath had left her to lift the curse.

[Silence!] Kargath roared fiercely and continued in desperation, [You know nothing about the fate of a demonic dragon!! Demonic dragons are not acknowledged by any dragon! They are ostracized and exterminated! I... could not afford to pass on such a fate to my daughter.]

Kang-Woo smirked. "Wow, I would think that the Dragon God cursed you because he fucking hated you if I didn't know any better."

He approached Echidna, whose shoulders were trembling with her head down, and placed his hand on her head.

"It sure is nice to be able to say that you had no choice."

Phrases like it was all for your sake, it couldn't have been helped, and that there was no other way... They were all so sweet that they could completely erase one's bitter regrets.

"To be honest with you, I have no idea what to feel," Kang-Woo remarked.

He could not even imagine the feelings of a parent since he did not have children or parents. The concept of family was a complete enigma to him.

"But..." Kang-Woo patted the crying Echidna. "Do you seriously believe Echidna wanted that?"

He stared at the crying girl. To her, Kargath had been everything. She did not care about the fact that she was a demonic dragon or that she would be ostracized by other dragons. Kargath had made her the loneliest dragon in the world to save her from isolation; it was truly ironic.

[You know nothing!] Kargath exclaimed.

"That's why I said I have no idea, man."

There was no need for Kang-Woo to know about what Kargath had felt and the resolve he had to make to leave Echidna or what sort of tearjerking story was hidden underneath. None of that mattered.

"What matters is that..."

Kang-Woo pulled Echidna toward him by the shoulder. Echidna's eyes widened as she was pulled into Kang-Woo's embrace.

"Kang... Woo?" She looked up at him with shaking eyes.

Kang-Woo said to Echidna while embracing Echidna, "... Echidna is my Familiar."

[What did you say?] Kargath's eyes widened.

He knew very well what the word *Familiar* entailed.

[H-How dare you?! You've been enslaving Echidna?!]

"Whoa there, don't get the wrong idea. At least say that I subordinated her."

[Get away from Echidna!] Kargath roared madly.

Kang-Woo grinned and looked toward Echidna. "You heard him. What should I do?"

Echidna hesitated as she trembled and bit her lip. She then slowly grabbed Kang-Woo's clothes and wept. "Don't go away. Don't leave me alone again..."

Kang-Woo smiled widely. "Oh man, what do we have here?" He turned to Kargath. "It looks like you'll be the one to be abandoned this time."

[You bastaaaaaaard!]

Kargath raised his head and charged at Kang-Woo in fury.

Kang-Woo extended his arm toward Kargath and commanded in Soul Speech, "Kneel."

Boom!

[Kurgh!]

The massive Kargath was pushed down by an unknown power. He stared at Kang-Woo in shock.

[H-How can a human use S-Soul Speech...?] he muttered as if he couldn't understand. He shouted desperately while twisting and turning, [My child! Come here! You are being deceived by that human!!]

"Urgh." Echidna bit her lip and turned to face Kargath. "Dad..." She stood up straight and continued after much silence, "I was so... so lonely when you first disappeared."

[That's...]

"I was okay with being a demonic dragon. I didn't care even if I was ostracized and hunted down. All I wanted was... to be together with you, Dad. But why... Why did you disappear... without a word?"

More tears flowed down Echidna's cheeks.

[Echidna...] Kargath said with a trembling voice.

Echidna raised her head after crying for a while and said as if she was releasing her pent-up emotions, "I'm not gonna go to you, Dad. The place where I belong... is here now."

She gripped Kang-Woo's clothes tighter. Kang-Woo smiled as he placed his hand on Echidna's shoulder. "You heard her."

He cackled.

Cha Yeon-Joo watched in silence.

She knew exactly what was going on. She knew that Echidna had chosen Kang-Woo over Kargath of her own accord and that Kargath was reaping what he had sown.

'But...'

She stared at the despairing Kargath and the cackling Kang-Woo who had his hand on Echidna's shoulder.

'Why does that son of a bitch look like the villain here?'

[N-No!! A-Anything but my daughter...!]

"Maybe this wouldn't be happening if you treated her better when it mattered~"

'Dude.'

[A-Aaaaahh!! Wh-What are you planning on doing to my daughter?!]

"Hahaha! I can at least guarantee that she'll have way more fun with me than she ever had with you."

'Oh Kang-Woo, you son of a bitch.'

"I'll send you pictures from time to time. Ones of her smiling very happily, that is."

'You crazy bastard.'

"Pfft! Bwehehehe!! Right then, I'll be taking your daughter!"

Yeon-Joo stared at Kang-Woo in shock. "He's..."

'A fucking scumbag.'

Chapter 413 - Church of Splendor

The picnic on Caldesann came to an anticlimactic end due to Kargath's appearance. Everyone was disappointed, but they knew that they couldn't continue the picnic. The party members promised to do something like this again next time and packed their things.

Oh Kang-Woo placed several restrictions on Kargath so that he couldn't try anything funny and returned to the imperial palace. Kang-Woo would normally have killed him to eliminate any risk factors, but he couldn't bring himself to kill Echidna's father in front of her.

"Kang-Woo." Echidna entered Kang-Woo's room while he was unpacking.

She came up and hugged him without a word. She was acting reserved, similar to when Kang-Woo first met her.

Kang-Woo gently patted her head.

After hugging him for a while, Echidna muttered cautiously, "I don't wanna be alone anymore."

Kang-Woo smirked. "I'll make it so that you can't leave my side no matter how much you don't want me to."

"Hihi." Echidna giggled and buried her face in Kang-Woo's embrace. "I'm sorry. The picnic was ruined because of me."

"It's fine. We can always go again when we have a chance."

Going to a picnic was no big deal; although it would be hard now since they were so busy, they could go on all the picnics they wanted until they were sick of it once they finished what they needed to do.

"Okay!" Echidna shouted brightly and nodded cutely. She then grabbed his clothes and asked carefully, "Kang-Woo, can I sleep with you tonight?"

"Mmm... Just a second."

Kang-Woo needed to ask Han Seol-Ah if it was okay since they usually slept together every night. Just as he was about to call her...

"I think it's fine," Seol-Ah said as she entered the room as if she had heard their conversation from outside. "It's been a while since I slept with Echidna."

She lightly hugged Echidna and placed her head on Echidna's chin.

Echidna turned around and asked in anticipation, "Are you gonna sleep with us too, Seol-Ah?"

"Yeah, sure." Seol-Ah smiled and patted Echidna's head.

"Hm! Hm! Okay! Let's all sleep together!"

Echidna jumped on the bed and snorted in excitement. Kang-Woo and Seol-Ah softly laughed and stared at each other.

"Hm! I'm gonna stay up late tonight!" Echidna shouted with shining eyes, lying between Kang-Woo and Seol-Ah.

However, she fell asleep after not even ten minutes of excitement. Kang-Woo smirked and closed his eyes after lying down. It was a short trip, but he had a feeling it would be a long-lasting memory.

"Here is my report on what I have investigated about the Church of Splendor," Lilith said as she entered Kang-Woo's room with a few pages of documents in hand.

A few days passed since the trip. Kang-Woo took the documents that Lilith handed him and nodded.

"First, this is the current size of the Church of Splendor."

Lilith pointed at a specific portion of the document. There was a map that seemed to be one of Aernor and the Church of Splendor was marked with a yellow highlighter.

"Its forces are spreading at an extraordinary rate with the Arnan Empire as the epicenter."

"You say that, but it doesn't look like it has spread much beyond Arnan, has it?" Kang-Woo remarked.

"It hasn't even been a month since it was formed, after all."

"Oh, right." Kang-Woo nodded as if he had forgotten.

The Church of Splendor was indeed growing at an extraordinary rate; it was only natural with Kang-Woo's miraculous feat during the war and Kim Si-Hun's fame. Even so, it was difficult for the Church of Splendor to take over the other religious organizations of Aernor, a polytheistic world.

'It's the same as Christianity failing to spread largely throughout Japan.'

Faith was complex; people usually did not welcome change, especially in the case of religion. It would take a long time for someone who already believed in one religion to switch to another.

"Considering that, it's pretty fast," Kang-Woo said.

The Church of Splendor was growing so quickly that it could even be considered a contagious disease.

"..."

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes. After listening to Lilith, he noticed something strange after taking a look through the documents again.

"Isn't it spreading a little too quickly?"

It was the complete opposite question from the one that he had asked before. He could not help but think that the church was growing a little too quickly once he took a look at the map again after taking into account Aernor's religious circumstances.

"Yes, you're right," Lilith agreed. "It's because the Church of Splendor took over some existing religious organizations."

"They joined my religion?"

"Yes. The remnants of the Godly Pantheon made declarations along the line that they had received revelations to follow the God of Splendor, causing a massive influx into the Church of Splendor."

"..."

Kang-Woo fell into thought as he stroked his chin.

'The gods gave revelations to follow me?'

He shook his head after some thought.

"That's hard to believe."

The gods had likely received significant penalties because of the mass deaths of the incarnations. There were likely even some gods whose Deific Essence was annihilated.

'But they're transferring their forces to a different god in that situation?'

It was far too optimistic to think that they had made a necessary sacrifice for the sake of Aernor's future. For gods born with Deific Essence like Gaia and Tirion, Deific Essence was the only way for them to influence the physical world. In other words, Deific Essence was no different from their limbs.

'Cutting off their limbs and giving them to another god?'

It was bullshit. Kang-Woo snickered. He had a feeling about what was going on.

"After all the shit they went about the glory of the Godly Pantheon and all, they've pretty much given up on it."

The gods took the brunt of the penalty after their incarnations were killed at the hands of Tai Wuji. Those who worshiped gods with low Deific Essence had likely lost most of the blessings and power that they had received from that god. Not only had the power of the churches weakened after Si-Hun's appearance, but the people who had acted as the leaders of the churches had ended up dying during the war. The remnants had no choice but to find another way to live.

'And so they chose the Church of Splendor as their lifeline.'

It was far too wise of a decision for Kang-Woo to insult them as a bunch of leeches since he would have made the same choice if he had been in their shoes.

"Yes. Because of that, there have been some issues occurring in the Church of Splendor," Lilith stated.

"Well, I would assume so."

Kang-Woo nodded as the puzzle pieces matched inside his head. The remnants of the Godly Pantheon were absorbed into the Church of Splendor. No, *absorbed* was not the right word to use.

"They're probably working to devour the Church of Splendor as we speak."

"Hoho, exactly."

Kang-Woo crossed his arms and shook his leg. The Church of Splendor was easily being devoured by the remnants of the Godly Pantheon no doubt because of the Church of Splendor itself.

"Maybe I should've made some apostles or an incarnation," Kang-Woo muttered.

