

M. in Hell 101

Chapter 101: A Talent Ascended From the Ground

"A spar?"

The next day, Oh Kang-Woo was given an unexpected offer when he arrived at the training room with Kim Si-Hun.

Kang-Woo looked at Tian Wuchen, surprised.

"Why so out of the blue?"

"I wanted to see for myself how you can be so confident in front of me," Wuchen said with shining eyes.

Kang-Woo stroked his chin.

'It's a good opportunity.'

He had been wanting to test the power of his demonic crystal. If his opponent was the Sword Emperor, he would be able to test it without restraint. Even leaving that aside, he still wanted to see how powerful a World Ranker was.

"Oh, Father. Don't be so childish. What if Kang-Woo gets hurt while sparring with the Sword Emperor?" Tian Suyan asked with a worried expression.

Kang-Woo turned to her.

"Please forget what my father just said. I don't want you to get hurt in a pointless spar," Suyan said while carefully touching his arms.

"..."

Kang-Woo kept his mouth closed; then he smirked and said, "I don't like it."

"Pardon?"

"Your trivial acting. I don't like it."

"What do you..."

On the surface, it looked as if she were trying to stop them from fighting, but her real intentions were clear.

' *"What if Kang-Woo gets hurt..." "A pointless spar..."* '

They were clearly phrases to hurt a man's pride.

'How cute.'

She knew she was an attractive woman, and she was using it as a weapon to get what she wanted.

He had no complaints about someone knowing, understanding, and using their strengths. However, he found her somewhat clumsy and inexperienced behavior rather cute.

"You got some points deducted for being too explicit. You have to hide your intentions a little bit more."

"..."

"The timing in which you appeared is also bad. If you want to do it properly, you should've mentioned it like a throwaway line before Tian Wuchen offered to spar with me."

"F-Fufu. What an interesting interpretation."

"Points deducted for that as well. If you want to appear relaxed, practice not becoming flustered first."

"..."

Suyan remained silent.

Kang-Woo kept talking.

"And finally, the acting was unnecessary. I wasn't planning on refusing anyway."

Kang-Woo drew out energy from the demonic crystal. A powerful force emitted from him.

Suyan bit her lips.

Seeing her frustration was quite cute.

"Hahahahaha!" Wuchen laughed out loud while holding his stomach and tearing up. "It's my first time seeing someone get Suyan this good."

"B-Be quiet, Father!" Suyan shouted while blushing.

Wuchen couldn't stop laughing for a while.

"That aside... how unexpected. I thought you would refuse."

"I have no reason to."

"Hahaha! I hope that mindset of yours doesn't change after our spar."

Wuchen raised one hand.

At that moment, a sword that was on one side of the training room flew toward him. It had been a long time since his heart had beaten so fast. The last time was when he faced Grace McCubbin during the World Ranker evaluation.

'I pray that he isn't all talk.'

He thought the disappointment would be bigger if the sparring match ended too quickly. Wuchen was hoping for Kang-Woo to be someone strong enough to let him have some fun.

"Then let's begin."

Wuchen drew out the Qi from within him.

"I'll be rooting for you, hyung-nim!" Si-Hun shouted.

The Sword Emperor, who would be teaching him martial arts, and Kang-Woo, whom he had pledged his loyalty to...

He thought for a bit about who to root for, but as expected, he wished for Kang-Woo to win.

'I'm sure it'll be difficult, though...'

Kang-Woo's opponent was the Sword Emperor.

Si-Hun knew Kang-Woo was strong, but he didn't think Kang-Woo could win against the Sword Emperor, one of the stronger World Rankers.

"That's disappointing. You won't root for me?" Wuchen asked.

"U-Uhmm..."

"Hahaha! It's okay. I don't know what happened between you two, but having a bond thicker than blood is something to celebrate. I will also give it my all," Wuchen said in a relaxed manner.

He didn't think he was going to lose in the first place. He had become far too strong to experience defeat.

'Alright, then.'

He drew out his Qi and looked at Kang-Woo after enhancing his eyesight. Although Kang-Woo wasn't a martial artist, Wuchen could sense a strong energy within Kang-Woo's dantian.

'No wonder he's so confident.'

It was a highly concentrated energy. It felt different from Qi, but it felt powerful nonetheless.

'Hm?'

.

At that moment, he sensed something strange.

Wuchen looked a little higher, at Kang-Woo's heart.

'Huh...?'

It was dark. He couldn't see anything. He enhanced his eyesight even more with Qi, but he still couldn't see anything.

'What is that?'

He had a bad feeling about it.

Wuchen felt a chill. Something was definitely wrong. It was an abyss, and he could not fathom its depth and width.

'A sea...'

It was like looking at the sea; the abyss was so massive that one couldn't even begin to calculate its size.

"Huh?"

The energy disappeared.

Wuchen focused his attention on Kang-Woo's heart again, but the colossal energy he'd just felt wasn't there anymore. All he could see was the energy spreading throughout Kang-Woo from the dantian.

'Was I seeing things?'

It seemed he'd become too excited at the thought of fighting after quite some time. Wuchen shook his head to get a hold of himself.

'There is no way one man could hold that much energy.'

He had most likely seen wrong. No other reason could explain it.

"... Can I start?" Kang-Woo asked.

"Oh, my apologies. My eyes haven't been as good as they used to be due to my age."

Wuchen raised the practice sword. It wasn't the time to be distracted by illusions.

Stomp!

As Kang-Woo and Wuchen both stomped the floor, their spar began.

The one who attacked first was Kang-Woo.

'Leviathan.'

He merged the Authority of Iron Axes and the Authority of Freezing.

An axe surrounded with cold energy was created. He grabbed the axe's handle, and the energy from his demonic crystal enveloped the axe.

'Very nice.'

Infusing the highly concentrated demonic energy from the demonic crystal into a weapon made with an Authority instead of infusing regular demonic energy made the weapon far more destructive.

However, the true advantages of the demonic crystal lay elsewhere.

Kang-Woo focused the demonic energy from the demonic crystal on his legs. Although he hadn't used the Authority of Haste, he had become much faster.

'Adaptability.'

The first advantage of the demonic crystal was that it could substitute body-fortification Authorities. Of course, its effect was lower compared to a real Authority's, but the important point was that it could substitute an Authority to a certain extent.

Boom!

"Kurgh!"

The axe and the sword clashed against each other.

Wuchen's eyes widened.

His hand wielding the sword trembled. The practice sword couldn't handle the impact and was destroyed.

"Hup!"

Wuchen quickly extended his hand.

Another practice sword flew toward him, and he grabbed the sword and used the Azure Dragon Sword Technique. He swung his sword up from the ground as if a dragon was soaring up into the sky. He aimed for Kang-Woo's neck.

Kang-Woo leaned back to dodge the attack.

The tip of the sword changed direction and struck the edge of Leviathan in Kang-Woo's hand.

The axe flew away, but a spear had appeared in Kang-Woo's hand before the axe had even landed on the ground. It was Bident, the two-pronged spear created by merging the Authority of Dark Spears and the Authority of Hellfire.

Whoosh!

"Whoa!"

Wuchen retreated after seeing the spear that had formed in a flash in Kang-Woo's hand.

Kang-Woo grabbed Bident even tighter, his eyes shining.

'Speed.'

The second advantage of the demonic crystal was the speed at which he could manifest Authorities. The speed at which he created Bident had become incomparably faster than before.

Stomp!

He stepped forward, leaned back, and then pushed forward as if rebounding.

Kang-Woo threw the spear in his right hand.

"Azure Dragon Flash!"

A blinding light shone. It was the same light that had slashed the three Giant Ogres simultaneously.

Bident was shattered by the light.

The energy of the demonic crystal infused in the spear turned into hellfire and exploded, and Wuchen was pushed back.

'Destructive power.'

The third and biggest advantage of the demonic crystal was its destructive power. A highly concentrated demonic energy was a lethal weapon on its own.

"Very nice."

Kang-Woo smiled.

The power of the demonic crystal was greater than he had expected. The demonic crystal wasn't as boundless as the Ten Thousand Demon Core, but its ability to compress demonic energy was highly advantageous. Because he couldn't fully use the Ten Thousand Demon Core yet, it was an adequate substitute.

He extended his right hand and merged the Authority of Blades and the Authority of Explosion. He felt that something was lacking.

'Authority of Slashing.'

He merged three Authorities into one, creating a two-meter-long greatsword. He clenched the sword handle.

"Gram."

He spoke the name of the sword. It was the name of a sword in myths.

Kang-Woo stomped the ground and swung Gram, emitting razor-sharp energy horizontally.

"Haap!" Wuchen exclaimed. He dropped the practice sword and put his hand on his waist. His belt became a sword.

Powerful and razor-sharp energy could be felt from the sword, and a materialized form of Qi enveloped its blade. The materialized energy was condensed Qi, which could be considered the essence of a martial artist.

The two swords clashed.

Rumble!!

The training room that was created to resist aggressive training shook.

The floor cracked, and the walls burst.

Kang-Woo widened the distance. His hands were numb.

'I'd expect nothing less from a World Ranker.'

Wuchen, who had unleashed his full power, was strong.

Kang-Woo would've lost if he didn't have the demonic crystal.

Kang-Woo looked around.

'If we keep fighting, the building will crumble.'

He'd tested the power of the demonic crystal enough.

He was satisfied with the result. He wanted to see what more Wuchen had, but going any further would be excessively greedy. For the moment, he was satisfied knowing he could fight one-on-one with a World Ranker.

"I think that's enough."

Kang-Woo gave up.

There was a short silence. Si-Hun's and Suyan's mouths were wide open as the two stared at Kang-Woo. However, it wasn't just the two of them whose mouths were stuck open in surprise.

"What... are you?"

Wuchen glared while grabbing his trembling hand.

"For God's sake, stop asking me that. I'm getting sick of it. Are you going to believe me if I say that I really am a Player who awakened three months ago, as you've already investigated?"

"There's no way that's true. How could someone in just three months—"

"See? Why do you keep asking me if you won't even believe me?" Kang-Woo answered tiredly. "I really am the person you've investigated. *Sigh*, I'm too tired to even explain at this point. Yeah, I

have something similar to that Heavenly whatsit thing. You said that it's a talent descended from the heavens, right?"

Kang-Woo pointed to the ground.

"Then I guess I'm a talent that ascended from the ground."

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"..."

There was a heavy silence.

Tian Wuchen, who was looking at Oh Kang-Woo with sharp eyes, sighed.

"Well, if you say so, I'll just accept it as it is."

He still couldn't believe it.

Wuchen wasn't acting like this because he was arrogant or uncompromising.

If a global boxing champion was forced to a standstill against a rookie boxer who had only picked up the sport three months ago, what would the boxing champion think? Of course, there would be many possible explanations, but the boxing champion most certainly wouldn't think it was simple talent.

This was not possible with just talent.

*'And?it's?true,'?*Kang-Woo thought.

He didn't become strong enough to fight toe-to-toe with one of the strongest people in the world through talent. After all, he had spent many years in Hell.

However, he couldn't say he was the demon king who'd come back to Earth after living in Hell for ten millennia.

No, even if he said the truth, they would probably think he was crazy.

'Rather than that, it's better to claim it's talent.'

If they weren't going to believe either explanation, there was no reason to go with the option that made him look like a lunatic.

"H-Hyung-nim...?"

Kim Si-Hun seemed lost for words. He couldn't believe that Kang-Woo had been a formidable match for Sword Emperor Tian Wuchen, one of the top ten strongest people in the world.

'I knew hyung-nim was strong, but...'

He had never imagined Kang-Woo was this strong.

Si-Hun looked at Kang-Woo with eyes full of respect. His heart beat faster. He felt better after realizing that Kang-Woo, whom he had chosen to trust and follow, was strong enough to fight against the Sword Emperor.

"Then I'll get going. Do your best to learn," Kang-Woo said.

"Yes, hyung-nim!" Si-Hun answered in a loud voice.

Kang-Woo smirked and turned around. He noticed that Tian Suyan was looking at him.

'What's up with her?'

It wasn't just an expression of shock. Her body was trembling, and she was smiling. She was even stamping her feet repeatedly and clenching her fists. It was as if she couldn't control her excitement.

She looked as if she'd won the lottery.

"F-Fufufu. Well, well. I truly... did not expect this at all."

Suyan licked her red lips while blushing. She looked like a predator who had found prey.

Wuchen grabbed his head and sighed.

Suyan pranced toward Kang-Woo and spoke in an excited voice.

"You've shocked me. I guess there really was a reason why you were so confident in front of my father."

"I'm not stupid enough not to be able to differentiate between courage and arrogance."

"Fufu. It's just as you say. Oh, do you happen to have some time after this? It's my first time in Korea, so I would love for you to take me around."

"I'm sorry, but I already have plans."

Today was one of the regular days that Kang-Woo met up with Cha Yeon-Joo to hear about the Demon Cult's movements.

Suyan seemed happier after her offer was rejected.

"Perhaps another time, then. Oh, this is my number. If there's anything you need, feel free to give me a call."

She took out a card from her wallet and put it in Kang-Woo's chest pocket.

'Why is she so proactive?'

