

M. in Hell 491

Chapter 491 - Conviction Succumbs to Hope (1)

“Kurgh, urgh.”

Eilles collapsed on his knees on the melted ground. The gold and black flames had melted the frost swirling around various parts of his body.

Clatter.

The Frost Sword in his hand fell to the ground.

“Oh, but I guess I had fun,” said Kang-Woo brightly as he stretched.

His battle against Eilles had been more entertaining than he had hoped.

‘His swordsmanship fell behind that Arianne girl.’

However, Eilles possessed the power of frost that far surpassed Arianne’s swordsmanship. The surroundings, even the air itself, were frozen with each of his sword swings. Kang-Woo also found it nice that it would instantly turn into ice if he allowed Eilles’s attack to touch him.

‘It was pretty helpful.’

Eilles had been the perfect opponent to test the Flames of Voracity combined with Chaos. Kang-Woo smiled in satisfaction and walked toward Eilles, who was on his knees.

“Kill... me.”

“You have something to tell me before I kill you.”

“I believe I told you that I won’t talk.”

“Don’t worry.” Kang-Woo lightly patted Eilles’s shoulder. “You will.”

Eilles frowned aggressively and turned away from Kang-Woo. Kang-Woo turned away from Eilles and picked up the Frost Sword on the ground.

“Wow, this sure is a great sword.”

The power infused in the sword covered in white frost was so strong that Kang-Woo felt like his hand was going numb. It was inferior to Ingrium purely in terms of rank, but its frost attribute allowed it to surpass the bounds of a sword.

‘Regardless, I don’t need it.’

Kang-Woo didn’t need to go out of his way to use it since he had the Key of the Demonic Sea and Ingrium. No, even if he didn’t have two extraordinary weapons, Kang-Woo had far surpassed the level of needing a weapon.

‘In that case.’

Kang-Woo turned around and called, “Si-Hun.”

“Yes, hyung-nim.”

Kim Si-Hun, who was neutralizing the rest of the Frostborn knights while Kang-Woo was battling Eilles, quickly ran toward Kang-Woo.

“Here. You can have this,” said Kang-Woo as he handed Si-Hun the Frost Sword.

“H-Hyung-nim?”

“What was it called again? Formless Sword? I know you can make swords with that, but a swordsman’s gotta have a good sword.”

It was the nature of a swordsman to desire a great sword, and no words of greatness could describe a sword like the Frost Sword.

‘It’s at least Mythic-grade if I had to grade it.’

It could even be Transcendent-grade, considering how easily it penetrated Han Seol-Ah’s sanctuary.

“It’ll be far better than the holy sword you used to use.”

“Hyung-nim...” Si-Hun teared up. He took the Frost Sword and continued, “Thank you, hyung-nim— no, Kang-Woo hyung. I’ll take good care of it.”

Kang-Woo stared blankly at the brightly smiling Si-Hun. “Uhh, mm. Yeah, you do that.”

‘My god, this son of a bitch is bad for my heart.’

It was only for a moment it had not even been for a millisecond, but...

‘I’d... no, no! Darling is the only one for me!’

Kang-Woo furiously shook his head and coughed loudly. He turned to his party members although each of them was extremely powerful, facing an army of ten thousand had likely been difficult for them. Their faces were dyed with fatigue. Lilith was the only one who looked fine since she had barely taken part in the battle.

“Everyone but Lilith, leave the dungeon first,” Kang-Woo said.

“Pardon? What about you, Kang-Woo?” asked Seol-Ah, anxiously grabbing Kang-Woo’s clothes.

Kang-Woo smirked and lightly hugged Seol-Ah’s waist. He glanced at the collapsed Eilles and said, “I have some stuff left to do here.”

“Ah...” Seol-Ah nodded as if she understood. She grabbed Echidna’s hand and replied, “We’ll be waiting for you at home, then.”

“Well then, we will go on ahead, hyung-nim.” Si-Hun bowed slightly and turned around.

Balrog stared at Si-Hun’s back in silence and stood up. “My king, please summon me at any time if you require assistance.”

“Hm? Yeah, sure.”

Kang-Woo momentarily felt something was off with how Balrog stared at Si-Hun, but he decided to pay it no mind and nodded.

‘Did something happen between them?’

Whatever the case, it was not something he had the leeway to concern himself with at the moment. The party members left the Frozen Temple, leaving only Kang-Woo, Lilith, and the collapsed Eilles on the desolate battlefield.

“Now then.” Kang-Woo turned to Eilles and smiled. “Shall we get on with the interrogation?”

“Kurgh,” Eilles grunted. He expected to be interrogated since he had been spared. “It’s pointless.”

Eilles glared at Kang-Woo coldly. His conviction, deep within his heart, would never be bent.

“You never know until you try.” Kang-Woo walked toward the collapsed Eilles and extended his arm toward him.

‘Authority of Sealing.’

Fwoosh—!!

The Flames of Voracity wrapped around Eilles to restrain him.

“Hmm. How are you planning on interrogating him, my lord Demon King?” Lilith approached the restrained Eilles and scanned him from head to toe with narrowed eyes. “It is never easy to make uncompromising people like him talk.”

“I’m sure it is.” Kang-Woo nodded. He placed his hand on Eilles’s head and continued, “But we have to make him talk, no matter what.”

That was how desperate Kang-Woo was for information about Bael. His eyes glinted as he activated an Authority.

‘Authority of Domination.’

Crackle—!!

“Kurgh!”

Black sparks crackled in front of Eilles’s head. He shook his head in pain, but that was it the Authority of Domination failed to take control of his mind.

“Tsk,” Kang-Woo clicked his tongue with a frown.

As he had expected, mind control Authority had no effect.

‘There’s no way they didn’t prepare countermeasures for this.’

Kang-Wo didn’t know about Bael, but he was sure that Amon would have foreseen such a situation and prepared countermeasures for it.

'In that case...'

Kang-Woo turned around. There was a reason why he had Lilith stay despite getting everyone else to leave the dungeon.

“Do me a favor, Lilith.”

“Hmm.” Lilith looked down at Eilles with her arms crossed.

“You... and your ■■■■■■■■■■ will be able to do it,” said Kang-Woo with certainty with his hand on her shoulder.

Lilith tilted her head in confusion. “Wouldn’t he just enjoy it?”

“No.”

'He won't. I've never been more sure of anything in my entire life.'

Lilith pouted and complained, “Ngh. I don’t understand why you hate tentacles so much, my king.”

'You don't? Why don't you understand? No, even if you don't, you should've fucking figured it out a long time ago after all the times I'd said it.'

Regardless of whether Kang-Woo found Lilith’s tentacles disgusting or not, it no longer mattered now that Lilith had decided to take part in the interrogation.

“I’ll leave it to you, then,” Kang-Woo expressed.

“Yes, my king.”

Lilith smiled widely and nodded.

Squelch.

Her hair moved as if it were alive and turned into green tentacles.

“Wh-What are you planning on doing?” Eilles asked as he stared at the green tentacles in pallor.

Kang-Woo patted Eilles’s shoulder as if to cheer him up, “You should’ve talked when I asked nicely.”

He shook his head and turned away.

“Kurgh! W-Wait...!” Eilles shouted.

Squelch.

“Gah! A-Argggghh!”

Squelch! Squelch! Squelch!

“Guuurrrggghh!!”

The green tentacles stuck to Eilles. He twisted and turned as he screamed in terror. Some time passed and Eilles was left struggling, still restrained by the Flames of Voracity.

“A-Arrgghh.”

Nightmarish pain tore his mind apart. Although he was made of ice, he had sensory perception. Pain, displeasure, and fear took control of him. The displeasure could not be explained as anything other than disgusting. Eilles was getting nauseous from the feeling of the tentacles sticking to his skin. He bit his lip, suppressing the desire to vomit at any second. freewebnovel.com

“I... M-My... My conviction...”

However, Eilles raised his head with his eyes wide open. He recalled the first time he met his lord. He recalled the thrill and awe he had felt back then.

‘Lord Bael...’

Eilles recalled the endless darkness— the boundless abyss within the innocent-looking boy.

‘Only you... can destroy this irrational world and build it anew.’

Only Bael could become the master of the new world.

“Will not... be bent.”

Eilles’s eyes were still blazing with unwavering conviction despite being covered in green tentacles.

Kang-Woo stared at Eilles wide-eyed, genuinely surprised.

‘He’s enduring that?’

Lilith’s interrogation skills surpassed even the Authority of Domination in certain ways. It was not a matter of her tentacles being hideous and disgusting her tentacles naturally oozed powerful hallucinogenic substances and were able to inflict the pain of one’s flesh being torn apart. One’s fingernails being ripped out, bones breaking, and eyeballs being pulled out were nothing compared to the pain Eilles was currently experiencing.

‘But...’

Eilles, the master of the First Heaven, was enduring and had overcome that excruciating pain.

“Hah,” Kang-Woo chuckled.

“I apologize, my king.” Lilith sighed and shook her head. Eilles passed out as soon as she released him from her tentacles. “He has developed a tolerance.”

The fluid that oozed from her tentacles possessed powerful hallucinogenic properties, but it had its limits. The target no longer saw hallucinations once they built a tolerance to the substance over time.

‘From what I know, no one ever endured to the point that they built up a tolerance.’

Kang-Woo looked down at Eilles, genuinely impressed. Kang-Woo had naturally never felt the hallucinations and pain that Lilith’s tentacles induced, but he had heard from Lilith that the pain was close to the amount that Kang-Woo felt when *molting*.

“No wonder he was so confident that we wouldn’t be able to get him to talk.”

As one who had experienced the pain that came with molting, Kang-Woo couldn't help but be impressed. He clapped as he looked down at Eilles.

"Umm... What should we do now?" Lilith looked at Kang-Woo as if she didn't know what to do.

She knew that it would be difficult to get Eilles to break, but she had not expected him to be this tenacious.

"Should we give up on information about Bael?"

Since the Authority of Domination and the extreme pain induced through hallucinations did not work, there was no practical way to make Eilles talk anymore. They would still be able to inflict physical pain on Eilles even if he built a tolerance to Lilith's hallucinogen, but he would most likely be able to endure that pain as well.

"No need." Kang-Woo calmly shook his head. He crouched, lightly patted the unconscious Eilles's back, and continued, "Conviction usually succumbs to hope."

"Pardon?" Lilith tilted her head in confusion. "Don't you mean despair?"

"No." Kang-Woo lightly shook his head with a wide smile. "He'll break at the face of hope."

Lilith remained silent. A chill ran down her spine. She thought for a moment that she saw goat horns on Kang-Woo's forehead.

"Up we go." Kang-Woo stood up and stared in the direction where Arianne had run. "Now then, let's go catch us a spoiled princess."

Chapter 492 - Conviction Succumbs to Hope (2)

Drip, drip, drip.

Melted ice fell as drops of water on the floor. Darkness fell on the temple that reeked with the stench of blood.

"A-Arggh." Eilles twisted and slowly opened his eyes. "Kurgh!"

He tried to move, but the black flames wrapped around him did not allow him to.

'Where am I...?'

He looked around. He had woken up in his half-melted temple where the Frostborn fought against the intruders.

'He didn't imprison me somewhere else.'

The fact that the intruders did not move him while he was unconscious was precious information.

'Time isn't on their side.'

If the intruders had all the time in the world, they would have taken him to their base and slowly interrogated him. Eilles narrowed his eyes and looked around. He couldn't see his interrogators, the man named Oh Kang-Woo or the woman named Lilith, anywhere.

"Where did they go?"

Eilles looked around uneasily. There was no way they had gone back after giving up on prying information out of him.

