**Chapter 153: The Woman Behind the Falls**  
**Year: 2113 | Location: Shizoku Prefecture**

The silver-blue air-car hummed low as it glided over fractured asphalt and root-strangled paths. Kael sat in the front, arms crossed, gazing through the reinforced glass as the forest deepened. Cherry lounged beside him, her fur occasionally crackling with static. In the rear seats, Kitsune remained quiet, tails curled, while Faye Illena and Yoru Seiran monitored the terrain through the side panels.

It had taken them four and a half hours to reach the fringes of Takejubuchi, the waterfall village nestled within the Shizoku Prefecture. Along the way, they encountered numerous mutated beasts—many exceeding **14★ and 15★** in power. Yet none were foolish enough to engage Kael’s team. A few observed from a distance, others slinked back into the deeper shadows.

As the terrain thickened, towering trees blocked the air-car’s sensors. Kael pulled to a stop on a dirt ridge that overlooked the forest’s natural boundary.

“We walk from here,” he said, unstrapping his spear and stepping out.

For the next thirty minutes, they navigated the overgrown trail. The further they went, the stranger the silence became. No mutated birds. No chittering insects warped by radiation. Just normal trees. Untouched flora. Peaceful wind.

Too peaceful.

They finally arrived at the village gate, which stood between two intact cement pillars. The village itself still retained the structure of pre-apocalypse settlements—squared buildings, old irrigation lines, even solar tiles faded by age. Farmers moved silently among the patches of green, planting, harvesting, living.

At the gate, two uniformed soldiers stepped forward. Their expressions were respectful but alert.

“Halt. Identification?” one of them asked, already squinting at Kael’s insignia before recognition softened his tone. “Apologies, sir. We were not expecting an envoy.”

“I’m Kael Ardyn. These are my companions—Cherry, Kitsune, Faye, and Yoru.” His voice was calm, composed. “We’re here regarding the red-haired woman seen near the waterfall. Names and your last update.”

The first soldier straightened. “Private Isao Kento. This is Private Nari Mizue. We’ve both been assigned here since the second year.”

He continued, “Six months ago, during the monsoon season, a loud crash was heard near Takejubuchi Waterfall. Several villagers checked the location and discovered a cave behind the falls—where the cliff wall had previously been flat. They explored it with torches but found nothing. No heat, no signs of life. We posted a rotation of sentries to guard it.”

Private Mizue picked up the thread. “But the very next morning, she appeared. A woman with deep red hair, wearing a matching red flocked cloak. She stepped out of the cave as if she'd always been there. Our people were shocked—we’d kept watch all night, and not once did anyone see her enter. Or exist.”

Kael narrowed his eyes. “And then?”

“She refused all our offers. Shelter, food, protection. Spoke coldly, sharply. Some villagers tried a few more times to reach out, but each time she rejected them. Eventually, they stopped. No one’s gone near the cave since.”

Kael gave a slow nod. “Understood.”

As he passed through the village, he asked a few locals the same questions. The answers never varied. The red-haired woman had emerged. She had refused contact. She had vanished into solitude.

There were no lies in their eyes. Just quiet unease.

Eventually, Kael regrouped with his team at the village edge.

“She could be a Remnant,” Yoru said softly. “Or something older.”

Faye adjusted the scope on her shoulder lens. “We won’t know unless we see for ourselves.”

Kael turned toward the distant roar of falling water. It was time.

“Let’s go to the waterfall.”

**[End of Chapter 153]**

**Chapter 154 – The Hidden Depths**

The waterfall’s crashing sound gradually grew louder as Kael’s team approached. It had been about fifteen minutes since they departed from their last rest point, and aside from the sound of rushing water and birds fluttering away from their path, the journey had been unnervingly quiet.

“**Iris,**” Kael said, his voice low but calm, “**Scan the area—two kilometers radius. Focus on residual beast energy or psionic traces.**”

Iris’s voice responded a second later, **“Scanning… No significant energy signatures or anomalies detected within current range.”**

Kael furrowed his brows. “**Nothing at all?**”

“**Affirmative. No hostile lifeforms or environmental distortions recorded. The energy landscape appears dormant.**”

Faye, who was walking beside him, narrowed her eyes toward the cliff face ahead. “That’s odd. This waterfall is listed in the old maps as a convergence site… even minor leylines passed through here. Something’s *off.*”

Kael nodded. “**Yoru, can you scout around the cave? Don’t go inside yet—just cover the perimeter. Quietly.**”

Yoru gave a subtle nod and disappeared in a silent flicker, merging into the shadows like a breath lost to the wind.