Anyone would notice her intentions when she was showing this much interest in him. The problem was the reason for her interest when they had only become acquainted with each other not long ago.

'She has some weird tastes.'

He couldn't understand why she was giving affection to him instead of Si-Hun.

Kang-Woo took the card out of his chest pocket and put it inside his wallet. Whatever the case, she was the daughter of the Sword Emperor. It wasn't a bad idea to build good relations with her.

"Fufu, I'll be waiting for your call."

After giving him a seductive smile, Suyan turned around.

As she turned, Kang-Woo clicked his tongue.

'I'm sure her affections will die down soon enough.'

He couldn't understand why she was showering him with such affection out of the blue. Strongly blazing emotions, however, were just as quick to fizzle out, and Kang-Woo thought that her interest in him would also die down soon.

Kang-Woo left the training room after saying goodbye to the blankly standing Wuchen.

"... Father."

There was an awkward silence after Kang-Woo left the training room. Suyan's voice echoed through the silent room, and she turned toward Wuchen while smiling.

"I think I've found him."

"..."

Wuchen remained silent.

There was no need to even ask what she was talking about.

'I screwed up.'

Not only was his plan screwed, it was progressing in the opposite direction.

He wanted Si-Hun and Suyan to become a couple. The biggest reason was Si-Hun's talent, the Heavenly Martial Physique.

Talent in martial arts was transmitted through genes. This meant that if Suyan and Si-Hun had a baby, there was a chance that a child with an incredible unique talent would be born.

But in Kang-Woo's case, it was different.

From what Wuchen had seen, Kang-Woo had no talent in martial arts. His great power had likely been accumulated through endless effort and experience rather than talent.

If Suyan and Kang-Woo had a baby, there was a chance that their descendant wouldn't have talent in martial arts.

'I have no other choice.'

He turned to Si-Hun, grabbed the practice sword, and opened his mouth to say, "Let us begin right away. Raise your sword, Sword Dragon."

"Oh, yes. Understood."

Wuchen's eyes shone.

'I will make the Sword Dragon stronger.'

He'd do it even if he had to put everything on the line.

* * *

Kang-Woo received a call after leaving the building.

The call was from Cha Yeon-Joo.

[Come to the guild office right now. We have to go to Hwarang Corps headquarters.]

"The Hwarang Corps? Why?"

[Hwa-Yeon said that something urgent had happened.]

"What happened?"

[I haven't received the details either. Oh, but I had heard that Captain Jang Hyun-Jae had returned from Japan. It probably has something to do with that.]

"Hmm..."

Jang Hyun-Jae was the leader of Hwarang's 1st Squadron as well as the current commander of the Hwarang Corps.

As he had been a former member of the special forces, he had created a civil militia to stop crimes committed by Players. The civil militia was officially approved by the nation, giving birth to the Hwarang Corps.

He was even famous outside Korea, as he was one of the few Players in Korea who could face the former number one of the country, Baek Kang-Hyun.

"I'll be right there," Kang-Woo answered shortly and hung up the phone.

After he met up with Yeon-Joo, they immediately drove to Suwon.

When they arrived at the Hwarang Corps headquarters, they saw Baek Hwa-Yeon waiting for them outside. They followed her inside.

Goo Hyun-Mo, leader of the 2nd Squadron, and a man Kang-Woo had never seen before were in the captain's office.

The man approached him and extended his hand. "Nice to meet you. I've heard a lot about you from Hwa-Yeon."

"Hello. My name is Oh Kang-Woo."

"I am Jang Hyun-Jae, the captain of the 1st Squadron."

He was a man devoid of facial expressions. He seemed to be in his late thirties. Although he wasn't very tall, he had a muscular body. He looked like he wouldn't even bleed if you poked him with a needle, but unlike his stiff face, he had a very gentle voice.

"Long time no see, old man Hyun-Jae~" Yeon-Joo expressed.

"Long time no see. There seemed to be a huge incident in Korea... I'm sorry for not being here to help."

"Not at all. It was more or less resolved thanks to this guy here... although we weren't able to prevent civilian casualties."

Yeon-Joo seemed sad after thinking of the civilians who had lost their lives during the Isu Station incident.

Hyun-Jae sighed with a heavy expression.

"It isn't your fault. No one could have possibly expected the Demon Cult to become so active all of a sudden."

He sounded sad.

Yeon-Joo shook her head numerous times and asked, "So, what happened?"

"I have some news related to the Demon Cult," Hyun-Jae replied.

Yeon-Joo's eyes shone after hearing the words *Demon Cult*

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Hyun-Jae looked around and then said in a low voice, "Signs of Japan's Demon Cult forces preparing a demon summoning ritual have been discovered."

"A demon summoning? Like Oriax?"

"Yes, but on a much bigger scale."

"... Is Japan's Demon Cult really that big?"

Hyun-Jae nodded. "The Demon Cult's forces in Japan are bigger and stronger than the one previously in Korea."

"Wha..."

Yeon-Joo sighed.

There had been numerous casualties in Korea alone. She couldn't even imagine how many more casualties there would be if a force bigger than the one that had been in Korea took action.

"Was it Japan's government that requested assistance?" Hwa-Yeon asked.

"Yes. Although it hasn't been released by the press, they are in a serious predicament," Hyun-Jae replied.

"But Japan has Fujimoto Ryoma. Do they even need our help?"

Fujimoto Ryoma. Although he had been evaluated lower than Sword Emperor Tian Wuchen, he was still one of the eight World Rankers, and his Mythic-grade equipment, Eye of Susanoo, was famous worldwide.

"If we leave Fujimoto Ryoma aside, the overall level of Japanese Players isn't that high. This is a pretty serious case, so it needs as many Rankers to participate as possible."

"Hmm."

"The fact that the Demon Cult incident in Korea had been resolved also likely influenced the decision."

The terror incident Kang-Hyun had caused in Isu Station had become the starting signal for the other branches of the Demon Cult to take action.

Trust in Korea's capability had gone up because Korea had completely dealt with the situation.

"But to think that Japan would ask Korea for help... that's unexpected," Yeon-Joo mumbled.

Although the world had changed after the Day of Calamity, negative historical sentiments between the two countries hadn't disappeared.[1]

The relationship between Japanese and Korean Players wasn't the best.

"That just goes to show how serious the situation is," Hyun-Jae said.

"I guess that's true." Yeon-Joo nodded with a heavy expression. She let out a sigh. "Which demon are they trying to summon this time...?"

They had been able to defeat Oriax easily because he had suddenly acted strange, but it wouldn't have been an easy fight if they'd fought against him in normal conditions.

But a demon stronger than him...?

Yeon-Joo was already feeling anxious before the battle had even begun.

"Hmm."

Kang-Woo fell into thought.

'A demon, huh?'

Kang-Woo wondered if he should wait until the Demon Cult summoned the demon or not. From Kang-Woo's point of view, it would be better if they successfully managed to summon a demon.

Demons were an important source of demonic energy to him.

'My Demonic Energy stat hasn't been going up at all lately.'

He thought that if he devoured a demon, maybe his Demonic Energy stat would increase.

'Letting them summon a demon and then devouring it with Predation would be best.'

There was no better way for him to grow at the moment than to devour a demon.

While he was smacking his lips, Hyun-Jae and Yeon-Joo's conversation continued.

"I already know which demon they're trying to summon," Hyun-Jae said.

"Oh, which demon?"

"I heard they're trying to summon the succubus queen."

"A succubus?" Yeon-Joo tilted her head in wonder. "Don't tell me... the demon that sucks the life force out of men?"

"Yes. Her name is... Lilith. I heard they were trying to summon a demon named Lilith."

"Hah, as expected of the Japanese. Of all the demons, why would they summon such a perverted—"

Slam!

A chair was turned upside down—the one Kang-Woo had been sitting on.

"Wh-What? What's wrong?" Yeon-Joo asked.

"..."

Kang-Woo's face turned pale. He recalled the tentacles that were forever embedded in his memory.

"——op it," he said with a trembling voice.

"What?"

"We have to stop it."

Wait for the demon to be summoned and then devour it?

Aim to raise his stagnated Demonic Energy stat?

Screw it all.

None of that mattered.

"We have to stop the summoning!" Kang-Woo exclaimed desperately.

Chapter 103 - To Japan (2)

Lilith...

She was one of Oh Kang-Woo's most loyal subordinates along with Balrog when Kang-Woo was in Hell.

If Balrog was said to be as strong as the seven princes, then Lilith was said to be capable of annihilating their armies with all sorts of illusions and restricting abilities.

Illusion and mind-control magic...

Lilith was stronger than Kang-Woo, who possessed Authorities, in those two fields. Since she was also very intelligent, she was the one in charge of managing the demon king's army.

And...

Officially, she was Kang-Woo's wife.

'Fuck.'

When Kang-Woo appeared in the Ninth Hell and was growing his forces alongside Balrog, he was once ambushed by Prince Satan, and half of his forces ended up dead.

The princes were so powerful to the point that they weren't able to kill each other, and Kang-Woo had been driven to the brink of defeat after losing half of his forces.

The one who had saved him was Lilith, who had the title of being the most beautiful woman in Hell.

'Most beautiful woman, my ass.'

Thinking about those tentacles made him curse.

Lilith, who was struggling because of Prince Asmodeus's tiresome proposals, had joined forces with Kang-Woo, who had, at the time, declared war on all seven princes.

From Kang-Woo's point of view, Lilith's beauty was incomprehensible, but she could seduce any demon.

Thanks to the demons following her, Kang-Woo's forces became even bigger than before Satan's assault. Thanks to her, he overcame the crisis and kept battling against the princes.

After that, she started to have strong feelings for him while fighting alongside Kang-Woo when facing the princes.

The demons that followed her wanted her love to bear fruit, and because of that, Kang-Woo was forced to marry her as a formality.

Since most of Kang-Woo's forces followed Lilith as much as they did him, he couldn't ignore their wishes.

'Damn.'

Thinking about his life after marriage gave him chills.

Lilith had tried to sneak into his chambers every single night, and he had to desperately escape from her tentacles. Those horrible days had come to an end when he was able to put an end to the war and return to Earth.

'I refuse to go back to those days.'

He clenched his fists.

No, Lilith being summoned now could bring a worse result than those days.

Kang-Woo was not strong enough to escape from Lilith at the moment. Although he'd grown at a faster pace than anyone else, he still wasn't as strong as demons like Balrog or Lilith.

If Lilith was summoned to Earth, he could be devoured by her.

'How could they possibly be able to summon Lilith?'

Kang-Woo couldn't understand it.

It wasn't as simple as moving on to summoning a demon from the Ninth Hell since they had managed to summon Oriax from the Seventh Hell and Amdusias from the Eighth Hell.

Lilith was one of the most powerful demons in the Ninth Hell. She couldn't be compared to beings like Oriax or Amdusias.

'Has the Gaia System weakened that much?'

It was a desperate situation, and it was worse than he had initially thought. If archdemons like Lilith appeared on Earth in bulk, the current state of humanity wouldn't be able to handle them.

"You have a strong sense of justice, just like Hwa-Yeon mentioned."

Jang Hyun-Jae smiled with satisfaction. It seemed like he'd misunderstood Kang-Woo's shout.

Cha Yeon-Joo looked at Kang-Woo suspiciously as if asking him why he was so desperate.

Kang-Woo didn't answer. There were more pressing matters at hand than being misunderstood.

"... Please tell us more about Japan's current situation," Kang-Woo asked in a low voice.

Hyun-Jae had mentioned that Japan was in such a bad state that they had even asked for Korea's help.

Kang-Woo thought that he might be able to gain a hint about the situation from his explanation.

"Fuuu. Please keep this strictly confidential."

Hyun-Jae sighed. He individually looked at Yeon-Joo, Baek Hwa-Yeon, Goo Hyun-Mo, and Kang-Woo. The four of them nodded.

"The Demon Cult has kidnapped Kurosaki Yurie."

"Kurosaki Yurie?"

It was the first time Kang-Woo had heard that name. Except for him, the faces of the other three people turned pale after they heard the name.

"K-Kurosaki Yurie?!"

"Are you serious, old man?"

"... Please explain."

Kang-Woo lightly poked Yeon-Joo's side.

Yeon-Joo looked at him as if she was baffled that he really didn't know. She bit her lips.

"The Miko of the Heavens. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that she's currently the mental pillar of the Japanese."

"Oh, interesting. But why is she the mental pillar instead of Fujimoto Ryoma?"

"There are many reasons, but... first off, her social status is no joke."

"Her social status?"

Yeon-Joo nodded.

"She's the emperor's granddaughter."

"..."

The emperor was more like a position of symbolic value in Japan and had almost no real influence.

No, in the modern era, one could say that even its symbolic value was disappearing. But for the past five years, after Japan's situation quickly changed, the position of that very symbol massively rose in importance.

Japan had suffered far more damage than Korea had during the Day of Calamity five years ago.

There was one reason for that... the SS-rank gate that opened in Hokkaido.

The strong monsters that had appeared from that Gate had almost destroyed the entire country. The situation improved after Players appeared, but despite that, Hokkaido was still a deserted prefecture.

In such a crisis, the hopes of the Japanese turned to the emperor, who had been nothing but a symbol. The people hoped for the imperial family to turn the situation around somehow.