Fwoosh! Fwoosh—!

"Kurgh. Shit."

Eilles drew out the power of frost and tried to break free, but the black flames restraining him did not budge.

"Fuuu," Eilles sighed deeply and stopped struggling.

His blue eyes shone brightly within the dark temple.

'I'll never talk.'

Eilles more or less had an idea about what information regarding Bael that the intruders wanted.

'They want details about the day of the apocalypse.'

Bael and his army would invade Earth in exactly thirty-five days. They would massacre humanity, kill every god, and create a new world.

Eilles closed his eyes in silence.

'If I can't break out of these restraints...'

He was planning on ending his own life at the very least. After all, dead men told no tales.

"Fuuu."

Eilles had no qualms about dying. Rather, he was happy to die as long as it was for the sake of his loyalty toward his lord. However...

'Arianne.'

His daughter's face popped up in his head. The innocent laughter of the Frost Princess, as white as snow, echoed in his mind.

"Haaa." Eilles closed his eyes as he sighed. He muttered, "I'm... sorry."

He shook his head to shoo away the image of his daughter in his head.

"Frost Spirits," called Eilles as he slowly raised his head.

Light particles slightly smaller than the size of a fist formed around him. They were spirits created from the energy of frost, considerably smaller than when they first appeared. No, it wasn't just their size; the light particles were significantly dimmer and the cold energy within them was nothing compared to what it used to be.

“It seems you all have also been injured quite a lot.”

Eilles looked at the Frost Spirits sorrowfully.

‘But this should be enough.’

They were more than strong enough to end his life.

Eilles raised his head to expose his neck and closed his eyes. He commanded the Frost Spirits around him for the last time, “Kill me.”

Crack!

The Frost Spirits turned into sharp ice spears that shot toward Eilles’s neck.

Shatter!

However, the spears were destroyed before they could reach Eilles’s neck. The Frost Spirits around him were engulfed by the black flames and evaporated.

“Come on, I can’t let you have a badass death.”

“Bastard.” Eilles frowned fiercely. He bit his lip as he stared at the Frost Spirits which had become vapor and dissipated. “You still haven’t given up?”

“Of course not.” Kang-Woo nodded with a wide smile.

“You moron,” said Eilles as he glared at Kang-Woo coldly. He continued firmly, “No matter what you do, I will never talk. Even if you rip off my fingernails, sever my limbs, or pry out my eyeballs, my conviction will not die.”

Kang-Woo smiled. “Yeah, I know.”

Eilles narrowed his eyes. He said coldly, “I don’t know what you’re planning, but there is nothing you can do.

“Whatever you do, you can never surpass him.”

Eilles thought about Bael, his master; a true demon who possessed an endless abyss. He was the only one worthy of ruling all worlds.

“Come to think of it, the woman who was with you referred to you as the Demon King.” Eilles chuckled mockingly. “I know you are a demon, but... that title does not suit you.”

Eilles had never heard about the Demon King since he had only met Bael after the thousand-year war in the Ninth Hell. However, he could easily figure out what the title *Demon King* signified.

“You call yourself the king of demons?” Eilles stared at Kang-Woo as he laughed mockingly. “Lord Bael is the only one who fits that title.”

Kang-Woo dumbfoundedly looked down at Eilles in silence. “Pfft!”

He burst into laughter as he clenched his stomach. “Bwahahahaha!! Dayum, I didn’t think I’d laugh so hard all of a sudden.” He wiped his tears from laughing too hard. “You haven’t heard anything about me from Bael, have you?”

“Makes sense. There’s no way he’d want to tell you.”

If Bael were to tell anyone about how that long war ended, it meant that he would have to acknowledge his loss.

“What relationship do you have with Lord Bael?” asked Eilles.

“Heh.” Kang-Woo smiled.

He reached down to grab Eilles by his white hair.

Bash!

He raised his knee and smashed it into Eilles’s chin.

“Kurgh!!” Eilles grunted in pain.

Kang-Woo did not stop; he smashed his knee into Eilles’s face over and over again.

“Guh! Gah! Kurgh!”

Eilles’s nose broke. His teeth made of translucent ice shattered and fell to the ground as they mixed with white blood.

Thud.

Eilles fell to the ground on his face.

“You should consider the position you’re in, my friend.” Kang-Woo crouched and lightly slapped the collapsed Eilles’s head. He smiled kindly and said, “I’m the one who’s asking the questions, aren’t I?”

“Kuh...” Eilles bit his lip from the humiliation. He looked up at Kang-Woo.

“Kill me,” he said angrily. “You will never hear what you want from me.”

Eilles’s voice was filled with certainty. His eyes did not falter in the slightest even after getting tortured to this extent.

“Really? Do you truly think you can overcome any kind of pain?” Kang-Woo asked.

“Without question,” Eilles answered without hesitation. He continued with eyes filled with willpower, “My conviction will not be bent by mere pain.”

He was not all talk; he was certain that he would never give away information about Bael, whatever pain he was subjected to.

‘Lord Bael.’ Eilles bit his lip as he thought about his lord. ‘No matter the despair and agony I am placed in, my loyalty for you will not change.’

Eilles glared at Kang-Woo with blazing eyes. He chuckled mockingly again and continued, "Now, torture me however you want. You can peel off my skin, gouge out my flesh, and even break my bones.

"You won't get anything from me. Rather, you will only waste the little time you already have to prepare for Lord Bael's grand plan."

The demon known as Oh Kang-Woo was powerful; so powerful that Eilles, the strongest of the Four Heavenly Kings, had not been able to deal any meaningful damage to him. He could even become a threat to Bael's grand plan.

'I'm prepared to endure any kind of pain as long as I can keep him here.'

"Pfft! Hahahahaha!" Kang-Woo burst into laughter with his hand clenching his stomach as he looked down at Eilles. He nodded repeatedly with a smile of satisfaction. "Man, you're good. I like you. Personally, I'm a huge fan of single-minded people like you."

He liked these kinds of people much better than those blinded by desire with no conviction, ideals, or aspirations.

"Because it's all the more fun to break you."

Kang-Woo cackled as he moved his shoulders up and down.

Eilles frowned in displeasure.

"Ahem. Alright, you said that your conviction won't be bent by any pain, right?" Kang-Woo grabbed Eilles by his chin as he nodded in understanding. "In that case."

He bent down and looked into the eyes of Eilles, collapsed on the ground, looking up at him.

"Ah," Eilles groaned the moment he saw Kang-Woo's black scleras, yellow irises, and horizontal pupils.

'What the...' He could feel that something was going wrong. *'What is this feeling...?'*

Eilles lowered his head in confusion.

"What about this, then?"

Just then, Kang-Woo took something out of his pocket. It was a translucent piece of ice.

"Ah." Eilles's eyes widened the moment he saw the ice. He trembled and his teeth clacked together. "N-No."

He denied his thoughts. He desperately hoped that the first thing he thought of when he saw the piece of ice was wrong.

"I-It can't be."

He leaned closer to look down at the piece of ice that Kang-Woo dropped on the ground. It was an immaculately beautiful piece of ice. He understood whose it was even if he didn't want to.

“A-Aaaahh,” Eilles groaned in despair as tears ran down his cheeks.

“Arianne, was it?” The demon brought his mouth close to Eilles’s ears and whispered, “She had such beautiful fingers.”

“A-AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH!!” Eilles screamed. “Y-YOU SON OF A BIIIIIIITCH!!!”

Crack! Crack!

Eilles writhed madly and charged at the demon.

“I’LL KILL YOU! I’LL KILL YOU! I’LL KILL YOU!!”

However, the black flames wrapping him restrained him.

“I WILL KILL YOUUUUUUUUUUUU!”

Eilles’s screams of *despair* echoed throughout the temple.

Chapter 493 - Conviction Succumbs to Hope (3)

Crack, crack!

Eilles twisted and turned madly. The chains made of flames around him were pulled taut. He screamed and roared in resentment.

“A-AAAAAAAAHHH!!”

Eilles drew out what little remained of his power of frost. His entire body was screaming at him in pain but he paid it no mind; pain was nothing before immense resentment.

“I WILL KILL YOUUUUUUUUUUUUUU!!”

Crack, crunch.

Eilles reached for the demon, smiling brightly, in front of him but the chains of flames pulled him back. He clenched his fist; frost energy gathered around it and grew claws exuding freezing air. He thrust the claws at the demon’s neck.

Crack—!!

“Kurgh! Gaaaaahhh!!”

However, the claws stopped in their tracks along with the sound of bone breaking. Eilles had extended his arm until the claws were away from the demon’s neck by a hair’s breadth, but it would not go further no matter how hard he tried.

“You sure are fired up,” the demon said as he looked down at Eilles with an entertained smile.

Rage surged from Eilles again. His head was getting burning hot and he was tearing up.

“Haaa, haaa,” he panted heavily. The tears that were welled in his eyes trickled down his cheeks. “Hurgh, urghhhh. Arianne... Arianne...”

Eilles would be lying if he said he didn't expect this to happen. The first thing he thought about the moment he was captured by the demon named Oh Kang-Woo was Arianne. He had been relieved even as he was getting tortured because his pain only gave his daughter more time to escape. However...

"Hurghhh. Ari...anne." Eilles's tears wet the floor of the destroyed temple. "Oh... Kang-Woo."

He looked up and glared at the smiling demon. His captor was not a hero or a saint; he did not blabber endlessly about ethics and morals. Hence, the demon likely knew that the best way to make Eilles talk was not physical pain but to use Arianne.

"Well, then." The demon lightly kicked away the piece of ice on the floor toward Eilles. "Are you up for talking now?"

"Shut up!" shouted Eilles in rage.

His blue eyes shone with bloodlust as he stared daggers at Kang-Woo, but only for a moment. His glare soon lost its strength and was replaced with tears.

"Please..." Eilles lowered his head and wept as he begged, "Please... anything but my daughter."

"Hahahaha!!" Kang-Woo burst into laughter with his stomach clenched. "Man, what a tearjerker. Wouldn't you agree?"

"I would never expect you to be a being who's trying to eradicate humanity if I didn't know any better."

Kang-Woo looked down at Eilles as he giggled. Eilles, who was crying for his daughter, did not look like a villain in any way.

"But why don't we try reversing our roles?" Kang-Woo suggested.

"Let's say you captured a human with valuable information. But damn, the son of a bitch won't talk no matter what you do. Just as you're getting stressed out of your mind, you happen to find out that the human cares deeply for their child. With all that information, what would you have done?"

Kang-Woo patted the silent Eilles's shoulder.

"Don't be frustrated. Don't be sad. Don't act like you're the victim. It's just that I can do what you would have done as well. That's all there is to it."

"BASTAAAAAAAARD!"

Eilles twisted and charged at Kang-Woo again.

Fwoosh, fwoosh!

The chains of flames were pulled taut to restrain him again.

“Oh, and of course.” Kang-Woo grabbed the struggling Eilles’s head, brought his head close to Eilles’s ear, and whispered, “I’m better at it.”

Kang-Woo cackled as his shoulders moved up and down.

“Now, then.”

He extended his arm toward the chains of flames, which were slowly losing their strength, and used the Authority of Sealing again.

Fwoosh!

The flames which had been slowly getting weaker the more Eilles thrashed around burned brightly again. Kang-Woo turned away from Eilles after recharging the Authority of Sealing.

“One a day.”

“What?”

Eilles stared at Kang-Woo with trembling eyes. The demon pointed at the severed piece of ice.

“It’ll grow by one each day.”

Eilles’s eyes widened. He looked in despair at Kang-Woo. “Wh-What do you mean?!”

“Come on, you know exactly what I mean, don’t you?”