Cherry’s ears twitched. “Feels too quiet,” she muttered, tail swishing. “Even normal birds aren’t making much noise now.”

Kitsune looked up at the sun filtering through the trees. “It’s a false calm. Nature hides before a storm.”

About five minutes passed before Yoru returned, his expression unreadable. He landed lightly beside Kael.

“**The surrounding 3 kilometers are lifeless,**” he reported. “**Not even bugs or small animals. No traps, no arcane barriers, no recent footprints. No anomalies.**”

“…Like someone wiped the area clean,” Faye murmured.

Kael clenched his fist slightly. “Alright. We proceed, but slowly. Weapons at the ready. Eyes sharp.”

The entrance to the cave sat behind the waterfall—just as the reports had stated. The rock opening was narrow but tall enough for a grown adult to pass without crouching. As the group stepped inside one by one, the rush of water behind them dulled into a hushed, distant rumble.

Cherry pawed ahead and sniffed the air. “No scent of anyone living here recently.”

Kitsune walked gracefully to the far wall. “It’s small,” she noted. “About the size of a van… and no energy trails. Not even dust disturbed.”

For over half an hour, they combed the small space—checking for hidden traps, glyphs, illusions, and even heat residue. Nothing.

Faye pressed her palm against the rocky walls, shaking her head. “No psychic impressions either. It’s like this place was *emptied.*”

“…This isn’t right,” Kael said, quietly. Then he closed his eyes and focused inward.

He activated his **Spiritual Perception**.

In an instant, Kael’s senses warped. The seemingly solid end-wall of the cave flickered under his spiritual awareness—like it was transparent. He stepped toward it.

“…This wall,” he muttered, reaching out. “It’s… thin. *Too* thin.”

He laid his hand against it again, then drew his fist back.

**Boom!**

With a controlled burst of force, Kael struck the wall. Cracks spidered instantly before a chunk gave way, revealing a hidden tunnel beyond. Dry heat surged outward like a gasp from the earth itself.

The team tensed.

“…Well,” Faye said, smirking, “Looks like someone didn’t want guests.”

They stepped through.

The deeper path was dry and widened the further they went. The walls glowed faintly orange as residual heat leaked from deeper within. Steam hissed from vents along the ground.

“The air’s thick…” Kitsune said, frowning. “Sulfur… magma nearby, perhaps.”

“Something’s definitely burning,” Cherry added. “But I smell people. Just barely.”

Minutes passed as they descended. Then—

Voices.

Two women. Arguing.

Kael raised his hand, motioning them to halt. The voices were faint, echoing, but they carried urgency.

“Why must we *all* suffer like this?!” shouted one—sharp, furious, and pained. “You were one of us… Why now do *you* supervise us like we’re prisoners?!”

A calmer, gentler voice answered. “I’m not supervising you. I’m *guiding* you. The time to escape our fates is nearly here.”

Kael’s eyes narrowed.

“Yoru,” he whispered. “Stealth technique. Now.”

Yoru exhaled and placed a hand on the cave wall, releasing a ripple of white-gray energy. A subtle, silent veil blanketed the team. Their presences faded—like they were part of the stone.

The team advanced slowly.

They came upon a massive chamber—roughly the size of a cathedral. Lava-like veins pulsed in the stone, giving the space a dim, infernal glow.

Two women stood at the center.

One had long **crimson-red hair** that flowed like fire, her eyes glowing with ember light. She wore a crimson combat cloak half burned at the edges, radiating intense heat in every breath. She stood defiant, almost aggressive.

The other had soft, **light green hair**, tinged with **pale pink at the ends**, flowing down her back. Her expression was serene, eyes a faded amber. She wore a **cream flock gown**, clean and elegant, despite the surroundings.

The red-haired woman stomped forward. “You *lied* to us. I don’t care what you saw in that vision. I’m not bowing down to some fate written in stone!”

The green-haired woman didn’t flinch. “It’s not about bowing. It’s about surviving. About *freedom.* I told you, I’ve found the legendary Condi—”

She stopped.

Her gaze drifted up, unerringly toward the rock outcropping where Kael’s team hid.

“…Hm.” A faint, sly smile crept onto her lips.

“Looks like we have unexpected guests,” she said quietly to the red-haired woman.

The red-haired one turned sharply.

Both women now faced Kael’s direction.

Faye cursed under her breath. “Damn… she saw us. Through *Yoru’s* veil?”

Cherry’s fur bristled. “Her eyes… they’re too clear.”

Kael narrowed his gaze. “They’re not ordinary. Not in the slightest.”