The God of Splendor, the one whom the devotees of the Church of Splendor worshiped, did not have any apostles or an incarnation. There were not even devotees to whom Kang-Woo had indirectly granted power; it was only natural since the religion was made spontaneously by the people of the continent who praised Kang-Woo and Si-Hun.

In other words, the Church of Splendor had no one in administrative positions whom Kang-Woo had appointed. To the Godly Pantheon, there was no better religious organization for them to devour.

"They sure used their heads," Kang-Woo smirked.

Members of the Godly Pantheon had administrative experience in their respective churches, so it was likely a piece of cake for them to use the people of the continent, who had gathered purely for the sake of worship, for their benefit.

'I mean, it would've been no business of mine what they did with the Church of Splendor before, but...'

The situation had changed. After all, the pure faith of the Church of Splendor's devotees could be converted into power for him. Kang-Woo now had a reason to grow the Church of Splendor. The Church of Splendor would grow even if he just left it to be, and the remnants of the Godly Pantheon would benefit from its growth as well.

'But...'

There was a huge problem.

'They don't have an ounce of faith in me as a god.'

The remnants of the Godly Pantheon had simply stuck to the Church of Splendor like a pack of hyenas to regain the power that they had lost after the influence of the churches had severely weakened; they did not have any form of faith in Kang-Woo. It was truly ironic that the leaders of the Church of Splendor did not believe in the God of Splendor.

"Shall I kick them out?" Lilith asked casually.

Kang-Woo shook his head. "No, it's better to have experienced people in administrative positions than some randos."

"But why? They don't believe in you, Master Kang-Woo." Lilith tilted her head in wonder.

Kang-Woo stood up while smiling. The solution was simple.

"In that case, I'll make them believe."

It was time for him to give a sermon.

A boy with blank eyes was walking along a desolate land under a red sky.

"Welcome back," an unpleasant voice like nails on a chalkboard sounded out.

Darkness clumped together in midair and walked out a hunchback demon with a staff.

"Yeah." The boy with blank eyes nodded. He turned to the hunchback demon and asked, "How is the progress on the world tree?"

"It is proceeding according to plan. We will see results in a little longer," replied the hunchback demon as he hit the ground with the end of his staff.

The boy nodded. "Oh, right. Something pretty interesting was formed. Have you heard?"

"Are you referring to the Church of Splendor?"

"Yeah." The boy nodded with a faint smile.

"What will you do?" the hunchback demon asked.

"I wonder what I should do?" The boy looked up at the red sky and fell into thought. He then answered uninterestedly, "Mmm. I'm too lazy to think about it."

"I understand. In that case, I will take measures myself." The hunchback demon bowed deeply. He cackled and then asked, "How did you feel about seeing the Demon King after all this time?"

The boy remained silent. Then, the corners of his mouth slowly rose; they went past his cheekbones, all the way to his earlobes. "Kihi!"

Madness filled the boy's blank eyes. Enormous demonic energy poured out from him.

Crack, crack!

Goat horns sprouted from the boy's forehead and bat wings pierced out of his back.

"Haaah," the boy exhaled in ecstasy as he recalled the Demon King's radiant Flames of Voracity. He muttered, "He looked very... very delicious."

"Kekeke." The hunchback demon nodded. "I am glad to hear that, Lord Bael."

Chapter 414 - Do You Believe In The Light?

"We must put our faith in the God of Splendor!!!"

"Lord Oh Kang-Woo will save Aernor from the darkness!"

The plaza was blasting with the shouts of people in white clerical clothing with voice amplification magic tools in hand.

"Hoho, they sure are going at it." Lilith giggled.

Kang-Woo nodded as he chuckled. "Man, it's only hitting me now after coming here myself."

It felt like he was in some sort of cult rally, but its effect was huge.

"All hail Oh Kang-Woo! All hail Kim Si-Hun!"

"Blessed be the God of Splendor!"

Kang-Woo could feel the fanaticism in their cheers. Slushy, who was on his shoulder, was bouncing up and down as if it couldn't wait to gobble up all the faith in the air.

'So this is where the Church of Splendor is based.'

Kang-Woo looked around. The Church of Splendor was not based in the capital but in the city where the Godly Pantheon had been based; to be more exact, the Church of Lumeria where Anduin had been a member had changed to the base of the Church of Splendor.

'I guess the Goddess of Peace was dumped.'

Kang-Woo feigned laughter due to the absurdity. The Church of Lumeria had held the most influence in Aernor, which was why Anduin had been the leader of the Godly Pantheon. However, the base of the Church of Lumeria was now being used as the base for the Church of Splendor. Kang-Woo was astonished by how quickly the apostles of the Goddess of Peace had changed ship.

"Shall we take a look around the base?" Lilith suggested.

"Sure." Kang-Woo nodded.

He looked around the buildings that had become the base of the Church of Splendor with Lilith. There was no one to recognize him since he had changed his appearance with Mimicry.

"I can see they threw a shit ton of money into making these buildings."

Kang-Woo whistled as he looked around. Although it was not as extravagant as the imperial palace, the buildings could still hold their own. It felt like he was witnessing the buildings of the Catholic church in the Middle Ages when their power was at its peak.

"Oh my, look over there, Master Kang-Woo."

Lilith pointed somewhere as she was looking around. Thousands of people had gathered to pray in front of a giant mural; it was one drawn of Kang-Woo turning the demonic beast army into ash in an instant.

'When the hell did they draw something like that?'

Kang-Woo stared at the mural in disbelief. It had only been a month since the Church of Splendor had formed; he couldn't believe that such a massive mural had been drawn in that short of a time.

"O God of Splendor..."

"Grant us light."

Kang-Woo could hear the people gathered in front of the mural praying. Slushy chewed slightly, absorbing the faith in the air little by little. He could feel Divinity flowing into him through Slushy.

'Pretty sweet.'

It was like being fed while doing nothing in bed. Kang-Woo smiled as he was earning Divinity for free without having done anything.

'But it's still not that much.'

No matter how quickly the Church of Splendor was expanding throughout the continent, it was only a little over a month old. Also, there was a limit to how much Divinity he could earn since the ones in leadership did not believe in Kang-Woo in the slightest.

"Are you all praying sincerely?" someone asked.

A group of people entered through a door. Unlike the priests in white clerical clothing shouting in the plaza, these people were wearing extravagant vestments.

"Cardinal Mihile!"

"Whoaaa!"

"We will be counting on your guidance today as well, Cardinal Daylen!"

People cheered as the one known as Cardinal Mihile entered alongside several other cardinals.

"Haha. There's no need to rush, dear devotees," Mihile laughed brightly as he placed a thick book on the podium and stroked the cover.

'Cardinal, huh?'

Kang-Woo scanned the cardinals standing on the platform with great interest. They all looked like kind elderly gentlemen from just a glance.

"Can I leave today's sermon to you, Cardinal Ian?" asked Mihile as he turned.

The cardinal known as Ian was a middle-aged man with hollow eyes and black hair, a rare hair color in Aernor.

"No. I apologize. My throat hurts too much today," Ian replied as he rubbed his throat.

Mihile's eyebrows rose slightly.

"Ah..."

"To think we can't hear Cardinal Ian's great words..."

Many people expressed disappointment.

Mihile reassured them as he opened the book. "Hahaha. It can't be helped since Father Ian isn't feeling well. In that case, I will relay to you all the words of light in his place."

The devotees cheered passionately as Mihile stood in front of the podium. He raised his hand to calm the devotees down as if it were an everyday occurrence, and silence fell in an instant.

"Today, I would first like to talk about hardship and adversity," Mihile began. "There will be times in your lives when you will experience suffering and hardships, but it is especially in such times when you must never lose faith. Your faith in Lord Oh Kang-Woo symbolizes your acknowledgment of his supreme authority, and it will help you overcome any adversity. We must always believe in our god Oh Kang-Woo and trust that he will guide us to the right path."

'Wow, would you take a look at this son of a bitch?' Kang-Woo was impressed by Mihile's sermon. *'He sure is getting into it, huh?'*

Experience sure spoke for itself; despite the sermon being about a simple subject, it was impactful enough to pull people in.

"Verse 19 states that although righteous people will experience suffering, He will save us from adversity."

'I won't, though.'

"If you take a look at chapter 27 verse 2, Lord Oh Kang-Woo says that we must love our enemies who give us adversity and suffering."

'The hell are you talking about? You should kill your enemies.'

Kang-Woo listened to Mihile's sermon while chuckling. It was so well-structured that he couldn't believe that it had been made in just a month.

'They've prepared so well.'

Kang-Woo softly laughed as he passed around the book that the Church of Splendor was giving out. He couldn't hold in his laughter for the entire sermon.

'I'm shocked that someone with no faith whatsoever can spout shit like that.'

He had not felt an ounce of faith in Mihile. Slushy on his shoulder had been drooling while staring at the devotees listening to the sermon, but it showed no interest in the cardinals on the platform.

"I will roll the question over to you all. How would you describe your feelings about Lord Oh Kang-Woo? Do you worship him?" Mihile closed the book. "That will be all for today's sermon."

Thunderous applause rang out along with cheers. Mihile smiled in satisfaction as he stared at the Church of Splendor's devotees. The cardinals climbed down the platform.

"Let's go," Kang-Woo stated.

"Yes, my king."

Kang-Woo snapped his finger and activated the Authority of Stealth to conceal himself and Lilith, then followed behind the cardinals.

"I have some business to attend to, so I will excuse myself." Cardinal Ian bowed and turned around. Once he got far enough away, the other cardinals' attitudes changed abruptly.

"Fuuu. Why has Ian been acting that way lately?"

"He's blatantly ignoring us at this point."

They stared at Ian in displeasure as he was getting further away.

Mihile raised his hands to silence them. "Now, now, calm down. What if the devotees hear?"

"Hmph. I doubt those unenlightened bunch would even be able to understand what we're saying."

"Hahaha! Right you are."

The cardinals laughed heartily.

"Haaah. I was honestly worried about what would happen once I heard the news that Sir Anduin was killed, but life sure does find a way for you to live on."

"It must be the blessing of the gods."

"Hehe. Some nobody up and became the God of Splendor? Where in the world did that kind of absurd rumor come from?"

"Who cares, as long as we benefit from it?"

The cardinals nodded repeatedly and snickered.

"Long live the God of Splendor!" one of the cardinals shouted and spread his arms.

Whoooooom!

Just then, light manifested.

"Thank you, everyone." A being enveloped in splendid golden light walked toward the cardinals. He placed his hand on his chest and said affectionately, "To think you would have so much faith in the light... I have been truly moved."

The cardinals gasped in shock. Kang-Woo, who had undone Mimicry, looked the same as the mural.

"Why are you all so surprised?" Kang-Woo tilted his head as if he couldn't understand. "I've come to visit the Church of Splendor after hearing about it recently."

"I-I see."

The cardinals glanced at each other as they were sweating profusely. They all focused their gaze on Mihile, who calmly walked forward and bowed.