And then, Kurosaki Yurie, the emperor's granddaughter, stepped up.

She was able to prevent the worst situation. She had not only asked for help from foreign Players but had also not held back on the support given to Japanese Players.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that Japan would not exist today if it hadn't been for Kurosaki Yurie.

The people of the country worshiped her to the point that some even protested for the old emperor to step down and for Kurosaki Yurie to take his place.

Yeon-Joo's "mental pillar" was the correct way to describe her.

"Hmm... Is that why she came to be known as the Miko of the Heavens?" asked Kang-Woo.

"Oh, that's because of her ability. Although she isn't a World Ranker like Fujimoto Ryoma, she's still quite strong."

"What's her ability?"

"She... can summon the souls of the gods in Japanese mythology into her body."

"..."

Kang-Woo's eyes narrowed.

Summoning gods into one's body was an ability so incredible that it wouldn't be weird if it were stronger than the Ten Thousand Demon Core.

Yeon-Joo continued to explain, "I don't know the details either, but I think she can only bring out a portion of the gods' powers."

That was obvious.

If she could bring out their full powers, she would've become the world's strongest instead of a World Ranker.

"I've also heard that Fujimoto Ryoma's Eye of Susanoo was made with Kurosaki Yurie's ability to summon the gods."

"Hmm..." Kang-Woo groaned. He turned to Hyun-Jae. "Have they found out why the Miko of the Heavens was kidnapped?"

"No, they haven't. Why would they take such a huge risk to kidnap her...? I can only guess that it has something to do with the demon summoning."

"..."

Kang-Woo remained silent. He closed his eyes and thought about it.

There were many possibilities. What he had to do now was to deduce the Demon Cult's actions from the information that he had been given.

'There must have been a reason.'

They wouldn't have kidnapped her for no reason; her position was far too high to take that risk.

'Maybe to simply use her as a sacrifice?'

Kang-Woo shook his head. If they were just going to use her as a sacrifice for the summoning, they wouldn't have gone out of their way to kidnap her.

'The ability to possess the power of the Gods.'

Kang-Woo focused on her abilities.

If the Demon Cult had a reason to kidnap Kurosaki Yurie, it most definitely had to do with that ability.

"The gods of mythology..." Kang-Woo mumbled in a low voice.

He felt as if he was about to grasp something. Just then, the names of the seven princes of Hell, such as Satan and Lucifer, came to mind.

Kang-Woo's eyes shone.

"I see."

He finally understood.

He thought of a question that he had had ever since he had been in Hell.

When he had first heard about the seven princes, he was surprised because their names were almost identical to the names of the demons associated with the seven deadly sins.

Lucifer, Satan, Bael, Leviathan, Belphegor, Mammon, Asmodeus.

Those were all names he already knew.

As he thought about it calmly, it made no sense.

If the Nine Hells were in a completely different dimension than Earth, such a thing would be impossible.

'If such names were transmitted to other worlds as myths...'

It could be hypothesized that beings in mythology were beings of worlds other than Earth. If the gods in Japanese mythology were also beings of another dimension, the ability of Kurosaki Yurie could be defined as:

'The ability to summon the powers of extra-dimensional beings.'

The pieces of the puzzle were finally coming together.

If that was the case, he could somewhat understand what he couldn't initially grasp about how the Demon Cult could possibly summon Lilith.

'The Gaia System hasn't been weakened to that extent.'

It wasn't like the Gaia System had become so weak that the Demon Cult could summon Lilith, an archdemon from the Ninth hell.

The Demon Cult had realized the truth of Kurosaki Yurie's abilities and were trying to use them to summon Lilith.

"Let's go to Japan right away."

Kang-Woo stood up.

Since Kurosaki Yurie had already been kidnapped, it was now a race against time. They had to save her as soon as possible and stop the summoning.

"... You're awfully enthusiastic today. Okay, I'll gather my guild members," Yeon-Joo remarked.

"No, you'll have to go alone." Kang-Woo turned to Hyun-Jae for confirmation. "Am I right?"

"Hah... You're more impressive than what I've heard."

"... What are you guys talking about?" Yeon-Joo asked.

"The Japanese government is desperately trying to hide that the Miko of the Heavens has been kidnapped. At the very least, they'll announce it after she is rescued."

Considering Japan's current state, people would panic if they heard that the Miko of the Heavens had been kidnapped.

"We can't ask for large-scale support. If Japan could do that, they wouldn't have tried to gather people in such a secretive way."

The more people there were, the faster the rumor would spread.

"How many people can we bring at most?" Kang-Woo asked Hyun-Jae.

"Seven."

"Then I guess we can take two more including the people in this room."

If that was the case, he had a good candidate.

"Let's set out in 30 minutes. Is there a plane ready?"

"It's on standby at the airport."

"The airport is too far. Let's ask Echidna."

"Echidna...?"

Yeon-Joo's and Hwa-Yeon's faces turned pale after hearing Echidna's name. Hwa-Yeon gave a quick explanation to the confused Hyun-Jae.

"... Your summoned beast is a dragon?"

He couldn't believe what he was hearing.

Kang-Woo ignored his question and took out his smartphone. They didn't have much time.

"I'll call her immediately, so wait for me in front of the base in about 30 minutes."

"W-Wait. Are you saying that while even knowing where we have to go?"

"I would guess Hokkaido. Sapporo, to be exact, since that's where I heard the SS-rank Gate is," Kang-Woo concisely answered Hyun-Jae, who was bewildered. It wasn't hard to guess where the Demon Cult was planning to summon an archdemon of the Ninth Hell.

"... Hah," Hyun-Jae laughed lifelessly.

Kang-Woo was right.

Chapter 104 - To Japan (3)

Fwoosh!

A dragon, a being that could not exist on Earth, was soaring through the skies with its giant wings. It was Echidna, who immediately came flying after receiving Oh Kang-Woo's call.

"... When did you prepare something like this?" Cha Yeon-Joo asked. She was sitting on a chair installed on Echidna's back.

"I didn't want to suffer like last time," Kang-Woo answered.

He thought about when they had ridden Echidna to Pohang. He had held on to one of her scales for dear life. He didn't want to experience that ever again.

"Are you the one keeping up this barrier as well?" Yeon-Joo said while touching the black barrier surrounding the chairs.

Kang-Woo nodded.

"I've become better than how I was then."

To be more exact, he now had more demonic energy.

After his Demonic Energy stat surpassed three digits, he had absolutely no problem maintaining the Authority of Projection to cover Echidna's body and block the wind with a barrier at the same time.

'The demonic crystal plays a big part too.'

After he'd made the demonic crystal, he'd become capable of using demonic energy more effectively.

He could now more comfortably use Authorities that had required more focus in the past. Thanks to that, although Echidna was flying at full speed, Kang-Woo's group was able to fly to Japan comfortably.

However, they couldn't do anything about the massive shaking.

"Urp! Urpp!!"

Goo Hyun-Mo was about to vomit, and a single tear trickled down his cheek.

"P-Please, a bit slower..."

"Just endure it since we're in a hurry."

"Guuuuuhhhh."

He agonized at Jang Hyun-Jae's sharp answer. It was the worst possible condition for someone who suffered from motion sickness.

[Kang-Woo, are you going to fight again?] Echidna said in a worried voice tone. [Don't do what you did last time.]

"Okay."

Kang-Woo nodded while smiling bitterly.

Unleashing the Ten Thousand Demon Core...

He didn't want to do something as reckless as that again.

'Although, I'll have to do it if absolutely necessary.'

He had also acquired a new power, the demonic crystal.

If things went well, he would be able to solve the incident without using the Ten Thousand Demon Core.

"Uhhh... Kang-Woo."

He heard a despondent voice. Kang-Woo turned around. Han Seol-Ah was sitting among Ranker-level Players.

"I-Is it really okay for me to come with you all?"

She felt like a cat among a group of lions. She looked at Kang-Woo with worry.

"It's okay. All you have to do is to keep us buffed from the rear."

"W-Wouldn't taking Si-Hun or Tae-Soo have been better? I'm not sure if I'll be of use to y—"

"I guarantee that you'll be of more help to us than them this time around."

Kang-Woo had chosen Seol-Ah as the last member.

Just like she'd said, Kim Si-Hun would've been of bigger help if what they needed was more power. However, he had chosen Seol-Ah for one simple reason.

'The buff I'd received before...'

Her buff Grace of Light could boost unique stats.

Because her level had gone up quite a lot, the effect would probably be bigger compared to before. Also, since his Demonic Energy stat was now in the triple digits, the buff effect would be enormous.

It wasn't a buff that she could only apply it to him, so he was expecting it to increase other people's strengths too.

'Now that I think about it, buff abilities are practically overpowered.'

A buff skill that increased your stat by an absolute number?

Considering how hard it was to increase one's stat the higher one's level became, its effect was no joke.

The reason why players tried so hard to get Legendary-grade equipment was mostly because of the stat boost.

[Kang-Woo, we're here.]

Kang-Woo raised his head. He could see a giant island—no, land.

Hokkaido was so big that it was weird to call it an island.

"..."

Kang-Woo remained silent after looking down at the island from above.

Tragic was the first word that came to mind.

Sapporo, which was where the SS-rank gate had appeared, was completely destroyed. It was like the city ruins in a post-apocalyptic film.

'I guess this is how a city that isn't able to handle the wave of monsters ends up.'

He heard there were also some cities like that in Korea, but none had been destroyed over such a wide area as Hokkaido.

Grrrrr!!

A monster came into view as it flew out from between destroyed buildings. It was a giant dragon over ten meters long. Its skin was covered in hard rock, and its claws were so sharp that they could tear through steel.

It was a Drake, the SS-rank common monster that was the main culprit behind Hokkaido's destruction.

[Kang-Woo.]

"Go around it. We don't have the time to face that monster right now."

[Okay.]

Echidna flew around the Drake.

"Over there."

Hyun-Jae pointed. Near the ocean was a bunker that resembled a bunker from a certain popular game.[1]

It was the Sapporo Base, which had been made to retake Hokkaido, which had become heaven for the monsters of Japan. Although Japan had built a base, they hadn't seen any significant results yet.

Echidna quickly returned to her human form after landing on the ground.

As Kang-Woo released the Authority of Projection, they appeared as if they'd suddenly descended from the sky.

"Who goes there?!"

"Wh-Where did they..."

The Japanese Players guarding the base took out their weapons.

Hyun-Jae approached and talked to the Players in fluent Japanese.

Kang-Woo said, "Echidna, remember the interpretation magic you used before? Cast it on me."

"Okay."

After the magic was cast on him, he could understand the conversation between Hyun-Jae and the Japanese Players.

"I would like a report on the current situation."

"Prime Minister Yamada and Sir Fujimoto Ryoma are in the middle of a meeting. I will contact them immediately, so please wait for a moment."

Hyun-Jae nodded.

After a short moment, a very wrinkled old man and an attractive young man walked out of the bunker.

"Ohh, I didn't expect reinforcements to arrive so quickly... Thank you very much, Captain Jang Hyun-Jae."

"Not at all. Our neighboring country is in a crisis, so it is only natural that we overcome it together."

"The people behind you are...?"

Prime Minister Yamada quickly scanned the people. There were three familiar faces. He knew the Red Rose guildmaster, Cha Yeon-Joo; and the two captains of the Hwarang Corps, Baek Hwa-Yeon and Goo Hyun-Mo.

But he knew nothing about the other three.

"They are Players who have volunteered for the Demon Cult subjugation and the hostage rescue operation. I will vouch for their skills," Hyun-Jae said.

To be honest, he didn't know how strong Kang-Woo, Echidna, and Seol-Ah were, but he couldn't say anything that would lower the prime minister's trust.

"Hmm. I understand. I trust you, Captain Jang."

This wasn't the time to be picky.

As Prime Minister Yamada finished talking, Fujimoto Ryoma stepped forward and formally bowed toward Kang-Woo's group.

"Nice to meet you. My name is Fujimoto Ryoma."

He was tall and handsome. Although he wasn't as abnormally handsome as Si-Hun, he was still quite a good-looking young man.

His eyes were especially eye-catching. His left eye was blue, unlike his black right eye, which gave off a mysterious feeling. He was odd-eyed, as they said.

"First off, thank you very much for volunteering to help in this incident. You could have ignored it since it was not your country's business, but I am relieved to see how passionate you are to help as if it were your home cou—"

"That's enough formalities," Kang-Woo interjected.

Ryoma's face crumpled momentarily.

Kang-Woo said, "More importantly, we would like to hear about the Demon Cult's current location and the progression rate of the summoning ritual."

"Hmm..." Ryoma nodded while smiling again. "In that case, I will give you an outline of the current situation."

He guided Kang-Woo and the rest into the bunker.

There was a map of Sapporo in the bunker's meeting room.

"We believe that the summoning ritual is being prepared here." He pointed to the map with a long baton. "Sapporo Station, the place where the SS-rank Gate first opened. We believe they're making the preparations on the station's third floor. However, there are many variant monsters that we believe the Demon Cult has set free in the area. There are also a few Demon Cult members guarding this area."

The explanation continued.

"We cannot get through with our current forces, which is why we've asked for your help."