“You son of a...! Y-You scumbag!”

Cutting off one finger each day... not even Eilles had expected such an atrocious act.

He shouted at Kang-Woo who was about to turn his back to him and leave, “S-Stop! N-No, please stop!!”

Fwoosh, fwoosh!

He desperately reached out for Kang-Woo but the chains of flames wrapped around his arm.

“A-Aaaahh,” Eilles groaned in despair. “ARIAAAAAAANNE!!”

He roared like a beast as tears flowed down his cheeks.

The number of familiar pieces of ice each day. Eilles’s despair grew with each passing day. His mind broke little by little and he was becoming insane as the days passed.

“Arghhh...” Eilles groaned as he looked down at the pieces of ice on the floor.

Humans might see these pieces of ice and think they were gems made of ice, but to Eilles, they could not be any more hideous.

“Hurgh. Hurghhhh. A-Arianne...”

Eilles lowered his head and touched the piece of ice with his nose. There were four pieces of ice on the floor. Frostborn did not have flesh made of skin and blood like humans but they were not free

from the fear of dismemberment. In terms of regenerative capabilities, the Frostborn were no different from humans.

“I’m... I’m so sorry.”

In other words, his daughter would no longer be able to use a sword.

“Hurgh.”

Eilles thought about his daughter smiling as she danced with her sword. She had been like a beautiful fairy befitting her title of *Sword Princess*. Heart-wrenching agony attacked Eilles, far worse than his skin being torn, his flesh being gouged, and his bones being broken.

“Why don’t you start talking now?” the demon whispered.

Rage no longer surged from Eilles. The only emotion left to him was his immense sense of powerlessness and despair weighing on his shoulders.

‘I...’

His world was falling apart— no, it might already have. The loss of everything he had was inevitable the moment he had lost to the demon. Eilles closed his eyes. He could feel his conviction, which he believed would not succumb to anything, wavering. It was slowly being broken down.

Eilles opened his eyes.

‘If I tell him...’

Arianne’s life might be spared.

“What will... What will happen to my daughter?” he asked.

“She will live as long as you tell me what I want to know. That includes you, of course,” said the demon in his sweet whispers. “I love to lie, but I always keep my word at the very least.”

Eilles knew that the demon’s sweet whispers were complete bullshit.

However, the demon’s lies were too sweet to resist; Eilles felt as if the demon’s lies were numbing his brain.

“Here, can’t you see Arianne is also begging?”

The demon placed a transparent crystal orb on the floor in front of Eilles.

- F-Father...

A familiar voice flowed out from the orb.

“A-Arienne!!”

Eilles rushed toward the crystal orb but the chains of flames restrained him.

“A-Aaaahh.” Eilles thrashed about as he burst into tears. “Ari...anne. Arianne...”

- It hurts... so much... Father...

She sounded as if she were on the verge of death. The immense despair weighing on Eilles was crushing him.

“I’m running out of time to spare now. Hurry up and talk,” said the demon in slight impatience.

“I...” Eilles lowered his head within the endless swamp known as despair. He continued, “I...”

He raised his head, a small light glinting in his eyes as dead as that of a corpse.

“I... will not talk.”

“What?” The demon’s eyes shook. He continued in irritation, “The fuck? Are you crazy? Huh? You still won’t talk even after your daughter is in this state?”

The demon grabbed Eilles by the collar. “Talk.”

“...”

“Tell me everything you know about Bael!!”

The demon glared at Eilles in madness.

Eilles ignored the demon’s shouts and looked down at the transparent crystal in sorrow. “I’m sorry...”

He thought about his daughter, who was likely suffering from intense agony across that crystal.

“My daughter... My Arianne.” Tears flowed down Eilles’s cheeks. He wept as he lowered his head. “Please forgive... this horrible father of yours.”

“Shit!”

Bash!

The demon punched Eilles in the face and stomped his foot as if he did not expect this turn of events.

“I didn’t think he’d be so tenacious...” muttered the demon as he pulled on his hair. “... Should I give up?”

The demon sighed.

“I should consult with Lilith first.”

The demon turned around, off in his thoughts.

Step, step.

The demon disappeared, leaving Eilles alone on the floor of the giant temple.

“Arianne...” mumbled Eilles as he wept, his voice echoing throughout the destroyed temple.

Time passed and darkness filled the temple. Eilles was on the floor, his eyes devoid of light.

Fwoosh.

Just then, the chains of flames restraining him shook. Eilles's eyes shone.

'Come to think of it.'

The demon came to see Eilles every day to add more strength to the weakened chains of flames.

'But he just left today.'

Eilles's eyes glinted with blue flames known as *hope*.

Chapter 494 - Conviction Succumbs to Hope (4)

Fwoosh, fwoosh.

The chains made of flames binding Eilles burned.

'Just a little more.'

Eilles gritted his teeth as he twisted and turned. He was mentally drained from the past four days that the demon tormented him, but he had thankfully been gradually regaining his strength.

"Frost... Spirits..." Eilles called.

The Frost Spirits which had exploded at the hands of the demon a few days ago dimly appeared.

'Their strength won't be enough.'

Even if the chains had weakened, the spirits were not strong enough to break them.

"Fuuu," Eilles exhaled.

Although he had partially recovered his strength in the past four days, the effects of the excruciating torture remained.

'But I have to escape.'

Eilles was sure that Arianne would be brutally killed by the demon if he missed this opportunity.

"Argh, gah."

Crack, crack.

Eilles frantically thrashed about, which the chains of flames responded to by shrinking against him. Eilles forcibly twisted his left arm which was bound by the chains.

Crack!

"Gaaaaahhh!"

Bones broke as his arm bent at an unnatural angle.

"Haaa, haaa."

Eilles panted heavily and looked down. A small gap between him and the chains was formed thanks to his arm breaking.

'I'll use this gap.'

He focused the power of frost that he had drawn out to a single point. The dim Frost Spirits gathered to that point and turned into a small blade.

Scratch, scratch.

Eilles cut the chains of flames using the ice blade little by little from the inside.

'Just a little more...'

Scratch, scratch.

The chains were gradually getting thinner because the energy within them had not been recharged.

'A little more!'

Eilles's eyes filled with hope.

Crunch!

The chains of flames broke at last.

"Huff! Huff!"

Eilles fell to the ground as he panted heavily after managing to escape from the chains.

'I-It worked!'

He stood up, clenching his unnaturally bent left arm. He felt lighter than ever now that he was free.

"Arianne, Arianne..."

Eilles hurriedly looked around. He did not need anything else, not even his life. All he needed was to rescue his poor daughter, who was likely in immense pain due to the demon's clutches.

'I don't even have a second to waste.'

Based on what the demon had said before leaving Eilles, he was surely planning his next interrogation plan. Eilles needed to escape with his daughter before his conversation with the demon named Lilith ended.

Eilles staggered along, pain spreading throughout his ragged body with every step he took.

'Arianne.'

"Frost Spirits." Eilles closed his eyes and commanded the Frost Spirits, getting dimmer as if they did not have much strength remaining. "Find Arianne."

Whoooooom!

White frost poured out of the Frost Spirits as if they were going out with a bang. The Frost Spirits dispersed in all directions.

"Kurgh."

Eilles felt like his body was falling apart just from giving the Frost Spirits a simple command.

'I have to keep moving.'

He gritted his teeth and forced his legs to move. He had a reason why he couldn't stop.

Whoooooom!

The Frost Spirits gathered in front of Eilles as he wandered around the temple with staggering steps. His eyes shone.

'She's close.'

Arianne was imprisoned somewhere nearby.

'I have to hurry.'

Eilles quickened his steps. The hallway of the temple that he walked along all the time felt endless for some reason.

"Arianne, Arianne..."

He forced his body to keep moving. He finally reached the end of the hallway after what felt like a century and placed his hand over the door handle.

Creak. Eilles carefully opened the door.

"Father...?"

"A-Arienne!!"

Inside was Arianne, who was also bound by chains of flames like he had been. Her usual smile was nowhere to be seen, replaced by a grimace of pain. Her body, perfectly trained for her brilliant swordsmanship, was beyond emaciated.

"Hurgh! Arianne... My Arianne...!"

Eilles embraced Arianne and burst into tears.

"Father...!" Arianne also smiled brightly and buried her face in Eilles's chest. "I knew you would come! I was so, so sure that you would come to rescue me!"

The princess of the Frostborn wept sorrowfully.

"Shh. He will come if you're too loud."

"Gasp..."

Arianne's expression turned pale. Eilles looked down at Arianne bound in the chains of flames. His gaze was naturally drawn to her hands.

"Ahh..."

Only a pinky finger remained on her right hand. Eilles grabbed that hand and burst into tears as he crouched.

"I'm sorry... I'm so sorry, my daughter."

The fact that he failed to protect his daughter broke his heart. Eilles cried in silence with Arianne in his embrace.

“Let’s get you out of this.”

Eilles gripped the small ice blade he had used to cut through the chains of flames which were also burning faintly, possibly because they were not recharged either.

Scratch, scratch.

“I-I’ll be alright, Father. You should hurry and run aw—”

“Silence,” Eilles said firmly as if he would not accept any complaints.

Crunch!

The chains binding Arianne broke as well.

“Ah...!” Arianne’s eyes widened. She smiled brightly and hugged Eilles. “Father, Father, Father...!”

“Haaa, haaa.”

Eilles, who used all of his strength to break the chains, staggered as he panted heavily. Arianne quickly supported him.

Eilles shut his eyes tightly and held Arianne’s right hand with only a pinky finger remaining. “Whatever it takes... I will make it so that you can wield a sword again.”

“Father...”

“No need to worry. I will make sure to kill that demon Oh Kang-Woo myself on the day of the Apocalypse.”

“I-It’s too dangerous, Father!”

Arianne shook her head in terror. Seeing that, Eilles’s expression broke down. He couldn’t believe that his daughter, whose smile was as bright as the sun, was making such a horrified expression.

‘Oh Kang-Woo...’

Eilles clenched his fists, his fury blazing within him.

‘Now isn’t the time.’

It was too early to set his desire for revenge ablaze.

Eilles clenched Arianne’s hand tightly and said, “Let’s go back to where Lord Bael is. Can you walk?”

“Yes, I can. But Father...” slurred Arianne as she stared at the lifelessly staggering Eilles.

Eilles smiled faintly and answered, “Don’t worry about me.”

“Urgh, how dare that filth do this to you, Father...!”

Arianne fiercely bit her lip, her rage surging from seeing her father reduced to rags. Eilles patted Arianne's head and turned around.

"Let's go."

Eilles moved as he held hands with Arianne. He walked cautiously, looking around with his eyes as sharp as a hawk's.

'It's too soon to be relieved.'

He had successfully rescued Arianne, but they had yet to escape.

'We have to go to where Lord Bael is.'

Only then would they be truly safe.

"Huuu, huuu," Eilles breathed anxiously with each step he took.

He was heading to his throne, where a Gate that led to Bael was.

'Please...'

Eilles gulped with an expression filled with desperation. Just then...

Boom—!

"SHIT!!" someone shouted from the other side of the long hallway where Eilles had been tied up.

'He's here.'

The demon found out that Eilles had escaped.

"Hurry!"

"Yes, Father!"

Eilles quickened his steps, still holding Arianne's hand. They were almost at the Gate that led to Bael.

"Haaa, haaa!"

They reached an extravagantly decorated space. There was supposed to be a throne in the room, but it was not there because it had turned into the Frost Sword.

"This way!"

Eilles ran to the back of where the throne usually was.

Whoooooom!

A Gate leading to Bael opened once he placed his hand on the magic tool that Amon had given him.

'I did it!'