"I deeply appreciate your visit. My name is Mihile. Although I am lacking, I have taken on the role of delivering your words to the devotees."

"Hahaha. I'm honored to receive such faith when I've only just earned Deific Essence and become a god." Kang-Woo nodded with a bright smile.

Seeing his reaction, the other cardinals sighed in relief; they seemed to be assuming that Kang-Woo had not heard their earlier conversation.

"In that case," Kang-Woo said as he took a step forward. "I would like to take this chance to deliver my words to you all directly."

The cardinals nodded with an awkward smile, being given the chance to hear a sermon directly from a god.

"First..." Kang-Woo slowly raised his hand. "I would like to talk about hardship and adversity."

Kang-Woo threw a fast punch. He held back as much as possible, but it was still not enough for cardinals, who had lost the powers granted to them by their gods, to handle.

Bash!

"Kurgh!"

Mihile was punched directly in the face.

"G-God of Splendor!"

"Wh-What are you—!"

The other cardinals shouted in shock. Kang-Woo grabbed the cardinal next to him by the hair and smashed his head into the wall.

Wham!

"Arrrggghhh!"

"There will be times in your lives when you will experience suffering and hardships."

Crunch.

The arm of one of the cardinals was twisted severely.

"Gaaaaaaaahhh!"

"But it is especially in such times when you must never lose faith."

Crack!

The teeth of one of the cardinals fell to the ground.

"Verse 19 states that although righteous people will experience suffering, the light will save them from adversity."

Boom!

Kang-Woo grabbed the fleeing Mihile by the leg and smashed him down onto the ground.

"Chapter 27 verse 2; we must learn to love our enemies who give us adversity and suffering."

"S-Save u— Aarrgghh!"

Kang-Woo trampled on Mihile's knees as he was crawling away. Mihile's screams rang out along with the sound of his bones breaking. It did not take long for all the cardinals to be collapsed on the ground. All of their limbs were twisted in abnormal directions.

"Sister Lilith," Kang-Woo called.

"Yes, God of Splendor." Lilith appeared behind Kang-Woo and bowed modestly.

"Please treat the cardinals."

"Yes, my lord."

Lilith took out a potion emitting golden light. It was a special healing potion made with a drop of the God of Splendor's blood. Once Lilith poured the potion on the cardinals, their bodies immediately returned to normal.

"Now then, everyone." Kang-Woo smiled. "Let us continue the sermon."

"W-Wait—"

Crunch! Crack!

The God of Splendor's sermon continued.

"Aaarrggghhh!!"

"Bleeeeeghhh!"

The cardinals cheered as if they were deeply inspired after hearing the words of a god. Kang-Woo smiled in satisfaction.

"Everyone," he called.

"Urrrhhh," the cardinals groaned like Undead.

"Do you believe in the light?"

"Kurgh! D-Do you seriously think you'll get away with what you've done to—"

"Haaa," Kang-Woo sighed and shook his head. "It seems you still lack faith."

Kang-Woo grabbed Mihile by the hair and clenched his other hand into a fist.

"S-Stop! W-Wait—"

Crunch!

Mihile's cheekbone shattered. Unable to handle the massive pressure, one of his eyeballs popped out of the socket. Horrible violence continued on end.

"Everyone," Kang-Woo called again. "Do you believe in the light?"

"Yesss..."

"W-We do."

Kang-Woo turned his head to look at Slushy. It was facing away from the cardinals as if it was completely uninterested in them. It meant that faith could not be detected in them.

"Aaaahh." Kang-Woo shook his head in pity. "It truly breaks my heart that I must put my devotees through such suffering."

He couldn't believe that it was this difficult to deliver the words of a god. His heart ached every time he swung his fists.

'But...'

He needed to endure it. For the sake of delivering the words of the light and for true faith to bloom...

'I have to overcome this pain.'

Kang-Woo clenched his fists and bit his lip. He had resolved himself for it, but his heart still hurt nonetheless.

"Hurghh..." Tears flowed down Kang-Woo's cheeks. He reached down and grabbed Mihile's eyeball that had popped out. "Everyone... Do you believe... in the light?"

Chapter 415 - This Is The End Of The Line, Damn Swindler

"Do you believe in the light now?" asked a young man enveloped by radiant light in a brightly lit room.

"Y-Yes!!"

"We believe!!"

The cardinals in extravagant vestments nodded furiously. Their faces were filled with fear and suffering. The young man softly patted the black lump on his shoulder that was drooling with its mouth wide open. It was proof that faith could be felt in them.

"Haha," Oh Kang-Woo laughed and nodded in satisfaction. "What a relief... It seems my words have reached your hearts."

He could vividly feel their belief as they looked up at him. He was moved by how his teachings had allowed blazing passion to be lit in their hearts.

"Don't you agree, Cardinal Mihile?" Kang-Woo asked leisurely.

"A-Aaaahh." Mihile's face turned pale as he nodded like a bobblehead.

Kang-Woo lightly patted Mihile's shoulder. "Thank you for guiding the devotees in my place thus far."

"N-Not at all. I-It is only natural for me to do as a d-d-d-devotee of the Church of Splendor," Mihile replied desperately.

Kang-Woo laughed lightly. "Haha. Come to think of it, I heard you were once a devotee of Lady Lumeria, the Goddess of Peace."

"Oh, y-yes. Th-That's correct."

"Even if it was because of a revelation sent by her, to think you would work so hard to deliver the words of light to the people of the continent... I have been truly moved."

"Ah, h-h-haha. Th-Thank you very much."

"In that case, could I ask you to continue to do your best to grow the Church of Splendor even more... Not just limited to Arnan, but throughout the continent?"

Kang-Woo grabbed Mihile's hand tightly. Mihile's hands were trembling severely, likely because Kang-Woo's words moved him.

"Eek!!" Mihile shrieked, looking like he was about to pass out at any moment.

Kang-Woo tilted his head in wonder. "What's wrong, Father Mihile?"

"N-Nothing at all! I will do my best to spread the words of the God of Splendor throughout the continent!" Mihile screamed with conviction.

Kang-Woo smiled in satisfaction. "I'm very glad to hear that, Father Mihile."

Kang-Woo couldn't help but be moved by Mihile's dedication despite Kang-Woo only having acquired Deific Essence a month ago. His eyes teared up with certainty that the Church of Splendor would be expanded at an even greater pace from today onward.

"In that case, could you gather the devotees for a moment, Father Mihile?" Kang-Woo asked.

He needed to take direct action for the expansion of the Church of Splendor to take off at an even greater pace. People would naturally place greater faith in something that they could see than what they couldn't.

"O-Of course!" Mihile nodded furiously.

The cardinals quickly turned around and ran to the massive prayer room where the devotees were gathered. Kang-Woo smiled as he stared at their backs.

"I guess that resolves the faith issue."

Lilith, who had been watching the whole time, approached Kang-Woo in worry. "Are you sure this was the right decision, Master Kang-Woo?"

It had been far too forceful of a method. Kang-Woo would be the one in a predicament if the cardinals were to blabber about the sermon that Kang-Woo had subjected to them.

"It's fine." Kang-Woo nodded leisurely. "I placed an Authority on them so they can't talk about it."

Kang-Woo knew very well that he would be the one in trouble if that were to happen, so he had restricted the cardinals with the Authority of Fear during the sermon.

"Hoho. I never thought to instill faith in people using such a method. How fascinating," Lilith remarked.

"Well, it's technically not faith."

It was likely closer to an emotion akin to self-protection brought about in a situation of extreme terror. There were different kinds of faith.

'It doesn't matter.'

After all, his main source of faith was the regular devotees, not the cardinals. He couldn't care less whether or not they had faith in him or feared him, as long as they obeyed his commands.

"Right then, let's get on with the second sermon."

Kang-Woo slowly walked to the prayer room. It was time to deliver the words of the God of Splendor to the regular devotees this time.

Murmur, murmur.

"L-Lord Oh Kang-Woo himself has manifested?"

"Is that true?"

"A-Aaaahh. To think I would live to see the day..."

Kang-Woo could hear people mumbling as he headed to the prayer room where the mural was drawn. It had not been long since he had told the cardinals to gather the devotees, but the prayer room was packed with people to a point that couldn't be compared to from earlier. The cardinals seemed to have gathered as many people as possible through something like a broadcast.

'It's about the same amount of people as when Iris announced her marriage.'

There were so many people that it looked like the entire city had gathered.

"Grrrk! Grrrk!"

Slushy bounced ecstatically; it seemed to have been impressed by the dense amount of faith that every single person was exuding. Kang-Woo scanned the people before climbing up the platform. There was a massive amount of people, but...

'It's still not enough.'

It was nowhere near enough to fill the belly of Kang-Woo, whose Deific Essence had reached Top-rank. The conversion of faith to Divinity was highly inefficient in the first place. If the Authority of Predation could be compared to a nuclear power plant, converting faith to Divinity would be similar to a solar power generator. Since the power conversion efficiency was so inefficient, he needed as much faith as possible.

'The people of this city won't be enough.'

This many people had shown up only because it was where the Church of Splendor was based; he could expect nowhere near these numbers in other cities.

'Not just that, its quality is poor as well.'

It was only natural since the Church of Splendor was formed because of the miraculous power that Kang-Woo had shown during the war against the Constellations of Evil. To put it in other words, that was the only reason. Before then, forget the God of Splendor, no one even knew Kang-Woo's name; actually, they knew the name itself.

'It was leaked because of Iris's bullshit during her marriage announcement.'

Back then, Kang-Woo had Kim Si-Hun play the blunder off by saying that *Oh Kang-Woo* was the other name that Iris called him when they were alone together. It had been resolved without issue at the time, but the issue resurfaced after Kang-Woo came to be known as the God of Splendor.

'We managed to bury it again somehow.'

Barely anyone cared about it in the first place, and the small commotion died down after Si-Hun clarified that *Oh Kang-Woo* was actually his older brother's name. Although that created confusion regarding Iris's past statement, not many people paid it any mind since people cared more about the birth of the light that would save the continent from darkness rather than who the princess would be marrying.

'Regardless...'

Kang-Woo's name had only been spread widely because of the miracle that he had shown during the war.

'I need to show them more proof.'

He needed to show them that he was the light that would save the continent and that the people of the continent needed to place their faith in him as their god.

Kang-Woo slowly walked up the steps to the platform.

Whoooooom—!

Blinding light poured out of his body as he climbed. The mumbling devotees fell silent after witnessing the overwhelming splendor.

"A-Aaaahh."

"The light..."

"The light has manifested..."

The devotees' eyes widened. This was the light that eradicated darkness that they had only heard about through rumors. The ones who were witnessing the light with their own eyes were frozen in shock.

"Greetings, devotees of light." Kang-Woo raised his arms after coming up to the platform. Blinding light spread throughout the enormous prayer room. "I will bless all who have gathered here today in the name of Splendor."