"What is the plan?" Hyun-Jae asked.

Ryoma pointed to two places on the map.

"We're planning on using a feint tactic. First, we will grab the Demon Cult's attention with a fake attack and then ambush them from behind. I would like to leave the ambushing to the Korean Players. I am sure they won't have information about you all, so it will have a high chance of success."

"Hmm," Hyun-Jae said.

A feint to grab attention from one side and ambush from behind...

It was a good tactic and had even been proven to be successful throughout history.

'That's the problem.'

The problem was that the plan was too good. The enemy could easily think of it and make countermeasures for it.

It wasn't like the Demon Cult was guarding a massive area like a castle.

They only had to guard the place of the summoning ritual and Kurosaki Yurie.

"I know what you're thinking," Ryoma said while smiling.

He pointed to another part of the map.

"To be frank, there is another part of the plan. Taking advantage of the confusion, someone will infiltrate the station through here and save the Miko of the Heavens."

The third card of the feint.

It wasn't a bad tactic if it worked. No, the feint itself was already good.

The Demon Cult didn't know that Korean Players were taking part yet, so it could perfectly catch them by surprise.

"I will be taking on this role. I believe I am most suited for it since it requires an individual to act alone."

He had the vigor befitting a World Ranker.

'No, it's not really vigor.'

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes. He could smell the desire from Ryoma.

'I guess he wants to be a hero.'

A World Ranker, only eight in the entire world, rescues the emperor's kidnapped granddaughter!

Kang-Woo could already picture the headline. The press could even make a drama out of it. Ryoma probably knew that better than anyone.

'Well, it doesn't really matter.'

Kang-Woo didn't care if Ryoma wanted to become a hero or not. The only thing that mattered was that the tactic Ryoma had proposed wasn't bad, and if it was successful, Kang-Woo would be able to stop Lilith's summoning.

"In that case, let's get started."

Kang-Woo stood up.

Chapter 105 - Feint Tactic

At the north exit of Sapporo Station, Oh Kang-Woo's group was hidden among the rubble. They were so silent that not even their breathing could be heard while they looked around with sharp eyes.

"Grrr..."

It turned out that Fujimoto Ryoma hadn't lied. The area surrounding Sapporo Station was full of demonic beasts.

Kang-Woo's group still hadn't seen anyone who belonged to the Demon Cult. However, the demonic beasts weren't fighting with each other despite not having intelligence, so they were probably being controlled by someone.

"What are you going to do?" Cha Yeon-Joo whispered in Kang-Woo's ear.

It tickled.

Kang-Woo used the Authority of Silence.

"Sound won't leak anymore, so you don't need to talk like that," he replied.

"Ngh...! Wh-What? Are you saying that it's unpleasant?! I find it unpleasant too!" Yeon-Joo shouted while blushing.

Kang-Woo smirked.

Then he turned his head toward Jang Hyun-Jae and said, "Once we receive the signal, we will do a frontal assault. Are you okay with that?"

"Hmm. The goal is to cause confusion, so that seems to be the best way," Hyun-Jae answered with a nod after thinking about it for a while.

It was risky, but he couldn't deny that it was the most effective way.

"Seol-Ah, when the signal comes, buff everyone and follow us from behind. You don't need to overwork yourself with healing; just focus on buffing us."

"Okay, Kang-Woo."

"Yeon-Joo and Echidna, you guys are in charge of ranged support while protecting Seol-Ah. The rest of us will charge at the enemies. Oh, Captain Jang, what weapon do you use?"

"I use a hwando[1]."

"Then you must be a melee warrior class. You can charge along with us."

"..."

Kang-Woo briefed them on the plan in an instant.

Hyun-Jae, who had his role as the leader taken away, looked at Kang-Woo weirdly while thinking, 'I heard he was exceptional, but...'

The most impressive thing he had heard about Player Oh Kang-Woo was that he'd defeated Yeon-Joo in a sparring match. He'd also heard that Kang-Woo was the one behind the El Cuero hunt and the person who had resolved the Isu Station incident.

When Hyun-Jae first heard about Kang-Woo, he simply thought that he was a Player gifted in fighting.

'I guess that wasn't everything.'

Not even a day had passed since Hyun-Jae met Kang-Woo for the first time, but he quickly realized that Kang-Woo wasn't simply a strong Player. Kang-Woo was level-headed and extremely quick-

witted. He had excellent judgment and was good at taking action. Additionally, he had a charisma that made others follow him.

'He'll make it big.'

The fact that Hyun-Jae was following Kang-Woo's orders even though he had led the Hwarang Corps for many years was proof of that. Hyun-Jae was glad that someone like Kang-Woo had appeared right when the world was struggling with monsters and the Demon Cult.

Vrrrr!

That sense of relief only lasted for a short while though. It ended when Hyun-Jae's receiver began vibrating.

A weird sound rang out in the distance, and the demonic beasts turned in that direction.

"...I knew it," Kang-Woo mumbled after seeing the demonic beasts' movements.

The Demon Cult was not stupid. Only a few demonic beasts moved toward the source of the sound, the north exit. It seemed like they were already prepared for a feint tactic.

However...

'They probably have no idea that the ones ambushing them from behind would be us,' Kang-Woo thought.

Leaving Ryoma aside, the average level of the rest of the Japanese Players wasn't high. They had Ranker-level Players like Kurosaki Yurie, but they didn't have as many Players like that as Korea.

So, even if the Demon Cult was prepared for a feint tactic, it was unlikely they'd imagined the possibility that Korean Players would take part in it. No, even if they'd imagined it, it made no difference.

'Because I'm here.'

Kang-Woo raised his right hand. He merged the Authority of Freezing and the Authority of Iron Axes.

'Leviathan.'

An axe that emitted chilling energy appeared in his hand.

The Demon Cult could have expected reinforcements, but they probably would never have imagined that there would be someone as strong as a World Ranker among the reinforcements.

Kang-Woo wasn't very well known for how powerful he was, but that was because he'd tried his best to remain anonymous. An invisible threat was far more terrifying than a visible one.

"Get ready," Kang-Woo said quietly.

The rest nodded and took their weapons out. Han Seol-Ah proceeded to cast buff magic, while Echidna let out a snort and prepared a wide-area magic.

"Curtain of Light," Seol-Ah said.

Riiing.

[Boosting Physical Defense and Magical Defense by 300.]

[Applying an intermediate health recovery buff.]

Considering Seol-Ah's level, the effects of the wide-area buff weren't bad at all. After all, receiving a boost of 300 in Physical and Magical Defense was equivalent to having equipped Unique-grade gear.

Nevertheless, that wasn't the buff that Kang-Woo wanted.

"Please use the Grace of Light that you cast on me last time," Kang-Woo requested.

"Oh, okay, Kang-Woo! But Grace of Light is a single-target buff and doesn't last very long..." Seol-Ah replied.

"It's okay."

Kang-Woo had assumed that a buff that boosted a stat by an absolute value wouldn't last very long. Seol-Ah cast a new spell, and her hands were wrapped in light.

"Grace of Light!"

Riiing.

[You have received the Grace of Light.]

[Boosting Physical Defense and Magic Defense by 300, and Demonic Energy by 3.]

'I knew it. The buff effect is better than before,' Kang-Woo thought.

His Demonic Energy stat had been boosted to 106. Kang-Woo smiled in satisfaction upon feeling the explosive amount of demonic energy inside him.

If his stats were low, he wouldn't have seen such great results with an increase of only three points in the stat. However, his stat value was at the level of World Ranker's, so he profited a lot from increasing his stat by an absolute value.

"Begin," Kang-Woo said.

"Dark Swarm!" Echidna's clear voice rang out.

Black smoke spread throughout the area. The skin of the demonic beasts melted upon being touched by the smoke, and a horrible stench filled the air.

Clatter!

Then Yeon-Joo's red chains enveloped a wide area, mercilessly slashing the demonic beasts.

Kang-Woo stood up. With a stomp, he charged toward the demonic beasts. He jumped into the air and swung Leviathan downward, unleashing a terrifyingly frigid energy. After being frozen by the energy, the demonic beasts in the area shattered.

"Haap!"

"Here we go!"

Baek Hwa-Yeon, Hyun-Jae, and Goo Hyun-Mo took their weapons out and ran toward the north exit.

The demonic beasts were stronger than the ones that had appeared during the Isu Station incident, but it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the Players facing them now were among Korea's strongest.

Slam! Crack!!

"Kiiiekk!!" a demonic beast that was almost three meters tall screamed in pain.

It was a Demon Golem, a demonic beast that inhabited the Second Hell along with Buers.

Various other demonic beasts that inhabited the Hells ranging from the First to the Third were guarding the exit.

Kang-Woo couldn't understand how the Demon Cult had managed to summon and control them. He'd known since seeing Baek Kang-Hyun fuse with a demon that the Demon Cult was far more knowledgeable than him about summoning and controlling beings of Hell, but this scene further confirmed it.

'But that isn't important.'

Nevertheless, it didn't matter if the demonic beasts in front of them had been summoned from Hell, created by planting a demonic crystal inside a monster, or even if they had been created by exposing a person to demonic energy. There was only one thing Kang-Woo had to do, and he didn't have the capacity to care about anything else.

"Kiiiekk!"

A scrawny demonic beast that looked like a zombie or a mummy came running toward him. Kang-Woo threw Leviathan. The rotating axe, which was emitting freezing energy, smashed through the head of the scrawny demonic beast.

Then Kang-Woo raised his hands and used the Authority of Hellfire. As he lowered his hands, the Hellfire spread in the shape of a fan. He turned 180 degrees, pulled his right fist back, and lowered his posture. Kang-Woo focused the Authority of Spallation on his fist, and the demonic energy on his fist took on the shape of a wedge.

A Demon Golem ran toward Kang-Woo, and he punched it. His fist smashed a massive hole into the Demon Golem's chest, causing it to collapse.

Flare!

"Graaaahhhh!!!"

"Waaahhhh! Wh-What the hell?!" Hyun-Mo shouted.

Hot air brushed past his cheeks. He turned his head around and saw a dog with three heads glaring at him.

It was a Cerberus, a demonic beast that inhabited the Third Hell. However, it was as strong as a demonic beast inhabiting the Fifth Hell, if not stronger.

'They even have a Cerberus under their control...?' Kang-Woo thought.

It was the demonic beast he'd wanted to summon at first. Of course, since he had summoned Echidna, a Cerberus looked like a mere mutt with three heads at this point.

"Haap!"

Hyun-Jae fended off the Cerberus. There wasn't even a need for Hwa-Yeon or Hyun-Mo to join in. A Cerberus was a powerful demonic beast, but it wasn't as strong as Hyun-Jae, who was one of the strongest Rankers.

Fwoosh!

"Grrr!"

The problem was that there wasn't one but three Cerberuses. Hwa-Yeon and Yeon-Joo each had to fight one, which slowed their momentum a bit.

"Keep the formation here!" Kang-Woo shouted.

"K-Kang-Woo!" Seol-Ah exclaimed.

After leaving a command, Kang-Woo charged into the exit by himself.

It would be far safer to charge into the exit after gradually clearing out the demonic beasts, but the situation was urgent.

'What's taking that Fujimoto guy so long?' Kang-Woo wondered.

He looked around. His group had caused more than enough chaos and confusion. They had killed most of the demonic beasts defending the north exit, and the forces that had been involved in the diversion were retreating to regroup.

Boom!

At that moment, a strong wind blew past him. It was so strong that it seemed like a typhoon.

'Fujimoto.'

Kang-Woo had heard that Ryoma mainly used wind magic while wielding the Eye of Susanoo. Ryoma had most likely caused the sudden typhoon.

Assuming that was the case, Kang-Woo moved to join Ryoma, but an annoying amount of demonic beasts charged toward him. After wiping them out, he saw stairs that led upstairs.

'They should be on the top floor.'

He wasn't in a tall building. The top floor was probably the third or fourth floor. If it was only that tall, he could get to it just by jumping; he didn't need to use the Authority of the Sky.

Kang-Woo proceeded to load power into his legs.

"...Huh?"

At that moment, he sensed something was off. He had an unpleasant feeling as if he'd seen a misaligned cog in a machine.

Kang-Woo narrowed his eyes and looked around, and he soon realized the source of the unpleasant feeling.

'I don't see any Demon Cultists.'

He had not seen a single Demon Cultist on the way here or when he went up the stairs. From what he could see from the bottom floor, there were none on the top floor either.

That was strange. If the summoning ritual was so important, there should've been many people guarding it. It wasn't enough with just demonic beasts. Even if they hadn't been expecting intruders, there was no way that they would not appear now, considering he had caused an ungodly amount of noise.

Then he saw Ryoma heading up to the top floor while fighting against demonic beasts.

'What if the ritual isn't taking place on the top floor?'

There was a chance that could be the case. Of course, Kang-Woo's guess could be wrong. Maybe they weren't showing themselves because they needed as many people as possible for the summoning ritual.

'Fujimoto is going to the top floor anyway.'

Nevertheless, since he had Ryoma as insurance to deal with the Demon Cultists if they were on the top floor, Kang-Woo looked around the area once more. Judging by the sheer number of demonic beasts around here, this truly seemed like the place where the summoning would take place. Moreover, there was demonic energy spread throughout the entire station.