Eilles's eyes filled with hope. A bright smile replaced his expression of despair.

He pulled Arianne by the hand and said, "Let's go. We only have about a month until the day of the Apocalypse."

Treating her daughter was important, but so was making the day of the Apocalypse happen. The Frostborn were wiped out due to the intruders and the Frost Sword was taken from Eilles, but he still possessed the Deific Essence of Frost as well as his power.

Arianne stood in front of the Gate, staring at it in silence.

"We have to go now. What are you waiting for?" Eilles said as he pulled on Arianne's arm.

"I see." Arianne smiled. "A month, huh?"

Arianne melted as if she were liquid. Darkness oozed from her body made of translucent ice.

"Thanks, that was good info."

The demon appeared from the darkness.

"Huh?" Eilles's eyes widened as he stared at the demon dumbfoundedly. "What the..."

His thoughts were jumbled; his brain was unable to process the information sent by his eyes. It was as if he were trapped in a nightmare.

"Ari...anne?"

"Pfft!" The demon clenched his stomach and crouched. He laughed vulgarly, "Bwehehehehe!! Don't worry. That immature princess is safe."

The demon dropped a crystal orb. It shone brightly and displayed a hologram of Arianne sleeping on a bed.

"Ah..."

Eilles's eyes quivered. His eyes once again naturally gravitated to her hands.

"Her fingers..."

All ten of her fingers were perfectly intact.

"Come on, man. Did you seriously think I cut off her fingers?" The demon cackled as his shoulders moved up and down. "I don't do uncivilized shit like that, bro."

The demon shook his head humorously.

"Right, then. Now that you saw that..." The demon picked the crystal orb back up and tilted his head. "You're feeling hopeful again, aren't you?"

Eilles saw that his daughter's fingers were intact. He found out that his precious daughter could keep wielding a sword like she loved to do, and that she had never been tortured in the first place. Hope bloomed from within the despair.

"What do you think?"

It was exactly because of that... Eilles couldn't afford to let go of the hope, which had been so sweet that it made his brain numb, after experiencing it once.

"You..."

Eilles's expression turned pale after realizing he had been running around on the demon's palm all along. He turned to look at the demon, his eyes shaking. He could see an endless abyss beyond the demon's black eyes. Chills ran down Eilles's spine and fear took control of him. He recalled the time when he first met Bael.

"Wh-What are you...?"

The darkness he had seen back then was nothing compared to this.

"I told you." The demon patted Eilles's shoulder with a smile. "That your conviction will break."

The conviction that had stood tall against all despair had succumbed to hope.

Chapter 495 - Preparations for War (1)

Thud.

Eilles fell to his knees on the spot.

"Now, I have a few more things I want to ask." Oh Kang-Woo smiled brightly and crouched in front of Eilles. "Where else is that son of a bitch Bael gathering his forces?"

"That's..."

Eilles slightly quivered as he panted heavily.

Kang-Woo lightly patted Eilles's shoulder and continued, "If it's too hard for you to say... how about I give you something other than fingers as a gift this time?"

"N-No!" Eilles hastily shouted.

Immense fear took control of him. He clenched the sliver of hope that he had been given a taste of. The second time was always easier than the first.

Eilles shut his eyes tightly and slowly remarked, "There... aren't many forces like the Frostborn."

"Then?"

"The majority of Lord Bael's army is made up of the demons of the Ninth Hell."

"What?" Kang-Woo frowned.

'That son of a bitch crawled back to the Ninth Hell?'

It was not unexpected; Bael was a demon, so there was no being easier to handle for him than other demons.

'Then that means...'

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes. If Bael had recruited the demons of the Ninth Hell into his army, conflict with Kang-Woo's former forces would have been inevitable. After the death of the seven princes of Hell, the Demon King's army had become so big that no other faction could compare to it.

"How did he gather his forces?" Kang-Woo asked.

"I... don't know that much. Dealings in the Ninth Hell were mostly taken care of by Lord Amon."

"Hmm..."

It did not seem like Eilles was lying.

'I guess he doesn't know what's happening in the Ninth Hell.'

It was a shame.

"Also..."

Kang-Woo asked a few more questions. Eilles's conviction had been destroyed; he was blabbering information as if his tenacity never existed.

"Alright, thanks for that." Kang-Woo tapped on Eilles's shoulder and walked past him.

"I'll keep my promise, so don't worry."

"Promise?"

"I told you I would spare you and your daughter if you told me the truth." Kang-Woo shrugged. "You'll find the sleeping princess not far south of the temple. I won't bother with where you two run off to."

Eilles stared at Kang-Woo as if he couldn't understand. Kang-Woo smiled.

"But naturally..."

He snapped his fingers.

"Kurgh! Gaaaaahhh!"

Eilles clenched his chest and collapsed. He convulsed as if he were having a seizure.

"If you go back to Bael, the ember I've sown in your body will burn you alive."

"Huff, huff."

"Eilles stared at Kang-Woo with shaking eyes. He gulped and asked in a trembling tone, "Why are you... protecting mere humans?"

Eilles had realized it as soon as he gazed into the Demon King's eyes and the endless sea of demonic energy within them. The one who would become the master of the new world was not Bael but the demon in front of him. He couldn't comprehend why the king of all that was demonic, who was destined to rule above all, would go this far to protect mere insects.

“Well, obviously...”

Kang-Woo smiled. He muttered something as he walked past Eilles, but Eilles was not sure if he heard correctly because it was so quiet or he had never heard such a word before.

“Kimchi... what?”

Eilles remained dumbfounded as he stared at Kang-Woo walking away.

“Wonderful job, my king.”

Lilith, who had been standing by in front of the Gate, bowed modestly to Kang-Woo as soon as he came back to Earth. Kang-Woo lightly nodded.

Lilith approached Kang-Woo and asked, “Are you sure it was okay to spare them? It would have been better to purge possible troubles by killing them...”

“Don’t worry. I made sure that won’t happen.” Kang-Woo shrugged and shook his head.

“Hmm.” Lilith narrowed her eyes and giggled seductively. She hugged Kang-Woo’s arm and remarked, “As I’d thought, you’ve become more gentle compared to how you were back in Hell.”

“...”

“Back then, you would’ve just killed them without hesitation.”

“Well... that’s true.” Kang-Woo softly nodded. He chuckled and asked, “What? Does it bother you?”

“Hoho. Of course not.” Lilith shook her head as if it were nonsense. She gently caressed Kang-Woo’s cheek and continued, “I will love you no matter what you are, my king.”

Kang-Woo remained silent as something welled up within him. He shook his head to shoo away unnecessary thoughts. “More importantly, there isn’t much time.”

“Do you mean until Bael comes to Earth?”

Kang-Woo nodded. “Thirty-one days.”

According to Eilles, there was exactly one month left until the *day of the Apocalypse* arrived.

“We have to do everything we can until then.”

The final battle that would decide everything was just around the corner.

‘Will I lose everything I’ve built until now, or will I devour Bael and acquire the life that I’ve always aspired to have?’

Kang-Woo closed his eyes tightly and clenched his fists. The immense pressure of anxiety weighed down on his shoulders.

“You’ll win,” Lilith stated and kissed the frozen Kang-Woo on the cheek. She looked straight into his eyes and firmly remarked, “You’ll win, my king. As you’ve always done.”

“Yeah.” Kang-Woo laughed insincerely and nodded.

‘Thirty-one days.’ He started walking as his eyes shone sharply. *‘I’d love to get Transcendent-rank Deific Essence by then.’*

That was the most effective way to emerge victorious but it was impossible to build a month-long plan around that.

‘First, I have no idea how to get it.’

It was nothing but a gamble to make a plan around something he had no idea how to go about getting.

‘In that case...’

Kang-Woo fell into thought as he tapped on his chin.

“We’ll have to use the fact that we have the initiative to our advantage.”

“Are you planning on attacking Bael’s army as soon as they arrive?”

“Yeah, since they have no idea that I know exactly when the day of the Apocalypse is.”

“Hmm. But don’t you have to know where Bael will attack to do that?”

It was pointless to know when Bael would attack if they did not know where. It was not like they could set up a defense perimeter that covered the entirety of Earth.

“I know where.” Kang-Woo smiled. “Seoul. Bael will come to Seoul.”

He recalled the future that Kim Tae-Hyun saw.

‘I won’t rely on it one hundred percent, but there’s a high chance that Seoul being the location of the final battle hasn’t changed.’

If the future could change so easily, there was no way Tae-Hyun would have tried so desperately to kill Kang-Woo. Changing the future was possible, but it was likely extremely difficult.

“How about we attack Bael first? That could catch him off-guard,” asked Lilith as she rubbed her lips with her finger.

Kang-Woo shook his head. “We have far too little time to gather our forces. Also, having the final battle in the Ninth Hell is far too risky.”

The majority of humanity’s forces for the final battle would mostly consist of humans; Hell was far too disadvantageous of an environment for humans to fight in since demonic energy was even in the air.

“Oh, I completely forgot that your army mostly consisted of humans, my king.”

“Well... we’ve spent the majority of our lives in Hell, after all.”

“Then are you planning on setting the defense line in Seoul?”

Kang-Woo nodded. “We first need to declare martial law and evacuate every citizen in Seoul. They should be evacuated to at least Busan— no, just evacuate them to America while we’re at it.”

He was planning on placing a barrier that enveloped the entirety of Seoul to prevent the destruction from spreading, but letting civilians stay in the vicinity was far too dangerous.

‘Well, evacuating them to America won’t amount to much once the battle against Bael begins.’

If the barrier were to be destroyed, the effects of the battle would spread throughout Earth.

“Then how about we evacuate them to Aernor?”

“Aernor?” Kang-Woo’s eyes shone; he did not even think of that. “Mm. Yeah, that would be a lot safer.”

“But...”

“The amount of chaos would be immeasurable.”

How many people spending regular daily lives would accept without question if they were told out of the blue to move to another world? It was not like they could be told that they were being evacuated because Earth might be destroyed.

‘If we were to reveal that, everyone on Earth would try to go to Aernor.’

Although the population had reduced considerably ever since the Day of Calamity, there were still three to four billion people. It was impossible to evacuate them all to Aernor in a month without causing global chaos.

‘I have no choice.’

Kang-Woo would prefer to move everyone on Earth to Aernor but it was realistically impossible.

“We have to focus more on making the defense line stronger than evacuating the citizens right now.”

Nowhere in the Triad would be safe if Kang-Woo were to lose to Bael anyway. Whether it be Kang-Woo who failed to maintain control over the Demonic Sea or Bael, the Triad would end either way.

“I will contact Layla and have her gather the elite members of Guardians in Seoul,” Lilith said.

“Average Players will only get in the way, so have them evacuate the civilians.”

“Yes, my king.”

“And you remember Khadgar, right?”

“The mage who supplied magic tools to Guardians?”

“Yeah. Have him make a communication network.”

“A network?”

“We’re gonna be gathering as many forces as possible. There are bound to be language barriers, so we need as many communication devices with interpretation magic enchanted on them.”

“Mm. But didn’t you set him free last time?”

“There are no breaks during a national— no, a global emergency.”

‘Wake up, Khadgar. You have some more work to do.’

“We have a lot more to do. We have to contact the angels and have the gods of Olympus participate as well.”

“Will we be able to do it?” Lilith shook her head as if she were dumbstruck.

The amount of work was unreal for it all to be completed in one month, but...

“One month. We have to be ready in one month,” Kang-Woo said quietly.

Chapter 496 - Preparations for War (2)

Thud. Oh Kang-Woo put down the Nectar he had been drinking on the table. Gaia flinched.