Kang-Woo activated the Authority of Vitality as he filled the room with light. The widely spread demonic energy filled the ten thousand people gathered to the brim with energy. Although it was nothing compared to Han Seol-Ah's buffs, this was more than enough for now.

"W-Wowww!"

"I'm brimming with power..."

The devotees of the Church of Splendor expressed surprise. All of their fatigue vanished and they were filled with energy as soon as the light touched them.

"O God of Splendor!"

"Save us from the darkness!"

The devotees all kneeled and began praying as if they had planned it. There were even those crying from being so moved among them.

'Now, then...'

Kang-Woo looked for something while looking down at them. He had successfully managed to clear the first condition with the wide-area buff.

'But... This isn't enough.'

The elimination of fatigue and surge of power could not be called a god's miracle.

'In times like this...'

Actions spoke louder than words. After all, the cardinals who were filled with disbelief were now filled with unwavering faith in Kang-Woo after his sermon.

"O dear lamb who follows the light..."

Kang-Woo, who had been looking around, quickly found his target. He was staring at a woman who was desperately praying while hugging a child who looked to be about five years old. The child did not seem to be in good condition because they were coughing severely in pallor even after receiving Kang-Woo's blessing.

"P-Pardon? A-Are you talking to me?"

The middle-aged woman quickly looked up as Kang-Woo walked toward her.

"Yes, I am." Kang-Woo nodded as he reached out to the child. The woman's eyes were filled with hope and fear. "Your child seems to be sick."

"Y-Yes! All of a sudden, since a few days ago... P-Please look after this poor child!" the woman yelled in desperation.

Kang-Woo slightly bit open his thumb to make blood. His red blood carried a golden tinge.

"Ah..." The woman flinched.

Kang-Woo gently patted the woman's back and held out his thumb toward the child.

"Let my blood guide the young lamb toward the light," Kang-Woo said.

The drop of blood fell into the child's mouth, and then the severely coughing child began to heal at an extraordinary rate.

"A-Aaaahh."

"H-How can this be...?"

The devotees expressed disbelief while wide-eyed. After witnessing a miracle, they quickly ran toward the platform while pushing each other aside.

"O-O God of Splendor!"

"Please grant the blessing of light to my wife as well!"

"M-My husband was greatly hurt in the mines a while ago! Please..."

There were not many people who would be able to stay still after witnessing a miracle happen right before their eyes. Chaos fell in the prayer room.

"Be silent," Kang-Woo said.

The rowdy prayer room fell silent immediately. The immense power flowing out of Kang-Woo weighed down the devotees running toward him.

"There is no need to worry, devotees of light," Kang-Woo said as if calming down the devotees.

"The blessing of light will be with you all."

"A-Aaaahh," the devotees expressed as they prayed while crying.

"Sister Lilith," Kang-Woo called.

"Yes, God of Splendor."

Lilith walked forward with perfect timing and took out a potion that had been used while Kang-Woo was giving the cardinals a sermon. A large amount had been consumed for the sake of

instilling faith into the cardinals, but there was more than enough for everyone here since he had made them in bulk before coming to the Church of Splendor's base.

"Please distribute the holy water to the devotees," Kang-Woo stated.

"As the light commands." Lilith bowed deeply.

'I knew it was the right choice to bring Lilith with me.'

They had only devised a general plan before coming here; Kang-Woo had mostly been adlibbing this entire time, but Lilith was matching his pace perfectly. Such perfect teamwork would not have been possible if it had been Seol-Ah or any other party member.

'I should give her a gift or something later.'

Kang-Woo turned toward the devotees while smiling in satisfaction.

"Aaaahh. O God of Splendor."

"I will follow the light!"

Kang-Woo could now feel something beyond faith in the devotees' eyes.

'Yeah, this is more like it.'

Their faith was more like fanaticism now. Kang-Woo had hoped for the Church of Splendor to become more like a cult.

'It might cause trouble with the other religious organizations if they become a little overzealous in their beliefs, but...'

Kang-Woo couldn't care less if they caused a religious war or interrogated heretics.

'As long as I can squeeze out faith from them, that's all I need.'

Kang-Woo burst out laughing in his head. He could see Slushy on his shoulder drooling as it felt the fanatical faith from the devotees.

'Alright, this should do for n—'

Crash!

The door burst open and a man walked up to the platform with big strides. The gazes of the surprised devotees turned to the man who suddenly appeared.

"Cardinal Ian?"

The hollow-eyed black-haired man gritted his teeth and shouted, "This is the end of the line... damn swindler!" He pointed at Kang-Woo and turned to the surprised devotees.

Ian shouted while frowning, "Dear devotees of light, you are all being deceived! That man is not the God of Splendor! His... His true identity is..." He said while glaring fiercely at Kang-Woo, "The king of demons... and all that is evil."

Chapter 416 - Water Always Knows The Answer

"..."

Deathly silence fell within the massive prayer room. The devotees, who had been going wild after witnessing the God of Splendor's miracle, looked at each other in confusion.

"Father Ian?"

"Wh-What do you mean?"

The devotees were left flustered. None of them would have believed it if the one spouting nonsense that the God of Splendor was a swindler had been some random person, but it was Cardinal Ian. He was one of the founding members of the Church of Splendor alongside the other cardinals like Mihile who had received revelations from the gods.

The fact that Ian, who had the support of the devotees to the point that he could be the leader of the church, was claiming that the God of Splendor was a swindler would naturally cause the devotees to be confused.

"All of you, please calm down." Oh Kang-Woo slowly extended his hands toward the rowdy devotees. A golden light was brought down on them like a tent. Kang-Woo smiled faintly as if he was not flustered in the slightest and looked at Ian. "Cardinal Ian, was it? I've heard a lot about you."

That was a lie. He had seen Ian when he first entered the prayer room, but he had never heard anything about him other than when the other cardinals talked behind his back.

"There seems to have been a mistake—"

"Shut up, abominable demon!" Ian firmly shook his head as if he did not find it worth his time to entertain Kang-Woo.

Kang-Woo's eyebrows slightly flinched.

'What the hell is going on?'

He was as calm as he could be on the outside, but his mind was in jumbles.

'How does he know?'

Kang-Woo slightly bit his lip as he replayed the memories of every action he had taken after the war.

'Nothing.'

No matter how hard he thought about it, he had done nothing that could have possibly revealed his identity. Most of his battles against the Constellations of Evil had occurred within a barrier made by the Demonic Sea, and traces of his demonic energy had completely disappeared after earning Deific Essence.

'Did he see Balrog changing into his true form during the war?'

That was the only thing that Kang-Woo had failed to perfectly conceal.

'No, no.'

Kang-Woo shook his head. He had taken action to quickly resolve that matter.

'Besides, just because Balrog's identity was revealed wouldn't make him think that I'm the Demon King.'

It would be a massive jump in logic.

'What could it be, then?'

Ian would have had no way of realizing Kang-Woo's true identity.

"That demon is the Demon King who ruled over the Nine Hells!" Ian shouted.

"..."

Silence fell the more Ian shouted. Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes and scanned Ian. He could think about how Ian had figured out his identity later. Putting out the fire that Ian had set was of higher priority.

'Well, considering the situation...' Kang-Woo looked at the devotees' expressions and smiled faintly. *'It doesn't look like I'll have to do anything.'*

In other words, the situation would resolve itself without him needing to do anything.

"What kind of nonsense is that?!"

"The God of Splendor has shown us the miracle of light before our very eyes!"

"There is no way that he would be the Demon King!"

The devotees strongly refuted Ian's claims. Some were directing hostility, and even bloodlust, at him. They might have believed Ian's claims before Kang-Woo had shown them a miracle, but they had seen a severely ill child being healed to perfect condition right in front of them. Even someone with the title of cardinal would not be able to convince them with just his words, no matter how influential his sermons were.

'People in suffering need miracles that they can see rather than vague words of light.'

"The evil one here us you, Cardinal Ian!"

"He dares disrespect the God of Splendor!"

Hostile screams filled the prayer room. The woman who was shouting that her husband was in serious condition was swinging the thick holy scripture threateningly.

"Kuh..." Ian bit his lip anxiously as he looked at the crazed devotees. He clenched his fists and shouted, "Those tainted by darkness, receive the judgment of light!"

He decided to take matters into his own hands after judging that he wouldn't be able to convince the public. Thick sacred power flowed out of him; he was quite powerful, to be expected of someone possessing the title of cardinal. He formed a spear made of light and fired it at Kang-Woo.

"Kyaaaaaaaaahhh!"

"G-God of Splendor!"

The devotees ran in front of Kang-Woo while screaming to take the attack for him, but...

Scatter.

The spear of light being fired at Kang-Woo turned to dust in midair as if the spear itself was refusing to attack him.

“H-How...” Ian trembled while wide-eyed.

He gritted his teeth and prepared his next attack. Kang-Woo extended his arm toward Ian.

‘Authority of Stillness.’

He activated Prince Belphegor’s Authority. Irresistible power stopped Ian’s movements.

“Devotees of light, quell your rage,” Kang-Woo remarked to the devotees, who had let madness take control of them. They flinched and stepped back. “There seems to have been a misunderstanding.”

Kang-Woo walked toward Ian, who could not move at all due to the Authority of Stillness. Kang-Woo lightly placed his hand on Ian’s shoulder and said in sorrow, “Cardinal Ian. I have faith in you.”

“Aaaahh...”

“O light...”

The devotees knelt while tearing up. The God of Splendor was not enraged at Ian, who had not only insulted him by claiming he was the Demon King but even attacked him. Instead, he was saying that he had faith in him.

“Devotees of light,” Kang-Woo said as he turned to the devotees. “You must not forget the words of light.” He slowly raised his hand and pointed at the holy scripture on the podium. “Chapter 27 verse 2; learn to love your enemies who give you adversity and suffering.”

“Hurgh. I will keep it in mind... for the rest of my life!”

“We will trust and follow only the path of splendor!”

The devotees bowed their heads while hugging the holy scripture. Hearing the God of Splendor putting the words of light into action was highly impactful to the devotees, who had only read it through the holy scriptures. Kang-Woo turned away from the devotees while smiling gently.

“I will resolve this misunderstanding with Cardinal Ian. In the meantime, I will have the other cardinals guide the devotees’ prayers.”

“U-Understood!” Cardinal Mihile shouted as he bowed deeply.

Kang-Woo grabbed the immobile Ian by the shoulder and dragged him down from the platform and into the bathroom next to the prayer room. He placed a barrier with demonic energy and then undid the Authority of Stillness.

"Huff, huff!" Ian stepped back as he panted heavily. "Bastard! How long will you keep up this wicked facade?"

He yelled in anger and raised his fist to punch Kang-Woo, but Kang-Woo easily caught it.