"In that case..."

His thoughts were brief, and his actions swift. Kang-Woo clenched his hand into a fist and merged the Authority of Titanic Might and the Authority of Waves.

'Skybreaker.'

Great power gathered around his fist.

It was a simple process of elimination.

'If they're not above...'

The only other possibility was underground.

Kang-Woo raised his fist and smashed it down with all his might.

Boom!! Rumble!!!

The floor was destroyed, and he fell underground, landing in a dark subway tunnel.

"Kurgh! Wh-Who are you?!" a Demon Cultist in a red demon mask said to Kang-Woo.

'Bingo.'

Kang-Woo stomped on the floor.

Chapter 106 - There Are No Hopes and Dreams in Hell (1)

"How did you get here already?!" the Demon Cultist exclaimed in a flustered tone.

Kang-Woo didn't answer. He just used the Authority of Blades, lowered his posture, and swung his blade upward.

"Kuh!"

The Demon Cultist raised his hand, and a barrier made of demonic energy blocked the blade.

Clang.

"Whoa," Kang-Woo muttered with bright eyes.

The impact that he felt from the block was quite powerful. The Demon Cultist was stronger than he'd expected.

"You're not Fujimoto... Who are you?" the masked Demon Cultist asked, looking at Kang-Woo.

Kang-Woo extended his hands. He merged two Authorities and created a long spear.

After grabbing the Bident, he said at a low volume, "Move."

"Well... I didn't expect you to answer me."

The Demon Cultist clenched his hands into fists, and a strong demonic energy flowed from them.

'I guess the Demon Cult in Japan truly is far stronger than the one in Korea,' Kang-Woo thought.

The Demon Cultist currently facing Kang-Woo didn't seem to be a cardinal like Baek Kang-Hyun, considering he wasn't participating in the summoning ritual. It meant this was the power of a regular priest, and it was completely different from that of the Demon Cult's priests in Korea.

'But...'

Kang-Woo gripped the spear tighter.

This Demon Cult priest might be stronger than the ones in Korea, but he was still just a priest. There was no way Kang-Woo was going to lose.

Whir!

The Demon Cultist raised his hands, and a strong barrier made of demonic energy blocked the tunnel.

"You shall not pass!"

Judging from his scream, it seemed like he was quite confident in his skills. However, Kang-Woo smirked, finding it funny that the man was screaming so confidently just because he had been able to block Kang-Woo's attack once.

Kang-Woo focused on his dantian. Energy flowed out of his demonic crystal and gathered around the Bident's edge. He then lowered his posture and pulled the spear back. Stepping forward, he threw the Bident at the barrier. The impact of his attack shook the entire tunnel.

"H-Huh?"

Crack!

The Demon Cultist's eyes quivered. The Bident smashed through the demonic energy barrier and flew toward him. He quickly rolled to the side. It was humiliating for him to do that, but it was the correct decision.

The Bident flew past him and made a huge explosion.

"E-Eeeek!"

The Demon Cultist stepped back while making a pale expression.

Kang-Woo walked toward him and pulled off the Demon Cultist's mask, revealing the face of a fat young man in his late twenties.

"Where is the ritual taking place?" Kang-Woo asked.

"C-Cough! H-How did you—!"

Crack!

"Arrgghh!"

"I won't ask you again," Kang-Woo stated.

The young man had a fearful gaze. He bit his lips while holding his finger that had been bent at a weird angle.

"I-I'll... never tell you!"

This was a burning conviction. He showed the resolution of a knight who was willing to lay down his life for his liege.

'What the hell?' Kang-Woo thought.

He was surprised. He'd never seen a Demon Cultist with such great loyalty to their cult. The fundamental structure of the Demon Cult should have made that impossible. The Demon Cult promised two things while gathering new devotees: immortality and power gained through demonic energy.

In the case of Baek Kang-Hyun, he cared more about having power, but most people cared more about immortality. After all, it didn't matter how much money a person had, they still couldn't bribe death to keep it away. Even if a person had billions, they'd die once they were old.

The whole reason why the Demon Cult had managed to become a global force was that they promised escape from the cycle of life. Regardless of country, race, and values, most people would crave immortality.

Ideals? Beliefs? Nothing of that sort mattered. All of those things were meaningless before what the Demon Cult could provide—immortality.

Of course, there were flaws in the Demon Cult's scheme. The cultists would not be satisfied with 'going to heaven after death,' the lure that other pseudo-religious cults used to get members. So, the level of loyalty that Demon Cultists had to their cult was extremely low in comparison.

'Or that's how it should be...'

"I choose death!" the Demon Cultist declared.

He bit his tongue and severed the artery within it, causing blood to pour out.

It was surprising that he committed suicide by biting his tongue. This wasn't something that a person could do with only an average level of conviction.

"What's up with this crazy level of loyalty...?"

Kang-Woo laughed in disbelief. He wondered if this guy was truly part of the same Demon Cult.

"Damn."

Kang-Woo threw the corpse aside and used the Authority of the Beholder to search for where the ceremony was taking place. However, the tunnel was so full of demonic energy that the location wasn't easy to find. It was like searching for a tree in the middle of a forest.

Seeing as he had no choice other than to run around to find it, that's exactly what he did.

"Who goes there?!"

"Stop him!!"

Kang-Woo kept running into Demon Cultists, and fierce battles broke out. They weren't strong enough to be a threat to him, but they were still able to slow him down. He was starting to get irritated by the pointless battles.

"Waaaaaargh!"

"Huh?" Kang-Woo uttered.

He'd heard some shouts while running through the underground tunnels.

Kang-Woo then moved toward the source of the sound.

'Found them.'

He saw a small altar. A beautiful woman with long black hair was lying on the altar. There was a stream of blue light flowing out of her and into the Rift. That woman was the Miko of the Heavens, Kurosaki Yurie.

Kang-Woo created the Leviathan once again and approached the altar, where he saw a group of Demon Cultists and the person leading the summoning ritual. He had seen summoning rituals like this numerous times before.

"What the..." Kang-Woo uttered, his mouth hanging wide open.

This was a summoning ritual, but something was different. They weren't like the other Demon Cultists whom he'd seen before.

"Let's go, guys!! Just a bit more! It'll be summoned soon!"

"Yeeaaahhh!! As expected of the cardinal we trust and follow!!"

"Stay strong, Cardinal Akiyama!!"

"We will also help however we can!!"

They were hyped up like crazy. It was hard to think of them as evil beings who had accepted demonic energy and worshiped demons. Rather than a demon-summoning ritual, it was more like a sports club's dinner party.

The man referred to as Cardinal Akiyama tightened his fists. Demonic energy flowed out from him and made the Rift bigger.

"Let's go! Our goal is Lilith, the Succubus Queen!"

At Akiyama's shout, the Demon Cultists shouted in excitement as well.

"Aaah, finally! Our long-cherished wish!"

"I would have no regrets even if I died now, Your Eminence!"

'Chaotic' was the perfect word to describe this situation. Kang-Woo looked at them with a confused gaze.

'What's wrong with these guys?'

It was as if he'd returned to Hell. He couldn't understand what was going on.

Kang-Woo was flustered by the unexpected development.

'No, it would be strange to have expected something like this.'

It was so unexpected that he was disappointed by what he had expected.

The Rift wriggled and grew in size. The blue light that was flowing out from Kurosaki Yurie's body merged with the Rift.

Akiyama raised his hand and exclaimed, "The time has finally come to welcome our true god!"

"OOOH!!"

"We have no more need for Hitomi[1]! We no longer need to covet life beyond the monitor! Right here and now, our faith will surpass dimensional boundaries!"

"Urghh! Your Eminence!"

"We will follow you to the very end!!"

An enthusiastic speech ensued.

It was at this moment that...

"H-Huh?! Y-Your Eminence! There's an intruder!"

They had finally noticed Kang-Woo's presence.

The Demon Cultists stood up and took their weapons out. Kang-Woo raised one hand and stopped them.

"No. Finish what you were doing. Just... give me some time to think," Kang-Woo said desperately.

He needed time to organize his thoughts. He wondered if he was dreaming.

Kang-Woo rubbed his eyes, but the scene before him did not change.

'These guys are Demon Cultists...?'

These men were different from the wicked, covetous, and crazed Demon Cultists that he'd encountered previously.

'Well, I guess you could say they're also wicked, covetous, and crazed in a way.'

However, it was different... There was one crucial difference.

"Hmm. I was expecting the intruder to be Fujimoto. How unexpected," Cardinal Akiyama remarked. He took a step forward and raised his red leather whip. "Tsk, I prepared this for her, but... I guess I have no choice."

"...What do you mean you prepared it for her?" Kang-Woo asked.

"Hahaha! Obviously—."

"Wait, no, I don't want to hear it," Kang-Woo interjected, shaking his head.

Cardinal Akiyama's expression hardened.

"Hmph, you were the one who asked. What do you mean you don't want to hear it?"

"..."

Kang-Woo remained silent. He didn't know how to explain the complex emotions he was feeling.

"Leave this to us, Your Eminence!"

"Please continue the summoning ritual!"

"You guys..." Cardinal Akiyama muttered, fighting back his tears. He shook his head and took a step forward. "No! I cannot stand still in this situation! Love always flourishes amid oppression and crisis! This will make it burn even stronger?!"

"Aaahh..."

"Your Eminence..."

There was a weird sense of comradery among the men.

Kang-Woo grabbed his forehead. He thought he was about to go crazy.

"You guys... Don't tell me... The reason you're trying to summon the Succubus Queen is... Don't tell me... Seriously, don't fucking tell me..."

He couldn't say it properly. He wanted so bad to not believe that his conjecture was true that he repeated 'Don't tell me' three times.

"The reason we're trying to summon her? Isn't that obvious?!" Cardinal Akiyama shouted from the depths of his soul. "Why do you think I... no, we joined the Demon Cult?!"

"I don't know. I... I really don't. What the actual fuck is up with you guys?"

"Obviously to summon the queen that we should be presenting to the modern world!"

"What's obvious about that, you dumbass?!"

"Tsk, ts. This is why it's impossible to get through to someone who doesn't understand what it's like to have hopes and dreams."

Akiyama swung the whip.

Crack!

The whip slapped the floor.

He continued with intense eyes, "Every man dreams about succubi! Isn't that the ideal all men crave?!"

"..."

Words that Kang-Woo didn't want to believe were true had emerged from Akiyama's mouth. He couldn't believe that there were so many Demon Cultists in Japan because... they were trying to summon Lilith. Out of all the countless demons in Hell... she was the one they wanted.

Kang-Woo would've preferred to hear that they were after immortality or power. If that had been the case, he wouldn't be feeling all of this turmoil.

"Every man dreams about succubi...?" Kang-Woo said while trembling.

He was shocked, angry, and annoyed.

Succubi—Kang-Woo had had high hopes for them in the past too. He had gotten so tired of living surrounded by horrible demons in Hell that he had often thought he'd like to meet a succubus.

"Hahaha! That's right! That is our faith!"

"Do you bastards only think with the thing between your legs?" Kang-Woo questioned with a shaking voice.

Memories of the past and all the trauma were returning to Kang-Woo. He'd despaired the first time he saw Lilith. She had been far too different from what he'd imagined. Even Balrog looked more beautiful than her.

The tentacles... Kang-Woo recalled the horrible, wiggling tentacles, as well as the eighteen eyes looking at him.

"Don't underestimate Hell," Kang-Woo said.

The Bident's prongs began to twist and transform into the Gáe Bulg, the result of merging three different Authorities. It emitted an ominous aura.

Kang-Woo stated, "There are no hopes and dreams there."

Chapter 107 - There Are No Hopes and Dreams in Hell (2)

"Tsk, I knew there was no getting through to you," Cardinal Akiyama stated.

"I don't want to hear that from you of all people," Oh Kang-Woo replied.

He spread the energy of the demonic crystal through his body, and Demonic energy gathered at the head of the Gáe Bulg.

'Kraken's Rage.'

Kang-Woo activated the effect of the Black Pearl Coat, which boosted his Demonic Energy stat by 5. Thanks to that and Han Seol-Ah's buff, his stat reached 111.

Whooooosh!

'Whoa.'

Kang-Woo's eyes lit up.

Compared to when his Demonic Energy stat had been in the range of 100–109, there was a massive difference in the amount of demonic energy that he could use now that the stat had surpassed 110. Just like the milestones for leveling up, every increase of 10 stat points was a milestone that brought about a huge improvement in the stat's effect.

The demonic energy filled his entire body. Kang-Woo gripped the Gáe Bulg even tighter.

He felt like he'd be able to overpower Tian Wuchen at this moment with the massive wave of power circulating throughout his body. He couldn't help but get drunk on the power, even though it was a temporary result of the combined effects of Seol-Ah's buff and the Black Pearl Coat's special effect.

Boom!

Kang-Woo stomped on the ground and thrust the Gáe Bulg forward. Akiyama's whip wrapped around the Gáe Bulg as if it were alive. Nevertheless, Kang-Woo didn't care. He just pulled his spear back as hard as he could.

"H-Huh?" Akiyama uttered.