“So,” Kang-Woo remarked quietly. “Most of the gods of Olympus won’t be able to participate in the war?”

He glared at Gaia as if he were dissatisfied. Gaia lowered her head as her lips quivered.

“I-I’m sorry. They have yet to recover from Bael’s attack fully, so the majority of the gods won’t be in any condition to fight.”

“...”

Gaia quickly continued as if to appease Kang-Woo, “B-But I will bring with me every single god who can move at least a little.”

“Haaa,” Kang-Woo sighed deeply.

Bael had attacked Olympus while Earth was being invaded by the Parasites. The majority of the gods were thankfully not devoured by Bael, but they were wounded to the point that their Deific Essence was on the verge of being annihilated.

‘Did he plan this as well?’

Kang-Woo thought Bael’s main objective had been to sow the seed of doubt in Gaia’s heart to create discord between her and Kang-Woo, but he couldn’t rule out other possibilities.

‘Or it might have been Amon’s idea.’

Considering all of Bael's actions until now, everything had been about Kang-Woo; Bael had no interest in anything unrelated to Kang-Woo. Despite that, his plan was being set up very smoothly for the day of the Apocalypse.

'Amon is coordinating Bael's madness.'

If not for Amon, the impulsive Bael who did as he liked could never have set up such an intricate plan.

"What a pain."

Excluding Kang-Woo's main party members, the gods of Olympus could be considered the most powerful force Kang-Woo had; their incapacitation would deal a massive blow to his plan.

'Well, it doesn't seem like she's lying.'

The gods of Olympus, whom Kang-Woo had seen during his visit to see Gaia, were so injured that they could barely stand.

'Not even Seol-Ah will be able to heal them.'

Physical injuries could be healed with no problem as long as they were alive, but not even Han Seol-Ah's healing magic could heal injuries to one's Deific Essence.

"I have no words." Gaia sighed and shook her head. She raised her head again after some silence and continued calmly, "But Uranus and I are almost completely fine. If Bael has amassed an army of demons from the Ninth Hell, we and the Protectors will be more than enough to stop them, wouldn't you say?"

She was treating the demons of the Ninth Hell as if they were monsters from a low-ranking Gate.

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

It was understandable, considering the current extent of the Ninth Hell's forces.

'Demons from the Ninth Hell barely feel like a threat at this point.'

Every prince of Hell, the former rulers of the Ninth Hell, was dead except for Bael, and the Demon King, the pinnacle of all demons, was none other than Kang-Woo. In other words, the Ninth Hell without the Demon King and the seven princes of Hell was but a gathering of average demons. And most importantly...

"How many demons from the Ninth Hell can even penetrate the Deific Essence barrier?"

No demon had possessed Deific Essence back when Kang-Woo used to rule over Hell as its king. To put it simply, people with Deific Essence like Kim Si-Hun, Gaia, and Cha Yeon-Joo would easily be able to massacre the demons.

'But...'

Kang-Woo shook his head with deeply sunken eyes.

"Do you think they didn't think of that?" he stated.

“That’s...”

“Bael was the one who freed the gods from their leash. Would he have done such a thing without realizing they would get in his way?”

Although Bael was a demented son of a bitch, Gaia was underestimating him far too much.

“He has the Demon God’s heart and the privilege to manipulate the Law of Titans. There’s no way he would plan an attack with no countermeasure for those with Deific Essence.”

Gaia remained silent, being bombarded by irrefutable facts. “I didn’t think it through enough.”

“Tsk,” Kang-Woo clicked his tongue and stood up. “I got it for now. Gather as many gods as you can and manifest on Earth before the date I told you. They don’t need to be from Olympus; just get as many as possible.”

“I got it.” Gaia nodded. Just as Kang-Woo turned around, she grabbed his clothes. “Umm...”

“What?”

“Thank you.”

“Heh. What brings the sudden change of heart? You were going off not long ago about me being the Demon of Prophecy who will end the world.”

“A-Ahem. Forget that.” Gaia coughed, her cheeks slightly flushed. She looked up at Kang-Woo and continued, “To be honest, I am still scared. I’m worried that the Demonic Sea laying dormant inside you will devour you and end the world.”

“But,” Gaia said as she stared at Kang-Woo firmly. “I’ve decided to trust you, no matter what end awaits me.”

Gaia clenched the fist of her other hand, which was on her knee.

“I see.”

Kang-Woo smiled and shook his hand. He never expected Gaia to say that she trusted him ever again after revealing his true identity to her and giving her no choice but to trust him.

‘It’s not a bad feeling.’

Kang-Woo shrugged as he turned around and left Olympus.

‘Now, then.’

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes after returning to the Hall of Protection. He had just finished his business with Olympus but there was no time to rest. He took out his smartphone and opened a web portal with a green background[1] to check the trending searches.

[Live Trending Keywords]

1. Martial Law
2. Seoul Martial Law
3. Martial Law meaning
4. Seoul house price

“Yeah, house prices sure are fucking important.”

Kang-Woo chuckled. As he had expected, chaos had befallen Korea once martial law had been declared.

‘Yeah, it would be weirder if everything was normal after martial law was declared and people were told to move to another world.’

It would be crazy behavior if people just packed their bags and left for Aernor without question. Kang-Woo opened the news category and read through the comments.

[News Feed]

Chamber: The hell? Martial law out of nowhere...?

tokki: What the hell’s this nation come to?!

Namu: Could it be related to the insect invasion in Seoul last time?

Jing S: But fr, are they even allowed to kick out every citizen in Seoul this suddenly?

Cyncoco: Isekai, here I come!! Lezgoooooo!! My time has finally come!!

Penguin the GOAT: Holy shit, there’s a martial law opposition rally at Gwanghwamun right now.

Cosy: LMAO everyone, gather at Gwanghwamun if you don’t wanna be chased out to another world.

‘A rally, huh?’

As Kang-Woo had expected, panic had reached its peak.

“But this...”

He had already thought of a peaceful countermeasure that would turn the chaos into trust.

Brrrrr. Kang-Woo called someone.

- What do you want?

An irritated voice sounded from the other side of the phone.

- I’m already busy as hell, so I’m gonna hang up if it’s not impor—

“Yeon-Joo.”

- ... What?

“I miss you.”

- *Pfft!* Cough! Cough! *Wh-What?*

“I want to see you right now.”

- *Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What's* wrong with you all of a sudden?! *Y-You* know we're gonna be drowning in work for the next month!

“That's exactly why.”

- *Wh-What?*

“We... only have a month left, Yeon-Joo.”

- *S-So* what?

“Now's the only time we have... to say the things we haven't been able to say to each other.”

- ...

“This might be... our only chance.”

- *U-Urghhh.*

“...”

- ...Where are you?

The voice across the phone sounded slightly elated.

Kang-Woo answered, “Come to the roof of our apartment.”

- *N-Ngh.* I-I'll be there in a bit, so wait for me there.

Before hanging up, Kang-Woo heard stomping sounds and Yeon-Joo screaming, ‘*Kyaaaahh! What do I do?!*’.

“Alright.”

Kang-Woo made Yeon-Joo something to give her after he hung up. He already had a rough idea of it so it did not take long to make.

Creak.

After about two hours of waiting on the rooftop, Yeon-Joo finally appeared as she opened the door to the roof.

“S-Sorry for making you wait so long,” she said as she swept back her red hair with a yellow hairpin on it.

She had gone all out on her attire instead of her usual jeans and a white T-shirt. She was wearing a white blouse and a checkered skirt. She was wearing low patent leather heels and even some expensive-looking accessories. She was already a knockout beauty in regular attire, but she looked even more radiant now.

“S-So, what did you want to say to me?” Yeon-Joo asked as she twirled the ends of her hair around her finger for no reason.

“I wanted to ask you a favor.”

Kang-Woo smiled and handed her something. Yeon-Joo expressed slight disappointment.

“What is it?”

“A speech.”

“A speech?” Yeon-Joo frowned.

Kang-Woo turned on the live stream of the martial law opposition rally and said, I’d like you to put an end to this rally as the leader of the Church of Splendor.”

“...”

Yeon-Joo read through the speech that Kang-Woo handed her in silence. In it were things about how everything was according to what the God of Splendor had prophesied, and that they needed to go to Aernor before an even bigger disaster struck. Yeon-Joo turned red after reading further into the speech.

“I-I’m not fucking doing this! Wh-What the fuck?!”

It was not just about reciting the speech; Yeon-Joo would need to put on a tearjerking performance and preach *Ohmen* in front of hundreds of thousands of people. It was impossible to do for anyone with a sense of shame, especially for the relatively shy Yeon-Joo.

“Never! I’ll neeeeeeeeeever do it!! Over my dead body!!” she shouted madly.

Snap!

Just then, Kang-Woo took a photo of Yeon-Joo.

“What did you just do?”

Yeon-Joo flinched and stared at Kang-Woo.

“If you don’t do it...” Kang-Woo smiled brightly. He opened the messenger app, selected a photo, and hovered his thumb over the *send* button. “I’ll send this photo of you I just took... to Seol-Ah. I wonder how she’ll react?”

“KYAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH!!” Yeon-Joo screamed.

She looked down at her clothes in pallor. Unlike her usual clothes, her attire oozed with the desire to look pretty for someone, and the same could be said for her makeup and hairstyle. If Seol-Ah were to see this...

“Y-You...” Yeon-Joo’s shoulders trembled. “YOU MOTHERFUCKEEEEEEEEEEEEERRRRR!!”

She grabbed Kang-Woo by his hair and smashed her knee into his face. Her attack penetrated his Deific Essence barrier and caved his face in. Blood poured out of Kang-Woo’s nose.

'Uhh, mm.'

Kang-Woo fell into thought as he was getting his ass beaten by a crazed lioness.

'Man, it's actually hurting my conscience this time.'

He knew that he had taken advantage of her feelings far too much this time.

'Yeon-Joo, oh Yeon-Joo. Forgive me just this once. I'll be super, super good to you once this is all over. I'll carry you to Gold.'

Chapter 497 - Preparations for War (3)

“Everyone! Trust in the light! Follow the path of light!” shouted Cha Yeon-Joo, enveloped in radiant splendor.

All eyes of the people gathered at Gwanghwamun were on her. The speech that Yeon-Joo had been reciting for the past twenty minutes was about to reach its climax.

“The God of Splendor will save us all!”

Clatter!

Gold chains poured out in a fan-shape from the area around Yeon-Joo's back, making them look like wings made of brilliant light.

“Ah...”

The eyes of the crowd shook. They recalled the Parasite invasion in Seoul, which was only a month ago. The one who had saved them was the God of Splendor with his brilliant wings.

“O God of Splendor...”

The number of people bursting into tears with their mouths covered with both hands increased. They knew very well who had saved them as Seoul was covered in flames. The Sword Dragon, the Players of Guardians, and the soldiers from Aernor all did their part, but the one who had wiped out countless Parasites with one attack was the God of Splendor.

“Ohmen...”

“Hurgh. Please punish us fools.”

“We were blind to the word of God!!”

The devotees of the Church of Splendor, who had been secretly planted throughout the crowd, shouted praises for the God of Splendor as they acted like they had been led astray. Their voices spread several hundred meters using a magic tool.

Fwoosh—!!

At the same time, the light of splendor burst out of Yeon-Joo and enveloped the entire crowd.

[I will guide you to salvation.]

A solemn voice echoed within the people's heads. None of them knew this, but it was just a recording of Vaal Zahak's voice, which could be mistaken for that of a crime boss.

[The light will save you all.]

There was nothing more effective than a good voice in pulling out emotion from people's hearts. Vaal Zahak's deep and dignified voice moved the hearts of everyone gathered at the rally. According to Kang-Woo, the skeleton's voice was Kim Si-Hun-level.