"Kurgh! L-Let go of me!"

Ian tried to get out of Kang-Woo's grasp, but could not overcome Kang-Woo's grip strength.

"Cardinal Ian," Kang-Woo called with a gentle smile. "Where did you hear that false information?"

"Hah, false information, you say?" Ian glared at Kang-Woo and bared his teeth. "I saw you ruling over the Nine Hells with my own eyes! You were sitting on a giant throne with hundreds of thousands of demons at your heel!"

"..."

Kang-Woo frowned.

'He saw me back when I was in Hell?'

He could understand Ian's attitude if that were true. Even if he had entered the Church of Splendor to make use of its rise in popularity, he was still a priest; he followed the light and resented all those dyed in evil. It was only natural for him to be enraged by the fact that the God of Splendor was the Demon King.

'Well, even if he's a priest, he's nothing more than a leech who stuck to a different god after abandoning the one he used to believe in.'

Ian was fundamentally no different from Mihile since the only reason they stuck to the Church of Splendor was to regain their power that had been vanishing after the Godly Pantheon fell apart. Their actions of writing holy scriptures and giving sermons based on that was no different from a scam.

'Even swindlers have a conscience, is that it?'

Ian delivered the words of a god that he didn't even believe in for the sake of keeping his power but was enraged when the god turned out to be the Demon King. It was truly ironic.

'Regardless...'

Kang-Woo did not care about the reason behind Ian's actions.

"Who showed you?" Kang-Woo asked.

Who dared to show Ian his days of ruling over Hell as the Demon King? That was all that mattered.

"Hmph, do you seriously believe I'll tell you?!" Ian snorted and turned his head away.

Kang-Woo stared at Ian with deeply sunken eyes and placed his hand on Ian's head.

'Authority of Fear.'

Kang-Woo activated the Authority that would control Ian's mind. However...

Crackle—!

“... Hm?”

“Kuh! Did you think that your evil schemes would work on me?!”

Black sparks flew from Ian's head. Ian glared at Kang-Woo ferociously while gritting his teeth. Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes.

‘He resisted the Authority?’

Even though the Authority of Fear had a high chance of failure, it should not have been possible for Ian to resist it considering their unfathomable gap in power.

‘If that's the case...’

It meant that someone else had provided Ian with a measure to resist mind-control Authorities, and it was likely that the individual had told Ian about Kang-Woo's true identity.

“Haha,” Kang-Woo softly laughed.

“Wh-What's so funny...?” Ian stared at him with trembling eyes.

Kang-Woo swept up his hair.

‘If mind-control Authorities won't work...’

He had no choice but to make Ian talk of his own accord without relying on Authorities, and it was simple to do so.

“Cardinal Ian.” Kang-Woo smiled gently. “Have you heard of this saying?”

“Wh-What saying...?”

Ian trembled. Kang-Woo walked to the bathroom sink and turned on the faucet. In terms of water facilities, Aernor was not much different from Earth. Water poured into the sink.

Kang-Woo placed his hand over the stream of water and remarked, “Water always knows the answer.”

“... What?”

Ian tilted his head. He had never heard of such a saying.

“Hahaha,” Kang-Woo laughed. He approached Ian and grabbed him by the hair. “No need to worry.”

He stuffed Ian's head into the sink filled with water.

“Kurgh! Urpp!! Urgh!”

Ian flailed aggressively.

Kang-Woo added more strength to his hand and continued, “You'll find out what it means soon enough.”

Chapter 417 - I Swear In My Deific Name of Splendor

"Kurgh, Urgh! Urpp!"

"Right then, can you tell me who showed you that footage now?"

"I-I canno—"

Splash!

"Kurp! *Gurgle! Gurgle!*"

"Hahaha, you're unyielding. I like that about people."

"Kurgh!" Ian grunted in pain as he coughed up water and trembled. His eyes looking up at Oh Kang-Woo were dyed in fear. He averted his gaze from Kang-Woo and remarked, "I-I don't... k-know."

"You don't know?"

"Yes. I-I don't know who showed m—"

Kang-Woo grabbed Ian by the hair and smiled in a way devoid of malice. "In that case, I will help you remember."

"W-Wait—"

Splash!

Bubbles came up from under the water. Kang-Woo counted down slowly and then pulled Ian's head out.

"Right, did that jog your memory?"

"*Huff! Huff! Huff!*" Ian trembled as he panted heavily.

Kang-Woo could easily tell that Ian's eyes dyed in fear were directed not only toward him.

"Cardinal Ian," Kang-Woo called.

"U-Urgh." Ian flinched.

Kang-Woo smiled gently and placed his hand softly on Ian's shoulder. "There's no need to worry."

"..."

"Nothing will happen to you as long as you answer me honestly."

"Th-that's..."

"I swear in my Deific Name of Splendor. I'm sure you know what it means for a god to pledge with their Deific Essence on the line."

"B-but..."

Ian gulped and looked up at Kang-Woo in doubt.

Kang-Woo smiled. "Oh, the footage you've seen was indeed of me. However... look at me now."

Whooom.

Golden light poured out from Kang-Woo's hand.

"A-Aaaahh." Ian's mouth fell open from witnessing the Deific Essence of Splendor right in front of him.

He had seen Kang-Woo emitting light toward the devotees earlier, but seeing the splendid light up close was in a league of its own.

"O-O light..." Ian stuttered as he reached for the golden light.

It was warm and beautiful, on another level compared to the sacred power that he had witnessed all his life. Demon King? That was out of the question. How could the king of all evil possess such radiant light? Ian trembled.

'Maybe I was mistaken.'

How could anyone doubt that Kang-Woo was the God of Splendor after seeing this light? Ian's eyes shook; he even thought that the torture Kang-Woo had subjected him to had been for his sake.

'Yes...'

Ian placed his hand on the splendid light as he remembered the words that he had emphasized again and again during his sermons.

'Hardship and adversity.'

As long as one believed, they would be saved.

"A-Aaaahh."

Ian stared at the light in front of him in a daze, unable to close his mouth. He was sure that the God of Splendor had done all this to guide him to salvation. The light of hope filled his eyes.

'*Hah.*' Kang-Woo smiled faintly as he looked down at Ian. '*Humans sure are fascinating.*'

He could feel trace amounts of Ian's faith in him. Ian's attitude logically did not make sense; how could someone have faith in someone who had tortured him just a few moments ago?

'Well, I guess it makes sense in this case.'

Kang-Woo laughed softly. Ian had been forced on the boundary between life and death again and again through Kang-Woo's torture. A ray of hope was placed in front of him when both his body and mind were at their limits; there was no way that he wouldn't grab hold of it, even if the chance of salvation was minuscule.

"A-Are you truly... the God of Splendor?" Ian asked.

"That's right," Kang-Woo affirmed without hesitation. "Lady Gaia already knows that I used to be the Demon King."

"Ah..." Ian's eyes widened. According to what he had heard through the Godly Pantheon, Oh Kang-Woo and Kim Si-Hun were both retainers of Gaia. "Then Lady Gaia has..."

"Yes. She has accepted me as her retainer even after knowing everything," Kang-Woo answered calmly with his hand on his chest. His voice carried faint sorrow.

"..."

Ian remained silent. He could tell why there was sorrow in Kang-Woo's voice.

'He must have felt guilty.'

Ian was sure that Kang-Woo felt guilty about the fact that he used to be the king of all that was evil.

"I... apologize. Without even knowing that, I..." Ian lowered his head.

Kang-Woo gently patted Ian's shoulder and said, "There is no need to worry, devotee of light. Anyone can stray from the path of light. So have I."

"O God of Splendor..."

"Right then, can you tell me who showed you my past?"

"Th-That's..."

"Do not worry, devotee of light. I swear in my Deific Essence of Splendor that I will protect you."

"..." Ian expressed hesitation for a while. He then clenched his fists and answered, "The one who showed me was... a hunchback old man."

"... A hunchback old man?"

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes. The word *hunchback* reminded him of a certain demon.

'But Amon isn't a human.'

Ian had referred to the person as an old man.

"Was he human?" Kang-Woo asked.

"Pardon? Y-Yes, he was." Ian nodded in confusion, not knowing why Kang-Woo was asking such a thing.

Kang-Woo scanned Ian with deeply sunken eyes.

'He doesn't seem to be lying.'

If that was the case, it meant that the hunchback whom Ian had met was a human, not a demon.

'Or...'

He might have been a demon in human skin.

'There's a good chance that it's Amon.'

Kang-Woo could not think of anyone but Amon who possessed footage of his past in the Nine Hells and was a hunchback.

"That old man showed me the footage... and said that the *time of prophecy* would arrive if I didn't expose the God of Splendor's fa?ade."

"..."

Kang-Woo's eyebrows slightly flinched.

'He even knows that I'm the Demon of Prophecy?'

Kang-Woo's head hurt. He recalled Amon as he swept up his hair. Amon used to be one of Satan's subordinates and one who managed to reach extraordinary heights in black magic. He had made a Gate that led to Earth using the Hell Armaments that Kang-Woo had gathered.

Kang-Woo gathered information about Amon from his memories, but there was one thing that he remembered most of all.

'I could never figure out what was on his mind.'

Amon was unpleasant and abnormal. He had sworn his loyalty to Kang-Woo and praised his name after becoming his subordinate, but Kang-Woo knew that he had never been genuine. To Kang-Woo, Amon was more of a business partner whom he cooperated with for each of their benefit rather than a subordinate.

"..."

Kang-Woo remained silent. He thought about why Amon was acting like this and how he had managed to figure out his true identity but ceased thinking momentarily after.

'I can't figure anything out with the information I have now.'

He lacked far too much information; there was no way for him to guess Amon's goals.

'One thing I know for sure is...'

Kang-Woo smirked as he looked down at Ian.

"... Son of a bitch, he dares to taunt me?"

Amon had purposefully leaked his identity to Kang-Woo through Ian. Kang-Woo couldn't help but laugh.

"Pardon? Wh-What do you mean?" Ian asked dumbfoundedly.

Kang-Woo did not answer; he simply covered his face with one hand and suppressed his laughter. Thick and crazed bloodlust swirled around him.

'He would have easily been able to keep himself hidden.'

If Amon was able to change his form into a human, he would not have had to stay as a hunchback. There was no way that Amon was stupid enough to not realize that Kang-Woo would easily figure him out just from the facts that the culprit was a hunchback and that he possessed footage of Kang-Woo's days in Hell. If Amon kept his hunchback form, it meant that...

'He's daring me to catch him, is that it?'

Amon was blatantly taunting Kang-Woo.

"Pfft, hahahahaha!" Kang-Woo burst into laughter.

Although they had been nothing but partners, Kang-Woo couldn't help but laugh at the fact that his past subordinate was taunting him.

Rumble—!