Kang-Woo's sudden pull caused Akiyama to stumble to the ground pathetically. Then Kang-Woo thrust his spear at Akiyama.

"Your Eminence!"

A Demon Cultist stepped in between Akiyama and the spearhead, but Kang-Woo did not pull back. The spear went right through the Demon Cultist, tearing his skin apart and piercing his bones.

That gave Akiyama a bit of time to escape the fatal blow. He rolled to the side, and the spearhead brushed past his clothes.

"YOOUU!!!" Akiyama raged.

He aggressively swung the whip, which was surrounded by demonic energy. It wrapped around Kang-Woo at a frightening speed, squeezing with great power that could tear even apart steel.

Kang-Woo quickly decided on a plan of action.

'Authority of Invulnerability.'

He dropped the Gae Bolg, which dispersed into the air after the Authorities were canceled. Kang-Woo then invested all of his demonic energy within the demonic crystal into the Authority of Invulnerability. Darkness encompassed him completely like a demonic energy barrier.

"Urrrggghhh!" Akiyama groaned, his face turning red.

He was squeezing with all his might, but he couldn't break through the barrier of darkness. Then Akiyama changed his strategy. He loosened the whip's hold on Kang-Woo and concentrated demonic energy into the cracker of the whip.

Crack!

'It worked!' Akiyama exclaimed inwardly.

The demonic energy that he'd gathered at one point managed to break through Kang-Woo's demonic energy barrier and inflict some damage on him. It took off some flesh from Kang-Woo's right shoulder. Yet, Kang-Woo remained expressionless. No, he was smiling.

After being freed from the whip's grip, Kang-Woo moved again. He didn't have time to use the Authority of Regeneration. Instead, he used the Authority of Haste and dealt a clean roundhouse kick to Akiyama.

Bash!

"Kurgh!"

Kang-Woo hadn't used a weapon in that attack, but he'd used the Authority of Haste to kick, making his leg the weapon.

Akiyama's body flew back with an explosive bang like that of a cannon. The wall was destroyed, and hazy smoke filled the tunnel.

At this point, Kang-Woo did not deal additional blows to Akiyama. Instead, he ran toward the widening Rift.

"Stop him!"

"Protect the Rift!"

The Demon Cultists who were surrounding the Rift ran toward Kang-Woo, and his battle against the Demon Cultists continued. They weren't strong, but it was a time-consuming battle because there were many of them. It was difficult even for Kang-Woo to face ten people at once.

'Damn.'

With a fist covered in the Authority of Waves, Kang-Woo punched a Demon Cultist who was approaching him. However, his attacks didn't stop there, as more Demon Cultists jumped at him without fear of death like moths rushing into flames.

Consequently, Kang-Woo was delayed even further. The duration of Kraken's Rage was now almost over.

Akiyama was in a bad state.

"A-Aaahhh..." he groaned in despair.

He felt like his heart was being torn apart as he watched his subordinates, who shared his convictions, get killed.

'If only I were stronger...' Akiyama thought.

He clenched his hands into fists. If he were as powerful as the three cardinals who had been granted the title of Apostle of Evil, he would've been able to save his subordinates from the hands of that intruder.

Akiyama's rage and regret from being unable to save his subordinates weighed down on him.

"Run away," Akiyama said, grabbing his whip more tightly.

The other Demon Cultists turned to him.

"I will deal with him! All of you, run!"

"Y-Your Eminence...!"

"W-We can't do that!"

They cried out desperately.

Akiyama shouted with a trembling voice, "Don't worry! Even if my body dies here, our beliefs, our wishes, will last forever!"

"Aaahhh!"

"When do you think someone dies?! Is it when their heart gets pierced by a spear? No! Is it when they become a monster from losing control of their demonic energy? No! It is when we lose sight of our beliefs! That is when we die!"

Tears flowed from the eyes of the Demon Cultists, and Akiyama cried along with them.

At the sight of the incredibly moving scene, Kang-Woo said, "Cry me a river."

Upon hearing the harsh criticism, Akiyama frowned and replied, "Do not mock our beliefs!"

"Don't say those lines from anime so seriously. You're making me cringe."

"Ngh...!"

Akiyama flinched as if it were true that he'd taken the lines straight from an anime.

"If you're gonna be the villain, then just get defeated after laughing maniacally for a bit," Kang-Woo commented.

He extended his hand and merged three different Authorities to create a greatsword over two meters long.

These people were hot and passionate individuals who didn't seem like typical members of the Demon Cult. Nevertheless, Kang-Woo had no intentions of going easy on them.

After all, they were still Demon Cultists. It wasn't hard to imagine what they had done to grow their forces to the point where they could manage to summon a demon. They looked dumb, but Kang-Woo was certain that they had to have done things to instill fear and despair into others.

Kang-Woo didn't care what their beliefs were. It didn't matter at all. He had things he had to do, and time was running out.

"If your beliefs are so important, die for them," he said, raising his greatsword.

The Rift had grown so much that it almost reached the ceiling...

Kang-Woo threw the greatsword at it.

"Nooo!!!" Akiyama screamed and threw himself at the greatsword.

The Gram, the greatsword, pierced him, causing his blood to spray out.

"Cough! Kurgh!"

"Your Eminence!!!"

The remaining Demon Cultists screamed desperately. Nevertheless, Kang-Woo ignored them; he didn't have time to bother with them.

Then Kang-Woo approached the Rift.

"Kuh!"

The remaining Demon Cultists glared at him, but they didn't charge toward him. They just took Akiyama, who was dying, and ran away.

Kang-Woo glared as he watched them flee.

It wouldn't be hard to chase and kill them. In fact, that would be the best option to eliminate future issues.

"Fuck," he cursed.

However, the Rift had become too big for Kang-Woo to leave now. Stopping Lilith's summoning was more urgent.

He stepped closer to the Rift.

Kang-Woo didn't have Seol-Ah's buff or his coat's special effect, Kraken's Rage, anymore. He concentrated the demonic energy inside the demonic crystal in his hands and touched the Rift.

"Kuh..." he groaned.

The power of the Rift weighed down on his hands with immense pressure.

If he knew more about the demon summoning process, he would be able to close the Rift more efficiently. Nonetheless, he had no other choice but to forcefully close it at present.

It was a brainless method, but it was effective. The Rift started to shrink in size.

'Good.'

He started to have hope that he'd be able to close it.

Right then...

Squelch, squelch.

Tentacles wriggled out from the Rift. These were the tentacles that Kang-Woo was familiar with.

His face turned pale.

'No.'

The tentacles latched onto Kang-Woo. Its suction cups sucked on his skin as if savoring it.

Brrr.

The tentacles trembled in delight.

Considering the way they trembled after tasting his skin, there was no need at all for Kang-Woo to consider who they might belong to.

- I'm coming, my king...

"No! Stay away!" he screamed in despair.

The being that he didn't want to and shouldn't meet was trying to come to Earth.

Kang-Woo explosively raised the energy output of the demonic crystal. He was even debating whether he should unleash the Ten Thousand Demon Core.

'The Ten Thousand Demon Core...'

Then he recalled Echidna's plea and decided that he didn't need to think too deeply.

'There's no need to stop the summoning at the risk of his life.'

It was true that Kang-Woo didn't want to see Lilith again, but it wasn't to the extent that he would put his life at risk to avoid her.

'I'll just do everything that I can right now.'

It would be stupid to risk his life for something like this.

While suppressing the Rift with the energy inside the demonic crystal, he used the Authority of Predation to devour the demonic energy maintaining the Rift.

The demonic energy of the Rift flowed into him and mixed with the demonic crystal.

'Just a bit more...'

The Rift grew smaller, reaching a size where it was barely big enough for an adult human to go through.

- Aaahhh...!

Kang-Woo heard Lilith screaming in agony. Her tentacles retreated into the Rift and disappeared.

Upon seeing that, Kang-Woo's eyes lit up. He squeezed out his remaining energy and focused on suppressing the Rift once again. Simultaneously, the amount of demonic energy that he was absorbing from the Rift grew.

'There's almost nothing left of the demonic crystal.'

Was it because he'd used too much power? The demonic crystal in his dantian was almost all gone. He needed more of it; it was difficult to suppress the Rift with mere demonic energy.

Kang-Woo closed his eyes and concentrated. He recalled the Heavenly Dragon Cultivation Technique that he had learned from Kim Si-Hun. If there was almost nothing left of the demonic crystal, he just needed to make it bigger.

He used the Heavenly Dragon Cultivation Technique to its absolute limit and grew the demonic crystal with the demonic energy that he was absorbing from the Rift. Kang-Woo could feel his dantian tingle as the demonic crystal expanded.

'Almost done.'

He bit his lip tensely.

Kang-Woo was a master at controlling demonic energy, but using the Heavenly Dragon Cultivation Technique to such an extreme extent was difficult even for him. He felt like his meridians were about to burst from overuse.

'Just a bit more...!'

Tap.

The palms of his hands touched, and the Rift closed. Blue light spewed out from the Rift and flowed into Kurosaki Yurie, who lay unconscious on the altar. Her ability to summon extra-dimensional beings seemed to be returning to her.

"Huff, huff."

Kang-Woo panted and slumped to the ground, covered in sweat. The high he felt from stopping Lilith's summoning was mixed in with the fatigue he felt from circulating demonic energy to the absolute limit.

"Fuu..."

He caught his breath.

The process had been difficult, but he had managed to stop the summoning. Kang-Woo flopped onto the ground with his arms and legs spread wide open.

Riiing.

"Hmm?"

At that moment, he heard a familiar bell chime. He slowly opened his eyes as message windows popped up in front of him.

[The demonic crystal has reached the size necessary to achieve the Ultimate Demonic Body.]

[You have fulfilled all three conditions required to achieve the Ultimate Demonic Body.]

[Commencing body transformation.]

Chapter 108 - Ultimate Demonic Body

Crack!

Kang-Woo could hear his skeleton contort. His muscles were torn apart and made anew. Unimaginable pain spread throughout his body. It was as if his body had been torn to shreds and forcibly sewn back together again.

"..."

He remained silent and focused on the changes that were happening inside him. He had to know what the Ultimate Demonic Body was exactly.

The pain hindered him from concentrating, but it wasn't like he couldn't endure it. Kang-Woo was used to enduring pain.

'So, this is the Ultimate Demonic Body.'

He wasn't quite sure what it was yet, but he could tell the changes were purely internal. Nothing about him had changed externally.

His muscles toughened, and his bones hardened. Those were positive changes indeed, but he wasn't sure what made them so great to deserve a grandiose name like 'Ultimate Demonic Body.'

'Hm?'

While Kang-Woo was wondering that, a new change occurred. The energy inside his dantian started to melt into his blood. His muscles and bones had changed just a moment ago, and now even his blood was changing. Blood full of demonic energy circulated through every nook and cranny of his entire body.

'Whoa.'

The pain stopped, replaced by an indescribable sense of fullness.

Kang-Woo moved his finger. His body, which had had no sensation since the transformation began, moved according to his will.

He slowly got up, and message windows appeared.

Riiing.

[The transformation into the Ultimate Demonic Body has been completed.]

[All stats have risen by 5.]

[Commencing the second step to becoming a Demon God.]

"Wow."

Kang-Woo's eyes lit up.

'All stats rose by five...'

It was a satisfying number.

He really liked that his Demonic Energy, which had shown no signs of rising, had just risen by five at once to 108. Without buffs like Kraken's Rage, the stat would remain under 110, but a rise of five was a huge change. The amount of demonic energy inside him had increased as well, similar to whenever the seal of the Ten Thousand Demon Core weakened.

'But the biggest change is...'

Kang-Woo looked down at his right arm.

The blood flowing out of his shoulder, which Akiyama had injured, was black.

'The demonic energy melted into my blood.'

Kang-Woo's muscles had become thicker and his bones harder, both of which were positive changes... But the biggest change was that his demonic energy had completely melted into his blood.

Moreover, it wasn't normal demonic energy; it was highly concentrated, similar to the energy inside of the demonic crystal. In other words, the energy of the demonic crystal that had only been in his dantian had spread through his entire body. It was as if his body had become one big dantian.

"Very nice."

Kang-Woo was satisfied.

This was a level of power he hadn't achieved during his rule over the Nine Hells. The sensation of getting stronger made him excited.

'I wonder what the second step to becoming a Demon God is.'

After achieving the Ultimate Demonic Body, Kang-Woo's body changed more than he'd imagined. He'd even gotten a power that was beyond his imagination. It was no surprise that he'd be interested in what was next.

Kang-Woo opened his status window and checked the information for the second step.

[Information]

[Demonic Soul: The second step to becoming a Demon God.

*Condition 1: ???

*Condition 2: ???]

There wasn't any information except for the name 'Demonic Soul' and that he needed to fulfill two conditions.

'First was the body, and now it's the soul.'

Just like before, there wasn't any information about the power that the Demonic Soul would bring him.

Kang-Woo looked away from his status window. Since he didn't have any information about how to fulfill those conditions, there was no point in thinking about it any longer.

He then checked the Sixth Awakening Trait that he'd acquired previously. It had fully unlocked after he achieved the Ultimate Demonic Body.