And then the green-haired woman tilted her head slightly, eyes gleaming with curiosity.

“Shall we invite them in?” she asked, not angrily—but almost… amused.

The red-haired woman clenched her fists, molten heat radiating stronger now. “They better not be enemies…”

Kael’s hand inched toward his spear.

**End of Chapter 154.**

**Chapter 155: The Root of Recognition**

Kael and his team—Cherry, Kitsune, Faye Illena, Yoru Seiran—stepped cautiously out of the rocky overhang they’d been hiding behind. The heat was suffocating now, rising in waves from the molten-like earth. The walls glowed faintly in hues of red and orange, the very stone shimmering with stored heat. Each step felt heavier than the last, not from fatigue—but from the sheer pressure exuding from the two women waiting ahead.

The light green-haired woman with pale pink streaks stood barefoot on the heated stone as if it were nothing. Her cream cloak barely moved in the thick air, yet her aura was calm, warm, almost inviting. In contrast, the red-haired woman beside her radiated searing heat, her crimson cloak flickering like flames, her narrowed gaze locked onto the intruders with suspicion and veiled contempt.

Cherry took a step behind Kael, her fur lightly bristling. Kitsune, ears flat, tail lowered, subtly emitted healing water energy to help the team tolerate the heat. Even Faye and Illena, both experienced and capable, were stiff with tension, sweat trickling from their brows. Yoru’s face remained unreadable, though his fingers twitched slightly, prepared to draw a blade at any moment.

The green-haired woman smiled first.

“So, we meet again… Kael Ardyn.”

Everyone froze.

Even Kael’s feet halted mid-step. His gaze narrowed. “...Again?” he asked, voice cautious, suspicious. “I don’t believe we’ve met.”

The red-haired woman scoffed, shifting her weight. “You entertain insects now?” she snapped at the green-haired woman. “Why waste your thoughts on such an insignificant human?”

Kael didn’t respond immediately. He tilted his head slightly, lips tight, analyzing. “I’m certain I’ve never seen you before.”

The green-haired woman’s smile didn’t fade. “Not like this, no,” she said gently. “Tell me… do you remember the ancient tree? The one buried deep below, hidden by root and time?”

The moment the words left her mouth, Kael’s expression shattered.

He staggered one half-step back. “...What?” he murmured, breath hitching.

Cherry’s ears perked. Even she remembered it—that dark, living prison of roots, where they had nearly perished.

The memory crashed over Kael like a tidal wave.

Over two years ago. Trapped by a mutated tree. Dragged underground with Cherry. An entire space wrapped in living wood. No light. No air. Only pulsing, breathing bark and a strange fruit he had been forced to eat to survive. Deeper yet—an ancient tree, so immense, so impossibly vast that Iris couldn’t measure its power. The AI had faltered for the first time.

A being older than the apocalypse. It had spoken in his mind.

*“You are the thread… the one who will lead.”*

He had told no one. Not even Iris fully understood what they had seen.

Kael’s eyes widened now, filled with disbelief.

“You… how do you know about that?” he asked slowly.

The green-haired woman’s smile deepened. Her eyes shimmered faintly, like dew forming on ancient petals.

“Because I was that tree, Kael.”

The air shifted.

Kitsune’s tails lowered entirely in disbelief. Faye instinctively stepped closer to Illena. Even Yoru’s mask of calm cracked slightly as he gave Kael a glance.

Kael stared at the woman like she was a ghost.

“That… can’t be. That tree… you were buried underground for thousands of years,” he whispered. “You were a part of the earth itself.”

“I still am,” she said. “But now, I have taken this form—temporary, mortal, and bound in flesh. It’s… exhausting, but necessary.” She turned her head to the side, admiring the shimmering cavern wall. “We’ve waited long enough.”

The red-haired woman snorted, though her expression had turned from irritation to a reluctant silence.

The green-haired woman glanced at her companion, her expression softer now. “Kael is the key,” she said, her voice carrying a quiet reverence. “The one we have waited for… across ten millennia.”

The words struck like thunder.

No one spoke. No one dared.

The oppressive heat, the weight of the ancient aura surrounding the two women—it pinned the team in place. Kael’s mouth was dry. He could feel his heartbeat like war drums in his chest. Iris remained oddly quiet in his mind—perhaps for the first time ever, the AI didn’t know what to say.

Yoru lowered his stance, whispering softly to Faye, “Did she just say ten thousand years…?”

“She did,” Faye whispered back, jaw tense. “And I don’t think she was exaggerating.”

Cherry let out a quiet, wary meow.