Enormous energy poured out from Kang-Woo and shook the Church of Splendor's base— no, the entire city that it was based in.

"A-Aaaaaahhh!" Ian screamed as he crouched.

Kang-Woo paid it no mind.

"Alright, I'll play ball."

He licked his lips as his eyes glinted. There was likely nothing he would be able to do at the moment; there was no way that a demon as clever as Amon would have left any clues for Kang-Woo to chase him with.

'I don't know where you are and what you're planning, but...'

Kang-Woo's heart beat rapidly. He had a feeling that there was something unfathomable lying dormant, waiting for him; something even greater than Tai Wuji.

"Haaah," Kang-Woo exhaled heatedly and pulled down the rising corners of his mouth with all his might.

He could feel his powerful hunger setting ablaze— no, it was becoming fire itself.

Fwoosh—!

Gold and black flames ignited, filling the barrier with intense heat.

"Kurgh, argh!" Ian struggled on the ground in pain.

Kang-Woo smirked and condensed the flames to the end of his finger. The Flames of Voracity shrunk down to the size of a candlelight and flickered on top of his finger.

"Thank you for being honest, Cardinal Ian," Kang-Woo remarked.

"*Huff, huff!* A-Ahem. Then..."

"Yes. There's no need to worry."

Kang-Woo nodded with a bright smile. And then...

Stab!

"Kurgh, kuh!"

He stuffed the Flames of Voracity into Ian.

"Kurgh, gaaaaaaaahhh!" Ian screamed as he twisted and turned.

The Flames of Voracity within him was burning him from the inside.

"Wh-Why...?!" Ian looked up at Kang-Woo in shock as if he couldn't understand. "Y-You... swore on... your... Deific Essence..."

A pledge with one's Deific Essence on the line was not to be taken lightly; once a god broke a pledge after swearing on their Deific Essence, their Deific Essence would be demoted or annihilated as per the *providence*.

"Hahaha," Kang-Woo laughed. "Yes, I did indeed swear on my Deific Essence." His smile grew wider, turning into madness. "My Deific Essence of *Splendor*, that is."

Ian's eyes widened as if he had realized something. "N-No way..."

'Why... why... why...'

Ian fell into despair as that one word echoed inside his mind. He stood up using all his strength and raised his fist to punch Kang-Woo.

"Y-You bastaaaaaard!!"

"Pfft! Bwehehehe, this is why you should always read the fucking contract before signing, dipshit."

Fwoosh!

Ian was engulfed by the Flames of Voracity before he even had a chance to punch.

Chapter 418 - The Awakened Princess

The rapid growth of the Church of Splendor got explosively faster after the God of Splendor manifested at the base of the church and performed a miracle. The devotees of the Church of Splendor in other nations besides Arnan were also making branches of the church of their own accord.

The main factor that influenced the explosive growth was of course the holy water made with the God of Splendor's blood, which could heal any injury or cure any illness of those who drank it. The devotees prayed sincerely day and night just to procure the holy water distributed only to the most devoted members of the church.

Crunch, crunch, crunch.

Slushy burped as it bounced up and down after absorbing the overflowing faith across the entire continent from the windowsill. After absorbing a large amount of faith, it rolled toward Oh Kang-Woo and stuck to his arm. The Divinity converted from faith flowed into him through the Key of the Demonic Sea.

Kang-Woo, who had been sitting while looking through the document that Mihile had sent him, smiled in satisfaction.

"It's become quite a lot," he remarked.

It had been worth taking action personally.

'Well, it still can't be compared to devouring Deific Essence with the Authority of Predation, though.'

That could not be helped since eating Deific Essence to collect Divinity would naturally give more Divinity than converting faith into Divinity.

'But at least with this, I have a stable and endless supply of Divinity.'

It was like depositing a sizable sum of money in a bank and earning interest. Although it was not much at the moment, Kang-Woo was able to earn Deific Essence for free without much work.

"A few decades of this and it'll sum up to an enormous amount," Kang-Woo mumbled as he patted Slushy, who was dozing off as if it had gotten tired from eating faith.

If a few decades passed like this, he would be able to gain enough Divinity as what he had gotten after devouring the Constellation of Fear; it would unfortunately not be as much as what he had gotten after eating Tai Wuji. It was an incredible amount considering Kang-Woo had not been able to defeat the Constellation of Fear without opening a Door back when he had faced him for the first time.

Not only that, but the future of the Church of Splendor was very bright since it had not yet spread throughout the entire continent.

'But...'

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes. Desire was endless; he couldn't have cared less when the means did not exist, but now that he was collecting Divinity through the Church of Splendor, he was dissatisfied with how little he was collecting each time.

"I'd prefer to have something more impactful."

Kang-Woo could not think of anything that would be even more impactful than the holy water.

'At this point, bringing the dead back to life would be the only way.'

However, that was impossible even for Kang-Woo.

"... If not that, I'd need the appearance of some sort of villain."

After the death of the Constellations of Evil, there had been no appearances of beings that could be a threat to the continent. Lucifer was cooped up who knows where, and Amon had not taken any action since his taunts.

'I mean, I could pretend to be Lucifer again, but...'

It would be inefficient to go out of his way to raise people's faith in that manner. No matter how perfect the plan was, he needed to take into account every variable that could risk the exposure of his identity. It was not worth going through the risk just to be able to collect a little more Divinity from the Church of Splendor.

At the moment, the amount of Divinity that he was earning from the Church of Splendor was nice to have but not to the point that he depended on it. The cease in supply would not have a significant impact in the slightest.

'I'll wait a little longer.'

Since Amon had gone out of his way to taunt Kang-Woo, Kang-Woo was hoping for him to take some sort of action. He got out of his chair and left his room. The moment he opened the door, he happened to see Cha Yeon-Joo walking along the hallway.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the great God of Splendor?" Yeon-Joo waved as she snickered.

"Where are you off to?" Kang-Woo asked.

"To check up on the princess,"

"Iris? Why all of a sudden?"

"Layla asked me to check up on her since it's weird that she still hasn't woken up."

"Hmm."

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes. He had completely forgotten about Iris due to matters regarding the Church of Splendor, but Iris had not woken up for almost two months.

"That's true," Kang-Woo remarked.

As Layla had said, it was far too late. Although Elune, the leader of the high elves according to Douglas, possessed Top-rank Deific Essence like Gaia, it was still far too late.

'Layla said it would take around a month.'

Although the time taken for one to accept Deific Essence and become an incarnation varied between people, one couldn't help but wonder if there was some sort of issue when it had almost been two months.

"I'll go with you," stated Kang-Woo.

He followed Yeon-Joo to check on Iris.

Creak.

Once they slowly opened the door, they could see Iris lying in bed completely still like a dead person. One would think she was indeed dead if not for her shallow breaths and the faint green energy flowing out from her.

"H-Have you come to see the princess?"

The maids who had been nursing Iris quickly bowed once Kang-Woo and Yeon-Joo entered. They could not hide their anxiety as they looked at Kang-Woo, who was being treated with more respect than any noble after the war.

Kang-Woo nodded and asked, "May we check Princess Iris's condition for a moment?"

"O-Of course!"

"We will leave you to it! Please call us back once you're finished!"

The maids backstepped toward the door while bowing repeatedly. Although Kang-Woo's party members were considered VIPs, it was unreal to leave them alone with a member of the imperial family without any guards. However, Kang-Woo currently had as much, if not more, influence than the emperor himself.

The maids quickly left the room and closed the door. Kang-Woo walked toward Iris, who was lying still in bed.

Yeon-Joo scanned Iris and remarked, "Nothing seems to be off about her from a glance."

"That's the problem," Kang-Woo responded.

There was no way to know why Iris had not woken up yet if nothing was wrong.

"Hmm." Yeon-Joo poked the sleeping Iris and said, "Actually, there's something I've been curious about all this time."

"What is it?"

"Is it okay for her not to eat and stuff?"

"Apparently, it's fine since nutrients are automatically generated while one is accepting Deific Essence."

"Really? Then, uhhh... What about the bathroom?"

"..."

'Huh?'

"That I don't know," Kang-Woo said.

"..." An awkward silence fell. Yeon-Joo glared at Kang-Woo and got between him and Iris as if protecting Iris. "I won't stand for it if you're imagining weird stuff."

"You're the one who brought it up first. Besides, what the hell would I be imagining?"

'Is Layla influencing you?'

"Ngh. Whatever the case, she sure has it rough. She's pretty much a vegetable with no signs of waking up."

Kang-Woo nodded as he sighed. "Yeah, we need her to wake up so we can get back to Earth as soon as possible."

Although they had gotten used to life in Aernor, there were still many things that they missed about Earth. Kang-Woo clicked his tongue and placed his hand on Iris's forehead. Just then...

Whoooooom—!

The faint green light flowing out of Iris suddenly grew thicker.

"A-Arggh," Iris groaned as her fingers slightly twitched.

"H-Huh?" Yeon-Joo, who had been poking the sleeping Iris, expressed confusion.

Kang-Woo turned to her and said calmly, "Go bring Layla. Seol-Ah, too."

"O-Okay!" Yeon-Joo nodded quickly and ran out the door.

Kang-Woo's eyes widened as he was checking Iris's condition.

'Her ears... are getting longer.'

They were just like those of the elf Kang-Woo had seen among Reynald's party.

'Is the incarnation process finally over?'

The opportunity to gain information about the location of the Demon God's corpse had arrived at last after almost two months of waiting. Kang-Woo bit open his finger and poured blood into Iris's mouth just in case. He used the Authority of Regeneration, but nothing about Iris changed.

"A-Arghhh!"

Iris's movements grew bigger.

Bang!

The door swung open fiercely and entered the party members one by one.

"Kang-Woo!" Han Seol-Ah shouted.

"I brought them all!" Yeon-Joo said.

"Hyung-nim! What was that energy just now...?" Kim Si-Hun asked.

"Just a moment, Kang-Woo." Layla walked forward and closed her eyes after grabbing the groaning Iris's wrist.

Her white light and Iris's green light mixed.

"This is..." Layla's eyes shone. "A sign of Deific Manifestation."

They had seen Deific Manifestation multiple times in Layla.

Kang-Woo nodded and asked, "Does that mean a high elf is trying to manifest here by borrowing Iris's body?"

"Yes. Not only that, they are very powerful... It might be Lady Elune, whom Douglas had mentioned last time."

"I see."

Kang-Woo nervously scanned the light pouring out from Iris.

'Would she figure me out?'

Kang-Woo was more or less sure that he would not get caught after awakening the Deific Essence of Splendor, but he could not help but get chills down his back.

'Should I just stay as far away as possible?'

That was the best way to ensure his safety.

'No, it would be too unnatural.'

He would have considered it if he was already far away, but it would be far too unnatural to leave all of a sudden since he was already in the room. Not only that, not showing himself to the high elf when he was worshiped even more than Si-Hun as the savior of the continent after becoming the God of Splendor was a stretch. Worst-case scenario, it would cause the high elf to have doubts about him.