"Ohmen...!!"

"I believe, I believe, I believe!!"

The decoys praised the God of Splendor even more. Add to that the Incarnation of Splendor sprouting brilliant wings and the voice of God echoing from the light, there was no question.

"A-Aaaahh."

Seoul had experienced an extinction-level threat only a month ago and the one who had saved them from despair was the God of Splendor, who was currently warning them of danger. It was more than enough to break through the people's psychological defense.

"O-Oh..."

Tears welled up from their eyes. Humans were sentimental creatures; the wave of emotions spreading throughout the crowd began to influence each of the hundreds of thousands of people, causing them to lose their sense of reason.

"OHMEEEEEEEEEN!!"

The prayer that started from somewhere caused the others to follow suit.

"Everyone..."

Yeon-Joo's shoulders trembled as she stood in front of countless people. Her white vestments fluttered as she kneeled in front of everyone.

She shouted in tears, "OHMEEEEEEEEEN!!"

Her shout sounded more like one of desperation than praise for some reason.

"Great job," said Oh Kang-Woo, who had been watching from backstage.

Yeon-Joo walked past Kang-Woo, her eyes as cold as frost. She then stopped and turned her head with a fierce look. "Just this once. This is the last time."

She glared at him and angrily threw aside her long white hat.

"I'm never doing this again. I'm not gonna do this church leader shit anymore either. Got it?"

Yeon-Joo ripped off her fluttery vestments in tears and threw it aside. Under it were the clothes that she had worn to meet Kang-Woo on the roof. She was not used to dressing nicely, but she had tried her best. She cried even more as she looked down at them.

“Don’t ever contact me again,” she stated coldly. “You’re busy anyway, aren’t you? We only have a month.” She clenched her fists. “I did everything I could, so stay out of my life from now on.”

Yeon-Joo turned around as she wiped her tears.

“Yeon-Joo,” Kang-Woo called.

She ignored him and walked away. Kang-Woo caught up to her and grabbed her hand.

“What?” she asked as she glared at him coldly.

Kang-Woo yanked her hand...

“Mmph!!”

... Tilted his head, and kissed her.

“M-Mmph!! Mmmmmmph!”

Yeon-Joo’s eyes widened. She waved her hands around, but Kang-Woo embraced her and leaned in even more for a deeper kiss.

“Pwah!” Yeon-Joo hurriedly stepped back after the short kiss. “Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What the fuck?!!”

Her face turned so red that it looked like it would burst from a slight poke.

“Wh-What was... th-that for?” Yeon-Joo stammered with a hint of elation in her voice.

Kang-Woo smiled faintly and lightly grabbed Yeon-Joo’s hands. “Thanks. I mean, I love to tease you for fun, but I’ve always cherished you.”

“U-Urgh.” Yeon-Joo lowered her head which had turned bright red. “Wh-What the f-fuck’s gotten into you? I-It doesn’t suit you at all, y-you damn virgin. H-Haha. Y-You think you’re hot stuff just because I h-hung out with you a bit? Wh-When did I ever say that I-I was interested in someone like y-you? Sheesh. Th-This is the problem with virgins...”

Her stuttering continued as tears flowed down her cheeks, but they were tears of joy unlike before.

“Pfft!” Kang-Woo laughed, unable to hold it in any longer.

The sight of the crying Yeon-Joo was beyond beautiful.

“Wh-What?! Wh-Why the fuck are you laughing?!” Yeon-Joo shouted madly.

Kang-Woo patted her head as he snickered. “Sorry, but I have to go. I’ll tell you why I laughed later.”

He wanted to stay with her for a little longer, but Iris had contacted him during Yeon-Joo’s speech. Considering what Iris had requested of him, he couldn’t stay here for much longer. As Yeon-Joo had said, they only had one month.

“Ugh...” Yeon-Joo flinched and bit her lip. She could still feel Kang-Woo’s lips on hers. She was feeling fuzzy as if she were dreaming. “O-Okay, sure.”

Yeon-Joo looked away from Kang-Woo. She heard from Kang-Woo that there was going to be a battle against Bael in one month, so she knew how busy of a schedule he had.

“Ngh...”

Yeon-Joo rubbed the end of her shoe on the ground as if she were dissatisfied. She was wearing low heels instead of her usual sneakers. She could feel her face and ears getting red.

‘I must be crazy.’

Yeon-Joo shut her eyes tightly and shook her head. She thought there was no way that these clothes looked good on her.

‘These would look far better on Seol-Ah or Lilith...’

Her expression turned darker the more she thought that she had done something pointless.

“Oh, right.” Kang-Woo stopped in his tracks and turned to Yeon-Joo. He said nonchalantly, “Those clothes look good on you.”

“Wha...!”

Kang-Woo then flew up into the sky. Yeon-Joo quickly turned around but Kang-Woo was already gone.

“Argh! Wh-What the hell are you talking about, you son of a bitch?!” Yeon-Joo cursed at the vanished Kang-Woo for no reason. “Urgh...”

She clenched the hems of her skirt after cursing some more.

“Hehe.”

Yeon-Joo smiled more brightly than ever.

“Ah, S-Sir Kang-Woo!”

A woman with hair so blonde that it looked as if it were made of liquid gold, was waiting in front of the Gate leading to Aernor. Irisran to Kang-Woo as soon as she noticed him.

“It’s been a while, Sir Kang-Woo.”

“It sure has.”

Kang-Woo slightly nodded. It had definitely been a while, but it had been far longer for the ones he was about to meet.

‘It has seriously been a while.’

He could barely remember how long it had been even after combing through his memories.

Iris turned to Kang-Woo and remarked, “Please wait just a little bit. They will be here soon.”

Kang-Woo nodded and stared at the massive Gate several kilometers tall.

Crackle—!

Blue lightning sparked soon after.

“Kang-Wooooooooooo!!!”

A blue-haired boy flew out of the Gate as the wings on his back flapped energetically.

“Uriel.”

Kang-Woo smiled at the boy flying toward him. He had left Uriel in Aernor so that Uriel could deal with the aftermaths of the destruction in Sant’Angelo from the invasion by the Constellations of Evil.

‘It’s nice to see him again.’

Others might think of him as an unruly child, but he was at least docile in front of Kang-Woo.

“Hah, how’ve you been? I’ve heard so much. Earth was attacked by otherworldly beings not long ago, wasn’t it? Are you hurt anywhere? I’m so sorry I wasn’t able to h
—”

“Stop. Calm down, Uriel,” someone with a deep voice interjected. Michael slowly walked out of the Gate from behind Uriel. He bowed courteously and greeted, “It’s been a while, Kang-Woo.”

Next to him was a woman who reeked of alcohol, sweeping her hair back with a smile.

“Sheesh~ give it a rest already, brat. Is he your long-lost lover or something?”

“What did you say?” Uriel glared fiercely at Gabriel, the woman who reeked of alcohol. “Damn drunkard...”

“Hihi. What’s up with you? It’s not like it’s your first time seeing me drunk.”

“Shut up!”

Uriel and Gabriel began to bicker with each other.

“Haaa...” Michael sighed as if he were having a headache. He paid them no attention and extended his arm toward Kang-Woo. “I have been relayed the situation from Iris, Kang-Woo. An army of demons will be attacking Earth in one month...”

“Yes,” Kang-Woo replied.

“I apologize for not being able to help during the last invasion. We have only just finished rebuilding Sant’Angelo.”

“It’s alright. I’m grateful enough for you coming this time.”

Kang-Woo grabbed Michael’s hand with a smile.

'The gods of Olympus, the martial law, and now the angels.'

Kang-Woo was slowly gathering the crucial pieces of the puzzle.

Chapter 498 - Stragglers (1)

"Ah... To think there was such an atrocity in Olympus..." Michael expressed sorrow.

He, Uriel, and Gabriel couldn't help but be shocked after hearing that Bael had attacked Olympus.

"Th-Then have all the gods of Olympus been annihilated?" Uriel asked.

"No, but..."

Oh Kang-Woo explained the current state of Olympus.

"This is... the worst."

Uriel's expression hardened. It was despairing to hear that most of the gods of Olympus could not participate in the war against Bael and his army, which was only a month away.

Kang-Woo mentioned, "I'm sure Bael attacked them with this in mind."

"Haaa..." Uriel shook his head in disbelief. "Just how strong is Bael... to be able to decimate Olympus by himself?"

He knew how powerful those with Deific Essence were since Michael was one of such beings. He could hardly believe that a group of such beings were one-sidedly beaten by one demon.

"He's strong. Overwhelmingly so," answered Kang-Woo concisely.

He was not exaggerating to keep them on their toes; Bael was so powerful that not even Kang-Woo was sure whether or not he would be able to defeat him. Bael might even be on the same level as the Titans, the creator of worlds.

Silence fell. Even Gabriel, the always playful angel, was serious after hearing about the loss at Olympus.

"It might be weird for me to say this since I was the bearer of the bad news, but relax." Kang-Woo smiled faintly and continued, "Whatever the case may be, this isn't a battle we can avoid. We should be raising our chances of victory instead of trembling in fear."

It was easier said than done. Imagine if a dump truck were to suddenly veer off its lane and charge right at you; how many of us would be able to stay calm and think to roll to the side? Nine out of ten people would fall into panic mode and get hit by the truck without being able to react.

'And those nine out of ten people can't become an archangel.'

The archangels did not betray Kang-Woo's expectations.

"You're right."

"Nothing will change even if we stay in fear."

Uriel and Michael nodded in seriousness. They were unwavering to the point that it was boring.

'They don't disappoint.'

It would have been pointless to ask for their assistance if they were any other way.

Kang-Woo continued, "Let's head to the Hall of Protection first. I will give you the details on the defense line there."

"Very well." Michael nodded. As he was following behind Kang-Woo, he was reminded of something and then asked, "Oh right. Come to think of it, why did you ask us not to bring the other angels?"

"Oh, I was curious about that as well. Why did you ask only for us three?" asked Uriel with his head tilted in wonder.

Michael approached Kang-Woo and said, "If you're worried about the state of Sant'Angelo, it has been more or less resto—"

"No, that's not why." Kang-Woo shook his head.

When he asked Iris to contact Michael to ask for assistance, he also told Iris to tell Michael not to bring other angels aside from Uriel and Gabriel.

"Setting up the defense line itself is going to be much later. I just thought there was no need to bring so many so soon."

Michael tilted his head in confusion, unable to understand the logic. He asked, "Shouldn't it be prepared as soon as possible since the war is only a month away?"

"We're indeed short on time, but not getting caught is more important."

Bael would be attacking Seoul in one month, but Kang-Woo needed to maintain the facade that he had no idea about the day of the *Apocalypse* for their plan of attack to work.

'That would make the ambush meaningless.'

Kang-Woo had temporarily prevented Bael from being able to observe them through the System, but that was not good enough for him to rest easy.

'We have to set up a defense line throughout Seoul.'

It was far too wide of a perimeter to be lying in ambush; stealth was the most crucial part of this plan, which required the defense line to be prepared as thoroughly and quickly as possible. Hence, it needed to be set up as late as possible.

"It seems I did not think it through enough." Michael nodded as he stroked his chin, having fully understood Kang-Woo's intentions. "But wouldn't it be discovered regardless as soon as we set up the defense line?"

Kang-Woo shrugged and answered, "I've already thought of a countermeasure for that."

However, his countermeasure was not as perfect as he was letting it out to be.

'But...' Kang-Woo lightly closed and opened his fists. *'How hard can it be to keep a brat's eyes covered?'*

He was certain that he was unmatched at least in his ability to hide things.