Kitsune’s voice echoed telepathically into Kael’s mind, shaken: *She… smells like the old world. Older than anything I’ve known. Be careful.*

Kael didn’t answer. His gaze remained locked on the two women before him.

The red-haired one finally crossed her arms, expression unreadable. “So,” she muttered, “this is the one you’ve tethered all your hopes to.”

“He’s not hope,” the green-haired woman replied softly. “He is inevitability.”

Then she turned fully, her eyes gleaming like morning light filtering through ancient leaves.

“Welcome, Kael Ardyn,” she said. “To the place where destiny begins anew.”

**End of Chapter 155.**

**Chapter 156: The Flame and the Root**

The moment hung suspended in silence—then shattered.

A roar of heat exploded outward from the red-haired woman. The very air twisted, molten waves crashing against the stone walls. The ground groaned under the sudden shift, and a high-pitched whine of vaporizing moisture filled the cavern.

Kael and his team staggered as the temperature spiked. The walls pulsed with red-hot veins. The vast underground chamber—already warm—was now an oven.

“You—” the red-haired woman growled, voice thick with restrained rage. Her crimson eyes flared like twin suns. “Did you give *him* your Amrit Fruit?!”

The words rang like a verdict. Her voice cracked stone along the ceiling, fragments falling and hissing against the heated floor.

The light green-haired woman didn’t flinch. She merely smiled, the same serene expression as before.

Her silence enraged the red-haired woman further.

“You dare!” the red-haired woman shouted. “That fruit blooms once in a thousand years! You gave it to a *human*?!”

The floor split at the edges, the heat now intense enough to blacken the stone beneath Kael’s boots. Cherry hissed, drawing closer to Kael, while Kitsune instinctively spread a layer of mist around the group to offer some protection.

But even that wouldn’t have lasted.

The green-haired woman raised her hand gently. From her palm, an emerald light shimmered outward—gentle yet absolute. A dome of translucent energy enveloped Kael and his team, instantly shielding them from the boiling heat. Within the dome, the temperature returned to normal, though their nerves remained frayed.

The red-haired woman stepped forward, fury twisting her expression. “Have you lost your senses, Sylva?” she spat. “Why would you give it to him? A dull, powerless human? He had *nothing*!”

The name struck Kael like a hammer.

Before he could speak, the green-haired woman—Sylva—gestured to the group behind her. “Then look again,” she said softly.

The red-haired woman’s gaze narrowed. For the first time, she turned her full attention to the others.

Her eyes passed over Faye, Illena, and Yoru without pause. But when they landed on Cherry, they lingered.

Then Kitsune.

Her eyes widened faintly. Her expression shifted from scorn to suspicion—and then to shock. A faint glow circled her pupils as she probed deeper, not with vision, but with something far older—ancient perception.

“You—” she breathed. “They’re linked… psionic bonds…?”

Sylva nodded. “Formed naturally, without force. Without pact. He earned them.”

The red-haired woman drew back slightly, the air beginning to cool. The volcanic atmosphere lessened, and the ground seemed to exhale in relief. The pressure that had pinned Kael’s team to the earth slowly receded.

She looked at Sylva with narrowed eyes, still skeptical, but no longer enraged. “Is this really… *that*?” she asked, the faintest edge of disbelief in her voice.

Sylva’s smile became radiant, almost youthful in its joy. “It is,” she said with certainty. “The legend our leader passed down… is no legend.”

Kael could barely breathe.

He glanced at his companions—each one still pale, shaken. Even Cherry was unusually silent. Kitsune’s fur lay flat, ears alert but subdued. Faye looked like she had seen a god. Illena clutched her staff tighter than usual. Yoru was still, hand near his blade, but unmoving.

*This… this is more than thirty stars,* Kael thought grimly. *This is beyond understanding.*

The pressure of their aura alone was altering terrain. Sylva had effortlessly blocked infernal heat. The red-haired woman’s mere outburst had caused a cave to boil.

Kael steadied himself, swallowing hard.

He forced his voice through the fear. “Who… are you two really?”

There was a pause. Then Sylva stepped forward.

“My name is Sylva Everly,” she said, voice layered with both age and grace. “I am the *Banyan Eternal Tree*. Guardian of this planet, and once… its warden.”

A shadow crossed her face.

“I was the prison keeper of this world.”

The red-haired woman scoffed, folding her arms with a roll of her eyes. “And I,” she said with a smirk, “am one of her prisoners.”

She glanced toward Kael and his companions, her expression darkening with wicked delight.

“You may know me better as the *Infernal Phoenix*,” she said.

The name hit Kael like a slap.