[Sixth Awakening Trait: Demonic Art of Creation (Rank: SS)]

[Effect: The Player can create equipment infused with the power of Authorities. The more Authorities that are used simultaneously during the crafting process, the greater the power that the crafted equipment will possess.

However, to create equipment of the Mythic grade and above, a material of the same grade is required.

*The number of equipment that can be crafted with Demonic Art of Creation is one. The previously crafted equipment will be destroyed if any more is crafted.]

"Wow!"

Kang-Woo's eyes gleamed.

'Not bad at all.'

Being able to craft equipment infused with the power of Authorities was a huge advantage. Valuable materials of the same grade were necessary for crafting equipment of the Mythic grade or higher, but that wasn't the case for equipment of the Legendary grade or below. This was an incredibly good Trait, especially considering how much of a difference the Black Pearl Coat had made to his combat prowess.

'I'm not sure what this Trait has to do with the Ultimate Demonic Body though.'

This Trait had been unlocked after he achieved the Ultimate Demonic Body, but the two things seemed to have no relation to each other.

'Is there a different reason?'

There was no way for Kang-Woo to know for sure at this point. In any case, there was no point jumping to conclusions when he didn't even know if the Demonic Art of Creation was related to the Ultimate Demonic Body.

'Besides, it's not that important.'

The important thing was that he'd achieved the Ultimate Demonic Body and that he had risen to a higher stage thanks to it. Additionally, the Sixth Awakening Trait that he'd fully unlocked was quite useful.

Kang-Woo left his questions aside and placed his hand on his right shoulder. He used the Authority of Regeneration, and his wound healed quickly.

"I should get out of here," Kang-Woo said, turning around.

He had stopped Lilith's summoning and achieved the Ultimate Demonic Body. It seemed like his level was still capped, but two of his other problems had been solved at once. He was enjoying the current situation so much that he wanted to dance.

Kang-Woo hummed as he approached the altar.

'So, this girl is the Miko of the Heavens.'

From her appearance, the Miko of the Heavens just looked like an ordinary but elegant and beautiful girl.

Kang-Woo lifted her in his arms.

Boom!

Right when he was about to use the Authority of the Sky to return to the surface, the ceiling of the tunnel was destroyed.

"Huff, huff."

A good-looking young man was panting heavily. His blue and black odd eyes gazed at Kang-Woo.

"Wha—"

"You were a step too late," Kang-Woo stated.

"Are you saying the summoning ritual took place down here and not on the top floor?" Fujimoto Ryoma asked with sharp eyes.

Kang-Woo gestured to the altar with his chin.

"As you can see."

"...How did you know that it was taking place here?"

"Because I noticed that there were no Demon Cultists on the way up."

"Hah, you broke away from your designated area of operations without permission just because of that?"

Ryoma seemed annoyed.

Kang-Woo smirked and said, "Our role from the beginning was to cause chaos, was it not? Just because I didn't head up to the top floor doesn't mean that I broke away from the designated area of operations."

"Then you should have told m—"

"It was nothing but a guess on my end as well. Why would I call you about unverified information?"

"..."

Trembling in frustration, Ryoma could only close his mouth upon hearing Kang-Woo's smooth answers.

'I'm sure he wanted to monopolize the achievement,' Kang-Woo thought.

He'd known that from the first moment they met.

Regardless, Kang-Woo walked past Ryoma, who was glaring at him. He didn't have a reason to care about Ryoma's intentions.

"Kuh," Ryoma uttered with a frown.

He bit his lips and continued to glare at Kang-Woo, who had taken the lead.

Ryoma felt conflicted. He flapped his lips, seemingly anxious. He looked around and then lifted his walkie-talkie after having come to a decision.

[Emergency! Requesting assistance from all units! Converge on the underground tunnel!]

Kang-Woo scoffed, "Hah, how over the top."

[There was a Demon Cultist spy among the Korean Players! Requesting immediate assistance!]

Kang-Woo turned around and looked at Ryoma in disbelief, although it wasn't hard for him to imagine why Ryoma was saying something like that all of a sudden.

'This guy's insane.'

His delightful mood was instantly ruined.

Kang-Woo frowned and said, "I know what you're trying to do, but you'd better stop."

"Nonsense, you filthy Demon Cultist! Let the Miko of the Heavens go!"

"Nonsense? That's rich, coming from you. If you want to monopolize the achievement, go for it. I can't even bring myself to deal with you."

Kang-Woo tried to hand Kurosaki Yurie to him, but Ryoma stepped back and raised powerful wind currents from his hands.

"Hmph! Enough with your pathetic excuses!" Ryoma rebuked angrily.

Despite the anger in his voice, Ryoma was smiling.

"Haaa..." Kang-Woo sighed.

He could hear people running down the tunnel. It was the group of Japanese Players that had taken the role of bait in their tactic.

Strangely, Prime Minister Yamada was with them.

He asked hurriedly, "Wh-What in the world is going on?!"

"It's as you can see. As soon as I defeated the Demon Cult, that man appeared and tried to kidnap the Miko of the Heavens again!"

"..."

Fujimoto Ryoma had shouted before Kang-Woo could say anything.

Prime Minister Yamada looked at Kang-Woo and murmured, "Hmm..."

Many things that Fujimoto had said made no sense. Firstly, Fujimoto appeared too unscathed for someone who claimed to have fought against the Demon Cult, and the situation didn't seem to be very urgent despite him having called it an emergency.

The second thing was related to Kurosaki Yurie, who was in the arms of the Korean Player. Her hair wasn't disheveled, and her clothes were in a neat state; it didn't seem at all like she was being kidnapped.

"What are you doing, Prime Minister?!" Ryoma questioned.

"Oh, m-my apologies," Prime Minister Yamada replied, flinching in surprise. He then shouted at the squadron of Players, "Surround the Demon Cultist!"

Kang-Woo was quickly surrounded by the Japanese Players.

He smirked at Prime Minister Yamada and remarked, "I see you're in cahoots with him."

Prime Minister Yamada had felt that something was off. That much was obvious from his expression. Yet, his attitude changed the moment Fujimoto yelled at him.

'They must've been prepared for something like this from the beginning.'

Kang-Woo guessed that they had planned to frame a Korean Player as a Demon Cultist on the off chance that a Korean Player rescued the hostage before Ryoma could. Otherwise, there was no reason for the prime minister to be here instead of in the bunker.

'What a bright idea.'

There were no cameras installed in the tunnel, and they hadn't recorded the tactic being carried out. In a situation like this, the only way to prove the accused's innocence was through testimonies. However, if everyone present was part of the same team, then they could label anyone passing by as a member of the Demon Cult. It was a typical witch hunt.

Kang-Woo burst out laughing. He found the trap so cute that his irritation disappeared.

'Come to think of it, that eye of his is Mythic-grade equipment, isn't it?' Kang-Woo thought.

The Eye of Susanoo was Fujimoto Ryoma's globally famous trademark equipment.

'Since it's a Mythic-grade piece of equipment, I'm sure the material for it is also Mythic-grade.'

A wide smile appeared on Kang-Woo's face.

"I surrender."

He placed Kurosaki Yurie down and raised his hands.

Chapter 109 - Five Mistakes (1)

"What is the meaning of this?!" Jang Hyun-Jae shouted when he saw Japanese Players dragging Oh Kang-Woo in handcuffs.

Fujimoto Ryoma stepped up to the front.

"That is what we want to ask you. This man is a spy from the Demon Cult, and he had dared to kidnap the Miko of the Heavens."

"... What?"

"Hmm... Judging from your expression, it seems you have also been fooled."

Ryoma looked at Hyun-Jae, Baek Hwa-Yeon, and Goo Hyun-Mo. In reality, since he'd accused Kang-Woo of being a spy from the Demon Cult, the correct thing would be to say that every Korean Player who had come to Japan was also a member of the Demon Cult.

'But that would cause too much of an uproar.'

It would be far too overboard.

There was a difference between accusing an unknown Player of being a Demon Cultist and accusing members of a military unit working for the government.

'They won't be able to defend his case, anyway.'

He smiled wickedly.

If Korea recklessly defended Kang-Woo, this issue might escalate into a national conflict, and it would make them look as if they were trying to defend a Demon Cultist who had tried to kidnap the Miko of the Heavens. More importantly, there was no way to prove his innocence, and the Koreans knew they had no chance of winning the case.

'They'll back off if they're smart.'

It was a simple problem. Would Korea, out of sentiment, make a risky gamble that could escalate to a national conflict, or would they resolve the issue with the sacrifice of one person?

There was no need to even think about it.

Korea would escape like a lizard dropping its tail.

"... Do you have proof?" Hyun-Jae asked.

"Both Prime Minister Yamada and I saw it with our own eyes. Is that not enough proof?"

"There is no proof that you two are lying either."

"Are you suspecting us?"

"That's..."

Hyun-Jae's expression hardened.

Since he was the commander of the Hwarang Corps, he couldn't make any incriminating statements. He knew what kind of trouble it could bring.

"Hah, these sons of bitches..."

Cha Yeon-Joo stepped forward as if taking the silent Hyun-Jae's place.

Hwa-Yeon grabbed her shoulder.

"Let go," said Yeon-Joo.

"Yeon-Joo, calm down and let's talk it out—"

"I told you to let go."

Yeon-Joo fired sharp bloodlust at Hwa-Yeon.

She brushed off Hwa-Yeon's hands and walked toward Ryoma.

"You must've been hit and are seeing things, seeing from the blue eye of yours. Should I make your other eye blue as well?"

"Haha. You seem to be in shock. I also couldn't believe it when this man tried to kidnap the Miko of the Heavens. We never thought that the forces of the Japanese Demon Cult had stretched to other countries as well."

"How dare you bastard keep spouting nonsense...?"

Red chains spread out from her wrist.

Kang-Woo opened his mouth while looking at her.

"Stop, Yeon-Joo."

"You want me to stop in this situation?" she said aggressively.

Kang-Woo smirked and replied, "It's okay."

"What's okay?! These damn monkeys are...!"

"Calm down. Has anything ever gone wrong after I said that it's okay?"

"Ngh...!"

Yeon-Joo grunted.

"K-Kang-Woo..." Han Seol-Ah stared at him as if she was about to start crying.

"I'll come back soon. Stay with Echidna."

"Y-You really will come back, right?"

"Yeah."

"Kang-Woo, where are you going?" Echidna asked.

"There's been a misunderstanding. I'll be back in a flash to resolve it, so you can wait for me, right?"

"Yeah, I can wait."

Echidna nodded.

Unlike other people, she wasn't worried about Kang-Woo. Their souls were linked, so she could instinctively tell that he really thought that the situation was nothing.

"Have you finished saying your farewells? Seeing that so many people are worried for you, you seem to have hidden the fact that you're a filthy Demon Cultist very thoroughly."

"..."

"Your crimes will be thoroughly exposed in a court of law."

Ryoma dragged him away.

Kang-Woo followed him carefreely.

They were heading to a boat that would take them to the mainland.

Kang-Woo boarded the boat and then closed his eyes after sitting down.

Ryoma said, "You seem rather calm. Do you seriously think you have a chance of escaping after coming this far?"

"..."

Kang-Woo remained silent.

Ryoma smirked.

"I'm sure you know that you'll be abandoned at the very end."

The effort needed to prove his innocence was so astronomical that abandoning him was the far better option.

Ryoma said, "The truth isn't important. You may find the situation unfair, but just accept it. I will pull some strings so that you are not executed."

The truth wasn't important. An irrefutable lie was no different from the truth.

* * *

Kang-Woo was transported to a prison in Tokyo designed for Players.

Ryoma, who was worried he would escape, put mana restraints all over his body, which made it difficult for Kang-Woo to even move a finger.

After being put in mana restraints, Kang-Woo sat with the wall against his back. The solitary cell was so small that he couldn't even lie down.

Ryoma smiled while looking down at him through the steel-barred window.

"The trial will be soon, so I will see you there."

It was a formal trial. Since there was no evidence, the trial would be completely reliant on witness accounts, and all of the witnesses, including Prime Minister Yamada, were his pawns. Ryoma would also personally choose the judge.

The only person Ryoma was worried about was Kurosaki Yurie, but she had no idea what had happened since she had been unconscious at the time.

'If everything goes well...'

Ryoma clenched his fist. There was a reason why he'd tried so hard to monopolize the achievement.

'... I can finally have the Miko of the Heavens.'

He had been planning to marry Yurie for a long time. Their marriage had not been established up until now because she'd refused many times, but it would be hard to go against public opinion this time.

People were sensitive to sensational topics, and his rescuing of her by himself was sensational enough.

'Heh, I can already see the headlines.'

The kidnapped princess gets married to her hero.

One could already picture it from just that phrase.

She was someone who couldn't go against what the citizens expected of her, so she wouldn't be able to refuse his marriage proposal any longer.

Of course, the reason wasn't that he was in love with her. She was clearly beautiful, but he wasn't interested in someone as boring as her.

'As soon as the marriage is established...'

The entirety of Japan would be in the palm of his hand.

He was the person who represented the power of Japan, and she was the person who received the love of the people of the country. If they joined forces, he would be able to replace the old emperor.

'The Japanese empire will once again be known throughout the world.'

Japan had suffered massively as a country ever since the Day of Calamity. Their reputation as an economic giant had plummeted to the point that they were below Korea.