'I'll just conceal my energy as best as I can.'

Kang-Woo stuffed the demonic energy spread throughout his body into the Ten Thousand Demon Core and replaced it with sacred power. The golden light that had been radiating from him became even brighter.

"... Wait." Layla frowned as she was touching Iris's wrist.

"What's wrong?" Kang-Woo asked.

"Something... is off." Layla tilted her head as if she couldn't understand. "This isn't a normal Deific Manifestation."

"Pardon? What do you mean?"

"... The Deific Essence I'm feeling is highly unstable."

Layla closed her eyes tightly and felt Elune's Deific Essence flowing through Iris. It was shaking violently as if it had been damaged. Then, Iris's eyes slowly opened.

[*C-Cough!!*] Iris coughed up blood as soon as she opened her eyes. She swayed as she covered her mouth with one hand. [Arggh, urgh. Wh-Where am I...?]

A mystical voice, completely different from that of a human, which felt like it was echoing within one's mind, flowed out of Iris's mouth.

[Cough!]

Iris— no, Elune, who had borrowed Iris's body, coughed up blood again while covering her mouth. Kang-Woo grabbed her arm as she was violently coughing up blood.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

[Wh-Who are you...?]

Elune slowly looked up. Kang-Woo and Elune's eyes met.

Kang-Woo carefully supported her and said without hesitation, "This is embarrassing for me to say myself, but I am the one who has been chosen by Splendor."

Splendid, beautiful, and warm golden light poured out from Kang-Woo.

[Aaaahh, you must be...] Elune remarked with a trembling voice. [The... savior.]

Kang-Woo smiled faintly and nodded. "That's right."

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Chapter 419 - Darkness Casting Over The Future

[Cough! Cough!]

Elune, who had manifested by borrowing Iris's body, coughed aggressively with one hand covering her mouth.

"A-Are you okay?" Han Seol-Ah asked as she used healing magic on Elune.

White light flowed into Elune and her complexion improved. She turned to look at Seol-Ah in surprise.

[Why do I feel Lady Seraph's energy inside you...?]

"Oh, that's..." Seol-Ah slurred in puzzlement.

Not even she knew why Seraph's soul was inside her. Oh Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes and scanned Elune as an awkward air was lingering between Seol-Ah and Elune.

'What's going on? Has the Deific Manifestation not been properly realized?'

As Layla had mentioned, Elune's Deific Essence was highly unstable. It was as if he was looking at a critically injured patient. Kang-Woo was reminded of something as he looked at Elune coughing up blood.

'She gives off the same feeling as Layla when I first met her.'

At the time, Layla's condition had deteriorated to the point that she needed to be in a wheelchair and was blind. Her condition was because Gaia had been injured due to the invasion of the Demon of Prophecy into Earth, damaging Earth's protection in the process.

'An incarnation's state of being is connected to their respective god.'

In other words...

'Is Elune injured?'

The first thing that Kang-Woo wondered was why. He had heard that, unlike the other gods, high elves resided in a dimension that a giant tree known as the World Tree was.

'It's an important tree that acts as a pillar for the Triad, from what I've heard.'

According to Douglas, the World Tree was created by Yggdrasil, the Titan of Life. They also created high elves to be the guardians of the World Tree, and elves were derived from the high elves.

'I heard that the World Tree was protected by a powerful barrier.'

The barrier had been so powerful that not even Demon God Bauli, who had been rampaging to destroy the Triad during the era of myths, was able to approach anywhere near the World Tree.

'If Elune was injured despite that...'

It meant that something terrible had happened within the World Tree.

"Lady Elune," Kang-Woo called.

[Ah, savior.] Elune turned to Kang-Woo while in the middle of being healed by Seol-Ah. Just then, her eyes widened. [Huh? H-How?]

Elune looked around in disbelief. Her mouth opened in shock as she looked back and forth at Kang-Woo and Kim Si-Hun behind him.

[Th-there are... t-two saviors?]

"Pardon?"

'Oh, fuck.'

A chill ran down Kang-Woo's back. He aggressively bit his lip.

'Shit. It wasn't me.'

He had thought he had been chosen as the savior because he had acquired the Derific Essence of Splendor and his fame had spread throughout the continent. However, his guess had been way off the mark.

'I forgot that he was the protagonist.'

Kang-Woo put a hand on his forehead and bit his lip. He had been acting as the light so much lately that he had forgotten the most important fact; he was not the savior but the Demon of Prophecy who would bring all world to an end.

[But according to the prophecy... No, prophecies aren't always correct,] Elune muttered in confusion.

Kang-Woo placed his hand on her shoulder to change the subject. "Please calm down, Lady Elune."

[Ah...]

"More importantly, what just happened? You coughed up blood all of a sudden... Is something wrong with Iris's body?"

[No, not at all. Rather, the problem is... me.]

Elune lowered her head with a stiff expression and touched the blood on Iris's clothes as if she were sorry for hurting Iris.

"Is something wrong?"

[...]

Elune clenched her clothes while biting her lip. Kang-Woo waited for her to answer without rushing her.

Elune then answered, [The World Tree... has begun to rot.]

"Pardon?"

'It can rot?'

[It is of course not a natural phenomenon.] Elune shook her head and continued, [Someone is corrupting the World Tree intentionally.]

"... Who?"

[Well... We have yet to find the culprit either. The power of the high elves comes from the World Tree. Since the source of our power is suddenly rotting...]

"Your condition has become so critical that you can barely maintain your Deific Essence?" Kang-Woo asked.

[...] Elune nodded in silence.

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue.

'If even the leader of the high elves coughed up blood as soon as she manifested...'

There was no question about the condition of the other high elves.

'This isn't good.'

Kang-Woo frowned. Elune's condition was only a little better than Gaia's back when the Gaia System was damaged.

'Would she be able to locate the Demon God's corpse in this state?'

The reason that they wanted to meet the high elves was ultimately to figure out the location of the Demon God's corpse. However, seeing the state that Elune was in, it seemed like a stretch for her to locate it.

'No, no.'

Elune may know where the corpse was without needing to locate it with her power.

"Lady Elune," Kang-Woo called.

[Yes?]

"We're searching for the Demon God's corpse. Do you perhaps know anything about where it is?"

[Ah...] She lowered her head apologetically as her lips quivered. [I apologize. Because the World Tree is rotting... We can barely use our power to detect the demonic.]

"Is there anything about its location that you knew about in the past?"

[... Do you know what the Demon God's corpse sealed in Aernor is?]

Kang-Woo nodded. He had heard about it from Gaia before coming here.

"I heard that it is the Demon God's heart."

[Yes, that is correct. It is the region that contains the largest portion of Demon God Bauli's power as well as the decisive region for his revival.] Elune continued in a low tone, [After the war against the Demon God ended, Lady Gaia asked me to seal the heart in a barrier that changes location in specific time intervals. It was so that no one could figure out where it was without being chosen by the World Tree.]

"..."

"W-Wait! That means..." Cha Yeon-Joo sprang up from her chair with a hardened expression. If its location changed periodically... "We have no way of finding the Demon God's corpse anymore..." she muttered lifelessly.

Kang-Woo did not look good either.

'It's sealed in a barrier that changes locations?'

He swept up his hair as he sighed deeply. If that was true, it was truly impossible to find the Demon God's heart without Elune's help.

'Fuck.'

Kang-Woo almost swore out loud due to the unexpected development. He had thought about combing through the entire continent if not even the high elves knew where the corpse was, but that plan had gone up in flames.

'We need Elune's help.'

If that was the case, there was only one way.

"Is there a way to restore the World Tree?" asked Kang-Woo as he placed his hand on Elune's shoulder.

[... There is.]

Kang-Woo sighed in relief. "How do we do it?"

[The World Tree is being corrupted because of a *black thorn* embedded in it.]

"A black thorn?"

[Yes. I don't know exactly what it is, but... I am sure that it is muddling the inside of the World Tree and absorbing its energy.]

"I see." Kang-Woo softly nodded.

The way forward was bleak after hearing about the Demon God's heart, but it cleared up after hearing the solution.

"Do we just have to get rid of that thorn, then?" he asked.

[... Yes, b-but it is extremely dangerous because the World Tree's energy is running rampant around the area!] Elune shouted as her pointy ears trembled.

Kang-Woo smirked and turned to his party members; they were nodding despite him not saying anything. He turned back to Elune and said, "It's okay. We will dispose of the thorn that is corrupting the World Tree."

[Ah...] Elune expressed.

She lowered her head as she teared up. Her shoulders were trembling; perhaps because she was in Iris's body, she looked like back when Iris was freed from Fidelio's grasp.

[Th-thank you. Th-thank you... very much!] Elune bowed repeatedly.

Kang-Woo smiled awkwardly as he looked down at her.

'She doesn't give off the aura of a Top-rank goddess at all. Well, in any case...'

She was far easier to deal with than someone like Gaia.

[May your path be filled with blessings, dear saviors.]

Elune brought her hands together and prayed. Green light flowed out from her and filled the room.

Riiing.

[You have received 'Elune's Blessing!']

[Raising all stats by 5.]

'Oh, I completely forgot about stats.'

Kang-Woo had reached a point where increases in his Demonic Energy stat did not mean much to his growth. However, it was always welcome.

"Thank you very much," he remarked.

[I don't know why there are two saviors contrary to the prophecy, but... considering how powerful you both are, I believe that you will be able to stop this world's demise.]

Elune looked at Kang-Woo and Si-Hun with a bright smile. She stood up as she staggered.

[Ngh...!]

"Ah! B-be careful!"

Layla quickly caught Elune as she was about to fall.

[Thank you, incarnation of Gaia.] Elune bowed slightly to Layla and slowly walked toward Kang-Woo and Si-Hun. [Could you two come toward me for a second?]

"... Okay."

"Of course."

Kang-Woo and Si-Hun glanced at each other for a second and walked toward Elune. Elune grabbed each one of Kang-Woo and Si-Hun's hands and closed her eyes.

[I cannot use much of my power since my Deific Essence is unstable, but... I can at least see a little bit of your paths forward.]

Whoooooom—!

A dense green light poured out from her. Kang-Woo frowned, unable to figure out what she was trying to do.

"It's foresight," remarked Douglas, who slowly walked over to Kang-Woo, as if resolving his worries.

"... Since when were you here?" Kang-Woo asked.

"How could I miss the chance to see a high elf when I've been researching them my whole life?" Douglas chuckled and continued, "What Lady Elune is doing to you right now is the unique ability of the high elves."

"Foresight?"

"To be more exact, she's warning you of the dangers you will face in the future. It's not as exact as a prophecy, though."

Kang-Woo slightly nodded.

'Dangers of the future, huh?'