"This won't be easy." Michael narrowed his eyes and nodded.

"But it has to be done."

"As expected of the God of Splendor." Michael laughed.

Kang-Woo smiled back and turned around. "Right, let's go to the Hall of Protection. Layla will brief you on the details once you arrive."

"Hm? Wh-What about you, Kang-Woo?"

"I have something to do, so I can't stay."

One month was barely enough time to prepare a barrier and a defense line around Seoul, all while staying out of Bael's sight. There was no time to waste catching up with old friends.

"Oh." Uriel expressed dejection.

"Urghh..." Iris also looked dejected, biting her lip after finding out that she wouldn't be able to spend time with Kang-Woo after being apart for so long.

"Wow, the great God of Splendor sure is popular." Gabriel wrapped her arm around Kang-Woo's shoulders with a smile. She brought her mouth close to Kang-Woo's ear, her breath reeking of alcohol. "Why don't you work your charm that got you so popular on little old me as well?"

"Hahaha."

'What's wrong with you, crazy lady?'

"I already have a Darling."

'Keep that up, and you'll die.'

"Hmm. You're getting me even more fired up."

'You might catch fire for real at this rate.'

"Alright, please come this way."

Kang-Woo took Gabriel's arm off of his shoulders and turned.

"Tsk, you're no fun." Gabriel clicked her tongue and stepped away from Kang-Woo.

Kang-Woo looked back at her and smiled.

'You don't know this, but I just saved your life.'

“Before that, I have something to tell you,” Michael remarked as Kang-Woo was about to get moving as he shook his head.

“Oh... that? Is there even a need to tell him when it’s almost over?” asked Uriel apathetically as he interlocked his finger behind his head, knowing exactly what Michael was about to tell Kang-Woo.

“We should share every little detail in dire situations like this.”

“What is it?” Kang-Woo asked as he turned to Michael, tilting his head.

“A group of demons was discovered in Aernor not long ago.”

“A group of demons?”

“Yes. There were about... a hundred of them.”

“That’s not that many... or I guess it could be considered a lot. Did they cause any issues?”

“Not much. After all...” Michael narrowed his eyes and continued, “They were stragglers.”

“Stragglers?”

“Yes. I do not know exactly why, but the demons were running away while covered in wounds.”

“From who?”

“That we don’t know, but I would assume there was some sort of power struggle among the demons.”

Kang-Woo suddenly recalled what Eilles had said.

- The majority of Lord Bael’s army is made up of the demons of the Ninth Hell.

In other words, Bael had taken control of the Ninth Hell after Kang-Woo left.

‘And if there was a power struggle among the demons of the Ninth Hell...’

Kang-Woo thought about his loyal subordinates who had been with him during the war against the seven princes of Hell and when he earned the right to rule over Hell.

‘It can’t be.’

A thought that he didn’t even want to imagine crossed his mind. He suspected as soon as he was told that Bael had gathered an army of demons from the Ninth Hell that there would be a conflict between his former army and Bael’s army. He had already expected and prepared himself for it.

‘But...’

If the number of stragglers only amounted to a hundred, it meant one thing that Kang-Woo had not expected to happen.

“...”

Kang-Woo’s expression froze, chilling bloodlust filling his eyes.

‘I’m sure it’s not.’

He erased the negative thoughts, denying them as nonsense.

‘I’m sure they’re just some random straggler demons.’

A part of his mind was sure that his negative thought was true despite his best efforts to deny it.

Kang-Woo asked quietly, “Was there... a particular demon among them whose name you know or if any of their characteristics stood out to you?”

Michael nodded. “Oh, yes. I believe the leader of the stragglers was named...” He lightly tapped on his chin as he combed through his memories. “Doomguard.”

Kang-Woo closed his eyes. The possibility he had tried so hard to deny had become a fact.

‘Doomguard.’

He was the Guardian of Ruin, as well as the demon who commanded the third battalion of Kang-Woo’s Demon King army.

“Could you... tell me where those stragglers are headed?” Kang-Woo asked.

“Oh, of course. They’re heading southeast of Aernor, but... we are close to catching up to them. If you would like to interrogate them, I would recommend you wait a litt—”

“No,” Kang-Woo interjected, his eyes glinting fiercely. “I will go personally.”

“You, Kang-Woo...?”

“Yes. There is a high chance they are associated with the Demon of Prophecy. I would like to interrogate them myself.”

“I see. In that case, I will have the pursuit squad accompany y—”

“No, no, it’s alright. You can just tell me where they are and I will resolve this issue myself.”

Kang-Woo waved his hand and smiled brightly, but there was something slightly off about his smile.

Chapter 499 - Stragglers (2)

“Did you say... Doomguard?”

Balrog, who had instantly flown to Oh Kang-Woo as soon as he received the call, clenched his fists.

“Hmm. I can more or less tell what happened in the Ninth Hell.”

Lilith, who came with Balrog, sighed and shook her head. Kang-Woo had ordered them to come to the Gate leading to Aernor as soon as he guided the archangels Michael, Uriel, and Gabriel to the Hall of Protection.

“If Doomguard was the only one there... would that mean Arakyle, Nahila, and Wrethion were all killed by Bael?” asked Bael with a heavy expression.

Kang-Woo’s army used to be divided into five battalions. Balrog led the first battalion, Destruction Corps, Arakyle led the second battalion, Despair Corps, Doomguard led the third battalion, Ruin Corps, Nahila led the fourth battalion, Grief Corps, and Wrethion led the fifth battalion, Resentment Corps.

These five battalions fought alongside Kang-Woo in the war to decide the true ruler of the Ninth Hell. And of course, the one who decided those cringy names was not Kang-Woo.

‘It’s all Balrog’s naming sense.’

He had decided on those names without consulting Kang-Woo, claiming that the names were required so that they could strike fear into their enemies.

‘My god, just thinking about those days makes me...’

He recalled cringing every time he commanded each battalion. Memories flashed before his eyes like a panorama.

- Uh, mm... R-Ruin Corps, strike the enemy from behind, and... Despair... do we really have to use these fucking names?

- Of course, we do!

- Why? Why the fuck do we have to?

- Because they are cool!

- Son of a bitch.

“Urgh...”

Kang-Woo wildly shook his head to shoo away his dark past.

“Even if you were absent, all five battalions being wiped out is impossible,” stated Balrog as he shook his head incomprehensibly.

Kang-Woo remained silent, his expression hardened. Balrog was right; even if he, Balrog, and Lilith were absent, there was no way that all five battalions were wiped out. Unless...

Kang-Woo smiled somberly. “Yeah... it’s impossible.”

“Please wait, my king. Didn’t Eilles say that Amon dealt with most matters of the Ninth Hell?” asked Lilith as she frowned.

Kang-Woo clicked his tongue.

‘As expected of Lilith. She noticed the worst possible outcome.’

“Then it could mean that—”

“Enough.”

Kang-Woo cut Lilith off and gestured at Balrog with his chin. Lilith’s expression hardened.

“What are you two talking about?” Balrog stared at Lilith and Kang-Woo with his head tilted.

Kang-Woo refused to elaborate and turned around. He remarked, “Let’s find Doomguard first.”

“Yes, my king.” Lilith nodded.

“...?”

Balrog narrowed his eyes, unable to understand, but he did not demand an explanation.

“Let’s go.”

Whoooooom.

Kang-Woo walked into the Gate leading to Aernor. His vision distorted and he felt nauseated. Once they arrived at Aernor, he held Lilith, who couldn’t fly and lifted her.

Lilith would have stuck to Kang-Woo to seduce him in normal conditions, but she was off in her thoughts with a gloomy expression. Kang-Woo sighed.

‘Authority of the Sky.’

He slowly floated once he activated the Authority. Balrog sprouted his gigantic wings and followed behind him.

‘The southeastern region of Aernor, I believe they said.’

It was not far since the Gate connecting Earth and Aernor was located in the southernmost region of Aernor. It was impossible to know Doomguard’s exact location since he was on the move, but...

“That way.”

Kang-Woo could find him easily because Doomguard was one of his *retainers*. He quickly flew toward the direction that he pointed at.

Whoosh—!!!

Sharp winds brushed past his skin. The sonic booms from their supersonic speed destroyed the areas in their flight path.

“Haaa, haaa,” Doomguard panted heavily as he staggered.

His vision was blurry and his energy was bottoming out.

“Lord... Doomguard... we can’t...”

One of his Ruin Corps subordinates’ groans echoed within his ears.

“Keep moving,” commanded Doomguard as he turned his head to look back. Behind him were about a hundred of his ragged subordinates. He said, barely managing to squeeze out a response, “We have to make it... to our king.”

He was also in terrible condition; he was missing an arm, and black blood was pouring out of his wound that reached from his chest to his stomach. His goat horns, which were no different from his pride as a demon, were broken in half.

“Keep... mov...”

Doomguard’s voice grew fainter.

Boom.

He staggered and collapsed to his knees. The unending outpour of black blood wet the ground.

‘*My king...*’

Doomguard thought about his master as his consciousness waned.

“Ah...”

He hallucinated his master approaching from afar.

Whaaaaam!

Something flying toward the stragglers at astonishing speed landed on the ground.

“Doomguard.”

Kang-Woo looked down at his ragged retainer.

“My... king.”

Crunch.

Kang-Woo bit open his finger without hesitation and stuck his bleeding finger inside Doomguard’s mouth.

‘*Authority of Regeneration.*’

Doomguard slowly began to return to normal as soon as Kang-Woo activated the Authority. However...

“*Cough! Cough!*”

Doomguard covered his mouth and coughed up black blood. Kang-Woo frowned aggressively. He bit open another finger to bleed even more.

“Drink.”

“My king...”

“Drink.”

“...”

Kang-Woo poured large amounts of his blood into Doomguard's mouth as he activated the Authority of Regeneration at full throttle. All of Doomguard's injuries disappeared as if time had been reversed.

"Cough! Kurgh!"

Doomguard continued to cough up blood despite all of his injuries having disappeared.

"My king, this is..." Lilith said quietly.

"I know," Kang-Woo answered, biting his lip.

The Authority of Regeneration could only treat superficial injuries; it couldn't heal internal accumulated damage. Doomguard's body was already destroyed to the point that it couldn't be healed with the Authority of Regeneration.

"What the hell happened, Doomguard?!"

Balrog grabbed Doomguard's shoulders with a miserable expression. His missing arm had regenerated, but it drooped lifelessly as if it had lost all feeling. Kang-Woo stared at Doomguard with deeply sunken eyes.

"Doomguard..."

"Hehe. I'm happy that... I managed to see you again... *Cough!* Before my last breath, my king. I... I have something that I need to tell you... no matter what."

Doomguard smiled in a way that did not fit his hideous looks at all. His smile was filled with Purity, unlike Balrog's. Although he was violent enough to be known as the Guardian of Ruin, he was but a loyal baby to Kang-Woo.

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes and recalled the terrible wound that spanned from Doomguard's chest to his stomach before Kang-Woo healed him. It looked as if he were hacked by a saw blade; there weren't many demons who could make such a wound.

'In the end...'

The possibility that he wanted to deny had become reality.

"Arakyle did this... didn't he?"

"..."

Doomguard lowered his head, looking like he was about to break at any second. He kneeled in front of Kang-Woo as if he were confessing his sins.

"What... do you mean?" asked Balrog with a trembling voice. His eyes were shaking as if he couldn't understand. "Arakyle is... your loyal subordinate, my king."

Arakyle was the commander of the Demon King's second battalion, the Despair Corps.

"Why would he... attack Doomguard?!" Balrog shouted.

As someone whose loyalty to his king was on par with that of the king of the Frostborn for Bael, Balrog was having a hard time understanding.