Cherry hissed audibly.

Kitsune froze, eyes wide. Even Yoru let out a low curse under his breath.

Sylva’s expression became sorrowful.

“Her name now is Emberlyn. She was sealed here long ago, along with many others who walked paths of destruction,” Sylva said. “But her fire could never be fully extinguished.”

Emberlyn gave a slow, predatory smile.

Kael’s instincts screamed at him—but he stood firm.

Emberlyn chuckled, voice rich and dangerous. “Don’t look so scared, little humans,” she cooed. “I haven’t decided if I want to roast you yet.”

**End of Chapter 156.**

**Chapter 157: The Truth Beneath the Flames**

A heavy silence hung in the air, only the soft crackle of dissipating embers from Emberlyn's aura breaking it.

Faye, her voice trembling slightly, finally spoke. “W-Wait… did you say *Infernal Phoenix*? The ancient beast with 55.5-star power… the one with the abilities of… fire and reincarnation?”

Emberlyn turned her head slowly toward the girl, one brow raised. A short laugh escaped her lips—sharp and dry.

“*Only* 55.5 stars?” she said with a dangerous smile, laced with equal parts amusement and scorn. “Child, had I not been suppressed, I would’ve soared far beyond that pitiful number.”

Her smile widened, eyes burning with the faint echo of ancient fury. “Even your records are laughably incomplete.”

Kael’s fists tightened slightly. The weight of her presence still lingered in the air despite the returned calm, like invisible flames pressing on their skin.

He stepped forward, steadying his breath. “You mentioned… prisoners,” he said carefully. “Who are they?”

Sylva Everly looked away, her expression dimming, as though a wound long buried had been reopened.

“…All twenty-seven of the ancient beasts recorded in your histories,” she said, her voice heavy with sorrow. “They’re not just beasts. They’re my… charges. They are the prisoners.”

Kael froze.

All twenty-seven?

The same beings the world now feared and studied—the apex predators of myth and nightmare—they were all… imprisoned?

“But… they all look human,” Kael said slowly, brows furrowed.

Emberlyn turned toward him, giving a light shrug. “After reaching the Fifth Ascension—beyond 50 stars—we gained the ability to adopt a humanoid form. It’s easier to move… and speak among mortals this way.”

Kitsune and Cherry’s ears both twitched at the same time, instinctively recognizing the hidden weight in her words.

Kael nodded slowly. His mind reeled with implications, but one question burned hotter than the others. “Why were you all imprisoned here?”

The cave grew silent.

Emberlyn looked away, for once not smirking.

The silence stretched—seconds, then minutes. The only sound was the distant drip of moisture deep within the cave’s core.

Finally, Sylva answered.

“…Once,” she began, “we were not prisoners. We were a team. Thirty of us… from a certain faction—one among many that once ruled beyond this world.”

Kael and the others remained quiet, sensing something profound was being unraveled.

“But…” Sylva’s voice grew softer, almost a whisper. “We offended another faction. A powerful one. There was conflict. And in the end, a decision was made.”

She looked away, eyes dim. “All thirty of us were sentenced. Banished. Suppressed on this world for eternity.”

Kael’s eyes narrowed. “Thirty? But you said twenty-seven prisoners.”

Sylva nodded. “I was the twenty-eighth. The weakest among them… the newest member of our team. But I hailed from a powerful family—one whose name carried weight even in that realm.”

Kael listened intently. He could hear the pain behind her words. The loneliness.

“The factions… compromised. They didn’t imprison me—but forced me to act as warden. I was ordered to monitor the others until I received new orders from my family.”

She chuckled dryly. “But… they never came.”

A flicker of grief passed through her face.

“I waited. One thousand years. Five. Then ten. For more than 10,000 years, I received no summons, no word. We were all… forgotten.”

She looked down at her open hands. “I thought… if we could awaken slowly… perhaps we could remember who we were, regain what we lost. But the humans—curious, persistent—dug too deep. Explored too far. And that… disrupted everything.”

Her gaze swept over the group. “The sudden influx of energy… our sealed bodies absorbing traces of this world’s life essence… we all woke far earlier than we should have.”

Kael felt a chill run through his spine.

“And because of that…” Sylva finished, “…this world now breathes our aura. The land itself begins to change. Beasts evolve. Nature stirs. And what you call the apocalypse—was merely the first ripple of our return.”

A heavy stillness followed her words. The cave, despite its heat, felt colder than ever.

Kael looked at Cherry and Kitsune—both still visibly tense.

The world… was never meant to hold these beings.

And now, their presence was changing everything.

**End of Chapter 157.**