He found it laughable. Danger was his everyday life and he had overcome them every single time. He wasn't all that interested in being warned of it.

'Well, but still...'

It didn't do him any harm to know.

[...]

Elune focused as she held Kang-Woo and Si-Hun's hands. A green light as comforting as the sun shining down on a peaceful forest enveloped them.

[A-Aaaahh.] Elune's mouth gaped open. [H-how...? Wh-why...?]

She trembled in disbelief. Kang-Woo and Si-Hun stared perplexedly at the trembling Elune.

[*Huff, huff, huff!*] Elune fell to her knees as she panted heavily.

Si-Hun carefully supported her.

"... What happened?" Kang-Woo asked in a low tone.

[Ah...] Elune trembled in pallor. [S-something's wrong...]

"What do you mean?"

[Y-your futures... A-all the possible paths that you could embark on...] Elune bit her lip. [Th-they are all shrouded in colossal darkness. An endless abyss is... engulfing your futures!]

"..."

'Huh?'

[Th-that's not possible... This is more than just encountering dangers on your path! Th-there isn't a single moment when you're free from the darkness!!]

'Wait a minute...'

[A-Aaaahh, o almighty Titans. Why... Why have you given these poor saviors such an awful fate?!]

Elune closed her eyes and teared up.

"..."

Kang-Woo glanced away from Elune. The endless abyss filling the two saviors' paths...

'... Isn't that me?'

[Sniff. Y-you will be engulfed... by a b-black sea...]

'Shit. It fucking is me.'

Chapter 420 - Unwavering

"Uhhh... Mm."

Oh Kang-Woo looked at Elune, who was crying as if they were all doomed. There was no need to think about why his and Kim Si-Hun's paths were shrouded in darkness.

'Because I'm that fucking darkness.'

It was only natural.

"What do you mean... darkness?" Si-Hun asked with a hardened expression.

Elune wiped her tears and answered, [The paths that you two must walk are shrouded... in endless darkness.]

"... Does that mean it is dangerous?"

[It is not just dangerous!] Elune shouted. [I have... never seen such a future. It is worse than when I prophesied the continent's demise!]

"..."

[Just thinking about the despair that you two must struggle through, I...] Elune lowered her head, unable to finish her sentence.

Her slender shoulders were trembling. She was likely not this saddened simply because she was worried about Kang-Woo and Si-Hun's futures; she was probably in despair over the fact that the duty of the saviors to save the world from its demise would never be realized.

[At this rate...]

The world would inevitably end. The saviors, the continent's only hope, would ultimately be engulfed by endless darkness. Elune trembled due to the inevitable despair. She was shocked even greater than when the World Tree began to rot. It was only natural since she had just prophesied that this world had no future.

"..." Si-Hun clenched his fists and bit his lip ferociously. "Is it that bad... even after the Constellations were killed?"

He thought the darkness had been somewhat lifted after the war against the Constellations of Evil ended. He had hope that they would be able to stop the world's demise and move forward.

'But...'

Si-Hun shut his eyes tightly. Nothing had changed. His and Kang-Woo's paths were still shrouded in unfathomable darkness.

"..."

Si-Hun had already been determined to face the countless dangers that were in his and Kang-Woo's path, but hearing about it directly from Elune gave him chills. He recalled Alec and Reynald, who had died at Satan's hands, Ludwig, who had been corrupted by Rakiel, and the countless heroes devoured by the darkness.

'Maybe one day...'

Si-Hun turned his head as his eyes shook and looked at Kang-Woo, who was looking at Elune with a hardened expression.

'Hyung will also...'

Si-Hun clenched his fists to the point that his hands would break. A heavy atmosphere loomed over the room.

[*Sniff... Sniff.*]

'For fuck's sake.' Kang-Woo grabbed his forehead as if his head hurt. *'What am I supposed to do here?'*

He couldn't come out and say honestly that the darkness Elune had seen in her foresight was him.

'I need to take care of this funeral home atmosphere first somehow.'

Kang-Woo looked beyond Si-Hun and at Layla, Cha Yeon-Joo, and his other party members. Everyone in the room looked as if they were patients who received the news from the doctor that they were terminally ill.

"A-Aaaahh. N-No," Han Seol-Ah muttered.

In the case of Seol-Ah, she looked as if she would explode if someone touched her the wrong way.

'At this rate...'

A disaster would befall them before they even tried to restore the World Tree— no, his identity might be exposed before that.

"Fuuu," Kang-Woo took a deep breath, stood up, and walked toward the crying Elune.

'If I can't reveal my identity...'

He had to go about it a different way.

'But that's...'

Kang-Woo gulped as his shoulders slightly trembled. Just thinking about the idea that he had come up with was enough for him to feel like his heart was getting squeezed. He was sure that it would work; from what Elune had shown him, he was sure that she would be convinced. But... But...

'I have no choice.'

Kang-Woo bit his lip. He had no other way to resolve this situation.

'I have to be unwavering.'

He resolved himself and walked forward.

"Lady Elune."

[... Yes?] The crying Elune raised her head. Kang-Woo stared at her with deeply sunken eyes and carefully grabbed her hand. [L-Lord Kang-Woo?]

Elune looked up at Kang-Woo perplexedly. Kang-Woo guided her by the hand toward the windowsill. He opened the window and the chilly night air flowed in. He looked up to see a dark sky without a single star.

It was only natural since using illumination magic tools was the norm in Aernor. It was especially so since they were in the capital of the Arnan Empire; just like how dark the night sky was in Seoul, the capital of Arnan was also shrouded in darkness despite each house being illuminated.

Kang-Woo looked up at the night sky and slowly turned to Elune. "The night sky... is dark."

[Yes, it is...] Elune stared at Kang-Woo dumbfoundedly as if she had no idea what Kang-Woo was trying to say.

Kang-Woo smiled and continued, "Just like our future that you prophesied."

[...]

Elune flinched. She slowly lifted her head and locked eyes with Kang-Woo.

Whoooooom.

Kang-Woo slowly raised his hand and golden light poured out from it.

[Lord Kang-Woo...?]

The radiant splendor that poured out from Kang-Woo shot toward the night sky. The sky shrouded in darkness without a single star in sight was lit brightly.

[This is...]

"How is it now?" Kang-Woo looked up at the shining night sky with a bright smile. "Do you... see the light now?"

Elune blankly stared at the blazing light shining in the night sky with her mouth agape. It was beautiful.

[...]

Tears flowed down her cheeks unbeknownst to herself. She recalled herself crying in despair after foreseeing a future shrouded in darkness. It was unbearably embarrassing.

"Haha," Kang-Woo laughed and slowly raised his hand to wipe Elune's tears.

[L-Lord Kang-Woo.] Elune stared at Kang-Woo in surprise and then averted her eyes from him in embarrassment. Her face was slightly flushed.

"There is no need to worry, Lady Elune." Kang-Woo continued, "Light... shines brighter in the darkness."

[...]

Elune looked up at Kang-Woo as if she had never thought about it that way. The hero who had been foretold of his near-inevitable death was still shining brightly.

'But I...'

She had burst into unsightly tears from the despair that the saviors would be killed and the world would meet its demise.

'So much for being the guardian of the World Tree and one who needs to guide the saviors to the right path.'

Forget guiding them to the right path, she had lost all hope and fell into despair all by herself.

[... I apologize, dear saviors. I have shown you an unsightly side of myself.]

Elune bowed deeply with a faint smile. This was not the time to be wallowing in despair. Overcoming the immediate danger was of higher priority.

[In that case, I will guide you all to the World Tr—]

"Oh, just a moment, please," Kang-Woo interjected. "May I excuse myself for a moment?"

[Pardon? Is something wrong...?]

"Not at all. I just... want to harden my resolve," Kang-Woo remarked somewhat sorrowfully.

[Ah,] Elune expressed.

She had an idea about why Kang-Woo had said that.

'He was saying things like that, but I'm sure he was afraid too.'

She was embarrassed of herself for only saying what she wanted to say without knowing how Kang-Woo felt.

[I understand.]

Elune slowly nodded. Kang-Woo turned around and went past the door. Si-Hun tried to follow him, but Kang-Woo stopped him in his tracks.

Clack.

"..."

Kang-Woo sprinted through the hallway after closing the door behind him. He jumped into his room and locked the door.

"U-Urghhh."

He twisted and turned as if in pain.

"ALWIUDHFIWOLAUDBVLKDJHBFILWUABF." Kang-Woo screamed incomprehensible words. "Fuck, fuck, FUUUUUUUUUUUUCK!!!"

His bellows shook the room.

"Light... shines brighter in the darkness."

The words that he had said himself replayed inside his head.

"Urpp!"

The kimchi stew that he had for dinner came all the way up to his neck due to the insanely revolting feeling. He fell to his knees, his fingers distorting as if he was having a seizure.

"Ah..."

Kang-Woo blankly stared at the night sky. His eyes were filled with an endless sense of shame and remorse; it was like staring at himself across the monitor after doing the deed to some porn.

"I wanna die. I... don't need anything else anymore... I just wanna die."

Tears flowed down his cheeks. He had prepared himself for it, but he could not get used to this pain.

"Urghh."

The road to being a hero was a harsh one. His sobs of shame continued for a very long time.

"Fuuu. Well, then." Kang-Woo came back after calming himself down and asked calmly, "Are we heading to the place where the World Tree is right away?"

Elune nodded. [We should go as soon as possible.]

The World Tree was rotting as they spoke, so they needed to get rid of the black thorn embedded in the World Tree as soon as possible. Kang-Woo turned around to look at his party members.

"Let's go, hyung-nim."

"Urghh, what the hell is with this development?"

"Hm! I'll go anywhere as long as it's with you, Kang-Woo!"

Each of the party members brought out their weapons as if they were indifferent to the unexpected danger. The anxiety in the air was almost palpable. Kang-Woo smiled and nodded.

"Let's go then."

[... I would like to thank you once again.] Elune bowed to the party members. [Well then, I will open the door to the World Tree right away.]

"Is it okay when your Deific Essence is unstable?"

[You're all risking your lives, so I cannot afford not to either as the guardian of the World Tree,] Elune remarked firmly.

The green light flowing out of her seeped into thin air.

[Ngh...]

She controlled her Divinity as she bit her lip as blood flowed from between them. And then...

Crack.

[... Huh?]

A crack formed in the air like a mirror and enormous black energy poured out from it.

Rumble—!!

"Kyaaaaahhh!"

"Wh-what the hell?!"

The entire imperial castle shook. Kang-Woo quickly stepped back with Elune, who had been blankly staring at the crack.

"What's going on?!" he asked.

[I-I don't know eith—]

Shatter—!!

The crack that formed in the room went out through the window and connected with the night sky. A giant Rift several kilometers wide covered the sky of the capital.

Rumble—!!

Black rotten tree roots stretched out from the Rift.