“Why would fellow commanders—”

“Balrog, stop,” said Lilith as she sighed deeply. There was no change in her expression since she had already expected this to happen. “I’m sure you’ve already figured out what happened as well.”

“...”

“Most of what happened in the Ninth Hell was done by Amon, not Bael. If Bael didn’t involve himself, there was no way that only a hundred survived, even if they had to retreat against Bael’s army.”

Merely a hundred surviving was logically impossible, considering the size of the Demon King’s army.

“It would’ve made more sense if no one survived. It would just mean they decided to die honorable deaths.”

However, they had run away instead of going out with a bang.

“If only a hundred managed to survive...”

If it was logically impossible, it would mean that something illogical had occurred.

Lilith shut her eyes tightly and continued firmly, “It means our king was betrayed.”

Kang-Woo had been betrayed by his subordinates, his retainers whom he had led throughout the war and fought alongside to the very end.

“We were... betrayed,” Lilith said hesitantly.

She knew how much Kang-Woo cherished his retainers as well as how many he lost during the thousand-year war. She couldn’t even imagine how Kang-Woo was feeling after finding out one of those retainers had betrayed him.

‘*My king...*’

Lilith turned to Kang-Woo, who was looking down at Doomguard with his head lowered. She wanted to embrace and console him, telling him that it was not his fault and that it couldn’t be helped.

“...”

However, the sorrow, rage, frustration, resentment, and regret in his eyes kept her legs from moving.

Boom!

Balrog stomped his foot and stared at Doomguard, grimacing like a Yaksha.

“Is that true?” he asked.

“...”

“I asked you if that’s true, Doomguard!”

Balrog roared like a ferocious beast. Doomguard simply trembled in silence with his head lowered. Balrog walked to him and reached out for him.

“Balrog.” Kang-Woo grabbed Balrog’s arm. “Stand down.”

“But...!”

“Stand... down,” Kang-Woo said in a deep voice.

Balrog flinched and took a step back.

Kang-Woo lightly placed his hand on the kneeling Doomguard’s shoulder and said, “Doomguard.”

“Yes.”

“Good work for making it this far.”

“...”

Doomguard looked up at Kang-Woo in silence. Black blood flowed from the corner of his mouth and welled at the end of his chin.

“Heh... hehe.” Doomguard smiled innocently in a way unbecoming a demon. “If I knew... this would happen...” He raised his shaking hand and grabbed Kang-Woo’s hand on his shoulder. “I would have... come to see you... sooner.”

Doomguard smiled brightly again as the light in his eyes dimmed. His hand on Kang-Woo’s hand dropped as if a string holding it up was cut. The light in his eyes disappeared.

“And...” Kang-Woo said as he slowly raised his head. He stared at one of the hundred demons collapsed behind Doomguard. “It’s been a while, Arakyle.”

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“Hahahaha!”

A bright laughter echoed. One of the demons on the ground behind Doomguard split in half.

“I thought I’d hidden myself pretty well... I guess I can’t fool you, my lord Demon King.”

A demon with hands made of sharp saw blades showed himself. He was wearing a formal suit with his hair neatly swept back, a rare sight to see for a demon. Arakyle, the commander of the Despair Corps, bowed courteously.

“Of course, I would. After all, we were family,” Oh Kang-Woo said in a deep tone.

The word family sounded awkward to him despite saying it himself.

“Family... yes, we sure were. Such a word doesn't suit demons, but you were different, my king.”

Arakyle chuckled. The Demon King was ruthless to his enemies but treated the demons whom he accepted as his retainer like family.

“You were the closest thing to what a demon should be... as well as the one furthest from it,” mentioned Arakyle as if reminiscing.

He had met Kang-Woo about three hundred years ago when Kang-Woo defeated a prince of Hell for the first time.

“We went through... so much together.”

Arakyle had fought together and shared victories with Kang-Woo. They emerged victorious against the forces of the seven princes of Hell and earned the right to rule Hell.

“It is truly an honor to see you again, my king.”

Arakyle bowed courteously.

Kang-Woo lowered his head with deeply sunken eyes. He carefully laid the dead Doomguard on the ground.

He closed Doomguard's eyes and replied, “Yeah, it's good to see you too. Though I never expected our reunion to happen by you stabbing me in the back like this.”

“Hahaha. I didn't expect things to end up this way either.”

Arakyle tapped on the ground with his saw blade hands.

“Arakyle, you bastard...”

Balrog glared at Arakyle fiercely, clenching his fists as if he were about to charge at him at any second.

“Wait.” Kang-Woo stopped Balrog and slowly walked forward. He stared at Arakyle and asked, “Lemme ask you something.”

“You have but to ask.” Arakyle lowered his head with a smile.

“Why?” Kang-Woo asked in a deep tone.

“Hahaha!!” Arakyle burst into laughter and stared at Doomguard on the ground. “If you are referring to why I killed Doomguard...” He clicked his tongue. “It is because he continued to refuse my proposal.”

“Proposal?”

“Yes,” Arakyle answered as he spread his arms widely. “My proposal to betray you and join Bael's army.”

“...”

“No, no. I misspoke. Betray isn’t the right word... You can’t call it a betrayal.” Arakyle shook his head and cackled. “Isn’t it only natural for demons to pursue their desires?”

Desire was no different from instinct for demons; it allowed them to be demons and for them to stay as one. Desire was everything to them.

“ARAKYYYYYYYYYLE!!!”

Boom!

The surroundings shook as Balrog unleashed a roar. He clenched his fists and charged at Arakyle.

Clank, clank.

Black armor began to wrap around him.

Tsssssss—!!

White steam poured out from the armor’s gaps and Balrog flapped his wings from within the steam. Arakyle raised his saw blade hand.

Clang—!!!

Balrog’s fist and Arakyle’s saw blade clashed, causing a thunderous sound of clashing metal to echo.

“Huup!” Balrog inhaled and added more strength to his fist. His red muscles swelled as if they would explode. His eyes were filled with rage as he exclaimed, “You... You dare... betray our king?!”

To Balrog, betraying Kang-Woo was a capital crime, regardless of the reason.

Boom! Crash!

Balrog swung his fists madly, each swing making sounds similar to cannon fire.

“HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN...?!”

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

Arakyle blocked every single one of Balrog’s punches. The gaps between the saw blades widened little by little with every clash.

“EVERYTHING OUR KING HAS DONE FOR US?!!”

Crash—!

Balrog interlocked his fingers and swung down his fists with his entire weight behind them.

Clang—!

Arakyle’s saw blade bent sideways. Balrog pulled his right leg back and lowered his stance. He twisted his torso and raised his right fist high.

“Sky...” He used the torque to swing his fist down. “Breaker!!!”

Balrog used one of the few techniques that he learned from Kang-Woo. A punch that could obliterate even a giant mountain smashed into Arakyle. However...

“Haha. You have changed quite a bit as well in the time I haven’t seen you, Lord Balrog. Was a whip not your weapon of choice?”

Arakyle had taken Balrog’s punch straight on his chest. Balrog’s fist was easily blown back by the invisible power around Arakyle.

“This is...”

Balrog frowned aggressively. He knew what the power wrapped around Arakyle was all too well.

“But in the end...” Arakyle smirked. “You are but a pathetic fly without Deific Essence.”

He cackled as he swung down his saw blade hand. The demonic energy wrapped around the blade was infused with Divinity.

Slash!!

“Gah!”

Balrog jumped back in shock, but the saw blade easily slashed through his black armor and formed a large wound across his chest. Black blood poured out like a fountain. Balrog tumbled across the ground as he clenched his chest.

“Kurgh...!” Balrog bit his lip aggressively.

‘Deific Essence again...?’

He clenched his fist wrapped with the black armor. Simply having Deific Essence created an insurmountable gap between those with and without it. Balrog gritted his teeth.

- Come to think of it, you haven’t awakened Deific Essence yet, have you?

Kim Si-Hun’s words from when they were heading to the Frozen Temple popped into his head.

Balrog grimaced fiercely. He knew that Si-Hun’s words had not been to mock him, but...

“Shit, shit, shit!!!”

Bang!

Balrog smashed his fists into the ground.

“Huff, huff.”

More black blood poured out as the wound on his chest widened. Balrog looked down at his blood.

‘There is a way.’

His new ability, Overlord Armor, grew stronger using his blood as the energy source. In other words, he got stronger the more he bled.

‘If that’s the case.’

There was a way to fight on par against those with Deific Essence, albeit temporarily.

'But...'

Hesitation filled Balrog's eyes. He clenched his fists anxiously.

"What's wrong?" Arakyle asked mockingly. "Did you realize that you can't do anything just by shouting pledges of loyalty?"

Balrog's expression hardened.

Arakyle, drunk on power, continued elatedly, "Loyalty won't get you anywhere. You can't get anything with just conviction and willpower." He raised his saw blade hands high. "Only desire, the instinct of demons as well as what allows us to exist, completes us."

Arakyle laughed as his shoulders moved up and down. The Deific Essence, which he acquired after making a deal with Amon, fired him up.

He turned to Kang-Woo and asked, "Wouldn't you agree, my king?"

Kang-Woo stared at Arakyle in silence. The Deific Essence he could feel from Arakyle was as powerful as that of Tai Wuji and Gaia.

"Haaa," he sighed deeply.

'There's no way Arakyle awakened Deific Essence on his own.'

Hence, there was only one answer.

'He became an incarnation.'

Kang-Woo wasn't sure whether Arakyle became Bael's incarnation or an incarnation of one of the outer gods cooperating with Bael, but he was sure that Arakyle had gained power incomparable to his past self.

'So... this was your plan, Bael.'

Uniting the Ninth Hell was meaningless by itself. Since the gods were freed from the restrictions of the Law of Titans and could now manifest into the physical realm, the demons also needed Deific Essence to fight evenly against them.

'I knew he would prepare countermeasures against Deific Essence, but I never thought one of them would be to grant Deific Essence to one of my former subordinates.'

"Hah," Kang-Woo chuckled, covering his face with one hand. "For fuck's sake, you sure say some badass shit."

'Only desire completes demons; how badass is that?'

"To put it simply, you betrayed me because Bael's ass you were sucking was so sweet, right?"

Arakyle had packaged the reason for his betrayal to be something grandiose, but it was overly simple when unraveled.

"Hmm. Your choice of words is as vulgar as always."

Arakyle glared at Kang-Woo.

“Of course it is. You know how I am,” said Kang-Woo.

Arakyle replied quietly, “I sure do. You were always like this.”

The memories he had with Kang-Woo flashed before his eyes. He recalled the wretched war and the battles they fought together to bring the seven princes of Hell down.

“Aaaahh, they were truly wonderful memories.” Arakyle trembled with a bright smile.
“But...”

That was the end of it. His master had changed once they conquered the Ninth Hell.

“You no longer desired,” Arakyle stated as he looked at Kang-Woo in disgust.

Yes; once the Demon King devoured every prince of Hell, he chose to lay down everything and go back to Earth.

“In that moment, you lost your reason to exist as a demon.”

Demons were born to desire; it allowed them to exist and was what completed them. However, the Demon King, who had the entire Ninth Hell in his hands, gave up on desiring. The Demon King filled with enough madness to devour everything in the world, whom Arakyle remembered, ceased to exist after the battle against Bael.

‘Demons need a new king.’

They did not need a king with no desire. They needed a new king filled with unending desire.

‘Yes, Lord Bael... the demon made purely of desire... is fit to be our new king.’

Arakyle smiled widely and raised his saw blade hand.

“Demon King,” he said to Kang-Woo as if making a declaration. “Your era is over.”