Upon becoming a World Ranker, Ryoma had decided to make Japan the strongest country in East Asia. The first step toward that goal was to become the emperor.

"You can hire any lawyer you want, although I don't think there's anyone who'd be willing to defend you."

Ryoma turned around while smiling wickedly.

As Ryoma turned his back to leave, Kang-Woo opened his mouth.

"You..." Kang-Woo continued in a cold voice, "You think you're clever, huh?"

"... What?"

"Do you think everything's going according to your plans?"

"Hah." Ryoma laughed at the absurdity. "Of course. Isn't that obvious from the prison cell you're in?"

Kang-Woo's inability to move even a finger due to the mana restraint made him look like a bug.

Kang-Woo softly laughed.

"Five."

"... Five what?"

"The number of mistakes you've made. You've already made five."

"... Hah. Hahaha! That's funny!"

Ryoma also knew that his plan wasn't perfect. It was highly improvised and full of holes, but still, he hadn't made five mistakes.

"You're saying a lot of shit for a rat in a cage."

"You sure about that...?" Kang-Woo closed his eyes while leaning against the wall. "You'll soon find out, even if you don't want to."

"Hah... What a joke." Ryoma clicked his tongue and shook his head. "We'll see if you can remain that carefree during the trial."

Ryoma walked out of the prison after saying those last words.

Click.

There was a heavy silence after the door was locked.

A CCTV was monitoring Kang-Woo's cell twenty-four seven, and the bars were made of a material that not even a Ranker could break easily.

Kang-Woo closed his eyes and leaned his back against the wall. Considering that he was locked in an infamous prison, he seemed too relaxed.

As time passed, the sun set, and night fell.

Kang-Woo slowly opened his eyes.

"Let's get started," Kang-Woo mumbled as he used an Authority.

The energy of the demonic crystal that had melted into his blood rose. He was using his power so naturally that one wouldn't believe that his entire body was covered in mana restraints.

That was Ryoma's first mistake.

'Mana restraints don't work on me.'

Although mana and demonic energy were similar, they were fundamentally different powers. Mana restraints did not affect him.

Kang-Woo used the Authority of Projection and the Authority of Dolls. Afterward, he slipped out of the restraints as if his soul had escaped his body. He looked down and saw the fake body he had created using the Authority of Dolls.

He had escaped from the cell while leaving a fake body behind.

Although this prison was famous for having zero successful escapes due to its air-tight security, Kang-Woo had no problem escaping because he could fully use his Authorities.

"Fuuu."

The cool night air brushed his cheeks. Although he'd only been locked up for half a day, he felt free.

As he used the Authority of the Sky, the bustling city of Tokyo spread beneath his feet.

"Now then, let's prepare for the trial."

Of course, he could escape to Korea and assume a completely new identity if he wanted to, but he was not one to play along with someone else's intentions.

'Answer evil with greater evil... and return bloodlust with even greater bloodlust.'

That was something he'd learned to survive.

Kang-Woo stretched.

They had said that the trial would take place as soon as possible, so it was probably going to take place in a few days.

"I'll have to move quickly."

Kang-Woo crossed the night sky.

Chapter 110 - Five Mistakes (2)

The entirety of Japan was shocked the moment it was announced that Kurosaki Yurie had been kidnapped by the Demon Cult, but the people's shock only lasted for a little while.

When the news spread that Fujimoto Ryoma had rescued her, the mood took a drastic turn for the better.

The Player that could be said to represent all Japanese Players had saved the Miko of the Heavens!

All news was full of praise for Ryoma, and Yurie's rescue was even covered in foreign countries.

Comparatively, there was almost no news that talked about Kang-Woo. No, he had barely been mentioned.

Ryoma had warned the news outlets ahead of time to stop the incident from getting bigger until the trial had come to a ruling.

Three days passed.

Ryoma, who had become a national hero, was walking to court.

It was the day when the trial of Korean Player Oh Kang-Woo would take place.

"You made sure that the judge in charge of this trial is Judge Wakabe, right?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Good."

Ryoma smiled.

Wakabe Nobuhito was a judge who had helped Ryoma get out of legal trouble a couple of times before. He was moderately greedy and very quick-witted.

The trial would go smoothly as always.

"Prime Minister Yamada will be the witness."

"Hahaha! Good."

A testimony from the prime minister? Even if Judge Wakabe wasn't in his pockets, the case would be a slam dunk.

Ryoma felt that all of the relationships he'd built throughout the years had formed one big castle.

'And I'll soon become the king of that castle.'

He was a bit bothered by Kang-Woo's relaxed attitude, but there wasn't a way for Kang-Woo to turn this case around anymore.

The reason why so many people had been victims of witch hunts was that there wasn't a way for them to prove they weren't witches in the first place.

It would be the same this time as well.

There was no way Kang-Woo would be able to prove that he wasn't a Demon Cultist.

'It would have been great if I had acquired a few demonic crystals.'

Demonic crystals were the black gems made of concentrated demonic energy that the Demon Cult used. If he'd been able to acquire one, he would've had an easier time framing Kang-Woo as a Demon Cultist. Sadly, however, he had not been able to get one.

'It would be troublesome if I am accused of being a Demon Cultist while trying to get one.'

Since Prime Minister Yamada was going to be a witness, there was no way Kang-Woo would be able to win, anyway.

Ryoma entered the courtroom with light steps. He saw Cha Yeon-Joo and the other Korean Players glaring at him.

'They look rather furious.'

It was understandable. After all, their comrade had been framed as a Demon Cultist, so it wasn't weird for them to react like this.

'But considering they haven't done anything for the last three days, I guess they've given up as well.'

It really didn't matter if they got angry. Rage wouldn't change anything in this world.

The reporters who had been waiting outside swarmed toward him.

"Mr. Fujimoto! There hasn't been any information released regarding this trial. Could you tell us what is going on?"

"Why is a trial suddenly being held for a Korean Player?"

Ryoma had restricted the news outlets for the last three days, but there was no more need for that. Today was the day when the truth about the Demon Cult spy named Oh Kang-Woo would be revealed.

Ryoma replied with a smile, "I cannot give any details until after the trial."

"Could you at least tell us what the trial is about...?"

"The trial is related to the forces that kidnapped the Miko of the Heavens. As for the details, it would be better for you to see for yourselves."

"If it's the forces that kidnapped the Miko of the Heavens..."

"The Demon Cult? Is the Demon Cult somehow related to a Korean Player?"

The reporters were in an uproar. They hadn't been told any information beforehand, so they were making many assumptions.

Ryoma smiled in satisfaction and took his seat.

Step, step.

As he waited carefreely, he saw Kang-Woo enter the courtroom. Although Kang-Woo was no longer covered in mana restraints, his hands were still restrained.

Already beginning to act, Ryoma glared at Kang-Woo as Kang-Woo entered.

Judge Wakabe entered the room soon after and took his seat. He didn't look good. His face was pale, and he was trembling. It was as if he was terrified.

Bam, bam.

"L-Let the trial begin." Judge Wakabe turned to Ryoma. "Prosecution, begin your testimony against defendant Oh Kang-Woo."

"Yes, Your Honor."

The prosecutor stood up.

"Defendant Oh Kang-Woo is a Player who had participated in the operation to rescue Princess Kurosaki Yurie. He suddenly broke off from his formation when the operation to break through the north exit took place, and he participated in the Demon Cult's summoning ritual. As Mr. Fujimoto Ryoma defeated the Demon Cultists and stopped the summoning ritual, Defendant Oh Kang-Woo grabbed Princess Kurosaki Yurie, who was unconscious on the altar, and tried to run away."

"What kind of bullshit are you bastards spouting?"

Slam!

Yeon-Joo angrily stood up, fed up with the prosecution's lies. Jang Hyun-Jae and Baek Hwa-Yeon tried to stop her. Frowning, Yeon-Joo was forced to sit down.

Judge Wakabe looked at Kang-Woo after the short incident. Judge Wakabe then spoke to the defendant Kang-Woo, who was sitting in the defendant's seat in a relaxed manner.

"Th-The defendant..."

Clack!

Judge Wakabe dropped his gavel.

He exclaimed with a pale face, "I-I'm sorry!"

He apologized to someone, then quickly picked up the gavel and took a deep breath. He spoke in a trembling voice without being able to look properly at Kang-Woo. "Ahem. Let us resume the trial. D-Does the defense have an attorney—"

"I do not," Kang-Woo stated.

"In that case, do you have anything to say in your defense?"

"I am not a Demon Cultist."

"..."

There was a heavy silence.

"I-Is that it?"

"Yes."

Kang-Woo nodded with a smile on his face.

"Pfft!"

Ryoma covered his mouth and tried to hold in his laughter.

'Is that what he calls a defense?'

The only possible explanation at that point was that Oh Kang-Woo was stupid.

The uneasiness Ryoma felt had completely disappeared.

He would win the trial—there was no way he'd lose. The winner had already been decided from the beginning, and the trial was just a formality.

"Your Honor, the prosecution calls to the stand Prime Minister Yamada."

"Will the witness please take the stand?"

Prime Minister Yamada walked toward the witness stand.

"Hmm?"

Ryoma tilted his head in confusion.

Prime Minister Yamada was acting weird—his face was pale, and he was trembling.

'Did something happen yesterday to Judge Wakabe?'

Both Prime Minister Yamada and the judge looked to be in somewhat similar states.

'Well, it must be a sign of their age.'

It wasn't weird for their health to deteriorate since neither one of them was a Player.

Ryoma waited calmly for the prime minister's testimony. The reporters also looked at Prime Minister Yamada with shining eyes.

"I," Prime Minister Yamada said with a trembling voice, "I would like to use this stand to reveal a secret that I have been hiding."

"... Huh?"

Ryoma frowned at the unexpected development.

"I am... being threatened by Fujimoto Ryoma."

"What?!"

"Wh-What the hell?"

"What is he talking about?"

There was a huge commotion in the courtroom.

Prime Minister Yamada peeked at Kang-Woo and then continued, "Fujimoto Ryoma is framing the Korean Player as a Demon Cultist to hide his true identity. Player Oh Kang-Woo is also nothing but a victim in his heinous scheme."

"WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?!"

Slam!

Ryoma sprang up from his seat.

Everyone's attention focused on him. After noticing that the reporters were looking at him, he took a deep breath.

"Fuuu... Prime Minister, what are you talking about all of a sudden? Hiding my true identity? What identity is that?"

"Fujimoto Ryoma is"—Prime Minister Yamada gulped, and his nervous voice spread through the courtroom—"a Demon Cultist. It was also actually Fujimoto who had kidnapped Princess Kurosaki Yurie in this incident."

"Wh-What did you say? What the hell are you talking about, you son of a—"

The reporters stood up.

"P-Prime Minister! What do you mean?!"

"Please give us more details!"

Fujimoto Ryoma was the one who kidnapped Kurosaki Yurie?

This was far from a truth bomb but more like a natural disaster.

"I have actually known this for a very long time, but he... Fujimoto Ryoma said that if I revealed the truth, he would offer all my family members as demon sacrifices."

"Hah, have you gone mad, old man...?"

Ryoma laughed in disbelief.

It was true that Prime Minister Yamada was his subordinate, but he had never taken his family hostage, nor was he the one who had kidnapped Yurie.

The sole culprit of Yurie's kidnapping was the Demon Cult.

'What the hell is going on?'

He couldn't understand it. Why was Prime Minister Yamada trying to frame him as a Demon Cultist? He couldn't think of a single reason. His mind became messy at the unexpected development.

"Prime Minister! Is what you've just said true?"

"Then, how does that explain Mr. Fujimoto rescuing the hostage?"

"I also have something to say in regards to that. The one who saved the Miko of the Heavens was not Fujimoto but the Korean Player sitting there, Mr. Oh Kang-Woo. Rather, Fujimoto was the spy who had spread false information that the summoning ritual was taking place on the top floor to hinder the operation."

There was a huge uproar again. A few reporters even dropped their audio recorders.

"That's bullshit! Everyone! I am being framed! Prime Minister Yamada is not in his right mind!"

The uproar became bigger.

Kang-Woo looked as if he found the uproar fun. He tried his best to hold in his laughter.

'This was your second mistake.'

He had an Authority that allowed him to make people his pawns.

Ryoma's plan was doomed as long as Kang-Woo possessed a mind-controlling Authority.

'You shouldn't have used Prime Minister Yamada as a witness.'

Prime Minister Yamada was not a Player; he was just a regular person. He did not have the power to resist mind-control Authorities.

If Ryoma needed a witness, it would've been better to use one of the Players who had come to the underground tunnel with Prime Minister Yamada.

"You crazy old man...! Do you have proof?! Huh? Show me the proof!" Ryoma screamed like a madman.

Prime Minister Yamada nodded. "I do have proof. Please take a look at this, everyone. This was found in Fujimoto's residence."

"What...?"

Ryoma looked dumbfounded.

Kang-Woo couldn't hold it back anymore and let out a soft laugh.

The demonic crystal was something that only the Demon Cult used and could create.

But...

'I can make them too.'

That was Ryoma's third mistake. He didn't know that Kang-Woo could also create demonic crystals.